An Age of Iron and Rust: Cassius Dio and the History of His Time

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For my grandmother, Carol Mancini

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**Introduction: Cassius Dio in the Age of Iron and Rust**

The year 192 CE witnessed extraordinary performances by Commodus, Roman emperor and son of Marcus Aurelius. In these games, Commodus sometimes fought as a gladiator and dressed in the guise of Mercury or Hercules or else in silk or Indian garb, excelling especially in the hunt. On the first day he shot down one hundred bears, taking breaks to cool himself with chilled wine drunk from a club-shaped cup, guzzled down in one gulp. The following morning, he cut down a tiger, a hippopotamus, and an elephant, in addition to numbers of other animals; in the afternoon he returned to fight as a gladiator.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While this display was not exactly novel, it certainly got the attention of one of its eyewitnesses, the second-generation Roman senator Cassius Dio, who was in attendance with his senatorial peers. These senators were not only in the arena, they were also shouting encouragement to their emperor: “You are master and you are first, you who are the most fortunate of all!”[[2]](#footnote-2) Not everyone was so excited: Dio reports that many of the Roman people did not enter the amphitheater, because of a rumor that Commodus wished to re-enact the story of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds, with some of the spectators as his quarry (73[72].20.1-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Despite their dutiful attendance, the fearful senators were threatened by the emperor. In this memorable scene, Commodus, having slain an ostrich, waved the bird’s head in front of the senators, “showing that he would do the same to us” (73[72].21.1-2 [Xiph.]: ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτι καὶ ἡμᾶς τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο δράσει). Although Dio saved the day by chewing on some laurel leaves to avoid detection of his laughter, and having his coevals do the same, the scene paints a bleak view of political life under the young emperor.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This event is direct evidence of the decline that Dio had already signaled at the end of the previous book. Upon the death of Marcus Aurelius, Dio included a lengthy obituary, which concludes with the following judgment (72[71].36.4 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]):

ἓν δ’ οὖν τοῦτο ἐς τὴν οὐκ εὐδαιμονίαν αὐτοῦ συνηνέχθη, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν καὶ θρέψας καὶ παιδεύσας ὡς οἷόν τε ἦν ἄριστα, πλεῖστον αὐτοῦ ὅσον διήμαρτε. περὶ οὗ ἤδη ῥητέον, ἀπὸ χρυσῆς τε βασιλείας ἐς σιδηρᾶν καὶ κατιωμένην τῶν τε πραγμάτων τοῖς τότε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν νῦν καταπεσούσης τῆς ἱστορίας.

But there was one thing that did not lead to his happiness; for although he raised his son and educated in the best way possible, he went astray from him to the greatest extent. We must now discuss this, as our history now our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day.

From a golden kingship to a period of iron and rust: this point in Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* marks a clear break between the peace and prosperity of the Antonines and the turmoil and embarrassment of the reign of Commodus. This notice also serves as another important turning point for Dio’s history, when it transitions from a period researched by Dio primarily through reading to one defined by Dio’s own autopsy and experiences as a Roman senator.[[4]](#footnote-4) Early in his Commodus narrative, Dio informs his reader that what follows will be an eyewitness history (73[72].4.2 [Xiph.]), in the great tradition established by Thucydides and practiced by many others. From this point on, Dio’s experience goes hand in hand with Rome’s descent and is the main source for the narrative of his own time.

The period that Dio covers in these final books, from about 180 to 229 CE, witnessed the end of the Antonines and the rise of the Severan dynasty, with a lengthy civil war in between. Commodus reigned as the heir to his father Marcus Aurelius from 180 until 192 CE, when he was brought down in a palace coup. His death ushered in a period of instability and civil war. His immediate successor was Pertinax, a coeval of Marcus Aurelius who attempted to restore a form of government where the *princeps* worked closely with the Senate. His reign, however, was a mere eighty-seven days (duly noted by Dio, 74[73].10.3 [Xiph.]), as he was murdered by a member of the praetorian guard in the palace. The praetorians continued to hold sway and handed power to Didius Julianus, who allegedly placed the highest bid for the empire in the form of payment to the guard.[[5]](#footnote-5) This action, however, was perceived as a signal by provincial generals that the position of *princeps* was unstable, and soon various contenders emerged. Septimius Severus was the first to claim the throne, eventually beating back Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus. By 197 CE Severus was the uncontested leader of the Roman world.

Septimius Severus’ reign stretched until 211 CE and attempted to restore a sense of stability and grandiosity. He advertised the fertility and harmony of his family, positioning his two sons as his heirs. He celebrated secular games, pushed social legislation, and presented himself as the bringer of a new golden age to Rome. This image quickly came crashing down, when his son Geta was murdered, allegedly at the hands of his older brother Caracalla, before the conclusion of their first year of joint rule. Caracalla was hostile to the Senate and spent much of his reign abroad. On the eve of his Parthian campaign, he was murdered in a plot orchestrated by his praetorian prefect Macrinus, who soon laid claim to the throne as Rome’s first equestrian emperor. Macrinus’ reign, however, would be a mere fourteen months, once he fell in civil war to the upstart Elagabalus, who claimed to be the son and legitimate heir of Caracalla. The accounts of Elagabalus’ reign are fantastical, portraying the young *princeps* as a perverted, barbarous priest emperor. He himself could not survive palace intrigue, and was replaced after four years by his young cousin Severus Alexander.

It was during the reign of Severus Alexander that Dio both held his second consulship and, threatened with violence by the Pannonian troops, was forced from his position in public life, back to his ancestral home in Bithynia (80[80].5.1 [Xiph.]). The period that he witnessed firsthand was one of transition, which could be seen alternatively as one of disturbance and discord (the civil wars of 193-197 and of 218 CE) or of stability (the reign of Septimius Severus and later Severus Alexander). Certainly, it was the time, in standard periodization, that preceded the “third century crisis”, which followed upon the assassination of Severus Alexander in 235 CE and sent Rome back into an extended period of civil war and disturbance, both in Rome and throughout the provinces.

We do not know how long Dio lived beyond 229 CE or how influenced he was, if at all, by this later period which we judge to have been so unstable. Rightly or wrongly, however, he has been criticized for not foreseeing the problems that would arise over the following half century.[[6]](#footnote-6) In general, Dio has been seen as inferior to predecessors such as Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, or Tacitus, and for a long time the use of his history was confined to mining it for historical information.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even when Dio writes contemporary historiography, a form generally held in high esteem by both ancient and modern commentators, this section of his work has come in for significant criticism.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This approach is deficient, as it places on Dio the burdens of the modern historian and their interests. Instead, it is better to understand Dio’s history as a retrospective examination at Rome’s past, as it tells Rome’s lengthy story, covering over 1,000 years from the city’s very beginnings. Likewise, we should see Dio’s history as a product of its time. Dio was moved to write history by the events of 193-197 CE, specifically Commodus’ death and subsequent civil wars and Septimius Severus’ rise to power (73[72].23 [Xiph.]). Dio’s career began with two relatively modest productions, frequently referred to as pamphlets, on the civil wars of 193-197 CE and on the signs that foretold Severus’ rise to power. Encouraged by support from his contemporaries and Septimius Severus himself, Dio took up the task of writing an entire history of Rome, initially up to the death of Septimius Severus, but extending insofar as Fortune allowed him.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Writing the history of his own time was surely a difficult task for Dio. In this book, I address a number of questions about how and why Dio shaped the narrative of this period in the ways that he did. The opening chapters consider Cassius Dio’s literary career and its implications for the creation of the *Roman History*; Dio’s connection to the Greco-Roman historiographic tradition; and his view of the Roman monarchy. Although these chapters deal with questions that have been the subject of debate for decades, if not longer, I consider them at length here because they inform the more sustained analysis of books 73[72]-80[80] that follows. The subsequent chapters address directly the unique methodology that Dio employs and how Dio used historical narrative to produce a history of an age of iron and rust. For Dio, the value of his history lay in his ability to see and interpret events on his own. The result is a bleak and disillusioned accounting of the decline of Roman governance, which had reached a golden age in the recent past before descending rapidly into a period of iron and rust. Dio’s overall goal is to examine the nature of Roman governance, especially monarchy, and to understand how monarchy degenerated in his own age. This goal is met by producing a history that also degenerates, for the which the only solution offered at the end is escape, from both Rome and politics as well as history writing. Dio’s text thus mirrors the disintegration of political life at Rome and portends an ominous future.

Opinion of Dio has significantly shifted over the past few decades, as numerous studies have demonstrated that Dio’s work was thematically driven and carefully written. The current study follows this approach, in an attempt to show that the contemporary portion was approached analytically, though with a significant, and purposeful, change in tone and approach. While studies of individual sections of the contemporary portion have been made, there are few that deal with this section of the work as a whole.[[10]](#footnote-10) The current study seeks to better understand the final books of the *History* and to situate them within the scope of Dio’s massive work. Dio’s understanding of the Roman past was necessarily influenced by his own experiences and outlook, and the contemporary portion was constructed to highlight and work within the themes that he had established in the earlier sections, thus making it possible to show that the various parts of Dio’s *History* were in constant conversation with each other.

*Survey of scholarship on Cassius Dio’s* Roman History

The last decades have seen a veritable explosion of Dio scholarship, an increase that would have been hard to imagine half a century ago. While Dio has inevitably been used as a source for various periods of Roman history, especially the end of the Republic and early Principate (for which he provides the longest continuous surviving narrative), his work has less often, until recently, been considered on its own literary or historiographic merits. In the following few paragraphs, I provide an overview of Dio studies over the past century or so, focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on monographs, commentaries, theses, and edited volumes.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Two studies of Dio’s history set the course for its reception in the twentieth century. The first is Schwartz’ *Realencyclopädie* article, published in 1899. This work was largely interested in source criticism, but also commented on the perceived intellectual bankruptcy of Dio’s historical thought. While Schwartz acknowledged the difficulty of Dio’s undertaking, he also noted that “in place of order there is a tedious schematization, and the self-restraint of the master [i.e., Thucydides] turns into a vagueness that gets in the way of the essential features. The reasoning itself is trivial, a shallow moralizing with common maxims… Dio’s unimaginative, dull imitation of Thucydidean expressions is singly irritating because one has to crack the nuts but find no kernels”.[[12]](#footnote-12) He found Dio guilty of excessive omission and of creating “a gray, shapeless mass” (Schwartz 1899, 1689: einer grauen, formlosen Masse), and he opines that Dio was harmed by too much rhetoric, a product of the education of the high empire (Schwartz 1899, 1690). Schwartz, however, saw some value in Dio’s history of the Principate, and especially for the history of his own age. For him, books 73[72]-80[80] were written with “increased freshness and precision” (Schwartz 1899, 1691: einer viel grösseren Frische und Praecision). This point of view, however, is a product of comparative sources. Schwartz claimed that Dio would have a better reputation if the final books survived in full, especially in comparison to the material in Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* (1691).

The next influential work on Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* was Millar’s (1964) seminal study, which somewhat paradoxically created a greater understanding of the *History* and closed off significant work on Dio for almost a generation. Millar’s book shared Schwartz’ generally low opinion of Dio’s history. Millar depicted the author as diligent but ultimately fatigued, having spent most of his resources collecting material and constructing his narrative. The size and scope of the work made it impossible for Dio, in Millar’s opinion, to provide an analytical framework for his history. Indeed, Dio was simply content to bring his history into existence.[[13]](#footnote-13) There can be little doubt that Millar was influenced by the prevailing view of his own and preceding generations, which understood Dio as a sort of Thucydides “pretender” whose analytical powers could not match the ambition and scope of his work, just as Schwartz had propounded decades earlier. But again like Schwartz, Millar (1964, 171) evinces an interest in books 73[72]-80[80], providing a general overview of this section but ending this chapter with criticisms of what Dio wrote and how he wrote about it.

Millar’s study, abetted by a general bias in the fields of Classics and ancient history against working on authors perceived of as inferior to the “greats”, such as Thucydides or Tacitus, exhausted many avenues of inquiry.[[14]](#footnote-14) In a sense, Millar’s book was not enough to save Dio’s reputation, even if it was later seen as a jumping off point for future scholarly undertakings.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, no other major work on Dio’s history appeared until Reinhold’s (1988) commentary on books 49-52, which was the first in a series of commentaries, under the group name “Dio Project”, that aimed to cover all of Dio’s history.[[16]](#footnote-16) This project had its genesis in the 1980s, but volumes have been produced slowly. Aside from Reinhold’s initial offering, Murison published a commentary on books 63[64]-67 in 1999, and Swan on books 55-56 in 2004. My own commentary, on the final three books, was published in 2018. Aside from this project, commentaries were also published by Edmondson (1992), on selections from the Julio-Claudian books; by Rich (1990), on the Augustan settlement; and Mallan (2020) on the reign of Tiberius (books 57-58). A series of commentaries in the Budé series has also appeared, covering (so far) a number of books from Dio’s surviving text: Lachenaud and Coudry (2011, 2014) on books 36-40; Freyburger, Hinard, and Cordier on books 41-42 (2002); Bertrand and Fromentin (2008, 2014) on books 45-47; Freyburger and Roddaz (1991, 1994) on books 48-51; Bellissime and Hurlet (2018) on book 53.

These commentaries were part of a change in the opinion of Dio in the 1980s and 1990s, and since that time a large number of publications have re-assessed the value of many aspects and sections of Dio’s text. A few examined Dio’s very fragmentary early books, such as the contribution of Simons (2009) and Urso (2005, 2013), which focus largely on Roman magistracies, significant historical turning points, and important characters in books 1-35. One can now add to this group the recent volume of Burden-Strevens and Lindholmer (2019), which collects essays that deal with various aspects of this first few decades of the history.

Other studies have responded to one of Dio’s main concerns, namely the causes of the decline of the Republic and Rome’s change to monarchy. Fechner (1986) looked at the Dio’s account of the Republic and his overall political thought. Lintott’s (1997a) contribution is still important, even if the outlook remains rather negative. The recent theses of Rees (2011) and Lindholmer (2017) explored the roles of jealousy, and competition in Dio’s conception of how Rome’s democracy destroyed itself, while Burden-Strevens’ (2020) monograph examined the role of speeches in Dio’s *History* in this period Likewise, the transition to monarchy, and especially the figure of Augustus, have received their due, as in the studies by Manuwald (1979), Rich (1989), and Madsen (2019, forthcoming a).

Several volumes have put Dio in conversation with other authors in enlightening ways. Gowing (1992) published a comparative study of the triumviral narratives of Appian and Dio. Sion-Jenkis (2000), in a work that covers many more authors than Dio, has examined the reception in ancient authors of the changes in government as Rome moved from Republic to Principate, while Carsana (1990) examined the views of various authors on the mixed constitution, including Dio’s. Hose (1994) produced a study of Florus, Appian, and Dio (as well as some fragmentary historians) and Kuhn-Chen (2002) focused on Appian, Dio, and Herodian. These studies, generally speaking, allowed Dio more freedom of thought, each arguing that Dio put his own stamp on the source material that he employed.

Dio’s contemporary books have also received increased attention since the 1980s. The important study of Bering-Staschewski (1981) demonstrated how Dio set up Marcus Aurelius as a paradigm against which his contemporary emperors would be judged. Other studies have had more mixed results. Rubin (1980) provided an examination of the effect of Septimius’ Severus propaganda on Dio (as well as on Herodian and the author of the *Historia Augusta*), concluding, with regard to Dio, that our author was more or less an aider and abettor of Severus. Schmidt’s (1997) *ANRW* chapter also took a conservative approach, much in the vein of Millar, with its focus on Dio’s time of writing and Dio’s relationship to Severus. These questions are of course important, but they would not be significantly moved forward until the work of Kemezis (2014), whose more wide-ranging work argued that the contemporary portion was written in direct contrast to the official messaging of the Severans.

Most recently, two international networks, centered in France and Denmark, respectively, have continued the trend of re-evaluating Dio. The French network brought forth a hefty, two-volume collection of essays in 2016, which takes a rather systematic approach to Dio and positions itself as a next step after Millar. These essays cover virtually all aspects of Dio’s history, including source criticism, political and historical views, Dio’s persona and career, and much more. On the Danish side, several volumes, which generally take a thematic approach, have been published: Lange and Madsen (2016) on Dio’s political and cultural background; Osgood and Baron (2019) on the Late Republic; Lange and Scott (2020) on violence, war, and civil war; Madsen and Lange (2021) on Dio’s historical methods and Kemezis, Bailey, and Poletti (2022) on Dio’s place in cultural milieu of the second and third centuries CE. A companion (Madsen and Scott, forthcoming) has also recently appeared.

Recent trends in scholarship on Dio have pushed analyses in two directions. One strand focuses on Dio’s stance as a monarchist, his approval of the figure of Augustus (in broad outline, if not on every specific detail), and his subsequent condemnation of the Severan dynasty as a failure of Augustan-type monarchy. A second strand sees Dio’s work as more of a literary project that sought to overturn the messaging of the Severan house, especially that of Septimius Severus. These views are not diametrically opposed, but they diverge in their take on Dio’s overall project: a long-range view of the past, or more of an immediate response to Dio’s contemporary circumstances. I will deal with this question throughout the book, but it is worth noting here that my approach is a sort of middle road between these two views. As I will elaborate later, I argue that Dio wrote an *ab urbe condita* in order to put the Severan period into the overall context of the Roman past, which allowed him to best explain how his contemporary world marked a failure in leadership in comparison to the models of the past, and indeed was a period that needed a new history because the Roman past was so poorly understood by those of his own day.

*The remains of the contemporary books*

Like much of Cassius Dio’s *History*, we rely for books 73[72]-80[80] largely on the epitome of John Xiphilinus. In the eleventh century, Xiphilinus produced an epitome of books 36-80 of Dio’s history, and he is the primary source for the reconstruction of Dio’s text for books 61-80. Comparison to Dio’s surviving text shows Xiphilinus to be a faithful copyist, though he sometimes provides his own commentary on particular situations.[[17]](#footnote-17) His selection of material tends to be highly biographical, which has the possibility of shifting the emphases of Dio’s original text.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This epitome is supplemented by passages from the *Excerpta Constantiniana* that are attributable to Dio.[[19]](#footnote-19) For the section of the text in question, we are mostly concerned with the *Excerpta de Virtutibus et Vitiis* (*Excerpts on Virtues and Vices*), referred to in this book with the abbreviation *Exc*. *Val*.[[20]](#footnote-20) Others derive from the *Excerpta de Sententiis* (*Excerpts on Gnomic Statements*), abbreviated here as *Exc*. *Vat*.[[21]](#footnote-21) Zonaras, who in the twelfth century produced an *Epitome of Histories*, which is most important for reconstructing books 1-21 of Dio’s history (and sometimes supplements other sources for books 44-67) makes one contribution to the section of Dio’s text under discussion (80[79].16.7).

One section of Dio’s original text, however, survives for these books. A single manuscript, *Codex Vaticanus Graecus* 1288 (fifth or sixth century CE), contains the text of 79[78].2.2-80[79].8.3, though at times it is lacunose.[[22]](#footnote-22) This book details the assassination of Caracalla, the brief reign of Macrinus, and the rise and early reign of Elagabalus. It provides interesting insight into what an entire book from this section of Dio’s history might look like, though it is difficult to know how far its content and form and can extrapolated across other contemporary books (see further below).

This book is therefore a study of a part of Dio’s text that does not survive in full, a situation that raises several questions, not least of which is whether what we have of books 73[72]-80[80] is representative of what Dio included in them in their original form. We can approach this question in several ways. First, how does the length of the epitomized books compare to books that survive in full? How does the content of book 79[78], which survives nearly in full, compare with Xiphilinus’ epitome of that book and to the content of the other contemporary books? What indications do we have about the structure of these books individually and in comparison with one another? And finally, since we rely primarily on Xiphilinus for the text of these final books, how do the predilections and preferences of the epitomator affect our reading of this section of the history? We should note that modern scholars have generally allowed that Xiphilinus’ epitome, while abridging Dio’s text, still provides enough detail from which we can glean Dio’s attitudes toward the events of his own age. Sometimes the issue is barely countenanced, as in Millar’s chapter on Dio’s contemporary books. Other have looked more specifically at Xiphilinus’ faithfulness to Dio’s text and his preferences in epitomization. Still, Andrews (2019, 48-62) has recently, and rightly, pointed to the limitations of Dio’s text, and those concerns require a response.

Books 36-56 remain largely intact, and a tallying of pages in Boissevain’s edition reveals that they average just under 32 pages per book, with the lowest page count being 27 (book 51) and the highest being 43 (book 48); most books range between 34-39 pages. When we turn to books 73[72]-80[80], we find that the average page count is about 20.5 per book; the shortest books are 16 pages (books 76[75] and 77[76]), whereas the highest is 30 pages (book 78[77]). In these latter calculations, I have left out book 79[78], which survives in large part in *Codex Vaticanus* 1288. This book covers 49 pages in Boissevain’s edition, though that number is skewed by Boissevain’s extensive *apparatus criticus*, which makes the book longer than even the longest fully surviving book (48). This basic survey suggests that in Xiphilinus’ epitome (plus supplemental excerpts), we have close to two-thirds of Dio’s original text, though sometimes as little as about one half.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The contents of these epitomized books were of course shaped by Xiphilinus’ choices and his preferences for the type of material that was relevant to his eleventh-century project. Xiphilinus was largely interested in the character of the emperors, and decidedly less so with matters of interest to modern prosopographers or military historians. Thus, for example, in the surviving book 79[78], Dio includes an in-depth listing of Macrinus’ appointments (79[78].12-15), though this section is largely passed over by Xiphilinus.[[24]](#footnote-24) This preference might also explain why Dio’s book on Caracalla (78[77]) is epitomized at greater length by Xiphilinus than the other of contemporary books (and those on Commodus and Elagabalus clock in longer than the ones on Septimius Severus). Dio seems to have been more interested in the character of these emperors, both for reasons specific to their manner of rule and because their reigns were generally less eventful than that of Septimius Severus.[[25]](#footnote-25)

By another approach, we can trace themes throughout these books, ones that resonate also with earlier parts of the work (cf. Andrews 2019, 63). It seems that Dio was interested in how young emperors presented themselves publicly, a theme that runs through and connects the reigns of Caligula, Nero, Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus. Dio was also concerned with the best method of succession, as seen in Hadrian’s adoption speech, Marcus Aurelius’ concerns over passing power to Commodus, and Severus’ decision to hand power to Caracalla and Geta.[[26]](#footnote-26) The ideal form of the emperor is explored in the figures of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius, and it is against these two characters that other emperors are implicitly (and at times explicitly) judged. We also do not need to limit this discussion to the books on the Principate. Historical examples such as Sulla and Marius recur throughout the books that discover the Late Republic and the Principate. Perhaps most of all, civil strife rears its head early in the work and re-appears again and again, practically until the final lines of the history.

These themes are traceable throughout the work, whether we rely on fragments, epitomes, excerpts, or preserved portions of Dio’s original text. We of course must admit that we cannot know Dio’s opinion of every detail included in his history, and this study will not be concerned primarily with Dio’s attention to constitutional matters or a comprehensive accounting of key figures in his own day. Rather, it will focus on the themes of the history, Dio’s self-presentation and its effect on the text, and the historian’s method of recounting a period that he himself witnessed. Most of all it will assess how Dio thought the contemporary portion fit into the work as a whole and why it was important to present it in such a way. But before going into greater detail about the plan of the work, it will be necessary to lay out some basic ideas about how we should approach books 73[72]-80[80] of Dio’s *Roman History*.

*Approaching the contemporary history*

Contemporary historiography has, generally, been the most valued form of history writing in both antiquity and the modern day. The immediacy and vividness of a contemporary narrative were considered mirror is accuracy and trustworthiness, in the belief that memories faded and stories became fantastical over time.[[27]](#footnote-27) On the other hand, later sources that treat earlier events have been seen as too influenced by subsequent events and the concerns of their own day.

These views have specifically affected the reputation of Cassius Dio and his *Roman History*. The portions that survive in full, which detail the Late Republic through the reign of Claudius, have most often been mined for information, as well as criticized for their alleged mistakes, omissions, and misunderstandings. The contemporary books, on the other hand, though surviving only in epitome and excerpts, have been valued as an important source that is superior to the other surviving texts. Millar (1964, 119) opens his chapter on Dio’s contemporary books thus:

It could be said of Dio as of Livy, that we would willingly exchange what we have of his for what we have not. On the one hand, while Dio’s history of Augustus is of the greatest value, the complex political and military events of the late Republic were a hopeless task for his narrative technique. On the other, the straight narration of the early Republican history would have suited him perfectly, though the account might not have given many new facts or insights; and above all the full version of what he wrote about the obscure period of the Antonines and of his eyewitness record of the Severan age would be beyond all price.[[28]](#footnote-28)

There turns out to be a disconnect, however, between this introductory statement and Millar’s overall conclusion about these final books of the *History*:

Dio was no Polybius. In writing the history of his own times he had no conscious historical theory or framework, but was simply concerned to carry on his History as far as fate would allow. The result is inevitably disappointed…

These criticisms bring up a number of important questions. What is the value of the contemporary books as a historical source (and what are their limitations)? Is the contemporary history a self-contained narrative within the *Roman History*? What is its relationship to the rest of the *Roman History*?

We might treat the final questions first. Just as he does for other sections of the history, Dio is careful to set off the final books from what comes before, in terms of both method and content. He clearly marks the place where he becomes an eyewitness of events early in the reign of Commodus, and he apologizes for the diminished and unworthy content of the history from that point forward. This latter point is important, as it correlates with his claim that following death of Marcus Aurelius that his history descended into a period of iron and rust.

Thematically, however, the contemporary books have concerns similar to the ones that came before, especially Dio’s unease about the state of Rome’s monarchy. For Dio, monarchy was the best form of government for Rome, and the first fifty-one books of the history chart the evolution of Rome’s government from kingship to democracy to monarchy. Once monarchy was fully established by Augustus (53.17.1), Dio traces its development over time. Among Dio’s main interests was the maintenance of links to tradition, such as in his concern over imperial self-presentation and the monarch’s relationship with the Senate, as well as the decline and (re)generation of the monarchy through civil war. These same concerns are found throughout the contemporary books, as they are in the decades that precede them.

A further question, recently raised by Andrews (2021, 309) is whether we ought to see the contemporary books as “an explanatory tool for understanding Dio’s earlier narrative”, or *vice versa*. An inclination of much scholarship on Dio has been to see his own experiences as informing his historical views, and thus his position as a third-century writer affecting his presentation of the Roman past.[[29]](#footnote-29) We must be careful not to fall into the trap that Dio has only presented his *Roman History* as a third century document, as that would diminish the extensive source material that he used to create his narrative of earlier period. Still, it is impossible to suggest that Dio was not affected by the circumstances of his own age. As such, we should see his narrative as a blending of his source material with his understanding of the Roman past, filtered as it was through his own experiences. This point is important, because instead of seeing Dio as a mere copyist of his source material prior to the contemporary books, we can understand his history as the creation of its author, with particular emphases and themes.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Recent scholarship has indeed stressed the uniqueness of Dio’s understanding of Roman history, going even back to his depiction of early Rome.[[31]](#footnote-31) Factional strife, conflict with and within the Senate, and competition and jealousy all play a role in Rome’s past from the city’s foundation through to the period of dynasts and the eventual fall of the Republic. For Dio, it was the monarchy that brought these issues to heel and created an equilibrium in Roman government and thus stability for Rome and its empire (44.2.1-4). Dio thus created his own vision of the Roman past, which must have been drawn from his research as well as his experiences and understanding of human nature.

This leaves us with a question about Dio’s experiences of his own age and the way that he transmitted in his history. The contemporary books are frequently said to have value, but they have also been seen as biased, reactionary, gossipy, and unreliable.[[32]](#footnote-32) Yet these charges misunderstand the goal of the ancient historian, who strove to produce a believable account that was a reflection of the events narrated. A related issue is Dio’s ability as a historian, especially in the final books. Millar’s view, seen above, was that Dio was content to write until he no longer could and that his narrative form was unsuitable for historical analysis. This study takes the opposite view, that Dio intended to craft a sustained and considered analysis of the Roman past.

*Plan of this study*

In assessing the contemporary portion of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History*, this study takes a wide view. It begins with an overview and evaluation of Cassius Dio’s literary career and an attempt to clearly lay out how Dio came to write history, how his earlier works relate to and differ from the *Roman History*, and how the *Roman History* was the product of a later period, far removed from the immediate events that informed his first literary works.

The second chapter evaluates Cassius Dio’s relationship to the Greco-Roman historiographic tradition, through three major ideas: writing an annalistic Roman history *ab urbe condita*; writing history under autocracy; and the influence of debates over the best type of constitution. While sometimes noted, less appreciated has been how unique Dio’s contribution to the tradition is. After Livy (or even in the decades before his work), writing from Rome’s foundation fell out of fashion, with historians instead preferring to explore the recent past, which remained the norm into the second century CE. From that point, aside from the war monographs that seem to have been produced under Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius, contemporary history writing in general seems to have almost disappeared. With his *Roman History*, Dio resurrects both *ab urbe condita* and contemporary historiography, telling the story of Rome’s past with a focus on constitutions, a concern that can be traced back to the historiography and philosophy of ancient Greece.

Chapter 3 flows directly from these observations, with its attention on Dio’s conception of the Roman monarchy. In this section, I review Dio’s ideas about the best form of monarchy for Rome and survey Dio’s depiction of monarchs from Augustus to his own time. The main argument in this chapter has to do with Dio’s contribution to the narration of the Roman past. As he was not the first to create this narrative for much of his history, I suggest that Dio’s particular stamp was his idea about civil war as a recurring phenomenon, borrowed from Thucydides but modified: no longer was civil war simply a destructive force, but actually was the necessary means by which Rome was first able to establish a proper monarchy and then re-create it after periods of decline. As for his own age, Dio suggests that the decline he witnessed was permanent, as the usual cycle of decline and renewal seems to have no longer been possible.

These opening chapters engage debates that have long surrounded the study of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History*, and they are important for the present work for a number of reasons. They lay out of the groundwork of my approach to Dio’s *History* by outlining the arc of his literary career, the purposes of his various works, the moment in which the *History* was ultimately completed, and the tradition by which Dio was both constrained and was also responding to. They also look back at other parts of the *History* and attempt to understand some of the major themes and ideas with which Dio was operating and which have specific bearing on the subsequent examination of the contemporary books.

Analysis of the contemporary books is carried out over the course of chapters 4 to 8, segmented according to the significant narrative portions of the text. The decline in Dio’s own day begins with the transition of power from Marcus Aurelius to his son Commodus in 180 CE. Chapter 4 examines this break, for it is at this point that Dio’s work transitions from a history of the past to one for which Dio was an eyewitness. Here I assess how Dio constructs the figure of Marcus Aurelius, especially with regard to Dio’s desire to present an idealized version of the *princeps*, even when it contrasted with contemporary views or the actions of bad emperors earlier in the history. As others have written, Commodus is then presented as his father’s opposite. My concern in this chapter has more to do with Dio’s change in historical methodology as his history transitions from father to son. Dio’s claims of autopsy help verify the atrocities that he witnesses during his lifetime and aim to elevate his version of events against others.

Informed by the arguments of these first four chapters, the second half of the book seeks to understand how and why Dio constructed his narrative of the Severan dynasty. This examination amounts to a series of close readings of Dio’s *History*, in an effort to elucidate the methods and message of the author over the final set of books. The first chapter in this section considers Dio’s depiction of the reign of Septimius Severus. It argues that Dio constructed his account of this reign in three parts, each informed by Severus’ pretense, a characteristic scorned by Dio elsewhere. Through his narrative, Dio argues that Severus was hardly the ideal emperor he claimed to be, an analysis that is buttressed by Dio’s eyewitness status.

The sixth chapter tackles the problem of Dio’s supposedly “mixed” depiction of Septimius Severus. As will be seen in the foregoing chapter, Dio thought negatively about various aspects of Severus’ reign, yet he curiously includes a positive obituary of the emperor. Rather than see this dichotomy as a product of Dio’s inconsistent technique, I will set this depiction against the other “mixed” depictions of the contemporary history, namely those of Pertinax and Macrinus. In each of these men Dio finds aspects to praise and aspects to blame. Rather than showing Dio’s inconsistency, they paint a portrait of period that had no good options for emperor, suggesting in turn that the chance of political consensus at Rome was dead.

The final two chapters assess the reigns of the later Severans. Dio’s Caracalla narrative, which begins in book 77[76] during the reign of Septimius Severus and ends in book 79[78], functions as an important connecting thread between the two halves of the Severan dynasty. This thread is picked up after Caracalla’s death and prior to the accession of Elagabalus with the figure of Julia Domna, who serves as the ultimate link between Septimius Severus and the emperors Elagabalus and Severus Alexander. Dio is keen to highlight the differences between image and reality, not only in this instance, but throughout his account of the reigns of Caracalla and Elagabalus. A major concern here is the perpetuation of young, inexperienced emperors. At the end of the Severan age we find a succession of three, and despite promises under Severus Alexander of a return to a golden age, Dio instead pairs the various threats that Rome and its empire faced with his own escape from public life.

At the end of this study, it will be possible to consider the contemporary history as a whole, which for Dio is crucial to understanding the overall arc of Rome’s monarchy to 229 CE. From a historiographic perspective, it is possible to observe that Dio presents his history as one of the few ways for correcting the problems that Rome faces: not with a series of suggestions on the best form of monarchy (though those can be found in the Agrippa-Maecenas debate), but through narrative. Dio suggests that the emperors of his own time did not fully understand Rome’s history, and so his work stands as a corrective to that misunderstanding.

This study helps us to continue to move beyond the idea that the contemporary portion of the *Roman History* was undertheorized and that the final books were a mere add-on, simply written as far as Dio could go. Instead, we see Dio’s work as a having a unified purpose and maintaining a consistent outlook throughout. While Dio did react to these emperors and their actions, the purpose was not an immediate rejoinder to the indignities of senatorial life at the time. Instead, Dio uses the story of his own time, and especially his status as an eyewitness, to create a unique account that attempted to get to the heart of political life in his time. With this account, Dio elevates (or re-elevates) the power of historiography to challenge the *status quo* and, despite Dio’s pessimism, to provide possibilities for how Rome might restore itself to a golden age.

**Chapter 1: Cassius Dio’s Literary Career**

In a single chapter in the surviving *Roman History* Cassius Dio provides tantalizing but partial details about his literary career. We learn that the *Roman History* was not Dio’s first work, but that he was the author of two shorter writings, composed and published during the reign of Septimius Severus, and that the approbation that Dio received, from the emperor himself and others, spurred Dio to compose the *Roman History* over a course of over two decades. The material that Dio provides in this chapter has been a matter of controversy and debate and has influenced and affected how the final books of the *Roman History* have been interpreted. It will therefore be necessary to review some of these issues and provide a reading of this passage, in combination with other parts of the *Roman History*.

The placement of this passage is important. It comes after Dio has narrated the death of Commodus and is about to embark on the wars and civil wars that followed the emperor’s demise.[[33]](#footnote-33) These wars and civil wars were what ultimately led Dio to write history, though the journey is a bit complicated. First, Dio reports that he had first written and published a “little book” (βιβλίον τι) about the dreams and signs that gave Severus an expectation of gaining the imperial power. Dio sent a copy of this text directly to the emperor himself and received a positive response in return. Severus’ reply, which Dio received in the evening, was followed by a dream, in which a divine force (τὸ δαιμόνιον) ordered Dio to write history.[[34]](#footnote-34) This historical work would cover the wars and civil wars that followed upon the death of Commodus. The emperor received a copy of this work as well and was also pleased by it, as were others. Dio then decided that he would write the affairs of the Romans, which he simply describes here as “everything else” (τἆλλα πάντα), and he would incorporate (ἐμβαλεῖν) his treatise on the wars and civil wars into this larger work. The larger *Roman History* would continue “as far as Tyche permitted” (73[72].23.3, μέχρις ἂν καὶ τῇ Τύχῃ δόξῃ).

In the final part of this passage, Dio praises the power of his protective deity, Tyche (73[72].23.4 [Xiph.]):

τὴν δὲ δὴ θεὸν ταύτην ἐπιρρωννύουσάν με πρὸς τὴν ἱστορίαν εὐλαβῶς πρὸς αὐτὴν καὶ ὀκνηρῶς διακείμενον, καὶ πονούμενον ἀπαγορεύοντά τε ἀνακτωμένην δι’ ὀνειράτων, καὶ καλὰς ἐλπίδας περὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος χρόνου διδοῦσάν μοι ὡς ὑπολειψομένου τὴν ἱστορίαν καὶ οὐδαμῶς ἀμαυρώσοντος, ἐπίσκοπον τῆς τοῦ βίου διαγωγῆς, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἴληχα, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο αὐτῇ ἀνάκειμαι.

This goddess gives me strength to continue my history when I become timid and disposed to shrink from it; when I grow weary and would resign the task, she wins me back by sending dreams; she inspires me with fair hopes that future time will permit my history to survive and never dim its lustre; she, it seems, has fallen to my lot as guardian of the course of my life, and therefore I have dedicated myself to her.

Finally, the passage concludes with a statement about the length of time, and effort, that Dio spent on writing the *Roman History* (73[72].23.5 [Xiph.]):

συνέλεξα δὲ πάντα τὰ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις μέχρι τῆς Σεουήρου μεταλλαγῆς πραχθέντα ἐν ἔτεσι δέκα, καὶ συνέγραψα ἐν ἄλλοις δώδεκα· τὰ γὰρ λοιπά, ὅπου ἂν καὶ προχωρήσῃ, γεγράψεται.

I spent ten years in collecting all the achievements of the Romans from the beginning down to the death of Severus, and twelve years more in composing my work. As for subsequent events, they also shall be recorded, down to whatever point it shall be permitted me.

This lengthy passage has been used to explain various aspects of Dio’s literary career: the content and dating of the earlier publications; and the time of composition of the *Roman History*, as well as its plan, form, and endpoint. A discussion of these various points will help clarify some aspects of Dio’s literary career and how we should understand this important passage within the context of the *Roman History*.

*The work on dreams and portents*

Cassius Dio’s first work dealt with the signs and portents that led to Septimius Severus’ rise to power. In addition to Dio, other sources report the signs that foretold Severus’ rise, no doubt reflecting the messaging of Severus himself, who wrote an autobiography that also likely included such information.[[35]](#footnote-35) Dio’s work could not have been published before 193 CE and was likely completed in or after 197 CE, when Severus defeated Clodius Albinus at Lugdunum and stood as emperor with no more rivals.[[36]](#footnote-36) Using evidence from Dio’s *Roman History*, we find Dio reporting that during the civil war between Severus and Albinus senators were still hesitant to take sides (76[75].4.2 [Xiph.]):

συγκινουμένης οὖν διὰ ταῦτα τῆς οἰκουμένης ἡμεῖς μὲν οἱ βουλευταὶ ἡσυχίαν ἤγομεν, ὅσοι μὴ πρὸς τοῦτον ἢ ἐκεῖνον φανερῶς ἀποκλίναντες ἐκοινώνουν σφίσι καὶ τῶν κινδύνων καὶ τῶν ἐλπίδων.

While, then, the entire world was disturbed by this situation, we senators remained quiet, at least as many of us as did not, by openly inclining to the one or the other, share their dangers and their hopes.

This passage suggests that it was not until after the Battle of Lugdunum that Dio was comfortable siding publicly with Severus, which the production of such a writing implies. Furthermore, it seems that Severus was only briefly in Rome in 196 and 197 CE, thus making Dio’s window for delivery of the document to Severus rather slim, and unlikely before those dates.[[37]](#footnote-37) Dio will also have wanted to allow time for Severus to have made such dreams and signs well known, and Dio might also have added to Severus’ record by “discovering” other applicable portents.

Why did Dio produce this work? The traditional view is that Dio hoped to secure his political position within the new regime and actively took up the role of Severan propagandist. This view is complicated by divergent opinions on Dio’s status under Septimius Severus. Some scholars have argued that Dio was both in and out of favor during Severus’ reign, which at times has been tied to a change in relationship between Dio and Severus after the publication of this work.[[38]](#footnote-38) We might take a more generous view, that, after the volatility of civil war, Dio’s work, and other works like it, were meant to forge a relationship between senators and emperor in an effort to show acceptance of the new regime and build consensus, which may have also been a purpose of the following work on wars and civil wars. This view is not incompatible with the idea that Dio was trying to preserve himself and his political career, but it shifts the view, slightly, from Dio merely as a sycophant of Severus who only later developed ideas about the best path forward for Rome’s monarchy.

*The work on wars and civil wars*

Cassius Dio’s second writing, and first historical work, has garnered much more comment and controversy than the first. As noticed above, Dio at the beginning of 73[72].23 writes that the work was about πόλεμοι… καὶ στάσεις μέγισται, a phrase that has caused some disagreement. Both Schmidt (1997, 2611-2613) and Slavich (2004, 152) have argued that the work only covered the civil war against Pescennius Niger and was published by mid-195 CE. They have arrived at this belief based on Dio’s statement that he no longer left this earlier work apart but incorporated it into the larger *Roman History*. Schmidt and Slavich have taken this statement quite literally and assumed that the positive tone of the earlier work must therefore be reflected in the *Roman History*. The year 195 CE becomes key for their argument, since in spring 195 CE Severus rehabilitated Commodus and claimed to be his brother, which elicited from Dio a condemnatory judgment in the *Roman History*.[[39]](#footnote-39) Thus, since only the civil war against Niger had been fought at that time, only those events were included in the monograph.

This thesis, which argues that Dio wrote only about a single civil war, is not tenable in the face of Dio’s claim that he wrote about “great wars and civil wars” (πόλεμοι… καὶ στάσεις μέγισται). The simpler and more straightforward reading of this phrase is that the work dealt with the wars and civil wars that followed the death of Commodus. These would include Severus’ civil wars against Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus, as well as Severus’ Parthian Wars.[[40]](#footnote-40) On linguistic grounds this reading is also the easiest. In this instance, Dio does not qualify the πόλεμοι, and if he meant it to mean “civil wars” he would have used the phrase πόλεμοι ἐμφύλιοι (or similar), as he frequently does elsewhere in the *Roman History*.[[41]](#footnote-41) It is also clear from comparison with other passages that στάσεις can mean civil wars.[[42]](#footnote-42) Likewise, Dio at times pairs πόλεμος ἐμφύλιος with στάσις, suggesting that in this passage he does not mean to equate πόλεμος alone with στάσις, but that he means to indicate foreign wars and civil wars.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Dio’s phrasing also seems to reflect the historical situation, for which the foreign and civil wars were closely intertwined. Septimius Severus began his first Parthian campaign in 195 CE, when the Osroëni and the Adiabeni in Mesopotamia revolted and attacked Nisibis (75[75].1.2 [*Exc. UG*]). This campaign was directly bound up in the civil war against Pescennius Niger, as they appear to have used the unrest caused by civil war as an opportunity to avenge prior defeats.[[44]](#footnote-44) Severus retook Nisibis and then sent forces to capture Adiabene.[[45]](#footnote-45) Quick on the heels of this campaign came the uprising of Clodius Albinus in 196 CE and the subsequent Battle of Lugdunum in 197 CE (76[75].4.1, 6.1-8). In that same year, Severus invaded Parthia and conducted a more extensive campaign than the earlier one, this time making a tripartite attack on the Seleucia and Ctesiphon, Mesopotamia, and Adiabene.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The civil war against Niger, the first Parthian campaign, and the civil war against Albinus were closely connected and should thus make up the πόλεμοι… καὶ στάσεις μέγισται mentioned by Dio. Severus’ own messaging, furthermore, tied both civil wars and both Parthian campaigns together, as we can see, for example, on the Severan arch in the Roman Forum, which was dedicated to Severus and his sons “on account of the restoration of the state and the expansion of the power of the Roman people” (*CIL* 6, 1033 = *ILS* 425: *ob rem publicam restitutam imperiumque populi Romani propagatum*). The phrase “*ob rem publicam restitutam*” is reminiscent of Augustus’ proclamation after the civil wars that he was the restorer of the state, which thus makes the Severan arch a civil war monument as much as it is a monument celebrating foreign victories.[[47]](#footnote-47) The connection among these conflicts seems to be reflected in Dio’s phrasing in this passage, and it should not surprising if Dio’s worked mirrored the emperor’s official messaging.

The arguments of Schmidt and Slavich also ignore Dio’s claim, noted above, that even by the time of Severus’ conflict with Albinus, many senators, including Dio, were not inclining to one side or the other; instead, Schimdt and Slavich suggest that Dio had become a partisan of Severus much earlier, for which there is little evidence in the *Roman History* or elsewhere. It is safer to assume that Dio produced this work after the publication of Severus’ autobiography and Severus’ Second Parthian War, and perhaps sent it to Severus as late as 202 or 204 CE.[[48]](#footnote-48) Although briefly in Rome in 197 CE, Severus was soon away from the capital again, campaigning in Parthia for several years and then traveling to Egypt.[[49]](#footnote-49) He celebrated his *decennalia* in Rome in 202 CE, and he was certainly in Rome in 204 CE for the celebration of the *ludi saeculares* (after an intervening trip to Africa and especially Lepcis Magna, his hometown).[[50]](#footnote-50) Millar (1964, 29) suggested that Severus would hardly have wanted the civil wars to crop up again at this point, though there is little to recommend this idea. It is certain that Dio would have presented Severus as the vanquisher of illegitimate rivals and the defender of the Roman state, which was in line with Severus’ own messaging. This might have reinforced some positive aspects of his reign at the ten-year anniversary of his rule, or slightly later at the *ludi saeculares*, an important event that trumpeted Severus’ rule and family.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Dio’s work must have tracked closely to Severan messaging, and Severus’ autobiography, likely published a few years prior, would have covered much of the same material.[[52]](#footnote-52) Severus’ work, which dealt with his early life and rise to power, was an apologetic text meant to atone for his behavior in civil war. In addition to absolving himself for responsibility for starting the wars against Niger and Albinus, he seems to have aimed at excusing the cruelty that he had exhibited.[[53]](#footnote-53) In addition, part of Severus’ messaging, as seen on the arch, must have been to portray himself not only as a civil war victor but also as a capable commander of foreign wars and defender of the Roman world.[[54]](#footnote-54) Since this messaging was bound together by the emperor himself, it seems likely that Dio’s work would have in some way mirrored it.

Dio’s book on wars and civil wars after the death of Commodus was one of many that dealt with Severus and his reign during this period, if we follow Herodian on the issue (2.15.6-7):

τῆς μὲν οὖν ὁδοιπορίας τοὺς σταθμούς, καὶ τὰ καθ’ ἑκάστην πόλιν αὐτῷ λεχθέντα, καὶ σημεῖα θείᾳ προνοίᾳ δόξαντα πολλάκις φανῆναι, χωρία τε ἕκαστα καὶ παρατάξεις, καὶ τὸν τῶν ἑκατέρωθεν πεσόντων ἀριθμὸν στρατιωτῶν ἐν ταῖς μάχαις, ἱστορίας τε πολλοὶ συγγραφεῖς καὶ ποιηταὶ μέτρῳ πλατύτερον συνέταξαν, ὑπόθεσιν ποιούμενοι πάσης τῆς πραγματείας τὸν Σεβήρου βίον. ἐμοὶ δὲ σκοπὸς ὑπάρχει ἐτῶν ἑβδομήκοντα πράξεις πολλῶν βασιλέων συντάξαντι γράψαι, ἃς αὐτὸς οἶδα. τὰ κορυφαιότατα τοίνυν καὶ συντέλειαν ἔχοντα τῶν κατὰ μέρος πεπραγμένων Σεβήρῳ ἐν τοῖς ἑξῆς διηγήσομαι, οὐδὲν οὔτε πρὸς χάριν ἐς ὕψος ἐξαίρων, ὥσπερ ἐποίησαν οἱ κατ’ ἐκεῖνον γράψαντες, οὔτε παραλείπων εἴ τι λόγου καὶ μνήμης ἄξιον.

The parts of his journey, what he said in each city, and the signs that seemed to appear often by divine providence, all the lands and battle formations, the number that fell on either side in the battles, many writers of history and poets have composed in sufficiently fuller detail, as they have made the life of Severus the focus of their work. I undertake to collect and write the actions, over a period of seventy years, of many emperors, which I myself have experienced. I will therefore describe those deeds of Severus that are the most significant and are of consequence, successively in chronological order. I will not praise his deeds to the heavens out of bias, just as did those who wrote during his lifetime, nor will I leave out anything worthy of record or remembrance.[[55]](#footnote-55)

It has been assumed that Dio was one of those who wrote “with bias” (πρὸς χάριν), which brings up a larger question about writing history of a period during which the emperor was living.[[56]](#footnote-56) Writing about a ruler during his lifetime was a hazardous endeavor for a historian, since he risked either offending that ruler or opening himself up to charges of bias (or both).[[57]](#footnote-57) Herodian’s criticism echoes the words of others, perhaps most pertinently Tacitus’s views on the historiography of the early Principate (*Ann.* 1.1.2-3).[[58]](#footnote-58) There, Tacitus claims that under Augustus upright characters were available for recording the deeds of this age, until they were overtaken by the sycophants. Likewise, Augustus’ successors, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, were the subjects of false history, written on account of fear, and it was not until after their death that the record was reversed, though too severely because of hatred. While Tacitus’ overall point in this passage is to stress his own impartiality, and thus his reliability, the claim is striking because it assumes that contemporary historians could not write accurate histories during the Principate.

Lucian takes on this topic specifically throughout the course of his *How to Write History*. Using Lucius Verus’ recent Parthian campaign and the works sprung from it as his starting point, Lucian is highly critical of the encomiastic bent of much historiography of his own day (*Hist. conscr.* 2). He laments the fact that most histories do not record events, but rather praise rulers and generals and confuse history and encomium.[[59]](#footnote-59) In Lucian's view, most of the histories of his own day were written with a view to the benefit that might accrue to its author.[[60]](#footnote-60) Instead, Lucian advises that historians be free from bias and influence (*Hist. conscr.* 38; cf. 61). Taking his cue from Lucian, Fornara (1983, 103) comments that under the Principate, “[h]istory became the province of opportunists”.

A broader view has been taken Woodman (1977, 38), who has written that “[h]istorians were required to demonstrate their patriotism by describing the principate of the living emperor as a period of progress, harmony and success”. This understanding focuses less on the personal benefits of writing about a living emperor and emphasizes the positive state of affairs under which emperor and subject lived. Although one might argue that the difference between the views of Fornara and Woodman is simply a matter of emphasis, it is worth remembering that panegyric maintained a place in history writing. For example, Lucian allows that praise does have its place in historiography, so long as it is applied with restraint (*Hist. conscr.* 9). This consideration is in line with the general belief in historiography as a genre of praise and blame; one may do either, so long as charges of bias are avoided or explained away. Woodman’s view is important because it provides the work with a political purpose, which was to orient the current ruler toward acknowledging his place in the longer arc of Rome’s past, while also possibly functioning as a way to build consensus and allowing senators and others to have a say in what sort of world they were living in.

In this vein we might consider a different approach to Dio’s first writings, one that goes beyond mere encomium. As noted above, Dio was not the only one to produce a work about Severus, and that group of writings included Severus’ own autobiography. This autobiography, and the surfeit of works written about Severus by other contemporaries, can be seen as part of a negotiation, largely with the Senate, over the next steps forward after the civil wars of 193-197 CE. While this work was partisan, it was also part of a competition to control the narrative of the events.[[61]](#footnote-61) If we approach Dio’s writing on the conflicts of the mid-190s in the same vein, then we can understand it as both praising Severus and attempting to push the new *princeps* in a particular direction. Such an approach understands the work as akin to Pliny’s *Panegyricus*, which, while fulsome in its praise of Trajan, was also attempting to influence the new emperor, or Tacitus’ *Agricola*, which warned against the excesses of a recently fallen tyrant.[[62]](#footnote-62) For Dio, the key would have been nudging Severus toward the *civiltas* that he would go on to ascribe to the better emperors in his *Roman History*.[[63]](#footnote-63) The earlier work can function as something akin to Dio’s belief that the emperor should work closely with the best men and maintain a monarchy that is imbued with civility, an idea that underpins his entire depiction of the Principate in his *Roman History*.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Because nothing of Dio’s monograph survives, it is difficult to draw exact conclusions. But because Dio reports that he incorporated the earlier work into his larger history, we may be able to pinpoint a few areas where Dio was mixing praise and encouragement.[[65]](#footnote-65) One such passage might be Severus’ entry into Rome as emperor in 193 CE. Dio (75[74].2.1-6 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]) describes a wondrous, peaceful spectacle witnessed and celebrated by nearly all in Rome. Crucially, Dio describes how Severus approached Rome in his military outfit but made sure to change into civilian clothes before entering the city. This description differs from the threatening scene described by the *Historia Augusta* (*Sev*. 7.1-9) and may contain a residue of Severan propaganda.[[66]](#footnote-66) But we might also read it as a way for Dio to stress to the new emperor the best way to carry out his civil functions in Rome – that is, with a feeling of consensus and in an environment of calm and peace. Likewise, Dio includes details of interactions with the Senate after the conclusion of the civil war with Niger. Dio singles out the figure of Cassius Clemens, who did not favor Severus in the civil war but was permitted to speak frankly and was lightly punished (75[74].9.1-4 [Xiph.]). Just as Severus had to apologize for his cruelty, so this example would help bolster that defense. But it could also serve as encouragement for the new emperor to recognize the importance of frank speech for his senatorial counterparts.

Because of the uncertainty of the contents of the monograph versus what ended up in Dio’s *Roman History*, we might not push these ideas too far. But this approach helps mediate the view that Dio turned abruptly from sycophant to critic (an issue that will be further explored below). The shorter works were part of his life as a senator. They were not outside of literary norms for the Principate and they can be understood as part of the negotiation with a new ruler in the aftermath of civil war. As we will see, however, the *Roman History* was quite a different sort of document, though similar issues of bias, time of writing, and purpose must be addressed.

*Cassius Dio’s* Roman History

Cassius Dio’s discussion of his first two, shorter works in the same context as the *Roman History* has greatly affected the way that scholars have approached the *Roman History*. Some of these issues have been glimpsed above, as in the discussion of how Dio incorporated the work on wars and civil wars into his larger history. Related concerns include the following. First is the thesis that the *Roman History* was written during Dio’s political career and thus is a sort of immediate response to his situation, like the first two works. Scholars that have pursued this approach have been faced with a related question: as a work of immediate response, at which point and/or why did Dio change his mind about Septimius Severus? The answers to this question have been tied to Dio’s political career, either under Severus or his successors, which in turn forces us to see the history as a reactionary and retaliatory work against emperors whom he did not like for various reasons. The final issue is the endpoint of the work. Based on 73[72].23, scholars have suggested that Dio meant to write merely as far as he could beyond the death of Septimius Severus, which implies that Dio had no real analytical plan for the three books that follow book 77[76]. The collective views understand the history, as scholars such as Schwartz (1899) and Millar (1964) did, as a work with little intellectual framework. In what follows, I discuss these concerns and offer a different, more fruitful approach to the *Roman* *History*.

The time of Dio’s composition has been, and continues to be, a matter of debate.[[67]](#footnote-67) Though not frequently acknowledged, the vividness with which Dio imbued his contemporary books, which positions the reader as an eyewitness to a number of intense situations, gives the impression that the work was written in almost real time.[[68]](#footnote-68) Combined with the “dating” that Dio provides for his *Roman History* at 73[72].23, this has led scholars to propose a time of composition that was quite close to the events as they occurred. According to this “early” dating, Dio began writing the *Roman History* (after ten years of research), during the reign of Septimius Severus and completed it, down to the death of Severus, in 217/218 CE (during the reign of Macrinus or Elagabalus).[[69]](#footnote-69) Over the following years, he brought the history to its endpoint, which was his retirement in 229 CE. This view necessarily sees both of Dio’s early works completed and published by 196/197 CE and work on the *Roman History* begun immediately afterwards.

A modified version of this theory places the time of compositions slightly later. This was proposed a century ago by Vrind and has been followed, more recently, by several others.[[70]](#footnote-70) This view situates the beginning of research a few years later, in 201/202 CE and has composition extend until 223/224 CE. An adjunct to this view is the suggestion that Dio wrote a first and second edition of the work.[[71]](#footnote-71) The first edition (down to the death of Severus) was completed around 223 CE and was later revised and extended down to Dio’s retirement in 229 CE. The extent of this revision has been a matter of debate, but has generally been seen as light, with Dio inserting some negative commentary especially about Septimius Severus and thus changing the overall tone of his depiction of the emperor from one edition to the next.

The proposal of two editions is evidence of some of the major problems with these two datings. There is no mention by Dio at 73[72].23 that he composed the work in this manner, and most arguments are based on the premise that Dio initially began his work during Severus’ reign and wrote in praise of the emperor. Thus, supposed internal evidence has been used to prove where later insertions were made.[[72]](#footnote-72) It also does not take into account the inconsistency between Dio’s laborious effort to complete about 76 books in twelve years, while finishing the final four in a period of another seven to ten years.

A later dating, advanced by Letta (1979) and Barnes (1984), provides a more logical approach to the question. This theory argues that Dio commenced research for the *Roman History* after the death of Septimius Severus in 211 CE and that he continued writing the history into the early 230s CE. Letta and Barnes make greater sense of Dio’s supposed “insertions” into the *Roman History*, focusing not on Dio’s political opinions that supposedly changed over time, but on information provided by Dio that reflects his experiences as a Roman magistrate and observer of events of his own age. For example, Dio adduces eyewitness knowledge of Thapsus in Africa (43.7.2) and Pannonia (49.36.4), which would have been the product of his governmental posts held in the 220s. Likewise, his discussion of the *ornamenta consularia* at 46.46.4 and comment that they were counted as a regular consulship numerous times in his own age means that the passage could not have been written until after 218 CE.[[73]](#footnote-73) Thus, these and other such examples suggest that Dio was writing the work well into the 220s, if not beyond.

It is frequently underemphasized that the one fact we know about Dio’s time of composition is that the *Roman History* was not completed until after 229 CE.[[74]](#footnote-74) While this fact led scholars to propose a revised second edition of the original work, it is easier to understand Dio’s *History* as composed during the latter part of his political career and especially during his retirement to Bithynia. This way, we can understand the work as informed by Dio’s experiences throughout his entire life and political career rather than an immediate response. Another important point in this passage at 73[72].23, which is not stressed enough, is the period of time that Dio provides for his research and writing, a total of twenty-two years. This tantalizing piece of information has been used primarily to calculate exactly which twenty-two years Dio spent in these activities. More importantly, the twenty-two years stress the long period of time that it took Dio to research and write his history.[[75]](#footnote-75) As noted above, it attests to the hard work and labor that Dio endured to write his *Roman History*. Just as importantly, it provides important chronological distance between Dio’s first writings and the later *Roman History*. This distance emphasizes that the first two works were much more immediate and much more of their own time and place, which is further underlined by the fact that Dio sent the works to the emperor Septimius Severus himself.

Despite the temporal distance between the genesis and completion of the work, Dio makes clear at 73[72].23 the important position that Septimius Severus would have for the history.[[76]](#footnote-76) This importance is reflected as well as 79[78].10, when Severus appears to Dio in a dream and instructs him to “learn accurately and write an account of all that is said and done” (πάντα καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα καὶ τὰ γιγνόμενα καὶ μάθῃς ἀκριβῶς καὶ συγγράψῃς). Dio situates this dream after the death of Caracalla. In this passage, Severus serves as another divine sign that encouraged Dio’s writing. Whereas Tyche had appeared to Dio previously, now it was the deceased emperor telling him to continue with his work. Thus, in the figure of Severus in Dio’s dream we find combined the living Severus who first encouraged Dio’s literary career and Severus as divine messenger urging him on. These statements raise an important question about Cassius Dio’s views of Septimius Severus. Dio has generally been seen as approving of Severus in the first two writings, while the portrayal in the *Roman History* is seen as “mixed”.[[77]](#footnote-77) This perceived change in tone has led scholars to try to find a turning point at which Dio revised his initial views about Severus. This discussion has, since Schwartz (1899, 1720), centered on the disappointment that Dio, who had put so much hope in Severus, felt when that emperor did not live up to expectations. More recently, Hose (2007, 464) has suggested that the civil wars of 193-197 CE changed Dio’s opinion about the internal composition of his work. For Hose, these civil wars were key events, and the need for an explanatory mechanism was found in Thucydides’ views of history and especially of human nature. In a similar vein, Zecchini (2016, 121-124) posits that Dio thought of Severus positively but that his experience of his successors changed his overall opinion.[[78]](#footnote-78)

In some ways, these responses are reasonable, or even expected, based on what information Dio reveals at 73[72].23. When the reader meets that passage, they have not yet waded deeply into the contemporary portion of the history. There has only been the indication that Rome was descending into a period of iron and rust – which is indeed proven by Dio’s account of the reign of Commodus. Dio, however, then sets up Septimius Severus as a savior from decline. Like Augustus and Vespasian, he would fight a civil war, which one expects would restore a proper form of monarchy.[[79]](#footnote-79) Dio also indicates favor toward Severus in his reporting of the two pamphlets that he wrote on his behalf. This consideration has led scholars to believe that Dio likely meant to show Severus’ reign as the return of a golden age in Rome, and he had plenty of Severus’ own propaganda to exploit.[[80]](#footnote-80)

There are reasons, however, to resist this reading. For the *Roman History*, Septimius Severus plays a crucial role, but in a much different way than in the earlier works. The wars and civil wars after the death of Commodus inspired all of Dio’s writings, and the figure of Septimius Severus emerged as essential character for all three. For the earlier writings, however, Severus was the living civil war victor and new emperor, with whom Dio (and his fellow senators, we presume) had to negotiate a path forward. For the *Roman History*, Severus is still key, and indeed Dio seems to have selected his death as his first targeted endpoint, what we might consider the point that Dio at minimum expected to reach. But most importantly, in this passage Dio writes of Severus as a deceased emperor. This fact in and of itself separates the first two works from the *Roman History*. Dio will not be sending a copy of the *Roman History* to Severus (or any other emperor, so far as we know). If Dio sacrificed the impression that he was writing without bias in the earlier works, he seems determined to reclaim that impression for himself in the *Roman History*.

We can return again to Dio’s call to history at 73[72].23. By choosing to discuss his literary career at the point he does, Dio conscientiously builds his authorial *persona*. In the past, he had written shorter, less consequential works, perhaps more laudatory of and in sync with the messaging of the existing regime. The *Roman History*, on the other hand, would have a grander sweep and a more detached author. This makes the placement of this aside crucial: just as we are about to embark on a history of the civil wars and the Severan period, Dio wishes to stress how he as a historian has changed, and he implicitly promises something different in this work, as compared to his earlier writings.

A final dream would indicate to Dio when to end his history, as he indicates in the closing of the work (80[80].5.2-3 [Xiph.]). In this passage, Dio states that the divine power (τὸ δαιμόνιον), also mentioned in 73[72].23, showed him that he would spend the rest of his life in Bithynia. The escape from danger circles back to the protections offered to Dio by Tyche, while the retirement from public life offers Dio a respite and opportunity to complete his history.[[81]](#footnote-81) These protections stress the dangers of senatorial life that Dio had faced and reflect the degradation of the Roman monarchy that he witnessed.

The connections among these passages are multiple, and they suggest that Dio formulated the three sections to form a coherent programmatic statement. Above all, they present Dio as a divinely inspired and protected author.They also reveal Dio’s changing path to the construction of his *Roman History*. By mentioning his earlier works and their direct connection to Septimius Severus as most significant audience member, Dio demonstrates how the current work will be grander and of a different nature. Dio knew that he was going to record some strange and hardly believable events. These presentations would run contrary to the official narratives of the respective reigns, so Dio needed to stake out some sort of semi-neutral ground on which he could stand as a historian.[[82]](#footnote-82) Dio seems to have decided to put that in full view in order to increase his trustworthiness as a guide for this period.

As a work of the 230s CE, Dio’s *Roman History* shows similarities to and differences between itself and the historiography of the previous century. The peace and increased *libertas* of the Antonine period turned history writing from oppositional to a buttress of the dynasty’s ideals and a way of championing ideas such as adoptive succession or the figure of the *civilis princeps*.[[83]](#footnote-83) Dio is in some ways an heir to these ideas, but he also signals the importance of the death of Commodus and subsequent civil wars both as the break between Antonine and what would follow and as the genesis of his history. He is therefore signaling to his reader at 73[72].23 his awareness of the change, for he saw it in his own literary career. But by the 230s, he no longer needed to please Septimius Severus, who was long dead. The *Roman History* was quite different than the two shorter works, in terms of scope, content, and message. It was not written for an immediate, contemporary audience, but no doubt, like Thucydides, Dio hoped that it would a possession for all time, as indicated at 73[72].23.4 [Xiph.].

