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THE AUGUSTAN *DISCRIPTIO ITALIAE*: AN ATTEMPT OF
REGIONALISM?

Among the interventions that Augustus realized in Italy during his Principate, the attention of the scholars has been mainly attracted by his division of Italy into eleven regions. The insufficient informations that we receive from Pliny (*nat. hist.* 3, 46) have led to quite distant interpretations. Some scholars think that the regions had a purely statistic role, based on *census* (Mommsen, Nicolet, Laffi); for others, they were districts for the administration of public lands and imperial properties (Marquardt, De Martino). In this paper it is argued that the Augustan regions were territorial districts whose role was to convey the local data to the central administration, probably including also lists of imperial lands; and it is questioned the possibility of a comparison between the Augustan invention and the administrative function of the modern regions.

1. *The situation before the Augustan discriptio.* — The analysis of the territorial situation of Italy before the Augustan *discriptio* (division) into eleven regions, realized between 8 and 7 BC¹ — probably in connection with the division of Rome into fourteen regions² — can be useful to understand the meaning of the division itself.

Italy was composed of more than 400 communities, *municipia*, *coloniae*, *praefecturae* and of the surrounding lands organized in rural districts named *pagi* connected with the communities. The *pagi* as well as the communities had a territorial and administrative role. It is well known that, in the late Republic and during the Empire, *pagus* could create *magistri pagorum* with administrative, religious functions, could enact its rules (*decreta*), and could have its financial resources. As said above, *pagus* was an administrative set-up strongly integrated into the Roman municipal system that during the Empire would have assumed an important cadastral function³. As it is attested by Augustan epigraphic sources⁴, post-classical legal texts⁵ and the

¹ Cass. Dio. 55.8.7. Hypothesis compatible with the relationship between the creation of the Augustan regions and the delimitation of northern Italy — this last procedure was finished before the census in 8 BCE — established by Scherling, 1918, col. 1250 and more recently by Ørsted, 1988, p. 135.

² Laffi, 2007, p. 97, believes it is possible.

³ Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, pp. 51 s.

⁴ CIL, II, 5042: *Dama L. Titi ser. fundum Baianum qui est in agro qui / Veneriensis vocatur pago Olbensi uti optimus maximusq./ esser HS n. I fidi fiduciae causa m(a)n/cipio accepit ...* The source comes from Hispania Baetica and deals with the *mancipatio fiduciae causa* of a *fundum* and the connected slaves. Another source is in CIL, II.5², 989: *P(ublius) Acilius/ P(ubli) l(ibertus) Antiochus/ sepultus est / fundo suo / pago Singilensi.* According to Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, pp. 53 s., the sources would show the identification of the lands by belonging to *pagi* outside Italy, during the Augustan age. This criterion of identification is preserved until IV sec. AD, as shown in CIL, X, 407, see about it Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, pp. 54 s.

⁵ Ulp. 3 de cens. D. 50.15.4 pr.: *forma censuali cavetur, ut agri sic in censum referantur. Nomen fundi cuiusque: et in qua civitate et in quo pago sit: et quos duos vicinos proximos habeat.* The source would deal with the organization of provincial lands, even though Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, p. 52 and nt. 25, thinks that the system of *pagi* was relevant also for the municipal land organization. See on the lands *in dominio ex iure Quiritium*, Paul. 13 resp. D. 33.1.12 pr.: *Gaius Seius praedia diversis pagis Meviae et Seiae legavit et ita cavuit: praestari autem volo ex praediis Potitiani praediis Lutatiani annua harundinis milia trecena et salicis munda annua librarum singula milia.*

tabulae alimentariae in Trajan's age⁶, the lands were identified thanks to their belonging to a specific rural district⁷.

Alongside this mapping of the land there was a census's organization based on the contribution of the different cities of the Italian land. The *lex Iulia municipalis*⁸, in the I century BC, organized the census's operations in *municipia*, and the local magistrates prepared the lists of the *municipes* with regard to their patrimony and their belonging to the local district. These lists were sent to Rome and inserted in the public archives to form the *tabulae publicae censoriae*⁹.

