THE OPPOSITION UNDER THE EARLY CAESARS:  
SOME REMARKS ON ITS NATURE AND AIMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In one of his more detailed statements on the method of writing history the Greek historian Polybius comes to the conclusion that things will never go well with this discipline until either those who are or have been engaged in the affairs of the state make it their serious business to write history or those who set out to write history first seek to acquire a thorough understanding of politics. Since these words were written more than two thousand years ago, it has become sufficiently clear that there would be but little history of any kind, if the writing of it had been left to statesmen and politicians. Of necessity the ‘would-be authors’ in this field have had to be recruited from the ranks of scholars, but the demands made by Polybius of historical investigation proper would still seem to hold, namely, that it should not be based on some logic contrived in the isolation of an academic study, but should at all times keep in touch with the realities of life, public or otherwise.

It is perhaps for this reason that every generation of historians feels compelled to reinterpret the past and in doing so stamp it with some of the contemporary problems and concerns, especially so if a particular period of history happens to offer striking analogies and parallels to the historians’ own age. The dangers inherent in such an ‘engaged’ or ‘involved’ historical research are obvious, but there can be little doubt that every scholar feels himself best fitted to interpret conditions which—in the broadest sense—lie within the orbit of his own experience. The field of Roman history offers some notable examples of this: world events since 1945 have once more focused attention on the problem of Roman imperialism and the various forms in which it manifested itself. The experience of mass violence again, in Europe, America and elsewhere, has given rise since the 1960’s to investigations of similar phenomena in the later stages of the Roman republic. In a world of growing disillusionment with politicians and the existing systems of government, of army coups and rule by military juntas, a study of the Roman army and its role in politics is not only significant on its own account but markedly relevant to an understanding of present times. Many of the problems of Rome in the first century A.D., after Augustus had established an autocracy in all but name or, as Gibbon put it, “an absolute monarchy disguised by the form of a republic”, can be appreciated much more clearly and nearly today than they could by scholars living in eras which were spared first-

1. In substance this paper represents the text of the inaugural lecture delivered by the author as professor of ancient history and historiography at the University of South Africa on Thursday, 8th February 1979.  
2. Pol. 12, 28, 1.
or secondhand experience of authoritarian regimes. Although that elusive abstraction the 'Zeitgeist' should not be invoked unnecessarily, it would seem that the lessons of European history during the past half century or so have left an unmistakable imprint on research dealing with Rome under the early emperors, or, as one would prefer to name the period, under the early principate. Thus Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution* (1939), in which he analyses the rise to power of Caesar's adoptive son Augustus, cannot but evoke the events which shaped the history of Germany and Italy in the 1930's, while his later work on the Roman historiographer Tacitus (1958) would hardly have been the same, if the era of Stalin and his successors had not attuned the sensibilities even of 'ancient' historians to the atmosphere of despotic regimes and the political and personal problems arising in it. I doubt whether there is any need to comment on the fact that the only monographs dealing explicitly with the opposition under the Caesars are those of Gaston Boissier published shortly after the deposition of Napoleon III, emperor of the French, and of two young German historians, whose doctoral theses appeared within a decade or so from the end of World War II, and both of whose 'Doktorväter' must have had suggestively in their minds their own experiences of the early 1940's in Germany. It is as a fellow-student of one of them at the University of Heidelberg, but also as a keen observer of the so-called dissident movements in Eastern Europe and lately in Iran, that I have decided on the theme of this lecture.

2. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Our most persuasive if by no means uncontroversial source for the history of the early empire is Tacitus, whose best known work is perhaps the short treatise on the life and virtues of his father-in-law Agricola, one-time governor of Britain. In its first chapters he draws a gloomy picture of public life under the rule of Domitian, of a senate stripped of any real authority and even dignity; of loss of self-respect among the ruling classes which, in the long run, proved hardly less damaging than either the burning of books or the loss of free speech; above all, of the sustained feeling of guilt for having outlived a period of tyranny and oppression 'per silentium'—'and no word said'.

This is neither the time nor the place to discuss the essential veracity or bias of Tacitus' historical writing. As regards the problem of the opposition under or, to put it more accurately, to the principate there are, however, three statements of his which seem to show up its essence: in the opening chapters of the *Annals*, a work which covers most of the history of the Julio-Claudian emperors, he

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4. L'Opposition sous les Césars, 1875.
claims that Augustus assumed control of the state in 27 B.C. with no opposition offered to him, since civil wars and judicial murders under the proscriptions had disposed of all men of spirit, and the upper-class survivors had found that subservience was the way to succeed, both financially and politically. That there was another side to the domestic history of the Augustan principate emerges, however, from an oblique remark on the peace which had been established after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 B.C: 'there was indeed peace, but a bloodstained one', marred not only by military disasters such as that of Varus in Germany but also by plots against the life of the princeps and political assassinations. In the Agricola, again, Tacitus remarks that prior to the reign of Nerva, who was proclaimed emperor by the senate after Domitian had been assassinated, the institution of the principate had proved to be incompatible with the concept of freedom. This would suggest at the very least that there had been political conflicts and struggles of varying form and intensity under both the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors. The obvious questions to be asked are: who were the protagonists of these conflicts or, in the terms of Boissier, who were the so-called 'malcontents'? what were their aims and motives? and, finally, by what methods can we hope to throw some light on the internal crises of an autocratic system of government which was in use or abuse nearly two millennia ago?

3. THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE OPPOSITION
The problem of the nature of the opposition to the early principate is obviously a complex one. It would therefore seem best if we first tried to establish what it was not. In recent times there has been a certain tendency to regard the whole range of what might be termed 'threats to the established Roman order' as manifestations of opposition. A distinction must be made, however, between symptoms of dissatisfaction with prevailing social and economic conditions or with Roman rule as such and, on the other hand, the opposition proper to an emperor and the system of government he represented. The various uprisings in the provinces, for example, even under emperors whose provincial administration is held to have been sound, were mostly triggered off by fiscal burdens or by the greed and corruption of individual Roman governors. The disturbances of the city populace of urbs Roma, again, were mostly about 'bread and butter' issues, such as shortages in the corn-supply. Mutinies of the provincial legions are another matter, and a serious one at that. Since the unwavering loyalty of the armies was the mainstay of imperial power, any revolt, such as those of the troops in Germany and Pannonia after the death of Augustus, or of the Illyrian legions on the accession of Claudius, should be regarded as a distinct danger signal. Yet in these as in later instances, under the Flavian emperors, a close scrutiny of the commanders of the seditious legions and of their political

affiliations usually brings to light that the army or armies concerned were but instruments in a power struggle which had its origin in Rome itself. From the evidence at our disposal it would appear therefore that what serious opposition there existed under the early principate was no widespread popular movement but that it came from where one would expect it to come—from the politically and socially leading circles in Rome, that is, chiefly from the senate and what we may regard as the contemporary establishment. It would, however, be a simplification to speak of a senatorial opposition as such. The senate, which had once been the only effective governing body in Rome, had changed profoundly since republican times and now consisted partly of descendants of the old ruling aristocracy, with strong memories of the power and dignity enjoyed by their ancestors, and partly of political newcomers who owed their position either directly or indirectly to Augustus and his successors. Ironically, though, some of the ‘new men’, the homines novi, turned out to be the most outspoken and intransigent champions of what remained of real or apparent republican traditions, while the heirs of famous names stood, more often than not, for the indolence, ineptitude and subservience of the ruling classes which Tacitus scourgéd as consistently as did the satirists Martial and Juvenal. But there is still another side to whatever opposition the successors of Augustus and also those of Vespasian encountered—the ambition of the so-called ‘heirs and rivals’! Since the principate was no monarchy in which ‘the king never dies’, the succession could not be provided for by statute and regulation and certainly not be openly hereditary. Yet for more than fifty years after the death of Augustus the armies which had grown up as a new source of power would not accept anyone as princeps who was not connected with Augustus through family ties. The successión thus became a contended issue between various ‘groups’ or ‘factions’ within the ‘domus regnatrix’ or ‘reigning house’ itself. In much of modern historical writing these have been labelled as ‘Julians’ and ‘Claudians’ respectively, in a convenient if misleading attempt to compartmentalize what cannot actually be so treated. The outcome of the struggle was the so-called Julio-Claudian dynasty—another misnomer, since the term seems to indicate that the supreme position in the state was, from Augustus to Nero, the inheritance by right of one single family (the Julio-Claudians). Somehow it is more correct and appropriate to speak of a Flavian dynasty: while Augustus had no male offspring of his own, Vespasian had two adult sons when he was proclaimed princeps in A.D. 69, and he left no doubt throughout his reign that these sons, Titus and Domitianus, would succeed him—which, in fact, they did.

4. THE AIMS AND MOTIVES OF THE OPPOSITION
So far, so good. What then were the aims and motives of the opposition? Obviously the ‘heirs and rivals’ of the ruling emperors hoped either to succeed

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or to supersede them. But what is one to make of the slogan of ‘libertas’—
‘freedom’—which occurs and recurs in the history of the early principate? The
coinage of Brutus and Cassius had already let it be known that Caesar was killed
for ‘freedom’s sake’. After Caligula’s assassination in A.D. 41 Libertas was the
password given out to the urban troops. Seneca and Thrasea Paetus, the most
prominent of Nero’s victims, died with the name of Iuppiter Liberator—Jupiter
the Liberator—on their lips. After Nero’s downfall ‘liberty’ and ‘liberty
restored’ became widely publicized mottoes, which were duly revived after the
death of Domitian, when Nerva allegedly reconciled the principate and
‘libertas’. Our time and age tends to regard the term ‘freedom’ with some
scepticism and misgiving, as—and I quote the words of R. MacMullen—‘an
umbrella under which everyone shelters when the political weather is uncer-
tain’.12 Does this also hold good for ‘libertas’ in Rome?

