Conclusion

The Neronian era is often identified as a moment of transition in Roman political thought, one marked by increasing willingness to acknowledge the constitutional transformation of the late first century BCE. Although narratives of ancestral refoundation remained influential in public discourse, Neronian writers began to portray and address the *princeps* as an autocrat. At the same time, they also started constructing a rupture between the *res publica* populated by statesmen like Cicero and Cato and that governed by the Caesars. My book has traced one of the conceptual avenues through which this shift in political language became possible. It argues for the importance of figurative speech generally, and the metaphor of the body politic specifically, in integrating the idea of sole rule into the paradigm of Roman Republicanism. Looking for ways to articulate the relationship between the *princeps* and *res publica*, Julio-Claudian writers did not need to invent new models of political authority. They found plenty that were already well-developed in Late Republican literature. Among them were the metaphors of the head of state and the civic healer, which were used in different ways to negotiate the role of the statesman in the mixed constitution. Gradually adapting them to the context of autocracy over the span of a century, a variety of Roman thinkers addressed the Principate without ever naming it as such.

This story impacts our understanding of both Roman Republicanism and its Imperial reception. The fact that Julio-Claudian writers found Republican figurations of statesmanship amenable to the validation of sole rule should give pause to those interested in reviving classical republicanism today. Cicero and his contemporaries might have professed their hatred of kings and tyrants, but they also strongly believed in the ability of an exceptional statesman to guide the *res publica* on the basis of his civic wisdom rather than elected office. Indeed, one reason why they used metaphors of the body politic was to direct focus away from questions of legality and towards those of morality. That these metaphors could

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undermine the constitution they were invoked to protect became clear during the downfall of the Republic. Their revival in the context of autocracy is therefore revealing but not surprising. Equally important to this story, however, are the ways in which Imperial writers reworked the figurative language of the Late Republic to serve their own needs. By inventing a fictive Republican past for capital symbolism, in particular, they obscured the novelty of the Principate for themselves and those who later read their texts. Their efforts illustrate the difficulty of separating the political thought of the historical Roman Republic from the Julio-Claudian reception of Roman Republicanism. Only by carefully distinguishing between these two categories can we arrive at an accurate understanding of either.

By the mid-first century CE, an autonomous organism composed of interdependent parts had evolved into a collection of quarrelsome limbs reliant on a head of state for survival. The fact that this transformation took place confirms that Roman thinkers perceived the Principate to be a new political form in need of explanation, justification, and interrogation. They might have continued to use the term *res publica* in relation to it, but they developed other ways of distinguishing between self-governance and autocracy. Through their lamentations over the loss of *libertas* and related ideals, they confronted what was lost with the transition to sole rule. Through their celebrations of civil war's end and the establishment of the *pax Augusta*, they illuminated what was gained. Expecting them to have distilled the complexity of their views into categories like "Republic" and "Principate" is to misunderstand the nature of their political thought, which resisted theoretical and terminological abstraction at nearly every turn. Entering the more diffuse world of storytelling and figurative speech allows us to see how Roman thinkers came to terms with a revolution to which they never assigned a name.

Organic metaphors played a key role in the legitimation of the Principate as a natural and necessary form of political organization. Yet they also allowed Roman thinkers to explore the limitations of a system dependent on a single individual whose selection was haphazard, whose actions lay beyond the scope of censure, and whose rule could only be challenged through assassination.[1] These weaknesses worked in combination to make the Principate highly susceptible to violence, a problem that Romans tended to understand as the repetition of an ancestral curse rather

[1] As Flaig 2011: 77 notes, an emperor could never be deposed by institutional procedures, only by violence. This violence could take the form of either an assassination or usurpation, both of which produced conditions amenable to civil war. Pettinger 2012: 3 describes politically motivated violence as an instrument of power necessary to maintain the façade of Republican continuity.

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than a product of their constitutional form.[2] Even as Julio-Claudian writers grew more direct in their criticisms of sole rule, however, they also expressed skepticism towards the possibility of an alternative. Seneca argued that the separation of head and body would lead to mutual destruction, while Lucan posited civil war as the inevitable consequence of rebellion. Even as they criticized individual Caesars, then, they articulated a more profound commitment to their rule as the only viable option. They did not need to celebrate the Principate as an ideal institution, in other words, because they had already come to see it as a necessary one.

