Staging power: a study of narrative patterns in Herodian's history of the Roman Empire

Laporte, K.

2. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

2.1 Composition, order, structure

As frequently noted in scholarship, Herodian's method of composition relies on a particular selection from the historical material available to him[1]. This he explains not in the work's preface, but, notably, in an authorial aside at the very end of book two (2.15.7). The note comes in the wake of Severus' dealings in Rome, after his endorsement by the senate and Julianus' execution, just when the new emperor had placated Albinus and was preparing to face Niger. Herodian claims that many of his predecessors, historians and poets alike, chose to work exclusively on Severus and have therefore described in great detail all aspects of the emperor's march to Syria[2]. Looking, for his part, at a wider period, he will instead "write a systematic account" (*συντάξαντι γράψαι*) of this expedition[3]. More specifically, this version will comprise "only the most important and conclusive of Severus' actions separately, in chronological order" (*τὰ κορυφαιότατα τοίνυν καὶ συντέλειαν ἔχοντα τῶν κατὰ μέρος πεπραγμένων Σεβήρῳ ἐν τοῖς ἑξῆς*)[4]. Herodian also anticipates potential critics by emphasizing that this practice will not cause him to leave out "anything which merits attention and record" (*εἴ τι λόγου καὶ μνήμης ἄξιον*). Included well after the work's general preface and in a discussion about a particular case, this comment could, admittedly, pertain only to Herodian's account of the war between Niger and Severus. But it should be noted that many historical works in the Thucydidean tradition (cf.Thuc. 5.26) also feature second prefaces and that Herodian's history is clearly set within that tradition. And in fact this method of selection can already be observed throughout the first two books of the *History*, making Herodian's comment applicable to the whole work[5].

---

[1] Cf. above, [3-5].

[2] So Kraus 2010, 414-15 argues: "… but to understand the star – the emperor, the philosopher, or the general – as an actor in society, we need that central subject to be in some sense familiar. […] Too many *minutiae* – too many anecdotes and *bons mots* – destroy one of the main purposes of ancient history." Cf. above, [18, n. 7].

[3] This *συντάξαντι* has been translated by various turns: "a chronological account" (Echols 1961); "in sintesi" (Càssola 1967); "sistemáticamente" (Torres Esbarranch 1985); "dans un seul ouvrage" (Roques 1990a); "in einem Überblick" (Müller 1996).

[4] Compare with Tac., *Annal*. 1.9, who lists the many *uana* of Augustus' life that captured popular interest after the emperor's death.

[5] *Pace* Schettino 2017, 77-78, who argues that while the plural is possible for the expression *ἐν τοῖς ἑξῆς*, it would apply to the next two books, dealing with Severus' rule. This passage has often been discussed in comparison with the preface, but the focus has been rather the (non-)problems of chronology posed by Herodian's contradictory statements of covering "sixty" (1.1.5) or "seventy" (2.15.7) years. On this last point, see also [2, n. 5; 295, n. 10].

If the selective nature of Herodian's writing has been noted early on in scholarship, it was mostly understood as serving rhetorical or dramatic purposes. Within this context, narrative and history were incompatible, and too much style or dramatization was seen as an undesirable quality, unsuited to proper historical records. In its binary opposition to fact, fiction in any part (from invention to arrangement) was an impediment to the correct description of truth[6]. Listed at length in many earlier studies, Herodian's 'distortions' and 'manipulations', or at worst his 'errors', were used to argue against the accuracy of the facts presented in the *History*, which led to its firm dismissal as a reliable historical source[7]. Herodian's story, with its particular selection and disposition of facts, is certainly compelling and often dramatic, but neither trait should be irreconcilable with history-writing[8]. The array of themes and techniques used by Herodian serves the story, but this story conveys meaning and, better yet, a historian's insight into his own period: so Whittaker notes that Herodian's relies on political criteria of selection, rather than rhetorical[9]. Following these observations, this chapter explores how Herodian's method of composition affects the narrative structure of the *History*, which refers here very broadly to temporal arrangement (e.g. sequencing, speed, simplification, assimilation).

As a general rule, Herodian's *History* follows a linear storyline, presenting events within self-contained units, one after the other[10]. To achieve this narrative simplicity, the historian uses several techniques in relation to narrative time. The manipulation of time, and more specifically the arrangement, or order which makes up a certain sequence, of episodes, is taken here as the "set of relations between the order in which events (are said to) occur and the order in which they are recounted."[11] Speed, as the "rate at which they unfold"[12], whether

---

[6] On fact and fiction in historical narratives, see above, [10-11].

[7] E.g. Platnauer 1918, 2 ("constantly at fault both in chronology and geography; he omits much of importance, and makes up for it by the insertion of long, tedious, and pointless speeches in imitation of Greek models"); Bersanetti 1938, 361, about Herodian's representation of an indolent Niger: "violando la verità egli ha voluto far nascere il romanzesco"; or Reardon 1971, 219, n. 74 who finds Herodian's method "des plus 'littéraires'" and therefore "fautive" (at 219, n. 74). For Kolb 1972, 161-2, n. 770, Herodian is a "Übertreibungskünstler" who has written a historical novel and, as such, relied on "Phantasie und Erfindungsgabe" instead of credible sources; with 76: "eine Neugestaltung der Ereignisse zum Zweck billiger Effekthascherei". Similarly, Strobel 1993a, 18: "den weniger anspruchsvollen Literaten" (comparing Herodian to Dio); with 1993b, 1353, calling Herodian "der Romanschriftsteller, der sich als Historiker ausgibt". De Blois 1998, 3415-16 notes the predominance of "all kinds of trivialities" typical of biographies over "important historical facts, geographical data and dates". In spite of its own fair share of criticism, another, much later work, the *Historia Augusta*, was often considered to be a more trustworthy source and was used to disprove much information found in Herodian's *History.* See Hidber 2006, 45-71, for a comprehensive survey of modern, mostly negative, views on Herodian's method.

[8] Chapter 4 of this dissertation is devoted to a positive reading of Herodian's dramatizing techniques. In my view such devices do not weaken Herodian's interpretation of history, but rather enhance it.

[9] Whittaker 1969-70, lviii; with Sidebottom 1998, 2820-2; Zimmermann 1999a, 6-7. Cf. above, [5].

[10] See e.g. Sidebottom 1998, 2814-15; Hidber 2007, 199-200, 207; Kemezis 2014, 236, 240. With Whittaker 1969-70, xli who points to "the dramatic and episodic character of the writing."

[11] Prince 2003, s.v. "order". See also Genette 1972, 77-121. For a clear explanation, rife with ancient and modern examples, of the different notions tied to narrative time, see de Jong 2014, chap. 4.

[12] E.g. Prince 1982, 54-59: "the events and situations making up the world of the narrated may be presented more or less quickly and the rate at which they unfold constitutes what is called narrative speed" (quote at 54). For the purposes of this dissertation, I make no particular distinction between speed and rhythm, the latter of which might elsewhere be taken as a "recurrent pattern in narrative speed and, more

recounted faster or slower than they (are said to) have occurred, is another way for the historian to give shape and meaning to the story. Not solely related to time, focalization can also contribute to the selection and presentation of the material in (mostly) linear storyline. Focalization can be defined as the "perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented; the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered"[13]. By channelling certain story elements through the perspective of the main characters (generally the emperors), Herodian is therefore able to maintain a relatively straight line of storytelling.

In addition to analepses (flashbacks) and prolepses (flashforwards), speed, or focalization, editorial choices can concern omissions or insertions of certain events within a more or less standard(ized) sequence, like an emperor's accession or death: for instance, Whittaker has talked about the "telescoping of events", through which Herodian might compress long periods of time into short mentions, merge several episodes into a single one, or omit events some altogether[14]. Similarly, Kemezis concludes that "Herodian has streamlined his content to the point where there is hardly any material that does not advance the story towards its next climax."[15] For Kemezis, Herodian's approach falls in line with Lucian's instructions on *How to write history*, relating to efficiency, pertinence, and brevity (e.g. Lucian., *conscr. hist.* 19; 27-28; 55-57)[16]. In a similar spirit, Sidebottom has linked the *History*'s linearity to the text's readability and accessibility[17]. As we will see in this chapter, a heavier intervention on the material might also force the similarities between two stories. By using formulaic storylines organized along a (mostly) linear schema, Herodian can thus strive to make his history clear and lively, just as he can secure its entertainment factor and memorization potential[18].

---

generally, any pattern of repetition with variations." (ap. Prince 2003, s.v. "rhythm") On the theoretical problems tied to narrative rhythm and speed, see also Bal 1997², 99-111.

[13] Prince 2003, 31, s.v. "Focalization" (after Genette 1972). On focalization, see Bal 1997², 142-60, with e.g. Fludernik 2009, 36-39 or de Jong 2014, 47-72.

[14] Whittaker 1969-70, xlii-xliii. See also Hidber 2006, 136-46; *id.*, 2007, 208-10; Castelli 2008, 106-7.

[15] Kemezis 2014, 236-7, adding: "Even when describing wars, he omits anything that would detract from momentum." Most recently, Chrysanthou 2020 offers an overview of these streamlining techniques, as regards to displacements, omissions, and modifications of context, by comparing several episodes of the first five books of the *History* to their versions in what is held to be its source material, i.e. Dio's *Roman History*.

