Empire of virtue? normative language and the legitimation of power in Roman North Africa

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CONCLUSIONS

As we saw throughout the first chapter, the Roman imperial state – and those members of the social and cultural elite with close relations to the state – had a distinct vision on the rules and normative beliefs that made up legitimate power. The emperor was expected to effectively fulfil a number of roles, from successful military commander to conscientious statesman to generous benefactor. It goes without saying that no emperor ever managed to fulfil all of these various roles to perfection, particularly given that different audiences attached value to different aspects of imperial behaviour. Virtuous behaviour was both a distinct aspect of legitimate imperial rule and an overarching method of indicating that a given emperor fulfilled the requirements of legitimate power. In other words, an emperor praised for his *providentia* or *virtus* clearly displayed his skill as a military commander while an emperor who was lauded for his *nobilitas* and *humanitas* clearly fulfilled his role as an aristocrat among his fellow-senators. Naturally, the legitimacy of power was not solely based on character. But even though virtuous behaviour was in and of itself not a guarantee of power, it was nevertheless an essential element of the normative beliefs that formed the basis of legitimacy.

Legitimacy depends on consent; no form of power can be legitimate without some form of consent of those under its sway. Consent need not be expressed through voting or flag-waving, nor need it entail enthusiastic approval: each political system has its own forms of consent, unique to the power relationships within that system. Imperial coinage or edicts may propagate the emperor's honorific titles and virtues, but these cannot in and of themselves enforce legitimacy; they only offer persuasive iterations of the rules and normative beliefs of legitimate power in general, and more or less explicit claims on the current regime's ability to live up to these rules and normative beliefs. Through their literary value and the high societal standing of their authors, texts such as Seneca's *De Clementia* or Pliny's *Panegyricus* are powerful expressions of consent with an impact beyond the immediate relationship between Seneca or Pliny and their respective monarchs. At the same time these texts also attempted to mould the future behaviour of emperors by setting out desired patterns of behaviour, thereby shaping the normative beliefs on which legitimacy rested. The North African dedications – in the form of statue bases, building dedications, altars and more – have offered us a different perspective. Their authors were, generally speaking, not powerful political actors with close relations to the imperial court. Still, these dedications were freely set up and show great variety in the normative language they employed. This suggests that they can be meaningfully considered expressions of consent, although within the boundaries of a strongly hierarchical and exploitative Roman imperial system. It should be kept in mind that many dedications did not employ normative language in any way, beyond honorific elements propagated in officially sanctioned titles such as *Pius Felix*. Yet those dedicators that did opt to include additional elements in their inscriptions offer us a window – no matter how limited and incomplete – on to provincial responses to both imperial and local claims to legitimacy.

In the past few chapters we have seen emperors, officials, benefactors and magistrates praised with rich and varied normative language. I have aimed to contextualise this language in distinct ways,

pointing to peculiarities and features unique to their specific circumstances. In the introduction of this thesis, I posed three questions: To what extent did key imperial virtues and other forms of legitimising normative language find their way into provincial dedications? Did normative language play a role in the legitimation of other power relationships within provincial communities? And what does the appearance of certain normative language in dedications tell us about the legitimation of power relationships and the ideals of power in provincial communities? The epigraphic material has provided us with a sometimes bewildering or disparate number of trends, exceptions, unique quirks and commonplace features. In an attempt to distil some measure of order from this seeming chaos, I propose to contextualise the inherent contradictions and uncertainties that have popped up throughout the previous chapters, looking for contact between various layers of power and rhetoric. I will approach this on the basis of four paradoxes: normative language is both flexible and bound by traditions; it is both reactive and prescriptive; it closely follows imperial trends and yet ignores common features of imperial ideology; it is ostensibly intended for the honorand yet often more telling of the dedicator.

