CHAPTER ONE

CHANGING EMPERORSHIP: SETTING THE SCENE

For any scholar who is examining power and status relations in Roman imperial times, the position of the emperor is a logical starting point. Although it seems obvious that the emperor’s office held the greatest power within the Empire, it cannot be accepted unquestioningly that emperors kept exercising the highest power in the same way, given that the Roman world changed so much between AD 193 and 284. However, while the position of individual emperors was hardly ever unchallenged in the third century, especially from 235 to 284, the emperor as such remained the focal point of the Empire. Under Diocletian, emperorship underwent several changes. Most apparently, four men governed, instead of one under the Tetrarchy, and the emperors presented themselves as domini rather than principes.¹ There had been a major shift away from emperorship as it had functioned in the first and second centuries AD. These changes made by Diocletian of course resulted from a process of transition that had started long before.

The development of emperorship—or elements of it—in the third century has received abundant attention in recent studies.² As noted above, a discussion of the power and status of the third-century emperor, focusing particularly on developments that could potentially have undermined his authority, is indispensable for my study. Yet, as much of this has already been dealt with in detail elsewhere, this chapter will be relatively brief and will serve as an introduction to the history and problems of the period AD 193 to 284. It will also contain a summary of recent theories on the transformation of emperorship, and introduce the other parts of this book.

¹ See Aurelius Victor, Liber de Caesaribus 39, 4, on Diocletian being called dominus. For recent studies on emperorship under the Tetrarchy, see, for instance, Rémy (1998); Rees (2004); Demandt-Goltz (2004); Boschung-Eck (2006).
² See, for example, Johne (2008), and generic overviews such as Sommer (2004); Hekster (2008), 56–68. Millar (1992) and Ando (2000) do not focus on the third century only, but are extremely useful to anyone who studies emperorship between 193 and 284.
1.1. Factors Influencing Emperorship between AD 193 and 284

The Changing Background of the Emperor³

As the Principate developed from a Republic in which the nobility gathered in the senate carried out the essential offices, and the princeps combined spheres of power previously held by senatorial magistrates, it was only natural that the emperorship was initially assigned to a senator.⁴ Eventually, however, equites could also ascend the imperial throne. During the first and second centuries AD, the principle of a senatorial princeps was endured, although toward the end of the second century men who had risen from equestrian ranks can be found among the imperial candidates. Both Pertinax and Pescennius Niger were Italic homines novi, who embarked upon an equestrian career, but rose to senatorial rank through adlectio. Pertinax even was of very humble origin: he descended from a freedman.⁵ Septimius Severus was the son of an eques, yet he had immediately initiated a senatorial cursus honorum. The Augusti of the first and second centuries AD were all either from the Italic peninsula, or originating from the Latin-speaking aristocracy of the Western provinces.⁶ Like Pertinax and Pescennius Niger, Didius Iulianus was also born in Italy. His

³ This section is largely based on the information gathered by Kienast (1996), 152–263; Johne (2008); and several biographies on individual emperors or specific periods in the third century, such as De Blois (1976); Dietz (1980); Birley (1988); Körner (2002); Kreucher (2003).

⁴ The literature on the transition of Republic to Principate is immense. On the emperor as a senator, see, for example, Wallace-Hadrill (1996); on the senate in the early Empire, see Talbert (1984); id. (1996).

⁵ Pertinax: adlectus inter tribunicios (or aedilicios?), circa 170/171. Niger: adlectus inter praetorios, 180/183?. Avidius Cassius, the son of an equestrian orator who managed to enter the senate under Marcus Aurelius and who seized power in the East in 175, may be added to this category of imperial candidates with equestrian roots. See Kienast (1996), 142–143; 152–153; 159–160. Cf. Vespasianus, who also became emperor with a fairly humble background. According to Suetonius, Divi Vesp. 12, 1–2, his father was of equestrian rank.

⁶ The Iulio-Claudian emperors stem from ancient patrician gentes bound to Rome; the Flavians belonged to the Italic municipal aristocracy; Traianus’ family came from Italica, in Hispania Baetica, which was also the hometown of Hadrianus’ family. It remains unclear, however, whether Traianus and Hadrianus were born in Italica. On Traianus compare Kienast (1996), 122, and Eck (2002b), 10; on Hadrianus, see Syme (1964), 142–143; Birley (1997), 10; and Canto (2002). Antoninus Pius was from Lanuvium, Italy; Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus were born in Rome; and Commodus in Lanuvium. This development coincided with a more general gradual shift of power from the Empire’s geographical center: in the second century, men from the East entered the Senate in Rome. See Halfmann (1979).