

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE PROLIFERATION OF ELITES

JOHN MATTHEWS

When I was a boy, my entire family, two adults and three children, myself the eldest, used to get about the English countryside crammed into, and clinging onto, a motor-cycle and sidecar combination, already of ancient vintage. The machine, which I think cost my father £15, was a 1933 Royal Enfield, a wonderful creation with a single large cylinder and twin trombone-shaped exhausts, which emitted a distinctive, quite musical popping sound that would identify it unmistakably at a great distance. In due course, I too began to run around on similar, if not quite such venerable, machines. To keep these old things on the road, we had to know the little second-hand shops in back streets that broke up old motor-cycles and sold their parts as spares. Our main source, tucked away behind Leicester railway station, was “Elite Spares,” as painted in white letters on a red sign over the door and pronounced by us in a manner that had little to do with the French language. Thinking of this experience in relation to a conference on elites, I consulted the New Haven telephone directory for parallel passages. I found quite a selection: “Elite Construction Inc.,” “Elite Fitness Inc.,” “Elite Property Services,” and “Elite Secretary Associates,” with, I am sure, more dotted around the Yellow Pages if I were to go after them. Showing the instability of the concept, “Elite Fitness Inc.” had appeared in the previous edition of the directory as “Elite Power and Fitness Inc.,” while to show its impermanence, “Elite Auto Sales” and the associated “Elite Auto Service Department” had disappeared altogether—much as I found one day that “Elite Spares” behind Leicester Station had disappeared in a scheme of slum clearance that had flattened acres of the city. Still, my research showed the continuing appeal of this admittedly untechnical use of the term “elite.” It comes, of course, from

French *élire*, “choose” (Latin *eligere*), in the sense of “selecting” or “choosing out” something for its distinction or excellence in a category of persons or institutions.¹ Moving from dictionary to dictionary, I see that the leading men of a city were, for Cicero, *virī electissimi civitatis* (*pro Quinctio* 2). The converse of this everyday, casual idiom is the use of the word as a quasi-technical term promising more than it delivers. Some years ago, I examined an extremely interesting Ph.D. dissertation in which I noted at one point, crowded within a couple of pages, twelve or more uses of the term, sometimes in the singular, sometimes plural, sometimes a noun, sometimes an adjective (“elite culture,” “elite values,” “civic elites,” and so on), all piled together without any definition or restriction of meaning. When I commented on this in the *viva voce* examination (which, in the university in question, could materially affect the outcome), the candidate replied, quickly and in a tone inviting complicity, “But we all know what elites are, don’t we?” Well now, do we? A look of anxiety flickered over the candidate’s face, as well it might, but I let the moment pass, recommending for the future a more careful definition of the term or a more sparing use of it, or preferably both.

However carefully, or however casually, we define elites, we are in a domain of conscious experience. Being chosen for excellence within a social group is a matter of deliberation on someone’s part, even if the formation of the social group itself is not; as Michele Salzman points out in her chapter in this volume, elites involve “*mentalités*” as well as social realities, an awareness of membership that can be challenged as well as upheld—indeed, the concluding section of the conference from which this collection of papers derives was entitled “Challenges to Elite Awareness.” This ensued naturally from what conference participants showed elites to be doing and experiencing: to summarise some of the titles of the contributions, they patronised art and architecture, created perspectives, exercised charismatic leadership, defended class, were aware of crisis and had conservative tendencies, caused and experienced tension, exercised pastoral care, clustered at the convergences of authority and power (and of chaos and

1 Webster’s *New Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd ed. 1940), always open for consultation in the Yale Classics Library and a sheer delight, gives the etymology of the word and then the following general definition; “The choice or select part; the flower; esp. with a collective sense, a group or body considered or treated as socially superior; usually with *the*; as, the *elite* of a society; he is one of the *elite*.” See further below, n. 20.

organisation), taught or seduced the crowd, claimed responsibilities and owned to guilt. Look, too, at the ivory diptych of the consul of 517, used as an emblem of the conference and reproduced here (see overleaf). The consul entertains the people with a hunting display; he wears the elaborate robes of office, he sits on a carved throne surrounded by the symbols of power, he is shown with the people for whom he exercises responsibility and who look up to him as their benefactor. So much part of an elite is he, that he even has one name twice. Appropriately enough, it is "Anastasius," resurrected, one might say, for a second appearance five names after its first. I admit to a moment's anxiety when I looked up Anastasius in Volume II of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* and found there, "See also Anonymous 4."² I need not have worried. Anonymous 4 refers to another, damaged diptych, for which Anastasius is one of four possible candidates, all of them prominent senators.

