

1 | Introduction

Imperial Imagery and the Role of Social Dynamics

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The two concepts that provide the framework for the present volume – ‘imperial imagery’ and ‘social dynamics’ – emerged from a series of workshops held at Durham University between 2014 and 2017. The workshops aimed to establish new methods for exploring how images relating to the Roman emperors were used, produced, and received, at all social levels.¹ We deliberately sought to identify categories of material created or used in social contexts beyond the immediate sphere of the imperial family itself, in order to establish whether, how, and why the roles played by imperial imagery were consistent or changed in different situations. From the very start, we worked from the premise that no universal model can adequately encompass all such images, or explain how they all communicated. For instance, imperial imagery could be dangerous or entirely uncontroversial, depending on the materials, people, and locations involved. Local agents, histories, hierarchies, and image systems made for different attitudes to imperial images, and even images that look the same to our eyes may have meant very different things to different contemporary viewers. People related to these images in individual ways; even more importantly for us, they used these images to relate to each other.

‘Imperial Imagery’ and ‘Social Dynamics’

The visual world of the Roman Empire was huge and diverse. From Romano-British sculpture on Hadrian’s Wall to the mummy portraits of Egypt, images drew on local styles, materials, and content.² Yet there were

¹ In this volume, following convention and for the sake of smooth English, we have freely used the words ‘emperor’ and ‘empire’ alongside ‘imperial’. The various labels for emperorhood (such as *princeps*, *imperator*, or αὐτοκράτωρ) are not sequential but simultaneous; all three occur already in the *Res gestae*.

² For Romano-British sculpture, Henig, 1995 provides an overview; Webster, 2001 is an important ‘bottom-up’ interpretation. On mummy portraits and their contexts in Egyptian funerary art, see Riggs, 2002.

some images that were so widespread that they deserve the label ‘imperial’. One way to define ‘Roman imperial imagery’, then, would be imagery that is characteristic of the Roman Empire. We have chosen a definition that is more specific, yet allows for considerable diversity: imagery that makes reference to imperial power. Most obviously, portraits of the emperors spread across the empire and beyond, appearing on the coins used in everyday transactions, statues or busts used for imperial cult, and even silverware or cameos commissioned and displayed privately. A suite of other images connected to imperial power, from oak crowns to legionary eagles, also recurs across geographical boundaries. These all belong in our category, but so might, for example, images of provincial elites holding imperial priesthoods or freedmen *vicomagistri* sacrificing to the Lares Augusti: both groups used self-representation to reflect on their relationship to central power.

Images vested with imperial authority travelled well beyond the emperors’ own sphere. They form an imperial *koine*, a shared visual language of power largely developed under Augustus but modified during the centuries by new elements and juxtapositions. Innovations were often introduced without the emperors’ control or even knowledge. None of the patrons or artists examined in this volume were emperors, and few were imperial officials: some did not even dwell within the empire. Yet all contributed to the evolving Roman imperial image-world. In new contexts, an image’s power to denote a relation between ruler and ruled could be exploited in new ways. Our approach has allowed us to explore the functions imperial imagery performed for those who sought to harness its power, and how the aggregate of imperial imagery was enlarged and modified as a result.

Imperial images were remarkably elastic. They found uses in all manner of negotiations, whether vertical or horizontal, elite or sub-elite. We could read them as propaganda and vectors of Romanisation, as victims and weapons of aggression, as benefactions and bids for benefactions, as tokens of loyalty, genuine enthusiasm, or subversion, or simply as tokens, to be exchanged for things desired but beyond our reach. They could be exclusive, unique, and significant, or they could take the form of routinely reproduced ornamentation. Their imperial connotations could be inescapably emphatic, or activated only on certain occasions, or powerful precisely because of their banal omnipresence.³ Their use could be tightly controlled by central or local authorities, or could be completely unmonitored.

³ On the power of repetition, see Noreña, 2011, esp. 197–8, 304–6; Rowan in this volume.

Rather than seeking simple answers to the question of what imperial images were and were meant to do, therefore, we have sought to find tools that enable us to talk about imperial imagery with enough precision to allow for comparisons, over time, space, and social context. For this volume, we have adopted a lens we find particularly helpful in interpreting how imperial images developed and were understood: that of social dynamics. These images, vested with their own power, were always intimately entangled with the relationships that patrons and viewers had with others around them – and not just their ultimate rulers, but those immediately above and below them on the social scale. In some ways, our volume resonates with a recent monograph by Emma Dench on Romanisation, in which she highlights the importance of understanding this development from the local perspective.⁴ Yet ‘Romanisation’ is not one of our keywords. Rather than tracing how Roman power and culture as such were received, embraced, or opposed, we are exploring how a semantic system of power could be adopted and adapted to fit local aims. For the questions this volume pursues, ‘social dynamics’ are at least as important as ‘imperial imagery’.

