

Introduction

By means of new laws brought in under my sponsorship I revived many exemplary ancestral practices which were by then dying out in our generation, and I myself handed down to later generations exemplary practices for them to imitate.

Res Gestae divi Augusti 8.5¹



When at the end of his life, Augustus reflected back on his long political career in his *Res Gestae*. Rome's first *princeps* showed himself very aware of how to phrase his novel position in terms of tradition. The text pays ample attention to how this position was the consequence of a whole set of titles, honours, and prerogatives bestowed upon Augustus by the traditional constituents of the Republican political system, and also goes out of its way to demonstrate that Augustus' actions were never at variance with the powers and prerogatives of these constituents. At the same time, the above passage is only one of four phrases in the *Res Gestae* that emphasize how the *princeps*' policies were informed by ancestral custom (*mos maiorum*).² Besides portraying Augustus himself as respecting tradition, this passage also appears to have anticipated how his precedent would provide future generations with a model to emulate. Thus the new political system of the Principate was established with a keen eye for how it fitted what had been before, and how it would itself become 'what had been before'.

Even if the *Res Gestae* gives us an indispensable insight into Augustus' own appreciation of the impact and implications of imperial rule, it sheds a rather Rome-centered light on the matter. This naturally follows from the circumstances of its composition, but the ancient historian is left with an incomplete image of imperial rule for the Empire as a whole. The imperial superstructure was not just responding to what happened in Rome, but also had to be related to the amalgam of power structures that existed throughout the Empire. The latter only marginally appears from the *Res Gestae*, which is even truer for the

1 *Legibus novis me auctore latis multa exempla maiorum exolescentia iam ex nostro saeculo reduxi et ipse multarum rerum exempla imitanda posteris tardidi.* Text and translation by A. Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: text, translation, and commentary* (Cambridge 2009), 66. Also see in this volume Mitropoulos, p. 188.

2 The other parts being *RG* 6.1, 13, 27.2.

impact of traditions other than the *mos maiorum*, which were similarly plentiful in the Roman *oikumene*. The interface between tradition and the shifting configuration of power structures in the Roman Empire lays at the heart of this volume. It deals with this issue not just for the Augustan Empire, but also for the imperial period over the long haul. As such, this volume will show the configuration of the Empire as a flexible organism that was constantly renegotiated and redefined, with countless of novel practices and actions rooted in tradition that would themselves become the ‘exemplary practices [for later generations] to imitate’.

1 Power Structures and Tradition: a Definition

With the amalgam of power structures, this volume refers to the various power networks that gave the ancient world its political, social, and religious hierarchies. These networks were organized in different ways and according to different traditions, appearing at a central as well as a local level. The combination of overarching imperial structures (the Roman senate, priestly colleges in Rome, imperial mints etc.) and local structures (city councils, (inter)regional cults, local mints etc.) formed the backbone of the Roman Empire; the Empire’s coherence existed in its diversity. These central and local structures were inextricably intertwined and interdependent: the imperial administration could not properly function without local administrations within the Empire, and vice versa.³

These central and local structures thus all exercised, transmitted and negotiated power. But what was the nature of this power? In its most basic form, power may be defined as the ability to control people and events, allowing one to bend their environment to their will. The way power is discussed throughout this volume, however, for the most part concerns far more subtle forms of control, corresponding to the classic definitions of power of Max Weber and Steven Lukes.⁴ In their view, power is not so much about an ability that is constantly wielded publicly, as it is about a far less overt means of control through which beliefs, expectations, and actions are subtly steered towards one’s favour. In the modern world this could be achieved through propaganda and/or marketing strategies, but in the ancient world, too, there were means

3 See for instance D. Slootjes, *The Governor and his Subjects in the Later Roman Empire* (Leiden/Boston 2006).

4 M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen 1922); S. Lukes, *Power: a radical view* (London 1974).

to move people's perceptions. There were more direct forms of doing so, such as through a person's manifestation in the public sphere, but especially representation in its many different forms also gave a more subtle dimension to the exercise of (most notably imperial) power.⁵ The latter fits well with the idea that power was not just about more direct forms of control, and attests to an ancient awareness that for a power structure to properly function the anticipation of any potential resistance by presenting said power structure – and potential changes made to existing power structures – as a matter of course is of key importance.

