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Imagining Power
Reality Gaps in the Roman Empire

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Abstract

This article reflects on some of the problems inherent in the study of imperial (self)presentation. It argues that Roman emperors had to bridge the gap between the reality of emperorship and its perception by different layers of society. Augustus solved the problem by putting forward a multi-faceted imperial persona, to whom different audiences could relate differently. This plurality characterised ‘normal’ images of power in the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. Exception to the rule was imagery of those rulers who expressly aimed to legitimate themselves through clear but controversial visual programmes. This resulted in inflexible imagery, and antagonistic reactions. The problems which the Roman Empire faced in the third century widened the ‘gap’ between imperial image and daily reality, and changed the dynamics through which Roman ideology was formulated.6

Every era has its own political reality gaps. Especially sole rulers regularly broadcast images which often bear only little relation to reality. The Roman Empire, which in many ways could be described as a military dictatorship, was no exception.1 In the 3rd century AD, for instance, a period in which the Empire was under massive pressure, and saw more than fifty more or less legitimate rulers and usurpers, an army officer named Domitian is said to have become usurper over part of the Roman Empire for a short spell in AD 271.2 In fact, there was so little evidence for this usurpation, that up to a few years ago, there was serious doubt about Domitian’s position. That doubt was set aside recently when a single silvered bronze radiate coin of this Domitian II was discovered among a hoard (the Chalgrove II) of Roman coins found near Chipping Norton (Oxfordshire). This shows him clearly portrayed as emperor (fig 1). It was, actually, the second bronze coin showing the usurper, but the first sample was found under dubious circumstances in Southern France (Roman Aquitania) around 1900, and was deemed a forgery.3 Though the new find now makes Domitian’s accession all but certain, his reign must have been exceedingly brief. Bronze coins were minted in large numbers, and are therefore also found in substantial quantities. Only two remaining coins thus signify an extremely short sway. For instance, over two hundred coins remain of the rather obscure usurper Laelian, who in AD 269 opposed for two or three months the first Gallic emperor Postumus.4

Domitian seems not to have had a solid base of power. The 3rd century AD was characterised by unrest and usurpations, but on the whole would-be-emperors were supported by thousands of soldiers before trying to gain power over (parts of) the Roman realm. Domitian II, it seems, occupied the mint accompanied by only few men, which left him with nobody to defend his claim. Striking coins that proclaimed his power seems to have been more important than consolidating the power proper. The legend CONCORDIA MILITUM (harmony of the troops), which accompanied a standing Concordia, was wholly out of place. Unless Domitian tried to gain support by having his head depicted on coins, and wanted - like the Wizard of Oz - to be in power by making people believe that he was in power, through a feigned image. If so, it was unsuccessful. He was executed without further ado.5

Domitian II expressed an as yet unfounded powerbase on coins by minting his portrait on coinage. He was not the first would-be-usurper

Fig. 1. Chalgrove bronze of Domitian II (photo R. Abdy, courtesy British Museum, London).
to do so. Earlier, at the end of the 2nd century, the infamous emperor Commodus (180-192) only believed that his ostensibly trustworthy underling Perennis was trying to betray him when soldiers showed him coins bearing Perennis’ portraits. Here too, execution followed. The importance of imperial portraits on coins is likewise clear from a surprised statement by the classical author Dio Cassius - a late-2nd/early-3rd century Roman senator from the Greek east - that in earlier times the emperor Vitellius (AD 69) had not destroyed the coins of his enemies and predecessors Nero, Galba and Otho. Equally interesting in this respect is the somewhat outlandish story by the same author that the emperor Caracalla (AD 211-217) convicted a young man for bringing a coin - and hence the imperial face - into a brothel, thus bringing it in disrespect, only to be released because the emperor died before the time of execution. The link between the value of the coin and the portrait of the emperor may be clearest from the notion held by some Romans that if it was the imperial portrait which gave a coin its value, then the greater the portrait on a coin was, the greater its value; a misconception that some laws explicitly warned against.

Imperial power was indicated through imperial coinage. The imagery on coins both reflected that power, but in some ways also defined and constructed it. Domitian’s attempts to hold the mint thus appear similar to modern attempts to occupy radio and television stations in contemporary coups d’etat! These too fail without further military support. Imagining power was not enough without armed support. Reality got in the way.

