

BEYOND THE TANAIIS: TACITUS AND QUINTUS CURTIUS

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Abstract

Due to the confusion between the Don and the Sir-Daria in some ancient sources, Tacitus' account of the Roman campaign against Mithradates VIII of Bosphorus might have been inspired by the episode of Alexander's crossing of the 'Tanais' reported by Quintus Curtius. Tacitus highlights the importance of the first Roman victory beyond this river: this land was considered the limit of the known world, as was also the case of Britannia, whose conquest was also described by Tacitus. If we admit a Claudian date for Curtius' work, the favourable image of Alexander's victory over the Sacae given by this author could have evoked the emperor's triumph over Mithradates, who was of Achaemenid descent.

In an interesting article published in 2004, B. Bosworth remarked upon the close relationship between Curtius Rufus' *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, and the work of Tacitus, whom he may have influenced to a considerable degree. One of the aspects proposed by Bosworth is the analogy between Agricola's campaign in Britannia, and Alexander's struggle against the Scythians on the Tanais (Curtius 7. 7. 1–7. 9. 19).¹ In both cases, the subject is a war at the limits of the known world, against virtuous and fierce peoples. In each case there is a speech in which the ambition of the conquerors is criticised: both Alexander and Rome want to gain control of the whole world, fighting against unconquered peoples, who live in poor and inhospitable territories and who are prepared to defend their freedom rather than live under a foreign power. In Curtius' account, an old Saca ambassador reproaches Alexander; in the case of Tacitus, Calgacus, the Caledonian chieftain, delivers the speech (Curtius 7. 8. 12–30; Tacitus *Agricola* 30–32).²

Nevertheless, there is another passage in Tacitus which is quite similar to the content of Curtius' Scythian speech: it is the account of Claudius' campaign against Mithradates VIII of Bosphorus (Tacitus *Annales* 12. 15–21; Cassius Dio 60. 8. 2).³ It

¹ Bosworth 2004, 555–59.

² Bosworth 2004, 555–58. See also Ballesteros-Pastor 2003, 30 n. 34, 32. On Calgacus' speech, see in particular Clarke 2001, 103–12. Furthermore, a relationship between Tacitus *Agricola* 38. 2 and Curtius 9. 9. 1 has been detected: Wolfson 2008, 65–74.

³ Pliny *NH* 6. 17; Petrus Patricius *FHG* IV 184–185, fr. 3; Levick 1990, 157–58, 230 n. 25. The chronology of this war has been discussed (see Goroncharovskii 2003; Saprykin 2005, 174–75).

was, moreover, a struggle east of the Tanais and against tribes considered to be of Scythian origin. Towards AD 45/6, Mithradates had rebelled against Rome and had re-established his rule, expelling his brother Cotys, who had been installed on the throne with Roman support. The Roman armies, having achieved a victory over Mithradates and the Sirakoi, his allies, passed in their march near the Tanais.⁴ Eunones, king of the Aorsi, who had given refuge to Mithradates, requested Claudius' clemency for the defeated king of Bosphorus. The emperor then deliberated between sparing Mithradates' life or fighting in the lands of Scythians and Sarmatians: unknown regions, with impassable roads, warlike kings, wandering peoples and unproductive lands. All this represented great peril and little benefit.⁵ The dilemma is similar to that proposed by the old Saca to Alexander: war against the Scythians is uncertain, and the profit obtainable from a poor nomadic people does not justify so great a risk.⁶

Tacitus' passage on this Roman campaign also has an epic tone, as noted by P. Wuilleumier.⁷ This is reflected above all by the express mention of the River Tanais, a mythical frontier that marked the limit between Asia and Europe and was, to some extent, the end of the *oikoumene*.⁸ Alexander believed that he was crossing this same river for his struggle against the Scythians, because he confused the Tanais (Don) with the Iaxartes (Sir-Daria).⁹ It is interesting to observe that

⁴ Tacitus *Annales* 12. 17: *exercitus Romani, quem incruentum et victorem tridui itinere afuisse ab amne Tanai constitit.*