The events that took place after the deposition of Nero in 68 CE illustrated the prescience of Seneca's and Lucan's warnings about the reprisal of civil war, though neither survived long enough to witness them. Both were forced to commit suicide in the purge that followed a doomed effort to replace Nero with G. Calpurnius Piso.[3] The extent to which either played a role in the Pisonian Conspiracy is unclear; Seneca probably did not, while Lucan likely did.[4] Suetonius describes him as nearly the plot's standard-bearer (*paene signifer Pisonianae coniurationis*) and claims that he called for Nero's head (*Caesaris caput*, Suet. *Vita Luc.* 21–4).[5] Although later writers emphasized the personal rather than political motivations for his involvement, they nevertheless located him at the forefront of a mutiny of the body politic.[6] Tacitus portrays the conspiracy within this imagistic framework, introducing the familiar trope of a two-headed organism to mark the return of civil strife.[7] He reports the birth of two-headed fetuses and a calf with a head on its leg (*bicipites hominum aliorumve animalium partus . . . natus viculus cui caput in crure esset,* Tac. *Ann.* 15. 47.1–2), portents that signified the hatching of a new head of state: *parari rerum humanarum aliud caput, sed non fore validum neque occultum* ("Another head was being prepared for human affairs, but it would be neither strong nor secret," Tac. *Ann.* 15.47.2). This symbolism conveys

[2] Armitage 2017: 59–90 discusses the Romans' fixation on the cyclicity of civil war, which he suggests they saw as "their civilization's greatest curse," (75).

[3] The primary narrative of the conspiracy is Tac. *Ann.* 15.48–74, on which see Ash 2018: *ad loc.*; Pagán 2004: 68–90; Woodman 1993.

[4] Tacitus only reports rumors of Seneca's knowledge (Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.1) but assigns Lucan a leading role (Tac. *Ann.* 15.49.3). Griffin 1976: 367 emphasizes the divergence of Seneca's and Lucan's politics.

[5] Despite our limited knowledge of Lucan's biography, Martindale 1984: 67 stresses three points of political significance: that Lucan composed a poem attacking Caesarism, was banned from reciting his poetry, and died in a conspiracy against Nero. Ahl 1971 uses Lucan's literary record to trace a potential path towards his radicalization.

[6] For the depoliticization of his death in the biographical tradition, see Goldschmidt 2019: 90–1.

[7] Allusions to the Catilinarian Conspiracy abound in Tacitus' narrative of the Pisonian Conspiracy, inviting readers to compare the bodily imagery associated with each (Ash 2018: 220).

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figuratively what his narrative soon confirms literally: the goal of the conspirators was to replace one head of state with another, not challenge the Imperial model of the body politic.[8] Even as the fallibility of the Principate provoked dissent, it was strong enough to set the terms within which that dissent operated. Failing in its objective and leading to a bloody purge, the ill-fated plot highlighted the risks that lay in rebellion.

Although the Pisonian Conspiracy was short-lived, dissatisfaction with Nero's rule soon found expression on a much larger scale in the provincial rebellion fomented by G. Julius Vindex.[9] As Neronian writers predicted, the revolt produced wide-scale civil slaughter yet did little to change the constitution by which the *res publica* was governed. Although those competing for power invoked Republican political language – most notably the ideal of *libertas* – to establish their legitimacy, they did not view its tenets as mutually exclusive with sole rule.[10] The conceptual entrenchment of the Principate finds eloquent expression in Tacitus' *Histories*, where S. Sulpicius Galba uses the metaphor of the body politic to assert the inevitability of autocracy.[11] Speaking with Piso Licinianus, his chosen successor, he develops a counterfactual that locates Republican governance far in the past (Tac. *Hist.* 1.16.1):[12]

> Si immensum imperii corpus stare ac librari sine rectore posset, dignus eram a quo res publica inciperet: nunc eo necessitatis iam pridem ventum est ut nec mea senectus conferre plus populo Romano possit quam bonum successorem, nec tua plus iuventa quam bonum principem.
>
> If the huge body of the empire were able to stand and maintain balance without a guide, I would be worthy to be the one from whom the *res publica* began. But we long ago now reached the point that my old age can offer the Roman people nothing more than a good successor, and your youth nothing more than a good *princeps*.