MASKING POWER

300 years before Domitian’s attempts to gain power, in 31 BC, Octavian, the later emperor Augustus, won a decisive victory at Actium, in the battle between himself and Mark Antony over supremacy in the Roman Empire. This was as much a battle of words and images as it was one of men and ships. Propaganda and counter-propaganda were used to convince people of the Roman-ness of the protagonists. Octavian was to be shown as the saviour of society - restorer of respect (to the res publica and the gods) - with his opponent depicted as a degenerate drunk, the whipping boy for Cleopatra, who was presented as a Wicked Witch of the East. When Octavian had won the military battle, there was no longer an opponent to play images off against. From 31 BC onwards, it was clear to all that the realm had only one ruler. Defining this ruler was a challenge not just for the new emperor himself and those surrounding him, but also for the heterogeneous population of the Roman Empire. Thus, directly after Actium, many must have been thinking about proper ways to flatter the new ruler, showing which side they - of course - had always been on. Anecdotal evidence may illustrate this, though the story is from a much later source, and may suggest as much about general power structures as it does of the situation at the time:

Among those who welcomed him on his return in state from his victory at Actium was a man with a raven which he had taught to say: ‘Ave, Caesar, victorious commander’. Octavian was charmed by this compliment and gave the man 20,000 sesterces for the bird. But the bird’s trainer had a partner, and, when none of this large sum of money had come his way, he told Octavian that the man had another raven and suggested that he should be made to produce it as well. The bird was produced and repeated the words which it was taught to say: ‘Ave, Antony, victorious commander’. The princeps, however, was not at all angry but instead simply ordered the man to share the money with his mate.

The story continues with others, inevitably, training flattering birds, and producing parrots and magpies, which Octavian duly bought. Not all birds were equally studious. A linguistically challenged raven heard his owner lament repeatedly ‘nothing to show for trouble and expense’ (opera et impensa periit). When the raven finally did manage to hail the emperor the latter replied that he had similar birds at home already. Upon which the bird repeated his master’s words, ‘nothing to show for trouble and expense’, which so amused Octavian that he gave more money on that occasion than on all others.

Though the story might well be fictional, the image it brings to mind, of subjects searching for modes to compliment their new master, is also found elsewhere. In Athens, for instance, in 21/20 BC, a statue was carved for the new emperor (now called Augustus) as the new Apollo: Νέος Ἀπόλλων. Athenian local elite recognised and acknowledged the power of the new ruler, by equating him with the god Apollo, a divinity to whom Augustus had always shown honour - and who, in the earlier mentioned battle of images with Mark Antony, was clearly positioned on
Augustus’ side. Associating the new emperor with Apollo is often seen as a reaction to a centrally constructed notion, but it cannot be sufficiently emphasised that - in this case at least - there was no such central notion.

Though Augustus had emphasised that Apollo was his favourite deity and (unsubstantiated) rumours circulated that Augustus had once dressed up as Apollo at an infamous dinner-party, clear images of Augustus as Apollo were never centrally produced. Only in 29 BC a series of coins was issued, which show the face of Apollo, the features of whom might perhaps - with some reading into it - bear resemblance to those of the emperor (fig. 2). Yet, perhaps to avoid any possible confusion, not a single coin depicting Apollo’s face was struck at Rome from 27 BC onwards. The Athenians who set up their image of a ‘new Apollo’ did so because they thought it might please the emperor, not because the emperor had showed them that it would.

The enthusiastic ravens and images of the emperor as a god in Athens suggest that Roman subjects subjugated themselves to their new superior lord. But this new superior lord had different ideas. He could not simply drop the carefully constructed image which had suited him so well in the battle with Mark Antony. He was the defender of Roman-ness. Wielding supreme power did not mean he could show his might. The new image of Augustus was that of someone taking responsibility, but not acting as sole ruler. After all, his adoptive father Julius Caesar had been assassinated for showing superiority without measure. Augustus, therefore, slowly shaped his power in various ‘constitutional settlements’, and described his ensuing position rather modestly in his Res Gestae, which was prominently displayed after his death through various inscriptions throughout the realm:

After this time I excelled all in influence (auctoritas), although I possessed no more official power (potestas) than others who were my colleagues in the several magistracies.

