

AGRICOLA'S PROCONSULSHIP

In a recent issue of this journal, J. K. Evans once again subjects Tacitus' narrative concerning the projected proconsulship of Agricola to review, and concludes that Tacitus was wrong and that his "use of innuendo has obscured what must have been a frequent and straightforward procedure."¹) That in itself is a bold statement susceptible of no proof, for what may be routine in the case of one individual will be anything but that in the case of another, and it should not be forgotten, as von Fritz so acutely pointed out, that an atmosphere of tension and fear can cause events to happen which in other circumstances need not have occurred.²) The power of suggestion, when invoked by an authority with the power to command, is the equivalent of command.

Evans claims that Agricola had no reasonable expectation of a proconsulship because "it was Domitian's policy to reserve the proconsulships of Asia and Africa for those senators pursuing a civil rather than a military career, a class which considered these proconsulships the apex of the senatorial career."³) *Viri militares* could reasonably expect an iterated consulship as an alternative, and he cites only two such men who held these proconsulships under Domitian, Sex. Iulius Frontinus and L. Furius Vettianus. Whatever we take as the essential meaning of the term *viri militares*, popularized by Syme and recently subjected to close scrutiny by Campbell,⁴) I think it must refer,

1) "Tacitus, Domitian, and the Proconsulship of Agricola," 119 (1976) 79-84; the quotation is from 80.

2) K. von Fritz, "Tacitus, Agricola, Domitian and the Problem of the Principate," CPh, 52 (1957) 73-97; also now, in German, in R. Klein, Prinzipat und Freiheit, WdF CXXXV (Darmstadt, 1969) 421-463. Exemplary (and crucial) is this statement on 96: "Tacitus is not only a great writer and a great artist, but also a great historian, who has given a description of the poisonous atmosphere of dissimulation and tyranny, of suppressed rebelliousness and servility prevailing under the early emperors that is to a large extent true, and indeed unsurpassed, if one disregards the lack of any investigation into its underlying causes."

3) P. 83.

4) B. Campbell, "Who were the 'Viri Militares'?", JRS, 65 (1975) 11-31.

at the minimum, not necessarily to a class, but to the type of men whom the emperor judged to have the ability to govern one of his military provinces. Such a man might never have to fight and would thus be unable to gain the reputation of being a good general, but the intrinsic qualities would have to be judged to be present.⁵⁾ In this sense, all men who became legates of the emperor's provinces with consular rank can be considered *virī militares*. Scrutiny of the provincial fasti of Asia and Africa will perhaps suggest a pattern different from that which Evans proposed.

I choose to consider the entire Flavian period, in order to gain some background to Domitian's actions. We must, first of all, be alert to the fragmentary nature of these fasti; for Asia, Eck lists known holders for all years but seven, with two men unplaced in a precise year, while for Africa only thirteen are known, fewer than half.⁶⁾ Statements based upon such statistics should be presented with caution. Secondly, we do not know, in every instance, the previous posts that the proconsuls held; were this information available, we might find that the number of men who had earlier been consular legates would be substantially increased.

The pertinent aspects of these careers for proconsuls of Asia follow:

5) "In certain reigns the personal trust of the emperor must have been the main criterion in many appointments." (Campbell 27).

6) W. Eck, *Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian* (Munich, 1970) 234-236.

Name	Imperial legateships	Consulship	Proconsulship
M. Aponius Saturninus	Moesia (cons.) 69/70	a. 69	c. 73/74
M. Vettius Bolanus	Britannia (cons.) 69/70-70/71	66	c. 75/76
M. Ulpius Traianus	Cappadocia-Galatia (cons.) 70/71-72/73 Syria (cons.) 73/74-77/78	70	79/80
C. Calpetanus Rantius	Numidia (praet.) 69/70-70/71	71	c. 81/82
Quirinalis Valerius	Pannonia (cons.) 73/74-76/77		
Festus	Hispania citerior (cons.) 78/79-80/81		
Sex. Iulius Frontinus	Britannia (cons.) 73/74-77/78 Germania inferior (cons.) 82/83-83/84	73?	86/87
C. Vettulenus Civica Cerialis	Moesia (cons.) 81/82-83/84	74?	c. 87/88
L. Luscius Ocrea	Lycia-Pamphylia (praet.) 74/75	77?	c. 90/91
P. Nonius Asprenas Caesius Cassianus	Cilicia (praet.) between 72 & 82	?	between 87/88 & 95/96
Let us insert the following hypothetical career in the list following Civica Cerialis:			
Cn. Iulius Agricola	Aquitania (praet.) 73/74-76/77 Britannia (cons.) 78/79-84/85 Moesia (cons.) 86/87-88/89	77	90/91

Surely that would not appear out of place. Men from the military provinces gained the proconsulate of Asia with considerable regularity under the Flavians.⁷⁾ Festus may already have been designated under Titus, but nonetheless he suffered no disability under Domitian. Of Agricola's predecessors in Britain, Vettius Bolanus and Iulius Frontinus became proconsuls, while Petilius Cerialis, perhaps because of his relationship with Vespasian, returned to a second consulate and, it may be, ultimately even a third.⁸⁾ Agricola would have fit right into the pattern. But something happened. It was not, I think, Domitian's desire to keep Asia as the apex of a civilian career, but rather the revolt of Antonius Saturninus in Germania superior. And linked with this are the events along the Danube.⁹⁾

