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WHAT'S IN THE NAME: THE SO-CALLED FIRST TRIUMVIRATE

RONALD T. RIDLEY

In this journal Ernst Badian, as so often, raised an interesting question: who first gave the totally inaccurate name of the First Triumvirate to the informal alliance of Pompey, Crassus and Caesar in 60?¹ For once, he uncharacteristically did not also provide the definitive answer. He was able only to state that the term was already known to Wilhelm Drumann and Paul Groebe in their classic *Geschichte Roms*.² After referring to 'das erste Triumvirat', they gave as sources Livy, Velleius, Suetonius, Dio, Plutarch (five times), Appian, Zonaras, Florus and Cicero (twice), a total of twelve references, none of which in fact call it any such thing.

It is indeed hazardous attempting to identify the origin of such an error. There always lurks the possibility that an overlooked writer may have anticipated the identified culprit.³ This particular case is, however, of such interest in the history of the late Republic that an attempt should be made.

There are many Renaissance writers who may be consulted. The discovery of the fragments of the *fasti* in the sixteenth century depredations in the Forum produced a number of outstanding works of editing and commentary and the beginning, in fact, of modern scholarship on the political history of the Republic. The greatest Republican historian of the age, Carlo Sigonio, in his edition of the *fasti* with commentary in 1556 referred to a

¹ 'M.Lepidus and the Second Triumvirate', *Arctos* 25 (1991) 5–16.

² Drumann and Groebe, *Geschichte Roms*, 6 vols, Bern 1899–1929, 3 (1906), 179.

³ As I found in an earlier exercise of this kind: 'To be taken with a pinch of salt: the destruction of Carthage', *CPh* 81 (1986) 140–146; cf. Brian Warmington, 'The destruction of Carthage, a retractatio', *CPh* 83 (1988) 308–310, Giulia Piccaluga, 'Chi ha sparato il sale sulle rovine di Carthagine?', *Cultura e scuola* 1988, 153–165.

'conspiratio', 'coitio' and 'societas'.⁴ Onofrio Panvinio in his edition, 1558, made no comment.⁵ Bartolomeo Marliani in his annals, 1560, wrote of 'conspiratio inter tres principes civitatis'.⁶ Alongside these three Italians, the Spanish Antonio Agustin in his essay on Roman families wrote similarly of 'tyrannis trium virorum clarissimorum'.⁷

At the end of the sixteenth century there appeared one of the earliest biographies of Caesar, by Stefano Schiappalaria. He described the formation of the alliance thus: Caesar 'entrò nell'amicitia e autorità loro (Pompey and Crassus) per terzo'. On the next page, however, we read: 'quel Triumvirato (così volle (Cicero) nominarlo) aspirava alla monarchia'.⁸ The error therefore goes back at least to the sixteenth century, but its subsequent history is also not without interest.

The Flemish Stefan Pigge in his annales of 1615 employed an eloquent array of terms: 'foedus', 'amicitia', 'coitio', 'conspiratio' and 'coniuratio'.⁹ The French historian Scipion Dupleix in his Roman history, 1638, noted only that Caesar reconciled Pompey, and Crassus and that Varro wrote his *Tricipitina* against the coalition.¹⁰ It is unfortunate that chapters 9–15 (Jugurtha to the end of the Republic) of Saint-Evremond's essay on the character of the Romans written in the 1660s are missing.¹¹ Another biographer of Caesar, the Flemish Hubert Goltz in 1663 described the union as a 'quasi conspiratio', while his contemporary, the Englishman Samuel

⁴ Sigonio, *Commentarius in fastos et triumphus romanos*, Venice 1556, 125.

⁵ Panvinio, *Fasti*, Venice 1558, 174.

⁶ Marliani, *Annales consulum*, Rome 1560.

⁷ Agustin, *de familiis Romanorum*, first published with Fulvio Orsini, *Familiae romanae*, Rome 1577, but reprinted by Graevius, *Thesaurus* 7.1222.

⁸ Schiappalaria, *La vita di C. Julio Cesare*, Antwerp 1578, 45–46. For this forgotten author, the only resort is Mario Cosenza, *Dictionary of Italian humanists*, 4 vols, Boston 1962, 4.3227, who knows only that he came from Genoa, and served the Hapsburgs.

