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Institutio privata or τέχνη βασιλική:
private life as a form of imperial education,
from political ideal to legitimitizing tool (II-IV century)¹

1. *Imperial succession: an introduction*

The subject of imperial succession has long been of interest to Roman historians, precisely because of its undefined nature. Like the institution of the Principate itself, succession was never actually regulated by law. Since the new regime was initially presented as a restoration of the Republic, the position of the *princeps* was never constitutionally sanctioned². As such, the role was never formally hereditary. From a purely legal point of view, Mommsen's statement that the Principate was a juridically permanent revolution is still relevant: according to the law, the Empire died with each emperor, only to be reborn when a new emperor was elected and granted imperial prerogatives by the Senate and the people³. At the same time, it has been argued that imperial power was based on *consensus*, on the personal relationships between the candidates for power and the main components of the Senate, the people and, above all, the army⁴.

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² The problematic nature of the Principate has been object of many debates. A useful tool to understand the evolution of its interpretation by historian are the essays published in the 2012 *CEDANT* collection, especially Ferrary 2015, Nippel 2015 and Marcone 2015.

³ Marotta 2016 193-201 and 2018.

⁴ Flaig 2015.

According to this view, it wasn't the law itself that determined succession, but the consent of these social groups, whose loyalties would follow different paths, sometimes choosing the heir of the previous emperor, sometimes military commanders or prominent senators.

Despite the debate over what constituted the legitimacy of the emperor or his office, a dynastic rationale can be discerned from the dawn of the imperial age, beginning with Caesar's adoption of Octavian, and continuing through the Augustan age, when the new *princeps* sought to find a successor within his circle of friends and family through a dynastic policy made of marriage and adoption. Augustus knew that succession would not be an automatic affair, for without him the very existence of the Principate would be in doubt. He then sought to bind his chosen heirs to his political position and to himself by granting them magistracies and powers similar to his own, and symbolic titles such as *princeps iuventutis*⁵.

Augustus' actions set an example for the future: with a few exceptions⁶, future emperors prepared their succession in a similar way, marking their heir in advance with imperial titles and endowing him with the political and military powers that had become an imperial prerogative. Family ties weren't enough to mark the heir to the imperial throne, but had to be reinforced by institutional means. Nevertheless, imperial succession was *de facto* hereditary, and even when it wasn't the new emperor tried to strengthen his claim to power by establishing links with the previous dynasty: men who rose to power through military strength, such as Vespasian, Severus or Macrinus, established ideological

⁵ Augustus' failed dynastic plans involved a number of relatives and allies: Marcus Claudius Marcellus, son of Augustus' sister and first husband of his daughter Julia, who died in 23 BC; Marcus Agrippa, his closest ally who married Julia in 21 BC and died in 12 BC; his stepsons Lucius and Gaius, whom the *princeps* had adopted in 17 BC and who died in 2 and 4 AD respectively. Tiberius, who had been overshadowed first by Marcellus and Agrippa and then by Gaius and Lucius, only received the *tribunicia potestas* after their deaths. For a detailed summary of Augustus' attempts to determine his succession see Pani 1990, 221-229 and especially Sawiński 2018, 21-99, who looks closely at each of the people involved in Augustus' schemes, to determine what role the *princeps* wanted them to play.

⁶ The main exceptions were Caligula and Claudius, who were chosen respectively by the mob and the pretorian guard solely on the basis of their private relationship with the previous emperor, as a result of the influence of the *Domus Augusta* and the deep connection between the *gens Iulia* and the Principate itself. Nero's accession, though still dynastic, was at least prepared through adoption, the title of *princeps iuventutis* and the destination to a future consulship at only thirteen years of age. On the dynamics of succession in the Julio-Claudian dynasty see Sawiński 2018.

links with the family that had preceded them, using their names and borrowing ideas and themes for their self-representation⁷.

The relevance of the dynastic principle is particularly evident at times when succession seemed to follow different rules. During the second century, for example, the link between the emperor and the heir chosen from outside the family was strengthened by the creation of family ties through marriage and adoption.

Even during the tetrarchy, dynastic considerations continued to be important. Diocletian's tetrarchy was explicitly based on something other than bloodlines: in its ideological communication, the tetrarchy excluded mothers and wives and sought to present the *Augusti* and *Caesares* as a unit, a single family detached from any other earthly relationship. Even then, however, relations between the rulers were marked by marriages⁸, and representations of the co-rulers as 'brothers' and of the *Augusti* as 'fathers' crept into the new system, which ultimately failed precisely because of dynastic ambitions⁹.

For the sake of simplicity, it's enough to say here that from the beginning of the Principate there was no single source of legitimacy, but that succession was determined by a variety of interlocking factors: multiple social forces were involved, such as military influence, political relevance and dynastic reasoning; the Senate, the army and the people would exercise their influence in different ways at different times. Nevertheless, private citizens chosen as emperors by the army or the senatorial elite would consolidate their position through dynas-

⁷ Vespasian was the first to use the names Augustus (for himself) and Caesar (for his sons) outside of the Julio-Claudians, taking what had hitherto been a family name and finally turning it into a title, but also symbolizing continuity with the earlier dynasty. Severus adopted himself and his children in the Antonine family. For Macrinus, who acted similarly towards the Severans, see *infra*. On the use of these strategies of dynastic legitimization throughout the history of the Roman Empire see Börm 2014, Humphries 2019. See also Lo Cascio 2005, 137-142, 156-158 and 170-172.

⁸ Galerius married Diocletian's daughter Valeria, while Constantius married Maximian's daughter (or stepdaughter) Theodora. After Diocletian's retirement the marriage alliance was used once again by Constantine who married Maximian's daughter Fausta in 307, a union intended not to promote cohesion among the tetrarchs but to establish an alliance between a retired *Augustus* who wanted to return to power and a young and ambitious Caesar who needed to assert himself in a dominant position. On the possibility of other dynastic implications in the tetrarchic system see Zuddas 2023, 11-14.

⁹ For the non-dynastic representation of the tetrarchic system see Hekster 2014. On the use of marriage and adoption to strengthen the relationships between the tetrarchs and the role of dynastic ideology in the crisis of the tetrarchic system itself see Hekster 2015, 278-297. The failure of the tetrarchy was marked by the rise to power of Constantine who placed dynastic themes at the centre of his propaganda, emphasizing his connection with his father and his supposed kinship with Claudius II, celebrating his mother in his coinage.

tic ideology, while the succession of heirs of imperial families would be prepared by institutional means. As Francesco Amarelli has pointed out, the inheritance of the imperial office is both completely alien to the juridical nature of the Principate (which was formally reconstituted each time before the people and the Senate) and deeply rooted in the mentality of the Roman aristocracy: the whole of republican politics was based on the compromise between public power, obtained by winning elections, and the private (but still political) influence that helped win those electoral votes, a kind of social power that was handed down from generation to generation. The strength of this aristocratic mentality was immediately evident with the election of Caligula and Claudius to the Principate, for within a few years of Augustus' death the fiction he had created disappeared¹⁰. In the Roman mind, the fact that an emperor had to be elected and formally invested with power by the Senate and the people did not conflict with the idea that the social status required for the role was passed from father to son.

