

'Empire without Alternative? Autocratic Power and Inevitability in the early Roman Empire'

1. Aims of the project

The inevitability of the establishment of an autocratic regime in Rome at the end of the first century BCE was long taken for granted in the study of Roman history. The Republican constitution had proven itself fundamentally and irredeemably incapable of governing a world-empire; the senate, unable to prevent the rise of ever more powerful dynasts, could do no more than to pit one against the other, gradually undermining its own authority; and the civil wars, which had plagued Rome for a century and would have continued until the City had torn itself completely apart, could only be quelled by the awesome power of autocracy, the rule of one man. With the assumption that one-man rule *was* inevitable came also an assumption that one-man rule was *perceived* as inevitable by the Romans. Given that one-man rule endured, so the (circular) logic went, one-man rule was inevitable and must have been perceived as such by contemporaries.

'Empire without Alternative? Autocratic Power and Inevitability in the early Roman Empire' (EWA) offers the first in-depth analysis of whether one-man rule was perceived as inevitable by Roman historians in the early Roman Empire (31BCE-CE117). Imperial ideology, for sure, promoted the idea that one-man rule was the only alternative (and thus hardly worthy of the word "alternative"): some historical accounts from the period are indeed characterised by a strong teleological drive and treat the inevitability of one-man rule as a premise to be accepted, not a claim to be debated. But there were other voices, too, other historians. Their works, however, have not been read with the approach required to grasp how alternatives to autocracy – i.e. alternatives to the course of events that came to pass – may be activated in historical texts, especially those written under the watchful eye of an emperor. Inspired by recent pioneering work on the use of literary devices that activate alternative pasts, EWA will explore how alternatives to autocracy are activated (or shut down) in historical texts from the early Empire. My primary research objectives may be summarised in two points:

1. Explore how the claim that one-man rule was inevitable functions as a truth/premise within the imperial 'truth regime' (cf. sect. 3): how is it deployed and/or negotiated by different historical writers?
2. Identify and analyse unrealised (and realised) alternative pasts, so-called 'futures past' (cf. sect. 3), in historical texts from the early imperial period: how are alternatives to autocracy activated and/or shut down?

2. State of the art – and where it falls short

EWA takes its cue from Christian Meier's description of the last 100 years of the Roman Republic (133-31BCE) as a 'Krise ohne Alternative'. In Meier's analysis, the republican political structure could not be discarded without simultaneously discarding the social structure. Members of the Republican upper class were therefore unable to imagine an alternative to politics as usual.¹ While Meier claimed that the crisis was solved by Augustus' reorganisation of the state, Aloys Winterling has recently argued that the structural deficiencies of the Republic remained unsolved despite the establishment of the imperial regime.² In this view, the Romans of the Empire, too, were trapped in a world devoid of alternatives, in which autocracy, however mitigated by senatorial participation, was perceived as an inevitable fact of life.

Although the assumption that the Roman Republic had put itself on an inevitable path towards one-man rule sometime in the late second century BCE still exerts a powerful influence in the study of Roman history – note e.g. that a key article in the 2014 *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* dates the beginning of the republic's "crisis with no way out" (p. 80) to the murder of Tiberius Gracchus in 133BCE, more than a century before Augustus was the undisputed ruler of Rome³ –, it has come under increased scrutiny in recent years.⁴ This scrutiny, however, has only partially manifested itself in a reconsideration of the perceptions of the Romans themselves. While the memory of the Republic during the Empire has been studied and the republican sympathies of various imperial authors have been proclaimed,⁵ the presence of actual alternatives to one-man rule has been investigated only in the years leading up to and during Augustus' reign, i.e. the formative years of the imperial regime.⁶ There is, in other words, still a lack of research on alternatives to one-man rule in literature from the imperial period itself, where the *communis opinio* still appears to be that such alternatives were inconceivable.

