

Imperial Influence and Innovation: The Good Emperors and The Bronze Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius

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Roman portraiture was a powerful instrument for promoting imperial propaganda, legitimizing authority, and communicating social and political ideologies. Imperial representation throughout the Principate fostered a visual continuum that reinforced the ideals of the subsequent ruling dynasties. Dynastic imagery is often identifiable through the incorporation of previous influences and contemporary innovations. Drawing upon the visual characteristics associated with past influential sovereignties served to legitimize one's throne and demonstrated one's aptitude for leading. These recurring themes in imagery, however, do not dismiss the presence of innovations within imperial representation. On the contrary, the imagery of every age of emperors consisted of unique attributes that promoted the values and ideals associated with the contemporary political regime. Moreover, this notion of innovation is apparent in iconographic elements that advertise the priorities of individual emperors within certain dynasties. Imperial representation of the Good Emperors exemplifies this combination of influence and innovation.

The Good Emperors refer to the imperial succession of five *Caesares*: Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. This prosperous dynasty emerged following the tyrannical rule of Domitian, whose assassination concluded the Flavian regime. After Domitian, the

Senate sought to appoint an emperor whose interests did not lie in notions of absolute power but rather in the restoration of the political system implemented by Augustus and the stability of the Roman state.

¹ The success of this dynasty was rooted in an interest in social welfare, military prowess, and a curiosity for intellectual growth. Such values were promoted within the imperial representation of these emperors.

This dynasty was unique as succession was appointed through the adult adoption of the seemingly most capable man rather than inherited through bloodlines. This adoption phenomenon, therefore, prevented these emperors from relying solely on genetic markers within their representation, such as the broad Julio-Claudian cranium or the close-together-eyes of the Flavians, to legitimize their thrones. Instead, their portraiture emphasized the connection to their predecessors through other means.

In 96 CE, the Senate appointed Nerva as emperor. His reign was brief, yet he established influential alimentary programs which were further built upon by his successors. Nerva, who took to the throne at a mature age, is depicted in a realistic manner as his portraiture is characterized by veristic elements, a prominent style of portraiture most often associated with the Republic. Verism was also utilized by the Flavian dynasty. Furthermore,

¹ Diana E.E., Kleiner "Civil War, the Flavians, and Nerva" Roman Sculpture (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 199.

his short, tousled hair that falls over his forehead references Julio-Claudian and Augustan imagery.² Nerva's representation alluded to the Republic when the Senate had more power, created a sense of continuation by drawing on aspects of Flavian imagery, and likened him to the first emperor by using elements of Augustan iconography.

Trajan, an immensely popular and highly regarded emperor, ruled from 98 to 117. He not only continued to foster and promote the social programs established by Nerva but also served as a renowned military general whose successful conquests in Dacia and Germania brought the empire to its greatest territorial extent in 114. Within his portraiture, Trajan sported the same Julio-Claudian hairstyle as Nerva but further aligned himself with Augustus through an idealized and ageless face. Furthermore, because his role as a soldier was most prevalent throughout his reign, he was often portrayed wearing an ornamented cuirass.

Hadrian, the successor of Trajan, reigned from 117 to 138. He cultivated culture through a deep interest in Greek scholarship, implemented several building projects throughout the empire, and nullified the debts of Roman citizens.³ Hadrian's portraiture promoted his interest in Greek culture through the inclusion of voluminous, curly hair as well as a philosopher's beard. While his hair and beard contrasted the short military style worn by Nerva and Trajan, the agelessness and idealism of his imagery mirrored that of his predecessor and referenced Augustan neo-classicism. Additionally, while Hadrian's reign was mostly peaceful, he, like Trajan, is often portrayed in a cuirass, thus creating a link to his predecessor by emphasizing the superior military capability of this dynasty.

The fourth Good Emperor, Antoninus Pius, led a long and relatively peaceful reign from 138 to 161. Antoninus was recognized for his unwavering dedication to Hadrian, the Senate, and the people of Rome; he was thus granted the name *pius*.⁴ Representations of Antoninus Pius are heavily influenced by Hadrian's imagery. He is depicted with tousled curls and a full beard, remains ageless throughout his imagery, and often sports a cuirass, although there were minimal military conflicts throughout his reign. However, an innovation within his portraiture was his half-lidded, somnolent eyes, which caused him to appear rather impassive and disinterested in his status as emperor. This unique attribute may have reflected his initial reluctance to take to the throne when chosen as Hadrian's successor.⁵ This feature became a staple of Antonine imagery and is prominent in depictions of Marcus Aurelius who, like his predecessor, reluctantly came to power.

