In the Shadow of Augustus: Succession Crises in the Roman Empire AD 14-193

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Abstract

Periods of crisis threaten the stability, and sometimes the very existence, of institutions and invite/provoke change. They highlight inherent weaknesses – in this case succession to the role of Roman emperor, a position that Augustus misleadingly claimed did not exist. Despite scrupulously avoiding any suggestion of monarchy, Augustus was determined to establish dynastic rule, ultimately adopting Tiberius as his immediate successor. On other occasions, succession was more problematic. This thesis considers five significant moments of rupture in the two centuries following the political settlement of 27 BC, examining what they reveal about leadership of the Roman world and the emperor's relationships with key acceptance groups amongst those he ruled, particularly the Senate, the urban populace of Rome and the army. These 'crises' are the accession of Tiberius following the death of Augustus (AD 14), which determined that the Principate would survive to become an institution on the Augustan model; the assassination of Caligula and the accession of Claudius (AD 41), where the Senate briefly flirted with a return to the Republic; the tumultuous events of AD 69 when frontier armies decided which general would rule Rome through a series of civil wars; and the murder of Domitian (AD 96), accession of Nerva and the adoption of Trajan which showed the benefits of choosing a successor based on merit, rather than adopting a close relative. After a sustained period of stability under the 'Adoptive Emperors', the return to a biological son as heir saw Commodus prove unequal to the task, his demise prompting instability and another destructive round of civil wars (AD 193).

This thesis draws heavily on ancient literary sources, although it remains mindful of their limitations, supplemented by epigraphic and numismatic evidence and the opinions of modern scholars. While there has been considerable scholarship on Augustus' attempts to arrange his successor and the machinations of various actors during the Julio-Claudian

dynasty, focus on succession throughout the entirety of the two centuries which followed Octavian's ascent has been much rarer. Succession occurred in a distinctly ad hoc manner, smooth transmission of power periodically hindered by lack of an acknowledged hereditary principle, failure to create a law of succession, and little consensus regarding what criteria made a man a viable candidate to become emperor. Moreover, there was no time limit on tenure nor any mechanism to remove an emperor who proved incompetent or who acted as a tyrant, except through violence. The Praetorian Guard played a decisive role in deposing emperors and elevating others in their stead, while interventions by the legions at key moments demonstrated that power ultimately depended on the army. Intermarriage amongst aristocratic Roman families created a pool of senators who had a tie of kinship with the ruling family and, therefore, some claim to the throne when there was no biological son. Without laws to regulate such claims, factional strife at court was rife, while imperial women and freedmen wielded significant influence. Succession remained an unresolved problem, proving even more troublesome during the third century AD.

Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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Introduction

> 'When written in Chinese the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger, and the other represents opportunity.' (Senator John F. Kennedy, April 12, 1959)

Whether an event is considered a crisis is often a function of the language used to describe it, 'in the telling and the framing' (Klooster and Kuin 2020: 10) and, also, who is doing the telling. This thesis addresses the question: to what extent do periodic succession crises AD 14 –193 illustrate an essential problem of the Principate? After analysing the development and nature of the Augustan model, it examines five moments of rupture in terms of their causes and outcomes, as well as their importance in the evolution of the Principate as an institution.

The key moments for analysis are:

i. The accession of Tiberius after Augustus' death (AD 14).

ii. The assassination of Caligula, the accession of Claudius (AD 41).

iii. The 'Year of Four Emperors' (AD 69).

iv. The assassination of Domitian, the accession of Nerva (AD 96).

v. The 'Year of Five Emperors' (AD 193).

The shaping of the Principate after Augustus was a more or less continuous (if bumpy) adjustment to the idiosyncrasies of subsequent rulers, spiced with moments of crisis when the behaviour of 'bad' emperors resulted in 'decisive intervention' (Hay 1999: 317) to remove the individual and excise dynastic heirs. Although the fundamental nature of the Principate arguably did not change – apart from brief periods of shared control, the state was ruled by a virtually all-powerful individual, 'same play, different cast' (M. Aur. *Med.* 10.27) – the transference of power from one emperor to another varied considerably.

While Augustus' dynastic planning has attracted considerable scholarly attention, this thesis considers succession over a two-hundred-year period as the Principate is established, consolidated, and moves beyond its founding dynasty. Six methods of succession occur in this period:

i. an emperor is succeeded by his biological son,

ii. the emperor adopts a relative as his successor,

iii. the emperor is assassinated, and a successor is acclaimed by the Praetorian Guard,

iv. a usurper backed by the legions seizes power,

v. the emperor is assassinated, and a successor is appointed by the Senate, or

vi. the emperor adopts a successor who is not a blood relative (even though blood relatives are available), choosing the 'best' man as successor.

Each of these methods is a potentially viable model for producing a capable successor and ensuring stability, yet each, at times, was problematic. Other possible methods could include election; however, this was never seriously considered.

Defining 'crisis'

While 'there is no one, universally accepted definition of crisis' (Coombs 2012: 18), in political terms, crisis can be understood as a period where the normal functioning of the political system is severely disrupted, producing moments of uncertainty and institutional instability (Vierhaus 1978: 328-329); a critical juncture which may threaten the very existence of the political regime itself (Vierhaus 1978: 321, 323, 329). Golden (2013: 4) defines crisis as 'a perceived threat to core values.' Hölkeskamp (2009: 8) argues that when analysing historical crises, 'internal conflicts', 'collapse of institutions for conflict resolution' and the 'failure of procedures for establishing consensus' need specific consideration.

Scholarly debate over what constitutes crisis suggests three common characteristics: elevated levels of threat, heightened uncertainty, and 'urgency in terms of time for decisions to be taken' (Boin *et al*. 2017: 5-7). Crises cannot simply be ignored; they demand decisive action to reassert authority and restore continuity or they invite, indeed provoke, significant change. Crisis can certainly provide opportunity. When discussing the financial crisis, Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama's former Chief of Staff, suggested: 'you never want a serious crisis to go to waste' (Krauthammer 2009), a sentiment with which many leaders through the ages would, no doubt, concur. For a government or individual ruler, crises disrupt norms, creating physical and psychological conditions which open a window of change, and are a test of resilience and leadership.

The notion of crisis is not a modern invention. The ancient Greek word *krisis* describes that moment in treatment when a decision must be made, on which hinges whether the patient literally lives or dies, a turning point in a disease (Koselleck 2006: 358-361). The ancient Greeks and Romans tended not to use the word to describe moments of political instability; the Greeks used the term *stasis* to describe civil strife, one element of which included civil war resulting from competition among the elite for power (Börm 2018: 56-57), while Roman writers employed terms such as *res novae*, *discordia* and *bellum civile* to 'distinguish political change deemed legitimate from their illegitimate variants' (Klooster and Kuin 2020: 5). Regardless of nomenclature, violence became a key feature of Roman politics in the Late Republican period, an acknowledgement of the failure of previously accepted methods of resolving political conflict, thereby establishing new patterns of behaviour (Flower 2010: 82). Lange (2016: 23) claims that Late Republican Rome 'lacked a monopoly on the legitimate use of force' which impaired the capacity of the state to resist challenges. Zartman (1995: 1) defines state failure as 'a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and

political order have fallen apart, and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new.' Many of these elements are obviously applicable to Republican Rome.

To curb the use of force in service of individual ambitions and bring a sustained period of peace and stability at Rome became the supreme test of Roman statesmanship. This is the kernel of Augustus' achievement; he provided a 'lifebelt' to the floundering Roman state (Drinkwater 2007: 67). After his death, the ad hoc nature of succession to the role of *princeps* made transmission of power, at times, fraught with difficulties. The seeds of this lay in its origins. The Augustan Principate was contrived and presented as the influence of an extraordinary individual, respecting *mos maiorum* and operating within a Republican framework, rather than as a monarchy, thus 'there could be no acknowledgement of the hereditary principle, dominant as it was in practice and, *a fortiori,* no law of succession to regulate hereditary claims' (Griffin 1984: 189).

Instability surrounding succession was cause and symptom of civil war, both in the carnage of the 'Year of Four Emperors' and the later chaos of the 'Year of Five Emperors'. While the violent death of an emperor need not necessarily result in sustained conflict, it was invariably dangerously close (Grainger 2003: 213). Moments of transition often became periods of crisis. There is a distinct irony here; a system which was originally constructed to end civil wars, risked perpetuating them when succession became contested.

Key Literary Primary Sources

The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* is Augustus' attempt to control the narrative of his reign from beyond the grave. The tone is established in the first sentence, 'At the age of nineteen on my own responsibility and at my own expense I raised an army with which I successfully championed the liberty of the republic when it was oppressed by the tyranny of a faction' (*RG* 1.1). This emphasises Augustus' youth and that he acted as a *privatus* (inviting comparison

with Pompey) to restore the liberty of the *res publica* from the tyranny of a *factio* (cf. Caes. *BCiv.* 1.22), which has echoes of Cicero (Ramage 1987: 67, Galinsky 1996: 45-46) and Julius Caesar (Mouritsen 2001: 9; Raaflaub 2003: 50, 66). Legitimacy was conferred on his actions retrospectively when the Senate granted Octavian praetorian *imperium*, thereby condoning behaviour that was 'strikingly illegal' (Hodgson 2014: 255-256). Throughout the work Augustus employs Republican idioms to position his actions as a response to crisis; he frames himself as the saviour of the state.

The text is seemingly factual (Eck 2007: 133), however, the aim of the *Res Gestae* is propaganda. The list of accomplishments is lengthy and the statistics impressive by any measure. It is telling what is not said. Various enemies are never named, Augustus claims victory at Philippi when it was Antony who played the major role, the questionable acts of the triumvirs are glossed over (*RG* 7.1). Augustus claims the support of all of Italy (*RG* 25.3) in the war against Cleopatra, yet 300 senators fled to Antony. He arrogates the deeds of others to himself (Claassen 2019: 6-7). The suppressions, omissions and distortions are a deliberate attempt to manipulate the reader, which makes the document more problematic than it, at first, appears. Nowhere is there mention of what was clear to contemporaries. Ovid's comment 'the state is Caesar' (*Trist*. 4.4.15) suggests that Augustus' influence went well beyond his 'official' powers.

Velleius Paterculus wrote a *Compendium of Roman History*. While Velleius is often derided for his sycophancy and his work consequently devalued as propaganda, he was an experienced soldier, a senator, and knew Tiberius well. Velleius served as *praefectus equitum* on the Rhine under Tiberius (2.104.2). He was elected quaestor for AD 7 (2.111.3), however, revolts in Pannonia and Dalmatia saw him serve as a *legatus Augusti*, again under Tiberius (2.111.4). Velleius was thus 'spectator and then assistant of Tiberius' superhuman deeds for nine (or eight) years continuously from AD 4' (Sumner 1970: 274). Returning to Rome in AD

12, he and his brother were elected praetor for AD 15 as *candidati Caesaris* (2.124.3). Thereafter, Velleius served as a senator, presumably mainly in Rome (Connal 2013: 51). Velleius views Tiberius as *optimum princeps* and, as a *novus homo*, is one of many whose career benefitted from the Principate, which he presents as a continuation of the Republic. 'He does not idealize the past; he is fully satisfied with the new regime, which he firmly believes to be the dawning of a much better era' (Balmaceda 2014: 342).

Although the later parts of his work veer into panegyric, Velleius' work is valuable as a positive account by an eyewitness to the Principate as it was unfolding, rather than offering the negative views of writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius who wrote a century later or Dio who wrote two centuries after Actium and who reflect a matured tradition. Velleius had not experienced the paranoia of Domitian nor the unpredictability of Commodus; the excesses of the Principate were largely still to come. Moreover, the work was likely begun in AD 29, completed the following year (Sumner 1970: 287). Even fierce critics concede that the first half of Tiberius' reign were years of good government (Tac. *Ann*. 1.72, 4.6; Suet. *Tib*. 26; Dio 57.18.11; Sen. *Clem*. 1.1.6) before the retirement to Capri, the increasing prevalence of *maiestas* trials and recriminations after the betrayal of Sejanus. Whatever the truth of Tiberius' final years, Velleius did not live to see them. His work reflects the man he knew and clearly admired. Velleius concludes his work with a prayer to Jupiter, Mars and Vesta imploring them to,

> Guard, preserve, protect our present state, this peace, this *princeps*. And when he has discharged his mortal duty for the longest span, destine successors to succeed him at the latest possible time, but successors whose shoulders are strong enough to sustain the empire of the world as resolutely as we know his have done (2.131.1-2).

Velleius clearly expects there to be no succession until after Tiberius' death. He speaks of 'successors' (plural) although whether this means that on Tiberius' death there should be more than one immediate successor sharing power or whether it refers to a line of emperors

stretching well into the future is unclear. Velleius also notes the need for 'strong men to shoulder the burden', perhaps suggesting that neither Caligula (aged eighteen) nor Tiberius Gemellus (around ten at the time) are ready (Sumner 1970: 291).

Tacitus bemoans the loss of *libertas* as the *princeps* increasingly exercises a *dominatio*, virtually as master (*dominus*), with 'citizens reduced to servitude' and senators lacking 'the freedom to participate in the politics of a free state' (Strunk 2016: 25-26; Mellor 1993: 102-103). The *Agricola*, written in AD 98 under Trajan, while primarily an *encomium* of Tacitus' father-in-law Agricola, paints a striking portrait of the fear and uncertainty senators endured under the tyranny of Domitian (*Agr.* 1-3, 39-45) and is a searing indictment of the Senate's collective weakness (*Agr.* 45). Tacitus' experiences under Domitian are also reflected in his damning portrayal of Tiberius (Waters 1964: 49-54, 68-70; Syme 1930: 66, 70). Much of the *Histories*, written between AD 105 and 108, recounting events following the demise of Nero up to the death of Domitian, has been lost. The extant portion covers the events of AD 69 and parts of 70. Tacitus' narrative of that tumultuous year illustrates the instability and chaos caused by competition between ambitious generals, backed by potentially mutinous troops motivated by opportunities for plunder, as succession was determined on the battlefield.

Tacitus' views on the nature of the Principate are most fully realised in the *Annals*, an account of the events following the death of Augustus, with surviving books covering parts of the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. Tacitus decries that Rome is an autocracy (*Ann.* 4.33); Augustus 'absorbed the functions of the senate, the officials, even the law. Opposition did not exist' (*Ann.* 1.2). Tiberius is a hypocrite (*Ann*. 6.51) who hides his true feelings and pretends to be virtuous. He allows 'pretences of freedom' to the Senate (*Ann.* 1.77) which has 'a shadow of its ancient power' (*Ann*. 3.60). *Libertas* ceases to exist (*Ann*. 6.48) as *maiestas* charges proliferate, brought by unscrupulous *delatores* (*Ann*. 1.73, 11.5.1, 16.28-29; Walker 1952: 215-218). Rutledge (2001: 24) observes that 'the *delator* becomes a *genus*, readily

identifiable as a marginalised individual out to destroy his betters'. Senators become increasingly servile (*Ann.* 1.7.1), 'too busy calculating their private prospects to worry about the public interest' (*Hist*. 1.19), reduced to sycophancy (*Hist.* 1.45; Boesche 1987: 205-209) and submissiveness (Penwill 2015: 195). Dissimulation by the *princeps* and obsequious flattery at court worsened under Tiberius' successors (*Ann*. 14.10, 14.14-15; *Hist.* 1.15, 1.36). Tacitus understands that the Republic is long gone and cannot be resurrected (Mellor 1993: 90-91, 102-105; Mutschler 2008: 121-125). Perhaps like Marcellus, 'Earlier times earned his admiration, the present his allegiance. He prayed for good emperors but took them as they came' (*Hist.* 4.8).

Suetonius is primarily interested in character and shows emperors as both 'public actor and private man' (Hurley 2014: 37). His writing is often anecdotal, spicing descriptions of the serious conduct of government with salacious gossip, although Suetonius' stories of sexual depravity should not necessarily be taken at face value (Meister 2014: 70-71). Rumours of sexual misbehaviour were common in Roman political invective, particularly when weaponised against predecessors of the current regime (Chong-Gossard 2010: 320-321). Suetonius wrote his *Lives* of the twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar through to Domitian, under the emperor Hadrian, whom he served as *ab epistulis* (Lindsay 1994: 459-460). He arranges his material *per species* rather than chronologically (*Aug.* 9). Succession is not one of these topics (Osgood 2013: 19). On the other hand, there are portents which suggest that the accession of the emperor is 'predestined' (Osgood 2013: 36-37; Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 192-193), provided, of course, that one interprets these signs correctly (*Tib*. 14.1, 14.4; *Cal.* 12.2, 19.3; *Galb.* 4.1-3, 8.2, 9.2, 18; *Oth*o 4.1; *Vesp.* 5.1, 5.3; cf. *Ner.* 40.3; *Vesp.* 4.5, 5.2).

As his focus is biography, Suetonius describes both virtues and vices in his subjects, with an emphasis on how each emperor's character impacts on his public role (Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 142). Augustus is the *exemplum* to which subsequent emperors are compared (Hägg 2012:

219; Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 110, 114, 117, 139, 201-202). Those of his successors who are depicted as 'bad' emperors tend to lack self-control and are in thrall to their vices. The longer their reign lasts, the more their character deteriorates, as their true nature is revealed (Suet. *Dom.* 10.1; *Ner.* 19.3; *Cal.* 22.1; *Tib*. 42.1; Cochran 1980: 200). They forfeit acceptance. In Suetonius' view, they invite their fate.

Cassius Dio was a senator, likely born in Nicaea in Bithynia (Millar 1964: 8), who eventually served as consul. He was in Rome during Commodus' reign so offers accounts of events he witnessed from 180 onwards (Dio 72.14.4-24). Dio was encouraged to write history by Septimius Severus (Dio 72.23.1), ultimately producing an eighty-volume history of Rome, much of which has been lost, although we have surviving Byzantine epitomes, particularly by Xiphilinus, for some of the lost portions (Pistellato 2023: 304-306). Dio views the Principate as the 'only stable form of government' (Millar 1964: 93). For him, democracy is incapable of bringing order (47.39) as democracies can flourish for only a short period historically, whereas monarchy has a poor reputation, yet is effective; 'it is easier to find one good man than many' (44.2.1-4). The Principate is much better and safer than a republic (53.19.1, 54.6.1). The rule of one man was a necessity, Augustus saved the Romans' freedom, establishing order and security – 'they were subjects of royalty without being slaves and citizens of a democracy without suffering discord' (56.43.4).

While he accepted the necessity of a monarchy, Dio saw at first-hand how problematic the behaviour of emperors could become. His thoughts on succession are likely closely attuned to those articulated in the speech Dio puts into Hadrian's mouth justifying the dying emperor's adoption of Antoninus Pius as his successor (69.20.1-5). It seems clear that this is not a transcript of any actual speech by Hadrian (Millar 1964: 71; Birley 1997: 294). In the speech, Hadrian espouses the benefits of selecting 'the best and most suitable man as successor, rather than simply handing the purple to a natural-born son' (Davenport and

Mallan 2014: 638, 643, 650). This method guarantees a man of sound mind and body (69.20.3; Ash 1999: 24-25). Dio ideally envisages a *civilis princep*s. Antoninus is 'noble, mild, compassionate, prudent' (69.20.4), emphasising civic rather than martial virtues.

By placing his argument that adoption on the basis of merit is the best method of choosing a successor in a speech by Hadrian, Dio is drawing attention to the clouds over Hadrian's own accession to the throne, as well as the legacy of deviating from this strategy, where Marcus Aurelius, for all his virtues and wisdom, handed power on to Commodus, even though aware of his severe limitations as a potential emperor (72.36.3-4, 73.1.1; Davenport and Mallan 2014: 661-662). There was, of course, no chance that Marcus Aurelius or any other emperor would overlook their biological son as heir (Hekster 2001: 41). Dio's preference for a successor based on merit presents an ideal rarely realised, as crises caused by dynastic succession plagued the Roman Empire in his lifetime, plunging the Roman world into regular bouts of violence.

Scholarship on Succession

Scholarship on succession focuses on how individual emperors attempted to ensure dynastic succession and how they legitimated their rule. Mommsen (1887-88: 1265) framed the Principate as a continuation of the Republic. The Principate was the product of a 'revolutionary uprising', the *princeps* 'the agent of the people's sovereignty' (1887-88: 748-749). Whilst the *princeps* exercised an extraordinary level of power, this came from legal authority as it was granted to him by the Senate and People. Augustus' power was *legibus conscriptum* (defined by law), therefore it was constitutional. 'He does not stand above the laws, but the laws stand above him' (Mommsen 1992: 94). Mommsen exaggerates this aspect of the Principate. Any sense of *dyarchie* or partnership between Senate and *princeps* is very unevenly weighted; real power increasingly resides with the emperor. As Syme (1939: 2)

attests, ‘The letter of the law might circumscribe the prerogative of the First Citizen. No matter: the *princeps* stood pre-eminent, in virtue of prestige and authority tremendous and not to be defined.’ Syme (1939: 9) echoes Tacitus; in practice, Augustus was a despot. Mommsen believes that the Principate was ‘wholly devoid of legitimacy’ (1887-88: 844) and that it was impossible for it to have any type of monarchic continuity. For Mommsen (1887-88: 1143), ‘The Principate dies when a *princeps* dies.’ Thus, every new emperor needed to start ‘from scratch’ (Flaig 2015: 82). If we accept Mommsen’s views then the Principate would not be an institutionalised monarchy, rather a succession of individual principates.

A ruler or regime can seize power through force and rule through coercion, suppressing opposition and terrorising the population. Whether this model is sustainable long term is doubtful and places the government in perpetual survival mode, preventing resources being allocated to pressing social and political problems, with potentially negative consequences for both the ruling elite and the repressed masses. It is in the interests of both ruler and ruled for the government to be considered as legitimate. Poggi (2011: 82) argues,

> For political institutions, legitimacy means that they can assume, in their routine operations, that subjects or citizens will comply with the orders of political authorities on the basis not only of autoreflecting habit or of fear of punishment, but also of a willing disposition to obey, motivated by a sense of obligation and of moral self-respect.

Legitimacy depends on the attitudes and beliefs of the groups who are being ruled; if they are prepared to obey, then the government can function. This is a ‘voluntary acceptance of the status quo by those who are not in power’ (Gotter 2008: 181). Commands by the ruler are accepted by the ruled as a ‘valid’ norm (Weber 1978: 946). If not, at some stage, the government becomes dysfunctional.

Weber (1978: 215) argued in the 1920s that principles of legitimation consisted of three ‘pure types’ which rulers could appeal to as the basis of their legitimacy;

> 1. Rational grounds—resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).
>
> 2. Traditional grounds—resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority).
>
> 3. Charismatic grounds—resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority).

Sommer (2011) applies Weber's paradigms to Imperial Rome. He finds elements of all three principles contributing to the legitimacy of the Principate (161, 180). Legal authority was administered through an administrative elite (166-167), traditional authority stemmed from *mos maiorum* (170-171), charismatic authority was generated by stressing extraordinary personal achievements (175-176). The Principate was able to be consolidated because Augustus ended civil war and subsequent smooth transition of power prevented future conflict; it was presented as in keeping with Republican traditions; it gradually became an office with clearly defined powers and Augustus' *auctoritas* ensured widespread acceptance (180). Charisma was crucial, fostering what Weber terms *Erbcharisma,* where Augustus' prestige, garnered over a lifetime of achievement, was attached to his immediate family and then to future successors, linked to him as a 'founding father' (177). Descendants of future emperors such as Vespasian and Septimius Severus also benefitted from the achievements of a 'founding father' as they attempted to establish a dynasty (181).

Guthrie (2019) breaks Weber's categories into five, emphasising the *princeps'* role as benefactor of the legions and the role of the honour system in dictating acceptable relations between *princeps* and Senate. While the Senate had only as much power as the *princeps* allowed, it remained important: 'the senatorial nobility was a ruling class whose wishes the leader had to follow (and if he did not, he risked being overthrown), but not a governing class that itself took part in government' (Veyne 2003: 9). Essentially, the *nobiles* allowed the emperor to govern; in return, he treated them with respect and did not behave as a tyrant.

They continually judged whether the *princeps* showed *civilitas* or tended towards *superbia* (Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 43, 45-46).

Lendon (2006) rails against the use of Weber's categories to study the Principate. He argues that 'Rather than the emperor depending on the power of law, the power of law appears far more often, and increasingly over time, to depend on the emperor' (55). For Lendon, charisma was not transferred through lineage nor invested in an office, and many emperors were decidedly unexceptional (57). Emperors were not constantly trying to legitimate themselves (63); 'on average one in eight imperial coins advertised imperial virtues on their reverse. More than twice as many carry depictions of gods' (61), while themes were randomly 'invented, abandoned and revived' (62). Emperors sought glory and honour rather than legitimising themselves through persuasion. They entertained and fed the people because it was dangerous not to, as largesse had come to be expected. Emperors did not try to seem more legitimate than potential rivals, rather they used politics (or murder) to solve their problems (cf. Ando 2000: 45).

Flaig (1992) presents the Principate as an *Akzeptanz-System*. He argues that there is a distinction between the legitimacy of a ruler and the legitimacy of a system of government. After the Principate was established, all relevant sectors in Roman society always expected a monarch (2015: 82; 2011: 77). The monarchy was legitimate, however, the emperor was not legitimate, instead he needed to be accepted by key acceptance groups and to maintain that acceptance (2010: 278). These acceptance groups are the senatorial aristocracy, the *plebs urbana* of the capital and that half of the Roman army made up of Roman citizens (2010: 280). There was no body which could institute an emperor (2015: 84), no procedure which gave a right to govern – not the acclamation by the soldiers as *imperator*, nor decree by the Senate, nor the law passed by the people's assembly (2011: 85). Instead, the monarch was exposed to 'hyper-communication' with these three groups and needed to be responsive to

their expectations and demands (2015: 88). 'The *plebs urbana* asked for a friendly *patronus* but she refused to behave like a *clientela*; the army asked for an able *imperator*, and the senators wanted to have a monarch who played the role of *primus inter pares'* (2015: 90). There was no dynastic legitimacy. If a father was deposed, his son did not succeed him (2010: 279). Emperors were never removed from office by election or constitutional mandate. An emperor could, however, be replaced through assassination or power could be violently usurped (2011: 77). Self-preservation demanded that the emperor continue to maintain acceptance with all three groups; 'the various facets of the emperor's image were manifestations of an ongoing process of negotiation between the *princeps* and the three social groups that had the political power to influence the imperial image' (Seelentag 2011: 77-78).

Augustus paid particular attention to the citizens of the capital, no doubt mindful of a narrow escape in 38 BC, when Antony's soldiers managed to rescue him with some difficulty from a violent crowd in a narrow lane near the Forum (Dio 48.31; App. *BC.* 5.67-68). Rutledge (2021: 414) suggests that Augustus was a *popularis* leader who was careful 'to maintain his popularity and to cultivate the urban populace.' His building program revitalised the city, he standardised monthly distribution of grain (Suet. *Aug.* 40.2), was unwilling to allow foreigners to become new Roman citizens and only allowed a limited number of slaves to be manumitted (40.3). He frequently distributed largesse (41.1-2) and provided lavish entertainments, at which he showed his manifest delight in and enjoyment of the spectacle (43-45; *RG* 22-23). Augustus modelled what became an expectation; the emperor should listen to and consider seriously the shouted petitions of the crowd on these occasions (Millar 1977: 369-372).

Veyne (1990) explores the socio-economic relationship between the leader and the led through euergetism. The *princeps* generated loyalty through *beneficia*, including presentation of 'extraordinary' shows, and 'erecting all public buildings (except those monuments the

Senate and People raised in his honour)' (389; Syme 1939: 404). The emperor was effectively the sole public benefactor, the patron of the city and its inhabitants. 'He alone would distribute money to the *plebs*, together with banquets or *epolae* and *congiaria* and he alone would be honoured by the *plebs*' (388). Bread and circuses were political gestures, demonstrating the emperor's wealth, power, and prestige (418). *Konsenzrituale* (consensus) rituals, both formal and informal, offered opportunities for both implicit and explicit displays of loyalty and were important for both ruler and ruled alike (Flaig 1992: 198-199). At the circus (150,000), the amphitheatre (45,000), the theatre (15,000) the emperor mixed with large crowds. 'Emperors of the first century spent around one fifth of their governing time in these venues' (Veyne 1990: 400). Moreover, these public occasions gave the crowd the opportunity to express negative opinions as well as adulation, a measure of free speech apparent nowhere else. Fronto stresses the importance of imperial generosity:

> The Roman people are held fast by two things above all, the corn-dole [*annona*] and the shows...the success of government depends on amusements as much as more serious things…by the shows the whole population is kept in good humour (*Principia Historiae* 17).

There was also face to face contact at religious ceremonies, as well as when the emperor left or returned to Rome and 'when he addressed a *contio'* (Rich 2015: 107; Flaig 1992: 76).

Roman emperors were keen to project a sense of worthiness. For those who succeeded either their natural or adoptive fathers, this meant winning military victories and building a reputation for *virtus* and *felicitas* (Olszewski 2020: 224: Hekster 2011: 339). For those who usurped the position, it meant validating their claims on power and securing their ability to rule. Perceived legitimacy is critical to this (Greene 2017: 324). Beyond the legal validity of how power was acquired and is exercised, Beetham (2013: 15-16) suggests that power 'can be seen to be legitimate to the extent that' it is exercised according to justifiable rules (in terms of shared beliefs by ruler and ruled) and with evidence of consent through actions (17-

18). Alagappa (1995: 24) adds another category to Beetham's conceptualisation of legitimacy - performance (proper and effective use of state power). The ancient sources are seemingly less concerned with the legal basis of an emperor or usurper's claims to power – their 'formal' legitimacy - as with their behaviour as emperor, and their ongoing relationship with the various acceptance groups (Icks 2016: 319; cf. Ando 2016: 576; Beek 2019: 76); not on how they acquired power, but what they did with it. Acton's famous dictum, that power by its very nature exerts a corrupting influence on those who acquire it, is misleading. What access to power does is to heighten individual characteristics already present. Power does not create character flaws, it reveals them. Cracks in the imperial image of some emperors widened into crevasses, fracturing relationships with key acceptance groups, prompting violence and political instability.

The imperial system proved 'robust' (Ash 2016: 215), able to withstand the worst excesses of individual rulers, assassinations, and civil wars, yet struggled to establish durable familial dynasties. Based on close study of thirty-one global monarchies, Scheidel (2011) claims that the Roman monarchy, in its entirety, is a 'genuine outlier' in global terms, characterised by a high level of violent turnover and a lack of dynastic continuity – a dysfunctional combination of 'low rates of reproduction and high rates of violent attrition'. The elites readily accepted frequent 'premature termination', while, from Augustus on, Rome had an unusually large standing army, 'geographically and culturally detached from the core regions of the Roman world'. Access to coercive use of force gave the emperor a high degree of autonomy and protected him from other constituencies but left him 'highly vulnerable to challenges from within the military domain'. As the following chapters will show, Augustus shaped the Principate so dramatically in its formative years that he set it on a trajectory it could not escape from.

Chapter One

> **'**This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.' (Tony Blair, on the aftermath of 9/11, 2 October 2001)

The Principate was conceived from crisis. The assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BC left a leadership vacuum at Rome. The motivations of the conspirators were a mix of the political and the personal (Nic. Dam. 62-66; App. *BC.* 2.111; Dio 44.1; Epstein 1987: 566-68). Whatever vague plans the self-styled 'Liberators' had of restoring *libertas* were soon abandoned as they were forced to flee Rome for the East. In a letter to Atticus, Cicero outlines their weakness, 'What remains to be done requires troops and money of which we have none' (14.4.2). The Roman world was again plunged by a parade of competing ambitions into the maelstrom of civil war; more than a decade of violence and destruction, until Octavian, posthumously adopted in Caesar's will (Suet. *Iul*. 83), emerged victorious. Styling himself 'Caesar' appealed to Caesar's veterans, clients, and *amici*, while his ability to forge political connections and strong sense of what the moment required showed that, despite his age, Octavian was remarkably politically astute. Antony had derided Octavian, 'You, boy, who owe everything to a name' (Cic. *Phil*. 13.11.24-25). He was merely one of many who sadly underestimated the young man's capabilities and later paid the price for their misjudgement.

Who do you say I am?

In view of Augustus' success in attaining power it can be tempting in hindsight to see his actions as elements in a grand scheme, meticulously planned and ruthlessly executed. Octavian was clearly ambitious, 'the first Roman politician to aim right from the start at permanent sole supremacy' (Levick 2010: 5). Cicero was disconcerted by a speech young Caesar gave to veterans he was attempting to recruit, 'so that I may attain my father's honours' (Cic. *Att*. 16.15.3). Augustus 'found the whole state exhausted by internal

dissensions and established over it a personal regime known as the Principate' (Tac. *Ann*. 1.1). Tacitus notes that on Augustus' death there were divergent views. To some, Augustus had done what was necessary to fulfil both his filial and his patriotic duty (*Ann.* 1.9.3), working with Lepidus and Antony 'until the only cure for the distracted country had been government by one man' (*Ann.* 1.9.4) Afterwards, Augustus had not established himself as king or dictator but *princeps* (*Ann.* 1.9.5). He had brought peace, beautified the city, and used force only when necessary. In the *Res Gestae* (1.1) Augustus offers similar justification for his actions. Dio (56.35-41) records the funeral oration for Augustus delivered by Tiberius, his adopted son and heir. As would be expected, it is fulsome in its praise.

Others, whose views Tacitus chronicles second and at greater length, suggesting where his sympathies lie, presented a different version of Augustus' rise to power *(Ann.* 1.10). For them, Augustus' real motive was 'lust for power'. He formed alliances when expedient, betrayed trust when it was to his personal advantage. The proscriptions carried out by the triumvirs were particularly 'distasteful'. Appian claims that 300 senators and 2000 equites were listed (App. *BC.* 4.5; Dio 47.13; Suet. *Aug.* 27.1; cf. Plut. *Cic.* 46.3). The peace which eventually ensued was 'bloodstained' (Tac. *Ann.* 1.10.4). Criticisms did not spare Augustus' personal life, accusing him of adulterously carrying off a pregnant Livia, who became 'a real catastrophe to the nation'. Augustus even wanted himself venerated in temples (*Ann.* 1.10.6). Far from having the good of Rome as his driving motivation, he selfishly chose Tiberius as his heir because Tiberius' 'cruelty and arrogance' would make Augustus seem more glorious in comparison (*Ann.* 1.10.7; *contra* Vell. 2.104.1; Suet. *Tib.* 21.3)

Octavian was an opportunist. Whilst there are always elements of chance at work in historical affairs, he both created opportunities and took advantage of those that presented themselves. The outcome was never preordained nor self-evident. His supremacy was not assured until Actium, a battle which both decided the war and became 'the foundation myth of the

Augustan Principate' (Lange 2021: 11), a 'secular miracle' (Zanker 1988: 84). Thereafter, Augustus continually invented and reinvented himself, acting and reacting in response to pressing needs. 'Tacitus expresses an awareness, if not a detailed analysis, of how Augustus changed and why he kept changing' (Pagán 2020: 382). Johnson (1973: 172) correctly cautions against assuming, 'a stability for the regime and a constancy of attitude towards the regime that did not exist'.

