

Balbuza, Katarzyna

'Aeternitas' - an element of Emperor Trajan's self-representation : (an outline of the problem)

Res Historica 29, 27-32

2010

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez **Muzeum Historii Polski** w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej **bazhum.muzhp.pl**, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Katarzyna Balbuza

Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań

AETERNITAS – AN ELEMENT OF EMPEROR TRAJAN'S SELF-REPRESENTATION (AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM)

At the beginning of the 2nd century CE, the theme of eternity in connection with the imperial power, the Emperor, or the Roman state was nothing new or incomprehensible for the Roman consciousness¹. This theme had begun appearing, regularly if somewhat bashfully, as far back as the times of Augustus, in the coinage and literature of the 1st century CE².

Trajan stood out from the Emperors who ruled before him, in particular the Flavians, in the way in which he distanced himself from the concept of eternity, both in the aspect of *aeternitas Augusti*, understood as the eternal nature of the

¹ On the *aeternitas*: W. M. Roscher, *Aeternitas*, [in] *Ausführlicher Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, hrsg. W. M. Roscher, Bd I, 1, Leipzig 1884–1886; E. Aust, *Aeternitas*, RE I (1894), 694–696; *Aeternitas*, [in] *Dizionario Epigrafico di Antichità Romane di E. de Ruggiero*, vol. I, Roma 1895; F. Cumont, *Les dieux éternels des inscriptions latines*, RA, 9, 1888, 184–193; Idem, *L'éternité des empereurs romains*, RHL, 1, 1896, 435–452; L. Berlinger, *Beiträge zur inoffiziellen Titulatur der römischen Kaiser: eine Untersuchung ihres ideengeschichtlichen Gehalten und ihrer Entwicklung*, Diss. Breslau 1935, 25–42; M. P Charlesworth, *Providentia and Aeternitas*, HThR, 29, 2, 1936, 107–132; H. U. Instinsky, *Kaiser und Ewigkeit*, „Hermes”, 77, 1942, 313–355 (= *Ideologie und Herrschaft in der Antike*, hrsg. H. Kloft, Darmstadt 1979, 417–472); E. Saglio, *Aeternitas*, [in] DAGR I (1969), 126–127; G. G. Belloni, *Aeternitas*, [in] LIMC, vol. I, Zürich 1981, 244–249; R. Turcan, *Rome éternelle et les conceptions gréco-romaines de l'Éternité*, [in] *Roma, Constantinopoli, Mosca, Napoli* 1983, 7–30; Idem, *Aeternitas*, [in] *Enciclopedia Vergiliana*, vol. I, Roma 1984, 43–44; M. D. Dopico Caínzos, *Liberalitas et aeternitas principis en Plinio el Joven*, „Ktèma”, 18, 1993, 227–243; Eadem, *Una aproximación al significado de aeternitas en Ciceron*, RPL, 19, 1996, 45–58; F. Graf, *Aeternitas*, DNP 1 (1996), 206–207; M. D. Dopico Caínzos, *Aeternitas rei publicae como programa político en Cicerón: el ejemplo del Pro Marcello*, „Athenaeum”, 85, 2, 1997, 391–408; Eadem, *Le concept de l'«aeternitas» de Rome: sa diffusion dans la société romaine*, LEC, 66, 3, 1998, 259–279; Eadem, *«Aeternitas» o desaparición de Roma?: dos visiones de la sociedad romana*, QUCC, 63, 1999, 139–161; K. Balbuza, *Roma Aeterna symbolem cywilizacji (czasy Hadriana)*, [in] *Miasto w starożytności*, ed. L. Mrozewicz, K. Balbuza, Poznań 2004, 213–221, Eadem, *Idea Aeternitas w ideologii władzy cesarzy z dynastii flawijskiej*, [in] *Grecy, Rzymianie i ich sąsiedzi*, ed. K. Nawotka, M. Pawlak, Wrocław 2007, 559–571.

² K. Balbuza, *Koncepcja wieczności państwa w Rzymie Augusta: zarys problemu*, [in] *Haec mihi in animis vestris sunt templa: studia classica in memory of professor Lesław Morawiecki*, ed. P. Berdowski, B. Błahaczek, Rzeszów 2007, 197–204.