The last Good Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, ruled from 161 to 180. He spent most of his reign engrossed in military conflict along the Rhine and Danube frontiers. Like Hadrian, he was profoundly interested in scholarship. During his military campaigns later in his life, Marcus wrote a series of reflections on Stoic principles, an adherence to his beliefs, known as the *Meditations*. However, his devotion to Stoicism did not seamlessly align with the necessary obligations of an emperor. Within his *Meditations*, Marcus advised himself to remain true to his virtuous character lest he become a Caesar "stained with purple."⁶ However, two dedicatory inscriptions that are dated to shortly after Marcus was adopted by Antoninus Pius and initially granted the title of Caesar, utilize the unique epithet of

² Diana E.E., Kleiner "Civil War, the Flavians, and Nerva," 200.

³ Diana E.E., Kleiner "Art under Trajan and Hadrian" 250

⁴ Brian K. Harvey. "Two Bases of Marcus Aurelius Caesar and the Roman Imperial Succession." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004), 57.

⁵ Cassius Dio *Roman History* 69.20.

⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.30.

piissimus to describe him.⁷ Therefore, while he was averse to the power and authority of Caesar, he was resolute in embracing the duties bestowed upon him as emperor. This dissonance is reflected within his imperial representation.

Portraits of Marcus Aurelius employ elements of his predecessors to legitimize his connection to this dynasty while introducing innovations that reflect his values and ideals. He is represented as both a scholar and soldier. Depictions of Marcus embrace attributes of his predecessors, such as the voluminous hair and philosopher's beard worn by Hadrian and Antoninus. However, his imagery is unique as it portrays him throughout all stages of his life.⁸ Emperor Hadrian took a particular interest in the last Good Emperor when he was just a child.⁹ Hadrian nurtured his intellectual capabilities by supporting his education and bestowing titles upon him to advance his influence within the Roman political sphere. The aging of his portraiture legitimizes his reign as it perpetuates the notion that his role as emperor was predestined. Furthermore, it shows his evolution from an intelligent and virtuous young man, engrossed with Stoicism, to a capable military general whose philosophical beliefs are at the forefront of all conflict.¹⁰ The bronze equestrian sculpture of Marcus Aurelius embodies the essence of the latter. It draws upon iconographic influence and innovation to exemplify his reign, celebrating his military triumphs and conveying the intricacies of his mind.

Specific characteristics associated with his age provide a useful paradigm for dating Marcus' portraiture. The gilded bronze statue depicts Marcus with tight curls and a fuller and slightly forked

beard. These attributes suggest that this sculpture was made in the later years of his life. Moreover, this monument was likely decreed in 176, when the emperor celebrated a triumph in Rome following his successful campaign against the Germans and his victorious battles against the Macromanni, the Sarmatians, the Vandals, and the Quaedii.¹¹

The survival of ancient bronze sculptures is rare, as artifacts made from metal were often melted down and repurposed throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. While the presence of bronze equestrian sculpture is evident within literary and numismatic evidence, the survival of such works is a commodity. The existence of this statue today can be attributed to a fortunate misconception that involved medieval Christians mistaking the pagan Marcus Aurelius for the Christ-conforming Constantine.¹² Because this sculpture is the only one of its medium to have survived into the modern period, other forms of evidence must be used to contextualize it.

In 1528, the monumental statue was moved to the oval piazza on the Capitoline Hill in Rome by Michelangelo.¹³ Although it is unknown from where the statue was moved, the works of ancient historians and archaeological evidence can provide insight into its possible original context. Honoring military triumphs through constructing monuments and erecting statues within the Roman Forum was common practice throughout the Republic.¹⁴ When Augustus became emperor, he sought to draw upon this tradition of publicly celebrating one's military prowess while establishing a legitimate dynasty. He accomplished this by placing monuments associated with his military triumphs and a new dynasty near

⁷ Harvey, "Two Bases of Marcus Aurelius Caesar and the Roman Imperial Succession," 46.

⁸ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 270.

⁹ *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, 4.1.

¹⁰ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 270

¹¹ *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, 17.1-3.

¹² Kleiner "Antonine Art," 271.

¹³ *Ibid*, 270.

¹⁴ Thomas, Michael L. "(Re)Locating Domitian's Horse of Glory: The 'Equus Domitiani' and Flavian Urban Design." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 49 (2004), 24.

the Temple of Deified Caesar.¹⁵ By drawing upon the relationship between power and place, Augustus portrayed himself as the worthy successor of Caesar and established a secure connection and lineage that his future successors would build upon. The concept of emperors erecting contemporary monuments in close proximity to structures honoring divine predecessors became common practice throughout the imperial period.

