

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 28 (2018)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 28



Book Review: M. HEBBLEWHITE, The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235-395, London- New York 2017

Michael Edward STEWART

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.18586](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.18586)

Copyright © 2018, Michael Edward Stewart



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

STEWART, M. E. (2018). Book Review: M. HEBBLEWHITE, The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235-395, London- New York 2017. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 28, 399-412. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.18586>

M. HEBBLEWHITE, *The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235-395*, London-New York 2017, pp. 240. ISBN 978-1-4724-5759-2

The rise of the soldier-emperor stands as a central feature of the Roman Empire in the years from 235 to 395. During this turbulent and transformative era, the army often made or unmade emperors. In this learned, clearly written, and visually pleasing monograph, Mark Hebblewhite (henceforth MH) explores the fraught relationship between the emperor and the soldiers he led.

The author divides the book into six concise thematic chapters that address various aspects of the emperor/army relationship. A brief introduction and a short conclusion frame these chapters. This thematic approach leads to some overlap and repetition of themes and events across the chapters. More positively, the book has many clear and useful images of imperial coinage that allows the reader to follow closely the reasoning behind MH's main lines of argument. Moreover, as far as I could discern, the monograph was largely free of factual and typographical errors.

The Introduction sets up the temporal and methodological parameters for the study. MH posits that his book offers a unique perspective on what he describes as the 'loyalty bond between the emperor and army' (p. 4), in the key years from 235 to 395¹. By examining the symbiotic yet oftentimes troubled nature of the relationship between the ruler and his army, he contends that one can glean the shifting 'nature of emperorship' at a time when the military became 'the key interest group the emperor needed to appease if he wished to stay in power' (p. 1).

1. MH's terminus in 395 is apt, since after the death of Theodosius I in that year, emperors had ceased to lead the army into battle personally, a trend that would continue for over two centuries; on this trend, see W. KAEGI, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge 2003, 68-9.

Chapter 1 offers an interesting if somewhat underdeveloped look at what the author labels, ‘the dawn of the warrior-emperor’. In contrast to many emperors before 235, he proves in this chapter and throughout the book that most third and fourth century soldier-emperors ruled ‘not by virtue of birth, but by military merit’ (p. 43). He contends that ‘This trend for military competence as the key determiner for imperial suitability’ was linked intimately to the political and military crises of the third century. In response to the twofold threats of external invasions and crippling civil wars ignited by rival claimants to the throne, those in power entrusted the defence of the state to a professional army of mixed descent that fought its battles primarily on the Empire’s outer fringes. In a further effort to curb threats of usurpation and create a more effective fighting force, the senators and other social elites who had extensively used their military commissions to further their political careers, no longer needed to fulfil their military duties. In contrast to his imperial counter-parts in the first and second centuries, from the third century, an emperor seldom had the luxury to remain within the environs of Rome focusing on his civilian role. In this period, emperors and their armies fought mostly on the Empire’s periphery. ‘Rome’ therefore became increasingly wherever the emperor and his army were campaigning. In the turbulent third century, this meant the locus of Roman power flowed increasingly away from Rome. While these developments drew the emperor closer to his officers and soldiers, it distanced him from the senators, aristocrats, and other civilian officials in Rome and its hinterlands. As MH shows so clearly, it is only against this backdrop that one can appreciate how and why the army was increasingly able to impose its will upon the emperor.

As this, and subsequent chapters reveal, since the army could make or break his reign, the emperor needed to spend abundant time and money massaging the mood of his soldiers: happy army, happy emperor. MH sifts through the contemporary literary and visual evidence, which uncover that emperors like Maximinus Thrax (r. 235-238) sought not just to promote hyper-martial images of themselves as heroic warriors, but also sought to break down some of the barriers between themselves and their soldiers. Unlike earlier emperors like Caracalla (r. 198-217) who rhetorically advertised themselves as ‘fellow soldiers’, but never actually battled on the front-lines with their men, Maximus Thrax fought with his soldiers, therefore truly fulfilling his role of *commilito* (companion in arms). As MH cautions we should not, however, take this egalitarian blurring of the lines between *commilito* and *imperator* too far. While it is true that an emperor like Julian (r. 360-363) shared some of his soldiers’ hardships—

despite what his late fourth-century admirer Ammianus Marcellinus claimed, he, like most warrior-emperors, did not fight alongside his troops during the din of battle. As MH clarifies, ‘while the idea of the *commilito* could be useful in imperial messaging, Roman armies did not generally expect their emperors to transcend the position of *imperator* and fully embrace the physical role of *commilito*’ (p. 26).