⁵ Tacitus *Annales* 12. 20: *At Claudius (...) dubitavit tamen, accipere captivum pacto salutis an reperere armis rectius foret. Hinc dolor iniuriarum et libido vindictae adigebat; sed disserebatur contra suscipi bellum avio itinere, inportuoso mari; ad hoc reges feroces, vagos populos, solum frugum egenum, taedium ex mora, pericula ex properantia, modicam victoribus laudem ac multum infamiae, si pellerentur (cf. Cassius Dio 37. 3. 2).* Both the Sirakoi and the Aorsi were considered to be Scythian tribes by Strabo (11. 2. 1). However, some authors said that they lived in Sarmatia: Pliny *NH* 4. 80, 6. 16–17; Solinus 15. 18; Ptolemy *Geographia* 3. 5, 7. 10. This confusion between Sarmatians and Scythians was common among late Hellenistic and Roman authors (Nicolai 1984, 113–25; Olbrycht 2001, 442–43). Sirakes was a Scythian name: Polyaeus 7. 11. 12, 8. 26; Olbrycht 2001, 443 with n. 134. The Arosi and the Sirakoi had lived formerly in the region of the Aral (Olbrycht 2001, 443–47).

⁶ See, for instance, Curtius 7. 8. 22: *Transi modo Tanain; scies, quam late pateant, numquam tamen consequeris Scythas. Paupertas nostra velocior erit quam exercitus tuus (...). Rursus, cum procul abesse nos credes, videbis in tuis castris.* In a similar sense, cf. Justinus 2. 3. 10–12.

⁷ Wuilleumier 1976, 58 n. 4.

⁸ Flor. 1. 39. 6: *terminum gentium Tanain*; Horace *Carmina* 3. 10. 1: *extremum Tanain si biberes.* Augustus tried to highlight Roman dominion over the whole world with the explicit mention of the peoples beyond the Tanais: *RG* 31: *nostram amicitiam appetiverunt per legatos Bastarnae Scythaeque et Sarmatarum, qui sunt citra flumen Tanaim et ultra reges*; Cresci Marrone 1993, 115; Olbrycht 2001, 447. On Augustus' rule over the Maeotis and the Hyrcanian Sea, see also Virgil *Aeneid* 6. 798–799; Horace *Carmina* 3. 4. 36. For further references to Augustan propaganda on Roman dominion over the Scythians, see Ballesteros-Pastor 2003, 37 n. 71.

⁹ This mistake was noted in antiquity (Plutarch *Alexander* 45. 5; Strabo 11. 7. 4; Pliny *NH* 4. 69; Solinus 49. 5; Bosworth 1980, 377–78). This confusion may be due to the image of the world in

Tacitus states that the legions were three days' journey from the Tanais – a distance which, it seems, was indicative of the nearness of these limits of the world. Pompey, as Plutarch says, also stopped his march three days from the Hyrcanian Sea (Plutarch *Pompeius* 36. 1).¹⁰

It is difficult to use this analogy between Tacitus' account and the speech of Curtius as a valid argument to date the *Historiae Alexandri Magni* to the time of Claudius.¹¹ However, if we admit this chronology, it may be possible that Curtius would have established an association between the Roman emperor and this episode of Alexander's history. It is interesting to observe how Curtius, after the harsh warnings of the Scythian delegation, describes the Macedonian raid across the Tanais in surprisingly favourable terms: Alexander's aim is only to win glory by defeating an unbeaten people.¹² In fact, it seems as though the king was adopting an attitude proper to the Scythians, that is, the search for glory and honour, rather than the desire for power and wealth.¹³ Alexander sets the Saca prisoners free, showing his *clementia* towards the defeated enemy;¹⁴ in the same way, Claudius allows Mithradates to travel safely to Rome, where the ruler lived for 20 years until his death (Tacitus *Annales* 12. 21; Plutarch *Galb.* 13. 4, 15. 2).

This positive view of Alexander also agrees with the fact that in Curtius' passage on the Macedonian raid beyond the Tanais several aspects have been detected that seem difficult to believe, and that, furthermore, they differ greatly from Arrian's account of this same episode.¹⁵ Beside the differences on tactical matters, it is interesting to note that Arrian (*Anabasis* 4. 4. 5) tries to diminish the Macedonian victory over the Scythians, saying that Alexander had only defeated some brigands. On the contrary, Curtius wanted to present Alexander as triumphant over this people.

Alexander's times (see Bosworth 1996, 81–82). There was a similar landscape on the banks of both rivers (Bosworth 1995, 27; Geus 2003, 238).

