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Splendid Isolation

Secluded Emperors and the Spectre of Oriental Despotism

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1. Introduction

Emperor Carinus is usually not counted among the most exemplary rulers of Rome. Nevertheless, he features as the hero in an anecdote told by Synesius of Cyrene in his speech *De regno* ('On Kingship'). Leading a military campaign against the Parthians, the emperor ordered a stop when the army had reached the borders of enemy territory. While the soldiers were having a bite to eat:

> an embassy appeared from the enemy lines, thinking on their arrival to have the first conversation with the influential men who surrounded the king, and after these with some dependents and gentleman ushers, but supposing that only on a much later day would the king himself give audience to the embassy.[1]

To their astonishment, however, the Parthians were immediately led before Carinus, who was sitting in the grass enjoying some pea soup. Without bothering to get up, the emperor threatened that all Parthian forests and plains would within a month be barer than his head if they did not surrender. To underline the point, he took off his cap to show the ambassadors his bald head. When this message was conveyed to the Parthian king, he was so terrified that he immediately came to discuss terms. Hence 'he of the tiara and robes' yielded to 'one in a simple woollen tunic and cap'.[2]

We can safely assume that this display of imperial machismo never actually took place. For one thing, the Parthian Empire had long been replaced by Sasanian Persia in Carinus' day, and for another, Carinus never launched a campaign against Rome's eastern neighbour.[3] But the truthfulness of the story is less important than the message it meant to convey. Synesius allegedly delivered *De regno* before Arcadius during his embassy to Constantinople at the end of the fourth century, although its blunt tone makes it unlikely that it was spoken to the emperor's face.[4] The speech criticizes the young ruler for his passive, secluded lifestyle, comparing him and other emperors from the recent past to splendorous peacocks and, less flatteringly, lizards who never peep out of their lair to enjoy the sun. Unlike the gruff warhorse Carinus, who spent his days among his men and was content to live on army rations, Arcadius wallows in luxury in the palace, far away from the eyes of *hoi polloi*. 'You rejoice only in the pleasures of the body, and the most material of these, even as many as touch and taste offer you,' Synesius admonished the emperor. Unable to resist yet another animal simile, he added: 'and so you live the life of a polyp of the sea'.[5]

2. Imperial Visibility and Oriental Seclusion

De regno presents the most elaborate treatment of a theme which frequently features in speeches and histories from the late fourth and fifth centuries: the *princeps clausus*.[6] This is the emperor who is locked away in his palace and, blissfully unaware of the outside world, fails to interact with his subjects. In these texts, imperial seclusion is often associated with excessive pomp, the dominance of eunuchs at court, and an inclination on the part of the emperors to prefer luxury and indolence to military toil.[7] While this is undoubtedly a distorted and exaggerated image, it does signal how concerned late antique authors and orators were about imperial visibility and accessibility.

Of course, such concerns were hardly new. Complaints about rulers who made themselves unavailable to their subjects can be traced back to the early days of the Principate, although they may have been expressed in different ways.[8] From the reign of Augustus onwards, visibility and accessibility had served as important markers of good emperorship. Various scholars have explored how the Romans connected 'seeing' and 'being seen' to notions of power.[9] On the one

[1] Syn. *de regno* 12.4: *πρεσβείαν ἐκ τῶν πολεμίων παρεῖναι καὶ οἴεσθαι μὲν ἥκουσαν προεντεύξεσθαι τοῖς βασιλεῖ παραδυναστεύουσι, καὶ τούτων γε αὖ πελάταις τισὶ καὶ εἰσαγγελεῦσιν, ὡς εἰς ἡμέραν πολλοστὴν ἀπ'ἐκείνης τοῦ βασιλέως τῇ πρεσβείᾳ χρηματιοῦντος* (trans. A. Fitzgerald 1930). See Lamoureux and Aujoulat 2008 for a detailed commentary on the speech; also Cameron and Long 1993: 103–42. Translations of other texts come from the Loeb Classical Library, sometimes adapted.

[2] Syn. *de regno* 12.7: *τὸν ἐν τιάρᾳ καὶ κάνδυϊ... τῷ μετὰ χιτῶνος φαύλων ἐρίων καὶ πίλου.*

[3] It is possible that Synesius was thinking of Carinus' father, Carus.

[4] See Cameron and Long 1993: 127–42, who argue that the speech was aimed at a court faction whose favour Synesius hoped to win. (This is contested by Hagl 1997: 76–82, but see Lenski 1998.)

[5] Syn. *de regno* 10.3: *μόνας ἡδομένους τὰς τοῦ σώματος ἡδονάς, καὶ τούτων γε τὰς ὑλικωτάτας, ὅσας ἁφή τε καὶ γεῦσις πορίζουσι... βίον ζῶντας θαλαττίου πνεύμονος.*

[6] The words are first used by Sulpicius Alexander (preserved in Greg. Tur. *HF* 2.9) with regard to Valentinian II: *clauso apud Viennam palatii aedibus principe* ('the emperor was cloistered in the halls of the palace at Vienne').

[7] See Icks 2017; also Stroheker 1970; Chastagnol 1985.

[8] See further the discussion of this topos in historical context in Chapter 14.

[9] Parker 1999; Fredrick 2002; Hekster 2005; Icks 2020a. See Duindam 2016: 227–85 for a cross-cultural perspective on the (in)visibility of monarchic rulers, in particular during ritual performances.