Despite some criticism levelled at it, Chaim Wirszubski’s study of Libertas as
a political idea at Rome during the late republic and early principate (1950) may be
regarded as definitive.13 In it he traces the inevitable change which the meaning
of Roman ‘libertas’ underwent during the two hundred odd years between the
Gracchi and Trajan which witnessed the gradual disintegration of the repub-
lican form of government and its replacement by a monarchical or semi-
monarchical order—an order which, in its own turn, was anything but static. To
my mind the antithesis between what constituted political liberty—‘Freiheit, die
ich meine’—under the republic and what under the established principate, can
be illustrated with the aid of two authors whose works are currently read by our
pregraduate students in Latin. While Livy, who wrote under Augustus, could or
would still maintain that freedom existed by its own right and was independent
of another’s will,14 Pliny the Younger, the contemporary of Tacitus, said in an,
admittedly, panegyric speech addressed to the emperor Trajan: ‘You bid us to be
free, and we shall be free; you tell us to express our views openly, and we shall
make our views a matter of public debate’.15 There is yet another aspect to the
obvious contrast between ‘freedom by right’ and ‘freedom on sufferance’. Under
the republic political freedom meant, basically, ‘freedom to’, namely the
freedom to strive for positions of power and influence within the limits of what
Badian has termed ‘the egalitarian working of oligarchic government’,16 that is,
within a political and constitutional framework which aimed at preventing
anyone from gaining overwhelming prestige. Under the principate the concept
of liberty gradually came to acquire a rather negative notion—that of freedom
from a so-called ‘malus princeps’ or ‘bad emperor’ who failed to display ‘civatis

13. For further discussions see e.g. the review of Wirszubski’s monograph by A. Momigliano,
JRS 41, 1951, 146–153 (= Quinto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico,
Liberty under the early Roman empire’, HSPh 67, 1963, 93–113.
animus' towards the senate and its members. Whether this 'civilia animus' is the
equivalent of 'civility', 'modest restraint', 'conduct suited to a citizen', 'consti-
tutional behaviour' or 'republicanism' should properly be decided by my
comrades-in-arms, the classical philologists. Suffice it to say that the expression
is post-Augustan and occurs chiefly in contexts describing the attitude of
individual emperors vis-à-vis the senate. Two of these testimonies seem to be
specially relevant: although Tiberius refused the title of 'father of his country'
and would not allow the senate to swear obedience to his enactments, he did not
convince anyone of his 'civilia animus', because he revived the law of treason—
or so Tacitus claims.\footnote{17} In the year 32 the high price of corn nearly caused riots
in Rome. When the demonstrations, in accordance with former constitutional
practices, were dealt with by the senate and the consuls, 'the emperor's silence
was not, as he had hoped, taken as proof of 'civilia animus' but of arrogance'.\footnote{18}
Perhaps it may be permitted to cite a comment of J. C. Rolfe on 'civilia animus'
in Suetonius' Life of Tiberius c. 26 and let it go at that: 'Tiberius' conduct was
that of a magistrate of the olden times, who had regard to the laws and to the
rights of his fellow citizens'.\footnote{19}

Laws and the guarantee of civic rights are essentially juridical notions.
Another conceivable interpretation is that defended by Ronald Syme. Although
he has been repeatedly taken to task for being too much of a 'Realpolitiker' in
his approach to Roman history,\footnote{20} I tend to agree with him when he states, rather
provocatively, that 'Liberty and the laws are high-sounding words. They will
often be rendered, on a cool estimate, as privilege and vested interest.'\footnote{21}
This view is, of course, by no means novel. In the opinion of Sallust Roman
politicians even under the republic were acting a pretence. Whether they
asserted the people's rights or the senate's, they strove for power only.\footnote{22}
Tacitus' judgement was understandably even more damaging, namely, that nobody ever
sought power for himself without invoking liberty and similar specious names.\footnote{23}

