

# Introduction

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Rome's transition from Republic to Empire undoubtedly marks one of the most fascinating episodes of historical change in Roman history. After the drama and chaos of the civil war, the post-Actium period saw the establishment of a new political system, the principate, which was to be dominated by the Julio-Claudian dynasty for almost a century. Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero each left their fingerprints on the new order and contributed in their own ways to the shaping of the imperial system.<sup>1</sup> While change and innovation often occurred under the guise of continuity and tradition in these decades, the transformation that unfolded was undoubtedly profound and significant. Above all, the Julio-Claudian era gave rise to and consolidated a new narrative of one-man rule which had fundamental implications not only for politics and society, but also for Rome's identity, culture, economy, and relationship with the rest of the Mediterranean world.

The present volume offers ten fresh studies on the Julio-Claudian era and the evolving *principatus*.<sup>2</sup> The contributions *inter alia* problematize traditional terminology and periodization and identify 'phases', 'stages', and 'turning-points' for transitional developments of this era (see the chapters by Wiseman, Eck, Cowan); they analyse the role of individuals and institutions in influencing and shaping transformational processes (chapters by Drinkwater, Burnett, Goodman); they unearth distinct discourses and new structural features of the Julio-Claudian principate (chapters by Kuhn, Osgood,

1 Biographical studies of the Julio-Claudian emperors are numerous, and the following list is not intended to be exhaustive: see *inter alia* Eck 1998; Southern 1998; Kienast 1999; Levick 2010 (Augustus); Seager 1972; Levick 1976; Yavetz 2002 (Tiberius); Barrett 2000 and 2015; Winterling 2003; Barrett/Yardley 2023 (Caligula); Levick 1990; Osgood 2011 (Claudius); Griffin 1984; Champlin 2003; Drinkwater 2019 (Nero). On the biographical approach vs. alternative models for writing a history of the imperial period, see Winterling 2011, with further comments by Brandt 2021: 2–4.

2 The term 'principate' is used in its broadest possible sense to refer to the political system that emerged as well as the régimes of Julio-Claudian *principes*, and as a temporal marker. See Malloch 2022: 94–97, who has helpfully disentangled and clarified the ancient and modern meanings of *principatus*/principate, with useful reference to earlier scholarship and the confusions found in them (esp. Béranger 1953; Gruen 2005; Cooley 2019).

Rowan); and they discuss the question of how contemporaries and later historiographers perceived this major period (or particular phases) and critically engaged with it (chapters by Cowan, Mallan).

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The years of Caesar's supremacy foreshadowed many of the political, social, and religious changes that were to characterize the Augustan principate as it emerged in the aftermath of the civil war.<sup>3</sup> Ronald Syme famously described the shift from Republic to Empire as a 'revolution'.<sup>4</sup> According to him, a significant 'transformation of state and society' took place in the years between 60 BC to AD 14, which manifested itself politically in the emergence of a new oligarchic elite. Many later commentators of this period followed his lead, trying to define more precisely what 'revolution' actually meant in the absence of any revolutionary ideas, plans, or socio-economic crisis.<sup>5</sup> Fergus Millar succinctly spoke of 'a revolution of consciousness, in which, on the part of Romans and non-Romans alike, an awareness arose everywhere of being part of a system where power was held by a single ruler'.<sup>6</sup> This system of one-man rule emerged,<sup>7</sup> as Tacitus put it, 'after the battle of Actium, when the interests of peace required that all power should be concentrated in the hands of one man'.<sup>8</sup> It developed in a complex and gradual process of experimentation, adaptation, and negotiation, marked by paradoxes and ambiguities.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning ambiguity surrounded the position of the first *princeps*, who as *primus inter pares* wished to be seen as one of his senatorial peers, but still towered above them all. His political authority rested on a complex aggregation of various constitutional powers, titles, and privileges, which were underpinned by the *auctoritas* and dynasty of his person.<sup>10</sup> Later ancient historiographers such as Tacitus or Cassius Dio were astute observers of how Julio-Claudian emperors from Augustus

3 For a more recent discussion of Caesar, see esp. Osgood 2006; Stevenson 2014; Morstein-Marx 2021. On the triumviral period: Lange 2009; Cornwell 2017, and, more recently, Pino Polo 2020 and Westall/Cornwell 2024.