Whether it be in public action or in representation, tradition was commonly played upon in displays of power. 'Tradition' has seen many different definitions in modern scholarship, yet may in short be defined as those practices, beliefs, and customs that are believed to have been passed down through generations.⁶ The 'believe to' is an important component of this definition, as tradition does not necessarily refer to actual ancient practices and ideas. Indeed, ever since Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger ground-breaking *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), 'invented tradition' has been a frequently recurring term, one that also can be applied to the Roman Empire.⁷ Such an invention had covert forms, but could just as well appear out in the open. The closing phrase of the above-cited passage of *Res Gestae* is a beautiful example of the latter, with Augustus clearly offering his own behaviour as a similar referential framework to posterity as the practices of old.

Both the actual and the invented form of tradition served the same purpose in relation to power: to successfully embed authority within ideas of what society perceives as being customary, so as to give it a sense of legitimacy. Indeed, by properly translating ideas of power in relatable terms, the likelihood that claims of power are accepted significantly increases, and it is from general acceptance that legitimacy emerges.⁸ Although it seems paradoxical, (the call

5 For the emperor's public manifestations, F. Millar's *The emperor in the Roman world* (London 1977) with its famous phrase 'The emperor was what the emperor did' (p. 6) remains a seminal work. See C.F. Noreña, *Imperial ideals in the Roman west: representation, circulation, power* (New York 2011), for the power-related implications of (imperial) representation.

6 For tradition in the ancient world, see e.g. J. Fejfer, M. Moltesen & A. Rathje, eds., *Tradition: transmission of culture in the Ancient World* (Copenhagen 2015).

7 This has been quite recently shown by the volume of D. Boschung, A. Busch, M.J. Versluys, eds., *Reinventing 'the invention of tradition': indigenous pasts and the Roman present* (Paderborn 2015).

8 This was one of the core premises of the NWO-funded research project 'Constraints and Tradition', to which the conference at which the collected contributions were presented was related. O. Hekster, *Caesar rules: the emperor in the changing Roman world (c. 50 BC–AD 565)* (Cambridge 2023) is the synthesis of this project.

for) tradition is often at its most powerful in times of tremendous change. This naturally follows from the rationale that for any innovation to be successfully incorporated into society, it has to take into account – or alternatively, be ‘anchored’ into – current expectations, beliefs, and practices.⁹

Above we saw how Augustus’ particular attention to the *mos maiorum* served as a strategy to present the advent of monarchic rule in Rome in traditional terms. This was just one of the traditional foundations upon which the Augustan Principate came to rest, a number of examples of which are addressed in the following chapters. Further down below, moreover, we will see that Augustus’ words would prove predictive, as the imperial regime would become a new multifaceted tradition into which new developments were commonly anchored. Anyone with a desire for power had to relate to emperorship in one way or another, finding a common source of inspiration in Augustus himself as well as in other inspiring (or less inspiring) figures of imperial standing.¹⁰ In order to properly exercise power, one had to take into account the various traditional practices and forms of expression that previous rulers or ruling bodies had employed in their exercise of power.

In addition, Roman power was not just bluntly projected on the various locales of the Empire in a uniform manner. Expressions of power varied according to region or city, and differences can be seen between Rome and the provinces and between different provinces and cities within the Empire. Next to these local varieties, expressions of power also differed according to the medium that was used for communication; coins, inscriptions and imperial sculpture, for instance, did not necessarily broadcast similar messages or display similar ideological patterns during a specific reign.¹¹ These local and

9 The notion of ‘anchoring innovation’ is central to the ongoing Dutch Anchoring Innovation research program, in which ancient historians, archaeologists and classicists look for ways in which innovations were connected to what society perceived as being familiar. For a discussion of its core premises, see I. Sluiter, ‘Anchoring innovation: a classical research agenda’, *European Review* 25, no. 1 (2017), 20–38. Also see the various volumes within the series of *Euhormos: Greco-Roman Studies in Anchoring Innovation*, published by Brill.

10 For Augustus as an example, see most notably E. Lyasse, *Le principat et son fondateur: l'utilisation de la référence à Auguste de Tibère à Trajan* (Brussels 2008). For how emperors themselves used their predecessors as a point of references, see O. Hekster, *Emperors and ancestors: Roman rulers and the constraints of tradition* (Oxford 2015).