In economics, sociology, and psychology, ‘social dynamics’ refers to a way of studying the relationship between individuals and groups. Large-scale, group behaviour is seen as the sum of thousands and millions of small-scale interactions between individuals.⁵ In using the language of social dynamics, we propose an interpretative model in which both the remarkably stable library of imperial imagery and its variation over time and space are the product of the way these images were used in local contexts, and in particular of their place within specific social relationships. Those making, viewing, and interpreting imperial images drew on and reacted to the attitudes and ideas of those immediately around them, geographically and socially. They used images associated with imperial power to map out the hierarchies they encountered in daily life, advance their own social position, or triangulate their relationships with local and central authorities. At the same time, they brought their own ideas about power and its expression to the imperial imagery. More simply, then, to

⁴ Dench, 2018.

⁵ The term ‘social dynamics’ goes back at least as far as John Stuart Mill, who used it to describe how societies change over time. For most current scholarship, including in social archaeology, the ‘dynamics’ element refers less to large-scale change over time and more to the dynamic state of societies constantly in flux. Economists like Durlauf and Young, 2001 tend to use it to emphasise how individuals’ decisions are affected by those around them. In psychology, see e.g. Brown, 2000, who writes that ‘dynamics *within* groups and dynamics *between* groups are closely related’ (xvii; his *italics*).

adapt a phrase of Lieve Van Hoof, social dynamics refers to the dynamic relationship between imperial images and their social context.⁶

Defining imperial imagery as imagery referring to central power already suggests questions about social dynamics: senators and subsistence farmers had different relationships with the emperor and the apparatus of imperial power, and these, in turn, were conditioned by social structures closer at hand. Our definition is less straightforward than one based on the frequency or geographical spread of any given image, because it relies ultimately on the images' meaning, whether in the eyes of patrons or audiences. But it is precisely the creation, interpretation, and reinterpretation of these images in local contexts that makes them so fascinating, and that the chapters in this volume explore. Yet how do we (and how did they) know when an image referenced imperial power? Did the Victory on a lamp read 'emperor is victorious' to its viewer, or simply 'appropriate ornament for lamp'? Did the colour purple always imply 'imperial', and if not, when and where did it cease to do so? Here, too, social dynamics can help. We cannot tell what individuals thought about the images and objects they made and saw, but we can study the role the images played in human interactions.

In a monograph which has served as a key inspiration for this project, Olivier Hekster noted the existence of multiple, locally defined practices and iconographies related to imperial imagery which were parallel to, not in communication with, central ones.⁷ Sometimes, our sources show us, the emperor's image could be understood as a direct symbol of central authority, as in the episode of Jesus and the coin (Mark 12:14–17). As a token of the emperors' numinous presence it could be the focus of symbolic acts of submission to Roman power, or a target of formal abuse or even vandalism (Fig. 1.1).⁸ But imperial imagery was also used to chart relationships other than that between subject and ruler – even when drawing on that very relation for its power. It is with these situations that this volume is concerned.

⁶ Van Hoof, 2010: 1.

⁷ Hekster, 2015: 30, 37, 268–73, developed further in his contribution to this volume. The most flagrant example is how emperors are represented in Egypt.

⁸ We argue below that using imperial images was not necessarily a declaration of loyalty. But when loyalty declarations were required, images were often involved: consider Pliny's use of an image of Trajan as a test for suspected Christians (*Ep.* 10.96), or Corbulo forcing Tiridates to lay his diadem at the feet of a portrait of Nero (*Tac. Ann.* 15.28). On attacks on imperial images and *damnatio memoriae*, see Stewart, 2003: 267–99; Varner, 2004; Flower, 2006. Even *damnatio* was embedded in social dynamics: for example, Dickenson, 2017: 137 suggests that three statues of Nero at Messene escaped damage because of the continuing prominence of the local patrons who had set them up.



Figure 1.1 Fragment of a head of Geta showing signs of deliberate damage, c.198–204 CE. Rome, Musei Capitolini 2519. Image: FittCap70-97-03 (H. Fittschen Badura), arachne.dainst.org/entity/3444056.

