MAPPING THE REPRESENTATION OF ROMAN IMPERIAL POWER IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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On 31 December 192, the controversial last Antonine emperor, Commodus, was murdered after a reign of twelve years. His violent death inaugurated a period of instability concerning imperial succession which continued (with some short interruptions) until Diocletian’s succession in 284. Apart from the difficulty of imperial succession, Roman emperors had to cope with other severe problems from 193 onwards, some already announcing themselves during Marcus Aurelius’ reign. External powers, for example the Persians, and internal frictions threatened the unity of the Empire. In addition, economic problems aggravated the overall situation. From 284, however, Diocletian brought relief; together with his co-regents he gained military victories and brought military, administrative, and financial reforms into force.

It is evident that ‘a strong man’ was badly needed in the period 193–284. Even if rulers could not be one, they had to at least present themselves as such. In order to preserve the fragile unity within the Roman Empire, representation of imperial power was thus of vital importance. How, then, did the representation of Roman imperial power develop during the troublesome years 193–284 A.D.? Was it a random process by means of ad hoc decisions from the different emperors and influential people around them? Or can we distinguish patterns in the ways in which third century emperors were represented and/or presented themselves to their subjects?

In this article the previous questions will be addressed only indirectly.1 Attention will primarily be paid to the methodology that underlies an analysis of the representation of imperial power in the period preceding

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1 My dissertation on patterns and developments in the representation of Roman imperial power (A.D. 193–284) will focus on these questions.
the third century crisis and in the period of actual crisis. Firstly, the term ‘power’, ‘representation’ and all concepts linked to these issues will be discussed. Emphasis will be on a clear definition of the concepts. Secondly, the media used for representation and the ‘problems’ inherent to communication (and to the media used for this purpose) will be dealt with. Finally, a case study will be presented: in which way does a medium employed for representation, in this case imperial coinage, provide an insight into the development of the representation of power in the third century A.D.?

**Concepts and theories**

Power is, then, a far more complex and mysterious quality than any apparently simple manifestation of it would appear. It is as much a matter of impression, of theatre, of persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation.3

It is not easy to grasp the exact meaning of a concept so comprehensive and, at the same time, so widely used as the term ‘power’. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED in the following) defines power amongst other things as “the capacity to influence the behaviour of others, the emotions, or the course of events”.4 This broad definition does not put any limitations on the possession of power; power is not necessarily restricted to particular individuals or groups within society. Although it is obvious that different types of power are meant here, relations of power exist in the public sphere (for instance between a political leader and his or her subjects) as well as in the private realm (for instance between parents and their children).

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The ways in which power can be attained vary. When we narrow the concept ‘power’ further and apply it to the authority which the Roman emperors wielded over their subjects in the third century A.D., the means that the future emperors employed to obtain the purple illustrate the various ways in which power could be acquired; some imperial candidates appealed, rightfully or not, to their ancestry and claimed in this way the supreme rule, whereas the majority of third century rulers used their legions to acquire the imperial throne.

Furthermore, wielding power is inextricably bound up with the representation of power. Elsner’s observation that power is “a matter of . . . persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation”, illustrates this perfectly. Before elaborating on the link between wielding power and its representation, however, the concept ‘representation’ will be defined first. ‘Representation’ is, in my view, a symbolic rendering in text or image that can provide an insight into social relations and the ideals, standards and values involved. When we apply this definition to the Roman emperor, the representation of imperial power is thus a means for spreading imperial ideology. To avoid misunderstanding, ideology must not be conceived as static: “Ideology is never a coherent whole, never totalised; it constantly adjusts and readjusts, being part of a living society”. Thompson’s definition in *Ideology and Modern Culture* underlines the dynamic character of ideology; he describes ideology as “the ways in which the meaning constructed

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5 Next to the meaning ascribed to ‘representation’ used here, ‘representation’ can also imply people who act, symbolic or concrete, on behalf of other persons or organs. In this article, however, only the form of representation consisting of a symbolic rendering in text or image will be dealt with.


