

AN UNPROMISING DYNASTIC SUCCESSION IN THE THIRD CENTURY: HOSTILIAN AND VOLUSIAN AS *PRINCIPIES IVVENTVTIS* ON ROMAN IMPERIAL COINAGE (AD 251)

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Abstract: *When Trebonianus Gallus was acclaimed emperor after the Battle of Abrittus, which resulted in the death of Decius and Herennius Etruscus at the hands of the Goths, it might have seemed that the imperial succession was completed. However, Decius was survived by another son, the fifteen-year-old Hostilian, who in fact held the title of Caesar at that time. Then an imperial collegiate was constituted by Gallus, Hostilian, and Volusian (Gallus' son). Dynastic coin types bearing the title PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS ("to the prince of youth") were struck at Rome for both Hostilian and Volusian in the summer of 251. We explain how these coins were intended to promote Volusian, rather than Hostilian, as the favored successor to his father.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *Imperiul roman în secolul al III-lea, succesiunea puterii, Hostilian și Volusian, monede imperiale.*

Rezumat: *O succesiune dinastică fără perspectivă: Hostilian și Volusian ca principes iuventutis pe monede imperiale romane (251 d.H.). Când Trebonianus Gallus a fost aclamat împărat după bătălia de la Abrittus, care a dus la moartea lui Decius și a lui Herennius Etruscus, ar fi putut părea că succesiunea imperială a fost încheiată. De la Decius, însă, a supraviețuit un alt fiu, Hostilian, în vârstă de cincisprezece ani, care la acea vreme deținea titlul de Caesar. Apoi, un colegiu imperial a fost constituit de Gallus, Hostilian și Volusian*

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(fiul lui Gallus). Tipuri de monede dinastice purtând titlul legenda PRINCIPI IV-VENTVTIS („principelui tinereții”) au fost bătute la Roma atât pentru Hostilian, cât și pentru Volusian în vara anului 251. Explicăm modul în care aceste monede au fost menite să promoveze pe Volusian, mai degrabă decât Hostilian, ca favorit al succesorul tatălui său.

More than 75 years ago, H. Mattingly published a study on the coinage under Trebonianus Gallus, Volusian, and Aemilianus. At the beginning of the text, he writes that in 251, after Decius and Herennius Etruscus died in battle against the Goths, “the army had at once proclaimed a new emperor, Trebonianus Gallus [...]. The senate ratified the choice; but Decius left a wife who was *Augusta* and a second son, Hostilian, who was *Caesar* at Rome, and *it was necessary to reconcile their claims with those of the new Augustus*. The solution chose was to raise Hostilian to the rank of *Augustus*, to create Volusian, son of Gallus, *Caesar* in his place, and, it appears, to leave Herennia Etruscilla in possession of her honours. [...] *It is hard to believe that this agreement could have been reached without exchange of views between Gallus in the field and the senate at Rome*. [...] Whether the strain between old dynasty and new could have been sustained can only be guessed” (our emphasis)¹.

Mattingly describes an unusual situation in Roman imperial history. Hence his assumption that the “agreement” between those involved (Gallus, Hostilian, Volusian, Herennia Etruscilla) may have been “strained”. Despite that, the joint rule of Gallus and Volusian remains an unexplored area by modern historical scholarship². We are

¹ H. Mattingly, *The reigns of Trebonianus Gallus and Volusian and of Aemilian*, *Num. Chron. and the Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, 6/1-2, 1946, 36-46 (36).

² It is worth mentioning scholars like C. Préaux, *Trébonien Galle et Hostilianus*, *Aegyptus*, 32/1, 1952, 152-157; J. Heurgon, *Traditions etrusco-italiques dans le monnayage de Trébonien Galle*, *Stud. Etr.*, 24, 1955-1956, 91-105; M. Christol, *A propos de la politique extérieure de Trébonien Galle*, *RN*⁶, 22, 1980, 63-74. More recently, see L. Grozdanova, *Trebonianus Gallus and Volusianus (AD 251-253): ruling the empire in between the West and the East*, *Ancient West & East*, 13, 2014, 117-137; D. A. Alvarez, *Las acuñaciones de la ceca de Antioquía bajo los reinados de Decio Trajano y su familia y de Treboniano Galo y Volusiano*, *Revista Omni*, 8, 2014, 203-218. G. di Sotgiu (*Treboniano Gallo Ostiliano Volusiano Emiliano (1960-1971)*, in *ANRW*, 2.2, 1975, 798-802) published a valuable, but short, survey on the state-of-the-art on this subject in the 1960s, accompanied by some comments about the works selected by her. We know nothing of this sort regarding the last fifty years (1972-2022).

interested in those dynastic aspects of the “imperial triarchy” formed by Gallus, Hostilian, and Volusian after Decius and Herennius Etruscus died³. So, we explore coin types displaying the title PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS minted at Rome for Hostilian and Volusian in the summer of 251. We aim to show that these coins, by subtly emphasizing Volusian rather than Hostilian, reveal how blood ties were regarded as paramount for Roman emperorship in the middle of the third century.

The succession to Decius

In the spring of 251, imperial regions like Dacia and the Moesiae were ravaged by Gothic invasions. Since the end of the 240s, small groups of Gothic warriors crossed the Danube more frequently to plunder several urban and rural settlements in those provinces. These dispersed raiders combined their forces, under a “king”, only when they had to confront Roman armies. After that, they went their separate ways and resumed pillaging the undefended imperial countryside, until the moment they returned to those areas from which they had departed, beyond the *limites* of the Empire⁴.

On that year, different groups of Gothic warriors closed their ranks under the leadership of Cniva. In turn, emperor Decius and his

³ We set Herennia Etruscilla aside in our paper. It is very likely that Afinia Gemina Bebiana, Gallus' wife, was already dead in 251, which explains why she is not mentioned as *Augusta* in any source whatsoever. Furthermore, the honors held and/or granted to Etruscilla after Decius passed away were due to the simple fact that she was the mother to a (theoretically) senior emperor, that is, Hostilian. Among the political rites commonly observed in the third century, it causes no surprise that Etruscilla, as mother to a ruler, were honored with titles, or inscriptions and coinage in her name and so on. For this reason, it is hard to agree with U. Huttner (*Von Maximinus Thrax bis Aemilianus*, in K.-P. Johné (Hrsg.), *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser. Krise und Transformation des römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr. (235-284)*, Berlin, 2008, 212) who supposes that Bebiana did not receive the title of *Augusta* because Gallus, wishing to avoid a clash with Decius' supporters, allowed Etruscilla to remain the sole *Augusta* and, therefore, respected political arrangements prior to his own acclamation. Nevertheless, keeping the title of *Augusta* to Etruscilla should not prevent Bebiana from being awarded the same rank if Bebiana were still alive by then—after all, she was the wife of Gallus. The hypothetical coexistence between the *Augustae* should not be seen as extraordinary, but rather as a result of this unusual pact that culminated in the collegiate formed by Gallus, Hostilian, and Volusian, if Bebiana were still alive.

⁴ T. S. Burns, *Rome and the barbarians, 100 B.C. – A.D. 400*, Baltimore-London, 2003, 284.

son Herennius Etruscus personally moved to the Lower Danube and waged war on Gothic tribes. Probably between the end of May and the beginning of June 251, an armed conflict took place between Romans and Goths on the swampy outskirts of Abrittus. The Goths were able to overcome the legions and defeat them. Although Roman losses were presumably not so high, it was the first time an emperor had been killed fighting *gentes externae*⁵.

Notwithstanding the unprecedented nature of the event, we are interested in the succession to Decius and his son. Their death touched on an essential feature of Roman emperorship, that is, the transmission of the imperial power. Roman troops that survived the defeat at Abrittus, largely composed of soldiers from the Danubian provinces, quickly hailed Gaius Vibius Trebonianus Gallus as emperor. In 250, Gallus was made governor of Moesia Superior with *propraetorian* powers (*legatus Augusti pro praetore*). The “Gothic issue” required someone with experience of military command and good relationship with the soldiery so that the political and social order in such an unstable area could be maintained. It is worth remembering that, also in 250, Gallus defeated the Goths nearby Novae (Moesia Inferior). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the troops on the Danube have acclaimed Gallus soon after the disaster at Abrittus.