We examine the status and actions of those who made, used, or saw imperial imagery, and how drawing on a link to imperial power played into their social relationships. Images establish connections, in the first place between authors and audiences (including, but not limited to, emperors, peers, subordinates, enemies, and god(s)) but also between individuals depicted, designers, manufacturers, purveyors, transporters, donators, owners, dedicators, decision-making bodies, viewers, and connoisseurs. All the individual interactions that formed this web had an impact on imperial images. Examining the social dynamics of imperial images can help us understand not only why they permeated the Roman world so thoroughly, but also how they could mean such different things in different contexts. It also means that in situations where the images themselves are lost we can still analyse the networks of which they were part, and that they helped create.

Top-Down or Bottom-Up? Approaching Imperial Imagery

Interpretative models for the spread and meaning of imperial imagery have shifted in recent decades: rather than viewing imagery as emanating from the centre and spreading to the periphery, more attention is paid to the creation of individual objects at the other end of the

scale.⁹ This shift from a top-down to a bottom-up model is analogous to the change in how scholars conceive imperial power: from active to passive governance.¹⁰ To speak of imperial monuments as conscious statements of Roman hegemony over conquered territories (or to use the word *propaganda*) has become unfashionable (although these terms still remain current for the later empire).¹¹ The bottom-up approach, by contrast, reflects the fact that very few surviving monuments were created by the emperor himself or at his direct order, as noted by Jane Fejfer in her study on Roman portraiture.¹² Newer models, therefore, afford more agency to the monuments' actual creators and patrons. For example, we could interpret imperial arches and statues as unintentional monuments (using the terminology of Alois Riegl¹³) to Roman power, through the voluntary adoption of Roman symbols by self-Romanising local elites.¹⁴ Meanwhile, art historians have found new interest in 'bad' or divergent portraits, or imperial imagery rendered in local styles (Fig. 1.2).¹⁵ Methodologies applied to imperial images have shifted accordingly, away from treating them as evidence of a top-down monologue and towards reflecting a more reciprocal relation, such as the 'panegyric milieu' coined by Emanuel Mayer to describe how locals and emperors both contributed to shaping imperial imagery and ideology, or the two-way dialogue between benefactions and honours examined by Zanker.¹⁶ Most insistent on a from-below perspective are approaches that position honours as didactic, providing clues to how the authors of images, monuments, and panegyrics would like the emperor to behave.¹⁷

Even these studies still tend to position the emperor at the centre of the story, if now more often in the role of audience than agent.¹⁸ In the wake of the demise of the propaganda model, imperial images are often viewed as responses to imperial benefactions (and attempts at angling for them), or as expressions of loyalty to the emperor, variously styled as voluntary or obliged.

⁹ This introduction is not intended as a bibliographic conspectus: it would be impossible to do justice to the vast scholarship on imperial imagery. For an overview of the development of theoretical perspectives on imperial imagery (including a bibliography), see Hekster in this volume. Dally, 2007 explores how and why scholars once fixated on a top-down model and have now shifted their emphasis.

¹⁰ This shift is usually attributed to Fergus Millar's enormously influential book (2001) pointing out how unlikely it is that emperors actively devised all policies attributed to them.

¹¹ See for instance the articles by both editors in Boschung and Eck, 2006.

¹² Fejfer, 2008: 421–5, 428. ¹³ Riegl, 1982 [1903]: 23. ¹⁴ So e.g. Woolf, 1998.

¹⁵ Zanker, 1983; good discussion in Smith, 1996 and Mayer, 2010: 114–19.

¹⁶ Mayer, 2002; Zanker, 2002: 9–37, esp. 10–14.

¹⁷ E.g. Marlowe, 2006 on the Arch of Constantine.

¹⁸ A consequence best outlined by Levick, 1982, on coins.