It is quite a repertoire and throughout it, in all their manifold identities and experiences, elites are never absent-minded. They express their elitism intentionally, with one exception—they do seem to *proliferate*. That proliferation is not intentional is partly a semantic matter, or rather a matter of one's point of view; it is an external perspective, that of the observer—the historian—rather than the participant. If there is intentionality in the process, it is that of the "selfish gene" of a famous book in the biological sciences (by Richard Dawkins), ensuring the continuance of the species in ways of which its individual members are not aware. As we see in this volume, and saw still more clearly in the conference from which it descends, elites offer an approach to an extremely wide range of subjects, and there are so many elites: Christian aristocrats, early Byzantine senators, members of the curial class, aristocratic bishops, spiritual leaders, ascetic "parasites," pious widows, and more. These groups certainly existed, but what does it add to our knowledge to describe them as "elites"? Does their proliferation express some real facet of the cultural and social history of the Roman empire? Or has the idea, in a sort of historiographical inflation, escaped our control, to be recaptured by an increasingly desperate debasement of the currency of explanation as we create ever more elites? Does it have a reliable or constant meaning to say that someone is a "member of an

2 Jones et al. 1971.2.82–83 (Anastasius 17), beginning with the sober and undoubtedly correct remark, "his names indicate that he was a relative of the emperor." For Anonymous 4, see p. 1220.



Diptych made in Constantinople in 517 of the Consul Anastasius, great-nephew of the Emperor Anastasius (491-518). Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. 55, no. 296 bis.

elite,” or have elites become so readily invoked that they are beginning to lose explanatory value—like saying that someone should be excused for some unacceptable behaviour, “because after all he (or she) is only human”? It may work as a mitigating factor in personal or social relations, but, in a court of law, it fails to discriminate between types of human behaviour that the law, like the historian, must treat differently. And, of course, behind the whole issue is the ancient historian’s constant awareness that, given the character of our sources, pretty well everything in our domain of knowledge that takes a reasonably articulate form flows, in one way or another, from an elite of literate people. To be chosen for commemoration in the evidence is, in its own way, to belong to an elite.³

I begin my own comments on this subject with a text from the *Theodosian Code*, which had earlier attracted my attention for various reasons, and has recently received a very interesting discussion by Thomas McGinn.⁴ It is a law of Constantine, one of two sequential extracts “read at Carthage” at two moments in the same year, April 29 and July 21, 336. The texts pick up an interesting juridical and personal situation. The second aspect, relating to “the son of Licinianus,” has been persistently misunderstood (he has nothing to do with the son of any usurper or deposed emperor), but I’ll consider only the first aspect now. The title in the *Code, de Naturalibus Filiis et Matribus Eorum* (“On Natural Children and Their Mothers”), concerns the rights of inheritance of children borne outside legal matrimony by women of low degree to fathers of high social status. A well-known example is Augustine’s son Adeodatus, presented to him by the young woman “whom wandering lust and no particular judgment had brought my way,” to quote F. J. Sheed’s unkind translation of *Confessions* 4.2. Despite her greater fame in this respect, Augustine’s unnamed mistress is not the only victim of his secular ambitions in the mid 380s. The legal situation arising for Adeodatus from his father’s betrothal to a girl from the Milanese upper classes is one of many things not explained in the *Confessions*; the young lad, of whom Augustine was so fond, could have found himself without an inheritance if the marriage had taken place.

3 See the limiting cases discussed by Hanson 1991, referring by way of contrast (160) to “those who were fully literate in every sense, the élites of cities whose literary productions and literary tastes continue to influence our own.”

4 McGinn 1999 and 1997.75–78. I first heard the arguments at the American Philological Association meeting at Washington, D.C., in December 1998 and am grateful to Tom McGinn for guiding me to and sending me copies of the published versions.

Constantine's law addresses the social situation in terms of two polarised categories of persons. At the upper end of the scale, the envisaged fathers are indeed members of a political and civic elite of an easily definable sort: senators or *clarissimi*, *perfectissimi* (men of equestrian rank), *duumviri* (municipal magistrates), *quinquennales* (census officials, also magistrates), *flamonii* and *sacerdotes* (holders of civic priesthoods).

