IV. The Isaurian Mountains in Late Antiquity

The situation found in the mountains of Isauria in late antiquity reveals deeply rooted continuities with the past. The patterns of relationships between mountain and plain, between highland peoples and the lowland state remain much the same. The Diocletianic breakdown of provinces subdivided the Cilician Plain, but left mountainous Isauria as a single unit. The geographical base for control of the mountains, however, was still a plain; the new provincial centre was Seleukia on the Kalykadnos, the river valley forming the major ‘internal plain’ of the southern Taurus. The military situation reflected in the Notitia Dignitatum emphasizes the continued peculiarity of Isauria as a province; unlike elsewhere, there was no separation of the civil and military commands. The same document reveals the continued inadequacy military resources—two legions (Legiones II and III Isaura) and some auxiliary troops, perhaps

1500 to 2000 men in all. The Notitia places them ‘in Isauria’, but Ammianus reveals with precision that they were located at Seleukia, safely in the coastal zone.\(^{106}\).

Two incidents are known from the third century which form a link between what little is known of mountain-plain relations in the Principate and the more detailed information from the fourth century. The first concerns a so-called ‘rebel tyrant’ from Isauria in the time when Gallienus was central emperor (AD 253-68). The man, called Trebellianus, was caught up in a labelling conflict; outsiders perceived him as an ‘archpirate’ and ‘emperor’, although his actual role was simply that of a dependable and powerful local ruler, whose very success in that role only served to highlight his autonomy from a weak central government.\(^{107}\) The source that reports the story also gives a vivid, though traditional, picture of the Isaurians and their unsubdued land. The more interesting suggestion, perhaps, is the view expressed in this biography that it was roughly from this period onwards that a weakened central government in Rome was compelled to face a hard reality and to treat Isauria in effect as an internal frontier, an area within the Roman empire inhabited by ‘barbarians’ and ‘enclosed by a new type of line of guard-posts, as if it were a genuine frontier’.\(^{108}\)

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106) Notitia Dignitatum, orien, xxix.7-8; the missing Isaura is presumably to be identified with the legion prima Isaura sagittaria (Not. Dig. or. vii.20 = 56; Seeck, pp. 20 & 22) in the eastern pseudocomitatenses and therefore not in the provincial garrison; cf. Amm. Marc. 14.2.14, AD 353.

107) SHA, Tyr. Trig. 26.1-2: ...Qua crat Trebellianum factum in Isauria principem, ipsis Isauris sibi duce quaerentibus. Quem cum ali archpiratam vocasset, ipse se imperatorem appellavit. Monetam etiam eudi iussit. Palatium in arce Isauriae constituit. Qui quidem cum se in intima et tuta Isaurorum loca munitus difficultatibus locorum et montibus contulisset, aliquando apud Cilicias imperavit. That the author says that Trebellianus called himself ‘emperor’ (of Rome?) is surely to be taken as no more than another one of the labels generated from the perspective of the centre.

108) SHA, Tyr. Trig. 26.6-7: Denique post Trebellianum pro barbaris habentur; etenim in medio Romani nominis solo regio eorum novo genere custodiarium quasi limes includitur, locis defensa non hominibus.