

Chapter 1

Introduction: Toward a New Interpretation of Imperial Rome

Setting out from different points of departure, the articles assembled in this book all seek a fresh interpretation of the politics, society, and culture of imperial Rome. What they share is the belief that, in order to be able to capture adequately the complexity of the conditions in imperial times, concepts not of unity but of difference are required. The period was characterized by incompatible, mutually contradictory structures that brought the protagonists face to face with the paradoxical consequences of their actions. Employing a term coined by Reinhart Koselleck, the background to this strange phenomenon may be described as “*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichen*” (“simultaneity of the non-simultaneous”), as the coincidence and coexistence of old and new.

The political integration of Roman society was “old.” It had become established during the early republic and meant that, on the one hand, social stratification and, in particular, the undisputed social preeminence of the Roman senatorial nobility guaranteed the smooth running of its political system. On the other hand, it led to the social stratification being reproduced and manifested by this very political system at the same time. For the upper stratum, this was illustrated by the fact that noble status arose from holding magisterial office and thus joining the political institution of the senate, and that the position of each individual within the aristocratic rank order was defined by his placement within the senate’s magisterial grades. The meaning of the word *honor* allows us to see these interchanges find their semantic expression: it described both the political office and the social honor resulting from it.

However, the role of emperor and the structure of how imperial rule was organized, which had evolved and become differentiated in the late republic, were “new.” In fundamental contrast to the political order of the *res publica*, based on political offices being discharged on a temporary basis by individuals elected to that position in turn, the role of emperor was

2 Introduction: Toward a new interpretation of imperial Rome

lifelong, which led to negative consequences, especially for the emperors themselves: they were unable to resign and could divest themselves of their special position only in death. Within the administration of imperial government, which developed out of a large aristocratic household, the emperors were able to make appointments without formal restrictions or temporal limitations. Yet, at the same time, these positions had no power to advance their holders in rank, which would have been comparable to the traditional republican *honores* that continued to exist.

The fundamental contradiction between the continuing political integration of society based on the political order of the republic on the one hand, and the imperial patrimonial form of rule on the other, is often overlooked, since for the most part those of senatorial standing took on offices within the republican and imperial structures of political organization in turn over the duration of their *cursus honorum*. These were, however, separate and fundamentally incompatible structures and systems. Each was without alternative and dependent on the other, but their coexistence led to consequences reaching well beyond the structures of political organization and of social stratification themselves. They affected the course of the history of political events as much as the shaping of close personal relationships and the semantics of society's self-description in imperial Rome.

The studies brought together in this book aim to illustrate the real advances in understanding that this – at first seemingly rather abstract – theoretical concept facilitates. The three articles that make up the first section analyze four central issues: the structures of political organization (mostly described as “state” or “constitution” in scholarship, employing modern terminology), social stratification (classification of society according to the fundamental differentiation between noble and not noble), close interpersonal relationships within and/or across classes (friendship and *clientele*), as well as the Romans' self-description as a political society that found its expression in the differentiation between “public” and “private” spheres. With regard to each of these topics, as it is shown, fundamental unresolved – more long-standing or recent, latent, or manifest – scholarly controversies that have the character of an impasse may be found. They replicate, thus the argument, the contradictions and paradoxes of politics, society, close interpersonal relationships, and social self-description; paradoxes that were founded in the historical reality of imperial Rome itself.

The second section demonstrates how starting with differences, at the level of real spheres of action and at the level of the history of events, holds explanatory potential. Both cases in point – the imperial court and the actions of the emperor Caligula – at the same time concern fundamental deficits in modern imperial historiography: the court, termed *aula Caesaris*

1

in the sources, has been almost completely overlooked in the scholarship of the twentieth century – in contrast to the nineteenth century – even though its direct political and social relevance is unquestionable. However, the court may only be understood fully once the inconsistency of imperial self-description in differentiating between the “private” and “public” sphere has been taken into account. The court was neutral toward the Roman distinction of the domestic and civic arena, and the hierarchy according to proximity to the emperor that developed at it was unable – in contrast to the courts of other eras and cultures – to replace the traditional politically determined hierarchy of social stratification with a new kind of courtly integration. The political integration of Roman society remained dominant in spite of imperial rule.