1. *Adoption and imperial education: a political ideal*

At the end of the first century, after two families had succeeded each other on the imperial throne, ending in the deposition of unappreciated rulers, the new practice of adoption led to what was perceived at the time, and for a long time afterwards, as a golden age. This alternative method of succession, which seemed to look outside the imperial family for the perfect heir, shouldn't be idealised, as the age of adopted emperors was a product of necessity, both practical and political. Nevertheless, this new practice of succession, which determined the choice of the next four rulers, led to the development of an ideal that we can see represented in Tacitus' *Historiae*. Here, in the famous speech in which the emperor Galba announces his choice of Piso as his successor, the historian offers a justification for the use of adoption in choosing an heir to the imperial seat. In Tacitus' reconstruction of the speech, Galba compares his own choice to that of Augustus, who placed many of his closest allies and relatives in high political positions, in order to prepare their succession in his place. Galba, however, did not for the best candidate look in his *domus*, but in the *res publica*, and chose a man whose life had been full of adversities that had successfully tested his good qualities. The old senator, aware that the Empire could no longer survive without a ruler, regrets that he cannot restore the *res publica* to its former state: the only thing he can do is to ensure that his successor will not be

¹⁰ On this particular aspect of Roman mentality see Amarelli 1989, 39-40. On the Julio-Claudian Empire as a 'principato gentilizio' see Pani 1990 and 1994.

chosen by mere chance, but that an *integrum iudicium* will point to the right candidate, selected by the common consent of the people (Tac. *Hist.* 1, 16: *Nam generari et nasci a principibus fortuitum, nec ultra aestimatur: adoptandi iudicium integrum et, si velis eligere, consensu monstratur*). Under the previous dynasty, he says, the Roman Empire was the *hereditas* of a single family, a *domus dominorum* ruling over a people of *servi*. Now, through adoption, some of the old *libertas* will be reintroduced to the *res publica*¹¹.

The memory of Caligola, Nero and, more recently, Domitian, is always present in these words. The idea that those *principes* took what belonged to the Roman people and treated it as their own personal property was a common theme of senatorial discourse at the time. Having been subject to an emperor as a private citizen, Piso will be able to rule as he would have liked to be ruled, respecting of the *libertas* of his subjects.

This section of the *Historiae* is clearly influenced by the current political discourse surrounding another event that determined the imperial succession, Nerva's adoption of Trajan. Very similar themes to those present in Galba's speech can be found in Pliny's *Panegyric*, a work of a different genre but nevertheless born of the same political and cultural framework as Tacitus' *Historiae*. Like Galba in his speech, Pliny insists on the lack of kinship between Nerva and Trajan (*nulla cognatio*), in order to distinguish this case of adoption from that of Tiberius and Nero, two stepsons adopted only to satisfy a wife: this time the choice was based solely on Trajan's excellence. This way of providing a successor, says the orator, allows one to look outside the family to all the subjects and find the most deserving man, without having to rely on a wife to provide a suitable successor. After all, since the emperor should not be the *dominus* of a house full of *servi*, but a *princeps* of the *cives*, he should be chosen

¹¹ Tac. *Hist.* I 15-16: «Herein I follow the example of the deified Augustus [...]. But Augustus looked for a successor within his own house, I in the whole state. [...] If the mighty structure of the empire could stand in even poise without a ruler, it were proper that a republic should begin with me. But as it is, we have long reached such a pass that my old age cannot give more to the Roman people than a good successor, or your youth more than a good emperor. Under Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius we Romans were the heritage, so to speak, of one family; the fact that we emperors are now beginning to be chosen will be for all a kind of liberty; and since the houses of the Julii and the Claudii are ended, adoption will select only the best; for to be begotten and born of princes is mere chance, and is not reckoned higher, but the judgment displayed in adoption is unhampered; and, if one wishes to make a choice, common consent points out the individual. [...] The distinction between good and evil is at once most useful and quickest made. Think only what you might wish or would oppose if another were emperor. For with us there is not, as among peoples where there are kings, a fixed house of rulers while all the rest are slaves, but you are going to rule over men who can endure neither complete slavery nor complete liberty» (Translated by Moore 1925).

from among them¹². Even when he wishes for the emperor to have a son that will succeed him, without completely rejecting the idea of dynastic succession, Pliny wishes for the future heir to resemble someone Trajan would adopt (Plin. *Paneg.* 94, 5: *deinde ut quandoque successorem ei tribuas, quem genuerit quem formaverit similemque fecerit adoptato*).

Trajan's private origins are then explicitly linked by Pliny to his good judgement as an emperor: having lived under a tyrant, sharing danger and fear with the members of the Senate, his rule is now guided by his *privatum iudicium*, the ideals and values acquired before his rise to imperial power (Plin. *Paneg.* 44, 2: *Nam privato iudicio principem geris, meliorem immo te praestas, quam tibi alium precabare*). Trajan's experience as a private citizen, which led him through adversity towards success (*ad usum secundorum per adversa*), gave him an outside perspective on the role of emperor, the *privatum iudicium* that's one of the characteristics of Pliny's *optimus princeps*¹³.

The two texts here mentioned, whose similarities are striking, have long been seen as a pair. When Tacitus wrote of Galba, he knew that his readers would think of Trajan, but what he meant by this parallel has long been debated. The emphasis put by Tacitus on the adoption itself is nowhere to be found in other accounts of the same events. The historian chose to place it at the centre of his narrative, but also emphasised the negative aspects of the affair. Although Galba's choice appears in the *Historiae* as driven not by necessity but by a political ideal, he is not a positive model: Galba is described as a weak man, subject to the will of his advisers, incapable of understanding the situation in which he found himself and what it required. His adoption of Piso is not, in

¹² Plin. *Paneg.* 7, 3-6: «No tie of kinship or relationship bound adopted and adopter [...]. Thus you were adopted not as others have been hitherto, in order to gratify a wife; no stepfather made you his son, but one who was your prince, and the divine Nerva became your father in the same sense that he was father of us all. This is the only fitting way to adopt a son if the adopter is an emperor; for when it is a case of transferring the Senate and people of Rome, armies, provinces, and allies to a single successor, would you look to a wife to provide him, or seek no further than the four walls of your home? No indeed, you would search through all your subjects, and judge him the closest and dearest to you whom you find to be the noblest and dearest to the gods. If he is destined to rule the people, one and all, he must be chosen from among them all, for no natural law can satisfy you when you are not appointing an overlord for your household of cheap slaves, but a prince and emperor for the citizens of Rome» (Translation by Radice 1969).

