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## Kings beyond the *claustra*. Nero's Nubian Nile, India and the *rubrum mare* (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.61)

### Summary

This paper considers ancient and some modern thought about the general characteristics of 'client kings'. Arguably exceptional cases (especially Parthians) and key issues (especially succession) are examined in the larger framework of Roman imperialist ideology as well as, where possible, from kings' viewpoints. Differences and changes are seen as variations on an elastic, but integral theme. That elasticity, enhanced by the language of courtesy, obstructs narrow modern definition, but crucially explains the success of this Roman imperial strategy. Tacitus is central to all this. Finally, a new reading of *Annals* 2. 61 arises from this and closer consideration of Roman notions of the Red Sea region ("Ethiopia", India etc.), so that the passage becomes inconclusive to discussions of the completion-date of the *Annals*, on which it has often been seen as important.

Keywords: Tacitus; Nero; Caucasus; *claustra*; Egypt; Red Sea.

Der Beitrag widmet sich antiken wie auch zeitgenössischen Überlegungen zu Besonderheiten des ‚Klientenkönigtums‘: Ausnahmefälle (insbesondere die Parther) und grundsätzliche Fragen (vor allem hinsichtlich der Erbfolge) werden im weiteren Kontext der römischen Herrschaftsideologie und soweit möglich auch aus der Perspektive der Könige untersucht. Unterschiede und Veränderungen erweisen sich als Varianten eines facettenreichen, aber grundlegenden Themas. Dieser auch noch durch die höfische Sprache erweiterte Facettenreichtum widersetzt sich zwar einer enggefassten modernen Definition, erklärt aber gleichzeitig den Erfolg dieses römischen Herrschaftsinstrumentes. Im Zentrum des Ganzen steht das Zeugnis des Tacitus. Daraus sowie aus einer näheren Untersuchung römischer Vorstellungen von den Gegenden um das Rote Meer („Ethiopia“, „India“) resultiert schließlich auch eine neue Lesart von *Annales* 2,61; daher wird diese Passage auch nicht länger als beweiskräftiges Argument in den Diskussionen über das Vollendungsdatum der *Annales* dienen können, innerhalb derer ihr so oft große Bedeutung zugemessen wurde.

Keywords: Tacitus; Nero; Kaukasus; *claustra*; Ägypten; Rotes Meer.

## I Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to look again at the role(s) played by monarchs of various kinds in the functioning and development of the Roman frontier, with particular reference to what may be called the ‘far frontier.’ By this designation I mean the rulers who were demonstrably beyond the power of the Romans in a military sense, but who might still be considered (whether by Romans or by modern scholars) as in some sense ‘client kings.’ In particular, we shall look again at Nero’s expedition into ‘Ethiopia’ to find the source of the Nile, where distant kings played a significant role, perhaps even as far as India. That discussion will shed a rather different light on the famously unclear rumination of Tacitus at *Annals* 2.61, where Germanicus visits the *claustra* of Upper Egypt. Meanwhile, *en route* we shall also visit the *claustra* of the Caucasus, to assist with a broad understanding of Roman dealings with the many different client kings (and their dealings with Rome), including the royalty of Parthia.

## 2 Generalization and the hazards of succession: Roman emperors and Parthian royals

Already some three decades ago I sought to establish the outlines of what I imagined as a version of Weber’s Ideal Type, ‘the client king.’ I sought to proceed beyond the great plethora of variations among different rulers across time, place and local circumstances in order to generalize in a way that would be analytically useful, especially in understanding the dilemmas and opportunities encountered by ‘the friendly king’ (as I preferred to call him and sometimes her) and the strategies and choices he might make. On reflection now (though I certainly did not realize it at the time) my agenda was rather postcolonialist in that the perspective of the king seemed much more enlightening than the concerns of Roman power, whether at the center or among Romans closer to the frontier, not least provincial governors. On the whole the book was well enough received (its poor production-quality notwithstanding),<sup>1</sup> but some critics were troubled by the fact (certainly true) that different rulers did different things at different times. In that sense there was a reluctance to consider the generalized experience of ‘the’ client king, which was the whole point of the exercise.<sup>2</sup> Of course, all kinds of different actions and events might occur, but the dynamics of the broad set of relationships remained the same to an important extent. And that was the nature of the kind of Weberian characterization of client rulers that I sought to elucidate.

1 Typical of early ‘camera-ready copy’ before modern desktop publishing.

2 E. g. Mitchell 1987.

There was some discussion also about the appropriateness of the word 'friendly,' since it was certainly the case that some of these rulers were not particularly or at all friendly to Rome in some part of their activities. Of course, at one level we have here the language of courteous personal and interstate relationships, which was the more usual mode of imperial diplomacy, however much Romans may have enjoyed stories of no-nonsense Romans encountering overly sophisticated and mendacious foreigners.<sup>3</sup> However, there is also the key reality of the inequality in power and resources which this language is designed to massage. But the reality was in no way concealed. For it was very clear to all concerned that some rulers had tiny states, while others had significant forces and other resources at their disposal. These were inequalities between the various 'friends' and also between those 'friends' and Rome. The point is that it was not generally in the interests of either Rome or its friendly rulers to harp on such differences. The friendly ruler was a very practical feature of Roman imperialism, but it was the very fluidity of his role that made him most effective. The essence of that role was his maintenance of basic stability in his realm and his support of Roman interests, whatever those might be and howsoever they might arise. Among his greatest problems was that Rome was not a monolith, so that he was all too easily entangled in the internal travails of Roman political struggles, with which he had at least to be conversant in order to manage his rather ill-defined 'friendship' with the individuals, groups and interests which constituted the Roman state, whether under the Republic or under the rather more centralized Principate.

The issue of difference between friendly rulers is at its sharpest with regard to the kings of Parthia, whose military potential and resources dwarfed so many other friendly rulers. Meanwhile, there is certainly something rather awkward in taking these as client kings or friendly kings when so much of Roman imperialist thought presents them as the great enemy, the other of the "two great empires."<sup>4</sup> I would suggest, however, that the issue is not so much whether or not they were in a formal or informal sense friendly kings, but that their relationship with Rome was more generally idiosyncratic and peculiar, especially by virtue of their military potential, their history with Rome and their willingness often to engage with Rome in constructive diplomacy to mutual benefit.

We should perhaps recall Plutarch's formulation of Marius' peremptory advice to another such king, Mithridates VI Eupator, "Either try to be more mighty than the Romans or do what you are told in silence" (*Marius*, 31). According to Plutarch (broadly contemporary with Tacitus, be it noted) Marius spoke so bluntly because he wished to provoke the king to war, while the king was all the more shocked by his first experience

3 On the discourse of friendship see Saller 1983. See also below on Plutarch's Marius and Cn. Piso.

4 Plin. *nat.* 5.88: *inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque*; cf. Matthews 1984, 161.

of Roman outspokenness (*parrhesia*) because he had shown all due courtesies and respect (*therapeia* and *time*) to the Roman. The historicity of the moment need not detain us: the bluntness ascribed to the Roman has its own history in Greek and Roman culture and the historiography of ancient diplomacy, traceable at least as far back as the response of Herodotus' Scythian King Idanthysus to the Persian King Darius when the latter demanded his subjection.<sup>5</sup> The whole problem with Parthia, from a Roman perspective, was that the scope for diplomatic accommodation coexisted with the awareness on both sides that in crude military terms Parthia could inflict serious harm upon the Roman Empire, in the east at least. In that sense there was an abiding unclarity about where superiority lay between the two. On the one hand, the spectacular defeat of Crassus continued to resonate among Romans long after, while the occasional Parthian movement through the century or so after Crassus reminded Romans that Parthia might do much the same again. On the other hand, however, a Parthian king (Phraates IV) had returned Crassus' standards, sent sons and their families to Rome for their 'education' and maintained broadly cordial relations.<sup>6</sup> Strabo, towards the beginning of the first century AD, opines, with a rather reticent optimism, "the Parthians are all but near to handing all their power to the Romans" (Strab. 6.4.2).

As Nero's regime appreciated particularly well, diplomatic accommodation did not preclude proclamations and celebrations of imperial achievement against the Parthians or any other power. Nero's arrangements with the Parthians over Armenia were remarkable as a solution of the problems presented by that land, but they were not untypical of the tenor of the relationship between Rome and Parthia that had been set with such fanfare by Augustus and Tiberius in 20 BC (e. g. *R. Gest. div. Aug.* 32: the Parthian king, however, *non bello suprat*). Meanwhile, the tradition of Nero's personal fascination with Tiridates exemplifies a broader and older anxiety at Rome that emperors might have rather too much in common with the kings with whom they associated. For kings and their offspring mixed in Roman society under Republic and Principate alike: Pliny put their special knowledge to good use, for example, in his account of the geography of the interior of Asia, where he makes much of the special knowledge he has been able to gain from "kings sent to Rome from there as suppliants or the children of kings as *obsides*."<sup>7</sup> Romans retained a special set of responses to royalty, a full spectrum from positive to negative.<sup>8</sup> Royal engagement in Roman scholarship was no great problem for the empire and redounded to the king's credit as a wise ruler: it suffices to recall the work of Juba II, another of Pliny's sources.<sup>9</sup> But there was something uncomfortable

5 Hdt. 4.127; cf. Ballesteros-Pastor 1999.

6 Rose 2005 stresses the second half of this dichotomy. Cf. Kleiner and Buxton 2008, with substantial bibliography.

7 Pliny *nat.* 6.23 with Millar 1982. The Latin *obsides*

is conventionally translated as 'hostages,' but the term is a poor reflection of their position and significance: Braund 1984 ch. 1; Allen 2006.

8 Well captured by Rawson 1975; cf. Erskine 1991.

9 Roller 2003.

in the potential for royal political influence at Rome, especially where emperors were concerned. We may recall the notion that Agrippa I and Antiochus IV, as they were to become, had taught Caligula to be a tyrant (Cass. Dio 59.24.1: *tyrannodidaskaloi*). At the same time, even under the Principate there abided a concern in Roman ideology that the Roman abroad, in the alien company of foreigners and kings, was not only physically at risk, but also in moral danger. This was the context for Cn. Piso's petulant comment on the splendid banquet that he and Germanicus received from the king of Nabataea, Aretas IV, where the king bestowed golden crowns on his guests: Piso is said to have remarked that this banquet was being given for the son of the Roman *princeps*, not for the son of the Parthian king (*ann.* 2. 57).<sup>10</sup> The remark suggests that Germanicus was in danger of becoming like the son of the Parthian king, drawn into eastern ways of luxury and probably despotism by the disturbing generosity of the Nabataean king. And there is also the further suggestion that the king himself was more used to hosting Parthian royalty, a question-mark against his loyalty to Rome.<sup>11</sup> When Piso proceeded to throw away his crown and inveigh at length against luxury, Germanicus tolerated him in part because this strand of thought had long had a respectable place in Roman ideology. More specifically, it was precisely the sense of similarity between a Roman emperor and a Parthian king that gave force to the notion that the Nabataean king was somehow confusing the two. Accordingly, the Parthian king Vologaeses' famous concern for the dead emperor Nero (Suet. *Nero* 57) may be read as a mark of the emperor's successful diplomacy and high reputation on the eastern frontier, but Romans might also take the view that Parthian sympathy and mutual understanding were less than entirely creditable to a *princeps*.

