



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: S. Bönisch-Meyer (2021) Dialogangebote : Die Anrede des Kaisers jenseits der offiziellen Titulatur]

Icks, M.

DOI

[10.1515/klio-2023-2001](https://doi.org/10.1515/klio-2023-2001)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Klio. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Icks, M. (2023). [Review of: S. Bönisch-Meyer (2021) Dialogangebote : Die Anrede des Kaisers jenseits der offiziellen Titulatur]. *Klio. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte*, 105(1), 392-396. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1515/klio-2023-2001>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Sophia Bönisch-Meyer, Dialogangebote. Die Anrede des Kaisers jenseits der offiziellen Titulatur, Leiden – Boston (Brill) 2021 (Impact of Empire 39), X, 626 S., ISBN 978-90-04-44373-0 (geb.), € 136,25

Besprochen von **Martijn Icks**, E-Mail: m.icks@uva.nl

<https://doi.org/10.1515/klio-2023-2001>

The representation of Roman imperial power has been a fruitful field of study in recent decades. Whereas initially much attention was focused on messages formulated in the centre of power, scholars have increasingly taken the responses and contributions of other groups such as military officers and provincial elites into

account.¹ Awareness has grown that the creation of imperial ideals and images was not a top-down process, but rather a joint effort involving interactions between various parties. Sophia B(önisch)-M(eyer)'s study "Dialogangebote. Die Anrede des Kaisers jenseits der offiziellen Titulatur" fits well into this trend. The central topic of this hefty tome, which is based on her PhD thesis, is the unofficial titulature used to address the emperor. These titles, employed in panegyric and other literary texts, but also on coins, in inscriptions and papyrus documents, are the 'dialogue proposals' the title refers to.

In a long introductory chapter, B.-M. sets out the goals and methods of her study. She follows Gunnar Seelentag in defining the emperor's 'Imago' as a multifaceted amalgam of his self-representation and his representation by others.² The author acknowledges that the line between 'official' and 'unofficial' imperial titles is somewhat blurred, but proposes that the titles used in military diplomas offer a good yardstick, since these were official documents issued by the imperial administration. Accepting these titles as official, others that move beyond or replace them can be considered unofficial. The scope of the study is quite ambitious, both in terms of its chronological range (from Augustus to Severus Alexander) and in terms of the variety of primary sources it examines (including panegyric, historiography, Greek and Latin inscriptions, imperial and provincial coinage and papyri). It therefore represents a significant expansion of the modest and in part rather dated body of scholarship that already exists on unofficial imperial titles.³ In the latter half of the introduction, B.-M. provides some sound critical reflections on the challenges and opportunities posed by various types of source material. For instance, she remarks on changes in the epigraphic habit over time, noting that the largest numbers of inscriptions were issued under Septimius Severus and Caracalla, but that the percentage of inscriptions containing *epitheta* (i.e. unofficial titles) was also at its peak under the Severans, so that the absolute increase in the use of *epitheta* cannot only be explained from the fact that more inscriptions were issued. She also offers some thoughts on rare bilingual inscriptions which do not always provide direct Greek equivalents for Latin titles. Other points touched upon include the difference between legends on the obverses and reverses of imperial coins, the use of imperial

1 P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, Munich 1987; C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Berkeley 2000; C. F. Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West. Representation, Circulation, Power*, Cambridge 2011; O. Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors. Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*, New York 2015.

2 G. Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians. Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat*, Stuttgart 2004.

3 L. Berlinger, *Beiträge zur inoffiziellen Titulatur der römischen Kaiser. Eine Untersuchung ihres ideengeschichtlichen Gehaltes und ihrer Entwicklung*, Breslau 1935; R. Frei-Stolba, *Inoffizielle Kaisertitulaturen im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert*, MH 26, 1969, 18–39; C. F. Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West. Representation, Circulation, Power*, Cambridge 2011.

titles in papyri and various other matters. While these methodological reflections are certainly worthwhile, they are also quite extensive and at times go into a lot of detail for what is supposed to be an introductory chapter.