Emperor (with pretensions to deification), and *aeternitas Augusta* (the eternal Empire). However, the Emperor's self-restraint in this respect does not entail that he had entirely resigned from this theme, which was clearly attractive. The iconography of Aeternitas introduced by the Flavians, and other rather older ideas, still survived.

Somewhat late on in his reign, but for a period of almost ten years, Trajan's imperial mint produced coins which bore the image of the female Aeternitas and a legend³. The coins were minted towards the end of the fifth consulship and throughout the sixth, from 106 to 114 CE. They were exclusively denarii and all were produced in the imperial mint in Rome. The iconography on the obverse of all five types of coin is almost identical: the head of Trajan, facing right and crowned with a laurel wreath. The legends differ only in the number of the consulship (i.e. V and VI). The reverses of these denarii show a frontal view of the female Aeternitas, facing right and holding a blazing sun in her right hand. In her left hand she holds the moon. The image is undersigned with an inscription AET(ernitas) AVG(usta or AVG(usti)) which runs across the coin. Around the figure of Aeternitas there is inscribed a legend CO(n)S(ul) V P(ater)P(atriciae) S(enatus) P(opulus)Q(ue)R(omanus) OPTIMO PRINC(ipi). The numbering of the consulship was placed on the reverse only until 111 (RIC II 91; 92), and then it was moved to the obverse. After the year 111 the legend on the reverse read: AET(ernitas)-AVG(usta or AVG(usti)) S(enatus)P(opulus)Q(ue)R(omanus) OPTIMO PRINC(ipi) (RIC II 241) or AET(ernitas)-AVG(usta or AVG(usti)) S(enatus)P(opulus)Q(ue)R(omanus) OPTIMO PRINCIPI (RIC II 229). The only innovation on the reverse of these coins was the full word AETERNITAS, which appeared on one of the denarii (RIC II 92), but the iconography in this case remained unchanged. This way of presenting the idea of *aeternitas* was not groundbreaking. It was familiar from the coinage of the Flavians, in particular Vespasian's. According to Richard Reitzenstein⁴, who bases his conclusions on a fragment from the first book of

³ RIC II 91=BMCRE 374=Cohen 3=Strack 154 (104–110 CE). Obverse: head of Trajan (right), laureate, draped, legend: IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P; reverse: Aeternitas standing l., holding heads representing sun and moon, legend: AET-AVG (across field) COS V P P SPQR OPTIMO PRINC (around); RIC II 92=Cohen 6 (104–110 CE). Obverse: as RIC II 91; reverse: as RIC II 91, legend: AETERNITAS COS V P P SPQR OPTIMO PRINC. RIC II 229=Cohen 4 (111CE). Obverse: as RIC II 91, legend: IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS V DES VI; reverse: as RIC II 91, legend: AET-AVG SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI; RIC II 241=Cohen 5 (112–114CE). Obverse: as RIC II 91, legend: IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS VI P P; reverse: as RIC II 91, legend: AET AVG SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI; RIC II 242 (112–114CE). Obverse: as RIC II 242; reverse: as RIC II 241, legend: as RIC II 241.

⁴ Horapollon, *Hieroglyphica* 1. The above interpretation should be treated with a certain amount of caution, since Horapollon's source is criticized for distortion and too frequent references to the Greek tradition, which was not connected with the Egyptian tradition (Horapollon, *Hieroglyphy*, translation and commentary by J. Krocak, introduction by J. Sokolski, Wrocław 2003, 15 n.).

Hieroglyphica by Horapollon, the Romans took their symbolism of the sun and moon from Aion, a deity known in the East since ancient times. Therefore, if we accept the view of the ancient historian, eternity is both Aion and Aeternitas, depicted through two symbols: the sun and the moon.

