

The Charismatic Emperors: Weberian authority in Julio-Claudian Rome and the fall of Nero.

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Scholarly understanding of the nature of the principate remains a myriad of competing viewpoints, each searching to deliver a fixed perspective on the political world created by Augustus. Modern arguments have largely developed out of three standpoints, each with their own merits and flaws.² Traditionally, debate was between the continental interpretation, where the principate is seen as a diarchy with Augustus' power coming out of legal authority from the senate, and the Anglophone understanding of the principate as merely a veneer of legitimate public offices used to disguise the *princeps*' autocratic control based upon military dictatorship. More recently, a mixed interpretation has been offered by Egon Flaig who re-orientated the debate around four key constituencies – the *princeps*, the senate, the army, and the urban plebs – outlining the interaction between these as the core of the principate. Flaig's interpretation rests on an invocation of Max Weber's notion that the rulers do not legitimise themselves, but are instead legitimised by those they rule.³ The success of Flaig's theory is in its widening of discussion beyond the realms of senatorial relations, which dominate the traditional interpretations, and the introduction of wider

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²For the continental view see: Helmut Castritius, *Der römische Prinzipat als Republik* (Husum: Matthiesen, 1982) For the anglophone view see: Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'Civilis Princeps. Between citizen and king', *Journal of Roman Studies* 72, pp.32-48. Egon Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1992).

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) pp.215-216.

interest groups. However, Flaig's use of the Weberian notion of legitimacy as acceptance has opened a fourth channel. Based on this, another perspective has been introduced by Michael Sommer based upon the three types of legitimacy put forward by Weber.⁴ Sommer makes the case that the legitimacy of the principate was made up of three elements: legal authority implemented through the administrative elite; traditional authority stemming from the central position of *Mos Maiorum*; and charismatic authority generated by force of personality.⁵ Ultimately, this viewpoint creates the character of the *princeps* as a strongman, with the necessary charisma to inspire followers or place their claim beyond all doubt.

Sommer's Weberian principate has the advantages of flexibility, there is no one source of legal or traditional authority and as such it can be re-applied to different eras of imperial rule. However, such flexibility also opens the paradigm up to the charge of being vague and of diminished value in an analysis of an individual *princeps*.⁶ The closest Sommer comes to pointing towards the practical limitations a *princeps* could experience comes in his closing arguments, where Sommer points towards some of the factors which could lead to the principate collapsing. Grouped together under the term 'mundanization' these are variously: the usurpation of charisma through traditional authority institutionalising the *princeps* role in the state, the rise of legal authority, and an over-reliance on dynastic succession for legitimacy depersonalising the ruler's position.⁷ However, 'mundanization' fails to account for the fact that the legitimacy of the *princeps* and the legitimacy of the principate are not one in the same. Instead, a stronger interpretation of these processes would be to see the position of

⁴ Michael Sommer, 'Empire of glory. Weberian paradigms and the complexities of authority in imperial Rome' *Max Weber Studies*. 11.1. (2011) 155-191.

⁵ Sommer devotes a section to each in his article. For legal authority see: Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, pp. 162-167; for traditional authority pp.167-171, for charismatic authority pp.171-180.

⁶ Something Sommer himself notes as he intends to introduce the theoretical basis of the arguments. Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, p.180.

⁷ Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, pp.172-173.

the *princeps* slowly becoming institutionalised as the system itself became accepted. Furthermore, if this premise is established, then it actually adds further credence to Sommer's overarching arguments that the principate was primarily established through force of character, that is, Weber's personal charisma. As the tools initially developed by Augustus to secure his position became ingrained they were simultaneously less beneficial to a *princeps* and more beneficial to the principate. Only charismatic figures such as Vespasian or Trajan could break this mould to be successful, often founding new dynasties in the process.

This paper intends to use the Julio-Claudian dynasty as a window through which the Weberian principate can be further explored. Initially, it intends to break down the three Weberian legitimacy categories further into five separate elements in order to more carefully chart the institutionalisation of the *principes* positions. This is not a move away from the three legitimacies, but a method of showing how they manifested in the period. Initially the *princeps'* role as the benefactor of the legions will be explored, before going on to discuss how the honour system dictated acceptable relations with the senate. Next, the element downplayed by Sommer, self-representation, will be touched upon as it too contained elements of institutionalisation that created expectations of the *princeps*. Finally, the two forms of charisma will be added to the fold. It will be shown that dynastic charisma was useful as a succession tool, but a *princeps* without personal charisma was doomed to an early grave. Hence Claudius can be witnessed rapidly enhancing his reputation through quick victories in Africa and an invasion of Britannia.

The second section of this paper will introduce Nero as a case study of this five-fold paradigm. It will be demonstrated that Nero's vulnerability primarily stemmed from his inability to carry out the institutionalised role expected of him, especially as a benefactor to the military,

meanwhile his decision to separate himself from his mother and his origins ebbed-away what little remained of his dynastic legitimacy. In this situation only a charismatic military man could hope to reinvigorate the Julio-Claudian dynasty, however, Nero's continued disassociation from the army and his treatment of its leaders provided a final blow to his principate. Nero's weakened position became increasingly clear as alternatives with greater personal charisma began to appear around him, most notably Corbulo. Finally the lack of challenge to the proclamation of Galba as *princeps* was due to Nero's own bankrupt reputation.

Princeps or Imperator?

