



Death and the Emperor. Roman Imperial Funerary Monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, Penelope J. E. Davies. University of Texas Press, 2004. ISBN 0-292-70275-2. Pp 265.

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This book studies seven buildings in the city of Rome: Titus' arch, the Temple of the Flavian Gens, the mausolea of Augustus and Hadrian, and the columns of Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. The 117 black and white photos and line drawings are crisp; thorough notes and bibliography accompany the text. The first two chapters are descriptive. They demonstrate that the monuments were parts of complexes now mostly disappeared, and as visual *res gestae* continued a venerable practice whereby illustrious Romans celebrated for perpetuity their accomplishments on behalf of the Roman state. Davies' primary goal is "to uncover political or ritual motivation behind [the monuments'] design, decoration, and location"(1): chapters 3-6. Evidence is slight, for only Trajan's column still stands in something like its original setting, just the base of Pius' column survives, and the temple has vanished. The two mausolea held the remains of most members of the imperial families to 193; Trajan and his empress Plotina were entombed in the chamber at the column's base.¹ Davies strives to convince readers that the arch, temple and columns of Pius and Marcus are really funerary: none had a burial chamber.

Davies logically infers that emperors such as Augustus and Hadrian, accompanied by committees of experts, had great influence in designing these structures, and her emphasis on imperial *pietas* is good.

The monuments had a “dual valency” (49): by dutifully completing his predecessor’s commemorative monument and decreeing his apotheosis, a new emperor claimed dynastic continuity and denied any disruption in the succession. Domitian built the arch whose ceiling panel shows Titus’ apotheosis, Hadrian finished Trajan’s column and constructed the temple of *divus Traianus*, and Commodus oversaw his father’s column on which Jupiter assists the Roman army.

Women of the imperial house were vital symbols of the continuity of smooth transmission of power, though usually not mothers of the successor.² Hadrian scrupulously tied himself to the family of his cousin Trajan: in addition to the column and temple, he entombed Plotina’s ashes alongside Trajan’s, built a temple and basilica to his mother-in-law Matidia and Trajan’s sister Marciana, whose granddaughter was his wife Sabina.³ Such *pietas* legitimized Hadrian’s rule and anticipated the deification which Pius obtained.

Davies acknowledges the speculative nature of her hypotheses. That for extensive Egyptian influence in the Augustan complex is not convincing. Surely Octavian spent too much time and effort all through the 30s asserting his Roman-ness to intend viewers to interpret the buildings as an admission of Egyptian influence at the heart of the Urbs. Romans didn’t celebrate victories by building in the defeated peoples’ styles: note the sequence of triumphal arches in Rome, Augustus’ trophy over the Alpine peoples at La Turbie and Trajan’s trophy at Adamklissi in the Dobrudja.

Davies believes that, “taken as a group the funerary monuments of the Roman emperors exhibit a pattern of cosmic allusions.” The ancient concepts of the zodiac with cyclical (not linear) time, the eternally dying and reborn sun, and cosmic kingship influenced Roman theory whereby emperors were associated with *basileus helios* and *Sol Invictus*.⁴ Chapter 6’s thesis that these varied monuments were carefully sited so as to provide visual links from one to the other and thereby “to encourage association rather than rivalrous comparison” (171), is thin. Did viewers, even the elite, have such a refined appreciation? To see so much abstract propaganda in such a small and varied assemblage of monuments without ancient written backing seems excessively speculative.

Errors are few: the names are Gallus, not Galo (4), and Allobrogicus, not Allobrogisius (148); confusion over the Agrippinas, as not Caligula’s mother (Major) but his sister (Minor) was Augustus’ great-granddaughter (114); bottom of 146, “state” should be “estate”; the

“Ciconiae” was on the left bank of the Tiber, as in figs. 110-112 (160). For the numbering of the ring-walls of Augustus’ mausoleum on 14ff. see note 5. Livilla should be identified (103), and “the peacock as the primary vehicle for female apotheosis” needs justification (109).

The concrete factual and dynastic information in the first two chapters will be the most valuable portions of this study for most readers. The more speculative chapters will be controversial: slender piers have to support weighty hypotheses.

¹ Trajan wanted to join the great men of old buried within the *pomerium*: he intended the chamber to contain his ashes from the start but masked the purpose as a victory monument to thwart possible opposition (31-34). Titus’s ashes were first placed in the mausoleum of Augustus, whence Domitian transferred them and Vespasian’s to the Temple of the Flavian Gens. The remains of Pius and Marcus were deposited in the mausoleum of Hadrian.

² If we skip Tiberius Gemellus and Britannicus, only Vespasian and Marcus were succeeded by biological sons.

³ Davies inconsistently speaks of “Hadrian’s newly established dynasty” (83) but then proceeds to demonstrate that emperors were at pains to deny that a dynasty was new. For Trajan’s efforts to maximize his ties to the Flavians and mark out the intended succession, see my “Colonia Marciana Traiana Thamugadi: Dynasticism in Numidia” *Phoenix* 56 (2002), 84-108.

⁴ See chap. 3, esp. pp. 79-92. Davies appropriately brings in the medieval notion of “the king’s two bodies.” Solar imagery is most obvious in Augustus’ sundial and obelisks, less so in the mausoleum of Hadrian and the sculpted columns. Hadrian may have utilized the similarity between his *nomen* Aelius and the Greek for “sun”, *helios*.