In this sense, the proclamation of Gallus represents another episode that stressed the political relevance of military groups from the Danube in the third century. For men like these, military leadership and fighting skills became the crucial aspect for choosing a new emperor⁶. In the context of the disruptive crises the Roman Empire underwent in the years 250-280, the frontiers on the Danube turned to be a focal point where several wars broke out, both external and internal, enhancing the influence of the soldiers and their officers who served there.

Nonetheless, we must bear in mind that Gallus’s career followed the same track of other men of senatorial status in the first half of the

⁵ There is a vast bibliography on the subject. See, for instance, O. Hekster, *Rome and its empire, AD 193-284*, Edinburgh, 2008, 20, and A. Goldsworthy, *The fall of the West: the death of the Roman superpower*, London, 2009 (E-book).

⁶ See, in general, A. Chastagnol, *Le Sénat romain à l’époque impériale. Recherches sur la composition de l’Assemblée et statut de ses membres*, Paris, 1992, 207, and M. Hebblewhite, *The emperor and the army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235-395*, London-New York, Routledge, 2017, 11.

third century. Born around 206 in Perugia, he came from the *gens Vibia*, a distinguished local family with senatorial background. Gallus started his political career as *quaestor* less than thirty years later, and his election to that magistracy probably conferred upon him the right to become a member of the Senate (*adlectio senatus*). He then became aedile or tribune of the plebs (c. 237)—which implies that Gallus did not hold patrician status—, praetor (c. 240), and finally in 245 he was appointed as consul *suffectus*. Apart from that, he served as *legatus legionis* in Thrace between 235 and 236⁷. It means that fifteen years before his elevation to the imperial throne, Gallus commanded a legion on the Lower Danube. In short, although he was not born in the Danube region, it can be assumed that he cultivated personal relationships with soldiers who served (and lived) in provinces such as Thrace and Moesia.

But at the time Gallus was proclaimed, a male descendent of Decius was alive and well. In 250, Decius associated with himself in power his two sons: the older one, Herennius Etruscus, born in an unknown date in the 220s, received the title of *Caesar* in May or June 250. He was possibly elevated to the rank of *Augustus* a few weeks before the battle of Abrittus, when he and his father died, as mentioned above. On the other hand, Decius' younger son, Hostilian, had also become *Caesar* in (apparently) September 250⁸, when he was 14 or 15 years old⁹. Unlike his father and his older brother, Hostilian did not die in battle against the Goths, as he had remained in Rome, so it

⁷ M. Craven, *The imperial families of ancient Rome*, Stroud, 2019 (E-book). See also D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *Römische Kaisertabelle. Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, 6. Aufl., Darmstadt, 2017, 200. Rulers like Decius, Gallus, Valerian, and Gallienus all held senatorial status. From late 260s onwards, with the acclamation of Aureolus, Claudius II, Aurelian, and Probus, men enrolled in the equestrian order rose from the lower ranks of the army to imperial power. In spite of any differences among them, in the second half of the third century one of the most remarkable features about Roman emperors is that they all have participated in wars.

⁸ D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *op. cit.*, 198.

⁹ The birthdate of Hostilian cannot be ascertained at all. C. J. Fuhrmann (*Herennius Etruscus (251 A.D.) and Hostilian (251 A.D.)*, *De Imperatoribus Romanis*, 2001, URL: <http://www.roman-emperors.org/hehost.htm>) says that “Judging by his boyish portrait on extant coins, Hostilian was considerably younger [than his brother]”. Sabine R. Huebner (*The “Plague of Cyprian”: a revised view of the origin and spread of a 3rd-c. CE pandemic*, *JRA*, 34, 2021, 151-174 (156)) estimates that he was fifteen years old when he died, implying that he was born around 236.

seems. Thus, while the legions on the Danube acclaimed Gallus as *Augustus*, a surviving and direct heir to Decius lived in the center of the Empire, bearing the imperial title of *Caesar*.

The succession to Decius can, therefore, be described as unique amid the Crisis of the Third Century. For instance, it was not due to the lack of acceptance of a ruler by military groups (or, at least, by some of the provincial armies), a process which often led to the proclamation of an official who would stand as a rival to reigning emperors. It was less the case of a succession following the natural death of a monarch. Gallus was chosen as successor to rulers who died in battle against foreign enemies. In a difficult situation like this, there were some issues to be dealt with: Gallus had, first of all, to set an agreement with the Goths in order to restore public safety in Danubian provinces. That came in the form of a tribute paid to Cniva to take the Goths away from Roman territory, an understandable move if we consider what happened at Abrittus.

However, another fact really draws our attention. Decius had dynastic concerns of his own and, as expected, there was no place for Gallus in Decius' plans. The would-be dynasty of Decius did not lose support of the main acceptance groups (the Roman army and the Senate), nor it was overthrown by usurpers or rebels. So, when Gallus rose to power, the young Hostilian still remained as the legitimate *Caesar*. To put it differently, the imperial household of Decius, represented by Hostilian as *Caesar* (and by his mother, Herenia Etruscilla as *Augusta*), could simply not be ignored by Gallus¹⁰.

An original solution: the merging of dynasties

Once the peace treaty with the Goths was concluded, Gallus left Moesia and departed to Rome. According to Zosimus, the new emperor hastened to do so, to obtain the recognition of his powers from

¹⁰ O. Hekster (*All in the family: the appointment of emperors designate in the second century A.D.*, in L. de Blois (ed.), *Administration, prosopography and appointment policies in the Roman empire*, Amsterdam, 2001, 35-49 (39)) reminds us that "[...] ignoring a relative could be dangerous. Those with imperial blood could be the natural focus-point for any who were discontented with a current ruler. An insurrection against an emperor was deemed to be far easier if an imperial relative would lead it. Often members of the imperial family were popular among the troops, sometimes also those fallen from favour".

the Senate¹¹. Despite the laconic and scattered nature of Late Antique narratives about what followed Gallus' arrival at Rome, it seems that in a brief interlude (extending from June to mid-August 251) several things happened. Firstly, Hostilian was elevated to the rank of *Augustus*. It is not certain, but it is probable that Gallus also took him in adoption¹². Moreover, the title of *Caesar* was granted to the young Volusian, a consanguineous son of Gallus¹³. Lastly, we have the death of Hostilian, most likely the victim of the epidemic that took place in Rome in the second half of 251.

So, in the summer of 251 a newly formed imperial collegiate comprised three members: on the one hand, a young man who belonged to the dynasty that Decius had planned to establish (i.e., Hostilian). On the other, a father and his natural-born son (Gallus and Volusian). The probable adoption of Hostilian by Gallus meant that the two families merged into one. In the years that followed the end of the Severan era – from the rise of Maximinus Thrax in 235 to the acclamation of Valerian in 253 – the quick succession of emperors denotes how fragile the dynastic principle was as a stable basis for Roman emperorship. Even so, there was a recurrent and systematic attempt to reaffirm it as one of the foundations of legitimate political authority¹⁴. “It was”, states E.

¹¹ Zos. 1.25.1 (trans. Ridley).

¹² C. Davenport (*Rome and the rhythms of imperial life from the Antonines to Constantine*, *AnTard*, 25, 2017, 23-39 (30)) argues that the adoption of Hostilian “served as a way of securing the city of Rome while Gallus was still in the provinces”. That would make sense if, in his absence, Gallus aimed at preventing the supporters of Decius from staging a rebellion in Rome. But if that were the case, either news about what happened at Abrittus spread faster than usual or Zosimus was wrong, because Gallus stayed away from Rome for too long. In short, Davenport's claim does not provide any supporting chronological evidence on which it could rely.

