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# TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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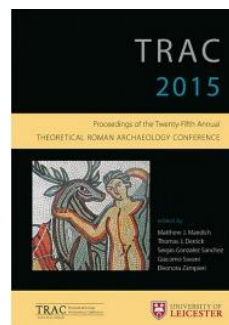
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# Imperial Statues and Public Spaces in Late Antiquity: Conceptualising ‘Constantine’ at York as an Ancient Public Commission

*Brittany Thomas*

## *Introduction*

The occasions for erecting an imperial statue in antiquity were many and varied, and these included accession, a military victory, the anniversary of an important event, the emperor’s visit to a province, and local veneration. Although there is a general consensus among scholars that new official portraits were probably created by a court artist and then copied and distributed throughout the Empire, there is no definite answer to the question of why new portrait types were sculpted (Højte 2005: 86; Fejfer 2009: 410). We know even less about the specific process of how imperial statues were commissioned – what was the nature of the relationship between the Emperor, the commissioners, and the artists? How did statues arrive in public urban spaces? We have no literary, epigraphic or archaeological evidence to answer these questions for most of the imperial period, and only for Late Antiquity do we have a small body of literary evidences concerning imperial commissions (Fejfer 2009: 408). Additionally, we know very little about reaction: how did the ancient public interact with and respond to these statues?

This paper uses a prominent modern statue of the early fourth century A.D. Emperor Constantine as a potential guide to commissions. As Liz James (2013: 18) argued of art objects in Byzantium, these works are indeed ‘things’, and as ‘things’ they have a history and a value in their social function; they are ‘objects that have a job’. We can trace the history of this particular statue’s social ‘job’ precisely because it is a contemporary work. There is both a forward and backward idea to erecting a statue of Constantine in 1998 – we can project back the modern process to understand ancient commissions, but modern commissions also pluck moments out of ancient history and bring them forward to a modern audience. This is a monument that stresses the antiquity of the city while connecting the ancient, medieval, and modern spaces of this particular urban area through the idea of one event: the accession of Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. Though these processes are largely invisible in antiquity, this paper proposes that understanding the way modern public statues are commissioned and then erected is one possible tool for understanding ancient honorific sculpture. Using insights from an interview with the sculptor Philip Jackson that took place February 27th, 2015 in his studio in Midhurst, West Sussex this paper will explore the biography of this statue and ask further questions about ancient viewership and interaction with public monuments.



Figure 1: Philip Jackson's statue of Constantine at York (author's photo).

Eboracum (York) holds significance as the site of Constantine's acclamation as Emperor by his troops in the summer of A.D. 306 following his father's death. The bronze cast of Emperor Constantine that now stands near York Minster, between the medieval cathedral and the site of the ancient Roman Legionary Headquarters, was commissioned by the York Civic Trust in 1998 and sculpted by Philip Jackson, Queen Elizabeth II's acting royal sculptor (York Civic Trust; 'CV: Philip Jackson CVO DL MA FRBS') (Fig. 1). Richard Reese argued in the very first TRAC volume that we interpret by analogy, and this analogous interpretation is 'theory level 1' (Reece 1993: 34, 36). Although Philip Jackson's Constantine statue is obviously a modern interpretation of the Emperor, it represents an imperial figure from Late Antiquity. This statue in particular is a suitable parallel for exploring the way public statues were erected in antiquity because Constantine was well known for actively, and almost aggressively, creating a new imperial image in the period following the Tetrarchy (293–c. 313) (Bassett 2004: 3, 14–15; Parsi Presicce 2005: 140). We have record of his statues everywhere from Britain to the Greek East, and he is also one of the few imperial figures for whom we have record of directly commissioning his own statues (*Life of Constantine* 4.15; *Parastaseis* 58).

