IMAGINING THE ROMAN EMPEROR

How was the Roman emperor viewed by his subjects? How strongly did their perception of his role shape his behaviour? Adopting a fresh approach, Panayiotis Christoforou focusses on the emperor from the perspective of his subjects across the Roman empire. Stress lies on the imagination: the emperor was who he seemed, or was imagined, to be. Through various vignettes employing a wide range of sources, Christoforou analyses the emperor through the concerns and expectations of his subjects, which range from intercessory justice to fears of the monstrosities associated with absolute power. The book posits that mythical and fictional stories about the Roman emperor form the substance of what people thought about him, which underlines their importance for the historical and political discourse that formed around him as a figure. The emperor emerges as an ambiguous figure. Loved and hated, feared and revered, he was an object of contradiction and curiosity.

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Perceptions of Rulers in the High Empire

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Preface: in omnibus varius – *A Multifaceted Emperor*

This book is founded on the study of the emperor in his world and how the inhabitants of the Roman empire understood this larger-than-life figure. The common strand that runs through this book can be formulated as follows. The Roman emperor seems to be a set of binaries, which makes him seem contradictory. Take two possible vignettes of the Roman emperor: the passive emperor responding to petitions, which on the face of it seems logistically challenging, and the emperor as a single godly figure and the focus of cult, given the variety of cultic activities that were associated with the emperor and his family across the empire. These vignettes become difficult to reconcile into a single figure. The binaries include the status of the emperor as a political figure within the Roman state: a *princeps* amongst *cives*, though the responsibility and power he wielded were in fact supreme, blurring the lines between his person and the *res publica*. The emperor was a man and a god, statuses which are hard to separate; the emperor was both placed above the laws and lived according to them; and the position of emperor was imbued with an authority and power that made it unassailable, though the history of this period is littered with instances of the contested legitimacy of any given *princeps*. The emperor could be seen to be radically free from coercion and uniquely shackled with the responsibilities of being the moral exemplar of the Roman world. More profoundly, such an assumption has the Roman emperor both appear to be a supreme commander in the mould of illustrious *summi viri* of the past and described as a slave, in the company of lesser entities as seen by Roman social sensibilities: slaves, freedmen, women, and bandits as well as freaks and monsters – all of which reveal anxieties about the power associated with the emperor himself. These binaries, and how they collapse into a single person, form the subject of this book.

These binaries cannot be separated from each other entirely, as they describe a nominally single entity, the Roman emperor. The fact that they

are embodied in a single person should suggest similarities in any given theme conceptually, which supplies a great deal of information about the thought-world of the inhabitants of the Roman empire (i.e. the conceptual assumptions and ideas that inform how these people understood the world around them). Instead of accentuating the contradictions and 'problems' inherent in this interpretation, the point that I am arguing here appreciates the inconsistencies *as* inconsistencies rather than attempting to explain them away.

Indeed, inconsistency and 'incompleteness' are endemic in the position that comes from its foundation. Augustus never packaged a 'complete' emperor, with a title, constitutional formalisation, or a set of particular duties. Rather than seeing the age of Augustus as a 'half-baked' principate, the principate was never complete at all: much was left to ambiguity and expectation.[1] It is because of this incompleteness, then, that the emperor could occupy all his roles simultaneously. To put it in a more 'political' and 'legal' way, the position that Augustus held seemed to be cobbled together from various magisterial and religious roles, yet those titles never added up to embody a complete and definable position. That 'extra' portion in itself was volatile and subjective, namely the clout or charisma a leader held.[2] In this way, any single term or single power to describe the nature of the emperor would be by definition reductive and particular to that context, which in turn suggests that the emperor was meant to be jagged, incomplete, and more than the sum of his parts. Imagination then can run wild on the various roles that he could fulfil, grounded in both 'reality' and 'fiction'.

