

19. The Roman Empire

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The beginning of the Roman imperial period is usually dated to the battle of Actium in 31 BC, when Octavian (later Augustus) defeated Antony and Cleopatra. Its end is less clear, though the deposition of the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, in AD 476 is conventionally used (see also chapter 20). Before then, however, major reforms by Diocletian (AD 284–305) had already transformed the empire beyond recognition.

Outline of events

The early Roman Empire is, ironically enough, characterised by emperors pretending not to be in sole control. The assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BC) had shown that suspicion of tyranny could be fatal. Augustus' sole reign, therefore, had a Republican façade, in which he was *princeps* or 'first citizen'. A few years after gaining absolute control at Actium, Octavian returned power to the Senate (28–27 BC). In return, the Senate gave Octavian the name 'Augustus' ('consecrated one'), and *imperium* (sacrally imbued executive power) in those provinces where most of the legions were based. Augustus was also elected consul every year until 23 BC. This, however, restricted career opportunities for senators, and he accepted instead the powers of tribune of the *plebs* (*tribunicia potestas*) and supreme *imperium* in the provinces over which the Senate had not yet delegated authority to him.

It was important to keep senators happy. Not only did they occupy key political and administrative positions, the Senate as a whole bestowed powers and honours on the emperor. This was crucial for appearing a legitimate ruler. Losing the

consulship made Augustus' position in the city of Rome weaker, though his *tribunicia potestas* still gave him much power. However, in 19 BC the Senate gave him consular power in Rome itself, though Augustus preferred to stress his *tribunicia potestas*, emphasising his protection of the people of Rome. He also held various priesthoods, further strengthening his moral authority (*auctoritas*). He controlled the legions and was immune from trial. Thus, Augustus had complete control of the Roman Empire. The reality of power, however, was given shape through standard republican offices. In Augustus' own words: 'I excelled all in *auctoritas*, though I possessed no more official power (*potestas*) than others who were my colleagues in the several magistracies' (*Res Gestae* 34.3). This made it easier for the traditional elite to accept Augustus' position: he paid them proper respect. This amalgamation of traditional powers and magistracies formed the basis of imperial power for the duration of the empire.

There had been a real sense of gratitude towards the first *princeps*, who had restored order after years of civil war. Augustus ruled for forty-one years and outlived his opponents. His immediate successors, collectively known as the Julio-Claudian dynasty, who continuously emphasised their link to Augustus, were not so lucky. Like him, they were given key powers by the Senate, but they lacked his *auctoritas*, for which they compensated in different ways. Tiberius (AD 14–37) hid behind Augustus' example. His successor Gaius (Caligula) was only 25 when he came to power. He presented himself as all-powerful, disregarded Rome's traditional elite and was murdered within four years. Ancient literary sources, all written by the elite, portray him as

insane. The accession of Claudius (AD 41–54) was a result of support from the emperors' guard, the Praetorians, who had been concentrated in barracks on the outskirts of Rome in AD 22. This had increased their importance to the extent that they could ignore the Senate and decide that Claudius, Caligula's uncle, was the true heir.

Claudius' accession shows the importance of dynastic considerations. He had a limp and a speech defect, and Tiberius had refused him a magistracy twice. But he was a member of Augustus' dynasty, and soldiers liked that. He took possession of the enormous wealth and status of the imperial household. In return, he gave large donatives to soldiers and strengthened his military reputation by conquering Britain. He was much less openly monarchical than Caligula. The last Julio-Claudian was Claudius' adopted son Nero (AD 54–68). He started by showing respect for the senatorial elite, adhering to the advice of his tutor Seneca. Later he became very autocratic and paid more attention to the *plebs* than to the Senate. Rebellion in the provinces allowed the Senate to declare him an enemy of the state. Nero has been blamed for all kinds of evil behaviour, including the Great Fire of Rome (AD 64). He was not even in Rome at the time, but senatorial authors blamed him all the same. Emperors who showed disrespect for the Senate were not remembered fondly.

