INTRODUCTION

An Imagined Emperor

> Aurea secura cum pace renascitur aetas . . .
>
> A Golden age with an assured peace is reborn . . .[1]
>
> . . . sed legibus omne reductis
> ius aderit, moremque fori vultumque priorem
> reddet et afflictum melior deus auferet aevum.
>
> . . . yet, with laws being restored as a whole, justice will arrive, and a better god will remove the age of misery and restore the customs of the forum and its former appearance.[2]

The opening epigraph is from Calpurnius Siculus' first *eclogue*, here recounting the prophecy of Faunus inscribed on a beech tree. It is found by Corydon and Oryntus in their effort to escape the sun in late summer.[3] The inscription describes the coming of a new golden age, precipitated by a young emperor who will restore peace and order, to the joy of the people, and bring back a time of plenty and life without care, just as the poets had described.[4] In many ways, it captures the essence of several themes that will be explored in this book, which is a study of the perception and reception of the Roman emperor from the perspective of his subjects. These are timelessness, comparability, and liminality, which can be explained as follows. The temporal dimension involves the continual existence of the emperorship, in the sense of the idea of the permanence of the emperor, which gave him a timeless quality. This brings us to comparability, which invites the judgement and scrutiny of different emperors from the perspective of his subjects within the rubric of what it means to be an emperor – a conversation that is continually being augmented with the advent of new emperors and the reinterpretation of previous ones. Finally, his liminality

[1] Calp. *Ecl.* 1.42–6. All translations are my own, loosely adapted from the Loeb translations in the first instance, with exceptions noted throughout the book.
[2] Calp. *Ecl.* 1.71–3. [3] Cf. Wiseman (1982: 57). [4] For more on these themes, see Chapter 6.

is due to the emperor being caught between several different roles and worlds that are inherent to the nature of the position. Depending on context, the emperor can be perceived to be *basileus*, responding to petitions from his subjects, and also the first amongst equals in Rome.[5] He could be a paragon of moral rectitude, distant from the vicissitudes of luxury, but also seen in the company of freaks, engaging in depravity.[6] He could also be godly, standing between humanity and the divine; a bringer of peace and plenty to the world; a harbinger of a new golden age; but also a *Saturnalicius princeps*, a figure who brings about ruin and chaos.[7]

As a precursor, all these themes are present in Calpurnius Siculus. The lack of specificity in the allusions to any singular emperor points to the malleability of the themes and images with which he is elaborating.[8] Indeed, the strength of the argument that the *iuvenis* described throughout this poem as clearly being a reference to Nero was challenged by Champlin a few decades ago, who argued for a third-century date and the young man actually being Alexander Severus.[9] This precipitated a scholarly firestorm involving several classicists, commencing with a strong rejection of Champlin in order to bolster the Neronian date.[10] However, the terms of these debates concerning the historical and literary references apparent in Calpurnius Siculus, alongside analyses of his metre, syntax, and prosody, fall beyond the scope of this book. Perhaps the key point to argue takes its cue from Horsfall's agnosticism in the dating of the poems, namely concerning the timelessness of its themes.[11] In other words, the references above could refer to a specific emperor, yet they are framed in such a way that they can be disputed. Temporal wavering is at play here, brought into relief by the mythological references, which places the discourse of what it means to be an emperor outside of time. As this book will show, this developing conversation scrutinised the idea of the emperor throughout the period in question, namely the first two and a half centuries of our era, allowing for comparison to occur between different emperors and different contexts.

[5] Millar (1977: 3, 11). [6] Dench (2005: 279–92).
[7] Dench (2005: 280); Dickison (1977: 634–47). [8] Cf. Horsfall (1997: 166).
[9] Champlin (1978), esp. 98–100.
[10] For a comprehensive account of this debate, see Martin (1996: 34–5, n. 4). For the first reactions, see Townend (1980: 166–74), Mayer (1980: 175–6), and Wiseman (1982: 57–67). For Champlin's response, see Champlin (1986: 104–12), alongside aid from Armstrong (1986: 113–36), for a more literary and metrical analysis of the poet's work that preferred a later date. For a sceptical appraisal of the earlier date, see Baldwin (1995a: 157–67) and Horsfall (1997: 166–95).
[11] Horsfall (1997: 192–5). Cf. Potter (1994: 141) for a similar argument with respect to the emperors in the Sibylline Oracles.