[16] Cf. de Jong 2014, 101: "narratological time is a highly efficient means for identifying which accents a narrator wants to place, which events to foreground or downplay, and which relationships between events to make clear." This narrative 'streamlining' also conforms to the idea, according to White 1978, 91, that a (hi)story's "coherence is achieved only by a tailoring of the 'facts' to the requirements of the story form." Cf. Marincola 1999, 314, on narrative arrangement in ancient historiography.

[17] Sidebottom 1998, 2814-15. This simplification is also at play in the thematic aspects of the stories: a closer look at the storylines generated by Herodian's editorial choices reveals a limited number of themes and narrative patterns (this will be the focus of chapter 3 of this dissertation). Sidebottom 1998, 2815-16, accordingly, has noted that "Herodian often resorts to 'formulaic' descriptions of certain events", such as revolts, 'traps' (esp. emperors tricking praetorians), or battles; with e.g. Whittaker 1969-70, lvii, talking about the "liturgic quality" of the death notices. Herodian's use of repetitions had already been detected by Fuchs 1895 and 1896.

[18] The use of formulae and patterns in relation to composition and memorization can be traced back to the narrative mechanisms involved in the oral transmission of earlier texts, such as shown by Parry and Lord.

But this structural work has implications going beyond strictly formal considerations. As noted by Bal:

> Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides[19].

It is precisely through the interplay of typification and individuation that Herodian is able to alert the reader to significant elements of an episode or a character. Herodian creates, with the application of thematic and structural patterns, various expectations in the reader as to how certain events might unfold and certain characters might act. Moreover, if, following Bal, order is more technique than convention, then part of the readers' enjoyment and their interpretation of the story can emerge from having these expectations challenged by Herodian[20]. Though the *History*'s storylines admittedly bear many similarities, units are inevitably tailored to each character.

From the perspective of narrative structure, this chapter focuses on such disparities and their impact on representation in four clusters of similarly arranged narratives: the accessions of Commodus and of Caracalla and Geta; the accessions of Pertinax, Gordian I, and Gordian III; the accessions of Niger and Severus; the deaths of Marcus and Severus. These sets rest on analogous ways of coming to power and of dying, reflecting the loose categories seen in the previous chapter. Starting from these similarities in context, Herodian can shape the episodes by assembling plot components along varying sequences and by inserting a number of differences into seemingly identical events, sometimes to surgical precision. These structuring strategies can be used to play off harmony against discord, or caution against haste. A similar sequence of events might be used to emphasize the emperors' passivity, whether a show of deference or a case of incompetence, or agency. In the same way, the story's rhythm (or narrative speed) is another adjustable element, whether it speeds up, pauses, stops, or slows down different sections within a similar pattern. This careful examination of narrative sequences will eventually lead us to reflect on how an emperor might come to power and die in a 'proper' manner and, conversely, on the implications of a failure or a refusal to comply with these expectations.

2.2 All in good time: stories of hereditary succession

Three sons, within the scope covered by the *History*, successfully took over from their emperor fathers: Commodus from Marcus Aurelius, Caracalla and Geta from Septimius Severus. In Herodian's work, all three children are presented by the author-narrator as the inevitable heirs and are expected, by internal audiences, to inherit the emperorship upon their fathers' deaths. In addition to these logical filial implications, Herodian notes that when

[19] Bal 1997², 82.
[20] Sidebottom 1998, 2819-20 (mostly about anticipating the death of emperors).

Severus returned from Britain after defeating his last rival, Albinus, the emperor "appointed his sons to take a share in the empire, each with the title of Augustus"[21]. The historian uses Caracalla and Geta's association to formalize their successional advent and set them up as the designated heirs to the Empire. Conversely, whereas we find traces of Commodus' association in other sources, Herodian omits any mention of it in his own account[22]. This choice helps portray Marcus as an emperor in perfect control[23], more than it says anything in particular about Commodus, who only appears as the object of his father's worries (1.2.-4) and does not actively play a part in the story until his own sole accession.

As mentioned above, Commodus' and Caracalla and Geta's associations are depicted in Herodian's work as self-evident matters: the sons will succeed the fathers, regardless of their actual competence (cf. 5.1.2-8). Although this may certainly reflect common political practice[24], Herodian's tendency to focus on conclusive action gives these two hereditary successions even more finality. For Caracalla and Geta, Herodian takes this strategy one step further by presenting their *joint* accession as inevitable: a double succession was apparently not the only approach possible for an emperor with two sons. For Vespasian (the only precedent at that point in time), the elder of two sons, Titus, was always favoured as sole heir[25]. An entirely different treatment is given to the associated sons who do not go on to become the next emperors: as unsuccessful heirs, they are only briefly cited, having become mere 'trivialities' for Herodian's stories of their fathers' rules[26]. For Herodian's purposes, Commodus, Caracalla, and Geta are, as sons, only relevant characters because they would eventually inherit successfully the emperorship from their fathers. And, in fact, the realization of these successional designs informs their whole portrayals, starting from their first appearances in Herodian's account of their fathers' lives. In addition to their featured mode

---

[21] 3.9.1: τούς τε υἱεῖς αὐτοῦ κοινωνοὺς τῆς βασιλείας καὶ αὐτοκράτορας ἀποδείξας. Geta might actually have been made Caesar at that point, see e.g. Birley 1999, 130; Kienast, Eck & Heil 2017[6], 160-1. Beyond Herodian's usual narrative efficiency in combining two related and similar events (Geta would be given these honours some ten years later), this passage might also serve to suggest that Severus' change in policy, now a joint succession between the brothers, was the emperor's plan all along. This would render Caracalla's claim to sole emperorship virtually groundless, even emphasizing further how he went against his father's wishes.

[22] Cf. *SHA*, *Marc.* 16.1 (*cito nomen Caesaris et mox sacerdotium statimque nomen imperatoris ac triumphi participationem et consulatum*); *SHA*, *Comm.* 2.1 (*princeps iuuentutis*); 2.4 (*imperator*); Vict., *Caes.* 16.9 (*Caesar*); Oros. 15.12 (*adsumpsit in regnum*). Cass. Dio 72(71).22.2 is similarly vague: during Cassius' revolt, Commodus assumes the *toga uirilis*; also 72(71).30.3-4, where Commodus is referred in association to his father's power. On the role of education and more generally *paideia* in Herodian, see Sidebottom 1998, 2805-12; Zimmermann 1999a, esp. 17-40; this position is challenged by Hidber 2006, 236-7 and Kemezis 2014, 231, n. 10 and 270, n. 116.

[23] On the image and function of Marcus in the *History*, see further below, section 2.5.1.

[24] Hekster 2002, 29: except for the case of Nero, "there are no examples in the early Roman Empire of a natural son being passed over as heir to the throne." Accordingly, Herodian seems to acknowledge the inevitability of (an attempt at) hereditary succession, since all emperors in the *History* have designated their sons as their heirs (only Pertinax kept his son far away from the emperorship, cf. 2.4.9); more generally, on Herodian's depiction of imperial associations, see below, [91, n. 251]. Herodian seems somewhat sceptical of this mode of succession, since even Marcus' son eventually became one of the worst emperors of Herodian's time. On the hereditary nature of Commodus' accession in Herodian, see Marasco 1998, 2863-8; Zimmermann 1999a, 31-34; Hekster 2002, 15-30, 39; Hidber 2006, 153-7; Galimberti 2014, 63 (*ad* 1.5.1).

[25] E.g. Morford 1968, 65-68; Hekster 2015, 55-57.

[26] Contrast with Herodian's portrayal, or lack thereof, of the sons of Pertinax (2.4.9; below, [166, n. 260]), Macrinus (5.4.12; below [164-5, n. 256]), or Maximinus (8.4.8; below, [164-5, n. 256]).

of succession, these two accessions bear many similarities in terms of context, both spatial and political. Herodian builds on these shared aspects to shape parallel stories, but with contrastingly significant sequences.

2.2.1 The good son

In his account of Commodus' accession, Herodian seems to adhere to a somewhat expected order of events. First comes Marcus' funeral. Only then is Commodus 'allowed' to come to power. The story of Marcus' death is even wrapped up completely: along with a projection into the near future of its reach and impact throughout the Empire (1.4.7: τοῖς καθ' αὐτὸν ἀνθρώποις), it also gives Herodian the occasion to cite the emperor's wider legacy (ἐς τὸν ἐσόμενον), even though his death had only just taken place[27]. Significantly, Herodian then writes that "for the next few days Marcus' son was kept busy with the arrangements for the funeral"[28]. Coupled with the *History*'s general linearity, this temporal marker (ὀλίγων δὲ διελθουσῶν ἡμερῶν) is used to emphasize a clear sequence of events[29]. It is also striking that, in his first appearance in the story after his father's death, Commodus, not yet emperor but soon-to-be, is still designated as Marcus' "son" (1.5.1: τὸν υἱόν), rather than by his own name. In Herodian's *History*, Commodus is said to have first conducted his filial duties and is shown to conform to a certain propriety, leaving it to his fathers' advisers (τοῖς φίλοις) to coordinate the transition. Marcus' friends, in the *History*, take on a sort of (and very brief) interregnum, bridging the gap between the two emperors[30].

