

Born to Be Emperor

The Principle of Succession and the Roman Monarchy

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WHEN CONSTANTINE I WAS ACCLAIMED EMPEROR BY THE ROMAN troops in Eburacum (York) after the death of his father Constantius Chlorus in the summer of 306, this step was at once both extraordinary and predictable—and it was probably seen as such by contemporaries, whether or not they considered the Imperium Romanum a hereditary monarchy. Neither in the eyes of the new *senior augustus* Galerius nor in the view of most modern historians did Constantine's accession satisfy the prevailing criteria of the time. Whether he can be called a “usurper,” however, is of secondary importance,¹ for it is clear that he saw himself confronted by a deficit of legitimacy.² His success tipped the balance in favor of the idea that being related to an emperor justified one's claim to rule, and it was in this period that the dynastic principle was established as an *explicit* element of the legitimation of Roman rulers once and for all. With the exception of Jovian, who ruled for only a few months, all universally recognized emperors between 324 and the mid-fifth century, without exception, were members of only two dynasties: first the Constantinian and subsequently the Valentinian-Theodosian. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the causes and consequences of this development.

¹ On Constantine as usurper, see Jones 1964, vol. 1, 78–79; Grünewald 1990, 13; Bleckmann 1996, 43; Kolb 2001, 59; Lenski 2006, 62; Brandt 2006, 32; Van Dam 2007, 83; Humphries 2008, 84. *Contra*: Odahl 2004, 78–79; Barnes 2009, 381; Wienand 2012, 119–142. On an extremely pragmatic definition of “usurpers” as “emperors who had been defeated in civil war” and the term *tyrannus* as a designation for “a failed *augustus*,” see Humphries 2008, 86–87; cf. also Szidat 2010, 27–31. For the purposes of this discussion, the term “usurper” denotes someone who illegitimately attempts to establish himself as emperor, and “monarchy” denotes a political system dominated by an individual.

² It is impossible to determine whether Constantine or his dying father gave the impetus for his acclamation as emperor (cf. Odahl 2004, 78; Barnes 2009, 381). The argument that the Tetrarchs, particularly Galerius, had sent Constantine to Britain so that he could be elevated to *caesar* by the then *senior augustus* Constantius (Schmitt 2007, 101) is speculative and, in my opinion, cannot satisfactorily explain the events.

PRINCIPATE AND DYNASTY BEFORE 284

The dynastic principle had been important in the Roman monarchy from the very beginning. The idea that property, clients, and influence—but not *potestates* and *honores*—could be inherited was self-evident to the Roman nobility of the *res publica libera*. It made the careers of not a few *homines novi* far more difficult. Theoretically, the principle of meritocracy obtained; but in reality, as in most aristocratic societies, the Roman nobility sought to limit the number of social climbers and to concentrate power in the hands of the established *gentes*. Without the widespread willingness of supporters and soldiers to transfer their loyalty to their *patronus*'s heir, Caesar's adoptive son Octavian could never have seized power for himself in the Imperium Romanum.

It was probably inevitable, that Octavian—now Augustus—resolve the question of the succession during his lifetime: a new struggle for power after his death, which easily could have escalated into civil war, would otherwise have been virtually inescapable. It was natural for a *nobilis* to bequeath the position that he had achieved to a member of his family; and likewise already the first *princeps* sought to pass on his power to a biological heir within his own family. It is not this which is striking and which stands in need of explanation, but rather the persistence of the notion that descent from emperors did not qualify a man to rule, despite all trends to the contrary: if a *princeps* died before a successor had been designated or, ideally, had already been made co-ruler, then the question of the next emperor was essentially still open.³

In the early period of the new order, this is still fairly easy to explain. That Augustus as the notional restorer of the *res publica* could not simply bestow on an heir the exceptional position that his remarkable personal *auctoritas* justified⁴ is obvious enough. His rule was based on the premise that he had brought the civil wars to an end. The honors and the exceptional powers, which clothed his power in legitimate forms, had only been conferred on him. He therefore had to acknowledge the necessity of promoting and selecting potential successors according to their achievements and merits, not their familial relationship to himself. The principle of meritocracy, which had dominated the self-understanding of Roman *nobiles* for centuries, was still too strong. Of course, it was only proper to support the political career of younger relatives, but they had to attain personal *auctoritas* by their own accomplishments in the service of the *res publica*.⁵

³ Cf. Dahlheim 1989, 16–17.

⁴ Aug. *Res gest.* 34.

⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 56: *Numquam filios suos populo commendavit ut non adiceret: Si merebuntur* (“He never recommended his sons to the people without adding, ‘As long as they deserve it’”). The *Historia*

Yet just a few decades later, the Roman monarchy was a *de facto* reality to which there was no alternative. At the very latest, the events after the deaths of Caligula and Nero, who both died without leaving a designated heir, must have made this clear to even the slowest observer. Both times the monarchy continued. And yet still the dynastic principle could not establish itself. If an emperor wished to secure the succession of a specific candidate, even one of his own sons, he had to invest that candidate with the appropriate powers in his own lifetime and raise him to *princeps iuventutis*, or *caesar*, or directly to *augustus*. Titus, Commodus, and Caracalla are the best examples of this procedure. Although the familial relationship with the emperor and membership of the *domus divina* were in practice crucial for the succession, they were not decisive in formal terms and could not by themselves ensure a smooth transition of power. There was no automatic succession in the sense of “Le roi est mort, vive le roi!” A natural or adopted son of an *augustus*, as legal heir to the emperor’s property and clients, had the means to render it virtually impossible to pass him over without bloodshed. Nonetheless, descent did not lend him *per se* sufficient legitimacy or a formal right to rule, least of all before the senate. Only against this background could the ideological foundation of the adoptive emperors be formulated, which Tacitus already puts in the mouth of Galba:

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; . . . for to be begotten and born of princes (*a principibus*) is mere chance, and is not reckoned higher, but the judgment displayed in adoption is unhampered.⁶

Yet even the two most famous childless emperors of the second century, Trajan and Hadrian, hesitated for a conspicuously long time before appointing a co-ruler. Trajan probably never took this step,⁷ while Hadrian did so only when he was mortally ill, and even then he chose harmless candidates without military accomplishments. In light of the fact that an unclear succession at the death of an emperor would almost inevitably provoke civil war, the apparently irresponsible behavior of these *principes* requires an explanation. Presumably many *augusti* feared that their already precarious position might be threatened by the elevation of a co-ruler and successor. Instead of risking the fate

Augusta probably alludes to this passage when it reports of Pertinax that he wanted to raise his son to the rank of *caesar* only when he had earned it: *cum meruerit* (Hist. Aug. Pert. 6.9).

⁶ Tac. *Hist.* 1.16 (trans. Moore 1925).

⁷ Cass. Dio 69.1.3; Hist. Aug. *Hadr.* 4.10. In any case, Hadrian, as Trajan’s great-nephew, seems to have been the closest male relative of the *princeps*.

of a “lame duck,” they ignored the pleas of the senate and the threat of bloody conflict after their death for as long as possible. It moreover is scarcely a coincidence that Marcus Aurelius raised his five-year-old son Commodus to the rank of *caesar*: the risk of being marginalized by one’s natural son seems to have been very small compared to that taken in the last resort by adopting a successor. The obligation of *pietas* toward one’s own biological father most likely was considered simply non-negotiable. What is clear is that in the eyes of most emperors, the dynastic principle was to be preferred: that almost every *augustus* who had a natural son sought to establish him as his successor is sufficient proof of this.⁸ The fact that the relationship between an emperor’s sons could prove problematic is exemplified by Domitian and Titus and, above all, by Geta and Caracalla.⁹ As fate would have it, though, only two emperors—Vespasian and Septimius Severus—were survived by more than one biological son in the first 250 years of the Principate.

If, then, the *principes* favored the dynastic principle from the beginning while the monarchy in Rome became ever more “natural,” why was dynastic succession to the throne never universally accepted? In part, at least, this can perhaps be explained in terms of the “system of acceptance.”¹⁰ If we agree with Egon Flaig, there was no single, indisputable source of legitimacy,¹¹ and none of the groups on which the rule of the *augustus* depended—neither the soldiers nor the *nobiles* or the *plebs urbana*—was willing to forgo the advantages they derived from the fundamentally negotiable nature of the imperial succession. This had come to light as early as 41, when the Praetorian Guard on its own initiative acclaimed Claudius emperor, so that the new ruler would be indebted to them.¹²

Above all, the demand of the soldiers for the right to acclaim an emperor of their own choosing grew louder over the decades, although the military milieu had always been inclined toward the foundation of dynasties: *exercitus facit imperatorem*.¹³ An automatic succession of emperors was not in the interest

8 Claudius evidently is an exception, since he seems to have preferred his adopted stepson Nero over Britannicus. The sources explain this with reference to the influence of Agrippina (Tac. *Ann.* 12.41; Cass. Dio 61.32.1–2). There is no reliable evidence for the view that in the end, he instead sought to establish Britannicus as his successor and was murdered because of it (Tac. *Ann.* 12.65–66; cf. Aveline 2004). It is, however, possible, that Nero was intended to act merely as temporary ruler on behalf of Britannicus. I am not aware of any other example in Roman history of an emperor’s son being excluded without violence from the succession.