⁹ Pigge, *Annales romanorum*, Antwerp 1615, 3.346, 351.

¹⁰ Dupleix, *Histoire romaine depuis la fondation de Rome*, 3 vols, Paris 1638, 2.520.

¹¹ Saint-Evremond, *Réflexions sur les divers génies du peuple romaine*, first published in Paris 1705.

Clarke, wrote of a 'league'.¹² The German Johannes Fabricius in his 'numismatic biography' of 1678 did not mention the alliance.¹³

It was, however, in 1681 that the first monograph on the subject of the alliance appeared: Samuel Broe, Seigneur de Citri et de la Guette's history of the triumvirates. One can hardly speak of entries in biographical dictionaries on this man, although they do exist; for he is cited virtually only as the author of this work, although he also wrote histories of the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin, of Florida, of Mexico, and of Peru. This work on the late Republic is therefore anomalous in his production. He wrote of 'that league which was afterwards called the Triumvirate', without specifying when or by whom.¹⁴ The name 'triumvirate' had now become embedded in a book title, but it is unlikely that this volume was sufficiently well known to have great influence.

One of the leading German scholars of this period, Johannes Graeve, among his many editions of texts, included Suetonius. He made no comment, however, on the 'societas' of chapter 19.¹⁵ The century concluded with Laurence Echard's pioneering history of the Republic, which appeared in 1695. He did cite Guette among the few available modern sources; it is only natural therefore that he wrote of 'this Triumvirate'.¹⁶

The age of the Enlightenment was rich in studies of the Republic, as one would expect. Aubert de Vertot d'Auboeuf (usually known as Vertot), author of the 'Roman revolutions' of 1719, mentioned only Caesar's

¹² Goltz, C. Julius Caesar, Bruges 1663, 5; Clarke, The life and death of Julius Caesar, London 1665, 7.

¹³ Fabricius, C. Julius Caesar numismaticus sive dissertatio historica, London 1678.

¹⁴ Broe, Histoire des deux triumvirats, Paris 1681, Eng. trans. by Thos. Otway, The history of the two triumvirates, London, 2 vols in 1, London 1686. There are 'articles' on Broe in Jocher, Allgemeines Gelehrtenlexikon, Leipzig 1750–, 2.340, Nouvelle biographie générale, Paris 1855–1866, 10.623; see also Index bio-bibliographicus notorum hominum, Osnabruck 1974–, 37.424.

¹⁵ Suetonius, ed. Graeve, 1677, 2nd ed. The Hague 1691.

¹⁶ Echard, The Roman history from the building of the City to the perfect settlement of the Empire by Caesar Augustus, London 1695, 290. On Echard, 'The forgotten historian: Laurence Echard and the first history of the Roman Republic', Ancient society 27 (1996), 277–315.

reconciliation of Pompey and Crassus in order to gain the consulship.¹⁷ The Jesuit Francois Catrou's monumental history called the union 'un Triumvirat'.¹⁸ Montesquieu, in his work of astonishing synthesis, the *Considerations* of 1734, covering from the foundation of Rome to the fall of Constantinople, in chapter 11 was more circumspect: 'enfin il (Pompey) s'unit d'intérêts avec César et Crassus'.¹⁹ Another French historian ignored his caution. Charles Rollin in his Roman history of the later 1730s described Caesar as forming the league famous (si connue) as the Triumvirate.²⁰ An English contemporary, Nathaniel Hooke, in his history of Rome down to 28 BC, in 1738 also wrote of the alliance 'commonly called the first triumvirate'.²¹ And for the first time historians began to elaborate on the significance of the alliance. Thomas Blackwell in his memoirs of the court of Augustus of 1753, lashed out at

'the fatal and pernicious Combination that first blasted the vigour of the Roman Republic. It was a latent, but effective Tyranny established in a free Commonwealth; an oligarchy, or Government of three, who ruled absolutely.'²²

The greatest historian of the Republic in this century, the Huguenot Louis de Beaufort in his famous precursor of the *Römische Staatsrecht* in 1766 was, as one would have hoped, precise: Pompey allied with Caesar (se leguer avec lui). The name triumvirs applied only to the personalities of 43, although even in their case it was 'plus véritablement une tyrannie qu'une

¹⁷ Vertot, *Histoire des révolutions arrivées dans le cours de la République romaine*, 3 vols, Paris 1719, 3.714.

