

# 1 | Introduction

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## Studying the Roman Court

In AD 39, the emperor Caligula built a bridge of boats on the Bay of Naples. Over two days, he paraded back and forth across it on horses and chariots, provoking considerable speculation about his motives. Suetonius, Caligula's biographer, reports a number of theories, but privileges one that he heard from his grandfather, who in turn had claimed that it came from some of Caligula's 'more intimate courtiers' (*interiores aulici*).<sup>1</sup> The details and validity of the theory need not detain us. What are important are the assumptions that lie behind Suetonius' words: that the emperor Caligula was surrounded by a court; that the courtiers who comprised it had an internal hierarchy, with some being more intimate with the emperor than others; and that those enjoying closer proximity could be privy to the emperor's inner thoughts.

This would not have been news to a Roman reader in the age of Suetonius, who wrote in the early second century. Seneca the Younger, writing in the mid-first century, likewise assumes the existence of a monarchical court (*aula*) at Rome.<sup>2</sup> So too did authors later in that century.<sup>3</sup> Several decades after Suetonius, the emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote in Greek about the members of the court (*aulē*) that surrounded the first emperor, Augustus.<sup>4</sup>

Modern historians of the Roman Principate, with a few minor exceptions,<sup>5</sup> have always acknowledged the existence of the court that is plainly

<sup>1</sup> Suet. *Calig.* 19 (= Vol. 2, 1.8 [f]); cf. Dio Cass. 59.17.

<sup>2</sup> Sen. *Tranq.* 6.2 (= Vol. 2, 1.8 [a]); Sen. *Ep.* 29.6 (= Vol. 2, 1.19); cf. Sen. *De ira* 2.33 (= Vol. 2, 1.18).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Mart. 7.40, 9.79 (= Vol. 2, 1.24 [b], 25). <sup>4</sup> M. Aur. *Med.* 8.31 (= Vol. 2, 1.8 [g]).

<sup>5</sup> Gag  (1971: 191; cf. Perrin 2007: 223) and Veyne (1976: 619) denied the existence of a Roman court because there was no Versailles equivalent – no palace in which ceremonial was concentrated and aristocratic courtiers resided. But it is invalid to elevate specific features of one court as normative: see Winterling 1999: 37 for cogent critique; cf. Vale 2001: 16 for the atypicality of the 'Versailles model'. Schumacher (2001) argues that there was no Roman court before Hadrian because there was neither an 'integration of administrative functions into a socially acknowledged and legally defined institutional structure' nor a spatial concentration of

evidenced in the sources. But modern discussions for a long time examined the Roman court in a somewhat dismembered way: individual limbs and organs were studied, as it were, but not the whole body. They focused on specific aspects of the court, but not their wider role in the court's complex social structure. For example, Theodor Mommsen and those who followed him in the public law tradition of Roman history made important contributions to the understanding of several categories of court personnel, especially those with administrative or political roles.<sup>6</sup> The emperor's aristocratic friends and the councils (*consilia*) that advised him were also studied from an early stage.<sup>7</sup> In the 1930s, Andreas Alföldi produced a pair of studies on Roman court ceremonial and on the emperor's dress that are still important today.<sup>8</sup> A burst of scholarship in the 1970s made vital contributions to our understanding of the slaves and freedmen of the emperor in domestic and administrative posts.<sup>9</sup> In Roman studies there is also a long tradition of imperial biographies, and especially those underpinned by rigorous prosopographical methods have offered important insights on the individuals who made up specific emperors' courts, and on the ramifications of court dynamics for high politics at particular moments.<sup>10</sup>

