

Gaining and Losing Imperial Favour in Late Antiquity

Representation and Reality

Edited by

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Kept in the Dark: Narratives of Imperial Seclusion in Late Antiquity

Martijn Icks

Abstract

This paper explores the role of imperial accessibility in late-antique panegyric and historiography, focusing on the late 4th and early 5th centuries. In particular, it discusses complaints about increased imperial seclusion in the works of Pacatus, Synesius, Ammianus Marcellinus, the *Historia Augusta* biographer, and others. These authors and orators developed the image of the *princeps clausus*: the aloof, secluded ruler who dwells at the heart of a highly ceremonious court and stands under the influence of malicious eunuchs. Although this image is highly exaggerated, it reflects genuine elite concerns. Whereas the “good” emperors of the Principate had been relatively accessible to members of the senatorial class, allowing them to compete for imperial favour and hence to gain power and status, the imperial court of Late Antiquity emphasized the social distance between the monarch and elite groups. At the same time, a new class of professional courtiers gained power and prestige from their proximity to the emperor. This prompted anxiety in senatorial aristocrats and other elites that their ties to the emperor were under pressure, potentially leading to a loss of influence and social status.

Roman elites competed for imperial favour since the days of Augustus. As Georg Simmel has argued, such competition has strong socializing effects, establishing common norms between the competitors and the party whose favour they are trying to gain.¹ This was certainly true for the Roman Empire. Literary sources show the development of a normative discourse defining the proper roles of emperors, senators, and courtiers in the never-ending negotiations of power, status and honour that took place at the imperial court and beyond. As this discourse makes clear, imperial accessibility was of great concern to members of the Roman elite. After all, one could only hope to influence an emperor if one was allowed to get close to him. For this reason, “good”

1 Simmel, “Soziologie der Konkurrenz”, pp. 1012–3; Helle, “Soziologie der Konkurrenz”, p. 951.

emperors tend to be characterised as highly visible and approachable in the literary sources of the Principate, while the “bad” ones typically display the opposite qualities.

In Late Antiquity, the competition for imperial favour continued unabated. However, clues in the literary discourse indicate that some authors, at least, felt that the long-established rules of the game were under pressure. This paper will explore the role of imperial accessibility in late antique panegyric and historiography. In particular, it will discuss how recurring complaints about increased imperial seclusion reflect the concerns and anxieties of senators and other members of elite groups.

The importance of the emperor's presence among his subjects is expressed well in Pacatus' panegyric on Theodosius. The Gallic rhetorician delivered this speech in the Roman Senate in 389 AD, after Theodosius had come from Constantinople to free the West from the usurper Magnus Maximus.² It goes without saying that the emperor was lauded for his military exploits, but Pacatus also dwelt on his visibility and accessibility:

(...) you frequently emerge and you show yourself to the waiting people [*crebere egressu expectantibus populis te fateris*], and being willing not only to let yourself be seen, but to be approached readily [*nec videri modo patiens, sed facilis adiri*], you listen to the entreaties of your subjects at close quarters, so that no matter who consults you, even if he should have earned a refusal (which is rare), he goes away with the consciousness of having seen the divinity [*visi numinis*].³

Of course, we need to consider these remarks in context. The image of an emperor who moved freely among his people will have had special resonance in Rome, the cradle of the principate, where rulers were ideally seen as father figures who stood close to the *populus Romanus*, displaying *civilitas*.⁴ Although Pacatus' use of the word *numen* leaves no doubt about Theodosius' superhuman status, the emperor's accessibility allows even common citizens to approach him and make requests—most of which are granted, as the orator makes a

2 See Leppin, *Theodosius der Große*, pp. 87–133 for the usurpation and defeat of Maximus. See Nixon/Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, pp. 437–47 for the historical context and circumstances of the speech.

3 *Panegyricus Latinus* 2(12).21.2.

4 Wallace-Hadrill, “Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King”. *Civilitas* is also a key virtue of Trajan in Pliny's *Panegyricus*, which claims that the emperor entered Rome on foot and freely mingled with the crowd, accessible to all (23.2). The passage in Pacatus may well have been inspired by Pliny's remarks.

point of mentioning. However, he immediately adds that not all late-antique rulers were as willing to show themselves as Theodosius was:

But how different the custom of other Emperors (you know of whom I speak) who considered their royal majesty diminished and cheapened unless they were shut up within some remote part of the palace [*qui maiestatem regiam imminui et vulgari putabant, nisi eos intra repositum palatinae aedis inclusos*], as if in some sanctuary of Vesta, to be consulted with reverence and in secret [*veneratio occulta*], and unless a carefully arranged solitude and widely imposed silence protected them like a rampart as they lay buried in the shade of their abode [*nisi intra domesticam umbram iacentes solitudo provisiva et silentia late conciliata vallassent*]. And on the occasions when they ventured into the light and could bear to face the day, they were carried in sedan chairs and carriages and, covered on all sides and overhead by a very dense screen of men and weapons, they were moved along slowly and at a measured tread. At such times the people were driven far away, and the busy hand of the lictor repelled the plebs with a lash, so that they were isolated even in public [*ut secretum esset in publico*].⁵

