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Criticism of the princeps clausus in fourth- and fifth-century sources

Icks, M.

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OF LIZARDS AND PEACOCKS
CRITICISM OF THE *PRINCEPS CLAUSUS*
IN FOURTH- AND FIFTH-CENTURY SOURCES*

MARTIJN ICKS

IN HIS HISTORY of the Vandalic War, Procopius makes no secret of his contempt for Honorius, noting how the feeble ruler had been «sitting in Rome, with never a thought of war in his mind, but glad, I think, if men allowed him to remain quiet in his palace.»¹ When the emperor heard that the Gothic war chief Alaric was approaching with an army, he immediately fled to Ravenna, making no effort to defend his people. There, as Procopius relates in a famous anecdote, he received news that the *caput mundi* had been sacked:

At that time they say that the Emperor Honorius in Ravenna received the message from one of the eunuchs, evidently a keeper of the poultry, that Rome had perished [Ῥώμη ἀπόλωλε]. And he cried out and said, «And yet it has just eaten from my hands!» For he had a very large cock, Rome by name; and the eunuch comprehending his words said that it was the city of Rome which had perished at the hands of Alaric, and the emperor with a sigh of relief answered quickly: «But I, my good fellow, thought that my fowl Rome had perished.» So great, they say, was the folly [τοσαύτη ἀμαθία] with which this emperor was possessed.²

David Engels has remarked that the story not only highlights the incompetence and foolishness of Honorius, yet also bears a striking resemblance to an anecdote in Cicero's *De divinatione*. As the Republican orator relates, Aemilius Paullus's victory over King Perseus was unwittingly prophesied by his daughter, who told him that her pet dog Persa had died (*Persa periit* – note the close parallel to Ῥώμη ἀπόλωλε).³ Whereas the death of one providentially named animal signalled glory for Paullus, the alleged death of another signalled Honorius's disinterest in affairs of state. Moreover, the fact that the curiously named Roma did not actually die seems to imply that omens no longer functioned properly, indicating a breakdown in the communication with the gods. This would have been a highly relevant topic

* I would like to thank Bruno Bleckmann and Brian Campbell for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ Procop. *Vand.* I 2, 8: οὐδὲν ὁ τι καὶ πολέμιον ἐν νῶ ἔχων. Procopius appears unaware that Honorius's imperial residence was initially at Milan.

² Procop. *Vand.* I 2, 25-26. Waterhouse's painting *The Favourites of the Emperor Honorius* (1883) has been inspired by this scene.

³ Cic. *div.* I 103; see also Val. Max. I 5, 3; Plut. *Aem.* 10, 6-8.

during the reign of the devout Honorius, who had the Sibylline Books burned. Therefore, Engels speculates that the anecdote was probably not invented by Procopius, but reflects contemporary criticism of the emperor by pagan aristocrats.⁴

Whether or not this is correct, Procopius's unflattering portrayal of Honorius clearly expresses disapproval of the *princeps clausus*, the emperor who is locked away in his palace and hardly interacts with his subjects. As far as we can tell, the term was first used in the late fourth century by Sulpicius Alexander, who lamented that «Valentinian [II] the emperor was shut up in Vienne in the palace [*clauso apud Viennam palatii aedibus*], and reduced almost below the position of a private person», while his authority was so defective that «no one of all the oath-bound soldiery was found to dare to heed the familiar speech or obey the command of the emperor.»⁵ Other fourth- and fifth-century authors likewise expressed their criticism and concern with regard to rulers who lived secluded lives and seemed to lack the power, or even the will, to pursue the interests of their subjects in an active manner.⁶ As André Chastagnol has argued, an aristocratic ideology developed which equated 'bad emperors' with a number of stereotypical traits: isolation in the palace, dominance by eunuchs and 'Oriental' pomp.⁷

Although the emergence of the *princeps clausus* as a literary commonplace has received some scholarly attention, it has mainly been used as a tool to determine the date of writing of the *Historia Augusta*. These attempts at dating have also been at the heart of many analyses of the depiction of child emperors in fourth- and fifth-century sources, who are often associated with seclusion in the palace. All too often, scholars have attempted to tie references in the *Vita Heliogabali*, the *Vita Severi Alexandri*, the *Vita Gordiani* and other lives to particular political constellations in late antiquity, such as the courts of Valentinian II and Honorius.⁸ Meaghan McEvoy

⁴ D. Engels, *Der Hahn des Honorius und das Hündchen der Aemilia. Zum Fortleben heidnischer Vorzeichenmotivik bei Prokop*, A&A 55, 2009, 118-129, part. 122-126. Nothing is known about Procopius's possible sources for the anecdote.

⁵ Preserved in Greg. Tur., *Franc.* II 9.

⁶ For a discussion on the theme of the *princeps clausus* in late antique literature, see F.K. Stroheker, *Princeps clausus. Zu einigen Berührungen der Literatur des fünften Jahrhunderts mit der Historia Augusta*, in J. Straub (Hrsg.), *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1968/1969*, Bonn 1970, 273-283; A. Chastagnol, *Autour du thème du princeps clausus*, in J. Straub (Hrsg.), *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium, 1982/1983*, Bonn 1985, 49-161; F. Kolb, *Untersuchungen zur Historia Augusta*, Bonn 1987.

⁷ Chastagnol, *Autour du thème du princeps clausus*, cit., 157. Significantly, it is a eunuch who brings Honorius the news that Rome has fallen in Procopius's anecdote; see Engels, *Der Hahn des Honorius*, cit., 121.

⁸ J. Straub, *Studien zur Historia Augusta*, Bern 1952, 75-98; Stroheker, *Princeps clausus*, cit.; Chastagnol, *Autour du thème du princeps clausus*, cit.; Kolb, *Untersuchungen zur Historia Augusta*, cit.; A. Lippold, *Principes pueri – parens principum. Timesitheus = Stilicho?, Constantius?, Aetius?*, in W. Dahlheim - W. Schuller - J. von Ungern-Sternberg (Hrsg.), *Festschrift Robert Werner. Zu seinem 65. Geburtstag dargebracht von Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern*, Konstanz 1989, 213-227; F. Kolb, *Politische Terminologie und historisches Milieu: Kinderkaiser und parens principis in der Historia Augusta*, in G. Bonamente - K. Rosen (Eds.), *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Bonnense*, Bari 1997, 153-160; A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford 2011, 750-753.

has recently provided an excellent analysis of the emergence of child emperors in the late Roman West, but her focus is on their political circumstances and self-representation.⁹ In contrast, little has been written on the literary commonplace of the *princeps clausus* as a subject in its own right.

It will be worthwhile to take a closer look at the different aspects embodied by this literary figure, as well as at the significance these aspects held for the conception of 'good' and 'bad' imperial rule by a range of late antique authors. Let it thus be clear that my focus is on the *princeps clausus* in Greek and Latin literature, *not* on the actual conduct of late antique emperors. Before proceeding with this topic, I will briefly discuss the models of passive and active emperorship that stood next to each other in this period, and which formulated very different standards for the way a ruler should behave.

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE EMPERORS

During the fourth and fifth centuries, one of the main trends in the development of the imperial office was its increasing elevation by ritual and pomp. This process is already evident in the time of the tetrarchs, whose public appearances could be described in terms of an epiphany.¹⁰ The imperial palace came to be understood as a sanctuary in late antiquity, the audience hall as the inner sanctum. From the time of Constantius II onwards, at least, a curtain withdrew the enthroned emperor from the sight of his subjects, making him literally invisible until he was revealed in all his majesty.¹¹ Evidently, the degree and nature of this ceremonialization differed between eastern and western courts, as well as between individual reigns. Moreover, even in Constantinople, where it flourished to its fullest extent, the emperor could and did not always present himself as a remote, exalted figure, dressed in splendour.¹² On the whole, though, it is fair to say that new modes of imperial

⁹ M.A. McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367-455*, Oxford 2013. See also W. Hartke, *Römische Kinderkaiser. Eine Strukturanalyse römischen Denkens und Daseins*, Berlin 1951; C. Molè Ventura, *Principi fanciulli: Legittimismo costituzionale e storiografia cristiana nella tarda antichità*, Catania 1992, discussing child emperors in Rufinus's *Historia ecclesiastica* and the *Gallic Chronicle* of 452.

¹⁰ See A. Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, Darmstadt 1970³, 1-118 for a detailed discussion of court ceremonial in late antiquity. See S. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 23-33 for the tetrarchic emperor as *deus praesens*.

¹¹ Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation*, cit., 33-38.

¹² When Theodosius II led a religious procession barefoot, for instance, he was emphasizing his humility; see J. Harries, *Pius princeps: Theodosius II and fifth-century Constantinople*, in P. Magdalino (Ed.), *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th Centuries*, Aldershot 1994, 35-44; M. Meier, *Die Demut des Kaisers. Aspekte der religiösen Selbstinszenierung bei Theodosius II. (408-450 n. Chr.)*, in A. Pečar – K. Trampedach (Hrsg.), *Die Bibel als politisches Argument. Voraussetzungen und Folgen biblizistischer Herrschaftslegitimation in der Vormoderne*, Munich 2007, 135-158; C. Kelly, *Stooping to conquer: The power of imperial humility*, in Id. (Ed.), *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, Cam-

representation gained ground in late antiquity which stood in stark contrast to the ideal of the modest, accessible *princeps* that the likes of Augustus and Trajan symbolized.¹³

Parallel to these changes in representation, a new, more passive kind of emperorship developed. In the West, the reigns of Gratian and particularly Valentinian II signalled the dawn of an era of child emperors that would last until the second half of the fifth century. Both rulers had been elevated to imperial rank at an early age and never managed to become strong authorities in their own right, but were dominated by committees and, later, powerful military figures, such as the Frankish general Arbogast. The long reigns of Honorius and Valentinian III saw the consolidation of a symbiotic relationship between the emperor and his strong right-hand man, with the latter (Stilicho, Constantius III and Aetius respectively) taking a proactive part in political and military matters, while the former was mostly reduced to a ceremonial and religious role.¹⁴ McEvoy has dubbed this development the «infantilization of the imperial office», which denotes «the process by which even emperors who attained adulthood continued to be treated effectively as powerless minors, incompetent in the field of adult duties and responsibilities.»¹⁵ In the East, Arcadius and Theodosius II were likewise dominated by powerful individuals, although in their cases these tended to be non-military figures, such as the courtiers Rufinus and Eutropius, and the empress Pulcheria, elder sister of Theodosius II. Like their Western counterparts, these rulers did not wage war in person and spent most of their days in the capital, at the centre of an elaborate and highly ritualized court.¹⁶ One contemporary critic, Synesius of Cyrene, complained that the emperors of his day were so splendidly dressed that they resembled peacocks, yet kept to their lairs like lizards, «scarcely peeping out at all to enjoy the sun's warmth [μόλις εἴ πη πρὸς τὴν εἴλην ἐκκύπτουσα].»¹⁷

It goes without saying that a secluded, mostly ceremonial emperorship was to

bridge 2013, 221-243; H. Leppin, *Kaisertum und Christentum in der Spätantike: Überlegungen zu einer unwahrscheinlichen Synthese*, in A. Fahrmeir - A. Imhausen (Hrsg.), *Die Vielfalt normativer Ordnungen. Konflikte und Dynamik in historischer und ethnologischer Perspektive*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, 197-223, part. 210-214. However, such ostentatious displays of humility ultimately served to underline the emperor's superior position (Kelly, *Stooping to conquer*, cit., 228-229).