¹³ Plin. *Paneg.* 44, 1-2: «What an advantage it is to have attained success through adversity! You shared our lives, our dangers, our fears, the common lot at that time of all innocent men. You know from experience how bad rulers come to be hated even by those who have corrupted them. You can remember how you joined in our prayers and protests—witness the fact that your sentiments have remained those of a citizen since you become prince, while your merits have proved greater than anything you could have hoped for in another» (Translation by Radice 1969).

Tacitus' view, a winning choice¹⁴. While Galba's speech has alternatively been seen as an endorsement or a criticism of the idea of adoption as a method of succession, its presence in the same cultural context in Pliny's *Panegyric* testifies to the relevance of these issues at the time. The idea of the selection of the best possible candidate and the problem of what made a good emperor must have been central topics in the political debate. Tacitus seems to place the issue in a wider historical context, by providing an example of the failure of this model, which should have added complexity to the discourse¹⁵.

A further contribution to this debate seems to have been another speech on succession, again probably fictional, attributed by Cassius Dio to a dying Hadrian addressing the most influential senators on his deathbed. The speech has not survived in its original form, but we do have Xiphilinus' version of the text. Here the emperor regrets that he hasn't been able to produce an heir by natural means (φύσις), but states that the Senate has given him the possibility of obtaining one by law (νόμῳ). Whereas in the first case, the choice of successor would have been determined by the will of the δαιμόνιον, adoption allows him to decide for himself. Since his first choice, Lucius Ceionius Commodus, has died, his successor will be Antoninus, a man who has shown no interest in politics, but who stands out for his moral qualities¹⁶.

The speech is not free from ambiguities: the fact that Hadrian, whose adoption had not been approved by the Senate, insisted on the legal basis for his choice; the death of the first candidate, and the election of a man who was pas-

¹⁴ For the significance of the adoption in Tacitus' narrative, compared to the other historical accounts of the same event and the political context of Nerva's adoption of Trajan, see Klaassen 2014, 123-151.

¹⁵ See Klassen 2014, 159-151 for a more detailed account on the matter. On the idea of adoption versus dynastic succession in the *Historiae* see also Davenport - Mallan 2014, 651. On Tacitus' idea of *libertas* under an emperor and Galba as an example to learn from see also Shotton 1991, 3274-3285.

¹⁶ Dio LXIX 20, 2-5: «Nature has not given me the means to produce a child, yet you have given me the means [to produce one] by law. The latter method differs from the former: for whereas a begotten child turns out in whichever way as seems pleasing to the daimonion, one takes an adopted son upon himself by his own choice. [...] I have found an emperor for you in place of Lucius, whom I present to you: a man who is noble, mild, compassionate, prudent and capable of acting without the rashness of youth nor with the apathy of old age, a man who was educated according to the laws, who has held office according to the ancestral customs, so that he is not ignorant of anything relating to the burdens pertaining to the imperial office, but who is able to perform all these things himself in an appropriate manner. I speak of this man here, Aurelius Antoninus, although I know that he is the most politically disengaged of men (for he has put such desires for power far away). I nevertheless consider that he will not be heedless of my concerns, or yours, but will accept the empire, albeit reluctantly» (Translation by Davenport - Mallan 2014).

sive in regards to politics; the fact that, as a part of this succession strategy, Antoninus was required by Hadrian to adopt Marcus Aurelius, the same man who would years later reinstate the dynastic succession, leading to a series of emperors who, in Dio's eyes, were failures. Davenport and Mallan, analysing the speech in the wider context of Dio's work and contemporary events, suggest that by introducing the speech at this point in the narrative, Dio, like Tacitus, wanted to present an ideal option, that of electing the best man as emperor, without concealing the problematic nature of its actual realisation¹⁷.

While these passages cannot be taken as evidence of a conscious decision by the emperors themselves to favour adoption as a succession mechanism over dynastic succession - a practice that must have been determined by necessity and possibly with the aim of establishing a new dynasty¹⁸ - they do reflect the nature of the political debate that ensued and how it was perceived by the senatorial élite: in the eyes of some members of the Roman aristocracy, the selection of a successor from their ranks would have been the best way to prevent tyranny and restore some form of *libertas*, offering a new opportunity to gain influence over the choice of their ruler and, possibly, over his actions¹⁹. According to this perspective, being born outside of the imperial family and experiencing private life could in itself provide an emperor with a different form of education, not only forcing him to excel in his morals and virtues in order to obtain the imperial seat, but also allowing him to know the condition of a subject and to form the *privatum iudicium* that would help him to wield his power in a fair way.

When the dynastic succession was restored after the death of Marcus Aurelius, this idea survived. In the third century, when continuity at the head of the Empire was an obvious problem, the possibility of hereditary succession versus the election of the best candidate reappeared in the work of Herodian. The first example is the letter which, according to the historian, the newly acclaimed emperor Macrinus sent to the Senate at the beginning of his short reign. In Herodian's version, the *eques* Macrinus, the first man of non-senatorial rank to be elected to the imperial office, writes to the assembly to ask for their support, focusing on his status as a *privatus*, which he believes is what makes him fit to

¹⁷ On Hadrian's speech in Cassius Dio see Davenport - Mallan 2014.

¹⁸ Carcopino 1949; Amarelli 1989, 53-54. On the political context that made it necessary for Nerva to consolidate his position by adopting Trajan see Grainger 2003, 66-72. On the dynastic aspects of Trajan's Principate see Klaassen 2014 24-25.

¹⁹ On the role of the senatorial and cultural élite in defining, together with the emperor, the new model of the *optimus princeps* see Geisthardt 2015; *contra* Soverini 1989, who believes that Pliny's adherence to Trajan's ideology, though sincere, conceals the real state of the senatorial elite, which at the time lacked any initiative and was unable to exert any influence on the *princeps*.

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rule. Macrinus promises that under his rule the Empire will cease to be a βασιλεία and will once again become a ἀριστοκρατία, precisely because, having obtained his power through the approval of the Senate, he will be grateful to the assembly and respect its role. He then speaks of inherited qualities, such as nobility and wealth, as blessings that shouldn't deserve praise if not achieved by oneself. To illustrate his point, Macrinus introduces the examples of Commodus and Caracalla: such rulers, having inherited the Empire, regarded of it as their own private property and mistreated it. An emperor elected by the Senate, like Macrinus, would instead remain grateful and humble, having obtained his position on his own and hoping to preserve it for his own descendants. Under his rule, the aristocracy would be free again, as it had been under Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax, emperors who, just like Macrinus, had private backgrounds²⁰. In Macrinus' letter hereditary succession is presented as a matter of luck, leading to the danger of tyrants at the top of the Empire, while the election of a ruler from among the citizens would ensure a fair and balanced government.

