

Mark Hebblewhite: *The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235–395*. London/New York: Routledge 2017. xv, 240 S. £ 120.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-5759-2

This study, a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation (Macquarie University, 2012), presents itself as “a book about power and the exercise of power” (‘Preface’, x). As a matter of fact, this general theme is explored from a narrower, well-defined perspective: Hebblewhite considers the political role played by the Roman army in the period 235–395, and the various strategies deployed by each emperor in order to create and maintain “the bond of loyalty (*fides*) he needed with the army” (‘Introduction’, 1). In doing so, the author continues the research conducted for the early Empire by J. B. Campbell and J. Stäcker, whose methodological influence is clearly perceptible and duly acknowledged (4–5).<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction, Hebblewhite recalls also the important study of A. D. Lee on the military history of Late Antiquity,<sup>2</sup> as well as further scholarship dealing with different aspects of imperial ideology and imperial military engagement (5). At the same time, he stresses the novelty of his own approach and contribution, which comes indeed to fill an actual research gap for the period considered.

The author articulates his analysis in six chapters devoted to different facets of the emperor's interaction with the army. He starts with the seizure and maintenance of imperial power. Chapter 1 (‘Dawn of the warrior-emperor’, 8–32) argues with abundance of examples that, after 235 and well into the fourth century, “military competence” became “the key determiner for imperial suitability” (9). In parallel, the success of an emperor in asserting his authority depended first and foremost on the backing of the troops. So much so that, according to Hebblewhite, even the perception of the dynastic principle was affected: In the third century, designate heirs were given a martial aura, and the passing on of imperial power within the same family was justified for the sake of continuity in military leadership. In the fourth century, the tension between military needs and dynastic claims led to the emergence of a new form of dynastic legitimacy, “one that relied on proving to the army

- 1 J. B. Campbell: *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 BC–AD 235*. Oxford 1984. J. Stäcker: *Princeps und miles*. Studien zum Bindungs- und Nahverhältnis von Kaiser und Soldat im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr. Hildesheim u. a. 2003 (Spudasmata 91).
- 2 A. D. Lee: *War in Late Antiquity. A Social History*. Oxford 2007 (Ancient World at War).

that a particular bloodline had the monopoly on military competency and the ability to win *victoria* for the empire” (15). Additionally, the author scrutinises the *topos* of the emperor as *commilito*, distinguishing between rhetorical claims, actual practice, and the soldiers’ expectations – these being limited to the display of effective leadership in campaigns.

While no one could deny the paramount importance of military success and imperial *victoria* in the construction of consensus and imperial legitimacy, Hebblewhite’s argumentation risks to appear one-sided. The behaviour of the officers’ group and, more generally, the action of military and non-military elites is not taken into account, nor does the author consider the role played by shared interests – based on family ties, common social and cultural backgrounds or regional connections – in ensuring (or, conversely, undermining) imperial control over the state apparatus. Such an analysis would have been particularly appropriate for the fourth century, when the emergence of more stable imperial dynasties, a growing bureaucracy and a renewed court life provided a more complex framework to the action of local armies and military leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Having identified in the army the essential political interlocutor of the emperor throughout the period considered, Hebblewhite moves on to see how this new message of military prowess and military legitimacy was conveyed to the troops (chapter 2, ‘Advertising military success’, 33–70). The analysis focuses on coinage, one of the most pervasive and effective tools of imperial propaganda: Variations, continuities and adaptations in both iconography and legends are carefully presented. Images and legends referring to imperial *virtus* and *victoria* or to the restoration of the state’s security were alternatively employed to meet the changing needs, aspirations and aims of Roman rulers, while imperial portraiture displays a general evolution towards a militarized and weaponized representation of the ruler. Also the use of imperatorial acclamations, *nomina devictarum gentium* and other imperial epithets (in

