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Martijn Icks

Turning Victory into Defeat

Negative Assessments of Imperial Triumphs in Greco-Roman Literature

Abstract: The *triumphus* conferred great military prestige on generals and emperors. Exploiting that prestige for their own purposes, Greco-Roman authors constructed subversive discourses around this ritual in their works. Through negative descriptions of triumphal processions, they could criticize, question or mock the accomplishments of *triumphatores* they did not like, undermining their glory and turning real or claimed victories into moral defeats. This literary weapon was particularly potent in the time of the Empire, when the senatorial elite had lost control over triumphal displays. ‘Bad’ triumphs of an extraordinary nature were attributed to Mark Antony, Caligula and Nero, criticizing their alleged transgressions of traditional Roman norms. However, more conventional *triumphi* could likewise come under attack by hostile historians and biographers, who used their descriptions of these events to define the limits of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emperors.

Introduction

Crassus’s ill-fated military campaign against the Parthians in 53 BC did not only end in a humiliating defeat for the Romans, but also earned the general an ignominious death. After the unfortunate commander had died in a skirmish that broke out during peace negotiations, the Parthian general Surena cut off his head and hand, sending them to the Parthian king. Yet that was not the end of Crassus’s posthumous humiliation. According to Plutarch, Surena announced to the citizens of Seleucia that the defeated general was still alive and would be put on display. A mock procession was staged in the city, in which one of the Roman captives was dressed in female royal garb and forced to answer to the name of Crassus and the title of *Imperator*. He was led along the streets on horseback, accompanied by a curious entourage:¹

Before him rode trumpeters and a few lictors borne on camels; from the fasces of the lictors purses were suspended, and to their axes were fastened Roman heads newly cut off; behind these followed courtesans of Seleucia, musicians, who sang many scurrilous and ridiculous songs about the effeminacy and cowardice of Crassus; and these things were for all to see.

1 Plut. *Crass.* 32.2–3.

Even if Plutarch had not remarked that Surena “insultingly” called the procession a triumph, this would be immediately clear to both the ancient and the modern reader. Many of the familiar elements of a Roman triumphal procession – the figure of the *triumphator*, the lictors accompanying him, even the ‘soldiers’ following him singing ribald songs – are present, albeit in distorted, farcical form. In short, Surena allegedly turned one of the Romans’ most important rituals against them, mocking Crassus for a ‘victory’ which revealed his unmanliness and gained him no other trophies than the heads of his own countrymen. Apparently, the symbolic power of a Roman triumph was so great that even enemies sought to appropriate it and use it for their own ends.

The mock procession described in the *Life of Crassus* is not mentioned by any other source. Moreover, the parody could only have worked if we assume that Surena had quite a detailed notion of what went on at a Roman triumph – and that he expected the people of Seleucia to be familiar enough with the ritual to appreciate the display. The latter in particular seems doubtful. In all likelihood, the story has been elaborated or even completely invented by Plutarch to emphasize the disgrace of Crassus’s defeat. Yet that does not make the episode any less interesting. It only means that it is Plutarch, rather than Surena, who is the author of the dead general’s humiliation.

Since Roman triumphal processions could confer great prestige on a general, they also provided his enemies with powerful tools to attack and subvert that prestige. This fact was not lost on ancient historians and biographers. Greco-Roman literature contains many examples of triumphs which are presented in an unfavourable light by the author. Usually, such hostile accounts do not describe the staging of mock processions, as in the case of Crassus, but criticize, question or mock the accomplishments of triumphing generals. Hence they undermine the *triumphator*’s glory and turn real or claimed victories into moral defeats. In her provocative study on the Roman triumph, Mary Beard already remarked on this, noting that “writers exploited the vocabulary of triumphal subversion to symbolize the emperor’s misconduct or to calibrate his impropriety.”²

We need not be surprised that emperors were favourite targets. After all, the master of the Roman world enjoyed unprecedented control over the triumphal ritual and could decide for himself when and how to employ it to boost his military prestige.³ Since the senate’s traditional right to grant or refuse triumphs had been reduced to anticipating or rubber-stamping the emperor’s wishes, the elite could only express its disapproval by constructing subversive discourses on triumphal displays – usually after the rulers in question were safely dead. Similar subversive discourses were constructed around other imperial rituals; for instance around imperial investiture ceremonies, which were often described in topical terms to depict candidates

2 Beard 2007: 272.

3 Benoist 2005: 195–239.

for the purple as corrupt and power-hungry villains.⁴ Because the rituals at the root of these descriptions carried so much symbolic meaning, and because Roman audiences were generally familiar with the way the ritual was supposed to proceed, hostile authors could manipulate their accounts to signal that the person at the centre of the ritual was not up to the expected standards.⁵ Hence, literary accounts of rituals were an effective means to enhance the communication between text and readers. As the editors of the 2004 volume *Rituals in Ink* have correctly remarked: “If performed rituals matter in society, literary rituals must matter in texts.”⁶

In this article, I will explore the tendency of ancient authors to ascribe ‘bad’ triumphs to ‘bad’ emperors. Due to the critical nature of the historical and biographical genres, such negative examples are more numerous than purely positive interpretations of triumphs, which are mostly limited to panegyric. Whether these hostile accounts provide accurate reflections of ‘what really happened’ is not the issue here. Regardless of veracity, the reasons that historians and biographers give for mocking or condemning triumphing emperors and the strategies they employ to do so can tell us much about their norms and expectations. The central question is: how did Greco-Roman authors use the imperial triumph in their accounts to define the limits of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emperorship?

