

Grapsai : 'to draw an image' - 'to write a text'

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The institution of imperial authority underwent dramatic changes during the period of Late Antiquity. The idea of the Emperor as the *princeps*, or the first citizen, of Rome gave way to the idea of the Emperor as the *dominus*, or the absolute power.¹ This transformation in imperial power is portrayed in the artwork of Late Antiquity.

Art plays an extremely important role in all civilizations. It has a power to shape social and personal identity and to transmit complex political and theological messages.² Power is very rarely limited to the pure exercise of brute force. The Roman state increased its authority and legitimacy through intricate ceremonies -displaying wealth and tradition, but, more importantly, demonstrating the powers of the Roman imperium. Power is a matter of both impression and of persuasion. Imperial imagery serves to represent and define who the Emperor is and how he is to rule. In following the trail of this imagery, one can see the true nature of this transforming role. In the propagation of the imperial office, art is power.³

From the time of the first Augustus (43 BC) to the absolutism of Late Antiquity, there is a significant reformulation of imperial power. Through a concession of legal rights, Augustus was named princeps of Rome. He was also the rightful heir, nephew of Julius Caesar, to the Roman *imperium*.⁴ By Late Antiquity, however, the Augustus neither had a legitimate concession of power nor a hereditary right to the throne (the death of Nero in AD 68 ends the hereditary line of the Caesars).⁵ He is, however, considered the

¹ A.H.M. Jones, 'The Imperium of Augustus,' *Journal of Roman Studies* 41 (1951): 112.

² K. Clark, *Civilization* (New York, 1969), 1.

³ J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire (AD 100-450)* (Oxford, 1998), 54.

⁴ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. R. Graves (London, 2003), 46. Please note that the relevant page numbers (and not chapter/verse numbers) are those quoted here for ancient sources.

absolute authority. This transformation of imperial authority is dramatically manifested in imperial images.

In the Early Roman Empire there is a great Hellenistic influence in art, in the usage of naturalism - an "imitation of 'real-life' desires... on an idealizing mythological level."⁶ The early imperial way of life is therefore deemed "Graeco-Roman."⁷ This Hellenization of Roman imagery under Augustus is shown in the cadaverous portraits of Julius Caesar, "still true to the unrelenting naturalism of republic portraiture, with the quasi-heroic features, decoratively generalized, that are given to Augustus and the Julius emperors that followed him."⁸ In the Early Roman Empire, having a public portrait which transmits one's individual features is seen as the greatest proof of power and success.⁹

The Augustan Principate overturned the long-established social hierarchy of the Republic.¹⁰ Augustus claimed his legitimacy through a series of constitutional rulings: Augustus, Princeps Senatus, tribunician power, and *Maius Imperium*.¹¹ But did these titles give him enough power to rule for fifty-eight years? Where did his power lie?

In large parts of the Empire, particularly the Greek East, many subjects regarded the living Augustus as a god.¹² While this belief was not common in Rome¹³ until his death and divinization in AD 14¹⁴, Augustus' imperial images encouraged these Hellenistic tendencies as another means of legitimacy. For example, the statue of Augustus from the Prima Porta shows the emperor as larger than life - depicting him as seven feet tall. He is shown "as in a large number of Augustan and later imperial images, in cuirass and military cloak, [and] appears to be proclaiming victory."¹⁵ Augustus, a small man of about 5'7"¹⁶, is said to have hid in the bushes during his first battle.¹⁷ This monument to Augustus is meant to aggrandize and idealize the man both physically and in terms of military leadership.

⁵ Ibid., 249.

⁶ R. S. Nelson, *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2000), 52.

⁷ F. M. Clover & R.S. Humphreys, *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Madison, WI, 1989), 8.

⁸ C.R. Morey, *Early Christian Art* (Princeton, 1942), 48.

⁹ Pliny, *Natural History*, Vol IV, trans. W.H.S. Jones (New York, 1935), 226.

¹⁰ Cassius Dio, *The Augustan Settlement*, trans. J.W. Rich (Warminster, 1990), 13.

¹¹ Velleius Paterculus, *Velleius Paterculus: Compendium of Roman History and Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. F. W. Shipley (London, 1924), 355-357.

¹² Suetonius, 80.

¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

On further investigation, this statue propagates the Augustan imperial image in even deeper and more divine ways. There is a strong Hellenistic undercurrent in his idealized features, and bare feet which, in ancient Greek tradition, signify divinity.¹⁸ But even more potent is his sculpted support, a Cupid on a dolphin which alludes to the mythological, divine descent of the Julian family from the goddess Venus.¹⁹ Thus, while the initial impact of the sculpture may be a political statement of authority through military leadership, the sculpture simultaneously legitimizes this so-called *princeps* by implying his connections to the deities. Such an assertion implies recognition of the world-order established on earth, and under the control of the Empire and Emperor.²⁰

Augustus' ambivalent position, between *princeps* and monarch, man and god, was not an impasse to his legitimacy. It is this ambivalence that helps him to create the delicate role of Emperor in a quasi-Republican context. By bolstering his political and military power with imagery alluding to the divine, he secured his role in the Empire.

Through the ancient Greek tradition of hero worship,²¹ the Roman imperial cult was formed. The Greeks understood the influence of art in worship and display of power, as no one can deny the "grandeur of the Parthenon and the majesty of Athena of Pheidias [in awakening]... Athenian hearts to the loftier notions... of divinity."²² It is these influences of imperial imagery to which the first Augustus owes his divine legitimacy. The facade of the Roman Republic was continued in this manner.²³ The message demonstrated through his imagery however, shows an emperor who is more than just a first among equals, as his imperial images demand "every subject of the Roman empire to pay his respects."²⁴

Augustus' *Res Gestae*, an account of his life and achievements, has a strong focus on the buildings and monuments he created.²⁵ Augustus used his artistic achievements to

¹⁵ J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (New York, 1995), 162.

¹⁶ Suetonius, 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁸ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 162.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁰ Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, trans. D.A. Russell (New York, 1992), 14.

²¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Vol. I*, trans. F. W. Shipley (London, 1924), xviii. (introduction).

²² Pausanias, Vol. I, xxi (introduction).

demonstrate his feats as emperor. This power of symbolism is also used on Augustan coinage. Before the last year of Julius' Caesar's life, coins did not portray living Romans, but because of the Hellenistic influences that re-emerged with vigour during the reign of Augustus, every coin portrays a picture of the princeps, and, on the reverse, depicts an image of one of his buildings.²⁶ In this way the "panegyric reflex [of interrelating] portrait and monument... [acts to] confer grandeur."²⁷ The *Res Gestae* also specifies which construction projects denote which reign (i.e. Republican, Caesarian, or Augustan) which suggest "that Augustus was using buildings specifically to elicit support from the different political constituencies he needed to satisfy."²⁸

Augustus' reign shows a focus on rebuilding the empire rather than on foreign conquest.²⁹ He uses art to promote his administration of "peace, abundance, devotion to duty and reverence for tradition."³⁰ But after his death, the social order changes, the ambivalence between *princeps* and Emperor, god and man, that had served to gain legitimacy, while keeping a Republican facade, would become more obviously authoritarian.³¹

As early as Trajan (AD 98-117) the nature of the Principate had changed. Trajan's column, built in AD 112, acts as a triumph, depicting his military acts and victory against the Dacians (AD 105-106).³² This column (which also acts as his funerary site) can be compared to Augustus' Mausoleum. Augustus, however, did not ask for his military acts to be engraved.³³ This omission serves to propagate the idea of Augustus as "restorer of the peace in order to transmit his power... on the contrary, Trajan needed to emphasize himself as warrior and triumphator,"³⁴ as he lacked hereditary legitimacy. Similarly however, Trajan's column is crowned with a statue of himself, in the same manner as Augustus' Mausoleum. Thus, Trajan's column shows his desire to gain legitimacy through connection to Augustus, while at the same time "affirming his own character, originality and power."³⁵

Artwork of this period loses its traditional form of naturalism and idealism of

²³ Cassius Dio, 13.

²⁴ Pausanias, Vol. I, xxii (introduction).

²⁵ Velleius Paterculus, 345.

²⁶ Elsner, *Art and Text*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ J.J. Pollitt, *The Art of Rome*, (Cambridge, 1995), 100.

³⁰ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

Classical Hellenistic style seen during the early Principate. In one relief medallion of Emperor Hadrian (AD 118-136) there is a depiction of Hadrian hunting, and offering his hunt to the statue of Apollo. The figures are done in idealized proportions, with proper weight distribution. Each body is separated from each so that the individual as an "organic unit and a corporeally beautiful whole"³⁶ can be realized. Figures in the third century however, begin to lose their corporal beauty, and rather than existing in natural groupings, overlap each other. The movement and expressive calm of the Early Empire is lost to jagged and exaggerated contours and gestures. These dramatic figures, anarchic in form, draw parallel with their chaotic society.³⁷ Marcus Aurelius (d. 180), emperor during this fatal period, notes in his *Meditations* the desire for uniformity and world law,³⁸ in hopes of reuniting his empire. In this falling empire, Diocletian emerged to create such a cohesive uniformity.