¹³ Nevertheless, *civilitas* was still an imperial virtue in late antiquity, even for emperors who emphasized their sacred nature; see R. Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole*, Berlin-Boston 2013, 99-104; contrary to S. Schmidt-Hofner, *Trajan und die symbolische Kommunikation bei kaiserlichen Rombesuchen in der Spätantike*, in R. Behrwald - C. Witschel (Hrsg.), *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum*, Stuttgart 2012, 33-59, who argues that displays of *civilitas* were only relevant within the *pomerium* of Rome and signalled the imitation of Trajan.

¹⁴ McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule*, cit., 305-329.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁶ See Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel*, cit., for the emperor's new role as a sedentary monarch in Constantinople.

¹⁷ Synes. *regn.* 15, 7.

the benefit of people like Arbogast, Stilicho and Eutropius, who appropriated part of the power that had formerly belonged to the emperor. Not all rulers were able or willing to comply with their reduced role: in all likelihood, Arbogast's uncompromising dominion drove Valentinian II to suicide (if the *magister militum* did not have him killed outright), whereas Valentinian III finally rebelled against Aetius, with fatal consequences for them both.¹⁸ Others, such as Magnus Maximus and Constantine III, rejected the passive, mostly ceremonial role outright, actively taking charge of politics and waging war in person.¹⁹ Yet that does not mean that the new style of rulership could not benefit the emperor, as well. For one thing, there is no indication that either Arcadius or Honorius ever felt dissatisfied with leaving many important matters in the hands of their courtiers and generals. In fact, this even stabilized their position: it now became possible to topple a regime without toppling the nominal ruler, as was proved when the emperor's position remained unaffected by the downfall of such powers behind the throne as Rufinus, Eutropius and Stilicho.²⁰

Moreover, appearing remote could actually enhance a ruler's status, as previous late antique emperors had already discovered. To the Roman elite, there was something unsettling about being observed, since it meant one was open to the gaze of others, which carried implications of penetration and submission. As Holt Parker has noted, «to make oneself seen, to be open to the gaze of others, to others' evaluations, is to be graded and degraded» – something which was well and good for infamous individuals such as actors, gladiators and prostitutes, who customarily made a spectacle of themselves, but was highly problematic in the case of emperors and senators. The only way for them to avoid degradation was to be continually in control of their self-representation and reception; no mean task, to say the least.²¹ The strong association between gazing at and dominating someone may have prompted the emperors of late antiquity to withdraw themselves from the gaze of their subjects as much as possible. From their seclusion, they could observe without being observed, which put them in a dominant position. Nevertheless, as Rene Pfeilschifter has argued for late antique Constantinople, the completely isolated *princeps clausus* did not exist. Even rulers who presented themselves as the exalted representatives of God on earth were still dependent on the acceptance of

¹⁸ Death of Valentinian II: B. Croke, *Arbogast and the death of Valentinian II*, «Historia» 25, 1976, 235-244; P. Grattarola, *La morte dell'imperatore Valentiniano II*, RIL 113, 1979, 359-370. Rebellion of Valentinian III: McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule*, cit., 295-304.

¹⁹ McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule*, cit., 315-316.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 323 makes this point with regard to Stilicho's downfall.

²¹ H.N. Parker, *The observed of all observers: Spectacle, applause, and cultural poetics in the Roman theater audience*, in B. Bergmann - C. Kondoleon (Eds.), *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, New Haven-London 1999, 163-179, part. 164-168. See also: O.J. Hekster, *Captured in the gaze of power: Visibility, games and Roman imperial representation*, in Idem - R. Fowler (Eds.), *Imaginary Kings: Royal Images in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*, Stuttgart 2005, 153-171.

their subjects to stay in the saddle. Therefore, they needed to interact with key groups in the palace, the hippodrome and other locations.²²

Inevitably, there were groups who resented the general shift to a more ceremonial, passive emperorship. These would include Rome-based senators who felt remote from the courts in Milan, Ravenna and other places; military officers who preferred to see the emperor leading armies in the field; and provincial elites who longed for their sovereign to take a personal part in the protection of their homeland from barbarian invaders and other threats.²³ Nevertheless, palace-bound emperorship increasingly became the accepted norm in the East, to the point that Justinian could proudly declare that his power and military success did not depend on weapons, soldiers or generals, but solely on the favour of the Almighty.²⁴ In the West, however, the final decades of Roman power saw the return of adult, military active emperors such as Avitus and Majorian, although there were also rulers who served as mere figureheads, such as Severus and Romulus Augustulus.²⁵

Regardless of these diverging paths, the ideal of an active, accessible ruler was still very much alive in both halves of the Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. Synesius's speech *De regno* provides one of the most vivid examples, expressing a wistful longing for the 'old style' soldier emperors who were not afraid to get their hands dirty. In this work, the indolent, luxuriously living Arcadius is contrasted with the gruff war-horse Carinus. As the story goes, the latter, in the middle of a military campaign against the Parthians, was dining with his soldiers when a Parthian embassy approached. The ambassadors, expecting to have to deal with many courtiers before they could actually talk to Carinus directly, were astonished to see «a tunic dyed in purple [...] lying on the grass», while the emperor was eating «a soup of yesterday's peas, and some bits of salted pork that had grown old in the service.» Removing his cap to reveal his bald pate, Carinus promised the foreign embassy that the forests and plains of Parthia would soon be barer than his own head, unless the Parthian king complied with his wishes. Then he invited the ambassadors to «attack the stew-pot with him» if they were hungry, or else to depart.²⁶

Such sentiments were not limited to the works of nostalgic elites. Praise for an open, active style of rule made frequent appearances in late antique panegyric. In AD 389, the orator Pacatus favourably compared Theodosius to many of his (un-

²² Pfeilschifter, *Kaiser und Konstantinopel*, cit., 76-122. See also M. Icks, *The inadequate heirs of Theodosius: Ancestry, merit and divine blessing in the representation of Arcadius and Honorius*, «Millennium» II, 2014, 69-99 for Arcadius's and Honorius's continued reliance on the acceptance by their subjects.

²³ See R. Lizzi Testa (a cura di), *Trasformazioni delle élites in età tardoantica: Atti del Convegno Internazionale. Perugia, 15-16 marzo 2004*, Roma 2006 for the changing nature of late antique elites.

²⁴ *Cod. Iust.* I 17, 1 pr.: [...] ita nostros animos ad dei omnipotentis erigimus adiutorium, ut neque armis confidamus neque nostris militibus neque bellorum ducibus vel nostro ingenio, sed omnem spem ad solam referamus summae providentiam trinitatis [...].

²⁵ See F. Oppedisano, *L'Impero d'Occidente negli anni di Maioriano*, Roma 2013 for a recent study on the reign of Majorian.

²⁶ Synes. *regn.* 16, 4-8. Of course, Carinus's enemies would have been Persians, not Parthians. Even so, he never fought against them.

specified) predecessors for often appearing in public and being accessible to his subjects.²⁷ The emperor's simple lifestyle also set him apart from previous rulers. In addition, his military exploits earned him much praise.²⁸ More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that Claudian, propagandist of Stilicho, expected the young Honorius to grow into a martial emperor as well – or at least felt impelled to suggest this to his audience at the Milan court. In his panegyric on the emperor's third consulate (AD 396), the orator alleged that «as a child thou didst crawl among shields, fresh-won spoils of monarchs were thy playthings, and thou wert ever the first to embrace thy stern father on his return from rude battles».²⁹ Undoubtedly, Claudian continued, Honorius and Arcadius would grow into great conquerors. «E'en now I see the sack of Babylon and the Parthian driven to flight that is not feigned, Bactria subjected to the Law, the fearful pallor of the Ganges' servile banks, the humbled Persian throwing off his gem-encrusted robes.»³⁰ None of these professed expectations was ever fulfilled, of course, yet the imperial brothers continued to present themselves in military garb on their coins. On obverses, they often wore helmet, spear and shield, whereas on reverses, they could sometimes be seen holding a standard and trampling a captive enemy underfoot.³¹ To a lesser extent, military iconography was also used by the equally unwarlike Theodosius II and Valentinian III.

The notion of an active, conquering emperor who spurned luxury and was easily accessible to his subjects was hard to reconcile with the notion of an aloof, remote monarch, enshrined in the pomp of a highly ritualized court. The *topos* of the *princeps clausus* in fourth- and fifth-century sources sprang from the tension between these two ideals. In the following sections, I will take a closer look at the different accusations levelled against the «lizards» and «peacocks» whom Synesius so despised. I will focus on four aspects: the emperor's isolation in the palace, cutting him off from political affairs and making him inaccessible to his subjects; the unwholesome influence of eunuchs and other suspicious characters; the emperor's preference for indolence and luxury over an active military life; and the pomp and ceremony associated with court life. What was the significance of these criticisms, and how did they relate to images of the ideal ruler from the time of the principate? Finally, I will ask to what extent we can regard the *princeps clausus* as a typically pagan *topos*, criticizing the rise of Christian piety as the dominant imperial virtue.

²⁷ *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 21, 1-5.

