

## Introduction: The Sources for the Roman Court

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In this volume, we present a selection of the most important sources for the Roman imperial court. We have been guided by two criteria in choosing them. Some of the sources – which almost select themselves – are *the* central pieces of evidence on a particular point and have been repeatedly discussed in the modern scholarship (e.g. 1.8 [g], 2.9 [b], 3.6, 4.16). On other issues, the evidence is more plentiful and historical knowledge rests on the patient accumulation of data. In these cases, we have aimed to provide at least a representative sample, with the full awareness that we are omitting other texts which also illustrate the same points. We have exercised such selectivity, for instance, with anecdotes in literary sources showing the (alleged) power of imperial women and freedmen (see 3.30, 37, 39–40, 43) and with the many inscriptions that evidence the job titles and hierarchy of court domestic servants (see 3.41, 4.5, 5.11).

As with the first volume of this book, the period covered runs from Augustus to the end of the third century AD, and we continue to use ‘court’ as an etic category that refers to the social circle surrounding the emperor.<sup>1</sup> However, as Chapter 2 shows, the study of space is essential to understanding social interactions, and we have also included a selection of sources illustrating the language that the Romans themselves used to describe the court surrounding their emperor (1.7–16).

The writing of history is a process invariably shaped by the types of sources at our disposal. It is therefore worth reflecting on what kinds of evidence have survived, and on how the genres of that evidence predetermine what we can know about the Roman court. Such reflection should be conducted in a comparative spirit, with an eye to the sort of evidence available for monarchical courts in more recent periods, so as to highlight the particularities of the Roman evidence. The goal is not to complain about how little evidence Roman historians have in comparison to historians of early modern or modern courts – this would be churlish, given that the Roman court is so much more richly documented than most other ancient courts. Rather, we anticipate that many users of this volume will not be professional historians of ancient Rome, so it is worth explaining what is distinctive about the Roman sources, since this is not self-evident.

<sup>1</sup> See Vol. 1, 5–8.

## Documentary Sources

For the courts of some historical societies, we possess archival material that allows us to peer into the inner workings of the royal household. Thus, for example, extensive financial accounts survive relating to the courts of many late-medieval kingdoms and principalities of north-west Europe. These allow us to recover details about the physical realities of court life (food, drink, clothing, etc.) and about aspects of court culture such as patronage of music, literature, and the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> In the Roman case, a mass of ephemeral paperwork relating to the running of the emperor's household must have been generated.<sup>3</sup> None of this has survived the intervening two millennia.

In the case of late medieval Europe, we also have household ordinances, which fall somewhere between being descriptions of the royal household as it was, and the household as the king wished it to be, since they often represent attempts to control expenditure.<sup>4</sup> Also mingling the descriptive and the prescriptive are ceremonial manuals. For instance, the Byzantine *De ceremoniis* preserves details of ceremonial practice at the court in Constantinople. At the same time, it is also an attempt by its compiler, the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, to revive rituals that had fallen into desuetude, thereby creating a sense of order and reinforcing his dynasty's position.<sup>5</sup> As far as we know, there were no similar attempts to regulate in writing the operation of the Roman emperor's household or his court ceremonial, and certainly no such texts have come down to us.

Courts in literate societies also produce masses of paperwork relating to the monarch's political and administrative duties. Some documentary material of this kind does survive from the Roman world. By and large, it does not allow us to see in detail the processes of deliberation that led to the emperor's decisions. Rather, what we possess in large quantities are documents communicating the emperor's decisions: his edicts, his letters to communities and individuals, and his written responses to petitions. These have not survived in public archives. Rather, a few hundred survive on inscriptions and on papyri preserved in the dry sands of Egypt; several thousand more that had legal relevance were incorporated into late-antique law codes, which have come down to us through the manuscript tradition. These texts were the products of interactions between the emperor, his advisory councils (*consilia*), his various secretaries (especially the *ab epistulis* and *a libellis*), and sometimes other courtiers. Generally these interactions are not recorded in the document, but occasionally they are, and we have included several that explicitly show the influence of mothers and wives on the emperor's decisions (3.27, 29, 32, 34), as well as documents that

<sup>2</sup> Vale 2001: 9–10, 69–135.

