

Image of the Emperor and Common Belief in the Roman Empire

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Literary sources, but also epigraphic evidence and above all artifacts and papyrus documents of the imperial age support the hypothesis that the common belief in the healthy and prophylactic power of the image of the Roman emperor was deeply rooted in the current mentality, so much so as to be assimilated by the contemporary philosophical and cultural context and propaganda.

Keywords: image of the Roman emperor, common belief, current mentality

Introduction

Presenting the topic and method of his research on thaumaturgy kings, Marc Bloch introduced the reader to the dimension of the origins of touch and sacred royalty in the early Middle Ages without neglecting some precedents: among which, the amazing events at the center of the stay of Vespasian in Alexandria in Egypt as well as those that occurred at the bedside of the dying Hadrian. In both cases, it was a question of miraculous healings, linked to the person of the emperor. Methodologically careful Marc Bloch advised, however, caution since it would never have been ascertained if the belief in the superior character of the Augusti had been strong enough to make their miraculous power currently perceive—in the common mentality—as truly operative; after all, he did not fail to underline elsewhere that, in the eyes of their faithful, the ancient kings (of the Merovingian dynasty) had always appeared as characters superior to the rest of the people just as their vague mystical halo was due to their own dominion on the collective consciousness from obscure reminiscences, dating back to paganism (Bloch, 1924).

Healing Power

The historical precedents mentioned by Marc Bloch were the miraculous healings performed by Vespasian and Hadrian¹. Apparently dissimilar that cases actually seem to subtly converge: In the case of Hadrian, they would have occurred in the imminent death of the emperor—and moreover, according to Marius Maximus, the result of a simulation²; yet the story of the woman who in a dream had the warning to divert Hadrian from the idea of suicide, because he would be healed, and having not obeyed she became blind to regain her sight first by obeying the dream precept of kissing the knees of the emperor, then by ritual ablutions with the water of a temple, appears structured like the narrations of healings operated by incubation inside the chapels dedicated to the cult of Aesculapius, but also of Serapis³. While in the case of Vespasian, the prodigious healings, which

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¹ Tac. *Hist.* 4, 81; Suet. *Vesp.* 7, 2; Cass. Dio 65(66), 8, 1-2; SHA *H* 25, 1-3.

² SHA *H* 25, 4: *quamvis Marius Maximus haec per simulationem facta commemoret.*

³ Cracco Ruggini (1979), p. 591; Le Glay (1976), pp. 353, 355, 365 and 368 about Hadrian $\square\pi\iota\phi\alpha\nu\square\sigma\tau\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma/[v\square]\omicron\varsigma\square\sigma\kappa\lambda\eta\pi\iota\square\varsigma$ (*Inscriften von Pergamon* II, 365, 3-4); see Fündling (2006), pp. 1101-1102 about *genua osculare*.

took place through his action in the context of his acclamation as emperor and his stay in a center like Alexandria in Egypt, were for the whole world the clear and indisputable proof of the salutary power of the new ruler. All the more so because the prodigy was in line with both the collective perception and the sacred representation that the emperors had inherited from the Lagidi, in turn heirs of the Egyptian kings (Cracco Ruggini, 1979, pp.588-589; Levick, 2016, pp. 78-79).

The emperor, by touching a blind man or a cripple or touched in turn, could heal him—it was believed; and even if all this had been artificially conditioned by the summit of the propaganda machine to strengthen the position of a candidate for the empire or by the manipulative influence, for instance, of the priests of Serapis for the shared management of part of the power, it still had in the mentality and in the collective imagination suited ground to grow and spread⁴. This seems to be confirmed by a papyrus fragment, part of the collection donated by King Fuad to the Papyrological Society of Cairo: The acclamations and wishes produced in honor of Vespasian—son of Amon and $\square\nu\alpha\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\lambda\omega\nu$, i.e., Oriens, the rising sun, placed under probably the protection of Serapis in the mentality of the inhabitants of Egypt—almost certainly sprang up on the occasion of his first entry into the city, and above all they were part of a narrative dispatch typologically not unrelated to those official editorial offices ($\square\kappa\tau\alpha\ \tau\square\nu\ \tau\mu\square\nu$) to which an anonym referred tangentially in the letter from Alexandria to his brother and son, mentioning among other things the entry of Titus on April 29, 71 AD. Writings that perhaps converged in some dossiers in turn not extraneous, directly or indirectly, even to writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius⁵.

