THE PRINCIPATE – LIFEBELT, OR MILLSTONE AROUND THE NECK OF THE EMPIRE?

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The Augustan Principate was the product of crisis – a response to the challenges that precipitated the fall of the Republic. The Principate worked because it met the political needs of its day. There is no doubt that it saved the Roman state and the Roman Empire: it was a lifebelt. But it was not perfect. In its turn it precipitated more challenges that had to be responded to – more crises – in particular that known as the ‘third century Crisis’. In the long run it was a problem as much as a solution: a millstone as much as a lifebelt. In the end, it had to go. I will briefly deal with the Principate as a problem, and then suggest a new way of discerning the strains that brought about its demise.

The Principate was created by Augustus and continued by the Julio-Claudians. However, there is a case for arguing that the Principate had still to establish itself as ‘the office of emperor’ as late as the death of Nero. The continuing challenges and responses that created and developed the Principate sometimes also broke it open to show its workings, and what contemporaries made of it. Thus Plutarch reports that in A.D. 68, Galba, on his way from Spain to take up power in Rome, entertained a group of senators in southern Gaul. Though he could have used the imperial furniture and servants sent to him by the Praetorian Prefect, Nymphidius Sabinus, initially he chose not to, which was remarked upon favourably by his guests.¹ Galba’s modesty is explicable in various ways but, following Wiedemann’s appreciation of Galba’s family pride, I believe that he rejected this ‘family silver’ basically because it was the silver of an alien family.²

Galba, born in 3 B.C., had lived under all the Julio-Claudian rulers. His view of the Principate is therefore likely to have been shaped by how it was seen by the high Roman aristocracy at its inception: not as

* I am very grateful to Wolf Liebeschuetz for commenting on a preliminary draft of this paper.

¹ Plutarch, *Galba* 11.1: *kataskeuē kai therapeia basilikē*.

² T.E.J. Wiedemann, ‘Nero to Vespasian’, *CAH* 10, 256–282, at 262–263.

a monarchy, but as the Republic continuing under the patronage and direction of a great man and his *domus*.³ In June 68, this first *domus* and its current leader had perished in disgrace and destruction.⁴ But the Republic continued, and needed protection, and it was as the head of the next protective *domus* that Galba at first projected himself.⁵ This explains why he revolted in the name of the Senate and People of Rome, and why he initially refused the ‘imperial’ titles – especially, of course, that of ‘Caesar’, which, as a family name, would have stuck in his aristocratic throat.⁶ In 69 Vitellius, too, revolted in the name of the Senate and People of Rome, did not claim the title of Augustus until it was granted to him by the Senate, and initially rejected that of ‘Caesar’.⁷

In the end, both were forced to call themselves ‘Augustus’ and ‘Caesar’ if only to lay their hands on the massive wealth of the *domus Caesaris*.⁸ However, their actions demonstrate that by the middle of the first century A.D. Rome hardly possessed an established imperial monarchy. And, though rulers of successive dynasties acquired ever greater practical power, this potentially dangerous internal contradiction – Wallace Hadrill’s ‘pose of denial’⁹ – persisted within the system. Extremely illuminating in this respect is the remark attributed to Trajan when appointing Sextus Attius Suburanus as his Praetorian Prefect: “Take this sword and use it for me if I rule well, and against me if I rule badly.” This instruction is reported favourably by Pliny the Younger, Dio and Aurelius Victor, and without disapproval by Millar.¹⁰ However, in terms of fostering political stability it is a disastrous precept. It urges

³ Cf. Cassius Dio 54.12.4: *prostasia*; 55.6.1, 55.12.3: *hēgemonia*. (I owe these references, and the following, to Wolf Liebeschuetz.)

⁴ As Tacitus has Galba say (*Historiae* 1.16): *Sub Tiberio et Gaio et Claudio unius familiae quasi hereditatis fuimus* (“Under Tiberius, Gaius and Claudius we Romans were the heritage, so to speak, of one family” [trans. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed.]).

⁵ Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.16 (again by Galba, as *rector* of the Empire): *et finita Iuliorum Claudiorumque domo optimum quemque adoptio inveniet* (“since the houses of the Julii and the Claudii are ended, adoption will select only the best” [trans. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed.]).

⁶ Plutarch, *Galba* 5.2; D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle. Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie* (Darmstadt 1996²), 102. Cf. Suetonius, *Galba* 1.2.

⁷ Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.62; 2.62; 3.58; Kienast 1996, op. cit. (n. 6), 106; Wiedemann 1996, op. cit. (n. 2), 273.