If the placement of imperial statues in correspondence to dynastic monuments effectively legitimized such dynasties, then it is plausible to assume that the Good Emperors would have capitalized on this phenomenon as well, especially when considering the added emphasis of creating meaningful connections to their predecessors due to the lack of blood relation. The *Historia Augusta* states that Marcus erected statues of all nobles killed in the Germanic and Macromannic wars within the Forum of Trajan.¹⁶ This may suggest that his equestrian statue was situated in Trajan's forum as well. Although both the Forum of Trajan and the Forum Transitorium would have served as advantageous locations for imperial statues of Marcus, it is more likely that his equestrian statue, which promotes his dexterity as a general, would be associated with Trajan, who was the most exceptional military commander of this age of emperors. Moreover, the placement of Marcus' equestrian monument among the statues of his fallen comrades would further perpetuate the emperor's allegiance to the military, which played an essential role in securing the success of this dynasty.

Although this statue of Marcus Aurelius is the only surviving imperial equestrian statue from antiquity, the commonality of this form of imperial

representation is apparent through literary evidence. The works of ancient historians offer information regarding the *Equus Domitiani*, which was once located in the Roman forum before the Senate subjected Domitian to *damnatio memoriae*, resulting in the destruction of all monuments associated with him.¹⁷ Domitian's statue emphasized military dominance as he was depicted sitting upon a horse whose hoof was stepping on a personification of the Rhine, demonstrating his status as Germanicus.¹⁸ Dressed in a bronze cuirass, with a cloak hanging off his back and a sword resting at his side, he looked as if he was ready for battle.¹⁹ With his right hand, he proudly gestured to signify the end of a military conflict, and he held a statuette of Minerva in his left hand.²⁰ Domitian embodied an overpowering general who proudly conquered foreign enemies with undiminished zeal.

These historical accounts of Domitian's monument provide valuable insight into the tradition of equestrian statues as a celebration of military triumphs and offer a point of reference to the statue of Marcus Aurelius. However, there are challenges in comparing these two monuments when only one still exists. From the descriptions of the *Equus Domitiani*, it seems that Domitian was promoted as a cruel and dominant general, a realistic testament to his tyrannical reign. However, elements of Marcus Aurelius' monument suggest an interest in demonstrating diplomacy and peace rather than sheer military dominance. This can be further examined by analyzing the gesture, clothing, and facial expression of the Good Emperor.

Like Domitian, Marcus sits upon a horse whose right hoof rests on a fallen barbarian.²¹ Although the statue of the barbarian no longer exists, it

¹⁵ Ibid, 25.

¹⁶ *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, 21.7.

¹⁷ Thomas, "(Re)Locating Domitian's Horse of Glory," 21.

¹⁸ Ibid, 27.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 271.

²¹ Ibid

is likely that it was also a personification of the Rhine, considering the title of Germanicus was bestowed upon the emperor after conquering the Macromanni.²² In his left hand, he held the now lost reins of the horse and possibly another object.²³ Although it is impossible to discern what this lost object was and if it even existed, some scholars speculate that he held an eagle-tipped scepter.²⁴ This scepter would have been symbolically significant as *Aquila* references the standards of Roman legions and is closely affiliated with Jupiter. Imperial dynasties often associated themselves with a particular deity. When Trajan aligned himself with Jupiter Optimus Maximus, his predecessors followed suit.²⁵ Therefore, it is plausible to assume that Marcus would be equipped with such an instrument that would connect himself to Trajan, parade his triumph, and invoke the support and approval of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

Moreover, his right hand is extended toward the fallen barbarian. The gesture he partakes in is subject to various interpretations regarding its intended meaning. One explanation suggests that he is engaging in a gesture of clemency.²⁶ The last Good Emperor was very tolerant of his foes and lax in punishing those who did any wrong towards either him or the Roman state. He extended this leniency to his captive enemies as well and is said to have permitted many foreigners to settle on Roman land.²⁷ So perhaps his gesture references his clemency and is meant to emphasize the power of being militarily superior while also showing mercy to those conquered by him.

Another interpretation relates to the Augustus of Prima Porta statue, circa 20 BCE. This sculpture, in which Augustus is dressed in full military

armor, influenced many imperial military portraits. Augustus is depicted reaching one arm out in the *adlocutio* pose as if gesturing to his soldiers. This same pose continuously reappears throughout the representation of many emperors. Marcus Aurelius, therefore, may be embracing his role as a general and addressing his troops through the *adlocutio* pose. This interpretation is especially intriguing if the original location of this monument was situated in the Forum of Trajan, alongside the statues of the fallen nobles who were killed in the wars against the Germans and Macromani. This would imply Marcus' intention to act as a valiant general and lead his men and Rome toward a prosperous future, even in a posthumous state.

While this monument of Marcus Aurelius draws upon past influences of imperial imagery, he lacks the usual military garb typical of an emperor. Instead, he opts for a simple, unornamented short tunic and a *paludamentum*. His clothing is a stark contrast to the highly decorated cuirasses displayed on the Augustus of Prima Porta, the *Equus Domitiani*, and the portraiture of his predecessors. His cloak established him as the champion of the Roman legions, while his humble dress embodied the dichotomy between his commitment to his duties and his reluctance to assume power. Like the ambiguous gesture of his hand, his choice of clothing offers various interpretations.

