

## *Regna*: Geography, Teleology, and the Construction of Roman Identity

In the introductory book of his *Natural History*, the elder Pliny expressed his admiration for the extensive research that had been conducted on almost any subject already by early Greek writers. He elaborated further:

‘I am all the more impressed that when the world was at variance and divided into kingdoms, as if limb from limb (*orbe discordi et in regna, hoc est in membra, diviso*), things so difficult to discover were a matter of concern for so many men, especially amidst wars and untrustworthy strangers, with rumors of pirates – the enemies of all mankind – discouraging those who would travel.’ (*Nat. Hist.* 2.117).

This ancient *orbis discors* – difficult and divided, but inquisitive – is contrasted with the Roman world of Pliny’s day, which he characterizes as unified and universal, but intellectually incurious. While the encyclopedist’s particular interests in this passage lie in the state of knowledge and scholarship, his analysis rests implicitly upon a much more comprehensive vision of the progress of history: a puzzle of disjointed *regna* has gradually given way to the coherent order of the expanding *orbis Romanus*. This set of assumptions is not peculiar to Pliny or his project; it is deeply embedded in the Roman discourse of empire and identity. A generation later, Tacitus put similar sentiments – equating kingdoms with a kind of primordial chaos – into the mouth of the Roman general Petilius Cerialis, in a speech delivered to the rebellious Gallic *civitates* of the Treveri and Lingones: ‘There had always been kingdoms and wars (*regna bellaque*) throughout Gaul until you submitted to our laws’ (*Hist.* 4.74.1). Tacitus’ historiographical model, Sallust, sheds light on another aspect of this view of the inverse relationship between *regna* and the Romans, frequently defining the two as ideologically

antithetical in his autoethnographic critiques of Roman imperialism: his Jugurtha asserts that, ‘in the opinion of the Romans, all *regna* are in opposition (*advorsa*) to them’ (*Jug.* 81.1); Mithridates complains that ‘the Romans have followed their custom of overthrowing all *regna*’ (*Hist.* 4.69.15), and that ‘they believe that everything that is not enslaved, and especially *regna*, are their enemies’ (*Hist.* 4.69.17).

Focusing on an interconnected series of representative case studies drawn from Cicero, Sallust, Pliny, and Tacitus, this paper argues that kingdoms (*regna*) were fundamental to the way in which the Romans, since at least the late Republican period, conceptualized time and space and understood their own place therein. In the teleological interpretation of an *imperium sine fine*, kingdoms signified anteriority and primitivism, and marked geographical peripheries; where there were *regna*, there were not – yet – Romans. Moreover, *regna* operated as a negative counterpoint in the negotiation of Roman cultural identity: more powerfully and more enduringly than any other single marker of identity, to not be ruled by kings defined what it meant to be Roman.

While previous scholarship has explored some of the political dimensions of kingship at Rome in the competition between Republican aristocrats or the self-fashioning of the emperors (e.g. Giua 1967; Wallace-Hadrill 1982; Erskine 1991; Martin 1994; Gisborne 2005), generally absent from these discussions has been attention to the complementary significance of kingdoms (and their negation) in broader Roman ideas of history and culture. In work on geography and empire (e.g. Nicolet 1991; Lavan 2013) or on Roman imperial identities (e.g. Dench 2005), the place of *regna* has remained relatively unexamined. Recent studies of relevant Roman authors have foregrounded their projects of (re)structuring time and space with Rome at the center (e.g. Elliot 2013 on Ennius; Murphy 2004 on Pliny), but again have not noted how prominently *regna*

feature therein. This paper attempts to bring together these threads of scholarship, and to demonstrate the abiding importance of *regna* in the Roman mentality and the construction of Roman exceptionalism.

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