Florian Sittig, Psychopathen in Purpur. Julisch-claudischer Caesarenwahnsinn und die Konstruktion historischer Realität. Historia Einzelschriften, volume 249. Publisher Franz Steiner, Stuttgart 2018. 576 pages.

›Mad‹ Roman emperors have long been a source of fascination for scholars and laymen alike. In the late nineteenth century, the German historian Ludwig Quidde propagated the term ›Caesarenwahnsinn‹ to describe rulers whose uncontrolled power induced megalomania, paranoia and other undesirable qualities. Although his study ostensibly discussed Caligula, it was really a veiled attack on the German Emperor William II (Caligula. Eine Studie über römischen Cäsarenwahnsinn [first ed. Leipzig 1894, 31st ed. 1926). Quidde's publication earned him a conviction for lèse-majesté and abruptly ended his academic career, but the term he had helped to popularize stuck. In recent decades, scholarship has devoted much attention to supposedly mad rulers like Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus and Elagabalus, but tends to opt for

a more cautious approach. Although the goal is usually not to rehabilitate these emperors, many modern studies at least attempt to understand their unconventional actions and displays on their own terms, trying to establish the emperors' motives and taking later distortions by a hostile literary tradition into account (e. g. A. Winterling, Caligula. Eine Biographie [Munich 2003]; E. Champlin, Nero [Cambridge and London 2003]; O. Hekster, Commodus. An Emperor at the Crossroads [Amsterdam 2002]).

One thing that sets Florian Sittig's book apart from such studies of individual ›mad‹ rulers is that he takes a broader perspective, discussing allegations of imperial madness as a structural feature of the Roman principate. Specifically, he looks at the emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. With the exception of Augustus, all the rulers of this house are portrayed to varying degrees as mad in the ancient sources. Sensibly, Sittig refrains from giving a verdict on the Julio-Claudians' actual mental health, but treats imperial madness as a literary discourse that stands in need of explanation. As he argues, it would be too easy to explain stories about mad emperors away as a case of disgruntled senators rejecting imperial rule altogether; rather, we should regard them as part of a drawn-out negotiation process about power and influence, which resulted from the Augustan reordering of the socio-political system (p. 22).

How do the literary sources associate the Julio-Claudians with madness and what light does this shed on the ways in which emperors and elites sought to define their roles in the fluid world of the early principate? In order to answer these questions, the author first aims to establish how Greeks and Romans conceived of ›madness‹ as a social and cultural category. Next, he will discuss the lives and reigns of the Julio-Claudians (minus Augustus) in terms of the various aspects of ›mad‹ behaviour ascribed to them: their weakness of will, their cruelty, their constant fear, their avarice and their hubris.

After Sittig has set out these goals in the first chapter, the second one delves deeper into the theories and methods underlying the study. Rejecting a psycho-historical approach, the author adopts the Foucauldian notion that the boundaries of ›mad‹ behaviour are socially constructed and therefore culture-dependent. While the modern opposition between madness and reason partially holds true for premodern societies, there was also a sense that madness could open alternative paths to truth.

The third chapter proceeds to chart the various discourses regarding madness in Greco-Roman literature, discussing the concept from a mythical, medical, philosophical and legal perspective. In myth and cult, madness was often imagined as a temporary state, caused by the gods or other supernatural beings, such as the Erinyes. It was usually visited upon mortals who broke divinely ordained norms, or opposed the gods in some way, although Dionysus would not only strike his enemies, but also his worshippers with delirious ecstasy. Medical discourse, in contrast, sought the explanation for madness in corporal causes, namely a misbalance in the four ›humours‹ or essential bodily fluids, dismissing visions of supernatural beings as symptoms of a disturbed mental state. In philosophy, there was a tendency to associate madness with a lack of reason and control over one's desires. Stoics like Seneca considered ›mad‹ people as unable to maintain a harmonious, balanced state of mind and therefore as prone to excesses.

