

A Postcolonial Reading of Tacitus' *Agricola*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to re-examine the narrative of Roman imperialism and its constructed cultural hierarchy within Tacitus's *Agricola* through a postcolonial lens. Despite being composed in the early second century AD, the patterns of domination, assimilation, and resistance revealed in *Agricola* resonate profoundly with modern colonial dynamics. By dissecting Tacitus's portrayal of Roman expansion in Britain, this study demonstrates how the empire packaged conquest as a civilising mission while simultaneously relying on violence, cultural obliteration, and ideological legitimisation. Caligula's famous indictment-'They create desolation and call it peace'-serves as the central argument, exposing the inherent contradictions within imperial discourse. Employing modern postcolonial concepts-alterity, hegemonic discourse, and cultural conquest-this paper demonstrates how Tacitus both participated in and subtly critiqued Roman imperial ideology. Concurrently, this study emphasises a fundamental divergence between Tacitus's moral concerns and modern postcolonial theory: the former primarily reflects on internal Roman corruption, while the latter examines the structural oppression endured by colonised peoples. Through this comparative lens, the essay reveals the intricate interplay of power, culture, and identity within the Agrippina, elucidating both the value and limitations of applying postcolonial theory to the context of ancient empires.

KEYWORDS

Tacitus; *Agricola*; Postcolonialism; Romanisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Written in the early second century CE, Tacitus' *Agricola* is an important document for understanding the relationship between the Roman Empire and its provinces and the complex inner workings of imperialism. The work focuses on the life and career of Tacitus' father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius *Agricola*, a Roman general who played a key role in the conquest of Britain. Through *Agricola*'s exploits, Tacitus not only chronicles the military campaigns, but also criticises the ideology of the Roman Empire and its moral consequences. The Battle of *Agricola* thus provides valuable insights into the expansionist mentality of the Roman Empire, offering a nuanced examination of power, conquest, and cultural assimilation.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly applied postcolonial theory to works such as *Agricola*, as these texts often reflect the dynamics of empire building, cultural domination, and the 'othering' of conquered peoples by empire.[1] Postcolonial criticism emerged in the wake of European colonialism to explore how imperialism used language, culture, and narrative to justify and perpetuate domination.[2] Through this lens, Tacitus' portrayal of Roman imperialism takes on new significance. One of the key moments in *Agricola* is a quote from Calgacus, the British leader, who says 'They make deserts, but call them peace'. This quote emphasises the violence inherent in imperial conquest

and is a sharp criticism of the Roman portrayal of imperial expansion as a civilising mission. By applying a postcolonial framework, we can explore how Tacitus's narrative subtly critiques Rome's imperial ideology, while also revealing the ways in which imperial might constructs and maintains power.

The aim of this paper is to explore Tacitus' *Agricola* through the lens of postcolonial criticism, examining the text's representation of Roman imperialism, the cultural repression of the “barbaric” Other, and the narratives of power and resistance embedded in the conquest of Britain.[3] While postcolonial theory is often associated with modern colonial practices, it provides a valuable tool for analysing ancient imperial systems, particularly Rome, where the relationship between centre and periphery was equally shaped by cultural domination and the imposition of foreign rule.[4] An analysis of the work of Tacitus will reveal how the Roman Empire justified its expansionist ambitions, presenting itself as a bringer of peace and civilisation while at the same time inflicting violence and destruction on the peoples it sought to conquer.

The paper will begin with an introduction to the historical context of *Agricola* and the nature of Roman imperialism. The paper will then introduce key elements of postcolonial theory, showing how these concepts can be applied to the study of Roman imperialism, and in particular how the Roman Empire constructed its relationship with conquered territories. Next, the paper will explore the cultural practices that underpinned Roman expansionism, focussing on the assimilation and legal integration strategies that Rome employed to incorporate newly conquered peoples into its empire. Finally, the paper will explore Tacitus's internal critique of imperialism, examining how his perspective as a Roman elite complicates traditional imperial narratives and provides a critique from within the empire.[5]

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF TACITUS' AGRICOLA

Written in the early second century CE, and probably completed around the reign of Emperor Domitian, the work reflects both Tacitus' admiration for his father-in-law's achievements and his criticism of the moral decay of the Roman elite. Although ostensibly a biography, the *Agricola* is also a masterful commentary on the ideology of the Roman Empire, providing a lens through which to understand the mechanisms of Roman expansion and control of its provinces, as well as the violence inherent in the imperial project.

