Chapter 11

Mines and Economic Integration of Provincial ‘Frontiers’ in the Roman Principate

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Introduction

In 25 BC Augustus proclaimed the subjugation of the Asturians and Cantabrians and closed the gates of the Temple of Janus in Rome. Military campaigns in North-western Spain had begun as early as 30 BC, perhaps even earlier, and Augustus himself led Roman forces against Asturian and Cantabrian hill forts in 27 BC. As it turned out, the proclamation of peace in 25 BC was premature: Cassius Dio reports two further revolts in 24 and in 22, which both were quickly put down. A final uprising erupted in 19; after a series of setbacks, Agrippa finally pacified the region by the year 15 BC.1 A significant Roman force consisting of three legions, undoubtedly accompanied by an unknown number of auxiliary units, remained in the Northwest for decades.2

Pliny records that the gentes or civitates of the Northwest were divided into three assizes, each centred on an assize town founded under Augustus, namely Asturica, Lucus, and Bracara.3 Asturica Augusta was apparently established on the site of a former legionary camp and became the administrative centre for the region, which likely managed the emerging gold mining operations throughout the northwest. Both Asturica and the legionary camp of León, and more importantly the adjoining civilian settlement there, offered significant economic opportunities for the native inhabitants of the area, attracted further settlers, and functioned—as some scholars put it—as “islands of romanitas”.4

The countryside offered a markedly distinct picture. Roman authors indicate a dramatic change in the life of Asturians and Cantabrians in the immediate aftermath of conquest: according to Dio, Agrippa ordered the tribesmen

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1 Dio 51.20.5, 53.25.5–8, 53.27.1, 53.29.1–2, 54.5.1–3, 54.11.2–5.
2 Alföldy (2000b, 449–53); Kienast (1999, 351–4) with further bibliography and sources. For military presence in the Northwest, see LeRoux (1989); Morillo Cedrán (2000); Morillo Cedrán & García Marcos (2003).
3 Plin. NH 3.28.
to come down from their hill forts and settle in the plains. More importantly, they were ordered to mine the soil for gold and other resources. Only then, says Florus, did the Asturians gain knowledge of the riches in their ground:

The natural advantages of the place favoured his [Augustus'] plan; for the whole district bears gold and is rich in copper-green, cinnabar, and other pigments. Thus the Asturians, while searching riches in the deep for others, came to know their own resources and wealth.5

In Florus’ and Dio’s narrative the conquered population, following the final military defeat, are presented in a passive role: on the orders of Augustus they are dislodged from their remote hill forts and settled in the plains. What is more, the Asturians are made to exploit mineral resources, and only as a result of this they are enlightened about the profitability of the landscape they inhabit. The latter remark by Florus appears to reflect the notion held by Pliny the Elder and Tacitus that it was Rome and its representatives which spread ‘civilization’ (humanitas) and its rewards—in this case in the form of geological and technological knowledge.6

The narrative offered by our literary sources in which the indigenous Asturians are presented in a passive role appears to colour most modern scholarly accounts of the aftermath of Roman conquests in the Spanish Northwest, especially when it comes to the exploitation of resources.7 Even though there is archaeological and palaeolimnological evidence for mining and metallurgical activities in the Late Iron Age throughout North-western Spain, the locals are assumed to have contributed very little if any technical expertise once Rome began to intensify mining operations.8 The Asturians and other tribes simply provided unskilled miners; in the context of their munera, local communities

5 Florus 2.33.59–60: Favebat consilio natura regionis; circa enim omnis aurifera est et chrystosalae minuique et aliorum colorum ferae. Itaque exercerit solum iussit. Sic Astures nitentes in profundo opus suas atque divitas, dum aliis quaerunt, nosse coeperunt. See Dio 54.11.5.
8 For pre-Roman mining in Spain, see Curchin (2004, 145–6); Almagro Gorbea (2011, 74–5); for palaeolimnological evidence, see Martínez Cortizas et al. (2013) with further bibliography. For pre-Roman mining in Gaul: Cauuet et al. (2006); at Rośia Montana: Cauuet et al. (2003); Cauuet (2012); for Dolaucothi see Burnham & Burnham (2004, 329–30). For mining practices in the Ancient World, see Domergue (2008).