

## Roman Imperial Auctions: Subverting or Continuing a Republican Political Process?

One of the many actions for which emperors are criticized by ancient authors is their habit of holding auctions of personal or imperial property. Caligula and Nero are condemned for such a practice, but it also occurred under Nerva, Marcus Aurelius, and Pertinax as well as possibly others. Emperors are repeatedly criticized for conducting such auctions and for driving up prices for the sycophantic or frightened attendees. But this sort of spectacular financial transaction had a number of political aspects that deserve investigation. Looking beyond the condemnation of the emperor as auctioneer we can see political causes behind both the decision to auction property and the selection of items to be auctioned. Some emperors were theatrically lending support to their statements of budgetary woe. Others were creating a public persona by simplifying their lifestyle. Others were distancing themselves from predecessors.

The motives of purchasers are also more varied and nuanced than might first appear. Beyond mere sycophancy, some appear to be making a statement of political support while others sought to own imperial possessions, either to celebrate or condemn the previous owners. Tracing the auction habit back to its origins in the confiscations during the civil wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC we can see that it was always a politically charged spectacle and that the emperors who acted as auctioneers were keenly aware of and deliberately exploited the political component of the events that they were creating.