Nicolet has asserted that these classifications, according to the alphabetical and topographical order of the *municipia* (*vicinitas*), could have been the premise of the Augustan *regiones*¹⁰. Starting from Mommsen's suggestion¹¹, the French scholar has supposed that the Italian regions were spontaneously born as a consequence of the topographical classification of the lists of *municipes*. August would have arranged this imperfect distribution, maybe completing a more ancient division in eight regions¹², in the perspective of the general reorganization of the Empire¹³.

2. *The discriptio by Plin. 3.46.* — Pliny attests the Augustan *discriptio* in a passage of the *Naturalis Historia*:

Plin. 3.46: *nunc ambitum eius (Italiae) urbesque enumerabimus, qua in re praefari necessarium est auctorem nos divum Augustum secutoros discriptionemque ab eo factam Italiae totius in regiones XI, sed ordine eo, qui litorum tractu fiet; urbium quidem vicinitates oratione utique praepropera servari non posse, itaque interiore parte digestionem in litteras eiusdem nos secutoros, coloniarum mentione signata, quas ille in eo prodidit numero.*

In the description of the Italian boundaries and cities, Pliny says that he will follow the Augustan division of Italy into eleven regions¹⁴ and the alphabetical criterion used by August in the list of the cities in the hinterland¹⁵, some of which described as colonies.

It has been observed¹⁶ that in the text the eleven regions are identified on the basis of irregular criteria: in central-southern regions the common origin, the same culture and language seem predominant; in northern regions, instead, the boundaries follow the geography of the land. Lists of cities in alphabetical order are collected inside the regions: in some regions there is only a list of cities, in other regions there are more lists, distinguished on the basis of different ethnic groups. It is impossible to know if the different lists have been introduced directly by Pliny or rather were in Pliny's source.

According to Plinian description, the regions are the areas in which the cities are collected. A similar organization was already testified in the fiscal structure of Asia in the Sullan period. Cicero uses the verb *describere*¹⁷ to indicate the division of cities

⁶ See the *Tabula* of *Veleia* (CIL, XI.1, 1147) and the *Tabula* of *Liguri Bebiani* (CIL, IX, 1455) and about them Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, pp. 131 ss.

⁷ De Pachtère, 1920, and Capogrossi Colognesi, 2002, pp. 57 s.

⁸ Nicolet, 1991, pp. 90 ss.

⁹ Cic. *pro Cluent.* 41.

¹⁰ Nicolet, 1991, p. 92.

¹¹ Mommsen, (1852) 1908, pp. 179 ss.; Id., (1883) 1908, 240 ss.

¹² Mommsen, (1898) 1908, pp. 275 ss., observing that the first eight regions included Italy up to Magra and Rubicon, below *Gallia citerior*, and the last three regions extended to *Gallia citerior* after Caesar's death, he believed that the first eight regions were earlier than Augustan age and that Augustus added Gallia.

¹³ Nicolet, 1988, pp. 181 ss.

¹⁴ See Laffi, 2007, pp. 97 s., on *discriptio* that supposes it was a specific geographical work of Augustus. About the boundaries of the regions see Thomsen, 1947, pp. 17 ss.

¹⁵ Cfr. Nicolet, 1991, p. 87; così Laffi, 2007, p. 97.

¹⁶ Laffi, 2007, pp. 101 ss.

¹⁷ Cic. *ad Quint. fr.* 1.1.33; *pro Fl.* 32.

into 44 districts for the collection of the war benefits and Cassiodorus¹⁸, with regard to the same situation, names the districts *regiones*. Probably, as Nicolet¹⁹ says, the aim was to realize uniform contributory districts.

Is the Sullan organization a useful example to understand the function of the Augustan *discriptio*?

3. *The aim of the discriptio*. — As we have said, Mommsen²⁰, followed by Nicolet, supposed that the regions arose as spontaneous districts, with a geographical identity, in which the data were collected from the cities and sent to the central administration. The idea that regions were created for statistical aim has found great favour among the subsequent scholars²¹. Laffi²² especially has confirmed the hypothesis, focusing the attention on two sources: a passage by Pliny²³ about some cases of longevity attested by the census under Vespasian and Titus in 73-74 AD, collected on a regional basis, and an inscription²⁴ on the *cursum honorum* of the senator *M. Hirrius Fronto Neratius Pansa* who, as it seems, collected the data on census of the cities in *regio X*.