Commodus' actual agency in Herodian's story, or even just his level of activity, is another point of interest. The son first "was kept busy" (ἀπησχόλουν) with his father's obsequies. According to Herodian, it is only once "his advisers decided" (ἔδοξε τοῖς φίλοις) that Marcus' heir was led (προαγαγεῖν τὸ μειράκιον) before the soldiers to deliver an *adlocutio* and make distributions. Herodian thus shows how Commodus first deferred to his fathers' advisers, who took upon themselves to ensure the succession ran smoothly. As such, Herodian gives the *philoi* temporary pre-eminence over the successor, both as characters in the story and as political agents. The impression created is one of tradition and strict procedure. As Herodian notes, a formal speech to the army and *donatiua* were then held, "as was usual (ἔθος) on the occasion of imperial succession" (1.5.1: ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶ τοῖς βασιλείαν διαδεχομένοις). Similarly, the army is said to have gathered for Commodus' speech "on the usual ground"

---

[27] Cf. 1.4.7: "leaving his contemporaries with a longing for him and future generations with a permanent record of his goodness" (πόθον τε τοῖς καθ' αὐτὸν ἀνθρώποις ἐγκαταλιπὼν ἀρετῆς τε ἀίδιον μνήμην ἐς τὸν ἐσόμενον αἰῶνα); on Marcus' death and legacy, see below, [93-97].

[28] 1.5.1: ὀλίγων δὲ διελθουσῶν ἡμερῶν, ἐν ὅσαις περὶ τὴν κηδείαν τοῦ πατρὸς τὸν υἱὸν ἀπησχόλουν.

[29] Although vague and unremarkable in itself, this indicator is not particularly frequent in Herodian, see for instance Whittaker 1969-70, xxxix-xliii; Joubert 1981, 45-77; Hidber 2007, 144-6. Since it comes at the very beginning of the *History*, its effect is perhaps not as powerful as markers appearing (or not) later on, once the reader has acquired a sufficient grasp of the historian's treatment of time and chronology.

[30] φίλοις can relate, both semantically and syntactically, to either τοῦ πατρός or τὸν υἱόν, or even both. Technically, these were Marcus' *amici* first (see below, [94-96]), but the emperor had asked them to watch over his son, so they had also just become Commodus' advisers; cf. 1.5.2: τοὺς πατρῴους φίλους.

(1.5.1: ἐς τὸ εἰωθὸς πεδίον). Since Commodus' accession is the first such episode of the *History*, these indications certainly have an informative value since they sketch out the general event through this particular occasion. But this episode also informs itself, reinforcing the image of Commodus following set conventions (at that point at least). As Herodian recounts, once the troops had assembled on the parade ground, "Commodus (ὁ Κόμοδος) came out in front (προελθών) and performed (ἐπετέλει) the imperial sacrifices"[31]. Commodus then "mounted" (ἀνελθών) the tribune set in the middle of the camp, "positioned his father's advisers round about him" (περιστησάμενος τοὺς πατρῴους φίλους), and "addressed" (ἔλεξε) the troops[32]. The shift in focus is striking: Commodus is now a properly named character with agency[33], as noted by the transition from object (or passive subject) to (active) subject[34]. The power relationship between Commodus and Marcus' friends is now inverted, as the advisers are 'demoted' from subject to object. This instrumentalization of Marcus' *philoi*, who arguably become an extension of Marcus himself, allows Herodian's Commodus to present his rule along the lines of tradition and continuity and to promote the idea of dynastic stability, whether in good faith or not[35].

A promotion

In Herodian's *History*, Commodus addresses the soldiers after conducting the usual inauguration sacrifices: "I share (κοινή) with you the pain caused by the recent events and your grief is no less bitter than mine, of that I am painfully convinced"[36]. Strikingly, the new emperor first tries to establish a sense of community based on their shared mourning for a father (1.5.3: κοινὴν εἶναί μοι), along with a parity amongst them in Marcus' eyes, and the old emperor's utmost trust in them. According to Commodus, Marcus "loved all of [them] as one" (1.5.3: πάντας ἡμᾶς ὡς ἕνα ἠγάπα)"[37]. In this same speech, Commodus also insists that he is indebted to the older men within their ranks, since they took an active part in his education

[31] 1.5.2: προελθὼν δὲ ὁ Κόμοδος τάς τε βασιλείους θυσίας ἐπετέλει.
[32] This image mirrors Marcus' last moments as they are depicted by Herodian, cf. 1.4 and below [94-97].
[33] Admittedly, Commodus' name appears for the first time in the *History* early on in the passages devoted to Marcus, but as object to his father's action (1.2.1: τὸν δὲ περιόντα Κόμοδόν τε καλούμενον ὁ πατὴρ μετὰ πάσης ἐπιμελείας ἀνεθρέψατο). Commodus is also mentioned, unnamed, as the object of his father's worries and action (cf. 1.3.1; 1.3.5; 1.4.1; 1.4.3-4; 1.4.6; with below [92-93]).
[34] In this sequence, Commodus' ascent to power is even made visible on the physical level, when he is "mounting the platform which had been raised up for him" (1.5.2: καὶ βήματος αὐτῷ ἐς ὕψος ἀρθέντος ἐν μέσῳ τῷ στρατοπέδῳ ἀνελθὼν ἐπ' αὐτό). This might also foreshadow his predilection for spectacles and the cause of his downfall, as will be discussed below in section 4.4.1.
[35] It seems likely that (at least in Herodian's view) Commodus' deference to his father's friends lasted at least "for a short time" (1.6.1: ὀλίγου μὲν οὖν τινὸς χρόνου); see Kemezis 2014, 255. Cf. Cass. Dio 73(72).1.1-2: Commodus was "not naturally wicked" (πανοῦργος μὲν οὐκ ἔφυ), but under the influence of corrupt friends quickly became cruel and lustful as if it were a "second nature" (ἐς φύσιν). This, according to Dio, happened early enough that Marcus knew it (σαφῶς προγνῶναι).
[36] 1.5.3: κοινὴν εἶναί μοι πρὸς ὑμᾶς τὴν ἐπὶ τοῖς καταλαβοῦσιν ἀλγηδόνα καὶ μηδέν τι ἧττον ὑμᾶς ἐμοῦ δυσφορεῖν ἐμαυτὸν ἀκριβῶς πέπεικα, trans. mod. Interestingly, this is Commodus' only speech in *oratio recta* in Herodian's *History*.
[37] Cf. 1.5.4, with similar phrasing: "my father loved us all alike and taught us all our virtues" (πάντας γὰρ ἡμᾶς ὡς ἕνα ὁ πατὴρ ἐφίλει).

(cf. 1.5.3-4; with 1.4.3). This 'debt' enables Commodus to strengthen the hereditary aspect of his transition; while it certainly denotes order and continuity, it also emphasizes its predestined nature and Commodus' entitlement to the emperorship.

After these opening words, Commodus then stresses his worth as an emperor 'born in the purple'[38]. From there, the main section of his speech contrasts strongly with its initial tone[39]. Commodus now declares, asserting himself as the natural heir to his father, that he has received the empire from Fate itself, unlike his predecessors who had been adopted (1.5.5: οὐκ ἐπείσακτον)[40]. Herodian's Commodus presents his accession as a preordained event, claiming that: he was "born in the palace" (1.5.5: ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις ἀπεκυήθην); "the imperial purple lay waiting for [him] from the moment [he] was born" (1.5.5: ἅμα τῷ τῆς γαστρὸς προελθεῖν ἡ βασίλειος ὑπεδέξατο πορφύρα); "on that day [he] was both man and emperor" (1.5.5: ὁμοῦ δέ με εἶδεν ἥλιος ἄνθρωπον καὶ βασιλέα); he is an "emperor not assigned to [them] but born for [them]" (1.5.6: οὐ δοθέντα ὑμῖν ἀλλὰ γεννηθέντα αὐτοκράτορα, trans. mod.)[41]. This seems to express an effort, on Herodian's part, to mark a certain, artificial departure from Antonine ideology, which, for Severan-era writers, was based, broadly speaking, on the practice of adoptive succession, with an emphasis on excellence[42]. In this way, the story of Commodus' accession is made to deviate from earlier successional practice, as it is shown by the inaugural speech he is given in the *History*. In an emphatic defence of his inherited power, Herodian's Commodus forsakes his initial posture of community with his audience and asserts this shift to hereditary monarchy by stating that Marcus has now become a "companion of the gods" (1.5.6: σύνεδρος… θεῶν). Whereas he had previously cited kinship with the soldiers, Commodus now puts a definitive gap between them, by implicitly calling himself the son of a god and taking his 'rightful' place above them. This contrast, however, is overemphasized by Herodian, since adoption and marriage had, in effect, contributed to creating close(r) familial ties between the emperors since Augustus. Heirs were often already related in some way to the incumbents. In the case of the Antonines, adoption became a practical solution, since neither Trajan, nor Hadrian, nor Pius had sons. While personal merits were presented as being strongly valued over descent, dynastic continuity was an important aspect of Antonine ideology, as a way to ensure to stability and legitimacy[43]. Accordingly, official imagery could

---

[38] Note how Commodus himself says that he has never claimed to be their superior "in [*his*] father's lifetime" (1.5.3: περιόντος μοι τοῦ πατρός, my emphasis). A similar strategy can be found in the very beginning of Commodus' speech at 1.5.3: μοι πρὸς ὑμᾶς ('I with you'), ὑμᾶς ἐμοῦ ('yours and mine'); or at 1.5.4 where the use of inclusive pronouns (ἡμᾶς, ὡς ἕνα) cannot obscure the individualized ὁ πατήρ, which seems to betray a certain sense of possession (i.e. "*my* father").

[39] As discussed in the previous note, this supremacy had already been hinted through a play on singular and plural pronouns.

