FIGHTING FOR ROME:
THE EMPEROR AS A MILITARY LEADER

Olivier J. Hekster*

“I and the army are in good health”. The combination of ruler and troops is telling. No phrase could illustrate more clearly the impact of empire (in the form of the emperor) on the armies, or indeed the impact of the armies on the empire. Emperors ruled through military force—even if many tried to disguise this. The importance of military support for successful rule is much discussed. The famous statement of the rhetorician Favorinus—who was reproached by friends for conceding a point to Hadrian though he himself was right—that the “most learned man is the one who has thirty legions”, is only the most eloquent formulation of a state of affairs that was known to all. The impact of soldiers on the existence of empire is obvious, whereas their impact in various regions of the empire is expertly set out in some of the other papers in these proceedings. But what was the impact of empire on the armies? Perhaps most importantly, the emperor arrived on scene. Where before various military leaders had divided the loyalty of troops, or indeed competed for it, from the reign of Augustus onwards the armies, in general, served their emperor—and him alone. The emperor was the military leader *par excellence*. Legionary commanders owed him their *imperium*; their victories were his to celebrate, as laid out in the ‘constitutional’ settlements of 28/27 BC, 23 BC and 19 BC.  

---

*I owe gratitude to the participants of the workshop for their comments, especially to Jon Coulston, Hannah Cotton and Jasper Oorthuys. This paper discusses, from a variant point of view, some of the same themes that have been explored in O.J. Hekster, ‘The Roman army and propaganda’ in P. Erdkamp, ed., *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Malden MA and Oxford, forthcoming).*


2 SHA, *Hadrianus* 15.13; Philostratus *Vita sophistarum* 489.

3 The literature is, of course, immense. See, on the constitutional position in general, J.-L. Ferray, ‘À propos des pouvoirs d’Auguste’, *Cahiers du centre G. Glotz* 12 (2001),
Throughout the *Res Gestae*, Augustus emphasises how actions were taken “*meo auspicio,*” and, indeed, decisions on whether to wage war or not were variously ascribed to imperial whim. Augustus was even described as “lord of war and peace”. The fact that he left an account in his will, as Suetonius (*Augustus* 101.4) writes, of “how many soldiers there were in active service in all parts of [the whole empire, (O.J.H.)]”, implies that nobody else was in possession of those details. That notion is strengthened by a famous passage of Tacitus in which Tiberius ordered a document to be produced and read. This contained a description of the resources of the State, of the number of citizens and allies under arms, of the fleets, subject kingdoms, provinces, taxes, direct and indirect, necessary expenses and customary bounties (*opae publicae continebantur, quantum civium sociorumque in armis, quot classes, regna, provinciae, tributa aut vectigalia, et necessitates ac largiones*). All these details Augustus had written with his own hand… (*Ann.* 1.11).

The central position of the emperor is further emphasised by a decree thatClaudius is alleged to have passed which “forbade soldiers to enter the houses of senators to pay their respects”. Soldiers could not be clients of anyone but the *princeps* himself. The person of the emperor was paramount.

This centrality was also made clear visually. The imperial image, through portraiture and statues, was highly visible in military camps. The emperor’s *imago* was present on *dona militaria* and on manipular *signa*. On the *signa*, in fact, the reigning emperor’s name was written on the *vexillum*, thus identifying the face on the *imaginés*, though not only emperors were depicted there—symbols particular to the legions were

---