At the heart of the *Agricola* is the depiction of the conquest of Britain and the struggle between Roman civilisation and barbarism.[6] Tacitus blends military history with reflections on the moral and cultural dimensions of the conquest in his narrative. The work is shaped by the tension between two dominant forces: the Roman desire for expansion and the resistance of the native Britons.[6] Agricola's military campaigns, particularly his victories over the Caledonians in northern Britain, are described as symbols of Roman virtue, order and discipline. Tacitus praises Agricola's ability to control outlaws on the borders of the empire, especially his efforts to civilise the barbaric inhabitants of Britain through Roman law, architecture and culture.

However, the narrative also reveals Tacitus' ambivalence towards the imperial project. While Agricola's military achievements are celebrated, Tacitus also hints several times at the darker side of Roman imperialism. Roman expansion was not a peaceful or morally pure enterprise. Instead, it was fraught with violence, exploitation, and cultural destruction. Agricola in many ways became a symbol of the contradictions of Roman imperialism - his success in conquering Britain is portrayed as necessary for Rome's survival, but it also highlights the tensions within Roman imperialism, particularly the moral and cultural costs of empire. As a member of the Roman aristocracy, Tacitus was acutely aware of the moral and political corruption that characterised the reigns of the emperors, particularly that of Domitian.[5] The *Agricola* is therefore a critique not only of Roman imperialism,

but also of the political decay that Tacitus believed was spreading within the empire. His depiction of the Roman conquests, especially in Britain, highlights the complex relationship between imperial power and the moral corruption of the ruling elite.

Roman imperialism was characterised by a system of assimilation and integration, a 'civilising mission' that went beyond the imposition of Roman governance or law; it also transformed conquered peoples into 'Romans' by granting them Roman citizenship and giving them access to Roman rights and privileges'.^[4] Rome encouraged the conquered peoples to adopt Roman customs, laws and language, which was seen as a means of bringing order, peace and stability to the provinces.

This process of Romanisation was particularly evident in Britain. Tacitus praised Agricola's efforts to bring Roman civilisation to the 'barbaric' islands. Agricola's construction of Roman-style towns, introduction of Roman laws, and encouragement of Roman cultural practices were all designed to bring the 'barbarians' into the arms of the empire. In Tacitus' narrative, these actions are portrayed as part of a larger mission to bring peace and stability to this unruly, chaotic land. However, despite the apparent success of this mission, Tacitus also implies that this integration was a form of cultural domination that erased the identity of the conquered peoples.

Thus, the relationship between Rome and the conquered peoples was one of domination and submission. Although the Roman Empire often attempted to present itself as a civilising force, such claims easily masked the violence and cultural destruction that accompanied conquest. The conquest of the Britons included the violent suppression of resistance, the imposition of Roman customs, and the gradual erasure of indigenous customs. Tacitus, in praising Rome's civilising mission, acknowledges the hardships of Roman conquest. The contradiction between the Roman demand for peace and the reality of conquest and destruction became a central theme of his work.

One of the most striking aspects of Tacitus' narrative is his portrayal of indigenous leaders who rebelled against Roman conquest, particularly the British chieftain Calgacus. Calgacus's famous speech, 'They make deserts and call them peace,' is a powerful expression of rebellion against the ideology of the Roman Empire.^[7] In this speech, Calgacus accuses the Romans of destroying the lands they conquered in the name of bringing peace and stability. The British leader's words criticised the Roman rhetoric that justified conquest by presenting it as a civilising mission. Through this speech, Tacitus presents a more critical view of the Roman Empire's plans and acknowledges the harsh reality of conquest. Tacitus' ambivalent attitude towards Roman imperialism is reflected in his assessment of Agricola.^[1] While he praises Agricola's military prowess and achievements, he also emphasises the moral cost of Roman expansion. Agricola's campaigns were seen as necessary to protect the Roman Empire and its survival, but were accompanied by the destruction of native cultures and the imposition of Roman power. As a result, Tacitus offers a nuanced critique of the Roman imperial system - recognising the benefits of the empire, but also highlighting its inherent violence and moral flaws.

3. ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND TACITUS' CULTURAL NARRATIVE

In the narrative of the Roman conquest of Britain, Tacitus emphasises not only Agricola's military successes, but also his efforts to instil Roman culture and governance in his newly acquired territory. However, Tacitus' narrative is by no means uncritical. Tacitus portrays Roman imperialism as a force that, despite its claims to bring order and peace to the 'barbarians,' tended to destroy the very culture it sought to rule. With the tools of postcolonial analysis, we can better understand how Tacitus critiques this dynamic - analysing how Rome portrayed itself as a civilised empire, while at the same time perpetrating violence and repression against native cultures.

One of the central features of Roman imperialism was the policy of Romanisation, especially in peripheral provinces such as Britain. This process involved the imposition of Roman culture, law and administration on conquered territories. Tacitus highlights the role of Agricola in spreading Roman

civilisation throughout Britain. The Roman general built Roman-style towns, instituted Roman laws, and endeavoured to make native Britons accept Roman customs, all measures taken to create a more orderly and peaceful society. Agricola's success in introducing Roman architecture, education and culture was seen as part of the imperial mission to bring civilisation to the 'barbarians'. However, Tacitus was acutely aware that the process of Romanisation was not merely an act of benevolence; it also had a dark side. While admiring Agricola's achievements, Tacitus does not shy away from exposing the violence inherent in these acts of cultural integration. The narrative of conquest in Agricola is deeply intertwined with the theme of cultural erasure. The imposition of Roman customs - whether through the building of towns, the spread of Roman law, or the introduction of Roman citizenship - meant the suppression of native British customs, traditions, and political structures.

Tacitus' ambivalent attitude towards Roman imperialism is reflected in his treatment of the Romanisation process. He recognises the practical benefits of Roman rule, but also highlights its costs, particularly the cultural destruction that accompanied empire-building. For the Britons, the Roman project of civilisation was not a peaceful transfer of knowledge and culture, but an imposition that led to the loss of their cultural identity. The contradiction between the supposed benefits of Romanisation and the violent means by which it was carried out constitutes a key aspect of the Tacitus narrative.

One of the most powerful critiques in Agricola is embodied in the speeches of Cargacus, a British chieftain who led a rebellion against the Roman army. Cargacus famously said, 'They make deserts and call them peace.' This quote, which Tacitus includes in his text, sharply critiques the Roman Empire's ideology of justifying conquest through the language of peace and civilisation. In Calgacus' view, the Romans brought destruction under the guise of order; they conquered and destroyed the people and then claimed that they had brought peace to the land. Tacitus incorporates Calgacus' remarks as a rebuttal to the self-image of the Roman Empire. In depicting conquest, the Romans portrayed themselves as peace and order makers, yet this narrative ignored the suffering and destruction that accompanied their conquests.[3] By including this speech, Tacitus demonstrates how the imperial powers used language and ideology to justify their actions, which in reality were violent and exploitative. Calgacus' words expose the contradiction at the heart of the Roman imperial project: the imposition of peace through the destruction of culture and society.

An important aspect of Roman imperialism was the construction of the 'other' - the barbarian or outsider - who was placed in opposition to Roman civilisation. In the narrative of Agricola, the 'civilised' Romans are constantly juxtaposed with the 'barbaric' Britons. Tacitus depicts the native Britons as a fragmented, disorganised group who often need Roman order and law. However, Tacitus also recognises the resilience and dynamism of the Britons, particularly through Cargacus and other leading figures who rebelled against Roman rule. In this context, the Agricola can be read as an engagement with imperialist discourse, which sought to define the colony as 'other' - uncivilised, chaotic and in need of Roman governance. The portrayal of the Britons as 'barbarians' justified Roman conquest and domination. However, Tacitus also humanises these 'barbarians' through their leaders, showing their courage and ability to resist. The contradiction between the Romans' view of the Britons as an uncivilised people and the Britons' actual resistance to Roman rule reveals the complexity of the imperial encounter.

