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Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455

Meaghan A. McEvoy



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Preface

This book aims to set in its full context the rule of child-emperors in the late Roman west from the late fourth until the mid-fifth century AD, and to highlight the proliferation of minority governments of this period as a key factor in the transformation of the imperial office in the late Roman world.

The late Roman empire has received considerable attention in recent decades, yet the child-emperors of the period themselves have seldom been considered worthy of notice. Some modern studies have offered extensive coverage and analysis of fourth- and fifth-century history, yet do not identify or investigate the child-emperor as in any way exceptional.¹ Others focus on specific historians or writers of the period, such as Ammianus, Ausonius, or Claudian, or on key political figures, such as Ambrose of Milan, Stilicho, Galla Placidia, or Aetius; or on broader themes, such as aristocracy and senate in the late empire.² And immensely valuable though all of these works have been in addressing many developments of the period, none of them view the accessions of a series of infant emperors as in any way surprising.

Even works which have noted the phenomenon of the child-emperor in late antiquity have thus far dealt only with the depiction of young emperors in the *Historia Augusta* and the topos of child-princes in texts of the period.³ Studies of the so-called ‘generalissimos’ of the western Roman empire (a term used, not unreasonably, by many modern scholars to describe the generals who frequently dominated the western governments of the period) trace merely the rise of their protagonists rather than the structural and political circumstances that made such a rise possible.⁴ And though a number of recent and excellent studies have highlighted the stresses and strains of the late Roman imperial office, changes in the machinery of government in this era, and the development of imperial policy over this period, child-emperor rule has continued to be seen merely as a curiosity, rather than a significant development worthy of attention in its own right.⁵

¹ Jones (1964a); Stein (1959); Seeck (1919).

² Matthews (1989); Cameron (1970); Sivan (1993); McLynn (1994); Mazzarino (1942) Sirago (1961); Oost (1968a); Sivan (2011); Zecchini (1983); Coulon (2000); Stickler (2002); Matthews (1975).

³ Hartke (1951); Molè Ventura (1992).

⁴ See particularly O’Flynn (1983). Further examples of use of ‘generalissimo’: Matthews (1975), 302; Holum (1982), 49; Heather (2005), 223.

⁵ Lenski (2002); Kelly (2004); Errington (2006); and for the rule of child-emperors as a curiosity, see e.g. Szidat (2011), 54–5.

In view of the absence of any other collective study of the reigns of the four western child-emperors of the Valentinian/Theodosian house—Gratian, Valentinian II, Honorius, and Valentinian III—and the general avoidance of detailed political analysis of the late fourth and fifth centuries by modern scholars, a chronological investigation of the period seemed the best way to proceed. On examining the wide range of sources for the period and the questions they raised in their turn, it quickly became clear that a careful re-examination of each of the reigns of the four emperors in question, an unpicking and reconstruction of the politics of the period, was essential in order adequately to appreciate the gradual evolution of attitudes towards imperial rulership, to the individual rulers themselves, and to the role of those who surrounded and influenced them across this eighty-year period. I have chosen in consequence to examine each reign through a narrative analysis of its politics and in the process to highlight certain important tendencies, to situate the contingent events in their structural context, and in the conclusion to draw out the key changes which were thus revealed, and to offer an explanation which takes into account both the immediate politics of promotion and also longer-term systemic changes. My approach has thus been to try to differentiate between the ‘deeper’ structural constraints underlying and framing the politics and cultural assumptions of groups and individuals on the one hand, and the conjunctural or short-term decisions or events on the other, but at the same time to pinpoint their ‘emergent’ characteristics, that is to say, the results of the combination or re-combination of such different levels of social being as reflected and realized in the actual behaviour of individuals—generals, senators, churchmen—or groups—the senate, aristocracy, the army.

Inevitably, this raises the issue of the tension between a narrative account and a structural analysis. While a *histoire événementielle* alone is perhaps an inadequate vehicle on which to carry an analysis of causal relationships, a narrative account of the very complex politics of the period, particularly from c.395 onwards, proved to be the best way to bring out and to illustrate various processes of change in cultural attitude and social practice. As a result I have tried to exploit this possibility, while always bearing in mind the different levels of causal relations referred to above. In thus reconstructing from the sources a history of the period, which, for the fifth century especially, has not yet been firmly established by modern scholarship, this focus on political narrative is able both to situate events in their historical context rather than presenting them as isolated eventualities, and in so doing, as the story of the period itself unfolds, to draw out the structural developments.

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List of Abbreviations

AE	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i> (Paris, 1888–)
AHR	<i>American Historical Review</i>
AJAH	<i>American Journal of Ancient History</i>
AJP	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
Ant.Tard.	<i>Antiquité Tardive</i>
Art Bull.	<i>Art Bulletin</i>
BCAR	<i>Bollettino della commissione archeologica comunale di Roma</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CAH	<i>The Cambridge Ancient History XIII: The Late Empire, AD337–425</i> , ed. Av. Cameron and P. Garnsey (Cambridge, 1998); <i>XIV: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD425–600</i> , ed. Av. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby (Cambridge, 2000)
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum, series Latina</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
CJ	<i>Codex Justinianus</i>
CJourn.	<i>Classical Journal</i>
CLRE	<i>Consuls of the Later Roman Empire</i> , ed. R. S. Bagnall, A. Cameron, S. R. Schwartz, and K. A. Worp (Atlanta, Ga., 1987)
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
CSHB	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i>
CSirm	<i>Sirmondian Constitutions</i>
CTh	<i>Theodosian Code</i>
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
HTHR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
ICUR	<i>Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae</i>
ILCV	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres</i>
ILS	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>

<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JLA</i>	<i>Journal of Late Antiquity</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JThS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>Mus.Helv.</i>	<i>Museum Helveticum</i>
<i>NC</i>	<i>Numismatic Chronicle</i>
<i>NTh</i>	<i>Novels of Theodosius II</i>
<i>NVal</i>	<i>Novels of Valentinian III</i>
<i>Opus.Rom.</i>	<i>Opuscula Romana</i>
<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>PBSR</i>	<i>Papers of the British School at Rome</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> , 3 vols., ed. A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris (Cambridge, 1971–92)
<i>REA</i>	<i>Revue des études Anciennes</i>
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des études Byzantines</i>
<i>RH</i>	<i>Revue historique</i>
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique</i>
<i>RIC</i>	<i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i> , Volume 9: Valentinian I—Theodosius I by J. W. E. Pearce (London, 1951); <i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i> , Volume 10: <i>The Divided Empire and the Fall of the Western Parts, AD395-491</i> by J. Kent (London, 1994)
<i>RIL</i>	<i>Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo</i>
<i>RPAA</i>	<i>Rendiconti della pontificia romana di archaeologia</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>ZAC</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>



Gold solidus of Valentinian I issued in AD367 for the accession of Gratian, bearing the legend 'Spes Rei Publicae'. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC.

Introduction

SPES REI PUBLICAE: THE HOPE OF THE STATE?

The numerous child-emperors of the late Roman world make up a strange and unexpected phenomenon which has been entirely neglected by scholars of the period thus far. Yet it is a development which has crucial ramifications for any understanding of the era, and represents a serious omission in the considerable attention accorded to the political and cultural history of late antiquity in the last few decades.

