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The repute and reality of being a Roman emperor





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Introduction

This course considers the relationship of the emperor with the Roman provinces, and how this relationship was mediated and represented, as well as how the culture of empire was manifested in the identity of the emperor.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

 understand the central role played by the Roman emperor in the construction and development of culture, identity and power.



1 The emperor and his subjects

The image of Augustus as a good emperor persisted after his death. This was due at least in part to the success and thoroughness of his own image creation. But it also reflected the interests of his immediate successors. The Julio-Claudian emperors (so named because they were connected by blood with Julius Caesar or the Claudian family of Tiberius – see the family tree in Wells, pp. 64–5) claimed power by descent and thus it generally assisted and justified their own position to celebrate Augustus and his achievements. To a degree this was true not just of the Julio-Claudians but all subsequent emperors. This is not to say that Augustus was above criticism in the centuries that followed his life (for example, see Tacitus, *Annals* 1.1–1.4, and Essay Two in Huskinson, p. 44); but to condemn Augustus outright would be to condemn the political system he created and thus by association the living emperor.

In this course you will explore the public image of some of Augustus' successors. Integral to this public image was the way in which the emperor treated and was seen to treat his subjects. Here you will focus on one key group – the provincials – but other key groups of subjects included the senatorial élite, the populace of Rome and the army. These groups sum up the major divisions of people with whom the emperor had to interact; in broad terms his popularity depended on winning their favour and support. These group labels are being employed for convenience and where appropriate other groups will also be considered. General labels, such as provincials, troops, people and senators, inevitably lead to a loss of individuality and you will need to remember that not all members of these groups thought the same or were the same.

Reconstructing what anyone actually thought of a given emperor is impossible, as is knowing what the emperor thought of them. The evidence often reflects idealisations or demonisations of relationships. The voices of the common people, troops or provincials are rarely found in the extant sources. This reflects, in part, both geographical and political distance from the centre of power. It is not to say that these people did not have opinions about the emperor, but these were rarely recorded or they were summarised in sources mediated through an élite perspective centred on Rome. Even when evidence such as statues, inscriptions and honorary dedications set up to the emperor by soldiers or civilians survives, it remains difficult to evaluate the rationale behind these gestures and the responses they evoked. As the geographical and political distance between people and the emperor decreases the evidence becomes less abstract. The bulk of the evidence is focused on Rome itself and the loudest voice belongs to the élite, and especially those of senatorial and equestrian status. These were men of money and education who served the emperor and some of whom wrote or commissioned diverse forms of literature, largely for the consumption of men of the same standing. Within this literature opinions were expressed and judgements passed on emperors, although when studying these it needs to be remembered that the authors often had their own political agendas or were influenced by those of others.

A particular emperor may have been, and may have remained, the hero of the common people or the troops but despised by the senatorial élite, or indeed vice versa. The possibility of a mixed response to the life and times of a given emperor is important to note since often the surviving literary accounts tend to polarise emperors as good or bad, as loved by all or hated by all. The evidence is often coloured by the objectives of the creators; we are left with a series of representations – not just of how the living emperor



presented himself but how he was presented by others once he was dead. Evaluating the reign of an emperor involves not only assessing how the emperor treated others and was regarded by them, but how he manipulated the reputations of his predecessors and how his own reputation was subsequently manipulated by his successors.

Your work in this course will involve an assessment of the ways in which the emperor had contact with the provinces in particular and how and why this affected his reputation. The types of evidence available are diverse and the following sections by necessity focus only on selected aspects of this. In particular you will look at a range of literature – history, biography and panegyric. You will be introduced to the conventions of these genres and the importance of understanding the perspectives of the individual authors. In particular you will become familiar with the ancient approach to writing history, which was often very different from our own. Much, although not all, of what you consider will represent posthumous judgements on the emperors involved rather than full accounts of reigns. It will not be possible here to assess in detail the actions, policies, building schemes and so forth of all the emperors mentioned, but you should remember that literary judgements were only one aspect of the posthumous legacy left by an emperor.

The sources you will consider provide insights into the reigns of some of the emperors of the first two centuries AD. The intention is to identify general trends and thus you are not expected to learn all the dates and events associated with these emperors. You should, however, familiarise yourself with this information by looking at the list of key dates from *Experiencing Rome*, below. For further details on the reigns of the emperors mentioned you should refer, if you so wish, to Goodman (chapters 5, 6 and 7) or Wells (chapters 5, 7 and 9).

Please click to view key dates from Experiencing Rome (pdf, 1 page)



2 The emperor and the provinces

2.1 The provinces

Controlling and governing the provinces was a substantial part of an emperor's remit. Here you will consider different ways in which the emperor had contact with his provincial subjects. You will work through some sections from books by Goodman and Lewis, and Reinhold and watch a short video sequence.