### *Commissioning an Imperial Statue*

The production of a statue is a negotiation between several parties. Foremost is the negotiation of the image between the commissioner and the artist; but it is also important to consider the nature of the actual subject of the commission (who could also be the commissioner), and more widely the audience (a broad and varied group). The patron or commissioner could be a single person, a group of people, or a large body like a city. The 'artist' could be a single sculptor, but statues were just as often the product of a full workshop. In antiquity it was common for both the patron and the subject or honouree to be named in the statue's inscription or dedication. Writing was in itself a method of communicating the social relationship between dedicator and honouree (Weisweiler 2012: 320). If there is a group who is almost entirely invisible in

the archaeological record, it is the artist (although in the Greek world sculptors and artists had higher standing and did sign their work, this is a significantly less common phenomenon in the Roman world). The identification of artists, schools, or styles has generally been done through formal analysis, but these ‘schools’ are not easy to pinpoint and can be an arbitrary designations (Scott 2006: 635); and, accordingly, just how imperial portraits were produced and distributed is difficult to understand.

However, we do have a large body of evidence for the existence of honorific imperial statues in antiquity (Ward-Perkins 1984: Appendix 1). In the context of Constantinian statues, we can observe that it was common in antiquity for the commissioner or patron to be a city council, especially that of a provincial city or a colony (LSA-615 Termessus Maior; LSA-862 Samothrace; LSA-927 Delphi). An individual person may have been a high imperial official such as a governor, a praetorian prefect, a consul, a tribune, or a military commander (LSA-1089; LSA-1120; LSA-1140). Lower and other officials include those with such titles as ‘Quintus Attius Granius Caelestinus, caretaker of the bed of the Tiber and sewers of the sacred City’ (LSA-304). Groups of people also erected statues, such as the guild of salt traders (*corpus salariorum*) (CIL VI, 1152) and the guild of leather workers and tanners (*corpus coriariorum magnatariorum solatariorum*) (CIL VI, 1117).

The last and perhaps most expected category would be the imperial office itself. It was quite common for Emperors to commission dynastic statue groups, especially of their immediate predecessors and of previously deified Emperors; and in Late Antiquity, for Eastern and Western Emperors to acknowledge each other through public dedications (LSA-2729 Theodosius I familial group; LSA-2745 Marcian awarded by Leo I; LSA-2709 Valentinian I awarded by Valens). However, it was much rarer for a living, seated Emperor to commission a statue of himself for a public space. The *Parastaseis*, a ninth century Byzantine text that compiled notes on monuments in Constantinople, reported an imperial group in the Constantinian forum. The source notes the tradition that Constantine had a vision of setting up this imperial statue group to honour himself, his mother, and his sons in the Philadelphion in the centre of Constantinople (*Parastaseis* 58).

Was an ancient statue of Constantine commissioned in Eboracum upon his accession, and could it have made a suitable reference for a modern one? This head of a beardless man (Fig. 2), now in the Yorkshire Museum, has been identified as the head of a Constantinian statue (Rinaldi Tufi 2005: Catalogue no. 131). The LSA catalogue discussion states that ‘the honorand was a significant beardless individual of the later Roman Empire. This combined with the fact that York had a special connection to Constantine [...] makes the identification highly probable’ (LSA-1226). The reason the face is so unrecognizable is due to the reworking of an earlier statue that probably had a beard, combined with the water damage and erosion the stone suffered. While it is true that Eboracum was a large and important city, and likely the provincial capital of Britannia Secunda from the late third century onward, it was never an official imperial capital or residence, and the matter of Constantine’s elevation there was more or less a fluke.

In his study of Roman imperial statue bases, Danish scholar Jakob Højte argued that no governing principal for when portrait types were created could be established (Højte 2005: 86 n. 191). What was true for one Emperor, such as a portrait upon accession or consulship, did not hold true for others. For these reasons, he argues ‘it seems highly problematic ... to automatically assume that new portrait types were connected to important events in the life of the emperor’ (Højte 2005: 86 n. 191). But while we cannot assume that a statue of Constantine was erected in York solely because it was the site of his elevation, it cannot be ruled out that the city might have erected one in antiquity just as the modern city did in 1998. The modern Constantine statue

occupies a prominent civic space, therefore several groups had a say in its installation. In York, the three most prominent groups that could influence the design and placement of the statue included The York Civic Trust, broadly representing ‘the City of York’; York Minster, represented by the Dean of the Chapter; and a committee from the Roman Society. Jackson originally wanted the statue to hold a cross in order to cast a shadow on the ground, but the Dean of the Chapter, who did not want the statue to be too tightly associated with Constantine’s position in the Church, rejected this detail (Jackson, Interview). Instead he is holding an archaic Mesopotamian sword that gives a similar effect. The original wax model of the statue was passed to each commissioning body in turn, and it took more than three years to make its way back to the sculpture studio (Jackson, Interview). This indicates some of the invisible processes in the erection of public sculpture – the social, spatial, and temporal considerations taken into account long before the statue was ever unveiled to the public.

