ROMAN EMPERORS IN POPULAR JARGON: SEARCHING FOR CONTEMPORARY NICKNAMES (I)¹

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Popular culture and opposite views of the emperor

How was the reigning Emperor regarded by his subjects, above all by the common people? As is well known, genuine popular sentiments and feelings in antiquity are not easy to uncover. This is why I shall start with a quote from a recent work by Tessa Watt on English 16th-century ‘popular culture’:

“There are undoubtedly certain sources which can bring us closer to ordinary people as cultural ‘creators’ rather than as creative ‘consumers’. Historians are paying increasing attention to records of slanderous rhymes, skimmingtons and other ritualized protests of festivities which show people using established symbols in a resourceful way.”²

The ancient historian cannot use the same kind of sources, for instance large numbers of cheap prints, as the early modern historian can.³ But we should try to identify related forms of ‘popular culture’.

The question of the Roman Emperor’s popularity might appear to be a moot one in some people’s view. Someone could argue that in a highly

¹ This study contains a reworking of only part of my presentation at the workshop in Rome. For reasons of space, only Part (I) of the material can be presented and discussed here, while Part (II) (‘Imperial Nicknames in the *Historia Augusta*’) and Part (III) (‘Late-antique Imperial Nicknames’) will be published separately. These two chapters contain issues different from those discussed here, which makes it feasible to create the division. The nicknames in the *Historia Augusta* are largely literary inventions (but that work does contain fragments from Marius Maximus’ imperial biographies, see now A.R. Birley, ‘Marius Maximus: the Consular Biographer’, *ANRW* II 34.3 (1997), 2678–2757, esp. 2689 f. and 2736 for epithets and appellatives after Commodus’ death). For Late Antiquity, the conflict between traditionalists and Christians constitutes a new element (not surprisingly, many sources concern Julian the Apostate). An earlier paper on Imperial Nicknames was presented in June 1997 at the Universities of Münster, Göttingen, and FU Berlin. Two recent works by Eleanor Dickey, ‘Κύριε, δέσποτα, domine. Greek Politeness in the Roman Empire’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001) 1–11, and *Latin Forms of Address from Plautus to Apuleius* (Oxford 2002), are of interest for my undertaking, but they are not directly relevant to the question of nicknames and epithets. I wish to thank the participants at all these events for helpful comments and am particularly indebted to Anthony Birley, Bruno Bleckmann, François Chausson, C.J. Classen, Jonathan Edmondson, Johannes Hahn, and Olivier Hekster. Last but not least, sincere thanks are due to Lukas de Blois, Gerda de Kleijn and the other organizers of the Rome workshop.

² T. Watts, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640* (Cambridge 1991), 4.

³ For an exemplary study, see R. Cust, ‘News and Politics in Early-Seventeenth Century England’, *Past & Present* 112 (1986), 60–90, esp. 65–69.

stratified society such as the Roman world the common people would automatically feel only hostility towards their oppressors. Or one might consider the question equally uninteresting because people who regarded the emperor as one of their gods would never think of blaming or criticizing him. Both these views find some support in the ancient sources, a fact that shows the question to be rather more complicated and hence worth investigating.

In the collection of writings by the stoic philosopher Epictetus we find the following passage about the relation between the emperor and his subjects:

“In this fashion the rash are ensnared by the soldiers in Rome. A soldier, dressed like a civilian, sits down by your side, and begins to speak ill of Caesar, and then you too, just as though you had received from him some guarantee of good faith in the fact that he began the abuse, tell likewise everything you think, and the next thing is — you are led off to prison.”⁴

“Speak ill of Caesar” — here we find one contemporary view of the Emperor illustrated.⁵ But it is not the only one. Aelius Aristides, another Greek writer, writes in his famous ‘Praise of Rome’ in the following way about Roman governors in the provinces:

“No one is so proud that he can fail to be moved upon hearing even the mere mention of the Ruler's name, but, rising, he praises and worships him and breathes two prayers in a single breath, one to the gods on the Ruler's behalf, one for his own affairs to the Ruler himself.”⁶

This, then, is the opposite view held by the subjects (albeit we are here dealing with upper-class subjects). They pray for the wellbeing of the

⁴ Epictetus 4.13.5. Translation by W.A. Oldfather (Loeb Classical Library, henceforth LCL).

⁵ This is probably the source of the claim by P. Veyne, ‘The Roman Empire’, in P. Veyne (ed.), *A History of Private Life I. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, Mass. 1987), 5-234, esp. 97, that Romans were wont to curse their emperor and the gods (no reference is given). Similarly also in Ambrose, *De Helia et Ieiuno* 12.41; see Sr. M.J.A. Buck (commentary and translation), *S. Ambrosii De Helia et Ieiuno* (Patristic Studies 19, Washington, D.C. 1929), 74 f.: “Men without a tunic, without even funds for the following day, lounge at the doorways of taverns. They pass judgement on emperors and officers of state; indeed they seem to themselves to reign, and to command armies” (*de imperatoribus et potestatibus iudicant, immo regnare sibi videntur et exercitibus imperare*).

⁶ Aelius Aristides, *Eis Rhomen* 31-32. Transl. by J.H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power. A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 43.4), Philadelphia 1953, 899 chapter 32.

emperor, and they pray directly to the Emperor, who in many ways is similar to a god even while still dwelling among his subjects on earth. But being a god did not make the emperor immune from criticism; for this we can once more rely on Epictetus:

“But no, you sit trembling with fear something will happen, and lamenting, and grieving, and groaning about other things that are happening. And then you blame the gods! Although you have these faculties free and entirely on your own, you do not use them, nor do you realize what gifts you have received, and from whom, but you sit sorrowing and groaning, some of you blinded toward the giver himself and not even acknowledging your benefactor, and others — such is their ignoble spirit — turning aside to fault-finding and complaints against God.”⁷

It is thus apparent that whether a Roman emperor was regarded as man or god, he would not have been beyond criticism, and therefore investigating the popularity of Rome’s rulers is a meaningful task. Moreover, we can begin by excluding the ‘ruler cult’⁸ from our considerations, as we have now seen in Epictetus that common people might curse gods as well as human beings. We cannot a priori assume that Roman emperors would have been immune from imprecations or profanities.

Emperors, the aristocracy, and the common people

The popular appeal of the Roman emperors is clearly a very wide topic. At least since Fergus Millar’s *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London 1979; Ithaca, N.Y. 1992, 2nd ed.) there has been an awareness of the structural importance of the emperor as an institution in the Roman world. Yet a study of the popularity of the emperors was not part of Millar’s enterprise.

Many works discuss the relations between the rulers and their subjects in the Roman world, but traditionally the focus has been on the often troubled

⁷ Epictetus 1.6.38, 42. Translation by W.A. Oldfather (LCL).

⁸ Various aspects have been illuminated by S. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1984); D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire I-II* (Leiden 1987-1992); U.-M. Liertz, *Kult und Kaiser. Studien zu Kaiserkult und Kaiserverehrung in den germanischen Provinzen und in Gallia Belgica zur römischen Kaiserzeit* (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 20, Rome 1998); M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott. Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart 1999) See now also the contribution by Professor Panciera in this volume, with some sceptical comments on the concept of ‘ruler cult’.

relations between the emperors and the upper class.⁹ It is a commonplace that the senatorial aristocracy found it difficult to accept one-man rule; and even the 'good' emperor Vespasian had to deal with a Stoic opposition in the Senate. There is not much new to be found in this regard; Tacitus' view of the Principate is well known and so is, at the other end of the spectrum, the loyal Pliny's view of 'good emperors' such as Trajan — to mention two representative sources.

The study of the relations between the emperors and the common people, the anonymous masses of the empire, is a more recent phenomenon, and it is certainly much more difficult to approach and correctly define the feelings and opinions of the lower strata in the Roman world. Zvi Yavetz's pioneering *Plebs and princeps* (Oxford 1969) has been followed by several useful and enlightening works.¹⁰ While the literary sources and modern scholarship mostly focus on Rome, some scholars have studied the popular movements elsewhere, in particular in Alexandria and Antiochia in connection with imperial visits.¹¹

From Rome itself we have information, apparently in origin deriving from non-literary sources, indicating how some of the emperors were

⁹ The classic work by Gaston Boissier, *L'opposition sous les Césars* (Paris 1905, 5th ed.), focuses on the opinions of the aristocracy, as does R.A. Bauman, *Impietas in principem* (München 1974). There is nothing relevant for my topic in C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley 2000), chapter 5 'Roman Emperors and Public Opinion'. On the Fondation Hardt Colloquium on 'Opposition et Résistance', see the next note.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Z. Yavetz, 'The Urban Plebs in the Days of the Flavians, Nerva and Trajan', in A. Giovannini (ed.), *Opposition et résistance à l'empire romain d'Auguste à Trajan* (Entretiens Fondation Hardt 33, Vandoeuvres - Genève 1987), 135-181; J. Sünkses Thompson, *Aufstände und Protestaktionen im Imperium Romanum. Die severischen Kaiser im Spannungsfeld innenpolitischer Konflikte* (Bonn 1990), 95-134; 155-166; E. Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt a.M. 1992), 38-93 (with an ambitious emphasis on historical methodology, but perhaps less sensitive to traditional 'Quellenkritik'); J. Sünkses Thompson, *Demonstrative Legitimität der Kaiserherrschaft im Epochenvergleich. Zur politischen Macht des stadtrömischen Volkes* (Historia Einzelschriften 84, Stuttgart 1993). For events in A.D. 20, see W. Eck, 'Plebs und Princeps nach dem Tod des Germanicus', in I. Malkin - Z.W. Rubensohn, eds., *Leaders and Masses in the Roman World. Studies in Honor of Zvi Yavetz* (Leiden 1995), 1-10; L. de Blois, 'Volk und Soldaten bei Cassius Dio', *ANRW* II 34.3 (1997), 2650-2676, esp. 2658-2660 discusses Dio's view on the relation between people and *princeps*. Regardless of her title, M. Griffin, 'Urbs Roma, plebs and Princeps', in L. Alexander (ed.), *Images of Empire* (Sheffield 1991), 19-46, is, *contra* Yavetz, much less inclined to attribute importance to movements by the people.

