Chapter 13

The Provinces and Worldview of Velleius Paterculus

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Velleius Paterculus published his historical work in about AD 30. Recent scholarship on his text has focused on various themes including aspects of his own personal biography, his impact on Latin historiography, his presentation of various Roman values, and his depiction of certain characters and institutions from Roman history.1 His understanding and presentation of the geography of the Roman Empire has garnered far less scholarly consideration.2

This paper, therefore, examines Velleius’ presentation of political and spatial geography. Since the 1980s, historians have debated the ways in which the Romans envisioned and understood the geographic space of their empire. Some have argued that the Romans’ view of space was primarily based on a hodological or linear perspective—a result of the Roman tendency to list geographic items in such mediums as the itinerary.3 Others have concluded that the Romans employed a form of scientific cartography.4 Talbert has proposed an additional model:

In short, then, I suggest we would be right to perceive a sense of the empire’s provinces as spatial entities, and of the geographic relationship between them, developing from the early first century AD. This sense—alongside the linear sense gained from itineraries, together with representations in a variety of art forms—becomes a further recognized means by which Romans envision their wider surroundings.5

As an active soldier, politician, and writer during a period in which such a provincial framework apparently developed, Velleius’ text offers a case study through which Talbert’s suggested provincial framework can be tested and the Roman worldview illuminated. The first half of this paper examines some of

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1 Yardley (2011) xxiii–xxiv; Cowan (2011) for further bibliography.
2 Bispham (2011) does focus on the place of Italy in the text, but not the geography of the broader empire.
3 Janni (1984); Brodersen (2001), (2003), and (2012); Whittaker (2002).
4 Jodry (1951); Dilke (1985); Nicolet (1991).
the potential and often competing sources of knowledge, including personal travel, itineraries, and even maps of a certain kind, which confronted Velleius as he sat down to write his history. The second half examines how the provinces do indeed appear as the dominant framework upon which Velleius, and presumably his readers, envisioned the Roman Empire.

Sources of Knowledge

Unlike most other ancient historians, Velleius happily peppered his work with personal details, so that much of his career is documented in his own words. Although most of the autobiography—especially the sheer joy he takes in recording the deeds and loyalties of his ancestors—need not concern us here, those passages that record his travels are of interest because they illustrate when and where he might have gained first-hand knowledge about the geography of the empire. By 2 BC he had served as a military tribune in Thrace and Macedonia (2.101.3). During the next five years, probably as part of Gaius Caesar’s entourage, he visited Achaia, Asia, and, so he says, omni-bus ad Orientem (“all the eastern provinces,” 2.102.2), presumably Bithynia-Pontus, Galatia, Cilicia, and Syria (2.101.3). He may even have followed Gaius into Armenia. He noted the fact that he had seen the mouth of the Black Sea, and both its coasts (2.101.3). The real highlight of the eastern tour came in 1 BC, when he witnessed the diplomatic meeting between Gaius, an heir of the emperor Augustus, and Phraates, the king of Parthia, on a small island in the middle of the Euphrates River (2.101.3). The low point (perhaps) came with the death of Gaius in Lycia in AD 4, although Velleius is not sympathetic to the deceased who impiously chose to abandon his political career (2.102.3). Later that same year, and after returning to Rome, the future historian was promoted to praefectus equitum and sent with Tiberius to Germany. Their route to the front took them per celeberrimam Italiae partem tractumque omnem Galliae provinciarum (“through the most populous part of Italy and along the whole extent of the Gallic provinces,” 2.104.3). Presumably, having crossed through the Alps, the imperial army skirted the eastern borders of Narbonensis, Aquitania, Lugdunensis, and even Belgica before crossing into Germania where they encountered and subjected the Canninefates, Attuarii, Bructeri, and Cherusci (2.105.1), all tribes located predominantly in the far north of Europe, just east of the Rhine delta. From there he claimed that Perlustrata armis tota Germania est (“the Roman armies wandered over all of Germania,” 2.106.1), and that they

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7 Barr. 10.