To what extent Tacitus, writing a century after Augustus' death, accurately reflects contemporary attitudes (Shotter 1967: 174) or, more probably, reflects his experiences under Domitian (von Fritz 1957: 78) or the accession of Hadrian (Syme 1958: 481) or simply highlights his conviction that the Principate was founded on dissimulation and hypocrisy (Walker 1952: 242) is difficult to determine. There is no doubt, however, that a variety of opinions of Augustus did exist and, indeed, may have changed over the long period during which Augustus reigned. As Tacitus observes, 'Actium had been won before the younger men were born. Even most of the older generation had come into a world of civil wars. Practically no one had ever seen truly Republican government' (*Ann*. 1.4; Harlow and Laurence 2017: 128-29). By the time of Augustus' death 'five out of six inhabitants of the empire were unable to remember a time when he had not been their sole ruler' (Scheidel 1999: 280). Augustus' position in the state had become the status quo.

Consolidation

With the military threat eliminated, Octavian's attention turned towards consolidation of the state and his ongoing primacy. Suetonius claims that Augustus twice 'seriously thought of restoring the Republican Constitution' (*Aug*. 28.1). The first occasion was 'immediately after the fall of Antony'. It is hard to believe that, if such thoughts did cross Octavian's mind, they were anything more than a momentary whim. On the threshold of a sustained level of power

and influence, Octavian would simply not have countenanced handing back power to the Senate, thereby risking further discord arising from competing rivalries (Rich 2015: 111). Neither would he risk his own safety. On the other hand, he did not wish to share Julius Caesar's fate and knew full well that the idea of a king was inimical to the Romans.

A clear motif of *recusatio* runs through the *Res Gestae*, which is later echoed in the accession of Tiberius. Augustus states that he refused several triumphs (*RG* 4.1), rejected the dictatorship, and demands that he be consul for life pressed on him by both the People and the Senate (5.1, 5.3) and insists that, although offered a position as supervisor of morals in 19, 18 and 11 BC, 'I would not accept any office inconsistent with the custom of our ancestors' (6.1). While Lepidus was alive, Augustus would not entertain being *pontifex maximus* (10.2). He did not put his name on buildings he restored (20.1). The emphasis here is on modesty and avoiding the appearance of autocracy.

These twin concepts, an affected reluctance to take power and an adherence to strictly Republican forms, were the defining characteristics of Augustus' political settlements. On 13 January 27 BC Octavian, in a lengthy speech in the Senate, gave back his powers (Dio 53.2.5-17.1). Rather than accept this, senators begged him to maintain his authority. On the pretext of military necessity, Octavian would now govern through legates those provinces where unrest persisted i.e. Spain, Gaul (except for Gallia Narbonensis), Syria, Cilicia, and Egypt, which he would administer directly. The remaining provinces were to be the 'people's provinces', governed by senatorial appointees chosen by lot (Dio 53.13.6). Despite Octavian's pretences, the real intention of these arrangements was to disarm the Senate by gathering all the armies under his control (Dio 53.12.3). This distribution of provinces was to be for a ten-year period, although if his provinces were pacified before this time, Octavian would relinquish control back to the Senate (Dio 53.13.1). Unsurprisingly, this never happened and renewals of his *imperium* at the designated time of expiry became routine until

his death: ‘the emergency and the accompanying powers had both become permanent’ (Rich 2012: 87).

Three days later, Octavian was given the title ‘Augustus’ (Suet. *Aug*. 7.2; Hekster 2017: 55). Romulus had been considered, designating Octavian a second founder of Rome, however, Romulus had been a monarch, and had murdered his brother. Far better a name with religious, rather than political overtones. Augustus had significantly strengthened his position: ‘He got everything without having to give up anything’ (Eder 2005: 27). Dio observes, ‘In this way, the power of both people and senate passed entirely into the hands of Augustus and from this time, there was, strictly speaking, a monarchy’ (53.17.1).

The Principate evolved over time. Augustus showed deference to the Senate, even as he steadily concentrated more control in his own hands (Salmon 1956: 477-480; Galinsky 2012: 185). Aware that his holding the consulship every year stifled competition for the office and embittered the *nobiles*, in 23 BC Augustus resigned the consulship (his eleventh). He was granted tribunician *potestas* renewable annually, which he held until his death in AD 14 (*RG* 4.4; Dio 53.32.5), including the right to bring measures before the Senate. Tacitus (*Ann*. 3.56.1-2) claims that Augustus emphasised possession of the ‘tribune’s authority’, thereby downplaying his more significant powers, clearly appreciating the symbolic value of signalling to the *plebs* that he would champion their causes (Jones 1951: 116). Augustus still maintained *imperium* as governor of the provinces previously entrusted to him; now, he was granted *imperium proconsulare maius* in any Roman territory (Dio 53.32.5), including retaining his *imperium* in Rome itself.

While he could claim that all these powers were Republican and that each had precedent, this was misleading. Augustus was not entitled to be a tribune because he was a patrician. Tribunes did not command armies. Further, nobody before Augustus had held such a

combination of powers at once, nor for as long. Augustus, through skilful political manoeuvring and a compliant Senate had, in many cases, 'obtained the functions and trappings belonging to an office without holding the office himself' (Gruen 2005: 43), which he never relinquished, effectively ceding him de facto monarchy. As Vervaet (2010: 165) argues, the principate was founded on public and private lies.

Augustus placed great emphasis on his prestige. In the *Res Gestae* he summarises his achievement,

> In my sixth and seventh consulship after I had extinguished civil wars, and when with universal consent I was in complete control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my power to the dominion of the Senate and People of Rome…After this time I exceeded all in influence, although I possessed no more official power than others who were my colleagues in the several magistracies (34.1, 34.3).

Velleius (2.89.2-6) similarly emphasises restoration, including 'the old traditional form of *res publica*' (2.89.3), a return to a sense of normality after civil war (2.90.1; Lange 2020: 145-146). Augustus' claim seemingly suggests that his power relies on the respect other Romans have for him based on the demonstrated excellence of his character and his many achievements, including his military successes. He is merely 'first among equals', ruling through informal influence and moral authority. Rowe (2013: 15) argues that the conventional reading of the passage is mistaken. This is not a claim that Augustus' real power was 'extra-constitutional', rather it places emphasis on his collegiality – even though I clearly surpass all in *auctoritas*, this is of no import because I have no more *potestas* than others. Rowe (2021: 144-45) further suggests that throughout the *Res Gestae* 'Augustus portrays his whole public career as collegial [1.3, 1.4, 6.2, 7.1, 34.3], except for temporary emergencies' [1.1, 25.2, 34.1, 5.2].

Augustus and the Army

While the constitutional arrangements provided a cloak of legality over Augustus' exercise of executive power, the foundation of his supremacy was military. 'If the *imperium* were withdrawn, he could still rely on that power better called by the sinister word *potentia i*n this context: soldiers would follow him whatever the Senate said, as they had already shown' (Levick 2010: 71). After Actium, Augustus discharged 300,000 soldiers, assigning land, or giving monetary bonuses (*RG* 3.3). With the 28 remaining legions, which included some of Antony's veterans as well as his own troops, he created a standing professional army based in the provinces, protecting the frontiers, and standardised the length of service in 13 BC (Dio 54.25), raising this in AD 5 (Dio 55.23). Augustus boasted of the fact that he purchased the land on which to settle veterans (as opposed to confiscating it) in 30 BC and 14 BC (*RG* 16.1), 'the first and only one to have done this'. He set up military colonies across the empire, including 28 in Italy (*RG* 28) and gave payouts (*praemia*) at the end of service in 7, 6, 4, 3, and 2 BC amounting to 400,000,000 sesterces (*RG* 16.2). To meet the financial impost of the retirement bonuses given to 4,000-5,000 soldiers a year, where each man was paid 12,000 sesterces (Dio 55.23), the 'equivalent of over 13 years' pay' (Gilliver 2007: 187), Augustus established the *aerarium militare* in AD 6, funded through 'additional taxation' (Suet. *Aug.* 49.2). Although Augustus personally contributed 170,000,000 sesterces (*RG* 17.2) and allowed donations from cities and client kings, he would not allow private citizens to offer any endowments to this fund (Dio 55.25.3). The emphasis on personal loyalty and the bond with the emperor was explicit; Augustus had recruited most of the army (Ridley 2005: 51), he guaranteed their pay, the coinage used to physically pay the soldiers featured his image and self-presentation (Keppie 1985: 149) and he ensured that their promised retirement benefits were honoured. The troops were effectively Augustus' clients (von Premerstein 1937: 100),

rather than behoven to their general, and therefore less likely to join any revolt (Raaflaub 2009: 209; Syme 1939: 352, 376, 404).

Augustus also sought to ensure loyalty through the *sacramentum* which required soldiers and their commanders to swear personal allegiance to the emperor at an annual ceremony (Tac. *Hist.* 1.55). Even soldiers stationed in the provinces administered by the Senate took the oath to the *princeps* (Raaflaub 2009: 211). The imperial portrait (*imago*) was prominent in every camp (Tac. *Ann*. 1.39) and in the late Augustan period, camps which were long established had a statue of the emperor in the *praetorium* (Bleicken 2015: 499). Augustus was also generous with awards and decorations, awarding 'silver and gold ornaments and collars rather than mural crowns' (Suet. *Aug*. 25.2).

Augustus aimed to cement his hold on power and to prevent the possible rise of a military rival. Only three legions were stationed in provinces not commanded by appointees of Augustus: in Africa, Macedonia, and Illyricum. The other legates were directly appointed by the *princeps*: relatives, loyalists, and a significant number of *novi homines* (Syme 1939: 327; Campbell 1984: 328; Ridley 2005: 69-70; cf. Raaflaub 2009: 218-220). Commands were usually short, two or three years, and commanders waited years between appointments. Augustus wanted men capable of winning victories, yet who would not challenge him nor attempt to seize power. Whereas he had regularly bestowed triumphs before 19 BC (Dio 54.12.1; Beard 2007: 68-69, 302), after this date, only Tiberius was afforded the honour; in 7 BC (Dio 55.6.8) and in AD 12 (Vell. 2.121). Agrippa, ever the loyal lieutenant, had refused triumphs he was offered, perhaps persuading Augustus towards this policy (Dio 48.49.4, 54.11.6, 54.24.7-8; Tan 2019: 195-196; Flower 2020: 16). Augustus was cognisant that 'the triumph was so prestigious that no-one outside the imperial family should be allowed to share it' (Campbell 1984: 138-39). Tacitus notes a similar attitude under Domitian: 'Talents in other directions could at a pinch be ignored; but the qualities of a good general should be the

monopoly of the emperor' (*Agr.* 39.2; Purcell 1996: 795). Ultimately, the size of the army after Actium and the nature of its command was dictated by Augustus' fears of potential military rivals and his determination to prevent armed usurpation.

The best laid plans

Efforts to ensure a smooth succession proved much more challenging. While Augustus strenuously avoided the impression of a heritable autocracy, he was both *pater patriae* (*RG* 35.1), which implied a patriarchal role over the state, and head of his own family, which meant passing on at his death enormous resources and a huge degree of influence which would position his heir for political prominence (Stevenson 2013: 119). While the focus had initially been on Augustus himself, the *domus Augusta* had become increasingly identified with the Roman state. Augustus was 'obsessed' (Eck 2007: 157) with the need for a descendant linked by blood to succeed him. His bout of near fatal illness in 23 BC saw him hand his signet ring to Agrippa, presumably designating him as heir (Suet. *Aug.* 28.1; Tac. *Ann*. 2.43.2; Dio 53.30.1-3; Levick 1976: 83; Corbett 1974: 89). In this instance, Augustus chose proven competence over blood ties, a choice rarely made by any emperor thereafter. On his recovery, Augustus downplayed any dynastic intentions (Dio 53.31.1-4; cf. Crook 1996: 84-85; Severy 2003: 69), emphasising his ongoing respect for law and tradition, which, in terms of his desire for a political successor 'in his own family and of his own blood' (Syme 1939: 341), was clearly disingenuous. To what extent such protestations were believed is doubtful; 'events of 27 and 23 moved the Roman state in the direction of monarchy, not away from it, and no-one of the time thought otherwise' Millar (1973: 50).

Augustus arranged a series of endogamous marriages to facilitate his succession plans. He had no biological son and his marriage to Livia was childless. Augustus' daughter, Julia, was pivotal to his ruthless manipulation of family to achieve his aims. In 25 BC, at the age of

fourteen she was married to a relative three years her senior: Marcellus, the son of Augustus' sister, Octavia (Dio 53.27.5). Augustus likely planned to later adopt any male offspring (Simpson 2008: 361). After Marcellus' death in 23 BC, Augustus' hopes centred on Julia's marriage to Agrippa in 21 BC which produced three sons, Gaius (born 20 BC), Lucius (born 17 BC) and Agrippa Postumus (born 12 BC) and two daughters, Julia the Younger and Agrippina the Elder.

Augustus symbolically adopted both Gaius and Lucius in 17 BC, suggesting they would be groomed as his heirs, taking the name 'Julius Caesar' (Suet. *Aug*. 64.1; Tac. *Ann.* 1.3; Dio 54.8.5, 54.18.1; Vell. 2.96.1). The adoption of his grandsons as infants was unusual, providing clear evidence of dynastic intent (Dio 54.18.1; Galinsky 1996: 43; Stevenson 2013: 128). Although a Roman noble could adopt an heir outside a blood relative, Augustus could not realistically adopt Agrippa. A principle of Roman adoption was that the relationship 'should, as far as possible, replicate nature' (Cic. *Dom.* 14.36; Lindsay 2010: 358). As Agrippa was married to Julia, had Augustus adopted him, the marriage would be deemed incestuous unless Agrippa divorced her; an unlikely demand, given Augustus' public stance as a protector of marriage and traditional morals (Simpson 1996: 329; Lindsay 2009: 198).

After Agrippa's death, Augustus' stepson, Tiberius, was compelled to divorce his much loved, pregnant wife, Vipsania, (Suet. *Tib.* 7.2-3; Dio 54.31.1-2), to marry Julia, thus effectively becoming protector of 'all the possible heirs, the children of Julia, his own son Drusus, and his nephew [Germanicus]' (Corbett 1974: 88)**.** He later withdrew to Rhodes, upset both by Julia's infidelities and the behaviour of Gaius' supporters (Suet. *Tib.* 10–11; Tac. *Ann*. 1.4, 1.53, 4.57; Vell. 2.99.2; Dio 55.9.5–7; Levick 1976: 37-39; Alston 2014: 88-89), shunning both Rome and public life.

Augustus' plans were thwarted, in part because he outlived potential successors. Gaius died in Lycia in AD 2, Lucius eighteen months later at Marseilles (Dio 55.10a.8-9; Vell. 2.102.3). Julia the Elder (2 BC) and her daughter (AD 8) were exiled for 'indulging in every sort of vice' (Suet. *Aug*. 65.1-2; Dio 55.10.12-16; Tac. *Ann*. 4.71; Norwood 1963: 154). Augustus was forced to turn to Tiberius, who had returned to Rome in 1 BC having promised to play no further part in politics (Suet. *Tib.* 11) and adopted him in June AD 4. Augustus also adopted Agrippa Postumus, while Tiberius was forced to adopt Germanicus (Suet. *Aug.* 65.1, *Tib.* 15.2, 21.2-3, *Cal.* 1.1, 4.1; Dio 55.13.2; Vell. 2.103.1-104.2, 2.112.7; Tac. *Ann.* 1.3, 4.57), although Tiberius already had a son of his own blood, Drusus. Germanicus was a direct descendant of Augustus, too young at this stage to be *princeps*. Gruen (2005: 48) argues that Augustus was not denigrating Tiberius, nor necessarily designating Germanicus as a future successor, instead uniting the pair, thus reducing the possibility of factions being formed in the imperial household, although it seems more likely that he was determined to promote the eventual succession of a 'dream ticket' (Drinkwater 2019: 173) of blood heirs: his grandnephew, Germanicus and his granddaughter, Agrippina the Elder.

Agrippa Postumus was disinherited and exiled in AD 7 (Vell. 2.112.7; Tac. *Ann.* 1.3–4, 1.6; Suet. *Aug.* 51, 65, *Tib.* 15; Dio 55.22.4, 55.32.2; Plin. *NH* 7.150). In contrast, in the decade following his adoption, Tiberius campaigned successfully in Germany, suppressed rebels in Pannonia, and led victorious armies on the Rhine. When Augustus finally died, Tiberius was the logical successor, establishing a model of the emperor designating his successor through adopting him, entrusting him with tasks which would allow him to build a public reputation and gradually investing him with powers.

Implications

While Augustus lived, he was both adaptable and pragmatic. He avoided explicit mentions of succession, expressing annoyance at honours voted to Gaius and Lucius and insisting that they prove themselves worthy (Suet. *Aug.* 56.2; Dio 54.27.1, 55.9.1-8). Nonetheless, he clearly desired that his legacy be assured by choosing an heir to act as *paterfamilias* for his family and, by extension, the state. Any successor needed to be able to exercise control over the army, please the people and maintain a working relationship with the Senate. The method of succession was flawed from its inception by the tension between these competing demands.

Several questions become obvious.

i. Augustus could pass on his possessions and his wealth in his will. As happened when he became Caesar's heir, there would also be a transfer of loyalties from clients to the new *patronus*. On the other hand, *auctoritas* could not be inherited nor could any magistracy. There was no official Republican position of *princeps* to hand on. Gruen (2005: 34) argues that 'Augustus never occupied a post called the Principate, nor did he exercise an office to which the title *princeps* was attached.' How can a system based on the prestige of a remarkable individual transfer power to others while still ensuring stability i.e. smooth transition of power?

ii. Given that the system evolves to become virtually a hereditary monarchy, how does it cope with a *princeps* who is inexperienced, inept, vicious, disturbed, or indifferent? Will this result in the overthrow of not just the individual ruler but the Principate itself?

iii. What happens when a *princeps* dies before he can designate a successor?

Opposition to Augustus

There were signs of potential disruption. Despite his claims that he acted with universal consent, there were conspiracies against Augustus led by M. Aemilius Lepidus in 30 BC (Vell. 2.88.1-3; App. *BC.* 4.50.217-219), by L. Murena and Fannius Caepio (Vell. 2.91.2) in 22 BC and by Egnatius Rufus in 19 BC (Vell. 2.91-3-4). Seneca mentions these and describes a later conspiracy centred on Julia and 'all the noble youths who were bound to her by adultery as by a sacred oath' (*Brev.* 4.5, *Clem.* 1.9.6) as do Pliny *(HN* 7.149), Suetonius (*Aug.* 19.1) and Dio (54.15.1-4). Dio also reports anonymous plots in 19 and 9 BC (55.4.3).

It became dangerous to be a man of high rank and 'deliberately or not' test the boundaries of 'self-advertisement' and the 'limits of freedom of action' (Raaflaub and Samons 1990: 425). M. Licinius Crassus, although awarded a triumph in 27 BC, was denied the *spolia optima* on a technicality. Livy clearly regards Augustus' evidence as spurious (4.20.7; Badian 2011: 25-27; Vervaet 2017: 106). C. Cornelius Gallus, the first prefect of Egypt, placed inscriptions on pyramids celebrating his successes and erected statues of himself (Dio 53.23.5). Accused of disrespect (Ovid *Trist.* 2.445-446; Suet. *Aug.* 66.2) he was recalled, formally lost the emperor's friendship, was indicted by the Senate, and committed suicide, likely in 27 BC (Dio 53.23.5-53.24.3). Augustus was reinforcing that the imperial family was to have a monopoly on military glory. This no doubt fed some degree of resentment. There were also, even in Augustus' time, aspects of succession which could trigger a crisis.

The most dangerous conspiracies for future emperors were often those within the imperial household itself. It is difficult to determine to what extent Julia's exile in 2 BC and the death of Iullus, Mark Antony's son, was due to adultery as claimed or whether this was 'part of a plot against the monarchy' (Dio 54.10.15). Tacitus (*Ann*. 1.10, 1.53, 3.18, 3.24, 4.44), Suetonius (*Aug.* 19.1, 65.1-5, 101.3, *Tib.* 11.4) and Velleius (2.100.2-5) concentrate on

immorality rather than conspiracy. On the other hand, the charges may suggest 'power struggles within the imperial family', an attempt 'to influence the succession, the designated successors, and, possibly, the future course of the Principate' (Raaflaub and Samons 1990: 431). These accusations may accurately reflect Julia's promiscuous behaviour; they may be the misogynistic slurs of political enemies against an innocent woman; they may exemplify Julia's rebellion against the moral conservatism of the Augustan regime; or they may show that Julia cemented a political pact with leading aristocrats through sex (Alston 2014: 90). It is almost impossible to divorce the political from the personal. Lacey (1980: 139-141) argues that Julia's adulterous tendencies were well known amongst her friends (Macrob. *Sat.* 2.5.7), and that Augustus was forced to respond to Julia's behaviour in 2 BC because opposition by leading *nobiles* to his promotion of Gaius and Lucius as effectively princes and dynastic heirs, in a royal family whose destiny was intertwined with Rome itself, prompted anonymous rumours that the boys were, in fact, not Agrippa's children at all. If they were bastards, or regarded as such, this would be devastating for Augustus' succession plans. Augustus wanted focus on the scandal of 2 BC, not scrutiny of Julia's earlier behaviour.

Scandals surrounding Julia the Younger and L. Aemilius Paullus, her husband, and the exile of Agrippa Postumus for boorish behaviour are likewise presented as moral deficiencies, which could merely be pretexts, when husband and wife may, instead, have been part of a conspiracy. There seems to have been a scheme to free Agrippa Postumus and Julia the Elder from exile and to take them 'to the armies' (Suet. *Aug.* 19.2, cf. 65.4; Vell. 2.112.7; Tac. *Ann.* 1.3.4; Dio 55.32.1). The implications of this for Tiberius' succession will be discussed in the next chapter. While a palace revolution was unlikely to occur before Augustus' death, the presence of factions in the royal family vying for influence and control, each with varying groups of supporters outside the immediate family who hoped to benefit from the succession of their candidate, created the possibility of instability and crisis.

The Legions

While Augustus tried to take the army and its officers out of politics, the army remained a personal army, albeit loyal to the *princeps* (Bleicken 2015: 553). This loyalty depended to a large degree on the way the *patronus* cared for the soldiers. While Caesar had doubled the soldiers' pay, increasing it to 225 *denarii* a year (Suet. *Iul.* 26), it was not adjusted again until Domitian's principate; 'service was long; pay became more and more insufficient' (Mann 1983: 49). Donatives came to be expected by the troops 'taken as a right, no longer as an exceptional and voluntary gift…a precondition of loyalty' (Raaflaub 2009: 214-15). Discipline was harsh, some officers were corrupt. There was, at times, a perfect storm of circumstances to inspire mutiny. In 19 BC soldiers refused to follow Agrippa's orders in Spain (Dio 54.11.3). There was anger over the length of service and the sum received on discharge which threatened to spill over into violence in 13 BC (54.25.5), further demands for reform in AD 5 (55.23). In Dalmatia in AD 9, Tiberius was afraid that his army would mutiny and decided to split his force into three corps (56.12.2). After the 'disaster which had befallen Varus…no men of military age proved willing to be conscripted', forcing Augustus to draw lots, disenfranchising every fifth man under thirty-five, even executing some (56.23.2-3). Veterans were also selected to re-enlist by lot, and freedmen were enlisted.

The loyalty of the army to the *princeps* could neither be guaranteed nor assumed. Ensuring the promotion of trustworthy leaders and closely supervising their actions could only go so far. The emperor was far away in Rome. Augustus was conscious of being a visible presence in the provinces, a practice later emulated by Trajan and Hadrian; 'he [Augustus] inspected every province except Sardinia and Africa' (Suet. *Aug.* 47; Syme 1939: 388; Galinsky 1996: 368). There were no feelings of strong loyalty to the Senate amongst the soldiery. Moreover, Augustus himself had risen to power through force of arms and his example remained powerful, despite his reforms. Soldiers still relied extensively on local commanders for their

welfare and could be persuaded to support individual generals in a revolt, particularly if they felt that the reigning emperor was unwilling to listen to and accede to their demands. Such revolts were few and unsuccessful until AD 69 when the Roman Empire was beset by civil wars.

The Praetorian Guard

Another Augustan innovation was also to become a catalyst of later succession crises. Augustus installed military units in the city, thus ignoring regulations that kept armed soldiers outside the *pomerium* (Rüpke 1990: 29, 35-36, 55-57). A permanent military presence could be justified by Augustus as guarantors of public safety and added security for both emperor and wider population. To what extent this *militia in urbe* was regarded as a threat or a nuisance by the public is much more open to question. As Busch (2007: 316) suggests, 'It is inevitable that these troops, as an interacting social group, had an impact on everyday life.' Augustus instituted a *praetoriae cohortes* of 4500, organised as nine cohorts (Tac. *Ann.* 4.5; Kennedy (1978: 275-276) shows that Dio's claim of ten (55.24.6) is anachronistic), 1500 soldiers in units of *cohortes urbanae* to act as a regular police force (Tac. *Ann*. 1.8, 4.5; Suet. *Aug*. 101) and a paramilitary state fire brigade (*cohortes vigilum*) of 3500 (Dio 55.26.5), which was organised in AD 6. There was also a personal bodyguard of German cavalryman (*Germani corporis custodes*) numbering 500 (Suet. *Aug.* 49.1). Presumably, it was believed that, as foreigners, they would be immune from the partisan nature of Roman politics. The number of troops in Rome was only to increase under future emperors; estimates from the time of Augustus suggest 1: 125-100, rising to 1: 45-25 from the reign of Severus (Eaton 2020: 1).

Republican precedents could not disguise the fact that this significant military presence in the city was a visible sign of the emperor's power and a significant departure from Republican

norms. That power was further consolidated after the Guard was moved in AD 23 to a camp on the Viminal Hill (Tac. *Ann*. 4.2). Under Augustus only three cohorts were accommodated within the city limits, the others outside Rome (Suet. *Aug.* 49.1), perhaps in a nod towards Republican tradition of a city free from military presence (Rollinger 2023: 228-229), however, concentrating them in a fortified camp increased their potential for political influence. There were no other military forces in Italy apart from two fleets at Ravenna and Misenum (Tac. *Ann.* 4.5).

Augustus endeavoured to ensure the Praetorians' loyalty. They were paid more than regular soldiers (Dio 53.11.5) and had a shorter length of service before their pension; four years less than a legionary. This preferential treatment is further evident in Augustus' will (Suet. *Aug.* 101; Tac. *Ann.* 1.8) where he bequeathed a thousand sesterces to each guardsman, five hundred to each of the urban cohorts and three hundred to every citizen soldier. In 2 BC Augustus established a command structure for the Praetorians of two equestrian prefects (Eaton 2020: 8). The office of *praefectus praetorio*, subsequently increased in political influence becoming pivotal in the making and unmaking of emperors. The position was 'military in rank, political in significance' (Syme 1958: 591). The Praetorians would need careful management. Their ongoing loyalty, like that of the army itself, could not be taken for granted.

Conclusion

Augustus' quest for a political successor mirrored the strategies used by noble families to ensure a male heir. Rome was a patrilineal society; only a son could inherit, become head of the family, and ensure continuity of the family line. For those without a natural born son, adoption of a close relation allowed the transmission of 'the name, the wealth, and the family rites of his adopter' (Cic. *Dom*. 35; Corbier 1991: 63). The adopter was normally elderly, the

adoptee usually already an adult and presumably capable of acting as *pater familias*. While Roman law did not allow political office to be inherited, inheriting Augustus' wealth and possessions and the reflected prestige of the imperial family positioned his heir for political prominence, albeit the Senate needed to pass the *lex de imperio* which legitimated a new emperor. Most of the emperors who followed Augustus also resorted to adopting a successor because they had no living sons. These adoption practices showed considerable flexibility. Augustus adopted his grandsons, Antoninus Pius his son-in-law, Galba adopted Piso, a young man from a distinguished family, rather than a blood relative, Trajan was not related to Nerva, chosen because of his military capabilities.

Augustus' attempts to determine his successor (rather than leave events following his death to the whims of the Senate) also highlighted the difficulties involved in adequately preparing a future *princeps* for the role. In an ideal world, the successor would live to adulthood, achieve elected office, serve as consul, acquire military and diplomatic experience, have successfully commanded an army, perhaps governed a province, and be familiar with the shifting loyalties and behind the scenes manoeuvring of Roman politics. This could hardly be achieved in less than a decade (Grainger 2020: 10, 13), meaning a man would not be *princeps* until his mid-30s at the earliest. As the deaths of Gaius and Lucius in foreign climes showed, acquiring these experiences could be dangerous. Moreover, a clearly designated successor was a potential target of conspiracies to replace him, while a trained successor waiting in the wings posed the risk to the incumbent that he would become impatient and precipitate his father's demise (Grainger 2020: 19). On the other hand, an untrained successor, particularly if young and inexperienced, risked disaster. After the ritual formula to adopt Tiberius, Augustus added a phrase noting that he did this for the good of the state (Vell. 2.104.1). Rather than denigrating Tiberius as the last man standing, Augustus was reinforcing that he had chosen a

capable, experienced adult to succeed him, rather than the untrained, unruly Agrippa Postumus (Instinsky 1966; 332; Seager 2005: 31).

Rome never had a written constitution. Instead, there was a reliance on custom, precedent and legislation which was tweaked to meet the needs of the moment. The *princeps* expanded the limits of this flexibility. Augustus well understood the sheer level of war weariness which afflicted all classes in Rome. Tacitus notes, 'He seduced the army with bonuses, and his cheap food policy was successful bait for civilians. Indeed, he attracted everybody's goodwill by the enjoyable gift of peace' (*Ann.* 1.2). Likewise, he recognised the importance that names, titles and symbols played in Roman politics. Augustus, and future emperors, paraded their virtues 'on coins and monumental sculpture, in inscriptions and panegyric' (Ware 2014: 87). In his self-presentation, Augustus emphasised the imperial virtues inscribed on a Golden Shield presented to him by the Senate, which affirmed his *virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia* and *pietas erga patriam* (*RG 3*4.2; Wallace-Hadrill 1981: 300). Art and architecture linked the Julian family with Rome's legendary past and glorified the present. A wide range of propaganda asserted that Augustus was the *auctor* of peace and prosperity (Suet. *Aug.* 28.2), a leader who promoted a general renewal of Rome beyond the field of politics, extending to a religious and moral revitalisation.

Augustus still needed the Senate. They provided the continuity necessary to any sense of a restored Republic: the elected magistrates, especially the consuls, the generals, the provincial governors. The Senate's traditional role and collective prestige added weight to the accumulation of honours which marked Augustus' career and played a 'crucial role in shaping the structures and images of the monarchy' (Rich 1998: 127). While the award of the *corona civica* (*RG* 34.2) emphasised Augustus' military victory and fulfilment of his filial duty as avenger of Caesar, the inscriptions on the *clupeus* were not merely an acknowledgement of Augustus' virtues but a reinforcement of the qualities the Senate expected him to continue to

display (Welch 2019: 304); a social contract between the first citizen and *senatus populusque Romanus* (296). The Fasti Capitolini erected by the Senate display a similar emphasis on continuity. The listing of every man who had ever been consul, and a list of those who had ever celebrated a triumph was a reminder that Augustus stood on the shoulders of the great men who had come before him. While Augustus deserved his accolades, he was expected to continue to act this way in the future (Russell 2019: 180). Ultimately, the Senate was 'the only body which could provide continuity between the reigns of individual emperors, and legitimacy to the new successor' (178).

Moreover, the Senate was to play a critical role in determining the legacy of an emperor. Only the Senate could formally vote to have the deceased apotheosised; the honour could not be decreed by the new *princeps*. Whether his predecessor received the title *divus* and was voted the three main parts of the appropriate imperial cult (a temple, a priest and a priestly college) ultimately depended on the Senate, thereby maintaining its role as the chief religious authority of the state. Later emperors, whom the Senate regarded as tyrants, had their memory officially damned. The deceased emperor was thus subject to a formalised posthumous judgement based on the merits of his reign, his character and behaviour, including whether he had acted as a 'good' senator would (App. *BC* 2.617-618), the Senate 'symbolically enacting its role of collective superiority over one of its members' (Price 1987: 86-87). Only a virtuous emperor was recognised as worthy of a place in heaven.

Roman politics was not based on a hereditary principle. Only election created magistrates and only ex-magistrates could sit in the Senate. Augustus' powers were not arbitrary. The Senate, as an institution, acknowledged Augustus' leadership based on his personal qualities and demonstrated excellence. At no stage did this equate to an endorsement that he could simply choose a relative as his political successor. No constitutional mechanism enabled the transfer of power from one emperor to another. 'Nothing about 'succession' was ever made explicit

by Augustus, or the Senate and People – there were no edicts, no decrees, no laws about the succession to Augustus' (Osgood 2013: 25). There were no recognised criteria on what constituted an eligible candidate for emperor. While the Principate was an increasingly personal exercise of power, the 'fiction' that the *princeps* was 'the first magistrate in a restored Republic' created a political system which invited violence as 'any successful senator was a potential emperor' (Weisweiler 2020: 50).

Chapter Two

> 'The death of the *princeps* Augustus…created a fundamental and unprecedented political problem: who is to replace the dead leader and, more importantly, what precisely is being replaced?' (Corbeill 2004: 144)

When Augustus died, Tiberius 'legally became the *pater familias* and conceptually became the *Pater Patriae'* (Severy 2003: 205*),* consolidating the unique position constructed through Augustus' political wiles as a dynastic institution – 'from *princeps* to Principate' (Vout 2013: 59). Tiberius was well qualified. He had begun his military career at the age of sixteen, had been sent to Germany by Augustus nine times and had won great renown (Tac. *Ann.* 2.26.3). Augustus had not left Italy since 8 BC (Garzetti 1974: 11-12), leaving Tiberius 'the executive arm, in whose person Augustus wages war' (Seager 2013: 44). Tiberius had been invested with *tribunicia potestas* (Vell. 2.103.3; Tac. *Ann*. 1.10; Suet. *Tib*. 16.1; Dio 55.13.2, 56.28.1), while in AD 13 a consular law initiated by Augustus gave Tiberius *imperium proconsulare maius* (Suet. *Tib*. 21.1; Stevenson 2013: 137; cf. Vell. 2.121.3). Tiberius' powers were the equal of Augustus'. It was clear that he was the intended successor (Seager 2005: 37-39). Although Kornemann (1930: 5) claims that Augustus 'conceived the Principate…as a dual rule by means of the double occupation of the highest position, i.e. as a double principate', this *doppelprinzipat* is exaggerated. Augustus' solution to the ills of the Roman world was essentially based on the various acceptance groups conferring power on one pre-eminent individual, not inviting an eventual competition for sole power between co-rulers. The *princeps* could co-opt helpers as needed, but these were never equal partners (Charlesworth 1933a: 144).

On Augustus' death, even before the will was read, Tiberius took steps to impose his authority, issuing the imperial watchword (demonstrating that he was the new supreme commander (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.7; Eaton 2011: 56), both symbolically and in practice), while also sending letters to the armies and provincial governors (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.5; Dio 57.2.1). Both

consuls, as well as the Praetorian Prefect and the Prefect of the Grain Supply, swore an oath of loyalty to Tiberius, then 'Senate, army and people' likewise (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.2; Timpe 1962: 38-40, 65). His accession seemed mere formality, the continuation of Augustus' policies guaranteed, peace and stability assured.