9 Cass. Dio 78.1.4.

10 Flaig 1992, 174–207.

11 Flaig 1992, 184.

12 Joseph. *Ant. Iud.* 19.2.1.

13 Hier. *Ep.* 146.6; cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.76.4: *Et posse ab exercitu principem fieri sibi ipse Vitellius documento* (“Vitellius himself proves that it is possible to be made *princeps* by the army”).

of the groups concerned, whose influence remained undiminished well into the third century, as was clearly illustrated in the “year of the six emperors” of 238.¹⁴ If the closest male relative of the *princeps* could not assert his claim to the succession almost automatically, then the death of the emperor became an opportunity to renegotiate privileges and loyalties. At the same time, an emperor who had not yet designated a successor retained sole power and need not fear his own marginalization.

The persistence of the notion that descent from emperors did not qualify a man to rule is still attested by Herodian, who puts a plea in favor of meritocracy in the mouth of Macrinus.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the fact that dynastic bonds on the whole became ever more important for the question of succession can scarcely be contested.¹⁶ An important step in this direction was taken by Septimius Severus, who expected to derive an advantage in the civil war of 193 from claiming (fictitious) descent from the Antonines.¹⁷ He established a close relationship precisely between his own *domus* and the soldiers, which proved sufficient to bring Elagabalus to power in 218: the young man simply spread the claim that he was an illegitimate son of Septimius’s son Caracalla.¹⁸ Gordian III, likewise a youth, owed the purple in 238 to being grandson and nephew, respectively, of two emperors who had ruled for only several weeks.¹⁹

DIOCLETIAN AND THE FIRST TETRARCHY

At the latest since 268, the real choice of a successor lay with the armies, not least because the military threats to the empire meant that emperors were usually acclaimed not in Rome but rather by the armies on the frontiers. This must have further reduced the importance of the Roman senate and *plebs*.

The period of instability into which the Principate fell in the mid-third century was ended by Diocletian. The Tetrarchy²⁰ established by him represents

¹⁴ Börm 2008a, 76–77.

¹⁵ Herod. 5.1.5–7. Macrinus in fact sought to associate himself with the Severan dynasty; cf. Zimmermann 1999, 220. Moreover, he allowed his young son Diadumenianus to be raised first as *princeps iuventutis* and *caesar*, and then as *augustus*; Cass. Dio 78.17.1; cf. Syme 1972.

¹⁶ Hekster 2002 argues, from the example of Commodus, that the character of the principate as an “acceptance system” did not mean that the dynastic principle was unimportant.

¹⁷ Cf. Birley 1988, 17. Moreover, the conduct of Clodius Albinus—who allowed himself to be encouraged by Severus with the rank of *caesar* and the expectation of succeeding him, although his rival had two sons—can be better explained if the governor of Britain did not envisage a dynastic succession.

¹⁸ Cass. Dio 79.32.1–3.

¹⁹ It is possible that Gordianus III also sought to establish a fictive relationship to the Severan dynasty; cf. Börm 2008a, 78.

²⁰ Seston 1946; Barnes 1982; Kolb 1987; Rees 2004.

an important caesura, during which the reigning *augustus* separated the “holy family” of the four emperors from their natural relatives; they intermarried among themselves²¹ and apparently envisaged no role for Maxentius and Constantine. Considerations of military efficiency obviously played a role here. No *augustus* had succeeded in establishing a dynasty since 235, while not a few had elevated either immature or incompetent sons as co-emperors, who sooner or later failed and thereby weakened the empire further. Even ancient authors justified the gradual introduction of a college of emperors by referring to military threats.²² With the foundation of the Sasanian empire in 224, which permanently threatened Rome with the prospect of war on more than one front, the military threat had become far graver and could scarcely be managed by a single ruler.²³

Above all, however, Diocletian’s arrangement reduced the likelihood of usurpation, which had so seriously shaken the Imperium Romanum in previous decades. Now a pretender would have to deal with an entire college of emperors.²⁴ Still more important, ambitious commanders who considered themselves *capax imperii* could hope to be admitted to the imperial college peacefully instead of having to wage civil war against the ruling family.²⁵ The emperors’ sons Maxentius and Constantine were certainly cultivated,²⁶ presumably to prepare them for admission to the imperial college once they merited it; yet around 300, the right to rule was less hereditary than ever.

Diocletian himself began as a soldier emperor who had seized power in civil war against Carinus, the son of the emperor Carus, and he was perhaps

²¹ Eutr. 9.22.1.

²² Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 39.17–24; Eutr. 9.22.1. Despite these explanations, Frank Kolb assumes that the Tetrarchy was not improvised as a response to military problems, but rather that it was the product of a carefully conceived plan; cf. Kolb 1987.

²³ Heather 2005, 58–67; cf. Wiesehöfer 2008.

²⁴ During the first Tetrarchy there were certainly usurpers; cf. *Epit. de Caes.* 39.3 (*hoc tempore Charausio in Galliis, Achilleus apud Aegyptum, Iulianus in Italia imperatores effecti diverso exitu periere*).

²⁵ In my opinion, it was therefore not a matter of taking into the Tetrarchy men from whom there was no potential threat of usurpation (*contra* Seston 1954, 1039). On attempted usurpation by successful military commanders in the third century, see Hartmann 1982.

²⁶ At least in the case of Constantine, this is certain; cf. Mitchell 2007, 62. When the later tradition, which is favorable to Constantine, complains that Galerius subjected the young man to considerable danger in the war against the Sarmatians (Anon. Val. *Origo Const.* 2–3), there may be a concealed suggestion that the intention was actually not to endanger Constantine but rather to offer him the opportunity to earn military laurels. Had the intention been, on the other hand, to eliminate him, there would have been more simple means. Eusebius also mentions the support for Constantine through his father’s colleagues (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.19.1). According to Lactantius, however, he had risen only to the rank of *tribunus primi ordinis* (Lact. *Mort. pers.* 18.10). It is uncertain whether Constantine was engaged to the daughter of Maximianus before 306; cf. Bleckmann 1996, 41.

not altogether innocent of the death of Carinus's brother Numerianus in 284.²⁷ Like many emperors before him, the new *augustus* began his rule with usurpation against a dynastically legitimate emperor. Quite early in his reign it became apparent that familial relationships (*consanguinitas*) would no longer be decisive, even before the expansion of the diarchy to the Tetrarchy in 293. This is reflected in the panegyric transmitted under the name of Mamertinus, which was delivered in *Treveris* (Trier) in 289, in honor of Diocletian's colleague Maximianus. Reference precisely to the dynastic principle makes it clear, on the other hand, that criticism of it already required a justification: "Both of you are now most bountiful, both most brave, and because of this very similarity in your characters the harmony between you is ever increasing, and you are brothers in virtue, which is a surer tie than any tie of blood."²⁸

Naturally, there was rivalry within the Tetrarchy. Lactantius may have exaggerated the ambition of the *caesar* Galerius who is said to have become increasingly dissatisfied with his subordination to the *augusti*, especially after his spectacular victory over the Persian *Šāhān šāh* Narses in 298.²⁹ Yet it was natural that a system in which outstanding *virtutes* and *gesta* justified rule could not remain free from tension and rivalry. The superiority of the *augusti*, *creatores deorum*,³⁰ however, was secure, and the *auctoritas* of the *senior augustus* Diocletian seems to have never been challenged by the other three emperors.³¹ Decades later, Aurelius Victor emphasized these clearly defined relationships: "Finally, they used to look up to Valerius as a father or like a mighty god. The nature and importance of this attitude have been made conspicuous by the crimes committed by relatives from the founding of the city to our own times."³²

Diocletian's intention to minimize the importance of *consanguinitas* in the imperial succession is often seen as the decisive mistake that led to the collapse of the Tetrarchy after 306.³³ Meritocracy and the dynastic principle were not, however, fundamentally incongruous.³⁴ It must have been obvious to

27 Eutr. 9.20.1–2.

28 *Pan. lat.* 10(2).9.3 (trans. Nixon/Rodgers 1994).