Exercise 1

Initially I would like you to consider, in general terms, how the face, name and authority of the emperor were promoted across the vast territories of the empire. In the *Res Gestae* of Augustus (a vast inscription in which Augustus recorded his achievements as a type of autobiographical epitaph) he was presented as a world ruler in both Rome and the provinces. Can you suggest some other major mechanisms through which the provincials would have come into contact with the emperor or would have been reminded of his importance? Very briefly note down your ideas.

These are the four major areas which I have thought of – you may have considered some additional factors or may have organised your answer differently.

Personal contact. The emperor or members of the imperial family could visit and travel the empire.

Intermediaries. Subordinates and representatives, whether administrative officials, governors or army commanders, could act in the emperor's name and were a reminder of his authority.

Image. The emperor's image could be promoted through statues, inscriptions, coins and benefactions, such as buildings, which were funded by the imperial family.

Cult. The emperor could be represented as a saviour, the bringer of peace and security, which made him appear superhuman or divine.

I want now to consider each of these factors in more detail.

2.2 Personal contact

Remember that although the city was important to him the emperor did not have to pass all his time in Rome, and many emperors visited other parts of the empire. Such mobility was often associated with military campaigns. For instance, there were a significant number of campaigns undertaken during the reign of Augustus, and these were generally headed by the emperor or members of his family. Emperors such as Gaius, Claudius, Domitian, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius also campaigned on the edges of the empire, which meant that they had to pass through and stay in many provincial towns. The emperor Hadrian is also known to have travelled the empire extensively, viewing and exploring his



domain (see Lewis and Reinhold, pp. 460–2). It is also worth remembering that many emperors had family connections with certain provinces and cities. The family of Trajan, for example, was from Spain and the emperor Septimius Severus came from north Africa. Even if the emperor could not visit all parts of the empire, he could maintain personal contact through intermediaries (see Section 2.3). In addition the representatives of the provinces could come to Rome. Towns and settlements could send ambassadors to Rome to represent their viewpoints, and in addition every Roman citizen had the right to appeal to the emperor for a fair trial. (For references to embassies see Lewis and Reinhold, pp. 9, 274, 287, 522.) This is not to say that all provincials had close contact with the emperor, but it was important for the emperor to appear accessible and not to allow communications to be hindered by the size of the empire.

2.3 Intermediaries

The emperor could not be in all places at once, and he employed subordinates and representatives in the provinces to act on his behalf.

Exercise 2

You should now read Goodman, pages 100–4 and 107–10, below. This will provide you with an overview of how the provinces were administered.

What did the emperor expect of his representatives and how did he achieve this? Please click to read the Goodman extract. (PDF, 9 pages, 0.6 MB)

You were probably struck by the flexibility of the system. 'No one, not even Augustus, seems ever to have produced an overall strategy for provincial administration' (Goodman, p. 100). There were set offices such as governors appointed either by the senate or the emperor, legionary commanders and procurators who collected taxes. However, the emperor could and often did employ his own private agents to resolve difficulties. Goodman's discussion highlights certain objectives for these officials. In particular the financial relationship between the emperor and the provinces is described in detail; it was a primary role of intermediaries such as governors to ensure that the taxes were collected. For this to occur the provinces needed to be well ordered; thus the administration of justice and the supervision and command of the army were also entrusted to suitable subordinates. The source of administrative and military officials was in general, although not exclusively, the élite of Rome, especially those drawn from the equestrian and senatorial orders. Simultaneously local élites were encouraged to maintain a level of autonomy in their towns and cities and this helped to minimise the number of officials. It was through this élite that the provincials had contact with the sources of power in the Roman empire. One major concern in using intermediaries was that individuals might accumulate too much personal power. This was overcome by the short tenure attached to most posts and the idea that important issues should always be referred back to the centre. Disloyalty to the emperor was thus rare but certainly not unheard of.

It is difficult to judge the degree to which individual emperors took an active interest in the details of provincial administration. Many may have been content to allow their subordinates to monitor affairs, only interfering when a crisis arose. But the correspondence between the emperor Trajan and the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the



Younger, illustrates the emperor's advisory role on many matters concerning the day-to-day running of the province. (For examples look up Pliny the Younger in the index of Lewis and Reinhold.) We do not know how representative Trajan and specifically his relationship with Pliny was, but the correspondence at the very least illustrates one of the avenues by which the provincials could gain the ear of the emperor. (For further discussion of correspondence and communication between the emperor and his officials refer to *Experiencing Rome*, Essay Two, pp. 37–41.) You should also note that informal intermediaries could be important. People who knew and met the emperor, both in official and unofficial contexts, could serve as points of contact between the emperor and local communities. In particular, towns and cities sought patrons – wealthy and influential men who could represent their interests in Rome (for examples of patrons see Lewis and Reinhold, pp. 45, 262, 271–4). Members of the imperial family could be particularly powerful patrons and the ultimate patron was the emperor himself.