Indeed, this is also observable in the quotation in the epigraph, which involves a judgement on the suitability of different emperors in their ability to ensure the peace and prosperity of the empire. Not only does the new emperor bring the return of a golden age, but he does so at the expense of the previous emperor and his age of oppression. Accordingly, there is an inherent comparability between different emperors. Furthermore, the debate highlights the importance of the emperor within the conceptual framework of how the world works; it is the emperor who is responsible and culpable for the good and the bad. The hope for a *melior deus*, who would ensure peace and prosperity in the world, was met with the fear that he would fall short of the mark. Not only does this god remove the previous age of affliction; he also creates an age of law and justice, which can be observed through the political life of the Roman people. Such are the peculiarities of the Roman monarchy that it could allow godly metaphors yet also stress and foster political and civic life. The idea that there would be a 'better god' highlights the extraordinary scrutiny placed on the position and conduct of the Roman emperor and indeed the different roles he had to fulfil.[12]

This theme of the liminality of the emperor is one that runs throughout this book and often involves the expectation or understanding of the emperor as someone who occupies a space between the real and the imaginary – seemingly contradictory and inexplicable. Such was the impression of the Roman emperor on the *imaginaire*. The contradictory roles of the emperor can be argued to be extremes, part and parcel of the spectrum of opinions concerning what made an emperor 'good' or 'bad', which seem separable and distinct. However, when the lens becomes less focussed on encompassing the position of the emperor, these roles become less easily delineated. Hence the liminality: all these roles contribute to how the emperor was perceived by his subjects in the Roman empire, and therefore it permeates the discourse concerning the emperor. This means that we often get a contradictory view of the emperor, one that cannot be easily defined or explained. A goal of this book is to appreciate the cracks and fissures that populate the thought-world of the Roman emperor, in order to appreciate the different roles the emperor had to fulfil and also to see the differing perspectives of these roles, particularly from a wider, inclusive perspective.

Though this book cannot be exhaustive, a comparative look at different sources, including iconographic, papyrological, literary, and epigraphical material, revealed several interesting points which aggregated to provide an

[12] See Chapter 1.1 on the paradoxes of the Roman emperorship.

alternative perspective of the Roman emperor in his world. It is alternative in the sense that I attempt to flip the picture and observe the idea of the emperorship from the perspective of his subjects rather than attempt to assess outward representations of the position.[13] Reception, rather than representation projected outwards, is the key difference here.[14] Also, the book does not outline or explain the nature of Roman imperial administration, which includes the senatorial, equestrian, and freedmen officials who ran the day-to-day business of the Roman empire.[15] It is this choice of lens and focus that reveals different impressions of the emperor.

Indeed, these impressions seem to confirm the subjectivity and volatility of the position. It is subjective in that it seemed ideologically incumbent to the success of an emperor to be challengeable. In other words, there is the idea that the emperor was dependent on the consent of his subjects in order to rule. This involves the corollary that he could lose his power. This in turn evokes Weber's schema of charismatic authority, which brings us to volatility. The emperor's authority is volatile in both the vastly different and contradictory imaginations of the emperor, encompassing both what was hoped and feared in his conduct and the instability of the system that resisted a smooth succession of one emperor to the next. In terms of the historical impact, it means that the system had a failsafe: if an emperor proved to be unsuitable for the position, he could be removed, but not to the destruction of the system itself. This meant that what people thought about him *mattered*, thus meaning that what people thought about the emperor and talked about was important to the political, social, religious, and cultural life of the empire. Moreover, whether these impressions of the Roman emperor were strictly *true* misses the point of the discourse. Conversations about the emperor need not to have been true to have had an impact on the historical, social, and cultural context of the Roman empire. Once rumour and stories are promulgated, they become historical entities in their own right which reveal the reception of an emperor in the Roman world. Such is the murky world of talk about the Roman emperor that must be appreciated.