²⁸ *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 13-14 (simple lifestyle); 8, 1-5; 22, 1-23, 1 (military achievements).

²⁹ *Claud. cons. Hon. III* 22-24: *reptasti per scuta puer, regumque recentes / exuviae tibi ludus erant, primusque solebas / aspera complecti torvum post proelia patrem* [...]. See A. Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, Oxford 1970 for Claudian's role as court propagandist in the service of Stilicho, particularly chapters II (30-45) and IX (228-252).

³⁰ *Claud. cons. Hon. III* 201-204.

³¹ Helmet, spear and shield: *RIC* X, Arcadius, 7, 22-23; Honorius, 8, 24. Trampling an enemy: *RIC* X, Arcadius, 1, 14b2, 1205; Honorius, 1206, 1206d. I have discussed Arcadius's and Honorius's military representation in more detail in Icks, *The inadequate heirs of Theodosius*, cit.

IMPERIAL ISOLATION

When Theodosius visited the city of Emona, Pacatus relates in his AD 389 panegyric, crowds poured out of the houses and blocked the streets. Old men congratulated themselves on their years, young men pledged their service, and women were overcome with joy.³² Although the bloated language is typical for late antique oratory, the numerous expressions of delight with the emperor's appearance in the sources highlight the great weight attached to imperial visibility in late antiquity. When the emperor paid a visit to Rome, Constantinople or some other city, showing himself in all his splendour, he honoured the inhabitants and allowed them to express their heartfelt support of his reign.³³ Yet it was not enough that the people could look upon and cheer their ruler. According to Pacatus, what made Theodosius truly stand out from other rulers was his accessibility. Not only did he regularly appear in public, he also allowed his subjects to approach him, so that they could consult him and make requests. This praise is followed by sharp criticism of some of the emperor's unnamed predecessors, who «considered their royal majesty diminished and cheapened [*maiestatem regiam imminui et vulgari putabant*]» if they did not remain locked up in their palace, where few could approach them. Even on those occasions when they ventured outside, Pacatus continues, they were transported in sedan chairs or carriages, heavily guarded on all sides, while lictors employed the lash to keep the people away. As a result, such rulers were «isolated even in public [*secretum [...] in publico*]»³⁴

Of course, the merits of imperial accessibility were hardly a new consideration, but had already been of great importance in the time of the principate. In a famous anecdote related by Cassius Dio, Hadrian was addressed by an old woman during one of his travels. When she asked for a hearing, he tersely replied that he had no time. «Stop, then, being Emperor», she snapped at him. Immediately, the berated monarch saw the error of his ways and granted her a hearing.³⁵ The message is clear: a proper *princeps* always stood at the service of his subjects, no matter how humble the supplicant or how inconvenient the timing. Theodosius appears to have taken this to heart: even the generally hostile Zosimus had to admit that the emperor «seemed very accessible to those who had an audience with him.»³⁶ Likewise, Julian took a sincere interest in the concerns of his subjects in his role as judge, «bringing the guilty to order with moderate punishments and protecting the innocent with the safety of their property.»³⁷ Yet the old notion of the emperor as the modest servant of the state had eroded since the second century. Whereas Augustus had justified his supreme position through the claim that he was there to serve

³² *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 37, 3-4.

³³ MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, cit., 46-48.

³⁴ *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 21, 2-4.

³⁵ Dio LXIX 6, 3: *καὶ μὴ βασιλεὺς.*

³⁶ Zos. IV 27, 1: *τοῖς μὲν ἐντυγχάνουσιν ἐδόκει πῶς εὐπρόσιτος εἶναι.*

³⁷ *Amm.* XXII 10, 1.

and protect the *res publica* and its citizens, later emperors started to conceive their power as a god(s)-given right.

Much of Pacatus's criticism is concerned with the widening social gap between the emperor and his subjects that resulted from this shift in the conception of imperial rule. The *princeps clausus* is so majestic that he disdains to mingle with the commoners, preferring the seclusion of the palace to maintain his sacred aura. In other words, the emperor's status has become so exalted that he finds it beneath himself to interact with the very people he rules over. The image of the lictors with their lashes is particularly effective in this regard, since these functionaries accompanied the emperor in his role as a magistrate, and hence as a servant to the people. Once again, Theodosius functions as a counterexample: as Pacatus relates, the kind emperor made unpretentious appearances, showed himself as a ruler and a senator, and even visited private dwellings without a guard, since the love of the people kept him safe.³⁸ Synesius, ambassador to the court at Constantinople, expressed a similar view in a speech he allegedly held before Arcadius himself, although the frankness of his words makes it likely that he was in fact addressing a group of courtiers who were sympathetic to his ideas on rulership. The orator scorned the emperor's «fear of being brought to the level of man by becoming an accustomed sight [σύννηθεις [...] θέαμα]». Significantly, 'being seen' is once again related to degradation here, although Synesius makes it clear that Arcadius has nothing to fear, emphasizing that a ruler should not hide from the people: «As long as you deem man unworthy of you, you will not attain man's perfection.»³⁹

The emperor's isolation from his subjects did not just carry the connotation of imperial arrogance. If the people feared to approach their monarch and to speak freely before him, this marked him as a tyrant. The most famous example is undoubtedly Domitian in Pliny's *Panegyric*, «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.» Perhaps Olympiodorus had this image in mind when he remarked that Constantius III had «a mien worthy of a tyrant [εἶδος ἄξιον τυραννίδος]», since he kept darting sullen glances out of the corners of his eyes when he was riding in public processions.⁴⁰ Theodosius was of a wholly different character: during his reign, «no one [came] into the palace

³⁸ *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 47, 3. The theme of the *princeps* so beloved by his subjects that he needs no further protection can also be found in Plin. *pan.* 49.

³⁹ Synes. *regn.* 14, 3: «Ἐως οὖν ἀπαξιοῦτε τὸν ἄνθρωπον, οὐδὲ τῆς ἀνθρώπου τυγχάνετε τελειότητος. See A. Cameron – J. Long, with a contribution by Lee Sherry, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-Oxford 1993, 127-133 for Synesius's audience. The counterarguments proffered by W. Hagl, *Arcadius Apis Imperator. Synesios von Kyrene und sein Beitrag zum Herrscherideal der Spätantike*, Stuttgart 1997, 76-82, who holds that the speech was held before Arcadius, have been convincingly refuted by N. Lenski, *Review: W. Hagl, Arcadius Apis Imperator*, *BMCRev* 98.3.08, <http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/1998/98.3.08.html> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁴⁰ Plin. *pan.* 48, 4: *occurru quoque visuque terribilis: superbia in fronte, ira in oculis, femineus pallor in corpore, in ore impudentia multo rubore suffusa*; Olymp. fr. 23.

with pounding heart, chattering teeth and pale with fear but with confident and up-standing thoughts as if entering the sanctuary of a holy place.»⁴¹ In this case, the word ‘sanctuary’ [ἄσυλα] has a positive connotation, in contrast to the passage where Pacatus compares the residence of Theodosius’s less pleasant predecessors to «some sanctuary of Vesta [*aliquod Vestale secretum*]». This may be a reference to the temple of Vesta in Rome, a place renowned because no men were allowed to enter it.⁴²

It is also noteworthy that the spaces where hidden emperors resided are associated with darkness and secrecy. Pacatus speaks of «some remote part of the palace [*repositum Palatinae aedis*]», where rulers who could hardly «bear the face of day» [*diem ferre*], were consulted «with reverence and in secret [*veneratio occulta*]». Synesius, as we have seen, compared *principes clausi* to lizards who seldom peeped out of their lairs to enjoy the sun.⁴³ Such comments have an ominous ring. After all, if a ruler withdrew from the public gaze, his behaviour could not be checked. Once again, we are reminded of Domitian, who «always sought darkness and mystery [*tenebras semper secretumque captantem*]», and «lurking in his den [*specu inclusa*]» relished the blood of murdered family members. Also, Tiberius comes to mind, who, «having gained the license of privacy, and being as it were out of sight of the citizens [*quasi civitatis oculis remotis*]», gave free reign to his debauched desires on Capri.⁴⁴ In late antiquity, the notion persisted that those who remained hidden probably had something to hide. As Synesius remarked, «tyrants are always doing astounding things, concealing themselves from the public gaze [*κρυπτόμενοι*], and then appearing to the consternation of the beholders [*σὺν ἐκπλήξει φαινόμενοι*]». This was all the more painful since emperors were supposed to set a virtuous example to their subjects, «for in whatsoever the king rejoices, this must at once increase and be adopted by the majority.»⁴⁵ That said, the possibility of secret crimes and debaucheries is mostly just hinted at in the accounts of late antique *principes clausi* – for instance when Sidonius Apollinaris laments the unspecified «vices [*vitia*]» of the now defunct Theodosian house in his panegyric to the more ‘active’, outgoing emperor Avitus.⁴⁶

A much more outspoken accusation against isolated emperors is their lack of interest in the wellbeing of their subjects. We have already encountered the example of Honorius’s complete indifference to news of the sack of Rome. Zosimus records that Honorius and Arcadius were «quite ignorant of what was happening», leaving matters of state to such trusted underlings as Stilicho and Rufinus. In fact, Arcadius was allegedly so extremely foolish that he had no clue how to respond to a crisis,

⁴¹ Them. Or. 15, 190c: ὅσπερ εἰς τὰ ἄσυλα τῶν ἱερῶν.

⁴² Paneg. Lat. II (XII) 21, 3.

⁴³ Paneg. Lat. II (XII) 21, 3-4; Synes. regn. 15, 7.

⁴⁴ Plin. pan. 48, 3-5; Suet. Tib. 42, 1: *secreti licentiam nactus et quasi civitatis oculis remotis*.

⁴⁵ Synes. regn. 17, 5; 28, 3. Claudian agreed, remarking that «virtue hidden has no value» (*cons. Hon. IV 222*). Plin. pan. 45 also highlights the emperor’s exemplary role.