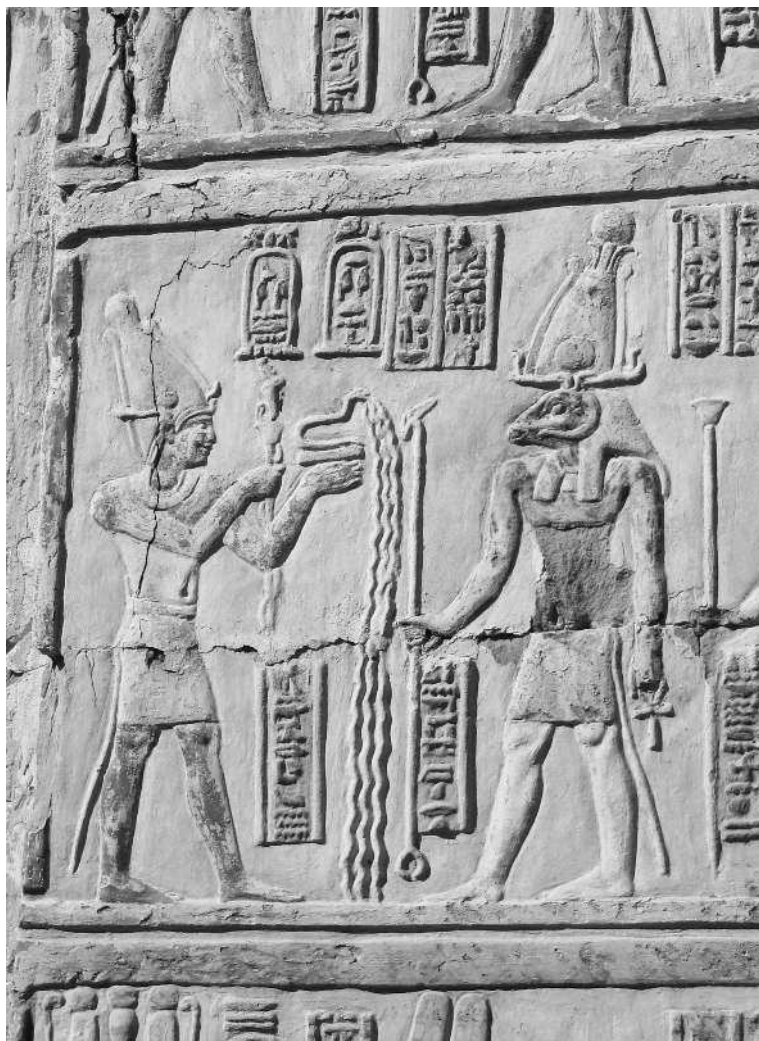


Figure 1.2 Titus Caesar offers gifts to the god Khnum. Detail of a relief in the temple at Deir el-Haggar, Dahkleh, Egypt, first century CE. Photograph: M. Hellström.

Yet, it is not obvious how an image, as such, would have guaranteed loyal behaviour.¹⁹ None of the examples we examine include any explicit statement of allegiance or submission, forced or freely given. And how would the

¹⁹ The predicament we face as modern scholars mirrors that an emperor might have faced had he tried to use imagery as an index of loyalty: though the ritual performance of loyalty was always important, we can never know whether an image expressed any sincere sentiments (and we have, for the most part, left that question aside). Treating statues of emperors as an index of enthusiasm: e.g. Polley, 2004/5 [2007]: 147–8; as responses to benefactions: Papi, 2004; as attempts to curry favour: Patterson, 2003. On dedications to emperors as demonstrations of loyalty, obliged but not by default unwilling: Moralee, 2004.

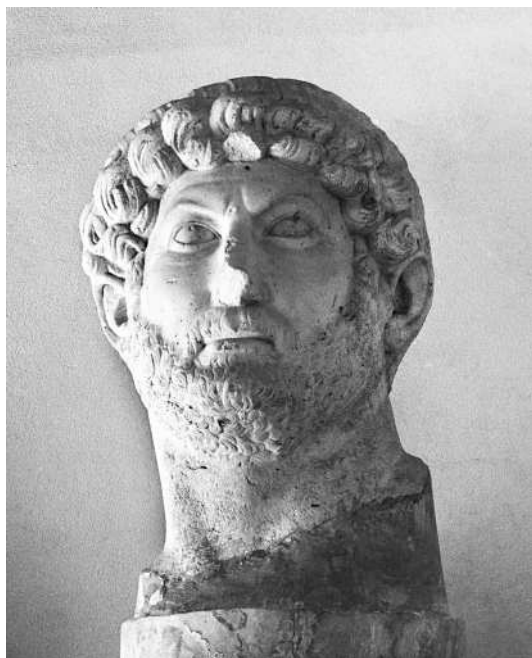


Figure 1.3 Atypical colossal head of Hadrian from Egypt, second century CE. Alexandria, Musée Gréco-Romain 20885. Image: FA-Oe292 (H. Oehler), arachne.dainst.org/entity/1060558.

emperor be expected to know about (and duly reward) some individual's use of an imperial image on a cup, or a bust in a professional association's meeting place, or even a statue in the forum of a provincial town?