Tacitus' treatment of the Britons' resistance in Agricola does not romanticise them, but rather acknowledges their ability to resist and their desire to preserve their way of life.[7] By recognising the agency and dignity of the rebellious imperialists, Tacitus undermines the imperialist narrative that seeks to construct the Other as an inferior entity. In this way, Tacitus implicitly criticises the way in which the Roman Empire used the concept of the Other to justify its actions, while also revealing the limitations of this imperial narrative.

4. ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND MODERN COLONIALISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

One of the main similarities between Roman colonialism and modern colonialism is that they both focus on economic exploitation. In *Agricola*, Tacitus implicitly reveals that Roman imperialism was not only about territorial expansion, but also about extracting wealth from the provinces. The Romans levied taxes, controlled resources and relied on enslaved labour to keep their empire going. In Britain, for example, resources such as tin and lead were extracted for the benefit of Rome in much the same way as they are extracted in the modern colonial system.

Modern colonialism, particularly in the nineteenth century, was also driven by resource aspirations. European powers extracted raw materials such as rubber, cotton and minerals from the colonies, and the global capitalist economy of the 19th century meant that colonised regions were integrated into global trade networks in a much more extensive and systematic way than was the case in Rome. Whereas the Romans used tribute and taxation to fund their imperial endeavours, modern colonial powers tend to adopt more radical strategies, deploying multinational corporations to directly exploit resources. The Industrial Revolution also meant that colonial economies were not only about resource extraction, but also about reshaping local economies to meet imperial needs.

Both the Roman and modern colonial systems relied on forced labour, but the scale and nature of this labour differed. In the Roman Empire, slaves were used extensively, particularly in mining and agriculture. Tacitus alludes to the existence of enslaved Britons who were forced into labour as part of the economic structure of the empire. In modern colonialism, particularly in the Americas, slavery was institutionalised on a much larger scale. Enslaved Africans were taken to work on colonial plantations to produce cash crops for the European market. Labour in the modern colonial system is racialised and often more brutal than in the Roman Empire. The difference is in how the colonial power views its subjects. Roman slavery was more flexible in terms of social integration, and some slaves could eventually gain citizenship. In contrast, modern colonialism reinforced rigid racial divisions, and the institutions of slavery and forced labour were embedded in a broader ideology of racial superiority.

Culturally, the 'other' in the Roman and modern colonial systems did not have equal utility or intensity. Roman imperialism focused on the integration of conquered peoples into the empire, although this integration was accompanied by the imposition of Roman culture, law and language. Tacitus' *Agricola* shows that Agricola attempted to "Romanise" Britain by promoting Roman customs, building Roman towns and encouraging Roman education. While this process often involved the incorporation of local elites into the Roman political system, it also highlighted the gulf between the Romans and the 'barbarians' they conquered. Modern colonialism has a more rigid construction of the Other. European colonial powers typically viewed the aborigines as inferior and attempted to 'civilise' them through education, religion and legal systems. However, these efforts served more to reinforce the coloniser's sense of superiority than to integrate the colonised people into the imperial structure.

In both cases, however, the concept of 'otherness' was central to justifying imperial rule. The Romans saw themselves as purveyors of civilisation, while modern colonisers portrayed the indigenous population as in need of 'civilisation' through Western educational, religious and political systems. Whether Roman or European, cultural imposition has always been linked to the need to subordinate indigenous populations to the imperial system.

In sum, Roman imperialism and modern colonialism share similarities in terms of economic exploitation, the use of forced labour and military control, but they also differ in their methods and scale. Both systems aimed at extracting wealth from conquered lands and maintaining dominance through cultural and economic subjugation. Roman imperialism was characterised by a certain fluidity in the processes of integration and assimilation, whereas modern colonialism is more rigid,

with a greater emphasis on racial hierarchies and direct administrative control. By comparing the two systems, we can gain insight into the persistence of imperial ambitions and the long-term evolution of colonial practices. The methods of the Roman Empire may have been less industrialised, but the logic of resource extraction, military domination and cultural imposition still resonates within the framework of modern colonialism, making the comparison both meaningful and revealing.

5. FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TACITUS AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

There is a fundamental difference between the goal of the narrative of Tacitus and the modern postcolonial position. Tacitus' aim in writing *Agricola* was not to criticise imperialism per se, but to reflect on the moral and political corruption within the Roman Empire. In contrast, postcolonial theory, as a modern scientific discipline, focuses on the power structures, cultural oppression and long-term effects of colonialism. This chapter will compare the fundamental differences between the goals of Tacitus' narrative and postcolonial theory, examining the goals, theoretical backgrounds and methodologies of both.

Our first concern is with Tacitus' own willingness to write. Tacitus' main concern in the *Agricola* is not a direct critique of the expansion of the Roman Empire, but rather a reflection on the moral and political decay that the Empire experienced as it expanded. As a Roman historian, Tacitus focuses on how the internal values of the empire degraded as its power expanded. He does not present imperialism as inherently wrong; rather, he criticises how imperial leaders departed from traditional Roman virtues through political corruption. Tacitus emphasises the contrast between the degradation of the imperial system and the virtuous leadership of *Agricola*, who governed Britannia in a more moderate and humane manner, which he sees as a right direction that distinguishes the empire from the political realities of the moment. Tacitus indirectly criticised the violent expansion of the Empire, but his main concern was with the moral consequences for Rome itself. Tacitus praised *Agricola*'s rule as an example of a more honourable form of governance, as a warning to his contemporaries of the dangers of a corrupt political system that sacrificed virtue for the good of the empire. His historical narrative thus reflects moral anxiety about the future of the Roman Empire rather than advocating an end to imperial conquest.

Conversely, postcolonial theory emerged as a critique of colonial history, particularly during the decolonisation period of the twentieth century. Whilst there are moral indictments of former sovereigns, on the whole this theory is primarily concerned with the study of the impact of sovereigns on their colonies. Unlike Tacitus, who focused on the internal consequences of imperialism, postcolonial theorists studied the multifaceted effects of imperialism on colonial societies. Important figures in postcolonial theory such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak emphasised how colonial powers constructed and maintained hegemonic control through culture, politics and economics. Postcolonial theory challenges the notion of a 'civilising mission' that justifies imperial expansion. It critiques the ways in which colonialism imposes racial, cultural and social hierarchies and constructs the coloniser as the 'other'. Whereas Tacitus' reflections may imply moral concerns about imperialism, postcolonial theory goes further, exposing the violence inherent in colonial relations and the enduring effects of these structures on postcolonial societies.

From this, we can see the fundamental difference between Tacitus himself and modern theories. Tacitus' aim in the *Agricola* is to reflect on the moral decay of the Roman Empire, particularly the behaviour of the leadership and its effects on Roman society. His focus is not to question the legitimacy of Roman imperialism or colonial behaviour, but to warn of the consequences of moral decay. Tacitus criticised the behaviour of Roman leaders but did not explicitly question the imperial project itself. On the other hand, postcolonial theory challenges the legitimacy of imperialism. It is not content to look at the individual morality of imperial rulers, as Tacitus does, but to critique the colonial system as a whole, revealing its exploitative, racist and oppressive underpinnings.

Postcolonial theorists are less concerned with the behaviour of individual leaders and more concerned with how the empire acted as a system of domination to oppress colonial peoples and cultures. Whereas Tacitus reflected internally on the fall of Rome, postcolonial theory confronts the wider effects of imperialism.

Tacitus, as a Roman historian, wrote with the intention of presenting historical events as moral teachings to contemporary readers. His history is primarily a critique of the decadence of the political system through a moral lens. Tacitus' writings are reflections on the moral direction of Rome, focusing on personal virtues, especially those of the ruling class. Although he is critical of the behaviour of the empire, his approach to history does not engage in the critical analysis found in the modern social sciences.