7 Concerning the relation between representation and ideology in modern times, Sturken and Cartwright observe the following: “People use systems of representation to experience, interpret, and make sense of the conditions of their lives both as image-makers and as viewers. In essence, we construct ideological selves through a network of representations – many of them visual”. See further M. Sturken and L. Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford 2001), 56.

and conveyed by symbolic forms serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain structured social relations from which some individuals and groups benefit more than others, and which some individuals and groups have an interest in preserving while others may seek to contest.9

Imperial ideology, and therefore its representation, was established by a dialogue between the Roman emperor (together with his entourage) and his subjects: “…es wäre fatal, alles einer zentral gelenkten Maschinerie unterzuordnen.”10 Without a dialogue between the highest levels of imperial administration and the lower levels in Roman society, alienation must have been unavoidable. How, then, could imperial ideology serve as a binding agent within the Roman Empire when there would have been an unbridgeable gap between the central authority and the inhabitants of the Roman Empire?11 Furthermore, for the emperor it was dangerous not to anticipate what different sections of the Roman population expected from him; there are examples available of Roman emperors who did not (or not enough) care about their subjects’ expectations and died a violent death.12 The argument, however, must not be pushed too far; in the end, emperors, or at least the ‘imperial centre’, were decisive on their own ‘visual programme’.13 Moreover, active participation of a large part of the Roman population in establishing imperial ideology was nearly impossible if only because of practical reasons.

Ideology can thus be spread by means of representation. Is it, however, also right to use the term ‘propaganda’ instead of ‘representation’ with respect to the spreading of imperial messages in the Roman Empire? This problem has been addressed by many modern scholars.14

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12 The Syrian emperor Heliogabalus (218–222 A.D.) is an example of this.
13 The most telling example of the emperor’s influence on his imagery is the difference between the first and the second series of coins minted for Hadrian. The first series of coins were minted during the emperor’s absence from Rome. On the second series of coins, minted in a period during which the emperor was present in Rome, a change in titulature is apparent in comparison with the first series of coins. This makes clear that the authority of the emperor in this field should not be underestimated.
14 For an overview of various opinions on this topic, see Weber and Zimmermann 2003, op. cit. (n. 6) (see especially O. Hekster, ‘Imperial Spin: Propaganda – Selbst-
As I have already shown, it is important to use clear definitions for concepts linked to communication. If clearly defined, it can be useful to apply modern concepts to the ancient world and, in this, also to compare different periods of history. Avoiding modern concepts could “all too easily lead to a confusing array of equally circumspect semi-synonyms”. However, it is often necessary to dispose these concepts of their modern connotations and, consequently, define them broadly. Especially the term ‘propaganda’ is, to the modern mind, closely associated with totalitarian regimes who held sway during specific periods in the previous century. To make this concept work in ancient terms, it is necessary to strip ‘propaganda’ from its modern negative connotations. This can be achieved by applying the following common definition of ‘propaganda’: “The systematic propagation of information or ideas by an interested party, esp. in a tendentious way in order to encourage or instil a particular attitude or response”. Holding on to this definition, the concept propaganda is more powerful than the term representation but therefore not less useful. While using the definition of propaganda provided by the OED, it is still possible to acknowledge the dialogue taking place between emperor and people with regard to imperial ideology. Therefore, in my opinion, it is certainly valid to use the term propaganda in connection with the ‘machine’ spreading imperial ideology in the Roman Empire.

Then, returning to the connection between the representation of power and wielding it, the representation of imperial power is necessary to legitimize the authority of the emperor which is, in turn, vital for his keeping of supreme rule. This is, in short, my view of power as “a matter of (...) persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation”. Next to legitimization, representation of power can also (and of course simultaneously) be employed for education and glorification. The last objective is the most conspicuous and therefore the most treacherous one; it can provide the concept...
‘representation of power’ with a negative connotation and, additionally, obscure the pluriform character of it.

To sum up, representation of power is essential for having power. Additionally, representation of imperial power is a means for spreading imperial ideology. The latter is susceptible to external influences because of its dynamic character. As a result of this, representation of imperial power is affected by means of a dialogue between emperor and people.18

Finally, the aims of representation of power can be summarized in three concepts: education, glorification and legitimization. The aim last mentioned displays the relation between representation of power and having power the most clearly and therefore closes the circle.

Communicating imperial ideology: media and perception

Any form of representation makes use of media. Which were these media and what was the scope of these different media within the Roman Empire?

