Napoleon and Ancient Rome: The Models of the Republic and the Empire, 1779-1815

Vous n'oubliez jamais votre Plutarque, mon Empereur,
– disse il Beauharnais.

Il barone rampante, chap. XXVIII

1. *Man of Plutarch*

In his splendid study of Napoleon's life up to 1802, Patrick Gueniffey dwells on two episodes which pose the problem of the modernity of Bonaparte from different perspectives. In the second half of 1790, some time after Pasquale Paoli's return to Corsica, the young officer spent a few weeks with the distinguished champion of the cause of independence, first in Bastia, then in Orezza. On an excursion to Porta Nova, Napoleon was at Paoli's side, discussing with him various moments of the liberation war in which the great man had distinguished himself in 1768-1769, before his long English exile. Suddenly Paoli said to him, «O Napoléon, tu n'as rien de moderne! Tu appartiens tout à fait à Plutarque!»[1]. Caution is in order, not just because of the unmistakably Plutarchian tone of the anecdote, which appears to be a reprise of the familiar theme of the encounter between the declining old leader and the young man on the rise[2]. A few

[1] P. Gueniffey, *Bonaparte 1769-1802,* Gallimard, Paris 2013, p. 109, who derives the quotation from Las Cases' *Mémorial* (I, Garnier, Paris 1847, p. 399).
[2] Cf. *e.g.* the anecdote of Caesar and Sulla in Plut. *Caes.* 1.4.

«FuturoClassico» n. 8, 2022 ISSN: 2465-0951
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different versions of the story survive, in fact, and some diverge even on substantial aspects; it is certain that the tale goes back to Napoleon himself, who also was, as is well known, a keen reader of Plutarch. The version quoted by Gueniffey is the one reported by Las Cases, in which a potential margin of ambiguity can easily be recognised: Paoli's comment could mean 'you are like a character of Plutarch', that is a figure of great historical and moral importance, whose importance transcends time; or 'you are an obsessive reader of Plutarch', who behaves according to the moralistic parameters of his biographies, which are ill-suited to actual reality. Paoli himself, on the other hand, was an avid reader of the classics, especially Livy and Plutarch: in that line, if it was actually pronounced, there was also an agnition of sorts[3]. Other versions of the story survive, and leave no room for ambiguity. In conversation with Antommarchi in 1819, Napoleon claimed that Paoli had recognised in his young interlocutor the same sentiments harboured by Plutarch's men: «tu n'es pas de ce siècle, tes sentiments sont ceux des hommes de Plutarque. Courage, tu prendras ton essor»[4]. According to de Norvins, though, Paoli said that his young interlocutor was «taillé à l'antique», and thus was a man of Plutarch[5]; according to the Abbot Toussaint Nasica, Paoli is said to have remarked, in private, that young Napoleon would eventually succeed, and that he only lacked the opportunity to prove himself 'a man of Plutarch'[6]. The list could go on[7].

[3] See Stendhal's observations on the affinities between the two men (*Mémoires sur Napoléon*, p. 30), with the analysis of F. Manzini, *Stendhal's Parallel Lives*, Peter Lang, Oxford-Bern-Berlin etc. 2004, pp. 200-201.

[4] *Mémoires du docteur Antommarchi, ou les dernier moments de Napoléon*, I, De Mat, Brussels 1825, p. 166.

[5] J. de Norvins, *Histoire de Napoléon*, Société Typographique Belge, Brussels 1841, p. 12.

[6] T. Nasica, *Mémoires sur l'enfance et la jeunesse de Napoléon Ier. jusqu'à l'âge de vingt-trois ans,* Dupont, Paris 1865, p. 105.

[7] See *e.g.* B. O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile or, A Voice from St. Helena*, I, Simpkin and Marshall, London 1822, p. 251: «Paoli often patted me on the head, saying, 'you are one of Plutarch's men'. He divined that I should be something

The second episode recalled by Gueniffey dates from less than a decade later[8]. In 1797 Wilhelm von Humboldt expressed (independently, of course) an opposite view to that of the old Corsican leader. On 26 December, after seeing Napoleon at a session of the Institut de France, where the young general had just been elected a member of the *Arts Mécaniques* section, the great Berlin intellectual wrote a splendid description of the remarkable character he had just observed up close, concluding with some quick physiognomic remarks: «Sein Gesicht ist durchaus modern, und meinem Urtheil nach mehr französich, als italiänisch. Von Seiten des intellektuellen Ausdrucks könnte es zum modernen Ideale beitragen»[9]. In a letter from the same period, Humboldt observed that what made Napoleon modern was the clear conviction that his fortune would never stand in the way of his fate: he embodied a full alignment between thought and action, which tended to overcome the limits to which the human condition is subject. Goethe, in conversation with Eckermann, set the problem in very similar terms, drawing a portrait of an energetic and determined Napoleon, worthy of the appellation of demigod[10]. In his opinion, Bonaparte's fate was unprecedented, and is perhaps destined never to be repeated in the future: his greatness lies precisely in his unparalleled qualities. His figure is admirable, but cannot be exemplary, because it eludes imitation: it could not be further from the men of Plutarch.

In some respects, a late development of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* unfolded around Napoleon. His figure summed up a tension that has never been fully resolved since: the tension between the call for continuity with the past and with the models of the ancient world, and the aspiration to go beyond those

extraordinary») or H.-G. Bertrand, *Cahiers de Sainte-Hélène,* II, ed. P. Fleuriot de Langle, Albin Michel, Paris 1959, p. 143, mai-juin 1818: «Afin de me gagner, il me flatta. C'est dans cette circonstance qu'il me dit: 'Tu es un homme antique, un homme de Plutarque'».

[8] Gueniffey, *Bonaparte 1769-1802* cit., p. 319.

[9] W. von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIV, 1, Behr, Berlin 1916, p. 377.

[10] J.P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens: 1823-1832*, III, Brockhaus, Leipzig 1868[3], p. 156.

examples and construct a new paradigm. Goethe himself was a direct witness to that: in a conversation in October 1808, the emperor stressed to him the importance of composing a new tragedy on the death of Caesar, which would surpass that of Voltaire, performed that very evening. In his opinion, that play could even have become the work of the German writer's lifetime: it would have shown how much good Caesar could have brought to mankind if only he had been allowed to complete his great designs[11]. Even for the champion of modernity, therefore, it was not easy to look away from the model of the great ancient dictator and the ghost of his betrayal.

This dynamic is not confined to conversations with eminent figures, or to the historiographic and intellectual debate. Bonaparte's victorious descent into Italy, in 1796-1797, set the analogy with Julius Caesar in pressing terms[12]. Even among the anti-revolutionary exiles there were those who considered him superior to the great Roman commander[13]. In other cases the historical analogy could instead take on negative resonances. Reflecting in his memoirs on the historical importance of the victory of Marengo (14 June 1800), Joseph Fouché observed that Napoleon's success was comparable to Actium, at least for its historical importance: Napoleon was as lucky as Octavian had been, «mais moins sage»[14]. From that fateful day, in Fouché's view, he began to surround himself with a crowd of bad advisors who would go on to cause much harm. One of the targets of the attack was Pierre Louis Roederer, who had emerged as an important figure in the run-up to the Eighteenth Brumaire. In the account of the conclusion of the armistice of Alexandria with Austria that he

[11] On the literary tradition on this invitation, see G. Seibt, *Goethe und Napoleon. Eine historische Begegnung*, Beck, Munich 2009[4], pp. 132-133.