¹³ Zosimus (1.24.1, trans. Ridley) implies that Gallus made Volusian his *Caesar* while both were still in Moesia. But cf. Aur. Vict. 30.1 (see below). In any case, Volusian was probably older than Hostilian, being born in around 230.

¹⁴ Maximus, son of Maximinus Thrax, became *Caesar* to his father; amid the civil strife in 238, it can be noted that men belonging to three generations of the Gordian family (grandfather, uncle, and grandson/nephew, respectively) were proclaimed as emperors. A little later, Philip II also received the title of *Caesar* from the hands of his father, Philip the Arab; finally, as pointed above, the same goes for Decius and his sons (Herennius Etruscus and Hostilian) and, of course, for Gallus and his son Volusian.

Lo Cascio, “politically impracticable to have an imperial succession that completely excluded the dynastic principle”¹⁵.

In 251, such a principle was pushed to its limits. A compromise solution between two imperial families was established, in an attempt, at first sight, to merge them both into a new and, hopefully, long-lasting dynasty. Sharing power with Hostilian meant that Gallus and Volusian linked themselves to the Decii¹⁶, so the family of Decius stayed in power even though the soldiers on the Danube had chosen someone outside his family to succeed him.

Therefore, we need to take a closer look at the chronology of events, however shady this may be in relation to the Roman Empire in the third century. There are, at least, two specific dates we can rely on. A small inscription from Pannonia Inferior shows that Decius and Herennius Etruscus no longer ruled on June 11, 251¹⁷. In addition, on June 24 the *consecratio* of Decius (and, perhaps, of Herennius Etruscus) was approved by the Senate, in the presence of Gallus¹⁸. The fact that Decius and his eldest son were no longer indicated as rulers in this epigraphic monument in Pannonia (a place closer to Moesia Inferior, where both died, than Rome) leads Huttner to suppose that their death occurred at the end of May or no later than the first days of June, considering, among others, that the news about the defeat at Abrittus was unknown in Rome on June 9¹⁹. In this sense, the acclamation of Gallus as *Augustus* (and possibly the granting of the title of *Caesar* to Volusian) by the troops on the Lower Danube took place in the beginning of June.

But late antique historians, such as Aurelius Victor, claim that the senators, when told the news of Decius’ death, “conferred the powers of *Augustus*” (“*Augusta imperia*”) upon both Gallus and Hostilian,

¹⁵ E. Lo Cascio, *The government and administration of the empire in the central decades of the third century*, in *CAH*², vol. 12, Cambridge, 2005, 156-169 (157).

¹⁶ L. Grozdanova, *op. cit.*, 120; see also L. de Blois, *Image and reality of Roman imperial power in the third century AD. The impact of war*, London-New York, 2019, 69.

¹⁷ U. Huttner, *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 211.

¹⁸ D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *op. cit.*, 195, 197; U. Huttner, *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 211

¹⁹ *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 211.

while they made Volusian *Caesar*²⁰. In turn, the information that Gallus adopted Hostilian as his son comes from Zosimus²¹. That is, Aurelius Victor says nothing about Gallus' proclamation by the army in Moesia. But his assertion that Hostilian received the rank of *Augustus* on the initiative of the Senate allows us to conclude, as did Mattingly decades ago²², that it was the result of an agreement involving Gallus and members of the senatorial order. In our view, that took place shortly after Gallus and Volusian arrived at Rome, possibly in mid-June 251.

Unfortunately, we can only guess under what conditions such a pact was settled. It is worth questioning whether Gallus voluntarily agreed with the idea of sharing power with Hostilian. At that time, Gallus had the support of an important segment of the imperial army, i.e., the legions that proclaimed him after the Battle of Abrittus. But we think that the elevation of Gallus to the throne was also due to his attachment to Decius, a ruler whose bonds with the soldiers on the Danube were significant. In addition to his Illyrian origins²³, in 248 Decius was appointed by Philip the Arab as *dux Moesiae et Pannoniae* (that is, a supra-provincial command) to deal with the revolt of Pacatian and to repel the Goths and the Carpi back to their territories. Even before that, Decius governed Moesia Inferior in approximately 234²⁴.

In this case, the proclamation of Gallus by those soldiers closely attached to Decius²⁵ implies, in our view, that the troops regarded Gallus as a suitable choice insofar as he kept on good terms with the late emperor. It should be recalled that Decius sent Gallus to one of the Moesiae as governor, that is, to a province strategically located from

²⁰ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 30.1 (trans. Bird). It reads in the *Epitome de Caesaribus* that Hostilian “was made *imperator* by the Senate” under Gallus and Volusian (*Epit. de Caes.* 30.1, trans. Banchich).

²¹ Zos. 1.25.1. (trans. Ridley).

²² See above, p. 12.

²³ He was born around 190 in Budalia (Pannonia Inferior) into a large landowner family.

²⁴ On the career of Decius, see M. Craven, *op. cit.* (E-book).

²⁵ At least half of the 60 military coin types issued for Decius bear the legend GENIVS EXERCITVS ILLVRICIANI on the reverse. Another four coins show the inscription EXERCITVS INLVRICVS (sic). Such an effusive praise to Illyrian troops expresses both the eagerness to consolidate (and to announce) the loyalty of these legions, and a way of thanking them for making Decius emperor. On that, see E. Manders, *Coining images of power. Patterns in the representation of Roman emperors on imperial coinage*, Leiden-Boston, 2012, 256.

the northern frontier and a place where many soldiers who fought at Abrittus called home.

Likewise, Decius was a leading figure among the senators in the 240s. He held the office of consul *suffectus* at some time before 232. It seems that his admission into the Senate took place in the early 220s. When Philip the Arab sent him to the Danube, he held the prestigious office of prefect of the city of Rome, maybe since 247.

Younger than Decius, Gallus had also held the consulship once, as indicated above. Moreover, L. de Blois argues that Gallus was connected to those senators who revolted against Maximinus Thrax in 238²⁶. Despite the impossibility of proving de Blois's suggestion, it invites us to compare the political career of Pupienus Maximus, one of the coemperors elected by the senators in April 238, at the height of the crisis between Maximinus Thrax and the Senate, with those of Decius and Gallus. Unlike these two, Pupienus apparently came from a modest family; he even served the army as *primus pilus* (the chief centurion of a legion), and military tribune. But he rose to a higher social status in a notable manner, holding several magistracies and being governor of, at least, four different provinces, among which Germania Inferior or Superior (i.e., a frontier province where he commanded more than one legion). A token of his prestige lies in the fact that he held the ordinary consulship twice, in c. 207 and 234, when he also served as *praefectus Vrbi*²⁷.

According to R. Syme, Pupienus turned his fortunes around when he got married to Sextia Cethegilla, who belonged to one of the most distinguished senatorial families in the second century²⁸. Although Pupienus was not born into a patrician family, we know that his offspring eventually came to acquire the status of patricians, as noted in the case of Pupienus Pulcher Maximus in the 230s. Finally, Syme also points out that the *gens* Pupiena was to certain extent linked to the town of Volaterrae²⁹, a small place located in Central Italy where, in the remote past, the civilization of ancient Etruria has flourished.

²⁶ L. de Blois, *op. cit.*, 69.

²⁷ On Pupienus and his career, see R. McMahon, *Pupienus (238 A.D.) and Balbinus (238 A.D.)*, *De Imperatoribus Romanis*, 2001, URL: <http://www.roman-emperors.org/pupi.htm>

²⁸ She was related to the Sextii on her father's side and to the Cornelii on her mother's.

²⁹ R. Syme, *Emperors and biography*, Oxford, 1971, 173-175.