The most decisive change in the Principate can be perceived in Diocletian's reign, beginning in AD 289.³⁹ In the second half of the third century, the Roman Empire was troubled by internal and external wars which disrupted social order and tradition. The Empire was invaded on all fronts. In this time of chaos, usurpation by local army leaders throughout the empire caused "the traditional connections between the provinces [to be] dissolved and unity of the empire [to be] shattered."⁴⁰

"He was the new Jupiter on earth who would master chaos and fling the rebelling giants to the ground; it was in this aspect that Diocletian was celebrated by panegyrists and artists."⁴¹ The empire became a system of absolutes-as there was no longer an Augustus concerned with pleasing various factions, or carefully accumulating collections of titles to legitimize his power.

In this transformation of imperial power, there is a decline in Hellenistic imagery. The Greeks detestation of representations of pain could not express this era of chaos. In classical Greek imagery, to submerge man's dignity to the circumstances of life would be

³² Ibid., 10.

³³ Velleius Paterculus, 345.

³⁴ Elsner, *Art and Text*, 23.

³⁵ Ibid., 24.

³⁶ H.P. L'Orange, *Artforms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*, (Princeton, 1965), 85

³⁷ L'Orange, 88.

³⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. M. Staniforth, (Baltimore, 1964), 65.

³⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, Vol. I., trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), xxiii (introduction).

seen as grotesque, as man is master of his world.⁴² While Augustus may have been such a master, this mould no longer fit the crumbling Roman world. Diocletian created a new imperium, and a new respect for it, by introducing a series of Oriental customs into imperial court procedure, most notably mandatory obeisance (*adoratio*) before the emperor⁴³. "Everything connected with the emperor was called... *sanctissimus* or *divinus*."⁴⁴ These decrees show the influence that invasion has had on the empire, transforming the previous Graeco-Roman imperium into a soon-to-be monarch influenced by Eastern religion and philosophy.⁴⁵ No longer was there ambivalence about man or god, Principate or Dominate. Coming out of the chaotic third century, Diocletian reorganized and stabilized the empire through absolute control based on divine legitimacy.

In Diocletian's establishment of the Tetrarchy, he further organized the dishevelled Roman Empire. With four leaders, guarding both fronts (eastern and western), Diocletian protected against usurpations to the throne.⁴⁶ In AD 287, Diocletian named the two Augusti '*Jovius*' and the two Caesars '*Herculius*'. In this way, while he established an obvious superiority between the four leaders, he also gave them a common origin based on divine inheritance. This commonality replaced the personal individuality of the emperor.⁴⁷ Coin portraits show this idea of *similitudo*, so that "one emperor's portrait [could] be substituted for another and thus to be considered current under the four different imperial names."⁴⁸

During Diocletian's vicennalia in AD 303, the monumental Rostra at the Forum Romanum was erected. The monument consists of five huge columns: the center statue is topped with Jupiter, while the outer four, symmetrically grouped around the god, depict the four tetrarch leaders. Again the idea of *similitudo* is stressed, as the four leaders are all of the same type, dress, gesture, and appearance.⁴⁹ Further, the sides of the column depict the emperor sacrificing, in an act of showing his *pietas* that foreshadows "the hero of Late Antiquity—the martyr and the ascetic, as the legends of martyrdom would replace the heroic myths of the Early Empire."⁵⁰

⁴⁰ L'Orange, 40.

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Morey, 58.

⁴³ Pollitt, 210.

⁴⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, xxiv (introduction).

⁴⁵ L'Orange, 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45

Diocletian's reign lead toward an empire no longer diverse in religious cult-life, or depicted diversely in an artist's interpretation, but one where a strict and uniform government was implemented into all facets of life.

