

## Cassius Dio and the Principate

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# Misunderstanding History: Past and Present in Cassius Dio's Contemporary Books

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**Abstract** At the heart of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* was the charting of changes in government from the early kings to the monarchy established by Augustus, with particular emphasis on the decline of the Republic and the transition to monarchy. Throughout Dio's analysis we observe certain individuals who serve as examples to be emulated or avoided. In Dio's own age, emperors generally misunderstood or misinterpreted, willingly or unwillingly, these examples from the past. These failures allow us to consider Dio's understanding of the function of historiography and his ideas about the utility of his own work. While this may lead us to the negative conclusion that Dio believed all forms of government eventually degenerate, it also leaves open the possibility that Dio considered the writing of history, and thus the guarantee of a proper understanding of the past, to have positive, transformative consequences for Rome's monarchy.

**Keywords** Cassius Dio. Contemporary historiography. Severan dynasty. Pertinax. Septimius Severus. Caracalla. Macrinus. Elagabalus.

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Cassius Dio turned to the writing of history, like many others, during a time of crisis.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he cites the civil wars that were fought after the death of Commodus as the reason why he first took up the pen (73[72].23.1-3). His initial steps as a writer were shorter works, on portents that foretold the rise of Septimius Severus and on the civil wars that followed the death of Commodus. After approval from many, including the new *princeps*, Septimius Severus, Dio soon conceived of a much larger work – not a monograph on civil wars or divine signs, but one that covered the entirety of Roman history down to his own age. From Dio's surviving text, we can see that it was not only the civil wars of 193-197 CE that prompted Dio to write history. These civil wars were a symptom of a rupture in the governance of the Roman world. As Dio specifically states, the death of Marcus Aurelius brought an end to a golden kingship and was the beginning of a period of "iron and rust" under Marcus' son, Commodus (72[71].36.4).

Dio's decision to write history in the aftermath of these changes raises questions about how he conceived of the purpose of his work, especially in the absence of explicit statements on the topic. We unfortunately do not possess the full preface to the work, upon which we rely for guidance in interpreting so many other works of history. Despite this absence, notices throughout Dio's history highlight his main concerns. Scholars have long recognized the main themes of the work, namely the changes in the form of Rome's government over time and especially Dio's focus on the late Republican period of dynasts, its civil wars, and the change to a period of monarchy, Dio's preferred form of government.<sup>2</sup> Less clear are the goals that Dio had in mind for his history. Was his history a "possession for all time" like the work of Thucydides, his greatest influence?<sup>3</sup> Or was Dio attempting to speak to his peers and contemporaries about the direction of the principate of his own age?<sup>4</sup> Was he a moralizing historian, and did he see his work as having some sort of educational purpose?<sup>5</sup>

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**1** Cf. Marincola 1997, 34-9. I would like to thank the editors and reviewers for their valuable comments, which helped improve this paper greatly; all errors are my own. Translations of Greek and Latin texts are from the Loeb Classical Library.

**2** For Dio's interest in changes in government at Rome, see, e.g., Kuhn-Chen 2002, 183-201; Fromentin 2013 (who specifically attempts to reconstruct the content of Dio's lost preface); for his interest in monarchy in particular, see, e.g., Rich 1989, 92 and Madsen 2016, 138-9, as well as Bono's contribution to this volume.

**3** Thucydides' influence on Dio has been observed since antiquity and has been related to both his writing style and outlooks, especially his views of human nature; on the latter point, see, among others, Reinhold 1988, 215-17.

**4** Discussions of this sort center largely on the Agrippa-Maecenas debate in book 52, which Millar 1964, 107 calls "a serious, coherent, and fairly comprehensive plan for coping with what Dio conceived to be the evils of his time".

**5** For Dio's educational aims, see Lintott 1997, 2499-500.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and it will not be necessary, or even possible, in this paper to explore all of them. What I propose here is an examination of the inter-connectedness of Dio's work and its relationship to Dio's views of the purpose and utility of his project. As history of the entire Roman past, Dio's work is rife with correspondences throughout time, which serve to show the destructive consequences of certain behaviours and political changes, and which thus give Dio's work an overall interpretive framework.<sup>6</sup> Thus we can understand how the democracy of the Republic gave way to the monarchy through figures such as Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Julius Caesar.<sup>7</sup> As many have observed, Dio was a monarchist and Augustus stands at the most significant transformational point in the history and a figure to be emulated by his successors. The later emperors would either succeed in this regard (for example in the figures of Vespasian, Trajan, or especially Marcus Aurelius) or fail (for example, Caligula, Nero, or Domitian).

In Dio's contemporary books, we find that the emperors generally fall into the latter group. Pertinax rushed in his attempts to reform, Severus exhibited the wrong type of behaviour after the end of civil war and in his choice of hereditary succession, and Caracalla, Macrinus, and Elagabalus chose to emulate the wrong sorts of leaders. In each of these cases, the reader has already been primed to reach back to earlier portions of Dio's work and acknowledge the failures of Dio's contemporary emperors through this lens. In what follows, I argue that the emperors of Dio's own age frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted, willingly or unwillingly, the Roman past, and that these failures are brought out by Dio in earlier parts of his work. My goal is to move beyond a comparison of emperors to figures such as Augustus or Marcus Aurelius and to consider what the failures in these areas tell us about the nature of Dio's overall project.<sup>8</sup>

The self-reflective nature of the history suggests that Dio wished to elevate the importance not only of historiography generally, but especially his own history. With an analysis of the "use and abuse" of history in his contemporary books, I will suggest that Dio believed that knowledge of the past could lead to stability and good govern-

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**6** *Contra* the negative view put forward by Millar 1964, 45, that Dio's work was a mere record of events, and not an interpretation of them. Kemezis (2014, 90-149) has recently advanced a reading of Dio's text that foregrounds the reading the Late Republican and Augustan books as means of understanding Dio as an author of the Severan period; cf. the approach of Gowing 1992, 289-94.

**7** The bibliography on this topic has expanded significantly in recent years; for Dio's view of the fall of the Republic, see especially Fechner 1986; Sion-Jenkis 2000; Rees 2011; Burden-Strevens 2016, and Lindholmer 2017.

