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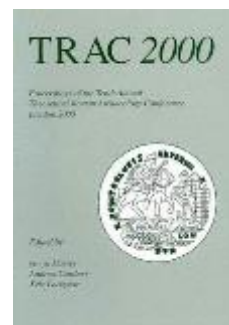# Writing Colonial Conflict, Acknowledging Colonial Weakness

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3.1   Comparative Colonialism

On the 12th of April 1877 a small mission stood in Pretoria, and read a proclamation that served to annex the Transvaal to the British Empire. As Melmoth Osborn read the proclamation, he was so nervous that Rider Haggard, also present, had to take over from him. Osborn's nervousness was well-founded. Despite being the representative of the most powerful nation on earth there were a mere handful of officials and twenty-five mounted Natal police to hold this new territory. There was no pomp and ceremony about the annexation: that was tactfully left for a month until the first British battalion arrived, and the position of the colonial staff became more secure (Pakenham 1992, pp. 40-1). In the absence of an immediate military presence it would seem that even representatives of the most powerful empires must act with caution. In other words, in some circumstances, colonial negotiation may be less one sided than we often imagine.

In the paper that follows I shall use the well-documented phenomenon of European colonialism, especially (though not exclusively) the British experience in South Africa, to consider the way in which our own colonial past has influenced our writing concerning colonial conflict. This will allow a more informed approach to the less well-understood phenomenon of Roman colonisation. It is thus the working assumption in this paper that situations occurring in different times and different places *may* have a family resemblance that allows informative comparison. This is not to deny the importance of issues like human agency, or 'negotiation', or the importance of historically-specific analysis, and studies of this kind do not seek to claim that all colonial situations are identical (Webster 1994, pp. 2–3). The aim is simply to provide an informed context for more detailed historically located study. Neither is it my intention to attempt to offer a 'general theory of colonial conflict'. This clearly runs counter to the deconstruction of Romanisation and other social meta-theories, which has occurred in relation to the Roman Empire in recent years (Mattingly 1997c). The model is a partial one, relevant in some circumstances, some of the time — it is just one tool that may be used to reach an understanding of the experience of the coloniser.

3.2   Defining Colonial Power

Said (1993, p. 8) defines colonialism as the 'implanting of settlements on a distant territory'. To achieve this, a small group of individuals with ties to the metropolitan centre manage to dominate a (usually) much larger 'native population', by virtue of

some form of military superiority. The impact of such military power may well be mediated through trade and/or religion, but it is the ability to coerce which underpins the inequality of colonial negotiations. This is evident throughout the European occupation of Africa (see Pakenham 1992 in general, but also Keegan 1996, pp. 15–37 on the early Dutch and British settlement in South Africa) and in the wider context of European colonialism, for example in the Spanish in Central America (Ferro 1997, p. 34). Thus, taking European colonisation as an example, it can be argued that European ascendancy was ultimately reliant on a military superiority stemming from a level of technological warfare that could not be matched by indigenous populations.

A second common feature of colonial domination is that it is usually only viable when maintained from the outside. If a small force is to dominate a large area or population, it needs to call upon resources from a wider imperial structure, which is effectively the test that Said (1993, p. 8) uses to distinguish 'imperialism' from 'colonialism'. In part, it is the ability of 'the men on the spot' to call upon an empire's greater ability to summon resources and military muscle to a given location that allows the development of imperial technologies of power and control. For example, in the case of the annexation of the Transvaal, even though for a few short weeks the British presence was very small indeed, a military force was on the way — the twenty-five military police had power disproportionate to their strength, backed as they were by the prospect of a larger scale military intervention. For that month, the authority of the mission to Pretoria was based not upon their actual power as present in the Transvaal, but upon the power of the empire which had sent them, a power articulated through the strength of the prevailing colonial discourse, rather than present military strength. It was not, in this month, the power of the mission that created this discourse, but the more distant and abstract resources of the British Empire upon which they could draw in case of trouble. This may function on a more informal level, when settlers and natives have differential access to wider economic structures where technological advantage can be bought. The 14,000 Boers of the Great Trek were able to carve out geographically large territories in relation to their numbers in the face of African opposition, in part because the sale of imported firearms was permitted to the emigrant white population, but not to the Africans undergoing colonisation (Schreuder 1980, p. 47).

