Ben N. BERRESSEM, Die Repräsentation der Soldatenkaiser. Studien zur kaiserlichen Selbstdarstellung im 3. Jh. n. Chr. Philippika; Altertumswissenschaftliche Abhandlungen Bd. 122. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2018, XI + 499 S., EUR 98,00. ISBN: 978-3-447-11032-7

The third century AD has attracted much attention over the past twenty years or so. With notable exceptions, it used to be dismissed as a time of permanent crisis and decline, not just politically and economically but also artistically. In addition, it poses considerable challenges to scholars due to the scarcity of contemporary written sources and difficulties in dating archaeological and artistic evidence. Yet more recent scholarship has not only discovered an inherent interest in observing how an empire dealt with the instabilities and threats to its survival during this period, but has also been more daring in taking up the methodological challenges. As a result, a very considerable number of publications have been written lately, from both an ancient historical and a classical archaeological point of view.

The book under review, Ben Berressem's (B.) 'slightly extended' (*Vorwort*) PhD thesis defended in 2016 at the University of Trier, aims to fill one of the remaining gaps in this scholarship by examining building activities and portraits of the emperors and their families between AD 235 (the end of the Severan era) and 285 (the beginning of the Tetrarchy), with the aim of adding to our understanding of the self-representation of these emperors and their legitimising strategies. This is a very welcome undertaking. It is widely agreed that both public building and imperial portraiture were prominent means of communicating the power, virtues and ideologies of emperors to the general public, and little of the research on these materials has comprehensively considered either recent insights and debates or the latest excavations.

The book presents its materials and argument in a systematic way, starting with an introduction that explains the author's aims and methodology (pp. 1–8), followed by brief discussions of some key concepts used to describe the era (the term 'soldier emperors', *Soldatenkaiser*, and the concept of 'crisis') (pp. 9–19). Chapter 3 (pp. 21–51) is a knowledgeable discussion of historical research based on literary texts, coin reverses and imperial titles in inscriptions. Chapter 4 (pp. 53–132) is dedicated to imperial building activities, including two separate sections on Philippus Arabs's newly founded city Philippopolis and Aurelian's Sol Invictus temple in Rome. Chapter 5 (pp. 133–334) is on portraits of the official emperors and their family members, as well as those of the Gallic Empire and of usurpers. Chapters 6 and 7 draw general conclusions on the emperors' traditionalism and innovative impetus

(pp. 335–43) and on their self-representation in general (pp. 345–49). Then a 48-page catalogue of portraits in the round accepted by the author as those of members of the imperial families, a very short index, an extensive bibliography and eight plates of coins conclude the volume.

The reader will appreciate the convenient summary of recent debates among ancient historians, as well as the comprehensive presentation of literarily and archaeologically attested building activities and portraits attributed to the emperors. It was certainly a good idea to discuss coins and portraits in the round together, not least because we do not have examples of the latter for all emperors let alone their wives. Similarly, including the Gallic emperors and usurpers opens up new lines of enquiry. B. also draws a number of convincing conclusions, although not all of these are in fact new. He rightly observes that *the* image of a soldier emperor does not exist and that there was a range of ways in which emperors could be depicted. He demonstrates that portraits of imperial sons were shown in a more classicising style (and from Gallienus onwards with a particular type of beard) not just because of their age, but to indicate their position in the hierarchy (pp. 313–18). That B. describes the stylistic differences as 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' representations, respectively, is nevertheless rather unhelpful, as it has long been observed in scholarship on portraiture: not only is it likely that young boys had relatively smooth and even faces, but it is also unclear whether the emperors did indeed have all the lines and severe expressions that we find on the portraits. B.'s terminology also contradicts some of his own observations (pp. 318–29). Physiognomic similarities between members of the imperial family are shown to be deliberate choices in portraiture in some instances, contributing to a demonstration of dynastic concordia and reassurance of orderly succession (most notably among the Licinii), although this reviewer finds similar suggestions in other cases occasionally somewhat over-optimistic.