**8** This approach can be seen in, e.g., Bering-Staschewski 1981; Martini 2010, and Scott 2015. For Augustus as Dio's ideal, see especially Reinhold, Swan 1990.

ance, whereas its absence led to misinformed judgments and poor rule. Furthermore, Dio's work, which came after a long dearth of history writing *ab urbe condita* down to one's own time, serves, aspirationally, as a means of correcting the misunderstanding of the past that Dio observed in his own day.<sup>9</sup>

## 1 The Function of Cassius Dio's Contemporary Books

For most of the twentieth century, Cassius Dio's *Roman History* was poorly received, to a large extent because of the views put forth by Schwartz (1899) and Millar (1964). These two scholars saw Dio as a rather shallow imitator of Thucydides and as one whose main goal was to simply write the history without much thought toward historical outlook or overall goal. Among other critiques, Schwartz (1899, 1690-1) censured Dio for having no understanding of the oligarchy that governed the Republic and describes his moralizing as insubstantial and meaningless. And although Schwartz allowed that Dio's work becomes richer for the period of the Principate and especially for his own time enjoys a better reputation than Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*, the work as a whole is ultimately marred by his misunderstanding of the Republic, for which his history is the only continuous narrative that survives (1899, 1692). Millar's judgments fall along the same lines, although they are at times even harsher. For example, Millar (1964, 171) concluded that Dio had no narrative goal in mind, even for the history of his own period, and that his only goal was to write "as far as fate would allow" and that "the result was inevitably disappointing".

Taking a more positive approach, we can assess Dio's reasons for producing a new Roman history and ending it with a contemporary portion, narrated primarily from the author's point of view as a Roman senator. The importance of Dio's personal experience can be gleaned from his first-person statements in the final books. At 74[73].4.2 he explicitly marks the point when autopsy provides evidence for his reports and replaces his reliance on the authority of others. Later in the same book (74[73].18.3-4), Dio apologizes for including material that would generally have been considered unworthy of his history, except for the fact that he was recording what the emperor did and what he himself witnessed. On the latter point, Dio goes on to say that his eyewitness status made him the one who could most accurately report these events. This passage elevates the im-

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<sup>9</sup> On the lack of historiography *ab urbe condita* since the time of Livy, see Marincola 1997, 32; Mehl 2011, 152-3; Kemezis 2014, 92. Contemporary historiography in Greek had been absent in Rome as well: Kemezis 2010, 286.

portance of Dio's own experience, even at the expense of the dignity of his work. Moving to the end of the history, we find a corollary to the comments that we saw at the outset of the contemporary portion. At 80[80].1.2, Dio notes that his absence from Rome precluded him from any longer providing an accurate account of events. He thus ends his account summarily, and not with the end of a reign but at the point that he himself departed from politics at Rome. According to Dio, times were grim, for himself especially, as the emperor had to protect him from the threatening soldiers; the only thing he could do was, like Hector, escape "out of the dust and the slaying of men and the blood and the uproar" (80[80].5.1-3, quoting *Il.* 11.163-4).

The final books were important, in Dio's eyes, precisely because they record the experiences of the senator himself. Dio, of course, was hardly the first one to elevate personal experience in the writing of history, as Thucydides had long ago established the primacy of contemporary historiography. Dio's decision, however, to note the importance of his own experience suggests that he may have envisioned his work, at least conceptually, along the lines of an historian such as Polybius.<sup>10</sup> In this comparison, we can emphasize Polybius' description of his history as "pragmatic" and having moral and educational goals.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that the meaning of the phrase "pragmatic history" has been a matter of debate, we observe in other areas of Polybius' history his belief in the importance of personal experience and even, as Moore (2019) has recently argued, that history itself was a vehicle for gaining the type of experience needed by the politician or statesman.

Polybius also stresses the importance of his own participation in the events that he narrates. Polybius' decision to alter his original endpoint, changing it from Rome's victory over Macedon in 167 BCE to 146 BCE, was in fact made because of his experience of the period:

Polyb. 3.4.12-13 διὸ καὶ τῆς πραγματείας ταύτης τοῦτ' ἔσται τελεσιούργημα, τὸ γνῶναι τὴν κατάστασιν παρ' ἑκάστοις, ποία τις ἦν μετὰ τὸ καταγωνισθῆναι τὰ ὅλα καὶ πεσεῖν εἰς τὴν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἔξουσίαν ἕως τῆς μετὰ ταῦτα πάλιν ἐπιγενομένης ταραχῆς

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**10** Dio has generally not been seen as an heir to Polybius, either in terms of historical thinking or use of source material. As to the former, Millar 1964, 171 put it rather bluntly: "Dio was no Polybius". Regarding Dio's possible use of Polybius as a source, the most recent assessment argues that there is little evidence to believe that Dio followed the tradition put down by Polybius (Foulon 2016). Yet that hardly means that Dio did not know Polybius. Aside from the general unlikelihood of that, Dio (fr. 1.2) claims to have read almost everything written about the Romans, which must have been largely true, considering the scope of his work.

**11** On the debate over the meaning of "pragmatic history", see Thornton 2012 for an accessible overview with citations.

καὶ κινήσεως. ὑπὲρ ἧς διὰ τὸ μέγεθος τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ πράξεων καὶ τὸ παράδοξον τῶν συμβαινόντων, τὸ δὲ μέγιστον, διὰ τὸ τῶν πλείστων μὴ μόνον αὐτόπτης, ἀλλ' ὧν μὲν συνεργὸς ὧν δὲ καὶ χειριστὴς γεγονέναι, προήχθη ὡς ἀρχὴν ποιησάμενος ἄλλην γράφειν.

So the final end achieved by this work will be, to gain knowledge of what was the condition of each people after all had been crushed and had come under the dominion of Rome, until the disturbed and troubled time that afterwards ensued. About this latter, owing to the importance of the actions and the unexpected character of the events, and chiefly because I not only witnessed most but took part and even directed some, I was induced to write as if starting on a fresh work.

Polybius, of course, did not have to extend his work; rather, he decided to do so, in large part, because he played a role in the affairs of that period.<sup>12</sup>

Let us return to Millar's claim that Dio wanted only to write as far as fate allowed him. The fact that Dio ends the history with his own departure from political life demonstrates the importance of an accounting of the period that he experienced. His history as a whole showed the changes of government throughout the Roman past, and by ending in his own day Dio allows readers to judge for themselves whether Rome was still on a path to prosperity, as Dio saw it when the Republic changed to a monarchy. Dio, too, was uncertain of the endpoint of his history. He researched down to the death of Septimius Severus, but he continued on as long as fate allowed (73[72].23.3, 5).<sup>13</sup> His reason for continuing was probably much the same as Polybius: that he himself could attest to the situation better than anyone else. Like Polybius, Dio uses his own experiences to provide for the reader firsthand examples and an accounting that would be crucial for the reader in assessing the argument of the work as a whole.

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<sup>12</sup> On this point, see McGing 2010, 76.

<sup>13</sup> This passage is the main starting point regarding Dio's time of composition, which remains a contentious issue. For a review, see Scott 2018, 10-14. Letta 2019 has recently reconsidered the question in light of the theories put forth since his initial argument, re-affirming his belief in a late dating of the history, which Dio would have begun after the death of Septimius Severus and completed sometime in the 230s CE.

