

REACTIONS TO IMPERIAL RULE

Approximately 50 to 60 million people lived within the confines of the Roman Empire at its height. This great mass was ruled by one man whose ability to retain power depended ultimately on brute force and terror. The emperor's subjects reacted to their powerlessness in a variety of ways: by accommodating themselves to reality in a spirit of realism or self-deception; by dissociating themselves from the state as far as was possible, and making their lives and careers within alternative value systems in which Roman politics and public affairs could be seen as irrelevant; or by committing themselves to oppose the state, by open defiance of imperial propaganda or (less commonly) by armed rebellion in the form of political conspiracies, banditry or national revolt.¹

It is implausible that any one emperor will have elicited a uniform response across his extensive domains. In any case, some of his subjects may have reacted to him as an individual (or, at any rate, they may have reacted to the *persona* that he succeeded in conveying), whereas others may have viewed him only as a representative of the imperial system. It is reasonable therefore to expect variety in different places and periods, and the remaining chapters of this part of the book will be devoted to examining the response of different peoples in different areas of the empire.

It should be admitted at the outset that the project is not altogether straightforward, since the amount and type of evidence vary drastically from area to area, and it is rarely likely to be easy to see whether what survives represents typical attitudes or exceptional ones. In general, it can be asserted that the viewpoints of women, children and slaves are particularly hard to investigate, and the predominant trend of the evidence is to illuminate the attitude of the richer members of society who had the ability to record their ideas in durable form such as inscriptions, and who had either the education to produce the literary works preserved through the medieval manuscript traditions or the money to commission such works from others.

TYPES OF EVIDENCE

The bulk of the literary evidence, at least from the first century AD, derives from the city of Rome itself. It is tempting to see this fact as though it were significant, as if the city were somehow more Roman than more distant parts of the empire. But it has already been noted that this was not always the attitude of the state, and, as will be seen below, it was not always the attitude of the inhabitants of the empire. The survival of such literature was due almost entirely to its perceived literary merit in Late Antiquity, not because of its social or political relevance at the time of composition. Nonetheless, the preponderance of the evidence and its intrinsic interest have been allowed in this book to expand the sections below on the city of Rome to two chapters (Chapters 17 and 18).

Second only to the output of the city of Rome was a great flood of literature produced in Greece and Asia Minor between the late first and second centuries AD. Works of history, rhetoric, scholarship and philosophy were produced (and survived) in profusion, but their evidence is of a peculiar kind, since much of it emphasizes not contemporary society but that of Classical Greece before the Hellenistic period.

The third type of literary work to survive in any quantity, and again not necessarily representative of the attitudes of more than a few, is religious literature. Many Christian and Jewish writings of this period were preserved by the Early Church and to a lesser extent by later Judaism. They contain much incidental information on the life of inhabitants in the parts of the empire bordering the eastern Mediterranean, but they provide few insights into the northern or western regions of Roman rule.

For these other views, then, the reactions to imperial rule must be gauged from the ambiguous testimony of buildings, artefacts, and inscriptions. In Egypt a mass of papyri illuminates some aspects of life in villages and small towns. In Greece and in Asia Minor the strength of the epigraphic habit provides a large corpus of evidence of how local aristocrats wished themselves to be viewed. But for much of northern Europe the picture has to be built up entirely from archaeological remains, and the fragments of unreliable comments about these unfamiliar societies written by authors from the urban civilizations of the Mediterranean region.

ACCOMMODATION

The bulk of the evidence for accommodation to one-man rule by self-deception derives from the capital city and the municipalities of Italy, even though within the imperial court itself, there was no pretence: the imperial palace was a machine for the aggrandizement of its chief occupant; its other inhabitants, his huge *familia* of slaves and freedmen, existed to do his bidding. Senators and others of the higher social orders within Roman society proved highly competent

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in presenting themselves as willing participants in an aristocratic society of noble equals, a myth perpetuated as much by them as by the emperors themselves. A similar self-deception may be found in, for example, Aelius Aristides' image of his beloved Smyrna as one of a harmonious league of cities of which Rome too was only one city, albeit the most glorious (see Chapter 13).

