

Natural and Elemental Imagery in the *De rebus bellicis*

In the fourth century A.D., an anonymous writer addressed a pamphlet to the emperor now known as the *De rebus bellicis*. With the aid of illustrations, the brief text outlines nothing less than a plan to revive the Roman Empire. After proposing several economic reforms, the Anonymus describes a number of inventions for the emperor to implement: a boat powered by oxen, an undergarment designed for armor, variations on the scythed chariot, a new and improved ballista, and others. Many previous scholars have focused on the viability of these contrivances and debated how seriously the Anonymus should be taken as a technical thinker. These assessments range from the highly critical – “a fantastic do-gooder about whom nobody need concern himself” (Schneider, 1910) – to the overly positive – “the only Roman who is known to have made a conscious and serious attempt to improve the technology of his day over a wide field” (Thompson, 1996). This focus on the seriousness and value of the *De rebus bellicis* has often distracted from the text’s unique perspective on nature and empire.

This paper argues that the Anonymus’ presentation of *natura* as Rome’s enemy is a hitherto overlooked theme that unifies the text. Throughout the *libellus*, the author deploys elemental imagery in order to characterize Rome’s problems. In one passage, the Anonymus states that his inventions will help the emperor defeat his enemies “not only with force, but even by the genius of your skill, especially when, with your intellect, you find these contrivances useful through all the elements (*per omnia elementa*)” (*De rebus bellicis* 18.7). This paper contends that the Anonymus deploys elemental imagery elsewhere in the *libellus* in order to show that Rome must struggle not merely with external enemies but with *natura* itself. This portrayal of empire both elevates the emperor and makes the author’s inventions seem all the more necessary.

Not only is the Anonymus' approach rhetorically advantageous, but it also relates to themes in a wider body of ancient technical and military literature. Technical writers often use the relationship between *natura* and *machina* to explicate mechanical processes, understand phenomena, and generally enliven their descriptions of machines (Roby, 2013). This paper shows how the Anonymus engages in this discourse, while still framing his argument around the notion that *natura* was a force to be overcome through *ars*. The focus on skill as opposed to force is also common in ancient historiography and military literature, but the metaphor of *elementa* is rarely invoked prior to the Anonymus. For him, in the defense and expansion of empire, nature is a force to be imitated, but also overcome. Barbarians, defended by the elements, beset the empire on all sides. The Romans, lacking these natural advantages, must turn to mechanical contrivances to turn the tide.

Finally, this paper argues that the Anonymus' approach to empire fundamentally differs from that of his fourth century contemporaries. Vegetius' emphasis on *disciplina* is nowhere to be found in the text, nor does religion factor in as it does for an Augustine, Ambrose, or Libanius. Instead, the Anonymous situates the empire within a dangerous natural world full of enemies. If the emperor is to defeat his foes he must become master, rather than victim, of the elements. In this regard, the *De rebus bellicis* is unique not only as a pamphlet of bizarre contraptions but also as a way of making sense of the relationship between empire and *natura*.

Bibliography

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