Various media could contain (symbolic) references to imperial power and/or present a particular picture of the emperor, for instance imperial and provincial coinage, reliefs and imperial portraits, literary and administrative texts, texts of law, petitions, votive inscriptions, games, and imperial appearances. Together they convey a visual programme presenting imperial ideology.19

Ancient media used for dissemination of messages have to be put in the proper context. Important in this matter is questioning the scope of the particular media. Who saw the votive inscription dedicated to Jupiter? Who came in touch with imperial coins? It is evident that a votive inscription, put up in a distant corner on the Forum in a provincial city, was known to fewer people than a silver coin propagating Septimius Severus’ victory over Clodius Albinus that was disseminated to the farthest corners of the Empire and was used as means of payment. Some media are thus more locally bound than others. Furthermore, illiteracy

18 “An advantage of the term ‘representation’ is that it can refer not only to the visual or literary portraits of the king [Louis XIV], the image projected by the media, but also to the image received,…”, see P. Burke, The Fabrication of Louis XIV (New Haven en Londen 1992), 10.
19 On ‘visual programme’ and image as ‘semantisches System’ see T. Hölscher, Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System (Heidelberg 1987).
could also play a part while analyzing the scope of particular media. Which part of the Roman society was actually able to read Virgil’s *Aeneis* or a text of law? The oral tradition, still present in Roman society, informed illiterates about important decisions and gave them, to a certain extent, access to literary texts. Moreover, images provided information about significant events. Yet, illiteracy limited the scope of particular media. Additionally, in the case of coinage, the material of which the coins were made and that decided its value could put some restrictions to the scope of this medium as well; it is hardly imaginable that the poor had access to coins of a high denomination.

Another practical aspect of representation that can be linked to the scope of the messages spread by the different media is the ‘practice of looking’, in other words the problem of interpretation. Different people look at imagery in different ways. There is, however, not only a difference between the interpretations of the imperial visual programme by the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, but also between the interpretations of the ancient viewer and the modern interpreter. A modern scholar analyzing imperial representation is thus faced with two problems; it is hard to take both the various ways in which the imperial imagery could be interpreted by contemporaries and the difference between ancient and modern practices of looking into consideration. Although it is impossible to equalize ancient and modern ways of looking, this problem can be dealt with by putting the message in its ancient context. This implies, for example, that the author of a text or the manufacturer of a portrait has to be examined, insofar possible. The other problem of interpretation, the different practices of looking by contemporaries, is more difficult to ‘solve’; using media that limit the ways of looking as a starting point probably helps while dealing with this problem. Coinage, then, is the best example since text and images on coins work together. This cooperation between

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21 Concerning the practice of looking, see especially Sturken and Cartwright 2001, op. cit. (n. 7).
22 Modern scholars hold various opinions concerning the extent to which coin types were actually seen and understood. Howgego states that “at a minimum, it cannot be wrong to assert that coinage was one of the means by which imperial imagery penetrated into private contexts”: C. Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins* (London and New York 1995), 74. Symbols which were particular to coinage were found in numerous.
text and image restricts the possibilities of interpretation and provides therefore more clarity about how the majority of the Romans would have interpreted the messages.

Interpretation of imperial imagery is by necessity linked to the perception of imperial messages. Perception, in its turn, is inextricably connected with communicating imperial ideology; ideological messages are intended to reach audiences and they thus provoke interpretation. In a few cases the targeting of specific audiences while communicating imperial ideology might have occurred in the Roman Empire.

*Representation of imperial power in the third century A.D. on coinage*

When analyzing the representation of imperial power in general and the development of imperial representation in the third century in particular, it is useful to take imperial coinage as a starting point. The reason for this is not merely that the interpretation of messages spread by this medium could be simplified by the presence of both text and images, as stated above. Additionally, a coin, ancient or modern, “will be an object existing in multiple copies that will be distributed to a large number of people who may be scattered over a wide geographical area.” Equally important is that Roman imperial coins were minted uninterruptedly from the beginning until the end of the Empire, even in periods of crisis. Therefore, they present a coherent picture that can be used to obtain information about economic procedures as well as historical events and processes. Among those processes, the development of imperial representation occupies a prominent position.

parts of the private sphere. In my opinion, this makes clear that coins were certainly seen and possibly also understood.

23 Hekster 2002, op. cit. (n. 8), 8.


25 In contrast to imperial coinage, provincial coinage is more useful for analyzing the extent to which imperial messages permeated the Empire.

But what kind of messages did imperial coins disseminate? What was put on the obverses and reverses? The obverses of imperial coins usually show portraits of members of the imperial family, most frequently the emperor. The reverses could also contain an imperial portrait. These imperial portraits, on most obverses and some reverses, show the emperor in a particular role:

In order to fulfill public expectation, the Roman emperor had to perform a number of roles, either passively or actively and often simultaneously. He was a citizen, a general, a consul at various stages in his life, a husband and father, a son, a founder or consolidator of a dynasty, a companion of the gods, specially favored by them and even virtually assimilated to them on occasion. All of these concepts found visual expression in coin portraits in the late republic and the empire, (...)\(^\text{27}\)

On the obverse, next to the imperial portrait the emperor’s titulature is put forward. On the reverses, the legend and design present an image of the emperor and/or of his reign in a broader sense. Wishes or promises concerning the future, a special connection between the emperor and one or more deities, important events of the emperor, significant events; all kinds of messages were put on the coins’ reverses. These messages are linked to the emperor and his reign by means of its content and/or the fact that the portrait of the emperor on the obverse and the message on the reverse belong to the same coin. In contrast with the reverses, the obverses were more static and less susceptible to major changes during the course of the Empire. The reverses changed more easily; almost during every reign new types were introduced.