11 See O. Hekster et al., ‘Nero’s ancestry and the construction of imperial ideology in the early Empire. A methodological case study’, *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology* 1:4 (2014) 7–27; Hekster 2015, op. cit. (n. 10).

medial differences resulted in a multitude of hybrid forms through which power was expressed, all embedded within existing thought and practice.

At the heart of this volume, then, is the way tradition functioned as a means to exercise power as well as to make such wielding of power appear legitimate. As such it is more about how the Empire was impacted by traditions, than the impact of empire on these traditions. With 'empire' being quintessentially a political construct, most contributions will focus on the way political authority was exercised and/or negotiated on both a local level and a global scale. However, we will also encounter various other mutually dependent kinds of power. These are not just those powers intrinsically linked with the imperial position, such as legal power (Cortés Copete; Daalder) and religious authority (Gartrell; Lozano & Muñiz Grijalvo). Social power, too, comes to the surface in this volume through examples of the way women could at times exercise control despite the patriarchal norms of Roman society (Torregaray Pagola & Ñaco del Hoyo; Carruci). Finally, we will also see how local idiom may be said to have exercised a form of power over the way new power structures were communicated (Capponi; España-Chamorro; Betjes; Hahn).

2 Structure of the Book

The contributions in this volume each in their own way shed light on the inter-relationship between power and tradition, thus attesting to the coherence in diversity referred to above. They are grouped chronologically, following the rationale that after the Augustan Principate had been built upon traditional structures of power, it became itself such a point of reference onto which later structures were founded.

Part 1 of the book deals with the substructures that formed the foundation for the construction of the Augustan Empire. Amber Gartrell and Fernando Lozano & Elena Muñiz Grijalvo delve into the Empire's divine underpinnings, and show continuities and novelties in the use of religious affairs in the formulation of power. Gartrell (Chapter 1) does so by discussing how in the early Principate the Republican practice of invoking the gods to legitimize claims of power was continued. Lozano & Muñiz Grijalvo (Chapter 2) instead focus on Hellenistic precedent, as they demonstrate the continuation of bestowing cultic honours upon leading political figures in the Greek world. In both cases, imperial monopolization was the innovative element, which was part of a wider trend that had Augustus exclude potential rivals to establish and consolidate imperial power.

The only ones to be allowed to share in the emperor's power were the members of his family that were to guarantee his lasting legacy. The first two contributions both address the imperial family in passing, yet it is from the chapters of Elena Torregaray Pagola & Toni Ñaco del Hoyo and Florian Groll that we get a more comprehensive understanding of the role tradition played in embedding members of the Augustan household in existing power structures. Torregaray Pagola & Ñaco del Hoyo (Chapter 3) focus on the portrayal of the Sabine women in Augustan literature to demonstrate how Roman mythology was turned into a proper precedent for diplomatic missions of the women of the *domus Augusta*. Groll (Chapter 4), too, finds Republican precedent, as he reveals the ways by which the innovative role of the imperial family in triumphal processions was rendered traditional.

Whereas chapters 3–4 pay ample attention to the way Republican tradition was played upon in the formation of novel power structures, the chapters of Livia Capponi, Sergio España-Chamorro, and Sven Betjes instead highlight the use of traditions in Roman power constellations in other parts of the Empire. Capponi (Chapter 5) evaluates the extent of imperial control in Egypt, as such demonstrating how the imperial superstructure depended on pre-existing power constellations in this part of the Empire. For Roman Hispania, España-Chamorro (Chapter 6) shows how for local toponymy, local tradition could also be ignored as the region became dotted with blunt expressions of Roman control. For practically the same region, Betjes (Chapter 7) shows that the Romans were not entirely unreceptive of traditions bound to local landscapes, as their roads appear to have been embedded in such a discourse.

Parts 2 and 3 subsequently turn to the first to second and third to fourth centuries respectively to address the functioning of the Empire once the Principate was well-established. Part 2 starts with the contribution of Christer Bruun (Chapter 8), whose discussion of the continuing importance of local elections shows that the imperial monopolization of a wide range of powers, honours and prerogatives did not lead to an empire-wide preclusion of local decision-making. Furthering the idea that decision-making was not just the emperor's business is the piece of Margherita Carucci (Chapter 9), who by singling out Plotina shows how empresses could have a significant effect on political affairs, while conforming to prescribed norms in a male-dominated society.