Other scholars, such as Marquardt²⁵, preferred to give the Augustan regions a more substantial role as premise of the next administrative and legal order of Italy. Marquardt particularly focused the attention on the gromatic sources²⁶ that show that the lists of *subseciva* — areas of land not privately attributed — were collected in the imperial *tabularium* and distinguished on the basis of the Augustan regions. According to his views, a similar criterion was used in the administration of lands, of *vicesima hereditarium* and *vicesima libertatis*.

Moving from the same perspective, De Martino²⁷, highlighting a text of M. G. Nipsus²⁸, quoting the *liber beneficiorum regionis* about the lands donated by Augustus or outside the *adsignatio* is quoted, supposed that all the description of the public lands and the imperial dominions was made according to a regional criterion²⁹. All these arguments led him to conclude that the Augustan *discriptio* was aimed to ensure the administration of public properties, and that in the absence of forms of regional autonomy, any comparison with modern regionalism should be avoided³⁰.

De Martino's ideas have been recently criticized by Laffi³¹ who has doubts about the connection between the *regio* in the text of Nipsus — that he interprets as an area, a land in a general meaning — and the *regiones* of the Augustan *discriptio*.

Actually, the information of Nipsus is inadequate to take a position³²: it is possible, but we do not have decisive proof, that the regions were originally conceived as territorial districts dealing with the administrative and financial organization of public lands and imperial dominions.

¹⁸ Cass. *Chron.* 670.

¹⁹ Nicolet, 1991, pp. 84 s.

²⁰ See *supra*, § 1.

²¹ Desjardins, 1876, pp. 193 ss.; Cardinali, 1942, pp. 104 s.; Thomsen, 1947, p. 152, even though he supposes a larger use of the regions (*infra*, § 4); Tibiletti, 1966, p. 918.

²² Laffi, 2007, pp. 110 ss.

²³ Plin. *nat. hist.* 7.162-164.

²⁴ The inscription is published by Torelli, 1968, pp. 170 ss., and in «Ann. Épigr.», 1968, nr. 145.

²⁵ Marquardt, 1881, pp. 219 s.

²⁶ Marc. Iun. Nips. *lib. II felic.* in *Grom. vet.* I, 295, 9-15 (Lachmann): ... *vel quaeris si in libro beneficiorum regionis illius beneficium alicui Augustus dederit.*

²⁷ De Martino, (1975) 1996, pp. 246 ss.

²⁸ See *supra*, nt. 26.

²⁹ De Martino, 1975, pp. 692 s. So Gabba, (1991) 1994, p. 139, who supposes to connect the Augustan regions and the cadastral organization of Italy to restore the *tributum*.

³⁰ De Martino, 1975, p. 693.

³¹ Laffi, 2007, pp. 105 ss.

³² In spite of the double reference in the same passage to 'region' and to 'Augustus': the connection can lead to think a specific value of the term *regio*.

It seems to be excluded, on the contrary, the opinion of Crawford³³ on the role of the Augustan regions as military districts: there is no evidence and the hypothesis is based only on the remark that the Augustan peninsular regions correspond to the areas of military enrolment of the late Republic.

4. *The functions of the regions after their creation.* — The use of the regions as districts for the collection of *vicesima hereditatium* probably came later³⁴. Although Thomsen³⁵ cautiously supposed that the organization of the *vicesima* tax was originally on regional basis, it has been highlighted that the first evidence about the existence of districts for tax collection organized on a regional basis, but different from the Augustan regions, date back to Antoninus Pius' empire³⁶. Furthermore the *vicesima* tax was introduced in 6 AD after the *discriptio*: so the connection between the two phenomena is very weak.

Other administrative functions were connected more or less permanently to the regional structures: e.g. the *curatores viarum*, responsible for the maintenance of the most important Italian road networks; the *curatores alimentorum*³⁷; the *iuridici* for the administration of justice³⁸; the *vehiculatio*, the service to ensure the transmission of official news³⁹.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the doctrinal division between a formal role of the Augustan regions, simply statistical, and a substantial one, connected to the administrative and financial management, should be left aside. Certainly the delimitation of land for statistic role, based on *census*, had to favour the creation of large intermediate structures between the central power and the *municipia* aimed at transmitting the cadastral data and the data about public lands. Of this system, a clear evidence is the list of *subseciva*.