During his life, too, the unmistakable power of the emperor was hidden behind more traditional facades. Images masked the reality of power. Even the well-known building activities of the emperor were often presented as restoration activities. Where that was impossible, like in the case of the Palatine Apollo temple, the motives for construction were mostly phrased in traditional terms. Where Domitian II, hurriedly minting coins, tried to gain power by appearing powerful, Augustus could remain powerful by masking his power. In both cases image and reality bore little resemblance to each other.

**PRODUCING AN EMPEROR**

Gaps between image and reality as sketched above tend to cause conflicts. Sometimes, these conflicts are easily solved. The gap between Domitian’s image and reality was bridged by his execution. Augustus, however, managed to bridge his ‘reality gap’ by using conflicting images. There was no need to erase one image - in different contexts different images could exist alongside one another. Different people, in different areas, acknowledged Augustus in different ways. He was simultaneously a prominent - but not overbearing - senator and absolute ruler. He was human, superhuman and divine - traditional and innovative.

There have been regular attempts to link these different images, or at least to create a hierarchy between them. In doing so, images of Augustus as unmitigated autocrat are often marginalised. For instance, Pollini argues that the divine-Hellenistic images of Augustus, such as the famous Gemma Augustea (fig 3) ‘cannot be considered indicative of official Augustan ideology because of the private nature of the cameo’. This is true. Yet, an image which is not indicative is not absent, nor invisible. The Augustus of the Gemma Augustea - throned and laurate, and physically elevated in the audience’s eyes, is as much part of...
imperial imagery as centrally issued notions of a Roman-traditional princeps. Private images were visible to Augustus’ contemporaries, and often show how those contemporaries thought the emperor wanted to be seen. Though both ancient and modern authors have often tried to (re)construct a ‘coherent’ Augustus, one might suggest to simply accept the incoherence of Augustan imagery, and conclude that the Romans themselves - at least for a substantial period of time - did not quite know what to do with their new ruler either.

Augustus’ image, then, may not have been centrally moulded and well-defined, but rather one that developed through second-guessing by the different subjects of what their new ruler expected and, probably, reactions from the centre to these expectations. Augustus used the resulting plurality of images to his advantage. It might not be a coincidence that the emperor Julian the Apostate (360-363) - known especially for trying to ‘repaganise’ the Christian Roman Empire - already used Augustus as by-word for a flexible image:

Octavian entered, changing colour continuously, like a chameleon, turning now pale now red; one moment his expression was gloomy, sombre, and overcast, the next he unbent and showed all the charms of Aphrodite and the Graces.

Plurality of images could also explain how emperors as different as Vespasian, Trajan and Hadrian could all present themselves - with some justice - as a ‘new Augustus’. They simply stressed different aspects of the Augustus-persona.

This plurality appears a uniform characteristic of imperial representations in the early Roman Empire. The coexistence of images which, strictly speaking, ought to exclude one another made the emperor easier to accept for the wide-ranging population of the Roman Empire. These different images could then be used to appeal to different audiences - or at least almost every emperor accepted that different ‘target-groups’ put forward different images. Hadrian, for instance, famous for his Wall as much as for retreating from occupied territory, and demarking the limits of empire, could be considered a peace-emperor par excellence. His statues and coins, on the other hand, regularly depicted him in military gear (figs 4-6). And, though he did not use many titles on his coins, locally fabricated inscriptions mention substantial numbers of titles. In fact, much more than Augustus (and perhaps even Nero), Hadrian was locally celebrated as Ζεὺς Ὁλύμπιος, Διόνυσος, Νέος Διόνυσος, Νέος Ἀσκληπιός, Νέος Ἡλιος, though he never centrally presumed divine status.

These parallel, or even conflicting, images of power were acceptable and perhaps even encouraged, as long as they did no damage to the imperial powerbase. That does not exclude some measure of central control. Arrian of Nicomedia, for instance, the 2nd century philosopher/historian, wrote a famous passage in a letter to Hadrian about a statue of the emperor which he had seen at the Black Sea coast:

A statue of you stands there, rather fitting in its posture, as it points towards the sea, but as far as the execution goes, neither did it resemble you, nor was it very beautiful. Send, therefore, a statue in the same posture, one truly worthy to carry your name, for the place is wholly suitable for an eternal memorial.

