

## **Making and Unmaking the Emperor**

### **The use of ritualised standard practices to elevate and denigrate emperors in ancient Rome (46 BC – AD 395)**

As numerous studies have shown, power is not just a matter of force. It is essential for any ruler to legitimise and enhance his position, presenting himself in ways that win and maintain the support of his subjects. In achieving this goal, ritualised standard practices are important instruments. A prime example is Louis XIV's Versailles, where every detail of court life was carefully orchestrated to embellish the glorious position of the Sun King. Although most rulers did not go to such lengths, the employment of ritualised standard practices as a means of legitimisation and glorification is a phenomenon of all times and cultures, be it ancient Greece, medieval Europe, or the modern-day United States.

Consequently, the *delegitimation* of rulers works the other way around. Opponents who want to renounce, remove or even kill a ruler attack his elevated position to justify their act (either beforehand or afterwards). By committing 'character assassination', they demonstrate that the king, emperor or president in question is/was not worthy to rule and should be/had to be disposed. Attacking the ritualised standard practices which propagate and highlight a ruler's power is one of the primary ways to achieve this.

In the field of ancient history, several studies have been devoted to the representation and legitimisation of rulers. Two examples are Paul Zanker's *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (1987), about Augustan propaganda, and Olivier Hekster's *Commodus, an Emperor at the Crossroads* (2002), which examines the representation of the emperor Commodus. The circumstances of ritualised standard practices have been explored by ancient historians, but rituals as a means of representation of power have only recently received much attention, as attested by Eftychia Stavrianopoulou's volume *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World* (2006) and the forthcoming eight *Impact of Empire* volume on the dynamics of rituals. In his study *Rome, le prince et la Cité* (2005), Stéphane Benoist has examined how public ceremonies were used to associate emperors with the city of Rome. However, this is only one aspect of the ways in which ritualised standard practices were used by Roman emperors to enhance their position of power. Moreover, the transfer of such imagery into ridicule in order to delegitimise the position of ancient rulers has hardly received scholarly attention. Study of this topic could reveal much about the limits of imperial power, the underlying discourses from which the standard practices in question took their meaning, and their relative importance in imperial representation.

In this project, I first of all want to examine the ways in which Roman emperors used ritualised standard practices to elevate their position and legitimate their rule. The focus will be on standard practices which took place in the public or semi-public sphere: *adventus*, *adlocutio*, military triumphs, banquets, sacrifices, the distribution of gifts and funerals. These standard practices bore meaning in several fields, including the military, civic, political and religious spheres. They were very visible to the Roman public and were advertised on coins, in reliefs and other forms of imperial propaganda.

In addition, I also want to examine the opposite, *i.e.* how ritualised standard practices were used to *attack* Roman emperors. In their works, hostile authors from the Roman elite could transpose standard practices which aimed to elevate the ruler to different contexts, presenting them as negative and casting the emperor in an unfavourable light (often posthumously). For

example, in the work of Suetonius, Nero's triumphal procession after his return from Greece makes him a mock figure because his only victories had been gained in musical contests (*Vita Neronis* 25,1-2). Likewise, in the *Historia Augusta*, Elagabalus degrades both himself and the time-honoured practice of *adlocutio* by giving a speech to the prostitutes of Rome, addressing them as his 'comrades in arms' (*Vita Heliogabali* 26,3-4). In this way, authors constructed powerful images which damaged the reputations of rulers, turning them into *exempla* of tyranny and misbehaviour.

The main question is: how did ancient authors transpose ritualised standard practices that were in use as means of imperial representation into their negative reverses, thus delegitimising rulers they did not like? A connected second question is: which ritual or cultural standard practices were most frequently used in this respect? To answer these questions, it first needs to be clarified which ritualised standard practices were most popular and important in imperial representation.

Using modern academic literature, I will first make a brief study on the 'making' and 'unmaking' of rulers through standard practices in Hellenistic, medieval and early modern times. With my findings as a general model, I will turn my attention to ritualised standard practices from the Roman Empire. I will examine these one by one, looking at their use for positive as well as negative goals (*i.e.* elevation and denigration). In each case, I will ask to which socio-cultural notions the standard practice adhered and how these notions were emphasised or inverted to either praise or criticise Roman emperors. Finally, the conclusion will give a synthesis of my findings and compare them to the general model I created in the introduction.

My research will make use of diverse source materials, including several forms of literature – historiography, biographies, plays, poems and panegyrics – as well as coins, inscriptions, papyrus texts and architecture. I will examine Roman rulers from the time of Julius Caesar to the definite division of the empire in an eastern and western part (46 BC – AD 395). This allows for a comparison between pagan and Christian emperorship: which standard practices were abolished or shifted meaning, which stayed the same?

The project aims to contribute to the current discourse on ritualised standard practices in representations of power and status. Rather than regarding ritualised standard practices as static and unchanging, it follows recent scholarship in focusing on the dynamics of such practices, namely on their shifting meanings when transposed to different cultural contexts or to different political aims.