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Rome

From Monarchy to Monarchy

This chapter is an analysis of the power structure of the Roman state from its foundation, traditionally dated 753 BCE, to the accession of the Emperor Diocletian in 284. The chapter is divided into two sections. Section A is an analytical narrative, while Section B is a discussion of some of the main discordant views propounded in modern writings.

My own view is that the early monarchy, on which there is very little reliable evidence, was replaced around 509 BCE by a “republic” dominated by an oligarchy or aristocracy. Thus far, the power structure of the Roman state conforms to a universal pattern that I identified in my Two Models of Government, first published in 2016: monarchy succeeded by an oligarchy or aristocracy. By “oligarchy”, I mean government by an elite minority, and “aristocracy” refers to a hereditary oligarchy.

The accession of Julius Caesar’s heir, known to history as Augustus, replaced the republican oligarchy with a thinly disguised monarchy that was able to satisfy, or at least placate, all sectors of society and to provide a stable form of government that lasted for some three hundred years.

Section A. From Romulus to Diocletian

In the beginning, Rome was a monarchy. According to tradition, Rome, whose conventional founding date was 753 BCE, was first ruled by a succession of seven kings, starting with the eponymous Romulus, who,

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if he existed at all, must have been named after the city rather than the other way round. The whole period of the monarchy is extremely shadowy. Our main authority for it is the Roman Historian Titus Livius, or Livy, whose great Roman History, titled *Ab Urbe Condita* ("From the Foundation of the City"), was written some 500 years after the fall of the monarchy, which is commonly dated to 509 BCE. Livy felt obliged to relate traditional tales and legends about the early history of Rome, but he also had access to earlier historical accounts, and he actually provides a list of no fewer than a dozen authors' names, the earliest being Quintus Fabius Pictor, whose history of Rome, written in Greek in around 200 BCE, survives only in fragmentary form.

The monarchy appears initially to have been not hereditary but elective, with the king being chosen by the Senate, an aristocratic council, and confirmed by the citizens meeting together in the Assembly known as the *Comitia Curiata*. The last three kings, Tarquinius Priscus, Servius Tullius, and Tarquinius Superbus ("Tarquin the Proud"), were reputedly Etruscans, and the monarchy seems to have become hereditary at that time, as the two Tarquins were either father and son or grandfather and grandson, and Servius Tullius was supposedly the younger Tarquin's father-in-law.

Livy's account of the last period of the monarchy paints a very confused picture, with Tarquinius Superbus initially cultivating the support of the Senate against Servius Tullius, his father-in-law, portrayed as a populist king, distributing conquered lands to the whole populace and enjoying widespread popular support. (Livy 1.46.1). Servius Tullius is even said to have been physically attacked by his son-in-law and murdered by Tarquin's entourage. (Livy 1.48). Once ensconced in power, we are told, Tarquin "...killed the leading senators who he believed had favored the cause of Servius." (Livy 1.49.2.1). This may indicate aristocratic opposition to his rule, which rather contradicts his earlier stance.

What, then, was the power-structure under the Roman monarchy? If the earlier kings really owed their position to election by the Senate, an aristocratic body, then that may point to an aristocratic regime from the start, with the king as essentially *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The last three kings, however, may possibly represent a period of Etruscan domination over Rome. So, the uprising that ended the monarchy may then be interpreted as the reclaiming by the indigenous Roman aristocracy of their previous pre-eminence against foreign domination. The only thing that appears to contradict this interpretation is the tradition that Lucius Junius Brutus and his co-conspirator Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, who were chiefly instrumental in overthrowing Tarquin the Proud and would become the first two consuls of the new Republic, were both related to the king, and that Brutus had two of his

sons put to death for siding with the ousted king. If there is any truth in this picture of a family feud, then it may be that Tarquin's overthrow was the result of internecine conflict within the Roman aristocracy.

Relics of Monarchy

Long after this time, there were some telltale signs that Rome had actually been a monarchy. These included the position of *interrex* and that of *rex sacrorum*. The *rex sacrorum* (literally, "king of the holy") was the patrician holder of the highest-ranking but largely ceremonial priesthood in the Roman state religion, who was in practice subordinate to the Pontifex Maximus (chief priest). The *rex sacrorum*, then, may be a relic of the religious functions originally carried out by the kings.

During the Republic, an *interrex* was elected by the Senate for five days only in order to hold elections when for some reason the consuls had been unable to do so. This office may possibly hark back to a time when there was a gap between two elective kings, causing an *interregnum*.

"Republic" and Democracy

The English word "republic" is a translation of the Latin *res publica*. The Latin adjective *publica* is a contraction of the non-existent **populicus*, from *populus*, "the people." So, *res publica* means, literally, "the people's thing, the people's business," hence "public or civil affairs, public or civil administration, public or civil power," and hence "the state, commonwealth, republic." (Lewis & Short.) It generally refers to the *Roman* state, as against foreign states, for which the word *civitas* was preferred, and from which (via the French) we have the English word "city."

It is important to note that, in referring to the Roman state, *res publica* did not identify any particular form of government and was still used to refer to the Roman state long after the Roman Republic had ceased to exist and when Rome was ruled by emperors. For example, in the dedication by Pliny the Elder (23–79) of his *Historia Naturalis* (Natural History) to the future Emperor Titus, he congratulates Titus on his service to *the state*, this term being expressed by *res publica*, written in 77, more than a century after the end of the Roman Republic. (Pliny, *Natural History*, 3.)

The term *res publica* clearly, therefore, carries no implication of democracy even though it is based on the word *populus*, meaning “the people.” The acronym *SPQR*, for *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (The Roman Senate and People), a corporate designation of the Roman state, likewise carries no implication of democracy and is also not associated with a republican form of government. In fact, it is first encountered only in the late Republic and continued to be used well into Imperial times. Both the Arch of Titus, dating from 81 (CIL VI 945), and the Arch of Septimius Severus, constructed in 203 (CIL VI 1033), were dedicated to the memory of these emperors by The Roman Senate and People, the latter well over two centuries after the demise of the Roman Republic.

From One Brutus to Another

Whatever the precise explanation may be for the overthrow of the monarchy, there can be no doubt about the nature of the republic which replaced it. Far from being a democracy, it was controlled by a hereditary aristocracy that gradually morphed into an oligarchy. “Oligarchy,” from the Greek, means literally “the rule of the few,” whereas the literal meaning of “aristocracy,” also of Greek origin, is “the rule of the best.” Aristotle (384–322 BCE) used both terms to refer to minority rule, *aristokratia* being the “good” form and *oligarchia* the “bad” or “perverted” form. (Arist. Politics III.7.) My own usage of these terms is rather different. Aristocracy refers to rule by a hereditary elite and also to the membership of that elite, while “oligarchy” is used to refer to a non-hereditary ruling elite. And it is worth noting the Latin term *res publica* or *respublica* (republic) did not refer to the type of government or power structure but was a much more general term meaning essentially “the Roman state.” (See sidebar).

According to our sources, the Latin word *rex* (king) and the whole idea of monarchy were taboo in the Roman Republic (and long afterward), which makes perfect sense because what an oligarchy dreads most is a strong ruler supported by the masses. But, as the history of the late Republic demonstrates, it would be a mistake to assume that this fear of monarchy was shared by the populace at large. Indeed, in times of crisis, the ordinary people would look to a strong leader to champion their cause against the oligarchy.

The Republican constitution, meaning the creation of the ruling oligarchy, was carefully constructed so as to prevent power from being

concentrated in the hands of any one person. One of its main features was collegiality, or shared power, together with short terms of office, and rotation. The chief offices and institutions of state included the following:

Consuls: The king was replaced by two consuls with equal authority elected for a year at a time, each with the right to veto the other's actions. They alternated in holding supreme power *imperium* (supreme power) month by month. According to tradition, the consuls (possibly originally called praetors) had to be patricians until the *Lex Licinia Sextia* of 367 BCE threw the consulship open to plebeians as well, and the *Lex Genucia* of 342 BCE, which reserved one consulship for a plebeian every year but permitted both consuls to be plebeians (Livy 7.42.), The *Lex Genucia* also laid down the rule that a ten-year gap had to be left before an office-holder could be elected to the same office for a second term, but this was repealed in 217 BCE. (Livy 27.6.7.)

Other magistracies: All other regular executive magistracies, such as the praetorship, aedileship, and quaestorship, were similarly collegiate, being shared by several office-holders at the same time. They were elected for a year at a time and could be re-elected but only after a gap of ten years.

Tribunus plebis (Tribune of the plebs): An important office, traditionally said to have arisen out of the conflict between patricians and plebeians, known as the Conflict or Struggle of the Orders, which ended after about two centuries in 287 BCE. The tribunes, 10 in number after 457 BCE, were elected by the *Concilium Plebis*, an assembly of all Roman citizens except patricians. Tribunes could convene this body and preside over it. By the third century BCE, the tribunes also had the power to summon the Senate and put proposals to it. *Provocatio* (appeal against execution or flogging without trial) could be addressed to a tribune, but details are sketchy. A really important power held by tribunes was *intercessio*, the power to veto the action of any magistrate and even acts of the Senate, but no magistrate could veto the action of a tribune. Coupled with *sacrosanctitas*, or inviolability of their persons, a breach of which was punishable by death, these powers made tribunes extremely influential. According to persistent tradition, the tribunate was created to protect the original plebeians in the Conflict of the Orders.

These plebeians, or some of them, eventually fused with the patricians to form a composite patricio-plebeian aristocracy. The dating is much disputed, and it appears that it was only in 173 or 172 BCE that both consuls were plebeians for the first time (Cornell 1995, p. 337 f.)

However, there is really no need to dismiss Livy's detailed account. A simple explanation may be that, though it was constitutionally permissible from 342 BCE for both consuls to be plebeians, this law was not acted on until 173 BCE. The *Lex Genucia* was, after all, according to Livy, purely permissive and not mandatory. In other words, it *allowed* both consuls to be plebeians but did not require it. What is more significant is that, from 343 BCE onward, one consul was always a plebeian. These plebeians therefore formed an integral part of the senatorial aristocracy or oligarchy. So, who then made up the *plebs* whom we encounter in political activity in the late Republic, particularly from the time of the Gracchi, two hundred years after the *Lex Genucia*? Were they simply those plebeians from the early Republic who had been left behind when their more fortunate brethren joined the aristocracy? This seems unlikely as this later *plebs*, sometimes termed *plebs urbana* (urban plebs), is often portrayed as a mob, or what Cicero described as *faex Romuli* (the dregs of Romulus)." (Cicero *Ad Att.* 2.1.8.) Though created to protect the interests of a very different *plebs* in the early Republic, the tribunate was used to good effect by demagogues like the Gracchi in the late Republic on behalf of this more desperate *plebs*. In 48 BCE, *tribunicia potestas* (tribunician power) was granted to Julius Caesar, who, as a patrician was ineligible to hold the actual tribunate. In 23 BCE, this same power was bestowed by the Senate on Augustus for life, in addition to the *sacrosanctitas* of a tribune which he already had. Tribunician power was an important signal of the emperor's identification with the interests of the lower classes, and it was routinely bestowed on every emperor, usually upon his accession.

Censor: A very senior post in charge of taking the census of citizen numbers, open only to former consuls, again shared by two equal officeholders, elected originally for five years but later for eighteen months.

Senate: This was the most important deliberative body under the Republic, made up of former holders of the different executive magistracies. Until the passing of the Ovinian Law (*Lex Ovinia*) in 318 BCE, senators were appointed by the consuls and, after that date, by the censors. Under Sulla's reforms of 81 BCE, *quaestors* were granted automatic membership of the Senate. Consuls were invariably drawn from the ranks of the Senate.

Assemblies: Roman citizens were members of several Assemblies, arranged in slightly different ways: the *Comitia Curiata*, *Comitia Centuriata*, and *Comitia Tributa*. It was the *Centuriata* alone, in which the citizens were arranged along military lines, that had the power to declare war and to elect the highest-ranking magistrates,

the consuls, praetors, and censors. Until 241 BCE, the *Centuriata* was effectively controlled by the aristocracy. It was then reorganised on more egalitarian lines, but subsequently reverted to the older arrangement. However, the Roman Republic never claimed to be a democracy, and the consuls, praetors, and censors were always chosen from the ranks of senators, regardless of the arrangement of the assembly. Besides these assemblies, there was the *Concilium Plebis*, which appears to have had the same arrangement and membership as the *Comitia Tributa*, with the exclusion of patricians.

