

THE ROMAN SENATE AND ARMENIA (190 BC–AD 68)

Pierangelo Buongiorno

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6826-0800>

Università del Salento

Abstract: Even with the Principate, the Senate kept a major role in Rome’s diplomatic relations with Armenia. This paper will examine the extant evidence of the senatorial decrees, paying a special attention to the decrees dating to the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. These decrees can be reconstructed analysing some relevant epigraphic texts (the *Res Gestae divi Augusti*, the *Senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre*, the *Senatus consultum de honoribus Germanico decernendis*) and a source of absolute importance as the *Annales* of Tacitus.

Keywords: Roman Senate, Armenia, *Res gestae divi Augusti*, Germanicus, Roman Empire, Tacitus.

The Beginnings

The development of international relations between Rome and Armenia makes an excellent case study to understand the evolution of the role of the Senate in the sphere of Rome’s foreign policy among the end of the republic and the advent of the empire.¹ Within the framework of the provincial annexations carried out by Rome from the mid-third century BC, the Senate played a central role. To understand the phenomenon, it is useful to quote a passage of Polybius’ *Histories* that gives a perfect representation of the Greek and Oriental attitude towards Republican Rome:

Plb. 6.13.8–9: ἐξ ὧν πάλιν ὁπότε τις ἐπιδημήσαι μὴ παρόντος ὑπάτου, τελείως ἀριστοκρατικὴ φαίνεται ἡ πολιτεία. [9] ὁ δὲ καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τῶν βασιλέων, πεπεισμένοι τυγχάνουσι, διὰ τὸ τὰ σφῶν πράγματα σχεδὸν πάντα τὴν σύγκλητον κυροῦν.

If one were staying at Rome when the consuls were not in town, one would imagine the constitution to be a complete aristocracy: and this has been the idea entertained by many Greeks, and by many

¹ For a general introduction to this topic see now G. Traina in Ferrari – Traina 2020, 23–43.

kings as well, from the fact that nearly all the business they had with Rome was settled by the Senate.

This must have been the impression that even the first kings of Armenia made, who came into contact with Rome. This may also have been the case of the start of diplomatic relations between the Roman Senate and the kingdom of Greater Armenia. According to Strabo, who possibly depended on a lost passage of Polybius, after the peace of Apamea, in 188 BC, the Senate formally acknowledged the new regime of the local dynasts Artaxias and Zariadris, possibly son and father:²

Strabo 11.14.15: εἶθ' ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀντιόχου τοῦ μεγάλου στρατηγῶν τοῦ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους πολεμήσαντος διηρέθη δῖχα, Ἀρταξίου τε καὶ Ζαριάδριος; καὶ ἦρχον οὗτοι τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιτρέψαντος; ἡττηθέντος δ' ἐκείνου προσθέμενοι Ῥωμαίοις καθ' αὐτοὺς ἐτάττοντο βασιλεῖς προσαγορευθέντες.

And then the country was divided into two parts by Artaxias and Zariadris, the *stratēgoi* of Antiochus the Great, who made war against the Romans; and these generals ruled the country, since it was turned over to them by the king; but when the king was defeated, they joined the Romans and were ranked as autonomous, with the title of king.

Under Antiochus the Great, Artaxias and Zariadris held the title of governor (*stratēgos*), but they possibly enjoyed a broader power, as it was the case of peripheral strategies in the Seleucid Empire. They now respectively ruled two independent kingdoms: Greater Armenia and Sophene. As it seems from the passage of the *Geography*, Rome eventually accorded them autonomy, recognizing their royal title. The Senate was evidently trying to extend Rome's sphere of control as far as the Caucasus. This was the starting point of a dialogue between Rome and Armenia, often conflicting, but nevertheless fruitful.

As Edward Dąbrowa pointed out in his paper,³ during the second half of the 2nd century BC, under the reigns of Artavasdes I and Tigranes I, Armenia reinforced its role as a regional power. Relations with Rome, of which we know very little for this time, have therefore remained of substantial and reciprocal balance. The spheres of interest of the two worlds were not yet conflicting: Armenia was more concerned with the Parthians, now masters of Mesopotamia.⁴

But, as Nina Garsoian pointed out it was mainly “during Tigranes’ reign, in the first half of the last century BCE, (that) Armenia . . . became the leading power of the East in the vacuum created by the decline of the Seleucids, as well as by the rivalry between Rome, temporarily distracted by the Mithridatic wars, and the growing power of the Parthian empire.”⁵

The reign of Tigranes II marked a change of pace. In the dynamic also a particularly hostile figure in Rome comes into play, namely that of the king of Pontus Mithridates VI.

In this first phase of the Mithridatic campaigns, the Senate saw Armenia as an autonomous kingdom, although not formally hostile to Rome. In the campaigns promoted by the Senate for the defence of the Reign of Ariobarzanes I of Cappadocia, Tigranes II

² See Patterson 2001.

³ See Dąbrowa, in this volume.

⁴ Geller –Traina 2013.

⁵ Garsoian 2004.

cooperated with Mithridates VI, but on the formal level he continued to proclaim himself as *amicus atque socius* of Rome.⁶

From Lucullus to Pompey: The Turning Point

The scene changes with Lucullus's campaign in the East, following his consulate of 74 BC. Lucullus's operations, in close agreement with the Senate, stopped Mithridates' expansion but they experienced a significant setback when Mithridates received Tigranes' support, which as was well known was bound by marriage ties.