One of the most startling examples of the sense that the Roman emperor and Parthian king shared much in common is to be found in some rather neglected verses of Statius' *Thebaid*, composed c. AD 80–90. At one level we may understand his poetry in the strong Roman tradition of expressing and even showing empathy with the perspectives and dilemmas of its opponents.<sup>12</sup> However, we see here also how much the successor to the Parthian throne looks like a successor to the *princeps* of the Roman Empire. For, in a simile bearing on succession among the bygone Argives, the poet introduces what can only be a Parthian royal, imagining the dilemmas of a young successor to the Parthian throne:

*sicut Achaemenius solium gentisque paternas exceptit si forte puer, cui vivere patrem tutius, incerta formidine gaudia librat, an fidi proceres, ne pugnet vulgus habenis, cui latus*

10 Goodyear 1981 *ad loc.* is probably right to think that Aretas gave the banquet in the province of Syria.

11 Not without some cause: e. g. Ios. *ant. Iud.* 18.155.

12 Notably, Tac. *ann.* 15.1–2; cf. in general, Ando 2008, 291.

*Euphratae, cui Caspia limina mandet. sumere tunc arcus ipsumque onerare veretur patris equum, visusque sibi nec sceptrum capaci sustentare manu nec adhuc implere tiaram.*  
(Stat. *Theb.* 286–293)

Like an Achaemenid taking over the throne and his father's people, if perhaps a boy, safer with his father alive: he balances joy with uncertain fear. Would the elite be loyal? Would the masses chafe at his reins? To whom should he entrust Euphrates' flank? To whom the Caspian thresholds? He fears to take up the bow and set his weight on his father's horse. In his own mind he is not fit to wield the sceptre nor yet to fill the tiara.

Roman poets felt able to describe Parthians as Achaemenids, despite (and perhaps also because of) the consequent ambiguity.<sup>13</sup> There is little of that ambiguity here, however, for reference to the Euphrates and Caspian Gates suits Parthia far better than Persia. Indeed, this extraordinary passage has been taken to refer to the succession of a particular Parthian prince, as well it may.<sup>14</sup> However, the very fact that it is a simile arising from succession among Argives invites us to consider its wider relevance. Succession is the abiding problem, and frequent obsession, of monarchy in all its forms.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, it is a *leitmotiv* of the Principate, both in literature and in political reality, so that we should not find it remarkable that events in Parthia often look so similar to events at Rome, for example, in the *Annals* of Tacitus.<sup>16</sup> While it is the succession of emperors that has the greatest impact, the theme of succession reverberates loudly at all levels of Roman society, embracing wills, legacy hunting, freedom of speech and the rapacity of emperors, amongst much else.<sup>17</sup> Kings regularly seek to arrange their succession, not least to polish and ensure their own legacy as fine kings. However, within the Roman ambit, kings were wise to look to Rome, whether in the hope of securing the succession they desired or, where no more desirable option existed for them, as the best successor available.<sup>18</sup> In Statius' sketch of the young successor's anxieties, there is no great sign of any anxiety about Roman judgments or responses. And yet Rome is not far away. Elsewhere Statius himself writes of Romans contesting the Caspian Gates, no doubt primarily the Darial Pass of northern Iberia (*silv.* 4.4.7), while the Euphrates frontier could only signal the potential for conflict with Rome. Naturally enough, the Roman writer has nothing to say about Parthia's dilemmas on other frontiers to its south and east.

13 *OLD* s. v. *Achaemenius*. Note e. g. Stat. *Theb.* 1.718 on the Persian-Parthian sun-god.

14 Hollis 1994. It is overlooked by the excellent studies in Wiesehöfer 1998, though the Achaemenid associations of Parthia are treated there.

15 Goody 1966; cf. MacGaffey 2006 with bibliography.

16 On which, e. g. Ash 1999, raising also the view that Parthian inadequacies might be held responsible for Roman degeneration, in the absence of a suitably dangerous opponent.

17 E. g. Millar 1977.

18 Cf. Braund 1983.

At the same time, however, Statius was surely aware that Rome had played very substantial roles in the Parthian royal succession in the decades previous to his poetry. For example, the emperor Claudius had responded to Parthian envoys' requests and sent a grandson of Phraates IV, a certain Meherdates, to become Parthian king in place of the reportedly tyrannical incumbent, Gotarzes. Tacitus has the Parthian envoys refer in the Senate to their old friendship with the Romans and point out that the Romans should help their allies, the language of friendly kingship. They were rivals in strength, they said, but yielded to Rome *per reverentiam*. They had sent the sons of their kings as *obsides* so that they might acquire a better king, accustomed to the *mores* of the emperor and the senators (*ann.* 12.10). The diplomatic courtesies were heavily laced with Tacitean irony.

After the manner of Statius' *puer* Meherdates was young, albeit a *iuuenis* (*ann.* 12.11). And his youth was an issue, we are told, for his inexperience meant that he was easily deceived (*ann.* 12.12). Tacitus had had Claudius share his wisdom on government with the youth, homilies whose heavy irony has been well observed: while Claudius' own rule hardly qualified him to dilate on such matters, it was at least unclear that Roman ideals were appropriate to the ruling traditions of a Parthian king. In any event, Meherdates did not last long. For he showed himself a true *alumnus urbis* (as Claudius had called him, intending to be positive), when, ignoring sound advice from the Roman governor of Syria, he preferred to enjoy the luxury of Edessa rather than seize the moment to take power (*ann.* 12.12). The satirist Juvenal makes a similar point about the ill-effects of the education of royals at Rome, for all the fine words of the envoys who had come to take home young Meherdates.<sup>19</sup> In the shambolic events that followed, Gotarzes captured the young man, cut off his ears and denounced him as a foreigner and a Roman, says Tacitus: after all, he probably held Roman citizenship, as friendly rulers of the Principate usually did, while his upbringing in Rome was no doubt also embraced within the insults. Tacitus concludes that the living, earless Meherdates demonstrated the *clementia* that Gotarzes had been said not to have and, probably more important, constituted a disgrace for Rome (*dehonestamento: ann.* 12.14). The historicity of all this is difficult to assess, though it is worth noting that the frequent discovery of Gotarzes' coins in the Caucasus tends to support Tacitus' passing remark that he was energetic in sending *corruptores* to spread money to win loyalty. However, it is clear enough that Tacitus uses the story of Meherdates to show the gulf between imperial intentions (in particular, that of Claudius) in Rome and the problems in realizing those intentions as fact in the distant kingdom. As the sardonic author comments, this case illustrates the general principle, proved by experience, that barbarians preferred to ask for kings from Rome than to have them: *experimentis cognitum est barbarous malle Roma petere reges quam habere* (*ann.* 12.14).<sup>20</sup>

19 Iuv. 2.163–165 (and throughout the poem) with Gowing 1990.

20 Gowing 1990, esp. 321.

That (though set in a civil war) and Statius' example illustrate the hazards of succession from all points of view, including those of the predecessor, the successor, the kingdom at large and any powers with an interest in the stability of the kingdom. This was the great weakness of the imperial use of friendly rulers, while it was also a weakness of the rule of emperors at Rome: as Statius wrote the *Thebaid*, Domitian had recently come to power, himself young enough and with thoughts of the Caspian Gates (e.g. Suet. *Dom.* 2). Therefore it is hardly surprising that as insightful an historian as Tacitus perceived the problem of succession among kings, Roman emperors and others besides, not least in Parthia. In that sense we may indeed see him as critical of central aspects of the Roman strategy of using such rulers, as has been suggested.<sup>21</sup> But, for all that, it is by no means clear that his accounts of various failures amount to a critique of the system as a whole, whether in practice or in principle. In Meherdates' case, for instance, there were shortcomings aplenty, but Rome had not suffered much loss. While the Parthians had suffered bloody civil conflict, Rome had lost a Parthian *obses*, whose primary value was for deployment in this kind of way. Certainly, Tacitus stresses the blow to Roman pride and reputation, but that was not the loss of an army: not a single Roman had died or suffered defeat, unless we count Meherdates himself. The entire plan had been a Parthian one, in which Rome's role had been simply to deliver Meherdates. There was no guarantee that, if he had been successful, he would have reigned in Roman interests. Tacitus liked defeated rulers to die in dignity (*ann.* 2.63, Maroboduus; cf. *Hor. carm.* 1.37 for the thought). Meherdates had not.

As Tacitus presumably realized, it was the nature of the system (if we may so term the use of friendly rulers) that sundry problems would arise. In addition to succession, many other difficulties might emerge: the ruler might need Roman intervention, prove insufficiently obedient, flout Rome's interest or even go to war against her. With no doubt there was an instability in friendly kingdoms. To be clear, this is not the kind of instability currently in vogue among literary critics (including some critics of Tacitus)<sup>22</sup> according to whom nothing means anything very concrete and all decisions significantly imply the many decisions which were neither taken nor considered, so that authorial anxiety is everywhere and now the previous fashion for authorial subversion<sup>23</sup> seems itself to be subverted by a trepidation, uncertainty and lack of direction that have more to do with the modern academic than with even the most timorous of ancient writers. Rather, it is the instability involved in the holding of power. Clearly such instability was undesirable, but what was the alternative? It is of course true that from time to time Rome chose to establish its own direct rule by removing or failing to replace a ruler,

21 Gowing 1990.

22 E. g. Lavan 2011, esp. 294 n. 1, finding ambiguity in Tacitus' view of Agricola; see further below on slavishness.

23 Note Hine's scepticism on claims of Senecan subversion, for example: Hine 2006, 64 and further below.



but that option was frequently out of the question, beyond the military strength of the empire. Frequently too, it was not especially desirable, for friendly rulers were often a satisfactory enough choice (or the least bad option at any rate), so that in some areas they were retained for centuries, as for example in the Crimean Bosphorus, where too kings might proclaim their Achaemenid identity (Tac. *ann.* 12.18, Mithridates VIII, who lived on in defiance, denying defeat). The whole purpose of friendly rulers was not to hold for Rome lands that could readily be held by direct rule without cost to Rome, but to establish a link, a degree of influence and preferably a measure of control in areas which were in one way or another difficult, whether by reasons of terrain, location, distance, local culture and/or the local ability to maintain independence by force if necessary. As for Parthia, which under the early Principate seems to have presented all these difficulties to various extents, Rome remained unwilling and unable to establish any direct administration there. For when Trajan had his great victory over Parthia, he installed a friendly ruler. Trajan's act, rather as Nero's arrangements with Parthia over Armenia, was in a strong sense a continuation of long-standing Roman diplomacy in Parthia, though the military success it expressed certainly offered powerfully to lay the ever-looming ghost of Crassus.<sup>24</sup>

