THE IMPERIAL ART OF DYING

By
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Becoming a Roman emperor was no fun. Statistics show that the new ruler had a much greater chance of dying from violence than from disease or old age. Out of 80 emperors whose death cause is more or less certain, no more than 29 died of natural causes. Out of the other 51, 38 were murdered or executed, seven fell on the battle field, two of them fighting foreign enemies (Decius and Iulianus), whilst the other five were killed during a civil war. Five emperors committed suicide. Finally one Augustus, Theodosius II, had a fatal accident: he fell from his horse and broke his neck.

Of course there were highs and lows, but only during the heyday of the Empire in the second century CE, in Gibbon's words the period "during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous",¹ did the number of emperors who died in bed surpass those whose met a *mors immatura*. This happy condition repeated itself much later, during the twilight of the Empire in the West. The most risky period was the third century CE when only three rulers met a natural death.

The Appendix at the end of this paper lists the ends of the Augusti mentioning only the emperors who were more or less recognised as legitimate rulers. The figure of 80 rulers whose cause of death is known, is based on a recent Dutch monograph by F. Meijer that deals with the final moments of 86 'official' emperors.² If all the pretenders and counter-emperors were to be included, the picture would become even gloomier. Recently, a young German scholar, Tobias Arand, has published his dissertation, in which he deals with the picture, which ancient authors present of the death of all the bad emperors. As he discusses all pretenders as well, his number is considerably higher: 171 (would-be) rulers.³ In many ways, the present paper is a counterpart to his extensive study, but as saints

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York no year), 70, chapter 3 towards the end in the complete edition published in The Modern Library.

² Fik Meijer, *Keizers sterven niet in bed. Van Caesar tot Romulus Augustulus* (Amsterdam 2001) (Emperors do not die in bed, from Caesar to Romulus Augustulus), in which the author summarises the lives of 86 emperors, highlighting the events surrounding the end of these Caesars.

³ Tobias Arand, *Das schmachliche Ende. Der Tod des schlechten Kaisers und seine literarische Gestaltung in der römischen Historiographie* (Frankfurt a.M. 2002) 57. All evil emperors are mentioned from page 62 onwards, with the negative sources.

are scarcer than sinners, the available material on good emperors is much easier to process.

Apart from Arand's dissertation and Meijer's book, which just offers summary descriptions, a serious comparative study on the death of emperors does not exist. *Imperial Exits* by 'Julius Cicatrix', a pseudonym of a classical scholar, and the cartoonist Martin Rowson, claims to be "a hilariously horrid history lesson",⁴ but it is no more than a failed attempt to be funny. Of course, the death of specific rulers is discussed in modern imperial biographies. There are quite a few papers on the death of individual rulers, which implicitly or explicitly make comparisons.⁵ Finally, imperial exits are sometimes discussed in studies on ancient death.⁶

Arand's general conclusion is as predictable as mine: a bad emperor usually has an infamous death, whereas a ruler of good fame meets a fine end. What, however, constitutes a good death? In this context, the question of the veracity of a specific imperial exit is of little significance, as we will never know "wie es eigentlich gewesen". This situation is not due to the fragmentary state of the sources. Actually, the death of the emperors receives considerable attention in ancient historiography. In general, more than in modern times, the way of dying was regarded as the crown or the disgrace of one's life. One only has to think of Solon's conversation with Croesus to be aware of the great value the ancient world attached to a worthy exit.⁷

In the case of emperors, it is clear that the picture of their death was adapted to their reputation. The demonisation of the evil emperor has its

⁴ Text on the cover; Julius Cicatrix & Martin Rowson, *Imperial Exits* (London 1995; New York 1996).

⁵ Johannes Straub, 'Die ultima verba des Septimus Severus', *Bonner-Historia-Augusta-Colloquium* 2 (1964), 171 ff.; Dominique Conduché, 'Ammianus Marcellinus und der Tod des Julian' (1965), in: R. Klein, ed., *Julian Apostata* (Darmstadt 1978), 355-380; Gunther Sceda, 'Die Todesstunde Kaiser Julians', *Historia* 15 (1966), 380-383; Barry Baldwin, 'Hadrian's farewell to life. Some arguments for authenticity', *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970), 372-374; Herbert Bannert, 'Der Tod des Kaisers Marcus' in: *Latinität und alte Kirche. Festschrift für Rudolf Hanslik zum 70. Geburtstag* (Vienna & Graz 1977), 9-19; Barry Baldwin, 'Hadrian's death in the Historia Augusta', *Gymnasium* 90 (1983), 546; Udo Frings, 'Neros Tod. Sueton, Nero 47-49', *Anregung. Zeitschrift für Gymnasialpädagogik* 31(1985), 229-238; Geza Alföldy, 'Herodian über den Tod Mark Aurels', in: G. Alföldy, ed., *Die Krise des Römischen Reiches* (Stuttgart 1989), 14-24; Anthony R. Birley, 'Hadrian's farewell to life', *Laverna* 5 (1994), 176-205; Charles Leslie Murison, 'The Death of Titus: A Reconsideration', *The Ancient History Bulletin* 9,3/4 (1995), 135-142.