At the lower end of the scale, the mothers of the disadvantaged children are defined as follows: slave-women or their daughters, freed-women (Roman or Latin) or their daughters, women of the stage or their daughters, mistresses of taverns or their daughters, women of low or abject estate, the daughters of pimps or gladiators, or women in charge of merchandise for sale to the public (street traders or owners of market stalls?). An especially interesting feature of the law (which is about inheritance, not sex) is the fact that it concerns relations between the top layers of civic society and the bottom; absent from it are the substantial intermediate layers between these extremes: ordinary *curiales* not magistrates, free men below curial rank. Below senators and equestrians, the law concerns the inner elite of the curial order known as the *principales viri*, those local worthies who held office and performed significant public functions rather than those who just made up the numbers in the city council, paid their taxes, and took on the inferior social burdens in their communities. Perhaps after all, at his point of departure from Africa with his mistress and their son, Augustine, from a curial family of lower rank,⁵ would have been exempt from the terms of the law. In terms of what he hoped to do with his life, however, he would not have remained so. A provincial governorship such as he was searching for during his sojourn at Milan would have landed him right there among the *clarissimi*, men of senatorial rank. It is true that Valentinian tempered the severity of Constantine's legislation (*C. Th.* 4.5.4, of 372), but Adeodatus would still have been severely disadvantaged if his father had carried out his plan to marry into the upper classes.⁶

In its disdain for the less conspicuous members of Roman society, Constantine's law reminds us of what we would all regard as axiomatic: Roman society was a society of estates, orders, and ranks, in which distinctions of class and status were measured in legal and other precisely articulated, and publicly visible, terms. It is not just social class but defining *an*

5 His father was *municeps Thagastensis admodum tenuis*, *Conf.* 2.3(5)—meaning a poor *curialis*.

6 This is not among the many relevant issues excellently discussed by Shaw 1987.

“elite” within a social class that is in question; its members are senators and equestrians, they have held magistracies and priesthoods, they have been distinguished by public office, by insignia that would pick them out in their cities: *senatores seu perfectissimos, vel quos in civitatibus vel quinquennialitas vel flamonii vel sacerdotii provinciae ornamenta condecorant*. In the *Theodosian Code*, a lot of ideologically revealing but legally superfluous language has been left out by its editors, following their instructions to do so; but a lot remains, so firmly entrenched in the *mentalité* of its authors that it could not be omitted without a complete loss of sense.

This is not all. Even among the underclasses of women mentioned in the law, their lack of status is a relative matter. *Ancillae* are one thing, but *libertae* have by definition been “chosen out” to receive freedom—the law even specifies the category of freedom given, whether “Roman” or “Latin.” Perhaps we cannot expect it of tavern-keepers or “abject women,” daughters of pimps or people who sell wares in public, but *scaenicae*, like charioteers or those musicians so despised by Ammianus Marcellinus (14.6.18), could transcend their social status and display an earned distinction at their craft. We need not be taken in by the prejudice (or *mentalité*) of senators and those who subscribed to their system of values. And there are those commemorations of successful athletes and charioteers, setting out the precise ways—with which combinations of horses, at which festivals, with how many successive victories, and so on—in which they have excelled the achievements of their rivals.⁷ The statistical erudition of these texts can be paralleled in the sports pages of any newspaper, and if modern sporting stars are not members of an elite, then who is?

We can all imagine elites not considered in Constantine’s law, but it’s not the legislator’s intention to give us a social analysis. His aim is to address a specific legal issue and to deal with the situation that gave rise to it; the text was “read out” at Carthage and primarily concerned the *municipia* of Africa. Observing that the effect of the law was to take restrictions first applied, in the legislation of Augustus, to members of the Roman senatorial class and extend them to equestrians and members of municipal aristocracies, Thomas McGinn argues that its purpose was to broaden and to consolidate the definition of the elites of the Roman empire from the point of view of the central government in response to the great social changes that had

7 E.g., the famous inscription of “Appuleius Diocles, most eminent of all charioteers” (*ILS* 5287), already discussed by Friedländer and translated with commentary by Sherck 1988.213–15.

taken place since the days of Augustus—including those achieved by Constantine himself.⁸ This issue can be seen from different points of view. Accepting the argument that the law concerned the adaptation of Augustan legislation to a new social situation, and certainly that it has nothing whatever to do with Constantine's religious position, I wonder whether the "redefinition of elites" envisaged by McGinn is not best seen more simply as a consequence of the enlargement of the scope of government and of its greater level of intervention in the lives of its subjects. On either view, we are made to appreciate that the definition of an elite is a relative matter, subject to renegotiation in the light of social and political change.