29 Lact. *Mort. pers.* 9.8: *quo usque caesar?* ("How long still only *caesar?*")

30 ILS 629: *diis genitis et deorum creatoribus dd. nn. Diocletiano et [Maximiano invictis] Augg.*

31 Bleckmann 2004, 75. Julian also depicts the subordination of the remaining three emperors, including his own grandfather, Constantius Chlorus, to Diocletian by describing them as dancers and bodyguards of the *senior augustus* (Iul. *Caes.* 315a–b). An indication of Diocletian's exceptional *auctoritas* is afforded by his intervention in the power struggles of 308, when he again held the consulship and compelled the rival emperors at Carnuntum to make at least a temporary agreement.

32 Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 39.29 (trans. Bird 1994).

33 Cf. Christ 1995, 730; Bellen 1998, 269–270; Brandt 1998, 27; Frakes 2006, 93; Demandt 2007, 74.

34 The marriage relationships of the *augusti* and *caesares* with one another demonstrate that family categories were not foreign to the Tetrarchs. Thus, Galerius was Diocletian's son-in-law; cf. Brandt 1998, 62. This was especially true for the *Iovii* Diocletian, Galerius and Maximinus Daia. In fact, it

Diocletian, who had otherwise proven to possess a sharp appreciation of political realities, how great was the devotion of the soldiers to tradition. We might well conclude that he had good reasons for his policy. And indeed, if his aim was to prevent usurpation, then his actions were only reasonable. Retreat from the *de iure* irrelevant dynastic principle was his answer to the civil wars of the third century. In contrast to the emperors of the second century, Diocletian, who was the only Roman emperor to abdicate voluntarily,³⁵ was true to his word when he propagated the principle of meritocracy.

The new system could offer ambitious men prospects and thus prevent usurpation, only if positions in the college of emperors became available at relatively short intervals. If vacancies were not created by natural means, as a result of the deaths of emperors, then *augusti* would have to abdicate to ensure that the system achieved its principal aim of avoiding bloody power struggles. Precisely this occurred in May 305,³⁶ and it was precisely for this reason that Constantine and Maxentius, natural sons of emperors, could not be permitted to enter the imperial college automatically, since this would have denied advancement to experienced men. Diocletian's Tetrarchy did not fail because of an arbitrary or naïve rejection of the dynastic principle but rather because Constantius Chlorus died before his son could earn regular admission to the college of emperors on the basis of his achievements.³⁷

CONSTANTINE: THE FOUNDING OF A DYNASTY

The exact sequence of events that led to the acclamation of Constantine by the legions in Britain in July 306 remains uncertain.³⁸ Even if his dying father had indeed bestowed the purple on him, Constantine's pretensions to the rank of *augustus* clearly violated the rules of the Tetrarchy.³⁹ Perhaps he was not

is quite possible that Diocletian wanted them and not the *Herculii* to be viewed as the actual *domus augusta*.

³⁵ Bleckmann 1996, 38–40.

³⁶ The new Tetrarchy immediately advertised the unity of the college of emperors on its coins: CONCORDIA AVGG ET CAESS NN (RIC VI 203 no. 618). The abdication of the *augusti* Diocletian and Maximian had evidently been long in the making; cf. Kolb 1995, 30.

³⁷ It is conceivable that Galerius sent Constantine to Britain above all so that he might distinguish himself in the fighting there, and indeed he accompanied his father on a campaign against the Picts (Anon. Val. *Origo Const.* 4). Constantius Chlorus's death was quite possibly unexpected.

³⁸ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.21.1–1.22.2; Anon. Val. *Origo Const.* 4: *Constantinus omnium militum consensu caesar creatus* ("Constantine was unanimously declared *caesar* by the soldiers"); cf. Potter 2004, 340–346, who illustrates the problems of the tradition friendly to Constantine.

³⁹ The sources are divided as to whether Constantine aspired to the title of *augustus* in July 306 (Schmitt 2007, 104). In my opinion, there is no compelling reason to doubt the near-contemporary report of Lactantius, favorable toward Constantine, according to which he began his reign as *augustus* (Lact. *Mort. pers.* 24.9), while he was acknowledged reluctantly by Galerius only as *caesar* (Lact.

a usurper—or perhaps he had to usurp power simply to stay alive—but he definitely had to acknowledge that he lacked legitimacy. Nothing illustrates Constantine’s consciousness of this deficit more than his efforts to compensate for it, even after Galerius had grudgingly recognized him as *caesar*.⁴⁰

Since Constantine obviously could not claim to have performed any significant service for the *res publica*, as he had hardly any *gesta* to show, and since by accepting his demotion to *caesar* he implicitly conceded that neither his father nor the legions in Britain had had the right to confer on him the rank of *augustus*, there remained only one strategy of legitimation: to emphasize the dynastic principle more openly and insistently than ever in the past three centuries. This has been recognized by past scholars.⁴¹ Constantine took the first step in this direction already in 307, which is reflected in the panegyric delivered in Constantine’s and Maximian’s honor on the occasion of Constantine’s marriage to Fausta:⁴²

And so we give you the most heartfelt thanks in the public name, eternal princes, because in rearing children and wishing for grandchildren you are providing for all future ages by extending the succession of your posterity, so that the Roman state, once shaken by the disparate characters and fates of its rulers, may at last be made strong through the everlasting roots of your house, and its empire may be as immortal as the offspring of its Emperors is perpetual. . . . For you are propagating the State not with plebeian offshoot but with imperial stock, so that that thing which we were congratulating you on finally coming to pass in the thousandth year after the foundation of the city, that is, that the reins of our common safety not be handed down, subject to change, through new families, may last through all the ages, Emperors forever Herculian.⁴³

This speech reads almost as a deliberate alternative to the Diocletianic model. It is no longer the achievements of individuals, who through their outstanding service can rise to power, but rather the supposed stability from limiting the Principate to a single family that is the central message of the panegyric. Given that Constantine had hardly any achievements to show, this is unsurprising. His military experience must have seemed all the more modest against the glory

Mort. pers. 25.1–5). Eusebius also says unambiguously that Constantine was acclaimed in Eburacum as βασιλεὺς αὐτοκράτωρ and σεβαστὸς αὐγουστος (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.22.1).

⁴⁰ Humphries 2008.

⁴¹ Cf. Kolb 2001, 59–61; Mitchell 2007, 62–63.

⁴² The exact time and place (probably Trier, but possibly Arles) of this speech are disputed; cf. Grünewald 1990, 26.

⁴³ *Pan. lat.* 7(6).2.2, 2.5 (trans. Nixon/Rodgers 1994).

of Galerius's victory over the Persians in 298. The rhetor of 307 knew of hardly any victories for which he could praise Constantine.⁴⁴ Until his new father-in-law elevated him to *augustus*, he ranked as the lowest of the four emperors, and he was also the newest among them; Constantine probably manipulated the reckoning of his *tribunicia potestas* in order to make it comparable to that of his rivals Severus and Maximinus Daia.⁴⁵ This was obvious sleight of hand. The only advantage Constantine clearly had over the other three Tetrarchs was that he was the son of an *augustus*. Only he was *divi Constanti pii augusti filius*,⁴⁶ to whom his deified father had bequeathed the *imperium*.⁴⁷ Praxagoras, in his brief outline of Constantine's rise (FGH 219), mentions the βασιλεία he inherited from Constantius as the starting point. Circumstances dictated Constantine's actions, and from his perspective there was probably no alternative. His emphatic propagation of the dynastic principle, however, would have far-reaching consequences for the Roman empire.

Three eventful years later, the arrangement made at the conference of Carnuntum in 308, chaired by Diocletian, which had sought to rescue the Tetrarchic system, had failed.⁴⁸ The open power struggle intensified. After the death of Maximian, his son Maxentius emerged as Constantine's principal opponent. Maxentius had had himself acclaimed *augustus* in Rome in October 306, and he controlled Italy and Africa.⁴⁹ He was recognized by none of the other emperors. However, he could not only rely on the support of the senate, *plebs*, and Praetorian Guard, but he also enjoyed another advantage that must have irritated Constantine: like Constantine, Maxentius was the son of an *augustus*. If Constantine took his own propaganda seriously, which had so vehemently promoted the dynastic principle, then he had to acknowledge that Maxentius had a powerful claim to rule. Still worse, whereas Constantine was probably born out of wedlock,⁵⁰ Maxentius was the legitimate son of an *augustus*.⁵¹

44 *Pan. lat.* 7(6).4.4: *Tibi cunctis hostibus alacritatis tuae terrore compressis interim deest materia vincendi* ("Because all of our enemies have been suppressed from fear of your achievements, there is at present nothing for you to conquer").

