

Olivier Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors. Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Culture and Representation, Oxford University Press, 2015, 395 pages, 109 figures, 5 tables, ISBN 978-0-19-873682-0.

Olivier Hekster's book is about lineage in the Roman imperial families (p. IX) and it is not an easy-to-read one. The author approaches all possible facets of this subject and he does it based on a multitude of ancient sources and modern literature. The first (introductory) chapter is called Introduction to Dynastic Rule and presents the apparition and the trajectory of the dynastic concept in the Roman thinking of the Principate. The importance of ancestry and kinship are emphasized, as well as the representation of these components of the dynastic concept for the public. The latter is an important area of investigation of this book, which therefore is also a book about representation and self-representation of the emperors and their biological and adopted families.

The second chapter's title is Running in the Family and it opens the Part One: Family Ties. The chapter investigates the place and importance of the biological or adoptive fathers for the foundation of the ascent to the imperial throne and the further legitimating the imperial power. For this purpose the author examines foremost the images on coins and the statues, but also the imperial titles and filiations, the triumphal monuments (as Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' columns), virtually all available evidence that is related to this aspect.

The next chapter bears the title Your Mother's Son and examines the role of the women from the imperial families. The author shows that there actually was no Roman tradition in publicly commemorating women before the Principate, so Augustus, who wanted to publicly honour Octavia and Livia had "little real precedent to which to turn" (p. 116). Since a lot of the lineage of the Julio-Claudians was established through the women in the (extended) family, there's little surprise that the figures of Livia, Octavia, Julia or Agrippina had such an importance in the representations of that dynasty. During the Antonine dynasty there prominently was Plotina, who – as adoptive mother – was quite represented especially in Hadrian's reign, which is quite unsurprising if we think of the part she played in Hadrian's ascent to power, but also the two Faustinae, etc. The other period when women became very important in the self-representation was, of course, the Severan dynasty, when Julia Domna was already very prominent during Septimius Severus' reign, with most of the emphasis on her as the mother of the future emperors. More than that, the precedent of Julia Domna created the possibility of a dynastic link for the sons of her nieces Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea, even if there was also the claim that Elagabalus was the son of Caracalla.

The fourth chapter focuses on several matters, like the figures of Caesar, Augustus and Nerva and how the latter two have become reference figures, Augustus for the 1<sup>st</sup> and Nerva for the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The way that

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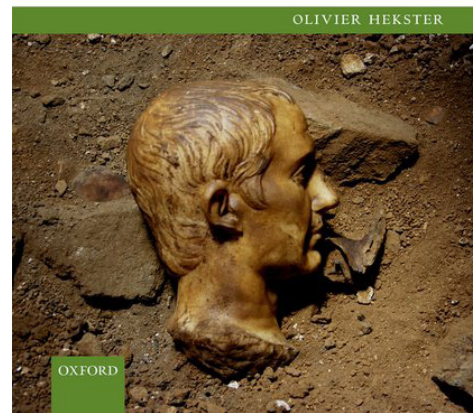
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OXFORD STUDIES IN ANCIENT CULTURE AND REPRESENTATION

## EMPERORS AND ANCESTORS

Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition

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DOI: 0.14795/j.v3i1.162

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN-L 2360 – 266X

non-imperial elite families traced their own lineages, partially as an attempt to emulate the imperial houses, but also as a tradition of heroic lineages in the East of the Empire. Another subject of this chapter is the image of the Augustan household in ancient literature. Finally, the subchapter called A Family at the Centre of the World attempts to draw the conclusions of these rather mixed approaches, trying to see whether one could find patterns in the matters treated. A few things are clear, like the establishing of the concepts of *domus Augusta* and *domus divina* and the fact that the imperial practice seems to have had a profound influence on some modes of ancestral representations by the non-imperial elite. Other than that, there doesn't seem to be other certain patterns in these matters.

The Part Two opens with the fifth chapter, called Some Have Ancestors Thrust Upon Them, that essentially treats the fictive, invented lineages. The author establishes that Septimius Severus' fictive claim to be the (adopted) son of Marcus Aurelius and thus the brother of Commodus had no proper precedents in the Early Principate. This claim seems to have been systematically pursued, although only gradually introduced starting with 195, since it's one of the few cases where all the media (coins, stone inscriptions and imperial portraiture) have been concerted used to propagate the invented lineage. Once this particular method of invented lineage used and validated, nothing could prevent other emperors to make use of it as well, like Elagabalus' and Severus Alexander's claims to be Caracalla's sons. The fact that Decius took up the name Traianus is seen by the author as a similar, even if less explicit claim and based on this emperor's need to be a part of a succession of "good" emperors, which is visible also through his "restitution" coins. Constantine I used a fictive descent from Claudius II Gothicus as one of various invented ancestries. Finally, at the end of the fifth chapter, the author describes the multiplying of the invented ancestries in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, in a time where names could be obtained either linked to a certain state function or even through buying a house of a famous family, whose name and ancestors would have been simply taken over by the buyer. A curiously similar phenomenon occurred when Christian bishops of the 4<sup>th</sup> century started to claim fictive descent from revered martyrs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.

The sixth chapter (Sons of Gods and Heroes) examines the claims for divine descent of some imperial houses and other forms of association with gods or mythological heroes, from the claim of the descent from Aeneas (and thus from Venus) by the *gens Iulia* and especially by Caesar, Augustus and – less emphatically – by the whole Julio-Claudian

dynasty, through the quite odd association between Domitian and Minerva as his divine companion (that lead as far as creating faces that combined the traits of the goddess and those of the emperor) to the divine companions of other emperors, as Hercules was for Commodus. Added to that, there was the very specific way of seeing the emperors as gods and sons of gods in Egypt, continuing the old pharaonic tradition that had made its way also through the Hellenistic period of Egypt.

The seventh, and final, chapter has the title The Tetrarchs: Divine Brothers and Fictive Fathers. It approaches a new political system that abandoned the three centuries tradition of focusing on kinship and on the *domus augusta* in favour of representation of four mature men unrelated by blood that ruled the Roman world. Women of the imperial family were also excluded from the representation under the original Tetrarchic. This was not meant to last though, since under Constantine the lineage (real and also fictive) regained its place within legitimating of power. While the Roman Empire had "no formal hereditary rule, yet people still expected emperorship to stay within the family" (p. 314). Old habits die hard, we might say.

Olivier Hekster's book is an exhaustive analysis of the concepts of lineage and kinship throughout the history of imperial Rome. It examines all extant media of those times, from coins and statues to inscriptions on stone and reliefs. It investigates the relations between the centre and the periphery in matters of representation and the variations of the messages and the methods. The book also tries to see whether certain patterns can be established in the above-mentioned matters. Sometimes such patterns could be more or less revealed, sometimes not. In his endeavour, Olivier Hekster not only examines all relevant sources from all angles, but he uses and cites most probably all relevant historical literature as well (only the bibliographical list takes up 34 pages - pp. 333-367), hence my affirmation at the beginning that this is not an easy-to-read book. The well-chosen illustrations and several annexes are meant to make the reader's life easier though. Thus there is a list of the emperors and their dates of rule (p. 325), a set of imperial stemmata of the ruling houses and of the Tetrarchy (pp. 327-331) and the very useful indices: Index locorum, separated by media (literary sources, coins, inscriptions and papyri) – pp. 369-384, and a General index – pp. 385-395).

Olivier Hekster's *Emperors and Ancestors* is a book to be taken into account by all present and future research of both the dynastic concept and of the self-representation in the Roman world.