

Identities of emperor and empire in the third century AD

By Erika Manders and Olivier Hekster¹

In AD 238, at what is now called Gressenich, near Aachen, an altar was dedicated with the following inscription:

[to Iupiter Optimus Maximus]/ and the genius of the place for/ the safety of the empire
Ma/ sius Ianuari and Ti/ tianus Ianuari have kept their promise freely to the god who
deserved it, under the care /of Masius, mentioned above, and of Macer Acceptus, in [the
consulship] of Pius and Proclus (*[I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo)] et genio loci pro salute
imperi Masius Ianuari et Titianus Ianuari v(otum) s(olverunt) l(ibentes) m(erito) sub
cura Masi s(upra) s(cripti) et Maceri Accepti, Pio et Proclo [cos.]*).²

Far in the periphery of the Roman Empire, two men vowed to the supreme god of Rome and the local genius, not for the safety of the current rulers, but for that of the Empire as a whole. Few sources illustrate as clearly how, fairly early in the third century already, the Empire was thought, at least by some, to be under threat. At the same time though, the inscription makes clear how the Empire as a whole was perceived as a communal identity which had to be safeguarded by centre and periphery alike. Finally, it is striking how in the text Empire has taken the place of emperor.

In the very same year, however, at the other periphery of the Empire, the inhabitants of the town of Skaptopara (in modern Bulgaria) explicitly turned to the emperor, Gordian III, whom they address in exalted terms. They write:

To Emperor Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus, Pious, Fortunate, Augustus, a petition from the villagers of Skaptopara, also known as the Greseitai. You have often, in replying to petitions, announced that in this most fortunate and eternal time of your reign villages should be settled and improved, rather than their inhabitants be ruined. This both results in the security of mankind and benefits your most holy treasury. Consequently we bring a lawful petition to your godliness, hoping that you will

¹ This article was greatly improved by the comments on the original paper of Simon Corcoran and Françoise Van Haepelen, and especially of Stéphane Benoist.

² *CIL* 13.7844. Cf. Eck 2007, especially 33-34.

graciously give your approval to us as we make our appeal in this way (Αὐτοκράτορι Καίσαρι Μ. Ἀντωνίῳ Γορδιανῶ Εὐσεβεῖ Εὐτυχεῖ Σεβ. ᾧ δέησις παρὰ κωμητῶν Σκαπτοπαρήνων τῶν καὶ Γρησειτῶν. Ἐν τοῖς εὐτυχεστάτοις καὶ αἰωνίοις σου καιροῖς κατοικεῖσθαι καὶ βελτιοῦσθαι τὰς κώμας ἥπερ ἀναστάτους γίγνεσθαι τοὺς ἐνοικοῦντας πολλάκις ἀντέγραφας· ἔστιν γὰρ καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν ἀνθρώπων σωτηρία τὸ τοιοῦτο καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱερωτάτου σου ταμείου ὠφελεία. Δὴ ὅπερ καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔννομον ἰκεσίαν τῇ θειότητί σου προσκομίσομεν, εὐχόμενοι ἰλέως ἐπίνευσαι ἡμῖν δεομένοις τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον.).³

As the petition makes clear, in Skaptopara soldiers, private visitors, and even the procurators and governors with their staff had been confiscating goods and demanding accommodation, all without payment. Apparently Skaptopara was so attractive with its spa-like water, that ‘official’ guests from afar came to the town, and demanded hospitality, thus abusing the already problematic system of *angareia* or *vehiculatio*, which obliged provincial subjects to accommodate transportation and lodging of official Roman travellers, based in the provinces.⁴ First, the people turned to local authorities, in this case the governor, who forbade the military agents to continue the abuses, but without result.⁵ The town then sought help from the emperor to end this hopeless situation. His response, on December 20th, 238, must have been a disappointment:

Emperor Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus, Pious, Fortunate, Augustus, to the villagers, through the soldier Pyrrhus their fellow householder: this sort of quarrel, directed with entreaties ..., ought to be officially settled by the governor's court, which has better knowledge about the matters which will be brought up, rather than by the receipt of an explicit decision in the form of an imperial written opinion. I have written it. I have authorised it. Seals: 7 (*Imp. Caesar M. Antonius Gordianus pius felix Aug. vikanis per Pyrrum mil. conpossessore. Id genus qu[ae]rellae praecibus intentum an[te], iustitia pr[aesi]dis [p]otius super his quae adlegabuntur instructa, discinge [q]uam rescripto principali certam formam reportare debeas. Rescripti. Recognovi. Sig[n]a.*).⁶

³ CIL 3.12336; Hauken 1998, 98, 117, with further references.

