The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium

The Rhetoric of Empire

In *The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium*, Sarolta Takács examines the role of the Roman emperor, who was the single most important law-giving authority in Roman society. Emperors had to embody the qualities or virtues espoused by Rome's ruling classes. Political rhetoric shaped the ancients' reality and played a part in the upkeep of their political structures. Takács isolates a reoccurring cultural pattern, a conscious appropriation of symbols and signs (verbal and visual) belonging to the Roman Empire. She suggests that contemporary concepts of "empire" may have Roman precedents, which are reactivations or reuses of well-established ancient patterns. Showing the dialectical interactivity between the constructed past and present, Takács also focuses on the issue of classical legacy through these virtues, which are not simply repeated or adapted cultural patterns but are tools for the legitimization of political power, authority, and even domination of one nation over another.

Sarolta A. Takács is professor of history and founding dean of the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program at Rutgers University. A recipient of fellowships from the Center for Hellenic Studies (Harvard University) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as well as grants from the Loeb Classical Library Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Fondation Hardt, she is the author of *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* and *Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion*.

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To My Friends
Inspirations and *Psychēs Iatroi*

And

To My Teachers
Motivators of Ideas and Questions

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Abbreviations

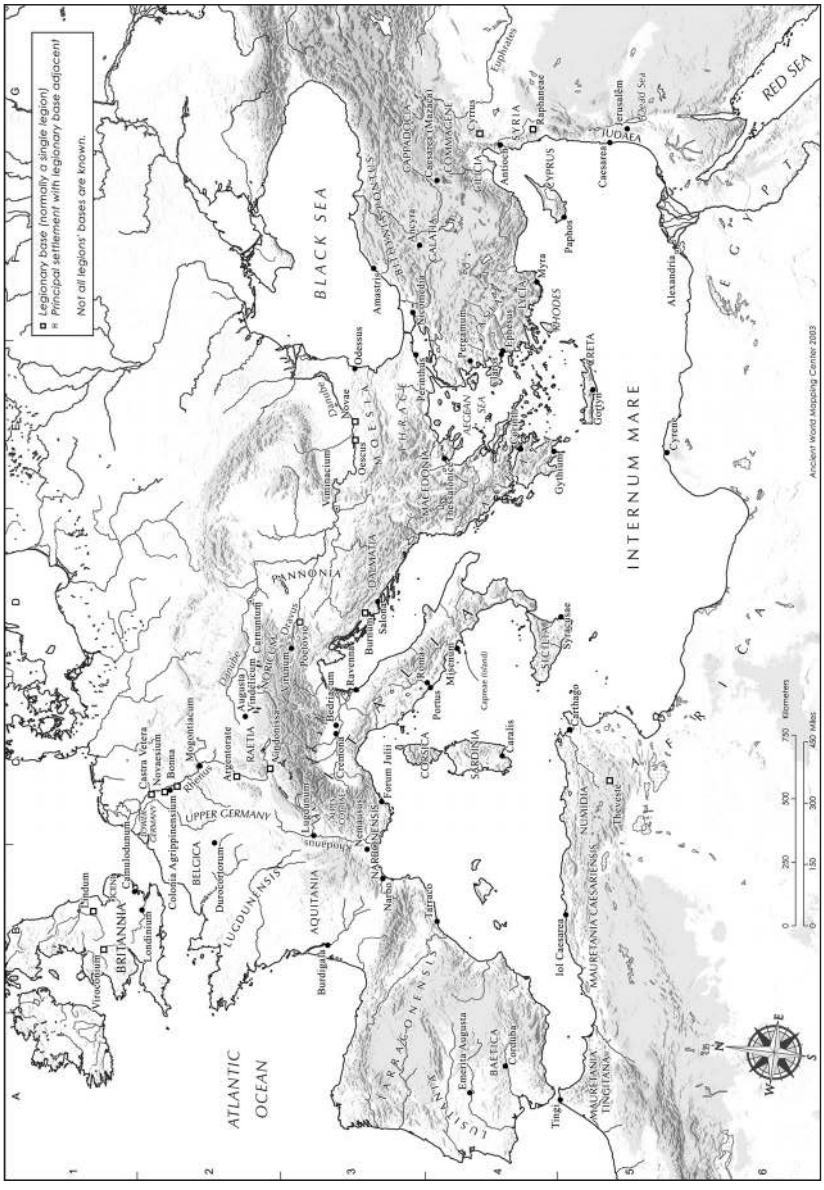
AE	*L'Année épigraphique*
AHR	*The American Historical Review*
BMCRE	*British Museum Coins of the Roman Empire*
CIL	*Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*
HThR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*
IGUR	*Inscriptiones Graecae urbis Romae*
ILS	*Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*
MGH Poet. Lat.	*Monumenta Germaniae historica poetae Latini*
OCD	*Oxford Classical Dictionary*
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*
RE	*Realencyclopädie der Altertumswissenschaften* (Pauly-Wissowa)
REB	*Revue des études byzantines*
REL	*Revue des études latines*
RhM	*Rheinisches Museum*
TAPA	*Transactions of the American Philological Association*
WS	*Wiener Studien*
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie and Epigraphik*