Cultural and Philosophical Context

[GAP]

The episodes do not appear as singularities, but which seem to retain traces of a latent continuity rooted in common convictions and all the more evident in a subsequent age of stark contrast between historical reality and imperial propaganda, the latter as a reaction to the conditions of critical transformation structural. Starting from the 3rd century, the official manifestations, the cultural and artistic ones up to the individual choices (lexicon, iconography, epigraphic themes) mark the divergence between the tendencies to idealize, in a synchronic and classical dimension, the times preceding the age of the Antonines and the insistence on the illusory golden profile of the age immediately to come, almost the result of the mental attitude aimed at alienation and detachment from a disturbing and anguished reality. Long coveted but remote in a distant time, the golden age makes active in the age of Gallienus the function of an idyll in which to collect how much the empire would have gained from the end of its crisis; it, historiographically, instead activates the inverted and mirror image of the apex of a world in periclitant difficulty. In this context, the emperor acted as the entity that presided over the functioning of the world by virtue of the specific relationship with the divinity. It therefore became essential that the propaganda representation of him reached and emotionally and religiously involved all people, just as it was essential to detect the predisposition to perceive his image in those ways due to the material and psychological impact exerted on ordinary daily life (MacMullen, 1976, pp. 26 and 35; 1997, p. 50).

The reference context is that of an age during which the relationship between the emperor and the mobs had entered the dimension of religious feeling; the emperor introjected the cosmic order of the $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, reflecting

⁴ Cracco Ruggini (1979), pp. 596-601: § 3 *I parametri mentali: l'“amico di Dio” e i suoi miracoli*.

⁵ *P Fouad 8 = SB XVI, 12255*; see Montevicchi (1981), pp. 159-161 and 164-167. $\square\kappa\tau\alpha$: *P Oxy. XXXIV, 2725*.

it in turn on the earth through his *virtus*, that is, the mimesis of divinity and thus becoming a saving figure⁶. In fact, the common mobs would have been saved by imitating the emperor in turn, the physical appearance of which was sufficient to renew souls and minds. And the perception of the ruler as if he participated in the divine nature was certainly not foreign to the current mentality of people who did not subtlety on the distinction between the spiritual dimension and corporeal materiality, confusing this nature with the physical and mortal aspects of the human existence of men considered superior. Indeed, the intellectualist insistence on the devaluation of the figural representation of the emperor according to a divinizing apparatus (throne, trident, thunderbolt, crown with rays) to the advantage instead of the exaltation of the *virtus* alone because a sign of the introjection of the λόγος seems to prove that in the mentality and in the collective imagination that representation was the current image of the emperor (Chesnut, 1978).

Belief that seems to flow in the lower bottom coherently with the surface current in the riverbed of the philosophical and religious idea that the emperor could get closer to the gods thanks to his *virtus* and at the same time preserve his personal human features, in line with the doctrine attributable to Plotinus according to the speculation of which, in the first treatise *Problems of the Soul*, as every power descends from above, so the universal soul shapes the cosmos and dominates it from above⁷ and by virtue of that previous relationship all living beings are micro-cosmoses, so that the soul arranges bodies—statues for gods and dwellings for men—since the action of the soul outwards assimilates what it can to be affected, making to live by reflection what would not have a life of its own. The body, therefore, has an εἰδωλον of the λόγος and of the life of the soul which in turn provides a form⁸. Moreover, Plotinus himself, in the treatise *On Virtue*, had insisted on assimilation as a necessary relationship between images—metaphorically, the relational connections in the hypotactic between divinity, soul and Man on the one hand and divinity, λόγος, emperor and *virtus*, men on the other—so much so as to affirm that those who possessed civil virtues were able to make us similar to divinity⁹. That the soul received the imprint of its shape modeled by the divine mind and that in turn it modeled and adhered to the body in all its extension was an idea already expressed by Plutarch in the booklet *De facie in orbe lunae*¹⁰; but that the material image, depicted through a statue or a portrait, is a medium between absence then presence and finally vivification is a belief based more on collective mental representations¹¹.

The emperor could also consider himself inspired by a divine or magical power that dwelt in him, and through him served the good of the empire and its inhabitants, assuming that on the basis of such a belief was a mystical intervention, perhaps in the form of a vision¹²; yet that a figural image of the emperor conveyed his saving capacity seems a conviction rather shared horizontally by the person concerned than programmatically elaborated and disseminated from above: A conviction rooted in the cultural “basso continuo” so as to insinuate

⁶ Plutarch (*Ad principem ineruditum*) insisted on the need that only by introjecting the universal λόγος and only by practicing virtue accordingly could the emperor become εἰκὼν θεοῦ (Plut. *Mor.* 51, 780 E-F). The relationship between λόγος, μίμησις and εἰκὼν θεοικὸς significantly occurred at different times and authors, both in Philo of Alexandria and in Eusebius of Caesarea, biographer of Constantine (see Antonius Melissa, *Loci communes* 2, 2, *Patr. Gr.* CXXXVI, col. 1012 B-C and Eus. *Vita Constantini* 1, 5).

