Alexander V. Makhlaiuk*

Emperors’ Nicknames and Roman Political Humour

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Summary: The article examines unofficial imperial nicknames, sobriquets and appellatives, from Octavian Augustus to Julian the Apostate, in the light of traditions of Roman political humour, and argues that in the political field during the Principate there were two co-existing competing modes of emperors’ naming: along with an official one, politically loyal, formalised and institutionally legitimised, there existed another – unofficial, sometimes oppositional and even hostile towards individual emperors, frequently licentious, humorously coloured and, in this regard, deeply rooted in Roman Republican traditions of political humour. Many of the known imperial nicknames and appellatives belong to a specific kind of folklore and express popular public opinion. They survived for us because of ancient authors’ interest in using such material for their literary and ideological intentions, particularly to express better the individual characteristics of the historical personages. But, for the very same purposes, Greek and Roman writers could invent some names and sobriquets, following special rhetorical and moralising principles, or mere love of ridicule. All in all, most imperial nicknames, both authentic and made-up, reveal a rather good quality of humour and mockery constructed by expressive linguistic devices and various rhetorical tropes. An apt derisive nickname marked anti-values, mocked the ruler’s badness and could vilify his reputation to the extreme, stigmatise his personality, or else become a widely-used quasi-cognomen. Many nicknames and appellatives were of ephemeral, ad hoc nature, their sense and effect largely dependent on the particular context; but, taken as a whole, they demonstrate the possible scope of and common trends in naming practice. The political system of the Principate and its very atmosphere of hypocrisy did promote double meaning and double thinking reflected in the double system of the rulers’ nomenclature. Imperial nicknames were a counter-hegemonic transcript and a weapon in the struggle for symbolic capital. All the efforts which many emperors took to control their nomina were ultimately powerless against the strength of the inevitable humorous counter-naming by the ruled.

Keywords: Roman Emperor, Imperial Names, Nicknames, Titulature, Principate, Political Humour

*Kontakt: Alexander V. Makhlaiuk, E-Mail: makhl@imomi.unn.ru
“And some of their kings have actually had surnames given them in mockery, as Antigonus Doson and Ptolemy Lathyrus. Surnames of this sort were even more common among the Romans.”

In his account of usurpations of the mid third century, the author of the Historia Augusta (SHA) narrates the rise to power of one Regilianus, the military commander in Pannonia, who rebelled against the emperor Gallienus, around A.D. 259/260, and ruled for just a couple of months. The anecdote claims that he gained the emperorship through a notable jest (capitali enim ioco regna promeruit):

“For when some soldiers were dining with him and a certain acting-tribune arose and said, ‘Whence shall we suppose that Regalianus gets his name?’ another replied at once, ‘I suppose from his regal power’. Then a schoolmaster who was present among them began, as it seemed, to decline grammatically, saying, ‘Rex, regis, regi, Regalianus’, whereupon among the soldiers – a class of men who are quick to express what they have in mind – one cried out, ‘So, then, can he be regal?’ another, ‘So, then, can he hold regal sway over us?’ and again another, ‘God has given you a regent’s name’. [...] The next day after these words were spoken, on going forth in the morning he was greeted as emperor by the front-line troops. Thus what was offered to others through daring or reasoned choice was offered to him through a clever jest.”

(SHA Trig. Tyr. 10.3–7, transl. D. Magie)

In spite of its evidently fictitious character, this episode, like many other anecdotes from Roman imperial history, can reveal not only the author’s biases and literary manner, but also some beliefs and attitudes concerning what people thought about actual phenomena. There are at least two important moments in the story of Regalianus to be noted for the study of Roman political culture during the Empire. The first point worth emphasising is that the ruler’s (or pretender’s) name and its semantic characteristics seem to have had symbolic value for the ruled, and in some cases a name (either an official one, or an informal sobriquet) provided a good occasion for wordplay and puns. The second point is that jokes and jests with a name were sometimes a dangerous thing, if they had political implications. The SHA passage cited above is remarkable because of its ambivalent wording, capitalis iocus, where the adjective means, on the one hand, “pun-

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1 Plut. Cor. 11.3–4 (transl. B. Perrin). All translations of ancient literary texts are from the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise noted.
2 According to coins his correct name was P. C(ornelius) (?) Regalianus. See Dembski – Winter – Woytek 2007.
3 Rudoni 2013.
4 Saller 1980.
ishable by death" or “dangerous”, “pernicious” and, on the other hand, “first-rate”, “fine”.5 Thus, being a well-turned equivocation, it can signify a deadly dangerous joke.6 Here we have one of numerous examples of the SHA’s predilection, noted long ago, for play on words (rulers’ names included),7 and this is instructive on how the SHA “mocks emperors and the institution of emperors”8.

All in all, the interconnectedness between the ruler’s name, his authority, his perception by the elites or by ordinary people and political humour seems to be evident, given the great attention which most ancient authors9 paid to imperial titles, honorific epithets, family names, nicknames and laudatory or pejorative appellatives, not infrequently using them with humorous and ironical or invective and derogatory colouring. Official and semi-official naming of the emperors with their core titulature formulae was omnipresent in the Roman world and belonged, above all, to the public sphere. This resounded at various public ceremonies, court and senatorial assemblies (with their traditional acclamations which were published in the Acta Senatus10), in the urban crowd’s outcries at games and spectacles, in speeches of orators and ambassadors, in civilian and military oaths, in town gatherings, in temple prayers and dating references in papyri, in letters and petitions addressed to rulers; they were engraved in numerous building inscriptions,11 cities’ honorific and legal decrees, stamped on imperial and provincial coinage – that ubiquitous medium of the ancient world –, and on bronze military diplomas issued for retired soldiers. Many of these namings were of a strictly formulaic and/or laudatory character and sometimes very pompous.12 However, there was another kind of imperial naming, which was

5 Oxford Latin Dictionary (Oxford 1968), 271, s.v. *capitalis*.
6 Rudoni 2013.
7 Dessau 1889, 384 f. On verbal humour in the SHA in general see: Cascón 1989; Cascón 1996; Reekmans 1997; on word play in imperial names: Ballester 2014.
8 Haake 2015, 293, n. 180.
9 Among the major Roman historians onlyTacitus has little interest in emperors’ nicknames, while Cassius Dio and Herodian (not to mention biographers) frequently refer to imperial nicknames and appellations.
10 Alföldi 1934, 79–88; Aldrette 1999, 128–134.
11 It is noteworthy that the largest inscription in the Roman Empire has, in its main content, the nomenclature and titles of the emperor Elagabalus. This inscription of 147 meters was carved around the theater arena in Tarracon, reconstructed by this ruler, and runs: IMP CAES DIVI ANTONINI MAGNI FILIVS DIVI SEVERI NEPOS MARCVS AVRELIVS ANTONINVS PIVS FELIX AVGVSTVS SACERDOS AMPLISSIMVS DEI INVICTI SOLIS ELAGABALI PONTIFEX MAX TRIBVNIC POTEST COS PROCOS P P. See Alföldy 1997, 57–92.
12 Cf., for example, Commodus’ titulature in his message to the Senate cited by Cassius Dio: “The Emperor Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix Sarmaticus Maximus Britannicus, Pacifier of the Whole Earth, Invincible, the Roman Hercules, Pontifex Maxi-
used in quite different circumstances and sometimes (although not always) in other places. One might hear (or read) various mocking sobriquets and derogatory epithets of various emperors in licentious verses and songs, in secret talk among conspirators or in courtiers’ gossip, in senators’ speeches, outcries and maledictions pronounced after the death of a ‘bad’ emperor, in testaments of individuals who were executed or committed suicide, and, finally, in historical or biographical writings dedicated to previous rulers. In some cases, when political circumstances radically changed, one and the same people spoke of dead or overthrown emperors in a totally different way from those alive and in power.

In this respect, it is revealing to compare two pieces of evidence from such an important eyewitness as Cassius Dio who knowingly expressed the ambiguous collective mindset of senators. In his account of Commodus’ gladiatorial fighting, the historian reports (in the first person) that the senators in the amphitheatre were commanded continually to shout out exhilarating chants calling the emperor “Lord”, “first and of all men most fortunate”, “victor”, “Amazonius” (73[72].20.2). But immediately after Commodus’ assassination, the same senators (and presumably Dio himself among them), who recently had cried out at the games and unanimously voted unusual honorific titles for Commodus, now (together with the people standing in front of the curia) shouted many bitter words against the dead emperor declared a public enemy. They called him “all sorts of names, an accursed wretch and a tyrant, adding in jest such terms as ‘the gladiator’, ‘the charioteer’, ‘the left-handed’, ‘the ruptured’”, and “changed their wording, making them utterly ridiculous” – ἐς τὸ γελοιότατον (74[73].2.2–3, transl. E. Cary). One cannot exclude the possibility that these outcries were published in the Acta Senatus. Also it seems quite plausible that at least the last name mentioned here (“the ruptured”) might have been a mocking sobri-
quet of Commodus, as well as “the charioteer”, while “the gladiator” and “the left-handed” are assumed, along with his other gladiatorial surnames, to be the official title-names by which the emperor himself wished to be called. But all four names, as the words προσετίθεσαν ἐπισκώπτοντες show, were included in invective appellations, and therefore we are dealing here with a case where an official title is turned upside down and transformed into its contrary – a wicked jest, a kind of parody. Probably, a similar attitude to the overthrown tyrant also became widespread in the provinces, as evidenced by one of the papyri, in which Commodus is called the ringleader of the robbers – λειστάρχος (P.Oxy. I, 33 = Wilcken, Chrest. 20, col. IV 8 = Musurillo 1954, 65–70, 214–220).