The rise of Augustus had ended a turbulent period of civil war in which the power of generals and their personal armies had dominated and destroyed the Republic. While Augustus attempted to show himself as closing this chapter in Rome's history through actions such as closing the gates of the Temple of Janus, and through taking on republican offices and official powers – as outlined in his *Res Gestae* – it was his control of the legions which provided the backbone to his authority.⁸ That Augustus was aware of the crucial role the military continued to play in maintaining his exalted status can be seen through moves such as the creation of the *aerarium militare* in 6CE, which was initially funded by Augustus himself before new taxes were raised.⁹ The fund was the first centrally administrated provision for veterans and early evidence of *principes* positioning themselves as the sole benefactor for the army. Furthermore, the success generated by sponsorship of the Roman military machine can be

⁸ For an overview see: Walter K. Lacey, *Augustus and the principate: the evolution of the system* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1996) and Cf. Flaig, *Den Kaiser*. The closing of the Janus gates is attested in: *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*. 13.

⁹ Anthony Birley, 'Making Emperors. Imperial Instrument or Independent Force', in *A Companion to the Roman Army*, ed. Paul Erdkamp (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) pp.379-394 (p.380); Dio Cassius. 55.25.3.

seen in the critical remarks of Tacitus, he claimed the enticement of the army with gifts to have been one of the keys to Augustus' control over the state.¹⁰

Yet, the mutual reliance formed in the special bond between the *princeps* and the legions had in reality created a new issue in the maintenance of the principate. *Principes* were to be dependent upon retaining the loyalty of a vast body of men who were stationed at the frontiers of empire and most of whom would never meet nor see the *princeps* personally. It was simply impossible for the *princeps* to visit every pocket of the empire, and this made it difficult for *principes* to build the same rapport as generals of the Republican era had. Therefore, it fell to local commanders on the ground to represent imperial ambitions and ensure the loyalty of the troops to the person of the *princeps*. Over time as the adult male population of the Julio-Claudian household contracted and it became increasingly common for major commands to go to members of other senatorial households this arrangement became increasingly problematic, definitively demonstrated in the tensions of Nero's later reign and his eventual demise (discussed in section two). Turning once more to Tacitus, his profound statement on the civil wars of 69CE, "For the now the secret of empire had been revealed, that emperors could be made elsewhere than Rome," demonstrates this juxtaposition whereby *principes* were required to simultaneously rely on senators to command, but the troops they commanded to remember who their paymaster really was.¹¹

In order to mitigate the disaster that eventually occurred in the reign of Nero the loyalty of the army had to be assured through means that could be clearly associated with the *princeps* alone. The creation of the *aerarium militare* can be seen as a first step towards this goal, with Augustus positioning the imperial family as the guarantor of a legionary's well-earned

¹⁰ See Tacitus, *Annals*. 1.2.1.

¹¹ Tacitus, *Histories*. 1.4.

retirement. That Augustus was aware of the connotations of his actions can be inferred from his decision to stress his generosity in settling three hundred thousand men-at-arms during his time in office in his *Res Gestae*, this was done through the provision of land in Italy or later through settlement in *coloniae*.¹² Practices such as these were continued by later *principes* and can be evidenced in cases such as Claudius' settlement of troops in Camulodunum or Nero's settlement of veterans at Antium.¹³ Finally, the provision of a donative to the troops in Augustus' will can be read as an attempt to smooth the transition of Tiberius through a posthumous reminder of the family's continuing status as benefactors.¹⁴

However, the *princeps* role as a benefactor which had begun as a personal link between Augustus and his men quickly became institutionalised through the continuation of the very measures Augustus had introduced. Nowhere is this better witnessed than in an examination of the continued use of donatives after Augustus' decision to give the legions money in his will.¹⁵ The giving of money to troops had been commonplace during the civil wars of the late republic, but Augustus seems to have attempted to move away from the practice. As noted above, the decision to include a donative in his will may have been Augustus' method for ensuring a smooth transition for Tiberius. If this was the case it did not work. Not only did the Rhine and Pannonian Legions both mutiny, but in reality Augustus had reintroduced a tradition of donatives that he had broken. The practice quickly re-established itself and became of increasingly negative value to the *princeps*, eventually only noteworthy if it was withheld. Each subsequent ruler was expected to give such a gift to the legions and Nero's initial successor Galba made the mistake of failing to follow this precedent, not only

¹² *Res Gestae*, 3.3; 28.

¹³ For Claudius: the more famous Colonia Claudia Victricensis. For Nero: Tac. *Ann.* 14.27.

¹⁴ Suetonius, *The Life of Tiberius*. 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

withholding a donative promised to the Guard for their abandonment of Nero, but also failing to make payment to the legions in the provinces who by this time had grown used to such gifts upon the creation of a new *princeps* in Rome.¹⁶ That Galba's decision cost him is openly noted by Tacitus who laments that "Galba had let fall a remark which augured well for Rome, but spelt danger to himself."¹⁷ The giving of financial gifts had come to be expected of the *princeps* whomever occupied that position, developing the *princeps* role as a benefactor into an institutional, rather than personal practice.