These considerations reveal the main problem with the “early” or “middle” datings. Both see the *History* more or less complete by the early 220s, when Dio was a participant in Roman politics. There are two main options for explaining the completion of the work under these terms. The first is that Dio wrote his *History* largely in the shape that it now comes down to us (significantly critical of Septimius Severus) and hid this document away, only to finish off the final portions perhaps a decade later. An alternative is that Dio revised, perhaps slightly, the original manuscript and added the final four books. Neither of these possibilities is particularly attractive. The long gap assumed by the first possibility seems unlikely. As for the second, it plays into a traditional view of Dio’s *History* as lacking historical analysis and, in the case of his presentation of Septimius Severus, a muddled mess of opposing opinions from the insertion of negative material after an initially positive depiction. Thus, the late dating becomes the most attractive option, not only because it is plausible based on the details that Dio himself provides, but also because it follows with Dio’s indication that this history was written after the death of Severus and with more independence and critical distance than the earlier two writings. With the History, Dio was not participating in an immediate dialogue about the nature of the new regime but was constructing an analysis of Roman governance, and particularly Roman monarchy, that stretched over several centuries of the Roman past.

When Dio could have published such a work remains an intriguing question. Of Dio’s writings, we can only say securely that the pamphlets were, in some form, published, as they had at least been read by some peers and Septimius Severus himself.[[84]](#footnote-84) As for the *Roman History*, though one might speculate, there is little evidence to suggest that any portions were published.[[85]](#footnote-85) We know that Dio completed the work in retirement in his home in Bithynia, which suggests that the work saw publication either very late in his life or after his death, perhaps during the end of Severus Alexander’s reign.[[86]](#footnote-86) Eisman (1977, 667-668) explored the possibility that, given Dio’s critique of the Severans overall, the work, or at least its critical sections, were probably published posthumously. Kaldellis (2017, 52-53), on the other hand, has suggested that the work was published while Dio was living but away from Rome, during the latter part of Severus Alexander’s reign. It is difficult to decide between these two, as we know that Dio completed his work but also that it may have been uncomfortable, for Dio and the ruling house, to see such a work made public. Even if Severus Alexander was seeking to create distance from these two emperors, Dio’s history would have shown how interwoven his story was with theirs. There is no possibility of certain knowledge, and despite their seeming differences, the theories presented here are quite similar: the work was published when Dio was far removed from public life in Rome, whether that was in Bithynia or in death.

Thus far the discussion has avoided a biographical reading of the *History*, whereby the vicissitudes of Dio’s political career have been employed to explain the favor or disfavor he shows toward certain emperors. This approach runs counter to a strand of criticism about Dio and his history that centralizes these data.[[87]](#footnote-87) A biographical reading does harm to Dio’s autonomy as an author, as it takes from him any interpretative activity or historical framework for the history as a whole, and runs parallel with, for example, Millar’s views on the inadequacies of the contemporary books. Others have suggested that Dio’s revision of his earlier views, as expressed in the first two writings, have only muddled his opinions, as they stand in the *Roman History*.[[88]](#footnote-88) On the face of it, it would be curious if Dio decided to write an entire history of Rome in order to settle old scores with these emperors. A better argument, however, can also be made along interpretive grounds: namely, that throughout the history of the Principate, Dio establishes proper modes of comportment and behavior for his emperors and then judges them accordingly, including throughout the contemporary books. Without such a framework in place, Dio could open himself up to charges of bias. Furthermore, if we track Dio’s political career, as it is known to us, his advancement at times comes under emperors who he deeply criticizes in the *Roman History*.[[89]](#footnote-89) With these considerations in mind, we should discard the idea that Dio tried to use his history merely to take vengeance on emperors that he disliked during his life as a Roman senator.

*Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have attempted to tease out some of the finer points regarding Cassius Dio’s literary career and the differences between his first two writings, produced during the reign of the living emperor Septimius Severus, and his *Roman History*, researched and composed over a long period of time and published sometime after Dio’s retirement from public life in 229 CE. Approaches to this material have been influenced by two main concerns. The first is that Dio was writing in almost real time and was immediately responsive to events that he himself lived through; and the second, related point is that Dio approached the *Roman History*, and especially the contemporary books, with little analytical framework.

The discussion above has tried to look more closely at Dio’s programmatic statements and to contextualize his literary output. While little can be said with certainty, we perhaps should understand Dio’s first two writings as part of a post-civil war negotiation between senator (or Senate) and new emperor, aiming to positively influence Septimius Severus to become a sort of ideal *princeps*. The key here is that the audience for these works was both Dio’s peers and the emperor himself. The *Roman History*, however, had a much different aim, as it told the story of Rome’s monarchy and described both good and bad emperors along the way. But perhaps most importantly for this discussion, it was written at a remove that was not possible for the earlier works. As such, we should be cautious in how we discuss Dio’s approach to key figures from his own time, especially Septimius Severus and cognizant of the historiographical aspects Dio’s programmatic statements. Before approaching the figure of Septimius Severus directly, however, it will be useful to discuss in greater detail Dio’s historiographical project. The following chapters attempts to situate Dio’s work within the history of Roman historiography and contextualize his views on the best form of government.

**Chapter 2: Cassius Dio and the Historiographic Tradition**

When Cassius Dio decided to write his *Roman History*, tradition strongly suggested a particular format: an annalistic history *ab urbe condita* to the author’s own day. Yet if tradition suggested this, it was not from recent precedent. History *ab urbe condita* had not been written on a large scale since the time of Livy, and contemporary historiography had either also ceased to be written or had become largely apoliticized and an instrument for fealty toward the emperor.[[90]](#footnote-90) As seen in chapter 1, the Severan period gave birth to a renewed interest in history writing. Dio’s decision to write a Roman history came from the civil wars that occurred after the death of Commodus. For Dio, Commodus’ reign stood at the rupture between the high point of the Roman monarchy and its decline in Dio’s day. This rupture gave Dio the opportunity to consider the whole of the Roman past, primarily according to its shifting governmental forms. These developments led directly to the form of Roman monarchy under which Dio lived.

Although he chose to write an annalistic *ab urbe condita*, Cassius Dio bent this conventional approach to suit his needs, at the level of both content and form. Dio’s work, influenced strongly by Thucydidean thought, would tell the story of Rome’s change of governments over time. His emphasis on violence, strife, and civil war would be born out of both his research into the Roman past and his own experiences in Rome’s political life. He would infuse his work with a Greek tradition of analysis of governmental forms. Finally, by writing of his contemporary period, he would bring the entirety of the Roman past under the influence of his own experiences.

In what follows, which, it is hoped, is judiciously selective, I will consider the annalistic *ab urbe condita* form that Dio adopted and how he used it in his *Roman History*; the implications of writing to political history under a monarchy; and finally Dio’s decision to focus on constitutional forms as an outgrowth of the Greek historiographic tradition. It will be possible to trace Dio’s adherence to tradition as well as his innovations, which will provide a better understanding of some of his goals in composing his *Roman History*.

*Writing Roman History* ab urbe condita

From practically the beginning of Rome’s historiographic tradition, writing history *domi militiaeque* according to consular year and from the founding of the city was the dominant mode.[[91]](#footnote-91) Fabius Pictor began his work with the foundation of Rome (*FRHist*. 1 T 12) and may have also been written in annalistic format.[[92]](#footnote-92) Even if Fabius did not write annalistically, it was a mere generation later that L. Cassius Hemina, writing in the mid-second century BCE, and L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, perhaps writing a few decades after that, used that format, wrote *ab urbe condita* by consular year (for the period of the Republic), and likely brought their histories down to their own times.[[93]](#footnote-93)

For these early writers, who formed a narrative of the Roman past out of a conglomeration of legend, family stories, and some official records, returning to Rome’s origins allowed for a place of competition and antiquarianism.[[94]](#footnote-94) Much had to be explained, and details would of course have been contested.[[95]](#footnote-95) There was also the desire to explain Rome’s foundation to the broader world, especially as Rome became a dominant player in the Mediterranean after the Second Punic War. Incredibly, these works grew in size over time, suggesting that the interest in the distant Roman past was not abating.[[96]](#footnote-96) Whereas Piso’s history ran four or possibly five books, Gnaeus Gellius would soon produce a much longer work, from Rome’s foundation to at least 146 BCE, which reached only 216 BCE in book 30 or 33.[[97]](#footnote-97)

By the Late Republic annalistic writing from the foundation of the city was sometimes criticized as being “dry” or “meager” (*ieiunius*) and attention in this period turned to contemporary events, both for their content and because one could include their own activities in the narration of events. This change manifested itself in variations on the established form, with writers producing monographs, continuous histories, autobiographies and memoirs, and, in general, works that eschewed traveling back further in time in favor of analysis of more recent events. Yet the question of whether to write *ab urbe condita* or about more recent events appears to have been ever present for the Roman historian.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In the preface to his history, Livy seems to react to this preference for more recent history in the Late Republic and triumviral period, and his decision to write an annalistic history from the foundation of the city represents a response to the shift that had occurred over the previous generations.[[99]](#footnote-99) In his preface, Livy acknowledges that his contemporary reader likely wished to rush through the distant Roman past in order to get to more recent events (*pr*. 4-5). In some ways Livy’s history ultimately delivers satisfaction to his readers on this point, as he spends a significant portion of his 142 books on the events of the previous forty or fifty years.[[100]](#footnote-100) He is insistent at the outset, however, that there is value to be found in spending time with Rome’s more remote past, specifically for the examples of proper (or improper) behavior that they offer (*pr*. 6, 9). In this preface, Livy reveals one of the main reasons that he wished to go back to Rome’s foundation: writing in a society beset by various ills, the distant past was a place to look for a remedy. Still, Livy’s desire to linger in Rome’s past only forestalls the necessity of bringing the history down into the present. But even in his comments on the moral superiority of early Rome in comparison to the Rome of his day, Livy has already begun to tell the story of his present and how it interacted with the past.

It is important to remember that Livy, just as Dio would do later, returned to a traditional Roman historiographic form that had been neglected in the preceding generations. As we observe with Livy, the major changes of his own time sent Dio far into the Roman past. Dio was also greatly affected by the changes occurring around him, though he seems to have used the Roman past differently – not as a guide for behavior that might heal current maladies, but as a way of charting how Rome’s developed its various governments, and why exactly contemporary changes were occurring. Both authors, however, had to contend with writing under an autocratic government. It will therefore be useful to trace the development of historiography at Rome during the subsequent centuries both in terms of form and content, in order to see how autocracy affected the genre.

*Writing under autocracy*

The end of civil wars and the establishment of the Principate by Augustus brought a number of changes to how Roman history was written. During the Republic, history writing had been part of the competition between elites for status and honor. During the reign of Augustus, the ruler attempted to set a monopoly on these attributes. Over time, Augustus himself (and at times his family members) increasingly became the sole winners of glory and praise.[[101]](#footnote-101) Under certain emperors, the stakes of writing within a genre based on the binaries of praise and blame became fraught with danger or humiliation.[[102]](#footnote-102) During the Principate, we find authors who were at least half-reconciled to the monarchy and whose opposition was a rejection of the emperor himself, not the system of government.[[103]](#footnote-103) Historians would bemoan the nature of their material as being either less exciting or even unworthy of record, an issue compounded by the decreased flow of information under a monarchy. This seems to have led to a diminution of history writing, and especially contemporary history, from the second into the third centuries. Historians of this period were concerned with how they could manage relationships with the emperor and his household, how they could recognize an emperor’s dangerous characteristics, and how they could survive a bad emperor without losing self-respect. Other concerns included the preservation of liberty, specifically the preservation of free expression of opinion, and a strengthening of civilian rather than military concerns.[[104]](#footnote-104)

In this respect, Livy’s history somewhat uncomfortably spans the divide between Republic and Principate. The first five books were likely published in the early 20s BCE, making them something of a product both of the triumviral period and the first years of what we now call the reign of Augustus.[[105]](#footnote-105) This first pentad, of course, only detailed early Roman history, from the foundation of the city to the Gallic sack in the early fourth century, and it would be many years before Livy made it even to the events of the Late Republic.[[106]](#footnote-106) It is difficult to understand the full contents and tenor of these later books. From the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, Livy was writing “a history of his own time” and once he got to the events of the reign of Augustus, few had already done so.[[107]](#footnote-107) Livy may have focused his narrative more on foreign wars, which would have connected to earlier periods of Roman dominance, and avoided “awkward topics”.[[108]](#footnote-108) In any case, it was likely not until long after the events (likely after the turn of millennium) that Livy produced his narrative of the contentious events of the Late Republic. If the note added to the beginning of *perioche* 121 is correct, the events from 43 BCE onwards were perhaps not even published until after Augustus’ death.

In the period after Actium, other writers dealt with the civil wars of the recent past (Augustus included) much closer to the time that they occurred. The new *princeps* published his own memoirs in the mid-20s BCE, surely with the intention of explaining his role in the preceding conflicts. His account stood alongside a number of others. Asinius Pollio wrote his history soon after young Caesar’s victory at Actium, which seems to have concluded with the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE.[[109]](#footnote-109) M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus is a similar example. Fragments of his history do not cover events after Actium, which possibly suggests that the history was produced in the 20s BCE, around the same time as Augustus’ *de vita sua*.[[110]](#footnote-110) Cremutius Cordus was a bit younger, having been born in the triumviral period.[[111]](#footnote-111) It is likely that he took his history down to at least 18 BCE.[[112]](#footnote-112)

There is much debate about the tenor of these works and their attitudes toward the new *princeps*. Pollio had been a partisan of Antony and eventually remained neutral at the time of Actium (Vell. 2.86.3). He later divorced himself from public life and turned more fully to literary pursuits, opening up the *Atrium Libertatis* as the first public library in Rome.[[113]](#footnote-113) Agreement on his attitude toward the new *princeps* is lacking.[[114]](#footnote-114) Messalla fought at Philippi on the side of Brutus and Cassius (holding a high command), then joined Antony before finally fighting with young Caesar against Sextus Pompeius.[[115]](#footnote-115) He held the suffect consulship with young Caesar in 31 BCE and was a commander at Actium, and later won a triumph in 27 BCE. On the literary side, he was patron to a circle of poets, including Tibullus, Sulpicia, and Lygdamus, and he was a distinguished orator. Messalla remained engaged in politics and allied himself closely to the *princeps*, so closely that he led the Senate in proposing the title *pater patriae* for Augustus in 2 BCE (Suet. *Aug*. 58). Against this backdrop, it is likely that Messalla’s history told a story sympathetic to the *princeps*.[[116]](#footnote-116) Less can be said securely about the work of Cremutius Cordus. Cordus, famously, was said to have praised Brutus and Cassius, in a passage which also names Livy, Pollio, and Messalla as those who wrote positively about figures like Pompey, Brutus, and Cassius.[[117]](#footnote-117) This notice, however, tells us more about the memory of civil war fighters than it does about the authors’ attitudes toward the emperor.

Even though writing about the civil wars might have been fraught with peril, if we are to take seriously Horace’s (*Odes* 2.1.6-8) remarks about Pollio’s work, these examples suggest that Tacitus’ view of writing history under Augustus was accurate, that history could still be properly written, with freedom of speech.[[118]](#footnote-118) This appears to be further confirmed by later sources, in which we find in the historical record a portrait of young Caesar the triumvir that is frequently unflattering, as, for example, in the stories about his sacrifice of senators on the altar of Julius Caesar during the Perusine War.[[119]](#footnote-119) It was against these sorts of stories that Augustus was reacting through the publication of his own memoirs.[[120]](#footnote-120) In many ways this situation ran parallel with the historiography of the Late Republic and the use of memoir or autobiography alongside more traditional historical forms as a way to tell the story of one’s own time (and especially one’s own involvement in it).

An important question is whether this changed over time, either by consensus or by force. Though scarce, some information attests to episodes of censorship by the *princeps* later in his reign. Cassius Dio records, vaguely, that Augustus, discovering that “some vituperative pamphlets were being written concerning certain people” (56.27.1: βιβλία ἄττα ἐφ’ ὕβρει τινῶν συγγράφοιτο), ordered them to be burned both inside and outside the city, and punished some of the writers. This notice might refer to, among others, the work of Titus Labienus.[[121]](#footnote-121) Seneca (*contr*. 10, pr. 4-8) refers to Labienus as an orator with much freedom of speech (*libertas*) whose writings (*scripta*) were burned. This man was also a historian, and Seneca says that he remembers hearing Labienus recite some of his historical works and saying that he would omit certain parts, though they would be read after he died. Labienus did die, by suicide, after his works were destroyed. The full nature of his work is unknown, but it likely treated recent history and was oppositional to Augustus.[[122]](#footnote-122) A similar fate met the works of Cassius Severus.[[123]](#footnote-123) Also relevant here is the fact that Tacitus (*Ann*. 1.72) cites Augustus as the first to prosecute written libel under a charge of *maiestas*, which was expanded under Tiberius. Though this example involves an orator (not a historian), it adds to the impression that the liberty and license that seem to have existed in the earlier part of Augustus’ reign began to disintegrate as time passed. Our knowledge of historians from this period suggests that some wrote of the recent past, but few, in any, published works about the current regime.

Because of the large of number of lost histories from the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods, we tend to rely again on Tacitus for ideas about how history in that period was written. The quality of these works, and in fact the character of the historians themselves, were, for Tacitus, determined in large part by the change from Republic to Principate. In a passage mentioned above (*Ann*. 1.2), Tacitus writes that for the reigns of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero history was written in two ways: either with flattery of the emperors were still alive, or with hatred if written after their deaths. Tacitus advances similar ideas in the *Histories* (1.1), again seeing Actium and the change to monarchy as a turning point.[[124]](#footnote-124) There he praises the historians of the Republic and explains how history degraded during the Principate, a form of government that was necessary in order to achieve peace: writers did not understand politics since it was no longer their province, and later they desired to flatter or expressed hatred of the master.[[125]](#footnote-125) In a brief statement at the end of the second book of the *Histories*, Tacitus demonstrates that his concerns about earlier historians, present in the preface, also extended to those who wrote under the Flavians. Thus at *Hist*. 2.101, he writes:

*Scriptores temporum, qui potiente rerum Flavia domo monimenta belli huiusce composuerunt, curam pacis et amorem rei publicae, corruptas in adulationem causas, tradidere*.

The contemporary historians, who wrote their accounts of this war while the Flavian house occupied the throne, have indeed recorded their anxiety for peace and devotion to the State, falsifying motives in order to flatter.

Although this statement is made with regard to a single event, its ties to Tacitus’ earlier statements make it equally programmatic and highlight the failure of historiography, in Tacitus’ view, from Actium up to Tacitus’ own day.[[126]](#footnote-126)

It is hard to test Tacitus’ ideas against reality, since so little history writing from the Julio-Claudian period survives. We know, for example, that Aufidius Bassus wrote a *Bellum Germanicum* and a history of his own times (*FRHist*. 78 F 3-4). The history perhaps began with the Late Republican civil wars, and it seems to have ended sometime around 50 CE, though it may have been earlier.[[127]](#footnote-127) Bassus himself seems to have been an old man in the early 60s CE, and it is likely that he was writing of the events of his lifetime from a bit of distance.[[128]](#footnote-128) A second example is Servilius Nonianus, a senator and consul in 35 CE. His work, called *Annales*, likely went back to the civil wars, though the beginning and end dates of the history are obscure. It is possible that he should be classed in the group that Tacitus accuses of writing about emperors (dead or alive) with *ira et studium* (*FRHist*. 1.523). Seneca the Elder wrote *Histories*, which also began with the civil wars of the 40s BCE and proceeded up to his own lifetime. The work was not published while he was living, for which we can adduce several possible reasons: he died before finishing it, he did not want to be seen as flattering, or, the opposite, he feared retribution (*FRHist*. 1.506). Within this group we find here some continuity with the Augustan writers, who wrote about the recent past (with especial interest in the civil wars as a watershed moment), but not about the reign of the emperor under whom they lived (or, in the case of Seneca, forestalled publication).[[129]](#footnote-129)

The attention to the recent past appears to remain the same in the Flavian period, with writers like Pliny the Elder, Cluvius Rufus, and Fabius Rusticus. Pliny’s career as a writer of history began under Claudius and Nero, when he wrote his *Bella Germaniae*. Later, his general history continued Aufidius Bassus, seems to have ended in 71 CE with the triumph of Vespasian and Titus, and was written between 69 and 77 CE (*FRHist*. 1.532). Pliny, however, did not publish it, claiming that he did not want it to seem like a work meant to aid his ambition (*HN*, pr. 20). More obscure is the work by Cluvius Rufus, though it seems it detailed the reigns of Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (perhaps ending in 68 CE).[[130]](#footnote-130) A bit later is Fabius Rusticus, whose history may have covered from the reign of Caligula to the civil wars of 68-69 CE (*FRHist*. 1.570). From these examples, it seems that the situation is little unchanged from the Julio-Claudian period, as we continue to see a reluctance to write up (or publish) the history of the current regime, though in these instances some authors evince an interest in the civil wars of 68-69 CE. An exception to this is the work of Josephus, who published his work during the lifetimes of Vespasian and Titus but had to defend himself against charges of bias for doing so (*Vit*. 361-367).[[131]](#footnote-131)

Issues of bias were not the only problem with writing the history of the Roman Principate. A major problem was the subject itself. In a discussion of the various forms of government under which people live (democracy, oligarchy/aristocracy, or monarchy), Tacitus (*Ann*. 4.32) opines on the effect of government on the writing of history. Under monarchy, not only is freedom of speech restricted, but the subject matter for history is frivolous.[[132]](#footnote-132) He goes on to wish that no one compare his work to his Republican predecessors, whose subject was Roman success abroad and political turmoil at home and who had “freedom to explore”.[[133]](#footnote-133) His work, on the contrary, is narrow and inglorious (*nobis in arto et inglorius labor*), since peace was nearly constant, the events of the city were pitiable, and the *princeps* rarely wished to expand the empire. Nevertheless, he pleads, examination of these deeds might turn out to be profitable. The usefulness of Tacitus’ work is that it will help distinguish the honorable from the dishonorable, since most people learn by example (4.33). Tacitus also generalizes about his material, which differs from the topographies, battles, and deaths of leaders that readers want to learn about; Tacitus, instead, must write about harsh orders, perpetual accusations, false friendships, the ruin of innocent people and always the same reasons for their demise (*saeva iussa, continuas accusationes, fallaces amicitias, perniciem innocentium et easdem exitii causas*). This material is again contrasted with the works of old, which were written without one being punished for praising Carthage more than Rome. Now Tacitus even has trouble recounting the base deeds of the early Principate because relatives of those whose deeds are recounted are still alive, or people see their actions in those thus described.[[134]](#footnote-134)

These concerns preface Tacitus’ account of the fall of Cremutius Cordus, accused by agents of Sejanus of *maiestas* for praising Brutus and Cassius in his history. Cordus defends himself with a speech, citing others, including Livy, Asinius Pollio, and Messalla Corvinus, who wrote favorably about Brutus and Cassius and who were nevertheless not put on trial for doing so. This episode has generally been taken as a defense of freedom of speech under the Principate and as evidence that higher minded rulers would allow such discourse. On the other hand, oppressive rulers, such as Tiberius in this episode, would not allow it. A writer like Cremutius Cordus could exist under a superior emperor like Augustus, but things become problematic under one less so. Tacitus therefore presents this episode as a comment on the relationship between the historian as the guardian of ancient Roman standards and the imperial power that threatens them.[[135]](#footnote-135)

An important takeaway from the Cordus episode is that historians of the Principate tended to write histories of their own times, but almost always of the recent past rather than of the reigns of current emperors, as noted in the examples above. These works were an attempt to come to terms with the unresolved issues associated with great periods of change. The animating questions were what happened to the Republic, where this new form of government had come from, and how to find a way forward. It is likely that these histories were meant to comment on the nature of monarchical rule and act, to a certain extent, as a guide or warning for the current emperor. But there was a concern about publishing certain histories under particular emperors, an acknowledgement not just of the standards of ancient historiography (to avoid bias) but also a fear of retribution for publishing something unwelcome.

Tacitus follows these trends in his own writing. In his *Histories* he wrote about the recent past, then, instead of writing about the history of his times (the reigns of Nerva and Trajan) as promised (*Hist*. 1.1), he went backwards and began from the death of Augustus. Tacitus shares common ground with writers like Pollio, Cordus, and Corvinus: he re-thinks the unresolved recent past from a new situation under Nerva and Trajan.[[136]](#footnote-136) The *Histories* themselves focus on the rupture between the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties, and whereas the *Annals* go back in time, they consider the Julio-Claudian dynasty in light of the change from Domitian to Nerva and Trajan. Despite his claim that the content of his work is trivial, Tacitus succeeds in elevating his role as a historian who does not seek his own glory but who is able to illuminate for his reader information that is difficult to access.[[137]](#footnote-137)

The model of historian that Tacitus developed does not appear to have been widely pursued in the years that followed. In the words of Flach (1973, 132) historiography in the second century went fallow, seemingly lulled into a state of complacency by the peace, prosperity, and freedom of the Antonine age.[[138]](#footnote-138) Per Lucian (*Hist. conscr.* 2), interest in the second century was action at the borders, since there was not much else going on. The histories that Lucian refers to, which took Lucius Verus’ Parthian campaign as their subject, have been deemed encomiastic, and sycophantic, works of history, a view only supported by Fronto’s *principia historiae* sent in letter form to the emperor Marcus Aurelius. This document outlines some ideas for a history, and with the emperor as addressee must be seeking approval.[[139]](#footnote-139) This sort of history writing, seen as typical of the second century, aligned itself directly with current imperial messaging.[[140]](#footnote-140) If we look back at earlier periods in the Principate, goads to writing history were most frequently times of conflict, especially civil war (as fact true across much of ancient Greek and Roman historiography). The absence of such conflicts during the second century help explain the absence of contemporary political historiography, while the perceived peace and prosperity perhaps explain the bent toward encomium.

*Greek constitutional analysis*

As noted above, Cassius Dio’s impetus for writing history was the conflict that followed upon the death of Commodus, especially the wars (civil and foreign) that brought Septimius Severus to power. Dio’s *History* surely meant to process these events through historical narrative, but he also makes Rome’s governmental forms a significant focus. This emphasis is especially seen in the amount of time that Dio spends on the transition from the period of dynasts in the Late Republic, from the rise of Pompey in book 36 to the establishment of monarchy (proper) by Augustus in book 53. In addition, he devoted an entire book (52) to a debate between Agrippa and Maecenas on whether young Caesar should restore Rome’s democracy or establish a monarchy. There is reason to believe, as Rich (2016, 278) has argued, that Dio devoted similar space to speeches debating the transition from monarchy to democracy earlier in Rome’s history in book 3.[[141]](#footnote-141)

There are two important points to be made here regarding Dio’s work and its connection to earlier Greek historiography and thought. Taking the Agrippa-Maecenas debate narrowly, we can find the inclusion of similar debates in historical work going back at least to Herodotus, whose book 3 features a constitutional debate, set in Persia (3.80-82).[[142]](#footnote-142) In this debate the speakers offer arguments in favor of forms of government that correspond explicitly or implicitly with monarchy, democracy, and oligarchy. Within this Greek tradition the idea of a mixed or balanced constitution surfaces as an enduring concept.[[143]](#footnote-143) This idea may appear already in Herodotus’ constitutional debate (Roy 2012), and certainly in Thucydides (8.97.2), who writes that when Athenians changed its government from the 400 to the 5,000, this form, being a mixture of the few and the many, was the best of his age. Plato (*Leg.* 693d-e) includes a discussion of governmental forms, with monarchy and democracy at either pole, and the best form being a balanced mixture of the two. Likewise for Aristotle the mixed constitution is a repeated concern.[[144]](#footnote-144)

The question of Rome’s constitution was of interest to subsequent Greek historians of Rome as well. Polybius’ book six includes an extended discussion of ideal government types and the change they underwent as they declined, before demonstrating how Rome’s constitution was a mixture of the three (6.11.11). Polybius’ discussion of Rome’s mixed constitution (as well as their customs) is central to his thesis about how and why Rome was able to become the most powerful state in the Mediterranean. Dionysius of Halicarnassus used his exploration of early Roman history to discuss the foundation of Rome’s constitution, possibly in response to Polybius.[[145]](#footnote-145) He is explicit that an analysis of Rome’s constitutions will be a main focus of his work (*Ant*. *Rom*. 1.8.2), and in the second book he includes a brief constitutional debate between Romulus and the Roman people (*Ant*. *Rom*. 2.3-4), followed by a lengthy description of Romulus’ government (*Ant*. *Rom*. 2.7-16) that is capped off with explicit comparisons to Greek states (*Ant*. *Rom*. 2.17).[[146]](#footnote-146) Later, as Rome changed from monarchy to Republic, Dionysius gives Brutus two speeches on the nature of Rome’s changed constitution.[[147]](#footnote-147) Finally, while brief, Appian’s (*BCiv*. 1.6) notice about Rome’s best form of government should be mentioned, especially as it helps connects such concerns among Greek writers across the centuries, connecting as it does the advent of the monarchy in Rome and its bringing of *homonoia*.

These Greek ideas about government were translated to the Roman world by Cicero, in the first book of his *De re publica*, though that is a politico-philosophical work along the lines of the works of Plato and Aristotle above.[[148]](#footnote-148) Cicero’s work, however, like Polybius’ ideas, were meant to prove the superiority of the Republican government and its mixed form.[[149]](#footnote-149) Tacitus (*Ann*. 4.33), in a passage mentioned above, briefly responds to the idea of mixed government, noting the difficulty of both creating and maintaining a mixed form.[[150]](#footnote-150) Cassius Dio, whose *History* has a foot in both the Greek and Roman traditions, takes up these ideas not only in the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, but throughout the work as a whole. We will see below where and how Dio deploys the idea of a mixed constitution. It will now be useful to consider these three themes altogether in Dio’s *History*.

*Cassius Dio’s* Roman History

History writing was dragged out of its doldrums after the death of Commodus and the ensuing civil wars, as we saw in the quotation from Herodian in the preceding chapter, and Cassius Dio was but one of many who took up the pen in response to the rise of Septimius Severus.[[151]](#footnote-151) Dio’s ultimate project, the *Roman History*, emerges as a reclaiming of two traditions, the Republican tradition of writing history *ab urbe condita* combined with how to best write the history of the Principate. Dio adds in an analysis of government that has its roots in the Greek tradition and would become the main focus of his work.

Cassius Dio’s *History* mirrors the content of a typical Roman history, namely events *domi militiaeque*, which he signals in his preface with the notice that “it is my desire to write a history of all the memorable achievements of the Romans, as well in time of peace as in war, so that no one, whether Roman or non-Roman, shall look in vain for any of the essential facts” (fr. 1.1: ὁ δὲ Δίων φησὶν ὅτι σπουδὴν ἔχω συγγράψαι πάνθ’ ὅσα τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις καὶ εἰρηνοῦσι καὶ πολεμοῦσι ἀξίως μνήμης ἐπράχθη, ὥστε μηδὲν τῶν ἀναγκαίων μήτε ἐκείνων τινὰ μήτε τῶν ἄλλων ποθῆσαι). But Dio also says that he will be selective and not include all the material that he has researched (fr. 1.2). Taking these statements as part of a larger analysis of the highly fragmentary books 1-35, Rich (2016) has come to some fascinating conclusions about Dio’s annalistic method. Rich argues that Dio covered periods of the Republic unevenly. Some were quite rich in detail, and for these Dio employed an annalistic method. For others, Dio was much more selective and covered lengthy periods, and for these Dio sped through without using a year by year breakdown (Rich 2016, 277-280). Further, Dio seems to have covered the Third Punic War annalistically, whereas the Macedonian and Achaean Wars, in close chronological orbit, he covered “in single blocs” (Rich 2016, 285).

The flexibility of Dio’s use of the annalistic system can be seen in sharper focus in the books which survive in full. For the Late Republic, Dio at times prefers to follow the exploits of a single character (which foreshadows his coverage of the Principate). For example, he devotes space to Pompey’s actions in the East (36.45-37.7) and Caesar’s Gallic campaigns (39.40-53; 40.32-44).[[152]](#footnote-152) Lindholmer (2020) has argued that Dio breaks with a Livian model of annalistic narrative in his books on the Late Republic, focusing instead on the dynasts of the period. This allows Dio to give more emphasis to the corrosive effect of competition and serves as an example of his narrative and interpretive technique.

For the period of the Principate, Dio transitioned to a more biographical mode, described by Pelling (1997) as “bio-structuring”.[[153]](#footnote-153) In this mode, Dio used many characters to plot the course the of his narration. Thus, Pelling observes, for example, a “Sejanus narrative” during the reign of Tiberius, and similar observations can be made for other reigns as well.[[154]](#footnote-154) Yet Dio at times still seems to use an annalistic dating method, as when during the reign of Macrinus he marks 218 CE as the consular year of Macrinus and Oclatinius Adventus (79[78].26.8]). It is not clear, however, from this passage if we have evidence that Dio used this method throughout the imperial books, as Rich (2016, 272) suggests, or if the strangeness of the consulship of Macrinus (both former praetorian prefects) caused Dio to use the consular dating to emphasis the aberration.

Thematically, Dio focuses throughout his history of the Republic on competition and jealousy, and thus violence, strife, and eventually civil war, that punctuated the Roman past. This viewpoint, which is derived in large part from Dio’s Thucydidean outlook and his belief in the constancy of human experience, is hardly an idealized version of the Roman past that offered a remedy to Rome’s current ills. Libourel (1974, 384) has noted Dio’s differences with earlier annalistic sources, especially with regard to his more violent depiction of early Roman history. Libourel’s conclusion is that Dio followed an annalistic source that was significantly different than Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, though this argument has been challenged recently by Lange (2019, 176), who insists that we see these differences not based in Dio’s source material but rather in his historical outlook.

There is much to recommend this view, especially since we can trace, as Lange (2019, 176-184) has done, Dio’s near obsession with civil strife throughout his work. The civil strife that repeatedly appears throughout the period of the early monarchy and early and middle Republic, though it remains a controlled phenomenon to such an extent that at the beginning of the Second Punic War Dio writes that the Romans were living in harmony (fr. 52.1).[[155]](#footnote-155) This undercurrent of strife, however, breaks through completely in the period of the dynasts in the Late Republic. Rome’s democracy was failing, in Dio’s eyes, expressly because it invited competition and jealousy among its most powerful actors, who in turn used their military force against the state, causing Rome to fall into a period of period of civil war.[[156]](#footnote-156) Like other writers, Dio saw Rome in the Late Republic as having undergone a lengthy civil war that began well before the famous conflict between Pompey and Caesar.[[157]](#footnote-157) His innovation is to extend the threat of stasis back practically to Rome’s origins, rather than presenting an idealizing portrait of early Rome followed by decline. This stance serves his overall thesis about the need for monarchy as a stabilizing force at Rome, and it also reflects his own experiences of civil war in the 190s CE.

Glimpsed obliquely in this discussion lies the repeated interest in producing histories *ab urbe condita*: the ability to work within the tradition but also to rework parts of the Roman past in light of the present. Because these works contained a contemporary portion, they would have narrated the Roman past through the lens of the author’s own experiences of contemporary Rome.

As seen above, it became increasing difficult, for various reasons, to write contemporary history under the Principate. Like Tacitus, Cassius Dio shows concerns about the worthiness of his material, including a notice toward the beginning of his Commodus narrative. There he commits to providing a full account of Commodus’ reign, despite the material being unworthy of history; its importance lay, rather, in Dio’s presence and ability to witness the events themselves (73[72].18.3-4 [Xiph.]). In fact, it is Dio’s very proximity to events that will make this part of his work the most accurate. This passage must be read against Dio’s notice (53.19) about the changing nature of the flow of information under the Principate. Like Tacitus, Dio cites, if vaguely, a sort of golden age of Roman historiography, when under the Republic the truth could be obtained because the free flow of information was not harmed too severely by fear or bias.[[158]](#footnote-158) Dio places this passage not after Actium, but at the point at which Roman became a true monarchy, that is, after the Augustan settlement. For Dio and his predecessors in writing the history of the Principate, information was hard to come by, and Dio reports what information was made public, regardless of its truth or falsity, though he will also include his own insights and judgments, based on what he read, heard, and saw.

We can find continuity between Tacitus and Dio in their elevation of the role of the historian. This historian, despite dealing with more difficult source material, was well positioned and had the right experience to properly narrate and explain the Roman past.[[159]](#footnote-159) A key difference comes down to their attitudes toward the Principate. Tacitus’ concerns are primarily the role of the *princeps*, who had a negative effect on truth because of writers’ desire to flatter or to express hatred and who, through his domination of political life, left men untrained in political affairs and thus unable to understand their material in the proper way.[[160]](#footnote-160) The monarchy meant the diminution of freedom, and Tacitus’ writings become, in part, an example of exercising what freedoms were left.[[161]](#footnote-161) The inception of the Principate cut off the modes of distinction available to the Republican senator, and sometimes also proved dangerous to him as well.

For Dio, while the monarchy might limit the flow of information, it was worth investigating it to show how it succeeded or failed, under various sorts of emperors. In many ways, this is a reflection of the greater acceptance of monarchy by Dio’s age and the belief that it was needed for the stability of the empire.[[162]](#footnote-162) Dio sees the monarchy much less negatively, assuming the right man was in charge, and he argues that it preserved freedom for the Romans.[[163]](#footnote-163) These views, however, are not as far apart as they seem. Dio does not suggest that the Romans’ freedom was preserved indefinitely, or in all situations. Rather, it was the perfected monarchy of Augustus that brought this about, and the story that he tells in the aftermath of the (re)foundation of the monarchy is about how well this perfect monarchy might be maintained.

With his contemporary history, Dio makes the argument that it was not only under “good” emperors that a historian could thrive. It is in this regard that the development of Dio’s senatorial persona is key. The authority of his work is derived in part from his status as a senator, which is particularly pronounced in the contemporary portion of his history, wherein Dio many times reports events from his position within the curia itself.[[164]](#footnote-164) Yet Dio’s experience in the Senate is presented in a highly ambivalent way, with two main functions in mind: the first, to demonstrate how in his own age the emperors’ treatment of this body showed the debasement of the monarchical system that was established in a positive way by Augustus; and the second, to justify the writing of his own history, with the purpose of exposing the ills of his own time and supporting his thesis about the decline of the monarchical system under which he lived. The Senate in Dio’s own day, as he depicts it, is a place of debasement and danger, and the Senate is constantly seen as a font of hypocrisy, vacillation, and obsequiousness.

The threat of violence and the fear felt by the senators is a recurring theme throughout the contemporary books. Dio reports watching Commodus threaten himself and his fellow senators with a severed ostrich head at the arena (73[72].21.1-2 [Xiph.]). He describes his fear of appearing with his fellow senators in front of Didius Julianus (74[73].12.2–5 [Xiph.]). Dio details the trials held by Septimius Severus in an attempt to ferret out senatorial disloyalty during the civil wars, and he provides a significant list of senators who were put to death under Severus.[[165]](#footnote-165) He again expresses his fear when he discusses the scene in the Senate that witnessed the downfall of Baebius Marcellinus, brought about by an informer’s dream, a piece of evidence exhumed under torture (77[76].8.1-9.2 [Xiph.]). The humiliation of the senatorial class can be seen in eyewitness report of Caracalla’s behavior at Nicomedia, when the emperor ignored Dio and his associates in favor of drinking with the soldiers (78[77].17.1-4 [Xiph.]). Purges of senators like that after Severus’ accession were also seen in the reigns of Caracalla and Elagabalus.[[166]](#footnote-166)

The Senate is also portrayed as powerless as it is fearful.[[167]](#footnote-167) When Didius Julianus acceded to the throne, Dio notes that the senators concealed their true feelings, while the Roman people visibly and forcefully denounced their new emperor at the games (74[73].13.2-5 [Xiph.]). Later, Dio provides a similar example of this behavior in the civil wars following the death of Commodus, when he writes that he and his fellow senators were unwilling to openly choose sides, in contrast to the Roman people (76[75].4.2 [Xiph.]). After Caracalla’s death, the Senate refused to take any action against his memory, while the people celebrated and praised his assassin Julius Martialis (79[78].17.4-18.3).[[168]](#footnote-168) Soon afterwards the Senate dutifully carried out the will of Macrinus, voting him titles in response to his letter, while the people bemoaned their fate of being without a ruler (79[78].17.1-3; 79[78].20).[[169]](#footnote-169) The Senate also rubber stamped the accession of Elagabalus and turned against Macrinus, whom they had earlier praised (80[79].2.5-6). The closing of the history brings this fearfulness and powerlessness into focus. Dio was unable to carry out his role as governor and then even of consul out of fear of the soldiers, and he depicts his departure from Rome as similar to Hector’s escape from the bloody battlefield (80[80].5.2-3 [Xiph.]).

Dio’s senatorial status guarantees him access to information and underwrites his qualifications to write the history of his age (as well as the Roman past). His description of the Senate and senatorial life in his own day also hints at the importance of history writing. In Dio’s own day, the Senate was weak and ineffectual, cowering before the threat of violence made by various *principes* and unable to act in independent ways. For Dio, his senatorial background laid the groundwork for his *History*, which would ultimately become his real contribution to Roman political life.

Dio’s ambivalent attitude, however, and his close proximity to the rulers under whom he lived laid him open to charges of bias in his account of his own age. In this regard the completion of work in retirement, far from Rome in Bithynia, is important. As Dio departs Rome and Italy for Bithynia at the end of his *History*, he provides space for critical distance through the theme of displacement. In this complex passage, Dio explains that he was forced to leave Rome and spend his consulship elsewhere in Italy so that he could be safe from the praetorians, and eventually he went home (οἴκαδε) and spent the remainder of his life in his homeland (πάντα τὸν λοιπὸν τοῦ βίου χρόνον ἐν τῇ πατρίδι ζῆσαι), as was revealed very clearly to him by the daimonion when he was in Bithynia (ὥσπερ που καὶ τὸ δαιμόνιον ἐν τῇ Βιθυνίᾳ ἤδη μοι ὄντι σαφέστατα ἐδήλωσεν). As the final passage in Dio's magnum opus, these statements have important implications for our understanding of the work as a whole, vis-à-vis Dio’s self-presentation within the history. In this passage, Dio goes into a sort of double exile, first out of Rome and then to Bithynia.[[170]](#footnote-170) What is especially important here is Dio’s description of Bithynia as his *patris*.[[171]](#footnote-171) The use of this term does more than simply signal Dio’s native land. Coming at the end of the history, it suggests that Dio had been a foreigner in Rome throughout his political career and that his retirement, and separation from Roman political life, would bring him homeward.[[172]](#footnote-172)

This final passage connects to an earlier one, specifically Philiscus’ *consolatio* to Cicero and his prescriptions for how Cicero might spend his newfound *otium* (38.28.1-3):[[173]](#footnote-173)

ἂν μὲν γάρ μοι πεισθῇς, καὶ πάνυ ἀγαπήσεις χωρίον τέ τι παραθαλασσίδιον ἔξω πάτου ἐκλεξάμενος, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ γεωργῶν τε ἅμα καὶ συγγράφων τι, ὡς Ξενοφῶν, ὡς Θουκυδίδης. τό τε γὰρ εἶδος τοῦτο τῆς σοφίας διαρκέστατόν ἐστι καὶ παντὶ μὲν ἀνδρὶ πάσῃ δὲ πολιτείᾳ ἁρμοδιώτατον, καὶ ἡ φυγὴ φέρει τινὰ σχολὴν γονιμωτέραν. ὥστ’ εἴπερ ὄντως ἀθάνατος καθάπερ ἐκεῖνοι γενέσθαι ἐθέλεις, ζήλωσον αὐτούς. τά τε γὰρ ἐπιτήδεια ἀρκοῦντα ἔχεις καὶ οὔτ’ ἀξιώματός τινος προσδέῃ. εἰ γάρ τι καὶ ἐν τούτοις ἀγαθόν ἐστιν, ὑπάτευκας· καὶ πλέον οὐδὲν τοῖς καὶ δεύτερον καὶ τρίτον ἢ καὶ τέταρτον ἄρξασι, πλὴν γραμμάτων ἀριθμοῦ κενῶν, ὑπάρχει, ἃ μήτε ζῶντα μήτ’ ἀποθανόντα τινὰ ὠφελεῖ.

For if you will take my advice, you will be quite satisfied to pick out a little estate in some retired spot on the coast and there carry on at the same time farming and some historical writing, like Xenophon and like Thucydides. This form of learning is most enduring and best adapted to every man and to every state; and exile brings with it a kind of leisure that is more fruitful. If, then, you wish to become really immortal, like those historians, emulate them. You have the necessary means in sufficiency and you lack no distinction. For if there is any virtue in such honours, you have been consul; nothing more belongs to those who have held office a second, a third, or a fourth time, except an array of idle letters which benefit no man, living or dead.

For many of both his Greek and Roman historian forebears, exile or displacement was a widespread phenomenon.[[174]](#footnote-174) In addition, displacement had particular value in the second and third centuries CE for philosophers, who appropriated their banishment for *parrhesia* and *eleutheria* as a way to distinguish themselves as ones who spoke freely.[[175]](#footnote-175) For Dio, time at Rome, away from home, was necessary to gain the appropriate experience and information to compose a history, but that this history could only be completed once he separated himself from Rome and its political life.[[176]](#footnote-176)

A final point to consider is Cassius Dio’s borrowing from the Greek tradition. When Dio decided to include the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, he was drawing on this philosophical background, but more specifically reaching back to Herodotus and perhaps especially Polybius by inserting it into work of historiography. The Agrippa-Maecenas debate is certainly an heir to these sorts of discussions. In that debate, Agrippa presents arguments for why young Caesar should adopt a democratic form of government rather than a tyrannical one, while his counterpart Maecenas urges the civil war victor to effect a monarchy. It is clear from elsewhere in the history that Dio preferred monarchy, but specifically a monarchy mixed with democracy that preserved the Romans’ freedom and brought order to their society (56.43.4).[[177]](#footnote-177) The inclusion of the debate and the preference for a mixed form of government demonstrate that Dio was partaking in this centuries’ old debate, perhaps even responding directly to Polybius’ ideas about mixed government at Rome.[[178]](#footnote-178) Dio’s preference for monarchy helps to explain why Agrippa’s speech is oriented in such a way (not aimed to rebutting monarchy but rather tyranny) and especially the why Maecenas makes the prescriptions that he does. Maecenas not only defends monarchy generally but also suggests specific policy points, including how the various social classes fit into the governing structure and even the use of a common coinage among the provincial cities.

It has long been suggested that the *History*, and specifically the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, are part of the tradition of “kingship” literature.[[179]](#footnote-179) This mode of discourse was employed during the Principate especially by Dio Chrysostom, whose four orations (*Or*. 1-4) on the virtues of the ruler were addressed to Trajan, and it has largely been interpreted as a way for Greek elites to interact with and influence the Roman monarch of their day. Sidebottom (2006) has demonstrated that Dio Chrysostom resuscitated the oration “on kingship”, which can trace its origins all the way to Homer and which was especially relevant in the fourth century BCE. Sidebottom (2006, 151-152) sees the orations of Dio Chrysostom as showing the Roman monarch accepting the messages of Greek philosophy and eventually acting “in accordance with the core values of Greek culture”.

We should differentiate here between a speech on kingship inserted into a narrative work and the genre as it was revived in second century CE. Millar (1964, 107) rightly acknowledged the different aims of the speeches. Whereas the *peri basileias* speech focused on the moral character of the ruler, Cassius Dio’s Agrippa-Maecenas debate makes specific suggestions for political and constitutional change, as noted above. Likewise, Kemezis (2014, 131) points out that the kingship orations of Dio Chrysostom have panegyrical qualities that “allow the speaker to define what an ideal ruler is” but that Cassius Dio’s focus, in general, is not on the virtues of the monarch but how that monarchy should properly function.

The question of “kingship literature” also raises the question of the immediacy of Dio’s message, whether in the Agrippa-Maecenas debate or for the *History* overall. Although some have posited that the Agrippa-Maecenas debate was perhaps read publicly by Dio, there is little evidence to suggest that parts of the *History* were read out or published during the reigns of any of the rulers about whom Dio wrote.[[180]](#footnote-180) The only possibility is under Severus Alexander, though we should still resist the idea that Dio wrote an 80-book history in order to influence the behavior of a single emperor.[[181]](#footnote-181)

*Conclusion*

Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* is an amalgam of traditional Roman, and Greek, historical forms, stamped with the author’s own preferences and inclinations. Although we cannot answer definitively why Dio decided to go back to Rome’s foundations and write a history to his own time, it is possible to make some suggestions. As a supporter of the Roman monarchy, it cannot be the case that he wished to signal his Republicanism by reclaiming an abandoned Roman history type. More likely is that he felt the need to provide an update on the Roman past that had been missing for centuries. Through his own analysis, focused as we have seen on governmental forms and filtered through a Thucydidean outlook, Dio was able to reshape the Roman past. This, of course, was one of the few areas of innovation possible, as one could not simply re-write episodes and it was unlikely that Dio was going to unearth some new version of a story. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis, combined with the molding of the annalistic and, later, a biographical approach to his subject. Dio’s view of the Roman past was not one of idealization and moral superiority; instead, it was evidence of the constancy of human nature, ready to break through and bring and the Republic to an end.

These views connect also to the history of Dio’s own time, as it was also studded with civil war and violence. To write this story, however, which would ultimately be critical of the ruling house, Dio had to forestall the publication of his work and could only finish it in his retirement, far away from Rome and at home in Bithynia. The survey of writing under the Principate demonstrates that such works were rarely produced and that writers favored analyzing the more recent past or, closer to Dio’s time, writing shorter works about the exploits of the ruling emperor. We can see more clearly how Dio’s first writings, and especially the work on the wars and civil wars after the death of Commodus, differ from the later *History*. As Dio tells us, the first works were for immediate consumption by his peers and the emperor Septimius Severus himself. This later work was not aimed at a particular emperor but was meant to be Dio’s magnum opus, which would provide a complete re-envisioning of the Roman past, suited to the political viewpoints of our third century author. In this work, Dio melds traditional Roman historiographic forms, Greek thought, and his own reading of both the Roman past and present. In the following chapter, we will examine how Dio brings this viewpoint to bear on his ideas about the Roman monarchy.

**Chapter 3: Cassius Dio and the Roman Monarchy**

As has been frequently pointed out, Cassius Dio was a monarchist, and one of the main themes of his *History* is to demonstrate the need for Rome’s adoption of a monarchy after the Republican civil wars.[[182]](#footnote-182) Book 52, in which Agrippa and Maecenas give their advice to young Caesar about which form of government to pursue, begins thus (52.1.2):

Ταῦτα μὲν ἔν τε τῇ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ἐν τῇ δημοκρατίᾳ ταῖς τε δυναστείαις, πέντε τε καὶ εἴκοσι καὶ ἑπτακοσίοις ἔτεσι, καὶ ἔπραξαν οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ ἔπαθον· ἐκ δὲ τούτου μοναρχεῖσθαι αὖθις ἀκριβῶς ἤρξαντο, καίτοι τοῦ Καίσαρος βουλευσαμένου τά τε ὅπλα καταθέσθαι καὶ τὰ πράγματα τῇ τε γερουσίᾳ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ ἐπιτρέψαι.

Such were the achievements of the Romans and such their suffering under the kingship, under the republic, and under the dominion of a few, during a period of seven hundred and twenty-five years. After this they reverted to what was, strictly speaking, a monarchy, although Caesar planned to lay down his arms and to entrust the management of the state to the senate and the people.

This passage marks the formal transition from the period of dynasts to the monarchy, and over the next few books, Dio will explain how Augustus was able to establish his power.[[183]](#footnote-183) A significant amount of scholarship has focused on Dio’s depiction of Augustus and his reign, including the paired speeches of Agrippa and Maecenas in book 52 that debate the adoption of democracy or monarchy.[[184]](#footnote-184)

The establishment of monarchy was certainly a key moment for Dio’s history, but we must also remember that the remaining books (about a third of the history overall) trace the development of that institution over time. From the Julio-Claudians to his own day, Dio charts the ups and downs of Rome’s monarchy and, through a hybrid approach that combines Thucydides’ ideas about civil wars with Roman historical reality, demonstrates the importance of civil war and *stasis* in the history of Rome’s monarchy. For Dio, civil war was functioned as a sort of cleansing solution for Rome, bringing about the monarchy in the first place and later ridding Rome of tyrants and resetting the monarchy of more solid footing. This cycle ultimately fails, twice, in Dio’s own day, which contributes to the sense of decline that he attributed to his contemporary period. It will be useful here to assess Dio’s views on monarchy before proceeding to a survey of how and why he wrote the history of Rome’s monarchy in the way that he did.

*Monarchy v. democracy*

Although it is Augustus who brings Rome into a true monarchy, Dio begins his discussion of the change from democracy to monarchy with the rise of Julius Caesar. In an important passage at the beginning of book 44, as a part of Dio’s description of the assassination of Julius Caesar, an act that Dio considered ill-advised and spurred by jealousy and hatred (44.1.1), Dio discusses at some length the benefits of monarchy and the pitfalls of democracy. The context here is important, as Dio saw Julius Caesar as ushering in the Roman monarchy, and he considered the plot against Caesar an act of the uncontrolled rule of the many.[[185]](#footnote-185) This murder “again produced for the Romans, out of a period of harmony, strife and civil wars” (44.1.2: στάσεις τε αὖθις ἐξ ὁμονοίας καὶ πολέμους ἐμφυλίους τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις παρεσκεύασεν,).

The elements that led to this conflict, namely competition, envy, and jealousy, were part of Dio’s history of Rome even from the Early through the Middle Republic. Dio is less idealizing than some of his historiographic peers about the virtue of early Romans and suggests that this virtue resided in a few great figures who kept the negative traits of others at bay.[[186]](#footnote-186) Like other historians, Dio saw the figures of the Gracchi and later Sulla as key figures whose actions marked important turning points in the fall of the Roman Republic.[[187]](#footnote-187)

As Rome’s empire grew, however, and human nature being what it was, these negative characteristics could not be held in check. At the beginning of book 44, we find Dio commenting on the weaknesses of democracy in this regard. In Dio’s eyes, despite the positive connotations of democracy, it is monarchy that brings good order, whereas democracy cannot live up to the high ideals of its name (44.2.1). Democracy has only ever been successful for short periods of time, and only in places that were not exceptionally prosperous (44.2.3). Rome, on the other hand, was too wealthy and too successful and thus could not be moderate enough to foster a successful democracy, and without moderation it could not be harmonious (44.2.4):

πόλιν τε αὐτήν τε τηλικαύτην οὖσαν καὶ τοῦ τε καλλίστου τοῦ τε πλείστου τῆς ἐμφανοῦς οἰκουμένης ἄρχουσαν, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν ἀνθρώπων ἤθη καὶ διάφορα κεκτημένην πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ μεγάλους πλούτους ἔχουσαν, ταῖς τε πράξεσι καὶ ταῖς τύχαις παντοδαπαῖς καὶ ἰδίᾳ καὶ δημοσίᾳ χρωμένην, ἀδύνατον μὲν ἐν δημοκρατίᾳ σωφρονῆσαι, ἀδυνατώτερον δὲ μὴ σωφρονοῦσαν ὁμονοῆσαι.

But for a city, not only so large in itself, but also ruling the finest and the greatest part of the known world, holding sway over men of many and diverse natures, possessing many men of great wealth, occupied with every imaginable pursuit, enjoying every imaginable fortune, both individually and collectively, — for such a city, I say, to practice moderation under a democracy is impossible, and still more is it impossible for the people, unless moderation prevails, to be harmonious.

Dio connected Rome’s expansion, especially in the Late Republic, to the weaknesses of democratic rule.[[188]](#footnote-188) We can return here to the vices of men who competed for greater glory, primarily through foreign wars and commands. For Dio, the problem of Rome’s democracy was its flexibility, which led to the unrestricted extension of military command. Because military command and success in foreign wars increased one’s political standing in Rome, the extension of such command was the source of jealousy and competition that eventually led to the rule of a single man.[[189]](#footnote-189)

At the beginning of book 44, Dio also discusses the figure of the monarch. He claims that it is easier to find one good man to rule rather than the many good men that are required for an upstanding democracy (44.2.2). The reason is simple: “it does not belong to the majority of men to acquire virtue” (44.2.2: οὐ γὰρ προσήκει τοῖς πολλοῖς ἀρετὴν κτᾶσθαι). This statement reflects the ideas above, that in Dio’s portrayal of earlier Roman history it was not the majority of Romans who were virtuous, but only a few. Still, even a bad ruler coming to power is better than similarly bad leaders running a democracy. To prove his point, Dio appeals to the historical traditions of not just the Romans, but also of the Greeks and barbarians: kings have had more successes than popular governments, and monarchs have presided over fewer disasters than when power was in the hands of the mob (44.2.3). Dio connects the dots in this passage: democracies that were small and less successful in expanding might have been stable, but Rome’s imperialistic bent demonstrated the need for a single ruler, as success abroad led, inevitably to strife, jealousy, and competition, which in turn toppled the democracy. Even a bad ruler would, in Dio’s eyes, bring greater stability than the rule of the many.

*Young Caesar’s choice: between monarchy and tyranny*

As Rome turns from Republic to Principate, Dio dedicates an entire book to a debate between Octavian’s advisors, Agrippa and Maecenas, on the best type of government to pursue, with Agrippa advocating for democracy and Maecenas championing monarchy. Much has been said about these paired speeches, and especially the speech of Maecenas, as a sort of political pamphlet aimed at contemporary reform.[[190]](#footnote-190) For now, I will limit discussion to a few key points, especially those that exhibit important connections to the introduction of book 44, discussed above.

As seen above, Dio’s main point in support of monarchy is that it brought stability and harmony to Rome, whose empire had grown too large to be managed by a democracy. In his advocacy for democracy, Dio’s Agrippa describes the situation as it pertained during the Republic, and he provides an idealized view of the balance of power between people, Senate, and military (52.9.4-5):

ἡμεῖς γὰρ αὐτοὶ οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι ἄλλως τὸ πρῶτον πολιτευόμενοι, ἔπειτα ἐπειδὴ πολλὰ καὶ δεινὰ ἐπάσχομεν, τῆς τε ἐλευθερίας ἐπεθυμήσαμεν καὶ λαβόντες αὐτὴν πρὸς τοσοῦτον ὄγκον προήλθομεν, οὐκ ἄλλοις τισὶν ἢ τοῖς ἐκ τῆς δημοκρατίας ἀγαθοῖς ἰσχύσαντες, ἐξ ὧν ἥ τε γερουσία προεβούλευε καὶ ὁ δῆμος ἐπεκύρου τό τε στρατευόμενον προεθυμεῖτο καὶ τὸ στρατηγοῦν ἐφιλοτιμεῖτο. ὧν οὐδὲν ἂν ἐν τυραννίδι πραχθείη. ἀμέλει τοσοῦτον αὐτῆς διὰ ταῦτα μῖσος οἱ πάλαι Ῥωμαῖοι ἔσχον ὥστε καὶ ἐπάρατον τὸ πολίτευμα ποιήσασθαι.

We Romans ourselves at first had a different form of government, then later, after we had gone through many bitter experiences, conceived a desire for liberty; and when we had secured it, we advanced to our present proud eminence, strong in no advantages save those that come from democracy. It was on the strength of these that the senate deliberated, the people ratified, the soldiers in the ranks were filled with zeal and their commanders with ambition. None of these things could happen under a tyranny. At any rate the ancient Romans came to feel so great a hatred of tyranny for these reasons that they even laid that form of government under a curse.

In creating this idealization, Agrippa refers to tyranny, an idea that can be found elsewhere in the speech.[[191]](#footnote-191) Thus, Agrippa asserts that democracies and tyrannies stand in opposition to one another (52.5.1). Those living under tyrannies are enslaved and always plotting against their rulers (52.9.3; cf. 52.10.4-11.1).

There is a reason that Agrippa keeps his focus on tyrannies: they are the natural outgrowth of monarchies (52.13.6). Agrippa’s focus on tyranny reflects a strain of Dio’s *History* that was prevalent in his account of the Late Republic. Julius Caesar’s rise to power fueled suspicion that Rome would descend into despotism, and although Caesar attempted to persuade the Senate that he would not turn into a tyrant (43.15.5; cf. 43.17.2), his murderers thought of themselves as liberators and tyrannicides (44.35.1). In the aftermath of Caesar’s death, the rhetoric surrounding the issue is amplified by Dio. Thus, in his speech against Mark Antony, Cicero says that he could not live under a monarchy or tyranny (45.18.2) and accuses Antony of aiming at tyrannical power (45.33.2; cf. 45.25.2) and for not loving his country and hating tyranny sufficiently (45.37.3). This stance seems to flow from Cicero’s opinion of Julius Caesar, who, desirous of being a tyrant (45.34.3), set up a tyranny in the place of a consulship (45.31.2).[[192]](#footnote-192) Finally, he challenges his fellow senators not to be weak and raise a monstrous tyrant themselves (45.35.1).[[193]](#footnote-193)

Agrippa’s concerns thus reflect a state of mind in which monarchy and tyranny could not be separated and which was highly influenced by the events of the Late Republic, as Dio narrates them. Maecenas’ goal is to advise young Caesar on how to avoid the tyranny that Agrippa has been warning of. In contrast to Agrippa, Maecenas presents a grimmer view of the Senate and plebs (52.20.3):

αὐτὸς μέντοι σὺ πάντας αὐτοὺς αἱροῦ, καὶ μήτε ἐπὶ τῷ πλήθει ἢ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ ἔτι τινὰ αὐτῶν ποιήσῃ, στασιάσουσι γάρ, μήτε ἐπὶ τῷ συνεδρίῳ, διασπουδάσονται γάρ. μὴ μέντοι καὶ τὰς δυνάμεις σφῶν τὰς ἀρχαίας τηρήσῃς, ἵνα μὴ τὰ αὐτὰ αὖθις γένηται, ἀλλὰ τὴν μὲν τιμὴν φύλαξον, τῆς δ’ ἰσχύος παράλυσον τοσοῦτον ὅσον μήτε τοῦ ἀξιώματός τι αὐτῶν ἀφαιρήσει καὶ τοῖς νεωτερίσαι τι ἐθελήσουσι μὴ ἐπιτρέψει.

But make all the appointments yourself and do not any longer commit the filling of one or another of these offices either to the plebs or to the people, for they will quarrel over them, or to the Senate, for the senators will use them to further their own private ambitions. And do not maintain the traditional powers of these offices, either, for fear history may repeat itself, but preserve the honour attaching to them, at the same time abating their influence to such an extent that, although you will be depriving the office of none of its prestige, you will still be giving no opportunity to those who may desire to stir up a rebellion.

This passage shows connections to Dio’s thoughts at the beginning of book 44, namely that the Senate in its jealousy brought about the murder of Caesar and took Rome from a period of harmony to one of discord. But more importantly, there was a need to curb the powers that could be gained by Rome’s senators.

For Maecenas, the key to avoiding discord was to make sure that all members of society knew their proper roles in the administrations of government; that the finances of the empire be managed appropriately; and that the monarch showed clemency and acted in a civil manner. Maecenas develops these themes over the course of the speech. He lays out the proper roles for senators and equestrians (52.19–26) and gives advice on managing imperial finances (52.27-30). He also provides guidance for how the monarch should behave: to be cautious in pursuing claims of insults against himself, to control displays of anger, and to show no resentment when plots are revealed (52.31.5-10) but let the senators the ones who dealt with such matters (52.32). Finally, the monarch’s behavior should be an education for his citizens, not a means of intimidation (52.34.1).