⁸ T.E.J. Wiedemann, ‘Tiberius to Nero’, *CAH*² 10, 198–255, at 200–202.

⁹ A. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘*Civilis princeps*: between citizen and king’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982), 32–48, at 36.

¹⁰ Pliny, *Panegyricus* 67.8; Dio 68.16.1²; Aurelius Victor, *Caesares* 13.9; F.G.B. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London 1977), 123.

continuous assessment of the man, not automatic fealty to the office, on criteria that are Republican not monarchical,¹¹ and so encourages challenge for the control of the whole Roman world.¹²

This brings us to interesting issues such as Flaig's dismissal of notions of 'legitimacy' and 'illegitimacy' with reference to the office of emperor.¹³ In terms of the Principate as a problem, and much else besides, the Roman imperial 'constitution' is indeed a fascinating topic, still capable of enormous development. A great deal of valuable work has, of course, been done of late: one thinks of that of Wiedemann and Flaig, already mentioned, and, for the later period, that of Pabst.¹⁴ I hope that in future research I shall be able to pursue the idea of early Roman rulers as great aristocrats rather than monarchs.¹⁵ Their control of the Roman state may be construed as Republican aristocratic *aemulatio* carried to destructive extremes; and their pride in their lines, and so their favouring of dynastic succession, as much aristocratic as monarchical.¹⁶

I now turn to the notion of the Principate as a fatally strained form of government, and raise a specific issue which will return us to two of the main themes of this volume: the impact of crisis on administration and politics, and the wider historical perspective of the third century Crisis. What did these 'emperors', who were not emperors, make of their position? The Principate was based on the brilliant devising and marketing of the Augustan 'message': that the dominance of the Julian

¹¹ Measuring him on a scale calibrated between the extremes of *civilitas* and *superbia*: Wallace-Hadrill 1982, op. cit. (n. 9), 43, 45–46.

¹² The sentiment goes back, of course, to Augustus. Cf. his habit of never commending his sons to the people without adding "if they are worthy": Suetonius, *Augustus* 56.1; P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor MI 1988, trans. A. Shapiro), 215.

¹³ E. Flaig, 'Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im Spätromischen Reich', in F. Paschoud and J. Szidat (eds.), *Usurpationen in der Spätantike* (Historia Einzelschriften 111, Stuttgart 1997), 15–34, at 19.

¹⁴ Wiedemann 1996, op. cit. (n. 2 and n. 8). E. Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpationen im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt 1992); Flaig 1997, op. cit. (n. 13); A. Pabst, *Comitia imperii. Ideelle Grundlagen des römischen Kaisertums* (Darmstadt 1997). See the very useful review of important aspects of the problem in O. Hekster, *Commodus. An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Amsterdam 2002), 16–30.

¹⁵ Cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1982, op. cit. (n. 10), 36, noting the 'Mommson/Alfoldi' controversy.

¹⁶ Cf. F. Kolb, 'Die Gestalt des spätantiken Kaisertums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Tetrarchie', in F. Paschoud and J. Szidat (eds.), *Usurpationen in der Spätantike* (Historia Einzelschriften 111, Stuttgart 1997), 35–45, at 38, on the traditional Roman association of *virtus* and 'Erprinzip'.

clan was the end of history. The ‘future’, ‘prophesied’ in the mythical past, was now the present. All that remained was the eternity of Rome.¹⁷ So, how was this handled by emperors who were not descended from or adopted into the Caesars – beginning with Galba? The practical solution was, as we have seen, that they were compelled to adopt the Augustan message, associating themselves with prophecy by calling themselves ‘Caesar’.¹⁸ But exactly how was all this articulated and explained by these emperors, both to themselves and to others? The short answer is we do not know. As far as I am aware, we have no text indicating that this was ever directly taken up and thrashed out by contemporaries. I can find nothing along these lines in, for example, Seneca, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus or Dio. The gap is significant – part of the sclerotic ideology of the Principate, to which I will come below. However, it has struck me, in the light of recent publications,¹⁹ that we may be able to find an indirect answer to these questions in the great structures of imperial Rome: on the Capitol and the Palatine and in the Forum and the Campus Martius.

As is now widely accepted, Augustus hammered home his message in buildings and monuments, in what was the culmination of a battle for prestige between the leaders of great *domus* that began with Marius and Sulla.²⁰ As is also generally acknowledged, Augustus used these monuments and buildings to tell the particular story of a particular family. Central Rome was re-cast as a narrative in stone of the inevitability and rightness of the Julian protectorate. This was expressed most clearly in the *Forum Augusti* and its great temple of Mars Ultor.²¹ But it is surely legitimate to wonder what the reactions of a Flavian, Antonine or Severan ruler were on visiting this complex, which has been called “the distillation of the collective memory of Republican Rome for the benefit of the Julio-Claudian dynasty”²² What was it like for such men to move in the townscape of Julio-Claudian Rome?