3 See, among others, the more nuanced analyses of M. Whitby: *Emperors and Armies, AD 235–395*. In: S. Swain/M. Edwards (eds.): *Approaching Late Antiquity. The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*. Oxford 2004, 156–186; M. A. McEvoy: *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455*. Oxford 2013 (Oxford Classical Monographs), 23–102. Compare, for instance, the interpretation of Magnentius’ usurpation provided by Hebblewhite (19) and J. Harries (*Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363. The New Empire*. Edinburgh 2012 (The Edinburgh History of Ancient Rome), 190–196).

inscriptions and coins) mirrors first the desperate need to project an image of military success under critical circumstances, then the progressive reassertion of imperial authority under the collegiate power of the Tetrarchy and the dynastic rule of the fourth century. This insightful interpretation of numismatic evidence is very appropriate for the study of imperial propaganda among soldiers, who were the primary recipients of monetary emissions. However, we could wonder what impact this kind of communication had outside the military *milieu*,<sup>4</sup> and whether the imperial image conveyed by other media (public monuments, epigraphic texts, official acts) coincided with this militarized portrait or left more room to other imperial virtues, such as justice and piety.

After outlining the political foundations of the emperor-army relationship, as well as the fashioning of an imperial self-representation to the army's benefit, Hebblewhite goes on to explore the practical means Roman emperors used to boost military support. Of course, the ability to guarantee regular economic rewards and juridical privileges stands out as the primary condition to secure loyalty. In chapter 3 ('*Praemia militiae*', 71–119) Hebblewhite carefully stresses also the associated symbolic value of *praemia militiae*. Particularly, the declining economic significance of the military *stipendia* and the growing importance of regular and irregular *donativa*, distributed on the occasion of major political events, contributed to conspicuously connect the soldiers' welfare with the fate of the imperial regime. The development of the *annona militaris* and the regular granting of *praemia veteranorum* also enhanced the soldiers' dependence on the emperor for their subsistence during service and beyond. The consideration of the economic burden imposed on the Roman state by these military expenditures (102–105) indirectly raises the question of the political role played by the social groups called to support the army through taxation, and by the holders of key positions in the financial administration – an issue that remains unaddressed.

Chapter 4 ('The emperor, the law and *disciplina militaris*', 120–139) examines the imperial intervention in the normative framework regulating military life. While the soldiers' juridical privileges originated from the very conditions of the military profession, their regular confirmation and progressive enhancement were exploited by the imperial power as a tool to maintain consensus and facilitate recruitment. Most notably, emperors "sought to capitalize" on

4 The question was already raised by H. Elton in his review, see below, n. 5.

the *ius conubii* and “on the family structure of the army by ensuring that the children of serving soldiers would follow their fathers’ footsteps and become soldiers” (125). The issue of the ‘barbarisation’ of the later Roman army is discussed incidentally, in connection with the legal status of barbarian troops and their possible access to citizenship. In this chapter, as in the previous one, Hebblewhite acutely illustrates the selective and targeted use of economic rewards and legal benefits, which were employed as flexible and effective instruments of control by the emperor. The author then moves to reconsider a long-debated question: the supposed decline of the Roman army in Late Antiquity. He chooses to focus on one of the alleged causes of this decline, namely the slackening of military discipline. Having exposed the literary *topoi* underlying pessimistic representations of the late Roman troops, he concludes that “the Roman army remained a generally well-disciplined and effective fighting institution right down to the death of Theodosius, if not his sons” (133). As regard imperial willingness to enforce the respect of law and discipline, actual efforts appear to have been made whenever the soldiers’ insubordination took the form of revolt or desertion. On the other hand, the reiterated legislation against civilian abuses reveals also the limits of the imperial action, forced as it was to mediate between the needs of justice and the necessity to maintain the army’s support.