### 3 From Germanicus at the *claustra* to Nero's Nubian Nile

All this tends to support those who (rightly) insist that Tacitus' remarks on Germanicus' visit to Egypt do not help us much in dating the completion of the early books of the *Annals*. The passage has been well discussed by a host of scholars, but it may be worthwhile briefly to draw attention to some aspects of it that bear on the present discussion, especially as controversy seems to persist.<sup>25</sup> Tacitus' account of Germanicus' journey up the Nile, with all its possible associations with earlier journeys there, is replete with pre-Roman antiquity, including the Spartan origins of Canopus, the activities of Hercules, and above all the stunning assertion of King Ramesses' imperial might at Egyptian Thebes. There Germanicus learns of that king's empire, which embraced all Asia Minor and more, including even the Medes, Ethiopians and Scythians. The revenues of that empire, continues Tacitus, were "no less magnificent than those commanded by the might of Parthia or Roman power" (*ann.* 2.60). Once again we see the Roman Empire set beside the Parthian in a manner that suggests substantial parity between the two great empires. And once again we see how those empires are readily compared with empires

24 On which, e. g. Sen. *nat.* 5.18.10.

25 Goodyear 1981, *ad loc.* has a fine discussion, observing (*contra* Lipsius) that if Tacitus wished to introduce Trajan here, he "bungled the job." For

Pagán 2012, however, the passage remains decisive, either for a date post 106 (Goodyear) or a date post 117 (Lipsius).

of the past, whose demise might be taken as a warning for the future. However, as Tacitus has it, Germanicus (with his grandfather Antony's shade never far away)<sup>26</sup> was engaged by other wonders too,<sup>27</sup> both man-made and natural, when he came to Elephantine and Syene:

*Exin ventum Ejephantinen ac Syenen, claustra olim Romani imperii, quod nunc rubrum ad mare patescit.* (Tac. *ann.* 2.61)

Then he came to Elephantine and Syene, the bounds once of the Roman Empire, which now lays open to the Red Sea.

Since Lipsius at least there have been attempts to find Trajan in this sentence: talk of the *rubrum mare* might be taken to refer to the Persian Gulf, at which Trajan famously stood at the height of his eastern conquests in AD 116, allegedly with disappointed thoughts of Alexander and India.<sup>28</sup> We may note, however, that Trajan is nowhere mentioned, while he is also strikingly absent from the extensive treatments of Parthian affairs throughout the *Annals*.<sup>29</sup> And also that the *rubrum mare*, which may refer to the Persian Gulf on occasion, refers more usually to the Red Sea.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, Tacitus does not use the phrase elsewhere, for its appearance at *Annals* 14.25 must be a manuscript error: there is a clear nonsense in the idea of sending Hyrcanians to the Red Sea (worse, Persian Gulf) as a way of getting them back to their homes by the Caspian without being caught by Parthians.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the discovery of the so-called *Tabula Siarensis* may prompt the suspicion that the very name of Germanicus evoked thoughts about the limits of empire, perhaps echoing even to Tacitus' day, though it is to be stressed that the extant text of that inscription says nothing that explicitly connects his monuments with such limits.<sup>32</sup>

There has also been astute consideration of the possible relevance of Roman activities in Arabia.<sup>33</sup> However, any interpretation of Tacitus' troublesome phrase must account for the important fact that Tacitus has here been writing sustainedly about the situation in Egypt. Arabia, though often associated with Egypt, has not been at issue at all in this part of the *Annals*. Moreover, if he had wanted to whisk his readers suddenly

26 Kraus 2009, 111.

27 On the *miracula* of Egypt: cf. Sen. *nat.* 4a.1.1 with Williams 2008, 229–230.

28 Cass. Dio 68.29.1; cf. Parker 2008, 2001–2003 on Trajan and India.

29 Woodman 2009, 41.

30 The term (thoroughly discussed by Goodyear *ad loc.*, who shows that it most easily means Red Sea here) may also denote the whole body of water that takes in both and much the Indian Ocean.

31 Unwittingly demonstrated by Schmitthenner 1979,

102, seeking a route for them that way (Plin. *nat.* 6.58 does not help). Lipsius' *sui* is surely correct: these were Hyrcanians going to the Hyrcanian Sea, presumably via the Caucasus.

32 See the interesting remarks of Potter 1987.

33 Goodyear's preference (Goodyear 1981, 392–393, with bibliography). The Nabataean kingdom had been made a province and road-building had ensued, not least to the Red Sea: Isaac 1992, 119–121; Bowersock 1983, 83.

from Egypt across the Red Sea and Arabia itself to the Persian Gulf, his choice of expression was uncharacteristically infelicitous. In that event, he would surely have used *Persicum mare* or some other form of words to make plain that he did not mean simply the Red Sea: we may compare the elder Pliny who does broadly that in describing Arabia as projecting between two seas, the *rubrum* and the *Persicum* (*nat.* 6.143). In addition it has also been observed, importantly, that other passages in this part of the *Annals* do not make good sense if Trajan had already at the time of composition reached the Persian Gulf.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, if we take *rubrum mare* to denote the Red Sea, however closely demarcated, and not the Persian Gulf we are left with an apparent peculiarity. For the Roman Empire had stretched to the Red Sea from the moment that Rome took over the Ptolemaic kingdom.<sup>35</sup> Romans were busy in the Red Sea well before Germanicus, as archaeology and the literary tradition demonstrate, not least in exacting taxes from trade activities there. An extreme example of one of the consequences is provided by the elder Pliny, who, as we have seen in other contexts, liked to set his geographical studies apart from earlier accounts by introducing informants and information with which he had some personal contact or knowledge. Characteristically, therefore, Pliny tells us of a delegation sent to Rome under Claudius by the king of Sri Lanka (alias Ceylon alias Taprobane). As he tells it, the delegation was a consequence of Roman involvement in taxing goods on the Red Sea, in process already under Augustus and so well before Germanicus' visit to the *claustra* of Egypt.<sup>36</sup> The freedman of a tax-farmer named Annius Plocamus had been blown as far as Sri Lanka, where he had impressed the king. In particular, the king is said to have observed that the coins in the freedman's possession were of a standard weight, despite the fact that their heads indicated that they had been minted by different emperors. In that fact, according to Pliny, the king saw *iustitia* and so dispatched a delegation of four men to Rome in his eagerness to establish friendship (*hoc maxime sollicitatus ad amicitiam: nat.* 6.85). Claudius was then emperor, while Pliny says that he garnered a great deal of information not only about their own land but about lands beyond, which he presents to the readers of his *Natural History*, information better than otherwise available (*nat.* 6.84). This is a good example, whatever we think of the details, of a king taking the initiative in establishing friendship with Rome. However, the whole affair and the Augustan involvement in the Red Sea from which it springs, tends to render Tacitus' troublesome phrase difficult in another way. For, if Roman imperial power had stretched to the Red Sea since the death of Cleopatra (one might argue even before since the Ptolemies were friendly and allied kings, and Cleopatra herself almost certainly a Roman citizen),<sup>37</sup> we are left to wonder which period Tacitus had in mind

34 Goodyear 1981, 389.

35 E. g. Sidebotham 1986.

36 Starr 1956; Schmitthenner 1979, 102–103.

37 Peek 2011.

when he wrote *olim* as well as to ponder any sense in which Germanicus was not able to reach or even sail the Red Sea if he had so wished.

These matters have generated a vast scholarly bibliography. Certainty on these hoary questions is impossible and the achievement of wide consensus unlikely. However, given the sustained focus on Egypt in these chapters and the clear suggestion that the old *claustra* of the Roman Empire there are now (*nunc*) in some sense open to Roman *imperium*, it is surely primarily from a perspective in Egypt that we should consider the Roman Empire as opening to the Red Sea. Tacitus seems to be suggesting that Germanicus stopped at the *claustra* marked by Elephantine and Syene, as was appropriate in his day, but that the *imperium Romanum* now reaches beyond these old limits to the Red Sea. The issue is not when and whether the empire reached the Red Sea at all (it had done so for at least half a century or so before Germanicus), but where the empire now (*nunc*) reached that sea. Germanicus had travelled up the Nile and stopped at the *claustra*. Tacitus' claim, I suggest, is that the empire now (*nunc*) stretches through and beyond the *claustra* on up the Nile to give access to the *rubrum mare*. And for the extension of Roman power up the Nile we must consider the Roman concern with Meroe and so-called 'Ethiopia,' that is the Upper Nile valley of Nubia, and how the *rubrum mare* could have featured in that concern.<sup>38</sup>

Already under Augustus Rome had probed beyond the *claustra*, but success was very limited and temporary: Nubians celebrated their victory, so that Germanicus would have been unwise to proceed beyond the *claustra*.<sup>39</sup> Of course, the whole issue of Egypt had been brought into particular vogue by Julius Caesar's exploits there, the activities of Antony and above all the Augustan construction of Cleopatra, though the roots of Roman interest in Egypt were deep enough from as early as the third century BC.<sup>40</sup> Hence Germanicus' desire to tour the region. Under Nero, however, there was a new initiative on the southern frontier of the province of Egypt, perhaps encouraged by Seneca, who had a long-standing involvement with the region and later also lands there.<sup>41</sup> Nero sent an expedition through the *claustra* and on, further up the Nile. This was a mission that was at once scientific, diplomatic and military. Our two key texts, the younger Seneca (*nat.* 6.8.3) and elder Pliny (*nat.* 6.181 with 12.19; cf. Cass. Dio 63.8.1–2), offer slight differences of detail about this expeditionary force which have caused much trouble to scholars, to the extent that two such forces have sometimes been imagined, quite unnecessarily.<sup>42</sup> The force was quite small, but made up of praetorians and so in that sense of some standing (Plin. *nat.* 6.181). Seneca says that, when the force returned from its

38 The advance of Roman *imperium* need not entail annexation of a province, *pace* Goodyear 1981, 391. See further below.