B. also correctly observes that the earlier emperors' portraits draw on existing visual language even in those elements that are often seen as typical of the era, such as short hair and the stern expression just mentioned, and that an increasing use of military dress on coins, even including helmets (!), suggests a more emphatic focus on military virtues and the military as a primary audience only from Gallienus onwards. The argument would have benefited from consideration of the addressees of various coin types more generally.

Furthermore, physiognomic and pathognomic details such as contracted brows and earnest or even grim facial expressions are found in many portraits from the era, interpretations of which as indications of *cura imperii*, military

power and achievement B. rejects outright as subjective (p. 305). He warns against what Bert Smith has called 'biographical fallacy': the methodologically problematic assumption that surely what we know about an individual from other sources must lie behind their portraits' iconography. While caution is certainly appropriate, one wonders whether the author throws the baby out with the bath water. B. prides himself on applying a 'positivist' approach throughout, apparently meaning that he accepts propositions only when there is 'hard evidence'. However, as every historian knows, it is impossible to avoid bias and speculation altogether; we can only suggest plausible scenarios of the past that are not contradicted by logic or our sources. And of course, this is what B. does too. One example is his interpretation of the stylistic changes following the last portrait type of Gallienus. Portraits present facial features in an increasingly abstract manner, to the extent that they become almost interchangeable (accordingly adding to our difficulties in identifying their subjects). It is surely convincing to see these later portraits as expressions of a trans-personal idea of the emperor, a trend that can also be seen in the emperors' titles and other praise (pp. 331–34). Yet when B. goes on to agree with the majority of scholars that they are an indication of transcendence and a 'sacralisation' of the emperor, he has to draw on external sources to bolster this view. In support he could have cited the radiate crowns that some emperors feature on coins (referring to Marianne Bergmann's research on these),[1] although one might object that similar stylistic features also occur in private portraiture. Are these aiming for sacralisation as well?

As these remarks already indicate, despite its merits, the book is ultimately a missed opportunity. It has maintained the format of a typical dissertation, with systematic discussion of evidence beyond what is needed to support the argument (yet without turning it into a consolidated catalogue of all the evidence). More importantly, it lacks a structured consideration of methodology, is partly methodologically flawed and could often have taken its observations much further. While B.'s explicit aim is to research the *self*-representation of the emperors, he does not consider in any organized way who may have been responsible for the erection of buildings or the creation of coin and portrait types. For buildings, he makes the astonishing claim that it did not matter who the actual patrons were (pp. 5–6). Here as elsewhere, it would have been useful to engage with scholarship on buildings and portraits more widely and, for this aspect, to take into account Emanuel Mayer's excellent discussion de-

[1] M. Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher: theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1998).

monstrating that patronage mattered deeply.[2] The observations that the relevant emperors continued to erect public buildings, that these buildings were by no means only for the military, and that Rome did not get entirely neglected even though there were increased building activities in the provinces are all convincing and relevant. More could however be said about the predominance of baths among buildings attributed to the emperors than that they are 'cultural symbols of Roman civilisation' (p. 128). The use of spolia is barely mentioned despite extensive scholarship on the matter (p. 129), and it would be fascinating to learn more about the choice of locations and the way these buildings reacted to – or were a reaction from – a local populace.

The identification of imperial portraits in the round of the post-Severan period is notoriously difficult, with views varying widely among scholars. A study with the aims of the present one needs first to establish a reliable evidence base. This is what the author claims he did, but he does not discuss how he got there and what exactly his principles were. He simply declares (p. 134) that he applied a 'positivist' approach (*möglichst positivistische Bestimmungsmethode*), without telling the reader what he means by this or discussing Klaus Fittschen's programmatic publications on methodology[3] and the criticism they have faced. It emerges from his discussions of examples that his main criteria were similarity to coin portraits and the existence of replicas, surely a defendable methodology for identifying a core of relatively securely attributable images. Yet given that he only looks at metropolitan Roman coins while the portraits come from various places, and given the fact that local patrons may have chosen to diverge from any official image (as they did in the past), the limitations of relying only on this core should be acknowledged. Moreover, the particular challenges the third century poses in this regard, especially in the post-Gallienic period, merit a fresh discussion, which could have constituted a very useful contribution to methodological clarity in a field that has produced some wildly speculative attributions that B. has rightly (in this reviewer's view) rejected.

