

María Pilar García Ruiz and Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas (eds.), *Emperors and Emperorship in Late Antiquity: Images and Narratives*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. \$127.00 (Hardcover); \$127.00 (eBook). Pp. xii, 248. ISBN 9789004446908.

In antiquity, state legitimacy was rarely asserted on the basis of explicit, generally-applicable criteria: it was usually simply accepted uncritically.<sup>1</sup> When the authority of a Late Antique ruler *was* seriously challenged, conversely, he appears to have been less able than we might expect to quash the challenge simply by appealing to his own legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> In the relative absence of criteria, then, what did it actually mean to assess an emperor? *Emperors and Emperorship in Late Antiquity* provides a broad and helpful sample of partial answers to that question.

The book, part of Brill's Impact of Empire series, publishes the conference proceedings of an international workshop of the same title (University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, 2017), assembling nine papers on various fourth-century representations of emperorship. The chapters are organized chronologically by emperor, focusing (mainly) on Constantine, Julian, and Theodosius.

Though comparison, ranking, and the legitimacy of emperors are recurring themes, the overall impression given by the book is one of variety. *Emperors and Emperorship* does not confine itself to official communication between the emperor and his subjects: there are chapters focusing on honorific monuments, open letters, satire, panegyric biography, and various kinds of oratory and historiography. One common thread is that all the chapters deal in some way with works (if the term is interpreted very broadly) of a public character, and thus reflect the sphere in which imperial virtues were performed and evaluated. The emperor figures sometimes as author of the work under examination (chapters 4, 7, 9) and occasionally as audience (chapter 7) but more often simply as its subject (chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8).

In light of the importance of tyranny and legitimacy to the book, it was helpful to begin with Ignazio Tantillo's chapter "Emperors and Tyrants in the Fourth Century." Tantillo demonstrates well that the characterization of defeated internal enemies as tyrants, above all in public monuments in Rome itself, suited post-Constantinian imperial propaganda needs. The argument suggests a perceived need to delegitimize defeated enemies, at least for some audiences (though perhaps more as bad people than as illegitimate rulers). Also suggestive of an inchoate but real idea of legitimacy is Tantillo's further point, which could be demonstrated further, that the Roman public remained uncomfortable with celebrating victories against fellow-Romans.

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<sup>1</sup> Moses Finley, *Authority and Legitimacy in the Classical City State* (København: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Egon Flaig, «Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im Spätromische Reich», in François Paschoud and Joachim Szidat (eds.), *Usurpationen in der Spätantike* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), especially p. 30.

Diederik Burgersdijk's chapter ("Constantine's Arch: A Reassessment in Light of Textual and Material Evidence") is a reasonable critique of previous scholarship on a well-studied monument. Burgersdijk is probably correct that a newly positive view of *spolia* in general does not explain the reuse of earlier materials in the arch, and almost certainly correct that Constantine was not the author of its message. He interprets the Arch of Constantine, plausibly, as the senate's repurposing of a monument of the "tyrant" Maxentius. Burgersdijk leaves us with the intriguing suggestion that the monument invites Constantine to return to Rome, and, consequently (though he does not spell it out), to more fully confront the legacy of his defeated rival.

José B. Torres' contribution ("Purple and Depiction of Constantine in Eusebius") focuses on purple as a marker of imperial office in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. Torres demonstrates that references to purple recur at key moments in the narrative (Constantine's accession, the Council of Nicaea, and his death), and makes a convincing case that these references structure the work. He is also probably correct in viewing the references to purple in this clearly Christian narrative through the lens of Biblical references, though the intertexts with the accounts of Jesus' passion could be demonstrated further. That the display (and renunciation) of a standard marker of imperial office could be read through a religious (Biblical) perspective in such a way as to endorse the ruler is hardly surprising for this period, but the chapter provides a clear case study.

María Pilar García Ruiz' "*The Caesars: A Myth on Julian's Emperorship*" addresses a work which puts the Roman emperor in a wholly different religious context. Julian's *Caesars* is a highly unusual text in which a reigning emperor ranks all his predecessors and rates his own uncle particularly poorly. As Ruiz notes, the text has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship; her contribution to the debate is to examine the work as myth, following Julian's own suggestion and using his definition in his earlier *To the Cynic Heracleios*. More specifically, she interprets the *Caesars* as an alternate version of Julian's other myth, in the *To the Cynic Heracleios* (227C-234C). Although the version in the *Caesars* is less clearly focused on Julians's own emperorship, both myths do indeed spell out Julian's program of imitating the gods, and Ruiz' interpretation is compelling.