[8] See Rudich 1993: 88 on the abandonment of "republicanist phraseology" by the conspirators, who sought a worthier *princeps* rather than a return to the *res publica vetus*. Leigh 1997: 3 suggests that the virtues of the Republican system continued to provide "a paradigm for the criticism of autocracy," even when proposed reforms sought the moderation rather than abolition of the Principate. On the impracticality of Republicanism by this date, see Wirszubski 1950: 125.

[9] On the circumstances surrounding the rebellion, see Morgan 2006: 11–30 and Urban 1999: 49–65.

[10] See Gallia 2012: 12–46 on invocations of *libertas* in 69 CE. What "the coexistence of *libertas* and *principatus* was supposed to entail" evolved throughout the Imperial period (44).

[11] The speech, of course, reflects Tacitean hindsight as much as Neronian political realities (Gowing 2005: 103).

[12] Damon 2003: *ad loc.* 1.16.1 argues that *res publica* should be taken as a reference to the ancestral Republic here. Haynes 2003: 51 stresses Galba's counterfactual, which renders the Republic a mirage.

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In using the scope of the empire to justify the prop of sole rule, Tacitus' Galba invokes a by now familiar rhetorical tradition. Foregrounding the structural tension between liberty at home and conquest abroad, he suggests that Romans long ago sacrificed internal autonomy in favor of external conquest.[13] Those living in the present have little choice but to accept a system of their predecessors' making.

Plutarch's narration of the Year of the Four Emperors in the *Life of Galba* similarly frames the necessity of the Principate in relation to the logic of the body. The text opens with a generalizing comparison of an army to a strong body that must be subjected to the reasoning faculties of its commander: οἱ δὲ πλεῖστοι, καθάπερ ἐρρωμένον σῶμα, τὸ στρατιωτικὸν ἀξιοῦσιν ἰδίᾳ μηδέποτε χρώμενον ὁρμῇ συγκινεῖσθαι τῇ τοῦ στρατηγοῦ ("Most people think it right that an army, like a vigorous body, should never use its own initiative but rather follow that of their commander," Plut. *Galb.* 1.1). While each provincial governor acts as the mind of his own troops, the *princeps* stands at the head of the armed forces collectively. Nero's failure to keep control of this body leads to the rebellion of Julius Vindex: τὴν δὲ Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίαν ... εἰς πολλὰ διασπωμένην ἅμα καὶ πολλαχόθεν αὖθις ἑαυτῇ συμπίπτουσαν ("The Roman empire ... was ripped into many pieces and at the same time collapsed into itself again from every direction," Plut. *Galb.* 1.4). Plutarch blames the self-destruction of the body politic on the license of the soldiery rather than the ambition of those seeking power. Endorsing a key tenet of Julio-Claudian political thought, he suggests that the warring limbs of the empire are only able to achieve concord under autocracy. The absence of a strong head consequently denotes the beginning of a civil war.[14]

Plutarch makes the toppling of Rome's head of state explicit in the letter that Vindex sends to Galba to persuade him to rebel: ὁ Οὐίνδιξ ἔγραψε τῷ Γάλβᾳ παρακαλῶν ἀναδέξασθαι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν καὶ παρασχεῖν ἑαυτὸν ἰσχυρῷ σώματι ζητοῦντι κεφαλήν, ταῖς Γαλατίαις ("Vindex wrote to Galba, urging him to assume power and offer himself to a strong body seeking a head, namely the Gallic provinces," Plut. *Galb.* 4.3).[15] Directing readers' attention to Galba's head, Plutarch foreshadows the gruesome

[13] On "the autocratic logic of imperial expansion," which only fully emerged under the early Principate, see Arnason 2011: 9 . That the "slavishness" of senators at home in fact paralleled that of provincial subjects abroad is a theme that Tacitus elaborates in the *Agricola* (see Lavan 2011; Liebeschuetz 1966).

[14] See Stadter 2014: 61 on the *Galba*'s illustration of the damage wrought by irrational armies and weak generals.

[15] Ash 1997: 196–9 establishes the importance of this passage to the corporeal symbolism of the text.