A career could be spent exploring the various binaries and boundaries at play within the person of the emperor.[3] However, there can be a historical explanation for why this form of autocracy developed in this manner, which has to do with the form of *res publica* that Augustus laid down, based as it was on the politics of consensus and cooperation. I also discuss trends and examples that illustrate the 'doubleness' of the Roman emperor.[4] I do not pretend to be comprehensive in my treatment

[1] Drinkwater (2019: 12); Drinkwater (2013). [2] Ando (2000).
[3] For a recent attempt, see Hekster (2023), esp. 1–22.
[4] I borrow this concept from Greensmith (2020: 49–51), who notices an aspect of doubleness in Greek culture in the Roman empire that reflects on the tensions in cultural and intellectual life in the Greek east. In the context of the reception of Homer in the third century, the idea of engaging in the 'poetics of the interval' suggests a longing to supply meaning to gaps of knowledge, whilst also appreciating the existence of the gap itself. Such a reading speaks well to the idea of the Roman emperorship, to which his subjects supplied much imagination to the 'interval' between the realities of his power and the expectations placed on the position, along the several axes I have enumerated here. The emperor becomes a temporal figure, imbued with different meanings as you observe him. Hence the 'ambiguities' and 'doubleness' of his reception.

of the Roman emperor in the first two centuries AD. A holistic treatment of the Roman emperor that treats his manifestations across time and space in the Roman empire would be a feat of collaboration, which would necessarily include scholars of different disciplines. What I seek is a blueprint of enquiry.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, to fashion a metaphor from physics, illustrates the understanding of the Roman emperor outlined in this book. To describe the principle, it is impossible to determine both the momentum and the position of a particle with high precision at the same time. Observing one phenomenon (say momentum) with high precision means that you cannot observe the other (the position) with high precision. Accordingly, there is a gap in measurable knowledge when considering an object. I believe this principle can be applied to the Roman emperor. To observe one aspect of the emperor, such as his status as a godlike figure, may throw light on his position in between human and divine affairs, but doing so may obscure how the emperor was considered a human political office. This is but one tension that can be observed with respect to the emperorship, which makes the position a multifaceted one, subject to the measurement we choose to quantify at any given time.

The focus of this book is on the position of the emperor and how he was conceived by his subjects. Such an activity may prove to demystify the Roman emperorship, particularly along two axes: First, to prove that the Roman emperor was a politically resonant figure across the empire, and not just in the juridical and constitutional context of the city itself, or even amongst the citizen population across the empire. By definition, the Roman emperor had to be understandable and approachable in different contexts, which led to the multifaceted nature of his office. Second, to show that the processes of legitimation and criticism are in some part comparable to different forms of autocracies in human history, and that by appreciating the differences and similarities in those vastly different contexts of time and space, we may come to an understanding of how monarchies form and replicate themselves. Such an activity is the argument of Duindam's book *Dynasties* and Bartlett's *Blood Dynasty*, and the Roman emperor should be seen within that continuum, rather than exceptionally idiosyncratic.[5]

This book was written throughout much of the decade of the 2010s, and the argument gestated particularly after the times of Brexit, the rise of

[5] Duindam (2016); Bartlett (2020).

Trumpism, and the SARS CoV-2 pandemic. Much of what happened during these times helped sharpen my interest in how people respond to crisis and perceived political upheaval, as well as the volatility of information as seen through social media and the Internet. The difficulties of discerning truth from falsehood have come to the forefront in our times, making my chosen project one of pertinent interest. In many ways, my book serves to vindicate the importance of fictionality to the study of history, as it is those responses to fears and imagination that can help inform political and social interactivity.

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This book was a labour of love for many years, both before and after my doctorate. Its completion would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of friends and family alike. First mention goes to my wife and confidant, Philippa Christoforou, who has read through many versions of this work and has listened to me go on about the Roman emperor for many years now. None of what I have written here would have been possible without her love and steadfastness, particularly through lean times and heavy teaching loads. Any success in my life has been because of her. To my parents, Andreas and Jacqueline, and my sister, Nasia, to all of whom this book is dedicated, I thank them for the encouragement, prayers, and reminders that history has been my calling since I was very young.

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I have had with those colleagues and in those places have enriched the book no end. Special thanks go to St John's College and Dr Matthew Nicholls – the support received for research grants and a dedicated space to write the book during the global pandemic made it possible to complete this work.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient authors follow the conventions in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, fourth edition. For the journal abbreviations, I have followed *L'année philologique*. All papyri are cited according to the latest version of the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, published online (http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/texts/clist.html).