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hand, emperors, consuls, and other prominent figures had to put themselves on display to show off their high status and personal qualities, impressing the soldiers and people on whose support their power ultimately relied. As part of these displays, they had to signal their readiness to listen to and address the needs and grievances of ordinary citizens. On the other hand, the high and mighty made themselves vulnerable through such displays, since they had to subject themselves to the public gaze and hence to public judgement. If they did not behave according to social norms and expectations, they were seen as dishonourable and lost their legitimacy as political leaders.[10]

In the endless game of watching and being watched, of judging and being judged, the imperial court played a central role. After all, this was the place where elites gathered, where alliances were forged or broken, and favours granted or withheld. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has remarked, the court was a fundamentally theatrical place, a glamourous stage on which actors could show themselves, but also play roles and veil their true intentions, all the while eyeing each other intently. Above all, it was the place where one strove to gain the attention and hopefully the favour of the emperor.[11] From the perspective of courtiers, imperial visibility and accessibility at court were thus of paramount importance. If one could not see the emperor, be seen *with* the emperor, or be seen *by* the emperor, one had no opportunity to forge close ties, boost one's prestige, and advance one's interests, let alone acquire the sort of intimacy with the ruler that enabled real influence over the longer term.[12]

Taking these things into consideration, it is not hard to see why Greco-Roman orators and authors presented imperial seclusion as problematical. According to Synesius, Arcadius not only failed to appear in public, but was even difficult to approach within the confines of the court: surrounded as he was by unworthy favourites, only a few privileged senators were allowed to greet him, while generals and captains were hesitant to enter the palace.[13] The anecdote about Carinus and the Parthian embassy provides an important counterpoint to this image of an unapproachable ruler. Synesius' point is not just that Carinus showed active leadership and martial valour, but also that his active campaigning and closeness to the soldiers made him highly accessible—even to his enemies. As the speech emphasizes, the Parthians were highly surprised by their speedily admission and the lack of ceremony in their encounter with the leader of the Roman world.

[10] See in particular Parker 1999: 167–8 for the dual nature of visibility as a source of power as well as vulnerability in Roman culture.

[11] Wallace-Hadrill 2011: 97–8.

[12] For the concepts of the 'politics of access' and 'politics of intimacy', see the Introduction of this book.

[13] Syn. *de regno* 10.4, 11.3. Synesius is painting a caricature; see Pfeilschifter 2013: 76–122 for the actual circumstances of imperial accessibility in late antique Constantinople, and McEvoy 2020a for an examination of Arcadius himself.

Presumably their own master, 'he of the tiara and robes', would not have been so readily available.

In another passage of *De regno*, Synesius likewise frames imperial seclusion as Oriental, holding up another historical figure for Arcadius to emulate: Agesilaos II, 'the lame king whom Xenophon praises throughout all his history'. Allegedly, this monarch was 'most conspicuous in all his actions to everyone who desired to see the leader of Sparta'. Because he was such an excellent general, he almost managed to drive King Artaxerxes II from his kingdom.[14] Once again, an active and accessible Western ruler is (almost) triumphant over an Oriental ruler who is imagined as his opposite.

As we will see, Synesius of Cyrene was not the only author who thought there was something distinctly un-Roman about emperors who lived in splendid isolation. Either implicitly or explicitly, Greco-Roman sources frequently associate the figure of the secluded emperor with the world of the East, in particular with the Persian court. In fact, the notion that Oriental kings sealed themselves off from their subjects has deep roots in Greek literature, going all the way back to Herodotus, Ctesias, and Xenophon. In this chapter, I will explore imperial seclusion as a marker of 'bad' emperorship in Greco-Roman literary discourse, with a particular focus on the image of the secluded Oriental court as a parallel or counterpoint to the Roman court. First, I will briefly discuss the roots and characteristics of his image. Then, I will analyse when and how it was employed in depictions of invisible, inaccessible emperors from the early Principate to Late Antiquity.

3. The Invisible Kings of the East

Scholars of the Achaemenid court have commented on the limited visibility and accessibility of the Persian king, who appears to have been 'a shadowy figure even to longstanding courtiers'.[15] Although he travelled between several capitals to make himself available in different locations, the Great King took care to maintain an aloof status and placed himself at a great distance from his nobles and common subjects through the unmatched splendour of his appearance and highly formalized court ceremony. Those who approached him without permission risked death. Access to the monarch was controlled by eunuchs, who held sway over the royal bedchamber and served him at dinner.[16]

[14] Syn. *de regno* 13.8: *τοῦ χωλοῦ βασιλέως ὃν ἐπαινεῖ Ξενοφῶν ἐν ὅλῳ συγγράμματι . . . ἐν ᾧ πάντα ποιῶν καταφανέστατος ἦν οἷς ἐπιμελὲς τὸν ἡγεμόνα τῆς Σπάρτης ὁρᾶν.*

[15] Llewellyn-Jones 2013a: 44.

[16] Wiesehöfer 1996: 29–55; Briant 2002: 259–61, 274–7; Brosius 2007; 2010; Llewellyn-Jones 2013a: 44–8. Much of our information about the Achaemenid court comes from Greek sources, but palace architecture and reliefs confirm the impression of the king's aloof status and limited accessibility.