⁷ Plotinus (*The Katabasis of the Soul in the Body*) used the comparison with the ἰπστασία βασιλική (Plot. *Enn.* 4, 8, 2, 28).

⁸ Plot. *Enn.* 4, 3, 6, 23-24; § 9, 34 and 42-44; § 10, 12-13, 27-28 and 31-43.

⁹ Plot. *Enn.* 1, 2, 2, 26; § 7, 28-30.

¹⁰ Plut. *Mor.* 60, 945 A.

¹¹ Schnapp (1994), p. 43. Firm. *Math.* 2, 30, 5 also simplifies the role of the emperor in the cosmic economy as a mediation between divine and human.

¹² Gagé (1986), pp. 2386-2387; see de Blois (2019), p. 245 about the utterance *dis animo voltuque compar* in the dedication to Gallienus *CIL* III, 8193 = *ILS*, 550.

itself into the second of the two treaties by Menander of Laodicea *On the Commendations* and in the treatise *On the Eulogy of the Best and the King's Commendation* within the *Corpus Hermeticum*¹³: Menander associated the thaumaturgy of the statues of the Asclepiades with that of the emperor's $\square\psi\iota\varsigma$, the only sight of which diverted the evils from anyone who met him; the hermetic treatise praised the prophylactic capacity, at its simple manifestation, of the emperor's $\epsilon\kappa\kappa\acute{\omega}\nu$.

Current Mentality and the Cultural “basso continuo”

Set of anonymous knowledge and forms of wisdom, spread across the board with the preeminence of collective points of view over individual ones; impressions not formulated and characterized by a degree of partial awareness (if not unawareness); set of automatic, shared and persistent habits and manners of behavior, collective mentalities are dissolved in a culture and constitute the roots of its practices. They innervate beliefs, world views, sensitivities, perceptions and representations of reality almost always characterized by disorganization, as much as by metaphorically nebulous structures; above all, they persist over the long term: they are, therefore, the cultural “basso continuo” of any social whole¹⁴.

This guideline also seems to emerge from humanity that shines through the papyrus remains, both from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. From the Egyptian village of Kellis, in the oasis of Dakhla¹⁵, left in 353 A.D. a petition addressed to the praeses of the Thebaid—Flavius Faustinus—and sent by a certain Aurelius Genas, the komarchos. The sender, who had acted according to the rules by requiring the subjects assigned to the liturgies to deposit their name at the strategos' office, denounced the serious violence and public humiliations suffered by a powerful local notable, one of his satellite and of their henchmans (Harpocraton and Taa and the $\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\mu\mu\alpha\chi\omicron\iota$ of the country) so as to be at the end of life, concluding the petition with the usual formulas: in writing, it had been delivered to the acting agent of the exactor, a man named Hermogenes, accompanied by oath for the divine and heavenly Fortune of the emperors; above all, Aurelius Genas invoked the $\square\psi\iota\varsigma$ of his lord: in this he would find refuge and justice from the evils he suffered (a list of which, moreover, already appeared in a copy delivered to the local stationarius, Ammonius)¹⁶. The structure and lexicon of the petition, which are mirror of the functional representation of the actors (victims and opponents) as well as, implicitly, of the social and economic tensions of a small town on the geographic periphery of the late ancient empire, are stimulating subjects of study, however secondary here (Bryen, 2013, pp. 97-100). On the other hand, the dimension now assumed by the $\square\psi\iota\varsigma$ is relevant: be in the presence and sight imply the physical presence of the $\kappa\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$, that is, of the one who depositary of power is able to heal an unjust situation; and since in the imperial Hellenistic lexicon $\kappa\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ corresponded to the name of *dominus* assumed by the emperors almost officially starting from the Severan age (Mason, 1974, pp. 13 and 64; Magioncalda, 1991, p. 81), it is evident how strong the conviction that his complaints would have found a favorable reception by the emperor was in the mentality of an exponent of the socio-cultural layer of Aurelius Genas—although practically the petition would have been evaded by a governor, representative of the emperor, because the former was an emanation of the figure and image of the latter.

¹³ *Rhet. Gr.* III, p. 375, 13-21 Spengel; *Corp. Herm.* 18, 16.

¹⁴ “Basso continuo”, taken from music theory, is due to Corrao (2004), p. 407.

¹⁵ The site currently corresponds to the locality of Ismant el-Kharab; the Greek papyri discovered were published in 1995 by Klaas A. Worp.

¹⁶ *P Kell. G. I*, 23 (row 28); see Bryen (2013), pp. 265-266, nr.110.