⁴ Kolb 2000, 49-51. Cf. Frensdorf 1956.

⁵ On changes within the structuring of local power, see Slootjes, forthcoming.

⁶ CIL 3.12336.

This petition, followed by the imperial response, gives another perceptive on the position of the Roman emperor in the early third century. Whereas in the Gressenich inscription the absence of the emperor's name was striking, it is noticeable how in Skaptopara the emperor remained the ultimate authority to turn to, described in exalted terms, even if the system which he personified was starting to become problematic. To approach the emperor in these terms, and then inscribe the text in what must have been a central location, shows how at least in Skaptopara, people assumed that power was still with the emperor. It is, in fact, a common response in military dictatorships to blame advisers and minor administrators for wrongs, arguing that the leader is simply kept ignorant.⁷ Roman emperors, however much they presented themselves as a *civilis princeps*, were ultimately military dictators.⁸ But the Roman Empire was extraordinary in that individuals, or certainly communities, could and did turn to the emperor; and that the emperor more often than not answered.

Of course responding to requests was an essential part of Roman emperorship.⁹ As supreme ruler, the emperor was the ultimate judge, and he was in this capacity approached by a substantial number of his subjects.¹⁰ The history of the third century is characterized by the arrival of 'soldier emperors' and emphasis in modern historiography is often given to the changes this has wrought in emperorship. But one should not underestimate the continuing importance – also in the third century – of Millar's famous *adagium*: 'the emperor was what the emperor did'.¹¹ It is not coincidental that, notwithstanding the 'epigraphic habit' which severely limits the number of inscriptions from the third century, there is substantial epigraphic evidence for continuing petitions to the Roman emperor, carefully analysed by Tor Hauen.¹² The original numbers must have been substantial. In Severan times, for example, an Egyptian *strategos* named Serapion is stated to have heard (and answered) within three days, the astounding number of 1,804 cases in March 209 (*P.Yale* I, 61). Even if far fewer requests reached the emperor – and we cannot be certain that this was the case – it still shows how much attention from the centre, either from the emperor himself, or those immediately surrounding him, must have gone to reacting to subjects.

⁷ This mode of behaviour is not unique to the Roman Empire. 'If only the Czar/ Hitler/ Stalin knew' were likewise widespread sayings in the various dictatorships of early twentieth-century Europe.

⁸ On the continuing importance for emperors to present themselves as a good *princeps*, see Benoist 2007, 262-265.

⁹ Millar 1992².

¹⁰ On the role of the emperor in interpreting law, see Peachin 1996, 10-91.

¹¹ Millar 1992², 6

¹² Hauen 1998. For the notion of the 'epigraphic habit', see famously MacMullen 1982, but with the comments by Woolf 1996, 38.

By seeking help directly from the emperor, the inhabitants of Skaptopara – like the other petitioners thorough Roman history – no longer gave the emperor the possibility to hide behind an ‘administrative façade’. In doing so, they placed the competition for resources between themselves and the various representatives of Rome ‘directly within the sphere of imperial politics’.¹³ Yet the emperor counteracted by pointing at his own lack of information, pointing out that the court ‘has better knowledge about the matters which will be brought up’. In the case of the Skaptopara inscription, then, the emperor chose to remain impartial in the dispute. In a way, then, he chose absence here – even if he was explicitly invoked.

Absence in a more physical way might well be one of the key words to describe Roman emperorship in the third century. After all, the emperors were increasingly rarely in the capital of the Empire. In the period AD 200-250 emperors were present at Rome in 21 out of 50 years, for stays which were much shorter than in earlier times, whereas in the period AD 250-300, emperors were present in 18 out of 50 years; but most of these stays were extremely short periods in between campaigns.¹⁴ This absence is often commented upon, and may well be one of the main reasons for the lessening importance of the city of Rome – which in a sense reached its low during the Tetrarchy.¹⁵ These increasing imperial absences from Rome must also have affected the number of petitions. Emperors, like governors, had always travelled through their territory to make themselves approachable to their subjects – most often to act as a judge. This mobility may have become somewhat extreme in the third century, and unwelcome to Rome, yet one positive consequence for provincial subjects was that it became much more straightforward to present petitions to the emperor.¹⁶