What is not yet at issue is any change in the social and cultural criteria according to which the Roman elite was defined. I would question Claudia Rapp's assertion in her conference presentation that "the economic gap between the *curiales* and the senators was insignificant in comparison to that between the *curiales* and the merchants, artisans and independent farmers that constituted the middle classes." This is true, certainly, of near-senatorial grandees like Augustine's patron Romanianus and the categories of *curiales* mentioned in Constantine's law, but it is not true of near-peasant farmers like Augustine's own father, grimly hanging on, through good years and bad, to the lowest echelons of curial status. But it is still the case that we have as yet seen *no alternative value system* that would challenge the formation of an elite in terms of the educational and cultural benefits that flowed from the economic position of a landed class. Nevertheless, already in the early centuries of the Roman empire, new value systems did arise, and to show this I'd like to revert to the idea of the "estates" or "orders" of Roman society—that is, to the idea of status as enshrined in legal distinctions and ordered forms of behaviour.

The importance of this in the Roman case is common knowledge. Senators and equestrians qualify by wealth, but actual membership in these orders is a matter of formal admission, the right to wear a particular form of dress—in the case of the senatorial order, the *laticlave* or purple-bordered toga, and the holding of specific offices, the *vigintivirate* and the *quaestorship*. In the theatre, senators sit together, distinguished from men of equestrian rank who are themselves distinguished from others. And there are juridical distinctions which change their boundaries with time: between freedom and

8 McGinn 1999.59–61; Constantine was aiming at an "overall redefinition of the Roman political elite," and "reworking the notion of imperial elite" (60, 61).

slavery, between citizen and non-citizen, between *honestiores* and *humiliores*, as the previous distinction fades in significance (Garnsey 1970, esp. part iv, 221–76).

Historians would agree also that as the empire developed (with tendencies in this direction before the foundation of the principate), the number of “estates” before us increases, sometimes with momentous consequences. I will offer one obvious example, and a second in support of it.

From the end of the second century B.C., we see the growth of a professional army at Rome, producing a new factor in politics and, soon, a new estate in the realm. Soldiers and lower officers, who had previously been drawn from the farming classes of Italy, but were now recruited without a property qualification, behave and relate to each other, and to their commanders, in a way that reflects their now professional status. They dress in uniforms and carry standard equipment, they are loyal to military emblems such as the legionary standard, they are trained to acquire certain attitudes, they win legal benefits, they acquire *de facto* and later fully legal marriages, they receive discharge payments and settle locally as leading members of local communities where they are commemorated by thousands of inscribed honours in the cities of the empire with their careers and distinctions set out for all to see (MacMullen 1967.chap. v). The transformation of these men into an elite of service transforms our evidence also by the sheer scale of its commemoration. Their commanders arise at first from the regular senatorial *cursus honorum*, mixing civil and military offices, encouraging the affectation that they learn the soldier’s craft from instruction manuals—witness those handbooks, “Teach Yourself How to be a General,” described in a fascinating article by Brian Campbell (1987). Let us not be misled. This persistent tradition of “aristocratic amateurism” understates, if it is not meant to distract from, the growing professionalism of the imperial military elite. The question is debated, but one may refer to Pliny the Elder’s report of the description of the geography of north Africa written by Suetonius Paulinus, conqueror of Mauretania and later of Britain, or to the extraordinary military and diplomatic exploits of Nero’s governor of Moesia, Plautius Silvanus, set out on his mausoleum at Tibur.⁹ Cultivated these men might be, but they were not unskilled dilettanti playing at being generals or learning it

9 Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 5.14, ILS 986, Sherk 1988.64–66, Millar 1982; for Plautius Silvanus see Millar 1982.7–9; for Suetonius Paulinus and other cases, 18. In my view, Millar understates the strategic rationality—the professionalism—of Roman frontier policy, as does Mann 1974.