What then were the actual, that is, the political issues at stake in the conflict
between the opposition and the principate? Obviously the first question to be
considered is whether the opposition was aimed at the principate as such, in other
words, whether the opposition sought seriously to abolish the principate and to
re-introduce something resembling the traditional form of republican govern-
ment. The answer to this is relatively simple and clearly in the negative. Tacitus
says that, as the end of Augustus drew near in A.D. 14, there was indeed some
idle talk about the blessings of freedom but that the fear of a possible civil war
prevailed.\footnote{24} That this fear was a legitimate one is shown by the attitude of the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{17}{Tac. Ann. 1, 72.}
\footnote{18}{Tac. Ann. 6, 13.}
\footnote{19}{Loeb edition vol. 1, 1951; p. 332, n.b.}
\footnote{20}{See e.g. A. Momigliano, JRS 41, 1951, 146 (= Quinaria contributo p. 958 f.)}
\footnote{21}{The Roman Revolution p. 59.}
\footnote{22}{Sall. Cat. 38, 3.}
\footnote{23}{Tac. Hist. 4, 73, cf. Ann. 16, 22.}
\footnote{24}{Tac. Ann. 1, 4.}
\end{footnotes}
legions who made it very clear indeed that after the death of the princeps they would and could only be kept in hand by another princeps. The only known occasion on which the restoration of the republic was ever publicly contemplated was after the murder of Gaius in A.D. 41, but even then the senate was not in agreement and more senators thought of the candidates who might assume the supreme position in the state than of the abolition of the principate. But the senate was no longer master of the situation: while the debate was going on in the curia, Claudius was proclaimed emperor by the palace guards and the senate perforce had to confirm their choice. The events of these two days—January 24th and 25th—dove home a lesson which had, in fact, been established long before: that the senate and the republican magistrates—that is, the consuls—were no longer capable of controlling the armed forces and that the principate as institution was therefore a necessity. If peace and stability were to endure, the essentially monarchical form of government created by Augustus had to continue: this message is conveyed not only in the official propaganda, as evidenced in inscriptions and coins, but also by writers whose misgivings about the principate are sufficiently well known. The rule of one man was the price the Romans had had to pay for the immense extension of their empire and its safe keeping, and the best one could hope for was that a 'good' prince would assume control of the state. This is the gist of a speech on high policy which Tacitus puts at the beginning of his first major historical work, the Histories, and in which the emperor Galba is made to express the view that since circumstances had made monarchy indispensable, the succession to the principate should be determined by adoption and the choice of the best possible man. In passing it may be mentioned that the oration of Galba which has clear bearings on events in Tacitus' own time—Nerva's rule with its claim to have reconciled freedom and the principate, and Nerva's choice of the best man as partner and successor—has often been regarded as the historian's political credo. But Tacitus was aware that Nerva, in 96, like Galba in 69, had acted under compulsion when choosing a successor, and Galba's speech therefore reflects at most the doctrines of government prevailing in Tacitus' own day and some of his scepticism regarding them.

The accession of Claudius had finally proved that republicanism was no longer practical politics. When Furius Camillus Scribonianus, governor of Dalmatia, staged a revolt in 42, he did indeed promise to restore the republic, but his promise was a spurious one: he had been a potential candidate for the principate after Caligula's death, and his real aim was to overthrow Claudius.

25. Cf. the report of Tacitus, Ann. 1, 16 ff. on the commotions in various parts of the army at the death of Augustus.
27. See e.g. Sen. Clem. 1, 4; Tac. Hist. 1, 1; 1, 16; Ann. 1, 9; 3, 28.
In the atmosphere of discontent prevailing during the last years of Nero's reign, when conspiracies were rife, only one man, the consul Julius Vestinus, was suspected of wanting to restore the republic, and that earned him the hostility of all those working towards the removal of Nero as princeps of the day. Although there were plots against the lives of nearly all the emperors who followed Claudius and Nero till the time of Hadrian, their object was always to replace the current princeps, not to abolish the principate.

Since the conflict between opposition and principate was thus not actually a conflict between republicanism and monarchy, it has frequently been maintained that the motives of the opposition were not so much of a political as rather of a moral or ideological nature. To put it differently: what the opponents objected to was not the principate as such but rather the unworthy and 'un'-Roman behaviour of individual emperors. Now it is an established fact that, from Nero onwards, philosophical creeds became increasingly relevant in the struggle between senate and emperors. In 62 commitment to Stoicism was for the first time denounced as a politically dangerous attitude and with this the drama of what is usually called the 'Philosophical Opposition' opened. In her book on Seneca. A philosopher in politics (1976) Miriam Griffin has suggested that the story of the punishment and expulsion of philosophers both in and out of politics, under Nero and the Flavians, should perhaps rather be called the 'Philosophical Persecution' (p. 363): although philosophical doctrines had always been regarded with some suspicion, it was only now that their profession was made the subject of criminal charges.

According to Tacitus the idea of frightening Nero with 'Stoicorum adrogantia', the allegedly arrogant, ambitious and dangerous tenets of the Stoic sect, was conceived by Ofenius Tigellinus, who had ousted Seneca as Nero's chief adviser. Rubellius Plautus, a kinsman of Nero, was the first victim. Soon after Thrasea Paetus, a prominent senator, compromised himself by an undisguised abstention from public life and especially from senate meetings. About this time Seneca also wrote his seventy-third letter to Lucilius. In it he refutes the charge that adherents of philosophy were 'defiant and stubborn men, contemptuous of magistrates, kings and all engaged in government', while advising Lucilius to devote himself to philosophy, yet not to boast of it, 'since philosophy itself, associated with arrogance and defiance, has brought many men into danger'. In the wake of the Pisonian conspiracy Seneca was forced to commit suicide, and both Musonius Rufus, a Stoic, and Demetrius the Cynic were exiled for teaching philosophy. In 66 Cossutianus Capito, son-in-law of

35. Sen. Ep. 73, 1.
Tigellinus, made Stoicism one of the charges he brought against Thrasea Paetus. The pattern continued under the Flavians: Helvidius Priscus, a declared Stoic, was executed under Vespasian, and in the same year, A.D. 71, all professional philosophers were expelled from Rome. Finally, during the last years of Domitian's reign, two senators were put to death, because they had written biographies of Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, and the philosophers were now banished not only from Rome but from the whole of Italy.