The support openly given to Mithridates marked the *casus belli* from the point of view of the Romans. A passage from Cicero's speech *pro lege Manilia* says that Tigranes had welcomed Mithridates who was *diffidens*:

Cic. *Leg. Manil.* 23: *Hunc in illo timore et fuga Tigranes, rex Armenius, exceptit diffidentemque rebus suis confirmavit et adflictum erexit perditumque recreavit. Cuius in regnum postea quam L. Lucullus cum exercitu venit, plures etiam gentes contra imperatorem nostrum concitatae sunt. Erat enim metus iniectus eis nationibus quas numquam populus Romanus neque lacessendas bello neque temptandas putavit; erat etiam alia gravis atque vehemens opinio quae per animos gentium barbararum pervaserat, fani locupletissimi et religiosissimi diripiendi causa in eas oras nostrum esse exercitum adductum. Ita nationes multae atque magnae novo quodam terrore ac metu concitabantur. Noster autem exercitus, tametsi urbem ex Tigrani regno ceperat et proeliis usus erat secundis, tamen nimia longinquitate locorum ac desiderio suorum commovebatur.*⁷

Diffidens means without no more *fides*: such a formulation is deliberately played on ambiguity, but it could indicate Mithridates as the one who had broken the *foedera* with Rome, or rather was at war with Rome.

The juridical structure of the command of Lucullus, whose *imperium* was subject to continuous senatorial mandates and was renewed year by year, was not however adequate for a war in places so far away and with dynamics that were unknown to most senators. And this was perhaps one of the causes that led Lucullus to get bogged down, despite having achieved success on the battlefield. Among the arguments put forward by Cicero in his *suasio* of the *lex Manilia* is that of the distance from Rome and the impossibility of taking decisions independently by the holder of the *imperium*.

Cic. *Leg. Manil.* 26–27: *Lucullus, qui tamen aliqua ex parte eis incommodis mederi fortasse potuisset, vestro iussu coactus qui imperi diuturnitati modum statuendum vetere exemplo putavistis,*

⁶ Plut. *Sull.* 5; App. *Mithr.* 14.68; Justin 38.3.1.

⁷ “In this alarm and flight of his, Tigranes, the king of Armenia, received the *diffidens*, encouraged him in his fortunes, gave him new spirit in his depression, and recruited with new strength his powerless condition. And after Lucius Lucullus arrived in his kingdom, very many tribes were excited to hostilities against our general. For those nations which the Roman people never had thought either of attacking in war or tampering with, had been inspired with fear. There was, besides, a general opinion which had taken deep root, and had spread over all the barbarian tribes in those districts, that our army had been led into those countries with the object of plundering a very wealthy and most religiously worshipped temple. And so, many powerful nations were roused against us by a fresh dread and alarm. But our army although it had taken a city of Tigranes' kingdom, and had fought some successful battles, still was out of spirits at its immense distance from Rome, and its separation from its friends.”

*partim militum qui iam stipendiis confectis erant dimisit, partim M'. Glabrioni tradidit, multa praetereo consulto; sed ea vos coniectura perspicite quantum illud bellum factum putetis quod coniungant reges potentissimi, renovent agitatae nationes, suscipiant integrae gentes, novus imperator noster accipiat vetere exercitu pulso. 27. Satis multa mihi verba fecisse videor qua re esset hoc bellum genere ipso necessarium, magnitudine periculosum.*⁸

If the Romans were induced to authorize a conflict against Mithridates out of fear of losing control of the Eastern provinces, the traditional instruments of command were not adequate to allow Lucullus to operate in a complex military campaign carried out at a great distance from Rome. This hindered the Senate from directing military activities. And on the other hand, at that time the Romans did not yet have a detailed knowledge of the territory and culture of Armenia. Suffice it to say that until the campaigns conducted by Pompey the Romans had no idea of the existence of a river called Araxes.⁹

All this also had significant repercussions on the political scenario in Rome. Thus, the conflict between the senators and the people during the year 66 BC is consummated on this matter. A part of the senators, and certainly the crowd, supported the possibility of replacing Lucullus by extending the *imperium maius* conferred on Pompey for the war against the pirates. This sort of unlimited power, which made it possible to resolve conflicts of competences with other provincial governors for the benefit of the holder of an *imperium maius*, and also to take binding decisions for the *res publica* in an autonomous way, had given good proof of himself by allowing Pompey to defeat pirates in a few months.

As highlighted more than a century ago by the greatest scholar of Roman republican legislation, Giovanni Rotondi, with the approval of the *Lex Manilia* the *imperium* attributed to him by the Senate left Pompey with a wide margin of discretion not only in the conduct of the military campaign but also in the negotiations of peace.¹⁰ The thing is well perceived by Velleius Paterculus:

Vell. Pat. 2.37.5: Servatus regi honos imperii, sed multato ingenti pecunia, quae omnis, sicuti Pompeio moris erat, redacta in quaestoris potestatem ac publicis descripta litteris. Syria aliaeque, quas occupaverat, provinciae ereptae, et aliae restitutae populo Romano, aliae tum primum in eius potestatem redactae, ut Syria, quae tum primum facta est stipendiaria. Finis imperii regii terminatus Armenia.

The king was allowed to retain the honors of royalty, being also compelled to pay a large sum of money, all of which, as was Pompey's practice, was remitted to the quaestor and listed in the public accounts. Syria and the other provinces which Mithridates had

⁸ "At the very time of this misfortune,—of this most terrible disaster in the whole war, Lucius Lucullus, who might have been able, to a great extent, to remedy the calamity, being compelled by your orders, because you thought, according to the old principle of your ancestors, that limits ought to be put to length of command, discharged a part of his soldiers who had served their appointed time, and delivered over part to Glabrio. I pass over many things designedly; but you yourselves can easily conjecture how important you ought to consider that war which most powerful kings are uniting in,—which disturbed nations are renewing,—which nations, whose strength is unimpaired, are undertaking, and which anew general of yours has to encounter after a veteran army has been defeated. 27. I appear to have said enough to make you see why this war is in its very nature unavoidable, in its magnitude dangerous."

⁹ Traina 2018b.

¹⁰ Rotondi 1912, 375–376.

seized were wrested from him. Some were restored to the Roman people, and others were then for the first time brought under its sway—Syria, for instance—which first became a tributary province at this time. The sovereignty of the king was now limited to Armenia.

Although Velleius' account seems to summarize a *senatus consultum*, these decisions were taken independently by Pompey and only later ratified by the Roman Senate.