The Death of Agrippa Postumus

The ancient literary sources trace the evils of Tiberius' regime to its first acts. Tacitus writes that the murder of Agrippa Postumus was the 'new reign's first crime' (*Ann*. 1.6.1), foreshadowing that other crimes would follow. Tiberius said nothing in the Senate, 'pretending the orders came from Augustus' (*Ann*. 1.6.2). In fact, insists Tacitus, the real culprits were Tiberius and Livia (*Ann*. 1.6.4). This is consistent with two themes which recur throughout Tacitus' account of this period; Tiberius is a hypocrite who repeatedly hides his real thoughts and feelings behind a mask of pretence, while Livia has come to exercise an extraordinary influence over first Augustus, then later, Tiberius. Tacitus suggests that she may have positioned Tiberius for the succession by arranging the deaths of Gaius and Lucius (*Ann*. 1.3.3), then pushing Augustus to exile Agrippa Postumus (*Ann*. 1.3.4). Some suspected that Livia poisoned Augustus (*Ann.* 1.5.1; Dio 56.30.1-2; Barrett 2002: 66-68).

Suetonius also records rumours regarding the letter which ordered Agrippa's death – some suggested Augustus left it, to be sent to Planasia on his death, others that Livia wrote it in Augustus' name while Tiberius may or may not have known. Regardless, Tiberius claimed that he had not issued such an order and threatened an inquiry in the Senate (*Tib*. 22). Dio blames Tiberius for Agrippa's death who, although adamant that he had given no orders, suspiciously did not punish the perpetrator and allowed rumours to fester, including that the centurion guarding him had slain Agrippa on his own initiative (57.3.5-6), which seems

highly unlikely. Velleius does not delve into details, merely noting that Agrippa 'met the end which his madness deserved' (2.112.7).

There seem obvious issues with attributing blame to Tiberius. If he received the news privately, as surely no messenger would be so indiscreet as to deliver such a message in front of witnesses, there would be no benefit to Tiberius in demanding an inquiry in the Senate. Pettinger (2012: 177-179) argues that Tiberius' surprise was genuine, and that the order came not from Tiberius, nor Augustus, originating from Sallustius Crispus, Augustus' trusted advisor. Other modern scholars lay blame on a variety of suspects. Hohl (1935: 352-355) suggests that Augustus took precautions to ensure Tiberius' smooth succession, entrusting Crispus with the task. A critical piece of evidence is that Augustus did not mention Agrippa in his will (finalised in April AD 13), knowing that Agrippa would not be alive to receive any bequest (Seager 2005: 41). Pappano (1941: 43-44) believes that the letter ordering the execution must have had Tiberius' seal, however, it was actually sent by Livia and Crispus. Allen (1947: 131-134) proposes an ingenious theory: Agrippa died of natural causes. Tales of his murder are the work of a faction led by Agrippina, designed to discredit Tiberius. Detweiler (1970: 295) returns to the ancient sources, endorsing Tacitus' condemnation of Tiberius and Livia. Shotter (1971: 1120, 1122-23) believes that Tiberius was responsible, as Tiberius feared Agrippa and was sensitive to rumours.

While it seems impossible to determine who gave the order for Agrippa's murder, there is no doubt why he was killed. Agrippa Postumus was both adoptive son of Augustus and his grandson. Tacitus reports a plot by Audasius and Epicadus to abduct Agrippa and his mother from the respective islands where they were exiled, take them to the army and instal Agrippa as *princeps* (*Ann*. 2.39; Suet. *Aug*. 19). A rumour circulated that Augustus and a close confidant, Fabius Maximus, travelled secretly to Planasia just before Augustus' death, where the *princeps* and his grandson were supposedly reconciled, and Augustus designated Agrippa

as his successor (Dio 56.30; Tac. *Ann*. 1.5.2; Plin. *HN* 7.150). There was no subsequent alteration to Augustus' will to support this. Levick (1976: 65) believes that Augustus did make the journey and made the decision that he could not allow Agrippa to become a figurehead for a future revolt against Tiberius. He worked through Crispus and either prepared a missive authorising the execution, which Crispus sent on news of Augustus' death, or perhaps a letter was sent simply saying that Augustus was dead, triggering arrangements already put in place.

Agrippa had a dishonourable reputation which had led to his repudiation by Augustus and subsequent banishment, had no *auctoritas* through winning military victories nor achievements in public office. Nonetheless, while he lived, as a blood relative of Augustus and a member of the Julian family, Agrippa was a potential danger to the *princeps* (Tac. *Ann*. 1.4) as he could be used as a rallying point for those who wished to overthrow Tiberius (Charlesworth 1923: 156; Béranger 1953: 140; Norwood 1963: 163; Pettinger 2012: 100, 184, 228-229). Augustus understood this, as did Crispus, Livia, and Tiberius.

Agrippa Postumus was murdered because of who he was and what he might become; killed in what might be termed a pre-emptive strike. The threat he potentially posed to Tiberius was real. Dio reports the activities of Clemens, a former slave of Agrippa who 'pretended to be Agrippa himself', winning 'many followers' in Gaul and Italy, even marching on Rome until captured, tortured and executed (57.16; Tac. *Ann*. 2.39-40; Suet. *Tib*. 25). This phenomenon was to recur. A false Drusus in the Cyclades, possibly in 31 (Tac. *Ann*. 5.10), which Tuplin (1987: 799-801) associates with the machinations of Sejanus, while, after the demise of Nero, three impostors gained a following and enjoyed short-lived success (Gallivan 1973: 364-365); in 68 or 69 in Greece (Tac. *Hist*. 2.8-9), in the East during the reign of Titus (Dio 66.19.3b; Griffin 1984: 215) and c. 88 under Domitian (Suet. *Ner.* 57; Tac. *Hist.* 1.2).

Agrippa Postumus was potentially more dangerous than any of these pretenders, as the faction which had previously supported Gaius was never supportive of Tiberius.

Tacitus exonerates Augustus of complicity in the death of Agrippa, claiming that 'the emperor had never been callous enough to kill any of his relations and that he should murder his own grandchild to remove the worries of a stepson seemed incredible' (*Ann*. 1.6.3). This is naïve. Augustus understood *realpolitik* as well as anyone. There had never been succession to the role of *princeps* before. Tiberius was the man best suited to the demands of the time. The political logic is unerring. For the sake of stability, Agrippa must die. If not Augustus himself, this would doubtless sum up the thinking of key figures around him (Birch 1981: 456; Kehoe 1985: 250, 253-54). Indeed, Strunk (2014: 144) argues that Tacitus' account of the whole episode demonstrates 'how power under the Principate lay neither with the Senate and people of Rome…nor even with the *princeps*, but with imperial women and ministers who deliberately skirted the Senate and *princeps* to achieve their own ends.'

The Accession Debate

Tiberius' behaviour during the accession debate is puzzling. None of Tiberius' actions after the death of Augustus hint at any reluctance to assume the role for which he had long been groomed. Moreover, there was no overt opposition to him, nor would any conspirators have gained traction; 'soldiers surrounded him in the forum, soldiers accompanied him in the *curia*' (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.5). Tiberius controlled the key assets of the empire (Wiedemann 1996a: 202). Although Tiberius had called the meeting of the Senate to discuss Augustus' funeral using his tribunician powers (Tac. *Ann*. 1.7.4) and was careful to preserve the ability of the Senate to withhold its approval, there was no viable alternative to Tiberius, nor any reason to look for one. Kampff (1963: 30) poses the logical question; 'How could the Senate pass over a man who besides being a worthy candidate in his own right was *Augustus* and *divi filius* and

appoint someone who was neither?' At his father's funeral Tiberius literally and symbolically shouldered the burden of Augustus, essentially committing to continuation of Augustan precedents (O'Gorman 1995: 110-112). Yet, at another meeting in the Senate a fortnight later, Tiberius professed reluctance to assume power.

The ancient sources suggest that Tiberius' hesitation was a charade. Velleius emphasises Tiberius' hopes to be one among many, rather than *princeps*. Finally, Tiberius acceded to senatorial pleas, 'the only man to whose lot it has fallen to refuse the principate for a longer time, almost, than others had fought to secure it' (2.124.1-2). Tacitus believes that Tiberius' expressed desire to be excused from responsibility altogether or to take a branch of government himself while sharing power with a colleague to lighten his burden (*Ann*. 1.11-12) was simply pretence. He showed hesitancy only in the Senate. Suetonius also regards this prevarication as a 'shameless mime' which frustrated the senators, causing some to lose patience (*Tib.* 24.1) Even as he accepted the role, Tiberius hinted that he might later resign (*Tib.* 24.2). Dio observes 'while actually administering all the business of the empire, he declared he did not want any of it' (57.2.3). Tiberius proposed dividing the empire into three areas of responsibility (one part consisting of Rome and the rest of Italy; the second, the legions; the third, the subject peoples outside), each with a different head, one of which would be Tiberius (57.2.4). Dio claims that Tiberius' actions were 'chiefly because it was in his nature to do so…but partly also because he was suspicious of the Pannonian and German legions and feared Germanicus, then governor of the province of Germany and beloved by them' (57.3.1). Tacitus also notes Tiberius' fear of Germanicus (*Ann.* 1.7.9) and a desire 'to detect what leading man were thinking' (*Ann.* 1.7.11), remembering every word, every look, twisting them 'into some criminal significance.'

Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio are no doubt influenced by the fact that Tiberius subsequently ruled for twenty-three years, becoming increasingly autocratic the longer he reigned,

suggesting that his professed desire to be rid of the burden of power was hypocrisy. Modern scholars note strong parallels between the events of 17 September AD 14 and those surrounding Augustus' first settlement in 27 BC (Syme 1939: 439; Béranger 1953: 152; Kampff 1963: 39; Pettinger 2012: 166). What Tiberius is engaging in is *recusatio imperii* - 'a situation when the person on whom power is bestowed actually refuses or pretends to refuse' (Huttner 2004: 16), emulating the example of Augustus, who followed a long tradition in Roman politics of avoiding the appearance of being too eager for power (Freudenberg 2014: 112). 'The Principate was established by an act of denial (*recusatio)*, ritually perpetuated from reign to reign…this pose of denial…constitutes the dominant feature of imperial ceremonial' (Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 36). Tiberius wanted it to 'seem that he had been called and chosen by the state' (Tac. *Ann*. 1.7.10; cf. Dio 57.3.3). Levick (1976: 75) argues that Tiberius needed to know that he had the Senate's support, while etiquette demanded that Tiberius display 'a decent papal reluctance.' If we accept that Tiberius was merely engaging in political theatre, thus demonstrating his *modestia,* then it seems that neither he nor the Senate had learned their lines well enough, resulting in confusion and later charges of dissimulation.

Tiberius was not necessarily merely playing a predetermined role. Dio notes that Tiberius made mention of his age (fifty-six) and his near-sightedness (57.2.4). He had removed himself from public life before when he 'retired' to Rhodes (Huttner 2004: 133-134). Massie (1983: 90-91) describes his personality: 'a withdrawn, silent man, given to long periods of brooding…gnomic in utterance…forced to the centre of the stage who was yet dominated by a desire to withdraw.' Augustus had avoided the appearance of monarchy by setting limits on his tenure in magistracies and renewing his powers at regular intervals. In theory, there was a choice each time. It was possible not to renew his i*mperium*; in reality, this simply would not happen. Tiberius saw the proposed grant of imperial powers without time limit as a radical

departure from Augustan precedent and tried to avoid the political error which had claimed Julius Caesar by dividing government, sharing responsibility with prominent senators, nominated by the Senate as well as the *princeps* (Kampff 1963: 41).

Tiberius had Republican tendencies. He wanted (at least initially) to encourage senators to show a degree of independence. This created a paradox. For senators to advance their careers and to survive the accusations of enemies depended on their relationship with the emperor. His goodwill was more likely to be secured through flattery and obsequiousness than genuine independence, while ambition was always suspect. The very existence and nature of one-man rule entailed the loss of *libertas*. Tiberius could be frustrated by the Senate's servility (Tac. *Ann.* 3.65), however, it was almost inevitable (Alston 2014: 122-123). Rowe (2021: 151) argues that the key point at issue in the accession debate was whether Tiberius would rule alone or share power; 'not Tiberius' refusal of power; but the Senate's refusal to grant Tiberius colleagues.' Simply because Tiberius' proposals were ignored does not mean that they were not genuine.

Suggestions that Augustus and Tiberius had previously agreed on a radical change to the Augustan model of government lack credibility. Dio claims that after Augustus' will was read out in the Senate, Drusus read four documents: Augustus' will, instructions for his funeral, a description of his *acta* (the *Res Gestae*) and a set of 'instructions and commands' for Tiberius and 'for the public at large' (56.33.3). Included in these was a clause which stated that they should 'never allow executive power to depend on one person' (56.33.4). Following this advice would effectively abolish the Principate and return power to the Senate. It is hard to believe that Augustus would undermine his designated successor in this manner (Hohl 1933: 113). Suetonius, who as Hadrian's private secretary presumably had access to the imperial archives, makes no mention of this political testament. While argument by absence has limitations, Suetonius gives lengthy descriptions of the contents of Augustus' will and

describes the other three documents (*Aug.* 101). He expressly says three documents twice (*Aug*. 101.1, 101.4). Injunctions 'forbidding one man rule and imperial expansion are demonstrably contrary to Augustan policies' (Ober 1982: 320) and seem unlikely to reflect Augustus' views in AD 14. Tiberius saw himself as dutifully following Augustan precedents (Tac. *Ann.* 4.37; Strabo *Geog.* 6.4.2; Seager 2005: 149; Levick 1976: 82); consolidating, rather than revolutionising, the position created by Augustus.

Mutinies

The aftermath of Augustus' death was marked by uncertainty. This was natural as Augustan 'rule' had been accepted by most Romans for forty-five years and there had never been succession to his political role before. Velleius, likely resident in Rome at the time, describes an atmosphere of fear and confusion (Gabba 1984: 82). Suetonius (*Tib*. 25.1-2) portrays a Tiberius beset by problems: disharmony in Italy and camp mutinies in Illyricum and Germany.

> Both bodies of mutineers demanded very large concessions – particularly that they be paid at the same rate as the Praetorians. The army in Germany also refused to acknowledge an Emperor whom they had not chosen themselves and did all they could to make their Commander-in-Chief, Germanicus, accept the title despite his flat refusal. A fear that they might succeed was the main reason for Tiberius' plea to the Senate [for a colleague or several colleagues].

While Suetonius' chronology is inaccurate regarding Clemens and Marcus Scribonius Libo Drusus, who engaged in conspiracies against Tiberius in AD 16 (Sage 1982/83: 299), the potential threat posed by legions marching on Rome was much more serious. There were three legions camped at Emonia in Pannonia and four near Cologne (Tac. *Ann*. 1.16.2; 1.31.3). While they were separate events and independent of each other, Tacitus' account presents the two mutinies almost as an exact parallel (Woodman 2006: 305-307; Williams 1997: 58; cf. Ross 1973: 211). Each mutiny begins the same way (*Ann.* 1.16.1, 1.31.1) after news of Augustus' death (1.16.2, 1.31.3). The troops are easily roused (16.3, 1.31.4) and

complain about thirty years of service (1.17.2, 1.35.2), and the savagery of centurions (1.17.4, 1.31.4). Both mutinies are quelled after the arrival of the emperor's son, Drusus in Pannonia, and Germanicus in Germany (1.24.3, 1.34.1), and the eventual slaughter of the ringleaders - by Drusus (1.29.4) and, in Germany, by their fellow soldiers, who are now ashamed of their previous actions (1.42, 1.45-48). While the mutiny has significant support, enough soldiers are not committed, allowing officers to retain the upper hand (Vell. 2.125; Dio 57.4-6), albeit an eclipse of the moon, seen by the soldiers as a bad omen (Tac. *Ann.* 1.28.1; Dio 57.4.4), and a storm, which keeps soldiers in their tents (Tac. *Ann*. 1.30.2; Dio 57.4.5), are helpful to Drusus.

These revolts are not primarily because Tiberius is now the emperor rather than Augustus. Neither do they seriously represent a move by the army to demand the opportunity to choose the emperor. These are echoes of a later period. Drusus correctly points out that the leaders of the mutiny in Pannonia have no ability to grant any concessions, to pay the soldiers or to take power in Rome (Tac. *Ann.* 1.28.4). Rather, the 'madness' (the metaphors used by Tacitus suggest mental illness (Williams 1997: 58); *rabies*, *furor* and *ratio* recur regularly) is caused by longstanding grievances about pay and conditions. Of more significance is the attempt to persuade Germanicus to stage a military coup (Tac. *Ann*. 1.31.1, 1.35.3; Dio 57.5.1), although how determined the soldiers are on this course of action is debatable as when Germanicus draws his sword to take his own life as he cannot bring them to order, the soldiers 'jeeringly shout their approval, one proffering his own sword saying: 'Take this; this is sharper' (Dio 57.5.2; Tac. *Ann*. 1.35.4-5). Ross (1973: 215; cf. Fulkerson 2006: 175) dismisses the gesture as 'theatrical' and is critical of Germanicus' actions throughout (216-217), claiming that Germanicus 'avoid(ed) all responsibility' in allowing the troops to take punishments into their own hands. Shotter (1968: 199) concurs, suggesting that Tacitus portrays Germanicus as ineffective, although arguably Germanicus needed to make some concessions because his

army was simply not large enough for a full-scale assault on four rebellious legions (Brice 2015: 118). On the other hand, Germanicus' actions are a public gesture of loyalty to Tiberius, while maintaining good relations with the soldiers he led seems prudent. After the mutiny, Germanicus' legions showed fierce loyalty to him (Tac. *Ann*. 1.71.2-3, 2.12).

It is not surprising that Tiberius would have mixed feelings towards Germanicus despite his loyalty in suppressing the mutiny (Tac. *Ann.* 1.52.1; Dio 57.6.2-4). Augustus had foisted Germanicus on Tiberius, forcing him to adopt the young man (Tac. *Ann*. 1.3.5), while Germanicus had been given more important military commands than Drusus (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.6-7), essentially downgrading Tiberius' son. Germanicus had the family background to be a viable emperor. He was popular with the people (Tac. *Ann*. 1.33.2; Dio (57.6.2) hyperbolically claims, 'he had the goodwill of all the Romans as well as of their subjects') and had command of eight legions of battle-hardened veterans who would follow him if he chose to seize power (Martin 1981: 107).

Germanicus was already next in line for the throne, so only needed to wait to eventually succeed Tiberius, although he would not be the first heir apparent to grow impatient and overthrow his father. Whether such behaviour would be accepted by the Senate, the masses and other elements of the army is more problematic, while patricide would do little to enhance his image. Williams (1997: 61) detects an 'Augustan tinge' in Germanicus' only punishing 'a few' mutineers, while the concessions he made indicate some sympathy with their demands. She believes that the 'German revolt might have been Germanicus' 'practice run' for a later imperial coup'. This is purely speculative. There was certainly concern at Rome. The accounts of both Tacitus and Dio present a clear juxtaposition of stability in the capital with discord in the provinces, highlighting the potential for civil war to mark Tiberius' accession (Tac. *Ann.* 1.24.1; Dio 57.3.1-2, 57.7.1; Malloch 2004: 201). This is hardly the

'new dawn' which greets the accession of Nerva and Trajan (Tac. *Agr.* 3.1, 44.5; Woodman 2006: 329).

Whether Tiberius was reluctant to publicly assume Augustus' role as *princeps* due to health concerns, his personal Republican tendencies, *modestia*, *dissimulatio*, through fear of Germanicus and the troops on the Rhine or a combination of these, is impossible to know. Tiberius was unfavourably compared to Germanicus in public opinion, the 20% tax on inheritances to fund the military (Dio 56.28.6) instituted by Augustus was deeply unpopular, the new *princeps* did not enjoy public entertainments (Tac. *Ann.* 1.76). The deaths of Julia, supposedly starved to death on Tiberius' orders, and Agrippa Postumus further blackened his reputation. Anonymous pamphlets spread rumours about him (Tac. *Ann*. 1.72.3; Suet. *Tib*. 59). Pettinger (2012: 212-215) argues that Libo and his fellow conspirators posed a significant danger. They aimed not simply to replace Tiberius as *princeps*. Instead, they plotted nothing less than a restoration of the Republic. This seems highly improbable unless Germanicus acceded to these fantasies, as he had the military power to crush any coup and the *auctoritas* to rule Rome himself. It is no surprise that both Clemens and Libo failed. After AD 16, many senators and *equites* who hated Tiberius centred their hopes on Germanicus and later, Agrippina and her sons, while Tiberius became increasingly suspicious, particularly vulnerable to the calumnies spread by Sejanus, the Praetorian Prefect.

Conclusion

While Tiberius may have flubbed his lines in the Senate, transfer of autocratic power after Augustus' death was successfully orchestrated. There are elements in Tiberius' accession comparable to those in modern totalitarian societies, such as events associated with the death of Kim Jong-il and the subsequent succession by Kim Jong-un, his third son, in December 2011. As Rosenblitt (2012: 202, 204-205) notes, in both instances the death is announced

only after arrangements for a 'smooth transfer of power' are in train (Tac. *Ann*. 1.5.6; Dio 56.30.5-31.1; Suet. *Tib.* 22), rumours assert that the leader's death occurred earlier than official versions suggest, there are 'public displays of grief' and 'pledges of loyalty' given to the 'new autocrat', whose first act is to secure control of the military (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.4-7; Dio 57.2.1). Omens are interpreted, while coincidences are noted (Tac. *Ann*. 1.9.1). The new leader is called to accept power 'by the state' (Tac. *Ann*. 1.7.10) and distributes largesse (Tac. *Ann*. 1.8.3). The written will of his predecessor is used to legitimise his successor (Tac. *Ann*. 1.8.1-3; Dio 56.32.1-4; Suet. *Tib.* 23). Rome is clearly not North Korea; however, the parallels are striking. Rosenblitt (2012: 213) wonders to what extent displays of grief at Rome were genuine and notes Tacitus' comments (*Ann.* 1.7.2) on the fear felt by senators, who were desperate to be seen to be displaying the 'correct public display of combined mourning and joy'. Tiberius' accession 'was constructed on an essentially totalitarian model' (Rosenblitt 2012: 212; cf. Wiedemann 1996a: 199), a further step in the entrenchment of one-man rule.

Tiberius' ascent to power was broadly accepted. The Senate was not monolithic. While some individuals perhaps dreamed of power themselves or offered clandestine support to factions within the imperial household opposed to Tiberius, others sought to curry favour and win promotions through their imperial connections. Still others sought to make the best of whatever circumstances prevailed, preserving their own *dignitas* throughout, in contrast to fruitless displays of overt opposition (cf. Tac. *Agr.* 42.4-5; Oakley 2009: 192-194). Throughout the first century AD some still clung to Republican ideologies and were considered dangerous enough to be prosecuted and executed or forced to commit suicide (Wilkinson 2012: 5, 16). It could be argued that such thinking was utopian and increasingly impractical as emperors became more openly monarchical. Nonetheless, the Senate, despite some frustrations with his behaviour, acquiesced in Tiberius' primacy with no move to

repudiate Augustan precedents and change the form of government. The coexistence of the Republic and the monarchy as touted by Augustus continued, as Tiberius showed 'almost excessive courtesy' to individual senators and to the Senate as a body (Suet. *Tib.* 29) and referred 'all public business, however important or unimportant to the House' (Suet. *Tib.* 30).

Whilst he was personally unpopular, Tiberius' role was accepted by the *plebs urbana.* There had been riots in 22 BC, in response to grain shortages (Dio 54.1-2), when, according to Dio, only Augustus' intervention prevented the burning of the Senate House with the senators inside. The *plebs* demanded Augustus be made dictator, consul every year for the rest of his life and censor for life. Throughout the following years, they wanted Augustus to take more power, not less. In AD 15 Tiberius transferred elections from the Tribal Assembly to the Senate. Rather than rioting accompanying 'the deprival of this right', Tacitus observes that the public made virtually no objection (*Ann*. 1.15). On the other hand, there were riots at the *ludi Augustales,* games honouring the deified Augustus, in AD 14, due to rivalry between ballet dancers (Tac. *Ann.* 1.54.2) and, the following year, increased violence with similar causes (Tac. *Ann.* 1.77; Suet. *Tib*. 34). Velleius praises Tiberius for suppressing riots in the theatre and ensuring low grain prices (2.126.1-3). In 33 there were near riots in the theatre, angry shouts condemning the high price of corn (Tac. *Ann.* 6.13).

Tiberius rarely attended the theatre (Tac. *Ann.* 1.54; Suet. *Tib.* 47.1), in contrast to his predecessor. Beyond meeting the basic needs of the *plebs*, the *princeps* needed to possess *levitas popularis*, to have what we would today call 'the common touch', to take enjoyment in games and amusements, to live amongst the common people (Yavetz 1969a: 138-139). Tiberius' retirement to Capri in 26 further dented his popularity (Tac. *Ann.* 4.67; Suet. *Tib.* 40; Seager 2005: 174). He never set foot in Rome again, governing through letters sent to the Senate. The common people may have delighted in Tiberius' passing (Suet. *Tib*. 75), however, throughout Tiberius' reign, they remained supportive of the position of *princeps*

itself, playing little role in political affairs unless disgruntled by the 'price of bread and lack of circuses' (Seager 2005: 211; Levick 1976: 121).

Augustus had ensured that Tiberius was legally positioned to succeed him, that he had *imperium aequum*, including *imperium consulare*, assisting Augustus in the census (Suet. *Tib.* 21.1; Levick 1976: 63). He also sought to shore up Tiberius' military position by ensuring that key commands were held by men Tiberius could trust, including relatives of the imperial family (Kienast 1982: 122; Syme 1939: 437-438). In AD 13 Germanicus commanded the legions in Germany (Tac. *Ann.* 1.31.2); on the Danube, Quintus Julius Blaesus who had close ties with Tiberius (*Ann.* 1.16.2); in Syria, Quintus Metellus Silanus whose daughter was betrothed to Germanicus' eldest son (*Ann*. 2.43.2); in Spain, M. Aemilius Lepidus whose daughter was betrothed to Germanicus' youngest son (*Ann.* 6.40.3; Vell. 2.125.5; Sawiński 2018: 109).

Tiberius was the empire's foremost general; he had won numerous victories, was brave in battle, well respected (Tac. *Ann*. 1.4.3; Suet. *Tib.* 9, 16-19). Velleius claims that his soldiers had a deep affection for him (2.104.3-4), while Tiberius was remarkably solicitous of his men's health and welfare (2.114.1-3). He believes that Tiberius was the obvious choice as successor; he 'towered above the others' (2.103.2). From Tiberius' first entry into public life in 23 BC, everyone could see future greatness just by looking at him (2.94.1-3; Pieper 2021: 241-242).

Succession to Augustus did not become a crisis. Tiberius ultimately accepted his duty, his father's *paterna statio* (Vell. 2.124.2; Gell. *NA* 15.7.3), with strong martial credentials, an old-fashioned sense of traditional Roman virtues and a desire to maintain the premise that '[Rome] has moved not from Republic to Empire but from Republic to better Republic' (Gowing 2005: 43). Tiberius benefitted from growing confidence at Rome that Augustus had

been ‘divinely predestined’ to rule, possessing unique qualities which were passed on to other members of the *domus Augusta* (Cooley 2019: 72, 79-80, 85), yet he also possessed *auctoritas* in his own right. Despite some initial concerns, Tiberius was not forced to confront significant political or military opposition. Potential rivals within the imperial family were eliminated or carefully watched. There was no civil war.

Chapter Three

> 'Gaius Caesar, whom, in my opinion, Nature produced to show what unlimited vice would be capable of when combined with unlimited power, dined one day at a cost of tens of millions of sesterces' (Sen. *Helv.* 10.4).

Tiberius' accession seemingly established that a new *princeps* needed to be a close relative of Augustus, to have experience in political affairs through sharing some of the ruler's powers and responsibilities and to have earnt a reputation for *virtus* through military achievements. Caligula met only one of these criteria, yet was enthusiastically embraced by the Senate, People, and armies as Tiberius' successor. Tiberius had named Caligula (Germanicus' son, Tiberius' grandson) and Tiberius Gemellus (his 'natural' grandson) as co-heirs to his property and possessions in his will, designating neither as his political heir (Suet. *Tib.* 76). He clearly understood the need for a successor from within the imperial family (Tac. *Ann*. 6.46.1; Timpe 1962: 60-61), otherwise the stability he and Augustus had devoted their lives to preserve could be swept away by civil strife. Claudius (Germanicus' brother, Tiberius' nephew) was disqualified by a reputation for being 'weak-minded' (Suet. *Claud.* 5), regarded even by his own mother as 'a freak of a man' (Suet. *Claud*. 3.2), clearly unfit for office (Suet. *Claud.* 4.2). Tiberius was not enamoured with the thought of Caligula on the throne (Philo *Leg.* 33-34), believing that he would 'have all Sulla's faults and none of his virtues' (Tac. *Ann*. 6.46.4), clearly recognising the young man's capacity for cruelty (Suet. *Cal*. 11). While Suetonius claims that Tiberius had used Sejanus to eliminate Germanicus' children to pave the way for Gemellus' succession (*Tib*. 55), Tiberius seems to have soured on the young man, believing him the product of adultery rather than Drusus' legitimate son (Suet. *Tib.* 62.3; Dio 58.23.1-2).

While Tiberius may have hoped to live long enough to promote Gemellus' interests, it is difficult to believe that he had any illusions regarding what would ultimately result after his death, which rumours suggest may have been hastened by the actions of Caligula and Macro,

through poison (Suet. *Tib.* 73.2; *Cal.* 12.2) or suffocation (Tac. *Ann*. 6.50.9; Dio 58.28.3). Caligula basked in the reflected glory of his father, Germanicus, enjoyed significant popularity with the *plebs* (Tac. *Ann.* 6.46.1; Dio 58.8.2) and had lived in military camps during his childhood. Gemellus, seventeen at the time of Tiberius' death, had not yet assumed the *toga virilis* and was unlikely to have enjoyed much factional support (Timpe 1962: 58; Barrett 1989: 39). Tiberius was prescient, on one occasion clasping Gemellus while telling Caligula, 'You will kill him, and another will kill you' (Tac. *Ann.* 6.46.4; Dio 58.23.3). Josephus describes Tiberius' anguished realisation that Caligula's primacy was inevitable (*AJ* 18.211-219). Tiberius may have genuinely believed that as neither was old enough nor experienced enough to govern in their own right – Caligula was twenty-four and had held only the quaestorship (Dio 58.7.4) – naming them as joint heirs to his estate was the best he could do. Perhaps he was also preserving the illusion of the Senate's ability to freely choose a successor, rather than having one thrust upon them, thus avoiding some of the senatorial angst which accompanied his accession in AD 14 (Balsdon 1934: 15-16).

Caligula's accession was greeted with almost universal enthusiasm (Suet. *Calig.* 13.1). He was the great grandson of both Augustus and Marc Antony, suggesting impeccable breeding. For the Senate he offered relief from the atmosphere of fear and suspicion engendered by the increased frequency of *maiestas* trials. Some, no doubt, believed that the inexperienced young man could be manipulated to their advantage. Suetonius (*Cal.* 13) claims that 'most provincials and soldiers' shared respect for Germanicus and 'compassion for a family' which had suffered much under Tiberius. The whole city seemingly turned out to greet Caligula's return from Misenum, shouting terms of endearment. Caligula's confirmation was 'immediate and unanimous' (Suet. *Cal.* 14.1). This was a *fait accompli*; the Praetorians had saluted Caligula, the Senate 'rubber stamped' the choice. Josephus writes that Caligula 'informed' the Senate of his accession (*AJ* 18.234). Unlike both Augustus and Tiberius who had received

powers at various intervals, Caligula received these *en bloc,* except *pater patriae*, which he assumed later in the year (Dio 59.3.2; Suet. *Cal.* 14.1; Timpe 1962: 65, 75; Brunt 1977a: 98; Barrett 1989: 56-57). The Senate granted Caligula *ius arbitriumque omnium rerum*, virtually unlimited power in public life, thus formalising the privileges enjoyed by Augustus, while paving the way for future grants of imperial power.

This sense of optimism was badly misplaced. Caligula had never led an army. He had neither the temperament nor the political experience to be a *princeps* on the Augustan model. While both Augustus and Tiberius were *principes*, leading men, in a Senate which had other luminaries, Gaius possessed no *auctoritas.* He had no moral or political authority based on his accomplishments. While he had spent five years on Capri with Tiberius, this was hardly a period of sitting at the emperor's feet being instructed in statesmanship. Caligula's legitimacy was inextricably tied to his family; 'Power did not come from the constitution, from the legal grant of the Senate, still less from the will of Tiberius, but from birth' (Alston 2014: 133). In hindsight, given Caligula's arrogance and self-absorption, the travails of his upbringing, including the brutal deaths of his family, which would likely have had a traumatic impact on his psychological state, and his lack of preparation for the role he inherited, his fall from grace always seems the probable result. Lucius Arruntius was prophetic,

> 'If Tiberius despite all his experience, has been transformed and deranged by absolute power, will Gaius [Caligula] do better? Almost a boy, wholly ignorant, with a criminal upbringing, guided by Macro…I foresee even grimmer slavery ahead' (Tac. *Ann.* 6.48.2-3).

The Influence of the Praetorian Prefect

Macro's role in Caligula's accession was crucial. Caligula allegedly won his support after seducing Macro's wife, Ennia Naevia, swearing to marry her when he became emperor (Suet. *Cal.* 12.2). These promises were confirmed by an oath and in writing, suggesting that Ennia was far from blindly besotted by love. Caligula used sex to allow him proximity to poison

Tiberius; Macro encouraged the affair (Tac. *Ann.* 6.45.3; Dio 58.28.4) as he hoped to benefit from acting as a political mentor to the young *princeps.* Ultimately, this would prove a Faustian bargain (Philo *Flacc*. 13-16, *Leg*. 61; Suet. *Cal*. 26.1; Dio 59.10.6; Barrett 1989: 79). After Tiberius' death it was Macro who guaranteed the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard; it was Macro who organised letters to provincial governors and army commanders; it was Macro who ensured that Tiberius' will was declared null and void in the Senate, ironically on the grounds that the testator had not been of sound mind (Dio 59.1.2). Caligula, reassured by the support of the Praetorians, was already acting as if he were emperor, issuing orders by letter (Joseph. *AJ* 18.234-236). The Senate had no real choice but to agree to Caligula's accession, rendering their acclamation of the new emperor mainly symbolic – a precursor of the future.

Having witnessed the fluctuations in Sejanus' career (see Appendix One), Caligula understood the importance of maintaining the loyalty of the Praetorians. Tiberius had left a bequest of 1,000 sesterces per man in his will. Caligula doubled this, adding another thousand from his own funds on his accession (Dio 59.2.1); 'by giving them twice as much, Caligula set the precedent that the loyalty of the guard should be bought by their new *imperator*, instead of being rewarded by the old one' (Wiedemann 1996a: 222). Any potential future threat from Macro was neutralised in 38 (Philo *Leg.* 52-59). Caligula's frequent taunting of Chaerea can be seen partly as an attempt to 'ingratiate himself' with the Praetorians (Eaton 2011: 52), bolstering his closeness to them as *commilito* (fellow soldier). Donatives and momentary popularity with the rank and file by humiliating a military tribune were not enough to prevent his ultimate demise at the hands of those responsible for his security.

Mad? Bad? Dangerous?