For a modern royal sculpture, Jackson had only to say that royalty ‘will have a say’ in their image, but that is not to suggest that they design or dictate the final outcome (Interview). We can presume that most Emperors, even those for whom we have less evidence, had some say in the imperial image. In many cases they were drawing upon standard imagery (Stewart 2008: 51–52), but when new portrait types were created, or portraits introduced in the provinces, these symbols and styles were wholly mixed with local expectations (i.e., the artist would take care to ensure that the audience understood the statue).

### *Producing an Imperial Statue*

For the Constantine statue to go from the design to a fully-fledged monument standing in a public square, two more processes had to happen – the modelling and casting of the statue. Working from his studio in Midhurst, Jackson revealed that before he ever begins any large sculpture he makes a small wax model, or maquette, of the figure by working from photographs whenever possible (Interview). As Constantine is a historical subject he drew upon historical sources for his design. However, Jackson’s Constantine is not meant to be a copy of an already existing imperial statue, nor does it even conform to the conventions of ancient Roman imperial portraiture. Instead, Jackson wanted to convey him as a person steeped in thought over the question of Christianity (Constantine being the first Roman Emperor to formally accept the Christian religion), and as someone who knows he is making a pivotal decision in the course

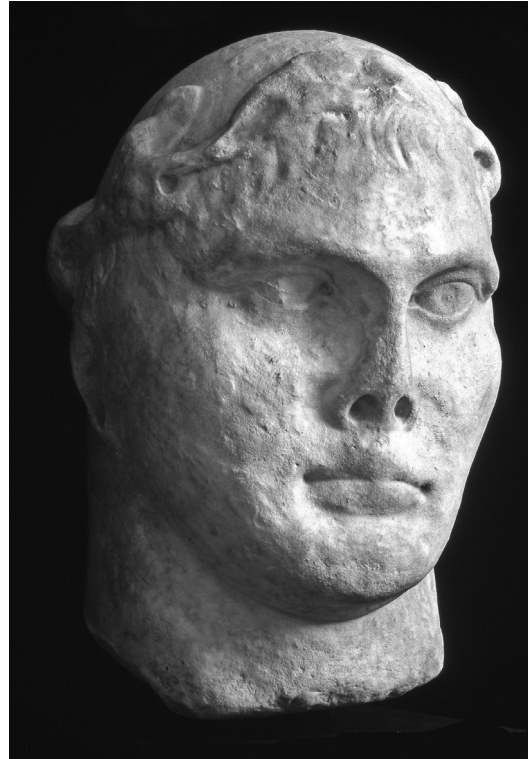


Figure 2: ‘Constantine’ head from the Yorkshire Museum (York Museums Trust).

of his *imperium*. Constantine is dressed in archaizing clothing, a kind of ceremonial garb not contemporary with Late Antique imperial dress, but clothing that conveys the power of office and commander. This statue conveys an idea rather than an actuality.