39 Burstein 2008 offers an excellent sketch of these matters, with valuable bibliography; cf. Welsby 1996; Welsby 2001.

40 E.g. De Vos 1980.

41 Well set out by Williams 2008.

42 See Hine 2006, 63, with bibliography, among which De Nardis 1989 satisfies any desire for footnotes in spades.

adventures, he heard the report on the mission given to Nero by two centurions, while Pliny writes that a military tribune commanded the expedition. Conceivably, Seneca's memory may have been faulty.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, the report of the centurions suggests that the tribune did not return to Rome, whether dead (through conflict, accident or illness) or re-deployed elsewhere. Seneca praises the emperor's commitment to the advancement of knowledge: the emperor is acclaimed as "the greatest lover of truth" (*aman-tissimus veritatis*). The expression is echoed by Seneca's nephew, Lucan, who, prone to encouraging comparison between Nero and Julius Caesar, has the latter affirm, "But, though so much *virtus* dwells in my heart, so great a love of truth, there is nothing I would rather learn than the origins of the river (Nile), concealed for so many ages, and its unknown source (*caput*: cf. Seneca's *ad caput investigandum*)" (Lucan. 10.188–191)<sup>44</sup> Clearly, discourse about the expedition (involving at the very least Seneca, Lucan and evidently Nero himself, but probably also a much wider public)<sup>45</sup> was couched in terms of love of truth and the search for the Nile's head, whatever else might be involved in the enterprise. In fact there is good reason to think that Nero was rather serious about matters of science as well as the arts, and every reason to include the Nile expedition within that interest.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, as Lucan makes clear, the question of the Nile's source evoked not only Caesar but also pharaohs and Alexander himself. For Lucan claims that Alexander had sent a body of picked men to find its source, but they had been beaten back by heat (Lucan. 10.270–275): this group recalls Nero's praetorians well enough. Of course, from the outset, it had been hoped that Nero's force would find the source of the Nile, and there was a suggestion that it may have done so, though the expedition had been undone by the impassable swamps of the Sudd that remain very difficult of passage to the present day. However, success could be claimed. These swamps might be taken to show further progress than achieved by Alexander's picked men, stopped by the desert. And the centurions were able to report about a possible source, as well as the terrain, conditions, flora and fauna that they had encountered, on which Pliny has a lot to say in consequence. This was all new knowledge, on which Lucan stays silent, presumably avoiding anachronism but also missing a chance to praise his emperor. However, the centurions were able also to report on the attitudes they found at Meroe and among other rulers of the region south of the *claustra*, who were said to have shown their friendship with Rome. As Seneca has it, the centurions reported that they had penetrated *ad ulteriora*

43 See below on his apparent confusion of Philae with Meroe.

44 *Sed, cum tanta meo vivat sub pectore virtus, tantus amor veri, nihil est quod noscere malim quam fluvii causas per saecula tanta latentes ignotumque caput.* On Nero's love of truth, see Montiglio 2006, 577; Hine 2006.

45 As often, philological attention has limited the

significance of the shared language of Seneca and Lucan to their narrow literary society: Williams 2008, 232. Pliny gives a strong sense of the expedition's contribution to knowledge, as discussed below.

46 Further, Hine 2006, 64–67: note especially the Egyptian dimension of the crepuscular Chaeremon.

after being given help by the king of Ethiopia and commendation to the nearest kings (*a rege Aethiopiae instructi auxilio commendatique proximis regibus ad ulteriora penetrassent*). Pliny asserts that there are 45 kings in Ethiopia (*nat.* 6.186), so that we may understand why the mission focussed on the *proximi*. The identity of the King of the Ethiopians mentioned by Seneca remains unclear, though one might imagine a high king of particular importance, at least in Roman eyes. There was a special ruler at Meroe, not a king but a queen, known by the title of Candace. About her Pliny has a little to say: the expedition must have had contact with her and clearly reported on her (*nat.* 6.186). Again we may wonder about the accuracy of Seneca's recollection. It may well be that Seneca has misremembered this lady as a king.

Evidently royal attitudes in the region had softened since the conflict with C. Patronius, encouraged by Augustus' own soft diplomacy<sup>47</sup> and no doubt also by the burgeoning prosperity visible in the material record of Nubia through the first century AD. That prosperity is usually explained as a consequence of Nubian exchange and economic mediation with Roman Egypt to the north and India, Arabia and the African hinterlands to the south.<sup>48</sup> Seneca, whose knowledge of the Upper Nile had evidently benefited from the centurions' report, seems to envisage a trade-route beyond the *claustra*, along the Upper Nile through Ethiopia (that is, Nubia) and across desert sands<sup>49</sup> to what he calls the "Indian Sea" (*Ab hac Nilus magnus magis quam violentus Aethiopiam harenasque, per quas iter ad commercia Indici maris est, praelabatur: nat.* 4a.2.4). It may be important that Seneca wrote a work entitled *De situ Indiae* as well as a discussion of Egypt,<sup>50</sup> especially if we see him as central to the dispatch of the mission up the Nile. Nero's key courtier had a particular interest in the broad region, while the geographical tradition about India was so bound up with that about Ethiopia that in some degree he must also have engaged with Nubia in these writings. In any case, the interweaving of India and Ethiopia provides an important context for Roman activities to the south-east, as we shall see.<sup>51</sup>

This is our first glimpse of a *rubrum mare* beyond the *claustra*, though Seneca's discussion in this section of the *Natural Questions* is a little undermined by his disquieting confusion (as it seems) between Philae and Meroe. It is therefore all the more important that the elder Pliny is so clear in his association between the expedition, Ethiopia and the Red Sea, though he nowhere specifies that the Red Sea was a particular objective of the mission, which it may well not have been. For, when Pliny gives the dimensions of Ethiopia, he explicitly takes Ethiopia and the *rubrum mare* together as if a unit, though he does not explain why (*nat.* 6.196). More important still, he is wholly explicit that beyond Meroe lies the *rubrum mare*:

47 Millar 1982, 12.

48 Burstein 2008, esp. 50; cf. Burstein 1998. On India and Ethiopia, Schneider 2004; Parker 2008 passim.

49 On Ethiopian sands and dust, cf. *nat.* 1. *praef.* 9;

3.6.2; 4a.2.1 and 2.18.

50 Plin. *nat.* 6.60 with Schmitthenner 1979, 102; Parker 2008, 70.

51 See the important study of Schneider 2004.

All the tract from Meroe is bounded by the Cave-dwellers and the Red Sea, with a three day journey from Napata to the coast of the Red Sea, on which route rainwater is conserved for use at some places, a region most fertile and with gold.

*Trogodytis et rubro mari a Meroe tractus omnis superponitur, a Napata tridui itinere ad rubrum litus, aqua pluvial ad usum compluribus locis servata, fertilissima regione quae interest auri.* (*nat.* 6.189)

Napata had a particular significance among Romans as the town sacked by the Augustan expedition of the prefect Petronius, whose violence had not taken him at all as far as Nero's diplomacy, though he had striven to retain a fortified position at Primis, well to the south of Elephantine and Syene (*nat.* 6.182; cf. 184).<sup>52</sup> Strabo, who probably took his information from Petronius himself, unwittingly underlines the achievement of Nero's mission when he explains why Petronius had not pressed on south of Napata – "he judged that the regions beyond were difficult to travel" (Strab. 17.1.54). Nero's small force had made that journey. Moreover, Pliny, though no great admirer of Nero,<sup>53</sup> is very clear that Nero's mission had been a major advance on Petronius' under Augustus, in the sense that it had gone much further and brought back much more information, which, as far as Pliny was concerned, had firmly settled a series of disputes, particularly about distances.<sup>54</sup> For the Roman military had a strong and very practical concern with distances between settlements and other key points in the landscape.<sup>55</sup> In fact, on their return Nero's men seem to have presented their emperor with some kind of map (*Aethiopiae forma, ut diximus, nuper allata Neroni: nat.* 12.19).<sup>56</sup> For Pliny and *a fortiori* for Nero and his regime, earlier Greek and Roman knowledge and achievement in the geography of the region had been far superseded by the results of Nero's expedition.

As interest in Egypt and the Nile was key to the dispatch of the expedition, so too it provided a context for the reception and celebration of its successful outcome. The Nile and its region were a major theme of Neronian Rome: to the expedition and the remarks of Seneca and Pliny we may add an account of Egypt by Claudius Balbillus, its prefect through Nero's early years. Some governors liked to dilate on the provinces they had held, but wonder-filled Egypt and the Nile in particular were especially ripe

52 Strab. 17.1.48–54; cf. Welsby 1998, 1983.

53 Beagon 1992, 191.

54 Nero's mission might have been judged inferior in that it seems not to have sacked any town or won any battle, but Pliny does nothing to encourage that line of thought.

55 Millar 1982, 16.

56 Rackham's much-used and very useful Loeb trans-

lation of this textually corrupt passage seems to take *forma* here to mean no more than 'appearance' or the like, but Pliny's array of distances and the rest are consistent with a pictorial image: for *forma* ... *allata*, cf. Vitruv. 2. *praef.* 2 (*formas adfero*). On schematic military maps, see Millar 1982, 16; cf. Parker 2008, 220 and the literature he cites for more pessimistic notions.

for such treatment.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, we must also recall the extraordinary excursus on the Nile and its sources that occupies a large part of the tenth book of Lucan's *Civil War*, where we see how the Nile readily evoked Alexander, the aforementioned Julius Caesar and other totemic figures of the past. In addition to Seneca's taste for Egypt, the emperor's personal fascination with the region was well known and well criticised among contemporaries.<sup>58</sup> Tacitus reports Nero's plan to visit Egypt, no doubt encouraged by the expedition's success. The idea of such a visit was swiftly abandoned, according to Tacitus (*ann.* 15.36), though a bath was built in Alexandria to receive the emperor, the undoing of the prefect Caecina Tuscus, who dared to use it (Cass. Dio 63.18.1), so that we may infer that the visit was not so much cancelled as postponed. Tacitus also tells us that in AD 65 Nero chose to have the body of his second wife, Poppaea, embalmed "after the manner of foreign kings" (*regum externorum consuetudine: ann.* 16.6), a phrase of broad application, but which tends to suggest Egyptian practice in particular.<sup>59</sup>

However, Tacitus is remarkably silent about the expedition up the Nile. That silence resists explanation, though we may note that Tacitus is silent too about Nero's similarly-looking mission to trace the amber route towards the Baltic.<sup>60</sup> Conceivably, he remarked on such matters in the context of his (no doubt scorching) treatment of Nero's later planned expedition to the *Caspia claustra* of the Caucasus, the Darial Pass, evidently also with an eye to Alexander (Suet. *Nero* 19).<sup>61</sup> We may suspect that he preferred to omit an expedition which, as even Pliny makes clear, brought much credit to the emperor. After all, Tacitus could find space for the absurd (as he presents it) search for Dido's Carthaginian treasure (*ann.* 16.1–2.1). However, if Tacitus was silent on the Nile expedition, Nero's regime certainly was not. From the first years of his reign much had been made of trivial successes at the frontier, notably in Armenia, well before there had been anything substantial to crow about. It was only consistent to make the most of success up the Nile. Accordingly, when Tiridates eventually reached Nero on the bay of Naples and was entertained with spectacles at Puteoli, Nero's freedman presented before him and the public an entire day of "Ethiopians" (Cass. Dio 63.3.1). Men, women and children featured, at least some apparently in gladiatorial combat. The fact that the expedition had returned several years or more before Tiridates' arrival tends to indicate how much was made of the Nile success,<sup>62</sup> for it still resounded and Tiridates could be shown the reach of the Roman Empire with the expectation that he would be impressed,

57 *Sen. nat.* 4a.2.13–15 with Williams 2008, 233 on Balbillus, prefect AD 55–59.

58 Champlin 2003, 174.

59 In detail, Counts 1996.

60 *Plin. nat.* 37.45 with Hine 2006.

61 Some doubt Nero's concern with Alexander, for

reasons unclear to me: see Hine 2006, 64 with bibliography.

62 The *Natural Questions* was completed c. AD 63, but the expedition had returned before that date, presumably while Seneca was still busy at Nero's court: further, Williams 2008, 218 n. 4.



especially as Parthia had neither gained nor lost anything on this frontier, which was for them relatively unfamiliar and perhaps more than a little exotic.