Thus, imperial coinage proves to be valuable for interpreting the image of imperial power during the course of the third century that circulated through large parts of the Roman empire. It can be seen as a message medium, as a “vehicle for imperial communications”\(^\text{28}\). Nowadays, starting from this presupposition has been generally accepted, although opinions vary widely concerning the extent to which coins were used for disseminating ideological messages. Could imperial coins be interpreted as the outcome of a well-oiled propaganda machine or were those coins just spreading trivial messages? The assumption that decisions about the imagery and legends on imperial coins originated at

\(^{27}\) King 2002, op. cit. (n. 26), 127.

the top underlies both points of view. 29 Whether the emperor himself or officials such as the tresviri monetales, the secretary a rationibus or the procurator monetae had been responsible for minting, 30 “each coin minted at Rome was an official document and as such represented an official expression of the emperor and his regime”. 31 Moreover, whether the coins were spreading “messages from” or “tributes to” the emperor, 32 “they must display the emperor as he wished to be perceived”. 33 However, one has to keep in mind that, as discussed above, messages spread by means of coins almost inevitably anticipated wishes/expectations of particular groups in Roman society.

Concerning third century imperial coinage, part IV and V of the Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC in the following) provide the best overview. Although the catalogue, based on coin hoards, is old and therefore not wholly up to date, it outlines the coin types minted during the third century. Unfortunately, no other catalogue, representative with regard to coins minted in the imperial mints during the third century, exists.

In which way can the coin types listed in the RIC be deployed to map imperial representation in the turbulent third century? In my research on the representation of imperial power during the period 193–284, I analyzed the coin types mentioned in the RIC and divided them in so-called ‘representation categories’. Examining the types of all Augusti in the period 193–284, I chose to analyse only the reverses and not the obverses because of the reason mentioned above; the reverses are less static and more susceptible to changes than the obverses. Therefore, they provide more distinct images of particular emperors and their reigns which facilitates an analysis of the development of imperial representation in the third century. In addition, for reasons of space, coin types of usurpers and of members of the imperial family other than the emperor, types showing another portrait next to the imperial portrait on the obverse, consecration issues, and types listed in the RIC as hybrid, irregular, barbarous or false are left out of consideration.

The third century types provide thirteen representation categories. In the appendix an overview of the different categories is given. Naturally,

31 Noreña 2001, op. cit. (n. 28), 147.
32 Wallace-Hadrill 1986, op. cit. (n. 30), 68.
33 Hekster 2002, op. cit. (n. 8), 89.
some coin types can be placed into more than one category (for instance types that show the emperor in military dress making a sacrifice). I have tried to avoid overlap as much as possible, since otherwise the division of types into representation categories is of less value. However, the elaboration on the categories that can be found in my forthcoming PhD dissertation aims to present a balanced picture.

After dividing the coin types into these categories, it is possible to distinguish the forms of imperial representation that were the most widespread and that were rare in the third century. Most coin types belong to the categories ‘military representation’, ‘divine association’, ‘saeculum aureum’, and ‘virtues’ (see figure 1). Of all coin types, 22.5% have a military character, on 21.8% of them the emperor and his reign are associated with the divine, 19.2% promote saeculum aureum and 17.4% glorify virtues. 21.2% of all coin types are spread over the remaining categories.34 Thus, in the turbulent third century emphasis was laid on military matters, which is not strange for a period afflicted by many military problems. In addition, the frequent appearance both of associations of emperors and their rules with the divine (in other words mainly with deities who could provide help in straitened circumstances) and of promises/promotions of a golden age on third century coinage is not astonishing in a troublesome period. The emphasis on the virtues of the third century emperors shows that the rulers apparently had an interest in presenting themselves as the right man in the right place during a period in which the emperorship shook perceptibly. Of course, this does not imply that all exponents of these forms of representation should be reduced to actual third century problems and that in other periods these forms were not as common as in the third century.35

Analyzing the coin types may result in the categories described above, yet a problem inherent in this way of examining coinage has to be addressed. The above examination is based on coin types and not on actual numbers of coins. How reliable is an analysis based on types?