4 Syme 1939: vii (Preface).

5 See, for example, Alston's 'Rome's Revolution'. For Alston, it is a 'transformation in political culture that lay at the heart of the revolution' (Alston 2015: 5). See also Wallace-Hadrill's 'cultural revolution' (Wallace-Hadrill 2008).

6 Millar 2000: 1.

7 On the 'Roman emperor' and the system of one-man rule, Millar 1977 remains a classic. Recently, the topic of Roman emperors has found renewed interest and is treated in three monograph-length studies: see Beard 2023; Hekster 2023; Christoforou 2023.

8 Tac. *Hist.* 1.1.1: *postquam bellatum apud Actium atque omnem potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit*. Engl. transl. by C. H. Moore, Loeb Classical Library.

9 Alston 2015: 1–5 rightly points out the multiple paradoxes of this transformation. For these paradoxes, see also Millar 2000: 4; Judge 2019; Christoforou 2023.

10 On the powers of the *princeps*, see esp. Brunt/Moore 1976; Ferrary 2001; Rich 2012; Vervaet 2010; Christoforou 2023: 28–58.

to Nero negotiated their position, power, and public image; how they facilitated the transmission of imperial power to the next in the Julio-Claudian line; and how they fostered, undermined, or perverted their relationship with the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman People. While Tacitus bitterly pointed out the loss of senatorial *libertas* and lamented the state of senatorial ‘slavery’, Cassius Dio did not hesitate to call the early principate what it was in his view – a ‘monarchy’ (*monarchia*).<sup>11</sup> Their rhetorical choices have undoubtedly had an impact on the assessment of the early principate by later generations, but so have those of modern scholars.

Timothy Peter Wiseman focuses on this matter by analysing the rhetorical choices made by modern scholars when referring to the political situation of the triumviral period and Augustus’ supremacy. In his intentionally provocative ‘call for order’, Wiseman reminds his readers that terms and qualifications such as ‘absolute rule’, ‘monarchic’, ‘dead republic’, or ‘autocratic’ must be used with the utmost caution, as they misrepresent the true nature of this period. He demonstrates how these terms have had important and influential rhetorical value in key works of scholarship and how they have set the tone for the study of this era. Wiseman stresses the continuities from Republic to Empire and advocates the value of critically re-reading the contemporary sources as an avenue towards a more nuanced understanding of the years between 44 BC and AD 4.

The question of how contemporaries perceived and conceptualized this era of change is an important one, which is also addressed by Eleanor Cowan. She discusses conventional periodization (‘late republican’, ‘triumviral period’, ‘Augustan Rome’, ‘Tiberian Rome’) and introduces the notions of ‘post-conflict society’ and ‘transitional justice’ to re-conceptualize the period between 49 BC and AD 29. Focusing on Velleius Paterculus as a key witness of this period, Cowan demonstrates that his narrative of Roman society in this period presents it as a transition from injustice to justice, including a phase of ‘transitional justice’. Cowan argues that Tiberian Rome must be understood in terms of a post-conflict society, as the trauma and fear of civil war continued to shape Roman community and historiography. Velleius presents Tiberius as a bulwark against civil war and as a guarantor of hope and peace who embodies a further stage in this transition: it is Tiberius who not only guarantees the rule of law, but revives justice. Cowan demonstrates the value of Velleius’ narrative of this period for gaining insight into the winners’ post-war justifications of conflict and the ways in which contemporaries perceived the transition from Republic to Empire.