2.4 Image

In the city of Rome the emperor glorified his relationship with the provinces. Here you will consider how the emperor was exalted in the provinces. It was impossible for the emperor to be seen personally by all his subjects and so methods were employed to publicise his face and name – to overcome geographic distance by making the emperor familiar to his people. Standardised images of the emperor – on statues, busts and coins – were widely copied and placed in prominent public locations.

Exercise 3

To explore these and some additional methods you should now watch 'The emperor in the provinces', below. This video sequence examines how the face and name of the emperor were promoted in the provinces.

You may find it useful to refer to the map showing the provinces of the empire (Map 1 from *Experiencing Rome*, below) and the statue of Augustus (Plates 1 and 2).

Please click to view the map. (PDF, 1 page, 0.4 MB)

Please click to view Plate 1 Marble statue of Augustus, found in the Via Labicana, Rome. The head is covered, suggesting Augustus' role as pontifex maximus. After 12 BC, height 207 cm. Museo Nazionale, Rome. (Photo: Alinari). (PDF, 1 page, 1.7 MB) Please click to view Plate 2 Detail of Plate 1. (Photo: Alinari). (PDF, 1 page, 2.3 MB) As you watch note the major ways in which the image of the emperor was presented in the provinces.

Emperor and empire (part 1; 9 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

Emperor and empire - part 1

Emperor and empire (part 2; 6.5 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

Emperor and empire - part 2



Emperor and empire (part 3; 6 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

Emperor and empire - part 3

The video sequence focuses on both the visual and verbal means that were used to promote the emperor in the provinces. Busts, statues and coin images recorded the likeness of the emperor and could associate him with certain attributes. So the emperor might be represented as a priest or a soldier, while on coins his image might be associated with military victories and conquests or idealised virtues. (For further discussion of this, see *Experiencing Rome* Essay Two, pp. 42–4.) The name of the emperor was recorded through inscriptions which could also list his official titles and authority. Inscriptions might accompany statues and portraits but were often associated with buildings and structures. These might be funded by the emperor, who was thus recorded as a benefactor providing a gift to the local community; or the buildings might be dedicated to the emperor by local communities. An important avenue for promoting the name and image of the emperor was the imperial cult. Through buildings and rituals the relationship between emperor and provincial was placed in a religious context.

The image of the emperor was promoted in the provinces through multiple methods. Additional areas not explored in the video include further elements of the emperor's role as a benefactor. For example the emperor might fund local shows or gladiatorial contests, or he could elevate the status of a community or reward elements of the population with Roman citizenship. Such actions might be commemorated by inscriptions and those who gained citizenship under a given emperor normally adopted elements of the imperial nomenclature as their own. But above all such actions indebted the populace to the emperor and promoted loyalty to his name and image.

Promoting the name of the emperor entailed benefits to both sides. It was to the emperor's advantage to gain popularity and support, but it could also benefit the local community to gain imperial favour. It is often difficult to reconstruct the specific circumstances behind certain actions such as the erection of statues. Did the emperor dictate that these should be set up? Or was it a spontaneous gesture from the provincial community? Often the reality probably lay somewhere between the polarity of an enforced action and a voluntary one. Both sides knew the benefits to be gained and the power that was associated with the face and name of the emperor.

2.5 Cult

In many ways the emperor became a figurehead who helped to bind the empire together. The emperor was promoted as larger than life, a man who bordered on the divine. It is worth noting that the text of the *Res Gestae* from Ankara was found attached to the walls of the temple of Rome and Augustus; it was placed in a religious centre where the emperor was worshipped. The video section on 'The emperor in the provinces' also examined several cult buildings which promoted the emperor's name and image in a religious context. While alive Augustus and his successors were not regarded as gods, at least not in Rome. It was only at death that *apotheosis*, or the raising of the emperor's



spirit to divine heights, occurred as a result of a vote in the senate. But Augustus (and his successors) did explore and exploit his divine associations. He became the leader of Roman state religion – the *pontifex maximus*; the relationship between Augustus and the divine Julius Caesar was celebrated. Augustus also traced his ancestral line back to the goddess Venus and claimed close ties with the god Apollo – and few people could boast of such close personal connections with the gods! Even the name Augustus had a sense of the revered and sacred about it. It was thus a relatively small step for his subjects to view Augustus himself as divine and in some parts of the empire the living emperor was worshipped.