⁶ Willibald Schmidt, *De ultimis morientium verbis* (Marburg 1914); Peter Schunck, *Römisches Sterben. Studien zu Sterbeszenen in der kaiserzeitlichen Literatur, insbesondere bei Tacitus* (Heidelberg 1955); Werner Portmann, 'Antike: Sterben/Tod', in: P. Dinzelbacher, ed., *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte. Hauptthemen in Einzeldarstellungen* (Stuttgart 1993), 231-244.

⁷ Herodotus 1.30; see my forthcoming article 'Ancient Euthanasia 'Good Death' and The Doctor in the Graeco-Roman World' in *Social Science and Medicine*.

counterpart in the beatification of the virtuous ruler in his final act. The phrase ‘final act’ is purposely chosen to convey the notion that the life of any prince is one continuous show. Even in the last remaining monarchies of the modern world, one can observe that royals are permanently putting on a performance. Since even the contemporary can never be sure ‘how he or she really is’, the authenticity of the ancient reports on Roman emperors and their death is even more unreliable.

On the other hand, there is and was a firmly established scenario for playing the ruler. It is, therefore, highly probable that emperors, especially those who were much concerned about their reputation, ‘staged’ their own death. In this respect, many an emperor could have made Nero’s last words his own : “Qualis artifex pereo”.⁸ Actually, already the first *princeps* demonstrated that he was aware that being an emperor was one great act:

“On the last day of his life he asked every now and then whether there was any disturbance on his account; then calling for a mirror, he had his hair combed and his falling jaws set straight. After that, calling in his friends and asking whether it seemed to them that he had played the comedy of life fitly, he added the tag: ‘Since well I’ve played my part, all clap your hands and from the stage dismiss me with applause.’”⁹

Augustus, who set the stage for proper imperial behaviour, was also a model in the art of imperial dying. Up to the end, he showed his concern for the commonwealth, by asking whether there were any troubles, and he also cared for the well-being of his family, being worried about the health of Drusus’ daughter. Next, he cared for his personal decorum by combing his hair and making sure that his corpse would not offer the unpleasant sight of an open mouth. Augustus did not die in solitude. His friends were with him and he gave up the ghost in the arms of his most trusted companion Livia.

Augustus’ death was not painful, he got an *exitus facilis* just as he had wished for: “For almost always on hearing that anyone had died swiftly and painlessly, he prayed that he might have a like *euthanasia*, for that was the term he was wont to use.” (Suetonius, *Augustus* 99.2). The use of the Greek word *euthanasia* for a gentle, rapid death is quite uncommon. Cicero

⁸ Suetonius, *Nero* 49.1.

⁹ Augustus quoted here in Greek a clause from comedy. See Suetonius, *Augustus* 99.1, as translated in the Loeb edition by J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA & London 1920).

still used it in the current meaning of a noble death. In the chaotic situation after the murder of Caesar on March 15th 44 BCE he had left Rome on the advice of Atticus. This same close friend urged him only a few months later to come back. Cicero was surprised about this change of mind and showed some irritation over Atticus' arguments: "What did astonish me beyond measure was that you should use the words: "A fine thing for you, who talk of a noble death (*euthanasia*), a fine thing indeed. Go desert your country."¹⁰

Finally, in the description of Augustus' model death, it is stressed that he hardly lost contact with reality. The one sign of wandering before he breathed his last breath was that he called "out in sudden terror that forty young men were carrying him off. And even this was rather a premonition than a delusion, since it was that very number of soldiers of the praetorian guard that carried him forth to lie in state," so Suetonius (*Augustus* 99.2) plays down the weakening of Augustus' mind.

These topics recur in the descriptions of the death of respected emperors. As the degree of self-determination is an essential element in staging the imperial decease, we will explore the various arts of dying in a sequence that starts with involuntary, sudden death by murder (and one accidental end). Next, we will discuss imperial ends on the battlefield, then natural death, and finally the cases of *mors voluntaria*, in which the will promises to play a major part.

Making the best of murder

In principle, being murdered is a fate that befitted tyrants such as Caligula and Domitian. The '*optimus princeps*' even exhorted his praetorian prefect not to hesitate if he would turn out to be an evil ruler. When handing over the ceremonial dagger to Suburanus, Trajan said: "To you this I entrust to my protection, if I act rightly; if not, rather against me."¹¹

In his study on the death of evil emperors, Arand gives numerous ghastly details of the end, which rogue rulers met. As the script of a murder case is dictated by the enemy, the room for staging is very limited, but the emperor of good fame can try to make the best of it.