Like all things Persian, the court of the Great King was fascinating to Greeks of the classical age, prompting admiration as well as scorn.[17] As the royal seat of a continent-spanning empire, it was by definition a very un-Greek place, unlike anything to be found in the world of self-governing *poleis*. In classical Greek literature, the Persian court is famed for its incredible wealth, which not only symbolized the Persian king's unsurpassed power, but could also be interpreted as a sign of Oriental *tryphē*, of indulgence in luxury and bodily pleasure, and hence as a sign of weakness and decadence.[18] The Greeks famously rejected *proskynesis*, the ritual of obeisance to the monarch, as a gesture of submission to a despotic ruler that was incompatible with Hellenic freedom.[19]

Both these things—despotism and *tryphē*—play a large role in Greek literary images of the secluded Persian (or, more generally, Oriental) court, where the king's luxurious life is wholly detached from that of ordinary mortals. As Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has pointed out, Greek discourse was fixated on the invisibility of the Persian monarch, while at the same time imagining him as all-seeing, since his numerous spies and informers allowed him to keep a close eye on the doings of his subjects. Frequent reference is made to criminals and traitors having their eyes gouged out. In short, the Great King controlled not only his own visibility, but also the very sight of his subjects.[20]

Herodotus traces the origins of the Near Eastern court back to the predecessors of the Persians, the Medes. Right from the start, it seems, seclusion was a vital ingredient of Oriental court life. As the historian has it, Deioces, the first Median king, lived in a palace that was enclosed by seven strong concentric walls and communicated with the outside world through intermediaries. Significantly, 'he had spies and eavesdroppers everywhere in his domain', strengthening the impression of a monarch firmly in the grip of paranoia, while drawing attention to the striking imbalance in visibility between ruler and ruled.[21] Deioces seems to suffer from delusions of grandeur, thinking he is a being of a higher order, or at least working hard to create this impression in others. His isolation is thus not only a matter of physically distancing himself from his subjects, but also of claiming a status that places him above and beyond conventional social hierarchies.

[17] Much has been written about Greek perceptions of Persians and the Persians' role as the 'Other' in Greek culture; e.g. Hall 1989; Isaac 2004: 257–303; Gruen 2011: 9–75; Lenfant 2012. See Strootman and Versluys 2017 for a wide-ranging treatment of the reception of Achaemenid Persia in antiquity and beyond.

[18] Briant 2002: 255–6; Jacobs 2010: 395–7. Persian kings feature prominently in Book 12 of Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, which is entirely devoted to *tryphē*; see Lenfant 2007.

[19] E.g. Hdt. 7.136; Plut. *Artax.* 22.4; Just. *Epit.* 6.2.13.

[20] Llewellyn-Jones 2013b: 173–7; also Llewellyn-Jones 2013a: 47–8. The concept of an 'empire of the gaze' has been borrowed from Grosrichard 1979, which explores early modern discourses on Oriental despotism, including the notion of a secluded court.

[21] Hdt. 1.99–100: *οἱ κατάσκοποί τε καὶ κατήκοοι ἦσαν ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν χώρην τῆς ἦρχε.*

Ctesias also discusses the Near Eastern court in his *Persica*, but traces its origins to the Assyrians.[22] As the author claims, the first Assyrian king to isolate himself from his subjects was Ninyas, the son of the legendary warrior-queen Semiramis.[23] His example was followed by his successors, culminating in the reign of Sardanapalus, the last Assyrian monarch. Much more so than Herodotus, Ctesias associates royal seclusion with great luxury and passive 'feminine' behaviour. The prime motive for the Assyrian kings to seek solitude appears to have been not a concern for their safety, but the creation of an environment where they were not bothered by the troubles of the outside world. Sardanapalus in particular is presented as the very embodiment of *tryphē*, a man deprived of any masculine qualities who wallows in luxury and has no other goal than indulging in bodily pleasures.[24] A similar theme is present in Xenophon's *Agesilaos*, where the visibility and active leadership of the Spartan king are contrasted with the seclusion of the Persian monarch, with the former sharing the toil and hardships of his soldiers, while the latter spends his days in comfort and limits his availability to his subjects as much as possible.[25]

Obviously, not all classical Greek authors judged the Persian or Oriental court in the same manner, but the seclusion of the Oriental king frequently serves as a marker of the distance and alienation between the monarch and his subjects. This theme was still current in the literature of the Roman Empire, especially in Greek sources. Pseudo-Aristotle's *De mundo* ('On the Universe'), a philosophical treatise from the Hellenistic or early imperial age, describes Cambyses, Xerxes, and Darius as leading secluded lives, 'invisible to all, in a marvellous palace with a surrounding wall flashing with gold, electrum and ivory', while their intermediaries ensure that they 'might see everything and hear everything'.[26] The story of the effeminate, wool-spinning Sardanapalus was retold by Diodorus Siculus and Athenaeus and was still known to Paulus Orosius in the early fifth century. Many more stories about invisible, androgynous kings can be found in Book 12 of the *Deipnosophistae* ('Sophists at Dinner').[27]

[22] Lanfranchi 2010: 56–7. See Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2013: 1–87 for a good discussion of Ctesias' use of Persian sources and his perspective on the East.

[23] Preserved in Ath. 12.528e–f (Ctesias, *Persica* F1n in Lenfant 2004).

[24] Ctesias' account of Sardanapalus has been lost, but several adaptations in later works allow us to reconstruct the gist of the original text: Diod. 2.23.1–4; Nicolaus of Damascus, *FGrH* 90 F2 (Ctesias, *Persica* F1pδα); Ath. 12.528f–529a (Ctesias, *Persica* F1pα).

[25] Xen. *Ages.* 9.1–5. The author gives a more nuanced verdict on the Persian court in his *Cyropaedia*, where Cyrus the Great is said to have limited royal visibility in order to rule more effectively (7.5.37ff.); see Vlassopoulos 2017: 370–2. For a discussion on the various interpretations of Xenophon's Cyrus as an ideal ruler, see Tamiolaki 2017: 190–2.

[26] Aris. [*Mund.*] 398A: *παντὶ ἀόρατος, θαυμαστὸν ἐπέχων βασίλειον οἶκον καὶ περίβολον χρυσῷ καὶ ἠλέκτρῳ καὶ ἐλέφαντι ἀστράπτοντα... πάντα μὲν βλέποι, πάντα δὲ ἀκούοι.* Interestingly, the author employs the image of the secluded Persian king in a positive context, as a metaphor for the divine; see Betegh and Gregoric 2014.