It is difficult to discern the truth regarding Caligula's personality, behaviour and policies as the primary sources are so uniformly hostile. Suetonius and Dio reflect an antagonistic senatorial tradition, portraying the young ruler as a tyrant. Although each of Suetonius' *Lives* follows the same basic structure, there is a crescendo effect in the accounts of 'bad' emperors where their vices, being placed after their virtues, and invariably elucidated at greater length, dominate the overall impression. Caligula's *popularitas* and *pietas* (15.1) are followed by a pivot to description of a 'monster' (22.1) whose *superbia* and *saevitia* decline into sexual depravity, wasteful extravagance, and greed (22-42) until his excesses cause his assassination (50.2-51). Suetonius claims that Caligula had a 'brain sickness' (51.1) and reports a rumour that Caesonia gave him an aphrodisiac which drove him mad (50.2; Joseph. *AJ* 19.193; Juv. *Sat.* 6.613-617). Dio alleges that the emperor was mentally unbalanced (59.23.4; 59.26.5), Tacitus that he had a disturbed mind (*Ann*. 13.3.2; *Agr*. 13). Josephus depicts Caligula as a combination of foolishness and madness (*AJ* 19.1, 19.5, 19.11), as does Philo (*Leg.* 34). Seneca, who knew Caligula personally, suggests a *morbus animus* (disease of the mind) afflicted the emperor (*Clem*. 1.25.2). Tacitus' account of Caligula's reign has been lost. Although there is no reason to believe his judgement of the *princeps* would be positive, his methodology offers a valuable perspective lacking in Suetonius and Dio (Charlesworth 1933b: 106-107). Suetonius tends to report various anecdotes uncritically, while Dio rarely cites his sources. Both generalise and exaggerate. Moreover, as Claudius came to power as a direct result of Caligula's murder, it was important for him to promote the denigration of his predecessor; to make clear 'not that the imperial system was inherently evil, but Caligula was an inherently evil emperor' (Barrett 1989: xvi).

Caligula suffered a life-threatening illness in October 37 (Suet. *Cal.* 14.2), after which his behaviour seemed to deteriorate. Philo suggests that Caligula's embrace of a life of luxury

was a cause of his illness (*Leg.* 14), although this is contradicted by Suetonius (*Cal.* 11). Josephus claims that Caligula's 'madness' did not surface until much later (*AJ* 18.256; Suet. *Cal*. 50.2; Balsdon 1934: 156, 205, 213-14; Morgan 1973: 327-29). While modern scholars have speculated on the nature of his illness/mental condition (Katz 1972: 223-225, thyrotoxicosis; Massaro and Montgomery 1978: 908; 1979: 699-700, bipolar disorder; Benediktson 1989: 371-373, interictal temporal lobe epilepsy), it is impossible to make an accurate diagnosis, particularly as we rely on sources which reflect a clearly tainted tradition, who did not witness Caligula in his private life and where 'madness' becomes a convenient coverall for unpredictable and unconventional behaviour. Seneca's allegation that Caligula's pale complexion was proof of his madness (*Constant.* 2.18.1) is an example which does not stand up to modern medical scrutiny.

Revisionist scholarship has presented a different picture, generally seeking alternative explanations to the interpretations in the ancient literary sources. An early apologist Willrich (1903: 118) claims to detect a 'method' in Caligula's 'alleged' madness. Balsdon (1934: 203) finds 'efficiency', 'sanity' and 'constructive imagination' in Caligula's administration. Barrett (1989: 241) argues that Caligula was 'a Stalinesque figure, capable of rational decisions, capable of statesmanlike acts (when it suited him)…ultimately indifferent to the consequences of his actions on others.' Winterling (2011: 98-99) sees Caligula's actions as a response to what he considers the Senate's 'hypocrisy, deception, and lies', openly fawning over the *princeps'* every wish while seeking opportunity to conspire against him and secretly hating him. While Augustus had used a model of 'ambiguous communication' with the nobility (14), Caligula despised this 'doublespeak', becoming blatantly autocratic (100) and determined to humiliate the Senate (147). Sidwell rightly notes the problems with assessing tyrannical behaviour, particularly given Caligula's perverse sense of humour. She suggests

(2010: 206) that the label ‘madness’ is ‘no longer an acceptable answer’ and the explanation for Caligula’s behaviour is more complex.

The ancient sources admit that Caligula began positively. Elections were restored to the people, rescinding Tiberius’ initiative (Suet. *Cal.* 16.3; Dio 59.9.6, 59.20.3-5; Yavetz 1996: 104). He won further popularity through paying the legacies to the *plebs* on behalf of Tiberius and Livia, including additional payments from his own resources (Dio 59.2.1-2). Caligula provided lavish public entertainments and enjoyed games and the theatre, often surrounding himself with actors whom he would kiss as friends (Dio 59. 5.3; Suet. *Cal.* 33, 36.1), while he fancied himself in various roles, appearing as charioteer, gladiator, singer, and dancer (Suet. *Cal.* 54.1-2) and was an active supporter of the Greens racing faction (Dio 59.14.6). He discontinued prosecutions for *maiestas* (Dio 59.4.3, 59.6.1-4, cf. 59.16.8), publicly burning documents which could incriminate those who had persecuted his family and refused to try cases still lingering from the previous regime (Suet. *Cal*. 15.4). No doubt many in the Senate saw these actions as a welcome change from the last years of his aged predecessor.

This early promise quickly deteriorated into an atmosphere of fear and paranoia as Caligula infringed political, social, and moral norms, alienating both ‘the Senate and the imperial *domus*’ (Pagán 2004: 94). He committed incest with his sisters (Suet. *Cal.* 24.1; Dio 59.3.6, 59.11.1, 59.22.6; Ferrill 1991: 82-83), raped women at banquets (Dio 59.8.7), associated with prostitutes and ‘made advances to almost every well-known married woman in Rome’ (Suet. *Cal*. 36.1) amongst a host of examples of sexual depravity. Arguably these were demonstrations of his authority, rather than an uncontrollable sexual appetite. Caligula, likewise, sought to expose recalcitrant senators. Those who failed to properly mourn Drusilla were charged with treason (Dio 59.11.5-6). *Maiestas* trials again became a feature of public life and the documents supposedly previously burned miraculously reappeared (Dio 59.16.1-7; Balsdon 1934: 50; Barrett 1989: 92-93). Protogenes, an imperial freedman, carried with

him two books, *The Dagger,* and *The Sword,* which contained names and addresses of those Caligula planned to have killed (Suet. *Cal.* 49.3). Dio (59: 26.1-2) claims that at mere nod from Protogenes senators tore Scribonius Proculus to pieces in the House. Dio's version of events is doubtful, the 'judicial assassination' likely 'prearranged', aimed at intimidating the Senate (Rutledge 2001:204). While the sources indicate that Caligula killed many senators to confiscate their property as his profligate spending had bankrupted the treasury (Dio 59.2.5, 18.1; Suet. *Cal.* 37-40; Joseph. *AJ* 19.3; Philo *Leg.* 105) this desperate need for money is disputed by modern scholars (Balsdon 1934: 38-40, 154-155, 184; Barrett 1989: 228-229), while Wilkinson (2004: 66-67) argues that the twenty-five individuals named in the sources as victims were, in the main, aware of plots against the emperor or actively involved in a conspiracy themselves. Suetonius attests to a conspiracy led by Cn. Lentulius Gaeticulus in 39 (Suet. *Claud.* 9.1; cf. Dio 59.22.5-7), while it is not difficult to believe that there were other plots (Dio 59.25.5b).

Caligula made clear to the Senate where power ultimately resided - with the *princeps* alone. Senators were required to kiss his feet or hands in greeting (Dio 59. 27.1-2), leading families were stripped of ancestral honours (Suet. *Cal.* 35.1), senators were made to run alongside his coach or wait on Caligula at table (Suet. *Cal.* 26.2). The emperor removed the consuls on a spurious pretext, replacing them with his own candidates (Dio 59.20.1-3) and threatened to destroy the Senate (Dio 59.25.5; Suet. *Cal.* 49.1). One of the best-known claims is that Caligula wanted to appoint his favourite horse, Incitatus, consul (Suet. *Cal.* 55.3; Dio 59.14.7; Barrett 1989: 46, 217). Most modern commentators interpret this as some kind of sarcastic remark or attempt at humour – perhaps about the qualities of the consuls (Willrich 1903: 461-462), as an insult to the senate (Alston 2014:139), as a joke with an edge to it to remind senators that he had the power to do anything he desired (Adams 2007: 162-163), to

satirise senatorial aspirations for office (Winterling 2011: 103-104), while Woods (2014: 775-777) believes that Caligula was mocking the candidacy of Asinius Celer.

Likewise, the bizarre story of Caligula ordering his army to collect seashells on the beach near Boulogne in early 40 to be taken back to Rome and displayed as the spoils of his triumph over Neptune (Suet. *Cal.* 46; Dio 59.25.1-3; Aur. Vic. *Caes.* 3.11-12) is difficult to accept at face value. Davies' suggestion (1996: 127) that they were to be used as missiles in military exercises on the beach seems highly unlikely. Balsdon's explanation (1934: 90-92) that this was intended to humiliate recalcitrant troops who had perhaps ignored orders to board ships to invade Britain is more plausible (cf. Dio 60.19). Barrett (1989: 137-138) regards the act as purely symbolic, representing Caligula's acceptance of the 'surrender' of the British chieftain, Adminius. Other scholars argue a misreading of the text. Woods (2000; 83-85) suggests that *concha* is a derogatory term for the small British boats the Romans captured, not seashells.

Caligula's supposed flirtations with belief in his imperial divinity are also problematic. He had statues of gods brought to Rome and decapitated, replacing the head with his own likeness, had temples built to himself (Dio 59.28.5; Suet. *Cal.* 22.2), instituted his own official cult where membership came at an exorbitant cost (Dio 59.28.5 claims ten million sesterces) and dressed as Neptune, Bacchus, Apollo, Hercules, Diana, Juno, and Venus (Dio 59.26.5-10). Caligula claimed intercourse with the moon and pretended that he was Jupiter (Dio 59.26.5), as well as sometimes dressing as a woman (Dio 59.26.7). A clear message was being sent that he was above any Roman aristocrat or foreign king. Alston (2014: 136-137) sees Caligula's assumption of divine status as a new way to force public displays of loyalty from others, rather than a sign of madness.

Conspiracy

Caligula's confrontational attitude towards the Senate, his cruelty, and his mercurial temperament created fear and fed conspiracy. There were three separate conspiracies in 41, involving nearly all those around the emperor (Dio 59.29.1a). One group formed around Aemilius Regulus who detested the injustice of Gaius' behaviour, another around Annius Minucianus who desired revenge for the death of his friend, Lepidus (Joseph. *AJ* 19.17-20). The third, was led by Gaius Chaerea, who enlisted the support of his fellow military tribune, Cornelius Sabinus (Joseph. *AJ* 19.46-48). Josephus suggests that Chaerea wanted to liberate Rome from tyranny and had Republican tendencies (*AJ* 19.27-29, 19.31, 19.34, 19.37). Suetonius notes an additional personal motive; Caligula had persistently teased Chaerea, labelling him effeminate (*Cal.* 56.2; Dio 59.29.2; Joseph. *AJ* 19.21-22, 19.29).

Many knew of the plot – senators, *equites*, soldiers, including Clemens, the Praetorian Prefect (Joseph. *AJ* 19.38-45) and Callistus, Caligula's freedman, who enjoyed a position of great power under the emperor, yet had shifted his allegiance to Claudius (Dio 59.29.1; Joseph. *AJ* 19.64-69). Winterling (2011: 174-176) suggests that the successful plot was masterminded by Callistus to ensure the accession of Claudius, under whom he would continue to enjoy imperial favour, essentially using Chaerea as a tool to achieve his purpose. Callistus certainly prospered in later years (Dio 61.30.6b; Tac. *Ann*. 11.29.1-2). In contrast, Claudius quickly appointed Rufrius Pollio and Catonius Justus as Praetorian Prefects, removing the incumbents. The ringleaders were dealt with; Chaerea was executed and Sabinus committed suicide (Joseph. *AJ* 19.268.-273; Suet. *Claud*. 11.1; Dio 60.3.4-5). Protogenes and Helicon, other prominent freedmen who exercised influence over Caligula, were killed soon afterwards (Dio 60.4.5). Levick (1990: 35) also notes layers to the conspiracy: Chaerea and his fellow officers providing the initial impetus, while Vinicianus and some colleagues saw opportunities to restore Senatorial influence over affairs. The divided loyalties after the

assassination were exploited by a third group, which included Callistus and significant elements in the Praetorian Guard, to instal Claudius (Joseph. *AJ* 19.64-69; Dio 59.29.1).

Aftermath

While the conspirators' plans to kill Caligula were successful, if they genuinely hoped to somehow establish a restored Republic or, at least, an alternative to the Principate (Low 2013: 213) they were ultimately frustrated, despite a brief flicker of Senatorial ascendancy. The Senate met on the Capitol (Suet. *Cal.* 60; Dio 60.1.1). Some wished to end the Principate, proposing the elimination of any remaining members of the imperial family (Aur. Victor *Caes.* 3.16; Oros. 7.1.3; cf. Joseph. *BJ* 2.205); others accepted the necessity of one-man rule yet wished the Senate to choose Caligula's successor (Levick 1990: 31). They were supported by either three or four urban cohorts (around 1,500-2,000 men) under the command of the Prefect of the City, L. Volusius Saturninus (Joseph. *BJ* 2.203, *AJ* 19.138). The State and Military Treasuries had been moved to the Capitol and were well guarded. Caligula's wife, Caesonia, and their daughter were killed on Chaerea's orders, almost certainly immediately after Caligula's death, despite the impression given in Josephus' account (*AJ* 190-200; Barrett 1989: 166-167; Levick 1990: 37-38). The ancient sources vilify Caesonia as complicit in her husband's worst behaviours (Joseph. *AJ* 19.193; Juv. *Sat.* 6.614-626; Ramage 1989: 675-80), while Suetonius reflects the excesses of the tradition regarding Caligula by claiming that Julia Drusilla was already mimicking her father's viciousness, scratching at her playmates' eyes (*Cal.* 25.4) – a remarkable feat of motor co-ordination given the infant was barely a year old (Varner 2001: 45).

The Praetorians had other ideas. According to Suetonius, these evolved from an 'extraordinary accident' (Suet. *Claud.* 10; Dio 60.1.2-3); Caligula's uncle, Claudius was found, by a wandering Guardsman, hiding behind a curtain in the palace, recognised and

taken to the Praetorian camp. The soldiers resolved that 'when matters were still undecided, it was well to choose the emperor themselves' (Joseph. *AJ* 19.164). They swore allegiance to Claudius and with nine cohorts of troops were well placed to force the Senate to accept their choice. The acclamation of Claudius as *imperator*, when he had no military victories to justify the title, created a new political ritual. The first step in both choosing and acknowledging the new emperor was taken by the Praetorians, their choice only later ratified by the Senate (Arena 2007: 329-330), demonstrating that the 'centre of political gravity' had shifted under the Principate from the Forum and the Capitol to the palace and the Praetorian camp (Fagan 2016: 237-238).

There was no legal basis for Claudius' candidacy. He had not been adopted as heir apparent nor named successor in his predecessor's will (McIntyre 2023: 2018). Claudius had been regarded within the imperial family as unfit for a career in public life (Suet. *Claud.* 3.4) and enjoyed little prestige in his own right. He had not proven himself as a military leader and had made no real mark in politics, although he had been appointed as suffect consul for two months in 37 by his nephew (Suet. *Cal.* 17.1, *Claud.* 7; Dio 59.6.5). More often, Claudius served as the butt of Caligula's jokes (Suet. *Claud*. 8-9). His sole imperial quality was that Claudius was Germanicus' brother. His claims to the succession were, at best, dubious (Osgood 2011: 30), albeit the salutation by the Praetorians as *imperator* conferred some legitimacy. Claudius promised 15,000 (Suet. *Claud.* 10.4) or 20,000 (Joseph. *AJ* 19.247) sesterces to each man to ensure their support.

The Senate's indecision, coupled with their lack of reliable military backing, saw their hopes of control over the situation fade. Two tribunes were sent to warn Claudius against assuming power, summoning him to the Senate. Claudius refused, claiming that he was forcibly detained (Suet. *Claud.* 10.3; Joseph. *AJ* 19.229-236; Dio 60.3a-4). The Senate's next meeting, held before dawn, was attended by only a hundred senators (Joseph. *AJ* 19.248-249). There

was no more talk of restoring the Republic. The priority now was to elect one of the senators as *princeps*. M. Vinicius was blocked by the consuls, Valerius Atticus' claims were resisted by L. Annius Vinicianus, who according to Dio was also proposed (60.15.1). It is claimed that Galba, the commander of the legions on the Upper Rhine was mooted (Suet. *Galba* 7.1), as was Plautius, governor of Pannonia (Levick 1990: 32). Claudius was emperor before messages could even reach them and both stayed loyal. In a further blow, the Senate's troops deserted them, making common cause with the Praetorian Guard (Dio 60.1.4) with whom many shared a camp. Whilst they were probably reluctant to fight fellow soldiers (Joseph. *AJ* 19.259-260, *BJ* 2.211-212), announcements during the evening of Claudius' donative to the urban and provincial troops matching that to the Praetorians (Joseph. *AJ* 19.246) played an important role in their decision, particularly as the annual pay of an ordinary legionary was 900 sesterces. Without military backing, the Senate was forced to concede. They voted Claudius 'all the remaining prerogatives of imperial power and their wishes were duly enacted by the People in assembly' (Dio 60.1.4; Joseph. *AJ* 19.266; Timpe 1962: 90; Brunt 1977a: 98; Levick 1990: 33; Osgood 2011: 31).

Conclusion

The reign of Caligula was brief – a little under four years. It demonstrated the dangers of the ill-defined nature of the principate, 'an office which lay uneasily between a hereditary monarchy and an elected magistrate…gradually and imperfectly becoming an institution' (Osgood 2011: 22). Caligula alienated the Senate and aroused the enmity of elements of the Praetorian Guard with his unconventional behaviour. He demonstrated that there were few checks and balances on imperial power. A rogue emperor could not be removed by popular vote nor impeached. The only alternative was violence.

While there was no mutiny from a provincial commander which brought Caligula down, nor a popular uprising in the streets which toppled him, Josephus claims, 'there was no one who would not have reckoned the removal of Caligula a blessing' (*AJ* 19.62). Other sources contain instances of Caligula's disdain for the public's welfare, including closing granaries, which forced people to starve (Suet. *Cal.* 26), mixing iron with the coins he threw to the crowd from the palace roof which caused numerous casualties (Dio 59.25.5) and having a mob, which gathered in the Circus to object to his conduct, massacred (Dio 59.28.11). Wilkinson (2004: 69) believes that these tales are essentially urban myths, absent from Seneca and contemporary sources, and that the only real evidence of widespread unpopularity is with the Senate (70-71). Dio offers an anecdote where the 'multitude' enjoy the humiliation of the Senate when Caligula creates an imperial brothel using senators' wives and families (59.28.10). In contrast, Yavetz (1996: 117) points to a decline in Caligula's relationship with the populace after 39. This gave confidence to the assassins. Whilst there would be no move to overthrow Caligula by the *plebs urbana*, neither would there be riots protesting his removal. Caligula became the first emperor to be openly assassinated, a direct repudiation of his approach to governing.

To what extent Claudius was involved in the plot is impossible to say with any certainty. Josephus (*AJ* 19.212-226), Suetonius (*Claud.* 10.1-3), and Dio (60.1.2-3) give weight to Claudius being a reluctant ruler caught up in events, who became the vehicle for the Praetorian Guard to protect their very survival as a body. This version of events, with its elements of *recusatio imperii,* was promoted by Claudius. On the other hand, Josephus (*AJ* 19.162-166) also provides an alternative explanation where the Praetorians were searching for Claudius, having unanimously decided that a new emperor was required, and that Claudius was their preferred choice. As Germanicus' brother, Claudius had ties to each previous *princeps* (Sawiński 2018: 237), a quality no other candidate offered (Griffin 1984:

192; Levick 1990: 33). Jung (1972: 380-382) believes that Claudius knew of and welcomed the assassins' plans; his ascent planned by a separate group of Praetorian officers on the periphery of Chaerea's plot who wanted Caligula dead, yet saw benefit in having Claudius continue the dynasty, and whose views aligned with most of the Guard. Claudius' accession was no fortunate accident, neither was it spontaneous.

Claudius came to power in a military coup. Coinage from 41/2 features the inscription PRAETOR RECEPT (*Praetoriani Recepti*) displaying Claudius greeting the Praetorians, essentially acknowledging his debt to them (*RIC* 1.38). Claudius is depicted in the middle, both commander and colleague of the soldiers, standing between soldiery and Senate 'on…the same metaphorical and physical level as the soldier' (Gibson 2013b: 121). Whilst Claudius promised to rule with moderation (Joseph. *AJ* 19.246) and later took few reprisals against those who had plotted against Caligula, the reality that power at Rome depended on the military was patently clear. The Senate knew this, declaring Claudius a *hostis* (Joseph. *BJ* 2.205; Levick 1990: 35), and attempting to gather their own loyal forces, including radical proposals to free slaves to fight (Joseph. *AJ* 19.241-244). There was the very real prospect of civil strife.

The rising in 42 led by Annius Vinicianus and Furius Camillus Scribonianus, fuelled by promises to restore the Senate to its former authority, can be seen as an extension of these events. It failed because the legions in Dalmatia remained loyal – Claudius' donatives had the desired effect; his reign was saved by the soldiers (Dio 60.15-16; Suet. *Claud.* 13.2; Tac. *Ann*. 13.43.2; Osgood 2011: 45; Low 2013: 209-210). The supposed consensus touted by Augustus had been replaced by naked force. A precedent was established; in disputes over who would be *princeps,* the soldiers would decide which candidate they preferred, ensuring his success, at least temporarily. Loss of the loyalty of the armies meant political oblivion and a painful death.

Caligula's death created a succession crisis. For a brief period, there was no emperor. There was a genuine attempt to restore the Republic, despite seventy years of the principate seemingly embedding itself in the collective consciousness. We cannot know what would have happened had the Senate acted differently in January 41, however, it would be an overstatement to assert that the continuation of the principate was inevitable or guaranteed. Neither was Claudius' rule, despite its merits, a precursor of future stability. His accession showed that 'a Caesar could be made, other than a Julius' (Osgood 2011: 31). Future ambitious commanders would seek power at the point of a sword. The lack of a strong constitution, flaws in individual leadership, the residual loyalty the soldiers felt towards their commanders and the lack of loyalty to the government would trouble Rome for centuries to come.

Chapter Four

> ‘He [Nero] would accordingly have put numerous persons out of the way immediately, had not Seneca said to him: "No matter how many you may slay, you cannot kill your successor"’ (Dio 62.18.3)

Nero has a reputation for casual cruelty, depraved sexual behaviour, petulant narcissism, and reckless extravagance. He is portrayed in the sources as a hated tyrant. Amongst Nero’s alleged crimes are the poisoning of his stepbrother, just shy of Brittanicus’ fifteenth birthday (Tac. *Ann.* 13.15-17; Dio 61.7.4; Suet. *Ner.* 33.2), matricide (Tac. *Ann.* 14.1-11; Suet. *Ner*. 34), the deaths of two wives, various family members (Suet. *Ner*. 35.4-5), a slew of other potential heirs (Rogers 1955: 197, 211-212), senators whom he suspected of plotting against him, and the forced suicide of his leading general, Corbulo (Dio 63.17). Nero is accused of setting fire to Rome, supposedly to build his exorbitantly priced palace, the Golden House (Suet. *Ner*. 38; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.1). Pliny highlights his greed and love of luxury (*HN* 37.7.20, 38.10.29). To what extent this image of Nero, replete with literary *topoi*, is the creation of Flavian propaganda and later Christian writers, for whom Nero became the Antichrist, is difficult to determine. Nero was happy to burnish his own myth, playing Orestes and Alcmaeon on stage (Dio 63.9.4; Champlin 1998: 100-101; Drinkwater 2012: 161).

Tacitus begins his account of Nero’s reign by describing the death of Junius Silanus as its first crime (*Ann.* 13.1.1-3), deliberately echoing his description of the death of Agrippa Postumus. His rhetoric throughout the subsequent books ‘gives the impression of an endless steady stream of blood’ (Pagán 2004: 73), particularly after the thwarting of a conspiracy in 65 involving more than forty senators, *eques* and Praetorian officers which aimed to assassinate Nero and make L. Calpurnius Piso *princeps* (Tac. *Ann*. 15.48-74). Notably, there is no suggestion of a return to the Republic, instead, a desire for a *princeps* drawn from outside the imperial family. While some of the conspirators are seemingly motivated by patriotism (Suet.

Ner. 36.2: Dio 62.24.1-2), Tacitus makes clear that others act purely from self-interest (*Ann.* 15.49.3-4; Keitel 1984: 319-320). This muddled plot reveals significant disenchantment with Nero from elements of the nobility and those close to him.

The elite feared Nero's brutality, while many despised his vulgarity. The longer Nero reigned the more it became plain to see that he preferred singing, acting and chariot racing to the serious duties of running the empire (Champlin 2003: 81, 234, 236). 'As an actor Nero outraged the sensibilities of conservative Romans' (Frazer 1966: 17). It was beneath a senator to participate in games; to be on stage rather than in the audience. Nero's life of excess outraged conventional standards of morality, with the notorious party hosted by Tigellinus merely a prominent example of disregard for traditional values. Dio's account (62.15) has slaves raping their masters, fathers watching their daughters being sexually assaulted. Suetonius (*Ner.* 27) and Tacitus (*Ann*. 14.15) report other instances where celebrations descended into wild orgies. Nero's sexual activities, including two 'marriages' to men, Pythagoras and Sporus (who was castrated for the purpose), suggested a complete lack of self-control, an inability to master his passions (Suet. *Ner*. 28-29, 35.4; Dio 62.28.2-3, 63.13). Like Caligula, after a positive start to his reign, Nero relied less on the Senate, governing through his friends and court, expecting sycophancy. He wanted applause from senators, not partnership. The sources claim that he gave 'unmistakable hints' that he planned to one day kill all the senators and let knights and freedmen govern the provinces (Suet. *Ner.* 37.3; Dio 63.15.1-2, Plut. *Galb.* 3.3; Plin. *Pan*. 63.6; Oros. 7.7.9).

Tacitus insists (*Hist*. 1.4, 1.16) that Nero's death was welcomed by senators and the wealthiest *equites*, as well as the 'respectable' members of the middle class, while only the *plebs sordida* mourned his passing. Suetonius (*Ner* 57.1) reports widespread general rejoicing. While Flaig (2010: 282-288) claims that Nero's fall came because he lost acceptance from senators, the army and the urban masses, there is ample evidence that Nero

was popular with the *plebs* in his lifetime and that this popularity endured post-mortem. Nero presented himself as the epitome of piety and justice, keen to attack corruption (Van Overmeire 2012: 483). He guaranteed the grain supply (Tac. *Ann.* 15.36.1-4), organised spectacles (Suet. *Ner*. 11-12; Dio 61.19), constructed public buildings (Tac. *Ann*. 13.31.1; Martial 7.34), handed out money (Suet. *Ner*. 7.2, 10.1; Tac. *Ann*. 13.31.2). Nor is there clear evidence that ordinary soldiers were disgusted by Nero's behaviour and desired his removal (Talbert 1977: 74-76).

Nero showed the *plebs* and soldiers that he loved what they loved. In the anonymity of the crowd, while attending the circus and amphitheatre, there was opportunity to voice critical opinion, as indeed happened when the masses expressed anger at Nero's treatment of Octavia (Tac. *Ann*. 14.61). On most occasions, however, they reacted with great enthusiasm to their ruler's public performances (Dio 61.15.1, 61.20.4-5, 63.10.1, 63.20.5; Suet. *Ner.* 53). The *princeps* ensured that he paid donatives to the Praetorians, including in the critical aftermath of the death of Agrippina. The legions were 'fed, paid and led' (Van Overmeire 2012: 485). In the provinces he was generally well liked, especially in Greece. Writing after Nero's death, Dio Chrysostom claims that 'everyone' longs for his return (21.9-10). Outside the Senate, the court, and some military officers, Nero was 'vastly popular' (Champlin 1998: 98), even loved.

A Failure of Resolve

The catalyst for Nero's ultimate demise was the revolt of Vindex in March 68. Dio suggests that frustration with levels of taxation was a factor (63.22.1a-2). In a fictional speech (Królczyk 2018: 861), he also has Vindex rail against Nero's personal failings – he destroyed 'the very best in the Senate', murdered his mother, was mediocre as an actor and singer and was clearly not fit to be a Caesar, unworthy of the mantle of Augustus (63.23.3-6; Suet. *Ner.*

41.1, 45.2). Vindex's rebellion was not primarily nationalistic in focus, nor did he intend to restore the Republic, rather he sought to instal a better emperor on the throne – a position he had no desire to hold himself (Dio 63.23; Brunt 1959: 534). Instead, he proposed to make Galba, the governor of *Hispania Tarraconensis*, emperor.

Galba simply waited, neither responding to Vindex's overtures nor reporting them (Plut. *Galb.* 4.2; Suet. *Galb.* 9.1), although the fact that he had not revealed Vindex's plans to Nero was itself treachery. Galba's hand was eventually forced, as he had intercepted messages from Nero ordering his assassination (Suet. *Galb.* 9.2). Galba gathered troops and allies, including Otho (Suet. *Otho* 4.1; Plut. *Galb.* 6.1), governor of Lusitania, and perhaps Tib. Iulius Alexander, the Prefect of Egypt (Brunt 1959: 536; Shotter 1975: 63). Vindex's uprising was easily quelled by the hardened legions based on the Rhine, likely in May 68 (Murison 1993: 26; Wiedemann 1996b: 260) at Vesontio (Dio 63.24.2-4, Plut. *Galb.* 6.3, Tac. *Hist.* 1.51.1, 4.57.2). Given that Galba had only one legion (Suet. *Galb.* 10; Wellesley 1975: 5), the defeat of Vindex should have saved both Rome and Nero (Syme 1958: 179), provided Verginius Rufus remained loyal.

Nero was driven from power more by rumours than force of arms (Tac. *Hist.* 1.98.2). While the emperor was apparently initially unconcerned by news of Vindex's rebellion, Suetonius claims that Galba's defection inspired panic (*Ner.* 40.4, 42; Plut. *Galb.* 5.3), although Drinkwater (2019: 397) detects no signs of a 'senatorial surge against Nero or in favour of Galba in Rome'. Whether Verginius was truly loyal throughout (Levick 1985: 337; Drinkwater 2019: 403) or 'a silent partner' in a cabal with Vindex and Galba to oust Nero (Daly 1975: 100; cf. Townend 1961: 339; Hainsworth 1962: 98, 1964: 133; Shotter 1967: 372-373) defies resolution. Although Verginius refused attempts by the Rhine legions to make him emperor both before and after Vesontio (Plut. *Galb* 6.2, 10.2-3; Tac. *Hist* 1.82; Dio 63.25.1-2), made no attempt to march on Rome and seemingly remained above the fray, Nero

interpreted Verginius' actions as a betrayal, his sense of having lost the loyalty of the armies palpable (Suet. *Ner.* 47.1; Shotter 2001: 254). He unsuccessfully attempted to recruit soldiers from amongst the urban *plebs*, forcibly enlisted slaves (Suet. *Ner.* 44.1-2) and created a legion from the sailors based at Misenum (Plut. *Galb.* 15.4, Suet. *Galb.* 12.2), as well as sending for the Illyrian legions (Tac. *Hist*. 1.6.2, 1.31.3, 1.70.1). It was all too little, too late. Recognising the rapidly changing situation, Nymphidius Sabinus, the Praetorian Prefect, with his eyes firmly on his own prospects (Plut. *Galb.* 2.1-2; Ottley 2010: 95), swung the loyalty of his soldiers behind Galba with the promise of a *donativum* amounting to ten times their yearly pay, double what both Claudius and Nero had distributed to mark their accession (Morgan 2006: 29). The Senate now declared Nero a *hostis* and proclaimed Galba emperor, thus legitimising him, effectively denying other potential claims (Brunt 1959: 541). In despair, Nero took his own life (Suet. *Ner*. 49; Dio 63.29.1). The Julio-Claudian dynasty was over.

A Failure of Imagination

Galba was neither a man of his time nor the leader Rome needed. After Nero's death, he was well placed to succeed him. Galba's distinguished ancestry (Suet. *Galb.* 2) gave him credibility with the aristocracy. He had enjoyed military successes in Germany and Africa (Plut. *Galb.* 3.2), where he had demonstrated both personal toughness and a willingness to demand high standards of his soldiers. Galba had served under Caligula and Claudius and governed the largest of the Spanish provinces for the previous eight years. He was also extremely wealthy (Plut. *Galb.* 3.1). Galba was seemingly well capable of being emperor (Morgan 2006: 19). In contrast, Suetonius makes clear that aspects of Galba's personality made him unsuitable for the role, tainted by two damning faults – *severitas/saevitia* (a severity which tips into cruelty) and *avaritia* (an insatiable desire for wealth). Moreover, Galba was old (seventy-two) and anachronistic in his thinking. As *princeps*, Galba showed a

disastrous lack of judgement: ‘he outraged all classes of Rome’ (Suet. *Galb.* 16.1). His reign lasted less than seven months.

After his arrival in Rome, Galba rapidly forfeited any prospective goodwill (Flaig 2015: 91-92). The *plebs urbana* were angered by his failure to punish the despised Tigellinus and Halotus (Dio 64.3.2-3; Suet. *Galb.* 15.2; Plut. *Galb.* 17.1-5). Galba handed over government to Titus Vinius (who led Galba’s army), the commander of the Praetorian Guard, Cornelius Laco, and Galba’s freedman, Icelus (Plut. *Galb.* 11.2. 17.3, 18.1; Tac. *Hist*. 1.13.1). The sources suggest that the trio ran rampant; corruption, indolence and self-enrichment characterising their behaviour. They were widely loathed (Tac. *Hist.* 1.6.1, 1.12.3; Suet. *Galb.* 14.2-16.2; Dio 64.2.3; Plut. *Galb.* 17.10). High ranking senators were both embarrassed and insulted to have to seek favours from them (Flaig 2015: 93). Galba sought to have private gifts given by Nero returned minus a tenth, even though many of the recipients would have already spent these (Tac. *Hist.* 1.20). Subsequent forced bankruptcies further diminished his acceptance by the elite.

Galba had already shown that he was ‘tone deaf’ when, angered by their ‘impudence’, he had ordered his troops to disperse a group of petitioners from the new legion Nero had raised, killing thousands, and then applying the ancient punishment of decimation (Suet. *Galb*. 12.3; Tac. *Hist*. 1.6; cf. Plut. *Galb.* 15.3-4). Morgan (2006: 43-44) argues that this incident demonstrates the traits which made Galba ‘such a poor emperor’: his reversion to an exemplary punishment from the past which had fallen into disuse now that the army was on a professional footing showed him as out of touch with contemporary thinking and discipline; Galba had a legalistic mind and would slavishly follow the letter of the law; Galba’s innate savagery. The impact of this incident on morale can easily be imagined. Suetonius makes clear that such brutality was almost inevitable given Galba’s ‘genetic make-up and his Julio-Claudian upbringing’ (Benedikston 1996: 172).