The emperor Caligula continues to be regarded as mad or lunatic by some scholars. This view, however, only denotes the problem it purports to solve. The emperor represents an important test case for any interpretation of imperial politics and society. His example allows us to illustrate very well how its structural paradoxes caused unintentional consequences for the protagonists as a result of their actions, running counter to their aims. Caligula’s uniqueness consisted of the fact that he attempted to break through these behavioral paradoxes communicatively – at the expense of the aristocratic protagonists.

A new approach becomes more convincing when it can be shown that previous scholars have already observed the same problem – in the context of different theoretical frameworks and employing different terminologies – and sought to solve it. Indeed, it was not only in the dead ends of modern scholarship that the structural contradictions of imperial times found an echo. This is demonstrated in the two articles of our third section, taking Theodor Mommsen and Christian Meier as examples.

In his *Römisches Staatsrecht*, Mommsen attempted to explain the complex political structures of the empire with the notion of “dyarchia.” He wished to do justice to the contradictory circumstances of the historical reality he was analyzing by employing a term that denoted these very contradictions. Mommsen’s difficulty, however, consisted of the fact that within the overarching framework of his constitutional law, the notion of dyarchia in its turn represented a contradiction, apparent in the need for a doubled-up concept of sovereignty. Still, subsequent scholarship has virtually all misunderstood and rejected, or ignored, Mommsen’s notion of a dyarchia in imperial times.

The term “crisis without alternative,” employed by Christian Meier to characterize the process of the Roman republic’s decline in his book *Res publica amissa*, is interpreted in a new fashion in the final article: the

4 *Introduction: Toward a new interpretation of imperial Rome*

impossibility of changing the republican order despite its evident failure, which caused Meier to coin this new term, is set in relation to the phenomenon of political integration. Changing the constitution in the direction of a monarchy, which would have suggested itself from a modern perspective, was impossible since removing the republican political organization would simultaneously have drawn into question the social stratification and thus the social rank of each individual. The paradoxical effects of the actions of the aristocratic protagonists observed by Meier were linked to the fact, thus the argument, that these actions always took place within the double context of mutually contradictory systems. Finally, it becomes clear that Augustus by no means, as Meier supposed, represented the solution of the crisis, rather that the structural problems continued to exist in greater concentration in imperial times and can be described as an “involutive” development. 2

These suggestions regarding Meier’s analyses illustrate that the interpretations of imperial Rome proffered in this book also imply a changed perspective on the circumstances of the late republic, for the structural paradoxes and contradictions within the sphere of politics, society, close interpersonal relationships, and social self-description originated in that period. The political significance of the great aristocratic households, the precursors of the later imperial court, increased in those times. Something similar applies to the paradoxes of the actions of aristocratic protagonists.

However, the particular limitations of the studies introduced here should be mentioned, as well as the potential to extend them. They do not concern themselves with statements about Roman society and culture as such or with the Roman empire overall. Rather, the focus is always directed away from the periphery and toward the center: not the people but the aristocracy, not the provinces but Rome. This Rome-centric approach by no means gainsays the necessity of overcoming the narrow inner-Roman perspective of aristocratic imperial authors and to take broader contexts into consideration, which is often emphasized. Instead, it adopts the results of studying the periphery and applies them to an analysis of the center. The structures of imperial Rome are interpreted within their urban tradition, which continued to shape it even once the city of Rome had conquered all other cities and partly absorbed them into its own citizenry and once, in turn, the role of emperor had emerged, in complete contradiction to the urban-determined structures. 3

The approach based on written evidence created within the context of the aristocratic society of the city of Rome is therefore not a shortfall due to the state of the transmission, but in keeping with the subject: we are 4

dealing with a premodern society organized according to the distinction between top and bottom and that between center and periphery, and studying the inner-aristocratic communication of such a society may be considered an albeit limited, yet at the same time privileged subject, to help render its distinctive underlying structures more intelligible.

These articles have been written over the last 10 years in various circumstances and for various occasions. In view of the breadth and the extent of most of the topics treated, their purpose cannot be to capture relevant sources or even modern research in an exhaustive fashion. They do, however, aim to present a new attempt at interpretation for discussion, an attempt that goes beyond that research, does justice to the complexity of the political, social, and cultural state of affairs in imperial Rome, and allows for a coherent overall interpretation.