Dictator: The only exception to the rule of shared power was the appointment of a *dictator* in an emergency, which was strictly limited to a tenure of six months. The Senate had to pass a decree (*senatus consultum*) instructing the consuls to nominate a dictator. The dictator would then appoint a *magister equitum* (master of the horse) to assist him and act as his deputy when necessary. Once appointed, the dictator had absolute power over the Roman state, superseding that of the consuls. The most admired type of Republican hero was someone like Cincinnatus, who, after resolving the immediate emergency in a fortnight, at once gave up his dictatorship and returned to his plough and to obscurity. The reason that Cincinnatus was fêted as an ideal Republican was that he had no interest in gaining personal power. After 202 BCE, the Senate would issue an emergency decree, labeled by modern historians *senatus consultum ultimum*, instead of appointing a dictator. The dictatorship was only revived much later on, in 82 BCE, first for L. Cornelius Sulla and then again for Julius Caesar in 46 BCE but, so far from preventing one-man rule, it was now used as a vehicle to achieve just that: bringing down the Republic.

“In the Consulship of Julius and Caesar”

A visceral fear of one-man rule is characteristic of oligarchies and aristocracies, not least in the case of the Roman Republic, where, as mentioned above, this fear was stemmed by collegiality and rotation of office. However, a less than persuasive argument is put forward against this view by Lintott, who opines that, “We would be wrong...to see collegiality in principle as a form of constitutional check: the multiplicity of magistrates was perhaps in origin intended rather as cover for a multiplicity of functions and insurance against the sudden death or disability of a magistrate.” (Lintott, loc 1250.) The key word here is “perhaps.” The only evidence for this view is that “...we find the praetors and quaestors generally each having separate functions, although the treasury came to be entrusted to a pair of quaestors, and the aediles, curule and plebeian, worked in pairs in the administration of the games”

(Ibid.). A key fact is that the consuls, who did *not* have “separate functions,” had a veto power over each other. And, besides the power of the holder of a higher magistracy to forbid a lower magistrate from acting in a certain way, a magistrate could use the power of *intercessio*, as it was called, to cancel a *colleague’s* action after it had occurred by acting in a contrary sense. But Lintott is anxious to wave this aside as well: “Where we find magistrates, other than tribunes, actually obstructing their colleagues in the late Republic, it is by exploiting their power of consulting the auspices in order to detect unfavourable religious omens” (Ibid.). This use of the auspices to block a colleague’s actions was a well-known political ploy which only confirms its function as an attempt to prevent an individual from becoming too powerful. An extreme example of this (not mentioned by Lintott) was the attempt in 59 BCE by Julius Caesar’s conservative co-consul, Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus, to block Caesar’s populist legislation by closeting himself at home and issuing proclamations announcing bad omens, of which no proof was required. (Suetonius, Julius, 20.1.) As a result, Bibulus was sidelined, and some jokers signed mock-formal documents dated “Done in the consulship of Julius and Caesar” instead of “Bibulus and Caesar.” (Ibid. 20.2.)

In sum, Bibulus’s religiosity, whether genuine or feigned, is just an extreme example of a magistrate’s armory to check and balance a colleague’s actions—quite in keeping with the republican ethos of elite group power designed to prevent any one individual from becoming too powerful. Because of Caesar’s popularity among the masses, Bibulus’s attempts to block him backfired. When he opposed Caesar’s land redistribution bill, he found himself attacked by an irate mob, which broke his *fasces* (the bundle of rods and an axe that symbolized his authority as a consul) and pelted him with feces. (Plutarch, *Cato the Younger*, 32.2.)

Violent conflicts like this foreshadowed the impending demise of the republic, with three civil wars in quick succession, first between Caesar and Pompey, then, after Caesar’s murder, between the Caesarians and Caesar’s assassins (the latter fighting for the continuance of the old oligarchical order), and, finally, between the two leading Caesarians, Marcus Antonius and Caesar’s heir, the future Augustus, who emerged as sole ruler of the Roman world after his victory over Antony at Actium in 31 BCE. But, before discussing the repercussions of this momentous event, let us take a step backward.

The Fall of the Republic

The last century of the Roman Republic was marked by confrontations between two groupings within the ruling oligarchy, one of which championed the cause, and depended on the support, of the lower classes,

and the other, of a more “conservative” mindset, bent on the continued dominance of the senatorial elite. The terms “Populares” and “Optimates”, used by Cicero in *Pro Sestio* in 56 BCE to describe these two groups, tend now to be rejected by historians. However, here I agree with Lintott that, “As for *optimates* and *populares*, even though they came from the same social class with its framework of individual and family connexions, this is no reason to deny the divergence of ideology highlighted by Cicero,” with programs and leaders going back generations. Even if *popularis* politicians “...pursued their own interests more than those of the men they claimed to represent,...the mere possession of personal ambition does not disqualify a man from advancing the interests of others.” (Lintott, A., p. 52 f.)

The long-smouldering antagonism between the *plebs urbana* (the urban masses, not to be confused with the original plebeians involved in the so-called Conflict of the Orders) and the dominant elements in the Roman oligarchy eventually burst into flames over the radical agrarian reforms proposed by Tiberius Gracchus with popular support.

The Gracchi Brothers

In 133 BCE, Tiberius Gracchus, a member of the patricio-plebeian aristocracy, plebeian on his father’s side and patrician on his mother’s, was elected tribune of the *plebs* and immediately introduced an ambitious program of land reform entailing redistribution of land from wealthy *nobiles* to the urban poor. Tiberius Gracchus’s attempt to run for re-election was opposed by conservative senators, and violence erupted resulting in the clubbing to death of Gracchus and some 300 of his supporters.

Ten years later, in 123 BCE, Tiberius Gracchus’s brother Gaius Gracchus was also elected tribune of the *plebs* and attempted to revive his late brother’s program plus further measures to curb the power of the senatorial oligarchy. He had a broad base of support, made up not only of the urban poor but also of the agrarian poor and even some *equites* (equestrians, the wealthy class just below that of senator). However, his bid to extend Roman citizenship to non-Roman Italians cost him the support of a substantial number of the Roman urban poor, who were unwilling to share the privilege of Roman citizenship with outsiders. When Gaius Gracchus was defeated for re-election to the tribunate, there was a mass rally of his supporters on the Aventine Hill. The Senate declared a state of emergency by passing what is now termed a *senatus consultum ultimum*, and the pro-senatorial consul Lucius Opimius at the head of a force of armed supporters defeated Gaius Gracchus and his followers in

a pitched battle. Gracchus committed suicide, and approximately 3,000 of his supporters were put to death in the proscriptions that followed.

Gaius Marius

The next popular leader was rather more successful. This was the great military reformer, a *novus homo* (new man) of equestrian origin, Gaius Marius, who was elected consul an unprecedented seven times between 107 and 86 BCE. Until the Marian reforms, only property owners were eligible to serve in the Roman army. What Marius did was to turn the Roman army into a professional standing army open to all citizens, no matter how poor. Soldiers were now recruited for an enlistment term of sixteen years. Marius's reforms offered the landless masses the opportunity to become paid professional soldiers, an offer that was enthusiastically taken up. Retired soldiers were given a pension and a plot of land in conquered territory. Marius also extended Roman citizenship to citizens of the allied Italian cities in return for service in the Roman army. While creating a much improved Roman standing army, Marius's reforms tended to transfer the troops' loyalty from the state to their general.

Sulla

Lucius Cornelius Sulla, nicknamed Felix (Lucky), from an impoverished patrician background, who as *quaestor* (deputy commander) to Marius in the Jugurthine War managed by a stratagem to capture King Jugurtha himself in 105 BCE. But Marius and Sulla soon crossed swords, leading eventually to Sulla's unprecedented march on Rome with his army in 88 BCE and again in 83 BCE. Sulla used his victory in 81 BCE to have himself appointed *dictator legibus faciendis et reipublicae constituendae causa* (dictator for the making of laws and for the settling of the constitution). This was the first time that Rome had a dictator since 202 BCE, but, unlike previous dictators, Sulla's appointment was for an indefinite period. He held it for just over a year, using his power to enact some far-reaching constitutional reforms intended to strengthen the Senate against popular institutions, notably the tribunate of the *plebs*. He then resigned and retired into private life to write his memoirs and, if Plutarch is to be believed, to devote himself to debauchery (Plutarch, Sulla, 37). But no tinkering with the constitution could save the Republic. Sulla's own career illustrated the fundamental truth that the future shape of the Roman government would be decided not by laws but by arms.

Pompey

The Roman Republic was now hurtling toward civil war, which was hastened by the fact that the Republic had become an unwieldy empire with trouble-spots needing urgent military attention. Sulla died in 78 BCE, and within less than ten years, most of his reforms would be rescinded by two of his former lieutenants on their return from successful military exploits: Gnaeus Pompeius, nicknamed Magnus and generally referred to in English as Pompey, and Marcus Licinius Crassus, one of the richest men in Rome, who were elected as joint consuls in 70 BCE.

Julius Caesar

The lineup for the final dénouement of the Republic took shape in 60 BCE, when the state was hijacked by an alliance between three strongmen in the so-called but unofficial First Triumvirate: Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar.

Gaius Julius Caesar was Marius's nephew, and he remained true to his uncle's populist politics. In Sulla's final purge of Marian partisans in 83 BCE, the seventeen-year-old Caesar was spared only through the intervention of his mother's family, which included supporters of Sulla and the Vestal Virgins because the young Caesar had been nominated as *flamen Dialis* (the high priest of Jupiter). In reluctantly sparing Caesar's life, Sulla is said to have predicted that Caesar would prove the ruin of the aristocracy, "...for in that Caesar there are many Mariuses." (Suetonius, *Julius*, 1; Plutarch, *Caesar*, 1.)

Caesar early on showed his mettle. When captured by pirates, who demanded a ransom of twenty talents of silver, the young Caesar insisted that he was worth at least fifty. When released, he promised to return and crucify them all, which is exactly what he did. In 63 BCE, Caesar was elected against great odds to the prestigious position of Pontifex Maximus (chief priest) of the Roman state religion. After serving as praetor in 62 BCE, he was allotted the province of Hispania Ulterior (modern southeastern Spain), where he conquered two local tribes and, in 60 BCE, was hailed as *imperator* (commander) by his troops on the field of battle.

With the support of his partners, Pompey and Crassus, in the First Triumvirate, Caesar was elected consul in 59 BCE and successfully proposed a popular law redistributing public lands (*ager publicus*) to the poor. He also managed, in the face of "conservative" opposition, to be allotted as his proconsular command (the command that an ex-consul was given after

his term of office) not one but three provinces: Illyricum (the Balkans), Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy) and later also Transalpine Gaul (southern France). (Suetonius, *Julius*, 19.2.)

Caesar expanded Roman territory by his conquest of what was known as Gallia Comata (long-haired Gaul or northern France), which he publicized himself in his book *De Bello Gallico* (*The Gallic War*), inflicted on generations of schoolchildren right up to the present day.

Caesar's command had been extended to 50 BCE, by which time the Triumvirate had collapsed. Crassus had been killed in battle against the Parthians in 53 BCE; and Pompey had changed sides and become the champion of the Optimates, who now controlled the Senate and, unprecedentedly, made Pompey sole consul in 52 BCE. When Caesar's command ended in 50 BCE, he was ordered to disband his army and return to Rome as a private citizen, exposing him to possible prosecution. Instead, on January 10, 49 BCE, he chose to cross the Rubicon (the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy) with an armed legion, famously remarking (apparently in Greek) "the die is cast". (Plutarch, *Pompey*, 60.2; Plutarch, *Caesar*, 32.8.4; Suetonius, *Divus Julius*.)

Caesar was now at war with the Republic, which had entrusted its fortunes to Pompey. After Caesar's decisive victory over Pompey at Pharsalus in Greece in July 48 BCE, Caesar entered Rome as a conquering hero. He was named dictator, then won a second consulship in an election presided over by himself, and resigned his dictatorship after eleven days. In 48 BCE, he was named dictator again, this time for a year. Then in 46 BCE, after a few foreign interludes, he was named dictator for a year yet again and was designated as dictator for nine further years. As if this was not enough, Caesar was also elected to serve as consul (simultaneously with his dictatorship) three more times, for 46, 45, and 44 BCE. Julius Caesar was now king in all but name. To drive the point home, in early 44 BCE, he was named *dictator perpetuo* or *dictator in perpetuum* (dictator in perpetuity), the precise meaning of which is explained below. In accepting this title, Caesar effectively signed his own death warrant. Caesar was seen by the *Optimates* as threatening to bring to an end the 450-year-old Republic, and about sixty of them conspired to assassinate him, which occurred on the Ides of March (March 15) 44 BCE, one of the best-known dates in history.