Álvaro Sánchez-Ostiz's "Cosmic Warnings and Imperial Responses" offers an attractive narratological reading of a series of celestial omens in Ammianus' history respectively announcing the fall of Ursinus and the deaths of Constantius II, Julian and Jovian. Sánchez-Ostiz plausibly suggests that these passages were meant to be read together and that they serve to implicitly rank the emperors involved, unsurprisingly to the advantage of Julian, whose judgment best corresponds to the learned authorial perspective of the scientific digressions. The chapter ends with an interesting point: the implied comparison favours Julian, of course, but it also demonstrates that to be an emperor was to exist in relation to past and future emperors (whose legitimacy is, it seems, taken for granted).

Fabio Guidetti's "Between Expressionism and Classicism" addresses another way of distinguishing and implicitly comparing emperors: imperial portrait sculpture. This lavishly illustrated overview of Roman imperial portraiture, especially under the Valentinians and Theodosius I, focuses particularly on analysis of a group of imperial sculptures in the Tetrastoon and the 'Place of Palms' in Aphrodisias in Asia Minor. Guidetti's analysis of these sculptures bears out his main point that the traditional stylistic options in imperial sculpture (Roman realism, Hellenistic theatrical art and Athenian classicism) remained available in Late Antiquity wherever suitably trained workforces remained available. Naturally, the availability of older sculptures suitable for reworking helped. At that same time, Guidetti emphasizes that stylistic choices still conveyed political content, and that a mixing of styles within the same face, common in the period, might reflect, more or less intentionally, an ambiguity in conceptions of the emperor and his role.

María Victoria Escribano's "The Letter from Magnus Maximus to Valentinian II" is a thoroughly argued and convincing reconstruction of the circumstances and meaning of the open letter of 386–7 preserved as *Collectio Avellana* 39. In a helpful complement to Tantillo's chapter, Escribano illustrates the malleability of the key concept of tyranny. Although *CA* 39 never uses the term *tyrannus* itself, Escribano rightly underscores the gravity and irony of a usurper emperor (a tyrant in a sense established since Constantine) accusing his colleague of being a persecutor of the Church, referring to the basilica controversy of 386 with Ambrose of Milan. Since persecutors were tyrants in Lactantius' Christian sense and since tyrants were internal enemies to their colleagues (though Maximus repeatedly distances himself from a hypothetical *inimicus* in *CA* 39.1, 2, 7), Escribano thus argues, convincingly, that Maximus directly challenges the rule of his recipient.

If a local religious incident in 386 could be used to mount a broad challenge to the emperor, a local challenge to an emperor in 387 could also be capitalized on to make a religious point. Indeed, it could be used to make competing points, as Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas demonstrates in his chapter on the statues riot in Antioch, "Toying with Theodosius." The incident spawned a wide variety of sermons, speeches and references in histories, which Quiroga Puertas necessarily discusses selectively. The chapter emphasizes religiously-motivated differences in the identification of Antioch's ambassador to Theodosius (bishop Flavian, the *magister officiorum* Caesarius, or, ahistorically, the orator Libanius). More originally, it also highlights partisan advantage in highlighting cause (the destruction of the temple of Tyche, for Libanius) versus effect (Theodosius' Christian forgiveness, which the incident prompted). Insofar as the chapter shows that the emperor might be viewed within a variety of religious frameworks, it complements the discussions in the third and fourth chapters. One wonders, though, whether the chapter might not equally well have highlighted the striking demonstration of common values and civic solidarity in the sources.

Daniëlle Sloopjes' "Managing the Empire while Securing the Throne" is an intriguing study of the impact of Theodosius I on the administration of an empire neither ever entirely at war nor ever entirely at peace. This chapter's fit in a book about images and

narratives is not entirely obvious, but it does shed light on administrative machinery which likely occupied much of the emperor's time and which ultimately allowed him to be worthy of comment. Sootjes focuses particularly on the status of Illyricum, which presented awkward problems, especially after Adrianople, and whose precise borders and status within Theodosius' administration changed repeatedly. The chapter also advances compelling evidence from Gaul that the stain of usurpation could slow acceptance of otherwise uncontroversial reforms enacted by a usurper. More than most of the chapters of *Emperors and Emperorship*, the conclusions of this chapter are tentative, but it does provide a very useful program for future research.

A reader looking for insights into humbler perspectives, like those of the Libyan peasants who apparently believed that Agamemnon was emperor and Odysseus was his friend (Synesius of Cyrene, *Ep.* 148.16), will not find them in *Emperors and Emperorship*. It is telling that the most widely accessible images of the emperors, on coins, receive limited treatment in those chapters which deal with visual art. All the same, the book certainly advances the study of what was at stake when images and stories about the emperor circulated in the complicated world of the fourth-century Roman Empire. It is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in this important subject.

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