Extraordinary triumphs

Mark Antony

Several ‘bad’ triumphs in Greco-Roman literature are marked as such by the *triumphator* deliberately ignoring the conventions of the ritual, shaping it into something new to suit his purposes. One famous example precedes the rise of the Empire. In his biography of Mark Antony, Plutarch goes into some detail about the commander’s military exploits in the East. Antony was co-ruling the Roman territories with Octavian at the time, but resided in Alexandria as Queen Cleopatra’s lover. In 34 BC, he marched his troops into the kingdom of Armenia, which had abandoned him in

4 See Icks 2011 and Icks 2012. A particularly good example is Ammianus’s farcical account of the elevation of the usurper Procopius (AD 365–366), who was “raised in a laughable manner to this dishonor of all honours” (26.6.16), although the passage presents Procopius as inept rather than villainous.

5 Buc 2001 has drawn attention to the manipulation of the descriptions of ruler rituals in early medieval sources, arguing that “in some political cultures at least, it may be ritual-in-text rather than ritual-in-performance that best legitimizes or delegitimizes” (8). Likewise, in her volume on the failure of ritual, Ute Hüsken has remarked that “All ritual texts are likely to express above all the agenda of those who composed the texts and of those in charge of transmitting them” (Hüsken 2007: 343).

6 Barchiesi/Rüpke/Stephens 2004: vii.

his campaign against the Parthian Empire two years earlier. According to Plutarch, Antony persuaded the Armenian king Artavasdes II to come to him, “seized him, and took him in chains down to Alexandria, where he celebrated a triumph”. The details of this ritual are not described, but the biographer notes that “herein particularly did he give offence to the Romans, since he bestowed the honourable and solemn rites of his native country upon the Egyptians for Cleopatra’s sake”.⁷ Cassius Dio elaborates on the story, describing how Antony drove into the city upon a chariot “in a kind of triumphal procession”, presenting the spoils of war and the Armenian royal family to Cleopatra. The Egyptian queen made a splendid figure, sitting upon a gilded chair upon a platform plated with silver. However, “the barbarians addressed no supplications to her, nor made obeisance to her, ... but merely addressed her by name”.⁸

In both accounts, Antony’s presumptuous decision to stage a Roman triumph in a foreign country, in honour of a foreign queen, indicates that he has turned his back on Rome and has become a foreigner himself. A regular triumph would culminate at the Capitol, where the victorious general would sacrifice to Jupiter, thus fulfilling the vows he had made before he set out and dedicating his victory to Rome’s supreme deity.⁹ Antony’s triumph culminates before the throne of Cleopatra, placing her at the centre of the ritual. This allegation enhances the portrait that both authors paint of Antony, namely that of a man who could not control his passions and was so smitten with the Egyptian queen that it seriously compromised his ability to act virtuously and sensibly.¹⁰ As Christopher Pelling has noted in his commentary on Plutarch’s biography, the author does not criticize Antony’s military confrontation with Artavasdes, but saves his vitriol for the ensuing triumph to strengthen the image of the talented general who loses his head over a beautiful woman.¹¹ Significantly, even the captured Armenians in Dio’s account prove themselves Antony’s superiors in this regard, refusing to prostrate themselves before the Egyptian queen. Moreover, both Plutarch and Dio record a subsequent scene in which the Roman commander grants Cleopatra, her son Caesarion, and her children by Antony territories to rule over. These do not only include Antony’s recent and future conquests, but Roman lands as well – another affront that proved that Antony’s allegiance no longer lay with the people of Rome.¹²

Discussing the accounts of Plutarch and Dio, Ronald Syme has commented that “hostile propaganda has so far magnified and distorted these celebrations that accu-

⁷ Plut. *Ant.* 50.4: τὰ καλὰ καὶ σεμνὰ τῆς πατρίδος.

⁸ Cass. Dio 49.40.3: ἐν ἐπινικίοις τισὶν.

⁹ Künzl 1988: 85–94; Beard 2007: 82.

¹⁰ According to Plutarch, Antony’s love for Cleopatra was his “crowning evil” which “roused and drove to frenzy many of the passions that were still hidden and quiescent in him, and dissipated and destroyed whatever good and saving qualities still offered resistance” (*Ant.* 25.1).

¹¹ Pelling 1988: 240.