Early in the twentieth century two American scholars, Emmerson Swift and Merriweather Stuart proposed counter arguments about how imperial portraits were crafted. Swift (1923: 290) argued that ‘standard types’ were produced in Rome as the ‘official’ portrait of the Emperor upon his accession, a view largely based on the hair-style and facial features of early imperial portraits. Wax models of this portrait were then sent out to the provinces to be reproduced in marble or bronze. Stuart (1939: 602) rejected his theory by showing that official portraits were not necessary to produce an imperial sculpture, pointing to the many statues which were erected either just pre- or post- accession to the throne. These theories have still never been fully explored due to the lack of substantial physical evidence (Højte 2005: 16–17, 87). Yet, based on Jackson’s process, there is no reason why an imperial sculptor could not have worked from at least some kind of portrait or model, perhaps not every time, but at least those in the imperial capital surely had access to visual material if not their live subject. Statues made by studios that did not work from an official portrait would account for why some vary from the standard and some do not. This small wax model is the same one that goes to the commissioner for approval. The process of making a small maquette before working up a full size model goes back at least as far as the Renaissance, as several of these surviving maquettes from Italy are currently housed in the Victoria and Albert and date to the early 16th century, including the Rape of the Sabines by Giambologna (museum #4125-1854) and two slaves struggling by Michaelangelo (museum #4108-1854). Jackson believes that Michelangelo could walk into his modern studio on any day and immediately understand it for what it was – the skills are the same, most of the hand tools for sculpting the clay are the same; the only differences would be modern precision tools and electric ovens (Interview).

Bronze was the material of choice for honorific statues in most parts of the Roman Empire, and is, incidentally, still the material of choice for public sculpture produced in Jackson’s studio. The process of casting a bronze statue is usually via the ‘lost wax’ method, which is one known as far back as the third millennium B.C. in the Near East from where it spread to Egypt, Greece, and Rome (Noble 1975: 368). Jackson believes it is a process as old as sculpture itself, evident in the fact that it remains the most logical way to create a monumental statue (Interview). For direct solid casting of smaller objects it started with a wax model. This model was then covered in clay, leaving a small hole in the bottom. The clay would then be heated to melt the wax out of the centre (hence ‘lost wax’), and was then fired to harden it into a mould. At this point, for a large bronze, the mould is usually sent to a foundry where molten metal is poured into the mould, then fired again to cast the bronze. The final step is revealing the finished statue by breaking the clay or plaster mould (Noble 1975: 368–369). The process for monumental bronzes was similar, though they had to be cast in pieces, and might be done indirectly by making a plaster cast of a clay model which was then covered inside by a layer of wax instead of starting directly with a wax model (Noble 1975: 368–369).

Unfortunately, by the Middle Ages bronze became more valued as a precious scrap metal than honorific statues were valued as decoration, and so our remaining imperial statue samples are those which were done in marble rather than bronze (Højte 2005: 30). For imperial statues cast using this ‘lost-wax’ process, we no longer have the original wax models because these were melted out in order to make the moulds; we no longer have the vast majority of the moulds because they were either too fragile or had to be broken to reveal the statue; and we largely no