The great weakness of colonial control in such a circumstance is that in a large formal empire, where there will be many competing demands for resources, there is a real possibility that the necessary military assets will be stationed elsewhere at the time they are required to suppress a local native revolt or reverse a defeat. In the case of the famous British military disaster at Isandhlwana, Disraeli was forced to 'divert troops urgently needed elsewhere' (Guy 1979, p. 52). The 'man on the spot' is in an ambiguous position in that his presence is an active affirmation of Imperial power, but at the same time he is isolated from that power to a greater or lesser degree. The actions of colonial administrators were essentially underwritten by military 'suasion', albeit that the instruments of this power may have been quite distant (if, for example, there was no local military presence). This situation would necessitate some considerable delay before any transgressions on the part of the subordinate population could be duly punished. A good Roman example is that of the Boudican revolt (see Salway 1981, 113–23 for a brief summary of the conflict and its aftermath, and Webster 1993 for a fuller account), which we will pursue further below. It would have been of little help to the procurator, Decianus Catus, faced by a revolt in East Anglia, to know that there was a legion in North Wales fighting Druids, and this probably explains his early flight to Gaul (Webster 1993, p. 93). Any administrator in a situation of

colonial negotiation must calculate how far the threat of hypothetical retaliation at some unspecified future time by troops stationed elsewhere, will secure compliance with orders given now. If this balance is not struck, and revolt occurs, the issue (from the perspective of the Imperial Administration) rapidly becomes one of how long the besieged colonials can survive until help arrives.

This theme of numerical asymmetry lies at the heart of an important feature in modern portrayals of colonial conflict. The number of colonial troops committed to an engagement is usually small and precisely recorded, but by contrast, the natives are numberless, or recorded as suspiciously large round numbers (making them 'many' rather than 'few'), or simply not quantified. The figures quoted for the action at Isandhlwana have almost 1,800 Europeans (although this figure is broken down in detail), but 'over 20,000' Zulus (Morris 1966, pp. 360 & 387). At Rorkes Drift there were 84 British against 4,000 Zulus (Morris 1966, p. 389). Obviously this is partly because of the better availability of information on European deployments. However, the failure to accurately quantify native insurgents is a common feature (see also Edwards 1973, pp. 73 & 76, on the siege of Lucknow and Ferro 1997, p. 33, on Cortes' campaigns in Mexico as two examples amongst many). The specific circumstances in which such figures are generated matters less than the fact that it is a commonly repeated pattern, and that such figures originally functioned in a context of colonial conflict for consumption by an imperial audience. The casualty figures of the Zulu war were 'experienced' by a British, not a Zulu public, and are a product of imperialism, as much as any other aspect of the colonial experience. However, these figures are then absorbed more or less uncritically into modern accounts.

This has the effect of reducing native insurgents from the status of individuals to simply part of an undifferentiated mass, impossible to define, and thus dangerous when unleashed. The primeval, and animalistic threat of the 'primitive' may be extended from people to environment somewhat in the manner of Marlow's sense of experience in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* On one level the 'darkness' may be read as a metaphor for a remote, primeval evil with the capacity to taint and corrupt (Singh 1988, pp. 271–2), and the 'unspeakable' rites of the region add to the lack of engagement with specifics that would generate a sense of history for the native. In relegating people to the status of an undifferentiated a-historical state, they become one more force of savage nature for the coloniser to contend with. For the coloniser this simultaneously emphasises both the sense of difference with the native, but also that such 'difference' can only be maintained artificially by continued contact with the outside. The 'Primitive' is thus an all-embracing state in which people are almost inanimate, like disease or tropical weather — something to be contended with and, if possible, 'civilised'.

This is a familiar aspect of colonial representations of native peoples, and has been explored in the context of historical archaeology (Miller *et al.* 1989b, p. 22), and more specifically in the 'a-historical' barbarity of Celtic warrior societies (Webster 1996). As Webster points out such constructs are established from two principal discourses, that of the 'timeless primitive' and that of 'barbarism' (Webster 1996, pp. 111–4). These discourses, rooted in a wider eurocentric perspective on the colonial encounter, are widespread in historical analysis, ethnography and archaeology (Webster 1994, pp. 1–2), but as we shall see later, they are also present in the historically located context of classical texts.