To a modern audience it may seem bizarre or even offensive that the inhabitants of the empire could actually believe that their emperor was a god or demigod. Was anything more involved than tasteless flattery and indulgent egotism? It is important to note the role that the cult played in the relationship between emperor and subject, and also that the relevance and nature of the cult, probably differed widely across the empire. As with other elements that promoted the emperor's image, a two-way process was often in operation. I would like you now to read an extract from a letter written by the emperor Claudius to the inhabitants of the city of Alexandria in Egypt. In this letter the emperor responds to certain requests made by the Alexandrians and tries to resolve disputes and problems which have arisen.

Exercise 4

Please read the short extract, taken from Lewis and Reinhold, below.

As you read make notes on the following questions.

- 1. Where does the impetus for the honours listed come from?
- 2. What honours is Claudius prepared to accept and what does he reject?

Please click to view the extract from Lewis and Reinhold.

- 1. Claudius lists many honours but repeatedly makes it clear that these have been suggested and requested by others. He does not tell the Alexandrians that they must set up statues and so forth but grants them permission to do these things if they so wish. The inhabitants of the city presumably at the instigation of their leading citizens wish to honour Claudius in various ways. This declaration of loyalty needs to be brought to the emperor's attention since Claudius, who is miles away in Rome, cannot see for himself that Alexandria is devoted to him. But the Alexandrians also gain an opportunity to show their loyalty in Rome itself since one of the statues is to be set up in the capital while its partner remains in Alexandria to become the focus of extravagant rituals. These gestures, although apparently instigated by the Alexandrians, are designed to unite Rome and Alexandria to mutual advantage.
- 2. Claudius begins by noting that he is not particularly partial to such honours but continues to accept just about everything that he has been offered his birthday as a holiday, statues of himself and his family, and numerous other images which are to be set up in various locations. It is almost as if the emperor feels obliged to sanction the honours for fear of causing offence and as he notes, to accept some and to refuse others would appear inconsistent. However, Claudius does draw the line at the suggested appointment of a high priest and the building of a temple. Golden statues, thrones, processions and all their trappings are



acceptable but he is not to be revered as a god. Claudius does not wish to cause offence by appearing to condone the blurring of the line between human and divine.

Claudius' hesitation over divine honours reveals the predicament faced by at least some emperors. The impetus for divine worship might arise in the provinces rather than at the emperor's instigation, and how should he respond to this? In some areas of the empire, such as Egypt, ruler-cult was a long-held tradition - but to declare oneself divine before death would be to invite scorn and even ridicule from other parts of the empire. (For example, see Goodman, p. 125, for the excesses of Gaius.) It is worth noting that most emperors were eager to appear modest in the titles and praise which they accepted or were seen to accept (see Lewis and Reinhold, pp. 286, 521-3). But it could also be to the emperor's advantage to exploit the ambiguous position he occupied between the gods and men. The divine concept reflected in part the unique position which Augustus created for himself and his successors; he appeared superhuman or like a gift from the gods (Wallace-Hadrill, 1993). There was much to be gained in stature by appearing, if not completely divine, certainly more than human. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the empire would never have seen the emperor face to face; to them he was a figure who symbolised Rome and the empire, and the continuity and security of that empire, and who personally held vast power and wealth. All this may well have contributed to an image of omnipotence and thus divinity.

2.6 Centre and periphery

Here you have considered some of the ways in which the power and authority of the emperor were communicated to the inhabitants of the empire. The full dynamics of the relationship are difficult to reconstruct especially as the view gained is mainly from Rome looking out to the provinces rather than vice versa. It was important for the emperor to appear to be a competent ruler of the empire. It was one method used by his peers and successors to evaluate an emperor's reign. But it is often difficult to see beyond the projected image to the reality. To those in Rome it was only if something went drastically wrong or if there was an opportunity for military glory that the provinces deserved to be mentioned. The Rome-centred view also makes it difficult to know the degree to which individual emperors made an impression in the provinces. Heads on statues and faces on coins might change, but did much else? Nevertheless it is possible to note that the relationship often flowed in two directions. The urge to commemorate and celebrate the emperor often originated within a given province at the will of the inhabitants, not because it was decreed or enforced by Rome. The inhabitants of the empire were not simply ruled and controlled by others but participated in the process themselves. However, to speak of the provinces collectively and of the provincials en masse is to mask the level of diversity. The consideration of the imperial cult illustrates that the responses to both the emperor and imperial rule could vary greatly.



Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.



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