Despite the clear importance of the legions to imperial power the major emphasis of Augustus' constitutional settlements in 27BCE and 23BCE had been on a restoration of the Republic. This ideology of restoration rather than transformation naturally reintroduced an enlarged role for the senate in the 'new' era that was to follow. It must be admitted that Augustus would have had little alternative but to lean on the Senate in any case, as it was the Senate which produced the proconsuls, legates and other major functionaries that kept the empire ticking.¹⁸ Yet, the awkward position that this created for *principes* has been succinctly summed up by Aloys Winterling, who states that the principate was a 'new' system which required a monopoly on honour, attempting to assimilate with an 'old' system dependant on a distribution of honour.¹⁹ This notion has been touched upon already by Sommer in his introduction of both the legal and traditional aspects of authority.²⁰ However, whilst the Senate does no doubt fit into these two elements of authority, the emphasis that Winterling places on honour represents the key to the Senate's role in legitimising the *princeps*' position.

¹⁶ For Galba's withholding of the donative see: Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.5. His general treatment of the legions can be seen in: Sue. *Galba.* 12.2. A donative would also have been expected upon the adoption of Piso: Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.14-18.

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.5.

¹⁸ On the role of the senate as an administrative group see: J Edward Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Aloys Winterling, *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p.1.

²⁰ Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, pp. 167-171.

Augustus was forced to place the role of the *princeps* within the confines of a nominally republican social structure, creating a system where the *princeps* acted as the focal point for the distribution of honour.²¹ This system worked well for Augustus due to both his immense personal charisma and due to the organic development that his relationship with the senate must have undergone. With a great restoration of the republic in progress, even with Augustus' clear seniority, it made sense for senators to push the limits of what they could hope to achieve under the 'new' system. This is what explains why the triumph of Lucius Cornelius Balbus in 19BCE was allowed and why it was the last non-imperial triumph for several centuries.²² Senators still strove to achieve the highest honours possible and Balbus' case for a triumph was clearly too strong to ignore.²³ Yet, if the *princeps* was to be the centre of the honour system they needed to ensure they alone had access to the highest honours of all, they could not be outshone. It is this argument that suggests Agrippa's rejection of triumphal honours in 14BCE came at Augustus' behest, setting a precedent that the *princeps* and his family would be the only ones afforded a triumph.²⁴

However as with the military, we again see the stabilising effects of precedent being eroded over the course of the Julio-Claudian period. Augustus may have reserved the highest honours for the imperial family, but he had also created a system wherein senators had expectations of what they could achieve and how the august body itself should be treated. This opened *principes* up to criticism if they diverged to dramatically from the precedent laid down. Tacitus is disparaging of Tiberius for his treatment of Publius Cornelius Dolabella when he not only

²¹ Honour and social relations are well discussed in: Matthew B Roller, *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²² See Attilio Degraffi, *Fasti Capitolini* (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1955) p.90ff.

²³ Balbus' expedition is recorded by Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*. 5.5. On the importance of honour, see Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, pp. 108-120.

²⁴ Dio. 54.24.

dismisses Dolabella's request for a triumph, but he fails to honour him at all.²⁵ However, this must also be read the other way around. Tiberius was clearly in firm control of the honour system, and his right to decide on the matter had been accepted by the senate. Indeed, Tiberius had awarded *ornamenta triumphalia* to the previous proconsul of Africa, Blaesus, who, Tacitus claims, achieved limited success due to his relationship with Tiberius' Praetorian Prefect.²⁶

In a similar vein, the supposed madness of Gaius has been reassessed by Winterling along similar lines.²⁷ Winterling argues that what is often viewed as madness was in fact Gaius' attempts to break the constraining influence that the honour system had created and move to a more overtly autocratic style of rule. However, the methods which Gaius used in order to attempt this break were overly confrontational for a comparatively young *princeps*, still largely ruling through virtue of his dynastic connections, and ultimately led to his demise.²⁸ The murder of Gaius represented the apex of the effects of institutionalisation, yet still it cannot be referred to as a simple case of 'mundanization.' After Gaius' death there was no serious attempt to restore the republic, senators instead searched to find an appropriate replacement to fill the vacancy in the imperial office.²⁹ The principate itself had become accepted. What had changed from the time of Augustus was the now firmly fixed expectations of how the Senate, and indeed the wider senatorial class, should be treated. *Principes* were in control of the honour system, but they could not just abuse their status with wanton abandon.

²⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 4.26.

²⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 4.23.1; 4.26.1.

²⁷ Winterling, *Politics and Society*, pp. 103-122.

²⁸ A taste of Gaius' behaviours can be found in: Dio.59.29.9.

²⁹ The fallout of Gaius' murder is preserved best by Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.157-245.

Although it was less obvious than the *princeps'* relationship with the senate, the way *principes* chose to present themselves, both physically and in propaganda pieces such as coinage or symbolic architecture, also became institutionalised over time. Whilst Sommer has not explored this avenue of legitimacy, claiming that Flaig overstates its importance, self-representation was undoubtedly a factor in the acceptance of imperial authority.³⁰ To be *princeps* one had to act as a *princeps* should. This expectation was initially borne out of the Roman obsession with *exemplum* and the necessity for all to live up to the deeds of their ancestors. Plutarch's portrayal of the republican general Marius offers the classic paradigm against which *principes* were viewed as military leaders.³¹ Marius is commended for sharing in the toils of the average soldier, for his bravery, and for his immense resilience to all hardship. *Principes* were required to live up to these expectations, or at least appear to do so. It comes as no surprise then that even Tiberius, with his immense military reputation, was keen to use his early coinage to remind people of his successes. One example from 15/16CE depicts Tiberius on a quadriga celebrating his triumph in 13BCE, reminding all of his achievements.³² Similarly, Augustus explored the physical realms of representation through the building of the *Ara Pacis* meanwhile Claudius took ownership of his military conquests in Britannia through naming his son Britannicus.³³

The continued use of established patterns of appearance on items such as coins and even the development of institutions such as the imperial cult can all be said to have aided in the acceptance of the principate rather than the *princeps*. Coins that once bore the image of Tiberius could soon bear the image of Gaius. It was not the personal to the *princeps*, but the

³⁰ Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, p.160.