Chapter 2 is where the analysis proper starts. B.-M. provides a diachronic overview of the use of *epitheta* in various media, discussing each emperor in turn. As quickly becomes clear, epigraphy renders by far the richest results. For the Julio-Claudians, unofficial titles mostly occur in Greek inscriptions and usually concern the emperor's roles as a protector and sacred figure, while the military aspect is mostly absent. More innovation can be seen in the reign of Vespasian, including the use of *epitheta* on imperial coinage. Remarkably, there is a lack of epigraphic *epitheta* for this emperor, but this can be explained from the lukewarm support he received from the inhabitants of Achaia and Asia Minor, regions which tended to produce a large proportion of the total number of Greek inscriptions. It is to B.-M.'s credit that throughout her analysis she shows herself keenly aware of how factors such as these can skew the available evidence. Starting with Domitian, *sacratissimus* becomes a popular epithet, but a more significant development occurs under Trajan, when innovative Latin *epitheta* start to emerge in various media, often with military connotations (e.g. *fortissimus*). From the time of Septimius Severus onward, Latin *epitheta* outnumber those in Greek in inscriptions, which the author connects to the changing epigraphic habit in North Africa; another good example of her analysis taking political and cultural changes into account. Unofficial titles referring to the emperor in his military role culminate under the Severans.

In the third chapter, the corpus of *epitheta* is grouped into five categories which are discussed in turn: firstly, references to the emperor as divine, which occur mostly in the Greek East and are limited to panegyric in the Latin West; secondly, references to the emperor as victorious general, which are rare in the East, but especially prominent in Latin panegyric and inscriptions; thirdly, references to the emperor as ruler of the world, which occur in both halves of the Empire in panegyric, historiography and inscriptions, but barely in papyri or provincial coinage; fourthly, references to the emperor as father of his subjects, which are frequently found in (Latin) literature, but barely in inscriptions, because *pater patriae* already filled that niche; and fifthly, references to civic virtues such as *indulgentissimus* and *providentissimus*, which occur mostly in Latin epigraphy and are completely absent in Greek inscriptions. B.-M. notes that honorands could respond to imperial self-representation with their choice of epithets, but could also formulate imperial ideals of their own. However, most of the unofficial titles used during the principate stem from a pool of conventional honorifics that changed slowly overtime, while most innovations were limited in scope and soon vanished again. When emperors were named in inscriptions on monuments they would probably never see, this

could serve several functions: 1) making the emperor present for the local population; 2) allowing the builder to represent himself locally; and 3) showing to the local governor that the community was loyal to the regime. The last part of the chapter concerns patterns in the erasure of unofficial titles. As the author convincingly argues, the fact that honorifics considered to be very characteristic for an emperor were sometimes erased if he fell out of favour, such as ‘neos Apollon’ in an Athenian inscription referencing Nero, indicates that viewers were aware of *epitheta* and that they were considered relevant in the communication between ruler and ruled.

Chapter 4 puts the focus on the people who introduced unofficial titles, trying to establish whether there is a connection between their social position and their perspective on ideal rule. Ancient historiography provides a few examples of emperors introducing new *epitheta* for themselves, but these were all branded as tyrants; apparently, it was not accepted practice for a ruler to directly instruct his subjects on how they should honour him. This is confirmed by imperial letters, rescripts and other forms of communication by the regime, in which we see the emperor strictly adhering to his official titles. As B.-M. explains, rulers who did not restrain themselves in this regard deprived their subjects of an important means of communication, because it was a key feature of the principate that the people (and especially the Senate) could decide for themselves what honours to grant their sovereign. This did not mean that the emperor lacked all control over the process: rulers with a preference for certain *epitheta* could have these introduced in the public domain by persons close to them, while they reserved the right to reject honorifics granted to them by others (as they indeed sometimes did). These dynamics, aptly demonstrated by B.-M., challenge Noreña’s model of top-down communication between centre and periphery and are one of the most interesting points raised in this study. The author further notes that senators were rather conservative in the imperial *epitheta* they used in inscriptions, but that other groups employed a wide variety of unofficial titles. Cities and city councils in particular played an important role in the publishing of *epitheta* and usually took their pick from a pool of conventional possibilities, although regional culture and current affairs also played a role. In the Greek East, local honorific traditions were often highly independent of general trends in imperial self-presentation.

The fifth and final chapter summarizes the work’s conclusions, and as such is mostly a reiteration of observations that have already been made in the previous chapters. While these are generally well-founded and convincing, what is lacking is a proper synthesis, distilling a few key takeaways from the many small and larger points raised throughout the analysis. As it stands, the reader is left with the impression of a study that has many interesting things to say on many issues, but is less successful at tying the various threads together. The conclusion is followed by a number of extensive appendices (more than 100 pages) which meticulously

document each literary passage, inscription, coin and papyrus text that has been employed in the book. No doubt extremely useful to future research, these tables testify to the ambitious scope and thoroughness of the present study, which constitutes a major step forward in our understanding of the use of unofficial imperial titles in the principate.