

**John Richardson, *The Language of Empire: Rome and the idea of empire from the third century BC to the second century AD*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. ix, 220 p. \$99.00. ISBN 9780521815017.**

J. Richardson himself gives the reader an accurate description of the book here under review: “This book is a biography of a word, or perhaps of a family of words related to one another, historically if not semantically. The central figures of this diachronic group-portrait are *imperium* and *provincia*, and it is their development and life story which form the plot of the narrative” (57).

*The Language of Empire* is a kind of “parallel lives” of *imperium* and *provincia*, which grow from the power of a magistrate and the task on which he exercised it to mean the Roman Empire and its constituent parts. The scope of the book is thus rather narrower than its title might imply, but Richardson’s findings are much richer than a chronology of the meanings of two words. The life of words is lived in the statements of speakers, and such statements necessarily inform us not only of the meaning of a given word, but also of the conceptions and preoccupations of individual authors, whose usage may be compared with profit.

In the second edition of *CAH* 7.2, A.E. Astin writes of the creation of two new praetors in 227 BC, to govern Sicily and Sardinia and Corsica, that, “Their appointment initiated a shift in the meaning of the word ‘provincia’, which soon came to signify a subject territory placed under the authority of a Roman magistrate (or, later, pro-magistrate).”<sup>1</sup> Thus the general view. Richardson demonstrates, however, that this shift was far from rapid. After a brief methodological discussion in Chapter 1, “Ideas of Empire,” Richardson discusses the usage of *imperium* and *provincia* from the later third to the early first century BC. Chapter 2 reaches a number of significant conclusions. The evidence of the official business of the Senate presented by Livy, wherein Livy’s language more closely reflects that of his annalistic sources, shows that even “boundaries” mentioned as between *provinciae* are notional rather than geographical limitations on the *imperium* of the magistrate, even when such limits coincide (30). The Romans might occasionally speak of the *imperium* or power of the Roman people, but there is not a hint that they saw themselves in possession of a territorial empire. *Imperium* was power and *provincia* the occasion of its exercise (61f.).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Cicero and his contemporaries. Cicero uses *imperium* in the traditional sense of the power of a magistrate in slightly more than half of all passages, but he also speaks frequently of the *imperium populi Romani*, which accounts for roughly one third of the total (68). This usage can mean the power of the people or stand for the state itself. Remarkably, it emerges from the discussion that Cicero speaks of *imperium* almost always in the abstract: even when he mentions *fines* and *termini* of the *imperium*, it is unclear whether he means the limits on the power of the people or on the territory of the Roman Empire (75f.). Richardson comes to the remarkable conclusion that Cicero

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<sup>1</sup> A.E. Astin, “Postscript. The Emergence of the Provincial System,” *CAH* VII.2 (Cambridge, 1989), 571.

appears to have no coherent notion of an “empire” in the sense expressed by *imperium Romanum* in a later age (91). Caesar, by contrast, who speaks of turning areas into provinces, anticipates Augustan usage (96f.). Richardson views the provincial settlements of Sulla and, in particular, Pompey as a watershed in the Roman conception of Empire. Sulla sundered provincial commands from the urban magistracies; Pompey, by creating *provinciae* in the East as permanent, necessarily territorial entities, anticipates the consolidation of the Empire under Augustus, which was accompanied by a new, territorial conception (114f.).

This Augustan Empire is the subject of Chapter 4, and here we finally reach the era in which the notion of a territorial Roman *imperium* was born. Richardson divides this chapter between prose authors (especially Livy) and poets. Of the latter, only Ovid comes to perceive the Roman Empire as a territorial entity, banished as he was to its edge (132f.). Complementing the Latin prose authors, Strabo’s usage of the Greek equivalent to *provincia*, ἐπαρχία, is overwhelmingly territorial (138ff.).

