
Scholars used to talk about Roman imperial power as though it were a ‘constitutional’ matter, a state ‘position’, an aggregate of various powers derived from republican offices. Yet at the same time it was a personal possession—emperors had it, applied it, emphasized legal and traditional precedents, sometimes hid it or pretended that it was not as great as it was, and saw it diminished or lost only through military usurpation or death. Such emperors employed propaganda in support of their desires. Lately, under the influence of sociology, a revolution has begun to take place: scholars have started to write about imperial power in social terms, i.e. as something subject to continuous negotiation or ‘construction’. Clifford Ando’s recent book on *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty* (Berkeley, 2000), for instance, speaks of a complex conversation between the centre and the periphery (ed.: see the review in this issue). The emperor’s power was not possessed uncontestedly, its moral and legal bases were subject to ongoing examination, and it was applied to the extent that it was conceded. This was the way to deal with the sensibilities of various groups—not, that is, by repression but through flexibility, through alternately pressing and yielding in a complex negotiation that saw power applied, sustained and assented to by all groups in society. Roman emperors needed to operate this way because they could only rule the empire with the assistance of members of an élite which had cherished traditions of leadership and from which alternative rulers might at any time arise. The élite was simultaneously necessary for rule and a potential threat. No emperor could take the loyalty of individual aristocrats for granted. Their aims, ideals and sensibilities had to be taken into account.

It should be said at the outset that I find this notion of a flexible, non-prescriptive negotiation quite helpful for understanding the management and maintenance of power in the Roman world, in politics certainly but also in areas like religion (cf. 19 for the broad definition of ‘politics’ adopted in this study). Hence, there is much that appeals about the approach and findings of the book under review. Matthew Roller joins a growing band in writing of a ‘dialogue’ between Julio-Claudian
emperors and Roman aristocrats, who spoke as individuals but sought to engage others of their class (7). This was not merely a reaction to the new ruling order in the wake of republican collapse, it was actually constitutive of the new order (19). It was how the new order was composed—of different interest groups constructing places for themselves via a complex dialogue or conversation or negotiation. Emperors were praised and flattered only insofar as they were simultaneously constrained. Analogies for imperial rule, like the power of a master over slaves or a father over sons or a gift-creditor over a gift-debtor, were applied and debated in ways that constantly stressed the ideal of gentle, respectful rule rather than coercion and repression. This would secure the positive response and personal security which all emperors needed.

The ‘Introduction’ (3-13) spells out what is likely to be the most contentious proposition:

that, in this period, the emperor was being invented on the fly, through various feats of imagination, as a social figure who related in particular ways to other members of society, and particularly to elites. (6)

Roller does not seem to be arguing that the emperor’s power changes in quantity or nature, but rather that different characterizations of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled affect how imperial power will be employed, and whether it will be to the greater or lesser advantage of various interest groups. This is very different to the pictures given by previous generations of historians, interested in personality, who have cast their emperors as figures of control, master manipulators, careful planners, devious men orchestrating developments with developed capacities for foresight. Weinstock’s Caesar (or, even more, Mommsen’s) is being swept away with this new picture, as are a succession of pictures of (in particular) Augustus. It seems justified to do so, though I am concerned that Roller concentrates exclusively upon literary texts on the grounds that ‘it is here that the material for this investigation is richest’ (6). Perhaps so, but much of the surviving corpus of art and architecture could have been mined for aristocratic ideals and presentation.

Roller’s book is divided into two parts, each containing two chapters. Part 1 (‘Ethics and Imperial Ideology’, 15-126) contends that
Julio-Claudian aristocrats employed ethical thought and writing to contest and control the impact of the principate upon their traditional privileges. The power and primacy of ethical ideas is emphasized, in my view rightly, for moral understanding 'was perhaps the most important mode of understanding in Roman culture' (10). Readings of Lucan and Seneca show that the emergence of the principate was associated with the rise of new systems of moral value that competed strongly with the old. Chapter 1 (‘The Ethics of Civil War: Competing Communities in Lucan’, 17-63) is about Lucan’s ethical engagement with the principate. Caesar’s bid for power creates an ethical conundrum: his followers have no trouble referring to the Pompeians as enemies, but the Pompeians think of their opponents as fellow citizens. For one group the use of violence is unproblematic; for the other it is problematic in the extreme, even impossible. The ‘alienating discourse’ of the Caesarians turns out to be more effective for motivating military action than the ‘assimilating discourse’ of the Pompeians. Subsequently, the Caesarian perspective was institutionalized in the imperial oath of loyalty, so that traditional aristocratic values were marginalized, even late in the Julio-Claudian period when Lucan was writing. The picture is a bleak one: the victory of Caesar and the principate ensured an ongoing, irreparable fracturing of the community. By contrast, Lucan’s *ad finis* and contemporary, the younger Seneca, gives a more optimistic message.