¹⁸ Catrou, *Histoire romaine*, 20 vols, Paris 1725–1737, 16.176, 179.

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, Amsterdam 1734; ed. Truc, Paris 1967, 57.

²⁰ Rollin, *Histoire romaine*, 7 vols, Paris 1738–1741, 6.558.

²¹ Hooke, *Roman history from the building of the city to the ruin of the Commonwealth*, 3 vols, London 1738, book 8, chap. 11.

²² Blackwell, *Memoirs of the court of Augustus*, 3 vols, Edinburgh 1753–1763, 1.176.

magistrature légitime'.²³ Oliver Goldsmith in his history followed Blackwell's lead in criticising the alliance:

'This was called the First Triumvirate, by which we find the constitution weakened by a new interest, that had not hitherto taken place in the government.'²⁴

A specialist who should have known better, because the evidence (or rather the lack of it) was in front of him, the numismatist William Cooke, in his numismatic history of 1781 still persisted in writing of the first triumvirate.²⁵ The Scottish historian Adam Ferguson in his history of the Republic, 1783, followed suit: it was 'a private combination ... afterwards, by a kind of mockery ... termed the Triumvirate', although as usual he did not specify when or by whom.²⁶ Charles Hereford, in his history 1792, similarly but more prosaically stated that 'This league, from the number which composed it, was termed the Triumvirate'!²⁷

The secret was finally revealed in 1807 by Pierre Levesque in his 'critical history': 'Leur coalition forma ce que les modernes appellent le premier triumvirat'.²⁸ Jules Michelet in 1831 returned to Vertot's idea of reconciliation: Caesar 'trouva moyen de reconcilier Pompée et Crassus'.²⁹ There was a return to anonymity with the English historian Thomas Arnold in his well known history of 1838–1843:

'He had already effected that famous coalition between Pompey, Crassus and himself which has been distinguished by the name of the

²³ de Beaufort, *La République romaine*, 2 vols, The Hague 1766, 1.248, 410. On de Beaufort, see Gibbon's complement, Venice 1986.

²⁴ Goldsmith, *Roman history*, 2 vols, London 1769, 1.418.

²⁵ Cooke, *The medallic history of imperial Rome*, 2 vols, London 1781, 1.34; cf. the coin evidence for 43, plate 4.

²⁶ Ferguson, *The history of the progress and termination of the Roman Republic*, 3 vols, London 1783, 2.160.

²⁷ Hereford, *History of Rome*, 2 vols, London 1792, 2.267.

²⁸ Levesque, *Histoire critique de la République romaine*, 3 vols, Paris 1807, 3.78.

²⁹ Michelet, *Histoire romaine*, Paris 1831, book 3, chap. 5.

triumvirate or "Commission of Three", an appellation borrowed from the usual number of persons employed by the state as commissioners for executing any particular service, and bestowed in mockery on the three individuals who were purposing to dispose of the whole government of the Commonwealth with no authority but their own ambition.'³⁰

Conyers Middleton, the notorious sceptic, in his biography of Cicero in 1839 was correct in calling it 'a triple alliance', and also fulminated against it in very similar vein:

'This is commonly called the first triumvirate: which was nothing else in reality but a traitorous conspiracy of three, the most powerful citizens of Rome, to extort from their country by violence what they could not obtain by law.'³¹

Finally the modern era of Roman historiography dawned. Although Barthold Georg Niebuhr's history of Rome did not progress beyond the Punic wars (because he was forever returning to revise the early volumes), we have notes of his lectures on the Republic. Perhaps the fault lies with his students, but there is nothing on the alliance.³² Theodor Mommsen, on the other hand, mentioned it often: 'the second coalition' (the first being that of 71–70, between Pompey and Crassus), 'the coalition'.³³ Equally careful was the unjustly neglected George Long in his analysis of the decline of the Republic: 'an alliance', 'the confederation', and the 'Coalition'.³⁴ Christian Lange's Roman antiquities of 1876 similarly mentioned 'ein Bund'.³⁵

In the same year, however, there appeared a second volume, almost exactly two centuries after that of Broe, with the title of *The Roman trium-*

³⁰ Arnold, *History of Rome*, 3 vols, London 1838–1843, 2.347.