⁴⁶ Sid. Apoll. *carm.* 7, 542-543.

giving the reins of government to the eunuch Eutropius to put things rights.⁴⁷ Not only were these emperors locked away in their palaces, then, but they withdrew themselves from public affairs altogether. In doing so, they completely avoided their responsibility as rulers. Perhaps even worse is the careless Gallienus, as he is maliciously portrayed in the *Historia Augusta*. Although the author does not characterize the emperor as a 'hidden' ruler – Gallienus makes many public appearances in the course of the *Vita*, usually for grand spectacles and celebrations – his utter disinterest in the calamities befalling the Empire certainly shows his isolation from the suffering of his subjects. Whenever news reached him of yet another province rebelling against the throne, he allegedly laughed it off, ironically wondering how they were ever going to do without the specific products coming from that region.⁴⁸

Closely tied to the *princeps clausus*'s lack of engagement is his lack of reliable information about what is going on in the Empire. As is remarked in the *Historia Augusta*, «the emperor who is shut up in his palace [*qui domi clausus est*] cannot know the truth.» Isolated from the people, he has to rely on what his courtiers tell him.⁴⁹ Synesius bemoaned this state of affairs. The secluded Arcadius, he complained, was «seeing very little [ἐλάχιστα [...] ὁρῶντας]» and «hearing very little [ἐλάχιστα [...] ἀκούοντας] of those things by which the wisdom of action is accumulated.»⁵⁰ As these words indicate, the emperor was not only expected to take a passive interest in the affairs of his subjects, but to actively interfere to improve their lot. If he was not even aware what was happening in the lands under his dominion, a proper response became impossible. Unfortunately, as many sources attest, the typical *princeps clausus* was surrounded by shady figures, most of them eunuchs, who spoon-fed him whatever misinformation suited their own purposes. It is to this aspect of the 'hidden emperor' theme that we will turn next.

EUNUCHS AND OTHERS SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS

Much has been written on the role of eunuchs at the late antique imperial court.⁵¹ The *Historia Augusta* credits their introduction to Elagabalus, although this

⁴⁷ Zos. V 1, 3; 14, 1. There is an overlap in criticism of the isolated, disinterested emperor and the incapable (usually underage) emperor; see for instance the tirade against child emperors in *HA, Tac.* 6, 4-6. Both types of ruler fail to look after their subjects.

⁴⁸ *HA, Gall.* 6, 3-7. As the author contends, Gallienus administered the Empire «like a boy who plays at holding power» (4, 3), hence linking him to incapable child emperors.

⁴⁹ *HA, Aurel.* 43, 3-4. See also *HA, Gord.* 25, 4: «Wretched is an emperor before whom men do not speak out the truth, for since he himself cannot walk out among the people he can only hear things, and then believe either what he has heard or what the majority have corroborated.»

⁵⁰ Synes. *regn.* 14, 3. Not surprisingly, considering that he was an ambassador from a province himself, the orator recommended the use of embassies so that «the king will know that which is afar no less than that which is near» (23, 1-2).

⁵¹ See for instance K. Hopkins, *Eunuchs and politics in the Later Roman Empire*, PCPhS 189, 1963, 62-

may be little else than a *topos* to underline that emperor's alleged effeminacy.⁵² Certainly, eunuchs became increasingly important figures in the palace in the fourth and fifth centuries, since their low social status made them completely dependent on the goodwill of the emperor, and their inability to procreate meant they did not pursue any benefits for their offspring. In particular, the *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, a position always filled by a eunuch, came to great prominence, even gaining the rank of an *illustris* in the early fifth century.⁵³

Not surprisingly, traditional elites resented this rise in the fortunes of a group which they had always held in utter contempt. «Thus the noble names of ancient houses fawned upon all the foulest and most infamous men of the imperial court», Mamertinus complained in a panegyric to Julian, referring to the powerful eunuchs at the court of Constantius II.⁵⁴ Such scornful snobbery is reminiscent of the suspicion and distaste with which first-century senators looked down on the freedmen who rose to prominence during the reign of Claudius. Just as this group was tarred for its supposed bad influence on government in general and the emperor in particular,⁵⁵ numerous references in late antique sources describe the decadence and corruption allegedly introduced by eunuchs. According to Ammianus, «it must be admitted that the major part of those creatures maintained a vast nursery of all the vices, to such a degree that they infected the state with evil passions [*ut rem publicam infecerint cupiditatibus pravis*]». The praetorian prefect Timesitheus, in an undoubtedly fictitious letter addressed to Gordian III, as quoted in the *Historia Augusta*, wrote that «no one could bear it when commissions in the army were given out on the nomination of eunuchs, when labours were denied their due reward, when men who should not have been were slain or set free through caprice or bribery, when the treasury was drained, when conspiracies were fomented by those who moved cunningly about you every day [*per eos qui cotidie insidiosissime frequentabant*].»⁵⁶ The *Epitome de Caesaribus* records that Licinius was «a vehement suppressor of all eunuchs and courtiers, calling them worms and vermin of the palace.» Yet the most powerful accusations were uttered by Claudian, whose *In Eu-*

80; M. Scholten, *Der Eunuch in Kaisernähe. Zur politischen und sozialen Bedeutung des praepositus sacri cubiculi im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; W. Stevenson, *The rise of eunuchs in Greco-Roman antiquity*, JH Sex 5, 1995, 495-511.

⁵² HA, *Alex. Sev.* 34, 3; M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago-London 2001, 63. Hopkins, *Eunuchs and politics*, cit., 77-78 suggests that eunuchs may have gained prominence at court when Diocletian elaborated court ritual.

⁵³ Scholten, *Der Eunuch in Kaisernähe*, cit., 184-185.

⁵⁴ *Paneg. Lat.* III (XI) 19, 4.

⁵⁵ According to Cassius Dio, for instance, the imperial freedmen and Messalina manipulated Claudius to get rid of their enemies (LX 14, 1) and sold military commands and governorships (LX 17, 8).

⁵⁶ Amm. XXII 4, 2; HA, *Gord.* 24, 3. Avarice in particular was supposed to be a vice of eunuchs; according to Ammianus because they sought to compensate for their lack of children (XVIII 5, 4). Zos. V 24, 2 also speaks of the «insatiable avarice of eunuchs».

tropium speeches are long litanies of complaint against the crimes and vices of the eunuch at the heart of power in Arcadius's Constantinople – above all his corruption and effeminacy.⁵⁷

To be sure, allegations of decadence and corruption were hardly limited to eunuchs. Other powerful figures in the vicinity of the emperor, such as Stilicho and Rufinus, also received their share of criticism in this regard.⁵⁸ However, eunuchs were specifically criticized because they controlled the access to emperors who lived withdrawn in their palaces. The *Vita Alexandri* perhaps sums it up best:

These creatures alone cause the downfall of emperors, for they wish them to live in the manner of foreign nations or as the kings of the Persians, and keep them well removed from the people and from their friends [*qui eos a populo et amicis summovent*], and they are go-betweens, often delivering messages other than the emperor's reply, hedging him about, and aiming, above all things, to keep knowledge from him [*claudentes principem suum et agentes ante omnia, ne quid sciat*]. And since they are nothing but purchased chattels and slaves, how, pray, can they have knowledge of the right?⁵⁹

Much is contained in this passage. Firstly, eunuchs are associated with the world of the 'East', a point to which I will return. They are also associated with slavery and immorality, two well-worn tropes. Most importantly, however, they are said to shield off the emperor from his friends and subjects, hence being the cause of his isolation. In the aforementioned letter of Timesitheus to Gordian III, an ominous image is conjured up of «evil men [*pessimi*]» trying to ensnare the young ruler, who «settled beforehand among themselves what to advise you about the righteous, drove away the good, introduced the abominable, and, in the end, sold all your secrets for a price.» Likewise, the author of the *Vita Aureliani* warned his readers that it was all too easy for four or five men to deceive a secluded emperor, if they agreed among themselves what they would tell him beforehand. In fact, he claimed, among the things that made emperors «evil [*malos*]» were not just a lack of restraint and abundant wealth, but also «unscrupulous friends, pernicious attendants, the greediest eunuchs, courtiers who are fools or knaves, and – it cannot be denied – ignorance of public affairs.»⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Epit. de Caes.* 41, 10: *tineas soricesque palatii*. For a detailed analysis of Claudian's invectives against Eutropius, see Cameron, *Claudian*, cit., 124-155; H. Schweckendiek (ed. & transl.), *Claudians Invective gegen Eutrop (In Eutropium)*. Ein Kommentar, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York 1992; and J. Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium: or, How, When, and Why to Slander a Eunuch*, Chapel Hill 1996. As Timo Stickler has argued, senatorial resentment against powerful eunuchs is also evident in the posthumous character assassination of Valentinian III, who came under the sway of the court eunuch Heraclius during his final months on the throne; see T. Stickler, *Der Vorwurf der Effemination als politisches Kampfinstrument in der Spätantike*, in E. Hartmann - U. Hartmann - K. Pietzner (Hrsg.), *Geschlechterdefinitionen und Geschlechtergrenzen in der Antike*, Stuttgart 2007, 277-294, part. 287-290.

⁵⁸ See for instance Zos. V 1, 1-3.

⁵⁹ HA, Alex. Sev. 66, 3.

⁶⁰ HA, Aurel. 43, 1-4: *iam primum, mi amice, licentia, deinde rerum copia, amici praeterea improbi, satel-*

Since eunuchs controlled the flows of information to and from the secluded emperor, it was all too easy for them to blacken the reputations of their enemies, prompting the monarch to take action against them. Gratian and Valentinian II, for instance, were said to have «attended to little beside the calumnies of the eunuchs who waited on them.» Likewise, court eunuchs slandered the successful general Sebastianus to Valens – an emperor who was «ready to listen to informers without distinguishing truth from falsity», according to Ammianus.⁶¹ Yet the prime example of a ruler who fell under the spell of slanderous eunuchs is undoubtedly Constantius II, whose «anxious ears», as Ammianus records, «were always attentive and open to such gossip.»⁶² With great vigour, the historian rails against Eusebius, Constantius's grand chamberlain, comparing him to «a viper swelling with abundant poison [*coluber copia virus exuberans*] and arousing its multitudinous brood to mischief». Allegedly, this unwholesome figure prompted his minions to besmirch the reputation of Ammianus's beloved commander, Ursicinus, urging them to address the emperor «amid the duties of their more private attendance, with the soft utterances of voices always childish and persuasive [*gracilitate vocis semper puerilis et blandae*].»⁶³ The ominous language is instructive. Elsewhere, the author mentions detractors who, «while performing duties of an intimate nature, by secret whispers [*per arcanos susurros*] supplied fuel for false accusations», and speaks of «muttering [*mussitantes*]», «whispered slanders [*mordaces susurrus*]» and «secret whispers [*opertis susurris*].»⁶⁴ In short, emphasis is put on the secretive, private sphere in which the eunuchs spread their poisonous tales. It was a sphere from which senators, military officers and other members of the Roman elite were excluded, which made it impossible for them to protect themselves against attacks.