The event that perhaps left many surprised in Rome, but that was ultimately a fruit of a strategic calculation of Pompey, was the signing of a treaty with the defeated Tigranes, who became *amicus et socius* of Rome and remained on the throne of Armenia for another ten years. Mithridates, defeated and alone, killed himself. Once again, we have an account of Cicero. Such an account is not the only one we have, but it is for sure the closest to the Pompey's mentality:

*Cic. Sest. 58–59: Cum Armeniorum rege Tigrane grave bellum nuper ipsi diuturnumque gessimus, cum ille iniuriis in socios nostros inferendis bello prope nos lacessisset. hic et ipse per se vehemens fuit et acerrimum hostem huius imperi Mithridatem pulsum Ponto opibus suis regnoque defendit, et a (L.) Lucullo, summo viro atque imperatore, pulsus animo tamen hostili cum reliquis suis copiis in pristina mente mansit. hunc Cn. Pompey cum in suis castris supplicem abiectum vidisset erexit, atque insigne regium, quod ille de suo capite abiecerat, reposuit et certis rebus imperatis regnare iussit, nec minus et sibi et huic imperio gloriosum putavit constitutum a se regem quam constrictum videri. 59. Qui et ipse hostis fuit populi Romani et acerrimum hostem in regnum recepit, qui conflixit, qui signa contulit, qui de imperio paene certavit, regnat hodie et amicitiae nomen ac societatis, quod armis violarat, id precibus est consecutus.*¹¹

The end of the war and Pompey' return to Rome marked an increase in diplomatic relations between the Roman Senate and the kingdom of Armenia. Very well-known is the story of the embassy sent by the Senate in 59 BC and in which Caesar, Pompey and Crassus tried in various ways to send Publius Clodius Pulcher. Cicero remembers the story with a certain irony.

Cic. Att. 2.7.2: de Publio quae ad me scribis sane mihi iucunda sunt, eaque etiam velim omnibus vestigiis indagata ad me adferas cum venies, et interea scribas si quid intelleges aut suspicabere, et maxime de legatione quid sit acturus. equidem ante quam tuas legi litteras, fin̄ hominem ire cupiebam, non me hercule ut differrem cum eo vadimonium (nam mira sum alacritate ad litigandum), sed videbatur mihi, si quid esset in eo populare quod plebeius factus esset, id

¹¹ “With Tigranes, king of the Armenians, we waged a serious war of very long duration; he is having, I may almost say, challenged us, by inflicting wanton injuries on our allies. He was not truly a vigorous enemy on his own power and on his own account, but he also defended with all his resources and protected in his territory, that most active enemy of this empire, Mithridates, after he had been driven from Pontus; and after he had been defeated by Lucullus that most excellent man and most consummate general, he still remained in his former mind, and kept up a hostile feeling against us with the remainder of his army. And yet this man did Cn. Pompey—after he had seen him in his camp as a suppliant and in an abject condition—raise up and placed on his head again the royal crown which he himself had taken off, and, having imposed certain conditions. on him, ordered to continue king. And he thought it no less glorious for himself and for this empire, that the king should be known to be restored by him, than if he had kept him in bonds. 59. Therefore, Tigranes—who was himself an enemy of the Roman people, and who received our most active enemy in his territories, who struggled against us, who fought pitched battles with us, and who compelled us to combat almost for our very existence and supremacy—is a king to this day, and has obtained by his entreaties the name of a friend and ally, which he had previously forfeited by his hostile and warlike conduct.”

*amissurus. 'Quid enim? ad plebem transisti ut Tigranem ires salutatum? narra mihi, reges Armenii patricos resalutare non solent?' quid quaeris?'*¹²

New Actors on the Stage: Artavasdes II, Caesar, and Marcus Antonius

The death of Tigranes II, which occurred in 55 BC, opened the scene to the succession of his son Artavasdes II, who inherited a relationship of *amicitia et societas populi Romani*, fruit of the capitulation of his father Tigranes II. The defeat of Licinius Crassus at Carrhae¹³ had in any case the effect of attracting Artavasdes II into the Parthian orbit, within which substantially the Armenian king remained, with the brief parenthesis of the apparent support given to Marcus Antonius between 36 and 34.¹⁴

In this period, however, the dialogue policy taken by the Senate towards the Armenians did not disappear at all. We have some, albeit fragmentary, notices of senatorial decrees addressed to the Armenians, probably in the context of negotiations conducted by Julius Caesar in view of his campaign in the East. These decrees are remembered by a rather ironic passage of a letter from Cicero to Lucius Papirius Petus of 46 BC. Cicero in fact speaks of a false *senatus consultum* written at Lucius Cornelius Balbus' home (Balbus was very closed to Caesar) and addressed *in Armeniam et Syriam*.

*Cic. fam. 9.15.4: An minus multa senatus consulta futura putas, si ego sim Neapoli? Romae cum sum et urgeo forum, senatus consulta scribuntur apud amatorem tuum, familiarem meum; et quidem, cum in mentem venit, ponor ad scribendum et ante audio senatus consultum in Armeniam et Syriam esse perlatum, quod in meam sententiam factum esse dicatur, quam omnino mentionem ullam de ea re esse factam. Atque hoc nolim me iocari putes; nam mihi scito iam a regibus ultimis allatas esse litteras, quibus mihi gratias agant, quod se mea sententia reges appellaverim, quos ego non modo reges appellatos, sed omnino natos nesciebam.*¹⁵

After the death of Caesar, the political role of the Senate in Eastern affairs became much more marginal. However, the question is easily understandable given the wide

¹² "I am quite delighted to hear what you tell me about Publius; pray ferret out the whole story, and bring it to me you when come, and meanwhile write anything you may make out or suspect, and especially as to what he is going to do about the legion. For my part, before reading your letter, I was anxious that the fellow should go, not, by heaven, in order to avoid his impeachment—for I am wonderfully keen to try issues with him—but it seemed to me that, if he had secured any popularity by becoming a plebeian, he would thereby lose it. 'Well, why did you transfer yourself to the Plebs? Was it to make a call on Tigranes? Tell me: do the kings of Armenia refuse to receive patricians?'"

¹³ Traina 2010.