¹¹ For Caracalla's visit to Alexandria in A.D. 215, see recently Sünkses Thompson 1990, op.cit. (n.10), 159-163 and C. Bruun, 'Pericula Alexandrina: The Adventures of a Recently Discovered Centurion of the *legio II Parthica*', *Arctos* 29 (1995), 9-27. On the emperor Julian and the people of Antiochia, see M. Gleason, 'Festive Satire: Julian's *Misopogon* and the New Year at Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986), 106-119, with the comments by H.-U. Wiemer, *Libanios und Julian. Studien zum Verhältnis von Rhetorik und Politik im vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Vestigia 46, München 1995), 194-197; 208-210.

regarded by the *plebs*: popular chants, anecdotes, graffiti — most of them recorded by intellectuals and handed down in literary texts, of course; Mireille Corbier paid close attention to these expressions of opinion in the Capital some time ago.¹² As a complement to the missing original evidence from Rome, many first-hand sources are found in Pompeii, where graffiti and inscriptions provide a number of references to the rulers and their families; many positive and some negative.¹³

A verbal expression of opinion is mentioned in a familiar passage from Suetonius' biography of Caesar:

“That he did not refrain from adulterous affairs in the provinces is shown in particular by this couplet, which was also shouted by the soldiers in his Gallic triumph: ‘Men of Rome, keep close your consorts, here’s a bald adulterer. Gold in Gaul you spent in dalliance, which you borrowed here in Rome.’¹⁴

We seem to be dealing with just the kind of popular verse that Tessa Watts was referring to in the introductory quote, although the verse is transmitted by the learned Roman knight Suetonius.¹⁵

The text is interesting in that Caesar's soldiers are clearly proud of him and indeed they celebrate a triumph together. Yet they attribute less than flattering epithets to him. This is in fact not very surprising, because it was Roman custom to present derogatory *ioci* during a triumph, overturning the social roles, as at the Saturnalia.¹⁶ More important is the wording of Caesar's

¹² M. Corbier, ‘L'écriture dans l'espace public romain’, *L'Urbs. Espace urbain et histoire I. siècle av. J.-C. - III. siècle après J.-C.* (Coll. EFR 98, Rome 1987), 27-60, esp. 53-57 (on Rome).

¹³ See, e.g., CIL IV 1074 *Iudiciis Augusti Augustae feliciter* ..., with the recent comment by L. Falanga, ‘Sul significato di *fidelis in p.* e su altre iscrizioni pompeiani’, *Rivista di Studi Pompeiani* 1 (1987), 209-219, esp. 209 (probably Nero and Poppaea). In general on references to the rulers in Pompeian inscriptions, see J. Carcopino, ‘Un procureur méconnu de Néron’, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1960), 150-58, esp. 253-55. Carcopino's main argument is that CIL IV 8075 *Cicuta ab rationibus Neronis Augusti* (= AE 1962.133) is a reference to Nero's benefitting financially from poisoning his enemies. More recently, P. Cugusi, ‘Spunti di polemica politica in alcuni graffiti di Pompei e di Terracina’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 61 (1985) 23-29, esp. 23-27, has argued for an anti-Augustan interpretation of CIL IV 6893 = *Carmina Latina epigraphica* 2050.

¹⁴ Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 51. The Latin verse goes: *Urbani, servate uxores: moechom calvom adducimus / Aurum in Gallia effutuisti; hic sumpsisti mutuum*. Translation by J.C. Rolfe (LCL), slightly modified.

¹⁵ Cf. that a good case for reading a direct, and insulting, reference to Domitian in the popular verse cited by Suetonius, *Domitianus* 14 has been made by C. Faraone, ‘A proposito di un ‘olpe campana’ del Museo di Capua’, *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia d'Archeologia* 59 (1986-1987), 111-117.

¹⁶ On *ioci militares* and *cantilenae* during triumphs, see I. Kempff, ‘Romanorum sermonis castrensis reliquiae’, *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie* Suppl. 26 (Leipzig 1901), 342-400, esp. 357-360; H.

epithets: *moechus calvus*. The adjective *calvus* is also used as a Roman name, a *cognomen*,¹⁷ which brings us to the topic of nicknames.

The importance of nicknames and how to identify them

The approach to 'popular culture' that I have chosen leads us to naming practices. When people bestow names on other people, these names tend to reflect the feelings of the giver towards that other person, and by definition this applies most of all to nicknames. In the following I will investigate the question of popularity by focusing on nicknames and popular epithets of the Roman emperors.¹⁸

There is another investigative thread in this study as well. It is commonly thought that the *cognomina* used by the Roman republican aristocracy often had their origin in nicknames given by the soldiers and the common people. A common explanation, which most eloquently has been argued by Andreas Alföldi, assumes that the aristocracy accepted nicknames given by their inferiors whether they were positive or derogatory (he believes the latter to have been very common), perhaps as a way of courting popular favour.¹⁹ Since many of the traditional aristocratic *cognomina* originated during a period for which contemporary sources do not exist, the theory is difficult to prove or disprove. A second purpose of the present investigation is to study a period of Roman history when contemporary evidence is easier to uncover than for the republican period. (Referring back to the Roman Republic is perhaps not besides the point in the context of a discussion about the 'Impact of Empire'.) Besides investigating the popularity of the emperors in the light of nicknames, I am interested in how the Roman rulers behaved in relation to nicknames and epithets given them by the people, and whether

Versnel, *Triumphus. An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden 1970), 95-96.

¹⁷ I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (Helsinki 1965), 35. Of course, the cognomen *Calvus* is never used by or for Caesar, which illustrates one of the points I shall be making.

¹⁸ There is a rich literature on the use of nicknames by scholars working in psychology, social psychology and anthropology. For political nicknames see, for instance, A. Rynell, 'Some Political Nicknames in Caricatures under George III', *Studia Neophilologica* 14 (1941/42), 343-356. For an introduction to modern research on nicknaming see J. Morgan *et al.*, *Nicknames. Their Origins and Social Consequences* (London - Boston 1979), and the special issue on nicknaming of the journal *Names* 38 (1990), containing among others the following studies: T.J. Holland jr., 'The Many Faces of Nicknames', 255-272; P.L. Leslie & J.K. Skipper jr., 'Toward a Theory of Nicknames: a Case for Socio-Onomastics', 273-282; E.D. Lawson, 'Nicknames: an Annotated Bibliography', 323-363.

¹⁹ A. Alföldi, *Early Rome and the Latins* (Ann Arbor 1965), 82 f.; Idem, 'Les *cognomina* des magistrats de la République romain', *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire offerts à A. Piganiol II* (Paris 1966), 709-722, esp. 710; Idem, *Römische Frühgeschichte. Kritik und Forschung seit 1964* (Heidelberg 1976), 108 f.

there was any interest in adopting them (while of course remembering that the social position of the ruling elite during the Republic cannot quite be compared with the *princeps*' unique position).

The title of this study contains the qualification 'contemporary', and by this I mean 'contemporary with the emperor for whom the nickname is intended'. When investigating how a Roman emperor was regarded during his reign, contemporary nicknames are of particular value. Nicknames coined after the reign of an emperor strictly speaking only testify to how posterity perceived him.

The assumption that nicknames of a public figure might tell us something about that person's public appeal is, I believe, quite uncontroversial. What the nicknames tell us is, however, not always self-evident. Several questions need to be considered: (1) Who is using the nickname, (2) in what context, and (3) what is the value of the nickname — is it positive or negative, laudatory or pejorative? Before surveying the material, we also need to agree on what constitutes a nickname.

In this paper I am adopting two very simple principles when studying nicknames. Firstly, I am interested in names, appellatives, not in mere epithets. The context must clearly indicate that we are dealing with a name, which means that we are looking for phrases such as *dicitur*, *appellatus est*, *cui erat cognomen*, or Greek equivalents. For completeness, also certain unusual cognomina that seem to have been acquired during an emperor's reign are included, as they might have nicknames as their origin.

Secondly, simple epithets will nevertheless be included when they appear in a context outside the literary circles of the upper classes. We are focusing on the popular reputation of the emperors and it is reasonable to assume that an epithet that circulated among the people might have given origin to a nickname. A quote from a poem by the late-antique writer Ausonius will illustrate the criteria here adopted:

Primus regalem patefecit Iulius aulam
Caesar et Augusto nomen transcripsit et arcem.
privignus post hunc regnat Nero Claudius, a quo
Caesar, cognomen Caligae cui castra dederunt.
Claudius hinc potitur regno. post quem Nero saevus,
ultimus Aeneadum. post hunc tres, nec tribus annis;
Galba senex, frustra socio confisus inerti;
mollis Otho, infami per luxum degener aevo,
nec regno dignus nec morte Vitellius ut vir.
his decimus fatioque accitus Vespasianus

et Titus imperii felix brevitatem secutus
frater, quem Calvum dixit sua Roma Neronem.²⁰

Ausonius' poem illustrates how my criteria work: it presents two instances of relevant nicknames, namely *cognomen Caligae* for Gaius and *Calvus Nero* for Domitian. Caliga is expressly defined as a *cognomen*, and for both these appellatives we find phrases that qualify them as having been in common usage: *cui castra dederunt* and *quem sua Roma dixit*, respectively.²¹ To return to the earlier passage by Suetonius: there we find two significant epithets for Caesar, *moechus* and *calvus*, both said to have been used by the soldiers.