¹⁰ This distance may not have been real (Wirth 1983, 32 n. 97).

¹¹ For a general review of the problem of Curtius' date, and a defence of his work being written under Claudius, see principally Atkinson 1998, 3451–55; and further André 1998, 26; Dion 1998, 74; Atkinson 2000, 319; 2009, 2–14. Other scholars have proposed a date in the time of Vespasian (see Fugmann 1995; Baynham 1998, 201–19; Bosworth 2004, 566).

¹² Curtius 7. 9. 17–18: *Invictos Scythas esse crediderant; quibus fractis, nullam gentem Macedonum armis parem fore confitebantur. Itaque Sacae misere legatos qui pollicerentur gentem imperata facturam; moverat eos regis non virtus magis, quam clementia in devitos Scythas. Quippe captivos omnes sine pretio remiserat, ut fidem faceret sibi cum ferocissimis gentium de fortitudine, non de ira fuisse certamen.*

¹³ Justinus 2.3. 7: (Scythae) *nihil victores praeter gloriam concupiscunt; cf.* 1. 1. 2: (Vezosis and Tanaus) *nec imperium sibi, sed populis suis gloriam quaerebant.*

¹⁴ Curtius 7. 9. 18; Arrian *Anabasis* 4. 5. 1. A similar attitude is seen in Curtius (7. 10. 4–9) in relation to the Sogdian prisoners. On Claudius' *clementia* in Tacitus, see further Syme 1958 I, 414–15; II, 497.

¹⁵ In particular, it is hard to believe Curtius' description (7. 8. 7, 7. 9. 2–4) of the Macedonian tactic of crossing the river (Ricky 1975; see further Bosworth 1995, 27–28).

As in the case of Britannia, Scythia was at the end of the world; their inhabitants were poor but brave.¹⁶ As with the conquest of Britannia, Claudius might have exalted his triumph in the East, not only as worthy of comparison with Alexander's exploits, but also as *primus inventor*, because it was the first military success of Rome beyond the Tanais.¹⁷ Thus, it is not unlikely that Tacitus would have thought to link the struggle of Alexander against the Sacae and the campaign of Claudius against the Scythian tribes.¹⁸ Let us also remember that Mithradates was declared to be a descendant of the Achaemenid line.¹⁹ Therefore, the Roman emperor had triumphed over the same dynasty that Alexander had defeated some four centuries earlier.

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¹⁶ On this image of the edges of the *oikoumene*, see in general Romm 1992, 45–77. On the Scythians, see Hartog 1980, 23–25. On Britannia, see Stewart 1995; Clarke 2001, 104–08. It must be noted that in Britannia there was a river called the Tanaus (Tacitus *Agricola* 22. 1), and this was also the name of a mythical Scythian king (Justinus 1. 1. 6). Tacitus mentions in both campaigns the problem of piracy, characteristic of the barbarian countries located in the limits of the known world. (Tacitus *Annales* 12. 17; *Agricola* 28. 2; cf. Clarke 2001, 110).

¹⁷ Koestermann 1967, 137. Pliny (*NH* 6. 14) states that the Tali, a people who lived near the Caspian Sea, were known in Rome for this war against Mithradates. The campaign of Agricola is also regarded as the first time in which the Romans reached some parts of northern Britannia (Tacitus *Agricola* 10. 4). On the importance of the geographical discoveries made by the Roman armies, see Mattern 1999, 26–29.

¹⁸ There may have been a relationship between Claudius and Alexander with regard to the conquest of Britannia (Dion 1988, 74). This success of Claudius was exalted as the extension of the Roman dominion to the end of the world (Melmoux 1990; Richard 1998; Barrett 2000).

¹⁹ Tacitus *Annales* 12. 18. 2; cf. Plutarch *Alexander* 60. 14; Koestermann 1967, 138. On the Achaemenid lineage of the Mithradatids, see Bosworth and Wheatley 1998. This was also noted by Sallust (*Historiae*. fr. 2.73M), whose description of the Black Sea was probably consulted by Tacitus for his account of this campaign against Mithradates (Syme 1958 I, 354; Koestermann 1967, 140). The whole passage has a clear Sallustian influence (Syme 1958 II, 706, 730).

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