¹² Plut. *Ant.* 54.3–6; Cass. Dio 49.41.1–4.

racy of fact and detail cannot be recovered”.¹³ Nevertheless, it is interesting that older accounts do not mention an Alexandrian triumph at all. Strabo merely states that Artavasdes was “carried off prisoner to Alexandria by Antony and was paraded in chains through the city”. Velleius Paterculus, whose portrayal of Antony is far from favourable, records that the general “obtained possession of the person of King Artavasdes by deceit, and bound him with chains”. He does not tell us what happened to the king afterwards, but in the same chapter, he records that Antony had ordered that he should henceforth be called the new Father Liber, and had driven through Alexandria in a Bacchic chariot, wearing a saffron robe of gold and holding a thyrsus in his hand.¹⁴ Other authors also mention that Antony associated himself with Dionysus.¹⁵ As A. J. Woodman has remarked, this strategy allowed the Roman general to emphasize his ties with the Ptolemaic dynasty, which had long been connected to the Dionysus cult, and to evoke the memory of Alexander the Great, who was also associated with the god.¹⁶ Therefore, Paterculus’s story may well be grounded in fact.

Several modern scholars have assumed that Antony’s Dionysian procession was also the event at which Artavasdes was paraded through the streets in chains.¹⁷ However, it should be noted that Paterculus does not state this anywhere, nor does any other ancient author. At best, it can be argued that both events are mentioned in the same chapter and therefore may well have occurred at the same time. Yet even if we accept this hypothesis, it would not necessarily mean that Antony intended the procession to be seen as a ‘proper’ Roman triumph.¹⁸ Whether he did or not, it is significant that some authors chose to present it as such and hence turned their description of the event into an accusation. Most likely, this interpretation originated with Octavian and his supporters, who had every reason to cast suspicion on Antony as a traitor who had abandoned the rites and values of his ancestors.¹⁹ The story would have sounded plausible to most contemporary Romans, especially since a ‘genuine’ triumph also had Dionysian connotations.²⁰ By the time that Plutarch and Dio wrote their accounts of Antony, the allegation that he had usurped the triumphal ritual for

13 Syme 1967: 270. Plutarch’s sources for Mark Antony’s biography are discussed by Pelling 1988: 26–31. They include Asinius Pollio and Q. Dellius, both of whom initially supported Antony, but abandoned him in the course of the war. The latter may have written against Antony in the propaganda wars of the late thirties.

14 Strab. 11.14.15; Vell. Pat. 2.82.3–4.

15 Woodman 1983: 213–214 lists several passages, such as Socrates of Rhodes, fr. 2, Sen. *Suas.* 1.6–7 and Plut. *Ant.* 24.3, 26.3. According to the latter, Dionysus was the god “to whom Antony always likened and attached himself most” (75.4). For non-literary evidence, see Tondriau 1949: 130–132.

16 Woodman 1983: 213–215.

17 Woodman 1983: 215; Huzar ²1986: 182–183.

18 Huzar ²1986: 182.

19 Beard 2007: 269.

20 Versnel 1970: 235–254, 288–299; Bastien 2007: 172–179.

the sake of Cleopatra may well have been considered historical fact. History, as usual, was written by the victors.

Caligula

The emperor Caligula offers a prime example of a ruler whose triumphal displays are mercilessly mocked by ancient authors. Lacking the military prestige of Augustus or Tiberius, the young emperor sought to compensate for this by launching a campaign against the northern barbarians. The results did not meet his expectations. After his troops had failed to gain any significant victories in Germany, the emperor marched towards the Channel, apparently planning to invade Britain. However, instead of crossing over to the unconquered island, he gave an order that has puzzled scholars to this day. As Suetonius records:²¹

Finally, as if he intended to bring the war to an end, he drew up a line of battle on the shore of the Ocean, arranging his ballistas and other artillery; and when no one knew or could imagine what he was going to do, he suddenly bade them gather shells and fill their helmets and the folds of their gowns, calling them ‘spoils from the Ocean, due to the Capitol and Palatine.’ As a monument of his victory he erected a lofty tower, from which lights were to shine at night to guide the course of ships, as from the Pharos. Then promising the soldiers a gratuity of a hundred denarii each, as if he had shown unprecedented liberality, he said, ‘Go your way happy; go your way rich’.

It has been suggested that Caligula issued his peculiar command to humiliate his soldiers because they refused to cross the Channel.²² Although this is a plausible explanation, neither Suetonius nor Cassius Dio mentions anything of the sort. Both authors prefer to present Caligula’s claim to have conquered the Ocean as genuine, thus strengthening the image of the young emperor as a madman with delusions of divinity. All the acts mentioned by Suetonius – the collection of booty, the erection of a victory monument, the promise of a donative – were regularly performed by victorious generals. Allegedly, the emperor also requested a grander triumph than had ever been celebrated before, but ultimately settled for the lesser honour of an ovation due to a conflict with the senate.²³ According to Dio, the senators had hesitated at bestowing great praise on Caligula “for some trivial exploit or none at all”, reason-

²¹ Suet. *Cal.* 46. Cass. Dio 59.25.1–3 also mentions the story.

²² Balsdon 1934: 91–92; Wardle 1994: 312–315; Winterling 2007: 112–113. Apparently, the soldiers initially refused to cross the Channel before Claudius’s invasion as well, because it fell outside the limits of the known world (Cass. Dio 60.19.2–3). Barrett 1989: 135–138 rejects the humiliation hypothesis, arguing that Caligula did not intend to cross the Channel at this time.