Because of this limited role, the regions never took either the central power's place or the *municipia* political role. As it has been stressed⁴⁰, the presence of intermediate structures did not represent a phase of 'provincialisation' of Italy at least until the middle of the III century AD: perhaps the creation of regions was more an answer to the need of decentralizing the central magistrates' power than an interference in the local administrations.

5. *The role of the Augustan regions in comparison with the modern model.* — The role of the Augustan regions does not allow a consideration of them like a prefiguration of the modern regionalism. Their function avoids any form of political-administrative autonomy that is typical of the modern forms of regionalism. If a modern analogy is to be found, one may look at the fourteen districts that in 1864 Pietro Maestri, director of the Central Commission of Statistics in the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce of the united Italian State⁴¹, elaborated, previous to the enactment of the municipal and provincial law of 1865 that will lead to the centralist model of government. These districts had to function as form of aggregation of data in the first national statistics and later were named 'regions', replacing the original name 'district'.

³³ Crawford, 2002, p. 1133.

³⁴ Desjardins, 1876, p. 198; Nicolet, 1991, pp. 92 ss.

³⁵ Thomsen, 1947, pp. 147 ss.: «in view of the great importance of the new tax, the *vicesima hereditatium*, and of the fact that from the moment a reliable historical tradition begins it can be seen that the districts of tax-collection were formed on the basis of the Augustan regions, the possibility cannot be disregarded that the regional system was actually introduced in connection with that new tax in A.D. 6».

³⁶ Laffi, 2007, pp. 107 ss.

³⁷ Thomsen, 1947, pp. 183 s.

³⁸ See Mommsen, (1887) 1952, pp. 1077 ss.; Desjardins, 1876, p. 199; Thomsen, 1947, pp. 153 ss.

³⁹ Laffi, 2007, p. 95.

⁴⁰ See *Introduzione* in Gabba, 1994, p. 13.

⁴¹ Laffi, 2007, pp. 113 ss.

The regional question was faced later, when the Constitution in 1948 chose a compromise between the state and the regional needs: in art. 5 it is written that the Republic, one and indivisible, recognises and promotes local autonomies, adding that the regions can enact rules in some specific fields as long as they do not oppose the national interest. Some subsequent rules enacted between 1968 and 1977 implemented this possibility: the law on the elections of the regional council (L. 17.02.1968, n. 108); the law on the financial assignment for the operation of the regions (L. 16.05.1970, n. 281); the rule on the independent statutes (DPR 24.07.1977, n. 616). The constitutional law 18.10.2001, n. 3 changed the relationship between state and regions in accordance with the principles of the EU that consider the regions, and not the states, as political-administrative institutions of reference, configuring a multi-level governance model; and the law so-called Bassanini (L. 15.03.1977, n. 59) that introduced in Italy a model of administrative federalism. The new art. 114 of the Constitution has equated the state to other institutions; the art. 117 has revolutionised the allocation of the legislative power with a list of the subject-matters in the competence of the state and those in the competence of the regions; the art. 119 has ensured financial autonomy to the municipalities, provinces, metropolitan areas and regions in line with the principles of the Law 5.05.2009, n. 42⁴².

Actually, the administrative federalism has never been fully realized and the recent European financial crisis has introduced some innovations that have affected the statual form of the single member states, tending to realize a European federalism that overcomes the problem of the relationships between state and regions⁴³.

To sum it up: the modern regions have more differences than similarities with the ancient regions. There is only one element in common: the statistical function of the original districts, later transformed into modern regions. In the modern history of Italy, these districts were the first step to the substantial development into regions with political-administrative autonomy; in Roman history, on the contrary, the statistical function of the regions was more relevant in comparison with the limited administrative task of the organization of the public lands. The modern model of regionalism is far away from the Augustan regions.

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⁴² Segatori, 2010, pp. 435 ss.; Mangiameli, 2012.

⁴³ Cammelli, 2012, pp. 673 ss. Mangiameli, 2012.

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