In Greco-Roman literature, an entourage of corrupt, decadent courtiers was traditionally the hallmark of 'bad' emperors who shared these characteristics. A prominent example from late antiquity is the *Vita Heliogabali* in the *Historia Augusta*, which gives a detailed description of the debaucheries of a ruler who surrounded himself with handsome men from «the stage, the circus and the arena», and was «always ready to promote men of the basest character and the lowest calling.»⁶⁵ Emperors who secluded themselves from the elite and spent all their time with eunuchs and other characters of dubious morality ran the risk of becoming 'infected' by their vices. Hence Synesius warned Arcadius against those at his court who were

lites detestandi, eunuchi avarissimi, aulici vel stulti vel detestabiles et, quod negari non potest, rerum publicarum ignorantia.

⁶¹ Zos. IV 22, 4; 23, 5; Amm. XXXI 14, 6.

⁶² Amm. XIV 11, 4: *eius aures (...) expositas semper eius modi rumoribus et patentes*. See A. Demandt, *Zeitkritik und Geschichtsbild im Werk Ammians*, Bonn 1965, 45-50 for the malicious role of courtiers (particularly eunuchs) in the work of Ammianus.

⁶³ Amm. XVIII 4, 4. Other victims slandered by Constantius's minions (not necessarily eunuchs) include the future emperor Julian (XV 2, 7-8) and the prefect Silvanus (XV 5, 3-5).

⁶⁴ Amm. XIV 11, 3; XX 2, 1; XXIX 1, 20.

⁶⁵ *HA, Heliogab.* 6, 4; 20, 3.

«at once ready to laugh and weep without measure» and who were always «playing the buffoon with gestures, noises, and every means in their power», since they could encourage «that foggy blindness of mind [τῆς ψυχῆς τὴν ἀχλὺν] which you have contracted from living a life not in accord with nature.» As Zosimus records, Theodosius was thoroughly corrupted by the eunuchs at his court, «influencing the emperor as they wished [τὴν τοῦ βασιλεύοντος εἰς ὅπερ ἐβούλοντο μεταφέροντες γνώμην].» He squandered huge amounts of money on banquets and other excesses, thus impoverishing himself. As we have seen, Ammianus went even further, maintaining that the eunuchs who held sway at the court of Constantius II corrupted the whole state by setting a bad example.⁶⁶

Imperial seclusion, then, could reflect badly on the emperor's moral standing. At the same time, it is important to note that this was not always the case. Although Ammianus went on at length about the influence of eunuchs during the reign of Constantius II, he nevertheless assessed that the emperor had lived a temperate life, characterized by «abstinence from dissipation and luxury», and that he was «so extraordinarily chaste, that not even a suspicion could be raised against him even by an ill-disposed attendant on his private life.»⁶⁷ Likewise, Claudian took care that his fulminations against the corrupt courtiers Rufinus and Eutropius did not reflect badly on Theodosius and Arcadius.⁶⁸

Another noteworthy aspect of eunuchs is their association with the world of the 'East'. Since castration was not allowed in the Roman Empire, many eunuchs did indeed originate from across the eastern border.⁶⁹ In Roman eyes, they had long been a typical feature of 'Oriental' courts. As Claudian exclaimed, «Let eunuchs govern the East by all means, for the East rejoices in such rulers, let them lord it over cities accustomed to a woman's sway.»⁷⁰ Good examples of this stereotype are presented by Diodorus Siculus and Athenaeus, who describe several 'Oriental' kings in their works. Like the Roman *princeps clausus*, these rulers kept hidden in their palaces, guarded by eunuchs, with whom they shared several characteristics, like being fat, white-skinned and perfumed. Rather than engaging in warfare, these 'female-kings' preferred to spend their time on sensual pleasures, or on activities typically regarded as feminine.⁷¹ The most notorious of them, the mythical Assy-

⁶⁶ Synes. *regn.* 14, 4; Zos. IV 28, 1-3; Amm. XXII 4, 2.

⁶⁷ Amm. XXI 16, 5-6. Evidently, though, the historian did not refrain from criticizing the emperor in other respects, noting that he «easily surpassed the savagery of Caligula, Domitian, and Commodus» when he perceived a threat to his position (16, 8).

⁶⁸ Cameron, *Claudian*, cit., 69-70, 88, 128.

⁶⁹ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, cit., 62-63.

⁷⁰ Claud. *In Eutr.* 1, 427-429.

⁷¹ M. Gambato, *The female-kings. Some aspects of the representation of eastern kings in the Deipnosophistae*, in D. Braund - J. Wilkins (Eds.), *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, Exeter 2000, 227-230. One example is the Assyrian king Ninyas, who «spent all his time in the palace, seen by no one but his concubines and the eunuchs who attended him, and devoted his life to luxury and idleness and the consistent avoidance of any suffering or anxiety» (Diod. Sic. II 21, 2).

ian king Sardanapalus, was allegedly never seen by anyone who did not live at the palace. He «lived the life of a woman, [...] spending his days in the company of his concubines and spinning purple garments and working the softest of wool», the latter being regarded as a suitable occupation for housewives, while wearing female clothing and make-up. When the Median general Arbaces laid eyes on him – bribing a eunuch to gain access to the palace – and saw how Sardanapalus spent his days, he «despised the king as worthy of no consideration» and started a revolt.⁷²

To my knowledge, there are no similar stories about *principes clausi* whose shameful ways are suddenly revealed to startled subjects, nor were these hidden rulers represented as completely emasculated. Nevertheless, as Matthew Kuefler has remarked, any male from the Roman elite who surrounded himself with such womanish creatures as eunuchs raised doubts about the status of his own masculinity.⁷³ Hence Ammianus wrote with scorn about the Roman senators of his day, who no longer engaged in the traditional ‘masculine’ activities of warfare and politics, but wasted their time on «gluttonous banquets and the various allurements of pleasures», and could be seen in public with a huge following of household staff, including, significantly, «the throng of eunuchs [*multitudo spadonum*] [...], sallow and disfigured by the distorted form of their members». As the historian complained, these senators had clearly forgotten that their ancestors had won fame through «fierce wars», rather than through riches.⁷⁴ The same accusations – indulgence in luxury and pleasure, and a distinct lack of military prowess – were levelled against the *princeps clausus*.

INDOLENCE AND MILITARY PASSIVITY

Whereas Ammianus targeted the indolence of Roman senators in his famous description of life in the old capital, his contemporary Eunapius made it clear that it was imperial indolence that was chiefly responsible for the sorry state of the Empire. As he noted:

It was clear to all that if the Roman state rejected luxury [τρυφήν] and embraced war, it would conquer and enslave all the world. But God has set a deadly trait in human nature, like the poisonous gall in a lobster or thorns on a rose. For in high authority he has implanted love of pleasure [τὴν ἡδονήν] and ease [ῥαθυμίαν], with the result that, while they have all the means with which to unite mankind into one polity, our Emperors in their concern for the transient turn to pleasure [τὸ ἡδὺ] while neither pursuing nor showing interest in the immortality which is brought by glory [τῆς δόξης].⁷⁵

⁷² Diod. Sic. II, 23, 1; 24, 1-5.

⁷³ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, cit., 69; see also M.E. Stewart, *The Soldier's Life: Martial Virtue and Hegemonic Masculinity in the Early Byzantine Empire*, University of Queensland 2012 (unpublished).

⁷⁴ Amm. XIV 6, 16-17; 6, 10: *bella saevissima*.

⁷⁵ Eunap. fr. 55.5-10.

Others also criticized the emperors' lack of military prowess. According to Zosimus, Theodosius became so depressed after his campaign against the usurper Maximus that, although he had been victorious, he «decided to renounce war and battles [πολέμοις μὲν ἀπειπεῖν ἐγνώκει καὶ μάχαις]» and «resumed his former way of life, with lavish feasts, constant pleasures and ostentatious shows and horseraces.»⁷⁶ His grandson Theodosius II was «unwarlike and lived a life of cowardice [ἀπόλεμος ὢν καὶ δειλίᾳ συζῶν]», Priscus alleged, since he did not fight his enemies, but preferred to buy them off. (Not surprisingly, «everything he did was under the influence of eunuchs.»)⁷⁷ In the sixth century, John Lydus would utter a similar complaint with regard to Zeno, who was apparently such a coward that «not even in images could he endure to look on a battle.»⁷⁸

In many of these passages, the life of the soldier is juxtaposed to a life of luxury and leisure, as if these were the only two options available. This can most clearly be seen in Zosimus's portrayal of Theodosius, since for all his efforts to model the emperor as an indolent hedonist, the author could not ignore his military achievements. Hence we are presented with a ruler who is vigorously riding off to war in one scene, only to lapse back into his old vices once the battle has been won. Zosimus himself expresses amazement at Theodosius's constant fluctuation between these two opposite modes of life.⁷⁹ An unambiguous example of an emperor supposedly living in idleness – though not in isolation – is provided by the *Vita Gallieni* in the *Historia Augusta*. In blatant disregard of the known facts about this military active ruler, the hostile biographer remarks that Gallienus «surrendered himself to lust and pleasure [*libidini et voluptati se dedit*]» and showed himself «so careless of public affairs that his name was not even mentioned to the soldiers.» As a consequence of this indolent attitude, he claims, many of his troops joined Postumus, who rebelled against the throne and founded the Gallic Empire.⁸⁰ Likewise, most of the *Vita Heliogabali* is one long inventory of the boy emperor's luxuries and debaucheries, from the organization of colour-themed banquets to the deliverance of speeches before the gathered prostitutes of Rome – activities which thoroughly disgusted the praetorians and prompted them to overthrow him.⁸¹

Evidently, the link between indolence and lack of military prowess was not first forged in late antiquity. We need only recall Cassius Dio's portrayal of the young Commodus, who hastily abandoned his father's war on his accession, since he «hated all exertion [*μισόπονός τε ὢν*] and craved the comfortable life of the city.»⁸²

⁷⁶ Zos. IV 50, 1.