[40] *LSJ*, *s.v.* ἐπείσακτος: "brought in from outside, opp. οἰκεῖος". Note how the word implies an inherent foreignness to what is being brought in. It is also frequently used for the importation of goods.

[41] Cf. 1.7.3-4; 1.17.12.

[42] Cf. Cass. Dio 69.20: having proven his *capacitas*, a new emperor (i.e. Antoninus Pius) is 'found' (εὗρον) and 'given' (δίδωμι) to the senators by the dying Hadrian.

[43] See the relief on the Antonine (or so-called 'Parthian') Monument at Ephesus (date unknown, likely erected for Pius; Ephesos Museum, Vienna, Austria) depicting Hadrian's adoption of Antonius Pius, as well as Pius' adoption of a Marcus and Verus; with e.g. Hekster 2015, 90-5 ("The emphasis on prospective

be used to project particular expectations of succession: through an array of representations, titles, and functions[44], Commodus was introduced early on as Marcus' heir so that his accession, when it came, would have been expected by everyone.

In his closing remarks, Commodus enjoins the army to pledge loyalty to him, appealing to their sense of duty and promising them greater fame and glory than they had garnered under Marcus' leadership[45]. According to Herodian, however, the new emperor "won the army's allegiance with a generous donative" (1.5.8: μεγαλοφρόνως δωρεαῖς χρημάτων οἰκειωσάμενος τὸ στρατιωτικόν), after which he withdrew (ἐπανῆλθεν) to the imperial quarters. Although accession *donatiua* had been standard practice since at least Claudius, Herodian's wording (οἰκειωσάμενος + δωρεαῖς) may serve to cast some doubts on Commodus' allegedly strong kinship with the army[46]. Though the expression might also hint at a certain opposition to Commodus' accession, Herodian reiterates the hereditary nature of the succession by noting that Commodus 'returned' or 'went back' (ἐπανῆλθεν) to the imperial palace. Collecting the emperorship as his birth right, so Commodus came to power[47].

As we will see below, Herodian reproduces key points of Commodus' accession episode throughout the emperor's rule and, especially, in the story of his death. One such example is the continuous tension between tradition and change, as represented by Marcus' legacy and Commodus' own inclinations, deeds, and ideological designs. Another aspect emphasized by Herodian is Commodus' initial passivity: though it is first associated with deference to his father's advisers, this reasonable conduct will soon be shown to fester into incapacity and vulnerability to plotters and parasites[48]. A third important element linking

---

dynastic continuity was common during Antoninus' reign." quote at 91, under figure 36). On the monument's dating, see e.g. Faust 2012. Similarly, Rowan 2013 shows how the ideas of imperial succession and dynasty are often featured in Pius' coinage, whether through the appearance of *Pietas* and *Fides*, or the portrayal of Hadrian and Marcus. Rowan also notes that Pius' early issues as Augustus "remained largely unchanged from that struck for him as Caesar" (at 233); this would serve to express Pius' smooth transition from one role to another and, more widely, a dynastic stability under the Antonines.

[44] For instance, the statue of the boy Commodus cast as a *Hercules infans duos dracones strangulans* (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, USA), likely produced ca 175 for his nomination as *princeps iuuentutis*, might be using the Heracleian theme to celebrate the direct succession from Marcus to his natural son; see Hekster 2002, 117-20 and Cadario 2017, 44-46; with Cass. Dio 73(72).7.1-2.

[45] On Commodus' speech, see Marasco 1998, 2864-5; Zimmermann 1999a, 31-34; Kemezis 2014, 253-5; Galimberti 2014, 65-69 (*ad* 1.5.3-8).

[46] Among others, on accession donative, Campbell 1984, 168-70; Hebblewhite 2016, 77-79. Still only implied here, the problematic theme of money and military power will build up into a much larger consideration throughout the rest of the work. One such case is the infamous auction of the Empire by the praetorians, see below section 3.5. Significantly, Herodian omits the similar distribution made by Pertinax upon his own accession (2.2.9-10; cf. Cass. Dio 73(72).1.2; *SHA*, *Pert.* 4.6; with below, [59-60]).

[47] Some standard features of subsequent proclamations in the *History* are missing here, most notably the *acclamatio* by the troops and the senatorial ratification. Although it might reflect (the lack of) material evidence (cf. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 1.5.1), it also serves to cement the image of a self-evident succession.

[48] Certain parallels may be drawn between Herodian's Commodus and the various ancient portrayals of Tiberius: the emperor's lack of rivals (esp. Drusus and Germanicus) either revealed a pre-existing badness in him (ap. Suet., *Tib*. 42.1; 61; *Calig.* 6.2; Tac., *Annal.* 4.1.1; 6.51.3; Cass. Dio 57.13.6) or 'shipwrecked' an otherwise inherently good character (also ap. Cass. Dio 57.13.6, in an εἴτε… εἴτε construction); see esp. Gill 1983, 481-7, with further references. Herodian similarly attempts to navigate between innate and acquired traits in Commodus, but is faced with the added challenge of preserving Marcus' idealized image. Wanting to praise Marcus' life, rule, and character unconditionally, Herodian presents Commodus' tyrannical

Commodus' two main stories is a strong sense of performance. In Herodian's *History*, Commodus is, to a certain extent, depicted as acting out his own accession, complying to fixed conventions and establishing himself in the continuation of Marcus[49]. This self-awareness given to Commodus would eventually transform into a pronounced taste for the theatrics, which peaks, in Herodian's view, in the story of that emperor's death.

2.2.2 An impatient heir

Just like in Herodian's treatment of Marcus' succession, Severus' two sons are presented as the emperor's heirs at law (though the act of their association is made explicit, cf. 3.9.1). In contrast with the (depicted) peaceful circumstances surrounding Marcus' succession, Herodian shows how the political and familial context in which power passed on from Severus to his sons was already rife with tension. Whereas Commodus' accession episode is arranged in a generally harmonious and orderly manner, Severus' death and the prospect of absolute power only served to heighten Caracalla and Geta's existing antagonism. Herodian uses their ongoing feud, already noted in the account of Severus' rule (cf. 3.10.3ff), to frame their coming to power, making it culminate in Geta's murder[50].

A rush to power

Key differences between the *History*'s two hereditary successions are immediately visible in the narrative structure of their stories. Compared to the tidy, well-defined sequence of events observed in Commodus' inaugural episode, Herodian details Caracalla and Geta's joint accession through a fairly messier chronology. According to Herodian, Severus, as he was slowly fading away, passed the command of the troops on to Caracalla. The young heir, however, was more interested in securing the army's exclusive loyalty through gifts and flattery, in anticipation of his imminent, shared accession (3.15.1; 3.15.5)[51]. Geta, for his part, is said to have been tasked with administration and justice, left behind in Eboracum with a council of Severus' senior advisers (3.14.9). In Herodian's account, both sons are already invested with effective power while Severus still lived, skipping ahead in the succession sequence used for Commodus. Herodian reports that, back at the front, Caracalla had even attempted to hasten Severus' death, although the emperor's physicians refused to comply (3.15.2; 3.15.4). Indifferent to his military command, Caracalla thus tried to accelerate the successional process, eager to be rid of his father (cf. 3.15.2: ὡς ἂν θᾶττον αὐτοῦ ἀπαλλαγείη),

character as the outcome of a gradual corruption, driven by external factors, and not as an outright evil disposition or even its eventual revelation. On this point, see further below, [226-9].

[49] Later on, as Herodian records, Commodus would also partake in many games and hunts in similarly fabricated moments, this time within the controlled environment that is the theatre. Commodus' death, through Herodian's use of dramatic patterns, will perhaps amount to the most spectacular scene of the story of that emperor's rule; see below section 4.4.1.

[50] On Geta's murder, see section 4.4.2.

[51] In Herodian's story, deceit is a shared trait between Caracalla and Severus, which for Caracalla is already suggested by Herodian in the Plautianus affair, at 3.12 (with below, [100]).

who was in his view "a troublesome nuisance" (3.15.2: παχθὴς αὐτῷ καὶ ὀχληρός) hindering his rise to full emperorship[52].

Severus' death notice, in the *History*'s sequence, follows an understated passing[53]. However, unlike Marcus' funeral which also came right after that emperor's death, the account of Severus' last rites is instead postponed either until after his sons' joint accession (for Severus' cremation and 'familial' funeral) or their return to Rome at the beginning of the next book (for his state funeral and *consecratio*). Pending the resolution of his dramatic arc, Severus is in fact temporarily removed from the ongoing narrative, while Caracalla eagerly takes over from his father. This peculiar order of events in Herodian's story reflects the general subversiveness of Caracalla's tenure. As Herodian shows, Caracalla assumed full imperial powers immediately after Severus' death. There is a very thin line, in Herodian's account, between one reign and the next. Arguably, the rivalry between the brothers had featured extensively in the last part of Severus' rule, so Caracalla's eagerness was predictable, but the (apparent) lack of closure for Severus seems at odds with the rest of that emperor's story. The transition from Severus to Caracalla (3.15.4) is first set forth right before in Herodian's death notice for Severus (3.15.3), which announces that the emperor was succeeded by his sons (ἐπὶ παισὶ νεανίαις διαδόχοις ἀνεπαύσατο). Interestingly, this handover is not featured in a narrative episode, in which Caracalla (and possibly Geta) would have been formally inducted, but in an authorial comment acting as a death notice for his father, expressed through an outside perspective on Severus' legacy.