Whereas the Agrippa-Maecenas debate is an expansive debate about how Young Caesar should form his government, the books on the reign of Augustus demonstrate how it was actually accomplished. For Dio, the only figure who could bring Rome beyond the period of dynasts and into a true monarchy was the heir of Julius Caesar. Over the course of books 45-56, Dio tells the story of how a young man, new to Rome’s political scene, cunningly overcame his rivals, defeated his enemies in foreign and civil wars, and brought Rome into agreement on a new government, with himself at the top.[[194]](#footnote-194)

Dio takes a realist view of young Caesar’s actions in the period of the triumvirate, arguing that he did what was needed to rescue Rome from the dynasts and establish a monarchy.[[195]](#footnote-195) The first challenge for young Caesar was to convince the Senate and people that they needed him. In a speech that is meant to function as Octavian’s *recusatio*, Dio is quite clear that it was not given in earnest but was calculated to affirm Octavian’s position as ruler of the Roman world (53.2.6).[[196]](#footnote-196)

The speech itself mainly concerns the provinces, armies, and security of the empire. These concerns bring the reader back to the failures of the Late Republic and the rise of the dynasts, who exploited Rome’s military power and potential for expansion to increase their own political power at the expense of the security of the state. They also mirror, generally, Maecenas’ advice on organization of the empire. This monarchy would not appear to be the rule of a single man, for Young Caesar “wished even so to be thought a *civilis princeps*” (53.12.1: βουληθεὶς δὲ δὴ καὶ ὣς δημοτικός τις εἶναι δόξαι).[[197]](#footnote-197) Thus, he divided the provinces between himself and the senators (53.12), had his power in those provinces approved for a period of ten years (53.13.1; cf. 53.16.2), established appointments for equestrians (53.15), and was honored with the name Augustus (instead of Romulus, his first choice: 53.16.7-8). TheSenate also retained control of the courts and dealt with embassies (53.21.6). Augustus, however, following the advice of Maecenas, created a smaller circle of advisors, upon whom he relied by heavily than the Senate as a whole (53.21.4-6):[[198]](#footnote-198)

τὸ δὲ δὴ πλεῖστον τούς τε ὑπάτους ἢ τὸν ὕπατον, ὁπότε καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπατεύοι, κἀκ τῶν ἄλλων ἀρχόντων ἕνα παρ’ ἑκάστων, ἔκ τε τοῦ λοιποῦ τῶν βουλευτῶν πλήθους πεντεκαίδεκα τοὺς κλήρῳ λαχόντας, συμβούλους ἐς ἑξάμηνον παρελάμβανεν, ὥστε δι’ αὐτῶν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσι κοινοῦσθαι τρόπον τινὰ τὰ νομοθετούμενα νομίζεσθαι. ἐσέφερε μὲν γάρ τινα καὶ ἐς πᾶσαν τὴν γερουσίαν, βέλτιον μέντοι νομίζων εἶναι τὸ μετ’ ὀλίγων καθ’ ἡσυχίαν τά τε πλείω καὶ τὰ μείζω προσκοπεῖσθαι, τοῦτό τε ἐποίει καὶ ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ ἐδίκαζε μετ’ αὐτῶν. ἔκρινε μὲν γὰρ καὶ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν ἡ βουλὴ πᾶσα ὡς καὶ πρότερον, καί τισι καὶ πρεσβείαις καὶ κηρυκείαις καὶ δήμων καὶ βασιλέων ἐχρημάτιζεν, ὅ τε δῆμος ἐς τὰς ἀρχαιρεσίας καὶ τὸ πλῆθος αὖ συνελέγετο· οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἐπράττετό τι ὃ μὴ καὶ ἐκεῖνον ἤρεσκε.

Most important of all, he took as advisers for periods of six months the consuls (or the other consul, when he himself also held the office), one of each of the other kinds of officials, and fifteen men chosen by lot from the remainder of the senatorial body, with the result that all legislation proposed by the emperors is usually communicated after a fashion through this body to all the other senators; for although he brought certain matters before the whole senate, yet he generally followed this plan, considering it better to take under preliminary advisement most matters and the most important ones in consultation with a few; and sometimes he even sat with these men in the trial of cases.

The speech provoked various reactions from the Senate: some believed him while others disbelieved; some favored monarchy, and some realized democracy was a cause of discord. But there is little question about young Caesar’s intention: Dio ends the passage with the notice that the new *princeps* had a decree passed that doubled the pay of his bodyguard, commenting, “This shows how sincere had been his desire to lay down the monarchy”.[[199]](#footnote-199) Although Dio highlights Augustus’ duplicity (Rich 1990, 139), it is clear that our author approves of the new governmental situation: “In this way the government was changed at that time for the better and in the interest of greater security; for it was no doubt quite impossible for the people to be saved under a democracy” (53.19.1: ἡ μὲν οὖν πολιτεία οὕτω τότε πρός τε τὸ βέλτιον καὶ πρὸς τὸ σωτηριωδέστερον μετεκοσμήθη καὶ γάρ που καὶ παντάπασιν ἀδύνατον ἦν δημοκρατουμένους αὐτοὺς σωθῆναι).

While these changes resulted in a newly settled constitution, there was still the question of Augustus’ persona, still lacking as it did the clemency mentioned by Maecenas.[[200]](#footnote-200) This change is key, because it not only completes the transformation from triumvir to merciful emperor, but also because the employment of clemency allows others to fully recognize Augustus’ power.[[201]](#footnote-201) Dio holds off on this transformation until book 55, when he uses the various plots against Augustus as an opportunity for a conversation between the emperor and his wife about the best way to approach the situation.[[202]](#footnote-202) An anxious and fearful Augustus, aware that monarchs especially are threatened by treachery (55.15.1), is soothed by Livia. She reminds him that such plots are the product of human nature (55.14.4-8) and that they possess the power to defend themselves against such attacks (55.15.3). Her best and final advice, however, is for Augustus to change people’s nature and set an example of clemency for his subjects (55.16.3-6). By following Maecenas’ advice and setting his behavior as an example, Augustus achieved his goal: “As a result of this course he so conciliated both him and the other persons so treated that neither they nor any one of the rest thereafter either actually plotted against him or was suspected of doing so” (55.22.2: κἀκ τούτου καὶ ἐκεῖνον καὶ τοὺς λοιποὺς ἀνθρώπους οὕτως ᾠκειώσατο ὥστε μηδένα ἔτ’ αὐτῷ τῶν ἄλλων μήτ’ ὄντως ἐπιβουλεῦσαι μήτε δόξαι).

Dio’s Augustus was concerned not just with securing peace through monarchy, but also making sure that the monarchy was properly maintained. To this end, Augustus left prescriptions for ruling the empire, outlined in the documents made public at his death. Of particular importance are two injunctions that Dio describes at length. The first states that public affairs be handed to men of ability and should not be dependent on a single individual, for this would lead to tyranny whereas Rome would be secure if, under shared governance, a single man died (56.33.4). This statement is of particular importance, since it shares so much with Dio’s own prescriptions about a properly functioning monarchy, as seen in the passages from book 44 and elsewhere discussed above, and it also is concerned, as were the speeches of Agrippa and Maecenas, of a descent into tyranny. The second piece of advice has to do with the expansion of empire, which Augustus warns against. To expand would be to risk attack and losing the current empire (56.33.5), which mirrors Maecenas’ earlier advice.[[203]](#footnote-203)

Following a description of the funeral and Tiberius’ speech in eulogy of Augustus, Dio comments on Augustus’ monarchy in terms that overlap with a number of the proclamations surveyed above (56.43.4):[[204]](#footnote-204)

διά τε οὖν ταῦτα, καὶ ὅτι τὴν μοναρχίαν τῇ δημοκρατίᾳ μίξας τό τε ἐλεύθερόν σφισιν ἐτήρησε καὶ τὸ κόσμιον τό τε ἀσφαλὲς προσπαρεσκεύασεν, ὥστ’ ἔξω μὲν τοῦ δημοκρατικοῦ θράσους ἔξω δὲ καὶ τῶν τυραννικῶν ὕβρεων ὄντας ἔν τε ἐλευθερίᾳ σώφρονι καὶ ἐν μοναρχίᾳ ἀδεεῖ ζῆν, βασιλευομένους τε ἄνευ δουλείας καὶ δημοκρατουμένους ἄνευ διχοστασίας, δεινῶς αὐτὸν ἐπόθουν.

Not alone for these reasons did the Romans greatly miss him, but also because by combining monarchy with democracy he preserved their freedom for them and at the same time established order and security, so that they were free alike from the license of a democracy and from the insolence of a tyranny, living at once in a liberty of moderation and in a monarchy without terrors; they were subjects of royalty, yet not slaves, and citizens of a democracy, yet without discord.

The period from the death of Julius Caesar to the death of Augustus marks a formative, and positive, development for Roman governance, in Dio’s view.[[205]](#footnote-205) A true monarchy brought harmony and order, situated as it was between the evils of democracy and tyranny, both of which robbed Romans of security and liberty. In what follows, we observe how well Augustus’ successors maintained this monarchy.

*The Roman monarchy: decline and renewal*

Cassius Dio has been faulted for presenting a static version of the Roman monarchy, rather than one that changed over time. For example, Dio presents the changes that occurred under Augustus as if they all occurred at once.[[206]](#footnote-206) He then neglects to chart the changes in the growth of imperial power under successive monarchs. The cause for this, it has been argued, is that Dio was writing from a third century perspective and either was unaware or unconcerned with the changes that occurred over a long period of time.[[207]](#footnote-207)

In place of a “change over time” model, which is a particularly modern point of view, Dio examines the Roman monarchy through a pattern of decline and renewal that welds his Thucydidean mode of thought regarding civil war with the realities of Roman imperial succession.[[208]](#footnote-208) Dio can therefore trace the individual dynasties as they decline from model emperors to tyrants and then are swept away by periods of civil war (or near civil war). This process repeats itself numerous times throughout the history, though it breaks down twice in the Severan period, suggesting that the history, as Dio himself notes, has descended, perhaps permanently, into a period of iron and rust.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Dio’s debt to Thucydides is well known, especially his emphasis on human nature and its relationship to historical events.[[210]](#footnote-210) Equally important for Dio is the belief that strife and civil war will recur “while human nature remains the same” (Thuc. 3.82: ἕως ἂν ἡ αὐτὴ φύσις ἀνθρώπων ᾖ).[[211]](#footnote-211) Dio’s view of civil war, however, differs in important ways from Thucydides’ understanding, which highlights the negative aspects of civil war. While Dio accepts these negative aspects, he also recognizes that civil war led to the dissolution of Rome’s democracy, made a way for monarchy, and later ousted unfit tyrants in favor of more acceptable monarchs. Dio’s depiction of individual emperors does not differ significantly from surviving accounts.[[212]](#footnote-212) Instead, he offers a rubric for understanding the monarchy as one of decline and renewal. As we reach the end of the history, Dio suggests, through this rubric, that renewal may no longer be possible.

The transformative nature of civil war is most easily seen in Dio’s comments on the Battle of Philippi (47.39.1-5, excerpted):

μέγιστον δὴ τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντας τοὺς ἐμφυλίους τοὺς τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις γεγονότας οὐκ ἀπεικότως ἄν τις συμβῆναι νομίσειεν... ὅτι περί τε τῆς ἐλευθερίας καὶ τῆς δημοκρατίας τότε ὡς οὐπώποτε ἐπολέμησαν. συνέπεσον μὲν γὰρ καὶ αὖθις ἀλλήλοις, ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον· ἀλλ’ ἐκείνους μὲν τοὺς ἀγῶνας ὑπὲρ τοῦ τίνος ἐπακούσουσιν ἐποιήσαντο, τότε δὲ οἱ μὲν ἐς δυναστείαν αὐτοὺς ἦγον, οἱ δὲ ἐς αὐτονομίαν ἐξῃροῦντο.... καὶ οὐ λέγω ὡς οὐ συνήνεγκεν αὐτοῖς ἡττηθεῖσι τότε· τί γὰρ ἄν τις ἄλλο περὶ αὐτῶν ἀμφοτέρωθεν μαχεσαμένων εἴποι ἢ ὅτι Ῥωμαῖοι μὲν ἐνικήθησαν, Καῖσαρ δὲ ἐκράτησεν; ὁμοφρονῆσαι μὲν γὰρ ἐν τῷ καθεστῶτι τρόπῳ τῆς πολιτείας οὐκέθ’ οἷοί τε ἦσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ὅπως δημοκρατία ἄκρατος, ἐς τοσοῦτον ἀρχῆς ὄγκον προχωρήσασα, σωφρονῆσαι δύναται· πολλοὺς δ’ ἂν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς καὶ αὖθις ἀγῶνας ὁμοίους ἀνελόμενοι πάντως ἄν ποτε ἐδουλώθησαν ἢ καὶ ἐφθάρησαν.

One would naturally believe that this conflict was the greatest and went beyond all civil wars that fell upon the Romans... since they fought, as never previously, over liberty and democracy. Indeed, they fought one another just as before; they made those struggles over whom they would obey, but at that time some led them toward domination of a few, the others delivered them into freedom... I do not say that it was not a good thing for them to have been defeated at that time. For what else might one say about those fighting on both sides, other than that the Romans were defeated and Caesar won? For they could no longer continue together in the previously instituted form of government. Indeed, it was the case that an intemperate democracy, have gained such a great empire, could not be moderate. Should they have continuously taken up many similar conflicts, they one day would have been enslaved or completely destroyed.

Though couched in a double negative, Dio’s viewpoint is clear: those fighting for a perpetuation of rule by dynasts needed to be defeated. Fighting (and winning) the civil war, however, was not enough, and the subsequent monarch needed to prove his worth. Such was the state of affairs in the conflict between young Caesar and Marcus Antonius (50.1.1):

Ὁ δὲ δῆμος ὁ τῶν Ῥωμαίων τῆς μὲν δημοκρατίας ἀφῄρητο, οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἐς μοναρχίαν ἀκριβῆ ἀπεκέκριτο, ἀλλ’ ὅ τε Ἀντώνιος καὶ ὁ Καῖσαρ ἐξ ἴσου ἔτι τὰ πράγματα εἶχον, τά τε πλείω σφῶν διειληχότες, καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῷ μὲν λόγῳ κοινὰ νομίζοντες, τῷ δὲ ἔργῳ, ὥς που πλεονεκτῆσαί τι ἑκάτερος αὐτῶν ἐδύνατο, ἰδιούμενοι.

Democracy was taken away from the people of Rome, but a true monarchy had not yet come into form. Antony and Caesar managed affairs equally, having divided most of them between them, considering the remainder nominally shared between them, but really appropriating to himself whatever he was able to take for his own advantage.

We have observed above the changes that Augustus instituted to turn Rome into a proper monarchy, but conflict came before that transformation could occur. As the monarchy degenerated, civil wars would usher in a *civilis princeps*, a scenario that was repeated as dynasties turned from one to the next.

Decline from the Augustan paradigm would not take long. Dio foreshadows the degeneration of the Julio-Claudians just as the dynasty is beginning. In his summation of Augustus’ reign, Dio, in what serves as a sort of introduction to the reign of Tiberius, writes: “For human nature is so constituted that in good fortune it does not so fully perceive its happiness as it misses it when misfortune has come” (56.45.1: καὶ γὰρ φιλεῖ πως τὸ ἀνθρώπειον οὐχ οὕτω τι εὐπαθοῦν τῆς εὐδαιμονίας αἰσθάνεσθαι ὡς δυστυχῆσαν ποθεῖν αὐτήν). Tiberius’ reign begins well enough. He was well born and well brought up (εὐπατρίδης μὲν ἦν καὶ ἐπεπαίδευτο), and Dio, over several chapters, places Tiberius’ early actions in line with the behavior of a *civilis princeps*.[[213]](#footnote-213) We learn from the outset, however, that Tiberius had a most idiosyncratic nature (57.1.1): one never knew what Tiberius was thinking, and the emperor was eager to conceal his true meaning.[[214]](#footnote-214) This made his reign dangerous (57.1.4), especially after the death of Germanicus, which Dio locates as the time of Tiberius’ transformation (57.13.6; 19.1). Like others, Dio focuses on Tiberius’ use of *maiestas* trials (57.19.1-4), and the figure of Sejanus becomes the bridge between aiding the emperor’s cruelty (57.19.5) and proof that the Romans (and especially the senators) were being ruled over by an incompetent emperor.[[215]](#footnote-215) Tiberius was also a reluctant emperor, handing power both to Livia (57.12.2) and Sejanus (58.5.1), preferring to withdraw to Capri rather than govern from the imperial capital (58.5.1). As his distance from the Senate grew, Tiberius began to curry favor with the praetorians, so that they could help him against the senators (58.18.2-3).[[216]](#footnote-216) The themes developed here are important. We find a reluctant emperor who used his power arbitrarily and alienated the Senate.

At the end of the reign, we learn of a rumor that Tiberius was happy to hand over the empire to Gaius so that he might look better (58.23.3-4), an echo of Dio’s closing remarks to Augustus’ reign (56.45.3) and an indication that that monarchy would further decline.[[217]](#footnote-217) Despite a reign that began as the “most civil” (δημοκρατικώτατός), Gaius soon turned the “most monarchical” (μοναρχικώτατος) (59.3.1). Augustus is a recurring exemplar in this book, though at times misconstrued by the young emperor.[[218]](#footnote-218) Thus, Gaius took in a single day all of the honors and titles that Augustus had been slowly forced to accept over time (59.3.2); at Tiberius’ burial, Gaius did not say too much about Tiberius himself, but instead reminded the people of Augustus and Germanicus, in an attempt to connect himself to them (59.3.8); dressed in triumphal garb, he dedicated the Temple of Augustus (59.7.1); he renewed permission, given by Augustus and suspended under Tiberius, that people come barefoot to the games (59.7.7); like Augustus, he published an accounting of public moneys, which had not occurred while Tiberius was away from Rome (59.9.1); and he disliked it when the Senate referred to him as “young Augustus”, though it was meant as a form of praise (59.13.6).

Dio’s repeated references to Augustus in this book demonstrate both his emphasis on the superiority of Augustus’ monarchy and Gaius’ inability to match his predecessor. It is against this backdrop that Gaius’ deviations become brighter. We encounter new problems in this reign, including the spending of enormous sums on actors, horses, gladiators, and other entertainments and subsequently exhausting the treasury (59.2.4-5). Dio mocks Gaius’ attempts at imperial expansion in Britain and uses the episode to highlight Gaius’ abuse of the Senate upon his return (59.25.2-5 [Xiph.]). In a related incident, Dio tells the story of Protogenes, imperial freedman of the emperor, who brought about the death of the senator Scribonius Proculus (59.26.1-4 [Xiph.]). In addition, Gaius broke norms of imperial self-presentation, dressing himself as both goddesses and women (59.26.6-7 [Xiph.]).[[219]](#footnote-219) Gaius’ distance from the ideal of the Augustan monarchy is felt in his slide toward tyranny, affirmed obliquely by Dio when he notes that Gaius was spending time with Kings Agrippa and Antiochus, who were “tyrants trainers” (59.24.1: τυραννοδιδασκάλους).[[220]](#footnote-220)

Claudius’ reign is a mixed depiction in Dio.[[221]](#footnote-221) On the one hand, Claudius was intelligent (60.2.1 [Xiph./Zon.]) and carried out a number of good measures, including conciliating those opposed to him and getting rid of *maiestas* charges (60.3.5-6), as well as turning back the taxes introduced by Gaius, bringing back exiles, and freeing those imprisoned on charges of *maiestas* (60.4.1-2). He also broke with the tradition of Tiberius and Gaius by returning money that they had confiscated, while allying himself with Augustus by barring individuals from making personal contributions to him (60.6.2). Likewise, he swore, as had others swear, to uphold Augustus’ acts (60.10.1). He publicly tried cases in the forum, and he investigated financial matters with the relevant magistrates (60.4.3-4). Claudius’ main fault, however, which stemmed from his upbringing, was his subservience to freedman, slaves, and women (60.2.4). Dio thus spends much of the narrative of this reign discussing the machinations of characters such as Agrippina, Messalina, and Narcissus. As such, Claudius represents the limits of inherited succession: despite being an able ruler in many ways, he had already been corrupted by the family from which he came.

Not surprisingly, Nero represents the low point of the Julio-Claudian line. Dio claims that Nero’s goal was to destroy the entire city and kingdom of Rome (62[62].16.1 [Xiph.]). He had such little concern for the city that while Rome burned (which Dio says was the worst disaster since the Gallic Sack), he played the “Capture of Troy” (62[62].18.1-2 [Xiph.]).[[222]](#footnote-222) Evidence of his desire to destroy the empire was his devastation of Greece (62[63].11.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).[[223]](#footnote-223) Like Gaius, he transgressed boundaries of imperial comportment. He acted with such license that he drove chariots in public (62[62].15.1 [Xiph.]), while in Greece he appeared with Sporus/Sabina as his wife and Pythagoras as his husband (62[63].13.1-2 [Xiph.]). He was especially hateful toward the Senate (62[63].15 [Xiph.]), and when he found himself abandoned by his friends and advisors at the end of his reign, he planned to kill the senators, burn Rome, and flee to Alexandria. Toward the end of his narration of Nero’s reign, Dio shows just how far the monarchy had fallen from its Augustan form when he discusses Nero’s freedman Helius (62[63].12.2 [Xiph.]):

οὕτω μὲν δὴ τότε ἡ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴ δύο αὐτοκράτορσιν ἅμα ἐδούλευσε, Νέρωνι καὶ Ἡλίῳ. οὐδὲ ἔχω εἰπεῖν ὁπότερος αὐτῶν χείρων ἦν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα ἐκ τοῦ ὁμοίου πάντα ἔπραττον, ἐν ἑνὶ δὲ τούτῳ διήλλασσον, ὅτι ὁ μὲν τοῦ Αὐγούστου ἀπόγονος κιθαρῳδοὺς καὶ τραγῳδούς, ὁ δὲ τοῦ Κλαυδίου ἀπελεύθερος Καίσαρας ἐζήλου.

Thus the Roman empire was at that time a slave to two emperors at once, Nero and Helius; and I am unable to say which of them was the worse. In most respects they behaved entirely alike, and the one point of difference was that the descendant of Augustus was emulating lyre-players and tragedians, whereas the freedman of Claudius was emulating Caesars.

The decline is marked by Dio’s identification of Nero as the descendant of Augustus and his preference for alternative forms of self-presentation, and emphasized by the perpetuation of Claudius’ preference for freedmen.[[224]](#footnote-224)

Nero’s misrule would not be tolerated indefinitely, and civil war would lead to his end and the eventual beginning of good rule under Vespasian. This process is set in motion by Vindex, whom Dio describes as a “lover of freedom” (φιλελεύθερον, 63[63].22.12 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]) and who risked bringing civil war to Rome in order to overthrow a tyrant.[[225]](#footnote-225) Vindex’ love of freedom recalls the passage above, in which Dio states that Augustus preserved freedom for the Romans and offered them peace and stability (56.43.4). Vindex’ love of country over desire for glory is proven by his desire to have Galba become the next emperor (63[63].23.1 [Xiph.]), and once the Senate removes Nero’s guard and elects Galba as emperor (63[63].27.2b [Zon.]), the Romans’ liberation is exemplified by their wearing victory caps for their freedom (63[63].29.1 [Xiph.]). Galba’s position, however, was not yet secure, and Otho’s ability to engineer a conspiracy among the praetorians hints at lurking problems that Rome still faced (63[64].5.3 [Xiph./Zon.]). The Senate was forced to vote Otho as emperor, and Otho became the next Nero, by taking that emperor’s name (63[64].8.1-21 [Xiph./Zon.]). Otho, however, soon met his death in battle against Vitellius’ forces (63[64].11 [Xiph./Zon.]), which in turn faced Vespasian’s troops at Bedriacum (64[65].12-15), while Vitellius was murdered by the people in Rome (64[65].20-21).

Vespasian emerged as the Senate’s choice (65[66].1.1 [Xiph.]), and, similarly to Augustus, Vespasian is praised by Dio for combining autocracy with civility (65[66].10.4-11.3). His concern for Rome and the empire, in contrast to the selfish emperors before him, can be seen in his amassing money for the needs of the people, not for himself, as he led a simple life (65[66].10.3 [Xiph.]). He rebuilt damaged buildings in Rome and inscribed them, not with his own name, but with that of their original builders (65[66].10.1a [Zon.]), just as Augustus had done (56.40.5).[[226]](#footnote-226) He was available to all, and he frequently shared his table with senators (65[66).10.4-6 [Xiph.]). While this much epitomized reign is difficult to get a full picture of, it is clear that Vespasian had restored, to a certain extent, the civil principate established by Augustus.

Dio seems to have had some initial misgivings about Titus at the time he came to power, though he uses Titus’s transformation as a way to comment generally on the figure of the good monarch. Dio writes that those who use power merely as assistants only have their own interest at heart, whereas true monarchs aim for a good reputation, since they know that all responsibility falls on them (66[66].18.1-2 [Xiph.]). Dio is sure note that Titus put no senators to death (66[66].19.1 [Xiph.]), and he also states that Titus seems to have benefited from a short reign, as he ruled mildly and died at a high point (66[66].18.5 [Xiph.]). This comment is made in comparison to Augustus, who ruled for many years and over time overcame his earlier harshness and developed a more positive reputation. This comparison is important, as it hints at Dio’s misgivings about hereditary rule and foreshadows the crimes of Domitian that follow.

Domitian plays the role of the next tyrant that Rome faced.[[227]](#footnote-227) Dio had already introduced Domitian during Vespasian’s reign, with the comment that details about him, though unworthy of history, had to be recorded because they showed his character (65[66].9.4 [Xiph.]). At the outset of Domitian’s reign, Dio spends time recounting some of the emperor’s vices (67[67].1.1-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). While he can enumerate those, he is at a loss to know now many Domitian had killed, since he didn't keep records of it, or even send any notice to the Senate, except for their heads. Domitian’s cruelty caused him to isolate himself, trusting only freedmen or prefects (67[67].14.4 [Xiph.]).[[228]](#footnote-228) This isolation inevitably led to his assassination, plotted by two *cubicularii*, an *ab epistulis*, and a freedman (67[67].15.1 [Xiph.]).

After Domitian’s despotic rule, Nerva’s reign was a relief and a harbinger of a return to a good monarchy under his successors. Dio implies a return to consensus rule when he states that the Romans appointed Nerva emperor, and the erasure of Domitian’s memory, through the melting down of his statues, was also a boon to imperial finances (68[68].1.1 [Xiph.]). We are reminded here that Domitian had flooded the empire with images of himself in gold and silver (67[67].8.1 [Xiph.]) and also that bad emperors in the past had mismanaged finances.[[229]](#footnote-229) Nerva embodies these changes, when he bans statues of himself in gold or silver to be made and when he sells imperial property to raise money. Most importantly, however, Nerva chose a successor, Trajan, based on his excellence, not his nationality or the fact that he had living relatives to whom he might have passed power (68[68].4.1-2 [Xiph.]).

The death of Domitian and the transition to Nerva and the eventual Antonine dynasty is notable for the lack of civil war, though the threat is present (68[68].3.3-4 [Xiph.]):[[230]](#footnote-230)

Αἰλιανὸς δὲ ὁ Κασπέριος ἄρχων καὶ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, καθάπερ ὑπὸ τοῦ Δομιτιανοῦ, τῶν δορυφόρων γενόμενος τοὺς στρατιώτας ἐστασίασε κατ’ αὐτοῦ, παρασκευάσας ἐξαιτῆσαί τινας ὥστε θανατωθῆναι. πρὸς οὓς ὁ Νέρουας τοσοῦτον ἀντέσχεν ὥστε καὶ τὴν κλεῖν ἀπογυμνῶσαι καὶ τὴν σφαγὴν αὐτοῦ προδεῖξαι. οὐ μήν τι καὶ ἤνυσεν, ἀλλ’ ἀνῃρέθησαν οὓς ὁ Αἰλιανὸς ἐβουλήθη. ὅθεν ὁ Νέρουας διὰ τὸ γῆρας οὕτω καταφρονούμενος ἀνέβη τε ἐς τὸ Καπιτώλιον, καὶ ἔφη γεγωνήσας “ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ τῆς τε βουλῆς καὶ τοῦ δήμου τῶν Ῥωμαίων καὶ ἐμοῦ αὐτοῦ Μᾶρκον   
Οὔλπιον Νέρουαν Τραϊανὸν ποιοῦμαι”.

Casperius Aelianus, who had become commander of the Praetorians under him as he had been under Domitian, incited the soldiers to mutiny against him, after having induced them to demand certain persons for execution. Nerva resisted them stoutly, even to the point of baring his collar-bone and presenting to them his throat; but he accomplished nothing, and those whom Aelianus wished were put out of the way. Nerva, therefore, finding himself held in such contempt by reason of his old age, ascended the Capitol and said in a loud voice: “May good success attend the Roman senate and people and myself. I hereby adopt Marcus Ulpius Nerva Trajan”.

In many ways, Nerva’s ability to stave off civil strife is emblematic of the Antonines as the eventual high point of the Roman monarchy, which came about by their eschewing hereditary succession. If this close sequencing of events mirrors the contents of Dio’s original, then it seems that the very act of adopting Trajan, and choosing a successor outside of one’s family, was the reason that civil war could be avoided.

Dio’s portrayal of Trajan is quite positive. Trajan promised not to put senators to death (68[68].5.2 [Xiph.]),[[231]](#footnote-231) and Dio praises him for his justice, bravery, and simplicity (68[68].6.2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), as well as his generosity (68[68].7.2 [Xiph.]). He came to power when he was forty-two years old, which put him in his prime both mentally and physically (68[68].6.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Dio’s attention to this detail emphasizes his preference for adoptive succession, as it contrasts with the young emperors like Gaius or Nero and also the older Claudius. Dio even goes so far as to excuse Trajan’s vices, such as drinking, love affairs with boys, and war mongering (68[68].7.4-5 [Xiph.]).[[232]](#footnote-232)

At Trajan’s death, Dio follows a tradition which held that no adoption plan had been made and that Hadrian’s accession was engineered by Attianus, Plotina, and a large military force (69[69].1.1-2 [Xiph.]). This leads into a somewhat mixed, but overall rather positive portrait of Hadrian, who is faulted for his jealousy of sophists (69[69].3.3-4 [Xiph.]) but also praised for working with the Senate and surrounding himself with the noblest men (69[69].7.1-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Vat*.]) and for training his soldiers well (69[69].9.4 [Xiph.]).[[233]](#footnote-233) In a key passage at the end of his reign, Hadrian gives a speech about the benefits of adoptive succession (69[69].20 [Xiph.]), which surely is Dio’s way of praising, in general, the type of monarchy established by Nerva, and specifically the coming reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius.[[234]](#footnote-234)

Almost all of Dio’s narrative of the reign of Antoninus Pius is lost and had been even at the time that Xiphilinus made his epitome (70[70].1.1).[[235]](#footnote-235) The successive reign of Marcus Aurelius (and for a time, Lucius Verus), however, was for Dio the high point of the monarchy, as Dio refers to Marcus’ rule as a “golden kingship” (72[71].36.4 [Xiph.]: χρυσῆς τε βασιλείας), and throughout his depiction of this reign, Dio cites many of Marcus’ attributes. He ruled moderately and forcefully (72[71].3.4 [Xiph.]) and was also painstaking and diligent, holding court whenever he was not at war (72[71].6.1-2 [Xiph.]). He was deferential to the people and Senate in financial affairs, even though Dio makes it clear that it was in Marcus’ power to manage the fiscus as he wished (72[71].33.2 [Xiph.]). At the end of the book, Dio includes a lengthy obituary, in which he praises Marcus for, among other things, enduring with extraordinary circumstances and holding the empire together (72[71].36.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).[[236]](#footnote-236)

Marcus’ reign saw the uprising of Avidius Cassius in Syria, an event that provides an interesting parallel to the possible, but ultimately unrealized, civil war under Nerva. In Dio’s telling, Marcus turned this possibility of civil war into an opportunity for clemency and forgiveness; indeed, his goal was to demonstrate the “right way to deal even with civil wars” (72[71].26.4 [Xiph.]: ὅτι καὶ ἐμφυλίοις πολέμοις ἔστιν ὀρθῶς χρήσασθαι). Marcus only got to the point of preparing for civil war when Cassius died (72[71].27.2 [Xiph.]) and the conflict was mooted. This example, and the threatened conflict by the praetorians under Nerva, emphasize when civil war was needed and, just as importantly, not needed. These unrealized civil wars speak to the type of rule that Nerva and his successors established. It is therefore not surprising to find the next round of civil war coming only after the death of Commodus.

With the accession of Commodus, both Rome’s history and Dio’s history descends into a period of iron and rust, and his death brings on a series of civil wars. Regarding these conflicts, Dio writes: “For this reason it became especially clear that the terror would not reside in the city, but that it would spread to the entire world that it possessed” (73[72].24.2[Xiph.]: ἀφ’ οὗ δὴ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα δῆλον ἐγένετο ὅτι οὐκ ἐν τῇ πόλει τὸ δεινὸν στήσεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην αὐτῆς ἀφίξεται). These wars were a significant turning point for Dio, for they were the impetus for his career as a historian, as we saw in chapter 1. Commodus was assassinated in a palace coup and Rome would see civil war lasting until 197 CE. At first Pertinax became emperor, in a scenario that was similar to the events following the death of Domitian.[[237]](#footnote-237) Pertinax too was the Senate’s preference and, like Nerva, he had to resist a mutiny among the praetorians. Following Nerva’s lead, Pertinax attempted to face down the revolt, though his bravery was rewarded by a sword thrust from one of the bolder soldiers (74[73].9.4-10.1 [Xiph.]). Didius Julianus would buy his position as emperor from the praetorians, but he was soon challenged by several provincial governors.

What follows mirrors, to a certain extent, the events of 68/69 CE. Septimius Severus found himself the eventual winner of these civil wars, welcomed by the Senate and people of Rome as a replacement for Didius Julianus and eventually besting Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus in civil war. His reign, however, was not the return to an Augustan-style monarchy. Instead, Severus alienated the Senate, waged wars for personal glory, and promoted his rivalrous sons as heirs.[[238]](#footnote-238) Several years later the equestrian emperor Macrinus found himself challenged by a teenager who claimed to be the son of Caracalla and is popularly known as Elagabalus. Civil strife arose among the soldiers in the East, who chafed against Macrinus’ efforts to carry out military reform, and Elagabalus took advantage (79[78].28.1). Elagabalus would eventually defeat Macrinus and his forces and assume power as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Despite his name, his reign little resembled that of Dio’s preferred ruler. Instead, Dio documents a reign of cruelty, perversion, and eccentricity.

Dio connects the civil wars of his own age when he repeats his comments from earlier, almost verbatim: “And so it happened: for the terrors remained not only in the city, but it affected the entire world that it possessed” (79[78].26.1, καὶ ἔσχεν οὕτως· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐν τῇ πόλει μόνῃ τὸ δεινὸν ἔμεινεν, ἀλλὰ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην αὐτῆς… ἐπέσχεν). In this instance, the civil war was fought between the equestrian emperor Macrinus and the young Elagabalus, posing as the son of Caracalla. Elagabalus’ victory meant both the reformation and redefinition of the Severan dynasty, under whom Dio would serve out his political career before his retirement to his native Bithynia. When read within the framework of Dio’s overall history of the monarchy, these two instances of civil war, and their evil spreading around the world, appear to break Dio’s analytical model. Whereas earlier civil wars brought monarchy into existence or rid Rome of a tyrant, these civil wars do not produce the same effect. Instead of an enlightened monarch, Rome is left with the founder of the Severan dynasty, Septimius Severus, and his unforeseen successor Elagabalus.[[239]](#footnote-239)

*Good v. bad emperors*

Rome’s monarchy declined following the death of Commodus, as glimpsed above in the discussion of civil war. As he makes clear in his transition from Marcus Aurelius to Commodus, and thus from past history to contemporary history, Dio understood his own age to be one of decline and degeneration. The nature of imperial historiography demanded a focus on the emperor, and thus the source of decline in Dio’s age must be related to this figure. Commentators have put different emphases on what exactly was driving the decline that Dio observed in his own age. On the one hand, Dio has often been seen as focusing on the moral problems that pertain to his own period. Thus, for example, Espinosa Ruiz (1982, 233) characterizes Dio’s Rome as ill and its moral decline caused by the people in power. Similarly, Davenport and Mallan (2014, 649) have pointed out that after the end of Julio-Claudian dynasty, Dio tends to focus more on the virtues of Rome’s emperors as an index of their ability to rule well.

Despite his focus at times on moral excellence or failings, it would be wrong to characterize Dio as a moral historian. Of course, like ancient writers of history, Dio partakes of the genre’s inclination toward praise and blame, and he excoriates behavior that he finds inappropriate or unbecoming. Even with this in mind, it is difficult to see Dio as a historian in the mold of, say, Livy or Sallust, who focused on the moral character of the Romans generally and used these judgments to explain Rome’s various rises and declines. In Dio’s scheme, moral qualities of those in positions of leadership could certainly aid in bringing about peace and prosperity, though they were not strictly necessary. In light of Dio’s comments at the outset of book 44, we observe that the Roman emperors were judged according to the man’s official actions. Thus, Kemezis (2014, 135) has observed that “Dio gives us little clue about how that achievement related to the personal characteristics of the ruler”, and, even more importantly, that an emperor’s actions were driven by the contemporary political culture, not their own personalities (139-141). Similarly, Hose (2011, 115-116) has observed that from Commodus onwards, the nature of the ruler became less important, whereas the structure of Rome’s government and the environment in which the emperor lived gained greater significance. Thus, Dio judges emperors with respect to the system that was established by Augustus, which was based primarily on consensus achieved among emperor, Senate, and people.[[240]](#footnote-240) In this way a “good” emperor either will not create or will correct problems within the system, whereas a “bad” emperor will create or exacerbate them. Dio judges the emperors as emperors, in terms of how they acted and performed their role as rulers of the Roman world.[[241]](#footnote-241)

If we take Dio’s “best” emperors, Augustus and Marcus Aurelius (and perhaps Vespasian), we find that the moral capacity of the emperor was not a determining factor in bringing stability to the Roman world. Dio’s Augustus might even be considered morally challenged. He was at times cruel, philandering, hypocritical, and deceitful.[[242]](#footnote-242) Yet despite this ambivalent moral depiction, Dio sees him as the savior of Rome, as he successfully brought the empire from the deleterious period of the dynasts into a peaceful monarchy. In the figure of Marcus Aurelius, we have a man of high moral character who also brought Rome into a golden age. We get the sense that Marcus’ moral excellence aided this effort, but Dio focuses just as much on his duties as emperor, such as holding court, consulting with the best men, and sharing power with the Senate. In this comparison, Marcus’ moral superiority functions as a beneficial adjunct to his work as emperor, not necessarily a cause of it. With these considerations in mind, when reading Dio we should focus on how he thought the Principate worked, and how well individual emperors followed his precepts. Dio’s moral judgments become his way of attacking those who violated these precepts, but they were not necessarily the cause of their inability to rule well.

*Conclusion*

Rome’s adoption of monarchy and the maintenance of that system is a major theme in Cassius Dio’s *History*. Throughout the end of the Republic, the triumviral period, and the reign of Augustus, Dio explains why the change was needed and how Augustus set up a successful form of monarchy in place of the degenerated democracy. As the historian looked back and reflected on the history of the Roman monarchy, he recognized the repeated role that civil played from the Late Republic to his own day and created a specific scheme for understanding the cyclical nature of the Roman monarchy, which reflected his belief about the immutability of human nature. This scheme is particularly potent for the contemporary history, since it sets up the expectation that the civil war victor of the conflicts after the death of Commodus will emerge as an Augustus-like figure who re-settles the constitution and ushers in a period of peace and prosperity.

The final civil war of Dio’s lifetime, between Macrinus and Elagabalus, has even greater consequences. In this instance, the Severan dynasty had been interrupted by the figure of Macrinus, and this civil war worked to re-establish the Severan line in the ruling house. If Septimius Severus’ civil war victory constituted a partial failure of the civil war-scheme, then this final conflict stands as a metaphor for the complete breakdown of the Roman monarchical system, with an equestrian emperor fighting in the East against a Syrian teenager with tenuous ties to the Severan house. What follows in the reign of Elagabalus is, for Dio, perhaps the complete *denouement* of the Roman monarchy (cf. Osgood 2016) and then his subsequent departure from public life in Rome.

The tracing of Dio’s civil war scheme demonstrates the author’s continual shaping of his material. The originality of Dio’s contribution is not the re-writing of the Roman monarchy on a case by case basis. Throughout the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties, the reputations of the emperors were generally set, and this continued even for the figures of Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian. Dio’s contribution is the particular framing of the monarchy as one of decline and rebirth, a setting that occurred through civil war, just as it had after Actium. It is not until closer to his age, specifically with Marcus Aurelius and his successors, that Dio moves into a period for which he is one of the first (and in some instances, likely the very first) to write up narratives of their reigns. In the following chapters, we will examine how Dio framed the dyad of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus according to his ideas about the flow of information under the monarchy and then with the change to his eyewitness history. From there, it will be possible to explore how Dio wrote about the Severan dynasty. Dio’s Septimius Severus wished to present himself as such a figure, but ultimately he was a flawed character who merely gave the appearance of being an enlightened monarchy. Once he decided to pass power to his sons, there was little hope for the monarchy to recover. For Dio, these were contentious claims that had to rely on his ability to witness the events of his age.

**Chapter 4: Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Historical Method in Cassius Dio’s Contemporary History**

Though Cassius Dio’s contemporary history begins in the reign of Commodus, it is important to remember that he came of age during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.[[243]](#footnote-243) The memory of Marcus looms large in Dio’s *Roman History*, and the emperor has generally been interpreted as a paradigmatic figure by whom other emperors might be judged.[[244]](#footnote-244) This approach has allowed for fruitful analyses, and there can be little doubt that Dio admired Marcus Aurelius and held him up as an example to behold. Less attention, however, has been given to Marcus’ narrative or structural function within Dio’s text. Because Dio was perhaps the first writer to produce a history of his own period, and because of the general absence of contemporary history under the Antonines, Dio likely had significant leeway in shaping the figure of Marcus into the idealized form that we find in his history.[[245]](#footnote-245) Part of this shaping was contending with popular opinions of Marcus during his own day, which at times understood the ruler as less than ideal, or apologizing for the emperor when he does not adhere to the standards of monarchical comportment that Dio sets up throughout his *History*.

In this chapter I will survey Dio’s attitude toward Marcus, focusing primarily on Dio’s stance as an apologist for his ideal emperor. Analysis will then move to Dio’s depiction of Commodus, specifically as a counterpoint to the figure of Marcus Aurelius. With these two characters Dio forms a sort of diptych, wherein we see Rome reach its proverbial high point under Marcus, only to see the entire edifice torn down by Commodus. Through this contraposition, Dio also reveals the contemporary world that he will create and the methods that he will employ to narrate, and at that same time analyze, the reigns of the emperors of his own day. In book 73[72], Dio introduces his contemporary period, to which he claims not only to be an eyewitness, but also to be the most highly qualified individual to tell the story of what he saw. The placement of this notice comes at a crucial point in the book, when Commodus, toward the end of his reign, celebrates games and performs publicly in them as well. With the announcement of his eyewitness status, Dio invites us to consider his methodology in narrating the story of the Roman monarchy and how that will change in the coming books.

*Cassius Dio on Marcus Aurelius*

For Cassius Dio, Marcus Aurelius was the ideal emperor and his virtues are numerous. These virtues are described both throughout Dio’s narrative of his reign and especially in the lengthy obituary that Dio provides for Marcus at the end of book 72[71]. Marcus was an attentive and diligent emperor, giving people plenty of time to speak and spending much time on each case, for he was hardworking (φιλόπονος) and aimed for precision (ἀκριβῶς) in all aspects of his rule (72[71].6.1-2 [Xiph.]). He was also favored by the gods: victory was given to him by divine force, as when in battle against the Quadi a rainstorm saved the Roman forces from ruin (72[71].8.1-4; 10.1-5 [Xiph.]).[[246]](#footnote-246) He knew the proper way to deal with internal conflict.[[247]](#footnote-247) Marcus’ speech regarding the uprising of Avidius Cassius in Syria considers the evils of civil war, a lamentation of the lack of loyalty, and his concern for the safety of his people and country rather than his own security (72[71].24.1-4 [Xiph.]). Marcus frets that if Cassius were to kill himself, Marcus would not have the opportunity to offer him forgiveness (72[71].26.1-4 [Xiph.]). Although this opportunity was indeed taken away from him, Marcus still dealt with the civil war in a different way, when he refused to view Cassius’ severed head (72[71].28.1 [*Exc. Val*.]).[[248]](#footnote-248) Dio’s extensive eulogy for Marcus summarizes a number of his positive traits. Dio writes that Marcus possessed all of the virtues and ruled better than anyone. He was committed to kindness (εὐεργεσία) (72[71].34.3). He had an excellent character, but was also aided greatly by his education (72[71].35.6). Despite his physical weakness, he managed to endure and preserve the empire, which most impressed Dio (72[71].36.3).[[249]](#footnote-249)

Dio’s almost completely positive portrayal of Marcus runs up against some obstacles, which become apparent when we observe the historian responding to explicit or implicit criticisms of Marcus. The criticisms of Marcus are not unique to Dio, as can be seen in other sources, such as the *Historia Augusta*. For example, Marcus’ *vita* in the *Historia Augusta* includes the rumor that Marcus was responsible for the death of Lucius Verus.[[250]](#footnote-250) The *vita* also concludes with a number of criticisms of the emperor, which stands in contrast to the conclusion of the preceding lives, in which the end of the biography contains an encomiastic section for the emperor.[[251]](#footnote-251) There Marcus is criticized for advancing the careers of men who committed adultery with his wife, his greediness, insincerity, and for making his court haughty by excluding his friends from banquets and other interactions (*HA*, *Marc*. 29.1-6). These discrepancies suggest that the idealized image of Marcus was competing with a more neutral or even at time hostile accounting of his life and reign.

Some of these complaints are mirrored in Dio, while others are unique to his work. For example, in his discussion of Marcus’ handing of money and the finances of the empire, of which he is complimentary, Dio writes (72[71].32.3 [Xiph.]):

ἀφ’ οὗπερ καὶ νῦν θαυμάζω τῶν αἰτιωμένων αὐτὸν ὡς οὐ μεγαλόφρονα γενόμενον· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα οἰκονομικώτατος ὡς ἀληθῶς ἦν, τῶν δ’ ἀναγκαίων ἀναλωμάτων οὐδὲ ἓν ἐξίστατο, καίπερ μήτε τινὰ ἐσπράξει χρημάτων, ὥσπερ εἶπον, λυπῶν, καὶ πλεῖστα ὅσα ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἔξω τῶν ἐγκυκλίων δαπανῶν.

Therefore I am surprised to hear people even to‑day censuring him on the ground that he was not an open-handed prince. For, although in general he was most economical in very truth, yet he never avoided a single necessary expenditure, even though, as I have stated,​ he burdened no one by levies of money and though he found himself forced to lay out very large sums beyond the ordinary requirements.

Although Marcus’ actions agree with Dio’s sense of frugality, it is notable that in the early third century this idealized emperor (in Dio) perhaps did not possess the sterling reputation that he would come to have later.[[252]](#footnote-252)

On other issues, we see Dio excusing behavior that goes against his general model of a good emperor.[[253]](#footnote-253) For example, Marcus Aurelius did not always communicate with the Senate properly, as when Marcus received the title of *imperator* from the soldiers while still in the East, prior to a vote by the Senate. Dio excuses Marcus’ behavior, because the emperor usually awaited senatorial approval and in this instance received the title as if it were a sign from god (72[71].10.5 [Xiph.]). Likewise, Dio notes the irregularity of Marcus’ communication to the Senate after his settlement with the Iazyges, which he excuses on the grounds that Marcus was taken so unawares by the revolt of Avidius Cassius in Syria (72[71].17.1 [*Exc*. *UG*62]). These comments would be less noticeable if elsewhere Dio did not censure other emperors for similar behavior.[[254]](#footnote-254)

Dio is also defensive of Marcus’ actions after the death of Avidius Cassius. In a lengthy speech, Marcus Aurelius stresses his work on behalf of the state and that, for him, victory was an opportunity to forgive Avidius Cassius (72[71].24.4, 26.2 [Xiph.]). Clearly this speech is meant to emphasize Marcus’ selflessness and mercy, further buttressed by Dio’s claim that the emperor did not wish to view the head of Avidius Cassius and that he put no one in the provinces to death.[[255]](#footnote-255) It seems that Marcus showed similar leniency toward the Senate, but that he also took the opportunity to put some others to death (72[71].28.3 [*Exc*. *Val*.]):

τῶν δ’ ἄλλων ὀλίγους πάνυ, ὅσοι καὶ ἔργῳ τι οὐ μόνον τῷ Κασσίῳ συνεπεπράχεσαν ἀλλὰ καὶ καθ’ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκεκακουργήκεσαν, ἐδικαίωσεν. τεκμήριον δὲ ὅτι Φλάουιον Καλουίσιον τὸν τῆς Αἰγύπτου ἄρχοντα οὔτε ἐφόνευσεν οὔτε τὴν οὐσίαν ἀφείλετο, ἀλλ’ ἐς νῆσον ἁπλῶς ἐνέβαλεν. τὰ δὲ ὑπομνήματα τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ γενόμενα κατέκαυσεν, ἵνα μηδ’ ὀνείδισμά τι ἐξ αὐτῶν σχῇ, καὶ πάντας τοὺς συγγενομένους αὐτῷ ἀφῆκεν.

Of the others, he executed a very few, who had been guilty of some overt crime not only in co-operation with Cassius but also on their own account. A proof of this is that he did not slay or deprive of his property Flavius Calvisius,​ the governor of Egypt, but merely confined him on an island. He also caused the records made in this man’s case to be burned, in order that no reproach should attach to him from this source; and he released all who had been associated with him.

In this passage, Dio suggests that Flavius Calvisius had earned a penalty of death and uses his survival as an example of Marcus’ leniency.[[256]](#footnote-256) Still, Marcus put some to death, perhaps for reasons not associated with the uprising. With the phrase καθ’ ἑαυτοὺς (“on their own account”), Dio seems to suggest that Marcus used this event as an opportunity to deal out punishments more widely than those that just had to do with the revolt. So while Marcus’ leniency is notable, it is also the case that Dio criticized other emperors for meting out punishments in similar situations or with similar arbitrariness.[[257]](#footnote-257)

Another such passage comes toward the end of the narration of the reign and pertains to Marcus’ military successes (or lack thereof). Dio is aware of the difficult situation that Marcus faced militarily throughout his reign. These considerations seem to compel Dio to argue that if Marcus had lived longer, he would have been able to conquer everything in a particular area (72[71].33.42 [Xiph.]). Although the nature of the surviving text makes the exact identification unclear, the context suggests that the region was the northern frontier. Whatever the case, Dio seems sensitive to Marcus’ military shortcomings, in ways that he is not for other emperors.[[258]](#footnote-258) In Dio’s eyes, death unfairly cut short Marcus’ attempts at such success.

The most glaring problem, however, is Marcus’ handling of his son, Commodus. At the end of the generous eulogy discussed above, Dio reports that there was but one thing that kept Marcus from complete happiness: despite bringing up and educating Commodus as well as possible, his son still proved to be a disappointment (72[71].36.4 [Xiph.]).[[259]](#footnote-259) Dio uses this comment to transition to the reign of Commodus, while also stating that the history will change from a golden kingship one of iron and rust. As a proponent of adoptive succession, Dio could have seen the elevation of Commodus as the fault of Marcus, yet he takes pains to blame to spare Marcus of criticism.

The problems begin with Commodus’ initial elevation as Marcus’ successor. The revolt by Avidius Cassius caused Marcus significant anxiety and, according to Dio, forced his hand with regard to succession. Marcus had Commodus brought to him from Rome, as if now old enough to assume the *toga virilis* (72[71].22.2 [Xiph.]). We can contrast here the behavior of Faustina, who Dio tells us induced Cassius to rebel by telling him that Marcus was dead. This she did because Marcus was in fact ill and she was worried that the foolish and young Commodus might be unable to take the throne and she might be forced to lead a private life. While this story is meant to reflect poorly on Faustina, it does so as well on Marcus, for despite the early signs of Commodus’ incompetence, he insisted on marking him out as his heir. In another passage, Dio discusses Marcus’ premature betrothal of his son to Crispina. Dio states that the situation with the Scythians had become so dire that Marcus set up the marriage between Commodus and Crispina sooner than he had wished.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Dio’s preference for adoptive monarchy is clear, especially in his comments surrounding Nerva’s adoption of Trajan and Hadrian’s speech on the matter. The situation with Hadrian is important in this context, because it shows an emperor concerned to put in place a robust succession plan, which contrasts with Marcus’ lack of foresight. Looking forward, we can also see the positive example of Pertinax, who chose not to elevate his son (74[73].7), as well as the criticism of Septimius Severus for passing power to Caracalla and Geta, despite the fact that he knew it would turn to poorly (77[76].14; cf. 77[76].7). Dio’s excusing Marcus’ choice in this instance of course allows him to shield his favorite emperor from blame, but it also works to highlight the break in the history that is coming and the contrast between father and son, which we will observe in Dio’s depiction of Commodus and his reign.

*Marcus Aurelius and Commodus: a study in contrasts*

At the outset of his contemporary history, Dio sets up Marcus Aurelius and Commodus as almost complete opposites.[[260]](#footnote-260) This distinction, which is more of a historiographic reading than a political reality, is brought out most directly in Dio’s summation of Marcus’ reign and transition to the sovereignty of Commodus, where he famously describes the descent from Marcus’ golden kingship to a period of iron and rust. This statement works to prepare the reader not just for the decline of affairs under Commodus (and his successors), but also for a direct linking and contrasting of father and son.[[261]](#footnote-261)

Dio is almost lenient toward Commodus, at least at the outset of book 73[72], a position that appears to be influenced by his deference to Marcus Aurelius. He states that Commodus was not evil by nature, but rather was simplistic or harmless (ἄκακος) and paints him as a victim of his companions and the environment in which he lived as emperor.[[262]](#footnote-262) Dio states that Commodus was enslaved because of his simplicity and cowardice (ὑπὸ δὲ δὴ τῆς πολλῆς ἁπλότητος καὶ προσέτι καὶ δειλίας), and out of his ignorance he fell into a licentious and murderous nature (ἐς φύσιν ἀσελγῆ καὶ μιαιφόνον). Naturally, Marcus in his wisdom had the foresight to know this would happen, leaving behind many overseers for Commodus, including the best of the senators.[[263]](#footnote-263) Commodus, however, ignored this advice, made a truce with the foreigners, and went to Rome, because he was spiteful of labor and wanted the ease of city living (73[72].1.1-2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).

A discrepancy between Dio’s initial description and that of the *Historia Augusta* has been noted. Contrary to Dio, the *HA* states that “even from his earliest years he was base and dishonourable, and cruel and lewd, defiled of mouth, moreover, and debauched” (*Comm*. 1.7: *nam a prima statim pueritia turpis, improbus, crudelis, libidinosus, ore quoque pollutus* *et constupratus​ fuit*). This passage suggests that views of the situation that were less sympathetic to Marcus were current.[[264]](#footnote-264) Dio appears to shape his narrative to be more sympathetic to Marcus Aurelius. Only later, once Commodus has shed his father’s advisors and Marcus’ reign is well in the past, does Commodus become a murderous and unstable character.

Despite Dio’s effort to stress Marcus’ foresight regarding Commodus’ nature, the young emperor quickly undermined the safeguards that his father put in place and highlights the contrast between father and son.[[265]](#footnote-265) This theme is further developed in the subsequent comments, as Commodus’ choice to abandon the frontlines and retreat to the pleasures of Rome stands in opposition to Marcus’ preference to resist making treaties with foreigners. Instead, Marcus aimed for their complete destruction, and treaties were only made when the enemy had been neutered and the terms were favorable for the Romans.[[266]](#footnote-266) Thus can Dio describe Commodus as hating work (μισόπονος), whereas earlier we read that Marcus was a lover of toil (72[71].6.2, φιλόπονος). Dio also states that Commodus was the target of many conspiracies, which stands in contrast to the single plot against Marcus engineered by Avidius Cassius, who thought the emperor was dead and, in Dio’s telling, was duped by Faustina.[[267]](#footnote-267) Commodus killed many people, whereas Marcus (almost) kept his vow not to kill a single senator, as we observed above.

Many of Commodus’ victims were men prominent in Marcus’ reign, and Dio devotes a significant amount of space to detailing these murders, as well as the activities of such prominent men whom Commodus did not kill.[[268]](#footnote-268) Dio first discusses Salvius Julianus and Tarrutenius Paternus, two consulars.[[269]](#footnote-269) Dio describes each man’s loyalty to Marcus, insisting on Julianus’ uprightness and deference to Commodus at the time of his accession, even though Julianus could have led his army against Commodus and seized the throne. As for Paternus, Dio denies that he led the conspiracy of which he was accused and which led to his death. Others perished because of their supposed plots against Commodus, though Dio reorients these stories in order to disparage the emperor. In this way Dio presents the deaths of the brothers Sextus Quintilius Condianus and Quintilius Maximus.[[270]](#footnote-270) Dio comments on their excellent reputation for education, generalship, accord, and wealth (73[72].5.3-4 [Xiph.]). He then holds them up as an example of concord, living, working, and dying together, as a result of the suspicion caused by their amity.[[271]](#footnote-271) In addition to other virtues, Dio focuses repeatedly on the education of these men.

Dio goes on to include a flattering portrait of Aufidius Victorinus.[[272]](#footnote-272) Victorinus, who had been honored by Marcus Aurelius and was known for the excellence of his character and rhetorical abilities, decided to die by suicide when he heard rumors that he would be put to death. First, however, he boldly confronted the prefect Perennis, asking why he was waiting to have him executed. To demonstrate his excellence, Dio relates two anecdotes attesting to his upstanding morality. In the first, as governor of Germany he compels his subordinate to refuse bribes by publicly holding up his own behavior as an example. In the second, when he was governing Africa he sent another subordinate back to Rome for similar behavior.

Dio’s extended description of Ulpius Marcellus provides a contraposition to these miniature biographies. Marcellus cuts a strange figure in Dio’s narrative, at once measured, thrifty, and militarily successful, as well as proud, arrogant, and pretentious.[[273]](#footnote-273) Dio notes that this man was originally ordered to be put to death by Commodus, though he eventually secured a pardon. His survival marks his difference with the more virtuous characters discussed above, and one gets the sense that the more mottled characters such as Marcellus survived the reign of Commodus, whereas Marcus Aurelius’ virtuous coevals were more likely to meet their death, or at least disappearance (as in the case of Sextus Condianus).[[274]](#footnote-274)

Commodus’ rejection of his father, however, extends beyond his father’s senatorial peers who were set up as his advisors. Commodus also turned against his praetorian prefect Perennis. In Dio’s rendering, Perennis plays the part of Commodus’ wise advisor, just as Seneca and Burrus for Nero before him and Gannys for Elagabalus after him.[[275]](#footnote-275) Dio viewed Perennis as a moderate man, who had in mind the best interests both of himself and of the state.[[276]](#footnote-276) His only mistake was his love of power that led him to cause Paternus’ downfall. Otherwise, Perennis seems to have met Dio's approval for understanding his place in the Roman social hierarchy (73[72].10.1 [Xiph.]).

The fall of Perennis dovetails with the rise of Cleander, and with other less admirable individuals (in Dio’s eyes) more generally. Indeed, Dio states that Cleander was responsible for the mutiny that killed Perennis, since Perennis had previously held Cleander’s behavior (just as Commodus’) in check (73[72].9.3-4 [Xiph.]). Cleander then becomes the sort of character that illustrates the social upheaval of Dio’s day: a man of lower class, he was not restrained in his ambitions, which eventually brought about his demise.[[277]](#footnote-277) Significantly, however, Cleander essentially takes Perennis’ job; although not praetorian prefect *de iure*, Cleander held the title *a pugione* and functioned as an equal, or even superior, to Commodus’ two other prefects.[[278]](#footnote-278)

Dio joins his introduction of Cleander with comments on a certain Saoterus and the senator Julius Solon. Cleander, who had been formerly enslaved, advanced as high as Commodus’ *cubicularius*. He was responsible for the deaths of many individuals, including Saoterus, Commodus’ previous *cubicularius* who had also been very powerful. Cleander therefore stands both in connection to the past and to the new future under Commodus. Prior to Cleander’s rise, powerful men such as Saoterus existed, though we get the impression that their power was tempered by upstanding senators and men such as Perennis. Yet this power threatened to break through, as it did in the figure of Cleander. This power manifested itself in Cleander’s selling of positions in the senators, military commends, and other political offices. In this state of affairs could a man such as Julius Solon become a senator, though Dio says that he had to lose all of his possessions to do so (73[72].12.3 [Xiph.]). In Dio’s eyes, this is exactly the type of person, wealthy though hardly upstanding, who replaced the admirable examples from the time of Marcus Aurelius.

The miniature biographies, of both Marcus’ virtuous coevals and Commodus’ preferred associates, relate to Dio’s views on governance, as these individuals do not allow the monarchy to function properly as the shared rule between emperor and “best men”. It is in this context that Dio's description of the debasement of the Senate itself is relevant. By describing the Senate as a place with few worthy figures, Dio shows that it is not simply the emperor himself who errs in this scenario, but that in some way there were very few good men left in Rome on whom an emperor could rely (if he even wished to do so). In the reign of Commodus, we see the number of good men decreasing, a process that will appear to continue under his successors.

The final third of the Dio’s surviving account of Commodus’ reign deals with the emperor’s self-presentation in the last years of his sovereignty. Here we can observe a transition. Thus far, book 73[72] has dealt with the ways that Commodus distanced himself from Marcus, and, although that distancing was occurring, the story is still told in the shadow of Marcus’ reign. When we turn to the later part of the book, we find Commodus more powerfully taking the lead role. The new program of self-presentation detailed there revolves around Commodus’ claim to have brought Rome into a golden age (73[72].15.6 [Xiph.]; cf. 73[72].16.1 [Xiph.]). It is almost impossible to read this section of Dio’s history and not reflect on his comments at the end of Marcus Aurelius’ reign, that Rome was descending from a golden kingship into a period of iron and rust, and this contraposition highlights Dio’s attempts to set off the reigns Marcus Aurelius and Commodus as a crucial turning point.[[279]](#footnote-279)

One might further read Commodus’ self-positioning, with the various name changes and the adopting of the Hercules-persona, as a rejection of his Antonine lineage. In Dio’s telling (and as is reflected in the material sources), Commodus took on the image of Hercules (73[72].15.6 [Xiph.]), even wishing to act out some of his patron’s labors.[[280]](#footnote-280) This change goes hand in hand with Commodus’ transformation into a gladiator. The young emperor’s penchant for the arena contrasts with Marcus’ rejection of it, as does the son’s extravagant spending on such endeavors, versus his father’s frugality.[[281]](#footnote-281)

From the surviving text, it appears that Dio has provided a loosely chronological accounting of Commodus’ reign. There is little evidence of an adherence to annalistic structure, which Dio seems to eschew in favor of a what Millar (1964, 125) has seen as an account “designed to illustrate the ruler’s character and method of government”. While the emphasis might be a bit more on the former, the method of narration serves another purpose as well. As the introduction to the period of iron and rust, Dio needs to demonstrate how a reign like Commodus’ was possible. For Dio, Commodus was responsibly raised and only changed over time.[[282]](#footnote-282) Thus, the changes that occurred during his reign were at least partly a structural breakdown of Dio’s preferred form of monarchy. Once those breakdowns occurred, Commodus could emerge as the self-obsessed Hercules ruler that he presented himself as.

At the end of his narration of Commodus’ reign, Dio remarks that at the death of Commodus the true Aurelii stopped ruling (73[72].22.6 [Xiph.]). The notice looks forward to the Severans and marks the end of an era. Yet Dio’s narrative reflects a change that had been occurring over a number of years and marks Commodus’ reign as the perversion of the golden age of the Antonines. Commodus’ death ushered in a period of war, which, just like a portentous fire in Rome, would wash over the entire world (73[72].24.2 [Xiph.]). As we look at Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, we observe not only a change from gold to rust, but also hints about how Dio will present his contemporary history to his reader.

*From Marcus to Commodus: the role of the historian*

Cassius Dio’s intentionally idealized depiction of Marcus Aurelius, in contrast to his portrait of Commodus, does not just signify the change from gold to iron and rust, but it is also the point at which Dio’s work moves from the history of the past to the history of present. With that shift comes a change in Dio’s historical methodology. Based on comments attesting to his eyewitness status during the reign of Commodus, the reign of Marcus Aurelius is the last one for which he employed the methodology laid out in his narration of Augustus’ reign. As we saw in chapter 2, the Roman democracy transformed into a monarchy, making it necessary for the historian to recalibrate his research methods. This change made information much more difficult to access, and so Dio would rely on public reports for his history, plus his own insight gained from hearing, reading, or observation, where applicable.

Dio lays this out in a lengthy passage at 53.19.1-6, which deals primarily with the open flow of information during the democracy and how that access to information was cut off during the monarchy. Dio acknowledges that historical works composed during democracy could be written with bias, but that this was not a significant problem because information was available and many accounts were written. Under the monarchy, information was much more tightly controlled, and though Dio is not specific about their dissemination, stories came to be made public which frequently ran counter to what really occurred. Left unsaid, though still implied, is that there were fewer historical works written during the monarchy and that these would likely be more biased, or their bias harder to detect. Dio states that he will not swim against the tide, but will instead narrate events as they have been publicized, whether that was really how they turned out or not. This aspect of his history was glimpsed in the previous chapter, with the discussion of how the content of his history of the monarchy, at least into the second century CE, does not differ substantially from other accounts. As a historian in the Greco-Roman tradition, Dio necessarily engaged with what has been called ancient historiographic theory.[[283]](#footnote-283) This mode of research and writing employed both the eyes and ears of the historian, with a preference for sight (ὄψις) over hearing (ἀκοή). The distillation of information came in the form of the writer’s opinion or judgment (γνώμη). Thus, Dio’s contribution will be to provide his own insight when he can, based on his own research (reading, hearsay, or autopsy), if it provides something other than the common story.[[284]](#footnote-284)

Following the statements at 53.19, Dio soon provides a real example about how he was selective, amid the vast amount of information at his fingertips, and included only material that is relevant to the story that he is telling (53.21.1-2):

Αὔγουστος δὲ τά τε ἄλλα τὰ τῇ ἀρχῇ προσήκοντα προθυμότερον, ὡς καὶ ἐθελοντὶ δὴ παρὰ πάντων αὐτὴν εἰληφώς, ἔπραττε, καὶ ἐνομοθέτει πολλά. οὐδὲν δὲ δέομαι καθ’ ἕκαστον ἀκριβῶς ἐπεξιέναι, χωρὶς ἢ ὅσα τῇ συγγραφῇ πρόσφορά ἐστι. τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ τοῦτο καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔπειτα πραχθεῖσι ποιήσω, ἵνα μὴ καὶ δι’ ὄχλου γένωμαι πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐπεσφέρων ἃ μηδ’ αὐτοὶ οἱ πάνυ αὐτὰ μελετῶντες ἀκριβοῦσιν.