<sup>3</sup> On the *ratio castrensis*, the office administering the emperor's household finances, see Davenport and Kelly, Vol. 1, 134–5, and Edmondson, Vol. 1, 172.

<sup>4</sup> Vale 2001: 9, 42–56.

<sup>5</sup> Cameron 1987; see Moffatt and Tall (2012) for text and translation.

give fragments of information about the composition and workings of advisory *consilia* (3.7–8, 4.6 [f]).

Rather more plentiful than inscribed examples of the emperor's official communications is another genre of inscription, namely funerary epitaphs. Some thousands of these epitaphs, most discovered in and around the city of Rome, record the job titles and family relationships of imperial slaves and freedmen. These give vital data about the organization of labour amongst domestic servants at court, and about the social world of these workers.<sup>6</sup> Somewhat fewer but still very plentiful are epitaphs and other inscriptions that tell us about the careers of the senators and equestrians who came into contact with the court (4.6 [b–c]). In this book, we have given a selection of relevant epitaphs and career inscriptions, but they represent a mere fraction of what survives. It is only by combining hundreds of these inscriptions that we can build up a picture of the groups working in administrative, political, and domestic roles at court.

### Eyewitness Accounts

There are some eyewitness accounts of life at the Roman court, but again they are quite different from those that exist for many more recent courts. There are no Roman equivalents to the *Mémoires* of the Duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1755), that give such an important perspective on the court of Louis XIV,<sup>7</sup> or of the court memoir of Lord Hervey (1696–1743), a favourite of Caroline of Ansbach, the wife of George II of England.<sup>8</sup>

There are, however, letters written by Roman aristocrats that give details about the emperor's court. The correspondence of Pliny the Younger occasionally touches on matters relevant to the court (2.20, 3.5, 4.30), although he was never an important courtier, as much as he wished to be. More important is the corpus of letters written by and to Fronto, who was a leading courtier for part of the Antonine period. These letters, which survived through the manuscript tradition (like those of Pliny),<sup>9</sup> are rich with important details about court ceremonial and etiquette (4.3 [b], 4 [d], 14), about the physical spaces of court life (2.17, 22 [a], 23), and about how Fronto negotiated his relationships with emperors and fellow courtiers (4.10). The Fronto letters are not, however, analogous to some of the famous early modern corpora of correspondence by courtiers, such as the letters of Madame de Sévigné (1626–96), another shrewd observer of the court of the Sun King.<sup>10</sup> The letters in the Fronto corpus rarely

<sup>6</sup> For fundamental treatments of these texts, see Boulvert 1970, 1974; Weaver 1972. See too Edmondson, Vol. 1, Chapter 8.

<sup>7</sup> Sainte-Simon 1983–8. <sup>8</sup> Hervey 1931.

<sup>9</sup> On the transmission of classical manuscripts from Antiquity to the Renaissance, Reynolds and Wilson (2013) and Wilson (2017) provide fundamental surveys.

<sup>10</sup> Sévigné 1972–8.

relate detailed sequences of court events, so they do not permit us to reconstruct a narrative history of the court, not even for the period in which Fronto's influence was at its zenith.

In the Roman case, some important eyewitness testimony also comes from an unexpected quarter: philosophical treatises. A number of surviving philosophical works from the first and second centuries were written by people who belonged to or were close observers of the imperial court. Because of the importance of practical ethics in Roman philosophy, these authors at times reflect on the real conditions and events of the social world surrounding them. Thus, Seneca the Younger, an important courtier under Claudius and (especially) Nero, discusses individuals and specific events at court (1.4, 18; 4.12 [a], 22) and the aulic milieu more generally (1.8 [a], 19). The *Meditations* of the emperor Marcus Aurelius also include generalized reflections on court life (1.8 [g], 23, 26; 3.11).