[27] Oros. 1.19. See Gambato 2000 for secluded 'female-kings' in Book 12 of the *Deipnosophistae*.

4. Secluded Emperors in the Principate

As is well-known, Augustus founded his rule on the notion that he was a *princeps* rather than a *rex*, communicating to the senators that he regarded them as his peers. Consequently, most emperors from the time of the Principate cultivated their *civilitas*. This meant that they rejected excessive luxury and pompous displays, preferring to project the image of a modest, accessible prince.[28] However, that was not their only mode of representation. As Christoph Michels has explored in Chapter 1 in this volume, even an exemplary *princeps* like Antoninus Pius was at the centre of an ostentatious court and could be unabashedly referred to as μέγας βασιλεὺς by senatorial courtiers like Fronto. On the other hand, the *Historia Augusta* praises Antoninus for his abolishment of imperial pomp and reducing the influence of courtiers who acted as intermediaries.[29]

Civilitas, then, can be understood as just one among several imperial strategies of communication, to be employed for particular audiences on particular occasions. A *civilis princeps* displayed himself in ways that emphasized his closeness and accessibility to his subjects, in particular the senatorial aristocracy that would posthumously chronicle and judge his reign. However, this emphasis on the emperor's modesty, closeness, and accessibility was at odds with the splendour of the *aula Caesaris* that developed over the course of the Principate. For a keen observer like Marcus Aurelius, there was no fundamental difference between the Roman court and those of monarchic figures like Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great, and Croesus of Lydia.[30] By its very nature, these comparisons suggest, the Roman court had a whiff of the Oriental about it. But was it also characterized as a place of Oriental-type seclusion by Greco-Roman authors?

Among the rulers of the first and second centuries, two stand out for their alleged isolation from their subjects: Tiberius and Domitian.[31] In the case of the former, the emperor's withdrawal to Capri was a major point of criticism in the literary sources. Suetonius discusses it in terms of a withdrawal from the public gaze, remarking that Tiberius, 'being as it were out of sight of the citizens... at last gave free rein at once to all the vices which he had for a long time ill-concealed'.[32] Tacitus makes a similar comment, speculating that the emperor left for Capri 'to find an inconspicuous home for the cruelty and lust which his acts proclaimed to the world'.[33] The underlying assumption is that sovereigns who

[28] Wallace-Hadrill 1982.

[29] Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 2.3 (vdH² p. 21, l. 20, p. 23, l. 17); *HA Ant. Pius* 6.4, 7.7–8. See also M. Aur. *Med.* 1.17.5 for the lack of pomp at Antoninus' court.

[30] M. Aur. *Med.* 10.27.

[31] Another good example might be Commodus, who became estranged from the senate and ruled through intermediaries like Perennis and Cleander for large parts of his reign. See Hekster 2002: 60–77.

[32] Suet. *Tib.* 42.1: *quasi civitatis oculis remotis, cuncta simul vitia male diu dissimulata tandem profudit.*

[33] Tac. *Ann.* 4.57, 6.1: *saevitiam ac libidinem cum factis promeret, locis occultantem.*

were not held in check by the public eye might be up to anything. Although there are obvious parallels to the secluded hedonism of Oriental kings like Ninyas and Sardanapalus, Tiberius' seclusion is never framed as such in the literary sources. One reason for this may be that the emperor made no attempts to elevate his status through pomp and splendour, a recurring feature in stories about secluded Oriental kings.[34]

Things are different in Domitian's case. Unlike Tiberius, this ruler *did* adopt a more explicitly autocratic style, downplaying his *civilitas* in favour of a grand, superhuman aura.[35] In the works of Martial and Statius, emphasis is laid on the emperor's awe-inspiring presence and majestic appearance.[36] Only after Domitian's assassination and Nerva's and Trajan's return to a more modest style of representation did Martial openly associate his former patron with Oriental despotism, bidding all flatterers to 'go far away to the turbaned Parthians and, with base and servile supplications, kiss the feet of their pageant kings'.[37] Such remarks signal the restoration of cordial relations between emperor and senate after a period of alienation under Domitian. In Pliny's famous *Panegyricus* to Trajan, the deceased tyrant's social isolation is described in vivid terms:

> this is the place where recently that fearful monster built his defences with untold terrors, where lurking in his den he licked up the blood of his murdered relatives or emerged to plot the massacre and destruction of his most distinguished subjects. Menaces and horror were the sentinels at his doors, and the fears alike of admission and rejection; then himself in person, dreadful to see and to meet, with arrogance on his brow and fury in his eye, a womanish pallor spread over his body but a deep flush to match the shameless expression on his face. None dared approach him, none dared speak; always he sought darkness and mystery, and only emerged from the desert of his solitude to create another.[38]

[34] In fact, as Cassius Dio remarks, while Tiberius was still in Rome he was 'extremely easy to approach and easy to address', making an effort to ensure that 'the people might meet him with as little difficulty and trouble as possible' (57.11.1–7).

[35] For Domitian's reign and representation, see Jones 1992; Southern 1997; Leberl 2004; Gering 2012.

[36] E.g. Mart. 5.3, 7.5, 9.24; Stat. *Silv.* 4.1.1–4, 4.2.10–17.