²³ Suet. *Cal.* 47–49.2. Since Caligula only celebrated an ovation, he probably never requested a triumph at all: Barrett 1989: 138; Wardle 1994: 315–317.

ing that this would only give the appearance that they were mocking their sovereign. Unfortunately, the emperor did not follow their logic and exploded in anger, coming within a hair's breadth of destroying the senate altogether.²⁴ Of course, the notion that the Curia would deny the emperor honours because he had not earned them is ludicrous. However, Dio's account once more highlights the shrill contrast between Caligula's military pretensions and his actual military track record, which was virtually non-existent.

Even more peculiar than the story of Caligula's victory over Oceanus are the accounts of his triumph at the Gulf of Baiae. It is possible that the emperor staged this ritual after his return from the shores of the Channel, although our sources treat these as two completely separate events.²⁵ According to Dio, who offers the most detailed account, Caligula did not consider it a great achievement to drive a chariot on land and opted for something more challenging.²⁶ He ordered the construction of a bridge made from ships crossing the waters between Puteoli and Bauli. The historian continues:²⁷

When all was ready, he put on the breastplate of Alexander (or so he claimed) [ὥς γε ἔλεγε], and over it a purple silk chlamys, adorned with much gold and many precious stones from India; moreover he girt on a sword, a shield as well, and donned a garland of oak leaves. Then he offered sacrifice to Neptune and some other gods and to Envy (in order, as he put it, that no jealousy should attend him), and entered the bridge from the end at Bauli, taking with him a multitude of armed horsemen and foot-soldiers; and he dashed fiercely into Puteoli as if he were in pursuit of an enemy. There he remained during the following day, as if resting from battle; then, wearing a gold-embroidered tunic, he returned in a chariot over the same bridge, being drawn by race-horses accustomed to win the most victories. A long train of what purported to be spoils [ὡς καὶ λάφυρα] followed him, including Darius, a member of the Arsacid family, who was one of the Parthians then living in Rome as hostages. His friends and associates in flowered robes followed in vehicles, and then came the army and the rest of the throng, each man dressed according to his individual taste.

After this dazzling display, Caligula climbed a platform and addressed his troops, praising them for their valiant efforts and granting them a donative. A feast ensued that lasted all night, with the emperor getting very drunk and hurling many of his men into the water. On this note, the celebrations ended.²⁸

²⁴ Cass. Dio 59.25.4–5: ἐπὶ μηδεμιᾷ ἢ μικρᾷ τι. Presumably, the 'divine honours' which the senators withheld from Caligula were connected to the triumph he intended to celebrate (59.25.3).

²⁵ Winterling ²2007: 120–124. In Dio's chronological account, the triumph at Baiae (59.17.1–11) precedes the emperor's victory over Oceanus (59.25.1–3).

²⁶ Caligula's desire to defy nature is a recurring theme in ancient literature. Whereas the emperor wanted to drive a chariot across water, Suetonius records that the triremes in which he had entered the Ocean were carried to Rome overland for most of the way (*Cal.* 47).

²⁷ Cass. Dio 59.17.3–6.

²⁸ Cass. Dio 59.17.6–10. Suetonius offers a shorter account: *Suet. Cal.* 19.1–3, 32.1. It is impossible to

Aloys Winterling has plausibly interpreted the spectacle as an attempt to create a new kind of triumphal ritual combining Hellenistic and Roman elements. It did not only demonstrate the emperor's unlimited power, but also hinted at his ability to cross the Channel and conquer Britain, should he want to. Moreover, it was a conscious move away from Rome and the senate, and therefore an unmistakable statement that Caligula wanted to detach himself from the Republican traditions of the principate and no longer sought the praise or approval of the Curia.²⁹ In the eyes of Cassius Dio, however, the ritual just demonstrated the emperor's unlimited hubris. The author mentions how Caligula boasted that even Neptune was afraid of him and his men, and how he made fun of Darius and Xerxes – kings who were themselves considered symbols of extreme pride – because their ship bridges over the Hellespont paled into insignificance next to his own construction.³⁰ The emperor's aspiration to be a new Alexander also bespeaks his inflated opinion of himself. It was all too easy for Dio to burst this bubble. When the historian casts doubt on the authenticity of Caligula's breastplate, questioning whether it had truly belonged to the great conqueror, he also casts doubt on the emperor himself, ridiculing his absurd pretensions.

The rest of Dio's account likewise undermines Caligula's prestige. It is important to note that the first part of the triumphal ritual is in fact no triumph at all, since it precedes the 'victory' celebrated in the second part. Rather, it is an enactment of the emperor going into battle, including the customary sacrifices to the gods before the start of the campaign and a mad dash over the bridge "as if he were in pursuit of an enemy".³¹ The 'captives' the young ruler brings back with him were certainly not the spoils of any conquest, but had been brought from Rome to play their part in the spectacle. The 'triumph', in short, celebrates a victory the emperor had never really won, but which he only staged, like an actor in a play. Describing the feast that followed the performance, Dio notes that "fires were lighted on all sides, as in a theatre", once more drawing attention to the artificiality of the event.³² The message seems clear. Real conquerors celebrated real triumphs, referencing battles that had actually taken

determine whether Dio is directly dependent on Suetonius, but the many similarities between both works at least suggest that they used the same sources (Wirth 1985: 42; see also Millar 1964: 85–86, arguing that it is an "attractive possibility" that Dio used Suetonius directly for his account of the reign of Augustus).

