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. 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.

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”. 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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