It was Caesar's undoubted popularity with the masses coupled with his arrogance and habit of plain speaking that caused his downfall. He is said, for example, to have remarked "...that the Republic was nothing but a name, without substance or form; that Sulla had acted like an idiot by laying down the dictatorship; and that people ought to be more careful when speaking with him, and should take what he says as law.". (Suetonius, *Ibid.*, 77.) Above all, not only was he unable to resist accepting most

of the exceptional honours which were showered upon him, but he also did not seem to have recognized the likely backlash from the *Optimates*. According to Suetonius, among other honours accorded to him was the title *Pater Patriae* (Father of the Nation); several statues of himself, including one next to those of the seven kings of Rome; and a college of priests dedicated to himself. When, "...amidst the immoderate and unusual acclamations of the people..." (Ibid., 79), a man in the adulating throng placed on one of Caesar's statues a laurel crown encircled with a white fillet, a symbol of royalty, and two tribunes ordered the fillet to be removed and the man responsible for placing it there to be imprisoned, Caesar reprimanded the tribunes and dismissed them from office. This gave the impression, welcomed by the populace and feared by the *Optimates*, that he aspired to make himself king although when hailed by the people as *rex* (king), he responded jocularly, "I am Caesar, not Rex", *Rex* being a name as well as a title. And when his staunch supporter Mark Antony, as consul, on several occasions placed a laurel crown on Caesar's head, Caesar waved it aside and ordered it to be taken to the temple of Jupiter. (Ibid., 79.)

Caesar probably did not cry "*Et tu, Brute?*" ("You, too, Brutus?"), as suggested by Shakespeare, nor even, in Greek, "*Kai su, teknon?*" ("You, too, my child?"), as rather skeptically suggested by Suetonius and Cassius Dio, when he was stabbed by Marcus Junius Brutus, whom Caesar had taken under his wing. (Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 84; Cassius Dio, 44.19.)

So out of touch with reality were Caesar's assassins that, according to Plutarch, they marched to the Capitol proudly brandishing their daggers full of confidence and fondly imagining that they would be fêted for saving the Republic and restoring "liberty." (Plutarch, *Caesar*, 67.3.)

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, even Caesar's close friend, Mark Antony, was apparently unsure which way the wind was blowing. Plutarch, in his *Life of Antony*, says that Antony even gave the conspirators his son as a hostage, and entertained a leading conspirator, Cassius, to dinner while Lepidus, Caesar's master of the horse (lieutenant to Caesar as dictator), did the same for Brutus. (Plutarch, *Antony*, 13.) As consul, Antony convened the Senate, spoke in favour of an amnesty and of allotting provincial commands to both Brutus and Cassius and proposed a law abolishing the position of dictator forever. The Senate ratified these proposals, while voting to honour Caesar by giving him the posthumous title *divus* (the divine Julius), making him a minor deity, and confirming all Caesar's reforms (Plutarch, *Caesar*, 67.7; *Antony*, 14.)

Armed with his new command, Brutus issued coins with the motto *LEIBERTAS*, the old-fashioned spelling of *libertas* (liberty), and others with the legend *EID MAR*, an abbreviation for (the again intentionally

archaic spelling of) *Idibus Martiis* meaning “on the Ides of March”, together with a *pileus* (cap of liberty given to newly enfranchised slaves) and two daggers, celebrating Caesar’s assassination. On the obverse was a portrait of Brutus described as *imp(erator)*, general. Mary Beard opines, “The portrayal of a living person on a Roman coin was taken as a sign of autocratic power.” (Beard, p. 295.) Brutus certainly did not have “autocratic power,” but was that what he was aiming at? Almost certainly not. The portrait of a living person on a coin *was* decidedly rare, but the name Brutus was closely identified in the Roman psyche with a fervent anti-monarchical tradition. Marcus Brutus himself claimed descent from the founder of the republic, Lucius Junius Brutus, who, according to persistent tradition, had been instrumental in ending the monarchy in 509 BCE, some 450 years earlier and whose portrait had appeared on coins minted by Marcus Brutus as moneyer at some time between 59 and 54 BCE. With the legends EID MAR, the date of Caesar’s assassination, and LEIBERTAS, the watchword of the oligarchic republic, the message conveyed by Brutus’s coins was *not* that he was aiming at autocratic power, but that he had emulated his iconic ancestor by liberating Rome from a tyrant who had enslaved it.

The populace, however, were incensed at the murder of their idol as the assassins soon learned when an unruly crowd descended on their houses intent on burning them down. As part of his lifelong devotion to the popular cause, in his will, Caesar bequeathed to the Roman people his gardens near the Tiber, and left every Roman man 300 sesterces.

Caesar’s Heir

Probably the most significant provision of Caesar’s will was his adoption of his nineteen-year-old great-nephew, Gaius Octavius who also inherited three quarters of his substantial estate. But before he could take power, he had to emerge victorious from a two-stage civil war, first against the conspirators and then against his erstwhile fellow triumvir Mark Antony.

Emerging victorious in 31 BCE from the Battle of Actium against Antony, the young Caesar established a new form of government, which, with modifications, was to last for three centuries, with repercussions down to the present day. But what sort of government was this to be? There is a great deal of confusion among modern writers about the nature and even the name of this new form of government. In common parlance, Augustus is generally referred to as the first Roman “emperor,” and the system of government instituted by him as the “Roman Empire”. But this is neither clear nor accurate. See the discussion below.

Avoiding Julius Caesar's Mistake

As an astute politician, Augustus took care not to make the same mistake that had cost Julius Caesar his life. Julius Caesar had ruled Rome as “dictator” for four years when he was appointed *dictator perpetuo* or *dictator in perpetuum* (literally, “dictator in perpetuity”, commonly translated as “dictator for life” but more accurately dictator for an indefinite period). Acceptance of this title signaled the end of the Roman Republic, which had lasted for 450 years under an elite to whom one-man rule was carefully eschewed except for brief emergencies. Julius Caesar's position as *dictator perpetuo* posed a threat to this dominant minority, a number of whom, therefore, conspired to assassinate him on that fateful Ides of March, 44 BCE.

After his victory over Antony at Actium in 31 BCE, Augustus faced a serious dilemma. He was now master of the Roman world, but on what footing should his rule be placed? The title *rex* (king), which even Julius Caesar had refused, was anathema to the Republican aristocracy. But the title “dictator” was clearly also now off limits. The common people, who adulated Julius Caesar, had no objection to one-man rule, as was made clear in their outpouring of grief on Caesar's assassination. Indeed, they wanted a strong leader to champion their cause. So the young Caesar's game plan was to retain the support of the masses without offending the aristocracy, a daunting balancing act.

The Transmogrification of an Equestrian

The historic figure who is usually referred to as “Augustus” was born in 63 BCE into an equestrian family (i.e. the second rank, below that of senator), with the undistinguished name *Gaius Octavius*. In 44 BCE, on adoption in his great-uncle Julius Caesar's will, he immediately took his adoptive father's name: *Gaius Julius Caesar*. It was usual for an adoptive son to tack his own original *nomen* (name), in this case “Octavius,” on to his new name as an additional *cognomen* (surname), often in adjectival form, so: “Octavianus.” That is why he is generally referred to by modern historians during this period of his life as “Octavian”, but he is not known ever to have used the name “Octavianus” himself. To his contemporaries, he was known simply as “Caesar,” and this was his greatest asset with the masses as it enabled him to capitalize on his adoptive father's popularity. Moreover, besides having been a charismatic champion of the people, Julius Caesar was now a divinity, having been deified shortly after his death. So, in 42 BCE, the next step in Augustus's transmogrification was to add *Divi Filius* (son of a god or

son of the divine (Julius)) to his name, which now became: *Gaius Julius Caesar Divi Filius*. In 38 BCE, in a masterstroke, both his forename “Gaius” and his clan name (*nomen gentilicium*) “Julius” were ditched and replaced by *Imperator* (commander), the victory title by which a successful general was hailed by his troops on the field of battle. This gave him a new identity: *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius*. But the culmination of his reinvention of himself came in 27 BCE when he was accorded by the Senate the title *Augustus* (the Sublime or the Revered), a sobriquet associated with Romulus, Rome’s mythical founder. He then emerged in his full glory as *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*.

Taking each component of this nomenclature separately:

Imperator: As Augustus tells us in his masterly autobiography, which came to be known as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, he was hailed as *imperator* twenty-one times (RG §4). This was the traditional way in which a successful general was honoured by his troops on the field of battle. But, in a master stroke, he now adopted it as a forename. This designation, which came later to be used to mean emperor (and has given us the English word “emperor”), is the reason that the whole regime instituted by Augustus came to be known in English (and similarly in the Romance languages) as the Roman Empire. Because Roman emperors had never had the title of king, when Napoleon Bonaparte assumed monarchical powers he chose to call himself not king but emperor, which did not offend against his republican sensibilities as heir to the French Revolution.

Caesar: This is the only part of Augustus’s final designation that was an actual name: Julius Caesar’s *cognomen*. But it also became a title, later accorded to the emperor-designate and later still to a “junior” emperor, with the title *Augustus* reserved for “senior” emperors. It is the origin of the Russian imperial title *Tsar* or *Czar* and German *Kaiser*, and hence *Kaiserzeit* for the whole period ushered in by Augustus’s accession to power.

Divi Filius: Being the son of a god was no mean feat, but Julius Caesar was reputedly already of divine stock before his deification as a descendant of the goddess Venus Genetrix, whose image accordingly appears on coins issued by earlier members of the Julian *gens* (clan). The Julii traced their descent from Venus through Iulus, the son of Aeneas, the mythical Trojan prince who was an ancestor of Romulus, the eponymous legendary founder of Rome. It was partly to celebrate this tradition that Vergil wrote his *Aeneid*.

Augustus: This designation meaning “the Sublime one” or “the Revered one,” associated as it was with Romulus, gave the whole

carefully crafted new self-image an aura of sanctity, and hinted at Augustus's claim to be the second founder of Rome. Augustus himself was to be deified on his death as were most of his successors. The jovial Emperor Vespasian (r. 69–79) famously quipped on his deathbed, “Oh dear, I think I’m becoming a god.” (Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 23.4.) The deification of the emperor became the basis of the Imperial Cult, which was eventually extended to worship of the *genius* (attendant spirit) of the living emperor and, especially in the Eastern provinces, of the living emperor himself as well.

Augustus's Autobiography (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*)

In his carefully crafted autobiography, Augustus managed to paint a composite picture of himself as a powerful populist leader and at the same time as the restorer of the republic in order to win the support of the *plebs urbana* (urban plebs) while conciliating the senatorial aristocracy at the same time. Here are a few choice extracts:

Victorious but merciful general: “I frequently waged civil and foreign wars by land and sea, and as victor I spared the lives of all citizens who sought pardon” (§3).

Recognition and modesty: “I twice celebrated a triumphal ovation and a curule triumph on three occasions, and was hailed as *imperator* twenty-one times, with the Senate decreeing more triumphs to me, all of which I refused” (§4.1).

Holder of Republican offices: “When I wrote this I had been consul thirteen times, and was holding tribunician power for the thirty-seventh time” (§4.4). “When offered the consulship [in 22 BCE] every year for the rest of my life, I did not accept it” (§5.3).

First Settlement: In 27 BCE, “having come to be in complete charge of everything by universal consent, I transferred the state (*res publica*) from my power (*potestas*) to the control (*arbitrium*) of the Roman Senate and People.” In return for this, he was named “Augustus” by the Senate. “After this time I surpassed everyone in influence (*auctoritas*), but had no more power (*potestas*) than the others who were my colleagues in each magistracy” (§34).

Dictatorship refused: “The dictatorship was offered to me by both the people and the senate both when I was present and when I was absent from Rome in [22 BCE], but I did not accept it” (§5.1). In fact, in 22 BCE, there were food riots, with the urban masses calling on Augustus to become dictator to solve the problem. That was also the

first year when Augustus for the first time declined the consulship, which so worried his loyal *plebs* that they refused to elect a second consul that year, ostensibly keeping the vacant seat open for Augustus. This concern erupted in riots in that year and also in 21 and 19 BCE. (Dio Cassius, 54.1, 54.6, 54.10.)

Benefactor of the poor: Augustus contrasts his refusal of the dictatorship in 22 BCE with his acceptance of the task of saving the corn supply during the corn shortage in that year, which he achieved “within a few days” and “at my own expense and effort” (§5.2). Augustus proudly records his bounty to the *plebs Romana*, or ordinary people of the capital: 500 sestertii to each member of the *plebs* under Julius Caesar’s will in 44 BCE; 400 each from the spoils of war in 29 BCE; and another 400 sestertii, in 24 BCE, this time at his own expense; twelve rations of grain apiece at his own expense in 23 BCE; and 400 sestertii each for the third time in 11 BCE. The recipients of his bounty never numbered fewer than 250,000 people. But in 5 BCE, he gave 240 sestertii apiece to 520,000 members of the urban *plebs*. At the time of his triumph in 29 BCE, he gave 1,000 sestertii to 120,000 of his soldiers settled as *coloni* in Italy. And in 2 BCE, he gave 60 denarii (240 sestertii) apiece to the more than 200,000 members of the *plebs* then in receipt of public grain (§15).