In this case, perhaps, it was Arrian who thought that the statue would be unacceptable to the emperor. Yet within Hadrian’s reign there is also evidence for imperial limits to imagery, and perhaps even restrictions proper. The evidence can be found in Hadrian’s coinage. In AD 117, when Hadrian had just come to power but was yet to return to the capital, a series of coins was issued in his honour, depicting him as ‘Father of the fatherland’ (pater patriae; fig. 4). A second series of coins, issued after Hadrian had arrived at Rome, no longer uses the title pater patriae (fig. 5). Only ten years later, in
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128 AD, the title is used again (fig. 6). Here, it seems clear that whoever decided coin types anticipated the way in which the new emperor wanted to be seen, but was mistaken. As soon as Hadrian returned to Rome, he corrected the image.28

Thus, it seems, emperors were ‘produced’, creating the emperors’ images. From the bottom up different layers of society anticipated how the emperor wanted to be seen. The emperor, in turn, tried to adjust his image to expectations. The central imagery which resulted could lead to local reactions, which in turn could occasionally cause new adjustments in central imagery.29 Different images were moulded to fit into the different realities that constituted Roman society.

CLARITY AND MADNESS

Not all emperors played by the rule. The process of producing emperors, in which all sides did their utmost to abide to the other sides’ expectations in creating an imperial image, does not seem to have held sway for the so called ‘mad emperors’ of Rome. Infamous emperors like Caligula (37-41), Nero (54-68), Commodus (180-192) and Elagabalus (218-222), because of madness or for other reasons, broadcast very specific images.30 Nero, for instance, so clearly presented himself as a theatrical autocrat, and Commodus as a divine gladiator, that other images paled into absence, especially since these rulers personally put the image forward - and lived it in the public eye.31 These strong central images left little space for inserting parallel imagery. When Nero expressly emphasised maternal ancestry in his titulature (the first emperor to do so), inscriptions throughout the empire had to follow him rapidly and consistently.32 Similarly, when Commodus, dressed like Hercules, opened the consular year accompanied by gladiators, it became difficult to portray him simultaneously as kindly senator.33 Interestingly, the emperors for whom this analysis holds are without question young men, whose only claim to the throne was an explicitly dynastic one. Unlike experienced emperors such as Tiberius, Trajan or Marcus Aurelius they could not refer back to their accomplishments and may well have had to overcompensate for this in order to gain acceptance as a ruler.34 One way of doing so was through the creation - in actions and images - of an imperial persona which was not depended on experience, but was justified through other factors.35 Clearly, the choice of the persona was important for the emperors’ (later) reputation, but it might be suggested that the lack of a flexible way to interpret their imperial images was of the utmost importance for the perception of these emperors as mad. Going against expectations carries risks.

One should not exaggerate the point. ‘Sane’ rulers sometimes also presented themselves and their family unequivocally. Vespasian - Nero’s successor - clearly steered away from his predecessor’s portraits and portrayed his head bald and wrinkled against Nero’s idealised features and careful coiffure (figs 7-8).36 This was a clear and unambiguous change of imagery. But even if the image was centrally constructed, there remained possibilities for slight variations. Vespasian was generally portrayed (in literature and visually) as a kindly and experienced, though somewhat mean, older man, but nobody denied that he was also a dominant commander - which was also emphasised by the many coins that showed IUDAICA CAPTA (fig. 9). And in any case, Vespasian’s image was created to be least offensive to most audiences, whilst the autocratic image of the likes of Caligula and Nero was unacceptable to at least the higher
echelons of society. There are even indications that Vespasian’s image reacted to local realities.37

The importance of these subtleties, and of imperial images more generally, should not be underestimated. The emperor’s authority was absolute. His image, on coins or in statuary, was omnipresent. The young Marcus Aurelius was rightly (and famously) told by his tutor Fronto:

> You know how in all money-changers’ bureaux, booths, bookstalls, eaves, porches, windows, anywhere and everywhere there are likenesses of you exposed to view (Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.*, 4, 12.4).

Recent estimates hold that the total number of statues in Rome by the mid 2nd century AD was approximately half a million - or one statue for every two persons. Rome’s ‘second population’ formed an intrinsic part of public life, and imperial prototypes did much to shape other public, and private, statuary.38 Private portraits from the provinces, and equally from Italy itself, regularly followed fashions which were expressed and initiated through imperial models. Often these portraits were modelled so closely on imperial images that musea still erroneously identify these busts as small imperial statues.39 Even state-portraits, by client-kings such as Juba II of Numidia, were often based on imperial exempla.40