While MH recognises that the growing necessity for later Roman emperors to promote their military qualities had deep roots in earlier Roman history, more could have been said about these traditional ideologies discussed in important recent studies like Myles McDonnell’s *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*². As McDonnell points out, and we noted above, during the Middle and Later Republic, most eligible Roman men –including those from the refined upper-crust– spent part of their young adulthood fighting in Rome’s armies. Structural changes under the Principate, however, had seen emperors increasingly monopolising military glory, while at the same time ‘fewer and fewer Italian men performed military service’. This left many within the Roman nobility cultivating, what McDonnell describes as ‘a private, Hellenic type of *virtus*’³. So, perhaps instead of perceiving the rise of soldier-emperors as a ‘dawn’, we should understand it instead as an imperial reiteration of the more traditional martial virtues from the Republic, when the deeds and military successes of its citizen cavalry-man represented the surest path to public prestige. Dominating military *virtus* had worked for most emperors during the heady days of the *Pax Romana*. However, a combination of outside invasion, structural changes within the army, and the gradual shift of political power away from the city of Rome to the edges of the empire in the third and fourth centuries, made it much more difficult for the emperor to maintain his ‘monopoly’ of military glory. Certainly, no emperor could allow a general from the Empire’s periphery to obtain a military reputation, which surpassed that of his own. To do so could prove fatal to his rule, since someone from the officer-elite who displayed the proper military qualities to his soldiers could quickly become a serious challenger to the reigning emperor’s legitimacy. The trend towards soldier-emperors in the third century therefore makes sense both practically and ideologically. Indeed, Republican military-heroes like Publius Scipio Africanus (236 BCE-183 BCE) offered templates and models for these later Roman emperors to emulate⁴.

2. M. MCDONNELL, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*, Oxford 2006.

3. M. MCDONNELL, *Roman Manliness*, 383-89.

4. See, e.g. Eutropius, *Breviarium* bk 3.

The study gathers momentum with a stimulating second chapter on the necessity for these warrior-emperors to advertise their military successes to their soldiery. The author's deft and convincing analysis of the shifting messages behind the inscriptions and military imagery on imperial coinage is particularly instructive. Although some might question whether emperors used coins to carry political messages and/or that the army represented the primary target for such communication, the author convinced me that these changes were no accident, but reflective of the increased militarisation in the period and therefore evidence of the need for the emperor to personalise his propaganda for his armies.

Building upon the work of recent numismatic scholars, MH illustrates that by the opening of the third century, themes on the reverses of imperial coinage needed of a civilian administrator like fairness (*aequitas*) and piety (*pietas*) were being replaced by more traditional martial qualities, which the army now demanded from 'their' emperor. Here, MH focuses more narrowly on the coinage of emperors who rose to power with minimal or no military achievements under their belts. He finds that *virtus*— which can be defined as military courage or manliness—served as a prominent theme on the coinage of these aspiring soldier-emperors. While MH recognizes that *virtus* had non-military connotations in Latin, he argues persuasively that the five main *virtus* types on imperial currency, 'served as a broad signifier of the emperor's martial nature and willingness to undertake military duties' (p. 36).

The army expected the emperor to wield his *virtus* to perform his primary duties of either adding territory to the Roman *imperium* or shielding the realm from foreign incursions⁵. According to MH this expectation helps to explain why the imperial coinage intimately linked the *imperator's virtus* to *victoria* (victory). As in the literature of the day⁶, praise for an emperor's use of his military *virtus* to achieve *victoria* did not necessarily correspond to actual victories on the battlefield. Emperors like Pupienus (r. 238), Balbinus (r. 238), Gordian I and II (r. 238), Quintillus (r. 270) and Florianus (r. 275-276) who had never achieved military victories over external enemies appeared to have felt few qualms in proclaiming their martial virtues on their coinage to buttress their imperial pretensions. I suspect, however, that there may have been less thought behind the thematic choices on the coinage of these short-reigning emperors than MH implies. A usurper needed to muster the

5. See, e.g. Themistius, *Letter of the Emperor Constantius* 18c.

6. M. STEWART, *The Soldier's Life: Martial Virtues and Manly Romanitas in the Early Byzantine Empire*, Leeds 2017, 68-69.

army's support as quickly as possible, so it seems probable that they may have just blindly adopted themes that the earlier emperors had employed.

