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Introduction

Emperors and Expectations

Emperors in Their World

Roman emperors ruled their world. They did so from the moment that emperorship was established in Rome up to the fall of the Roman empire. This seems self-evident, but almost everything in the previous two sentences is subject to debate. There was no clearly articulated concept for 'emperor' in the Roman world, which makes it hard to firmly state when Roman emperorship started. Was it during Caesar's reign, as he was the first sole ruler of the Roman world since the mythological kings? Or during the rule of his adoptive son, the later Augustus, under whom the institutional basis for a supreme position of power was created that would be the foundation of Roman rule for centuries? The accession of Tiberius was the first example of proper succession, which brought its own problems for an office that did not exist in a system in which magisterial offices could not be inherited.[1] It could also be argued that Roman 'emperorship' only started under Caligula, who had little military and administrative experience when he came to power but still received all the honours and powers that effectively constituted Roman leadership immediately after the death of his predecessor Tiberius. It is even possible to push the 'official' start of emperorship forward to the start of Galba's reign, because that was the first moment that someone from outside Augustus' household was given 'imperial' powers.[2] The end of Roman emperorship (and of the Roman empire)

[1] The literature on the beginning of Roman emperorship is immense. Suetonius starts his biographies of Rome's first sole rulers with Caesar. On Caesar's and Augustus' positions in the state see below p. 24–25. Tiberius' accession is discussed in Vel. Pat. 2.124–5, Tac. *Ann.* 1.7, 1.12 and Dio 57.2. An extraordinary newly found inscription shows the importance of military loyalty to the new ruler before anything was resolved by the Senate: P. Rothenhöfer, 'Emperor Tiberius and his P*raecipua Legionum Cura* in a New Bronze Tablet from AD 14', *Gephyra* 19 (2020), 101–10 and now especially A. Caballos Rufino, 'Un senadoconsulto del año 14 DC en un epígrafe bético', *ZPE* 219 (2021), 305–26.

[2] On Caligula receiving powers *en bloc*: A. Barrett, *Caligula. The Abuse of Power* (London – New York 2015^{2}), 73–80. The legal basis of power was formalised in a so-called *Lex de Imperio*. The one for Vespasian is transmitted to us: B. Levick, 'The *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani*: The Parts and the Whole', in: L. C. Colognesi / E. Tassi Scandone (eds.), *La Lex de Imperio Vespasiani e la Roma dei Flavi* (Rome 2009), 11–22 and below p. 34.

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is even more difficult to properly date. In the Roman west, Romulus Augustulus, who was deposed by Odoacer in 476, is often described as the last Roman emperor, but nearly a century later, the eastern emperor Justinian ruled in the Italian peninsula. Even when the west was finally and definitively lost to Roman power, the various kings who followed in the emperors' footsteps fulfilled much the same function as emperors, and were often addressed by similar titles and visualised in similar images.[3] In the eastern parts of the Roman empire, moreover, emperors continued to reign until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. By then the empire had shrunk dramatically in size, and the changes in its socio-political and cultural set-up were such that historians talk about the Byzantine rather than the Roman empire, although the inhabitants themselves did no such thing, and continued to describe themselves as Romans.[4]

So there is no clear definition of what a Roman emperor was, nor an undisputed date for the beginning or end of Roman emperorship. Still, for a very long time a series of individuals were nominally in charge of one of the largest political units that world history has seen. It had been created through massive military expansion, and although from the early third century onwards all free inhabitants were awarded Roman citizenship, the diversity of the peoples who had been coerced and incorporated into the Roman world remained continuously visible. Rome ruled an empire.[5] Up to the first century BC, this territory was governed through what is often described as a 'mixed constitution', which incorporated aristocratic, democratic and monarchic elements of rule. This Roman constitution had evolved and shifted substantially over time, but it excluded sole rule, except for clearly delineated periods of crisis, in which a 'dictator' could take sole decisions.[6] When the problems facing the ever-expanding empire

[3] Clear historical overviews are provided by M. Kulikowski, *The Tragedy of Empire. From Constantine to the Destruction of Roman Italy* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2019), esp. 214–30 and P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire. A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford 2006), esp. 430–59. See further below p. 35.

[4] C. Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford 2005), 29–32, points out how *byzantios* was only used to refer to inhabitants of the capital. For everyone else *romanus* or *rhomaios* was used.

[5] J. Burbank/ F. Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton – Oxford 2010), 8 for the definition of 'empire'. On the awarding of citizenship through the co-called *Constitutio Antoniniana* (AD 212): A. Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution. An Edict for the Caracallan Empire* (Leiden – Boston 2018).