Nero's suicide was followed by civil war and, after a year of fierce fighting, the establishment of a new dynasty; a pattern repeated several times in the next centuries. Some generations into a dynasty, a young emperor would come to the throne who disregarded the Senate and based his power on the soldiers and/or *plebs*. Eventually he was assassinated and the dynasty brought to an end. The end of a dynasty brought instability that only the use of legions would end. Provincial governors in control of legions (mainly based near the Rhine, Danube and in the Eastern provinces) were in those circumstances instant contenders for the throne. In AD 69 Flavius Vespasianus (Vespasian), who had been fighting a war in Judea, was victorious. When the Flavian dynasty that he started fell through the anti-senatorial behaviour of his younger son Domitian, with the inevitable conspiracy (AD 96) and ensuing eradication of his name and image from official records and buildings (*damnatio*

memoriae), the Senate chose their own favourite, the elderly Nerva. He lasted just over a year in sole control. By then his position was so weak that he had to adopt Trajan, governor of Upper Germany, the general whose armies could reach Rome most rapidly. Under Trajan, the empire reached its largest size. Serious campaigns against the Dacians and Parthians led to the creation of new provinces, and ensured Trajan's reputation as 'the best ruler' (*optimus princeps*). The empire had probably overstretched itself: Trajan's successor Hadrian (AD 117–38) gave up some of the newly conquered territory and focused on fixed frontiers. Notwithstanding this policy, Hadrian, like all emperors, had to present himself as a capable warrior.

Trajan did not establish a dynasty as such. Like his predecessor and his two immediate successors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (AD 138–61), he had no son (in all cases coincidence not choice). These emperors therefore adopted male relatives and made them heirs. Dynastic considerations always ruled supreme. The last of these 'adoptive emperors', Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–80), did have a son, Commodus, who, inevitably, succeeded him. Lack of respect for the Senate, conspiracy, assassination (AD 192) and an unenviable posthumous reputation followed the established pattern. The Senate then chose the elderly Pertinax, who was killed by the Praetorians, and in the ensuing civil war the legions from the Rhine and Danube provinces, led by Septimius Severus (AD 193–211), were victorious.

When the Severan dynasty, including some odd emperors even by Roman standards, ended (AD 235), no new dynasty replaced it, although not for want of aspirants. Rather, different legions continually put forward their own generals. Military preference for dynastic succession, a tradition reaching back to Augustus, also led to the appointment of child-emperors, hardly ever lasting long. Gordian III (AD 238–244), for instance, was only 13 when he came to power and was only chosen because his grandfather and father (Gordian I and II) had been joint emperors for a year (AD 238). He lasted just over five years, followed by twenty-two more or less acknowledged soldier-emperors in fifty years. The crisis ended with the accession of Diocletian, another general-turned-emperor. His twenty-one-

year reign saw many administrative, economic and army reforms. His government, more than that of any previous emperor, constituted military despotism. He appointed a co-emperor and two deputies, who were to succeed and appoint deputies in turn. The power to appoint successors lay with the emperors alone. This system (the 'tetrarchy') marked the end of the 'principate', in which the emperor nominally was 'first citizen', and the introduction of the 'dominate' – rule through unambiguous direct control (see also chapter 20). The position of emperor had travelled a long way from Augustus' *civilis princeps* (polite first citizen) to Diocletian's *dux* (leader), though the voyage had been a gradual one.

Governing the Empire

Ultimate authority in all respects lay with the emperor. Individuals or groups could turn to him with requests; cities regularly sent embassies for decisions on controversial issues. Responding to these various local problems, and similar requests from people in Rome, was a time-consuming imperial occupation, and it increased the importance of the imperial household tremendously. Those directly surrounding the emperor regulated his accessibility, and it was through direct access to the emperor, at the court, that many important decisions were taken. Thus imperial freedmen became important political entities through their influence on emperors (which senatorial historians tended to exaggerate). What happened at court happened outside the public domain, and could never be checked. This partly explains the emphasis on court gossip in imperial literature.

The emperor owned land in many provinces, with imperial estates growing at an astonishing rate. Like any Roman noble, he expected gifts and inheritances from *amici* (friends) – he simply had more of them. He could also acquire land, mines and quarries himself. Nero is said to have confiscated half of Africa by executing six wealthy landowners (Pliny *HN* 18.35). To what extent these estates, or imperial property in general, were public or private is open to debate. Whatever the exact status of the property, much of it was run by procurators, direct appointments by the emperor, who by their proximity to the *princeps*

gained disproportionate influence in a province. But Roman bureaucracy was limited in size, which constrained its day-to-day impact on society. Local elites in provincial communities remained crucial for administration. Villages and towns retained much autonomy through councils and magistrates, for instance in constructing and managing public buildings, associations for trade and cult, and the food supply. They also did much of the tax-collecting. Essentially, Rome governed its provinces in order to receive taxes and manpower, and to avoid rebellions. These local magistrates – the old aristocracy in much of the East of the empire, a newly created upper class in substantial parts of the West (this is only one of the differences between East and West) – had good reason to appreciate good relations with Rome. They also wanted to emphasise their superior status in their city and the superior status of that city over neighbouring cities, spending much money on public buildings and festivals in the process (*euergetism*; see also chapters 17, 34 and 60). They formed the glue that held the empire together.