¹⁴ In the crucial moment; Artavasdes II decided to snatch away his support to Marcus Antonius: Strabo 11.14.15; Plut. *Ant.* 50; Dio 49.25–31; see also Liv. *Per.* 130; Plut. *Ant.* 47–48; Front. *Strat.* 2.3.15 and 2.13.7).

¹⁵ "Do you suppose the number of senatorial decrees will be any the less if I am at Naples? While I am at Rome and actually haunting the forum, senatorial decrees are written out in the house of your admirer, my intimate friend. And whenever it occurs to him, I am put down as backing a decree, and am informed of its having reached Armenia and Syria, professing to have been made in accordance with my vote, before any mention has been made of the business at all. And, indeed, I would not have you think that I am joking about this; for I assure you I have had letters from kings at the other end of the earth, thanking me for having voted for giving them the royal title, as to whom I was not only ignorant of their having been called kings, but of their very existence even. What, then, am I to do?"

margin of autonomy reserved for *triumviri rei publicae constituendae*, based on the *lex Titia* (43 BC). With such a *lex* the triumvirs took in their hands a series of matters once entrusted to ordinary magistrates and promagistrates under the control of the senatorial assembly. The Senate could at least ratify decisions taken by the *triumviri*, as a relevant epigraphical text as the *senatus consultum de Plarasensis et Aphrodisiensibus* of 39 BC shows.¹⁶

Thus, as far as we know, the operations conducted by Marcus Antonius in Armenia were carried out without any formal involvement of the Senate. Antonius decided in absolute autonomy to punish Artavasdes II and his children, and then to kill him with the consent of Cleopatra after Actium¹⁷. Only late and fragmentary notices of the betrayal and of the subsequent defeat of Artavasdes II and even the notice of a kind of triumph celebrated by Marcus Antonius in Alexandria came to Rome. And late were also the news about Marcus Antonius' attempt to enthrone in the kingdom of Armenia his son Alexandros Helios, born from his relationship with Cleopatra.¹⁸ These notices were furthermore mostly conveyed in a partial way to discredit Antonius, as Cassius Dio himself informs us.

Dio 49.41.4–5: καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνα ὡς ἔχων ἤδη ἐχαρίζετο. καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ ἐν τῇ Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ μόνον εἶπεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην, ἵνα καὶ παρ' ἐκείνων τὸ κῦρος λάβῃ, ἐπέστειλεν. οὐ μόντοι καὶ ἐν τῷ κοινῷ τι αὐτῶν ἀνεγνώσθη: ὃ τε γὰρ Δομίτιος καὶ ὁ Σόσσιος ὑπατεύοντες ἤδη τότε, καὶ ἐς τὰ μάλιστα αὐτῷ προσκείμενοι, οὐκ ἠθέλησαν, καίπερ τοῦ Καίσαρος ἐγκειμένου σφίσι, ἐς πάντας αὐτὰ ἐκφῆσαι. 5. νικησάντων δὲ ἐν τούτῳ ἐκείνων, ἀντεπεκράτησεν ὁ Καῖσαρ μηδὲν τῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἀρμενίου γραφέντων δημοσιευθῆναι: τοῦτόν τε γὰρ ἠλέει ἄτε καὶ λάθρα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῷ Ἀντωνίῳ κεκοινολογημένος...

Not only did he say this in Alexandria, but he sent a despatch to Rome as well, in order that it might secure ratification also from the people there. None of these despatches, however, was read in public; for Domitius and Sosius were consuls by this time, and being extremely devoted to him, refused to publish them to all the people, even though Caesar urged it upon them. 5. But, although they prevailed in this matter, Caesar won a victory in his turn by preventing any of Antonius' despatches regarding the Armenian king from being made known to the public; for he not only felt pity for the prince, inasmuch as he himself had been secretly in communication with him for the purpose of injuring Antonius . . .

It is a common opinion that the conquest by Antonius brought the kingdom of Armenia into the Roman-Egyptian orbit, so much so that Movsēs Xorenac'i (*Hist. Arm.* 2.24) records that under Antonius for the first time the Armenians were forced to pay the tribute in Rome. From the point of view of the Senate of Rome, in any case, that of Antonius was not perceived as a conquest. A senatorial historian like Cassius Dio, after almost three centuries after the events, still remembers how the campaigns of Antonius had determined the loss of all influence not only on the Parthians, but also on

¹⁶ A new critical edition with commentaries is now provided by Raggi – Buongiorno 2020.

¹⁷ *Ios. ant.* 15.104; Dio 49.40.3. Artavasdes II was then conducted in Egypt (Strabo 11.14.15; Plut. *Ant.* 50; Dio 49.33.2–4, 49.39.3, 50.1.4) and there killed (Dio 51.5; but see also Tac. *ann.* 2.3.2). On this topic, see Dąbrowa 2006 and Patterson 2015.

¹⁸ This child was only 6 years old in 34 BC but he was betrothed to Iotapa, who was the daughter of Artavasdes I of Media Atropatene: see Plut. *Ant.* 54.4; Dio 49.40.2, 49.41.3 and 49.44.2.

the Armenians (Dio 49.44.4). And in general terms it is on these behaviours of Antonius that the propaganda of Octavianus was immediately founded.

But coming back to the main question of the relationships of Rome and Armenia, after the imprisonment of Artavasdes II, his son Artaxias II, who had escaped the capture, had been already in 34 BC acclaimed king of Armenia by his troops.¹⁹ The defeat of Antonius in Actium and then in Alexandria had on the other hand allowed Artaxias to make his kingdom real and—there is to believe—without Rome’s hostility. The sign of this original kindness is that the younger brother of Artaxias II, Tigranes, had been taken hostage in Rome in 30 BC, where he lived for ten years.

The Augustan Strategy

In order to mark the change of pace from the aggressive policies of Marcus Antonius, Augustus maintained a relaxed policy with Artaxias II in his early years. We lack precise evidence of the involvement of the Senate, but it is reasonable to believe that, according to the political lines pursued by Augustus, the senatorial assembly was at least formally involved in relations with the Kingdom of Armenia.