Acta = Musurillo, H. 1961. *Acta Alexandrinorum*. Leipzig.
AE = *L'année epigraphique*.
ANRW = Temporini, H. and W. Haase (eds.). 1972. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. Berlin and New York.
APM = Musurillo, H. 1954. *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*. Oxford.
BGU = *Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen (later Staatlichen) Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden*. Berlin.
CAH ² = *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., 14 vols. Cambridge.
CIL = *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin.
Corinth 8.2 = West, A. B. 1931. *Corinth, VIII.2, Latin Inscriptions*. Cambridge, MA.
Dig. = Mommsen, T., P. Krueger and A. Watson (eds.). 1985. *The Digest of Justinian*. Philadelphia.
DPR = Mommsen, T. 1889–96. *Le droit public romain*, 7 vols., trans. P. F. Girard. Paris.
EJ = Ehrehberg, V. and A. H. M. Jones (eds.). 1976. *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius*, 2nd ed. Oxford.
I.Assos = Merkelbach, R. (ed.). 1976. *Die Inschriften von Assos*. IGSK Band 4. Bonn.
I.Sardis = Buckler, W. H. and D. M. Robinson (eds.). 1932. *Sardis, VII: Greek and Latin Inscriptions*. Leiden.
IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*. Berlin.

IGR = R. Cagnat (ed.). 1901–27. *Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes*. Paris.

ILAfr = Cagnat, R., L. Chatelain, and A. Merlin. 1923. *Inscriptions latines d'Afrique (Tripolitaine, Tunisie, Maroc)*. Paris.

ILLPRON = Hainzmann, M. and P. Schubert. 1986–. *Inscriptionum lapidarium Latinarum provinciae Norici usque ad annum MCMLXXXIV repertarum indices*. Berlin.

ILS = Dessau, H. 1892–1916. *Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, 3 vols. Berlin.

Inscr. Ital. 13.2 = Degrassi, A. (ed.). 1963. *Inscriptiones Italiae Academiae Italicae Consociatae ediderunt. Volumen XIII, Fasciculus II, Fasti anni Numani et Iuliani*. Rome.

Liddell and Scott, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed., rev. H. Stuart Jones (1925–40); suppl. By E. A. Barber and others (1968).

LTUR = Steinby, E. M. (ed.). 1993–9. *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, 6 vols., Rome.

OCD^{3} = Hornblower, S. and A. Spawforth. 2003. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. Oxford.

Orac. Sib. = *Oracula Sibyllina*. Cited in Gauger, J.-D. (ed.). 1998. *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*. Düsseldorf.

PIR^{2} = Groag, E., A. Stein, and L. Petersen et al. (eds.). 1930–. *Prosopographia Imperii Romani saec. I. II. III*, 2nd ed. Leipzig.

RGDA = *Res gestae divi Augusti*.

Roman Statutes = Crawford, M. H. (ed.). 1996. *Roman Statutes* (BICS Suppl. 64). London.

Ruggiero, *Diz. Epigr.* = de Ruggiero, E. (ed.). 1886–1997. *Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romane*. Rome.

SCPP = *Senatus Consultum de Pisone Patre,* text, translation and commentary from J. B. Lott. 2012. *Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome*. Cambridge.

SEG = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Leiden.

Sherk, *RDGE* = Sherk, R. K. 1969. *Roman Documents from the Greek East: Senatus Consulta and Epistulae to the Age of Augustus*. Baltimore, MD.

Smallwood, *Gaius* = Smallwood, E. M. 1967. *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero*. Cambridge.

StR = Mommsen, T. 1887–8. *Römisches Straatsrecht*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. Leipzig.

SVF = von Arnim, H. F. A. and M. Adler (eds.). *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, 4 vols. Leipzig.

*Syll.*³ = Dittenberger, W. 1915–24. *Sylloge inscriptionum Graecarum*, 3rd ed. Leipzig.
TLG = *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.
TLL = *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*.
TS = *Tabula siarensis*, text, translation, and commentary from J. B. Lott. 2012. *Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome*. Cambridge.