UNITING TWO WORLDS: LOWER NUBIA IN THE TIME OF THE MEROITIC VICEROYS (C. 30 BC TO THE MIDDLE OF THE AD FOURTH CENTURY)

I am your good servant, o Isis…
My heart is left to you in Black-land (Egypt),
in Meroe, and in the mountains.¹

1. Augustus in Lower Nubia

1.1. Cornelius Gallus and the Foederate Tyrannos of Lower Nubia in 29 BC

By my command and under my auspices two armies were led at about the same time into Aithiopia and into the Arabia called Felix, and great numbers of both enemy peoples were killed in battle and many towns were captured: In Aithiopia one came as far as the town of Na[p]ata, to which Meroe is very close. In Arabia the army advanced as far as the town of Mariba on the borders of the Sabaeans.²

The laconic sentences of Augustus’ Res Gestae draw a parallel between the military expeditions led by Aelius Gallus, Egypt’s second Roman praefect, to Arabia Felix in 26–25 BC and Publius Petronius, Egypt’s third Roman praefect, to Athiopia, i.e., the kingdom of Meroe, in winter 25–24 BC. The majestically simple formulation fits both campaigns into the monumental discourse on Augustus’ splendid successes; into a document, which the princeps composed for publication and which, according to A.H.M. Jones, did not include any obviously false or imprecise statement.³ However, the publication of a document did not

¹ Philae, Demotic graffito of Pasan, FHN III No. 260, lines 20–21, trans. R.H. Pierce.
guarantee its perfect authenticity in the antiquity, either: in fact, in so far as we are in the position to confront them with other evidence, the epigrammatic utterances quoted above are silent about some of the actual circumstances of the described events and manipulate some others. It must have been quite obvious for the contemporary reader that the Arabian undertaking was a failure, as also indicated by Strabo. Although Strabo speaks about treachery and the enormous difficulties presented by a barren country of roadless deserts in order to conceal the military failure of his personal friend Aelius Gallus (or even of Augustus himself), he records nevertheless important facts, which we cannot find in the Res Gestae when he describes the broken remainders of Aelius Gallus’ army returning before it could have reached its original destination or recounts the loss of the larger part of Gallus’ Red Sea fleet already before the beginning of the campaign. The mention of the city of Mariba is a manipulation of facts: in reality, Mariba was a small settlement and not the capital of the Sabaeans as the text might suggest. Deliberately misleading is the definition too: “the town of Napata, to which Meroe is very close”. In fact, the distance between the two cities is 270 km as the crow flies. The mention of Meroe was important because the more or less well-informed contemporary reader identified this place—which had already been described by Herodotus—with the royal residence of Aithiopia. We cannot be certain, either, that the capture of Napata was fact. The narratives presented in the Res Gestae and Strabo’s and Pliny’s work equally raise doubts in this respect. One has

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5 Strabo, 16.4.22–24.

6 Anderson 1966 250 ff. and Marek 1993 142 ff. agree that the expedition of Aelius Gallus reached only modern Sabata (Shabwa) in the Hadramaut and not Mariba in the land of the Sabaeans. The unlikely identification with the capital of the Sabaeans is accepted only by Wissmann 1976 7.


8 The historicity of the Arabian and Nubian narrative of the Res Gestae was doubted first by I. Hofmann: Der Feldzug des C. Petronius nach Nubien und seine Bedeutung für die meroitische Chronologie, in: Endesfelder–Priese et al. (eds) 1977 189–205 198 ff. Hofmann presented a detailed discussion of the topographical aspect of the Aithiopian expedition as it is reported by Pliny, Nat. hist. 6.181 ff. (= FHN III No. 204) and came