[6] A. Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford 1999), 1–2, 109–13; 191–213. The most important ancient discussion of the mixed constitution is Polybius, *Histories* 6.11–18. Illustrative for the notion that sole rule was excluded in the Republic: Tac. *Ann*. 1.1: 'freedom and the consulship were established by L. Brutus. Dictatorships were taken up only on occasion'.

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put pressure on its political system, the office of dictator changed to a more autocratical form. Its time limit was removed, and individuals were awarded a dictatorship for 'bringing stability to the political order' (*rei publicae constituendae*).[7] Ultimately, this would lead to civil war, Caesar's sole rule, more civil war and then Augustus' long reign – from which point onwards sole rule became the norm. From 50 BC onwards – brief periods aside – a sole man ruled an empire. These men were differentiated from other rulers, from 27 BC by the name Augustus, by both the Romans and those who came to be subjected by them. There was no doubt that they outranked the monarchs of neighbouring kingdoms, with the exception of the ruler of the adjacent Parthian (and later Sasanian) empire. It makes sense, then, to call these Roman rulers 'emperors', even if the Romans themselves did not.[8]

The change towards a political system in which one man ruled supreme was substantial. It also turned out to be effective, in the sense that for approximately 500 years in the west, and about a millennium longer in the east, emperorship was virtually unchallenged as a mode of rule, even if individual rulers were often challenged and deposed.[9] How was this new role incorporated into the existing structures of the Roman empire? And how could the position continue to function and flourish notwithstanding the massive changes that the empire underwent over the centuries? The transition to a Christian empire may be the most obvious of these, but there were other pronounced shifts. Militarily, Rome changed from an expansionist empire which expected to defeat its enemies to a territory defending its borders and negotiating with enemies. Geographically, the eastern part of the empire gained ever more importance, through the incorporation of eastern local elites and ultimately the move towards Constantinople as imperial residence and capital. There were major shifts in the organisation

[7] App. *BC*. 1.98.459; 1.99.462; L. Gasperini, 'Su alcuni epigrafi di Taranto romano', in: M. Raoss (ed.), *II miscellanea greca e romana II* (Rome 1968), 379–97; L. Gasperini, 'Ancora sul frammento 'cesariano' di Taranto', *Epigrafica* 33 (1971), 48–59; A. Baroni, 'La titolatura della dittatura di Silla', *Athenaeum* 95 (2007), 775–92; Lintott, *The Constitution*, 113.

[8] On periods of shared Roman emperorship, see below pp. 43 and 246–247. On the Parthians and Sasanians, and their relation to Rome: B. Dignas/ E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge 2007), 9–44; M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2009). Note that if we call the Roman ruler 'emperor' rather than Augustus, we should call the Persian rulers likewise. Placing an eastern king of kings against a Roman emperor says more about modern historiography than about ancient conceptions of rule.

[9] In his ongoing project 'New Blood: Rome's Emperors in Global Perspective', Walter Scheidel argues that the frequency with which individual Roman rulers were disposed is exceptional when compared to other monarchical systems of rule.

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of the empire as well, both in its territorial divisions and in the status of people who were placed in charge of administrative zones. Throughout all these changes, emperors retained their position as head of state.

Looking at the Roman empire over a long period of time, it is noticeable how often society was in political and cultural flux. For emperorship to endure, it must change with it. Yet, in ancient Rome, change and innovation were claimed to be suspect. A key notion was custom (*mos*), the way things were done at a given time, or even better, ancestral custom (*mos maiorum*), the way things had previously been done.[10] That was not an absolute. Romans were aware of change. The great second-century historian Tacitus, for instance, described how Emperor Claudius explained his proposal to allow members of the Gallic elite into the senate by quoting precedent, only then to note how 'what today we defend by examples will be among the examples'.[11] Claudius defended his innovation by presenting it as a continuity of existing practices, even if in extended form. That extension, however, could influence later practice. How was emperorship itself formulated and perceived on such a tightrope between (necessary) adaptation and the need for continuity? In other words, how was power presented and perceived in a society that was supposed to be dominated by tradition, but politically and culturally in flux? This book looks at emperorship over a long period of time in order to address this question.

Writing a History of Emperorship

This is a book discussing Roman emperorship over a period of more than 600 years. It cannot aim for completeness. Instead, it focuses primarily on the presentation and perception of emperorship, although it will argue that these had major repercussions for the emperors' behaviour. It does so by looking at how emperors were named and portrayed (Chapter 1), at the three main roles they had to fulfil; that of military leader, religious leader and divine figure, and as a civic ruler (Chapter 2), at the individuals and groups with whom emperors were expected to surround themselves (Chapter 3), and at the impact of (local) monuments, ceremonies and traditions on the perception of the emperors and their main roles in

[10] Lintott, *Constitution*, 4–6; A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge – New York 2008), 215–218.