45 Brandt 1998, 110–111.

46 CIL 17.88.

47 *Pan. lat.* 7(6).5.3. The example of Aurelius Victor, who in 360 (under Constantius II) soberly recognized that in 306, Constantine had simply "taken power," shows that this perspective never prevailed: *imperium capit* (*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 40.4).

48 On the occasion of this meeting and as a sign of the renewal of the Tetrarchy, the *augusti* and the *caesares* dedicated a temple to *Sol Invictus Mithras* (ILS 659).

49 Cf. Leppin/Ziemssen 2007.

50 Zonar. 13.1.4; cf. Schmitt 2007, 87–88.

51 Maxentius is probably the *filius* of Maximianus mentioned in the panegyric of 289 (*Pan. lat.* 10[2].14.1).

Constantine thus needed to bolster his ideological weaponry. He needed something that could justify his pretension to superiority. As matters stood, it seemed opportune to play the dynastic card yet again to trump Maxentius. It is thus no coincidence that next to Constantine's father, the *divus* Constantius, a second *divus*, Claudius II Gothicus (268–270), was now paraded to legitimate the emperor.

And so I shall begin with the divinity who is the origin of your family, of whom most people, perhaps, are still unaware, but whom those who love you know full well. For an ancestral relationship links you with the deified Claudius, who was the first to restore the discipline of the Roman empire when it was disordered and in ruins. . . . Among all who share your majesty, I aver you have this distinction, Constantine, that you were born an Emperor.⁵²

There is absolutely no evidence that Constantius Chlorus was really a descendant of the famous victor over the Goths.⁵³ The rhetor himself admits that this claim of descent would be news to most of his audience, which should be proof enough that it was a recent fabrication. Claudius II had triumphed spectacularly over a Germanic *gens*, and, like his alleged descendant, came from Illyricum. He evidently was remembered fondly, though his reign of just two years cannot have left much of an impression. To choose Claudius as an imperial forebear, which thereby made Constantine the descendant of two *augusti* and two *divi*, was ingenious. To make absolutely sure no one could miss it, the rhetor openly explains the purpose of this construction: to demonstrate that Constantine is superior to all of his fellow emperors, because he alone is a born *imperator*.⁵⁴ This strategy strongly recalls Septimius Severus who, unlike Constantine, chose a fictitious dynastic connection that did not lie decades in the past.

The appeal to Claudius Gothicus must have been emphatically propagated, as it seems to have become widely known. The tradition was still familiar to the author of the *Vita Claudii* in the *Historia Augusta*,⁵⁵ and in 361, Julian,

52 *Pan. lat.* 6(7).2.1–2, 2.5 (trans. Nixon/Rodgers 1994).

53 Cf. Syme 1974.

54 I am of the opinion that Constantine's adoption of Christianity, at least initially, was also an attempt to distance himself from his rivals. The fact that the Christians represented only a modest minority (cf. Bringmann 1995) and that a specific personal experience may have motivated Constantine's adoption of the God of the Christians (cf. Weiß 2003) is not relevant here. Moreover, as a monotheistic religion, Christianity may have been particularly attractive to a man who wanted to establish himself as sole ruler. On Constantine and Christianity, cf. Bardill 2012: 338–396.

55 *Hist. Aug. Claud.* 3.1–2: *In gratiam me quispiam putet Constantii caesaris loqui. . . Claudium principem loquor, cuius vita, probitas, et omnia quae in re publica gessit tantam posteris famam dedere ut senatus populusque Romanus novis eum honoribus post mortem adfecerit.* ("Some may think that

the last *augustus* of the Constantinian dynasty, portrays Claudius Gothicus in his *Caesares* as an exceptional ruler, to whose descendants the gods had entrusted the empire. Apparently he could take for granted that he himself was a descendant of Claudius, since he does not say a word on the subject: “Next came Claudius, at whom all the gods gazed, and admiring his greatness of soul granted the empire to his descendants.”⁵⁶

After Constantine’s victory over Maxentius in 312, his self-representation dropped every reference to the Diocletianic order.⁵⁷ In the panegyric of 313, the dynastic principle dominates completely; the rhetor expresses his hopes that the *maximus imperator* Constantine, to whom an heir has already been born, might have still more children “to govern the globe.”⁵⁸ The admission of men from outside the dynasty to the imperial college is no longer envisaged. Licinius, the *augustus* of the East, is not mentioned; the problem he poses is thus ignored.

After their first armed struggle for sole rule,⁵⁹ Licinius significantly followed the example set by Constantine: in 317, he raised his young son Licinianus to the rank of *caesar*.⁶⁰ This more than anything illustrates the effectiveness of Constantine’s emphasis on *consanguinitas*. Instead of turning to an experienced commander for support in light of the dangerous situation, as Diocletian had done in 285, Licinius embraced the idea of demonstrating stability and continuity by naming a successor from within his own family. During the first war against Constantine, he had acted differently and raised Valerius Valens, the Dacian *dux limitis*,⁶¹ to the rank of *caesar*.⁶² That experiment, however, had failed. The elevation of a man who was not a member of his family had not paid off. Valens, who was too dangerous as a new contender in the struggle for power, was probably killed at Constantine’s behest.⁶³

I speak in order to gain the favour of Constantius Caesar. . . when I speak of the *princeps* Claudius, whose life, integrity, and all that he did for the *res publica* won for him such fame among later generations, that the senate and people of Rome accorded him unique honours after his death.”) The author of the *Vita* claims to write in the time of Constantius. I follow the *communis opinio* here and assume that, in fact, the *Historia Augusta* was composed in the second half of the fourth century.

⁵⁶ Iul. *Caes.* 313d (trans. Wright 1913).

⁵⁷ Diocletian is mentioned in relevant sources for the last time in reference to the marriage of Licinius and Constantia in 313 (*Epit. de Caes.* 39.7).

⁵⁸ *Pan. lat.* 12(9).26.5; cf. Ronning 2007, 372.

⁵⁹ Anon. Val. *Origo Const.* 14–16; Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.18.1; cf. Lenski 2006, 73–74. Surprisingly biased: Odahl 2004, 170.

⁶⁰ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 41.6.

⁶¹ PLRE 1, 931.

⁶² Anon. Val. *Origo Const.* 17; cf. Christ 1995, 744.

⁶³ Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.20.1; *Epit. de Caes.* 40.9.

As for the youth of the new *caesares*, Constantine outdid his rival yet again: Constantine II was still an infant when he was clothed in the purple together with Licinianus and Crispus. It was thereby made clear to all that direct descent from an emperor was perfectly sufficient for elevation to the rank of *caesar*.⁶⁴ It was all but inevitable that this principle should result in a new war between the two remaining imperial families, in which Licinius was defeated in 324.⁶⁵ Constantine's victory was at the same time the triumph of the dynastic principle.⁶⁶ A central element in Diocletian's effort to stabilize the precarious Roman monarchy was thus abandoned and replaced with an essentially conservative strategy, which many emperors of the third century had already followed.

THE LEGACY OF CONSTANTINE: DYNASTIC RIVALRY

It is possible that the deadly clash between Constantine and his son and *caesar* Crispus reflects tensions within the *domus divina*, although the state of our sources makes it impossible to know for sure.⁶⁷ Yet there was another, more serious and central problem that resulted from emphasis on *consanguinitas* as the main basis of imperial legitimacy: if direct descent from an emperor justified a claim to the *imperium*, how would one decide which descendent enjoyed pre-eminence over the others? After Crispus's death, Constantine's superior *auctoritas* was never challenged again openly,⁶⁸ but how were his sons to proceed when he died? They faced essentially the same dilemma that plagues every hereditary monarchy in which there are no unambiguous criteria for succession. In late antique Persia, for example, where all descendants of Sasan, the founder of the dynasty, were eligible as heirs, some Great Kings executed all rivals, including their own brothers, as a precaution.⁶⁹ If they failed to do this, war over the succession often broke out between members of the royal family.⁷⁰

This danger became still more acute in the Roman empire because Constantine maintained another central element of the Diocletian model: a

64 Cf. Christ 1995, 744; Potter 2004, 378.

65 During this crisis, Licinius then raised his *magister officiorum* Martinianus to the rank of *augustus*; he was executed one year later, together with Licinius (cf. Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 41.9).