In the summer of 367, the soldier-emperor Valentinian I, ruler of the western Roman empire since 364, fell seriously ill. As he lay on what was believed to be his deathbed, court factions began scheming over who the emperor's successor should be, even, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, coming up with two potential candidates.

But while these designs were being agitated to no purpose, the emperor was restored with the help of numerous remedies; and observing that he was hardly yet rescued from the danger of death, he purposed to bestow the imperial insignia upon his son Gratianus, who had by this time nearly reached the age of puberty.¹

Valentinian's son Gratian was 8 years of age, and on 24 August 367, the emperor presented the boy to his assembled army as their new co-Augustus, with a speech commending the child as a tie between army and emperor, who would 'secure the public peace on all sides'.² Rarely in Roman history had so young a child been promoted to the full rank of Augustus, and yet only eight years later, in 375, Gratian's half-brother Valentinian II, a boy of only 4 years of age, was also proclaimed co-Augustus upon the death of their father.

¹ AM 26.6.4: *Sed dum haec cogitantur in cassum, imperator remediis multiplicibus recreatus, vixque se mortis periculo contemplans extractum, Gratianum filium suum, adulto iam proximum, insignibus principatus ornare meditabatur.*

² AM 27.6.8: *Gratianum hunc meum adultum, quem diu versatum inter liberos vestros, commune diligitis pignus, undique muniendae tranquillitatis publicae causa, in augustum assumere commilitium paro, si propitia caelestis numinis vestraeque maiestatis voluntas parentis amorem iuverit praeuntem . . .*

In 393 the eastern emperor Theodosius I made his 8-year-old son Honorius co-Augustus, and in 395, at the age of 10, Honorius would become sole emperor of the west. In 425, Honorius' 6-year-old nephew followed him in the role of emperor after a major eastern military expedition was conducted to set him on the western throne. None of these reigns was short-lived: Gratian was Augustus for seventeen years (367–83), Valentinian II for seventeen also (375–92), Honorius for thirty years (393–423), and Valentinian III another thirty years (425–55). In the east, similar child-emperor accessions occurred with the 6-year-old Arcadius in 383 and the nine-month-old Theodosius II in 402. Though no one (including Valentinian I) would have expected Gratian to be an actively ruling emperor with a separate administration at the age of 8 years in 367, a precedent had been set. In time these boy-emperors would grow to adulthood, yet their accessions at such tender ages and the methods which developed for coping with such youthful imperial leaders through long minority governments continued to have repercussions throughout their time as adult emperors also. Being a child-emperor for many years before reaching adulthood inevitably had implications for the rest of the reign, and the question of whether any of these boys ever embraced the full range of imperial functions upon reaching adulthood or remained, in some sense, forever 'childlike', is a crucial one. This repetition of child-emperor accessions, the survival and the sheer length of their reigns, following one after another, should give pause for thought: a new pattern was emerging in late Roman imperial politics. In the decades following AD 367, the western Roman empire witnessed three more boy-emperors and three periods of prolonged minority government. Such a situation had simply never occurred before in the long history of the Roman empire, east or west. What was happening to the imperial office in the late fourth/early fifth centuries?

It is not that the narrative of these reigns has been overlooked, but that the basic phenomenon and the developments which made it possible have not been adequately examined thus far. As noted in the Preface, the more dazzling activities of emperors like Theodosius I, or the remarkable and romantic adventures of the empress Galla Placidia, have not unreasonably attracted more interest in modern scholarship, with the later descendants of the Theodosian house in the fifth century especially dismissed as feeble and degenerate.³ Yet as much as these studies have contributed greatly to general knowledge and understanding of the period, the issue of child-emperors deserves to be addressed in its own right. This unexpected phenomenon—four emperors acceding to the western throne as young children, following each other in succession, and 'ruling' over such a long period—essentially from 375 to 455—was entirely without precedent in Roman imperial history.

³ e.g. Jones (1964a), 1. 173; Bury (1923), 1. 107.

Unless we are willing to concede either that this was just an historical accident, or that the phenomenon had no further ramifications, there must be some grounded explanation to account for it. Historical accident is in any case an unconvincing justification, and in fact merely avoids the issue: contingent events, whether the assumed result of a set of circumstances about which something is understood, or the unpredictable outcome of chance, are nevertheless always situated in the contexts in which they occur, hence framed and limited in their effects and the possibilities to which they may give rise. While the range of possible outcomes, which is usually limited, may be predicted, the exact outcome which will occur cannot be. My purpose, therefore, is not to focus solely on these individual child-emperor regimes, but to place them collectively in the broader picture of imperial politics in the late fourth to mid-fifth centuries, to look at the repeated succession of child-emperors in this period as a whole, as part of an overarching, interlinked development in the nature of imperial rule itself in late antiquity. For it is not merely the youth of these emperors that is intriguing, but still more importantly it is the prolonged minority governments that their reigns entailed, following one after the other, that made the rise of child-emperor rule in the late fourth century so qualitatively different from anything that the Roman empire had seen before.

Young emperors before 367

Before the accession of Gratian in 367 there had of course been young emperors: Augustus himself had been a youth of only 18 when Julius Caesar died in 44 BC, while Nero had been a teenager of 16 at the time of his accession. Caracalla had been made Augustus with his father Septimius Severus at the age of 11 in AD 197, while the eccentric Elagabalus (218–22) had come to the throne at the age of about 14, and his cousin Alexander Severus (222–35) at 13; Gordian III (238–44) had also been a teenage ruler. Amidst the tumultuous rise and fall of emperors during the third century, the emperor Macrinus (217–18) had named his young son Diadumenianus as Caesar, and then a year later co-Augustus (probably when the boy was 10 years of age), while Philip the Arab, emperor from 244 to 249, had attempted a similar arrangement, naming his son (another Philip) first Caesar and then co-Augustus when the boy was probably also aged around 9 or 10. Such accessions were unusual, but they did occur. Indeed, the first half of the third century saw a noticeable concentration of accessions of youthful emperors, with Macrinus and Diadumenianus (217–18), Elagabalus (218–22), Severus Alexander (222–35), Maximus Caesar (235–8), Gordian III (238–44), and Philip the Arab and his son Philip II (244–9). Yet it remained unusual for a child to become emperor before his teens, and it should be noted that, aside from the precocious Augustus (who reigned from 31 BC to AD 14), Nero (AD 54–68), and Severus

Alexander (who reigned for thirteen years, 222–35), few of these young emperors enjoyed long reigns, or indeed died natural deaths. In addition, although the second half of the third century would witness the creation of a number of imperial colleges, such as that of Carus (282–3) and his sons Carinus and Numerian, these sons—and indeed the Tetrarchic Caesars of Diocletian—tended to be adults when they were made partners in the imperial office.

With the exceptions of Diadumenianus and Philip II, it was also rare for an emperor's son to be made a full co-Augustus (rather than a Caesar) at a young age, particularly during the lifetime of an older, reigning Augustus. Marcus Aurelius, for example, had named his son Commodus a Caesar when the boy was only 5 years old, but he had remained Caesar only until raised as co-Augustus at 17. In the early fourth century, with the rise of the Constantinian dynasty, Constantine the Great similarly named his sons as Caesars while they were still boys, but it was not until his death in 337 that three of those Caesars achieved the rank of Augustus. Even at this point, however, Constantine's sons were still young: in 337 the eldest new Augustus, Constantine II, was not yet 21; Constantius II was aged 19, and Constans probably 13–15.⁴ Constantine's eldest son, the illegitimate Crispus, who was executed in mysterious circumstances in 326, had been Caesar for nine years (he was appointed to the rank in March 317) by the time of his death, was aged over 20, and had served in a number of military campaigns by this point, but there was no indication his father had anticipated elevating him as a full Augustus imminently; though there may have been numerous political reasons to delay such a promotion, this circumstance should remind us that it was only because of Constantine I's death in 337 that his surviving three sons became Augusti at the ages they did.