⁷⁷ Priscus, fr. 3, 1.

⁷⁸ Lydus, *Mag.* III 45.

⁷⁹ Zos. IV 50, 1-2.

⁸⁰ *HA, Gall.* 3, 6; 1, 3; 4, 3.

⁸¹ *HA, Heliogab.* 18, 2; 26, 3-4. See M. Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor*, London 2011, 108-115 for a brief discussion of the emperor's excesses in the *Vita Heliogabali*.

⁸² Dio LXXIII 1, 2.

However, the indolence of Commodus, Nero and other notorious ‘inactive’ emperors from the principate had always been presented as a personal flaw, whereas authors from late antiquity tended to perceive imperial *τροφῆ* and *ἡδονή* as structural problems. Eunapius, as we have seen, spoke of the emperors’ love of luxury and pleasure in general terms. Sidonius Apollinaris, praising the recently acclaimed Avitus, associated decadence and inactivity with the Theodosian dynasty as a whole, lamenting that the Romans had been «content to bear even the vices of an ancient stock and to tolerate, more from custom than by reason of just claim, a house that had been wont to be invested with the purple.»⁸³ A century later, John Lydus complained that «indolence had weakened those who have previously reigned as emperors», and that «men of yesteryear had renounced with military activities even the care itself, so to speak, of the affairs of state [*καὶ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν ἅμα τοῖς ὅπλοις καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν μέχρι λόγων φροντίδα τῶν κοινῶν ἀποπτυσάντων*].» He even claimed that this passivity had been formally institutionalized, alleging that Theodosius had issued a law forbidding emperors to wage war in person.⁸⁴

It should be stressed that not every emperor who lacked military prowess and wallowed in luxury was necessarily a *princeps clausus*. After all, the *Historia Augusta* presents neither Elagabalus nor Gallienus as rulers who kept hidden from their subjects – at least not from those who dwelled in the capital. Ammianus Marcellinus describes Constantius II as an emperor who was «drenched with awful gore» from all the civil wars he fought – in other words, as an ‘active’ leader, even if his activities were immoral – yet at the same time presents him as a man who was heavily influenced by his wives, eunuchs and other courtiers; a trait often associated with passive, secluded rulers.⁸⁵ These courtiers, Ammianus relates, defiled the palace with their vices and extravagances, so that «the place of triumphs won in battle was taken by those gained at the table», and military discipline grew lax.⁸⁶ The images of the indolent emperor and the *princeps clausus*, then, are not always congruous, yet the literary sources frequently associate imperial seclusion with military passivity, while the latter could be connected to indulgence in luxury and sensual pleasures. As we have seen, the locked-up Valentinian II was demoted «almost below the position of a private person [*paene infra privati modum redacto*]», since none of the soldiers obeyed his commands. The Western emperors, as Sidonius Apollinaris complained, stayed «closely confined [*clauso*]» while plunderers ravaged the Empire. Honorius was apparently more interested in the fate of his chickens than in that of Rome. In contrast, his father Theodosius not only showed himself regularly to his

⁸³ Eunap. fr. 55.5-10; Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 7, 541-543.

⁸⁴ Lydus *Mag.* II 15-16; II; III 41.

⁸⁵ Amm. XXI 16, 15-16. Another instance where the themes of the secluded and the indolent emperor do not match up is Zosimus’s hostile portrayal of Theodosius, who is said to have «commenced his reign in luxury and indolence», yet was also accessible to all who wished to see him (IV 27, 1).

⁸⁶ Amm. XXII 4, 4; 4, 6.

subjects, but also engaged in warfare «so frequently that your countenance is almost as well known to the barbarians as it is to us» – praise which neatly ties the emperor's visibility to his active military role.⁸⁷

Imperial seclusion, luxurious living and military passivity are all brought together in the most elaborate description of a *princeps clausus*, Synesius's *De regno*. The orator sneered at the emperor's passive, secluded lifestyle, accusing him of rejoicing only in «the pleasures of the body» and hence of living «the life of a polyp of the sea [βίον [...] θαλαττίου πνεύμονος].»⁸⁸ Arcadius, he claimed, would only walk on earth if it were sprinkled with gold-dust brought from distant regions, and exhibited luxury «even in the straps of [his] sandals». Had the Empire not fared better, he inquired, «when men living in the throng, blackened by the sun, led armies to battle, and bearing themselves in all other respects simply and artlessly [ἀφελῶς τε καὶ ἀύτοσχευῶς], instead of in a manner suggestive of the dithyramb and the tragic stage?»⁸⁹ The comparison highlights how the profession of actor was looked down upon by the Roman elite, suggesting artificiality, as if Arcadius was only pretending to be a true emperor.⁹⁰ We have already discussed the exemplary case of the soldier emperor Carinus. Another supposedly rough, no-nonsense ruler is celebrated in the *Historia Augusta*, which claims that the pretender Pescennius Niger «took his meals in front of his tent and in the presence of all his men, and ate the soldiers' own fare, too; nor did he ever seek shelter against sun or against rain if a soldier was without it.»⁹¹ This well-worn trope dates back to the principate, with the likes of Trajan, Hadrian and Caracalla allegedly all sharing the hardships of military toil with their men.⁹²

To Synesius, a king was first and foremost «a craftsman of wars, just as the cobbler is a craftsman of shoes.» Therefore, he urged that Arcadius should come out of his palace to inspect his troops and to practice arms besides them, riding horse and hurling javelins, so that he earned the right to call them 'fellow soldiers'.⁹³ It is striking how much emphasis the orator puts on visibility in describing the emperor's military role:

Now when a king exercises his body, keeps the field, and spends his youth in armour, all the cities are spectators [οἱ πανταχοῦ δῆμοι θέατρον εἰσι]. For he draws the eyes of all present upon him, and no one can endure to look elsewhere [οὐδεὶς ἀλλαχόσε βλέπειν ἀνέχεται]

⁸⁷ Greg. Tur. *Franc.* II 9; Sidon. *carm.* 5, 354-360; Procop. *Vand.* I 2, 25-26; *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 22, 1.

⁸⁸ Synes. *regn.* 14, 3.

⁸⁹ Synes. *regn.* 15, 6-7.

⁹⁰ See C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge 1993, 98-136 for Roman perceptions of actors and the theatre.

⁹¹ *HA, Pesc. Nig.* II, 1. Likewise, Ammianus claims that the brave ancestors of the indolent Roman senators of his day did not differ from the common soldiers «in wealth, mode of life, or simplicity of attire [*nec opibus nec victu nec indumentorum vilitate*]» (XIV 6, 10).

⁹² Trajan: Plin. *pan.* 13; Hadrian: Dio LXIX 9, 3-4; Caracalla: Dio LXXVIII 13, 1-2.

⁹³ Synes. *regn.* 13, 7.

when a king does anything conspicuously; every act of a king passing into a song rings in the ears of all men. And this custom is capable of bringing goodwill towards him in that the spectacle of a king is not a rare one to his soldiers, and his goodwill greatly strengthens the spirit of the troops.⁹⁴

The emperor, in short, had to put himself on display, but in doing so, he did not 'subject' himself to the gaze of his subjects, like gladiators and other infamous creatures did, but rather controlled it, forcing everyone to look at him and acknowledge him as their military leader. Other authors likewise held that emperors should be battle commanders and capable fighters. The latter stands in marked contrast to the principate, when emperors were not commended on their active participation in battle. Themistius, praising Theodosius, remarked that «it is appropriate for the king to command infantry, cavalry, generals and squadron commanders, while also, as far as he himself is concerned, should it so happen, fight well on foot and on horseback, shoot arrows straight and throw the javelin.» In one of Claudian's panegyrics, that same emperor admonished his son Honorius to be a capable warrior, once again contrasting the hardships of military duty with a life of luxury and leisure: «Not for thee let spacious tents overflow with princely delights, nor luxury don arms and drag to the standards her unwarlike train. Though the storm winds blow and the rain descends yield not to them and use not cloth of gold to guard thee from the sun's fierce rays.»⁹⁵

Such notions of the emperor's role as a battle commander were heavily gendered. As Zosimus knew, military campaigns were «manly and demanding tasks [τὸ ἀνδρωδέστερον καὶ ἐπιπόνον καὶ τληπαθές].» Rome's past as a conquering nation had caused it to adopt the figure of the soldier as a standard for masculinity. Not just individual Roman men, but the Roman people as a whole were supposed to possess superior *virtus*, and hence to be more masculine than foreign nations.⁹⁶ However, the Romans' confidence in their own martial prowess had been dealt a severe blow by Valens' disastrous defeat against the Goths in AD 378.⁹⁷ Ammianus fondly recalled the reign of Marcus Aurelius, when «after calamitous losses the state was presently restored to its former condition, because the temperance of old times was not yet infected by the effeminacy of a more licentious mode of life, and did not crave extravagant feasts or shameful gains.» Since then, things had deteriorated. When Constantius II's eunuchs held sway, the historian relates, this had such dev-

⁹⁴ Synes. *regn.* 13, 2-3.

⁹⁵ Them. *Or.* 15, 187d; Claud. *cons. Hon.* IV 337-341. Yet another example is provided by the *Historia Augusta*, which praises Probus for waging numerous wars and performing many martial deeds «with his own hand [*multa manu sua fecit*]» (*Prob.* 22, 1-3).

⁹⁶ Zos. IV 50, 2; Stewart, *The Soldier's Life*, cit., 20-21. For notions of *virtus* and Roman manliness, see also W. Eisenhut, *Virtus romana. Ihre Stellung im römischen Wertsystem*, Munich 1973; M. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*, Princeton 1995; and M. McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*, Cambridge 2006.