Augustus attended to all the business of the empire with more zeal than before, as if he had received it as a free gift from all the Romans, and in particular he enacted many laws. I need not enumerate them all accurately one by one, but only those which have a bearing upon my history; and I shall follow this same course also in the case of later events, in order not to become wearisome by introducing all that kind of detail that even the men who devote themselves to such studies do not know to a nicety.

This selectiveness is an important aspect of Dio’s work.[[285]](#footnote-285) We are not going to get a completely different version of the Roman Principate, but we are going to get one that has been well studied by the author and suited to his historical purposes.[[286]](#footnote-286)

In the following book, Dio again provides a specific example about how he will do his reporting. This time it is in the case of conspiracies against the emperor, about which information was especially difficult to access and to trust (54.15.1-4):

τούτων οὖν οὕτω γενομένων συχνοὶ μὲν εὐθὺς συχνοὶ δὲ καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐκείνῳ καὶ τῷ Ἀγρίππᾳ ἐπιβουλεῦσαι, εἴτ’ οὖν ἀληθῶς εἴτε καὶ ψευδῶς, αἰτίαν ἔσχον. οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἀκριβῶς τὰ τοιαῦτα τοῖς ἔξω αὐτῶν οὖσιν εἰδέναι· πολλὰ γὰρ ὧν ἂν ὁ κρατῶν πρὸς τιμωρίαν, ὡς καὶ ἐπιβεβουλευμένος, ἤτοι δι’ ἑαυτοῦ ἢ καὶ διὰ τῆς γερουσίας πράξῃ, ὑποπτεύεται κατ’ ἐπήρειαν, κἂν ὅτι μάλιστα δικαιότατα συμβῇ, γεγονέναι, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐγὼ γνώμην ἔχω περὶ πάντων τῶν τοιουτοτρόπων αὐτὰ τὰ λεγόμενα συγγράψαι, μηδὲν ὑπὲρ τὰ δεδημοσιευμένα, πλὴν τῶν πάνυ φανερῶν, μήτε πολυπραγμονῶν μήθ’ ὑπολέγων, μήτ’ εἰ δικαίως μήτ’ εἰ ἀδίκως τι γέγονε, μήτ’ εἰ ψευδῶς μήτε εἰ ἀληθῶς εἴρηται. καὶ τοῦτο μέν μοι καὶ κατὰ τῶν μετὰ ταῦτα γραφησομένων εἰρήσθω.

After these events, many immediately and many later were accused, whether truly or falsely, of plotting against both the emperor and Agrippa. It is not possible, of course, for those on the outside to have certain knowledge of such matters; for whatever measures a ruler takes, either personally or through the senate, for the punishment of men for alleged plots against himself, are generally looked upon with suspicion as having been done out of spite, no matter how just such measures may be. For this reason it is my purpose to report in all such cases simply the recorded version of the affair, without busying myself with anything beyond the published account, except in perfectly patent cases, or giving a hint as to the justice or injustice of the act or as to the truth or falsity of the report. Let this explanation apply also to everything that I shall write hereafter.

We find similar language in the passage to what we saw in 53.19. Here Dio states that he will record what has generally been said and not go beyond the public record (αὐτὰ τὰ λεγόμενα συγγράψαι, μηδὲν ὑπὲρ τὰ δεδημοσιευμένα), whereas earlier we find him writing that he will report what information has been made public (ὥς που καὶ δεδήμωται φράσω).

In this passage, Dio suggests that even during the Republic, one had to sift through numerous sources in order to find the truthful ones.[[287]](#footnote-287) In the Principate, historical accounts were less numerous and that it was difficult, but not impossible, to find information that would alter the public record. What becomes important, however, is Dio’s perspective. He specifically states that he will only include information that is relevant to his story. Further, he will use his own research, where possible, to augment or correct existing reports. Thus, passages in which he reveals that his version of events differs from others become important points which indicate that he is shaping his narrative in a certain way.

This method is observable in the discussion above. In the case of Marcus Aurelius, we can see that Dio adheres to what must have generally been the way that Marcus Aurelius presented himself publicly. A prime example of this is the way that Dio deals with the uprising of Avidius Cassius. Regarding inner continuity, we observe Marcus following Augustus’ example of clemency, as seen in chapter 3, and functioning as a monarch who can teach his subjects, as Maecenas suggested (52.34.1). Marcus even offers a correction on a recurring event of Roman history, civil wars, with his ideas about a “right way to deal even with civil wars” (72[71].26.2-4 [Xiph.]). Modifications to public opinion, however, were sometimes needed. We have seen above where and how Dio pushes back against some common criticisms of Marcus and that these corrections help him build up the emperor as one of the best in his history, especially where we can see Dio rejecting common critiques of Marcus in favor of his own interpretation of the emperor and his reign.

The age of the Antonines functions as a sort of intermediary portion of the history, between bookish research and eyewitness accounting. Recently, Schulz (2019a, 254-256) has written about the Antonine period being within Dio’s “communicative memory”.[[288]](#footnote-288) Dio explicitly demonstrates that this is the case. Dio gives us the impression that his historical training began under his father, Cassius Apronianus, who served for Dio as a link to the Antonine past.[[289]](#footnote-289) For example, in the opening lines of book 69[69], Dio advances a controversial view of Hadrian’s adoption. Specifically, Dio claims that there was no adoption, that Hadrian was simply a close companion of Trajan, and that his accession was made possible by the machinations of Attianus and Plotina. From this presentation it is clear that this view was not mainstream, and Dio himself is defensive of his statements. To bolster his claim, Dio cites his father as an authority, since he “had ascertained accurately the whole story about him” (69[69].1.3 [Xiph.]: ἐμεμαθήκει σαφῶς). His father also spoke these matters one by one (presumably to Dio, if not to others), and he could show as evidence the letters of Trajan to the Senate that were signed by Plotina, which she had done on this occasion but not on others previously. We can see that Apronianus set a good example as historian for his son. He understood the importance of accurate learning and also used documents as evidence, but perhaps most importantly it was his senatorial status that guaranteed access to such information, a status that is important both for the Roman historiographic tradition and for Dio’s overall self-presentation.[[290]](#footnote-290) Dio also showed early promise listening to a good source. Perhaps most importantly, Dio presents himself as being engaged in the historiographic process from an early age.[[291]](#footnote-291)

Dio continued to be by his father’s side and improve his historiographic method. In the story of Sextus Condianus (73[72].6), discussed above, Dio writes that a pretender claimed to be Sextus, presented himself to Pertinax, and was rejected because of his lack of learning. While the story is meant to contrast the *paideia* of Pertinax with the ignorance of Commodus, Dio seems to want his reader to draw even further conclusions. To this story he appends the statement that he was present and heard it, meaning, presumably, that he was present when Pertinax made the judgment of the pretender.[[292]](#footnote-292) But he also wishes to discuss something else that he saw (καὶ ἕτερον τοιόνδε εἶδον). An oracle in Cilicia had given Sextus a response, and Sextus had rendered the response in a drawing. When Dio was with his father in Cilicia, he saw the drawing, which showed a boy strangling two snakes and a lion chasing a fawn. Dio at first could not interpret (συμβαλεῖν) these images, until he learned (πυθέσθαι) that Commodus had strangled the brothers Quintilii, just like Hercules had strangled the snaked, and had chased Sextus.

This passage serves to define Dio’s development as an historian and to privilege the contemporary section of his history. Before maturity, and specifically before becoming a senator, Dio possessed only a rudimentary knowledge of the past, or even the present. He could learn from others, such as his father, but when left to his own devices, he could observe but not understand. Once he matures and becomes a senator, his eyes and ears, the main faculties for historical interpretation, also come of age. This gives him the ability to interpret his contemporary period properly, and even to understand signs from the gods. These two aspects of his historian persona he will develop throughout his contemporary history.

These passages serve as a soft introduction to the methodology that Dio will employ in the final books, for which Dio relies primarily on his eyewitness status. His first indication of this change comes in his discussion of the various plots against Commodus, about which Dio writes, “I state these and subsequent facts, not, as hitherto, on the authority of others' reports, but from my own observation” (73[72].4.2 [Xiph.]: λέγω δὲ ταῦτά τε καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ οὐκ ἐξ ἀλλοτρίας ἔτι παραδόσεως ἀλλ’ ἐξ οἰκείας ἤδη τηρήσεως). Not long afterwards, he expands on his methodology (73[72].18.3-4 [Xiph.]):

καὶ μή μέ τις κηλιδοῦν τὸν τῆς ἱστορίας ὄγκον, ὅτι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα συγγράφω, νομίσῃ. ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἂν εἶπον αὐτά· ἐπειδὴ δὲ πρός τε τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἐγένετο καὶ παρὼν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ καὶ εἶδον ἕκαστα καὶ ἤκουσα καὶ ἐλάλησα, δίκαιον ἡγησάμην μηδὲν αὐτῶν ἀποκρύψασθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτά, ὥσπερ τι ἄλλο τῶν μεγίστων καὶ ἀναγκαιοτάτων, τῇ μνήμῃ τῶν ἐσέπειτα ἐσομένων παραδοῦναι. καὶ μέντοι καὶ τἆλλα πάντα τὰ ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ πραχθέντα καὶ λεπτουργήσω καὶ λεπτολογήσω μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ πρότερα, ὅτι τε συνεγενόμην αὐτοῖς, καὶ ὅτι μηδένα ἄλλον οἶδα τῶν τι δυναμένων ἐς συγγραφὴν ἀξίαν λόγου καταθέσθαι διηκριβωκότα αὐτὰ ὁμοίως ἐμοί.

And let no one feel that I am sullying the dignity of history by recording such occurrences. On most accounts, to be sure, I should not have mentioned this exhibition; but since it was given by the emperor himself, and since I was present myself and took part in everything seen, heard and spoken, I have thought proper to suppress none of the details, but to hand them down, trivial as they are, just like any events of the greatest weight and importance. And, indeed, all the other events that took place in my lifetime I shall describe with more exactness and detail than earlier occurrences, for the reason that I was present when they happened and know no one else, among those who have any ability at writing a worthy record of events, who has so accurate a knowledge of them as I.

From Commodus onwards, Dio’s authority is heightened because he was a direct observer of events. It is thought that Dio held the quaestorship and entered the Senate in 189 CE, and that from this point in time his work is a truly eyewitness account (indicated in the earlier passage at 73[72].4.2 [Xiph.]).[[293]](#footnote-293) Yet the placement of this second passage is embedded within Dio’s eyewitness account of Commodus’ games, which took place in 192 CE. Thus, Dio’s methodological statement does not track with his political career specifically, but with an event for which eyewitness status was key. Or to say that another way, Dio elevates his eyewitness status not at the moment that he stepped into the Senate house for the first time, but when he first saw something of particular significance. Even in the epitome this is a lengthy portion of the book, and it is clear that Dio considered the event crucial to our understanding of the emperor Commodus. It seems crucial in other respects, as well.

Although at 73[72].18 Dio suggests that the details he will record about Commodus’ games are unworthy of history and need to be treated “just like any events of the greatest weight and importance”, it feels as if he is winking at the reader. His unwillingness to suppress these details adds to their importance, just as he elevates his own position as eyewitness and thus the one person who can create the most accurate account. In his depictions of both Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, we find Dio hewing rather closely to the emperor’s public image. For Marcus, with a few of Dio’s redirections, this puts him forward as one of Rome’s finest monarchs. For Commodus, his public actions as emperor are a demonstration of the ways that he has scorned his father’s example and attempted to create the monarchy in his own image. In both cases, what you see (or what Dio sees) is what you get what, though the overall effect is very different.

This approach gets at the crux of exactly what Dio thought was causing the breakdown of monarchy in his own day: monarchs, despite being educated and having good models from the past, decided to present themselves publicly in ways that were entirely inappropriate to the tradition that had been established by Augustus and passed down by more conscientious rulers. In the case of Commodus, Dio merely needs to relate to his reader that the emperor hunted a tiger, hippopotamus, and elephant (among other animals) in the morning before appearing as a gladiator (or, more specifically, a *secutor*) in the afternoon (73[72].19.1-2 [Xiph.]). When Dio tells us that the bouts fought by Commodus were a mere sham (73[72].19.4-5 [Xiph.]), this detail does not seem like some sort of secret information or the revelation of private fact, but rather it is the informed observation of an eyewitness and was a piece of information available to all the other eyewitnesses as well. It is a public fact, for which Dio merely serves as the reporter.

Dio positions himself as the first person to create a historical account of this period by insisting that he was present at all subsequent events that he will narrate and that he knows about them most accurately. This is a bold claim, since Dio certainly reports on events that he was not present at and also writes a Rome-centered history during periods when we know that he was outside of the city.[[294]](#footnote-294) He doubles down on this claim at the end of the work, when he says that his absence from Rome has curtailed his ability to report accurately (80[80].1.2-2.1 [Xiph.]). Therefore, we know that he is not asking us to take him literally. His “presence” at times is his status as a senator and active participant in the political life of his own day. Still, as we will see in subsequent chapters, he frequently acts, through a number of methods, as a “virtual eyewitness”, providing his reader with a sense of vividness throughout his narration.[[295]](#footnote-295)

Still, even if we should not take him literally for the balance of the contemporary history, the events that he describes immediately following the methodological statement in book 73[72] are given from a true eyewitness perspective. In addition to the details discussed above, Dio reports that “we senators together with the knights always attended” (73[72].20.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]: ἡμεῖς μὲν οἱ βουλευταὶ ἀεὶ μετὰ τῶν ἱππέων συνεφοιτῶμεν). Of the senators, only Claudius Pompeianus did not attend. Nor did many of the people. Dio uses this last detail to report the rumor that Commodus was going to shoot some of the spectators as he played out an imitation of the Hercules and the Stymphalian birds. The reason this rumor was believable is that Commodus had already gathered some men who had lost feet due to disease or accident, dressed them up like snakes, and killed them with a club, while they only had sponges (in the place of rocks) to throw at him (73[72].20.2-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).

The senators were also fearful, and for good reason. It is here that Dio relates the story of Commodus’ decapitating the ostrich and raising its head and his bloody sword toward the senators. Dio’s interpretation is that the emperor was “indicating that he would treat us in the same way” (73[72].21.1-2 [Xiph.]). The senators’ reaction, however, or so Dio tells us, was not fear but laughter – and luckily Dio was there to have himself and fellow senators chew on some laurel leaves from their garlands so that “we might conceal the fact that we were laughing” (73[72].21.2 [Xiph.]: τὸν τοῦ γελᾶν ἔλεγχον ἀποκρυψώμεθα). Most commentators have taken this passage at face value: Rome under Commodus was a dangerous place for a senator. Without contesting that, we certainly should note that that is what Dio wants us to think – just as he skillfully uses this episode as a way to show why that fear was well founded and also what a complete mockery Commodus was making of his position as monarch. But if we zoom out a bit, we can see that Dio has quite cleverly led us to believe that Commodus went out of his way and seemingly was standing right in front of the senators in the arena. Dio even makes the grin of the emperor malicious and claims that death was right in front of them.[[296]](#footnote-296)

The epitome includes one more episode from the arena, which gave some hope to the senators, according to Dio’s report (73[72].21.3 [Xiph.]). Commodus ordered the senators to enter the arena in clothing reserved only for the occasion of an emperor’s death, and then on the last day of the games, Commodus’ helmet was brought out through the same gates that they dead are brought. While the emperor was not dead yet, “these events caused absolutely every one of us to believe that we were surely about to be rid of him” (73[72].21.3 [Xiph.]: ἐκ γὰρ τούτων καὶ πάνυ πᾶσι πάντως ἀπαλλαγή τις αὐτοῦ γενήσεσθαι ἐνομίζετο). Dio uses this episode as a way to transition to the story of Commodus’ murder. Here we must keep in mind Dio’s statement that it is difficult to uncover the realities of conspiracies against the emperor. In this instance, he tells a story of a plot planned by Laetus and Eclectus, praetorian prefect and *cubicularius*, respectively. Their motivations were numerous: they were not happy with Commodus’ actions, and they were afraid because he had threatened them when they tried to stop him from performing in the arena (73[72].22.1 [Xiph.]). It seems that Commodus wanted to kill the consuls and come forth from the gladiator’s barracks as both consul and *secutor*. Dio reports that Commodus lived among the gladiators and warns the reader that no one should disbelieve the fact (73[72].22.2 [Xiph.]). He adds that Commodus had transformed the Colossus statue into one of himself as Hercules and inscribed with his many titles, this time including “champion of the *secutores*” (73[72].22.3 [Xiph.]: πρωτόπαλος σεκουτόρων). The murder was soon carried out, with Marcia in on the plot as well. At first Marcia tried to poison the emperor’s food, and when that failed, the athlete Narcissus strangled him in his bath (73[72].22.4-5 [Xiph.]).

While Dio’s eyewitness reports connect to ancient historiographic method and help advance his ideas about the monarchy of his day, it is also striking that he notes that some of his fellow senators lost their faculty of sight and thus were unable to witness firsthand these atrocities. Specifically, he discusses at length the case of Claudius Pompeianus, mentioned above.[[297]](#footnote-297) Dio refers to him as Claudius Pompeianus “the old man” (ὁ γέρων) and writes that he never attended these spectacles, contrary to the behavior of the other senators. In fact, Pompeianus preferred to die, rather than see the son of Marcus behave in such a way. Dio picks up the story of Claudius Pompeianus again during the reign of Pertinax, for it was at that time that Pompeianus made an appearance in the Senate, which marked the first and last time that Dio ever saw him (74[73].3.2-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]):

καὶ ἔγωγε τότε ἐπὶ τοῦ Περτίνακος καὶ πρῶτον καὶ ἔσχατον ἐν τῷ βουλευτηρίῳ τὸν Πομπηιανὸν εἶδον· ἐν γὰρ τοῖς ἀγροῖς τὰ πλεῖστα διὰ τὸν Κόμμοδον διῆγε, καὶ ἐς τὸ ἄστυ ἐλάχιστα κατέβαινε, τό τε γῆρας καὶ τὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν νόσημα προβαλλόμενος, οὐδὲ ἔστιν ὅτε πρότερον ἐμοῦ παρόντος ἐς τὴν γερουσίαν ἐσῆλθε. καὶ μέντοι καὶ μετὰ τὸν Περτίνακα πάλιν ἐνόσει· ἐπὶ γὰρ ἐκείνου καὶ ἔβλεπε καὶ ἑώρα καὶ ἐβούλευε, καὶ αὐτὸν ὁ Περτίναξ τά τε ἄλλα ἰσχυρῶς ἐτίμα καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ βάθρου ἐν τῷ συνεδρίῳ παρεκάθιζεν. καὶ τοῦτο καὶ τὸν Γλαβρίωνα τὸν Ἀκίλιον ἐποίει· καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος τότε καὶ ἤκουεν καὶ ἔβλεπε. τούτους μὲν οὖν ἐς ὑπερβολὴν ἐτίμα, ἐχρῆτο δὲ καὶ ἡμῖν δημοτικώτατα· καὶ γὰρ εὐπροσήγορος ἦν, ἤκουέ τε ἑτοίμως ὅ τι τις ἀξιοίη, καὶ ἀπεκρίνετο ἀνθρωπίνως ὅσα αὐτῷ δοκοίη.

And it was at this time, under Pertinax, that I myself saw Pompeianus present in the senate for both the first and the last time. For he had been wont to spend most of his time in the country because of Commodus, and very rarely came down to the City, alleging his age and an ailment of the eyes as an excuse; and he had never before, when I was present, entered the senate. Furthermore, after the reign of Pertinax he was once more ailing; whereas under this emperor he had both his sight and good health, and used to take part in the deliberations of the senate. Pertinax showed him great honour in every way; and, in particular, he made him sit beside him on his bench in the Senate. He also granted the same privilege to Acilius Glabrio; for this man, too, could both hear and see at that period. In addition to showing unusual honour to these men, he also conducted himself in a very democratic manner toward us senators; for he was easy of access, listened readily to anyone's requests, and in answer gave his own opinion in a kindly way.

This is an important passage for a number of reasons. Claudius Pompeianus and Acilius Glabrio represent senators of the age of Marcus Aurelius, but perhaps more importantly were closely associated with Marcus and his family. Claudius Pompeianus had been married to Lucilla Augusta, daughter of Marcus Aurelius, after the death of Lucius Verus.[[298]](#footnote-298) Manius Acilius Glabrio came from a consular family and was the likely son of Marcus Aurelius’ niece, Ummidia Cornificia Faustina.[[299]](#footnote-299) By elevating these two figures, Pertinax strengthens his connection to the Antonines (minus Commodus). Dio is clearly pleased by this, as he quickly cites Pertinax’ actions as a *civilis princeps* who was respectful to senators and easy to approach. Whereas the ailments of Pompeianus and Glabrio were patently excuses for their absence, Dio instead here elevates them to a higher importance, one that matches their own status: the refusal to bear witness to an unseemly ruler.

The problems with seeing and hearing reflect the difficulty of the period after Marcus Aurelius for these senators, who were subjected to such indignities as Commodus’ games.[[300]](#footnote-300) The ailments of Pompeianus and Glabrio demonstrate the shame and loss of dignity that the two men felt under a regime that gathered more and more power under the emperor and diminished the influence of the Senate. What is especially noteworthy here is the correlation to historiographic theory. For men of an older generation, the necessary faculties of sight and hearing were lost under emperors such as Commodus, as if they refused to stand witness to the atrocities and humiliations meted out by this emperor. In Dio’s presentation, only those who were older and knew Marcus Aurelius, a benign and less autocratic emperor, were willing to defy the young Commodus, while the rest of the senators simply did his bidding. Because of the lack of other detail, Dio comes to define this group for us. Commodus was the first emperor that he ever knew as a senator, so in some sense this behavior must have been normative. Without the contrast of Commodus’ father and predecessor, Dio and his fellow senators were accustomed to do the emperor’s bidding, no matter how ridiculous or humiliating. Likewise, Pompeianus thought it was acceptable for his sons to be in attendance, whom we should assume were Dio’s coevals. While this action was likely to preserve their lives, as Pompeianus knew he was risking death, they also would have lacked the outrage possessed by their father.

Cassius Dio’s ability to see throughout this period heightens the importance of his position as a historian, while also pointing out the difficulties of being a senator. The danger that he faced is specific to his living under an autocracy, but it also goes hand in hand with other aspects of ancient historiographic theory, particularly the endurance of toil and the ability to provide an accurate account. While he does not specifically state that he was φιλόπονος, a traditional term for an historian to self-apply, Dio is aware of the difficulty of writing history, and it is for this reason that he needed the strength and hopes of literary immortality provided by Tyche to complete his history, because, significantly, he became weary (πονούμενον) from the undertaking (73[72].23.4 [Xiph.]).[[301]](#footnote-301) These aspects of Dio’s persona helped him to write an account that was accurate, as can be seen in his frequent use of terms with the ἀκριβ- root with regard to his historiographic method.[[302]](#footnote-302) While the use of these terms abound in the history (cf. *Index Graecitatis*, 25-27), two particularly relevant examples occur in the contemporary history. The first comes from the programmatic statement at 79[78].10.2. In this passage, Severus appears to Dio in a dream and beckons him to approach, so that he might “learn accurately all that is said and done and record it” (79[78].10.2: ἵνα πάντα καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα καὶ τὰ γιγνόμενα καὶ μάθῃς ἀκριβῶς καὶ συγγράφῃς). Similarly, in one of his final statements in the history, Dio writes, “Thus far I have described events with as great accuracy as I could in every case, but for subsequent events I have not found it possible to give an accurate account” (80[80].1.2 [Xiph.]: ταῦτα μὲν ἀκριβώσας, ὡς ἕκαστα ἠδυνήθην, συνέγραψα· τὰ δὲ δὴ λοιπὰ ἀκριβῶς ἐπεξελθεῖν οὐχ οἷός).

As Commodus’ reign winds down, Dio uses the assassination to make a few more points. Just like the episode in the arena, Dio is concerned that the strange nature of the end of Commodus’ reign might seem unbelievable. He therefore prefaces his brief account of Commodus’ demise with a few more examples of visual evidence for Commodus’ insanity. In conjunction with his report that Commodus wanted to kill both consuls on new year’s day and to present himself as consul and *secutor* from the gladiator’s barracks, Dio then discusses Commodus’ changing the appearance of the statue outside the Colosseum to resemble Commodus and Hercules and quotes the inscription he had placed upon it. By pairing this final visual evidence with his own reports, Dio gives considerable weight to claims about the emperor’s intentions: if one could go and see the statue and inscription outside the Colosseum, what is so unbelievable about other aspects of his behavior. Dio’s repeated claims of authority serve his story in other ways. He has presented himself as the only capable narrator of the events, and his reports should be considered trustworthy; thus, the reminders of their strangeness reflect more on the emperor and buttresses Dio’s claim about a descent to iron and rust. Throughout this closing section to book 73[72] Dio uses his eyewitness status as a way to make the unbelievable believable.

*Conclusion*

The contrast between Marcus Aurelius and Commodus serves as an important introduction to Dio’s contemporary history, both in terms of its content and its historical methodology. Dio takes pains to present Marcus in a particularly flattering light and praises him as an ideal monarch. As observed above, Dio is eager to apologize for Marcus’ actions and criticisms of him that circulated in Dio’s contemporary period. The building up of Marcus’ image allows Dio to create his Commodus as an almost complete opposite of his father. This is done through specific characteristics and especially through the young emperor’s alienation of his father’s senatorial peers and the creation of a new imperial identity.

The change in emperors coincides with a change in Dio’s historiographic methodology as we move, in book 73[72], into Dio’s contemporary history. It is important for Dio to mark this change so thoroughly and repeatedly because of the nature of Commodus’ reign. Much of what Dio records might seem unbelievable, except for the fact that Dio claims to have been a witness to it all (and to all subsequent reigns, as well). The immediacy of Dio’s autopsy verifies the terror through which Commodus put Rome and, especially from Dio’s point of view, the senatorial elite. Dio marks out his new method, based on eyewitness reporting at 73[72].4, but he fully expounds on it at 73[72].18 for specific reasons: the games that Commodus celebrates and participates in are so unbelievable, but because they are also the perfect event to prove his thesis about the period of iron and rust.

After the narration of Commodus’ murder, Dio provides his notice about the civil wars and the beginning of his literary career, as discussed in chapter 1. This notice serves a sort of secondary introduction to the contemporary books, as Dio discusses his status and proximity to power, his work as a historian, and the plan for his history, including the contemporary books. Over the following chapters, we will investigate how and why Dio presented the remainder story of his own period, beginning with his depiction of the reign of Septimius Severus.

**Chapter 5: The Depiction of Septimius Severus: Content and Structure**

Of all the emperors in Cassius Dio’s contemporary history, Septimius Severus plays the largest role. In addition to inspiring Dio’s literary career, Severus’ rise to power and reign dominate three books, approximately equal in number to those that Dio dedicates to the subsequent Severan dynasty. Cassius Dio’s depiction of Septimius Severus, as it survives, relies on three extended episodes describing some of the emperor’s public events, specifically Severus’ initial entrance into Rome and the funeral for Pertinax, his civil wars and eastern campaigns, and the celebration of his *decennalia* and other events in the period 202-204 CE. It seems that Dio organized his narrative of the reign of Severus around these events, as they show the emperor’s actions in three distinct arenas: connections to the past, military prowess, and ideas of legitimation and succession. The final portion of the narrative depicts Severus’ campaign in Britain and the relations between Caracalla and Geta, which are prompted by the demise of Plautianus and serve as a transition from father to sons.[[303]](#footnote-303)

Cassius Dio was sensitive to appearances, whether they were real or fraudulent. In his obituary for Marcus Aurelius, he specifically notes (72[71].34.3-5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]):

αὐτὸς μὲν γὰρ ἁπάντων τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων ἀπείχετο, καὶ οὔτε ἑκὼν οὔτ’ ἄκων ἐπλημμέλει. τὰ δὲ δὴ τῶν ἄλλων ἁμαρτήματα, καὶ μάλιστα τὰ τῆς γυναικός, ἔφερε καὶ οὔτε ἐπολυπραγμόνει οὔτε ἐκόλαζεν, ἀλλ’ εἰ μέν τις χρηστόν τι ἔπραττεν, ἐπῄνει καὶ ἐχρῆτο ἐς ἐκεῖνο αὐτῷ, τῶν δὲ ἑτέρων οὐ προσεποιεῖτο, λέγων ὅτι ποιῆσαι μέν τινι ἀνθρώπους ὁποίους βούλεται ἔχειν ἀδύνατόν ἐστι, τοῖς δὲ δὴ οὖσι προσήκει, ἐς ὅ τι ἄν τις αὐτῶν τῷ κοινῷ χρήσιμος ᾖ, χρῆσθαι. καὶ ὅτι οὐ προσποιητῶς ἀλλ’ ἐξ ἀρετῆς πάντα ἔπραττε, πρόδηλον· ἔτη γὰρ ὀκτὼ καὶ πεντήκοντα καὶ μῆνας δέκα ἡμέρας τε εἴκοσι καὶ δύο ζήσας, κἀν τούτοις τῷ τε πρὶν Ἀντωνίνῳ συχνὸν χρόνον ὑπάρξας καὶ αὐτὸς ἐννέα καὶ δέκα ἔτη καὶ ἕνδεκα ἡμέρας αὐταρχήσας, ὅμοιος διὰ πάντων ἐγένετο καὶ ἐν οὐδενὶ ἠλλοιώθη. οὕτως ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸς ἀνὴρ ἦν καὶ οὐδὲν προσποιητὸν εἶχε.

He himself, then, refrained from all offences and did nothing amiss whether voluntarily or involuntarily; but the offences of the others, particularly those of his wife, he tolerated, and neither inquired into them nor punished them. So long as a person did anything good, he would praise him and use him for the service in which he excelled, but to his other conduct he paid no attention; for he declared that it is impossible for one to create such men as one desires to have, and so it is fitting to employ those who are already in existence for whatever service each of them may be able to render to the State. And that his whole conduct was due to no pretense but to real excellence is clear; for although he lived fifty-eight years, ten months, and twenty-two days, of which time he had spent a considerable part as assistant to the first Antoninus, and had been emperor himself nineteen years and eleven days, yet from first to last he remained the same and did not change in the least. So truly was he a good man and devoid of all pretense.

In this passage, Dio stresses Marcus Aurelius’ lack of pretense, through the repetition of the word προσποιητός, and the fact that he was truly a good man. What is of further importance is the reason why Dio thought Marcus was excellent, and not pretentious: Dio notes that Marcus drew the best out of everyone around him, and that he did not demand perfection when that was impossible. From this passage, we can be certain that Dio would be critical of any emperor who simply pretended to be a good man.[[304]](#footnote-304) In the following analysis, I will examine when and how Dio reveals that Severus was simulating the behavior of a good emperor, and what were the implications of that behavior.

My main argument in this chapter is that in each of these extended episodes, Dio depicts Septimius Severus and his reign as one infused with pretense.[[305]](#footnote-305) As a pretender who later became emperor, legitimacy and acceptance were what Severus coveted most, and he employed reverence for the past, military prowess, and traditional modes of legitimation and religious piety to achieve these goals. Dio’s narrative of Severus’ reign focuses on three main issues that Severus used to build up his appearance in these areas. What is crucial here is that Dio points out firmly and consistently that these were merely appearances, and that something less legitimate and perhaps more sinister lay beneath. While one may object that this reading is too heavily influenced by Xiphilinus’ excerpts, I contend that the excerpts are lengthy, thematic, and demonstrate an interlocking chain of critique. Much is surely missing from Dio’s original, but what survives provides a significant portrait of Severus that would unlikely be overturned by the content of Xiphilinus’ omissions.

*Septimius Severus in Rome*

Cassius Dio provides a detailed and dramatic accounting of Septimius Severus’ initial entrance into Rome in 193 CE after his acclamation as emperor. The event is presented as an eyewitness account and serves as an introduction to Septimius Severus as emperor proper. Once in Rome, Severus advertised himself to the people, and the legitimization of his reign began in earnest. An important aspect of this depiction is Dio’s use of the city’s boundary as a liminal area or zone to separate Severus' civil war persona from his new role as emperor. Before Severus entered the city, Dio details the punishments that the newly acclaimed emperor handed out to the praetorians for their participation in the murder of Pertinax.[[306]](#footnote-306) These events outside of the city walls give way to Severus’ entry into the city, which was no simple arrival in the capital, but rather an elaborate spectacle meant to make a good first impression on the senators and people of Rome.[[307]](#footnote-307) Dio points out that Severus approached the city on horseback and in his cavalry outfit, but then he changed into his “civil” (τήν τε πολιτικὴν) clothes and went by foot to the city center.[[308]](#footnote-308) Dio goes on to describe the sight, which he says was the most astonishing that he had ever seen. The city of Rome had been crowned with garlands and laurel and was lit with torches and incense. Senators, soldiers, and plebs all took part in the affair. The people of Rome, dressed in white and quite happy, gave much applause, while the soldiers, still under arms, marched splendidly as if in unison.[[309]](#footnote-309) Dio reports that the senators themselves (“we”) moved about in procession (75[74].1.4 [Xiph.]: ἡμεῖς ἐν κόσμῳ περιῄειμεν). Severus’ arrival threw the crowd into such a state of frenzy that they were dying to see and hear him, with some holding others up so that they might catch a glimpse of the new emperor (75[74].1.5 [Xiph.]).

Septimius Severus, it seems, had a particular image in mind when he constructed this entrance into Rome, which is reminiscent of Trajan’s initial appearance in Rome as emperor in 99 CE, as described by Pliny (*Pan*. 22-23).[[310]](#footnote-310) Pliny notes that Trajan decided to enter the city on foot, rather than be carried like previous emperors, who did so out of “overbearing pride” (*adrogantius erat*). The emperor’s lack of arrogance and decision not to humiliate the Romans made it so that the Romans could all come out to see their new *princeps* (*Pan*. 22):

*Ergo non aetas quemquam non valetudo, non sexus retardavit, quo minus oculos insolito spectaculo impleret. Te parvuli noscere, ostentare iuvenes, mirari senes… Videres referta tecta ac laborantia, ac ne eum quidem vacantem locum qui non nisi suspensum et instabile vestigium caperet, oppletas undique vias angustumque tramitem relictum tibi, alacrem hinc atque inde populum, ubique par gaudium paremque clamorem*.

Thus neither age, health nor sex held your subjects back from feasting their eyes on this unexpected sight: small children learned who you were, young people pointed you out, old men admired… Roofs could be seen sagging under the crowds they bore, not a vacant inch of ground was visible except under a foot poised to step, streets were packed on both sides leaving only a narrow passage for you, on every side the excited populace, cheers and rejoicing everywhere.

Just as in Dio’s account of Severus’ arrival, Pliny mentions the various groups within Rome, discussing the people, equestrians, and senators separately. If we take Dio’s account as generally reflective of the nature of Severus’ entrance into Rome in 193 CE, it is worth noting that Severus was especially cognizant of imperial precedent and history and that this sort of scene might have been planned along these same lines.

A key difference between the accounts, however, becomes apparent. Pliny notes that Trajan’s praiseworthy behavior only began at the time of his entrance, and that on a daily basis he became better and more admirable (*Pan*. 23: *tu cotidie admirabilior et melior*). Dio, on the other hand, stresses that Severus’ arrival was merely the first part in a series of misrepresentations that would eventually reveal themselves (and which Dio’s history was also intent on revealing). To begin with, Dio notes that the people of Rome, here depicted with the seemingly pejorative term ὁ δ’ ὅμιλος, were tricked by the emperor’s appearance, and they strained to see him (75[74].1.3-5 [Xiph.]):[[311]](#footnote-311)

ὁ δ’ ὅμιλος ἰδεῖν τε αὐτὸν καί τι φθεγγομένου ἀκοῦσαι, ὥσπερ τι ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἠλλοιωμένου, ποθοῦντες ἠρεθίζοντο· καί τινες καὶ ἐμετεώριζον ἀλλήλους, ὅπως ἐξ ὑψηλοτέρου αὐτὸν κατίδωσιν.

The crowd chafed in its eagerness to see him to hear him say something, as if he had been somehow changed by his good fortune; and some of them held one another aloft, that from a higher position they might catch sight of him.

It is a brief and subtle comment, but Dio’s statement “as if he had been somehow changed by his good fortune” (ὥσπερ τι ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἠλλοιωμένου) reveals that the people were witnessing merely the outward appearance of Severus and were expecting him to become (in vain, Dio suggests) a benign emperor.

This notice suggests that something more sinister lay under Severus’ veneer of being a *civilis princeps*, and Dio goes on to demonstrate Severus’ duplicity in the following passage.[[312]](#footnote-312) Despite making claims and promises that senators would be safe under him, Severus was the first to violate his promise and he put many senators to death (75[74].2.1-2 [Xiph.]). Dio characterizes these assurances as the actions of someone who was trying to act like previous good emperors, but the manner in which he describes Severus indicates that Dio hardly believed the promises himself.[[313]](#footnote-313) Dio’s complaints begin to mount throughout this passage. Not only was Severus cruel and duplicitous, he also effectively put Rome under martial law, spent too much money, and reformed the praetorian guard in foolish ways (75[74].2.3-6 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). This final critique ties back to the beginning chapter of book 75[74], when Severus either put to death or dismissed the praetorians for their participation in the murder of Pertinax. In avenging the death of Pertinax, Severus completed no satisfactory action, but rather worsened the situation.

Dio’s claim of eyewitness status indicates that he knew both how Severus presented himself and what lay underneath that presentation. In his description of Severus’ *adventus*, Dio portrays himself as a detached observer of the spectacle.[[314]](#footnote-314) We sense that he is there participating in the events, yet is also removed enough to see through the pretense of civil rule. Dio enhances this feeling, or so it seems in the epitome, by bookending Severus’ lavish arrival with his treatment of both praetorians and senators. Dio peels back the curtain and reveals the true nature of Severus’ reign, at the time when most people seemed to be welcoming his rule. Dio’s privileged status and his superior interpretative abilities are made in explicit contrast to the plebs (ὁ δ’ ὅμιλος), who see (ἰδεῖν) and hear (ἀκοῦσαι) Severus, but evidently do not understand.

This point of view informs our understanding of the chapters that follow. Dio goes on to enumerate some of the signs that foretold Severus’ rise to power (75[74].3.1-3 [Xiph.]). It is likely that this section derives from the research that Dio carried out for his first literary work, the pamphlet on dreams and signs that foretold Severus’ gaining the purple.[[315]](#footnote-315) As discussed in chapter 1, this document was meant to flatter Severus and was perhaps used by Dio as a way to guarantee his survival and ingratiate himself to the new regime. This knowledge, however, can cloud our view of this passage as it stands now in the epitome. In these opening sections on Severus’ reign, Dio has indicated his plan of undermining Severus’ legitimacy, and it is therefore difficult to read these omens in the same positive way that they were originally intended. Indeed, Dio has perhaps intentionally placed them in a section that we are meant to understand as containing undercurrents of criticism at the time of Severus’ accession, a juxtaposition that would have been absent from their original placement in the pamphlet on portents and prodigies.

Dio goes on to describe the funeral that Severus carried out for Pertinax, to which he devotes considerable space. The details given here alert the reader that this act was an important one for Severus, and for Dio’s history as well. Severus’ connection to Pertinax was key, as the new emperor could portray himself as the avenger of this “good ruler” and in some ways legitimize his position as *princeps*. The significance is further reflected in Severus’ taking the name Pertinax for himself, and other honors that Severus gave to Pertinax, which serve as a preface to Dio’s description of the funeral.[[316]](#footnote-316) Despite the seeming piety that Severus wished to display, Dio is eager to show that Severus was opportunistically using the funeral as means to enhance his standing. The description therefore focuses at important points on the façade of legitimacy that Severus achieved, but which Dio is able to penetrate.

In this funeral scene, Dio describes practically the entire city participating in the event, and he includes details such as the shouts of approval from the senators, the types of clothing worn by various groups, and the seating arrangements (75[74].4.3-5.3 [Xiph.]). The elaborate pageantry of the event mirrors the extravagance of Severus’ initial entrance into Rome, and it is likely that Dio’s message about the two events is similar. Notably, Dio mentions the significant period of time that had elapsed since the death of Pertinax and his funeral, and the fact that Pertinax’ body had to be represented by a wax figure (75[74].4.2-3 [Xiph.]).[[317]](#footnote-317) Dio even notes that a youth was given the job of fanning flies away from the wax figure, as if it were a real body lying there (ὡς δῆθεν καθεύδοντος).[[318]](#footnote-318) Price (1987, 61) has noted the irregularity of the occasion, but also “standard procedures” that Severus used “in order to insinuate an atmosphere of normality”. Dio seems attuned to this contraposition: Pertinax’ body had already been buried, and this “empty gesture” is reflected in the empty bier, both of which direct our attention to the inherent falsehood underlying Severus’ claim of descent from Pertinax and the purely political reasons for his carrying out this burial and deification.[[319]](#footnote-319)

Severus’ initial activities in Rome undoubtedly were meant to serve two purposes. His entrance into the city in 193 CE came as part of his march on Rome and seizure of power after the murder of Didius Julianus. Amid the outbreak of civil war and threats from other pretenders, Severus intended to win over the populace, and Dio’s depiction of the event suggests that he did, at least initially. The funeral and deification of Pertinax were further intended to legitimize Severus’ position. It is worth pointing out that Dio had said that the Senate declared Severus emperor and voted to deify Pertinax prior to Severus’ arrival in Rome (74[73].17.3 [Xiph.]). His entrance there was an opportunity to set the tone for his reign and claim his position as *civilis princeps*. Dio suggests that on the surface Severus achieved this, though Dio’s narrative insinuates that Severus was merely playing the part of the good emperor and that the image he put forward did not match the actions and motivations that lay underneath. In this respect, Dio demonstrates the need to see through the façade, and the eyewitness claims, explicit or implicit, throughout these passages give weight to Dio’s reading of the scenario.

*Septimius Severus’ civil wars and eastern campaigns*

The second lengthy section of Cassius Dio’s Severus narrative relates the emperor’s civil wars against Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus, as well as his eastern campaigns in Parthia. Once completed, Severus took credit for numerous successes, proclaiming himself both civil war victor and vanquisher of the Parthian threat. Thus, on his arch in the Roman forum, the inscription states that the monument was set up “for the restoration of the state and the enlargement of the empire of the Roman people” (*CIL* 6.1033: *ob rem publicam restitutam imperiumque populi Romani propagatum*), a claim that encompasses both the settling of the civil war and the campaigns in the East.[[320]](#footnote-320) Severus would use the civil war victory to initiate a period peace and the eastern victories to gather glory to himself and to begin to promote the dynastic ambitions of his regime.[[321]](#footnote-321)

There is some debate, as discussed in chapter 1, about the extent to which Dio included similar material in his writings on the civil wars after the death of Commodus that he mentions at 73[72].23 [Xiph.]. The answer to this question is ultimately unresolvable, as Dio’s earlier tract is now lost. As we shall see in what follows, the tone and tenor of this section correlates to what precedes and follows, thus suggesting that Dio reworked the material, at both the detail and thematic levels, to fit properly with his overall view of Severus and his reign.

Dio’s narrative of the civil war between Severus and Pescennius Niger begins at 75[74].6.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]. After a few anecdotes about Niger’s character, Dio appears to quickly and briefly narrate the engagements at Perinthus and Cyzicus (75[74].6.3-4 [Xiph.]), before proceeding to a description of a battle in the passes nearby Nicaea and Cius (75[74].6.5-6 [Xiph.]). In these passages, Dio consistently notes Severus’ absence.[[322]](#footnote-322) He states that Aemilianus fought against Severus’ generals at Cyzicus (75[74].6.4 [Xiph.]), and that Candidus led Severus’ forces during this battle (75[74].6.5 [Xiph.]). In the latter case, Dio even highlights Candidus’ inspirational leadership (75[74].6.6 [Xiph.]).

Dio next moves to the conflict at Issus, which he describes as a “great battle” (μεγίστη... μάχη), a judgment that perhaps explains his devoting more space to this battle than to the earlier ones (if Xiphilinus’ epitome properly reflects Dio’s original text). In his introduction to the battle, Dio notes that Severus’ forces were led by L. Valerius Valerianus and P. Cornelius Anullinus, whereas Niger himself was present on the opposite side. Dio then proceeds with a description of the battle itself, including significant detail about the arrangement of battle lines and Severus’ soldiers forming the *testudo* (75[74].7.3-6 [Xiph.]). The description reaches its peak with the victory seemingly in Niger’s hands, only to be denied by the eruption of a thunderstorm (75[74].7.7-8 [Xiph.]), which ultimately saved Severus’ forces. Dio goes on to explain that this battle was the deadliest in the war, as Niger lost 20,000 men (75[74].8.1 [Xiph.]). He also states that this battle revealed the meaning of a dream that Severus had while still in Pannonia (75[74].8.2 [Xiph.]). Niger was captured and beheaded not long afterwards, and Severus proceeded to punish Niger's followers (75[74].8.3[Xiph.]).

It is worth looking more closely at how Dio lays out his depiction of this battle. Severus used the Battle of Issus as a sign of his divine sanction, with both the weather miracle and the explication of the dream, and also as a connection to his Antonine predecessors, especially Marcus Aurelius.[[323]](#footnote-323) Yet Dio continues to note Severus’ absence from these battles, and in this case he names Severus’ generals several times throughout the passage. Dio also distances himself from the weather miracle, noting that the storm came by chance (συντυχία, 75[74].7.7 [Xiph.]) and that there were opposing reactions to it (courage on Severus’ side, fear on Niger’s), both of which cast some doubt on the divine aspect of the event.[[324]](#footnote-324) He goes further, saying that the storm caused Severus’ men to act beyond their power, whereas Niger’s performed below it. In fact, despite their initial flight, the appearance of Valerianus caused Niger’s troops to return to the fray, though they were beaten back again and dispersed by Anullinus (75[74].7.8 [Xiph.]). In his reporting of the dream, Dio brackets the interpretation with examples of Severus’ cruelty: the murder of 20,000 of Niger’s men and the cutting off and displaying of Niger’s head. This behavior seems to clash with the idea that it was made possible through a victory aided by divine favor.

From the civil war battlefield Dio’s narrative shifts to Rome, with an anecdote regarding the fate of Cassius Clemens, a senator who tried to remain neutral in the civil war between Severus and Niger. This episode provides Dio with the opportunity to provide details about the effects of the civil war in Rome. The impression of the passage, which may be part of a larger digression on Severus’ treatment of various individuals after Issus, is that Dio is providing an eyewitness account, especially with his inclusion of Clemens’ direct address to the emperor.[[325]](#footnote-325) Cassius Dio uses the figure of Clemens as a repository of frank speech (παρρησία), twice citing this virtue (75[74].9.1, 4 [Xiph.]). Clemens also claims that he was restricted by his *daimonion* from deserting to Severus’ side, giving his actions the same sort of divine sanction that Severus himself was claiming at Issus (75[74].9.2 [Xiph.]). Clemens’ independence from Severus therefore undercuts the emperor’s claims of divine favor, by suggesting that men were variously constrained by it (or not).[[326]](#footnote-326)

Severus’ seemingly lenient punishment of Clemens, allowing him to keep half his property, stands in contrast to the cruel treatment of others, as described in the *Excerpta* *Valesiana*. Severus’ mercy, at first glance, seems to be a product of his being astounded by Clemens’ frank speech (τῆς παρρησίας θαυμάσας), and thus an exception to the general cruelty of this period. As we observed in chapter 1, Severus had a need to excuse his cruelty in the civil wars, and in this episode Clemens cleverly suggests that Severus’ reputation is on the line. Dio presents this scene as if he were an eyewitness to a public event, which hints at Severus’ concern with maintaining or rehabilitating his persona through public actions. We should hesitate to see the passage as being in praise of Severus; instead, we observe the emperor acting not out of clemency but out of concern for his reputation and memory, in an attempt to combat the charges of cruelty seen in Dio and other sources.[[327]](#footnote-327) Severus was sensitive to creating a lenient persona to pass down to posterity, as Dio specifically shows. Dio uses this passage to highlight this aspect of Severus’ duplicity: the emperor was happy to mete out harsh punishments, unless he thought someone (specially, in this case, posterity) was watching. As we will see in the following scene, however, someone was always watching.

This attempt to create an image of clemency at Rome is further undercut by Severus’ viciousness at Byzantium in the following episode. The movement to this scene had been signposted at the end of the narrative of Issus, when Dio states that Severus sent Niger’s head to Byzantium (75[74].8.3 [Xiph.]), suggesting that the Clemens episode was a mere interlude. Once Dio transitions to the siege of Byzantium, he dilates on the exceptional nature of the city’s inhabitants, the location of the city, and the city itself (75[74].10-11 [Xiph.]). The extended passage gives the sense of personal autopsy, which is buttressed by Dio’s statement that he saw the Byzantine walls before they had fallen and had heard them “talk”.[[328]](#footnote-328)

Dio turns this passage into a tragic scene by its conclusion. He notes the lengths to which Severus went to destroy the city, spending three years besieging it (75[74].12.1 [Xiph.]),[[329]](#footnote-329) and he writes that the Byzantines, low in food, fortune, and hope, still held out, improvising weapons and eating leather hides (75[74].12.3-5 [Xiph.]). In such dire straits, the inhabitants who remained finally turned to cannibalism (75[74].12.5-6 [Xiph.]), whereas the ones that fled by boat were caught both by storm and the Roman forces (75[74].13.1-3 [Xiph.]). The tragic and pathetic nature of the scene is enhanced by Dio’s notice that those who remained in the city served as spectators to the destruction of their fellow citizens (75[74].13.4-5 [Xiph.]). He concludes the passage with a description of dead bodies and wrecked ships that washed up on the shores of the city (75[74].13.6[Xiph.]).

In the aftermath, Dio writes that the Byzantine soldiers and magistrates were put to death (with the exception of a boxer, 75[74].14.1 [Xiph.]). Dio then transitions to Severus’ reaction to the fall of Byzantium (75[74].14.2 [Xiph.]). Severus, in Mesopotamia at the time, was so happy about the destruction of the city that he said, “we have also seized Byzantium” (“εἵλομεν δὲ καὶ τὸ Βυζάντιον”). Dio spends several chapters providing details on the location of the city, its special defenses, and its inhabitants’ actions during the siege. Although it seemed that Severus had acted justly, Dio (75[74].14.4-6 [Xiph.]) points out the opposite: he had taken away the glory the Byzantines gained for their walls, and more importantly Severus had destroyed a key position for protecting the empire against foreigners. The siege and destruction of Byzantium highlight not just the folly of civil war but especially Severus’ mindless brutality, weakening the empire in order to exact vengeance on a city for supporting Niger.[[330]](#footnote-330)

Severus’ absence from the civil war is now brought into focus. In a passage that appears to follow directly on the siege of Byzantium, Dio notes that Severus was making a campaign against the Osrhoeni, the Adiabeni, and the Arabians out of a desire for glory (ἐπιθυμίᾳ δόξης, 75[75].1.1 [Xiph.]) and goes on to relate what appears to be a positive anecdote about Severus’ leadership. Caught in a dust storm, and already tired from a long march, Severus’ men despaired of water. Severus, however, filled his own cup with water and drank it in front of them, and his men quickly followed his lead.[[331]](#footnote-331) The following material, however, moves in the opposite direction. Dio notes that Severus sent out three generals to lead raids on the barbarian lands, which he took credit for. Dio even points out that Severus acted quite haughtily about this, as if he were the wisest and bravest of men (75[75].2.4 [Xiph.]).[[332]](#footnote-332) The contrast between the positive anecdote and Severus’ actions in the war highlight the gap between image and reality.

In the continuation of the narrative of Severus’ eastern campaign, Dio seems to further emphasize the emperor’s absence from the action. He describes how Severus divided the army into three parts, sending out the respective companies under Laetus, Anullinus, and Probus to subdue the barbarian (75[75].3.2-3[Xiph.]).[[333]](#footnote-333) After these “successes”, Severus claimed to have annexed a great amount of land, yet Dio protests that it was instead a source of wars and expense for Rome.[[334]](#footnote-334) Dio makes these statements with the benefit of hindsight, noting that Rome now spends a great deal on a region that gave little in return and is constantly fighting on behalf of these conquered peoples. This severe judgment effectively annuls the achievements of Severus’ campaign and calls into question Severus’ titles “Arabicus”, “Adiabenicus”, and “Parthicus maximus”.[[335]](#footnote-335)

From here, Dio appears to move quickly into the civil wars with Clodius Albinus.[[336]](#footnote-336) As a point of introduction, Dio cites the uncertainty of the situation, which affected the entire world, and the popular protests in Rome, which Dio himself witnessed and attributed them to divine inspiration (76[75].4.5-6 [Xiph.]). This passage places Dio in a position of privilege as an interpreter of these events, and it compensates for his inability to witness the war itself. Because he is able to properly interpret the divine signs, his eyewitness status effectively transcends his sense of vision, as he is able to see and foresee significant events and outcomes. An anecdote about the plating of coins reinforces this notion, while also suggesting that what most people thought happened was merely an illusion. In this episode, Dio claims that a silver rain had fallen in the Forum of Augustus, an event that elicited significant wonder for Dio.[[337]](#footnote-337) Dio states that he plated some bronze coins with the substance, though the plating had worn off on the fourth day later.[[338]](#footnote-338) In this analogy, Dio becomes the tester of truth and veracity; he notices that the real nature of the events will be eventually revealed, and he is a privileged position to see the reality.[[339]](#footnote-339)

These introductory remarks give way to an anecdote about a certain Numerianus, a schoolteacher who decided to raise a force on Severus’ behalf against Clodius Albinus.[[340]](#footnote-340) Numerianus was pretending to be a senator (βουλευτής τε εἶναι τῶν Ῥωμαίων πλασάμενος). Severus, fooled by the ruse, asked Numerianus to continue to build up his troops, which he did and even sent Severus seventy million sesterces. Numerianus eventually presented himself to Severus, though not asking to be made a senator and receive riches, but content to retire to the country with a stipend from the emperor. This story has resonances with Dio’s brief note about the brigands Claudius and Bulla. Claudius was plundering in Judaea and Syria and once presented himself to Severus without detection (75[75].2.4 [Xiph.]. Bulla was a tricky character, “never really seen when seen, never found when found, never caught when caught” (77[76].10.2 [Xiph.]: οὔτε δὲ ἑωρᾶτο ὁρώμενος οὔτε εὑρίσκετο εὑρισκόμενος οὔτε κατελαμβάνετο ἁλισκόμενος). When two of his men were captured, Bulla, like Numerianus, was able to pretend to be someone else and escape notice pretending to be a governor (πλασάμενος ὡς τῆς πατρίδος ἄρχων) and do away with the capturing centurion instead (77[76].10.3-4 [Xiph.]). Bulla’s elusiveness frustrated Severus, though he was finally captured. The end of his tale, however, is significant. After his arrest, Bulla was questioned by Papinian about why he chose to be a brigand, to which Bulla coolly replied, “Why did you become a prefect?” (77[76].10.7: διὰ τί σὺ ἔπαρχος εἶ;). The episode, as a whole, highlights the unstable nature of appearances and the collapse of traditionally upright positions in the imperial administration with the lowly and criminal brigand. These stories reinforce the idea of false appearances in this section of Dio’s history, that individuals frequently do not appear as they really are. They point up Severus’ inability to perceive individuals and events properly, which in turn shines a light on his own actions.[[341]](#footnote-341)

After the Numerianus episode, the narrative moves to the war against Albinus. Dio notes that prior to Lugdunum, Severus had been absent from all previous battles (76[75].6.1 [Xiph.]). Severus’ presence in this battle, however, proved important, as he personally fought, trying to keep his men from fleeing (76[75].6.7 [Xiph.]). His work in this regard, however, was mixed. Because only some of the men stopped their flight and turned around, they fought those still in flight, believing them to be Albinus’ soldiers. Laetus then had to approach with his cavalry and secure the victory (76[75].6.8 [Xiph.]). Dio closes the chapter by noting Laetus’ vacillation in the battle, only coming to fight when he knew he could secure victory for one side or the other and thus benefit himself.

Dio’s account of the battle is significantly ambivalent, especially with regard to Severus, whose seemingly noble leadership led to the destruction of his own forces. Dio goes on to state outright that the battle resulted in a significant loss of Roman power (76[75].7.1 [Xiph.]), going into detail about the bloodiness of the slaughter. But perhaps most notably of all, Dio explicitly rejects Severus’ account of the event, stating that he will write what really took place, not what Severus wrote about it.[[342]](#footnote-342) Dio had been building up his and Severus’ respective positions with regard to understanding the truth about these events, and he explicitly denies the emperor’s authority here.

The aftermath of the battle is a catalogue of the emperor’s cruelty and misinformed ideas about legitimation. Dio describes Severus’ mistreatment of Albinus’ body and his putting Albinus’ head on a pole and sending it to Rome. The placing of Albinus’ head on a pole for display mirrors the treatment of Pescennius Niger at Byzantium and serves to draw a circle around these events, uniting them in Severus’ cruelty and ruthlessness in the civil wars.[[343]](#footnote-343) This cruelty stands in contrast to Marcus Aurelius’ “right way” to deal with civil wars: among other things, that good emperor turned away from seeing Avidius Cassius’ head and had it buried, not displayed publicly (72[71].28.1 [*Exc*. *Val*.]). Dio specifically states that these were signs that Severus had no traits that made him a good ruler (76[75].7.4 [Xiph.]).

The internal connection to Marcus Aurelius’ (proper) treatment of Avidius Cassius’ severed head makes Severus’ subsequent self-adoption into the Antonine line, and especially the rehabilitation of Commodus, all the more shocking. In addition to the relating the Senate’s outrage at Severus’ claims of descent from Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, Dio states that Severus praised the cruelty of Sulla, Marius, and Augustus.[[344]](#footnote-344) What is perhaps most striking here is that, with the end of the civil wars, Severus ought to have been transitioning into the role of a *civilis princeps*, though Dio instead claims that this was the beginning of Severus’ contemptible behavior.[[345]](#footnote-345) An important comparison is Dio’s depiction of young Caesar/Augustus, as he goes from murderous triumvir to more sympathetic monarch.[[346]](#footnote-346) Both the Senate and people were afraid (76[75].7.4 [Xiph.]: ἐξεφόβησεν), which recalls the pervasive sense of fear under Commodus.[[347]](#footnote-347) As part of his association with Commodus, Severus rebuked the Senate for damning him earlier and chiding some of them for having fought as gladiators themselves (76[75].8.1-2 [Xiph.]). Severus’ rehabilitation of Commodus just at the time when it should have become permissible to criticize him.[[348]](#footnote-348)

These announcements were paired with the release of some prisoners, but also the condemnation of twenty-nine others (76[75].8.4 [Xiph.]). Dio claims that everyone pretended to be on Severus’ side, though it was a difficult balance (76[75].8.5 [*Exc. Vat.*]), as the concealment of true feelings was challenging, though too much pretending would reveal one’s true positions. The emphasis on dissimulation in this passage suggests that Severus’ plan had come to completion. Himself a pretender with a disingenuous lineage and questionable right to rule, Severus had persuaded the people of Rome to partake in this charade. The placement of this notice is remarkable, since Severus was not the civil war victor, having taken the place of Didius Julianus and then having vanquished his challengers Niger and Albinus. This sense of uncertainty and unwillingness to coalesce around the new emperor demonstrates that Severus had done things in the wrong order. His arrival in Rome in 193 CE, meant to unite all behind him, was premature, as his behavior in civil war proved that there was more to fear in Severus than welcome.

Dio completes this portion of his narrative by relating Severus’ second Parthian campaign, and he reveals the folly of the expedition at every turn. Severus seized the abandoned the cities of Seleucia and Babylon (76[75].9.3 [Xiph.]), plundered but did not occupy Ctesiphon (76[75].9.4 [Xiph.]), lost money and siege engines at Hatra (76[75].11.1 [Xiph.]), and was thwarted by the disobedience of his soldiers (76[75].12.4-5 [Xiph.]). Dio also depicts Severus as viewing the siege of Hatra from a “lofty tribunal” (ἀπὸ βήματος ὑψηλοῦ, 76[75].11.4 [Xiph.]), a point that seems to emphasize the emperor's distance from the action and his arrogance. This campaign would become one of the things celebrated by Severus on his return to Rome in 202 CE. Through the narrative of the civil wars and eastern expeditions, Dio illuminates the Severus’ inability to play the role of monarch particularly well. His actions were not all failures, as he surely knew some of the ways to prove himself. But ultimately his actions in civil proved his cruelty and his attempts at creating a military persona were undercut by the reality and folly of his eastern campaigns. This sense of illegitimacy and false claims that propped up Severus’ claim to the throne serve as a transition to Dio's final major section of his account of Severus’ reign.

*Septimius Severus’* decennalia *and the role of Plautianus*

At the beginning of book 77[76], Dio discusses numerous events that occurred in the years 202-204 CE, including the celebration of Severus’ *decennalia*, which was closely connected to the wedding of Caracalla and Plautilla. The symbolism of these two events is most important. The *decennalia* was a show of power and legitimation: despite having fought his way to the throne, Severus had been able to establish his rule for a significant period of time. He had already begun a messaging campaign that involved his family in order to stress both legitimacy and continuity, but this celebration would be the first official act that showed his sons Caracalla coming of age and taking a wife, a clear sign to the people of Rome that a lengthy dynasty might be formed.[[349]](#footnote-349)

This event, crucial to the advertisement of the regime’s vitality and longevity, is negatively foreshadowed by Dio in the final chapters of book 76[75] with his extended description of Plautianus’ rise to power.[[350]](#footnote-350) In a lengthy discursus on Plautianus’ influence, Dio cites numerous examples of the privileges that the praetorian prefect enjoyed under Severus. According to Dio, Plautianus had his co-prefect Aemilius Saturninus killed and took away the powers of his subordinates in order to gather as much influence to himself as possible (76[75].14.1-2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). He desired to be the “undying prefect” (76[75].14.2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]: ἀθάνατος ἔπαρχος,), presumably meaning that he wished to hold the position for life. But this was not the end of his ambition. He stole from cities, gathered exotic animals, and castrated hundreds of Roman noble youths so that his daughter might be attended only by eunuchs (76[75].14.3-5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). His power exceeded everyone else’s, and it equaled that of the emperors themselves (76[75].14.6 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). He had numerous statues erected in his honor, and the senators prayed for his good fortune (76[75].14.7 [Xiph.]). Dio claims that Severus was to blame for this perversion and inversion of power, in which Plautianus was *de facto* ruler, while Severus served as his prefect. Severus even made him consul and prayed that he would predecease him (76[75].15.1-2 [Xiph.]). The following sections further detail Plautianus’ influence, which extended to treating Julia Domna poorly and causing her retreat to philosophy (76[75].15.3-7 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).[[351]](#footnote-351)

Dio’s eyewitness status is again the linchpin for the proper interpretation of these affairs. Dio states that he, along with what seem to be his peers in the Senate, saw the wedding gifts themselves that Plautianus had given as a dowry, as they traveled from the Forum to the royal palace (77[76].1.2 [Xiph.]). He also gives a lengthy description of the games that were celebrated around this time, including an intricate account of a vessel looking like a ship, from which large numbers of animals emerged for a hunt (77[76].1.3-5 [Xiph.]).[[352]](#footnote-352) The mentioning of Plautianus’ gifts brings the prefect into the story at the outset, and in a specific way. Dio notes the lavishness of the gifts, stating that they were sufficient for fifty women of similar rank (77[76].1.2 [Xiph.]). This constitutes a public example of Plautianus overstepping his bounds, which flows naturally from Dio’s earlier accounting of his outsized powers. Dio places this eyewitness evidence at a key spot, between his description of Plautianus’ power and the prefect’s alleged plot to gain power for himself. This placement has the effect of making Dio an eyewitness to all of the events, even if most of them occurred out of his actual line of vision.