Despite all these advances in knowledge, it has only been in the last two decades or so that attempts to write critical history<sup>11</sup> of the Roman court as a complete entity have begun in earnest. This development has been influenced by the sociologist Norbert Elias<sup>12</sup> and the historians of early modern European courts whom he inspired. A chapter by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill in the second edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* established the Roman court as a discrete object for study and set out some of the salient points relating to the first-century court's functioning, its

the administration (352). This again attempts to make normative some arbitrarily selected features of certain historical courts; it also overstates both the sharpness of the transition from freedman to equestrian secretaries and our knowledge about the location of the bureaux of imperial secretaries: cf. Davenport and Kelly below, Chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Mommsen 1887–8: 2.2.807–9, 836–9. See too Hirschfeld 1905: 29–39, 318–42. For further references, see Winterling 1999: 15 n. 18 and Davenport and Kelly below, Chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup> Cuq 1884; Mommsen 1887–8: 2.2.834–6, 988–92; Crook 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Alföldi 1970 (first published in 1934 and 1935 as two extended articles).

<sup>9</sup> Boulvert 1970, 1974; Weaver 1972; cf. Fairon 1898, 1900; Michiels 1902; Hirschfeld 1905: 307–17.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Jones 1992: 22–71; Levick 2015: 60–93 (1st ed. 1990); see too Winterling 1999: 19–22 for further literature.

<sup>11</sup> For earlier collections of evidence, see Friedländer 1919–21: 1.32–102 (1st ed. 1862); Turcan 2009 (1st ed. 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Elias 1983 (Ger. orig. 1969).

membership, and its political impacts.<sup>13</sup> Soon after, a monograph by Aloys Winterling examined the court from Augustus to the Antonines. Since he too was establishing the Roman court as a separate field of study, Winterling understandably focused on two narrowly defined motifs: the way in which the court came to be differentiated from the typical aristocratic *domus*, and the aspects of the court that became ‘institutionalized’ (i.e. those that endured over long periods, and were to some extent independent of the whims of particular emperors).<sup>14</sup> More recently, books and shorter studies dealing with the courts of particular emperors or dynasties have appeared sporadically.<sup>15</sup>

Our work builds on all of these foundations, especially those laid by Wallace-Hadrill and Winterling. Although at points we disagree with them in matters of detail (as is inevitable in the writing of critical history), the reader will be left in no doubt as to our intellectual debt to both. Our aim is to broaden the discussion of the Roman court in a number of ways. Firstly, we cover a much longer chronological span than any of the existing studies on the Roman court. This has been prompted by the conviction that focusing on the courts of specific emperors or dynasties, whilst being an understandable way for an individual scholar to cope with the complexity of the source material, tends to occlude long-term patterns. We also have doubts about whether the transitions between dynasties – or even between emperors – were necessarily meaningful ruptures in the history of the court.

Where we do see a real caesura is towards the end of the third century. We are convinced by Rowland Smith’s arguments that the years around AD 300 were a hinge in the history of the court, since the fourth-century court was significantly different from what came before in terms of ‘its social composition, size, and structural complexity’.<sup>16</sup> In Late Antiquity the court was progressively uncoupled from the city of Rome and the members of the city’s senatorial aristocracy became less prominent as courtiers.<sup>17</sup> The sources also claim that the late third century saw an escalation in the degree of formalization and ritualization at court.<sup>18</sup> This is not to claim that there was an unbridgeable chasm between the court of the Principate and

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1996; cf. Wallace-Hadrill 2011. <sup>14</sup> Winterling 1999, cf. 2009a.

<sup>15</sup> Julio-Claudian court: Pani 2003; Paterson 2007. Claudian court: Michel 2015. Flavian court: Acton 2011. Severan court: Laeben-Rosén 2005; Schöpe 2014. Drinkwater 2019 (on Nero) stands somewhere between a traditional imperial biography and court history.

<sup>16</sup> Smith 2007, 2011 (quotation at 133). <sup>17</sup> Schlinkert 1998: 143, 152–5; Smith 2007: 179–86.

<sup>18</sup> See Davenport below, 306–9.

that of Late Antiquity,<sup>19</sup> but rather that the degree of change was substantial enough to demand a separate treatment for the later Roman court.