The autonomy of local government was restricted. Roman officials could and did interfere directly in disputes within a community's elite or between different communities. Sometimes these disputes were taken all the way to the emperor. The correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger, who was dispatched by the emperor to govern the province of Bithynia-Pontus (AD 110–12), illustrates the level of Roman interference, and how often the emperor was called upon to reach a decision. The spread of Roman citizenship further limited the importance of local laws and customs, since the privileges of Roman citizens could not be ignored: Roman citizens lived by Roman law. Local grandees, who had been of assistance to Rome, gained these privileges on being granted citizenship. Ultimately, however, the rise of local elites to citizenship, and sometimes even equestrian or senatorial status, made them less interested in their cities of origin, and caused real problems at the local level. The administrative reforms of Diocletian were partly aimed at solving those problems. Earlier, the emperor Caracalla, son of Septimius Severus, had granted citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Roman Empire

through the *Constitutio Antoniniana* (AD 212). There may have been fiscal reasons for this: more Roman citizens meant more tax revenues.

The *Constitutio Antoniniana* was the culmination of an ongoing extension of the citizenship reaching back into the Republic, but accelerating under the Empire. It had major consequences. One was to make Roman law universal, leading eventually to its codification: the resulting legal system is perhaps the Romans' most influential legacy (see also chapters 20 and 58). Bestowing citizenship was furthermore a gift that could never be completely repaid. In this way, the emperor bound the inhabitants of the empire to him: he had directly enhanced their status, so they owed him loyalty. Second, after AD 212 the relations between the inhabitants of Rome and those of its provinces appeared more egalitarian. This went hand in hand with an increasing difference between emperor and subjects. The emperor ruled openly supreme over all his subjects, which made differences between the subjects themselves less important.

Roman religion and Christianity

Caracalla expressed the hope that universal citizenship would unite the people under the Roman state gods, and guarantee good relations between men and gods (*pax deorum*). This emphasis on religion is characteristic of the Roman Empire. Religion permeated Roman life, with boundaries between religion and politics impossible to draw. The emperor himself was a prominent member of the pantheon, and the specific focus of various rituals. These imperial cults (various localities worshipped the emperor through different rituals) were a unifying factor for the heterogeneous empire. The emperor formed a recognisable focal point, whose worship could be incorporated within existing religious contexts. That does not mean that the imperial cult was organised from Rome as a political tool. Gods in the Roman world were worshipped for what they could do. People sacrificed to specific gods for specific favours. Someone as far elevated above his subjects as the emperor, who could bestow almost limitless favours, was easily equated with the divine: in an unlimited pantheon, there was always room for a new divinity. Similarly, normal honours would not

do justice to someone who had done so much for the peace and abundance of everyday life. No other repayment than divine honours would suffice. Equating the emperor with the gods was a way of coming to terms with someone in such a supreme position.

Sacrificing to the emperor and the gods of Rome ensured the *pax deorum*. Refusal to do so jeopardised the state's safety. This lies at the heart of the occasional persecution of Christians. Christianity had, almost from the outset, presented itself as a universal religion, disallowing participation in other cults. It could thus be interpreted as anti-Roman. Still, persecutions were rare in the first two centuries AD. Legal procedures and an attempt to avoid harassment are prescribed by the emperor Trajan in a famous letter to Pliny (10.69). Judaism, from which Christianity originated, was similarly monotheistic, but Roman decrees, a result of good relations between Jewish leaders and Augustus, protected its customary practices. Judaism was also a cult of respectable antiquity – something which Romans valued greatly. When the empire itself became less stable in the third century AD, loyalty to the state gods was deemed more important than ever before – and Christians, therefore, more suspect (see also chapter 20). Indeed, Caracalla's emphasis on unity under the gods after the *Constitutio Antoniniana* shows how participation in the worship of those gods was now formally expected. By then Christianity had become too large a religion to be seriously threatened by intensified persecutions. Constantine (AD 306–37) was the first Roman emperor to turn to Christianity, and in AD 391 it was made the state religion by Theodosius I (AD 379–95). Tellingly, they are the only emperors to be named 'the Great' in our late antique sources.

Problems of periodisation

Roman imperial history is a vast subject; most studies inevitably focus on specific chronologically- or topographically-defined aspects. Yet definitions of time and space carry with them certain preconceptions. Division of the period into different dynasties, for instance, or the analysis of individual reigns in imperial biographies places much emphasis on changes and events at the centre, and on the

personal influence of the ruler. Classical authors, almost all of them upper-class, were fascinated by the secret dealings behind closed doors which characterised imperial decision-making (see also chapter 50).

