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Roman Imperial Iconography and the Social Construction of Early Christian Identity

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Twenty-five years ago this fall I sat in my first New Testament class. Professor Erwin Buck was my teacher. The care he took in preparing his lectures, his organization of material, his attention to the details of the text, his insistence that interpretation remain rooted in a close exegetical treatment of the text, his theological and historical sensitivity in interpretation — these were only a few of the things that captured my scholarly and theological imagination. As for dozens of others who sat in his classes, Professor Buck became for me a role model. Over two decades later, my notes from that first semester of New Testament introduction sit on my bookshelf and encourage me to become the kind of excellent teacher he is.

Professor Buck’s was never an outmoded antiquarian interest in ancient texts as artifacts. To be sure, he always promoted in his lectures a rigorous application of the full repertoire of scholarly tools in the construction and retrieval of ancient meanings of texts. But texts — biblical or otherwise — were never things for Professor Buck to look at “out there.” Rather, he taught me that they are lenses for looking at things that are close, right here and now. Indeed, he taught, as indeed he preached and lived, a living relationship to biblical and ancient texts. He never tired of championing the strangeness of the world those texts inhabit, for what is the task of exegesis if not a championing of the other in all of its irreducible foreignness? But in recovering their strangeness he also encouraged me as a student to think about how that same strangeness might invite contemporary audiences to become a little bit strange in our own lived contexts.

The essay that follows attempts a social reading of early Christian texts from the perspective of ancient imperial iconography, to stir the imagination and consider New Testament writers as inviting their audiences to see the world in striking new ways. I attempt in what follows to see things from the inside out, as it were, and to ask, given that perspective, how our world might look
differently to us from that foreign point of view. For Professor Buck’s enlivening of the imagination, for his patience in inviting a young seminarian to see the world through the New Testament’s manifold witnesses, for the enduring imprint of his instruction in my own practices of exegetical and theological paedagogy I am filled with gratitude and dedicate these words to him with thanksgiving.

It is now over a century since students of early Christianity began to turn their attention to the Roman imperial emperor cult to discover parallels between representations of Jesus and theological ideals and Roman imperial motifs. Adolf Deissmann’s *Light from the Ancient East* represents the most potent and to this day relevant study from that period.\(^1\) To his name could be added half a dozen or so others, some of which like Harnack, Bornkamm, and Lohmeyer are immediately recognizable.\(^2\) Like Deissmann, these scholars were intrigued by archaeological discoveries such as the imperial inscription at Priene inaugurating an imperial cult as a determining force in the rise of early Christian theology. The Philippians Hymn, the Lukan Birth Narrative, the representation of Jesus’ death as a coronation and gateway to apotheosis were the most obvious sites for excavating a direct link between the imperial theology of the emperor cult and the worship of Jesus. I emphasize the notion of direct link because these scholars were convinced that the Roman imperial cult is indispensable in accounting for New Testament texts that celebrate the divine sonship of Jesus and his earthly and cosmic rule. Recently there has been a return to this way of engaging the New Testament evidence, but the focus has been mostly literary — imperial celebration of imperial rule is analysed at a textual level to show how parallels in vocabulary, metaphor, and narratives show New Testament representations of Jesus very much at home in — if resistant to — the Roman imperial context.\(^3\)

A relative late-comer in this scholarship has been attention to Roman political iconography in helping to understand the political location of early Christianity.\(^4\) The reason to attend to iconography in the rise of early Christianity and the construction of its multiply lived social worlds is because Christianity took root and came to life in a world of images, and especially in a world of imperial images — iconography designed to make compelling and instantly recognizable to the vast numbers of its illiterate inhabitants, amongst which we can number early Christians, the dynastic and political claims of its Roman rulers.\(^5\)
There are various ways in which to conceive of the role of imperial art in the social construction of early Christianity. Howard Becker has coined the phrase “art world” to describe the complex of relationships that arises in any production of art. Meaning making is a social activity and requires the promotion of a certain kind of audience in order to manifest the latent meanings of any piece of art. Consistent with Becker’s notion of artworld, the Heidelberg archaeologist and iconologist Tonio Hölscher has coined the phrase “Bildsprache” or “language of images” to understand Roman imperial art as a communication system. Hölscher’s approach is similar to that of Paul Zanker who also discusses imperial art as a system of signs. Both iconologists have pioneered a semiotic, constructivist approach to Roman art to place imperial iconography into an art world promoting Roman propaganda. Such approaches see visual media as a means toward encouraging or even limiting and permitting how the inhabitants of a social world are to realize and order themselves. That is, images, like words, aim at communication and persuasion, and the construction of audiences who receive the messages being communicated and appropriate them in ways consistent with their imperial aim. A semiotic constructivist approach to art takes up iconography as a system of communication and concerns itself with what imagery encourages or even permits societies or communities to realize about themselves and how societies use art to realize a political and ideological ordering of the world.