What he cannot choose, of course, is the place. It added to Caracalla's disrepute that he was killed when he had withdrawn to urinate, whereas Heliogabalus was finished off at the common lavatory. Caesar, on

¹⁰ Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 16.7.3.

¹¹ Aurelius Victor, *Caesares* 13.9: Tibi istum ad munimentum mei committo, si recte agam; sin aliter, in me magis.

the contrary, enjoyed a proper setting for his last moments being murdered in the senate. He also preserved his dignity by accepting death when it was inevitable and taking care of decorum, as Augustus did later. Caesar put the slip of his toga over his head and covered his legs. Similar care for a decent appearance after death is shown by Pertinax (ruled 31 December 192 - 28 March 193):

“After they had burst into the inner portion of the Palace, however, Pertinax advanced to meet them and sought to appease them with a long and serious speech. In spite of this, one Tausius, a Tungrian, after haranguing the soldiers into a state of fury and fear, hurled his spear at Pertinax’ breast. And he, after a prayer to Jupiter the Avenger, veiled his head with his toga and was stabbed by the rest.”¹²

In this case, as well as with Caesar, death came rapidly by stabbing. Emperors of bad fame like Caligula have a slow and gruesome end. First Cassius Chaerea gave him a swing with his sword and split his jaw. According to some he did so intentionally to make the tyrant die a slow death. When Caligula tried to escape he was caught by Cornelius Sabinus who made him stumble. Then the other conspirators came running on. They stabbed like savages and did not stop when he was dead; some even attacked him with their teeth. (Suetonius, *Caius Caligula* 58.3). The brutal end that took some time befitted a brute. Pupienus and Balbinus also underwent a slow killing.

Bodies of evil emperors were disgraced by mutilation. The corpse of Numerianus, who was murdered, was transported for quite a time in a chariot until the stench became intolerable. On the contrary, Caesar’s body is described as being well preserved.

Finally, a murdered Caesar can save his face by speaking some fine last words. Pertinax may not have equalled Caesar’s “*Tu quoque, Brute*”, but he shows proper resignation in the face of death. Herodian tells:

“So he left his room and faced the soldiers. He tried to find out why they had made the attack and to persuade them not to be

¹² *SHA, Pertinax* 11, as translated by David Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* I (Cambridge, MA & London 1921), 339.

carried away by their passions. Even then he kept his moderate, noble expression and his appearance of imperial dignity (μένων και τότε ἐν σώφρονι και σεμνῷ σχήματι και τηρῶν τὸ τοῦ βασιλέως ἀξίωμα) by showing no sign that he was afraid or flinching from the danger, or that he was begging for mercy. 'My death,' he said, 'at your hands is of no great consequence; I am an old man and have lived a long and distinguished life. Every man's life must come to an end sometime.'¹³

So although in general murder does not constitute a fine show, a few rulers manage to make the best of the role enforced upon them.

Not too unlucky Accident

The only case of an emperor meeting death by accident is Theodosius II. He died in consequence of a fall from his horse, breaking his back or neck, after a reign of 42 years. His death is not depicted as very miserable or shameful as he was able to appoint his successor Marcianus on his deathbed.

Falling on the good side

For the assessment of imperial death on the battlefield, it is essential whether a ruler died fighting foreign enemies or defeated by another victorious claimant to the throne. In the latter case, it is the death of a loser who deserves no better than a shameful death. There are two cases of emperors who died during a campaign against foreign enemies. No details are reported on Decius' end during the battle with the Goths in 251. His body was never recovered.

On the other hand, the pagan saint Julian died as a hero and a philosopher according to the sympathetic version of Ammianus Marcellinus. Seriously wounded, he was brought to his tent, where he demonstrated the power of his spirit by exhorting his disconsolate and sorrowful companions: "Most opportunely, friends, has the time now come for me to leave life (*advenit, o socii, nunc abeundi tempus e vita inpendio tempestivum*) [...]." Julian is proud to die from the blow of a sword: "I thank the eternal power that I meet my end, not from secret plots, not from the pain of a tedious illness, nor by the fate of a criminal, but that in the mid-career of glorious renown I have been found worthy of so noble a departure from this world." He therefore accepts his fate with joy ("*gaudens abeo*"). Wishing to distribute his goods

¹³ Herodianus 2.5.5-6, as translated by C.R. Whittaker (Cambridge, MA & London 1969).

among his friends he discovers that his *magister officiorum* Anatolius had been killed “and he who recently with such courage had been indifferent to his own fate, grieved deeply over that of a friend.” He comforts his weeping friends, as another Socrates and when all are silent, he engages with the philosophers Maximus and Priscus in an intricate discussion about the nobility of the soul. Death came suddenly and without pain, almost like the *exitus facilis* or *euthanasia* Augustus had not in vain longed for: “*vita facilius est absolutus*”.¹⁴ Julian’s end demonstrates valiant and philosophical contempt of death, shared with a company of close friends.

