Remembering Gallus: Elegy and Egypt

Egypt has been a crucial locus for sources of information on C. Cornelius Gallus, yielding two inscriptions as well as the Qasr Ibrim papyrus. The interpretation of these sources remains necessarily speculative and disputed: e.g., what does the Philae stele tell us about Gallus’ political disgrace and suicide; what does the Qasr Ibrim papyrus indicate about Gallus’ contributions to elegiac poetry and the evolution of that genre? This paper does not attempt to offer definitive answers to these questions. Instead, it approaches these sources from a different direction, suggesting that their Egyptian provenance is itself indicative of an aspect of how Gallus was perceived in antiquity. The paper uses the sources to posit a ‘Gallus-periphery theme’, i.e., that Gallus was connected with the edges of the Roman empire, particularly the Egyptian frontier, and that he was associated with absence from the imperial center, Rome.

Part one of the paper reinterprets one of Gallus’ two epigraphical self-memorializations in Egypt: the trilingual stele erected at Philae in 29 BCE, which enumerates Gallus’ accomplishments as prefect (*CIL* 3.14147*=ILS* 8995). My analysis focuses on the physical format of the stele, the trilingualism of the inscriptions, as well as the inscriptions’ emphasis on Gallus extending the frontiers of Roman Egypt. I argue that the stele not only functioned as a symbolic claim of Gallus’ central position in the relationship between Rome and its new Egyptian frontier, but also that it linked Gallus to Egypt in the ancient cultural imagination. As evidence of this link, I discuss passages from Strabo (17.1.53) and Cassius Dio (53.23.6), which may refer to the inscriptions on the Philae stele.

The second part of the paper examines a further example of the ‘Gallus-periphery theme’. I suggest that the elegiac verses by Gallus found on a papyrus at Qasr Ibrim (PQasrIbrim inv. 78-3-11/1 [LI/2]) provide further evidence of the perception of Gallus’ connection to Egyptian frontiers: the member of the Roman army who presumably brought Gallus’ elegies to the frontier outpost of Primis may well have done so because Gallus was perceived as suitable frontier reading, particularly for someone traveling to the same Egyptian frontier as Gallus had. Moreover, I suggest that from this perspective *legam* in verse 5 of the papyrus may be better understood to indicate that Gallus anticipates being absent from Rome during a future triumph, as Nisbet (1979) interpreted in the *editio princeps*, rather than taking it to mean that Gallus will be present at Rome, as most subsequent scholars have concluded (e.g., Mazzarino 1980 and Gómez Pallarès 2005).

My ultimate aim in this paper is to demonstrate that Gallus’ Egyptian connection provides an important insight not only into the memory and representation of Gallus, but also into the nature of subsequent Augustan elegy. In the conclusion I argue that the anti-travel theme present in the elegies of Gallus’ successors on one level reflects how Gallus became an icon of the dangers of mixing travel, politics, and love poetry, and an exemplar of the challenges of negotiating the politics and poetics of the early principate.

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