In contrast the imperial cult reveals accommodation by realists who recognized that all depended on one man's whim, and that he was to be flattered and courted accordingly. A good deal of emperor worship was stimulated by pressure from below, by the worshippers, rather than imposed by the emperor. The Greek communities of Asia Minor had always competed among each other for status and power, a legacy of their days as Hellenistic city-states. This rivalry continued under the empire, except they now vied for honours bestowed by the emperor. One of the greatest privileges was the title of *neokoros* ('temple warden'), which could only be granted to communities which had a provincial temple of the imperial cult. Some cities, such as Pergamon, Smyrna and Ephesus, had acquired three provincial temples by the early third century A.D., earning the right to be known as three times *neokoroi*. These privileges were advertised prominently on local coinages.

The maintenance of personal honour ensured that aristocrats played their part in the government of the empire, serving as provincial administrators and army commanders to enhance their personal status and *dignitas*, much as their predecessors had done under the Republic. In this way, the emperor functioned as the aristocrat *par excellence*, and other senators were encouraged to emulate his actions and virtues. Some senators portrayed themselves as grateful for whatever favour they received from the ruler, as in the case of L. Plotius Sabbinus, who proudly recorded on his career inscription that he had earned a position in the second group of men who paid homage to Antoninus Pius at his morning *salutatio* (CIL VI 4111 = ILS 1078). Another aristocrat of the Antonine age, the jurist Salvius Iulianus, specifically noted that his salary as quaestor had been doubled by the emperor Hadrian 'on account of his distinguished learning' (*propter insignem doctrinam*) (CIL VIII 24094 = ILS 8973). These rewards enabled senators to accumulate honour and personal distinctions within the constraints of an imperial system.

In the provinces accommodation to imperial rule usually began with the local elite, for whom recognition by Rome served as a bulwark for their own authority. It sometimes took the form of adoption of aspects of Roman culture, as described by Tacitus in his biography of Agricola, who had served as governor of Britain:

... the nation which used to reject the Latin language began to aspire to rhetoric: further, the wearing of our dress became a distinction, and the toga came into fashion, and little by little the Britons went astray into alluring vices: to the promenade, the bath, the well-appointed dinner table. The simple natives gave the name of culture (*humanitas*) to this factor of their slavery. (Tac. Agr. 21).

The distribution of inscriptions in the Gallic provinces shows that they were usually erected in urban regions, particularly in communities on major road networks or near military zones. Epigraphic commemoration was particularly favoured by freedmen as it allowed them to display their rise through the social hierarchy and the honours that had accrued to them as the result of Roman rule, such as membership of the priesthood of the emperor (the *Augustales*).²

On the other hand accommodation by provincials might sometimes involve cultural choices more complex than a simple adoption of a Roman way of life, since individuals might switch between different identities depending on the circumstances, wearing a toga, for example to participate in emperor worship, but speaking their native language, rather than Latin, with members of their family. These different aspects are often now difficult to trace, since the evidence generally shows us only one aspect at a time.³

DISSOCIATION

Dissociation from the state was easier at a greater distance, either geographical or social, from the centre of power, although even in Rome those poets like Ovid who wrote about love, not war, in a way distanced themselves from the regime.⁴ Some of the less prosperous and more inaccessible areas technically under Roman rule, such as Rough Cilicia, might witness almost none of the effects of the Roman state. With no troops stationed in the area, because there was nothing worth defending; with no urban centres, because the land produced insufficient surplus to permit their erection; with harvests too meagre to be worth the trouble to exact unpaid taxes, and routes into the territory too hilly to permit easy disciplining of the recalcitrant; in such cases, the natives' understanding of, and concern for, the Roman state may well have been negligible, although, in the nature of things, discovering much about the attitudes of such people will always be difficult. It is unusual that in the religious texts of the Jews of second-century Galilee something survives.⁵

