



[Salvian of Marseille, On the Providential Rule of God V.24-25](#)

The malfunctions of the Roman tax system and of civic institutions as source of social troubles

Name of the author: Salvian of Marseille

Date: 439 CE to 451 CE

Place: Gaul

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Parenetic treatise

Title of work: On the Providential Rule of God

Reference: V.24-25

Commentary:

For a general presentation of the author and of his work *On the providential Rule of God*, see [Salvian of Marseille, On the Providential Rule of God V.21-23](#).

The text presented here is an excerpt from the fifth book of the treatise, a book which compares Romans and barbarians and enumerates the numerous troubles caused by the malfunction of the fiscal system and by social injustice. After having insisted on the fact that members of civic institutions of various ranks used taxation for their own profit, at the expense of the poor persons (V.17-19), with the passive complicity of many clerics (V.19), Salvian narrates what he considers to be the direct consequences of this injustice. The first one is that many Roman citizens went out of the areas in which the Roman taxation system still functioned and were thus obliged of not being Roman anymore (V.21-23). The second consequence is presented in the passage quoted here, it is the burst of social troubles called *Bacaudae*. Other sources actually attest that *bacaudae* or *bagaudae* affected many regions in the Western part of the Roman Empire from the end of the third century CE onwards. The nature of these revolts has been largely debated. Being in the past largely interpreted as servile or peasant revolts, more recent studies insist on their diverse nature: some of them were caused by brigands who took advantage of the political instability in some regions whereas others were led by members of local or provincial élites who may have wanted to compensate the deficiency of the State by protecting their region by themselves (see Van Dam, *Leadership*, p. 41-48). Salvian must have inserted this short development about *bacaudae* because he had heard about some of these social troubles. We know for instance that a *bacauda* led by a general named Tibatto affected in 435 CE a region called *Gallia Ulterior*, which may be identified with an area located between Loire and Seine (Chron. Gall. a. 452, § 117). We also know that troubles had been endemic in Armorica during all the 440's. In addition, in 448 CE a doctor named Eudoxius had fled to the Huns after having taken part in a Bacaudic rebellion (Chron. Gall. a. 452, § 133). Thus, the reference to the *bacaudae* in Salvian's treatise can be explained by the fact that it was a contemporary phenomenon (on the context, see Lambert, "Salvian and the Bacaudae," p. 261-262).

First, it is interesting to consider who is attacked by Salvian in this text. In a quite general way, Salvian criticizes the "bad and cruel judges (*iudices*)" (V.24), he also highlights their dishonesty (*improbitates*, V.25), and he also explains that these *bacaudae* occurred because of "our wrongs," – "our" probably designating here all the Christians – and because of "the proscriptions and extortions of men who have turned the name of public tax to the increase of their own fortunes". Even if this last reference and that to the *iudices* seem quite imprecise, in the whole treatise Salvian is very attentive to use accurate words when he mentions the taxes or the officers who intervened at various stages of the taxation process (Roux, *Le devenir*, p. 430-440). He alternatively criticizes humblest *curiales* in charge of the collect of taxes (V.18), the *exactores* in charge of the collection of the arrears, the *principales* who were the most powerful members of civic council (V.18). He also criticizes aristocrats, the *honorati*, who had retired from important offices in provincial, diocesan or prefectural administration but who continued to influence the decisions of civic councils (VII.92). Finally, he also targets the highest instances of the state by criticising the praetorian prefecture of being the main responsible of the fiscal plunder of poor provincials. His words against these instances are sharp as he writes that the prefecture confers "a license to pillage" and that "the whole world is destroyed so that a few should bear the title of *Vir illustris*" (IV.21). The accuracy of Salvian's terminology shows that, even if his denunciation of the oppression of the mass of provincials by a minority of wealthy and powerful men corresponds to the usual codes of Christian exhortation, he was familiar with these procedures and with the civic context in which they took place. His attacks were thus far from being decontextualized or simple commonplaces (Brown, "Salvian of Marseilles," p. 13). In addition, the violence of his attacks against prefectorian



instances shows that he considers that he and his family were part of the small nobility who had suffered a lot of the injustices of the imperial tax machine and of the members of the upper ranks of the nobility (see Brown, *Through the Eye*, p. 447-449).