In Herodian's story, Severus' last moments pointedly segue into Caracalla's first actions as emperor: "as soon as Severus was dead (τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποθανόντος) Antoninus took over (λαβόμενος) power and straightaway (εὐθύς) began (ἤρξατο) to execute all the household attendants", along with his tutors and Severus' doctors[54]. Though not exceptional in itself, this particular placement of the genitive absolute (τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποθανόντος), set in between the main subject (ὁ… Ἀντωνῖνος) and verb (ἤρξατο), serves to emphasize Caracalla's impatience to become emperor. Through the use of the participle λαβόμενος, to which Severus' death is made subordinate, Caracalla's assumption of power becomes in turn circumstantial to his 'inaugural' purge (φονεύειν ἤρξατο). Against Herodian's detailed account of Commodus' accession, one might even argue that the historian bypasses Caracalla and Geta's actual succession, which is merely being *re*told through these participles, in order to provide background information to Caracalla's action[55]. Whereas Herodian's Commodus had initially deferred to Marcus' friends only to eliminate most of them at a later stage, Caracalla is shown to have immediately wanted to break away from his father and his legacy. Herodian notes that, to this end, "no one who

[52] Cf. Cass. Dio 77(76).14.1-3; 15.2: Caracalla plotted against both his brother and father, and even tried to kill Severus himself. On this passage, from Severus' perspective, whose death is depicted as lonely, see below, [106-7]. On Caracalla's and Geta's imperial ambitions and power politics more generally, see e.g. Kemmers 2011, with n. [66] below.

[53] Cf. 3.15.2-3, with below, [106-7].

[54] 3.15.4: ὁ δὲ Ἀντωνῖνος τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποθανόντος λαβόμενος ἐξουσίας, εὐθὺς ἀφ' ἑστίας πάντας φονεύειν ἤρξατο.

[55] The brothers' arrival in Rome after the British expedition is, arguably, treated by Herodian more as an *aduentus* than a 'proper' accession.

had been honoured by the old emperor or served as his attendant was allowed to survive"[56]. As is frequent in the *History*, Caracalla's first actions are meant to encapsulate his entire rule, which would be filled with even more bloodshed.

While an argument could be made for the urgency of the war at hand, Herodian points out that Caracalla's immediate takeover was less about securing a military victory than establishing himself as sole emperor[57]. The same could have been said for Marcus' succession, taking place during a similar campaign against the Germans, "whom he had not completely subdued" (1.3.5: οὓς οὐδέπω πάντας ἐκεχείρωτο). Herodian's clear sequencing, in Commodus' case, shows that this was a not a valid consideration. It seems even less so in the present case, since Caracalla was just shown to be thoroughly uninterested in Severus' war (3.15.1)[58]. Herodian in fact shows how Caracalla, who had failed to obtain exclusive support from the army, quickly negotiated a truce with the Britons and left the front (3.15.6). According to Herodian, Caracalla then reunited with Geta and, pressed by their mother, Julia Domna, and advisers, the brothers are said to have faked reconciliation – at least long enough to take care of Severus' funeral (3.15.8). After seeing to the cremation of their father's body, they sent ahead the urn to Rome, themselves leading the troops back through Gaul (3.15.7). Their simulated truce, however, would not last: according to Herodian, the brothers spent the whole trip back to the capital amidst mutual animosity and distrust (4.1.1-2). Finally arriving in Rome, Caracalla and Geta were then officially welcomed by the people and the senate as the new emperors (4.1.3).

Story of a funeral

As suggested above, Herodian uses narrative sequencing to suggest the problematic aspects of the transition between Severus and his sons. Comparing the disposition of this particular episode in the *History* with that of Commodus' own accession can only enhance this technique grounded in what we might call 'time management'. In Herodian's story, it is only once Caracalla and Geta reunited and assumed joint emperorship that they resolved to take care of their late father's body (3.15.7-8). But Herodian's decision to divide Caracalla and Geta's accession in two can only be partly attributed to location and circumstances. The limits of these contextual explanations become especially clear when we look at how Herodian depicts the brothers' arrival in Rome.

While Geta and Caracalla are shown, in the *History*, to lead the procession into the city, the story's focus quickly shifts (back) onto Severus, with Herodian noting that the late emperor's urn was saluted and escorted to the Antonine Mausoleum (4.1.3)[59]. Though

[56] 3.15.4: οὐδένα δὲ εἴασε περιγενέσθαι τῶν ἐν τιμῇ γενομένων ἢ θεραπείᾳ τοῦ γέροντος.

[57] This eagerness from Caracalla mimics the haste shown by Severus in his rise to power; cf. Cass. Dio 78(77).6.1a.

[58] This war is also framed as an excuse for Severus to take his sons away from the distractions of an urban life (3.14.2); Severus' motivations for going to war will be discussed extensively below, [103-6].

[59] Commodus is also given a formal entrance in Rome when he came back from Germany (1.7.3-6; with below, [196-7]), but Herodian makes no mention of a state funeral for Marcus in that occasion. This allows the historian to focus on Commodus' *aduentus* and more generally his rule, rather than linger on Marcus' death as some sort of unfinished business. More time, admittedly, had passed between Marcus' death

Severus' state funeral is initially intertwined, and introduced, with the brothers' formal entrance in the city, Caracalla and Geta are soon dismissed from the narrative. Herodian shows how the brothers, once their father's urn was laid to rest, conducted the appropriate sacrifices and made their way to the imperial palace (4.1.4). Notably, Herodian omits any sort of formal address to the senate, people, or troops from the new emperors, whether back in Britain or now in Rome. Herodian instead skips directly to the brothers' ascent to the palace, insisting again on the major conflict between them[60]. For all practical purposes, this could easily mark the end of their accession episode, since Herodian then explains how the brothers spent their everyday lives, completely cut off from one another (4.1.5). And yet, the story then unexpectedly circles back to Severus and his apotheosis, which remains tied with and serves, in a way, to draw out the sons' inauguration.

After describing once again the brothers' estrangement, Herodian relates that "the first thing (πρὸ ἁπάντων) they did was to carry out the funeral ceremonies for their father"[61]. Coming, in the *History*'s timeline, after Severus' death, the funeral procession to the Antonine mausoleum, and the beginning of Caracalla and Geta's tenure, Severus' apotheosis seems somewhat out of place. Even overlooking what is taken to be by scholars the usual proceedings for the *consecratio* ceremony[62] and the fact that Herodian rarely features this entire sequence of events (if at all), this scene clashes with the *History*'s generally linear narrative. Considering the work's typically simple structure, this alternation of funeral(s) and accession(s) seems excessively complicated. As can be seen in the *History* up to this point, merging several events into a single one is a practice used every so often by Herodian in the pursuit of narrative efficiency[63]. Based on Herodian's previous economical sequencing, Severus' apotheosis could have easily been combined with the funeral procession set earlier

(17 March 180) and Commodus' return (ca 22 October, cf. *SHA*, *Comm.* 12.7) than between Severus' death (4 February 211 and his sons' arrival (date unknown, perhaps by Caracalla's birthday on 4 April (Alföldy 1996, 28-30), in May (Fluss, in *RE* II.A2, s.v. "Severus", col. 1979: "etwa in Mai 211angekommen sein dürften", followed by Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad loc.* and Roques 1990, n. *ad loc.*), or "late in year" (*RIC* 4.1, 84, with 85-86; Halfmann 1986, 219)), but this difference alone cannot explain how Herodian marks a clear separation between Marcus and Commodus, while offering mingled accounts of Severus' death and Caracalla and Geta's accession and return to Rome. It should also be noted that the general mood surrounding Commodus' arrival is one of rejoicing, while Herodian depicts a much more sober atmosphere for Caracalla and Geta's inauguration in Rome, which is taken over by Severus' state funeral.

[60] Cf. 4.1.4-5; with below, [107-11], where the passage is read from the angle of Severus' characterization. On the imperial palace as the setting for the proclamation, see Royo 1999, 297-9; Arena 2007, esp. 334-5; Pitcher 2017, 278-9.

[61] 4.1.5: ἐπετέλεσαν δὲ πρὸ ἁπάντων τὴν ἐς τὸν πατέρα τιμήν.

[62] Herodian's story of Severus' apotheosis and Pertinax's deification in Cass. Dio 75(74).4-5 are usually cited together as examples of a new sequence of the *consecratio* ceremony, which splits the funeral in two, a first 'familial' one, then a second, 'imperial'; cf. Arce 2010, 301-12; with e.g. MacCormack 1981, 104-5; Zanker 2004, 16-56; Benoist 2005, esp. 164-73, on these two passages. See further below, [107-11], for a discussion on the actual attention given to Severus in this passage.

[63] For instance, Severus' two separate campaigns at Hatra become one in Herodian's account (3.9.1ff). In addition to Whittaker 1969-70, xlii-xliii, see Kemezis 2014, 236, n. 24: "The fact that Herodian stops to bring up the possibility of a Parthian war suggests that we are not dealing with a careless error, especially since Herodian had a more than adequate source in Dio. Herodian may be deliberately signaling, to those who know the facts, that he is streamlining the story and giving his characters neater motivations, thus presumably increasing the reader's pleasure."

in the story (4.1.4), instead of being split into two separate events. Regardless of historical accuracy or ceremonial procedure, this particular placement of Severus' apotheosis in the *History*'s timeline must be significant. Herodian uses Severus' posthumous ceremony to overshadow Caracalla and Geta's inauguration not only through its positioning, but also with an extensive explanation of the apotheosis ritual (4.2)[64]. This long description (to which we will come back at length in our discussion of Severus' death episode) is at odds with the brothers' barely mentioned accession and their 'stolen' *aduentus*. If Caracalla was shown to be overly eager to take over from his father, Severus is 'given back' his due time through the overwhelming story of his state funeral and apotheosis.

