

ROMAN EMPEROR AS THE WORLD RULER, AD 235–284

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ABSTRACT: Viewing the notions of *orbis* and *genus humanum* as ideological and political categories allowed to launch the idea of the Roman emperor's rule over the world in the imperial propaganda. The idea was never fully developed and it was subjected to various alterations. The motif of the barbarian showed the dynamism of the myth. In the propaganda the emperor was sometimes viewed as the ruler of the whole world and not only the sovereign of the Roman Empire.

The ancient Romans claimed that their rule extended over the whole of the *orbis terrarum*. The idea was stated as early as the late Republic: “imperium orbis terrae cui imperio omnes gentes, reges, nationes partim vi, partim voluntate consenserunt” (*Rhet. Her.* IV 13). In that respect the examples, drawn by Joseph Vogt from the writings of various ancient authors and quoted in his study of 1929, are quite typical. It appears from them that the notions of *orbis*, *orbis terrarum*, *totus orbis*, viewed as equivalent to the Roman world and state, served to express a deep-rooted conviction that the Romans had established their rule over the world¹. Nonetheless, such a conclusion involves contradictions. No political formation could dominate the terrestrial sphere, the greatest part of which was still unexplored, and the ancients were well-aware of this fact:

Orbis terrarum qui sub caelo est quattuor regionibus incolitur. Una pars eius est in qua nos habitamus; altera huic contraria, quam qui incolunt vocantur antichthones; quarum inferiores duae ex contrario harum sitae, quas qui [eo] incolunt vocantur antipodes (Ampelius, *Lib. mem.* 6, 1).

The term *orbis* in its narrower meaning, in the sense of the Greek *oikoumene*², comprises the representation of the whole inhabited world, though the Imperium Romanum covered that geographical space in part only. The Romans

¹ Vogt 1929: 5–7. See also Christ 1938: 115–120; Rösger 1983: 255–273; Mastino 1986: 63–162.

² Compare the definition of *oikoumene* in Kaerst 1903: 15 f. (in the geographical sense), 22–24 (the Roman civilisation which unites its inhabitants). See also Romm 1992: 37.