This thought-world about the emperor was a moving target, constantly evolving through time and space. In other words, the expectations and fears about the Roman emperor were added to by both real and imagined perceptions of him and his actions, made more and more complex by new

[13] Cf. further discussion in Chapter 1.1.
[14] For projected images and messages of emperors in portraiture and representation, see Hekster (2023: 45–69).
[15] For provincial administration, see Lintott (1993) and Davenport (2019).

examples being set alongside reassessment of the old. All this has essential implications for the sort of emperor that was imagined, giving a different perspective than a legal or administrative delineation of the office and his duties. It importantly suggests an emperor with a larger-than-life role, which transcended time and space, as hinted at in the passages of Calpurnius Siculus in the opening epigraph. To reiterate, this means that the emperor had more liminal and celestial aspects. His position made it necessary for him to be seen as a mediator between worlds, taking on different guises in different contexts, which meant that he had to be perceived to be solving a wide variety of problems, from the banal to the fantastical.

The book is split into thematic chapters and each one deals with the duties and expectations placed on the emperor. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the relevant themes concerning the power of the Roman emperor and how to approach our evidence from the perspective of his subjects. The chapter first deals with how anecdotal evidence and fiction are crucial to accessing the thought-world of the emperor's subjects and how they viewed the Roman emperorship. Second, I discuss the history and historiography of the Roman emperor and explore different vignettes of the emperor that reveal the position's multifaceted nature, which can be explained through its peculiar constitutional makeup. The chapters that follow are divided thematically and recount different 'topics of conversation' within the discourse about the emperor, each of which describes aspects of a thought-world about him. Such topics include the emperor as an arbiter of justice (Chapter 2), a supreme benefactor (Chapter 3), a curator of marvels (Chapter 4), and a subject of humour and derision (Chapter 5). The sixth and final chapter concerns the legacy and afterlife of the emperor, including the impression of the timelessness of the position, which was in constant dialogue with itself.

I hope that the breadth of topics and evidence discussed will weave a thought-provoking tapestry of the different and various perceptions of the Roman emperor. Accordingly, this book opens up the emperor to understandings of continuity and comparison, not in the sense of fixity or an unchanging impression but rather how different emperors from different contexts could be conceptually compared and contrasted to each other. It also creates a study concerning how an autocratic ruler was understood and perceived by his subjects, both revealing the weight of expectation and the difficulty of being an emperor and highlighting the resonance of the emperor as an idea for comparison with different periods of history.

CHAPTER 1

A History of the Roman Emperor

What will be argued in this chapter and this book concerns the multivalence of the Roman emperor that was *baked into* the constitutionality of the position and which contributed to its perception as a many-sided figure. Furthermore, this multivalence was a feature of the position as developed from Augustus onwards. I do not mean that Augustus had *planned* the emperorship to develop as it did but rather that the slippery nature of the position Augustus created, especially with respect to its definition and its powers, was a theme that remained centuries afterwards. The peculiar mix of constitutionally sanctioned powers that were derived from the political culture of the Roman republic and the charismatic authority of *Imperator Caesar* contributed to this problem of definition that resonated into the future. The unusual and confusing constitutional make-up of the Roman emperor, therefore, contributed to wide-ranging interpretations of his position and his duties across the empire. This can be no better seen than in a letter to Marcus Aurelius by Fronto in the second century AD, in which the role of the emperor is outlined:

> Nam Caesarum est in senatu quae e re sunt suadere, populum de plerisque negotiis in concione appellare, ius iniustum corrigere, per orbem terrae litteras missitare, reges exterarum gentium compellare, sociorum culpas edictis coercere, benefacta laudare, seditiosos compescere, feroces territare. Omnia ista profecto verbis sunt ac litteris agenda.
>
> For it falls to a Caesar to carry by persuasion necessary measures in the Senate, to address the people in public assembly on many matters, to correct the injustices of the law, to dispatch rescripts throughout the world, to take foreign kings to task, to control by edicts crimes among the allies, to praise their services, to supress the rebellious and to cow the proud. All of this must be done through the dispatch of speech and letters.[1]

[1] Fronto, *De eloquentia* 1.5; cf. Philostr. *Letters of Apollonius of Tyana* 21.

