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**Gunnar Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians. Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat. Hermes Einzelschriften, Heft 91.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004. Pp. 556. ISBN 3-515-08539-4. €80.00.**

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Based on the author's PhD research, this publication has all the characteristics of a German dissertation, most notably, a thorough, multidisciplinary approach, a wide scope, and a somewhat long-winded argument, which nonetheless results in a very readable book. Throughout the volume, Seelentag (henceforth S.) focuses on the notion of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung,' zooming in on various aspects of imperial representational politics during the reign of Trajan. It should be noted that English equivalents of the German 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' (usually rendered as 'representation of power') tend to obscure the ambiguity of the original term, which points to both hegemonic representation and self-representation, and, at the same time, describes the process by which power is constituted and maintained. As such, the concept of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' draws attention to the interrelations between representation and power, and it is precisely the dynamics of these relations that S. sets out to explore.

S. divides his book into six parts: (1) an introduction which outlines S.'s theoretical and methodological framework, (2) an extensive elaboration -- 14 chapters -- of the first years of Trajan's reign, (3) an analysis of Pliny's famous panegyric, (4) a reading of the Forum of Trajan, (5) a critical interpretation of the *Nummi Restituti*, and finally, (6) a concise conclusion. I will briefly discuss each of these sections.

In his introduction, S. finds fault with the traditional interpretations of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' that reduce this notion to 'propaganda' or 'self-representation,' concepts he considers too static and one-dimensional to describe the complex processes involved in the politics of representation during the Roman imperial age. S. himself conceives of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' as a multilayered, dynamic process that is negotiated on several levels of ancient Roman society. In his perspective, power does not function according to a top-down, hierarchical system but operates within a network of shifting power-relations which are essentially dependent on the principle of consensus. Consequently, S. defines 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' as the construction of a consensus, which is realised in the communication between the emperor and various sociocultural groups. S. convincingly singles out the senators, the *plebs urbana*, the army, and, of course, the emperor himself, as the main figures in the communicative process that helps to constitute imperial power by creating an ever-shifting consensus on the political status quo. Representations of the various stages in this ongoing communicative process are to be found in ancient literature, epigraphy, and the archaeological record, and S. tackles all these different sources with the same precision.

A key term in S.'s analyses is the concept of the *imago*, literally the 'image' of an emperor. Through different media, various aspects of the imperial persona are highlighted according to the divergent needs and expectations of different target groups. S. devotes most of his attention to letters, historiographic writing, coinage and architecture, all presenting images of the emperor that may well complement or contradict one another but, taken together, produce a multifaceted, highly political *imago*.<sup>1</sup> S. sees the *imago* as a focal point in the communication between the emperor and his subjects, since it functioned as a sort of screen onto which all kinds of political expectations, demands and desires could be projected. The senatorial class, the *plebs urbana*, and the army all demanded different things from the emperor, so that different images needed to be developed. In order to maintain existing social relations, the emperor continually had to prove that he coincided with his own *imago*, either by way of his virtuous character or through concrete political actions. S. takes care to stress the processual character of the 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' and, hence, the need to analyse the various imperial *imagines* according to their specific historical context.

In the book's second section, 'Von Rhein nach Rom,' S. focuses on the beginning of Trajan's reign, during which the emperor was absent from the capital. He is primarily interested in the question why Trajan stayed near the German border for almost two years and explores the negative effects of his absence on the relations between the emperor and the senatorial class: the limited means of communication intensified competition amongst the senators and obscured imperial policy. Above all, however, the senate saw itself devalued as an important partner in the communicative process that, according to S., secured imperial power as such: by not approaching the senate or the Roman people in his new role as emperor, Trajan denied the latter the possibility effectively to negotiate their position in the new political constellation. S. explains, however, that Trajan had good reasons not to return to the capital. The new emperor stood under great pressure to obtain a military *imago*: to acquire a solid reputation as a successful commander of the army and virtuous protector of the Roman empire. Trajan inherited this obligation not only from his Flavian predecessors -- most notably Vespasian, who had put great emphasis on the military aspect of the imperial *imago*, but also from his biological father, who had been a *homo novus* with a successful military career. In analysing how Trajan tried to secure a military *imago* for himself, S. gives a detailed account both of the concrete events in Germania, and of the various representations of these events circulating in Rome. He uses an impressive range of material to develop his argument, including the earliest coin emissions of Trajan's principate, Tacitus' *Germania*, a speech by Dio Chrysostom and several letters of Pliny. S. approaches these sources not only to reconstruct a specific period of Trajan's principate, but also to posit them as sites where contemporary power relations were negotiated in the absence of the real emperor. Although S. sometimes tends to repeat himself, and his great emphasis on Pliny is somewhat digressive, his careful readings of the various sources as components of a dynamic exchange of powerful images are both illuminating and convincing.

