

Carlos F. Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West. Representation, Circulation, Power.* University Press, Cambridge, 2011. Pp. xxii + 456. ISBN 978-1-107-00508-2 (Hardback).

This book, a heavily revised version of Noreña's doctoral thesis of 2001 supervised by Brent D. Shaw, examines the concept of 'the Roman emperor', who, through the dissemination of specific imperial ideals, became a unifying symbol for the western part of the Roman Empire between AD 69 and 235. Noreña argues that this unification did not only reinforce the power of the Roman imperial state, but that it also increased the collective authority of the local elites, thereby facilitating a general convergence of social power upon which the high Roman Empire was based.

The book opens with a general discussion of the diverse and fragmentary regions within the Roman Empire (pp. 1–26). Notwithstanding this fragmentation, one ruler held sway, as Noreña is quick to point out. The author then charts the rapid and extensive proliferation of imperial ideals in many forms, such as inscriptions and coins, through which the idea of 'the emperor' was spread from one end of the empire to the other, contributing to the emergence of a new, empire-wide symbolic system. Through a quantitative examination of over 185,000 coins minted by the Roman mint between AD 69 and 325 (chapters 2 and 3) as well as an analysis of 575 inscriptions erected in the Western Empire in the same period (chapters 4 and 5), Noreña attempts to show that "this empire-wide symbolic system helped to legitimate the political supremacy of the single imperial ruler; naturalise and universalise the experience of Roman imperial power; facilitate the cohesion of the dispersed local aristocracies of the empire; and reinforce their differentiation form, and dominance over, the masses" (p.15).

Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 28–177) form the first part of the book (Part I: Representation) and examine the official representation of imperial ideals on the central coinage. Through measuring the relative frequency of different coin types expressing specific ideals per imperial reign for AD 69–235, chapter 2 reveals that five core virtues were propagated on the imperial coinage in this period: *aequitas*, *pietas*, *virtus*, *liberalitas* and *providentia*. These five core virtues defined the ethical profile of a good Roman emperor. Furthermore, these virtues had specific applications in the public sphere, and together, they animated the military, religious, material, and dynastic strands of Roman imperial ideology. Chapter 3 concludes that the simultaneous circulation of millions of coins, with their ability to converge image and text into simple and attractive messages, could be employed more strategically than is normally thought. For example, the promotion of Pax and Concordia on silver, and of Fortuna and Salus on base-metal, implies a carefully coordinated targeting of different audiences across social classes. The fluctuating relative frequencies of the Victoria, Pax and Felicitas types, especially between the reigns of Nerva and Septimius Severus, show how certain clusters of benefits, mutually reinforcing, could be emphasised simultaneously. Coinage could thus be used strategically as a medium to advertise the concrete, material benefits that came with Roman imperial rule. Under this imperial rule, however, political freedom, *libertas*, was lost—something which is clearly reflected in the imperial coinage, which had a relative low frequency

of *libertas* types. In contrast to the general assumption that *libertas* was a key imperial ideal, the central coinage indicates that this ideal actually played a negligible role in imperial publicity.

The second part (Part II: Circulation), containing chapters 4 and 5 (pp. 180–297), describes and analyses how the ideals and imperial benefits examined in chapters 2 and 3 were communicated. In this part the interdisciplinary character of Noreña’s research comes clearly to the fore. In the introduction, he sets off with a discussion about the authority or authorities behind the inscriptions concerning the emperor, to see which, if any, can be perceived as “official”. On the basis of a corpus of 575 inscriptions, he creates a hierarchy of different types of inscriptions running from more “official” to more “unofficial”.

In chapter 4, Noreña starts to analyse the diffusion of imperial ideals throughout the Empire through honorific inscriptions (e.g. on statue bases, milestones, ect) from AD 69 to 235, from which he is able to highlight two interesting features. The first is the difference in language content. Inscriptions from AD 69 to Marcus Aurelius’ reign primarily employ the honorific language for virtues and civic benefaction, whereas the language employed in the inscriptions from Commodus’ reign to AD 235 is embedded in a martial context. Later in this chapter, Noreña compares this divergence with the messages broadcast on imperial denarii. The second feature is geographical. From AD 69 to 192 most inscriptions were set up in Rome, Italy, North Africa, southern Spain, and the Mediterranean coasts of Spain and Gaul, while many from AD 193 to 235 AD were set up along the Rhine-Danube corridor as well. Noreña then compares the honorific terminology employed in official inscriptions with the ideals and values represented on imperial coins, resulting in a splendid piece of interdisciplinary scholarship. By means of concrete examples, a section shows how specific honorific epithets in inscriptions of a particular reign resonate in the imperial coins issued during that reign, or how the emphasis on particular virtues on the coins could correspond to similar citations of these ideals in the inscriptions. As mentioned above, Noreña goes even further, by analysing the “civilian” and “military” personification types on imperial denarii in order to explain the shift to a more martial language in the inscriptions from Commodus’ reign onwards.

Chapter 5 turns to the “unofficial” inscriptions honouring the emperor, set up by local aristocrats or communities. Multiple examples of these honorific dedications show a picture of broad overlap, both lexical and ideological, between imperial honorific terms and ideals communicated by the central state and those cited in these “unofficial” inscriptions, and this in a far-flung pre-industrial Empire. Noreña also manages to sketch out how these honorific inscriptions concerning the emperor were produced spontaneously and that by local initiative, who in turn also benefitted from this association with the emperor.

The final part (III: Power) (pp. 300–324) contains a single concluding chapter which focuses on ideological unification and social power in the Roman West. Here Noreña argues that imperial ideals and values penetrated provincial societies in a broad and potentially deep way, and subsequently, that the local authorities contributed to it. Thus these concepts provided for the Empire a “symbolic glue” that enabled at least a measure of ideological unification between the multiple actors who

controlled the main power networks of the Roman Empire, providing a stable basis for its long-term maintenance and the reproduction of the larger configuration of power.

The book closes with a battery of appendices, mainly clarifying the calculations behind Noreña's sets of coin percentages in the different chapters. The illustrations in the book, such as coin plates, maps, and graphs, are marvellous, and clearly contribute to a better understanding of Noreña's arguments. This book is certainly important to all scholars interested in how power can be transmitted.

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