As I shall try to argue below, in the political field there were two co-existing competing modes of imperial naming during the Principate: along with an official one – politically loyal, formalised and institutionally legitimised –, there existed another – unofficial, sometimes oppositional and even hostile towards individual emperors, frequently licentious, humorously coloured and, in this regard, deeply rooted in Roman Republican tradition and political culture. It appears reasonable to assume that such a competition between different modes of naming was part of a symbolic struggle, which Pierre Bourdieu designated as a struggle for “the power to name and to create the world through naming […] a certain claim to symbolic authority as the socially recognized power to impose a certain vision of the social world”.

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16 On “the ruptured” cf. SHA Comm. 13. 1–2, where (with reference to Marius Maximus) is noted that Commodus had a conspicuous growth on his groin which prompted many verses alluding this deformity.

17 The surnames ἀριστερός and μονομάχος were among those inscribed on the statue of the Colossus (Cass. Dio 73[72].15.3–4; 22.3; Herodian. 1.15.8–9; SHA Comm. 11.8–10; 15.8). The biographer underlines (Comm. 17.10) that Commodus did not omit the surnames “gladiator” and effeminatus, perhaps having in view his title Amazonius.

18 The possibility of such a reinterpretation may be seen in the comments of Commodus’ biographer, who remarks that the Senate mockingly gave Commodus the title Pius after the emperor appointed a former lover of his mother to the consulship, and the honorary surname Felix is being connected to Sulla’s cognomen (SHA Comm. 8.1). However, both appear on Commodus’ coins and in papyri (εὐσεβής and εὐτυχής in Greek). As it happens, Commodus was the first emperor to use both these epithets in his official titulature (see Bureth 1964, 90 f.).

19 Bourdieu 1991, 105 f.
violence’”20. So not only imperial titulature as such,21 but also all the plurality of appellations, nicknames and sobriquets attributed to the Roman emperors and members of the imperial family, may be studied as “designating the fundamental values of different groups” and as “the visible trace of struggles for the power to name”22.

1. Brief Outline of the State of Research

Roman imperial titulature, including semi-official honorific surnames, appellations and epithets, has a long and intensive story of research, which persuasively shows the very important role of emperors’ naming in forming, institutionalising and propagating one-man rule and its ideology in the Roman world.23 This cannot be said about emperors’ nicknames, especially in connection with political humour. There are very few specific works on that theme, although Roman humour as such and its place in Latin literature and daily life are now studied quite intensively.24 The functions and historical significance of laughter in Roman politics have recently become a subject of purposeful and profound investigations which confirm the conclusion made by Halliwell on the Greek material: “[I]n a society with a strong sense of shame and social position, [humour] is a powerful means of conveying dishonour and of damaging the status inherent in a reputation.”25 This statement is obviously relevant for the early Roman Empire, where hierarchical structures and concern for reputation underlay social and political relationships.

Among the literature on this topic, the pioneering book by Anthony Corbeill should be mentioned first.26 Concentrating primarily on late-Republican oratorical practice, he has convincingly argued that political humour enforced a community’s norms, preconceptions and values, and helped shape and support its

20 Bourdieu 1991, 239.
21 Ames 1999, 64.
22 Bourdieu 1991, 290, n. 8.
23 There is vast scholarly literature dedicated to general evolutions and to particular titles of imperial appellation. See, e.g., Finke 1867; Riewald 1912; Berlinger 1935 (non vidi); Hammond 1969; Bureth 1964; Kneissl 1969; Frei-Stolba 1969; Mastino 1981; Mastino 1986; Scheithauer 1988; Magioncalda 1991; Mastino 2009.
24 In addition to the works cited in n. 7, above, see Reekmans 1992; Reekmans 2002; Luke 2010; Picón García 2012; Daniels 2013. Among more general works see de Saint-Denis 1965; Richlin 1992; Griffith – Marks 2007; Rich 2015.
25 Halliwell 1991, 285.
26 Corbeill 1996.
ethical standards no less than serious political discourse; jokes were a means of ordering social realities. Among other forms and kinds of political laughter, Corbeill examines the humorous use and abuse of politicians’ names. Mocking and pejorative cognomina, opprobrious sobriquets derived from personal physical peculiarities or various life circumstances, as well as name puns, publicly marked the characteristics of an individual and his ancestry. A name was not an empty signifier but a label that provided direct access to the internal content of a person. Humorous mockery of names was a specifically Roman phenomenon, which allowed the orator to degrade his opponent in a way unavailable to the Greeks. But, as the need to maintain balance within the ruling class diminished, the cognomen lost its original function of distinguishing the potentially powerful families by applying specific nicknames to them.

Cristina Rosillo-López has recently investigated Roman Republican political nicknames as an important element of cohesive and indeed genuinely challenging popular political culture, independent of elite influence. She emphasizes that some popular cognomina, being the result of the exchange of political information among the non-elite and condensing many meanings into a single word (‘in a nutshell’), present at the same time an alternative and independent political memory to that of the elite.

It would be very interesting to trace how these functions of positive, pejorative and jesting naming evolved and changed after the transition from the Republic to the Principate, under which open abuse and public derision of the ruler became practically impossible. For all that, the Romans’ partiality for laughter, bons mots and witticisms (dicta) did not disappear; and with the establishment of autocracy, as is well shown by Ray Laurence and Jeremy Paterson, an appropriate jocularity, a good personal sense of humour and a tolerance of others’ wittiness were expected of the princeps. Furthermore, using dicta by the emperor, his own ability to crack jokes, came to be of central importance, since this form of discourse helped to cross class and social boundaries, constructing an attractive persona of the supreme ruler in the eyes of his subjects. Laurence and Paterson, pertinently paraphrasing the well-known definition of Fergus Millar, claim that the emperor was not only what he did, but also what he said. But, given the importance of the emperors’ titles and nicknames, it seems fair to add that the emperor, in a certain sense, was what he was (nick)named.

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27 Corbeill 1996, 75.
28 Rosillo-López 2017a.
29 Laurence – Paterson 1999.
30 Laurence – Paterson 1999, 183. Millar’s phrase (Millar 1977, 6) is taken from his book “The Emperor in the Roman World (31 B.C.–A.D. 337)”.
The problems of power and laughter in Imperial Rome have been elucidated in three recent works. Mary Beard in her fascinating book puts laughter back into the imperial court and its penumbra to highlight the role that jokers played in Roman elite culture.\textsuperscript{31} As she emphasises, Roman autocracy was embedded in a culture of laughter and jokes. The relations between the ruler and the ruled were often delineated and discursively formulated in terms of laughing and joking. It was laughter that served as a key operator in this discourse, facilitating communication across the political hierarchy, and the emperor's attempt to govern laughter could be a political symbol of the ‘unnaturalness’ of autocracy.\textsuperscript{32} Although Beard is not concerned with the issue of imperial nicknames, her approach to Roman laughter as a form of political communication is very promising for a deeper understanding of the nature of humour presented in the appellations of emperors.

A similar view of the political role of laughter in relationships between the emperor and the aristocratic elite is developed by Jan B. Meister, who discerns the background of specific humour in the double-dealing essence of the Principate.\textsuperscript{33} The simultaneous coexistence of imperial autocracy and old Republican norms and traditions determined the so-called ambiguous communication – "doppelbödige Kommunikation" (in Winterling’s terms)\textsuperscript{34} – within which both the aristocracy and the ruler behaved as though the Republic continued to exist, but realized that real power was in the emperor's hands. Such an ambiguity in the system produced huge latent humorous potential, since, in the light of contemporary theories of humour, the laughable emerges where and when a ‘gap’ opens between a norm and its violation. Consequently, many episodes in political life could be treated in a comical or ironical way, though they originally had no such appearance. However, for the stability of the political system, it was very important to prevent any explicit detection of its ambiguous nature through joking, so laughter was only possible over banal things.

This ambiguity, one may suppose, appears also in imperial naming, both official and informal, and playing tricks with emperors’ names seems to be an important part of “doppelbödige Kommunikation”.

A very insightful and comprehensive study of humour and laughter in Roman politics from mid-third century BCE to the early Antonine age has been undertaken by Pascal Montlahuc in his recent book.\textsuperscript{35} He investigates the socio-political
mechanisms of laughing (risum movere) in all contexts where political humour emerged, from popular meetings and streets to the lawcourts, the Senate-house, triumphal processions, and graffiti. He thoroughly traces a dynamic evolution in its character on the different stages of Rome’s history (from the Middle and the Late Republic, the Caesarian and triumviral periods to the early Principate) and emphasizes not so much the ‘controlling’ and exclusionary function of political humour as ‘bottom-up’ mockery of aristocratic leaders and rulers by their subjects. This humour, in forms adapted to the regime of the Principate, is treated as a polymorphic phenomenon and as one crucial way of communicating political opinion and as the potential domain of all citizens rather than as the prerogative of aristocrats alone. Montlahuc offers a scrupulous contextualized analysis of concrete political circumstances, audience, and occasions of bons mots directed towards rulers, showing how “good” and “bad” emperors reacted to and used humour. However, the French historian does not deal with the issue of derisive imperial nicknames as a specific form of political humour and communication between the ruler and the ruled; nor does he consider the period after Trajan.

The only work in which imperial nicknames and popular epithets have been purposefully studied as a significant phenomenon of Roman political culture remains the article by C. Bruun.36 His aim is to investigate the popularity of Roman emperors in the light of their nicknames, primarily contemporary ones. The author tries to define who invented and used the nicknames, in what contexts, and what was the meaning and value of these names, including appellations and certain unusual cognomina that seem to have had nicknames as their origin, as well as some epithets, if they appeared in a context outside the literary circles of the upper classes.37 The list of nicknames under investigation counts almost 130 items,38 which Bruun divides into four groups: laudatory and apparently neutral nicknames, names with mild criticism, and highly derogatory sobriquets. It is clear that some nicknames could change their semantically neutral meaning and be used as an invective depending on the actual context.