The difference between making a child-Caesar or a child-Augustus should also be noted at the outset. The two ranks were marked out as distinct in this period, and although, as shall be discussed further in Chapter 3, Gratian and Valentinian II in particular would remain 'sleeping partners' for the first years of their reigns, they did so as co-Augusti, not as Caesars. The term co-Augustus does not necessarily imply less than full imperial power, merely that a number of members of the imperial college held this highest rank, whether adult or child—Valentinian I and Valens were co-Augusti from 364 to 365 for instance, just as Honorius and Arcadius were a few decades later. Seniority in this ultimate rank theoretically depended upon the date at which it had been achieved, and might involve some deference from the junior to senior Augustus (as with Valentinian III towards Theodosius II), and the order in which emperors' names would be given in official documents, but

⁴ Burgess (2008), 40.

in practice this distinction frequently had little discernible impact upon each emperor's power.⁵

The previous century, with its Tetrarchic and then Constantinian Caesars, had in all likelihood led to confusion over the role a Caesar was in fact meant to take (if indeed it had ever been clear-cut): should he be an active military lieutenant in the manner of Constantius I or Crispus, or undertake the more ceremonial role of young designated heir, as in the cases of the younger sons of Constantine during their father's reign, who were presumably in time expected to take on the active role? All of the Tetrarchic Caesars had been established generals, and all adults, at the time of their appointments; active leaders and administrators, rather than the blood-relation Caesars of the Constantinian house.⁶ Indeed, the rank of Caesar had been a common designation of an heir under the Constantinian dynasty, one which had been granted to no fewer than four sons of Constantine, and four of his half-nephews as well at different points (Crispus, Constantine II, Licinius Junior, Constantius II, Constans, Dalmatius, Gallus, and Julian).⁷ Of this collection of Constantinian Caesars, four had been summarily executed (Crispus, Licinius, Dalmatius, and Gallus), while Constantine's surviving sons had become Augusti in 337 only after a bloody massacre of almost every remaining male member of the Constantinian house. The Caesar Julian had become a legitimate Augustus (when already in rebellion) through good fortune when his cousin Constantius died, leaving the path to the throne clear.

With this recent history in mind, and indeed the more distant history of the internecine struggles of the Tetrarchic Caesars, perhaps 'Augustus' seemed a more secure rank for the emperor's young son. It should not be supposed that Valentinian I made Gratian co-Augustus accidentally, when he meant in fact to make a Caesar: there must have been a particular purpose behind this decision. It could be argued that Augusti might be more difficult to dispose of than Caesars, who clearly could be removed—although the sons of Macrinus and Philip the Arab could prove the exception here: in each situation when the father-emperor died (in both cases following defeat in a civil-war battle), the sons, despite their status, were simply eliminated so as to make way for the more favoured candidates, Elagabalus and Decius. In each of these cases, no guardian figure—such as that of Stilicho in the case of the orphaned Honorius in 395—came forward to support the claim of the dead emperor's son. As will be explored in detail in this study, dynastic succession, though not a factor to be dismissed lightly, did not automatically carry the day unless politicians

⁵ See e.g. Theodosius I's elevation of his son Arcadius as co-Augustus in 383 without the permission of the senior emperor Gratian (below, p. 88).

⁶ Though dynastic marriages were made with the aim of establishing familial ties: Potter (2004), 288, 347.

⁷ Crispus in 317—*PLRE* 1. 233; Constantine II in 317—*PLRE* 1. 223; Licinius Junior in 317—*PLRE* 1. 509–10; Constantius II in 324—*PLRE* 1. 226; Constans in 333—*PLRE* 1. 220; Dalmatius in 335—*PLRE* 1. 241; Gallus in 351—*PLRE* 1. 224–5; Julian in 355—*PLRE* 1. 477–8.

around the throne believed it, and the individual it devolved upon, worth supporting.⁸

Aside from these isolated and ultimately unsuccessful occasions, the creation of an emperor's son or chosen heir as an Augustus rather than a Caesar during the father's lifetime remained extremely rare. It has recently been suggested that Constantine I must have intended to elevate his two eldest surviving sons (Constantine II and Constantius II) to the rank of Augusti before his death, thereby creating a new 'Tetrarchy' of two Augusti and two Caesars, but that he failed to do so in time. By this argument, it is asserted that Tetrarchic precedent for creating Caesars and Augusti meant that: 'the proclamation of a new member of the imperial college or the promotion of a Caesar required the presence of an Augustus or the active approval of the senior Augustus, as without such approval at the very least, any new candidate would be viewed as a usurper.'⁹ Essentially, it is suggested that without a senior Augustus, the Caesars left after Constantine's death had no constitutional means of becoming Augusti. This is an important consideration, one which may even have had bearing on Valentinian I's decision to bypass the rank of Caesar entirely in Gratian's case: at any rate, the elevation of his son immediately to the highest rank in the imperial college must have been intended to try to avoid any difficulties in passing the throne to Gratian without incident when Valentinian I died. Such a creation certainly reinforced a desire on the part of the senior emperor to demonstrate that legitimate Augusti were made only by members of the imperial college. In the late fourth to mid-fifth centuries, the emperors Valentinian I, Theodosius I, Arcadius, and Constantius III, despite dying natural deaths, all left behind them sons and heirs who were still legally minors, yet who in a number of cases already carried the rank of co-Augustus. Roman mortality rates should probably also be borne in mind in this context: many adult emperors might not live to see their sons achieve maturity, and this would certainly be an element in the accessions of later fourth- and fifth-century child-emperors. Indeed, one of the most interesting questions that such a scenario poses is that of why, when child-emperors foreseeably created an unusual and precarious political situation, powerful individuals at court and in the military should choose to support fatherless boys as young as 4 or 6 years of age as their emperor.

Creating sons as full Augusti could also be interpreted as a strident statement of the legitimacy and intended longevity of a new reign, especially when, as we shall see, these creations were frequently made at moments of political crisis. That the ranks of Caesar and Augustus continued to be clearly perceived

⁸ One interesting case where such support was believed worthwhile, was that of the deceased Decius' son Hostilianus, who in 251 was adopted as his heir by the new emperor Trebonianus Gallus, though Gallus later plotted against Hostilianus (Zosimus 1.25.1–2).

⁹ Burgess (2008), 9.

as carrying a different significance can be seen in the fact that while the term Caesar was rarely used by the dynasty of Valentinian/Theodosius, it was still employed upon occasion to emphasize a particular political situation: such as in 424, when the eastern emperor Theodosius II made his then 5-year-old cousin Valentinian a Caesar, before making him Augustus of the west exactly one year later. Theodosius II was responsible for the creation of Valentinian III's entire rule, and by elevating him gradually in this way emphasized the dependence of his younger colleague upon himself.