Also intriguing is the philosopher Epictetus, whose lectures (as recorded by his pupil Arrian) recount what seem to be anecdotes concerning real events at the court of the mid-first century (1.22, 3.39–40). Epictetus tells us that he had been the slave of a certain Epaphroditus, who is often taken to be the man of this name who was Nero's secretary for petitions (*a libellis*), in which case Epictetus offers the perspective of someone very close to the centre of the court.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, doubts have been cast on whether this courtier was his master.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Epictetus offers well informed reflections on the court, and, unusually, these come from somebody of servile rather than senatorial or equestrian status. Indeed, we must always be aware that, with the exception of the tombstones relating to domestic servants, sources relevant to the court generated at a sub-elite level are vanishingly rare.<sup>13</sup>

Another kind of eyewitness testimony comes from surviving poetic works. A number of poets were in patronal relationships with the emperor and individual courtiers;<sup>14</sup> indeed, these court connections are perhaps part of the reason why their works were preserved and eventually made their way into the medieval manuscript tradition. The poems of such authors give a general sense of the literary tastes prevailing in court circles during particular periods. More specifically, Ovid gives vital eyewitness testimony about Augustus' residence (1.3 [a], 2.9 [a]). Writing in the late first century AD, Martial and Statius refer in their poems to physical characteristics of the Flavian Palace (1.10, 2.15, 2.16 [a],

<sup>11</sup> Millar 1965; cf. Starr 1949. <sup>12</sup> Weaver 1994.

<sup>13</sup> The paradoxographer Phlegon of Tralles (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> P 389), a freedman of Hadrian, records seeing human and animal curiosities that had been displayed at the court of Hadrian (*Mir.* 34.3–35, 97), but does not offer any profound insights into the court; the rumour that Hadrian ghostwrote Phlegon's works is unlikely: SHA *Hadr.* 16.1. Phaedrus (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> P 338), some of whose *Fables* comment directly (2.5) or indirectly (e.g. 1.2, 4.13, 14, 5.1) on the Roman court, is often described as an imperial freedman, but there are now significant doubts about his servile status: Champlin 2005: 98–101.

<sup>14</sup> See Bernstein, Vol. 1, Chapter 18.

4.29 [a]), and discuss their relationships with the emperor (3.20–2) and individual courtiers (1.24–5), as well as the social rituals of the court (4.29 [a], 33 [c]). As one would expect of poets who were (or wanted to be) close to the emperor, these works paint a flattering picture. But writings that reproduce the ideology of the regime are still historically important for this reason; we just need to see them for what they are.

### Literary Histories and Biographies

Some of the most useful and vivid evidence for the Roman imperial court comes from literary histories and biographies.<sup>15</sup> The coverage provided by such sources is uneven, since there are more dealing with the first century than there are for the second and early third, and very few of good quality give accounts of the period after the Severan emperors. This uneven coverage necessarily unbalances our knowledge of the court in favour of the earlier period. These works, which have all come down through manuscript tradition, are literary in the sense that they are not bare chronicles of deeds and events, but are self-consciously artistic works. Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Herodian, the historians who feature most frequently in this sourcebook, use the full battery of rhetorical and dramatic techniques to craft interesting narratives. They supplement their factual narratives with speeches that are (at best) imaginative reconstructions of what was said on an occasion;<sup>16</sup> they indulge in forceful authorial judgements; they attribute interior mental and emotional states to the major figures in their narratives. Their choices about which events to report and their decisions about emphasis are driven by their wider thematic concerns. They stand, in other words, in the grand tradition of Graeco-Roman history writing, which sought to produce works of history that were entertaining to read and morally edifying.<sup>17</sup>

The tradition within which these authors worked has implications for how useful they are for understanding the court. Warfare and high politics were considered in Antiquity to be the proper subject of historical works. As a result, no historian set out to write a history of the Roman court *per se*; rather, events at court are mostly narrated at length only when they have a direct impact on high politics. These narratives naturally tend to relate to acute crises at court, such as the fall of a powerful courtier (6.1–2) or the murder of an emperor in a palace conspiracy (6.3–4) – hence the focus of Chapter 6 of this book. We should be wary of taking these court narratives at face value, since our authors

<sup>15</sup> Matthews (2007: 269–76) surveys the historical and biographical works (both extant and lost) that recorded the history of the Principate.

<sup>16</sup> On speeches in ancient historiography, see Marincola 2007b.

