

Emperors in crisis

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Roman emperors had to implement drastic reforms in the third century. In order to retain their position of power in this turbulent period they developed an emperor ideology. With this they increasingly laid claim to their dynastic and godly position, says Dutch researcher Janneke de Jong. Using Greek papyrus texts she investigated how the power of Roman emperors was presented and received in Egypt, at that time a Roman province.

De Jong analysed about two-hundred Greek papyrus texts from a digital database containing 4500 documents. Examples are edicts, contracts, petitions, administrative correspondence and censuses. In the third century, Greek was the administrative language in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

Many ancient texts are dated according to the regnal year of the current emperor, who was referred to by his name and/or titles. De Jong noticed a change in the form of legitimisation the emperors' power position in the titles. The emperors increasingly emphasised their dynastic position by referring to their sons and future successors in the titles. They also increasingly laid claim to godly support.

'Good' emperors were deified after their deaths (consecratio), which is indicated in the titles by addition of the word 'god'. 'Bad' emperors were banished from the memory (damnatio memoriae), which meant that their names and titles had to be deleted from documents and their portrayals had to be destroyed. According to De Jong some emperors used this practice to strengthen their own position of power, and both

phenomena occur in third-century papyri.

De Jong believes that the texts reflect a development in the emperor ideology that was a response to other events in the Roman Empire. The third century was a period of crisis and transformation in the history of the empire. The borders were threatened and there were monetary, socioeconomic and religious tensions. During the second half of the third century, in particular, there was a rapid succession of emperors during civil wars and revolts.

With emperor Diocletian, who came to power in 284, a degree of peace seemed to return. Diocletian and his successors implemented a range of reforms in, for example, the governing system and the army. Also in the presentation of emperorship a change can be perceived. Since the first emperor, Augustus, Roman emperors had drawn upon dynastic, military and religious legitimisation when presenting their position of power.

This was an indispensable device for an emperor to legitimise his position of power and demonstrate that he was the right man for the job. From Diocletian onwards, the position of emperor clearly acquired a different character: the emperor became more of an absolute monarch and ruled by the grace of god. According to De Jong this explains the change in the presentation of the emperor's position.

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