Even more telling, Galba forfeited the loyalty of the soldiers by refusing to pay the promised *donativum*. His high-minded response reeks of political naivety. Galba declared that his custom was 'to levy his soldiers, not buy them' (Suet. *Galb.* 16.1; Tac. *Hist*. 1.5.2), a sentiment admired by Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.5.4), Plutarch (*Galb.* 18.4) and Dio (64.3.3), yet viewed by Suetonius as another example of 'almost compulsive miserliness' (Van Wassenhove 2008: 630). It may be that Galba simply did not have the enormous sums that Nymphidius had promised; 30,000 sesterces to each Praetorian, 5000 sesterces to each of the other soldiers (Plut. *Galb.* 2.2). Tacitus suggests that the symbolism of the gift was important, that Galba could have mollified ill feeling by giving a small sum (*Hist.* 1.18.3). Galba gave nothing. Plutarch notes a fear by soldiers that future emperors would act similarly (*Galb.* 18: 3-5).

By the time Galba entered Rome, Nymphidius was already dead. As his reward for bringing Nero undone, Nymphidius sought to be made sole Praetorian Prefect for life (Rudich 1993: 236). Plutarch claims that Nymphidius aspired to be emperor (*Galb.* 9.3), planning a coup (*Galb.* 13.4; Androulakis 2021: 76). There are signs of the emergence of an anti-Galban faction which sought to capitalise on the unpopularity of the aged emperor (Tac. *Hist*. 1.7.2-3; Plut. *Galb.* 15.2-4; Suet. *Galb.* 13, 14.1; Aur. Vict. *Caes*. 6), so Nymphidius may have been working to replace Galba with a more grateful senator (Ottley 2010: 107) or Nymphidius may have been framed (Wiedemann 1996b: 263-264). Regardless of his intentions, Nymphidius was murdered once he entered the Praetorian camp (Plut. *Galb.* 14.3-6;).

Discontent simmered in Germany. The Rhine legions turned annoyance into defiance on January 1 69 when they refused the oath of loyalty, mutinied, and sought to place Vitellius on the throne (Tac. *Hist*. 1.12). In addition to grievances about the emperor's parsimony, they felt snubbed by the lack of rewards given for their defeat of Vindex, frustration at the removal of their commander, Verginius Rufus, and loathed his replacement Hordeonius Flaccus (Tac.

Hist. 1.9.1). Galba's grants of citizenship to some of Vindex's Gauls further inflamed them (De Blois 2007: 8).

Galba's fate was sealed by his choice of successor. He rightly diagnosed that his age was an issue, especially as he was childless. Galba adopted Piso Licianus as his heir (Tac. *Hist.* 1.14-18; Suet. *Galb.* 17), a young man of distinguished lineage, who had no military experience and little political influence. Tacitus gives Galba a lengthy speech where he explains the failures of the Julio-Claudians, who chose family as successors rather than bypassing relatives to elevate the 'best' man to the purple. We cannot know if this account of the speech is accurate, although it is unlikely to be (Alston 2014: 215; Morgan 2006: 59). When Galba bemoans his lack of ability to restore the republic and waxes lyrical about Piso's Republican forebears (Tac. *Hist.* 1.15-16), the reader is left with the impression of a man hankering for an idealised past, unable to act decisively in the present. True to character, Galba did not pay a *donativum* at Piso's adoption (Tac. *Hist* 1.18.2), another instance of his inability to demonstrate the expected imperial virtue of *liberalitas* (Nowotka 1993: 260-261). Otho, furious at being overlooked, having steadily suborned the Praetorians, had Galba murdered and usurped power (Tac. *Hist.* 1.27-41, Suet. *Otho* 6-7; Dio 64-5-6). Piso was also killed, having been a Caesar for only five days (Tac. *Hist.* 1.43, 1.48).

Suetonius rightly observes that Galba enjoyed greater popularity and respect when winning the empire than he did when running it (Suet. *Galb.* 14.1). Tacitus' summation is biting – 'everyone agreed that Galba would make a worthy emperor, until he became one' (*Hist.* 1.49.4). Nonetheless, Tacitus seems to have some sympathy for Galba. He describes Galba's murder as a heinous crime (*Hist*. 1.25, 1.28, 1.40, 1.42) and condemns the conspirators (*Hist*. 1.26), while the description of the scene of his death is modelled on the death of Priam in the *Aeneid* (Benario 1972: 146-147; c*ontra* Power 2014: 220). Schochat argues (1981a: 202, 204) that Tacitus presents Galba more favourably than he deserves because he shared the strong

republican sentiment Galba espouses. This may be valid, however, the overwhelming impression the sources give is that Galba was a mediocre emperor at best, too old for the position, lacking any sense of *clementia*, stuck in the past, with no real understanding of the political realities he faced.

A Failure of Character

Otho is presented in the sources as deeply flawed. Tacitus introduces him by claiming that the young man 'mimicked Nero's vices' (*Hist*. 1.13.3-4), sharing the tyrant's love of luxury, essentially acting as a pimp in Nero's affair with Poppaea (Plut. *Galb.* 19.2-5; Suet. *Otho* 3; Perkins 1993: 849). There is nothing high-minded about the motivation for his conspiracy – there is political opportunity in chaos, he is jealous of Piso, angry at Galba for overlooking him as successor (Tac. *Hist.* 1.21; cf. Plut. *Galb.* 23; Suet. *Otho* 4). Otho fears that unless he acts, he will be assassinated; he is acting in self-defence (Shochat 1981b: 381). This is an opportunity to win fame, albeit by commissioning a sordid murder! The sources contrast Otho's mental toughness with his effeminacy (Tac. *Hist.* 1.22.1; Suet. *Otho* 12; Plut. *Galb.* 25.1, *Otho* 9.2). Tacitus accuses Otho of 'unmanly flattery' in his letters to Vitellius (*Hist*. 1.74.1; Plut. *Otho* 4.3). His 'luxury and licentiousness' mirrors Vitellius' 'gluttony and drunkenness' (Plut. *Otho* 9.4). The overall impression of Otho's character is a man dominated by profligacy, love of *luxuria* and tainted by his association with Nero (Charles and Anagostou-Laoutides 2014: 212). Plutarch draws an explicit comparison; though Otho 'lived no more decently than Nero, he died more nobly' (*Otho* 18.2). Both live a debauched lifestyle: 'they drink too much wine, they have too much sex, and they love food too much' (Charles and Anagostou-Laoutides 2014: 213). These are clearly not imperial virtues.

This portrait of Otho seemingly owes much to shifting political loyalties. Dio (65.1.1) notes how those who had been lavish in praise of Otho were quick to disparage him after his death.

By all accounts he had governed Lusitania well (Tac. *Hist*. 1.13; Suet. *Otho* 3.2; Plut. *Galb.* 20.1). There was no widespread purge of Galba's supporters after Otho's accession (Tac. *Hist* 1.42-46). He earned the loyalty of prominent generals, including Celsus (Plut. *Otho* 1.1; Morgan 2006: 96) and won the support of the legions stationed on the Danube and in the East. Otho allowed the Praetorians to choose their own prefect (Tac. *Hist.* 1.46). He forced Tigellinus to commit suicide (Tac. *Hist.* 1.72; Plut. *Otho* 2.1-3). Far from obscuring his past connections to Nero, Otho encouraged exhibition of portraits of the dead ruler and restored statues of Poppaea (Tac. *Hist.* 1.78; Plut. *Otho* 3.1), intended to marry Nero's widow (Suet. *Otho* 10.2), appeared in public with Sporus (Dio 64.8), worked on the unfinished *Domus Aurea* (Suet. *Otho* 7.1) and allowed the populace and the troops to salute him as 'Nero Otho' (Tac. *Hist.* 1.78; Suet. *Otho* 7.1). There was clearly political capital in associating himself with the last Julio-Claudian emperor.

Changing the *princeps* did nothing to inhibit the advance of the Vitellian legions. While defeat at Bedriacum did not spell the end of Otho's capacity to resist - he had fresh forces, reinforcements were coming from Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Moesia (Tac. *Hist.* 2.32.3, 2.46.3), his soldiers were not dispirited and sought revenge for their defeat (Suet. *Otho* 9.3; Dio 64.12.1; Plut. *Otho* 15.4-5) – Otho decided to commit suicide rather than sacrifice any more Roman lives. Suetonius' account of the *exitus* scenes of both Otho and Nero contrasts the nobility of Otho's sacrifice with the cowardly panic displayed by Nero. Nero dies alone, a pariah; Otho's death is accompanied by extraordinary outpourings of grief from his soldiers, 'many' killing themselves, having kissed the hands and feet of the dead *princeps* (Suet. *Otho* 12.2; cf. Plut. *Otho* 17.4; Tac. *Hist.* 2.49.3-4). Perhaps this is Otho's true character emerging (Charles and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2012: 105, 112). We need not go as far as accepting that Otho had a 'spark of spiritual greatness' (Shochat 1981b: 376) to acknowledge that the tradition regarding him is 'riddled with tensions and inconsistencies' (Ash 1999: 83). Tacitus

seems particularly determined to sully Otho's reputation, reluctant to credit any character development after Otho's days as a wastrel in Nero's court, despite his effectiveness as governor of Lusitania (Stolte 1973: 183), ability to win the loyalty of his soldiers and the outpouring of grief at his death, perhaps reinforcing the historian's revulsion with Otho's betrayal and Galba's murder.

A Failure of *Gravitas*

Vitellius' reputation is universally poor, with the ancient sources seemingly accepting the picture of him painted by the victorious Flavians. Vitellius is criticised for his love of luxury, his extravagant spending and debauched lifestyle. Tacitus describes him as 'slave of his belly and his palate' (*Hist*. 2.31, 2.71.1), noting his insatiable appetite (2.62.1). Vitellius' inner circle is characterised by late hours, wild orgies, chaos, and drunkenness (2.68.1); an indolence which is 'copied' by both his officers and ordinary soldiers to the detriment of military discipline (2.69.2). Dio claims that Vitellius spent 900 million sesterces on dinners during his reign, including a million sesterces on a single dish (65.3.1-3; cf. Tac. *Hist*. 2.94). Suetonius highlights Vitellius' gluttony and cruelty (*Vit*. 13-14), although the anecdotes he recounts seem suspiciously like those used to illustrate the vices of other stereotypical tyrants.

Accounts of his visit to the battlefield at Bedriacum some forty days afterwards to gaze upon the unburied corpses highlight deficits in Vitellius' character. Suetonius describes him as unperturbed by the smell, remarking, 'Only one thing smells sweeter to me than a dead enemy, and that is a dead fellow-citizen' (*Vit*. 10.3), before sharing his flagon of neat wine with his companions. Vitellius drinks 'openly…to excess…passing the wine around in the presence of the dead' (Morgan 1992: 27). Tacitus reports him 'blatantly exalting' (*Hist.* 2.70; Dio 65.1-3). While others look away, Vitellius does not avert his gaze. This is not the

behaviour of a man worthy to be emperor. As Tacitus comments in a later passage, Vitellius is ignorant of all law, human and divine (*Hist.* 2.91).

While the tenor of the ancient accounts of Vitellius' reign is overwhelmingly negative, it is possible to discern within these works, elements which suggest finer qualities. Davenport argues (2014: 101) that Dio has a tendency towards 'biostructuring'; arranging his material according to whether the historian regarded an emperor's actions as 'worthy of censure or praise', rather than chronologically. Thus, description of Vitellius' degenerate behaviour (65.2.1-5.3) is followed by more praiseworthy actions (65.6.1-7.2). Notably, Vitellius embarks on no purge of Otho's supporters (Dio 65.6.2; Tac. *Hist.* 2.60-1-2; cf. Suet. *Vit.* 14.2), senators and equestrians are forbidden to appear on stage or compete in the arena (Dio 65.6.3; Tac. *Hist.* 2.62.2), the *princeps* regularly appears at the theatre, attends the Senate, eats in a relaxed manner with the elite and shows that even though he has risen to great heights, he has not forgotten his old friends (Dio 65.7.1; Tac. *Hist.* 2.91.2; cf. Suet. *Vit.* 12.1, 14.3). Vitellius also makes funerary offerings to Nero (Suet. *Vit.* 12.2; Dio 65.7.2-3), although his critics derided his previous sycophancy, claiming that Vitellius willingly cheered Nero's performances, rather than acting under compulsion.

Vitellius sought popularity with the *plebs,* holding lavish games (Dio 65.7.1; Tac. *Hist.* 2.94-95). Tacitus claims that many of the lower classes accompanied Vitellius' ponderous march towards Rome, including 'buffoons, actors and charioteers', whose company he clearly enjoyed (*Hist*. 2.87). Later, as the Flavians approached Rome, the *plebs* were prepared to arm and fight for him, which they were conspicuously not willing to do for Nero. Newbold (1974: 317-318) suggests that a major motivation was fear of what the Flavians would do once they captured the city, particularly after the pillage which followed the sack of Cremona (Tac. *Hist.* 3.32-33), rather than love for or loyalty to Vitellius. Vitellius had planned to abdicate, supposedly in return for one million sesterces from the Flavians (Tac. *Hist.* 3.65), however,

the crowd, stunned by this, protested strongly (Suet. *Vit.* 15). When they attacked the Capitol, Sabinus was decapitated (Tac. *Hist*. 3.75).

Vitellius' fate was sealed. The mob watched the battles in the streets of Rome (Tac. *Hist.* 3.83.1, 3.84.2-3; Keitel 1992: 347, 349-350) as though they were watching gladiatorial games (*spectaculum*). Vitellius, discovered in hiding and dragged half naked through the streets, met the degrading end of a criminal condemned and ritually executed by the state, (Suet. *Vit.* 17; Joseph. *BJ* 4.652; Dio 65.20-21): 'Jeered along the way, Vitellius was led to the Stairs, there killed, and his corpse abused' (Barry 2008: 242; Osgood 2016: 224). Tacitus observes, 'the mob reviled him in death as viciously as they had flattered him while he lived' (*Hist.* 3.85) This is not merely an example of the fickle nature of the urban masses, rather a reaction to Vitellius' previous indecision. While Vitellius' soldiers fought bravely until the end; the *plebs* recognised a weak leader and a lost cause (Yavetz 1969b: 568-569).

A Failure of Leadership

The events of 69 revealed a 'well-hidden secret of the principate…it was possible for an emperor to be chosen outside Rome' (Tac. *Hist*. 1.4.2, cf. 2.76.4). That is, of course, if the would-be *princeps* could muster sufficient military support to not only win power but maintain it. While usurpers maintained the fiction that they were only responding to the demands of their troops, essentially that they had power 'forced on them', their real motivation was 'the need for self-preservation or naked ambition and the troops had to be persuaded, or bribed, to acclaim their commander' (Birley 2007a: 382). Otho's coup was certainly not a spontaneous rising by the Praetorians. Only twenty-three were waiting to acclaim him when he slipped away from a ceremony. At the Praetorian camp, Tacitus' account has him stretching out his hands, throwing kisses, 'in everything aping the slave in order to become the master' (*Hist*. 1.36), demeaning himself by virtually begging the soldiers

to support him (Icks 2014: 89). Only later, when speaking to the Senate, does Otho claim that he 'acted under compulsion, that he had been taken against his will and had actually risked his life by opposing the soldiers' (Dio 64.8.1-2; Suet. *Otho* 7.1) – a pretence aimed at disguising his ambition and winning the senators through a supposed *recusatio imperii*.

Likewise, Vitellius' revolt was months in the making, rather than simply the product of the refusal of the customary oath to the emperor on January 1. Murison (1979: 94) argues for a plot forming as early as September/October 68, around the time of the death of Fonteius Capito, who Tacitus suggests was murdered because he would not revolt against Galba (*Hist.* 1.7.2, 3.62.2). Valens and Caecina are identified as the instigators of the conspiracy, likely sounding out neighbouring governors. Vitellius had been appointed by Galba, not for any conspicuous merit, but because he was unlikely to become a threat (Suet. *Vit*. 7.1). For the plotters, Vitellius was an ideal figurehead; a man with a distinguished background (Dio 64.4.1-2), affable to the troops, ambitious enough to be disloyal. Most importantly, he took little persuasion to join them (Plut. *Galb.* 22.6-8; Tac. *Hist*. 1.52.4). The date and details of the 'spontaneous outbreaks' could now be arranged.

Proclamation of Vespasian in July 69 was also orchestrated by the highest ranks. Vespasian's military reputation garnered a wide range of support (Levick 1999: 67-68). Tiberius Alexander, Prefect of Egypt, had his legions swear allegiance on July 1. Two days later, Vespasian's legions in Judaea followed suit, supposedly 'at the instigation of the soldiers' (Tac. *Hist.* 2.79-80). Tacitus claims that the troops were fearful that others would 'earn the prizes of empire', while they would miss out on rewards (*Hist*. 2.6). Josephus (*BJ* 4.592-600), who had been present during similar speeches, reports the arguments used to persuade the troops (Connal 2012: 38): jealousy of the easy life soldiers lead in Italy compared to theirs; Vespasian has access to a larger army, suggesting an easy victory; he already has family in Rome. Vespasian offers future stability as he has an adult son, already proven as an effective

leader (Tac. *Hist.* 2.5, 5.1), with another son already in his late teens. Mucianus enraged the Syrian legions by telling them that Vitellius planned to relocate them to Germany (Tac. *Hist*. 2.80.3). Vespasian is presented as a far better emperor for Rome (and for the soldiers) than Vitellius. Vespasian's usurpation is framed as a fight against Vitellius, rather than against Rome; he is not driven by ambition, instead chosen by fate and the soldiers. Chilver (1957: 34) notes the 'clockwork precision' of July 1. Vespasian was biding his time, seeking an opportune moment; 'Vespasian and Mucianus had been calculating chances before Vitellius even went to Germany' (Chilver 1957: 34). Despite subsequent Flavian propaganda, Vespasian's accession was carefully engineered through the support of powerful friends: Mucianus, Tiberius Alexander, Petrilius Cerialis, and his own son, Titus.

Nonetheless, there are stories of soldiers acting independently of their commanders throughout the period. While the focus often falls on Verginius Rufus' repeated refusals to be *princeps*, it is telling that the offers are made by his legions in the first place. The murder of Galba occurs when 'two common soldiers undertook to transfer the imperial power of the Roman People - and did transfer it' (Tac. *Hist*. 1.25.1). When the Guards' armoury was opened the soldiers were not following orders, 'each man is his own leader and instigator' (Tac. *Hist.* 1.38.3). After the deaths of Galba and Piso 'everything was done on the initiative of the soldiers' (Tac. *Hist.* 1.46.1). Some soldiers, suspicious when they saw weapons loaded onto wagons at night, burst into the palace, threatening to massacre the senators gathered there at dinner with the emperor (Plut. *Otho* 3.3-7). Otho calmed them with difficulty; the next day making a placatory speech and promising a donative of 5000 sesterces (Tac. *Hist*. 1.82). This highlights Otho's weak leadership; 'he is not the master of the soldiers but their plaything' (De Blois 2009: 228). Tacitus' account of the incident claims that the soldiers were ignorant, drunk, seeking an opportunity to loot, suspected treachery from their leaders and, 'as is common with a mob', looking for something new and exciting (*Hist.* 1.80; Christoforou

2017: 11-12). Senators were also threatened after Otho's defeat at Bedriacum (Tac. *Hist*. 2.52).

Accounts of this tumultuous year are replete with instances of mutiny, disloyalty, and attacks on officers, enabled by a lack of leadership. Military discipline was rapidly eroded by civil war (Tac. *Hist*. 1.51). Commanders had to tread a fine line, lest they be attacked by their men: Claudius Julianus was far too lax (Tac. *Hist* 3.57), Minicius Galbiana too strict (Tac. *Hist.* 3.7). Valens was believed by the soldiers to be hiding booty which should've been shared (Tac. *Hist*. 2.29). Others were simply incompetent. The Vitellian defeat at Cremona was a failure of leadership (Tac. *Hist.* 3.18), as was the subsequent defeat at Bedriacum (Tac. *Hist*. 3.25). Hordeonius Flaccus was murdered by his own troops (Tac. *Hist.* 4.36); Caecina almost suffered the same fate when he tried to change sides and hand his forces over to Vespasian (Joseph. *BJ* 4.639-641). Tacitus 'detests all mobs, civil and military' (Syme 1958: 531), often depicting actions such as mutiny as examples of a collective madness. Connal (2012: 51-52) disputes this, arguing that the troops' behaviour generally stemmed from the 'rational pursuit of their aims and rational insistence on matters they considered important'. Soldiers on all sides were, at times, brutal; they plundered, raped, and pillaged, with the four-day orgy of destruction and looting after the sack of Cremona a particular lowlight (Tac. *Hist.* 3.33), as was the desecration of altars and shrines when the Flavians took Rome (Tac. *Hist*. 3.84), yet the common soldiers were much less inclined to change sides than their officers (Morgan 2006: 6) and showed remarkable loyalty to Otho and Vitellius, laying down their lives for leaders who were unworthy of their sacrifice.

Conclusion

Nero's principate laid bare the innate instability of dynastic succession to the Principate. He was 'a teenager of humane instincts and artistic tastes, but destitute of political aptitude and

moral principles' (Brunt 1971: 259). Nero left behind no heir. His fall brought chaos and civil war as military commanders vied for opportunity to rule. The curtain which shrouded Augustus' settlements was pulled back to reveal the naked truth that a *princeps*' authority depended on the frontier armies, particularly those on the Rhine (where there were seven legions), the Danube (another seven) and the East (where eight were stationed). The German legions made Vitellius emperor; the forces on the Danube and in the East secured Vespasian's victory.

Power came at the point of a sword. Events of 68/69 reiterated the influence of the 'real masters of the city' (Drinkwater 2019: 420) – the Praetorian Guard. Withdrawal of their support doomed Nero, Galba's refusal to pay the promised donative allowed Otho to violently supersede him. Winning their loyalty and the loyalty of the legions, was reinforced as crucial in gaining, consolidating, and maintaining power. Claudius had allegedly passed a decree 'forbidding soldiers to pay complimentary calls on senators' (Suet. *Claud*. 25; Thomas 2004: 428), aimed at preventing the formation of a client base amongst the soldiery. Imperial ideology continually reinforced that the emperor was the ultimate leader of every Roman army. While armies had a residual affection for members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, usurpers were guaranteed no such devotion outside their own forces, so had to continually promote their martial achievements (Hekster 2007: 93-94). Imperial coinage emphasised the emperor's role as a military leader; stress placed on his *virtus* and *providentia* (Noreña 2001: 156). Victory monuments and triumphs reinforced this image.

The city of Rome remained important. Usurpers marched on Rome to ensure that the Senate recognised their claim. While it was clear that they understood where the real power lay – Vespasian dated his *dies imperii* as the day of his acclamation by his legions (1 July), rather than his recognition by the Senate on or after 21 December 69 – all emperors still needed the senatorial class to help them govern and to formally vote imperial powers which legalised

and legitimised their position. Tacitus acidly describes the submissiveness of the Senate throughout (*Hist*. 1. 19, 1.35, 1.45, 1.47, 2.7I, 2.87, 2.101, 3.37, 3.55). With Flavian forces wandering the streets, they were in no position to limit Vespasian's powers and saw the enticing possibilities of him guaranteeing peace (Tac. *Hist*. 4.3.3). The Senate voted Vespasian 'at one stroke all the usual powers of a *princeps*…these powers included not only those which had been bestowed at one time or another on Augustus but others which had first been granted to one of his successors' (Brunt 1977a: 102).

Contested succession provoked civil war. Prolonged periods of internal conflict threatened the safety and security of the empire itself. Vespasian stepped back from the campaign in Judaea, handing control to Titus. On the Danube, the Rhoxolani invaded Moesia before being defeated (Tac. *Hist.* 1.79), while in late 69, the Dacians raided across the river, ultimately being confronted by Mucianus (Tac. *Hist*. 3.46). The Sarmatians also saw opportunity to cause Rome problems (Tac. *Hist.* 1.2, 4.54). In Britain, a quarrel between the governor, Trebellius, and Coelius, commander of the Twentieth Legion, was intensified by civil war. Trebellius was forced to flee to Vitellius (Tac. *Hist.* 1.60). The legions declared for Vitellius, although they later switched their allegiance to Vespasian, who had served in Britain. Roman forces in the province were forced into a war to restore Cartimandua, the queen of the Brigantes, to her throne (Tac. *Hist.* 3.45).

A more serious external threat loomed. The armies on the northern frontier had been weakened by Vitellius taking away troops to invade Italy. After defeating Otho, he garrisoned Rome with a force of 20,000 (Tac. *Hist.* 2.93). In Germany, Vitellius' demand for reinforcements to resist the Flavians was addressed by imposing a levy, marred by abuses of the recruiting process, which aroused resentment amongst the Batavians (Tac. *Hist.* 4.14). Civilis was also encouraged to revolt by letters from Primus and Hordeonius Flaccus, supporters of Vespasian (Tac. *Hist.* 4.13). A Roman defeat (Tac. *Hist.* 4.15-18) was followed

by a mutiny of units of Batavians and Cannefantes within the Roman army. They bested a Roman legion (Tac. *Hist.* 4.19-20). Civilis continued to prove troublesome, anarchy reigned in the legions in Germany and efforts were made to spark a wider Gallic revolt, until final negotiations after the certainty of Vespasian's victory seemed to restore peace (Tac. *Hist.* 4.21-36, 4.54-79, 5.14-26). Nonetheless, Vespasian began his reign with ongoing war in Judaea, Germany and Britain and unrest on the Danube.

Vespasian was by no means a flawless candidate. Tacitus notes that although he was 'a born soldier' who set a strong personal example to his men, he was stingy with money (Tac. *Hist.* 2.5; Dio 65.8.2-5; 65.14.5), a trait which had proved fatal to Galba. One key point of difference from his immediate predecessors is that, unlike them, Vespasian could secure authority over those who put him on the throne (Damon 2006: 273). Galba 'was ruled by the power of three men' (Suet. *Galb.* 14). Tacitus (*Hist.* 1.13.1) and Plutarch (*Galb.* 20.4) also suggest that Vinius, Laco and Icelus were the real power behind the throne. Under Otho, it was his brother, Titianus, and the Praetorian Prefect, Proculus (Tac. *Hist.* 2.39.1), while Tacitus claims 'Vitellius had no authority. The duties of command were performed by Caecina and Valens' (*Hist*. 2.92.1). Although having an adult and a nearly adult son was an undoubted advantage as a candidate for empire (Tac. *Hist.* 4.52.1; cf. 2.77.1), Vespasian relied on the military expertise of Primus and Mucianus during the campaign. He astutely remained in Alexandria, effectively distancing himself from culpability in the deaths of Vitellius' six-year-old son (Tac. *Hist*. 4.80.1; Dio 65.22.2) and prominent Vitellians, including Asiaticus, the influential freedman (Tac. *Hist*. 4.11.2, 4.39.3; Griffin 2000a: 6), albeit the Flavians resisted the temptation for 'Sullan-style proscriptions' (Osgood 2015: 1693). Vespasian was shrewd, gradually treating Primus with less importance, yet not acting in a hostile manner towards him (Tac. *Hist*. 4.80.3) and ensuring that Mucianus' 'regency' (Tac. *Hist*. 4.39.2) in Rome between December 69 and Vespasian's arrival (autumn of 70) did not

become problematic. Mucianus was respected, powerful, but Titus was clearly Vespasian's second in command (Damon 2006: 275). Mucianus seems to have been, like Primus, quietly nudged aside (cf. Levick: 1999: 194).

Ultimately, Vespasian won power due to a combination of his personality, the strength and loyalty of his forces, his political shrewdness, and the support of powerful *amici,* as well as the self-destructive tendencies of his enemies. He was not merely last man standing; instead, clearly, best man standing.

Chapter Five

> 'He made it his principal business to shore up the moral foundations of the State, which were in a state of collapse' (Suet. *Vesp.* 8.1).

A comparison between Octavian and Vespasian seems natural (Tac. *Hist*. 1.50, cf. 2.6, 3.66.3). Admittedly, the wars of the triumviral period had lasted well beyond one tumultuous year, had a much more severe impact in the provinces and had left Octavian with a pressing need to access lands for his veterans in Italy. On the other hand, recent street fighting in the capital recalled the conflict between Marius and Sulla (Tac. *Hist*. 1.89, 2.38, 3.51, 3.72, 3.83). Unlike Octavian, Vespasian was nearly sixty when he became ruler of the Roman world, there was no need for a political revolution, nor a series of settlements to gradually increase his powers. Neither did he need to disguise the autocratic nature of his rule nor the military ascendancy which had propelled him to prominence and was the basis of his authority (Waters 1963: 207-208). It was Vespasian's martial prowess which differentiated him from other senators and entitled him to be *princeps.* While Flavian propaganda suggested that his reason for 'initiating a civil war' (Suet. *Vesp.* 7.1) was to save Rome from the depredations of Vitellius, with Vespasian the epitome of *virtus*, full of righteous anger, a brave man favoured by fortune, Josephus' portrait is much more nuanced – 'a passive-aggressive tortured soul who rages so impotently, constrained by manifold fears – and practical inconvenience' (Mason 2018: 222). In Josephus' account it is Vespasian's officers who propel his ascent (*BJ* 4.592-600), eventually forcing him at sword point to 'shoulder the burden of empire' (4.616).

Vespasian was a *novus homo* with undistinguished forebears (Suet. *Vesp*. 1.1-2), yet so self-assured that he laughingly dismissed an attempt to provide him with a mythical ancestor with links to Hercules (Suet. *Vesp.* 12; Wardle 2010: 104). For him, practical demonstrations of imperial virtues were more important than a spurious genealogy. Vespasian was not just founder of a new dynasty; he was a second Augustus (Suet. *Vesp*. 9.1). His use of the *nomen*

‘Caesar’ and the *praenomen* ‘Imperator’ mirrored Augustus, he closed the Temple of Janus and built the Temple of Peace in conscious imitation of Augustus (Levick 1999: 73; Tuck 2016: 117-18). This physical restoration of the city was not a ‘passion for building’ reflected in the ostentatious designs favoured by Nero but practical and conservative, including the construction of the Temple of the Deified Claudius, seemingly a demonstration of *pietas* and a rejection of Nero’s tyranny (Ramage 1983: 213). The comparison between Flavian buildings constructed to benefit the public with the vanity and self-indulgence of Nero is noted by Martial who contrasts the Golden House with the Flavian Amphitheatre, ‘Rome has been restored to herself, and under your rule, Caesar, the pleasances that belonged to a master now belong to the people’ (*Spec*. 2.3-11). Pliny observes that in the *Templum Pacis* the public could now admire priceless works of art previously held privately in Nero’s palace (*HN* 34.84).

Dio also presents Vespasian as the new Augustus, a man determined to reassert traditional values, to openly consult senators (65.10.5), to live frugally and behave modestly. Vespasian’s affable nature (65.11.1-3) contrasts sharply with Nero’s depravity (61.5.1), Caligula’s execution of the wealthy (59.10.7, 59.22.3-4) and Tiberius’ duplicity (57.1.1-6). Dio’s ideal ruler is an ‘experienced and virtuous emperor (possessing political and military skills honed through membership of the Senate)’ who works constructively with an experienced elite prepared to, and free to, offer honest advice (Madsen 2020: 106). Vespasian, like Augustus, is a model for future emperors to emulate.

An Heir and a Spare

Vespasian was determined to create a dynasty. Both Suetonius (*Vesp*. 25.1) and Dio (66.12) report him telling the Senate that either his sons would succeed him, or nobody would. From the beginning of his reign Vespasian had succession as a clear focus. To some extent this was

natural as, despite his robust health, he was four years older on his accession than Tiberius had been and understood the need to promote the image of a new imperial family, conspicuous by its merits, if not its ancestry. Moreover, Vespasian was likely conscious of his lack of *auctoritas* (Suet. *Vesp.* 7.2; Waters 1963: 213). His appointment of Titus to the command in Judaea after Vespasian's departure was clearly dynastic, an opportunity for the son of the emperor to win *fama et gloria* independent of his father. The day after Vitellius' death Vespasian and Titus were elected by the Senate as joint consuls (both *in absentia*), although Titus had not yet been a praetor. Domitian, who was in Rome, was voted the praetorship and *imperium consulare* (Tac. *Hist.* 4.3.4; Suet. *Dom.* 1.3). Both Titus and Domitian were honoured with the designation 'Caesar' and styled as *Principes Iuventutis*; both appeared together on coinage (*RIC* 2.17, 2.31, 2.49, 2.62).

Although Domitian was to later claim that Titus' remarkable talents as a forger were responsible for Domitian not being named joint ruler in Vespasian's will, Titus was clearly established as the heir apparent (Suet. *Dom.* 2.2; *Tit.* 3). After the capture of Jerusalem, Titus returned to Rome in June 71 to share a lavish triumph with Vespasian (Dio 66.12.1; Joseph. *BJ* 7.156-157). It was proposed to grant Titus tribunician power and proconsular *imperium*, either outside Rome as held by Agrippa in 13 BC and Nero in 51 or as a colleague, as Tiberius was in AD 13 (Levick 1999: 185-186). Suetonius claims that Titus 'now became his father's colleague, almost his guardian' (*Tit.* 6.1). Titus was appointed commander of the Praetorian Guard (Suet. *Tit*. 6), likely in 71, thus giving him oversight over the emperor's personal security and command of the largest military force in Italy. Vespasian was signalling absolute trust in his eldest son, consolidating power in the hands of his family. While the soldiers in Judaea had saluted Titus as *Imperator* and according to Suetonius wanted to make him *princeps* (*Tit.* 5.2-3), there is no suggestion that he was anything but loyal. Titus was *consul ordinariis* with his father in 72, 74, 75, 76, 77 and 79. He shared the censorship with

Vespasian in 73-74 (echoing Tiberius and Augustus in AD 13-14). Dio (66.12.1-17.5) suggests that Vespasian and Titus were virtually joint rulers. Titus' position was thus comparable to Tiberius under Augustus and later Trajan under Nerva (Plin. *Pan*. 8.6; Hammond 1956: 79).

Vespasian was wary of Domitian's ambition. As a young man, Domitian had been desperate to prove himself, arguably too eager (Tac. *Hist.* 4.68), which drew his father's approbation (Suet. *Dom.* 2.1) and reluctance to advance his son's military ambitions (*Dom.* 2.2). Domitian understood that with an army a *coup d'état* could be staged. Tacitus reports that he sent several messages to Cerialis to ask him to hand over the army and supreme command (*Hist.* 4.86.1). Cerialis ignored these as youthful fantasies. Vespasian again thwarted Domitian's hopes of military glory in 75, declining a request to send one of his sons to aid Vologaeses I of Parthia (Levick 1999: 189). He was determined that Domitian would be seen as Titus' future heir, not his current equal.

Titus

When Vespasian died Titus acceded to the position he had been groomed for without significant external opposition. Inside the imperial family there was some disquiet. Suetonius claims that Domitian nursed various resentments, toyed with the idea of promising his troops double the bounty Titus offered and never stopped plotting against him (*Dom*. 2.3). Titus apparently was too soft hearted to have his brother executed or banished. Perhaps this worked to his detriment as Dio (66.26.2) presents Domitian as responsible for his brother's death. Suetonius is not as explicit (*Tit.* 10.1) but notes Domitian's enmity for his brother (*Tit.* 9.3; Galimberti 2016: 94; cf. Spinelli and Gregori 2019: 248-251). The extant evidence does not allow modern scholars to determine Domitian's guilt or innocence. Rumour and innuendo often swirled around the deaths of emperors. Nothing from the reigns of Nerva and Trajan

credibly suggests Domitian's guilt, in a period where denigration of Domitian was common and politically beneficial to the new regime. On the other hand, Titus was relatively young and strong and deteriorated very quickly, whilst Domitian was quick to declare himself the new emperor. Suetonius records that, as he was dying, Titus said that 'only a single sin lay on his conscience' (*Tit.* 10.1-2; Dio 66.26.3). Exactly what he meant is not clear,

> The prevailing view is that of those who say that he referred to his taking his brother's wife, Domitia. Others - and these I am inclined to follow - say that what he meant as his mistake was that he had not killed Domitian when he found him openly plotting against him (Dio 66.26.4).