Gladiatorial combat notwithstanding, the day of Ethiopians displayed to the royal Parthian also the theme of Roman friendship, the context and particular purpose of his long journey to Nero. For the Nile expedition had found friendly rulers, it was reported, who had done what the empire expected of its royal friends in that it had supported the work of the expedition, a point which figures prominently in Seneca's short account of its reported results. Meanwhile, something could be made of the toponym Philae too, which though it stood in fact at the *claustra*, seems to be presented by Seneca as the name for Meroe, to be translated into Latin as *Amicae*, whether for reasons of myth or because this was the boundary between Egypt and Ethiopia where friendship was established. Did Nero's regime claim that Meroe was friendly even in its name, either in the display at Puteoli or in some other context?<sup>63</sup> Possibly, but there was more pageantry to be had in the mythical associations of Ethiopia. Pliny's references to these offer substantial clues about the ways in which a whole day of Ethiopians might have been given some variety and zest. For Pliny mentions the eponymous Aethiops himself, the son of Vulcan, appropriate to the famous heat of the Ethiopia that took his name (*nat.* 6.187). Also the famous Memnon, whose Egyptian statue had fascinated Germanicus, might well have been put on show. Pliny mentions him as part of the great Ethiopian past, with which he connects even Andromeda (*nat.* 6.182), who may therefore also have appeared in the long show at Puteoli. She linked Ethiopia with Syria, a region of special interest for a Parthian set on the rule of Armenia. In addition, much might be made of sun, sand and, above all surely, the Nile itself, whether as a river, as a masculine river-deity or both. Presumably the river-god appeared in all his power and fecundity, presented as the supporter and ally of the expedition.<sup>64</sup> Exotic creatures – crocodiles, hippopotamus and the rest – were surely *de rigueur* in such a pageant, perhaps with ebony trees and other flora (Pompey had shown them: *nat.* 12. 19). Pliny holds forth on the various physical peculiarities of the inhabitants of these lands too, which might have been represented during the day, with or without claims to their scientific significance, such as Pliny implies (*nat.* 6.187–188). However, Pliny is interestingly sceptical about the reality of pygmies at the Nile's source. The source itself must have appeared in some form, though Pliny's apparent scepticism leaves a measure of doubt as to whether pygmies featured in any way. He is much surer about the use of red clay as body-covering, despite his misunderstanding of the practice as the result of local shame about having black skin (*nat.* 6.190), so that this very visual phenomenon may have been included in the pageantry too. There was a danger of monotony in devoting a whole day to Ethiopians, but Pliny's hints are enough

63 The extant sources on this are flimsy enough (Williams 2008, 232), but there was a potential to be exploited in this etymology.

64 Braund 1996a; cf. Graham 2005; Engels 2002, with full bibliography.

to show the potential variety of themes and images available to make up the show. At all costs the day had to be both striking and engaging, as also the rest of the festivities, for Tiridates had only just arrived and this was the moment to impress him.

We may be very sure that the celebration of Ethiopia went far beyond the day at Puteoli, both before and after. True, the expedition had been no stunning conquest. But a probing military expedition on so famous and evocative a quest was campaign enough for a Neronian celebration of the military success that the youthful emperor badly needed. As well as myth, exotica and combat, the show at Puteoli may have re-enacted scenes from the expedition in suitably martial terms. However, ultimately, it was Tiridates himself and the great agreement over Armenia that would overshadow Nero's Ethiopian campaign, albeit not quite yet and not entirely. For the success was made important enough to be registered, if not by Tacitus or by Suetonius, whose priorities were elsewhere. Pliny is clear that the scientific expedition had a military intent, as also is Cassius Dio: exploration and imperialism are familiar bedfellows.<sup>65</sup> And had not Nero found the source of the Nile, solving the famous old problem that had intrigued Alexander, Caesar and others? It was easy to say so. While Seneca praised Nero's love of truth, he could also draw a flattering comparison with Persian Cambyses, yet another glance at past empires.<sup>66</sup> For crazed Cambyses had made the mistake of launching an Ethiopian expedition in ignorance of the land and conditions there, but wise young Nero had sent a special unit to assess the situation as best could be done, with resulting success to proclaim. It is not hard to see why Nero's freedman considered it appropriate to set before the royal Parthian a day of Ethiopians, showing Neronian imperial success at a distant frontier, where Persian Cambyses had failed so spectacularly. No doubt the Ethiopians' association with the sun (e. g. Lucan. 10.307) did nothing to deter him: both Tiridates and Nero were committed to a sun deity, whether Helius-Apollo or Mithras, as their staged rituals in the Roman Forum made very plain.<sup>67</sup> And in fairness Nero's small expeditionary force had real achievements to claim. For, as we have seen, it was to its discoveries that Pliny turned for his account of the Nubian Nile, as earlier had the partial Seneca. And there was a real value in strengthening friendly relations with the rulers of the region beyond the *claustra*, especially in view of the unsatisfactory outcome of hostilities under Augustus. Meanwhile, all this illustrates well enough the aforementioned value of friendly rulers to Rome: the instability of the contacts that were strengthened and forged by Nero's Nubian expedition was a small downside that had to be tolerated when the upside of these connections was so clear and no better option existed for Rome.

65 As Hine 2006, 63 appreciates.

66 Sen. *de ira* 3.20.1: *non prouisis commeatibus, non*

*exploratis itineribus*. Cf. Lucan. 10.280.

67 Champlin 2003, 221–229.

It should not surprise us to find that Cassius Dio offers an account of Nero's Nile expedition in distinctly negative terms (Cass. Dio 63.8.1). Such is the tenor of his treatment of Nero and his regime as a whole. It is to be expected that the expedition's achievements would be rubbished by Nero's more determined critics. And so it is. For Dio brings together the Nile expedition and the later plan to campaign at the Caspian Gates as examples of the same process, throwing in alleged rancour with Parthian Vologaes too. Dio's claim is that Nero hatched these ambitious schemes to north and south only to abandon them when his scouts reported that these projects required time and trouble. Suddenly, the ambitious emperor was satisfied instead with the hope that these regions would come under Roman control on their own (*automata*). It was easy to be critical about a preference for diplomacy over war, especially as Nero set off instead (as Dio presents the matter) for his scandalously unmilitary 'campaign' of performance in Greece. In all this, Dio shows scant concern for chronology. By bringing these matters together his aim of course was to damn Nero's alleged combination of caprice and pusillanimity, rather as Tacitus suggests, for example, in his account of the emperor's aborted trip to Egypt. However, the two projects did have something important in common which may actually have featured in Nero's politics and in more positive accounts of his reign. Both plans concerned famous *claustra*. It may well be that Nero himself brought them together as examples of his desire and ability to extend Roman power. After all, Claudius had made much of his extension of the empire to Britain, a much-celebrated *leitmotiv* of his reign wherein breaking open the bounds of the natural barrier of Ocean had been a central conceit.<sup>68</sup> Nero could not claim to have created a new province, but he could claim with some justice to have addressed these two *claustra* at other points of the compass than Britain in the west. Events in the Caucasus remain murky, though Flavian concerns with the *claustra* there indicate a problem, in which the Alani certainly played a part.<sup>69</sup> To the south, as we have seen, it was easy for Nero to claim success. His expedition had probed deep and local rulers had shown their friendship. Whether or not there was any claim that they had been cowed by Nero's greatness, it could be proclaimed that new Ethiopian obedience made a fighting war there both unnecessary and unwise.

It remains unclear how far the sea passage to India mentioned by Seneca was important to Nero's expedition. Neither Seneca's brief mention of the centurions' report nor Pliny's disquisition on the nature of the Upper Nile have anything to say about the relevance of notions of India to the dispatch of the expedition. However, the manner of their accounts did not require it. Seneca says simply that they were sent *ad investigandum caput Nili*,<sup>70</sup> which might or might not entail information about a passage to

68 Braund 1996b; Clarke 2001.

69 I have explored this in Braund 1994.

70 Compare Julius Caesar's expressed desire at Lucan. 10.188–192.

India. However, the fact that Seneca elsewhere linked the Nubian Nile with sea-passage towards India tends to suggest that thoughts of India had at least some role in the expedition's dispatch.<sup>71</sup> At least we may be sure that in celebrating the expedition's success Nero and his regime made the most of its significance, so that there was every reason to bring forth notions of the *rubrum mare* and India. Roman emperors had been thinking about India for a long time: Augustus himself had boasted of the royal delegations that "were often sent to me from India, not seen before with any Roman leader" (*R. Gest. div. Aug.* 31.1). We are left to speculate about the parts of India from which all these royal emissaries had come.

None of this is to suggest that Tacitus alludes to Nero's expedition at *Annals* 2.61. Since he does not mention it in his extant account of Nero, it would be rather perverse to imagine that he alludes to it so obliquely when describing the activities of Germanicus, despite the fact that Germanicus was Nero's grandfather (another possible incitement for Nero's expedition). Tacitus' point seems to be rather that Rome has advanced its reach beyond the *claustra* where Germanicus had stopped, now stretching beyond as far as the *rubrum mare*. His choice of vocabulary suggests the opening (*patescit*) of what had been closed (*claustra*).<sup>72</sup> Translation into English tends to obscure or remove the evocations of the Latin words which Tacitus has chosen to use here. However, it must be stressed that *patescere*, usually translated in such contexts as 'to reach' or the like, is close to *patere* and strongly evokes opening. Meanwhile, *claustra*, though regularly and reasonably translated into English as 'Gates' strongly evokes the verb *claudere* to which it is related. *Claustra* might be places where passage is possible, but the basic meaning of the word is 'bolts': these are places where space is restricted or closed completely. Through this vocabulary Tacitus is seeking to communicate to his readers the sense that Rome has opened the barriers at Elephantine and Syene and, via 'Ethiopia,' has opened Roman power onto the *rubrum mare* not simply along the eastern coast of Egypt but much further south and east, even towards India. For their part Roman readers would have been well prepared for such a discourse of opening what had been closed. We have noticed how Claudius used the idea in his crossing to Britain. The same idea was used again by Tacitus to describe Agricola's exploits to the north of the island, where he "opened up new peoples" (*Agr.* 22). The sense of opening was both scientific exploration and military conquest, embodying the claim that among the positive benefits of Roman military activity was its ability to open up the world not only for the empire, but for humanity and civilization at large.<sup>73</sup>

71 India and Ethiopia are linked again at *nat.* 5.18.2; Schneider 2004.

72 As noted by Goodyear 1981, 391, with bibliography and parallel usages, but he does not see the significance of that fact.