36 Bruun 2003, 69, n. 1. Bruun announced the publication of two further parts of his research (“Imperial Nicknames in the Historia Augusta” and “Late-Antique Imperial Nicknames”), but as far as I know they have not yet been published (see Bruun’s Bibliography updated January 2016: https://www.yumpu.com/it/document/view/8169986/1-bibliography-of-christer-bruun-a-in-international). Earlier he had published an article on a nickname of emperor Constantine (Bruun 1995).

37 Bruun excludes from his discussion most of the unofficial honorary epithets given to the emperors in various decrees and other public inscriptions, as well as certain names and cognomina the emperors themselves attempted to appropriate.

38 Bruun 2003, 80–88.
Bruun’s general approach and conclusions are reasonable and, taken as a whole, do not arouse objections; he convincingly demonstrates how one nickname or another reflected the perception of Rome’s rulers in the eyes of contemporaries and how it might serve for the literary or ideological attitudes of some ancient writers. Nevertheless, some meaningful aspects of the questions have remained outside the author’s view, first of all, the significance of Roman political humour in the invention, semantics and functioning of rulers’ nicknames as contrasted to official imperial appellations. In this respect, it is necessary to add to the evidence collected and analysed by Bruun some data from the SHA and other sources, which, in spite of their fictitious character, can complement the general picture with interesting details showing some characteristic trends and features of Roman humour. So, in what follows I shall examine the interrelations between naming, humour and power in Imperial Rome, treating them as a particular form of political communication.

2. Dangerous but Inevitable Humour

For a start, it should be emphasised that humour at the expense of those in supreme power more often than not was far from safe under the Principate. References to jokes and puns were important in the characterisation of ‘bad’ (‘tyrannical’) and ‘good’ emperors. The very laughter of the bad emperors was pernicious, while the good ones were expected to display a markedly different attitude, the ideal of which is demonstrated by Vespasian: in Cassius Dio’s words, he “indulged in jests like a man of the people (δημοτικῶς) and enjoyed jokes at his own expense, and whenever any anonymous bulletins (γράμματα), such as are regularly addressed to the emperors, were posted up, if they contained scurrilous references to himself, he would simply post a reply in kind, without showing the least resentment” (Cass. Dio 66[65].11.1, transl. E. Cary; cf. Suet. Vesp. 20). The emperor Augustus behaved in a similar way: he was famous for his good sense

39 Beard 2014, 129–134; cf. Beard 2012, 903–905. Also see Montlahuc 2019, 335–401.
40 Thus Commodus, in the words of his biographer, was in iocis quoque perniciosus (SHA Comm. 10.4). On his jokes and reprisals against jokers see SHA Comm. 10.2–6; 11.1–4; Cass. Dio 72.17.2; 20.3. As a characteristic example of an emperor’s terrifying humour one can remember the famous night banquet of emperor Domitian described by Cassius Dio (see Makhlauk 2011). Another standard example of the joking tyrant is Gaius Caligula who, according to Seneca, “amid the multitude of his other vices had a bent for insult, was moved by the strange desire to brand every one with some stigma, while he himself was a most fruitful source of ridicule” (Sen. Constant. 18.1, transl. J. W. Basore).
of humour,\textsuperscript{41} and even issued special edicts in response to scurrilous or spiteful jests (\textit{ioci\textit{s} [...]} \textit{invidiosis aut petulantibus}), and vetoed the restriction of freedom of speech in wills\textsuperscript{42} (Suet. Aug. 55; 56.1). Such toleration of jokes served as a sign of a \textit{civili\hspace{0.02cm}s princeps} (Sen. Constant. 19.1–2; Cass. Dio 52.31.5–8; SHA M. Aur. 8.1).\textsuperscript{43}

Indeed, the anonymous \textit{γράμματα (\textit{libelli})}, mentioned by Dio, like scurrilous or derisive verses (\textit{carmina famosa}) inscribed on walls and statues or spread orally as a part of characteristic Roman folk culture,\textsuperscript{44} were frequently directed against rulers. To confine ourselves to a few examples, we may remember that Tiberius at the beginning of his reign faced “anonymous poems (\textit{carmina incert\hspace{0.02cm}is auctoribus vulgata}) on the subject of his ruthlessness, his arrogance, and his strained relations with his mother” (Tac. Ann. 1.72.4, transl. J. C. Yardley),\textsuperscript{45} but he remained patient with lampoons on himself and his family, declaring that the state had to have free speech and free thought (Suet. Tib. 28). The emperor Nero was a hero of many posted and circulated verses (\textit{proscripta aut vulgata carmina}), in both Latin and Greek, but he did not seek out or persecute the authors of those gibes, showing remarkable indulgence (Suet. Ner. 39.1–3).\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Sparsi libelli} with a Greek epigram, as Suetonius says, even induced Domitian to ignore his proclamation about cutting down the vineyards (Suet. Dom. 14.2). The addressee of the verses cited by the biographer is a billy-goat,\textsuperscript{47} and it is not difficult to imagine

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  \item \textsuperscript{41} Yavetz 1990, 31f.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} It was a rather characteristically Roman custom to express opinions freely about public figures, including obloquy against reigning \textit{principes} (Tac. Ann. 6.38.2–3; 16.19.5; Cass. Dio 58.16.177; 19.5; 25.2). See Keenan 1987; Champlin 1991, 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 39. For more detailed analysis see Montlahuc 2019, 284–300 and 311–317.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Veyne 1983, esp. 13f. On inscriptions and graffiti of that sort in Rome see: Corbier 1987; Zadorojniy 2011; Voegtle 2012; Rosillo-López 2017b, 144–150 (graffiti and placards during the Late Republic); McCarthy 2013, 250–259 (\textit{libelli}); Montlahuc 2019, 198–211.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Examples of such verses are cited by Suetonius in Tib. 59. Different abuses of Tiberius were distributed also “by billets placed in the orchestra” (\textit{per libellos in orchestra positos}) (Suet. Tib. 66), that is, among senators; and the emperor himself sometimes even gave them publicity (\textit{proferret ultro atque vulgaret}).
  \item \textsuperscript{46} A remarkable example of a sarcastic characterisation of Nero is presented by the well-known graffiti found in the vestibule of the “House of Publius Paquius Proculus” in Pompeii (building I.7.1). The text reads: \textit{Cucuta ab ra[t]ioni[b]us | Neronis Augusti} (CIL IV 8075). If \textit{Cucuta} here means \textit{cicuta} (hemlock, poison), it can be considered as the personification of poison, not as a real personal name of an otherwise unknown accountant of Nero, so we have a satirical squib at the emperor’s expense: “Poison is emperor Nero’s accountant”; that implies a witty criticism of Nero who was claimed to put people to death to get their money. Such an interpretation of the graffiti is proposed by Malik 2019, who provides the history of the debate and full references.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} This was a popular epigram by Euenes of Ascalon (Anth. Pal. 9.75: “Though thou eatest me to the root, billy-goat, I will yet bear fruit enough to provide a libation for thee when thou art sacrificed”, transl. W. Paton). Cf. Ov. Fast. 1.357–8.
that it could well be a nickname bestowed on the emperor, *ad hoc* at least – as in the case of Tiberius, with whom a line from an Atellan farce was associated after a certain Mallonia, a victim of his harassment, had been charged and committed suicide.48 This verse became current, and ran, “the old goat (*hircus vetulus*) was licking the does” (Suet. Tib. 45):49 that may be directly correlated with *Caprineus* (*< caper*), a double meaning referring both to Tiberius’ dwelling on the island of Capri and to his perverse sexual entertainment there (Suet. Tib. 43.2).50

Ambiguous rhymes and pamphleteering of that kind could become a cause for charges and execution. And such persecutions began under Augustus who had ordered to burn opprobrious pamphlets and punished some authors in A.D. 12 (Cass. Dio 56.27.1),51 although he himself did advise his heir to tolerate insults and criticism (Suet. Aug. 51.3). According to Suetonius, Caligula burned one writer of the Atellan farces alive *ob ambigu ioci versiculum* (“because of a humorous line of double meaning”, transl. J. C. Rolfe, rev. K. R. Bradley: Suet. Cal. 274). The authors of opprobrious and mocking writings are sometimes mentioned by name in literary sources. Thus, Sextius Paconianus under Tiberius was killed in prison for poems devised there against the emperor (Tac. Ann. 6.39.1). Antonius Sosianus was exiled for the *crimen maiestatis* after he had recited abusive verses (*carmina probrosa*) against Nero at a dinner party (Tac. Ann. 14.48.1–49.3; 16.14.1). Of course, oral opprobrium of the ruler might also lead to a person’s being charged, as seen in the case of one Pompeius (Pomponius), a senator, who was accused of indecent reproaches (ὡς λοιδορίᾳ χρησάμενος) against Caligula (Ios. Ant. Iud. 19.33).

However, very much depended on the momentary mood and whimsies of individual rulers. The epitomator of Cassius Dio’s History preserved a story about the ex-consul Junius Paulinus, known as an unsparing gossip and jester. He was put into custody by Septimius Severus, and even there continued to jest at the expense of the emperor, but was freed after his audacious response to the sovereign who had threatened to cut his head off:

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48 For our purpose, the issue of the truthfulness of this story is not of great importance. Recently Champlin 2015 has argued convincingly that the entire horrific tale of Mallonia related by Suetonius is no more than brilliant fiction.