Secondly, our treatment of the court is broader than those of Wallace-Hadrill and Winterling in a spatial sense.<sup>20</sup> Both scholars saw the court as a phenomenon focused on the city of Rome,<sup>21</sup> which led them to ignore the social and ritual world that surrounded the emperor when he sojourned in his Italian villas or travelled outside of Italy. We see this omission as difficult to defend, given the high degree of mobility of some emperors and their entourages. This study therefore contains chapters on imperial villas in Italy (Michele George, Chapter 10) and imperial journeys (Helmut Halfmann, Chapter 11).

Thirdly, we aim to give more emphasis to what could be called ‘court culture’.<sup>22</sup> Useful here is Peter Burke’s broad definition of ‘culture’ as ‘a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances and artefacts) in which they are expressed or embodied’.<sup>23</sup> Our study includes chapters on performance and literary patronage at court by Sarah Blake and Neil Bernstein respectively (Chapters 17 and 18) – that is, on the court as a site for formal cultural expression. We are also interested in attitudes and values more broadly. Existing studies of the Roman court have often focused on the tangible: the buildings in which court life took place, the people who were part of it, and the actions of courtiers (social rituals, factional struggles, patronal exchange, etc.). These preoccupations are entirely appropriate, and this volume certainly shares them. At the same time, we are also interested in the web of discourse and thought that surrounded the court, and the interaction between this thought-world and the court’s concrete realities. We emphasize that there was virtually no facet of court life that was not subject to debate and moralizing evaluation, and that this had real-world implications. In examining this dimension, we aim to exploit the happy fact that several of the historians, biographers, and philosophers who wrote our major sources were also involved with the court at some point in their careers, and therefore give us some direct access to the mentalities of courtiers.

<sup>19</sup> On continuities, see the essays in Davenport and McEvoy Forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> Some more recent studies of specific periods have discussed villas, gardens, and/or journeys: Acton 2011: 107–10 (gardens and Vespasian’s court); Schöpe 2014: 236–67 (Severan court); Michel 2015: 63–112 (Claudian court).

<sup>21</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1996: 287–8; Winterling 1999: 47 n. 1.

<sup>22</sup> For some preliminary comments, see Wallace-Hadrill 1996: 293–5; Paterson 2007: 123–4.

<sup>23</sup> Burke 1978: xi; this definition is used, e.g., by Hen 2007: 24.

## Defining the Court

Just what should we understand by ‘court’ in the Roman context? It is tempting to try to find the Latin word for ‘court’ and let its semantic range fix limits for our enquiry. After all, scholars and students of Roman history learn Latin and Greek precisely because we need to hear our subjects in their own words and see their world using native categories of thought. If we are to adopt what anthropologists would call an emic approach, what words should we use?

From the reign of Augustus onwards, the term *domus Augusta* (‘the House of Augustus’) is found in the sources, including official ones; various similar formulations are also used to refer to the emperor’s house.<sup>24</sup> The consensus is, however, that *domus Augusta* refers to the emperor’s ‘house’ in the familial sense of the word – that is, it refers to his relatives by blood, adoption, and marriage.<sup>25</sup> Slaves and freedmen were also considered part of the *domus* of the emperor, just as they were considered part of the *domus* of any aristocratic master. But the term did not include members of the aristocracy unrelated to the emperor or other people in his orbit, such as freeborn physicians or litterateurs. Thus, it overlaps only partially with any normal meaning of ‘court’.

Closer is the word *aula*, which encompasses a broader range of people. In certain contexts, including the ones discussed above,<sup>26</sup> it is generally translated as ‘court’, with good reason. It could be objected that *aula*, unlike *domus Augusta*, tends not to be used in official documents like senatorial decrees,<sup>27</sup> and that when it is used in literary works, there is often (but not always) a pejorative undertone.<sup>28</sup> However, words that lack government approval or have negative associations can still refer to real phenomena. More serious is the problem that we do not have a precise idea of the semantic range of *aula*. We can infer from particular passages that this word could refer not just to the emperor’s family members, slaves, and freedmen, but also to other people in close contact with the emperor, such as aristocrats not part of the imperial family, performers, and bodyguards.<sup>29</sup> However, such passages are not numerous enough for us to see,

<sup>24</sup> E.g. *domus divina* (‘the Divine House’), *principis domus* (‘House of the Emperor’), and *domus Caesaris* (‘Caesar’s House’).