The third part of the book offers a detailed discussion of Pliny's *Gratiarum Actio*, dated to September 100. S. places this famous text in the wider context of panegyric rituals and persuasively argues that Pliny's speech must not be seen as a thank-you note for the granting of the suffect consulship but as an instantiation of a ritual exchange of praise between the emperor and the senate. This ritual was performed on a regular basis and constituted an occasion where mutual social relations could be defined and redefined. S. interprets the Panegyric neither as an uncritical reflection of the imperial political programme nor as a detached vision of the ideal *princeps* but rather as a site of communication between the senators and the emperor and, hence, as a vehicle for multiple mechanisms of power and

ideology. Different aspects of the emperor's *imago*, such as specific imperial virtues or political acts that were considered especially important, were both questioned and affirmed in a rhetorical composition, the meaning of which was intrinsically bound up with communicative processes and with the negotiation of power in a ritual context. Since senators were very well able to subtly alter the official 'language' of imperial (self)representation according to their own political desires, panegyric rituals were not so much forms of flattery, as platforms of communication. In this respect, S. shows how Pliny's text carefully acknowledges Trajan's military *imago* as an effective political fiction -- the emperor had, after all, not yet celebrated a triumph -- and at the same time uses this very acknowledgment as a call for the emperor to come home and restore direct communications with the senate. By pointing to the agency of senators in their all but servile formulation of praise and by stressing the essentially social dimension of the panegyric genre as such, S. not only clarifies an important aspect of Trajanic 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' but also contributes to a deeper understanding of Pliny's text as part of Roman literary history.

Much has been written on the Forum of Trajan, and S. adds another hundred pages to what he calls the 'stone triumph' of the Optimus Princeps. S. links the obvious approach to the *Forum Traiani* as an ideologically charged space to a consideration of the meaning-effects of the Forum on ancient visitors, thus simultaneously addressing the question of Roman spectatorship. After describing the structural design of the complex, including the various ways in which earlier architectural forms were reworked and combined to form a highly eclectic building programme, S. goes on to discuss the several visual elements that at once display and maintain imperial power structures in the context of the Forum. He successively examines the *Equus Traiani*, the *imagines clipeatae*, the statues of subjected Dacians, and the *Columna Traiani*, focusing, on the one hand, on the ways in which earlier (most notably Augustan) imperial imagery resonates in these monuments, while, on the other, tracing the ways in which the monuments themselves were represented in a variety of media, for instance, on coins. By staying as close as possible to what we may assume to be the conceptual background of an ancient visitor of the Forum, S. hopes to reconstruct the ways in which the complex was perceived by Roman eyes. This ties in with S.'s emphasis on the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the imperial *imago*. Hence, the author devotes special attention to the question why the *Forum Traiani*, which was primarily aimed at a civilian public, was designed as a military monument, both architecturally and iconographically. His explanation, that the Forum emphasised not so much Trajan's role as a military commander as his heroic virtue, comradeship, and the beneficent acts both the emperor and the army (more accurately, the Roman legions) performed for the citizens, is nonetheless not so surprising. In the long run, S. does not actually present a new way of thinking about the Forum nor about Roman material culture more generally, and one might wonder if his analysis has, in fact, added anything to the classic interpretation of the same complex by Paul Zanker.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, although S. mentions Meneghini's well-known publication in the *Römische Mitteilungen* on the new archaeological discoveries on the Forum of Trajan that resulted from the recent excavations on the *Fori Imperiali*,<sup>3</sup> he refrains from entering into the ensuing debate on the layout of the complex. In a similar vein, and for reasons not quite clear to me, S. does not mention the other contributions to the same journal, although these appear to be of great importance for our understanding of the position of the Forum in a wider architectural context. Particularly the findings (preliminary as they may be) on the Forum of Augustus are conspicuously absent from S.'s argument, which is rather surprising, given the great emphasis the author generally puts on comparative study.<sup>4</sup>

