

WEGNER, MAX

Gordianus III to Carinus. With Contributions by Jörgen Bracker and Willi Real

[“Gordianus III. bis Carinus. Mit Beiträgen von Jörgen Bracker und Willi Real”]

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The purpose of “The Roman Imperial Portrait”, edited by M. Wegner, is to review critically, in a series of volumes, all the evidence there is about portraits of the Roman emperors and their relatives, the *domus divina*, and thus to provide not only a survey of the rulers’ appearances and an aspect of the Roman emperors’ cult, but also a well-founded construction of sculptural chronology for others to build on.

The present volume, by the editor, with contributions (the first two chapters) by his pupils J. Bracker and W. Real, covers the time of the so-called ‘soldier emperors’, a much more problematical period than that of the former volumes. There are a great number of emperors of short reign, about whom comparatively little is known; lack of evidence for identific-

ation, except for the numismatic, joins with a general deterioration in quality of both sculptural and coin portraits; and the constant change of rulers also obviously contributed to an assimilation of individual characterisation. All this accounts for a number of contradictory and unconvincing attributions. Here only such a general survey can help, and the same and rather cautious judgment expressed in this book is of great value.

After examining the iconographic basis given by the coins of the different mints and value, the authors start analytically by testing the attributions one by one. Indications such as appearance of replicas or strong likeness, which points to an eminent, usually imperial person, or imperial attributes such as a wreath, are of help. Even if some imperial portrait may not be accepted, this is methodically still the safest way. Any easily accepted misattribution might destroy the stylistic value of the whole. The book provides in chronological order, for each person considered a catalogue of all the identifications proposed. This is preceded by a short introductory passage giving the biographical essentials and an abridged argumentation on the more reliable of the attributions – if there are such. Thus the book contains much more work than appears at first sight. All the portraits of doubtful or even false identification or antiquity are marked in the catalogues; so those which are definitely acceptable can easily be found.

The first chapter, on the person most abundant in portraits in this volume, Gordianus III, is not quite satisfying. Bracker refrains from some mechanical misrepresentations in his dissertation on the same subject, but burdens his article with some unpleasant and useless controversy. His typology and its foundation on the (exceptionally not illustrated) coins is not quite convincing. Also, for instance, it remains unclear why the heads at Holkham Hall and in Venice should be excluded as false. Nevertheless the corpus-like presentation of this valuable material is meritorious.

The characteristic heads of Philippus Arabs and Traianus Decius have been recognized in two portraits each. The iconography of their successor Trebonianus Gallus is more problematic, but among the comparatively numerous bronze heads proposed Wegner is able to accept two as representing him. The rulers' sons are more difficult to distinguish, but in a careful analysis Real selects a group of heads as portrait of the younger Philippus Gallienus, whose name was applied to the 'renaissance' of the third quarter of the 3rd century, and who had the longest reign of the emperors in this volume. Thus sufficient evidence is preserved to reconstruct the development of his portrait features to some extent. Characteristic features such as his upper lip allow for the identification of two general types with several variations, which cannot be considered as simple replicas.

In this way the stylistic development can be traced with some certainty for

about three decades, whereas with the following emperors things become worse. None of the proposed identifications can be considered as sure; few seem acceptable to Wegner, including one of Carinus. Even Aurelianus and Probus remain unknown. The rather hopeless case of the rulers of the Gallic Empire has been left out of the volume.

The problems raised by the female portraits are partly different, owing to the changing fashion of coiffure. The number of portraits must naturally have been smaller, but nevertheless at least for a few empresses reasonable suggestions could be made – not surprisingly those whose husbands also proved identifiable, most convincingly Tranquillina, wife of Gordianus III. This series allows for a closer review of the development of coiffure, which is to be realized on the coins. For the dating of private portraits this is of special importance.

For quick orientation about the stylistic development of the Roman portrait in the mid 3rd century the plates, which give a representative choice of coin portraits and most of the attributions regarded as certain by the authors, will be an extremely useful reference. The financially imposed lack of more and better illustrations of the more doubtful portraits is compensated for by the references to illustrations in the excellent catalogues, which will be of great help even to those who disagree with the manner of attributions proposed here. On this basis one might even try to review the bulk of 3rd century portraits in search of further candidates for imperial portraits. And for the chronology of 3rd century sculpture in general this book provides a most helpful standard.

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