Abbreviations of Ancient Authors

Ach. Tat.	Achilles Tatius
Aug.	C. Iulius Caesar (Octavianus) Augustus
RG	*Res Gestae*
August.	Augustine
C.D.	*De civitate Dei*
Basil	Basil of Caesarea
Ad. adol.	*Oratio ad adolescentes*
Cato	M. Porcius Cato
Origines	
Cic.	M. Tullius Cicero.
Arch.	*Pro Archia*
Fin.	*De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum.*
Marc.	*Pro Marcello*
Phil.	*Philippicae*
Pis.	*In Pisonem*
Rab. Perd.	*Pro Rabirio Peduellionis Reo*
Sest.	*Pro Sestio*
Ver.	*In Verrem*
D.C.	Dio Cassius
D.H.	Dionysius of Halicarnassus
Enn.	Ennius
Ann.	*Annales*
Euseb.	Eusebius
Hist. eccl.	*Historia ecclesiastica*
Vit. Const.	*Vita Constantini*
G. Pis.	George of Pisidia
Ex. Pers.	*Expeditio Persica*
Rest. Cruc.	*In Restitutionem S. Crucis*
Isoc.	Isocrates
Arch.	*Archidamus*
J.	Josephus
BJ	*Bellum Judaicum*

Julian.	Julian (the Apostate)
Ep.	*Epistulae*
Lactant.	Lactantius
De mort.	*De mortibus persecutorum*
Lib.	Libanius
Liv.	Livy
Per.	*Periochae*
Malal.	John Malalas
Chronogr.	*Chronographia*
Mart.	Martial
Sp.	*Spectacula*
Petr.	Petronius
Plb.	Polybius
Plin.	Pliny (the Elder)
Nat.	*Naturalis Historia*
Plin.	Pliny (the Yonger)
Pan.	*Panegyricus*
Psellos	Michael Psellos
Chron.	*Chronographia*
Sen.	Seneca (the Younger)
Cl.	*De clementia*
Serv.	Servius
A.	*In Vergilium commentarius*
SHA	Scriptores Historiae Augustae
Comm.	*Commodus*
Heliogab.	*Heliogabalus*
Pert.	*Pertinax*
Sev.	*Severus*
Suet.	Suetonius
Aug.	*Divus Augustus*
Dom.	*Domitianus*
Nero	*Nero*
Tac.	Tacitus
Ag.	*Agricola*
Ann.	*Annales*

Hist.	*Historiae*
Theoph.	Theophylact Simocatta
Hist.	*Historiae*
Tyrt.	Tyrtaeus
Var.	Varro
Verg.	Vergil
A.	*Aeneid*
G.	*Georgics*
Zos.	Zosimus



