

## BOOK REVIEW

*Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War.* By OBERT BERNARD MLAMBO. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. xxvi + 246. Hardcover, \$103.50. ISBN: 978-1-3502-9185-0.

Should military veterans be rewarded with land, and, if so, where? These questions are of particular importance within an agrarian (pre-industrial) economy. The author of this book is from Zimbabwe. He here attempts a comparison between military veterans as agents of land expropriation as he experienced it at first hand in his own country and similar activities in late Republican Rome. His explicit intention is to clarify readers' understanding of ancient forces in play under various Roman generals such as Sulla, Julius Caesar and Octavian by illuminating similarities and differences with his own lived reality, at times citing the experiences of his own sister and father during the War of Liberation in Zimbabwe and its aftermath, also quoting copiously from the writings of African contemporaries. A variety of ancient sources is consulted, including, among others, Vergil, Appian and Dio Cassius.

Mlambo's exposition is well founded on theory and extremely persuasive. He starts by arguing for the validity of such a comparative approach, quoting a variety of modern approaches, even some aspects of feminist theory. Using these as points of departure, Mlambo looks at points of similarity (and some, remarkably few, differences) between the many land expropriations perpetrated by Roman generals to reward veterans' loyalty or to ensure their continued fealty to their leaders and a similar process in his native country under Robert Mugabe. In the latter case, a sense of entitlement and bitterness against the white farmers, who from the 1890s onwards had taken their ancestors' lands, fuelled the violent expropriation of (mostly) agricultural land by Zimbabwean veterans. In many cases the latter dispossessed even fellow-Africans working on white-owned farms, causing new hardship in the country.

In the first of eight chapters, Mlambo discusses the theoretical underpinnings of his approach, including thorough exploration of the concept of masculinity as a factor in veterans' world-view, which involved both natural biology and culture. He also explains his own application of "practice theory" and his use of ancient

sources. He cites Appian for a definition of *war veterans* as “those who fought on behalf of another” (30). Veterans were *clients* and *instruments* of the elite of both societies, who used both their clients’ bodies and their desire for land in order to achieve their own ends.

Chapter 2 draws a detailed comparison between ancient Rome and modern Zimbabwe, with emphasis on both differences and similarities in the concept of “war veteran” in the two societies, the role of colonization in both (with Rome an active colonizer and Zimbabwe a passive victim of colonization), the “manipulation” of dead bodies and wounds, scars in either society and the appearance of “female masculinity” in Zimbabwean veteran context versus the relative helplessness of Roman women (with some exceptions, like Mark Antony’s wife Fulvia).

Chapter 3 gets to grips with land ownership, masculinity (again) and war, citing inter alia Dio Cassius on the dispossession of citizens of cities which had opposed successful Roman generals, whereas in Zimbabwe, soldiers, and hence veterans, had seen themselves as *repossessing* land that had been forcibly taken over in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during colonization by British imperialists. The concept of veterans as heroes of the struggle who had “taken back” what had been their ancestors’ land, with an emphasis on their heroic masculinity and sense of entitlement, is compared with Roman veterans’ sense of personal entitlement to land as a *reward* for the heroic hardship they had endured while fighting for their respective generals.

The fourth chapter is devoted to what Mlambo terms “warfare madness”—a mindless rage that gives impetus to serious fighting and, often, wanton destruction, as depicted in authors such as Lucan, Dio and Appian and also displayed by Zimbabwean guerrilla-fighters. Too often, women were the victims of such assertion of fighters’ military masculinity in both societies.

The topic of Chapter 5 is what Mlambo calls “homosociality.” This term covers both soldiers’ relationship with and loyalty to their leaders and the masculine solidarity displayed with and between comrades in arms. The concept of the “instrumentalization” of war veterans by leaders (already cited on page 22) in order to gain or retain power is throughout important for Mlambo’s argument. The elite of both ancient and contemporary society used their loyal client-soldiers to gain political power for themselves. Similar concepts of camaraderie (Zimbabwe) and *commilitium* (Ancient Rome, 114) were utilized by elite leaders in their treatment of these clients, whom they rewarded with expropriated land. Generals were soldiers’ comrades “in both arms and crime,” so Mlambo (156).

Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on the physical presence of ancient and

contemporary soldiers, particularly the use made by their leaders of the men's bodily strength as depicted by Roman historians and poets. These men were willingly co-opted into violent land expropriation because of a "sense of entitlement" (141-143). Mlambo discusses both soldiers' physical suffering for the sake of their generals and the use of their bodies made for their own political ends, by generals like Sulla or Pompey as assertion of their own presence in political spaces. In Zimbabwe, similar invasions of soldiers into both farmland and urban centers served the political ends of ZANU-PF leaders. Interestingly, the matter of types of masculinity gains prominence here. Robert Mugabe's "more intellectual masculinity" apparently was despised by some of his soldiers who manifested "a violent masculinity" in their approach to the expropriation of land (178). Even the children of war veterans could base their land expropriations on the "muscular arrogance of their fathers" (182).

Interestingly, Mlambo indicates that in Zimbabwe non-militant citizens supported the veterans; Roman citizens suffered under veterans' incursions and opposed any co-operation with the armies, until Caesar mollified them by instituting a corn dole at Rome, a practice later followed by various other victorious generals in turn (184-186)—a "politics of the belly" (189). In Zimbabwe, a similar populist control of feed sales made "political but not economic sense" and led to widespread semi-starvation (190).

Mlambo's final chapter serves to wrap up and summarize his already well signposted arguments of previous chapters. Throughout, if (very occasionally) linguistic infelicities jar a reader, it should be remembered that Zimbabwean English differs from its American, British or even South African counterparts.

The usual front matter fills the first twenty-six pages (i - xxv.) A three-page Introduction by David Konstan of New York (xi-xiii) complements the striking dust cover that shows, top, a scene taken from the frieze in shallow relief portraying fighting men (and one woman) from the "Heroes' Acre" in Harare, Zimbabwe, and bottom, a battle scene in deeper relief taken from the Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus in the National Roman Museum, Rome. Konstan stresses the constant factor of neglect, and hence suffering, of British military veterans as illustrated by Rudyard Kipling's poem "Tommy" and equally experienced by Vietnam-era veterans in the United States.

Ten photographs serve as illustration: seven contemporary Zimbabwean scenes and three Ancient Roman artefacts. Finally, there are altogether 17 pages of notes (197-213) and a 16-page bibliography, averaging 25 titles per page (215-

231), a three-page Index of ancient passages cited and a five-page General Index (235-239).

In sum, this reader was helped by Mlambo's book to gain considerable insight into the emotions and actions of Roman veterans as well as a better understanding of contemporary hardships encountered by Zimbabwean freedom fighters before Independence was achieved, and subsequent hardships suffered by a dispossessed farming community, both black and white. This book is worth reading.

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