¹⁷ N. de Chaisemartin, *Rome: Paysage urbain et idéologie des Scipions à Hadrien (II^e s. av. J.-C. – II^e s. ap. J.-C.)* (Paris 2003), 226.

¹⁸ Cf. Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 33: the Principate was founded on and continued by the name of ‘Caesar’.

¹⁹ Specifically Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), and Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), but see also in general burgeoning ‘Rezeption’ studies.

²⁰ Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 64.

²¹ Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 193–195, 210; Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 125–128.

²² Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 128.

We must not overlook the obvious. There can be no doubt that they would have felt at ease because they were magistrates of the City. The Roman Senate's granting them *imperium*, before and after they came to power, was more than window-dressing. Again, the Republican, aristocratic, non-imperial, aspect of the Principate is crucial to its understanding. However, we can see successive dynasties also using buildings and monuments to express their own message to the City and to the World, and a fundamental element of this was: "We too are part of the Augustan tradition." In brief, they did this by:

- a) Sedulously conserving the existing buildings of the tradition: maintaining them, and restoring them if they became damaged through old age, fire or flood.²³
- b) Adding to them in the same architectural tradition – i.e. with fora and temples, beginning with Vespasian and his Forum/Temple of Peace.²⁴
- c) Crucially, respecting and continuing their religious tradition. As Zanker says, Rome was a city whose heart was unusually dominated by temples.²⁵

This last was possible because Augustus' religious repertoire was remarkably wide, allowing his successors easy access to all the main Greek and Roman gods. In other words, though Augustus made much of the Julian descent from Venus, he also showed immense reverence to all the Olympians and to the traditional Roman deities. Later rulers could therefore honour a wide variety of these without flouting Augustan conventions.²⁶ And since the same deities figure prominently in the Homeric poems and the stories of early Italy, the rulers who worshipped them could link themselves to the Troy story and the Romulus-foundation myth.²⁷ The Roman link to Troy, in particular, had, under the Republic, never been a Julian monopoly. The Vergilian canon was

²³ For restoration after major fires see, e.g., Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 169, 177 (Domitian); A. Boëthius and J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth 1970), 270 (Severans).

²⁴ Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 167.

²⁵ P. Zanker, 'The city as symbol. Rome and the creation of an urban image', in E.B.W. Fentress (ed.), *Romanization and the City: Creations, Transformations, and Failures* (Portsmouth RI 2000), 25–41, at 34.

²⁶ On the breadth of Augustan religion see Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 53, 56, 85, 187, 193; Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 100, 102, 110–111, 113, 117, 120.

²⁷ This is especially true, of course, of traditional Roman worship of Jupiter, the ultimate authority in the *Aeneid*: see, e.g., 4.220–221.

just one of a host of such stories that could be told concerning this link.²⁸ It would therefore not have seemed out of place for later non-Julii to claim their own association with it, and so attach themselves to prophecy-become-history. Like Augustus, they too were connected to the founders and foundation of Rome.²⁹

Examination of post-Augustan building activities throws up some predictable results. Famously, of course, Nero, the ruler who most flouted architectural tradition, came to a sticky end.³⁰ However, it also throws up some less predictable features, with certain rulers turning out, in this respect, to be much more, or less, conservative than they are traditionally depicted. The supposedly proto-tyrannical Domitian nervously squeezed his forum-complex into the established framework.³¹ The ‘good’ Trajan’s Forum is, on the other hand, disturbingly militaristic.³² And the ‘revolutionary’ Commodus did little to disturb the prevailing order.³³

The central monuments and buildings reflect, and may even be seen as a paradigm of, the Principate as ‘lifebelt’. They are a concrete manifestation of the cultural continuity and relative political stability that, for almost three centuries, the Augustan system gave the Empire. But they may also be seen as a paradigm of the Principate as ‘millstone’. Rulers’ boastful adornment of ‘downtown’ Rome was just another aspect of narrow aristocratic *aemulatio*. The convention of maintaining the Augustan architectural and religious heritage was politically necessary but practically difficult (through expense and shortage of space) and intellectually stultifying (because it allowed little or no room for experiment or change).³⁴ Innovation – in the form of Hadrian’s Pan-

²⁸ T.P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter 2004), 21. Cf. Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 107: more correctly, the Varronian, Livian, Vergilian canon.