Natural death in equanimity

Generally, virtuous emperors die in bed at an advanced age. Antoninus Pius was such a blessed ruler who got a *mors matura*. He was 70 years of age when he quite unexpectedly died from eating too much Alpine cheese.

“On the second day, as he saw that his condition was becoming worse, in the presence of his prefects he committed the state and his daughter to Marcus Antoninus, and gave order that the golden statue of Fortune, which was wont to stand in the bed-chamber of the emperor, be given to him. Then he gave the watchword to the officer of the day as “Equanimity,” and so, turning as if to sleep, gave up the ghost at Lorium. While he was delirious with fever, he spoke of nothing save the state and certain kings with whom he was angry. To his daughter he left his private fortune, and in his will he remembered all his household with suitable legacies.”¹⁵

Once more we find the familiar topics of an emperor who dies at a respected place – in this case the imperial villa at Lorium – who takes care of his family and the state and who hardly is *alienatae mentis*.¹⁶ The watchword that Antoninus Pius gave characterises the state of mind with which a good emperor meets his end: equanimity. Antoninus Pius’ death was as placid as his person was reputed to be.

¹⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus 25.3, as translated by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA & London 1940).

¹⁵ *SHA, Antoninus Pius* 12, as translated by David Magie *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* I (Cambridge, MA & London 1921), 131.

¹⁶ *alienatus in febris nihil aliud quam de re publica et de his regibus, quibus irascebatur, loquutus est.*

In his own way, Vespasian, who also died at an advanced age (69), remained true to himself by making jokes up to the end: “Woe’s me. Methinks I’m turning into a god.”¹⁷ In addition, he had the good luck of dying at a familiar place, his estate near Reate, where he spent the summer every year. Although he suffered from problems with his intestines, ascribed to a “too free use of the cold waters, he nevertheless continued to perform his duties as emperor, even receiving embassies as he lay in bed. Taken on a sudden with such an attack of diarrhoea that he all but swooned, he said: ‘a commander ought to die standing’, and while he was struggling to get on his feet, he died in the arms of those who tried to help him, on the ninth day before the Calends of July, at the age of sixty-nine years, one month and seven days.”¹⁸ Even in his last posture, Vespasian tried to preserve his dignity.

In the days of the emperor Marcus Aurelius the imperial code of behaviour was fully developed. In his *To myself* he shows awareness of the behaviour expected of a ruler and the danger that threatened his attempts to remain true to his philosophical self.¹⁹ He reminds himself that death is just natural phenomenon that one has to accept “rationally and with dignity”. Personal judgement should lead to this acceptance and not to “mere obstinacy as the Christians”. The end should not be a dramatic show.²⁰

According to the death report, Marcus stuck to his own scenario. When he grew ill he first discussed with his son the affairs of state. “Then, being eager to die, he refrained from eating and drinking, and so aggravated the disease.” This abstention looks like what Latin calls *inedia* and Greek *apokarteria*, a familiar and respected way of putting an end to one’s life, especially practised by those in old age. Among them, refraining from food is the most frequently reported method.²¹ He communicates with friends his scorn of death and has talks with his son, whom he only sends away from

¹⁷ Suetonius, *Vespasianus* 23.4 : ac ne in metu quidem ac periculo mortis extremo abstinuit iocis. [...] prima quoque morbi accessione: “uae,” inquit, “puto deus fio.”

¹⁸ Suetonius, *Vespasianus* 24.

¹⁹ “Take care that thou art not made into a Caesar, that thou art not dyed with this dye (Ὁρα μὴ ἀποκαίσαρῶθῃς, μὴ βαφῆς); for such things happen. Keep thyself then simple, good, pure, serious, free from affectation, a friend of justice, a worshipper of the gods, kind, affectionate, strenuous in all proper acts” (*Ta eis heauton* 6.30, as translated by George Long, *The Meditations by Marcus Aurelius* (New York 1909–1914 [first published in 1862])).

²⁰ *Ta eis heauton* 11.3.