Next, MH suggests that the need for a soldier-emperor to don realistic military outfits offered a convenient way 'to show his troops that he prioritised their needs over those of his civilian subjects'. Portrait-types with the emperor dressed in scale armour replaced the more ceremonial muscular cuirass on the obverse of coins during the second half of the third century, according to MH, because 'it was more commonly used in the field', and thus offered a direct message to his men that 'only he possessed the *virtus* needed to defend the empire' (p. 41). The trend in the third century to provide life-like physiognomies of the emperors on the coinage and the tendency of these soldier-emperors to wear short-cut beards, emulating the fashion of soldiers of the day, served as another way for the emperor to prove to his men that he was one of them—as MH puts it, 'not only their *imperator* but also their *commilito*' (p. 42).

The rise of the Tetrarchy at the close of the third century saw an ongoing emphasis on military ideologies. Yet, the Tetrarchs altered aspects of their victory celebrations. MH links the increasing political stability found under the Tetrarchic college to a decline of *virtus* themes on the coinage in the period. Instead, their coinage often attributed victories not to the *virtus* of any one emperor, but to the larger unity of the Tetrarchs.

The collapse of the Tetrarchic model, and the rise of Constantine (r. 306-337) led to further shifts in imperial ideology. MH attributes many of these changes to Constantine's establishment of a hereditary dynasty. He details the ways Constantine and his successors wielded motifs better suited to the hereditary dynasties they set up. As MH describes, Constantine radically reinvented his own portraiture to notify the army that 'their' emperor had transcended the constraints of the Tetrarchy. Little wonder then that visual motifs returned to a focus on the emperor's individual martial traits.

As MH explains, Constantine's sons needed 'to propagate the theme of all-conquering *imperator*' to their soldiers. This necessity combined with the sons' bloody rivalries might explain why the last three quarters of the fourth century produced some of the most violent and martial imagery on coins in Roman history. On the obverse of a coin a fearsome headshot of the emperor regularly in military garb served as a customary design, while on the reverse, a favourite motif was the representation of the emperor or his soldiers armed to the hilt standing over or spearing recoiling barbarian captives. MH contends (p. 47) that the need for these evocative and violent images to purposefully focus on the person of the emperor

as the defender of the Roman state stemmed from the stark military climate of the period, which culminated with the Roman army suffering a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Goths at Adrianople in 378. In the face of such a calamity, MH concludes, 'More than ever the emperor had to demonstrate that his military leadership was the only thing standing between the empire and oblivion at the hands of Rome's enemies' (pp. 47-48).

The narrow purpose of all this propaganda to massage the opinion of those in the army raises a question. Might these martial values have just served as empty tropes, ignored by most soldiers well-aware of the emperors' need to boast? MH largely skirts this issue. Though he does point out that there came a point when these aspirational emperors needed to live up to the rhetoric on their coinage or risk being replaced by someone with actual victories. As he admits in the Preface (p. x), some scholars, will reject the notion that emperors crafted these messages primarily for the soldiers and that they were not meant for a far-wider civilian audience. Certainly, in the fourth century, we find both Christian and non-Christian intellectuals espousing for their civilian readership the importance of military qualities in their visions of ideal emperors⁷. Might then the martial themes displayed on the currency offer the wider public evidence that their leader was living up to these militaristic codes?

The chapter closes by briefly examining the Titulature of military success. As MH explains, during the Republic acclamations needed to be 'linked to actual military achievements' by citizen generals. Yet in the imperial period up until 235, an emperor could bask in the glory of his commanders' triumphs, without leaving his palace. By the third century, the emperors who received acclamations were at least observing, if not always fighting in the battle-victories they celebrated. So, too had the power to celebrate these successes shifted from the Senate to the army in the field. After 235, we find emperors celebrating specific military victories with the use of proclamations (*cognomina devictarum gentium*). These declarations had become diluted under the Tetrarchs, celebrating no specific victory, but simply being renewed on a yearly basis. This practice shifted once again, under Constantine and his heirs, as MH proclaims: 'Each cognomen held by Constantine and his sons can be linked to actual campaigns (p. 58)'.