73 Clarke 2001, esp. 100, with Braund 1996b, chapters 1 and 9.

Confident Roman imperialism was at odds with *claustra*, for they were the instruments of defence, obstruction and closure, and so were inimical to the conception of Rome's imperialism as the facilitation of access, scientific knowledge and Roman military control. The elder Pliny's account of the Caspian Gates of the Darial Pass (which he alone insists on calling the "Caucasian Gates") illustrates their defensive obstructiveness very well:

... a huge work of Nature, with mountains suddenly split apart, where doors have been fitted with beams reinforced with iron, beneath the centre of which flows a river of ghastly odour. On a rock has been dug a fortress named Cumania, built to fend off the passage of innumerable peoples. There, at this place, the world is separated by gates (*terrarium orbe portis discluso*). Directly opposite stands the Iberian town of Hermastus. From the Caucasian Gates through the Gurdinian mountains the Valli and the Suani, unconquered peoples, dig gold-mines. From these to the Black Sea are very many types of Heniochi and then of Achaei. That is the situation at one of the most famous locations on earth. (*nat.* 6.30; cf. *Strab.* 6.4.2)

In essence, Pliny's description is accurate enough, except that it fails to make clear that a difficult road over many kilometres lies between the fortress of Cumania (whose remains are identified on a hill close above the left bank of the River Terek) and Hermastus, which must be Harmozica (alias Armazistsikhe). This is a fortified conical hill which faces the end of the route down from the mountains across the River Mtkvari (the ancient river Cyrus), an acropolis for the ancient capital at Mtskheta, situated at the end of that route and north of the Mtkvari. However, there is an element of imagination too, stressing the nature of the obstacle. The River Terek runs clean and odourless, while the great barred doors have yet to be established archaeologically and may well be invention. There was every reason for Pliny to have his geography right. Under Nero Corbulo's mapping in Armenia had taken in the place. Pliny knew that, for he complains idiosyncratically that the term "Caspian Gates" was used, wrongly as he insists (cf. *nat.* 6.40). The chance discovery of an inscription in the region of Harmozica also shows us that under Vespasian Roman military engineers were at work in Iberia strengthening walls: the inscription is dated to AD 75, two years before Pliny completed his work in AD 77 (*SEG* 20.112). As Stadius has already shown us, the Flavian regime was concerned about the *Caspia claustra*, as he more conventionally calls them.

A key feature of Pliny's account which is easily overlooked, however, is his treatment of the peoples of the region. On the Roman side of the *claustra* are the Iberians, by now an established friendly kingdom, Roman ally enough since Pompey, albeit not without incident. To the west, the peoples are unconquered (*indomitae gentes*), numer-

ous and fragmented (*plurima genera*) with names that recall Greek traditions of horrors there, though they are not a direct threat in Pliny's vision of the region. The problem, on his view, lies to the north, from where countless peoples (*innumerae gentes*) wish to cross southwards. Pliny doubtless knew that they had on occasion managed to cross with terrible consequences: only very recently Tiridates, now ruling in Armenia, had almost lost his life through such an incursion (*Ios. bell. Iud.* 7.7.4). It is the sheer weight of numbers that defies control. The fortifications at Cumania are the principal line of defence for the empire, so that where these *claustra* are concerned, the key issue is not their obstruction of Roman imperialism but their blockage of would-be invaders from outside. For Rome seems never seriously to have envisaged movement north of the Darial Pass onto the vast North Caucasian Foreland: there was nothing much to gain there. Both Rome and Parthia, separately and together, needed to defend here, but seem not to have considered (surely rightly) that the best form of defence might be attack. By contrast, as we have seen, expansion beyond Elephantine and Syene into Nubia was far more attractive for material, ideological and military reasons, which is why Rome was already probing in that direction under Augustus, why Nero sent his expedition and, on the present argument, why Tacitus alluded generally to Roman advancement there.

This substantial contrast between the two different *claustra* demonstrates clearly enough not all *claustra* were the same. However, we may also observe substantial similarities, prominent among which are the extraordinary numbers of peoples and kings who are said to have been involved at and around these key locations. Beyond the *claustra* of Upper Egypt we have seen no less than 45 kings, as well as Candace and (if he is not an error for Candace) a high king of some kind. Beyond the Darial *claustra* we have seen peoples who are simply countless, not to mention other numerous peoples of the area and of course the king of Iberia. Indeed there is every likelihood that the Caucasus and the steppe to its north could muster at least as many kings as the 45 or so of Nubia. Quite apart from the various kinglets of the western Caucasus listed in Arrian's *Periplus*, we have a series of names inscribed on artefacts, each of which presents a challenge of identification. Among older finds, there is Flavius Dades, found on a silver dish found in a burial close to Harmozica. Among more recent discoveries, in addition to our growing understanding of the Iberian elite, we must somehow locate Queen Ulpia Naxia, her seal-ring, sporting panthers as its hoop and her portrait and inscription on its face (Fig. 1), was found in a rich burial from the centre of Mtskheta.<sup>74</sup> Should we understand her to be an Iberian or is she a member of the burgeoning royal society of the Caucasus beyond?<sup>75</sup> The burial, possibly hers, was deposited in the later second century AD, while her *nomen* encourages a dating of that kind. There is little to be gained by speculating

74 I am grateful to Guram Qipiani and the Georgian National Museum for access and permission; also to

Sean Goddard for the drawing.  
75 Further, Braund, Nemsadze, and Javakhishvili 2010.

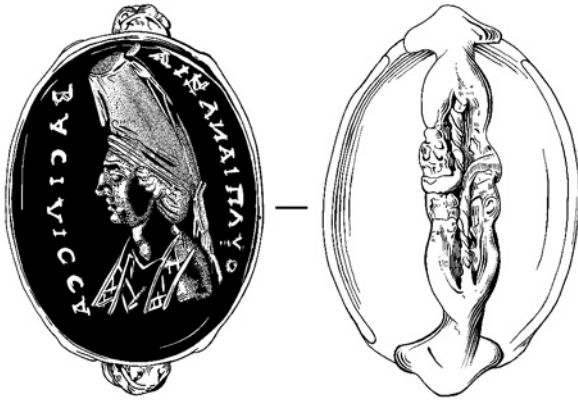


Fig. 1 Signet ring of Queen Ulpia Naxia.

about her acquisition of the name Ulpia and presumably Roman citizenship derived from Trajan, but we do well to note that an Iberian prince died for Trajan, probably at Nisibis. His verse epitaph mentions Seleucus Nicator, perhaps claimed also as an ancestor, and – most important for the present discussion – it identifies the Iberian kingdom as situated “by the Caspian *claustra*.”<sup>76</sup> Pliny alludes to that location’s enormous fame in the world, so we may well understand why the epitaph of an Iberian royal who died far away might situate his homeland according to this greatest of landmarks, with all its associations.

Each of these two *claustra* had its mass of rulers beyond and beside. In both regions, it was busy Roman diplomacy with these many authorities (albeit with their own internal hierarchies and alliances, no doubt) that made the *claustra* viable as strongpoints, whether for defence or for advancing beyond. The challenge for Roman government was enormous, so that while large decisions might be referred to the emperor, much diplomacy was left in the hands of local governors and other friendly kings. For in addition to all the problems that might attend the larger kingdoms, which we have already outlined, there was the sheer number of different rulers, each with their own agendas, traditions and no doubt resentments. It has been well observed that the Roman Empire had an easier task on its eastern frontier than its western to the extent that the former meant one substantial authority (under the Principate, Parthia) with which agreements could be made and hopefully kept, while to the west in Britain and Germany there was a plethora of different rulers, many with positions far less stable than, say, the Parthian throne. However, that general dichotomy requires modification insofar as there was much of the east that even Parthia could not control adequately. At the *claustra* of the north and the south there was a dizzying need for diplomacy, so that the model

76 IGR 1.192 = IGUR 1151.

of client kingship continued to flourish in all its complexity both in the Caucasus and in Nubia.

Augustus in the *Res Gestae* encapsulates an imperialist ideal which he claims to have achieved: “The borders (*fines*) of all the provinces of the Roman people whose neighbouring peoples did not obey our imperial command (*imperium*), I increased.”<sup>77</sup> However, as usual with the various excerpts from ancient texts which modern scholars roll out to support one view or another on Roman imperialism and frontier-ideology, the assertion requires close consideration that may seem to muddy his pellucid assertion. For a start, what did ‘obey’ mean? To ask that simple question is immediately to reveal a wide and complex spectrum of possible scenarios. For example, if the foreigner broadly followed Roman priorities, was that obedience enough? If, for special reasons, the foreigner acted in a way that did not suit Rome, or even against Rome, was that to be tolerated provided that in general or in future he was considered to be more Rome’s friend than her enemy? And which Rome was to be obeyed – the general at hand, his competitors in Rome, the emperor’s financial officers, the emperor’s advisers or (if he were to be troubled) the emperor himself? One could go on with such questions, but even these few illustrate the vitally important fact that it was not a simple matter either for Rome to insist on obedience or for others to deliver it.

And yet there is an ideological power in simplistic formulations of such desperately complex dilemmas. Plutarch’s Marius showed us one simple mode of dealing with the foreigner, in which the blunt and brutal demand for obedience was central and explicit. And as with Augustus’ expression, the alternative to obedience was war: Rome (or rather, this image of Marius) offered a simple black-and-white choice. For, as we saw, direct and commanding Roman behaviour of this kind suited a principal strand of Roman ideology: it was right and good for Romans to “war down the proud” as Augustan Virgil had Jupiter express part of Rome’s mission (*debellare superbos*: *Aen.* 853). But, for all the ideological power of such stances, it remained to deal with the realities of complex situations at the frontiers. There were limits even to Roman military capacity, as the occasional great disaster served to demonstrate very clearly, even if explanations could be spun to shift analysis of their causes away from the fact of those limits onto the shortcomings of individual Roman generals, a Crassus or a Varus. The military reality was that, strong and resource-rich as it was, neither Rome nor any other empire could combine, along all its frontiers, the blunt demand and enforcement of total obedience with active warfare in its absence. Of course, diplomacy did not work in that way: Plutarch’s Marius is an extreme, bent on creating war. In reading Augustus’ words in the *Res Gestae*, quoted above, scholars tend to follow his emphasis on the extension of

77 *omnium provinciarum populi Romani, quibus finitimae fuerunt gentes, quae non parent imperio nostro, fines auxi*: *R. Gest. div. Aug.* 26.1.



provincial territory, the successful imposition of war in the face of disobedience. However, his words are no less and probably more true when they are read in the way that he does not encourage quite so much. For he asserts not only war but also the success of his diplomacy, which features very prominently in this inscription as in the reality of empire. Of course, glory was traditionally to be had in war, but there was also glory to be had in diplomacy, at least because that too tended to suggest the military success and potential which underpinned and facilitated so much of diplomacy.

