As the title indicates, there are two largely separate topics in this book — gestures used by Roman speakers, and the ritualized responses made by crowds to speakers, especially Roman emperors. That the crowd’s acclamation could be in response to an emperor’s speech (with gestures) forms the tenuous link between the two sections, which are also separated chronologically since a significant amount of the evidence for each comes from different periods of Rome’s history. A stronger connection between the two topics would have produced a more coherent and complex argument.

Part 1 examines the Romans’ use of rhetorical gestures. The starting point is the oratorical treatises of Cicero (died 43 B.C.) and Quintilian (written before A.D. 96). The gestures mentioned by these authors are classified by function: a) expressions of emotion, b) pointing out people, places, and things relevant to the argument, and c) mimicry, accompaniment and signaling to the speaker’s claque. As the final catch-all category suggests, this typology is rather arbitrary (as the author admits, p. 42). What the categories do indicate, though, is the real purpose of all rhetorical gestures: to add the visual to the verbal, to show the audience the emotions of the speaker, to draw the eyes of the spectator to a person, statue, or building nearby, to visually reinforce the rhythm of the words of the speaker. As such, the gestures are always the visual accompaniment of the speech. Aldrete argues (pp. xix, 3–5) that gestures were as important as verbal content in ancient oratory. He relies on ancient assertions to that effect, but he ignores the relatively small amount that nonverbal language is discussed in the same texts. As great an oratorical performer as Cicero was reputed to be, I doubt he considered his carefully constructed and verbally elegant speeches to be incomplete without the gestures he used to accompany them (although that may be
one reason he revised them for publication). Quintilian was writing a textbook about oratory, and although he treats delivery at length, he leaves all aspects of gesture to the last. Words clearly came first. Only after having argued to the contrary for three pages, does Aldrete makes it clear that he understands this (p. 6).

The catalogue of gestures, neatly illustrated with line drawings closely follows Quintilian’s treatment and so adds little of anything new to our understanding. Such statements as ‘Sometimes the meaning of a single gesture could vary according to the context in which it was made’ (p. 15) shows the author’s naïveté about how gestures bear meaning. Even more problematic for readers of this journal is the statement that ‘The Romans seem to have believed that certain gestures constituted a natural language in which the signifiers were based not on meaning but on emotion’ (p. 53).

Using the evidence of Roman art and theater, Aldrete then examines the social context for the rhetorical use of gestures. The discussion of gestures in art is very brief because this topic has been thoroughly researched by Brilliant (1963). A full-scale study should have included a more developed synthesis of the visual material, including the contributions to the imagery of the late Empire by H. P. L’Orange (1953).

Joined to the discussion of visual evidence is the most interesting section of the chapters on gestures — an examination of stage gestures using textual evidence and the illustrations from the manuscripts of the Roman comedian Terence. Aldrete’s discussion of the interaction between orators and actors, and the class-based problems such interaction had for the aristocratic politician who needed to avoid any connection to the stage, is interesting and creative. The conclusion that Roman audiences were fully conversant with a language of gesture in public performance is undeniable.

The attention Aldrete pays to the audience is perhaps his greatest contribution to the study of Roman rhetorical practice. This also forms a bridge to the second half of the book, where the audience’s reactions in the ritual of acclamation is the focus of study.

Having in mind such movie clichés as the soldier who salutes with a ‘Hail, Caesar’ or the roar of a welcoming crowd in the amphitheater, the acclamation of the emperor is part of the common image of Imperial Rome (and its fascist imitators). In his treatment of the subject, Aldrete again gives a functional analysis to the examples of the ritual greeting, distinguishing acclamations as greetings to the emperor, as reactions to things he has said or done, and as a form of criticism or petition. Aldrete stresses that these are all part of the same process, the interaction between emperor and populace that mirrors the ritual performed individually between patron and client in Roman everyday life. How the roar of the
crowd worked, how it was often organized into chants and formulas, is discussed through the currently trendy metaphor of ‘call and response’. The interchange between imperial greeting and crowd reaction is seen as a constantly renewed negotiation of power in which the emperor recognizes the power of the people, who in turn recognize his imperium. Some emperors such as Claudius and Titus played their role in the ritual carefully; others, such as Caligula or Commodus, revealed their contempt for the crowd — and came to a bad end. Tiberius avoided any encounter with the people of Rome, and was despised.

This discussion gives us something new, a recognition of a very public form of communication between ruler and ruled, to add to those usually discussed. Many studies have focused on the Roman emperors’ use of grain doles, public entertainments, public building programs, and the symbolism of coinage with which to communicate, or even placate, the common people. The recognition of the importance of the exchange of salutes between prince and people at a public entertainment, a symbolic leveling during the demonstration of wealth and power, may be Aldrete’s real contribution in this volume. He rightly points out the power this ritual gave to the common people in the city of Rome in particular as the setting for most of these acclamations. However, the process was probably repeated wherever the emperor or members of his family were present (as a papyrus referring to the acclamation given to Germanicus in Egypt indicates, p. 114).

The appearance of any book addressing the use and meaning of gestures in the ancient world must be welcomed, but the present work has too much of the aftertaste of a dissertation to be a completely agreeable addition to the library. Probably this is the fault of the tenure system’s inflated valuation of research in hard covers, but that insight doesn’t help the reader. Throughout, there is little that is wrong (Antonius for Antoninus on pp. 117 and 131 is exceptional), but there are some extraneous topics that an editor might have eliminated (e.g., the history of the microphone on p. 74). Of the two sections of this study, the second, on acclamations, is the more valuable. The attention paid to audiences at each stage, while reflecting current scholarship on Roman society in general, is also to be applauded. What is wanting in the section on gestures is a treatment of the topic maturely rethought and fully presented.

References


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