Map 1. The Roman Empire.
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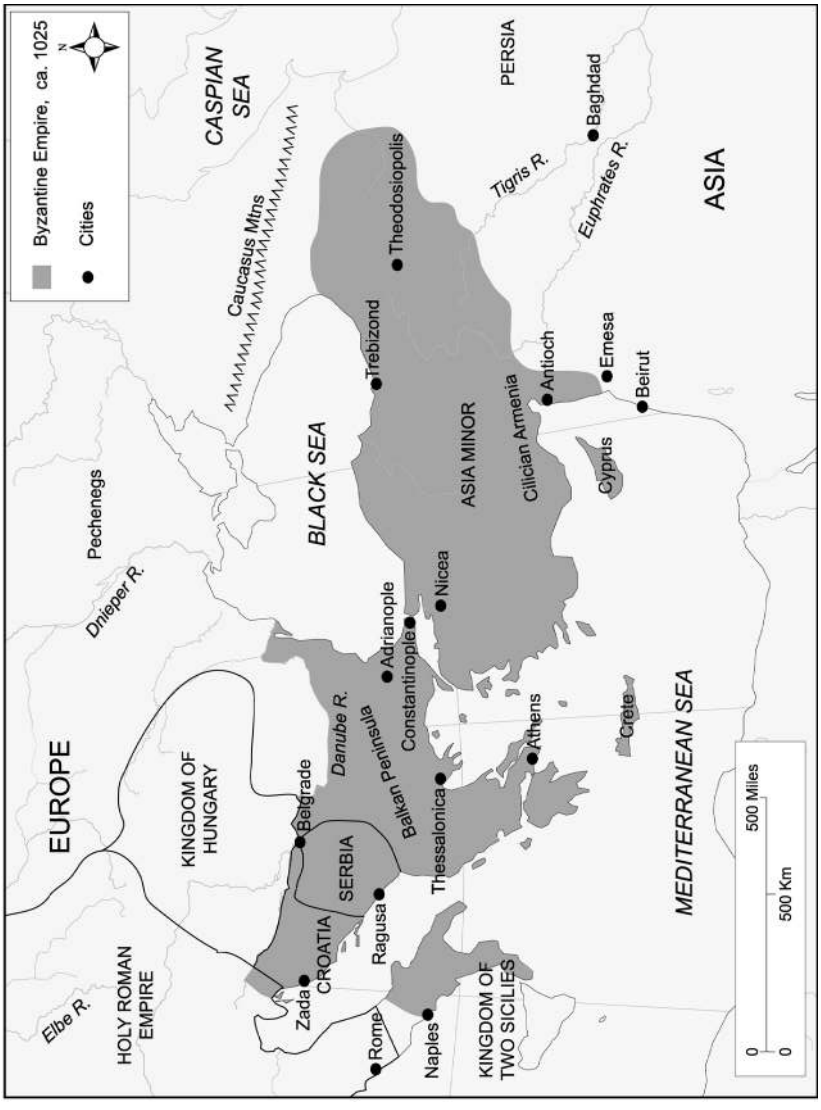

Map 2. The Byzantine Empire.
Map from Sarolta A. Takács, ed., *The Modern World*, vol. 4: *Civilizations of the Middle East and Southwest Asia* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2008), p. 27. Copyright © 2008 by M.E. Sharpe, Inc. Used with permission.

Introduction

Two dictators shaped my family's life: Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Their respective tyrannies, as well as their immeasurable brutality in the name of ideologies, had an impact even on those of us born long after they held sway over their nations. My father, who experienced the atrocities of World War II as a young boy and teenager, went on to fight the Stalinist regime of his beloved Hungary only to end up in the worst prison imaginable. He was one of the lucky ones. Imprisoned for life, he was released under Imre Nagy's general amnesty. After the failed uprising of 1956, he made his way to Switzerland, which became his new home. It is no surprise, then, that politics and history were topics our family discussed often and most intensively. In particular, we explored how well-employed rhetoric influenced public opinion; how rhetoric of the kind employed by Hitler and Stalin can shape public opinion and construct authority.

Later, as a graduate student, I had the opportunity to study with the Byzantinist Paul Speck (1928–2003). The horrors of World War II and the Nazi ideology that led to the abandonment of humanity gave Speck a particular insight into Byzantine history and texts. He taught

me to look for, and isolate, powers and processes that transformed events into historical memory. At times, this transformation created an imaginary world that was as important and formative as actual, tangible events. Our historical matrix is thus wrought, I believe, of both the actual and the imaginary. Rhetoric functions as the bond and the promulgator of this matrix.

The purpose of this study is to provide a historical analysis of the process by which Roman traditional virtues became absorbed and embodied in the emperor, and of the dynamic behind Rome's discourse of power, authority, and legitimization.[1] I propose to look at a political institution, the Roman emperor, who was the single most important instance or authority of that which was said. The emperor was the one perceived or constructed as the ultimate political and law-giving entity. This authority embodied, or at least appeared to possess, qualities or virtues that the group espoused. What the group espoused, of course, was constructed as well. Arguably, the most important medium that generated and upheld the construct of what was considered virtuous behavior was the spoken and the written word.