Relations with Rome, however, were broken when Artaxias II put to death some Roman citizens residing in Armenia. The effect of such a massacre was the breach of the *foedus* with Rome: it is well known that Rome guaranteed that none of its citizens could be sent to death by non-Romans. Artaxias sent an embassy to Rome (it is unclear whether to the senate or the emperor) in order to obtain the coming back in Armenia of his brother Tigranes. He was in fact kept as hostage in Rome after the defeat of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra. But the Romans sent back such an embassy with a clear refusal.²⁰

In 20 BC, finally, a new unofficial Armenian embassy reached Rome with the request for help for a change at the top: unseat Artaxias and replace him with Tigranes. Cassius Dio’s account informs us that Augustus sent in Armenia Tiberius with this very task.²¹ But the direct narrative of Augustus on this matter is also preserved in the *Res gestae* (27.2):

Armeniam maiorem interfecto rege eius Artaxe, c[u]m possem facere provinciam, malui maiorum nostrorum exemplo regn[u]m id Tigrani, regis Artavasdis filio, nepoti autem Tigranis regis, per T[i](berium) Ne]ronem trad[er]e, qui tum mihi privig[us] erat.²²

Augustus says that he preferred to come back to the model set by the ancestors and to see this land as a dialoguing subject on an international level. He then replaced the king of Armenia and didn’t constitute a Roman province of Armenia.²³ It’s important, by the Roman point of view, this very reference to *c[u]m possem facere provinciam, malui maiorum nostrorum exemplo regn[u]m id Tigrani . . . tradere*. This reference has in my

¹⁹ *Ios. ant.* 15.105; Dio 49.39.6.

²⁰ Dio 51.16.2.

²¹ Dio 54.9.4.

²² “Greater Armenia I might have made a province after its king, Artaxes had been killed, but I preferred, following the model set by our ancestors, to hand over that kingdom to Tigranes, son of King Artavasdes and grandson of King Tigranes; Tiberius Nero, who was then my stepson, carried this out.”

²³ On this topic see also Traina – Buongiorno 2020, 100–102.

opinion two different meanings: a indication to Pompey, and to his choice to confirm Tigranes II on the kingdom of Armenia in 65 BC. But also an allusion to Antonius' precedents in international diplomatic politics, with which Augustus was in open break. Several other sources tell us about the episode of 20 BC,²⁴ some of which allow us to assess the role of the senate. Above all Velleius' account suggests a senatorial decree, possibly supported by an intervention of Augustus, which formally delegated Tiberius to deal with the matter concerning Armenia:

Vell. 2.94.4: *Nec multo post missus ab eodem vitrico cum exercitu ad visendas ordinandasque, quae sub Oriente sunt, provincias, praecipuis omnium virtutum experimentis in eo tractu editis, cum legionibus ingressus Armeniam, redacta ea in potestatem populi Romani regnum eius Artavasdi dedit.*²⁵

Velleius mentions a mandate of Tiberius “*ad visendas ordinandasque, quae sub Oriente sunt, provincias,*” which could have been the model of the analogous senatorial mandate of Germanicus, *ad componendum statum transamarinarum provinciarum*.

Cassius Dio²⁶ also remembers a senatorial resolution that had decreed sacrifices (θυσίαι) for the success of the mission of Tiberius, which suggests that the senate was the interlocutor to whom Tiberius should have related the outcome of the mission. This too is a practice that we will see further on, with the campaign in the East of Gaius Caesar.

But, in view of the fact that in the autumn of 19 BC, on his return from the campaign in Armenia, Tiberius obtained ‘only’ the *ornamenta praetoria*, I would be inclined to believe that his role in the affair was similar to that which he would later cover C. Calpurnius Piso, or rather that of *adiutor* of the holder of the *imperium* (which, evidently, in 20 BC, could not have been any other than *Augustus*).

Let's look at the developments in relations between Rome and Armenia in the following years.²⁷ Little is known about the reign of Tigranes III: his Armenian kingship brought peace, stability to Armenia in peaceful relations between Rome and Armenia were maintained. The death of Tigranes III, around 8 BC, led then to the succession of his son Tigranes IV and his daughter Erato. The two were married (something inconceivable for the Romans²⁸) and in close diplomatic relations with the Parthian Empire. The sources inform us that the brief reign of Tigranes IV and Erato led to a relevant Parthian interference in the internal Armenian affairs.²⁹

On this basis Augustus tried to avoid a Roman failure in the protection policy on Armenia and attempted to enthrone Artavasdes III, the last surviving son of Artavasdes II and then brother of the deceased Tigranes III. Cassius Dio (55.9.4–5) informs us that around 6 BC Tiberius reached the *tribunicia potestas* and, with this power, he received

²⁴ Vell. 2.94.4; Ios. *ant.* 15.105, Suet. *Aug.* 21.3, Tac. *ann.* 2.3.4 and Dio 54.9.4.

²⁵ “Shortly afterwards he was sent by his stepfather with an army to visit the eastern provinces and restore them to order, and in that part of the world gave splendid illustration of all his strong qualities. Entering Armenia with his legions, he brought it once more under the sovereignty of the Roman people and gave the kingship to Artavasdes.”

²⁶ Dio 54.9.5.

²⁷ For a systematic analysis, see Pani 1972 and mainly Chaumont 1976, 73–85; for a restatement, see also Rivière 2016, 261–274 and 302–305.

²⁸ On the inconceivability of *incestus* in the Roman culture see Buongiorno 2016, with bibliography.

²⁹ See Pani 1972, 36–40.

by the Senate a command for the resolution of the conflicts in Armenia, in the attempt to replace Tigranes IV and his sister Erato. As regards the formal construction of the power granted to Tiberius, his increased rank (he had already been consul in 13 BC and in 7 BC he had celebrated a triumph over the Germans) suggests that in 6 BC he received an *imperium*, even if the sources do not explicitly refer to it.

