

1 ♦ THE CONCEPT OF ROLES AND THE MALAISE OF “IDENTITY”: ANCIENT ROME AND THE MODERN WORLD

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Fixed Roles, Ancient and Present

On the column of Trajan the emperor appears no less than nine times in a scene of *adlocutio*, a speech to his army.¹ He is always represented standing on a high podium, surrounded or followed by a group of officers, and directing his words with a deictic gesture towards his soldiers (fig. 1).² Very similarly President George Bush is pictured in American newspapers in a television speech to his nation, which is suggested as his audience by two microphones (fig. 3).³ The Roman emperor demonstrates by his entourage that he conducts the war against the Dacians in accordance with good advisors; in some scenes of the war council, this aspect even becomes an autonomous topic (fig. 2).⁴ Likewise, the American president emphasizes the fact that he wages the war against Iraq in total agreement with a group of influential senators. The similarity of attitudes is striking: the protagonist being more emphatically directed toward the audience, with an expression of great determination, the others in part looking at him, in part repeating and enhancing his determined expression, in part complementing it by physiognomies of seriousness and thoughtfulness.

In Roman art such scenes of *adlocutio* appear also on other monuments celebrating successful wars, most similarly on the column of Marcus Aurelius and on the arch of Septimius Severus. It was a stock type of political representation, in art as well as in real war, stressing some fundamental aspects of Roman aggressive warfare, above all the emperor's quality of political and military leadership, his personal determination to wage the war, his capacity to mobilize the ideological program of Roman virtues, his confidential reliance on his military staff, and his good relations, *concordia* and *fides*, with his army.⁵ The emperor, his officers, and the soldiers played a precise role in this event, by which they enacted these ideological concepts as a public performance. All this seems to have changed little in the last nearly 2,000 years.

Great emphasis is laid in such scenes on visual staging. Often Trajan is delivering his speech in

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¹ Scenes of *adlocutio* on the column of Trajan: Baumer 1991; David 2000.

² Lepper and Frere 1988, pl. LXXVII, cf. also pls. XI, XXVII, XXXIX; Coarelli 1999, pl. 125, cf. also pls. 10, 26, 46, 56, 84, 90.

³ *The Boston Globe*, 3 October 2002, p. 1.

⁴ Lepper and Frere 1988, pl. IX, cf. other groups of advisors: pls. XXV, XXVI, XLII, XLIX, LX, LXXVIII; Coarelli 1999, pl. 7; for numerous other groups of advisors: pls. 33, 35, 62, 76, 95, 127.

⁵ Campbell 1984, 69–88.

Fig. 1. Trajan in adlocutio. Rome, Column of Trajan (photo Anger, DAIR, inst. neg. 1989.0583).

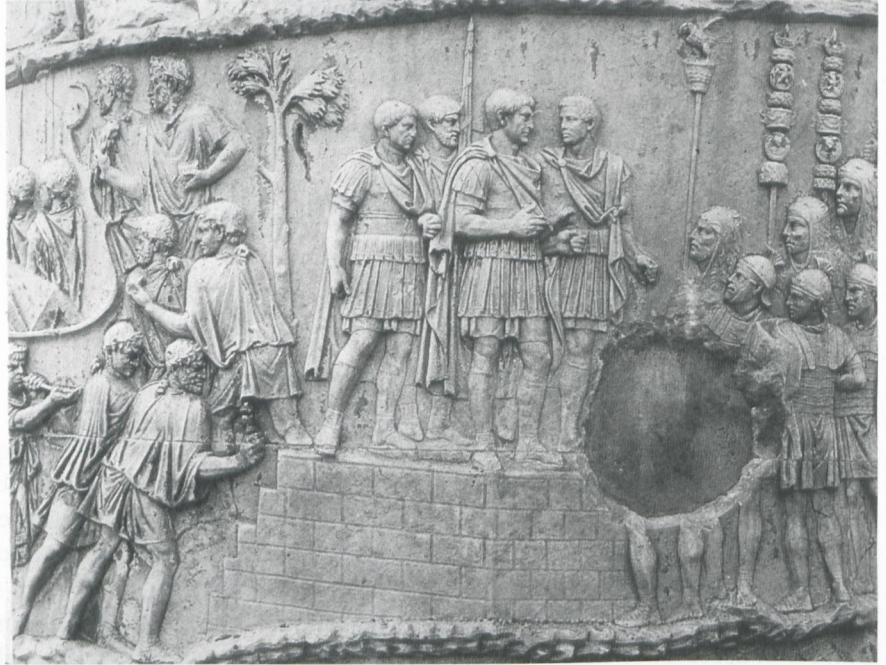


Fig. 2. Trajan seated amidst his war council. Rome, Column of Trajan (photo Anger, DAIR, inst. neg. 1991.0150).



front of his army's insignia, the holiest symbols of Roman sovereignty,⁶ very much like his American counterpart, before beginning a fundamental speech on attacking Iraq (fig. 4).⁷ The president's "vision for the Near and the Middle East," as it is advertised in the newspapers, must be a vision of

⁶ Other scenes with the representative use of ensigns: Lepper and Frere 1988, pls. X, XI, XXI, XXV, XXXIII, XXXVII, XXXIX, XLII; Coarelli 1999, pls. 10, 26, 32, 46,

49, 53, 55, 56, 63, etc.

⁷ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 February 2003, p. 1.



Fig. 3. President George W. Bush speaking at the White House alongside members of Congress (photo © AP Images/Doug Mills).



Fig. 4. President George W. Bush preparing to address an audience (photo © Agence France-Presse/Getty Images).



Fig. 5. Trajan receiving the submission of Dacians. Rome, Column of Trajan (photo Anger, DAIR, inst. neg. 1989.0746).

enemy defeat similar to that accomplished by Trajan in a scene of submission in front of his army's ensigns (fig. 5).⁸ Performative roles call for appropriate strategies and types of visibility.

Another means of giving impressive visibility to public events is staging them in front of the appropriate public scenery.⁹ Before entering the theater of war on the Balkans, Trajan performs a

⁸ Lepper and Frere 1988, pls. LIV–LV; Coarelli 1999, pls. 86–88. ⁹ See Grunow 2002.

great sacrifice in front of the magnificent facades of a theater, a temple, and other public buildings, representing the kind of Roman urban culture that is to be saved against the assault of the Dacians.¹⁰ In the same sense, Trajan's great administrative acts of money distribution and debt release are represented on the Anaglypha Traiani in front of public buildings of the Forum Romanum, the public burning of the debt records being placed below the temple of Saturnus, where the public treasury was housed.¹¹ Even more impressive is the great speech of Constantine on a relief on his arch, displayed on the rostra of the Roman Forum, in front of the five-columned monument of Diocletian and his co-emperors, and framed by statues of Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius.¹² Here the architecture of the huge platform, the columns with statues of Jupiter and his imperial predecessors, the images of "ideal" emperors of the past, and, last but not least, the real entourage of the emperor as well as the audience of citizens add up to a magnificent tableau of Roman greatness. From written sources we know that this staging of public acts in significant public spaces was a device not only of art but also of political reality. Symbolic architecture and significant images are the visual space in which the real actors play their symbolic roles.

The most important common denominator between the ancient war and its contemporary counterparts is the reduction of the adversaries' resistance to an individual foe. While all Dacians are continually defeated, in flight and submitting to the victorious Romans, Decebalus is the only enemy who stubbornly offers resistance to them. His role, however, as well as that of his actual doubles, is characterized by a dramatic lack of visibility, acting as he is from the woods and other hidden places.¹³ War, therefore, necessarily ends in the pursuit and hunt of the great personification of evil.¹⁴

The Roles of a Roman Emperor

On Trajan's column, the scenes of *adlocutio* are part of a precisely calculated scheme of military activities. Each of the three great offensive campaigns is described as an almost stereotyped sequence of a limited number of stock scenes.¹⁵ It starts with a *profectio* of the emperor and the army, followed by a war *consilium* (fig. 2), a ritual *lustratio* of the army, and an encouraging *adlocutio*. After these initial rituals, fortifications, camps, and roads are built, and the first captives are brought to the emperor. Then the army sets out to fight, a great battle is waged and of course won, and the brave soldiers are praised by the emperor in a second *adlocutio*. The subsequent scenes demonstrate the consequences of victory, a collective *submitio* of further groups of the enemy, a final speech, and a description of the more or less cruel consequences for the rest of the enemies' population. Within this general scheme there occur, during these three sequences of Roman initiatives, some minor modifications according to the specific character of the different campaigns, and moreover some individual scenes are inserted here and there. But on the whole, the concept remains remarkably stable. The same holds true for the two defensive campaigns, which follow a somewhat diverse pattern.

¹⁰ Lepper and Frere 1988, pl. LXIII; cf. other imperial acts in front of impressive facades of significant buildings: pls. X (left), XXVI (right), XXXVII, LXXII; Coarelli 1999, pl. 101, cf. pls. 8, 35, 53, 118.

¹¹ Hannestad 1986, 192–94; Kleiner 1992, 248–50.

¹² Hannestad 1986, fig. 127.

¹³ Particularly notable: Lepper and Frere 1988, pl. XCIX;

Coarelli 1999, pl. 163.

¹⁴ After these lines were written, history continued its play of analogies: the sons of the actual foe Saddam Hussein being captured and executed, like those of Decebalus on the column, their corpses publicly exposed, which in the relief account is the destiny of Decebalus himself (Lepper and Frere 1988, pls. CVI–CVIII; Coarelli 1999, pls. 171–73).

¹⁵ Hölscher 1991; Hölscher 2002.

Obviously, in all such scenes the emperor, the officers, the various parts of the army, and even the enemies play fixed roles. In these roles they perform a number of fixed values, which constitute the ideological framework of Roman warfare and Roman politics. The emperor demonstrates in the *profectio* his *virtus* of leading the army against the enemy; in the council scene, his quality of deliberating and consulting with his officers; in the *lustratio*, his *pietas* and *providentia*, securing the favor of the gods; in the *adlocutio*, his good relations, *concordia* and *fides*, with his soldiers; in the building scenes, his capacity to induce the soldiers to hard labor, *labor*, and to organize the military infrastructure of war; in the battle pieces, his *virtus* of supreme command; and in the *submissio*, his *clementia*, his *iustitia*, or his determination to punish hostile rebels.¹⁶

Almost all of these scenes, with their respective roles and values, also appear on other monuments of war and victory, referring to other emperors, other enemies in other parts of the world, and other courses of actual events. Almost regardless of historical differences, various war campaigns are conceived in official monuments according, more or less, to the same general patterns.

These results can be transferred and enlarged to the whole range of political representation on Roman state monuments, ranging from the solemn *adventus* of the emperor in Rome at the beginning of his reign to public sacrifices in civic spaces and to scenes of *liberalitas* toward the poorer sections of the population.¹⁷ The whole political business of the Roman emperor is represented on his monuments as a limited number of stock scenes in which he performs in public a limited number of stock ideals of a Roman statesman and war hero.

The Functions and Ambivalence of Role Behavior

The function of social roles is to provide the individual person in specific situations with patterns of behavior in accordance with collective expectations. Roles connect the individual person with three fundamental spheres of their existence: with the structural system of their society, where they have their social position; with the cultural system from which they receive their behavioral norms and values; and with the reality of social life, where social positions and values are brought into action. By performing a specific role, individuals incorporate specific values of their cultural repertoire that are linked to their specific position in significant social situations, giving them validity and visibility in the space of social reality.

There have been long and fruitless discussions among archaeologists about whether Roman "historical reliefs" are to be read as historical reports or as timeless representations of ideological values—*virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia*, *pietas*, and so forth—as they were proclaimed on the *clupeus virtutis* of Augustus.¹⁸ Indeed, this exclusive opposition of reality and ideology is conceptually misleading since it neglects the basic dialectics between these two spheres. The function of the Roman emperor was precisely to enact these ideological values in real public life, to give them presence, effectiveness, and visibility in specific situations of social reality. Salvatore Settis has demonstrated that the basic Latin concept of *exemplum* serves as a conceptual link between ideal values and the reality of life.¹⁹ We may add the concept of the public "role," which emphasizes the dynamic, the active and performative aspect of this mediation between ideology and reality.

¹⁶ Hölscher 1980, 290–97.

¹⁸ See Fittschen 1972; Hölscher 1980. *Clupeus virtutis*: Hölscher 1967, 102–5.

¹⁷ *Adventus*: Koeppel 1969. Sacrifice: Ryberg 1955. *Liberalitas*: Hamberg 1945, 32–41; Spinola 1990.

¹⁹ Settis 1985.

Thus, the relative standardization of political scenes in Roman state monuments does not mean, as many scholars have thought, that these monuments do not refer to specific acts, events, and situations of public life and military campaigns. On the contrary, it indicates that political and military enterprises were actually conceived and experienced according to these fixed patterns of public behavior and ideological values.

Therefore, the force—and the danger—of such roles lies in their capacity to reduce the complexity and variety of the world and of human life to a limited repertoire of manageable issues. The infinite variety and complexity of collective and individual life is reduced to a small number of “significant” situations. The wide and highly differentiated range of social and ethical issues is reduced to an imperative spectrum of clear-cut values. The infinite multiplicity and complexity of potential human actions, reactions, and attitudes are reduced to a calculable number of behavioral patterns, of social “roles.”

It is obvious that this conception of social reality, of social ideals, and of social behavior in distinct units is extremely helpful for individuals, on the one hand, in order to orient and integrate themselves into their society and, on the other hand, for the community to assign the individual an appropriate place within its social and ethical system. The Roman emperor knew thereby how to present himself within the public space and how to represent himself in public monuments. Roman citizens knew equally well according to which patterns and parameters they might behave toward the emperor and assess his rule. This is one of the basic foundations of the interior stability and the aggressive force of Roman imperial rule.

On the other hand, the simplifying reduction of complexity and variety that is inherent in this whole system tends to exclude the complexity of real experience dramatically. Reducing three entire war campaigns to a sequence of twelve stereotyped stock scenes each leaves very little space for contingent and individual reality. Accordingly, the specific culture of the Dacians, their particular means of resistance, and even their forms of being defeated, are almost nowhere taken into consideration. Conversely, under this condition, ideological claims could become predominant all the more easily: the more ideological concepts are developed in a vacuum of reality, the more they tend to become autonomous and self-sufficient. Needless to say, this combination of ideological self-assertion with ignorance of the adversary and neglect of reality has today reached a disastrous peak.

Complementary Roles, Divergent Roles

The importance accorded such role models in ancient Rome is particularly evident from the statuary types of Roman emperors. As Paul Zanker has demonstrated, there was a limited number of fixed statuary types by which the various qualities and aspects of imperial rule could be represented.²⁰ The togate type shows the emperor as a Roman citizen on various levels, from the *toga praetexta* of the curule magistrates to the *toga triumphalis* of the *triumphator*; the toga with *velatio capitis* defines him as a religious functionary, representing the quality of *pietas*; and from written sources we know even of the *statua auguralis* type, defining the specific function of the *augur* and the quality of religious *providentia*.²¹ On the other hand, the cuirass type showed him as an army leader, incorporating *imperium* and *virtus*.²² Moreover, there were ideal types, like the seated half-nude type

²⁰ Zanker 1979.

²² Stemmer 1978.

²¹ Goette 1990.

in the guise of Jupiter, that suggest sovereign rule over the world or the standing nude type with a dynamic turn of the head, after the model of the classical hero Diomedes, that signifies heroic *virtus* combined with superhuman power in the tradition of Alexander the Great.²³

Individual patrons who intended to set up an image of the emperor had the choice of what specific aspect they wanted to honor him with through their particular statue. Taken together, however, such images of the emperor in all major cities must have quickly become so numerous that the various types of representation added up to a rich spectrum of his qualities, which could be perceived more or less simultaneously, one beside the other. If there existed in Rome by 28 B.C. eighty images of Augustus in silver alone, which he ordered melted down in an act of conspicuous "modesty," then we have an indication of how many portraits in other, more frequently used materials we have to reckon with.²⁴

That such images—in various places, of heterogeneous functions, set up by diverse commissioners—may have been viewed by ancient spectators together and in relation to one another is suggested also by single and coherent groups of images where the same person was represented in various statuary types and roles. From the *Historia Augusta* we know of a painting representing the third-century A.D. emperor Tacitus five times: in a Roman toga, in a Greek *chlamys*, in a military cuirass, in a pallium, and in the habit of a hunter.²⁵ An approximately contemporary group of marble statues shows an unknown person in a civic toga and twice as a hunter in "ideal" nudity.²⁶

This practice can be traced back with some probability to the first phase of public images in Rome and its surrounding cities in the middle republican period. From Livy we know of a certain M. Anicius from Praeneste who, together with 570 soldiers under his command, bravely defended the city of Casilinum in 216 B.C. against Hannibal and was honored with a portrait statue in his city's forum.²⁷ This image is described very strangely as *loricata, amicta toga, velato capite*. If this is taken literally, it shows with utmost clarity that in this image the two aspects of religious *pietas* and military *virtus* were combined in an unusually forced iconography. Most probably, however, the explanation must go one step further since the combination of a toga, and even a *velatio*, with a cuirass is materially impossible. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose some misunderstanding by Livy or his source of this "statue," which in fact must have been a group of two or even three images showing him once in a toga *capite velato*, perhaps a second time in a normal toga, and certainly another time in a military cuirass.

Taking these types as role models means that they imply some performative qualities. Indeed, all such statuary types could be extended by further elements, step by step, into scenes of more complex and more narrative content. To the figure type with *velatio* and sacrificial *patra*, as restored on a portrait statue of Tiberius in Naples (fig. 6), there could be added, on a coin of Septimius Severus (fig. 7), a small altar by which the static figure is activated within a scene of sacrifice.²⁸ In relief sculpture, for example on the arch of Trajan at Beneventum or on a small altar in Milan (fig. 8), such reduced scenes may be extended into larger compositions, in which the emperor retains his statue-like posture.²⁹ Similarly, the static image of the emperor with a cuirass can be activated

²³ Maderna 1988, 18–55, 56–80.

²⁴ RG 24.

²⁵ Tac. *SHA* 16.2. Further examples: Fittschen 1977, 325–26.

²⁶ Von Heintze 1962; Kleiner 1992, 381, figs. 351–53.

²⁷ Livy 23.19.17–18. See Hölscher forthcoming.

²⁸ Portrait statue of Tiberius in Naples: Goette 1990, pl. 8, 2. Coin of Septimius Severus: *BMCRE* 1950, 5.79, no. 311, 97, no. 387–88; Hölscher 1980, fig. 19.

²⁹ Ryberg 1955, figs. 27, 29, 33d, 39a, 41d, 45c, 51, 64, 83; cf. 93, 95, 97c.



Fig. 6. Portrait statue of Tiberius. Naples, Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 5615 (photo DAIR, inst. neg. 06717).

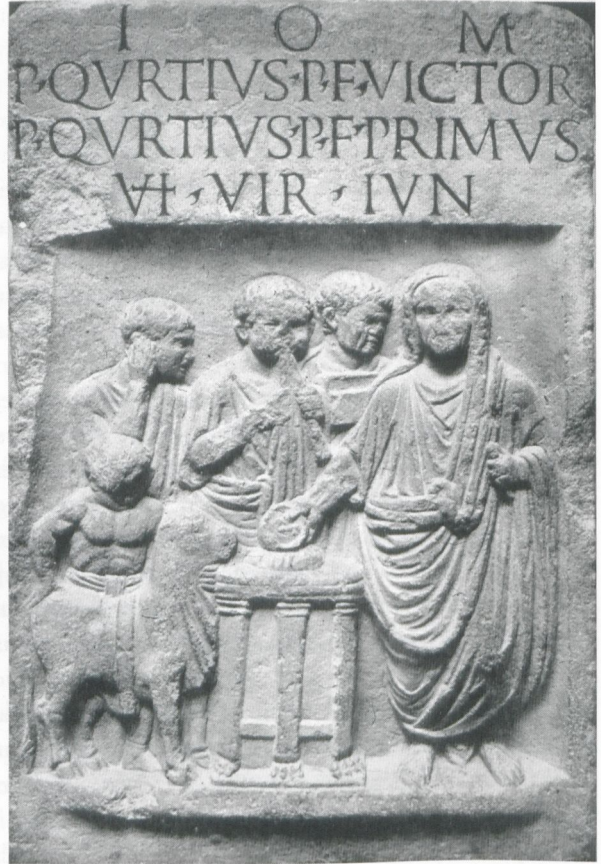


Fig. 8. Altar with a scene of a sacrifice of a sevir. Milan, Musei Civici (photo Rossa, DAIR, inst. neg. 1975.0848).



Fig. 7. Denarius with the emperor sacrificing, reign of Septimius Severus (photo Vögele, Archaeological Institute, University of Heidelberg).

by a gesture of his hand, as in the famous portrait statue of Augustus from Prima Porta.³⁰ By this potential activity, such images of the emperor in *tunica* and *paludamentum* can be integrated into larger scenes of *adlocutio*, where they may be slightly adapted to the situation.³¹ But even then the emperor always keeps a static, "statuary" character on his high podium.

From these observations there results a double ambivalence. On the one hand, statues and other images contain a certain potential activity that can be made explicit by further narrative elements but that must be inherent in the figure type itself as well. On the other hand, the representative character that is best expressed in an autonomous statue type is also transferred to the narrative scenes of public activity. This reciprocal dialectic between active statues and static activities is determined by the relation between a symbolic representation of ideal values and the dynamic activity of performing them in real life.

A second ambivalence concerns the relation between image and reality. As the statuelike emperor enacted political values in public life, his statues were also effective factors in public life.³² His images presided over public jurisdictions, lending their authority to the legal decisions of Roman magistrates; they were the object of soldiers' oaths, and so forth. The image, in this sense, *was* the emperor, in his various roles.

Permeability and Exclusiveness

Regarding the entire range of Roman society, as far as it is present in works of art, there is an interesting balance between such roles and values that are shared by and accessible to the whole community and others that are reserved for the emperor, on the one hand, and special social groups, on the other.

Shared ideals of the emperor and other groups are those that belong to the civic sphere. The most general case is the role of a Roman citizen, represented by the toga that is common to all Romans, including the emperor.³³ Of course, there were differences in status indicated by colors, seen above all in the *toga praetexta* and *triumphalis*, but these appear as variations of the common status of Roman citizenship. More specific is the ideal role of *pietas*, indicated by the *velatio* and scenes of sacrifice, which again is shared by all members of the cultural community of the Roman Empire. Beginning with Augustus, the emperor appears as the exemplary protagonist of this pious attitude toward the gods. But in his typological appearance, he is indistinguishable from the members of all other social classes down to the level of the middle class and the *liberti*, who frequently adopted such roles of *pietas*, thereby aspiring to some kind of public dignity (fig. 8).³⁴ Even the ambitious type of equestrian statues was at least accessible to all the upper classes, from the emperor through the senatorial and equestrian elite down to the local *decuriones*.³⁵ The same holds true for the military type of cuirassed statues.³⁶

Particularly revealing is the role of married couples, demonstrating their *concordia* by clasping hands. In the Antonine period, imperial couples are represented as exemplary models of matrimonial

³⁰ Hannestad 1986, 50–56; Kleiner 1992, 63–67.

³⁴ See in particular the altars of the *vicomagistri*: Ryberg 1955, 53–63; Hano 1986.

³¹ Ryberg 1967, fig. 37.

³⁵ Bergemann 1990, 14.

³² Generally, on the use of imperial portrait statues in specific topographical contexts, see Pekáry 1985.

³⁶ Stemmer 1978, 147–48.

³³ On social differentiation, see Goette 1990, 4–7.

Fig. 9. Sestertius with the emperor and his wife and couple of Roman citizens in the gesture of *dextrarum iunctio*, reign of Antoninus Pius (photo Vögele, Archaeological Institute, University of Heidelberg).



harmony, to be imitated by civic couples throughout the empire.³⁷ Again there was a reciprocal transfer from images to reality and vice versa. In the temple of Venus and Roma, images of Marcus Aurelius and Diva Faustina Minor were erected together with an altar where all newly married couples were supposed to offer a sacrifice to the imperial model of matrimonial harmony.³⁸ The same procedure is supposed to have been in existence by the time of Antoninus Pius since a decree of the *decuriones* of Ostia prescribing an analogous sacrifice of brides and bridegrooms to the local images of Pius and Faustina Maior *ob insignem eorum concordiam* must go back to a model in the capital.³⁹ This is represented on Antonine *sestertii* that, in large format, show the emperor holding a statuette of Concordia and clasping hands with his wife. In front of them, in much smaller size but in exactly the same attire and attitudes, a married couple offers a sacrifice at an altar (fig. 9).⁴⁰ We may question whether human couples imitated the postures of imperial statues in their actual ceremonies. But at a minimum, the real persons on the coin repeat the model of the imperial images, enacting the ideological concept of *concordia* that is represented as an ideal statuette type in the hands of the emperor. On hundreds of Roman sarcophagi and other monuments, this scheme is adopted for all strata of Roman society. This is a clearly evident instance of the exemplary visual character of the concept of the “role” permeating all social strata.

Hierarchy of political and social status is introduced in public images by subtler devices, above all by format and placing.⁴¹ On the whole, therefore, the typology of roles must have appeared rather homogeneous. This homogeneity in iconography and public visibility between the emperor and his subjects, in images that could be seen everywhere in public places and sepulchral areas of Roman cities, must have been an important bond of reciprocal coherence—all the more so since it concerns some central roles of collective behavior.

Only very few roles were reserved for specific groups or persons. On a famous pair of silver cups from Boscoreale, Augustus and Tiberius perform a set of stock roles of military character.⁴²

³⁷ *BMCRE* 1940, 4.44 nos. 298–300, 65, no. 466; *BMCRE* 1950, 5.206–7 nos. 272–74, etc.

³⁸ Cass. Dio 71.31.1.

³⁹ *CIL* 14 5326.

⁴⁰ *BMCRE* 1940, 4.198–99 nos. 1236–40.

⁴¹ Alföldy 1979; Alföldy 1984; Zimmer 1989.

⁴² De Villefosse 1899, 133–68; Hölscher 1980, 281–90; Kuttner 1995.



Fig. 10. Sarcophagus with scenes of deceased receiving the submission of enemies, performing a sacrifice, and united with his wife with clasped hands. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale (photo Alinari Archives, Florence).

Augustus, on the first cup, appears in one scene as the ruler of the world, holding a globe, to whom Venus offers a small Victoria, while Mars leads a group of provinces toward him. In the opposite scene he receives, with a gesture of clemency, the submission of the Gaulish tribes. Tiberius, on the second cup, is represented on one side in a scene of sacrifice before leaving for war, on the other as a *triumphator* after a victorious campaign. Of the four imperial virtues that were praised on Augustus's *clupeus virtutis*, three are demonstrated here in a ritual performance: *virtus*, *clementia*, and *pietas*.

One and a half centuries later, a group of sarcophagi of Roman senatorial officers shows a sequence of three or four very similar ritual scenes: a battle-piece (replaced on a sarcophagus in Mantua by a figure of *Virtus*, on another chest in Florence by a hunting scene), followed by the deceased receiving the submission of enemies, performing a sacrifice, and united with his wife by clasped hands (sarcophagus in Mantua: fig. 10).⁴³ Here, therefore, we meet again the performance of *virtus*, *clementia*, and *pietas*, and, in addition, of *concordia*. This is at once a striking demonstration of the relative stability of the Roman value system and a good example of the ambivalence between permeability and exclusiveness of these exemplary values. Most of these virtues, taken as abstract

⁴³ Rodenwaldt 1935; Hölscher 1980, 288–90; Reinsberg 1984; Kleiner 1992, 303; Reinsberg 1995; Wrede 2001, 21–43.

concepts, are shared between the emperor and the military elite. Only the highest expressions in ritual and allegory are excepted: while “ordinary” men demonstrate their military *virtus* in scenes of fighting and hunting, the honor of the triumph and the allegory of world dominion are reserved for the emperor.

The only statuary types that were exclusively adopted for the emperor are those derived from images of Jupiter, seated or standing.⁴⁴ On the other hand, there was one sphere that was never used in public monuments for the representation of the emperor, although it was of utmost importance in real policy: the organization and presentation of public games. This was one of the major themes exploited in the self-representation of members of the local elites, *decuriones* and *liberti* in the *coloniae* and *municipia* all over Italy, beginning in late republican and early imperial times.⁴⁵ It would be a rewarding task to compare systematically imperial and upper-class public self-presentation in actual public life and in public monuments, asking how far these two spheres are interconnected or independent semantic systems of social symbolization.

Roles and “Identity”

The various roles performed by single persons may complement one another—for example, *pietas* in religious rituals and *virtus* in military activity. Yet they may also be more contradictory. A famous sarcophagus in Naples from the time of Gallienus shows the deceased in four different roles: in the consular *processus*, as a Greek philosopher, in the habit of a magistrate, and in matrimonial harmony.⁴⁶ The two central figures, incorporating Roman *dignitas* and Greek *paideia*, would—at least in earlier periods—have been a conflicting pair. This divergence between public self-presentation in the capital and semi-private lifestyle in rural and seaside villas is well known. In art it is evident in the divergent styles of urban public monuments, following the tradition of classical dignity, and private residences, decorated according to the taste for Hellenistic *luxuria*.

Such divergences can easily be described as “roles,” and Roman art has developed efficient means to represent such roles performed by one and the same person. Should we go further? This brings us to the notion of “identity.” Roles are said to create and confirm “identity.” What do we mean by this notion? Is it anything more than a modernistic expression for “personality,” “quality,” “role”? What does “identity” imply? And why do we need it?

The term “identity,” individual as well as collective, is a creation of the twentieth century, increasingly in use after World War II and in particular during the last generation, when it became a fundamental catchword of social and cultural studies.⁴⁷ This universal and wholehearted adoption of not only the term but also the notion and concept of “identity” suggests, however, a kind of self-evident validity that contrasts markedly with its relatively recent origin. Therefore, we may at least ask to what extent we are dealing with a universal category of cultural anthropology or rather with a limited phenomenon of specific historical societies. Why could earlier scholars and entire societies do without the concept of “identity”? What did we win by introducing it into and placing it at the center of our heuristic terminology and cultural notions? What are its consequences for our understanding of historical and contemporary societies, not least of our own society and our social behavior?

⁴⁴ Maderna 1988, 18–55.

⁴⁶ Himmelmann-Wildschütz 1962; Wrede 2001, 70–76.

⁴⁵ Coarelli 1966; Franchi 1966; La Regina 1966.

⁴⁷ Niethammer 2000.

"Identity" is a basic category by which the questions "who am I?" and "who are we?" are answered. Of course, there is no doubt every historical society adopted definitions of who it was, for the entire body of its members as well as for particular groups and individuals. Otherwise there would not be any possibility of marking social structures. But "identity" is more than that: it means that every individual person, every social group or political community, is supposed not only to have but also to develop and strengthen, preserve and defend its "identity." It is this emphatic character of the notion of "identity" that goes beyond mere definitions of social entities, collective as well as individual.

Obviously, this emphasis on "identity" was conditioned by a crisis of contemporary societies that was diagnosed as a loss of this very "identity": first, a crisis of the concept of the "person," which is a main topic of early twentieth-century literature; then, a crisis of the "nation" and of cultural communities in recent trends toward "globalization." In this context, "identity" is conceived as a basic foundation, a driving force, and a leading principle of individual persons, social groups, and large-scale communities. All such entities, whether they feel in conscious possession of their "identity" or are in search of it, are claiming emphatically their right to "identity," advancing it against rival claims of alternative "identities." It is an essentially egocentric concept of individual persons, social groups, and political communities.

Like all terms of ubiquitous diffusion, the term "identity" has often become a *passé partout* for all sorts of social and cultural qualities. In a precise sense, however, it is meant to be a category of the highest rank, defining an irreducible, pre-rational core of individual persons and collective entities, which again are conceived according to the model of individual personality—in short, a core "behind" all manifestations of the specific person or community.

The basic—and most problematic—feature of this concept of "identity" is its fundamental idealism, irrationalism, and self-centeredness. "Identity" is different from "character," individual or collective, since it transcends good or bad. It is also different from "cultural habitus" since it is founded on underlying values and patterns of behavior that are not subject to debate: something between an individual's or a community's basic essence and its destiny.⁴⁸ From any aspect, "identity" means a given fact that cannot be criticized but must be acknowledged. Moreover, the notion of "identity" implies a strong emphasis on introspection, self-definition, and self-assertion; every goal can be strongly legitimized, without any further reasoning, by the claim to a right of "identity." This is, of course, not to deny categorically the validity of the term and the notion of collective and individual "identity," which exists and has therefore to be dealt with appropriately. Rather, it is to stress two points: first, that an emphatic concept of "identity" is not a universal and timeless anthropological fact but a specific phenomenon of certain historical societies; second, that it is a basically problematic and potentially dangerous concept that is of doubtful use and benefit when placed at the center of our own social system.

Regarding the situation of the contemporary world, the disastrous consequences to which the claims of collective "identity" of national, cultural, and religious communities almost necessarily lead need not be elaborated here. Kofi Annan warned against them many years ago, while the historian Lutz Niethammer has heavily criticized their scientific abuses. A critical analysis of the emphatic concept of individual "identity" has to be awaited.

Regarding historical approaches, the notion of "identity" seems to involve a kind of reflection on the individual or collective self that accords more with twentieth-century obsessions than with

⁴⁸ Bourdieu 1979. For further discussion of habitus, see Richard Alston's contribution in this volume.

the concerns of premodern societies. This is why I would like to ask whether in antiquity individual persons and social or political communities were really concerned with the question of who they were in the same sense as their modern counterparts.

The concept of "roles" is of a much more rational character. It is not based on an unquestionable core of an individual or collective self but on social conventions. Roles are not self-centered but communicative and socially oriented. They may be judged, as good or bad, on the basis of ethical categories, without questioning the individual or the community in its inner self. Persons and groups may adopt various roles; they may change their roles according to various social situations and their specific requirements. Therefore, is it not more appropriate, and less burdened by anachronistic assumptions, to speak of concrete public and private roles and qualities, merits and deficiencies in social communication?

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