Jagged and seemingly contradictory, the Roman emperor here fulfils many roles at once. Taken together, that a single figure is expected to fulfil these expectations should be put under historical scrutiny, not least given that the first roles that are outlined in the passage have to do with political life in the city of Rome itself. This *political* role of the Roman emperor can be easy to sideline, given the default interpretation of the Roman emperorship as an absolute monarchy. This political function will be treated in Section 1.2, but it is important to state that whereas the autocratic nature of the Roman emperor should not be underestimated, he still had to live within the constraints of a republican tradition that informed political life in Rome itself. The emperor's power becomes more acute across the empire, where the monarchical character of a Roman magistrate and his *imperium* come into play. That this enormous power could bleed into the Roman emperor's function within the city itself as we move towards the second century AD is not in question. What *should* be stressed is the ideological function of the Roman emperor as a mediator within the political life of Rome, which involved the public activities of senatorial meetings, assemblies, and judicial hearings. Empty or cynical as we may be about this pageantry and show, that there was an expectation to carry out these functions informs the ideology of both the Roman principate and the position of the emperor itself. Projection is key, therefore, especially in the communicative role of the emperor through speech acts and letter-writing. Though Fronto, as Marcus Aurelius' Latin tutor, stresses his own importance in the passage, this technology for the conveyance of opinion and ideology was crucial.[2] These points will be discussed further with respect to the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani* and the emperor's relationship to the law.[3] Still, it is notable that they appear here in Fronto's list of an emperor's duties.

The emperor's position as described in this passage is an active one, at least with respect to speech, campaigning, and writing. The emperor must cow the proud and crush rebellions, as well as send letters across the empire and receive embassies. Images of responsiveness, accessibility, and justice are all alluded to in this passage. Furthermore, there seems to be a tension in the passage between these duties of the emperor – between those of response and suggestion and those of force and compulsion. One phrase has distinct resonance in these lines: in the Latin, it is *feroces territare*, which means to

[2] Lavan (2018: 282–4) for the recent debate on self-fashioning in letter-writing, and Noreña (2007: 261–72) and Woolf (2015: 136–7).
[3] See Section 1.2.6; cf. Buongiorno (2012: 524–5).

frighten the savage with a frequentative verb to suggest sustained and intense action, a reference to the martial role of the emperor and the suppression of revolt and resistance both within and outside the empire. It does seem to intensify other clauses in the passage, particularly *reges exterarum gentium compellare, sociorum culpas edictis coercere* and *seditiosos compescere*. To have *benefacta laudare* sandwiched in between these more harrowing images of the emperor should draw attention to the juxtapositions of these different duties and thus the difficulty of maintaining an equilibrium between the variant potential images and duties of a Roman emperor.

This is an effective passage to illustrate the enigma that is the position and the variant expectations placed on the role.[4] The nature of the position, its ideology, its power, and from where it derives its authority are all difficult problems in its historical understanding. The emperor occupies different roles simultaneously and can perceivably switch between them. Depending on context, and building upon the images provided by Fronto in his list, the emperor can be perceived to be a king, responding to petitions from his subjects, and also the first amongst equals in Rome.[5] He could be a paragon of moral rectitude, distant from the vicissitudes of luxury, but also seen in the company of monsters, engaging in depravity.[6] He could be the bringer of peace and plenty to the world, a harbinger of a new golden age, but also a figure that brings about ruin and chaos.[7] All these variant images of the emperor contribute to the understanding of the emperor and his functions across the empire, which encompasses both the real and the imagined. The section that follows first deals with how to access the imagination about the Roman emperor, before moving on to discuss the emperor's constitutional position and how it has been interpreted through time.

1.1 Talking about the Emperor and Finding the 'Popular' Voice in the Conversation

> But no power, no empire, can hope to exist for long unless it wins the assent and trust of the majority of its subjects, and the question that this lecture aims at answering is, 'What did the common people under the Empire expect of their rulers, and how were they satisfied?' It is no good simply referring the inquirer to such treatises as Seneca *On Clemency*, Dio Chrysostom *On Kingship*, or the younger Pliny's

[4] This subject has a long bibliography. For various understandings of the Roman emperor and his enigmatic role, see Millar (1977); Ando (2000); Noreña (2011), esp. 56–7, 318–20; Tuori (2016), esp. 192–5; Desmond (2020: 11–12, 32–3, 105–7).
[5] Millar (1977: 3, 11). [6] Dench (2005: 279–92). [7] Dench (2005: 280).