Not considered, on the contrary, are Ausonius' epithets *saevus* for Nero, *senex* for Galba, or *mollis* for Otho, since, in the absence of any further evidence, there is nothing to indicate that they are anything more than the products of the poet's literary creativity. Therefore most of the epithets relating to Roman emperors found in ancient literature, and in official correspondence directed at the emperors, are outside the scope of my investigation.²² Negative epithets belong to the category of 'Schimpfwörter', on which there are good studies,²³ while laudatory and flattering epithets belong in the tradition of panegyric. This is, admittedly, to some extent a mechanical way of collecting the evidence, but in the present context I have not found a more manageable way.

Driven by the search for spontaneous (to the extent that such a phenomenon exists) expressions of sentiment by others than the imperial elite, I

²⁰ Ausonius, *Monosticha de ordine imperatorum*. The text is from the Teubner edition by S. Prete, *Decimi Magni Ausonii Burdigalensis opuscula* (Leipzig 1978), 202 f. (= R.P.H. Green (ed.), *Decimi Magni Ausonii opera* (Oxford 1999), 182: *De ordine imperatorum*). Translation: "Iulius Caesar was the first to open the royal hall, and he carried over to Augustus the name and the citadel. After him ruled his son-in-law Nero Claudius, after whom came a Caesar to whom the military camp gave the surname Caliga (military boot). After that Claudius took over power. After him the fierce Nero, the last offspring of the family of Aeneas. After him three rulers, in not even three years: the old Galba, in vain trusting a passive associate; the soft Otho, ignoble on account of the luxury in a shameful age, as was Vitellius, a man not worthy of the reign nor dignified in death. To these, tenth in order, Vespasian was called up by fate, and Titus, fortunate because of the brevity of his reign. His brother followed, whom Rome of his day called the bald Nero."

²¹ We are only at the first stage of the investigation here; the obvious next step is to evaluate whether the claim that the names were in popular usage is plausible.

²² Such epithets are, for instance, 'pseudo-Paeon' for Gaius (Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 110: ὁ ψευδώνυμος Παιών), *portio Neronis de crudelitate* for Domitian (Tertullianus, *Apologeticum* 5), *Subnero* for Commodus (Tertullianus, *De pallio* 4.5), and *latro Rutupinus* for Magnus Maximus (Ausonius 21.9 in Prete 1978, op. cit. (n.20) 196 = Green 1999, op. cit. (n.20) 191).

²³ See I. Opelt, *Die lateinischen Schimpfwörter und verwandte sprachliche Erscheinungen* (Heidelberg 1965), esp. 165-189; S. Koster, *Die invektive in der griechischen und römischen Literatur* (Meisenheim am Glan 1980).

also exclude epithets voted by the Senate, for instance Trajan's *Optimus*²⁴ which in most cases are conventional 'Siegerbeinamen' (such as *Germanicus*),²⁵ and unofficial but standardized honorary epithets given to the Roman emperors in various public inscriptions all over the empire — *indulgentissimus*, *fortissimus*, *clementissimus*, *piissimus*, and so on — even though in some of the cases Andrea Scheithauer has collected (from Marcus Aurelius onwards) these inscriptions were erected by local groups and collectives (but the authors of these texts are mostly imperial administrators).²⁶

There are many other standardized unofficial epithets (common, yet unofficial in the sense that the emperor would not use them himself) used frequently for emperors in the East, such as *Panellenios* or *Olympios*,²⁷ further divine epithets,²⁸ and traditional Greek epithets like *soter* (saviour), *ktistes* (founder), and *evergetes* (benefactor) that will likewise not be commented upon here.²⁹ Other standardized epithets can be found in petitions to various emperors.³⁰ Finally, attempts by the emperors themselves to appropriate names and certain *cognomina* of their predecessors, in particular the *nomen Antoninorum*, are not discussed.³¹

²⁴ Trajan was hailed as *Optimus* by the Senate in A.D. 98 (Plinius, *Panegyricus* 2.7), but as shown by R. Frei-Stolba, 'Inoffizielle Kaisertitulaturen im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.', *Museum Helveticum* 26 (1969), 18-39, esp. 21 f., the epithet had been used unofficially for several previous emperors. On *Optimus* as part of Trajan's official nomenclature, see recently E.I. Paunov & M.M. Roxan, 'The Earliest Extant Diploma of Thrace, A.D. 114 (= RMD I 14)', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 119 (1997), 269-279, esp. 273 f.

²⁵ P. Kneißl, *Die Siegestitulatur der römischen Kaiser. Untersuchungen zu den Siegerbeinamen des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 1969).

²⁶ A. Scheithauer, 'Super omnes retro principes ... zur inoffiziellen Titulatur römischer Kaiser', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 72 (1988), 155-177. An earlier valuable survey of unofficial yet commonly used epithets is by Frei-Stolba 1969, op.cit. (n.24), in particular on *optimus*, *maximus*, *sacratissimus*, *sanctissimus*, *indulgentissimus*, *liberalissimus*.

²⁷ On 'Olympios', see H.A. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs. 'Acta Alexandrinorum'* (Oxford 1954), 132 (mostly used for Hadrian); A.R. Birley, *Hadrian the Restless Emperor* (London 2000, 2nd ed.), 220.

²⁸ Two random examples: Nero is called 'Zeus Eleutherios' in SEG 47 (1997), 473; Titus is called 'neos Apollon' in SEG 23 (1967), 450; cf. n. 41 below.

²⁹ The indices of any issue of the *SEG* will reveal how commonly these epithets were applied to Roman emperors. The only case included below refers to Vespasian and is told by Josephus; the situation is unusually vivid and direct. Another literary example appears in Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 4 ('soter' and 'evergetes' for Caligula).

³⁰ See T. Hauken, *Petition and Response. An Epigraphic study of Petitions to Roman Emperors 181-249* (Bergen 1998), esp. nos. 3, 4, and 6. In these Greek documents, the emperor(s) are addressed with a variation on 'greatest and most divine of emperors ever'. Hauken at page 155 comments that ἀλυπότατος ('most happy, carefree') appears only once, in *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua* X 14.

³¹ See, e.g., Macrinus' attempt, in a letter to the Senate, to appropriate the cognomina *Severus*, *Pius*, and *Felix* (Cassius Dio 79(78).16.2). On the *nomen Antoninorum*, which plays such a large role in the *Historia Augusta*, see W. Hartke, *Römische Kinderkaiser. Eine Strukturanalyse römischen Denkens und*

Interpreting popular culture

Interpreting nicknames is not always straightforward. In Berlin, a few years ago, it was pointed out to me that a nickname used for the former East German leader Walter Ulbricht was 'Der Spitzbart' (in English perhaps 'Old Goatee'). In German this nickname has no particular connotations, it seems to me, either positive or negative. But I was assured that at the time it was throughout interpreted as pejorative.

A non-literary example of what might be called popular culture in the Roman world illustrates the need for interpretation.

Inscribed brick from Intercisa (from Vágó & Bóna 1976, op. cit. (n.32), pl. 30)

This is a drawing on a Roman brick from Intercisa in Pannonia, showing two figures who according to the text are Roman emperors (the text mentions three). Ramsay McMullen argued that we are dealing with caricatures, and that the drawing in reality expresses popular discontent with the rulers.³²

This is an interesting interpretation but difficult to accept. If one considers the physical context, the surface, the available tools, and the normal result from graffiti on bricks, then one will arrive at the opposite conclusion; surely this crude drawing is on the contrary a sign of loyalty, an indication of the respect that the Tetrarchs enjoyed also in a brick manufacture on the Pannonian *limes*. This of course is what most scholars who have discussed the drawing have concluded.³³

The issue of 'imperial caricatures'³⁴ reminds one of the mention by Fronto in one of his letters to the young future emperor Marcus, that Rome was full of bad portraits of the imperial family.³⁵ Again, the features of emperors and princes were surely not distorted on purpose but due to faulty craftsmanship, while the fact that these objects were so ubiquitous gives an indication of the taste of the common people. A modern-day parallel is provided by the pictures of the Saviour (with blinking eyes, in the kitchiest of ways) and of the Pope peddled around the Vatican.

The conclusion which imposes itself is that when studying popular culture one needs to be perceptive: what seems innocuous might be meant as critique, and what looks offensive might be intended as a compliment.

³² R. MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven & London 1988), 114 f. For the original publication, see E.B. Vágó & I. Bóna, *Die Gräberfelder von Intercisa I. Der spätrömische Südostfriedhof* (Budapest 1976), 185 with pl. 30; pl. XX. The original editors first suggested that the drawing was meant to be 'spöttisch'.

³³ See, e.g., T. Pekáry, *Das römische Kaiserbildnis in Staat, Kult und Gesellschaft dargestellt anhand der Schriftquellen* (Das römische Herrscherbild III.5, Berlin 1985), 103. One may compare the drawing, on another brick from Pannonia (Kisdorog), of a figure called ARIO (Areius?) or ARSO; again surely not for denigrating purposes; see *Instrumenta Inscripta Latina. Das römische Leben im Spiegel der Kleininschriften* (Exhibition catalogue, Pécs 1991), 178 f. Concerning visual evidence, the presence of the emperor in a recently discovered fragmentary wallpainting from Paris, argued by H. Eristov, 'Un témoignage de loyalisme impérial dans un décor peint?', *Gallia* 51 (1994), 217-232, might according to the author be evidence of 'imperial loyalism'.

