

BOOK REVIEW

Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualisation of Imperial Power in the Severan Period. By CLARE ROWAN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 303. Hardcover, \$ 110.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02012-2.

The last ten years of scholarship have greatly enriched our understanding of the Severan period of imperial history (193–235), and Clare Rowan's study of the emperors' religious self-presentation represents both a synthesis of this new material and an important advance in its own right. It will be indispensable to specialists in the period, and of great interest both to scholars of imperial Rome's religious and cultural history and also to students of the historical side of numismatics.

The book, a revised version of a Macquarie University doctoral thesis, consists of an introduction, methodological and background chapter and one chapter each on the four Severan emperors, followed by a brief conclusion and three appendices. Each of the main emperor-based chapters gives a detailed survey of surviving uses of religious imagery in visual media for that reign with particular emphasis on coinage, both imperial and civic.

The methodology chapter lays out Rowan's approach to coins (19–31), which is notable for its stress on hoard evidence as opposed to catalogs; thus Rowan looks not only at which types were issued, but also at which types were most heavily issued. It is this that leads to the most important finding of the book overall, which is that religious imagery is considerably more prominent in Severan than in Antonine coinage *when one considers it as a percentage of the total coins minted*. Thus in a sample hoard of 80,000 coins, a coin of Alexander Severus is twice as likely to have a religious image as a coin of Marcus Aurelius (see Rowan's Appendix 1). Furthermore, many of the cults invoked in Severan coinage are provincial in origin, suggesting a new ideological dynamic between center and periphery.

The remaining chapters detail the rather different emphasis that each emperor used in this practice. The chapter on Septimius Severus is the longest, due to the abundance of sources, and consists mostly of an important discussion of Septimius' use of the tutelary gods of Leptis Magna. Some of this material has

been covered very recently and in great depth by Achim Lichtenberger, in a book that Rowan was fortunately able to consult (*Severus Pius Augustus: Studien zur sakralen Repräsentation und Rezeption der Herrschaft des Septimius Severus und seiner Familie (193-211 n. Chr.)* Leiden, 2011). Rowan adds to this formidable study particularly in her coverage of numismatic material, of monuments in Leptis itself (84–102), and in her cultural-historical arguments, which are more straightforwardly presented without being any less sophisticated.

The chapter on Caracalla concentrates on an aspect of his persona that may be unfamiliar even to specialists: his obsession with his health. Rowan convincingly links his well-known devotion to Sarapis with numismatic references to Aesculapius and Apollo which seem to coincide with Caracalla's travels to specific holy sites, and with literary references to his diseases (115–37). The iconography of the cults finds its way into imperial coinage as a sort of reflex to the appearance of imperial ideology in provincial coinage and art.

The chapter also contains detailed considerations of Caracalla's visits to Troy and Alexandria (146–53). Elagabalus' religious self-presentation is well mapped territory, and Rowan is less interested in breaking new ground than in placing what we know in better perspective. Her sensible conclusion is that, based on the visual and material evidence, Elagabalus' presentation of himself as priest-emperor appears neither as a unilaterally and universally imposed policy, nor as a radical aberration from Severan practice generally, however disastrously it may eventually have failed.

The chapter on Alexander is the shortest, again as dictated by the available evidence, and Rowan mainly discusses his use of Jovian imagery and in general his reaction against Elagabalus. There is also a sensible discussion of Alexander's heavy use of solar imagery (241–5).

What makes this book most useful is its breadth and accessible organization: Rowan brings together a very great deal of material for a medium-length book, both in terms of ancient evidence and of modern bibliography, and presents it sensibly without getting lost in technicalities. Above all to be commended is her treatment of coins. Her quantitative methodology brings out her most original new findings, and she is clearly far more comfortable with the technical aspects of numismatics than most historians (this reviewer very much included), but she keeps these details fully integrated within historical arguments, and the non-specialist never feels talked over or talked down to.

This same breadth does at times constitute a drawback. The book discusses nearly all the "greatest hits" of Severan art and architecture, but in many cases,

such as the Arch of the Argentarii and Septimius Severus' Forum Arch (104–7), the discussion adds little either to the overall argument of the book or to the separate scholarship on the monument, and seems to be there for the sake of completeness.

The treatment of literary evidence and of historical narrative is sometimes faulty (e.g. the description of the aftermath of Pertinax's death at 34–5) and often heavily derivative of one point of view (e.g. Harker's revisionist take on the Alexandrian violence under Caracalla). These points are ultimately tangential to Rowan's larger argument, however. The idea of the Severans as religious innovators is of course not new, but much of the older work is ideologically problematic and/or based on uncritical readings of literary sources. Rowan's findings, and the recent scholarship she has admirably incorporated into her study, will place the entire discussion on much firmer ground.

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