A sociology of art amongst other things seeks to analyse the ways in which iconography makes social structures visible and promotes those structures in the very act of making them visible. Art is a means by which we make ourselves and one another visible to each other. This is especially the case in visual culture where images rather than texts dominate, as was in the case in Antiquity. Here the meaning of an image lies not so much in the genius of its execution, or even in its influences from other works of art and artists, but in the space that arises between art and viewer where viewers are invited to recognize themselves and hence become socially constructed as particular kinds of viewers. Art is a social process of meaning making. To that end, art constructs audiences who receive the images before them and interpret them, at least ideally, in terms intended by those have produced them. Robert A. Witkin has discussed this socio-constructive aspect of art in terms of semiotic flow — the messages
that are appropriated by an audience consistent with the values and agenda of artists and/or their patrons. Roman imperial art was carefully and self-consciously deployed.

Such semiotic flow may be seen in the Julio-Claudian period’s consistent deployment of a relatively narrow range of images and a consistent utilisation of Hellenistic and Classical forms to train those who saw them instantly to recognize and take in the imperial image of an empire centred in the piety, benefaction, and military prowess of the emperor. This created a certain kind of semiotic flow of communication and as such attempted to make visible and compelling a particular way of viewing and celebrating imperial social realities. While such an assessment easily becomes too reductionist, assuming static or socially homogeneous audiences who let the semiotic flow of meaning run over them like so many inert stones in a stream, Witkin introduces a second motif that helps to make his analysis more sophisticated. In addition to semiotic flow, he speaks of counter-flow. Counter-flow refers to the ways in which communicative systems are re-appropriated and rearranged when images are taken up and redeployed in ways inconsistent with or opposed to their more widely accepted meanings.

The concept of semiotic counter-flow is especially useful in locating Pauline theology along the horizon of the picture language of the Roman Empire. For here we find motifs of victory, of exaltation, of putting on and putting off military costume, of the uniting of diverse peoples under one lordship of Jesus, motifs that are fully at home in the imperial situation of the Roman Empire but redeployed in a way that suspends the absolute claims of Roman imperial political authority along the lines conceived by its iconographers.

The metaphors of semiotic flow and counter-flow allow for more nuance than the more traditional accounts that look for historical relations of cause and effect in assessing the role of imperial iconography in facilitating a social construction of early Christian identities. Adela Yarbro Collins has picked up on this more generalized account in an important essay on the influence of the imperial cult in the development of New Testament christologies and deploys the excellent phrase “the imperial situation of early Christianity” to offer a more expansive account of the relationship of Christianity to its multiple social environments. Attention to the flow of imperial iconography allows for a recognition of early Christianity’s “imperial
situation” and asks us look again at what is said in texts in order to uncover how that relates to what was seen almost everywhere in the imperial world that was the social matrix of early Christians. That social matrix was a world flooded with imperial imagery. For the urban world in which early Christianity expanded was one transformed by a mutually shared effort on the part of Roman rulers and local elites alike to insert the signs of imperial presence everywhere. This was in order to adapt local civic cultures of honour in a way that established right honour for the emperor in return for benefits to those civic leaders orchestrating it and the local populations celebrating it.