Scholars who have given passing attention to the boy-emperors of the late fourth and early fifth centuries have been almost uniformly content to put the accessions of these boys down simply to a triumph of the dynastic principle, without any serious consideration of what this means and whether it was a truly plausible reason for the promotion of a 4- or 6-year-old.¹⁰ Yet it is not clear that in the past dynastic claims had been wholly convincing in winning the throne for young emperors, however much their adult predecessors might wish it. Efforts to manufacture such a desire for dynastic succession can be seen in situations such as Marcus Aurelius' parading of his son Commodus before the military in the *toga virilis* upon learning of the revolt of Avidius Cassius; or the timing of the promotion of Diadumenianus and the use of the Antonine name to boost his claim.¹¹ As noted above, despite a five-year reign, Philip the Arab could not manage to pass the throne successfully to his son in 249, despite the boy's rank: inevitably, what was needed was a powerful individual, or group of individuals, who saw value in supporting the dynastically legitimate claim of a young heir, and there is no obvious reason why this should be any different in the fourth century.

In those cases where we do know of a young son of an emperor who was a potential heir upon his father's death, such boys rarely survived their fathers, or when they did, were discarded entirely. In AD 260, although the details are murky, another imperial child, the Caesar Saloninus, son of Gallienus, was apparently murdered by the general Postumus when the latter rebelled. The 'spontaneous' purge of 337, mentioned above, which left Constantine's sons as the only possible surviving candidates for the throne, saw the massacre of all male members of the imperial house except—significantly—the young children Gallus and Julian: apparently there was no expectation that they could pose a threat. Finally, the infant son of Jovian, who shared the consulship with his father in 364, is not mentioned by any source after Jovian's death as a potential successor to his father, though a comment in a sermon of John Chrysostom suggests he did survive into adulthood, having been maimed in infancy, presumably to ensure there was no chance of his posing a threat to

¹⁰ e.g. Oost (1968a), 194; Drinkwater (1998), 270. More specifically relating to the accessions of Honorius and Arcadius in 395, see Errington (2006), 13, 30.

¹¹ On Commodus: Campbell (1984), 49–50; for Diadumenianus, see Syme (1972), 272–91.

future imperial establishments.¹² Less than five years before the acclamation of Gratian, a boy-emperor still was clearly not considered desirable—perhaps not even genuinely feasible.

Although the cases of the child-Caesars or child-emperors of the early empire do not provide many successful scenarios of such political constructs prospering in the longer term, they do provide a backdrop against which to set the child-emperors of the later Roman empire. While none of these past imperial candidates was quite as young as the 4-year-old Augustus Valentinian II or the 6-year-old Valentinian III, and the long reigns that these later child-emperors experienced were extraordinary, earlier accessions of teenage emperors, some of whom did survive in office more than a few years, do suggest that there were ways in which imperial ideology sought to cope with such scenarios and power-players who believed supporting such candidates worthwhile. Youthful emperors such as Elagabalus, Gordian III in the third century, and the Constantinian Caesars in the fourth century laid some of the preliminary ideological groundwork for the phenomenon of the late Roman child-emperors which would come to full fruition in this period. Nevertheless, the extreme youth of the later child-emperors, the remarkable longevity of their reigns, and the circumstance of their succeeding one after the other in the west created the possibility of a true institutionalization of minority rule in the later empire which had never before existed.

For the successions and subsequent long reigns of Gratian, Valentinian II, Honorius, and Valentinian III to have been even remotely possible, a fundamental shift must surely have taken place in both the perception and reality of the demands of the imperial office, as well as in the political structures in which it was embedded. That an element of dynasticism always played a role is not in doubt; but on closer inspection, it rarely provides a full answer to this remarkable situation. In this book I seek to address these issues and the questions arising from them by assessing the nature of the functions expected of a late Roman emperor, and identifying the changes which had occurred in late Roman government and rulership which made the accession of child-emperors plausible, and in the longer run, even perceived as desirable in some eyes. I will consider the aspects of an emperor's office which a child could be presented as fulfilling, as well as the key functions which might be lost under a child-emperor, and the ways in which this loss might be cloaked. And over the longer term, as once primarily imperial responsibilities came to be delegated on a semi-permanent basis from the accession of a child-emperor onwards, the broader implications of change in the expected roles and responsibilities of an emperor will also become apparent, as will the limitations this could also eventually impose on the range of activities available to the emperor himself.

¹² Although apparently the boy still feared for his life: John Chrys. *ad vid. iun.* 4.

The increasing Christianization of the imperial office, combining with the reigns of these four boy-emperors during such a crucial period of development for the Christian religion under the Roman empire generally, can also be seen as vital to the character that these reigns would take on. One very significant aspect of this was the growing acceptability (in some circles at least) of extreme religiosity of an emperor as his most conspicuous virtue. In addition, I will examine in detail the particular circumstances in which these four young boys became Augusti, along with the roles of key politicians (military or civilian) behind them who saw more advantage in supporting the rule of a minor than in promoting one of their own. The question of how contemporaries learned to deal with a child-emperor reaching adulthood, whether a transition from ceremonial to actual power could be achieved, and how the same key players might maintain their powers (or seek to do so) through such a transition will also be a crucial consideration in determining how the regimes around child-emperors operated in this period. And in this context, the relations of essential groups, such as the elites of the military and aristocracy, with these minority governments and carefully guarded boy-rulers can also provide important insights to the workings of these late Roman governments. In bringing together the results of these investigations, I will suggest new answers to the core questions posed at the outset: how did the accessions of these child-emperors come about, how did their regimes survive—and for so long—in the highly militaristic world of the late fourth century and thereafter, and what long-term ramifications did this phenomenon have for the imperial office?

Although it might seem at first glance that they need no further elaboration, it will be worth considering very briefly how a number of key terms will be employed in the course of the investigation, beginning with the terms ‘child-emperor’ or ‘boy-emperor’ themselves. The latter term hardly needs justification: after all, it was clearly used by contemporaries in the fifth century, as we see in Sidonius Apollinaris’ panegyric to Avitus in 455, in which he laments the misfortunes that Gaul had suffered ‘under a boy-emperor’ (*principe sub puero*).¹³ Admittedly, Sidonius was not using this term in a complimentary manner, referring to the recently assassinated Valentinian III, who was aged 36 by the time of his death. However, although Sidonius employed the term in a derogatory sense, it need not always carry such implications. In any other situation, we would certainly refer to a 4- or a 6-year-old male as a child or a boy—there seems no reason, therefore, not to call such a young male upon the throne a child- or boy-emperor.

In contrast, terms such as ‘regency’ or ‘regent’ are worth a little more consideration. The term ‘regent’ is one which has been frequently applied in modern scholarship to a number of individuals closely associated with these

¹³ Sidonius, *Carm.* 7.533.

late Roman child-emperor governments: figures like Justina, Stilicho, and Galla Placidia.¹⁴ Yet as one scholar originally pointed out back in 1903, and as another explored more extensively in 1969, there could be no question of a fully fledged emperor having a protector whose rights extended to control of his government: 'there were no provisions in constitutional law for a period of minority during which an Augustus could not rule in his own right.'¹⁵ This is a crucial point in recognizing the truly unprecedented and paradoxical nature of the succession of child-emperors in the late Roman west. Though many emperors throughout the empire's history had attempted to pass the throne to their sons (real or adopted), and some certainly succeeded, the office had never legally become hereditary.¹⁶ Although it has been pointed out that there was no minimum age requirement for membership of the imperial college, the lack of legal provision for a regency scenario highlights the fact that the accession of an emperor who was a minor was not an expected outcome that had been regularized in any formal way.¹⁷ By definition, the *imperator* was an active, capable leader who still supposedly attained his high office through ability (frequently military) rather than any other qualification.¹⁸ In practice, of course, hereditary succession frequently did play a significant role in imperial accessions, though never before to the extremes of the acclamation of fatherless 4- or 10-year-olds that the late fourth century was to witness. This situation of such immensely young emperors ruling in the late fourth century (especially ruling 'independently' without an adult colleague in the west) was still very much a new phenomenon.