[12] On Napoleon's complex relationship with the model of Caesar before the Eighteenth Brumaire see M.-B. Bruguière, *La Lecture bonapartiste du césarisme antique*, in *Du césarisme antique au césarisme moderne*, Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, Aix-en-Provence 1999, pp. 49-78, esp. pp. 52-54.

[13] P.V. Malouet, *Mémoires*, II, Didier, Paris 1868, p. 507.

[14] See J. Fouché, *Mémoires,* I, Lerouge, Paris 1825[2], pp. 114-115.

published in the *Journal de Paris,* Roederer cited a famous line from Virgil's First Eclogue: *deus nobis haec otia fecit*[15].

The list of analogies, more or less fitting, could go on, and we shall have to come back to the problem of the tension between past and present at another stage of this discussion. It is also necessary to grant political and military strategy their fair share, even in the context of such an intellectually charged debate. It would be short-sighted to explain Napoleon's basic choices with the ambition of engaging with his classical models or other historical precedents of some kind: his political trajectory must be explained, first of all, through its specific historical context. The aim of this paper is to trace a history of the references that Napoleon made to ancient Rome in various passages of his biographical and political life, to understand them against the background of his education and his intellectual life, and to understand how those references to antiquity allowed him to reflect more deeply on his political project. The basic problem will therefore be Bonaparte's historical culture and the role it played in shaping his political outlook and his strategy of self-representation[16]. Some authors and texts, both ancient and modern, will thus be central to the discussion; iconographic sources will be discussed cursorily[17]. The starting point is necessarily his early youth, since the encounter with Greek and Latin authors during the years spent in the military school of Brienne (1779-1784), while the arrival point will be the surrender to the British

[15] *Ecl.* 1.6. *Journal de Paris* 273, 3 Messidor, VIIIme Année de la République (21 June 1800), p. 1292.

[16] The best introduction to this subject is A. Jourdan, *Napoléon. Héros-Imperator-Mécène*, Flammarion, Paris 1998, pp. 19-56.

[17] The presence of ancient Rome in Napoleon's iconography is a widely studied topic, and has been intertwined with the exploration of architectural and urbanistic themes: see V. Huet, *Napoleon I: A New Augustus?*, in C. Edwards (ed.), *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 53-69, esp. pp. 58-69, and W. Telesko, *Napoleon Bonaparte: der "moderne Held" und die bildende Kunst 1799-1815*, Böhlau, Vienna-Cologne-Weimar 1998, pp. 136-173. On the urban landscape of Paris see D. Rowell, *Paris: the 'New Rome' of Napoleon I*, Bloomsbury, London 2012.

in July 1815; at Saint Helena the reflection on ancient history and classical authors intensifies and becomes more focused, but in an altogether different biographical and historical context.

2. *Young Reader*

Napoleon was a young man of extraordinary intellectual curiosity, supported by an equally exceptional work capacity. During his years at Brienne, he did not receive an education of high critical refinement, but his training was neither light nor superficial, and he spared no effort. The classics were largely read in translation: he did not study Greek, and his Latin – at best – never reached an advanced level. His engagement was not, however, limited to a narrow anthological canon, and seems to have been led by intense personal involvement. His college companion Louis A. de Bourrienne, who would later become his private secretary from 1797 to 1802, drew a memorable portrait of Napoleon's conduct in the months following his arrival at Brienne, which deserves some discussion in spite of the well-known and well-founded reservations about its author's credibility. The young Corsican's estrangement from the setting to which he had been transferred emerges forcefully: the strong national and political ties with the cause of Corsican independence are a central aspect of a wider difficulty in integrating himself into a fundamentally hostile context. It is precisely the difficulty in establishing relationships with his companions that seems to explain Napoleon's choice to devote himself to study even during break time, going to the library and avidly reading history books, «surtout Polybe et Plutarque», as well as Arrian, firmly preferred to Curtius Rufus[18]. The fascination for Plutarch's work thus originated in those years, and was then widely confirmed in other moments of Bonaparte's life, until it became an almost proverbial

[18] *Mémoires de M. de Bourienne, Ministre d'État*, I, chez Ladvocat, Paris 1829, p. 33.

trait of his personality[19]; the interest in Alexander is not surprising. His engagement with Polybius, which in many respects might seem a reading of obvious interest to the founder of an empire, finds no echo in what is known of his later years, and is also at odds with Napoleon's longstanding approach to ancient texts. He was not so much a reader of historical works as a reader of biographies, and his view of the Roman world has a staccato feel to it: it favours pictures that are quite separate from one another, rather than reflecting a coherent interpretative framework[20].

The young Napoleon's reading, however, extended to a much wider field than Bourrienne's recollection might lead one to believe. On his first return to Corsica, in September 1786, he brought with him a trunk full of books, which his brother Joseph described as larger than the one containing his personal effects[21]. He had stored in it a wide selection of works, both ancient and modern: besides Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, and other French classics, there were Plutarch, Plato, Cicero, Cornelius Nepos, Livy, Tacitus; Joseph specified that they were in translation. A large part of the year that Napoleon spent in his homeland was devoted to the study of Corsican history, a fundamental step in deepening his loyalty to the national cause and in regaining some familiarity with the Corsican and Italian languages, which had gone dormant during the Brienne years; the reading of the classics was part of

[19] The well-known portrait of Napoleon at the Tuileries that Jacques-Louis David painted in 1812 includes a volume of Plutarch: that work was commissioned from the artist by the Scottish nobleman Alexander Hamilton, and reflects an «imaginative construct» that is fundamentally anachronistic, and in any case is not detectable to the emperor's self-representation strategy (see T. Crow, *Restoration. The Fall of Napoleon in the Course of European Art, 1812-1820*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018, pp. 5-7): even Napoleon's wealthy admirer wanted to recognize in him an 'homme de Plutarque'.

[20] See R. Dufraisse, *Les grands personnages de l'histoire romaine dans les récits et les écrits de Sainte-Hélène*, «Revue de l'Institut Napoléon» 147, 1987, pp. 11-37, at p. 13: «Ce qui, dans l'histoire ancienne en général, intéressait le plus Napoléon, c'étaient les portraits».

[21] See *Mémoires du Roi Joseph*, I, Perrotin, Paris 1853, pp. 32-33.

the anchorage that allowed him to maintain a link with the language of officialdom and its literary register. Joseph speaks of his brother as an «habitant du monde idéal»: a world populated with classical and modern texts, where philosophy and epic coexisted with tragedy and historiography, and where the unifying feature was precisely the linguistic form.

We do not know in which editions Napoleon had access to those ancient authors, nor which works of Plato and Cicero he read in those years; nor do any notes survive that might allow us to establish the quality of his engagement with those texts. From the quick list that Joseph recalls from memory, many years later, and which we cannot expect to be comprehensive, a clear preference for Roman themes emerges: the great historian of the republic and that of the early empire; a distinguished political figure and thinker. Then there are two biographers, Nepos and Plutarch, who juxtaposed with different outcomes and interests Greek and Roman characters, discussing political and military figures alike. There is nothing especially unusual in his repertoire of readings, nor should one overstate the work capacity that some attribute to the young officer. It is also possible that in his decision to turn up in Ajaccio with a large trunk full of books there was also an element of proud self-representation, which almost seems to anticipate Napoleon's compulsive tendency to surround himself with vast travelling libraries during the years of the Empire[22]: an early attempt to define his own personality towards an environment that was both familiar and foreign. Paoli's comment, pronounced three years later, may thus also be a reaction to the image of the brilliant, studious and passionate young man that Napoleon built for himself and his compatriots.