<sup>25</sup> Winterling 1999: 21–2, 196; Corbier 2001; Pani 2003: 18–20; Moreau 2005: 8; Michel 2015: 122–6 (with further literature at 122 n. 16).

<sup>26</sup> Above, 1. <sup>27</sup> I thank one of the Press’s anonymous readers for this observation.

<sup>28</sup> Thus Schumacher 2001: 350, with some overstatement; cf. Vol. 2, 1.24–5.

<sup>29</sup> See Vol. 2, 1.8.

for example, whether a Roman would have regarded all senators as part of the *aula*, or just the friends of the emperor. Nor can we see whether all imperial freedmen were counted as part of the *aula*, or just those based in Rome, or just those in service positions that brought them into close contact with the emperor. It is not clear how often an actor or musician needed to perform in the emperor's residence before observers would think of him as part of the court.

There is an additional problem. The Greek word *aulē*, from which *aula* was borrowed, was originally an architectural word used for courtyards; later it came to be used for the residences of Hellenistic kings, which were often arranged around courtyards.<sup>30</sup> Its Latin equivalent at first had this architectural element, and in time came to refer also to the assemblage of people typically found in the emperor's residence. But it never quite broke free of this association with the main residence of the emperor in Rome (or, later, in one of the Tetrarchic 'capitals' or Constantinople), with the result that when the emperor travelled, the (often very large) retinue of people around him tended not to be called the *aula*.<sup>31</sup> In the early Principate, his collection of aristocratic travelling companions were given a different name: the *comitatus*; eventually, in the course of the third century, this word came to refer to the whole court, wherever it was.<sup>32</sup> Thus, rigorously using *aula* as our analytical category would, at least for the Principate, force exclusive focus on the emperor in the city of Rome and blind us to the question of imperial mobility.

For these reasons, we have found it more useful to adopt an etic, not an emic, approach: when we speak of the 'court' we are applying to the Roman case an ideal type that has been developed by modern historians of diverse eras to describe a transhistorical phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> Unsurprisingly, there has been some debate over how 'court' as an ideal type should be defined, partly because of the multivalence of the English word (and its equivalents in other European languages). Some scholars of premodern monarchies have seen the 'court' in terms of action: a series of rituals or occasions centring on a monarch.<sup>34</sup> Others have seen the court primarily as a place – Hampton Court or the like. But it is perhaps fair to say that the social

<sup>30</sup> Strootman 2014a: 38–9; cf. Vol. 2, 1.1–2.      <sup>31</sup> Sources are assembled at *TLL* 2, col. 1457–8.

<sup>32</sup> See Vol. 2, 1.14–16.

<sup>33</sup> For useful discussions of 'court' as a transhistorical type, see Winterling 1997a; Butz, Hirschbiegel, and Willoweit 2004; Erskine, Llewellyn-Jones, and Wallace 2017a: xv–xviii.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Griffiths 1991: 48.

definition of ‘court’ as an assemblage of people in proximity to a monarch is the most common.

This accords with the brief definitions of ‘court’ provided by modern historians of the Roman imperial court, who have often seen the court as a group of people whose membership was determined by proximity to the emperor.<sup>35</sup> If we are to take ‘proximity’ to the emperor as the touchstone in defining what the Roman court was, we must be clear about what we mean by ‘proximity’. We could not reasonably say, for instance, that members of the crowd in the Circus Maximus should be included within the definition of the imperial court just because they were physically close to the emperor for a few hours.<sup>36</sup> We think it is best to see proximity as marked by *reasonably regular personal interaction* with the emperor. Most obviously, this would include face-to-face verbal interaction of the sort that the emperor had with members of the aristocracy at the *salutatio* (‘morning reception’) or a banquet, or with an astrologer whom he habitually consulted, or with a poet under his patronage. The provision of personal, domestic services as well as security services to the emperor should be added as another category of interaction that put people in proximity to the emperor. At least some service staff could have power and influence to rival members of the elite, as Jonathan Edmondson shows in Chapter 8. It therefore seems appropriate to us to include such staff in our definition.