³¹ Plutarch. *The Life of Marius*, 7.4-5.

³² RIC I, 4, p.93.

³³ On this topic see: John Ward-Perkins. *Roman Imperial Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

office of the *princeps* that came to be represented in these ways. *Principes* were ingrained into everyday life in a detached and official manner. This explains why our sources are particularly interested in the self-portrayal of Gaius and Nero, non-conformists whose reputations were undoubtedly affected by their antics.³⁴ Whilst Nero's effeminacy undermined his authority (see below), Gaius' divine pretensions showed scant disregard for religious or social norms by accepting divine-status whilst still living. Neither lost their thrones purely on this basis, demonstrating the secondary importance of representation, however the murder of an unpopular ruler is easier to justify.

Augustus had created a special bond between *princeps* and army that had slowly begun to deteriorate into a negative relationship, where the *princeps* was required to fulfil certain expectations. Likewise, whilst *principes* sat at the very top of the honour system that dominated interaction at the highest levels of society, they were also required to manage the honours they both acquired and bestowed carefully. Even in the realms of self-representation there were models that *principes* largely followed. It was this institutionalisation that placed the emphasis for maintaining control back onto the major factor Augustus had originally coined as the basis for his own power, *auctoritas*. *Auctoritas*, translated by Weber as charisma, was noted by Augustus in his *Res Gestae* as the backbone to his authority.³⁵ It was the outstanding quality that enforced the respect and fear required of subjects to accept his rule. In Sommer's introduction of the concept he reinforces this notion, referring to charisma as "the key to understanding the *arcanum imperii*."³⁶ For all the different elements that had

³⁴ For example Nero's taking to the stage is covered by Suetonius. *Nero*. 12.3-4; Tac. *Ann.* 14.20-21, Gaius' divine pretensions building temples to his *numen*: Suetonius, *Gaius*, 22.2.

³⁵ *Res Gestae*, 34.

³⁶ Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, p. 171.

been carefully interwoven to make the principate work, it ultimately boiled down to the ability of the *princeps* to command those around them with authority.

Sommer breaks down charisma into both personal and dynastic manifestations, with the prior the property of the individual and the latter the residual value of this to the successor(s).³⁷ In the case of the Julio-Claudians this was Augustus and the links of those later *principes* to him. These links had first been shown immediately after Augustus' death, where Germanicus utilised them in quelling the revolt of the troops along the Rhine in 14CE.³⁸ If Tacitus' account of events is taken at face value it was the flight of Germanicus' wife and child – the granddaughter and great-grandson of Augustus – that convinced the troops to cease their hostilities.³⁹ Furthermore, we see dynastic links openly utilised again when Gaius succeeded to the purple in 37CE, where Gaius' early representation is full of links to his father and by extension Augustus. For example, numismatic evidence from 37CE depicts Augustus' image on the obverse of coinage.⁴⁰ Indeed, Martin Goodman quite rightly notes that Gaius' popularity was down to ignorance at his true personality and the dominance of fond memories of his father Germanicus.⁴¹ Gaius' connection to Tiberius as his adopted son, the connection that ensured his succession, was played down to the point of insignificance.

Gaius is also an interesting test of the power of dynastic charisma as it was he who represented the first meritless appointment as *princeps*. Gaius was born into the imperial household and saw no distinguished service prior to succession. Whilst Tiberius, although he was selected by Augustus, had served with distinction, particularly along the Danube in 12-

³⁷ Sommer, *Empire of Glory*, pp. 171-180, 181. See also: Graeber, David and Sahlins, Marshall. *On Kings* (Chicago: HAU, 2017) who conduct a similar discussion on sacred versus divine kingship.

³⁸ Tac. *Ann*, 1.31-49.

³⁹ Tac. *Ann*, 1.41-44.

⁴⁰ Martin Goodman, *The Roman World 44BC-AD14* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 53.

⁴¹ *RIC I*, 10, p. 108.

9BCE and along the Rhine from 9-7BCE, and held the necessary senatorial offices to place his personal reputation beyond reproach.⁴² Gaius perfectly demonstrated the role that dynastic charisma had to play in aiding a smooth succession and reinforcing the claims of an *princeps* who lacked the personal charisma required.

This discussion leads neatly into the messy issue of the accession of Claudius in 41CE which demonstrates both the powers and the limits of dynastic authority. The story of Claudius' discovery by the Praetorians and their decision to elevate him to power has been well debated, and is evidence that dynastic authority continued to have enough of a pull to ensure it was indeed Claudius, and nobody else, who became *princeps*.⁴³ However, the moments that followed also served to demonstrate the limits to dynastic authority and highlight the role of personal charisma as the principal factor of imperial power. Claudius' initial accession was uncontested if not welcomed, on account of armed support in Rome, but also lacked strong support among the senate or the military commanders of the empire. The revolt of Furius Camillus Scribonianus, the Governor of Pannonia, in 42CE was a direct result of these shortcomings on Claudius' part, being as he was a *princeps* who had no military reputation.⁴⁴ Dio, the main source for the revolt, claims that Scribonianus was seen as a viable candidate for the throne by the senate.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Dio also claims that the revolt continued to gather momentum until Scribonianus promised a revival of republican institutions and the auspices turned, upon which the revolt collapsed.⁴⁶ At face value Dio's next claim and supported by Suetonius' account, that Claudius was greatly panicked by this turn of events, has little to commend it and seems to be dramatic embellishment of a revolt that never made

⁴² See Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 7-9.