“The great regularity and lawfulness of this higher and eternal world now, with the reform work of Diocletian, descended into our temporal reality, and the confusing multitude of the obstinate and unruly natural forms were aligned and arranged according to the strict lines of a transcendent order and symmetry.”⁵¹

The use of religion, begun in the Early Roman Principate, coupled with Diocletian's absolutism, acted as the precedent for imperium in Late Roman Antiquity. By the end of the third century, the battle against the threat of the Empire's dissolution culminates in religious discrimination against the Christians in the Great Persecution (303-311). But "trying to unify the Roman world under a state church [would] only be fulfilled with the constitution of the Christian state."⁵³

The imperial imagery of the Tetrarchy is not the end to the development of who the Emperor is and how he is to be portrayed. The Second Tetrarchy proved to be less successful as a symmetrical foursome-by AD 324, Constantine gained control over the empire as the sole leader.⁵⁴ A Christian convert,⁵⁵ Constantine used Diocletian's precedent of religious uniformity. Acting under the ancient Roman tradition of *pontifex maximus*,⁵⁶ he first attempted to unify the Christian church. Over time this sought-after unity expanded beyond the Christian church to the entire empire, by the exclusion and persecution of pagan religions.⁵⁷

His conversion to Christianity was pivotal in the transformation of Christianity from a religion on the margins to an integral element in imperial power. No longer are statues or portraits attempts to imply pagan divinity or heritage to the great emperors of the past. Instead, imperial portraits lose this sense of time and continuity, in a flat and standstill position, gazing into the world of the eternal. Imperial imagery, the power of *imperium*, becomes based on the symbolic. From the first moment of Constantine's con-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

⁵² Pollitt, 210

⁵³ L'Orange, 64.

version, his acceptance to Christ is shown by the act of putting a Christian symbol on his shield.⁵⁸ The cross simultaneously becomes Constantine's symbol and the symbol of *imperium*. "In these circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine that venerating the symbol or deciding to call oneself a Christian became an indication of loyalty to Constantine himself."⁵⁹

How did the Christ-figure, a human of humble means and no significance, who could act as a saviour, become an integral element and symbol of Roman *imperium*? The very concept is irrational and distasteful in the Hellenistic- influenced polity of the Early Roman Empire. Its origins and success come not from Hellenism therefore, but rather from the eastern front, where the first iconic imageries are seen.⁶⁰ With the move of the capital to Constantinople in 324, we see the emperor make official this shift from Hellenistic to Eastern conception of the imperial image.

In Constantine's search for stability through religious uniformity, like Diocletian, he focused on *similitudo* and symmetry. The Arch of Constantine (completed AD 315), erected after his victory over Maxentius (AD 312)⁶¹ depicts his imperial endeavours. The figures are not in natural groups, but are arranged uniformly in rows, symmetrically organized around the central dominating figure of the emperor.⁶² This organizational strategy corresponds to the domineering structure of the empire under Constantine.⁶³ But it was not only subordination to the emperor that was mandatory in the fourth century, the relief also creates subordination of the figures toward the outer framework. The whole-the empire-becomes greater than the individual.

The loss of the importance of individuality in Late Antiquity can be seen as the naturalistic portrait of the emperor is reduced into a simplified face and body. Late Antique imperial portraits become "vehicles of symbols and signs, fixed formula of expression of sacred attributes or certain insignia of state, all adhering to a higher and perpetual order into which the fleeting human being has entered."⁶⁴ Whereas the pagan imperial court merely demanded the acceptance of a rite, Christianity gave a stricter means of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁵ F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World: 31 BC-AD 337* (London, 1977), 580.

⁵⁶ Suetonius, 63.

⁵⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, 5.

⁵⁸ S. Mitchell et al., *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), 7.

⁵⁹ Mitchell et al., 7.

⁶⁰ Morey, 59.

uniformity, "the adhesion of the [individual] will to a theology, in a word, faith, a new life in a new people,"⁶⁵ to a greater whole.

The absolutism of imperium increased with successive emperors. Concurrently, art expressed this final transformation of imperium in Late Antiquity. The Theodosius Obelisk at the hippodrome in Constantinople shows this absolutism. Unlike the Early Roman Empire, whose figures are free in space, these figures are bound to one row, seemingly frozen in time, and subordinated to the central figure of the Emperor, "just as in real life individuals were firmly tied by the Dominate to their state."⁶⁶ With the figures turned on a profile, symmetrically placed around a supernaturally sized frontal image of Theodosius, the hierarchy of the state is literally set in stone.

While the Late Antique Emperors officially dropped the idea of imperial divinity, their artwork is as suggestive of the divine as was the Augustan *Prima Porta*, showing descent from the pagan Venus. Their divinity however would not be pagan but Christian. Constantine's court is depicted in imagery as

"an imitation of the divine court of Christ, the universal Emperor who sits arrayed in imperial purple on a blue globe in the apse-conch... as he rules the cosmos, seated on a blue globe, they rule the empire, as he grants gifts, so they bring him gifts. In visual imagery... the Emperor is imitator of Christ-the kingdom of this world is the image of the kingdom of heaven."⁶⁷

Though apotheosis was no longer practiced in Late Antiquity, upon his death in AD 337 Constantine was buried in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. On either side of this monumental tomb are six symbolic tombs of the Apostles.⁶⁸ The message of this imperial site is clear: Constantine was meant to be seen as a Christ-like figure.