[37] Mart. 10.72: *ad Parthos procul ite pilleatos et turpes humilesque supplicesque pictorum sola basiate regum.*

[38] Plin. *Pan.* 48.3–5: *quam nuper illa immanissima belua plurimo terrore munierat, cum velut quodam specu inclusa nunc propinquorum sanguinem lamberet, nunc se ad clarissimorum civium strages caedesque proferret. Obversabantur foribus horror et minae et par metus admissis et exclusis; ad hoc ipse occursu quoque visuque terribilis: superbia in fronte, ira in oculis, femineus pallor in corpore, in ore impudentia multo rubore suffusa. Non adire quisquam non adloqui audebat, tenebras semper secretumque captantem, nec umquam ex solitudine sua prodeuntem, nisi ut solitudinem faceret.*

Domitian, then, is not compared to a splendorous Oriental monarch, but to a savage, bloodthirsty beast that no one dares approach.[39] Obviously, Trajan is his opposite: the *optimus princeps* is of such excellent character that he is 'capable of living in the public eye' (*habitare ut in publicis posset*) and is on such friendly terms with the senators that his palace feels to them like 'a home we share' (*communi domo*).[40] Where Domitian sought 'solitude behind closed doors' (*solitudine et claustris*), Trajan freely mingles with 'the thronging crowds of his subjects' (*civium celebritate*). All this leads Pliny to conclude that the only protection on which an emperor can truly rely is the love of his people.[41]

In Dio Chrysostom's *Orations on Kingship*, the image of the secluded Oriental monarch features prominently. Although Domitian is nowhere mentioned by name, his shadow looms large in these works. All four of the speeches can be dated to the reigns of Nerva and Trajan and some of them, at least, appear to have been delivered before the emperor and his court.[42] In the course of these orations, Dio paints a picture of the ideal king, often through dialogues between historical characters such as Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander. Hence, a model emerges of a monarch of superior virtue who enjoys the approval of the gods, controls his impulses and desires, dearly loves his people, and makes every effort to provide them with justice and protection.[43] As a counter-example, the orator brings up the indolent Sardanapalus, whose unlimited power had made him so depraved that he 'would never have been aroused to leave his chamber and the company of his women'.[44] Elsewhere, Dio mentions the Syrian king, 'who spent his life in his harem with eunuchs and concubines without ever a sight of army or war or assembly at all'.[45] Without doubt, such bad *exempla* were meant to evoke the memory of the secluded Domitian, while Trajan was supposedly much closer to the ideal of the accessible king.

In the *First Oration on Kingship*, Dio conjures up the image of two mountains, Peak Royal and Peak Tyrannous, where Royalty and Tyranny reside. The latter is described as sitting on a splendid throne embellished with gold, ivory, amber, and other precious materials, with sceptres, tiaras, and diadems symbolizing 'vainglory, ostentation, and luxury' (*δόξαν . . . καὶ ἀλαζονείαν καὶ τρυφήν*). He continues:

[39] The association of tyrants with savage beasts goes back to Plato (*Resp.* 9.588b–589a) and Aristotle (*Pol.* 3.1287a).

[40] Plin. *Pan.* 47.4, 48.3. [41] Plin. *Pan.* 49.2–3.

[42] See Gangloff 2009: 6–14 for the dates and circumstances of the speeches. According to Moles 1983: 177–8, the fourth oration was also delivered before Trajan, at a very early point in his reign.

[43] Gangloff 2009: 17–29.

[44] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.3: *οὐκ ἄν ποτε ἤγειρεν ἐκ τοῦ θαλάμου καὶ παρὰ τῶν γυναικῶν.*

[45] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 4.113: *μετ' εὐνούχων καὶ παλλακῶν ἔνδον διαβιοῦντι, στρατοπέδου δὲ καὶ πολέμου καὶ ἀγορᾶς ἀθεάτῳ τὸ παράπαν.* Presumably the 'Syrian king' also refers to Sardanapalus. In another speech, Dio (through the mouth of Socrates) speaks of the possibility that the Persian king is a tyrant living a life of wealth and pleasure while suppressing his subjects (3.40–1).

> in order to assume the appearance of pride, she would not glance at those who came into her presence but looked over their heads disdainfully. And so everybody hated her, and she herself ignored everybody.[46]

Although the East is not mentioned in this passage, Tyranny's haughty demeanour and luxurious surroundings immediately bring to mind the secluded Persian kings from classical Greek discourse. However, Dio adds a remarkable detail that is not usually present in classical accounts of secluded kingship:

> And instead of Friendship, Flattery was there, servile and avaricious and no less ready for treachery than any of the others, nay rather, zealous above all things to destroy.[47]

The importance of friendship (*philia*) as a royal virtue is a recurring theme in Dio's oeuvre, especially in the *Third Oration on Kingship*. In the orator's view, it is friendship which inspires rulers to prefer altruistic toil over selfish pleasure and guarantees a close, stable bond between sovereign and subjects. Surrounding himself with true friends rather than untrustworthy flatterers brings a ruler delight and dispels loneliness. Moreover, Dio argues, loyal hearts provide better protection from harm than arms or fortresses.[48] As we have seen, this final point was also made by Pliny. The latter likewise emphasized the importance of *amicitia* in his speech to Trajan, so that some relation between the works of both orators is often assumed.[49] Evidently, the importance of friends at close quarters was a timely topic in the years immediately following Domitian's autocratic regime, in which the emperor had become increasingly alienated from his senatorial peers.

As Dio points out on more than one occasion, loyal friends are a ruler's eyes and ears, allowing him to see, hear, and think about everything that goes on around him.[50] A tyrant, however, is 'the most friendless man in the world' (*πάντων γὰρ ἀπορώτατός ἐστι φιλίας*), incapable of even making friends. Picking up a theme from classical discourse, Dio remarks that the Persian king may have had a special official called the King's Eye, but reproachfully adds that 'he did not know that all the friends of a good king are his eyes' (*ἀγνοῶν ὅτι τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ βασιλέως οἱ φίλοι πάντες εἰσὶν ὀφθαλμοί*).[51] This remark undermines the traditional image of the invisible but all-powerful and all-seeing Oriental monarch.