49 For a better understanding of the obscene meaning of this verse see Mallan 2016.

50 Cf. Bruun 2003, 94. To put it more precisely, Suetonius uses the word *Caprineum* in the neuter gender with the meaning “goat’s garden”, but “goat” as a sobriquet for Tiberius is evidently alluded to here.

51 Cf. also Suet. Aug. 19.1; 51.1; 55; Tac. Ann. 1.72.2–4; 5.4.4. On Augustan repressions see Montlahuc 2019, 293–300. On changes of politics in this regard compared to the Late Republic see Rosillo-López 2017b, 229–235, who notes that popular public opinion mostly remained as it had been in Late Republican Rome, and nicknames and songs against emperors still circulated (232).
“You can cut it off’, he said, ‘but as long as I have it, neither you nor I can restrain it’. Moved to laughter, Severus pardoned him. Moreover, Caracalla later not only tolerated his jokes, but even permitted him to write some verses against himself and bestowed on him a million sesterces.”
(Cass. Dio 78[77].11.1–12 and Petr. Patr. Exc. Vat. 143)

It is generally typical of a tyrannical emperor to kill even for harmless jokes (for example, Suet. Tib. 57.2; Dom. 10.2), and a splenetic ruler could see a taunt in a flattering appellation, like Caligula, who was irritated when people called him “young Augustus” (Cass. Dio 59.13.6). In extreme cases, mockery, jibes and back-biting against the emperor might cause mass death reprisals. The most notorious example of such a reaction is Caracalla’s massacre in Alexandria (between December 215 and April 216). Whatever were the real reasons for this mass killing of the city’s elite youth, according to the unanimous conviction of contemporary writers, it was the Alexandrians’ lampoons against the emperor that primarily caused his immense anger. Dio underlines that one of the reasons why the Alexandrians spoke ill of and ridiculed the emperor was the murder of his brother (78[77].22.1). Herodian, emphasising the Alexandrians’ ability and love of making a mockery and fun of mighty people, adds that they called his mother Jocaste and laughed over his short stature and imitation of Alexander the Great (4.9.2–3). It can hardly be doubted that the Alexandrians also did not skimp on witty and opprobrious nicknames for Caracalla, but this remains unknown.

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52 On this action see Bérenger-Badel 2005; Rodriguez 2012, with references to a vast earlier bibliography (the author argues that each stage of Caracalla’s repression against Alexandrians charged with the crimen maiestatis was based on a literal observance of Roman law and current jurisprudence).

53 Main sources: Cass. Dio 78.22.1–23.4; Herodian. 4.8.6–9.8. There is no mention of these lampoons in SHA Carac. 6.2–3.

54 Cf. an eloquent characteristic of the Egyptians in SHA Quadr. Tyr. 74: “puffed up, madmen, boastful, doers of injury, and, in fact, liars and without restraint, always craving something new, even in their popular songs, writers of verse, makers of epigrams” (transl. D. Magie. Cf. SHA Trig. Tyr. 22.1–2). This license and rebellious spirit were very ancient characteristics of the inhabitants of Alexandria (cf., for example, Pol. 15.27.3).

55 This was a hint at Caracalla’s alleged incestuous relationship with Julia Domna.

56 Caracalla himself ordered people to call him Magnus Alexander ([Ps.-]Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 21.4). His demonstrative Alexandermania apparently irritated at least a part of the senatorial elite. A good witness of this is Cassius Dio who, generally depicting Caracalla’s personality and behaviour in a negative tone, ironically names him οὗτος ὁ φιλαλεξανδρότατος, “the greatest admirer of Alexander” (78[77].9.1). On Caracalla’s imitatio Alexandri see Molina Marín 2015 (with further references).
As we can see from our brief overview, the relation of Roman emperors to jokes and jeering varied greatly. Broadly speaking, it had two extremes: at the one end, it was the willingness to take a jibe (even a biting one) with humour and to joke in return (the ‘model of Augustus or Vespasian’); at the other end, it was almost total intolerance of any joking treatment as undermining the ruler’s authority, and cruel reprisal (or at best black humour) in return (the ‘model of Caligula’). In the midst between these extremes, there happened to be a demonstrative or apparent unconcern over jests and mockery (Tiberius’ approach in certain situations). Mixed versions were also possible, depending on the particular situation. In any event, when humour of any kind concerned the holder of supreme personal power, it inevitably acquired a political nature and worked to provide feedback between the ruler and the ruled (even if it resulted in the death penalty for the jokers, which testifies to the seriousness of laughter). It is reasonable to assume that the anciently ingrained Roman habit and predilection for laughing and invective against power-holders persisted, in spite of all threats and restrictions due to autocracy, partly in their old forms of individual and collective activities, such as anonymous epigrams, chants, pamphlets and wall-inscriptions, notes in testaments, author’s literary pieces, and so on. But, in contrast to Republican times, the use of humorous invective and direct mockery against those in power almost entirely disappeared from public oratory. In that field they became possible only in absentia, after the overthrow or the death of a reigning emperor, or in the mouth of open mutineers and usurpers. At the same time, it is permissible to suppose that the restriction of opportunities for the free expression of public opinion led to an increased significance of such forms of laughter and invective as anecdotes, rumours, anonymous poems and *libelli*, as well as those apt nicknames which, having great evaluative possibilities, in all likelihood, were often inalienable elements of all these modes of humour production, and clearly contrasted with more and more pompous officious imperial appellations.

So in the next section I shall consider humorous nicknames of an ironical, critical, derogatory and clearly invective character, which are, perhaps, the most

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57 Epictetus in his “Discourses” (4.13.5) describes it as a quite customary situation in Rome when a soldier, dressed like a civilian, holds a conversation with a casual acquaintance and begins to speak ill of the emperor (κακῶς λέγειν τὸν Καίσαρα), and his collocutor, as if he had received some kind of guarantee from him in the fact that he began the abuse, speaks in a similar manner and then is led off to prison.

58 Cf. Hawkins 2017, 129, 130: “popular invective as a bottom-up admonitory rhetoric that became increasingly important as aristocrats’ freedom to chastise Roman leadership decreased [...] took on a greater role in Roman life” under the imperial regime.
expressive with regard to popular and, in some cases, the elite’s perception not only of a person in power, but of one-man rule as such.

3. Censuring and Labelling a Ruler through Naming

When considering imperial nicknames, it is necessary to bear in mind some important points. First, in many cases, such nicknames are very close to denigrating epithets or simple swearwords, related to a certain ruler in a concrete, one-off situation, which usually did not turn into a more or less permanent appellation. Secondly, a number of nicknames emerged before their bearer became emperor, and we mostly do not know if they were in use during his period in power or not. Given the very fact that they were preserved in our sources, we can nevertheless presume that they were of particular interest to the author and readers, and therefore at least some sobriquets may allude to and reflect features of an individual ruler, as he was perceived by his subjects. Thirdly, it is evident that one and the same nickname could resound differently depending on the place, time and circumstances, changing its originally neutral or even positive meaning to a pejorative. Sometimes precisely such a situation can produce a highly humorous effect.

Of course, the nicknaming of people in power was by no means an exclusively Roman phenomenon. This practice is well known among different peoples, including, the Greeks who actively gave amusing sobriquets to their politicians and, later, to Hellenistic kings. But the specifically Roman tradition of name-giving (noted by Plutarch) admitted pejorative names as cognomina and varieties of humorous mockery with them. Besides that, appeal to individuals’ sexual behaviour, as well as personal physical and mental peculiarities, was widely practised in Roman political humour, finding its expression in appropriate nicknames. Undoubtedly, these traditions continued under the Principate, and it is interesting to trace how they were used (and transformed?) in relation to the emperors.

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59 As a general introduction to the activity of nicknaming in Archaic and Classical Greece see Surikov 2018; on humorous nicknames of Hellenistic kings see, for example: Coloru 2014, 32–34.
60 In the passage cited above as an epigraph to the paper (Plut. Cor. 11.3–4; cf. C. Mar. 1.1–3).
61 Corbeill 1996, 75.
62 Corbeill 1996, 99–104. On anthroponymy and humour in Latin literature in general see Ballester 2014, 15–44.
In the rather long, but far from exhaustive, list of imperial nicknames, popular epithets and acquired *cognomina* from Augustus to the third century collected by Bruun, there is a number of items, which definitely had a humorous context and origin. Let us analyse the most indicative examples, providing some additions and corrections to Bruun’s survey.

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify that Bruun appears to be partially incorrect in pointing out that among all the emperors of his collection only three – Claudius, Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus – are not known to have any real nicknames relating to their reign. Indeed, it is greatly surprising that Claudius, who in Suetonius’ words was “one of the laughing-stocks of the court” (Suet. Ner. 6.2: *inter ludibria aulae erat*), received no derisory nickname or epithet, in spite of all his physical disabilities and eccentricity. At least, none are mentioned in our sources. However, Claudius was satirically immortalised in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*.

