

# The Emperor as Living Image in Late Antique Authors

Valerio Neri

## Abstract

Between the early imperial and early Byzantine periods, in descriptions of the ruler's body we can identify, *grosso modo*, two main tendencies: A realistic strain (as exemplified by the imperial portraits in Svetonius) that is anti-iconic in that it prevented the idealisation of the ruler often found in his sculpted portraits; and another, present in particular in encomiastic literature, that followed these idealised artistic presentations. The encomiastic literature from Constantine's I (r. 306–337) to Theodosius' I (r. 379–395) time still places the accent on the ruler's physical beauty as an expression of the particular relationship he had with the divine sphere. The first impression that Constantine's appearance leaves in the bishops gathered at Nicaea in the description of Eusebius of Caesarea is that of an angelic apparition. In Late Antiquity both in Christian and pagan authors, the main characteristic of the new canon of imperial beauty was light. This light prevents the perception of the sovereign's body and is considered in texts of the time as either an expression of the absolute distance between the emperor and common human nature, or a vain spectacle. The key text for imperial self-display in Late Antiquity is the famous description of Constantius' II (r. 337–361) *adventus* to Rome. In Christian authors writing about angels, the model of beauty that the emperor referenced was the glorious Christ reigning in heaven.

## Contents

Contesting the man-god in the early imperial period

From god to living icon in Late Antiquity

### Contesting the man-god in the early imperial period

[1] Present in both public and private spaces, imperial statues reproduced, even if in a stylised and simplified manner, the physiognomic traits of the ruling emperor and the symbols of his power and charisma. In doing so, imperial portraits substantiated the presence of the ruler around the empire.<sup>1</sup> The manner in which the emperor was

---

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between imperial statues and their referents, see e.g. Rudolf H. W. Stichel, *Die römische Kaiserstatue am Ausgang der Antike: Untersuchungen zum plastischen Kaiserporträt seit Valentinian I. (364–375 n. Chr.)*, Rome 1982 (= *Archaeologica*, 24); Marianne Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher. Theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz 1998; Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Berkeley 2000, 212–233; Peter Stewart, *Roman Art*, Oxford 2004 (= *New Surveys in the Classics*, 34); Luke Lavan, "Political Talismans? Residual Pagan Statues in Late Antique Public Space", in: *Late Antique Archaeology* 7 (2011), no. 1, 437–477. Due to the extensive bibliography on the topics touched upon in the text references are indicative.

perceived thus was shaped by his statuary representations, along with schematic depictions on coins and rare moments of physical presence. Literary descriptions add a complementary perspective on imperial self-presentation, rounding the image we have from visual sources and allowing us to discern the associations sought in official propaganda. We thus focus on accounts of imperial bodies in order to cast light on both the dynamic between physical beauty and divinity in Antiquity, as well as on the change in aesthetic canons of sanctity that takes place in Late Antiquity.

[2] Already in the writings of early imperial historians there is mention of the tendency of despotic rulers to identify themselves with their iconic representation: in the *Vitae* of Suetonius (70–126), Caligula (r. 37–41) demands that his stature is assimilated to that of a colossal statue.<sup>2</sup> Seen as deranged by authors of the time, such claims were rooted in the logic of the emerging imperial propaganda, which proposed an assimilation between the living emperor, his representations, and statues of the gods.<sup>3</sup> In the first century of the empire, statues of living emperors were presented, and to a certain extent perceived, as perfect reproductions emanating from the very person of the ruler. Produced using iconographic models developed in the capital, they functioned as cult objects in the context of the imperial cult, and the same reverence due to the emperor was expected towards them. Offences against these images were crimes of *lèse-majesté*.<sup>4</sup> When describing the equestrian statue of Domitian (r. 81–96) from the Roman forum, Statius (40–96) claimed that it perfectly reproduced the beauty of the emperor, without artful embellishments.<sup>5</sup>

[3] This veristic type of representation was slowly abandoned, and real and idealised physiognomic traits were enriched with motifs borrowed from statues of the gods; a synthesis that underlined the liminal ontological status of the emperor, who mediated between the human and divine spheres.<sup>6</sup> As the imperial policy of self-representation departed more and more from a realistic towards an idealised, godlike portrait, authors

---

<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *Cal.* 33 (ed. Henri Ailloud: Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *Vies des doux césars*, II, 5th rev. ed., Paris 1980, 87–88).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Witschel, "'Verrückte Kaiser'? Zur Selbststilisierung und Außenwahrnehmung nonkonformer Herrscherfiguren in der römischen Kaiserzeit", in: *Einblicke in die Antike. Orte – Praktiken – Strukturen*, ed. Christian Ronning, München 2006, 87–129 (= *Münchner Kontaktstudium Geschichte*, 9).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.74 (ed. Mauriz Schuster: Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, *Epistularum libri novem. Epistularum ad Traianum liber. Panegyricus*, Berlin 1992, 405).