After a brief list of omens, Dio moves on to the threat that Plautianus posed to Severus and the royal house. Dio’s narrative evolves into a conspiracy tale involving Severus, Caracalla, and Plautianus, though the individual roles of three characters are a bit obscure. Undoubtedly, the story that Dio is trying to convey was originally told by the Severan house and involved Plautianus’ alleged plot against Severus and perhaps Caracalla, with an aim to seize the throne for himself. Dio makes it obvious what kind of person Plautianus was and what he was planning, for he says that the prefect was always pale and trembling because of both his aspirations and anxieties (77[76].2.3 [Xiph.]). Dio, however, contends that Severus did not notice these signs, or at least pretended not to (ἢ καὶ εἰδῶς αὐτὰ οὐ προσεποιεῖτο). This claim has two functions. First, Dio again positions himself as an eyewitness to Plautianus’ behavior, and of course was able to discern even at that time the danger to the Severan house that resided in the prefect. From Severus’ point of view, however, it further builds up Dio’s implicit claim the outward appearance of the Severan house did not reflect its inner workings. Severus wanted to project an image of power and stability, and he simply pretended not to see anything that undermined that image. Like his interactions with Claudius, Numerianus, and Bulla, Severus was unable to perceive their true identities.

Severus, however, could not be oblivious to this threat forever. When his brother Geta, on his deathbed, told the emperor of Plautianus’ schemes, Severus had no choice but to reduce the prefect’s power. Dio explicitly states that Severus took away much of Plautianus’ influence (77[76].2.4 [Xiph.]), though the prefect attributed this diminution to Caracalla (77[76].2.5 [Xiph.]), which caused a rift between father-in-law and son-in-law. Rather than a plot against the co-emperors led by Plautianus, however, Dio writes that Caracalla took aim at the prefect by orchestrating a plot to make it seem as if Plautianus wished to assassinate both Severus and Caracalla.[[353]](#footnote-353)

Dio is skeptical of this alleged conspiracy (77[76].3.1-4[Xiph.]). He writes that, with the help of his tutor Evodus and a centurion named Saturninus, Caracalla fabricated a letter containing instructions for a plot against Severus and himself. Dio then goes on to further impugn the story, stating that Plautianus would never have carried out a plot in such a way or at such a location. Severus, however, believed the intelligence that he received, especially because he had had a dream that Albinus was plotting against him. Severus ordered Plautianus to the palace, and when the prefect was about to state his case, Caracalla interrupted him, grabbed the prefect’s sword, and punched him (77[76].4.1-3 [Xiph.]). Severus himself stopped Caracalla from killing Plautianus, but Caracalla managed to order the prefect’s death. Someone pulled some hair from the prefect’s beard and brought it to Julia and Plautilla, announcing the man’s death, which made Julia was happy and saddened Plautilla. Plautianus’ body was thrown from the palace, only to be later buried by Severus (77[76].4.4-5 [Xiph.]).

With this story, Dio depicts the struggle for power within the imperial house as early as 202 CE. We must remember that Dio connects this conspiracy with the *decennalia* (and, seemingly, the *ludi saeculares*), which celebrated the longevity the ruling house and the promise of dynasty. Dio severely undercuts this claim by devoting so much space to Plautianus’ powers and the conflict between Caracalla and the prefect. Also significant is Dio’s portrayal of Severus throughout this story as aloof and prey to Plautianus’ ambitions. Because of the void left by Severus’ supposed detachment, Dio allows the characters of Plautianus and Caracalla free reign to act as they wish. The end result is the destruction of the former and the increased license of the latter.

Indeed, Severus only reacted to Plautianus’ increased influence because of a dream that he had. Dio’s reporting of the dream is notable, as it undoubtedly calls to mind Dio’s earliest literary output. In this instance, Dio undermines the predictive abilities of Severus’ dreams, which responds, at a distance, to Dio’s earlier work on Severus’ dreams and portents. Through his own doubting of the conspiracy of Plautianus, Dio suggests that Severus’ belief in Caracalla’s claim against Plautianus was false, and thus that his dream should not have been trusted, or at least was misinterpreted. This in turn puts Dio in the position of the superior dream interpreter, while also suggesting that the dreams that Severus thought pointed to his taking the throne might also be called into question.

*Coda: Septimius Severus in Britain*

The final episode of Dio’s Severus narrative details the emperor’s campaign in Britain, though its purpose is much broader than that. This campaign was not merely for the protection of the empire or the winning of glory. Instead, Dio characterizes it as Severus’ attempt to straighten out his sons and the legions, who had fallen into laziness (77[76].11.1 [Xiph.]). Furthermore, Severus knew that we would not return to Rome alive. Dio’s opening to this final section on Severus is critical from the start, and looks forward to what is to come. Severus was aware that his end was near, and that his sons and the army were a problem for Rome, an idea that will be echoed in Severus’ final words to his sons.

Dio devotes a portion of this section to ethnography, which accords with his preferences elsewhere in the history.[[354]](#footnote-354) But Dio’s main focus is on Severus’ failures, both militarily and with regard to the maintenance of his family situation. To take the military issues first, Dio notes that Severus had difficulties with the terrain in Caledonia and did not actually fight any of the tribes there (77[76].13.1-3 [Xiph.]), the latter point mirroring Severus’ earlier “fighting”, both in the civil wars and against Parthia. It was only when Severus had been carried, by litter because of his weakness, into the friendly part of the country that he forced the Britons into an agreement (77[76].13.4 [Xiph.]), though it was hardly a glorious military victory.[[355]](#footnote-355)

The narrative then transitions to a discussion of Severus’ concerns about Caracalla’s lifestyle. Dio writes that Severus was anxious about Caracalla’s licentious living and because it was clear that, if he could, he was planning to kill Geta and was even forming a plot against Severus himself.[[356]](#footnote-356) There follow several examples of Caracalla’s failed plots, concluding with one against Severus himself, in which Severus challenges his son to kill him in front of Papinian and Castor, praetorian prefect and *cubicularius*, respectively (77[76].14.2-6 [Xiph.]). This sequence provides scathing commentary on Severus’ choices: despite his knowledge of Caracalla’s wickedness, Severus allowed him to live (and become his heir). This occasion brings the story back around to the beginning of the period of “iron and rust”. Dio claims that Severus frequently faulted Marcus Aurelius for not having Commodus killed, yet the emperor would not do so to his own son either. Dio concludes this judgment with one even more damning of Severus: “on the present occasion he allowed his love for his offspring to outweigh his love for his country; and yet in doing so he betrayed his other son, for he well knew what would happen” (77[76].14.7 [Xiph.]: τότε δὲ φιλότεκνος μᾶλλον ἢ φιλόπολις ἐγένετο· καίτοι καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἐν τούτῳ παῖδα προέδωκε, σαφῶς εἰδὼς τὰ γενησόμενα.). With these words, Dio looks ahead to subsequent books and the crisis of legitimacy that would plague Caracalla’s reign.

The narrative then transitions back to the British campaign, though Severus would not last for much longer. Weakened by his illness, Severus died in February 211 CE, helped along, some say, by Antoninus. On his deathbed, Severus spoke his famous last words: “Get along, make the soldiers rich, and scorn all others” (77[76].15.2 [Xiph.]: “ὁμονοεῖτε, τοὺς στρατιώτας πλουτίζετε, τῶν ἄλλων πάντων καταφρονεῖτε”). Dio then describes the preparation of Severus body for burial, including Severus' remark that the urn that would hold his ashes would possess the man that the world could not contain (77[76].15.3-4 [Xiph.]).

Severus’ British expedition serves a sort of coda, or even summation, of the three previous episodes. While Dio imbues the section with vividness and seeming eyewitness-like material (e.g., the reporting of Julia’s conversation with the Caledonian woman and Dio’s ethnography of the British), the focus is less on Severus’ reign and more looks to the future. Dio opens the section with the paired ideas of Severus’ end and the problems with his line of succession. Dio’s depiction of this campaign therefore serves to undermine two of Severus’ main claims: his military glory and the soundness of his succession plans. In fact, this section interweaves these two issues so closely that they serve both as a reflective comment on Severus’ reign and a foreshadowing of the ills to come.

For someone who obviously knew their history, could Dio’s Severus have been presented in a more damning light at the conclusion of his reign? Severus’ constructed connections to the Antonines, his mimicking of Trajan’s entrance into Rome, and his various efforts to present himself as a second Augustus are all torn down by Dio’s claim that, despite criticizing Marcus for making Commodus his heir, Severus did the same with Caracalla, even though he clearly knew what evils will follow.[[357]](#footnote-357) The end to Dio’s narrative of Severus’ reign effectively tears down the façade that Severus had built up, and which Dio had been poking holes in throughout. This ending effectively brings Dio and Severus into parallel positions, both being able to properly interpret the past, present, and future. Severus, however, makes the wrong choices, which in turn highlights the superiority of Dio’s historiography – even though he could do nothing about it at the time, his history serves to correct the ills of the past, which were caused Severus.

*Conclusion*

In his narrative of the reign of Septimius Severus, Dio organizes his material around three main, extended episodes: Severus’ initial entry into Rome; Severus’ civil wars and eastern campaigns; and Severus’ celebration of the strength and longevity of his reign and dynasty to come. Each of these episodes relies on Dio’s position as an eyewitness (virtual or otherwise) to cut through the official messaging of the regime. Dio, intent on uncovering the pretense of the Severan house, defines himself as an expert investigator and interpreter of both events and divine signs. The importance of this narrative sequence lies in Dio's use of public spectacle and eyewitness accounts to “uncover” the fraud that was being perpetrated by Severus.

A starting point for this investigation was Dio’s first document on the civil wars following the death of Commodus, and how Dio incorporated that material into his larger history. What others have called “inconsistencies” in this section of Dio’s narrative, such as his seeming praise and then blame of Severus, are here better understood as a larger narrative plan that sought to depict Septimius Severus as a duplicitous and untrustworthy *princeps*, one who insisted on a certain appearance that was not in line with reality. Dio therefore undercuts Severus’ stance as a *civilis princeps*, an able commander, and head of a stable and prosperous house.

We are left trying to understand why Dio presented Severus in this way. One reason is certainly that Dio positioned his contemporary history as oppositional to the Severan regime, and the undercutting of the image of its founding member would have been an important part of his overall attempt to undermine the regime’s validity and legitimacy. Dio, however, composed this work in the latter part of the dynasty, so it lacks the immediacy of a form or protest or resistance, at least as far as Septimius Severus was concerned. In the larger context of the *History*, it seems that Severus serves as an example of the tension between what a good emperor was supposed to look like and how he was supposed to act and the realities of Roman governance in the early third century. Dio does not cut through Severus’ false appearance simply for the sake of damning the emperor to ignominy, as can be seen in his final eulogy of Severus, which is rather positive. Rather, Dio depicts Severus on the surface playing out the role of the traditional *civilis* *princeps*, while attempting to mask the methods that he employed to gain legitimacy, such as the touting of mediocre campaigning as real victories and the marginalization of the Senate in favor of his praetorian prefect. In this depiction, Dio also reveals the problems that grew out of such methods, such as the threat that Plautianus was to his house and also the passing on of power to two rivalrous sons who would perpetuate, to the extreme, the policies of their father.

Dio’s depiction of Severus is complex, and made even more so by his obituary for the man. The following chapter will provide an assessment of this obituary, Dio’s overall view of the emperor, and how this final depiction places Severus among the other emperors of Dio’s age.

**Chapter 6: Mixed depictions: Pertinax, Septimius Severus, and Macrinus**

The previous chapter argued that Cassius Dio divided his narrative of the reign of Septimius Severus into three main sections, and that Dio used these sections to comment on the image of power and stability that Severus attempted to project. Throughout this analysis, Dio is eager to show that, while Severus’ reign possessed a patina of legitimacy and permanence, the reality was much more complicated. Simply put, although he was able to establish his rule and create a dynasty, Septimius Severus failed in establishing the correct type of rule and the correct type of dynasty, in Dio’s view.

Dio’s seemingly critical stance toward Septimius Severus throughout the narration of his reign is problematized by Dio’s eulogy of the emperor. Septimius Severus receives by far the lengthiest obituary in Dio’s surviving contemporary history.[[358]](#footnote-358) The commentary is seemingly laudatory, and it overlaps significantly with Dio’s obituary for Marcus Aurelius. Dio’s comments on Severus’ way of life and accomplishments have led scholars to understand Dio’s view of Severus as largely positive, and at worst “mixed”.[[359]](#footnote-359) The question, then, is why Dio followed his narration of Severus’ reign, which is aimed at undermining the emperor’s projected image, with an obituary that seems to praise Severus, for the most part.

The most developed and by now practically standard answer to this question has to do with how Dio composed the history of Severus’ reign, and indeed his contemporary history as a whole. The basic premise is that Dio at first thought positively of Severus and that this stance was at first reflected in his writings, though changed later. As we observed in chapter 1, this view stresses Dio’s earliest literary compositions and how they might be reconciled with Dio’s supposed first and second drafts or editions of his history. Discrepancies in Dio’s presentation of Severus and his reign have been explained in several ways. Rubin has argued that where Dio’s account appears to be confused between praise and blame of Severus, it is a product of Dio’s use of Severus’ claims of success as the basis of his work, then Dio’s attempts to rectify them.[[360]](#footnote-360) Eisman, on the other hand, expressing a view that has been adopted by several others, suggests that Dio wrote a first draft or edition of his history, which was largely positive toward Severus. Dio then edited his work, adding in more negative material about the emperor, which Eisman believes can be detected at certain points in the epitome.[[361]](#footnote-361) These views are largely similar, expounding a hypothesis that at its heart sees Dio’s contemporary history as a rather confused and ramshackle conglomeration of material, while also denying Dio full literary control over his text. A third approach has been offered by Schulz (2019a, 256-257), who suggests that Dio “has not created a coherent master narrative” for Septimius Severus because his immediate audience mostly lived through his reign and his dynasty was still in power. Thus, Severus’ final evaluation is still undecided. While this constitutes a step beyond the more critical views seen above, Schulz still suggests that Dio did not know quite what to do with Severus (or, by extension, the history of his own time).

As I hope to have shown in the previous chapter, what survives of Dio’s narrative of the reign of Septimius Severus appears to be a well constructed and organized analysis of this particular emperor.[[362]](#footnote-362) Such a view rejects the suggestion that Dio’s work as it comes down to us is a lightly revised second draft, with negative comments interspersed here and there, or an intentionally incomplete picture of a recently deceased emperor. In what follows, I hope to advance the claims of the previous chapter by examining Dio’s purpose in writing a number of “mixed” depictions of emperors into his contemporary history.

As discussed in chapter 4, Dio’s primary concern was whether the Roman political system could flourish, and the emperor played a key role. Thus, his focus on emperors has to do with their official actions in that role, as Kemezis (2014, 139-149) has pointed out. Likewise, Dio was interested in the monarchical system as a whole and believed that the strength of this system should be able to withstand even a bad emperor. The emperors whom Dio praises the most, Augustus and Marcus Aurelius, presided over periods of stability based on consensus-based rule among Rome's constituent groups. Regarding the Severans, Dio uses the recent past, namely the Antonine dynasty, as a touchstone. Dio displays an intense nostalgia for the generation of his father, which had Marcus Aurelius as both its emperor and ideal monarch.[[363]](#footnote-363) The corollary to this nostalgia was the impossibility of a similar golden age recurring in Dio’s lifetime. In Dio’s day, the return of a golden age was not impossible because the right sort of ruler could not be found, but rather because of the significant changes to the image of the emperor and his relationship to his constituent bodies that occurred under Commodus and were exacerbated by the Severans. Indeed, at least in Dio’s telling, we observe a re-ordering of the elements of power in the Roman governmental system. Augustus and Marcus Aurelius were able, in Dio’s eyes, to make the various constituencies of Rome, namely emperor, Senate, people, and military, come together in balance. Under Commodus, this balance began to falter. Despite Marcus’ attempts to prepare Commodus for the kingship, Commodus proved inadequate for the position. He marginalized the Senate and the advisors provided for him by his father, and he terrified the people. He attempted new forms of legitimization that fell outside the boundaries of tradition. His alienation of the Senate and people forced him to rely too strongly on the military and his closest confidants, and in conjunction these two groups rose up against him.

Septimius Severus’ attempts to return to a consensus-based style of rule can be seen in a passage examined in the previous chapter, detailing Severus’ initial entry into Rome in 193 CE. There, Dio is sure to point out the Senate, people, and military taking part in the celebration around the emperor’s arrival, while also insinuating that the scene was a sham and Severus’ consensus-based rule was merely a mirage. Dio’s vision of this event was of course affected by his experience and observation of Severus’ reign (and beyond). Indeed, we can look to Severus’ dying words to his sons, that they get along, enrich the army, and scorn everyone else, as an aphoristic encapsulation of his actual method of rule.

The failures of Commodus were also repeated by the other young emperors of Dio’s age, namely Caracalla and Elagabalus. All together, these highlight the weakness of inherited succession, but perhaps more strongly they signal the inability of young emperors to understand the nature of their position or to establish their legitimacy in an acceptable way. Not surprisingly, Dio is generally unsparing in his criticisms of this group. While these reigns will be examined in greater detail in the next chapters, we can say here that Dio presents a consistent portrait of these emperors as attempting to develop novel modes of self-presentation, all of which ended in their assassination.

It is the adult emperors, Pertinax, Severus, and Macrinus, who are portrayed in a mixed way, possessing some, or even many, good qualities, yet not enough to be truly good emperors.[[364]](#footnote-364) While flawed, Dio saw something positive in each of these monarchs. Dio has already established that he considers his own time a period of iron and rust. As such, there should be very little expectation of the reader to encounter an ideal *princeps* similar to Marcus Aurelius. In his presentation of the emperors, then, we should rather be examining how each recognized and confronted the problems of his time, which we see outlined in the transition from Marcus to Commodus. While moral and ethical considerations should not be completely thrown aside, it seems clear that, in Dio’s view, regardless of the emperor’s positive qualities, he would be hard pressed to correct the ills of Rome in this period. A related point is that the only ones that even had a chance of doing this were outsiders to the Severan dynasty. Dio therefore seems also to show the futility of dynastic rule, as well as the rule of usurpers, legitimate or not.

*Cassius Dio’s obituary for Septimius Severus*

In what survives of the *Roman History*, Cassius Dio dedicates two chapters to Severus’ obituary, far more than most others in his contemporary history, and surpassed in length only by the obituary of Marcus Aurelius. The length of the obituary and its connections to that of Marcus Aurelius demand our attention. As noted several times already, Dio uses Marcus as the paradigm of a good emperor, one who could achieve a golden kingship. We also know that this form of rule was never repeated in Dio’s own day, at least according to Dio himself. If in Marcus we find the ideal emperor who successfully combined personal attributes, as discussed in his obituary, with the proper actions of a monarch, then we must wonder what Dio wished to say about Septimius Severus.

There are several other reasons to pay attention to the obituary of Severus. For example, it has been noted that Dio deviates from the expected structure of such a piece and both adds and combines unusual elements.[[365]](#footnote-365) In his stretching of the boundaries of such a passage, Dio indicates that these chapters were essential to his portrait of Severus and to his discussion of the monarchy in this period overall. Therefore, it will be necessary to discuss its content and then attempt to explanation of Dio’s purpose.

In Xiphilinus’ epitome, the obituary seems to follow directly on Severus’ dying words, a natural enough transition. Addressing his urn, Severus supposedly said, “You will hold a man whom the world could not” (77[76].15.4 [Xiph.]: “χωρήσεις ἄνδρα ὃν ἡ οἰκουμένη οὐκ ἐχώρ ησεν”). This grandiose statement is a fitting end for a man who, in Dio’s eyes, was much less great than he considered himself to be. The first chapter of the obituary deals with Severus’ personality, and how that manifested itself, generally speaking, in his actions as emperor.[[366]](#footnote-366) Much of this material portrays Severus as a man of contradictions. For example, Severus used to be strong, but later grew weak from disease. He was very sharp and powerful with respect to his soul, but his education did not match his enthusiasm. He did not forget his friends, and he was harsh to his enemies. He paid great attention to everything he wished to achieve, but little attention to what people said about him. He raised money ruthlessly and spent it lavishly. He rounded up thousands for adultery, yet he never prosecuted any of them.

Within this first chapter, Dio also discusses Severus’ building program. In addition to building new structures and repairing others, Dio claims that Severus restored a large number of old buildings and placed his name on them. The effect of this was to make it seem that he had built them on his own and from his own money. This remark accentuates Dio’s overarching theme of Severus’ reign not being as great as it seemed. Dio is also specifically critical of Severus’ building program, stating that the emperor spent money foolishly (μάτην) making repairs to old buildings and constructed new ones, specifically singling out the enormous temple to Bacchus and Hercules (77[76].16.3 [Xiph.]). This is an important critique, as Hercules and Bacchus were two of Severus’ patron deities.[[367]](#footnote-367) Dio shows that he is picking up on this theme, but also criticizing its importance. The frivolousness with which Severus managed financial affairs can also be seen in Dio’s criticism of the emperor’s eastern campaigns. We also find a contrast with Augustus, who also undertook an enormous building program, but did not use it merely to aggrandize his own actions by placing his name on every structure.[[368]](#footnote-368)

The second part of the obituary details Severus’ way of life, specifically in peacetime (77[76].17.1-4 [Xiph.]). This chapter reads like a stereotypical description of a good leader. Severus was active in the morning, attentive to the concerns of the empire, held court, and gave litigants and advisors plenty of freedom to speak. After hearing cases, Severus rode his horse as long as he could, then exercised and bathed. He ate a good lunch, either alone or with his sons, before taking a rest. When he woke up, he pursued the rest of his undertakings, and went about speaking in Greek or Latin. In the evening he took another bath and then ate dinner with his advisors. He rarely made any others his table companions, and only by necessity did he hold lavish dinner parties. In the closing sentence, Dio highlights Severus’ activity, writing that his final words were, “Go ahead, give it to me, if we have anything to carry out” (77[76].17.4 [Xiph.]: ἄγετε, δότε, εἴ τι πρᾶξαι ἔχομεν).

The end of the obituary presents a sort of aspirational view of Septimius Severus as emperor, and we have to ask how well it tracks with the content of the three books that Dio wrote about Severus’ rise to power and reign. Indeed, the picture of Severus here seems to clash significantly with the portrait that Dio had been drawing. We could suppose that the missing content from those books would reflect what Dio has to say here, though that would make them rather incoherent. Instead, we should understand this passage as a reflection of the sort of emperor Severus wished to be, though we know from the preceding material that his real actions in that capacity were much more complicated. It is noticeable that in this obituary Dio focuses on Severus’ activities in peacetime and his attention to administrative detail. Indeed, the opening sentence of the second chapter of the obituary explicitly states that Dio will relate Severus’ habits during times of peace (77[76].17.1 [Xiph.]). This emphasis serves as a counterpoint to the preceding narrative, which focused to a large extent on Severus’ military affairs; indeed, there is really no part of the proceeding narrative that does not deal with that subject matter. In Dio’s view, Severus was a civil war emperor, and with this obituary he challenges the notion that Severus ever grew into the more developed type of *princeps*, such as the figure he describes in young Caesar’s transition to the emperor Augustus.

The most important distinction, however, is between Severus’ public actions and private way of life. As discussed earlier, Dio judged his emperors according to their official actions. Severus’ obituary, on the other hand, details, in large part, his private life as *princeps*. There are certainly positive traits in this description. Yet when he does mention public actions in the obituary, such as Severus’ building program or his lack of prosecution of adulterers, Dio is critical. By drawing this distinction, Dio highlights the difficulty of translating personal virtues into positive action as emperor. It seems, in Dio’s formulation, that even someone who possessed virtues and exhibited them privately had a difficult time translating those virtues to his public actions. In comparison with emperors of whom Dio approves, it seems that these virtues buttressed the proper management of the monarchical system, but did little to aid the monarch who did not make sure the system was functioning properly.

These two chapters make up an extended reading of Dio’s narrative of the reign of Septimius Severus, both in and of itself, and in the context of the contemporary history as a whole. It will be useful to draw some overall conclusion and make further remarks about the issue, since Dio’s view of Severus is crucial to his overall historiographic project. Both the narrative of Severus’ reign and his obituary constitute two ways in which Dio evaluated Severus as emperor, and they must be read as complementing each other. When he entered Rome as *princeps* in 193 CE, Severus tried to enter in the guise of the *civilis princeps*, such as Trajan did about a century before. Wearing his civilian clothes, Severus entered the city on foot and walked among his constituents, who seem to have responded positively to his appearance. He paid tribute to Pertinax and showed deference to the Senate. Yet it was not long before these actions were revealed as a mere façade. In contrast to his respect for Pertinax, Severus rehabilitated Commodus. Rather than respect for the senators, Severus soon began to put them to death. The prolonged civil wars and eastern campaigns were a testament to the violence and bloodshed on which his rule rested. His preference for dynastic succession and the privileging of equestrians such as Plautianus further demonstrated Severus’ inability to work with the Senate.

This entire narrative is meant to expose the true nature of Severus’ reign and highlight the emperor’s pretense of ruling in a civil manner. It is only natural, then, to understand Dio's obituary for Severus in the same manner. These final comments on Severus’ way of life show an emperor striving to play the part of *princeps* the right way. In Dio’s view, Severus did some of these actions well, such as in consulting advisors and judging cases. Dio specifically notes that these were the emperor’s actions in peacetime, and a reading of preceding narrative suggests that these moments were few and far between. In addition, Dio presents the portraits of a *princeps* who strived to be the best but was limited by personal and other shortcomings.

*The obituaries of Septimius Severus and Marcus Aurelius*

Marcus Aurelius’ obituary looms over the contemporary history, as it comprises Dio’s final statements before the descent into a period of iron and rust. Severus connected himself to Marcus Aurelius and undoubtedly wished to advertise his reign as a return to a golden age of Rome. Dio’s opening comments, in the surviving obituary, focus on Marcus’ moral and physical characteristics. Dio states that Marcus possessed all virtues and ruled better than any others in power (72[71].34.2-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), a comment that shows Dio’s belief in the division between the emperor’s virtues and his actions. Dio goes on to say that Marcus was not physically strong, but his strength improved over his life. He dedicated himself to beneficence (εὐεργεσίᾳ, 72[71].34.3), and caused no offense, while tolerating the offenses of others. Marcus acted out of true excellence, not out of pretense, but because of his excellence (72[71].34.4: οὐ προσποιητῶς ἀλλ’ ἐξ ἀρετῆς πάντα ἔπραττε). Indeed, he was a good man and, Dio repeats, showed no pretense (72[71].34.4: οὕτως ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸς ἀνὴρ ἦν καὶ οὐδὲν προσποιητὸν εἶχε).

In the following chapter (72[71].35 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), Dio provides significant detail about Marcus’ early education and political advancement. Marcus was trained in both rhetoric and philosophy,[[369]](#footnote-369) but even greater than his learning was his nature, which inclined to virtue. As proof, Dio notes the love that his family felt for him, as well as his humility and service under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. In his capacity as Caesar, he dressed like a private citizen and often visited the sick, all the while continuing his education. For Dio, this showed Marcus’ good nature, and also that he was aided by his education.

Dio concludes the obituary by stating that though Marcus had been strong earlier in life, he later suffered weakness caused by this study, and did not have good fortune (72[71].36). These hardships only increased Dio’s admiration for him, especially because Marcus survived and saved the empire. In the end, Marcus would have been completely happy, were it not for the disappointment of his son.[[370]](#footnote-370) Dio’s obituary of Marcus tells the story of a lifetime of virtue, made possible by good nature and education. Furthermore, Dio connects this virtue to both public and private life, as well as to the adoptive succession of the Antonines.

When we turn to a comparison between the obituaries of Marcus and Severus, the connections, and oppositions, are numerous. Dio notes that both Marcus and Severus suffered from physical weakness, though in Marcus’ case this was a problem he overcame, as well as a product of his devotion to philosophy. On a related point, Marcus spent his free time studying Greek and Latin rhetoric and philosophy, which we assume to be a private matter. Severus, on the other hand, was wanting in education, and felt the need to display his erudition publicly. Most important are Dio’s comments about the genuineness of Marcus’ self-presentation. Dio claims that he was truly a good man and did not pretend to be anything else. As seen in the previous chapter, Severus’ reign was predicated on pretense, and he constantly strived to be many things that he was not: well educated, a descendant of Marcus Aurelius, a valorous imperialist, and a benign *princeps*.

Perhaps worst of all, Severus recognized the strife between Caracalla and Geta prior to his death, and knew that Caracalla wished to kill him, even challenging him to do so by placing a sword in front of him (77[76].14.4-6 [Xiph.]). In this latter passage, Dio claims that Severus, when angry, held Marcus responsible for not getting rid of Commodus, though he himself was not able to put the good of Rome above his affection for his sons (77[76].14.7 [Xiph.]). It is noteworthy that Dio does not censure Marcus in the same way, and he turns Severus’ alleged complaint into a commentary on his own plan for familial succession. If anything, Severus’ choice is worse, since he had the example of Commodus and still determined it best to let his sons succeed him, despite knowing that it meant death for Geta.[[371]](#footnote-371)

The influence of Severus on his sons (particularly Caracalla) can be seen in his final words to them, which Dio claims to quote verbatim and without beautification: “Get along, make the soldiers rich, and scorn all others” (77[76].15.2 [Xiph.]: ὁμονοεῖτε, τοὺς στρατιώτας πλουτίζετε, τῶν ἄλλων πάντων καταφρονεῖτε). These words are practically prophetic. The education that Severus provided for his sons is of no consequence. Whereas Commodus was corrupted by his associates, Caracalla reached the throne already corrupted. Marcus’ desire to educate Commodus was the product of his own training and excellence; in the case of Caracalla, it appears to be the product of Severus’ desire to seem to be good like Marcus. Severus’ own uprightness, however, was lacking, and his tendencies as emperor, not an education in rhetoric and philosophy, greatly influenced his son and heir. The failure of education under the Severans shows how, in Dio’s critique, they have fallen from the Marcus-ideal.

Severus’ final words to his sons also look forward to the sense of isolation that surrounds the emperor. Rather than return to the consensus-based rule of Marcus Aurelius and his predecessors, Severus preferred his few advisors and a more authoritarian approach. The one negative aspect of Marcus’ reign that Dio mentions is the failure of inherited succession. Severus is implicitly faulted for knowing of this negative example and attempting it again, while at the same time having none of the positive qualities that might shape his sons to become good emperors.

It is in this light that the seemingly positive aspects of Severus’ obituary need to be understood. Because Severus positioned himself as a descendant of the Antonines, and a restorer of Antonine prosperity, we cannot look at Severus’ obituary in isolation. Despite his self-adoption into the Antonine line, as son of Marcus Aurelius and brother of Commodus, in reality Severus moved away from the model provided by Marcus Aurelius. Understanding Severus in this way gives any of his positive qualities a fleeting, ephemeral character, which goes hand in hand with the reign defined by pretense, as seen in the previous chapter.[[372]](#footnote-372)

*Other mixed depictions in the contemporary books*

While the portrait of Severus naturally looks ahead to the rest of the Severan line, Dio also relates it to two others, Pertinax and Macrinus. Pertinax, Severus, and Macrinus fit into an ideological chain. They represent three adult emperors of Dio’s age who faced challenges when taking the throne. Each came to power out of periods of conflict and strife and without a ruling family line to connect back to. Each also faced significant challenges that they attempted to overcome, primarily with the management of Rome’s military apparatus. In Dio’s *History*, they are defined by their attempts to play the role of the good emperor and their ultimate failures to make themselves into a truly transformative *principes* along the lines of Marcus Aurelius. Through these three figures, Dio suggests that in his age, even well meaning and earnest emperors could not reverse the process of decline. In what follows, we will examine the unique circumstances of Pertinax and Macrinus, and how they relate to the mixed depiction of Septimius Severus, seen above.

*The mixed depiction of Pertinax*

Dio’s depiction of Pertinax has generally been seen as laudatory, with Pertinax serving as a parallel to the good emperor Marcus Aurelius.[[373]](#footnote-373) There is, however, more to Dio’s Pertinax than simply positive aspects. It will be remembered, as Dio specifically points out, that Pertinax’ reign lasted less than three months. The brevity of his tenure invites us to question the value of displaying some of the attributes of Marcus Aurelius. In some ways, Cassius Dio’s depiction of Pertinax is the inversion of his portrait of Severus. Whereas Severus seems to perform a series of actions about which Dio is ambivalent in his judgment, there is little that Pertinax does which comes in for censure. On the other hand, Severus’ obituary is almost completely laudatory, whereas it is in Pertinax’ death notice that Dio includes his main critique of the emperor. This section will explore more closely Dio's nuanced portrait of Pertinax.

The epitome of book 74[73] opens with a programmatic μέν.. δέ statement: Pertinax was numbered among the *kaloi kagathoi*, but he ruled for only a short time.[[374]](#footnote-374) The tension between these two statements, that a senator became emperor but could not hold power for long, gets at the problems with monarchy in Dio’s day. Dio adds an ambivalent statement, which sets the tone for Pertinax’ accession. Pertinax was chosen for his virtue and standing (74[73].1.1 [Xiph.]: διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν γὰρ καὶ τὸ ἀξίωμα), but the selection was made by Laetus and Eclectus, the praetorian prefect and *cubicularius* – and specifically, not by the Senate.[[375]](#footnote-375) With Commodus’ murder still unknown, Laetus and Eclectus brought Pertinax secretly to the soldiers’ camp. Pertinax’ acceptance by the soldiers hinged on two factors: the presence of Laetus and the distribution of a large donative. Although Dio writes that Pertinax brought them to his side, he also highlights one of Pertinax’ first failures. Instead of appeasing the soldiers and truly winning them over, Pertinax spoke vaguely about righting certain wrongs. The soldiers took this to mean that the new emperor would soon take away the privileges that they received under Commodus, and they were displeased. At this time, however, they kept their anger hidden (74[73].1.3 [Xiph.]: ἐπικρύπτοντες τὴν ὀργήν). Throughout this passage Dio signals the latent danger that lurked for the new emperor. Several times Dio cites the secret nature of these dealings, including the concealment of Commodus’ death, Pertinax’ clandestine meeting with the soldiers, and the military’s hidden anger.

After taking leave of the camp, Pertinax made his way to the Senate house, at night. Pertinax refused the office of emperor because of the difficulty of the present circumstances (74[73].1.4 [Xiph.]: διὰ τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων δυσχέρειν), in a quotation similar to the one that Dio has Pertinax give the soldiers (74[73].1.3 [Xiph], καὶ δυσχερῆ τῶν παρόντων ἐστίν). According to Dio, Pertinax cited his age and bad health as reasons for his *recusatio*, though Dio specifically states that Pertinax was in fact in fine health, aside from an ailment of the feet (74[73].1.5 [Xiph.]). He also notes Pertinax’ excellence of spirit (τήν τε γὰρ ψυχὴν ἄριστος ἦν) and says that the senators truly chose him (ὡς ἀληθῶς ᾑρούμεθα). This final statement must simply mean that the Senate, as a whole (or so Dio presents it), truly supported Pertinax; the reader is aware that the praetorians are the ones who in reality elevated him to the position.

Dio goes on to record in some detail the reaction of the plebs. In this instance, the Senate and people act in accord, both groups abusing Commodus with insulting nicknames. In the amphitheater, the people made the same chants that they did under Commodus, only this time changing the words (74[73].2.1-2 [Xiph.]). They even cheered the senators, claiming that they had prevailed over Commodus (74[73].2.3 [Xiph.]). But Dio also chastises the crowd for having no foresight, abusing the newfound freedom under Pertinax and caring only for the loss of a tyrant so that they might exercise their freedom of speech (74[73].2.4 [Xiph.]).

The accession of Pertinax, at least in this telling by Dio, succeeds in bringing about a partial reformation of consensus rule. Seemingly, the Senate, people, and soldiers all believed that Pertinax was a good option, though for different reasons. This point is important, since Pertinax’ accession is presented as a choice. First, we learn that Laetus and Eclectus chose him (and happily) (74[73].1.1 [Xiph.]: ἡδέως αὐτὸν ἐπελέξαντο). Likewise, the Senate “truly chose him” (74[73].1.5 [Xiph.]: ὡς ἀληθῶς ᾑρούμεθα), and this choice is confirmed publicly by the people in the following scene (74[73].2.3-4 [Xiph.]). There is a bit of a twist, however. Whereas the Senate and people were freed from the fear that Commodus held over them, the soldiers were newly afraid because of the threat of a loss of privileges under Pertinax. Even these concerns can be seen as shortsighted: the soldiers only accepted him because he had the backing of Laetus and was able to distribute a large amount of cash, and the people of Rome cared only about the temporary removal of fear so that they might act in an outrageous manner. Whereas Pertinax is the Senate’s true choice, the soldiers reluctantly accept him, and the people seem to care only for their near-term happiness.

Once Pertinax gained power, Dio is explicit about his virtues as emperor. For example, Pertinax took the title of *princeps senatus*, put matters in order, and showed his love of humanity, the finest household management, and the most caring forethought for the common good (74[73].5.1-2 [Xiph.]).[[376]](#footnote-376) He acted like a good emperor, taking away the dishonor of being put to death unjustly and said that he would never carry out such a penalty (74[73].5.2). Pertinax also dealt effectively with the *fiscus*, which Commodus had depleted (74[73].5.4-5 [Xiph.]). Pertinax made commendable appointments (such as his father-in-law Flavius Sulpicianus as prefect of Rome), and he did not make his wife Augusta or his son Caesar, a decision to which Dio gives his approbation because neither deserved the title (74[73].7.1-3 [Xiph.]).

Pertinax’ tenure, however, did not depend on his own virtues. Just as in his accession, Pertinax needed the support of Laetus in order to remain emperor.[[377]](#footnote-377) Dio specifically states that Laetus complimented Pertinax while he insulted Commodus and orchestrated several actions in order to cast aspersion on Commodus (74[73].6.1-2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Laetus’ loyalty to Pertinax, however, was fleeting, and he began to turn the soldiers against him (74[73].6.2-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Dio later picks up this plot (74[73].8.1 [Xiph.]), in what becomes the narrative of Pertinax’ demise. In attempting to forestall his overthrow, Pertinax claimed to the praetorians that he had paid them as much as Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius (74[73].8.3-4 [Xiph.]). Dio, however, does not abide this false claim and points out Pertinax’ disingenuous. Dio’s critique demonstrates a weakness of Pertinax, which was already present at his accession, namely his inability to deal with the military.

Pertinax was able to temporarily forestall his end, but he refused to change his way of ruling. The praetorians and Laetus contrived a plot to put Sosius Falco in power, while Pertinax was away from Rome.[[378]](#footnote-378) Upon hearing of the conspiracy, Pertinax returned quickly to Rome, attempted to placate the praetorians, while the Senate was about to declare Falco a public enemy and condemn him to death. Pertinax, however, intervened and spared him, claiming that no senator would be put to death during his tenure (74[73].8.5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Laetus exploited Pertinax’ leniency, putting several soldiers to death and inducing them to blame Pertinax and eventually storm the palace and kill the emperor (74[73].9.1-2 [Xiph.]). Before the murder, Pertinax overestimated his stature, thinking that he could face down the angry soldiers (74[73].9.4 [Xiph.]). For the most part this worked, though one still attacked and killed the emperor (74[73].10.1 [Xiph.]). Pertinax’ bravery calls forth significant reverence from Dio, who states that though he thought Pertinax brave before, now he truly held him in awe (74[73].10.2 [Xiph.]). In the end, however, Pertinax’ leniency toward Falco activated nefarious aspects of imperial administration, first Laetus and then the praetorians, and ultimately led to Pertinax’ death. In his final scene, the image he had built up for himself as emperor was no match for the power of the praetorians.

This episode demonstrates how Pertinax misunderstood the support around him and was caught between the wishes of the praetorians and the Senate. His choice, however, satisfied neither side. He remained emperor (not Falco), and he did not allow the Senate to carry out the condemnation of Falco in protection of their favored emperor. This episode leads thematically into Dio’s final comments about Pertinax. For all of his admiration, Dio provides an explicit critique of the emperor, one that goes hand on hand with Pertinax’ handling of the Falco situation. He states that despite being experienced, Pertinax did not realize that reforms take time and wisdom (74[73].10.3 [Xiph.]).[[379]](#footnote-379) This comment draws the reader back to the end of book 52, when Octavian makes his choice of type of government, after listening to the speeches of Agrippa and Maecenas. Dio write that Octavian (52.41.1-2):

οὐ μέντοι καὶ πάντα εὐθὺς ὥσπερ ὑπετέθειτο ἔπραξε, φοβηθεὶς μὴ καὶ σφαλῇ τι, ἀθρόως μεταρρυθμίσαι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐθελήσας· ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν παραχρῆμα μετεκόσμησε τὰ δ’ ὕστερον, καί τινα καὶ τοῖς μετὰ ταῦτα ἄρξουσι ποιῆσαι κατέλιπεν ὡς καὶ κατὰ καιρὸν μᾶλλον ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ γενησόμενα.

… did not, however, immediately put into effect all his suggestions, fearing to meet with failure at some point if he purposed to change the ways of all mankind at a stroke; but he introduced some reforms at the moment and some at a later time, leaving still others for those to effect who should subsequently hold the principate, in the belief that as time passed a better opportunity would be found to put these last into operation.

Pertinax is thus guilty of trying to do too much too fast – a critique that places blame both on Pertinax and the times in which he lived.

Following the funeral for Pertinax that Severus carried out, Dio includes a lengthier obituary.[[380]](#footnote-380) In it, Dio extolls Pertinax’ measuredness: he was a good mix of bellicose and peaceful, showed both courage and uprightness, and maintained his natural manner, becoming neither proud nor servile when he rose to emperor. This passage concludes with a list of good characteristics, including nobility without severity, mildness without baseness, prudence without malice, justice without unnecessary harshness, thriftiness without meanness, and magnanimity without excessive pride.[[381]](#footnote-381) The placement of this fragment is important, since it seems to come in the midst of Severus’ reign. Dio’s normal method is to place the eulogy after an emperor’s death and then move on to the following reign. If it is the case, as it seems, that Dio has forestalled the eulogy of Pertinax to this point, then it stands in even greater contrast to its surroundings. Indeed, we must read these qualities as ones that Severus also hoped to possess (or Dio thought should possess), especially since the fragment falls at a time when Severus is actively associating himself with Pertinax.[[382]](#footnote-382)

The figure of Pertinax is, for Dio, a connection to the recent past of Marcus Aurelius.[[383]](#footnote-383) Pertinax is many ways is an analogue to Marcus himself, though he lived into a later different period. Pertinax, while otherwise an outstanding candidate for emperor (in Dio’s view), did not recognize the changes that had occurred after Marcus’ death. He seems to have thought that his persona and mode of rule would right the wrongs of Commodus. Dio, however, tells us that this change would not be easy, perhaps even impossible. His brief reign is a symbol for how far gone those times were.

*The mixed depiction of Macrinus*

In spring 217 CE the dynastic succession of the Severan line was interrupted when Caracalla was assassinated in the East and his praetorian prefect Macrinus was acclaimed emperor. His accession evoked from Dio various reactions. On the one hand, Dio was appalled by a man of Macrinus’ social status and background becoming emperor. On the other hand, Dio was aware of some of Macrinus’ administrative capabilities and used this interlude in the Severan dynasty to highlight some of the failures of Macrinus’ Severan predecessors. Like Pertinax, Macrinus was a mixture of good and bad aspects, and his reign was, unsurprisingly, rather short.

Macrinus was the first equestrian emperor, and Dio, whose elitist, senatorial outlook was greatly offended by the elevation of a man of such stature, became obsessed with the emperor’s social status. Dio frames Macrinus’ depiction with this aspect of his background, beginning his description of Macrinus with a note on his low birth and origin (79[78].11.1), and closing his obituary of the emperor with a discourse on the instability of human fortune and retrospective advise about how Macrinus, as an equestrian, ought to have handled himself (79[78].41).[[384]](#footnote-384)

Not only was Macrinus an equestrian, he was also from Mauretania, a fact that evokes from Dio an equally harsh, and equally stereotypical, reaction.[[385]](#footnote-385) As he focuses on Macrinus’ outsider status, Dio also notes that Macrinus looked physically different from what Dio thought he was supposed to look like. Specifically, Dio states that, in accordance with the Moorish custom, Macrinus wore a pierced ear.[[386]](#footnote-386) This aspect of the portrait is significant, since Macrinus will try to do his best to look the part of the emperor. He would adopt the name Severus, and he would give his son Diadumenian the name Antoninus and advertise him as his heir. It is possible that Dio is responding here to official media, such as coins or statues, that attempted to normalize Macrinus and his son as just another member of the Severan line.[[387]](#footnote-387) In Dio’s view, no one who actually saw him would have mistaken this ear-pierced Moor for anything of the sort.

The senatorial opposition voiced by Dio was not Macrinus’ only problem; he had similar issues of recognition with other groups and individuals. The people of Rome lamented his absence and acted as if they had no emperor, shouting as much in the circus (79[78].20.1-3). Dio explains that from this point onwards, the people of Rome treated Macrinus and Diadumenian as if they were dead. Likewise, the war against Parthia that was begun by Caracalla was continued, in Dio’s telling, because Artabanus held Macrinus in contempt as an unworthy emperor (79[78].26.4). This view seems to be confirmed by Dio’s following comment that Macrinus did not want to fight because of his inborn cowardice (the product of his Mauretanian background) and preferred to settle with the Parthians (79[78].27.1-3).

Macrinus’ image problem is magnified in the emperor’s final scenes (79[78].39-40). Finally facing up to his defeat at the hands of the partisans of Elagabalus, Macrinus fled the area of Antioch on or just after June 8, 218 CE, and he sent Diadumenian to Artabanus in Parthia. To disguise himself, Macrinus shaved his head and chin entirely and used a dark cloak to cover up his purple robe, in order to give the appearance that he was merely a private citizen (79[78].39.2). Making his way to Aegae in Cilicia, Macrinus posed as a soldier and was able to travel further, through Cappadocia, Galatia, and Bithynia. After sailing from Eribolon to Chalcedon, Macrinus wrote to one of the procurators asking for money. In this way, his identity was betrayed (79[78].39.5). He was arrested and taken back to Cappadocia, as if he were simply a criminal. When he learned that Diadumenian had been captured, he attempted to die by suicide, but could only manage a broken shoulder (79[78].40.1). He was later killed by a centurion, his body left unburied until Elagabalus passed by and ridiculed it (79[78].40.2).

By focusing on Macrinus’ changing of costume from emperor to civilian to soldier, Dio highlights both the instability of Macrinus’ rule and his un-emperor-like appearance.[[388]](#footnote-388) Dio also reinforces this point, rather subtly, through the lack of recognition of Macrinus by others during his flight. It seems that this man might have been able to make it all the way back to Rome, which Dio claims would have given him a fighting chance against Elagabalus (79[78].39.4). But Macrinus was virtually unrecognizable to anyone from Antioch to Chalcedon, and it was not until he identified himself that he was captured.[[389]](#footnote-389)

As part of his depiction of the emperor, Dio uses his stereotypical understanding of Macrinus’ ethnicity to explain both his rise and fall. As we have already seen, Dio associated Macrinus’ Moorish background with fear and cowardice, and timidity becomes one of the main motivations that Dio attributes to Macrinus throughout his depiction of the reign. Thus, when Macrinus learned that Caracalla was plotting against him, Macrinus grew afraid (ἐφοβήθη, 79[78].4.4) and therefore put together a plot, together with Julius Martialis, an embittered *evocatus* at the forefront, and soon had Caracalla assassinated (79[78].5.1-5).[[390]](#footnote-390) This aspect of his portrait manifests itself later in the book, when Macrinus decides to negotiate peace with the Parthians. Dio specifically blames Macrinus' Moorish cowardice and excessive timidity (as well as the indiscipline of the soldiers) in what in Dio’s eyes is a shameful concession to the Parthians (79[78].27.1). The Parthian debacle, coupled again with military indiscipline, lead to Macrinus’ demise (79[78].28). Needing to reform military pay, Macrinus displeased both veterans and new recruits, laying the groundwork for Elagabalus’ rise. Elagabalus’ retainers exploited the displeasure of the military and manufactured Macrinus' overthrow. In the final battle of his reign, Macrinus is again described as being defeated by his own cowardice (79[78].37.4: τῇ δὲ ἑαυτοῦ δειλιᾷ ἡττήθη).

Other criticisms of Macrinus flow from these negative assessments of status and appearance. Aside from his low birth and Moorish background, Dio specifically states that Macrinus’ good deeds were balanced by the criticism that he received for elevating unworthy men to positions of importance, providing several examples (79[78].13.1).[[391]](#footnote-391) Dio continues in this vein with Macrinus’ elevation of Oclatinius Adventus, his former colleague as praetorian prefect, and he states specifically that Macrinus made Adventus consul so that he might deflect criticism for his own rise to emperor (79[78].14.1-4).[[392]](#footnote-392) Dio goes on to censure Macrinus for putting Materianus and Datus to death, claiming that Macrinus was arrogant when he should have been moderate and should have displayed beneficence and excellence (79[78].15.3-4). Dio also records an instance when he and his fellow senators “condemned still more strongly his abasement and his folly” (79[78].38.2: τὴν ταπεινότητα καὶ τὴν μωρίαν αὐτοῦ πάντες κατέγνωμεν).

Despite these criticisms, Macrinus’ depiction is not entirely negative.[[393]](#footnote-393) At the same time that he discusses his low birth and Moorish origins, Dio commends Macrinus for his fairness (ἐπιείκεια) and faithful observance of the law, going even so far as to say that these aspects of his persona overshadowed his undistinguished background (79[78].11.1-2). Macrinus also showed signs of being or becoming a good *princeps*. He spoke well to the soldiers and forgave charges of *maiestas* (79[78].12.1). Macrinus spared the life of Aurelianus, whom the soldiers demanded be put to death (79[78].12.2).[[394]](#footnote-394) Dio also commends him in this passage for rescinding Caracalla’s taxes on inheritances and emancipations. He lauds Macrinus’ military reforms (79[78].28.3) and cites Macrinus’ practical experience (ἐμπειρία) positively, in contrast to his being challenged by Elagabalus, a mere boy (79[78].40.3).

Macrinus’ military reforms, which are praised by Dio, play an interesting role in the story. They ultimately lead to Macrinus’ demise, yet their legitimacy was based on a connection to Septimius Severus. Specifically, Macrinus returned troop pay for new recruits to the level established by Severus.[[395]](#footnote-395) This connection to Severus seems to have been part of a larger plan by Macrinus to associate himself with the former emperor, including taking the name Severus and coordinating his *dies imperii* with Severus’ birthday (79[78].11.6).[[396]](#footnote-396) This attempt at connection shows that there was a lack of knowledge of what a good emperor was like. Macrinus, unlike Dio, did not know to look to Marcus Aurelius as a model, but preferred the model of Severus. While there were practical reasons for Macrinus to do so, within Dio’s history this move emphasizes the lack of connection to the golden age and a preference for the more recent past, the period of iron and rust, and it mirrors Severus’ own rehabilitation of Commodus. As we have seen, Severus is an imperfect model, thus underlining the fact that a model *princeps* was out of reach for this period and mirroring the structural breakdown of Roman governance at the time.

In Dio’s account, Macrinus plays the role of an able administrator who did not fully grasp or could not fully implement a method for legitimizing his position. For Dio, the main issue (tied to Macrinus’ background and social standing) is that Macrinus simply did not look the part of an emperor and throughout the narrative of his reign, Dio seems to ask, again and again, how it was possible for an equestrian to gain the throne. This rumination leads to his summary of Macrinus’ reign (79[78].41.2-4):

καὶ ὁ μὲν ἐπαινεθεὶς ἂν ὑπὲρ πάντας ἀνθρώπους, εἴ γε μὴ αὐτὸς αὐταρχῆσαι ἐπετεθυμήκει, ἀλλ’ ἐπιλεξάμενός τινα τῶν ἔς γε τὴν γερουσίαν τελούντων τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς προστατῆσαι, αὐτοκράτορα αὐτὸν ἀπεδεδείχει, καὶ μόνως ἂν οὕτως τὸ αἰτίαμα τὸ τῆς ἐπὶ τὸν Καράκαλλον ἐπιβουλῆς, ὡς καὶ διὰ τὴν αὑτοῦ σωτηρίαν ἀλλ’ οὐ διὰ τὴν τῆς ἡγεμονίας ἐπιθυμίαν ποιησάμενος αὐτήν, ἐκφυγών, καὶ διέβαλεν ἅμα ἑαυτὸν καὶ διέφθειρεν, ὥστε καὶ ἐν ὀνείδει καὶ ἐν παθήματι ἀξιωτάτῳ αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι. τῆς γὰρ μοναρχίας, μηδ’ ὄνομα βουλευτοῦ ἔχων, ὀριγνηθεὶς καὶ τάχιστα καὶ βαρυσυμφορώτατα αὐτὴν ἀπέβαλεν· ἐνιαυτῷ τε γὰρ καὶ δύο μησίν, τριῶν ἡμερῶν, ὥστε καὶ μέχρι τῆς μάχης λογιζομένοις συμβῆναι, δέουσιν, ἦρξεν.

This man, now, might have been praised above all men, if he had not set his heart upon becoming emperor himself, but had selected some man belonging to the senate and had declared him emperor; only in this way could he have avoided blame for the plot against Caracallus and showed that he had done the deed in order to secure his own safety and not because of his desire for the rule. But instead of taking such a course, he brought discredit and destruction alike upon himself, so that he became the object of reproach and fell a victim to a disaster that was richly deserved. For, having grasped at the supreme power before he had even the title of senator, he lost it most speedily and disastrously, after ruling only a year and two months, lacking three days, reckoning the time to the date of the battle.

This summation blends the main themes of Dio’s Macrinus narrative: the story of an able equestrian who somehow came to power and was not capable of transforming himself into a real emperor.

*Conclusion: reading Dio’s mixed depictions*

Despite their brief reigns, Pertinax and Macrinus make an interesting pair in Dio’s *History*. They both became connected to the Severan dynasty (either for the gain of their successor or for their own personal benefit). Both men were proclaimed by the soldiers and then by the Senate. Their accessions end the ongoing fear of their predecessor (Commodus and Caracalla, respectively) among the people of Rome, and Dio records similar public reactions to each. In both instances, the *populus* cursed their predecessors and toppled their statues, and Dio characterizes the plebs in each instance as having little foresight, enjoying only their present situation and not thinking about the future. These statements in turn foreshadow each emperor’s short reign and the bad emperors that would succeed them. Both men are perceived as military reformers. In the case of Pertinax, this is merely suspicion, which Dio uses to foreshadow the emperor’s demise. In Macrinus’ case, the emperor attempted military reforms, specifically by trying to return to the system of tenure and pay of Septimius Severus. The use of Severus as a claim of legitimacy was rejected by the soldiers, and they revolted and eventually joined Elagabalus’ uprising. The military reforms of these men (perceived or otherwise) show that they are outsiders of the Severan dynasty, which Dio consistently portrays as eager to lavish money and privileges upon the troops.

There are connections, too, in the demise of each man. Dio notes that Pertinax might have saved himself from being killed by using his night guardsmen to protect him. Pertinax instead preferred to face the danger alone and try to stop the murderers simply by his appearance as emperor (74[73].9.3-4 [Xiph.]). Although this almost worked, Pertinax was killed by the one praetorian he could not win over. Macrinus, however, took the opposite approach, disguising himself by shaving his beard and head, in hopes of not being recognized. He escaped for a while, and Dio notes that if he had made it to Rome, he might have survived, since public opinion there was turning his way (79[78].39.3-4). His downfall also came at the hands of one individual, Aurelius Celsus, who recognized him (79[78].39.6). In these instances, Dio shows just how close both men were to surviving, though he also contrasts their approaches. These mostly good emperors could not survive whether they presented themselves as emperors or hid the fact. Their success lay just outside of their grasp, and they both fell because they could not tame the military.

In this grouping of “mixed” depictions, Septimius Severus succeeds where both Pertinax and Macrinus failed. Despite lacking an official connection to the Antonines, Severus was able to construct an image that tied himself and his dynasty to his predecessors (in fact, using the figure of Pertinax as well). He overcame the separate military problems that brought down Pertinax and Macrinus, respectively (and which, ironically, were acerbated by his son and allowed for the accession of Elagabalus). By putting Severus’ mixed depiction in conversation with those of Pertinax and Macrinus, we can see a connected chain of events that end up highlighting Severus’ actions of legitimation and control of the military. As we saw in the previous chapter, these were not positive outcomes in Dio’s view.

The reading of these three “mixed” depictions suggests that Dio’s portrayal of Septimius Severus was not simply a “touched up” version of an earlier draft but rather an intentionally ambiguous interpretation of the emperor. Because Dio does not fully denounce Severus, but gives him both positive and negative attributes, his history seems to be more than just a reaction against Severus’ (re)writing of Roman history. Rather, it can be seen as highlighting the possibilities and failures of the period. The mixed depictions of Pertinax and Macrinus support this view. Pertinax, Severus, and Macrinus are flawed, but not strictly evil, emperors. Dio did not wish to be solely condemnatory, but explored what positive aspects existed, and why they failed. Thus, we can see that through his narrative history of these reigns, Dio’s is still adding to his project of assessing the progress of the Roman monarchy over time.

Dio’s obituary of Marcus Aurelius focuses on the ethical qualities of that emperor, though in his contemporary history, these positive qualities seem not to matter so much. In each of his mixed depictions, Dio is keen to point out the positive ethical qualities of Pertinax, Severus, and Macrinus, yet their respective failures to achieve a golden rule are not specifically tied to their moral failings, but to structural problems within the monarchical system that each cannot overcome. Thus, for example, Pertinax might possess foresight, care for the common good, and resemble a good emperor, but he lacked the wisdom to see that the system required change over time. Likewise, Macrinus was upright and an able bureaucrat, but he could not enact his ambitious military reforms in this period of military privilege and power. Severus too resembled a good emperor, but his claim of the throne rested on a series of false assertions. Ultimately, Severus was not able to transcend his civil war self and complete the transformation from upstart to legitimate emperor in the same way that Octavius was able to become Augustus.

The ambivalence of this depiction stresses two things. First, it shows an emperor teetering on the balance between good and bad, though, as we saw in the previous chapter, this was more of a contrast between image and reality. Despite the fact that Severus could perform some duties of the emperor well, and even had a daily regimen based around such duties, he could never transcend the manner in which he came to power. Severus took the throne by force and depended on the military for legitimacy. Although he tried to overcome these initial steps by seeking legitimacy in his family and his actions, it would not be enough.

The second point is that the mixed depictions highlight the depth of baseness achieved by the Severan successors. While this point will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters, it is notable that Dio elevates only Pertinax, Severus, and Macrinus to the level of being almost acceptable. It also reveals the flaws in the Severan system, which were already nascent under Commodus, such as youth, reliance on bad advisors, and bizarre forms of self-presentation and legitimation. Dio’s achievement in his depiction of Septimius Severus and his reign is to cut through the pretext and show that, despite the regime’s claim to the contrary, the “good” aspects of Severus’ rule were mere appearances, which would inevitably give way to decline and horror. It is to these themes that the study now turns.

**Chapter 7: Caracalla and the Limits of Dynastic Succession**

Caracalla’s reign occupies an important place in Cassius Dio’s *Roman History*. His is the first planned accession since Marcus passed power to his son Commodus, an act that Severus copied upon his death. The path to Caracalla’s accession was therefore not a clear one. From the accession of Commodus to the death of Septimius Severus, we witness in Cassius Dio’s *History* a break with tradition and its attempted restoration. As Dio depicts it, Commodus swiftly departed from his father’s policies, did away with the advisors appointed by his father, and forged a new imperial identity that eschewed the norms established by the Antonines. After the death of Commodus, a return to traditional self-presentation was made first by Pertinax and then by Septimius Severus.

Severus’ efforts were various. He attached himself to Pertinax, Marcus Aurelius, and, controversially, Commodus. Dio found this last attachment particularly offensive, for reasons that are made clear earlier in his *History*. Severus’ reasons for rehabilitating Commodus are a bit unclear, though it seems that, despite the senatorial opposition voiced by Dio, Commodus was quite popular at the time, especially with the army.[[397]](#footnote-397) Severus also recognized his position as a civil war victor. In Dio’s telling, Severus preferred to see himself in the tradition of Sulla, Marius, and Augustus, whose cruelty helped them gain power, while rejecting the clemency that was offered by Pompey and Julius Caesar (76[75].8.1-3 [Xiph.]). In addition to this statement serving as a threat to the senators, it evinces a severe lack of historical understanding on Severus’ part.[[398]](#footnote-398) As a civil war victor, Severus at this point ought to have been transitioning out of the cruel behavior that, while reprehensible, was seen as almost acceptable in civil wars, as in the case of Augustus earlier in the *History*. The problem is that Severus miscategorizes Augustus. A reader of Dio would know that young Caesar was certainly guilty of the cruelty that Severus refers to here, but that the mature Augustus learned how to bring Rome under a monarchy with this cruelty slowly melting away.

Severus’ final efforts were in building a familial dynasty. Caracalla became Severus’ Caesar in 195 CE and eventually he and Geta were marked out as *Augusti* and successors of Severus. Caracalla wed Plautilla, daughter of Severus’ praetorian prefect Plautianus. We have observed already how Dio points out the flaws in this plan, from the machinations of Plautianus to the hostility between Caracalla and Geta. This succession was destined to fail, a fact known even to Severus himself, when he recognized, yet ignored, the folly of Marcus Aurelius’ passing power to Commodus.

Severus’ various attempts at legitimation and the creation of a familial dynasty are undercut by Dio’s consistent presentation of Severus as a pretender. In Dio’s eyes, Severus never truly legitimized his reign, because he did not understand that legitimation came through a monarch’s actions rather than his attachments. Severus created his own world, a re-imagining of Roman history that was in conflict with Dio’s, and it represents a break in the historical record that none of his successors would overcome.

The emperors that are Severus’ heirs and constitute his dynasty are a motley crew. Caracalla, Severus’ true son, had to find a way forward after the murder of his brother and co-heir Geta. Macrinus took power after Caracalla’s assassination, yet he was a usurper, the first equestrian emperor, and a man in search of a past. His brief reign was followed by that of Elagabalus, a young emperor who falsely portrayed himself as the son of Caracalla. Dio takes different approaches to each character, though he focused for each on demonstrating both on how their stories are intertwined and also how they diverge in the connections they make between past and present. In this and the following chapter, we will examine how Dio depicts their various reigns.

*Approaching Caracalla*

A common approach to Dio’s Caracalla is to focus on the author’s antipathy toward the emperor. Millar (1964, 150-151) cited Dio’s hatred and mockery of Caracalla as the twin drivers of his narrative, which can be found in the emperor’s lack of education, Alexander-mania, and even his ethnic make-up.[[399]](#footnote-399) Some have seen this antipathy as stemming from a personal hatred based on Dio’s political irrelevance during this reign.[[400]](#footnote-400) As such, it suggests that the depiction plays out like a personal vendetta against Caracalla and in turn is so biased as to be almost devoid of meaning. It is important to remember that Dio would have been concerned about charges of bias against himself. While it is true that Dio’s depiction of the emperor is negative, the author allows Caracalla to tell his own story. Thus, the depiction seems like less of an attack on the emperor than an interpretation based a combination of the method laid out at 53.19 (the use of public reports, combined with Dio’s informed opinion) and Dio’s own power of autopsy. This interpretation is also part of a larger analysis of how the Roman monarchy should (and should not) have functioned.

The goal of this chapter is to show how Dio draws up and uses the figure of Caracalla in his *History*. We saw previously that Dio sets up the death of Septimius Severus as an initial endpoint, thus making the reign of Caracalla the first part of the “continuation”. The connections between Septimius Severus and Caracalla, however, demonstrate that the so-called “continuation” was not a mere add-on to the history. Dio develops Septimius Severus’ succession plans in the final chapters of book 77[76], introducing Caracalla into the narrative with his marriage to Plautilla and making him a main character in the Plautianus conspiracy, British campaign, and finally Severus’ obituary. Through this “bio-structuring” Dio uses the figure of Caracalla to stretch backwards to Septimius Severus and (eventually) forward to Elagabalus, thus serving as the connective tissue between Septimius Severus and his dynasty.

As we will see, Caracalla is a key point of rupture between past and present and represents a key historical moment in the text. This rupturing began with the death of Geta, which left Caracalla isolated and in need of new modes of self-presentation. Like his father urged, he placed hopes in the military, adopting an Alexander-persona and campaigning for most of his reign. This ended, ironically, in his death at the hands of his closest military associates, far on the edge of the Roman world.

*Caracalla and Geta: a broken dynasty exposed*

The deadly conflict between Caracalla and Geta is foreshadowed during the final episodes of book 77[76]. Despite his alleged desire to become emperor himself, Dio portrays Plautianus as a check on the animosity between Caracalla and Geta; with the prefect gone, the outrageousness of their behavior and their fraternal rivalry took off (77[76].7.1-2 [Xiph.]). This section marks the fullest introduction of Caracalla and Geta, who had only been mentioned cursorily up to this point. Dio seems to forestall their entrance into the narrative to highlight their negative aspects, when they would inevitably become heirs to the throne.