Chapter 3 investigates rewards (*praemia militiae*) and payments that the emperor made to his soldiers. As MH explains, the army was by far the largest

7. To take only two examples, Themistius *Or.* 1.5c; Synesius, *De regno* 14.3.

employer in the Roman state and therefore the biggest expense for the imperial government. Little wonder then that contemporaries were often critical of the amount of money the emperor lavished upon his armed forces.

Though the army had always received special financial considerations from the emperor, as MH posits, from the reign of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211), ‘the army’s growing sense of entitlement’ saw the emperor ‘raising the *stipendium* to curry the favour of the army’ (pp. 74-5). As MH avers, some have even argued that from this time we should see the Roman army as a mercenary force. After 235, the soldiers received the *annona militaris*, a regular payment. Military-historians continue to debate how and when this change came about, but by the third century soldiers no longer had to pay for their ‘food, arms, armour, clothing’, and housing. On this shift, MH concludes: “The *annona militaris* most likely developed from a series of one-off levies under the Severans to finally become under Diocletian an institutionalized system designed to provide the army with in-kind payments” (p. 90).

Scrutinising late Roman laws, MH reveals that an emperor’s relationship with his soldiers did not end when they left military service. They continued to get special exemptions, discharge bonuses, lands, goods, and tax breaks. Soldiers wounded early in their career, could also expect to receive the same benefits as a veteran who had retired after 20 years of service. The emperor’s motives for these expenditures were no doubt self-serving. As MH points out, discharged soldiers ‘represented a destabilising presence within the Empire’ (p. 99). They could turn to banditry or more dangerously ignite rebellion.

Not surprisingly, those soldiers closest to the emperor reaped the greatest rewards. Relying upon the sparse evidence found on funerary monuments and in the literary sources, MH reveals that imperial units and bodyguards like the *protectores* and *candidati* –who were expected to give their own lives safeguarding the emperor– received from him distinct and costly garments that proclaimed to all their special status. These men could also expect extra payments and gifts (*dona*) such as torques, in most instances, made up of common base metals, but, according to MH, owning ‘great symbolic significance’ (p. 96). In exceptional cases, such as when a soldier performed a significant act of valour, we find the emperor granting the recipient with either torques, rings, or clasps made of gold or other precious metals. All these ornamental gifts, which were to be displayed for all to see, functioned to further bind these warrior-elites to the emperor they served and depended upon for their high-status.

Although these payments and rewards were far from full-proof, they offered an effective way for the emperor to prove to 'his' army that he cared for their needs. But the relationship was inherently unstable. As MH concludes, no amount of money or prize an emperor granted his soldiers could guarantee against betrayal. If the army refused to accept the emperor's *donativum* it indeed served as 'a public statement of rebellion' (p. 83). Nevertheless, as the third and fourth centuries progressed, these rewards and payments gradually solidified to become an integral aspect of the relationship between the emperor and his army. Little wonder, then, that civilians might question such lavish spending when the military effectiveness of the Roman army came into question in the later part of the fourth century.

Chapter 4, 'The emperor, the law and *disciplina militaris*', tackles the paradox of being a soldier in the third and fourth centuries. Granted privileges unavailable to most Roman citizens, soldiers could be hailed in the contemporary sources either as conquering heroes or disparaged as ill-disciplined louts. Coming in at a slim seventeen pages, not counting notes, the chapter struggles to provide the needed scope to tackle its wide-range of chosen topics as diverse and contested as soldiery privileges, conscription, barbarization, desertion, indiscipline, and the army's fraught relationship with civilians in the later Empire.

This is not to claim that the chapter has nothing important to say, only that these topics needed further fleshing out. The chapter is at its best when discussing the appeal of soldiering for those from the humble classes. As MH explains, 'Becoming a soldier was far more significant than simply taking up a profession. In reality, the Roman Army was a legal class within the empire' (p. 121). Soldiers, who hailed mostly from the lower classes, were treated with respect. As we have seen, they certainly collected better benefits and, if they did not die in battle, had a better retirement than most Roman civilians. As MH reveals in this chapter, third and fourth-century emperors took clear steps to ensure that serving in the army remained an attractive choice for those from the less privileged classes of Roman society.