from books. In time, the balance shifts further, as the military pressures on the imperial frontiers create the need for fully professional soldiers. Traditional literary culture and a landed background come to mean a lot less than they used to. The military career or “order of employments” of the later emperor Pertinax, which took him from centurion to consul in ten years, was, long before Mommsen, the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, and the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, presented by Gibbon as “expressive of the form of government and manners of his age” (*Decline and Fall*, chap. iv, n. 45). An epigraphic example from the same generation as Pertinax is Valerius Maximianus, the only known senator and consul from Poetovio in Pannonia. Maximianus’ inscription, set up in Numidia by a grateful subordinate, described how, while serving in Germany, he had “killed with his own hand Valao, prince of the Naristae.”¹⁰ As was nicely observed by Hans-Georg Pflaum, the great student of equestrian careers, the promotion of this *homo militaris* to the ranks of the senate can only be assigned to “an overbearing necessity.”¹¹ Maximianus will remind us of the description of Pannonians by that unexpected observer, Cassius Dio from Asia Minor, for whom these people (49.36.4, trans. Cary 1917):

lead the most miserable existence of all mankind. . . . They cultivate no olives and produce no wine except to a very slight extent and a wretched quality at that, since the winter is very rigorous and occupies the greater part of the year, but drink as well as eat both barley and millet. For all that, they are considered the bravest of all men of whom we have knowledge; for they are very high-spirited and bloodthirsty, as befits men who possess nothing that makes an honourable life worthwhile.

This Dio knew, having seen them himself as legate of Pannonia and their commander. It was a full century before the time of Dio that a retired career soldier, Claudius Maximus of Philippi, could have it inscribed on his epitaph how he had cut off the head of the Dacian king Decebalus and presented it to Trajan—a scene also portrayed on Trajan’s Column (Speidel 1970). We have in the rise of these *hommes militaires*, and in their capacity to make a

10 *L’Année épigraphique* 1966 no. 376; Pflaum 1960.476–94.

11 Pflaum 1960.493: “l’agrégation de cet *homo militaris* parmi les clarissimes a dû répondre à une nécessité pressante.”

public virtue out of professional violence, a real challenge to elite identity, especially over a period when senators were, whether *de facto* or *de iure*, progressively excluded from military command in favour of social parvenus from the Danubian provinces. These men ultimately became emperors of Rome. We can read their ideals on their coin legends: VIRTUS ILLYRICI: GENIUS EXERCITUS ILLYRICIANI: PANNONIAE. This, and not a mere renegotiation of the boundaries of privilege within a homogeneous ruling class, is what we are looking for in the appearance of a new elite; the emergence of a new system of values that would define it differently.¹²

I've no need to trace here the rise of other groups that, in what Syme called "the triumph of the non-political classes," joined the elite structure of the Roman republic and early principate—Italian and later provincial for Roman, equestrian for senator, freedman for equestrian. Even, or perhaps especially, with elites, it may be a case of dog eats dog, and I can't resist Tacitus' version of the senate's reception of the Emperor Claudius' proposal to extend to the Celtic dynasts of Tres Galliae the right to enter upon senatorial careers. Italian senators of more modest wealth, in a Tacitean perspective rather different from Claudius' majestic vision of Roman history as a process of the ever-widening inclusion of outsiders, oppose it on the grounds that "those rich men will swamp everything," *oppleturos omnia divites illos*.¹³

My supporting example is taken from the growth of what Bruce Frier called "that self-consciously autonomous field of study," Roman law (Frier 1985.269–87 [citation at 272]). Beginning in the early first century B.C. but much accelerated under the principate, we witness the rise of the jurists, a breed of specialists first drawn, but later diverging, from the aristocratic nexus that had prevailed in these matters since the time of the Twelve Tables. It was an equestrian friend of Julius Caesar who wrote the first commentary on the Praetor's Edict, another equestrian to whom Tiberius, in a much-debated passage of the jurist Pomponius, gave the *ius respondendi* (*Digest* 1.2.44, 48). The last really famous senatorial jurist was Salvius Julianus, who codified the Edict in the time of Hadrian. His still more famous successors, Papinian and Ulpian, were men of equestrian status and of provincial background—Ulpian was very proud of his origin in the city of

12 Hopkins 1965 writes of an aristocratic value system and the stresses and strains put upon it by the rise of rivals for power, but not of the emergence of an alternative value system.

13 Tacitus *Ann.* 11.23. For Tacitus' "reworking" of Claudius' oration, which survives on a famous inscription (*ILS* 212), see esp. Griffin 1982.

Tyre and described in his work *On Censuses* how it came to be made a Roman colony.¹⁴

The result of these and other changes is that “elite society”—seen in the number of elites that we encounter—becomes more complex, while the political power structure, being ever more concentrated on the emperor, becomes simpler. The simplicity, however, is in the fundamentals of the structure and not in the details. As the Roman empire grows in complexity, it exacts a greater complexity of responses to different areas and problems, to be met by ever greater skills in administration and finance, and this feeds back into Roman society by creating new elites, as the people who have advanced by means of these specialisms exact due recognition as members of a new elite of government service.¹⁵ And there is an ideology to match, as Marcus Aurelius wrote to a newly promoted procurator, Domitius Marsianus:

Having long wished to raise you to the splendour of ducenariate procurator, I now take advantage of the opportunity which offers itself. Succeed therefore Marius Pudens, with as much assurance of my continued favour as you remain mindful of the qualities of honesty, diligence, and experience. Farewell my Marsianus, my very dear friend.