So, Pupienus was (at first) a senator of plebeian status, whose political advancement was, to a large extent, marked out in the service of the army. It should be observed that distinctions between patricians and plebeians within the senatorial order were still relevant in the imperial era. Patrician senators enjoyed certain privileges which were expected to grow their public career faster. For example, considering that they were not permitted to hold magistracies like the tribunate of the plebs or the aedileship (since they were restricted to plebeians), they advanced more quickly to the highest offices, such as the praetorship and consulship. On the contrary, senators of plebeian origins were usually appointed as praetors or consuls only at an older age. Nevertheless, the most striking feature in the evolution of the senatorial *cursum honorum* in the third century is the tendency, on the side of the patricians, to withdraw from military commands, dominating most of the civil functions or priesthoods in the city of Rome. Conversely, senators of non-patrician status – including those equestrians who became members of the Senate – assumed, for the most part, military and administrative offices in the provinces, namely those of *legatus legionis* or *legatus pro praetore*³⁰.

Just like Pupienus, Decius and Gallus were senators of plebeian origins. They all were no stranger to life in the army. Lastly, it is interesting to mention their Etruscan background. Even though Decius was born in Pannonia Inferior, he was linked through marriage to an important family of “Etruscan” ancestry. Herennia Etruscilla was the daughter of Quintus Herennius Etruscus, a senator under the Severans who, in turn, descended from Cupressenus Gallus, consul *suffectus* under Antoninus Pius in 147³¹. In the case of Trebonianus Gallus, as previously stated, the *gens* Vibia originally came from Perusia, a town founded by the Etruscans more than a thousand years earlier.

We cannot exclude the possibility that these assumptions are fortuitous. In the middle of the third century, “Italians” by birth still corresponded to a third or even half of the members of the Senate (not to mention that they were close to the center of imperial power for consecutive generations, so they had a degree of influence it should not be

³⁰ A. Chastagnol, *op. cit.*, 158-159.

³¹ M. Craven, *op. cit.* (E-book).

underestimated)³². But this prevalence of emperors of “Italian”/“Etruscan” senatorial stock (or at least related to Central Italy) between 238 and 268, such as Pupienus, Decius, Gallus, Valerian, and Gallienus, is quite significant. It is tempting to see that as resulting from a network of social interactions or perhaps even kinship ties connecting those rulers and their families with each other, given the fact that they all came from an area so specific as it was the case of “Etruria”³³.

In any case, one can conclude that a young man like Hostilian might have a substantial support among senators, whether “Italians” or not, who helped him to sustain his position as an imperial ruler who came to power as *Caesar* to a (biological) father he outlived. In addition, Gallus cultivated a personal relationship with Decius, so it might be difficult for him to disregard Hostilian’s claims. However, that does not mean that Gallus readily acquiesced to an agreement whereby power had to be split between him and Hostilian. One can assume that Gallus did not need to adopt someone he was not related to in order to arrange for his own succession. Volusian was enough for that—even more so because, if Zosimus is correct, he was old enough to carry out military activities, unlike Hostilian³⁴.

Despite this, it can be said that Gallus’ expectations had been, at a first moment, met. Sharing power with Hostilian could strengthen his newly acquired position as emperor. In this sense, he would be

³² F. Chausson, *Variétés généalogiques - V Africanus et Corneliae. Remarques sur un réseau impériale des années 238-268*, in C. Bertrand-Dagenbach, F. Chausson, *HAC Nanceiense. Atti dei Convegna sulla Historia Augusta XII*, Bari, 2014, 129-157 (131).

³³ *Ibidem*, 131-132, 157. For instance, Heurgon (*op. cit.*, 92) proposes that, under Decius and Gallus, their common “Etruscan-Italic roots” could be noted in the way they presented themselves and their families in certain coins. But cf. R. Syme (*Emperors from Etruria*, in Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers*, Oxford, 1983, 199; 205), who warns us not to exaggerate the “Etruscan ancestry” of those rulers, since there is no evidence that they were somehow related to each other. With emperors changing on a frequent basis, new rulers sought to link themselves to their predecessors in order to obtain legitimacy. Although it implied continuity, it was not enough “to attest alliances or a nexus” among them.

³⁴ As O. Hekster (*Emperors and ancestors. Roman rulers and the constraints of tradition*, Oxford, 2015, 2) puts it, “Roman imperial succession was a dynastic matter. From the reign of Augustus onwards, imperial power was transferred to members of the family if these were at hand. When there were no living family members who could succeed, adoption was a viable option to guarantee dynastic continuity”.

pleased to connect himself with the son of his immediate predecessor³⁵, which had the sympathy of the Senate and the army, that is, those groups whose consent to rule the Empire was decisive. Consequently, a peaceful transition of power took place in June 251, in the form of an unparalleled dynasty to come.

But the situation changed when Hostilian died, probably in mid-July or, ultimately, in the autumn of 251. Volusian was raised to the rank of *Augustus* sometime in August 251³⁶, maybe to replace Hostilian as co-emperor paired with his father. A century later, Latin epitomists would report that Hostilian was one of the fatal victims of the plague that reached Rome at the time³⁷. In turn, Greek-speaking authors like Zosimus, relying upon Dexippus of Athens, stated that Hostilian was murdered by Gallus³⁸. However, Zosimus' explanation of the

³⁵ Hostilian “[...] personified the transfer of the imperial power from his biological father to his adoptive father”, L. Claes (*Kinship and coins. Ancestors and family on Roman imperial coinage under the Principate*, Nijmegen, 2013, 139) concludes.

³⁶ As indicated by D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *op. cit.*, 201, and U. Huttner, *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 213. See, in general, D. Potter, *The Roman empire at bay AD 180-395*, London-New York, 2004, 248. C. Préaux (*op. cit.*, 157) examines an *ostrakon* from Thebes (Egypt), dated August 13, 251. It refers to both Gallus and Hostilian as *Augusti*. But that does not exactly mean that Hostilian was still alive at the time, as it took a while – about a month – for news from Rome to reach a distant province. Thus, it reveals what people living in the provinces know about their emperors, but it proves nothing about the moment Hostilian died.

³⁷ See, for instance, Aur. Vict. 30.2 (trans. Bird) and *Epit. de Caes.* 30.1 (trans. Banchich). R. Huebner (*op. cit.*, 157) offers an alternative version about Hostilian's death, according to which he passed away at Viminacium (Moesia Superior). It implies he did not stay in Rome but accompanied his father and his brother in the Gothic campaign in 251. In consonance with it, his remains would have been buried in a mausoleum that lies in what is now the Archaeological Park of Viminacium (today's Serbia). Although there is no inscription in the site confirming this assumption, Huebner argues that local coins minted for Hostilian defines him as *Caesar* and *Augustus*, therefore providing, in her words, “some confirmation” to her conjecture. This possibility, nonetheless, requires further confirmation. Not to mention that certain questions remain unanswered if Huebner is right. If Hostilian were in the Illyricum at the death of his father and his brother, why did the soldiers proclaim Gallus as the new ruler? Did they also raise Hostilian to the rank of *Augustus*? Finally, it should be recalled that Aurelius Victor and Zosimus tell that Hostilian died in Rome, though they followed different traditions about this episode.

³⁸ Zos. 1.25.2 (trans. Ridley).

event seems implausible³⁹. In any case, the death of Hostilian put an end to this ephemeral “triarchy” in 251.

Hostilian and Volusian as principes iuventutis

In the summer of 251, it was paramount for emperors to advertise that they were able to restore stability across the Empire. The presence of two young men – Hostilian and Volusian – could instill expectations on Roman people of a long-lasting dynasty being created under the authority of Gallus. Their youthfulness meant that the family of Decius *and* that of Gallus would still rule in the years to come. Confronted with the unexpected death of Decius and Herennius Etruscus, the members of the Senate, especially perhaps those who belonged to plebeian but “traditionalist” families (of which Decius provided a clear illustration)⁴⁰, would be pleased with promises of continuity between new rulers and their immediate predecessors.