The second interesting aspect of this text is the animal vocabulary used by Salvian to describe the administrators, that is both the dishonest *iudices* (provincial governors or even judges in charge of petty crimes at civic level) and the members of civil instances in charge of the repartition and collection of the taxes. Salvian presents them as "savage beasts" (*immanes bestiae*) who failed to govern (*regere*) them as they were supposed to, but which "devoured" (*devorare*) them. Salvian even adds that: "they were not only fed by the spoils (*spoliis*) of so many men as most of the brigands, but yet by their torn flesh (*laceratione*) and, so to speak, by their blood (*sanguine*)". There are various other passages in the treaty *On the Providential Rule of God* in which Salvian uses the verb *devorare* in a quite similar perspective. For instance in IV.74, a wealthy man (*praepotens*) oppresses a poor person (*pauper*) who thus becomes his prey (*praeda*). The *praepotens* is thus presented as devouring (*devorare*) the only good he has. In other passages, it is not the cruel oppression of wealthy men against poor men which is underscored but the oppression of powerful administrators. We can of course quote the famous sentence: "And which are, I do not say the cities, but the municipalities and the villages wherein *curiales* are not public tyrants (*curiales fuerint tot tyranni*)?" (V.18). Then, Salvian focuses his critics on the most important members of their *ordo*, namely the *principales* and presents the later as devouring the entrails of widows and orphans and even of every saints (V.18). Analysing this development about the *curiales* and *principales* in connection to the text presented here, we can measure that, when he uses animal vocabulary to criticize these administrators of various kinds, Salvian connects two kinds of discourse. First, through this image of the judges and members of civic élites devouring poor and weak persons but also, in the case of the *principales*, religious persons, Salvian uses a commonplace of Christian literature. Actually, the details about the *lacerationes* and running blood are added by Salvian to stress the extreme cruelty of these men in a way which clearly echoes some Christian motifs of martyrs torn apart in the arena or even of Roman judges or even of emperors themselves devouring Christians (see for instance the bloody details of the *iudex* compared to a "ferocious beast," *agrios th?r*, and devouring a Christian woman in Eusebius of Caesarea, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* VIII.8 or Lactantius's attacks against a persecutor emperor, probably Galerius, that he presents as a beast, *belua*, of an extreme cruelty, *immanitas*, tearing the members of Christians and crushing their bones, see Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* V.11.5-6). However, we think that it would be erroneous to consider that Salvian had only in mind this imagery of Roman persecutors. In the text presented here targeting the *iudices* and the members of civic élites, as in the passages in which *curiales* and *principales* are attacked, it is not so much the will of these officers to eradicate Christians which is condemned but more their unrestrained appetite for money and goods. When he compared these dishonest judges and civic élites with beasts, Salvian may have had also in mind *exempla* coming from classical works. The association of the image of the *bestia* or of the *belua* with man or men that challenged the order of the *respublica* and/or who proved to be extremely bad and cruel persons is well-attested for instance in many of Cicero's speeches. Actually Cicero compares some of his enemies as Verres, Antony or Catilina with *immanis belua* "savage beast" to denounce the numerous crimes they committed (against Verres, see Cicero, *Against Verres* V.109; against Antony, Cicero, *Philippicae* IV.12; against Catilina Cicero, *For Sulla* 76). However, it is interesting to note that many Roman authors used the animal metaphor to signify that a man had a tyrannical behaviour. Thus, Cicero's comparison of Antony in *Phil.* IV.12 with a "savage and horrible beast" (*immanis taetraque belua*) works with a previous passage (*Phil.* III.29), in which he presents him explicitly as a tyrant. This rhetorical association of tyrant and beast is also developed for emperors. One can remember Pliny the Younger who, in his *Panegyric of Trajan*, describes Domitian as "the most savage beast," *immanissima belua* (Pliny the Younger, *Panegyric of Trajan* 48) and the numerous references that Suetonius makes to the *saevitia* (which refers to the ferocity of the wild animals but which also refers to hysterical cruelty of men, especially of tyrants) of many emperors that he presents as tyrants, namely Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian (see for instance Suetonius, *Tiberius* 75; Suetonius, *Caligula* 34; Suetonius, *Nero* 36; Suetonius, *Vitellius* 13; Suetonius, *Domitian* 10; about the notion of *saevitia*, see Dunkle, "The Rhetorical Tyrant," p. 14-15). Thus, one element shows that when Salvian compares the Roman administrators with cruel beasts, he must have had also in mind these classical *exempla*, it is when he compares the dishonest *curiales* in V.18 with *tyranni*.