Having completed the consecration ritual for their father, the brothers are shown returning to their quarters, in an echo of their initial procession to the palace[65]. In contrast to the description of Marcus' neatly ordered succession, Herodian now continually switches focus between Severus and his sons, going back and forth between funeral and accession. Whereas Severus' death, in Herodian's rendition, had immediately transitioned into Caracalla's takeover, leading to his temporary disappearance from the narrative, Severus in turn hijacks the story of his sons' coming to power. By swapping expected lead characters in given scenes and alternating between endings and beginnings, Herodian structures the story in a way that illustrates how the normal order of things was subverted when power was passed on from Severus to his sons. Displaying so the father's figure still looming over the recently installed sons, also suggests that Severus' succession, and more largely his dynasty, is not yet fully resolved (and will possibly remain problematic).

Secondary characters

Closely tied to the *History*'s narrative sequencing is the matter of the parts given to characters other than the emperors. In Herodian's story of Marcus' succession, the roles were clear, efficient, and systematic: the dying father and emperor, the supporting advisers, the son and successor. Although Caracalla and Geta are technically invested with the same power, at least according to Herodian, they do not receive equal attention in the story. Whereas Caracalla is given the usual narrative focus enjoyed by Herodian's emperors, Geta's part throughout the *History* likens him more to secondary characters, such as short-lived usurpers. This disjunction can be explained, in part, by the specific moment in time in which the transition took place. When Severus passed away, the brothers were in two different locations: Geta was conducting imperial business from the city, and only Caracalla was present at the front with their father. Mimicking the effective succession, Herodian shifts the story's focus, within the same sentence, from Severus to Caracalla[66]. Geta, as a player, is not brought in at

[64] A similar description of the apotheosis ritual could have appeared much earlier in the story, either in connection with Marcus' death, or even, like in Dio, with that of Pertinax.

[65] 4.3.1: *ταύτην δὴ τὴν τιμὴν ἐκθειάσαντες οἱ παῖδες τὸν πατέρα ἐπανῆλθον ἐς τὰ βασίλεια*; 4.1.4: *ἐπιτελέσαντες δὲ τὰς νενομισμένας ἱερουργίας ἐπὶ ταῖς βασιλικαῖς εἰσόδοις ἀνῆλθον ἐς τὰ βασίλεια*.

[66] It could be argued that Geta had already taken over the legal and political aspects of emperorship, cf. 3.14.9; with below, [106-7], on the impact of Severus' choice to divide power. Geta is also said to have inspired equal affection and loyalty within the troops; see Kemmers 2011. Still, Geta's physical disconnect

all either in terms of power or story, until the brothers are physically reunited (from 3.15.6). From that point onwards in the *History*, their joint activity, though brief, is treated as a whole, with Caracalla and Geta now equals[67].

Unlike Marcus' friends, Severus' advisers are barely present in the *History*, much less influential. Herodian mentions that Geta, left in the city, had been given "a council of the emperor's senior friends" (3.14.9: *συνέδρους τῶν φίλων τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους*)[68] to go about imperial affairs, while Severus and Caracalla went ahead to the front. Though it may ultimately have been part of Severus' succession plan, this decision, in Herodian's reading, is treated as a temporary measure and not as a long-term strategy in the event of the emperor's death. Furthermore, when Severus died, Herodian significantly does not bring these advisers at all in the whole successional affair. They only reappear when Caracalla returns from the front and are shown supporting Julia Domna in her pleas for the brothers' reconciliation and peaceful co-emperorship (cf. 3.15.6). In Herodian's *History*, Severus' friends remain on the side-lines and never transcend their condition as tertiary characters. They are only ever made to advise the brothers in conjunction with Julia Domna[69]. If the brothers tend to heed their counsel, it should be noted that these advisers do not actually initiate any action, but merely follow Domna's lead[70].

---

with the army, increasingly depicted by Herodian as the true seat of imperial power, foreshadows his demise in favour of Caracalla's sole accession. It is also true that, at this point in the story, the army rejects Caracalla's demands and urges him to share the emperorship with Geta (3.15.5-7). Herodian might be setting up the expectation, for the audience, of a smooth tenure between the brothers in order to disrupt it later, but looking at the importance already given to their rivalry both in Severus' mind and in terms of textual space, it might be more a matter of drawing out the inevitable.

[67] Cf. *SHA*, *Seu.* 20.1 (*laetatum, quod duos Antoninos pari imperi rei p. relinqueret, exemplo Pii*). Both these views are in disagreement with Cass. Dio 78(77).1-2, in which precedence is already given to Caracalla: "After this Antoninus assumed the entire power; nominally, it is true, he shared it with his brother, but in reality he ruled alone from the very outset" (*μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος πᾶσαν τὴν ἡγεμονίαν ἔλαβε· λόγῳ μὲν γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, τῷ δὲ δὴ ἔργῳ μόνος εὐθὺς ἦρξε*). Though Geta features more prominently in Herodian's story, his portrayal is, arguably, never turned inwards, serving instead to flesh out the characterization of Severus and Caracalla. Geta's ever-growing rivalry with Caracalla and his excessive interests in games and shows illustrate Severus' failures in terms of family and, more broadly, of dynasty consolidation; see e.g. Hekster 2017, 114-15. For Herodian, Geta's newfound virtues post-accession serve as a foil to Caracalla's vices and contrast sharply with his brother's thirst for absolute power, his cruelty, or his harsh impatience. Even though the image of his tenure is tarnished by his feud with Caracalla and his ensuing murder, Herodian's Geta embodies a somewhat successful transformation from heir to ruler; cf. 4.3.2-4; with below, [262-4]. See also Sidebottom 1998, 2808-9 and Zimmermann 1999a, 198-200 who both emphasize a 'paideiatic' foundation in Herodian's portrayal of the brothers. Interestingly, Geta's character in the *History*, for all its rhetorical features, would also be in line with epigraphic and numismatic evidence; cf. Kemmers 2011, esp. 287.

[68] Plautianus, Severus' praetorian prefect and close friend, had featured heavily in previous chapters, during the account of his attempted usurpation, see 3.10.5-3.12. On Severus' friends, see also below, [106-7].

[69] Beside the aforementioned passage at 3.15.6, see too 4.3.5. In that second instance, these advisors are later summoned by Caracalla and Geta and sit in on the brothers' plan of splitting the Empire in halves; on this project, see below [105; 196, with n. 71; 238, n. 283]. An unspecified mix of advisors 'inherited' from Severus (4.3.5: *συναγαγόντες δὴ τοὺς πατρῴους φίλους*) and others of their own choosing, these characters are kept nameless and faceless, made to move as a monolithic unit and conform to Julia Domna's actions. They are somewhat set apart when, in the aftermath of Geta's murder, Caracalla is said to have executed all of his brother's friends and allies (4.6).

[70] 3.15.6: *συνάγειν αὐτοὺς ἡ μήτηρ ἐπειρᾶτο καὶ οἱ ἐν ἀξιώσει ὄντες καὶ σύνεδροι πατρῷοι φίλοι*. Mostly left to his own devices, Herodian's Caracalla might be seen as the realization of Marcus' worries about his own son (cf.

Structure of hereditary successions in the History

Several parallels can be drawn between the stories of Marcus' and Severus' successions in Herodian's work, both in terms of context and of narrative techniques used by the author. To begin with, these are the only two instances of natural deaths and of hereditary successions within the period covered in the *History*. Accordingly, both Commodus' and Caracalla and Geta's accessions are shown to be closely connected to their fathers' deaths. Herodian amplifies this similarity in context by framing the two episodes in highly contrasted sequences, which enables a very surgical comparison between these stories[71]. On a structural level, what Herodian suggests to be the ideal changeover follows a proper order of events, with each character playing a specific part. Since Herodian usually conforms to a linear narrative, this means that the father's funeral should clearly precede the son's assumption of power[72]. As such, Herodian's story of Commodus' accession takes place on the frontier, a few days after Marcus' funeral. Commodus' return to Rome, some months later, is treated by Herodian not as an inauguration, but as an *aduentus*, that is, broadly speaking, a ceremonial entrance of the prince in the capital following a military campaign (1.7.3-6)[73]. Conversely, under a somewhat similar timeframe, the sequence of Caracalla and Geta's joint accession and return to Rome after an expedition to Britain is interwoven with Severus' state funeral and apotheosis.

Significantly, Herodian does not linger over the formal or legal technicalities of the transfer of power from fathers to sons. Hereditary succession appears to be self-evident, both from the author-narrator's perspective and that of the internal audience[74]. Herodian's criticism focuses on the failed rules of the sons, not so much on the mode of succession itself. In fact, the historian appears to be more interested in the process of succession and in the conduct of the individuals involved. Following these two accession episodes, it seems that for Herodian a good succession, and a good successor, should follow a certain order. By conforming to what is implied to be the 'proper' sequence of events, Commodus is shown to respect tradition and maintain his father's legacy. To illustrate how Caracalla disregards both convention and dynastic continuation, Herodian shuffles around the now expected successional sequence. This promising image of Commodus sets up his dramatic downfall, but more importantly reflects positively on Marcus, as we will see below. By contrast, Caracalla's

1.3.1-5; with below, [92-93]): a youth without experience or guidance coming to absolute power. Compare with Pompeianus' named and voiced presence in the early stages of Commodus' rule, cf. 1.6.4-7. Julia's role, in the *History*, seems similar to that of Pompeianus, or Julia Maesa.