³⁹ D. Potter (*op. cit.*, 247) and L. Grozdanova (*op. cit.*, 118) estimates as “improbable” and “hard to accept” the information that Gallus betrayed Decius, leading him into an ambush that cost Decius his own life (see Zos. 1.23.3, trans. Ridley). They assure that the acclamation of Gallus by the legions makes no sense if Gallus had something to do with Decius’ downfall, and subsequently, the slaughter of Roman soldiers at Abrittus. In our view, L. de Blois (*op. cit.*, 68) accurately explains the logic behind those arguments so favored by late antique writers: “Of course there were rumors that Decius had been betrayed by Gallus, as there had been when the emperor Gordian III had died after losing the battle at Misiche against the Persians, early in AD 244. There *had* to be betrayal, a Roman emperor could not simply lose” (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ The adherence of Decius to “Roman tradition” is subject to many scholarly studies, which are beyond our purpose to evaluate here. But it is worth mentioning how we define Decius as a “traditionalist”. U. Huttner (*Zwischen Traditionalismus und Totalitarismus. Zur Ideologie und Praxis der Regierung des Kaisers Decius*, in K.-P. Johne, T. Gerhardt, U. Hartmann (Hrsgg.), *Deleto paene imperio Romano. Transformationprozesse des Römischen Reiches im 3. Jahrhundert und ihre Rezeption in der Neuzeit*, Stuttgart, 2006, 37-56) investigates in what sense the measures taken by Decius, in accordance with conventional practices (and the conservative *habitus* of the Senate), have reached an unusual degree of radicalism that can be thought of as one of the symptoms of the Crisis of the Third Century. He recalled that totalitarianism, as seen in the twentieth century, find fertile ground in critical periods. Conversely, E. Manders (*Communicating messages through coins: a new approach to the emperor Decius, Jaerboek voor Munt -en Penningkunde*, 98, 2011, 1-22) deals with one of the main tokens of Decius reputed traditionalism, that is, a series of “consecration coins” of eleven deified emperors, in order to show how these

Coins minted at Rome during that period broadcast dynastic messages, especially on types displaying the legend PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS (“to the prince of youth”) on reverses of Hostilian (as *Augustus*) and Volusian (as *Caesar*). These coins were issued in the name of Hostilian for, at least, a month (between the second half of June and the first half of July 251), and they consisted of silver *antoniniani*⁴¹ and bronze *sestertii*⁴². In the case of Volusian (as *Caesar*), coins describing him as *princeps iuventutis* were produced between June and August⁴³, in all metals (*aurei*⁴⁴, *antoniniani*⁴⁵ and *sestertii*⁴⁶). In the years 235-253, marked by various imperial proclamations and short-lived dynasties, it can be noted a remarkable iconographic continuity in these coin types⁴⁷. On the one hand, we have a significant presence of military symbols, whereby the young emperor is depicted as a warlike figure. On the other, we observe a kind of “Apollonian” style, underpinning supposedly cleansing qualities attributed to young *Caesares*⁴⁸, as follows:

coins contained innovative aspects in relation to the modes of representation of Roman emperorship, thus deviating from customary practices.

⁴¹ *RIC* IV.3, Trajan Decius, no. 189.

⁴² *RIC* IV.3, Trajan Decius, no. 219.

⁴³ It should be noted that even after Volusian became *Augustus*, these coins were still issued for him at Rome.

⁴⁴ *RIC* IV.3, Volusian, nos. 129, 130.

⁴⁵ *RIC* IV.3, Volusian, no. 134.

⁴⁶ *RIC* IV.3, Volusian, nos. 241, 242.

⁴⁷ Sesterces (see *RIC* IV.3, Trebonianus Gallus, no. 118) and asses (see *RIC* IV.3, Trebonianus Gallus, no. 119) bearing the legend PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS were minted for Gallus too. However, it appears that this was due to a misunderstanding on the part of the mint-masters in Rome, who mistakenly used reverse dies designed a little earlier for Hostilian (that is, from the time he held the title of *Caesar*). See M. Hekster, *The emperor's family on coins (third century): ideology of stability in times of unrest*, in O. Hekster, G. de Kleijn, D. Slootjes (eds.), *Crises and the Roman empire*, Leiden-Boston, 2007, 291-309 (304).

⁴⁸ J. Gagé, *Programme d'italicité' et nostalgies d'hellénisme autour de Gallien et Salonine. Quelques problèmes de 'paidéia' impériale au IIIe siècle*, *ANRW* 2.2, Berlin, 1975, 828-852 (845). See also L. Claes, *op. cit.*, 172-173.



Image 1 Portrait and titulature (IMP CAE C VAL HOS MES QVINTVS AVG) of Hostilian on the obverse

RIC IV.3, Trajan Decius, no. 192

© American Numismatic Society, Mantis Database

Available at: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.27005>



Image 2 Apollo on the reverse with the legend PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS (“to the prince of youth”)

RIC IV.3, Trajan Decius, no. 215b⁴⁹

© American Numismatic Society, Mantis Database

Available at: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1905.57.192>

Image 2 brings forth evidence of the “Apollonian” model that Gag  speaks of. Apollo is shown in the center, seated. Being the god of music, his left elbow rests on the lyre, an instrument that, according to the myth, had been crafted from a tortoise’s shell by Hermes, who gave it to Apollo. An object commonly observed on Roman imperial coinage in the first three centuries AD, the lyre expressed the idea of “celestial harmony”⁵⁰. In his right hand, Apollo raises a laurel branch. As a reward for agonistic victory, for example, laurels were linked to the Pythian Games which took place in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi every four years, until they disappeared over the fourth century. So, the

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, it was not possible to find any image displaying those coins referred to in notes 41 and 42 (see above). By way of illustration, we feature instead the obverse of an *antoninianus* struck for Hostilian as *Augustus* (Image 1), and the reverse of an *aes* – which, however, had been minted for him a little earlier, when he held the title of *Caesar* (Image 2). Be that as it may, it is worth stressing that both Image 1 and 2 comprise the exact same symbols as seen on the reverses and obverses of those types specified in notes 41 and 42.

⁵⁰ S. W. Stevenson, C. Roach Smith, F. W. Madden, *A dictionary of Roman coins, Republican and Imperial*, London, 1889, 530.

branch emphasizes both the celebration of a victory (in competition, on the battlefield) as it relates to rituals of purification and reparation⁵¹.

In turn, the coins minted for Volusian are typical of a “military style”:



Image 3 Portrait and titlature (C VIBIO VOLVSIANO CAES) of Volusian on the obverse

On the reverse, Volusian is represented in military attire and the legend reads PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS (“to the prince of youth”)

RIC IV.3, Volusian, no. 134

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Available at: https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/volusian/RIC_0134.jpg

On the reverse, the spear brings forth ideas of strength and vigor. On imperial coinage, it was not rare to see the *hasta*, together with the shield, in association with youthful members of the ruling family⁵². It was also an item related to the gods, including those emperors who achieved apotheosis. In this sense, the spear has become a symbol of majesty⁵³. In addition, maybe the human figure representing Volusian on the reverse wear the *paludamentum*, the cloak of a military commander (such as the *legatus legionis*). In his right hand, he holds a

⁵¹ M. B. Ogle, *Laurel in ancient religion and folk-lore*, *AJPh*, 31/3, 1910, 287-311 (287-288). It is said that, after eliminating the serpent Python who lived in Delphi and presided at the oracle, Apollo cleansed himself with laurels, in order to protect himself from the vengeful spirit of the creature killed by him.

⁵² S. W. Stevenson, C. Roach Smith, F. W. Madden, *op. cit.*, 447.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 446-447.

wand, another symbol of authority. It is noteworthy that the iconography of Image 3 is very similar to those observed on types struck at Rome, depicting the goddess *Providentia*, from the reign of Septimius Severus onwards. In this case, however, the deity carries a wand over an orb set at her feet⁵⁴.