6.1. – Authoritative examples

In both a civilian and a military context we saw clear signs of epigraphic trends, either across the region or within a single community. The appearance of *fortissimus felicissimus* in dedications to Septimius Severus across North Africa is an example of the former, the propagation of purely local titles such as *ornator patriae* in Lepcis Magna an example of the latter. Naturally, imperial honorifics travelled much more easily given the wide-ranging influence of the emperor and the imperial administration. Yet we saw equally wide-spread honorifics – *innocentia* in particular – employed to honour both imperial officials and local magistrates. The latter use in particular points to shared ideals of just and legitimate power that crop up across the province. Why some honorifics spread across the region while others appear only on rare occasions is a matter of speculation. Undoubtedly, some aspects of normative language were simply broad enough to cover a wide range of desirable behaviours, such as *ob merita*. Others reflect widely-held ideals of praiseworthy behaviour, such as imperial invincibility or *indulgentia*, or municipal *liberalitas* and *amor patriae*, which made them obvious choices for dedicators seeking an appropriate form of praise. Although it might be argued that panegyrists such as Pliny worked in a far more sophisticated rhetorical milieu than a member of the provincial elite, we find the same normative tradition of panegyric in North Africa, as we have seen in several of the speeches of Apuleius to imperial governors, or for that matter in the council deliberations on the honours of Plautius Lupus in Lepcis Magna. Literary and rhetorical culture facilitated the strong association between virtuous behaviour and legitimate power, and not just in connection with the emperor. Yet at the same time there remained distinct differences between epigraphic and literary cultures: whereas Apuleius (or Pliny, or Menander Rhetor) incorporated a striking range and variety of virtues and honorifics in his orations, epigraphic texts are usually far more limited in their wording. Beyond practical considerations such as the size and cost of the inscription, this may also reflect different rhetorical strategies of praise. In the case of the emperor or the imperial family, dedicators may have wished to stick closely to ideological concepts propagated by the regime, or else opted for virtues that were deemed appropriate to the context, for example an imperial benefaction. The repetition of certain aspects of normative language in dedications to governors, magistrates and benefactors may furthermore suggest the development of epigraphic 'genres' of praise. By consistently associating *innocentia* with good governance or *liberalitas*/*munificentia* with acts of munificence, both virtues became stock

elements in the praise of good governors or benefactors respectively, further entrenching their position in local epigraphic traditions.

The question of variety and flexibility is also tied to the authorship of the inscriptions. The precise dating of inscriptions is often uncertain which, coupled with the limited survival rate of epigraphic material, makes it difficult to create a detailed chronological overview. Given this limited information, it remains an open question to what extent the dedications by city councils and other civic organs influenced the dedications by private dedicators. Presumably the city council, as an authoritative civic institute, set a precedent within a community. And the city council may have turned to either imperial officials or documents (in the case of the emperor) or the honorand himself for additional information. Given the high costs of erecting statues or monuments, as well as the public setting of these inscriptions, we may safely assume that dedicators carefully chose the wording of their dedications. An outdated title, incorrect information in a *cursus honorum* or a word of praise that rang false: although not life-threatening, such blunders nevertheless could undermine the commemorative potential of the dedication – and have a negative impact on the status of the dedicator. Copying some of the wording employed by the city council or an imperial official may have been considered a safe bet for some dedicators.

At the same time, however, we also found copious examples of private dedicators employing unique or rare honorifics, from the veterans of Lambaesis erecting an altar to the *pietissimi* Geta and Caracalla to Plotius Thalus, freedman of the wealthy Sertius from Thamugadi, who praised his former master as *patronus praestantissimus*. Unique honorifics suggested sincerity by avoiding tired formulas and praising the honorand in a novel way. This not only reflected positively on the honorand, but also highlighted the dedicator's devotion or close relationship with the honorand. The honorific language offered the flexibility to include flourishes and variations that stressed the exceptionality of the honorand, without in most cases deviating too far from the precedent set elsewhere. As an added benefit, the dedicator could display his literary skill in finding a fitting form of praise for his honorand.

6.2. – Responses and wishes

Some dedications were erected as a direct response to interventions within the community, such as the dedications erected in response to imperial benefactions. From financially contributing to the building projects to grants of colonial rights, we have seen various examples of emperors interfering in the civic landscape of North Africa. The dedications recording these benefactions uniformly praise imperial *indulgentia*, irrespective of the type of benefaction. The choice for *indulgentia* was not a surprising one – particularly given its hierarchical associations – but as an honorific it appears to have been almost exclusively associated with imperial munificence. In the field of the local elite, we see an equivalent in the dedicators who are honoured for their *liberalitas* or *munificentia* after their benefactions. Perhaps this is only to be expected in the case of munificence, given that these dedications were often rooted in specific, concrete acts within the community.