[11] Tac. *Ann.* 11.24. The original speech of Claudius is transmitted through *CIL* 13.1668. It includes many references to earlier Roman history.

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Rome, Constantinople, and the wider Roman world (Chapter 4; for the location of the various places mentioned in this book, see Map 0.1).

In order to explore these four themes, the book uses a wide variety of source material. Centrally issued coinage (also called imperial coinage) has survived in substantial numbers for the entirety of the period. It forms a useful starting point to establish a baseline of developments in the emperor's names and titles (through the legend), image (through the portrait), and role (through the scenes on the reverse of coins).[12] Central coins can often be contrasted to so-called provincial coinage, issued by autonomous cities or kings who had allied themselves to Rome.[13] Statues and other sculptural portraits of the emperor are also transmitted in large quantities, as are inscriptions and papyri referring to the emperor. All of these can be used to look at developments over time, though all have their peculiarities, limits and drawbacks which need to be taken into account before drawing historical conclusions.[14] Narrative reliefs, paintings and large-scale imperial architecture are similarly important to the argument, and they must have dominated the (urban) landscapes of the Roman world, thus playing a major part in transmitting the emperor's roles. There are also objects which were of more precious materials, such as gems or ivory diptychs, which have therefore been transmitted in much smaller numbers and were only accessible to a limited audience in antiquity. In that sense, they showed more private images of the emperor, or at least images that could be targeted to a specific group. The precious objects help to show how wide the range of possibilities for imperial representation could be as long as you knew who the audience would be. And of course much of our evidence is literary (the

[12] R. Wolters, 'Die Geschwindigkeit der Zeit und die Gefahr der Bilder: Münzbilder und Münzpropaganda in der römischen Kaiserzeit', in: G. Weber/ M. Zimmermann (eds.), *Propaganda – Selbstdarstellung – Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreich des 1. Jhs. n. Chr.* (Stuttgart 2003), 175–204; 190–1, 195; M. Crawford, 'Roman Imperial Cointypes and the Formation of Public Opinion', in: C. Brooke/ B. Stewart/ J. Pollard/ T. Volk (eds.), *Studies in Numismatic Method: Presented to Philip Grierson* (Cambridge 1983), 54–5. The analysis of coin types has been facilitated enormously through the digitisation of material in the 'Online Coins of the Roman Empire' database (OCRE): http://numismatics.org/ocre/. On the use of OCRE as a research tool, see now S. Betjes, *The Mind of the Mint. Continuity and Change in Roman Imperial Coin Design from Augustus to Zeno (31 BCE–491 CE)* (PhD Nijmegen 2021), 38–44.

[13] These coins are systematically presented on https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/, which also supplies an introduction to the use of this material, with selected bibliography. See further below p. 318–320.

[14] Roman imperial statues are now assembled in the 'Roman Imperial Portraits Dataset' (RIPD): https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-2ca-hxmd and https://imperialportraits.rich.ru.nl/, and the 'Last Statues of Antiquity' dataset (LSA): http://laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk/. For inscriptions see especially the 'Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss-Slaby' (EDCS): http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/ and for papyri the 'Papyrological Navigator' (PN): https://papyri.info/.