²¹ See my *From Authanasia to Suicide. Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London/New York 1990), 38–39 and graph on page 35.

fear that he might catch the disease. Then “he covered his head as though he wished to sleep and during the night he breathed his last”.²²

The rare case of a third century emperor who died naturally is Claudius Gothicus, who is hailed as an amalgam of Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Augustus.²³ However, his death from a disease is reported with too few details to admit any analysis: “Now when the war with the Goths was finished, there spread a most grievous pestilence, and then Claudius himself was stricken by the disease, and, leaving mankind, he departed to heaven, an abode befitting his virtues.”²⁴

Lack of will in *mors voluntaria*

In principle, a self-chosen death allows for the greatest personal input. Generally, the ancient paradigm of suicide is marked by the stress on volition, a notion conveyed by the most common terms *mors voluntaria* and *hekousios thanatos*.²⁵ Maybe the emperor Marcus Aurelius showed this self-determination in his abstinence from food. His motive for doing so was what in Latin would be called *impatiens doloris* or more generally *taedium vitae*.²⁶ Ancient motivation is dominated by *pudor*, as is to be expected in such a shame society. However, the five assured cases of imperial self-killing show the rather ‘low’ motive of *desperata salus*, i.e. the suicide does not see any other escape than to put an end to his life. All five are aware that their reign and life are over. Maximinus Daia resorted to poison when he was besieged, a means not highly regarded.²⁷ Gordian the Elder “seeing there was no aid in Africa, and being distressed with a great fear of Maximinus and by knowledge of Punic faith, also because Capelianus was assailing him very sharply, and

²² SHA, *Marcus Antoninus* 28.

²³ SHA, *Divus Claudius* 2.3.

²⁴ SHA, *Divus Claudius* 12.

²⁵ See my ‘Voluntary death in Latin’, in: A.P. Orbán & M.G.M. van der Poel, eds., *Ad Litteras. Latin Studies in Honour of J.H. Brouwers* (Nijmegen 2000), 143–161.

²⁶ For ancient motivation of suicide see Van Hooff, op. cit. (n.21) and my more recent paper ‘Hatten antike Selbstmörder eine Psyche?’, *Psychotherapie, in Psychiatrie, Psychotherapeutische Medizin und Klinischer Psychologie* 4.4.2 (1999), 213–224.

²⁷ According to Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 49, the notorious persecutor had a painful, long death struggle. He ate earth and banged his head against the wall, which made his eyes jumped from their sockets. Then finally he saw the Light. Pagan authors are less imaginative: Aurelius Victor has him simply perish near Tarsus (*Caesares* 41.1). Zosimos 2.17.3 says laconically: Μαξιμιτινον, ὃς διὰ τῆς ἐφ᾽ αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὴν Αἴγυπτον ἀπιὼν ἐλπίδι τοῦ συναγαγεῖν εἰς τὸν πόλεμον δυνάμεις ἄρκουσας ἐν Ταρσῷ τελευτᾷ.

because in the end the struggle had wearied him in mind and soul”, even hanged himself, an unseemly method proper to slaves and wives.²⁸

Three emperors, Nero, Otho and Magnentius, at least used a respected way out by using a weapon. Magnentius first killed his kin and then threw himself on his sword (his Caesar Decentius hanged himself eight days later). Nero showed cowardly hesitation in using the dagger against himself.²⁹ Only Otho is depicted as preserving his dignity to the end. The report of his last moments is of special interest as Suetonius tells us that his father Laetus was witness to the events. The example of a common soldier led Otho to give up his life. This man on bringing news of the defeat of Otho’s army “was believed by no one, but was charged by the soldiers now with falsehood and now with cowardice, and accused of running away; whereupon he fell on his swords at the emperor’s feet. My father used to say that at this sight Otho cried out that he would no longer endanger the lives of such brave men, who had deserved so well.”³⁰

Thereupon Otho made sure that his nearest kin and friends took care of their safety. He sent letters of consolation to his sister and to Nero’s widow Messalina, whom he had intended to marry. Then he burned all his letters, to prevent them from bringing danger or harm to anyone at the hands of the victor. He also distributed what money he had with him among his servants. “When he had thus made his preparations and was now resolved upon death (*intentusque iam morti*)” he learned that people who left the camp were seized as deserters. In order to prevent any further violence he said: “Let us add this one and more night to our life.” (these were his very words), and he forbade the offering of violence to anyone. Leaving the door of his bedroom open until a late hour, he gave the privilege of speaking with him to all who wished to come in. After that quenching his thirst with a draught of cold water, he caught up two daggers, and having tried the point of both of them, put one under his pillow. Then closing the doors, he slept very soundly. When he at last woke up at about daylight, he stabbed himself with one single stroke under the left

²⁸ SHA, *Gordiani tres* 16-17: Amata used the ‘nodum informis leti’; cf Vergil *Aeneis* 12.603.

²⁹ Arand 2002, op. cit. (n.3), 208: “Der erste Selbstmord wird von Nero berichtet. Während die ersten paganen Autoren aus schon genannten Gründen nicht den Selbstmord als Tat kritisieren, zeigt sich für sie jedoch in der Ausführung der Charakter des Kaisers. Zögerlich, halbherzig, eben unrömisch tötet sich der Kaiser bei Sueton in einer theatralischen Karikatur auf einen Suizid. Auch Cassius Dio betont noch die Hilfe durch einen Freigelassenen, die den gewählten Tod erst eigentlich verachtenswert macht. Der christliche Autor Eusebios aber berichtet nur noch, Nero habe sich selbst getötet. Ihm ist der Selbstmord als solcher unabhängig von der Ausführungsart bereits ein Negativum.”