Once again, the words of our source cannot be taken at face value. In this case, the problem is one of the reliability of Herodian himself: the historical validity of the letter has long been questioned, especially when compared with other evidence of Macrinus' legitimization strategy. Looking at what sources, both literary and documentary, have to say about his brief reign, one can see a clear attempt to show continuity with his Severan predecessors. Not only did Macrinus show great respect for the late Caracalla and the surviving members of his family, but he also used every ideological means at his disposal to estab-

²⁰ Hdn. V 1, 4-8: «Nobility and wealth and such like are considered lucky, but they are not qualities one praises, because they are inherited from someone else. [...] For instance, what benefit to you were Commodus' noble birth or Antoninus' succession to his father's rule? Some get possession of the empire as though it were an inheritance they were owed; then they misuse and make a mockery of it like a private family heirloom. But others who receive the power from you are always indebted to your favour and try to repay you for the benefits they received. Nobility of birth in the case of patrician emperors degenerates into haughtiness, because they have a contempt for their subjects and think them vastly inferior to themselves. But those who reach the power from moderate means treat it carefully as a reward for their labour, and continue to respect and honour, as they used to, those who were once more powerful than themselves. [...] You shall live in security and freedom, the rights which you lost under the nobly born emperors but which Marcus first and then Pertinax, both of them men who were born of common cloth before they came to power, tried to restore to you. It is better to be the distinguished founder of a line and leave this to one's descendants than to inherit a glorious past from one's ancestors and disgrace it by corrupt behaviour» (Translated by Whittaker 1969).

lish a link with his predecessor's family²¹, knowing that to maintain his power he had to rely on the support of armies still loyal to the previous dynasty. While the historical validity of the letter itself is questionable, and no definitive conclusion can be drawn²², its importance in the wider context of Herodian's work should not be discounted, as it is not the only occurrence of similar themes.

Indeed, something comparable to Macrinus' letter can be found in the same work in the speech attributed to Pupienus, delivered at Aquileia in front of to the troops who had mutinied against Maximinus²³. In his brief address, Pupienus insisted that he and Balbinus had been chosen by the Senate and the people of Rome because of their nobility, but also because of their long record of public service, which qualified them for the imperial seat: their election to the Empire should be seen as a promotion to the final stage of their political careers. In this passage, full of senatorial rhetoric and nostalgia for the times of the Republic, we're reminded once again that the Empire is not the ἴδιον κτῆμα of a single family or individual but belongs to the Roman people and should be

²¹ According to sources, he chose *Severus* as a name for himself and *Antoninus* for his son; he then waited four days to accept the acclamation of the army, so that his *dies imperii* would coincide with Severus', and, like Severus, he refused the title *Parthicus* as it was offered to him after he signed a treaty with the Partic Empire. Numismatic evidence shows a striking resemblance between his portraits and those of Severus and Caracalla. On Macrinus' policy of dynastic legitimation cf. Baharal 1999, Bérenger 2017; on this aspect of Macrinus' ideology in relation to the letter to the Senate discussed here, see Marasco 1996.

²² Authors such as Petrikowitz 1939, 545 or Millar 1964, 163 n. 4 were quick to dismiss the letter as an invention of Herodian. Others, such as Mazza 1986, 23, believe that a letter did exist, but that what we read in Herodian's work was 'reconstructed' by the author according to his political beliefs. Marasco 1996, after considering the contents of the letter in comparison with the rest of Macrinus' self-representation, and the closeness of its contents to the rest of Herodian's political ideas, states that it must have been a pure invention of the historian. The possibility that a newly acclaimed emperor, the first of equestrian rank, would use a form of senatorial rhetoric to introduce himself to the Senate, while at the same time insisting on strengthening his support within the army by creating a link with the previous dynasty doesn't strike me as entirely implausible. Studies of imperial ideology such as Meister 2012 or Hekster 2022 have clearly shown that the image of an emperor was much more multifaceted than we would expect, as emperors from Augustus onwards adapted their self-representation in different contexts in order to meet the expectations of the people who interacted with them and their image.

²³ Hdn. VIII 7, 4-5: «For the future you must always enjoy these benefits by keeping your pledges to the Romans and the Senate and to us your emperors. The Senate and the Roman people decided to choose us because of our noble birth and many achievements in a long series of offices, which we held like graded promotions before reaching this final position. The empire is not the private property of a single man but by tradition the common possession of the Roman people» (Translated by Whittaker 1969).

administered by experienced governors²⁴. In Herodian's work, then, the critique of hereditary succession is also linked to the idea of experience and education: being born into privilege and raised as a future emperor could lead a ruler down the wrong path, convincing him that the Empire belonged to his family and not to the Roman people, whereas serving the *res publica* as a *privatus* was what could really teach a man how to rule. The idea of the emperor's παιδεία is also meaningful in Herodian's judgement of Alexander Severus: according to the historian the young prince, while possessing many virtues, lacked the experience and the strength to deal with war, having been brought up in the luxury and peace of the court²⁵.

Such passages testify to the survival of the idea of electing the best candidate for emperor during the great political instability of the third century²⁶ and can give us an idea of Herodian's own opinion on the matter. While Herodian himself was not of senatorial origins and the wider context of his historical work suggests his belief that the key to stability was the ὁμόνοια, a *consensus universorum* that included not only the Senate but also the people and the military, his worldview seems to have been influenced by the aristocratic idea that the Empire shouldn't be the *res privata* of a single family, but that it would flourish under the leadership of a ruler chosen for his virtues and experience rather than his birth²⁷.

The resilience of these political ideals in senatorial circles is also evident in the *Historia Augusta*. In the Life of Tacitus, for example, the biographer recalls the speech of the senator Meciui Faltonius Nicomachus (Hist. Aug. Tac. 6, 1-9): here the senator praises the assembly for electing of an older man, more experienced than the young princes who needed the approval of their teachers

²⁴ On Herodian's opinion of the lack of support from the army and the people for Pupienus and Balbinus, who relied only on the Senate, see Davenport - Mallan 2019, 428-436.

²⁵ Hdn. VI 2, 3; on the role of παιδεία in Herodian's evaluation of Severus Alexander's reign see Zimmerman 1999, 232-252 and Roberto 2017.

²⁶ Another source that could testify to the survival of this ideal during the third century is a laudatory speech preserved in the *corpus Aristideum*, known with the title Εἰς βασιλέα and generally dated to the reign of Philip the Arab or Decius (Aristid. XXX 5; 12-13). The speech is critical of the idea of hereditary succession and praises the emperor for having acquired the throne because he was worthy of it. On the content and the dating of the speech see Swift 1966 and Mazza 1983, 55-68. On its similarities and differences with the Herodian's letter see Marasco 1996 and Mazza 1983, 82-93, who notes the importance of the emperor's ethical virtues in the description, as a result of the development of a new ideal of sovereign in the third century.

²⁷ On Herodian's ideas about the state of the empire and what constituted a good emperor see Mazza 1983, 18-26, Marasco 1996 and 1998, Zimmerman 1999, especially 214-222 and 278, Davenport - Mallan 2019. On the originality of the Greek historian's point of view, which wasn't that of a senator but of a functionary, see Mazzarino 1966, 204-2008.

or their mothers, and wishes that Tacitus would not have children, so that he wouldn't leave them the Empire as a *villula* and his subject as *servi*. Even if the *Historia Augusta* itself cannot be considered a reliable source and its author's position on dynastic succession is full of ambiguities, the passage can nevertheless attest to the survival of the themes in question until the second half of the fourth century, at a time when the accession of child emperors to the throne was becoming more and more common²⁸.