³⁴ A related case is the rough graffiti portrait of man with the inscription CAICAP from Terracina, presented by H. Solin, 'Caesar und P. Clodius Pulcher in Terracina', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 43 (1981), 357-361, esp. 360 (with discussion).

³⁵ Fronto, *Ad Marcum Caesarem* 4.12.4.

Imperial nicknames, popular epithets and acquired *cognomina* from Augustus to the third century³⁶

Emperor	nickname etc.	source	used by
Augustus ³⁷	Thurinus	Suetonius, <i>Augustus</i> 7.1	given in childhood, used by M. Antonius
	puer	Suetonius, <i>Augustus</i> 2	— (<i>alii iactassent</i>)
	Kaipias (Καιπίας) ³⁸	Cassius Dio 45.1.1	—
	pater patriae	Ovidius, <i>Fasti</i> 2.127-28; Suetonius, <i>Augustus</i> 58.1-2;	<i>plebs</i> and Senate
	‘father’	Cassius Dio 56.9.3	the <i>equites</i>
	Apollo Tormentor	Suetonius, <i>Augustus</i> 70.2	the people
	Augustus ³⁹	Suetonius, <i>Augustus</i> 7.2	the Senate, proposed by Munatius Plancus
	‘avertor of evil’ (ἀλεξίκακος)	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> 144	—
	‘fortune’s gem’ (κόσμος τύχης)	Petrus Patricius fr. 191 ⁴⁰	Constantinus I
Tiberius	Callipedes	Suetonius, <i>Tiberius</i> 38	<i>vulgo vocaretur</i>

³⁶ The following list has no precedents, as far as I know, but Kempff, op. cit. (n.16), 354-357 lists some imperial nicknames and epithets. For the nicknames in the *Historia Augusta* and for later nicknames see the Introductory note above. It would be futile to claim completeness for the list, but it ought to contain enough material for a meaningful discussion of the topic.

³⁷ After his testamentary adoption, *Octavianus* was part of the young Caesar’s nomenclature, but the future emperor never used that name as it bore witness to his origin; see D. Kienast, *Augustus Prinzeps und Monarch* (Darmstadt 1999, 3rd ed.), 9. On Octavian’s nomenclature during the triumviral period, see in detail C. Rubincam, ‘The Nomenclature of Julius Caesar and the Later Augustus in the Triumviral Period’, *Historia* 41 (1992), 88-103.

³⁸ The *cognomen* Καίπις is mysterious, and it appears nowhere else. The text may be corrupt, as has often been suggested, see recently Kienast 1999, op. cit. (n.37), 9 f. A possible explanation, advanced earlier, was repeated by V. Gardthausen, *Augustus und seine Zeit* II (Leipzig 1891), 20: the Latin name for Thurii was Copiae; perhaps a Greek ethnic derived from Copiae might explain the name.

³⁹ Suetonius, *Augustus* 7.2., relates that the Princeps declined the cognomen *Romulus*. According to Suetonius, *Augustus* 53.1, Augustus strongly opposed being addressed as *dominus* (master, lord), and when it occurred, he forbade it. Cf. Dickey (2001), op.cit. (n.1), 2.

⁴⁰ U.P. Boissvain, C. de Boor & Th. Büttner-Wobst, eds., *Excerpta historica iussu Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti* IV (Berlin 1906), 271.

	Biberius Caldius Mero	Suetonius, <i>Tiberius</i> 42; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 2.2; cf. Cassius Dio book 58 fr. 5 ⁴¹	<i>in castris; a iocularibus</i>
	Caprineus	Suetonius, <i>Tiberius</i> 43.2	<i>vulgo dictitabant</i>
	Tiberiolus meus	Tacitus, <i>Annales</i> 6.5	Cotta Messalinus
	‘the Elder’ (ὁ πρεσβύτερος)	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> 142	—
	Atreus	Cassius Dio 58.24.4	Tiberius himself
	Agamemnon	Cassius Dio 59.19.2	Agrippina the Younger
	‘bloodstained mud’ πηλὸς αἷματι πεφυρμένος	Cassius Dio 58 fr. 3 (see n.41)	—
Gaius	Caligula	Seneca, <i>De constantia sapientis</i> 18.4; Tacitus, <i>Annales</i> 1.41; ibid. 1.69; Suetonius, <i>Caligula</i> 9.1; Cassius Dio 57.5.6; ibid. 62(62).4.1; Athenaeus 4.148d; Eutropius 7.12.1; other later sources	a centurion / <i>legiones militari vocabulo</i> / (the legions), Agrippina's wish / <i>castrensi ioco</i> / the soldiers / Boudicca / — / — (<i>cognomento C.</i>)
	Gaius	Seneca, <i>De constantia sapientis</i> 18.4	Herennius Macer
	sidus, pullus, pupus, alumnus	Suetonius, <i>Caligula</i> 13	the people of Rome (and along the road from Misenum)
	Pius, Castrorum filius, Pater exercituum, Optimus maximusque Caesar	Suetonius, <i>Caligula</i> 22.1	<i>cognominibus adsumptis</i> (own initiative), <i>vocabatur</i>
	Latiaris Iuppiter ⁴²	Suetonius, <i>Caligula</i> 22.2; Cassius Dio 59.28.5;	<i>quidam salutarunt</i> / he himself

⁴¹ U.P. Boissvain (ed.), *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum quae supersunt* II (Berlin 1955), 616.

⁴² On Jupiter (*Zeus*) as appellative for Gaius, see also Cassius Dio 59.28.8; 30.1a.

	Bacchus, Evaeus, Lycaeus ⁴³	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> 96	choirs chanting
	Ares	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i> 97	—
	‘young Augustus’ (νεανίσκος Αὔγουστος)	Cassius Dio 59.13.6	the people in the circus
	Britannicus ⁴⁴	Cassius Dio 59.25.5 ^a	—
	‘big humbug’ (μέγα παραλήρημα)	Cassius Dio 59.26.9	a Gallic shoemaker
Nero	‘matricide’ (μητροκτόνος)	Suetonius, <i>Nero</i> 39.2; Cassius Dio 62(61).16.2 ² ; 62(62).18.4	<i>dictum</i> or <i>carmen</i> by the public
	Pacan	Suetonius, <i>Nero</i> 39.2	<i>carmen</i> by the public
	‘beautiful Caesar, Apollon, another Pythian’ ⁴⁵	Cassius Dio. 62(61).20.5	his soldiers
	‘mistress Domitia Nero’ ⁴⁶	Cassius Dio 62(62).6.5	Boudicca
	‘Pythian Victor, Olympian Victor, Victor of the ‘Grand Slam’, Universal Victor’ ⁴⁷	Cassius Dio 62(63).10.1	his soldiers

⁴³ Cf. the notice in Cassius Dio 59.26.5-6 that Gaius impersonated various gods: Jupiter, Neptune, Herakles, Bacchus, Apollo, Juno, Diana, and Venus, which would mean that he temporarily assumed their names too. In fact Athenaeus 4.148d says that Gaius was called ‘new Dionysos’ and dressed like the god. From the context it is clear that he continued an Hellenistic tradition; for instance Marcus Antonius had given orders to be proclaimed as Dionysus before him (Athenaeus 4.148c).

⁴⁴ The passage (Joannes Antiochenus fr. 82 M) claims that the epithets *Germanicus* and *Britannicus* were given in mockery. The former name was however part of Gaius’ official nomenclature.

⁴⁵ ὁ καλὸς Καῖσαρ, ὁ Ἀπόλλων, εἰς ὡς Πύθιος.

⁴⁶ ἡ Νερωνίς ἢ Δομιτία.

⁴⁷ Πυθιονίκης, Ὀλυμπιονίκης, περιοδονίκης, παντονίκης.

	'Olympian Victor, Pythian Victor, Hercules, Apollo, Only Victor of the 'Grand Slam', Only one from the beginning of time, Divine Voice' ⁴⁸	Cassius Dio 62(63).20.5	the people of Rome, the Senate
	malus citharoedus	Suetonius, <i>Nero</i> 41.1	Julius Vindex, rebel
	Ahenobarbus	Suetonius, <i>Nero</i> 41.1	Julius Vindex, rebel
	Thyestes, Oedipus, Alcmeon, Orestes	Cassius Dio 63(63).22.6	Julius Vindex, rebel
Sulpicius Galba	Cupido	Suetonius, <i>Galba</i> 20.2	Otho's soldiers
Otho	Nero	Tacitus, <i>Historiae</i> 1.78; Suetonius, <i>Otho</i> 7.1; Plutarchos, <i>Otho</i> 3.1; cf. 3.2	<i>populus et miles / ab infima plebe / the crowd in the theatres</i>
	'father'	Cassius Dio 63(64).14.1	his soldiers
Vespasianus ⁴⁹	Vespasianus ⁵⁰	Suetonius, <i>Vespasianus</i> 15	Helvidius Priscus
	'saviour, benefactor'	Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i> 3.459	the people of Tarichaeae
	Cybiosactes	Suetonius, <i>Vespasianus</i> 19.2	the people of Alexandria
Domitianus	calvus Nero	Ausonius, <i>de XII Caesaribus</i>	<i>dixit sua Roma</i> ⁵¹
	dominus et deus	Cassius Dio 67(67).4.7; 13.4; Eutropius 7.23.2	D. was pleased to be called / <i>se appellari iussit</i>
Traianus	locupletator	CIL VI 958 = VI 40500	<i>cultores Larum et</i>

⁴⁸ Ὀλυμπιονίκης, Πυθιονίκης, ..., ὡς εἰς περιοδονίκης, εἰς ἅπ' αἰῶνος, ἱερὰ φωνή.