This citation from the emperor’s letter of appointment was inscribed by Marsianus’ brother Domitius Fabianus on the base of the equestrian statue voted to Marsianus by the city council of Bulla Regia in proconsular Africa, the expense of which Fabianus saved them by paying for it himself.¹⁶ It is a not uncommon situation in the Roman empire for an individual whose fame and virtue derived from one environment to be praised for them in another.

14 *Digest* 50.15.1 pr.: “One must realize that there are some colonies with *ius Italicum*, as in Syria Phoenice, the most splendid colony of the Tyrians, which is my place of origin, outstanding in its territories, of very ancient foundation, powerful in war, always loyal to the treaty it made with the Romans, for the deified Severus and our emperor granted it *ius Italicum* because of its great and conspicuous faithfulness toward the Roman state and empire (*ob egregiam in rem publicam imperiumque Romanum insignem fidem*).” Ulpian then names sixteen other cities of colonial status in the east, Asia Minor, and Dacia.

15 This is not to claim anachronistic levels of specialisation, cf. the sceptical studies of Brunt 1975 and 1983.47–52. My point concerns the evolution of a new value system based on an ideology of service. The service itself does not need to have been especially efficient, though I think that it was, to a greater extent than conceded by Brunt.

16 *L’Année épigraphique* 1962 no. 183. The citation is headed *exemplum codicillorum*.

This process, what we may call the emergence of an aristocracy of service, had been happening for a long time—something very like it comes in the later chapters of Tacitus' *Agricola*, justifying his father-in-law's support of the tyrant Domitian in the interests of hard work and loyal service in the administration of empire—but it becomes more prevalent as time goes on. The *Theodosian Code* could be pertinently indexed under "Elites, Handbook for the Guidance of . . ." It is easy enough to find examples, as for instance:

Those persons who have very gallantly led their soldiers in transmarine provinces and in consideration of their merits have obtained the countship of the first order, <and those also> who have obtained honorary letters patent conferring upon them the title of master of the horse, shall be subjoined to men of the loftiest ranks, and such respect shall be paid to them, that those who are decorated with the insignia of the proconsulate shall yield precedence to them.¹⁷

Referring to quite another elite, the senatorial aristocracy of Rome, Ammianus Marcellinus had his own famously comic version of this obsession with precedence and forms of respect;

If one tries to greet these people with an embrace they turn their head to one side like a bad-tempered bull, though that is the correct place for a kiss, and offer their knee or their hand instead, as if that should be enough to make anyone happy for it.¹⁸

To trace this process of the evolution of an aristocracy of service is more than I can do here, nor is it really necessary, for the essentials are well known. To round off my remarks, I would like to pose three questions.

First, elites rise into view, and, in the Roman empire as in the modern world, they announce their presence as they do so. Whether soldiers,

17 The text is a compilation of two (*C. Th.* 6.14.1 and 6.22.4) of the four texts comprising Valentinian's "law of precedence" of July 5, 372 (see also *C. Th.* 6.7.1 and 6.9.1). For the reconstruction, see Matthews 2000.221–23.

18 *osculanda capita in modum taurorum minacium obliquantes*, etc.; Amm. Marc. 28.4.10, transl. Walter Hamilton. See below, n. 22, on the etiquette of *osculatio*.

equestrians, provincials, or any other category of the upwardly mobile, they leave a mark on the sources because they draw attention to themselves and because people notice them. This is the purpose of the operation. In the early second century, the younger Pliny saw near Rome on the road to Tibur an inscription in honour of Nero's freedman Pallas, and wrote a letter about it (*Ep.* 7.29):

To him the senate decreed, in return for his loyal services to his patrons, the insignia of praetor and the sum of fifteen million sesterces, but he thought fit to accept the distinction only.

In Tacitean fashion (and I say this advisedly, for the scholarly emulation of his great contemporary is clear), Pliny later took the trouble to look up the actual decree of the senate and “found it so verbose and fulsome that the insolence of this inscription seemed modest and perfectly humble by comparison.” “How glad I am that my lot did not fall in those days,” pronounced Pliny at the end of his extended and really quite interesting study of elite dissonance, “for which I blush as if I had lived in them!” (*Ep.* 8.6).