Thus, we see the Roman imperial court as a circle of people who had reasonably regular verbal interaction with the emperor and/or who provided him with domestic or security services. Defined this way, the court included (but was not entirely restricted to) members of the emperor’s close family, a portion of the Roman aristocracy, scions of foreign royal dynasties sojourning in Rome, domestic servants, bodyguards, people offering cultural services (poets, actors, etc.), and ‘technicians’ of various kinds (astrologers, physicians, etc.).

We have not followed the path taken by some historians of the Roman court, who, perhaps inspired by the multiple meanings of *aula*, have defined ‘court’ as being not only a social circle, but *also* a physical place *and* a form of behaviour.<sup>37</sup> We believe that there is scope for confusion in this approach, not least because of the mobility of the Roman court in some periods. If court is a place as well as a social circle, then it would be

<sup>35</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1996: 285; Winterling 1999: 2; Demougin 2001a: 208; Paterson 2007: 140; Acton 2011: 104.

<sup>36</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1996: 286.

<sup>37</sup> Winterling 1997a: 13–14, 1999: 2; Schöpe 2014: 15; Michel 2015: 18.

necessary to say, for example, that during Hadrian's tours of the Empire there was a court in Rome (the Flavian Palace complex) and a court in the provinces (the emperor's entourage). During the Tetrarchic period, with four highly mobile emperors and multiple 'capitals' and palaces, the conceptual confusion would be still greater. Of course, to understand a social group, we must study the spaces in which its members moved and the ways in which they acted and interacted. Considerable attention is given to both issues in this study. The social sense of 'court' is, however, our guiding category of analysis.

Two other terminological issues should also be mentioned. Firstly, various circumstances could separate leading members of the court from the emperor for extended periods – for instance, tenure of a provincial governorship or a legionary legateship, or an imperial journey. Rather than insist that such people were members of the court even when thousands of kilometres away from the emperor, we have found it helpful to use a second term, namely 'courtier'. By 'courtiers', we have in mind people who had the *potential* to have close and regular interaction with the emperor or to offer him personal services when in the same environs, but who were not necessarily doing so at a particular time.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, like scholars of many historical courts, we have found it useful to talk in terms of 'inner' and 'outer' courts to capture the fact that the Roman court was a hierarchical grouping in which people enjoyed differing degrees of proximity to and favour with the emperor.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to some historical courts, the 'inner' and 'outer' parts of the Roman court did not have a clear architectural articulation. Rather, we use these terms as a conceptual shorthand, indicating differences in degrees of proximity and favour rather than sharply separated spheres.

## Models, Patterns, and Methods

What kind of historical knowledge can we hope to produce in studying the Roman imperial court? It will be obvious from the length of this book and from its companion volume that a great deal can be known about the court; the quantity and depth of our evidence are truly impressive by the standards of ancient history. With this said, we still cannot reasonably hope to

<sup>38</sup> This meaning of 'courtiers' is implicit in Wallace-Hadrill's observation that the court moved with the emperor, but not all courtiers did (1996: 286).

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Strootman 2014a: 32; Erskine, Llewellyn-Jones, and Wallace 2017a: xvii–xviii.



produce a narrative history of the Roman court. For some courts, especially from the early modern period and later, there are enough first-hand sources such as letters, diaries, and personal memoirs to make detailed reconstructions of how events played out over time. In the Roman case, we lack similar sources that provide extensive narrative detail. For specific events at court we rely on biographies and histories, often written in high literary style and well after the period they are describing. Survival patterns mean that some periods are better covered by such works than others, with a particular shortage for the mid-third century. These histories and biographies tend to have wide concerns, and when they do tell us about events at court, it is often in the form of anecdotes, designed to make a morally edifying point. When the court became relevant to Roman politics – for instance, during crises surrounding the discovery of a plot to murder the emperor or the fall of some powerful courtier – then the sources can paint somewhat more extensive vignettes. But it is only occasionally that the gaze of an ancient historian or biographer falls like a spotlight on the events of the court; most of the time, the stage is in darkness.