Individual drop-outs could make their stand in any part of the empire. In some cases, they would elevate their stance to the level of a philosophy. Thus the bearded Cynics on street corners were a phenomenon frequently noted in the cities of the Mediterranean region in the Early Empire.⁶ Cynics preached self-reliance and disregard for the empty trappings of public life. For many Cynics this attitude would attract no notice: only those otherwise expected to take on a public role, such as senators in mid-career, or those who proclaimed their faith in the market-place came (deliberately) to wider attention. Again, the lives of those private men and women who lived in a self-contained world of family and friends can rarely be reconstructed, and it is even more difficult to know whether that life was deliberately chosen or the unintended consequence of unknown difficulties encountered when entering on a public

and political career otherwise desired. But of some, like those who sought a different explanation of life within religious groups such as Christianity, something more positive can be said; the literature produced for and by such converts reveals the creation not just of an alternative theodicy but of a society within a wider society, with its own bonds, pressures and expectations.⁷

OPONENTS OF THE STATE

And finally, there were also explicit opponents of the state, who can conveniently be divided into those whose hostility was expressed symbolically and those who genuinely expected or hoped to change the system under which they were ruled, or at least the individual at the head of that system. In neither case is the motive of the actors always evident.

Of symbolic opponents of the imperial regime much the best known are the heroes of the 'Stoic' opposition whose exploits fill, often tragically, the pages of Tacitus' *Annals*.⁸ Stoicism in itself might simply provide an antidote to the preferences and pressures of court life, but some Stoic senators and equestrians gained fame or notoriety by public expression of their distaste for the emperor or hatred of his immense power. By speeches in the senate or ostentatious demonstrations of defiance, they frequently brought upon their heads the displeasure of the emperor and in some cases eventual martyrdom. Such was the case with Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus in AD 66, as described in a lengthy narrative by Tacitus, who begins by detailing the charges against Thrasea:

After the massacre of so many distinguished men, Nero finally coveted the destruction of Virtue herself by killing Thrasea Paetus and Marcus Barea Soranus. He had long hated them both. Against Thrasea there were additional motives. He had, as I mentioned, walked out of the senate during the debate about Agrippina. He had also been inconspicuous at the Youth Games. This gave all the more offence because during Games (the festival instituted by Antenor the Trojan) at his birthplace, Patavium, he had participated by singing in tragic costume. Besides, on the day when the praetor Antistius Sostianus was virtually condemned to death for writing offensive verses about Nero, he had proposed and carried a more lenient sentence. Again, after Poppaea's death, he had deliberately stayed away when divine honours were voted to her, and was not present at her funeral. (*Annals* 16.21)

The mode of senators' and equestrians' expression of opposition was tied up with their self-image as members of the Roman upper class. They never had any hope of changing the regime or threatening the autocrat. At best they won for themselves gratification, and for him embarrassment. Such opposition was as ineffective as the use of pejorative nicknames to refer to emperors or the circulation, after the death of Agrippina, of witty epigrams about Nero as a matricide (Suet. *Nero* 39.2), or the subtle cultural resistance among the provincial populations encapsulated in a reluctance to equate traditional local

gods with Roman deities, or the continued use of non-Roman domestic spaces such as British roundhouses, which have been identified by archaeologists adopting post-colonial approaches to the material evidence as signs of opposition to Roman hegemony.⁹

Genuinely dangerous opposition to emperors came rather from his army commanders or from his close acquaintances, including his *familia*, or from mass uprisings by his subjects. The possibility that an imperial legate might rise up against the princeps who had selected him for command was apparent from the beginning of the Roman Empire. It had been precisely the prospect of winning power by the use of provincial legions that added fuel to the civil wars from 49 BC to Actium. Army commanders marched on Rome from all parts of the empire in AD 69. Scribonianus, legate of Dalmatia, rebelled against Claudius in AD 42, and Saturninus, governor of Upper Germany, raised a revolt against Domitian in AD 89. Other disaffected commanders were inhibited, presumably, by the fear of death as the price of failure, and the knowledge that not one of them controlled sufficient troops to expect success if faced by the concerted opposition of fellow commanders. It is worth recalling that all of Nero's legates, apart from Galba in Spain, remained loyal to him in AD 68, until in panic Nero engineered his own death. For many commanders it seemed all too likely that fellow generals would remain loyal to the man who had appointed them all. It was clearly unsafe to ask, for fear of accusation of plotting treachery.