[46] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.78–82: *ἵνα δὲ φαίνοιτο μεγαλόφρων, οὐ προσέβλεπε τοὺς προσιόντας, ἀλλ' ὑπερεώρα καὶ ἠτίμαζεν, ἐκ δὲ τούτου πᾶσιν ἀπηχθάνετο, πάντας δὲ ἠγνόει.*

[47] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.82: *ἀντὶ δὲ Φιλίας Κολακεία παρῆν, δουλοπρεπὴς καὶ ἀνελεύθερος, οὐδεμιᾶς ἧττον ἐπιβουλεύουσα ἐκείνων, ἀλλὰ μάλιστα δὴ πάντων ἀπολέσαι ζητοῦσα.*

[48] Konstan 1997: 131–8.

[49] Konstan 1997: 126. Pliny develops the theme of *amicitia* in *Pan.* 85–7.

[50] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.32, 3.104–7. [51] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 3.116–18.

Trajan would be well advised to take a different course. Only through the cultivation of *philia* could he hope to keep a grip on his empire and govern it well.

5. Secluded Emperors in Late Antiquity

On the whole, direct comparisons between the Roman court and the secluded courts of Oriental kings appear to have been sparse in the literature of the Principate. However, the theme became more prominent in Late Antiquity. An important reason for this was the rise of Sasanian Persia in 224, which posed a serious challenge to Roman hegemony and led to several military conflicts between the two superpowers in the third and fourth centuries.[52] At the same time, as Matthew Canepa has argued, Roman and Sasanian modes of imperial representation influenced each other deeply through diplomatic contacts: both the Roman emperor and the Persian king gradually adopted many of the same rituals and symbols, including the diadem, the nimbus, red or purple shoes, prostration, and ceremonial silence.[53] In short, the Sasanian court became an important point of reference for the Roman emperor—much more so than the Parthian court had ever been.

For late antique Greco-Roman authors, the splendorous Persian court provided an apt parallel to assess the elaborate ceremony that came to envelop their own sovereign. Critical voices contended that the emperorship had been infected with Oriental *tryphē*. Eutropius scorned Diocletian's splendid adornment and above all his introduction of prostration, a custom which he considered 'suited rather to royal usages than to Roman liberty' (*regiae consuetudinis formam magis quam Romanae libertatis*). He recounted how many Persian courtiers and treasures had fallen into Diocletian's hands as war booty, strongly suggesting a connection between both events.[54] According to the *Historia Augusta*, it was the Syrian Elagabalus who first demanded imperial adoration 'in the manner of the king of the Persians' (*regum more Persarum*), although the custom was abolished by his successor, the 'good' Emperor Severus Alexander.[55] Doubtlessly, many Greeks and Romans would also have been reminded of Alexander the Great, whose infamous attempt to introduce *proskynesis* was recounted in Greco-Roman literature as having deeply offended his freedom-loving Greek and Macedonian followers.[56]

[52] For Roman–Persian relations, see Wiesehöfer and Huyse 2006; Dignas and Winter 2007; Canepa 2009.

[53] Canepa 2009: 188–223.

[54] Eutr. 9.26; see also Lact. *DMP* 21.2, where it is Galerius who introduces prostration after a victory over the Persians.

[55] *HA Alex. Sev.* 18.3.

[56] For example, see Curt. 6.6.1–11; Arr. *Anab.* 4.9–12. See Alföldi 1970: 9–25 for the literary contrast between *Romana libertas* and *servitus Persica*.

Modern scholarship points out that the ceremonialization of the imperial office was not achieved in one sudden shift under Diocletian, but was a gradual development over the course of centuries.[57] As Canepa suggests, courtly rituals like *proskynesis* may actually have been adopted by the Sasanians from the Romans rather than the other way around.[58] But realities mattered less than perceptions. We can assume that many late antique Romans accepted imperial pomp and ceremony without question, taking great pride in kissing the emperor's robe and other ceremonial privileges.[59] After all, the courts were bustling with new elites such as high-ranking eunuchs and other social climbers who had attained their privileged position through the fulfilment of a range of civic or military offices. Unlike the traditional senatorial aristocracy, many of these people did not attach much value to the old ideal of imperial *civilitas* and were quite happy to work in a system that emphasized the great social distance between themselves and their sovereign.[60] Yet others, including but not limited to members of the senatorial aristocracy, continued to cherish the notion of a modest, accessible *princeps* who treated distinguished men as equals. In their eyes, the elevation and ceremonialization of Roman emperorship was a lamentable innovation whose origins were to be found in Persian despotism. Emblematic of this 'Orientalization' were the eunuchs who came to dominate court life in Late Antiquity.[61]

As a result, there was a conspicuous gap between literary discourses on 'good kingship' continuing in the vein of earlier Greek and Roman models and the practice of the increasingly ceremonious and (especially after 395) sedentary emperorship of the late third and the fourth and fifth centuries. Needless to say, new narratives were developed which were better suited to the emperor's changing role. A good example can be found in the *Panegyrici Latini*, where the splendorous appearance of Diocletian and Maximian is described in terms of an epiphany.[62] Nevertheless, ideals of imperial *civilitas* and accessibility, often combined with active military leadership, are expressed too frequently and persistently in late antique literature and oratory to be dismissed as outdated and irrelevant. They remained viable as an alternative discourse for authors to criticize the pomp of an aloof, ritualized court and, at times, for emperors to employ before a receptive audience.

[57] See Alföldi 1970 for the development of Roman imperial ceremonial; also Kolb 2001: 38–46. See further the discussions in Chapter 3 and Chapter 10.

[58] Canepa 2009: 64–6, 149–52.