Requests – and acclamations – were of course also made by cities as a whole, clearly defining the relationship between city and emperor. These acclamations were increasingly often epigraphically recorded towards the end of the second century. Near-simultaneously, cities began issuing coins showing acclamations of emperors.¹⁷ These two tendencies seem to indicate the growing importance of showing loyalty to the emperor. Likewise, passing a decree to congratulate new emperors showed the cities’ allegiance. How much such explicit acceptance of imperial power was appreciated is clear from the many positive imperial responses to such decrees.¹⁸ With the rapid turnover of emperors in the third century, the risk

¹³ Ando 2007, 375.

¹⁴ Halfmann 1986, 221-244; Hekster 2008, 14-16.

¹⁵ For the importance of the presence of emperors for the status of the city of Rome, see Benoist 2005.

¹⁶ Fowler/Hekster 2005, 13; Hauken 1998, 151; Birley 1988, 138.

¹⁷ Roueché 1984, 185-6.

¹⁸ Reynolds 1982, 131-3, 140-3. Cf Millar 1992², 410-420.

in too readily greeting a new emperor was obvious – but the benefits in getting it right grew as well.

A somewhat safer strategy would be to acclaim an emperor at a later stage – when there was at least some certainty that he had a secure power base. This seems to have been the strategy chosen by the inhabitants from Perge in Pamphylia during the brief reign of Tacitus (AD 275-276) – resulting in the longest acclamation inscribed on a single stone. The acclamation, in fact, seems to coincide the emperor Tacitus granting the city the right to call itself ‘Metropolis of Pamphylia’, which was extensively celebrated.¹⁹

Even if imperial power changed in the third century, and the focus of that power was no longer the city of Rome, imperial approval was still of utmost importance in the fierce inter-town competition which defined much of the Roman Empire. The emperor remained the central figure who could bestow honour and solve problems in a way nobody else could.

Yet that is not to deny that there was real change. Somewhat overstating, one could argue that whereas in previous ages military qualities had been *necessary* qualities to gain the purple, they now had become *sufficient* qualities for the emperorship. The resulting rapid changeover, in combination with the imperial absence from Rome, created the above sketched changing patterns of imperial acclamations and petitions.

Similar developments are recognisable when one looks at the ways in which emperors presented themselves. Most strikingly, this is clear from analysing centrally minted third-century coin types. These types can be roughly grouped together in thirteen different categories, such as, for instance, dynastic or military representation, divine association, emphasis on imperial virtues or the message that the Golden Age was coming about.²⁰ The military category, referring to the armies, victories, or depicting the emperor in a military role, is the single largest group, and comprises 22.5% of all coin types, just outnumbering the 21.8% coin types association imperial power with the divine. The ‘Golden Age’ category, emphasising the prosperity that emperors have brought or will bring, comprises 19.2% of coin types. 17.4% stresses the imperial virtues – within which military qualities had risen in status (fig. 1). Thus, for instance, *virtus* and *providentia* (which was required to safeguard the state) together comprised a quarter of all imperial virtues as displayed on *denarii* between AD 69-238. *Virtus* alone accounted for 13%. From 238 to 284, however, the number of *virtus* coins struck seems to have risen steeply among the coin types displaying imperial virtues. At the

¹⁹ Roueché 1989, 208.

²⁰ Manders 2007, 285, 289-290; Manders 2008, 14-30, with table 2.

same time, *aequitas* (tranquillity/ justice) which had constituted 24% from AD 69-238 was depicted substantially less often.²¹ This increasing emphasis on the imperial military qualities is also visible from the fact that in coinage depictions of the emperor in a cuirass became the dominant type.²² In the third century, then, approximately every other coin showed the emperor as someone who would bring military glory or peace – in substantial periods of third-century history, the difference would have been hard to tell.