It should be noted, however, that the title *princeps iuventutis* was far from new in the middle of the third century. In the Early Principate, it consisted of an honor conferred upon the leaders of the equestrian order, at the time reorganized by Augustus. M. Horster points out that the title was aimed at distinguishing those boys Augustus adopted as sons. A parallel could be drawn between Lucius Caesar and Gaius Caesar, the young boys appointed as “first among youth” or “among the *equites*” – thus reinforcing the bonds between imperial family and the members of the equestrian order – and the emperor himself, “first among all citizens” (that is, “the” *princeps* in a strict sense)⁵⁵. As *principes iuventutis*, Lucius and Gaius were regarded as potential new rulers, as those who would be heirs to Augustus in private sphere and his successors in Roman politics⁵⁶.

Nonetheless, this title was not enough to unequivocally designate a successor to the throne. Such a political catchword was part of a complex discourse in which many honors and offices were combined to single out a potential successor among the members of the ruling family. Consequently, it is impossible to set a particular hierarchy of value to decide whether the title *princeps iuventutis* was more or less important in terms of succession. There were a variety of titles, offices, and priesthoods that served to publicly advertise an eventual successor to a ruler⁵⁷.

Despite that, defining a member of the imperial family as the “prince of youth” had a special appeal to Roman society. The concept of *iuuenta* (or *iuventutis*) in ancient Rome called for social expectations people held about the future and likewise it was related to ideas

⁵⁴ See, for instance, *RIC* IV.1, Septimius Severus, nos. 491a, 491b.

⁵⁵ M. Horster, *Princeps iuventutis: concept, realisation, representation*, in S. Benoist, A. Daguet-Gagey, C. Höet-van Cauwenberghe (éds.), *Figures d'empire, fragments de mémoire. Pouvoirs et identités dans le monde romain impérial (Ile s. av. n. è. – VIe s. de n. è.)*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 2011, 73-103 (74).

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 81.

⁵⁷ Including, for instance, the title of *Caesar*, the admission to main religious colleges of Rome or the promotion to an office without reaching the minimum eligible age required to hold it. See M. Horster, *Princeps iuventutis...*, 89-90.

of beauty or bravery, just to name a few⁵⁸. In fact, the overlap between *iuuentutis* and military prowess dated back to the Roman Republic, since the word *iuuentus*, in a more technical sense, referred to the category of military-aged men. Hence the common view that the defense and expansion of the State (*res publica*) relied on the vitality and fierceness possessed by young men⁵⁹.

But “being young” was also a matter of how people think about human lifespan and its basic stages of development. A. Frascetti explains that in Rome “childhood” (*pueritia*) ranged from birth to 15 years, while *adulescentia* ranged from 15 to mid/late 20s. Next, *iuuenta/iuuentutis* encompassed roughly the period between 30 to 40-45 years of age. Finally, by the age of 45 or so, someone was considered old⁶⁰. However, the lifespan of a Roman *uir* was less understood in biological terms and more in accordance with the belief that a man came of age the moment his political career began, since he was thought to have those “physical and cognitive abilities” required to hold offices and to take part in the government⁶¹. In this case, it was expected that the *princeps iuventutis* carried out his duties *domi militiaeque*, therefore proving himself as a suitable emperor to be.

Furthermore, J.-P. Morel argues that, despite the huge number of sources relating to *principes iuventutis* in the imperial period, they had very ancient roots, going back to rather spontaneous social groups that came about in archaic Rome, placing themselves as the leaders among youth. Morel assures that in the reign of Augustus this old-fashioned institution underwent a double process of “fossilization” and “recovery”. On the one hand, duties and prerogatives originally set for an entire social/age group have been limited to a few or to only one young man. It meant that organic practices from the past were constrained by “voluntary [acts of] creation and regulation”, in order to make them fixed, “fossilized”. On the other hand, the “recovery” of

⁵⁸ M. Horster, *Princeps iuventutis...*, 79.

⁵⁹ J.-P. Neraudau, *La jeunesse dans la littérature et les institutions de la Rome républicaine*, Paris, 1979, 5; 132.

⁶⁰ As quoted by A. T. M. Gonçalves, *A juventude dos imperadores romanos Caracala e Geta: questões políticas, familiares e numismáticas*, *Romanitas – Revista de Estudos Grecolatinos*, 16, 2020, 101-120 (103).

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 103.

such an institution enabled it to be revived, albeit artificially, so that it could be used for propaganda purposes⁶².

But, although one can trace it back to archaic Rome and its “young noble warriors” who fought for their city, Horster reiterates that the notion of *princeps iuuentutis* was easily accommodated to Augustan transformation in ideology and politics. As an example of this kind of change, the *transuectio equitum*, the annual parade that took place in Rome on July 15 from the early days of the Republic, became under Augustus a ceremony in which the newly reorganized equestrian order presented itself collectively as a cohesive group, symbolically exhibiting its military valor. In this respect, as leaders of the *ordo equester*, “princes of youth” started to occupy a prominent position in ceremonies like these, where equestrians stood in front of the imperial household, senators, members of the *plebs*, and so forth⁶³.

In short, the connection of *principes iuuentutis* with the equestrian order was meaningful under Augustus. However, it became increasingly tenuous over time. The title of “prince of youth” came to be explored above all as a dynastic theme. That is, young men appointed as such, who allegedly had the leadership qualities requested of an emperor, should ensure the permanence of the ruling dynasty – and, by extension, of the *res publica*.

Thus, imperial coins featuring the legend PRINCIPI IUVEN-
TVTIS expressed future expectations, thus promising that a young man should prove himself a good emperor when the time comes. Nevertheless, it was only in the reign of Vespasian that coins bearing the inscription came to be struck in the name of a young man formally associated to power, that is, Domitian (to whom his father had also granted the title of *Caesar*). At least until the final decades of the third century, this legend was commonly observed on the coinage issued for young *Caesares*⁶⁴.

Some elements linked to the equestrian order, however, were still noticeable even later than the reign of Augustus. For instance, when Commodus came to power as *Caesar* in 175-176, the mint of Rome struck coins with symbols that appeared on series of Nero. On

⁶² J.-P. Morel, *Sur quelques aspects de la jeunesse à Rome*, in École Française de Rome, *L'Italie préromaine et la Rome républicaine. Mélanges offerts à Jacques Heurgon*, Rome, 1976, 663-683 (671-672).

⁶³ M. Horster, *Princeps iuuentutis...*, 77.

⁶⁴ Idem, *The emperor's family...*, 303-304.

the reverse of these coins, it says EQVESTER ORDO PRINCIPI IVVENT[VTI] (“the equestrian order to the prince of youth”). But it was not the result of an initiative promoted by the *equites*, but rather a sort of diffuse revival of motifs applied to coins a century earlier⁶⁵.

In addition, to the extent that legions consisted more and more in the decisive groups of support to imperial rulers from the Severan era onwards, displaying the relationship between emperors and the equestrian order on coins became unimportant. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the third century there were no more vestiges on coinage about the original link that once existed between “princes of youth” and equestrians (in fact, under Septimius Severus the title *princeps iuventutis* came to be bestowed upon a member of the imperial family by decision of the Senate, with the *ordo equester* playing no part in it). Thus, in the first decades of the third century,

“The title *princeps iuventutis* had become a conventional designation for younger members of the imperial family, rather than an emblem of the association between the imperial house and the *ordo equester*. The military iconography on the coins of the *princeps iuventutis* reflected the reality of power in the imperial age: the purple was conferred by the army”⁶⁶.

For this reason, coins issued for young *Caesares* like Caracalla, Geta, and Diadumenian depicted them in the guise of military commanders. A. T. M. Gonçalves points out that the portrait busts of the sons of Septimius Severus were designed to “publicly spread the message about renovation with continuity, preserving extant privileges and prerogatives, [and showing them as] capable of providing for harmony and abundance on imperial territory”⁶⁷. Under the Severans, *principes iuventutis* were depicted as victorious leaders, in military attire and associated with traditional symbols of victory, like trophies and army standards⁶⁸. Other military elements were further added: coins minted for “princes of youth” like Maximus (Maximinus Thrax’s son) and Philip II (son of Philip the Arab) represented them carrying

⁶⁵ C. Davenport, *A history of the Roman equestrian order*, Cambridge, 2019, 407.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 408. See also M. Horster, *Princeps iuventutis...*, 88-89.