One analysis suggests that his clothing serves as a "reference to the civil side of his imperial power."²⁸ The stability of an emperor's rule relied upon successfully accommodating not only the Senate but also the people of Rome. The last Good Emperor understood the importance of accommodating the people and promoted alimentary programs

²² Cassius Dio *Roman History*, 72.3.

²³ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 271.

²⁴ Woloch, Michael. "A Note on the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius." *American Journal of Archaeology* 73, no. 4 (1969).

²⁵ Harvey, "Two Bases of Marcus Aurelius Caesar and the Roman Imperial Succession," 49.

²⁶ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 271.

²⁷ *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, 24.1-3.

²⁸ Kleiner "Antonine Art," 271.

to provide communities with food in times of famine, increased the grain supply, and made public entertainment more affordable.²⁹ Like his predecessors, Marcus valued the well-being of the Roman people. He ruled in a reasonable and just manner. While his position atop a magnificent horse signifies his superiority as emperor, his simple clothing demonstrates his allegiance to the people. By promoting himself in a modest manner that reflected his attitude as an emperor, he was able to gain popularity among Romans and further secure his political position.

Moreover, without the accompaniment of the necessary armor and weaponry, he gives the impression of a leader who conquers through peace and diplomacy rather than violence. During the reign of Trajan, there was a shift in how conquered enemies were portrayed in imagery. This is evident on one of his imperial coins, which depicts a personification of Germany, holding an olive branch on the reverse side.³⁰ Trajan, therefore, was the first emperor to show his ability to both conquer and pacify a foreign territory.³¹ Perhaps Marcus Aurelius' weaponless nature served to mirror Trajan's promotion of foreign enemies while simultaneously demonstrating his affinity for philosophy. Within his *Meditations*, Marcus reflected upon the virtue of tolerance. The Good Emperor emphasized the tolerance of those who have erred in judgment and the importance of leading them toward a right and just way of life.³² Marcus's devotion to Stoicism may have influenced his perception of his enemies. He would rather have conquered them through philosophical enlightenment than through violence. Regardless of the intended meaning, the depiction of an emperor wearing a simple tunic while simultaneously demonstrating military superiority is

an innovative form of imperial representation.

In examining the facial characteristics of this statue, it is evident that while specific attributes were influenced by his predecessors, such as his sleepy Antonine eyes, other aspects were entirely new and unique to him. Perhaps the most striking and revolutionary attribute within Marcus' portraiture is the inclusion of emotional expression. As Marcus sits upon the horse, he looks off into the distance, his focus directed beyond where his right arm extends. With a pensive gaze, his eyebrows are raised, creating lines on his forehead that do not suggest aging but rather a deep state of contemplation. The departure from conventional impassive facial depictions is significant, as it demonstrates the Good Emperor's recognition of the parity between his mental and physical state.³³ His success as a general and emperor was grounded in his profound intellect and devotion to philosophy. While Hadrian shared a similar commitment to scholarly pursuits, Marcus established the new ideal of conveying psychological virtues within the imperial representation.

Examining the bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius provides significant insight into the prominent imagery and iconography utilized throughout the age of the Good Emperors. Forms of imperial representation established in the Principate remained influential in the portraiture of subsequent dynasties, and individual emperors often adopted new visual elements to promote contemporary values. The Portraiture of Marcus Aurelius embodied the concept of an emperor fostering the visual continuum of imperial imagery by embracing iconographic elements from predecessors while simultaneously establishing new modes of representation. Marcus' equestrian statue serves as a testament to his reign as it illuminates

²⁹ *Historia Augusta*, Marcus Aurelius Antonius, 11.3-5.

³⁰ Gunnar Seelentag, "Imperial Representation and Reciprocation: The Case of Trajan." *The Classical Journal* 107, no. 1 (2011).

³¹ *Ibid*

³² John Lombardini, "Stoicism and the Virtue of Toleration," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 4 (2015), 663.

³³ Kleiner, "Antonine Art," 270.

the duality of his obligations as emperor and his devotion to Stoicism. He is portrayed as a victorious general whose triumphs align with the Roman value of military dominance and constitute him a worthy successor of his dynasty. Nevertheless, his reluctance to accept authoritative power is evident through elements such as hand gestures, garb, and, most notably, his emotional expression. Marcus Aurelius navigated the balance between honoring his duties and staying true to his philosophical beliefs. By acknowledging the intrinsic relation between effective leadership and mental disposition, Marcus revolutionized a new form of imperial representation, in which the emperor's psychological state was tantamount to their physical state.

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