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manner of his death later in the text. At the same time, he employs a metaphor strikingly similar to that which Catiline used on the senate floor in 63 BCE.[16] Locating the Gallic provinces in the role previously played by the *populus Romanus*, he illustrates the growing importance of the army as a determinative force in Imperial politics.[17] Galba's reaction to Vindex's invitation, in turn, foregrounds the extent to which Roman political language had evolved over the preceding century. Whereas Catiline's speech had provoked horror among his fellow senators, Vindex's letter convinces Galba to revolt. A metaphor that connoted tyranny in the Late Republic could now be used – at least in Plutarch's imagination – to flatter the political ambitions of a prominent general.[18] As the Praetorian Guard and senate turn against the *princeps*, a contest of heads begins that is soon decided in Galba's favor. This reading allows us to see Nero's subsequent suicide as a prefiguration of the self-destruction of the body politic.

Although Galba emerged as the victor in his contest of heads with Nero, he soon earned the dubious distinction of becoming the first Roman head of state to suffer literal decapitation.[19] After he was killed in a mutiny of the Praetorian Guard, his head was chopped off, affixed to a pole, and paraded through the city. The event serves as the climax of Plutarch's biography, which revels in the gory detail of Galba's bald head proving too slippery to hold (Plut. *Galb.* 27.3). Borrowing from the tropes of theater to stage the scene, Plutarch describes Galba's executioner as a crazed Bacchant: δρόμῳ χωρεῖν, ὥσπερ αἱ βάκχαι, πολλάκις μεταστρεφόμενον, καὶ κραδαίνοντα τὴν λόγχην αἵματι καταρρεομένην ("He ran on foot, as if a Bacchant, often twirling himself around and brandishing the spear dripping with blood," Plut. *Galb.* 27.3).[20] The comparison not only alludes to the beheading of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, but also to the death of Crassus, whose severed head was supposedly received by the Parthian king while he was watching a production of the play.[21] The fate of Crassus, in turn, hints at

[16] An incident recounted at Plut. *Cic.* 14.4–5.

[17] As Tacitus later put it, *evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri* ("The secret of empire was revealed: that the *princeps* could be created somewhere other than Rome," Tac. *Hist.* 1.4.3). Master 2016: 77 suggests that the *Historiae* elevates the provincial armies to the role of kingmaker.

[18] Suetonius uses different phrasing (Suet. *Galb.* 9.2), suggesting that the language is Plutarch's own, on which see Ash 1997: 196.

[19] The decapitation of emperors and usurpers would become standard practice by the third century CE, as discussed by Kristensen 2015 and Omissi 2014.

[20] See Keitel 1995 on Plutarch's use of tragic tropes in the *Galba* and *Otho*.

[21] Plut. *Crass.* 33. Braund 1993 illustrates the extensive use that Plutarch makes of Euripides' *Bacchae* in the *Life of Crassus*. On Bacchic allusions as a trope of later civil war literature, see Mebane 2019.

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that of his fellow triumvir Pompey, whose head was also paraded on a pike before a crowd of spectators in an Eastern land.[22] Because Pompey's death was often portrayed as a reprisal of Priam's, scholars have seen references to the mythical Trojan king lurking in portrayals of Galba's demise.[23] This thicket of allusions locates the death of Galba in a cycle of beheadings that stretches back centuries. Although the first *princeps* to suffer decapitation, Galba is cast as another victim in a long line of statesmen felled by ancestrally rooted violence.

The *Life of Galba* concludes without providing any sense of closure to the violence that structures the text.[24] Plutarch instead foreshadows the integration of M. Salvius Otho, Galba's successor, into the same pattern of civil war. He reports that when Otho was presented with Galba's head, he immediately demanded that of Piso Licinianus too.[25] Going above and beyond, his soldiers also bring him the heads of Titus Vinius, the current consul, and Cornelius Laco, the commander of the Praetorian Guard. In a particularly gruesome image, Otho assumes the role of *princeps* while standing amid their severed trunks: καὶ Καίσαρα καὶ Σεβαστὸν ἀνηγόρευον, ἔτι τῶν νεκρῶν ἀκεφάλων ἐν ταῖς ὑπατικαῖς ἐσθῆσιν ἐρριμμένων ἐπὶ τῆς ἀγορᾶς ("They proclaimed him both Caesar and Augustus while the decapitated corpses clad in their consular robes were still strewn throughout the Forum," Plut. *Galb.* 28.1). In her reading of this scene, Rhiannon Ash notes the disjuncture between the titles Otho receives and the bloodied consular robes that surround him. "The trappings of power," she writes, "prove to be no protection against brute force, and inevitably, the outlook for Otho, being awarded his lofty titles amidst the mutilated bodies, is not good."[26] Although Plutarch sees the selection of a strong *princeps* as the best defense against civil war, his own narrative seems to revel in its cyclical and iterative nature.[27]