One famous example of a locally produced image that did apparently reach the emperor's ears, if not his eyes, is the statue of Hadrian at Trapezus in Cappadocia mentioned by Arrian (*Peripl. M. Eux.* 1.3–4). Arrian, then governor of the province, writes that the statue is poorly made and not a good likeness: perhaps something like the portrait from Athribis (Fig. 1.3). He asks that Hadrian send a better version, since the spot on which the statue stands facing the sea is extremely appropriate for an eternal monument. This passage has been used to support both top-down and bottom-up models of the dissemination of imperial portraiture: the poor quality of the portrait argues for local agency, while the fact that Arrian asks for a substitute direct from the centre suggests that a top-down process for disseminating imagery existed at least in theory.²⁰ Which is Arrian's own

²⁰ Discussion in Zanker, 1983: 7–8; Ando, 2000: 229–30; Mayer, 2010: 118–19.

position? His plans to ‘correct’ the statue suggest that his ideal would be perfect fidelity to a central model. Yet his purpose in writing the letter is surely to flatter Hadrian with his attention to the emperor’s image, and by letting him know that his provincial subjects have chosen to honour him independently of any central encouragement.²¹ And what did the people of Trapezus, or perhaps the individual *euergete* among them, have in mind when they put up the statue? Arrian records that Hadrian has visited this very spot himself in person: did the Trapezians imagine that he might return to see his statue? Or that a visiting governor would happen to report it to him? Both hypotheses seem inherently unlikely. But one function the statue did serve in practice was to impress not the emperor, but the governor: a much more likely visitor. The emperor was neither author nor primary audience, but a means of triangulating a relationship between the city and Arrian himself.

Arrian specifically mentions one potential function of the statue: as an eternal monument. It served this purpose for its patron or patrons too, memorialising their generosity to future generations of Trapezians and travellers as well as beautifying (depending on your level of connoisseurship!) a prominent spot on the coastline. If put up by one rich patron, it demonstrated his local pre-eminence; if by the town, it participated in Trapezus’ own competition with other nearby communities. For some of these purposes, any monument would do. But they chose a statue of the emperor for good reason. It doubtless memorialised Hadrian’s earlier visit, a distinction few polities could claim even for this most well-travelled emperor. The visit and the statue allowed a tiny portion of imperial glamour to rub off onto the Trapezians. Rather than signalling their loyalty to the emperor, they were signalling their imperial connection to their peers and neighbours.

The most relevant point about the Trapezus statue, however, is that it is exceptional. It was only by chance that Arrian saw it and reported it to the emperor. Perhaps, indeed, he only mentioned it because it was so interestingly ugly: its success comes from its failure. The vast majority of such statues never made it into a literary geography. Some other images, especially those set up in public by civic communities, might be reported to the emperor via official letters from the cities themselves, or proleptically by petitions asking for permission to use the imperial image. Some were

²¹ Section 5 of the *Periplus* makes this point clearly: Arrian emphasises that the Trapezians offered prayers on Hadrian’s behalf, even though they had less to thank him for than Arrian himself did. As Ando, 2000: 229 points out, the situation is made more complex by the fact that this was not a real imperial communiqué, but a literary exercise written for a wide audience: the governor’s official correspondence with Hadrian would have been in Latin.

placed where he might actually see them. But the majority of objects discussed in this volume were both produced and received in social contexts that the emperors would scarcely have been aware of, or have been likely to receive (or wish to receive) reports about.

We have not sought to place imperial imagery in a linear model that connects central power with the empire's subjects, whether top-down, bottom-up, or reciprocal. Regardless of directionality, such models are ultimately too simplistic to cover the amorphous world of imperial imagery. For the same reasons, many theories from modern media studies that we surveyed proved inadequate, working as they often do from a basic proposition of sender and receiver.²² For us, there is no easily defined group of 'receivers': ordinary Romans might have been the audience for centrally produced objects such as coins, but also created, commissioned, or purchased images themselves. We treat them as agents, whose aims were not obviously defined by central authorities. Our social dynamics approach allows us to situate imperial imagery within a web of social relationships, without assuming that a given image was intended to achieve (or actually achieved) any kind of direct communication with the emperor. Rather than a top-down or bottom-up approach, we privilege the horizontal and near-horizontal: the full range of social interactions that took place within an image's immediate context.

Social Dynamics in Practice: Hierarchy and Agency

The images we discuss were created and received by groups ranging from senators and client kings with personal relationships with the emperor to provincials for whom imperial power was distant and abstract (though no less real). No Roman emperor, however autocratic, had the power (or the time) to create or approve every new contribution to imperial imagery, and even images that were indeed created at the centre were constantly remade as they were reproduced, reappropriated, and reinterpreted by multiple audiences. Equally, imperial imagery was not a free-for-all; real power differentials on large and small scales could shape how these images were used, or bring danger for those who overstepped the mark. Our approach has allowed us to explore how imperial imagery was interwoven with social hierarchy and how its use gave scope for individual agency at multiple social levels.

²² Hekster's chapter in this volume puts our approach in the context of a related set of debates surrounding imperial imagery, propaganda, and mediation.