It would lead us too far to examine the effects that philosophical teachings may have had on men's attitudes to the principate. If we were to do so, however, we would be confronted at the very outset with several apparent inconsistencies: Firstly it has been claimed that the Cynics disliked emperors as such, while the Stoics only disliked bad emperors. But the facts known about individual philosophers and their followers do not always fit this scheme and, moreover, men in charge of affairs, such as Vespasian's helpmate, Mucianus, clearly failed to appreciate the suggested points of distinction. Secondly, the Stoics themselves seem to have been both upholders and opponents of the regime. The Stoic Athenodorus of Tarsus was an honoured counsellor of Augustus; Seneca was the tutor of Nero and then one of his chief ministers; and Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher as well as an emperor. On the other hand the younger Cato, whom Seneca considered the perfect Stoic, had died in 46 B.C. in defence of the old republic which Caesar had overthrown, and his conduct was still regarded as exemplary by Stoics under the principate. Thrasea Paetus, who wrote his biography, was the centre of a circle which offered decided opposition to certain emperors, an opposition which was definitely ascribed to Stoic teaching. But whereas Thrasea had, according to Cassius Dio, 'never said or done anything that was insulting to Nero, save merely that he refused to share his practices', his son-in-law Helvidius Priscus allegedly went much further: under Vespasian 'he for ever attacked monarchical systems and praised democracy and made it his business to overthrow the established order'.

Dio's report on the activities of Helvidius Priscus was almost certainly

39 Dio 65, 12, 3.
40. Dio 65, 13, 1 f.
42. Apart from R. MacMullen, Enemies of the Roman order, 1967, chapters 1 and 2 the penetrating studies of J. M. C. Toynbee, G&R 13, 1944, 43–58 on 'Dictators and philosophers in the first century A.D.' and, especially, P. A. Brunt, PBSR 43, 1975, 7–35 on 'Stoicism and the principate' may be consulted with profit.
44. Dio 65, 13, 1.
45. Cf. PIR I, 262, nr. 1288; 102, nr. 617; 119, nr. 697.
47. Plut. Cato 25, 1.
48. Dio 66, 12, 1 f.
coloured by his own bias against philosophers.\textsuperscript{49} In general the sources tend to show that philosophy in first-century Rome meant a loose complex of ideas, none of which posed a direct threat to the principate \textit{per se}. Why then did the emperors, and especially those emperors who for some reason or other felt insecure in their position, take the professors of philosophy so seriously? The answer seems to be that philosophic doctrines and ideas were or could be construed as a cover for dangerous practices, as soon as members of the leading classes became involved. Significantly enough the accusers of Thrasea Paetus suggested that his attachment to Stoicism was a mere pretence that concealed anarchic designs on ruler and empire alike.\textsuperscript{50} Similarly Vespasian's collision with the philosophers came about—and I quote from Dio (65, 13, 1)—"inas-much as many . . . actuated by the so-called Stoic principles, were taking advantage of the name of philosophy to teach publicly many doctrines inappropriate to the times", that is, presumably, disaffection towards the new emperor and his sons.\textsuperscript{51}

There remains one other matter to be considered. Both Dio and Tacitus assert that Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus, the two ‘arch-martyrs’ of the Stoic opposition under Nero, were done to death simply for what they were and because they represented Virtue Personified, ‘virtus ipsa’.\textsuperscript{52} Obviously, though, these statements must be taken with considerable reserve. If one inquires about the relatives and friends of Thrasea Paetus, it becomes apparent that the men who prosecuted him could perhaps have alleged a stronger charge than discontent or contumacy; namely, an hereditary feud with the dynasty reaching back to the days of Claudius.\textsuperscript{53} Barea Soranus, again, had been a friend of Rubellius Plautus, a relative of Nero and a potential pretender to the principate.\textsuperscript{54} It may be added that Soranus had also been governor of Asia at a time when rumour was rife of a secret understanding between Rubellius Plautus and Domitius Corbulo, commander of the Roman forces in the east.\textsuperscript{55} There was always a possibility that Nero’s enemies might build up against him a coalition of triple strength—the leading men of authority and principle in the senate, a candidate endowed with birth and energy, and a group of army commanders.\textsuperscript{56} Hence any allegation that the senatorial opposition was motivated purely by philosophical convictions and republican sentiments needs to be carefully scrutinized. On a plain statement Thrasea Paetus and his associates were primarily Roman senators who held Stoic views, not Stoic philosophers who happened to be senators at Rome, and we must therefore still take into account that the feud against the emperors—most of all against those who had not won

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Cf. R. Syme, \textit{Tacitus} p. 550.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 16, 22, cf. 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Cf. M. P. Charlesworth, \textit{CAH} 11, pp. 6; 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Dio 62, 26, 1; Tac. \textit{Ann.} 16, 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Cf. R. Syme, \textit{Tacitus} p. 559.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 16, 23, 30. cf. \textit{Ann.} 13, 19; 14, 22.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Tac. \textit{Ann.} 14, 58.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Cf. R. Syme, \textit{Tacitus} p. 560.
\end{itemize}
their position through their personal capacities and with the assent of the senate—was a political one.