Tacitus' *Histories* explores the same themes of headlessness and irresolution through the burning of the Capitoline temple by Vitellius' troops.

[22] Dinter 2012: 48–9 suggests that Lucan exploits this parallel.

[23] Joseph 2012b: 85–8 notes allusions to both Priam's "ur-death" in *Aeneid* 2 and the death of Pompey in *Bellum Civile* 8 in Tacitus' *Historiae*. He builds upon earlier parallels identified by Benario 1972. Power 2014 is unconvinced of the Priam intertext in the *Historiae*, though he notes its operation in Suetonius' *Life of Galba* (Power 2007).

[24] Ash 1997: 198 describes the *Galba* and *Otho* as "distinctly acephalous, with weak opening and closure." On the lack of closure as foundational to Roman civil war literature, see Lowrie and Vinken 2023: 8.

[25] 'Οὐδέν ἐστι τοῦτο, ὦ συστρατιῶται, τὴν Πείσωνός μοι κεφαλὴν δείξατε' ("This counts for little, soldiers. Show me the head of Piso," Plut. *Galb.* 27.3).

[26] Ash 1997: 199

[27] See Ginsberg and Krasne 2018: 2, who make this point in relation to Flavian literature more broadly.

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This catastrophe, which serves as the climax of Book 3, has been widely recognized as a duplication of Galba's beheading.[28] As the *caput orbis*, the Capitoline occupied a place in the Roman imagination that mirrored that of the *princeps*. The parallel allowed readers to connect the figurative decapitation of the city to the literal decapitation of its ruler.[29] Tacitus encourages this reading by crafting thematic symmetry between Galba and the Capitoline, both cast as old and noble eminences felled by their own citizens.[30] Tacitus further personifies the hill by providing it with a eulogy and describing its loss as a physical disfigurement (*saeva ac deformis urbe tota facies,* Tac. *Hist.* 3.83.2).[31] The ramifications of its destruction become even clearer when the Gauls interpret the disaster as a sign that the Roman Empire is coming to an end (*finem imperio adesse crederent*, Tac. *Hist.* 4.54.2). Their judgment, which calls to mind the Gallic Sack, confirms the existential threat posed by the indulgence in internal warfare. In this way, the mutilated city – headless in more ways than one – serves as "a graphic symbol of the suicide which is civil war."[32]

In the short term, the crisis of 68–69 CE was resolved through the victory of Vespasian, who set out to cure the ills that had festered under the Julio-Claudians and their usurpers.[33] Insofar as Vespasian came to power through civil war and promised to heal its attendant wounds, he self-consciously occupied a position that recalled that of the first *princeps*. Whereas Augustus' connection to such imagery remained figurative, however, Vespasian was rumored to have actually performed healing miracles amid his rise to power. Legend held that he was approached by two men, one blind and the other lame, while visiting Alexandria.[34] They informed him that Serapis had visited them in their sleep and advised them to seek a cure from his hands. Although skeptical, Vespasian agreed to spit into the eyes of the blind man and touch the paralyzed limb of the lame man. Both were miraculously healed, revealing the curative capacities of the man fated to rule Rome. This story likely arose in a local Alexandrian context in