29 Winterling 2007: 120–124. See also Kleijwegt 1994, who makes a compelling case that Caligula staged the Baiae spectacle as "a ritualized change of alliance after his fall-out with the senate" (669), using it to strengthen his ties to the military instead.

30 Cass. Dio 59.17.11. Suetonius also mentions Xerxes, but suggests that Caligula's true reason for building the bridge was to defy a prediction by the astrologer Thrasyllus, who had told Tiberius that Caligula had no more chance of gaining the throne than of riding over the Gulf of Baiae with horses (*Cal.* 19.3).

31 Cass. Dio 59.17.4: καθάπερ ἐπὶ πολέμιους τινὰς.

32 Cass. Dio 59.17.9.

place. Caligula, in contrast, had only phony victories to boast of. His triumph was full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Nero

Like Caligula, Nero was not an emperor who enjoyed great military prestige. Instead of setting out to conquer foreign lands, he tried to manifest himself as a cultural leader, publicly performing as a singer and an actor.³³ As part of this cultural program, he traveled to Greece in AD 67 to participate in the Olympic Games and several other festivals, winning many prizes for chariot-driving, singing and acting.³⁴ Suetonius describes how the emperor returned to Italy in triumph, visiting several cities before he entered Rome:³⁵

Returning from Greece, since it was at Naples that he had made his first appearance, he entered that city with white horses through a part of the wall which had been thrown down, as is customary with victors in the sacred games. In like manner he entered Antium, then Albanum, and finally Rome; but at Rome he rode in the chariot which Augustus had used in his triumphs in days gone by, and wore a purple robe and a Greek cloak adorned with stars of gold, bearing on his head the Olympic crown and in his right hand the Pythian, while the rest were carried before him with inscriptions telling where he had won them and against what competitors, and giving the titles of the songs or of the subject of the plays. His car was followed by his claue as by the escort of a triumphal procession [*sequentibus currum ovantium ritu plausoribus*], who shouted that they were the attendants of Augustus and the soldiers of his triumph.

The procession made its way through the arch of the Circus Maximus, across the Velabrum and the Forum, and ended at the temple of Apollo on the Palatine. Victims were slain along the route, while Nero was sprinkled with sweets and ribbons. Cassius Dio, who also records the event, mentions that the streets were decorated with garlands and that the whole population and the senate acclaimed the emperor as ‘Olympian Victor’, ‘Pythian Victor’, ‘our Hercules’ and ‘our Apollo’.³⁶

Clearly, Nero’s entry in Rome as described by these authors is highly reminiscent of a triumphal procession. John Miller has pointed out that Nero seems to have introduced several variations on traditional triumphal elements. For instance, the wreath of laurel that a *triumphator* would traditionally wear on his head had been replaced

³³ Morford 1985; Champlin 2003.

³⁴ For more on Nero’s Greek tour, see Griffin 1984: 162–163; Morford 1985: 2024–2026; Alcock 1994; Champlin 2003: 53–61.

³⁵ Suet. *Nero* 25.1.

³⁶ Suet. *Nero* 25.2; Cass. Dio 63.20.1–6. Since the descriptions of Suetonius and Cassius Dio are quite similar, but differ in some of the details, they likely used a common source: Bradley 1978: 148; Griffin 1984: 230–231. Unfortunately, the corresponding passage in Tacitus’s *Annales* has been lost.

with the olive crown of an Olympic victor; the signs which normally told the audience which states and cities had been conquered now bore the names of the games at which Nero had triumphed; and instead of his children accompanying him in the chariot, the emperor had a defeated lyre-player at his side.³⁷ However, the aspects in which Nero's procession radically differed from a traditional triumph are just as significant. Both Suetonius and Cassius Dio mention that the emperor entered the city through a breach in the city walls, a custom apparently practiced in Greece to welcome home athletes who had been victorious in the Panhellenic games.³⁸ Rather than following the customary triumphal route, which went around the Palatine counter clockwise, Nero travelled in clockwise direction through the Circus Maximus, over the Velabrum and the Forum – tempting Edward Champlin to remark that Nero's procession “looks like a deliberate anti-triumph”.³⁹ Moreover, Suetonius records that the procession did not culminate at the Capitoline temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, but at the temple of Apollo on the Palatine. Instead of Rome's supreme deity, it was the god of beauty and the arts to whom the emperor dedicated his victories.⁴⁰

Catherine Edwards has interpreted Nero's ‘cultural triumph’ as a deliberate provocation of traditional Roman values, parodying the triumphs of victorious generals from the past.⁴¹ Alternatively, it is possible that the emperor did not seek to provoke, but merely employed the familiar idiom of the ritual to create a new image. Considering Nero's persistent attempts to present himself as a cultural, rather than a military champion, it seems likely that he would use the triumph as a model to stage his glorious return from Greece – especially since he also used triumphal symbolism in other non-military contexts, expanding the applicability of the triumphal vocabulary.⁴² Ultimately, however, it is impossible to determine how accurately the accounts of Suetonius and Cassius Dio reflect what actually happened in AD 67. The authors may very well have exaggerated the parallels of Nero's procession to a regular triumph to highlight the (in their eyes) absurdity of the event. In other words, it may have been

37 Miller 2000: 416.

38 Suet. *Nero* 25.1; Cass. Dio 63.20.1. Vitruv. 9, *praefatio* 1 briefly mentions the welcoming ceremony for victorious Greek athletes, but has nothing to say on the breaching of city walls.

