

History of BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review (ISSN: 1055-7660) was founded by Richard Hamilton and James, J. O'Donnell, and purports to be the second oldest online scholarly journal in the humanities, and the oldest open access journal.* The first reviews shipped in November 1990. In 1993, we were joined by the *Bryn Mawr Medieval Review* (since 1997: [The Medieval Review](#)), conceived by Eugene Vance of the University of Washington, later edited by Deborah Deliyannis, and now edited by Joey McMullen at Indiana University (where it is based). Email subscribers may elect to receive BMCR alone or BMCR and TMR together ([subscription form here](#)).

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Tenir le loup par les oreilles: Prendre le pouvoir et le conserver dans la Rome imperiale des premiers siècles

Jérôme Sella, *Tenir le loup par les oreilles: Prendre le pouvoir et le conserver dans la Rome imperiale des premiers siècles*. Collection Époques. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020. Pp. 576. ISBN 9781026708988 €31,00.

Review by

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This book (the revised version of a dissertation defended in 2016 at the Université de Lille^[1]) focuses on how Roman emperors from Augustus to Caracalla seized and maintained their power. For each emperor Sella recounts his accession, the real or potential attempts to overthrow him, and the precautionary measures taken to counter them. As stated at the opening of the *Conclusion générale* (p. 547), the overall aim of the book is «dresser un bilan de ces quelque deux cent cinquante ans d'évolution des pratiques politiques impériales pour acquérir et conserver le pouvoir». The title, *Tenir le loup par les oreilles* ('Holding the wolf by the ears'), draws inspiration from a saying often repeated by Tiberius, according to Suetonius, to convey his constant fear of impending dangers;^[2] the emperor was quoting a passage from Terentius' *Phormio*, which in turn translated a Greek proverb indicating an extremely dangerous situation, difficult to control but impossible to escape.^[3] The topic, at the crossroads of political and cultural history, political theory, sociology and crowd psychology, will certainly be of interest also outside the field of classics. Almost thirty years after Egon Flaig's study, ^[4] a new analysis would be most welcome, taking both newly available documents and theoretical reflections into consideration.

The book is divided in three parts and fourteen chapters, narrating events from the young Caesar's first appearance on the public scene of Rome (44 BC) down to the third century AD. The short *Introduction* (pp. 7-14) presents the subject, highlights its analogies with current political developments, outlines the structure of the book and lists the main bodies of sources examined. Part 1 covers the Julio-Claudian emperors from Augustus to Nero (44 BC – AD 68); Part 2 goes from Galba's rebellion against Nero to Nerva's designation of Trajan as his successor (AD 68 – 98);^[5] Part 3 examines the system of imperial succession between Trajan and Caracalla (AD 98 – 217), with some remarks on later third-century developments. A *Conclusion générale* closes the book (pp. 547-549). The narrative is organised chronologically around three key themes: 1) how

each emperor built and maintained the consensus between the three main components of the Roman state (the Senate, the people of Rome, the army), which provided the necessary stability to his power; 2) how each emperor countered possible attempts at usurpation and organised the transmission of power to his planned successor; 3) how the development of imperial power over generations crystallised into a collection of exemplary practices, providing later emperors with guidelines on how to seize and maintain power. Sella draws together these three interpretative lines in an engaging and well-written narrative, largely based on Latin and Greek historiographical sources (especially Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio) and supported by a constant attention to the smallest prosopographical details of potential successors, usurpers, conjurers.