2. *From politics to panegyric: private education as a tool for praise*

After the failure of the tetrarchic experiment, for three times during the fourth century one man took the Empire supported by the military and passed it on to his descendants.

Already in 306, the death of the newly proclaimed *Augustus* Constantius had left a void that was immediately filled by his son, thus reaffirming the dynastic principle that Diocletian had tried to put aside. Constantine's self-representation was built around his genealogy: his descent from the *divus* Constantius, first, and from the *divus* Claudius, a few years later – attested in numismatic as well as literary sources – was what would set him apart from the other tetrarchs and allow him the possibility to assert his divine right to the throne²⁹. The idea of passing his power to his children was always present: already visible in the panegyric of 307, pronounced in the occasion of his marriage to Fausta,³⁰ it was partially put into effect as early as 317 with the elevation of his sons – the teenager Crispus and the infant Constantine II – to the rank of *Caesar*, and became a reality after his death, when three of his sons divided the Empire among themselves³¹.

²⁸ Béranger 1974 examines the biographer's opinion on the question of dynastic succession, identifying cases in which he supports it, others in which he opposes it, and even cases in which he is neutral. For a detailed analysis of the speech of Mecius Faltonius Nicomachus in relation to the polemic against child emperors and its connection with the senatorial political reaction of the late fourth century see Vitiello 2021.

²⁹ Paneg. VI 2, 1-5. On the pivotal role of dynastic legitimacy in Constantine ideology see Börm 2014; on the role of *divus Constantius* and *divus Claudius* in Constantine's propaganda through numismatic evidence see Hekster 2015, 225-233 and 288-291.

³⁰ Paneg. VII 2, 2: *Maximas itaque vobis, aeterni principes, publico nomine gratias agimus, quod suscipiendis liberis optandisque nepotibus seriem vestri generis prorogando omnibus in futurum saeculis providetis*; 7, 2, 5: *qui non plebeio germine sed imperatoria stirpe rei publicae propagatis*.

³¹ Crispus fell from his father's favour in 326, and was eliminated, but other children continued the dynasty: Constantine II was joined as *Caesar* by the seven-year-old Constantius in 324 and the thirteen-year-old Constans in 333. For Constantine's plans for his succession, which probably

A clear example of how dynastic succession could be understood at this time is provided by Eusebius. In his *Life* of the emperor, the bishop of Caesarea states that under Constantine the Empire is a πατρῷος κληῖρος and dynastic succession is sanctioned by natural law: «Thus also did the throne of Empire descend from his father to him, and by natural law it was stored up for his sons and their descendants, and extended to unaging time like a paternal inheritance»³². In Eusebius' eyes, then, Constantine was chosen by God, who granted him the Empire as his private possession: dynastic succession was not just a possibility but a reality, blessed by divine power³³. What had been denied for two centuries could now be clearly stated and celebrated³⁴.

In this new phase of Roman history, the question of what made a good emperor and what constituted the ideal form of imperial education moved out of the context of political and philosophical debates concerned with the nature of power and became a fundamental theme of an entirely different literary genre, the panegyric.

A useful lens for analysing the surviving imperial encomia and placing them in the context of the literary genre to which they belong is the work attributed to Menander Rethor: a manual of rhetoric, probably dated to the end of the third century, composed of two treatises dedicated to epideictic oratory³⁵. Since the manuscript tradition has preserved few traces of speeches delivered in honour of the prince before the fourth century, the manual, by systematising the typical practices of this type of speech, offers a picture of epidemic oratory and of speeches dedicated to the emperor in a historical period about which there is little information available, allowing at least a partial understanding of the con-

involved some sort of 'dynastic tetrarchy', with his nephew Dalmatius as the fourth ruler and his brother Hannibalianus as *rex regum et Ponticarum gentium* see Barnes 2011, 163-168. An in depth analysis of the dynamics of the succession to Constantine is the recent volume by Zuddas 2023.

³² Eus. *Vit. Const.* I 9, 2: Οὕτω δὴ καὶ ὁ θρόνος τῆς βασιλείας πατρόθεν μὲν εἰς αὐτὸν κατήκει, θεομῶν δὲ φύσεως παισὶ καὶ τοῖς τούτων ἐγγόνοις ἐταμιεύετο εἰς ἀγήρω τε χρόνον οἷά τις πατρῷος ἐμηκύνετο κληῖρος. Translation by Cameron - Hall 1999.

³³ On the succession to Constantine in Eusebius' *Life* see Farina 1966, 169 and Zuddas 2023, 1-2.

³⁴ On the evolution of the idea of the Empire as a private property, from the early imperial period to the age of Constantine and his successors, see Tantillo 1998. Similar ideas can be found in Eus. *Vit. Const.* I 21, 2; IV 51, 1; IV 6, 63.

³⁵ Russell - Wilson 1981 distinguished the two treatises that make up the work attributed to Menander, assuming the existence of two different unknown authors, but were able to date both treatises to the reign of Diocletian on the basis of references to historical events present in the text. This hypothesis has been supported by Agosti 2002, who found striking correspondences between the words of Menander Rethor and an anonymous poem dedicated to Diocletian preserved on papyrus.

text in which the numerous surviving imperial panegyrics of the fourth century must have been written.

In the section on the βασιλικὸς λόγος in his treatise on epideictic speeches, Menander Rhetor lists a number of topics that must be addressed while celebrating the ruler. After the emperor's country and family, the next item on the list of praise is his upbringing³⁶: a panegyric speech should mention whether he was raised in the palace, already wrapped in the purple as a baby, or describe his studies and military experience, if he didn't have such a noble upbringing. Regardless of whether the ruler had been born a *privatus* or a prince, then, the rules of the literary genre included the celebration of his youth and education. The flexible nature of the panegyric meant that the same author could use opposing models on different occasions of praise: the political ideals underlying of each argument of praise were irrelevant.