> Panegyric on Trajan. Instructive these treatises are, and useful . . . but they have one common fault: with their elegance and sophistication, their almost painfully literary quality, they can have reached and influenced only a small circle, whereas we are concerned with the ordinary people, 'What did the farmer in Gaul, the corn-shipper in Africa, the shopkeeper in Syria, expect?'[8]

At the Raleigh Lecture on History in 1937, M. P. Charlesworth showed his interest in the attitudes of subjects towards the empire and asked the question of what they expected from the emperor, and what they thought about him – an interesting question, which is fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. Charlesworth himself seems to disavow the literary production of the upper echelons of society, noticing that their learning and social position would inform their opinions about the *princeps*. Yet Charlesworth's solution to his enquiry was to explore the 'propagandic' output of the centre, which included observing imperial coinage, arguing for both the purposeful propagation of an imperial idea or image and its unproblematic reception by a wider population.[9] In other words, Charlesworth's method was to extrapolate popular opinion on the emperor from evidence of his actions and images, which included media that could be interpreted as having been disseminated by the government.[10] This approach to the understanding of ideology and image dissemination in the empire has had a large impact on the historiography of the Roman empire.[11]

This approach is altered here. The endeavour is to find popular voices in the evidence we do have, which might range from subliterary texts such as the *Acta Alexandrinorum* to Tacitus and Suetonius. The point is to appreciate the potential for a multiplicity of voices that reflect *conversations* about the emperor, which involves a dialogue between participants in a public transcript. As such, any evidence can be included insofar as it reflects wider concerns and shows an interest in what people say about the emperor, all of which may reveal discord and disagreement. The existence of that tension suggests the multiplicity of an emperor's reception, which enriches our understanding of an emperor's thought-world, or what he was thought to be. This is the approach of Hekster in his monograph *Emperors and Ancestors*, who chooses to concentrate on archaeological and numismatic

[8] Charlesworth (1937: 5). [9] Charlesworth (1937: 12–13).
[10] Noreña (2001: 147): 'each coin minted at Rome was an official document and as such represented an official expression of the emperor and his regime'.
[11] Ando (2000), esp. 19–48; Flaig (2019); Syme (1939: 448–75); Noreña (2001: 146–68); Noreña (2011, esp. 1–26); Nutton (1978: 209–20); Rogers (1991); Veyne (2002); Wallace-Hadrill (1981b); Winterling (2009: 9–33); Zanker (1988), esp. 3; Hekster (2022).

evidence first, with literary sources coming in as contrast.[12] My approach flips this equation and focusses on written sources whilst using art historical and numismatic material as contrast. The balance is calibrated this way because (1) speech acts are important as social interactions and opinions that formulate what an emperor is expected to be and (2) such dialogues are observable in iconographical evidence, too, and thus such evidence acts as an important foil. In all, reactions and impressions are fundamental. Another volume may be needed to explore the variety of potential evidence that could be brought to bear. However, the purpose here is to find tensions in all sorts of evidence, which might reveal the expectations placed on the emperor, which will be treated in a thematic way, and what the variety of opinions might be in those themes.

Before commencing with the difficulties of this subject, it is important to outline the underlying premise of this book, which has been a theme running through the first part of this chapter. As highlighted by Charlesworth in the section epigraph, the idea that the imperial regime and its power were derived from the *consensus* of different constituencies has been important to the understanding of the Roman government in the early principate.[13] The corollary of this premise is that the dialogue that existed between emperor and subject was important to this idea of consensus and that people's opinions of the emperor *mattered*. Who those participants were in that conversation is a fundamental matter of discussion. That said, the emperor was a transcendental figure who appeared across the empire, meaning that he was not only a *princeps* in the city but variously a supreme magistrate, *hegemon*, *basileus*, or even *theos* across the Roman world. It is through these different roles that we can reconstruct the tapestry of opinions that surrounded the idea of emperorship.

The distinction that needs to be drawn here concerns how those opinions mattered, too. Looking for the *political* impact of opinions on the actions and history of the regime would be a chimera, as such an interpretation would presume a large degree of political agency resting with the silent masses of the Roman empire, suggesting that this was the sort of discourse that could make or break an emperor. Also, such a reading would put far too much onus on the impact of political upheaval, which may suggest that the

[12] Hekster (2015: 36–7).

[13] Cf. Noreña (2011: 7): 'With these influential collectivities the emperor was in constant dialogue, both real and symbolic, interacting with each in a highly prescribed manner calculated to elicit the public displays of consensus, or "acceptance", upon which imperial legitimacy ultimately rested.' Cf. Weber (1978: 1114–15) on charismatic authority, whence the kernel of these ideas is derived; see also Flaig (2019).