3. *Against Erudition*

What is more interesting for our purposes is how the frequentation of a relatively wide range of literary texts was an integral aspect of Napoleon's training during his military school

[22] Jourdan, *Napoléon* cit., pp. 22-26 is essential reading on this theme.

years, which he did not lose sight of even in his later life. However, a well-known passage in the *Memorial of Saint Helena* also reveals a degree of impatience with an aspect of the education he received in those years. In a conversation with Las Cases in which he discussed at length Catiline's conspiracy and the initiative of the Gracchi, Napoleon compared, with a striking metaphor, the study of the Roman Republic to «grappillage», the gathering of the fruits that have fallen from the trees: a necessary exercise, given the scarcity of ancient sources. On the other hand, the great modern compilations of Charles Rollin and his continuator Jean-Baptiste-Louis Crévier have serious flaws: they are works «sans talent, sans intention, sans couleur», the products of an era in which men of letters are no longer men of state, familiar with political matters[23]. The hyper-specialization that has yielded such positive outcomes in the sciences has extended to the humanities with disastrous results. Reading the ancient sources is therefore a necessity, because in those works the blending of civic participation and literary commitment is still full, and is therefore at the service of historical understanding. In Napoleon's disdain for Rollin there was a more general set of objections to a crucial aspect of his early training: Rollin was among the authors he read at Brienne, and his annotations based on parts of the *Histoire ancienne,* mainly devoted to Persian and Greek history, and dating from 1788, survive[24]. In another conversation in 1816, the Emperor openly complained about the «temps que de si mauvais livres faisaient perdre à la jeunesse»; Crévier was more harshly criticized there than Rollin was, while the Abbé Vertot, the author of a major work

[23] On this critical judgment see the contribution of M. Zanin.

[24] *Napoléon inconnu. Papiers inédits (1786-1793)*, I, édd. F. Masson-G. Biagi, Ollendorff, Paris 1895, pp. 285-333 (*Manuscrits* XV and XVI; see also the notes on Plato's *Republic* in *Manuscrit* XIV, pp. 281-284) = *Napoléon Bonaparte. Oeuvres littéraires et écrits militaires,* I, éd. J. Tulard, Claude Tchou, Paris 2001, pp. 91-137, 309-312.

on the «Révolutions» of Republican history, was criticised for his prolixity, albeit in the context of a generally positive judgment[25].

At least two closely connected consequences derive from this brief, but coherent verdict of Napoleon's: an explicit devaluation of the contribution that scholarly research can bring to the understanding of ancient sources and, more generally, of any historical problem; and, secondly, the need for a man of action to form his own critical judgement on the ancient texts and to share it with his contemporaries. During the years of Saint Helena – after his political life had come to a traumatic conclusion – Napoleon carried out part of that in-depth work, starting with the *Précis des guerres de César*, offering an original development of the classical *topos* of the defeated politician who devotes himself to historical writing. The underlying attitude, however, is already defined in his early years, and should be taken as the key to understanding Napoleon's relationship with the model of ancient Rome. Only one modern author escaped the charge of erudition, and was emphatically credited with a decisive role in Napoleon's formation: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, whose *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* was the great discovery of the period he spent at Valence (Oct. 1785-Sept. 1786) and a work to which he continued to return over the following years[26]. Human history found there, in his opinion, a coherent discussion, where the reconstruction of factual developments was integrated with a strong interpretative framework, and the celebration of great men was combined with the analysis of a vast providential design. It may surprise one only to some extent that the training of a young officer in the years just before the Revolution found in that piece of 'sacred history' a source of inspiration: Bossuet's historiography offered a vision that went beyond those of the great moralistic compilations, and

[25] Both the *Histoire romaine* of Rollin and Crévier and the work of Vertot appear in the library of Napoleon's *Cabinet particulier* at the Tuileries: see the instructive catalogue of the works of 'écrivains modernes de l'histoire romaine' in A. Guillois, *Napoléon. L'homme, le politique, l'orateur d'après sa correspondance et ses oeuvres*, II, Ollendorff, Paris 1889, p. 554.

[26] Villemain, *Souvenirs*, pp. 112-113. On his admiration for Bossuet see Jourdan, *Napoléon* cit., p. 44.

made it possible to find an order in the world through a pattern in which the succession of the empires, on the one hand, and the sequence of great men, on the other, were interwoven. So ambitious and so simplifying a vision could not but have a strong appeal on a man who was always a passionate and creative reader, but only rarely showed an eye for detail.

4. *The Rejection of Analogy*

In the years of his rise to power Napoleon did not openly invoke precedents and models drawn from the classical world. Of course he operated in a political and institutional context that was still marked by the revolutionary experience, in which references to antiquity were pervasive[27]. The connection with ancient history can also be used to mark a line of discontinuity with respect to themes of revolutionary political culture, especially in an anti-egalitarian key. The institution of the Légion d'Honneur in 1802 is a conspicuous and decisive step, which aroused strong opposition, especially in the Conseil d'État, where it was passed by a narrow margin. In the session of May 7th (18 Floral, Year X), to Théophile Berlier, who objected that the new honour would contradict the republican spirit, and cited the examples of the Greeks and Romans to argue that magistracies and public posts are the only acceptable honours in a republican regime, Napoleon replied by openly invoking the Roman model:

[27] C. Nicolet, *La Fabrique d'une nation. La France entre Rome et les Germains,* Perrin, Paris 2003, pp. 138-141 makes the point very effectively. – The theme of the influence of Antiquity on the French revolutionary movement has of course received considerable attention: see esp. C. Mossé, *L'Antiquité dans la Révolution française*, Albin Michel, Paris 1989; F. Hartog, *La Révolution française et l'Antiquité. Avenir d'une illusion ou cheminement d'un quiproquo?*, in C. Avlami (ed.), *L'Antiquité grecque au XIXème siècle. Un exemplum contesté?*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2000, pp. 7-46; D. Di Bartolomeo, *Nelle vesti di Clio. L'uso politico della storia nella Rivoluzione francese (1787-1799)*, Viella, Rome 2014; F. Benigno-D. Di Bartolomeo, *Napoleone deve morire. L'idea di ripetizione storica nella Rivoluzione francese*, Salerno Editrice, Rome 2020.

> On nous parle toujours des Romains ! Il est assez singulier que, pour refuser les distinctions, on cite l'exemple du peuple chez lequel elles étaient les plus marquées. Est-ce là connaître l'histoire ? Les Romains avaient des patriciens, des chevaliers, des citoyens et des esclaves. Ils avaient pour chaque chose des costumes divers, des moeurs différentes. Ils décernaient en recompenses toutes sortes de distinctions, des noms qui rappellaient des services, des couronnes murales, le triomphe ! Ils employaient jusqu'a la superstition. Otez la religion de Rome, il n'y reste plus rien. Quand ce beau corps de patriciens n'exista plus, Rome fut dechirée; le people n'était que la plus vile canaille; on vit les fureurs de Marius, les proscriptions de Sylla, et ensuite les empereurs. Ainsi l'on cite toujours Brutus comme l'ennemi des tyrans. Eh bien ! Brutus n'était qu'un aristocrate; il ne tua César que parce que César voulait diminuer l'autorité du sénat pour accroitre celle du people. Voilà comme l'ignorance ou l'esprit de parti cite l'histoire.
>
> Je défie qu'on me montre une république ancienne et moderne dans laquelle il n'y ait pas eu de distinctions !... Je ne crois pas que le people français aime *la liberté, l'égalité*; les Français ne sont point changés par dix ans de revolution; ils sont ce qu'étaient les Gaulouis, fiers et légers. Ils n'ont qu'un sentiment, l'*honneur*[28].