We know about elites because their rise generates the evidence about them; these are not meant to be silent or invisible processes and they are commemorated. My first question then is, what about the reverse process? What happens when an elite declines and disappears? How do we detect it? Are we missing something important here, or is the Roman empire like a modern expanding economy, able to offer endless opportunities to an endlessly proliferating number of elites? But what happens when the economy ceases to expand; can anyone describe the *disappearance* of the Roman senate, or of the class of *curiales*, when the Roman empire ceases to flourish?

One candidate for study, taking a hint from Pliny's reflections on bygone days, is the decline of the old republican aristocracy in the early empire. We see its members in Tacitus' *Annals* and other sources, begging the emperor, like one descendant of the great orator Hortensius (*Ann.* 2.37–38), for a cash donation to maintain their status, fighting voluntarily as gladiators or appearing in Nero's games, committing suicide to avoid poverty (that is to say, a non-senatorial lifestyle). The decline of the republican nobility used conventionally to be seen in terms of political opposition and the consequential loss of property, combined with demographic decline—the latter not surprising, since the political experience itself was, for many, a

discouraging one. Relatively little attention is given to Matthias Gelzer's essay on "The Nobility of the Principate," less extensive and less famous by far than his classic "The Nobility of the Roman Republic," but still a subtly nuanced interpretation, capable indeed of expansion but persuasive in its essentials.¹⁹ Senators who rejected Augustus' restoration of their order and declined his offer of participation in the principate undermined their social and economic status by cutting themselves off from political office and withdrawing from that competition for office on which, still under the principate, social and family prestige depended. So the old nobility disappeared from the scene into some less conspicuous arena of life, an unmarked disappearance of an elite that is only traceable in the moral reflections on their disreputable descendants offered by Tacitus and his like (Gelzer 1975.158–61).

To find the same process in the late empire, we might invoke Michele Salzman's help to look, if not at the end of the senate as such, then at the pagan aristocracy as a declining elite in relation to their rising Christian counterparts. These aristocrats solved their problem by jumping ship and joining the other side, taking with them all the baggage they could carry—which, as Peter Brown memorably showed, was quite a lot (Brown 1961). Sometimes it was too much (to change the metaphorical mode of travel) for those self-appointed check-in clerks, like Jerome, who would have charged excess baggage fees for the pagan culture they brought with them or made them leave it behind. In a way, these aristocrats exercised, as it were, a choice of elites; abandoning the pagan, they retained the aristocratic and, in due course, acquired a new identity as a Christian senatorial elite. In the process, as Michele Salzman shows, they might actually have to change their minds on important issues. It is a multi-dimensional picture, and the behaviour of these senators is not easily classified. Different types of elite, religious and social, are involved simultaneously, and they overlap in complex ways.

My second question, therefore, reverting to the question of *mentalité*, concerns the interplay of different elite cultures in a single person or group. Take the case of Ammianus Marcellinus. Let me suppose that I have made a good enough case to retain him as an Antiochene rather than a product of

19 The essays, originally published separately, were translated together by Robin Seager in Gelzer 1975. "The Nobility of the Principate" is at 141–61. See, too, chapter xxxii of Syme 1939, "The Doom of the *Nobiles*."

Alexandria or some other city (Matthews 1994). Now, an older view was that Ammianus was from the elite of Antioch, that is to say, from the curial class of the Greek city; but, in studying him, I thought that it might make better sense to see him as a member of a family settled there through imperial service. This would explain how he came, so early in life, to belong to what is usually called the “elite corps” of *protectores domestici*.²⁰ So, this member of an elite of imperial service living in the city—those people sometimes *honorati*—joined an elite corps in the Roman army and came many years later to Rome. There he was greatly disappointed by the behaviour of the historic elite of the entire empire, the senatorial aristocracy—or at least by that minority of the nobility who “do not reflect where they were born” (14.6.7). Then, in an equally famous passage, Ammianus denounces that ambiguous elite of the imperial court, the eunuchs, but makes an exception, as one so often finds with social and other forms of prejudice, for the one whom he knew personally, Julian’s former aide, Eutherius.²¹ Living in retirement at Rome, Eutherius won the affection and friendship of “all orders” of Roman society, *colatur a cunctis ordinibus et ametur*—obviously including Ammianus himself, the *honestus advena* of an earlier passage (16.7.7, 14.6.12). It would be interesting to know how many of the “elites” of Roman society were represented at Eutherius’ soirees and how one would count them; senators no doubt, but also visitors from the imperial court, retired officials living at Rome, professors and literary connoisseurs, aspiring historians interested, like Ammianus, in Eutherius’ “immense memory,” Christians as well as pagans, slave and free, men and women, young and old.