Other dedications, however, take a more proactive approach. From the modest statue base set up by the Fulvii of Lepcis Magna to Augustus the *conservator* to the lavish dedications set up by the wealthy Marcus Caecilius Natalis in Cirta to the *virtus* and *indulgentia* of Caracalla and the *securitas* of the age: many if not most dedications to the emperors were erected independent of imperial

intervention within the community. In a similar fashion, the many dedications *pro salute* are expressions of loyalty, in the vast majority of cases set up independently from any imperial intervention. We have seen local magistrates promising statues *ob honorem* to the emperor or to deified concepts such as Pietas Augusta or Concordia Augusta, while members of the local elite could be honoured for a variety of services to the community without being tied to any one specific act.

In both cases, however, normative language set a standard of laudable behaviour within a given context, from emperor down to local benefactor. This is true even for the most reactive of dedications. Praising the emperor for his contributions to a local aqueduct may seem like little more than an formulaic acknowledgement after the fact, but it nevertheless gave expression to the idea that legitimate rulers should show *indulgentia*, that the individual emperor in question had admirably met this standard and that the community had profited from imperial virtue. Although honorific epigraphic language was at times formulaic and limited, it nevertheless spelled out normative beliefs of legitimate power and gave consent to existing power relationships by recognition of those normative beliefs in the current powerholders. Although this might seem a rather extravagant claim for texts that may have only been readable or even accessible to a small portion of the population, I would argue that normative language was not limited to statue bases and building dedications. Normative language features in orations, literature, cult, funerary epitaphs, law courts, honorific names and titles, coinage, imperial edicts and personal communications. Our honorific inscriptions are but one aspect of a much wider discourse. This is not to suggest that normative discourse was indistinguishable from medium to medium, but rather that these various media drew from an underlying cultural logic that was formed by, and in turn helped shape, existing power relationships.

This discourse was not only concerned with the emperor but also with local power relationships. Benefactors were lauded for their generosity, their merits or their civic love with a great variety of adjectives. Such language not only idealized the actions of the honorand, but also enticed future dedicators to contribute to the community. Or, in the explicit words of the city council of Lepcis Magna: “since behaviours of this kind ought to be rewarded so that others too could be stimulated to (give) the same pleasure”.[1031] This mechanism of attempting to set standards for ancient elite behaviour was not limited to the context of munificence, but was just as relevant – if not more so – for civic politics. By praising *innocentia* in exceptional magistrates, the *curiae* not only endorsed a general normative belief that magistrates were supposed to act according to the standards of *innocentia*, but also set out expectations of future behaviour from other magistrates.

Equally important to note is that the praise of virtues was far from static but susceptive to broader societal changes, particularly in the expectation of legitimate power and good governance. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the praise of governors. Throughout the imperial period, communities singled out specific virtues for praise in their governors – most notably *innocentia*, *iustitia* and a variety of virtues of mildmanneredness such as *moderatio* – to give voice to their hopes and expectations on gubernatorial governance. With the emergence of a more vocal culture of criticism in Late Antiquity however, these virtues gain a sharper political edge. Although there were clear and unequivocal power differences between the governor and his subjects, African

[1031] IRT 601b.

communities were now much more willing to elaborate on expected standards of character and behaviour in office for their governors. And again, it bears repeating that we find a similar system of thought in late antique oratory, literature and law, which makes epigraphic texts part of a much wider cultural phenomenon.

Whether intentional or not, dedicators took on the role of moral arbiters. After all, it was the dedicator who judged the honorand's deeds and character worthy of honours and who included specific points of praise to characterize the relationship between honorand and dedicator. The community (or private dedicator) showed itself to be a moral agent, capable of recognizing, judging and praising virtuous behaviour. This may in part explain the often detailed and precise normative vocabulary in public dedications which is so often lacking in private dedications, particularly to personal patrons. Given the closer and more equal relationship between civic institutions and powerful members of the community, public dedicators could more easily claim this role of moral arbiter, praising magistrates and benefactors for specific virtues and setting standards of behaviour. The power dynamic between clients and patrons – whether a freedman and his former master, or an officer and his governor – favoured a different, more generic type of praise.