66 Cf. now Szidat 2010, 165–181; cf. also Barnes 2011 (esp. chapter vii).

67 Odahl 2004, 204–208; Brandt 2006, 118–120; Demandt 2007, 95–96.

68 It is an open question, however, whether the attempted usurpation of Calocaerus (PLRE 1, 177) was as harmless as it is generally assumed, and whether the rebel was really nothing more than a laughable *magister pecoris camelorum* (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 41.11).

69 For example, according to Tabarī (1.1060), Kabad II had seventeen of his (half-) brothers murdered immediately following his accession, on the grounds that they were potential rivals.

70 Amm. Marc. 23.6.6. On succession in the Sasanian empire, see Börm 2008b, 433–435.

college of emperors. In addition to his three sons, in 335 he raised a fourth *caesar* to the purple, his nephew Flavius Dalmatius (Delmatius).⁷¹ As the numismatic evidence demonstrates,⁷² he envisaged a revival of the Tetrarchy, in which Constantine II was probably to reign as *senior* and Constantius II as *iunior augustus* after Constantine's death,⁷³ supported by their brother and cousin as *caesares*.⁷⁴ Constantine's failure to appoint at least one further *augustus* during his lifetime, however, ruined this plan. It is difficult to discern the reasons for this failure, but it is at least conceivable that he may have feared being rendered a "lame duck" by a co-ruler of equal rank. Perhaps his *auctoritas* was not as unassailable and his position not as strong as outward appearances suggest. This at least would explain why he spent the months before to his death planning a Persian war: victory would have brought enormous prestige, as the example of Galerius had shown. If Constantine had returned from the East as a new, triumphant Alexander, he could have done as he wished and raised two *augusti* to make his wishes clear. Events, though, took another course.

As is wellknown, the promised *securitas perpetua* did not prevail after Constantine's death in 337.⁷⁵ In the following months, the four *caesares* failed to agree who among them should enjoy seniority and become *augustus*, since they were all grandchildren of the *divus* Constantius. The Gordian knot was cut by the soldiers who killed Dalmatius, his brother Hannibalianus—then *rex regum et Ponticarum gentium*—and other family members of the deceased *augustus*. The army clearly refused to accept any extension of the dynastic principle: the soldiers would be ruled only by the sons of the late *augustus*, as Zosimus soberly concluded.⁷⁶ It was not, therefore, decisive to be simply a member of the imperial family. Shortly after these events, Eusebius also formulated the view that by God's will, Constantine's βασιλεία, which he had taken over from his father, had now passed legitimately to his sons and their descendants. He regarded the Imperium Romanum as an eternal κληρος of a single family.⁷⁷ What Tacitus had condemned two centuries earlier had at last become respectable.

The massacre of 337 was a portent of things to come. The events exposed the fatal absence of an automatic rule of succession. Constantine's successors

⁷¹ *Epit. de Caes.* 41.19–20. The *epitome* confuses Dalmatius (PLRE 1, 241) with his brother Hannibalianus.

⁷² RIC VII 583 no. 89. On the reverse, the medallion shows an enthroned emperor (Constantine) with nimbus, flanked by two larger and two smaller figures, with the legend SECVRITAS PERPETVA.

⁷³ Cf. Chantraine 1992. The assumption that Constantine intended Constantine II to be sole *augustus* (Cara 1993) cannot be substantiated.

⁷⁴ Demandt 2007, 104.

⁷⁵ Cf. Klein 1979a; Burgess 2008.

⁷⁶ Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.40.3.

⁷⁷ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.9.2.

cultivated dynastic succession more than ever before,⁷⁸ and still the succession was not automatic. The son of an *augustus* inherited only a claim to rule, not the rule itself. Even the son of an *augustus* became emperor only by the ceremony of elevation and acclamation.⁷⁹ The difference between the Roman monarchy and a “normal” kingdom may have continued to fluctuate in the fourth century—it was no coincidence that terms derived from *rex*, especially *regnum*, appear with increasing frequency in unofficial usage⁸⁰—but it did not disappear altogether. As we shall see, this was also true for the meritocratic principle. As the office of emperor was not formally hereditary, neither primogeniture nor seniority could establish precedence among members of the imperial house.

This structural problem was not resolved by the fact that all three surviving sons of Constantine now ruled the empire as *augusti*. Already the third century had demonstrated how a college of emperors without a clearly established hierarchy was dysfunctional; one might cite Geta and Caracalla or Pupienus and Balbinus as examples. The Roman empire was in essence always a monarchy, even when more than one ruler shared its governance.⁸¹ Someone *had* to take precedence. If no agreement about rank could be achieved, as it had been under Diocletian, this provoked conflict. Bruno Bleckmann has shown that within colleges of emperors after Diocletian it was almost always impossible to keep rivalries under control. With the exception of Valentinian I and Theodosius I, no *augustus* was able to establish himself indisputably as supreme.⁸²

This observation is correct, but it raises the question of causes. In my opinion, the answer lies in the affirmation of the dynastic principle by Constantine. Among potential rulers legitimated by birth, no one was prepared to accept the seniority of another. In the context of an imperial college, the necessity of which the events of the third century had proven, this discord would inevitably lead to disaster. This was a fundamental difference from arrangements in which an emperor owed his position not to an imperial forebear but to a *senior augustus* as his *auctor imperii*, even if they were related.

Rivalry and distrust within imperial colleges of blood-relatives were the rule after 337; to cite Polybius, one could almost speak of οἰκεῖοι φόβοι of the

78 Frakes 2006, 95–96; Rosen 2006, 38.

79 Cf. Jones 1964, vol. 1, 322.

80 Cf. Lact. *Mort. pers.* 7.2. In the Greek world, βασιλεύς together with αὐτοκράτωρ and σεβαστός had long been customary in unofficial usage, though in official usage only from 629; cf. 1 *Tim.* 2.2. In the Latin context, it appears that Christian or biblical influence above all led to the fact that *rex* could increasingly denote a ruler generally in literary, including Roman, usage; cf. Augustin. *c. Faust.* 22.75.

81 Cf. Porphy. apud Macarius Magnes 6.20.

82 Bleckmann 2004, 76.



Figure 12.1 Festaureus of Emperor Constans, RIC 8 Siscia 18.

emperors.⁸³ At the end of 337, the three brothers had attempted to agree on their respective territories.⁸⁴ Constantine II, however, claimed seniority over his brothers and in 340 sought to establish predominance by force against Constans,⁸⁵ who already in 337 had minted coins advertising his own claims (cf. Figure 12.1).⁸⁶ After all, he too was the son of an emperor. Just three years after the death of their father, dynastic rivalry had led to civil war, which came to a swift end only because Constantine II soon perished. The following ten years were marked by tension between the two surviving brothers; this tension found expression (as had been the case also with Constantine and Licinius) not least in ostentatiously contradictory religious policies.⁸⁷ Then precisely what Diocletian's system was intended to prevent occurred—the usurpation of a general who saw no peaceful means of fulfilling his ambitions as long as rule was confined to a single dynastic family.⁸⁸ Constans died in 350 while fleeing from the troops of Magnentius.⁸⁹

83 In fact, Hellenistic monarchies, which Polybius (5.34.1) had in mind, were confronted by similar problems: as all heirs of a ruler were dynastically legitimate, it frequently came to bloody contests for the throne; cf. Gehrke 2013.

84 Barceló 2004, 55–57.

85 Philostorg. *Hist. eccl.* 3.1a; Zonar. 13.5.7–8.

86 RIC VIII 350 no. 18. In my view, everything suggests that the dominant figure in the image on the reverse is supposed to represent not Constantine II but Constans; cf. Kolb 2001, 243–249.

87 Cf. Brandt 1998, 42. On the religious conflicts after 337, see Brennecke 1984; Hahn 2004; Isele 2010.

88 PLRE 1, 532; Drinkwater 2000; Barceló 2004, 92–101. On imperial dynasties between 350 and 395, cf. Errington 2006, 13–42.

89 *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 41.24. On the usurpations after 337, cf. now generally Szidat 2010.