As Thomas Pekary has noticed, the emperor’s portraits were strategically erected in the main centres of social interaction and public life — not only on civic buildings, but also at markets, in baths, in gymnasia and theatres — wherever people gathered and engaged social commerce. These images were venerated at temples and altars dedicated to the emperor, erected at the most privileged and conspicuous spots of ancient cityscapes, and thus gave visual testimony to the imperial orientation of ancient cities.13

This deployment of portraiture and sacred architecture helped secure an imperial transposition of local urban cultures. Added to this was the construction of Roman administrative space, which equally as potently transformed the urban imagination in an imperial direction. S. R. F. Price has shown how through the erection at the main squares of the empire’s cities of imperial spaces taking the form of porticos the Roman empire achieved a formalization and standardization of civic space and helped to make visible the monarchical structure of the social world of the empire’s inhabitants.14 That sense was further communicated by an often-repeated representation of imperial architecture on the empire’s coins. This of course helped subjects to realize the importance of imperial patronage in promoting civic life. It also helped to promote a sense of a shared urban social geography marked by the presence of imperial buildings. The urban world of the Roman Empire was one where cities competed to honour the emperor with cults, temples, statues, and honours, and sought to win in return particular honours.

We can imagine the civic spaces in which early Christianity was taught and believed within a social world filled with imperial imagery, and it is no coincidence this imagery has left its mark on the pages of the New Testament albeit in often dramatically altered form.
From an anthropological standpoint, complexly organized societies are governed by making centres of power known and felt and known at peripheries of power. The challenge of any central political administration is to spread its sphere of influence everywhere. As Clifford Geertz has noted, art and political ritual are important means of achieving this and making this felt throughout a political administration’s spheres of influence. Administrations justify their “existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of stories, ceremonies, insignia, formalities, and appurtenances that they have inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented. It is these — crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences — that mark the center as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built.” Visual media like coins, imperial portraits, administrative spaces, temples, and triumphal monuments such as arches or trophies of victory were a central means by which the centre marked itself and advertised its claim to be a power that arose naturally from the way the world is built.

Early Christianity must be assessed in terms of the ways iconography helped to make this social world natural in order to recover the ways in which Christian theology itself helped, through the appropriation of imperial metaphor, to promote even if inadvertently the construction of the Roman imperial world felt along the many complicated networks of social discourse that comprised the ancient world, and to show how it resisted that construction of the way things were. Attention to the semiotic flow of imperial art and the counter-flows arising from Christian appropriations of the picture language of the early church’s imperial situation helps us to recognize the complex negotiations of imperial culture that helped to make up the social world of earliest Christians.

The flow of imperial picture language is especially evident in the iconography expressing the Roman imperial theology of victory. Its influence cannot be underestimated in the construction of early Christian theological ideals where one detects potent counter-flows and revolutionary reinventions of the iconographic signs everywhere erected around the Empire. The Roman imperial theology of victory as a means of revealing and promoting a world in which divine power was entrusted to the Roman people arose out of Hellenistic and late Republican era ideologies celebrating the virtus or natural ability and
piety of the Roman emperor as securing a divinely appointed series of military victories over enemies and establishing a worldwide dominion.

The importance of military imperial art in shaping the social world and expectations of imperial subjects has been taken up by John R. Clare in his *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*. As opposed to asking the typical art historical questions of imperial monuments that suggest elite viewers with expertise in decoding imperial iconography, Clare tries to imagine how monuments with a military theme would have been interpreted by non-elite viewers and concludes that they would have recognized an account of Roman systems of conquest, colonization, and Romanization. Imperial art attempted to make immediately recognizable to its viewers, elite and non-elite alike, the potency of Roman rule; the ideal viewer was one who, even if she could not decode the more sophisticated representations before her, could nevertheless quickly insert herself as one who belonged to those ruled and even conquered. This was done on a grand scale, but also in the daily lives of the Empire’s inhabitants. Imperial portraits have already been mentioned.

But coins were the privileged media to promote and make everywhere known Roman imperial victory theology. A relatively narrow repertoire of simple images communicated in an instant the larger dynastic and theological claims of a worldwide *imperium* sanctioned by and preserved by the gods. Winged victory, globe, sceptre, crown, throne, representation of the fear-struck conquered, seated or bound beneath military trophies, or at the feet or throne of the emperor, or in gestures of supplication and devotion — these were iconographical short hands to express the Empire’s potent civic theology of Victory. In representing this theology, the imperial court and its subjects constructed themselves and made manifest structures of society and social ordering and so brought to expression social structures which were otherwise invisible or known by other means.