<sup>5</sup> Statius, *Silv.* I.1.17–18 (ed. and trans. David R. Shackleton Bailey: Statius, *Silvae*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 2003, 30) *nec veris maiora putes: par forma decorque, par honor* cf. also Arrian, *Per. Pont. Eux.* 1 (ed. Aidan Liddle: Arrian, *Periplus Ponti Euxini*, Bristol 2003, 54) where the historian, while governor of Cappadocia (130–137 CE), mentions seeing a dissimilar statue of Hadrian and asks the emperor to send one that shows his true features.

<sup>6</sup> Augustus, for example, had himself depicted in the library of the temple of Apollo in Rome *habitu ac statu Apollinis* (cf. Ps.-Acron *ad* Horace, *Ep.* 1.3.17, after Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, Leiden 1993, 2nd ed., vol. 1.1, 82); while a preserved statue of Claudius, currently in the Vatican Museums, shows the emperor as Jupiter.

made a point of stressing the physiognomic particularities of the various emperors, as a way to stall the process of divinisation.

[4] The phenomenon is not easy to disentangle. On the one hand, the models that artisans used to render emperors godlike were manifold, with them ranging from Jupiter and Sol to Alexander the Great. On the other, the physiognomic details mentioned by ancient authors were not the fruit of objective observation but referenced particular character traits, in accordance with the physiognomic culture of the time.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while at times written and artistic sources converge, with the latter corroborating the former, in other instances the traits mentioned in one category of sources cannot be identified in the other. The so-called *Epitome de Caesaribus*, an anonymous history written towards the end of the fourth or in the first years of the fifth century, as well as the *Historia Augusta* that is almost contemporary to it, ascribe to emperor Caracalla (r. 211–217) the tendency to imitate the common depictions of Alexander the Great by creasing his forehead and leaning his head towards the left.<sup>8</sup> The many extant portraits of the emperor confirm the information provided by the author. The crease is rather a frown, the mark of Caracalla's portraits, and the craned neck is an energetic turn towards an enemy rather than a contemplative gaze. Nevertheless, despite the threatening vigour emanated by Caracalla's interpretation of the stance, the imitation persists, in particular in the portraits that reproduce also the upward gaze of the Macedonian prince, such as the one in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 1).

---

<sup>7</sup> On physiognomy in Roman antiquity, see e.g. Elizabeth Cornelia Evans, *Physiognomics in the Ancient World*, Philadelphia 1969 (= *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 59.5); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*, Princeton 1995; Tamsyn S. Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire*, Ann Arbor 1995.

<sup>8</sup> *Epitome de Caesaribus* 21.4 (ed. Michel Festy: Pseudo-Aurelius Victor, *Abrégé des Césars*, Paris 1999, 55); cf. also *Hist. Augusta: Caracalla* 2.1-2 (ed. David Magie, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1993 [= *Loeb Classical Library*, 140], 4). On the *Epitome*, see Jörg A. Schlumberger, *Die Epitome de Caesaribus. Untersuchungen zur heidnischen Geschichtsschreibung des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, Munich 1974; on the *Historia Augusta*, see Mark Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, Bruxelles 2012.