Remarkably, the usurpation of Magnentius did not represent a fundamental break from the dynastic principle. History might have been different had Constantius II accepted Magnentius's terms and legitimated his position. He didn't. As it became apparent that civil war was inevitable, Magnentius did what the emperors of the third century and Licinius in 317 had done: he appointed a *consanguineus*, his brother Decentius,⁹⁰ as co-ruler, before they were both defeated by Constantius II and perished.⁹¹ The decisive battle at Mursa in 351 is reckoned among the bloodiest of all antiquity. Since it was above all the elite troops of the empire who died, the scenario that had so weakened the Imperium Romanum a century earlier was repeated once more: bloody civil war, precipitated by the attempt of successful generals to depose the ruling family.⁹²

Shortly after the victory, which was complete with Magnentius's suicide in 353, the sheer inescapability of the essential problem became obvious: Constantius II was the sole surviving son of Constantine, but he evidently did not believe that he could single-handedly master all the challenges that faced him. The Roman empire was simultaneously threatened on the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates frontiers. If Constantius II adhered to the dynastic principle, then only his cousins Gallus and Julian were eligible as co-rulers.⁹³ Like him, they were both grandsons of the *divus* Constantius; their father, however, unlike his half-brother Constantine, was born of a legitimate relationship of the *augustus* with Theodora—and this was obviously a sensitive matter.⁹⁴ Initially, Constantius decided in favor of Gallus, who was raised to the rank of *caesar* in March 351, before Constantius himself took to the field against Magnentius.⁹⁵ The circumstances that then led to Gallus's execution in 354 can scarcely be accounted for, above all, because the unflattering picture of Gallus painted by Ammianus Marcellinus may well be biased.⁹⁶ It nevertheless can be assumed that Gallus was unwilling to accept the role of an obedient viceroy, envisaged for him by Constantius, who expected him to protect the eastern provinces from the Persian king Šabühr II. With this turn of events,

90 Cf. Bleckmann 1999a.

91 Aur. Vict. 42.9–10.

92 On the unclear role of the senior officer Vetrano, who perhaps on the initiative of the *augusta* Constantina only pretended to aspire to the purple, and who already in 350 renounced his position as emperor—a highly unusual procedure which itself requires an explanation—see Bleckmann 1994.

93 Blockley 1972.

94 Zonar. 12.33. This question already appears to have played a role in 337; cf. Rosen 2006, 49–50.

95 PLRE 1, 224–225.

96 Tränkle 1976.

Constantius's attempt to prevent conflict between co-rulers by appointing Gallus to the clearly subordinate position of *caesar* had failed.

The fact that Gallus's brother Julian, despite the considerable mistrust in which he was held by the *augustus*, was himself raised to the rank of *caesar* soon after Gallus's death, only underscores the dilemma. Even after his unhappy experiences with Gallus, and with some hesitation, the emperor saw simply no alternative. Constantius needed to give his attention to the Persian front, but he could not leave the West, where usurpations threatened, without a representative of the imperial family. He could not have anticipated that these threats would collapse as quickly as that of Silvanus, who was killed in Cologne by his own men in the autumn of 355.⁹⁷ Only weeks after these events, Constantius elevated Julian to *caesar*. Like Gallus before him, Julian was watched by men faithful to his cousin,⁹⁸ but again as with Gallus, this did not prevent an escalation of conflict. It is of secondary importance whether Julian himself provoked his acclamation as *augustus* by the Gallic legions in 360.⁹⁹ The usurper certainly wanted to avoid civil war against his cousin—not least because he can have had little hope of victory—but he was not willing to renounce the rank of *augustus*. An amicable settlement was impossible, and only Constantius's death in 361 forestalled armed conflict. Aurelius Victor must have had the two ambitious *caesares* in mind when he complained that the evil consequences of an unclear hierarchy in the imperial college were easy to see in the internecine conflicts that raged in his day.¹⁰⁰

Julian's efforts to strengthen the charismatic basis of his rule are noteworthy.¹⁰¹ This was in effect an attempt to justify a hierarchy, an attempt that shows that the meritocratic principle had not been forgotten. Julian's fateful commitment to the Persian war can also be seen within this context: as victor over the Great King, he would have enjoyed incomparable *auctoritas*. At the same time, the descendant of the *divus* Constantius clung to the principle that only an immediate family member would inherit the purple, as if this were self-evident: "It is the custom to hand down the succession to a man's son, and all men desire to do so."¹⁰²

97 Cf. PLRE 1, 163; Amm. Marc. 15.5.15–31; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 42.14–16.

98 On the control of Gallus, cf. Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.48.5; Athanas. *Apol. Const.* 3. On Julian's desire to pursue an independent policy, cf. Amm. Marc. 20.8.14.

99 Of course, Julian could have refused the acclamation; cf. Rosen 2006, 178–185. On the reception of the acclamation, cf. Wiemer 1995, 28–35.

100 Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 39.29.

101 Julian early emphasized the special significance of ἀρετή (i.e., *virtus*) for a ruler; Iul. *ad. Them.* 255d–257s; cf. Stenger 2009, 135–165. Aurelius Victor already recognized that inherited natural qualities were worthless if the *principes* did not display traits such as affability and education; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.13.

102 Iul. *Caes.* 334d (trans. Wright 1913).

The problem of usurpation by pretenders from outside the ruling dynasty, such as Magnentius or Vetranio, was not new, but merely a reversion to pre-Tetrarchy conditions. What was new, however, was the escalation of rivalry and conflict within the dynasty. This was a direct consequence of the combination of the concepts of joint rule by a college of emperors and the dynastic principle, and this problem became particularly evident in the generation after Constantine. Whether Julian had intended to share power with his distant relative Procopius must remain unknown, though it is unlikely.¹⁰³ Procopius could probably claim no imperial ancestor, and as a usurper in 365 ostentatiously advertised his relationship to the Constantinian dynasty.¹⁰⁴ It is likewise impossible to say what solution Julian might have chosen in order to meet the obvious need for at least two emperors in the empire, any more than we can say what his short-lived successor, Jovian, would have done.

Immediately after his accession to the throne in 364, Valentinian I named his brother Valens as second *augustus*. Valens could not claim any imperial ancestors and so seems to have accepted a position subordinate to Valentinian, his *auctor imperii*.¹⁰⁵ This stable situation gave the usurpation attempted by Firmus, the *dux Mauretaniae*, no chance of success.¹⁰⁶ The brothers, who would never meet again, seem to have agreed upon a relatively clear territorial division of responsibilities.¹⁰⁷ Yet this could not prevent the buildup of tension immediately after Valentinian's death in 375 between his son Gratian and the latter's uncle, Valens. This probably led to the catastrophe of Adrianople three years later, where Valens, driven to recklessness by his rivalry with Gratian, was killed.¹⁰⁸ Once again, contention for pre-eminence between blood-related emperors had seriously weakened the Imperium Romanum. Faced with military threats, Gratian then broke with customary practice: his half-brother Valentinian II was too young to be effective, and so for the first time in many years, Gratian elevated an experienced commander, Theodosius I, to *augustus*.¹⁰⁹ Theodosius

103 PLRE 1, 742–743; cf. Lenski 2002, 68–115.

104 Amm. Marc. 26.7.10. Following his death in May 366, his relative Marcellus continued the usurpation, allowed himself to be acclaimed emperor (Amm. Marc. 26.10.3–5), and died soon thereafter (Zos. *Nea hist.* 4.8.3–4).

105 Lenski 2002, 32. Valens displayed reserve in his religious policy as long as his brother was alive (Oros. *Hist. adv. pag.* 7.32.6).

106 Zos. *Nea hist.* 4.16; CIL 8.5338.

107 Bleckmann 2004, 76.

108 Lenski 2002, 355–368; Heather 2005, 178–179; cf. Eunap. *Fr.* 42 (Blockley).

109 This explanation also occurs in the sources: cf. *Chron. Gall.* a. 452 (ad ann. 379): *Gratianus parvulum fratrem habens regni [!] consortem probatae aetatis virum Theodosium in societatem regni [!] asciscit*. (“Because Gratian only had a quite young little brother as co-ruler, he took a man of proven age, Theodosius, as co-ruler.”) On child emperor rule in the Roman West, cf. McEvoy 2013.

subsequently sought a connection with the dynasty by marrying Valentinian's sister, Galla.