A clear example of this flexibility can be found in Libanius: in the earliest of his extant speeches, dated between 344 and 349³⁷, the orator celebrates the dynastic succession of Constantius II and Constance, the two surviving sons of Constantine, describing it in a similar way to Eusebius: the two emperors hadn't come to the throne by force or money, but it had been handed down in their family for three generations, in the same way that paternal property is inherited (πατρῶας καὶ παππῶας οὐσίας), and therefore according to law (νόμῳ)³⁸. The nobility of the two princes was in fact evident from birth, and to celebrate it Libanius doesn't need to resort to the mythological examples that Menander Rhetor suggests to praise rulers of obscure origins: unlike the heroes

³⁶ Men. Rh. 371, 17-372, 2: «Next comes 'nurture'. Was he reared in the palace? Where his swaddling-clothes robes of purple? Was he from his first grown brought up in the lap of royalty? Or, instead, was he raised up to be emperor as a young man by some felicitous chance? (Look out similar examples, if any, and insert them at this point.) If he does not have a distinguished nurture (as Achilles had with Chiron), discuss his education, observing here: 'In addition to what has been said, I wish to describe the quality of his mind.' Then you must speak of his love of learning, his quickness, his enthusiasm for study, his easy grasp of what is taught him. If he excels in literature, philosophy, and knowledge of letters, you must praise this. If it was in the practice of war and arms, you must admire him for having been born luckily, with Fortune to woo the future for him. Again: 'In his education, he stood out among his contemporaries, like Achilles, like Heracles, like the Dioscuri'» (Transl. By Russel - Wilson 1981).

³⁷ On the problematic dating of this speech see Malosse 2001. For a detailed introduction and an English translation of the speech see Lieu - Montserrat 1996, 147-209.

³⁸ Lib. Or. LIX 13: «For they did not enter authority by expelling the holders to a foreign province, nor again did they flatter the populace and purchase the office like something from the wares in the marketplace, but just as men who individually inherit their fathers' and grandfathers' property are entitled to this by law, so also the emperorship belongs to these men from the third generation into the past» (Translation by M.H. Dodgeon in Lieu - Montserrat 1996).

educated by Chiron, unlike even Romulus and Remus, Constantine's sons received from the very beginning a ἡμερος τροφή, a civilized nourishment, appropriate to their condition, and were wrapped in imperial purple as soon as they were born. The birth of the emperors takes on a dimension of almost mystical superiority, involving a mysterious and ineffable divine element (καὶ πλείω καὶ θειωδέστερα; Lib. Or. LIX 30-31). Their education was twofold, as they were simultaneously instructed in the administration of the Empire and in rhetoric, so that their verbal skills would match the important matters they would soon be dealing with. Their παιδεία, was special above all because they were educated for greatness: when they were still children, in fact, their father had raised them from the status of ἰδιῶται, so that they would never know the smallness of everyday things, but would possess μεγαλοφροσύνη and aim at something great in all their actions (Lib. Or. LIX 37-39). At the same time, however, he wanted to give them a position intermediate between his own and that of private citizens, so that, although they had a status appropriate to the teaching they were about to receive, they would not be satisfied with their condition, but would have as their goal the attainment of the summit of power (κορυφή τῆς ἔξουσίας)³⁹.

The meaning of Libanius' words is clear: even someone born in the purple needs a proper education to become a good emperor and must be put in a position where he feels the desire to better himself, but the appropriate training needed to rule can only be received by someone born and raised above the common people⁴⁰.

The same model of describing nobility by birth and education could not be applied by Libanius in the speeches dedicated to Julian. In fact, the dynamics of Julian's rise to power had led to an ambiguity in his approach to the dynastic principle: if the new emperor was indeed the last heir of the Constantinian dynasty and his appointment as Caesar was legitimised by the authority of Constantius, his acclamation as Augustus stood in contrast to that same authority. To complicate matters further, when Constantius died on his way to face his

³⁹ Lib. Or. LIX 40-41 «He gave them a form of address superior to their earlier one but second to his own. This represents, so you might say, a more precise ranking of emperorship. And he did this probably for the following reasons. He did not leave them to remain among private citizens nor did he immediately advance them to the summit of power, fearing the meanness of the former and the excess of the latter. For if he had allowed them to belong to the ordinary citizens and attempted to educate them thus, they would have been less enthusiastic to receive their instruction without the accompanying status, whereas if right from the start he had brought them to the zenith of authority, they would have been more indifferently disposed towards their studies when they had already obtained everything» (Translation by M.H. Dodgeon in Lieu - Montserrat 1996).

⁴⁰ On the theme of education and dynastic succession present in Libanius' panegyric to Constantius II and Constans, in contrast with a model based on the idea of *civilitas*, see Callu 1987.

nephew, Julian presented himself once again as the legitimate heir⁴¹. This ambiguity is evident in the speeches of Libanius, who, while praising the ruler's lineage, often cites the years he spent as a private citizen in Antioch as the cause of his greater suitability for the Empire: Libanius says that the gods, in choosing Julian as king, set him on a path that would give him practical and real knowledge of the things he had to administer, and it was his humility in the face of this experience that made him more capable as a ruler than his predecessors (Lib. *Or.* XIII 7-9). Compared to the child emperors of his time, Julian was a superior because he came to the throne at the right time in his life (οὐτωςὸ μὲν τῶν πρὶν ἢ λυσιτελεῖν βασιλευσάντων κρατεῖς, ὅτ' ἄμεινον, ἐπὶ τοῦτο ἦκων). When his brother Gallus was called to the Empire and Julian remained a private citizen, he had devoted himself to philosophy, choosing not to be satisfied with the honours and adulation he would receive simply because of his birth, but to take care of his soul (Lib. *Or.* XII 29-32). On this occasion, Julian realised that wisdom, the most precious possession he could ever acquire as a private citizen, would be even more precious to him if he ever found himself administering the Empire (Lib. *Or.* XVIII 17).

In line with Julian's ideology, which, while stressing a dynastic continuity with Constantine's family, recalled the early imperial ideal of the *princeps civilis*⁴², Libanius does not neglect the prince's noble lineage, but includes the uniqueness of his experience as a private individual: during these years, the young prince showed modesty and humility despite his nobility, and embraced an experience that gave him the opportunity to gain practical knowledge of the world, together with the only true παιδεία, the philosophical one⁴³.

When Julian died on the battlefield without leaving a successor, the Constantinian line had finally come to an end. After the brief parenthesis of Jovian's reign, the accession of Valentinian to the imperial throne and his choice of

⁴¹ Amm. XXI 15, 2. On Julian's transition from legitimate Caesar to illegitimate Augustus and finally legitimate heir of Constantius see Bleckmann 2020, 97-100.

⁴² On the role of dynasty and divine will in Julian's self-representation see MacCormack 1981, 192-196. Julian himself developed a complex idea of succession: he believed that while dynastic succession was an undeniable reality, one could not be satisfied with being a legitimate heir, but that the dynastic nature of the empire should be an incentive to improve, to surpass one's predecessors. On the interplay between the two ideas of hereditary succession and virtue in Julian's own writings, see Athanassiadi 2014, 63-65 and Tantillo 1998.

⁴³ While Libanius insists on the rhetorical and philosophical aspects of Julian's private education, Ammianus focuses on the military side. Both authors share the idea of a divine will that brought Julian to the throne. On the divine and military aspects of Julian's legitimization in Ammianus see MacCormack 1981, 192-196 and Ross 2016, especially 122-123.

his brother Valens as co-ruler⁴⁴ led to the establishment of a new dynasty by two men born and raised as *privati*. In the panegyrics of this period, the idea of the superiority of a ruler who has acquired experience as a private citizen is intertwined with the foreshadowing of a dynastic succession.