Since there could be no such thing in the late Roman world as a regency, however, there was in consequence simply no official position of regent for anyone to fill.¹⁹ Yet there was an alternative position, one which I would argue was distinctly different from that of regent, but which more accurately reflected the positions of individuals like Stilicho: that of 'guardian'.²⁰ As a child left parentless at the age of 10, for instance, the emperor Honorius was in

¹⁴ e.g. for Justina: Sivan (1996), 200; for Stilicho: Kulikowski (2007), 166; for Galla Placidia: Mathisen (1999), 174.

¹⁵ Mommsen (1903), 101 f. Cf. Straub (1952), 108; Cameron (1969), 276; (1970), 39.

¹⁶ As far back as Augustus and his designation of Gaius and Lucius Caesar as *principes iuventutis* the ruling imperial house had sought to guarantee its desire for hereditary succession: see Rowe (2002), 75–6; Severy (2003), 68–77.

¹⁷ On there being no minimum age for office, see O'Flynn (1983), 45–6.

¹⁸ See in general Campbell (1984), and esp. 59–69; also Matthews (1989), 283.

¹⁹ Admittedly the *Historia Augusta* does refer to a 'regency' (*interregnum*) existing temporarily in situations where an emperor had died and his successor had not yet been appointed (*SHA Tacitus* 1). This is very different from the sort of scenario envisaged by those who write of a 'regency' of Stilicho or Galla Placidia, however, implying a long-term legally defined role of an adult essentially ruling in place of a child-emperor.

²⁰ On the legal role of the guardian, see *Der kleine Pauly* (1979), 1012–14, s.v. 'tutela', and in comprehensive detail on the history of tutela, and the legal role of *tutores*, see Kaser (1959, repr. 1971), 85 ff., 277 f., and 352 ff.; 2 (Munich, 1959), 158 ff.

need of a guardian, and assuredly this was the legal remit of Stilicho's protective role in relation to the young emperor.²¹ However, the role of a guardian was by no means the same as that implied by the term regent: the two terms did not entail the same function simply because the child in need of protection or guidance was an emperor. Under Roman—and indeed modern—law, the term guardian implies protection of a minor's personal property and rights. In contrast, the term 'regent' suggests control or management of a government in a minor's stead. And in addition, under Roman civil law, *tutela* for a Roman boy ceased when he reached the age of 14: even in the guise of a guardian, the extent of the authority of a figure like Stilicho was legally limited.²² The position of an Augusta in this respect (or perhaps even the positions of the Augustus Gratian in relation to his younger brother Valentinian II, or the Augustus Theodosius II in relation to his cousin Valentinian III) differed from that of an individual like Stilicho or Arbogast, who were not of imperial rank. A co-Augustus or an Augusta did at least share that status which in theory entitled them also to a share in the government. Nevertheless, in the case of a woman—such as Justina with her son Valentinian II, or Galla Placidia with her son Valentinian III—such powers would surely still be greatly limited.²³

Overall, the key point to emphasize is that while the term regent is frequently used in modern scholarship to describe individuals who held a position of authority in relation to child-emperors, this is not a term that the late Roman world recognized. Usually, if the relationship of such an individual to an emperor is given a term at all (which is rare), the term used is that of *tutor* or *curator* in Latin, or *epitropos* in Greek—that is, guardian.²⁴ And the Latin word *regens* itself appears to be an invention of medieval Latin, not classical or late antique.²⁵ This is not to suggest that in reality the powers exercised by such an individual as Stilicho were not those that we would recognize as regency—much like the position of 'Lord Protector' that Edward Seymour held for part of the reign of the child-king of England,

²¹ Blockley (in relation to Theodosius II) asserts that an emperor, even when a minor, was legally *sui iuris* and could not therefore have a guardian, but it is unclear on what evidence this claim is based: (1992), 51–2.

²² Cameron (1969) 277. Cf. Cameron (1970) 39. According to the Glossary of the Pharr translation of the *Theodosian Code*, a person under 25 remained a minor, however, and his legal guardian once he reached the age of puberty was termed a *curator*: Pharr (1952), 578, 588, 598.

²³ As Jones points out: 'Women and eunuchs had no official part in the government and owed their power solely to their personal ascendancy over an immature or weak-minded emperor' (1964a), 1. 341.

²⁴ e.g. Eunapius, frg. 62.1; Claudian *III Cons.* 151–3; Olympiodorus, frg. 1.

²⁵ Latham (1965), s.v. 'regentia', p. 398. The earliest attestation of 'regens' to mean regent is c.1343.

Edward VI. And while the role of an emperor's mother might come close to a position of regent, as we shall see, the question of the genuine extent of influence an imperial woman could have over matters of government is an important one. Sources such as Eunapius or Zosimus had no doubts as to where true power lay in these child-emperor governments, describing individuals like Stilicho or Rufinus as running the west and east in the stead of Honorius and Arcadius, or the general Aetius as wielding great power during the reign of Valentinian III.²⁶ But it is important to recognize that this frequently cited position of regent itself did not exist for the Romans—however convenient a term it might be for us. This realization highlights again the paradox of an emperor too young to rule in his own right; but additionally, it emphasizes the precarious, quasi-legal status of individuals like Stilicho, who as a guardian and *magister militum* only, in fact had no constitutional control over Honorius' government in the emperor's name such as the term regent would imply, even if he managed to exert that control nevertheless. As has been observed, such unofficial regents could provide stability for a government if they maintained their dominance over a long period, but their positions were insecure and vulnerable to intrigue.²⁷ As noted above, individuals such as Stilicho and Aetius have often been referred to by modern scholars as 'generalissimos', a not unreasonable term to describe their position as supreme commanders; perhaps, as we shall see, the term 'manager' is also appropriate for such individuals who can be seen as the dominant organizing influence of a government, with effective power (exercised through the emperor) to appoint and dismiss other significant individuals.

Two further terms which will arise frequently in the course of the discussion are 'rule' and 'regime'. In this context, without attributing any particular technical sense to these terms, rule is intended to indicate the emperor himself (that is, the rule of the emperor Valentinian, or Honorius). Regime, on the other hand, is intended to designate the system operating around a given emperor, a system of which he may be either the genuine leader or the figurehead. In the late Roman world within which these child-emperor courts operated, the regime which ran them can perhaps best be seen as a set of personal relationships represented by a group of people who are in a position to manage the way in which the empire is governed. Such a group might be made up of different conglomerations of individual ministers and generals who sought to hold sway over the court. Thus regime may be applied to the system established by dominant individuals under the rule of an emperor—such as 'the regime of Stilicho'.²⁸ It has been noted that the weakness of the

²⁶ Eunapius, frg. 62.1; Zosimus 5.1.1–5.