³¹ Middleton, *History of the life of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, London 1839, 78.

³² Niebuhr, *Lectures on the history of Rome*, 3 vols, London 1849.

³³ Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 3 vols, Berlin 1854–1856, Eng. trans. from 8th ed. *History of Rome*, 5 vols, NY 1895, 4.504, 514, 515.

³⁴ Long, *The decline of the Roman Republic*, 5 vols, London 1869, 3.401–402.

³⁵ Lange, *Römische Alterthümer*, Berlin 1876, 3.278.

virates. The author was Charles Merivale, Dean of Ely, and the slim volume was simply a history from Sulla to Actium. He thus went out of his way to give a strange and inappropriate title to the history of this period. He wrote of 'the league between these three aspirants to a dominant power in the state, which is marked as the First Triumvirate.' He then immediately admitted that it was not

'a regularly appointed board of three for the administration of affairs. It neither had, nor pretended to have, any legal basis; it was no more than a spontaneous and possibly a tacit understanding ... In the eyes of others it was a regnum.'

According to Merivale, they obtained their title 'rather as a nickname than as an established fact.'³⁶

After Drumann and Groebe, referred to at the beginning of this essay, in the twentieth century Guglielmo Ferrero in his study of the greatness and decline of Rome 1902–1904 referred carefully to the 'coalition', but then spoiled everything by his marginal title, 'the triumvirate revealed'.³⁷ William Heitland's 1909 history of the Republic oscillated wildly: 'a coalition', 'the so-called First Triumvirate', 'the so-called Triumvirs', 'The Three', and 'the Triumvirs'.³⁸ Herbert Havell in 1914 wrote of 'that famous Triple Alliance ... which is known in history as the First Triumvirate'.³⁹ Ernst Meyer's famous study of the principate in 1918 followed the major German tradition in referring carefully to the 'Koalition', 'Verbindung', 'Bund' and 'Verschwörung'.⁴⁰ Max Cary was the author of the relevant chapter in the *Cambridge Ancient History* and followed Heitland's model. He wrote of 'a partnership', 'an alliance', and 'the coalition', 'or as it came

³⁶ Merivale, *The Roman triumvirates*, London 1876, 67, 192.

³⁷ Ferrero, *Grandezza e decadenza di Roma*, 5 vols, Milan 1902–1904, Eng. trans. *The greatness and decline of Rome*, 5 vols, NY 1909, 1.316, 317, 324, cf. 320.

³⁸ Heitland, *The Roman Republic*, 3 vols, Cambridge 1909, 3.123, 124, 125, 130.

³⁹ Havell, *Republican Rome*, London 1914, 487.

⁴⁰ Meyer, *Caesars Monarchie und das Principat des Pompeius*, Berlin 1918, 3rd. ed. 1922, 55.

to be called, the First Triumvirate', but the chapter was entitled 'The first triumvirate'.⁴¹

The Americans entered the field with Frank Marsh's standard volume in the Methuen series on the later Republic. He noted:

'This combination is known as the First Triumvirate, but it should be borne in mind that it was simply an agreement between three politicians, two of whom were private citizens and the third a candidate for office, to work together for their own personal advantage.'⁴²

The unchallenged classic of Republican historiography in the twentieth century appeared in 1939. Ronald Syme wrote of a 'secret compact', 'the dynasts', and 'the dynasts' coalition' – but also of 'the triumvirate'.⁴³ Even Homer nods. And following Marsh's lead, the French volume in the parallel Clio series, the *Histoire générale*, Jerome Carcopino's Roman history in 1943 under the heading 'le premier triumvirat' warned that this was a modern term, 'une expression amphibologique'(!). It had nothing in common with the second triumvirate,

'n'eut rien d'une institution consacrée. Ce fut, en marge de l'état, l'association privé de trois hommes qui ... unissaient sous la foi des serments, leurs influences et leurs projets pour diriger la République.'⁴⁴

In the Italian series, *Storia di Roma*, the author of the fifth volume, Roberto Paribeni, in 1950 also drew attention to the anomalies: 'il così detto primo triumvirato', 'la denominazione impropria di primo triumvirato, sorta dopo che ne fu palese l'esistenza e l'azione', and after the name of triumvirate was given to a very different thing, the magistracy of 43.⁴⁵

In her famous study of Caesarian politics, Lily Ross Taylor wrote that Pompey 'made a deal with Caesar and Crassus ... the so-called first trium-

⁴¹ Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 9, 1938, 514–515.