A first example can be found in Symmachus' *laudatio prima*, a speech delivered at the celebration of the *quinquennialia* of Valentinian's reign. The beginning of the speech is lost, but the surviving part begins precisely with the section on 'nurture'⁴⁵, where the orator focuses on the years the emperor spent in Africa, following his father on his military campaigns: the knowledge of a place so different from the cold Illyria of his birth makes Valentinian a native of the whole world, and therefore similar to a god. Unlike rulers who grew up in a palace, Valentinian's education took place in the world, and it was what he experienced before Fortune granted him the kingdom that enabled him to acquire the tools with which to defeat any enemy and made him worthy of the imperial seat (Symm. *Or.* I 2: *Priuate hoc industriae tuae debes quod te dignum reddidit principatu*). In Symmachus, the same grateness that Gratian the Elder had instilled in his sons through their *privata institutio* is immediately foreseen to become the source of a new dynasty (*vena regalis*)⁴⁶; the celebration of Valentinian and Valens' father – seen as the worthy founder of a new dynasty – and the prefiguration of the younger Gratian's accession to the throne must have been an essential part of the new rulers' legitimization strategy, to enhance the status of their own family and to oppose any usurpers who, like Procopius, might have claimed a connection with Constantine⁴⁷. As in Libanius, the dynastic principle is not discussed here, but it is clearly reaffirmed, while at the same time the opposing literary motif is applied to the specific praise of the ruler.

⁴⁴ Ammianus mentions the words of the *comes domesticorum* Dagalaifus who, while Valentinian was consulting his *consistorium* about the choice of a co-ruler, spoke against the selection of his brother Valens (Amm. XXVI 4, 1: "Si tuos amas" inquit, "imperator optime, habes fratrem; si rem publicam, quaere quem vestias"). According to Humphries 2019 this episode reveals that a debate about dynastic succession might have still existed after Constantine.

⁴⁵ On the context and themes of the *laudatio prima* see Sogno 2006, 1-12.

⁴⁶ Symm. *Or.* I 2-3: «You have surpassed every single man's experience, because you have those of everyone. You owe to your private industriousness the things that make you worthy of the Principate [...] Once you were worthy, glorious Gratian, of having sacred seeds sprout from you, of being seedbed of the Principate, of being a vein of royal blood: you raised sons who would soon be fathers of all, to whom a private education bore such fruits that their current higher station lacks nothing».

⁴⁷ For Procopius self-representation as Julian's heir and Valentinian's ideological strategy see Lenski 2002, 97-104.

Almost contemporary with Symmachus' speech is Themistius' panegyric in honour of the consulship of Valentinianus Galates, Valens son and the first of his family to be destined for the imperial seat from his early childhood. The orator, who offers himself as a teacher to the young prince, describes the pros and cons of the child's situation. Valentinian is in a better position to achieve greatness than his father and uncle, but at the same time the task before him is more difficult: he is preparing to receive the Empire as an inheritance and not as a reward for his valour, and the model with which he must compare himself in order to surpass his fathers by his own deeds is not a ἰδιώτης, as Gratian the Elder was for Valens and Valentinian, but a pair of rulers, the best among the Roman emperors (Them. *Or.* IX 124B-C). A great advantage, however, is that he will be able to receive an education proper to a king, different from that of the ἰδιῶται, which will teach him to be master first of himself and then of others⁴⁸. The culture of the emperor, so different from that of his subjects, must be a demonstration of his divine nature. The embarrassment of having to compare the upbringing of a prince with that of a private citizen is here overcome by the idea that every son, starting from the position he inherits from his father, must go one step further: Valentinian will be able to surpass his father through his education.

As one might imagine, the theme returns in speeches dedicated to Theodosius, a private citizen whose father had died in disgrace but who was called to the Empire by virtue of the *auctoritas* he had acquired on the battlefield. References to the emperor's origins often insist on his personal virtues, as opposed to his nobility. So does Themistius, who compares Theodosius' status to that of Constantinople, a capital that could not boast the nobility of Rome: neither of them has any connection with the 'race of rulers', but both became partners in the Empire of someone of more noble descent (Rome and Gratian) through their virtue; thus, it wasn't family connection or kinship that made Theodosius emperor, but virtue and strength. Gratian was wise to choose the best man as his closest relation, rather than relying on kinship to choose someone who could share the power with him⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Them. *Or.* IX 125D-126B: «For, beloved child, even in studies a distinction must be made between those suitable for the sovereign pupils of Zeus and those that are suitable instead for subjects and private citizens. Suitable for the prince are the doctrines that elevate the soul, that fill with majesty and make one who is destined to rule other men master first and foremost of himself [...]. Just as you are not destined to wear the same weapons as your subjects or garments similar to theirs, nor to inhabit a house equal to theirs, [...] so you must possess the highest culture, by which we can declare your divinity».

⁴⁹ Them. *Or.* XIV 182A-B: «And yet of the two mother cities of the world I mean that of Romulus and that Constantine it is ours, I would say, that is in greater harmony with you. For she

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A reference to Theodosius' origins is also found in Pacatus Drepanius, who emphasizes Theodosius' estrangement from the imperial family and the fact that he agreed to become ruler against his will; the new emperor was called by Gratian to offer his services to the Empire and didn't obtain it by money, family connections, or the absence of a ruler⁵⁰. Once again, the time spent as a private citizen comes up in the speech: for Pacatus, just as for Libanius, it was Fortune that kept Theodosius away from the Empire, so that as a private citizen he could gain experience in civil as well as military matters⁵¹. In the same speech, however, the succession of Arcadius is presented as imminent⁵².

In fact, Theodosius' legitimation strategy was not devoid of dynastic aspects. Like Valentinian, he didn't just want to celebrate his family's future but also sought to glorify its origins, both by rehabilitating the image of his father⁵³, who was now the subject of statues and panegyrics, and by creating a fictitious link with another Roman emperor who came from the Iberian peninsula, Trajan⁵⁴.

Clearly involved in their father's dynastic plans were Arcadius and Honorius. As with the children of Valentinian and Valens, mentions of Theodosius' sons in panegyrics are often connected to the theme of βασιλική τέχνη.

In Themistius the παιδεία of Arcadius is described as necessarily different from that of a ἰδιώτης: like Alexander, the young prince must be moulded by philosophy, the only science that can give him the nourishment he needs to equal the great rulers of the past, who must be his models⁵⁵. In Claudian similar themes are used for Honorius, who is praised for never having known the state of *privatus*, having been born once his father was already emperor (*Ardua pri-*

had no association of any sort with the race of rulers, and yet she became partner in empire with the great city through her virtue. And it was not family connection which advanced you to the purple, but virtue in superabundance, not close kinship but display of strength and manhood» (Transl. by Heather - Moncur 2001).