More effectively dangerous were the emperor's close associates whose physical proximity to him gave them opportunities denied to others. The tally is long of emperors killed by trusted subordinates, praetorian guards, wives, children, freedmen and slaves. No amount of care could counteract the risks posed by the opportunity for murder. The motives for such opposition were frequently personal. Cassius Chaerea, tribune of the praetorian guard, committed murder because he had suffered a personal slight from Gaius. Nero sought power in place of his adopted father. The man who killed Domitian had probably been suborned by Nerva, who benefited so rapidly from the latter's death. None of these was trying to change the system, even though some senators in AD 41 thought the system could be changed once Gaius' murder had been effected.

MASS INSURRECTION

And finally, mass insurrection. In the nature of the Roman Empire, which favoured so strongly the rich landed class, a class struggle by the poor urban plebs might reasonably have been expected, but it is not found.¹⁰ In the city of Rome the urban plebs had learned to play an important political role in the Late Republic, when in the 50s BC Clodius and Milo terrorized the city and controlled the political agenda, and in the triumphal period that role was maintained, though to less effect. The power of the plebs was still being

demonstrated in 22 BC, when the senate was briefly barricaded inside the *curia* (senate house), and in 19 BC, when the consular candidate Egnatius Rufus garnered a dangerous amount of popular support in the city. But despite the symbolic hostility to unpopular emperors manifested at *spectacula* (shows), the urban plebs stayed strikingly quiescent through most of the early principate, bought off by 'bread and circuses'. The rural poor, both free and slave, were effectively cowed into submission; the slave revolts of the Late Republic were not repeated in the imperial period.

Revolts, when they did happen, took place at a distance from the centre of power. The tally of recorded disaffection is quite considerable in Gaul, Britain, the Balkans, Africa, Judaea and Pontus. There may also have been many other revolts which the sources do not record, since the Roman state tended to ignore such setbacks when it could and native literature rarely survives. So, for instance, the contemporary author Velleius Paterculus almost completely ignored the major insurrection by Tacfarinas in Africa in AD 17-24, and it is the chance survival of later histories that preserve an account of the episode.

What the rebels sought was not always complete independence from Roman rule. Many revolts were sparked off by the census, by the enthusiastic collection of taxes, or by conscription, and in such cases a diminution of the tax burden may have been their sole hope. But other rebellions clearly had more ambitious aims. There was a rash of revolts on the geographical fringes of Roman power, particularly in the northern provinces, in the Julio-Claudian period.¹¹ Led by members of the old local ruling class who had partially, but evidently not yet entirely, incorporated themselves into mainstream Roman society, these rebellions marked a last-ditch attempt to win back independence before it was too thoroughly eroded.

But it is not always easy to distinguish in the sources between local disturbances and insurrection against Rome. Where, for instance, should one place the *stasis* (civil unrest) in Alexandria under Hadrian?¹² Anti-Roman papyrus and known to modern scholars as the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, the discontent of Alexandrian Greeks was nonetheless sparked off by hostility to local Jews and to Egyptians, and the urban riots had no chance of threatening Roman power, as Trajan's and Hadrian's treatment of the city shows they were well aware. Similarly, the frequent revolts in Judaea usually expressed discontent with Rome in religious terms, but there are good grounds to suppose that the rebels hoped for far more than religious tolerance to Jerusalem. Inhabitants of Greek *poles* (city states) always valued their freedom almost as an element of the definition of their communities, but they could, when they wanted, define freedom as local autonomy under Roman rule. Similarly, supporters of the *imperium Galliarum* (empire of the Gauls) led by Civilis and the Batavi in AD 69 may have seen themselves as an expression of Gallic nationalism, but they may also have seen themselves in the context of Roman politics, as opponents of the Vitellian regime.¹³