With this brief intervention Bonaparte carries out an admirably complex intellectual operation of overt political significance. The importance of a well-informed knowledge of the past is asserted; a full and reasonable line of continuity with the ancient cities is sustained; and the validity of the facile analogies in which many supporters of the Revolution had ventured is denied. The corollary is the fall of any exemplary value of the Roman historical experience: if an historical precedent is to be sought in antiquity, it will rather be recognized in the Celtic background that remains central to any construction of the French nation.

If there are some historical analogies around the figure of the First Consul, they are not directly attributable to Bonaparte. A possible exception deserves some discussion. In late 1799 an anonymous pamphlet began to circulate in Paris: it was said to

[28] See *e.g.* A.-C. Thibaudet, *Le Consulat et l'Empire ou l'Histoire de la France et de Napoléon Bonaparte de 1799 à 1815,* II, Renouard, Paris 1834, pp. 477-478.

have been translated from English, and was entitled *Parallèle entre César, Cromwel, Monck, et Bonaparte*[29]. It proposed an exercise in historical analogy in two directions: towards the English Revolution, respectively seen at its climax and in the counter-revolutionary phase that led to the restoration of monarchy; and towards the late Roman Republic. The anonymous author disdainfully rejected the analogy with the two English political leaders, who are altogether unworthy of being compared to a figure like Napoleon, both in their intentions and in their personal qualities. When it comes to Caesar, though, a more complex argument applies. From a military point of view the analogy is defensible, for their respective merits and for the decisive role they both played in bringing to an end a season of civil conflicts. From a political standpoint, however, the distance is very clear: Caesar is a subverter of the primacy of the nobility and the champion of a demagogic cause, of the «populace» as opposed to the «people»; Napoleon has instead «rallié la classe des propriétaires et des hommes instruits, contre une multitude forcenée». His agenda goes beyond class boundaries, and it includes and values important strands of conservatism. The simplification borders on caricature, and a clue to its minimal historical validity is offered by the judgment with which the anonymous author summarizes his analysis: Caesar was a usurper and a tribune of the people, while Napoleon was a legitimate consul. In the final part of the essay, the discourse shifts again to the level of analogy: the two men are united by their character and fortune. They are dominant personalities, like Alexander the Great, capable of leaving a decisive mark on their time and on posterity. Notably, Napoleon can lead the Republic into a luminous future if he is shielded from the iniquities of fate – if his life is protected. He is the only one able to protect the Republic from the return of the government of the assemblies that had caused so much harm in the previous decade, or from the restoration of the legitimate monarchy; on the other hand, it is necessary to avoid entrusting too much power to the army, so that

[29] For an effective discussion of this affair see Nicolet, *Fabrique* cit., pp. 143-144.

the Caesar of the present day cannot be succeeded by another Caligula, another Claudius, another Nero (here too the historical judgment is rather questionable). The most precise analogy that applies to him is with Pericles: the problem is how to make sure that the 'first citizen' is in due course replaced by someone of comparable worth.

It was not difficult to read in that text, along with a call for unquestioning loyalty to Napoleon, the intimation of a dynastic succession. The controversy surrounding the identity of the anonymous author and his intentions soon extended to Napoleon's immediate circle, and became the subject of a bitter clash between Joseph Fouché, Minister of Police, and Lucien Bonaparte, who was explicitly suspected of having directly inspired that text. The First Consul immediately distanced himself from the contents of the pamphlet, and in very harsh terms too; in a meeting with Fouché, Lucien showed his accuser the manuscript, annotated by the First Consul in his own hand. After a bitter clash with his brother, he was appointed ambassador to Spain and removed from Paris. The nature of Napoleon's involvement in the writing of that essay is a fascinating subject, although it is impossible to reach a firm conclusion on the matter; at any rate, it is of relative interest for the purposes of our discussion. What is more significant is the way in which historical analogy is deployed: Caesar's historical trajectory receives an openly superficial reading, entirely functional to the pursuit of a set of contingent political aims. To speak of a model risks being misleading, because the analogy is enclosed in a suffocating schema that leaves no room for in-depth study; it is rather a reference to the past, whose task is to underline the exceptional greatness of Napoleon, on the one hand, and to mark a clear contrast with certain aspects of Caesar's precedent. The definition of Caesar as a demagogue is evidently disingenuous, and revealing of how unscrupulous the recourse to ancient history could be in that political climate. On the other hand, the strategies through which the history of ancient Rome is reinterpreted and redefined clarify the fundamental terms of the political projects in play: through the deformation of a demagogue Caesar, we can understand what Napoleon aspired *not* to be – or the scenario that

some of his supporters aimed to avert. By making reference to antiquity, we can map out the underlying stakes of the political contest more clearly.

The principle remained valid even after the completion of Napoleon's hegemonic project. In February 1802, during a lunch with the trusted Roederer, in the presence of Josephine and his brother Louis, Napoleon declared his intention to write a short essay – «cinq ou six chapitres d'histoire ancienne» – devoted to Julius Caesar. The intention was to demonstrate that Caesar never intended to make himself king, but aimed at restoring civil order through the «réunion de tous les partis»[30]. He was killed for this very reason: his assassins were about forty friends of Pompey. The plan was not followed through, and in later years Napoleon occasionally expressed less positive views. On 21 March 1804, hours after the foiling of a conspiracy against him, in conversation with Louis de Fontanes (whom several contemporaries identified as the author of the *Parallèle*) he touched upon a number of historical topics, and briefly remarked that Caesar had not always shown himself to be greater than the circumstances he had brought about, and had occasionally displayed a degree of weakness[31]. In December 1812, during a conversation with Fontanes and Barante, as he reflected on leadership and its pitfalls in the aftermath of the defeat in Russia, he said that he admired Caesar as a military man, but not quite as a political leader: «Il aimait trop à plaire au peuple, aussi il ne pouvait pas réussir à s'emparer du pouvoir»[32].

In Napoleon's public discourse, though, that historical experience took on an exemplary status at a crucial junction. In October 1809 the Emperor addressed a letter to the Institut de France, in

[30] See P.-L. Roederer, *Mémoires sur la Révolution, le Consulat et l'Empire*, éd. O. Aubry, Plon, Paris 1942[5], p. 185. On this unfulfilled aspiration see Jourdan, *Napoléon* cit., p. 32.

[31] *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat*, I, Calmann Levy, Paris 1880[9], p. 334.