## 2 Pertinax: Not Quite Augustus

The defining factor of Pertinax' reign is its brevity – a mere eighty-seven days (74[73].10.3). His tale is a cautionary one, as he came to power ostensibly through a vote of the Senate but in reality through the favour of the praetorian prefect Laetus, and indeed it was the fall from Laetus' favour that brought about his end.<sup>14</sup> In this short period of time, however, he impressed Dio in a variety of ways. In addition to the usual honours Pertinax took the title *princeps senatus*, in accordance with the old custom (74[73].5.1).<sup>15</sup> In Dio's eyes, this made Pertinax more of a *civilis princeps* – certainly a good thing, as Dio had earlier praised Augustus for skilfully making such a change earlier (56.43.4).<sup>16</sup> He also swore to never put senators to death, and he sold off Commodus' luxuries in order to re-fill a depleted treasury (74[73].5.1-2).<sup>17</sup>

Dio provides a vivid description of the events that led to Pertinax' fall. After carrying out some unspecified reforms, Pertinax lost the favour of the soldiers and freedmen, some of whom entered the Senate house to promote their preferred replacement, Falco (74[73].8.2). Falco, however, was spared by Pertinax, even though the Senate had condemned him. It was not long before Pertinax was murdered, partly through the machinations of Laetus, who pretended he was putting soldiers to death over the Falco affair at the emperor's orders (74[73].9.1).

Pertinax met his end in the palace, facing down an angry band of praetorians, an act which Dio describes as either noble or stupid (74[73].9.3, *πρᾶγμα εἶτ' οὖν γενναῖον εἶτε ἀνόητον*). Dio further claims that Pertinax could have fought the soldiers off with the night guards or even hidden himself to secure his survival, but Pertinax instead tried to astound them with his appearance and words (74[73].9.4).

<sup>14</sup> In Dio's version, Laetus facilitated Pertinax' rise and brought his fall, noting that Laetus never showed any loyalty to the emperor (74[73].6.3). For a review of the various sources, see Appelbaum 2007.

<sup>15</sup> For the importance of Pertinax's use of this title, as well as further consideration of Pertinax' reforms, see also Pistellato's contribution to this volume.

<sup>16</sup> In the former passage, Dio says that Pertinax "wished to be *δημοτικὸς*", whereas in the latter, he writes that Augustus "mixed monarchy with democracy" (*τὴν μοναρχίαν τῇ δημοκρατίᾳ μίξας*). These terms, *δημοτικός* and *δημοκρατία*, are practically synonymous in Dio and should be equated with the Latin term *civilis* (Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 44). For the concept of the *civilis princeps* in Dio's work, see Bono 2018, as well as the contributions of Bono and Madsen to this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Pertinax also decided not to make his wife Augusta or his son Caesar (74[73].7). This move confused Dio a bit, since the Senate had granted these honours. While Dio provides possible explanations, the likeliest is that Pertinax recognized the failure of inherited succession that had resulted in Commodus' coming to power and wanted to avoid the same charge.

This tactic failed, and Pertinax was eventually struck dead, along with Eclectus, and his head was cut off and placed atop a spear for display (74[73].10.1-2). It is at this point that we receive Dio's final judgment: Pertinax failed to understand that restoring the state required both wisdom and time – it could not be all completed at once.<sup>18</sup>

Bering-Staschewski (1981, 44-5) has observed that Dio's portrait of Pertinax shows how he fell short of the ideal of Marcus Aurelius. While it may be true that Pertinax was not the perfect emperor that Marcus was, it must also be admitted that the circumstances of his reign were not the same. This comparison, then, ultimately misses the point. Two points should be made instead. First, a significant change occurred under Commodus, which Marcus did not have to deal with, namely the growth of the praetorian prefect and guard. This growth in power ultimately brought about Pertinax' fall, no matter how much senatorial support he had. Second, although Marcus met challenges during his reign, he did not need to enact a complete settlement of the state. Pertinax, however, needed to re-order the state, in the same way that Augustus did, and Dio's wording at 74[73].10.3, πολιτικὴ κατάσταση, recalls the comments in Augustus' necrology, that the first princeps "transferred the government in a way to give it the greatest power, and vastly strengthened it" (56.44.2 τὸ πολίτευμα πρὸς τε τὸ κράτιστον μετεκόσμησε καὶ ἰσχυρῶς ἐκράτυνεν). The language also recalls the statement in the Greek version of the *Res Gestae*, that Octavian was made consul by the people and chosen as one of the triumvirs "to settle the affairs of the state" (ἐπὶ τῆι καταστάσει τῶν δημοσίων πραγμάτων). While Dio does not use this vocabulary elsewhere in his extant history, the idea recalls the figure of Augustus, who firmly established monarchy in Rome.<sup>19</sup>

This recollection brings the reader back to the central section of the history, which traces the period of dynasts through to the rise of young Caesar and beginning of monarchy. This process was lengthy, which is stressed by the number of references to the stops and starts that it went through.<sup>20</sup> Further, even after the civil wars of the triumviral period Augustus did not consolidate his power in a short period. Dio spends an entire book (53) on the settlements of the 20s BCE. The length of this process stands in direct contrast to the brevity of Pertinax' reign, which Dio stresses in his brief eulo-

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**18** 74[73].10.3. Appelbaum 2007, 203-4 suggests that the displeasure of the praetorians was rooted in Pertinax' attempts to reform the body. For the death of Pertinax interpreted through a stoic lens, see Noe and Pistellato in this volume.

**19** I thank Antonio Pistellato for helping make this connection, for which see also his contribution to this volume.

**20** For example, Dio suggests at 44.1.2 that Julius Caesar had introduced a monarchy in Rome, but it is not until 52.1.1 that he states that had changed to a monarchy, "strictly speaking".



gy (74[73].10.3). Dio's Pertinax felt that he could quickly conciliate both praetorians and Senate, but he did not realize how much work needed to be done to repair the balance of power in the state. Just as Pertinax did not remember his example of Augustus, he also did not understand the break that occurred between Marcus and Commodus. Dio clearly pointed this out, with his famous comment on the descent from the golden kingship of Marcus to a period of iron and rust. Pertinax, an accomplished figure under Marcus (e.g., 72[71].3.2, 22.1), seems to have underestimated the change that had occurred and what it would take to rectify the situation. Readers of Dio's history would know otherwise.