Soldiers and veterans: Augustus paid out about 600 million sestertii for land in Italy to settle soldiers on as *coloni* in Italy and 260 million for provincial land. And he paid a further 400 million paid to soldiers on their retirement to their home towns (§16). Augustus founded colonies of soldiers in Africa, Sicily, Macedonia, and Spain plus 28 colonies in Italy (§28).

Tribunician power: In 23 BCE, Augustus was voted the tribunician power for life together with sacrosanctity of his person, which he had for some years and was a protection traditionally accorded tribunes of the *plebs* (§10.1). For more on tribunician power, see under the discussion of the Republican constitution, above.

Pontifex Maximus: Augustus was offered by the people the position of Pontifex Maximus (chief priest) of the Roman civic religion, which had been held by Julius Caesar, but he makes the point of stressing that he refused to accept it until the death of Lepidus (his former colleague in the Triumvirate), whom he studiously avoids naming but accuses of having taken the opportunity of civil war to “seize” the priesthood. Augustus’s acceptance of the priesthood occurred in 12 BCE, “...with such a multitude pouring in to my election from the whole of Italy as has never been said to have occurred before” (§10.2).

Pax Augusta: “During my principate, the senate decreed three times that the Temple of Janus should be shut” to signify the attainment of peace by victory throughout the Roman Empire, which had only occurred twice before since the foundation of Rome over seven hundred years earlier (§13). Augustus’s rule did indeed usher in about two centuries of peace, which is, therefore, sometimes labelled the *Pax Augusta*, or more usually *Pax Romana*.

Public works: Augustus provides us with an impressive list of his public works, including his rebuilding of the Senate-house and his restoration of 82 temples in one year (28 BCE) together with several new temples, including one to the Divine Julius (Caesar). We also read of the repair of aqueducts, including the doubling of the supply to the Marcian aqueduct (§19–20).

Games: Augustus paid for eight gladiatorial games, three athletics displays, 27 dramatic shows and 26 beast-hunts, and a massive mock sea battle involving 3,000 men in addition to the rowers of ships involved. Above all, there were the Secular Games of 17 BCE, a magnificent religious festival (§22). The Roman satirist Juvenal, writing about a century after Augustus, famously remarked that the Roman populace were keenly desirous of only two things: “bread and circuses” (*panem et circenses*). (Juv. 10.81.) Augustus’s pandering to this desire is a mark of his populist side.

Pater Patriae: In 2 BCE “the senate, the equestrian order and the entire Roman people” gave Augustus the title *Pater Patriae* (Father of the Country)—the highest possible accolade that a Roman could be given.

Summary of bounty: Tacked on to his autobiography is an Appendix added after Augustus’s death summarising his bounty: 600 million denarii to the treasury, the Roman *plebs*, and veterans; another impressive list of temples and other public works; an incalculable outlay (*impensa innumerabilis*) on games, dramatic shows, hunts and the mock sea battle; donations to towns destroyed by earthquake or fire; and grants to individual friends and senators to make up their property qualification.

Did Augustus Wield Sole Power?

Constitutional position—“first settlement”: Augustus is at pains to stress the constitutional nature of his rule. He admits that he had complete power until 27 BCE but then claims to have handed back

the *res publica*, the government of the state, to the Roman Senate and people—and, thereby, to have “restored the Republic”, whose corporate designation was *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (The Roman Senate and People), represented by the acronym SPQR. As mentioned above, there is no implication here of democracy. From 31 to 23 BCE, Augustus was consul, every year—the top Republican magistracy, which however it was unrepublican to hold so many times in succession. Under the so-called “first settlement” (a modern label) of 27 BCE, in return for “restoring the Republic,” Augustus was accorded the title of “Augustus” borne as a name. Then comes the mock-modest boast, the most memorable phrase in the whole autobiography: “After this time I surpassed everyone in influence (*auctoritas*), but had no more power (*potestas*) than the others who were my colleagues in each magistracy” (§34). This is not a very reliable picture of the true position. For one thing, it omits Augustus’s *imperium* (command) over the provinces containing the greatest concentration of legions: Syria, Cilicia, Cyprus, Gaul and Spain, together with Egypt, which, since the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, had effectively become part of Augustus’s personal patrimony. He governed all these provinces as consul, which was certainly not in keeping with Republican traditions. Even less so was the sheer magnitude of his vast *provincia*. As consul, he also had *imperium* in Rome and Italy and could override the governors of all the provinces, which were not directly under his control. It is also worth noting that, even before his victory over Antony at Actium in 31 BCE, “the whole of Italy” together with the Gallic and Spanish provinces, Africa, Sicily, and Sardinia swore a personal oath of allegiance to him (§25.2). Augustus does at least admit that he had more *auctoritas* (“influence”) than anyone else. *Auctoritas* was an intangible quality which could not be made the subject of a formal grant but which enabled its holder to exert his will more subtly by suggestion, without force or even command. (Cf. Some incorrect interpretations of *auctoritas*, like Michael Grant’s theory that it “devolved” from the emperor to the *consilium principis*, the emperor’s advisers). (Grant, M. 1971, pp. 130, 453.) I agree with John Crook that *auctoritas* was not “...the kind of thing that could ‘devolve’ or ‘be transferred’ at all.” (Crook, J.A., 1955, p. 17 n.) Another implausible interpretation tries to limit Augustus’s *auctoritas* to a single incident in 28 BCE on the ground that *auctoritas* is not mentioned anywhere other than in Augustus’s autobiography. (Rowe 2013.) But why would we expect *auctoritas* to be mentioned in the literary sources? It was not an official power but a nebulous quality, an aura of authority, which Augustus undoubtedly exuded in large measure. The language is not complex and clearly relates to a

long period: “After this time...” The existence of Augustus’s *auctoritas* over a long period is not in doubt. What is in doubt is Augustus’s modest claim that it was *only* in respect of his *auctoritas* that he surpassed everyone else. The truth was that he surpassed everyone else not only in respect of his *auctoritas* but also in his formal *imperium*.

Constitutional position—“second settlement”: In 23 BCE, after a life-threatening illness, Augustus’s formal powers were placed on a slightly different footing from before. (Dio Cassius, 53.32.) In particular, he no longer continued to hold the consulship year after year, thus freeing up one of the two “ordinary” consulships for someone else to hold. But he retained control of his provinces, which was renewed at regular intervals for the rest of his life. He was now given *maius imperium*, “greater command”, proconsular (instead of consular) power not only over his provinces but also in Rome itself, with the right to override all other provincial governors. In 22 BCE, Augustus handed back to the Senate the peaceful provinces of Gallia Narbonensis and Cyprus, but Illyricum was transferred to Augustus in 11 BCE and Sardinia in 6 CE; all new provinces were automatically entrusted to Augustus, and when the frontier was extended to the Danube, all troops in Macedonia were moved so as not to be under the control of the Senate. In the end, the only senatorial province with a garrison was Africa, with just one legion. Instead of the consulship, Augustus was now given *tribunicia potestas* (tribunician power) on an annual and indefinite basis, and this became the way Augustus and all subsequent emperors counted the years of their “reign”. So, coins would normally show a number after the tribunician power, thus: “TRIB. POT. IV”. In fact, Augustus may have been granted tribunician power long before 23 BCE, or at least some aspect of it, but it is in that year that the formal use of tribunician power as a reign tabulator begins. But why tribunician *power* and not simply the position of tribune, *tribunus plebis*? The formal reason is that, as a patrician by adoption, the emperor was ineligible to be elected a tribune. But, in fact, the emperors had more power than an actual *tribunus plebis* would have had during the Republic. One important power associated with tribunician power was the *ius auxilii*, or the right to come to the assistance of a citizen who complained of being oppressed by another magistrate). In Republican times, a tribune could exercise this power only in the city of Rome itself, but the imperial tribunician power extended throughout the Roman world. Augustus’s tribunician power also gave him the right to submit legislative proposals to the *Concilium Plebis* the popular assembly, and to summon the Senate and submit motions to it as well. Another important power included in the tribunician power was the *ius intercessionis* the right to veto the acts of other magistrates, including the consuls,

and the Senate itself. In addition, tribunician power gave the emperor *coercitio* (the right enjoyed by all magistrates to compel a reluctant citizen to obey his orders on pain of sanction). Above all, Augustus's *tribunicia potestas* carried with it *sacrosanctitas*, or inviolability of their persons, which meant that any assault on his person was prohibited by law. The position of tribune itself was low down on the traditional senatorial *cursus honorum*, or career structure, but, starting out as it did as a protection of the (original) plebeians against the patricians, the imperial tribunician power remained redolent of this ancient class struggle and enabled Augustus and his successors to stand as champions of the urban *plebs* against the senatorial aristocracy (see below).

Augustus and the urban plebs: Augustus established a bond with the urban *plebs* which his successors continued to maintain. In his important study titled *Plebs and Princeps*, Zvi Yavetz summed up the position in these words: "With the commencement of the Principate, the emperors became in a sense *patroni* of the entire urban *plebs*. The *tribunicia potestas* was an important advantage, while generous *largitiones* and proper conduct helped in no small measure to this end." (Yavetz 1988, p. 152.) However, a section of the *plebs* remained part of the *clientela* of major aristocratic houses. "Although the emperor was not officially referred to as *patronus* of all the *plebs*, there was a clear conflict between his influence and the patronage exercised by individual senators." (Ibid., p. 97.) Yavetz also plausibly suggests that "...the laws limiting the emancipation of slaves were likewise passed for no other reason but to restrict the private *clientela* of the senatorial aristocracy." (Ibid., p. 96f.) because a manumitted slave became a *libertus* or *libertinus* (in the later Roman Empire the two terms are used interchangeably, meaning freedman), who would automatically become a *cliens* to his former master as *patronus*. "As a general principle he (Augustus) prevented anyone (Agrippa being the exception that proves the rule) from bestowing *beneficia* (favors) on the masses." (Ibid., 97.) Later emperors followed the same pattern, and it is worth noting that the supposedly "bad" emperors got that reputation largely from their treatment of the upper echelons of society, while retaining the support of the *plebs*. (See Yavetz on Nero, Ibid., p. 153.)

Augustus and the Senate: In his autobiography Augustus makes a point of stressing that all his honors and titles were granted to him by the Senate and people in time-honored Republican fashion and that he refused the tainted title of dictator. The modest-sounding title *Princeps*, or "first citizen," which is mentioned three times in the autobiography in a very matter-of-fact way, was intended to suggest

that Augustus was merely “first among equals”, although the reality was very different. It is this title which has given the whole period from Augustus to the accession of Diocletian in 284 the designation of the Principate, as it is usually termed by historians, although it is commonly referred to by the general public simply as “the Roman Empire”, from the title *imperator*, which, as we have seen, was adopted by Augustus as a forename. Augustus made much of restoring the Republican constitution. Elections to the traditional Republican magistracies were put on a firm footing, and provincial commands were reserved for those who had reached the praetorship and the consulship. But Augustus did not want the old *nobiles*, the top echelon of the Senate, to continue to monopolise these commands. So, he introduced into the Senate *novi homines*, “new men drawn from the length and breadth of Italy”. (Jones 1955, p. 20.) As we are told in the Appendix to his autobiography, he even gave some personal “...grants to individual friends and senators to make up their property qualification”, a way of introducing hand-picked friends to high office. Augustus also used as a counter-measure against the nobility the “ingenious electoral machinery of the *Lex Valeria Cornelia* of 5 CE, whereby, although the freedom of the *comitia* (popular assembly) was theoretically left untrammelled, a strong lead was given to it by ten centuries composed in the main of the very class whom Augustus wished to see elected to praetorships and consulates.... By the accession of Tiberius the monopoly of the *nobiles* had been broken, and a sufficient number of new men had been promoted to the higher ranks of the Senate to make it possible to entrust elections to the Senate itself.” (*Ibid.*, p. 20 f.) It is important to realise, however, that being a member of the Senate was in itself no longer of great importance. Membership was only necessary in order to obtain appointment to provincial governorships, the overwhelming majority of which were in the gift of the emperor. Only the so-called senatorial provinces had governors allocated by the Senate. At the time of Augustus’s death, in 14 CE, there were only ten of these.

Augustus and the *equites*: Augustus tried to bolster the *equites* (“equestrians”, literally “knights”), the second rank in the state, as a counterweight to senators, relying on them as military commanders, tax collectors, and in many other capacities. He broadened the scope of the equestrian class, encouraging the Italian towns to nominate suitable entrants into this order. (Suetonius, Augustus, 46.)