However, the military resistance of Tigranes IV, supported by the Parthians, determined the need for a new military intervention by Rome around 2 BC and AD 1. An account occurs again in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (27.2):

Et eandem gentem postea d[e]sciscientem et rebellantem domit[am] per Gaium filium meum regi Ariobarzani, regis Medorum Artabaz[i] filio, regendam tradidi et post e[ius] mortem filio eius Artavasdi. Quo [i]nterfecto [Tigrane]m, qui erat ex regio genere Armeniorum oriundus, in id re[gnu]m misi.³⁰

This passage tells much more than we would expect and compresses events of many years, up to the last years of Augustus' empire. First of all, since the Armenians "changed their loyalty and rebelled," Augustus subdued them through Gaius Caesar. While Augustus completely obliterates the name of Tigranes IV (and Erato), he remembers instead the revolts and the imposition, in rapid sequence, of three *reges socii* of non-Artaxid dynasty: Ariobarzanes of Media (king from 2 to 4 AD), his son Artavasdes IV (king from 4 to 6 AD), and then, after the killing of this one, Tigranes V, a king coming from Herodian dynasty (who remained on the throne of Armenia until 12 AD).

Augustan account keeps trace of an ideological debate about Armenians and allows us to develop some considerations. The Armenians are represented as an indomitable and, above all, unreliable enemy, as suggested by the use of the verb *descisco* (in the meaning of abandonment, to change one's loyalty).

The same meaning can be traced, more or less in the same span of time, in Velleius, with reference to the Parthians, accused to have broken the *foedus* with the Romans.

Vell. 2.100.1: *Sensit terrarum orbis digressum a custodia Neronem urbis: nam et Parthus desciscens a societate Romana adiecit Armeniae manum.*³¹

This kind of allusion is the antechamber of what will be the judgment of *ambiguitas* given on the Armenians by a senatorial historian as Tacitus. *Desciscens* is similar, in its meaning, to *ambiguus* ("untrustworthy"). A qualification of the Armenians as an ambiguous people legitimized, on a formal level, every decision of the Romans, which would have justified every type of intervention against the Armenians, accusing them from time to time of not respecting the clauses of the stipulated treaties. This therefore also explains the use of *ambiguitas* as a notion in Tacitus (*Armenia ambigua gens*³²): As

³⁰ "When the same people later changed their loyalty and rebelled, I subdued them through the agency of my son Gaius and handed them over to be ruled by King Ariobarzanes, son of Artabazus, King of the Medes, and after his death to his son Artavasdes. When he was killed, I sent Tigranes, a scion of the royal Armenian house, to that kingdom."

³¹ "The whole world felt the departure of Nero from his position as protector of the city. The Parthian, breaking away from his alliance with us, laid hold of Armenia, and the eyes of its conqueror were no longer upon it."

³² Tac. *ann.* 2.56, 13.34. On this matter see Traina 2018a, 71–79. On the *ambiguitas* in Tacitus see Hellegouarc'h 2002, 216–223.

a senator writing under Trajan, Tacitus could ideologically justify the constitution of an “Armenian province.”³³

In fact, *ambiguitas* is a legal category: in Roman law *ambiguitas* justifies a contracting party, victim of the ambiguous behavior, to disregard the contract and to act, in a trial or in form of self-protection, to protect its own interests. A contemporary of Tacitus, the jurist P. Iuventius Celsus, stated that although with reference to private law, the ambiguity is cause of disputes, and the contracting party (*stipulator*) may use it to its own advantage.

Cels. 26 dig., D. 34.5.26: *Cum quaeritur in stipulatione, quid acti sit, ambiguitas contra stipulatorem est.*³⁴

Celsus recalled a more ancient principle, variously affirmed by Roman jurists.³⁵ We come now to examine the typology of power conferred on Gaius Caesar. Cassius Dio (55.10.18–20) recalls that Gaius Caesar was invested with a proconsular imperium aimed at the settlement of business in the eastern provinces. From the technical-legal point of view, the conferral of the *imperium* was authorized by a *senatus consultum*, followed by a *lex*: a procedure that we will find again some years later, with the conferment of the *imperium* to Germanicus.

The *imperium* conferred to Gaius Caesar, probably *maius* if compared to the one of the provincial governors, allowed Gaius Caesar to operate in the East without limits. However, it is probable that the *imperium* conferred on Gaius Caesar was *aequum* (hence on the same level) as that of the emperor, as suggested by a passage from Cassius Dio (55.10a.7), which recalls how—when in AD 2 the Armenian resistance was subdued—“it was not only Augustus who assumed the title of imperator, but also Gaius (τό τε ὄνομα τὸ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος οὐχ ὁ Αὔγουστος μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ Γάιος ἐπέθετο).”³⁶

Gaius Caesar operated then in agreement with the Emperor under the formal control of the Senate. Cassius Dio also clarifies that in AD 2 Armenia was handed over by Augustus and the senate first to Ariobarzanes and later, when he died shortly afterwards, to his son Artavasd. The historian also says (55.10a.9) that Lucius Caesar, in the period in which he was in Rome during the military campaign of his brother Gaius, “personally read the letters of Gaius in the Senate every time he was present there.” Which suggests that the interlocutor chosen by Augustus for the entire operation was, in fact, the senatorial assembly.

Gaius operated then in Armenia in the name and on behalf of the senate: at the base of his *imperium* there was therefore a *senatus consultum* issued on the proposal of Augustus.

³³ On the political conduct of Trajan towards Armenia see Chaumont 1976, 130–143.

³⁴ “Where any question arises as to the intention of the parties in a stipulation, the ambiguity should be interpreted against the stipulator.”

³⁵ See mainly Tafaro 1998³.

³⁶ A systematic and useful analysis is provided by Dalla Rosa 2014, 231–241 (anyway with some different conclusions).