MH further contends that soldiers 'enjoyed a legal status that surpassed what they would have enjoyed as civilians' (p. 120). For example, they could petition the emperor for tax relief and sometimes obtain exemptions from a range of civic duties. They also received the same exemption from torture enjoyed by the Roman aristocracy. We also have many cases of an emperor intervening to protect the legal-rights and wills of soldiers unable to defend themselves since they were on campaign or had been killed in battle. From 197, the emperor also granted them

the right to marry. As MH explains, for soldiers this benefit was a double-edged sword: “Once this right (marriage) was granted, no emperor moved to take it away. Instead, emperors now sought to capitalize on the family structure of the army by ensuring that the children of soldiers would follow in their fathers’ footsteps and become soldiers” (p. 125).

These benefits serve as another useful reminder that military service supplied members of the lower-classes and non-Romans some upward mobility⁸.

The next section deals with the fourth-century barbarization of the army. Here, MH moves into disputed territory. He is certainly right to claim that with the increased use of non-Roman soldiers in the fourth century, the emperor’s relationship with his armies grew even more complex. However, on the vexed issue of barbarization, to my mind, MH leans far too heavily on traditional scholarship that underplays the role of non-Romans in the army before the fourth century, and tends to rely on a strict binarism between Romans and non-Romans that appears out of touch with the more complicated realities of the day⁹. The tide of non-Roman soldiers who flooded into the field armies in the aftermath of the defeat of Adrianople certainly changed the makeup of the Roman army for a time, yet Rome had a long history of integrating barbarians into the Empire. As Kaldellis has suggested, it normally only took two generations for a ‘barbarian’ to become ‘Roman’¹⁰. So, while some modern historians highlight the general Stilicho’s (c.359-408) half Vandal parentage, they generally fail to note that the emperor Arcadius’s wife and mother of the emperor Theodosius II (r. 408-455), the empress Aelia Eudoxia (c. 378-404), was the daughter of the Frankish Western *magister militum* Bauto and a Roman mother, and therefore as much a barbarian and/or a Roman as the infamous generalissimo.

Next, MH turns to the controversial issue concerning the military effectiveness of the late Roman armies, and, in particular, the question of whether Roman emperors ‘deliberately relaxed standards of *disciplina militaris* with the hopes of

8. STEWART, *Soldier’s Life* [as in n. 6], 59.

9. For a closer look at the blurring of social and political boundaries between these Roman and non-Roman soldiers in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, see W. GOFFART, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*, Philadelphia 2006; M. KULIKOWSKI, *Rome’s Gothic Wars*, Cambridge 2006; D. PARNELL, *Justinian’s Men: Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers. 518-610*, London 2017.

10. A. KALDELLIS, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformation of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge, 2007, 77.

gaining political favour from the troops' (p. 128). Here, MH does a better job of recognizing that the rhetorical aims of the ancient author could be out of touch with fourth-century realities. Late Roman writers constantly bemoaned what they saw as the declining *disciplina militaris* (disciplined fighting ability). As MH recognizes, however, such gloomy views can be found in Republican and imperial writers. In fact, the Romans' adulation of the role of their army in setting up the Roman realm, guaranteed that the contemporary army would often pale in comparison. Prone to pessimism, Roman literature had a long history of presenting the 'current' Roman army in a state of crisis. In rebuking contemporary soldiers and the Roman army, fourth-century intellectuals like Ammianus and Vegetius followed an extensive line of Roman historians who reminisced about the good old days¹¹. MH also recognises that many fourth-century emperors like Julian, Valentinian I (r. 363-375), and Theodosius I (r. 378-395) had obtained reputations for 'imposing strict discipline' upon their soldiers (p. 132). MH indeed concludes that the emperors had not significantly relaxed the discipline of their armies, and that when properly led, the army continued to perform well.

MH, however, sees desertion as a bigger problem in the fourth and fifth centuries than it was in earlier periods, though for his pessimistic assertions about the fifth century, he does not distinguish between the East and West Roman armies. He is correct when he writes that 'military service was far less palatable for citizens of the later empire', but does not clarify which citizens he is talking about or explain that many military scholars do not believe that this reluctance to serve had much to do with a waning of fighting zeal¹². Moreover it must be pointed out that despite the influx of non-Romans into the Roman armies after 378, even then, the majority of soldiers remained Roman, and the percentage of Romans serving in comparison to non-Romans in the East Roman army, at least, would increase dramatically in the fifth and sixth centuries¹³.