39 Champlin 2003: 231.

40 According to Dio, the procession visited the Capitol and then proceeded to the imperial palace, with no mention of a visit to the temple of Apollo (63.20.4). John Miller has suggested that the triumph's culmination at the temple of Apollo was a reference to Virgil's account of Octavian's triumph of 29 BC (*Aen.* 8.714–722), which likewise culminated at this temple. The fact that Nero used Augustus's triumphal chariot speaks in favour of this theory (Miller 2000).

41 Edwards 1994: 90.

42 Griffin 1984: 230–234. Examples include Nero receiving the Armenian king Tiridates dressed in the guise of a triumphing general (Suet. *Nero* 13.1; Cass. Dio 63.4.1–3) and conferring the *ornamenta triumphalia* on men for other than military services (Suet. *Nero* 15.2).

Suetonius and Dio, rather than Nero himself, who turned the emperor's return from Greece into a parody of a triumph.⁴³

Suetonius certainly seems to employ this strategy in the next lines of his account, describing how Nero erected statues of himself as a lyre-player and only addressed the soldiers by letter or through an intermediary in order to save his voice. Allegedly, the artistically inclined ruler was even accompanied by an assistant who reminded him to spare his vocal organs and held a handkerchief to his mouth.⁴⁴ Dio is even more explicit in his disapproval. The historian closes his account of the cultural triumph with an acid remark, aimed at the senators who acclaimed the emperor as Olympian Victor, Hercules and Apollo. "I might, to be sure", he comments, "have used circumlocutions, but why not declare their very words? The expressions that they used do not disgrace my history; rather, the fact that I have not concealed any of them lends it distinction."⁴⁵ Obviously, these authors had little sympathy or understanding for what the emperor was trying to do. In their worldview, there was no room for a ruler who aspired to shine as an artist or a chariot-driver. If a victory had not been achieved on the battlefield, it did not count as a victory at all.

Regular 'bad' triumphs

In the case of Caligula and Nero, criticism focused on their transgression of the traditional forms of the ritual as they had been established during the Republic – i.e. a procession through the *pomerium* of Rome, following a standard route and characterized by standard attributes and actions, such as the sacrifice of white bulls at the temple of Jupiter. Although variations in the repertoire of triumph were probably much greater than is often assumed, as Beard has argued, it is evident that events such as Caligula's spectacle at Baiae and the 'musical triumph' of Nero fell outside the norms of what Greco-Roman authors understood as a 'proper' Roman triumph.⁴⁶

Clearly, not all emperors were as creative (or as recalcitrant) as Caligula and Nero in inventing new forms of triumphal rituals. However, that did not mean their displays escaped criticism and mockery by ancient authors. Since the triumphs these emperors celebrated adhered more closely to traditional forms, literary attacks on these events were also more or less standardized. Every triumph constituted a claim that the emperor had gained a significant victory – a claim that could easily be contested. Claudius, for instance, is said to have celebrated a triumph of "great splendor" because of his conquest of Britain, although Suetonius claims that the emperor

⁴³ Morford 1985: 2026.

⁴⁴ Suet. *Nero* 25.3.

⁴⁵ Cass. Dio 63.20.6

⁴⁶ Beard 2007 : 80–106, 266–272.

received dominion over the new territories “without any battle or bloodshed”. These words were not intended as a recommendation, since the author introduces the conquest with the remark that Claudius “made but one campaign and that of little importance”.⁴⁷ Likewise, Dio records that Claudius accepted the *ornamenta triumphalia* for his annexation of Mauretania in AD 44, “though he had not gained any success and had not yet come to the throne when the war was finished”.⁴⁸

A recurring motif in ‘bad’ triumphs is the use of fake prisoners or booty. Allegedly, when Caligula returned from his failed campaign in Germany, he made a selection of tall Gauls he deemed “worthy of a triumph”. These men were ordered to dye their hair red, let it grow long and learn to speak the Germanic language, so he could present them as captives in his triumphal procession.⁴⁹ Domitian pulled off a similar trick when he celebrated his Germanic victory, purchasing ‘captives’ from traders. After the emperor had been forced to make peace with the Dacian king Decebalus, “he graced the festival that followed with many exhibits appropriate to a triumph, though they came from no booty that he had captured”. On the contrary, establishing peace with the Dacians had been a very costly affair, Dio informs us, and the so-called ‘booty’ actually consisted of imperial furniture! The fact that Domitian considered even the contents of his own palace as spoils of war made him conqueror over the Romans, rather than the Dacians, and betrayed the extent to which this tyrant had “enslaved even the Empire itself”.⁵⁰ Small wonder, then, that Pliny the Younger was relieved when Trajan ascended the throne, so he could look forward to the day “when the Capitol shall see no masquerade of triumph, the chariots and sham trappings of a false victory, but an emperor coming home with true and genuine honour”.⁵¹