²⁷ Jones (1964a), 1. 344.

²⁸ And as we shall see, in the west such regimes were almost always dominated by the holder of the office of *magister militum utriusque militia in praesenti*; see Jones (1964a), 1. 341–2.

consistory (the private advisory body of the emperor) was revealed when the emperor was a child (or immature), because it was at such moments that an individual or clique generally came to dominate.²⁹ But in fact, while the individual/clique who represented the most powerful influence on the emperor could frequently (as we shall see), pack the consistory and main offices of state with his/its supporters, the consistory nevertheless still continued to perform its usual functions, if not perhaps with the same level of independence theoretically attached to the institution. A regime was essentially institutional—making up the recognizable government—and generally comprised of individuals who held specific offices of state.

The rise of political opponents who managed to dislodge the manager of a regime and take their place could also see the emergence of different regimes at different points in time, such as that of Olympius in 408–9, followed eventually by that of Fl. Constantius (from c.411 to 421), both of which still operated under the rule of the emperor Honorius. And of course, if the ruler himself upon reaching adulthood should succeed in taking charge of the regime itself, it could then become *his* regime: thus it is possible to speak (albeit briefly) of the regime of Valentinian III in 454. As we shall see, this was a rare eventuality. And as will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapters, amidst the jostling for power that the rise and fall of different regimes implied, the stability of the system such regimes sought to control, though inevitably affected by such vicissitudes, in the realms of bureaucratic government especially continued to operate in the increasingly professional and institutionalized manner that had developed over the previous centuries. Below the emperor, it was the very highest military commands and administrative posts for which the influential members of the court vied, and the ability of dominant individuals to direct the assignment of such posts allowed the creation of systems such as the regime of Stilicho or that of Aetius.

Problems and evidence

The western Roman empire of the later fourth, and especially the fifth, centuries has long been viewed as problematic in modern scholarship, due to the state of the source material available. With the conclusion of Ammianus Marcellinus' immensely valuable *Res gestae* in 378, followed by the ceasing of the less reliable (though at times surprisingly well-informed) Zosimus in 410, the last half-century or so of Roman rule in the west has traditionally been regarded as something of a 'black hole', an unfocused, hazy period about

²⁹ Ibid. 1. 341.

which our increasingly fragmentary sources can provide only occasional glimpses into the workings of imperial government or the plight of provincials in the face of barbarian invasions. It is true that the nature and extent of our source material changes markedly from the first decade of the fifth century onwards.³⁰ Nevertheless, those sources which are available still offer considerable scope for historical investigation of the period.

For a study focusing on the emperors, and particularly the child-emperors, of the period, their presentation, and the workings of their government, there is in fact a rich and varied fund of source material available. For each of the boy-emperors there are extant writings either in the form of outright panegyrics, such as those of Gratian's tutor Ausonius and the aristocrat Symmachus, the court poet Claudian, and the fragments of Merobaudes, or in a very similar laudatory style, such as the imperial funeral orations of Ambrose. While great care must be taken in assuming historical accuracy for such compositions (see the discussion on this issue in Chapter 1), and though the purpose of panegyrics has long been a matter of debate among scholars, these works nevertheless provide an immensely valuable picture of how an emperor—or the regime directing him—was presented. Although they fall just beyond the particular chronological scope of this investigation, the panegyrics of the Gallic aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris are also a valuable source, in providing both a verdict from outside the centre of government on the recent administration of the empire, and also a picture of the continuing expectations of a late Roman emperor. While these sources always carry biases and hidden (or not-so-hidden) agendas, they remain extremely useful resources.

In terms of secular histories of the period, the work of Ammianus Marcellinus, which as noted above halts soon after the battle of Adrianople in 378, is the most important source for information on fourth-century emperors, their campaigns, and their relations with many senatorial aristocrats and military leaders.³¹ Thereafter, for a narrative account we are reliant on the less adept and sometimes muddled work of the eastern historian Zosimus, writing in the late fifth century, who can nevertheless provide remarkably detailed reports of western affairs at times—such as the famous senate meeting at Rome of early 408—which are unavailable anywhere else.³² After Zosimus' account terminates in 410 there is no continuous narrative surviving. Zosimus relied heavily on two other historians for much of his material—Eunapius and Olympiodorus—whose accounts did extend beyond 410, but sadly little of their compositions have survived except through usage by Zosimus and the

³⁰ The work of John Matthews and Andrew Gillett on Olympiodorus' history, the fragments of which are among the few narrative works to extend beyond 410 on western events, and the reliance of other sources upon this history, make this clear: Matthews (1970), 80–2, and Gillett (1993), 1–2.

³¹ Matthews (1989), 3 ff.

³² Lenski (2002), 5; Goffart (1971), 412–41.

ecclesiastical historian Sozomen.³³ Happily for this investigation, several of the more extensive surviving fragments of Olympiodorus, who ended his history with the installation of Valentinian III as western emperor in 425, deal with the campaign to achieve this event. The fragmentary remains of the work of Priscus of Panium, whose history covered the years 433–73, similarly provide some lucky survivals in an eyewitness account of an embassy undertaken to Attila the Hun, while the extant excerpts of the sixth-century work of John of Antioch include valuable information regarding the downfalls of Aetius and Valentinian III. Unfortunately, all of these sources, with the exception of Ammianus, were written outside the western empire. Yet the importance of not discounting the information they offer is well demonstrated by a modern study of the writings of Olympiodorus on the downfall of Stilicho, which revealed the historian not only to have a strong interest in western affairs, but also access to information from within Stilicho's inner circle of supporters.³⁴ In addition to these more extensive sources, a number of surviving chronicles also deal with the period, starting of course with that of Jerome, but also including works such as the much later *Chronicon paschale*, the chronicle of Marcellinus *comes*, and the work of the fifth-century Spanish bishop Hydatius. While generally bare of detail, these writings can still offer important information.

There is also a considerable number of ecclesiastical histories dating from this era, and although once more exclusively the work of easterners, these still often show an interest in western affairs. The works of Rufinus (c.403), Philostorgius (c.425), Socrates (c.446), Sozomen (c.448–9), and Theodoret (449–50) all provide valuable insights into the period.³⁵ Despite their eastern origins, these sources can yield information regarding the west which remains unavailable elsewhere—such as Socrates and Sozomen attesting to an edict passed by Gratian shortly after the battle of Adrianople assuring freedom of worship to his subjects. None of these ecclesiastical historians encompasses the whole of the period examined here—Theodoret's work stops around 408, for example, Sozomen's in 425, and Socrates in 439. Thereafter Evagrius is the only church historian who attempts to deal with the period from c.431 onwards, but he was writing a century after events.³⁶

The eastern origin of many of these texts—of both secular and ecclesiastical history—must make any researcher aware of the strong possibility of eastern bias in respect of western affairs or individuals, such as Stilicho or Aetius. But this can be seen as a strength of the material as well, in its potential to give an insight into eastern court attitudes or traditions regarding such major

³³ Jones (1964a), 1. 170.

³⁴ Matthews (1970), 89–2.

³⁵ Lenski (2002), 5.

³⁶ e.g. Jones (1964a), 1. 170.

western figures; for example, that apart from the somewhat more favourable stance of Olympiodorus, Stilicho was undeniably regarded with suspicion while so far as we can tell, it appears that Aetius was not.