Finally, legal discourse concerned itself mostly with the consequences, rather than the causes, of madness. Roman law made an important distinction between harmless insani and violent furiosi, with those in the latter category being placed under supervision or even locked up. Sittig does a recommendable job discussing these various discourses, drawing on an impressive array of primary sources, but I'm not convinced the breadth and level of detail of his treatment are strictly necessary for the topic at hand. A more concise, focused discussion would have sufficed to enable the reader to place Julio-Claudian madness in its discursive context.

With these preliminary chapters out of the way, the second part of the book gets to the meat of the matter. The fourth chapter is devoted to ›skirt-chasers, mother's boys and henpecked husbands‹. Here Sittig discusses the alleged incapability of Julio-Claudian emperors to exert their own will and how they are instead domineered by the wills of others, especially their mothers and wives. In (male-centred) literary discourse, leading and governing had long been regarded as the distinguishing qualities of a true Roman vir, since women, freedmen and slaves were too focused on their own self-interests and short-term goals to be able to make decisions for the greater good. This association of virtus with leadership capabilities led to tensions in the early principate, when the status of women and freedmen as members of the imperial household suddenly placed them in the very heart of political power. This gave them much more opportunity to influence affairs of state than they would have had in the time of the Republic, at the expense of the senatorial elite. Stories of weak-willed emperors doing the bidding of their mothers, wives and favourites reflected elite resentment of this situation.

As most Julio-Claudians had been raised amidst women and freedmen, Greco-Roman authors suggested that they lacked virtus and hence neglected their political and military duties, focusing instead on the pursuit of their own whims and pleasures.

While Caligula and Nero were portrayed as too young to control their lusts, Tiberius and Claudius suffered from the opposite problem: they were too old. As Sittig ingeniously argues, hostile authors had good reason to frame the ›Fremdbestimmtheit‹ of these emperors, their lack of control over their own mind and desires, as a case of imperial madness. Doing so allowed them to criticize the undue influence of women and freedmen without either discrediting the senatorial value system (according to which the emperor's position at the head of the senatorial aristocracy meant he should act as the embodiment of virtus par excellence), or rejecting the system of imperial government altogether. The narrative of madness thus served as a ›buffer‹ between monarchic practice and long-established aristocratic values (p. 198).

The fifth chapter shifts the focus to the alleged cruelty and sadism of the Julio-Claudians. As Sittig explains, the use of violence did not necessarily carry negative connotations in Roman literary discourse, as long as it was aimed against wild beasts or external threats. However, using violence against honourable Roman citizens was seen as problematic, especially if they were senators or knights. Emperors who did so gave in to irrational, emotion-driven feritas and hence degraded themselves to the level of barbarians or animals. Such violence against fellow Romans was associated with madness and civil war. Since the time of Augustus, the concordia of the imperial family symbolized the welfare of the res publica as a whole. This meant that emperors who executed or assassinated family members – which might sometimes be politically expedient – could easily be framed as a threat to the social order.

Criticism of the weak military track record of the Julio-Claudians was also included in this hostile discourse: the fact that they apparently rather waged war against their own subjects than against foreign enemies was presented as further proof of their madness. Only Augustus and Vespasian were in the happy position that they could claim to have restored pax after a period of internal strife, thus legitimizing their power. The emperors who ruled in between these two gained the throne on dynastic grounds, which was fundamentally at odds with the notion of a res publica restituta. For these rulers, emphasizing their potential for violence against their fellow senators was an important means to consolidate their power, but also made them come across as tyrannical sowers of discordia. It was only with the arrival of adoptive emperorship, which theoretically allowed any senator of merit to qualify for the imperial purple, that a form of succession was established which was in harmony with aristocratic values and made implied threats of violence superfluous.