⁴⁹ According to Suetonius, *Vespasianus* 4.3 he was commonly (*vulgo*) called *mulio* before he became emperor, on account of his business activities. On the nickname, see now A.B. Bosworth, 'Vespasian and the slave trade', *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002) 350-357.

⁵⁰ Suetonius specifies that the Stoic Helvidius continued to address the Emperor *privato nomine*.

⁵¹ The same expression already appears as an invective in Juvenalis 4.38, and it is of course possible that this is what Ausonius means by *sua Roma*.

⁵² The OLD and the ThLL register only two other occurrences of the rare word *locupletator* as an attribute

	civium ⁵²		<i>imaginum domus Augustae</i>
	herba parietina/parietaria	Ammianus Marcellinus 27.3.7; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 41.13; cf. Petrus Patricius fr. 191 (see n.40)	— (<i>cognominarunt</i>) / Constantinus I / Constantinus I
	Crinitus	Eutropius 8.2.1; Ioh. Lydus, <i>De mensibus</i> 4.18	— / —
Hadrianus	Graeculus	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 14.2	<i>a plerisque</i>
	‘painting tool’ (ἐργαλεῖον ζωγραφικόν)	Petrus Patricius fr. 191 (see n.40)	Constantinus I
Antoninus Pius	Pius	Cassius Dio 70(70).2.1; Aurelius Victor 15.1; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 15.1; Eutropius 8.8.1, 3	the Senate / — (<i>cognomentum Pii / postea cognominatus / nominatus, dictus est</i>)
	‘cumminsplitter’ (κυμνοπρίστης)	Cassius Dio 70.3.3 ⁵³	scoffers (οἱ σκώπτοντες)
Marcus	Verissimus	AE 1940, 62; ⁵⁴ Cassius Dio 69(69).21.2	<i>a collegium</i> in Ostia / Hadrian
	‘laughable’ (καταγέλαστος)	Petrus Patricius fr. 191 (see n.40)	Constantinus I
Commodus ⁵⁵	Herakles ⁵⁶	Athenaeus 12.537f; Cassius Dio 73(72).15.2, 5; Herodianos 1.15.8	Commodus himself / (Herodian: he wants use to stop)

for an emperor, in both cases for Hadrian. This means that the tribute by the *cultores Larum* is the first known case, and moreover the other expressions are not identical. On the coin BMCI III, 415 no. 1193 (from A.D. 119/121, struck in Rome) Hadrian is called *locupletator orbis terrarum*, while the Ostian inscription CIL XIV 2799 addresses Hadrian and Sabina as *locupletatores municipii*. It seems that the Roman cultic organization was the first to use an epithet which then enjoyed a brief popularity.

⁵³ U.P. Boissvain (ed.), *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum quae supersunt* III (Berlin 1955), 244.

⁵⁴ Further instances will be referred to below in n. 70.

⁵⁵ Not included is *Sextus* for Commodus, once suggested on the basis of a passage in Galenos (14.651-657 Kühn) by A.R. Birley, ‘A nickname for Commodus and the date of Fronto’s death’, *Chiron* 2 (1972), 463-473, on which V. Nutton, ‘Sextus or Commodus?’, *Chiron* 3 (1973), 429-437.

⁵⁶ The rare appellatives *Pacator Orbis* and *Invictus Romanus Hercules* are not registered by Kienast 1999, op. cit. (n.37), 147-149, but they are found in two inscriptions and some papyri, see M.P. Speidel, ‘Commodus the God-Emperor and the Army’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 109-114, esp. 111

	Amazonius, Exsuperatorius (Ὑπεράριος)	Cassius Dio 73(72).15.4	Commodus himself
	‘Golden one, Herakles, god’ (ὁ χρυσοῦς)	Cassius Dio 73(72).16.1	— indefinite
	‘lord, the first, the most fortunate of all, Amazonian’ ⁵⁷	Cassius Dio 73(72).20.2	the senators
	Scaeva (‘lefthanded’) (?) ⁵⁸	Herodianos 1.15.8	Commodus himself
	‘champion of the <i>secutores</i> , only lefthanded gladiator to conquer twelve times one thousand opponents’ ⁵⁹	Cassius Dio 73(72).22.3	Commodus himself
	‘victor of a thousand gladiators’ ⁶⁰	Herodianos 1.15.9	Commodus himself
	‘criminal, tyrant, gladiator, charioteer, lefthanded, ruptured’ ⁶¹	Cassius Dio 74(73).2.2	the people of Rome
Helvius Pertinax	Pertinax	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 18.1	— (<i>cognomentum sortitus est</i>)

n.14. They are borderline cases for our purpose, but as shown by O. Hekster, ‘Commodus-Hercules: The People’s Princes’, *Scripta Classica Israelica* 20 (2001) 51-83, esp. 72-77, their use is a response to Commodus’ ruler propaganda. Cassius Dio 73(72).15.5 quotes a letter from Commodus containing these titles, as already pointed out by Dessau in ILS 400 (= CIL XIV 3449).

⁵⁷ Κύριος, πρῶτος, πάντων εὐτυχέστατος, Ἀμαζόνιος.

⁵⁸ On the possible use of this name, see the comment by C.R. Whittaker in the Loeb edition, p. 105, with references.

⁵⁹ Πρωτόπαλος σεκουτόρων, ἀριστερὸς μόνος νικήσας δωδεκάκις χιλίους.

⁶⁰ Μονομάχους χιλίους νικήσα. On the confusion about what Commodus wanted the inscription on the Colossus in Rome to read, see the comment by C.R. Whittaker in the Loeb edition of Herodianos p. 107.

⁶¹ Ἀλιτῆριος, τύραννος, μονομάχος, ἀρματιλάτης, ἀριστερὸς, κηλήτης, SHA, *Commodus* 18-19 describes the reaction of the Senate, based on Marius Maximus’ biography; cf. Birley 1997, op. cit. (n.1), 2689 f.; 2736.

	Chrestologus	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 18.4	— (<i>appellavere</i>)
Didius Julianus	Commodus	Cassius Dio 74(73).12.1	his soldiers
	‘stealer of empire, parricide’ ⁶²	Cassius Dio 74(73).13.3	the people of Rome
Pescennius Niger	‘the new Alexander’	Cassius Dio 75(74).6.2 ^a	his soldiers
Septimius Severus	Pertinax	Aurelius Victor 20.10; Eutropius 8.18.3	himself or his critics / <i>se appellari voluit</i>
Imp. Antoninus	Caracalla	Aurelius Victor 21.1; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 21.2; Eutropius 8.20.1	— (<i>dictus</i> ; <i>cognominatus est</i>); —
	Caracallus	Cassius Dio 79(78).3.3; 79(78).9.3; etc.	— (on campaign) / some people
	‘comrade, brother-in-arms’ (συστρατιώτης)	Herodianos 4.7.6	the Emperor wanted his soldiers to call him
	sideribus in terram delapsus Tonitrator Augustus	<i>CIL</i> VI 40638 (= VI 1080) ⁶³	<i>corpus piscatorum et urinatorum</i> in Rome
	Bassianus	Cassius Dio 79(78).9.3	some people
	Magnus, Alexander	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 21.4	<i>se iussit appellari</i>
	Tarautas	Cassius Dio 79(78).9.3; 79(78).10.3; 79(78).11.4; etc.	some people
	‘the Ausonian beast’ (ὁ Αὐσονίος θῆρ)	Cassius Dio 78(77).16.8; 78(77).23.4	the people of Pergamon

⁶² Τῆς τε ἀρχῆς ἄρπαξ, πατροφόνος.

⁶³ The wording is adopted from the new rendering of the inscription by G. Alföldy, ‘*Nox dea fit lux!* Caracallas Geburtstag’, in G. Bonamente & M. Mayer, eds., *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Barcinonense 1993* (Bari 1996), 9-36, esp. 23-25 (with a comma between *delapsus* and *Tonitrator*). In the inscription, the emperor is also saluted as *orbis terrarum propagator* and *dominus maximus*, but as Alföldy, p. 25 n. 44 showed, these epithets are formulaic. The former epithet is e.g. given to Trajan in *CIL* VI 958 = VI 40500 mentioned above in this table.

	“a temperate man” ὁ σώφρων	Cassius Dio 78(77).24.2	the Emperor called himself
M. Aurelius Antoninus	Bassiana	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 23.3	himself; <i>se iusserat appellari</i>
	Heliogabalus	Aurelius Victor 23.1; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 23.1-2	— (<i>dictus / dictus est</i>)
	Tiberinus	Cassius Dio 80(79).1.1; 21.3; anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 23.7	— / — (<i>appellatus est</i>)
	Tractitius	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 23.7	— (<i>appellatus est</i>)
	Sardanapallos	Cassius Dio 80(79).1.1; 2.4	—
	Assyrios	Cassius Dio 80(79).1.1; 11.2	—
	Pseudantoninus	Cassius Dio 80(79).1.1; 7.3; etc.	—
	Gynnis, ‘womanish man’	Philostratos, <i>Vitae sophistarum</i> 625	[Aelianus a philosopher]
	‘Antoninus the catamite’ (‘Αντωνείνος ὁ κόρυφος)	<i>P. Oxy</i> vol. 46, no. 3298	— (unknown writer)
	‘the unholy little Antoninus’ (ἀνόσιος Ἀντωνίνος μικρός) ⁶⁴	<i>P. Oxy</i> vol. 46, no. 3299	— (unknown writer)
Severus Alexander	Severus	Aurelius Victor 24.4	<i>milites</i>
	‘little woman, timid boy a slave to his mother’ ⁶⁵	Herodianos 6.9.5	the soldiers of Maximinus
	Marcellus	anonymus, <i>Epitome de</i>	— ⁶⁶

⁶⁴ J. Rea in *P. Oxy* 46, p. 72 points out that Heliogabalus sometimes appears a Ἀντωνίνος μικρός in papyri, in order to distinguish him from Caracalla, Ἀντωνίνος μέγας. I have not been able to access A. Lukasewicz, ‘Kaiser Elagabal in den Papyrusurkunden. Historiographie, Papyri und öffentliche Meinung’, in *Studia G. Kolendo dicata* (1995) 171-76.