For, as we saw with Nero and the Nile expedition, there were many ways in which an emperor could turn practical diplomacy into military and other renown. Accordingly, soon after in the *Res Gestae*, Augustus presents his appointment of a king to replace the dead king of Armenia with another king as a major act of traditionalism, with which Tiberius is also involved to his glory. The emperor insists that he could have made Armenia a province, but preferred to follow the traditional path of client kingship (*R. Gest. div. Aug. 27.2: ... malui maiorum nostrorum exemplo ...*). Of course he does not explain that preference in this case nor set out all the problems of annexation, not least the consequences to be expected from the Parthians. Instead he seeks to validate it by setting out the genealogy of his new nominee, grandson of the Tigranes whom Pompey had left to rule there. Discussing the passage, Brunt and Moore rightly note that the emperor gives little indication of the upheavals that followed from his 'preference,' but then seem to suggest that he had a viable alternative, with which it is not easy to agree.<sup>78</sup> However, my point here is not to explore the many ways in which Augustus presents himself in the best light in the *Res Gestae* (a long and otiose task), but rather to use that tendency to show how grand notions of Roman imperial activity could coexist comfortably enough with the messy realities of the busy diplomacy upon which the imperial frontiers depended, whether for their security or for their extension.

It follows that we should not be too occupied by the apparent inconcinnities and inconsistencies in the various statements and suggestions of different Romans about the frontiers of the Roman Empire, upon whose resolution so much scholarly effort is expended. For not only do our various 'sources' (the reductionist common term does not help) have their own angles of vision and intention, like Augustus in his famous inscription, but – perhaps even more important – they are dealing with issues which are contested, dynamic and contestable. Why should one expect Romans to agree at all about the nature of the imperial frontiers? It is to be expected that broad tendencies are visible in Roman thought on the subject over time, for example the tendency for Roman emphasis to move rather away from war and expansion and towards the virtues of military conservatism and defence that is visible through much of the second century AD. However, the tension between those two general options – territorial expansion or

78 Brunt and Moore 1967, 72, noting Antony's example, which Augustus too may have had in mind.

maintenance of the status quo – had been part of Roman thinking for as long as we can explore it. Under the Republic, where too greed and glory did not require the extension or creation of provinces, there was regular controversy and hesitation for example, about how to respond to bequests of kingdoms, caused not only by the rivalries of power politics but also by the very issue of imperial expansion and the acquisition of further territory and its associated consequences.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, it is the same abiding issue that sets the context both for Augustan expansionism and for his very different final advice, having set out in writing a tally of the empire's resources, that the empire should be kept within its boundaries, not expanded.<sup>80</sup> In his usual sardonic manner, Tacitus adds that it was unclear whether he gave this advice through fear or through envy (of his successor's own potential achievements): *incertum metu an per invidiam*. Certainly, no-one could read the mind of the dead Augustus, though Tiberius will have had his own ideas. The main point here, however, is not to speculate about Augustus' motives in giving this advice but to locate that kind of advice within the history of Roman imperialism, as an on-going option debated through the Republic and Principate. The more conservative option may have been to the fore under Hadrian, for example, but the matter was by no means settled as we see not only with Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, but still more clearly with the expansionist tendencies of Septimius Severus.

#### 4 Augustan initiatives

With all that in mind we may return to the Nile and the Darial Pass and to friendly kings there and elsewhere. In the *Res Gestae* Augustus proclaims sterling success in Nubia, which he pairs with Aelius Gallus' contemporary success in Arabia and so makes the image of success there still greater. He insists that these successes had been achieved under his leadership and auspices: in each land huge numbers of hostile locals had been killed and several towns captured. In Ethiopia, he specifies, his army had penetrated as far as the town of Napata (here, Nabata), next to which is Meroe (*R. Gest. div. Aug.* 26.5). Evidently, Meroe already had a significant reputation, perhaps not only because it had been the seat of Petronius' principal opponent, the Candace of his day. However, the grandeur of Augustus' assertions of great victories and a probe into Ethiopia which may well also have encouraged Nero's mission, was a positive presentation of a messier reality. For Strabo describes an ebb and flow of conflict towards Ethiopia. According to his well-informed account, Gallus' use of troops from the Roman forces in Egypt had precipitated trouble there. As we have observed, even Rome could not fight on all fronts at

79 On bequests, Braund 1983.

80 *Tac. ann.* 1.11: *consilium coercendi intra terminos imperii*.

the same time. The Ethiopians had a local grievance with the nomarchs, which is not explained but no doubt involves financial demands. Petronius' first military response had been successful enough, but a second was soon needed, during which he reached and sacked Napata. However, as we have seen, he did not want to attempt any further advance south, daunted by the terrain. These conflicts were not settled by his military actions, especially as he had not in fact reached Meroe, as Augustus admits in his inscription, though the emperor tries to suggest that Petronius somehow came close enough. Peace was restored to the region only after the prefect arranged for an 'Ethiopian' delegation to visit Augustus. Their willingness to make the journey was doubtless improved by the fact that he was at the time not in Rome but on the island of Samos. Strabo's account of the agreement there (17.1.54) indicates that the 'Ethiopians' achieved a great deal at this meeting. This seems to have been a new beginning in Roman relations with 'Ethiopia,' for when Petronius had responded to their diplomatic efforts by telling them to go to Caesar, they had claimed not to know who he was or where he might be found. Hitherto their dealings with Rome had apparently been interactions with authorities in Egypt, nomarchs and possibly the prefect. Of course, Egypt had been a Roman province for only some ten years, but even so their apparent ignorance (if it is not taken as disingenuousness) is noteworthy. On Samos, says Strabo, they got everything they wanted from Augustus, who even remitted the payments he had imposed upon them. The nature of those payments remains obscure, perhaps linked to their displeasure with the nomarchs or possibly reparations which the emperor had initially demanded. Nor, more generally, is it at all clear how much of this all affair arose from the Nubian population resident *north* of Syene and Elephantine.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, we must note a potentially very important 'coincidence.' It was also to Augustus on Samos that an Indian delegation came and established friendship, to the emperor's evident delight, for at least one of the envoys travelled with him to Athens (Cass. Dio 54.9.8–10, noting earlier contact too). An Indian entourage was all the more exotic because, as Trajan's musings at the Persian Gulf show, thoughts of empire in India tended to evoke also Alexander. Of course, it might be mere chance that this Indian mission happened to travel to Augustus on Samos around the very time that the Nubians arrived there, for Dio indicates that many envoys made similar journeys. However, we must at least consider the possibility that the two embassies were in some sense connected, though we do not know how that might have come about or the precise sequence of events. If, as suggested above, Nero's Nubian expedition had been encouraged by notions of the Red Sea and India (not least Seneca's), we can only wonder whether the arrival of these two delegations before Augustus at more or less the same time was the consequence of Roman diplomatic activity beyond the *claustra* and/or communication between the Nubians and their neighbours far across the sea. If that is right, Tacitus'

81 On them, Adams 1983.

troublesome remark that introduces Roman expansion towards the *rubrum mare* into a narrative about Germanicus at the *claustra* would be a little less out of place: Augustus had already been thinking in that direction.<sup>82</sup>

The outcome of all this was that both sides could claim a victory for themselves, as did Augustus in the *Res Gestae*. He did not need to dwell on the military setbacks his forces had suffered or the diplomatic concessions he had agreed on Samos, about which even Strabo is noticeably vague. However, thanks to Strabo, we can start to see the messy realities of frontier relationships that lay beneath lofty Roman talk of demanding obedience and warring down the proud. These are the inconsistencies and discontinuities that emerge when we bring together different authorial agendas, perspectives and discourses. Scholars may seek to argue that one formulation is better or truer than the other, but the more important observation surely is that they exist side-by-side and, however we choose to judge them, each has its own kind of validity. Meanwhile, in postcolonialist vein, we have for once some insight into the perspective(s) of the other side, the ‘Ethiopians’. Caution is required in view of our limited grasp of the available Meroitic evidence, but it seems that among the ‘Ethiopians’ too there was the celebration of victory.<sup>83</sup> Understandably so, for even Strabo’s account from the Roman side makes clear that they had inflicted serious blows upon the Romans. They had actually captured Syene, Elephantine and Philae, the famous *claustra*, early in the conflict, enslaving their inhabitants and dismantling Augustus’ statues (while apparently ignorant of his identity). They had also made an agreement on Samos which, as Strabo puts it, gave them everything they wanted. Although they had suffered setbacks too, Meroe itself was unscathed and the Roman military had done damage only at the frontier. No doubt the fact that both sides could claim success contributed to the stability that seems to have ensued down to and beyond Nero’s day. Finally, Strabo’s account tends also to indicate that Augustus’ celebration of his success here had already taken some of the course that Nero was to follow in the display at Puteoli and elsewhere. For Petronius had sent 1 000 ‘Ethiopian’ captives to the emperor in Rome, where excuse must have been found to display them to the Roman public, though many of these may have been repatriated under the subsequent agreement on Samos. We may wonder whether Augustus too had had an ‘Ethiopian day,’ and indeed whether any of those who appeared before Nero and Tiridates had been brought back by the Nile expedition as slaves or delegates. Like Nero too, Augustus’ regime had invoked the famous debacle of Cambyses: Strabo says that Petronius successfully traversed the area where Cambyses’ army had been overwhelmed. And, as both Strabo and the *Res gestae* indicate, there was already much talk of Candace, Meroe, Napata and other places and distances (as Pliny confirms:

82 Note too Germanicus and the Persian Gulf (further, below): Cantineau 1931; cf. Matthews 1984,

165–166; Potter 1991; Gawlikowski 1998.

83 Burstein 2008.

*nat.* 6.35) in Augustan Rome. These unfamiliar names and places served to evoke under Augustus the reach of imperial power and influence that Nero was to develop further with his expedition to the source of the Nile, emulating all that Augustus had achieved there. Nero's expedition had been an innovation, but, as often at Rome, closer examination shows that the innovation stood within a tradition, including not only Persians and Greeks but also the paradigmatic Roman *princeps* himself.<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, Augustus gives us also a rare glimpse of activities at the Darial Pass, though it is no more than the slightest of glimpses:

Our friendship was sought, through envoys, by the kings of the Bastarnae, Scythians and Sarmatians who are on this side of the River Tanais and on the far side, also the king of the Albanians, Iberians and Medes. (*R. Gest. div. Aug.* 31.2)

Pompey's campaigns and celebrations had made these names less unfamiliar, so that Augustus' more jubilant tone on envoys from India, immediately prior to these words, is understandable enough: these were a first and were clearly a remarkable sight to behold (Strab. 15.1.73). However, these regions too were exotic enough in his day, while events in the Caucasus could have consequences for his arrangements in Armenia, about which he had rather more to say. Hence his active diplomacy, though he represents these efforts as the initiative of foreigners who come to him. We may wonder, even so, whether any of these asked the question posed by the 'Ethiopians' to Petronius and presumably also to the freedman by the king of Sri Lanka, namely who is he and where can we find him? But Augustus' account gives no hint of such questions: they come to him because they desire his and Roman friendship, so that their very coming from obscure and distant lands is an index of the greatness of the emperor and Rome alike. We should have expected the major kings of the Caucasus (of Iberia, Albania and Media Atropatene), whose delegations are named as a cluster, a little apart from the others. Much more interesting is this indication of Roman diplomacy in the interior of the north coast of the Black Sea and, most important for the present discussion, with Sarmatians east of the Tanais, that is on the North Caucasian Foreland. Fleeting Augustus reveals diplomatic activity not only with the Iberians who hold the *claustra* of the Darial Pass, but also with the peoples (or some of them) who pose a threat to security from the northern side of these Gates. It need hardly be said that the local situation here differed from that obtaining at the *claustra* in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia. However, we should note a measure of similarity.<sup>85</sup> For in each case Roman diplomacy seeks to operate beyond the barriers,

84 Note also the Augustan mission of Dionysius of Charax eastwards: Plin. *nat.* 6.141, with a view to the operations of C. Caesar. Even Nero's amber

expedition had some Augustan precedent, since a fleet had broached the Baltic: Plin. *nat.* 2.167.