[32] *Souvenirs du Baron de Barante*, I, Calmann Lévy, Paris 1890[2], p. 372. See O.B. Hemmerle, *Crossing the Rubicon into Paris: Caesarian Comparisons from Napoleon to de Gaulle*, in M. Wyke (ed.), *Julius Caesar in Western Culture*, Blackwell, Malden-Oxford 2006, pp. 285-302, at 286-287.

response to its proposal to attribute the titles of *Augustus* and *Germanicus* and to cite them in the inscriptions of the Arc de Triomphe that was then being planned in Paris (*Correspondance* no. 15894)[33]. Napoleon explained his refusal in a very dense text, dictated at Schönbrunn Palace, which puts forward both a clear judgment on the history of Rome and a precise view on the current relevance of that model. The two titles had put to him in recognition of his recent military victories, notably that of Wagram, in the previous July. In his opinion, however, neither Augustus nor Germanicus had an adequate military reputation; the former could only be credited with the victory at Actium, while the latter was mostly associated with grim memories[34]. This was not, though, simply a claim on his own merits as a military leader; a clear political and historical judgment was also at work. A direct link with the Roman Empire, in which several illegitimate and bloodthirsty rulers (Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian) succeeded one another, is neither sustainable nor desirable, and Bonaparte explicitly reproaches the members of the Institute for losing sight of the fundamental differences between that historical experience and the present one: to clearly distinguish between the two empires should indeed be the decisive task of a great cultural institution.

The only major figure in Roman history who distinguished himself for his personal qualities and his military exploits was Caesar, who was not an emperor: an association with him would in principle be desirable, if his name had not been debased by generations of «petits princes», down to the German ones recently

[33] Nicolet, *Fabrique* cit., p. 147 reads this text in the light of an ideological strategy that focuses on the reference to Charlemagne; in general on the subject see T. Lentz, *Napoléon, une ambition française. Idées reçues sur une grande figure de l'Histoire*, Le Cavalier Bleu, Paris 2013, pp. 37-43. On Napoleon and the Merovingians see I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 79-81.

[34] Napoleon's interest in, and admiration for Octavian's strategy at Actium is also confirmed by a passage in the published *Mémorial* (II, éd. M. Duran, Flammarion, Paris 1951, pp. 33-36, 15 July 1816), where plans for the invasion of England are discussed.

defeated by Napoleon himself. The corollary of this assessment is clear. No assimilation to the great figures of imperial history is possible, and Napoleon's only title must be that of «empereur des Français». An important linguistic argument also comes into play. The inscriptions must be in French; no other languages must be used, and the restriction also applies to a dead one like Latin. The fact that the Romans had sometimes resorted to Greek was not a valid reason, according to Napoleon: it was a tribute to the continuing importance of Greek as a language of culture and art. That role had been taken over, in the modern age, by French itself, «la plus cultivée de toutes les langues modernes»[35]. The analogy with antiquity was thus unviable even from that point of view.

At least three interconnected lines of inquiry emerge from this surprisingly complex text. Caesar is explicitly identified as a term of comparison, although not quite as a model: Napoleon establishes an analogy with him, but without going into it in any depth; on the other hand, the historical development that separates him from the Dictator, the weight itself of his political and ideological heritage are the factors that make any serious comparison unviable. Secondly, the Roman Empire is not discussed as a political or administrative model: the emperors – including Augustus – are acknowledged only in their capacity as military leaders. Thirdly, in Bonaparte's reflection on the Roman empire there is no reference whatsoever to what happened in Rome after the first century CE; the problem of the decline of the Western empire is not touched upon, not even to establish a further contrast with Napoleon's approach and record[36]. The

[35] Latin did play a role in official Napoleonic epigraphy, though, especially in Italy: see the summary in T.N. Turk, *Napoleonic Latin Inscriptions,* «French Studies» 35, 2021, pp. 49-69, esp. pp. 61-64, where there is no mention of the letter to the Institut.

[36] Napoleon is said to have made a somewhat revealing reference to the Late Empire during a debate with the delegates of the Chambre des Représentants on the eve of his departure for the campaign that was to end at Waterloo, on 11 June 1815: «La crise où nous sommes engagés est forte. N'imitons pas l'exemple du Bas-empire, qui, pressé de tous côtés par les barbares, se rendit la

comparison between ancient Rome and contemporary France is not explicitly proposed, except to observe that the French language has a higher cultural prestige than that achieved by Latin in antiquity.

5. *Roman Matters*

The letter to the Institut, however, makes no direct reference to the dualism between the capitals of the two empires it discusses; the mention of the use of French in the inscriptions of the Arc de Triomphe draws attention to the need of giving a distinctive aspect to the monumental landscape of Paris, and establishing an original balance between continuity and change. In the background of this debate are the Roman question and the opposition between empire and papacy: the decision not to use Latin in public epigraphy is also explained by the rejection of the official language of the Church. The problem of the relationship with Rome arises from an original point of view in the conversations that the emperor had at Fontainebleau, between October and November 1810, with Antonio Canova. The Italian sculptor was at court to work on a series of portraits of members of the imperial family, but his priority was to ensure his own return to his studio in Rome as soon as possible. His position was further complicated by his relationship with Pope Pius VII, then a captive in Savona. In the conversations between the two – recalled by Canova in some notes that were certainly not intended for publication, and published shortly after his death by his biographer Melchior Missirini (1824) – Rome emerges as a constant and controversial point of reference[37]. To Canova, who asked for

risée de la posterité en s'occupant de discussions abstraites, au moment où le belier brisait les portes de la ville» (P.A. Fleury de Chaboulon, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la vie privée, de retour et du règne de Napoléon en 1815*, II, Murray, London 1820, p. 132).

[37] On the Roman background of this visit see R.T. Ridley, *The Eagle and the Spade. Archaeology in Rome during the Napoleonic Era*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 86-87. – A few months later, in May 1811, the son

reassurance that its return was imminent, Napoleon replied, almost provocatively, that by then all the great art had been collected in Paris, after the confiscations; the only thing missing was the Farnese Hercules, which the Emperor intended to seize from Naples in the near future. The conversation then moved on to the plan to inaugurate a new season of excavations in Rome to make up for the loss of the works transferred to France; the emperor's stated intention was to inaugurate a season that neither the Pope nor the great aristocratic families of Rome had ever had the foresight to plan. Napoleon then declared his intention to take a trip to Rome; shortly afterwards, preparations were made for a visit that, as we know, never took place. Canova openly poses as a respectful, but firm defender of the interests of Italy and its cities, and argues for the need to secure a season of peace for Rome and the peninsula: both the sword and the book are necessary. The emperor, though, contends that might is the decisive factor: «"Ci vuole questa", disse, e mise le mani su la spada "questa ci vuole!"»[38].

In this conversation at Fontainebleau, thus, Napoleon restates, in spite of Canova's prompts, his dismissive judgement on the historical experience of the empire and his wholehearted appreciation for Caesar – his clemency and his ability to restrain violence are not mentioned, though. In a subsequent exchange, Napoleon praised the Roman people: to Canova, who replied that

of Napoleon I and Maria Theresa of Austria, who was given the title of King of Rome, was born: see the useful collection of evidence in S. Jaques, *The Caesar of Paris. Napoleon Bonaparte, Rome, and the Artistic Obsession that Shaped an Empire*, Pegasus Books, New York-London 2018, pp. 351-356 on the iconographic program that accompanied that event, in which the theme of foundation had a significant role and the image of Romulus and Remus a prominent place. On this phase of Napoleon's relationship with the city see S. Vandiver Nicassio, *Imperial City: Rome under Napoleon*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2005, pp. 191-193 and, from a different point of view, C. Versluys, *Le préfet Camille de Tournon et la mise en valeur des monuments antiques romains: projets, réalisations et propagande*, «Anabases» 5, 2007, pp. 161-177. On the relationship between Napoleon and Canova see Huet, *Napoleon I: A New Augustus* cit., pp. 59-61.