The last two chapters (chapter 5, ‘Rituals of identity’, 140–179, and chapter 6, ‘Symbols of power’, 180–214) examine the use of public ceremonies and symbolic objects as further means to strengthen loyalty. The regular recourse to “ritualised symbolic interactions” (140) – the emperor’s acclamation by the soldiers, imperial allocutions to the troops, and the swearing of the *sacramentum militiae* – in significant events and crucial moments of the Empire’s political life confirms, if need be, the importance of the army’s allegiance to the imperial cause. Particularly interesting is the reconstruction of the progressive development of a ritualized accession ceremony in the fourth century, as well as the discussion of the content and cultural implications of the military *sacramentum*. In this context, the author briefly hints at the effects of the imperial adhesion to Christianity on military life and culture, and traces the introduction of Christian language in the military oath (163–164). The study of Christian attitudes towards the military *sacramentum* also sheds light on the religious implications of this public act of fealty and on the widespread reverence it inspired.

The impact of Christianisation on military life (or rather, on imperial military communication) resurfaces in relation to the use of *signa militaria*, most notably the *labarum*. Though refraining from an in-depth discussion of Constantine's religious choice and its reception in the military environment, Hebblewhite recognizes that the reasons for the success of the Constantinian standard lies in its religious ambiguity (189) and in its ability to act as a personalized sign of both imperial victory and divine protection – two fundamental qualities of military *signa* and imperial *imagines*.

While the dissemination of imperial images in military camps acted as a ubiquitous reminder of the emperor's presence, the bestowal of honorific epithets and the honorific mention of troops on imperial coinage were targeted at specific units, whose support was considered politically crucial. These honours aimed at establishing a closer and more personal fidelity bond between the ruler and certain groups of soldiers. The form and use of such honorific expressions depended on circumstances and on the political priorities of the imperial government. Though their persisting use might be symptomatic of a certain success, doubts exist about their actual effectiveness. As the author rightly observes, ceremonial and symbolic tools could enhance fidelity, but they were of limited effect unless more solid (material) grounds for military support existed (217–218).

The author's conclusions in favour of the army's increasing weight in the political arena and of a militarisation of the imperial role do not come as a surprise and could hardly be contradicted. They can be nuanced, though. As observed by other reviewers, Hebblewhite's 'army' emerges as a quite monolithic and unchanging institution:<sup>5</sup> Regional identities, rank and social differentiations, as well as their respective evolutions over time, are not taken into account. Long-debated historiographical questions, such as the barbarisation and Christianisation of the army in the fourth century, are only alluded or treated incidentally. In a more general way, Hebblewhite's emperor and his army seem to operate in a social, administrative and geographic vacuum: All other constituents of the Empire's institutional and social structure are more or less neglected, dwarfed by a military force that appears as the only key determiner of political history.

5 See the reviews of H. Elton (Bryn Mawr Classical Review, 2017.11.28), and P. Rance: The Role of the Military in the Late Roman Empire. In: CR 68, 2018, 1–3.

As a matter of fact, the author is aware of this imbalance, and he knows that his “thesis on the Roman army as a towering goliath determining the course of imperial history” might appear as “oversimplistic” to some readers (X); still, he maintains that no other institution had comparable importance and that the army’s influence on political power was “immediate, overwhelming and final” (*ibid.*). On the whole, Hebblewhite delivers what he promises: a synthetic, narrow-focused study of the subject announced, i.e. the institutional relations between emperors and troops in the Later Roman Empire, with a commented presentation of relevant literary, juridical and numismatic evidence. As such, his book provides a useful introduction to this specific historiographical problem, a thought-provoking reading, and a good starting-point for more nuanced and comprehensive analyses.

*This review is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 677638.*

---

Luisa Andriollo, Bamberg  
[luisa.andriollo@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:luisa.andriollo@uni-bamberg.de)

**[www.plekos.de](http://www.plekos.de)**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Luisa Andriollo: Rezension zu: Mark Hebblewhite: The Emperor and the Army in the Later Roman Empire, AD 235–395. London/New York: Routledge 2017. In: Plekos 20, 2018, 441–446 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2018/r-hebblewhite.pdf>).

---