[71] See e.g. Hekster 2009, with further references, on common sequences of imperial succession under the Julio-Claudians and the Antonines, from an emperor's death to his deification (or lack thereof).

[72] As a general rule, the *consecratio* of a deceased emperor would be separate from his funeral. It was authorized by *senatus consultum* (with the exception of Domitian) and closely tied with the accession of the next emperor, for whom the apotheosis ritual became a tool of legitimization; see e.g. MacCormack 1981, 93-106; Zanker 2004; Benoist 2005, chap. 3-4.

[73] On imperial *aduentus* between the second and fourth centuries, see e.g. Benoist 2005, 61-101.

[74] Already known from being their fathers' sons, these new emperors evidently do not receive the usual introduction of a new protagonist that would outline merits, motivations, and means available; on this point, see below [208-9].

actions mark him as a bad emperor from the outset, and thus underline Severus' failure to secure a stable empire.

2.3 How (not) to choose your emperor: navigating contrived accessions

Unlike the inherently connected cases examined in the previous sections, similarities between the accessions of Pertinax, Gordian I, and Gordian III may seem quite tenuous at first, since there is a considerable chronological gap between Pertinax and Gordian I; there are no dynastic links between Pertinax and the Gordians; Gordian III is a teenage emperor while the other two are much older; Pertinax's story belongs to the 'centre', but the Gordians are on the 'periphery'. In Herodian's *History*, however, these episodes follow a very similar plot: in the wake of a difficult political situation (i.e. Commodus' assassination; Maximinus' rule; the death of every other emperor of 238), a small group of individuals come together to select and put in power a new emperor[75]. By using the same sequence to tell these stories, Herodian can strengthen the parallels in context, characters, and cause. In fact, within this analogous structure, Herodian is able to transform the (too) stark differences between the three episodes into meaningful elements of characterization. What seems at play here is less the strict order of events, but rather the involvement of the future emperor in each of the phases leading to his proclamation.

2.3.1 An enlightened choice

After murdering Commodus, Marcia, Eclectus, and Laetus began to search for a new emperor[76]. In Herodian's *History*, Pertinax's selection and subsequent inauguration conform to a clear sequence of events, progressing neatly from Commodus' death to Pertinax's accession. According to Herodian, it was only after disposing of Commodus' body that the conspirators would be ready to address the question of succession. By contrast with cases of hereditary succession in which preparations are depicted as desirable, this new sequence reinforces the idea that there was no undue premeditation on the conspirators' part, who were only acting in (pre-emptive) self-defence. Similarly, the *History*'s format, episodic and linear, serves to detach the future emperor from the previous events. Since Pertinax is only

[75] I use the term 'selection' (and, occasionally, 'promotion') to contrast with the notion of 'election' (strictly understood here as the outcome of a voting process), which I take to only apply, in the *History*, to Maximus and Balbinus. *Contra* Meulder 2002, 75, for whom Herodian's Pertinax does gain power through election: quoting Herodian at 2.1.3-2.3.4, Meulder argues that "ce long extrait prouve que Pertinax est élu par le peuple et le Sénat, et un peu (!) par la garde prétorienne […]". It should be noted, however, that Herodian uses in that sequence ἐπιλέξασθαι and ἀναλογιζόμενοι… εὕρισκον (2.1.3), but neither the more voting-oriented χειροτονέω ("to vote by show of hands"), nor ψηφίζω ("to vote by ballot"), which are featured profusely in his account of Pupienus and Balbinus' election (7.10.2-5; and below, [256-7]). To my sense, this seems to suggest that the historian makes a difference between a 'selection' through consensus and a strict 'election'. On Herodian's use of political terms, see Roques 1990b, esp. 40 on 'elections'.

[76] Like certain ancient records (see following note), modern scholarship tends to consider that Pertinax was implicated in the plot from the start, at the very least as the in-the-know successor; see e.g. Hekster 2002, 81-83, Strobel 2004, or Pasek 2013, 127-37; on this passage, see also Galimberti 2014, *ad loc.* On the relations between Pertinax, Eclectus, and Laetus, see further below, [58-59].

introduced in the story once Commodus has exited the stage for good, Herodian can show that this new character was not implicated in the conspiracy, nor was he even aware of it. By making the conspirators fully responsible for Commodus' assassination and setting a distinct *interregnum* between the two princes, Herodian can clear the future emperor of any potential blame in the plot[77].

Plotters turned promoters

The identity of the people who chose Pertinax plays an important part in Herodian's story. The new emperor was endorsed by three individuals in positions of power and prestige. First there was Marcia, Commodus' "favourite concubine" (1.6.4: τῶν παλλακίδων τιμιωτάτην)[78]. According to Herodian, she "was treated just like a legal wife with all the honours due to an empress apart from the sacred fire"[79]. In Herodian's story, Marcia is, at first, shown to truly care for Commodus and would act against the emperor only later and in an effort to forestall her execution. As we will see below, this portrayal is quite different from the accounts found in Dio-Xiphilinus and the *Historia Augusta*[80]. Marcia had two associates: Eclectus, the chamberlain, and Laetus, one of the praetorian prefects (1.16.5). They too seem to have had some amount of affection and loyalty for their emperor, until he turned against them. But their portrayals in Herodian's *History* are not entirely positive and also include elements liable to be problematic: there were apparently rumours of an affair between Marcia and Eclectus, while the latter is described as typically impulsive and emotional on the basis of his Egyptian roots (1.17.6)[81]. And yet, certain of Eclectus' key actions, if swift, also show caution: for instance, when Marcia produced the incriminating tablet, Eclectus sealed it and had it sent with a trusted messenger to inform Laetus of the situation. This, according to Whittaker, was to "counteract the firm loyalty of the guards to Commodus". Acting without delay also allowed Eclectus to take advantage of the fact that the soldiers were not armed during the Saturnalia (as explained at 2.2.9)[82].

Herodian's overall portrayal of these three characters, although not flawless, remains more positive than elsewhere. According to Dio, Marcia had first been Quadratus' lover, who

---

[77] In Cass. Dio 73(72).1.1, Pertinax, while not having had a hand in the murder himself, is linked much more closely to the conspiracy: sceptical, Pertinax sent someone to see Commodus' body, and presumably assisted Eclectus and Laetus in its disposal. The *SHA* clearly associate Pertinax to the plot: *tunc Pertinax interficiendi Commodi conscientam delatam sibi ab aliis non fugit* (*Pert.* 4.5). So Julian, *Caes*. 312C-D, notes: "But Pertinax, you too were guilty, since at least so far as conjecture went you were privy to the plot that was aimed at the son of Marcus" (καὶ σὺ δέ, ὦ Περτίναξ, ἠδίκεις κοινωνῶν τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς, ὅσον ἐπὶ τοῖς σκέμμασιν, ἣν ὁ Μάρκου παῖς ἐπεβουλεύθη, trans. Wright 1913).

[78] On Marcia's portrayal, see further below, [213-14; 229-34], with [230, n. 244] more generally on her (historical) identity.

[79] 1.16.4: καὶ οὐδέν τι ἀπεῖχε γαμετῆς γυναικός, ἀλλὰ πάντα ὑπῆρχεν ὅσα Σεβαστῇ πλὴν τοῦ πυρός.

[80] Modern views on Marcia tend to minimize Herodian's version which makes her the instigator of the plot, either giving precedence to Laetus and Eclectus, or making the three equally initiating, see e.g. Birley in *OCD*[3], s.v. "Marcia", or Lightman & Lightman 2008, s.v. "Marcia (4)".

[81] On Herodian's (so-called) ethnographical interests, see below, [199-202].

[82] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad loc.*; cf. 2.2.1.

had previously made an attempt on Commodus' life (cf. 1.8.4-8)[83]. Similarly, Eclectus is said to have previously been the cubicularius of that same Quadratus; Dio also claims that Eclectus and Marcia were married after Commodus' death. In the *Historia Augusta*, Marcia is closely associated to Commodus' excesses (cf. *SHA*, *Comm.* 8.6; 11.9). Eclectus (possibly) appears first in the *Vita Veri* as one of Verus' "unscrupulous freedmen" (*SHA*, *Ver.* 9.5: *libertos improbos*)[84]. These questionable implications do not feature in Herodian's story, which even treats Marcia and Eclectus' affair as a rumour (1.17.6: διεβάλλετο). Although they finally took action to preserve their own lives, the conspirators are also depicted as concerned parties for Commodus and for the Empire more generally. Their motivations are shown to be an intricate mix of affection, self-preservation, and principles. Most of all, Herodian gives their plotting against the emperor just the right amount of planning and reacting.