[59] Kissing the emperor's robe as a privilege: Matthews 1989: 246–9. A fine example of the rejection of *proskynesis* is provided in the *Historia Augusta*, where Maximinus Thrax exclaims that he would never let free men kiss his feet—unlike his son, who acted 'exceedingly haughty' (*superbissimus*) (*Max. duo* 28.7).

[60] Noethlichs 1998; Smith 2007; Icks 2020b: 181–3.

[61] Icks 2017: 467–72; also Stevenson 1995. For the intensification of ceremonial in historical context, see Chapter 14.

[62] *Pan. Lat.* 11(3).10.4–5.

The continuing relevance of imperial *civilitas* is well illustrated by Pacatus' panegyric on Theodosius, delivered in the *curia* at Rome in 389. The orator's emphasis on this particular virtue was not only especially appropriate in the urban setting of Rome, where the sovereign had traditionally assumed the role of 'first citizen', but also well suited to an emperor who liked to present himself as a new Trajan.[63] The speech, which was strongly influenced by Pliny's panegyric, recounts how Theodosius freely mingles with the people of Rome and is happy to grant their requests. In contrast, his unnamed predecessors are denounced as *principes clausi* who 'considered their royal majesty diminished and cheapened unless they were shut up within some remote part of the palace', where they lay 'buried in the shade of their abode'.[64] This description does not evoke the splendour of Oriental seclusion so much as it does Domitian's gloomy solitude.

Theodosius was a military active emperor who claimed victories against barbarians and usurpers, but his sons Arcadius and Honorius became 'palace emperors' who hardly left their capitals and entrusted their battles to right-hand men like Stilicho, Gainas, and Eutropius. In doing so, they cemented a trend towards a more passive, ceremonious emperorship that had already been initiated under Gratian and Valentinian II.[65] When adult commanders such as Majorian and Anthemius became Western emperors in the late fifth century, they found themselves part of—and struggled against—a system in which many of their military responsibilities were invested in the general Ricimer, as Meaghan McEvoy discussed in Chapter 8. Evidently, this state of affairs exposed emperors to criticism, as we have already seen in Synesius' comments on Arcadius in *De regno* at the start of this chapter. In this speech, imperial seclusion was closely associated with military passivity.

Synesius' text contains several references to the splendorous courts of the East. For instance, the orator remarks upon Arcadius' gold-bedecked, gem-studded dress and claims he could only walk on earth that had been sprinkled with gold dust imported from far-away continents. Both aspects evoke the image of the Persian king, who was famous for his magnificent clothes and the fact that his feet were not allowed to touch the ground.[66] Like Xenophon in the case of Artaxerxes II, Synesius interprets Arcadius' alleged tendency to stay hidden as a misguided attempt to boost his prestige and project a superhuman aura.[67] This was imprudent behaviour because, as the orator explains, the king should display his virtue

[63] See Schmidt-Hofner 2012 for Trajan as a role model of *civilitas* in late antique Rome.

[64] *Pan. Lat.* 2(12).21.2–3: *qui maeiestatem regiam imminui et vulgari putabant, nisi eos intra repositum Palatinae aedis inclusos... intra domesticam umbram iacentes.*

[65] See McEvoy 2010; 2013 for developments in the West; see Pfeilschifter 2013 for sedentary emperorship in Constantinople.

[66] Syn. *de regno* 11.2–4; see also Chastagnol 1985: 158–60 for Arcadius' splendid dress. For the feet of the Persian king not touching the ground: Ath. 12.514c.

[67] Syn. *de regno* 10.2 (14.3). Cf. Xen. *Ages.* 9.1: 'the Persian thought his dignity required that he should be seldom seen'; also Hdt. 1.99.

in public to inspire emulation in his subjects. In particular, Arcadius is urged to become acquainted with his soldiers and play an active role in warfare, since a king is 'a craftsman of war' (τεχνίτης ... πολέμων), just like the cobbler is with shoes.[68]

In fact, the ideals of kingship espoused in *De regno* are heavily inspired by Dio Chrysostom's kingship orations, with which Synesius was well acquainted. Like the addressees of Dio's speeches, Arcadius is urged to set a moral example through personal excellence, to reject indolence in favour of toil and to cherish true bonds of friendship, rejecting the flatterers at court who corrupt his soul.[69] Particularly, Synesius echoes Dio with his remark that friends allow a king to 'see with the eyes of all' and to 'take counsel from those opinions of all which tend to one conclusion'.[70]

Many of the points in *De regno* about the importance of imperial visibility can also be found in a contemporary speech by the western court poet Claudian.[71] In his panegyric on Honorius' fourth consulship, which was held in Milan at the dawn of 398, the poet recounts the parental advice that the old Emperor Theodosius had supposedly given his son, explaining to him how to be a good ruler. As Catherine Ware has pointed out, this speech combines elements from Pliny's panegyric with Dio's kingship orations, thus associating the young Honorius with the *optimus princeps* Trajan.[72] One such element is the notion that imperial rule was not a privilege to be enjoyed at leisure, but something that the emperor had to earn through moral excellence, which should always be on display:

> Had fortune, my dear son, given thee the throne of Parthia, hadst thou been a descendant of the Arsacid house and did the tiara, adored by Eastern lands afar, tower upon thy forehead, thy long lineage would be enough, and thy birth alone would protect thee, though wantoning in idle luxury. Very different is the state of Rome's emperor. 'Tis merit, not blood, must be his support. Virtue hidden hath no value, united with power 'tis both more effective and more useful. Nay, o'erwhelmed in darkness it will no more advantage its obscure possessor than a vessel with no oars, a silent lyre, an unstrung bow.[73]

[68] Syn. *de regno* 9.1–7, 11.5.