**IMAGE IS EVERYTHING**

Plurality, it seems, characterised ‘normal’ images of power in the first centuries of the Roman Empire. Exception to the rule was imagery of those rulers whose power base may not have been sufficiently all-encompassing. That imagery aimed to expressly legitimate the emperor with some groups in the realm, through clear but highly controversial visual programmes. This resulted in inflexible imagery, and often antagonistic reac-

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*Fig. 7. Nero, Glyptothek München, inv. 321 (photo E.M. Moormann).*

*Fig. 8. Vespasian Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, inv. 2585 (photo E.M. Moormann).*
tions. In turn, these reactions, especially by the higher echelons of society who wrote history, could lead to negative posthumous reputations as ‘mad’ emperors. Rulers who were sufficiently certain of their power base could (and did) adopt a more flexible pose. The principle might be expressed more generally. True power is characterised by the absence of necessity to act upon it. If a position of power is inescapable, it need not be emphasised. There were, of course, certain parameters, such as ubiquity of the images of ruling emperors, and the monopoly for the imperial family on images on coins. But within these boundaries, possibilities were near-endless.

It might be hardly surprising that images of power change in a time of crisis. When it is unclear who is in control, flexible depictions can become more problematic. The Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD was clearly a community in which central authority was - to say the least - somewhat unstable. There was a structural lack of dynastic stability. The empire saw fragmentation, multiple usurpers over the whole or parts of Roman territory, and changes in traditional patterns of status.41 When individuals such as Domitian II find possibilities to start minting their own coins, clear power relations are at a low. As a result, those in power changed their messages. More than before, military prowess was systematically put forward through various centrally-issued coin types, whereas messages emphasising the ability of rulers to guarantee aequitas (equality/stability) were much less prominent than before.42

There is discussion about who exactly decided on imperial coin types, but there does seem to be consensus that central coinage communicated central messages from the emperors, or those directly surrounding him.43 The centre, then, adapted imperial representation to changes in reality, even if it did not fully reflect it. According to this view, images of the Tetrarchs were wholly created at the centre. If, in this view, imperial imagery in the first two centuries AD could be described as a dialogue, or perhaps a discussion with various members of the audience, Tetrarchic imagery had best be described as a soliloquy - a theatrical explanation to the public, somewhat detached from any reality.46 And indeed, statues, paintings, coins and text all broadcast the same, or at least very similar, central messages. The emperors thus formed a self-supporting institution, inseparable and whole. Porphyry reliefs that were originally part of two columns in Constantinople but now form a famous statue group in Venice (fig. 10) illustrate the point most clearly. The emperors form a homogeneous group.47 As a consequence, personal features of the individual rulers were ignored, which was apparently deemed immaterial. The central image of unity and coherence was more important than real expressions.

This unity was also expressed by rulers clasping hands, or by the clasped hands as loose symbol. This became a regular image on coins and in statues - dextrarum iunctio (with the right hands clasped).48 That very phrase was used in panegyric as well:

For you rule that State with one mind, nor does the great distance which separates you from governing, so to speak, with right hands clasped.

Notably, however, there has been recent emphasis on Tetrarchic imagery which places less emphasis on imperial homogeneity, and might allow for some more flexibility in the way the imperial image was created.50 On at least some of Tetrarchic coins the different emperors were recognisably diverse through specific features.51
Likewise, though Mamertinus, the further unknown author who (sometime between AD 287 and 289) delivered the panegyric to Maximian from which the above citation stems, seems to have been exceptionally sycophantic and did not expect his audience to be surprised by this, it is not clear whether he simply followed orders, or retained some initiative. The notion of Concordia, for instance, which Mamertinus emphasised, only became a common Tetrarchic coin type after AD 289. It may of course be that this orator reacted to what was communicated to him by the court at Trier (where he probably delivered his panegyric), but it could also be that his expressions formed the basis for a later formulation of Tetrarchic messages.

If so, the process is somewhat comparable to what seems to have happened nearly two centuries earlier, when Pliny the Younger read his panegyric to the emperor Trajan in 100 AD. There, the interaction between expectations which poets put forward and imperial reaction is pronounced. Pliny seems to have been continuously ‘second-guessing’ what the emperor wanted to hear, and spent a substantial part of his speech defending his sincerity in using expressions that were near to (but not necessarily an exact copy of) imperial self-fashioning. If, indeed, Mamertinus worked in a similar way, it shows that even the Tetrarchic ideology retained some flexibility. Still, in one way at least the difference between the two panegyrics is pronounced. Mamertinus’ claims (and indeed many of the centrally produced coins and statuary) show the absence of any correlation between image and reality.