Augustus and the army: Important though the army was to Augustus, I agree with Brunt and Moore that it would be “...a mistake to represent his power as depending mainly on the support of

the army.” (Brunt&/Moore (eds.), 1967: 15,) Augustus went out of his way to reward his troops and veterans and to settle them in *coloniae* (“settlements”) all around Italy and the provinces. Augustus made sure that the army was largely under his control, and by the end of his reign, Africa was the only senatorial province with any troops at all (see above). And from the reign of the Emperor Gaius (Caligula) (37–41), the whole army was commanded by the emperor. The praetorian guard under a Praetorian Prefect came to play an increasingly important role in the Roman Empire, especially after the time of Augustus. And the setting up of the *cohortes urbanae*, (urban cohorts), a sort of police force for Rome, which, together with the *vigiles*, or (firemen), were seen as important factors contributing to Rome’s generally peaceful existence for the better part of four centuries.

***Consilium Principis*:** Augustus established the *Consilium Principis* or emperor’s advisory council, a semi-informal body drawn from his much larger body of *amici* (friends), which he consulted from time to time. This arrangement continued right throughout the Principate and ultimately became more formalised as the *consistorium*, a department of state) under Diocletian. John Crook’s learned study of the *Consilium* does, however, appear to overestimate the influence of the *Consilium* on imperial decision making. In the words of A.N. Sherwin-White, “It is by no means proved that the emperors regularly took the advice of a substantial body of *amici*, in any particular form, on most matters of high or low policy.” (Sherwin-White 1957, p. 253.)

Augustus: “Optimi Status Auctor”?

Suetonius quotes an edict in which Augustus expresses the hope that he will be remembered by posterity as *optimi status auctor* (architect of the best state of affairs). (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 28.) In the *Aeneid*, similarly, Vergil predicts that Augustus will usher in *aurea saecula* (golden centuries) (Vergil, *Aeneid* VI. 791–807), a prediction that would prove prophetic.

But what was the nature of the regime that Augustus established? My own view is that Augustus was decidedly the sole ruler of the Roman world. To sum up my findings, Augustus’s position depended on the following factors:

- Duly authorized *maius imperium*, initially as a consul and then later as a proconsul, enabling Augustus to override any other magistrate, including a consul;
- Duly authorized tribunician power, with the wide powers described above;

- The support of the urban *plebs* as their effective patron;
- The support of the *equites*;
- *Auctoritas* (influence) stemming from his connections and achievements;
- The support of the army, which, however, was *not* the mainstay of his power;
- *Amicitia*, a wide-ranging network of people linked to Augustus as their individual *patronus* or simply as *amici*, some of whom he would consult either formally, in the form of a *consilium* (council), or informally, *inter amicos* (among friends) but who had no decision-making powers. Contrary to Ronald Syme, this group did not constitute a party or an oligarchy of any kind (see below); and
- *Money*: Augustus inherited Julius Caesar's fortune to which he added the treasure of Egypt and other conquests. From this great fortune, which he had amassed, he was able to make lavish gifts to the people of Rome and others as is documented in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. (See above.)

From Tiberius to Diocletian

For three centuries after the death of Augustus, the trend was toward greater autocracy on the part of the emperor together with a decline of the old aristocracy and recruitment to the Senate from an ever-widening circle both geographical and social. The ancient sources attribute the changes in the Senate to the deliberate policy of "bad" emperors like Tiberius, Domitian, Commodus and Septimius Severus. Modern writers tend to stress demographic factors. Thus, Mason Hammond: "The chief and continuing factor which necessitated the introduction of fresh blood into the Senate must have been a failure on the part of the old senatorial families adequately to perpetuate themselves." (Hammond 1957, p. 75.)

The low level of reproduction of the old senatorial families has probably been exaggerated because we know that it was imperial policy from the start to broaden the scope of recruitment. The Emperor Claudius (r. 41–54), for example, forced the resignation of a number of senators who no longer met the property qualification, and at the same time, he promoted the admission of senators from Gaul. In proposing the admission of Gallic senators in a famous speech to the Senate (preserved in the bronze Lyon Tablet), a different version of which was reported by Tacitus, Claudius made a point of mentioning that both Augustus and Tiberius had encouraged recruitment to the Senate of men of wealth and breeding from the provinces. Interestingly enough, Claudius's speech was interrupted with cries to the effect that

“Italy is not so weak as to be unable to provide its own capital city with a senate.” Yet the Senate nevertheless passed a decree approving the emperor’s policy. (Tacitus, *Annals*, 11.23; Sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/48claudius.asp.) A number of detailed prosopographical researches were neatly summarised by Mason Hammond, showing that, of those senators whose origin is known, the proportion of provincials (i.e. non-Italians) increased steadily (with a couple of minor blips) as follows:

Vespasian (r. 69–79)—16.8%
 Domitian (r. 81–96)—23.4%
 Trajan (r. 98–117)—34.2%
 Hadrian (r. 117–138)—43.6%
 Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161)—42.5%
 Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180)—45.6%
 Commodus (r. 180–192)—44.7%
 Septimius Severus (r. 193–211) and Caracalla
 (r. 198–217)—57.4%
 Elagabalus (r. 218–222) and Severus Alexander
 (r. 222–235)—52.5%
 Third Century—56%

(Hammond 1957, *Ibid.*)

Under Vespasian, therefore, provincials made up only one-sixth of senators of known origin. There is a major jump under Trajan, and from the end of the second century provincials made up more than half the senators of known origin.

According to Pierre Lambrechts, (as modified by Syme), in the period between 117 and 192, no fewer than 48 percent of *consulares* (ex-consuls) and presumably an even higher proportion of senators of lower grades were of non-senatorial and indeed provincial origin. (Pierre Lambrechts 1936, I; Review by Syme 1937, p. 271 f.) It is important to note that Trajan was himself a provincial, from Spain, and practically all subsequent emperors were also provincials.

The ever-widening circle of senators, from whom most provincial governors were drawn, was an important reason for the stability and general tranquillity of the Roman Empire over a long period. In keeping with this trend, in the year 212, the Emperor Caracalla extended Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the Roman world by means of the so-called *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

Augustus himself was already clearly the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, as we have seen, although he was anxious not to make this fact too obvious for fear of offending the element which had assassinated

his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. Later emperors had no such qualms. The jurist Ulpian (170–228) famously declared, *Princeps legibus solutus est* (The emperor is exempt from the laws or The emperor is not bound by the laws) although this is sometimes interpreted to refer only to the marriage laws. That narrow interpretation is almost certainly wrong because the historian Cassius Dio (155–235) makes it clear that the phrase *legibus solutus* exempts the emperor from *all* laws, but he dates this back to 24 BCE in the reign of Augustus, which, if true, is certainly not mentioned by either Tacitus or Suetonius.

Another similar and equally famous formulation of imperial power, which is attributable to Ulpian, is, “*Quod principi placuit legis habet vigorem*” (What pleases the emperor has the force of law), which is said to derive from the *Lex de Imperio* (the law defining an emperor’s power on his accession).

Can such sweeping powers be traced back to the *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani*, the law defining the powers of Vespasian, on his accession in the year 69? Unfortunately, only the latter part of the inscription promulgating this law has survived. This law provides that any candidate for a magistracy or other position of importance who is “commended” by the emperor shall be given “special consideration”. There is also a blanket clause giving the emperor the “right and power” to execute anything that he considers to be “...in accordance with the public advantage and the dignity of divine and human and public and private interests” just as Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius had done. The exact scope of this power is not clear, but it is significant that it is said to have belonged to Augustus as well, and it would presumably have been granted to all subsequent emperors. (*Ancient Roman Statutes*, 1961, p. 149 f.)

The well-known story about how Claudius became emperor is instructive. On the assassination of Claudius’s nephew, the Emperor Gaius (Caligula) in the year 41, Claudius was cowering behind a curtain, when a common soldier, seeing Claudius’s feet protruding below the curtain, pulled him out and recognized him. Claudius, fearing the worst, fell at his feet in supplication only to find himself hailed as emperor. This shows the deference and strong sense of loyalty of the ordinary people for their “betters” and for heredity, which was one of the reasons for the longevity of the Roman Empire. When the Julio-Claudian line ended with Nero, after a three-fold hiccup a new dynasty of the Flavians was briefly established by Vespasian and then from the accession of Nerva in 96 until the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 a succession of “good emperors” was attainable thanks to adoption. None of these “good emperors” had sons of their own, but Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his son Commodus, who unfortunately was not in his

father's mould. Commodus's assassination in 192 was followed, after two more brief hiccups, by the Severan dynasty, which remained in power until 235. The next half century saw a large number of emperors taking power until the accession of Diocletian in 284, which introduced what modern historians call the "Dominate."

Here is a bird's-eye view of some major developments leading from the Principate to the Dominate (See Arnheim 1972, p. 21 ff.):

- Before long, consuls appear to have been directly appointed by the emperor. (Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.772, 2.71.3);
- Starting in the early Principate, the Senate's financial control was gradually eliminated. As an institution, the Senate was a mere cipher, happy to humor the emperor's every whim. But the same does not apply to senators as individuals. For, though some important posts were now held by equestrians or even by freedmen (especially under Claudius), the great majority of high imperial appointments continued to be reserved for senators until the second half of the third century. But senatorial status was in the emperor's gift, and emperors continually brought new blood into the Senate as we have seen. So the fact that most provincial governors were senators did not mean that these posts were reserved for the scions of old families;
- In the course of the third century, the old traditional framework was gradually abandoned, until by the end of the century, only very few posts of importance were open to senators. The tendency now was to bypass the Senate by appointing non-senators directly to a governorship without bothering to make them senators first;
- An ambiguous passage in *Aurelius Victor* has given rise to the belief that senators were deprived of military commands from the reign of Gallienus (260–68) onward (Aurelius Victor, 33 f., 37.5–6);
- Be that as it may, a number of non-military provinces also experienced a change from senatorial to equestrian governors;
- But while equestrians moved into the erstwhile preserves of senators, there was no movement the other way to produce Lambrechts's fabled "fusion" of the two orders (Lambrechts 1937, 107ff);
- This process culminated in the reign of Diocletian, who may justifiably lay claim to the title "Hammer of the Aristocracy", as I dubbed him in my book, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire* (Arnheim 1972);
- The powers of the emperor are neatly summarised by Cassius Dio, who agrees with Ulpian that the emperor was above the law (Cassius Dio, 53.17.1, 18.1);
- Imperial trappings became increasingly grand. Nero was shown in his lifetime wearing the radiate crown of the sun, a symbol of divinity,

on some of his coins. In the late third century, this gave way to the jewelled diadem of the sun-god;

- By the third century, an oath by the emperor's *genius* was considered more binding than one by the gods;
- Everything connected with the emperor was given the epithet *sacrum* (sacred or holy); and
- Under Diocletian, the imperial court was well and truly decked out in Oriental trappings and an aura of cool aloofness on the one hand and abject self-abasement on the other pervaded everything.

Section B. Two Disquieting Tendencies

There are two disquieting opposite tendencies current among writers on ancient history. One tendency is of undue negativity, what may be called the pooh-pooh mindset, dismissing out of hand ancient evidence, sometimes relating to whole periods. The danger here is that one may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The opposite tendency is one of excessive uncritical acceptance of certain ancient evidence. The danger here is even greater, resulting as it may in a distorted or even completely false image of the period concerned. Though this tendency is the diametric opposite of the pooh-pooh tendency, the two tendencies sometimes coexist, surprisingly enough, even in the works of the same writer.

“The Fourth Century and the ‘Conflict of the Orders’ Belong in the Realm of Myth.”

Much of the early history of Rome is based on tradition. But does that entitle us to dismiss it out of hand? T.J. Cornell's *The Beginnings of Rome* (1995), covering the period down to 264 BCE, has been criticized for adopting a “too trusting and overly optimistic” attitude to the ancient source material. (Forsythe 2005, p. 4.) At the opposite extreme from Cornell is Fergus Millar, who opines, “So far as ‘real’ history goes, we should forget the earlier Republic, and begin where contemporary evidence begins, in the time of Hannibal.” (Millar 2002, p. 85 f.) Hannibal lived from 247 to about 182 BCE and fought Rome in the Second Punic War, which lasted from 218 to 203 BCE. Millar continues, “The fourth century and the ‘conflict of the orders’ belong in the realm of myth. Yet so apparently purist a decision will not really do either.”—and so, he charitably stretches the period of “real” history two or three generations further back to allow for “collective memory.”

Conflict of the Orders

Millar condemns as a “circular” definition this conclusion by Christian Meier as quoted by Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp (2010) about the aristocratic monopoly of office in the Republic: “Whoever played a part in politics belonged to the aristocracy, and whoever belonged to the aristocracy played a part in politics.” (Millar, *Ibid.*, 94.) In fact, it is not circular at all. A parallel would be to say something like this: Any animal with a single horn on its head is a unicorn, and every unicorn has a single horn on its head. In other words, the class of animals with a single horn is closed. If you come across an animal with a single horn, you know that it must be a unicorn. And, if you come across a unicorn, you know it must have a single horn on its head. In other words, the two classes, that of unicorns and that of single-horned animals are coextensive.