1 Portrait of emperor Caracalla (r. 211–217), marble, ca. 212–217 CE (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

[5] An *imitatio Alexandri* is attributed by written testimonies, in particular by Ammianus Marcellinus (d. ca. 400), also to emperor Julian (r. 361–363). Ammianus's description of Julian as "leonine"—the way Plutarch (46–120) had described Alexander—with broad shoulders, burning gaze, and wide mouth could recall a physical likeness to Alexander. The reference to Alexander does not, nonetheless, manifest in the emperor's gestures or, as in the case of Caracalla, in his iconography, but likely indicates Ammianus' appreciation of Julian.<sup>9</sup>

[6] Between the early imperial and early Byzantine periods, in descriptions of the ruler's body we can identify, *grosso modo*, two main tendencies: A realistic strain that is anti-iconic in that it prevented the idealisation and thus consecration of the ruler often found in his sculpted portraits; and another, present in particular in encomiastic literature, that follows these idealised artistic presentations. In between, we find descriptions that combine elements from both, and which require a thorough analysis in order to decipher the ruler concept they expose.

[7] In his *Vitae*, Suetonius underscores defects in almost all descriptions of imperial bodies; flaws which were obviously left out of official representations: Domitian's baldness; the short stature of Augustus, Otho, and Titus; or the excessive height and general corporeal disharmony in the case of emperors such as Caligula.<sup>10</sup> Among the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 25.4.22 (ed. Wolfgang Seyfarth, *Ammiani Marcellini Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, Leipzig 1978, I, 364); cf. Evans, *Physiognomics in the Ancient World*, 76–77; Guy Sabbah, *La méthode d'Ammien Marcellin. Recherches sur la construction du discours historique dans les Res gestae*, Paris 1978, 422–423.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. David S. Rohrbacher, "Physiognomics in Imperial Latin Biography", in: *Classical Antiquity* 29 (2010), 92–116; Valerio Neri, *La bellezza del corpo nella società tardoantica. Rappresentazioni visive e valutazioni estetiche tra cultura classica e cristianesimo*, Bologna

defects signalled by Suetonius feature also a prominent stomach, as those of Titus and Domitian, or the slenderness of limbs and joints, as the legs of Claudius and Domitian and the feet of Nero. Furthermore, in contrast to iconographic representations that stressed the immobility of rulers, Suetonius insists on the manner in which his subjects moved. In particular, the *ambulatio*, the way of walking is used to cast light on the ruler's character.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Augustus' left foot was weak, which made him limp at times; Tiberius walked with his neck and face stiff; Claudius walked with difficulty due to his weak legs, and thus annulled the image of authority he managed to project while still. Even in emperors whose beauty and harmony of shape Suetonius openly praised, such as Augustus, he mentioned defects that prevented the assimilation of the body he described with its image: the shape of the emperor's body is excellent in all periods of his life, yet he is short, his teeth are sparse, and he has blemishes and bald spots all over his body. Even when he occasionally mentions charismatic traits such as the *divinus vigor* of Augustus' gaze, Suetonius distances himself by stressing that it was a characteristic that the emperor himself liked to be praised as the feature that associated him to Apollo—thus identifying an instrument of self-presentation rather than making an objective observation.<sup>12</sup> In essence, the Suetonian description of imperial bodies seems rooted in an anatomical analysis similar to objective medical observations. The reason behind this incisiveness is to be sought in official propaganda, which produced objects such as the statue of Prima Porta (now in the Vatican Museums) or the Great Cameo of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France) in which personal traits served only to differentiate between embodied gods. In underscoring the emperors' realistic traits, and in particular those which revealed them as regular human beings, authors followed the aesthetic canons of the time, in which beauty and harmony stood for perfection, and physiognomic features translated character. In the following centuries, as the ruler's privileged relationship with the divine became a given, the semiotic of the divinised body changed.

### From god to living icon in Late Antiquity

[8] Late antique historians continue the practice of their early imperial predecessors and describe the outlook of rulers both 'realistically' and in an idealised manner. Within this traditional dynamic, a momentous change is discernible, one that mirrored a new way of conceptualising the relationship between the human and divine spheres. With the adoption of Christianity by emperors beginning with Constantine the Great (r. 306–337), the iconographic assimilation of the emperor's image with those of the gods is discontinued, and new ways of expressing the divinity of the imperial body are sought by authors and artists. For Late Antiquity we thus have texts, often by pagan authors,

---

2004, 125-128; Jacques Gascou, *Suétone historien*, Rome 1984, 592; J. Couissin, "Suétone physiognomiste dans les Vies des XII Césars", in: *Revue des Études Latines* 31 (1953), 234-256.

<sup>11</sup> Gait was an important indicator of character in the late Republican and early Imperial period, betraying one's self-control and masculinity, see Gleason, *Making Men*, 60-62.

