

Josiah Osgood, *Claudius Caesar: Image and Power in the Early Roman Empire*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 357. ISBN 978-0521-70825-8. \$32.99 (pb)

It has been about two decades now since Levick's 1990 biography of the emperor Claudius was produced and, given the developments in the field of classics, especially in the range and interpretation of available evidence, it is time for a re-assessment of the reign of the Claudius Caesar. Josiah Osgood has taken on this task very well and has produced a book that will be used by scholars, instructors and students for many years. Traditionally, imperial biography has relied heavily on literary evidence, which is analysed and examined in an attempt to uncover "what really happened". The focus has very much been the reign of the subject emperor and placing the emperor in context has meant looking at his immediate predecessor and successor. Osgood's methodology is quite different. He states that he has three goals, none of which is strictly a biography. His goals are to examine the principate of Claudius, to better understand the role of the princeps and to look at the contribution Claudius' reign made to the development of the principate (27–28). Osgood makes much more use of inscriptional and papyrological evidence than has been done previously and looks at the reign of Claudius from an empire-wide perspective, rather than being Rome-centred one. Osgood also organizes his material in chronological order, rather than discussing Claudius' reign thematically. This approach, although not always adhered to, is an excellent one, since it allows him to show how Claudius' principate as a whole developed, rather than looking at different aspects (e.g., building, finance, the army, the senate) in isolation from each other. Finally, Osgood discusses in some depth how the princeps presented himself and how this presentation was received and reflected by members of the Roman Empire, especially those wealthy and/or influential enough to leave a lasting record. In particular, he notes how the princeps and various groups within the empire found mutual benefit in mutual support. As a result, this examination of Claudius' reign is an excellent one.

The book is divided into 12 chapters headed by a prologue on the state of the principate in 41 AD and an introduction entitled "The Problem of Claudius".¹ Osgood has given his chapters rather engaging titles (e.g., "A statue in silver", "Caesar-lovers", "Practical pyramids") which still inform. "Practical pyramids" discusses Claudius' building program and how it emphasized utility. There are also 60 pages of end-notes and the usual bibliography and index. The notes for each chapter are headed by a brief discussion of the principal scholarship on the chapter's topic, which is very useful for further reading as well as providing a glimpse into the main sources Osgood used throughout the book. The production is very good and there are virtually no typos, although one of them can cause confusion. On page 219 Osgood describes a Agrippina

¹ The Table of Contents can be found on the Cambridge University Press website: <http://www.cambridge.org/aus/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521881814&ss=toc>.

and Claudius clasping hands in ‘martial concord’ and then on page 221 this is called a ‘marital clasp’. I must confess that I am still not sure which is meant.²

Osgood makes several very good observations throughout his narrative. He notes, for example, the symbiotic relationship that many groups in the provinces had with the emperor. A new emperor would grant or confirm the group’s rights and privileges, and they, in turn, would visibly honour the emperor with statuary, thereby confirming his new position. At the same time he rightly adds that as this relationship evolved, it was less valuable for any individual emperor than it was for the institution as a whole. He notes that Claudius’ infamous dependence on his freedmen was necessitated by his lack of knowledge and experience in imperial management, government and politics.

He also makes an interesting point that Claudius’ adoption of Nero acknowledged how reliant the principate remained on the memory of Augustus and that this reliance paved the way for the civil war of 69. By implicitly requiring a blood relative of Augustus for the principate, a crisis was bound to arise when there were no longer any such blood relatives. This is an example of a theory which might not stand up to full scrutiny. One could well question whether Nero’s value to Claudius’ stability was more to do with Germanicus than Augustus and that the civil war of 69 was more a product of multiple claimants and no successor being groomed for the principate.

As the book proceeds, the chronological approach begins to break down due in large part to the state of the available evidence. One extreme example is that the grain shortage of 41 AD is not mentioned until page 182. Also, the chapters on the fall of Messalina, the marriage of Agrippina and the death of Claudius show a shift in approach which is caused by Osgood being forced to rely more on literary evidence. Despite his claim not to come to firm conclusions on questions such as whether Claudius was murdered, he poses the questions in such a way that makes the literary versions more than distinct possibilities.

The chronological approach also makes the readers appreciate the pattern of Claudius’ activity. The early part of his reign is filled with initiatives such as long-term building projects and the conquest of Britain. As Claudius’ reign continued, these initiatives tapered off simply because resources now had been committed and were not available for further new projects. The reader is also able to better appreciate the evolution of Claudius’ principate and how events contributed to this evolution.

Occasionally, there are peculiar comments which can distract the reader. Claudius’ speech in support of allowing leading citizens from Gallia Comata into the senate is described both as a ‘rather splendid speech’ (165) and a ‘truly pointless digression’ (166). The aqueducts are called the greatest works in Roman imperial history, and it is then claimed that this ‘cannot have been lost on Claudius’ (177). Thus is Claudius endowed with remarkable prescience. For some reason, Claudius’ new men, who were promoted

² Other typos noted are: ‘but the monument’ which should read ‘by the monument’ (94) and ‘Drusus f.’ Instead of ‘Drusi f.’.

into and through the senate are said to be ‘duller than the old nobility’ (199), which seems gratuitous. Overall, though, the book reads well, perhaps because of the character that Osgood puts into his writing.

In the end Osgood concludes that Claudius’ principate revealed the fundamental weakness in a governance model in which a militarily supported emperor existed within a constitutional framework and where a successor to the emperor was required, but could not be acknowledged without tearing down the facade of a senatorially appointed princeps. By focusing on what we can ‘know’ about Claudius, i.e., the products of his reign, Osgood creates what might be termed a political biography and, as a result, has made a very useful contribution to our understanding of both Claudius and the early principate.

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