Also noteworthy is the case of Gallienus, whose triumph is related in great detail by the anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta*. Allegedly, the emperor treacherously slew a group of disarmed soldiers at Byzantium and then tried to sell this heinous deed as a major victory to the people of Rome. During the lavish celebration of his decennial festival, Gallienus proceeded to the Capitol in a splendid procession, dressed in triumphal garb and accompanied by senators, knights and soldiers. Groups of men dressed as Goths, Sarmatians, Franks and Persians marched

47 Suet. *Claud.* 17.1–2: *sine ullo proelio aut sanguine*. Ironically, Suetonius claims that Claudius launched the campaign because he desired “the glory of a legitimate triumph”.

48 Cass. Dio 60.8.6. Other notable examples include Caligula being styled Germanicus and Britannicus because of his erotic conquests (Cass. Dio 59.25.5a; see Barrett 1989: 287 n. 56), Otho claiming credit for a victory against the Sarmatians which had been won in his absence (Tac. *Hist.* 1.79) and Theodosius I entering Constantinople as if he were celebrating a triumph in a period of crisis (Zos. 4.33.1).

49 Suet. *Cal.* 47.

50 Tac. *Agr.* 39.1; Cass Dio 67.7.2–4.

51 Plin. *Paneg.* 16.3: *non mimicos currus, nec falsae simulacra victoriae*.

along in the parade, representing the peoples the emperor claimed to have subdued.⁵² However,

As a band of Persians, supposed to be captives [*quasi captivorum*], was being led along in the procession (such an absurdity!), certain wits mingled with them and most carefully scrutinized all, examining with open-mouthed astonishment the features of every one; and when asked what they meant by that sagacious investigation, they replied, ‘We are searching for the Emperor’s father’.⁵³

Through this anecdote, the author undermines Gallienus’s credibility in one fatal stroke. Not only does he draw attention to the fact that the captives marching in the procession were fake, he also reminds his readers of the sad fate of Valerian, the first and only emperor ever to be taken captive by the Persians. Since Gallienus had not been able to free his father – worse, had not even tried – his boasts of military victory over these dreaded enemies rang hollow and revealed him as a hypocrite.

In some instances, it is not the triumph as such which is questioned by the authors, but the behaviour of the emperor during the proceedings. The most shocking lack of decorum was allegedly displayed by Commodus, who saw no problems in seating Saoterus, his “partner in depravity”, next to him in the *triumphator’s* chariot and repeatedly kissed him for all the world to see. Even if the story is true, the fact that the biographer recorded only this scandalous detail from what must have been a splendid occasion shows the remarkable degree to which ancient authors could determine a triumph’s status for posterity. At the other end of the spectrum, Constantius II acted more like a statue than like a human being during his triumphal entry in Rome in AD 357. Ammianus Marcellinus records how the emperor stood completely motionless in his chariot, gazing straight ahead without ever turning his face, “neither did he nod when the wheel jolted nor was he ever seen to spit, or to wipe or rub his face or nose, or move his hands about”. In fact, he only moved when he passed through high gates, for then he stooped, “although he was very short”.⁵⁴ With this remark, Ammianus makes fun of an emperor who wanted to appear larger than life. As Richard Flower has remarked, the historian regularly compares people to images to undermine their authority, for instance when he describes the senators who come out to meet Constantius as “august likenesses of the patrician stock” – in other words, as mere reflections of their glorious ancestors. Likewise, the triumph-

⁵² SHA *Gall.* 7.2–8.7. As has been argued by Bray 1997: 187–188, the story about Gallienus’s treacherous slaughter of the Byzantines (which is not mentioned by any other source) is extremely unlikely. Clearly, it constitutes yet another attempt by the biographer to undermine the emperor’s military prestige.

⁵³ SHA *Gall.* 9.5–6.

⁵⁴ SHA *Comm.* 3.6; Amm. 16.10.9–11.

ing emperor, behaving “as though an image of a man”, only demonstrates how far removed he is from the ideal he aspires to.⁵⁵

It may well be that Ammianus did not just target Constantius II with his mocking description. As the author remarks, the emperor celebrated, “without a title, a victory over Roman blood”. The same criticism could be levelled at Theodosius I, who had entered Rome in triumph in AD 389 – and hence shortly before Ammianus’s work was published – after defeating the usurper Magnus Maximus. We can assume that the historian’s readers would have applied his accusation against Constantius to the present emperor, as well.⁵⁶ This brings us to another aspect of triumphal criticism, namely the subtle art of discrediting contemporary rulers by focusing on similar bad behaviour by predecessors. Unfortunately, such allegations are often hard to substantiate. For instance, one might be tempted to read some criticism of Caracalla in Dio’s account of Caligula’s triumph at Baiae, since the claims that the Julio-Claudian emperor wore Alexander’s breastplate and had a certain Darius of Parthian origin among his ‘captives’ evoke Caracalla’s aspirations to model himself after the great Macedonian conqueror. At the same time, however, we should note that both these elements are already present in the biography of Suetonius, whom we could hardly suspect of holding a grudge against Caracalla.⁵⁷ At best, therefore, Dio may be said to have reproduced the details in his narrative because he thought they would strike a chord with contemporary audiences. In short, determining authorial intentions remains a tricky business, and we can only seek to temper wild speculation with plausible reasoning.

