Caesar’s Palace: Inside the Court of Early Imperial Rome

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EATON THEATRE

Program Partner: York University
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The Imperial Villas of Italy
Michele George – McMaster University

The world of the Roman imperial court was not confined to the palaces of Rome. Emperors owned lavish villas in rural and seaside areas of Italy, at which they and members of their court would often sojourn. This talk will look particularly at the archaeological discoveries that have been made at the sites of some of these villas, including Tiberius’ Villa Iovis on Capri, Domitian’s villa at Albano, Hadrian’s villa at Tivoli, and the Antonine Villa Magna near Anagni. The remains of these complexes suggest that they were simultaneously places of luxurious leisure for emperors and their courtiers, but also locations where the serious business of running an empire could take place. A powerful ideological statement about the emperor’s power to transform nature itself was also encoded in the architecture of some of these villas.

The Women of the Imperial Court: Images and Realities
Angela Hug – York University

The Roman historical and biographical books that have been fortuitously transmitted through medieval manuscripts contain many stories about powerful and independent women at the Roman court. Some such women are portrayed as exercising enormous influence over emperors, to the point of being de facto rulers; others are said to have distributed favours and patronage; women close to the emperor allegedly murdered rivals and even emperors; and to some court women the sources attribute a degree of sexual liberation that is surprising even by modern standards. The difficulty is knowing just how many stories about court women are malicious inventions – reflections of the deep misogyny of Roman elite society. In this presentation, we shall look at surviving physical evidence – coins, inscriptions, sculptures and reliefs – and compare their portraits of imperial women at the court with those found in the literary narratives.
3:00 PM – BREAK

3:30 PM
**Religion at Court**
*Fanny Dolansky – Brock University*

In monarchical courts throughout history, religious rituals and celebrations have been crucial moments in bringing courtiers together. They have also provided opportunities for the monarch and his court to come into contact with the wider society surrounding them. The Roman imperial court was no different.

In this presentation, we will consider how certain household rituals and festivals within the imperial house became court occasions. We will also examine a number of works of art (especially relief sculptures) that suggest that religious rituals in the city of Rome brought the emperor into contact with the populace at large. Closely related to Roman ideas about the divine realm were ideas about how to foretell the future. As a result, astrologers and other individuals claiming expertise in divination at times had great power and influence at court.

4:15 PM
**Dress and the Court**
*Kelly Olson – University of Western Ontario*

Unlike many other monarchical courts in history, the Roman imperial court had no distinctive form of dress. But this did not mean that dress (as well as jewellery and grooming) were of no importance in the world of the court. In this lecture, we will consider how the clothed and groomed body could be used for communication within court society. In the case of the emperor and his family especially, dress also communicated with the rest of society; the extensive inscriptional evidence for the organization of the imperial wardrobe hints at the message of magnificence often being conveyed. But magnificence was a two-edged sword. The writings of Roman courtiers that survive in medieval manuscripts show clear traces of moralizing discourses that sought to pressure the emperor into what were considered to be appropriate sartorial decisions.

5:00 PM – CLOSING REMARKS