Modern attempts to conceptualize the Julio-Claudian era are often dominated by the shimmering figure of Augustus. For instance, the title of the tenth volume of the *Cambridge Ancient History* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) programmatically refers to the long period of

11 See, for example, Cass. Dio 52.1.1; 53.17.1; Tac. *Ann.* 1.3.1. Malloch 2022 argues against a cyclical view of history in Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.1 and stresses that Tacitus avoids the language of kingship here. On Tacitus and *libertas*, see Jens 1956; Shotter 1978.

43 BC to AD 69 as ‘The Augustan Empire’, stressing that Rome’s first emperor left his unremovable stamp on this long era.<sup>12</sup> While the impact of the ‘Augustan model’ on later principates cannot be denied and has rightly been stressed,<sup>13</sup> recent approaches attempt to shift more attention to the distinct discourses and new features that emerged in the post-Augustan period.<sup>14</sup> Identifying the characteristic features of the reigns of individual emperors allows the historian not only to reveal ‘stages’ in the later course of the Julio-Claudian principate, but also to appreciate more fully the fluidity and adaptability of the principate in its post-Augustan phase. One approach to this problem is to ask how each of the Julio-Claudian emperors *after* Augustus negotiated their emperors with the Senate and different groups of the *res publica*. Thus Annika B. Kuhn examines Tiberius’ dealings with the symbolic capital of prestige and honour, one of the core elements in shaping the emperor’s position within the *res publica*. Her chapter analyses the motivations and reasons that led Tiberius to famously reject a number of honours proposed by the Senate. It argues that Tiberius adopted a characteristically novel attitude towards the honorific discourse between the Senate and the *princeps*, which derived from Tiberius’ distinctive notion of his role as *princeps* as well as his own conception of honour. By limiting the Senate’s ability to bestow honours on the emperor, he set the parameters for a new power dynamic in the principate, with implications not only for himself and his family, but also for his successors.

In the same vein, John F. Drinkwater explores the nature of the post-Augustan principate with a particular focus on the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula. He introduces the concept of the ‘plastic principate’, arguing that the principate of these years must be understood as a half-baked entity: the apparatus of government, the political methods, and the social expectations of the elite were still without proper shape. Drinkwater offers a re-assessment of the careers of the praetorian prefects Sejanus and Macro, whose actions he analyses within the conceptual framework of the ‘plastic principate’. Drinkwater argues that it was the transitional, flexible nature of the principate in these post-Augustan decades that allowed men of equestrian status to shape the principate in a critical phase of its history. It was the praetorian prefect Macro in particular who became an important agent in a significant transitional stage of the principate. Macro contributed to developing key structures of the *principatus*, which in the long run became fundamental for the consolidation of imperial power and dynastic rule.

12 Cf. Bowman/Champlin/Lintott 1996. Scholarship on Augustus has particularly boomed in the wake of the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 2014, intensifying the focus on Rome’s first emperor. Remarkably, most edited volumes are also restricted in their coverage to the Augustan era: see Millar/Segal 1984; Raaflaub/Toher/Bowersock 1990; Goodman 2018; Morrell/Osgood/Welch 2019. Refreshingly, Gibson 2018 adopts a broader perspective by focusing on the ‘Julio-Claudian succession’.

13 Gibson 2018.

14 See, for example, Cooley 2023: 62–82.

The tendency towards greater autocracy has often been seen as a characteristic feature of the later principates of Caligula and Nero. Christopher T. Mallan adds a historiographical perspective to this discussion of the development of the principate by exploring Cassius Dio's presentation of Caligula. Without doubt, Cassius Dio deserves special attention in this context, since he adopted an overly *longue-durée* perspective in his eighty-volume *Roman History*, inviting his readers to understand Roman history, including the Julio-Claudian era, as a continuum and to compare rulership across time.<sup>15</sup> Mallan demonstrates how Dio invites comparison between Caligula and his predecessor Tiberius through a variety of narratological strategies such as the use of rubrics in his survey of Caligula's character in the opening of Book 59 and the composition of a remarkable speech (Cass. Dio 59.16), put into the mouth of Caligula, featuring a ventriloquizing Tiberius. This speech not only enhances the characterization of Caligula, but also exposes structural flaws of the post-Augustan principate: the imbalance of power between emperor and Senate and the potential complicity of the senatorial order in the crimes of the principate. Mallan argues that Dio's Book 59 on Caligula's reign, together with Dio's Tiberian narrative in Books 57–58, provide the reader with an 'anatomy of tyranny' for this phase of the Julio-Claudian principate. Cassius Dio explains the continuity – but also discontinuity – of tyranny by presenting Caligula as a 'pupil' of Tiberius, who, however, did not learn the most important lesson from his master, which was how to ensure his own survival.