This is not at all illogical. In fact, there are two aristocratic models that contrast with it. It is quite possible, for example, to have a society where political office is reserved to only certain aristocratic families or individuals while other aristocrats are left outside the magic circle. It is also possible for an aristocracy to be open, so that, while all or most of its members are engaged in politics, outsiders are not excluded. This latter model is actually a better fit for the Roman Republic than Meier’s closed model because *novi homines*, or “new men,” were able to gain admission to the dominant elite from an early date.

According to persistent tradition, at some time in the early Republic, a protracted Conflict of the Orders broke out between the *patricii* (patricians) and the *plebeii* (plebeians). Some modern writers have suggested an ethnic distinction between the two orders. Livy more plausibly identifies the patricians, the dominant elite in the early Republic, as descendants of the original senators appointed by Romulus. (Livy 1.8.) In the absence of evidence, it would be idle to speculate on the origins of the two groups.

But that should not prevent us from accepting the historicity of a conflict between the ruling elite and an element of the population excluded from power. It would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater to agree with Fergus Millar in consigning the fourth century (BCE) and the Conflict of the Orders to the realm of myth, as cited above. (Millar 2002, p. 85 f.) We have a very detailed account of the Conflict of the Orders from Livy writing in the time of Augustus, on the basis, as mentioned above, not only of tradition but also of earlier historical accounts.

There certainly are some problems with the details of the Conflict of the Orders as they have come down to us. One question that has exercised scholars is why several of the early consuls, including Lucius Junius Brutus himself, appear to have been plebeians at a time when

only patricians were supposedly eligible. The answer may be that the clear distinction between the orders may only have developed later, but this is a puzzle-problem to which there is no definite solution.

Even if the details and dates of this protracted struggle as recounted by Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and other ancient sources are fictitious, there can be no doubt that from at least the third century BCE, the dominant elite in the Roman Republic was a combined patricio-plebeian aristocracy, which controlled not only the high magistracies of state, but also the senate, and the state religion. (See Stuart Staveland 2014.) It is significant that, from the fourth century BCE, every senatorial family was forever labeled as either patrician or plebeian, and the only way one could switch from one order to the other was by adoption, though entry to the plebeian part of the aristocracy was open to *novi homines* from outside.

“Monopoly of Office and Power”

But the fact that the Republic was dominated by a small elite is not in doubt. In rejecting this position, Millar was flying in the face of the evidence and opposing not only the Gelzer school of German scholars but also his own supervisor in Oxford, Sir Ronald Syme. (Syme 1939, p. 124.)

Gary Forsythe provides evidence of “...multiple offices shared by the same two individuals”, one patrician and the other plebeian, between 366 and 264 BCE, the century before the First Punic War. Forsythe lists no fewer than 16 such pairs, plus three further “...instances in which one person held two consulships with two brothers or members of the same family.” In addition, Forsythe notes the high frequency of repeat consulates in the twenty-five years after the reorganisation of 367 BCE. It is easy to pooh-pooh the *Consular Fasti*, the official list of consuls as recorded in the so-called *Fasti Capitolini*, as Millar does because they date only from the time of Augustus, but Forsyth based his observations on Livy’s history as well, which was also written during the reign of Augustus.

On the basis of detailed prosopographical evidence, Ernst Badian found that “...the proportion of consuls who came from families that had already produced at least one consul never fell below 70 percent in the whole period between 179 and 49 BCE.” (Badian 1990, pp. 371–413.)

Patronage or Clientela

Millar took issue with Matthias Gelzer’s classic view, advanced in 1912, that the Roman Republic was dominated by “a homogeneous elite (or ‘aristocracy’ or ‘nobility’) controlling the mass of the people through a network of patronage relationships.” (Millar, *Ibid.*, p. 92.)

Gelzer may possibly have overestimated the importance of patronage in elections, but it is hard to believe that it played no role at all, considering its antiquity and the fact that it was clearly still alive and well in the Principate, not a time when it could suddenly have sprung into existence. In addition, there was a persistent aristocratic ethos throughout Roman history. A.H.M. (“Hugo”) Jones described the people of Athens in the fifth century BCE as “...rather snobbish in their choice of leaders” (Jones 1957, p. 49) even though their regime was decidedly anti-aristocratic. The same can be said of the Roman *plebs* both during the aristocratic dominance of the middle Republic and in their support of *Populares* in the late republic.

Following Peter Brunt, Millar argued against Gelzer that “...such patronage relations cannot serve as the key to understanding the political process in Rome.” I will take Millar’s and Brunt’s points one by one.

The citizen body of Rome was too large for such a system to have operated effectively (Millar, as paraphrased by Guy Maclean Rogers as editor of Millar’s *Rome, the Greek World, and the East*.) Referring to patronage or *clientela* as a “system” is a mistake. This mistake sets patronage up as an “Aunt Sally” or straw man, making it easy to knock down. In fact, *clientela* was not a “system” and cannot, therefore, be expected to have “operated effectively”, whatever that is supposed to mean. Patronage was an *informal* social institution. And, of course, not every Roman would have been a patron or a client.

Patronage was “marginal” in the Republic but “...enjoyed a heyday under the principate” and “...flourished under the late empire” (Brunt 1988). There is little doubt about the importance of patronage in the later Roman Empire, more usually under the title *patrocinium*, which eventually morphed into the medieval seigniorial system. (See Arnheim 1972.) What about the Principate? The Epigrams of the Roman poet Martial, published between 86 and 103 CE, show that patronage was alive and well during the Principate but probably less political than social and financial. “With the commencement of the Principate,” writes Yavetz, “the emperors became in a sense the *patroni* of the entire urban *plebs*.” (Yavetz 1988, p. 152.) Garnsey, however, opines, “If everyone is a client, no one is.” (Garnsey in McGill, Scott et al 2010, p. 44.)

This misses the point. According to Yavetz’s cogent portrayal, the emperor was the patron “...of the entire urban *plebs*” but not of the whole population. There is a very big difference between the two. The *plebs* had long been opposed to the senatorial aristocracy and had their own champions, the *Populares*, culminating in Julius Caesar, a position which Augustus, as Caesar’s heir, prized and cultivated. Hence, the use of the tribunician power by Augustus and all his successors. But Augustus was

careful to balance his position as champion of the *plebs* with his claim to be the restorer of the Republic.

Brunt's idea that patronage relations during the Republic were "...fragile, peripheral, short-lived, and did not count for very much" may possibly be correct as far as the turbulent late Republic was concerned but less likely for the middle Republic. (Brunt 1988.) There is evidence of patronage going all the way back to the *Menaechmi* of Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE), which indicates that rich men liked to be the patrons of as many clients as possible.

I agree with Professor John North's characterization of the Brunt view as one of "sweeping negativity." Brunt's position was largely an argument from silence, based on the fact that "...clients are much less conspicuous in the sources" than we would expect if patronage was as important as was traditionally believed. North's comment is apt: "It is quite possible that the basic relationships of society, so familiar to contemporaries, should be assumed and rarely referred to in contemporary texts". (North 1989, p. 155.) But in fact, as Garnsey admits and as Brunt's own footnotes show, the sources are by no means silent on patronage.

Polybius Was Right

Up to now we have been concerned with the tendency on the part of certain modern writers to dismiss large amounts of ancient evidence out of hand, with the danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We now come to the opposite tendency, namely to accept too uncritically certain other ancient evidence. Some writers even have managed to combine both these opposite tendencies in the same book. One particularly disquieting tendency is to accept too readily any suggestion that the Roman Republic was democratic and even that the Principate of Augustus had democratic elements.

The evidence is quite clear, however, that the Roman Republic was an oligarchy or an aristocracy controlled by a senatorial elite, which, however, was open to *novi homines*. This is a modified version of the traditional view that can be traced back to Matthias Gelzer's *Nobilität der römischen Republik* (1912). Until the 1980s there was a basic consensus, in the words of Professor Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, "that the social and political order of the *libera res publica* (free republic) had been aristocratic or even 'oligarchic', meaning that all institutions and positions of power were controlled by a particular kind of ruling class, which recruited not only magistrates, generals, priests, and senators from its ranks, but also the official representatives of the people, the *tribuni plebis*." (Hölkeskamp 2010, p. 86.) This picture emerged largely

from prosopographical research. Since Gelzer's classic study, the existence of a "...complex system of patron-client relations" underpinning the political structure of the Republic had "...been generally accepted without further discussion." (Ibid.)

This consensus was broken by Fergus Millar, who, following Peter Brunt, not only poured scorn on the whole idea of the significance of patronage (*clientela*) but even "flatly denies the existence of the nobility or of any homogeneous patrician-plebeian political elite in general; for him, to put it in a nutshell, neither an aristocracy nor an oligarchy ever existed in Republican Rome." (Hölkeskamp, 2010, p. 108.) Instead, unduly impressed by the fact that elections and legislation were decided by popular assemblies, Millar even went so far as to refer to the "direct democracy" of the Republic:

In the light of recent work, it is time to abandon the once established presuppositions of a hereditary 'nobility', of aristocratic factions, and of an all-embracing network of dependence and clientship. We might then be able to see the public life of the classical Republic in a rather different light: as an arena in which those who sought and held office competed before the crowd.... It was this crowd which, however imperfectly, symbolized and represented the sovereignty of the Roman people. (Millar 2002, p. 141 f.)

And again: "Using 'democracy' in a strictly neutral sense, it is undeniable that the constitution of the Roman Republic was that of a direct democracy" (p. 165). This appears to relate to the period around 150 BCE. That Millar was not referring only to the legal or constitutional position but also to political realities on the ground is clear from the longer passage quoted above, and in addition from the writings of Millar's staunch defender, T.P. Wiseman: "Fergus Millar forcefully insisted on the centrality of the People's role in the political life of the republic." (Wiseman, loc 76. referring to Millar 2002a, pp. 109–42.)

The first question to ask is what Polybius actually said. Then, whether he should be believed. And, if not, what was the true position? The response to these questions is as follows:

- *Polybius did not say that the Roman Republic was a democracy;*
- *His reference to democracy in this connection has been misconstrued;*
- *What Polybius actually said was that the Roman Republic had a "mixed" form of government, combining monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy;*
- *In reaching this conclusion, Polybius was unduly influenced by the tradition of constitutional classification by a long line of Greek writers culminating in Aristotle; and*

- *The true position is that the Roman Republic was an oligarchy, meaning rule by an elite minority or an aristocracy, namely a hereditary oligarchy, which, however, was not closed to novi homines.*

What Polybius Actually Said

Millar, claiming to be following the ancient historian Polybius (c. 200–c.118 BCE), maintained that a good deal of sovereignty was exercised by the Roman people. Here is what Polybius actually said: ὥστε πάλιν ἐκ τούτων εἰκότως ἂν τιν' εἰπεῖν ὅτι μεγίστην ὁ δῆμος ἔχει μερίδα καὶ δημοκρατικόν ἐστὶ τὸ πολίτευμα. (“And so one might plausibly say that the people’s share in the government is the greatest, and that the constitution is a democratic one.”) (Polyb. 6.14.)

The key word here is εἰκότως (*eikotos*), meaning “in all likelihood, reasonably,” which comes from the verb *eoike* (it seems). The point Polybius is making is *not* that the constitution was democratic but that, if one looked at the people’s share in isolation, it might *seem* that their share was the greatest. Moreover, this passage is sandwiched between two other passages indicating that the Roman constitution was not a democracy but a mixed constitution.

It has to be remembered that Polybius was a Greek who had come to Rome as a hostage but stayed on and hobnobbed with some leading senators. His analysis of the Roman Republican constitution belongs to a well-known Greek genre going back to Plato and Aristotle and earlier writers. He classified the Roman constitution as mixed: a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The two consuls he identified as the monarchical element, which of course is arrant nonsense as the whole idea of the consulate was to prevent power from being concentrated in the hands of a single person. Polybius identified the Senate as the aristocratic element, which was fair enough, considering not only its elite composition but also the fact that it controlled all the finances, had jurisdiction over all serious crimes, and was in control of foreign affairs. “After this,” writes Polybius, “we are naturally inclined to ask what part in the constitution is left for the people.” As the people, through the popular assemblies, elected all office-holders, voted on laws, and decided questions of war and peace, he concludes with the sentence as quoted in Greek above. But he adds that, while the Senate must respect the people’s wishes, “...the people must be submissive to the senate and respect its members both in public and in private.” (Polybius 6.17.) So, it would be quite wrong to read Polybius as saying that Rome was a democracy. It is quite clear that he classified it as having a mixed constitution or government.