In addition to the Roman republic and the principate, I base this study on two of its successors, the Byzantine and the Carolingian empires, although the latter is represented only by a short analysis of Charlemagne's reign. The reader I have in mind is not the specialist but the person curious about the formative power of political rhetoric: verbal and visual expressions that persuade and thus shape our perception of a political leader. To sustain the Roman empire, a successful leader displayed *virtus* (virtue, manliness, moral stature, courage, and other qualities) to secure loyalty and employed rhetorical discourse, grounded in traditional virtues (the *mos maiorum*) established and accepted by the ancient Romans. The most virtuous leaders received the honorific "father of the country" (*pater patriae*) and could claim divine favor. Although Christianity introduced a new

[1] M. Foucault, *Archaeology of knowledge and the discourse of language*, translated by A. Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), *passim* but especially pp. 215–37.

"Father," the tripartite God, classical education (*paideia*) ensured the continuation of the established rhetorical discourse, comprised of words, behavior, and performance. Because literature is the premier carrier of classical education, analyses of texts play a significant role in this study.

Rome is one of the few city-states in history in which a republic was transformed into an empire, and, even when the original empire broke up into new political entities, it retained the same discourse that had shaped its history. In the republic, Rome's aristocracy linked achievements that resulted in glory (*gloria*) and commemoration (*memoria*) to virtuous behavior. The Latin word for virtue, *virtus*, has as its root *vir*, man. The best among men, or the real man, was the one who displayed all-around virtuous behavior. Roman writers explained the acquisition and maintenance of empire as a result of virtuous behavior. In their view, politics and morality went hand in hand. It was their traditional moral code that guided and defined these virtuous men, guardians of a vast, multicultural, and transforming empire.

Roman history was filled with stories of heroic deeds that resulted in Rome's primacy over the Mediterranean world. These virtuous displays of uprightness and personal sacrifice for the state, although often fictitious, had the power to demand replication. At the moment of imitation, the fictitious construct becomes real. The carrier of the core Roman virtues was the best among the elite men, the father of the country. From the time of Augustus, the emperor held this title; he was the living embodiment of these virtues. He, in fact, could be seen as the "Father" who generated a symbolic order of laws or a "discourse of the Master," in the terminology of Lacan, which, when disrupted, resulted in violence. At such moments of irrationality or ruptures, a new Father emerged, regenerating the old order at a heightened state of intensity.

Four historical periods will demark and provide the chapter structure of this examination. The chapters will trace republican Rome's ascent to hegemony over the Mediterranean world; its move from the republican system to the rule of one; the transformation of the pagan

to the Christian Roman empire, with its capital in Constantinople; and, finally, the transition from an orthodox to a fundamentalist Christian state. In the first chapter I will address the construction of Rome's virtuous man as a public figure. Key to this development were members of the Scipio family and Cato the Elder (214–149 BCE). Speeches of Cicero (106–43 BCE), in particular the *Verrines*, further defined the concept of the virtuous, the traditional behavioral code, and the idea of the "father of the country," the public figure who upheld all that was honorable, virtuous, and worthy of imitation.

The second chapter will primarily focus on Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE) and Nero (r. 54–68). Augustus, his person and his reign, set the stage for, and put into motion, the acceptance of the emperor as a most extraordinary entity. The emperor became a symbolic figure who defined and perpetuated "Rome," the empire with its diverse history, its laws, and its traditions. The dynasty Augustus had put into place ended with Nero, whose rule was, in essence, a performative act. Consequently, his ability to rule, that is, his ability to be the respected father of the empire, was fatally reduced. The remaining part of the chapter will focus on three subsequent emperors, Vespasian (r. 69–79), Domitian (r. 81–96), and Trajan (r. 98–117). Civil war produced Vespasian, who successfully reactivated the symbolic force of the ruler, something his second son, Domitian, was unable to uphold due to his alienation of the Roman nobility. "Bread and circuses" may have pacified the mob but they did nothing to mollify the elite, who were made painfully aware of their political irrelevance. Trajan, like Vespasian, a victorious general, emerged as Rome's new emperor. The all-encompassing, virtuous father that had emerged with Augustus returned in the person of Trajan.