As Mallan highlights, Cassius Dio believed that Caligula had two 'tyrant-teachers' (τυραννοδιδάσκαλοι): on the one hand Tiberius, on the other hand eastern client kings, who were present at the imperial court and were educated alongside Caligula. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the emergence and development of the imperial court, which was one of the most striking new features of the evolving principate.<sup>16</sup> Martin Goodman contributes to these studies of imperial court politics by shedding light on external factors impacting on the formation of the principate. He analyses the influence which members of the Herodian family held in the city of Rome and exerted on members of the imperial family during the Julio-Claudian period. By piecing together scattered references in our sources, he reconstructs the various visits of Herod the Great and his descendants in the city of Rome and reveals the social networks in which they circulated during the Julio-Claudian period. Goodman argues that the Herodians were consistently close to the *domus Augusta*. As he shows, this was concomitant with a fascination among Roman *principes* with kingship and with the emergence of two 'parallel' dynasties in these years: the Julio-Claudian dynasty and

15 In recent years, scholarship on Cassius Dio has been flourishing. Take, for instance, the series of volumes dedicated to Cassius Dio in Brill's *Historiography of Rome and its Empire* series (HRE). More specifically, on the Julio-Claudians in Cassius Dio, see Swan 2004; Mallan 2020; Cowan 2023.

16 For recent studies on the imperial court, see Kelly/Hug 2022 and Davenport/McEvoy 2023.

the Herodian dynasty. The two must be studied alongside each other if one is to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of the more recognizably ‘monarchical’ elements in the later stages of the Julio-Claudian principate.

While the imperial court emerged as a new institutional feature of the principate, other institutions and magistracies persisted from the Republican period. The question of how these former Republican institutions functioned and developed under the principate is a worthwhile subject for research. Yet, diachronic studies that trace the development of the traditional institutions and magistracies *across* the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors and thus reveal changes at the micro-level still remain *desiderata*. Adopting such a diachronic perspective, Werner Eck sets out to trace the continuities and changes in the consulship, the highest magistracy in the *res publica*, from the triumviral period to the reign of Nero. Through prosopographical analysis, Eck identifies different ‘phases’ in the consulship’s development and explores whether the appointment of suffect consuls was due to the necessity of circumstances or reflects a deliberate change in policy. Eck argues that the year 5 BC marks a turning point in the development of this office, since the appointment of annual suffect consuls became the norm as a result of a conscious change in practice. He furthermore examines how this evolving institutional pattern was subject to further change under Claudius. Eck shows that this transformation of the consulship was a gradual one, caused by a combination of *ad hoc* responses and intentional changes in policy. By the end of the Julio-Claudian era the consulship, though still the most prestigious magistracy, had become a shadow of its former self in political terms.

Transformational processes at the social-political level are broached by Josiah Osgood. While imperial women have received much attention in recent years,<sup>17</sup> he focuses on the understudied group of ordinary senatorial women, i. e. wives, mothers, and daughters of senators who were not part of the imperial family. Osgood argues that, although these women did not hold legal status as *senatoriae* in the early principate, they increasingly became part of the Senate’s history in the post-Augustan decades. Over six case studies, Osgood demonstrates how the principate, which witnessed the emergence of the new institution of the imperial court and the judicial role of the Senate, gradually altered the lives, status, reputation, and influence of this particular group of elite women. Their access to the imperial court and their involvement in its female networks increased their significance as an emerging force in politics, while they played a new role in the senatorial court as important witnesses giving testimony for others in the power politics of the principate. As a result of this transitional period, senatorial women became more deeply involved and integrated in senatorial politics; this phenomenon must be regarded as a striking, novel stage in the Senate’s history.