Monuments were also ubiquitous. All over the Empire were victory arches and military trophies, the latter in some instances surviving for a century or more on the fields of battle where they were erected. Monuments became means by which local populations could express their allegiance to Rome’s victory theology by erecting images of their own subjugation through military triumph. Ando Clifford gives examples of Augustan period military monuments erected by local populations in Gaul where patrons commissioned artists to represent...
their own ethnic groupings as peoples in postures of having been conquered before their military overlords. This was a means of local populations to honour Roman imperial power and benefit from it. The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias offers a similar practice, where statues representing conquered ethnē were erected beneath depictions of Roman imperial rulers celebrating their military achievements and prowess. Here even if the particular iconographical treatments of emperors and imperial family members cast in the company of cosmic powers, or themselves represented as divinities or semi-divine heroes, were not recognized by rank and file Aphrodisians, the organization of space was designed to persuade and make recognizable the legitimacy of the Empire’s victory theology. A relatively narrow courtyard was dominated by three-storey porticoes with statues and reliefs on the second and third levels. From the entry the eye was drawn eastward toward the end of a long courtyard where the temple was situated, raised several metres above the ground by several stairs. The combination of three-storey porticos and narrow courtyard created a strong sense of the vertical. This vertical sense wedded to the cultic invited viewers to conceive of themselves as subjects of a grand cosmic vision of divinely appointed victory whose continuing effects were to be enjoyed through ritualistic devotion to the imperial household. On the second story of the north portico were statues personifying ethnē integrated into the Empire by Julio-Claudian military and diplomatic prowess. There would have been no doubt concerning the viewer’s place in the cosmos, or that—believably or not—the gods had planned it that way.

Most of the monuments and trophies erected across the Empire have long since disappeared. But, as Paul Zanker has shown, the imagery of Rome’s theology of victory was appropriated everywhere across the Empire, from furniture to jewelry, from rings to clay lamps to roof tiles and marble ash urns. The users of the two silver cups from the villa of Boscoreale near Pompeii imported Rome’s victory theology into domestic life when they translated from contemporary monuments scenes of vanquished Germans in supplication before an enthroned Tiberius. A further striking example of the translation from the monumental into the daily is the first century Gemma Augustea commissioned to celebrate a military victory of Tiberius in 10 BCE under the auspices of Augustus. The upper register situates an enthroned and crowned Augustus. At the left Tiberius rides a chariot steered by Victoria, leading him to inevitable triumph. In the
lower register the victory already determined from above plays out: Roman soldiers erect a military trophy while the conquered are symbolised below as mourning or suppliant. The relative calm of the upper register contrasts with the drama below, the symbol that the peace Roman victory brings is the pacification of otherwise unruly people and the establishment of the tranquility and security of the upper register. Emotion is writ large on the vanquished of the lower region; even the soldiers who raise the standard echo more the calm of the upper register than the tumult below them. Auxiliaries in the lower register in ethnic military costume acclaim the diverse peoples of the empire folded into the divinely appointed project of imperial dominion. The piece situates domestic viewers in a narrative configuration of the world that iconographically represented the right of Rome to govern the world and discovered themselves accordingly as the beneficiaries of an imperial peace secured by divinely guided victory in a transethnic unity of peoples.

The fingerprints of this theology of victory can be detected in the pages of the New Testament. Paul’s letters in particular reflect this imperial situation and it is arguable, though of course not demonstrable, that his portrait of ideals as well as the outline of his theological vision was made persuasive by his audiences’ cultural formation in the iconography that constituted the Roman imperial art-world.