### 3 Septimius Severus as a New Trajan

In 193 CE Septimius Severus decided to challenge the rule of Didius Julianus from his position in Pannonia, and his march toward Italy revealed the fragility of Julianus' hold on power.<sup>21</sup> Dio reports that Severus took Ravenna without opposition and that praetorians turned against Julianus. Julianus' attempts to get the Senate to name Severus his co-emperor failed; instead, the Senate condemned Julianus, deified Pertinax, and hailed Severus as emperor. Julianus was killed, like Pertinax, in the palace.

In the aftermath of these events Severus carefully orchestrated his entrance into Rome, as Dio explains:

Cass. Dio 75[74].1.3-5 πράξας δὲ ὁ Σεουήρος ταῦτα ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἐσήει, [καὶ] μέχρι μὲν τῶν πυλῶν ἐπὶ τε τοῦ ἵππου καὶ ἐν ἐσθῆτι ἵππικῇ ἔλθων, ἐντεῦθεν δὲ τὴν τε πολιτικὴν ἀλλαξάμενος καὶ βαδίσας· καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ὁ στρατὸς πᾶς, καὶ οἱ πεζοὶ καὶ οἱ ἵππεις, ὠπλισμένοι παρηκολούθησαν. καὶ ἐγένετο ἡ θέα πασῶν ὧν ἐόρακα λαμπροτάτη· ἢ τε γὰρ πόλις πᾶσα ἀνθεσί τε καὶ δάφναις ἐστεφάνωτο καὶ ἱματίοις ποικίλοις ἐκεκόσμητο, φωσί τε καὶ θυμιάμασιν ἔλαμπε, καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι λευχειμονοῦντες καὶ γανύμενοι πολλὰ ἐπευφήμουν, οἳ τε στρατιῶται ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις ὥσπερ ἐν πανηγύρει τινὶ πομπῆς ἐκπρεπόντως ἀνεστρέφοντο, καὶ προσέτι ἡμεῖς ἐν κόσμῳ περιήειμεν. ὁ δ' ὄμιλος ἰδεῖν τε αὐτὸν καὶ τι φθεγγομένου ἀκοῦσαι, ὥσπερ τι ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἡλλιωμένου, ποθοῦντες ἠρεθίζοντο· καὶ τινες καὶ ἐμετεώριζον ἀλλήλους, ὅπως ἐξ ὑψηλοτέρου αὐτὸν κατίδωσιν.

After doing this Severus entered Rome. He advanced as far as the gates on horseback and in cavalry costume, but there he changed to civilian attire and proceeded on foot; and the entire army, both

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<sup>21</sup> For this and what follows, see 74[73].17.

infantry and cavalry, accompanied him in full armour. The spectacle proved the most brilliant of any that I have witnessed; for the whole city had been decked with garlands of flowers and laurel and adorned with richly coloured stuffs, and it was ablaze with torches and burning incense; the citizens, wearing white robes and with radiant countenances, uttered many shouts of good omen; the soldiers, too, stood out conspicuous in their armour as they moved about like participants in some holiday procession; and finally, we senators were walking about in state. 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.

Severus knew that first impressions were important, and he entered the city not as a conquering general, but as a *civilis princeps*. He quickly connected himself to the favoured Pertinax, and the reaction of the Senate and people of Rome was one of great expectation.

The description of this entrance is similar to the one we see of Trajan, as in Pliny's *Panegyricus* (22, excerpted):

*Ac primum, qui dies ille, quo exspectatus desideratusque urbem tuam ingressus es! Iam hoc ipsum, quod ingressus es, quam mirum laetumque! Nam priores in vehi et importari solebant: non dico quadriiugo curru, et albetibus equis, sed humeris hominum, quod arrogantius erat. Tu sola corporis proceritate elatior aliis et excelsior, non de patientia nostra quendam triumphum, sed de superbia principum egisti. Ergo non aetas quemquam, non valetudo, non sexus retardavit, quo minus oculos insolito spectaculo impleret [...]. Videres referta tecta ac laborantia, ac ne eum quidem vacantem locum, qui non nisi suspensum et instabile vestigium caperet; opletas undique vias, angustumque tramitem relictum tibi; alacrem hinc atque inde populum, ubique par gaudium paremque clamorem.*

Now first of all, think of the day when you entered your city, so long awaited and so much desired! The very method of your entry won delight and surprise, for your predecessors chose to be borne, or carried in, not satisfied even to be drawn by four white horses in a triumphal carriage, but lifted up on human shoulders in their overbearing pride. You towered above us only because of your own splendid physique; your triumph did not rest on our humiliation, won as it was over imperial arrogance. Thus neither age, health nor sex held your subjects back from feasting their eyes on this unexpected sight.... 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 leav-

ing only a narrow passage for you, on every side the excited populace, cheers and rejoicing everywhere.

Although there is no parallel account of Trajan's entrance into Rome in Dio's surviving history, there is other evidence suggesting that Severus took him as a model as he entered Rome in 193 CE.<sup>22</sup> Dio tells us of two main actions that Trajan took at the beginning of his reign:

Cass. Dio 69.5.2, 4 ὡς δὲ αὐτοκράτωρ ἐγένετο, ἐπέστειλε τῇ βουλῇ αὐτοχειρίᾳ ἄλλα τε καὶ ὡς οὐδένα ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν ἀποσφάξει ἢ ἀτιμάσοι, καὶ ταῦτα καὶ ὄρκους οὐ τότε μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ὕστερον ἐπιστώσατο. Αἰλιανὸν δὲ καὶ τοὺς δορυφόρους τοὺς κατὰ Νέρουα στασιάσαντας, ὡς καὶ χρησόμενός τι αὐτοῖς, μεταπεμψάμενος ἐκποδῶν ἐποίησατο. ἐς δὲ τὴν Ἱώμην ἐσελθὼν πολλὰ ἐποίηε πρὸς τε διόρθωσιν τῶν κοινῶν καὶ πρὸς χάριν τῶν ἀγαθῶν.

When he became emperor, he sent a letter to the senate, written with his own hand, in which he declared, among other things, that he would not slay nor disfranchise any good man; and he confirmed this by oaths not only at the time but also later. He sent for Aelianus and the Praetorians who had mutinied against Nerva, pretending that he was going to employ them for some purpose, and then put them out of the way. When he came to Rome, he did much to reform the administration of affairs and much to please the better element.

Parallels to Severus' actions are observable. First, Severus punished the praetorians who murdered Pertinax, which Dio describes before the entry itself (75[74].1.1-2). But in a twist, it was not the praetorians who caused unrest in the city under Severus, as it had been for Trajan. Instead, Dio explains:

Cass. Dio 75[74].2.3 αἰτίαν <τε> ἔσχεν ἐπὶ τῷ πλήθει στρατιωτῶν ὀχλώδη τὴν πόλιν ποιῆσαι καὶ δαπάνη χρημάτων περιττῆ τὸ κοινὸν βαρῦναι, καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ὅτι μὴ ἐν τῇ τῶν συνόντων οἱ εὐνοίᾳ ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ ἐκείνων ἰσχύι τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς σωτηρίας ἐποιεῖτο.