⁴³ See: Dio. 40.1-3; Suetonius, *Claudius*, 10.

⁴⁴ The revolt is attested to in Sue. *Claudius*, 35-36 and Dio. 60.15.

⁴⁵ Dio. 60.15.3.

⁴⁶ Dio. 60.15.4; Sue. *Claudius*, 10-11.

it to the battlefield. However, disregarding Dio's narrative here has two weaknesses. Firstly, Claudius' decision to reward the legion that had failed to join the revolt with the honorary title *Claudia Pia Fidelis* would suggest that the revolt was far from minor as imperial association would have brought great prestige to the legion. Secondly, as Barbara Levick has pointed out, Claudius' decision to invade Britannia was a direct result of a need for military prestige.⁴⁷ The *princeps'* dearth of reputation in this regard could have been nowhere clearer than when the legions had willingly backed a rival candidate for the throne, however briefly. The period following Scribonianus' revolt witnesses Claudius consistently building his personal charisma and fulfilling the now institutionalised roles expected of a *princeps*. Claudius' decision to invade, and more importantly, to oversee the final steps of the war in Britain personally was a clear decision to create an unobjectionable link between himself and military glory, completed through the celebration of a triumph.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, whilst the war had been raging Claudius had ensured that he was recognised as continuing his institutionalised role as the benefactor of the army, not only by giving the legions a substantial donative of 15,000 sesterces per man, but also introducing *diplomata* for auxiliary troops.⁴⁹ Also telling is Claudius' treatment of the Senate after his victory in Britannia where he rewarded those who served with distinction. Gnaeus Hosidius Geta was rewarded for his role in Britannia (and presumably also for his earlier service in Mauretania) with *ornamenta triumphalia*, meanwhile the commander of the invasion, Aulus Plautius, was awarded an *Ovatio* by the Senate for his efforts.⁵⁰ Such generosity was no doubt possible due to the

⁴⁷ See Barbara M. Levick, *Claudius* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p.162.

⁴⁸ See: Levick, *Claudius*, pp.168-170; Tac. *Ann.* 12.36.

⁴⁹ Donative documented by Suetonius, *Claudius*. 10.8, *Diplomata*: 322 ILS 1986, Smallwood GN 295, diploma, Stabiae, AD 52.

⁵⁰ On Gnaeus Hosidius Geta see: Dio 90.9.0; 60.20.4. On Aulus Plautius see: Dio, 60.19.4; cf. J Brian Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army 31BC-AD235* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 362.

security that Claudius' victory in Britannia had won for him. Claudius had proven he had the personal charisma to rule.

Nero – An institutional failure with limited charisma:

The collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in 68CE provides the final evidence for the Weberian notion that personal charisma was the cornerstone of legitimacy. However, in the fall of Nero we also witness the breakdown of every other element of the paradigm outlined above and, crucially, a realistic alternative in Galba. As outlined previously, by the time Nero succeeded to the purple in 54CE the majority of Augustus' legitimising factors had become deeply institutionalised and entrenched in imperial office as opposed to the person of the *princeps*. In this situation the importance of performing these roles without controversy increased, as did the necessity for the *princeps* to demonstrate his own personal charisma above all. Yet, the fall of Nero still comes as a surprise and his failure to maintain the five factors of legitimacy are difficult to separate into thematic discussions. Rather, it is easier to talk of Nero's position on succeeding the throne, his destruction of his own position and removal of his sources of authority, and then Nero's charisma deficit.

The surprise in Nero's downfall comes from the fact that Nero's position upon accession, measured against the paradigm above, was very strong. Claudius' success in Britannia revived the legitimacy of the Julio-Claudian dynasty after the rule of Gaius and the heavily criticised later years of Tiberius' principate. This comes to bear when Nero's accession is contrasted with that of his adoptive father. Claudius had been forced to wait thirty-days for the commotion surrounding Gaius' murder to settle before approaching the senate, and

subsequently faced a revolt.⁵¹ Meanwhile Nero, largely thanks to Agrippina, was swiftly accepted by the guard, the senate and presumably the people.⁵² The notion put forward by Tacitus that there was hesitation by the praetorians before proclaiming Nero *imperator*, and by extension *princeps*, seems fanciful given the close links between their commander and Nero's mother.⁵³ Furthermore, Agrippina provided a dynastic link going back to Augustus that could be used to place Nero's claims beyond any doubt. These were later stressed in the early part of Nero's reign where coins depicting himself and Agrippina on the obverse, with Augustus and Claudius in a quadriga on the reverse, highlighted the brilliance of his lineage.⁵⁴ The message of this imagery is clear, Nero's descent could not be questioned.

