Collaborators amongst the Opposition? Deconstructing the Imperial *Cursus Honorum*

The holding of high political office under the Principate has often been regarded as evidence for collaboration with, or at least acceptance of, the imperial regime. Thus, Pliny and Tacitus are generally viewed as accepting the legitimacy of the Principate and its *principes*, both good and bad, because they held high political office and furthered their careers under the Flavians, Nerva, and Trajan (Syme 1958, 76-77; Shotter 1991, 3327; Carlon 2009, 4-6). Conversely, the refusal to hold high political office or to seek to advance one’s political career has been interpreted as a mark of defiance and autonomy (Sailor 2008, 24-27). In this paper, I will challenge these assumptions in two ways: by examining the careers of the disloyal opposition, many of whom held high offices under the emperors they opposed, and the careers of the collaborators, many of whom despite their high offices eventually ran afoul of the regime, and by exploring how the opposition could actively use the *cursus honorum* as a means of opposition.

From the beginning of the Principate, the evidence reveals that opposition came from the elite. Looking at the political careers of dissidents, one can make the case that high office was concomitant with political dissent. Of course, not everyone who held high office was a dissident, and political offices were often the rewards of compliance. Yet those who did dissent generally had reached the highest rungs of the *cursus honorum*. Focusing just on the circle around Thrasea Paetus, the sources show that Thrasea, his father-in-law Caecina Paetus, and several close friends, including Barea Soranus, Arulenus Rusticus, and Helvidius Priscus the Younger, all reached the consulship. Herennius Senecio, by expressly deciding not to hold higher office under the Flavians, is the exception that proves the rule.

Moreover, many of those who could be labeled collaborators or adulators, such as Eprius Marcellus or Suillius Rufus, eventually were deemed enemies of the state. Their successful and ambitious advancement up the *cursus honorum* placed them in a position of great prominence and therefore in a position potentially threatening to the regime. Prominence, after all, not obscurity caught the attention of the emperor, and often this prominence led to persecution.

The sources also indicate that high office could be used to assert one’s autonomy. The legitimacy of Helvidius Priscus’ actions while praetor, such as dedicating the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus and leading the backlash against Neronian *delatores* (Tac. *Hist*. 4.4-9, 53), appears to be founded in part upon his political office. Moreover, holding political office was one of the few connections that senators under the Principate had to the republican past.

In summary, the fact that one held or did not hold high political office cannot be used as evidence of collaboration or dissent. Political opinions were often divorced from the political offices individuals held. This is of primary importance for determining the political views of writers like Pliny and Tacitus, whose political careers have inordinately influenced scholars in interpreting the political nature of their written works.

Works Cited

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