[38] A. Canova, *Scritti*, I, ed. H. Honour, Salerno Editrice, Rome 1994, p. 344.

it was especially virtuous until the Hannibalic War, he replied that it had always been, until Constantine: «I pretti sono stati quelli che hanno tenuto male quel paese»[39]. Shortly afterwards, Napoleon suddenly asked Canova to describe for him the quality of the air in Rome, not only in the present, but also in antiquity. The artist ended up evoking a passage from Tacitus which speaks of the unhealthy air in the Vatican and its pernicious effects on the soldiers that were quartered there. Napoleon immediately had his librarian bring him a copy of Tacitus, but was unable to find the passage; Canova sent him the exact reference after his return to Paris[40]. Napoleon, at any rate, dismissed Tacitus' testimony with an argument based on direct experience: it is common for diseases to circulate among troops that have just returned after a long engagement on a foreign front, and for these to recover their strength sometime later.

6. *The Tacitus Problem*

The perusal of Tacitus' text during the conversation with Canova was not an impromptu occurrence. As we have seen, Napoleon's interest in that author dated back to his early years, but grew especially strong during the Empire. In the conversation with Fontanes of July 1804 that was mentioned above in a different connection, Napoleon lamented the tendency of Tacitus to criticise the emperors without trying to account for their popularity, and imposing his own bias on the complexity of political history[41]. Shortly after Austerlitz, in January 1806, the Emperor received at the Tuileries some members of the Institut de France, who paid him tribute for his great recent victories. The statement of an influential member of the Académie française, Antoine-Vincent Arnault, celebrated the institution's role as the «organe de vérité», committed to celebrating the Emperor's contribution to the defeat of barbarism in Europe. Napoleon reacted by denouncing instead

[39] Ivi, p. 350.
[40] See *ibid.* Cf. Tac. *Hist.* II, 93, 2.
[41] *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat*, I, cit., p. 334.

the tendency of historians not to give him due honour, and by spreading a criticism of Tacitus: addressing the *Sécretaire Perpétuel* of the Academy, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, he invited him to write a commentary on that author, and «rectifier les erreurs et les faux jugements de l'historien». Suard replied that the name of Tacitus was such that it could not be diminished. According to the account that Suard's nephew gave of the episode some thirty years later, in the introduction to one of his translations of Tacitus, the emperor resented that reply. A few weeks later, on 11 February 1806, a harsh attack on the Roman historian and some of his interpreters appeared in the *Journal des Débats*: some of his modern readers had found in his work nourishment for their «esprit de faction et de révolte». The emperor had directly inspired that text[42].

Another version, reported by Suard's biographer, Dominique-Joseph Garat, reports at greater length Napoleon's reservations about Tacitus[43]. He viewed him a partisan historian, clearly opposed to the interests of the people, who instead loved the emperors: «et on n'aime pas des monstres». Suard replied that under the Principate there no longer was a people, but «une populace de toutes les parties de l'univers». Napoleon retorted by criticizing Tacitus' style and claiming a preference for clear writing. According to Garat, therefore, there was neither an invitation to write a commentary, nor an open tension between the emperor and Suard; on the other hand, as the biographer points out, there were many versions of that encounter, all very different from each other[44].

[42] For a summary of the affair see C.L.F. Panckoucke, *Oeuvres de C. C. Tacite traduites par C.L.F. Panckoucke, Annales, T. 1er,* Panckoucke, Paris 1843, pp. 64-68. Cf. J.-C. Assali, *Napoléon et l'antiquité*, Diss. Aix-Marseille 1982, I, pp. 262-264.

[43] D.-J. Garat, *Mémoires historiques sur la vie de M. Suard, sur ses écrits, et sur le XVIII siècle*, II, Belin, Paris 1820, pp. 423-426.

[44] Garat, *Mémoires,* p. 423. – Napoleon's dialogue with the Institut and his interest in classical studies are also testified by the *Rapport historique sur le progrès de l'histoire et de la littérature ancienne depuis 1789 et leur état actuel*

Other notable examples survive. In a conversation with an unidentified man of letters, in the forest of Malmaison, summarised in the introduction to a translation of Tacitus edited by Charles-Louis-Fleury Panckoucke, Napoleon discussed the merits of Tacitus as an historian of power: «Tacite nous explique fort bien comment les Césars s'étaient rendus odieux par leur débauches et par leurs cruautés. Mais d'où vient que ces empereurs étaient en même temps les idoles du peuple? C'est ce que Tacite ne dit pas, et ce qu'il faudrait nous expliquer»[45]. Tacitus is not reproached for having distorted historical reality, but for not having offered an adequate explanation for the events he discussed: for not having understood the importance of the link between monarchy and popular consensus[46]. To the critical gaze of the senatorial historian, Napoleon opposes an entirely different order of problems and interests. On the other hand, Tacitus offered the critics of the emperor and his methods a vast repertoire of examples and a model of conduct and prose. In a celebrated article published in the *Mercure* in July 1807, François-René Chateaubriand harshly attacked Napoleon, with whom he had severed ties after the assassination of the Duc d'Enghien. The identification with Tacitus was deep, and the reference to one of the protagonists of his work was purposefully aggressive: «C'est en vain que Néron

presented to the Emperor in February 1808 and published by the Imprimerie Impériale in 1810: see especially the statement of the Perpetual Secretary B.-J. Dacier on p. 14: «Si Alexandre ou Auguste avoient fait constater par une réunion de savans l'état général des sciences sous leur règne, combien ce noble et important tableau auroit ajouté à leur gloire!... Il seroit encore aujourd'hui le premier de tous les livres classiques». On this text see Nicolet, *Fabrique* cit., p. 108.

[45] Quoted in Panckoucke, *Oeuvres de C.C. Tacite,* p. 65. The passage is presented as a quotation from C. Cayx, *Histoire de l'empire romain depuis la bataille d'Actium jusqu'à la chute de l'Empire d'Occident,* I, Paris 1828, which I have not been able to locate in any library; it does not appear in the second edition of the work, published with Colas in 1836.

[46] Napoleon came back to the issue of Tacitus' inability to identify convincing historical explanations in a conversation with Bertrand at Saint Helena in February 1819: Bertrand, *Cahiers de Sainte-Hélène*, II, cit., pp. 285-286.

prospère, Tacite est déjà né dans l'empire; il croît inconnu auprès des cendres de Germanicus, et déjà l'intègre Providence a livré à un enfant obscur la gloire du maître du monde. Si le rôle de l'historien est beau, il est souvent dangereux…»[47]. The Emperor's response was drastic: the review was closed with immediate effect.