The hatred between Caracalla and Geta caused Severus to undertake his British campaign. The conduct of Caracalla, however, continued to be alarming. Severus was worried about his son’s behavior and knew that he wished to kill his brother (77[76].14.1 [Xiph.]), and Dio even relates a longer story about how Caracalla tried to kill Severus himself (77[76].14.3-6 [Xiph.]). Despite these concerns, Severus did not waver in his desire to establish his dynasty (77[76].14.7 [Xiph.]):

τοιαῦτα εἰπὼν ὅμως οὐδὲν δεινὸν αὐτὸν ἔδρασε, καίπερ πολλάκις μὲν τὸν Μᾶρκον αἰτιασάμενος ὅτι τὸν Κόμμοδον οὐχ ὑπεξεῖλε, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς τῷ υἱεῖ ἀπειλήσας τοῦτο ποιήσειν. ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνα μὲν ὀργιζόμενος ἀεί ποτε ἔλεγε, τότε δὲ φιλότεκνος μᾶλλον ἢ φιλόπολις ἐγένετο· καίτοι καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἐν τούτῳ παῖδα προέδωκε, σαφῶς εἰδὼς τὰ γενησόμενα.

Though he spoke in this fashion, he nevertheless did Antoninus no harm, and that in spite of the fact that he had often blamed Marcus for not putting Commodus quietly out of the way and that he had himself often threatened to act thus toward his son. Such threats, however, were always uttered under the influence of anger, whereas on the present occasion he allowed his love for his offspring to outweigh his love for his country; and yet in doing so he betrayed his other son, for he well knew what would happen.

Dio’s section on the British campaign suggests strongly that the books that were to follow were not merely an add-on or that Dio simply kept writing after he got to the death of Septimius Severus. We can see here at the end of his account of Severus’ reign that he employs the Plautianus-narrative and then the narrative of the British campaign as a way to transition to the reign of Caracalla (and Geta). Importantly, this transition, with its reference to the passage of power between Marcus and Commodus, also looks back to the very beginning of the contemporary history, creating yet another link in what is a complex and elegant set of connections throughout these final books.

These connections continue into the following book. At the outset of book 78[77], Dio tells us that Caracalla took sole power, despite the fact that it was nominally shared with his brother. He proceeded to act just as Commodus had at the beginning of his reign, following the death of Marcus Aurelius and the return to dynastic succession. Caracalla gave up the British campaign, made peace agreements with the enemy, left behind the camps, and returned to Rome (78[77].1.1 [Xiph.]). In an instant, at least according to Dio, Severus’ plans for a well-managed succession were scrambled, just as they had been for Marcus Aurelius earlier. Caracalla then had his prefect Papinian removed, as well as his tutors Evodus and Castor.[[401]](#footnote-401) In 211 CE, Caracalla also had Plautilla put to death (as well as her brother Plautius), thus officially ending Severus’ plan for familial succession. He even had the charioteer Euprepes put to death for no reason other than his fame.

Caracalla’s final hurdle to sole rule was his brother Geta. Despite his desire to carry out the murder even while Severus was alive, Caracalla faced a problem: the soldiers were well-minded to Geta because he resembled their father (78[77].1.3 [Xiph.]: πάνυ γὰρ εὔνοιαν αὐτοῦ εἶχον, ἄλλως τε ὅτι καὶ τὸ εἶδος ὁμοιότατος τῷ πατρὶ ἦν).[[402]](#footnote-402) Dio here reveals one of the keys to Severus’ successes: he was able to look the part of the emperor. In this instance we might appeal briefly to Severus’ images, which began to look more and more like Marcus Aurelius during his reign.[[403]](#footnote-403) Even if that was not the appeal for the troops, Dio suggests that their affinity for Geta was based on a visual continuity with his father, which likely raised the expectation of continuity in other areas.

Despite their public show of mutual affection,[[404]](#footnote-404) Dio relates that Geta’s murder was obviously close at hand, and that Antoninus could no longer conceal his wickedness.[[405]](#footnote-405) The hidden nature of their reign was about to break into the open, and Geta’s assassination would follow shortly.[[406]](#footnote-406) Dio claims that Caracalla first wanted to carry out the murder at the Saturnalia, though previously hostilities between Caracalla and Geta had become so intense that both were defending themselves against the other (78[77].2.1 [Xiph.]). Geta was under heavy guard, and so Caracalla had to convince their mother, Julia Domna, to host them for a possible reconciliation. Tricked by his brother, Geta sought refuge in his mother’s bosom when he was attacked by the centurions who had been prepared for the murder in advance by Caracalla. In a scene marked by its tragic elements of the story, Julia Domna sat holding her dying son, who cried out, “Mother, mother, my bearer, my bearer, help me! I am being slaughtered!” (78[77].2.3 [Xiph.]: μῆτερ μῆτερ, τεκοῦσα τεκοῦσα, βοήθει, σφάζομαι). The end of the scene is even more pathetic. Dio opines that Geta died practically in the very womb from which he was born, and depicts Julia as so covered in blood that she did not even notice a cut on her hand (78[77].2.4 [Xiph.]). In addition to suffering in this way, Julia was forbidden to mourn for Geta (78[77].2.3-4 [Xiph.]).[[407]](#footnote-407)

Although Caracalla attempted to erase Geta’s memory, he remains an important character (in death) in Dio’s narrative of Caracalla’s reign. Dio notes that Caracalla took legal action against Geta’s memory, including the erasure of his birthday, destruction of his statues, and the melting down of his coinage (78[77].12.6 [*Exc. Val*.]). According to Dio, however, Geta could not be forgotten. He reports that Caracalla was ill, both physically from disease and mentally from the torment caused by his brother, who often appeared to him (78[77].15.3-5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). In one particularly distressing scenario, Geta and Severus appeared to Caracalla brandishing sword. In response, Caracalla called upon the shades of Severus and Commodus, though Commodus spoke to him, and Severus showed up with Geta himself. Yet his appeal to various deities did not bring him any relief. Later, one of the deities from whom Caracalla sought aid was Sarapis, to whom he even dedicated the sword with which he killed Geta (78[77].23.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Following his narrative of Caracalla’s demise, Dio also includes two portents that recall the various strands of the Geta episode, in particular with Caracalla’s behavior after the murder (79[78].7.1-3). In the first, Dio describes one of Caracalla’s dreams, in which Severus appeared, bearing a sword and saying, “I will kill you, just as you have killed your brother” (79[78].7.1: “ὡς σὺ τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἀπέκτεινας, καὶ ἐγὼ σὲ ἀποσφάξω”). The dream connects to the earlier necromancy story, wherein Severus and Geta pursued Caracalla swords (ξιφήρης).[[408]](#footnote-408) This is followed by a report that, just prior to Caracalla’s death, there was an enormous fire in the temple of Sarapis at Alexandria. Though the fire caused no damage, it destroyed the sword that Caracalla had used to kill Geta (78[77].23.1 [Xiph.]). Caracalla’s real reason for dedicating the sword was perhaps in thanksgiving for his safety, seeing Sarapis as a tutelary deity.[[409]](#footnote-409) Dio presents this more negatively, suggesting that Caracalla valued the item as an instrument of Geta’s death.

Whereas Caracalla tried to erase his brother’s memory and frame his death as an act of self-defense, Dio does not allow Geta to disappear from his narrative. Rather, Geta and his ghost stalk and haunt Caracalla throughout his reign, a recurring reminder not only of the fraternal violence and murder but also of the failure of Severus’ succession plans. Just as, to a lesser extent, Commodus proved the failure of Marcus Aurelius’ dynastic policy, so even more did the failure of joint rule between Caracalla and Geta fracture the sense of harmony that Severus had hoped to promote and shattered the vision of a return of a golden age.

*Caracalla: an emperor isolated and alone*

Once the murder of Geta was carried out, Caracalla’s main task was to win over the military, whose affection for Geta was noted above. Caracalla quickly found himself in need of a message that would somehow explain the death of his brother. As he rushed to the camp, he exclaimed that he was in danger and was being plotted against.[[410]](#footnote-410) Once in the camp, Caracalla appealed to the troops as his “fellow soldiers” (78[77].3.1 [Xiph.]: ὦ ἄνδρες συστρατιῶται) and made various promises about enriching them. These statements look backwards and forwards: backwards, and with irony, to Severus’ dictum that his sons get along and enrich the army, and forwards to Caracalla’s main method of survival, which was appeal to the military.[[411]](#footnote-411)

The following day Caracalla met the Senate.[[412]](#footnote-412) Dio notes that the emperor spoke some words and provides a brief quotation about the liberation of exiles. The release of exiles should be taken seriously as it was likely part of Caracalla’s plan to improve his self-image and was a common action upon the passing of a tyrant-like emperor (in this case, Geta). Dio, however, states that the exiles that were freed were in fact criminals, and it was not long before Caracalla had exiled an equal number as before. Caracalla’s alleged disdain for the Senate, manifest here at the outset of his sole rule, becomes the analogue to his treatment of the troops, and in the rest of his account of the reign, Dio cites many other instances of the senators’ poor treatment at the hands of the emperor.[[413]](#footnote-413)

These scenes, with Caracalla in the camp and in the Senate, represent standard accession scenes that appear in the contemporary books and elsewhere. Thus did Pertinax (74[73].1 [Xiph.]) and Didius Julianus (74[73].11-12 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]) win over the soldiers in the camp before proceeding to the Senate. In this case, however, the formal accession of Caracalla and Geta already occurred, so these scenes represent a second accession, one that attempts to erase the dynastic ambitions of Septimius Severus, or at least significantly rewrite them. It also represents both a revelation of what lay beneath the joint accession of Caracalla and Geta and a fracturing of the dynasty that Severus had planned. In many ways, as we will see, this dynasty is now Caracalla’s and he will need to shape it for his own purposes.

The sense of rupture is enhanced by the lengthy (though highly compressed in the epitome) description of the purge that Caracalla carried out.[[414]](#footnote-414) This purge serves as a sequel to the dismissal of Papinian, and the murders of Evodus and Castor. Caracalla had 20,000 of Geta’s followers killed, according to Dio (78[77].4.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), and several exiled, as highlighted in the excerpts.[[415]](#footnote-415) It appears that Dio uses these murders as a way to transition into a discussion of Caracalla’s self-presentation. In Xiphilinus’ epitome we find the notice that “veering from murder to sport, he showed the same thirst for blood in this field, too” (78[77].6.2 [Xiph.]: ἐκ δὲ τῶν φόνων ἐς τὰς παιδιὰς ἀποκλίνων οὐδὲν ἧττον καὶ ἐν ταύταις ἐφόνα), after which Dio provides some details about Caracalla’s appreciation of hunts and gladiator fights. From there comes a discussion of Caracalla’s Alexander-mania (78[77].7.1-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). This included using implements once used by Alexander, training up a Macedonian phalanx (complete with period-specific weaponry and costumes), setting up statues of Alexander in camps and in Rome, and traveling with elephants.[[416]](#footnote-416) Caracalla also attempted synthesize his position with Alexander’s, calling Alexander “Augustus of the East” (78[77].7.2 [Xiph.]: ἑῷον Αὔγουστον) and writing to the Senate to explain that Alexander had come back to life in his person. This affection for Alexander also led Antoninus to punish the Aristotelian philosophers in Alexandria (78[77].7.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]) and reward the Macedonians (78[77].8.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).

Dio states that Antoninus’ love for Alexander (φιλαλεξανδρότατος) was connected to his being a lover of spending money on the soldiers (78[77].9.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]: ἐς τοὺς στρατιώτας φιλαναλωτὴς). This predilection in turn drove the emperor to strip money from everyone else, especially the senators. The charge of overspending on the soldiers is soon repeated (78[77].10.1, 4 [Xiph.]). These charges bookend descriptions of Antoninus’ actions in the arena, killing boars and other animals and racing chariots (78[77].10.2-3 [Xiph.]). Like Commodus (and other young emperors, like Nero), we find Caracalla developing new methods of self-presentation, especially performing in the arena.[[417]](#footnote-417)

The final part of this section of book 78[77] begins with an anecdote about a certain Junius Paulus. Although he was a consular, Dio says that he was a slanderous and mocking man (78[77].11.1 [*Exc*. *Vat*.]: ἀνὴρ ψιθυρὸς καὶ σκωπτικὸς), and for this reason Severus put him on parole (lit. “free custody”, φυλακῇ ἀδέσμῳ). When Paulus continued with his mocking, Severus wished to cut off his head, and Paulus was only spared by cracking a joke that made the emperor laugh. When Caracalla become emperor, he rewarded the man with a 25,000 *drachmae* for making a joke about the emperor’s savage appearance. This anecdote is interesting for what it says about Caracalla’s behavior in comparison with and contrast to Severus’. But Dio also uses the story as a way to discuss Caracalla’s nature. Not only did Caracalla never learn anything himself, he hated those (like Dio) who did. Severus, however, had raised him well and Caracalla continued his mental and physical training as emperor. Even though he was physically fit, he forgot his education (78[77].11.2-3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). This ignorance was masked by his ability to hit upon a fine phrase or saying (78[77].11.4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]).[[418]](#footnote-418) A final excerpt provides further comment about Caracalla’s character and points up his paranoia and isolation (78[77].11.5-7 [*Exc*. *Val*.]). Caracalla made many mistakes by acting out of his judgment. Not only did he wish to know everything, he wanted to be the only one who knew it; likewise, with power. He therefore never asked anyone for advice and was jealous of those who knew anything useful. He hated everyone, especially those he pretended to especially love. He killed many, and destroyed others by sending them to insalubrious provinces.

This concludes the section on Caracalla’s character, after which Dio will go on to discuss what he was like in war (78[77].12.1 [Xiph.]).[[419]](#footnote-419) Thus far, Caracalla is presented as an emperor in isolation. Formerly a co-ruler, he is now a fratricide and sole ruler. He has no advisors, and his jealousy and hatred keep others away. Internally, Dio makes a number of connections between the first acts of the reigns of Commodus and Caracalla. As we saw in chapter 6, Severus made a much more traditional attempt at legitimation when he first entered Rome as emperor in 193 CE. Caracalla’s second accession creates a break within the Severan dynastic plan and drives him to look for new modes of legitimation, just as Commodus broke with his father and acted in much the same way. Caracalla’s decision to latch onto Alexander the Great, while perhaps somewhat conventional in terms of Roman *imitatio Alexandri*, is out of place within the context of Dio’s history and is taken so far as to be made ridiculous.[[420]](#footnote-420) This mode informed his decision to carry out extensive campaigns from 213-217 CE, and we turn now to a discussion of those events.

*Caracalla on campaign*

The remainder of book 78[77], and into the beginning of book 79[78], details Caracalla’s campaigns abroad, though they also serve a springboard for judgment of the emperor.[[421]](#footnote-421) Dio’s depiction of Caracalla runs alongside the emperor’s public depiction, which focused on presenting the emperor as an able and successful military commander.[[422]](#footnote-422) By the end of his father’s reign, Caracalla (along with Geta) bore the titles *Parthicus Maximus* and *Britannicus Maximus*.[[423]](#footnote-423) In 213 CE, he adopted the title *Germanicus Maximus*, and he may have been aiming at a re-rewarding of the title *Parthicus Maximus* with his eastern campaign of 216-217 CE.[[424]](#footnote-424) In counterpoint, Dio focuses on Caracalla’s trickery and deceit, his cowardice, and his poor leadership. Dio’s opinions about foreign war and the expansion of empire, regarding which Dio was generally averse, provide important context.[[425]](#footnote-425) As we will see in the case of Caracalla, campaigns abroad were more of a way for the emperor to show his loyalty to the soldiers, as well as to reveal his true nature.

According to Dio, Caracalla was good at playing the role of soldiers, but failed when it came to being a military leader (78[77].13.1-2 [Xiph.]):

ἐν μέντοι ταῖς ἀναγκαίαις καὶ κατεπειγούσαις στρατείαις λιτὸς ἦν καὶ ἀπέριττος, τὰ μὲν διακονικὰ ὑπηρετήματα καὶ πάνυ ἀκριβῶς ἐξ ἴσου τοῖς ἄλλοις διαπονούμενος (καὶ γὰρ συνεβάδιζε τοῖς στρατιώταις καὶ συνέτρεχε, μὴ λουτρῷ χρώμενος, μὴ τὴν ἐσθῆτα ἀλλάσσων, ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶν ἔργον συνεργαζόμενος καὶ πᾶσαν τροφὴν τὴν αὐτὴν ἐκείνοις αἱρούμενος· καὶ πολλάκις καὶ πρὸς τοὺς προέχοντας τῶν πολεμίων πέμπων προεκαλεῖτο αὐτοὺς ἐς μονομαχίαν), τὰ δὲ δὴ στρατηγικά, ὧνπερ που καὶ μάλιστα διαπεφυκέναι αὐτὸν ἐχρῆν, ἥκιστα καλῶς μεταχειριζόμενος, ὡς ἂν τῆς νίκης ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς ὑπηρετήμασιν ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἐπιστήμῃ οὔσης.

On necessary and urgent campaigns, however, he was simple and frugal, taking his part scrupulously in the menial duties on terms of equality with the rest. Thus, he would march with the soldiers and run with them, neither bathing nor changing his clothing, but helping them in every task and choosing exactly the same food as they had; and he would often send to the enemy's leaders and challenge them to single combat. The duties of a commander, however, in which he ought to have been particularly well versed, he performed in a very unsatisfactory manner, as if he thought that victory lay in the performance of the humble duties mentioned rather than in good generalship.

The distinction that Dio makes between good soldier and poor leader serves as a metaphor for the tension between Caracalla’s self-presentation and what, according to Dio, is the underlying reality. Dio transmits the image that the emperor himself projected, while including his own negative judgment, which undercuts the military image that the emperor wished to project.

Dio’s Caracalla is characterized by trickery and deceit, especially in his military dealings. In order to conquer Osrhoene, Caracalla tricked (ἠπατηκὼς) its king, Abgarus, into believing that he might visit Caracalla as a friend. Caracalla then locked him up and seized his kingless land (78[77].12.12 [Xiph.]). Dio uses similar vocabulary in the following passage. When the king of Armenia was fighting with his sons, Caracalla sent a letter in which he pretended that he would help then get along, but he ended up treating them the same way that he had treated Abgarus of Osrhoene. The Armenians, however, would not give in to the same trickery but preferred fighting against Caracalla. Afterwards, no one would trust Caracalla, who learned the punishment for carrying out such trickery against friends (78[77].12.2 [Xiph.], τό τι ἀπατηλὸν πρὸς φίλους πρᾶξαι). The family strife that Caracalla tried to capitalize on in Armenia also appears in Parthia, where Vologaesus’ sons began to fight after their father’s death. According to Dio, Caracalla claimed to have stirred up problems between Vologaesus’ sons in Parthia, which was actually caused by chance (78[77].12.2a [*Exc*. *Val*.]).

In his dealings with the Germans, Dio characterizes Caracalla as “a complete trickster, fool, and great coward” (78[77].13.3 [*Exc. Val.*]: ἀλλὰ καὶ πάνυ καὶ ἀπατεῶνα καὶ εὐήθη καὶ δειλότατον αὐτὸν).[[426]](#footnote-426) Poor leadership is also apparent when Caracalla negotiates payments in exchange for “victories”, as when the Germanic Cenni agreed to take money for Caracalla in exchange for their “defeat” and his escape (78[77].14.1 [Xiph.]).[[427]](#footnote-427) Dio even takes time to complain about the emperor’s duplicity toward the Roman people, for whereas the coinage he gave the foreigners was genuine, he debased the coinage distributed to Romans (78[77].14.4 [*Exc*. *Val*.]).

Dio combines elements of Caracalla’s Alexander-mania, duplicity, and violence in his massacre at Alexandria. Despite his love for Alexander, Dio tells us, Caracalla destroyed Alexandria, at least in part because the Alexandrians had made fun of him for killing Geta.[[428]](#footnote-428) Caracalla at first hid his anger and pretended that he wanted to see the city, before slaughtering large numbers of them, arrayed in public to greet him.[[429]](#footnote-429) Dio further reports that Caracalla was present at these events, watched them, and took part in them, when he was not giving orders from the temple of Serapis (78[77].23.2 [Xiph.]). Dio here uses Caracalla as a virtual eyewitness, since the emperor merely “wrote to the senate that it was of no interest how many of them or who had died, since all had deserved to suffer this fate” (78[77].22.3 [Xiph.]: ἀλλὰ καὶ τῇ βουλῇ γράψαι ὅτι οὐδὲν διαφέρει πόσοι σφῶν ἢ τίνες ἐτελεύτησαν· πάντες γὰρ τοῦτο παθεῖν ἄξιοι ἦσαν).

A number of details in this passage connect to other parts of Dio’s narrative. The recurrence of Geta’s murder, now several years after the fact, demonstrates how the event looms over Caracalla’s reign. In addition to the examples of duplicity above, Caracalla’s feigned interest in visiting the Alexandrians mirrors the pretense of Severus’ reign, as does the wanton violence. Finally, Dio presents Caracalla acting as if presiding over a real campaign, in contrast to the sham expeditions that he had been waging up to this point. This is reinforced by the fact that Caracalla awarded prizes to the soldiers for the campaign, in a passage from the *Exceprta Valesiana* that seems to follow closely on the Alexandria story (78[77].24.1).

Caracalla’s final campaign was against the Parthians. Dio charged Caracalla with putting forth a pretext in his earlier campaign, and he does so again in this second war, namely that Caracalla claimed that Artabanus had refused to give his daughter in marriage.[[430]](#footnote-430) The Parthian king, however, realized that Caracalla was not serious about marrying her, but that in fact he wished to gain the Parthian kingdom for himself (79[78].1.1 [Xiph.]). Dio makes his best effort to efface this campaign, despite its likely importance to Caracalla’s self-presentation. He tells us that there was practically nothing of note to record (79[78].1.3 [Xiph.]), while relating a silly anecdote about two soldiers being unable to divide a wineskin and some details about how Caracalla never faced the Parthians, who stayed away in the mountains, but overran the area around Medea, won Arbela, and ransacked some royal tombs (79[78].1.2-4 [Xiph.]).[[431]](#footnote-431) Dio’s account runs opposite Caracalla’s message to the Senate; the emperor claimed to have totally defeated the Parthians, though Dio adds that he had never even come face to face with them (79[78].1.4-5 [Xiph.])

These final two episodes share an important thematic link. In both tales Dio cites Caracalla’s missives to the Senate, after producing a story that provides much greater detail, and also runs counter to, the content of the letters as Dio reports them. Just as we observed in the reporting of Severus’ wars, Dio is able to see through the account that the emperor wanted to put forward and in its place he produces a record of events gleaned through the emperor himself: either using the emperor as a virtual eyewitness or (seeming to) merely report the events as described by the emperor himself.

*Caracalla and the Senate*

Caracalla’s relationship with the Senate can be traced back to Severus’ final advice to his sons. When Severus told Caracalla and Geta to enrich the army and scorn all others, we must include the Senate in the latter category. Thus, even before his sole rule, Caracalla was instructed to pay the Senate little mind; furthermore, he could simply have followed his father’s precedent. As we have seen above, this attitude manifests itself after Geta’s murder, when Caracalla makes sure to visit the praetorian camp prior to visiting the Senate house on the following day. There, Caracalla made a short speech, perhaps claiming to have had a sore throat.[[432]](#footnote-432) Caracalla’s recall of exiles at this meeting (discussed above) may have been an attempt at initial conciliation, though it could also be seen as a cause for fear amongst some members.[[433]](#footnote-433) The purge that followed can hardly have been comforting.[[434]](#footnote-434)

Because of his extended absence from Rome, Caracalla’s relationship with the Senate is observed through his letters to the Senate, as well as Dio’s visit with him in Nicomedia. In the first, we learn of a certain Pandion and his relationship with Caracalla (78[77].13.6 [*Exc*. *Val*.]):

ὅτι ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος Πανδίονα, ἄνδρα πρότερον μὲν ἡνιόχων ὑπηρέτην γενόμενον, ἐν δὲ τῷ πολέμῳ τῷ πρὸς Ἀλαμαννοὺς ἁρματηλατοῦντα αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἑταῖρον ὄντα καὶ συστρατιώτην, ἐπῄνεσεν ἐν τῇ γερουσίᾳ διὰ γραμμάτων ὡς καὶ ἐκ κινδύνου τινὸς ἐξαισίου ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ σωθείς, οὐδ’ ᾐσχύνθη πλείονα ἐκείνῳ χάριν ἢ τοῖς στρατιώταις, οὓς καὶ ἡμῶν ἀεὶ κρείττους ἦγεν, <ἔχων>.

Antoninus sent a letter to the senate commending Pandion, a man who had formerly been an assistant of charioteers, but in the war against the Alamanni drove the emperor's chariot and thereby became both his comrade and fellow-soldier. In this letter he asserted that he had been saved by this man from an exceptional peril; and he was not ashamed at feeling more gratitude toward him than toward the soldiers, whom in their turn he always regarded as superior to us senators.

This letter presents a fascinating hierarchy of prestige, from Caracalla’s point of view. We have seen Caracalla’s efforts to please the soldiers and be one of them. Here we have Pandion taking the place as Caracalla’s “fellow soldier” (συστρατιώτην) and moving to first rank, even above the troops. The senators, not surprisingly, find themselves at the bottom of this hierarchy. In addition to the absurdity of this scene, Dio demonstrates that Caracalla’s love of the soldiers was not steadfast and that he was willing to place others in front of them. This important detail will recur in his death scene, to be discussed below.

A second letter is equally provocative, and it tells us something about senatorial group action during this reign (78[77].20.1-2 [Xiph.]):

καὶ μέντοι τοιαῦτα ποιῶν, καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἀντιοχείᾳ τρυφῶν ὥστε καὶ τὸ γένειον πάνυ ψιλίζεσθαι, αὐτός τε ὠδύρετο ὡς <ἐν> μεγάλοις δή τισι καὶ πόνοις καὶ κινδύνοις ὤν, καὶ τῇ γερουσίᾳ ἐπετίμα, τά τε ἄλλα ῥᾳστωνεύειν σφᾶς λέγων <καὶ> μήτε συνιέναι προθύμως μήτε κατ’ ἄνδρα τὴν γνώμην διδόναι. καὶ τέλος ἔγραψεν ὅτι οἶδα μὲν ὅτι οὐκ ἀρέσκει τὰ ἐμὰ ὑμῖν· διὰ τοῦτο μέντοι καὶ ὅπλα καὶ στρατιώτας ἔχω, ἵνα μηδὲν τῶν λογοποιουμένων ἐπιστρέφωμαι.

Nevertheless, while he was thus occupied and was indulging in luxurious living at Antioch, even to the point of keeping his chin wholly bare, he not only bewailed his own lot, as if he were in the midst of some great hardships and dangers, but he also found fault with the Senate, declaring that in addition to being slothful in other respects they did not assemble with any eagerness and did not give their votes individually. And in conclusion he wrote: “I know that my behaviour does not please you; but that is the very reason that I have arms and soldiers, so that I may disregard what is said about me”.

It is unclear whether the senators’ unwillingness to assemble or give individual opinions was a form of subversion, the product of fear, or simply a reaction to an absent emperor. The Senate’s lack of engagement in the politics of this reign, however, highlight the position of an uncomfortable emperor, who has become isolated and solely reliant on his military backing.

A final passage in this regard is the oft-discussed episode of Dio’s time with Caracalla in Nicomedia (78[77].17-18). Dio describes Caracalla’s behavior in camp, never holding court and preferring to satisfy his own desires and socializing with soldiers, while Dio and his peers waited dutifully outside of the emperor’s tent.[[435]](#footnote-435) This passage provides a vivid, first person account of the emperor’s neglect of duty and dismissal of proper social mores and rank. It also adds to the sense of the island that Caracalla had built for himself, surrounded by soldiers as he scorned everyone else. It is in this situation that Caracalla would find himself at the end of his life.

*Caracalla’s end*

The irony of Caracalla’s death, an assassination carried out amongst the soldiers, is not lost on Dio: “he was murdered in the midst of his soldiers, whom he most honoured and in whom he reposed vast confidence” (79[78].4.1: ἐν μέσοις τοῖς στρατιώταις, οὓς μάλιστα ἐτίμα καὶ οἷς ἰσχυρῶς ἐθάρρει, κατεσφάγη). The depiction of the murder heightens the sense of isolation around the emperor. Caracalla found himself on a journey from Edessa to Carrhae, a location beyond the remote boundaries of the empire; during the trip, when he had dismounted his horse in order to relieve himself, he was stabbed by Julius Martialis, an *evocatus* who begrudged the emperor for not giving him a promotion. The plot had been masterminded by the praetorian prefect Macrinus, who had also enlisted the aid of two praetorian tribunes, Aurelius Nemesianus and Aurelius Apollinaris (79[78].5.1-4). Martialis, however, was recognized and killed by a javelin throw by one of Caracalla’s Scythian bodyguards (who in turn was killed by Nemesianus and Apollinaris) (79[78].5.5).[[436]](#footnote-436) The episode is capped by a final irony: the soldiers, whom Caracalla courted so fiercely, were jealous of the emperor’s preference for foreign troops and so did not help him when he was being murdered (79[78].6.4).[[437]](#footnote-437)

Following a discussion of the portents surrounding Caracalla’s demise, Dio includes a final comment (79[78].10.3):

τοιοῦτος μὲν ὁ τοῦ Ταραύτου καὶ βίος καὶ ὄλεθρος ἐγένετο, καὶ αὐτῷ ἐπαπώλοντο μὲν καὶ οἱ τῆς κατ’ αὐτοῦ ἐπιβουλῆς μετασχόντες, οἱ μὲν εὐθὺς οἱ δ’ οὐ πολλῷ ὕστερον, προσδιεφθάρησαν δὲ οἱ πάνυ ἑταῖροι αὐτοῦ καὶ οἱ Καισάρειοι· οὕτω που φονικῷ δαίμονι καὶ ἐς τοὺς ἐχθροὺς καὶ ἐς τοὺς φίλους συνεκεκλήρωτο.

Such was the life and the end of Tarautas. His death was followed by that of those who had taken part in the plot against him, some of whom perished at once and others a little later; and his intimate friends and freedmen also perished. Thus it would appear that it was his doom to bring a bloody fate upon his enemies and his friends alike.

For Dio, Caracalla was a destructor. He combined the worst parts of his father and some of the younger emperors who populate Dio’s *History*, especially Commodus. Caracalla, however, carried all of these ideas further. He was not a civil war victor, but a fratricide; his development of the Alexander-persona was not merely ridiculous, but deadly; he did not just scorn all others, but brought a “bloody fate” to friend a foe alike.

*The content of Cassius Dio’s account*

The thin veneer of Caracalla’s bravery and leadership was easily pierced, as we have seen in a number of examples so far. Beneath this outer covering lay the true nature of the emperor and his reign. We do not find Dio, however, struggling against the strength of imperial messaging. Instead, our author allows Caracalla to write much of this material for himself. For a first example, we can return to Caracalla’s campaign against the Cenni for a passage that helps reveal part of Dio’s method (78[77].14.1-2 [Xiph.]):

οὓς λέγεται μετὰ τοσούτου θυμοῦ προσπεσεῖν τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις ὥστε καὶ τὰ βέλη, οἷς ὑπὸ τῶν Ὀσροηνῶν ἐτιτρώσκοντο, τοῖς στόμασιν ἐκ τῶν σαρκῶν ἀποσπᾶν, ἵνα μὴ τὰς χεῖρας ἀπὸ τῶν σφαγῶν αὐτῶν ἀποδιατρίβωσιν. οὐ μέντοι ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸ τῆς ἥττης ὄνομα πολλῶν χρημάτων ἀποδόμενοι συνεχώρησαν αὐτῷ ἐς τὴν Γερμανίαν ἀποσωθῆναι. τούτων γυναῖκες ἁλοῦσαι ὑπὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων, ἐρωτήσαντος αὐτὰς τοῦ Ἀντωνίνου πότερον πραθῆναι ἢ φονευθῆναι βούλονται, τοῦθ’ εἵλοντο· ἔπειτ’ ἀπεμποληθεῖσαι πᾶσαι μὲν ἑαυτάς, εἰσὶ δ’ αἳ καὶ τὰ τέκνα ἀπέκτειναν.

It is said that they assailed the Romans with the utmost fierceness, even using their teeth to pull from their flesh the missiles with which the Osroëni wounded them, so that they might have their hands free for slaying their foes without interruption. Nevertheless, even they accepted a defeat in name in return for a large sum of money and allowed him to make his escape back into the province of Germany. Some of their women who were captured by the Romans, upon being asked by Antoninus whether they wished to be sold or slain, chose the latter fate; then, upon being sold, they all killed themselves and some slew their children as well.[[438]](#footnote-438)

Here Dio cites the popular report through his use of λέγεται. It is likely that this report was the one promulgated by the emperor himself to the Senate, and it is not difficult to see how he would have tried to use the fierceness of his enemies to his advantage. It is also likely that Caracalla explained the settlements and perhaps even the details about the captured women and their decision to die by suicide.

In a similar manner, Dio reacts to Caracalla’s publication of his actions, which to Dio revealed the emperor’s evil nature, though the emperor himself thought they were commendable (78[77].15.1 [*Exc. Val*.]):

ὅτι ὁ αὐτὸς τὰ μὲν ἄντικρυς ὡς καὶ καλὰ καὶ ἐπαίνου ἄξια, καὶ τὰ αἴσχιστα, ἐφανέρου, τὰ δὲ καὶ ἄκων δι’ αὐτῶν ὧν ἀντικατεσκεύαζεν ἐξέφαινεν, ὥσπερ που καὶ περὶ τῶν χρημάτων.

He likewise published outright to the world some of his basest deeds, as if they were excellent and praiseworthy, whereas others he revealed unintentionally through the very precautions which he took to conceal them, as, for example, in the case of the money.

Although the specific context of this excerpt is difficult to pin down, it emphasizes that Dio did not need to fabricate or twist material, nor did he need to rely merely on gossip or rumor to create his account of Caracalla’s reign. Elsewhere, Dio also discusses Caracalla’s communications with the Senate, which may or may not have been different from the sources discussed in the two prior examples. In one instance, Dio mentions the emperor's missive regarding the events in Alexandria, which could hardly have resembled Dio’s account (78[77].23.2a [*Exc*. *Val*.]):

ὅτι τοὺς Ἀλεξανδρεῖς ἀποσφάττων ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος, καὶ ἐν τῷ τεμένει διαιτώμενος, ἐπέστειλε τῇ γερουσίᾳ ὅτι ἥγνευσεν ἐν αὐταῖς ἐν αἷς τά τε βοσκήματα ἅμα τῷ θεῷ καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἑαυτῷ ἔθυεν.

Antoninus, while slaughtering the Alexandrians and living in the sacred precincts, sent word to the Senate that he was performing rites of purification on those very days when he was in reality sacrificing human beings to himself at the same time that he sacrificed animals to the god.

Here Dio combines an official missive to the Senate with his own reading of the events, namely the massacre at Alexandria.

A final example is Caracalla’s writing about his Parthian campaign, as Dio says that he read the book that Caracalla written about it (79[78].2.1).[[439]](#footnote-439) In this instance, Dio reports that Caracalla needlessly ravaged some land near Media, including some Parthian tombs (79[78].1.1-2 [Xiph.]) Dio also selects information about the campaign (while deciding that most of it was unworthy of record, as seen above), including the anecdote about two soldiers troubling Caracalla about how to split a wineskin between them, (79[78].1.3-4 [Xiph.]). Dio concludes the passage with Caracalla's claim to have defeated the Parthians, even though he had never even seen them (79[78].1.4-5 [Xiph.]).

οἱ μὲν οὖν βάρβαροι ἐς τὰ ὄρη καὶ ὑπὲρ τὸν Τίγριν ἀπέφυγον, ἵνα παρασκευάσωνται· ὁ δὲ δὴ Ἀντωνῖνος τοῦτο μὲν ἀπεκρύπτετο, ὡς δὲ δὴ καὶ παντελῶς αὐτῶν, οὓς μηδὲ ἑωράκει, κεκρατηκὼς ἐσεμνύνετο, καὶ μάλιστα ὅτι λέων τις ἐξαίφνης ἐξ ὄρους καταδραμὼν συνεμάχησεν αὐτῷ, ὡς αὐτὸς ἐπέστειλεν.

The barbarians took refuge in the mountains beyond the Tigris in order to complete their preparations, but Antoninus suppressed this fact and took to himself as much credit as if he had utterly vanquished these foes, whom as a matter of fact he had not even seen; and he was particularly elated because, as he himself wrote, a lion had suddenly run down from a mountain and fought on his side.

In this passage, Dio emends Caracalla’s public statements about the campaign, or blends his own knowledge with what the emperor wrote to the Senate about it.

From these notices, Dio tells us that the true nature of Caracalla and his reign revealed itself, not only through the emperor’s actions but also through his public messaging. By foregrounding the account of Caracalla’s campaigns with a description of his character, we are primed to believe that Caracalla was a dissembler and concealer of the truth. Dio begins this characterization with the murder of Geta, which sets the tone for the rest of the story. Yet Dio makes sure that his attacks are not baseless. In fact, they are grounded in the emperor’s own messaging. Surely Dio is reading between the lines, but he makes his conclusions seem so apparent that they are difficult to argue against.

*Conclusion*

Cassius Dio’s Caracalla is portrayed, in book 78[77], in a bipartite manner, stressing the murder of his brother and the folly of his militaristic self-presentation. As this analysis shows, Dio was not keen simply to react against the actions of Caracalla. Rather, he seems to have adjusted his mode of narration to demonstrate the poor character of this emperor and to usurp from him any semblance of legitimacy. Yet even if we conclude that Dio’s presentation was simple, it was so only in its organization. We find Dio focusing his experience of the emperor through some of his main political concerns, which include imperial self-presentation, military activity, and relationship with the Senate.[[440]](#footnote-440)

An interesting aspect of Dio’s presentation of Caracalla is that his “Caracalla-narrative” stretches beyond the bounds of book 78[77]. The Caracalla story begins with the death of Plautianus in book 77[76] and ends well into book 79[78].[[441]](#footnote-441) So whereas Dio uses book 78[77] to tell us about Caracalla’s persona, his work as a character in the history extends much further. As we will see in greater detail later, he is the thread that connects the reign of Severus with the reign of Elagabalus (with significant assistance from Julia Domna).

With his focus almost primarily on Caracalla’s character, Dio shines a light on what exactly was passed from father to son. Pelling (1997) has stressed Dio’s penchant for stressing “trans-regnal” themes, and also that “the barriers between reigns are tight ones” (134). While the former is true in this case, the latter is surely not, as we see Dio breaking with some of his earlier techniques. This allows him to treat the dynasty as a whole in a more interconnected manner. There were, however, some problems. Macrinus was not really a Severan, and neither was Elagabalus. As we will see in the following chapter, this is exactly Dio’s point: by interweaving the characters throughout the final books, he stresses Severus’ decision to return to a hereditary dynasty while at the same time poking holes in its outward appearance.

**Chapter 8: The Re-creation of the Severan Dynasty: From Macrinus to Severus Alexander**

With the death of Caracalla, Septimius Severus’ hereditary dynasty hit a significant snag, as not one but two of Severus’ sons and heirs had now been murdered while being emperor. Despite the fact that the next three emperors would claim descent from Severus, image did not match reality. Macrinus was an equestrian interloper who gained the throne by plotting the assassination of Caracalla and then bringing about his proclamation as emperor among the legions in the East. His brief reign came to an end when the young Elagabalus claimed to be the son of Caracalla and defeated Macrinus in a civil war. Elagabalus himself would be replaced by his cousin, joined to him more fully through adoption. With these three examples, we find three Severans with only tenuous familial connection to Septimius Severus himself. For Dio, this situation further exposed the problems of Severus’ preference for hereditary succession and demonstrated the break between the Antonines and the Severans. His final three books explore how the dynasty put itself back together and to what effect.

This situation following the death of Caracalla was both a blessing and curse for Macrinus. The need to sway just one of the important constituencies, far from the view of the Senate and people of Rome, seems to have worked in his favor, likely aided by his position as praetorian prefect. Yet he also found himself entangled in the complex military affairs of Caracalla, from which he was not able to extricate himself. The presence of the army in the East, just as it allowed for his accession, appears to have brought about his demise, when Elagabalus and his family seized upon the army’s discontent and orchestrated his overthrow.

This overthrow allowed for, and perhaps demanded, a reconstruction of the Severan dynasty. Undoubtedly, part of Elagabalus’ process of legitimization, the reconfiguring of the dynasty, required Macrinus’ erasure. This is hardly surprising, but its significance seems to be great in the case of Elagabalus, who as a thirteen year-old boy had a tenuous claim to the throne and a fabricated connection to the founders of the Severan dynasty, Septimius Severus and Caracalla. Macrinus and his son and heir Diadumenian suffered a so-called *damnatio memoriae*.[[442]](#footnote-442) In addition to the *damnatio*, or perhaps as an extension of it, it seems that Elagabalus tried to erase Macrinus’ memory in other ways, including dating his reign from the end of Caracalla’s and perhaps having Macrinus’ name removed from the *fasti*.[[443]](#footnote-443)

While these details are not all a part of Dio’s narrative, we find our author grappling with these issues as he presents the period from 217-229 CE. In these final books, Dio repeatedly raises the question of who could become emperor and how. In less than a century, the monarchy descended from a well-ordered adoptive succession (highlighted by Hadrian’s speech about his succession plans), through a period of hereditary succession, to succession by chance or convenience. In Dio’s text, we might trace the origins of this innovation to Septimius Severus’ self-adoption into the Antonine line. The emperors Macrinus and Elagabalus would take this to new levels, and Dio is eager to highlight their false claims of power.

*Macrinus, equestrian emperor*

Cassius Dio’s book 79[78], surviving as it does in large part in *codex Vaticanus Graecus* 1288, gives us the opportunity to experience an un-epitomated section of the contemporary history. The book deals with the death of Caracalla, the reign of Macrinus, and Macrinus’ overthrow by the upstart Elagabalus. According to Millar (1964, 160), Macrinus’ equestrian status snapped Dio to attention and compelled him to write a history that has “a force and accuracy unknown to the rest of the narrative”. Millar’s comment reveals a preference for certain types of information, such as descriptions of *cursus*, imperial appointments, military reforms, and reaction in Rome; that is, a preference for facts and makes this section, for Millar, more pleasing than, for example, Dio’s descriptions of the reigns of Caracalla and Elagabalus.

While Millar’s views represent one approach to this section of Dio’s history, it also worth thinking of a different one. Rather than seeing Macrinus as simply an anomaly, Dio invites us to see his reign as part of the larger sweep of history. As we have seen, Dio’s mixed depiction of Macrinus sits in conversation with figures of Pertinax and Septimius Severus. The purpose of the following discussion will be to demonstrate how Dio has embedded his Macrinus narrative within the larger story of the Severan dynasty.

For Dio, Macrinus’ equestrian status drives much of his behavior as emperor. As he states in his introduction to Macrinus proper (79[78].11.1):

ὁ δὲ δὴ Μακρῖνος τὸ μὲν γένος Μαῦρος, ἀπὸ Καισαρείας, γονέων ἀδοξοτάτων ἦν, ὥστε καὶ σφόδρα εἰκότως αὐτὸν τῷ ὄνῳ <τῷ> ἐς τὸ παλάτιον ὑπὸ τοῦ δαιμονίου ἐσαχθέντι εἰκασθῆναι· τά τε γὰρ ἄλλα καὶ τὸ οὖς τὸ ἕτερον κατὰ τὸ τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν Μαύρων ἐπιχώριον διετέτρητο.

Macrinus was a Moor by birth, from Caesarea, and the son of most obscure parents, so that he was very appropriately likened to the ass that was led up to the palace by the spirit; in particular, one of his ears had been bored in accordance with the custom followed by most of the Moors.[[444]](#footnote-444)

For Dio, this was a man without a background. Macrinus, too, was aware of this shortcoming and his plan for legitimation and new reign began on the same day. Despite having a desire to rule that went back even to Caracalla’s reign (or so our sources claim), Macrinus did not immediately seize the throne but waited several days so that he could conciliate the troops and bring them to his side. It was at that point that he made his first familial connection, by aligning his *dies imperii* to coincide with the birthday of Septimius Severus (79[78].11.6). Macrinus was insistent on this being his accession day; when the Senate voted him a horserace to celebrate his *dies imperii*, Macrinus refused, saying that the event had already been appropriately celebrated (79[78].17.1). Likewise, contrary to Dio’s sense of decorum and process, Macrinus, in his first letter to the Senate, ascribed to himself an expansive titulature (79[78].16.2):

ἐνέγραψεν δὲ ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ Καίσαρα θ’ ἑαυτὸν καὶ αὐτοκράτορα καὶ Σεουῆρον, προσθεὶς τῷ Μακρίνου ὀνόματι καὶ εὐσεβῆ καὶ εὐτυχῆ καὶ Αὔγουστον καὶ ἀνθύπατον, οὐκ ἀναμένων τι, ὡς εἰκὸς ἦν, παρ’ ἡμῶν ψήφισμα.

And in this letter he subscribed himself Caesar, emperor, and Severus, adding to the name Macrinus the titles Pius, Felix, Augustus, and proconsul, without waiting for any vote on our part, as would have been fitting.

In addition, he elevated Diadumenian to the position of Caesar and granted him the title *princeps iuventutis*. This move resembled Severus’ desire for a familial dynasty but was completed with unusual haste.

The association with Septimius Severus, however, posed an immediate challenge: how was he to deal with Caracalla’s memory? This was a thorny issue, as Dio himself makes clear when he reports the reading of Macrinus’ first missive to the Senate (79[78].17.2-4):

τοῦ μέντοι Ταραύτου οὐδεμίαν μνείαν οὔτ’ ἔντιμον τότε γε οὔτ’ ἄτιμον ἐποιήσατο, πλὴν καθ’ ὅσον αὐτοκράτορα αὐτὸν ὠνόμασεν· οὔτε γὰρ ἥρωα οὔτε πολέμιον ἀποδεῖξαι ἐτόλμησεν, ὡς μὲν ἐγὼ δοκῶ, ὅτι τὸ μὲν διά τε τὰ πραχθέντα αὐτῷ καὶ διὰ τὸ πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων μῖσος, τὸ δὲ διὰ τοὺς στρατιώτας ὤκνησε πρᾶξαι, ὡς δέ τινες ὑπώπτευσαν, ὅτι τῆς τε γερουσίας καὶ τοῦ δήμου τὴν ἀτιμίαν αὐτοῦ ἔργον γενέσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ ἑαυτοῦ, ἄλλως τε καὶ ἐν τοῖς στρατεύμασιν ὄντος, ἠθέλησε. τοῦ τε γὰρ πολέμου αἰτιώτατον αὐτὸν ἐξ ἀδικίας γεγονέναι, καὶ τὸ δημόσιον ἰσχυρῶς τῇ τῶν χρημάτων <τῶν> τοῖς βαρβάροις διδομένων αὐξήσει βεβαρηκέναι ἔφη· ἰσάριθμα γὰρ αὐτὰ τῇ τῶν στρατευομένων μισθοφορᾷ εἶναι. οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἐτόλμησέ τις δημοσίᾳ τι τοιοῦτο κατ’ αὐτοῦ θρασύνασθαι ὥστε καὶ πολέμιον αὐτὸν ψηφίσασθαι, δεδιὼς μὴ καὶ παραυτίκα ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει στρατευομένων φθαρῇ· ἀλλὰ ἄλλως μὲν καὶ ἐλοιδόρουν αὐτὸν καὶ ὕβριζον ὅσα ἐδύναντο…

Of Tarautas he made no mention at this time, either complimentary or disparaging, save only that he referred to him as emperor, not venturing to declare him either a demigod or a public enemy. He hesitated, in my opinion, to take the former course because of the deed of his predecessor and the consequent hatred felt for him by many, or to take the second on account of the soldiers; but some suspected that it was because he wished the dishonouring of Tarautas to be the act of the senate and the people rather than his own, especially as he was in the midst of the legions. He also said that Tarautas by his wrongdoing had been chiefly responsible for the war and had added an immense burden to the public treasury by increasing the amount of money given to the barbarians, since it was equal to the pay of the soldiers under arms. No one dared, however, to utter any such bold sentiment publicly against him and go so far as to vote him a public enemy, for fear of immediate destruction at the hands of the soldiers in the City. Nevertheless, in other ways they heaped abuse and insult on him to the best of their ability…

In the following section Dio relates some of the specific acts that the public took against Caracalla, and he also notes their immense pleasure in being rid of him (so much so that they seem to have initially approved of Macrinus) (79[78].18.3-4). But that behavior stands in contrast to Macrinus’ more measured approach. As Dio makes clear, Macrinus realized he could not vilify Caracalla because of his popularity among the soldiers, but when it came to the Senate and people of Rome, associating with Caracalla was more difficult. Macrinus’ answer to this conundrum was to try to take the middle road: he would forcefully present himself as a new Severus, while his son, Diadumenian, could play the role of Caracalla. Indeed, Dio later reports that the people learned that Diadumenian had also taken the name Antoninus (79[78].19.1), a move surely meant to deflect attention from his role in the assassination, as Dio himself points out.[[445]](#footnote-445)

Despite these attempts at legitimation, Macrinus would ultimately not win over Dio or convince challengers. Although Dio looks kindly on Macrinus’ initial actions, which included suspending sentences and trials for *maiestas*, getting rid of Caracalla’s taxes on inheritance and emancipation, affirming that senators should not be put to death, and forbidding large images of himself to be made in gold or silver, he is critical of Macrinus’ appointments.[[446]](#footnote-446) He gave extended consular rank to those who had never held the consulship (79[78].13.1). Macrinus “most unreasonably” (ἀλογώτατα) made Marcius Agrippa, who previously had been a beautician and was even exiled before being recalled by Caracalla, governor of Pannonia and later Dacia, while Aelius Triccianus, who had been a soldier in the *legio II Adiutrix* and a “doorkeeper” (θυρωρός) became governor of Pannonia.[[447]](#footnote-447) Dio also considered it an insult to witness the elevation of Oclatinius Adventus to the position of consul (79[78].14).[[448]](#footnote-448) This man had been Macrinus’ co-prefect and was made a member of the Senate, despite the fact that he could not hold a decent conversation. Perhaps just as insulting was the fact that Adventus, according to Dio, claimed to be the one in line to become emperor after Caracalla’s death, and actually made a speech of refusal that was apparently accepted by the soldiers so that Macrinus could become *princeps* in his place (79[78].14.2). To Dio, this was a ruse to make Macrinus look better (79[78].14.4), though it is also a notable inversion of, for example, Augustus’ supposed plan to appoint Tiberius as his successor to make his previous reign seem better.

When Macrinus decided to rescind the military pay increase put in place by Caracalla for new recruits, he used the amount instituted by Severus, clearly an attempt to use Severus’ authority as support for an unpopular change (79[78].28.3). Dio approved of this reduction and added that Macrinus was hoping that the compromise would keep the soldiers from revolting. This seems to have worked at first, but, as Dio notes, the massing of troops in the East was dangerous (79[78].29.1-2) and the situation was worsened by the rebellion of Elagabalus, who, unlike Macrinus, preferred to tie his cause to the legacy of Caracalla, going so far as to pose as his son.[[449]](#footnote-449) Macrinus found himself trapped, as Dio relates as part of another of Macrinus’ letters to the Senate (79[78].36.2-3):

καὶ ἵνα γέ τις ἄλλα ὅσα παρά τε τοῦ Σεουήρου καὶ τοῦ υἱέος αὐτοῦ πρὸς διαφθορὰν τῆς ἀκριβοῦς στρατείας εὕρηντο παραλίπῃ, οὔτε δίδοσθαί σφισι τὴν μισθοφορὰν τὴν ἐντελῆ πρὸς ταῖς ἐπιφοραῖς, ἃς ἐλάμβανον, οἷόν τε εἶναι ἔφη (ἐς γὰρ ἑπτακισχιλίας μυριάδας ἐτησίους τὴν αὔξησιν αὐτῆς τὴν ὑπὸ τοῦ Ταραύτου γενομένην τείνειν) οὔτε μὴ δίδοσθαι …

And, to omit a recital, he said, of all the many means devised by Severus and his son for the undermining of military discipline, it was impossible, on the one hand, to give the troops their full pay in addition to the donatives that they were receiving (for the increase in their pay granted by Tarautas [Caracalla] amounted to two hundred and eighty million sesterces annually), and impossible, on the other hand, not to give it….

Macrinus’ attempts at military reform were quashed by a process of corruption (according to Dio) that began with Severus and continued with his son. In his very actions of trying to curb military indiscipline, Macrinus shows that, in reality, he was nothing like Septimius Severus or Caracalla, and his attempts at different forms of legitimation in Rome and in the East were futile, so long as he was surrounding by the numerous legions that Caracalla had amassed for his Parthian campaign.

This sense of entrapment extends to Macrinus’ extended stay in the East. By September 14, 217 CE Macrinus’ absence from Rome was notable, and Dio records the people’s lament that they were without an emperor (79[78].20.2-4):

ἔς τε τὸν οὐρανὸν τὰς χεῖρας ἀνέτεινον καὶ ἐβόων “οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Ῥωμαίων Αὔγουστος· τοῦτον ἔχοντες πάντα ἔχομεν”. οὕτως που πολὺ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ αἰδοῦς ἐς τὸ κρεῖττον καὶ καταφρονήματος πρὸς τὸ χεῖρον ἐμπέφυκεν, ὥστε καὶ ἐκείνους μηδ’ ἀρχὴν ἔτι εἶναι τόν τε Μακρῖνον καὶ τὸν Διαδουμενιανὸν νομίζειν, ἀλλ’ ὡς καὶ τεθνηκότας αὐτοὺς ἤδη καταπατεῖν. ὅθεν οὐχ ἥκιστα καὶ οἱ στρατιῶται κατεφρόνησαν αὐτοῦ, ἐν οὐδενὶ λόγῳ τὰ ἐπὶ τῇ θεραπείᾳ σφῶν πραχθέντα θέμενοι, καὶ μάλισθ’ ὅτι οἱ Περγαμηνοί, στερηθέντες ὧν παρὰ τοῦ Ταραύτου πρότερον εἰλήφεσαν, πολλὰ καὶ ἄτοπα ἐς αὐτὸν ἐξύβρισαν, ἐφ’ ᾧ δὴ καὶ δημοσίᾳ ἀτιμίαν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ ὦφλον.

But the crowd raised their hands toward heaven and exclaimed: “Yonder is the Romans’ Augustus; having him, we have everything”. So truly, it would seem, is there innate in mankind a great respect for that which is superior and a great contempt for that which is inferior; and so the populace thenceforth regarded both Macrinus and Diadumenianus as absolutely non-existent, and already trampled upon them as if they were dead. This was one important reason why the soldiers despised him and paid no heed to what he did to win their favor; another still more important reason was the Pergamenians, finding themselves deprived of the privileges that they had formerly received from Tarautas, heaped many and extraordinary insults upon him — conduct for which they were publicly dishonored by him.

Throughout book 79[78] Dio stresses Macrinus’ absence from Rome, primarily through other these scenes of public discontent and reports of letters sent to the Senate. The disconnect between emperor and Rome has other consequences, besides upsetting the people. For example, when Macrinus wrote to the Senate about Elagabalus, war was declared against the public enemy and his family (79[78].38.1). This was an empty gesture, since Macrinus was left in the East to fight the war for himself (and Dio skillfully uses this letter to introduce the final battle against Elagabalus). After his defeat, Macrinus became a man on the run, in search of the capital. He shaved his head and beard in order to disguise himself, traveling as far as Eribolon. Dio is clear about his goal (79[78].39.3-4):

…γνώμην ἔχων ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἀναδραμεῖν ὡς καὶ ἐκεῖ παρά τε τῆς βουλῆς καὶ παρὰ τοῦ δήμου βοηθείας τινὸς τευξόμενος. καὶ εἴπερ ἐπεφεύγει, πάντως ἄν τι κατείργαστο· ἡ γὰρ εὔνοιά σφων παρὰ πολὺ ἐς αὐτόν, πρός τε τὸ τῶν Σύρων τόλμημα καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Ψευδαντωνίνου ἡλικίαν τό τε τοῦ Γάννυ καὶ τοῦ Κωμάζοντος αὐτεπίτακτον σκοπούντων, ἐποίει, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας ἂν ἢ ἑκόντας μετανοῆσαι ἢ καὶ ἄκοντας καταδαμασθῆναι.

…it was his intention to make his way back to Rome, in the expectation that there he could gain some assistance from the senate and from the people. And if he had escaped thither, he would certainly have accomplished something; for the disposition of the people there was becoming decidedly more favourable toward him, in view of the effrontery of the Syrians, the youth of the False Antoninus, and the arbitrary course of Gannys and Comazon, so that even the soldiers either would have voluntarily changed their minds, or, refusing to do so, would have been overpowered.

Indeed, Macrinus was arrested by a centurion and eventually put to death, and so was his son Diadumenian (79[78].39.5-40.2).

In the subsequent eulogy, Dio describes Macrinus as “running away through the provinces that he had ruled” (79[78].40.4: δραπετεύσας διὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν ὧν ἦρξε) and follows with several other ironies.[[450]](#footnote-450) He closes by turning Macrinus’ story into one about the vicissitudes of fortune, though with a specific twist for this particular case (79[78].41.2-4):

καὶ ὁ μὲν ἐπαινεθεὶς ἂν ὑπὲρ πάντας ἀνθρώπους, εἴ γε μὴ αὐτὸς αὐταρχῆσαι ἐπετεθυμήκει, ἀλλ’ ἐπιλεξάμενός τινα τῶν ἔς γε τὴν γερουσίαν τελούντων τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς προστατῆσαι, αὐτοκράτορα αὐτὸν ἀπεδεδείχει, καὶ μόνως ἂν οὕτως τὸ αἰτίαμα τὸ τῆς ἐπὶ τὸν Καράκαλλον ἐπιβουλῆς, ὡς καὶ διὰ τὴν αὑτοῦ σωτηρίαν ἀλλ’ οὐ διὰ τὴν τῆς ἡγεμονίας ἐπιθυμίαν ποιησάμενος αὐτήν, ἐκφυγών, καὶ διέβαλεν ἅμα ἑαυτὸν καὶ διέφθειρεν, ὥστε καὶ ἐν ὀνείδει καὶ ἐν παθήματι ἀξιωτάτῳ αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι. τῆς γὰρ μοναρχίας, μηδ’ ὄνομα βουλευτοῦ ἔχων, ὀριγνηθεὶς καὶ τάχιστα καὶ βαρυσυμφορώτατα αὐτὴν ἀπέβαλεν· ἐνιαυτῷ τε γὰρ καὶ δύο μησίν, τριῶν ἡμερῶν, ὥστε καὶ μέχρι τῆς μάχης λογιζομένοις συμβῆναι, δέουσιν, ἦρξεν.

This man, now, might have been praised above all men, if he had not set his heart upon becoming emperor himself, but had selected some man belonging to the senate and had declared him emperor; only in this way could he have avoided blame for the plot against Caracallus and showed that he had done the deed in order to secure his own safety and not because of his desire for the rule. But instead of taking such a course, he brought discredit and destruction alike upon himself, so that he became the object of reproach and fell a victim to a disaster that was richly deserved. For, having grasped at the supreme power before he had even the title of senator, he lost it most speedily and disastrously, after ruling only a year and two months, lacking three days, reckoning the time to the date of the battle.

With this ending we see the intertwining of themes throughout this book. Macrinus, despite his positive traits, did not have the pedigree, and thus the wherewithal, to be emperor. He was caught between legitimation among the soldiers and among the Senate and people, and his attempts to thread the needle between the two were for naught. He was limited by the figures of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. His reign represents the power of the figures of Severus and his son, but also a break in the continuity of the dynasty. As we turn to the sequel, we will see that it was not Severus, but Julia Domna and a re-imagined family line that will be able to put it back together.

*From Caracalla to Elagabalus: the role of Julia Domna*

Julia Domna played an important public role within the Severan dynasty.[[451]](#footnote-451) As Septimius Severus gained and solidified his power, and especially as he advertised his dynastic intentions, Julia became an important maternal figure, whose presence and ability to bear male heirs was an important part of the stability of the early Severan regime. In this role, Julia took on the image of her predecessors, especially Faustina, wife of Marcus Aurelius, and she was associated with traditional Roman virtues. For the later Severans, Julia also served as a link to the earlier house of Severus, as one observes in her deification, likely under Elagabalus.

In Dio’s history, Julia also serves as a link between the two halves of the Severan dynasty, though in drastically different ways. Dio depicts Julia as an influential empress who stood at or near center of power. In addition to her power, Julia is also seen as educated and, most importantly, foreign. This depiction, especially with its emphasis on power and foreignness, departs from Julia’s official portrayal, a deviation that Dio uses to expose the true nature of the Severan lineage and to undercut its legitimacy.[[452]](#footnote-452)

In the books detailing the reign of Septimius Severus, Julia does not play a large role, at least in the epitome.[[453]](#footnote-453) What role she does play has generally been interpreted, at least recently, as a positive exemplum, acting either as a counterpart to the effeminate male characters in this section of the narrative or as a moral foil to Caracalla’s corrupt persona.[[454]](#footnote-454) In the Macrinus narrative, Julia plays an important structural and thematic role. While in Antioch, she is the recipient of a letter from Flavius Maternianus, which contained information about a prophecy that foretold Caracalla’s death (79[78].4.2). We meet her again several chapters later, and there Dio picks up her story where we had last met Julia. We are told that when Julia heard of Caracalla’s death she was in Antioch and, as a result of the bad news, attempted to die by suicide (79[78].23.1). She mourned, not for her dead son, but because she had to return to private life. Macrinus, however, did not remove her military guard and sent a friendly letter to her. Julia took advantage of Macrinus’ permissiveness and began to agitate with the nearby soldiers, attempting, according to Dio, to become a Semiramis or Nitocris (79[78].23.2-3). Macrinus soon had a change of heart and demanded that she depart Antioch. When she heard the slander against her son in Rome, she decided to die, from a combination of starvation and cancer that had been reactivated by a blow she had dealt herself.[[455]](#footnote-455)

The details contained here, especially the comparison to Semiramis and Nitocris, two eastern queens, emphasize both Julia’s power and her foreignness. In the subsequent obituary, Dio states that after the death of Caracalla, Julia “fell from power while still living” (79[78].24.2: τῆς ἀρχῆς ζῶσα ἐξέπεσεν). This statement correlates with earlier indications that Julia was in some ways serving as if in the role of regent, as when her name was included in official correspondence or when she received leading men (78[77].18.2-3 [Xiph.]). Dio notes that Julia became a sort of advisor to Caracalla (though he frequently ignored his advice).[[456]](#footnote-456) She received petitions and letters on his behalf and co-signed his letters to the Senate.[[457]](#footnote-457)

Dio’s belief in Julia’s regent-like status appears to be confirmed by his inclusion of an obituary for her, as well as the placement of this obituary in his narrative. Julia’s obituary is rather extensive, and mirrors others in the contemporary history, such as in the cases of Marcus Aurelius, Pertinax, Septimius Severus, and Macrinus.[[458]](#footnote-458) The pattern of the obituaries is also the same, noting the individual's family, birth, nature, education, lifestyle, actions, and fortune.[[459]](#footnote-459) Dio rarely includes such obituaries for women in his history, and the inclusion of one here places Julia on a similar level as other emperors.[[460]](#footnote-460) The placement of the obituary is also key. Throughout his history, Dio’s primary method is to end the reign of one emperor with an obituary before continuing to the next. By giving such a lengthy obituary to Julia, and placing it at the beginning of his narration of Macrinus’ demise, Dio is signaling that Julia serves as the true link between one emperor and the next.[[461]](#footnote-461) The further point here is that it is Julia, not the false claim of descent from Caracalla, that connects the two halves of the Severan dynasty.

In his introduction of the latter half of the Severna dynasty, Dio stresses this connection to Julia as well. He provides a length prosopography of Julia’s family at 79[78].30.2-4, illustrating the new family tree that will supplant the dynasty of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. Dio focuses especially on their Syrian extraction. Dio had already alerted us of Julia Domna’s Syrian background,[[462]](#footnote-462) and thus we can assume the same of her sister Julia Maesa and nieces Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea. He is sure to note that Soaemias’ husband, Varius Marcellus, was “a man of the same race” (ἀνδρὸς ὁμοεθνοῦς) and that Mamaea’s husband, Gessius Marcianus, was also a Syrian and from the same city of Arca (Σύρου τε καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐξ Ἄρκης πόλεως ὄντος). Furthermore, the new dynasty came straight from Emesa, where Maesa had been living since Julia’s death.

It is in this context that the previous comparison to Semiramis becomes especially relevant. The most extensive accounting of Semiramis’ life is found in Diodorus Siculus (2.4-20), and it will be worth pointing out several points of contact between the biographies of this eastern queen and Julia Domna. Semiramis, born in obscurity, gained a great reputation. She married twice, producing children from both unions. She became queen after the death of her second husband, and feared that remarriage might deprive her of her rule. After an attempt on her life by her son and a eunuch, Semiramis gave the kingdom to her son and disappeared. Likewise, Dio notes Julia’s rise to prominence from an obscure family (79[78].24.1). As noted above, Julia became a sort of quasi-regent after the death of Severus, taking over several roles of an emperor for her son Caracalla. The tension between Semiramis and her son resembles the relationship between Julia and Caracalla, which Dio says was defined by the mother’s hatred for her son. Finally, the uncertain circumstances of Semiramis’ death mirror the different, and indefinite, ways of death that Dio outlines for Julia.