This focus has great potential for a study of the inner workings of the imperial institution, both in its internal development and in its relationship with the two traditional pillars of Roman public life, namely the republican system (which continued to function until the third century) and the rules of family politics (to which the *domus Augusta* was not alien). Sella's book, however, fulfils these expectations only partially. This is not so much because of some factual errors^[6] and bibliographical omissions,^[7] but because of structural reasons. First, the complete lack of indexes makes consultation very difficult and does not do justice to a book whose most valuable contribution lies in the wealth of prosopographical detail. Second, Sella's approach solely depends on ancient historiographical sources, whose opinions are often adopted without adequate criticism. Third, no theoretical framework is provided for the analysis,^[8] and the reader is often left without clear definitions of the concepts used. For example, I find Sella's distinction between «succession régulière» and «pouvoir conquis par la force» (p. 39) problematic: it seems that by 'regular succession' the author means designation by the preceding emperor; in every other case, especially when the army plays an active role in the process, the accession is qualified as «usurpation». In Sella's view, most emperors 'usurped' their authority by virtue of their command of the strongest military force, whose power prevailed over the rule of law (pp. 18-21). But force does not necessarily mean illegality. The soldiers' role was essential since it was *their* prerogative to bestow the title *imperator* on someone; this acclamation was the first step of imperial investiture, eventually confirmed by the Senate and the people's assembly.^[9] This was the standard procedure, irrespective whether the new emperor had been designated by his predecessor or not; the independent choice of a candidate by the army was not rare, and surely did not automatically make the succession 'irregular'.

This tendency to delegitimise as 'irregular' or 'unlawful' any imperial accession until it is confirmed by the Senate, denying the army the role of «institution dispensatrice de légalité» (p. 20), ultimately replicates the point of view of senatorial historiography, on which Sella's narrative is largely based. Numismatic evidence is consistently used to support interpretations found in historiographical sources, while epigraphy is severely underused. For example, the *senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre* might have deserved a more extensive discussion of Germanicus' death; instead, Sella follows Tacitus and Suetonius very closely, while the *senatus consultum* is just mentioned in passing in a footnote on p. 101. Moreover, the author's approach to the literary sophistication of

Roman historical writing is often less critical than one might wish. This becomes apparent when dealing with Tacitus' most famous characters – Tiberius, whose portrayal has been carefully crafted by the historian to sketch a paradigm of the degeneration of unbalanced autocratic power; Messalina, whose alleged sexual excesses are in conflict with traditional gender-related expectations; Otho, whose immoral lifestyle is contrasted with his admirable way of accepting his own defeat. The 'dark lord', the 'whore queen', the 'redeeming death' are well-known examples of narrative archetypes typical of the historiographical genre. Their understanding as such is essential, not to challenge Tacitus' reliability, but to do justice to his greatness as a historian (i.e., above all, a narrator).^[10] Similarly problematic is Sella's tendency to attribute rights and wrongs to his sources based on whether or not they support his own interpretation: on p. 40, Velleius' praise of Augustus' restoration of the republican system is contrasted with the judgment of Dio, who «refuse de se laisser tromper» by such a show. One could argue, however, that these diverging opinions tell us less about the Augustan period than about how the imperial institution was perceived under Tiberius and the Severans, respectively. In a few cases, Sella's narrative becomes more overtly tendentious. For example, Tacitus' rhetorical showpiece at *Ann.* 1.9-10, staging the contrasting opinions about Augustus among the people of Rome, is seriously misrepresented on p. 25 by quoting only its negative part and implying that this was the historian's own opinion. This is misleading and an unfair representation of Tacitus' rhetorical abilities and the complexity of his historical judgment.

An excellent point raised by Sella concerns the role of praetorian prefects within the balance of power and consensus. As shown by the example of Sejanus, the praetorian prefect was instrumental to the preservation of imperial power as the emperor's most trusted collaborator, but also as a potential scapegoat whose position (and life) could be sacrificed by attributing to him the responsibility for the emperor's failures. But, apart from this, Sella's emperors are extremely lonely. Very limited attention is given to their relationship with their closest counsellors and family members: while a major figure such as Agrippina Minor is discussed in depth, the book lacks a thorough analysis of the role of the *domus Augusta* (especially its women) and the *consilium principis* in helping the emperor to seize and maintain power. This seems another consequence of Sella's dependence on historiographical sources that exploit the emperor's isolation for narrative purposes: in Tacitus, for example, loneliness is an essential trait in building the sinister depiction of Tiberius. However, a different narrative approach is also possible, as shown by Dio's staging of Augustus' political conversations with his counsellors and wife in books 52 and 55. Thus, the interplay between the ruler and his closest circle of collaborators is a key aspect of imperial power, and one that shows various possible interpretations by the ancient historians themselves. An analysis of the *consilium principis* and the changes in its composition over time would have contributed to highlight differences in how individual emperors dealt with similar problems and addressed the threats posed by potential rivals.^[11]