⁴² Marsh, *History of the Roman world* 146–30, London 1934, 179.

⁴³ Syme, *The Roman revolution*, Oxford 1939, 35–37.

⁴⁴ Carcopino, *Histoire romaine*, 2.2., Paris 1943, 716.

⁴⁵ Paribeni, *L'età di Cesare e di Augusto*, Bologna 1950, 83.

virate, which was, as Cicero recognised, a rival *factio*', and that 'they called themselves amici or socii, friends in the old tradition of Roman political alliance'. Her favourite – and revealing – phrase was 'deal'.⁴⁶ Richard Smith in his study of the failure of the Republic of 1955, which blamed all the reformers for the collapse of the system, wrote of 'the first triumvirate' without further ado.⁴⁷ Alfred Heuss in his 1960 history preferred 'dieser Dreibund, das sogenannte Erste Triumvirat – einer privaten Verständigung'.⁴⁸ More outspoken was Erich Gruen in his study of the collapse in 1974:

'The phrase "first triumvirate" itself is a modern construct, unattested in the ancient evidence. It draws on false analogy from the triumvirate of Octavian, Antony and Lepidus in 43, which possessed formal sanction and received dictatorial authority. By contrast, the union of political cliques in 59 was an informal amicitia.'⁴⁹

Perhaps cautioned by these various strictures, Peter Wiseman in the second edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* in 1989 preferred the term 'alliance'.⁵⁰

We may turn finally to biographies of the three participants in the alliance. James Froude's study of Caesar in 1907 was remarkably vague and misleading, referring only to the fact that 'all parties outside the patrician circle were combined for a common purpose'(!)⁵¹ Groebe, also author of the entry on Caesar in *RE*, naturally stated that 'das Bund ... wurde von den Triumvirn eidlich bekräftigt'.⁵² William Warde Fowler in 1925 referred to 'the coalition' and 'the triple league' of 60, but by 56 it had become 'the

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Party politics at Rome in the age of Caesar*, Berkeley 1949, 21, 48, 71, 132.

⁴⁷ Smith, *The failure of the Roman Republic*, Cambridge 1955, 113.

⁴⁸ Heuss, *Römische Geschichte*, Braunschweig 1960, 200.

⁴⁹ Gruen, *The last generation of the Republic*, Berkeley 1974, 90.

⁵⁰ *Cambridge Ancient History*², vol. 9, 1989, 367, 374.

⁵¹ Froude, *Caesar*, London 1907, 188.

⁵² *RE* X, 1917, 186–259.

triumvirate'.⁵³ John Buchan, similarly, in his biography dedicated to Aircraftman T.E. Shaw, began with 'the alliance of the dynasts', but again by Lucca, 'the triumvirate was reestablished'.⁵⁴ Matthias Gelzer's study, on the other hand, obviously took pains to be precise: there was 'an agreement', making the 'three confederates', 'the coalition of the three great principes', otherwise called 'the three allies' and 'the three dynasts'.⁵⁵ Herman Strasburger's special study of Caesar's early years in 1966 never wavered from the term 'Dreibund'.⁵⁶ Zvi Yavetz in his analysis of the changing historiography of Caesar wrote simply of 'the alliance between Pompey, Crassus and Caesar'.⁵⁷ The most recent biography, by Christian Meier, on the other hand, refers both to an 'alliance' and the 'triumvirate'.⁵⁸

The biographers of Pompey may again begin with Gelzer, who in 1949 preferred 'Dreibund'.⁵⁹ More characteristic of the English tradition, on the other hand, John Leach in 1978, although sometimes using the term 'coalition' or 'the three', after introducing the 'coalition which has become known as the first triumvirate', almost always referred to the 'triumvirs'.⁶⁰ Robin Seager's biography of the next year wrote of 'the coalition' or 'the three partners' in 'the compact which modern scholarship has misleadingly dubbed the "first triumvirate"'.⁶¹ Most recently Peter Greenhalgh carefully referred to 'the secret compact', 'the partnership', 'the coalition', 'the three headed monster' and the 'Big Three'.⁶²

⁵³ Fowler, *Julius Caesar and the foundation of the Roman imperial system*, London 1925, 102, 115, 178.