The sixth chapter discusses yet another aspect of Julio-Claudian madness: the emperors' constant fear to lose their thrones and their lives. Sittig makes it clear that this fear was not unfounded: conspiracies against emperors did occur and it was not until Diocletian that a ruler could give up his throne withoutalso giving up his life. Nevertheless, literary discourse condemned rulers who acted out of fear, presenting them as men who had lost self-control and were governed by sheer impulse, like animals or barbarians. Their actions were regarded as irrational and could therefore be linked directly to madness. In Greco-Roman thinking, fear always led to violence and violence begat more fear. When that violence was directed against external threats, it could be productive and enhance concordia among the Roman people. However, emperors who distrusted everyone around them unleashed violence and cruelty against their own subjects. This made them hated and feared in turn, igniting a chain-reaction of violence that disrupted the social order and could spell their own demise.

In Republican times, the senatorial aristocracy as a collective had kept its individual members in check by shaming and excluding anyone who pursued his own interests at the expense of the community. That mechanism no longer functioned in the time of the Julio-Claudians. Now it was the emperor who acted as the ultimate arbiter of what was considered acceptable or unacceptable. Pudor vis-à-vis one's senatorial peers had been replaced by metus vis-à-vis the monarch as the instrument of social control. If that monarch was governed by fear and lashed out at people erratically, the very rules of the social order became unreliable. If, however, the emperor acted as the embodiment of the law and upheld aristocratic norms, as Trajan was said to do, he became the rock on which senatorial securitas rested.

The seventh chapter is about the notorious luxury and avarice of the Julio-Claudians. From Caligula's lavish banquets to Nero's Golden House, stories of emperors wallowing in splendour and excess abound in the ancient sources. In Greco-Roman literature, luxuria was generally regarded as a source of moral corruption originating from the ›soft‹ lands of the ›East‹. Those who fell under its spell lost all sense of balance and moderation and hence displayed behaviour that could be characterized as ›mad‹. Luxury was thought to inspire avarice and ambitio, the desire for power to be able to fulfil one's luxurious needs. This link between a love for costly goods and political ambition was anything but coincidental: after all, Republican senators had long used displays of wealth to impress their peers and the populace at large, thereby aiming to gain prestige and political support. There was thus something decidedly ambiguous in senatorial attitudes towards luxury.

During the principate, emperors used similar tactics on a much larger scale, displaying and distributing their wealth to elevate their status and maintain the loyalty of their subjects. Yet according to hostile sources, insatiable rulers like Caligula and Nero drained public resources for their own pleasure and undermined the pax Augusta. Disparaging anecdotes about the excessive wealth and avarice of the Julio-Claudians signal the tension between the need for luxurious imperial display on the one hand and the traditional ideal of a moderate lifestyle on the other. An additional source of tension was the fact that senators were unable to compete with emperors in this regard; firstly because their means were far more limited, secondly because trying to outdo the monarch in displays of wealth was often taken as a political challenge by the latter, resulting in a death sentence.

New discourses developed in the course of the first century A. D., according to which luxuria could be seen as a mark of the civilization and sophistication of the upper classes. Rather than indicating political ambition, luxury came to be associated with otium, a concept which itself gained more positive connotations. Thus, a compromise was achieved allowing both emperors and senators a certain amount of luxurious display without immediately becoming morally suspect.

In the eighth chapter, Sittig turns his attention to imperial superbia, the ancient characteristic, which comes closest to the modern notion of Caesarenwahnsinn. In Republican discourse, any man who strove for sole rule by definition inhabited this trait, which was the opposite of moderatio and indicated contempt for the social order. This placed Julio-Claudian emperors in a difficult position. On the one hand, aristocratic norms obliged them to strive for honour, but claiming excessive honours made them vulnerable to accusations of superbia. This was especially true in case of the divine honours bestowed on them by the people. Posthumous consecration provided a workable compromise, associating the living ruler with the divine aura of his predecessor without granting him a fully divine status yet.

A further point of contestation was whether emperors were installed by the SPQR or elected by the gods; gradually the latter perspective won out, but the understanding was that emperors were accountable to the gods for the proper treatment of their subjects. Moreover, they were still required to adhere to aristocratic and civic norms to gain senatorial approval. Thus, senators carved out a new role for themselves in literary discourse. Since monarchs were prone to fall victim to superbia, as amply attested by the Julio-Claudians, it was up to the Senate to temper their pride and keep them with their feet firmly planted on the ground.