Moreover, such an idea is strengthened by the comparison with a papyrus inventory, datable to the age of Caracalla¹⁷. The paper lists, among the objects owned by the temple of Neotera in Oxyrhynchus (a syncretistic form of the deities Hathor and Aphrodite), a series of votive offerings, mostly categorized in the class of so-called “small finds”: anthemata with votive dedications, the most archaics anonymous; statuettes (ξόανα) of Demeter with a marble bust and wooden body; bronze statuettes of Neotera accompanied by a small support and a carved stone; five fingers; a statuette of Typhon; a helmet (?); four gold votive lamps; 10 bracelets and a childish ring; two spoons in gold; a golden pen (?); a childish silver bracelet accompanied by two other pieces; a silver crescent moon (?), a pendant and a childish silver mirror; votive lamps in silver, perhaps in the form of Bubasti, or Bastet; finally, earrings or jewels (πεινώτια) with pearls in number of 52¹⁸. These objects were precious not only for the material that externalized their value, but above all for the beliefs of devotees—whose direct and individual link with the divine actor and his sphere is evident with sufficient self-evidence from their own typology. Therefore, the care in inventorying an εἰκονίδιον that reproduced the portrait of Caracalla and of the couple Septimius Severus and Giulia Domna, next to/and before such votive offerings, stands out all the more characteristic: That is, a portrait painted in tempera on a wooden board or plank of the same kind of the “Severertondo” in Berlin¹⁹. This εἰκονίδιον is not only to be placed in relation with the dynastic and legitimistic needs expressed by the journey made by Severus in Egypt between 199 and 200 AD, but especially with a serial production, or at least in large numbers, of images destined to occupy walls and public and sacred spaces throughout the empire because they are believed to be living icons of the guardian presence of the emperor²⁰.

Conclusion

Already the rhetorician Fronto in his time, in fact, in answering a letter received from Marcus Aurelius, then Caesar, about the health of his daughter Annia Galeria Aurelia Faustina, recently born (146 AD), was smiling at the technical and material coarseness released by the imperial imagines everywhere and always exhibited in the form of paintings or sculptural models—on the desks of the money changers, in the loggias, in the shops, on the canopies and on the windows, in the atriums—yet he confided to his pupil that he could not fail to be seriously devout in front of those sacred representations²¹; above all, the implicit and automatic exposition of the imperial portrait is evident from his familiar prose, as well as the popular normality of its acceptance everywhere: in the commonly current mentality, the image of the emperor had to manifest his physical presence, and consequently the beneficial action of mediation between divine and human.

And the idea was so deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the imperial age, if still between the 4th and 5th centuries AD, Severianus the bishop of Gabala, near Laodicea in Syria, first a friend, then an emulator and finally an opponent of the Constantinopolitan patriarch John Chrysostom, in one of his homilies on the creation of the world recognized the need for the portrait of the emperor (who, due to of the limitation of human nature, it could not be ubiquitous and present to all) stood out in the courts, in the squares, in the

¹⁷ *P Oxy.* XII, 1449; see Lee (2001), pp. 31-32.

¹⁸ Rawlandson (1998), pp. 67-68; see Schenke (2000) about πεινώτιον.

¹⁹ SMB Antikensammlung—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, inv. 31329; see also Elsner (1998), p. 55, Fig. 22.

²⁰ Varner (2004), pp. 181-182; see also Heinen (2006), pp. 107-112, 117-124, 125-128 and 129-132. The εἰκονίδια inventoried in a billing register of the temple of Jupiter Capitoline in Arsinoe, dated 215 AD, can be traced back to the *imagines clipeatae* and the roundels (*BGU* II, 362).

²¹ Fronto, *Epist. ad M. Caes.* 4, 12, 6, pp. 66-67 van den Hout.

assemblies and in the theaters, that is, wherever an official acted in his stead so that every act was authoritatively confirmed in its being²².

In fact, the portrait (χαρακτήρ) did not function so much as a realistic representation of the emperor, but rather as a sign of his living presence, guaranteeing the proper functioning of the empire during his government (Elsner, 1998, pp. 54-55).

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²² Severianus, *De creatione mundi orationes* 6, 5, *Patr. Gr.* LVI, col. 489, 53-58. Not surprisingly, in the refined language in which an anonymous local sophist still wrote at the beginning of the Augustan age, on commission from the Mantinea community, the eulogy of Euphrosynos and his wife Epigones, the periphrastic metaphor μέχρι τῶν Σεβαστείων ἐπλήθησεν χαρακτῶρων (col. B, 24) dissolves in the correspondence between the imprinted image of a seal and the real face of the emperor, in presence of which, perhaps, Euphrosynos made a visit of person in Rome (IG V.2, 268 = SIG3, 783); see von Premerstein (1912), p. 206 and Papanikolaou (2012), pp. 141-142 and 146.