Soon after Agricola's recall from Britain, Moesia was invaded by the Dacians. Initial disaster was redeemed by the emperor himself, but the praetorian prefect Cornelius Fuscus and his army were annihilated. An interval of two peaceful (?) years followed, but in 88 this conflict was renewed, and Antonius Saturninus rose against Domitian in the same year. This event and subsequent misfortune along the Danube may well have caused Domitian fear, concern, and jealousy of those who might have proven a more attractive standard bearer of revolt than Saturninus had been. Else why would Agricola not have been posted to the Danube provinces? Tacitus well describes the desperate circumstances: *et ea insecuta sunt rei publicae tempora, quae sileri Agricolam non sinerent: tot exercitus in Moesia Daciaque et Germania et Pannonia temeritate aut per ignaviam ducum amissi, tot militares viri cum tot cohortibus expugnati et capti* (*Agr.* 41, 2).

There was another theater of empire which could have profited from a man of Agricola's talents, although it was not normally governed by a consular and this would have been an extra-

7) I believe that E. Birley's judgment is still valid: "I need hardly stress that the two proconsular provinces of Asia and Africa, which were reserved for ex-consuls, were in a very different category; they were often reserved to crown the career of a man whose whole active life had been spent in the emperors' service: witness the disappointment of Agricola when Domitian's agents forced him to withdraw his candidature for that high honour." ("Senators in the Emperors' Service," *PBA*, 39 (1953) 197-214, on 204.) I doubt that Birley would limit that honor to men who had pursued a "civilian" career in the emperors' service.

8) A. R. Birley, "Petillius Cerialis and the Conquest of Brigantia," *Britannia*, 4 (1973) 179-190, on 186-187.

9) See, in general, R. Syme, *CAH*, XI (1936) 168-178.

ordinary command. This was Mauretania, where Domitian was faced with unrest in the 80s. The two provinces of Caesariensis and Tingitana were sometimes combined under one governor. "Even in times of comparative peace Mauretania required a large army of occupation.... Although policy counselled a minimum of interference, peace and order could not always be guaranteed by these methods. A Mauretanian rising, like all African wars in any age, was an affair of years."¹⁰) The Flavians were consciously concerned with consolidation and modification of existing settlements, if such there were. Agricola had been very successful in urging the acceptance of *Romanitas* in Britain (*Agr.* 21); he could have been charged to attempt the same in Mauretania, or indeed (and perhaps more appropriately) in Numidia. Success here could then have been crowned by the proconsulship of Africa, although there is no evidence, for the Flavian age, that governors of Numidia or Mauretania had any advantage over others in designation for the proconsulship.

The suggestion has frequently been made that Agricola was not used after his British experience because he was a "one province man," who would not have been equally effective in totally different situations. That can be discounted, for a good general will be good regardless of the requirements of the campaign, and no one will deny that Agricola was a good general. One need only think of the careers of men like Corbulo, in Germany and the east, Suetonius Paulinus, in Mauretania and Britain, of Frontinus, in Britain and Germany, of Petilius Cerialis, in Germany and Britain, and of Trajan later on, in Germany, Dacia and the great war in the east.¹¹)

Tacitus says that Agricola remained in retirement and was denied the opportunity to serve in Asia. It cannot be shown that that was not what happened, and the reasons, equally likely, were Domitian's fear and jealousy of a truly distinguished commander, who might, given the opportunity (so the emperor thought) become a second Galba or, at least, a more attractive and thus more successful Antonius Saturninus. And the Asian *fasti* seem to bear out this conclusion, for it is not until after 88 that "light-

10) See, for Roman policy in Africa, R. Syme, *CAH*, XI (1936) 145-150; the quotations are from 149.

11) The importance of military ability in Tacitus' judgment of individuals is the subject of my paper, "*Imperium and Capaces Imperii* in Tacitus," *AJP*, 93 (1972) 14-26.

weights" become proconsuls: Ocrea and Cassianus had only held legateships of praetorian provinces and had held no other significant posts, as far as we can tell, in the emperor's service. Ocrea is particularly intriguing, since he *may* have been suffect consul in the same year that Agricola held a suffect consulate, and his proconsulship probably fills the year for which Agricola was eligible. There was no comparison in distinction and military prestige between the two candidates; that the emperor chose the lesser man stems from his fear of a rival, not from his desire to make the Asian post the culmination of a civilian career. Circumstances, not desire, brought that about in the years subsequent to 88. It was Agricola's misfortune at that period to have been a *vir magnus quantum licebat* (*Agr.* 17, 2), and his career thus came to an end.

This is what Tacitus implies; there is no evidence that gainsays him, nor is there cause here for innuendo. He may well be reporting what he had heard, not from Agricola himself, but from the latter's widow, his own mother-in-law. And if the reasons suggested above were not paramount in Domitian's mind, but men nonetheless believed that they were crucial, what difference was there? *Se non è vero, è ben creduto*, and Tacitus accurately represented the spirit and belief of his age.

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