This deduction passes over one all-important issue, however: what the abbreviation in the legend on the reverse means. While the abbreviation AET is simple to explain: AET(*ernitas*), the second element, AVG, is more problematic. There are two ways of interpreting it: AVG(*usta*) or AVG(*usti*). The question of which meaning was intended is of great significance for our discussion, since this will indicate which aspect of Aeternitas Trajan employed in his ideological programme. The former expresses the idea of the eternity of the Roman State (*Aeternitas Augusta*), and the latter the eternity of the Emperor (*Aeternitas Augusti*). The phrase AET(*ernitas*) AVG(*usti*) was meant to express the hope that the Emperor would be deified after his death and reside for eternity in the world of the gods. To which idea did Trajan wish to allude? Was it the first, older idea which had been exploited by the Julio-Claudian dynasty? Or was it also the newer idea introduced by the Flavians, which focused on the person of the Emperor as a god after his death? The legend AETERNITAS AVGVSTI first appeared during the reign of Domitian, on coins minted by the senate. It is possible that Trajan intended to continue in this style.

Scholars are divided on this issue, however. In the first half of the 20th century Paul Strack opted strongly for Aeternitas Augusta. Among contemporary scholars, Gunnar Seelentag, the author of the most recent monograph on Trajan, is of the opinion that Trajan preferred the idea of Aeternitas Augusti. He based his conclusion on an analysis of coins, which compared Trajan's coins with those minted by Hadrian in the year 119 CE in honour of Matidia, the niece of the divine Trajan and the mother of Sabina, the wife of Hadrian. These coins bear the legend Aeternitas Augusti, and not Augusta⁵. This hypothesis is supported by the correspondence of Pliny the Younger, who wrote letters from Bithynia to the Emperor, lauding him with various epithets and praising his old-Roman virtues. Included among these are *providentia* (*Ep.* X 108), *indulgentia* (*Ep.* X 120), and finally *aeternitas* (*Ep.* X 112). Allusions to the eternity of Trajan appear on numerous occasions in the letters of Pliny (*Ep.* X 41; 59; 83; 112). Letter

In German scholarship from the first half of XX century, Horapollon was granted a great deal of trust. Scholars such as the classical philologist and expert on Eastern religions Richard Reitzenstein (*Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*, Bonn 1921, 219), or Paul Strack (*Untersuchungen zur römischen Reichsprägung des zweiten Jahrhunderts*, Bd I: *Die Reichsprägung zur Zeit des Traian*, Stuttgart 1931, 187) and Klaus Ulrich Instinsky (*Kaiser und Ewigkeit...*, 333) accepted the words of Horapollon when he began to work on his *Hieroglyphica*.

⁵ G. Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Trajans: Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat*, Stuttgart 2004, 463sq.

X 41,1, sent between 3 and 28 January in the second year of his governorship contains the following phrase: *aeternitate tua*. In the next letter (X 59), from the period between 28 January and 18 September of the same year, we can find the following: *per salutem tuam aeternitatemque*. Letter X 83, written between 28 January and 18 September, most probably in late summer of his second year of governorship, and sent from Nicaea contained the following address to the Emperor: *per aeternitatem tuam*. In letter X 112, from after 28 January of his third year, Pliny wrote *debetur aeternitas* (X 112.3), while in letter X 83 this phrase can be found: *rogatus, domine, a Nicensibus publice per ea, quae mihi sunt et debent sanctissima, id est per aeternitatem tuam salutemque* (...). Scholarly opinion has it that the words which Pliny uses to address Trajan are clear proof that the Emperor consented to the use of such language, since in his replies to Pliny's letters Trajan did not reprimand him for excessive flattery.

However, in the opinion of an eminent scholar Paul Strack, these fragments are not a sufficient proof that Trajan continued the Flavian use of *Aeternitas Augusti*. Strack views Trajan as expressing more the aspect of the eternal state, familiar from the times of the Julio-Claudian dynasty – *aeternitas Augusta* (= *aeternitas Imperii*). And, interestingly, Pliny also provides support of this alternative theory: in one of his panegyrics delivered in around 100 CE, in the words (...) *Nuncupare vota et pro aeternitate imperii, et pro salute civium? immo pro salute principum, ac propter illos pro aeternitate imperii solebamus* (*Paneg.* LXVII). Pliny recalls the tradition of making a pledge to the eternity of the Empire⁶.