85 For broader similarities, e. g. Wells 2005.

while in each case too those barriers cut across local affiliations between the local inhabitants on both sides. We have observed as much for Lower Nubia, while Strabo is wholly explicit that there were ties of kinship between the Sarmatians of the North Caucasian Foreland and those dwelling in the mountains of northern Iberia (Strab. 11.2.1, 15–16).

When Augustus left his tally of the empire's resources upon his death in AD 14, he included what Tacitus calls simply "kingdoms," *regna* (*ann.* 1.11; similarly, the author himself, *ann.* 4.4, *socii reges*). Unfortunately, Tacitus felt the need to say no more about Augustus' document, so that we are left to wonder what it was that he wrote about these kingdoms, and indeed which kingdoms were mentioned. No doubt the emperor employed his own criteria, fully thought through or not. Meanwhile, we may also presume that he at least indicated their resources or lack thereof, and perhaps the attitudes and reliability of their incumbent rulers and the like. However, while much remains uncertain, there is no need to see a spatial consideration in Augustus' document, nor even in the much-cited formulation of Strabo, who stresses that kings were very much the emperor's area. The matter remains rather obscure.<sup>86</sup> For example, kings of the Sarmatians north of the Darial Pass may well have obtained the friendship they sought from Augustus, but it is surely incredible to imagine that he considered them to be inside the limits of the Roman Empire in spatial terms. Similarly, the 'Ethiopians'. For despite the agreement on Samos, Germanicus' tour stopped at the *claustra*, while even after Nero's Nile expedition and the confirmation of friendship among the inhabitants far south of Germanicus' stopping-point, the elder Pliny persisted in taking Syene as the *finis imperii* in AD 77 (*nat.* 12.19). Here Pliny cites the map presented to Nero by his expedition, though it is unclear that *finis imperii* featured there: the term may well be Pliny's own.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, however, in functional terms friendly kings were insiders, expected to obey Roman commands, as we have seen. It is understandable that on the rare occasion when Roman theorists contemplated the territorial space of *regna*, there was discussion as to whether kingdoms were to be treated as formally inside the empire, with the corollaries that might follow. Such was the problem of *postliminium*, where it might matter – for practical reasons as well as in terms of legal niceties – whether Romans in friendly kingdoms formally regained citizenship on their return from captivity further afield, before they made their way back into a Roman province. These were interesting technicalities which diverted jurists and might have real-world significance to be sure, but there is scant sign that these technicalities had significant purchase in everyday interactions at the frontier. However, the arcane issues of *postliminium* are valuable to our broader understanding of Roman conceptions of friendly kingdoms in spatial terms. It is worth stressing that juristic opinions on these matters are valuable not because we

<sup>86</sup> E. g. Millar 1982 shows how the Senate dealt with kings too, formally at least.

<sup>87</sup> On the map, see above p. 137 n. 56.

may take them to be creating Roman attitudes, but because they are attempts to formulate such attitudes in as coherent a manner as possible. On the spatial question (inside or outside the empire?), the key point is that friendly kingdoms were rather open to debate, though Roman voices tend to give the impression that they were more inside than outside. In addition to Augustus and Strabo, we have an excerpt from the writings of the Severan jurist Paulus, who asserts:

(A Roman citizen) is taken to have returned under *postliminium* when he has entered our territorial borders (*finēs*), just as he is lost when he has left those borders; but also if he has come into a friendly and allied state or to a friendly and allied king, immediately he is taken to have returned under *postliminium*, because there first he begins to be safe under public warrant (*publico nomine*).<sup>88</sup>

Much more important than the spatial question, however, is surely the functional one. What Augustus' inclusion of *regna* in his tally does show us is that, while there was scope for discussion about whether and which kingdoms were inside or outside the *imperium Romanum*, kingdoms were very much *of* the empire. Modern and ancient debates about their standing in spatial terms should not distract us from that key point. It is clear enough that Romans commonly treated friendly kings as part of the empire, even bringing them to trial at Rome.<sup>89</sup> While at the level of grand discourse friendly rulers must obey imperial command, even amid the complexities of the frontier Rome expected at least substantial compliance, as much as Romans thought was sufficient. That was a broad and flexible approach which served Rome well, however much it may have tested the jurists and disappointed the likes of Plutarch's Marius and Cn. Piso. For, while a simple dominance might be claimed at the centre of power, the empire was able to adapt its diplomacy to the different conditions applying in the many different kingdoms in Britain, Sarmatia, Ethiopia and elsewhere. The integration of friendly rulers into the *imperium Romanum* emerges even among the sharpest critics of the system. In particular, Tacitus offers a vision of the Roman Principate (at least under the Julio-Claudians and Flavians) as a force for enslavement, not only in the provinces, but at the highest levels in Rome itself, where *libertas* has been abandoned as much as removed (e. g. *ann.* 14.49). It is characteristic of Roman conceptions of the *regna* as integral features of the *imperium* that Tacitus includes friendly kings too as willing participants in the process of their own enslavement and servility, no doubt enjoying the rhetoric and emotion entailed in the idea of the king made a slave. *Libertas* flourishes, however imperfectly, outside the

88 *Dig.* 49.15.19.3 (Paulus): *Postliminio redisse videtur, cum in fines nostros intraverit, sicuti amittitur, ubi fines nostros excessit. sed et si in civi tatem sociam amicamve aut ad regem socium vel amicum venerit, statim postliminio redisse videtur, quia ibi primum nomine publico*

*tutus esse incipiat.* Cf. Ando 2008, much concerned with law and borders. On *postliminium*, Maffi 1992; Lica 2001. On its relevance to kings, Cimma 1976.

89 Millar 1982, 4 gives examples.

Roman Empire, but not in the kingdoms of that empire any more than in its Senate and provinces.<sup>90</sup> That is the key context for Tiridates' remark to Nero about Corbulo: when the king called the Roman general "a good slave," it was as yet unclear what kind of slave the new Parthian king of Armenia would prove to be, but, in his Parthian view (we are asked to believe), Corbulo was already slave enough (Cass. Dio 62.6.4). That was not to the credit of the emperor, all too comfortable with the Parthian.

With all that in view, we may concur with Isaac when he observes: "Rome regarded all client kingdoms as part of the empire."<sup>91</sup> For in practice that was true in an administrative and strategic sense as well as in a moral sense. Romans like Tacitus' Claudius might have lofty notions about the fine lessons that a young king might draw from his Roman friends, patrons and masters, but other Romans (notably Juvenal and Tacitus himself) might focus instead on the negative, embracing both the bad effects of Rome upon kings and the malign influence of kings upon Romans.

## 5 Conclusion

In any analysis of the *imperium Romanum* of the early emperors, the interpretation, outlook and assumptions of Tacitus tend to dominate, though the depth, complexity and often ironic tone of his writings make the understanding of his text phenomenally difficult. His process of selection, fundamental in all historiography, is central to those problems, as we have seen with our difficulty in providing a strong reason why he seems to have said not a word about Nero's Nile mission, an (apparent) omission made all the more striking by his favourite Pliny's enthusiastic account of the affair. We should expect his treatment of the various friendly rulers to be similarly challenging, and it is. However, we may also agree with the sentiments of David Potter, when he observes (with regard to *ann.* 4.4 and 13.7):

It is plain from these statements that Tacitus regarded the client kings he mentions as being within the area that Rome ruled, and thus that he did not see a great distinction between the provinces of the empire and client states when he thought about the extent of the Roman imperium.

Potter's assessment is part of a sophisticated argument that seeks to use interesting epigraphy concerning Characene to lend support to the notion that Tacitus has in mind specifically the Persian Gulf when he mentions the *rubrum mare* at *Annals* 2.61.<sup>92</sup> In the present paper, I have supported the case against that view, which remains conclusive in my judgment, though that is not to remove it completely from consideration. As for

90 Gowing 1990.

92 Potter 1991.

91 Isaac 1992, 397 n. 121, with bibliography.



suggestions that Roman activities in Arabia were in Tacitus' mind, there may well be some general sense in which they did have an impact, but the fact that such a view entails a sudden and unexpected switch of focus in the text from Egypt to Arabia seems to me to be a serious problem. Instead I have argued that we should pay more attention to developments in Nubia and, more specifically, to the major advance in the Roman cause beyond the *claustra* to the Red Sea through 'Ethiopia' towards India. It may seem perverse to suggest that Tacitus has this to the fore in his expression at *Annals* 2.61, given that he seems to say nothing of the matter when he could (and surely should) have done so in the Neronian books of the work (if it was not somehow in the lost final parts, for reasons unknown). However, we have seen that Nero's expedition had been part of a process, whose roots are traceable earlier, perhaps especially to the twin delegations ('Ethiopians' and Indians) to Augustus on Samos. We may be sure enough that Roman diplomacy had been very active beyond the *claustra*, in Nubia as elsewhere, both before Nero's expedition and after it down to the much-debated time of Tacitus' writing early in the second century AD. Germanicus himself had played a significant part in that diplomacy, not only with Nabataeans, but as far afield as Characene on the Persian Gulf, otherwise known as Mesene. It is entirely likely that Germanicus was engaged in significant diplomacy with the Nubians too as he visited the *claustra*, if diplomacy was not in fact a significant part of the purpose of that visit. In any event, it is unlikely that the Nubians would have missed the opportunity to pay their respects to the great Roman visitor nearby, and perhaps make some requests of him. In sum, what begins to emerge is an on-going process under the early emperors, whereby Roman *imperium* was indeed stretching towards the *rubrum mare* in every sense of the term, embracing the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and indeed even the Persian Gulf. Roman concern with the latter was not new under Trajan, as is indicated by Germanicus' diplomatic mission to Characene and perhaps also Augustus' earlier choice of a man of Charax to scout the east for C. Caesar. It may well have been awareness of Germanicus' part in this large process, as much as (possibly, more than) Nero's Nile expedition and other parts of the story, that prompted Tacitus to express himself in such a general fashion about Roman progress here and, moreover, to do so specifically at the moment in his narrative when Germanicus came to the *claustra* at the interface between the Roman province of Egypt and Rome's friends beyond. No *provincia Aethiopia* was ever established or seriously attempted, but Roman *imperium* could be said to have reached across Nubia to the Red Sea, even if the Nubians did not see the matter in quite that way. In practice, sufficiently compliant *regna* were so much part of Rome's *imperium* (functionally, if not always spatially) that matters theoretical could be left in the hands of the jurists, whose views in any case constituted no great challenge to everyday usage and behaviour, whether at the centre of power or at the frontier.

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