

An Overlooked *Arcanum Imperii*?: Reconsidering Indirect Rule in the Julio-Claudian East

Historians of the Roman Empire tend to view the existence of the so-called "client kings" in the early Imperial period as merely a historical relic in decline (Isaac 2013; Sartre 2013; Millar 2004), or, at best, as a temporary measure swiftly removed in favor of direct rule as soon as each territory was sufficiently "civilized" (Bowersock 1965; cf. Sullivan 1990).

I wish to demonstrate, by contrast, that Octavian/Augustus, in the aftermath of Actium and his resettlement of the East culminating in 20 BCE, intentionally maintained a system of indirect rule in major parts of the Roman east, namely in Thrace, Pontus, Cappadocia, Syria, and Judea. This system, moreover, acquired several core features, which distinguish it both from eastern monarchies of previous generations as well as from contemporary Roman "client kings" elsewhere in the empire: The pre-existing monarchic families, most of whom rose to power only under Pompey and Antony, enjoyed a complete monopoly of indirect rule in much of the Roman east – Roman emperors limited themselves to members of these specific dynasties when considering new monarchs to appoint, and no new dynasty was introduced (cf. Sullivan 1990). Members of these families furthermore enjoyed intimate, personal relationships with members of the Julio-Claudian family, which however, never seem to be of a romantic or sexual nature, and which are never complemented by marriage ties. Finally, these rulers, though often Roman citizens, ruled under an ostensibly Hellenistic-monarchic veneer, which was, however, in many respects a distinctly Roman interpretation or reimagining of Hellenistic Kingship, and contrasted with the fact that most of these dynasties did not exist before Roman rule.

I argue that this peculiar *combination* of features was not a historical remnant but rather was orchestrated by Augustus to serve as an additional *arcantum imperii*, hitherto overlooked by

scholars. In other words, I maintain that Augustus' system of indirect rule in the East was fashioned as a part of his project of centralizing political power around his family and himself: it created a special eastern elite, with complete political dependence upon, and strong personal loyalty towards, the Julio-Claudian family. These monarchs, however, had virtually no possibility of aiming at the imperial power itself due to their ostensible, Roman-fostered, uncivic *persona*. This elite could thus serve as an important and reliable counter-weight to potentially-threatening senatorial governors. The formation of this system should thus be viewed as complementary to other measures instituted by Augustus to curtail this threat, such as the famous decision to administer Egypt through *equites*.

Augustus' Julio-Claudian successors, who benefitted from this unique system, largely kept it in place or fostered it. While admittedly certain territories shifted to direct rule, some of those were subsequently given back to the hands of monarchs or switched back and forth several times between direct and indirect rule (e.g. Judea, Commagene). One should not conceive of an inevitable and one-directional trend of "provincialization" before the death of Nero.

It is only under the Flavians, I argue, that one detects real change, with the complete disintegration of the system of indirect rule and near-complete "provincialization" in the Roman east within a span of a single generation. This phenomenon, I believe, is due in large part to the Flavians' estrangement from, or indifference towards the system, which was based on personal, familiar ties. This significant change in the character of Roman imperialism in the east should thus be viewed more as a consequence of Flavian policy than as a simple culmination of a long-term, inevitable process, as is often maintained.

If correct, my conclusions have important implications for our understanding of the political and administrative development of the early Empire and point to a renewed and more nuanced appreciation of the political legacy of both Augustus and the Flavians.

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