<sup>17</sup> Mellor (1999: 185–200) provides a convenient overview of Roman ideas about the function of historical writing and the tensions between factual accuracy and literary artistry in Roman historiography.

would have had genuine difficulty finding reliable information about what happened in the inner recesses of the palace.<sup>18</sup> This problem was even worse when authors were discussing events that took place decades or even centuries before they were writing, as is often the case. The suspicion is that the surviving historical works (or the now-lost literary histories they were using) creatively embellished what would have been a very slender frame of hard historical data to make a more readable story.

As well as extended narratives, there are many smaller anecdotes about the court in works of Roman historiography, just as there are in works of philosophy. These accounts of what was said or done on a particular occasion add splashes of colour to narratives, and can be used by the author to make moral points or to illustrate the character of key figures such as emperors. Such anecdotes presumably circulated orally in Roman upper-class culture (and perhaps sometimes in society more generally) before being recorded in writing.<sup>19</sup> One can see the impact of this process of transmission in the cases where the same anecdote appears in two or more sources, reported differently each time. Thus, for example, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and the biographer Suetonius all record a story about the future emperor Vespasian being banned from court for being insufficiently enthusiastic about one of Nero's artistic performances.<sup>20</sup> Tacitus sets the episode in Italy, whereas Dio and Suetonius claim it happened during Nero's Greek tour. The authors also vary on the question of precisely what Vespasian had done during the performance to provoke the crisis, and Suetonius evidently was aware that different answers to this question were in circulation.

In works of biography such as Suetonius' *Lives* of the emperors from Augustus to Domitian, these kinds of anecdotes are commonly deployed. The ancient biographers of the emperors were not as concerned as history writers about producing chronologically coherent narratives. Rather, their concern was with the characters of their subjects, and so anecdotes about the private behaviour of emperors are frequently reproduced in service of this aim, along with more general discussions about the lifestyles and habits of emperors.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the pages of Suetonius are a fertile source for the early Roman court, and we have included many Suetonian passages in this book. On the other hand, we have been sparing in reproducing material from the other main collection of imperial biographies, the *Historia Augusta*. This collection of biographies of emperors from Hadrian to the late third century presents as the work of multiple authors writing in the Tetrarchic period, but is generally agreed to be the work of one author writing c. AD 400. While some of the early biographies in the collection seem to be based on sound sources, much of the collection is

<sup>18</sup> Cassius Dio (53.19, cf. 54.15.1–3) admits this explicitly; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.3.

<sup>19</sup> On anecdotes as sources for the history of the Principate, see Saller 1980.

<sup>20</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4, 14 (= 3.13); Tac. *Ann.* 16.5.3; Dio Cass. 65(66).11.2 (Xiph.).

<sup>21</sup> See especially Wallace-Hadrill 1995.

inaccurate and borders on the fraudulent.<sup>22</sup> The few passages from this work that we have included tend to be those that, for good or ill, are heavily discussed in the modern scholarship, or that can be confirmed by reliable evidence.

Given that most ancient writers of history and biography embellished their narratives and included anecdotes of dubious accuracy, it is tempting to give them the same treatment as the *Historia Augusta* and keep them at arm's length. This would be an easy way to deal with a complex source problem, but in our view it would be too crude. Factually inaccurate sources are still useful if one asks the right sort of questions of them. It is important to realize that Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius all had direct experience of the imperial court of their own days. In cases where they pass moral judgement on what happens in an anecdote – as they often do – they are also giving precious information about how people connected with the court believed the emperor and his courtiers should conduct themselves. Moreover, when they chose to include an anecdote or embellish a report in a particular way, they did so because what they were writing accorded with their general sense of what was likely at the Roman court. Thus, their works are evidence for general patterns of behaviour and material realities at court.<sup>23</sup> For instance, every version of the story of Vespasian's banishment from Nero's court emphasizes the dangerous and frightening position that Vespasian was in as a courtier who had lost the emperor's favour. They also hint that even senators like Vespasian were at the mercy of the slaves and freedmen who regulated access to the emperor, since in the stories it is a member of Nero's admissions staff who rudely turns Vespasian away from Nero's morning *salutatio*. Other sources repeatedly confirm the general truth of these details, even if we cannot be confident about precisely what happened on this specific occasion. Thus, in many cases, historians should read anecdotes and more extended narratives about the court in the same way as they do Apuleius' Latin novel, *The Golden Ass* – not as a source for actual events (since men do not turn into asses) but for its rich collection of realistic background details about rural life, about social and economic relations, and about being a subject in the Roman empire.<sup>24</sup>