³⁰ Suetonius, *Otho* 10.1, as translated by J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius II* (Cambridge, MA & London 1979).

breast; and now concealing the wound, and now showing it to those who rushed in at his first groan, he breathed his last.³¹

Apart from the emperor Marcus Aurelius who practised *inedia* to hasten his death there are two cases of attempted suicide. The first is that of Macrinus who threw himself from the wagon in which he was transported. Very interesting is the second case of attempted suicide, that of Hadrian, because it raises questions about the permissibility of medical assistance in self-killing, a highly topical problem.

“But Hadrian was now seized with the utmost disgust of life (*ultimo vitae taedio*) and ordered a servant to stab him with a sword. When this was disclosed and reached the ears of Antoninus, he came to the Emperor, and begged him to endure with fortitude the hard necessity of illness, declaring furthermore that he himself would be no better than a parricide, were he, an adopted son, to permit Hadrian to be killed. The emperor then became angry and ordered the betrayer of the secret to be put to death. The man, however, was saved by Antoninus. Then Hadrian immediately drew up his will, though he did not lay aside the administration of the empire. Once more after making his will, he attempted to kill himself, but the dagger was taken from him. He then became more violent, and he even demanded poison from his physician, who thereupon killed himself in order that he might not to have administer it.”³²

Hadrian's attempts to kill himself have all the marks of the 'restless emperor' he was.³³ By his impetuous ways he caused much distress among those who attended him, who also had to fear the anger of Antoninus Pius, Hadrian's successor designate. Apparently, the medical doctor whom Hadrian asked to help him could find no other way out of the terrible dilemma but to kill himself. No reference is made of any moral scruples on the part of the anonymous physician. There is no reason to assume that he stuck to his Hippocratic oath.

³¹ Suetonius, *Otho* 11.

³² SHA, *Hadrianus* 24.8-12.

³³ Anthony R. Birley, *Hadrian. The restless emperor* (London & New York 1997).

Firstly, we do not know whether Hadrian's physician belonged to the Hippocratic school, which after all was just one of the medical sects of antiquity. Secondly, it is uncertain to what extent the oath was ever sworn in that one particular school. The ancient evidence is very meagre.³⁴ Even if the Hippocratic oath had some meaning as a professional ethical code for the limited group of doctors, it should not be understood as dealing with assisted suicide, but with surreptitious murder by a doctor.³⁵ The context suggests this meaning, for in the lines preceding the key phrase the new doctor promises to refrain from 'injustice' (*adikia*). The Greek syntax points at this interpretation:

“Οὐ δώσω δὲ οὐδὲ φάρμακον οὐδενὶ αἰτηθεὶς θανάσιμον:
and I will not give a drug that is deadly to anyone if asked [for
it].”³⁶

In the Greek text the 'anybody' to whom the deadly medicine is not given is in the dative, whereas 'requested' is nominative, going with the subject, the 'I' who swears. If the person who requests and to whom the fatal drug is not given were to be one and the same person, the ancient Greek would be something like 'to anybody requesting', both words in the same case, i.e. dative, especially as the words follow each other. Now the different cases, dative and nominative, are indicative that the two words are not to be linked. The person who requests is not necessarily the person to whom the poison is (not) given. The Hippocratic doctor only swears that under no circumstance shall he lend himself to murder by poisoning on the request of a third person since, being in close contact with a patient, he was in a position to kill secretly.³⁷ We should remember that the fear of being

³⁴ Vivian Nutton, 'Hippocratic Morality and Modern Medicine', in: Hellmut Flashar & Jacques Jouanna, eds., *Médecine et morale dans l'antiquité*. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 43 (Vandoeuvres-Genève 1996), 46: "Pious hopes from Scribonius Largus, a sentence in Gregory of Nazianzus, Arabic reconstructions of Classical Antiquity, and the Constitutions of Melfi do not inspire great faith in the universality of the Oath, when contrasted with the numerous occasions when one can state that the Oath was *not* sworn."

³⁵ See for this interpretation of the Oath: Thomas Rütten, 'Medizinethische Themen in den deontologischen Schriften des Corpus Hippocraticum', in: Flashar & Jouanna 1997, op. cit. (n.34), 65-120, especially at 68-98.

³⁶ Translation by Heinrich von Staden, 'Personal and Professional Conduct in the Hippocratic Oath', *Journal of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 51 (1996), 404-437 at 407.