<sup>12</sup> Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*, Oxford 2008, 35-50 analyses Augustus' claims to divinity in relation with notions of masculinity of the time. On how that reflects in the representation of the emperor, see pp. 47-50.

that continue the Roman tradition while concurrently, in writings mainly of Christian bishops, a new corporeal aesthetic of sanctity appears.

[9] The encomiastic literature from Constantine's to Theodosius' I (379–395) time still places the accent on the ruler's physical beauty as an expression of the particular relationship he had with the divine sphere. In the panegyric that a rhetor from Gaul addresses to Constantine in 310, (in which he tells the vision of Apollo that Constantine had had inside the god's temple at Andesina [today: Grand, Dép. Vosges]), the sovereign recognises himself in the god on account of both of them being *iuvenis, laetus* and *salutifer*.<sup>13</sup> The emperor's beauty reveals an extraordinary likeness to the divine: upon seeing Constantine, the soldiers are convinced that they are obeying a god on account of his beauty, which testifies to the divine residing in his mind.<sup>14</sup>

[10] The concept is further developed and detailed in the panegyric to Theodosius written by the Gallic rhetor Pacatus. Theodosius is perfectly suitable for his role as emperor not only due to his moral characteristics but also due to his physical ones.<sup>15</sup> The importance of the two features is presented as equal, just as equal are the attraction and the admiration that these stir in onlookers. In a panegyric dedicated to the same Theodosius, Themistius (d. 388) states that the emperor's outlook is composed of the perfect correspondence between two beauties, that of the soul and that of the body.<sup>16</sup> The anonymous author of a history written shortly after the death of Theodosius, the so-called *Epitome de Caesaribus*, a text which ends with the commendation of the deceased emperor, compares the beauty of Theodosius with that of his political and military model, emperor Trajan (r. 98–117). Theodosius is more beautiful than Trajan, especially due to the size of his eyes, the *ingentes oculi*, and on account of the dignity of his gait (*dignitas in incessu*).<sup>17</sup>

[11] In the same vein, Ammianus Marcellinus (d. ca. 400) stresses the low height and short and curved legs of Constantius II (r. 337–361), despite the emperor's attempt to have the Roman audience recognise him as colossal in the context of his *adventus* in

---

<sup>13</sup> Pan. 6(7)21.3-7 (ed. Charles E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini. Introduction, Translation and Historical Commentary with the Latin Text of R. A. B. Mynors*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford 1994 (= *Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, 21), 248-251; 582-583); cf. Brigitte Müller-Rettig, *Der Panegyricus des Jahres 310 auf Konstantin den Großen. Übersetzung und historisch-philologischer Kommentar*, Stuttgart 1990, 275-289. I find correct Müller-Rettig's critique of the fragment's interpretation proposed by Rodgers, "Constantine's Pagan Vision", in: *Byzantion* 50 (1980), 259-278, according to which the person to which *totius mundi regna deberi vatam carmina divina cecinerunt* would be Augustus, and thus the first Roman emperor would be the character with whom Constantine identifies.

<sup>14</sup> Pan. 6(7)17.3.4 (ed. Nixon and Rodgers, 243; 581).

<sup>15</sup> Pan. 2(12)6.2-4 (ed. Nixon and Rodgers, 455-456; 650); Neri, *La bellezza del corpo nella società tardoantica*, 133; Michael Mause, *Die Darstellung des Kaisers in der lateinischen Panegyrik*, Stuttgart 1994, 151-162.

<sup>16</sup> Themistius, *Or.* 15.188C (ed. Wilhelm Dindorf, *Themistii Orationes ex codice mediolanensi*, Leipzig 1832, reprint Hildesheim 1961, 231-232).

<sup>17</sup> *Epitome de Caesaribus* 48.8 (ed. Festy, 55).