²⁹ Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 74–5; Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 67–68, 75, 177, 213, 230. Wiseman 2004, op. cit. (n. 28), 21, lists Aemilii, Cloelii, Geganii, Nautii, Sergii and Sulpicii as patrician houses that also, from a very early date, claimed Trojan descent. Cf. Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 209, for how Augustus’ harping on the Julian version of the Troy story very early led to its crude satirisation.

³⁰ Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 155–156.

³¹ Cf. Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 170, on Domitian as architecturally conservative.

³² Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 201–214.

³³ Hekster 2002, op. cit. (n. 14), 203–205.

³⁴ An important factor here was the apparent convention that, though rulers could re-develop secular sites, they must always replace temples. See, e.g., Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 164, 167, 177, 227. Note how Elagabalus’ temple of Ba’al was re-dedicated to Jupiter Ultor: Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970, op. cit. (n. 23), 274.

theon or, perhaps even more significant in the context of the last great round of challenge and response, Aurelian's Temple of the Sun – was restricted to the periphery.³⁵ Unable to move forwards, the Augustan architectural and religious heritage was incapable of further development: just like the Augustan Principate, it was officially stranded at 'the end of history'.³⁶

As we return from paradigm to process, we can see that this was dangerous. The central monuments and buildings also reflect the continuing ideological importance of the city of Rome – as the seat of the Republic which was the only institution which could formally grant a *princeps* his power. This is why, in the challenges and responses of the third century, rulers must constantly seek the city – to confirm their rule or prevent rivals from doing the same. This distracted them from dealing with problems elsewhere, and made Italy the cockpit of civil war.³⁷ And the Principate and its associated strain ran late – much later than is usually accepted. Diocletian restored the Julianic Senate House,³⁸ and his promotion of himself as the directive 'Jovius' to Maximian's executive 'Herculius' was deeply old-fashioned, clumsy and ineffective.³⁹ Maxentius seized Rome, forced Constantine to fight him for power there and, before his downfall, as Hekster has shown, returned enthusiastically to the Augustan tradition, including building.⁴⁰ He restored old structures and squeezed his Basilica Nova into the last available piece of space in the city centre.

The third-century Crisis did not end in 284/5: it took a break, and recommenced in 306! And, likewise, the Principate was not yet destroyed, only changed. Its contradictions and weaknesses continued to dog and clog the system.

³⁵ Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 219–23; cf. Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 139–41. Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970, op. cit. (n. 23), 498–500; A. Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (London 1999), 192.

³⁶ Cf. Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 226.

³⁷ J.F. Drinkwater, 'Maximinus to Diocletian and the 'Crisis'', *CAH* 12, 28–66, at 63.

³⁸ Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970, op. cit. (n. 23), 500.

³⁹ Cf. esp. Zanker 1988, op. cit. (n. 12), 230, with Chaisemartin 2003, op. cit. (n. 17), 191, 222, 226; Kolb 1997, op. cit. (n. 16), 37; R. Rees, 'The emperors' new names. Diocletian Jovius and Maximian Herculus', in L. Rawlings and H. Bowden (eds.), *Herakles/Hercules in the Ancient World* (Swansea 2005), 223–239, at esp. 227 and 233.

⁴⁰ O. Hekster, 'The city of Rome in late imperial ideology: the Tetrarchs, Maxentius and Constantine', *Mediterraneo Antico* 2 (1999), 717–748.

So, Constantine, like a challenger of an earlier generation, having taken Rome, found himself powerless before the forces of tradition. This is again reflected in his buildings. He could do little in the centre. Indeed, he was forced to accept Maxentius' Basilica. His great church of St. John Lateran was, like the Pantheon and the Temple of the Sun, forced to the periphery.⁴¹ Stultification, in the buildings at the heart of the imperial capital as in the evolution of the imperial political system, threatened to continue. It will now be very clear where my argument is going. It is entirely consistent with Hekster's comment: "Only by fully renouncing Rome and her traditions could Constantine become the first Christian emperor."⁴² But I would stress the wider historical picture, and would extend Hekster's conclusion, as follows: "Only by fully renouncing Rome and her traditions could Constantine throw off the millstone of the Principate, and so finally put an end to the third century 'Crisis'." To develop solutions indicated by this crisis, and partly followed up by the Tetrarchs, future rulers of the Empire needed new *space*, topographical and ideological, and they found it in Constantinople.

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⁴¹ R. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals. Topography and Politics* (Berkeley CA/London 1983), 2–3, 28–29 ("sparing pagan sentiment!"); M.J. Johnson, 'Architect of Empire', in N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge 2006), 278–297, at 283.

⁴² Hekster 1999, op. cit. (n. 40), 748.