Postcolonial theory, however, is rooted in an interdisciplinary approach to the social sciences, including history, anthropology, literature and cultural studies. It examines the dynamics of power, identity and resistance in colonial contexts and their enduring legacies. Postcolonial scholars understand the systemic oppression imposed by colonialism by deconstructing texts and cultural narratives. Analyses transcend historical events to explore the ongoing consequences of colonial rule and its lingering effects on postcolonial societies. Unlike Tacitus, postcolonial theory employs a more comprehensive and structural analytical framework.

In terms of methodology, the differences between the two become even more apparent. Tacitus uses the method of historical narrative to examine the moral and political decline of the Roman Empire. His approach is to recount events and reflect on individual behaviour, particularly that of the Roman rulers, in order to illustrate his concerns about the future of the empire. While his work reveals a critique of the Roman system, it is not a systematic critique of imperialism as a structure. In contrast, postcolonial theory employs critical deconstruction to analyse how colonialism operates on multiple levels, including linguistic, cultural, economic and political. It seeks to expose the power dynamics established by colonialism, particularly in terms of racial and cultural domination. Rather than simply describing historical events, postcolonial theorists aim to reveal the pervasive structures of oppression that shaped the experiences of colonised peoples. This methodology is fundamentally different from the historical narratives of Tacitus, which focus more on the internal decay of Roman political structures than on the systematic exploitation of colonised societies.

While Tacitus' *Agricola* provides a valuable reflection on the moral decay within the Roman Empire, it does not explore the effects of imperialism as comprehensively as postcolonial theory. Tacitus' focus on Roman leadership and internal corruption critiques the empire from within, but does not fundamentally question the legitimacy or violence of imperialism. Postcolonial theory, however, offers a more radical critique that focuses on the systemic nature of colonial oppression, the construction of racial and cultural hierarchies, and the legacy of imperialism.

Tacitus and postcolonial theorists are fundamentally different in their goals and methodologies. Whereas Tacitus' historical narratives were moral warnings to his contemporaries, postcolonial theory seeks to dismantle the ideological and structural foundations of empire.[8] Thus, when confronting Tacitus, as well as other writers of antiquity, we must be careful to use modern theories and not readily apply modern doctrines with which we are familiar to the writing of the ancients.

6. CONCLUSION

Analysing Tacitus' *Agricola* through the lens of postcolonial theory, we find a huge difference between Tacitus' narrative goals and modern postcolonial critique. Tacitus seeks to reflect on the moral decline within the Roman Empire, using historical events to emphasise the erosion of traditional Roman virtues. His aim was to warn his contemporaries against corruption and moral slippage rather than to challenge the legitimacy of Roman imperialism. In contrast, postcolonial

theory emerged to deconstruct the structures of oppression and exploitation that underpinned imperial rule, focusing on the racial, cultural and economic hierarchies imposed on colonised peoples.

By comparison, we can see the difference between the two in terms of objectives and methodology. Tacitus' historical writings focus on moral reflection on the internal decay of the empire and aim to encourage reform. He does not question the expansionist goals of empire, but argues for a return to moral rule. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, questions the imperial project at a systemic level, exploring how colonial powers maintained control through cultural domination and exploitation.

Tacitus' critique is indigenous, exploring the consequences of the expansion of the Roman Empire from within the empire. While he critiques the internal effects of imperialism, he does not extend it to the violence faced by colonisers. This contrasts with postcolonial theory, which emphasises systemic inequalities and the need to decolonise power structures. The difference also lies in methodology. While Tacitus uses historical narratives to critique Roman governance, postcolonial theory uses an interdisciplinary approach to expose the inequalities inherent in the colonial system. Postcolonial theorists deconstruct the imperial narrative to reveal the system of oppression created by colonialism.

In sum, while Tacitus' *Agricola* provides valuable insights into the moral depravity of the Romans, its critique focuses on internal issues rather than the wider violence of imperialism. Postcolonial theory offers a more comprehensive critique, emphasising the structural and enduring effects of colonial rule. By combining Tacitus' reflections with postcolonial critiques, we gain a more nuanced understanding of empire and its legacy

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