He was blamed for making the city turbulent through the presence of so many troops and for burdening the State by his excessive expenditures of money, and most of all, for placing his hope

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**22** 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, 386-7). 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).

of safety in the strength of his army rather than in the good will of his associates in the government.

Severus also followed the tradition of promising not to put any senators to death, which Dio follows up with the caustic remark: "Yet he himself was the first to violate this law instead of keeping it, and made away with many senators; indeed, Julius Solon himself, who framed this decree at his behest, was murdered not long afterwards. There were many things Severus did that were not to our liking".<sup>23</sup>

From Dio's account, with help from Pliny, we get the impression that despite Severus' attempts to recall the figure of Trajan, he was unable to keep up the appearance. In this example we see Dio's account as a corrective to the image that Severus was trying to cultivate – not just that he explains how Severus fell away from it, but how, although Severus carefully chose whom to imitate, knowledge of the past would render that image hollow and ineffective. Severus might at first seem a marvel to behold as he entered Rome, but his actions betrayed his outward appearance.

#### 4 Septimius Severus and Sulla, Marius, and Augustus

Despite his triumphant entrance into Rome in 193 CE, it would be several wars and more civil war before Severus was able to hold the position as princeps unchallenged. He first carried out a campaign against Pescennius Niger, who had been proclaimed emperor by his troops in Syria and whom he finally defeated at the Battle of Issus in May 194 CE.<sup>24</sup> In the following year Severus stripped from Clodius Albinus the title of Caesar, and by the end of that year Albinus had been declared an enemy of the state. Meanwhile Severus elevated his son Caracalla as Caesar.<sup>25</sup> Conflict with Albinus was inevitable and would occur at Lugdunum, with huge forces on both sides.<sup>26</sup> Severus prevailed in a difficult battle, and Albinus died by suicide, thus leaving Severus as the victor in the civil wars that raged from 193-197 CE.

The death of Albinus is an important inflection point for Dio's story about Severus. Dio's description of the aftermath of the battle is graphic and incisive; he writes that the battle resulted in a plain

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**23** Cass. Dio 75[74].2.2 πρώτος μέντοι αὐτὸς τὸν νόμον τουτονὶ παρέβη καὶ οὐκ ἐφύλαξε, πολλοὺς ἀνελών· καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Σόλων ὁ Ἰούλιος, ὁ καὶ τὸ δόγμα τοῦτο κατὰ πρόσταξιν αὐτοῦ συγγράψας, οὐ πολλῶ ὕστερον ἐσφάγη, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν ἡμῖν οὐ καταθύμια ἔπραττεν.

**24** Cass. Dio 75[74].6-8; *HA, Sev.* 8-9; Birley 2000, 108-14.

**25** *HA, Sev.* 10.1-3.

**26** See Graham 1978 and Birley 2000, 124-5 for an accounting of the size of the respective armies. The battle took place February 19, 197 CE.

strewn with Roman corpses and had caused Rome's power to decline (76[75].7.1-2). Severus had Albinus' head sent to Rome and put upon a pole for display, an action that Dio says shows that Severus was in no way a good leader.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, Dio states that he is providing details of what really happened, not the version of events that Severus himself had published (76[75].7.3). Severus' actions in the Senate would be just as astonishing. He claimed to be the son of Marcus Aurelius and the brother of Commodus, whom he was now deifying despite having reviled him previously (76[75].7.4).

The mention of Marcus Aurelius in this passage is intriguing, as the entire episode recalls the revolt of Avidius Cassius. Both are examples of civil war, and in Dio's telling Marcus succeeded where Severus failed. Facing the threat from Cassius in Syria, Marcus gave a speech to his soldiers in which he bewailed the evils of war (72[71].24.1).<sup>28</sup> He was committed to doing what was best for the state, even if that meant turning over power to Cassius (72[71].24.4). His goal was to forgive Cassius of his folly, and he worried that the opportunity to do so might be taken away by Cassius' death (72[71].26.1-2). In a pointed conclusion, Marcus ends his speech thus: "For that would be the one profit I could derive from our present ills, if I could settle this affair well and show to all mankind that there is a right way to deal even with civil wars". As it turns out, Cassius was soon killed, and his head was cut off and saved for Marcus' review. Marcus, however, refused to look at the severed head and had it buried instead (72[71].27.2-3<sup>1</sup>, 72[71].28.1).

Marcus' assertion that there was a "right way" to end civil war hardly finds a correspondence with Severus' behaviour in his own civil wars. As we have seen, Severus' war with Albinus was hardly for the benefit of the state; as Dio puts it, "thus Severus conquered; but the Roman power suffered a severe blow, inasmuch as countless numbers had fallen on both sides".<sup>29</sup> His behaviour continued to di-

<sup>27</sup> Cass. Dio 76[75].7.4. *HA, Sev.* 11.6-9 is more explicit about the mutilation of the corpse, claiming that Severus had the half-dead Albinus beheaded, the head sent to Rome, and the body placed outside his house, so that he might ride over it with his chariot. It also reports an alternate tradition that the bodies of Albinus, his wife, and children were thrown into the Rhone.

<sup>28</sup> Cass. Dio 72[71].24.1 πῶς γὰρ οὐ δεινὸν πολέμοις ἡμᾶς ἐκ πολέμων συμφέρεσθαι; πῶς δ' οὐκ ἄτοπον καὶ ἐμφυλίῳ συμπλακῆναι; A speech on this occasion is also mentioned by the *Historia Augusta* and attributed to Marius Maximus (*HA, Marcus* 25.10). The details, however, differ. The speech recorded by Maximus is said to have been delivered by Marcus Aurelius to his friends, and in this speech Marcus is said to have called the people of Antioch rebels, despite having pardoned them publicly. The difference in accounts of the speech is interesting. It might be that Dio and Marius Maximus included two different speeches, but it may also be that Dio used the occasion to highlight a theme (civil war) that runs through his work and also to further elevate Marcus' character.