However, when Nero ordered the murder of his mother he took the first steps towards destroying this dynastic link. Britannicus' murder in 55CE was political and could be expected, doing little harm to Nero's position.⁵⁵ However, Agrippina was the strongest dynastic link of his principate. Tensions between mother and son had existed for some time, and it is possible that Agrippina's sexual promiscuity and interference in political matters led Nero to believe his mother not only to be a restraint, but also a liability.⁵⁶ However, the murder of Agrippina not only opened Nero to the charge of matricide, but also broke his links back to Augustus. Furthermore, Agrippina's popularity with the military, as a daughter of Germanicus, can be inferred from the affection that was felt to Gaius as Germanicus' son.⁵⁷ When Nero later

⁵¹ Claudius' decision to approach the senate: Dio. 60.3.2-3. The revolt of Scribonianus: Suet. *Claudius*. 35-36 and Dio. 60.15.

⁵² See: Tac. *Ann.* 13.3; Dio. 61.3.

⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.

⁵⁴ *RIC I*, 6; Agrippina is even more prominent on: *RIC I* 3, p.150.

⁵⁵ Documented in: Tac. *Ann.* 13.14-17.

⁵⁶ Agrippina's alleged lovers in Nero's reign: Faenius Rufus, Tac. *Ann.* 15.50.4; Pallas, Tac. *Ann.* 12.25.1, 12.65.4, Dio 61.3.2; Aulus Plautius, Suet. *Nero*. 35.4; Rubellius Plautius, Tac. *Ann.* 13.19.3.

⁵⁷ The popularity of the family is nowhere clearer than Tac. *Ann.* 5.4-5.

divorced Octavia he severed his last link to those that had come before him, restyling his principate on its own terms.⁵⁸

Nero's destruction of his dynastic background raised a question about his rule, not merely due to his clearly insecure and angry character, but the fact became that if he were not ruling because of his family's achievements, and not ruling because of his own achievements, it begged the question as to why Nero should be followed at all. Agrippina's death was a rejection of Nero's own family, making it vital for Nero to build his personal charisma. Although Nero was too young upon accession to have achieved any military glory, he inherited a perfect breeding ground for it. Britannia lay half-conquered to the north, meanwhile in the east the Armenian-Parthian border regions were a source of discontent and brewing conflict. If Nero were to rule successfully he needed to capitalise upon these prospective avenues for military glory. The outbreak of the Boudican revolt made success in Britannia unlikely, however Nero's failure to build his reputation through his victories in the east would eventually hurt him.⁵⁹

Given Nero was able to celebrate a triumph for his wars in the east, the reasons why it did not display sufficient charisma must be explored.⁶⁰ This in part stemmed from the behaviour of Nero during the period in which the campaign was being conducted (58-63CE) as well as in its immediate aftermath, which weakened his association with the victory. It was from around this time that Nero began to act increasingly at odds with the presentation expected of an *princeps*. In the public sphere Nero introduced a series of Greek-style games known as the Neronia, meanwhile shortly after the conflict had finished Nero gave his first attributably

⁵⁸ The fate of Octavia: Tac. *Ann.* 14.59-63.

⁵⁹ The revolt of Boudicca can be read in: Tac. *Ann.* 14.30-39.

⁶⁰ Nero's triumph was complete with a triumph arch: Tac. *Ann.* 15.18.

public performance on stage.⁶¹ It is even possible that he entertained the Armenian King Tigranes in this manner.⁶² This behaviour could not have been further from the idealised Marius portrayed by Plutarch.⁶³ Nero compounded this image through choosing to marry publically his freedman Pythagoras in the role of the bride, something that must have caused some doubts as to the martial prowess of the supposed leader of the empire's military machine.⁶⁴ Generally, with the exception of the praetorian's whose proximity to political theatre made them an exception, the legions had shown themselves to be removed from the politics of Rome in the Julio-Claudian period. Indeed, they had supported Gaius despite his divine pretensions and even the revolt against Claudius does not appear to have spread into a wide-spread dissatisfaction with the *princeps*. However, Nero's behaviour pushed the legions' loyalty to breaking point. The fact that Nero failed to visit the troops in the east, as Claudius and even Gaius had done, during the major war that was occurring there only served to emphasise the disinterested state of the *princeps* in the military. Nero continually demonstrated no desire to become affiliated with the legions he was supposedly the leader of.

Nero's declining position was further compounded in the period by his treatment of members of the elite that provided the commanders to this force. After committing matricide in 59CE, Nero appears to have conducted a catalogue of further, brazenly political, murders. The most prominent of these was the killing of Thrasea Paetus in 66CE, the leader of senatorial opposition to Nero's excess and a widely respected figure.⁶⁵ Further to this, the Pisonian Conspiracy of 65CE had demonstrated the depth of opposition to Nero's rule, almost certainly

⁶¹ Neronia: Dio. 61.21; Tac, *Ann.* 14.20-21. Naples: Tac. *Ann.* 25.33; Suetonius, *Nero.* 20.

⁶² Dio. 63.3-6.

⁶³ Plutarch. *The Life of Marius*, 7.4-5.

⁶⁴ Examples of Nero's unusual sexual habits are attested in: Dio. 63.13; Sue. *Nero.* 28-29.