3. Theoretical and methodological framework – so how exactly will I read the texts?

EWA is theoretically founded on Foucault's concept of 'truth regimes', i.e. the interdependence between systems of knowledge and the power-systems within and through which they exist.⁷ In other words, the establishment of an autocratic political regime in Rome was accompanied by the emergence of a new truth regime: the ways in which knowledge was produced were transformed simultaneously with the power structures.⁸ However, since conflicting truth regimes tend to co-exist simultaneously,⁹ the transformation from a republican to an imperial epistemological system should not be envisaged as a clean break. Significant traces of the republican world-view, parts of which were deeply ingrained in the way people thought and spoke, remained and facilitated a certain amount of creative dissension within the imperial regime. In other words, EWA accepts the claim that Roman society and knowledge underwent significant change with the establishment of one-man rule without accepting that writers of the imperial period were unable to imagine alternative pasts and/or qualitatively different futures.

Methodologically, I will put the political horizons of imperial writers under scrutiny by undertaking philological analyses of key historical texts, since this is where imperial ideology is most elaborately expressed and most extensively negotiated. I will

¹ Meier, C. 1966. *Res Publica Amissa: Eine Studie zu Verfassung und Geschichte der späten römischen Republik* (Franz Steiner).

² Winterling, A. 2009. *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (Wiley-Blackwell).

³ Ungern-Sternberg, J. von. 2014. "The Crisis of the Roman Republic", *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* (CUP). Cf. Syme, R. 1958. *Tacitus* (OUP). Galinsky, K. 1998. *Augustan Culture* (CUP).

⁴ Morstein-Marx, R. & N. Rosenstein. 2006. "The Transformation of the Republic", *A Companion to the Roman Republic* (Wiley-Blackwell).

⁵ Gallia A. 2012. *Remembering the Roman Republic: culture, politics and history under the Principate* (CUP). Wilkinson, S. 2012. *Republicanism during the Early Roman Empire* (London). Strunk, T. 2016. *History after Liberty: Tacitus on Tyrants, Sycophants, and Republicans* (Michigan).

⁶ Morrell, K. et al. (eds). 2019. *The Alternative Augustan Age* (OUP). Goldenhard, I. et al. (eds). 2019. *Augustus and the Destruction of History* (CUP).

⁷ Foucault, M. 1980. "Truth and Power", *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault* (London).

⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, A. 2008. *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (CUP).

⁹ Weir, L. 2008. "The Concept of Truth Regime", *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 33.

focus on the premise around which changes in politics, morality, and rhetorical strategies seem to revolve: that one-man rule is inevitable and that failure to acknowledge this is, at best, equivalent to political incompetence, at worst, evidence of treason. The research will be carried out in two stages. In the **1st stage**, I will explore how the idea of inevitability functions within the imperial truth regime. Firstly, I will analyse its role in overtly pro-imperial historical texts (Velleius' *Roman History*, Florus' *Epitome*): how is the transformation from Republic to Empire negotiated, how is imperial rule legitimised within an allegedly still republican system of government, and how are enemies of imperial rule portrayed? Secondly, I will deconstruct the rhetoric of imperial accusers as represented by the historian Tacitus, whose works contain the most well-preserved specimens. Since the idea of truth regime implies that the truths underpinning a political regime are concealed within its ideology, one must look beyond the arguments articulated to the system of premises whereon they tacitly rely. The aggressive rhetoric of the accusers makes their speeches a treasure trove for uncovering such premises and the system they form.

In the **2nd stage**, I will investigate how alternatives to one-man rule are activated (or shut down) in Velleius' *Roman History*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Tacitus historical works, and Florus' *Epitome*. Whereas the accounts of Velleius and Florus are strongly monophonic (only the main narrators, who draw heavily on hindsight, are allowed to tell Rome's history), Lucan and Tacitus give voice to different (often opposing) characters and often dwell on moments when history could have taken another turn. In these analyses, I will draw on Jonas Grethlein's work on literary devices that activate alternative (unrealised) futures, so-called 'side-shadowing' devices. By suggesting that something else might have happened, such devices allow the reader – through a momentary suspension of her superior knowledge – to experience the past as the open-ended present it once was and thus to imagine alternatives to the present state of affairs ('futures past'): debates highlight the decisions with which historical agents grappled, introspection reveals expectations, narratorial uncertainty may mimic that of historical agents, the relation of rumours implies other possibilities, 'Beinahe-episodes' (i.e. things that almost happened) suggest that other outcomes were possible, and explicit counterfactuals develop such outcomes.¹⁰ By investigating such devices in the proposed historical texts, I will identify the alternatives to imperial rule imagined by those who had to define their place within it: which moments are singled out as decisive on the path towards one-man rule and which causes are given pride of place when explaining its rise?