In short, these anonymous tyrants made every possible effort to distance themselves from their subjects, both physically and socially. Their secretive, secluded lifestyles and insistence on reverential treatment posed serious barriers to anyone who wished to approach them and make a request. Whereas the “good” Theodosius stood at the service of his subjects, these “bad” rulers seemed only to care about their elevated status.

1 The Discourse of Imperial Seclusion

Pacatus’ remarks do not stand by themselves. In late-antique oratory and literature, we frequently encounter the figure of the *princeps clausus*: the invisible, secluded ruler who is out of touch with his subjects.⁶ In Synesius of Cyrene’s

⁵ *Panegyricus Latinus* 2(12).21.3–4.

⁶ The term appears to originate with Sulpicius Alexander (cited in Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 11 9), who mentions that “Valentinian [II] the emperor was shut up in Vienne in the palace” [*clauso apud Viennam palatii aedibus principe Valentiniano*]. For a detailed discussion of the *princeps clausus* in 4th and 5th-century sources, see Icks, “Of Lizards and Peacocks: Criticism of the *princeps clausus* in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Sources”; also Stroheker, “*Princeps clausus*. Zu einigen Berührungen der Literatur des fünften Jahrhunderts mit der *Historia Augusta*”; Chastagnol, “Autour du thème du *princeps clausus*”.

speech *De regno*, which presents itself as a critical address to Arcadius, the emperor and his predecessors from the recent past are scorned because they have given up military campaigning and have grown estranged from the soldiers, preferring instead to waste their time pursuing pleasure at their luxurious courts.⁷ Around the same time, Claudian stressed the importance of imperial visibility in his panegyric on Honorius' fourth consulate (398 AD). The orator put his words in the form of stern fatherly advice, presumably spoken by Theodosius, urging Honorius to always be visible, so that he can prove to his subjects that he is worthy to rule them and will win their support. After all, the old emperor admonishes his young son, it is the hallmark of tyrants that they live "hedged about with swords and fenced with poisons"; a beloved ruler will be safer from harm than one who needs to be constantly guarded.⁸

Authors like Ammianus Marcellinus and the *Historia Augusta* biographer, among others, likewise allude to emperors living in isolation from their subjects. Although the details vary from case to case, *principes clausi* are often portrayed as secluded, elevated figures, surrounded with excessive pomp and circumstance, who prefer a life of indolence and comfort over military toil. To make matters worse, they tend to fall under the spell of malicious courtiers, often eunuchs, who feed them false information about the outside world and set them up against their friends.⁹ The *Historia Augusta* emphasizes how vulnerable secluded rulers are to deception: "Four or five men gather together and form one plan for deceiving the emperor, and then they tell him to what he must give his approval."¹⁰ Such schemes could have disastrous consequences for those outside the inner circle. Ammianus records several cases of good men who fell victim to the slanders of courtiers, such as the *magister militum* Silvanus, who was forced to revolt against Constantius II because the latter had been made to believe (wrongly) that he aspired to the imperial purple;¹¹

7 The offensive tone of the speech makes it highly unlikely that it was actually performed in Arcadius' presence. It was probably aimed at disgruntled courtiers; see Cameron/Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius. With a Contribution by Lee Sherry*, pp. 127–42.

8 Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Honorio Augusto quartum consuli 255–295*. Cf. Synesius, *De regno* 9.3. The trope can also be found in Pliny, *Panegyricus* 49.2: Trajan "finds protection in popularity instead of cruelty, and seeks the thronging crowds of his subjects instead of solitude behind locked doors [*non solitudine et claustris*]".

9 For eunuchs at the late-antique court, see Hopkins, "Eunuchs and Politics in the Later Roman Empire"; Scholten, *Der Eunuch in Kaisernähe. Zur politischen und sozialen Bedeutung des praepositus sacri cubiculi im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.*; and Stevenson, "The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity".

10 *Historia Augusta, Vita Aureliani* 43.3–4.