Conclusion

Since any Roman triumph essentially constituted a claim to military victory, we need not be surprised that most criticism of triumphal rituals aimed at the validity of these claims, questioning whether an emperor had truly earned this high honour. In the eyes of hostile historians and biographers, of course, he had not. As we have seen, Greco-Roman literature abounds with accounts of rulers who made use of fake captives or fake booty, or claimed honours that far exceeded their actual achievements. Perhaps the best example of an emperor who did not know when to stop tooting his own horn is Domitian, whose habit of erecting one triumphal arch after the other

⁵⁵ Amm. 16.10.5; *reverendas patriciae stirpis effigies*; 10: *tamquam figmentum hominis*; Flower 2015: 830–833. See also Hartke 1951: 313–315.

⁵⁶ Amm. 16.10.1; McCormick 1986: 80–83. Perhaps the most notable example of a ruler being criticized for celebrating a victory over Roman citizens with a triumphal procession is Julius Caesar: Plut. *Caes.* 56.7–9; App. *Civ.* 2.101.

⁵⁷ Cass. Dio 59.17.1–7; Suet. *Cal.* 19.1–3, 52.

allegedly caused an anonymous contemporary to write ‘It is enough’ on one of the ubiquitous monuments.⁵⁸ Alleging that certain rulers had not earned their triumphs, ancient authors did not only diminish the military prestige that these men had sought to boost, but also revealed them as either madmen with delusions of grandeur, or as a cynical hypocrites who tried to deceive their own people. As Beard has succinctly stated: “In its simplest terms, ‘good emperors’ held proper triumphs for proper victories, while ‘bad emperors’ held sham ceremonies for empty victories.”⁵⁹

The best demonstrations of imperial hubris in Greco-Roman literature are triumphal celebrations that transgress the conventional forms of the ritual, shaping it into something new that was not in concordance with the *mos maiorum*. Caligula’s ‘triumph’ at Baiae is a prime example, demonstrating the arrogance of an emperor who took himself for a new Alexander and aimed to defy nature itself with his ride over water. Significantly, ancient authors could emphasize the triumphal aspects of certain imperial celebrations to make the emperor in question stand out as worse than he otherwise would. Mark Antony’s so-called ‘triumph’ in Alexandria demonstrates this nicely, since this event would not have carried such grave implications if Plutarch and Cassius Dio had simply interpreted it as a harmless Dionysian procession (as it perhaps was), rather than presenting it as a treacherous attempt to transplant one of Rome’s most sacred rituals to foreign soil. Suetonius and Dio may have employed a similar technique in their hostile descriptions of Nero’s ‘Greek triumph’. Clearly, this event would not have been nearly as ludicrous and shameful if it had not so closely paralleled a regular Roman triumph, since the similarities implied that the emperor presented his victories in chariot-driving and singing contests as equal to the military successes of regular *triumphatores*. Of course, we can only speculate to what extent this notion is due to literary distortion, and to what extent it was an unintended consequence of the way that Nero himself designed the ritual. Nevertheless, deliberately comparing an imperial celebration to a triumph made the targeted ruler vulnerable to accusations of transgression that would not be as poignant if the celebration was *not* interpreted in triumphal terms.

It was even possible to go one step further: the idiom of triumph could be applied to situations that did not constitute any kind of celebration at all. Mary Griffin has drawn attention to Tacitus’s Neronian narrative, remarking how the author repeatedly makes a travesty of Roman concepts of military glory to highlight the emperor’s unworthiness.⁶⁰ One intriguing example is Nero’s return to Rome after the murder of his mother. According to Tacitus, the young ruler fretted over the way the Roman people would receive him, but was calmed by his courtiers, who assured him that eve-

58 Suet. *Dom.* 13.2.

59 Beard 2007: 271.

60 Griffin 1984: 230–231.

rybody would be rejoicing about Agrippina's death. Travelling ahead of the emperor, these men

... found, indeed, an alacrity which surpassed their promises: the tribes on the way to meet him; the senate in festal dress; troops of wives and of children disposed according to their sex and years, while along his route rose tiers of seats of the type used for viewing a triumph. Then, flushed with pride, victor over the national servility [*publici servitii victor*], he made his way to the Capitol, paid his grateful vows, and abandoned himself to all the vices, till now retarded, though scarcely repressed, by some sort of deference to his mother.⁶¹

Needless to say, a triumphal celebration like this never happened. The event was made up by Tacitus to stress the depths to which Rome had fallen – not only because of the boundless cruelty of Nero, who did not even shrink back from killing his own mother, but also because of the shameless servitude of the Roman people, who were prepared to applaud the emperor for his heinous deed. Describing Nero's return as a triumph put it in stark contrast to the glorious deeds of the Roman generals of the past, whose exploits had truly been worth celebrating. The emperor's alleged victory over Agrippina, on the other hand, signified nothing but his ultimate moral defeat.

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⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.13.

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