⁹⁷ J. Mathews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364-425*, Oxford 1975, 99. See also Stewart, *The Soldier's Life*, cit., 53-54.

astating effects on military discipline that «in place of the war-song the soldiers practiced effeminate ditties [*miles cantilenas meditaretur pro iubilo molliores*]», while «the warriors' bed was not a stone (as in days of yore), but feathers and folding couches.»⁹⁸

The *princeps clausus* could be regarded as another sad product of this decline in Roman manliness. Synesius drew a comparison between familial and state affairs, remarking that «the same organization holds good for the state as in the family; the male element must defend and the female occupy itself with the care of the household within.» By implication, emperors who did not ride forth into battle, but preferred to spend their days in the palace, could not lay claim to true manhood. Hence Sidonius Apollinaris praised the military exploits of his addressee Avitus in his AD 455 panegyric, but scorned the emperor's predecessor, the unwarlike Valentinian III, as a useless *semivir*.⁹⁹

The indolent life that *principes clausi* were imagined to live at court only underlined their lack of manliness. It was bad enough that they surrounded themselves with effeminate eunuchs; on top of that, the wealth and extravagances of palace life sapped them of their masculine strength. Needless to say, *luxuria* was hardly a new vice in late antiquity. It was often assumed to have infected Rome after its armies brought back the fabulous wealth of the East in the time of the great Republican conquests.¹⁰⁰ *Luxuria* could be a symbol of status, but it was also a symbol of decadence, since it caused *mollitia*, effeminate softness. Men possessing this trait were characterized by their exotic clothing, feminine ways and inclination to sexual passivity – a feature which was in turn associated with military defeat.¹⁰¹ The author of the *Historia Augusta* closely linked *luxuria* to effeminacy in the case of Elagabalus, presenting the emperor as a paragon of both unmanliness and excessive wealth. Among many other things, he mentions that the young ruler «even wore jewels on his shoes» and would like to wear a jewelled diadem, «in order that his beauty might be increased and his face look more like a woman's.» Likewise, Pacatus denigrated some unspecified predecessors of Theodosius as «foppish and effeminate fellows [*delicati illi ac fluentes*]», relating how they floated roses in their drinking bowls in winter, ordered food from the farthest East, and indulged in numerous other excesses. In the same speech, he characterized many of the em-

⁹⁸ Amm. XXXI 5, 14; XXII 4, 6: *cum miles cantilenas meditaretur pro iubilo molliores*.

⁹⁹ Synes. *regn.* 19, 6; Sidon. *carm.* 7, 359. See Stickler, *Der Vorwurf der Effemination*, cit. for accusations of effeminacy against Valentinian III. In a sense, the worst indictment of an emperor's masculinity can be found in Claudian's first invective against Eutropius. Even though the eunuch's military exploits and triumph are the target of acid mockery, it was Arcadius who let this «slave» and «effeminate» fight on his behalf – although Claudian is of course careful not to bring this up.

¹⁰⁰ N.M. Ray, *Luxury*, in R.S. Bagnall et al. (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Vol. 8, Malden, MA 2012, 4175-4178.

¹⁰¹ Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, cit., 63-97.

peror's predecessors – presumably the ones he referred to before – as *principes clausi*.¹⁰²

Philostorgius described the contrast between the 'passive' Arcadius and his 'active' minister Rufinus in gendered terms. Whereas the latter was apparently tall and had a «manly disposition [ἀνδρώδης]», recognizable by «the quick glance of his eye and the eloquence of his tongue», the emperor was «short of stature and weak in bodily frame» – and hence clearly falling short of the masculine ideal. As Philostorgius has it, «the sloth of his natural disposition [τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς νωθεΐαν] showed itself in his speech, and in the blinking of his eyes, which remained closed like those of persons asleep, and were kept open with an effort.»¹⁰³ Even though there is no mention of luxury in this passage, Arcadius's indolence clearly marked him as inferior to the 'manly' Rufinus. The contrasting descriptions of both men's eyes confirm the impression: if the gaze of a strong leader was supposed to dominate, the emperor could learn a thing or two from the minister who actually ran his Empire for him.

POMP AND CEREMONY

Like excessive wealth and licentious living, an emphasis on court ceremony was not limited to emperors who remained hidden from their subjects. However, it carried connotations of inaccessibility, evoking the image of a ruler who could only be encountered in a highly formalized environment which was guided by strict rules. When Synesius told the anecdote of Carinus and the Parthian embassy, he was praising the emperor's accessibility as well as his modest way of life. Likewise, Pacatus favourably compared the accessibility of Theodosius to the seclusion of emperors who insisted that they should be consulted «with reverence and in secret», while «a carefully arranged solitude and widely imposed silence protected them like a rampart as they lay buried in the shade of their abode.» The imposed silence is a reference to the *silentarii* who hushed everyone in the emperor's presence into quietness, hence creating an atmosphere of reverence.¹⁰⁴ Ancient authors usually attribute the introduction of such elaborate court ceremony – in particular the *adoratio purpurae*, or kissing of the imperial purple – to Diocletian,¹⁰⁵ although we now

¹⁰² HA, *Heliogab.* 23, 4-5: *quo pulchrior fieret et magis ad feminarum vultum aptus*; *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 14, 1-2; 21, 3-4.

¹⁰³ Philost. *h.e.* XI 3. Arcadius's sleepiness is reminiscent of his imperial brother, who was said to act «as if awaked from a deep sleep» when the East sent him military aid against the Goths (Zos. VI 8, 2-3).

¹⁰⁴ *Paneg. Lat.* II (XII) 21, 3; Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation*, cit., 38.

¹⁰⁵ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 39, 2-4; Eutr. 9, 26; Amm. XV 5, 18; Hier. *chron.* 2311. Interestingly, Lactantius puts the blame on Galerius (*mort. pers.* 21, 1-2), undoubtedly because that emperor featured as the main villain in his work.

know that in fact the emperor only formalized developments which were already well under way.¹⁰⁶

Tellingly, many regarded this court ceremonial as something deeply ‘un-Roman’, often remarking on its ‘Oriental’ origins. They also associated it with opulence, another typically ‘Oriental’ feature. Eutropius remarked that Diocletian introduced a custom – namely, prostration – which was «more in keeping with royal usage than with Roman liberty [*regiae consuetudinis formam magis quam Romanae libertatis*]», while in the same breath remarking that «he had his clothing and shoes decorated with gems, whereas previously the emperor’s insignia comprised only the purple robe, the rest of his dress was ordinary.» Lactantius, attributing the introduction of prostration to Galerius, alleged that the emperor was prompted to do so after defeating the Persians, «whose usage and custom it is to bend themselves over as slaves to their kings».¹⁰⁷

As Andreas Alföldi has remarked, Greco-Roman authors loved to contrast *Romana libertas* to *servitus Persica*, depicting as tyrants those rulers who displayed themselves in fancy clothes and insisted on prostration.¹⁰⁸ In the *Historia Augusta*, the ‘good’ emperor Severus Alexander broke with his ‘bad’ predecessor Elagabalus, who had introduced imperial adoration *regum more Persarum*. Moreover, he wisely banished all of Elagabalus’ eunuchs from court, not wishing to lead the secluded life of a Persian king.¹⁰⁹ The anonymous biographer thus linked imperial isolation to elaborate court ceremony and put both in an ‘Oriental’ context. Perhaps he meant to evoke images of Sardanapalus and other ‘female-kings’ from the East who spent their days in secluded luxury.¹¹⁰

In Synesius’s speech on the monarchy, the *princeps clausus* is associated with great displays of wealth. At first glance, it may seem curious to link secluded rulers to any kind of display, yet Synesius is speaking primarily about scenes taking place in the confines of the palace, before a select audience of «men who may lawfully behold you [*ἀνθρώπων οἷς θέμις ὄρᾶν*]», as he formulates it, and who therefore «alone are happy among the senators [*μόνοι τῶν βουλευτῶν εὐδαίμονες*].» In the same passage, the orator rebukes Arcadius for the fact that «you cannot go into the council-chamber of your peers when you have to exercise the rule belonging to

¹⁰⁶ Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation*, cit., 58-59. For more on the *adoratio purpurae*, see W.T. Avery, *The ‘adoratio purpurae’ and the importance of the imperial purple in the fourth century of the Christian era*, MAAR 17, 1940, 66-80.

¹⁰⁷ Eutr. 9, 26; Lact. *mort. pers.* 21, 2. Eunuchs could also be associated with ‘Oriental’ pomp; see for instance Claud. in Eutr. 1, 414-416.

¹⁰⁸ Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation*, cit., 1970, 9-25.

¹⁰⁹ HA, *Alex. Sev.* 18, 3; 66, 3. The *Historia Augusta*’s professed loathing of imperial adoration is well summed up by Maximinus Thrax, who chastened his haughty son with the words «God forbid that any free man should ever print a kiss on my feet» (*Max.* 28, 7).

¹¹⁰ Cassius Dio, one of the main sources for the *Vita Heliogabali*, modelled Elagabalus after Sardanapalus, although he did not emphasize imperial seclusion; see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, cit., 98-101.

your title [...] unless you have wrapped yourself up in such and such a robe.» A subsequent remark, comparing the emperor to a man «chained with gold [χρυσῶ δεθείς]» awaiting incarceration, evokes the impression that Arcadius is a prisoner of his own splendid environment, unable to break free.¹¹¹

Remarks such as these could be taken as warnings against a life spent in luxury and excess, yet it is not only indulgence in *luxuria* as such that Synesius objects to. As the orator exclaims, «just to the extent that a monarch's regime inclines him to pompous display [σχῆμα σοβαρόν], to that extent it is deprived of reality.» Elsewhere, he described Arcadius's elaborate lifestyle as «a manner suggestive of the dithyramb and the tragic stage.»¹¹² The emperor, in short, was living a life of pretence – one that was «merely outward appearance and sham [τὸ φαινόμενον τε καὶ ἐπιποίητον].» Rather than attempting to pose as some kind of superhuman figure who was virtually out of reach of mere mortals, Synesius urged, Arcadius should lead armies to battle and live a sober life. Only then would he gain «the true beauty of a king [ἀληθινοῦ βασιλέως κάλλους].»¹¹³

THE *PRINCEPS CLAUSUS*: A PAGAN TOPOS?

Since most of the authors cited in this article are pagans, the question rises to what extent we should see criticism of secluded rulers as a typically pagan phenomenon. Some scholars have suggested that a new, Christian ideal of leadership became dominant in late antiquity, favouring piety over military courage.¹¹⁴ From a gender perspective, Kuefler has detected an important shift in ideals of masculinity, arguing that the traditional standard of military *virtus* was replaced by Christian virtues like asceticism and self-sacrifice as markers of Roman manliness.¹¹⁵ Considering that it was one of the defining characteristics of the *princeps clausus* that he no longer waged war in person, but stayed at court, where he was surrounded by 'effeminate' eunuchs, we might imagine that resistance against this model of emperorship came mostly from pagans who did not subscribe to the new Christian ideals, but still clung to the old notion of a military active leader.

