Roman Senators andAbsent Emperors in Late Antiquity


Abstract

It is often assumed that the political fortunes of the city of Rome and of its élite, the Senate, decline in late antiquity. Such decline is attributed to emperors residing in other centres closer to the frontiers and to the inflation of senatorial status in the fourth century. This article argues, however, that the senators of Rome continued to see themselves as important participants in imperial high politics throughout the period. Such ambitions were ably demonstrated by Q. Aurelius Symmachus, whose role as senatorial ambassador to the imperial court was predicated on the basis that the Senate in Rome was still an important political institution. Similar ambitions motivated Roman senators to give active support to rival sides in political usurpations in the fourth century; this activity was advertised, moreover, by an impressive series of dedications set up in the Forum Romanum in close proximity to the Senate House itself. The climax of these aspirations came in the unstable circumstances of the fifth century when, for the first time in over a hundred years, Roman senators seated themselves on the imperial throne. Far from being a moribund political anachronism, then, the Senate in Rome continued to act as a major partner in the running of the Empire throughout the last centuries of Roman rule in the West.

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