⁶⁷ A. T. M. Gonçalves, *op. cit.*, 111.

⁶⁸ R. Hedlund, “...achieved nothing worth of memory”. *Coinage and authority in the Roman empire c. AD 260-295*, Uppsala, 2008, 188.

a spear or holding a globe, as a means of glorifying their respective families⁶⁹.

Accordingly, J. Gag  explains that between 235 and 253 it was very common on imperial coinage to depict a young *Caesar* paired with his senior emperor (*Augustus*). At that time, the title of *princeps iuuentutis* became a conventional honor awarded to younger male members of imperial households⁷⁰. It can be noted that just a little bit later, in the reign of Gallienus, this title was no longer used only to designate a successor, but it was also given to the senior emperor. In other words, the honor tended to be transferred from young *Caesares* to *Augusti*⁷¹.

To sum up, one can certainly say that the iconography on coins struck for the youngsters Hostilian and Volusian in the summer of 251 was rooted deep in conventional practices that have taken shape during the Principate. Conversely, we must be aware that mode of representation, as seen on Roman coinage, were not invariable and thus susceptible to change. Politics, then and now, is permeated by symbolic gestures, statements and actions people constantly repeat. However, politics is also open to resignification in the way that the language about political events is. No doubt the title of *princeps iuuentutis* became commonplace in imperial politics in the middle of the third century; but it is precisely due to it that such an honor was bestowed upon Hostilian and Volusian and advertised through coinage.

To put it differently, political catchwords like *princeps iuuentutis* referred to a set of shared ideas, attitudes, and experiences, whether by social groups living in Rome or in the provinces, reiterating the willingness for dynastic continuity in a context of political and military instability. First and foremost, “*le pouvoir proc de fondamentalement de la capacit  d’agir en commun*”, as Paul Ricoeur defines it. And, he

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 188.

⁷⁰ J. Gag , *op. cit.*, 845. Davenport (*A History...*, 408) affirms that, in the middle of the third century, it consisted of “[...] a pro-forma honour for every imperial heir, as a way of showing their military qualifications”. See also R. Hedlund, *op. cit.*, 187.

⁷¹ J. Gag , *op. cit.*, 845.

continues, “*l’action en commun n’existe qu’aussi longtemps que les acteurs l’entretiennent*”⁷². Hence such a “pro-forma honour”, as Davenport defines it, should rather be thought of as an enduring practice that makes it possible for individuals to maintain “the capacity for collective action”. That is to say, the socially accepted rules and institutions the exercise of power depended on.

Subsequently, it causes no surprise that the meaning ascribed to the title of *principes iuventutis* in the summer of 251 remained along the same lines as those observed, for instance, almost half a century earlier, when Caracalla and Geta (as *Caesares* to their father) were termed in the same manner. So, coin types with the inscription PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS depicted both Hostilian and Volusian as the future leaders of the Roman Empire. In this case, those virtues attributed to youthfulness (like martial prowess and strength) were the cornerstones of dynastic succession, so that the senior emperor, when passing away, should be succeeded by one or more *Caesares* who would keep the ruling family in power. Nonetheless, it was Hostilian, a potential successor designated as such by his biological father (Decius) as well as a ruler (*Augustus*) paired with Gallus who, in fact, bridged the gap between past, present, and future which resulted from the merging of two different imperial households.

Thus, the imperial collegiate created in June 251 can be described as unique in Roman history. On the one hand, Hostilian posited himself as an *Augustus* simultaneously related to two other *Augusti* (by blood with Decius and by adoption with Gallus), and to a third *Augustus*, his late brother, Herennius Etruscus. Even so, he ultimately owed his position to Gallus, who accepted (unwillingly or not) to share the *imperium* with a young boy who survived the death of his father. On the other hand, realizing the need to consolidate his power and enhance his legitimacy, Gallus was eager to perpetuate the new dynasty by displaying the virtues of his young sons with whom he ruled the Empire. But, as indicated before, this unusual “triarchy” lasted for a few weeks. And if it is agreed that coins featuring Hostilian and Volusian as “princes of youth” spread the idea of harmony among the rulers, there were other subtle elements which, in our view, were meant

⁷² P. Ricoeur, *De la philosophie au politique*, in idem, *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*, Paris, 2014 (orig. 1987) (E-book).

to specifically promote Volusian, inducing positive expectations on him as the favored successor to Gallus.

In this context, it is worth stressing two aspects in relation to coin types with the legend PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS. Firstly, a difference can be noted between those “Appolonian” and “military” patterns to which Gag  draws attention. Only “Appolonian”-styled coins were issued for Hostilian as *Augustus*. Manders states that the recurrent presence of Apollo on the coinage struck for Herennius Etruscus and Hostilian in late 250 and early 251 suggests an effort to connect the god with the Decii, so that “[Apollo] seemed to have been of special significance to both princes”, along the same lines of what can be observed in series of coins issued for third-century rulers like Septimius Severus and Quintillus⁷³.

So, the mint of Rome continued to produce coins from the same reverse dies as designed for Decius’ family and its dynastic purposes. But, once the imperial collegiate formed by Gallus, Hostilian, and Volusian was established, the “military style” so commonly displayed for *principes iuventutis* on coinage in the years 235-253 could only be seen on coins struck for Volusian alone. As we have already pointed out, the propagation of those (putative) martial virtues was of paramount importance to legitimate the position of young *Caesares* as “designated successors” to a living ruler⁷⁴. In this case, we think the age gap of approximately five years between Volusian and Hostilian cannot be ignored. The relationship with Apollo was not enough for a *puer* like Hostilian to pave his way as the leader who would face a pressure from foreign enemies. His lack of combat experience and knowledge of warfare contrasted with those of Volusian, who had at least accompanied Gallus during the campaign against the Goths. In this sense, it causes no surprise to see Volusian, as *princeps iuventutis*, being portrayed as a Roman commander, while Hostilian was not, in a sharp contrast with the coinage struck for Hostilian at the time he was *Caesar* to his biological father⁷⁵.

⁷³ E. Manders, *Coining images...*, 133.

⁷⁴ M. Hebblewhite (*op. cit.*, 12) argues that, from 235 onwards, “dynastic legitimacy alone was not enough to ensure the position of [...] chosen heirs, so instead [the emperors] worked to provide them with a veneer of military legitimacy”.

⁷⁵ A few months earlier, the mint of Rome issued several *aurei* and double *denarii* for Hostilian (as *Caesar*) bearing the inscription PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS on their reverses. See *RIC* IV.3, Trajan Decius, no. 183, 183A, 183B, 183C, 183D, 183E.

Secondly, the mint of Rome had not issued gold coins for Hostilian after he held the title of *Augustus*⁷⁶. A. Bursche affirms that “it is exceptional for an emperor resident in Rome to fail to strike series of gold coins on the occasion of his proclamation as *Augustus*” (our emphasis)⁷⁷. Bursche goes on to say that there was a shortage of gold in Rome, because the reserves of that precious metal were taken to the Danube by Decius and his entourage, when they travelled north to fight the Goths. The imperial treasure, apparently in the form of coins, was seized by Cniva and his men after their victory at Abrittus⁷⁸.

At first, the absence of gold issues for Hostilian may seem circumstantial – even more so if we take into account the situation explained by Bursche. Nevertheless, the mint of Rome did not stop producing *aurei* and gold multiples at that time. That was the case, for

These types contain almost the same military motifs displayed a little later on coins with the title PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS struck for Volusian (see above, notes 44, 45 and 46).