Innovative critical thinking, however, is very much in evidence in S.'s interpretation of the *Nummi Restituti*. This section of the book forms S.'s most valuable contribution to the present field of study. The *Nummi Restituti*, a relatively small series of coins consisting of 51 *denarii* and 23 *aurei*, are Trajanic reproductions of both republican and imperial coins, mostly showing the great men of the past. However, the coins were far from identical copies, since Trajan made significant alterations in their design. By adding inscriptions, changing the original images, or even inventing new coin types while creating the illusion that they had historical precedents, Trajan carefully controlled the production of various images of his own persona to fit the ideological purposes of his time. S. not only analyses the ways in which images from the past were endowed with new meanings -- especially through the representation of great accomplishments such as the improvement of the urban Roman water supply, and the inherent personal virtues of Trajan that supposedly generated such projects -- but additionally establishes a firm date for the emission of the *Nummi Restituti*. While the dating of these coins has been widely debated -- propositions ranging from 102 up until 117, and generally inclining to the year 107/108 -- no attempt has been made critically to correlate the artefacts to the Trajanic 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' in a wider sense. S., in contrast, not only compares the *Nummi Restituti*, which were intended for a small, elite public, with the much more widely distributed 'Reichsprägung' but also relates their imagery to the ideological messages conveyed in contemporary art and architecture, in particular the *Forum Traiani*. This thoughtful, comparative approach leads S. to a dating of the emission in 112, thus clarifying a complex question that had hitherto remained unresolved.

In the concluding, and by far the briefest section of the book, 'Die Konstruktion der Imago,' S. summarily explores some of the more negative responses to representational politics during the reign of the Optimus Princeps. He ends the book with a summary of the preceding chapters. Unfortunately, he does not discuss if and in what way the results of his thorough investigation of representation, communication, politics, and power during the Trajanic period may be of a more general significance to research on Roman imperial 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' in other contexts. This may be due to the fact that S., while drawing considerable attention to the dynamics between power and images, and repeatedly (indeed, sometimes tiresomely) stressing the important role of communication in the production of both meaningful images and relations of power, does not offer a sustained theoretical argument in relation to the complex notion of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung' as such. In other words, while S.'s notion of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat' as a principle of consensus and communication, power and representation, is undoubtedly illuminating and helpful, as an analytical concept it remains somewhat undertheorised. The broad scope of S.'s research, however, and his careful use of both historical and archaeological sources, does open the way for a further, conceptually more complex investigation of the difficult process of 'Herrschaftsdarstellung.' As such, S.'s book may serve as an inspiring starting-point for future research.

The list of sources (p. 518-532) includes literary texts (arranged alphabetically by author), coins (indexed both chronologically and by publication), epigraphic references and papyri, and, as such, forms a comprehensive and valuable addition to the book as a whole. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the bibliography, in which quite a few important titles are missing, titles, moreover, that are in fact mentioned in the body of the text or in the footnotes. The general index (p. 533-556) is coherently structured and wide-ranging. A modest number of photographs are inserted in the text, most of them, however, unfortunately rather small in size. As a whole, the book is longer than its argument requires; S. would do well to abbreviate it in case he prepares an English translation, which would give it the wider readership that it definitely deserves.

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**Notes:**

[1.](#) It is striking that S. hardly pays any attention to imperial portrait sculpture. As is widely known, portraits of the emperor -- ancient *imagines par excellence* -- played a particularly important role in the maintenance of imperial politics of power and identity. Indeed, given their high visibility and their obvious role in processes of political communication, imperial portraits would have made an interesting case study in S.'s project. Cf. P. Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society. Representation and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2.](#) P. Zanker, *Forum Augustum. Das Bildprogramm*, (Tübingen: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1968).

[3.](#) R. Meneghini, "Il foro di Traiano. Ricostruzione architettonica e analisi strutturale", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, römische Abteilung* 108 (2001), p. 127-148.

[4.](#) Cf. E. la Rocca, "La nuova immagine dei fori Imperiali. Appunti in margine agli scavi", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, römische Abteilung* 108 (2001), p. 171-213, especially p. 184-195; S. Rizzo, "Indagini nei fori Imperiali. Oroidrografia, foro di Cesare, foro di Augusto, templum Pacis", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, römische Abteilung* 108 (2001), p. 215-244, especially p. 230-234.