It is a complex picture and, in this, realistic. If we are going to apply the notion of an elite to understand the experiences of individuals rather than simply to generate sociological parameters, we must get used to the idea of multiplicity, of moving between elites. People’s lives are not usually lived according to one and only one value system, and they may be able to switch from one to the other.

My third and last question is related to this. One can belong to an

20 This may be close to the original use of the term “elite.” Webster’s *New Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English Language* (above, n. 1), after the etymology of the word and the general definition cited above, gives just one, unusual example; “Collectively, highly trained soldiers;—applied to the Swiss first-line troops.” Was this the original *corps d’élite*?

21 Eutherius is also a notable exception to the diagnosis of Hopkins 1978.172–96. Perhaps it is just that we do not have Eutherius’ enemies to speak about him.

elite in different ways and at different levels. I had occasion some time ago to reflect on the ceremony of *adoratio purpurae* by which an aspiring member of the imperial elite signified his attachment by touching with his lips the edge of the imperial purple robe when it was offered to him (cf. Matthews 1989.244–47). I have no need to go into this, except to recall that I was once explaining the procedure to a partly non-specialist and non-academic audience. A gentleman in the audience—this was in England—stood up and modestly told us that he himself been honoured by Her Majesty the Queen. He then described how after receiving the honour one had to recede from Her Majesty’s presence without turning one’s back on the royal gaze, that is, walking backwards. (I had been talking about someone being bawled out of the imperial presence by the emperor Valentinian, an unlikely experience with the present monarch of the United Kingdom.) It crossed my mind, though I did not say so, that this well-known ritual is more humiliating than honorific, a point of view that had clearly not occurred to my friend the questioner. What I mean is that rituals, which, at one level, are intended to subordinate a person, may also serve to include him (or her) in a charmed circle. We are all familiar with versions of those humble and proud employees of august institutions, like Oxbridge colleges or great hotels in capital cities. (The combination can, of course, and in the Roman empire often did, turn nasty, as with those petty officials whose ill-will and limited imaginations are given disproportionate power to harm by the organisations to which they subscribe.) So with *adoratio purpurae*; the ceremony defined by inclusion a class of people, to quote again the *Theodosian Code*, “thought worthy to touch Our purple”—like Ammianus, who had done it, with evident benefit to himself.²²

I will close with two favourite quotations given me long ago by my old friend Philip Rousseau, the first from Plotinus’ *Enneads* (5.5.3). Plotinus compares the appearance to the philosopher, after much intellectual preparation, of the Supreme God, to the progress of a great king. He is not talking of any particular king, nor specifically of a Roman emperor, but this need not affect our enjoyment of the scene or our appreciation of its significance. The Supreme God, wrote Plotinus:

22 C. Th. 6.24.4 (March 6, 387), extending the right of *protectores* to greet *vicarii* with a kiss (*osculatio*). For *protectores* and *adoratio*, see *Notitia Dignitatum*, Or. 39.37, etc.; Matthews 1989.77, 246–47.

will be heralded by some ineffable beauty; as before a great king in his progress there come first the minor officials, then, rank by rank, the more exalted, and the closer to the king they are, the more like the king they are; next his own honoured company until, last among all these splendours, suddenly appears the Supreme Monarch himself, and all—except indeed for those who have contented themselves with the spectacle before his coming—all prostrate themselves and hail him.

The assembled grandees have their share in the pomp and circumstance directed at the great king and reflect his glory. Just so, on the other side of the religious divide, a desert father said, more briefly than Plotinus but just as forcibly (the other reference given me by Philip Rousseau), “We honour the One True God, and all men honour us!” (*PG* 65.213A).

This is not my motto in life, nor do I suggest it for others. But to end with it may help to bring out my central point. “Elites” are a multifaceted social construction and a negotiable instrument for the individual, and they have subjective value in terms of human experience as well as analytic value for the historian. They proliferate and, in doing so, they resist simplification. They come and they go, they evolve and they transform, they look in and they look out. They are meant to include or to exclude, to define or to separate, as appropriate; they function because they exact and are exposed to the appraisal of others: they invite participation and they need an audience.

Yale University