In Justinian's reign (AD 524-565), the visual impression of direct linkage between the temporal world and the eternal reinforced legitimacy, even though it was not directly a statement of divine origin. This linkage is clearly manifested through Justinian's frontal gaze. In the *Prima Porta*, and other such works of the Early Roman Empire, the gaze of the Emperor is always averted from the viewer to make clear his divine separation

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶² L'Orange, 89-90.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁵ Mitchell et al., 4.

⁶⁶ L'Orange, 100.

from his people. In Late Antiquity, the Emperor stares straight into the eyes of his beholder. This eye contact, coupled with the fact that Justinian and Theodora are often portrayed within a sacred space, serves two purposes. First, both the viewer and the Emperor share common ground in that, they are both worshipping Christ. Thus the viewers can identify with their leader.⁶⁹

This Late Antique imagery also serves another purpose. In the Early Roman Empire, imperial visual imagery is used to convey a message of legitimacy based on the strength and power of a stable and prosperous Empire. In Late Antiquity, artwork had the task of justifying a new kind of Emperor - one that could no longer claim legitimacy by such means. This shift in *imperium* shows that "physical power and idealism could no longer be used as conveyors of imperial power, for this power had long slipped away from Roman imperial hands."⁷⁰ It allows a weak empire to be acceptable by its analogous relationship to their humble Saviour. The change to Christianity allows people to seek, not happiness on earth, but a promise for the afterlife, a better life. This is the second impact of Justinian's frontal gaze - Justinian takes on the role of mediator, between the viewer and the divine.⁷¹ Through his mediation, he becomes essential to the viewer and to the Roman Empire. For in his gaze there is the promise and the path to the afterlife, the divine.

Early Roman imperial art focuses on the uniqueness of the emperor through its usage of mythic-historical events and idealized naturalism. By contrast, in later Roman imperial art what is stressed is not the individual, but the hierarchic order of the world.

“How different this is from the specific events which glorify Augustus: on Theodora's mantle is no assertion of historical achievement but rather the sacred and eternal narrative of the Magi bringing gifts to honour the nativity of Christ. Augustus wears his own history mythologized on his cuirass; Theodora wears a witness to the incarnation.”⁷²

While the art of Late Antiquity is flat, linear and schematic, the viewer sees these images as naturalistic in that they are living objects,⁷³ which communicate, by their intense gaze, a promise of a path to a greater place.⁷⁴ Imperial imagery is no longer called "to evoke a particular person, but an abstract relationship."⁷⁵ This role as mediator had

⁶⁷ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 180.

⁶⁸ Millar, 551.

⁶⁹ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 160.

been foreshadowed in the earlier Roman Empire, by the representations of the emperor as a practitioner of sacrifice.⁷⁶ But by also making the early emperor divine, the Roman populace is excluded. While this may have been an effective way of reigning during the height of Roman strength, it could no longer function in Late Antiquity. With the East and West at odds, and with usurpations and foreign invasions becoming common, the Emperor offers himself as the new saviour. It is through his mediation that the divine world can be attained. In exchange for his mediation, his imposing frontal gaze and sacred imagery demand all subscribe to his own God, his own state religion, his uniformity and absolutism.

The voyage through the visual imagery of the Roman *imperium* shows how power and fate can be personified. From the period of the Principate, through the Tetrarchs and Dominate of the third century, to the Christian Emperors of Late Antiquity, we see a series of rulers whose imperial imagery is not only innovative but omnipresent.⁷⁷

The Late Antique emperor does not work within the traditional imperial cult but rather turns to a tradition which promises a path to a better world. No longer does the world view imperial imagery as paying court to the emperor's strength⁷⁸ but rather views the emperor as a means of escape from the misery permeating throughout the empire. This is the power of the Late Antique Emperor, manifested and propagated through his visual imagery.

"Crede mihi; plus est, quam quod videtur, imago"- "Believe me: an image is more than it appears to be."- Ovid, *Heroides* 13.155.

⁷⁰ Morey, 59.

⁷¹ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 160.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷³ Nelson, 143-4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷⁵ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 189.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

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⁷⁷ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 160.

⁷⁸ Pausanias, Vol. II, 23.

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