As a Greek writing in Greek for a Greek readership, Polybius's interest in Roman government is heavily influenced by the long Greek tradition of classifying constitutions in a formalistic or schematic way. That is why it is hardly coincidental that, as an adulator of Rome, Polybius should have chosen to classify its constitution as mixed, the form that Aristotle, among others, considered to be the best and stablest form of government. Polybius's interest in the actual operation of the Roman constitution in practice was minimal.

Millar, as paraphrased by Rogers, opines that, "At the center of the practice of Roman politics was not the Roman patron (*patronus*) imposing his will upon a client, but rather the orator, addressing the crowd in the Roman forum." See above for a discussion on patronage. But what about the idea that politics in the republic was all about orators persuading voters in debate?

Formal Rights vs. Practical Realization

"The orator addressing the crowd": Millar's idea that the popular assemblies were deliberative assemblies open to persuasion by rhetoric is illusory. Even the citizens of "democratic" Athens, who might have been expected to turn out enthusiastically in great numbers in anticipation of participating in their far more powerful assembly, were lackadaisical and had to be corralled by the police into attending. (See Chapter 6.)

Henrik Mouritsen provides a welcome dose of realism as a corrective to Millar's starry-eyed view: "The fact that political proceedings are public does not in itself make them 'democratic.'" (Mouritsen, loc 586.) And again:

"The Roman 'democracy' is...founded on two—themselves indisputable—historical facts: the existence of a politically significant 'public' and the open access of all citizens to participate in this 'public'. These two facts do not, however, add up to a Roman 'democracy'. One crucial factor has been left out of the equation, which is the distinction between formal rights and their practical realisation." Mouritsen concludes that Millar's 'democratic' model "sits uneasily between, on the one hand, a very practical hands-on approach to politics and, on the other, an idealistic, almost naïve view of the relationship between constitutional principle and reality." (Mouritsen, 2008, loc 1841.)

Egon Flaig has pointed out that the popular assemblies almost always agreed with the bills presented to them, on the basis of which he denied that the assemblies were decision-making bodies, labelling them instead as "consensus-producing bodies". (Egon Flaig 1995, 77–91; 2003, 155–74; 184–93.)

What then about the *contiones* (informal non-voting public meetings), which Millar saw as the place where ambitious politicians employed persuasion to prepare the ground for later voting? (Millar 2002 6, 23, 136, 142, 158–61, 181–2.) As Hölkeskamp has stressed, these speeches do not necessarily imply a situation of open decision making. Rather, it was a situation where “...senators spoke and asserted what needed to be done, the People listened and followed their advice” (Hölkeskamp 1995, 27–49; 2010 88 f).

Referring to the Senate, Millar remarked that, “The notion of that body as an ‘aristocracy’ in the modern sense has confused the study of the Republic for decades.” (Millar 2002, p. 86.) It is not clear whether this remark refers only to the “early-middle- Republic” of about 390 to 218 BCE, or to later times as well. (Ibid., p. 85 f.) After consigning the Conflict of the Orders to the realm of myth and also rejecting the historicity of the Conflict of the Orders and of the “patricio-plebeian elite” that has generally been accepted as emerging after the resolution of that conflict, Millar provides us with a table purporting to show “Political Power in Mid-Republican Rome”. (Ibid., p. 99.) However, the table, which covers the period 362 to 217 BCE, contains only ten items, most of which are examples of laws proposed by tribunes of the *plebs*. The purpose of this table is to illustrate “...that the constitutional structure of the state, the conditions of office-holding, and the duties of office are for determination by the People via the medium of *leges* [laws].” (Ibid., p. 98.) So what? Modern writers on ancient history tend to be dazzled by anything that smacks of democracy and especially of “direct democracy”. (I note the same tendency in regard to Athens in Chapter 6.) It would, however, be a serious mistake to assume that we are dealing here with a genuinely deliberative assembly.

“Elective Dictatorship”

The present-day British constitution provides an apt parallel. The bed-rock principle of the British constitution is the sovereignty of Parliament. Parliament, and more particularly the House of Commons, is where the debates take place, and no statute can be passed without a majority in both houses of Parliament, together with the royal assent. However, as Lord Chancellor Hailsham pointed out in his book titled *The Dilemma of Democracy*, the British system of government is really an “elective dictatorship,” in which a government with even a narrow majority in the House of Commons can push through nearly any legislation it likes because of the iron grip that it has over its party members through the whip system, leaving not only the voters and Queen without any say

but also even Parliament itself. So, though the sovereignty of Parliament has validity as a constitutional and legal concept, in practical terms, it is a sham. (Hailsham 1979.)

“Significance of Graduated Voting Absurdly Exaggerated”

Electoral system: As for elections, it is important to realise that voting in the *Comitia Centuriata*, the assembly which elected the top magistrates, namely the consuls, praetors and censors, was in wealth-order, and voting stopped once a majority was reached. This assembly was reorganised in 241 BCE to make it slightly more democratic. The *Comitia Tributa* (Tribal Assembly), which elected the lower magistrates, was more democratic, as the “tribes” voted in a random order selected by lot. But again, voting ceased once a majority was reached. The *Concilium Plebis* (Council of the *Plebs*) was essentially the same body as the *Comitia Tributa* but with the exclusion of patricians. It elected the Tribunes of the *Plebs* and Plebeian Aediles, according to tradition as a result of the so-called Conflict of the Orders. The *Lex Hortensia* of 287 BCE gave *plebiscita* (*Concilium Plebis* decisions), the status of *leges* (laws), after which most laws were in fact *plebiscita* but were called *leges*.

Millar, however, asserted: “The significance of the graduated voting, in descending sequence by groups belonging to different property levels, as found in the ‘assembly of centuries’ has been absurdly exaggerated.” (Millar 2002, p. 178–9.) For more see Chapter 6 p. 208.

Millar did at least concede that “The consulate, for instance, was dominated by *nobiles*, the descendants of office-holders” for which he gave credit to Ernst Badian’s sterling work (Ibid.). But Millar then goes on the attack again. I will quote Millar, with my own comments in italics.

“Does that of itself prove that in political terms the *res publica* was, or could be, run by an oligarchy for its own benefit? No: firstly, public office was, as indicated earlier, conceived of as a favour conferred by the people.” M.A. *Maybe not “of itself”, but, until the convulsions of the Republic’s death-throes, the res publica actually was run by an oligarchy for its own benefit.*

Millar then provides us with “four fundamental points”:

1. Millar: “(F)irstly, elections to the consulship tell us a lot, but not everything, about Roman political life.” M.A. *Granted. But whoever said that consular elections told us everything about elections? Millar’s point is a classic Aunt Sally or Straw Man.*

2. Millar: “Secondly, other offices, and above all the tribunate, were also reflections of popular support, and vehicles of popular politics. M.A. *Absolutely. The tribunate came into existence to protect the original plebeians in the Conflict of the Orders, the historicity of which Millar rejects. Later on, the tribunate became an important weapon used by Populares, demagogues with popular support like the Gracchi, against the Optimates, upholders of the dominant oligarchy, who finally lost out to Julius Caesar and then his heir, the future Augustus, who turned the oligarchic republic into a monarchy, all of which Millar rejected.*
3. Millar: “(T)hirdly, the use of words, oratory, before the people, was central to the political process in Rome. M.A. *Not at all. This is part of the illusion of the Roman Republic as essentially democratic. As Egon Flaig has shown (see above), the popular assemblies almost always agreed with the bills presented to them, on the basis of which Flaig denied that the assemblies were decision-making bodies, labeling them instead as “consensus-producing bodies.”* (Egon Flaig 1995, 77–91; 2003, 155–74; 184–93.)
4. Millar: “(A)nd fourthly—the most important thing of all—the central focus of politics was *not* election to office but conflict about laws.” (Millar 2002, p. 178.) M.A. *That there was a certain amount of conflict about laws is undeniable. Sometimes, this conflict turned violent, but this was all part and parcel of the conflict between Optimates and Populares, in which the latter (and, no doubt, the former as well) had lower class support. It is an illusion to see this conflict in terms of swaying voters by argument in debate. The violent conflict over the Gracchan reforms marked the beginning of the end of the oligarchic state that we know as the Roman Republic.*

“Rem Publicam...in Senatus Populique Romani Arbitrium Transtuli”

Augustus’s vaunted restoration of the Republic: In his autobiography, Augustus claimed that, in 27 BCE, “I transferred the state from my own power to the control of the Roman Senate and People.” (Aug. *R.G.* 34.) Fergus Millar appears to have taken this literally, meaning the “...restoration of the citizen body to its rightful place within the constitutional structure of the *res publica* and its politics,” which “...provides the analytical framework for a very different understanding of what happened in 27 BC than we might gather from reading the *Annals* of Tacitus.” (Guy MacLean Rogers, “Intro: Polybius Was Right” –Millar 2002, p. xiv.) Rogers empha-

sizes the phrase “and the Roman people” as if that is in some way significant. This is a misunderstanding of the passage in Augustus’s autobiography, which is simply that he transferred the *res publica* (the state) from his own power to the *arbitrium* (discretion, or better, control or dominion) of the *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, (The Roman Senate and People) (SPQR), the traditional corporate designation of the Roman Republic. So, what Augustus is saying here is that he restored the Republic, which of course is false but which was a major theme in his propaganda. The mention of *populusque* (and the people), does not have any special significance.

Egypt: Rogers also makes much of the claim in Augustus’s autobiography that he had added Egypt “...to the *imperium* of the Roman people.” (Aug. *R.G.*, 27.) Why not again to the Roman Senate and People, SPQR? The omission of the “Senate” here is significant, but not for the reason that Rogers suggests. Augustus is *certainly not* claiming to have handed Egypt over to one of the popular assemblies. Egypt was newly conquered from Cleopatra (allied to Mark Antony), and Augustus ruled it as part of his own *patrimonium* (private estate) because he did not want the Senate or any senator to gain control of this rich province. So, the governor of Egypt was never a senator but always an equestrian with the title of “prefect”, and no senator was allowed even to set foot in Egypt without express imperial consent. How was Augustus to publicize his acquisition of Egypt in his autobiography? He could not very well say, “I added Egypt to my own private estate.” And he also did not want to say that he had given it to the Roman Senate and People, because then the Senate could have gotten its hands on it. So, he just said that he had added it to the *imperium*, of the Roman people. The term *imperium* in this context belongs to the category of what Lewis and Short call “publicists’ language,” with the multiple meanings of “supreme power, sovereignty, sway, dominion, and empire.” (Lewis and Short, s.v. *imperium*.) This had nothing to do with the popular assemblies but was simply a vague propaganda claim that Egypt was now under Roman control and the “people” certainly never had any say over Egypt or over who was to govern it.

“*Ironic victory*”: Rogers suggests that:

[I]t is possible to argue” that the Augustan “monarchy itself was one of the (unintended) consequences of the struggle between some of the *nobiles* and the *populus Romanus* over the question of who was the sovereign power in the *res publica*. If we look at the breakdown of the Roman Republic from this perspective, we might see the emergence of a monarch from among the *nobiles* in 27 BC as an ironic victory for that democratic element in the Roman constitution, the Roman people. (Millar 2002, loc. 206.)

This is muddled. The fall of the Roman Republic was indeed the victory over the senatorial aristocracy by the people's champion, first Julius Caesar and then his heir, Augustus. But it makes little sense to suggest that this amounted to the victory of the "...democratic element in the Roman constitution, the Roman people." Moreover, if the Roman people had exercised as much power in the Republic as Millar and Rogers seem to believe, why would they have wanted to destroy the Republic? Yet Julius Caesar had made no bones about his contempt for the Republic by accepting an indefinite dictatorship and by describing the Republic as just "...a name without substance or form." Augustus's victory was not of democracy but of a form of monarchy that artfully concealed its true nature and managed to survive, with some modifications, for some 300 years.

Mommsen's "Dyarchy"

The famous German historian Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) believed the Augustan regime was a "dyarchy" or "diarchy", in which power was shared between Augustus and the Senate. This view is not generally accepted. My own view, as mentioned above, is that what Augustus established was a monarchical regime based, as we have seen, on a combination of wide powers, with authority resting on broad support from the *plebs*, the *equites*, and the army, together with at least toleration by the surviving members of the Republican senatorial aristocracy and the support of the new men whom he had helped to qualify for entry into the Senate.