It would be misleading, however, to view the matter of (military) active versus passive rulers purely in terms of pagans versus Christians. For one thing, even in the fifth century, actively leading troops to battle remained a viable option for some Christian emperors, particularly in the West. The fact that church historians like

¹¹¹ Synes. *regn.* 15, 4-5. However, the remark that Arcadius refused to walk on earth that was not sprinkled with gold-dust indicates that not all his displays were confined to the palace (15, 6).

¹¹² Synes. *regn.* 15, 9; 15, 7.

¹¹³ Synes. *regn.* 15, 7; 16, 1.

¹¹⁴ K. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982, 50-51; Th. Urbainczyk, *Socrates of Constantinople*, Ann Arbor 1997, 146-147.

¹¹⁵ Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, cit.

¹¹⁶ Soz. *h.e.* IX 1.

Socrates and Sozomen, both writing under the court-bound Theodosius II, did not speak out against secluded emperors in their works is only to be expected. Yet that does not mean that all Christians of their time would agree with Sozomen's sentiment that «piety alone suffices for the salvation of princes [μόνην εὐσέβειαν ἀρχεῖν πρὸς σωτηρίαν τοῖς βασιλεύουσιν].»¹¹⁶ After all, it was Sidonius Apollinaris – nowadays venerated as a Catholic saint – who scorned the seclusion of the Western Theodosians and rejoiced at the accession of a new, more active emperor. Synesius of Cyrene, the main spokesman for a military active emperorship in the East, has been shown to have been a Christian from infancy.¹¹⁷ And while orators such as Themistius and Pacatus may have been pagans, they were still expressing their criticism of secluded rulers in speeches to Christian emperors, evidently expecting their sentiments to resonate with their imperial addressees.

Nevertheless, some authors did put their scorn for military passive emperors in a distinctly anti-Christian context. A prime example is Julian. In his satirical work *The Caesars*, Constantine is portrayed as a man who «cared not at all for victory [οὐδὲν ἔμελεν αὐτῷ περὶ τῆς νίκης]» and was content to pay tribute to barbarians, meanwhile enjoying a hedonistic lifestyle. At the heavenly banquet described in the text, the first Christian emperor seeks out the company of Pleasure, Incontinence and Christ, who proclaims loudly that he is willing to forgive seducers, murderers and other sinners time and time again. Other pagan authors followed suit. Zosimus, for instance, claims that Constantine waged no more successful wars after his defeat of Licinius and gave himself up to pleasure in Constantinople. When barbarians plundered the Empire, he preferred to flee.¹¹⁸ Bruno Bleckmann has traced such stories to a late-fourth-century tradition which criticized the emperor's open conversion to Christianity and his abandonment of Rome for a new capital. Due to these fatal acts, anti-Constantinian authors held, the Romans had lost the divine favour that secured military victory.¹¹⁹

Most ancient authors, though, did not present the emergence of the *princeps clausus* as a specifically Christian problem. Not a single hostile author, for instance, claims that it was Christian piety that kept the likes of Arcadius and Honorius cloistered at their courts. Rather, their seclusion was attributed to aloofness, cowardice, dullness of mind and the lure of luxury – motives which were usually not coupled to any religion. If we can take the surviving fragments of Priscus as a clue, many of the Christian authors who wrote secular histories in late antiquity, and whose works have been almost or wholly lost, would likewise have bemoaned the inaccessibility and lack of military prowess of their rulers, complaining that they did

¹¹⁷ T. Schmitt, *Die Bekehrung des Synesios von Kyrene. Politik und Philosophie, Hof und Provinz als Handlungsräume eines Aristokraten bis zu seiner Wahl zum Metropolit von Ptolemais*, Munich-Leipzig 2001, 190-201. See also Cameron-Long, *Barbarians and Politics*, cit., 28-35.

¹¹⁸ Julian. *Caes.* 328d-329b, 336a-b; Zos. II 31, 2-32, 1.

¹¹⁹ B. Bleckmann, *Constantin und die Donaubarbaren. Ideologische Auseinandersetzungen um die Sieghaftigkeit Constantins*, *JbAC* 38, 1995, 38-66, part. 56-66.

«nothing at all worthy of record [οὐδὲν ὅ τι καὶ ἄξιον μνήμης].»¹²⁰ In short, although anti-Christian sentiments may have fuelled some attacks on alleged *principes clausi*, dissatisfaction with this style of rulership could be shared by pagans and Christians alike.

CONCLUSION

The image of the remote, inaccessible ruler had already emerged in the Greco-Roman literature of the principate, most notably in the guises of Tiberius and Domitian. Still, it gained special significance in the late fourth century, when (most) emperors stopped leading armies in person and spent much of their time at the centre of a highly ceremonious court. That is not to say that accusations of imperial seclusion and associated criticisms always correspond to reality. Even a cursory glance suffices to find cases where such labels were clearly misapplied. For instance, it would be hard to establish which of Theodosius's immediate predecessors hid away in the dark, as Pacatus claimed – certainly not Valens, Jovian or Julian, who were all active and visible rulers. Likewise, accusations of indolence against the likes of Gallienus and Theodosius seem highly unfair. Such criticisms tell us less about the actual conduct of these emperors than they do about the notions ancient authors cherished regarding the defining characteristics of 'good' and 'bad' rule.

In this article, I have not only looked at the seclusion and inaccessibility that were deemed typical of the *princeps clausus*, but also at other aspects which were, to a greater or lesser degree, associated with this *topos*. The preference for a life of luxury and leisure over a life of military toil and 'manly' bravery were familiar tropes which lent themselves particularly well for application to rulers who no longer personally engaged in warfare. Moreover, the luxury of court could now be connected to another feature, namely its 'Oriental' insistence on elaborate ritual. The association with unworthy favourites, since long a tell-tale sign of the 'bad' emperor, now often took the form of association with eunuchs, who were not only depraved and lowly creatures, but also paragons of effeminacy, hence emphasizing the 'unmanliness' of rulers who refused to take up the sword in service of the Empire. In this way, old tropes could be picked up and, if necessary, adapted to create the distinct *topos* of an aloof ruler who spent his days in secluded splendour, unperturbed by (if not actually unaware of) the troubles of his subjects, controlled by sinister eunuchs who kept him isolated from even the most eminent senators and military officials.

Naturally, the resulting images in fourth- and fifth-century literature are not always neatly defined. Ammianus's Constantius II lived among his eunuchs, who

¹²⁰ Priscus, fr. 3, 1, speaking about Theodosius II in particular. The author's religious affiliation is unknown. Likewise, Procopius sarcastically remarks that Honorius «never succeeded in saying or in doing anything worth recounting [οὐδὲν οὔτε εἰπεῖν λόγου ἄξιον οὔτε πράξεισι ἰσχύσας]; for the time was not sufficient during which he lived in possession of the royal power» (*Vand.* I 3, 4).

whispered secret slanders to him, yet still engaged in warfare and lived a frugal life, despite the presumed opulence of his court. Elagabalus, as presented by the *Historia Augusta*, lived in extravagant splendour and insisted on prostration like a Persian monarch, yet did not remain hidden from his subjects. Theodosius, in the view of Zosimus, alternated the waging of war with bouts of decadence spent among his eunuchs, yet always remained accessible to anyone who wished to speak to him. These rulers possessed some aspects associated with the *princeps clausus*, but were not accused of isolating themselves. The above-mentioned criticisms could be combined in a variety of ways, or could be used separately, but that does not take away from the fact that late antique sources often drew associations between them. In their view, seclusion meant invisibility, which was an indication for morally suspicious behaviour, which was in turn confirmed by the prominence of eunuchs, which hinted at effeminacy, which manifested itself in a lack of military prowess, and so forth. Even if some of these elements were not explicitly mentioned in particular cases, they could still be implied.

The 'hidden' emperor from late antiquity was thus a different creature from the emblematic tyrant of the principate.¹²¹ Describing the reign of Nero, Tacitus records that «the Senate and leading citizens were in doubt whether to regard him as more terrible at a distance or among them.»¹²² Very often, though, the tyrants were among them, which meant that every thoughtless remark or action could have fatal consequences. (In fact, a capricious madman like Caligula might not even need a particular reason to order torture or execution.) In short, it was often the imperial *presence* which was a menace to aristocrats, whereas in late antiquity, imperial *absence* became the main course of concern. If one had no access to the emperor, one had no possibility to gain influence, or to defend oneself against the malicious rumours that may have been circulating at court. If the emperor was unaware of the troubles befalling the Empire, he would take no action to set matters aright. If there was no ruler to set a moral example, public morality would swiftly decline. In the end, it is hard to determine which posed the greater evil: the iron fist of a black-hearted tyrant – or the chronic negligence of a ruler who preferred to stay shut in his own little world.

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¹²¹ Of course, imperial 'badness' could also be conceived in different ways in late antiquity, for instance by referring to the emperor's heretical beliefs; see Urbainczyk, *Socrates of Constantinople*, cit., 152-156.

¹²² Tac. *ann.* XV 36.

ABSTRACT

This article explores how fourth- and fifth-century orators and authors from both halves of the Empire criticized palace-based emperors through the *topos* of the *princeps clausus*, the secluded ruler who stays invisible and inaccessible to his subjects. Although criticism of remote and aloof emperors such as Tiberius and Domitian went back to the early days of the principate, the *princeps clausus* only developed into a distinct type in the literature of late antiquity, when there was a tendency for emperors to stop leading armies in person and to spend much of their time at the centre of a highly ceremonious court, thus defying the expectations of traditional elites longing for military active leaders who were willing to interact with them in an open manner and on a more or less equal footing. Typical features of a *princeps clausus* include seclusion in the palace, motivated by arrogance and/or a disinterest in public affairs; corruption by eunuchs and other shady characters at court; a preference for a life of luxury and indolence over the pursuit of military duties; and an inclination towards 'Oriental' pomp and ceremony, although not all of these are necessarily always present in combination. Criticism of secluded rulers usually does not have overt religious connotations and is uttered by pagan and Christian authors alike.

Key-words: late antiquity, perception of emperor, *princeps clausus*, imperial visibility, seclusion

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