4. Project organisation and implementation

Aalborg University (AU) offers an excellent academic environment for EWA. In addition to Assoc. Prof. Carsten Hjort Lange, an expert on Roman history and historiography, the Department of Politics and Society boasts a diverse group of scholars and relevant research projects: 'Conflict, coercion and authority in history' on the historical origins of conflicts and the exercise of political authority, 'Political Sociology' on political behaviour and the formation of public opinion, and 'The Borders of Democracy' on democratic legitimacy and popular sovereignty. Together they provide an interdisciplinary context that will allow me to develop my research in dialogue with contemporary societal issues. EWA envisages three 1-month visits at Newcastle (NU), Heidelberg (HU), and Yale (YU). At NU I will discuss EWA with Prof. Federico Santangelo and immerse myself in the 'Writing of History' research cluster, which investigates the links between the writing of history and political debate in various periods. At HU I will discuss EWA with Prof. Jonas Grethlein and his colleagues in the project 'Experience and Teleology in Ancient Narrative', which explores ancient narrative texts with narratological approaches. At YU I will discuss EWA with Prof. Christina S. Kraus, a world-renowned expert on Roman historiography. In addition to these four, EWA's scientific advisory board includes Prof. Rhiannon Ash (Oxford), Dr Amy Russell (Brown), Dr Ellen O'Gorman (Bristol), Dr Lovisa Brännstedt (Lund), and Dr Hannah Cornwell (Birmingham). As well as providing expert guidance on a particular aspect of the project, each advisor has stated her willingness to (a) invite me to her institution to present EWA and (b) give a lecture at AU during the fellowship.

While the official start-date of EWA is 1 September 2021, it will by that time already be well under way. In April 2021 I will host (with Prof. Gunnel Ekroth) a workshop on autocracy at Uppsala University, and in May I will present at the Swedish Philology Congress in Stockholm. I will use these events to raise awareness and test preliminary hypotheses. During the 3-year fellowship period, I aim to organise a 2-day international conference at AU (preliminarily entitled 'Autocratic Ideology from the Ancient to the Modern World') and to publish a monograph and three peer-reviewed articles, as well as to set up several reading groups. EWA also aims to inform and engage the wider community: in addition to a podcast on 'How to get away with tyranny?', it includes two workshops in local high schools. Inspired by Timothy Snyder's 2017 *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, an accessible introduction to and impassioned guide on how to resist autocracy, these will stimulate learning about autocratic governments in general and the Roman Empire in particular, training the pupils' abilities to identify arguments from hindsight, challenge ideas of historical inevitability, and imagine alternative pasts, presents, and futures.

5. The future – why EWA?

2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. So, at least, is the verdict given by *Freedom in the World*, the flagship journal of the NGO 'Freedom House'. Rather than harvesting the democratic gains expected from the fall of the USSR, the Arab Spring, and the expansion of the EU, we find ourselves in the midst of a resurgence of autocracy. In Hungary, in Russia, in Turkey, in Brazil, in Poland, even in the US, we find a similar rhetoric: democratic institutions are too feeble and too inefficient to handle a crisis, and only a strong leader, unfettered by constitutional constraints, can guarantee peace and security. Scholarly interest in regime change has developed in tandem with this political development. While in the 1990s scholars were laying out trajectories of democratisation, the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed a renaissance of research on autocracy: on how it feeds on the fear of chaos, undermines the system it supposedly seeks to restore, and presents itself as the only option. "There is great power", after all, "in a regime making itself appear inevitable because it renders overt, declared opposition irrational".¹¹ It's about time this research took into account the most durable autocracy in European history: The Roman Empire. EWA, then, is a timely reaction to contemporary anxieties about a return to autocracy and a reminder of the ease with which formerly unthinkable political positions tend to be normalised in times of crisis.

¹⁰ Grethlein, J. 2013. *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography: Futures Past from Herodotus to Augustine* (CUP).

¹¹ Dukalskis, A. & J. Gerschewski. 2017. "What autocracies say (and what citizens hear): proposing four mechanisms of autocratic legitimation", *Contemporary Politics* 23.3 (special issue: Legitimation in Autocracies). See also Newell, W. 2013. *Tyranny: a New Interpretation* (OUP).