Syme: "A Monarchy Rules through an Oligarchy"

Against Millar's rejection of the characterisation of the Roman Republic as either an aristocracy or an oligarchy, we have this important statement by Sir Ronald Syme about the Roman Republic, based on detailed prosopographical evidence: "In any age of the history of Republican Rome about twenty or thirty men, drawn from a dozen dominant families, hold a monopoly of office and power." (Syme 1939, p. 124.) In his much acclaimed *The Roman Revolution*, a book about the rise to power of Augustus, written in 1939, Syme portrayed Augustus as an autocrat in all but name. But then Syme went off at a tangent and proclaimed in ringing tones, without any evidential basis that "In all ages, whatever the form and name of government or whatever may be the name and theory of the constitution, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an

oligarchy lurks behind the façade.” (1939, 7, 15.) Fifty years later, in 1989, his portrayal of Augustus’s regime was still the same, describing it as “autocratic government” and adding; “The Princeps duly went on to exploit the ‘res publica’, encroaching on the functions of Senate, of magistrates, of laws.” And: “‘Potentia’ now assumed the respectable name of ‘auctoritas.’” (Syme 1989, p. 1 f.)

I agree with Syme on the monopoly of office and power in the Roman Republic, but I certainly do not agree with the application of his one-size-fits-all oligarchic theory to the Augustan Principate. Accepting that Augustus initiated a monarchy, Syme tried to square the circle with the self-contradictory and erroneous oracular comment that “A monarchy rules through an oligarchy.”

Monarchy and oligarchy are diametric opposites, representing the two poles of governmental power. (See Chapter 6 for a full discussion.) By “monarchy,” I mean true, strong monarchy, a system in which power is concentrated in the hands of one person, usually with support from the lower classes, against the return of the oligarchy or aristocracy, which they have most likely overthrown. An oligarchy, on the other hand, is normally intent on perpetuating its shared group power and is, therefore, afraid of any one person becoming too powerful and having too much popular support. The vicissitudes of Roman history epitomize this type of conflict.

In the *Res Gestae*, as we have seen, Augustus makes a point of stating that he had no more *potestas* than any of his colleagues in office but surpassed everyone in *auctoritas*. (*R.G.* 34.5.) *Auctoritas* means “influence” and *potestas* refers to legally authorised, constitutional power. So, Augustus is trying to portray his position as conforming to the norms of the Republican constitution, which he claims to have restored. The fact that he had more *auctoritas* than anyone else was not unlawful. It was simply the expression of the esteem and prestige enjoyed by Augustus, similar to that which even great anti-monarchical Republican heroes of the past like Cincinnatus might have enjoyed. But what is *potentia*?

Syme does not mention *potestas* at all, but rather *potentia* and he does not suggest that this was ever given up, only that it masqueraded under the “respectable name of *auctoritas*.” Unlike *potestas*, which is duly authorised, constitutional power, and *auctoritas*, which was not power at all, *potentia* was unbridled, naked power or might.

Syme’s portrayal of Augustus is a gross exaggeration of Augustus’s position, but it is correct insofar as the regime is shown to be monarchical. Yet, no sooner does Syme condemn Augustus as a lawless despot than we come across the bombshell quoted above: “In all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade.” (Syme 1939, 7, 15.) Was

Augustus's rule not monarchical then? Syme certainly believed it was. So, how does he square this with his sweeping blanket theory of oligarchy? "A monarchy rules through an oligarchy," is Syme's baffling response. (Ibid., p. 8.) In 1989, Syme is still barking up the oligarchy tree: "Oligarchy is imposed as the guiding theme, the link from age to age whatever be the form and name of government." (Syme 1989, p. 13.)

This makes little sense. In a purely banal sense, it is of course true that no individual can single-handedly rule a state. The ruler will need the assistance and support of others in order to maintain power. But here we come to a crucial divide: between, on the one hand, those who serve a ruler in an inferior capacity and who are removable by the ruler at will, and, on the other hand, those who *share* his power. Where a ruler is surrounded by purely inferior minions who do his bidding, that is not an oligarchy because the minions have no independent power-base of their own. In that scenario, power is concentrated in the hands of the ruler, who exercises sole power. It is, therefore, a monarchy. By contrast, an "oligarchy" is a form of government where power is shared by the members of an elite group.

The essential difference between monarchy and oligarchy is the whereabouts of power. It is not always obvious whether the entourage surrounding a ruler is beholden to him, whether he is beholden to them, or possibly whether they are mutually dependent on each other.

The key question to ask is this: Who has the whip hand?

The existence of a ruling party, especially in a one-party state, may sometimes give a clue to the whereabouts of power but not always. So, for example, Adolf Hitler ruled Germany as "Führer" of the Nazi Party, but it would be a mistake to see power as vested in the Party, or any members of the Party, rather than in Hitler personally. The same applies to Communist Party leaders, such as Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, Cuba's Fidel Castro, and Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) and Xi Jinping in China. As far as Rome is concerned, there was in fact no Augustan "party" although Syme seems to have thought there was; but even if there had been, that would not necessarily prove that the system was an oligarchy.

Augustus's *Consilium Principis*, drawn from his *amici*, which is discussed above, did not constitute a party in any sense. Nor was it a council or cabinet, whose advice he was obliged to take. Indeed, certain important issues on which we might expect him to have taken advice do not appear to have been referred to the *Consilium* at all (Sherwin-White). Membership of the *Consilium* was not fixed, its meetings were irregular, and the emperor was not obliged to accept its advice in any event. Informal chats *inter amicos* (among friends), likewise, do not constitute any kind of oligarchy.

Like strong monarchs throughout history who understood the realities of power, Augustus clearly recognized that the old Republican aristocracy,

and especially the *nobiles*, “descendants of consular houses, whether patrician or plebeian in origin” (Syme 1989, p. 10), were foes or potential foes to his regime, just as they had been to Julius Caesar. But he recognized that Julius Caesar’s blunt forthrightness was not the answer, so he developed much subtler tactics to neutralize potential enemies, which enabled him to establish one of the stablest and most durable regimes in history.

Syme recognized Augustus’s defeat of the old nobility: “Not a mere faction of the nobility had been defeated, but a whole class.” (Syme 1939, p. 490.) In addition, “Power receding, aristocrats looked to priesthoods for ‘dignitas’ and social eminence” (Syme 1989, p. 3 f), recognition of the fact that the defeated aristocrats understood the need to look outside government appointments to achieve or maintain a position in society.

Hostility to the *nobiles* was engrained in the Principate from its military and revolutionary origins. In the first decade of his constitutional rule, Augustus employed not a single *nobilis* among the legates who commanded the armies in his *provincia*, and only three men of consular standing. When his position becomes stronger, and a coalition government based largely on family ties has been built up, *nobiles* like Ahenobarbus, Piso and Paullus Fabius Maximus govern the military provinces, it is true. But a rational distrust persists, confirmed under his successors by certain disquieting incidents, and leads to the complete exclusion of the *nobiles*, the delayed but logical end of Revolution and Empire. (Syme 1939, p. 502.)

Except for the suggestion of a “coalition government”, of which there is no evidence whatsoever, Syme correctly highlights Augustus’s reluctance to give military commands to *nobiles*. And Syme also looks ahead, beyond Augustus, to “...the complete exclusion of the *nobiles*.” Yet Syme still failed to recognize that the regime established by Augustus was not an oligarchy at all but a different type or model of government altogether, a form of monarchy, in which power was concentrated in the hands of a single individual and that this form of government would continue long after Augustus.

Envoi: Augustus v. Alexander

ἀκούσας δὲ ὅτι Ἀλέξανδρος δύο καὶ τριάκοντα γεγονώς ἔτη κατεστραμμένος τὰ πλείστα διηπόρει τί ποιήσει τὸν λοιπὸν χρόνον, ἐθαύμαζεν εἰ μὴ μείζον Ἀλέξανδρος ἔργον ἠγεῖτο τοῦ κτήσασθαι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν τὸ διατάξει τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν. [p. 234]

“Hearing that, after accomplishing most of his conquests by the age of thirty-two, Alexander was at a loss what to do for the rest of his life, Augustus expressed surprise that Alexander did not regard it as a greater achievement to stabilize the empire which he had won than to win it.” (Plutarch, *Regum et imperatorum apothegmata*, Frank Cole Babbitt, 1931, p. 235, translated by M. Arnheim.)

The above passage comes from a collection of aphorisms or sayings of a variety of kings and emperors published by the prolific Greek biographer and essayist, Plutarch, probably in around 100, or about a century after the time of Augustus.

A neat contrast is drawn here between Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), a military man obsessed with conquest, and Augustus, portrayed as a statesmanlike ruler, administrator and planner. Whether Augustus ever did comment on Alexander in this way is open to doubt. But, as they say in Italian, *Se non è vero, è ben trovato* (If it’s not true, it’s at least plausible). The contrast between the two men is certainly striking. By the age of 32, Alexander had conquered most of the known world, but he showed no interest in organizing his empire, and on his death soon after, it was split up among his generals. At 32, Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE) had just emerged as the victor of Actium and was about to embark on one of the most ambitious and enduring governmental or administrative feats ever achieved anywhere.

Nobody has ever accused Alexander of being a democrat (as far as I know, not yet, anyway!), and it is significant that, in Plutarch’s probably fictitious little vignette, Augustus speaks as a ruler in complete control of his empire. There is none of the propagandistic double-talk that we find in his masterly autobiography discussed above. Yet, it is to his acumen and thoroughgoing, unblinking analytical understanding of the true countervailing forces at work in the power structure of his dominions that his success is attributable, making him perhaps the most effective ruler of all time, who was able not only to consolidate a stable regime for his own lifetime across the whole Mediterranean basin, but also to guarantee its survival for another 300 years.

The Roman Republic as “Direct Democracy”

Until Augustus’s accession, the power structure of Roman history conformed to a general pattern shared by many other states, namely monarchy succeeded by oligarchy (minority rule) or aristocracy (hereditary minority rule), minority rule being the “default” form of government

throughout history. Some modern writers on the Roman Republic, as we have seen, have managed to misunderstand this whole process, first, by dismissing much of the earlier evidence out of hand and then by going to the other extreme and uncritically accepting a passage of Polybius taken out of context as indicating that the Republic could possibly be regarded as a direct democracy, which is the exact opposite of the true situation.

Seeing the Roman Republic as at all democratic gives one a completely false impression of what it was like. But, as we have seen, modern writers who take this view of the Republic tend to compound their error by also adopting too uncritical a reading of Augustus's autobiography and misinterpreting that regime as democratic to some extent as well, a view which is wide of the mark, to say the least.

The Roman Revolution

As discussed above, Sir Ronald Syme, the author of the magisterial and aptly named *The Roman Revolution* on Augustus's rise to power, was well aware that the new regime was a monarchy, but his focus on the prosopography of the senatorial aristocracy led him into a blind alley: "A monarchy rules through an oligarchy." (Syme 1939, p. 8.) He continues: "In all ages, whatever the form and name of government or whatever may be the name and theory of the constitution, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade." (Syme 1939, 7, 15.) Identifying monarchy with its diametric opposite, oligarchy, in this sweeping assertion is a serious logical category error.

"The First Emperor"

The section in Mary Beard's *SPQR* headed "The first emperor" is not about Augustus or even Julius Caesar, but Pompey. "Pompey," we read, "...has a good claim to be called the first Roman emperor." (Beard 2016, p. 273.) We are then treated to a catalogue of the honors and accolades showered upon Pompey. By the middle of the first century BCE, we are told, the stakes and "...the resources of cash and manpower available (were) so much larger that the rise of men such as Pompey was more or less unstoppable." (Ibid., p. 277.) Beard seems to assume that, had Julius Caesar not got the better of Pompey, he might have ended up in a monarchical role himself. There is very little evidence to back up this assumption. Unlike Caesar, Pompey certainly never identified with any particular political tendency. He was essentially a military man and a

very good one too, it would seem. He was essentially an equal opportunity narcissist, happy to accept triumphs, honors, and kudos from any source. But did he really want to rule over Rome as a monarch, and would he even have known what to do had he been placed in that position? Elected consul in 70 BCE, Pompey promised to disband his army after his second triumph, and he kept his word though he could have seized power instead had he so wished. And, when as consul he had to preside over the Senate, such was his ignorance of the procedure that he had to ask a friend to jot down some pointers for his benefit. Much later, in 52 BCE, when he was made sole consul in the Optimate interest, Pompey asked the arch-conservative Cato the Younger to share power with him and advise him, which Cato agreed to do, but only in a private capacity (Plutarch, Pompey, 54; Cato the Younger, 47–49). And Pompey then brought his father-in-law in as his colleague for the last five months of his consulship.

In short, there is really no reason to believe that Pompey was aiming to become the first emperor. But it is not surprising that writers of largely narrative history, with inevitable concentration on individuals, should place undue emphasis on them at the expense of the bigger picture.

An even more egregious example of this tendency than in regard to Pompey is Mary Beard's similar assumption about the coins issued by the conspirator Marcus Brutus: "The portrayal of a living person on a Roman coin was taken as a sign of autocratic power." (Beard, p. 295.) In fact, however, as pointed out above, Brutus's coinage was so replete with traditional republican, aristocratic, and anti-monarchical symbolism as to make it inconceivable that he was aiming at "autocratic power" for himself.