The praise of virtues had an ancillary function in softening suggestions of strife, mostly in the relationship between the community and its most wealthy or influential members. Ancient elites attached great value to the preservation of *concordia*/*homonoia* within their community, which had practical as well as ideological reasons. Corruption, mismanagement, taxation, abuse of (judicial) power, encroachment upon public space and the domination of civic life by a small number of families: all were potential sources of communal unrest. Honorific language presented elite behaviour in office or in changing the civic landscape as wholly motivated by honourable desires: civic love, generosity, blameless service to the community. Specific deeds and actions were in a sense 'internalised' as the natural result of the elite honorand's superior character. But at the same time, such virtues were not solely the reserve of the elite upper crust. By praising *liberalitas* or *munificentia* in benefactors of strongly varying means, the city councils and other civic institutions presented all forms of euergetic activity as motivated by the same honourable incentive. The emphasis here is on the choices made in representation and public commemoration. For contemporaries, the differences between a theater-building Annia Aelia Resituta and a decurion who 'merely' erected a statue would have been clear. Nevertheless, by praising various benefactors for their generosity and honourable intent, city councils may have hoped to entice benefactors of various means to contribute to the community with the expectation of receiving public honours on a more or less equal footing.

6.3. – Following the court?

Dedications to the emperor or the imperial family appear to closely follow ideological concepts formulated in and around the court, while at the same time also appearing to ignore key virtues propagated on, for example, imperial coinage. The Severan honorific phrases *fortissimus felicissimus* and *super omnes retro principes* are a key example of the former. And although it is perhaps more indirect, private and public dedicators in Cuicul erected statues to the *pietas* of Antoninus Pius, the *concordia* of Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius and the *virtus* of Commodus; all qualities closely related to each of these emperors in their public (self-)representation. The fact that imperial virtues

and titles in epigraphic texts shifted over the decades and centuries is in and of itself a sign of influence from Rome.

Whereas dedications to Roman officials, local magistrates and benefactors undeniably show signs of change between the second and fourth century, there is considerable consistency in the kinds of virtues praised. Both Severan and Constantinian governors were honoured for their *innocentia* and *iustitia* while magistrates from the early second to the late fourth century could be lauded for their *amor patriae*. The comparison with imperial dedications is striking. Even though we see similar ideas appear across centuries – the emperor as triumphant general in particular – the honorific phrases associated with these ideas differ markedly. Honorific epithets such as *fortissimus felicissimus* and praise-filled phrases such as *beatissima tempora* belong to clearly differentiated epochs of imperial rule and epigraphic rhetoric. Whereas the ideals and concepts associated with local power relationships remained fairly constant, those associated with imperial power shifted and changed over time. To explain some of these changes, we can point to the increasingly elevated position of the emperor within the state, to changes in imperial ideology and ideals of imperial power, or to late antique rhetorical culture that placed ever more emphasis on the recognition and praise of virtue. Yet the main point remains clear: honorifics and praise associated with the emperor changed between reigns and dynasties in a way that the honorifics associated with other powerholders did not. Although local epigraphic traditions weighed strongly in the choices dedicators made, they appear to have weighed less strongly in relation to the emperor. Imperial ideology, in other words, appears to have had some impact on provincial epigraphy.

Although dedicators across North Africa clearly responded to key elements of contemporary imperial ideology, they did not do so consistently. Many virtues and ethical qualities that appear regularly on imperial coinage are absent or only rarely appear in dedications. Some of this lack can be explained by the inclusion of honorific titles such as *Pius* or *Felix* within the imperial titulature, but this does not explain why virtues such as *providentia, aequitas* or *virtus* are so rarely praised, even when they are prominent on coinage and appear regularly in literary works praising the emperor. Part of the answer is to be found in the reactive nature of some dedications, responding to specific imperial interventions within the community by for example praising imperial generosity. As was noted above, however, many dedications to the emperor or imperial family were not necessarily set up as a response to imperial interventions. Under Septimius Severus and Caracalla, dedicators appear to closely follow imperial self-representation, not only in honorifics but also by underlining the Severan ideological notion of the imperial family as a harmonious unit in group dedications. An explanation for this phenomenon might be found in the prominent role of Roman imperial officials, particularly the Severan legate Quintus Anicius Faustus, who appears as a co-dedicator in dedications across North Africa. It is entirely plausible, though ultimately unprovable, that Faustus may have helped spread the title *fortissimus felicissimus*, directly or indirectly, through his involvement in the dedications. The title's appearance elsewhere in the empire, however, makes it clear that Faustus can only have been a contributing factor, as other forms of interactions with the imperial court and administration may also have provided avenues of dissemination. The expansion of municipal rights in North Africa under Septimius Severus, for example, brought many communities in fleeting contact with the court. It should also be kept in mind that Faustus was something of an anomaly. Other governors and legates are not nearly as prominent in our epigraphic record, although this need not imply that they were not consulted by provincials. Lastly we may

point to moments of political crisis, such as in the months after the murder of Geta, when large numbers of dedicators throughout the empire altered old epigraphic texts to reflect new political realities. We can suspect that in such moments of crisis, many provincials closely followed officially sanctioned honorifics to display their loyalty to the new regime.