<sup>29</sup> Cass. Dio 76[75].7.1 ὁ μὲν δὴ Σεουήρος οὕτως ἐνίκησεν, ἡ δὲ δύναμις ἢ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἰσχυρῶς ἔπταισεν ἅτε ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἀναριθμῆτων πεσόντων. On Severus' lack of clemency, see Rantala 2016, 168-70.

verge from Marcus', particularly with regard to his treatment of Albinus, who had died by suicide. Dio reports:

Cass. Dio 76[75].7.3-4 ἰδὼν δ' οὖν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς πολλὰ δὲ τῇ γλώττῃ χαρισάμενος, τὸ μὲν ἄλλο ρίφῃναι ἐκέλευσε, τὴν δὲ κεφαλὴν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην πέμψας ἀνεσταύρωσεν. ἐφ' οἷς δῆλος γενόμενος ὡς οὐδὲν εἶη αὐτοκράτορος ἀγαθοῦ, ἔτι μᾶλλον ἡμᾶς τε καὶ τὸν δῆμον, οἷς ἐπέστειλεν, ἐξεφόβησεν. ἄτε γὰρ παντὸς ἤδη τοῦ ὀπλισμένου κερρατικῶς ἐξέχεεν ἐς τοὺς ἀνόπλους πᾶν ὅσον ὀργῆς ἐς αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ πρὶν χρόνου ἠθροίκει.

The emperor, after viewing the body of Albinus and feasting his eyes upon it to the full, while giving free rein to his tongue as well, ordered all but the head to be cast away, but sent the head to Rome to be exposed on a pole. As this action showed clearly that he possessed none of the qualities of a good ruler, he alarmed both us and the populace more than ever by the commands that he sent; for now that he had overcome all armed opposition, he was venting upon the unarmed all the wrath that he had stored up against them in the past.

It is therefore striking to see Severus in this chapter invoke Marcus as a model, since reports that at this time Severus adopted himself into the Antonine line, with Marcus as his father and Commodus as his brother, an action that Dio says shocked the senators (76[75].7.4).

Other models are explicitly evoked in the following sentence. Dio paraphrases Severus' speech to the Senate on this occasion, noting that "he praised the severity and cruelty of Sulla, Marius and Augustus as the safer course and deprecated the mildness of Pompey and Caesar as having proved the ruin of those very men".<sup>30</sup> These figures of course feature prominently in Dio's earlier narrative, especially Sulla, famously known for his cruelty.<sup>31</sup> Severus' misunderstanding here, however, has to do with the figure of Augustus. Although Augustus might have had a reputation for cruelty in his earlier career, his character is transformed in 4 CE, when he takes advice from Livia on how to deal with conspirators. Livia advocates adopting a stance of clemency as an expedient measure, and this change in Augustus comes as part

**30** Cass. Dio 76[75].8.1 καὶ τὴν μὲν Σύλλου καὶ Μαρίου καὶ Αὐγούστου αὐστηρίαν τε καὶ ὠμότητα ὡς ἀσφαλεστέραν ἐπαινῶν, τὴν δὲ Πομπηίου <καὶ> Καίσαρος ἐπιείκειαν ὡς ὀλεθρίαν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις γεγεννημένην κακίζων.

**31** For an analysis of the figure of Sulla in Dio's history, see Urso 2016, Berdowski 2020. See also Osgood 2020, 318-20 for this speech's ability to recall the one delivered by Julius Caesar at 43.15-18.

of a longer transformation of his character throughout Dio's narrative.<sup>32</sup>

Severus does not seem to understand this change, as he places Augustus in a category of those who preferred cruelty. This is an important misunderstanding, because it is at this point that we should begin to see Severus' character transform. He has defeated his rivals, just as Augustus vanquished Mark Antony, Lepidus, and Sextus Pompeius, and he has securely placed himself upon the throne. Severus instead chooses to model himself on the figures of Sulla and Marius, known for their cruelty in Dio and elsewhere. But he also misconstrues Dio's message that civil wars were at times necessary, but that it is the behaviour of the *princeps* in their aftermath that is crucial to putting the state on secure footing.<sup>33</sup>

Another point to be made here is the connection to the treatment of Albinus, discussed above. This decapitation and display of Albinus' severed head in the Forum re-activates for the reader several earlier episodes from the history, which Lange (2020, 192) has recently suggested form a "topos of internecine conflict in Dio". Indeed, it connects directly to the civil wars of the Late Republic, when decapitation and display were practically regular occurrences.<sup>34</sup> In the Albinus episode, Dio implicitly compares the actions of Severus to those of the Late Republic dynasts, recounted in earlier books. It is therefore all the more shocking to see Severus explicitly associate himself with these characters, in his citation of his favoured dynasts of those civil wars. The explicit mention of Sulla, Marius, and Augustus puts even more focus on Severus' failures: he overtly demonstrates his knowledge of the Roman past, but does so in a perverse way that demonstrates his imperfect understanding of Roman history.

## 5 Septimius Severus and Hereditary Succession

The question of the passage of power from one emperor to the next was an important issue for historians of the Roman principate, including Dio. Earlier in his history Dio had shown his preference for adoptive succession, specifically at the adoption of Trajan by Nerva and in the speech on adoptive succession that he puts into the mouth

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**32** This speech of Livia to Augustus on clemency has been extensively commented upon; for references, see Allen 2020, 46 fn. 1. Allen 2020, 53-6 also discusses the transformative nature of this exchange, as a way for Augustus to move beyond the violence of the Late Republic. Burden-Strevens (2020, 187-90) notes the incongruity of Livia's description of Augustus' reign, as more in line with Dio's depiction of the proscriptions under Sulla or the triumvirs. Severus here seems to believe in this crueler version of Augustus' reign, or at least prefers to align himself with the *princeps*' actions as a triumvir.

**33** Scott 2020, 345-8.

**34** E.g., fr. 102.8-9, fr. 109, 37.40, 47.3, 47.49 (all discussed in Lange 2020).

of Hadrian.<sup>35</sup> With two sons Severus was in some ways bound to pass power to them. Yet Dio is clear that Severus had a negative example of this action to learn from, namely in the passage of power from Marcus Aurelius to Commodus.

In his depiction of Marcus, Dio shows an emperor who recognized the shortcomings of his son and attempted to compensate for them. In his final comment on Marcus, Dio writes:

Cass. Dio 72[71].36.4 ἐν δ' οὖν τοῦτο ἐς τὴν οὐκ εὐδαιμονίαν αὐτοῦ συνηέχθη, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν καὶ θρέψας καὶ παιδεύσας ὡς οἶόν τε ἦν ἄριστα, πλεῖστον αὐτοῦ ὅσον διήμαρτε. περὶ οὗ ἤδη ρητέον, ἀπὸ χρυσῆς τε βασιλείας ἐς σιδηρᾶν καὶ κατιωμένην τῶν τε πραγμάτων τοῖς τότε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν νῦν καταπεσοῦσης τῆς ἱστορίας.

Just one thing prevented him from being completely happy, namely, that after rearing and educating his son in the best possible way he was vastly disappointed in him. This matter must be our next topic; for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day.

