

Project objectives

As numerous studies have shown, power is not just a matter of force. It is essential for any ruler to legitimise and enhance his position, presenting himself in ways that win and maintain the support of his subjects. In achieving this goal, rituals are important instruments. Consequently, the *delegitimation* of rulers works the other way around. Opponents who want to renounce, remove or even kill a ruler attack his elevated position to justify their act (either beforehand or afterwards). By committing ‘character assassination’, they demonstrate that the king, emperor or president in question is/was not worthy to rule and should be/had to be disposed. Attacking the rituals which propagate and highlight a ruler’s power is one of the primary ways to achieve this.

This project analyses the delegitimation of Roman emperors through negative descriptions of imperial rituals. The main question is: how did ancient authors transpose rituals that were in use as means of imperial representation into their negative reverses, thus delegitimising rulers they did not like? A connected second question is: which rituals were most frequently used in this respect?

The prime objective of the project is to contribute to the academic discourse on rituals in representations of power and status through the presentation of papers at conferences, the publication of peer-reviewed articles and, eventually, a monograph. A second objective is to imbed the results of the project in the wider context of the delegitimation of rulers from a broad variety of geographic and historical contexts. Finally, the project aims to disseminate the research results to a wider (non-academic) audience.

Work performed

During the first year of the project, Icks (the researcher) has worked his way through a great number of ancient literary sources, resulting in a database of nearly 600 cases of negative descriptions of Roman imperial rituals. He has also familiarised himself with modern academic literature on these particular rituals and on sociological and anthropological theories of ritual in general. Based on these findings, he has taught the course ‘Kaiser und Ritual’ to undergraduates at the University of Heidelberg. In addition, Icks has discussed his project with several experts on ancient ritual, including Prof. Christian Witschel, Prof. Kai Trampedach, Prof. Tonio Hölscher, Prof. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou (all at the University of Heidelberg) and Prof. Angelos Chaniotis (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton). Finally, he has gotten in touch with the political scientist Dr. Eric Shiraev (George Mason University, VA), with whom he has taken preparations to host an international colloquium on the delegitimation of rulers (‘character assassination’).

During the second year of the project, Icks has focussed on one particular Roman imperial ritual, namely the investiture of men with imperial power (*i.e.* the accession of Roman emperors). He has processed his findings in several articles and papers presented to academic audiences (see ‘Main results achieved’). Icks has also applied for a Veni stipendium (a three-year Dutch postdoctoral scholarship) to continue and expand his research. His proposal received a double A rating, but was eventually not elected for funding. Together with Dr. Eric Shiraev, Icks has organised and hosted the international colloquium ‘Character Assassination: The Art of Defamation throughout the Ages’ at the University of Heidelberg (21st to 23rd of July 2011).

Main results achieved

Next to the aforementioned undergraduate course on Roman imperial rituals, Icks’s research has resulted in four papers on literary representations of imperial investiture rituals. The first was held at a meeting of the Sonderforschungsbereich 619 ‘Ritualdynamik’ (2010) at Heidelberg; the second at the ‘Shifting Frontiers’ conference at Penn State University (2011); the third at the ‘Character Assassination’ colloquium at Heidelberg (2011); and the fourth at the ‘Performing Civil War’ colloquium hosted by the Universities of Heidelberg and Konstanz (2011). A 30-page article on the

delegitimation of Roman emperors through negative descriptions of investiture rituals has just appeared in Angelos Chaniotis's volume *Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean: Agency, Emotion, Gender, Representation* (Stuttgart 2001, pp. 347-376). Another article on imperial investitures will shortly be submitted to the peer-reviewed journal *Historia*.

From July 21st to 23rd, Icks has hosted the international colloquium 'Character Assassination: The Art of Defamation throughout the Ages' at Heidelberg with Dr. Shiraev. The colloquium was attended by historians, political scientists and political psychologists from Germany, France, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Poland, the UK, the USA and New Zealand, leading to fertile interdisciplinary discussions on the delegitimation of rulers and other public figures in many different historical and cultural contexts. Icks and Shiraev have launched a website on character assassination (see below) and intend to host further conferences on this topic. They are currently negotiating the publication of a volume of conference proceedings and of a co-authored book on character assassination throughout the ages, aimed at a wider audience (see 'Expected final results').

The link to the website is: <http://characterattack.wordpress.com/>

During his stay at Heidelberg, Icks has also published two other books dealing with the character assassination of a Roman emperor. The first is his PhD-thesis *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (IB Tauris, London 2011; 276 pages); the second is *Hellogabalus, een denkbeeldige biografie* (with Prometheus-Bert Bakker), a reworking of the former book in Dutch, aimed at a wider audience.

Expected final results and their potential impact and use

Icks will soon submit a 20-page article about negative interpretations of imperial investitures in late antiquity to the peer-reviewed academic journal *Historia*. Prof. Christian Witschel and Prof. Stéphane Benoist (University of Metz, acting as advisor in this project) have already commented on the draft and consider it fit for publication. Icks has also been invited to write an article about imperial investiture rituals for the forthcoming 'Performing Civil War' conference volume and has been invited to present a paper on negative interpretations of triumphal processions at a 2012 conference focusing on this ritual. This paper will also be reworked and published as an article.

Icks and Shiraev aim to publish the 'Character Assassination' conference volume in 2013. This volume will contain an article by Icks on character assassination through negative representations of imperial rituals which already exists in draft form. Icks and Shiraev have also found several publishers interested in a co-authored book on character assassination that will be aimed at a wider audience and is also due for publication in 2013. Finally, they are in the preliminary stages of organising another colloquium on character assassination.

Through these academic publications (namely four more academic articles on negative interpretations of rituals and a conference volume on character assassination) Icks will contribute to current discussions on political rituals and the (de)legitimation of rulers. Through the organisation of another colloquium on character assassination he will expand the international network of scholars that he and Shiraev have already built for the first colloquium, stimulating further discussion and cooperation on this topic between experts from many fields and countries (including six EU member states). Through the popular book on character assassination, co-authored with Shiraev, Icks will bring the fruits of his research to the attention of a non-academic public.