⁶⁵ Thrasea Paetus' death: Tac. *Ann.* 16.21-35.

due to his treatment of the elite rather than his personality or foreign policy.⁶⁶ The plot's failings do not fail to hide the fact that the list of implicated figures is exceedingly long, suggesting an increasingly widespread discontent with Nero at this time. Indeed, Nero's contempt for the Senate and its procedures could be traced back to 62CE where, upon the Senate overturning his ruling on an issue, Nero wrote a sarcastic note to the body remarking at its authority and suggesting it overturn his recent imprisoning of Antistius also.⁶⁷

It is against this background that Nero's relationship with his most prominent commander, Gneaus Domitius Corbulo, must be seen. Far from threatening to the *princeps*, on appointment the decision to send Corbulo east must have seemed a masterstroke. Corbulo had built up an excellent reputation under Claudius, and if Tacitus is to be believed then his increasingly loyal following was the very reason that he was recalled from his command. Claudius is chastised by Tacitus for recalling Corbulo under the pretence that '...an eminent man is a threat to peace and to a cowardly emperor utterly galling!'⁶⁸ It may well have been the hopes of Agrippina, Seneca, and Burrus – who almost certainly made the appointment – that Nero's own stock would grow with his generals' success, as would be expected. They could not have foreseen, or thought that they would be able to control, Nero's excessively rejectionist self-representation and policies with regards to military matters.

Instead, while Nero persecuted the senatorial order and presented himself in an increasingly unsatisfactory nature, as well as committing a series of political murders, Corbulo was continuing to develop his military reputation. This was of course no threat in itself, Aulus Plautius had not been a threat to Claudius and was rewarded and subsequently allowed to

⁶⁶ Richard Alston, *Aspects of Roman History AD14-117* (Routledge; New York, 1998), pp.133-134.

⁶⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 14.48-49.

⁶⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 11.19.3.

enjoy a comfortable retirement.⁶⁹ However, there were three important differences between Claudius and Nero that changed their relationship with their general. Firstly, as outlined above, Nero was failing to carry out the institutionalised roles expected of the *princeps* and as a result his position was weakening. This naturally made Nero more reactive to perceived threats. Secondly, Corbulo held an unprecedented position for a general outside of the imperial family by 61CE. Having originally been designated *legatus Augusti pro praetore retinendae Armeniae* with two legions, Corbulo went on to become supreme commander of all forces in the eastern provinces with as many as four legions under his personal jurisdiction.⁷⁰ Of course, once again a contrast can be drawn with Aulus Plautius. Whilst Plautius had accumulated a vast command, the nature of the conflict had been very different to that of Corbulo's war, with the war in Britannia very much a product of Claudius' personal ambitions. Meanwhile, the war in the east had been triggered by a military disaster and an invasion of the Roman client-kingdom of Armenia.⁷¹ In this way, and due to the length of the conflict, it is perhaps easier to understand how the war could become more closely associated with Corbulo than Nero. It was a war, but not Nero's war. Furthermore, the mystique of victories over a Parthian foe continued to exist deep into the imperial period, creating added value for whoever was attributed with the triumph.

In spite of these factors, the most important factor colouring Nero's view of Corbulo was the personal network of the man himself. Tacitus tells an anecdotal tale focussed around the forced suicide of Rubellius Plautus that serves to introduce the threat Corbulo posed.⁷² Having been exiled in 61CE, supposedly because Nero saw him as a viable rival, Rubellius Plautus was

⁶⁹ Aulus Plautius' reward is noted in: Dio Cassius. 60.19.4; Campbell, p.362.

⁷⁰ See Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1. The limits of Corbulo's power are discussed in: Frederik J Vervaeke "Tacitus *Ann.* 15. 25.3: a revision of Corbulo's *imperium maius* in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*. ed. Carl Deroux (Brussels: Peeters, 2000) pp.260-298. Note also that Egypt would certainly not have fallen under Corbulo's remit.

⁷¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.34-41.

⁷² Rubellius Plautus' exile: Tac. *Ann.* 14.22; Suicide: Tac. *Ann.* 14.58-59.

ordered to commit suicide a year later. Supposedly, Lucius Antistius Vetus, an ally of Rubellius Plautus, wrote ahead to warn Rubellius Plautus and encouraged him to flee to Corbulo where he could start a rebellion, although Rubellius Plautus opted instead to comply with the order. It is impossible to testify as to the veracity of Tacitus' rather convenient story, which simultaneously depicts Nero as a tyrant, Corbulo as a potential saviour and Plautus as an upholder of true Roman values. However, true or not, the tale may have some grounding in the truth. Frederik Vervaeet has demonstrated that during his twelve-year command Corbulo developed a large network of clients amongst his officers.⁷³ While patronage had always been a key route of advancement in the legions, the career paths of Corbulo's officers after his death give some understanding of where their loyalties lay. Many went on to have distinguished careers during the Flavian period (69-96CE) and were part of Vespasian's forces when he marched on Rome. Most prominently the legate of Syria, Mucianus, went on to become one of the most trusted generals in Vespasian's bid for the throne and commanded the very same legions that Corbulo had previously.⁷⁴

Of course, Corbulo was technically following the *mandata* that Nero had given him and there is evidence to suggest that Corbulo was careful not to go beyond his remit in the carrying out of his orders.⁷⁵ Despite this, any notion that this suggested Nero was guaranteed to be the recipient of the glory his *legatus* accrued for him can be immediately dispelled by Nero's decision to execute Corbulo as soon as peace with Parthia was secured and the Armenian question settled.⁷⁶ Nero's actions are those of a *princeps* who understood that he had failed

⁷³ Frederik J Vervaeet, 'Domitius Corbulo and the Rise of the Flavian Dynasty', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 52.4 (2003), pp. 436-464. Cf. Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁷⁴ Association in: Vervaeet, *Corbulo and the Flavians*, p.460; See Tacitus. *Histories*. 2.76-7. For Mucianus and Vespasian.