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Map 0.1 The Roman empire

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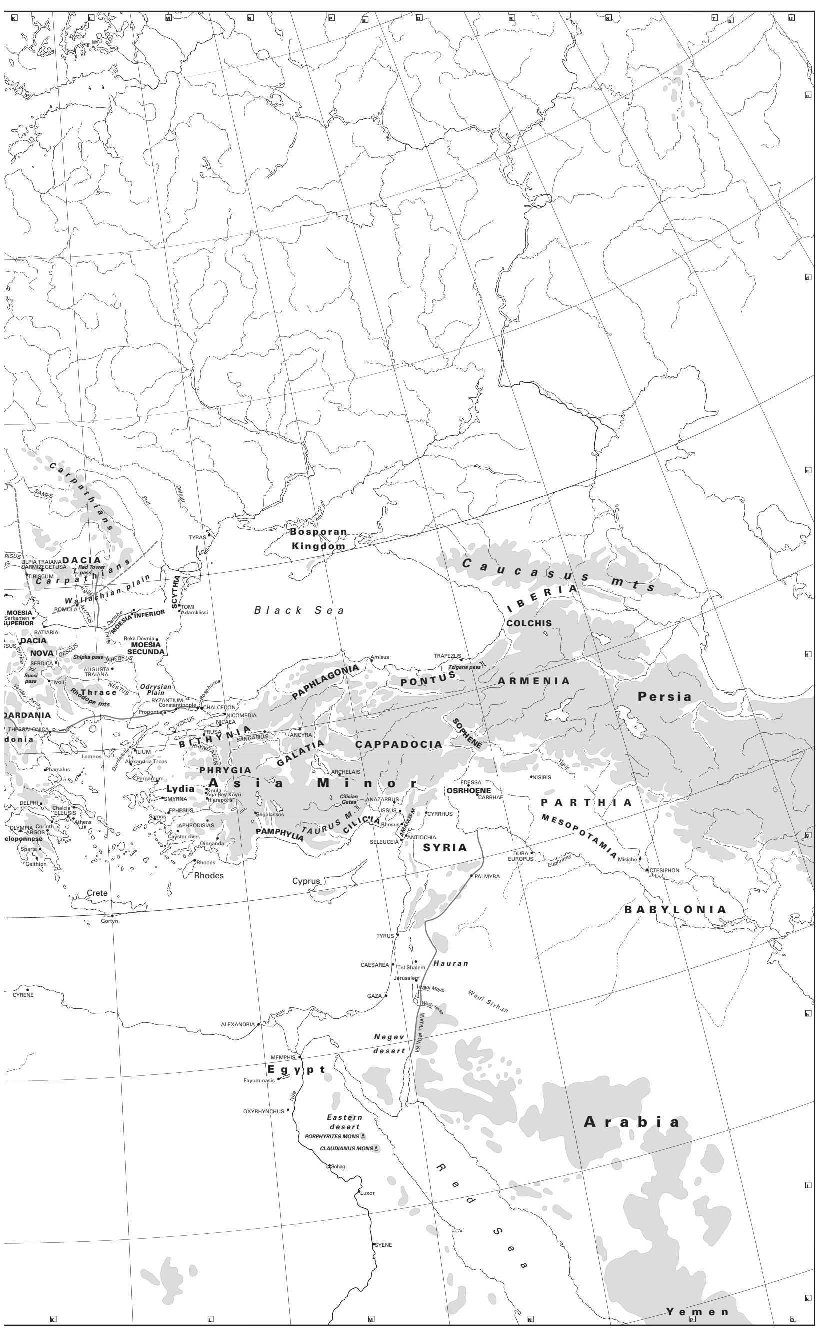

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documentary evidence from inscriptions and papyri aside). Throughout the book, testimonies from classical historians are used to (re)construct events and opinions. Equally important, however, are letters sent to and by emperors, legal texts (often issued by the emperor) and laudatory speeches (often delivered before the emperor). Like the material evidence, these texts have their peculiarities and limits, and throughout the book I will try to explain why I think that a certain text (or a certain object) can help us understand what an emperor did, or was expected to do. Ample citation of the literary sources and images of the material ones will hopefully help the reader to follow that argument.

This is a book about emperors, but no monarch rules on his or her own.[15] Empresses were important, as were imperial heirs, and they will receive much attention (especially in Chapter 3). But others, such as generals, senators, *equites*, bishops, local elites, friendly (and not-so-friendly) kings, philosophers and eunuchs mattered too. The emperor's relationship with soldiers and the crowds in Rome and Constantinople was an essential component of his rule (see especially Chapter 4), but it is difficult to find evidence for how these people, or people in the provinces of lower social status, such as the farmers and day labourers who must have made up most of the population of the Roman empire, thought about their emperor. There are texts discussing what soldiers and crowds did and wanted, but very few, if any, are from their perspective. I have tried to include as many of such 'popular' viewpoints as possible into the argument.[16]

Different Emperors at Different Times

The period which this book deals with starts when Caesar obtained sole power. It ends at the death of Justinian the Great in 565. The beginning marks the first occasion at which Rome was ruled by someone who could be called emperor. There had been sole rulers before Caesar, but not since the time of the legendary kings (when there had been a Roman city state

[15] The possible exception is the king in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*. But even he is much relieved when he finally encounters a subject.

[16] On 'popular' perceptions of emperors: K. Kröss, *Die politische Rolle der stadtrömischen Plebs in der Kaiserzeit* (Leiden – Boston 2017), 271–84; C. Courier, *La Plèbe de Rome et sa culture (fin du IIe siècle av. c–fin du Ie siècle ap. J.-C.)* (Rome 2014). An important analysis of the way in which art and monuments may have been perceived by non-elites: J. R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans. Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 BC–AD 315* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006).

