CLIFFORD ANDO, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); xxi plus 494, 7 figures; ISBN 0520 220676, $US 60.00/£38.00.

It is one of the paradoxes of Roman history that one of the largest and longest-lived empires of all time has become the symbol of imperial decline and necrosis. Ando’s book, with considerable verve and formidable erudition, sets out to explode the paradox. The spectacle of Rome’s magnificent glissade, he argues, has overshadowed its remarkable longevity and success. This longevity was all the more extraordinary because it was sustained by an imperial apparatus that even by pre-modern standards was vanishingly thin. Rather than seething with irredentist rancour, the Empire’s subjects were willing accomplices in its grand imperial project. How then did Rome pull it off? ‘What made Roman power persuasive or even attractive to the populations of the provinces?’

The answer, Ando argues, lies not just in the Empire’s astute manipulation of ideology, but even more critically in its remarkable ability to ‘get the message out’—to communicate and to persuade. It was words, not swords, that held the show together. The accessibility and reliability of the Roman administrative system—its law codes, courts and record offices—trading heavily on its rationality and uniformity, and underwritten by the prestige of Roman power, rolled the language of Roman rule out across the Empire, drawing its subject populations irresistibly in. It was then driven home by a comprehensive programme of rituals and imagery—from Imperial portraits and military standards to milestones and public holidays—that diffused a common symbolic and iconographic language of Imperial universalism and invincibility, a
barrage of Roman messages that created Roman audiences. This shared language could also be used by provincials to respond, and even remonstrate.

Both parties thus acknowledged their own unique roles in the maintenance of the social order. The people endowed the emperor with their imperium, in exchange for which he undertook a burden, the guardianship of the state. (148)

As comprehensive and convincing as the argument is, however, certain reservations persist. Getting the message out required writing. Whether this was through the inscriptions and proclamations with which Rome carpeted the Empire or via the bureaucracy of the legal and administrative system, whose very existence and operation advertised Roman justness and effectiveness, a basic level of functional literacy is assumed. The question of the extent or pervasiveness of literacy in antiquity is, of course, a notoriously thorny one. Ando adopts the commonsensical solution that writing could still serve as a mass medium as long as each subject at least had access to someone who could read and write (101). This view seems to be substantiated by the number of illiterates who participated in the system, filing deeds, presenting petitions, prosecuting court cases. But it also tends to diminish the sometimes profoundly different cognitive experiences of those on two sides of the literacy divide—a divide no less real because it is so hard to pinpoint.

The placard which was posted, in each of Judea’s three main languages, beneath Christ’s cross is a good example. Ando sees this as an eloquent example of the Empire’s relentless concern to communicate with its subject populations (98), which is probably true. But was it the efficiency and inexorability of Roman justice that those witnessing this event were absorbing? One clue is perhaps given by the excitable author of Revelations. What stands out about the mysterious John the Divine is not just his implacable hostility to Rome, the seven-headed beast from the sea, but the boiling irrationality of his world-view. We are in a world very different from the consensus-driven discourse of reason and order with which Rome supposedly conditioned its empire. This was one audience that got away.
Ando argues, by contrast, that (even) Christianity was eventually rolled flat by the irresistible prestige of the imperial juggernaut, as Christian writers plugged into the language of universalism and divine providence on which they'd been weaned by Imperial ideology (346-51). But here again we see the view of often super-literate intellectuals standing in for popular opinion; despite Ando's immersion in the inscriptive and papyrological evidence, the babbling voices of the Empire's ignorant and ignoble majority tend not be heard.

In fact, it has to be asked to what extent even Rome—even ideologically—conformed to the standards of order and rationality that Ando argues for. In particular, rationality butts up against the emperor's charismatic status as super-human and semi-divine. Ando couches his treatment of the emperor's super-potent numen in the language of Roman theorists, with the emperor as the embodiment of Rome's achievement and a convenient receptacle for the effusions of praise and approval that Roman peace and prosperity elicited. Its emotionalism was the emotionalism of patriotism, its operative ideals community and consensus. Yet as late as the fourth century, according to Synesius of Cyrene, the peasants of North Africa thought Agamemnon was the emperor. Either they got it wrong, and Ando's communications dragnet was not nearly as effective as he would have us believe, or, even more problematically, they got it right and 'the message' was exactly one of magico-mythic hocus-pocus—the emperor as immortal superman, mythic archetype and voodoo priest. This is only one odd-ball snippet of evidence, but the picture it conjures of the imagination of Rome's far-flung subjects feels more intuitively credible than the calm and rational world of Ando's Imperial ideology.

The uniformity too with which the Empire was saturated by official imagery does not necessarily imply consensus. Beyond the acclamations, panegyrics and thanks-offerings the cultural script often had a life of its own. As examples stretching from Ovid, turning Augustus' Imperial monuments into sets for his louche erotic escapades, to Tiberius' Capri fisherman and his pathetically misjudged gift of mullet go to show, ruler and ruled could be on radically different wavelengths. And as both Ovid and the fisherman discovered, the big stick was never far away. In a heavily authoritarian atmosphere such as Rome's, vociferous expressions
of loyalty are not really surprising. But then in a world in which practically every word shimmers with rhetorical varnish, how much of this can really be relied upon to express anything beyond the trite, mechanical and opportunistic? Does being able to manipulate the régime’s values mean one has accepted them? Is expediency—or fear—the same as loyalty?

The book also, it has to be said, falters in scale. Ando somewhat apologetically calls it an essay. But it’s an essay of five hundred densely crowded pages, and not even Ando’s lucid prose can stave off an oppressive sense of superabundance. The feeling is especially acute during his theoretical detours—Bourdieu and Habermas in particular—which clog the flow with unnecessary jargon (‘heuristic’, ‘intersubjective’, ‘normativity’) and contribute little to his overall argument.

But these criticisms are, if anything, a tribute to the book’s ambitiousness of scope and breadth of sweep. Ando’s command of the source material is truly impressive, covering Roman, Greek and Jewish sources—literary and documentary—from the Republic through to late antiquity. Much of it is brought together, moreover, in strikingly new and useful ways. His discussions of the mechanics of Imperial administration—how documents were distributed, archived and retrieved—and the role of these processes in creating communities of consent bristle with learning and deserve to be read in their own right, irrespective of the larger thesis they support. The book is a significant contribution to the study of Roman Imperial government, and demands the serious attention not just of Romanists, but of anyone interested in how pre-modern states inform, communicate and induce adherence.

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