Within this dominant mode of representation, one should give some emphasis on the coin types depicting the imperial *adventus* and *profectio*.²³ For whereas *adventus* coin types were distributed consistently throughout the third century, the *profectio* types were restricted to the reigns of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Severus Alexander.²⁴ It appears strange that more emperors issued *adventus* types than struck *profectio* types. After all, wars were waged almost continuously during the third century, but successful military campaigns, celebrated during the emperor's *adventus*, became scarce. Possible explanations for the discrepancy have been given by Hölscher, who argues that the imperial departure was celebrated with an eye toward a safe return to his residence; yet in the third century the emperor often travelled from one battle to another and rarely visited Rome. Also, still according to Hölscher, the majority of the third-century emperors owed their positions to the armies in the provinces. At the moment in which the emperor arrived in Rome, he had officially taken over supreme power. Finally, Hölscher suggests that the *adventus* of the emperor became an epiphany of the god-emperor in the third century, overshadowing the *profectio*.²⁵ For Hölscher, then, the interaction between the changing status of the emperors, the decreasing importance of Rome as imperial residence, and the heavy influence of the provincial armies on imperial power might all have contributed to the neglect of *profectio* scenes on coins after Severus Alexander.

This is interesting enough in itself, but becomes all the more striking once set against developments in the second-largest representational category that can be distinguished in third-century imperial coinage: divine association. For in this category, too, there are patterns visible that seem to show a changing relation between the emperor and the city of Rome. Most emphatically, coin types depicting the emperor as a *sacerdos* are substantially more common in the first half of the third century than in the second. Similarly, there is a decline in

²¹ Noreña 2001, 156; Hekster/Manders 2006.

²² King 1999, 133 with n. 21.

²³ Manders 2008, 85-88. Cf. Benoist 2005, 79-91.

²⁴ *RIC* IV.1, Septimius Severus, nos 91, 106, 138, 165a)-165c), 494, 728, 740A, 746, 752; *RIC* IV.1, Caracalla, nos 107, 108, 225, 226, 431-433, 438-440, 445, 446, 449a), 449b); *RIC* IV.2, Severus Alexander, nos 210, 524, 595, 596, 639-641.

²⁵ Hölscher 1967, 61-62. Of course, the notion of god-emperor seems to be somewhat of an overstatement, though there does seem to be sacralisation of power in the third century.

references to the title *pontifex maximus*, which runs almost parallel to the change in the depiction of the emperor as a priest; depictions of the emperor as a priest nearly disappear after Claudius Gothicus' reign and references to *pontifex maximus* decline from the rule of Claudius Gothicus onwards (fig. 2). It hardly needs reminding how closely the role of the emperor as chief priest was linked to the city of Rome.²⁶ His absence from the capital seems to have had consequences for the way in which the emperor depicted himself in 'religious' terms.

Yet the decreasing emphasis on the emperor as a priest was more than compensated by an increasing emphasis on the association between the emperors and individual gods. Indeed, from the second half of the third century onwards, ever more attention was paid to depicting gods (fig.2). The less the emperor was present in Rome, the more he seems to have emphasised the divine. It could, then, be argued that in the third century, emperors considered it more important to reduce the distance between themselves and the gods than to emphasise their priestly function. If true, this would link wonderfully well with Hölscher's argument that the *adventus* of the emperor became an epiphany of the god-emperor in the third century.²⁷ In the course of third-century history, the emperors' distancing from the capital made them less approachable to their subjects in that very capital – in turn allowing them to rise above these subjects. After all, it is much easier to think in exalted terms of a ruler who is physically absent.²⁸ The benefits to the emperors themselves are also clear: by enhancing their own status in the divine terms, they could find new means of legitimising their power during a period in which they were alienated, socially and geographically, from the Roman senate, and in which they no longer had the practical power to solve the sort of problems for which the inhabitants of Skaptopara approached them.

The argument, of course, is over-simplistic. But it still seems worthwhile to think of the identity of emperor and empire in the third century in terms of their relation to the city of Rome. The Roman Empire was ultimately a city state that had grown out of all proportions. Removing – or certainly lessening – the primate of the centre was to have serious consequences for the ways in which people thought about the empire, and about the rulers who so clearly formed the ideological focus of the realm. It is certainly too much to argue that the Gressenich inscription ought to be read in this light; even if the above sketched pattern is

²⁶ Stepper 2003, 9. Cf. Rüpke 2005, 1605-1605. This link between emperor and city was closely related to the important role of the emperor as a priest performing sacrificial duties, see Gordon 1990.

²⁷ Hölscher 1967, 61.

²⁸ Hekster 2005.

correct, AD 238 is far too early to see the consequences. Rather, one should think in terms of overlapping developments of imperial absence from Rome, enhanced notions of Roman-ness that were caused, or at least strengthened, by the *constitutio Antoniniana*, and the inevitable changes that the ongoing frontier wars in substantial period of third-century history were to cause. More factors can – and should – be added. Yet the identity of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and of their rulers, was inescapably linked to the city which gave its name to the realm.