Domitian had both personal motives (although Suetonius (*Tit.* 10.2) rejects the story of intimacy between Titus and Domitia) and political incentive to murder his brother. Whilst guilt should not be presumed, Domitian's accession certainly poses questions.

Domitian

Titus reigned for a little over two years. Domitian was heir apparent and duly succeeded him, having first hurried to the Praetorian camp, and paid a donative to ensure their support. The Senate duly bestowed the customary powers. After a promising beginning, 'His good-will and self-restraint were not, however, destined to continue long, and the cruel streak in him soon appeared' (Suet. *Dom.* 10.1; Plin. *Pan.* 45; Tac. *Agr.* 45; cf. Suet. *Ner.* 19.3). Far from being the embodiment of imperial virtues, Domitian displayed *rapacitas*, *saevitia*, *arrogantia* and *libinositas* (which, as Jones (1992: 105) notes, are standard phrases used to describe the rhetorical 'stock' tyrant). Domitian demanded he be addressed as *dominus et deus*, representing himself as god, rather than god-like (Suet. *Dom.* 13.2; Dio 67.4.7, 67.13; cf. Waters 1969: 399; Jones 1992: 108-109; Jones 1996: 109-110; Southern 1997: 36, 45). Domitian's natural tendency towards cruelty was exacerbated by the revolt of Saturninus in 89 and became an even more prominent feature of his reign after 93 (Suet. *Dom.* 10.5; Tac. *Agr.* 39), while his last years were punctuated by an increase in treason trials. Suetonius

claims that Domitian was now paranoid, constantly in fear of assassination, hated by all (*Dom.* 14.2).

The ancient sources deplore Domitian's treatment of the Senate. Domitian degraded the Senate collectively as a political institution and individual senators, many of whom sought to preserve influence, and arguably their lives, through sycophancy and flattery (Tac. *Hist.* 1.1). This was a time of book burnings (Tac. *Agr.* 2.1; Plin. *Ep.* 7.19.6), soldiers ringing the Senate house (*Agr.* 45.1), condemnation for petty offences, silencing of dissent – an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Tacitus stresses that he and his fellow senators were victims of Domitian (*Agr.* 2.3-3.2); some were executed, others exiled, while any sense of a political voice in public affairs was trivialised, resulting in a merely passive role, enduring domination by the *princeps* (Dészpa 2016: 166-167). Pliny notes that under Domitian the path to safety for senators lay in inactivity, in not taking risks, in not drawing attention (*Ep.* 8.14). *Virtus* was dangerous.

Domitian's growing paranoia fed his suspicious nature which increased the level of accusations. In his later years, 'the emperor was suspicious of all mankind and from now on ceased to repose hopes of safety in either the freedmen or yet the prefects, whom he usually caused to be brought to trial during their very term of office' (Dio 67.14.4). Pliny claims that Domitian was surrounded by informers (*Pan.* 45.1); *delatores* were lurking in the crowd at gladiatorial games to note the reactions of senators (*Pan.* 33-34). Juvenal writes, 'even the beaches were covered with spies' (*Sat.* 4.47-48). This sense of being under constant surveillance was, no doubt, both unsettling and intimidating. It created an atmosphere where there was no freedom to speak the truth (Plin. *Pan.* 62-65, 76.3; *Ep.* 1.12.8, 3.9.31, 3.11.2-3, 4.11.5-14, 4.22.5, 8.14.7-10). Senators lived in fear of arbitrary arrest. Pliny writes of threats to himself and the deaths of his friends (*Pan.* 90.5) claiming, 'I stood amidst the flames of thunderbolts dropping all around me, and there were certain clear indications to make me

suppose a like end was awaiting me' (*Ep.* 3.11.3). Pliny further appropriates the role of victim, suggesting that his name too had been on a list and that he had only been saved by Domitian's murder (*Ep.* 7.27.14; see also *Ep.* 1.5, 4.24, 7.14, 7.27, 7.33; *Pan.* 95.3; Strunk 2013: 103-105; Gibson 2020: 99-100).

Domitian's execution of senators exemplifies his violence (*vis*) and cruelty (*crudelitas, saevitia*). He ignored repeated decrees that no emperor should put a senator to death (Dio 67.2.4). Suetonius lists the names of high-ranking victims (*Dom.* 10). Dio notes a glut of accusations of *maiestas* (67.3.3, 67.4.5, 67.9.6, 67.11.2-13, 67.12.1-5, 67.13.1-4, 67.14.1-3; Plin. *Ep.* 3.11.7; 7.19.4). Dio also observes that many were exiled, including prominent women (67.3.4, 67.14.4; Plin. *Ep*. 3.11.3). The pretexts for some of these executions seem trivial (Suet. *Dom.* 10.2-4, 15.1). In contrast, Rogers (1960: 19-23) argues that these charges were just peripheral and that the real charge against the group of seven in 93 was treason, a conspiracy against Domitian by a 'close-knit group who stood in a clearly defined tradition of His Majesty's *dis*loyal opposition' (22).

Death of a Tyrant

Domitian was assassinated in his bedroom. Both Suetonius and Dio suggest a breakdown in the relationship between Domitian and his most powerful *liberti*. Suetonius bases his account on the eyewitness testimony of a boy who tended to Domitian's *lares,* listing Domitian's killers as the freedman Stephanus, steward of Domitian's niece, Domitilla, Clodianus, a subaltern, Parthenius, Domitian's chamberlain, Satur a decurion of the chamberlains and Maximus, a gladiator, a freedman of Parthenius (*Dom.* 17.1-2). Dio also has Parthenius as the prime mover who, having removed the blade from the sword the emperor kept under his pillow (67.17.1; cf. Suet. *Dom*. 17.2), sends Stephanus into the room to kill Domitian. He adds the detail that Stephanus was immediately killed by others not involved in the

conspiracy, presumably *domestici* or imperial bodyguards. Dio claims that Sigerius, a *cubicularis*, and Enterus, an *a libellis* responsible for petitions, were the main instigators, together with Parthenius.

Some argue that the plot reached into the imperial family itself. Suetonius states that Domitian's wife was part of the conspiracy (*Dom*. 14.1). Dio recounts a story that Domitia found a tablet listing those her husband planned to have executed and warned those named (67.15.3-4). Herodian tells a similar story regarding Commodus' assassination; a list of senior courtiers the emperor intends to kill (1.17.1-2), written on the same type of tablet (linen wood), is removed from the emperor's bedroom by a servant, accidentally discovered by the emperor's concubine, which then leads those fearful of the forthcoming purge to plan the emperor's assassination (1.17.7-8). The lack of contemporary evidence suggests that the story was first told about Commodus' death, then later added to the tradition about Domitian (Collins 2009: 84). The *Epitome de Caesaribus* (11.11) states that Domitia joined the plot due to her love for the actor, Paris. Jones (1992: 37) and Southern (1997: 118, 121) argue against Domitia's involvement as her relationship with her husband was better than described in the ancient sources. Vinson (1989: 444) rightly regards the stories of Domitia's adultery with Paris as unreliable, typical of the vituperation directed at unpopular imperial women. Levick (2002: 211) believes that Domitia later pretended to have been involved in the assassination to increase her political capital with Nerva and Trajan.

It seems clear that if the conspirators hoped to survive beyond the deed itself, there must have been others, of higher social standing and political influence, who were aware of the plot. Dio reports a tradition that both Praetorian Prefects were involved (67.15.2). Eutropius (8.1) notes the role of T. Petronius Secundus who, with Parthenius, 'made Nerva emperor'. Both were killed in 97 for their involvement in Domitian's murder (*Epit. De Caes*. 12.6), unlikely if Petronius was innocent of all knowledge of the plot. Syme (1983: 136-137) and Murison

(2003: 152) discount the notion that Norbanus was involved, noting that he was a Domitianic loyalist who had helped suppress the revolt of Saturninus, while Petronius had served as Prefect of Egypt in 92 and 93. Norbanus disappears from our records after 96, replaced as Praetorian Prefect by Casperius Aelianus, yet Petronius retained his position. This suggests that Petronius knew of the plot, approved, and ensured that the Praetorian Guard supported Nerva's accession, for which he was duly rewarded (Collins 2009: 87-88, 100).

Nobody would have wanted a recurrence of the instability which followed the fall of Nero. Dio (67.15.5) claims that the conspirators 'discussed the matter with various men', who turned them down, believing that this was a test of their loyalty, before Nerva became the 'compromise' candidate (Jones 1992: 195). This version of events would suggest that Nerva may not have actively participated in the plot, however, he was likely aware of it (Tekir 2022: 391) as the plotters would surely have sought his approval before such drastic action (Collins 2009: 97; *contra* Murison 2003: 155). Syme (1958: 3), no admirer of Nerva, suggests 'Nor was this a man whom any conspirators could approach with confidence (given his past performance) until the deed was done.' Nonetheless, Nerva was in Rome and was acclaimed emperor on the same day as Domitian's murder, 18 September, although he received the *imperium* from the Senate the following day (Harvey 2002: 44-45). Ehrhardt (1987: 20) presents Nerva as fully aware of the conspiracy because he was the overseer of a sophisticated intelligence service. It was a small step from knowing of an impending plot to accepting an invitation to be the beneficiary. On the other hand, it is difficult to envision Nerva, a private citizen, as an early version of Sir Francis Walsingham or Lord Robert Cecil, although Sejanus, Tigellinus and Titus had doubtless employed informers in their role as Praetorian Prefect, to gather information on plots against Tiberius, Nero, and Vespasian respectively.

Nerva was a Flavian loyalist. Nerva and Vespasian had been friends under Nero. Murison (2003: 149) postulates that Nerva acted as a protector and guide to Domitian, an 'uncle' figure in Rome, when Vespasian was in the East. Nerva later shared an ordinary consulship with Vespasian in 71, the only senator who was not a member of the imperial family to hold one with him (Jones 1992: 52). Nerva also shared a second ordinary consulship, with Domitian, in 90, perhaps as a reward for services during the revolt of Saturninus the previous year (Berriman and Todd 2001: 314). Suetonius (*Dom.* 14.1) writes that Domitian's *amici* were involved in the conspiracy – powerful senators and equestrian courtiers. The ancient sources do not name them, doubtless many remained powerful under Nerva's successors (Collins 2009: 89). Nerva was an acceptable choice for them, albeit he was over sixty and in poor health (Dio 68.1.3), suggesting that his reign would be brief. Other senators, while respecting Nerva's long career in the Senate, his discretion, and proven abilities to negotiate, were simply delighted to be freed from the tyranny of Domitian, smashing his statues with an almost visceral hatred (Plin. *Pan*. 52.4-5; Dio 68.1.1). Murison (2003: 153) goes further than mere acceptance, to argue that Nerva *was* the Senate's choice, while Bennett (1997: 33-34) believes Domitian's death the result of a Senatorial plot - 'the murder was the contrivance of the Senate' (Waters 1963: 217).

Nerva

Nerva's reign was blighted by instability. He was not the first choice of the conspirators, nor an obvious candidate for the Senate to enthusiastically endorse, likely approved by the Praetorian Prefects but not chosen by them. Yet Nerva had clearly exerted influence behind the scenes, had been honoured by Nero after the suppression of the Pisonian Conspiracy (Tac. *Ann.* 15.72.1-5) and been rewarded for his loyalty by both Vespasian and Domitian. Pliny's observation that Nerva 'even as a private citizen took note of whatever was done in the public interest' (*Ep*. 7.33.9) hints at 'some active, if unofficial, role in political life in the capital'

(Berriman and Todd 2001: 314). Nerva needed to walk a delicate path in the Senate between those who had supported Domitian and wanted to move on from their past and those who had suffered under the tyrant and now sought revenge. When Calpurnius Crassus was accused of allegedly plotting against Nerva's life, the nobleman was exiled, rather than executed (Dio 68.3.1; Plin. *Ep.* 9.13; *Pan*. 5.6-6.4, 9.1; Syme 1958: 9). In a stronger ruler this may have been a sign of clemency, instead it was regarded as weakness. Trajan was to punish the same Crassus for a later conspiracy directed at him (Dio 68.16.2).

Much of the disquiet stemmed from the military. There is no record of Nerva having been a military commander and no legion felt particular loyalty to him, nor is there evidence of strong links with leading generals. While it is likely that Nerva offered a generous donative to the Praetorians to secure their support in the immediate aftermath of Domitian's death (Syme 1930: 64-65), Suetonius is clear that when they heard the news of Domitian's assassination, the troops were 'deeply affected' and 'at once, began to speak of Domitian the God – they would have avenged him had anyone given them a lead - and insisted that his assassins be brought to justice' (*Dom.* 23.1). Although Nerva had a reputation for loyalty to Domitian, and may have promised to punish Domitian's assassins, ill feeling lingered, although the army in Pannonia, which had four legions, sent laurels celebrating victory over the Suebi in autumn 97, showing a willingness to support Nerva (Plin. *Pan*. 8.2; Dio 68.3.4). Nerva attempted to shore up military support by appointing Verginius Rufus, now over eighty, as consul and made further gestures to maintain the loyalty of the Rhine legions whose commitment to Domitian had proven crucial in supressing the revolt of Saturninus (Berriman and Todd 2001: 316-317).

The real danger lurked much closer to home. In July/August 97 the Praetorian Guard besieged Nerva in the palace, forcing him to hand over the murderers of Domitian. The assassins were duly butchered. Nerva was forced to offer thanks to the mutineers (*Epit. De*

Caes. 12.8), a public humiliation. Pliny describes these events as 'the great stain on our age', a shocking breakdown of military discipline, albeit with one redeeming feature (*Pan*. 6.1-4). Two or three months later, in October, Nerva, ascended the Capitoline Hill, entered the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and proclaimed M. Ulpius Traianus, commander of the three legions of Germania Superior, as his successor (Dio 68.3.4; Plin. *Pan*. 7-8). The mutiny by the Praetorians clearly influenced Nerva's decision, demonstrating that the childless emperor's successor needed to be a military man, not a civilian (Grainger 2003: 96; cf. Griffin 2000b: 95).

Given this was a year after Domitian's death, this riot seems less a spontaneous outburst of repressed anger than a calculated revolt. Theories abound. The Praetorian Guard was used to undermine Nerva's position, paving the way for the next emperor to be a man acceptable to the army or a specific military group (Berriman and Todd 2001: 326). Trajan's nomination as successor was not a clever ploy by Nerva to reclaim authority, rather Casperius, the Praetorian Prefect, was Trajan's agent, charged with negotiating Trajan's adoption (Berriman and Todd 2001: 328). Syme (1958: 13-14, 150-156, 206-207) supports Trajan as the candidate of the Praetorian Guard, arguing that Casperius would have been known to Trajan's father from their time together in Egypt (35). In contrast, relying primarily on Pliny's *Panegyricus* (6.1-4), Collins (2013: 57-58) suggests that Pliny would not have drawn public attention to Trajan's role in events and rejects the claim that Casperius was an agent of Trajan. Schwarte (1979: 147-148) theorises that Cornelius Nigrinus, governor of Syria, was the man who had bribed Casperius to lead the insurrection, based on a passage in the *Epitome De Caesaribus* (12.7-8), although the text does not specify who offered the bribe. Punishment of Domitian's murderers would enable a rehabilitation of Domitian's reputation which would position Nigrinus, Domitian's most decorated general, as the natural successor of Nerva. Kienast (1968: 62) posits Nerva as the 'willing agent' of the deaths of Domitian's assassins,

which paved the way for the adoption of Trajan, a direct response to the threat from the commander of the eastern army (59).

Why Trajan?

Pliny asserts that Trajan's primacy 'was not created for us by civil wars and country racked by the arms of battle but in peace, through adoption' (*Pan*. 4.5). The only bond between Trajan and Nerva 'was that of mutual excellence, rendering you worthy to choose or be chosen' (*Pan*. 7.7). Trajan accepted this adoption only reluctantly, motivated by his desire to protect the *res publica* from harm (*Pan.* 9-10). As we might expect, the 'official' version is misleading. There were other competent generals besides Trajan who commanded sizeable forces (Grainger 2003: 71-72; Rice 2015: 35). The process behind the decision to adopt Trajan was far more complex than our sources suggest (Bennett 1997: 46), while Trajan's military career to this point was much less distinguished than Pliny's portrayal indicates, and which is often accepted uncritically in modern scholarship (e.g., Garzetti 1974: 305-306). Grainger (2003: 98) highlights the importance of Trajan's age. The intrigue around succession aimed to replace not Nerva, but Domitian, who was forty-four when murdered – 'just about Trajan's age', rather than choose another older replacement, who, like Nerva, could be expected to have a short reign.

The primary considerations were military. Trajan's initial appointment in Germany and subsequent adoption was part of a plan to thwart the ambitions of Nigrinus. Trajan's command in Upper Germany meant that he was in command of the nearest large consular army to Italy and could intervene quickly if necessary (Eck 2002: 216). Syme (1983: 141-142) notes Trajan's strong networks of friends and family in Spain, in Rome and in Asia Minor, viewing him as a considered choice by army commanders who were prepared to negotiate to reach an acceptable candidate. The year since the death of Domitian had given

them time to consider their options and plan accordingly (cf. Berriman and Todd 2001: 331; Tekir 2022: 395).

Trajan was informed of his adoption by letter. Notably, he did not come to Rome to meet his adoptive father, perhaps wary of appearing in the city without his legions and vulnerable to betrayal. Trajan took the *cognomen* Nerva, but not the *gentilicium* Cocceius; he remained Ulpus. Later coinage 'explicitly commemorated both his adoptive and his biological father' (Hekster 2014: 383; *RIC* 726). He was quickly granted the same powers as Titus held under Vespasian (Plin. *Pan.* 8.6; Hammond 1956: 89). Syme (1958: 12) speculates on a temporary dyarchy, a 'civilian ruler at Rome' and a military leader on the Rhine, however, seriously doubts its durability. Even after Nerva's death, three months later, Trajan did not hurry to the capital, instead ensuring the loyalty of the armies (Plin. *Pan.* 18.6) by visiting the Danube legions.

Conclusion

Vespasian's desire to found a dynasty was only partially successful. He was able to consolidate power, partly though conscious emulation of Augustus, partly through his own character and, in part, because there was a widespread desire for peace and stability after the horrors of civil war. Tacitus claims that Vespasian 'unlike all the emperors before him - changed for the better' on becoming emperor (*Hist*. 1.50). Suetonius commends the Flavian record, albeit he notes that 'it is generally admitted that Domitian's cruelty and greed justified his assassination' (*Vesp*. 1.1), a sentiment no doubt influenced by the hostile tradition against Domitian prevalent in the reigns of his successors. On the other hand, while Vespasian openly demonstrated confidence by discontinuing the practice of having everyone attending his morning audiences searched for concealed weapons (Suet. *Vesp.* 12.; cf. *Claud*. 35), his appointment of Titus as Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, rather than an equestrian, and the

ruthlessness with which Titus carried out his role (Suet. *Tit.* 6) suggests that opposition was effectively quelled. Suetonius' claim that his research showed that 'no innocent party was ever punished except behind his back or while he was absent from Rome, unless by deliberate defiance of his wishes or by misleading him of the facts of the case' (*Vesp*. 15) is disingenuous, although it speaks to Vespasian's political skills – like many a modern politician, distancing himself from negative publicity, readily appearing in public in a favourable light while deflecting any criticism or odium onto subordinates.

The Flavians employed both 'Caesar' and 'Augustus' in their nomenclature. The name 'Caesar' no longer signified direct descent from the family of Caesar and Augustus and had, instead, over time, 'become a standard title for those ruling Rome' (Hekster 2014: 381). Nonetheless, it certainly implied a sense of symbolic continuity. A milestone in the Jezreel Valley in Judaea which can be dated to the second half of 69, the earliest extant document of Vespasian's reign, makes his position clear. Vespasian is represented as 'Imperator Caesar Augustus', demonstrating that the support and respect of the legions was critical in his ascent to power and the basis of his rule (Dészpa 2016: 174). The *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani* cited imperial precedents and formalised Vespasian's authority, essentially confirming his right to exercise the powers accumulated by Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius (Hurlet 2016: 26; cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.3.3). Clause VI gives the *princeps* authority to do 'whatever he deems to be in the interests of the commonwealth or in accordance with the dignity of Roman affairs, both secular and religious, public and private' which seemingly covers virtually every possibility. Clause VIII essentially provides cover for Vespasian (and those acting under his mandate), retroactively approving any of his acts before the passing of this *lex*, thereby legitimising his usurpation of power. We do not know to what extent this document merely restates the customary powers enjoyed by the emperor or whether it grants new powers to Vespasian. It seems unlikely, with Flavian troops in the streets of the capital that the Senate was in any

position to limit the role of the *princeps*. On the other hand, while Vespasian would have been keen to emphasise a sense of continuity with the emperors who had preceded him, he does not seem to have asked for, nor had conferred, powers beyond 'those which had been bestowed at one time or another on Augustus and others which had first been granted to one of his successors' (Brunt 1977: 102). If the document originates solely from Senatorial initiative, it could be an attempt to encourage Vespasian to follow the *exempla* of the 'good' emperors who proceeded him and to clarify Senatorial expectations of him, 'to tie the newly minted emperor into the existing tradition' (Tuori 2016: 177).

Succession was more obviously than ever a family affair, with prominence given to the eldest son as eventual heir. This did not necessarily prevent disharmony, as Domitian's rivalry with his brother clearly demonstrated. Neither did it guarantee that the successor, despite opportunity to be groomed for the role, given experience and public prominence would necessarily be a wise and capable ruler. Domitian seemingly both terrified much of the Senate and was himself terrified of conspiracies. His paranoia worsened, particularly when there were active conspiracies against him (Suet. *Dom*. 10.5, 14.1-4). While Domitian certainly enjoyed popularity with the soldiers, who were angered by his death and sought revenge, senators rejoiced at his demise, the *plebs* greeted the news of Domitian's murder with 'indifference' (Suet. *Dom.* 23). The Flavian dynasty only lasted as long as the last two Julio-Claudian emperors had.

The principate of Nerva seemed to offer opportunity for a reset. Like Galba, Nerva was essentially the Senate's choice, although he clearly offered no long-term prospects himself due to his age and physical infirmities. Like Galba, he faced difficulties in controlling the Praetorian Guard, although these were not caused by a failure to pay a donative (Bennett 1997: 37) and Nerva had sought to win their loyalty by restoring Casperius to his former position as Praetorian Prefect (Dio 68.3.3). Unlike Galba, he chose a strong military

commander as his successor, rather than the scion of a noble family. This was clearly calculated to ensure control over the military. The adoption of Trajan was unprecedented – 'the first time in Roman history (and the only time until the end of the third century), in which adoption by an emperor of someone wholly outside of the family leads to actual imperial succession' (Hekster 2014: 382).

Instead of simply being an example of an inspired choice of the best qualified man to be emperor, selection based on merit, Nerva seems to have made a virtue of necessity. While Dio approves of Nerva's disregard of Trajan's Spanish roots, praising his willingness to look 'at a man's ability rather than his nationality' (68.4.1-2) and notes that, to ensure the safety of the State, Nerva bypassed living relatives in making this choice, none of those relatives had the military strength that the situation required if civil war on Nerva's death was to be averted or if Nerva was overthrown (Geer 1936: 49). To prevent the crisis escalating, Trajan was the best option, both immediately and in the long term.

Nerva may well have adopted Trajan reluctantly and may have had his hand forced, yet there can be no real argument that adopting a general from outside the *domus* was extremely successful. Trajan's subsequent honorific, *optimus princeps,* was well deserved, while adoption of those related by blood or marriage had produced Caligula and Nero, and biological succession had seen Domitian's ascent. Perhaps adopting the next emperor from the pool available in the Senate – choosing the best of the best – thus ensuring experience, competence and virtue offered a pathway to future political stability.

Chapter Six

> 'Take care thou art not made into a Caesar' (Marc. Aur. *Med.* 6.30)

While Nerva passed over various relatives in adopting Trajan, seemingly freely choosing a successor based on merit, suggestions that this instigated a tradition of adoption of the 'best' man to be the next emperor to effectively create a meritocracy or provided a model to be emulated are overstated. An example of this 'orthodoxy' can be seen in Rostovtzeff's assertion (1926: 116), 'In his family life the emperor had to disregard his love for his own children; he had to look for the best man among his peers and raise him to the throne by adoption', a 'policy' he claims was followed by 'all the Roman emperors of the second century' until Marcus Aurelius broke a 'firmly rooted' tradition by leaving Commodus as his successor (344). In fact, the adoption practices of the second century AD, successful as they were, more closely resembled the practices of the Julio-Claudian emperors than continuation of a radical precedent set by Nerva (Rice 2015: 31-32). Rather than simply choosing the best man amongst his peers, 'these peers out of necessity had to belong to an exclusive group of imperial relatives' (Hekster 2002: 19-20). The reigning emperor may not always choose the nearest family member as his designated successor; however, it was nearly impossible for a non-family member to take precedence over a relative, particularly if that relative could win the support of the army. The military felt a 'strong dynastic loyalty' (Lendon 1997: 254; Timpe 1962: 88).

Trajan's successor was a favoured relation. Hadrian's adoption is clouded in controversy, yet there is little doubt that Trajan intended him to succeed to the throne. Hadrian's father was Trajan's first cousin. When he died, Trajan became one of the boy's guardians, promoting his education, advancing his career in public life. Hadrian married Vibia Sabina, Trajan's grandniece (Geer 1936: 50), a significant dynastic move, the links strengthened by the later

conferral of the title *Augusta* on Vibia's mother and grandmother (*CIL* 11.133). After his campaigns in Dacia (105-106), Trajan handed Hadrian a diamond ring he had received from Nerva, thus following Augustan precedent (*SHA Hadr*. 3.7, cf. Dio 53.30). Hadrian was consul in 108 and, benefitting from the fall of Palma and Certus, built a network amongst Trajan's *amici*. Hadrian was favoured by Plotina, Trajan's wife (*SHA Hadr.* 4.1, 4.4), who used her influence to secure him the governorship of Syria. Appointment to a second consulship for 118 'served to make his adoption a foregone conclusion' (*SHA Hadr.* 4.3).

There are conspiracy theories regarding whether Hadrian was adopted by Trajan *before* he died. The *Historia Augusta* has Hadrian receiving his letter of adoption on 9 August 117 (4.6). The adrogation was irregular as both parties were not present at the ceremony, as required by law (Lindsay 2009: 209). News of the death of Trajan came on 11 August, becoming Hadrian's *dies imperii*. Rumours spread that Hadrian had not been adopted before Trajan died and that Plotina had signed the papers after his death (Dio 69.1.1-4; cf. *SHA Hadr*. 4.10). A story which claims that Trajan wanted Neratius Priscus (*cos.* 97) to succeed him is dubious (*SHA. Hadr*. 4.8; Syme 1958: 233), as is the suggestion that Trajan wanted to emulate Alexander the Great in dying without nominating a successor, thereby leaving the choice to the Senate (*SHA Hadr.* 4.9). There is certainly room for doubt in the official version: 'the adoption was, at best, by a dying man and stage-managed by the Empress' (Birley 1997: 77).

Ultimately, legal concerns were moot. Trajan had clearly trusted Hadrian enough to repeatedly promote him (Bennett 1997: 203). Hadrian was in command of the Syrian legions, who duly acclaimed him emperor. A double donative was quickly paid to the soldiers throughout the empire and the Praetorian Guard (*SHA Hadr*. 5.7). When Hadrian wrote to the Senate asking them to confirm him as ruler (Dio 69.2.2; *SHA Hadr.* 6.2), refusal was never seriously entertained.

Antoninus Pius

Hadrian's initial choice as successor also gives lie to suggestions of adoption purely on merit. Hadrian's age (sixty in 136) and rapidly declining health (Dio 69.17.1; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 14.8) made it imperative to name a successor. Childless himself, he ignored Servianus, his deceased sister's husband. He also passed over Servianus' grandson (Hadrian's grandnephew), Fuscus. Hadrian forced both to commit suicide (Dio 69.17; *SHA Hadr.* 15.8, 23.2, 23.8, 25.8). Fuscus was implicated in a conspiracy against the emperor (Birley 1997: 291-292). On the other hand, Servianus was ninety when he died, so it is extremely doubtful whether anyone could have seriously envisaged him as a viable successor. Hadrian's preference was for L. Ceionius Commodus, one of the consuls for 136, whose sole recommendation according to the *Historia Augusta* was his 'beauty' (*Hadr.* 23.10; cf. *SHA Ael.* 3.3-4, 6.1).

There is likely more to the decision, albeit Hadrian is said to have 'at once' regretted his choice (*SHA Ael.* 3.7). The newly named Lucius Aelius Caesar was tubercular, regularly coughing up blood, so ill that he could not even enter the Senate to give a speech of thanks for his adoption (*SHA Hadr.* 23.16). If this is true, Hadrian must have realised that, although Aelius was in his thirties, a long reign was impossible. Perhaps he was banking on this. Aelius had a five-year-old son, far too young to be an immediate successor. On the other hand, Ceonia Fabia was already betrothed, at Hadrian's request, to the young Marcus Annius Verus, a favourite of Hadrian's (*SHA Marc. 4*; Birley 1997: 290). The young man was in his fifteenth year. Hadrian may well have been nominating a placeholder until Marcus was ready to succeed (Eutr. 8.11; *SHA Marc.* 16.6; Birley 1987: 233, 240; Birley 1997: 295-296). This could also have been a belated attempt to make amends for the execution of Avidius Nigrinus, Aelius' stepfather and father-in-law, in 118, when, on his accession, Hadrian eliminated potential rivals (Geer 1936: 51; Syme 1958: 601; Birley 1997: 289). Regardless, it is difficult

to see the selection of Aelius as any demonstration of mutual excellence or a conscious choice of the man best suited to govern the empire.

When, predictably, Aelius died a little over a year after adoption, Hadrian made a much better choice, albeit perhaps as a 'stop-gap emperor' (Hekster 2002: 24), who proved much more substantial as he ruled for twenty-three years. Marcus was too young to reign, only seventeen (*SHA Marc*. 5.1). Antoninus' adoption, a man known for piety rather than military vigour, may also have been a gesture to soothe the hurt feelings of the Senate after the choice of Aelius (Hammond 1956: 96). When he adopted his successor, just before the emperor's death in 138 (*SHA Hadr*. 25.7), Hadrian insisted that Antoninus Pius adopt two sons: Marcus Annius Verus (subsequently Marcus Aurelius), Antoninus' nephew, and Lucius Ceionius Commodus, son of the previous heir (subsequently Lucius Verus) who was only seven (*SHA Ant. Pius* 4) and was, at Hadrian's wish, to marry Faustina the Younger, Antoninus' only surviving child, although Antoninus later thwarted this plan by having her betrothed to Marcus, with their eventual marriage in 145 ensuring succession passed to Antoninus' natural heirs (*SHA Ant. Pius* 10.2; *SHA Marc.* 6.1; cf. Kornemann 1930: 77). Antoninus became both father and father-in-law to Marcus.

While many scholars believe that Hadrian was always keen on Marcus as the ultimate successor, other reconstructions are possible. According to Xiphilinus' summary of Dio (69.21.1–2),

> Hadrian caused Antoninus, since the latter had no sons, to adopt both Lucius Commodus' son Commodus… and, in addition to him, Marcus Annius Verus, a grandson of Annius Verus… And while he was ordering Antoninus to adopt both, he preferred Verus on account of his kinship and his age and because he was already showing his very great strength of character, for which reason Hadrian used to call him 'Verissimus' ['truest'], playing on the meaning of his name in Latin.

The order here is important. On the adoption of Aelius, he was designated as successor; his son, Lucius, who now became Hadrian's grandson, next in line. Marcus was merely Aelius'

future son-in-law (Barnes 1967a: 77). It seems nonsensical to deliberately choose a successor who was terminally ill and whose imminent death would leave an infant heir and likely instability. More likely, L. Ceionius Commodus was in sound health before his adoption, as shown by his subsequent military campaigns in Pannonia (Garzetti 1974: 437-438). The passage above seemingly misreads the original text – it is Antoninus who prefers Marcus, while Hadrian's pun could easily be mocking the pretensions of an eleven-year-old who imagined himself a philosopher (Barnes 1967a: 79). According to this reading of the situation, Hadrian wanted a Ceionius, not Marcus, yet knew that Lucius needed Antoninus' protection. Given we cannot know what Hadrian was thinking at the time, the quality of the available evidence admits only speculation.

Clearly, Hadrian's intentions were dynastic, rather than a choice of the best of the best. In contrast, Antoninus' death-bed promotion of Marcus Aurelius as his sole successor (*SHA Marc.* 7.3-4; *Ant. Pius* 12.5-6) was based on the assessment that Marcus' merits outweighed the questionable character of Lucius. While this may seem an example of adopting a successor based on the mutual excellence Pliny praised in Nerva and Trajan (*Pan.* 7.7), the picture is marred by the consideration that Marcus was Antoninus' nephew, as well as the fact that, far from a voluntary adoption, this was compelled by Hadrian as a prerequisite of Antoninus' initial adoption as Hadrian' successor (Rice 2015: 38).

Marcus Aurelius

The succession of Marcus Aurelius produced genuine innovation. Despite his status as the clearly designated successor, he waited for the Senate's persuasion before accepting rule, this *recusatio* an affirmation of the tradition that choice of an emperor lay with the Senate. Marcus refused the purple unless Lucius had equal powers – *imperium,* tribunician power, the name Augustus; although Marcus was *pontifex maximus*, Lucius only *pontifex* (*SHA Marc*.

7.6-7; *SHA Verus* 4.1). For the first time there were co-emperors, joint rulers. Both men went from the Senate meeting to the camp of the Praetorians where they were acclaimed as *imperator.* They duly offered the soldiers a bounty, 20,000 sesterces per man, more for officers (*SHA Marc*. 7.9; *SHA Verus* 4.3): 'presumably a double accession was thought to require exceptional generosity' (Birley 2012: 156).

While Marcus seems to have been sincere in his desire to treat Lucius as an equal and had cemented their bond by having Lucius marry Marcus' daughter, Lucilla, the older man had essentially been Antoninus' deputy for over thirteen years. It was no real surprise that, in time, Lucius slipped into a clear second place, exacerbated by the contrast between his life of luxury and Marcus' sense of duty. The *Historia Augusta*, admittedly an unreliable source, delights in chronicling Lucius' debauched lifestyle, his banquets and love of gambling with dice and observes that 'he rivalled Caligula, Nero and Vitellius in their vices', including wandering the streets at night concealing his identity while frequently engaging in brawls (*Verus* 4.4-4.9, 5-6.1-6; cf. *SHA Marc*. 12-13). There are even rumours of Lucius violating his mother-in-law, Faustina, who retaliated by poisoning his oysters (*SHA Verus* 10.1), although his death from the Antonine plague seems more likely (*SHA Verus* 8.1; cf. *SHA Marc*. 14.8). Well before Lucius' death in 169, 'Marcus seemed to be the real, indeed the only political centre' (Eck 2012: 97).