Although ecclesiastical histories of the west from c.360 to 460 are few, there are nevertheless substantial sources of information on affairs of the period to be found in other church writings by western personalities. The copious writings of Augustine of Hippo are the best-known, and while his concern was often not with court matters, nevertheless significant information can be gleaned from the *Confessions*, *City of God*, and his collected letters in relation to his early years as the court rhetor at Milan, his observations on the 'basilicas conflict' of 385/6, and later his own involvements in issues of religious doctrine and authority in Africa and appeals to the emperor—or his manager—for support. A further North African ecclesiastical writer, Orosius, whose *Seven Books Against the Pagans* terminates in 417, offers some intriguing insights (though his account is regarded by some as 'tendentious').³⁷ One of the other major letter-writers of the period, Symmachus, has also left a mine of information relating to the lifestyle and patronage networks of Roman aristocrats of the late fourth century, as well as government and administrative procedure, including his most famous work, *Relatio 3*, with its measured defence of the privileges of the ancient state cults. The funeral orations of Symmachus' adversary in the Altar of Victory controversy, Bishop Ambrose of Milan, were mentioned above. The letters and orations of this dynamic church leader provide an invaluable source of material for any examination of the western boy-emperors of the late Roman empire, for Ambrose had direct contact with three of the four. And finally, the extensive correspondence of Pope Leo the Great illustrates the extent of the bishop of Rome's contact with both the western and the eastern court during the reign of the western boy-emperor Valentinian III, which has considerable significance for this study, and the relationship between Christian emperor and Christian church which continued to develop across this period. While any collection of statesmen's letters must be approached with the knowledge that they have been carefully selected and edited to reveal only information that the writer or compiler wanted the reader to know, this does not in any way mean that they cannot be very valuable, even if their content may often be self-conscious.

Aside from these major secular and ecclesiastical writers, there are also many other writings from the period which can provide useful information, such as the later (sixth-century) histories of Procopius, Jordanes, and Gregory of Tours. Biographies of holy men, though only just established as a genre at this point, were growing ever more popular during this period, and for the west at least that of Paulinus on Bishop Ambrose gives some valuable material

³⁷ Ibid. 1. 154.

on the relations between imperial court and church. The ninth-century work of Agnellus on the early bishops of Ravenna, and the *Liber pontificalis* on the church at Rome, yield information on church-building and benefactions by the fifth-century imperial family. And the letters of Jerome and extensive sermons of Peter Chrysologos, bishop of Ravenna c.426–50, provide moments of insight into major events or imperial attitudes.

The richness of the legislative material of this period is extraordinarily well demonstrated by the *Theodosian Code*, which was completed in 437. This collection of imperial constitutions from the time of Constantine I provides a vast fund of information not only on matters of legal action but on the administration of government, recruiting for the army, the financial difficulties of the state, and the names of many major office-holders, for example.³⁸ The *Code* cannot tell us whether the laws issued were observed or enforced, and between 432 and 438 there are few laws preserved from the west, 432 presumably being the cut-off point by which western constitutions needed to be submitted to the eastern compilers for inclusion. From 438 to 454 however, the *novels* of Valentinian III survive, the rulings of his government made after the compilation of the *Code*, so that we have a relatively complete picture of imperial legislation overall throughout the whole period. This legislation generally cannot, of course, inform us whether the child-emperor, or child-turned-adult-emperor, as the case may be, was providing the initiative behind the legislation to which he put his name, or indeed whether legislation was issued in response to petitioning rather than as any sort of imperial initiative; nevertheless, the laws can still provide an otherwise largely unavailable illustration of the wide range of areas requiring imperial attention.

Another valuable early fifth-century text to survive is the *Notitia dignitatum*, which in the west seems to have been irregularly updated until around the time of Honorius' death in 423. Uncertain in accuracy as it is (and it has even been claimed that it cannot be used at all as a representative source), the *Notitia* can nevertheless be employed to discover the extent of military losses in the early fifth-century west, among other matters.³⁹ These official texts certainly do not hold all the answers, and need to be coupled with the other literary and non-literary evidence of the period to try to gain a complete picture, but they remain highly valuable.

Finally, numismatic and epigraphic evidence for the period can also prove extremely useful in developing the picture of the world of the late Roman west that these boy-emperors ruled. Numismatic evidence can be used, for

³⁸ See generally Matthews (2000).

³⁹ For the claim it cannot be used at all as a representative source, see Kulikowski (2000a), 360, 375–6. But for a more positive evaluation, see Hoffman (1969–70). The most comprehensive recent studies are Jones (1964a), Appendix 2, and Brennan (1995), 147–78. For discussion of its use to examine military losses in the west, see e.g. Jones (1964a), 2. 1325; Heather (2005), 247.

example, in establishing the ways in which the new boy-emperor's accession might be advertised, such as with the *Spes Rei Publicae* legend chosen by Valentinian I upon the elevation of Gratian. Similarly, relations between the eastern and western courts can to some extent be gauged by surviving coin images, such as through Theodosius II's attitude of paternal protectorship over Valentinian III well into the 430s. Epigraphic evidence, such as the inscription set up at Rome in the late fifth century ascribing victory over Gildo to both Honorius and Arcadius, provides illuminating insights into the tone the west, at least, was trying to strike in relations between the empires. And the inscribed statue-base of Aetius in the Atrium Libertatis at Rome helps to establish not only the general's many claimed victories, but also his position of power in the state in the 440s, and the support such tributes might reflect in their being erected by imperial or senatorial impetus. Similarly, the survival of such items of material culture such as the 406 consular diptych of Probus, depicting the emperor Honorius in martial guise, indicates the continuing presentation of an emperor as responsible for the victories of his armies even when he was no longer in the field, while the survival of a similarly imperial-style diptych for Fl. Constantius some years before the latter's accession illustrates his climb to power at court through the 410s.

In addressing the questions, therefore, of how child-emperor reigns came about, how they were presented, and how they functioned and survived, there is in fact a considerable range of information available, despite increasing gaps in the evidence as the fifth century progresses. This great range and variety of written sources for the period has, inevitably, generated a great deal of literature. But the methodological issues associated with the interpretation of the different types of material, as well as the varying views and agendas of those who have exploited these issues, has inevitably led also to many different and often conflicting views of both specific events or developments as well as the period as a whole. In pursuing my own interpretation and evaluation of the material, I have tried to take into account the different biases and hidden agendas of writers of the period, whether they be panegyrists, historians, government officials, or churchmen. Any specific problematic issues arising from these sources with respect to this investigation will be dealt with as they arise.

The following analysis provides a thorough scrutiny of the reigns of the western child-emperors Gratian, Valentinian II, Honorius, and Valentinian III: the politics of the period, the presentation of these boys as plausible late Roman rulers, and the overarching changes which their reigns imposed upon the nature of the imperial office itself in the longer term. For although these four western emperors all came to the throne as children, as their reigns—and their ages—progressed, only rarely were they themselves able to become more than 'childlike' emperors, even in adulthood. This phenomenon of the child-

emperor is not merely an odd development in the politics of the period, but also one which prompts many important questions about late Roman governance: who were the political players who brought about such events? Why did such powerful individuals choose repeatedly to invest in such 'figurehead' regimes? How—and under what conditions—could they maintain their interests or even control such regimes in the longer term once they were created? What may originally have been very short-term political calculations (as in the case of the accession of Valentinian II particularly) led ultimately to longer-term outcomes which in themselves permanently shifted the boundaries of the politically possible and acceptable in late Roman imperial government. It was a shift which in many ways amounted to a fundamental transformation of late Roman imperial governance.