Dio therefore seems keen to highlight Julia’s power and foreignness, and he makes her the link between the two halves of the Severan dynasty.[[463]](#footnote-463) The import of this, and especially the comparison to Semiramis, comes especially to the fore at the accession of Elagabalus, for whom Dio uses the nickname Sardanapalus (among others).[[464]](#footnote-464) Sardanapalus, another Syrian regent, was the descendant of Semiramis, thus bringing the linkage between Julia and the latter Severans full circle.[[465]](#footnote-465) As we will see going forward, Septimius Severus is virtually erased from this dynasty, which now has a young Marcus Aurelius Antoninus at its head. But which Marcus Aurelius Antoninus: the philosopher king or Caracalla? In what follows, Dio will emphasize the complete break with the Antonine past, in favor of one defined by Caracalla.

*Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Elagabalus): making mockery?*

Cassius Dio’s presentation of, and attitude toward, the emperor officially known as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but commonly called Elagabalus, has been called by Millar (1964, 169) “anecdotal” and “obscene”. [[466]](#footnote-466) Icks (2012, 94) has questioned the accuracy of Dio’s account. Sommer (2004, 107-109) has argued that Dio’s depiction of Elagabalus is based in mental illness, a “Caesar-mania”, that could also be traced in characters such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus.[[467]](#footnote-467) Osgood (2016, 178) has stressed the immediacy of Dio’s response, as a collection of anecdotes and stories that were circulating soon after the emperor’s death and that we should read his account as a sort of satire or secret history, going beyond the suggestions of Sommer and Icks, that Dio modeled his Elagabalus on stereotypical bad emperors or tyrants.[[468]](#footnote-468)

We ought to differentiate here the difference between modern concerns about accuracy and those of the ancient historian. Dio’s account was certainly meant to shock, but it also meant to give a reflection of the reign. Dio takes pains in this book to guarantee the validity of his information. The book opens with the report from the Senate chamber, with quotations from Elagabalus’ letters. Dio includes a significant number of names and specific detail in his list of those killed by Elagabalus (80[79].1.2-2.6). Finally, at the conclusion of this first section of the book, he includes the plea that no one should distrust his reports, since he has relied on his own investigation and from the reports of trustworthy men (80[79].7.4).

To explain the nature of the ruler and his reign, Dio organizes his account in sections that deal with a number of themes. The opening chapter (80[79].1-7) details Elagabalus’ communications with the Senate, his attempts ay legitimation, and his initial purge. Dio then moves on to actions that went “beyond established custom” (80[79].8-16). Finally, the book details the plot against Elagabalus and his assassination (80[79].17-21). As we can see, there is more to this account than just anecdotes, which make the middle section of Dio’s depiction. At the same time, we find an organization akin to that of Caracalla in book 78[77], and earlier in Dio’s books on Nero. As he had done previously with young emperors who flouted imperials norms, Dio focuses on the figure and character of the emperor as a way to reveal the deficiencies of their reigns and the limitations of the monarchical system.

Elagabalus had several hurdles to overcome when he assumed the emperorship. Born Avitus, he assumed the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, which connected him directly to his “father” Caracalla (also Marcus Aurelius Antoninus). It is notable that in Dio’s text the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus is applied to Elagabalus only once (79[78].32.2):

τόν τε γὰρ Ἀουῖτον, ὃν Μᾶρκον Αὐρήλιον Ἀντωνῖνον ἤδη προσηγόρευον, περιφέροντες ὑπὲρ τοῦ τείχους, καὶ εἰκόνας τινὰς τοῦ Καρακάλλου παιδικὰς ὡς καὶ προσφερεῖς αὐτῷ ἀποδεικνύντες, παῖδά τε ὄντως αὐτὸν ἐκείνου καὶ διάδοχον τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι λέγοντες

For they carried Avitus, whom they were already styling Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, round about upon the ramparts, and exhibited some likenesses of Caracallus when a child as bearing some resemblance to the boy, at the same time declaring that the latter was truly Caracallus’ son, and the only rightful heir to the throne.

The use of this name, specifically in this context, emphasizes the disconnect between representation and reality. This boy was certainly not the son of Caracalla and not really Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, which Dio continues to stress through his repeated use of the name “Pseudantoninus” instead.

The beginning of book 80[79] details Elagabalus’ initial missives to the Senate, which Dio characterizes as typical.[[469]](#footnote-469) “Typical” in this context must mean the concern about establishing one’s legitimacy in a time of crisis, just as it had been for Caracalla, Macrinus, and even Septimius Severus before him. Elagabalus’ plan was to de-legitimize the reign of Macrinus, who had, prior to his death, begin a messaging campaign against the young emperor (80[79].1.4):

καὶ δῆτα καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἔγραψεν, αἰνιττόμενος πρὸς τὰς διαβολὰς τὰς ἐς αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τοῦ Μακρίνου θρυληθείσας, ὅτι τὴν ἡλικίαν τὴν ἐμὴν διαβαλεῖν ἐπεχείρησεν, αὐτὸς πενταετῆ υἱὸν ἀποδείξας.

He also wrote the following, alluding to the derogatory remarks spread broadcast about him by Macrinus: “He undertook to disparage my age, when he himself had appointed his five-year‑old son emperor”.

As for Elagabalus, he (like Dio) would insult Macrinus’ background and social status and present him as the murderer of his now adoptive father, Caracalla (80[79].1.2):

πρὸς γοῦν τοῖς ἄλλοις τοῦτο ἔφη ὅτι “ᾧ μηδ’ ἐσελθεῖν ἐς τὸ συνέδριον μετὰ τὸ κήρυγμα τὸ χωρὶς τῶν βουλευτῶν τοὺς λοιποὺς ἐξεῖργον ἐξῆν, οὗτος ἐτόλμησεν τὸν αὐτοκράτορα, οὗ τὴν φρουρὰν ἐπεπίστευτο, δολοφονήσας τὴν ἀρχὴν αὐτοῦ παρασπάσασθαι καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ πρότερον ἢ βουλευτὴς γενέσθαι”.

For example, he said among other things: “This man [Macrinus], to whom it was not permitted even to enter the senate-house after the proclamation debarring all others than senators, dared treacherously to murder the emperor whom he had been trusted to guard, dared to appropriate his office and to become emperor before he had been senator”.

These comments, though surely meant to inflame his senatorial audience, are also ironic. Elagabalus had little claim to the throne other than his (fictive) connection to Caracalla, though he was quick to make that connection for the Senate when he appropriated for himself the titles of emperor, Caesar, and Augustus, the position of proconsul and the tribunician power, and claimed to be the son of Caracalla and the grandson of Septimius Severus (80[79].2.2). The tenuousness of Elagabalus’ claim to the throne demonstrates the fragility of the monarchy: if care was not taken to pass power to the right man, then it could fall into the hands of someone like Elagabalus.

Dio, of course, had already provided a lengthy prosopography of Elagabalus’ family, emphasizing its descent from Julia Domna, and specifically not Severus and Caracalla, as seen above. Moreover, he initially refers to the boy emperor as Avitus (79[78].31.2, 32.2), making sure to point out that the official name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was not the boy's real name (79[78].32.2). This undercutting of Elagabalus’ legitimacy manifests itself further, as when Dio consistently applies to him the name of Pseudantoninus for the remainder of the book.[[470]](#footnote-470)

Despite his initial amnesty for those who insulted Caracalla or himself, Elagabalus’ behavior soon devolved (80[79].3.3):

ἐς δὲ δὴ τἆλλα πάντα καὶ αἰσχρουργότατα καὶ παρανομώτατα καὶ μιαιφονώτατα ἐξοκείλας, ὥστε τὰ μέν τινα αὐτῶν μηδ’ ἀρχὴν πώποτ’ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ γενόμενα ὡς καὶ πάτρια ἀκμάσαι, τὰ δὲ καὶ τολμηθέντα ἄλλοτε ἄλλοις ὡς ἑκάστοις, ἔτεσι τρισὶ καὶ [ἐν] μησὶν ἐννέα ἡμέραις τε τέτταρσιν, ἐν αἷς ἦρξεν, ὥς γ’ ἄν τις ἀπὸ τῆς μάχης ἐν ᾗ τὸ παντελὲς κράτος ἔσχεν ἀριθμήσειεν, ἀνθῆσαι.

But, on the other hand, he drifted into all the most shameful, lawless, and cruel practices, with the result that some of them, never before known in Rome, came to have the authority of tradition, while others, that had been attempted by various men at different times, flourished merely for the three years, nine months and four days during which he ruled, — reckoning from the battle in which he gained the supreme power.

This contradiction is part of a lengthy μέν...δέ construction, suggesting that in Dio’s eyes good deeds by bad emperors are short-lived and are merely cover for the expression of their true nature. Dio follows this construction with a damning result clause: these horrible acts, previously unknown in Rome, became tradition, while others lasted only the length of Elagabalus rule, which was three years, nine months, and four days (80[79].3.2-3).

Dio goes into considerable detail about the murders of Elagabalus. These were primarily carried out against partisans of Macrinus, including his praetorian prefect and the governors of several provinces.[[471]](#footnote-471) Others were killed for the threat that they posed to Elagabalus’ rule.[[472]](#footnote-472) Silius Messalla was put to death for speaking out too freely against Elagabalus, and Pomponius Bassus lost his life because Elagabalus wanted to marry his wife (80[79].5.1-4). He even killed Gannys, who had begun his uprising against Macrinus.[[473]](#footnote-473) Finally, several men who orchestrated rebellions were murdered, even including a woolworker, which was a sign to Dio that everything had been completely turned on its head.[[474]](#footnote-474)

In the remainder of the account of this reign, Dio provides information on various irregularities, some closer to reality than others.[[475]](#footnote-475) There is a discussion of the introduction of the god Elagabal into Rome, as well as other religious abnormalities.[[476]](#footnote-476) Dio discusses the seemingly related issue of the emperor’s multiple marriages.[[477]](#footnote-477) He also highlights irregular appointments, as well as the emperor’s effeminacy (again, with some overlap between the two issues).[[478]](#footnote-478) Dio makes an effort to present these matters in a serious way, in a sense allowing the actions to speak for themselves. Thus, Elagabalus’ “violations of precedent” “were of simple character and did us no great harm, save that they were innovations upon established usage” (80[79].8.1: ἔξω δὲ δὴ τῶν πατρίων ἁπλᾶ μὲν καὶ μηδὲν μέγα κακὸν ἡμῖν φέροντα, πλὴν καθ’ ὅσον παρὰ τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐκαινοτομήθη). These included taking titles before they were voted; erasing Macrinus from the consular list; holding the consulship for the second time without every holding any other office; and not wearing the appropriate dress on the Day of Vows at Nicomedia (80[79].8.2-3).

Regarding his marriages there are similar notices. He divorced his first wife, Cornelia Paula, because of “some blemish on her body” and lived with Aquilia Severa, which Dio counts as “flagrantly violating the law” (ἐκφανέστατα παρανομήσας), as she was a Vestal Virgin. Here he even quotes Elagabalus as saying, “I did it in order that godlike children might spring from me, the high priest, and from her, the high-priestess” (80[79].9.3 [Xiph.]: “ἵνα δὴ καὶ   
θεοπρεπεῖς παῖδες ἔκ τε ἐμοῦ τοῦ ἀρχιερέως ἔκ τε ταύτης τῆς ἀρχιερείας γεννῶνται, τοῦτ’ ἐποίησα.”). Other violations of precedent also including his worship of Elagabal, though Dio is careful to say that the problem was not introducing a foreign deity or practicing strange rites, but rather that he placed Elagabal before Jupiter. Likewise, circumcision was part of being a priest of Elagabal, and the emperor only wanted a full castration because of his effeminacy. The problem was not dressing as a Syrian priest, but doing it in public (80[79].11.1-2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Dio refuses to discuss some of the rites of Elagabalus (though he mentions mentioning chanting, secret sacrifices, and other strange rites) (80[79].11.1 [Xiph.]). As for Elagabalus’ most outrageous acts, Dio says that they “would be impossible to conceal” (80[79].13.2 [Xiph.]: ἃ μηδ’ ἂν ἀποκρύψαιτό τις). These including dressing as a woman, acting as a prostitute, and other indecencies (80[79].13.2-4 [Xiph.]). Other acts were more public, including charioteer racing (80[79].14.2 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]), frequent dancing (80[79].14.3 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]), and other examples of his effeminacy (80[79].14.4-15.4).

By building up the public nature of Elagabalus’ actions, Dio is able to create room for himself to relate other salacious stories, like that of Aurelius Zoticus, the “Cook”.[[479]](#footnote-479) This athlete came to the emperor’s attention because of his large penis and was quickly made *cubicularius*, even before being practically paraded into Rome (this final detail suggests that public nature of the arrival, even if the subsequent details take place behind closed doors). In this scene, the emperor appropriately plays the role of Sardanapalus, insisting that Zoticus refer to him as empress (κυρία). Their liaison, however, was ruined by a drug, administered by jealous cupbearers, that prevented Zoticus from gaining an erection.

The final portion of the book deals with the elevation of Severus Alexander and the demise of Elagabalus (80[79].19-21). Dio portrays Elagabalus as an unserious emperor in front of the Senate, making jokes about adopting Severus Alexander and becoming the father to such a grown boy. Elagabalus is also portrayed as being under the control of the god Elagabal, who told the emperor to name the boy Alexander. When the emperor tried to get rid of his rival, he was opposed by Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea, who were backed by the military. Similarly, in a second plot against the boy, Elagabalus was opposed first by the army, which was further moved against Elagabalus by Maesa and Mamaea. This led to the murder of both Elagabalus and his mother Julia Soaemias, and paved the way for Severus Alexander's succession.

These sorts of details in particular raise questions about Dio’s approach to Elagabalus and his goals for his narration of this reign. Commentators have suggested that Dio’s depiction runs along the lines of typical portraits or stereotypes of bad rulers.[[480]](#footnote-480) What is notable about Dio’s account, however, even if it engages in general terms with stereotypical behavior of tyrants, is the level of detail. Some, or most, of it is indeed outrageous, but it is presented in such a way that anyone in Dio’s position would have been able to witness it firsthand. Dio was likely not in Rome himself during much of this reign, though that is perhaps the point: his analysis of this reign does not depend on access to secret information, but rather it is based on commonly known “facts” about the young emperor. The point here is not to contest the claim that Dio is largely working from anecdotes and other rumors about Elagabalus, which were circulating perhaps during but certainly after the emperor’s death. Rather, we should stress that Dio puts emphasis on the public nature of these actions and the fact that they were there for everyone to see. We need not, therefore, suggest that Dio has written a secret history of Elagabalus. Instead, Dio suggests that his work is the public transcript of what transpired. Any official messaging has been subverted to appear like a secret history. The success of Dio’s (and others’) approach can be seen in the modern reception of Elagabalus.

*And in the end: Severus Alexander*

The end of Dio’s *History* is an abbreviated account of the reign of Severus Alexander, which is dominated by details about the end of Dio’s political career and retirement to Bithynia. As I have already discussed the implications for his retirement as an aspect of his identity (chapter 1), I will focus here more specifically on how and why he has written Alexander’s reign, and ended his history, in such a way.

First, we should consider the length of this treatment. At the outset of his description of this reign, Dio writes that he has been as accurate as possible thus far, though that for the remainder of the *History* his accuracy was compromised by his absence from Rome.[[481]](#footnote-481) With this statement, Dio cannot mean that his absence from Rome during the reign caused him to be unable to write an accurate report. If so, this would also have been true for Elagabalus, as he was serving as curator of Pergamum and Smyrna, perhaps for the majority of Elagabalus’ reign. Instead, we should understand Dio to mean that his exit from public life, his permanent removal Rome, took him away from his subject and therefore rendered him unable to continue its history. Dio’s goal at this point is to provide a summary (κεφαλαιώσας) of events up to his second consulship.[[482]](#footnote-482)

Dio’s retirement comes after the halfway point of Severus Alexander’s reign, and it is possible that he was alive up to the end of the reign in 235 CE, or even beyond. What is striking about Dio’s account of this period is its negativity and pessimism, especially when other sources project it as a return to a more proper monarchical order.[[483]](#footnote-483) Book 80[80] opens with the very brief notice that Severus Alexander, once upon the throne, handed over command of the praetorians and remaining business of the emperor to Ulpian (80[80].1.1 [Xiph.]). It appears that Ulpian was one of the best men, as Dio shortly afterwards discusses his correction of many of Elagabalus’ excesses (80[80].2.2-3 [Xiph.]). In this same passage, however, Dio notes Ulpian’s death at the hands of praetorians. This turn of events highlights two of the weakness of Roman governance, as diagnosed by Dio. First, while Ulpian became a sort of *de facto* ruler, power still passed from one family member to the next. Second, despite Ulpian’s apparentness ability, he still could not survive the power of the military. Furthermore, Dio places the blame for Ulpian’s death on a certain Epagathus, as well as on the praetorians (80[80].2.4 [Xiph.]). This Epagathus appears to be the same sort of upstart freedman that Dio saw in possession of outsized power during the reigns of his own time.[[484]](#footnote-484) In Dio’s telling, Epagathus had to be quietly put out of the way (80[80].2.4 [Xiph.]), presumably so to not arouse the ire of the military.

The instability of the reign is further stressed by several comments that survive in the epitome. In a passage that seems to have been severely abbreviated, Dio notes that many rebellions occurred during Alexander’s reign (80[80].3.1 [Xiph.]). These internal problems were compounded by threats coming from Parthia in the East, which Dio claims terrified not only those in Rome but everyone else as well (80[80].3.1 [Xiph.]). The danger was exacerbated by the indiscipline of the soldiers, who were either joining Artabanus or refusing to fight. Dio himself could personally attest to their indiscipline, giving in the impression that he himself narrowly escaped death at the hands of the praetorians (80[80].4.2 [Xiph.]).

All of this leads up to the final chapter on Dio’s favor from Alexander and ultimate retirement to Bithynia. The impression is rather grim, and Dio appears to use a sort of ring composition to enhance this feeling. Although Alexander had appointed Ulpian as *de facto* ruler, Ulpian was the victim of the military’s license, which in turn was causing Rome to be threatened externally. Despite Alexander’s best efforts, of which Dio seems to approve, it appears that the structural problems of Roman government were too great to overcome. Even if one of the “best men” were in charge, he could not counter the insolence of the military, nor could this impertinent military be charged with defending the empire. For Dio, peace and security had been completely removed from Rome’s political life.

This brief overview caps Dio’s assessment of the Severans. The few “good” men left, like Ulpian (or perhaps Dio?), were no match for the violence of the military, which the emperor himself had trouble keeping at bay. This disorder is mirrored in the threat from the East, and Dio’s answer is to flee to the safety of his ancestral home. This short final section presents Dio’s final statement on the Severan dynasty, one that did not live up to the claims of stability and harmony marketed by its founder, Septimius Severus.

*Conclusion*

For the events that follow upon the assassination of Caracalla, Cassius Dio brings a historical analysis that exists on various levels. These final books are one part exposition of the public acts of incapable emperors, one part rumination on the state of Rome’s monarchy. The range of types of rulers in these books is astounding. In Macrinus we find the first equestrian emperor, whose reign elicited from Dio a strange combination of approval and condemnation based on his social status. Elagabalus is Sardanapalus incarnate, while Severus Alexander is presented as too young to do too much. In the final parts of the history, Severus Alexander’s age and incapability stand in contrast to the power of Rome’s military (and especially the praetorian guard), which seems to have gained control of Roman politics, a power shift that began at the outset of Dio’s contemporary books.

Dio’s concerns in these final books are greater than simply his interest in Septimius Severus and his dynasty, as they speak to the surfeit of problems that Rome faced that made his age one of iron and rust. Dio surely holds Septimius Severus accountable for these problems to a certain extent, but the issue also has to do with the break in continuity that Rome suffered during Commodus’ reign and the civil wars that followed. The reigns of Macrinus, Elagabalus, and Severus Alexander speak to this loss of tradition, as none of those three looked (or knew to look) further backwards than Septimius Severus himself. This inability is evidence of the enormous role that Septimius Severus played in this period, and it also attests to the need for writing history, something that could connect Romans again with their past, and especially the history of the monarchy and how it might be redeemed.

**Conclusion: Out of the Dust and Slaughter**

Cassius Dio’s outlook is grim at the end of the *Roman History*. Despite the fact that he shared the consulship with the emperor Severus Alexander, Dio presents himself as beset by danger and forced to depart first from Rome and then from Italy altogether, back to his homeland of Bithynia. For the final words of the *History*, Dio chose a quotation from Homer, positioning himself as Hector fleeing the battlefield:

Ἕκτορα δ’ ἐκ βελέων ὕπαγε Ζεὺς ἔκ τε κονίης  
ἔκ τ’ ἀνδροκτασίης ἔκ θ’ αἵματος ἔκ τε κυδοιμοῦ.

Hector anon did Zeus lead forth out of range of the missiles,   
Out of the dust and the slaying of men and the blood and the uproar.[[485]](#footnote-485)

Dio’s contemporary history spans his political career in Rome, from the time of his entrance into the Senate during the reign of Commodus up to his second consulship in 229 CE. By ending the work at the time of his retirement from public life, he centralizes his position as a key witness and interpreter of the events through which he lived. The personal aspect of this final notice gives Dio’s retirement to Bithynia a certain immediacy, but the inclusion of an ending proper reveals that this passage was written from a point of remove, in Bithynia. Dio here is a Homeric hero who has survived the turmoil and peril of his age and is now in a position to make a contribution to Roman politics in the form of his *Roman History*.[[486]](#footnote-486) With this framing, Dio elevates the contemporary books to a place of particular importance within the overall scope of his work. The specifics of that importance, and the way that Dio rendered his contemporary history, can be explored here.

*The importance of writing contemporary history*

For Cassius Dio, writing a Roman history *ab urbe condita* to his own day was a monumental undertaking in terms of both the scope of his narrative and the difficulties of concluding the work with a period about which he had a negative opinion. As we have seen throughout this study, those issues were intimately connected. An analysis of the themes of the work as a whole and the contemporary books themselves shows that Dio’s long view of the Roman past was tied to his own experiences as a senator and historian. Yet we should be cautious about seeing Dio merely as a simplistic historian who merely filtered the Roman past through his own contemporary lens, just as we should be cautious about seeing the finals books as a mere appendage to the *History*. With his magnum opus, Dio created a narrative of the Roman past according to themes and ideas that could be found both in his source material and in his lived experience. With that combination he presents to us a unique perspective on Rome’s shifting governmental forms and how they were in a state of decay in his own time.

Like many works of Greco-Roman historiography, Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* was born out of war, in this case both civil and foreign. The conflicts that followed upon the death of Commodus brought a re-ordering to the Roman world. Encouraged by the emperor Septimius Severus himself, Dio embarked on writing all of Rome’s history, so far as fate would allow. That the *Roman History* was a product of civil war has implications beyond just the immediate context of the conflicts that took place in the 190s CE. The Roman monarchy itself was a product of civil war, and it is this form of government, as established by Augustus, that Dio favors. In his subsequent depiction of the monarchy (or, more specifically, Roman monarchs), Dio shows how civil war could (or even should) have a positive outcome. For the Romans, in Dio’s view, civil war was a way to bring change to a degenerate governmental system. This process began with the decline of the democracy into a period of dynasts, which was reformed by the last standing dynast, young Caesar. The change that young Caesar underwent and also brought to Roman government is key. Dio presents young Caesar in a realistic manner, not excusing his actions in civil war but emphasizing that circumstances warranted them. What is important here is not what young Caesar did in civil war but what he did afterwards. He rescued Rome from the evils of democracy and established a monarchy with civil tendencies.

Dio’s interest in civil war demonstrates both his debt to Thucydides and his willingness to modify his predecessor’s views to suit his interpretative needs. For Thucydides, civil strife was recurrent and a source of destruction. Dio’s view aligns with this, but he also takes it a step further: when governmental forms degenerate, civil war is sometimes needed, acting as a sort of cleansing agent to wash away the bad and provide the opportunity for generation of a new form or renewal of a previously existing one.

The focus on governmental forms places Dio in a tradition of analysis that stretches back at least to Herodotus and sets him in conversation with other analysts of state constitutions. This connection is not just superficial. When Dio discusses Augustus’ monarchy mixed with democracy (a civil monarchy, as mentioned above), he enters a debate about mixed forms of government that had application in all sorts of Greek literature but also, and perhaps more importantly, became part of the discourse about Rome, as in the mixed form of government under the Republic that was praised by Polybius. The connection to Polybius might be taken even further. Polybius argued that Rome’s expansion was underwritten by its mixed form of government, which provided balance and ultimately superiority over other states. For Dio, Rome’s expansion was the main cause of the failure of democracy and the reason that monarchy was needed. Dio’s work should therefore be seen as engaging not just with a longstanding tradition, but specifically as a part of an argument over how Rome should be best governed.

Despite his belief in the superiority of monarchy, Dio was under no illusion that Rome’s monarchy had maintained the standard set by Augustus. The norms of imperial historiography, with its focus on the figure of the emperor, had been set, and Dio does not deviate. Also largely set were the portraits of the various emperors that came before Dio’s own time. Dio’s depictions therefore differ from his source material not in specifics but rather in their emphases. Dio is primarily, or even almost solely, concerned with the public figure of the emperor and his actions in the context of current political situations, and he concerns himself less with the moral character or private life of the emperor. This preference aligns with Dio’s concerns about the best form of government for Rome, as it allows him to analyze the emperors within the monarchical system developed by Augustus. It is important to note that there is not simply one type of emperor that rulers had to strive for. We can observe this even in the contrasts between Dio’s two best emperors, Augustus and Marcus Aurelius. The former is presented by Dio as highly pragmatic, even cunning, while Marcus is a philosopher king whose virtues shine through, despite the difficulties that he faced. Augustus’ reign came out of a tumultuous period of civil war and required a crafty and calculating *princeps* to bring Rome into good order, whereas Marcus’ reign came at the end of the well settled and calm period of the Antonines.

Marcus Aurelius is a key figure for Dio not just because he plays the role of a superior emperor. Dio is careful to create for his history a Marcus Aurelius that would allow him to emphasize the break in tradition that occurred after his death. It is especially in his portrait of Marcus that we find Dio beginning to shape the historical narrative of the recent past for his own purposes. By emending contemporary views of Marcus and crafting an idealized image of the *princeps*, Dio is able to present Commodus’ reign in stark contrast. To do so, Dio also has to defend Marcus’ decision to pass power to his son, which he does by emphasizing Marcus’ decisions to educate Commodus well and surround him with able advisors. For Dio, this is the way that the monarchy was supposed to function: even a bad *princeps* could be tolerated if there was the support of Rome’s best men. When the monarch himself was less than ideal, Dio believed that the system of Roman government would ensure that the inferior ruler’s vices would be held in check. This would be done through consultation with the best men of the state, whom (we assume) Dio believed would have been drawn primarily from the senatorial class. Yet in his own day Dio stresses that such men were scarce. This was largely a result of their being of Marcus Aurelius’ generation, and many of those who survived into Commodus’ reign were killed off. Their absence, from death or other reasons, meant that tradition could not be properly passed down to Dio and his peers. Thus, their earlier admirable behavior became fossilized, rather than an exemplum from which the senators in the Severan age could learn.

Dio presents the break between Marcus and Commodus as a multi-step process. Although Dio’s Commodus turns out to be a complete maniac, it was a development that occurred over time and was akin to emperors such as Nero and Domitian, bad emperors who brought their respective dynasties to an end. In Dio’s scheme, the end of a dynasty was simply a fact of history: no Roman ruling dynasty lasted forever. Likewise, emperors such as Augustus and Vespasian were not to be blamed for the behavior of their heirs. This situation changes, however, in Dio’s day. Dio seems particularly concerned about those who do not properly understand or learn from the past. Septimius Severus is known to have drawn from past exempla, especially the figures of Augustus and Trajan, and it is interesting to ponder whether Dio, who was likely researching his work at least during part of Severus’ reign, considered the incongruity between exemplum and Severus’ behavior. While we cannot answer that definitively, there are certainly parts of Dio’s Severus narrative that seek to undermine the emperor’s connections to earlier rulers. As we have seen, Severus appears to have modeled his entrance into Rome in 193 CE on Trajan’s and that Dio uses the event as an initial exploration of the disconnect between appearance and reality. A few years later, Severus’ attempts to connect himself and his family with Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, and at the same time his embracing of the cruelty of Sulla, Marius, and Augustus, are a failure to properly understand the past. This failure is made even more noticeable because it has inner references to Dio’s own presentation of the Roman past: surely no reader of the *Roman History* would wish the emperor to emulate Sulla, nor would they believe that Augustus exercised excessive cruelty.

Severus’ choice to pass power to his sons was equally ill advised, as the Roman monarchy had evolved over the period of the second century to a higher standard, when successors would be chosen on merit rather than family ties. The reader of Dio’s *History* would understand this, as Septimius Severus ought to have. While refusing to blame Marcus for it, Commodus’ inherited rule turned out to be a disaster, a fact recognized also by Dio’s Pertinax, who refused to elevate his son to the position of Caesar. Severus, however, raised Caracalla to the position of Caesar at practically the same time that he adopted himself into Antonine line, that is, in 195 CE while the period of civil war was ongoing. While we can understand the reasons for doing so, Dio’s *History* primes us to blame Severus for these actions, especially seeing as he chose family over country, despite faulting Marcus for passing power to his own son.

After the death of Septimius Severus, the Roman monarchy transforms in ways that are both familiar and novel. Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabalus connect to earlier, young tyrants, but their methods of self-presentation are also new, and, in Dio’s telling, seem to become more and more extreme. The reign of an equestrian emperor marks a completely unique and unexpected point in Roman history. The civil wars of 193-197 CE and then of 218 CE break from the pattern that Dio focuses on, which hinges on decline and renewal. With these broad themes in mind, we can observe that Dio used the present to understand the past and vice versa; what was important about the contemporary books, and indeed why Dio decided to write the *Roman History* at all, is that they offered both connections to the Roman past as well as deviations from it.

*Cassius Dio and the history of his own time*

Over the course of the contemporary books, the way that Cassius Dio presents his analysis shifts. The space that he devotes to the figure of Septimius Severus reflects the outsized role that Severus played in this period. Because Dio considered Severus to possess the image but not the substance of a truly good emperor, his deepest points of analysis can be found in the three books that detail his reign.

The thematic role that Septimius Severus plays in the contemporary books, as well as in the history overall, can be observed in Dio’s detailed and methodical depiction of the emperor as something that he was not. As we have seen, Dio presents the reign of Septimius Severus in three main episodes, which detail his accession, his figure as a victor as civil war and war and as a legitimized emperor celebrating his established dynasty through ritual celebrations such as the *decennalia* and *ludi* *saeculares*. These three sections map onto Severus’ main actions as emperor: his initial claim of power, the establishment of that power, and his plans for a hereditary succession. Within each section, Dio shows how Severus was never really more than a pretender. For Dio, Severus played the part of emperor well but could never elevate himself to the part of a truly good monarch. This depiction suggests an emperor aware of the successful emperors of the past, but without a good enough historical understanding to put that slight learning into practice.

When we zoom out from the depiction of Severus, we see that it has connections to other “mixed” depictions in these books, namely those of Pertinax and Macrinus. The so-called “mixed” depiction of Severus has long been debated and generally been employed to show that Dio’s shifting allegiances over the course of his literary career. As I have argued above, it is better to discard these notions. A close reading of Dio’s Severus shows an emperor who possessed some good qualities but was unable to translate them into a golden monarchy. Severus was not alone in his time, as Pertinax and Macrinus also played the part of the monarch decently well yet were beset by personal and political challenges that also prevented them from being a ruler like Augustus or Marcus Aurelius. The absence of such a ruler in Dio’s time further emphasizes the break with the Antonines and suggest that the return to a golden age was now completely out of reach.

Septimius Severus’ claims of continuity with the Antonines only serve to highlight the break. No matter how much Severus and his successors presented themselves as heirs to the Antonines, their actions argue otherwise. A key point here is that Dio’s argument about the severity of this change does not hinge merely on the reign of Septimius Severus, but just as much, and perhaps even more, on the reigns of his Severan successors. This understanding of Dio’s work has been set forth by others but not fully exploited to understand how and why Dio constructed the narrative of his own day. As Kemezis (2014, 146) and others have pointed out, Dio’s contemporary history is oppositional and presented a competing narrative with that of the Severan house, especially the messaging of Septimius Severus. Yet this reading presents Dio’s work as strictly reactionary, rather than as a nuanced understanding of the grand sweep of Roman history, in the end informed by the author’s eyewitness accounts.

For the younger emperors, Dio lets them tell their own story and allows the behavior and activities of Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus to speak for themselves. These emperors were young and came to power in periods of crisis and instability. Their reigns, however, were not novel. We have already seen Commodus’ attempts at new forms of self-presentation, and connections can also be made to other young tyrants such as Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. In each of these cases, Dio allows the young emperor to play the part of his public persona throughout the narrative of his reign. Thus, Commodus was the Hercules-gladiator and Caracalla was the Alexander-*commilito*, while Elagabalus plays the role of the depraved eastern monarch.

Dio’s consistent approach to these reigns raises the question of whether the past affects the present, or *vice versa*. It is merely an observation to say that we find connections among the reigns and images of these youthful rulers. Within the larger context of Dio’s work, we need to see them as harbingers of monarchical decline. This decline, however, was also remedied throughout Roman history. Thus, Nero gave way to (eventually) Vespasian; Domitian to Nerva; and Commodus to Pertinax. Yet it is at this point that things begin to break down. Pertinax’ reign was too short and too flawed, though it reinforces the idea of a decline that is irreversible.

Yet even if Dio lets these emperors represent themselves in ways that he did not for Septimius Severus, there are still points of focus that shape Dio’s images of each. For example, both Caracalla and Elagabalus bore the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (though seldomly in Dio’s *History*) and were marked out as not only heirs to Severus but also continuators of the Antonine dynasty. Dio scrambles this connection by focusing on Caracalla’s Alexander-mania and Elagabalus’ devotion to the Syrian deity. In particular he is focused on examining the origins of the Severan dynasty, which, in his telling, did not lie with Septimius Severus as much as with Julia Domna and then continued by her female relatives, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamea.

This focus helps explain Dio’s subsequent depiction of Elagabalus, which has been seen as absurd, obscene, and full of gossip. While book 80[79] at times provides humorous details, Dio’s overall message is serious: the Roman monarchy has reached a new low, by combining a youthful and unrestrained emperor with foreign female power. The fall of Elagabalus is presented as a struggle between the praetorians and the ruling house, who finally come to terms by deposing and killing Elagabalus and elevating his cousin, Severus Alexander, to the throne. The messaging surrounding Alexander is of a return to a golden age, though this possibility is, seemingly, rejected by Dio. At the end of the history, Rome is beset by a number of challenges, both internal and external. Dio thus subtly raises the question of how this was possible: how was a monarchy, Rome’s best chance of survival, able to descend from the heights set even in the semi-recent past by Marcus Aurelius? This is, of course, the question that Dio poses in his work and by the end of the history it is clear that he is the one who can answer it. We do not get an essay on kingship, but rather a narrative that attempts to explain how this process occurred over time.

*Senatorial history in a period of decline*

In his contemporary history, Cassius Dio blurs the line between his roles as senator and historian. He claims to have been the sole individual able to tell this story. Like Marcus Aurelius, Dio was a survivor who escaped a treacherous period. It is therefore not surprising that Dio decides to bring his *History* to a close not with the end of a reign or some other event significant to the history of Rome, but with an event significant to the work itself: Dio’s retirement and his related inability to be an eyewitness to history. This notice at the end of the work forms a bookend to Dio’s comments in book 73[72], which introduce the contemporary books proper: his status as eyewitness guaranteed accuracy and positioned him as the best person to create a narrative of this period.

In constructing the history of his own age, Dio leans on tradition as a source of authority for his narrative. Like Thucydides, one of his main influences, Dio presents himself as an ever-present eyewitness. Yet even more than his predecessors, Dio relies on his own experiences as an eyewitness to create and shape his narrative, an aspect of the contemporary books that places his own experiences at the center of how he interprets events. The importance of this stance derives from Dio’s status as a Roman senator, which put him close the action. While we might debate how close Dio really was, the role that he sketches for himself in the history is as one who experienced, fearfully, the humiliating and threat-filled life of a Roman senator.

We can draw two significant conclusions from this self-presentation. The first is that, despite the amount of outrageous and seemingly unbelievable material that Dio includes in his contemporary books, the stories are made credible by the sober voice that he has created for himself over the course of the history. This sort of material is introduced with Commodus’ exploits in the arena, which Dio claims to have witnessed firsthand. Other events, such as Didius Julianus’ winning the throne by auction, or strange behavior, like Caracalla’s Alexandrian massacre or even more unexpected material such as Elagabalus’ desire for sex reassignment surgery, become believable within this paradigm. Because the narrative is presented as derived from his personal experience, Dio is able to elevate even rumor and gossip to the level of fact.

The second conclusion is that Dio’s ability to survive this period is therefore key to his creation of this narrative. This may seem an obvious point, but the sense of danger that pervades the final section of the history makes it significant for the work as a whole. This sense of danger indicates that the Roman monarchy had devolved, and the random violence either threatened or carried out by various emperors shows that to be a Roman senator in this period was, in Dio’s view, rather perilous. We are reminded here not only of Commodus’ threatening behavior toward the senators in the arena, but also the various political purges carried out in Dio’s day and even the example of the unjust condemnation of Baebius Marcellinus under Septimius Severus.

Cassius Dio’s self-presentation in these books is as a scared and silent senatorial bystander. Little, it seems, was or could be done to bring the monarchy back into balance. In this regard, the use of violence, always the prerogative of the emperor, is central. Early parts of the history remind us of Augustus’ developed clemency and the mild approach of Marcus Aurelius to the threat posed by Avidius Cassius. The emperors were responsible for controlling this impulse, though few were able to do so during Dio’s time. These considerations are tied to Dio’s overall conception of the monarchy, which relied to the greatest extent on the official actions of the emperor, how the monarch decided to behave publicly toward not just the Senate but also the people and the army.

What could a senatorial historian do that might affect the political situation? Dio looked to his predecessors, especially on the Roman side. The completion of his work in a period of retirement allowed him to write accurately about his own age. The need to produce this *History* stemmed not from his dislike of certain emperors or the failures of his own political career, but was a part of his analysis of Roman government and how it changed over time. War and civil war may have been the ostensible reason for Dio’s decision to write the history, but this initial spur was overtaken by the need to show how, down to his own day, Roman government developed. His own experiences were the key part of this story, as it was the novel portion that would set his work apart from others. From his experiences, Dio crafted a longterm view of the Roman past that was informed by but not beholden to the narratives that he used to research and create his own.

The period from Commodus to Severus Alexander was a near-constant assault on those hoping for a normative, good *princeps*. Those who knew their history knew of figures such as Augustus and Marcus Aurelius – but so did Commodus and his successors. What Dio tells is a story of those two knowledge sets colliding. One was Dio’s version, the “true” history of Rome. The other was a distorted version of the past that produced a bizarre present. Dio’s work documents this bifurcation, this use and abuse of history. Had it been up to the emperors and their hangers-on to tell the story, what we would have now is something quite different from Dio’s account. These emperors succeeded in dragging down Dio’s work, as he concedes that his *History* matches the debased age in which he lived. This claim, however, vouches for the accuracy of his work while at the same time necessitates a novel approach to contemporary historiography, one that approached memoir and placed the author near the center of the action. Rather than detachment and sobriety, Dio favored proximity and immediacy.

These considerations should help us re-evaluate the contemporary books and their relationship to the history as a whole. Once seen as a mere addition to the work up to the death of Septimius Severus, the final books tell a coherent and analytical story about the degeneration of Rome’s monarchy in the beginning of the third century CE. In fact, Dio seems to argue that the contemporary books were a crucial part of the project, as it was in this section that the Roman past could interact with the Roman present (or more accurately, the more recent past). As likely the first to create a historical narrative of this period, Dio presents himself as the sole individual able to accurately and effectively its story. Along the way he also elevates the idea of history writing: one could only properly understand his Roman present through the Roman past, especially as the failures of his contemporary world were tied to a misunderstanding of what came before. Without a recent recounting of Rome’s history, Dio’s world was cut off from being able to learn from it. Dio’s work then fuses these two ideas. He recounts Roman history through a particular lens, with a focus on governmental forms, while in the contemporary books showing how the emperors under whom he lived failed to acknowledge or understand the past properly. In a system built on tradition, this failure meant that Rome’s monarchy would devolve.

If there is any hope in Dio’s *History*, it is that its production might help restore an awareness of how a proper Roman monarch came to be and how it could be maintained over time. Thus, Dio’s contribution to political life at Rome, made possible by his career as a senator, was the writing and eventual publication of the *Roman History*. As Dio has Philiscus say to Cicero, “This form of learning [i.e., historical writing] is most enduring and best adapted to every man and to every state; and exile brings with it a kind of leisure that is more fruitful. If, then, you wish to become really immortal, like those historians, emulate them” (38.28.2: τό τε γὰρ εἶδος τοῦτο τῆς σοφίας διαρκέστατόν ἐστι καὶ παντὶ μὲν ἀνδρὶ πάσῃ δὲ πολιτείᾳ ἁρμοδιώτατον, καὶ ἡ φυγὴ φέρει τινὰ σχολὴν γονιμωτέραν. ὥστ’ εἴπερ ὄντως ἀθάνατος καθάπερ ἐκεῖνοι γενέσθαι ἐθέλεις, ζήλωσον αὐτούς). We should understand Dio’s purpose and goal along these same lines.