Marcus' plan, aside from educating Commodus well, was to surround his son with advisors and guardians, many of whom were drawn from "the best men in the Senate" (τοὺς κρατίστους τῶν βουλευτῶν, 73[72].1.2). Commodus, however, rejected these men, preferring a life of luxury in Rome. In this brief overview of the passage of power from Marcus to Commodus, we can see Dio attempting to put Marcus in the best possible light and blaming Commodus for any of his own failings.

When we get to the case of Septimius Severus, the situation is quite different. Commodus' reign had been a disaster, and the failure of hereditary succession ought to have been clear, as they in fact were to Severus, at least in Dio's telling. During Severus' British campaign, Dio reports that Caracalla attempted to murder his father (77[76].14.4). Severus later confronted Caracalla in private, and to this scene Dio appends this comment:

Cass. Dio 77[76].14.7 τοιαῦτα εἰπὼν ὅμως οὐδὲν δεινὸν αὐτὸν ἔδρασε, καίπερ πολλάκις μὲν τὸν Μάρκον αἰτιασάμενος ὅτι τὸν Κόμμοδον οὐχ ὑπεξεῖλε, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς τῷ υἱεῖ ἀπειλήσας τοῦτο ποιήσειν. ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνα μὲν ὀργιζόμενος αἰεὶ ποτε ἔλεγε, τότε δὲ φιλότεκνος μᾶλλον ἢ φιλόπολις ἐγένετο· καίτοι καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἐν τούτῳ παῖδα προέδωκε, σαφῶς εἰδῶς τὰ γενησόμενα.

**35** Madsen 2016, 152. For a less positive interpretation of this speech, see Davenport; Mallan 2014.



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.

This is a chilling passage. For our purposes, Dio makes it clear that Severus understood the negative example set by Marcus, yet chose to follow it anyway, even if it meant destruction both for the state and for his son, Geta. We should pair this passage with Severus' final words to his sons, which are both deeply ironic and impressively prescient: "Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men" (ὁμονοεῖτε, τοὺς στρατιώτας πλουτίζετε, τῶν ἄλλων πάντων καταφρονεῖτε, 77[76].15.2).<sup>36</sup>

In Dio's account, the first precept is almost immediately broken, as Geta is murdered by his brother just a few chapters later (78[77].2.3-4). The second and third imperatives, however, are picked up almost as quickly, as we soon find Caracalla in the praetorian camp exclaiming, "Rejoice, fellow-soldiers, for now I am in a position to do you favours" (78[77].3.1).<sup>37</sup> It is not necessary here to provide specifics on the evils of Caracalla's reign, as Dio devotes practically his entire narrative of book 78[77] to them. It will be worthwhile, however, to look briefly at some of the models of rule that Caracalla took up.

The most prominent is his imitation of Alexander, but Dio also notes Caracalla's emulation of the cruelty of Sulla (78[77].13.7).<sup>38</sup> The example of Sulla is striking here, since we saw it invoked earlier by Severus. Severus, however, paired Sulla with Marius and Augustus, while here we have Caracalla limiting the model to the example of cruelty *par excellence*, thus essentially boiling down the model to its very essence. As for Alexander, Millar's (1964, 151) point is important, that *imitatio Alexandri* was not new to Rome, but the lengths to

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**36** We might also note the irony that Severus claimed to be the brother of Commodus, as noted above, yet here treats him as an unworthy ruler.

**37** For another example of enriching the soldiers and scorning everyone else, see 78[77].9.1-7, 78[77].10.1, 4, 78[77].24.1.

**38** For the imitation of Alexander, see 78[77].7-9; 18.1; 22.1; 79[78].19.2, as well as Hdn. 4.8.1-3, 6-9; *HA, Car.* 2.1-2. Caracalla's imitation of Alexander and Sulla has recently been analyzed by Zanin 2020, who concludes that Caracalla adopted these *personae*, inherited to some extent from his father, as a means of turning away from the senatorial elite and toward his provincial constituencies.

which Caracalla took left him open to Dio's "hatred and mockery".<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Caracalla used it as a pretext for war against Parthia, when he asked for Artabanus' daughter in marriage, in what must have been an imitation of Alexander's marriage to the daughter of Darius.<sup>40</sup> Dio considered this campaign barely worthy of record (79[78].1.3).

The failure of hereditary succession could be extended beyond Caracalla to the remainder of the Severan dynasty.<sup>41</sup> The point to be made now is that Severus' decision to pass power to his sons went against the lessons of the past, and his prescriptions for their success, namely that they enrich the soldiers, demonstrates the shifts in power that began under Severus and would continue later. Caracalla, in turn, shows even less care in choosing his models, opting for an overdone version of Alexander and the cruelty of Sulla. His reign proves both the failure of hereditary succession and the misunderstanding of good examples for emulation.

## 6 Macrinus and Elagabalus, Between Septimius Severus and Caracalla

Macrinus came to power after the murder of Caracalla and had to consider, quickly, his strategy for self-presentation.<sup>42</sup> As a former praetorian prefect and the first equestrian emperor, his rule needed an infusion of legitimacy. He was far from Rome and amongst a number of legions that Caracalla had assembled for his Parthian campaign. His solution to this problem was to connect himself to Septimius Severus, while at the same time at least partially effacing the memory of Caracalla.

Dio reports that, in his first missive to the Senate, Macrinus gave himself an expansive titulature: "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".<sup>43</sup> The last part of this sentence is interesting, not only because Macrinus was bypass-

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<sup>39</sup> See also Mallan 2017, 134-6, 144 for Caracalla's "misguided emulation" of Alexander, along with the similar comments by Carlsen 2016, 328. For a fuller analysis of the *imitatio*, see Baharal 1994.

<sup>40</sup> Cass. Dio 79[78].1.1; Hdn. 4.10.1-2. Meckler 1994, 31.

<sup>41</sup> See Madsen 2016 for further analysis.

<sup>42</sup> For the story, see Cass. Dio 79[78].4-6, Hdn. 4.12-13; *HA, Car. 7; Macr. 4.7-8*.

<sup>43</sup> Cass. Dio 79[78].16.2 ἐνέγραψεν δὲ ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ Καίσαρα θ' ἑαυτὸν καὶ αὐτοκράτορα καὶ Σεουήρον, προσθεὶς τῷ Μακρινῷ ὀνόματι καὶ εὐσεβῆ καὶ εὐτυχῆ καὶ Αὐγουστον καὶ ἀνθύπατον, οὐκ ἀναμένων τι, ὡς εἰκὸς ἦν, παρ' ἡμῶν ψήφισμα.

ing the Senate, but because he seems to have assumed these titles almost immediately upon his proclamation as Augustus in the East. The Senate in turn elevated his son Diadumenian to patrician status and gave him the titles of *princeps iuventutis* and Caesar (79[78].17.1). The Senate further voted Macrinus a horserace to celebrate his *dies imperii*, but this Macrinus refused. The reason is important: he had arranged for his *dies imperii* to align with the birthday of Septimius Severus, and thus claimed that the event had already been appropriately celebrated.