During the reign of Hadrian, furthermore, there was a remarkable interest in succession lists: the list of bishops of Rome (later the popes) represented by the *Liber Pontificalis* started in this period, as did reconstructions of the two main schools (Sabinian and Proculian) of jurists (civil lawyers). And Suetonius (c. AD 77–140) wrote biographies of Roman grammarians and poets, and, most importantly, his *Lives of the Caesars*. Succession and continuity seem to have been important topics at the time, perhaps a result of the lack of imperial sons (see above). Suetonius' *Lives* have greatly influenced later scholarship. Even his near-contemporary Tacitus, who wrote more analytical history, placed much emphasis on individual reigns. The fourth-century *Historia Augusta*, a continuation of Suetonius by an unknown author, almost completes the series of imperial lives for the entire period. This has been a major factor in encouraging reign-by-reign, or dynasty-by-dynasty, views of Roman imperial history.

An emphasis on emperors often leads to a focus on the city of Rome; only a few classical authors described the further regions of the empire. Crucial are the priceless survey of the Mediterranean by the geographer Strabo (60s BC–AD 20s) and the Jewish author Flavius Josephus (AD 37/8–100), a leader of a great Jewish revolt against Rome in AD 66–70, who changed sides and was given Roman citizenship. His writings on the *Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities* are our only literary texts written by someone combining provincial and Roman points of view. Finally, the prolific Aelius Aristides, born in Mysia, northwest Asia Minor (AD 117 – c. 181), wrote a speech, *To Rome*, which shows how an admiring provincial might view Rome's accomplishments. But these are exceptions, and most literary sources say little on the empire at large and even less on the provincials' points of view.

There are also more recent, now almost canonical, influences on our notions of the Roman Empire. Thus, for instance, Edward Gibbon's

magisterial *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) famously describes the period from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus as 'the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous' (I, 78), words still echoed in modern literature. Similarly, the notion of a general 'third-century crisis' derives partly from systematic blackening by the tetrarchs of the period preceding their reforms, but partly also from authoritative nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship following ancient commonplaces. Methodologically, scholarship in the twentieth century was heavily influenced by prosopography: the tracing of origins, career tracks and family connections of individuals. Of special importance here are Hans-Georg Pflaum and Sir Ronald Syme, who waded through masses of data on officials, illustrating how the Roman Empire worked. But prosopography should never be an aim in itself and cannot be used to analyse all relevant areas of Roman imperial history. At a much more popular level, Hollywood has been a major influence on common assumptions about individual reigns, and the Roman Empire in general.

Recent scholarship has been addressing these and similar problems. Material evidence has been crucial in this respect, with archaeological site reports and reinterpretations of Roman imperial art balancing the literary evidence. The negative senatorial descriptions of the reigns of 'bad' emperors, for example, have recently been challenged by looking at the way they are represented in art and architecture. Modern sociological, economic and anthropological theories form interesting bases for analysis of the evidence, as do new literary and visual theories. There is now more focus on the periphery of the empire, and on understanding the period by looking inwards from the provinces, rather than outwards from Rome. Much of the documentary and epigraphic evidence is, in fact, found in frontier regions (e.g. Egypt, or Vindolanda, near Hadrian's Wall). The increasing use of several types of evidence and theoretical frameworks in which literary evidence is placed in an ever-wider context leads to a continuous evaluation of many aspects of the Roman Empire. History continues.

Further reading

Sourcebooks

B. M. Levick, *The Government of the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* (2nd edn), London and New York: Routledge, 2000 – extremely useful, conveniently organised by themes.

Secondary literature

M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 – up-to-date and authoritative account of Roman religion(s), including a volume of source material.

A. K. Bowman, E. Champlin and A. Lintott (eds), *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 10: *The Augustan Empire, 43 B.C.–A.D. 69* (2nd edn), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey and D. Rathbone (eds), *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 11: *The High Empire, AD 70–192* (2nd edn), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

M. Goodman, *The Roman World 44 BC–AD 180* (*Routledge History of the Ancient World*), London and

New York: Routledge, 1997 – recent survey on a substantial period of Roman imperial history.

I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 – innovative new interpretation of the role of emperor and religion in the Roman Empire.

J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 – interesting and readable thesis on how the Roman Empire functioned, bringing together several strands of recent scholarship.

A. W. Lintott, *Imperium Romanum: Politics and Administration*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993 – a systematic account of the practical and legal aspects of administering the Roman Empire.

F. G. B. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World: 31 BC–AD 337* (2nd edn), London: Duckworth, 1992 – monumental study of what the emperor did and how the Empire worked.

D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay AD 180–395*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

C. Wells, *The Roman Empire* (2nd edn), London: Fontana Press, 1992 – lucid and concise analysis of the period up to AD 235. Probably the best place to start.