

Caesar's Palace: Inside the Court of Early Imperial Rome

MARCH 1, 2020

EATON THEATRE

Program Partner: York University

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council



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SYMPOSIUM

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9:00 AM - 5:00 PM
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Free with RSVP

9:00 AM - OPENING REMARKS

9:15 AM
Introduction: People and Palaces
Ben Kelly - York University

In the 20s BC, Rome transitioned from being a Republic to being a monarchy, with Augustus as its first emperor. Almost inevitably, monarchical rule entailed a court: a circle of people around the emperor whose special proximity gave them great political power and social standing. But this was no ordinary monarchy. Traditional ideas about the need for equality within the elite lived on, and so emperors had to negotiate between the need to project an image of unparalleled power and the pressure to emulate the style of Republican senators. This talk will focus on archaeological discoveries that have illuminated the early emperors' residences in Rome, especially the 'House of Augustus', Nero's Golden House, and the Flavian Palace. We shall see how the architecture of these structures reflects the early emperors' need to maintain a magnificent court while also styling themselves as senators in the Republican tradition.

10:00 AM - BREAK

10:30 AM
The Imperial Villas of Italy
Michele George - McMaster University

The world of the Roman imperial court was not confined to the palaces of Rome. Emperors owned lavish villas in rural and seaside areas of Italy, at which they and members of their court would often sojourn. This talk will look particularly at the archaeological discoveries that have been made at the sites of some of these villas, including Tiberius' Villa Iovis on Capri, Domitian's villa at Albano, Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, and the Antonine Villa Magna near Anagni. The remains of these complexes suggest that they were simultaneously places of luxurious leisure for emperors and their courtiers, but also locations where the serious business of running an empire could take place. A powerful ideological statement about the emperor's power to transform nature itself was also encoded in the architecture of some of these villas.

11:15 AM
The Women of the Imperial Court: Images and Realities
Angela Hug - York University

The Roman historical and biographical books that have been fortuitously transmitted through medieval manuscripts contain many stories about powerful and independent women at the Roman court. Some such women are portrayed as exercising enormous influence over emperors, to the point of being de facto rulers; others are said to have distributed favours and patronage; women close to the emperor allegedly murdered rivals and even emperors; and to some court women the sources attribute a degree of sexual liberation that is surprising even by modern standards. The difficulty is knowing just how many stories about court women are malicious inventions - reflections of the deep misogyny of Roman elite society. In this presentation, we shall look at surviving physical evidence - coins, inscriptions, sculptures and reliefs - and compare their portraits of imperial women at the court with those found in the literary narratives.

12:00 PM - LUNCH BREAK (ON OWN)

Banqueting with the Emperor

Keynote Address

*Matthew Roller
Johns Hopkins University*

1:15 PM

One of the key social rituals in the life of the imperial court was the banquet. This lecture will use the rich documentation concerning these occasions from surviving written sources, as well as archaeological discoveries of dining spaces in imperial palaces and villas. The theme will be banquets as occasions for communication. Such occasions were a chance for the emperor to broadcast messages to his courtiers about the style of his rule and to demonstrate who enjoyed his favour. They were also a chance for courtiers to communicate with the emperor and with each other – to compete for favour, to pressure the emperor, and (sometimes) to speak plain truth to power. In the written accounts of imperial dinners, there are also traces of how courtiers moralized about the proper and improper conduct of an emperor during a banquet. In court culture, banquets defined a reign: the dinner was the emperor.

2:15 PM

Slaves and Freedmen at Court

Jonathan Edmondson - York University

The lavish lifestyle of the Roman imperial court required numerous domestic servants. These were mostly drawn from the emperor's own slaves and ex-slaves. Due to the discovery of thousands of tombstones from Rome honouring the domestic staff of the court, we can reconstruct how service in the imperial household was organized, and the sorts of tasks performed by the staff. The close proximity to the emperor that domestic service entailed potentially gave some domestic servants a form of power. Surviving historical and biographical texts suggest that some domestic staff were able to control access to the emperor, that others were able to act as brokers in distributing imperial patronage, and that a few even became favourites of the emperor. Although some of these claims were perhaps fabricated by people hostile to particular emperors, cross-historical parallels with other courts confirm the general plausibility of the picture presented in the Roman sources.

3:00 PM – BREAK

3:30 PM

Religion at Court

Fanny Dolansky - Brock University

In monarchical courts throughout history, religious rituals and celebrations have been crucial moments in bringing courtiers together. They have also provided opportunities for the monarch and his court to come into contact with the wider society surrounding them. The Roman imperial court was no different. In this presentation, we will consider how certain household rituals and festivals within the imperial house became court occasions. We will also examine a number of works of art (especially relief sculptures) that suggest that religious rituals in the city of Rome brought the emperor into contact with the populace at large. Closely related to Roman ideas about the divine realm were ideas about how to foretell the future. As a result, astrologers and other individuals claiming expertise in divination at times had great power and influence at court.

4:15 PM

Dress and the Court

Kelly Olson - University of Western Ontario

Unlike many other monarchical courts in history, the Roman imperial court had no distinctive form of dress. But this did not mean that dress (as well as jewellery and grooming) were of no importance in the world of the court. In this lecture, we will consider how the clothed and groomed body could be used for communication within court society. In the case of the emperor and his family especially, dress also communicated with the rest of society; the extensive inscriptional evidence for the organization of the imperial wardrobe hints at the message of magnificence often being conveyed. But magnificence was a two-edged sword. The writings of Roman courtiers that survive in medieval manuscripts show clear traces of moralizing discourses that sought to pressure the emperor into what were considered to be appropriate sartorial decisions.

5:00 PM – CLOSING REMARKS