This short survey of Salvian's use of animal metaphors to speak about the exactions caused by the Roman administrators shows that Salvian allies both classical motifs associating cruel and tyrannical men or emperors with wild beasts and motifs taken from Christian literature, especially for what concerns the bloody details given by Salvian. Contrary to Cicero's attacks against individuals or those against tyrannical – and eventually persecutors – emperors, the originality of Salvian's point of view is that his comparison with wild beasts concerns all the Romans who were active at every level of the administrative hierarchy: the praefectorian authorities (that he may have known when he lived in Lérins), by the provincials authorities, by the civic magistrates and finally by the members of civic élites. Salvian's animalisation process is thus particularly interesting because of its general character. Far from being an invective only based on the denunciation of the oppression of the most powerful and wealthiest over



the poorest and the weakest, a kind of invective which was quite common in Christian literature, Salvian takes the trouble to connect his attacks with very concrete social realities. The *iudices-bestiae* or the *curiales-tyranni* are archetypal figures but they are used here to denounce a real phenomenon, namely the fact that the Roman power, through the Gallic prefecture, asked too much of the Gallic provincials – especially in term of taxation – without providing them the necessary compensations, as for instance to ensure the security of these provinces.

The last interesting element of the text presented here is the global reflection that Salvian develops regarding the relationship between the Roman instances and the Gallic provincials (see V.24). This reflection is pervaded by two dichotomies: freedom/enslavement; Roman/barbarian. The main message that Salvian develops throughout his work is that the fiscal policy and the lack of control of the administrators by Roman prefectural authorities led to the exclusion of a large part of the provincials who preferred to break away and to form *bacaudae* or even to run away in barbarian lands (last phenomenon explained in [Salvian of Marseille, On the Providential Rule of God V.21-23](#)). Salvian asserts that these men cannot be blamed as it is the Roman authorities themselves who, because of their wrongs, forced them to be criminals and/or to lose their Roman citizenship. This development fits in with the more general message of the treatise *On the provincial Rule of God* which consisted in saying that most Romans were so inhuman that they were in fact more barbarian than the barbarians themselves. Of course, this kind of statement was rhetorical and the main aim of the author was not to attribute qualities to the barbarians, qualities that they would have considered as real, but to criticize the Romans with the strongest arguments. In that perspective, Salvian is one of the authors of the fifth century who certainly succeeded to write one of the sharpest criticism against the Romans and in particular against the multitude of the men who played a role in the administrative or judiciary system in the Western Part of the Empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Bacaudae](#)
- [bestia](#)
- [criminosus](#)
- [exactio](#)
- [honor](#)
- [immanis](#)
- [indictio tributaria](#)
- [iniquitas](#)
- [iudex](#)
- [ius](#)
- [laceratio](#)
- [latro](#)
- [nomen Romanum](#)
- [praedum](#)
- [proscriptio](#)
- [rapina](#)
- [rebellis](#)
- [Romana libertas](#)
- [sanguis](#)
- [spolia](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Bagaudae](#)
- [beast](#)
- [blood](#)
- [brigandage](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [Gaul](#)
- [Gauls](#)
- [injustice](#)



- [judge](#)
- [oppression](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [Roman administration](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman corruption](#)
- [taxation](#)

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[Juvenal, Satires VIII.87-124](#)

On the risks of the misbehaviours of the Roman governors towards Rome's allies.

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Text

[Salvian of Marseille, On the Providential Rule of God V.21-23](#)

Gallic provincials who preferred to lose their Roman citizenship by emigrating towards barbarian or bacaudic areas

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