⁵⁴ Buchan, *Julius Caesar*, London 1933, 69, 92.

⁵⁵ Gelzer, *Caesar*, Stuttgart 1921, 6th ed. 1959, Eng. trans. Oxford 1969, 68, 117, 121, 127.

⁵⁶ Strasburger, *Caesars Eintritt in die Geschichte*, Darmstadt 1966, 23, 38, 48, 70, 87, 100, 134, 139.

⁵⁷ Yavetz, *Julius Caesar and his public image*, London 1983, 137.

⁵⁸ Meier, *Caesar*, Berlin 1982, Eng. trans. London 1995, 188.

⁵⁹ Gelzer, *Pompeius*, Munich 1949, 140, 142, 144, 145, 149.

⁶⁰ Leach, *Pompey the Great*, London 1978, 121–123, 125, 127–131, 141, 144–145, 148.

⁶¹ Seager, *Pompey, a political biography*, Oxford 1979, 82, 84.

⁶² Greenhalgh, *Pompey*, London 1986, 201–204.

Crassus has, of course, attracted less attention. Albino Garzetti in the long series of articles in *Athenaeum* in the 1940s complained about the use of the term first triumvirate which was unknown to all sources, because there was no legally constituted office. He referred constantly to the alliance as 'complotto', 'patto', 'lega', 'alleanza', 'accordo', 'unione'.⁶³ Frank Adcock in 1966 nevertheless called the alliance the first triumvirate, although seeming to prefer the term 'coalition',⁶⁴ as did Bruce Marshall.⁶⁵ More recently Allan Ward in his 1977 study, after introducing 'the coalition', 'often designated as the "First Triumvirate"', employed various alternatives: 'a mutual union', 'the partnership', and 'the three dynasts'.⁶⁶

Three things have emerged from this survey of scholarship of what is justly regarded as a turning-point in the political history of the late Republic: a paradox or mystery, clear patterns, and a possible answer. The paradox is that a political alliance has been continually referred to for centuries by the most eminent scholars by a name which not only does not exist in any primary source, but which is also completely and obviously erroneous. The mystery is that almost all of these scholars have been fully aware of this contradiction and yet have continued to use the term, instead of confining it to an explanatory footnote.

The patterns are telling. The great scholars of the Renaissance did not make any mistake about the coalition, nor did the leading scholars of the seventeenth century. By the next century, however, many histories, both English and French, were employing the misleading term; they even began to suggest that it was well known. At the same time, it is interesting to note, historians also began to criticise the coalition in very strong terms as undermining the Republican political system. Why historians of this age should have been more alert to such damaging political alliances or cliques than their predecessors is hard to see, given the many examples from all periods of history. It seems that for the first time in 1807 Levesque revealed that the term was a modern invention. Arnold obviously followed Ferguson in asserting that its origin was 'mockery'. In more recent times it may be

⁶³ Garzetti, *Athenaeum* 22 (1944) 5–11.

⁶⁴ Adcock, *Marcus Crassus millionaire*, Cambridge 1966, 41, 43, 45.

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Crassus*, Amsterdam 1976, 99f.

⁶⁶ Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the late Republic*, Missouri 1977, 214, 216, 218, 220.

asserted that German scholars have been more precise than generally English, French or Italian, although general histories, such as those by Marsh, Carcopino and Paribeni all began to issue cautions. Among the biographers of the three participants the same national variations are met, as one would expect, with a tendency in most recent studies to be more exact.

It was, as far as can be determined, one of the earliest biographers of Caesar, the Italian Schiappalaria, who was the first person to use the term 'triumvirate', falsely citing Cicero as his authority. The error thus has a far longer history than one would at first suspect, going back at least to this little known biographer of the late sixteenth century.⁶⁷

University of Melbourne

⁶⁷ I thank Ernst Badian for providing the stimulus to this discussion and the British Library for providing the marvellous facilities for carrying it out.