

BOOK REVIEW

Claudius Caesar: Image and Power in the Early Roman Empire. By Josiah OSGOOD. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 357. Hardcover, £55.00/\$80.00, ISBN 978-0521-88181-4. Paperback, £19.99/\$32.99, ISBN 978-0-521-70825-8.

Several recent accounts of Roman emperors have sailed off on a new tack. Instead of attempting a traditional biographical interpretation of the man, and thereby also a chronicle of his reign, each of these has sought to present an emperor on his own terms, and/or to view him as he was perceived by certain groups of contemporaries (other than the elite authors, who usually monopolize discussion). Thus, Caligula was not out of his mind; he simply had no taste for playing republic, when the reality was despotism; and so, he fashioned himself overtly as a tyrant, regardless of the consequences—or perhaps precisely to elicit certain ones of those (A. Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography* [Berkeley, 2011]). Nor was Nero a madman; he was, rather, a highly skilled artist, who deftly enlisted several forms of entertainment to construct particular evocative personae for himself; a master of self-representation, albeit not quite as the Roman elite preferred (E. Champlin, *Nero* [Cambridge, Mass., 2003]). Commodus can be read in a roughly similar vein; he drew on Hercules, and the various stories about, and attributes of, that hero, to present himself in a particular fashion to his subjects; and the presentation was, with many, quite successful (O. Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* [Amsterdam, 2002]).

Now comes Osgood. His book, too, is no typical biography; but this take on the genre moves in yet another direction. The essential point is this (257): “The real significance of the principate of Claudius, historically speaking, is not what it reveals of Claudius the man, but what it shows about the emerging institution of the principate.” What Osgood has given us, then, is a highly original, extremely thoughtful, beautifully written vision of fitful state formation between AD 41 and 54. In the end, of course, we come away also with a picture of Claudius, the man and the emperor. But as Osgood lucidly argues, it was the extreme difficulty of ascertaining how to be emperor, which ultimately shaped the final portion of Claudius’ life, and thus quite widely this period of Roman history.

The book is largely informed by several interrelated aspects of the Early Empire's nature. These worked on Claudius, as he attempted to rule; and his efforts to lead, in turn, left their own marks upon these various matters. Following Momigliano's observations (*Claudius: the Emperor and His Achievement* [Oxford, 1934]), Osgood stresses the fact that Augustus' uneasy amalgam of republic and empire remained a befuddling puzzle for Claudius (indeed, for every emperor). In particular, the quasi-retention of a republican state meant that a new imperial system of government could not be crafted with anything even approaching clarity, or in any detail. Thus, to start at the start, when Gaius was murdered, and had not indicated a successor, a conclusively "proper" or "constitutional" way forward was nowhere to be discovered. That notwithstanding, Claudius was quickly on the throne; but then, the awkward facts of his accession, not to mention the earlier vituperation of him by members of the Augustan house (and others), seriously undercut his authority. Attempting to counter such hindrances, and just generally in his zeal to rule as he found appropriate, Claudius was too fastidious. The result was a nasty paradox: "The loftier the goals the emperor set for his administration, the more likely he was to fail, and to open himself to allegations of incompetency, or even corruption. Yet precisely to try to win loyalty and increase his prestige, Claudius had to set loftier goals than those of Tiberius, even those of Caligula" (189). Augustus, in fine, had played his part well; but as Osgood aptly demonstrates, he fated all the various players in the sequel to write their own scripts as they went. In any case, Osgood argues that Claudius quite actively tried to shape his own time as emperor, and that in doing so, he contributed materially to the development of the imperial "system." As we observe this particular emperor at work, we are also being nudged slightly away from Fergus Millar's picture of a more passive, and perhaps generic, sort of monarch (*The Emperor in the Roman World* [Ithaca, 1977]): "... who the emperor was mattered" [136]. Still, Osgood sees quite clearly that Claudius (or any emperor) was indeed only one person; and hence, the *princeps'* direct involvement with his subjects was perforce limited. Thus, when an emperor *did* choose to intervene, the event was so momentous as to carry an aura of the divine. That said, Claudius was no lone actor. We are reminded, throughout, that "... much of this emperor's image, like any other's, was constructed in *dialogue* with his subjects" (317) [my emphasis].

These are (most of) the big themes of Osgood's book. They are worked out, over the course of twelve chapters, in a wealth of detail, and from a variety of interesting and often surprising angles. In the end, we do come away with a slightly different vision of the emperor Claudius. More precisely and importantly,

however, we see that Augustus' monster (or wolf, in Tiberius' terms) continued, even nearly a half century on, to cause the man on the throne to struggle mightily to be emperor. Osgood does not ultimately judge Claudius, though there are various points throughout the book where his sympathy for the man glimmers. Rather, he quite realistically finds that Claudius was "... caught between forces that would protect Rome from civil war and those that, for the sake of some men's 'liberty,' would plunge it into chaos" (258). This is a fascinating and important portrait of a man, and of the period and governmental "system," which imprisoned him, but which he tried, as best he could, to shape.

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