For unity amongst the tetrarchs was little and far between, and there certainly were hierarchical differences within the ranks. Statues might proclaim unity and power; that did not make continuous usurpations and malcontent less real. The summit here might well be a famous prize edict, issued by the tetrarchs in 301 (fig. 11). It introduced maximum prizes on a wide range of products, possibly to boost spending power for local elites. But the only direct result of the edict was the creation of a substantial black market. The tetrarchs suggested that they had a measure of control which proved wholly absent. Similar notions arise from the lengthy preamble to the edict, which celebrated peace and unchallenged supreme power - both conspicuously absent in reality. The emperors presented a fictitious authority, which was absent in most aspects of daily life. The images of power were wholly self-contained.

**Fig. 10. Tetrarchic Porphyry reliefs, Venice (photo E.M. Moormann).**

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**BRIDGING THE REALITY-GAP?**

One constant in describing images of Roman power has been a continuous conflict between image and reality. Not only did fact and fiction blur, but different fictions screened off different facts. Yet, if reality is shielded by a plurality of ‘spin’, how can historians researching Roman ideology nowadays find perspectives and gain insight in how the ancient world worked? Is there a path through the labyrinth of parallel and seemingly mutually exclusive images, which rulers and subjects, in discord and collaboration, have constructed around Roman rule?

One often used method is to turn to comparative history and the social sciences to find solutions. This has, among other contributions, led to what may well still be the most insightful brief survey of Roman emperorship, by Keith Hopkins. But material culture (and especially iconographic developments) has likewise been employed to analyse...
the construction of Roman ideology. The process has been greatly influenced by Paul Zanker’s seminal The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus. Zanker created a new - and highly influential - picture of Augustan ideology, using a multitude of sources, with prime positions for art and architecture. Following Zanker, many scholars have tried to amalgamate different types of sources into new coherent representations of Roman emperors. But one could pose methodological questions to this approach: does merging all kinds of different sources create a realistic image of ideologies and their background?

To an extent it does. Within individual reigns, central messages (or at least the visual representations of the reigning individuals) can be analysed through assembling a diversity of sources, whilst taking the historical contexts of the different sources into account. But the risk of the approach is that it fails to recognise the independent discourse that these types of sources adhere to a prolonged period of time. For example, there were conceptions on what ought to be on a coin, which over time became prescriptive for what is allowed on a coin. These conceptions differ from what could be expressed in a poem, or had to be stated in a panegyric. A useful comparison could be made to Roman orators: Conceptions about how these ought to move, behave and be dressed became prescriptive for how they wanted to move, behave, and be dressed, and indeed for how they needed to move, behave, and be dressed to be successful.

Again, different rules apply to medallions, mosaics, or statues. There might be regional differentiation, and historical developments do not necessarily follow the years of rule of individual historical figures. Not all types of sources were equally easy to adjust to individual ideological aims. Some resisted fashions much more than others. More generally: the different media through which individuals express their power, or in which reactions to those expressions figure, ought to be analysed through different ‘filters’ if the central point of attention is going to be historical processes, rather than historical individuals.

A specific example may clarify this. Take, for instance, the ‘internal discourse’ of Roman bathhouses. They were perfect buildings through which an emperor could show that he really cared for his people, and looking chronologically there is a rather obvious ‘monumental inflation’. That is, any constructed building had to be more impressive than a previously constructed building with the same function. Thus the bathhouse made by Agrippa on the Campus Martius in 25 BC (and which was finished completely in 19 BC) was impressive, but consecutive bathhouses had to be more impressive - larger, and richer in decoration - to show that an emperor cared as much. To state it somewhat crudely, building in Rome became a game of ‘my building is bigger than your building’. This development needs to be kept in mind. For looking within an individual reign, one might want to argue that the massive bathhouse of Diocletian (AD 306), which - measuring 316 by 356 meter - could house approximately 3,000 people at any one time and was magnificently decorated, betrays an insanely ambitious ruler, whose attempts to show the inhabitants of Rome how important they were, knew no bounds. However, the building - massive though it is - had to be this size to outdo the previous bathhouses, and one ought not conclude more from it than that Diocletian was willing to play the building game. In fact, the city of Rome was sidelined during the Tetrarchy, partly because primacy of Rome could not cohere to the proclaimed lack of hierarchy amongst the Tetrarchs.