[69] See Konstan 1997: 125–6 for Synesius' reliance on Dio for the friendship theme.

[70] Syn. *de regno* 7.3: τοῖς ἁπάντων μὲν ὀφθαλμοῖς ὄψεται ... ταῖς ἁπάντων δὲ ἀκοαῖς ἀκούσεται καὶ ταῖς ἁπάντων γνώμαις εἰς ἓν ἰούσαις βουλεύσεται. See note 50 for the relevant passages in Dio Chrysostom.

[71] Although there is no reason to assume that one copied the other: Cameron 1970: 321–3.

[72] Ware 2013: 315. However, I disagree with Ware's contention that the inspiration from Pliny and the inspiration from Dio can be neatly assigned to separate halves of Theodosius' speech. See also McEvoy 2013: 162–6 for a good discussion of the oration and its representation of the Honorius–Stilicho partnership, and see further Chapter 8.

[73] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 214–24: *si tibi Parthorum solium Fortuna dedisset, | care puer, terrisque procul venerandus Eois | barbarus Arsacio consurgeret ore tiaras: | sufficeret sublime genus luxuque fluentem | deside nobilitas posset te sola tueri. | altera Romanae longe rectoribus aulae | condicio. virtute decet,*

Once again, seclusion is associated with indolence. Only when Honorius can keep his passions under control is he fit to be emperor: 'When thou canst be king over thyself then shalt thou hold rightful rule over the world' (*tunc omnia iure tenebis,| cum poteris rex esse tui*).[74] By being visible, Claudian explains, the young ruler can prove his worthiness and hence win the loyalty of his subjects, which will keep him safer from harm than guards or weapons. In fact, seclusion is typical of tyrants, who 'live hedged about with swords and fenced with poisons, dwelling in a citadel that is ever exposed to danger, and threaten to conceal their fears'.[75]

A few lines further, Theodosius again brings up the East, pressing upon his son that 'they are not submissive Sabaeans whom I have handed over to thy rule, nor have I made thee lord of Armenia; I give thee not Assyria, accustomed to a woman's rule'.[76] Since he rules over Romans, who resent tyranny, Honorius should not claim an exceptional status and 'overstep the limits established for mankind' (*praescriptos homini transcendere fines*), but respect his subjects and the laws that he himself has set.[77] In short, he should not be like the Persian king, whom the Greeks and Romans mistakenly believed claimed a divine status. The speech ends with the old emperor urging Honorius to personally lead his troops into battle and share all of their hardships, while avoiding a spacious royal tent or other forms of luxury that would only slow the army down—tropes associated with the Persian king, especially Darius III on his fatal campaign against Alexander.[78]

Of course, as it turned out Honorius would never follow up on this advice, even when he reached adulthood and could feasibly have taken to the field. Yet in 398, Claudian apparently considered it prudent to associate the underage son with his father's active military leadership and to raise the expectation that he would follow in his footsteps. Evidently, 'palace emperorship' was not yet the established new model, although it was already on its way to set the standard in both halves of the empire. It is probably no coincidence that two of the texts that are most vocal in rejecting this type of rule stem from this transitional period, when memories of military active emperors were still fresh.

non sanguine niti. | maior et utilior fato coniuncta potenti, | vile latens virtus. quid enim? submersa tenebris | proderit obscuro veluti sine remige puppis | vel lyra quae reticet vel qui non tenditur arcus (trans. Platnauer, Loeb).

[74] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 261–2 (trans. Platnauer, Loeb).

[75] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 293–4: *muniti gladiis vivant saeptique venenis, | ancipites habeant arces trepidique minentur* (trans. Platnauer, Loeb). Cf. Plin. *Pan.* 49.2–3.

[76] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 306–8: *non tibi tradidimus dociles servire Sabaeos, | Armeniae dominum non te praefecimus orae, | nec damus Assyriam, tenuit quam femina, gentem* (trans. Platnauer, Loeb). The Sabaeans were governed by a secluded king living in 'effeminate luxury' (Strabo 16.4.9). The female Assyrian ruler is probably the legendary warrior queen Semiramis. See Lanfranchi 2010: 57–60 for the Persian king's supposed divine status.

[77] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 304 (trans. Platnauer, Loeb).

[78] Claud. *De IV Cons. Hon.* 320–52. See Briant 2015: 282–6 for the excessive luxury of Darius' campaign.

6. Conclusion

Classical Greek literature developed the image of the invisible and inaccessible Oriental king in his gem-studded court, a symbol of autocracy as well as *tryphē*. By the turn of the first century, this theme was picked up by Dio Chrysostom to contrast the aloof, secluded Domitian with the accessible Trajan. Yet whereas Oriental kings had often been imagined as all-seeing to underline their godlike power, Dio stressed that seclusion led to ignorance and that good governance was only possible with the help of true friends. In doing so, he advocated the importance of close ties between emperors and elites. The same theme was developed by Pliny, although without reference to the East. In Late Antiquity, the increasing ceremonialization of the imperial court—regarded as Orientalization by hostile sources—and the fact that most emperors stopped waging war in person prompted critical comparisons between Roman emperors and secluded Oriental kings. These were particularly prominent in Synesius' *De regno* and Claudian's panegyric on Honorius' fourth consulate, both addressed to 'palace emperors' who abandoned active military leadership and were content to play a mostly ceremonious role. Hence, a very old literary theme gained new relevance. While many of the new elites who frequented late antique courts were doubtlessly appreciative of the changing modes of imperial display and behaviour, there was still an expectation among traditionally minded audiences, such as members of the senatorial aristocracy, that Roman emperors were active and accessible, the opposite of Oriental despots. If they failed to uphold these standards, a vital distinction became dangerously blurred.