The chapter closes by briefly discussing the increasingly fraught relationship in the fourth century among the soldiers and the civilians they were supposed to protect. As MH indicates, we have numerous accounts in the contemporary literature of 'sexual misconduct and drunken rampages' (p. 135). Some of this friction occurs because we

11. See, e.g., Polybius, *Histories* 31.25; Herodian 2.2.3-6.

12. P. SOUTHERN – K. R. DIXON, *The Late Roman Army*, New Haven 1996, 68.

13. Full discussion in W. TREADGOLD, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081*, Stanford 1995, 14-15.

find in the later half of the fourth century soldiers and citizens coming into closer proximity. As MH avers, the emperors did not seem to support such misconduct. He offers abundant evidence of fourth-century emperors issuing legislation to crack down on such indiscipline. Nevertheless, MH asserts that the very need to legislate might indicate that discipline was breaking down. Yet Elton aptly reminds us, that our ancient sources tend to complain about a minority of soldiers' poor behaviour, rather than point out many military men 'who did their jobs'¹⁴.

The book closes with two strong chapters. In Chapter 5, 'Rituals of Identity', MH offers an erudite survey on three main aspects of the emperor's ritualised and symbolic interactions with the army: *acclamatio* (accession ceremony), *adlocutio* (speeches to the army), *sacramentum militiae* (soldier's oath). Although the ancient sources did not adhere to this strict terminology, MH's categorising of these three main categories, offers a pathway into examining the role that these ceremonial interactions played in binding an emperor to his men.

The army had long played a role in imperial accession. As MH states, lacking 'any regularl applied legal or constitutional rules' to establish legitimacy, new emperors needed the support of 'various interest groups, particularly the army'. Up until 235, most emperors remained 'content to receive their accession *acclamatio* from the troops who garrisoned Rome (p. 140)'. This meant that soldiers outside of Rome played little or no part in the process. The army's role in this process changed from 235 as the emperor spent more time campaigning and thus sought the support of his provincial armies. Blessed by relative political stability and keen on emphasizing consensus and ceremony, to advertise military support for their political ideology, the Tetrarchy crafted more formulaic accession ceremonies. Diocletian's act of transferring his commanders field cloak to the new Caesar offered a 'visual statement of the Tetrarchic principle whereby membership of a college was based on military prowess' (p. 142).

The *acclamatio* developed further under Constantine. It appears that the ceremony was driven by the first Christian Emperor's need to magnify his own military prowess and legitimacy as a means of coaxing the army that he had passed down these virtues to his sons. Unfortunately, we know little about the accession process of Constantine's sons. Luckily, as MH highlights, we have detailed evidence from Ammianus about Julian's *acclamatio* from 360. It offers firm evidence that

14. H. ELTON, Off the Battlefield: The Civilian's View of Late Roman soldiers, *Expedition* 10 (1997), 42-50.

protocols developed in the third century and refined under Constantine needed to be followed. As MH describes it, at Paris, Julian's army famously held an 'impromptu ceremony whereby Julian was raised on an infantryman's shield and crowned from a torque taken from the neck of a *draconarius*' [soldiers who bore cavalry standards known as the *dracones*]. Once the ceremony was complete, 'Julian offered the troops a *donativum* before returning to the palace' (p. 145).

As MH underlines, this is the first known example of a coronation being included in the *acclamatio* process. He rejects, however, the common notion that the use of the torque and the raising on the shield represent evidence of novel Germanic customs entering imperial *acclamatio*. Instead, he considers them as 'emergency measures designed to mimic official Constantinian practice' (p. 146). Whatever the truth of the matter, protocols needed to be followed. MH is surely correct when he declares, 'This incident shows the importance of ceremonial action in conferring legitimacy (p. 146)'.

Set-speeches provided the emperor the opportunity to communicate directly to his soldiers. While the surviving literary record provides us with some of the main themes of the actual speeches, the *adlocutio* scenes on the coins and medallions of the late Roman emperors, provide tangible evidence of their role to maintain their army's enthusiasm, counter the words of their rivals, and remind the soldiers of their special bond. As MH writes: 'While the effectiveness of *adlocutio* should not be overemphasised, it is similarly unwise to dismiss the practice as ceremonial window dressing' (p. 158).