Concerning Septimius Severus, it seems strange that Bruun mentions him in this way, while at the same time putting his name *Pertinax* on the list and referring to Aur. Vict. Caes. 20.10 and Eutr. 8.18.3, but not to the life of Severus in the SHA. Meanwhile it is the biography of the emperor that reports some interesting, although seemingly fictive and contradictory, details demonstrating a characteristic wordplay. On the one hand, it is said that Severus himself commanded people to call him by this name (*cognomentum*) in order to strengthen his own position (first of all in the eyes of the Pannonian legions, as the avenger of the emperor Helvius Pertinax murdered by the praetorians), but later refused it as bearing a bad omen (SHA Sept. Sev. 7.9). On the other hand, he officially accepted the name which was given to him by the Senate, not so much by his own wish, but as a result of his frugal way of life (*ex morum parsimonia*) (SHA Sept. Sev. 17.6), that is, not as his predecessor’s cognomen, but as one denoting his own qualities. The literal meanings of the emperor’s names were played out also in the story of his repressions: Severus supposedly put some people to death not only

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63 Bruun 2003, 80–88.
64 Bruun 2003, 90.
65 Augustus himself in his letter to Livia noted that Claudius is “wanting and defective in soundness of body and mind”, and that it is necessary to give no grounds for ridicule to people who are accustomed “to scoff at and deride such things” (Suet. Claud. 4.2).
66 Severus assumed it before leaving Pannonia (Herodian. 2.10.1), and during the first part of his reign was named *Imperator Caesar L. Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus*, as coins and inscriptions show. Concerning Severus’ naming and titles see Makhliuk 2018.
67 A slightly different version occurs in SHA Pert. 15.2: Severus accepted the name from the Senate “out of respect for so good a ruler”.
68 The Latin *pertinax* means “unyielding”, “pertinacious”.

for uttering jests or keeping silence, but also for crying out “many things with a double meaning, such as ‘Behold an emperor worthy of his name: Pertinacious in very truth, in very truth Severe’”69 (SHA Sept. Sev. 14.13, transl. D. Magie). Such interpretatio nominis, which entails the attribution of a quality to a person expressed by his name (or exactly its contrary), is surely one of the distinguishing features of the SHA’s literary style, and most of its name puns are invented more or less successfully.70 Humour of this sort primarily characterises the satirical content in the SHA itself,71 and its information should by no means be taken at face value, in contrast, for example, to speeches of Cicero or even Suetonius’ Caesares. However, leaving aside the factual historicity of name puns in the SHA, and collating its evidence with more authoritative sources, we can reveal some sustained ideological content.

As for Marcus’ informal cognomen Verissimus (“the most honest”) which was jokingly given to him by Hadrian and derived from his family name Verus, it is true that we have no proof that it was used after 154.72 This, however, does not mean that it could not have been in use during Marcus’ reign.73 Besides that, the SHA provides evidence of two other nicknames of Marcus, the authorship of which is ascribed to Avidius Cassius, who had tried to usurp power in 175. In the biographer’s words, he called Marcus dialogista, “a philosophizer”;74 and in another passage the author cites a fictitious letter from Lucius Verus to Marcus in which the former says that Avidius called Marcus philosopha anicula, “a philosophical old woman”, while Lucius himself was named luxurious morio, “a half-witted spendthrift” (SHA Avid. 1.8). Even if all these sobriquets are no more than pure forgeries, the author offers a rather witty version of the pejorative names,75 not impossible from the point of view of a political opponent. In any event, we may

69 Damnabantur autem [...] cur pleraque figurata dixissent, ut “ecce imperator Vere nominis sui, vere Pertinax, vere Severus”. Cf. Jiménez 2012/2013, 272f.
70 Reekmans 1997, 192–194; Daniels 2013, 78–81.
71 Daniels 2013, 83.
72 Main sources: Cass. Dio 69.21.2; SHA M. Aur. 1.10; 4.1; SHA Diad. 6.5; Iust. Mart. Apol. 1.1, and AE 1940, 62 (inscription of unknown collegia from Ostia dated about 154). See also P.I.R.2 A 697, with references to later literary evidence and coins.
73 It is interesting that, according to Herodian (1.2.1), one of Marcus’ twins, who died in his early childhood, was named Verissimus. If that is true, we can see here how an informal nickname could be turned into a family cognomen.
74 SHA Avid. 3.8: si dialogistam occidisset, Antoninum hic nomine significans.
75 Luxuriosus morio is something of a swearword, while, as Reekmans remarks, anicula was a suitable metaphor for a twiddler, and also because philosophers were old men, not old women (Reekmans 1997, 183).
guess that even such an ideal ruler as Marcus Aurelius might be a target of invec-
tive or ridicule.

The excessive fascination with philosophy or Greek art could cause a hostile
reaction among some individuals, as one may suppose from Hadrian’s nickname
Graeculus, “Greekling” (SHA Hadr. 1.5; [Ps.-]Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 14.2),\(^{76}\) as well
as from two remarks of the emperor Constantius I who is reported to have called
Hadrian a “painting tool” (ἐργαλεῖον ζωγραφικόν) and Marcus “laughable”
(καταγέλαστος).\(^{77}\) The emperor Nero is said to have been greatly offended when
Vindex tauntingly called him a wretched lyre-player – *malus citharoedus* (Suet.
Ner. 41.1). To give an instance from the later Roman Empire, we may cite Ammi-
anus Marcellinus’ evidence concerning the emperor Julian the Apostate: soldiers,
because of a shortage of food, assailed him “with foul names and opprobrious
language, calling him an Asiatic,\(^{78}\) a Greekling and a deceiver, and a fool with
a show of wisdom” (*Asianus, Graeculus, falax, specie sapientiae stolids*: 17.9.3,
transl. J. C. Rolfe). Similar derisive nicknames were given to him at the palace
of Constantius: a “nanny-goat”, “talkative mole”, “an ape in purple”, “a Greek-
ish pedant” (*capella, loquax talpa et purpurata simia et litterio Graecus*: Amm.
17.11.1).\(^{79}\)

Other personal features could also become a subject of more or less critical
assessment in the form of various witty nicknames. Antoninus Pius’ extraordi-
nary meticulousness in every matter made him a target of scoffers who wittily
called him “cummins splitter” (κυμινοπρίστης: Cass. Dio 70.3.3).\(^{80}\) But while this
is rather a kindly sort of humour,\(^{81}\) one of Tiberius’ nickname sounds quite
critical: because of his repeated postponement of planned visits to provinces
and the armies, he was jokingly called *Callippides*, by the proverbial name of
an Athenian actor of mimes who artfully imitated running but remained on
the same spot.\(^{82}\) The personal reputation of the empress Livia is aptly reflected in the
nickname *Ulixes stolatus* (“Ulysses in petticoats”), ironically used by Caligula

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\(^{76}\) In (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Epit. de Caes. it is said that this nickname was applied to him by many
people (*Hic Graecis litteris impensius eruditus a plerisque Graeculus appellatus est*), while the
SHA notes that it was used by some (*a nonnullis*). On negative implications of the diminutive
*Graeculus* cf. Juv. 3.78–83.

\(^{77}\) Petrus Patricius fr. 191 (Boissevain – de Boor – Büttner-Wobst 1906, 271, cited by Bruun).

\(^{78}\) The inhabitants of Asia, in the eyes of the Romans, had a strong reputation as worthless and
ostentatious people. Cf., e.g., Quint. Inst. 12.10.17.

\(^{79}\) The word *litterio* may have belonged to military jargon (cf. Aug. Epist. 118.26).

\(^{80}\) On this feature of Antoninus cf. SHA Pius 6.4; M. Aur. 1.16.

\(^{81}\) In Bruun’s view, this nickname contains an element of criticism (Bruun 2003, 94), but neither
Cassius Dio’s passage nor the remarks in the SHA and Marcus’ book support this conclusion.

\(^{82}\) On the proverb cf. Cic. Att. 13.12.
One can see the irony in Trajan’s nickname *herba parientina / parietaria*, “wall plant” coined on account of the legends he inscribed on many buildings. Pertinax’s nickname *chrestologus / χρηστολόγος* ("the smooth-tongued", "smooth-talk") sounds much more critical, given the corresponding remarks in his biographies (SHA Pert. 13.5–6; (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Caes. 18.4), as well as his other comic sobriquet *agrarius mergus* (“a land-cormorant”), caused by his insatiable desire for the extension of his landed property (SHA Pert. 9.4–5). Similarly, a feature like sordidness, as well as the introduction of new taxes, caused irritation among daring and mocking people in Alexandria, who nicknamed Vespasian *Cybiosactes* (“dealer in square pieces of salt fish”).

In consequence, the emperor was outraged to such an extent by the discontent, impertinence (insulting verses included) and reproaches of the Alexandrians that despite his indulgence only Titus’ pleading saved them from punishment (Cass. Dio 65[66].8.3–7). Before becoming emperor, Vespasian, forced to deal with mule trading, was nicknamed *Mulio* (“Muleteer”, Suet. Vesp. 4.3), and it cannot be excluded that this nickname might be remembered by those aristocrats who were not delighted with his ignoble origin and reprehensible business activities.

There is very bitter irony in Cassius Dio’s naming of Commodus, whom he called ὁ χρυσοῦς (the “Golden One”), in the very passage following his report of the official proclamation of Commodus’ “Golden Age” (72[73].15.6–16.1). The future emperor Opillius Macrinus’ cruel treatment of slaves became the reason for his nickname *Macellinus* (“Butcher”) given to him by his slaves and derived from *macellum* (“meat market”, SHA Opil. 13.3). Greed and women’s influence on the emperor as a military leader might have been perceived extremely negatively by the soldiers. Thus the rebellious part of the army, encouraging the rest of the troops to change sides to Alexander Severus, called the young princeps “[a stingy

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83 Amm. 27.3.7; (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Epit. de Caes. 41.13. This naming is ascribed to the emperor Constantinus I and most likely was not contemporary to Trajan (Bruun 2003, 94).
84 On Pertinax’s avarice cf. SHA Pert. 13.4. Given that the cormorant is proverbial because of its voraciousness (Plin. Nat. 11.202) and a seabird, not a field-bird, the unexpected epithet *agrarius* makes the nickname rather humorous. See Reekmans 1997, 183.
85 Suet. Vesp. 19.2. This was the surname of an impostor who, impersonating a relative of a Syrian king, happened to rule Egypt for some days in 58 B.C. and was known as a very stingy person.
86 Bosworth 2002, meticulously interpreting Suetonius’ phrase *ad mangonicos quaestus*, came to the conclusion that Vespasian was engaged in a very profitable but particularly disreputable trade in slave eunuchs (a kind of human mule).
87 In this regard, it is appropriate to recall that Dio considered Commodus’ accession as a transition “from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust” (72.36.4).
little woman], a cowardly boy, a slave to his mother” (Herodian. 6.9.5). On the contrary, the unusual physical strength, courage and cruelty of Maximinus Thrax are emphasised in his biography of the SHA by the allocation of a number of mythological names, which, however, should be attributed to the author’s literary fantasy.

