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Introduction

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Late Antiquity* includes all seven revised and peer-refereed papers presented at the one-day colloquium “Envisioning the Roman Emperor in Speech and Word in Late Antiquity.” This gathering, organized by Jan Willem Drijvers and Meaghan McEvoy and held at Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia) on 25 July 2018,¹ focused on the issue of how, in a period of change from the fourth to fifth century CE, a renewal of imperial leadership and ideology was initiated in order to recreate stable rule. It explored one of the principal ways in which this can be observed, through surviving spoken and written perspectives on late Roman rule. After the “crisis” of the third century, the Roman empire reinvented and revived itself thanks to the reforms of Diocletian and his Tetrarchic regime, as well as to the long, stable reign of Constantine. In this new Roman empire, emperorship and imperial ideology were reformulated, making use of the traditions of the past and introducing new elements. One of the key aims of the colloquium was to consider the processes by which imperial leadership was reshaped and framed in order to secure imperial rule once more after a period of crisis. Pivotal to the colloquium was the question of how texts and speeches about emperors and their families in the late Roman period functioned in communicating imperial rule and ideology.

The processes of political negotiation between a sovereign and his subjects are structured by symbols, rituals, and narratives. In the early Roman empire, speech-making was a useful medium of communication between an emperor and his people (and vice versa), and at the same time an important vehicle for

¹ This colloquium was made possible by a Macquarie University Faculty of Arts Visiting Fellowship grant for the visit of Jan Willem Drijvers (University of Groningen). We the organizers are grateful also for the generosity of the Macquarie University Ancient Cultures Research Centre (or ACRC, from 2019 the Centre for Ancient Cultural Heritage and Environment) and its director, Professor Bronwen Neil, who supported the event financially. We are grateful also to the Australasian Society for Classical Studies, which provided funding for crucial bursaries that enabled two graduate students to travel to the event. We would also like to thank the respondents to each paper, all of whom offered valuable insights and suggestions following the presentations on the day itself: Peter Edwell, Phoebe Garrett, Caillan Davenport, Tom Hillard, Chris Mallan, Brian Croke, and Chris Malone.

advocating and negotiating imperial ideology. This was even more the case in Late Antiquity: epideictic oratory—that is, praise-and-blame rhetoric—became crucial in the context of anchoring imperial rule in Late Antiquity, but invectives and funeral orations were likewise important texts for broadcasting imperial ideological concepts.

In addition to coinage, laws, and other imperial communications, panegyrics—that is, speeches of praise given in honor of an imperial person—were significant communicative statements about authority and power, serving as effective media for expressing, producing, and sustaining imperial ideology, and being as well an efficient means for broadcasting imperial representation.² Of all the speeches delivered in the Roman imperial period, only a small proportion have been passed down to us. However, considerably more speeches (both in Latin and Greek) have been preserved from the late Roman empire than from the early empire. In fact, in the late Roman empire, when the emperor no longer presented himself as *princeps* but rather as *dominus*, rhetoric may have become an even more important mode of communication in the context of imperial rule. Among those texts that survive, speeches in honor of emperors dominate, but a small number of speeches honoring imperial women as well as speeches delivered to imperial officials are also extant.

By the end of the third century, panegyrics had become one of the most significant forms of communication between a ruler and his subjects—indeed, they are the predominant form of public oration relating to emperors in the late Roman period and are the focus of more than half of the articles collected in this special issue. More than sixty panegyrics, most of them in prose, survive for the years between 289 and the early fifth century.³ This is a considerable number, yet only the tip of the iceberg; many more speeches must have been composed and delivered on a variety of occasions such as an imperial *adventus*, the emperor's *dies imperii*, a notable victory, the assumption of the consulship, or an imperial marriage.

Apart from panegyrics, invectives—that is, derogatory orations in which the emperor is criticized—seem to have become fashionable in the late Roman empire. Synesius's *De regno*, written in response to his failure to gain an audience at the court as ambassador of his city with the emperor Arcadius (reigned from 395 to 408), is well known. Synesius vents his irritation by reporting what is wrong with Arcadius's reign while listing the virtues and duties of an

² For a recent introduction to the importance of panegyric and imperial rhetoric for late antique political culture, see Omissi and Ross 2020, 1–22. Significant in this respect is the work by Roger Rees; see, for example, Rees 2002.