⁷⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.3; Frederik J. Vervaeet, 'Domitius Corbulo and Traianus' *Bellum Parthicum*', *L'Antiquité Classique*, 68 (1999), 289-297. Discusses the probable *mandata* of Corbulo's command.

⁷⁶ Dio Cassius, 63.17.

to secure his position. Furthermore, Corbulo's murder coincided with the execution of Sulpicius Scribonius Rufus and Sulpicius Scribonius Proculus, the governors of Germania Inferior and Germania Superior, the regions of the empire with the largest concentration of troops at peacetime.⁷⁷ Nero's decision to kill three of his senior, including one of his most popular, commanders must have caused some disquiet amongst the legions even if this did not manifest immediately.⁷⁸ The legions that Corbulo had commanded in the east are the best evidence of this, with Vespasian having difficulty controlling these men after they were transferred to his command at Nero's order in response to the revolt in Judaea.⁷⁹ It does not seem a stretch to assume that such loyalty existed also while Corbulo lived. The point remains that whatever Corbulo's intentions may have been, Nero could not wait to find out.

The final fall of Nero in 68CE was the result of a number of short term events and Nero's poor reactions to them and this is not the place to attempt to reevaluate what occurred. Nonetheless, some key points must be addressed to make sense of events within the paradigm outlined above. When Julius Vindex declared his support for Galba (who had not yet attempted to claim the throne) and Galba was subsequently forced into a decision as to whether or not make a bid at power, Galba immediately gained the support of the legion in Spain.⁸⁰ Furthermore, at some point shortly afterwards the Governor of Africa also declared his candidature for the role of *princeps*.⁸¹ Very quickly Nero's lack of personal charisma was unravelling his principate. The argument has been put forward that the defeat of Julius Vindex by Verginius Rufus demonstrates that the legions on the Rhine were still loyal to Nero.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Corbulo's popularity is consistently emphasised by Tacitus, most clearly upon appointment to Syria. See Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.

⁷⁹ Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 4.6.

⁸⁰ Suetonius. *Galba*, 4.

⁸¹ Suetonius. *Galba*, 6.

However, their subsequent refusal to challenge Galba's march on Rome suggests otherwise.⁸²

It is equally likely that the troops under Verginius Rufus' command were simply not willing to allow a rebellion to go unchallenged within Roman lands.

Finally, Nero's failure to perform his institutionalised roles ensured that he would not be able to repel the challenge Galba posed. Nero's treatment of the senate had shown a flagrant disregard for the social norms of the period and for Nero's own role as the arbiter of honour. Therefore it came as no surprise that the Senate were quick to capitalise upon the revolt and declare Nero an outlaw of the state.⁸³ Nor could Nero expect the army to come to his aid, as despite his attempts to play at the role of benefactor his effeminate behaviour and treatment of leading legionary commanders, particularly Corbulo, had bankrupt his stock with the army. Furthermore, Nero's decision to remove anyone with dynastic links to Augustus had left his right to rule predicated upon his own personal charisma, something he sorely lacked and perhaps never understood the value of. The political risk of turning on Nero had been minimised, meaning all that was required was a viable alternative to the throne for Nero's reign to be over. The fact Nero had managed to rule for fourteen years before his principate collapsed was testament to the strength of the institutions Augustus had created, sources of legal and traditional authority that could prolong the reign of an idle *princeps*. Yet, an *princeps* devoid of charisma would always fall when the circumstances finally arose to challenge his authority.

Conclusion

At the start of the Julio-Claudian period Augustus had spelled out the deeds of his lifetime through his *Res Gestae*, claiming in it that he ruled by dint of his immense *auctoritas*.⁸⁴ It is

⁸² Cf. Alston. *Roman History*, pp. 136-139. Tac. *Hist.* 1.8. and Plu. *Galba.* 6.

⁸³ Suetonius, *Nero*, 49.

⁸⁴ *Res Gestae*, 34.

then amusing to see the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty as due to his great-great-great-grandson's lack of that exact quality. Personal charisma was simply not luxury that *principes* could go without. Tiberius had acquired it before he was in power through his service on the frontiers. Gaius may have recognised his need for charisma, but was murdered before he could develop any. Claudius had earned his through the successful invasion of Britannia. Nero's mistake was to believe that he could rule without proving himself to be the military leader *principes* had to be. For all of Nero's faults as *princeps* it was his shunning of the military that finally brought him down.

This essay has attempted to highlight personal charisma as the central legitimating factor of the principate, building on the work of Michael Sommer, through demonstrating its primacy over four other categories that together with personal charisma constituted the vital elements of imperial power. It has been shown that Sommer's use of the three Weberian concepts of legitimacy – legal authority, traditional authority and charismatic authority – can be broken down into five elements that, albeit not neatly, characterised imperial rule in the Julio-Claudian period. Furthermore, it has been shown that three of these elements – military benefaction, the social hierarchy and self-representation – became institutionalised in a style reminiscent of Weber's 'mundanization' of power. The institutionalisation of these factors showed acceptance of the principate developing, yet simultaneously these factors became less personally attached to the incumbent in power. Crucially, dynastic legitimacy and personal charisma operated on a different dynamic to these other factors, and this made them the key to retaining imperial power. Dynastic connections were enough to earmark a man as the successor, and could buy an *princeps* time to develop their personal charisma. It was however this last factor that proved key. The downfall of Nero shows this model in action,

producing a narrative that explains not only his downfall but one that could also be utilised to evaluate the tumultuous year that followed.

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