First, the repeated introduction of new coin types during the course of the Roman Empire, as stated above, shows the importance of types and, therefore, the relevance of an analysis of imperial representation

34 The total percentage is more than 100% (i.e. 102.1%) because some coin types belong to more than one category.

35 On imperial virtues communicated by means of coins in the period 69–235 A.D., see Noreña 2001, op. cit. (n. 28).
based on coin types. Secondly, a correlation between coin types and actual coin numbers can be demonstrated. This correlation can be revealed by means of testing particular representation themes against actual numbers of coins. To analyze this, I took the category ‘divine association’ as example. The number of coin types promoting divine association issued during a particular reign was then compared with the actual numbers of coins of a particular emperor propagating divine association within representative hoards. The results of this comparison are shown in two graphs. The first one shows the percentages of denarii (attributed to particular emperors) promoting divine association within the Reka-Devnia and Cunetio hoards, set against the

36 The percentages are respectively on the total number of coin types issued during a particular reign as they are listed in the RIC and on the total number of coins of a specific emperor found in a particular hoard.
Fig 2: Development ‘divine association’ on denarii.

percentages of coin types (issued during specific rules), listed in the *RIC* only or amongst other things as *denarii*, showing divine messages.\(^{37}\)

In figure 3, the percentages of *antoniniani* (issued during other rules than the ones in figure 1) promoting divine association within the Normanby, Cunetio, Venera, Neftenbach, and Çanakkale hoards are opposed to the percentages of coin types (issued during particular reigns), listed in the *RIC* only or amongst other things as *antoniniani*, propagating divine association.\(^{38}\)

In interpreting these two graphs, it is obviously clear that, for most reigns, the percentages of *RIC* and the hoards do not wholly correspond with each other. When looking at the overall development of divine association, however, one sees similar fluctuations in the percentages of coin types listed in the *RIC* and in the number of coins stemming from the hoards. In my opinion, this conformity proves that coin types can

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\(^{37}\) Geta, Gordian I and II, Pupienus, and Balbinus are excluded here. The percentages are respectively on the total number of *denarii* of a specific emperor found in a particular hoard and on the total number of coin types, as they are listed in the *RIC*, issued during a particular reign and issued only or amongst other things as *denarii*.

\(^{38}\) Philip II, Herennius Etruscus, Hostilian, and Saloninus are excluded here. The percentages are respectively on the total number of *antoniniani* of a specific emperor found in a particular hoard and on the total number of coin types, as they are listed in the *RIC*, issued during a particular reign and issued only or amongst other things as *antoniniani*. 
be used in a research on the representation of imperial power in the third century. Thus, an analysis of the number of coin types indicates properly on which kind of messages emphasis was put and which messages were certainly not widely propagated during particular periods in Roman history.

For now, only the development of the representation of imperial power by means of imperial coinage has been discussed. In the end, combining separate approaches to specific media and separate models for analyzing different kinds of messages will ensure a complete and subtle picture of the development of the representation of (imperial) power, not only for the third century but for any historic period.

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## Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynastic representation</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the family of the emperor, his descent (of humans, dei and divi) and (intended) successors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military representation</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the (harmony in the) army, victories, subdued areas, the role of the emperor as general, and military titulature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divine association</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the connection of the emperor and his reign with the gods/the divine, and the role of the emperor as pontifex maximus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saeculum Aureum</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the prosperity which the emperor will bring/has brought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euergesia</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning social-economical achievements, accomplished by the emperor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigmata</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning attempts of the emperor to associate himself with the great emperors of the olden times (Augustus, Trajanus, Marcus Aurelius).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restitutor-messages</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the role of the emperor as restitutor (not only with regard to military matters but also with regard to religious and economical matters).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevation</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the placing of the emperor or members of the imperial family beyond the human ranks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific representation</td>
<td>All forms of representation in which the emperor (or someone else) assumes a ‘neutral role’ and fulfil no specific function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning the virtues of the emperor, the army, or the people (of Rome or of other regions).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aeternitas-messages</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning eternal continuation of the reign of the emperor at that time, the existence of Rome, peace, hope, happiness, security, the invincibility of the emperor and the Roman Empire, deities, and of the concord within the imperial family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical messages</td>
<td>All forms of representation concerning (personifications of) geographic entities such as the city of Rome and provinces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unica</td>
<td>All forms of representation that do not fit in the above categories.</td>
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