⁶⁵ Τὸ γύναιον μικρολόγον, μειράκιον δειλὸν μητρὶ δουλεῖον.

⁶⁶ The SHA, *Alexander Severus* 4.6 claims that it was an oracle (a *sors Praenestina*) which predicted that he would be ‘Marcellus’ (*tu Marcellus eris*).

		<i>Caesaribus</i> 23.4	
C. Iulius Maximinus	Thrax	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 25.1	—
Gordianus I	Africanus	Herodianos 7.5.8	a crowd in Thysdrus
Julius Philippus	Arabs Traconites	Aurelius Victor 28.1	—
Valerianus	Colobius	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 32.1	— (<i>cognomento Colobius</i>)
Probus	Equitius	anonymus, <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i> 36.2	—

Evaluating the evidence

The survey shows that nicknames and (alleged) popular epithets are ubiquitous in ancient texts of an historical character. They appear with some frequency in works of imperial biography (Suetonius, Aurelius Victor, the anonymous *Epitome de Caesaribus*, etc.), as well as in Philo's account dealing with events in the reign of Gaius, and in works of history (but the distinction between history and biography was difficult to maintain during the empire), in particular in Cassius Dio.⁶⁷ Besides Otho's appellative 'Nero', the surviving writings of Tacitus only mention one nickname (*Caligula*), a feature that may be significant; the historian perhaps thought such information unworthy of attention. Nicknames are also mentioned in, e.g., the prose writings of Seneca, Athenaeus and Philostratos. All in all, the list above, containing almost 130 nicknames or popular epithets from the outset of the Principate to the mid-third century A.D., is a sign that we are dealing with a significant phenomenon, even though sources other than literary ones contribute very little.

Outside the world of literary texts, there are two references to M. Antoninus (*Heliogabalus*), both denigrating, found in two papyri dated many decades after the emperor's death. In inscriptions, honorary or hypochoristic imperial epithets are found only three times, twice in Rome and once in Ostia. The earliest case is the epithet *locupletator civium* given to Trajan by the *cultores Larum et imaginum domus Augustae*, obviously an association extremely close to the ruler. A more unusual inscription from Rome, in which the *corpus piscatorum et urinatorum* salutes the emperor Caracalla with an

⁶⁷ For Dio, the question of accuracy in the Byzantine excerpts and epitomes of his work is important. According to F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964), 1-3, we should be able to rely on the text as far as our objective is concerned.

appellative that seems to be of their own making (*sideribus in terram delapsus Tonitrator Augustus*), was recently analyzed by Géza Alföldy, who indeed called it “ein einzigartiges Dokument der Frömmigkeit ‘kleiner Leute’”.⁶⁸ Thirdly, an undefined professional *collegium* in Ostia set up a large inscription in or shortly after A.D. 154, in which the future emperor Marcus Aurelius (at that time officially called Aurelius Caesar Augustus) is thrice referred to as *Verissimus Caesar*.⁶⁹ The epithet can also be found in two provincial coin issues, and is used in many late-antique sources,⁷⁰ but for the first time in a surviving literary text by Cassius Dio, who claims that Hadrian used the epithet for the young Marcus. That obviously gives a date before July 138, when the young prince was still in his teens.⁷¹ By 154, when the Ostian inscription was set up, Marcus was no longer a boy, but indeed a designated heir to the throne. The use of the unofficial name *Verissimus*, which may have originated some two decades earlier with Hadrian but never became part of the nomenclature of Marcus as prince or as emperor, is likely as close to spontaneous nicknaming of imperial family members one can hope to get in public inscriptions on stone.

That inscriptions should otherwise be absent from the list of sources (once we uphold the distinctions outlined above in section 3) is at first glance surprising, but from Suetonius and other authors one gets the impression that popular verses which can be expected to have contained epithets and nicknames normally were applied in secrecy and probably appeared overnight,⁷² which means that they were mostly painted or perhaps inscribed on wood or other perishable material; both methods were quick and cheap. This may explain why the epigraphic evidence for nicknames is so meagre.⁷³

⁶⁸ Alföldy 1996, op. cit. (n.63), 27. The epithet *Tonitrator* is, according to the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, once found as an epithet of Jupiter (*CIL* III 2766a). The Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg registers our case as the only epigraphically attested example of *Tonitrator*.

⁶⁹ The text was published by G. Calza, ‘Un documento del culto imperiale in una nuova iscrizione ostiense’, *Epigraphica* 1 (1939), 28-36, with comments on the epithet *Verissimus* on p. 35.

⁷⁰ For a collection of the sources, see *PIR*² A 697.

⁷¹ For the nomenclature and dates of the emperor Marcus, see D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle* (Darmstadt 1996, 2nd ed.), 139.

⁷² As appears from, e.g., Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 80.2-3, Cassius Dio 62(61).16.2^a; see in general Corbier 1987, op. cit. (n.12), 53-56.

⁷³ One might, *a priori*, think that curse tablets could provide us with imperial denigrating epithets. But the issues addressed in the preserved curse tablets are often very down-to-earth: retrieving a stolen piece of clothing, the fortunes of a racehorse, or amorous concerns; see A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris 1904), esp. 431-47 for the individuals occurring in them, and, for recent discoveries, R.S.O. Tomlin, ‘The Curse tablets’, in B. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath II. Finds from the Sacred Spring* (Oxford 1988), 59-277 (index of names on p. 261). Certainly one would never invoke the curse of the gods of the Underworld on another god, i.e. the emperor. (Cf. that Germanicus Caesar was

The survey also shows that nicknames or epithets appear in connection with almost every emperor. The exceptions are Marcus and Septimius Severus, for whom no real nicknames relating to their reign are known, and, above all, Claudius. With his known physical disabilities (ridiculed in the *Apocolocyntosis*), one would have thought that Claudius should have been a perfect target for biting epithets and nicknames — this is how Alföldi explains the many Republican aristocratic cognomina that refer to physical traits⁷⁴ — but in fact we hear of nothing.

The next question that needs to be faced is how accurate our sources are when claiming that a certain emperor was called by a particular nickname or epithet. In most cases, the scarcity of information makes it difficult and almost pointless to engage in a detailed discussion of historical accuracy (which the space in any case would not allow; but see the concluding chapter), and the question of authenticity has not troubled previous scholarship much. One could argue that some of the nicknames and epithets in our list have too much of a literary and intellectual flair for them to have been in popular use (for instance Biberius Caldius Mero, or the mythological nicknames given Nero), but comparative evidence, from seventeenth-century England, supports the common use of this kind of epithets too.⁷⁵

The main task here is to analyze the meaning and establish the emotional content of the names and epithets. A few of them, however, need no particular discussion: some were either inherited or were officially bestowed on a ruler, a fact which is misrepresented in the relevant sources,⁷⁶ while in the case of (Maximinus) Thrax and (Philippus) Arabs we are dealing with epithets/nicknames that seem to have been introduced by authors who postdate the emperors by over a century, each epithet found in only one source.⁷⁷ The bulk of the material can be divided in four groups.⁷⁸ (1)

allegedly the victim of curse tablets in Syria in A.D. 17; see Cassius Dio 57.18.9; Suetonius, *Caligula* 3.3: *devotionibus*. But as a Roman ‘prince’ Germanicus did not have divine status.)

⁷⁴ Cf. n. 19 above.

⁷⁵ See Cust 1986, op. cit. (n.3), 66–69.

⁷⁶ *Pius*, for the emperor Antoninus, *Pertinax*, for Pertinax and Septimius Severus, and *Severus*, for Severus Alexander are such cases; see Kienast 1996, op. cit. (n.71), 134; 152; 156; 177. See also Suetonius, *Tiberius* 17, which records suggestions by various senators that Tiberius be given the *cognomina Pannonicus, Invictus*, and *Pius*. This happened before he was emperor, and Augustus vetoed the proposal.

⁷⁷ The references to foreign ethnicities are surely meant to be unflattering. It is noteworthy that these single mentions have succeeded in influencing the way in which these emperors are commonly referred to in modern times.

⁷⁸ In addition, the interpretation of some nicknames and epithets is debated, and the restricted space does not permit a full review. For Valerianus *Colobius* see most recently A.R. Birley, ‘Fiction in the Epitome?’,

laudatory nicknames, (2) names apparently neutral, (3) names containing relatively mild criticism of some kind, and, finally, (4) highly derogatory nicknames.

(1) A fair number of nicknames or epithets have a flattering meaning, and some of these have a similar origin: the wish of the emperor to be called by particular nicknames or epithets.⁷⁹ This is told of Gaius,⁸⁰ Domitian, Commodus, and Caracalla. In addition, it seems that the positive epithets attributed to Nero and Commodus by the senate were not sincere but due to pressure. We have here, surely not by coincidence, a list of some of the very worst emperors our sources know. One gets the impression that only 'bad emperors' felt the need to influence the way their subjects addressed them, either because only tyrants anticipated that, unless they dictated what they should be called, pejorative nicknames would mark them, or because it was a sign of a 'bad' ruler to limit the freedom of his subjects to choose spontaneously whatever informal address they wanted to use.⁸¹ Several of these appellatives claim divine or semi-divine status for the emperor, which always was a contentious issue that the senatorial order found difficult to stomach.⁸² Viewed in this light, the series of positive allegedly self-imposed appellatives makes one wonder whether we might not after all, at least occasionally, be dealing with literary conventions; this question will be discussed below.