Napoleon's melee with Tacitus, however, was never fully resolved. In the encounters that the emperor had with Goethe in Erfurt and Weimar in October 1808, of which Talleyrand offers a detailed account, the name of the great historian appears repeatedly. These are not mere *obiter dicta*; according to Talleyrand, Napoleon carefully prepared his conversations with the distinguished personalities he received during his travels, and Goethe's greatness was abundantly clear to him[48]. In their first meeting, Napoleon put the subject in hardly equivocal terms:

> – Monsieur Goethe, vous devriez rester ici pendant tout le voyage, et écrire l'impression que fait sur vous le grand spectacle que nous vous donnons.
> – Ah! Sire, il faudrait la plume de quelque écrivain de l'antiquité pour entreprendre un travail semblable.
> – Êtes-vous de ceux qui aiment Tacite ?
> – Oui, Sire, beaucoup.
> – Eh bien ! Pas moi; mais nous parlerons de cela une autre fois. Écrivez à M. Wieland de venir ici…[49].

In those days, the theatre performances of the Comédie Française on the fringes of the Erfurt Conference forcefully raised the issue of the interference between ancient and modern history, and between drama and historical reality. The hatred of Racine's Mithridates reminded many of Napoleon's feelings towards the

[47] *Mercure de France,* t. 29, July 7, 1807. The text is quoted and extensively discussed in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, II, Lardinois, Liège 1849, pp. 102-103.

[48] C.M. Talleyrand, *Mémoires II. 1807-1815*, Plon, Paris 1957, p. 116. On these conversations see R. Mellor, *Tacitus*, Routledge, London-New York 1993, pp. 157-158.

[49] Talleyrand, *Mémoires II* cit., p. 109.

English[50]. Some time later, when the court moved to Weimar, the Emperor also had the chance to meet Christoph Martin Wieland, whom he had mentioned to Goethe during their first encounter. The opportunity was afforded by a reception which followed the performance of Voltaire's *Mort de César*. On that glorious occasion, at which Tsar Alexander was also present, Napoleon resumed his dialogue with Goethe, opening it at once with an exaltation of the tragic genre, which readily afforded him the chance to return to Tacitus and his flaws. Tragedy offers an incomparable moral lesson to «superior men», and draws strength from the collective dimension of stage representation; history is, by comparison, weak and ephemeral. Hence a new attack on Tacitus, «l'historien que vous autres citez toujours»: a detractor of mankind, from whom the emperor disdainfully declares never to have learned anything[51]. The tendency to always see criminal motives in every human action only diminishes the greatness of Rome, and betrays the attitude of an informer. Moreover, Tacitus' style is «une nuit toujours obscure». The judgement here reflects even more explicitly a deep-rooted interest: Napoleon confesses that he is not «un grand latiniste», but makes clear that he has read Tacitus in a dozen Italian or French translations, and has therefore drawn the informed and firm conviction that Tacitus' style and historical vision are inextricably linked in a knot of gloom and fear.

Wieland attempted a defence of the historian, addressing the emperor as a man of letters and a member of the Institut (little did it matter that Napoleon was a member of the Section of *Arts mécaniques*), and arguing that the Roman historian intended to denounce tyrants not so much to their contemporaries, but to posterity. On the other hand, the bleak picture he drew of imperial history is entirely correct, and the style does reflect the harshness of the subject matter; the work of Livy, who instead paints a

[50] Ivi, p. 111. The *Mithridate* was one of Napoleon's reads during his last days on Elba: L. Mascilli Migliorini, *500 giorni. Napoleone dall'Elba a Sant'Elena*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2016, p. 5.

[51] Talleyrand, *Mémoires II* cit., p. 123.

picture of the expanding republic, has an entirely different atmosphere, and a style in keeping with it. As for Tacitus, «son génie n'est inexorable que comme la justice»[52]; his historical vision is in fact deeply balanced, and in some parts of his work there is a fair appreciation of the emperors who were able to reconcile empire and liberty. Even Tacitus, according to Wieland, understood that this was the best possible regime: implicitly, therefore, the German poet made clear to the emperor that there was no reason to fear the work of the Roman historian. Napoleon welcomed this reply with apparent benevolence, but declared himself unconvinced, and promised Wieland to resume the conversation at a subsequent meeting, in Erfurt, which never took place[53].

7. *The Trajan Model*

The emperor under whom Tacitus wrote history, and who seemed able to embody a possible encounter between monarchy and freedom, was also a strong point of interest for Napoleon. In the great performance of *Le Triomphe de Trajan,* with a libretto by J.-A. Esmenard, and music by J.-F. Lesueur and L. Pertuis in October 1807, the recent victory of the Prussian campaign found an openly allegorical representation, to some extent directly prompted by the emperor himself[54]. Trajan, after his victory on the Dacians, returns to Rome; a plot against him, hatched by the defeated prince Sigismar with the support of some slaves, is foiled,

[52] Ivi, p. 124.

[53] Ivi, p. 126. The exchange with Wieland was a memorable occurrence; Friedrich von Müller, Chancellor at the court of Weimar, who was also present, wrote an account that Talleyrand had a chance to read shortly before leaving the city, and then returned to it in his *Erinnerungen*: see M. Zanin's contribution in this issue, which also dwells on Napoleon's comments on Tacitus during the Saint Helena years.

[54] See the excellent overview in Assali, *Napoléon et l'antiquité*, II, cit., pp. 337-343. Cf. also M.D. Zarzeczny, *Meteors that Enlighten the Eart: Napoleon and the Cult of Great Men*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, pp. xx-xxi.

and the emperor grants his pardon to the conspirators. It is not by chance that the princeps who led the empire to its greatest expansion was invoked as a precedent and a model at the climax of Napoleon's hegemonic parabola[55]. In a conversation with one of his confidants, the Count of Narbonne, Napoleon stated the hope that the comparison with Trajan would not turn out to be just a «flatterie d'opéra»: like him he had come to power after a season of terror, and like him he had led troops across the Danube and the Vistula. His major strategic challenge, however, was not in the East, but in the North[56]. The theme appears with striking frequency in conversations between Napoleon and Narbonne in early 1812, on the eve of the Russian campaign, reconstructed by Abel F. Villemain in *Souvenirs contemporains*. The analogy with a nodal point in Roman history played a central role.

Narbonne was a fervent admirer of Marcus Aurelius, whom he regarded as a rare example of moral virtue matched by unlimited and universal power, combining wisdom with great military qualities. In another conversation, he argued that the most effective answer to Tacitus and his criticism of the empire of the Caesars was precisely the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In Napoleon's reply historical reflection and political strategy were once again combined: «ce règne patriarcal des Antonins sera la retraite de nos vieux jours». The challenge of his time was instead to lead the French army in entirely new directions: beyond Vienna and the Danube, as far as the Niemen, the Volga and the Moskva: «et nous refoulerons pour deux cent ans la fatalité des invasions du Nord». The expansion and hegemony in Europe, and the imminent campaign in Russia are therefore a great defensive operation, which aims to resolve in the long term a historic, fundamental threat – «un service rendu à l'humanité». Only at a later stage could a season of peace and collective welfare be opened. Shortly

[55] Trajan's Column is also the model of the triumphal column of Place Vendôme: Huet, *Napoleon I: A New Augustus?* cit., pp. 63-65; Telesko, *Napoleon Bonaparte* cit., pp. 137-139.