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2 E. Mayer, Propaganda, staged applause, or local politics? Public monuments from Augustus to Septimius Severus, in: Ewald, B. C. (ed.), *The emperor and Rome: space, representation, and ritual* (Yale Classical Studies 35) (Cambridge 2010), 111–34.

3 K. Fittschen, The portraits of Roman emperors and their families: controversial positions and unresolved problems, in: Ewald, B. C. (ed.), *The emperor and Rome: space, representation, and ritual* (Yale Classical Studies 35) (Cambridge 2010), 221–45; ibid., Methodological approaches to the dating and identification of Roman portraits, in: B. E. Borg (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Art* (Malden, MA 2015) 52–70.

As for the interpretation of accepted portraits, B. briefly discusses the possibility that emperors who were in some position of status may have received portrait honours (and thus had a model for their official portrait) before they became emperor (p. 312). Yet again, this insight is not taken into account systematically with regard to the material. There is also insufficient discussion of the impact that the reworking of portraits may have had. Interestingly, the anonymous imperial portraits discussed on pp. 226–35 mostly belong in that category. B. makes the important observation that, in contrast to earlier periods, some of these portraits were reworked from 'good' emperors who never suffered a *damnatio memoriae* (p. 234). Yet do we really believe that this was done only due to lack of material when entire buildings were still erected from marble? Conversely, who in antiquity, and on what basis, would have noticed that the statues originally depicted 'good' emperors, thus associating the later ones with the 'good old days'?

Finally, imperial portraits are considered entirely in isolation, with no attention to private portraits except for their elimination from the list of imperial ones. The very fact of the existence of portraits that resemble the emperor so closely, and its implications, is not addressed. Is the idea that all those who styled themselves in a similar way to the emperor did so following his model? This seems highly unlikely given the circumstances of their short reigns and what we know from previous periods. What does this tell us, then, about the self-representation of the emperors? Should we not acknowledge that it was strongly influenced by élite preferences of the time? This would not imply that there was no room for innovation nor that choices were arbitrary or meaningless, just that the emperors reacted to, and often reinforced, ideas and messages shared by a wider élite, which, given the range of styles at any time, was a choice in itself.

Further questions remain: What does the statistical distribution of portraits in the round tell us? For instance, the high number per year of reign of preserved marble portraits of Gordian III and his wife Tranquillina remains unexplained. How do numbers of marble portraits relate to those of coins with imperial portraits? What about the number of inscribed statue bases for these emperors (i.e. is the statistical distribution of portraits in the round real or a result of preservation or lack of recognition)? What is their distribution across the empire and what does that tell us? More could have been made of the author's observation on the importance of coin emissions for new emperors (some good initial thoughts are on pp. 329–31). The discussion of naturalistic versus abstract portraits or elements and the reasons for these would benefit from more nuance. After all, the later portraits of Gordian III already feature highly

abstract formulae, while many coin portraits after Gallienus show faces that are no less naturalistic than those of the pre-Gallienic period, confirming that these styles were deliberate choices while begging further questions. Finally, the lack of appropriate illustrations is a major drawback. Although the plates of coins are helpful (albeit lacking the coins of the usurpers), there is not a single plan or photograph of an imperial building nor a single image of a marble or bronze portrait, despite their centrality to and lengthy treatment in the volume.

To conclude, this book has the merit of presenting a convenient summary of debates in scholarship on the age of the 'soldier-emperors' as well as helpful overviews of evidence for imperial building activities and imperial portraits of the time, thus facilitating future research. Its conclusions confirm and supplement the results of (some) previous research and argue convincingly for a view of the period as one not merely of decline and impotence, but concurrently of innovative efforts to effect positive change. Yet rather than providing comprehensive answers, the result is to draw attention to the many desiderata that still remain and to encourage further debate.

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