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The Consular Diptychs An Iconological Study

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Abstract

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The aim of this study is to link the imagery of the fully figural consular diptychs to the context(s) which contributed towards its conception, showing how it corresponds to well-developed ideas about the nature and functions of the ordinary consulate in the last 150 years of its existence (c. 400-542). Two basic assumptions guide the investigation: the appearance and development of an increasingly complex consular imagery from the latter half of the 4th century were determined by historical and socio-cultural factors peculiar to the period, and the consular images served a wider purpose than simply to commemorate the consular appointment of their honorands—they were used as vehicles for conveying a multi-faceted 'ideology of consulship'.

Preceded by a presentational introduction, the study is carried out in three consecutive steps roughly conforming to the iconological method originally developed by art historians E. Panofsky and R. Wittkower: description of the images, iconographical analysis (identification of motifs and subject matter), iconological analysis (interpretations of intrinsic meanings and the linking of these to a cultural context). The descriptions of the consular images (Part II) aim at supplementing those presented by previous scholars, providing a broad basis for the iconographical analyses (Part III), which in their turn investigate the motif repertory. Possible motivations behind motif selection/combination, compositional structures and representational mode(s) are sought with the ambition of defining which aspects of consulship were considered most representative to commissioners and artists. The iconologically oriented synthesis (Part IV) reassembles and further discusses the results of the iconographical analyses under thematic headings that correspond to five main aspects or functions of late antique consulship: public ceremonial, triumphal symbolism, consulship as a reflection of a Roman-imperial world order, transcendental symbolism, and consulship as a vehicle for public self-advertisement on the commissioners' part.

The mode of representing consulship/consular ceremonial is predominantly synoptic: inspired by imperial prototypes, ceremonial is represented through its most prominent ingredients—insignia, poses, gestures—condensed into a reductive ideogram which describes consulship as a passive state and its functions (games-giving, gift distribution etc.) as symbolic attributes of the consul. The repertory and combinations of certain victory motifs within consular imagery indicate that the consul's function as symbolic triumphator (which had its origins in the republic) successively grew in importance in the 4th-6th centuries, a period thoroughly characterised by upheaval, where it served to uphold an official image of the Roman state and empire as ever-victorious entities. An increasing stratification of the consular image into superimposed spheres, clearly inspired by imperial prototypes, reflects the hierarchy of a Roman world order ranging from the divine to the vegetal/material. The consul, enthroned at its centre, is invested with the (symbolic) power to regenerate the 'cosmic forces', his ceremonial enactments inducing universal prosperity for the new year. Individuality is fundamentally irrelevant to consulship, hence the consuls' stereotyped representation. Individual content is chiefly conveyed by means of the pre-established 'consular' motif repertory, and centres on the honorand's public merits—prominent ancestry, material prosperity, a fine career, victoriousness (actual or self-ascribed).

Keywords: Roman art, Early Byzantine art, ivory, consular diptychs, consul, iconology.