³⁷ Even if one would argue that the passage refers to any assistance in bringing about death requested by the patient or a third person, the stress certainly is not on assisted suicide. The refusal to commit *adikia* also points to murder, for self-killing was not regarded as a criminal act by ancient law, as was

poisoned was common in antiquity. Many a sudden death that was probably due to food poisoning was ascribed to a criminal act. However, a patient who hired a Hippocratic physician could be sure that he did not run the risk of being murdered by a criminal doctor. The argument that the oath formula was understood in antiquity to mean this, is supported by the hexametric, more elaborate version of the Oath: "Nor should somebody by presents make me to commit a painful trespass and to administer to a man harmful drugs that will bring about a fatal evil."³⁸ There is ample proof that ancient doctors were ready to assist in suicide, Seneca's being the most famous euthanasia case in the primary ancient sense of the word, i.e. a noble death. It was Statius Annaeus, who produced the hemlock, the poison hallowed by Socrates. Statius is denoted as a trusted friend of proved medical skill.³⁹ So there is little reason to suppose that Hadrian's doctor came to kill himself by any other reason than the impossible dilemma he was confronted with, given the anger of both the ruling emperor and the emperor designate.

The story of Hadrian's prolonged death is as ambiguous, as was his reputation in antiquity. Anyway, he too is credited with having preserved his mental faculties until the last moment, for

... he is said, as he lay dying, to have composed the following lines:

animula vagula blandula
hospes comesque corporis,
quae nunc abibis in loca
pallidula rigida nudula
nec ut soles dabis iocos!

Such verses as these did he compose, and not many that were better, and also some in Greek.⁴⁰

proven by Andreas Wacke, 'Der Selbstmord im römischen Rechts und in der Rechtsentwicklung', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 97 (1980), 26-77.

³⁸ Greek text in I.L. Heiberg, ed., *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* I.1 (Leipzig & Berlin 1927), 5-6.

³⁹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.64: *arte medicinae probatum*.

⁴⁰ SHA, *Hadrianus* 23.9:

O blithe little soul, thou, fitting away,
Guest and comrade of this my clay,
Whither now goest thou, to what place
Bare and ghastly and without grace?
Nor, as thy wont was, joke and play.

In any case, Hadrian died a natural death. His attempts of suicide did anything but embellish his end. The element of self-determination was only present in the abstention of food by the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Among the cases of suicide committed, only that of Otho constitutes a noble death.

Between perception and ritualisation

In his dissertation on the ignominious death of emperors, Tobias Arand sees less distortion in the stories about the end of virtuous emperors than of their evil colleagues. He discerns two other trends, less dramatisation and more restraint. The record is not embellished by rumours about death causes or circumstances.⁴¹ It is credible that the stories on the death of the virtuous, generally successful, emperors have a higher degree of veracity, as even the history of good death is written by the victors. The authors who sealed their fame had no reason to vilify them. Rather, one can suspect them of idealising the emperor's finale. Their noble picture is undoubtedly due to a positive perception.

On the other hand, one should not forget that these fortunate emperors were familiar with the scenario of the last act that they had to play. After all, there was a long tradition of good dying in antiquity. Moreover, the worthy emperors of the second century could look back upon a series of predecessors and the records of their death. A ruler such as Marcus Aurelius was certainly aware of the paradigm, so he could perform the death rituals of the virtuous emperor as far as it lay in his capacity to stage his finale.

⁴¹ Arand 2002, op. cit. (n.3), 229: "Abschließend lassen sich für die Darstellungen der Tode guter Herrscher drei Haupttendenzen festhalten, die geradezu die Kehrseite der Darstellungen schlechter Tode bilden:

1. Die Darstellungen sind im Kern ihrer Schilderung insgesamt konstanter als die auf schlechte Herrscher bezogenen Schilderungen. Es könnte so auch behauptet werden, daß die 'Spur' des historischen Ereignisses durch die zeitliche Folge der Berichterstattung geradliniger verläuft und die Todesdarstellungen der guten Herrscher die vergangene historische Realität weniger 'deformieren', dieser näherkommen.
2. Die Darstellungen sind deutlich weniger literarisch im Hinblick auf Spannungsbögen durchdramatisiert. Dies bedeutet jedoch nicht, daß nicht auch der Tod des guten Herrschers detailliert oder in einer unterhaltsamen Handlungsfolge berichtet werden konnte. Starb aber ein guter Herrscher an einer Krankheit, wurde dies konstatiert, bestenfalls um durchaus auch erfundene Details mit Bezug zur Lebensschilderung, wie z.B. von der *Historia Augusta* im Falle des Antoninus Pius, erweitert. Aber aber auch ein an sich dramatisches Geschehen wie die Ermordung des guten Alexander Severus wird nicht zusätzlich 'reißerisch', sondern mit eher gebremster Spannung dargestellt.
3. Diese Zurückhaltung der Darstellung geschieht so insgesamt durch den Verzicht auf einige angesprochene erzählerische Elemente. Spekulationen über alternative Todesumstände, mordende Nebenbuhler oder giftmischende Ehefrauen, werden in der Regel vermieden."

