FUNERAL, n.: A pageant whereby we attest our respect for the dead by enriching the undertaker, and strengthen our grief by an expenditure that deepens our groans and doubles our tears.¹

Societies have their own ways of dealing with death. Rituals are always of utmost importance. Philippe ARIÈS, in a magisterial analysis of the development of coping with death in more than a millennium of European history, saw how the “ritualization of death is a special aspect of the total strategy of man against nature”.² Clearly, death rituals are there for the individual to come to terms with the inevitable demise of someone close. Yet within this ritualisation for the purpose of the individual, community contexts are often crucial. The reaction of any individual to death is shaped by society, and takes place within a social group which can be composed of family, friends, or even paid professionals.³ Funerals, therefore, are framed by societal notions. More often than not, they reflect social status and hierarchy.⁴

The expenditures of funerals can be easily joked about – as attested by the quote from Ambrose BIERCE with which this paper opens – but these, too, have a clear function in placing death rituals in a community context. By an elaborate ritual, both the deceased and the survivors are raised above the mundane. Highbrow funerals show the grandeur of those who recently passed away, but may also

indicate the status of those who were closely connected to them. Funerals of, for instance, a beloved member of a royal house, are on the one hand farewell gifts of society to the deceased, but can, on the other hand, also set the surviving royalty apart by the extravagance of the ceremony. Thus, the funeral of Elizabeth the Queen Mother paid homage to a much-loved woman, but also strengthened the problematic position of the house of Windsor. Death is also, in a very obvious way, a moment of transition. As has often been stated, Arnold Van Gennep’s concept of the tripartite ‘Rites of Passage’ is of importance. Its usefulness in analysing death rituals is apparent. Through separation, transition and reincorporation, a person’s status changes. This is, of course, common knowledge. Yet it is worth starting this article with these commonplaces, since they are to be kept in mind when looking at Roman imperial funerals.

Roman emperorship was dominantly dynastic. Augustus may have tried to pretend – at least to some parts of society – that there was no official emperorship. It could, therefore, not be inherited, which would in any case have been impossible under Roman law, which did not allow for offices or magistracies to be inherited. Yet, Augustus’ continuous attempts to ensure succession by marrying adopted sons to his daughter and raising the profile of his grandchildren must have made reality obvious to all who wanted to see it. At least from the moment that Caligula was given in block all the titles and offices that Augustus and Tiberius had held before him, simply because he was a Julio-Claudian, emperorship was there, and it was there for dynastic taking – a message that Claudius’ accession would hammer home emphatically.


6 The importance of dynastic claims is also apparent from the systematic slaughter of imperial relatives by reigning rulers, who clearly deemed them a danger: M. Corbier, ‘La maison des Césars’, in: P. Bonte (ed.), Epouser au plus proche. Inceste, prohibitions et stratégies matrimoniales autour de la Méditerranée (Paris 1994), 243-291, 274-275, with references. Cf. also Nymphidius Sabinus, who started to spread rumours that he was Gaius’ illegitimate son when he began “to think of himself as potentially more than a kingmaker”; T. Wiedemann, ‘From Nero to Vespasian’, in: The Cambridge Ancient History 10 (1996, 2nd ed.), 261-262.