

## Agency and Ideology in Roman Imperial Milestones

The standard language of Roman imperial milestones was simple, formulaic, and dull. It could hardly have been otherwise, since formally these monuments were meant to convey a limited amount of practical information to the traveler, especially the distance from the road's origination point (the *caput viae*). Milestones also served as rhythmical indices of an empire-wide road network, though, and in this way transmitted an ideological message of centralized control over the landscape. This paper pursues this symbolic dimension of Roman milestones, with a focus on the language of the texts themselves, which can be read (so the paper argues) as a sensitive indicator of changes in Roman imperial ideology and in the relationship between center and periphery in this far-flung empire.

The paper is based on 1899 imperial milestones erected in the first three centuries CE. Following an introduction to the corpus of surviving milestones (total numbers, dating, standard features, and so on), the paper begins with a brief survey of global features in the language of the milestones, nearly all of which included the official titlature of the reigning emperor. The argument hinges on two developments in this monumental language and imperial titlature, the first well known (but debated), and the second largely overlooked.

Over the course of the first three centuries, as scholars have recognized, the emperor's titlature on milestones underwent a broad transition from presentation in the nominative to the dative case. Quantification of this transition reveals a higher degree of regional variation, and an earlier starting date (mid-first century CE), than previous studies have recognized. Interpretation presents a greater challenge. It has been argued that the dative case indicates that these milestones were set up "on the authority" of the emperor (Pekáry 1968: 22-6), but most now read

the dative milestones as dedications “to” the emperor. One clue, not normally considered in the context of these dative milestones, is the use of superlative epithets in the emperor’s titulature (e.g., *CIL* 8.10353 [road from Sitifis, Africa, 198 CE]: *fortissimo felicissimo*). Such superlative epithets were not part of the emperor’s official titulature (as reconstructed from military diplomata and imperial rescripts), and therefore belong not to a formal, governmental register, but rather to the domain of honorific practice.

The paper then turns to the ideological implications of this grammatical shift in the language of the milestones. It begins with the complication—entirely overlooked in the discussion—that even milestones with the emperor’s titulature in the nominative case included such honorific, superlative epithets (e.g., *CIL* 8.10307; 17/2.1.666; 3.5708). This suggests, so the paper argues, that even nominative milestones might be read not as declarations of the emperor’s authority for the road in question (the standard view), but rather as locally inscribed texts aimed, in some abstract way, at the emperor himself. Support for this interpretation comes from individual milestones set up at widely scattered locations throughout the empire that employed the same honorific terminology for the same emperor, especially in the Severan period (e.g., Caracalla as *fortissimus* and *felicissimus* in Noricum [*CIL* 3.5745] and Numidia [*CIL* 8.22384, 10305]; Severus Alexander as *invictissimus* in Numidia [*CIL* 8.22521] and Raetia [*AE* 1987.790]). Drawing on Noreña’s documentation of repeated correlations between provincial honorific inscriptions to the emperor and imperial coins minted at Rome (2011: 245-97), the paper argues that these nominative milestones, too, reflect local responses to centrally disseminated messaging, and should be seen as products of dialogic exchange between center and periphery.

The paper concludes with a more speculative, formalist discussion of the intersection of grammar and ideology on these milestones (taking a cue from Ma 2013 on Hellenistic statue bases), suggesting that both nominative and dative case endings for the emperor's titulature encoded different sorts of political relationships in the Roman empire, the first informed by an absolutist logic of monarchic authority (the "great man nominative"), and the second by a new and rapidly expanding language of honor and obligation (what Veyne 1962 has dubbed the "*datif d'hommage*") which, perhaps paradoxically, bound provincial subjects ever more tightly to their ruler.

#### Bibliography

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