Anyway, a natural death such as he had, offered most room for the imperial *ars moriendi*. Contrary to what we expected to find, the suicides of emperors were not models of *mors voluntaria*. These were self-killings from despair, so the liberty to perform was limited. Only Otho demonstrated his self-control to the end. Some imperial victims of murder, like Caesar and Pertinax, succeeded in preserving their dignity, even in their sudden death. With the evil emperors, on the contrary, ghastly physical details are stressed.⁴²

Ideally, the emperor meets his death at an advanced age. Until the last moment, he is in control of his mind. The emperor's *mors matura* is gentle, which also guarantees a well-preserved corpse. Those emperors who in the moment of murder showed concern for their looks demonstrate the importance of decorum.

An emperor who dies nobly faces the end with imperturbability, like a soldier or a Stoic. With friends he discusses the irrelevance of death. Preferably, he utters some unforgettable last words.

The exemplary death does not occur in miserable solitude. The lucky emperor dies at a familiar place. There he is surrounded by friends and family, for whom he shows his concern, both financially and emotionally. He also cares for his staff and the commonwealth. This *euthanasia* constitutes the imperial art of dying.

Nijmegen, October 2002

⁴² Arand 2002, op. cit. (n.3), 244: "Die deutliche Mehrheit der geschilderten Tode der schlechten Kaiser sind gewalttätige Sterbeakte: 'Mord und Hinrichtung', Selbstmord', 'Tod im Kampf' und selbst die Tode im Bereich 'Krankheiten' sind nicht selten von grober Grausamkeit der Schilderung."

Appendix: Causes of death of official emperors

Nr.	Name	
1	Caesar	Murder
	0	↑ first century BCE: 1 violent
2	Augustus	Natural
3	Tiberius	Natural
4	Caligula	Murder
5	Claudius	Murder
6	Nero	Suicide
7	Galba	Murder
8	Otho	Suicide
9	Vitellius	Murder
10	Vespasianus	Natural
11	Titus	Natural
12	Domitianus	Murder
13	Nerva	Natural
	100	↑ first century CE: 5 natural 7 violent
14	Traianus	Natural
15	Hadrianus	Natural
16	Antoninus	Natural
17	Lucius Verus	Natural
18	Marcus Aurelius	Natural
19	Commodus	Murder
20	Pertinax	Murder
21	Didius Iulianus	Murder
	200	↑ second century CE: 5 natural 3 violent
22	Septimius Severus	Natural
23	Geta	Murder
24	Caracalla	Murder
25	Macrinus	Murder
26	Heliogabalus	murder
27	Alexander Severus	Murder
28	Gordianus I	Suicide
29	Gordianus II	Fallen
30	Maximinus Thrax	murder
31	Pupienus	murder
32	Balbinus	murder

33	Gordianus III	murder
34	Philippus Arabs	Fallen
35	Decius	Fallen
36	Trebonianus Gallus	murder
37	Aemilianus	murder
38	Valerianus	natural
39	Gallienus	murder
40	Claudius Gothicus	natural
41	Quintillus	murder
42	Aurelianus	murder
43	Tacitus	?
44	Florianus	murder
45	Probus	murder
46	Carus	?
47	Numerianus	murder
48	Carinus	murder
	300	↑ 3d century CE: 3 natural 22 violent
49	Diocletianus	natural
50	Constantius I	natural
51	Severus	murder
52	Maximianus	?
53	Galerius	natural
54	Maxentius	Fallen
55	Maximinus Daia	suicide
56	Licinius	murder
57	Constantinus I	natural
58	Constantinus II	Fallen
59	Constans	?
60	Magnentius	suicide
61	Constantius II	natural
62	Iulianus	fallen
63	Iovianus	natural
64	Valentinianus I	natural
65	Valens	fallen
66	Gratianus	murder
67	Maximus	murder
68	Valentinianus II	murder
69	Eugenius	murder

70	Theodosius I	natural
	400	↑ 8 natural 11 violent
71	Arcadius	natural
72	Honorius	natural
73	Theodosius II	accident
74	Valentinianus III	murder
75	Maximus	murder
76	Avitus	?
77	Marcianus	natural
78	Maorianus	murder
79	Libius Severus	?
80	Anthemius	murder
81	Olybrius	natural
82	Leo I	natural
83	Leo II	natural
84	Glycerius	natural
85	Nepos	murder
86	Romulus Augustulus	natural
	476	↑ 4 th century: 8 natural 6 violent