Commodus

Unlike his predecessors Marcus, amongst his, at least, fourteen children (Birley 1987: 191), had sons who could succeed him. His two surviving sons (three elder sons died before 161, Commodus' twin died in 165) were given the title Caesar in 166 (*SHA Comm.* 1.10, 11, 13; *SHA Marc*. 12.8, 16.1, 21.3; Kornemann 1930: 80-81). When Annius Verus died, aged seven in 169 (*SHA Marc*. 21.3; Hdn. 1.2.1), it left just one heir, Commodus. The death of Lucius the

same year meant Marcus was sole ruler. Despite opposition from Faustina and Lucilla herself, who was still in her period of mourning, Marcus insisted that Lucilla marry Ti. Claudius Pompeianus, although he was considerably older than Lucius, perhaps over fifty, the age gap between the pair probably unwelcome to the nineteen-year-old bride (Birley 1987: 161). Pompeianus' father came from Antioch in Syria and had not been a Senator, although he had been Prefect of Egypt. Despite his origins and social status, Pompeianus had proven a capable and loyal general who had served in the north, including as governor of Lower Pannonia in 167. Marcus employed his talents further by making him his chief military adviser. Pompeianus' background offered other potential advantages: 'it would not give him any dangerous ambitions, of the kind which men of nobler origin married to an *Augusta* might acquire' (Birley 1987: 161-162).

The urgency to smooth Commodus' path to power was given further impetus by events in 175 (*SHA Marc*. 24.6-7; Dio 72.22.2-3) when, supposedly inspired by the false news of Marcus' demise, Avidius Cassius, governor of Syria, had himself proclaimed emperor by his legions. Commodus now assumed the *toga virilis*, aged fourteen, became *princeps iuventutis* (*SHA Marc*. 22.12, *SHA Comm.* 2.1-2, 12.3) and was to join his father on campaign (Hekster 2002: 35). Dio claims that Faustina had enticed the revolt with the promise that, if anything happened to Marcus, Avidius would gain the empire through marriage to her (72.22.3; cf. *SHA Avid.* 7.10). Regardless of whether this improbable story has any truth, it implies that Faustina could potentially play an important role as a 'transmitter of imperial power' from one emperor to another, just as she had for Marcus (Meyers 2016: 504). Marcus, ignoring speculation, took no action against her, while Faustina died soon afterwards, perhaps in autumn or winter 175 (*SHA Marc*. 26-4-9; Dio 72.29.1, 31.1-2; M. Aurel. *Med*. 9.3.1).

Although Avidius was defeated before Marcus left Italy, it was clear to the emperor that, rather than risk civil war in the event of his untimely death, he needed to firmly establish

Commodus as his successor (Hammond 1956: 103). Commodus was designated eponymous consul for 177 (at fifteen), was granted tribunician powers and acquired the *cognomen* of Augustus, thereafter, outwardly sharing power with his father. He was, however, clearly subordinate, as Commodus, like Lucius, was not *pontifex maximus* and lacked his father's experience and reputation. On his deathbed, during his last campaign on the Danube in 180, Marcus requested his friends and generals guide and advise the young man 'through the tempest and storm of life' (Hdn. 1.4.3-6).

Marcus was never going to overlook his natural son and adopt the 'best man' to succeed him. To do so would have risked civil war if Commodus remained alive, while to have him murdered or to exile him was unthinkable. Any successor other than Commodus would have had the elimination of Marcus' son as a priority, as history had shown with the executions of Agrippa Postumus on the accession of Tiberius, Tiberius Gemellus under Caligula, Britannicus by Nero. Whatever faults Marcus had observed in his son were not disqualifying, despite a report that he was disappointed, not because he was dying, only that he was dying leaving such a 'base and cruel' son to survive him (*SHA Marc*. 27.11-12), a claim which seems heavily influenced by hindsight. Marcus had tried to surround Commodus with wise counsellors (*SHA Comm.* 2.6, 3.1-3; Dio 72.1; Hdn. 1.2-8) yet gave him sole power. Realistically, he could not, and would not, act otherwise – as with other emperors before and after him, the bond between father and son, the ties of family, would invariably trump adoption if the successor was of an age to realistically take the reins.

Troubled Times

As emperor, Commodus seemingly demonstrated few of his father's virtues. Cassius Dio, an eyewitness to many of the events he describes, bemoans a 'descent from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust' (72.36.4). The ancient literary sources present Commodus as the epitome

of the ‘bad’ emperor, exhibiting signs of ‘madness and insanity’ (Hdn. 1.14.7-8), who has ‘cruel and murderous habits (Dio 73.1.1) and is the author of ‘many unseemly deeds’ (Dio 73.4.1). The emperor is ‘sinister and scandalous, cruel and obscene, filthy-mouthed and perverted’ (*SHA Comm*. 1.7-8). The *Historia Augusta* also includes anecdotes which show Commodus cutting open a corpulent man so that his intestines tumbled out (*Comm*. 10.5) and bleeding others to death with scalpels, like some deranged surgeon (*Comm.* 11.7). In these accounts, Commodus is portrayed as an amalgam of the worst of previous emperors; he shows little respect for the Senate, executing and banishing many senators; like Domitian, he becomes increasingly paranoid; like Nero he delights in public performances, although as a gladiator, rather than on the stage; like Caligula he has divine pretensions, although Commodus presents himself as the demi-god, Hercules. Commodus sponsors lavish entertainments, paid for by confiscations of the property of those executed (Dio 73.16.1). Accusations ran rife. Targets include those who had honour or influence under Marcus Aurelius (Dio 73.4; cf. Domitian’s resentment and removal (Dio 67.2; Rodgers 2021: 258) of those esteemed by Vespasian and Titus).

Growing disquiet

Commodus’ reign was punctuated by conspiracies and seemingly constant jockeying for position by those around him as ‘a succession of favourites held the real power like Grand Viziers, and Commodus devoted himself to pleasure’ (Birley 1988: 60). As early as 182, a plot centred on his sister, the *Augusta* Lucilla, nineteen years his elder, which included her nephew and alleged lover, Quadratus, and her daughter’s betrothed, her husband’s nephew, Quintianus (*SHA Comm*. 4.4.1; Dio 73.4.5; Hdn. 1.8.3-4). Lucilla was exiled to Capri and later murdered; others suspected of involvement were executed. The Praetorian Prefect, Paternus, seems to have been involved in the plot (Potter 2004: 88). A secondary target was Saoterus, Commodus’ chamberlain, who had the emperor’s ear (*SHA Comm*. 3.6; Millar

1977: 81) and treated the Senate with disrespect. Saoterus was assassinated by *frumentarii* (*SHA Comm.* 4.5-6, Hekster 2002: 53-54), although Dio (73.12.2) improbably puts his death much later, attributing responsibility for it to Cleander. Paternus was raised to senatorial rank soon afterwards, providing an opening for his previous colleague as Praetorian Prefect, Perennis, now the sole holder of the office, to accuse him of involvement in a second plot against the emperor, supposedly aiming to instal Salvius Julianus, who was commanding a legion, perhaps that of Upper Germany, at the time (Birley 1988: 61) and whose son was betrothed to Paternus' daughter, as emperor (Hdn. 1.8.3-8; *SHA Comm*. 4.7-8; Dio 73.5.1-2). Other distinguished *amici* of Marcus Aurelius perished in the aftermath. Traupmann (1956: 53) correctly identifies Commodus' targets sharing a common element: 'the faction of the senatorial party which had received high commands in the Marcomannic wars was considered the most dangerous for his security', a claim supported by the nearly simultaneous replacement of Pertinax, governor of Syria (*SHA Pert.* 3.3), and Didius Julianus (Dio 74.11.2; *SHA Jul*. 2.1-2). Perennis was now the most influential man in Rome, portrayed in the sources as virtually governing Rome 'while Commodus indulged his every whim' (Hekster 2002: 61).

Two already established trends continued: Commodus showed little inclination to govern and increasingly devoted himself to the arena, while the influence of those closest to him aroused resentment. Perennis' downfall (185) came with accusations that he had plotted to make his son emperor (Hdn. 1.9.1; cf. *SHA Comm.* 6.1), while Dio (73.9.2-4) presents a version of events which has origins in discontent among the legions in Britain (Brunt (1977b: 172). Dio defends Perennis' record, claiming that he was incorruptible (73.10.1), however, other sources suggest avarice and self-interest saw Perennis abuse his position (Hdn. 1.8.2; *SHA Comm.* 5.3, 6, 13). We simply cannot know which image is correct (Potter 2004: 89; Millar 1964: 128), although neither Perennis nor his sons could realistically have ever hoped to be

emperor (Hekster 2002: 63). What is certain is the pre-eminence at court of Cleander, a freedman, who had replaced Saoterus as *cubicularis* (Dio 73.12.1-2, Hdn. 1.12.3; *SHA Comm.* 6.3) and built a faction of senators through his willingness to sell 'senatorships, military commands, procuratorships, governorships, and, in a word, everything' (Dio 73.12.3; *SHA Comm.* 6.10; cf. Hdn. 1.12.3) to the highest bidder. This transactional approach reached its zenith in 190, when there were twenty-five consuls (Dio 73.12.4; *SHA Comm*. 6.9). This seems too brazen to simply be Cleander acting solely to benefit himself and must surely have been instigated by the emperor (Hekster 2002: 68-69). The sources claim that Cleander changed Praetorian Prefects 'hourly and daily', with Perennis' successor, Niger, only holding office for six hours, while Cleander elevated himself to the position (likely in 188), so that 'for the first time there were three Prefects' (*SHA Comm.* 6.5-13).

Cleander fell in 190, victim of a conspiracy led by Papirius Dionysius, the Prefect of the Grain Supply, and an array of senatorial cliques, who used their clients to provoke a popular disturbance over a shortage of grain. The populace blamed Cleander, troops could not quell the unrest, Commodus surrendered his favourite to the mob (Hdn. 1.12-1.13; Dio 73.12.5-14.4). Herodian, as is his wont (Alföldy 1989: 101), regards Cleander as responsible for the initial disruption of supply as part of a ploy to become emperor (1.12.3-4; Scott 2018: 444). Dio claims that Dionysius manipulated events to bring Cleander into disrepute (73.13.1), spreading rumours of disloyalty. Rather than a spontaneous outburst of popular anger, the demonstrations were carefully orchestrated to achieve a political goal (Whittaker 1964: 352, 363, 368; Alföldy 1989: 105, 121; cf. Potter 2004: 92).

Commodus himself was not to last much longer. In 192 he had the senate declare him a god, renamed Rome after himself (*Colonia Commodiana*), gave his name to the legions (*Commodianae*), assumed a range of extravagant titles, and named the twelve months of the year after these (Hdn. 1.14.9; Dio 73.15.2-6). He organised games which lasted for fourteen

days, slew animals in the arena, fought as a gladiator and terrified those close to him (Hdn. 1.15.1-9; Dio 73.18-21). According to Dio, the emperor planned to murder the consuls on January 1 and 'issue forth as both consul and *secutor* from the quarters of the gladiators' (73.22.2; Hdn. 1.16.3). A conspiracy was formed (Dio 73.22.1) which included the Praetorian Prefect, Laetus, and the chamberlain, Eclectus. Later, Commodus' mistress, Marcia became involved in the plot (73.22.4) and eventually Narcissus, the wrestler (73.22.5). Herodian suggests that Marcia was the instigator (1.16.4), after learning of Commodus' bizarre plans. After their attempt to poison Commodus failed, the three conspirators bribed Narcissus to strangle him (1.17.11).

Rather than the plot to assassinate Commodus being an ad hoc reaction to the sudden discovery of an immediate threat, where the selection of Pertinax by the conspirators took place after Commodus' death (Hdn. 2.1.3-4; Dio 74.1.2-3) and there was some reluctance on Pertinax's part to agree to their entreaties, it seems more likely that the conspiracy was 'carefully planned' (Barnes 1967b: 94, n. 56), had festered for well over a year, perhaps dating as far back to when Pertinax was designated one of the ordinary consuls for 192, and that Pertinax was involved (Birley 1969: 250, 252). The *Historia Augusta* clearly implicates him (*Pert.* 4.3-4) and there is circumstantial evidence to support this hypothesis in the reappearance of Ti. Claudius Pompeianus (*SHA Pert.* 4.10), who had retired from public life after the conspiracy of his wife, Lucilla, against Commodus, claiming 'his age and the state of his eyes' prevented him attending the Senate (Dio 74.3.2). Yet Pompeianus, twice consul, Marcus Aurelius' son-in-law and the former patron of Pertinax (Dio 74.3.1; *SHA Pert.* 2.4-5,4.10), was now present at the senatorial debate confirming his protégé as emperor, seemingly with 'both his sight and good health restored' (Dio 74.3.3). On the other hand, Okoń (2014: 48) believes that the conspirators initially had in mind, Q. Pompeius Sosius Falco, the consul for 193, yet changed their plans. Pertinax was widely respected, yet came

from humble origins, being the son of a freedman. While Pertinax's virtues, albeit his gentleness is exaggerated by Herodian (2.4.1; cf. Philippides 1984: 295-296), contrasted sharply with his predecessor's vices, his accession also invites comparison with Galba and Nerva, all three seemingly examples of the Senate, in the disruption following the assassination of an emperor they despised, restoring order by selecting its 'best' man and making him emperor - choosing elderly, eminently worthy senators (Murison 1999: 23-24; Davenport 2014: 99; Davenport and Mallan 2014: 647; Kemezis 2014: 55).

A Revolving Door

Despite his outstanding personal qualities, or perhaps because of them, Pertinax reigned a mere eighty-seven days. There was senatorial opposition from a group connected to the dead Lucius Verus which formed two conspiracies in 193: one when the Praetorian Guard tried to lead Maternus to their camp to proclaim him emperor (*SHA Pert*. 6.4-5; Jarvis 2022: 192) and an attempted coup by Laetus and Falco (*SHA Pert*. 10.1-10), when Laetus turned against the man he had only recently elevated, now favouring Falco because of his illustrious family, dynastic credentials as the nephew of the deified Lucius, and wealth (Dio 74.8-9). These failed conspiracies 'represent the final gambit of the Ceionian nobility' (Jarvis 2022: 196, 198-199; Champlin 1979: 305). Laetus allegedly launched a final coup when two (Dio 74.9.2) or three hundred (*SHA Pert*. 11.1) Guardsmen marched on the Palace. Pertinax confronted them and was murdered, his head mounted on a spear (*SHA Pert*. 10.8-11.13; Dio 74.9.1-10).

Conventional reasons offered for the Praetorian Guard's hatred of Pertinax include resentment of Pertinax's claim regarding the generosity of his donative, his denunciations of Commodus' lifestyle (Dio 74.13.4; *SHA Jul.* 3.7) and executions of members of the Guard after the failed conspiracy to instal Falco. Commodus had been popular with the troops

(Speidel 1993: 114), while Pertinax 'failed to understand…that one cannot with safety reform everything at once' (Dio 74.10.3). Birley (1969: 273) sees Pertinax's murder as 'an independent act by a group of discontented Guardsmen' to which Laetus acquiesced under pressure. More likely a reform of the Guard was imminent, including the appointment of a second Praetorian Prefect to share command or perhaps placing the Guard under the command of the Urban Prefect (Applebaum 2007: 204). Laetus seems to have had no candidate in mind to replace Pertinax, which casts doubt over his involvement in any plot, and simply slipped away to his house as violence escalated (*SHA Pert.* 11.7). Julianus certainly showed him no gratitude, appointing two new Prefects 'on the recommendation the Praetorians' (*SHA. Jul.* 3.1) and having Laetus executed (*SHA Jul.* 6.2; cf. Dio 74.16.5).

To what extent Julianus was directly responsible for Pertinax's death is unclear. Later sources, Aurelius Victor (*Caes*. 18) and Eutropius (8.16) are direct in apportioning blame, although, in a later passage in Eutropius, Albinus is named as an accomplice (8.18.4). The *Historia Augusta* also blames Albinus (*Alb.* 1.1, 14.2, 14.6), although these stories likely stem from the period after 195 and show clear signs of Severan propaganda (Birley 1969: 266, 273; Birley 1988: 118). Dio reports that the populace disparaged Julianus as 'a stealer of the empire and parricide' (74.13.3; *SHA Jul.* 3.7). His accession is presented in a tawdry story as the result of Julianus being the highest bidder in an 'auction' by the Praetorian Guard (Dio 74.11.3; Hdn. 2.6.4). Sulpicianus, Pertinax's father-in-law, was already in the Praetorian camp when news arrived of the emperor's death. He quickly sought support for his own claim to the throne (Dio 74.11.2), offering a donative of 20,000 sesterces (Pertinax had offered 12,000 three months earlier). Julianus arrived at the camp, offered 25,000 sesterces, and created fear in the soldiers by claiming Sulpicianus would seek to avenge Pertinax (*SHA Jul*. 3.2-3; Hdn. 2.6.9-10), while promising to honour Commodus. Applebaum (2007: 201) quibbles with the term 'auction' to describe a process where each contender made only one

bid, although, clearly, the candidate who offered the highest amount won out. He rightly points out that Julianus came to power 'the same way Pertinax did': he had the support of the Praetorian Prefect, Laetus, who acted as 'kingmaker', and he secured the loyalty of the Praetorians by paying a substantial donative (206).

While Julianus was not without imperial qualities – he was of consular rank, had commanded a legion in Germany and governed Belgica, Dalmatia, and Lower Germany, had earnt Commodus' ire and had won Pertinax's respect (*SHA Jul.* 1.1-2.3) – the Senate mistrusted him, the plebs despised him, the legions soon rebelled against him, and his only base of support was the Praetorian Guard who proved inadequate to protect him in the face of battle-hardened troops. So virulent was the feeling in Rome, the day after Pertinax's death the mob hurled stones at Julianus, occupied the Circus Maximus and called on Pescennius Niger and the Syrian army (Dio 74.13.5; *SHA Jul.* 4.7; Hdn. 2.7.3; Icks 2014: 93-94). Julianus allegedly sent an assassin to murder Niger, the governor of Syria, tried to remove Septimius Severus, governor of Pannonia Superior from his post and may have plotted against Clodius Albinus, governor of Britain (*SHA Jul.* 5.1, Hdn. 2.8-9). Whether the emperor moved first is doubtful. Severus was proclaimed emperor by his troops on April 9 (Birley 1988: 97), Niger was acclaimed at Antioch by his legions by the end of April (Hdn. 2.7.6, 8.5; Campbell 2000: 2), Albinus by his soldiers in the spring.

Julianus' position rapidly became untenable. The emperor's attempts to mount a defence became a shambles (Dio 74.16.2-3; Hdn. 2.11.9), although claims that he resorted to magic (*SHA Jul.* 9-11) and human sacrifice (Dio 74.16.5) seem likely to be the product of Severan propaganda or 'Dio's malice' (Leaning 1989: 561, 563). Julianus' fate was sealed by the Praetorians abandoning his cause after a letter from Severus which guaranteed no harm to the other Praetorians if they handed over Pertinax's assassins. The Senate duly declared Julianus a *hostis*, designated Severus emperor and bestowed divine honours on Pertinax (Dio 74.17.3-

4). Julianus was killed in the Palace on 1 June (*SHA Jul.* 8.8; Hdn. 2.12.7-13.1), having reigned a mere sixty-six days. Severus entered Rome amidst great spectacle, conscious of adding the support of the *plebs* to his military power and mastery of the Senate (Hdn. 2.14.1-5; Dio 75.1.3-2.6; *SHA Sev*. 7.1-8). He dismissed the Praetorians and removed their commanders (Hdn. 2.13.2-12; Dio 75.1-2), reconstituting the Guard with his own men.

Severus had already demonstrated his political acumen. Conscious of securing himself from fighting on multiple fronts, he sent a letter to Albinus, offering to make him Caesar and share the consulship for 194 (Hdn. 2.15.3-5; Dio 74.15.1). Notably, this did not include any grant of tribunician or proconsular power nor authority over Gaul or Spain (van Sickle 1928: 125-126). Albinus must have been naïve to believe that he had any chance of ascending to the purple as Severus had sons, albeit the eldest was only five, and by far the largest army. It seems eminently foreseeable that Severus would eliminate any threat from Niger and then turn on Albinus.

Conclusion

The period from the accession of Nerva to the death of Marcus Aurelius has been much lauded, most notably by Gibbon (1994 [1776], Vol. 1. Chap. III: 103) who believed it to be a time of happiness unequalled in human history. Apart from the myriad difficulties in attempting to measure human happiness, Gibbon does not consider the views of the many groups and individuals who have no voice in the literary record (Alston 2014: 272) and is perhaps overly keen to draw a sharp distinction between the relative stability under the Antonines and what followed. Stability was not because the model for choosing a *princeps* was now adoption. Adoption was used purely because the emperor had no biological son ready to succeed him. Trajan and Hadrian had not seen the need to groom a partner in power

during their reign, adopting a relative as successor only as they were dying (or, in Trajan's case, perhaps posthumously or not at all).

As well as their character and individual talents, the success of the 'adoptive emperors' can be attributed to the fact that each came to the throne at a mature age, having had experience in public life and each was able to reign for a significant period, which established continuity. Trajan became emperor at forty-five, reigned for nineteen years; Hadrian at forty-one, reigned for twenty-one years; Antoninus Pius at fifty-two, reigned for twenty-three years; Marcus Aurelius at forty, reigned for nineteen years. These were mature men on accession, better placed to handle the demands of empire than some who preceded them and many who followed them.

Despite being 'born in the purple', Commodus proved ill-suited to the demands of the office, particularly in his relations with the Senate, who vehemently condemned his memory: 'More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero' (*SHA Comm*. 19.2). He was not universally unpopular, however, clearly lacked the authority of his father and significantly transgressed against established norms. He had no children; Marcus' grandchildren were too young to rule. The lengthy civil wars which followed Commodus' assassination showed, yet again, the danger of an emperor dying without an heir. The return of a biological son succeeding his father brought back a recurrence of the problems which plagued Rome during first-century dynasties: 'the power of palace minions and women, executions of senators, disregard for the 'proper' business of empire, personal excess of various sorts…finally…the ultimate evil: civil war' (Peachin 2006: 135).

Severus won power because he had the strongest army. He sought to establish a dynasty by looking both backward and forward, posthumously self-adopting himself as the son of Marcus Aurelius, thus becoming Commodus' brother (Dio 76.7.4; cf. *SHA Sev.* 10.6, 11.3-4;

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 20.30). Bassianus was renamed Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Bestowal of divine honours on Commodus represent a further attempt to bolster perceptions of legitimacy, reinforcing Severus' connection to the previous royal family, placing him in a continuous line stretching back to Nerva (*CIL* 8.9317). Severus may have been laying a claim to Antonine wealth (Hekster 2001: 15), but he was also forging a connection with the *plebs* and with the armies. Severus effectively circumvented potential challenges by 'inserting himself into the closest possible relationship with the Antonine dynasty, one closer than any other claimant to the inheritance of Commodus' (Champlin 1979: 306). He was not a usurper, but family!

Conclusion

> Most Prime Ministers are faced with a predominant crisis, the handling of which defines their premiership and place in public memory…Some are handled by the premier with skill, instinct, and experience; others, as happened with Covid, sniff out a leader not up to the task, and a system that buckled (Seldon and Newell 2023: 181).

Augustus' position depended on his legal status, where he received regular grants of extraordinary magisterial powers from the Senate and People, the ongoing loyalty of the legions, and the immense *dignitas* and singular prestige he possessed. Moreover, the resources of the *patrimonium Augusti* (the imperial crown property) as well as his *res privata*, made him the wealthiest man in the Roman world, likely worth more than a billion sesterces (Alföldy 1988: 100), enjoying almost unlimited powers of patronage, including nominating men to priesthoods, commending candidates to voters and speaking in their support (Levick 1967: 228), and appointing military commanders. While his *auctoritas* could not be passed on intact to any successor, particularly as Augustus scrupulously avoided the appearance and language of monarchy, Augustus was determined to found a dynasty and to prevent civil strife on his death. Whether this was genuine concern for the future good of Rome, an ongoing attempt to secure his legacy, or a more cynical means to ensure his family's continued wealth and primacy matters little.

Augustus marked potential successors by a dual strategy; if young, they were placed in the public eye, received specific titles such as *princeps iuventutis*, their portraits were included on coins, they featured on triumphal arches, altars, temples, and public buildings (Zanker 1988: 221) and acquired military experience, while a close link was forged with the emperor through adoption (or marriage into the *domus*). Augustus deliberately restricted marriage into his house. Of the eighteen known marriages contracted by the first two generations of Augustan descendants, at least eleven were endogamous (Severy 2003: 64-65). This created a sense of exclusivity. Augustus' relations 'did not lightly consort with mere mortals…a kind of

people and a kind of family new to Roman experience' (66), thus promoting the concept of an imperial house.

Titles were used to emphasise continuity and to designate potential successors. Augustus' heirs would use both 'Caesar' and 'Augustus' to symbolise their links to the first *princeps* and/or the man recognised as the second founder of Rome (Gibson 2013a: 9). The importance of establishing links to previous emperors to confirm legitimacy continued long after the demise of the Julio-Claudian dynasty with 'Caesar' eventually signifying not membership of the *gens Julia,* but designation as emperor, used under the Flavians to mark Titus and Domitian as heirs apparent; thereafter, the title 'Caesar' becoming a public nomination of potential successors. Titus, Domitian, Trajan, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Verus, Commodus all held the title 'Caesar', later becoming *Augusti*; Piso Licinianus, Flavius (Domitian's son), Lucius Aelius, Helvius Pertinax (Pertinax's son) and Clodius Albinus were designated 'Caesar', however, died of natural causes or were murdered, and did not ascend to the purple. Galba initially refused imperial titles (Plut. *Galb.* 5.2) as did Vitellius (Tac. *Hist*. 1.62, 2.62, 3.58; Wiedemann 1996b: 273) although both eventually used 'Augustus', 'if only to lay their hands on the massive wealth of the *domus Caesaris*' (Drinkwater 2007: 68). In contrast, Vespasian styled himself *Imperator Caesar Vespasianus Augustus* from the moment his soldiers acclaimed him emperor (Tac. *Hist.* 2.80).

Despite these practices, lack of a method of succession was a glaring weakness in the structure of the Principate. In theory, the choice of emperor rested with SPQR, although SPQR were not legally nor constitutionally obligated to choose a *princeps* at all (Griffin 1984: 189). In practice, emperors had power conferred on them at Rome regardless of how they came to the purple, as SPQR lacked the military strength to prevent this. This invited instability, as, if any ruler confirmed by SPQR was legitimate, then a usurper could also achieve both power and legitimacy by overthrowing the incumbent and attempting to

establish his own dynasty on the pretext of saving the state from tyranny. Mommsen (1887/88: 1133) accurately characterises the Principate as 'not only in practice, but in theory, an autocracy tempered by legally permanent revolution'. Moreover, intermarriage amongst aristocratic Roman families created a pool of senators who had a tie of kinship with the ruling family and, therefore, some claim to the throne when there was no biological son (Griffin 1984: 192). Even without military intervention, emperors were vulnerable to the relentless scheming of imperial women, the malign influence of imperial freedmen, the ambitions of Praetorian Prefects, and the incessant jockeying for position of rival factions in the imperial court.

Imperial Women

The Principate shifted the *loci* of power from the public sphere to the court, to meetings between the emperor and a group of advisors, to rooms in the imperial palace, to the bedchamber. While a woman could not become emperor, the wife of an emperor, his sister(s) and other female relatives could influence his decisions through their proximity to him. There was no legal authority enjoyed by imperial woman, merely *auctoritas* (Hug 2022: 70-71), or *potentia*, if perceived by the sources as malign, as in the case of Agrippina the Younger (Suet. *Ner.* 6.4, *Vesp.* 4). While blood relationship to Augustus was significant in the elevation of successors, according to rumours, Livia schemed relentlessly, ultimately successfully, to make her son *princeps*. Dio claims that, under Tiberius, Livia behaved as if she were 'ruling alone' (*autarchousa*), although she was astute enough not to give offence by entering the Senate, the army camps, or the public assemblies (57.12.3; *Consolatio ad Liviam* 49-50; Vell. 2.130.5; Barrett 2002: 130). Her name was included on imperial correspondence (Dio 57.12.2), suggesting 'at the very least, an active sharing of power' (Hug 2022: 75). Agrippina the Younger influenced succession by persuading Claudius to adopt her son, thereby effectively superseding Claudius' biological son, Britannicus, who was younger than Nero, as

heir apparent. While the ancient sources, and many modern scholars, suggest that she had her husband poisoned, Aveline (2004: 473-474) strongly refutes claims that Claudius was murdered, although Champlin's verdict (2003: 44-46) that, 'we simply do not know' is a safer conclusion. Under Claudius, Agrippina defied convention, sitting in public with the emperor on a separate dais, receiving the homage of Caratacus (Tac. *Ann*. 12.37.4), meeting ambassadors and conducting 'ordinary' business (Dio 61.33.7). Her influence was initially even stronger under Nero due to both motherly bonds and her status as mother of the emperor. Agrippina apparently tried to mount the emperor's dais to sit beside him when an Armenian delegation was pleading their case, to the stupefaction of those present (Tac. *Ann*. 13.5.2; Dio 61.3.3-4). Tacitus claims that a Senate meeting was moved to the Palatine and a door built so Agrippina could hide behind a curtain and eavesdrop on the conversation (*Ann*. 13.5.1).

In the second century AD, the *Augusta*, Plotina was rumoured to have secured Hadrian's succession by promoting his interests, then actually writing the letter whereby Trajan adopted him, perhaps after the emperor had passed away (Dio 69.1.1-4). When a story spread that Commodus was not his biological son, having been fathered by a gladiator, rather than the emperor, Marcus Aurelius was asked whether he would divorce Faustina, for adultery. He replied, 'If we send our wife away, we must give back her dowry too' (*SHA Marc.* 19.8). Whether the anecdote above is true or not, it recognises that, regardless of Hadrian's demands, Marcus was emperor due to his marriage ties to Antoninus and that Faustina played an important role in the transfer of power.

While later courtly societies permitted women to rule in their own right or to act as regent for a prospective monarch too young to rule alone, 'to bridge the gap in male succession' (Duindam 2016: 58), thus preserving the dynasty (Duindam 2016: 2, 16-17, 89-90, 95), the Romans never embraced this practice. Women could not hold magistracies; they could

therefore neither have tribunician *potestas* nor possess the *imperium* which was the legal basis of the Principate (Hug 2022: 74).

Imperial women could contribute to instability, even posing a threat to depose the *princeps.* If imperial wives and widows feared loss of influence, they invariably conspired with a man, often a lover, against the emperor, hoping to maintain rank and privilege. According to the sources, jealousy often ran rampant in the imperial household. Tiberius complained about the friction between Livilla and Agrippina the Elder (Tac. *Ann*. 4.40.3), while Livia was alleged to be jealous of the latter (Tac. *Ann.* 2.43.4). Caligula's sisters conspired against him (Suet. *Cal.* 24.3). Commodus' sister Lucilla channelled her anger at the elevation of Bruttia Crispina into a failed conspiracy (Hdn. 1.8.3-4). Claudius was terrified by Messalina allegedly marrying C. Silius, fearing for his throne (Suet. *Claud.* 36; Tac. *Ann.* 11.31.1; Dio 61.31.2-4). Agrippina the Younger was accused of inciting Rubellius Plautus, a great-great-grandson of Augustus, to revolt (Tac. *Ann.* 13.19.3). It was alleged that with Nero dead she would marry Plautus and once again control the empire. Tacitus rightly dismisses later allegations of Claudius' daughter, Claudia Antonia's involvement in the Pisonian conspiracy, where she would supposedly add a cloak of legitimacy to the attempted coup by accompanying Piso to the Praetorian camp, then marrying him, as lacking credibility (*Ann.* 15.53.3-4; Rudich 1993: 216; Drinkwater 2019: 220). It was claimed that Domitia Longina was part of the plot which toppled Domitian (Suet. *Dom*. 14.1). Avidius Cassius rose against Marcus Aurelius because Faustina the Younger, fearing for her position if Marcus died, had allegedly offered Cassius both marriage and empire (Dio 72.22. 3-23.1; *SHA Marc*.24.6, *Avid. Cass*. 7.1, 10.1). In contrast, Pliny praises Trajan's wife and sister who, seemingly unusually, do not viciously compete for Trajan's affections (*Pan.* 84.2-4).

Lack of a clearcut heir posed difficulties regarding succession. Imperial wives were often unable to fulfil a primary function – to produce a son who would become a legitimate heir. In

the first two centuries of the principate, only Titus, Domitian and Commodus succeeded their biological father, while, even if a male heir was conceived, there were high rates of child mortality. Surviving childhood, of course, did not guarantee living long enough to become *princeps.* This poses the question as to why Roman emperors, unlike most premodern societies outside Christian Europe, did not practise polygyny. Duindam (2016: 110) notes that, even where monogamy is the norm in the wider society, polygyny is 'predominant in dynastic settings', ranging from rulers having both a wife and concubines to a group of women reserved exclusively for the emperor, as happened in the Ottoman harem or back-palace in Imperial China. He observes (121) that Japanese, Korean, Safavid and Mughal courts combined marriage with polygyny. These arrangements could be used to produce several sons. While Caligula (Suet *Cal.* 41; Dio 59.28.9) and Commodus (*SHA Comm.* 5.4) collected large numbers of women at court, these were used as prostitutes, rather than reserved for the emperor. Instead of polygyny, all Roman emperors, 'adhered to the societal norm of heterosexual monogamous marriage; only children of such marriages were considered legitimate' (Del Chrol and Blake 2022: 353).

There is no doubt that the lack of consideration of adopting a system of formal court polygyny went beyond demonstrating a respect for norms, as Roman emperors repeatedly violated social norms, particularly, if we can believe our sources, in the realm of sexual behaviour. More likely, the ease of divorce and remarriage, and the ready acceptance of adoption as a strategy for succession, rendered an exclusive reserve of women for reproduction unnecessary (Del Chrol and Blake 2022: 354). It is, of course, possible that a problem in terms of reproduction lay with the fertility of the emperor, rather than any female partner, so even a strategy of polygyny would not necessarily have guaranteed the required biological son.

The Fundamental Problem

Lack of a written constitution is problematic. Unlike other Western democracies, modern Britain relies on a 'mishmash of laws and conventions, customs, and courtesies' (*The Economist*, 2018). There is no single, codified document which sets out limits on behaviour. Priestley (1986: 117) claims that Britain relies on what he calls the 'good chap theory of government' – the notion that its politicians, whether male or female understand the 'unwritten rules' and choose to observe them (Hennessy 1995: 57, 65). The system depends on self-regulation to function effectively; essentially, those holding virtually unrestricted powers exercise restraint. Blick and Hennessy (2019: 30) note a fundamental weakness: assumptions that those who rise to high office will be 'good chaps' has left the British political system vulnerable to those who are not 'good chaps' but are willing to circumvent those rules for their own advancement. While the designation 'good chap' seems quintessentially British, there are parallels with the development of the Principate where the emperor was expected, particularly by the upper classes, to display *civilitas*, to act in accordance with social and political norms as any senator would and to avoid the core vices of *saevitia*, *avaritia*, *vis*, *superbia*, *libido,* and *crudelitas* commonly associated with tyrants (Dunkle 1971: 19). He was expected to demonstrate self-control. When the emperor consistently did not, and was demonstrably not a 'good chap', there was no mechanism for his removal except violence. Such violence never promoted his designated heir (if there was one) in his stead. The murder of Caligula did see the Julio-Claudian dynasty continue, albeit through Claudius' unlikely ascent. On other occasions, heirs perished in the immediate aftermath and dynasties collapsed.

