

BOOK REVIEW

The Image of Political Power in the Reign of Nerva, AD 96-98. By NATHAN T. ELKINS. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 207. Hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-064803-9.

Broadly speaking, the title under review joins a growing list of publications which strive first to devise and then implement a more theoretically informed approach to numismatics, in the spirit of Kemmers and Myrberg's "Rethinking numismatics" (*Archaeological Dialogues* 18.1 [2011]: 87–108). More specifically, the present study seeks to redeem Nerva, the first of the Five Good Emperors, by assessing the iconography of the reverse types on the coinage minted during his brief reign in relation to the iconography on the coinage minted under the emperors who reigned both before and after him. Elkins analyzes this iconography as an (active) expression of imperial ideology along the lines of Carlos Noreña's *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West* (2011).

In the Preface (ix–xiii), Elkins explains the rationale behind the choice of Nerva, whose coinage has been largely overlooked by scholars, even though it provides a unique opportunity to study all of the precious and base-metal coins produced under a single emperor. A short list of Abbreviations (xv–xvi) follows. In the Introduction, "The Power of Images in the Reign of Nerva" (1–23), the author argues for the communicative value of coin iconography across a broad spectrum of the population in Rome, Italy and the provinces: "This is the first attempt to study the complete imperial coin typology of a single emperor by quantifying and examining the targeting of coinage based on evidence from hoards and excavated single finds" (14).

Chapter 1, "Nerva as Supreme Military Commander" (24–51), examines the representation of the *princeps* as the *imperator*, especially in his fraught relationship with the Praetorian Guard. Several coin issues illustrate the importance of the bond between the emperor and his troops, including the various denominations with the legend CONCORDIA EXERCITVVM. Elkins convincingly associates this series of coinage with FIDES types minted during and after the

civil wars of AD 68–69, as well as those of the Late Republic. While scholars continue to debate the political, military and historical significance of the CONCORDIA EXERCITVVM types, Elkins emphasizes that “they must be understood as communicating with everyone—not just the armies—as touting the rhetoric of the military stability of the Roman Empire” (48).

Chapter 2, “Nerva, the Senate and People of Rome, and Italy” (52–101), broadens the scope of the investigation to embrace Nerva’s relationship with the urban plebs in Rome, the people of Italy in general and the Roman Senate. Throughout the chapter—indeed, throughout the book—Elkins argues against “imperial agency in the selection of coin imagery” (53), but I suspect that many, if not most, scholars would concede at least some level of direct intervention on the part of the emperor. Once again, several coin issues illustrate the nature and scope of Nerva’s relationship with these three core constituencies. Particularly interesting in this regard is the restoration coinage series which combines a portrait of the Deified Augustus on the obverse with the legend IMP(ERATOR) NERVA CAES(AR) AVG(VSTVS) REST(ITVIT) on the reverse—a powerful way for Nerva to cast himself as a *princeps* poised between tradition and innovation.

Chapter 3, “Nerva and the Roman Empire” (102–136), considers “the proliferation of imperial ideals on the coins, sometimes referred to as ‘imperial virtues’” (103), especially on the coins minted under the Five Good Emperors. In the case of Nerva’s coinage, *pietas*, *libertas*, *providentia*, *aequitas* and *iustitia* all appear as personifications and/or in the legends, and all “successfully communicated broad imperial ideals to audiences across the Roman Empire” (103). Elkins rightly focuses on the various LIBERTAS types minted under Nerva (cf. Tac. *Ag.* 3.1 as well as *Ann.* 1.1.1) and demonstrates how the coinage emerges from a rich “context of cultural memory and historical use of the iconography of Libertas” (130), e.g., the famous EID MAR *denarius*.

In the Conclusion, “The Visualization of Political Rhetoric” (137–154), Elkins ably restates the main outlines of his central argument: “Reexamined as a medium of state-sanctioned art, and in conjunction with contemporary texts, Nerva’s coinage was traditional and, like the coinage of previous emperors, also presented him as a progressive head of state involved with many different segments of the empire’s population” (137). The back matter includes four appendices (155–180) with various statistical analyses of the coinage minted under Nerva, a bibliography (181–200), and an index (201–207). Throughout the book, Elkins displays a masterful command of the numismatic evidence and con-

temporary scholarship, but he also tends toward an overly reductive interpretation of the coinage “as a medium of state-sanctioned art” (xi, cf. 3, etc.) and of the “contemporary texts” as “laudatory” (xi, cf. 3, etc., once again).

Despite these qualms, I want to conclude on a more positive note, because reading this book has prompted me to reflect on coinage as a prime example of intermediality. David H. Wenkel, in *Coins as Cultural Texts in the World of the New Testament* (2016), likewise ruminates on the hermeneutic potential of intertextuality for the study of coins as “cultural texts” (10-11), but “reading” ancient coins entails far more than intertextuality alone can explain. I would like to propose the term “nomismality” to describe the unique intersection of image and text on coins, along with the associated terms intranomismality and internomismality to describe the complex relationships between imperial and provincial coinage, as well as between individual coin series.

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