The *imperium* of Germanicus

The typology of the *imperium* previously conferred on Gaius Caesar is the basis of the one conferred, in AD 17, on Germanicus, albeit with some technical-formal distinctions. The intervention of Rome, in this case, was aimed at removing King Vonones I. He had been enthroned at the very end of Augustan empire, after a period of anarchy: despite his Arsacid origins, Vonones had been educated as a Roman, and was despised by the Parthian nobility as a Roman stooge.³⁷

The need to maintain equilibrium with an uncomfortable neighbour like the Parthians suggested to Tiberius to remove Vonones.³⁸ Thus, Tiberius discussed with the Senate the need to give Armenia a new king, identified in the Bosporan Zenon, proclaimed king with the name of Artaxias III (later king until 34 AD).³⁹ As a son of Pythodoris and nephew of Antonia, he was Roman citizen and a descendant of Marcus Antonius the triumvir.⁴⁰ But the enthronement of Zenon would have not peacefully been accepted and then it was necessary to impose him through a military campaign. The matter was obviously again discussed before the Senate. While Tacitus broadly describes the senatorial session,⁴¹ there are two main sources that allow us to take into consideration the content of the decision taken by the *patres* on the occasion, namely, to send Germanicus in the East with the main task to enthrone his second cousin Zenon as King of Armenia.

These two evidences are the *senatus consultum* which conferred posthumous honours on Germanicus himself and then, again, the *senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* (a decree passed as the final act of the trial against the senator Cn. Calpurnius Piso, accused of having poisoned Germanicus in Syria).

The senatorial decree about posthumous honours (mostly survived in a bronze inscription known as *Tabula Siarensis*) informs us that Germanicus died being

*proco(n)s(ul) missus in transmarinas pro[vincias] / in conformandis iis regnisque eiusdem tractus ex mandatis Ti(beri) C(a)esaris Aug[usti] dato re/g(e) Armeniae . . .*⁴²

The description of the technical aspects of Germanicus' powers is anyway more and better detailed in the account of the *senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre*.

SCPP 32–34 . . . Germanico Caesari, qui a principe nostro ex auctoritate huius ordinis ad / rerum transmarinarum statum componendum missus esset desiderantium / praesentiam aut ipsius Ti. Caesaris Aug(usti) aut filiorum alterius utrius . . .

. . . pro co(n)s(ule), de quo / lex ad populum lata esset, ut in quamcumq(ue) provinciam venisset, maius ei imperium / quam ei, qui eam provinciam proco(n)s(ule) optineret, esset, dum in omni re maius imperium Ti. Caesari Aug(usto) quam Germanico Caesari esset . . .

³⁷ Chaumont 1976, 73–84.

³⁸ Suet. *Tib.* 49.

³⁹ See Pani 1972, 173–191 and now Kovacs 2014 and Olbrycht 2016.

⁴⁰ On Pythodoris and her family see Campanile 2010, 57–85. On the 'Antonian' ideology of Germanicus see now Hoët – van Cauwenberghe, Kantiréa 2013, 135–156.

⁴¹ Tac. *ann.* 2.42–43.

⁴² *CILA* II 927, frg. I, lines 16–17.

Germanicus is here indicated as “Germanicus Caesar (who had been sent by our princeps in accordance with the authority of the Senate to settle overseas affairs that required the presence of either Ti. Caesar Augustus himself or of one or the other of his two sons).” He was a “proconsul about whom a law was put before the people providing that in whatever province he entered he had greater *imperium* than the proconsular governor of that province, with the provision that in every case Tiberius Caesar had greater *imperium* than Germanicus Caesar.” The conferment took place according to the usual procedure of conferment for senatorial decree (*ex auctoritate huius ordinis*) and then by law (*de quo lex ad populum lata esset*).

The formulation *in quamcumque provinciam . . . in omni re* clearly shows how the Senate (and then the people) granted to Germanicus the power of a *proconsul* but *extra ordinem*.⁴³ Because of a precise task, he operated with the full mandate of the senate and the people. He moved in the transmarine provinces with an *imperium maius (quam)*, a power greater than the one detained by all governors (of senatorial and imperial provinces); then *in quamcumque provinciam* he was in a condition of (so to speak) *potentia rerum omnium*, but *in omni re* he remained subject to the instructions of the emperor.

This connection between Senate and Emperor allowed the senators to write *ex post* that Germanicus Caesar had given to the Armenians a king according to the wishes of his father and of Senate. At the lines 43–44 of the *SCPP* we read about Artaxias III, that he was a king of Armenia (*rex Armeniae*):

quem Germanicus / Caesar ex voluntate patris sui senatusq(ue) ei genti regem dedisset.

A king whom Germanicus Caesar had given to that people according to the wishes of his father and of Senate.

The *SCPP* refers also, at lines 41–43, to a misconduct of Cn. Calpurnius Piso, who had been corrupted by the great gifts of Vonones and so he had allowed certain wicked and bold persons of the Armenians to speak with the previous king Vonones, so that by the agency of these same persons a disturbance would be stirred up in Armenia and so Vonones, if the new king of Armenia Artaxias III had been either killed or driven out would seize Armenia:

SCPP 41–45 . . . et conloqui quosdam ex numero Armeniorum malos et / audaces cum Vonone passus sit, ut per eosdem tumultus in Armenia excita/retur ac Vonone<s> vel occiso vel expulso rege Armeniae, quem Germanicus / Caesar ex voluntate patris sui senatusq(ue) ei genti regem dedisset, <eam> occuparet, / eaq(ue) magnis muneribus Vononis corruptus fecerit.

It’s interesting to observe that the *senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* too alludes to a bad connotation of some of the Armenians, *mali atque audaces*, because of their contacts with the Parthians. But in this case, these negative connotations are used mainly to justify the conviction of *Cn. Piso pater* behind the accusation of treason (*maiestas*).

There’s also a second and more important remark (from the Roman point of view): with reference to the organization of Roman power, the *senatus consultum* makes clear the relationship of Piso, who was *legatus Augusti* in the province of *Syria*, with Germanicus. The senatorial decree speaks of an *adiutor*.

SCPP 29–30 . . . deberet meminisse adiutorem se datum / esse Germanico Caesari . . .

⁴³ See my observations in Traina – Buongiorno 2020, 105–110.