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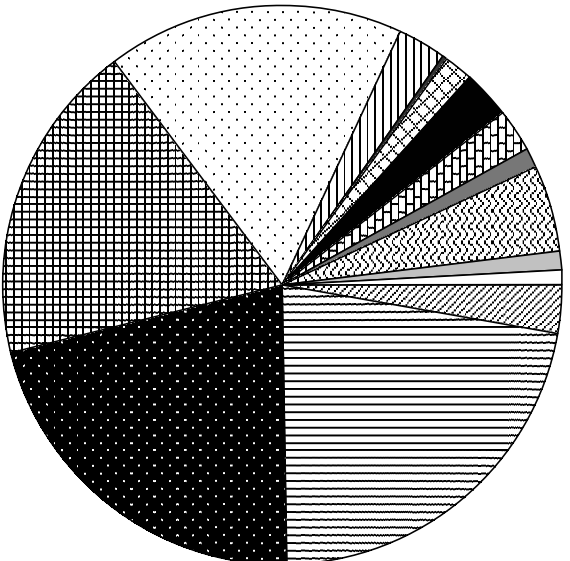
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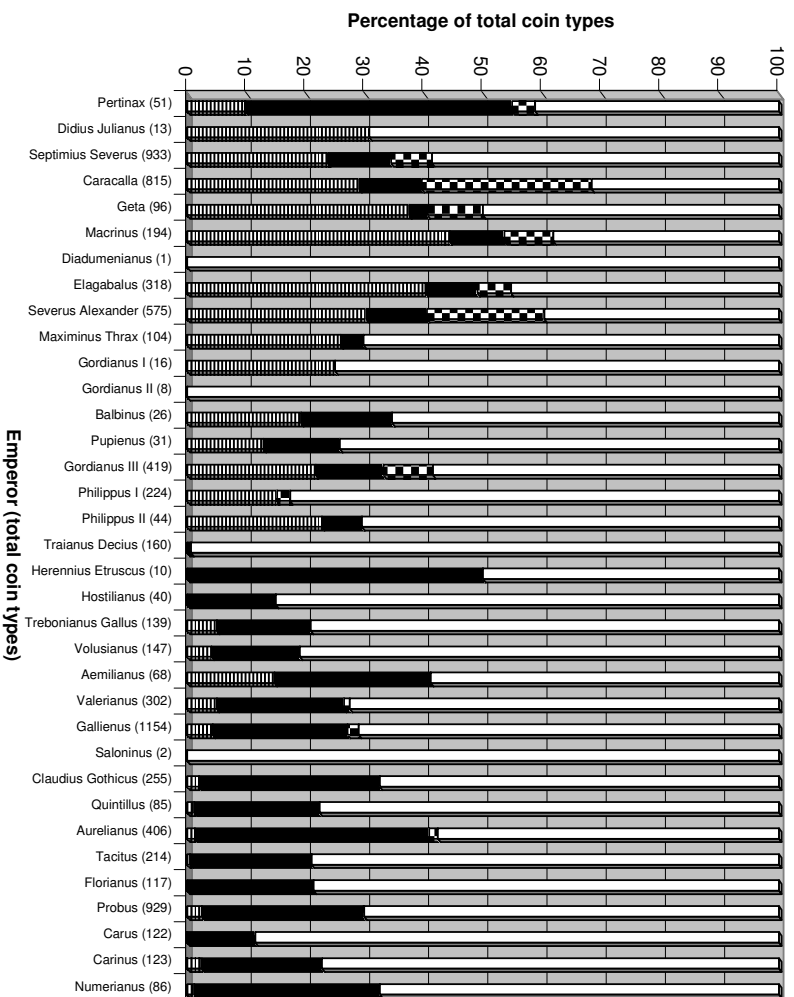
Figures

Figure 1



- ▨ Dynastic representation
- ▧ Military representation
- Divine association
- ▩ Saeculum Aureum
- Virtues
- Eurgesia
- ▨ Paradeligmata
- Resilitor-messages
- Geographical messages
- ▨ Elevation
- ▨ Non-specific representation
- ▨ Aerialtas-messages
- Unica
- Representational category uncertain

Figure 2



- None
- ▣ Both
- God
- ▨ Priest