But Maximinus’ barbarian origin caused no nickname, nor that of the emperor Philipp the Arab or any other ruler of the third century. Although the origin of an emperor could sometimes be a reason for a mocking nickname, as was the case of Alexander Severus whom, if we may believe the testimony of his biography, the Antiochians, Egyptians and Alexandrians in derision called “a Syrian”, “a Syrian synagogue-chief and a high priest” (archisynagagus, archiereus: SHA Alex. Sev. 28.7). Reekmans finds an authentic and quite witty ambiguity in these sobriquets, which were misunderstood by the SHA: seemingly some Greek historian, used in the biography, reported that oriental subjects called Alexander ἀρχισυναγωγός instead of ἀρχιερεύς (= pontifex), thus alluding simultaneously to the emperor’s religious functions and to his συναγωγὴ χρημάτων / aurum colligendum, which was the object of the charge against him (SHA Alex. 44.1; 64.3).

Interestingly, Alexander did not want to be considered a Syrian to such an extent that he even produced a fictive family tree (stemma generis) to prove otherwise (SHA Alex. 44.3, cf. 64.3). His predecessor Elagabalus was also nicknamed an “Assyrian”, “Sardanapalus”, “Heliogabalus/Elagabalus”, all underlining his eastern kinship, behaviour and predilections (Cass. Dio 80.1.1; 2.4; 11.2; Aur. Vict. Caes. 23.1; [Ps.-]Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 23.1–2). He is portrayed as an ‘oriental’ more explicitly than any other emperor. Incidentally, the biography of Elagabalus refers to the version that his name Varius was a sobriquet invented by his school friends because he allegedly was a harlot’s child sprung “from the seed of various

88 γύναιον μικρολόγον. The context of the phrase presumes that these words relate to Alexander’s mother rather than the emperor himself. Bruun, however, includes them in the naming of Alexander, and in his translation misses the epithet “stingy, greedy” (Bruun 2003, 87).
89 He is called, on the one hand, Hercules, Achileus, Ajax, Milo of Croton, Antaeus, and, on the other, Cyclops, Busiris, Sciron, Phalaris, Typhon and Gyges (SHA Max. Duo 4.9; 6.9; 8.5).
90 Their ethnic nicknames are mentioned only once in later sources ([Ps.-]Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 25.1; Aur. Vict. Caes. 28.1) and were hardly used by contemporaries. Cf. Bruun 2003, 90.
91 Reekmans 1997, 181.
92 Cassius Dio explains this nickname by the fact that Elagabalus frequently wore the dress of Syrian priests in public.
93 On Elagabalus’ nicknames see Osgood 2016, 180–183. Icks 2012, 98–101, points out that Dio constructed his depiction of Elagabalus around the figure of Sardanapalus as depicted by Diodorus Siculus (2.23).
94 For more details see Icks 2008, esp. 481–483.
men” (SHA Heliog. 2.2). This is of course one more name pun so characteristic of the SHA, but its invention once again confirms the importance of the legitimate origin of the occupant of the throne in the ideology of imperial power as it is expressed in this collection of emperors’ biographies.

Surprisingly, physical peculiarities are a rare basis of nicknames for emperors. Apart from Commodus’ nickname “ruptured” (κηλήτης),95 and possibly *Cupido* (“a pretty boy”) applied to Galba,96 we can indicate only *Calvus* (“bald”) as a nickname of that sort. Julius Caesar’s nickname *moechus calvus* (“bald adulterer”) used in a soldiers’ triumphal song (Suet. Iul. 51; cf. 45.2 on his baldness) is the most famous example,97 to which *Calvus Nero* for Domitian can be added.98 The former case with its theatrical implications constitutes a remarkable case of *oxymoron* and *aprosdoketon*,99 while the latter clearly alludes to vices signified by the name of the archetypal tyrant Nero. But neither Galba, who was *capite praecalvo* (Suet. Galb. 21), nor Caligula (Suet. Cal. 50.1) and Otho (Suet. Otho 12.1), who had problems with their hair, received such a nickname from this perceived disfigurement. Given the Romans’ common identification of baldness with sexual excess, and primarily homosexuality,100 one can conclude that *Calvus* as nickname might have indicated tyrannical features.101 This may be confirmed by an inscription on a lead sling-bullet from the Perusian War (41–40 B.C.), in which Lucius Antonius, the enemy of Octavian, is addressed *calve*.102 Octavian was also the addressee of witty obscenity inscribed on sling-bullets from the same time. In this case, we are dealing with rather crude Wittiness playing out sexual motifs. On

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95 See nn. 14 and 16, above.
96 It was a product of the *iocorum petulantia* (saucy jest) of servants and camp-followers who, after the murder of the emperor carried his severed head on a pike round the camp crying out “Galba, thou Cupid, exult in your vigour!”, forasmuch the report had gone abroad a few days before that, upon someone’s commending his person as still looking young and vigorous, he replied with Homer’s line “As yet my strength is unimpaired” (Suet. Galb. 20.2).
97 Cf. *calvus moechus* as a characteristic of the emperor Macrinus in anonymous verses in the SHA (Opil. 14.2). In these verses we also have a wordplay with the name *Verus*: the addressee of the verses is said never to have been *Verus*, that is a faithful one.
98 Juv. 4.38; Auson. *Monosticha de Ordine Imperatorum* 17 (Green 1991, 162); cf. Serv. Aen. 4.214. Domitian’s baldness: Suet. Dom. 18.1–2. On his own specifically humorous attitude to that feature: Morgan 1997. See also Deroux 1990; Charles 2002.
99 Cicu 1987/1988. *Calvus* in popular Roman drama was usually associated with a betrayed husband, while *moechus* meant an active adulterer.
100 On *calvus* as a sign of inadequate virility see Cantarella 1992, 159. Cf. Anagnostou-Laoutides – Charles 2012, esp. 1085f.
101 Therefore, Bruun’s opinion that *Calvus Nero* might merely be a literary “Schimpfwort” (Bruun 2003, 94) seems too simplistic.
102 Benedetti 2012, 74, No 33 = CIL XI 6721.13 = ILLRP 1111.
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some glandes Perusinae Octavian’s name seems to be given in the feminine form, Octavia, and in such a derisive and degrading context that it leaves no doubt that we are dealing with a direct allusion to effeminacy and participation in shameful homosexual practices, which is obliquely attested by Suetonius (Suet. Aug. 68; 71.1). One of the inscriptions runs: pet[o] / Octav[i]a // culum. Given that Octavian’s enemies called him simply Octavius, denying his adoption, the second word must be read Octavia(i), not as Octavia(ni), and similarly in another text, Octavia // ((phallus)) // a(c)cip[e].

Indeed, nicknames alluding to the effeminacy and sexual proclivities of rulers are in line with the traditions of Roman political humour, and find many parallels under the Principate. Nero’s effeminate personality is acrimoniously expressed in the feminine form of his name in the British queen Boudicca’s speech composed by Cassius Dio, ἡ Νερωνὶς ἡ Δομιτία (62.6.5). Suetonius reports that Vitellius, who had spent his early youth among the wantons of Tiberius, was given the nickname Spintria (Vit. 3.3) which stuck for the rest of his life. It is no wonder that such an emperor as Elagabalus, notorious for his sexual deviance and effeminacy, had at least three corresponding denigrating nicknames: the first is Γύννις (“womanish man”), given to him by the philosopher Aelianus (Philostr. Soph. 2.625). The second and third are preserved in two Egyptian papyri dated half a century after Elagabalus’ death, in one of which he is called Αντωνείνος ὁ κόρυφος (“Antoninus the catamite”) and in the other ἀνόσιος Ἀντωνίνος μικρός (“the unholy little Antoninus”: P.Oxy. xlvi 3298; 3299). Although the authorship of these two documents is unknown, they clearly demonstrate that the emperor’s reputation was a matter of interest (even if posthumous) far from Rome and the imperial court. Besides that, the nickname “Sardanapalus”, mentioned above,

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103 For the general context and details see Hallett 1977, especially 152–160. Cf. also Mangiameli 2012, 199–201.
104 CIL XI 6721.7 = ILLRP 1108. L. Benedetti adheres to the alternative reading: Octavia(ni) (Benedetti 2012, 72f., no 31), but Hallett’s arguments seem preferable (see next note).
105 Hallett 1977, 152 and 165, n. 8.
106 CIL XI 6721.6 = ILLRP 1107 = Benedetti 2012, 88 f., no 58 (read Octavia(ne)). Cf. also Benedetti 2012, 89, no 59: Octavia(ne) (?)
107 On these traditions under the Republic see Corbeill 1996, 104–106; 151–169, More generally, Richlin 1992, passim, esp. 57–63, 96–102.
108 Icks 2008, 484 f.
109 He composed an indictment for Elagabalus immediately after his death, “because by every sort of wanton wickedness he disgraced the Roman Empire”; and the author of the “Lives of the Sophists” continues, “On which a sophist Philostratus of Lemnos retorted, ‘I should admire you for it, if you had indicted him while he was alive’” (transl. W. C. Wright). The fact that this diatribe was written post mortem tyranni does not necessarily mean that the nickname was not in use during his lifetime. Gymnis is one of epithets of Dionysus (Jessen 1912).
also indicates effeminacy, since that mythical king was known to have spent his life as a woman, wore female clothing, covered his face and body with white make-up, and pursued love with men as well as women (Diod. Sic. 2.23; cf. Athen. 12.528e–529d). However, sexual excesses were by no means always a ground for condemnation, and if they were not connected to violence, they rather served as an occasion for more or less kindly jocular nicknames. This is the case with Gordianus II, in whose biography we find artificially fabricated wordplay with nicknames: because of his amorousness and his large number of children from concubines, he was called the \emph{Priamus} of his time and, as a joke in the second degree, \emph{Priapus} (SHA Gord. 19.4).\textsuperscript{110}