⁵⁰ Paneg. II 12, 1: *te nec ambitus nec occasio nec propinquitas principem creaverunt: nam et eras a familia imperatoris alienus et adscisceraris tertius et cogebaris invitus.*

⁵¹ Paneg. II 9, 1-3: «How veiled always the plans of Fortune! Who, I ask you, would not have then thought that retreat of yours from a military post to private life inimical to the public weal?! But she, in fashioning a future Emperor, wanted him to be a private citizen for a while, in order, since you already had a full mastery of the martial arts, that by taking part in civil life during a period of leisure you should be restored» (Transl. by Nixon – Saylor Rodgers 1994).

⁵² Paneg. II 11, 4.

⁵³ Paneg. II 5, 1-4; Claud. VII 24-40.

⁵⁴ Oros. *Hist.* VII 34, 2-4; Ps. Aur. *Vict. Epit.* XLVIII 1; XLVIII 8-10; Claud. VIII 24-40. On the supposed descent from Trajan of Theodosius and his family see Icks 2014.

⁵⁵ Them. *Or.* XVIII 224D-225A: ἄλλ', ὡς ἔοικεν, ὁ ἀνὴρ (*scil.* Theodosius) οὐ τὴν αὐτὴν ἀνήκειν ἡγείται παιδείαν βασιλεῖ προσηκείν καὶ ἰδιώτη.

vatos nescit Fortuna penates / et regnum cum luce dedit) and having been nurtured from birth by the imperial palace itself (*quem primo a limine vitae / nutrix aula fovet*)⁵⁶. The picture that Claudian paints for us is that of a child who has inherited imperial power as an inherent quality, whose birth immediately placed him on a plane separate from that of the private citizen, in an almost sacred dimension. Honorius' imperial παιδεία is also mentioned in by Claudian in the panegyric on the occasion of his sixth consulate: here Honorius is described as an inexperienced child, while, in the years he spent in Italy after the defeat of Magnus Maximus, he attended the ambassadorships sent to Theodosius and was introduced to the Empire so that, as future heir, he would learn what it meant to rule the Empire⁵⁷. What Claudian describes to us is an apprenticeship, in which the boy, working alongside his father, began from an early age to prepare himself for his future role.

Once again, the celebration of the private origins and education of the father stand side by side with the description of the βασιλική τέχνη imparted to his children.

Conclusions

The selection of texts presented here is intended to show a development, the evolution of an idea, from an original conception to something different, that has had a much longer life. The notion of what makes a good emperor in the context of imperial succession, as it appears in the sources of the second and third centuries, seems to identify a theme that is played out in a reflection of a political nature: it is an analysis that responds to the ideals of a particular social party, the senatorial one, but that fundamentally aims to find the best way to run the Empire. Tacitus and Herodian reflect on the dynamics of imperial succession, because in their eyes these issues were crucial to the fate of the

⁵⁶ Claud. VII 7-17. See also Claud. VIII 121-127: *Hoc nobilis ortu nasceris / aequaeva cum maiestate creates / nullaque privatae passus contagia sortis. / Omnibus acceptis ultro te regia solum / protulit et patrio felix adolesciscis in ostro, / membraque vestitu numquam violata profane / in sacros cecidere sinus.*

⁵⁷ Claud. XXVIII 65-76: «And though the diadem was not yet bound around your hair, he took you, still in your tenderest youth, as companion of his honours, nestling you on his purple-clad bosom, and, small though you were, he gave you your first taste of triumphs and taught you to play the prelude to your mighty destiny. And peoples diverse in tongue, and the nobles of Persia sent to sue for peace, once saw you sitting with your father in this very house, and bending the knee they lowered their crowns before you. With you he called forth the tribes to be enriched by bounteous gifts; with you he made his way, clad in the robes of victory, to the radiant shrine where the Senate was assembled, rejoicing to present you while a boy to the favour of the Romans, so that even then the new heir might grow accustomed to Imperial rule» (Transl. by Dewar 1996).

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Empire. The question of what experiences a man should have had in his life in order to be fit to rule is a serious one, and it is addressed in all of its complexity. From this point of view, a private background can be seen as an asset to an emperor, giving him knowledge and values that would be inaccessible to someone born into power.

In the fourth century, the only vestige of this pro-senatorial position is to be found in the *Historia Augusta*, which preserved the voice of an aristocracy now relegated to a marginal position. After Constantine's restoration of the dynastic principle, the motif of the emperor's education, a theme of historical and political literature, became one of the central topics of a genre, the panegyric, which had only one purpose: praise. The theme, stripped of its original political meaning, is thus transformed into one of the many possible means of praise that constitute the panegyrist's arsenal. From the original political ideal, two opposing "educational models" are born in ideology: the Πορφυρογέννητος, born in purple, and the private citizen who achieves power by his own means. These two models, as Gilbert Dagron has noted, persisted throughout the Byzantine period and faded traces of the early imperial and pro-senatorial idea of the *privata institutio* of the emperor survived, at least until the thirteenth century⁵⁸.

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⁵⁸ Dagron 2003, 36-48.

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Abstract

L'articolo analizza il motivo letterario dell'esperienza della condizione di privato cittadino come forma di educazione del *princeps*, messo in relazione con la riflessione sulla successione al soglio imperiale. Lo sviluppo, durante la prima età imperiale, dell'ideale dell'elezione del migliore, contrapposto a una successione di tipo dinastico, includeva una riflessione su quali fossero le qualità necessarie per un buon sovrano e quali esperienze permettessero di acquisirle. Nel corso del quarto secolo, con l'affermazione del principio dinastico, la modalità di successione non è più messa in discussione, ma l'educazione dell'imperatore, che sia *institutio privata* o τέχνη βασιλική, diventa un tema fondamentale della lode al sovrano, nel contesto del βασιλικὸς λόγος. All'interno di tale genere letterario, l'idea di un'educazione privata dell'imperatore si svuota del suo originario significato politico, per trasformarsi in uno dei possibili strumenti di lode nell'arsenale del panegirista. In questo rinnovato contesto culturale, *institutio privata* e τέχνη βασιλική possono trovarsi fianco a fianco, senza generare contraddizioni.

The article analyses the literary motif of the experience of private life as a form of education for the princeps in relation to the reflection on the succession to the imperial throne. In the early imperial period, the development of the ideal of electing the best candidate to the imperial throne, as opposed to a dynastic type of succession, entailed a reflection on what qualities were necessary to be a good ruler and what experiences made it possible to acquire them. In the course of the fourth century, with the consolidation of the dynastic principle, the mode of succession is no longer questioned, but the emperor's education, whether *institutio privata* or τέχνη βασιλική, becomes a fundamental theme of praise for the sovereign, in the context of the βασιλικὸς λόγος. Within this literary genre, the idea of the emperor's private education is stripped of its original political meaning in order to become one of the possible instruments of praise in the panegyrist's arsenal. In this new cultural context, *institutio privata* and τέχνη βασιλική can coexist without creating contradictions.