Thus the surviving sources do not permit a final decision to be made on which aspect of eternity was employed in the ideology Trajan promoted. The question that remains is why the Emperor did not require the meaning of the abbreviation to be clarified. There are two possibilities; the first being that one of the ideas described above was already so widespread and obvious that the Emperor considered it unnecessary to make it more precise on coins, the second is that Trajan identified with both aspects of *aeternitas*. The latter is more likely to be the case. In those times it was very difficult to separate these ideas from each other. The ideas of the eternity of the imperial house and the enduring success of the state were both propagated. As Seelentag (p. 464) shows, this can be seen from the context of the imperial couple's relationship with the cult of Vesta, the guarantors of the eternity of the state. Both displayed great respect for the goddess, as can be seen from the imperial couple's numerous coin issues in which Vesta was portrayed⁷. The pres-

⁶ The tradition is a long one. See G. Gernentz, *Laudes Romae*, Rostock 1918, 40sqq.

⁷ See RIC II Trajan II 9; 20, etc; Plotina 728–732 and 736–737.

ence of the theme of eternity can also be discerned in Trajan's restitution coins⁸. The second aspect of the ideology of Trajan's eternity is found in his concern for ever-lasting fame. In a few fragments of the *Panegyric* we read: (...) *ubi vera principis, ubi sempiterna sit gloria*, and further, having dealt with the transience and futility of earthly life and everything connected with it, the author continues: (...) *ut quisque factus est princeps, extemplo fama eius, incertum bona an mala, ceterum aeterna est. Non ergo perpetua principi fama quae invitum manet, sed bona concupiscenda est: ea porro non imaginibus et statuīs, sed virtute ac meritis prorogatur*. Without a doubt, Pliny is referring to eternal, ever-lasting fame here. In the fragment above he uses as many as three words to accentuate the idea of eternity: *aeterna*, *sempiterna* and *perpetua*⁹. Their semantic meaning is similar, but not identical.

The ideology of eternity in Trajan's Rome developed slowly and with subtlety, even if it was not vigorously promoted. A significant change was brought about in this ideology, namely the combination of two aspects which had been hitherto separate, *Aeternitas Augusta* and *Aeternitas Augusti*. One of Trajan's coins, adorned with the legend AETERNITAS (RIC II 92), brilliantly expresses that one, joint idea: the eternity of the state and those who govern it.

⁸ Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Trajans...*, 464–465; Idem, *Bilder und Betrachter: eine neue Restitutionsmünze des Traians*, „Klio”, 89, 2007, 161–183, esp.168.

⁹ See A. Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche*, Darmstadt 1970, 87, n.1 and 209, n.3; H. Temporini, *Die Frauen am Hofe Trajans: ein Beitrag zur Stellung der Augustae im Principat*, Berlin–New York 1978, 55, n.274.

CATALOGUE OF COINS – TRAJAN

No.	RIC II	Coin	Mint	Date	Obverse	Reverse	Notes
1	91	Denarius	Rome	ca 106–111	head of Trajan (right), laur., draped on shoulder IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P	Aeternitas standing l., holding heads representing sun and moon legend: AET-AVG (across field)	Cohen 3 BMCRE 374 Strack 174
2	92	Denarius	Rome	ca 106–111	head of Trajan (right), laur., draped on shoulder IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P	Aeternitas as above legend: AETERNITAS (across field) COS V P P SPQR OPTIMO PRINC	Cohen 6
3	229	Denarius	Rome	111	head of Trajan (right), laur., draped on shoulder IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS V DES VI	Aeternitas as above legend: AET-AVG (across field) SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIP (around)	Cohen 4
4	241	Denarius	Rome	January 112–autumn 114	head of Trajan (right), laur., IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS VI P P	Aeternitas as above legend: AET-AVG SPQR OPTIMO PRINC	Cohen 5
5	242	Denarius	Rome	January 112–autumn 114	head of Trajan (right), laur., draped on shoulder IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS VI P P	Aeternitas as above legend: AET-AVG (across field) SPQR OPTIMO PRINC (around)	