The specific building in question ought to be ‘filtered’ through the chronological development of the general type of building, before drawing conclusions from it. Similarly, there seems to have been an inflation of titulature, and an ever-increasing formalisation of what should be on central coinage. The conventions in types of sources, thus, seem to follow their own developments. These developments ought to be charted before using coins and titles to make claims on the behaviour of individual rulers.
Important, also, for an analysis of the dynamics through which imperial images were constructed, a diachronic analysis of different media might allow for an independent assessment of those media which were strictly in the hands of the centre, and those which were much more influenced by the local level. Comparing some developments of imperial portraits on the obverses of coins issued at the centre (Roman Imperial Coinage) and at the local level (Roman Provincial Coinage) might be illustrative. Augustus’ portrait, for instance, appears much later on provincial coins than on central coins (regularly only in the later part of the reign), and without clear geographic or chronological patterns - suggesting differently paced reactions from the elites in individual cities to what was formulated at the centre.68 A later development, however, of presenting emperors as the new Alexander the Great originates on local coinage and is not taken up by central mints.69 These local coins have been used as evidence for a reaction to Caracalla’s (presumed) interest in Alexander,70 but many of them also fit into long-standing local traditions, and some of the local coins which do not follow an established pattern actually predate Caracalla’s sole reign. For instance, an important bronze from a young Caracalla carrying a shield which depicts Alexander.71 It may suggest that elites in those surrounding him) or from his subjects.72 In this way, it should become possible to trace the dynamics through which imperial imagery was created, and learn how rulers in the Roman world shaped, and imagined, their power.

Notes

* Earlier versions of this article have been presented as my inaugural address at the Radboud University Nijmegen, as the Wiedemann Lecture (Classical Association Nottingham Branch), and also at research seminars of the University of Durham and the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. Many thanks to the audiences at these various institutions, to the critical referees for BABESCH, and especially to Jai Elsner, who read and greatly improved an earlier draft.

1 Note, for instance, how emperors routinely wrote to the senate stating ‘I and the army are in good health’; Dio 69.14.3, Reynolds 1982, document 6, 12. This was at least noted by some: Favorinus allegedly stated that ‘the most learned man is the one who has thirty legions’; HA, Hadr. 15.13; Philostratus, VS 489.

2 Zosimus 1.49; HA, Gallienus 2.6; Tyr. Trig. 12.13; 14; 13.3. On the so-called crisis of the 3rd century, see now Potter 2004; Hekster 2008; Joine 2008.


4 Gilljam 1982.

5 Kienast 1996, 237.

6 Herodian 1.9.2-7; Hekster 2002, 63.

7 Dio, 64.6.1. Cf. Dio 60.22.3; 78.12.6 for the imperial destruction of coins by hated predecessors; Crump 1985, 430-431.

8 Dio 78.15.5.


10 The literature on the battle, its aftermath and the importance of Actium in Augustan ideology is immense. See most recently, Lange 2009. Gurval 1995 remains fundamental.


13 Peppas-Delmousou 1979. The Greek reads: Ξέρνετον καίσαρο νεών Απόλλωνος. Though Νεών is a reconstruction, the only viable alternative is Θεόν, which expresses an even stronger divine claim. Cf. SEG 23 (1968), no 450 (Tiberius); IG IIª, 3278 (Nero).

14 See Suet. Aug. 70, for the probably apocryphal dinner party at which guests had dressed up like the Olympian gods. Apart from the fact that there is emphasis in the text that this was a secret party (for which the evidence by definition would be scant, if at all existent), there is the question which A.D. Nock asked ages ago: who would have played the role of Jupiter with Augustus playing Apollo?; cited by Charlesworth 1933, 175, n. 2.

15 Pollini 1990, 349-350 with fig. 18.

16 On this image, see e.g.: Galinsky 1996, 10-20; 80-90; Rich/Williams 1999; Millar 2000, 1-30.


20 The cameo, of course, is no evidence for a central image of the emperor as explicitly divine. Augustus holds the lirius, and receives one of Tiberius’ victory, in a re-enactment of an actual victory celebration, though the
exact date is disputed (Koortbojian 2006, 207; Kuttnrer 1995, 188). His elevation over the imprisoned captives, furthermore, can be explained by Roman visual traditions in depicting ‘bound and humiliated enemy captives’ (Hölscher 2003, 12; Dillon 2006, 264). The emperor’s heroic nudity, however, and the presence of Jupiter’s eagle shows a status far beyond that of his subjects. Cf. Koortbojian 2006, 208 on ‘the new, effectively “monarchical” status of the princeps with respect to the religious institutions’.