As a consequence of its narrow focus and choice of sources, Sella's book results in a remarkably uniform sequence of lonely and unscrupulous emperors, without friends or counsellors, driven only by their own will to survive and to kill all possible competitors except their heir apparent. This consistency sounds remarkably Tacitean – and suspicious. It seems difficult to believe that plots, conspiracies, usurpations happened one after another, decades apart, for the same reasons and in very similar ways. There may well be many analogies between the civil wars of 68-69 and those of 193-197, as Sella stresses several times (pp. 507, 515-516, 533-534); but one wonders whether differences could also be highlighted, given the changes that had occurred in the recruitment and composition of the Senate and the army over more than a century. Excessive confidence in a cause-and-effect paradigm, based on the accumulation of exemplary practices, results in a sort of mechanical determinism, which reduces historical complexities to mere iterations of one interpretative scheme. The Romans interpreted their own history through *exempla*: from modern historians we may expect an approach more attentive to complexity and individual specificities.

Notes

[1] <http://halma.univ-lille.fr/formation-et-doctorat/doctorat/docteurs>.

[2] Suet. *Tib.* 25.1: *Cunctandi causa erat metus undique imminentium discriminum, ut saepe lupum se auribus tenere diceret.*

[3] Ter. *Phorm.* 506-507: *immo, id quod aiunt, auribu' teneo lupum; / nam neque quo pacto a me amittam neque uti retineam scio.*

[4] E. Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern: Die Usurpation im römischen Reich*, Frankfurt-New York 1992.

[5] Subject of an earlier article of the same author: J. Sella, 'Rupture dynastique et mémoire des empereurs romains (68-69 apr. J.-C.)', *Revue historique* 317, 2015, 3-44.

[6] For example: Varus' defeat at the Teutoburg Forest at the hands of Ariovistus and the Suebi (p. 62; *recte*: Arminius and the Cherusci); Plotina's role in determining the imperial succession at the death of Hadrian (p. 69, note 2; *recte*: Trajan).

[7] To name just a few: A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines*, London 1974; F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, London 1977; J.T. Sunkes, *Aufstände und Protestaktionen im Imperium Romanum*, Bonn 1990; Huttner, *Recusatio imperii. Ein politisches Ritual zwischen Ethik und Taktik*, Hildesheim 2004; D. Mantovani, 'Les clauses «sans précédents» de la *Lex de imperio Vespasiani*: une interprétation juridique', *Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz* 16, 2005, 25-43.

[8] As regards political theories, the entry on '[Autocracy](#)' by [E. Frantz](#) in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* lists the most important contributions up to 2016.

[9] F. Jacques, J. Scheid, *Rome et l'intégration de l'Empire, 44 av. J.-C. – 260 ap. J.-C. Tome I: Les structures de l'empire romain*, Paris 1990, 22-26.

[10] Cf., among others, R. Syme, 'Obituaries in Tacitus', *American Journal of Philology* 79, 1958, 18-31; A. La Penna, 'Il ritratto 'paradossale' da Silla a Petronio', *Rivista di filologia e istruzione classica* 104, 1976, 270-293; C. Questa, 'Messalina meretrix Augusta e altre donne dei giulio-claudi', in id., *L'aquila a due teste*, Urbino 1998, 111-136.

[11] Cf. J. Crook, *Consilium principis. Imperial Councils and Counsellors from Augustus to Diocletian*, Cambridge 1955; J. Devreker, 'La continuité dans le *consilium principis* sous les Flaviens', *Ancient Society* 8, 1977, 223-243; P.A. Brunt, 'The Emperor's Choice of *amici*', in P. Kneissl, V. Losemann (eds), *Alte Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte. Festschrift für Karl Christ zum 65. Geburtstag*, Darmstadt 1988, 39-56; M. Christol, 'Le *consilium principis* aux deux premiers siècles: les traits de l'évolution vers un rouage administratif', in J.-L. Ferrary, J. Scheid (eds), *Il princeps romano: autocrate o magistrato?*, Pavia 2015, 587-612.