Rome. Even in the case of the hero of his *Res gestae*, emperor Julian, Ammianus cannot ignore the physical defects derided by the emperor's opponents, the low height and slim shoulders, but paints an image within which these elements are recontextualised.<sup>18</sup> Valentinian I (r. 364–375) emerges from the text of Ammianus as closest to his iconographic representations; quite surprisingly since the historian did not sympathise with his rule. Regarding Valentinian's body Ammianus notes that it was perfectly suitable to the dignity required by the imperial function: tall and muscular, with harmonious limbs, a luminous complexion, and bright eyes and hair. As only negative trait Ammianus mentions Valentinian's grim gaze.<sup>19</sup>

[12] In the sixth century, in John Malalas' *Chronographia*, which tells the story of the world from its creation to the reign of Justinian I (527–565), we find a nearly complete gallery of imperial portraits from Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) to Diocletian (284–305), that interrupts with Constantine and restarts with detailed descriptions of rulers of John's time: Anastasius I (491–518), Justin I (518–527), and Justinian I.<sup>20</sup> In the description of the latter, physical defects such as short stature and hair loss are not concealed but dwarfed by positive traits such as the general harmony of his body, the εὐμορφία, within which beautiful characteristics such as the nose or chest are singled out.<sup>21</sup>

[13] It is Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339) who introduces in his *Vita Constantini* new ways of idealised representation of the ruler's outlook, influenced by his Christian faith. The first impression that Constantine's appearance leaves on the bishops gathered at Nicaea is that of an angelic apparition, as his body is surrounded by the blinding and variegated light emanated by the purple, gold and jewels of his costume:

*And now, all rising at the signal which indicated the emperor's entrance, at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly, like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones.*<sup>22</sup>

[14] The author's attention then shifts to the physical traits and to the emperor's deportment. The ruler dominates those present through his height, beauty, and vigour. This obvious superiority is toned down by the emperor's piety, fear of God, gentleness,

---

<sup>18</sup> In associating them with the power of his gaze, Ammianus could be trying to associate Julian with Alexander the Great, or Ulysses.

<sup>19</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 30.9.6 (ed. Seyfarth, II, 157).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Jeffreys and Michael Jeffreys, "Portraits", in: *Studies in John Malalas*, eds. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Brian Croke, and Roger Scott, Sydney 1990 (= *Byzantina Australiensia*, 6), 231–244.

<sup>21</sup> John Malalas, *Chron.* 18.1 (ed. Hans Thurn, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, Berlin 2000, 232).

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Const.* 3.10.3 (ed. Friedhelm Winkelmann, *Vie de Constantin*, Paris 2013, 365) Πάντων δ' ἔξαναστάντων ἐπὶ συνθήματι, ὃ τὴν βασιλείωσ εἴσοδον ἐδήλου, αὐτὸς δὴ λοιπὸν διέβαινε μέσος οἷα θεοῦ τις οὐράνιος ἄγγελος, λαμπρὰν μὲν ὥσπερ φωτὸς μαρμαρυγαῖς ἔξαστράπτων περιβολὴν, ἀλουργίδος δὲ πυρωποῖς καταλαμπόμενος ἀκτίσι, χρυσοῦ τε καὶ λίθων πολυτελῶν διαυγέσι φέγγεσι κοσμούμενος.

downward-looking gaze, modest blush, and solemnity of gait.<sup>23</sup> The ruler's beauty on which encomiastic literature insists is the same that is perceived in his iconic representations, despite the fact that we can discern realistic physiognomic traits in late antique portraits. Gregory of Nyssa's (d. 394) statement that whoever drew dysmorphic features in an emperor's portrait would rightly stir the ruler's anger, because the beauty of the archetype would be damaged, indicates that a degree of realism was expected even in idealised portraits. We thus have, during the fourth century, a hybrid semiotic of the body; one that combined corporeal beauty with the physiognomic appreciation of the Romans and with the late antique taste for light as symbol of divinity.

[15] The main characteristic of the new canon of imperial beauty was light. This emanated from the purple, gold and jewels of the imperial costume, and blinds the gaze, as with the bishops gathered at Nicaea.<sup>24</sup> This light prevents the perception of the sovereign's body, and is considered in texts of the time as either an expression of the absolute distance between the emperor and common human nature, or as a vain spectacle. More radical Christian voices criticised this display. In his treatise *De regno* Synesius of Cyrene (373–414) is contrary to what he considers an empty show-off; a shiny spectacle of colours alike to those of peacocks.<sup>25</sup> In his *Vita Martini*, Sulpicius Severus (363–425) has the Devil appear to the saint as Christ, dressed as an emperor enveloped by the light of the purple.<sup>26</sup> Martin exposes the Devil and forces it to vanish, claiming that Christ would not have returned dressed in purple and adorned with a precious diadem. Peter Chrysologus, bishop of Ravenna around the middle of the fifth century, contrasts in one of his sermons the two sides of the late antique imperial image: the *dominus* and the *miles*. When, Peter asks rhetorically, is the ruler more glorious; when he displays himself shining in purple, donning the diadem, and covered in gold, sitting on the raised throne placed in his palace during solemn occasions; or on the battlefield, dressed with simplicity?<sup>27</sup>