[28] See Joseph 2012b: 98–103, whose discussion I draw upon later, alongside Ash 2010: 90–1.
[29] "Thus the destruction of the Capitol denoted the destruction of the metaphorical head of the body politic," Kraus and Woodman 1997: 96 note.
[30] Stressing this theme, Tacitus writes, *ipso Capitolio civium manibus incenso* (Tac. *Hist.* 1.2.2). Evans 2003: 270, fn. 39 remarks, "the citizen body literally destroys its own head."
[31] MacL. Currie 1989: 352 suggests that Tacitus treats the Capitoline "as a living being." The phrase *deformis urbs* also appears in Suetonius' representation of the disaster (Suet. *Vesp.* 8.5).
[32] Kraus and Woodman 1997: 96.
[33] Edwards 2012: 256 argues that Tacitus casts Vespasian's victory as a *remedium* for Rome's wounds.
[34] Suet. *Vesp.* 7; Tac. *Hist.* 4.81; Cass. Dio 65.8.1–2. There are minor discrepancies in their accounts; Tacitus and Dio report that one man had a paralyzed hand, while Suetonius says he had a lame leg.

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relation to the cult of Serapis, but its subsequent incorporation into Roman historiography suggests that it took on a broader role in establishing Vespasian's political legitimacy.[35] Marking a new phase in the body politic tradition, it literalized the promise of sole rule as a remedy for civil strife. At the same time, it confirmed the continued reliance of the Flavians on the political language – and constitutional form – developed under their Julio-Claudian predecessors.[36]

A story often told about the arrival of sole rule in Rome is that Augustus offered his fellow citizens a bargain: peace in exchange for liberty. Looking back on the civil wars of the Late Republic, Florus is one of many authors to invoke "the fiction of historical necessity," as K. Welwei terms it, to justify the establishment of the Principate.[37] Like the Julio-Claudian writers who preceded him, he uses the duality of mind and body to make his case (Flor. 2.15.5–6):

> gratulandum tamen ut in tanta perturbatione est, quod potissimum ad Octavium Caesarem Augustum summa rerum redit, qui sapientia sua atque sollertia perculsum undique ac perturbatum ordinavit imperii corpus, quod haud dubie numquam coire et consentire potuisset, nisi unius praesidis nutu quasi anima et mente regeretur.
>
> Yet it must be considered cause for celebration that amid such great upheaval, the highest power fell chiefly to Octavian Caesar Augustus, who used his wisdom and cleverness to restore order to the body of the empire, which was stricken on all sides and in turmoil. Without a doubt, it would never have been possible for it to coalesce and harmonize were it not governed by the nod of a single protector as if a spirit and mind.[38]

Florus' analysis serves a fitting point of conclusion to the story of the Roman body politic. Through his narration of the civil wars that brought the Caesars to power, he validates the prioritization of peace over liberty. Faced with the constant threat of civic collapse, who would not choose the same?

[35] On the local circumstances of the visit, see Arena 2001: 307–11; Ziethen 1994: 181–3; Henrichs 1968; Morenz 1949–50. Papaioannou 2018: 99–108 interprets the tale in relation to the political *medicus* and describes miracles as "a means through which the care of the emperor for his people was manifested," (108). Luke 2010: 77 argues for the promotion of the story under Domitian, whose reign saw renewed emphasis on the divinity of the emperor.

[36] On the tension between political continuity and change under the Flavians, see Zissos 2016: 2.

[37] Welwei 1996.

[38] Florus reprises this image shortly thereafter (*civilibus, externis, servilibus, terrestribus ac navalibus bellis omne imperii corpus agitatum est*, "The whole body of the empire was in turmoil due to wars civil, foreign, servile, terrestrial, and naval," Flor. 2.15.8).

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What Florus fails to acknowledge, however, is that the implementation of sole rule did not solve the problem of civil war. Flaws in the constitutional fabric of the Principate ensured that it would remain a problem for centuries to come. Yet even as Augustus' successors failed to uphold their end of the bargain, there was little talk of restoring the Republic. This book illuminates one reason why this was so. Imperial thinkers were so successful at incorporating heads and healers into their models of the *res publica* that they lost sight of the conditions under which they had ever survived without them. By retrojecting their own form of political organization onto the past, they created a Roman Republic that looked strikingly similar to the Principate. The construction of this continuity between past and present helped them come to terms with autocracy but also made it difficult to recover a historical constitution rooted in self-governance. Paradoxically, it was their commitment to the paradigm of Roman Republicanism that helped cement the Principate as Rome's governing form for centuries to come.

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