

BOOK REVIEW

The Antonine Constitution, An Edict for the Caracallan Empire. By ALEX IMRIE. Leiden, NL and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018. Pp. 175. Hardback, \$113.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-36822-4.

The year 212 AD looms large in the annals of Rome. In this year an emperor offered the rights of citizenship to the disenfranchised across the vastness of the empire. An edict, personal and powerful, that sought to reshape the very nature of Rome, and the relationship of citizen and state. At first glance, it can appear dramatic and life-changing, the sudden transformation of a timeless world. In another it appears empty, reinforcing what may already have been seen and felt upon the ground of ancient Rome. More often, it is regarded as an important prelude to the demise of Roman imperial power, demonstrating the true nature of imperial rule, and the fractured reality of a Roman political order reliant upon the legions. It is however a deeply complex moment in the history of the empire, associated with an emperor that himself defies definition. A fratricide, who according to the *Historia Augusta* sought to emulate Alexander the Great (and perhaps also Tiberius, Sulla and Hercules), he appears as yet another short-sighted, power-hungry and manipulative imperial figure. And yet it is he that sets out what we regard as an epoch defining legal change across the vastness of the empire. These inherent contradictions point to how little we really do understand about both the emperor behind this legal change, and the edict itself.

It is this topic that Alex Imrie's book focusses upon, the edict as preserved in the Giessen papyrus, the surrounding sources and the emperor (and dynasty) shaping this legal and societal shift. The transformation of a doctoral thesis into a book is not an easy task; the two by their nature are rather different entities. This is a work that is clear and succinct, but also one that carries with it the shadows of the thesis it once was. The opening for instance reads as a literature survey, rather than a close analysis of the important historiographical approaches. It also crucially omits full discussion of Cassius Dio (peculiar when he is drawn upon so often). At one point, Imrie does refer to the book as a thesis (48). However, this should not distract from the quality of the questions asked, and the important answers

provided, inchoate as some of them may be. The edict of 212 appears both ephemeral and absolute, important in reshaping and redefining what we (and contemporaries) understood to be Roman, but it also invites considerations of the emperor who stands at the heart of the action. Is it his design? Does it reflect, as Cassius Dio implies with pejorative spin, a desperate gamble for money and financial security? Or instead, as Imrie argues, is it part of a wider legalistic and fiscal approach taken by the Severan dynasty? There are sections of this volume that are excellent, focussed upon close scrutiny of the ancient evidence, and guided by thought-provoking and nuanced lines of questioning. The book is certainly successful in forcing a re-evaluation of the emperor Caracalla (and through him the Severan dynasty), recognising the shadow cast by the murder of Geta, and the complex nature of the Giessen papyrus. It is less successful in painting a clear portrayal of the scholarship, relating the Alexander *imitatio* to the edict and providing a consistent and persuasive argument.

The book is divided into five chapters, with an introduction and epilogue, and an appendix looking at the Giessen papyrus. The introduction runs through familiar scholarly approaches but does not really set out how Imrie's arguments engage with, build upon or challenge the dominant voices in Roman legal history. A notable absence here is Kaius Tuori's *The Emperor of Law, The Emergence of Roman Imperial Adjudication* (published in 2016). Tuori's examination of Caracalla, and Cassius Dio, would have added a useful backdrop against which to place the other perspectives mentioned. The questions Imrie poses in this introduction are important ones, but a fuller exploration of Cassius Dio here would have made most sense. The opening chapter is in truth an extension of the introduction, presenting a confident and thorough depiction of the historical context (12-29), alongside allusions to the edict in ancient writings and the role of jurists and the Giessen Papyrus. The argument and observations made in the final pages show great promise, placing the edict against the assassination of Geta (a convincing interpretation), as well as in a longer term attempts at legitimising his dynasty and image as a military emperor.

The chapters in the main body of the volume are of mixed quality. The strongest are chapters 2 and 3. Here Imrie sets out his argument in a clear and careful fashion, thinking through the fiscal and military backdrop to 212 (50-80; 81-98). The placement of the edict against the wider diplomatic efforts of the Severan dynasty is compelling, and encourages a re-examination of a familiar source (97-98). In contrast, the final two chapters appear out of place (99-112; 113-133). The myth of Alexander does not seem to have much bearing upon Caracalla's decision

or manufacture of the 212 edict, and although Chapter 5 contains some very promising lines of inquiry (e.g. “Re-writing the Severan Past” at 117-121), this needed to be set out in the opening half of the book rather than at its end. The image of Caracalla here is a convincing one, if a touch inchoate. Had this been prevalent in the opening chapters, the subsequent analysis of the edict and its motives would have rested on a much stronger scholarly foundation. The epilogue summarises the main points of the book rather well (134-137) and the appendix provides a close and erudite study of the papyrus itself.

To close, the year 212 will continue to feature in any history of later Rome. What Imrie’s book does very well is force us to ask both new and old questions of this moment, of the actual physical copies of the edict and the emperor and dynasty shaping this shift. This is then certainly a worthwhile read, with elements that show great promise.

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