[16] Despite these reserves, the luminous emperor was there to stay, as living image of the Christian god. The luminosity of his body conciliated the two strains, the imperial and the Christian, and assured the survival of the ruler's iconic dimension in the new religious milieu. The key text for imperial self-display in Late Antiquity is the

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Valerio Neri, "Il corpo luminoso dell'imperatore", in: *I disegni del potere, il potere dei segni*, eds. Claudia Giuffrida and Margherita Cassia, Ragusa 2017, 57-66; Ignazio Tantillo, "Attributi solari della figura imperiale in Eusebio di Cesarea", in: *Mediterraneo antico* 6 (2003), 41-59, and "L'impero della luce. Riflessioni su Costantino e il sole", in: *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité* 115 (2003), 985-1048.

<sup>24</sup> Maria Cristina Carile, "Imperial Icons in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. The Iconic Image of the Emperor Between Representation and Presence", in: *Ikon* 9 (2016), 75-98.

<sup>25</sup> Synesius, *De regno* 16 (ed. Antonio Garzya, *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene*, vol. 1: *Epistole, operette, inni*, Turin 1989, 26-27).

<sup>26</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Vit. Mart.* 24.4 (ed. Philip Burton, *Sulpicius Severus' Vita Martini*, Oxford 2017, 124).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 72ter.4 (ed. Gabriele Banterle et al., *Santi Petri Chrysologi Collectio Sermonum*, vol. 2, Milan and Rome 1997 [= *Scriptores circa Ambrosium*, 2], 88).



famous description of Constantius' II *adventus* to Rome.<sup>28</sup> In his encounter with the Senate and the people of Rome outside of the city as well as during his entrance in the old capital, a collage of visual registers containing paintings and statues, the emperor and his entourage, and, finally, the *populus romanus* and its leaders, creates meaningful similarities and contrasts between the partakers in the ceremonial, whether living or represented. This symbolic synthesis of Roman society that the *adventus* catalysed, and which the sculptor of Galerius' Arch in Thessaloniki managed to reproduce in stone (Fig. 2), had as focus and *raison d'être* the figure of the living emperor.



2 *Adventus* scene, Arch of Galerius, Thessaloniki, 289–299 CE (photo: Dan Diffendale)

[17] Upon passing the city gates, Ammianus observes Constantius' behaviour and stresses an element that is perhaps to be considered the apex of the irony that pervades his description of the Roman *adventus*: although short, the emperor bows when passing the tall gates; thus seeking an assimilation of his body with that of a colossal statue as the text's continuation demonstrates.<sup>29</sup> The assimilation to a statue is sought by the sovereign, and carefully constructed through deportment, costume, and contrast with the entourage. From the ruler and his guard, thanks to the purple, gold, jewels and metal weapons and armour, a constellation of variegated lights

<sup>28</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 16.10.1-17 (ed. Seyfarth, I, 82-85). Ammianus's account of Constantius' reign recommends him as the most coherent model of absolute ruler in the *Res gestae*, cf. Richard Flower, "'Tamquam figmentum hominis': Ammianus, Constantius II and the Portrayal of Imperial Ritual", in: *Classical Quarterly* 65 (2015), no. 2, 822-835; Roger C. Blockley, "Ammianus, the Romans and Constantius II: *Res gestae* XIV.6 and XVI.10", in: *Florilegium* 16 (1999), 1-15; Robert Owen Edbrooke, "The Visit of Constantius II to Rome in 357 and Its Effects on the Pagan Roman Senatorial Aristocracy", in: *American Journal of Philology* 97 (1976), 40-61.

