CHAPTER THREE
PRAETORIAN PREFECTS
AND OTHER HIGH-RANKING EQUESTRIANS

In the past, scholars have perceived a rise of the *equites* during the third century AD.¹ However, this view is problematic in more than one way. Already in the high Principate—from the Flavian to the Antonine emperors—, the equestrian *ordo* was an even more heterogeneous group than the higher-ranking *ordo senatorius*. Within the political system, the most significant subset of *equites* contained those who served as equestrian officers in the army and senior civil administrators.² Junior *equites* served as *tribuni militum* of legions and as *praefecti* of cohorts and cavalry units. Each year about 360 posts were available for senior officers of equestrian rank. These military officer-posts were a necessary hurdle for advancement to senior civil-administrative positions.³ Later, from the second century AD, the post of *advocatus fisci* became an alternative precursor.⁴ Later in their careers, *equites* could serve as provincial *procuratores*, who were responsible for financial administration and sometimes military logistics, and supervised freedmen procurators who themselves administered imperial properties in their provinces. Furthermore, *equites* could be governors of minor provinces or imperial secretaries at court.

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¹ The notion of the rise of the *equites* was defined by Keyes (1915). Cf. Stein (1963), 444–459; Rémondon (1970), 100–101; Alfoldy (1988), 193.

² Millar (1992), 279–290, for instance, identifies three subsets within the *ordo*: (1) holders of the public horse, (2) jurors at Rome, and (3) military and civilian office-holders. For the purpose of this study I will focus only on the senior members of the last subset, as this group constituted, along with senior senators, the political elite of the Empire. It should be noted, however, that only a minority of the *equites* belonged to this subset of office-holders.

³ Equestrian men usually started their career by filling a sequence of military posts (the so-called *tres* or *quattuor militiae*, depending on the number of positions). From the end of the Iulio-Claudian period the usual sequence of the *tres militiae* was *praefectus cohortis*—*tribunus militum*—*praefectus alae*. See Devijver (1989), 16–28; 56–72; and Dobson (1979).

⁴ The *advocati fisci*, employed by Hadrianus (*HA, Vita Hadr.* 20, 6), represented the *fiscus* (imperial treasury) in court (cf. for instance *Digesta* 28, 4, 3) and apparently acted as legal authorities. On the *advocatus fisci*, see also Crook (1995), 52–53.
Exceptionally successful equites could eventually reach the high prefectures which formed the zenith of the equestrian career: the praefectura annonae, the praefectura Aegypti or even the praefectura praetorio. In due course, the senior equestrian posts were qualified hierarchically by salary level; in that way an equestrian career developed by analogy with the senatorial cursus honorum. The equestrian career pattern, however, was never as strict as the senatorial one.

In the high Principate, most of the equestrians were landed gentry, but a minority consisted of ranking soldiers who had acquired equestrian status after holding the post of primus pilus (senior centurion of a legion). Because the ordo equester was more accessible to newcomers than the ordo senatorius, the equestrian order included far more members than the senatorial. And just as entry into the equestrian order was a personal honor bestowed by the emperor and not hereditary, so also ambitious equites who caught the attention of the emperor or one of his advisers could be promoted, or have their sons promoted, to senatorial rank through adlectio. By this process, the number of homines novi within the senate steadily increased during the first and second centuries AD.

The heterogeneous character of the ordo equester in imperial times also emerges in the way the ordo has been dealt with in scholarly discussion: much effort has been made to collect the scattered evidence, which has led to a number of works that treat certain aspects of the equestrian career and the ordo equester, but books on the order as a whole are rare and have not been written recently. Besides the inherently heterogeneous charac-

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5 Salary levels of 60,000 (sexagenarii), 100,000 (centenarii), 200,000 (ducenarii), and 300,000 (trecenarii) HS were the basis of distinctions. Career inscriptions of equites use these descriptions as titles.

6 Strabo, Geographica 3, 5, 3; 5, 1, 7, informs us that under Augustus 500 equites lived in Gades (Spain) and Patavium (Italy) respectively. According to Heil (2008b), 743, each generation of equites contained about 20,000 equites against circa 600 senators. Although these numbers may have changed after the Augustan era, the ratio of equites to senators will probably have remained fairly constant in the high Principate.

7 See most recently Heil (2008b), 740–744, on the development of the equester ordo in the first and second centuries.

8 The syntheses of Keyes (1915) and Stein (1927, second edition 1963) are outdated, but have not been replaced by more modern works. The amount of prosopographical research on specific aspects of the equestrian career is immense. See, for example, Pflaum (1950); id. (1960–1961); Devijver (1976–2001); id. (1989); id. (1992). Demougin (1988) focuses on the Julio-Claudian period only. Demougin-Devijver-Raepeaet-Charlier (1999) collects articles focusing on aspects of the order throughout several centuries, but does not amount to a history of the order as a whole either. Some articles sketch the broader outlines of the order and its role in imperial administration. See, for instance,