What then did the senatorial opposition want? When Thrasea Paetus spoke of the need for ‘libertas senatoria’ in A.D. 58, he had that senatorial independence in mind which the regime of the Caesars could or would provide. What the senate sought was not so much to reassert its former supremacy, but rather to maintain an honourable position as the emperors’ partner in affairs of the state. At the very least the senate as a body had two requests to make of an emperor: that he should allow it to transact business of importance freely and without constraint and that he should treat its members with respect. A survey given by Tacitus of the early years of Tiberius’ reign shows clearly and succinctly what was regarded as praiseworthy in a princeps; here I quote the historian: ‘In the first place, public business as also the most important private business was dealt with by the senate. Among its leading men there was freedom of discussion, and any lapses into servility were arrested by the emperor himself. His conferments of office of state took birth, military distinction and civilian eminence into account, and the choice fell clearly on the most deserving men. The consuls and praetors maintained their prestige and even the minor magistrates exercised their functions with authority. The laws, too, were properly enforced, with the exception of that of treason.’

‘Imago rei publicae’, the likeness of a free state, under Nero meant basically the same as did ‘species libertatis’, a semblance of freedom, under Tiberius. In his first speech to the senate, which Seneca had composed for him, Nero promised to correct the abuses of the Claudian regime and once more to share the responsibilities of government with the senate, ‘ex Augusti praescripto’—‘according to the principles of Augustus’. Nero was neither the first nor the last princeps to make such a pronouncement, but Trajan was the only one to be believed—or so Pliny says in the laudatory speech delivered to this emperor.

Co-operation between princeps and senate or, as B. H. Warmington put it, ‘government which respected as far as possible the pretensions of the senate’ is what the emperors promised and what the senate expected. Yet there would seem to be a difference between policy statements and the realities of politics, if we take politics—then as today—to mean the interplay of power and personalities. What concerned the senate first and foremost was the interests of its own order and the perpetuation of privilege. Essentially the conflict between princeps and senate was a conflict between an individual who held the effective

60. Tac. Ann. 4, 6.
power in the state and individuals or groups of individuals who laid claim to that same power or at least a semblance of it.

It is axiomatic that the aims of the senatorial opposition were modified as the principate achieved consolidation. Under Augustus the principal problem was that of his constitutional position vis-à-vis the senate, and there can be little doubt that Augustus acted under pressure in effecting the settlements of both 27 and 23 B.C., when the compromise between monarchy and republic was hammered out. In each case certain events had focused attention on the extent to which his constitutional standing had become untenable or precarious, thus calling for what P. Cartledge has termed 'second thoughts on the res publica'.

At the death of Augustus in A.D. 14 the imperial authority was transmitted for the first time to a successor who had been designated as such by adoption and by association in authority. As our sources reveal, Tiberius succeeded to the principate with the utmost reluctance, claiming that he was 'holding a wolf by the ears'. What was mooted in the first sessions of the senate, was the possibility of a divided principate in stead of one princeps, and according to Tacitus and Dio Tiberius actually offered to share the principate with others, proposing to take charge of one of three departments, either Rome and Italy, or the armies, or the provinces. In Tacitus' opinion Tiberius was not sincere, but on his own showing Tiberius did indeed try to make the senate at least a partner of his labours. Yet everything went wrong, mainly because the senate, though anxious to retain its prestige, could or would no longer act as a serious deliberative body and was on occasions only too happy to leave the more arduous and dangerous tasks to the emperor.

It has been claimed that Tacitus' historical writings, particularly the *Annals*, were perhaps conceived and executed as the story of the struggle between 'freedom', as understood by the senatorial oligarchy, and the increasingly absolute power held by the principes. To analyse this struggle in detail would require a sizable book, but two points may perhaps be raised in conclusion.