Among the positive nicknames and epithets there are however also several which according to the sources have an origin with the people of Rome, the Senate, or military units. In chronological order, *Augustus* and *pater patriae* for Octavian have been included, since he was the first emperor

G. Bonamente & M. Mayer, eds., *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Barcinonense 1993* (Bari 1996), 67-82, esp. 72 f. with previous suggestions. For Probus *Equitius* see B. Bleckmann, *Die Reichskrise des III. Jahrhunderts in der spätantiken und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung. Untersuchungen zu den nachdionischen Quellen der Chronik des Johannes Zonaras* (München 1992), 235 n. 66.

⁷⁹ In the following discussions, the additional information adduced is drawn from the passage that provides the name, unless otherwise indicated.

⁸⁰ The interpretation of *Latiarius Iuppiter* has caused some debate. Some scholars think that criticism of Gaius may have been implied, see D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula. A Commentary* (Coll. Latomus 225, Bruxelles 1994), 210 f.; D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' 'Life of C. Caligula'* (Atlanta 1993), 87 f.; C.J. Simpson, 'The Cult of the Emperor Gaius', *Latomus* 40 (1981) 489-511, esp. 498.

⁸¹ Good emperors endured jests and criticisms, see A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King', *Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982), 32-48, esp. 39 with some references; one might add, e.g., Seneca, *De constantia sapientis* 19.1-2, Suetonius, *Vespasianus* 20, and Cassius Dio 52.31.5-8 (the Speech of Maecenas).

⁸² Cf. however the divergent notice in Cassius Dio 78(77).5.1 that Caracalla did not want to be named after Herakles or any other god. Jupiter Latiaris for Gaius is not necessarily a compliment; see n. 80 above.

to be so addressed by the *plebs* and the Senate. Philo, who was only a visitor in Rome, relates positive epithets for Augustus and Tiberius (without indicating the origin). Gaius was given many pet names by the people early in his reign; later, the choirs were chanting mythologically inspired appellatives. The controversial Nero was praised as *Paeon* in popular verses, and the people of Rome and his soldiers invented a series of flattering epithets and nicknames. There are other positive epithets bestowed by military units: Otho was called *Nero* and ‘father’ by his troops, while Didius Julianus was called *Commodus* by his army — all complimentary addresses — as was the appellative ‘the new Alexander’ given to Pescennius Niger, likewise by the soldiers.

For the great general Trajan no military nickname is recorded, while his unofficial distinction *Optimus* (no real nickname) eventually became part of his official titulature.⁸³ The emperor Antoninus acquired the cognomen *Pius* early in his reign; the procedure is unknown. *Verissimus* was used for Marcus while he was emperor designate, as seen in the guild inscription discussed above. No nickname is known for Septimius Severus, while Caracalla was hailed as *Tonitrator Augustus* ‘who had descended from heaven’ by a guild in Rome. The name *Marcellus* is said in a late source to have been used as an appellative for Severus Alexander, which, if true, ought to be positively interpreted.⁸⁴ Gordianus I was given the complimentary epithet *Africanus* by a crowd in Thysdrus.

(2) The next group to analyze consists of seemingly neutral nicknames and epithets. Since there can, by definition, not be any neutral nicknames — the fact that a nickname or a special epithet is employed testifies to a particular relation between the person named and the user of the name — there is obviously more than one level of meaning to consider in this group.

Among nicknames neutral in appearance we find *Thurinus* for Augustus ‘someone who originates from Thurii’ (or ‘someone who has achieved a victory at Thurii’, referring to his father⁸⁵), and *Ahenobarbus* for Nero (literally ‘Bronzebeard’, but it was an old cognomen in the family of his father). Both these names were however used by political enemies as invectives (namely by Marcus Antonius and Julius Vindex, respectively), for they could be taken to indicate a common or non-imperial background.⁸⁶

⁸³ For *Optimus*, see above n. 24.

⁸⁴ This looks like a reference to the Republican Claudii Marcelli, among whom one for instance thinks of Claudius Marcellus ‘the sword of Rome’ in the Second Punic War (Plutarchos, *Fabius Maximus* 19).

⁸⁵ Suetonius gives both explanations.

⁸⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus* 2.3 stresses that Marcus Antonius taunted Augustus for having a Thurian origin.

Caligula and *Caracalla/Caracallus* belong in this group too, as does the cognomen *Bassianus* used for Caracalla. The use of *Bassianus* is similar to that of *Thurinus*: Cassius Dio mentions the name, which he implies was in common use, in order to point at the non-imperial origin of Caracalla.

It is interesting to note that the names *Caligula* and *Caracalla*, together with *Heliogabalus* (an invective; see below), are imperial nicknames that became permanent. They were apparently used during the ruler's life (at least in some contexts), they appeared in literary texts soon after, and these names have ever since been in common use when referring to the respective emperor. In origin, *Caligula* was certainly intended rather as a 'term of endearment', as it originated as a nickname used by the soldiers for the son of their commander, a practice which his ambitious mother apparently encouraged. There seems to have been a similar situation in the creation of the nickname *Caracalla/us*, as it appears among the soldiers and refers to a piece of clothing that the emperor wore and dressed his soldiers in.⁸⁷ However, Cassius Dio also indicates that *Caracallus* was used outside the army, and he mentions it in the same context as *Bassianus* and *Tarautas* (a pejorative nickname). In any case, these two semantically neutral names, which originally constituted a bond between the rulers and their soldiers,⁸⁸ were taken up by the later hostile (literary) tradition and were even, one could add, singled out as especially fitting denigratory nicknames. Neither nickname had a dignified ring to it, and in the eyes of the aristocracy it must have been particularly damaging for an emperor's reputation that he had debased himself in this way, courting the favour of the commoners (or the soldiers). From here arose both the necessity and the opportunity to 'turn' the value of these names. It is interesting that Gaius himself, according to Seneca, was sensitive to being called *Caligula* to his face by a centurion once he had become emperor (nor did he like being addressed as *Gaius*); surely for the same reason he did not appreciate the hypochoristic 'young Augustus'.⁸⁹ Augustus

The name *Thurinus* has caused much discussion, see recently Kienast 1999, op. cit. (n.37), 9 f. with further references. On *Ahenobarbus*, cf. K.R. Bradley, *Suetonius' 'Life of Nero': An Historical Commentary* (Coll. Latomus 157, Bruxelles 1978), 253. Note that according to Petrus Patricius (Cassius Dio 63.23.2 Boiss. = Excerpta Vaticana 76, p. 215 Mai = p. 197 Dind.) Julius Vindex used the name *Domitius* when speaking about the emperor.

⁸⁷ Cf. that in SHA, *Diadumenianus* 2.8 the author has Macrinus make the joke that his son Diadumenianus ought to be called *Paenuleus* or *Paenularius* for having given out *paenulae* to the soldiers.

⁸⁸ In the same way as the appellative 'fellow soldier, comrade', which Caracalla according to Herodian wanted his soldiers to use.

⁸⁹ Note that according to Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 19.33 one *Pompedius* (probably *Pomponius*) was accused of applying opprobrious epithets to Gaius.

reacted negatively to being called ‘boy’, but that epithet was indeed meant to be denigrating.

(3) Nicknames or epithets that contain an overt but rather mild criticism make up a third group. Three nicknames for Tiberius, *Biberius* *Caldius Mero*, are witty and satirical — *ob vinolentiam* — while *Callipedes* is ironical (the emperor was criticized for being slow). *Caprineus* is of course a *double entendre*, referring both to Tiberius’ dwelling on Capri and to activities that Suetonius describes in some detail (cf. Suetonius, *Tiberius* 45). Gaius is said to have been called ‘big humbug’ by a Gallic shoemaker he happened to meet, while the nickname *herba parietina* is meant as a rebuke for Trajan (coined several centuries later, it seems), since he allegedly inscribed his name on the buildings erected by others. Even for the inoffensive Antoninus Pius a nickname containing some criticism is recorded, ‘Cumminsplitter’, from being a stickler for detailed investigations (given by those whose affairs were not in order, of course). Also *Graeculus* for Hadrian⁹⁰ and *Chrestologus* (sweet-talker; smooth-tongued)⁹¹ for Helvius Pertinax are nicknames intended to convey a certain amount of criticism.

(4) Lastly, we have nicknames that clearly are invectives. Augustus was called *Apollo Tormentor* by the people in Rome in occasion of a food shortage, the epithet ‘bloodstained mud’ is recorded for Tiberius, without context. Nero was given the epithet ‘murderer of his mother’ in a popular verse in Rome (referring to the death of Agrippina), and the rebel Julius Vindex is said to have expanded on the theme, as well as labelling him a ‘bad musician’. The warrior queen Boudicca used a nickname for Nero implying femininity. Not surprisingly, we hear of pejorative nicknames used by enemy soldiers for Galba and, later, for Severus Alexander. Vespasian suffered the insult of being called *Cybiosactes* by the people of Alexandria, apparently because of his stinginess. The Alexandrians here used a pejorative nickname which they had previously given to a shortlived but much despised king of theirs who died in 56 B.C.⁹² Domitian appears as *calvus Nero* in Ausonius,⁹³ but this epithet, which is mentioned by many authors, may merely be a

⁹⁰ On the pejorative meaning, see M. Dubuisson, ‘*Graecus, graeculus, graecari*: l’emploi pejoratif du nom des grecs en latin’, S. Said (ed.), *ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΣ. Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l’identité grecque* (Leiden 1991), 315–335, esp. 322–329.