The response to this position has largely been to recover the 'lost' history of subordinate peoples, an activity for which archaeology is seen as the principal tool (Deetz 1996, pp. 4 11), acting, roughly speaking, as a corrective to historically informed

accounts which tend to favour the dominated, at the expense of the élite. This has resulted in a growing literature on resistance to domination in many different historical contexts (*e.g.*, Miller *et al.* 1989a; Scott 1985, 1990). The danger, however, is that limits to domination are couched only in terms of resistance, rather than resistance in the context of the greater or lesser weakness of the élite. The limits to domination lie not only in the ability of the subjugated to retain identity in the face of homogenising forces, but also in the inability of the élite to create true hegemony over their subjects (Scott 1990, pp. 77–96).

3.3   Considering the coloniser's perspective

Discrepant perspective, a concept developed by Said in the context of literary theory (Said 1993, pp. 35–50), is useful when deployed in an archaeological context (Mattingly 1997c, pp. 11–15). Simply stated, the concept suggests that different individuals will have differing experiences of life, depending upon their circumstances — their perspective is socially located. Such an approach has, hitherto, been largely deployed in the understanding of subject peoples, either in an attempt to understand broad landscapes (*e.g.*, Alcock 1997; Fincham 1999, 2000; Mattingly 1997a), or particular social aspects of their existence, like religion (Webster 1997). However, all groups in society have their socially located viewpoint, including those who rule. The lived experience of empire as perceived by representatives of the colonising power are as important to the understanding of colonial contact and concomitant issues of colonial negotiation and culture change, as the increasingly complexified study of those under domination.

Recent developments in the understanding of the relationship between ruled and rulers in the Roman Empire have begun to stress the options open to subordinates for pursuing resistance to Roman rule. Non-violent resistance has been fully explored by Scott (1985, 1990), and the concept has had an increasing impact on the archaeology of the Roman empire (see Hingley 1997 for Roman Britain as a case study, but also Alcock 1997, dealing with Greece, Webster 1997 on religion, and Fincham 1999 for the specific case study of Roman Fenland). However, the themes of unnumbered and faceless natives, numerical asymmetry between conquered and conqueror, and the absolute necessity of the colonial authorities to maintain contact with the outside world, suggests that in order to characterise the colonisers' experience of empire we should go beyond consideration of resistance to colonial rule. We need to recognise the active weakness of colonial control, rooted in the essential nature of colonialism, a weakness leading to a fear (which may be more or less hidden) of those who have been colonised.

This model is valid in the context of European empires, but an obvious objection to further extrapolation is that the Roman empire was not one of these. However, I would argue that this discussion has two things to offer to a consideration of the Roman colonial situation. Primarily, as I will illustrate, a post-colonial deconstruction of the portrayal of colonial conflict is vital to disentangling the influence of our own imperial past on the way in which colonial conflict in the Roman empire is conceived and written. However, it is also the case that the model of colonial interaction presented here offers some insight into the reconstruction of the Roman colonial encounter itself, and can be used to inform a limited reconstruction of some aspects of the Roman administrators 'discrepant experience' of empire. This issue is explored

by Majeed (1999) with reference to race, in which he adopts a comparative approach in a contrasting study of the Roman Empire and of the British in India.

3.4 Deconstructing Boudica

The Boudican revolt will act as our test case, both for the post-colonial deconstruction of modern portrayals, but also for a limited reconstruction of an 'official' perspective. The first task here is to consider modern accounts of the revolt, and the principal of these is G. Webster's (1993) *Boudica, the British Revolt Against Rome.* I would argue that the narrative supplied by Webster functions as a colonial document in itself, following the pattern established in other modern portrayals of colonial conflict, a contention supported by Webster's own comparisons with other conflicts, those of the Middle Ages, Ireland, and the Mau-Mau in Kenya. Although Webster catagorises these conflicts (and the Boudican revolt) as 'religious wars' (1993, p. 132), this comparison is established within a colonial context, drawing heavily upon parallels with the attitudes of the colonial English élite, or the 'traditional stiff upper lip of the upper-class Englishman', which are equated directly to the ruling class of ancient Rome (Webster 1993, p. 131).

The events of the revolt are relatively well known, and do not need to be rehearsed in detail. Roman treatment of the Iceni on the death of the client King Prasutagus was excessive, and sparked revolt. Boudica, daughter of Prasutagus, led the revolt, which neighbouring tribes joined. An early target for the rebels was Colchester, and the newly built Temple to the Divine Claudius (Webster 1993, pp. 86–93).