Much the same could be said about the military oaths of fidelity. While some might scoff at their effectiveness in an era when many soldiers broke their oaths and betrayed the emperor, as MH suggests, we should not see this as a sign that they did not take the *sacramentum* seriously. Yet, it is also true that an emperor with actual military achievements under his belt found his soldiers to be more compliant to their oaths. To this point, MH concludes, that despite the symbolic importance of these oaths, for the *sacramentum* to strengthen, the emperor needed to prove his worthiness to the oath through military successes.

Chapter 6, 'Symbols of Power', deals with the reality that most soldiers rarely ever met the emperor in person. According to MH, this distance made these soldiers 'susceptible to the influence of political usurpers who enjoyed a close proximity to the troops stationed far away from the emperor' (p. 180). It was therefore vital for an emperor to communicate via symbols to their men to keep their loyalty over long distances.

Dealing with admittedly slim evidence, the chapter opens by examining how the emperor linked himself ideologically to individual unit's military standards (*signa militaria*). One such example, was the dragon standard (*draco*) mentioned above, which 'consisted of a bronze wolf or snake's head with a piece of fabric attached' (p. 181). These standards were complimented by portraits or busts of the reigning emperor, which, according to MH, served as a constant 'reminder of the emperor's control over the lives of even the humblest of his subjects' (p. 184).

The *signa militaria* also served a practical purpose. On the battlefield they help to distinguish units from one another and during the fog of battle could serve as a rallying point for troops. As MH adds, they also functioned 'as a visual reminder of a unit's past record and a physical manifestation of their *esprit de corps*' (p. 181). Naturally, the emperor hoped to attach his own symbolic authority to what MH shows was the soldiers' intense loyalty to their individual unit-symbols. MH argues that the adoption of Christianity did not have an immediate impact on *signa militaria*. As MH aptly warns, 'we must be cautious of Christian writers who argue that the *Labarum* was a medium for spreading religious fervour. Under Constantine, the potency of the *Labarum* as a symbol of power lay in its ambiguity' (p. 189).

Since *signa militaria* served as a reminder of the emperor's authority, it comes as no surprise that they featured regularly on imperial coinage and other visual propaganda. During the period 235-284, we also find an upsurge in honorific coinage honouring the army. *Fides* and *Concordia* represented two favourite concepts. MH posits that, 'The proliferation of these messages again shows the willingness of the emperor to admit publicly that the military was central to his continuing rule' (p. 198).

MH closes with the lament, 'that we must end by again noting the sober fact that this period is littered with emperors who ostensibly did everything "right" and still lost the army's support' (p. 218). This stark reality might make some readers wonder if all the actions taken by the late Roman emperors to please their soldiers were for naught. Why keep trying to suck up to your army if they might end up assassinating you anyway? It seems that a partial solution to this vexing problem was found in the troubled reigns of Theodosius I's feeble non-warrior sons, Arcadius (r. 395-408) and Honorius (r. 395-423). We find these emperors –and those that followed in the fifth and sixth centuries– putting some distance between themselves and their armies. The Theodosian and Valentinian emperors let their generals do the fighting while they played more ceremonial roles that promoted their civilian

and religious qualities¹⁵. No longer completely beholden to the whims of the army, the emperor could let his generals deal with the military, while he basked in the relative security provided by his heavily protected palaces. Though both modern and ancient historians have lambasted Honorius and Arcadius for destroying ‘their polities through their enervated lifestyles’¹⁶, it is surely significant that the non-soldiers Honorius, Theodosius II (r. 408-450), and Valentinian III (425-455) were some of the longest serving emperors. This is surely no coincidence. We might attribute some of this longevity to these emperors’ relative insulation from their fifth-century armies endemically riven by rival factions. One can only hope that in a future study, MH turns his keen eye to the emperor/army relationship in the infamous fifth century.

MICHAEL EDWARD STEWART
University of Queensland
Australia

15. For these non-campaigning emperors, see now M. McEvoy, *Child-emperor Rule in the late Roman West, AD 367-455*, Cambridge, 2013. One may attribute this tendency to avoid combat to several other interrelated factors, including these emperors’ age when they obtained the purple, internal politics, and the stark lessons learned in the wake of the deaths of the fourth-century emperors Julian and Valens in battle.

16. R. WILKINSON, Theoderic Goes to the Promised Land: Accidental Propaganda in Jordanes’ Gothic History?, *Early Medieval Europe* 26.3 (2018), 259-81.