Firstly: although the opposition to the principate was confined almost exclusively to the senatorial class, it was not homogeneous in its motives or its aims. The abolition of the principate or the curtailment of its powers may still have been points at issue during the early stages of the 'novus status' or new order. In later decades, however, the conflict tended to centre increasingly on the claims of individuals or groups of individuals to determine who should be

70. Tac. *Ann*. 1, 12.
71. Dio 57, 2, 4.
72. See e.g. Tac. *Ann*. 2, 35; 3, 35; Hist. 4, 9.
princeps, a conflict which found a preliminary end after the death of Domitian, when it seemed to all intents and purposes that the emperor was at least chosen from the senate, if not by the senate.\footnote{75}

Secondly: much of the opposition which emperors such as Claudius or Vespasian encountered may have been due to the fact that the antithesis between urbs Roma and imperium Romanum had yet to be resolved. Whereas the emperors were concerned with the affairs of the empire at large, the senate, in spite of its changing composition, could never quite overcome the basically parochial outlook and narrow preoccupation with entrenched privileges typical of an oligarchy ruling a city-state.\footnote{76} In the last resort it had been the unwillingness of the senate as a body to face up to the manifold problems of the empire which had been the real cause of its undoing. In this context the year 60 B.C. must be regarded as especially significant: when Caesar, Crassus and Pompey formed an alliance for their mutual political advantage, this already marked the beginning of the end of senatorial dominance in government.\footnote{77}

5. DISCUSSION OF EVIDENCE
When all else is said and done, there still remains the question of the evidence. In the terms of historical research this may be taken to mean: 'How do we know that something is true? That it happened when, or how, or where it is said to have happened?' In a book entitled The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence (1968) the American scholar Robin Winks claims, rather tongue-in-cheek, that the historian must collect, interpret, and then explain his evidence by methods which are not very different from the techniques employed by the detective, or at least the detective of fiction (p. xiii). Though one would not wish the parallels between historical research and detective fiction to be taken too literally, it must be admitted that the ancient historian, especially, is frequently confronted with witnesses who are either mute or not very reliable and with evidence which is at best circumstantial. According to Cassius Dio, one of our main informants on the history of the early empire, a veil of secrecy descended—or rather was made to descend—on affairs of state in 27 B.C.

\footnote{75} Plin. Pan. 7, 6 cf. 2, 4. For pertinent remarks on 'imperaturus omnibus eligi debet ex omnibus' see, among others, H. Last, CAH 11, p. 413; Ch. Wirszubski, op. cit. p. 156 ff.; R. Syme, Tacitus p. 234.

\footnote{76} Thus strong objections were offered to the admission of 'primores' from Gallia Comata to the senate in A.D. 48 (cf. ILS 212 and Tac. Ann. 11, 23–25) and there can be little doubt that Vespasian's policy of 'filling up the highest grades of society by promoting the most distinguished Italians and provincials' (Suet. Vesp. 9) likewise provoked considerable resentment. (For senators recruited from the provinces of the Greek Orient see B. Stech, Klio, Beiheft 10, 1912, 178 f.; C. S. Walton, JRS 19, 1929, 46 f.; M. Hammond, JRS 47, 1957, 77 f.; R. Syme, Tacitus pp. 509–595; Ch. Habicht, MDAI(I) 68/9, 1959/60, 123 f.)

\footnote{77} Admittedly 'the menace of despotic power hung over Rome like a heavy cloud for thirty years from the Dictatorship of Sulla to the Dictatorship of Caesar' (R. Syme, The Roman Revolution p. 8). Yet in the opinion of Cato Uticensis, Asinius Pollio and others it was the year 60, during which the 'threeheaded monster' assumed control of the state and destroyed the power of the senate, that marked the crucial turning point in the history of the Free State. Cf. e.g. Plut. Caes. 13; Fomp. 47; Hor. Carm. 2, 1, 1 ff.; Cic. Att. 2, 18, 1 f.; 21, 1; Fam. 6, 6, 4.
Thereafter 'much that never took place was publicized, and much that occurred beyond a doubt, remained unknown'.78 Most of the real history of the principate is secret history, but there are still ways and means by which we can penetrate the wall of silence of which Dio complained.

Since the main preoccupation of the senatorial historians was the relationship between senate and emperors, their writings invariably furnish some indications of what Syme has termed 'crises in party and state'.79 That is, of power struggles not only between princes and senators but also among members of the inner circle of government. Unmistakable symptoms of such crises would seem to be the conspiracies by which the lives of nearly all the emperors were threatened, but the pitfalls which this line of approach poses, are obvious. Although Suetonius, for instance, furnishes veritable catalogues of plots80 and there is even inscriptive evidence for the uncovering of 'nefaria consilia'—'impious schemes'—against Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian,81 these may not have been either as frequent or as dangerous as the official statements made them out to be. 'A government may invent conspiracies for its own ends'82—what holds good today, held even better in the Rome of the Caesars. On the other hand most emperors did not die a natural death. We may discredit the rumours that the demise of Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius was hastened by their own kin, but Caligula and Domitian were murdered and Nero driven to take his own life. Domitian's complaint that no one believed emperors when they discovered a conspiracy unless they had been killed83 thus contains at least this much truth in it, that it was only on such occasions that the existence of an opposition or of oppositional groupings manifested itself beyond doubt.

Domitian, as Tiberius before him, seems to have become increasingly frightened of assassination, and the last years of both rulers have been stamped as reigns of terror due to the large number of prosecutions for high treason. Much—and perhaps too much—has been written by historians and jurists alike on the whole subject of the so-called 'maiestas' trials under the early emperors. What is important to remember, though, is that high treason was a flexible and comprehensive offence and that it was the very wideness of its scope and the uncertainty of its application which made the law of 'maiestas' so formidable.