⁹¹ The nickname is also mentioned by the SHA, *Pertinax* 13.5, where it is explained as *qui bene loqueretur et male faceret*; it was used by *cives sui* ... *qui nihil de eo meruerant* (13.6).

⁹² See *RE* IIA.1 (1921) 1246 s.v. “Seleukos no. 11” (Stähelin); cf. Strabo 17.1.11 (17.796).

⁹³ For the negative connotation of baldness in antiquity, see C. Deroux, ‘De la calvitie de Domitien à la cheveleure d’Alexandre: propositions sur Juvénal, *Sat.*, IV, 37–38’ in J.M. Croiselle (ed.), *Neronia* IV. *Alejandro Magno, modelo de los emperadores romanos* (Coll. Latomus 209, Bruxelles 1990), 277–288.

literary 'Schimpfwort'.

The death of Commodus gave, according to Cassius Dio, rise to a veritable flood of hostile epithets used by the people of Rome. Didius Julianus was hailed by the people of the capital as a 'stealer of the empire' and a 'parricide'. For the older son of Septimius Severus, many nicknames are mentioned. Besides *Bassianus* and *Caracalla/us* discussed above, our primary source Cassius Dio (whose text for the relevant years is preserved only in later excerpts, but one doubts that this would have influenced the use of nicknames in the text)⁹⁴ is particularly fond of the pejorative nickname *Tarautas*, used by the people of Rome, "from the nickname of a gladiator who was most insignificant and ugly in appearance and most reckless and bloodthirsty in spirit" (79(78).9.3).⁹⁵ Although all of this part of Dio's text was written after Caracalla's death,⁹⁶ it is probably significant that only after having recorded the death of the emperor, does Dio introduce a series of more or less pejorative nicknames. From book 79(78).9.3 onwards, he then alternates the nicknames *Tarautas* and *Caracallus* in quite a systematic way when referring to the dead emperor.⁹⁷

In addition we encounter the pejorative nickname 'the Ausonian beast', which according to Dio was used by the people of Pergamon. The context is not very clear. Dio claims that Caracalla was pleased by the nickname, but yet he seems to have executed many people in connection with the visits during which the nickname was given him. In any case, Dio seems to be referring to a real historical event.

The most extensive series of vicious nicknames and commonly used epithets relates to Varius Avitus, later M. Aurelius Antoninus, who of course is much better known as *Heliogabalus*.⁹⁸ In addition Cassius Dio mentions and himself uses *Sardanapallos* and *Assyrios* (both hinting at immoral

⁹⁴ See above n. 66.

⁹⁵ Translation by E. Cary (LCL).

⁹⁶ On the time of composition of Dio's work, see Millar 1964, op. cit. (n.67), 119-122; M.G. Schmidt, 'Die zeitgeschichtlichen Bücher im Werke des Cassius Dio — von Commodus bis Severus Alexander', *ANRW* II 34.3 (1997), 2591-2649, esp. 2598-2601 and 2618-2625.

⁹⁷ *Tarautas* 10.3; 11.4; *Caracallus* 12.2; 12.4; *Tarautas* 12.6; *Caracallus* 13.2; *Tarautas* 13.4; *Caracallus* 14.1; 15.1; *Tarautas* 15.2; *Caracallus* 16.2; *Tarautas* 17.2; 17.3 (twice), 18.3; 18.4; 18.5; 19.2; *Caracallus* 19.3; *Tarautas* 21.1, and so on.

⁹⁸ That pejorative nickname is not found in any source before the late fourth century. In addition to the references above there is the *Historia Augusta*, who calls the emperor Antoninus or Varius *Heliogabalus*. It may have been a contemporary sobriquet; see G.W. Bowersock, 'Herodian and Elagabalus', *Yale Classical Studies* 24 (1975), 229-36, esp. 233: "It is not impossible, however, that Marius Maximus [the third-century imperial biographer] ... recorded a vulgar usage and provided the foundation for the universal appellation from the fourth century to the present".

behaviour by the emperor), and *Pseudantoninos*, which labels the ruler as an impostor and an unworthy holder of the imperial purple.⁹⁹ Dio also cites *Tiberinus*, and he is echoed by the much later *Epitome de Caesaribus* which adds the nickname *Tractitius*. Both nicknames are said to be popular mocking sobriquets deriving from the fact that the body of the emperor was dragged through the streets and the sewers (*trahere*, *tractus*) and thrown into the Tiber. These two nicknames, then, were undeniably not in use during the emperor's life.¹⁰⁰

The reputation of immorality that lingered over the emperor Heliogabalus is interestingly enough confirmed by two denigrating epithets in an Egyptian papyrus, dated half a century after the emperor's death. The same theme is pursued also in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*, as the philosopher Aelian uses the nickname *Gynnis* ('womanish man') for the emperor.¹⁰¹

Conclusions

The passage from the *Lives of the Sophists* presenting a pejorative nickname for Heliogabalus brings us back to the question of contemporaneity, for Philostratus' comment to Aelian is "I should admire you for it [the invective against Gynnis], if you had indicted him while he was alive". He goes on to say that "while it takes a real man to curb a living tyrant, anyone can trample on him when he is down."¹⁰²

Of the literary sources presenting nicknames and epithets given by the Senate, the people or the soldiers, practically none was composed during the reign of the respective emperor.¹⁰³ But several authors experienced the times they later wrote about, for instance Philo, Seneca, Tacitus, and above all Cassius Dio, who is our most prolific source and was an eyewitness to the

⁹⁹ Dio alternates the use of *Sardanapallos* and *Pseudantoninos*, much as he did with *Caracallus* and *Tarautas* for Caracalla.

¹⁰⁰ On the historical context, see G. Alföldy, 'Zwei Schimpfnamen des Kaisers Elagabal. Tiberinus und Tractatitius', *Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium 1972-1974* (Bonn 1976), 11-21 (= idem, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches. Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbetrachtung. Ausgewählte Beiträge* (Stuttgart 1989), 217-228). The late-antique *Historia Augusta* also mentions the episode and gives the nicknames as *Tiberinus* and *Tractatitius* (*Antoninus Heliogabalus* 17.5). Alföldy 1996, op. cit. (n.63), 17 f. (223 f.) believes the difference to be significant and suggests that *Tractatitius* was the original nickname, which derived from the emperor's sexual habits. Considering the propensity of the author of the *Historia Augusta* for fiction and puns, it seems more likely that the *Historia Augusta*-version is an invention.

¹⁰¹ I wish to thank François Chausson for drawing my attention to this passage. Gynnis was an epithet of Dionysos, see *RE* VII.2 (1912) 2092 s.v. Gynnis.

¹⁰² Philostratos, *Vita sophistarum* 625, translation W.C. Wright (LCL).

¹⁰³ Pliny's *Panegyricus* is an exception that does not change the overall picture.

reigns of Commodus, Caracalla, and Heliogabalus, although he wrote and published his accounts of these reigns only after the death of the respective rulers (above n. 95). The decisive question is of course whether the use of these appellatives was contemporary with the rulers singled out in this way. Scholars largely tend to believe this, and in general this investigation has not found grounds for challenging the consensus. A different matter again is what if any nicknames were used in face-to-face situations. Besides mass scenes, which of course provided shelter for the individual participants, very few such situations are described: we find that Gaius did not tolerate his nickname *Caligula*, while the emperor Vespasian suffered with equanimity being addressed as simply *Vespasianus*, without imperial titles.

Having established the unusual proliferation of nicknames and appellatives recorded for Commodus, Caracalla, and Heliogabalus as recorded by Dio, we ought, however, to ponder the reasons for this. Are the many nicknames and epithets, mostly pejorative (except when self-invented by the emperors or patently insincere), due to: 1) the fact that Cassius Dio being personally involved in the events was aware of more nicknames than most ancient historians normally were, or 2) to the fact that Cassius Dio was particularly hostile to these three emperors and took special care to collect (or invent?) pejorative epithets and nicknames, or 3) to the fact that these three emperors were in fact more despised and hated by their subjects than other emperors?

If we could be certain that the third and last option is the right answer (and the same question could be posed for all the other authors who have recorded nicknames), the importance of nicknames and popular epithets for determining the popularity of individual Roman emperors would be of major importance. But we cannot exclude that the first or second explanation are at least partly relevant.

Overall, what we have found in the material presented above ‘makes sense’. When their subjects did not act under coercion, emperors were given negative epithets by groups and individuals whom they had antagonized, not to mention usurpers or rebels, while positive nicknames were given for good reasons. That the popular appeal of individual rulers as it appears in the nicknames and epithets used by the common people does not differ from the general perceptions in modern scholarship is not surprising; after all, existing scholarly views on the popularity of individual rulers normally include nicknames and appellatives among the sources. But as shown by the two inscriptions for the young Marcus and Caracalla, something of a ‘loyalist middle class’ attitude occasionally comes more into focus.

The reactions of the emperors are also of interest. It is noteworthy that there is no impact on the nomenclature of the emperors from (nick)names given by anyone but the Senate. This is true even of *Caligula*, which in origin was an affectionate surname. No ruler ever adopted a non-flattering nickname, as Caesar of course did not become Gaius Iulius *Calvus* even though his soldiers called him so, as we saw above. There is a corollary here that relates to the development of the aristocratic cognomina of the Roman Republic, but that is another story.¹⁰⁴ Roman emperors who today are known under a nickname or epithet that originated away from the court owe this fact to later authors.

Toronto, January 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. above n. 19.