<sup>29</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 16.10.10 (ed. Seyfarth, I, 84) *nam et corpus perhumile curvabat portas ingrediens celsas*. In the following lines, Ammianus masterfully suggests a contrast between the actual height of the emperor, that of his imagined self, and the scale of Roman monuments at the end of which the emperor is forced to admit his defeat: 16.10.14 *Deinde intra septem montium culmina per adclivitates planitiemque posita urbis membra conlustrans et suburbana, quicquid viderat primum, id eminere inter alia cuncta sperabat: Iovis Tarpei delubra, quantum terrenis divina praecellunt: lavacra in modum provinciarum exstructa: amphitheatri molem solidatam lapidis Tiburtini compage, ad cuius summitatem aegre visio humana conscendit: Pantheum velut regionem teretem speciosa celsitudine fornicatam: elatosque vertices scansili suggestu consulum et priorum principum imitamenta portantes, et Urbis templum forumque Pacis et Pompei theatrum et Odeum et Stadiu, n.s.m aliaque inter haec decora urbis aeternae.*

emanates—*corusco lumine radians*. The armoured knights, the *clibanarii*, are described on account of their metal shell as similar to statues by Praxiteles. The emperor himself displays a statuesque immobility—*figmentum hominis*: as if his neck was stiff, he never turned his head, whether to react to the carriage's movement or to respond to salutes. Ammianus insists on Constantius' immobility, which emerges as a characteristic of his behaviour in Rome and the provinces, and presents it as a highly personal trait: a quasi-inhuman patience. Together with behavioural patterns such as having never taken anyone with him on his carriage, or associated in consulship with a private—unlike other *principes consecrati*—his incredible discipline casts light on his ruler concept.<sup>30</sup> In the final description of the virtues and vices of Constantine's son, which Ammianus makes after the sovereign's death, the statue-like immobility is placed among his virtues, but associated with his strange custom of not eating fruit; a trait that the writer abstains from commenting.<sup>31</sup> Ammianus' ambiguous reading of Constantius' behaviour could reflect the debatable nature of these traits: some saw them as reflecting perfectly the image of the autocratic ruler while some, like Ammianus himself, found them incongruent with their own image of the ideal *civilis princeps*. The Roman *adventus* of Constantius brings together the old and the new in imperial self-presentation: the reference to statuary art and the luminosity of late antique divinities. Constantius' iconic aura comes equally from his immobility and luminosity, with physiognomic features losing relevance.

[18] The growing accent placed on light in the description of the emperor's body—an aura which almost canceled his carnality—is certainly related with the Christianisation of imperial culture and ideology. The sovereign can no longer have the carnal appearance of a *deus praesens*, of a god that takes human form, but that of an ethereal and luminous angel; as Eusebius had described Constantine at Nicaea. The dominant characteristics in Byzantine representations of angels are the blinding whiteness of their clothes and the light emanating from their bodies. The beauty of angels has neither individualistic traits nor seducing characteristics, it is a beauty that one admires from afar; an *inaestimabilis pulchritudo*. Nevertheless, angels crowd the countless celestial and terrestrial spaces and cannot thus reflect the uniqueness of the imperial figure. Above angels, the model of beauty that the emperor referenced was the glorious Christ reigning in heaven. The celestial court was the model on which the earthly one was shaped, as attested by mosaics in the sixth-century church of San Vitale in Ravenna (Fig. 3). There, both Christ reigning in heaven and the emperor are shown flanked by white-clad entourages adorned with gold and jewels.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 16.10.12 (ed. Seyfarth, I, 84).

<sup>31</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 21.16.7 (ed. Seyfarth, I, 246).

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of the setting and its meaning see Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany: Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400 - ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016 (= *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 6), 126-212.



3 Mosaic panels showing Christ reigning in heaven flanked by angels and saints, and Emperor Justinian I (527–565) with his entourage and the bishop of Ravenna. Apse of San Vitale in Ravenna, ca 548 AD (photos: Carole Raddato, [www.followinghadrian.com](http://www.followinghadrian.com))

[19] The beauty of Christ, whose scriptural roots are to be found in a Christological reading of Psalm 45, in which royal beauty was commended, is one which the Church Fathers detach from physical beauty. According to Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), Christ's was an intelligible beauty that had nothing in common with human beauty. This, the chosen apostles had witnessed at the Transfiguration, during which the human body of Jesus was pervaded by a light that annulled its materiality.<sup>33</sup>