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Part One

Gratian and Valentinian II

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The Emperor in the Late Roman World

You, best of emperors, at the outset of your Principate, still unripe in years but already ripe for power, showed that one did not have to await the passage of time in the hastening of virtue.¹

By the time of the accession of the boy-emperor Gratian in 367, there had been a Roman emperor for nearly four centuries, and a Roman empire for still longer. Before beginning to examine how the accessions of the child-emperors of the late fourth century came about, therefore, we should first consider the nature of the Roman imperial office itself. Considerable work on the role of the emperor in the Roman world has provided an invaluable guide to the many functions of the Roman ruler until the time of Constantine I.² But how had things changed by the late fourth century? In seeking to establish a picture of the baseline of attributes and virtues usually ascribed to a late Roman emperor, as well as the more practical aspects of his role, there are a number of valuable sources available, such as panegyrics, secular and ecclesiastical histories, and numismatic and epigraphic evidence. There are many contemporary writings on rulership and indeed rulers from this period, and this chapter is by no means a comprehensive survey of these: it is intended simply to draw upon a variety of (predominantly literary) sources to establish general patterns of imperial presentation up to the late fourth century, in order to proceed in following chapters to consider how these general patterns might be disturbed by the accession and long reign of an emperor who ascends the throne as a child.

The *Basilikos Logos* of Menander Rhetor was a guide to the aspiring orator facing the task of composing an imperial panegyric, and was composed in the late third century.³ It is this text, with its helpful divisions of the various aspects of the imperial office as indicating what was desirable in the office-holder, which provides the structure for this first chapter. Naturally this

¹ *Pan.Lat. IV. 16.4: Tu, imperator optime, inito principatu, adhuc aevi immaturus sed iam maturus imperio, ostendisti cursum aetatis non exspectandum in festinatione uirtutis.*

² See esp. the seminal monograph of Millar (1977).

³ Russell and Wilson (1981), xxxiv–xl.

does not mean that every, or indeed any, emperor could satisfy the profile Menander drew up; in addition, the imperial office continued to develop and evolve for another hundred years following Menander's composition, to the remarkable point where it was possible to conceive of a child as young as 4 years old filling the position of emperor in the late fourth century. Furthermore, with the imperial adoption of Christianity, new religious expectations of the emperor also developed—expectations, of course, which Menander could not have foreseen. The *Basilikos Logos* is therefore an extremely useful vehicle for exploring the functions of the position, but is not to be considered comprehensive.

A further valuable source of insight is the corpus of speeches known as the *Panegyrici Latini*. This collection of twelve panegyrics addressed to various Roman emperors over a 300-year period begins with Pliny's famous address to Trajan from AD 100, while all of the other speeches of the corpus date either to the third or fourth centuries, starting with the *Panegyric of Maximian* of 289 and ending with Pacatus' address to Theodosius I in 389.⁴ These orations therefore offer a practical application of the instructions given by Menander and other teachers of rhetoric on how to write an imperial panegyric. It is virtually certain that the writers of the *Panegyrici Latini* were familiar with manuals such as that of Menander, whose advice was probably very similar to that of other rhetorical teachers of his time generally.⁵ In fact, the methods and traditional vocabulary used conventionally for the praise of rulers had been in existence for centuries before the emergence of the Roman imperial cult.⁶ These panegyrics need not therefore be assumed to have consciously followed Menander's model, but their presentation of many of the same desirable imperial functions and virtues assists in discovering patterns of presentation. Similarly, the works of the imperial panegyrist Themistius provide some valuable reflections of how late fourth-century imperial regimes sought to present themselves as meeting the demands of their office and offer a further important resource.

The panegyric is arguably the most valuable source available in drawing up a checklist of the functions expected of an ideal late Roman emperor. Yet the questions of the exact purpose of these texts, and of their value in terms of providing the modern historian with trustworthy and credible evidence have caused considerable debate among scholars. It has been argued that the panegyric could be a speech of recommendation to a wayward emperor of the sort of qualities to which he ought to aspire; that such speeches consisted merely of shameless flattery and bids for patronage with no concern for reality; or that the panegyrist acted as a public-relations officer, broadcasting the

⁴ For the most recent edition and translation of this corpus see Nixon and Rodgers (1994). The orations are mostly anonymous and seem to have been the work of rhetors in Gaul; the compiler of the collection may well have been its final contributor, Pacatus: Nixon and Rodgers (1994), 4–6. Cf. also Whitby (1998), 4; Rees (2002), 6.

⁵ Nixon and Rodgers (1994), 11–12.

⁶ Cameron, Av. (1991), 125.

emperor's merits to his subjects exactly as he wished himself depicted.⁷ And, as impressive ceremonial occasions usually provided the backdrop against which a panegyric was delivered, such as an accession, an imperial *adventus*, or the assumption of a consulship, it has also been claimed that the form and execution of such an oration was more important than its content.⁸

Panegyrics must undoubtedly be approached with caution for use as historical sources, and it is important always to locate both panegyrist and panegyric within their specific historical context when considering their aims.⁹ Nor should the values or deeds ascribed to any individual in the context of a panegyric be automatically assumed to have any basis in truth, although equally, some of what they describe may well have had its roots in reality. Yet, while these texts must be treated cautiously as sources for historical facts, nevertheless they provide a rich source of information on how a particular emperor was presented at a particular moment in time, and the 'shameless flattery' panegyrics often contain should not blind us to the adaptability of the genre.¹⁰ Such public orations may only ever have reached a very limited audience: essentially the elite of the senatorial classes, senior bureaucrats and military leaders would be most likely to hear these speeches, and even if their written texts were later circulated, these too must have been available only to the literate upper classes. As one scholar has observed, the panegyric was a highly transient form of public communication.¹¹ Yet even with their limited audience, that audience was an extremely important one, for fundamentally it made up a significant proportion of those subjects any emperor needed to convince of his legitimacy and suitability to reign: the senatorial and military elite.¹² Moreover, the messages presented through imperial panegyrics would also frequently be echoed in other forms of imperial propaganda and government activity which would reach a far wider audience—such as in legislation and coin mottoes. And in the context of this investigation, there is another significant reason to view late Roman panegyrics as important sources, which is that they are an enduring form of imperial presentation which continued to be employed throughout the reigns of the boy-emperors of the late Roman west as one of the principal forms of presentation and which, as we shall see,

⁷ For the panegyric as a speech of recommendation, see Born (1934), 20 f.; as shameless flattery, see Macmullen (1964), 437; and for the panegyrist as human-relations officer, see Straub (1939). MacCormack argues that panegyrics were a medium to announce imperial programmes and policies: MacCormack (1976), 160. For further discussion, see Nixon and Rodgers (1994), 28–9; Rees (2002), 26–8.

⁸ On panegyrics forming part of the ceremonial of important imperial occasions, see MacCormack (1981), esp. 1–14. Cf also Whitby (1998), 3. On form and execution of the oration, see Cameron (1970), 36–7.

⁹ See on this point: Nixon and Rodgers (1994), 34; MacCormack (1981), 3.

¹⁰ Rees (2002), 26.

¹¹ Ibid. 188.

¹² Cameron (1965), 502.