Reflect continuously how everything of the same sort as what happens now, also happened in the past, and think of how it will happen again; put before your eyes whole dramas and scenes of the same types you have encountered in your own experience or in ancient history, such as the whole court of Hadrian and the whole court of Antoninus and the whole court of Philip, Alexander and Croesus. All of them were of the same sort, only the people were different.2

An emperor, if anyone, should know. All the world’s a stage, and the court he knew was only a specific re-enactment of a drama or scene that had played in the past and would play again in the future. We could hardly ask for a stronger or more authoritative invitation to consider courts as a cross-cultural phenomenon. Gibbon indeed seems to have taken the message, in a chapter that gives a devastating account of the ceremonials of the court of Constantine and his successors, marking the degeneration of the ‘manly pride’ of the Romans into the condition of ‘abject dependents’:

By a philosophic observer, the system of Roman government might have been mistaken for a splendid theatre, filled with players of every character and degree, who repeated the language, and imitated the passions, of their original model.

Gibbon’s footnote points to ‘Pancirolus ad Notitiam utriusque Imperii’; but in this last sentence, it is not the sources for ceremonial he is thinking of, but the philosophic emperor Marcus. Tacitly, the authority of

---

1 I have preserved the text of my paper as delivered in Istanbul with only minor modifications to take into account more recent publications. I am grateful both to the organizers of the conference, and to Jeroen Duindam for discussion.

the emperor of the Romans at their manly best is used to condemn the degeneration of the later Empire.³

Marcus’ assertion of continuity was right in more senses than one: it is not just that imperial courts had a generic similarity to other royal courts, but that there were strong ties of historical continuity that linked the Roman court to those of the Hellenistic east after Alexander, and to the Persian court which Alexander’s conquests absorbed and incorporated; and his prediction of future re-enactments was true in the stronger sense that the imperial court would provide models for the Byzantine, papal and early medieval courts, which in turn would influence the courts of absolutist Europe, and through Byzantium, the Ottoman and Russian courts.⁴ Constantinople is a good place to reflect on Marcus’ prescience.

Nevertheless, Roman historians have, at least until very recently, either ignored the imperial court as a phenomenon, or dismissed its importance, or even denied it. This much has now been shown in detail by the recent studies of Aloys Winterling, Aula Caesaris and Mario Pani, La Corte dei Cesari.⁵ Winterling in particular shows how despite the attention drawn by Ludwig Friedlaender to the imperial court as the central phenomenon of Roman imperial society, Roman historians continued to follow the lead of Mommsen, who excluded the court from his Staatsrecht on the grounds that it was not a legally-based institution.⁶ Mommsen was quite right: the court had no place whatsoever in the Roman constitution. On the other hand, Roman imperial history is incomprehensible without it, and the correct inference to draw was that a legal/constitutional approach was not appropriate for Roman imperial history. A century and more of post-Mommsenian

⁵ Mario Pani, La corte dei Cesari fra Augusto e Nerone (Rome; Bari 2003).
⁶ Winterling, Aula Caesaris, pp. 12–18.