There is no one definite answer to the question as to why a given dedicator opted to praise the emperor as *invictissimus* over *pietissimus*, or *fortissimus* over *providentissimus*. Such choices might depend on a host of factors, from personal preferences, to the response to an act of imperial munificence, to drastic political changes in the capital, to a dedication to the emperor set up by the city council in the year before. But although it is futile to speculate over the motivations of individual dedications, a more general look reveals that dedicators generally responded to important ideological features of a given reign without necessarily adopting a wide lexicon of praise for emperors – at least not until the early fourth century. This implies an aspect of choice in representation. The average African decurion may perhaps not have wielded quite as wide a normative lexicon as Pliny, but the epigraphic evidence makes clear that provincial dedicators were familiar with a wide range of honorific expressions. Despite this familiarity, key imperial virtues barely feature in the epigraphic record, while dedications repeatedly include imperial *concordia*, *indulgentia* or martial honorifics, among others. We could also mention the many dedications erected *pro salute* in this context, which profess a clear concern with imperial well-being and thus loyalty to the empire. Societal expectations and epigraphic precedents of course played their part in these choices. It nevertheless remains fair to conclude that provincials appear to have emphasized some features of imperial ideology over others. Occasionally, these choices can defy easy explanation, such as the lack of *fortissimus felicissimus* in military circles. Yet in general, they betray a concern with harmony, well-being, munificence and imperial triumph: themes that reflect the outlook of the provincial elite, concerned with stability and continued prosperity. For provincial elite audiences at least, some of these stereotypical imperial roles appear to have been of a much higher priority than others. The emperor as a conscientious civic administrator, munificent patron and triumphant general reigned supreme in the provincial conception of legitimate imperial power.

Though in some cases the emperor may have been informed of the intention to erect a new statue or monument in his name, he can hardly be considered the main audience for these dedications. We should not discount the intrinsic motivations of dedicators in singling out values that appeared meaningful to them, particularly given the cost and effort involved in erecting statues to the imperial family or dedicating monuments in their name. Yet at the same time the dedicators – often city councils filled with members of the local elite, or otherwise wealthy private dedicators – sent out a clear message on the legitimacy of the current reigning emperor. As an act of both praise and consent, erecting a dedication lauding the virtues of the emperor conferred legitimacy on existing power structures from which local elites ultimately derived their own position and power.

6.4. – Virtues and self-representation

The fourth and last paradox again involves the relation between honorand and dedicator. I already argued for the dedicator's role as moral agent and arbiter, but normative language could also define dedicators in a more direct way. Lepcis Magna offers a number of prime examples of normative language serving to define local, communal identity. Whether claimed or awarded, titles such as *ornator patriae* or *amator concordiae* served to create a sense of community within Lepcis Magna,

specifically as a Punic community. When the city received municipal rights and took over Roman magistracies and other civic institutions, the titles disappeared. Normative language could also be employed to form a sense of communal identity through interactions with the imperial administration. Under the Severans, both public and private dedications stress the strong relationship between city and emperor, for example by praising imperial *pietas* towards Lepcis. Although ostensibly praising for the emperor, the dedication also strongly suggests that Lepcis Magna was a community with a unique and favoured connection to the imperial court. In the fourth century, when the city may have gone through something of a resurgence, civic institutions stepped to the foreground as moral arbiters, awarding or withholding honours to local governors and reinforcing the notion of Lepcis Magna as an active political community.

We find echoes of the same principle elsewhere in North Africa, by both private and public dedicators. Praising a patron as *benignissimus* or *dignissimus* stressed the hierarchical nature of the relationship between patron and client, but also suggested something of the uniquely plentiful benefactions the patron had (supposedly) shown his client. For communities, stressing *amor patriae* in wealthy and powerful benefactors likewise suggested civic commitment and a close bond between the honorand and his or her native community. Members of the civic elite seeking to be elected to office could promise statues to the virtues or well-being of the emperor, markers of their loyalty to the empire as well as their own moral standing. In each of these cases we find dedicators elevating their own position by ostensibly praising the virtues of others by both stressing their close bond with high-ranking individuals as well as by displaying themselves as worthy moral arbiters. The praise of virtues, and honours in general, inherently carried an aspect of self-representation. By awarding a statue or dedicating a monument, the dedicator publicly declared his or her relationship to the honorand, as well as giving important qualifiers to that relationship. This was not simply a question of self-aggrandizing on part of the dedicator: the praise of the honorand ultimately depended on the honour of the dedicator for it to have effect.