> Here the tough veterans might hope to hold out long enough for help to come. But it was such a small area that the Britons could concentrate all their efforts on to it by throwing continuous missiles and by heaping burning brushwood round the walls. The Romans were trapped, totally unable to keep the natives at a distance, as soon as their own supply of missiles was exhausted. The enclosure was packed with survivors, men, women and children, overcome by the great heat, fire, smoke and rain of spears which never stopped. In two days it was all over. (Webster 1993, pp. 91, 93)

To my mind, this passage reveals all of the key characteristics of a western portrayal of colonial conflict. Not only do we encounter the recurrent theme of 'endless native spears', suggesting an inexhaustible, indefatigable force for destruction, but this is given further emphasis by the isolation of the colonial defenders, cut off from the wider structures of the province and thrown back on their own limited resources.

The ruthless destruction of London, and the helplessness of the Imperial authorities on the spot to contain the situation, backed by insufficient — and precisely numbered at 200 — soldiery, also follows this pattern of portrayal. The sense of helplessness once the natives are in revolt, the fact that the city is lost because it takes too long to summon sufficient troops to defeat the rebels, underline the 'colonial' nature of the conflict. Referring to the treatment that the natives accord to the inhabitants of London, Webster remarks: 'Used though we are to horrors and bestialities in our modern world, one still cannot read his [Tacitus'] words without revulsion' (Webster 1993, p. 94). This revulsion stems from the fact that lurking beneath every situation of colonial dominance is an underlying sense of the fragility of control. The sense of horror and impotence in the face of such violence arises from the sense that those on the spot are probably doomed to a grisly fate, despite being the servants of a power-

ful imperial state, and that once unleashed, the 'barbarous' nature of the native is in direct opposition to 'civilised' values.

The ultimate defeat of the Boudican rebels also gives an important insight into the construction of visions of colonial conflict, and the realities of colonial power. The odds quoted against the Roman army, numbered at thousands, were heavy, as the natives are horde-like, numbered in the tens, or hundreds of thousands, moving, as Webster describes (1993, p. 96), in a 'huge mob' said to 'flow like a great snake'. In the final battle Webster describes the British as being 'in a state of wild disorder', experiencing 'high exultation' (1993, p. 99), a 'solid surging mass' prone to 'rush about, yelling taunts and hurling missiles to little effect' (1993, p. 100). The bestial, primeval nature which made them so terrifying, is now their undoing, faced as they are by a small, but disciplined force of Romans, described as 'still, steel men coldly staring at them [the natives] with unflinching contempt' (1993, p. 100). In the fighting itself, Roman discipline overcomes British wildness, and colonial order is restored.

The themes running through Webster's account of the Boudican revolt are similar to those examined in the context of European colonialism in the first part of this paper. The same may be said for other modern portrayals of Roman colonial conflicts, be they popular accounts of the Boudican revolt (Sealy 1997), the loss of three legions in Germany under Varus (Wells 1972, pp. 238–42), or straightforward narratives of colonial conquest (Peddie 1987). This suggests that, as ever, elements of our own society's colonial past have a tendency to work into the way we think about the Roman empire   a tendency reinforced by traditional modes of classical education which encouraged the drawing of parallels between the British and the Roman empires. This is as true of certain specifics of our portrayal of conflict and military activity as it is of any other area of scholarship that is susceptible to post-colonial deconstruction. The 'barbarous' nature of the insurgents underlines their dangerous nature, cast as they are as almost primeval, and certainly primitive, force. Numerical asymmetry is an important aspect, excusing defeat, but increasing the achievement implicit in final victory. Webster's treatment of the rebels is located firmly within the ethnographic and historical traditions of 'timelessness' and 'barbarity' (Webster 1996, pp. 111–14).

Tacitus' *Annals* are, of course, the principal source for Webster's account, but the construction of a modern account around an ancient one has important consequences. Whilst it ensures that the modern history will carry with it an implicit Romano-centric viewpoint, this may actually generate a relatively good account of the 'discrepant perspective' of the Roman authorities.