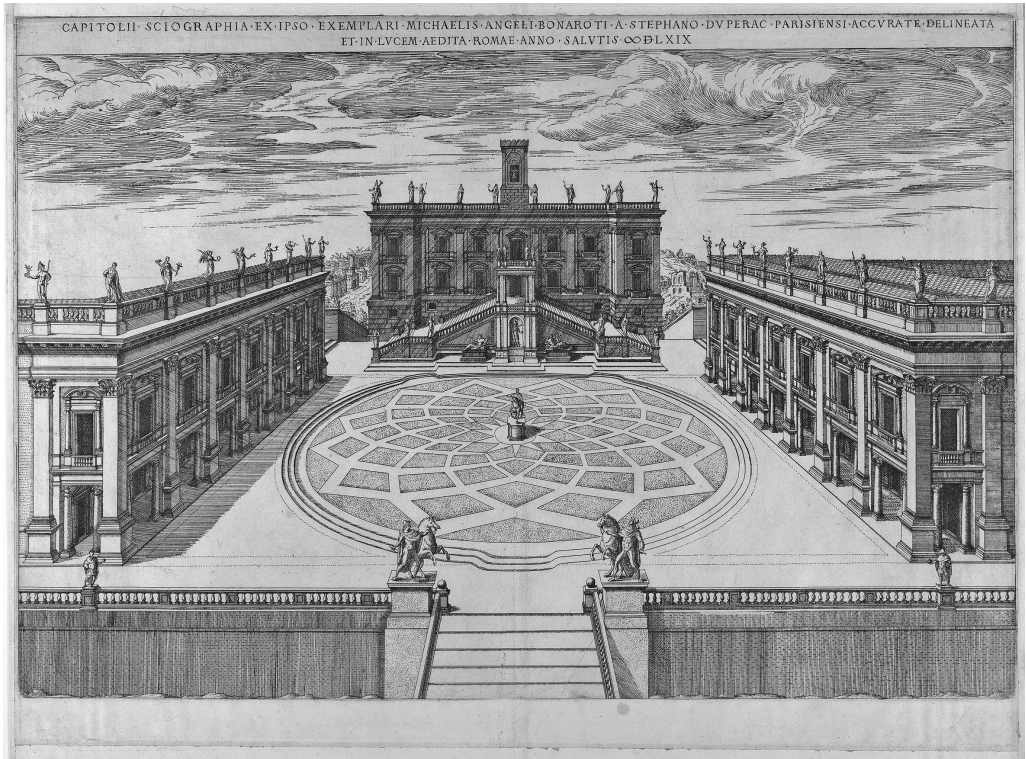


Figure 3: Engraving: Design for the Capitoline Hill by Etienne DuPérac, 1569 (*Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*, Metropolitan Museum of Art [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)).

longer have statues because they were melted down for their bronze. We know of their existence through literary and epigraphic evidence, and primarily through the abundance of statue bases found all over the Roman world (Højte 2005; LSA project); and we do have some rare survivals such as the bust of Hadrian found near the River Thames in London (British Museum catalogue no. 1848,1103.1), and the colossal bronze fragments of Constantine found near the Colosseum in Rome (Musei Capitolini inv. MC1072, MC1070, MC1065). Perhaps the most famous bronze imperial statue is the gilded bronze of Marcus Aurelius in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. This is the only imperial bronze equestrian statue to survive fully intact to present day (Elsner 1998: 78). This statue survived the Middle Ages by becoming a coveted public treasure of both medieval Popes and of Michelangelo when he chose it as the centrepiece of Rome's remodelled Capitoline Hill during the Renaissance (Fig. 3). This fortunate obsession was mainly the result of the statue's mistaken attribution to Emperor Constantine (Elsner 1998: 78).

### *Discussion: Viewing Public Statues, Ancient and Modern*

In his paper in the first TRAC proceedings, Richard Reece also defined theories in archaeology as 'unsuccessful ways of arguing against facts' (Reece 1993: 35). But are they successful ways of arguing without facts? Often as archaeologists we are presented with 'invisible' evidences

where we lack vital parts of the story: this happens when we find statues or statue bases out of their original context and do not know where they were displayed; when we only have a literary reference to a statue and do not know exactly what it looked like, only that it existed; and, finally, even when we have a complete or mostly complete statue whose original context we can place, we often do not know how people received it. The last category is perhaps the most abstract and subjective concept to reconstruct, and so, in some ways, any attempt to guess what ancient people were thinking about when they were looking at statues is by nature theoretical. We have to turn to other methods of understanding viewership in antiquity in order to make any meaningful conclusions. There has been a theoretical shift toward the ‘viewer’ in the last twenty years, with many studies centring on modes of perception and sensory experience (Elsner 1995; Zanker 1997; Stewart 2003; McMahon 2013). This shift helps us conceptualise public monuments as not just ‘things’ or decorations, but as part of a lived urban experience.

These viewers, or the audience, are an important part of considering public statues because of how greatly varied this group is. The audience is firstly the patron, and then people who may have living memory of the subject. This is a group that will have specific expectations of what the statue should look like. Then there is a small audience of important people attending the unveiling or ceremony, those who may have provided money for the monument’s erection. The general audience is the local public, but there will also be a ‘foreign’ or tourist public who will know little of the specific context when they come to visit. There is also a future public to consider, who may see the statue long after the first few generations are gone. David Freedberg, in the introduction to his influential book *The Power of Images*, argued that Art History has traditionally divided artwork into two categories of response: emotional or visceral response, to delicate material such as votive objects, effigies, funerary objects, pornography; and a critical response to high art forms such as film, performance, painting, and sculpture (Freedberg 1989: xxi). He posits, therefore, a kind of ‘popular’ versus ‘cultivated’ response framework. Philip Jackson’s gallery and exhibition works are markedly different in tone and style from his public commissions: they are darker, often anonymous, and emotive. Jackson’s public commissions, on the other hand, are formal, stately, and authoritative. Yet these works have also produced powerful responses from people who either knew the subject, or because the overall message they conveyed was deeply emotive, such as the RAF Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park, London. State commissioned artwork thus fills the role of a ‘high art’ form produced for a ‘popular’ response.