17 See, most recently, Boatwright 2021 and Cenerini 2021, with reference to the studies of individual imperial women.

Turning to the economy, Andrew Burnett explores how economic realities changed from the late Republic to the reign of Nero through the monetary reforms of Augustus and Nero. At the core of his analysis lies the question of the driving forces and the sustainability of economic change in these years. He discusses the details of the Augustan and Neronian reforms through numismatic analysis, tracing their content and contexts. Burnett argues that an imperial policy can be discerned in the reforms of Augustus, but that the outcome was ‘half-baked’ and did not last for long. He demonstrates that it was not until Nero that large-scale and wide-ranging reforms were initiated which properly tackled the endemic shortage of silver. Only then was a monetary system created that properly laid the ground for long-term stability in the following decades of the principate.

Finally, Clare Rowan shows how a neglected category of material, the lead tokens from Julio-Claudian Italy, offers new insight into the evolution of the early principate. She discusses how these tokens contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the transformation of the public image of the emperor and the changing conceptions of euergetism. According to Rowan, it was not until the time of the early principate that these tokens were employed in larger numbers, which thus reflects the increase in (imperial) euergetic activity from Republic to Empire and mirror the new role of the emperor as the main benefactor of Roman imperial society. She demonstrates how these tokens, when studied alongside imperial coinage, can provide a window into the development of imperial ideology. They reveal ‘pre-stages’ in so far as they attest to messages and ideas that had not yet entered the more official messages found on imperial coinage (e.g. the concept of *liberalitas*, or the presentation of certain members of the imperial family in public). Rowan stresses that, however insignificant they may appear at first glance, these artefacts deserve greater attention by historians of the Julio-Claudian principate as they are invaluable records of the formation and consolidation of imperial ideology.

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In AD 68, with the death of Nero, the Julio-Claudian principate eventually did undergo disintegration: the Julio-Claudian dynastic element vanished, while the principate as a political system persevered. With ‘the secret of empire now being revealed that an emperor could be made elsewhere than at Rome’,<sup>18</sup> a new chapter in the history of the principate had started in Tacitus’ view, namely a period which he characterizes as ‘rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace’.<sup>19</sup>

18 Tac. *Hist.* 1.4: ... *evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri*. Engl. transl. by C. H. Moore, Loeb Classical Library.

19 Tac. *Hist.* 1.2: *Opus adgrediior opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevum*. Engl. transl. by C. H. Moore, Loeb Classical Library.

Framed by two major civil wars, the Julio-Claudian era has been, and will remain, a most fascinating, vibrant, and promising field of research due to the manifold transitional processes that took place. The collection of studies presented here is not meant to serve as a handbook offering comprehensive coverage of the topic.<sup>20</sup> Representing different disciplines, the contributions are intentionally diverse in the methods and approaches they use, the style they adopt, and the aspects and questions they explore. They provide insight into some current research *foci* within the field, aiming to stimulate further discussion and debate on the Julio-Claudian principate, its evolutionary nature, and its ongoing fluidity and adaptability in its post-Augustan phase.

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<sup>20</sup> For a handbook on this period, see volume 10 of *The Cambridge Ancient History, Second Edition* (= Bowman/Champlin/Lintott 1996), which remains fundamental. See also, most recently, the excellent handbook-style overview of the Julio-Claudian period in Brandt 2021: 35–213. Some companions to the reigns of individual Julio-Claudian emperors offer a broad coverage of themes: see, for example, Galinsky 2005; Buckley/Dinter 2013; Bartsch 2017.



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