In ch.2 (‘Ethics for the Principate: Seneca, Stoicism, and Traditional Roman Morality’, 64-126), Roller discusses Seneca’s argument that Stoic ethics can compensate an aristocrat for the loss of traditional power that the advent of emperors has brought. Seneca deals not so much with alternative conceptions of the community as with alternative conceptions of the very foundation of ethics. Whereas traditional aristocratic ethics located moral value primarily in observed actions, Seneca urges his audience to accept as an alternative the Stoic system, which locates moral value in mental dispositions. For aristocrats who could no longer display their values through such observable rituals as the triumph, and who were forced to participate in what some clearly felt were demeaning acts of flattery, this would provide an alternative system for reclaiming lost privileges and supporting their pre-eminence. The nature of flattery becomes important: what kinds of speech can an aristocrat employ before a ruler? Roller ends by repeating his view that moral debate is fundamental to Roman thought. Roman aristocrats were
always inclined to assess social and political developments in moral terms. However, it was not sociopolitical change which gave rise to competing modes of ethical discourse (cf. 19 and 125 for the metaphor of the tail wagging the dog); it was the constant moralizing, manifest in texts given such names as De Providentia, De Vita Beata, De Beneficiis and De Clementia, which began to address itself to the changes brought about by the principate:

What I do wish to maintain, as the conclusion to be drawn from these two chapters, is this: the particular ethical discourses that are made to compete in the works of Lucan and Seneca, and the ways in which they are made to compete, constitute an engagement with and exploration of the possibilities for and limits of exercising power in the new sociopolitical order. (125)

Part 2 ranges across the Julio-Claudian era (and beyond) and is entitled ‘Figuring the Emperor’ (127-287). It argues that giving and receiving gifts, and applying authority paradigms (like father and master), were ways of applying social pressure to an emperor. Thus Roman aristocrats were struggling to control, not just comprehend and articulate, their new social reality. The employment of anthropological concepts like ‘gift-exchange’, ‘commodity-exchange’, and ‘hostile reciprocity’ (wounding exchanges between people well known to one another) is heavy throughout. Chapter 3 (‘The Emperor’s Authority: Dining, Exchange, and Social Hierarchy’, 129-212) looks at the Julio-Claudian emperors as gift-transactors, i.e. ‘givers and receivers of objects and services in a society where such exchanges were a means of establishing hierarchical social relationships’ (12). Modern understandings of ‘patronage’ tend to be broader than ancient ones (130-1), but underlying all characterizations of the emperor as a ‘patron’ is a recognition of the importance of exchange and reciprocity in the Roman world. Exchanging goods and services with the emperor was a common way in which Roman aristocrats articulated and manipulated the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Interestingly, Roller includes clementia within this rubric (cf. 132). The convivium or dinner-party, a key setting for the assertion and challenging of social hierarchy through exchange, was a particularly good place for negotiating the boundaries of this relationship.
Good emperors, it emerges, maximized their giving, and minimized their receiving, of gifts, thereby legitimating their power. The process, being competitive, required careful management, so that gift-debt (defined on 132) was avoided and social cohesion was enhanced. Everything might come down to the way an emperor handled one particular transaction, as when Julius Caesar and Augustus respectively faced down veteran soldiers who had put them on the spot. Traditional ideas of ‘patronage’, it is pointed out, often do not take into account the dynamism and dialogue which can see patronal authority tested through the contingencies of individual transactions. Long-standing clients may at times drop drunken insults to which a good emperor will respond by privileging the history of amicable exchange between the parties, as Augustus does with Rufus, and Tiberius with Cotta. Roller argues cogently that both ‘the immediate and the historic exchange situations ... are indispensible criteria for rendering an account of the authority confirmed or undermined’ (212). Also compelling is his view that reciprocity is so intrinsic to all the situations surveyed that “gift-exchange” is a more appropriate model for understanding the sociopolitical consequences of exchange with the emperor than is Veyne’s “euergetism” (212).

Chapter 4 (‘Modeling the Emperor: The Master-Slave Relationship and its Alternatives’, 213-87) shows that the relationship between the emperor and his subjects (especially aristocrats) in Julio-Claudian literature was frequently measured against two common authority relationships, that of the master-and-slave and of the father-and-son. The effect of employing the master-slave and father-son metaphors was to deploy both the power structure and the ethical structure of these relationships, which have contrasting ethical characters—the former is adversarial and exploitative, the latter is warm and nurturing (cf. 13). Meaning resides not in the metaphors individually but in the contrast of the binary opposites, which is sufficient to impose specific behavioural expectations and pressures upon both the emperor and his aristocratic subjects. To employ one metaphor is to reject the other, and that is simultaneously to take a stand on the legitimacy or otherwise of the emperor’s authority (cf. 213). There is little to quarrel about, especially as I have tried to make points very like these in an article which seems to have escaped Roller’s broad net: ‘The Ideal Benefactor and the Father
Analogy in Greek and Roman Thought', *Classical Quarterly* 42, 1992, 421-36.

The major finding from this study, in my view at least, is that Julio-Claudian aristocrats did not debate the emperor's 'constitutional position'; instead, they saw the principate in terms of ethical models, which they tested and debated vigorously. This is not to deny that law and tradition were important, nor that control of the army was basic. It is instead to assert the importance of ethical and moral systems for understanding, if not so much why, then at least how the emperors ruled Rome. This is an eloquent, sophisticated and innovative treatment of the emerging social and political order of the principate using the most widespread contemporary terms.

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