CHAPTER NINE

TENSIONS OF LOYALTY 210–217

*Trappings of power*

*Imperial consorts*

*Women and children*

*A question of succession*

*217: the year of the plague*

**Chronology**

210 winter: Cao Cao builds the Bronze Bird Terrace at Ye

1 Jan 211: Cao Cao publishes his *Apologia*

211 spring: Cao Pi is named Associate to Cao Cao as Chancellor; he is left in charge at Ye city as Cao Cao campaigns in the northwest

212 winter: Dong Zhao’s proposal, that Cao Cao be made a Duke and receive the Nine Distinctions, is opposed by Xun Yu; death of Xun Yu

213 spring: Cao Cao reorganises the provinces of Han

summer: Cao Cao is enfeoffed as Duke of Wei and receives the Nine Distinctions

autumn: official altars and an ancestral temple are established for the state of Wei; three of Cao Cao’s daughters enter the imperial harem

winter: Ministries and a Secretariat are established for the state of Wei

214 spring: Cao Cao is granted rank above the kings of Han

autumn: Cao Zhi is left in charge of Ye city as Cao Cao attacks Sun Quan

winter: Cao Cao kills the Empress Fu and two imperial children

215 Cao Cao’s daughter the Lady Jie become Empress

216 summer: Cao Cao is enfeoffed as King of Wei

217 Cao Cao is granted banners, flags and imperial insignia

winter: Cao Pi is appointed Heir to the kingdom of Wei

In this year there is a great plague
Chapter Seven discusses the campaigns by which Cao Cao consolidated his power in the north after the set-back at the Red Cliffs on the middle Yangzi, while Chapter Eight considers the nature of his government and the court which he established at his headquarters in Ye city. Formally speaking, Cao Cao’s power came from his appointment as Imperial Chancellor of Han, the position which he took early in 208; his *Apologia*, issued in 210, affirmed his loyalty and his concern to act as a servant of the imperial house, restoring its lost authority and bringing peace to the nation.

Almost inevitably, however, though Cao Cao renounced some fiefs, his military success and his dominance of the government meant that he was encouraged and expected to receive special recognition. Within a few years he had taken titles for himself, not just as a marquis, but as duke and then as king, and he received honours comparable to those of the great usurper Wang Mang at the end of Former Han. By doing so, as the *Apologia* had foreshadowed, he sought to confirm his position and that of his family for the future; but he also raised questions about his final ambitions, and he tested the faith of those followers who still retained a sense of loyalty to Han.

### The trappings of power

In his *Apologia*, published as a proclamation in the winter of 210/211, Cao Cao argued that his ultimate aim was to restore the authority of the Han dynasty throughout its fallen empire, and that he sought only security for himself and his family. In a show of self-restraint, he relinquished three of the four counties he had acquired as fiefs, with two-thirds of his former revenue.

At the same time, however, even as he reduced his own benefits in this way, Cao Cao arranged enfeoffment for three of his sons, and a few weeks later Cao Zhi, Cao Ju and Cao Lin each received the income from five thousand households, a combined amount almost as great as that which Cao Cao had given up. The eldest son, Cao Pi, was granted no fief, but he was appointed a General of the Household and named as Cao Cao’s chief Associate: during the autumn of that year he held formal power at Ye city as Cao Cao led his army against the warlords of the northwest.

Early in 212, moreover, as Cao Cao returned in triumph from his victory at Huayin and the conquest of the northwest, the puppet