### Material Culture

In this book, we have included a selection of material evidence relating to the Roman court. Aside from the inscriptions discussed above, which are material artefacts as well as texts (see 3.50 [b]), the material sources fall into two basic

<sup>22</sup> Syme (1971) is a classic work in the massive bibliography on this problematic source; see too Thomson (2012) for a survey of scholarship on key issues.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Lendon 1997: 27–9.

<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, the argument of Millar's (1981) classic study on the world of *The Golden Ass*.

categories: artistic representations of court groupings, and remains of palaces and other court spaces. With the first category of material evidence, we must again be judicious about the questions we ask. A group of statues of the imperial family (5.7), or a relief depicting the emperor and select courtiers at a hunt (5.13), or a coin depicting the emperor with his bodyguards (5.6) are not direct reflections of events on a particular occasion. They should not be read in the same way that we might read a photograph from the late nineteenth century, for example – which is not to imply that photographs are always artless reflections of reality either. Instead, artistic depictions of court groupings should be recognized as idealized representations of what the court should be like. Viewed in this way, they are immensely useful sources, since ideology is a historical fact too.

With the archaeological remains of court spaces, we obtain what is, in a sense, the most unmediated access to the court. No ancient author or artist stands between us and the ancient remains. There are other difficulties, however. Since the Roman palaces stand in the heart of a city that has been inhabited since Antiquity, much of the stone has been robbed out for reuse. Likewise with the Tetrarchic palaces in Augusta Treverorum (modern Trier, Germany) and Spalatum (modern Split, Croatia) (2.24–5) and the imperial villas in Italy that are known archaeologically (2.18, 21–2). We cannot experience these palaces in the same way that we can relatively intact palaces from more recent monarchies, such as the Residenz in Munich, the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, or the Forbidden City in Beijing. Moreover, what does remain of the Roman imperial residences can be devilishly complex. The site of the imperial palaces on the Palatine in Rome is 300 by 500 metres in size, and has up to six different storeys or levels of use. There are as many as eighteen different building stages preserved in the archaeology. An additional sort of complexity is introduced by the fact that these are important sites which are mentioned in ancient texts. Sometimes the texts and the archaeological remains match very well, such as with the winery at the Villa Magna at Anagnia (modern Anagni) (2.22). With other sites, such as the so-called House of Augustus on the Palatine (2.9) and Hadrian's Villa at Tibur (2.21), squaring the texts with the archaeological remains is much more problematic.

Archaeological remains do not, of course, speak for themselves; they need us to interpret them. The analysis of the Roman palaces in the first volume of this book<sup>25</sup> stands within the German tradition of historical *Bauforschung* ('building research'). This involves as a first step the painstaking documentation, using drawings and written lists, of the remains of a structure and the small finds from the site. The construction phases are then identified and separated to build up a sense of the evolution of the building over time. The end goal of the process is to connect the structure to its broader historical and social context.

<sup>25</sup> Pflug and Wulf-Rheidt, Vol. 1, Chapter 9.



Although it is impossible in a sourcebook to reproduce all of the documentation produced by this process, Chapter 2 contains some of the plans of the Flavian Palace that have been generated by this interpretative approach, and it highlights what is known of particular phases of the palace and how they connect with historical realities.

### **Continuity and Change**

The nature of our evidence for the imperial court allows us to write only certain kinds of history. We cannot write true narratives of court events over the course of months or years; at best, ancient historians such as Tacitus give us narratives of crises at court that ran for a few days or weeks. On some issues, we can put together rather more abstract narratives of change over time. We have the evidence to reconstruct the broad developments in the language the Romans used to describe their court (1.7–16), in the palace precinct in Rome (2.9–16), and in the ceremonial forms of greeting accorded to the emperor (4.11–18). On many issues, however, we have just a few data points that allow us to see examples of specific behaviours, relationships, and discourses separated by decades or centuries, without having the evidence to tease out subtle changes with time. Such is often the case with ancient social history.