[56] A.-F. Villemain, *Souvenirs contemporains d'histoire et de littérature*, Rozez, Brussels 1854, p. 126.

afterwards in the same conversation, Napoleon confessed to having little sympathy for Marcus Aurelius, who was too close to the sophists and «idéologues» of his time, and maintained that Diocletian was much more congenial to him – «un grand prince, administrateur, guerrier, nullement contemplatif»[57]. A little later, he made polemical comments on Montesquieu and stated his strong admiration for Sulla, a man who violently seized power, «parce qu'il se sentait capable de le porter» – and then abandoned it when «un *spleen*, une humeur noire, un de ces accidents intérieurs de l'homme, qui, dégoutant de la vie, peuvent bien dégouter de l'Empire» took hold of him[58]. In another conversation shortly afterwards, he also had words of praise for Marius, «ce paysan d'Arpinum», whose victory over the Cimbri (there is no mention of the Teutons) postponed for three centuries the invasion of the «peuplades gothiques», and thus made possible the Roman Empire and the rise of Caesar. The Russian campaign, «cette guerre aventureuse», is explained with this same order of concerns and aims[59].

8. *Themistocles in Rochefort*

It is, however, to Plutarch, and to Napoleon as the man of Plutarch, that we must return in conclusion, with a necessary shift from Roman to Greek models. Napoleon's last political act is in fact indissolubly linked to his long-standing engagement with that author and to the memory of one of his texts – or indeed of more than one. The circumstances are fairly well known[60]. Four weeks

[57] Villemain, *Souvenirs* cit., pp. 109-110.

[58] Ivi, p. 111.

[59] Ivi, p. 115. On the importance of this passage see also Assali, *Napoléon et l'Antiquité*, I, cit., pp. 265-266.

[60] T. Rood, *'Je viens comme Thémistocle.' Napoleon and National Identity after Waterloo*, in T. Fögen-R. Warren (eds.), *Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Idea of Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2016, pp. 71-110 is an excellent orientation point. On the presence of Themistocles in the political debate of the time see P. Treves, *L'idea di Roma e la cultura italiana nel secolo XIX*, Ricciardi, Milan-Naples 1962, p. 12.

after Waterloo, Napoleon was at Rochefort, on the estuary of the Charente, blocked by land by the advancing Prussian troops and by sea by an English fleet led by Captain Frederick Maitland. On 13 July he concluded that the only viable option was a request for asylum to the English Crown. He therefore wrote a personal message to the Prince Regent George[61]:

> Altesse Royale, en butte aux factions qui divisent mon pays et à l'inimitié des plus grandes puissances de l'Europe, j'ai terminé ma carrière politique, et je viens, comme Thémistocle, m'asseoir sur le foyer du peuple britannique. Je me mets sous la protection de ses lois, que je réclame de Votre Altesse Royale, comme du plus puissant, du plus constant et du plus généreux de mes ennemis.
>
> Napoléon

At the heart of that note was the allusion to a Plutarchian character: there was, however, a margin of ambiguity, and thus of potential confusion. The reference was certainly to Athenian Themistocles, on whom Plutarch wrote a biography. There were, however, two distinct moments in his life in which he presented himself to a former enemy as an exile: first to Admetus, king of the Molossians, with whom he had had serious political differences and to whom he addressed a solemn act of supplication, and then to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, to whom he mooted the possibility of a new offensive against the Greeks. Nothing in Napoleon's brief message resolves the ambiguity; the mention of the hearth of the English people may be read as a reference to the Admetus affair, but it might also be a generic hint to the hospitality that Napoleon hoped to obtain. The attempt, as is well known, was unsuccessful. Napoleon, who had handed himself to Maitland the day after writing that brief note, was not even allowed to leave the ship on arrival at the ports of Torquay and Plymouth, and was then deported to Saint Helena. His letter, however, circulated widely in the European press, and there was immediate disagreement on what the allusion to Themistocles implied. A reference to Admetus

[61] See *Correspondance générale publiée par la Fondation Napoléon*, XV, Fayard, Paris 2018, no. 40066.

may have been read as an exhortation to the English to respect the superior obligations of hospitality and honour towards the defeated enemy. An allusion to Artaxerxes, on the other hand, would have implied complex analogies, and could even have been read as a manifestation of willingness to serve the interests of the Crown in France; on the other hand, even during the Saint Helena years, the theoretical possibility of Napoleon's return retained some political relevance[62].

It is impossible to establish what the intent of that allusion to Themistocles was, and we must be open to the possibility of a margin of intentional ambiguity. Two points must be emphasized, though, by way of conclusion. When Napoleon had to imagine the first stage of his life after the end of his political trajectory, he resorted to the moral and narrative apparatus provided by Plutarch's biographies: a body of work with which he had a longstanding acquaintance, and which emphasized the strong interaction between the political and moral spheres. Down the end, therefore, Napoleon lived his own story as that of an «homme de Plutarque». At the same time, the reaction that the news of Napoleon's letter prompted in France, as well as in England, is an example of the mobilizing power that the exemplary repertoire of ancient sources had in that political and cultural context. The puzzling and controversial allusion to a Plutarch character brought into focus the fundamental problems of that historical junction: the magnitude of Napoleon's defeat, the relationship between his personal destiny and that of France, and the duties and prerogatives of the victors. Nor was it an ephemeral reminiscence, bound to be exhausted in that convulsive turn of events. When Louis-Napoleon visited Rochefort in 1852, months after the coup d'état that had brought him to power, the citizens welcomed him triumphantly. An obelisk erected for the occasion in Place Colbert bore an inscription: «Je viens, comme Thémistocle, m'asseoir au

[62] Cf. the recurring, uncontrolled rumours on Napoleon's return that circulated in France between 1815 and 1830: S. Hazareesingh, *Memory and Political Imagination. The Legend of Napoleon Revisited*, «French Studies» 18, 2004, pp. 463-483, esp. pp. 465-468.

foyer du peuple britannique. Je me mets sous la protection de ses lois»[63]. The memory of the Egyptian campaign – a foundational moment of Napoleon's imperial project – was proudly welded to the words with which that trajectory had come to an end[64].

Abstract.
The aim of this paper is to offer an historical account of the references that Napoleon made to ancient Rome in various passages of his biographical and political life, to assess them against the background of his education and his intellectual life, and to understand how those references to antiquity allowed him to reflect more deeply on his political project. The basic problem is therefore Bonaparte's historical culture and the role it played in shaping his political outlook and his strategy of self-representation. Some authors and texts, both ancient and modern, are central to the discussion; iconographic sources will only be handled cursorily. The starting point is necessarily his early youth, since the encounter with Greek and Latin authors during the years spent at the military school of Brienne (1779-1784), while the endpoint will be the surrender to the British in July 1815; at Saint Helena Napoleon's reflection on ancient history and classical literature intensifies and becomes more precise, but in an altogether different biographical and historical context.

Keywords.
Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon I, Ancient Rome, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Latin epigraphy, Plutarch, Tacitus.

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[63] F. Laurent, *Voyage de Sa Majesté Napoléon III Empereur des Français dans les Départements de l'Est, du Centre et du Midi de la France*, Imprimerie Simon Raçon et Compagnie, Paris 1853, p. 458. See Rood, '*Je viens comme Thémistocle*' cit., p. 84.

[64] I am very grateful to Manfredi Zanin for the prompt to work on this topic and for his comments on an earlier draft. I should also like to thank Sergio Brillante, Katherine East, and Imma Eramo for valuable advice on specific points, and two anonymous readers for their useful feedback. I have much benefited from the questions and reactions of several participants in the *Napoleone e l'Antico* workshop and of the members of lecture audiences at the Liceo Michelangiolo in Florence and at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle.