

A new portrait of Commodus

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SMITH, R. R. R., and CHRISTIAN NIEDERHUBER. 2023. *Commodus. The Public Image of a Roman Emperor*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag. Pp. 122, 99 plates. ISBN: 9783752007640.

Portraits of Roman emperors continue to fascinate. They are elaborate objects of art in their own right, represent idealized versions of much-discussed emperors, and were produced in large numbers, allowing us to assess processes of communication in the Roman world.

The relatively slim but extremely well-illustrated and produced volume under discussion deals with all of the above subjects in a clear and authoritative way, with Smith (S.) and Niederhuber (N.) demonstrating how it is possible to draw wider conclusions from a single object, when appropriately contextualized.¹ They take an as-yet unpublished portrait of Commodus (Fig. 1), privately bought in 2015, as their focus. Different chapters deal with the object and its provenance (ch. 1), the practice and history of imperial portrait design from Caesar to Constantine (ch. 2), the life of Commodus (ch. 3), and his portraiture as a prince (ch. 4) and as emperor (ch. 5). A brief conclusion (ch. 6) contextualizing the “new” portrait is followed by an appendix of the most important gems and cameos portraying Commodus as a prince and emperor, a bibliography and indices, and 99 plates of extremely high-quality color images.

Different readers will have greater or lesser interest in specific sections of the book, but each chapter is valuable and complements the others. Although over 2,000 ancient portraits of Roman emperors have already been published, the addition of one – certainly of such a high quality as the one discussed here – can still help us reach conclusions about imperial representations, and to place such a new find in its proper context is an important exercise.²

The physical object forms the clear starting point of the book. It can be dated to the end of Commodus’s reign (180–192 CE) as, stylistically, it follows the famous Capitoline bust of Commodus as Hercules. The authors trace the history of the portrait before it was bought in 2015 by its current private owner, among other ways through a 1902 Christie’s catalogue, and conclude that before 1902 it was in the Palazzo Borghese (off the via Ripetta in Rome) and was discovered sometime in the 16th c. Considering the quality of the portrait – which as the authors show was constructed for a bust, not as a statue head – it must come from an accomplished Roman workshop. When it was sold, the portrait sat on a polychrome bust from, probably, the second half of the 16th c. The authors explain why, during recent conservation, it was decided to replace that polychrome bust (Fig. 1) with a new one that forms

¹ For reasons of transparency, I note that Bert Smith taught me as a graduate student when I was working on my PhD on Commodus (over 20 years ago), and that I referred him to some bibliographic references for the volume under discussion. The authors of the volume under discussion supplied the images that accompany this review, for which I am grateful.

² See now the online dataset of published sculptural portraits of Roman emperors at <https://imperialportraits.rich.ru.nl/>.



Fig. 1. *Portrait of Commodus, mounted on 16th-c. polychrome bust. (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Photo: Omnia Art Ltd.)*

a more natural fit with the portrait (Fig. 2). Indeed, detailed information about the choices made during conservation and restoration (17–19) allows the reader to better understand the process of producing and preserving the object.

The portrait is then positioned within the larger practice of imperial portrait making. In only 20 pages (21–41), the authors summarize what they call the “horizontal aspect” of imperial portraiture – design and dissemination (21–24) – and give a historical overview of changing imperial imagery from Caesar to Constantine (24–41). There is much of value in this very condensed account of the state of the art, which will also be extremely helpful for both graduate and undergraduate teaching. Both authors, of course, have done much to set the agenda in the field, with N.’s recent monograph on the portraiture of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina probably the best modern analysis of the complexities of the creation

of imperial portraiture as a dynamic process.³ Their analysis of how we should look at portrait design is in fact highly programmatic. In particular, S. and N. emphasize that the production of an individual marble portrait was not the same as simply replicating a current central model, and that in order to understand the process of creating statuary portraiture, modern scholars need to take the creation of coin portraits into account. Significantly, also, they emphasize the importance of looking at the physiognomy of a portrait, rather than relying only on repeated hairstyle configurations (22–23). For a long time, portraits have been classified on the basis of imperial coiffure, and although this has resulted in a reliable corpus of identified imperial portraits, S. and N. rightfully show the limits of this approach.⁴ The historical overview that follows is more traditional and “leaves aside all questions of local context and the often-messy, highly variable reception of imperial portraits” (24). It situates the “new” Commodus portrait within a trajectory of imperial imagery, emphasizing the continuity of Antonine portraiture, and especially the close physiognomic similarities between the portraits of Commodus and those of his father,

³ Niederhuber 2022. The seven publications by Bert Smith in the bibliography offer only a glimpse of his contribution to the field. See further: Draycott et al. 2018.

⁴ Seminal remains the *Das römische Herrscherbild* book series, which has systematically brought together extant portraits of Roman emperors since 1939. See Riccardi 2000 and Stefanidou-Tiveriou 2022 for deviations from portrait types that can still be recognised as specific emperors. Although Fittschen (2011) argues strongly in favour of hairstyle as crucial factor in identifying imperial portraits, digital innovations have helped to recognize, identify, and interpret Roman portraits in multiple ways: Schofield et al. 2012; Pollini 2020; Langner 2021. See most recently Heijnen forthcoming 2024.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Commodus, mounted on new Carrara marble bust. (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Photo: David Gowers.)

S. and N. are of course right that the latter materials can form a “balancing corrective to the outlandish claims of writers,” their assertion that instead they “provide sober facts of events, offices, titles, names, victories, and often precise dates” (44) seems to underestimate how misleading this kind of evidence can also be. Brief sections on Commodus’s early “career” and on Commodus as emperor follow (44–46), mainly focusing on conspiracies and rebellions, as reported by the ancient authors. The brevity is doubtlessly a choice, but considering how closely shifts in Commodus’s imagery seem to have been related to events in his reign, somewhat more attention to major dynastic and political developments would have been helpful.⁵

The authors instead focus on Commodus’s most commented-upon public manifestations: his association with Hercules and his behavior in the arena. They analyze both the ways these are described by Dio, Herodian, and in the *HA*, and the ways in which they can be traced through documentary evidence. S. and N. pay special attention to the use of the title *Romanus Hercules* and to the scattered attestations of it on coins and inscriptions outside of Rome. S. and N. assume that “because imperial interest in Hercules was current and known for such a short time (192)” (47), dissemination of Commodus’s Herculean imperial imagery was only limited. But in *RPC IV.4*, Chris Howgego has noted the appearance of Hercules on tetradrachms in CE 184/5, convincingly linking it to early “imperial

Marcus Aurelius. This “urbane styled elegance” was to a large extent followed by Septimius Severus’s portraits, which makes the abrupt change towards “aggressive military dynamism” in Caracalla’s portraiture all the more striking (37). The authors then trace developments in imperial portraiture up to the Constantinian age, probably so as to show how Commodus’s imagery fit into a “long period of stability and conformity” (41) – which they contrast with the upheavals described in ancient literary accounts of Commodus’s life.

The middle part of the book (43–62) is formed by a slightly misnamed chapter “Commodus: A brief life,” half of which is rather formed by an analysis of the way Commodus was linked to Hercules on imperial coins and medallions. The chapter starts with a brief description of the three literary sources for the reign (Herodian, Dio, and the *Historia Augusta*), pointing out the ways they differ from other source material such as public inscriptions and coin legends. Although

⁵ For the relation between political events and public imagery: de Ranieri 1997; de Ranieri 1998; Hekster 2002; von Saldern 2003; Meyer-Zwiffelhofer 2006.

promotion of the cult of Hercules.” This makes it likely that there was a known connection between emperor and deity well before the last years of Commodus’s reign – even if there was not yet a conflation between the two.⁶ The main part of the chapter is an exemplary analysis of “the various forms of experimentation and association with Hercules at the imperial centre” (49) through imperial coins and medallions. Setting different Hercules-themed coins and medallions – with large, high-quality accompanying images – issued under Commodus in clustered sequence, they show the trajectory through which Commodus is increasingly linked to Hercules, and the various types of associations put forward by the coins and medallions. S. and N. ultimately argue that “the last step of an identification of Commodus with Hercules was never taken and was most probably never intended,” interpreting the Herculean visual program rather as “descriptive metaphors.” They note the potential for misinterpretation but are clear that coins and medallions do not match “the nature of the Hercules obsession described in the texts” (59). This was not quite the conclusion that I would draw from the evidence that is so meticulously presented here. Medallions with Commodus covered with a lion skin on the obverse, and Herculean attributes on the reverse, with reverse legend *HERCVLI ROMANO AUVGVST(O)* may not add “Hercules Romanus or any other Herculean formulation to the emperor’s names and titles” on the obverse (57), but they do suggest that it is the Roman Hercules who is presented there. Yet the authors are clearly right when they conclude that the evidence shows a “fuller, more complicated and more interesting representation of the emperor’s relationship with Hercules than many have expected” (60).

A brief conclusion to this chapter argues that it was not Commodus’s Herculean associations but his behavior in the arena that crossed the line of the acceptable and will have been the major cause for his assassination. Again, the authors may be right, but do not really provide the evidence for that assertion. They do, however, demonstrate how the remaining material evidence does not show “real signs of abnormal, deviant imperial behaviour” (61), but instead that Commodus’s fighting as *venator* in the arena was the only truly publicly verifiable aberration of imperial behavior – which may well have had fatal consequences.

The final two full chapters of the book turn to Commodus’s portraiture, first as a prince (63–76), then as emperor (77–93). A brief introduction sets out the research history of the various types of Commodus’s portraits, and how numismatic portraits, sculpted portraits, and statue bases relate. The chapter on princely portraits then brings together the known copies (31) of the four types that were issued before Commodus came to sole power, ordered chronologically. For each type, the authors give a brief description (e.g., “the young prince as a pre-adolescent boy”), discuss use of that type on medallions, and provide an overview of relevant statue bases, a numbered list of sculpted portraits with information as to where the object can be found, and discussion. Where relevant, sculpted portraits from Italy and from the East are placed under different subheadings, allowing an easy overview of how much “provincial” copies could differ from the central model. The chapter also emphasizes how the vast majority of Commodus’s pre-accession portraits (e.g., at least 70% of statue bases) stem from the period of joint rule with his father (176–180

⁶ Howgego 2024, 101–2, convincingly arguing against Hekster 2002, 103–4. The volume appeared too late for S. and N. to include it in their book, although they made use of Alexandrian coins through RPC online.

CE), showing how these portraits were used to boost the young emperor's public image, possibly in the aftermath of the Avidius Cassius revolt.

Four more types (surviving in 62 copies) were issued for Commodus as emperor. All are described in detail and linked to contemporary numismatic portraits, with conclusions on the different types relating changes in appearance to (political) needs of the young emperor. This allows the authors to make important observations about specific portraits. They show, for instance, that a copy in the Vatican of Commodus with short-cropped hair (type eight) originally must have worn a lion skin (90 no. 93), further illustrating the systematic Hercules-Commodus assimilation in the last year of the emperor's reign.⁷ In that context, I was surprised not to find discussion of the oversized Commodus(?)–Hercules statue in the Ammannati Courtyard of the palazzo Pitti.⁸ Certainly, the shape of the face resembles Commodus, and considering the authors' emphasis on physiognomy as criterion for identifying portraiture, discussion of this portrait would have been useful – as it seems to be a rare example of the emperor as Hercules without the short-cropped hair. In combination with a statue of Commodus as the infant Hercules, strangling snakes, which as S. and N. note was probably only made in the early 190s (69–70 no. 8), it shows the range of manifestations of the emperor in the guise of the demi-god.⁹

But this is only minor criticism about an extremely carefully argued and meticulously researched and presented book. It should form the starting point for anyone working on the last Antonine emperor, as S. and N. have shown how crucial the different forms of imperial portraiture are for understanding Commodus's reign, and for thinking about the public image of a Roman emperor.

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⁷ Rome, Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti XXVII 8, inv. 1613.

⁸ Palazzo Pitti, Pitti Objects of Art 1911 no. 608 (Carrara marble; h. 293 cm).

⁹ Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 1971.394.

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LIPPS, J., J. GRIESBACH, and M. DORKA MORENO, eds. 2021. *Appropriation Processes of Statue Schemata in the Roman Provinces | Aneignungsprozesse antiker Statuenschemata in den römischen Provinzen*. Material Appropriation Processes in Antiquity 1. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag. Pp. ix, 356. ISBN 978-3-95490-449-5

A main objective of ancient sculptors was to make their subject easily recognizable.¹ To create identifiable forms, statue-makers relied on a system of culturally resonant elements, such as style, pose, costume, and attributes. Charged meanings eventually accrued to certain statues for different reasons: religious significance, expression of societal values, and/or artistic fame, among others. As a result, those established models were favored, to varying degrees, for new works. It is important to stress that, in a world full of gods and heroes, identification of the subject of a divine statue was crucial, even urgent, in order to allow access to the relevant cult. For statues of gods and goddesses, the repetition of a figural model fulfilled, above all, religious needs, even if the statue itself was not in a persistent state of religious use; the distinct visual form offered the potential for activation. For statues of persons, which crowded civic spaces, the body-type could quickly communicate general content: emperor, philosopher, athlete, or citizen; like a god, or not a god.

¹ Smith 1996, 33–34; Smith and Niederhuber 2023, 21–24, 96, on imperial portraits.