11 Ammianus, *Res gestae* xv 5.1–16. *PLRE* 1, Silvanus 2, pp. 840–1; see also Hunt, "The Outsider Inside: Ammianus on the Rebellion of Silvanus" for Silvanus' revolt.

and of course Ammianus' own commander, Ursicinus, whose good name was dragged through the mud by eunuchs after his defeat at Amida, leading to his forced retirement.¹²

It is clear that the hostile depictions of so-called *principes clausi* in late-antique sources are prone to no small degree of exaggeration. We should hardly imagine that rulers indeed sealed themselves off in their palaces and became invisible to their subjects.¹³ Nevertheless, the discourse of imperial seclusion emerging from the late 4th century onwards reflects genuine concerns. It developed in a time when sedentary emperorship increasingly became the norm and most emperors stopped leading their armies in person. Instead, they took up a loftier position, presenting themselves as splendid, superhuman figures at the centre of highly ceremonious courts. The degree and nature of this ceremonization differed between eastern and western courts, as well as between individual reigns.¹⁴ Even in Constantinople, where it flourished to its fullest extent, the emperor did not always present himself as a remote, exalted figure, dressed in splendour, but on occasion also emphasized his Christian humility.¹⁵ There was even still a place for imperial displays of *civilitas*, as Pacatus' characterization of Theodosius' conduct in his 389 AD speech makes clear.¹⁶ On the whole, though, it is fair to say that new modes of imperial 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.

Inevitably, these changes affected the relationship between the emperor and elite groups, such as senators, high military officials, and curiales or provincial

12 Ammianus, *Res gestae* XVIII 4.1–6; 5.4–5; XX 2.1–5. *PLRE* 2, Ursicinus 2, pp. 985–6.

13 Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole*, pp. 99–105 (focusing on Constantinople).

14 See Smith, "The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire, c. AD 300–c. AD 450" for the development of the late-antique imperial court. For late-antique court ceremony, see Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreich*; McCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*; and Kolb, *Herrscherideologie in der Spätantike*, pp. 38–54. Sedentary emperorship in East and West is discussed by Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole* and McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455* (with a focus on child emperors) respectively.

15 Harries, "Pius princeps: Theodosius II and Fifth-Century Constantinople"; Diefenbach, "Zwischen Liturgie und 'civilitas': Konstantinopel im 5. Jahrhundert und die Etablierung eines städtischen Kaisertums"; Meier, "Die Demut des Kaisers. Aspekte der religiösen Selbstinszenierung bei Theodosius II. (408–450 n. Chr.); Kelly, "Stooping to Conquer: The Power of Imperial Humility".

16 Lejdegård, *Honorius and the City of Rome: Authority and Legitimacy in Late Antiquity*, pp. 35–8 (focus on Rome); Smith, "The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire, c. AD 300–c. AD 450", pp. 208–9; Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole*, pp. 99–104.

elites. Senators in particular were used to gaining prestige from their close association with the emperor. The disgruntlement with allegedly secluded rulers expressed in late-antique sources betrays a sense of alienation on the part of some elite members, who felt they were no longer as close to the emperor as they should be. This hindered them in their efforts to compete for his favour. Narratives of inclusion and exclusion were constructed around the locus of the imperial court, the place where emperors were supposed to have withdrawn to. In order to gain a better understanding of this discourse, I will make a brief excursion to the imperial court of the Principate and the role it played in defining the relationship between the emperor and the senatorial elite. In particular, I will touch on the idealized characterization of Trajan's court as a *communis domus* in Pliny's *Panegyricus*. Next, I will consider the late-antique court and how its changing power dynamics fed into elite anxieties about the visibility and accessibility of late-antique emperors.

2 Senators and the Imperial Court in the Principate

In an influential study on the imperial court, Aloys Winterling has remarked that the rulers of the Principate lived in a "Hof ohne Staat", a court without a state.¹⁷ The situation arose out of the peculiar way in which the monarchy had evolved from the Roman Republic. By the time Augustus and his successors managed to carve out a quasi-monarchical position for themselves, a senatorial aristocracy had been in place for centuries. This aristocracy had developed its own social hierarchy and rules of competition for status and power, based on such distinguishing markers as ancestry, proper moral conduct, the fulfilment of political office, rhetorical abilities, and military achievements.¹⁸ In other words, the upper stratum of Roman society functioned according to a value system that was completely independent of a monarchic court. Emperors were well aware that they could not simply abolish this system overnight and replace it with one in which social rank was wholly dependent on imperial favour. At best, they could interfere in the social hierarchy by granting political office to some senators and not to others, but they could not change the fact

17 Winterling, "Hof ohne 'Staat'. Die *aula Caesaris* im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr."

18 See Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, pp. 30–106 for an analysis of the way honour and social standing were constructed among Rome's elite in the late Republic and early Empire.

that a *proconsul* held more prestige in aristocratic circles than a *procurator*, regardless which of them had the closest ties to the person of the emperor.¹⁹

However, different values held sway at court, where proximity to the emperor was the most important marker of status and power. Regardless of their rank in the outside world, people like the *eques* Sejanus and even Claudius' freedmen could secure favours and prestige through their personal bond with the sovereign. Over time various ranks of imperial *amici* developed, defined by the frequency and intimacy of their contacts with the emperor.²⁰ In Simmel's terms, we could say that an alternative system of competition was established, with the sovereign as the third party determining who "won" or "lost". Ritualized and highly symbolic meetings between emperors and senators at the palace, such as banquets and the daily *salutationes*, signalled who enjoyed the ruler's favour. Nevertheless, even on these occasions, "good" emperors took care to present themselves as the first among equals, stressing their accessibility and amicability.²¹ In this sense, the imperial court of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD was notably distinct from Louis XIV's court at Versailles. In Norbert Elias' model of the latter, aristocrats were "tamed" through their competition for the favour of the Sun King in a never-ending game of ritual and etiquette. As Elias argues, it was not so much a nobleman's formal rank that determined his social status at court, but whether or not the monarch had expressed his affection and approval through the bestowal of some token privilege, such as the honour of helping him dress in the morning or serving him at dinner.²² In contrast, Roman emperors, at least the so-called "good" ones, were keenly aware that they could not treat senators as mere courtiers, but had to meet them on their own terms in order not to lose their vital support.

We can see these principles exemplified in Pliny's famous panegyric to Trajan, pronounced in the Senate in 100 AD, when Pliny was granted the

19 Winterling, "Hof ohne 'Staat'. Die *aula Caesaris* im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.". Other notable studies on the imperial court of the Principate include Saller, *Personal Patronage*, pp. 41–78; Wallace-Hadrill, "The Imperial Court"; Winterling, *Aula Caesaris*; and Paterson, "Friends in High Places". See Eich, "Aristokratie und Monarchie" for the relationship between monarchy and aristocracy in the Principate.

20 Winterling, "Hof ohne 'Staat'. Die *aula Caesaris* im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.," pp. 101–4.

21 For imperial banquets, see Vössing, *Mensa regia. Das Bankett beim hellenistischen König und beim römischen Kaiser*. For imperial *salutationes*, see Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, pp. 40–5.

22 Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft*. For criticism of Elias' court model, see Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court*, who contends that Elias overestimates the king's ability to domesticate the nobles through court etiquette.

consulship. Rather than describing the emperor's Palatine residence as an *aula*, a court, the orator invokes the language of the private home, emphasizing the emperor's hospitality and accessibility to his senatorial peers. "No forum, no temple is so free of access [*tam reserata*]: not even the Capitol and the very site of your adoption are more public and open to all [*magis publica magis omnium*]," Pliny remarks.²³ Although Trajan is a very busy man, he is always there to await and greet his visitors in person, while excusing those who have urgent business elsewhere. The senators consider it a pleasure to meet the emperor and do so out of their own free will. They gather round him "care-free and happy, coming when it suits us" and "stay behind to linger on as if in a home we share [*ut in communi domo*]" after they have paid their respects.²⁴ In short, the orator downplays the monarchical connotations of the court as much as possible. Trajan is presented as a patron receiving his clients, just as other patrons were doing in *salutationes* all over the city. No mention is made of ceremony or of dividing the visitors up in ranks. On the contrary, the whole affair takes place in a relaxed, informal atmosphere and the mutual bonds of affection expressed by the ritual are genuine.

However, it had not always been thus. Pliny conjures up the apparition of the tyrant Domitian, who only a short while ago had hosted very different meetings in the palace:

(...) this is the place where recently that fearful monster built his defences with untold terrors, where lurking in his den [*specu inclusa*] 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 [*tenebras semper secretumque captantem*], and only emerged from the desert of his solitude to create another.²⁵

23 Pliny, *Panegyricus* 47.5. In other words, the palace is presented not as the private possession of a wealthy monarch, but as a public space belonging to the entire Roman community.

24 Pliny, *Panegyricus* 48.1–3.

25 Pliny, *Panegyricus* 48.3–5.

In many respects, this passage seems like a foreshadowing of later images of the *princeps clausus*, except that Pliny does not paint a picture of the emperor as an exalted figure living in a golden cage, but rather depicts him as a savage animal lurking in a dark den. What both images share, however, is the notion of a ruler who shuts himself off from the outside world and is very difficult to approach.

3 Senators and the Late-Antique Imperial Court

By the 4th century, the relatively open court of the Principate had blossomed into something altogether more grand. In places like Constantinople, Milan and Ravenna, the imperial court became a distinct society in its own right, governed by elaborate ceremony, and peopled by professional courtiers whose rank and function were fully determined by court life. An estimated 6,000 people were part of the imperial *comitatus* in the 4th century, including guards, eunuchs and other servants, the members of the imperial consistory, and a whole host of civic and military functionaries.²⁶

At the same time, the senatorial elite had become much more diffuse than it had been in the first two centuries AD. On the one hand, there was the old senatorial aristocracy, a group that was not clearly defined in a legal sense, but distinguished itself through such markers of prestige as high birth, wealth, political accomplishments, *virtus* and *paideia*. On the other hand, there was the *Funktionselite* or *Dienstadel*, a varied group which encompassed everyone who had managed to climb the social ladder through their service at the court, the army or the civil administration.²⁷ These social climbers could not only achieve the old senatorial rank of *clarissimi*, but also the newly created ranks of *spectabiles* and *illustres*, the elite among the elite. This meant that high court officials such as the *magister officiorum* and the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* not only wielded great prestige within the confines of the palace, but could also

26 Smith, "The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire, c. AD 300–c. AD 450", pp. 196–9. For the late-antique court, see also Winterling, *Comitatus. Beiträge zur Erforschung des spätantiken Kaiserhofes*.

27 Rebenich, "Pars melior humani generis'—Aristokratie(n) in der Spätantike", pp. 154–5, 158–9. There is extensive scholarship on late-antique elites; see for instance Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425*; Salzman/Rapp, *Elites in Late Antiquity*; Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*; Badel, *La Noblesse de l'Empire romain. Les masques et la vertu*; and Lizzi Testa, *Le Trasformazioni delle élites in età taroantica. Atti del convegno internazionale, Perugia, 15–16 marzo 2004*.

claim a place at the top of the senatorial hierarchy, despite their often humble origins and status as eunuchs.²⁸ Indeed, Arcadius' grand chamberlain and right-hand man Eutropius even gained the consulship and was allowed to celebrate a military triumph.²⁹ From the end of the 4th century, the traditional *cursum honorum* lost its importance, so that senators who wished to achieve high posts in the imperial administration could only do so by first fulfilling offices at the imperial court.³⁰ Both in the Eastern and Western Empire, proximity to the emperor and services rendered to the emperor became the decisive factors that determined one's place in the social hierarchy.³¹

In this brave new world, it made sense for rulers to claim a more elevated position. For one thing, they had to inspire loyalty in the members of a vastly expanded imperial bureaucracy, many of whom did not adhere to traditional senatorial values. The new *Dienstadel* of Late Antiquity did not expect or need the emperor to behave as a *primus inter pares*.³² For another, the introduction of elaborate court ceremony and reliance on eunuchs and other social climbers allowed emperors to keep a certain distance from traditional elites. With the return to sedentary emperorship in the late 4th and 5th centuries, the senatorial aristocracy with its high status, vast wealth and powerful connections once again became a force to be reckoned with. Emphasizing one's unique superhuman status as ruler was a prudent strategy to limit the threat posed by potential rivals.³³ At the same time, new elites risen in the service of

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- 28 However, their formal status as *illustres* did not earn them the respect of the traditional elite, who continued to despise them as creatures without honour: Scholten, *Der Eunuch in Kaisernähe. Zur politischen und sozialen Bedeutung des praepositus sacri cubiculi im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, pp. 184–5; Idem, “Der oberste Hofeunuch. Die politische Effizienz eines gesellschaftlich Diskriminierten”, pp. 64–7.
- 29 Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom*, pp. 93–103.
- 30 Noethlichs, “Strukturen und Funktionen des spätantiken Kaiserhofes”, p. 20.
- 31 Noethlichs, “Strukturen und Funktionen des spätantiken Kaiserhofes”, pp. 33–4; Rebenich, “Pars melior humani generis’—Aristokratie(n) in der Spätantike”, pp. 157–8.
- 32 Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, p. 249; Smith, “The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire, c. AD 300–c. AD 450”, pp. 174–5.
- 33 See Börm, “Herrscher und Eliten in der Spätantike” for imperial strategies of dealing with powerful elites (comparison between late-antique emperors and Sasanian kings). Also Scholten, “Der oberste Hofeunuch. Die politische Effizienz eines gesellschaftlich Diskriminierten”, pp. 71–2. See Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425* for the importance of the senatorial aristocracy of the West. Pfeilschifter, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole*, pp. 452–65 argues that the senatorial aristocracy of Constantinople did not form a cohesive group that pursued its interests collectively.

the Empire—men like Rufinus,³⁴ Eutropius,³⁵ and Stilicho³⁶—sought to encroach on the power of weak rulers, forcing them into a mostly ceremonious position.³⁷ Perhaps even more than during the Principate, then, the imperial court was a battleground where various parties competed to influence or even control the emperor.

4 Unapproachable Emperors

With these things in mind, let us now return to some of the concerns expressed in late-antique discourse with regard to imperial accessibility. Even though it had been well over two hundred years since Pliny imagined Trajan's palace as a shared house which senators could wander in and out of at their leisure, the notion of an open court still retained some appeal. For instance, the panegyrist Mamertinus complimented Julian on maintaining the friends he had made in his private life, remarking that “no one has been thrust from his position, no one debarred from access to him, the doors of the palace are closed to no one [*nulli palatii fores clausae sunt*]”.³⁸ Likewise, Theodosius received praise from Themistius because “no one comes into the palace with pounding heart, chattering teeth and pale with fear but with confident and upstanding thoughts as if entering the sanctuary of a holy place [*ὥσπερ εἰς τὰ ἄσυλα τῶν ἱερῶν*]”. In fact, the emperor's very sight was “enough to dispel all fear from the spirit”.³⁹ By implication, of course, not all rulers were so easily approachable. We have already seen how the *principes clausi* described by Pacatus preferred to stay hidden “within some remote part of the palace”, shielding themselves off through silence and solitude. Synesius complained that only a few senators were fortunate enough to be able to behold the emperor lawfully, while Arcadius' lowly sycophants could apparently enter the palace with less trepidation than the generals who commanded the imperial armies.⁴⁰ Even though we should not take such complaints literally, they appeal to negative sentiments which must

34 *PLRE* 1, Flavius Rufinus 18, pp. 778–81.

35 *PLRE* 2, Eutropius 1, pp. 440–4.

36 *PLRE* 1, Stilicho, pp. 853–8.

37 See McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455* for the child emperors of the West.

38 *Panegyricus Latinus* 3(11).26.4.

39 Themistius, *Orationes* 15.190c. Compare *Panegyricus Latinus* 4(10).5.1–3, where Nazarius praises Constantine's appearance as much less intimidating than the splendour of the tetrarchs.

40 *Panegyricus Latinus* 2(12).21.3; Synesius, *De regno* 11.3; 10.4.

have existed at the time. Eager to gain imperial favour, senators, generals and local elites like Synesius himself evidently felt that they were not sufficiently able to interact with their sovereign.

Changing relations between emperors and elites fuelled these concerns. Whereas senators in Pliny's day could probably gain admittance to the court with relative ease, in Late Antiquity access to the monarch was strictly controlled by the *magister officiorum* and the *praepositus sacri cubiculi*.⁴¹ A famous case records how bishop Ambrose sought to arrange a private audience with the usurper Maximus to negotiate on behalf of Valentinian II, but was turned down by the emperor's chamberlain, who replied that he could only be heard in the consistory.⁴² It is not surprising that Ambrose preferred a private meeting, since formal audiences with the sovereign were highly ritualized affairs, where the enthroned monarch was concealed behind curtains, which opened to reveal him in all his majesty. Visitors were then allowed to approach him in order of rank and perform *adoratio*, prostrating themselves before the emperor and kissing the imperial purple.⁴³ During these meetings, even senators and high military officials would have to follow the instructions of the *magister officiorum*, the *silentiarii* and others who directed the proceedings, obstructing them from interacting freely and spontaneously with the monarch. Contrary to the *salutatio* of the Principate, then, late-antique audiences emphasized the insurmountable social distance between the emperor and even the most esteemed members of the elite. Any pretence that this was a meeting between equals was deliberately quashed.

Resentment against the ceremonization of the imperial office is well recorded in 4th- and 5th-century sources. Eutropius scorned Diocletian's splendid adornment and above all the ritual of prostration, which the emperor was supposed to have introduced and which was "suited rather to royal usages than to Roman liberty" [*regiae consuetudinis formam magis quam Romanae libertatis*].⁴⁴ Themistius remarked that many panegyric orators focused on the emperor's crown and glittering robe, but failed to realize that the true qualities

41 Paterson, "Friends in High Places: The Creation of the Court of the Roman Emperor", p. 123; Scholten, "Der oberste Hofeunuch. Die politische Effizienz eines gesellschaftlich Diskriminierten", pp. 51–4. The *magister officiorum* regulated access to imperial audiences and the consistory, while the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* determined who was allowed to enter the even more exclusive inner court, i.e. the emperor's private quarters.

42 Ambrose, *Epistula* 24.2.

43 For the ritual of *adoratio*, see Avery, "The 'adoratio purpurae' and the Importance of the Imperial Purple in the Fourth Century of the Christian Era"; and Smith, "The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire, c. AD 300–c. AD 450", pp. 214–20. In this volume, Fabian Schulz provides a detailed discussion of bishop Athanasius' audience with Constans.

44 Eutropius, *Breviarium ab urbe condita* IX 26. According to Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 21.2, it was Galerius who first introduced prostration, while the *Historia Augusta*

of a good leader were not so easily visible.⁴⁵ In particular, excessive pomp and ceremony could be associated with palace-bound emperors. Synesius mocked Arcadius and his predecessors for dressing as splendidly as peacocks, inquiring rhetorically whether things had not been better when they had still been leading armies in the field, “blackened by the sun”, while behaving themselves “in all other respects simply and artlessly” [ἀφελῶς τε καὶ αὐτοσκευῶς]. Likewise Claudian, in his panegyric on Honorius’ fourth consulship, had Theodosius press upon his son that it was all well and good for the tiara-adorned King of Parthia to while away his time in idle luxury, but that a Roman emperor could not keep his virtue “overwhelmed in darkness” [*submersa tenebris*]: rather than to “overstep the limits established for mankind” [*praescriptos homini transcendere fines*], he should respect his inferiors, obey the laws he himself has set and lead armies to battle.⁴⁶ Both authors, then, are making a case for a merit-based emperorship in which the ruler does not isolate himself in elevated splendour, but leaves the confines of the palace to actively serve the interests of the *res publica*.

5 Insiders and Outsiders

If the difficulty of getting close to the emperor was an important concern expressed in late-antique discourse, an additional concern was no less pressing: the fear that other people *were* on familiar terms with the sovereign and could influence his decisions. These were the eunuchs and other servants at court who had unrestricted access to the imperial presence. Naturally, our elite sources assume that the influence low-born courtiers had on the emperor could never amount to anything good. In the competition for imperial favour, they were unwelcome rivals. The *Historia Augusta*, in its depiction of Severus Alexander as an ideal prince, praises the young ruler for chasing all eunuchs from the palace, characterising their presence as un-Roman:

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 [*a populo et amicis summovent*], and they are go-betweens, often delivering

blames it on Elagabalus (*Vita Severi Alexandri* 18.3). All three authors associate the ritual with the Persians and hence stress its “un-Romanness”.

45 Themistius, *Orationes* 1.2a–b.

46 Synesius, *De regno* 11.2, 11.5; Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Honorio Augusto quartum consuli* 214–224, 296–305, 320–352.

messages other than the emperor's reply, hedging him about [*claudentes principem*], and aiming, above all things, to keep knowledge from him.⁴⁷

Although the passage occurs in the biography of an early 3rd-century emperor, it is likely to voice the author's contemporary concerns, as is the remark that Alexander surrounded himself with friends who were "upright and revered, not spiteful, or thieving, or seditious, or crafty, or leagued together for evil, or haters of the righteous, or lustful, or cruel, or deceivers of their prince, or mockers, or desirous of hoodwinking him like a fool", and who "sold nothing, who lied in nothing, who falsified nothing, and who never fell short of the expectations of their prince but were always devoted to him."⁴⁸ The author does not specify who these suitable companions were, but it is not a far-fetched guess that he is thinking of upper-class men with staunch morals and impeccable pedigrees.

Late-antique sources provide many examples of eunuchs or other courtiers who supposedly controlled emperors, such as the grand chamberlain Eusebius, who had Constantius II under his thumb,⁴⁹ the grand chamberlain Eutropius, who "ruled Arcadius like a fatted animal",⁵⁰ and the *magister officiorum* Olympius, who held sway over the court of Ravenna after Stilicho's demise.⁵¹ We have already seen that courtiers with close links to the emperor could pose a serious threat to outsiders, destroying their careers or even their lives by throwing suspicion on them.⁵² The young Gratian and Valentinian II, for instance, were allegedly "not able to think for themselves, and were controlled by the slanders of the eunuch chamberlains", while Valens was "ready to listen to informers without distinguishing truth from falsity"—not to mention Constantius II, whose "anxious ears" were "always attentive and open to such gossip" [*expositas semper eius modi rumoribus et patentes*].⁵³ Significantly, Ammianus often stresses the intimate, secretive atmosphere in which eunuchs wove their webs of intrigue, speaking of "secret whispers" [*arcanos susurros*], "muttering" [*mussitare*] and "whispered slanders" [*mordaces susurrus*]. These were scenes taking place in the emperor's private quarters—a place from

47 *Historia Augusta, Vita Severi Alexandri* 66.3. Perhaps the author had Julian in mind, who likewise expelled all his predecessor's corrupt attendants from the palace: Ammianus, *Res gestae* XXII 4.1–10.

48 *Historia Augusta, Vita Severi Alexandri* 66.2.

49 Libanius, *Oratio* 18.152; *PLRE* 1, Eusebius 11, pp. 302–3.

50 Zosimus, *Historia nova* V 12.1.

51 Zosimus, *Historia nova* V 35.1. *PLRE* 2, Olympius 2, pp. 801–2.

52 See notes 11 and 12 for the examples of Silvanus and Ursicinus as victims of malicious courtiers.

53 Zosimus, *Historia nova* IV 22.4; Ammianus, *Res gestae* XXXI 14.6; XIV 11.4.

which senators and generals were usually barred entrance, but where they feared their fates might be decided.⁵⁴

The fact that low-born courtiers wielded so much power and prestige was grating to members of the upper classes, who considered these privileges to be rightfully theirs. Claudian put it succinctly in his first invective on Eutropius: “He who was not suffered to perform the duties of a slave is admitted to the administration of an empire; him whom a private house scorned as a servant, a palace tolerates as its lord.”⁵⁵ Reminiscing about the bad old days before Julian became emperor, Libanius recalled how “we used to fall on our faces, as though struck by lightning” when encountering eunuchs and other palace servants. In similar fashion, Mamertinus reflected on the undignified behaviour many nobles displayed to win political office: “you would see men of patrician family bowing at the doors of those who ministered to the royal desire [*qui regiis cupiditatibus serviebant*]”.⁵⁶ As stand-ins for the emperor, these ministers were not just rivals in the competition for imperial favour, but could distribute favours themselves. Most authors and orators took it for granted that courtiers were unworthy of the political power placed in their hands and would abuse it at every possible turn. Railing against the corruption of Rufinus, Claudian described practices that many of his contemporaries would probably not have considered untypical for the goings-on at a late-antique court: “Everything had its price. He betrayed secrets, deceived dependents, and sold honours that had been wheedled from the emperor.”⁵⁷ After all, what else could one expect of such upstart riff-raff?

6 Conclusion

Late-antique narratives about imperial seclusion express a range of elite concerns regarding the changing relationship between ruler and ruled. The image of the secluded, inaccessible monarch is the representation of these concerns. Although imperial seclusion was not exclusively addressed in works of the senatorial aristocracy, the theme as such is heavily informed by the senatorial discourse on imperial *civilitas* from the time of the Principate. The image of an

54 Ammianus, *Res gestae* XIV 11.3; XX 2.1. See also Icks, “Of Lizards and Peacocks: Criticism of the *princeps clausus* in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Sources”, p. 480.

55 Claudian, *In Eutropium* I 142–144.

56 Libanius, *Oratio* 18.150; *Panegyricus Latinus* 3(11).20.4. Under Julian, these indignities had presumably ended: now the emperor himself approached men he deemed fit for political office (21.4–5).

57 Claudian, *In Rufinum* I 179–180.

amicable, approachable *princeps* who nurtures close bonds with senators and the Roman people at large, perhaps best epitomized in Pliny's panegyric to Trajan, serves as a counterpoint to the distant, elevated autocrat we encounter in late-antique texts. For many authors, the latter was a figure of scorn and resentment, because he did not adhere to the long-established norms regulating the competition for imperial favour. Traditional elites held strong views on *who* should be able to compete and on *which terms* the competition should take place. Those views often clashed with the realities of the late-antique court.

Of course, imperial inaccessibility and unworthy favourites had been causes of concern since the days of the Julio-Claudians, as accounts of Tiberius' withdrawal to Capri and Claudius' influential freedmen attest. We should be careful not to view the differences between the Principate and Late Antiquity in black-and-white terms. Nevertheless, the gradual development of a monarchic court, and the vast imperial bureaucracy that developed alongside it, confronted senators and other elite groups with a society and a space that did not function according to traditional aristocratic norms and values, but had a habitus and hierarchy of its own, where lineage, social rank and political accomplishments did not matter as much as proximity to the monarch. In Late Antiquity, the latter was of tremendous importance as a source of elite power and status. At the same time, emperors no longer downplayed, but rather emphasized the social distance which had always existed between themselves and members of the upper classes.

The consequences were not just symbolic. The emerging class of professional courtiers who regulated court ceremony, controlled access to the emperor, and were always in his vicinity infringed on privileges that aristocrats had long claimed for themselves. Although channels of communication between emperors and elites remained open, the rules of the game had changed. Palace meetings between the monarch and members of the upper classes became much more formalized occasions than the *salutationes* of the Principate had been, leaving less room for spontaneous interaction. Complaints about aloof, secluded rulers were a response to these changes. At least some senators and other elites felt that their ties to the emperor were under pressure, potentially leading to a loss of influence and social status. It is small wonder that they looked with envy and dismay at eunuchs and other palace-dwellers, who were under no illusion that they were the equals of their sovereign, but profited from their intimate acquaintance with the master of the Roman world and could snuff out the careers or even the lives of distinguished senators and military officers. Confronted with this privileged inner circle, men of high status might well feel uneasy, unsure about the extent to which they were being kept in the dark.

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