[20] As the new imperial concept takes root, the light mentioned in descriptions of imperial bodies comes increasingly more from the body itself (especially the eyes) of the sovereign, rather than the costume and setting. In the two panegyrics dedicated to Constantine at Trier, one in 310 and the other in 313, the rhetor celebrates the *fulgor oculorum* of the emperor. Similarly, Ammianus reminds us of the scintillating beauty of Julian's eyes, which revealed not the divinity of his mind but rather his penetrating intelligence.<sup>34</sup> The same author describes the burning light of the eyes, *oculorum flagrantior lux*, and the bright and pleasant beauty that emanated from the entire body of young Gratian (375–383) at his coronation (*reliqui corporis iucundissimus nitor*).<sup>35</sup>

[21] The motif of the light enveloping the emperor and which almost hides his body becomes increasingly frequent, although maybe not dominant in early Byzantine culture. In the *Vita* of bishop Porphyry of Gaza (347–420), written in the first decades of the fifth century by his deacon Mark, emperor Arcadius' (r. 395–408) presence at

<sup>33</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Hom. in Ps. 44, 5* (ed. Adriana Regaldo Raccone, *Omellie sui salmi. S. Basilio di Cesarea. Versione, introd. e note*, 2. ed., Alba 1978, 118).

<sup>34</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 25.4.22 (ed. Seyfarth, I, 364).

<sup>35</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* 27.6.15 (ed. Seyfarth, II, 44).

the baptism of his son Theodosius (the future Theodosius II) is described. The light coming from the imperial body, we are told, surpassed that of his purple vestment, shining among a constellation of lights and flashes coming from the white garments and lit candles of his entourage.<sup>36</sup> Flavius Corippus, in his laudative discourse on Justin II (r. 565–574), avoids describing the imperial body—with the exception of a reference to the *angelici oculi*—even when discussing ceremonies that had it as their focus. Concurrently, he insists on the light, on the bright whiteness that emanates from the body of Justin, as well as on that coming from the costume's purple, gold and jewels which, nonetheless, cannot shadow, but rather complements that coming from the very body.<sup>37</sup> In this, the emperor synthesises the new Christian model in which physical beauty manifested as light; an aesthetic rooted in the tradition of Adam's creation in the luminous image of God which was revealed at the Transfiguration.<sup>38</sup> Thus, immobility and light stood for the ruler's epiphanic dimension, with him constructed as living image of the divine; a divine at times identified with Christ and at times, as often in the fourth century, left unnamed.

### About the Author

Valerio Neri graduated from the University of Bologna in 1971. At first assistant professor of Greek and Roman Antiquities, and from 1983 on associate professor of History of Ancient Economics, he became full professor of Roman History at the University of Bologna in 2000. Eventually, he taught Roman History at the University's School of Letters and Cultural Heritage from 2014 to 2017. In the biennium 2017–2019, he holds the honorific title of *professore Alma Mater*. Among his main fields of interest are: the pagan and Christian historiography of Late Antiquity; Roman laws and late ancient society; Cassiodorus and the ostrogothic kingdom. He has also conducted research on the body and its social and cultural values as well as on the lower classes in late ancient society.

*E-Mail:* valeriolieto.neri@unibo.it

### Special Issue Editors

Michele Bacci and Vladimir Ivanovici, eds., *From Living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity*, in: RIHA Journal 0222-0229.

### Copy Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome

---

<sup>36</sup> Mark the Deacon, *Vit. Porph. Gaz.* 47 (ed. Henri Grégoire and M.A. Kugener, *Vie de Porphyre, évêque de Gaza*, Paris 1930, 128).

<sup>37</sup> Corippus, *In laud. Iust.* 2.100-101, 2.299, 3.220, 3.255, 4.243-247, 4.329 (ed. Averil Cameron, *Flavius Cresconius Corippus. In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, London 1976); Neri, "Il corpo luminoso dell'imperatore"; Paola Castronuovo, "Luce e splendore di Giustino II: la metafora della luce imperiale nel secondo libro dell'*In laudem Iustini*", in: *Storia, poesia e pensiero nel mondo antico. Studi in onore di Marcello Gigante*, ed. Francesco del Franco, vol. 2, Napoli 1994, 247-258.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. the contribution by Bogdan G. Bucur and Vladimir Ivanovici in this special issue, with bibl.

## License

The text of this article is provided under the terms of the [Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