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1. Specifically, a *secutor*; Cass. Dio 73[72].19.2 [Xiph.]. The text of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* is from Boissevain’s edition. Translations of Dio and other texts are from the Loeb Classical Library, at times slightly emended. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cass. Dio 73[72].20.2 [Xiph.]: καὶ κύριος εἶ καὶ πρῶτος καὶ πάντων εὐτυχέστατος. νικᾷς, νικήσεις. ἀπ’ αἰῶνος, Ἀμαζόνιε, νικᾷς. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On this episode, see also Ward 2011, 58-64; Beard 2014, 7-8; Scott 2018b, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On Dio’s career, see the recent, and thorough, evaluation of Molin 2016a; see also Davenport (forthcoming) for considerations of Dio’s role as both senator and historian. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 74[73].11.3 [Xiph.]. On this episode, see Appelbaum 2007, 201-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Millar 1964, 171, who also faults Dio for not noting the importance of the growth of Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Comparisons have been made to these authors for various reasons; for Thucydides, it has primarily been for outlook, whereas the others are historians of Rome, like Dio. See chapter 000 for consideration of Dio’s work alongside those of Polybius, Livy, and Tacitus. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See further below for some specific criticisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dio’s comments on how he came to write history bring up a host of questions, such as his stance as a senatorial historian, his attitude toward Septimius Severus, and even the overall goal of his work, all of which will be addressed throughout the course of this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A notable exception is Millar’s (1964) chapter on the contemporary books, on which see further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a more comprehensive accounting of work on Dio, see Fromentin 2021 and especially Kemezis forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schwartz 1899, 1690-1691: “an Stelle der Ordnung tritt ein öder Schematismus und die Selbstbeschränkung des Meisters wird zur Verschwommenheit, die gerade das Wesentliche unterdrückt. Das Raisonnement selbst ist ein gehaltloses, seichtes Moralisieren mit Allerweltssentenzen; nie kommt ein scharfes Bild der Situation, eine grossartig concipierte Motivierung heraus… Dios geistlose, schwerfällige Nachahmung thukydideischer Sentenzen ärgert nur, weil man Nüsse knacken muss und keinen Kern findet”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a summary of these views, see Millar 1964, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Millar 1964, viii-ix (cf. Sidebottom 2007, 76) for the influence of Syme’s *Tacitus* on his *A Study of Cassius Dio*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The French collaboration of Fromentin et al. (2016) explicitly positions itself in this manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For a brief overview of this series, see Scott 2018a, vii-viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, e.g., Xiph. 87.2, with Mallan 2013a, 611-612. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On Xiphilinus’ epitome and its reproduction of Dio’s text, see Mallan 2013a and Berbessou-Broustet 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The *Excerpta Constantiniana* were a tenth century project of the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus that collected historical knowledge under different rubrics (53 in total, five of which survive in part or full. See Németh 2018, 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. From *Excerpta Valesiana*, after their seventeenth century publisher Henri de Valois. These are sometimes referred to as the *Excerpta* *Peiresciana*, after the tenth century manuscript from which they are derived; others use the abbreviation *EV* (for *Excerpts on Virtues and Vices*). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. From *Excerpta Vaticana*, after their source, *codex Vaticanus Graecus* 73. They are also known as the *Excerpta Maiana*, after their nineteenth century editor, Angelo Mai. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See especially 79[78].12, 26, 31, and 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Comparison of the surviving book 79[78] with Xiphilinus’ epitome does not clarify the situation very much, as Xiphilinus’ epitome of that book is quite full. Millar’s (1964, 195-203) comparison of book 54 with Xiphilinus and Zonaras shows Xiphilinus’ epitome in that instance to be much more spotty. Thus, it is difficult to assume a certain amount of epitomization per book. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that the sections Xiphilinus chose not to epitomize were filled with similar information. Dio certainly spends a lot of times on Macrinus’ appointments, but he also notes that these appointments were the reason that Macrinus was criticized by some (79[78].13.1, 14.1, 15.1). These notices suggest that Dio included this material because it was out of the ordinary, which in turn suggests that attention to detail could have been lacking during a reign when such appointments did not offend the senatorial elite. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For an explicit statement on this point, see 78[77].12.1 [Xiph.]; at 80[79].8.1, Dio also shows how he is organizing his book on Elagabalus around certain traits of the emperor. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On these themes, see Scott (forthcoming b). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See esp. Thuc. 1.20-22, though note Thucydides’ and Woodman’s (1988, 15-23) concerns about the unreliability of eyewitness reports. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. It is worth noting, however, that later Millar (1998) praises parts of Dio’s work on the Late Republic, as noted by Osgood and Baron (2019, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This is a common viewpoint in most Dio scholarship; representative is Gowing’s (1992, 273-297) assessment of the differing presentations of Dio’s and Appian’s triumviral narratives. More recently, see, e.g., Urso 2016; Rantala 2016, 171-172; Carlsen 2019; Jones 2019; Schulz 2019b; Imrie 2021b. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Source criticism has also been a consistent part of Dio scholarship. Millar (1964, 38), however, tried, rightfully, to move away from such investigation, perhaps one of the most positive developments to have issued from the publication of his monograph. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See the essays in Burden-Strevens and Lindholmer 2019, particularly those by Urso, Madsen, Coudry, Lange, and Lindholmer. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For example, Andrews 2021, 308: “This is not the measured account of a reliable eyewitness; within the thematic framework of the *Roman History*, it is a character assassination”. See also Davenport 2017 on Dio’s use of gossip and rumor to denigrate Caracalla. Kemezis (2014, 146-149) discusses the reactionary nature of Dio’s contemporary narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “After this there occurred most violent wars and civil strife” (73[72].23.1: πόλεμοι δὲ μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ στάσεις μέγισται συνέβησαν). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Millar (1964, 29) takes this passage to mean that Dio sent the work and received a response on the same day, though that inference is not born out by the text; cf. Bowersock 1965, 470-471. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Herodian (2.15.6) notes that many wrote about Severus’ life, including signs of his rise to power; see further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rubin 1980, 42 places the work in 196 CE. Millar’s (1964, 29) suggestion that the work was sent to Severus in 193 CE is unlikely, as noted by Bowersock (1965, 470-471). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For Severus’ brief stay in Rome, see Millar 1964, 29; Birley 2000, 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See, recently, Letta 2019, 166 (reprising a number of arguments in Letta 1979), who argues that Dio’s neutrality, mentioned in the passage cited above, was looked upon unfavorably by Severus. Letta ties Dio’s neutrality to his disapproval of Severus’ self-adoption into the Antonine line in 195 CE. This thesis assumes an early date of publication for the pamphlet, which I have argued against above. For Dio’s falling out of favor with Septimius Severus and Caracalla, see also Gabba 1955, 293-294; similar ideas can be found in Meckler 1999 and Davenport 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 76[75].7.4 [Xiph.]. In this respect, their views dovetail with that of Letta, as seen in n. 6 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. That the work included both Parthian campaigns, see Bowersock 1965, 471; Barnes 1984, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For πόλεμος ἐμφύλιος as civil war, see, e.g., 38.17.4, 42.9.3, 44.1.2, 46.12.1, 47.6.2, 49.15.3, 52.42.1, 5, 53.7.2, 53.22.5, 56.37.2, 4, 56.38.1, 56.44.1, 63[64].13.1, 64[65].10.4, 68[68].26.42, 72[71].26.4, 72[71].27.2, 76[75].9.1, 79[78].28.1. On the taxonomy of civil war in Dio, see Lange 2017 and forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See, e.g., 39.58.2, 41.14.2, 41.46.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For πόλεμος ἐμφύλιος paired with στάσις, see, e.g., 44.1.2, 44.24.2-3, 52.27.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. 75[75].1.3 [*Exc. UG*]; Gradoni 2013, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 75[75].2.3-3.2 [Xiph./*Exc. UG*]; Gradoni 2013, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Gradoni 2013, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Lange 2016, 200. We should note, however, that there is little evidence that Augustus used the phrase *res publica restituta*; see Judge 1974 (esp. n. 4, with reference to the Severan inscription cited here) and Rich 2012, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The view espoused here is in line with that of Rubin 1980, 42-53; Bering-Staschewski 1981, 51-59; Barnes 1984, 246-247. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For the chronology and a narrative overview, see Potter 2014, 109-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Potter 2014, 115-166. See also Halfmann 1986, 216-218 for an outline of Severus’ movements in this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Rantala 2017 has recently examined the importance of these games for Severus’ reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Chausson (1995, 190-92) dates the autobiography to 197 or 198 CE. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. On the need for an apology for cruelty, see *HA*, *Sev*. 18.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Lusnia 2014, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Translation is my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. On the identity of these writers, see Whittaker 1969, 246 n. 3; Hidber 2006, 82-92; Sidebottom 2007; Galimberti 2014, 34-36; Scott forthcoming a. See also the discussion in chapter 2 on writing under autocracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. As surveyed by Luce 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On this famous passage, see, e.g., Koestermann 1963, 59-61 and Goodyear 1972, 96-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Hist. conscr.* 7. For Lucian's connection between myth and encomium in these passages, see Marincola 1997, 126-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Hist. conscr.* 13. On personal benefit as a cause for bias, see Luce 1989, 19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Thus, Westall and Brenk (2011, 397): “part of the partisan literature created specifically to win the peace in the wake of victory on the battlefields of civil war”. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Regarding the *Panegyricus*, Connolly (2009, 260) writes that “… Pliny’s speech helps reinforce the real conditions of absolute rule, under which Romans living under the principate were compelled to live, precisely as it explores ways to conceive life as the Romans wished to live it, *as free* yet within the constraints of absolute rule”. On speakers and historians using there medium to influence imperial virtues, see Zimmermann 1999, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See further chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. This issue is taken up in greater detail in chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. As mentioned above, I do not think that Dio incorporated this work into his *Roman History* without revision; still, even with revision, it is possible to see some areas where themes from the earlier text shine through. How Dio used these passages in the *Roman History* will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rubin (1980, 57-60), in a somewhat tortured analysis of the passage, is at least partially right to point out that “the whole passage in question remains an alien element in its context” (59), because its seemingly positive depiction of Severus’ arrival clashes with negative comments Dio’s makes in its aftermath. This contrast only increases the possibility that the scene in the *Roman History* might largely mirror the one in the work on wars and civil wars. For a more consistent reading of Dio’s depiction of Septimius Severus, see chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Arguments on this matter stretch from at least Schwartz (1899, 1686-1687) to Lindholmer (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Such as Commodus’ performance in the arena; for an analysis of this passage within the context of Dio’s historiographic method, see chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Among this group of scholars, the years in question are not completely agreed upon, and range from 194-216 to 196/7-217/8; see Schwartz 1899, 1686-1687; Gabba 1955, 297-301; Millar 1964, 28-30; Schmidt 1997, 2618-2625; Sordi 2000; Lindholmer 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Vrind 1923, 165-167; Rich 1990, 4; Murison 1999, 11; Kemezis 2014, 282-293. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Eisman 1977, 667-673; Swan 2004, 378-380. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See especially Eisman 1977, 668-673. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Barnes (1984, 247-251) adduces these and a number of other examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Scott 2018a, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See also Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom*. 1.7.2), who likewise claimed to have spent twenty-two years on the production of his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. For Severus’ influence on the work, see Schwartz 1899, 1685. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. On Dio’s depiction of Septimius Severus in the *Roman History*, see chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. To read Dio’s literary career as one that began with the approval of the regime only to later become highly disenchanted with the dynasty mirrors common views of Tacitus’ literary output, which frequently have seen Tacitus in the *Agricola* as championing the freedom under Nerva and Trajan while later becoming disillusioned with the Principate altogether (for collected references, see Adler 2016, 3 n. 8). With Woodman above, we should expect that presentation be generally positive, though that does not mean that such works could not have a more subtle message. Adler (2016) has recently suggested that despite the seemingly positive tone of the *Agricola*’s introduction, we should be attuned to the author’s negative opinions of autocracy expressed throughout the work. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Scott 2020; see also chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Suggested, but not fully explored, by Rubin (1980) 50-53. In a similar vein, Lusnia (2014, 43) speculates that Severus himself may have actively encouraged Dio to write a history of Rome with such a goal in mind; cf. Rubin 1980, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. For the Dio’s two personae, one as senator and the other as historiographer, as well as the importance of writing in retirement, see chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Dio’s historiographic method will be examined in chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Zimmermann 1999, 30-31; Kemezis 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. And Dio himself explicitly states that he “published” (ἐδημοσίευσα) the work on divine signs and that the work on wars and civil wars was “pleasing to other and especially Severus” (τοῖς τε ἄλλοις καὶ αὐτῷ τῷ Σεουήρῳ μάλιστα ἤρεσε). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Some have suggested, for example, that the Agrippa-Maecenas debate was a sort of set piece that might have been distributed, though that is merely speculation. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. For publication after death, see Murison 1999, 11-12; Eisman 1977, 667; Kemezis 2014, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. E.g., Wirth 1888; Letta 1979; Meckler 1999; and Davenport 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Thus, Rubin 1980, 41-42: “The problem which this presentation poses is soluble if it is assumed that when he was writing his contemporary history, Dio attempted to rectify a few facts which he believed to have been distorted by Severus’ propaganda, whose allegations he accepted as the basis for his own account, and that his attempt, far from redressing the balance between fact and fiction, only added further confusion”. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See Scott 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Flach 1973, 133; see also Kemezis 2010 on contemporary historiography under the Antonines, as well as the considerations in the previous chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Rich 2018, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. *FRHist*. 1.173-174; perhaps a Latin translation of his originally Greek work [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *FRHist*. 1.221, 234. On these two historians, see Rawson 1976. Forsythe (1994, 42; cf. Rich 2018, 45, with further citations) argues that Piso’s is the first known work to use an annalistic treatment for the Early and Middle Republic. Recently, Rich (2018, 46-48) has suggested that Piso did not treat every year of the Republic, but did so selectively (this is more a refinement than refutation of Forsythe’s view). Rich (2018, 59) has also cautioned that the term “annalist” can be misleading by suggesting, among other things, that early Roman historiography was homogeneous and that we should use the term only to denote works that provided year by year accounts. Forsythe (1994, 49-50) also cautions that “*Annales* must have gained currency during the late republic after the term *annales* became synonymous with a specific historiography – a work that covered Roman affairs from earliest times down to the author’s own day”. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. I use the term antiquarianism in a general sense of the investigation of the past rather than of a genre of writing distinct from historiography; for the argument that the distinction between history and antiquarianism is a false one, see Macrae 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. E.g., Piso’s (*FRHist*. 9 F 18) claim that Arruns and Lucius Tarquinius Priscus were not the sons but grandsons of Tarquin, which Dionysius of Halicarnassus (4.7.5) says Frugi is the only one to report. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. On the process of “historical expansion”, see Wiseman 1979, 9-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. *FRHist*. 14 F 9; *FRHist*. III.231. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Cf. Cic. *de leg*. 1.8; Plin. *ep*. 5.8.12. See also Richter 1961 for the Roman inclination to read the past through the prism of the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Conte 1994, 367 posits that Livy’s work was a direct response to Sallust’s monographs. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Livy devotes 40 books (103-142) to the period from ca. 63-9 BCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. See Lange 2016, 92 for the triumph, with further citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. For example, Pliny (*Ep*. 5.8.12-13) is not eager to write about his own time because of the possibility of charges of writing with too much praise of blame. Josephus’ (*Vit*. 361-367) decision to publish while Vespasian and Titus were alive, and to seek their approval, is instructive. He claims that it verified the accuracy of his account, but surely it also promised his own safety. For the justifications for writing non-contemporary history, see Marincola 1997, 112-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Mehl 2011, 122; cf. Syme 1958, 207, regarding Tacitus: “The quality of rulers matters more than any theory or programme”. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Mehl 2011, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. See Burton 2000 on the writing and publication of books 1-5 and how Livy should not be strictly referred to as an “Augustan historian”. For different, more ideological reasons, Syme (1959, 53) refers to his as “the last of the Republican writers”. See also Chaplin’s (2010) analysis of the *periochae* and the conclusion that they tell us little about Livy’s attitude toward Augustus and much more about his interest in the Republic. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. According to the *periochae*, it is only in book 109 that Livy begins to deal with the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Syme 1959, 62,64. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Syme 1959, 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Mehl 2011, 94; for references, see *FRHist* 1.439 n. 58. The work perhaps went down to Actium, though Nisbet and Hubbard (1978, 8) notes that continuing that far might have been risky. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Geiger 2011, 242, 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Probably around 35 BCE; *FRHist*. 1.497. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Suet. *Aug*. 35.2, with Wardle 2014, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. On this complex and its possible political implications, see Allen 2019. These pursuits, however, might not be seen as apolitical, but rather that he used these pursuits as a way to maintain his dignity; see Morgan 2000, 63-65, with comparisons to Cato and Sallust; Allen 2019, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Woodman’s (1988, 127-128) suggestion that Pollio’s history was hostile to Augustus is typical of the established belief about his work, though see the arguments of Bosworth 1972 for the opposite view, as well as Morgan 2001, 65-68 for a more nuanced view. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. For a more detailed overview of his career and political attachments, see Welch 2009, 200-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Welch 209, 207-208 suggests that the work was more of a memoir, through which Messalla could position himself within the new political situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Tac. *Ann*. 4.34. Cassius Dio (57.24.2-3) also reports that Cordus praised Brutus and Cassius and spoke nothing bad about Julius Caesar and Augustus, though he did not flatter them either. He also reports, as does Suetonius (*Tib*. 61.3, though Cordus is not named specifically), that Augustus had read or heard their histories himself. We will return to this passage in Tacitus below. For the tradition surrounding Brutus and Cassius, see Rawson 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Tac. *Ann*. 1.2. This freedom would mirror Augustus’ toleration of other literary output; see, recently, Le Doze 2019. Nisbet and Hubbard (1978 9, 15) see the comments as an echo of Pollio’s own prefatory statements, though “the issues of 49 were in fact largely dead” (15). For the difficulty of writing about the civil wars, in later periods, see Suet. *Claud*. 41.2; Sen. *de vita patris* fr. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. For this event, see Sen. *Clem*. 1.11; Suet. *Aug*. 15.1; Cass. Dio 48.14.4. The episode is absent from Appian’s (*B Civ* 5.48-49) version; see Lange 2021, 348-356. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See, for example, Welch 2019 for an analysis of claims of avenging Caesar and how Augustus did not exercise “systematic censorship of the record” (77). At times it is difficult to discern voices other than Augustus’; regarding this phenomenon, see in general the recent volume of Gildenhard et al. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. On this figure, see Syme 1938; Bauman 1974, 28-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. *FRHist* 1.472. Seneca notes that Labienus had “Pompeian passions” (Pompeianos spiritus) (translation from *FRHist*.). [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. His works, along with those of Titus Labienus and Cremutius Cordus, were “legalized” under Caligula (Suet. *Cal*. 16.1). A related episode may be the chastisement that Claudius received from Antonia and Livia during a public recitation of history, which began from the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. He thus changed his starting point to the end of the civil wars, since he realized he could not write freely or truly (Suet. *Claud*. 41.2). This occurred when Claudius was an *adulescens*, thus likely in the last part of the reign of Augustus (*FRHist*. I.511). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. For Actium as the beginning of a new era, beyond historiographic purposes, see Lange 2009, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. In order to ensure his own partiality, Tacitus tries to distance himself from his subject matter. He says that he did not know Galba, Otho, or Vitellius, and that although his career advanced under Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, he, as one who swore to remain faithful to history, would refrain from writing out of love or hatred. See, however, Mehl’s (2011, 124-125) comment that the historian’s claim of impartiality toward emperor cannot be trusted, since such statements were not made freely, as historians had the “disadvantage of existential dependency” on emperors for their own career advancement. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Sailor 2008, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Syme 1964, 418 considers to the end of Claudius’ reign in 54 CE improbable and an end in 31 CE, with the fall of Sejanus, possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. *FRHist* 78 T 2 = Sen. *ep*. 30.1-3, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. See Cornell 2020, 13-16 for writers who went further back in time and did not treat recent events. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. *FRHist*. 1.554-557. Arguments about publication depend on how far one believes Cluvius took his work [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Cornell (2020, 17-23) argues against the traditional view, followed here, that historiography diminished under the Principate. On the contrary, he argues that a significant gap in our knowledge of these writings leads us to this conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. *Ann*. 4.32: “I am well aware that many things that I have recounted, and will recount, may seem trivial and too unimportant for the historical record” (*pleraque eorum quae rettuli quaeque referam parva forsitan et levia memoratu videri non nescius sum*). These comments serve as a preface to Tacitus’ account of the demise of Cremutius Cordus. This passage has been much commented upon; see Moles 1998 for a general overview. Cordus will be discussed further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. “Freedom to explore” is Woodman’s (2004) translation of Tacitus’ *libero egressu*, which is a bit vague but is clearly meant to contrast the tight boundaries by which Tacitus sees himself confined. Moles (1998, 97) takes it as “free digressiveness”. On the phrase, see also Martin and Woodman 1989, 171-172; Damon 2010, 356-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. As Marincola (1997, 251) has noted, the difficulties that Tacitus faces will make his work more admirable and himself more immortal. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Klingner 1958, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Klingner 1958, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. See Sailor 2008, 262-263. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. See also Kemezis 2010 on the effect of the Antonines on the writing of contemporary history. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Kemezis 2010, 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Zimmermann 1999b, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Dio also seems to have devoted significant space to explaining the origins of various magistracies in the early books; see generally Urso 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Kemezis 2014, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. For a review of the concept in Greek thought, see Hahm 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. See, e.g., Lintott 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Pelling 2018; see also Balsdon 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Poletti 2018, 143-163, with ample citation. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. *Ant*. *Rom*. 4.71-75, with Poletti 2006, 206-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. See Sinclair 1951, 249-251 for the transmissions of these ideas through Dicaearchus to Cicero. Asmis 2005 situates Cicero’s work in competition with his Greek predecessors. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. See, however, Lintott 1997b, 80-85 on how Cicero’s approach differs from that of Polybius. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Syme 1958, 549 sees the passage as an anti-Ciceronian comment, though see the analysis of Taifacos 1981, who sees Tacitus participating in the larger tradition of though on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. See Freyburger-Galland 2003, 119 for the idea that Dio’s work was in direct response to the degeneration of historiography in the preceding generations. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. As cited by Rich (2016, 272 n. 5), with a few other examples; see also Bertrand, Coudry, and Fromentin 2016, especially for the period after 49 BCE (314-316). [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. See Coudry 2016 for this phenomenon in the Late Republican books. Coltelloni-Trannoy (2016a) has expanded on the work of Pelling and shown in even greater detail how Dio uses various issues, such as health, upbringing and education, and character, to develop his characters and provide a useful political analysis (361). [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. See, e.g., Millar 1964, 145 and Scott 2017, 158 for the “Plautianus phase” of Dio’s narrative of Septimius Severus’ reign, as well as chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Sallust (*Hist*. 1.9-10) also writes of Roman concord between the second and third Punic Wars; see also *Cat*. 10.1 for the destruction of Carthage as a turning point. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. On competition in Dio, e.g., Rees 2011, Kemezis 2014, 104-126, and Lindholmer 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. It is possible that Dio, like Appian, traced the origin back to the Gracchi, but there is not much of his surviving text to go on. Fr. 83.6 states that there was “disorder and confusion” (τε ταραχὴ καὶ [ἡ] ἀκρισία) because of the Gracchan reforms. Certainly he saw this process in motion by the time of Sulla. See fr. 102.7 for the Romans in civil conflict with one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. For a comparison of the view of Tacitus and Dio, see Sailor 2008, 138-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Whether Dio read and responded to Tacitus has been a matter of debate; see Rich 1989, 105-107, with citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. The animating question of Tacitus’ historical works, as Martin (1994 [1981], 9) has pointed out, is how one should act publicly under a government that looks like a Republic but is really an autocracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Moles (1998, 170) has noted that Tacitus aimed “to provide his readers with morally useful vicarious responses to the monarchy/tyranny of the Caesars”. In addition, “one should be seeking the maximum *libertas* and the maximum political distinction possible under the monarchy”. For Tacitus’ focus along these same lines, in contrast with Dio’s focus on the actions of the emperors, see Devillers 2016b, 333-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. The recent observation of Havener (2020, 145 n. 26) is instructive: “For Tacitus, monarchy is just a continuation of bloodshed under changed circumstances. The promise of peace may be upheld by the rulers in order to legitimize their position, but it is a bloody peace (*Ann.* 1.10.4: *pacem* […] *verum cruentam*) and thus not much better than the preceding conditions. For Dio, in contrast, monarchy can be the solution when it is exercised in a way that is beneficial for all. Appearance, in other words, is secondary when the practice conforms to the ideals of monarchical rule (as presented by Dio, of course)”. This difference can be seen specifically in the attitude that the two authors show toward Augustus. While Tacitus, at beginning of the *Annals*, does not have Augustus incorporating Senate in a positive way, Dio depicts the Senate as finding its best form under Augustus; Madsen 2019, 118-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. 56.34.4; see below and chapter 3 on Dio’s Roman monarchy. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. See especially Burden-Strevens 2015, 290-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. For the trials, see 75[74].9. For Severus’ duplicity and murder of senators, see 75[74].2.1-2 [Xiph]. Alföldy 1968 offers a study of Severus and the Senate and concludes that the relationship was rosier than as portrayed by Dio (and others, ancient and modern). [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Caracalla: 78[77].4.1 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.], with Sillar 2001; Elagabalus: 80[79].4.3-7.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. On this point, see also the analysis of Molin 2016b, 473-474. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Newbold 1975, 591 collects further passages of public protest in Dio’s *History*. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. At this point Macrinus was still in Antioch, and indeed would never set foot in Rome as emperor. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Seeing Dio as a displaced person has been proposed by Letta (1979, 163), who has suggested that we understand Dio’s forced retirement in 229 CE as a sort of exile. My contention here, however, is the opposite – that Dio positioned himself as a displaced Greek in Rome, and that this stance is developed as much in the content of his history as it is in the language and literary form that he used for his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Dio uses the term *patris* to refer to Nicaea as well, 76[75].15.3 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Ameling (1984, 138) has noted that Dio’s connection to his homeland was so strong that he preferred to stay there rather than have any further contact with the Romans. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Letta (1979, 157-163) suggests several passages in this speech that are relevant to Dio's own experiences, as especially sees the following quoted passage as related to Dio’s period of retirement (or exile). Millar (1961, 16-17) asserts that Dio must have had his Campanian estate in mind when writing this passage, though his homeland of Bithynia seems more likely. See Berrigan (1966, 60) for the general idea of writing history in retirement would have appealed to Dio. Also relevant is Cicero’s own prescription that he could write history only when “free from care and business” (*Leg*. 1.8, *cura uacare et negotio*). [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Dillery (2007, 69), writing about Greek historians, has noted that “[b]anishment, voluntary exile, detention abroad, travel - whatever the reason, prolonged residence away from one’s native polis would in fact have made an historiographic difference”. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the decision by Roman historians to write history either late in life or in retirement, away from the political life of Rome; examples include Cato the Elder (*FRHist*. I.193, 196); P. Rutilius Rufus (*FRHist*. I.278-279); Sulla (*FRHist*. I.283-284); Sallust (*Cat*. 4.1, *Jug*. 4.3); and Marius Maximus (Birley 1997, 2683). I am less concerned here with a common topic in Dio studies, namely Dio’s Greek and Roman identity (or identities). Scholars have argued that Dio was more of a Romanized Greek (e.g., Palm 1959, 81–82; Gabba 1959, 378; Aalders 1986, 283), but other have suggested more of a bifurcated identity between Greek culture and Roman politics (e.g., Swain 1996, 404–405; Burden-Strevens 2015). A more open interpretation has been made by Asirvatham (forthcoming), who investigates the various strands of identity, as available in the *Roman History*, without trying to place Dio on such a spectrum. See also Pitcher 2012, 267 for the richness of the allusion to Xenophon’s estate at Scillus. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Whitmarsh 2001, 135-140. Perhaps most significantly, Whitmarsh situates this sort of self-fashioning in the “long tradition of exiled writers” which included poets, philosophers, and historiographers. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Gowing (1998, 381-382) has observed that in this speech, Philiscus adopts a distinctly imperial view of life of a senator, in which leaving public life and writing history have the purpose of aiding the state. He also connects life in the Senate to one of exile in a passage regarding Julius Solon, who bought offices from Cleander, losing all his property, and being banished exile to the Senate (ἐς τὸ συνέδριον τῆς οὐσίας στερηθεὶς ἐξωρίσθη, 73[72].12.3 [Xiph.]). These observations dovetail with the discussion above: that the Senate was almost a place of punishment in Dio’s day, away from the safety and security of his homeland. They also emphasize Dio’s position straddling the two worlds of Roman senator and historian of Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. On the mixed constitution in Dio, see Carsana 1990, 83-94; with specific reference to the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula, see Coltelloni-Trannoy 2016b. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Carsana 1990, 94 cautiously suggests that Plutarch’s *Life of Lycurgus* was the means by which Platonic ideas of a mixed constitution were transmitted to Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Reinhold (1988, 183-184) clearly places Cassius Dio among the sophistic *peri basilieas* tradition of the second and third centuries CE, and more recently Jones (2016, 312-313) sees the entire history as running parallel to discourses on kingship. Likewise, Mallan, in a study of parrhesia in Dio, notes that *parrhesia* and *eleutheria* “was long a staple of political discourses on kingship”. See also de Blois 1998/1999 and Dorandi 1985 for the influence of Isocrates and Philodemus, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Millar 1964, 104 cautiously suggests that Dio read the debate before Caracalla at Nicomedia, but this is based on his (faulty) dating for the history and belief that Dio would have been writing book 52 around 215 CE). [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Meyer 1891 saw the Agrippa-Maecenas debate as a pamphlet criticizing Severus Alexander, a view that has indeed been resisted by many. Hammond 1932 rebuts Meyer specifically; see also Gabba 1955, 313-325; Millar 1964, 102-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. E.g., Millar 1964, 75-76; Roddaz 1983, 76; Rich 1989, 92-97; Kemezis 2014, 95-96. See most recently Madsen 2020, 25-56 for monarchy as Dio’s preferred system. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. For a periodization of Dio’s work, based on this passage and others, into “Republic, *dynasteiai*, Principate and contemporary”, see Kemezis 2014, 98. Whether the period of dynasts was a segment of the history or a mode of narration has been challenged by Lindholmer 2018. See also Bellissime 2016; Carsana 2016; Urso 2020; and Markov 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. For Dio on Augustus, see, e.g., Tränkle 1969; Manuwald 1979; Rich 1989; Reinhold and Swan 1990; Madsen (Histos, forthcoming). See also Roddaz 1983 and Gowing 1992 on young Caesar the triumvir in Dio. For the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. For Julius Caesar, and books 41-44, as the establishment of monarchy in Dio, see Cordier 2003, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Madsen 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. E.g., Appian, *B Civ*. 1.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. For Dio’s view of Roman imperialism, see recently Bertrand 2016 (esp. 694-695). [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. For the role of competition in the Late Republic in Dio's history, see, e.g., Rees 2011; Kemezis 2014, 104-126; Lindholmer 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. This approach is rightly rejected by Rich (1989, 99-100), who insists understanding the speech of Maecenas within the context of the history itself, rather than a stand-alone document. The bibliography on the Agrippa-Maecenas debate is immense. Much earlier scholarship sees the Agrippa-Maecenas debate as a sort of political pamphlet. In rejecting Meyer’s (1891) view that the pamphlet targeted Severus Alexander, Millar (1964, 103-104) argued that it was written under, and performed for, Caracalla. This view persists even in recent critiques of Dio’s work, e.g., Rantala (2016, 176), who calls Dio's history “a blueprint of how the empire should work from the senatorial point of view” and a “‘senatorial handbook’ of Roman politics”. See also Manuwald 1979, 21, who calls it a political “Denkschrift” (“exposé”). A more recent view has been to see the speeches, and especially Maecenas’ speech, as intended to create greater political consensus and thus a more stable political situation under the Severans (Kemezis 2014, 134; followed by Madsen 2016, 138). In my view, this is a modified version of the political pamphlet idea just discussed, as it suggests that Dio's history was very much “of the moment” and aimed at having an immediate impact on the politics of his own day. Molin 2016b usually puts the contents of the speeches in conversation with the contemporary history. A review of literature can be found in Adler 2012, 477 n. 3 as well as in Burden-Strevens (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See also the comments by Burden-Strevens 2020, 43-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. In his paired speech, Calenus claims that Antony put an end to the tyranny of Caesar (46.19.8). [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. For the theme of tyranny in Cicero’s *Philippics*, from which Dio seems to have drawn his material for this speech, see, e.g., Stevenson 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. On Dio’s depiction of young Caesar/Augustus, see Manuwald 1979, 271-278 (mixed); Rich 1989 (positive); Gowing 1992 (on the triumviral period: generally favorable), and Madsen forthcoming (idealizing). [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. See especially his comments at 56.44.1-2, as well as, recently, Lange 2021 on Dio’s view of human nature and civil war in the Perusia episode. Madsen (forthcoming) also treats Dio’s view of young Caesar the triumvir in this manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. On this speech, see Rich 1990, 136-139; Bellissime and Hurlet 2018, xii-xxvii [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. This translation deviates from Cary’s Loeb (“But as he wished even so to be thought democratic”). For δημοτικός as “*civilis*”, see Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. This group of advisors also appears to be mentioned at 53.2.7, just prior to Augustus’ first speech to the Senate. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. 53.11.5: οὕτως ὡς ἀληθῶς καταθέσθαι τὴν μοναρχίαν ἐπεθύμησε. This is the translation of Rich (1990, 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Rich (1989, 97; cf. 103) counts clemency as the “virtue by which Dio set no greater store in a ruler”. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Allen 2020, 53. See also Giua 1981 for the relevance of this issue to Dio’s contemporary period. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. In addition to the recent article by Allen 2020, see Adler 2011 on this speech. Markov (2019, 289-293) also treats the transformation of the ruthless Octavian to the clement Augustus. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. 52.37.1; Rich 1989, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Kuhn (2021), with references to earlier studies, has recently analyzed Tiberius’ funeral oration in terms of Dio’s source material, rhetorical aspects, and its reflection on Dio’s Tiberius. See also Rees (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Cf. Giua 1983, 449-452, though untenable is her conclusion that Dio’s final evaluation of Augustus contrasts with his depictions of Augustus’ actions as emperor and demonstrates the author’s inability to properly control his source material. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. This first settlement took place over the course of 28-27 BCE but is presented by Dio as having all occurred in 27 BCE; see Rich 2012, 50-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Millar 1964, 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Madsen 2020, 88 notes, rightly, that despite Dio’s preference for monarchy, he presents few emperors who carried it out particularly well. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. This argument was pursued by Scott 2020a and is presented here in a slightly revised formulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Photius (*Bibliotheca* 71) noted Dio’s use of Thucydides as a model. See Litsch 1893, Kyhnitzsch 1894, Kordos 2010. Reinhold 1985, 30-31; 1988, 215-217 examines the role of human nature in Dio. See also Aalders 1986, 291-294; Hose 2009, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Pelling 2010 surveys Thucydides’ influence on Greeks writing about Roman civil war. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. See, for example, Schulz 2014, 425-430 for a comparison of Dio with Tacitus and Suetonius on the figures of Nero and Domitian and the conclusion that the differences are a matter of emphasis, not material. Schulz concludes that Dio’s differences are a product of his third-century, senatorial perspective. In a similar vein, Platon (2017), in a study of Tiberius, argues that a study of Dio’s emperors bears most fruit when they are put in conversation with each other throughout the *Roman History*. Comparison with accounts from the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods is difficult because so few survive; see recently Devillers 2016a for an evaluation. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. See Bono 2018 for this analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. “In short, he thought it bad policy for the sovereign to reveal his thoughts; this was often the cause, he said, of great failures, whereas by the opposite course far more and greater successes were attained” (57.1.2: τό τε σύμπαν οὐκ ἠξίου τὸν αὐταρχοῦντα κατάδηλον ὧν φρονεῖ εἶναι· ἔκ τε γὰρ τούτου πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα πταίεσθαι καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου πολλῷ πλείω καὶ μείζω κατορθοῦσθαι ἔλεγε). On this passage, see Mallan 2020, 91-93; 2021, 148-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Cf. Mallan 2021, 143-144. See also Cowan (forthcoming) for the development of the themes of fear and hatred that Dio develops for Tiberius and his successors; cf. Schulz (2019b, 323) for fear and hate as regular aspects of Dio’s depiction of “bad” emperors. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Edmondson (1992, 23-24) understands Dio’s emphasis here on praetorian power and senatorial weakness in the Julio-Claudian period as anachronistic and a product of his third century perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. See also Dio’s critique of Tiberius’ succession plans in this chapter, to which Mallan (2021, 150 n. 81) astutely compares Dio’s later comments on Septimius Severus’ plan to pass power to Caracalla and Geta. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Edmondson 1992, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. With a bit of humor, Dio notes that, in death, Gaius discovered that he was not a god (59.30.1 [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. For more on the Gaius as tyrant motif, see Scott 2012, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Edmondson (1992, 52) notes that Dio is more sympathetic to Claudius than either Tacitus or Suetonius. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. For a deconstruction of Dio’s portrait of Nero as artist, see Schulz 2014, 408-416. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. For this aspect of Dio’s portrayal of Nero, see Malik 2021, especially regarding Dio’s deviation with other sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. On this theme, see further Gowing 1997, 2583-2584. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Furthermore, in his speech to the Gauls, Vindex urges them to help Rome and liberate the world (63[63].22.6 [Xiph.]), and Vindex later dies by suicide because he was not able to overthrow Nero and liberate Rome (63[63].24.4a [Zon.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Notice Septimius Severus’ opposite action at 77[76].13.3 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. This is insinuated, obliquely, by the detail that Domitian put the sophist Maternus to death for giving speeches against tyrants (67[67].12.5. [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. See also Schulz 2014, 420-422. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Relevant here is Didius Julianus’ request that he be granted statues of bronze, as he had noticed that the gold and silver ones of previous emperors had been destroyed. Dio tartly remarks, “In this he was mistaken, for it is virtue that preserves the memory of rulers; and in fact the bronze statue that was granted him was destroyed after his own overthrow” (74[73].14.2a [*Exc. Vat*.]: οὐκ ὀρθῶς τοῦτο εἰπών· ἀρετὴ γὰρ ἡ διαφυλάττουσα τὴν μνήμην τῶν κρατούντων· ὁ γὰρ δοθεὶς αὐτῷ χαλκοῦς ἀναιρεθέντος αὐτοῦ καθῃρέθη). For a consideration of this passage within the greater expanse of senatorial and Roman historiographic thought, see Audano 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. This episode is also recorded, in part, by John of Antioch and Cedrenus; see Boissevain 3.189. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. See, however, 69[69].2.5 [Xiph.], where Dio says that although Trajan ruled humanely, he was censured for putting people to death at the beginning and end of his reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. See Davenport 2021, 181-185 on Dio’s depiction of Trajan’s military endeavors. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. For Dio’s construction of this reign, see Millar 1964, 60-72; Davenport 2021, 185-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Madsen 2020, 111-113. The ironic reading of this speech by Davenport and Mallan 2014 is valuable in pointing out some of the shortcomings of adoptive succession, though it seems clear that this was Dio’s preferred method of passing power. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. See Juntenen 2013 for some of the historiographic problems related to this lacuna. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Dio’s portraits of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus will be assessed in greater detail in chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. See Birley 1969, 250-252 for the theory that Pertinax was involved in the conspiracy, for which there is no trace in Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. See further chapters 5 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Kemezis (2020) discusses the roles of the Senate and people in the civil wars of 193-197 CE as essentially passive, which in turn highlights the rupture in continuity in the imperial line and also absolves them of responsibility for the disorder of the later Severan period. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Kemezis (2014, 133) notes the limited role of the monarch in this scheme, contrary to the more popular reading of “monarchy under an ideal *princeps*” (quoting Reinhold 1988, 185). [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Kemezis 2014, 140. This understanding helps explain the seemingly mixed depiction of Severus; see chapter 6, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Examples can be found in Kemezis 2007, 271-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. On Dio’s nostalgia for the Antonine period, see Kemezis 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. E.g., de Blois 1984, 365; Martini 2010; Kemezis 2014, 96; Scott 2015, 160-161. The most thorough examination of Dio’s depiction of Marcus Aurelius, in comparison with the emperors of his own day, is Bering-Staschewski 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Herodian (1.2.5) writes that by his time (240s-250s CE) many wise men had written histories of Marcus’ bravery, moderation, and military and political excellence against those living in the North and East, though the identity of these writers is unclear. Kemezis (2010, 314) discusses the fragmentary authors Phlegon of Tralles and Chryseros, whose works went down to the time of Marcus, though it is unclear how much information about Marcus and his reign they contained. Kemezis 2010 also discusses the lack of contemporary history under the Antonines. Other than Cassius Dio, we really only know of Marius Maximus, who probably wrote a life of Marcus as part of his series of imperial biographies (Whittaker 1969, 10 n. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. See Kovács 2009 for a thorough overview of the event and its reception. See esp. pp. 26-38 for a review of the various disputes surrounding Dio’s version of the event, to which Xiphilinus appended a rare and lengthy interpolation. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. As observed also in chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. See Lange 2020 for the role that severed heads play in Dio’s work. Kemezis (2021b) treats Dio’s shaping of the overall story of the revolt. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. See Becker 2020, 213-215 on how Marcus’ ability to overcome illness contrasts with the outcomes of tyrannical emperors such as Caracalla. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. *HA*, *Marc*. 15.5-6; cf. *Luc*. 11.2. Cassius Dio (71[70].3.11 [Xiph.]) records the opposing rumor that Lucius plotted against Marcus. Syme (1971, 128-131) traces the content of these and subsequent chapters to Marius Maximus. Birley (2012, 21) suggests that the material was “adapted from Eutropius”; cf. Schwendemann 1923, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Bruch and Herrmann 2012, 485. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. As an example of his frugality, Dio praises Pertinax for sending around food to the senators, which some of his peers disapproved of (74[73].3.4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]); see Millar 1964, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. For Dio’s sympathetic approach to Marcus, with the examples cited here, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. For example, Dio criticizes Macrinus for assuming titles without waiting for approval from the Senate (79[78].16.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. 72[71].28.1 [*Exc*. *Val*.], 72[71].27.32 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. This figure seems to be the same as Gaius Calvisius Statianus, prefect of Egypt from 170-176 CE (*PIR2* C 356). Birley (1996, 255) notes that he was a friend of Fronto. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Dio insists on Marcus’ leniency numerous times: 72[71].27.32-28.2-3, 30.1-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]. In the contemporary books, we can compare the actions of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus, who all carried out some sort of purge after a civil war or related crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. For example, Dio criticizes Caracalla for purchasing a victory from the Cenni (78[77].14.2 [Xiph./*Exc. Vat*.] and Macrinus for settling with, rather than defeating, the Parthians (79[78].27.1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 22 reads this more sympathetically, as Marcus protecting Commodus from charges of plotting against his father, though this reading seems to ignore even Dio’s explicit disappointment in the elevation. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. As observed, e.g., by Millar 1964, 122; Bering-Staschewski 1981, 36, 114; Espinosa Ruiz 1982, 77-178; Hose 2011, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. The idea is surveyed by Bering-Staschewki (1981, 23-36), who concludes that Dio sets up Commodus “as a negative mirror-image of his father” (als negatives Spiegelbild seines Vater, 36). Rosen (1996, 160) sees Dio’s Marcus as viewed through the lens of his successors. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Hose 2011, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. See Bering-Staschewski 1981, 22 for these actions, and Dio’s depiction, as part of setting up Marcus as an ideal *princeps*. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Millar (1964, 124) rejects the theory that Dio was arguing against a common, earlier source, in this case Marius Maximus, as transmitted by the *HA* (as argued by Smits 1914, 33 and cited by Millar). We do not need to posit a different source, as such sentiments would have been known by Dio from his experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Smits 1914, 34 connects this passage to his argument, noted in the previous paragraph, citing *HA*, *Marc.* 27.11-12, which rejects Marcus’ foresight and also notes Commodus’ baseness and cruelty. It should be noted that the *HA* life of Marcus is much more critical, in general, in comparison to Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. At 72[71].13.1 [*Exc*. *UG*59], we learn that Marcus refused to settle with the Iazyges, preferring to destroy them completely. Later we find out that the Iazyges came to terms only after having been defeated, and we get the impression that Marcus did the same with the Quadi and Marcomani (72[71].16.1 [*Exc*. *UG*61]). [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. On this point, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 118 and Kemezis 2021b, 200-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Bering-Staschewski (1981, 28), with Millar (1964, 125), also notes the unchronological sequencing and thus literary quality of this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. The following individuals are discussed by Bering-Staschewski 1981, 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. See Gleason 2011, 35, with n. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. This section continues with an extended description of the demise of Sextus Condianus. Distinguished by both his nature and his learning, Sextus demonstrated his ingenuity when he found out that he had been sentenced to death and escaped. Through an intricate ruse, Sextus managed to disappear, and many were put to death who were thought to be him. After Commodus died, one man pretended to be Sextus in order to take possession of his money and stature, though he could not match Sextus’ learning, a failure that was uncovered by Pertinax (73[72].6.1-5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). In Dio's version of events, it at least seems that Sextus escaped, or in the very least outwitted not only Commodus but those pretending to be him. The story also points up Pertinax’ learning in contract to Commodus’ deficiencies; on this point, see Kemezis 2012, 399-400. See also Gleason 2011, 35 n. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. 73[72].11.1-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]. See Kemezis 2012, 388-394. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. 73[72].8.1-6 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]. See also Suda μ 206 Adler. Dio tells the story of Marcellus’ feigned wakefulness, by pre-writing letters for distribution at all hours of the night, and his preference for eating extremely stale bread. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. A similar “disappearance” can be observed in the figure of Claudius Pompeianus, who never showed up in the curia during the reign of Commodus, though he did ultimately survive into the reign of Pertinax. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Dio (73[72].9.1 [Xiph.]) remarks that Perennis oversaw both militarily affairs and affairs of state, as Commodus had devoted himself to chariot racing and debauchery. Dio’s version is vastly different from the one in Herodian (1.9.1-10), who depicts Perennis as aiming at becoming emperor himself through a plot against Commodus; see also *HA*, *Comm*. 5-6. On this depiction, see Whittaker 1969, 56 n. 2 and Scott 2018c, 439-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Bering-Staschewski (1981, 34) takes this as evidence of perversion of the emperor’s priorities, which are now attended to by his prefect. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. See Molin (2016b, 474-475) who groups Cleander with others such as Theocritus (under Caracalla), Epagathus (who survived the reigns of Macrinus, Elagabalus, Severus Alexander), and Comazon (under Elagabalus). [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Dio writes that Cleander “possessed the greatest influence after Perennis” (73[72].12.1 [Xiph.] and goes on to describe his power (and abuse of it). The detail that Cleander held the position *a* *pugione* is from the *HA* (*Comm*. 6.13); on that position, see also *AE* 1961, 280 and Krenn 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Cf. Millar’s (1964, 123) comment that Dio is satirizing Commodus’ messaging. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. See 73[72].20.2 [Xiph.] for the rumor that Commodus wished to reenact Hercules and the Stymphalian birds. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. For Marcus’ dislike of the arena, see 72[71].29.3-4 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]. On Commodus’ extravagance, see 73[72].16.3 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. This depiction will differ in the next instance of hereditary succession, when Septimius Severus passes power to Caracalla and Geta; for Severus’ failings in this regard, see the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Thus, Schepens 1975, who is careful to disentangle it from modern historiographic theory. See also Wiseman 1979 and Woodman 1988 for the different aims of ancient and modern historiography, as well as Marincola 1997, 63-86 for the overall tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Kemezis (2021a) has usefully applied Scott’s (1990) theory of “public” v. “hidden” transcript to Dio’s imperial books, at least up to the contemporary period. As he points out, surviving works on Roman emperors, such as those of Tacitus and Suetonius, participate in this discourse, in which they contrapose the public reasons given for actions or behavior with the “real” reason as uncovered by the historian. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. For Dio’s selectiveness, see also the discussion in chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. A corollary to this in the books on the early monarchy and the Republic are Dio’s emphases, especially on civil strife and the destructive effects of elite competition; on these issues, see Lange 2019 and Madsen 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. On a related issue, see Letta 2021, 74-79 for a survey of source criticism in Dio, and its general unfruitfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. An idea that was anticipated by Millar (1964, 62): “We tend perhaps to disregard the fund of common knowledge which would be available to a historian in recording events which took place not more than a century before he wrote….” [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. For his career, see *PIR2* C 485; Barnes 1984, 241-242; Halfmann 1979, 194 no. 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Indeed, Cassius Dio does not frequently chronicle his use of documentary evidence, especially in the contemporary books, where his most important claim to accuracy is his presence and status as a senator. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Pliny (*Ep*. 5.8) expresses the sentiment that his uncle’s status as a historian urged him in the same direction, which provides a possibly interesting parallel to Dio's mention of his father in this passage and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Dio’s formulation here is a little vexing. He seems to mean that he was present in Rome or that he was a senator at the time, and that the story of the meeting between Pertinax and the pretender, which perhaps took place in private, was then related to him somehow (either by Pertinax or perhaps by one of his peers). [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Millar 1964, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Dio’s sources for this period, aside from autopsy, are surveyed in a general manner by Millar 1964, 121-122; see also Letta 2016, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Letta (2016, 262-268) has produced instances where Dio, because of his absence of Rome, may have consulted the *acta senatus* (cf. Letta 2021, with the doubts expressed by Lange 2022, 1-2). These instances prove the general point being made here, that Dio masked his sources and always made it seem as if his presence was what produced the information. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. “And many would indeed have perished by the sword on the spot, for laughing at him…” (73[72].21.2 [Xiph.]: κἂν συχνοὶ παραχρῆμα ἐπ’ αὐτῷ γελάσαντες ἀπηλλάγησαν τῷ ξίφει). [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. In this passage, Dio also offers the Roman plebs as an exception, stating that many of them did not go into the amphitheater, while some looked in and then left (73[72].20.2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). I will address this contrast with senatorial behavior below. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. *PIR2* C 973; Okoń 2017 no. 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Though the exact family tree is uncertain. Champlin (1979, 295) places him as a great-nephew of Marcus Aurelius; see also *PIR2* A 69; Okoń 2017 no. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Scott 2021, 226-229. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. For “taking pains” (φιλόπονος) in writing history, see Plb. 12.27a.3, with Marincola 1997, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. On accuracy (ἀκριβεία), see Marincola 1997, 68-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. In this chapter I leave aside Dio’s eulogy of Severus, as it is set off from the narrative of the reign proper; I examine it in detail in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. We can also observe Dio’s pardoning those who were duplicitous by necessity, such as Augustus; see Reinhold and Swan 1990, 168. Notably, Dio does not make the same sorts of excuses for Severus. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Cf. Gleason 2011, 46: “Dio also shares Tacitus’ preoccupation with the theatricality of imperial power, and the consequent tension between appearance and reality”. For Dio’s recognition of pretense as an integral part of Roman politics, see Gowing 1997, 2568, with n. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. 75[74].1.1-2 [Xiph.]. Severus put to death those who were directly involved in Pertinax’ assassination, while the others he banished from Rome. The event is similarly reported, in broad outline, by Herodian (2.13.4-12) and the *Historia Augusta* (*Sev.* 6), though some differences emerge. Herodian and the *HA* report that Severus had the praetorians gather unarmed, whereas Dio states that they were disarmed after gathering, though the overall effect is the same. Herodian uses the occasion for Severus to give the praetorians a speech, which highlights Severus’ clemency and sense of justice, ideas that perhaps contrast with Dio’s depiction of a soldier preferring to kill himself. There are several possible motivations for Severus’ actions with regard to the praetorians, not least of which were his need to secure the loyalty of the body and perhaps also financial exigency; see Bingham 2013, 44-47; de la Bédoyère 2017, 219-223. It is likely this group that Dio mentions at 46.46.6-7, which, according to Dio, terrorized Rome and also frightened Severus by their behavior and demands for money. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Millar’s (1964, 139) reading of Dio’s “rapturous description of Severus’ entry into Rome” fails to account for the author’s notable, if subtle, critique of the event. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. For this tradition of *mutatio vestis*, see, e.g., Marshall 1984, 121-123, with further citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Rubin (1980, 57-60) discusses the discrepancies between Dio’s account and those of the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian. Specifically, he notes the *HA*’s (*Sev.* 7) claim that Severus entered Rome armed and with soldiers, which is opposed to Dio’s depiction of Severus’ peaceful entrance into the city in civilian garb, though notably Dio includes the detail that the soldiers were still bearing arms. For Rubin, this difference shows that Dio's account has a bias in favor of Severus. This is generally followed by Rantala (2016, 160), who suggests that the *Historia Augusta* might be more accurate on this account. In what follows, I do not wish to adjudicate the truth of each of the sources, but rather to show how Dio depicted Severus’ reign and why. While I agree that Dio’s account is more favorable to Severus on the surface, I suggest that he employs this maneuver to undercut Severus’ imperial identity. A point worth noting, however, is Dio’s claim to have witnessed this event, which Rubin does not address, instead insisting “that he simply copied his account in his composition about Severus’ civil wars into his major work without modifying it too much” (58). [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Severus’ intentional attempt to connect to Trajan can be observed elsewhere. It is seen most obviously in his titulature, in which he traces his lineage back to Trajan and Nerva (Cooley 2007, 386-387). He also seems to have proclaimed his conquering of Parthia and taken the title of *Parthicus Maximus* on January 28, 198 CE, which was the hundredth anniversary of Trajan's accession (Birley 2000, 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. For Dio’s use of terminology for the Roman plebs, see Yavetz 1969, 144; Hellström 2021, 200-202. The irony is noted by Rubin 1980, 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Cf. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 62-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Ando 2016, 573 notes that this passage reflects the fact that “the goodness of emperors had achieved the status of convention”. While this may be true, Dio also uses this sort of language to highlight the two sides of imperial self-presentation: the public half, which showed the emperor as “good”, and the half that Dio, through his interpretive skills, reveals as simply pretense. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. For the development of the adventus during the Principate, see Lehnen 1997; Lange 2016, 99-100, 156-157; Koortbojian 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Rubin 1980, 24. Rubin calls this passage an “extract”, which gives the impression that it is a verbatim copy from the earlier work. That may be the case, though certainty is impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. For Severus' use of the name Pertinax in titulature, see, e.g., *ILS* 413-414, 416-422. These honors include a dedication of a shrine, the use of Pertinax' name in oaths and prayers, and erection a s golden statue and throne, 75[74].4.1 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. The fiction is also noted by Favro and Johanson 2010, 25. Funerals performed for effigies are treated by Arce 2010, who, among other points, concludes that the wax effigy was simply a substitute for the dead body. Yet while this may be correct, the article is based primarily on two episodes: the one depicted here by Dio, and the funeral for Septimius Severus, as described by Herodian (4.2.2-11). While definite proof is inconclusive, there is the strong possibility that Herodian has transposed Dio’s description of Pertinax’ funeral onto the event for Severus, as already suggested, tentatively, by Whittaker (1969, 375 n. 3). Gradel (2002, 282-286) is more circumspect about the evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. See Denniston 1950, 265 for the ironic use of δῆθεν with ὡς. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Polybius’ (6.53) comments on the power of viewing the actual corpse during a Roman funeral are relevant here. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Cf. Desnier 1993, 554-558. Campbell (2005, 5) follows Dio and suggests that the eastern campaigns were meant to bring Severus glory, since he had not been present at the battles of the civil war against Pescennius Niger. This absence did not stop him from taking credit, as his various acclamations as imperator in the aftermath of these battles shows (Birley 2000, 110-114). See also chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. On this final point, see Osgood 2015, 1694. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. For Dio’s stress on Severus’ generals throughout his depiction of these campaigns, see Bering-Staschewski 1981, 70-71. Dio later states that Severus was not present at any battle until Lugdundum (76[75].6.1 [Xiph.], with Rubin 1980, 66). Graham (1973, 262-264) discusses the reasons why Severus decided to delegate such responsibility to other generals. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. On the latter point, see Cooley 2007, 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Rubin 1980, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. The passage on Cassius Clemens is directly preceded in Xiphilinus’ epitome by Dio’s statement that Severus punished the partisans of Niger (75[74].8.3 [Xiph.]); cf. the content of *Exc*. *Val*. 342-343 (75[74].8.4-5 and 75[74].9.4, respectively). [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. For a similar sentiment, generally construed, see Mallan 2016, 272-274. For Clemens’ ethical role, see Kemezis 2020, 268-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. See, e.g., Mallan (2016, 271) for a reading of this passage in praise of Severus. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. 75[74]14.5-6 [Xiph.]; see also Suda β 588 Adler. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Millar (1964, 139-140) suggests that this passage may have been part of Dio’s earlier work on the civil wars following Commodus’ death, and if so, its critical tone would have been Dio’s later addition. The general premise is possible, but, as will be seen in what follows, Dio’s description of the fall of Byzantium must have been a complete reworking of any earlier, laudatory, description of Severus’ taking the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. For Dio’s negative opinion, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Rubin (1980, 68-72) suggests that this might be an excerpt from another miracle story, though garbled in Xiphilinus’ epitome. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Severus’ raids resemble Caracalla’s later Parthian campaign, and Dio’s method of composition is similar in both instances. Both emperors claimed great success in the East, whereas Dio severely undercuts their achievements in his narrative (for Caracalla’s Parthian campaign, and Dio’s critique, see 79[78].1.5-2.1 [Xiph.], as well as chapter 7). This episode is followed by an anecdote about Claudius, a robber passing through Judaea and Syria, who came to Severus and greeted him, though he was never discovered (75[75].2.4 [Xiph.]). The anecdote seems to demonstrate Severus’ inability to tell fact from fiction and to highlight that Severus’ “successes” could not fully cover up other problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Possibly relevant here is Dio’s note that Trajan waged war against Decebalus himself, not through others (68[68].10.4 [Xiph.]) [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. For Dio’s critique of these actions, with reference to his depiction of Augustus, see also Reinhold and Swan 1990, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. E.g., *ILS* 418, 420-422. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Seemingly indicated by αὖθις at 76[75].4.1 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. 76[75].4.7 [Xiph.]: “But what I marvelled at most was this” (ὃ δὲ δὴ μάλιστα θαυμάσας ἔχω). [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Rubin (1980, 81-83) suggests that in this anecdote the silvery rain represents Clodius Albinus (with a connection between the Greek term for white, ἀργός/ ἀργής, corresponding to the “Albinus” of Clodius’ name), while the rain’s falling in the Forum of Augustus refers to Albinus’ seizure of the title Augustus. The ephemerality of the plating indicates Albinus’ brief tenure. In my view, this hypothesis requires too many associations to have made it part of Severus’ propaganda campaign. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Ash 2021, 99: “… he engagingly inscribes himself into his text as a kind of natural scientist”. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. 76[75].5.1-3 [Xiph.]. The reading of the Numerianus and Bulla episodes follow, in large part, the analysis of Gleason 2011, 56-58. This reading differs considerably from that of Rubin (1980, 77-78), who sees the Numerianus episode as a piece of Severan propaganda. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. During the Bulla story, Severus is said to complain that his generals were successful in Britain, while he himself could not catch a simple brigand in Italy (77[76].10.6 [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. 76[75].7.3 [Xiph.]: “I am not stating, now, what Severus wrote about it, but what actually took place” (λέγω γὰρ οὐχ ὅσα ὁ Σεουῆρος ἔγραψεν, ἀλλ’ ὅσα ἀληθῶς ἐγένετο). [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. 75[74].8.3 [Xiph.]. Rantala (2016, 168-170) ties Dio’s outrage over this event to Severus’ lack of *clementia*. While this may be true, it is not certain Dio would have expected *clementia* to be shown at this point, especially during a civil war. It is more likely the fact that Severus did not reform himself that this event was seen retrospectively as a harbinger of his cruelty to come. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. The latter is perhaps even more alarming, for a reader of Dio, who had previously seen the triumvirs claim *not* to have the cruelty of Sulla or Marius (47.13.4); see Scott 2020b, 176-179. For possible parallels between Sulla and Severus, see Rantala 2016, 172. For the chronology of Severus’ fictive adoption into the Antonine line, see Kolb 1972, 85-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. See Ando 2016 on Dio’s belief that the means by which an emperor came to power mattered far less than what he did once he held that power. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. On this portrayal, see Reinhold and Swan 1990, 159-162. Cooley (2007, 388-391) details some of Severus’ actions during and after the civil wars that connected him to an Augustan precedent, though the success of such actions is questionable, and certainly doubted by Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Cf. Gowing 1992, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. See Pliny, *Pan*. 53.3-6, with Bartsch 1994, 159-160, on how good emperors should allow bad former emperors to be criticized, whereas the bad emperor forbids it. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. For an overview, see Rubin 1980, 21-40 and de Blois 2016, 339-344, who focuses on the generosity of the Severan house as a main messaging point of the celebration. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. On this depiction, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 65-66, and on Dio’s use of a “Plautianus-phase”, Millar 1964, 145; Mallan 2013b, 740-742; Scott 2017a,158-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. For differing interpretations of the episode, see Mallan 2013b 742 and Scott 2017b, 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. This is a confusing passage, as Dio seems to have compressed the celebrations of 202-204 CE (possibly *decennalia*, return from Africa, and *ludi* *saeculares*) into one; see Scott 2017a for a review of previous opinions of the passage and an argument for why Dio compressed the events in this manner. Gorrie (2002, 465) stresses that the saecular games were an opportunity for Severus “to represent himself as a new Augustus, inaugurating a period of renew~ after the turmoil of civil war.” [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. An alternative version of this plot is told by Herodian (3.10-12), though many of its details are inverted versions of Dio’s tale (Scott 2018c, 450-454). [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. For ethnographic digressions in Dio, see Kuhn-Chen 2002, 138-139 (with specific comparison to Herodotus); Bertrand 2015 and Baron 2021, 90-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. For Dio’s critique of emperors who claimed spurious victories, see the examples of Caracalla (79[78].1.1-2 [Xiph.]) and Macrinus (79[78].27.1-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. 77[76].14.1 [Xiph.]. Caracalla's “licentious living” (ἀκολάστως ἔζη) is the sign of one unfit for ruling, such as Nero (62[62].15.1 [Xiph.]); Maecenas warns Octavian against this sort of behavior (52.39.4). Dio associates such behavior with women's sexual promiscuity; e.g., Messalina (60[60].18.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]; 60[60].22.5 [Xiph.]) and Pertinax’ wife (74[73].7.2 [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Dio’s use of the phrase σαφῶς εἰδὼς τὰ γενησόμενα (“clearly knowing what was to come”) at 77[76].14.7 [Xiph.] makes it clear that Severus had knowledge of what was going to happen. This claim subverts the normally positive trait of foresight (πρόνοια) for emperors; see 74[73].5.2 [Xiph.] for πρόνοια as one of Pertinax’ virtues (among others), with Bering-Staschewski 1981, 38-39. See Borm 2015, 240-243 on the social underpinnings of dynastic succession at Rome. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Other death notices for emperors in the contemporary books include those for Commodus (73[72].22.6 [Xiph.]), Pertinax (74[73].10.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Vat*.]; cf. 75[74].5.6-7 [*Exc*. *Val*.]), Didius Julianus (74[73].17.5 [Xiph.]), Caracalla (79[78].6.5), Macrinus (79[78].40.3-41), and Elagabalus (80[79].21.3 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). Julia Domna also receives a lengthy obituary (79[78].23-24), the significance of which is examined in chapter 8. See also the substantial notices for Sextus Condianus (73[72].6.1-5 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), Perennis (73[72].9.1-21 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), C. Aufidius Victorinus (73[72].11.1-4 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), and Cleander (73[72].12.1-13.1 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. E.g., Millar 1964, 138-150; Alföldy 1968, 113; Manuwald 1979, 283; Hose 1994, 408; Murison 1999; 11-12; see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Rubin 1980, 42. Throughout his study of Dio’s work, Rubin argues that Dio was revising his first works on Severus for inclusion into his longer history, thus accounting for such discrepancies in his depiction of Severus and his reign. He admits, however, that it is “tricky business” to reconstruct Severus' propaganda from Dio's surviving history (p. 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Eisman 1977, 667-673; cf. Swan 2004, 378-380, Rantala 2016, 162; see also chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. This view is similar to the one put forth by Bering-Staschewski (1981, 59), who argues for a unitary reading of Dio’s text that requires Severus’ mixed depiction to be understood through Dio’s overall conception of history. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. This aspect of Dio’s work is explored most thoroughly by Kemezis 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Davenport 2021, 193-194 notices the tension in Dio’s depiction of Pertinax, though it is not exploited on a larger thematic level as it is here. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Pomeroy 1991, 240: “Topoi are thus amalgamated in unusual patterns - an interest in imperial physiognomy is linked with appraisal of mental ability (first seen in Thucydides' portrait of Themistocles); moralizing anecdotes relevant to Rome as a whole are incorporated into a discussion of imperial policy; biographical details of daily events are added to the record of last words to illustrate the theme of unceasing imperial activity. The novelty of the approach is laudable, but the coherence is much less clear”. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. 77[76].16.1-5. The majority of this chapter in Boissevain’s edition comes from Xiphilinus’ epitome. *Exc*. *Val*. 353 provides a more condensed version of 77[76].16.1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. See Rowan 2012, 32-109 for Bacchus (*Liber Pater*) and Hercules as an integral part of Severus’ self-presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. “He repaired all the public works that had suffered injury, but deprived none of the original builders of the glory of their founding. He also erected many new buildings, some in his own name and some in others’, or else permitted these others to erect them, constantly having an eye to the public good, but grudging no one the private fame attaching to these services” (56.40.5: καὶ πάντα μὲν τὰ ἔργα τὰ πεπονηκότα ἐπισκευάσας οὐδενὸς τῶν ποιησάντων αὐτὰ τὴν δόξαν   
     ἀπεστέρησε· πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἐκ καινῆς, τὰ μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ ὀνόματι τὰ δὲ καὶ ἐφ’ ἑτέρων, τὰ μὲν αὐτὸς κατεσκεύασε τὰ δὲ ἐκείνοις οἰκοδομῆσαι ἐπέτρεψε, τὸ τῷ κοινῷ χρήσιμον διὰ πάντων ἰδών, ἀλλ’ οὐ τῆς ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς εὐκλείας ἰδίᾳ τισὶ φθονήσας). [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Dio provides the names of his teachers, Fronto and Herodes for rhetoric and Junius Rusticus and Apollonius of Nicomedeia, whose specialty was Stoic philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. This section also includes the reporting of one of Marcus’ dreams, in which he had shoulders made of ivory. The dream is also reported, more clearly, at *HA*, *Marc.* 5.2, where we learn that the dream occurred to Marcus on the day he was adopted, and the ivory shoulders were meant to demonstrate Marcus’ ability to bear the burden of being emperor. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Scott 2020b, 179-182. The continuity between Septimius Severus and Caracalla demonstrates that the so-called “continuation” was not a mere add-on to the history. Dio deeply develops Septimius Severus’ succession plans in the final chapters of book 77[76]. One might argue that these chapters and Septimius Severus’ obituary are a later addition, but to do so would completely undermine the argument that Severus’ “mixed” depiction is a product of light re-touching, as the obituary is the primary place where one finds any material praiseworthy of Severus. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Bering-Staschewski (1981, 116) characterizes Severus as one aspiring to be a good emperor, but failing because of his actions in civil war and his rehabilitation of Commodus. While Dio does judge these matters harshly, it seems more fruitful to look at Severus in the context of the dynasty he wished to join and the dynasty that he actually created. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. E.g., Bering-Staschewski 1981, 37-39, 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. “Pertinax was an excellent and upright man, but he ruled only a very short time, and was then put out of the way by the soldiers” (74[73].1.1 [Xiph.]: Περτίναξ δὲ ἦν μὲν τῶν καλῶν κἀγαθῶν, ἦρξε δὲ πάνυ βραχύν τινα χρόνον, εἶτα πρὸς τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἀνῃρέθη). [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. See Bering-Staschewski 1981, 40-41 on Dio’s possibly covering up Pertinax’ involvement in the overthrow of Commodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. On this passage, see Bering-Staschewski 1981, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Cf. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 41-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. On the figure of Falco and this conspiracy, see Champlin 1979, 299-305. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. See Appelbaum 2007, 203-204, who ties Pertinax’s assassination to a reform of the praetorian guard, not specifically mentioned by Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Boissevain (3.329) suggests that this passage may derive from a speech that Septimius Severus gave at the funeral for Pertinax. With Bering-Staschewski (1981, 60), I believe that this was Dio’s own eulogy of Pertinax, based on comparison to other eulogies and because there seem to be few, in any, set speeches in the contemporary history. If, however, Dio did transfer these words to Severus, the interpretation presented here would be even more valid and striking. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. “Being dignified without sullenness, gentle without humility, shrewd without knavery, just without excessive strictness, frugal without stinginess, high-minded without boastfulness” (75[74].5.7 [*Exc*. *Val*.]: σεμνὸς ἔξω τοῦ σκυθρωποῦ, πρᾷος ἔξω τοῦ ταπεινοῦ, φρόνιμος ἄνευ κακουργίας, δίκαιος ἄνευ ἀκριβολογίας, οἰκονομικὸς χωρὶς ῥυπαρίας, μεγαλόνους χωρὶς αὐχήματος). [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Dio even mentions Pertinax twice during Marcus Aurelius’ reign, pointing out his military exploits; 72[71].3.2 [Xiph.], 22.1 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. It is notable that we are here working with the nearly complete text of book 79[78]. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Millar 1964, 165 (with reference to Macrinus’ alleged “Moorish cowardice”), notes Dio’s “group prejudices”. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. 79[78].11.1, with Scott 2018a, 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Baharal 1996, 422-427. See also Salzmann 1983 (esp. 379-381) on how Macrinus’ portrait changes from its initial similarity to Caracalla’s to one more similar to that of Marcus Aurelius. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Cf. Gleason 2011, 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. It is perhaps also noteworthy that it is an equestrian, a procurator, who betrays Macrinus (79[78].39.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. See also Scott 2012, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. For this and what follows, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 96-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. This idea is related to the earlier claims that Augustus chose Tiberius as successor, in order to make himself look better; see chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Cf. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Macrinus, however, does seem to have put him to death later (79[78].19.1). He seems to be the only senatorial execution recorded for this reign (Leunissen 1989, 403). [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. 79[78].12.7. See Scott 2018a, 55-56 on this lacunose and the issue of troop pay under Severus. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Bering-Staschewski 1981, 95-96; Scott 2018a, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Hekster 2002, 186-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Cf. Scott 2020b, 176-179. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. See also Bering-Staschewski (1981, 78) on Dio’s negative depiction of Caracalla deriving from his genetic characteristics. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Meckler 1999, 40; Davenport 2012, 797-798. Wirth 1888, 56 and Letta 1979, 127-128 offer similar arguments about Dio’s career, believing that he had fallen into disgrace under Septimius Severus and Caracalla (and thus his first consulship cannot be placed in either of those reigns). Similar ideas are found in Espinosa Ruiz (1982, 222), who charges Dio with unleashing of his hatred of Caracalla in his narration of his reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. This notice recalls a passage from an earlier book, in which Dio recounts Caracalla’s conflicts with Papinian and Castor, which is part of Dio’s claim that Caracalla wished to kill both Severus and Geta during Severus' reign (77[76].14 [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. It is possible that this sentiment foreshadows the soldiers’ future preference for Elagabalus, who posed as the son of Caracalla and, according to Dio, showed some resemblance to Caracalla as a child (79[78].32.2-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. McCann 1968, 103-106; Baharal 1989, 577-580. See also Hekster 2017, who further surveys Severus’ connections to Pertinax and Commodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Dio says that they pretended to love and praise each other (78[77].1.4 [Xiph.]: προσεποιοῦντο μὲν γὰρ καὶ φιλεῖν ἀλλήλους καὶ ἐπαινεῖν), a pretense that mirrors Severus’ own, as seen earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. “Anyone could see that something terrible was bound to result from the situation” (78[77].1.4 [Xiph.]: καὶ ἦν οὐκ ἄδηλον ὅτι δεινόν τι παρ’ αὐτῶν γενήσοιτο); “for his evil purpose had already become too manifest to remain concealed” (78[77].2.1 [Xiph.]: καὶ γὰρ ἐκφανέστερον ἤδη τὸ κακὸν ἢ ὥστε συγκρυβῆναι ἐγεγόνει). [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. The description of Geta’s assassination is particularly vivid (78[77].2.1-6 [Xiph.]), and its details reveal that Dio has constructed the tale along the lines of a typical conspiracy plot type. Important details include nighttime activities and the violence done to Julia Domna, the female figure in the story; see Pagán 2004, 87-90 for the typology. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. For Dio’s dramatization of the scene, see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. This vocabulary may further recall the sword used against Caracalla when he was assassinated (ξιφιδίῳ μικρῷ, ξίφος, 79[78].5.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. See Rowan 2012, 137, with further references. Dio cites Apollo Grannus, Sarapis, and Aesculapius as the deities from whom Caracalla sought relief from ill health (78[77].15.6-7 [*Exc*. *Val*.]). See Becker 2020 on Dio’s use of this issue as a mean of de-legitimizing his rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. 78[77].3.1 [Xiph.], ὡς ἐπιβεβουλευμένος καὶ κινδυνεύων, in which the ὡς demonstrates Dio's skepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. See especially 78[77].10.1-4 [Xiph.], 78[77].13.1-2 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. On these events, see Sillar 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. For example, Dio mentions Caracalla’s purge of the Senate, including putting senators to death (78[77].6.1 [Xiph.]); the financial burdens placed upon the senators (78[77].9.1 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]); and the poor treatment that Dio himself received at Nicomedia (78[77].17.1.4 [Xiph.]). See Scott 2015, 162-167 for more detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Xiphilinus reports that Dio gives a list of names, “but for me it suffices to say that he made away with all the men he wished without distinction, ‘both guilty and guiltless alike,’ and he mutilated Rome, by depriving it of its good men” (78[77].6.1: ἐμοὶ δ’ εἰπεῖν ἐξαρκεῖ ὅτι πάντας ὁμοίως οὓς ἤθελε κατεχειρίζετο, ὅστ’ αἴτιος ὅστε καὶ οὐχί, καὶ ὅτι τὴν Ῥώμην ἠκρωτηρίασεν, ἀγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν στερήσας αὐτήν). [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. 78[77].5.3 [*Exc*. *Val*.]: Julianus Asper; 78[77].5.4 [*Exc*. *Val*.]: Laenus; 78[77].5.5 [*Exc*. *Val*.]: Thrasea Priscus. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. See Imrie 2021 for an analysis of this phalanx. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Espinosa Ruiz (1982, 227) connects Caracalla’s desire to be a new Alexander with Commodus’ self-presentation as Hercules. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Regarding Caracalla’s education (and its depiction in Dio), see Meckler 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. “He was entirely this sort of man; how he was in war I will now investigate” (78[77].12.1 [Xiph.]: τὸ μὲν οὖν σύμπαν τοιοῦτος ἦν. ἐν δὲ τοῖς πολέμοις ὁποῖος, ἐροῦμεν). Dio uses a similar formulation with regard to Nero: “Such was Nero's general character. I shall now proceed to details” (61[61].6.1: τοιοῦτος μὲν τὸ σύμπαν ὁ Νέρων ἐγένετο, λέξω δὲ καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον), which Gowing (1997, 2567) identifies as a turning point in Dio’s account of Nero’s reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. See Millar (1964, 151) on the idea that *imitatio Alexandri* was not new to Rome, but that Caracalla pushed it to the point of “hatred and mockery”. Mallan (2017, 134-6, 144) notes Caracalla’s “misguided emulation” of Alexander; cf. Carlsen 2016, 328. For a fuller analysis of the *imitatio*, see Bering-Staschewski 1981, 82-83; Baharal 1994; Rowan 2012, 152-157; Langford 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. This aspect of Dio's depiction of Caracalla has also been analyzed by Bering-Staschewski (1981, 87-91), though here I focus more on the narrative structure of Dio’s account. Caracalla was on campaign, from some time in 212 or 213 until his death in 217 CE. For the date of departure from Rome, see Halfmann 1986, 223, and pp. 223-225 for an overview of Caracalla's entire itinerary for these years. For his journey through Asia in 214-217 CE, about which there is still disagreement, see also Levick 1969; Johnston 1983; Boteva 1999; Opreanu 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. For an overview of this self-presentation, see Mennen 2006, 257-260. Analyses of Caracalla’s portraits have also generally noted the military aspects of his images; see Mennen 2006, 257-258, with references. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Kneissl 1969, 157-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. For the former, see Kneissl 1969, 159-165. Herodian (4.10.1) mentions Caracalla’s desire to be called *Parthicus Maximus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. For Dio’s views in this regard, see Bertrand 2016; see also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 87-91 for Caracalla’s foreign wars specifically. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. See also Bering-Staschewski 1981, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. The passage in *Exc. Val*. 378, which refers to people living along the Elbe, seems to be referring to this same event in Xiphilinus’ epitome. For the possibility that the name “Cenni” is corrupt, see Millar 1964, 155 n. 3, with reference to Boissevain *ad loc*. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Herodian (4.9.3) says that the Alexandrians mocked Caracalla for imitating Alexander and Achilles and also called Julia Doman “Jocasta”, thus insinuating an incestuous relationship between mother and son, just as in the Oedipus myth. Marasco 1996 takes this joke as historical, though see the reservations of Davenport 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. 78[77].22.1 [Xiph.]: ἐπικρυπτόμενος τὴν ὀργὴν καὶ ποθεῖν αὐτοὺς προσποιούμενος. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. The pretext for the first war against the Parthians was that hostages had not been released (78[77].19.1 [Xiph.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Millar (1964, 158) takes this report as an example of Dio’s lack of sources, though this view does not fully appreciate Dio’s method in these books; see Scott 2018a, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Evidence for Caracalla's sore throat is found in *Exc. Vat*. 136, not Xiphilinus. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Potter 2014, 137 posits that the recall could have been perceived as a reversal of Severus’ policies and thus a source of concern for those who had previously supported them. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. As noted above, Xiphilinus states that Dio included a long list of those killed, but he does not reproduce it. Herodian (4.6.4) and the *Historia Augusta* (*Car*. 5.1) mention the death of one governor each. He also killed his own cousin and the son of Pertinax, as well as the son of Lucilla (and thus grandson of Marcus Aurelius) (Herod. 4.6.3). Related events include Caracalla’s desire to kill Cornificia, the daughter of Marcus Aurelius (she died by suicide instead, 78[77].16.6a [*Exc*. *Vat*.]) and his putting to death the Vestal Virgins (78[77].16.1-3 [*Exc*. *Val*.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Davenport (2012, 802) astutely observes that Dio (79[78].8.4) also discusses his presence at a symposium held by Caracalla at Nicomedia to celebrate the Saturnalia. We need not, however, take these events to be completely contradictory, though they do mitigate the neglect that Dio describes in book 78[77]. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. The wording of this passage is difficult; see Scott 2018a, 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Analyses of the conspiracy, in comparison with other sources, include Hohl 1950; Kolb 1972, 118-135; Scott 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. The Osrhoeni referred to in this passage appear to be soldiers enlisted from that people and fighting on the side of the Romans. Boissevain (*ad loc*.) points to 68[68].18.1 for comparison. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. There is debate about the nature of this source. Millar (1964, 158) understands it as a letter to the Senate, whereas Westall (2012) views it more as a full blown literary narrative in the form of a *commentarius*. It seems more prudent, given the evidence from Dio, to side with Millar on this issue; see Scott 2018a, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. For Dio’s structuring around these concerns, see Pelling 1997, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Macrinus is not properly introduced until 79[78].11. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. For the *damnatio*, see 80[79].2.5-6, with *Exc*. *Val*. 403.As expected, their names are erased from inscriptions. See Pintaudi (1987) for a papyrus dating the *damnatio* to August 7, 218 CE. A significant amount of coinage bearing their images does survive, though the number of portraits and images is tiny; see Wood 1983; Varner 2004, 186-188. On the practice in general, see the comments in Hedrick 2000, 93-94 and the thorough study by Flower 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. For the dating of the reign to the end of Caracalla’s, see Sijpesteijn 1974 for the papyrological evidence. For the *fasti*, see de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 110, with *ILS* 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. See Allen 2022 on Macrinus’ “metamorphosis” and its possible connections to Lucius and the ass in Apuleius. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. On this association, see also Sünskes Thompson 1990, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. 79[78].12.1-7, though this section is fragmentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. 79[78].13.2-4. See further Scott 2018a, 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Adventus was praetorian prefect, with Macrinus, under Caracalla and later became Macrinus’ co-consul. On his career, see Rankov 1987 and Scott 2018a, 57, with further citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. 79[78].31.3; see also Hdn. 5.3.10 and *HA, Hel.* 2.1–4; cf. *Car.* 9.2, *Macr.* 6.2-9, 9.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. See Gleason 2011, 73-74 for this “usurpation in reverse” and Allen (forthcoming) for its parallels with wandering characters in the Greek novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. For Julia’s public image as wife and mother, see Langford 2013, 69-75; Rowan 2011, 249-253 examines Julia’s depiction in the numismatic evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. For this reading, see also Scott 2017b. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Marriage, as a sign of coming power, is mentioned at 75[74].3.1 [Xiph.]; treatment by Plautianus: 76[75].15.6 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.] (see also Suda ι 439 Adler); present at announcement of Plautianus’ death: 77[76].4.4 [Xiph.]; conversation with Caledonian wife: 77[76].16.5 [Xiph.]; at death of Geta: 78[77].2.4 [Xiph.]; admonishes Caracalla for overspending: 78[77].10.4 [Xiph.]; receives Caracalla’s mail at Antioch: 79[78].4.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. As counterpart to effeminate male characters: Langford 2013, 108-111; moral foil to Caracalla: Mallan 2013. See also Nadolny 2016, 142-148 for a similar reading to these two. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. 79[78].23.4-6; the passage is fragmentary, though preserved well enough that the general sense is clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. As seen above when she admonished him about spending too much money on the soldiers. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. The importance of this role is later seen when Julia was managing the emperor’s mail while he was leading an expedition to the temple of a moon deity and meeting his death (79[78].4.2-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Marcus Aurelius (72[71].34-35 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), Pertinax (74[73].10 [Xiph.], 75[74].5.6-7 [*Exc*. *Val*.]), Septimius Severus (77[76].16-17 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]), and Macrinus (79[78].40.3-41). Shorter death notices are provided for Commodus (73[72].22.6 [Xiph.]), Didius Julianus (74[73].17.5 [Xiph.]), Caracalla (79[78].6.5), and Elagabalus (80[79].21 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]). [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. For the form, see Pomeroy 1991, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Livia, for example, receives a shorter obituary at 58.2.1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. In the chapter following Julia's obituary, Dio begins his narration of Macrinus’ war with the Parthians, which leads directly to his overthrown at the hand of Elagabalus. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. 78[77].6.1a (*Exc*. *Val*.) and 78[77].10.2 [Xiph.], with Boissevain’s admonition that they may derive from the same single passage of Dio. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Cf. Mallan 2013b, 754-755; Scott 2017b, 421-422. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Dio also calls him “the Assyrian”, which plays on the same stereotypes, as well as “Pseudantoninus”, which highlights the falsity of his claimed lineage and in turn enhances his connections of Julia Domna and her eastern family. See 80[79].1.1 for Dio’s full list of nicknames, as well as Alföldy 1976; Bering-Staschewski 1981, 105-106; and Bruun 2003, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Icks 2012, 98-101 has posited that Sardanapalus serves as Dio’s model for his figure of Elagabalus; see also Lenfant 2001 for the development of the figure of Sardanapalus. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Consequently, Millar (1964, 169) does not treat the reign at any length in his survey: “Little of this calls for comment”. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. This approach is similar to that of the *Historia Augusta*, but different than Herodian’s depiction, which focuses more on Elagabalus’ foreignness; see further Scheithauer 1990; Kemezis 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. See also de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010 for a general questioning of the reality of Elagabalus and his reign, as it is contained in the literary source material. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. 80[79].1.2: “And he sent to Rome such a dispatch as was to be expected” (καὶ ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἄλλα τε οἶα εἰκὸς ἦν ἐπέστειλε). [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. As at 79[78].34.3, 35.1, 36.1, 37.2, 38.1, 38.2, 39.4, and 40.2. Dio continues to use the name, along with the Assyrian and Sardanapalus; cf. 80[79].1.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. 80[79].3.4-4.3. The praetorian prefect was Julianus Nestor. Governors included Fabius Agrippinus (Syria Coele), Pica Caerianus (legate to Arabia), C. Claudius Attalus Paterculianus (Cyprus), Aelius Decius Triccianus (Pannonia). [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. 80[79].4.3-7. Presumably that is the case for C. Julius Septimius Castinus, M. Munatius Sulla Cerialis, Seius Carus, and Valerianus Paetus. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. 80[79].6.1-3. For the identity of this individual, the same person also called Eutychianus by Dio, see Scott 2018a, 86-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. 80[79].7.1-4. In this section, Dio highlights those of lower rank whom the present circumstances made feel like they too could gain the throne. These included a certain ...s Verus (commander of *legio III Gallica*, formerly a centurion), Gellius Maximus (legate of *legio IV Scythica*), a son of a centurion, a woolworker, and a private citizen. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. It should be noted that at 80[79].8.3 the text of *Codex Vaticanus Graecus* 1288 runs out and that remainder of Dio’s text is derived again from the epitome of Xiphilinus and various excerpts. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. 80[79].11.2 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.], 80[79].11.3-12.1-21 [Xiph.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. 80[79].9.1-4 [Xiph.]. At 80[79].13.1 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.], Dio seems to relate the marriages to Elagabalus’ sexual deviance. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. The emperor’s effeminacy is discussed at 80[79].13-15. One of Elagabalus’ favorite lovers was Hierocles, whom the emperor wished to make Caesar, 80[79].15.4 [Xiph./*Exc. Val*.]. On the figure of Aurelius Zoticus, see further below. For Dio’s approach to Elagabalus’ sexuality, see recently Rantala 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. 80[79].16.1-6 [Xiph./*Exc*. *Val*.]. The *HA* (*Hel*. 10.2-7) tells a slightly different story, in which Zoticus was Elagabalus’ politically influential husband. While these differences might suggest a different source for the *HA* (Barnes 1972, 60), the stories mainly differ in Dio’s greater use of detail about their affair and a slight difference in emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. E.g., Sommer 2004, Icks 2011, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. “Thus far I have described events with as great accuracy as I could in every case, but for subsequent events I have not found it possible to give an accurate account, for the reason that I did not spend much time in Rome” (80[80].1.2 [Xiph.]: ταῦτα μὲν ἀκριβώσας, ὡς ἕκαστα ἠδυνήθην, συνέγραψα· τὰ δὲ δὴ λοιπὰ ἀκριβῶς ἐπεξελθεῖν οὐχ οἷός τε ἐγενόμην διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐπὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ διατρῖψαι). [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. 80[80].2.1 [Xiph.]. Dio’s use of κεφαλαιώσας (“I will narrate briefly”) in this passage suggests that Xiphilinus’ epitome, while likely abbreviated, still reflects the fact that Dio wrote a shorter account of this reign than others. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Herodian 6.1.2; *HA*, *Sev. Alex*. 2.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. *PIR2* E 67. He seems likely to be the same man who is noted as a freedman of Caracalla, known for his power and illegality (78[77].21.2 [Xiph.], and who escorted Diadumenian to Artabanus at the time of Elagabalus’ uprising (79[78].39.1); cf. Salway 1997, 147 n. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. See Aalders 1986, 292 n. 39 for parallel usage of this quotation at Lucian, *Nigr*. 18. It is unlikely, as Bering-Staschewski (1981, 126–127) suggests, that Dio was foreshadowing what we now refer to as the third century crisis, though the negative focus is certainly apparent. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Scott 2018a, 152-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)