A narrative history of the court would also face the difficulty that such anecdotes and vignettes, even if they could be connected into a coherent narrative, are often of dubious accuracy. Anecdotes demonstrably changed as they were transmitted orally before assuming written form,<sup>40</sup> and at times conform suspiciously well to standard stereotypes about tyrants and good kings. It was expected that ancient historians would produce vivid and readable narratives, and often the assumption is that they elaborated what they found in their sources using stereotypes and guesswork. Thus, any detailed narrative of court events would necessarily be built on a foundation of sand.

In this study, we have also avoided going to the opposite extreme of trying to conceptualize three centuries of Roman court history in terms of a monolithic social sciences model. This sort of approach has been quite influential in the study of monarchical courts. Model building was a concern of Norbert Elias, who played a central role in establishing courts as coherent social entities (or ‘figurations’, as he put it) deserving of study in their own right. He used as his case study the court of Louis XIV, which he saw as a mechanism for the monarch to bring to heel an otherwise dangerous landed aristocracy – to ‘domesticate’ it by entrapping it in a

<sup>40</sup> See especially Saller 1980.

golden cage.<sup>41</sup> Strong objections have been raised on empirical grounds about whether this model accurately represents the court at Versailles.<sup>42</sup> We likewise doubt on empirical grounds whether control of the aristocracy should be seen as the central function of the Roman court.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, we have not sought to construct some alternative large-scale model for the Roman court. The enterprise of model-making is convenient, in that it allows one to avoid becoming mired in a mass of empirical detail. But we do not think it is a valid way to conceptualize the Roman court over a space of three centuries, given that the wishes of particular emperors could radically alter the workings of the court, as could external events such as military emergencies that forced emperors to leave Rome for extended periods. We should avoid constructing an image of the Roman court as some vast machine that reliably turned out a particular product. Such images of Roman institutions are not uncommon in modern scholarship, but the implicitly functionalist assumptions that lie behind them are highly controversial in contemporary sociology – to say the least.

Nor have we attempted a related species of mental shortcut: a teleological master-narrative in which the court marches ever onward to some final state. Winterling's leitmotif of 'institutionalization' tends in this direction. As he freely admitted, its construction required him to ignore certain major facets of the court that could not fit the schema, such as the imperial family.<sup>44</sup> As several contributions to this volume argue, the sources also give inadequate underpinning to some strands of the 'institutionalization' narrative, including Winterling's notions that friendship and imperial dining became 'institutionalized' with time.<sup>45</sup>

What sort of historical knowledge is possible, then? The contributions to this study have mainly identified what may be called recurrent patterns in the history of the court – a kind of mid-range knowledge that stands somewhere between the all-embracing 'model' and the ebb and flow of transient events. We have sought to outline particular patterns that were visible in the courts of some (or even many) emperors, but were not necessarily present (or at least not evidenced) for others. Thus, studying the imperial court is not like hearing a simple, repetitive melody. It is more

<sup>41</sup> Elias 1983. A similar model was suggested in the study of Jürgen Freiherr von Kruedener, which was published just after Elias' contribution and was written independently of it: von Kruedener 1973.

<sup>42</sup> See especially Duindam 1995. <sup>43</sup> Wei and Kelly below, 109–13.

<sup>44</sup> Winterling 1999: 6–7.

<sup>45</sup> See Wei and Kelly (below, 93–5) and Roller (below, 322 n. 8), with Winterling 1999: 145–60, 169–92, 2009a: 85–6, 90–3.