Certainly the iconography of victory theology is directly applied in Col. 2:15 where there is explicit representation of Jesus’ death as a parade of triumph leading cosmic powers as conquered subjects. In Paul the claim becomes the site of Victory acclamation: “death has been swallowed up in victory … thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54-56), in fact rehearsing the kind of acclamation that would have been heard from crowds celebrating a victory. The fruit of that victory becomes strikingly universal and, for non-elites forever shut out of the networks of power constituting the Roman world, now accessible where one of Paul’s successors promises those united to Jesus’ death an enthronement and reign alongside him (Col. 3:1). Similarly echoing iconographical commonplaces is the evocation of the Philippians Hymn of every knee bowing and tongue confessing Jesus’ lordship. While one should not ignore the textual parallels with Hebrew Bible and even Roman imperial texts, as important are the iconographical parallels that would have helped to make these notions compelling.
Further at home in the iconographical program of the Roman Empire is the evocation of a trans-ethnic unity of peoples under one lordship. Paul who like the emperor spreads his Gospel to every corner of the *imperium*, “bearing fruit and growing in the whole world” as his disciple the author of the Colossians provocatively puts it (1:6; cf. 1:23), playing in the imperial contact zone celebrating the worldwide dominion of the Julio-Claudian dynasty as a saving Gospel of military might deployed shrewdly to bring harmony to the nations, creates a trans-ethnic unity of peoples that overcomes all social divisions and brings all into a harmonious unity of peoples and moral purpose. Even as the Augustan *Gemma Augustea* celebrates peoples brought into unity pacified beneath a military trophy with the imperial princes enthroned above, steered by Victory and other cosmic powers, so the author to the Colossians acclaims “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11; cf. Gal 3:28-29). And here, too, in the literary upper register of the letter are the cosmic powers — the thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers of the Colossian Hymn (1:16) at whose head Christ reigns — in the service of an imperial triumph. Imperial poets celebrated the reach of imperial power by portraying barbarian peoples as subject to Rome’s *imperium*.

These striking parallels suggest a shared cultural space of emerging Christian religion and imperial iconography. For the slaves and freed-persons which made up the bulk of Paul’s churches, imperial iconography wedded to a Gospel that found in the death of Jesus the means toward cementing diverse people and *ethne* together located the apostle’s teaching and preaching in a recognisable social world. However, even as it paralleled its imperial culture, it also disrupted it by acclamation the cross as the site of a reinvented victory theology. Once we recognise the imperial backdrop of Paul’s imagery we are in a better place to realize its semiotic counter-flow. Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* uses the term “poaching” to describe the means by which inhabitants of a society appropriate the official structures and publicly endorsed meanings of culture to construct their own unique identities. While cultures and societies strategize to make publicly endorsed meanings persuasive, de Certeau argues that everyday life engages in manifold tactics to make meanings personal and useable for daily use.

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Paul’s letters show the apostle poaching on imperial visual culture to offer a means for social reinvention along the categories of a theology of the cross and the reinvention of imperial culture away from a politics of domination toward one centred in self-sacrifice and love.

Notes


3 The most notable literary application of this theme has been the series of essays from the “Paul and Empire” Group of the Society of Biblical Literature. Richard Horsley offers a useful collection of these essays from multiple authors in three volumes: *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1997); *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000); *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2004).


Thus, Witkin, *Art*, p. 9.

For the ubiquity of imperial art in ancient settings see Thomas Pekáry, *Das römische Kaiserbildnis in Staat, Kult und Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 1965).


For victory on globe:
<http://www.dirtyoldcoins.com/natto/id/aug/aug010.jpg>;
barbarian:
<http://www.dirtyoldcoins.com/natto/id/aug/aug008.jpg>;
similarly,


For images of the Sebasteion and discussion of archaeological data see <www.nyu.edu/projects/aphrodisias>;
<http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/aphrodisias>.
For Claudius conquering land and sea,
<http://www.archaeology-classic.com/images/APHRODISIAS-6.jpg>;
a conquered ethne:
<http://www.griseldaonline.it/foto/Rambaldi_2/Immagine_5_th.jpg>;
civilized ethne:
<http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/?a=2530>.
20 For a photo of the remains of the *temenos* or temple precinct, which
gives a sense of scale and length, see
<http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/?a=2531>.

21 Thus, for example,
<http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/Images/109images/Roman/augustus/boscoreale_cup_1a.jpg>. The image shows Augustus
receiving a suppliant barbarian.

22 <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/romanciv/artandarchitecture/gemma.jpg>.

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 165-76.