From Tacitus, our best authority as to the offences originally and subsequently made indictable under the term 'maiestas', we gather that Tiberius 'reintroduced' ('reduxerat') the law of treason which had been for the most part

80. Aug. 19; Claud. 13; Nero 36; Dom. 10, cf. Vesp. 25.
82. R. Syme, The Roman Revolution p. 479.

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dormant under Augustus. It was allegedly suspended during the reigns of Caligula and Claudius and revived in the eighth year of Nero. Thereafter all emperors formally abandoned charges of 'maiestas' until Domitian, during the latter part of his reign, once more used treason trials 'to weaken the senate, to enrich the treasury, to punish those who refused office or abused it and to destroy men of principle'. According to R. Bauman this is the implication of a statement made by Tacitus at the beginning of his Histories. What are we to make of this evidence? Are we to assume a direct correlation between the number of real conspiracies and the number of treason trials under, say, Tiberius and Domitian? And must we conclude that there was less occasion for overt opposition and plots under emperors, such as Claudius, who preferred not to enforce the law of 'maiestas'? The answer to both of these questions must surely be no, once we think of the affair of M. Scribonius Libo under Tiberius or the fate of C. Vettulenus Civica Cerialis under Domitian and if we consider the fact that conspiracies undoubtedly occurred during the reign of Claudius but that they were suppressed by means other than charges of treason. When careful attention has been paid to the time and circumstances of all these transactions, the only valid statement which we can make regarding 'maiestas' trials under the principate is this: charges of high treason could be used as an instrument of government and also of repression whenever an emperor came to feel insecure, but at the same time there was the possibility—and of this both Tiberius and Domitian seem to have been sufficiently aware—that the various factions in the senate might fight their own political war with treason charges as a major weapon. That the heavy incidence of treason cases under Tiberius was largely the result of senatorial infighting, seems to have been established beyond doubt, and private ambitions and feuds would presumably also be discovered behind many of the treason trials under Domitian, if more were known about his reign.

6. APPROACH TO FURTHER RESEARCH
What has been preserved of the story of the opposition under the early Caesars amounts to little more than a roll of its victims, much along the line of the three volumes in which C. Fannius, a friend of the Younger Pliny, described the
history of those executed or exiled by Nero and other commemorative pamphlets such as the ‘Deaths of illustrious men’, which Titinius Capito, another literary friend of Pliny, composed. Although these works are lost, they indicate the way along which we can hope to reconstruct some of the political history of the times. A great deal has been said and written about prosopography, that is, the study of personalities, their careers and their social and family connections, by both the protagonists and the detractors of this method of historical research. Suffice it to say that the question “Who was who when and how?” is not only legitimate but indispensable in the study of any period of Roman history, since oligarchy remained its central and enduring theme, irrespective of the name or theory of the constitution. In the last resort the opposition to the principate was sustained by a relatively small circle: by persons of the immediate entourage of the emperors and by people in high and therefore conspicuous social and political positions. It is thus not so much by a study of ideologies as rather by one of personalities that we can hope to throw some light on the confused cause/effect relationship between senatorial resistance and imperial persecution and to establish not only what happened, but also how and why it happened.

7. CONCLUSION

The primary function and responsibility of the ancient historian as of any historian stricto sensu has always been explanation. As historians ‘wir sollen erkennen, nicht nur wie es eigentlich gewesen ist, sondern warum es so gekommen ist und so hat kommen müssen’—thus Beloch in a well-considered adaptation of Ranke’s famous dictum. As regards the utility and relevance of ancient history as such and also of the subject of this lecture I can do no better than to quote from Thucydides’ first book on the history of the Peloponnesian War: ‘it will be enough for me, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which—human nature being what it is—will, at some time or other and much in the same ways, be repeated in the future.

Evidently history never exactly repeats itself, since the factors in given historical contexts are never identical. What does remain the same, though, is human nature, and hence events of the past may often shed some light on the

98. See e.g. R. Syme, Tacitus p. v, as also The Roman Revolution p. vii.
99. See also D. McAindon, AJPh 77, 1956, 131 f.
100. See e.g. Hdt. 1, 1.
101. K. J. Beloch, Griechische Geschichte 1, 2, 1926, p. 7.
102. Thuc. 1, 22, 4.
underlying realities of present-day politics. To cite but one recent example: the fear has been voiced that the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini will signify the replacement of one form of despotism by another. In view of this a statement made in A.D. 66 regarding the Stoic sect sounds familiar as well as disquieting. I quote from Tacitus: 'They acclaim freedom to destroy the imperial regime. Having destroyed it, they will then strike at freedom itself'. Other parallels, both abroad and at home, will undoubtedly occur to any observant reader of a newspaper. However, parallel lines never actually meet, no matter how far they are extended, and this we should always bear in mind.

103. Tac. Ann. 16, 22.
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