Cn. Piso was then a special assistant attached to Germanicus. The figure of the “*adiutor*,” although not too formalized, had to respond to a consolidated tradition, as suggested by two elements within the text of the *senatus consultum*: the explicit reference to the *ius publicum* (SCPP 34), and the fact that, among the editors of the text of the *senatus consultum* there was C. Ateius Capito, already consul in 5 AD, but above all an excellent jurist and a great theorist of the Augustan and Tiberian principate.

Epilogue: The Roman Senate and Armenia from Caligula to Nero

Caligula’s bad attitude towards the *patres* and Tacitus’ lacunosity for the last part of the principate of Tiberius and for that of Caligula prevent us from verifying the role of the Senate towards Armenia in the enthronement of Arsaces I and then of Mithridates of Iberia. Certainly, however, we know that in 41 AD Claudius reconfirmed Mithridates of Iberia on the throne of Armenia with a *senatus consultum* (Tac. *ann.* 11.8.1; Dio 60.8.1).⁴⁴

But there is another relevant point. If we look up to the end of the Julio-Claudian age, there are traces to identify other governors with functions of *adiutores* on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Overall, the portrait of governors of the province of Syria comes out, called to carry out functions of control of the *limes* of the empire and to facilitate support operations for *reges* friends or imposed with the consent of Rome. This will happen even for the kingdom of Parthia, as shown by the operations carried out by Lucius Vitellius and the unfortunate story of Meherdates, escorted on the banks of the Euphrates by C. Cassius Longinus.⁴⁵

In the presence, however, of holders of an *imperium* who had received mandates to carry out operations beyond the banks of the Euphrates, the governor of Syria was appointed to support the operations. This was the case of Domitius Corbulo and C. Ummidius Durmius Quadratus, and then again, after Corbulo was holder from 63 AD of an *imperium* modeled on that of Pompey, by Gaius Cestius.

*Tac. ann. 15.25: Talibus Vologaesii litteris, qui Paetus diversa tamquam rebus integris scribebat, interrogatus centurio, qui cum legatis advenerat, quo in statu Armenia esset, omnes inde Romanos excessisse respondit. tum intellecto barbarorum inrisu, qui peterent quod eripuerant, consuluit inter primores civitatis Nero, bellum anceps an pax inho[ne]sta placeret. nec dubitatum de bello. et Corbulo militum atque hostium tot per annos gnarus gerendae rei praeficitur, ne cuius alterius inscitia rursus peccaretur, quia Paeti piguerat. igitur irriti remittuntur, cum donis tamen unde spes fieret non frustra eadem oraturum Tiridaten, si preces ipse attulisset. Syriaeque executio [C.] Ce[s]t[i]o, copiae militares Corbuloni permissae; et quinta decima legio ducente Mario Celso e Pannonia adiecta est. scribitur tetrarchis ac regibus praefectisque et procuratoribus et qui praetorum finitimas provincias regebant, iussis Corbulonis obsequi, in tantum ferme modum aucta potestate, quem populus Romanus Cn. Pompeio bellum piraticum gesturo dederat.*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Buongiorno 2010, 123–124.

⁴⁵ Buongiorno 2010, 284–286.

⁴⁶ “As this missive from Vologeses could not be reconciled with Paetus’ report, which spoke of the situation as still uncompromised, the centurion who had arrived with the deputies was examined on the

The text of Tacitus seems to refer quite clearly to a session of the Senate. This would also explain the use of the verb *placere* when Tacitus describes the behaviour adopted by Corbulo on the occasion of the peace of Rhandeia. A terminology which, as Giusto Traina pointed out, would suggest the existence of a *senatus consultum* which had conferred a very precise mandate on Corbulo by a collegial body.⁴⁷

On the other hand, despite the setbacks at the time of Caligula, after the Augustan formal restoration of the Republic the senate remained for many years still the formal controller of the international politics of Rome in the East, although always supported by the emperor. The presence of Armenian ambassadors in the Senate in Rome is still documented under Claudius (Suet. *Claud.* 25.4) and especially immediately after the advent of Nero (Dio 61.3.3, Tac. *ann.* 13.5): this is the famous episode that would have seen Agrippina interrupt a session of the Senate to underline her control exercised on the young emperor.

In order to magnify the role formally played by the Senate in international politics, the sources also inform us of the individuation, already from the last Augustan age, of a physical space where senate meetings were held to discuss international relations and receive foreign ambassadors: the temple of *Mars Ultor*, inaugurated in 2 BC.

But within a short time, even in this physical space, the figures of the emperors became bulky. It is no coincidence that after the victory of Corbulo over Armenia, the Senate decreed that a statue of Nero of the same size as that of the god should be built inside the temple of *Mars Ultor* (Tac. *ann.* 13.8). And this is also the reason why Tiridates legitimately despised Nero and blamed a man and a senator like Corbulo, reproaching him only for his loyalty to the emperor, and moreover to an emperor as Nero.

We are facing the waning of a political culture, with the Senate now reduced to the role of a squeezer and no longer able to determine domestic and international political choices in the hands of the emperor.

condition of Armenia, and replied that all Romans had left the country. The irony of the barbarians in asking for what had been taken was now obvious, and Nero held the senate to decide the choice between a hazardous war and an ignominious peace. There was no hesitation about the verdict for war. Corbulo, familiar for years with his troops and his enemy, was put at the head of operations, lest there should be a fresh blunder from the incompetence of another substitute, seeing that Paetus had inspired complete disgust. The deputation was therefore sent back with its purpose unachieved, but with presents leaving room for hope that Tiridates would not make the same requests in vain, if he brought his suit in person. The administration of Syria was entrusted to Gaius Cestius, the military forces to Corbulo, with the addition of the fifteenth legion from Pannonia under the command of Marius Celsus. Instructions in writing were given to the tetrarchs and kings, the prefects and procurators, and the praetors in charge of the neighbouring provinces, to take their orders from Corbulo, whose powers were raised to nearly the same level as that allowed by the Roman nation to Pompey for the conduct of the Pirate War.”

⁴⁷ Traina 2019.

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