In other words, monarchy and superbia were no longer inextricably linked in senatorial thinking: it was possible to be emperor without being haughty. The word superbia itself started gaining some neutral and even positive connotations from Augustus onwards; it could now indicate justified pride (p. 442). Nevertheless, Nero's attempts to associate himself in a positive manner with the proud figure of Phaethon did not earn him any appreciation from later authors. As an imperial quality, superbia retained its predominantly negative aura.

The third part of Sittig's study consists of just one chapter, the conclusion. Here the author provides general reflections on the literary discourse on imperial madness, which he regards as the product of the tension between republican (aristocratic) and monarchical perspectives on the emperor's role. By branding some of the actions of the Julio-Claudians as mad, senatorial authors disqualified them in their writings and held up their own views on proper imperial behaviour as the only legitimate ones. As Sittig emphasizes, these authors did not categorically reject monarchical rule, not even Tacitus; rather, they sought ways to accommodate the princeps in an aristocratic value system.

The reason why madness features so prominently in the historiography of the Julio-Claudians is because the roles of emperors and senators were still in flux in this new political situation. Both parties used the concept to their own benefit. For emperors, allegations of madness provided a handy means to eliminate potential rivals within their family or to distance themselves from a controversial predecessor. If a ruler was considered mad, that constituted a personal flaw and did not discredit the principate as a whole. Senators for their part considered it as their duty to restrain the excesses and follies even of ›mad‹ emperors, which provided them with a convenient excuse for their collaboration with questionable regimes. In extreme cases, the allegation of madness could even be used to justify tyrannicide. Imperial madness, in short, was a very flexible, useful concept for emperors and elites alike.

As I hope this extensive summary has made clear, Sittig's study provides the reader with a very rich and nuanced analysis of the iconic figure of the ›mad‹ emperor. While some of its insights may not be wholly new, the merit of this work lies in its systematic, thorough treatment of an important and fascinating literary discourse. The bibliography is solid, while the ›Stellenregister‹ listing textual passages highlights the enormous breadth of primary source material employed in this study.

At the same time, I must admit that I found Sittig's analysis rather long-winded at times, belabouring points in great detail even when this contributed little to the overall argument. While

I appreciate the author's efforts to explain the rationale behind imperial behaviour that the literary sources condemn as ›mad‹, this sometimes leads to pages-long excursions that stray far from the central topic. A good example is section 5.3 (pp. 225–235), which is largely devoted to the intricacies of dynastic succession and potential rivalry within the imperial family. Even in sections where the focus is firmly on the hostile literary discourse, the concept of ›madness‹ sometimes fades into the background. Sittig shows how traits like luxuria and superbia could be framed as ›mad‹ by Greco-Roman authors, but that does not mean that they were exclusively discussed in those terms.

This prompts the question whether his study may be casting the net too wide. Does every Julio-Claudian transgression of senatorial norms belong to a madness discourse, or is Sittig presenting the reader with a general catalogue of ›bad‹ imperial behaviour in the early principate, whose link to madness may be rather thin at times? To phrase it more pointedly, does a discussion of Tiberius' notorious stinginess and avarice (pp. 347–350) really mark him as a ›psychopath in purple‹? Admittedly, it is impossible to draw a clear line between ›inappropriate‹ and ›mad‹ behaviour in our sources, especially with ›madness‹ being such a fluid concept at the time, but when the term is applied too generically, it may lose its sharpness as an analytical tool.

Nevertheless, there is much of worth to be found in this study. I especially appreciated the fact that Sittig does not only discuss the frictions which generated the literary discourse on imperial madness, but also how new discourses developed during the early principate to reconcile senatorial and monarchical perspectives on imperial power. His book will certainly become a cornerstone in studies of Caesarenwahnsinn.

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