Even a seemingly honourable nickname could give an occasion for a joke. Thus, the nickname Diadumenian (derived from \textit{diadema}) given by Macrinus to his son (Cass. Dio 79[78].5.2) is explained in the SHA by the fact that the boy was born with a diadem around his head instead of a caul (\textit{pilleus}), a cap of freed slave, that signals the humble origin of Macrinus’ family.\textsuperscript{111}

Unsurprisingly, for the most part nicknames and appellatives with plainly pejorative meanings belonged to those emperors whom the tradition treated as tyrants, and there are some instances of a humorous and highly imaginative nature which emphasise typical tyrannical characteristics: cruelty, immorality, hypocrisy. In addition to the instances cited above, we may note the following invective nicknames and appellatives. Tiberius’ cruel and cold-blooded character, having been marked in his boyhood, caused Theodorus of Gadara, his teacher of rhetoric, to name him “mud kneaded with blood” (\textit{πηλὸς αἵματι πεφυρμένος}: Suet. Tib. 57.1). Nero in stinging poems that went the rounds after Agrippina’s assassination was called “matricide” (\textit{μητροκτόνος}\textsuperscript{112}: Suet. Ner. 39.2; Cass. Dio. 62[61].16.2; 62.18.4). Because of his executions of many senators Septimius Severus was named \textit{Sulla Punicus} and \textit{Marius} (SHA Pesc. 6.4). When Caracalla went to Pergamum, there an oracle was circulating with the surname \textit{ὁ Αὐσόνιος θῆρ} (“Ausonian beast”); the emperor took it to his own account and, killing many people, rejoiced and was proud of it (Cass. Dio 78[77].16.8; 23.4). Caracalla’s immense impious cruelty was fixed in his nickname \textit{Tarautus}, which was the sobriquet of a reckless and bloodthirsty gladiator.\textsuperscript{113} This nickname is men-

\textsuperscript{110} Reekmans 1997, 188.
\textsuperscript{111} Scott 2018, 37.
\textsuperscript{112} In Greek verses quoted by Suetonius, as Bücheler demonstrated, the numerical value of the letters in the name ‘Nero’ (1005) is the same as the sum of that in the word ‘matricide’ (Bücheler 1906).
\textsuperscript{113} Perhaps, the name of a celebrated gladiator of the time served as a nickname for the younger Drusus, the son of Tiberius, who, according to Cassius Dio (57.14.9), was “so prone to anger that
tioned by Dio\textsuperscript{114} among others by which some people called him after his death: Bassianus\textsuperscript{115} and Caracalla\textsuperscript{116} (Cass. Dio 79[78],9.3). The author of his biography points out that Caracalla, after defeating the Germans, named himself “either in jest or in earnest” Germanicus (SHA Carac. 5.6); although it was actually a part of his cognomina ex virtute,\textsuperscript{117} apparently there is a pun on the meaning of germanus as “brother”, so that the honorific surname could mean “the Winner over the brother” (i.e. Geta)\textsuperscript{118}. A joke of Helvius Pertinax, the son of the emperor, is constructed similarly: hinting at the assassination of Geta, he advised Caracalla to add to his victorious titles the surname Geticus Maximus, that is “Greatest Winner over Geta”, on the analogy of the title-name Gothicus (SHA Carac. 10.6; Geta 6.6).

In some situations, the urban mob might apply a derogatory name directly to a ‘bad emperor’, without any hesitation over the expression, as to Didius

\textsuperscript{114} Dio himself uses this nickname in his further account, thereby underlining his negative attitude towards the emperor (79[78],10.3; 11.4; 12.6; 13.4 etc.). On his attitude to Caracalla see Davenport 2012; Scott 2015.

\textsuperscript{115} He received this name in honour of his maternal grandfather Julius Bassianus, the priest of the solar god Elagabal in Emesa (Epit. de Caes. 21.2). It is used in the SHA, as well as by Herodian (3.10.5), Eutropius (8.20.1) and Aurelius Victor (Caes. 20.25, 23.1), but not documented on coins or in inscriptions. That the previous name of the emperor might be regarded as abusive mockery is confirmed by Julius Vindex’s speech against Nero, whom he called by his old family surname Ahenobarbus (Suet. Ner. 41.1).

\textsuperscript{116} This (also in the form Caracallus) was probably a mocking nickname which in fact became his unofficial cognomen. It derives from a Celtic or German word for a short cloak which was modified so that it reached to the feet. The emperor distributed these cloaks among the people of Rome, and he also ordered the soldiers to wear them (Cass. Dio 79[78], 3.3; SHA Sept. Sev. 21.11; Carac. 9.7–8; Diad. 2.8; Aur. Vict. Caes. 21.1; [Ps.] Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 21.2; Herodian. 4.7.3; Eutr. 8.20.1; Jer. Chron. a 2229). On the origin and form of this kind of cloak see Wild 1964; Kramer 2002. Perhaps we should not exaggerate the satirical meaning of this nickname. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the story about the emperor Macrinus, who was going to present mantles of a reddish hue to the populace in the name of his son, hoping that he would get the nickname Paenuleus or Paenularius (SHA Diad. 2.8). The story is likely to be an invention of the writer, but it reveals a specific logic that presupposes a positive link between an emperor’s nickname of that kind and his largesse.

\textsuperscript{117} Kneissl 1969, 242.

\textsuperscript{118} As in Cicero’s pun (Germanum Cimber occidit), cited by Quintilian in Inst. 8.3.29, or in a soldiers’ ditty on the triumph of Lepidus and Munacious Plancus (De Germanis, non de Gallis duo triumphant consules. [Vell. Pat. 2.67.3–4]). On this joke about Caracalla see Hohl 1950.
Julianus, who literally bought power after the murder of Pertinax: people assembling before the senate building called him “stealer of empire”, “parricide”, and this openly-expressed discontent led to violence (Cass. Dio 74[73].13.3). Understandably, it was much safer to attach abusive nicknames to a dead ruler. The murdered Elagabalus, whose body was dragged all over the city and then thrown into the Tiber, took, in addition to his previous sobriquets, a number of derogatory nicknames: Tiberinus, Tractitus / Tractaticius, Impurus (“the Tiberine”, “the Dragged”, “the Filthy”). If we append to them the names Elagabalus himself wanted to be called, this emperor seems to have been the owner of the greatest number of derogatory nicknames among all Roman rulers. This is by no means an accident. His entire behaviour and appearance were in a very striking contrast to Roman traditions and mores; his personality incarnated anti-Roman values and was vehemently condemned by ancient historians. At the same time, his posthumously-given nicknames (mostly of dysphemism character) may be considered a part of the so-called damnatio memoriae, which usually implied a curse on the name of the condemned ruler.

Nevertheless, names of such sorts could in certain political contexts be applied to rulers without a ‘tyrannical’ reputation. In the vicious propaganda wars political opponents exchanged various reproaches with one another, which frequently found their concentrated expression in sarcastic or derogatory nicknames. For example, Mark Antony, during his confrontation with Octavian, reproached him with his low-born origin and used to call him Thurinus (“descended from Thurii”), which was Octavian’s nickname in childhood (Suet. 119 SHA Heliog. 17.5; 33.7; Cass. Dio 80[79].1.1; 20.2; 21.3; Herodian. 5.8.9; (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 23.6. Alföldy 1976 supposes Tractatitus to have been an original nickname connected to Elagabalus’ sexual habits, while Bruun suggests that it was an invention of the the SHA (Bruun 2003, 96, n. 100).

120 These are the following: (1) Fabius Gurges (SHA Heliog. 26.2), presumably derived from Q. Fabius Maximus Gurges, three times consul in the first half of the third century B.C., whose surname originates from gurges, “a spendthrift”; Macrobius (Sat. 3.13.6) connects this surname to a dissipated inheritance; (2) Bassiana ([Ps.-]Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 23.3), i.e. the feminine of Bassianus, a name which Elagabalus took as alleged extramarital son of Caracalla. Thus the first emphasises Elagabalus’ demonstrative financial wastefulness; the second indicates his self-perception as transgender.

121 In the course of this propaganda Cassius Parmensis, one of the conspirators against Julius Caesar, taunted Octavian with being the grandson both of a baker and of a money-changer, and wrote in one of his (probably verse) letters: “Your mother’s meal came from a most vulgar bakery in Aricia; this was fashioned by a money-changer of Nerulum with hands discoloured from changing coins” (Suet. Aug. 4.2, transl. K. Scott in his paper cited in this note). On this propaganda and the understanding of this passage see: Scott 1933, 12–16.
Octavian’s excessive passion for expensive Corinthian bronzes caused the emergence of his nickname Corinthiarius, which appeared in an anonymous verse inscription written on his statue in Rome during the Triumviral proscriptions: Pater argentarius, ego Corinthiarius (Suet. Aug. 70.2). Around the same time, after the scandal of the banquet where guests appeared in the guise of gods and goddesses, while there was severe famine in Rome, angry Romans named the future Augustus (who represented Apollo at that dinner) Apollo Tortor (“tormentor, crucifier”), by the title with which the god was worshipped in a certain part of the city (Suet. Aug. 70.1–2).