3.5   Thinking Like Tacitus

Examination of the influence of our colonial past on the way in which archaeology has been conducted is not, of course, new. There is long-running debate on the links between the British empire, and the British conception of Rome (see Hingley 1994, and Webster & Cooper 1996 in general, but Freeman 1996 and Hingley 1996 in particular). Within this comparative context I would suggest that if colonial power has certain structural similarities wherever it occurs — albeit in historically specific contexts — and if western portrayals of colonial conflict are based upon a partisan understanding of the experience of such events based upon our own colonial past, then an understanding of how such portrayals themselves play a part within wider colonial discourses will lead us towards a discrepant experience of the coloniser.

Thus we see that Tacitus' account of the revolt (*Annals* XIV), as the principal source for Webster's historical narrative, contains many of the same elements, hordes of barbarous and undisciplined natives, vague estimates of enemy strength, figures for the Roman army which are smaller, and have at least the appearance of greater accuracy, isolation of military units and civilians. The two accounts are couched in the mould of a 'colonial' conflict, and function from a Romano-centric perspective. I would argue that in his treatment of the revolt, Tacitus is writing an account of a colonial conflict aimed at a Roman audience, and underlying his account are themes similar to those that we recognise in western portrayals of our own colonial conflicts, founded in the underlying nature of colonial power.

In the aggressive Roman behaviour that lead to the revolt, we may note that representatives of the Roman state had overstepped the point at which threatened retaliation held the natives in check. The vivid picture that Tacitus paints of the build-up to revolt suggests that the colonial 'negotiation' implicit in the first few decades after the conquest had been badly mishandled by the Roman authorities, who had clearly overestimated the degree to which at least some tribes were intimidated by the Roman Army, much of which was now absent from the area of the rebellion. The fall of Colchester illustrates this.

> Then a native horde surrounded them. When all else had been ravaged or burnt, the garrison concentrated itself in the temple. After two days siege, it fell by storm. A Roman division, attempting relief, was stopped by the victorious Britons and routed. (Tacitus *Annals* XIV, trans. Grant 1959, p. 318)

Here, and in his description of the fall of London, Tacitus reveals the weakness of the Roman position in the short term. With the available troops in the wrong place, there is little that can be done, and the price is paid for miscalculation, but it is at points when colonial power breaks down that we see its reality. In areas where there is no large military concentration available colonial negotiation is less one-sided than it might otherwise be, and this knowledge (and perhaps fear) must underpin the consolidation of any successful empire.

Thus, such accounts provide a clue to the 'discrepant perspective' of the Imperial authorities involved in such conflicts, and allow us to investigate their experience of empire. This is a vital element to set beside more 'native friendly' versions, because colonial negotiation can only be understood when we engage with the experience of both conquered and conqueror. Only together do they form something approaching the whole.

3.6 Conclusions

> If the 300,000 Natal Kaffirs chose to follow the amaHlubi lead, the colony might be snuffed out in a twinkling. The fear that gripped Natal was natural and acute, and it accounted for much of what followed. (Morris 1966, p. 222)

In 1873 Langalibalele, chief of the Hlubi, rebelled rather than register his arms with the British, whom he did not trust. He scored an early victory, but the ultimate result was violent and vindictive reprisals carried out by Natal forces, driven by humiliation, fear, and greed. Many Hlubi were killed, and their lands and property seized (Pakenham 1992, p. 48). It is not an apology for colonialism to suggest that to understand this event we need to reconstruct not only the sense of subjugation experienced by Langalibalele's people, but the sense of weakness, perhaps even terror, felt by the

colonists of Natal. I would suggest that an awareness of 'colonial weakness', and the deep-seated unease at the numerical asymmetry with the conquered, provide an important backdrop to understanding the social and political context of colonialism. This is illustrated by Majeed's exploration of the race issue for the British in India, where unease over possible colonial weakness re-enforced the need to demarcate ruler from ruled (Majeed 1999).

In pursuing this issue, both analogy with our own colonial past and consideration of modern representations of Roman conflict assist in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Roman colonial experience. When looked at from within a deconstructive framework built around the awareness of the a-historical nature of the portrayal of native peoples, accounts of warfare between imperial powers and their opponents can often reveal as much about imperial anxiety, as they do about empire-building. Such accounts articulate an underlying fear and knowledge of a fundamental weakness of colonial power: in essence what is expressed is the fragility of colonial control, and colonial identity.

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