Art Historian John Clarke (2003: 16) argued that elite (imperial) art complies with how history has been written and traditionally conceived – it is powerful, expensive, and imperial. While Clarke’s assessment is largely true, people still interact with public art even if it is conceived as ‘elite’ art. People are encouraged to interact with public art in a way they do not necessarily interact with those private or exhibition works – public art can be touched, moved, sat under or on, and is shared communally by all those who have access to it. They may look or pass by, but the option to interact with it is always available when they do choose to visit again. Furthermore, they are free to interpret and appropriate these sculptures in whatever way suits them; you need only think of famous public sculptures such as the Wall Street Bull in New York City or Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square to see how regularly people touch or otherwise interact with art in public space. Dutch scholars Stine Birk and Birte Poulsen (2012: 9) have said of ancient images that ‘meaning does not necessarily dwell within the image itself’, whereby meaning was always subjective for the viewer. Who are the viewers, who is the ‘public’ we keep mentioning whenever we talk about ‘public’ commissions? Jackson is very conscious of what



it can mean. He says ‘public’ is an important word – it means both current and future public. Public sculpture, he argues, has the ability to educate, to convey a certain moment in history, and is valuable in its accessibility – there is no need to go into a museum or gallery to look at it, as it is ‘history in the streets’ (Interview).

These comparisons to modern sculpture are not made without reservations. These are ideas and questions that I am yet to fully explore: how much did people really interact with public statues? Did they treat honorific subjects and imperial portraits differently than decorative public sculpture or those with classical and mythological themes? During the Principate imperial statues were cult images – they were actual deified versions of previous emperors subject to worship and veneration. Their movement, destruction, erasure, or reuse was more indicative of their power as a living object (Freedberg 1989; Greenhalg 1989). And while many contemporary tourist photos show people interacting with public art, ancient ‘tourism’ likely did not happen in this same manner. Did people touch them or visit and admire them the way we seem to today? Could they even get close to these statues? Placement of statues, especially in a crowded city like Rome, was usually on pedestals or columns, and the public would not be able to directly interact with them anyway because they would be looking down on them from above their heads. Generally, the public would be at eye level with a base inscription rather than the actual statue. Under the Tetrarchy the *Forum Romanum* contained five porphyry columns that were each twelve metres high topped by statues of the Tetrarchs along with Iuppiter Optimus, and a marble column seventeen metres high topped by another statue likely of Diocletian (Weisweiler 2012: 332). In this context the public surely understood the overwhelming monumentalisation of the space, but they could not directly touch or interact with those statues. Despite this fact, Weisweiler notes F.A. Bauer’s argument that these statues were positioned not in the centre of public squares, but often at their entrance and exit points, impeding the free movement of the public by being in the way (2012, 335; Bauer 1996, 363-365). This was in itself a way to force interaction, not the sort of tourism interaction of standing to contemplate the statue, but one that actually forced people to see it or go around it every single day by way of impediment.

Did the same amount of civic planning and trouble that went into erecting the modern Constantine statue in any way parallel the process with antique statues? Jackson (Interview) noted that a crowded city like London is a difficult space in which to introduce a new statue. London is a capital city, therefore only the most important subjects are on display. We can imagine that at the end of antiquity, a large imperial city like Rome or Constantinople would have much the same problem, precisely because of centuries of investment and building. Zachariah of Mytilene recorded 3,785 honorific monuments in Rome sometime in the late fifth century (*Chron.* 10.16). Weisweiler (2012: 324) effectively shows that there were in fact more honorific statues erected in public space between the fourth and fifth century than there were in the first three centuries combined. This suggests a high degree of internalised ideas about imagery and messages within Roman society – because of the abundance and frequency of public statues, their distinctiveness was not as important as their overall monumentalisation and transformation of public space. Due to their ubiquitous nature, we can hypothesize that there would not have been the same amount of intensive design going into individual statues, but there was certainly as much thought given to the general topography of a city when placing a statue. For example, during the *adventus* ceremony the ancient public would not need to read an inscription or understand imagery in vague terms to understand the explicit nature of imperial ceremony, but they did indeed prepare for the arrival and procession of the Emperor’s statue into a city.