Eliminating Rivals

The lack of formalised methods of selection of imperial heirs invited violence. Anyone with a direct link to the royal family or the previous emperor could be a figurehead for conspirators to rally around. The death of Agrippa Postumus set the standard: eliminate any possible rival. Another strategy was to have potentially troublesome relatives exiled, to be quietly killed later as Nero did with Octavia (Suet. *Ner*. 35.1-2; Tac. *Ann.* 14.63-4) and Commodus with Drusilla (Dio 73.4.6; *SHA Comm.* 4.4, 5.7). Age and innocence were no barrier: Vitellius' brother and young son were killed even though Vitellius himself had executed none of Otho's or Vespasian's relatives (Dio 65.22.1-2). Self-defence was often pre-emptive. Both Commodus and Septimius Severus killed off all men 'linked by either marriage or direct descent with the families of Marcus Aurelius or Lucius Verus' at any inkling of political ambitions (Hekster 2002: 26-27). Hekster (2023: 244) notes that Rome never developed 'a systematic way' to minimise potential threats from within the family, unlike the fourteenth century practice in Ethiopia of sending all male members of the royal family, 'with the exception of such who received dispensation', to a mountain fortress where they were kept under armed guard (Dombrovski 1988: 46-47, 55-56) or the Ottoman court of Mehmet II where the monarch on accession had the right to execute his brothers to ensure stability – a law which persisted until the early seventeenth century (Murphey 2008: 103). Roman emperors could not be so open and needed to find legal pretexts to execute siblings.

Regicide

Being a monarch has long been a hazardous occupation. A systematic study of regicide by Manuel Eisner examines 'all monarchs who ruled the major states of Europe between AD 600 and 1800, coding all who died of murder off the battlefield' (2011: 559). Of 1,513 monarchs in 24 countries during this period, Eisner found that 219 were victims of homicide (563).

Using standard criminological practice, this is an estimated murder rate of 727.6 per 100,000 person-years if only the 'certain' cases are included. It should be noted that Eisner differentiated between 'certain' and 'doubtful' cases. He excluded deaths on the battlefield, accidents, 'all cases of poisoning and cases of alleged murder in prison' (561). In the modern world, only war is as deadly. The fatality rate used to define 'major combat' for soldiers at war is six deaths per 1,000 personnel-years (Bird and Fairweather 2008), which can be compared to 14.51 per 1,000 ruler-years for monarchs 'if we include all types of violent deaths inflicted by enemies' (Eisner 2011: 564).

Being a Roman emperor was even more dangerous than the figures above indicate. Using Eisner's methodology, excluding cases where emperors were rumoured to have been poisoned, where they committed suicide, were usurpers never acknowledged by the Senate or where the evidence simply does not allow certainty, Kelly (2022: 379-381) has produced a statistical analysis for the period 27 BC-AD 300. The rate is around 6,989 killings per 100,000 ruler years, almost ten times the rate Eisner found. This rate is also much higher than the most violent periods of Eisner's study – the early Middle Ages, where the seventh century had 2,303 certain cases of regicide per 100,000 ruler years: the eighth century 1,425 (2011: 569). As Kelly observes (2022: 381), even if the tumultuous third century AD (which had around 13,971 murders per 100,000 ruler years) is excluded, the period covered in this thesis, from Augustus to Septimius Severus, still has a rate of 3,070 killings per 100,000 ruler years. I would argue that the rate is even higher as both Nero and Otho faced defeat and by committing suicide only pre-empted a violent death at the hands of their enemies. While rumours swirled that Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius were murdered, the evidence is often circumstantial, hearsay or does not stand up to scrutiny. If Roman emperors were paranoid, the statistics suggest that they had good reason to be!

Eisner offers other insights worth consideration. He notes (2011: 570) that the 'murder of a predecessor is associated with an increased risk for the current monarch' and that, 'in each polity, regicide tends to come in 'bundles'', a phenomenon which occurred in the aftermath of Nero's fall and following Commodus' assassination, associated with civil wars to determine the succession. Tellingly, this was avoided after the deaths of Caligula and Domitian; in Claudius' accession because there was a Julio-Claudian figurehead for the Praetorians to rally around; in Nerva's, likely because there were powerful figures at work behind the scenes who were playing a longer game (Grainger 2003: 126-127). Eisner's analyses (2011: 566) also 'suggest that murdered monarchs began their reigns considerably earlier than monarchs who died a natural death'. In our period this applies to those who came to power young, either through adoption or as the biological successor (Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus), yet clearly does not hold in relation to Galba (seventy-two on accession), Vitellius (fifty-four), Pertinax (sixty-six) and Didius Julianus (sixty) who were never able to establish themselves on the throne. While Caligula had a brief reign, the relative youth of the other 'bad' emperors did not create initial instability and each reigned for over a decade. More important in their demise was inexperience in handling the competing demands of the various acceptance groups and character flaws which became increasingly more evident the longer the emperor reigned.

Lack of laws around succession contributed to violence against emperors. While Eisner (2011: 568) notes a consistent downward trend in murderous attacks on European monarchs over a period of almost 1,200 years, more Roman emperors were murdered in the century after Septimius Severus than in the two hundred years preceding him. Regicide seemingly declined throughout Europe as succession laws developed. During the Early Middle Ages, succession included 'elective components, meritocratic elements, and a variety of inheritance principles, including a mix of agnatic (the throne passed the older brother of the deceased

monarch) and cognatic (the throne is passed to the eldest child) principles' (Eisner 2011: 572). After the eleventh century there was an 'increasing trend towards codified rules of succession based on primogeniture' (572). This did not happen in imperial Rome where, unlike other courtly societies, all children were expected to inherit property, rather than simply the eldest (Hug 2022: 78-79). Consequently, when it came to imperial succession, if there was more than one son and they were close in age, there was potential for conflict. Tiberius voluntarily retired to Rhodes as Gaius and Lucius were promoted as successors. Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.43.5) notes factions in Tiberius' court; one supporting Drusus, another Germanicus. The fear of being replaced by a brother was behind the murder of Brittanicus. The twelve-year age gap did not stop Domitian scheming against his brother after Titus became emperor. As there was no fixed method of succession and the clear acceptance of succession by murder, the murder of Galba, a first century example, was emulated at least four times, with five other possible cases, in the third century.

The Praetorian Guard

The Praetorian Guard proved a key factor in succession. They controlled access to the palace, accompanied emperors to banquets (Dio 60.3.3; cf. Suet. *Claud*. 35.1; Dio 68.15.5), the Senate house (Tac. *Ann.* 1.7.5; Suet. *Tib.* 24.1, *Claud*. 12.1; Dio 59.26.3; *SHA Sev*. 7.4-6) at special events and ceremonies (Suet. *Ner.* 13.1; Dio 63.4.2-3, 63.20.4) and on his travels outside Rome (Tac. *Ann*. 4.59.2; Plin. *HN* 9.15), including protecting him at imperial villas. The fact there were no successful attacks by a lone wolf assassin, a disturbed individual from outside the court (Suet. *Aug.* 19.1-2, *Claud.*13.1; *SHA Had*r. 12.5), is testimony that the Praetorians did their job well. Likewise, there were no successful conspiracies by groups of senators or equestrians without the involvement of members of the imperial family or Praetorian officers (Kelly 2022: 388). Tacitus' account has the conspirators devising a plan to kill Nero while the emperor is a guest at Piso's villa in Baiae, as he had a habit of dismissing

his bodyguards when he visited (*Ann.* 15.52.1), suggesting that they knew there would be few other chances to bypass his security. On the other hand, Praetorian Prefects and/or their men are said to have played a role in six of the seven assassinations of emperors in the period from the origins of the Principate under Augustus until the reign of Septimius Severus. During the next century, the involvement of Praetorian Prefects or soldiers or both in the murder of the emperor is alleged in at least nine more instances, suggesting that the role of the Guard in removing the emperor, thus clearing a path for his successor, was paramount long after the death of Caligula (Wiseman1988: 9).

Our sources often present the Praetorian Prefect in a negative light characterised by ambition and corruption. Sejanus is accused of aiming to be Tiberius' successor, seducing Livilla and having Drusus poisoned (Tac. *Ann*. 4.3, 4.8.1; Dio 57.22.1-2). There are issues with uncritically accepting these accusations, including that, somewhat carelessly if the pair were guilty, co-conspirators Eudemus (Drusus' physician) and Lygus (a eunuch in Drusus' household) were left alive to testify to the plot under torture (Seager 2005: 156-157; Levick 1976: 161). Tacitus clearly accepts the liaison as fact, although it makes little sense. Wood (1999: 182) poses a pertinent question, 'Why should the wife of the heir apparent to the empire, and the mother of his sons, trade her status and security, for…a man of a lower order who hoped to seize power by force?' Tacitus' explanation (*Ann.* 4.3.3) that a woman who has committed adultery would subsequently refuse nothing seems disingenuous. Likewise, although Nymphidius Rufus was critical in swaying Praetorian support away from Nero, there is insufficient evidence to support suggestions that he later aimed for supreme power himself (Plut. *Galb.* 9.3, 13.4, 14.1; Ottley 2010: 105, 109). After Tiberius' death, Macro essentially staged a *coup d'état* to ensure Caligula's accession (Grainger 2020: 36). Burrus, at Agrippina's behest, arranged for Nero to be saluted as emperor by the Guardsmen on duty, then at the Praetorian camp, before the subsequent ratification by the Senate (Tac. *Ann.* 12.69;

Suet. *Claud.* 45; Griffin 1984: 32-33; cf. Drinkwater 2019: 15). Laetus was directly involved in the assassination of Commodus, others knew of conspiracies forming and were complicit through their silence. The Praetorian Prefect was powerful enough to help destroy incumbents and to help make emperors in their stead but not to be emperor himself.

The Army

Although there was no fixed legal or constitutional role for the army specified in the selection of emperors, the principate was, at its core, a military monarchy; the legions could both initiate the transfer of power and were also a 'legitimator' of imperial succession (Makhlaiuk 2022: 465), thus their ongoing support was vital. Despite the impression given in the sources, the legions in this period did not regularly raise candidates to the purple except in the vacuum which followed the demise of 'bad' emperors. When Caligula was killed, civil war was averted as the candidate hastily chosen by the Praetorians was acceptable to the legions due to his relationship with both Augustus and Germanicus. On the other hand, Galba, while favoured by the Senate, was despised by the Rhine legions, while the legions of the East preferred Vespasian to Vitellius, with civil wars ultimately deciding the issue. Trajan was chosen because of his military credentials, to stave off any threat from a commander in the East (Brennan 2000: 46).

Under the 'good' emperors who followed Nerva, the military played little direct role in politics, although it is difficult to believe that the loyalty of the Praetorian Prefect was not sought for each appointment and the armies were paid a suitable bonus on accession. Appointments to provincial commands were given to loyalists to forestall possible challenges. Rumours of Marcus Aurelius' death helped propel Avidius Cassius' ambition, albeit he claimed that the soldiers in Pannonia had 'chosen' him (Dio 72.23.1). Military rebellions were a catalyst in Nero's destruction, Claudius' nascent rule was briefly threatened

by the rebellion of Scribonianus (Dio 60.15-16; Suet. *Claud.* 13.2, 35.2; Osgood 2011: 43-44), while Domitian was disconcerted by the revolt of Saturninus in 89 (Suet. *Dom.* 6.2; Dio 67.11.1), which led him to forbid two legions sharing the same camp (Suet. *Dom.* 7.3). Overall, the soldiers throughout the empire generally stayed loyal to their oath. Nonetheless, the army, particularly the legions stationed on the Rhine, the Danube and in the East, always remained a relevant factor in succession as they had the numbers needed to instal their choice of candidate if succession was disputed. On his deathbed, Septimius Severus supposedly advised his sons, 'Do not disagree between yourselves, give money to the soldiers, and despise everyone else' (Dio 76.17.4), recognising the primacy of the legions in maintaining an emperor in power.

Acceptance Groups

On most occasions the Senate had no say in choosing the next emperor. Their role was confined to 'officially' confirming him (Talbert 1984: 354-355), providing a sheen of legitimacy to his rule regardless of how power had been acquired. Although the *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani* sought to maintain the 'constitutional fiction' that the emperor's powers 'existed and were conferred by the Senate's decree' (Spielberg 1999: 160), in practice, by AD 70, they verged on absolute. While the Senate was confident enough to resist Caligula's attempts to have Tiberius deified, restricting commemoration to a grand public funeral (Dio 59.3.7-8; Suet. *Tib.* 75.3; Joseph. *AJ* 18.236), the reigning emperor usually had his wishes met regarding how his predecessor was to be remembered. The Senate's ability to pass memory sanctions against emperors whom they collectively despised tended to be enacted only when the incoming ruler saw political capital in denigrating his predecessor, thereby justifying the violent seizure of power and the installation of a new regime, particularly notable in the Flavian desire to offer contrast to Nero and attempts to erase Domitian from the public record in the reigns of Nerva and Trajan. In AD 138, in the aftermath of Hadrian's

death, the Senate, angered by Hadrian's execution of senators, wanted to enact memory sanctions against him. Had the Senate succeeded in this power-play it would have challenged the whole system of imperial adoptions, ushering in the possibility of the Senate choosing future rulers from amongst its members (Flower 2006: 273). Instead, Hadrian was deified, as the late emperor's adopted son and successor, Antoninus Pius, ultimately persuaded the Senate to relent, largely due to his political acumen and the healthy respect he enjoyed, although Dio also notes that fear of the soldiers may have played a part (Dio 69.23.3, 70.1.1-3). Nonetheless, wiser emperors understood that senators could contribute to his demise and sought to maintain acceptance through a 'carrot and stick' approach (Harris 2016: 179) – enticing loyalty through official appointments, access to the emperor, honours, and occasional financial favours, while sometimes reverting to more punitive measures; accusations of *maiestas* followed by exile or a death sentence. While there were frequent conspiracies, and, no doubt, others not attested in the sources, the Senate as a collective body never directly removed an emperor.

Likewise, the urban populace in this period never rose to overthrow an emperor, no matter how unpopular. The sources describe thirty-five riots in Rome between 31 BC and AD 96, a rate of one every 3.6 years (Aldrete 2013: 427). Riots in AD 6, 7, 19, 32, 51, 68, and 189 occurred primarily due to famine or fear of famine, although when the crowds hurled stale bread crusts at Claudius in the Forum in AD 51 (Suet. *Claud.* 18.2) they were obviously not yet actually starving! Crowds also clamoured for emperors to execute Sejanus (Dio 58.11.3-4), Tigellinus (Plut. *Galb.* 17.4) and Cleander (Dio 73.13.1-6; Hdn. 1.12-13), destroyed statues of Poppaea (Tac. *Ann.* 14.59-62) and spontaneously protested the injustice of the proposed execution of all the slaves of the City Prefect after he was murdered by one of his household (Tac. *Ann.* 14.42-45; Africa 1971: 14), albeit to no avail. In the safety of large crowds at the Circus and the theatres the emperor was exposed to unfiltered public opinion.

While it was a foolish emperor who disregarded the collective voice of the masses on these occasions, ultimately, as with the Senate, the emperor could bring overwhelming force to bear to quell unrest – there could be instances of rebellious behaviour but no revolution.

More important to an emperor's continued survival was the *familia Caesaris*: his freedmen and slaves, particularly those in the palace. Depending on the character of the emperor, those with the most access to him could exercise considerable influence and use their position to enrich themselves. Claudius' freedmen Pallas and Narcissus are alleged to have accumulated between them a sum equal to one-and-a-half times Rome's annual military budget (Rathbone 1996: 312). The ancient sources reflect deep senatorial resentment at the prominence of imperial freedmen, revealing an inherent duality; the imperial freedman was 'trusted familial insider and a stigmatised outsider' (Mouritsen 2011: 98). Claudius is characterised as a weak ruler, easily manipulated by his wives and freedmen (Suet. *Claud.* 25.5, 28-29.1; Dio 60.2.4, Sen. *Apocol*. 6.2). When Nero toured Greece in AD 66/67, he gave complete authority in Rome and Italy to Helius, resulting in the empire being 'slave to two emperors at once' (Dio 63.18.2-3). Suetonius (*Vit*. 12) claims that Vitellius was dominated by Asiaticus, while Saoterus, then Cleander, exercised extraordinary influence under Commodus. Freedmen were likely to be trustworthy as their prospects were so closely tied to those of their patron, with Callistus' betrayal of Caligula a notable exception. Those closest to the emperor were also at immediate risk of unpredictable mood swings, creeping paranoia and the jealous accusations of others who coveted opportunity. Their influence, and their lives, could end any moment. On occasion, fear led them to strike first. Both Domitian and Commodus fell victim to palace intrigues, assassinated in their private chambers.

A culture of political violence?

Acceptance groups clearly played a significant role in creating and removing emperors. Of the twenty-one rulers who gained the throne and were duly recognised by the Senate between the battle of Actium and AD193, five came to power due to either victory in civil war or successful revolt (Augustus, Galba, Vitellius, Vespasian, Septimius Severus), while Trajan was undoubtedly the preferred choice of key commanders after Nerva's weakness was exposed by the revolt of the Praetorians. The Praetorian Prefect likely murdered Tiberius, members of the Guard assassinated Caligula, Galba, Pertinax, and Didius Julianus, enabling the accession of Claudius, Otho, Didius Julianus and Septimius Severus respectively. Nero and Otho committed suicide after their cause was lost, pre-empting execution at the hands of their enemies, Vitellius was degraded then butchered in the streets after Vespasian's forces took Rome. Domitian and Commodus perished in palace conspiracies. Rumours strongly suggested that Claudius was poisoned by his wife, Agrippina. Of the first nineteen men who succeeded Augustus, at least ten died violently, most at the hands of soldiers, while only Nerva, after the assassination of Domitian, and Pertinax, after the slaying of Commodus, could be said to be the Senate's preferred choice to fill the vacuum, rather than a candidate favoured by the Guard or the legions.

There are differences between the Roman principate and other monarchies which might explain the incidence of violence in ridding Rome of one leader and/or in installing his successor. There has been much debate about the nature of the Augustan regime. Space precludes detailed analysis of this beyond what has been noted in earlier chapters. It seems clear that Augustus was not an absolute monarch who could exercise arbitrary power, exempt from the general laws. Moreover, the key element of monarchy – that a specific family provided the legitimate ruler and when the throne became vacant, the legitimate heir would automatically take charge – was absent, while the consent of the Senate, acting both on its

own behalf and on behalf of the Roman people was explicitly required (Loewenstein 1973: 321). Loewenstein (1973: 323) argues that the Principate was a political system *sui generis*, a 'republican monocracy', where the *princeps* exerted ultimate authority, either directly through his own powers, or indirectly, through his ability to influence the Senate and various magistrates, whilst the organs of republican government 'continued to operate legally'. In short, the Principate was different to other monarchies because it was not a monarchy. The lack of prescription regarding succession was not an oversight by Augustus but by design.

Perhaps a difference between Roman political theories regarding the use of political violence and prevailing practice in other monarchies can be found in Rome's early history, albeit this is shrouded in myths and legends. The collective historical memory which celebrated the expulsion of the last of the Etruscan kings, Tarquinius Superbus, due to his tyrannical behaviours (Livy 3.39.4), the abolition of the monarchy, the naming of the first consuls and the establishment of the Republic, meant that a tradition grew for the Romans to reject any ruler or potential ruler who aimed to impose *regnum*. Tarquin never returned to Rome (Livy 2.15.7, 2.21.5). This foundational event was celebrated every year on 24 February with the festival of *Regifugium* (Pina Polo 2006: 81). Cicero's rhetoric during the late Republic promotes the concept that it is the duty of a good Roman citizen to protect the *civitas* by killing a would-be tyrant. This thinking informs his *De officiis* where such a killing is an honourable act (3.19) because the tyrant behaves as a despised beast whose actions invite his death (2.23, 2.48, 3.32; cf. Pliny's description (*Pan*. 48.3-4) of Domitian). Justifying the use of violence to protect the community is also a keystone of Cicero's defence of Milo (*Mil.* 35) and is a feature of his imprecations to take violent action against Antony (*Phil.* 2.117, 3.33-35, 4.11, 5.31, 7.7-9). Caesar was, according to this logic, already acting as a tyrant so his assassination was justified. Certainly, during the last century of the Republic, the *bon*i saw the rise of their political enemies as a threat to what they considered the good order of the

state and used their fears as a justification for violence, which resulted in the killing of the Gracchi, Fulvius Flaccus, Saturninus and Glaucia, the Catilinarians, Clodius and Julius Caesar, often after the passing of the *senatus consultum ultimum*. It might be tempting to see the slaying of an emperor considered a tyrant as validated by *mos maiorum*: continuation of a Republican tradition which accepted tyrannicide. This misreads the available evidence. As Pina Polo (2006: 98-99) points out, the accusation of aiming at tyranny was highly political. Much of the elite saw so-called *populares* as a threat and were prepared to disregard the right to trial and appeal available to every Roman citizen, as well as the possibility of exile as punishment, and to have opponents killed. In contrast, the *plebs* was generally on the side of the victim. After Caesar died the *plebs* rejected the claims that they had been liberated from a cruel tyrant (Dio 44.20-21, 44.34.1-3; App. *BC* 2.121-122, 2.137-141; Plut. *Brut*. 18.10, *Caes.* 67.7) and Caesar's assassins were regarded as criminals (Tac. *Ann.* 3.76.1-2, 4.34-35). There was certainly disdain for the idea of being ruled by a king, however, at Rome, the idea of tyrannicide was never universally accepted. Even if we accept a tradition which demanded the removal of a tyrant as a civic duty, any sense of restoring the Republic seems noticeably absent from the motives ascribed to most of the conspirators against the 'bad' emperors, who seemingly are motivated more by fear, revenge for personal slights, and ambition rather than altruistic or patriotic concerns. On the other hand, the repeated civil wars in the last century of the Republic, the realisation that post-Sulla a path to power was to march on Rome with an army to either take power or force the Senate into concessions were lessons not lost on Augustus and future emperors. Violence was seemingly normalised as integral to Roman politics.

Even as the long reigns of Augustus and Tiberius consolidated the principate and ensured its survival, it became apparent that succession was far from settled. The only instance in the Julio-Claudian dynasty where the designated successor achieved power was when Tiberius

succeeded Augustus. Even then, he was clearly well down the pecking order as Augustus' preferred choice. In other cases, succession plans were disrupted by untimely deaths, political machinations and deadly violence against the *princeps*, as well as the lack of surviving natural born sons. Three, perhaps four, emperors of the founding dynasty, were murdered. Succession was potentially unstable from the start. After the demise of Nero, none of the later Roman emperors was descended from the traditional Roman nobility. Vespasian, who founded the next dynasty, was the son of an Italian tax collector (Suet. *Vesp*. 1). From the death of Nero onwards, any senator was a potential emperor if he had enough soldiers who were prepared to support his claims and were prepared to march on Rome, if necessary, to support his ambitions. Better emperors managed the demands of the position and maintained acceptance more successfully than others, although few, if any, were as omnicompetent as Augustus. Potential for disruption around succession was inbuilt into the system from the start in a manner simply not replicated in other monarchies

The Impact of Succession Crises

The death of Augustus posed a challenge. In a system which depended so much on the abilities of one man, it could neither be assumed that the Principate would survive to become an institution nor that the next *princeps* would slavishly follow Augustan precepts. Sonnabend (2000) believes that even had Augustus died when he was seriously ill in 23 BC the Principate was stable enough to continue under Agrippa. This is obviously unknowable. While Agrippa was *capax imperii*, his military talents were unquestionable, he had adorned Rome with buildings and was, after 30 BC, to all intents and purposes, *secundus inter pares* (Tan 2019: 198), the trajectory of the Principate would certainly have altered. Tiberius' accession ensured the survival of the Augustan model and prevented crisis.

The assassination of Caligula provided a fleeting opportunity for a return to the Republic. The young man's brief reign highlighted problems with imperial succession, demonstrated the influence of Praetorian officers in deposing an unpopular emperor and showed the Senate's lack of the military power needed to effect change. When Nero's behaviour became intolerable it resulted in rebellion and civil war. This became a turning point in the development of the Principate, putting paid to the prevailing practice that only those with direct or indirect genealogical links to Augustus had legitimate claims to imperial power. Conversely, Galba's abject failure to consolidate power demonstrated that a distinguished ancestry and blameless record were, in themselves, not sufficient qualification to rule the empire. The civil wars following Nero's death were a 'crisis of legitimacy' (Alston 2007: 191). While Nero ruled by hereditary right, Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian were contestants for power primarily because they commanded armies, open to challenge by others who felt they had equal or superior ability or claim. Vespasian emerged victorious from the chaos and presented himself as a second Augustus, although openly monarchical and with clear dynastic intentions. Imperial powers and prerogatives which had become normalised under previous emperors now became formalised.

The assassination of Domitian again resulted in the end of a dynasty. Instead of civil war, the Senate was able to appoint Nerva; an old man, childless, seemingly a 'stop gap'. Crisis was averted by Nerva's nomination of Trajan as heir. This choice of a successor based on his talents, rather than his blood relationship with the imperial family, produced the *optimus princeps* (Plin. *Pan*. 1.2, 2.7, 36.1, 38.1, 44.2, 53.2, 74.3, 88.4-10, 89.1, 91.1, 94.3, 95.3) and seemed to offer a potential model beyond the Augustan example which would guarantee stability through succession based on merit.

The Antonine emperors did not really embrace Nerva's example as any sort of guiding principle. They chose successors within the family, although largely these were men of

mature age when they ultimately succeeded to the throne and talented enough to balance the competing demands of the office. Commodus, who was born in the purple, prepared from birth to be a future emperor, and given experience in imperial roles was, as emperor, eventually destroyed by his character flaws as he repeatedly demonstrated his unsuitability for the role. Rule by a biological son, while always the preferred option, had again proven problematic. Civil wars followed his assassination.

Roman emperors lived in the shadow of Augustus. Succession was always dynastic. Octavian's claims to power rested entirely on his status as Caesar's son and heir, although merely being Caesar's heir did not make him *princeps* nor entitle him to any magistracy. Instead, he emerged victorious in a civil war and spent the period after Actium working on grafting lasting individual authority onto a system of government which set limits on personal ambition. After Augustus, there was never a formal method by which succession was organised as each emperor essentially made his own decision, likely heavily influenced by vested interests and the political imperatives of the moment. When an emperor was murdered, the transfer of power was determined by the military, either the Praetorians at Rome or through civil war. Appointment of imperial heirs was also unstructured, expectations of his/their role undefined (Hekster 2023: 243). While the legal position of the emperor was strengthened over time, and the Principate itself was so firmly established that, in any period of instability after 41, the question was never whether there should be an emperor but who would be emperor, succession remained a vexed issue which, on occasions, imperilled the empire itself. Violence was frequently used as an instrument to achieve political goals. When it came to imperial succession, the Romans of the first two centuries AD were prisoners of the Augustan past, much like the description attributed to Talleyrand of the Bourbons in exile, 'they have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing'. Many 'bad' emperors lay ahead.

Appendix One

Sejanus

The career of Sejanus revealed that the Praetorian Prefect could harbour political ambitions and exercise considerable influence. Initially the position was mainly administrative, responsible for the emperor's security (Keppie 1996: 120), however, Sejanus had higher ambitions, steadily securing the soldiers' allegiance to himself (Tac *Ann*. 4.2; Suet. *Tib*. 37.1; Dio 57.19.6). While Tacitus sneers that the Praetorian Prefect was a small-town adulterer from an equestrian background (*Ann.* 4.1-3), Sejanus 'connected by blood, marriage and friendship with the aristocracy old and new' (Champlin 2012: 387) was able to create networks based on reciprocity (Köstner 2020: 245-246) and to impress Tiberius, presenting an image as a man of *labor,* characterised by industry, constant vigilance and modesty, as evidenced by his refusal of rewards (Tac. *Ann*. 3.72.3, 4.39.2). Where Velleius notes virtues (2.127.3-4), Tacitus sees intense ambition hidden by a mask (*Ann*. 4.1), while Tiberius was far too credulous (*Ann*. 4.67).

Between AD 22 and 31 Sejanus accumulated rewards and powers, becoming so influential that Tiberius praised him as 'partner of my labours' (Tac. *Ann*. 4.2.3) and shared the consulship with him in 31. Dio writes that '[people] sacrificed to the images of Sejanus as they did to those of Tiberius' (58.4.4, 11.2), while his image was added to the *signa* of each legion (Suet. *Tib*. 65.1). The list of honours and the plethora of images of Sejanus indicate an extraordinary position in the state (Dio 58.2.7-8, 58.6.2, 58.8.4, 58.16.2; Tac *Ann.* 4.74): 'no-one but the *princeps* and immediate family ever had honours like these' (Champlin 2012: 373). Seneca would later query his friend Serenus, 'You have held the highest honours, but were they as great, as unexpected, and as all-encompassing as those Sejanus had?' (*Tranq.*

11.11). By 31 Sejanus was essentially Tiberius' 'junior colleague', a potential heir (Birley 2007b: 148; cf. Bird 1969: 86-87).

While Sejanus' career illustrates how far the Praetorian Prefect could rise, it is also a cautionary tale. It is difficult to determine whether Sejanus aimed to be *princeps* on Tiberius' death, whether he envisaged opportunity to act as a regent, if necessary, for a young prince (Barrett 1989: 18; Seager 2005: 153) or was simply conceited. Tacitus claims that Sejanus desired the purple (*Ann*. 4.2-3, 4.12.2-4), although he notes that Tiberius well understood the importance of dynastic considerations (*Ann*. 4.53.2). Sejanus sought a close connection with the imperial family, suggesting his betrothal to Livilla (Tac. Ann. 4.39-41) after her mourning period for her husband Drusus, Tiberius' son. Tiberius refused the marriage, although later possibly allowing a wedding to his granddaughter Julia, daughter of Drusus and Livilla (Dio 58.3.9; Jones 2017: 24-26) in AD 30.

The emperor later came to distrust his favourite. A letter from Antonia (Livilla's mother) supposedly warned Tiberius that Sejanus was planning a coup (Joseph. *AJ* 18.182; Suet. *Tib.* 61.1, 65; Dio 66.14.1-2), although Dio claims that Sejanus was not planning to move against Tiberius in 31 (58.6.4, 58.8.2). Suggestions that Tiberius had showered Sejanus with honours merely as some sort of 'smokescreen' (Suet. *Tib.* 65.1; Dio 58.4.1-3; Sawiński 2018: 149) seem counterintuitive. Surely, increasing Sejanus' status would only make attempts at his removal more perilous (Boddington 1963: 5-6)? While the ancient sources allege that Sejanus was plotting to kill Tiberius (Val. Max. 9.11. ext.4; Tac. *Ann*. 5.8, 5.11, 6.8, 6.47; Juv. *Sat.* 10.57-114; Suet. *Tib*. 65.1), this is improbable as Sejanus owed much of his influence to his close relationship with Tiberius and his ability to control access to the emperor on Capri.

Sejanus was not popular with the people of Rome, who jeered him on his way to prison and dragged down his statues (Dio 58.11.3). After he was executed, his body was exposed on the

Scalae Germoniae where the 'rabble abused [the corpse] for three whole days and afterwards threw it into the river' (Dio 58.11.5). Many of the aristocracy loathed him and delighted in his demise (Dio 58.11.2). Sejanus lacked military backing (Seager 2005:181). Boddington (1963: 15-16) argues that key army commanders refused to accept Sejanus as a future regent of Caligula, pressuring Tiberius to remove his support. Even the Praetorian Guard did not offer Sejanus a stable power base, transferring their allegiance to Macro, later receiving a donative for their loyalty to Tiberius, rather than Sejanus (Suet. *Tib*. 48.2; Dio 58.11.4, 12.2, 18.26; Levick 1976: 177). In the dramatic scenes which accompanied Sejanus' fall from grace, Syme's (1958: 406) suggestion that it is Tiberius who should be cast in the role of conspirator, Sejanus his victim has considerable appeal.

List of Abbreviations

With some exceptions, the abbreviations listed follow the format used in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Fourth Edition* (2012), edited by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

App. *BC* Appian *Bella Civilia*

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* Aurelius Victor *Caesares*

Caes. *BCiv.* Caesar *Bellum Civile*

Cic. *Att.* Cicero *Epistulae ad Atticum*

Cic. Dom. Cicero *De domo sua*

Cic. *Phil.* Cicero *Orationes Philippicae*

Cic. *Mil.* Cicero *Pro Milone*

CIL Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (1863–)

Dio Cassius Dio

Epit. De Caes. Epitome De Caesaribus

Eutr. Eutropius

Gell. *NA* Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae*

Hdn. Herodianus

Joseph. *AJ* Josephus *Antiquitates Judaicae*

Joseph. *BJ* Josephus *Bellum Judaicum*

Juv. *Sat.* Juvenal *Satires*

Macrob. *Sat.* Macrobius *Saturnalia*

M. Aurel. *Medit.* Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*

Mart. *Spec.* Martial *Spectacula*

Nic. Dam. Nicolaus Damascenus

Oros. Orosius

Ov. *Tr.* Ovid *Tristia*

Philo *Flacc.* Philo *In Flaccum*

Philo *Leg.* Philo *Legatio ad Gaium*

Plin. *HN* Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia*

Plin. *Ep.* Pliny (the Younger) *Epistulae*

Plin. *Pan.* Pliny (the Younger) *Panegyricus*

Plut. *Brut.* Plutarch *Vitae Brutus*

Plut. *Caes,* Plutarch *Vitae Caesar*

Plut. *Galb.* Plutarch *Vitae: Galba*

Plut. *Otho* Plutarch *Vitae: Otho*

RG Res Gestae Divi Augusti

RIC Roman Imperial Coinage

Sen. *Apocol.* Seneca (the Younger) *Apocolocyntosis*

Sen. *Brev.* Seneca (the Younger) *De brevitate vitae*

Sen. *Clem.* Seneca (the Younger) *De clementia*

Sen. *Constant.* Seneca (the Younger) *De Constantia sapientis*

Sen. *Helv.* Seneca (the Younger) *Ad Helviam*

Sen. *Tranq.* Seneca (the Younger) *De tranquillitate animi*

SHA Ael. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Aelius (Lucius Aelius)

SHA Alb. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Clodius Albinus

SHA Ant. Pius Scriptores Historiae Augustae Antoninus Pius

SHA Avid. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Avidius Cassius

SHA Comm. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Commodus Antoninus (Commodus)

SHA Hadr. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Hadrian

SHA Jul. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Didius Julianus

SHA Marc. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Marcus Antoninus (Marcus Aurelius)

SHA Pert. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Pertinax

SHA Sev. Scriptores Historiae Augustae Severus (Septimius Severus)

Strabo *Geog.* Strabo *Geographica*

Suet. *Aug.* Suetonius *Divus Augustus*

Suet. *Calig*. Suetonius *Gaius Caligula*

Suet. *Claud.* Suetonius *Divus Claudius*

Suet. *Dom.* Suetonius *Domitianus*

Suet. *Iul.* Suetonius *Divus Iulius* (Julius Caesar)

Suet. *Ner.* Suetonius *Nero*

Suet. *Otho* Suetonius *Otho*

Suet. *Tib.* Suetonius *Tiberius*

Suet. *Tit.* Suetonius *Divus Titus*

Suet. *Vesp*. Suetonius *Divus Vespasianus*

Suet. *Vit.* Suetonius *Vitellius*

Tac. *Agr*. Tacitus *Agricola*

Tac. *Ann*. Tacitus *Annales*

Tac. *Hist*. Tacitus *Historiae*

Val. Max. Valerius Maximus

Vell. Velleius Paterculus

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