The contributions of Juan Manuel Cortés Copete and Giorgos Mitropoulos bring us to the workings of imperial power in the Greek world, showing the close interdependence between imperial and local power structures. Cortés Copete (Chapter 10) draws our attention to the continuation of ancient local legal traditions in the age of Hadrian, who sought to make these compatible to the imperial system. Mitropoulos (Chapter 11) instead presents the imperial

system itself as a model applied in the Greek East by exploring the practice of *imitatio principis*, implying the various forms by which local elites sought to imitate or emulate the emperor to express their power at a local level.

The first three chapters of Part 3 similarly look at how imperial precedent was utilized, but instead focus their attention on the men at the top of the hierarchy. Elsemieke Daalder (Chapter 12) examines Caracalla's rescript practice to show him as continuing the legal practice of the Antonines, thereby nuancing Dio and Herodian's unfavourable accounts of this emperor. Lukas de Blois (Chapter 13) similarly brings nuances to our literary sources as he focusses on the radical reforms of Gallienus, which instead appear to have been far more traditional than the late-antique sources have us believe. Nikolas Hächler (Chapter 14) deals with Gallienus' contemporaries of the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires, and reveals the strategies that allowed their rulers to present the innovation of being a partition Empire as a traditional and legitimate enterprise. The fourth chapter in this part, that of Johannes Hahn (Chapter 15), also focusses on how a new power structure built upon existing repertoires, as it examines how Christian ascetics did so with regard to traditional practices regarding the mountainous landscape.

The greater majority of the chapters in this volume present to the reader an image of the Roman Empire as it has been characterised above: a patchwork of traditions and power structures that in varying ways depended on one another and that were variously employed in quests for the expression of changing realities. These chapters all show how such applications were strongly determined by the specifics of certain ages and locales. The volume nevertheless ends with Part 4 highlighting the *longue durée* of the political institutions of the Roman Empire. Stéphane Benoist (Chapter 16) does so by examining the political discourse of tradition and innovation from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE. Francesco Bono (Chapter 17) studies Justinian's *Novels* to show how the memory of the Republic still lingered in the sixth century, when traditional institutions were on the threshold of being set aside, ushering in a renovated Empire that would last another millennium.

Taken together, these contributions will show the Roman Empire as a world filled with a wide variety of cultural, political, social and religious traditions. These traditions would allow for the emerging superstructure of the Principate to be properly embedded into existing power structures at both a global and a local level. Once this imperial superstructure was established, tradition would remain a pivotal means by which power was defined, negotiated and transformed. This flexible dealing with tradition was essential in ensuring that the political hierarchy in itself was never questioned, even when the Empire faced numerous internal and external pressures. Only when in the fifth century the influx of tribal confederations impacted the Empire at large, the eventual

result for the West was the disappearance of Roman emperorship to the benefit of Germanic kings. In the East, however, the imperial power structure was to last until in 1453 the Ottomans finally conquered Constantinople.¹²

Acknowledgements

This volume forms the proceedings of the fifteenth workshop of the international network Impact of Empire, which took place at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, from 18–20 May 2022. It was organized by Sven Betjes, Olivier Hekster, Ketty Iannantuono, and Erika Manders. We are grateful to all the speakers and attendants of the workshop for their presentations and discussion, and to our student assistants Romeo Burger, Imke van Dijk, and Marieke Ceelaert, the latter of whom also helped tremendously in copy-editing and compiling the indices to this volume. We would also like to thank Jakob Jung for stepping in at the last stages of editing the volume. The production process of the volume was a smooth one, and we are grateful to Brill's anonymous reviewer for their comments and to Giulia Moriconi and Lucas Faessen at Brill for their support in the editing process. As always, the management team of the network was of great help in continuing the successful series of workshops. Finally, we happily acknowledge financial support from the Radboud Institute for Culture and History, the International Office of the Radboud University, the Ammodo Foundation and the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

¹² On the longevity of imperial rule, see most recently Hekster 2023, *op. cit.* (n. 8), 3.