More relevant to the subject of Late Antiquity is what happens to these statues later. Emperors

were still being deified into the fourth century (Trombley 2011: 26, 36). By the late fourth and beginning of the fifth century most of the specifically religious aspects of the imperial cult had disappeared and imperial statues were honorific in nature, but the Emperor still acted as the medium between God and his people, and retained titles such as *divus* (Trombley 2011: 49–50). The late fifth century perhaps marks the official end of worshipping the Emperor as a deity in his own right (Trombley 2011: 51). By the sixth century we have Cassiodorus, Theoderic's court scribe writing in Gothic Italy, already lamenting the poor state of Rome's statues and how little care they were given (*Variae* 7.13; 7.15), suggesting that they perhaps lost their meaning as honorific sculpture and were becoming increasingly a historic nuisance as cities crowded with older monuments looked for new public space to erect monuments for current monarchs and wealthy aristocrats. By the early ninth century we have record of imperial statues being lifted as cultural heritage prizes – as when Charlemagne carted off the equestrian statue of Theoderic in Ravenna to his palace in Aachen (Agnellus *LPR* 94). As already mentioned, by the Middle Ages Roman imperial bronzes were being melted down as scrap. These considerations still leave room for persisting questions – how much time had to pass before a statue was no longer important? Did they then become simple civic or public decoration? Did ancient people engage in acts of 'vandalism' or salvaging? And of those important survivals, does it mean they had to be appropriated by a later patron like Michelangelo, or wait until the advent of cultural tourism and museums in order to be saved? Michael Greenhalgh (1989: 248) proclaimed rather gloomily that 'progress destroyed antiquities before culture sought to conserve them'. I feel this is not to suggest that people in the medieval or early modern periods were not 'cultured' by our definition, but rather that statues and public sculpture more generally served a different kind of social function. The landscape could well have been so saturated by imagery that not all of it could possibly have held its original or historical meaning. As John Curran (1994: 48–49) noted in his study of statues in late antique Rome, statues were often moved and repaired because they were damaged '*fatali necessitate*', or 'by the accident of history'. The transition of public spaces inevitably leads to the transfer or destruction of certain public monuments when they no longer added to the meaning of the civic topography, or more simply because they were old.

### Conclusions

This paper has sought to broaden our perspective of ancient public commissions by addressing questions of process and placement. In large part, the discussion has been from the perspective of the artist and the public, rather than the commissioner or the subject, and therefore the conclusions drawn are largely about the relationship between artist and public spaces. The way scholarship has treated ancient sculptors seems to be as largely non-specific entities that anonymously comply with imperial directive to crank out standard official portraits. They are not treated in the same manner as other types of court artist or officiates, such as Cassiodorus, or Honorius' court poet, Claudian, both of whom have been subject to critical examination because we know who they were and what exactly they wrote (Cameron 1970; Bjornlie 2013). Arguably panegyric and honorific sculpture are two different types of imperial praise products meant for different audiences, but ultimately centred on the same subject. Even Cassiodorus' compilation of state letters has come under scrutiny as having been purposefully and artfully arranged to convey a specific type of imperial 'rulership' under Theoderic.

As I hope I have conveyed in this paper, the process of erecting a public statue, especially of a royal or imperial figure, is likely as long and dynamic as it was in antiquity. Philip Jackson

believes the interaction between artist and commissioner and the types of problems surrounding public sculpture have not greatly evolved or been modified in the modern era. This process is not a strictly top-down directive, nor is it an honour allowed to just anyone. Temporal and spatial constraints determine just how and when new sculptures were/are erected, but it is the relationships built up between patrons, artists, and audience that play a key role in our understanding of public sculpture. This paper has shown that there is a way to look at these invisible processes through theoretically, or at least conceptually, constructing them from a contemporary perspective.

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### Abbreviations

LSA Last Statues of Antiquity (Database)  
CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

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