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Excerpt
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rather than an empire) had someone attempted to gain sole control permanently. After Caesar, sole rule became the norm. The reign of Justinian forms the last period in which a Roman emperor aimed to rule a united eastern and western Roman empire. That reign also saw the abolition of the consulate, abolishing a post that had been central to Rome for over a millennium. Justinian even argued that Roman history had always been dominated by monarchs, showing how sole rule had become a self-evident part of the Roman past.[17] Roman systems of rule, then, shifted significantly during the reigns of Caesar and Justinian. This is clear with the benefit of hindsight but was also recognised by people at the time. Still, any demarcation of time is somewhat arbitrary, and neither beginning nor end date of this book indicates a moment of absolute change. Caesar's position was the result of a long-lasting process, and after Justinian's death sole leaders continued to rule the Romans. Rulers in Constantinople remained Roman emperors. Kings and popes in Rome and Ravenna, and powerful leaders of Gaul would continue to make use of imagery and titulature that placed them in line with (earlier) Roman emperors. Being the 'true' Roman monarch apparently bestowed legitimacy well after 565.

A substantial part of the six centuries with which this book deals is firmly placed in what is called late antiquity (usually dating from the very late third century to either the sixth or early eighth centuries). There has been an enormous amount of scholarly attention on this period in the past decades, much of it focusing on emperorship. Recent work still has to position itself in relation to Sabine MacCormack's magisterial *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, which appeared forty years ago.[18] She described the late-antique emperor as a figure of a much more exalted status than the rulers of the first two centuries of the principate, as was expressed through images and ceremony. Throughout the book, however, she emphasised that this had been a gradual transformation of existing notions and traditions. For MacCormack, that transformation first took shape during the reigns of Diocletian (organised in a so-called Tetrarchy) and Constantine. Later scholarship has refined MacCormack's ideas, and especially discussions about late-antique panegyric have developed our understanding of the emperor in the later Roman world enormously. Yet the notion remains that Roman emperorship and imperial ideology were wholly reformulated under Diocletian and Constantine (though making use of existing traditions), reacting to the instabilities of the third

[17] Justinian, *Novella*, 47. See below p. 194.
[18] S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1981).

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century.[19] This book will argue, instead, that the ruler's exalted status was an integral element of emperorship from the very beginning. It existed alongside the emperor's more 'senatorial' status and his roles as civil, military and religious ruler. From Caesar onwards, Roman emperorship meant different things to different people in different contexts. The balance between these various aspects of emperorship changed over time, but this was neither a linear process, nor a systematic one.

One reason why scholarship has so strongly emphasised the difference between emperors in the early and later Roman empire, and indeed the related difference between pagan and Christian emperorship, is the intellectual need for categorisation. It is easier to think in defined units. But any attempt to define such a category, for instance through periodisation, leads to the risk of lumping; overemphasising the similarities within the period under discussion. At the same time, there is the risk of splitting: continuously emphasising differences between more narrowly defined categories, up to the point that everything is unique and patterns cannot be established.[20] By widening the historical scope, this book aims to avoid some of these pitfalls. There is of course the real risk that it replaces one form of periodisation with another. Yet it hopes to show that it is important to look at Roman emperorship (and indeed Roman history in general) through an historical analysis that bridges the early empire/late antiquity divide.

Between Coercion and Communication

Throughout the period under discussion, emperors and their subjects paid attention to the presentation and perception of power. This was important for the longevity of Roman rule. Legitimation and acceptance of just rule

[19] J. W. Drijvers/ M. McEvoy, 'Introduction', in: J. W. Drijvers/ M. McEvoy (eds.), *Envisioning the Roman Emperor in Speech and Word in Late Antiquity* (= *Journal of Late Antiquity* 14) (Baltimore 2021), 2–8, 2. Recent important works on late-antique emperorship often focusing on the fourth and fifth centuries and supplying discussion of earlier bibliography are: M. P. García Ruiz/ A. J. Quiroga Puertas (eds.), *Emperors and Emperorship in Late Antiquity: Images and Narratives* (Leiden – Boston 2021); K. Cyprian Coda/ M. S. de Leeuw/ F. Schultz (eds.), *Gaining and Losing Imperial Favour in Late* Antiquity (Leiden – Boston 2019); D. W. P. Burgersdijk/A. J. Ross (eds.) *Imagining Emperors in the Later Roman Empire* (Leiden – Boston 2018); J. Wienand (ed.), *Contested Monarchy: Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD* (Oxford – New York 2015). On the Tetrarchy, below p. 43.

[20] J. Berg, 'Lumping and Splitting', *Science* 359 (2018), 1309. The concepts were first applied to the field of history by J. H. Hexter, *On Historians: Reappraisals of Some of the Makers of Modern History* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1979), 227–51.

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