In the third chapter I will look at the emergence of Christianity and its defenders, the martyrs, whose belief in God brought about a completely new system of ethics under which pagan virtues received a Christian interpretation. The virtuous Christian was the one who disengaged from worldly affairs and rejected the body. The goal of one's life was the attainment of the kingdom of heaven, to be in

the presence of God the Father. Unlike their pagan predecessors, Christians, both men and women, were ready to sacrifice their lives in acts of great virtue for a "Father" and a kingdom not of this world. Constantine I (r. 306–337) brought the Christians back into the political sphere as a means of unifying the empire under his leadership. In the process, Constantine fused the Christian ethics of the virtuous with those of Rome's pagan past. Thus, the foundation of the Christian Roman empire rested on the relationship between the spiritual Father and the emperor, who was perceived as His viceroy on earth.

The final chapter will begin by taking a closer look at the reigns of Justinian I (527–565), arguably the last Roman emperor, and Heraclius (610–641), the first Byzantine emperor and a crusader in the name of Christianity against non-believers, in this case the Zoroastrian Persians. When the Eastern Roman empire came under pressure in the seventh and eighth centuries, which saw the formation of empires under the Franks and Bulgars in the West and the Arabs in the East, the Byzantines diverted their political anxieties of a diminished empire to the religious sphere. Iconoclasm, the question of whether icons ought to have a place in religious worship and whether God could be pictorially represented, absorbed the Eastern Roman empire and left us with very little literature and artistic output from the period.[2]

While Byzantium was wrapped up in religious questions, the new empires in the West and the East embraced Greco-Roman culture or selected aspects useful to them from this cultural and political heritage. The Western empire under Charlemagne saw itself as a continuation of the Roman empire. Like its Eastern counterpart, it also had to contend with a commanding power, the Arabs or Saracens in Spain, who challenged its dominance. In the West as

[2] See P. Speck, *Understanding Byzantium: Studies in Byzantine Historical Sources*, edited by S. A. Takács, Variorum collected studies series CS631 (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate/Variorum, 2003), esp. "The origins of the Byzantine renaissance," pp. 143–62, "Further reflections and inquiries on the origins of the Byzantine renaissance," pp. 179–97, and "Badly-ordered thoughts on philhellenism," pp. 280–95.

well as in the East, newly formed empires clung to the rhetoric and moral blueprints of old. The Roman emperor, whether Byzantine or Frank, continued to embody the virtues that defined him as the father of the country.

Eventually, however, the Eastern and the Western Roman empires embarked on different ideological courses when legislation of Alexius I Comnenus (r. 1081–1118) moved higher education to the so-called Patriarchal School. Therefore, the princes of the Church alone determined explorations of the mind, which were only to take place within a Church-approved context. Orthodoxy gave way to fundamentalism in the East.

If one takes the fall of Constantinople in 1453 as the terminal date, Rome had created and perpetuated the notion of empire for more than two millennia. And, even when it no longer existed, Rome still set the standard. Empire created the space for virtuous behavior. The custom or tradition of the ancestors, the *mos maiorum*, put forth a set of core virtues and behavioral standards that not only were emulated but also determined a Roman's socio-political and, consequently, his economic status. Essentially, it provided a vocabulary for how public achievements were evaluated. The best of all Romans was the one who acted virtuously, or projected the act of being virtuous; in every circumstance glory (*gloria*) and commemoration (*memoria*) were his. A person thus perceived was believed to be extraordinary and might earn the honorific title "father of the country." When the republic gave way to the principate, this title became attached exclusively to the emperor. This singular and extraordinary entity, the emperor, however, was also the Father, the perpetual embodiment of the traditionally accepted and proliferated virtues that generated the dynamic of Rome's discourse of power, authority, and legitimization. In turn, this Father existed as long as the rhetoric, embedded in *paideia* (classical education), fueled the discourse.

The political consequences of 9/11 made me think again of questions of rhetoric, historical memory, and ideologies. If political rhetoric shaped the ancients' reality and played a part in the upkeep of their political structures and ideologies, it may do

the same in the modern world. Although I shall not venture outside my area of expertise, I hope that the present analysis of an ancient pattern within an imperial discourse will show how rhetoric has shaped, and continues to shape, public opinion.