When Gratian was defeated by the usurper Magnus Maximus in 383,¹¹⁰ Theodosius decided, like Constantius II before him, not to recognize the western pretender as his co-ruler.¹¹¹ The ensuing civil war ended only in 388 at a high cost to the empire. Significantly, Theodosius did not attempt to eliminate Valentinian II, the last legitimate emperor of the dynasty. The famous *Missorium* of Theodosius shows, however, that he marginalized the notional *senior augustus*.¹¹² The political constellation that took shape after the death of the young Valentinian, who was unable to emancipate himself from his *magister militum*, Arbogast,¹¹³ doubtless ensured that Theodosius would send neither of his two sons to the West. In 392, Eugenius filled the power vacuum, and although he energetically sought recognition from Theodosius, the latter took the field against his dynastically unrelated rival.¹¹⁴

When Theodosius lay on his deathbed shortly thereafter, the arrangements he had made for the succession showed notable consistency. His sons Arcadius and Honorius had already been named *augusti*, and by assigning half of the empire to each of them Theodosius acted entirely within the tradition of his predecessors. Even after 395, the Imperium Romanum remained formally united. Yet because the two emperors were still very young, they enjoyed no *auctoritas* of their own and, at least in their early years, depended on their respective courts. As time passed, however, an increasingly marked delineation of their respective competences crystallized. This was above all a consequence of the inability of either court to dominate the other. The dynastic principle now functioned, once the spheres of authority had been determined around 410, to unite the two halves of the empire, irrespective of any rivalry, which had prevailed particularly during the lives of Arcadius and Stilicho.¹¹⁵ The imbalance that repeatedly had resulted from the occasional division of the empire into three spheres¹¹⁶ yielded to the growing economic and military dominance of the East, which emerged ever more clearly as military catastrophes and civil strife struck the West from 406.

¹¹⁰ Prosp. *ad ann.* 384.

¹¹¹ Baldus 1984b. Maximus raised his small son Flavius Victor in 384 as *augustus* (*Epit. de Caes.* 48.6). Theodosius initially had coins minted in Constantinople with the motif DN MAXIMVS PF AVG (RIC 9 Constantinopolis 83d).

¹¹² Kolb 2001, 220–225.

¹¹³ Zos. *Nea hist.* 4.53; cf. Croke 1976; Börm 2010, 171–172.

¹¹⁴ Leppin 2003, 205–220.

¹¹⁵ Zos. *Nea hist.* 5.26.2; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 9.4.2–4; cf. Mitchell 2007, 89–93.

¹¹⁶ Bleckmann 2004.

The meritocratic principle never disappeared from public discourse, even though the dynastic principle now prevailed; and it could be reactivated. Thus, on the one hand, at the end of the century, in 398, Claudian observes in his panegyric for Honorius that the emperor had received life and the empire on one and the same day.¹¹⁷ At the same time, however, he puts words into the mouth of Theodosius I to the effect that, in contrast to the hereditary monarchy of Persia, outstanding *virtus* was still expected of a legitimate Roman emperor: “Very different is the state of Rome’s emperor. ’Tis merit, not blood, must be his support.”¹¹⁸ At least in theory, then, the personal quality of the Roman emperor was appreciated alongside his descent.¹¹⁹ It is scarcely a coincidence that Claudian presented this notion at a time when rivalry between Milan and Constantinople threatened to escalate: if Honorius, the younger brother, was to claim precedence, the dynastic argument would have been inappropriate.¹²⁰

PERSPECTIVES: THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

In the two centuries after Theodosius I, no emperor had more than one natural son, and many died childless. It was mere biological chance that hindered further destabilization of the Roman empire through inner-dynastic conflict. When Honorius died in 423, his nephew Theodosius II—after some hesitation—intervened in the West.¹²¹ The western pretender Ioannes,¹²² was not recognized in Constantinople. Instead, Theodosius raised the young Valentinian III to the rank of *caesar* in 424 and sent him to Italy with an army, where a year later he ascended the throne as *augustus*. Several years previously, Theodosius II had explicitly refused to recognize the elevation of Constantius III.¹²³ According to

117 Claud. *IV cos. Hon.* 8.160–161: *vitam tibi contulit idem imperiumque dies* (“The day that gave you birth gave you the empire”).

118 Claud. *IV cos. Hon.* 219–220 (trans. Platnauer 1922).

119 Almost contemporaneously, Synesius also expected proven military competence of the emperor in his *De regno* (20–21); cf. Hagl 1997, 63–102.

120 It is probably no coincidence that Honorius was the last emperor to celebrate triumphs in Rome, in 404 over the barbarians, and evidently again in 416–417 over the usurper Attalus (Prosp. *ad ann.* 417). His brother and rival Arcadius celebrated a triumph in Constantinople in 400 over Gainas. Perhaps Honorius’s transfer of his seat to Ravenna should be seen within this context, namely, that the city should, in competition with Constantinople, become the center of the Theodosian dynasty in the West. On the western Roman empire and the civil wars of the fifth century, cf. Börm 2013.

121 On Theodosius II, under whom the gradual process of making Constantinople “Greek” began, cf. Millar 2006. In the sources, he is depicted as weak and dependent; cf. Prisc. *Fr.* 3 (Blockley); Theophan. AM 5941.

122 Procop. *Hist.* 3.3.6–7.

123 PLRE 2, 321–325; cf. Lütkenhaus 1998.

Olympiodorus, another civil war threatened to erupt between East and West.¹²⁴ However, Constantius III died before the conflict could escalate, and Theodosius II does not seem to have harbored the same reservations against Constantius's son, Valentinian III, who like himself was a grandson of Theodosius I.

The eastern emperors interfered in the West persistently until the seventh century.¹²⁵ The increasing weakness of the Hesperium Imperium prevented Valentinian III in turn from influencing the succession of the eastern emperor in 450. Theodosius II had left behind neither a son nor a co-ruler. The new *augustus*, Marcian (450 to 457), strove to associate himself with the dynasty after his elevation by marrying Pulcheria, the daughter of Arcadius.¹²⁶

We cannot know whether it would have been possible to pass over a direct descendant of an emperor for the succession after 457, since no such situation occurred—but it is unlikely.¹²⁷ Leo II, succeeded his grandfather Leo I, albeit for only a few months, and in turn was succeeded by his father Zeno, who was declared co-emperor days after the death of his father-in-law.¹²⁸ Zeno's brother Flavius Longinus, *magister militum* and consul, however, did not get his own turn in 491. His attempt to seize the throne by force failed.¹²⁹ Anastasius, the new *augustus*, secured his own position by marrying the widow of his predecessor.

The death of Anastasius in 518 illustrated two things: the accession of Justin I showed on the one hand that the three adult nephews of the emperor could be passed over;¹³⁰ on the other, it became clear that this maneuver was problematic. Flavius Hypatius in particular, the most prominent and powerful of the nephews, played an important role over the next fifteen years, until he died as a usurper during the Nika Riot in 532.¹³¹

Procopius of Caesarea attests how immensely important the dynastic principle was in the sixth century. Not only does he observe that the three nephews of Anastasius were marginalized by Justin in reference to the succession of 518,¹³² but he also reports the decision of the Persian Great King Kabad I to

¹²⁴ Olymp. *Fr.* 33 (Blockley).

¹²⁵ Cf. Moorhead 2001.

¹²⁶ Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 2.1; cf. Burgess 1993/1994. As under the Severan and Constantinian dynasties, imperial women also played an important part; cf. Holum 1982, 208–209. Valentinian III regarded Marcian initially as a usurper and recognized him as co-emperor only in 452 under pressure from Aëtius.

¹²⁷ Flavius Marcianus, grandson of Marcian and son of Anthemius, however, attempted unsuccessfully to seize power in the East in 479.

¹²⁸ Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 3.1. Mitchell 2007, 114–115.

¹²⁹ PLRE 2, 668.

¹³⁰ The *Anonymus Valesianus II* preserves an anecdote that attempts to legitimize this process as a divine decision; cf. Anon. Val. 13.

¹³¹ Greatrex 1996.

¹³² Procop. *Hist.* 1.11.1.

have his son Khosrau adopted by Justin I.¹³³ According to Procopius, however, the *quaestor sacri palatii* Proculus had vehemently objected to the plan: “By nature the possessions of fathers are due to their sons and while the laws among all men are always in conflict with each other by reason of their varying nature, in this matter both among the Romans and among all barbarians they are in agreement and harmony with each other, in that they declare sons to be masters of their fathers’ inheritance.”¹³⁴

Since the Roman empire was also passed from father to son, so Proculus allegedly continued, by a fully legitimate adoption the Sasanian prince would also possess a claim to the succession in the Imperium Romanum. According to Theophanes Confessor, this argument convinced the senate.¹³⁵ The episode illustrates how Procopius and many of his contemporaries thought. In their eyes, the Roman monarchy could be passed down at least from father to son.