21 Cf. the wonderful analysis of the way the imagery on the Ara Pacis may have appealed to ‘ordinary Romans’ in Clarke 2003, 19-28.


25 Cf. this to the notions developed by Stuart Hall on representation in more general terms, e.g. Hall 1997.

26 Hadrian in the East: BMCRE III, cxxiv, cxxvi. On imperial coinage as propaganda, and the direct influence of the emperor, see Levick 1999b, 41-60.


30 Rose 1997, 73. Neronian inscriptions: CIL. 16.4 (=Ils 1987); followed throughout the realm, e.g. CIL. 2.4926, 4928, 4884, 4719, 4734; 3.346, 382, 6123; 7.12; 10.8014; 11.1331, 6955.

31 Dio 73.22-4-6; Herodian 1.16-17; HA, Commodus, 17.1-2, with Hekster 2002, 160-161.

32 For the notion of the Principe, and especially the creation of imperial legitimacy, functioning as a system of ‘acceptance’ by various groups, in which gaining acceptance from army, urban plebs and senate was sufficient (and indeed the only way) to become a legitimate Roman emperor, see Flagg 1992.

33 Divine sanction is one such mode, as seems to be suggested by Commodus’ emphasis on the providentia deorum which led to his accession. The message appears from AD 180 to 184 without interruption on coins of all denominations, and is even mentioned in the Arval Acts (for the first time in Roman history) in AD 183; Martin 1982, 339-340 with references; Scheid 1998, 265 n94 (=CIL. 6.2099), III 15-18. The gods guaranteed his birth (and survival) and where thus responsible for his rule. Alternatively, Champlin 2003 suggestsively argues that Nero purposefully ‘staged’ his actions and images in a mythological context to rise ‘above normal human constraints’ (p. 237).

34 See especially the comments in Roman Gold from Finstein (Ashmolean Museum Exhibition 2003), on the last-minute adaptation of a Vespasianic coin type mentioning Pietas to one mentioning Iustitia, following the destruction of the Jewish Temple (as argued in a forthcoming publication by C. Howgego).

35 Stewart 2003, 1-7. The notion of a ‘second population’ was coined by Cassiodorus in the 6th century (Variae 7.15); cited by the insightful Edwards 2003, 44.

36 Zanker 1983; Trillmich 1993.


38 For references, see above n. 2.

39 Manders/Hekster (forthcoming).


42 Rees 2005.

43 Most explicitly in the splendid l’Orange 1984. A more nuanced version is Walden 1990.


45 RIC 5.2, 223, 262, 297, 304. Concordia was one of the most common cointypes from the reign of Nero onwards, and was continuously (and vainly) proclaimed by many 3rd-century rulers: De Blois 1998, 3403, 3442. Cf. Davies 1985; Smith 1997, 183; Rees, 1993, 193; Kleiner 1992, 403-4.


48 Bellinger et al. 1964, nos 9-19; Kent/Hirmer/Hirmer 1978, nos 583, 585.

49 On date and author, see Nixon/Rodgers 1994, 41-43.

50 Rees 2004, 75.

51 See for an analysis of the historical and ideological context in which the panegyric was delivered Leadbetter 2004, 260-264.

52 On this ‘second-guessing’ and emphasis on sincerity, see Bartsch 1994, 148-87.


54 Concoran 2000, 252-3, 297; Ermatinger 1990.

55 Concoran 2000, 207-13, with references on 207 n. 10.

56 Hopkins 1978, 197-242. Real progress in the comparative approach is made by recent comparisons between ancient Rome and China, as exemplified by Mutschler/Mittag 2008. There seem fewer advantages to the application of psychology on our biased texts, as attempted by Southern 1997, 119-125.

57 Originally published as Zanker 1987, based on his 1983 Jerome Lectures. The notion of a Roman ‘Bildprogramm’, is likewise (semantically) presented by Hölscher 1987. For more recent views, see Hölscher 2000.


60 Ghini 1999.

61 Candilio 1999.


63 Hekster 1999; Curran 2000, 5-25, 43-69.

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