⁷⁶ I. J. Sellars (*The monetary system of the Romans. A description of the Roman coinage from early times to the reform of Anastasius*, [E-book], 2013, 287) mentions the existence of an *aureus*, not recorded in the *RIC* (see *NAC*, Auction 24, Lot 185), “that might be considered to belong to Hostilian as *Augustus* [which] shows him laureate but still using his title of *Caesar*, clearly a very early and confused issue from the mint of Rome” (our emphasis). However, since it cannot be taken for granted, even Sellars lists in his book only silver and bronze/copper alloy coins as admittedly struck for Hostilian as *Augustus*. See I. J. Sellars, *op. cit.*, 290.

⁷⁷ A. Bursche, *The Battle of Abrittus, the imperial treasury and aurei in Barbaricum*, *Num. Chron.*, 173, 2013, 151-170 (163-164). For a general view on Hostilian’s coins as *Augustus*, see D. L. Vagi, *Coinage and history of the Roman empire. c. 82 B.C. – A.D. 480*. Vol. 2 (Coinage), London-New York, 2015 (orig. 2000), 432.

⁷⁸ A. Bursche, *op. cit.*, 164. In a recent article, A. Bursche and K. Myzgin (*The Gothic invasions of the mid-3rd c. A.D. and the Battle of Abrittus: coins and archaeology in east-central Barbaricum*, *JRA* 33, 2020, 195-229 (225)) talks about the impact of these gold coins in Gothic society, stating that “[they] have assumed the role of a symbol, a prestige object invested with the glory of a great victory. Holes were made in the *aurei* [...], and as a rule above the head of the emperor or his family member. For the Goths, the imperial portrait seems to have played a role as an insignia; it confirmed their participation in the famous battle resulting in the defeat of the leader of their greatest army”.

instance, with *aduentus* types⁷⁹ struck probably on the arrival of Gallus and Volusian at Rome in June 251, as Huttner believes⁸⁰. The reverse of these coins shows Gallus on horseback left, in military attire, holding a scepter in his left hand and raising his right hand, disseminating motifs that figured among typical descriptions of *aduentus* scenes, that is, of imperial arrival ceremonies at a city, whether Rome or a provincial town of the Empire⁸¹.

Accordingly, Hostilian could not be depicted on those *aduentus* coin types, considering that he probably did not leave Rome for the campaign on the northern frontier. Moreover, if Huttner is right, those specimens were issued for Gallus when Hostilian became *Augustus*, so the lack of raw material cannot account for the absence of *aurei* in the name of Hostilian.

In turn, coin types bearing the legend PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS were struck for Volusian in all available metals (gold, silver, bronze/copper alloys). Thus, such a dynastic message linked with Volusian might reach as many and diverse people as possible, in Rome and in the provinces where these coins entered circulation⁸². But perhaps more importantly, precious-metal denominations like *aurei* were usually handled by members of the senatorial order and the army, whereas base-metal coins were mostly used by the lower classes⁸³. In this sense, the message about Volusian as *princeps iuuentutis* (and, therefore, a likely successor to Gallus) that appeared on gold coins was intended to target those social and political groups on whose support a Roman emperor rested his power. In conclusion, dynastic coins minted at Rome in the summer of 251 tipped the balance in favor of Volusian.

It should be recalled that, from Nero to Gallienus, denominations in bronze were struck under the nominal authority of the Senate. That was generally marked by the legend abbreviation SC (*Senatus consulto*, or “by decree of the Senate”) on the reverses of those bronze

⁷⁹ See *RIC* IV.3, Trebonianus Gallus, nos. 14 (ADVENTVS AVG), 15 (ADVENTVS AVGG). On the obverses of both coins, it reads the inscription IMP[ERATOR] CAE[SAR] C[ON]S[ERV]S VIB[IVS] TREB[ONIANVS] GALLVS AVG[VSTVS].

⁸⁰ U. Huttner, *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 212.

⁸¹ As noted by E. Manders (*Coining images...*, 73), these third-century *aduentus* types consisted basically of the image of an emperor on horseback, in military attire and raising his right hand.

⁸² On the importance of the use of a particular metal and how it affected the range of coin messages, see E. Manders, *Communicating...*, 18.

⁸³ For instance, see L. Claes, *op. cit.*, 245.

coins. On the contrary, emperors struck gold and silver coinage. Given that within the college of three Gallus retained seniority, we assume that Hostilian was intentionally deprived of being portrayed on *aurei*⁸⁴. If that is the case, we are presented with depictions of Volusian on coins of greater intrinsic value which reflect an attempt, on the part of Gallus and his court, to encourage the impression that one *prince* (Volusian) had primacy over another (Hostilian). Hierarchical distinctions between *Augustus* and *Caesar* were thus blurred.

Additionally, Huttner observes that the three rulers (Gallus, Hostilian, and Volusian) were never mentioned together on coins or epigraphs. According to him, it provides indirect evidence of the vulnerabilities of a political agreement which lacked “concrete genealogical cohesion” (“*konkreten genealogischen Zusammenhalt*”)⁸⁵. As Claes puts it, in the third century “kinship by blood had become more prominent, and that adoptive affinity lost impact in the imperial succession”⁸⁶. Hence the differences we note on the types relating to the *principes iuventutis*. If, as it seems, Gallus wished to downplay the position of Hostilian as his potential successor, it makes much more sense to avoid being displayed on coinage together with his two sons, therefore undermining the perception of a strong affiliation between Gallus and *both* of his sons. But it is impossible to say whether tensions were rising or not within the imperial collegiate, since it lasted only a few weeks. Had Hostilian survived the plague, maybe he, Gallus and Volusian could make it possible to strengthen one way or another their bonds with each other.

Final remarks

⁸⁴ One can assume that the decision to strike certain types for younger members of the imperial house, whether they hold the title of *Caesar* or *Augustus*, was largely up to the senior emperor and his inner circle of courtiers. It can be noted, over a period of almost fifty years between Maximus (in 236) and Carinus and Numerian (in 283), a stunning homogeneity on coin types issued for each of the young (or boy) emperors individually, which suggests that the choice to emphasize some aspects or types rather than others on their coinage depended, to a greater or lesser degree, on the “agenda” of each senior emperor with whom young *Caesares* and *Augusti* were associated. On that, see M. Hebblewhite, *op. cit.*, 29, n. 32.

⁸⁵ U. Huttner, *Von Maximinus Thrax...*, 213.

⁸⁶ L. Claes, *op. cit.*, 80.

As we have seen, the coin types minted at Rome for the *principes iuuentutis* Hostilian and Volusian in the summer of 251 intended to broadcast a dynastic message. In this sense, both Hostilian and Volusianus were depicted as possible successors to Gallus, in accordance with the common political practice in the middle of the third century. But, at the same time, some elements underscore an attempt to present Volusian as the most suitable young man to succeed his father in the future, even though he was, at least in principle, a junior emperor (*Caesar*) subordinate to the higher authority of the *Augustus* (that is, Hostilian). Although one must not lose sight of the circumstantial nature of the coinage struck for them (especially because it took place in an extremely short period of time), it seems odd that the elevation of Hostilian to the rank of *Augustus* had not been celebrated on gold coinage, for example.

In this matter, those specific coins reveal much about Roman emperorship: blood ties were relevant to shape the perpetuity of a ruling house, or rather, to carry expectations of its future continuity. Irrespective of the conditions surrounding this presumed pact by which the rank of *Augustus* was conferred upon Hostilian, the presence of a young man like Volusian meant that Gallus had no need to go beyond his family (on biological grounds, to make it clear) to find someone on whom he could set his hopes on paving the way for an untroubled succession. Therefore, Hostilian was not easily accommodated to the dynastic plans Gallus aimed at laying from the very beginning of his reign.

A stable political experience, in which power is divided among several emperors regardless of bloodline, was yet to come. Scholars conventionally referred to it as the “First Tetrarchy”. However, the actions Maxentius and Constantine took in 306 exposed the limits and political shortcomings of the collegiate system Diocletian had instituted at the beginning of the previous decade—and retrospectively, they warn us about the tough challenge Gallus and his corulers had to face half a century earlier.