This element of self-representation could remain largely latent, but we have also seen clear examples of dedicators more explicitly propagating their relationship to the honorand. Prime examples are the many dedications to members of elite families, instigated by their relatives. These dedications gave eloquent expression to ideals of familial behaviour and placed members of the communal elite on a pedestal in both a literal and figurative sense, suggesting their exceptional character and by extension that of their relatives. Perhaps the most egregious example of such familial self-representation is the Market of Sertius in Thamugadi. The monument gives clear expression to the various roles of Sertius and his wife within the community and as model members of the elite, all through the lens of laudable virtues. On a more modest scale, Nonius Datus sought to commemorate his contribution to a major engineering project to a military audience through the key virtues of *patientia*, *virtus* and *spes*; a contribution that would likely have gone unmentioned on the large dedicatory inscription on the aqueduct itself.

6.5. – Vibrant rhetoric

Returning to our main questions, it should be clear by now that no singular answer can be given that holds true for every community across several centuries of Roman rule, particularly when taking into account the influence of local epigraphic traditions. Yet we can deduct general patterns that hold true for many communities to some degree. Firstly, we saw that key imperial virtues found

their way into provincial dedications though in an inconsistent manner. Although eager governors, moments of crisis or imperial interventions certainly played their role in spreading elements of imperial ideology, these were intermittent influences. That fact that many dedications to the emperor or the imperial family contain praise for imperial virtues in spite of these exceptional circumstances suggests expressions of imperial ideology emanating from Rome had their effect. Yet this effect was if anything broad and unguided: while it emphasized the association between legitimate power and virtue, it left considerable room for flexibility and local interpretation. Where some dedicators appear to closely follow trends at the imperial court, others opt for honorifics that reflect their own concerns and wishes. It is at this level that we may place some aspect of the 'co-creation' of the imperial image that I wrote of in the introduction. Most dedicators, whether public or private, were influenced by local epigraphic traditions and precedents, which adhered to general trends seen throughout the empire but at the same time allowed for a local interpretation of those broader trends.

Secondly, there can be no doubt that normative language played an important role in power relationships across all layers of the community. Governors, magistrates and benefactors alike were praised with a wide lexicon of virtues. But we have also seen clear signs of differentiation: some virtues were clearly reserved for imperial authority, including martial virtues and specific terms such as *indulgentia*. Virtues fitted in 'genres' that were sometimes closely connected with the office of the honorand. Thus, governors and local magistrates alike were honoured for their *innocentia*, a virtue so deeply connected with ideals of good administration that it transcended the large hierarchical differences between the two groups. Likewise, benefactors of vastly differing economic means were all honoured for their *liberalitas* or *munificentia*. Here, too, flexibility was of key importance, if only to underline the impression of sincerity and zeal on the part of the dedicator. Thus we find countless variations, intended to keep the language of praise fresh. The very fact that dedicators often tried to verbalize an old idea in a slightly different and new way already suggests something of the importance attached to normative language.

Lastly, what does the praise of virtues and honorifics tell us of the legitimation of power relationships and ideals of power? Throughout this thesis we have seen normative language wielded for purposes of legitimation, manipulation and self-representation. Legitimation through the praise of emperors, governors and magistrates; manipulation by dampening suggestions of strife or enticing future benefactors; self-representation by stressing the close bond between honorand and dedicator. In their preference for some imperial virtues and honorifics over others, provincials betrayed their concern over public displays of loyalty to the imperial family and the continued prosperity of the empire. Through their praise of exceptional governors, provincial communities tried to ensure that future governors would adopt a similar approach to provincial administration, while private dedicators might wish to stress their close relationship to a powerful gubernatorial benefactor. And through the praise of magistrates and benefactors, communities lauded the exceptionality of their citizens while enforcing communal *concordia*. In these varied ways, normative language served as a powerful tool to navigate the ambiguous and fraught realities of provincial life under the empire.