In concluding our survey, it will not be a great exaggeration to say that almost no vice or weakness, oddity or eccentricity of ruler remained beyond derision or invective in the form of more or less witty nicknames which labelled the imperial person’s reputation in the eyes of the ruled and, as such, formed certain opinion about the object of assessment. The very position at the top of power inevitably made its holder a target of vilifying or relatively good-natured humour.

4. Concluding Remarks and General Summary

The evidence cited above confirms, I hope, that imperial nicknames with a more or less humorous colour, as a product of both individual and collective creativity, were used within the propaganda struggle and political daily life, serving a strong ideological weapon. As authors and sources of the various names we see the urban populace (plebs, crowd) both of Rome and of provincial cities, the theatrical public, rhetoricians and poets, rebellious commanders and pretenders to

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122 From Cassius Dio (45.1.1) one more nickname of uncertain meaning is known: ὁ δὲ δὴ Γαίος ὁ Ὄκτάουιος Καιπίας (οὔτω γάρ ὃ τῆς Ἀττίας τῆς τοῦ Καίσαρος ἀδελφιδῆς υἱὸς ὠνομάζετο) ἦν μὲν ἐξ Οὐελιτρῶν τῶν Οὐολσκίδων (“Now Gaius Octavius Caepias, as the son of Caesar’s niece, Attia, was named, came from Velitrae in the Volscian country”; transl. E. Cary). Bruun 2003, 80, n. 38, avowing the cognomen Καιπίας a mysterious one, assumes that a Greek ethnic derived from Copiae, the Latin name for Thurii, might explain the name. Ryan presumes its origin from Cupricornus (Caper), the zodiac sign under which the future Augustus was born (Ryan 2005). However, both opinions remain no more than questionable conjectures.

123 This word, coined in jest by analogy with argentarius (a silversmith or money-lender), means one who is in charge of Corinthian vases in the theatre (AE 1974, 24; 25; 1984, 31). As has been suggested, Cassius Parmensis might be the author of this line: Scott 1933, 14 f., with previous literature.

124 Suetonius reports rumours that Octavian proscribed some people in order to get their vases. This quite apt nickname has somehow remained out of Bruun’s sight.

125 Cf. Montlahuc 2019, 406.
power, aristocratic oppositionists and so on, from the emperor himself to people at the lowest level of society. All were involved in the contradictory communication between rulers and the ruled or in the propaganda struggle, being simultaneously its target audience and / or the active, though mostly anonymous, agents and participants.

The inscribed Perusian sling-bullets and other evidence allow us to highlight a particular role played by the soldiers in inventing witty nicknames and lampoons. Such wording was an important humorous component of the so-called sermo militaris. It is the castrensis iocus or militare vocabulum that provided the famous name Gaius Caligula; and it was in castris that the young Tiberius’ tria nomina, because of his excessive love of wine, were mockingly transformed into Biberius Caldius Mero (Suet. Tib. 42.1; Cass. Dio 58, fr. 3; (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 2.2: eleganter a iocularibus). It is noteworthy but not surprising that the troops were very active in giving the emperors nicknames. In Bruun’s collection, they are mentioned ten times in such a role (that is twice more than senators and a little more than the plebs in Rome with eight mentions), but the list can easily be extended with references in the SHA and other sources. This activity of the

126 The latter category is represented, for example, by a Gallic shoemaker. This man, as Dio reports, was moved to laughter, seeing Caligula uttering oracles from a lofty platform in the guise of Jupiter, and when the emperor inquired of him, “What do I seem to you to be?” he answered, “A big humbug”, μέγα παραλήρημα (or maybe in that context “impostor”). The historian, underlining that the man was not hurt in any way, concludes this story with a moralising sentence: “Thus it is, apparently, that persons of such rank [as Gaius] can bear the frankness of the common herd more easily than that of those who hold high position” (Cass. Dio 59.26.9, transl. E. Cary).

127 For the role of humour in the relationship between troops and military leaders in general see Montlahuc 2019, 136–145.

128 For evidence see Kempf 1901; Mosci Sassi 1983.

129 Suet. Cal. 9; Tac. Ann. 1.41.2; 69.5; Cass. Dio 57.5.6; 62.4.1; Athen. 4.148D; Eutr. 7.12.1; Aur. Vict. Caes. 3.4; (Ps.-)Aur. Vict. Epit. Caes. 3.2; Auson. Monosticha de Ordine Imperatorum 9 (Green 1991, 162) (cognomen Caligae cui castra dederunt); Suda κ 216 Adler καλλιγόλας. According to Seneca, after ascending the throne, Gaius saw this surname as a reproach and disgrace (convicium et probrum), and punished a primipilarius who addressed him as Caligula (Sen. Constant. 18.4). Seneca highlights that it was a name by which he was well known to the soldiers. At the same time, as Suetonius reports, Caligula himself wished to be called, among other honorific names, castorum filius and pater exercitum (Suet. Cal. 22.1).

130 For example, the legions gave Vitellius the surname Germanicus (Suet. Vit. 8.2; Tac. Hist. 1.62); and there is a story about the emperor’s mother Sextilia, who was told to deny this name claiming that she had born Vitellius, not Germanicus (Tac. Hist. 2.64; Cass. Dio 64[65].4.5). Caracalla refused the name of Hercules given to him by the military (SHA Carac. 5.5); the soldiers and the Senate called Gordionus III filius (SHA Gord. Tres 31.6), and after his death the troops made an inscription on his tombstone that acclaimed him, among other victory titles, non victor Philipporum (SHA Gord. 34.2–4), using double meaning of Philippi as a place where the emperor
army is hardly an accident, given the importance of the informal bonds between the emperor and the military. The ancient tradition of *carmina triumphalia* may also have played some role, since it presumed the use of licentious ditties in which the soldiers practiced acute ridicule on their victorious commander, biting nicknames included, as the well-known songs in Julius Caesar’s triumph testify, in which soldiers mocked him for his lecherous relations with the Bithynian king Nicomedes, which is entirely consistent with the contemporary use of this topic in political invectives against Caesar (Suet. Iul. 22.2; 49.1–3; 51; 52.3). However, we have no imperial nicknames derived from triumphal puns; the very custom of soldiers’ mocking songs hardly survived during the empire; and this is one of the possible consequences of changing the political regime at Rome and the triumph itself.

A considerable proportion of the known imperial nicknames and appellatives belongs to a specific kind of folklore representing non-elite voice. They circulated according to its rules and survived for us in the main because of ancient authors’ interest in using such material for their literary and ideological intentions, particularly to express the individual characteristics of the historical personages better. But, for the very same purposes, Greek and Roman writers could invent some names and sobriquets, following special rhetorical and moralising principles, or mere love of ridicule, and sometimes it is not easy to distinguish fictitious ones from those which were actually in use. All in all, many imperial nicknames, both authentic and made-up, reveal a rather good quality of humour and mockery constructed by expressive linguistic devices and various rhetorical tropes (metaphor, wordplay, irony, ambiguity, *interpretatio nominis*, *autonomasia*, *paronomasia*, *oxymoron* and *aprosdoketon*, and so on).

was defeated and as a name of his successor Philip who was suspected to be the murderer (the inscription is, of course, an invention of the biographer). The troops, in order to differentiate between two tribunes of the same name Aurelian bestowed on one of them, the future emperor, the nickname “Sword-in-hand” (*manu ad ferrum*: SHA Aurelian. 6.2). In the biography of the emperor Probus another fictitious epitaph composed by the troops is cited in which the literal meaning of his name is played out, “a man of probity” (SHA Prob. 21.4).

131 On the functions of triumphal songs in general see Beard 2007, 247–249, and in more detail with emphasis on their humorous contexts see Montlahuc 2019, 186–197. On Caesar’s relations with Nicomedes see Osgood 2008; Montlahuc 2019, 148–151.

132 It is not impossible that some traces of soldiers’ triumphal songs are preserved in the fragment of Joannes Antiochenus in book 59 of Cassius Dio’s History: this claims that Gaius Caligula was given the epithets *Germanicus* and *Britannicus* in mockery (59.25.5f). See Humphrey 1976, 252f.

133 On changes in the triumph see Beard 2007, 295–305, 321–328.
An apt derisive nickname marked anti-values, mocked the ruler’s badness and could vilify his reputation to the extreme, stigmatise his personality, or else become a widely-used quasi-cognomen, a signifier of the particular individual which perhaps had a humorous origin but lacked a clear mocking sense (Caligula, Caracalla). Many nicknames and appellatives were of ephemeral, ad hoc nature, their sense and effect dependent largely on the particular context. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, along with more or less lasting witty names, they demonstrate the possible scope of and common trends in naming practice. The political system of the Principate and its very atmosphere of hypocrisy promoted double meaning and double thinking that was reflected in the double system of the rulers’ nomenclature. The official naming and titulature symbolised power, virtues, authority and the legitimacy of the emperors; the unofficial nicknaming was its backside on which their private features and public inconsistencies were featured. By laying open this dark side of the rulers, nicknames were a counter-hegemonic transcript and a weapon in the struggle for symbolic capital and for the power to name as an important part of that. All the efforts which the rulers made to control their nomina (including unofficial names) were ultimately powerless against the strength of the inevitable humorous counter-naming by the ruled.

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