Chapter 5, “After Augustus,” in essence measures the extent to which post-Augustan authors reflect the new, territorial understanding of the Roman Empire: Velleius Paterculus, for example, uses *provincia* predominantly in a territorial sense (149f.); the usage of Valerius Maximus, by contrast, is essentially Ciceronian (151f). A subsequent section examines the usage of authors from AD 69 to 138; Tacitus in particular uses the word *imperium* frequently to mean empire (171). Richardson concludes by recapitulating the findings of the preceding chapters and briefly considering their implications. There is no clear answer to the question what the Romans thought they were doing as they established their empire (191f.). The corollary is that interpreters of Roman imperialism cannot presume that a single, coherent notion of empire lies behind the actions of individual generals of different periods: the creation of the Roman Empire resulted from “a series of imperialisms” (193).

Three appendices, a bibliography, and an index conclude the book. The appendices consist of a table and chart, detailing the use of *imperium* and *provincia* in the works of Cicero and the frequency with which the words appear in the extant books of Livy, and a brief note on the language of the jurists (Gaius and the authors excerpted in the Digest).

The quantification of Latin usage will no doubt leave some readers uneasy. To his credit, Richardson nowhere uses the numbers as more than indicative of general trends. The reader must accept his interpretation of most passages on good faith, but ambiguous passages are regularly indicated and discussed, lending transparency to the argument. Certainly, the use of Livy both as an authority for the “official” use of *imperium* and *provincia* in the third and second centuries BC (preserved via his annalistic sources) and as an Augustan author raises legitimate questions of source criticism, which Richardson does not hide. While some passages might be disputed, it is unlikely that the general conclusions should change. Richardson, in fact, has supplied himself with a strong *a*

*fortiori* defense of his analysis of early usage in that even in the extensive writings of Cicero the idea of a territorial empire behind *imperium* is wanting almost entirely.

*The Language of Empire* answers more definitively what the Romans were not thinking as they built their empire, namely that they did not understand *imperium* as territory. The discussion, however, evinces a noticeable teleological tendency. Richardson seeks to establish when *imperium* and *provincia* indicate territorial, imperial possessions. Once this stage has been reached, there is little more to do. Consideration of usage after the death of Hadrian would certainly have been interesting. Why, for instance, does *provincia* come to mean predominantly a territory, a province, while *imperium* maintains a host of meanings and only occasionally stands for a territorial empire? The multitude of meanings that *imperium* possesses, once *imperium* can also mean “empire,” is not seriously considered.

*The Language of Empire* is also limited by the terms of Richardson’s analysis. Richardson demonstrates clearly that *imperium* did not, indeed generally could not, refer to a territorial empire until Augustus. Might not the Romans, though, have used other words to express territorial acquisitions? Augustus celebrates the annexation of Egypt, for instance, on coins bearing the legend AEGYPTO CAPTA (*RIC* I 275). Egypt, and necessarily its territory, had been “taken” and “seized” or “captured,” while Asia, which had been a province for a century, had merely been “recovered” from Antony (*ASIA RECEPTA*, *RIC* I 276). What does it mean in the third century BC, though, when on his epitaph L. Cornelius Scipio Barbatus (cos. 298) claims TAURASIA CISAUNA / SAMNIO CEPIT / SUBIGIT OMNE LOUCANAM (*ILS* 1). Taurasia and Cisauna may be cities, but Samnium cannot be other than a large extent of territory, and the same holds for Lucania. Dessau tells us in fact to supply *terram* to complete the sense of LOUCANAM. And there are other examples (cf. *ILS* 3, in which Barbatus’ son claims to “take” Corsica and Aleria). *The Language of Empire* does not accommodate the language of territorial acquisition outside the discussion of *imperium* and *provincia*.

To conclude, Richardson has produced an arresting and enlightening study of the usage of the words *imperium* and *provincia* over approximately four centuries. The book is well produced and almost error free.<sup>2</sup> The Romans did not think of their *imperium* as empire until the age of Augustus, but what they did think of their many conquests will require further investigation.

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<sup>2</sup> The only typos I noted were a missing grave accent on ὀ[ς] and a space introduced in the middle of ἐλευθέρος, p. 46. Richardson oddly gives the number of passages in which Cicero uses *provincia* as both 673 and 672 on p. 79.