Leo I, Anastasius, and Justin I had each shown by their accession, however, that sons-in-law, brothers, and nephews of deceased *augusti* definitely could be overlooked in the succession, at least when they had not been elevated to *caesar* by the deceased. None of these three rulers could claim descent from an emperor. In Constantinople, the dynastic principle had therefore become only one of several legitimizing strategies. Justinian, for example, appealed above all to the concept of rule ἐκ θεοῦ,¹³⁶ while the ceremony of the elevation of an emperor demonstrates that the alleged *consensus universorum* was as essential then as it had been before.¹³⁷

Emperors died without having ensured the succession by appointing a co-ruler with surprising frequency—in 450, 457, 491, 518, and 565. None of these emperors left behind a son: just as in the case of earlier *principes*, one is inclined to suspect that these emperors preferred to risk conflicts after their deaths than to be marginalized as “lame ducks” by a co-ruler during their lives.¹³⁸ Justin I, who elevated Justinian as *caesar* exceptionally early and designated him as his successor, is depicted in the sources as his nephew’s puppet, probably not by coincidence. Leo I, on the other hand, liquidated his own *caesar* Patricius and the latter’s powerful father, Aspar, in 471.¹³⁹

133 Cf. Börm 2007, 311–317.

134 Procop. *Hist.* 1.11.18 (trans. Dewing 1914).

135 Theophan. AM 6013.

136 Meier 2003a, 115–136. Justinian, although nephew of an *augustus*, could only claim dynastic legitimation with difficulty, as this should equally have applied for the nephews of Anastasius, who had not been considered in 518.

137 Cf. Trampedach 2005; Canepa 2009, 8–11.

138 The expectation of the anonymous *Dialogus de scientia politica* (5.162–167), dating from Justinian’s reign, is conceivably to be understood against this background. The author suggests that an ideal emperor should either abdicate at the latest when he is 57, or designate a co-ruler as his successor.

139 Malalas 14.40; Marc. Com. ad ann. 471; Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 2.16; Iord. *Rom.* 338; cf. Croke 2005.

The first *augustus* after Theodosius I who had not merely one but several sons was Mauricius. The eldest son, Theodosius, was to be emperor in Constantinople; the second, Tiberius, was to reside in “old Rome.” The other brothers were to assist the eldest two and to govern “the remaining regions.”¹⁴⁰

We may reasonably infer from the dry report of Theophylact that Theodosius was to rule the East as *senior augustus* and Tiberius the West as *iunior augustus*, supported by their younger brothers as *caesares*.¹⁴¹ We can only speculate whether Mauricius’s plan would have led to rivalry between his sons, as had occurred after Constantine’s death. The violent death of the emperor and all of his sons in 602 rendered the plan obsolete. It is doubtful, though, that a college of brother emperors would have succeeded this time.¹⁴²

CONCLUSION

The Constantinian (re-)turn to the dynastic principle and succession based on blood relations, which promised a direct descendant of an *augustus* a claim to the throne, was ultimately permanent. The fact that emperors’ sons were the most natural successors of their fathers was not in itself new, as a glance at the Principate has shown. At least formally, late antique *augusti* who wished to establish a candidate of their own choice as successor still needed to elevate him to co-ruler in their own lifetime. The meritocratic principle continued to matter. Yet at the same time, the sources demonstrate clearly that the belief that the natural children of an emperor were born rulers and the empire was their κληρος gained considerable prominence with Constantine.

The real innovation of Constantine, however, lay not in strengthening the dynastic principle. Far more significant was the association of the Diocletianic model of a college of emperors with the concept of a functioning hereditary monarchy.¹⁴³ The model of the Tetrarchy had been effective because the *auctoritas* of the *senior augustus* was respected. This was not the case within a college of rulers in which the dynastic principle, but neither primogeniture nor seniority, applied. Whether an emperor appealed primarily to dynastic legitimacy or to charisma depended on the situation. One solution to rivalries within a

¹⁴⁰ Theophyl. 8.11.9–10.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Shlosser 1994, 70; Börm 2008c, 60–63.

¹⁴² This is suggested by a glance at Constantine IV, great grandson of Heraclius, who in 681 deposed his brothers and co-emperors Tiberius and Heraclius, and had them deformed; cf. Haldon 1997, 68–69.

¹⁴³ Precedents may be found among the soldier emperors (Carinus and Numerianus; cf. Rees 2004, 72); yet the constellation that several dynastically legitimate rulers had to co-operate with one another over the long term appears for the first time in 337.

college of emperors composed of blood relatives was the tendency toward more strictly defined territorial spheres of influence.

Did the dynastic principle as applied by Constantine help to stabilize the contested Roman monarchy? Was the position of dynastically legitimate emperors more secure? At first sight, at least in the eastern empire, this appears to have been the case: between the fourth and the sixth centuries, the number of usurpers in this region—except for a crisis period around 480—remained small. The first pretender in the East who was able to establish himself was Phocas in 602.¹⁴⁴ Insofar as an entirely different picture emerges in the western empire, however,¹⁴⁵ we may doubt whether it was the dynastic principle that really had a stabilizing effect in the East. Usurpers rose repeatedly against the ruling dynasty over the course of the fourth century in the West; ambitious men evidently saw no other path to power.¹⁴⁶ On this evidence, dynastic legitimacy did not protect emperors from usurpers in the least.

Various reasons produced the overall lower number of usurpations in the fifth and sixth centuries. Among other things, it appears to have been significant that powerful men such as Stilicho, Aëtius,¹⁴⁷ Aspar, or Ricimer could hold the reins without being limited by the restrictions to which emperors were subject. At least in the West after Constantius III, the figure of the truly powerful man behind the emperor made it unnecessary for ambitious men to aspire to the purple. A dynastically legitimate but largely powerless *augustus* could sit safely on his throne while real power as *patricius et magister militum*, at least in the West, was open to every ambitious man.¹⁴⁸ It was now for *this* position that there would be competition, as the conflict between Aëtius and Boniface shows.¹⁴⁹

Constantine's cultivation of the dynastic principle was the product of a crisis because it lent him the urgently needed legitimacy. Constantine's success

144 Cf. Mitchell 2007, 408–410. Basiliscus was able to expel Zeno in 475, but Zeno was able to reclaim the throne shortly afterward. Phocas was the first successful usurper in the East since 324; of twenty-one generally acknowledged emperors between 602 and 820, on the other hand, only five died a natural death; cf. Wickham 2009, 257.

145 There were numerous usurpation attempts in the West in the fourth and fifth centuries, which was certainly caused in part by considerable military threats. Unlike the third century, though, after Constantine no pretender succeeded in achieving general legitimacy and acceptance, and the unceasing civil wars eventually led to the fall of the western empire; cf. Börm 2013.

146 The large number of usurpation attempts under Honorius already impressed contemporary observers; cf. MGH AA 9, 629–630.

147 Cf. Stickler 2002.

148 On the relationship between the ruler and powerful aristocrats, see Börm 2010.

149 MacGeorge 2002. One is reminded of the later Merovingians, whose dynastically legitimate king was eventually dominated by his *maior domus*; cf. Einhard *Vit. Carol. Magn.* 113 (nonetheless a probably distorted depiction; cf. Moorhead 2001, 84).

helped this way of thinking become entrenched. Over the long term, however, the greater importance attached to *consanguinitas* destabilized the monarchy, which would be undermined repeatedly by dynastic conflict. Emperors who claimed legitimacy primarily through their descent always found it difficult to accept the priority of a family member. This was a structural weakness. The importance attached to the dynastic principle by Constantine ultimately weakened rather than strengthened the empire, because its transformation into a hereditary monarchy remained incomplete. The confinement of government to a single family was never entirely accepted; then, as before, there were no incontestable criteria for the succession, nor could there be.

To summarize: the dynastic principle had played an important role in the Roman empire from the time of Augustus on. For various reasons, though, Rome never formally became a hereditary monarchy. Between the third and the fifth centuries, at least two emperors were always needed in the Imperium Romanum—at least one *augustus* and one *caesar*. As son of an emperor and usurper, Constantine I made a virtue of necessity and turned the dynastic principle into an essential element of his imperial legitimation. From his death in 337 until 450, all imperial colleges were composed of blood relatives. While it is true that some soldier emperors had also made their sons or brothers co-rulers, these men had not inherited power: instead, they owed it to an *auctor imperii*. After Constantine, however, most rulers could claim emperors among their forefathers, and so rival claimants regularly came to blows. Rome remained a monarchy under colleges of emperors, but there could never be absolute or effective equality between the emperors: there always had to be one man with supreme *auctoritas*.¹⁵⁰ The conflicts that arose in the fourth century between blood-related rulers and the attempts by able men outside the imperial family to seize power weakened the Roman empire considerably. Through the fifth and sixth centuries, the dynastic principle remained dominant but was not successfully institutionalized; but the absence of a clearly regulated succession resulted in instability then, as it had before.

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¹⁵⁰ Cf. Szidat 2010, 46–58.