Macrinus' associations with Septimius Severus, made from the very outset of his reign, would continue. Facing a fiscal crisis, Macrinus decided to reduce military pay, taking care to do so only for new recruits. Macrinus leaned on the authority of Severus, making the reduction only to the levels set by him (and thus negating the increase in pay instituted by Caracalla) (79[78].28.3). Dio approved of this change 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.<sup>44</sup>

The trap in which Macrinus was caught is summarized neatly by Dio a few chapters later, when he recounts another letter to the Senate:

Cass. Dio 79[78].36.2-3 καὶ ἵνα γέ τις ἄλλα ὅσα παρά τε τοῦ Σεουήρου καὶ τοῦ υἱέος αὐτοῦ πρὸς διαφθορὰν τῆς ἀκριβοῦς στρατείας εὗρηνο παραλίπη, οὔτε δίδοσθαι σφισι τὴν μισθοφορὰν τὴν ἐντελὴ πρὸς ταῖς ἐπιφοραῖς, ἄς 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.

This brief excerpt shows not only the tension between the methods of Severus and those of his son, but also the overall theme of military

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<sup>44</sup> Cass. Dio 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.

indiscipline. While we should be circumspect about Dio's opinion of the military given his senatorial disposition, he highlights the rise of the military's influence that brought Severus to power and maintained the position of his dynasty.<sup>45</sup>

Macrinus was soon at war with Elagabalus, who would eventually defeat the equestrian upstart and claim his position as emperor. It is notable that Macrinus and Elagabalus looked only to the recent past for precedents of a ruler to emulate, as can be seen in the discussion above. This amounts to a serious case of amnesia, as there is no appeal to a model emperor such as Augustus or Marcus Aurelius. It is worth noting that this absence is better seen as part of Dio's plan, rather than a shortcoming on Dio's part, whether that be his lack of historical outlook or unsystematic approach to his material. As we have seen thus far, Dio was highly attuned to the repetition of models or *exempla* (good or bad) throughout his history. For the reader of Dio, the lack of an appeal to a model princeps in this situation reverberates throughout the text and punctuates an ending which suggests that a return to a stable form of monarchy under a good ruler is nearly impossible. For Macrinus and Elagabalus, the only models are those of the recent past, a choice which is perhaps driven in part by the elevation of the military as the most important constituency of the monarch. Indeed, the conflict between Macrinus and Elagabalus boils down to a competition between the models of Severus and Caracalla, and more specifically which one paid the soldiers more. Strikingly, this outcome hearkens back to Severus' dying words to his sons (discussed above), that they should enrich the soldiers. But even more importantly, knowledge of Roman history is not properly deployed by the main characters in the story, which calls into question the direction of the monarchy and the needs of Dio's contemporaries to re-learn the lessons of the past.

## 7 Conclusion: A Changed Monarchy

In the survey above, it is possible to observe a number of occasions when characters from Dio's own period use examples from the past to inform various choices that they have to make, related to such issues as the proper behaviour of the monarch, hereditary succession, or self-representation. These examples exist as a form of self-reference within Dio's work and allow the reader to reflect on the choices that have been made. But we should also acknowledge that the reader's interpretation is in many ways manipulated by Dio, who saw the Roman past as an interlocking sequence of characters, whose actions

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<sup>45</sup> For Dio's view of the military, see De Blois 1997.

and behaviour could re-appear at other times. Thus, there is not just cruel action, but the figure of Sulla who can be called upon again and again as a representation of that character trait. The same could be said for the figure of Augustus, the one who successfully brought Rome out of the period of dynasts and into a stable form of monarchy.

In Dio's own age, we find the figure of Pertinax, whose reign showed that being a reformer like Augustus could not be achieved quickly. Septimius Severus is presented as quite knowledgeable about Roman history, but is unable to properly deploy the lessons of that past. As such, he misunderstands the character of Augustus and incorrectly classes him with Sulla and Marius. Likewise, he mimics Trajan's actions, which Dio saw as positive, but cannot adhere to their underlying principles. His ultimate failure, passing power to his sons, should have been avoided, since he knew the example of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Instead, he opted for love of his family over love of his country, even if that meant the sacrifice of his younger son, Geta (77[76].14.7). After the death of Severus, we meet a series of emperors who are unable to look to the Roman past in the same way. Caracalla chose emulation of Alexander and Sulla, while the conflict between Macrinus and Elagabalus was decided through allegiance to either Septimius Severus or Caracalla.

These models, occurring throughout the long expanse of Roman history, could only be recounted properly by someone who had personal experience of Roman politics and a strong acquaintance of the Roman past through intensive study. The contemporary books are a necessary component of the history, in Dio's view, not simply a gratuitous addendum. Dio wrote history during a period of change, one that witnessed the rupture between the seeming peace and stability of the Antonines and the volatility of Commodus and the Severans.<sup>46</sup> With the contemporary books focused on his own experiences as a Roman senator, Dio connects past and present through the models and *exempla* analyzed above.

These observations raise questions about Dio's thoughts on the utility of history. On the one hand, we might suggest that for Dio, history was the story of decline, as his history proposes a model whereby it is impossible to return to the past - the high point of the Roman monarchy is over, and there is only deterioration. This approach would help to explain the helplessness of the ending of the history, wherein Dio is forced to flee Italy, under threat from the soldiers, so that he might escape, like Hector, "Out of the dust and the slaying

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<sup>46</sup> On the lack of contemporary historiography under the Antonines, see especially Kemezis 2010.

of men and the blood and the uproar".<sup>47</sup> For Dio, even his preferred mode of government, monarchy, would eventually fail. On the other hand, we might propose a more positive model. Dio was likely aware of the long gap in writing the history of Rome in its entirety. He may have thought this lack of history writing was leading to present ills, that Romans lacked a proper accounting of the past and the way that it informed the present. In this way the characters that have been analyzed above become examples of this sort of failure, while Dio's history becomes the possible remedy. By putting his history out into the world at a low point of Roman history, Dio may have hoped that those who read it would find proper models to emulate and thus appropriately reform Rome's degenerated monarchy.

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<sup>47</sup> Cass. Dio 80[80].5.3 ἕκ τ' ἀνδροκτασίης ἕκ θ' αἵματος ἕκ τε κυδοιμοῦ (quoting Hom. *Il.* 11.164).

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