

**'THE WORLD IS EMPTY AFTER THE ROMANS': THREE CASE STUDIES FOR THE  
RECEPTION OF ANTIQUITY IN THE WRITINGS OF ANTOINE SAINT-JUST**

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**ABSTRACT**

'The world is empty after the Romans': with this famous catchphrase, Antoine Saint-Just summarized the relationship between his own time and antiquity; but to understand the meaning of this phrase fully, it should not be taken merely at its face value. The rhetoric of the French Revolution was highly influenced by the texts of the Greek and Roman past, to the point that initially critics of the Revolution and then historians (until the present day) have considered the French revolutionaries as (frequently bad) imitators of the ancients. It is certainly true that the Enlightenment established a formal parallel between the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Greek and Roman past, taking it as a model and an aspiration; this process culminated during the French Revolution. At the same time the relationship between revolutionaries and antiquity was never constituted by an uncritical imitation or by a straightforward identification with the greats of the past. This complicated relationship is particularly evident in the writings of Antoine Saint-Just (1767-1794).

This paper reconstructs the reception of antiquity in the last works of Saint-Just, using as case studies three of the major speeches delivered at the end of his career (April 1794-July 1794): the *Rapport sur la conjuration* (delivered on 31 March 1794), the *Rapport sur la police générale* (delivered on 24 April 1794) and the *Discours du 9 Thermidor* (partially delivered on 27 July 1794). The analysis of these speeches demonstrates what was the reading and comprehension of Greco-Roman culture at the time, what sources influenced its use and finally how this contributes to a better understanding of one of the key figures of the French Revolution.