³ Omissi 2018, 43.

ideal king.⁴ Of another order are the invectives by Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers, and Lucifer of Cagliari against Constantius II (reigned 337 to 361) because of his support of Arianism, and the invectives against Julian by Gregory of Nazianzus.⁵ It is unlikely that some of these invectives were delivered in public, as the panegyrics were.⁶ Moreover, in panegyrics deceased predecessors of the sitting emperor could also be criticized as, for instance, in the case of the speech from 313 in honor of Constantine where Maxentius is characterized as a monster and a cruel and licentious tyrant, as is discussed further below.⁷

Few imperial funeral orations from Late Antiquity have been preserved. Arguably the most important is the *De obitu Theodosii* in honor of Theodosius I (reigned 379 to 395) by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, which especially communicates concepts of Christian imperial ideology.⁸ In addition, Gregory of Nyssa's funeral oration for the empress Flaccilla in the 380s focuses on the Christian piety and charitable activities of the *Augusta* and offers a view of the role of women in building the imperial image, a topic which will be explored below.

Since speeches contain influential communications about imperial rule, they cannot be dismissed, as has been done in the past, as empty and formulaic adulation or labelled as empty rhetoric. Nor are they mere imperial propaganda, as has for a long time been the scholarly opinion, nor are they media aimed only at announcing imperial programs and policies.⁹ Speeches reflect imperial wishes and are expressions of imperial ideology, and one might even state that imperial ideology was produced or at least sustained by these speeches. Undeniably, emperors had a great interest in these speeches because they communicated the current imperial ideology, broadcast the desired imperial image, and anchored their rule in society. In this way, these speeches allow modern-day historians to learn about the political and ideological program(s) of an emperor.¹⁰

Although such speeches, in particular panegyrics and funeral orations, had to be in accordance with the emperor's self-representation, most orators

⁴ For detailed discussion of this text, see Cameron and Long 1993, 103–42.

⁵ Flower 2013.

⁶ On the history of political invective, see Long 1996, Chapter 3.

⁷ This is also a frequent feature of the speeches made for Themistius in addressing successive emperors in the fourth century; see, for example, Them. *Or.* 6.74b–d with Heather and Moncur 2001, 84, note 153.

⁸ See a recent discussion of this important text in Liebeschuetz 2010, 174–203.

⁹ MacCormack 1975; Whitby 1998. For a discussion of (older) perspectives on the genre of panegyric, see Rees 2012b.

¹⁰ Omissi 2018, 54.

who composed and delivered them were not mere mouthpieces of the court but independent rhetors, though in the autocratic society of the late Roman empire these orators would probably not be able to criticize the emperor or his policy openly. Indeed, the degree to which orators received (or even sought) official information or even specific instruction on the content of their speeches continues to be debated by scholars.¹¹ Nevertheless, panegyrics were not a one-way, top-down form of communication from emperor to subjects. The speeches should also be seen as a bottom-up form of communication: they could contain requests and petitions, and even (disguised) criticism, from the emperor's subjects. Moreover, the orators who delivered these speeches could benefit considerably in terms of career-making and other advantages.¹² Recent studies also have warned against the dangers of analyzing such speeches as a group and neglecting to sufficiently consider and acknowledge the specific context particular to each oration.¹³ Hence, panegyrics also provide information about how the rule of an emperor is perceived and what an emperor could do in order to improve and sustain his relationship with his subjects.

Rhetorical approaches of the past have become a prominent feature of historical research in recent years. This concerns not only texts but also, for instance, the study of monuments and material culture, as demonstrated by in particular by the work of Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer.¹⁴ There is also an increasing awareness of the importance as historical sources of the highly stylized rhetorical speeches of the late Roman world. Speeches are now being considered as key expressions of contemporary political culture. Moreover, in connection with growing attention from scholars to the complexities of late antique leadership, especially emperorship,¹⁵ there is an increasing awareness of speech as a downward communication from the emperor and his court as well as an upward communication to the ruler and his entourage in contributing to a better understanding of anchoring, establishing, and sustaining imperial rule and ideology.

The articles gathered for this special issue explore the idea of envisioning the late Roman emperor in speech and word through the speeches and writings of a distinct period, from the late third century (the panegyric of Eumenius) to the late fourth century (the writings of Claudian). This is an extraordinarily rich period in terms of surviving writings about emperors, of

¹¹ See, for example, Nixon 1983; Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 26–33; Ando 2000, 126–27; Corcoran 2004 and 2007.

¹² Omissi 2020.

¹³ Kelly 1997, 149; Nixon 1983, 91.

¹⁴ Elsner and Meyer 2014.

¹⁵ See, for example, Ewald and Noreña 2010; Wienand 2015; Burgersdijk and Ross 2018; Manders and Slootjes 2020.

which only a handful are considered here, and it has been identified by scholars as a pivotal century in terms of the transformation of ideas about imperial rule and dynasty in the later Roman period.

The articles herein are arranged chronologically, in order of the dating of the texts on which each focuses, beginning with the contribution by Caillan Davenport, "Giving Voice to the Late Roman Emperor: Eumenius's *For the Restoration of the Schools* (*Pan. Lat.* 9[4]) in Context." Davenport analyzes a largely understudied speech and explores its representation of the orator as the voice of the emperor while also raising questions about the purpose of this unusual oration. In "Diocles the Timid: Invective History and Divine Justice in Lactantius's *De mortibus persecutorum* 17–19," Byron Waldron explores the presentation of the emperors Diocletian and Maximian in the invective history of the early Christian writer Lactantius. The *De mortibus persecutorum* is the only invective text explored in this collection, and it is also unusual for its form as an invective history, rather than as a speech. Thus, it offers a perspective on emperors far removed from the laudatory praise of the panegyrics more frequently explored in the context of understanding fourth-century imperial ideology.

The contribution by Jan Willem Drijvers, "*Panegyricus Latinus* 12(9): Constantine's Religious Ideology," analyzes the anonymous panegyric of 313, which was delivered in Trier the year following the emperor Constantine's victory over Maxentius. Drijvers explores the unknown panegyrist's characterization of the divine and the interpretation of this panegyric in light of the gradual process of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. A different perspective on the same panegyric is offered by Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides's "Tyrants and Saviors in *Pan. Lat.* 12(9): Pro-Constantinian Readings of the *Aeneid*." Here the panegyric of 313 is mined for its Virgilian analogies and its view of Constantine and Maxentius against this literary background.

Moving later into the fourth century, Alan Ross's "Envisioning *Adventus*: Ammianus between Panegyric and Polemic" examines how Ammianus treats the late Roman ceremony of *adventus* and envisions various emperors and their self-presentation in this ornate ceremonial context. In "Orations for the First Generation of Theodosian Imperial Women," Meaghan McEvoy investigates a group of speeches which offer rare insight into the women of the Theodosian imperial house in the 380s and 390s. In particular, she considers Gregory of Nyssa's funeral orations for Pulcheria and Flaccilla and Claudian's *Laus Serenae* and *Epithalamium for Honorius and Maria* with an eye to understanding the developing canon of virtues expected of the ideal Christian empress in Late Antiquity. Rounding out the collection of articles is Paul Roche's "Staring at the Son: Strategies of Praise in Claudian's *Panegyric on the Third Consulship of Honorius*," which provides a detailed analysis of the first panegyric given by the court poet Claudian in honor of the young

emperor Honorius in 396 and highlights the complexity of the politics of the western court at this time and the anxieties surrounding the future of this child-emperor.

These seven contributions by mostly Australian scholars to the one-day colloquium at Macquarie University in July 2018 offer a far from complete picture of the varied approaches and understandings of “envisioning the emperor in Late Antiquity,” but they nevertheless aim to contribute to the ongoing study of the position of the emperor and empresses as well as of imperial ideology in the later Roman empire.

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