The very best candidate

Once Commodus had been dealt with, all three are credited with the choice of the new emperor. According to Herodian, Marcia, Eclectus, and Laetus decided that they needed to find a "mature" (2.13: πρεσβύτην) and "wise" (σώφρονα) man to take over the Empire[85]. And so they "deliberated" (2.1.3: ἐβουλεύοντο) and "after considering (ἀναλογιζόμενοι) the possibilities, they could find no one better qualified (οὐδένα ἐπιτήδειον) than Pertinax"[86]. Though less than a day went by between Commodus' murder and Pertinax's proclamation, Herodian stresses the validity of this choice through verbs connoting deliberation (ἐβουλεύοντο, ἔδοξε, ἐπιλέξασθαι, ἀναλογιζόμενοι, etc.)[87] and a praising portrayal of their chosen candidate. As Herodian tells it, their plot against Commodus might have taken shape in reaction to their impending arrest, but their selection of Pertinax is shown as a calculated decision. Even though Herodian, at that point, does not name other viable candidates, it is implied that there were, but that Pertinax by far surpassed them in light of his many public achievements and his personal virtues[88].

---

[83] Cass. Dio 73(72).4.6; 73(72).13.5. According to Cass. Dio 74(73).16.5, Marcia and Laetus would later be executed under the orders of Didius Julianus.

[84] The identification of this Eclectus to one of Commodus' murderers is not entirely secure, though generally accepted by scholars, see e.g. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 4 *ad* 1.16.5; Roques 1990a, 228, n. 145; Chastagnol 1994, n. 2 *ad SHA*, *Comm.* 15.2.

[85] In a conversation with the man himself, Laetus also cites these virtues as the reason for having chosen Pertinax to become the next emperor, cf. 2.1.9. It may be that the mention of Pertinax's age is meant to suggest a certain outdatedness in the character, though his accompanying 'wisdom' and experience manage to balance out the possible stigmata attached to old age. For Herodian, one certainly may be too old to assume power, but the historian chooses to apply this theme to Gordian I, not Pertinax.

[86] 2.1.3: καθ' ἑαυτοὺς δὴ ἀναλογιζόμενοι οὐδένα οὕτως ἐπιτήδειον εὕρισκον ὡς Περτίνακα. Schettino 2017, 86-87 also notes that the proximity of Pertinax's house (whose location is unknown to us) to the imperial palace might have been another reason for the conspirators to choose the man. On a more nuanced take on Pertinax, see e.g. Strobel 2004.

[87] Note the use of the compound forms ἐπιλέγομαι and ἀναλογίζομαι, which might serve to emphasize the (relative) length and thoroughness of the deliberation, just as we would say in English 'to think it over', 'to think it through', 'to think it out'. See Castelli 2008, 108-11, who notes that there is a significant increase in speeches, from the final conspiracy against Commodus to Pertinax's appearance in the senate house.

[88] Cf. Pertinax's *recusatio*, where he puts forward Glabrio in his stead at 2.3.3-4; with below, [62-63].

Following this agreement between the conspirators, Pertinax is then properly introduced in the story and portrayed at length, with a list of his numerous political and military distinctions (2.1.4)[89]. Interestingly, Pertinax's achievements are cited before any further action towards his proclamation was taken (cf. 7.5.2). Herodian points out that the man had been one of Marcus' *philoi*, the dear friends and advisors to whom the old emperor had entrusted the custody of his son (and, through him, that of the Empire). Herodian even claims at that point that Pertinax was also "the only one" (2.1.4: *μόνος*) of these friends to have survived Commodus' purges, though he had stated otherwise in the previous book (1.17.2) and would later feature a much alive Glabrio (2.3.3-4)[90]. Herodian suggests that Commodus may have spared Pertinax because he had been "in awe of his prestige" (2.1.4: *διὰ σεμνότητα αἰδούμενος*) – or simply that Pertinax was deemed too poor (*ὡς πένητα τηρήσας*) to have posed any serious threat. Out of all of Marcus' "respected" (2.1.4: *σεμνῶν*) friends, Pertinax is even said to have been "the most highly honoured" (*ἐντιμότατον*). Among all the excellent men with whom Marcus chose to surround himself, Pertinax is singled out by Herodian as the best of them. As such, Pertinax's status as 'sole' survivor of Commodus' purges should not to be taken as a source of discredit, but as proof of his worth. Similarly, his close association to Marcus serves more as a confirmation of Pertinax's character than it constitutes a reason in itself: according to Herodian, Pertinax became of one Marcus' friends on his own merits, and this is also how he was chosen to be the next emperor. By evoking so Marcus, Herodian can also suggest his posthumous approval to Pertinax's accession and even the proper continuation of his dynasty[91].

Discussions and reactions

When the conspirators, as Herodian tells it, settled upon a new emperor, they decided to approach him quickly and discreetly: "and so it was that in the dead of the night, while everyone was sleeping soundly, Laetus and Eclectus, together with a few men who were in the plot, came to Pertinax's house"[92]. While nocturnal actions in Herodian tend to be linked to deceit and unlawfulness, they express in this particular scene foresight and caution on the conspirators' part[93]. As we will see below, Pertinax would also take the time to reflect on his

[89] As underlined by Herodian, Pertinax's meagre fortune, obscure origins, and status as a self-made man (also 2.3.1; 5.1.8) contrasted sharply with Commodus' position, who had been 'born in the purple' (1.5.5; cf. above, [43-46]).

[90] Cf. 2.1.7, in Pertinax's own words. Interestingly, Herodian introduces Glabrio without referencing Marcus. According to Cass. Dio 73(72).4.1 and 74(73).3.1, Pompeianus, who had briefly interacted with Commodus in the wake of Marcus' friends (1.6.4ff), was also still alive at that moment (cf. Crook 1955, 77-78). In *SHA*, *Pert.* 4.10, Pompeianus is the one urged by Pertinax to become emperor; Hohl 1956, 13-14 argued that Herodian must have confused Glabrio with Pompeianus.

[91] On Pertinax's career, see e.g. the inscription found in Brühl (near Cologne, Germany), published in Kolbe 1962, with *SHA*, *Pert*. 1-2.

[92] 2.1.5: *πρὸς δὴ τοῦτον τὸν Περτίνακα νυκτὸς ἀκμαζούσης πάντων τε ὕπνῳ κατειλημμένων ἀφικνοῦνται ὁ Λαῖτος καὶ ὁ Ἔκλεκτος ὀλίγους τῶν συνωμοτῶν ἐπαγόμενοι.*

[93] See, for instance, Macrinus' flight from the battlefield, at 5.4.7-8; with below, [136-9]. A more ambivalent example would be Severus' entrance in Rome, cf. 2.12.1-2, with below, [85-88].

next actions, before addressing the senate at daylight[94]. According to Herodian, Laetus and Eclectus arrived at Pertinax's house only to find it locked; there "they stood at the outer doors and raised the watchman", without resorting to violence[95]. The guard, however, took fright and, thinking they had come to kill Pertinax, went to fetch his master: "reports certainly say that he [i.e. Pertinax] remained so calm that he did not even get off his couch and never changed his expression"[96]. Likewise, Pertinax is said to have addressed his presumed murderers "confidently without losing colour" (2.1.6: θαρροῦντι μηδὲ ὠχριάσαντι). There is, in Herodian's account, an obvious contrast between the reactions of the watchman and of Pertinax, based not on diverging expectations (both thought the men had come to kill Pertinax), but on character. According to Herodian, Pertinax was, in fact, only surprised by the delayed reprisal, as he still believed Laetus and Eclectus had come under Commodus' orders (2.1.7). In Herodian's story, Pertinax's ignorance of the actual situation does not express helplessness, but serves instead to separate him from the conspirators and exonerate him from the plot. This 'buffing' strategy, used profusely in Marcus' idealized portrayal, allows Herodian to indicate how sound a choice Pertinax was to be invested with the emperorship.

Interestingly, Herodian's account of Pertinax's accession features several speeches: two for Pertinax and one apiece for Laetus and Eclectus (2.1.1). From a formal perspective, the number and close proximity of these speeches give the impression of an actual discussion, rather than an armed confrontation. Laetus' and Eclectus' alternating contributions also help to substantiate the idea of a return to harmony and aristocracy, which they hoped to establish with this prospective government. According to Herodian, Pertinax greeted the men with exhortations to finish him off so he would be "set free" (2.1.7: ἀπαλλάξομαι) from his constant fears. Laetus, however, was quick to reject these claims of hopelessness and cowardice, finding them "unworthy" (2.1.8: ἀνάξια) of the way Pertinax had lived his life thus far (προβεβιωμένων). Updating Pertinax on the latest events, Laetus then offers him the custody of the emperorship (2.1.9: ἐγχειριοῦντες), along with a detailed account of their reasons and motivations for choosing him. Laetus, in essence, reiterates Pertinax's merits first noted in Herodian's introduction of the character: his experience, his moderation, his respectability, as well as the universal affection he inspired made him the perfect candidate (cf. 2.1.3-4 and 2.1.8-9). Reassuring Pertinax of their goodwill towards him, Laetus instead expresses concern for their personal safety as king slayers, which he extends to the welfare of the whole population (2.1.8: ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τῇ τε ἡμῶν αὐτῶν καὶ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς). Arguably, this 'commonization' of fates tends to move this idea of safety away from direct retribution to

[94] In Cass. Dio 74(73).1.1, "the followers of Laetus and Eclectus" (οἱ περὶ τὸν Ἔκλεκτον καὶ Λαῖτον) came to Pertinax, instead of the men themselves, which perhaps lessens the solemn aspect of the episode. On the many values of nighttime (from divine inspiration and deep introspection to erotic encounters or military ambushes), see two recent edited volumes: Chaniotis (ed.) 2018 and Ker & Wessels (eds) 2020.

[95] 2.1.5: ἐπιστάντες δὲ αὐτοῦ κεκλεισμένης τῆς οἰκίας ταῖς θύραις διεγείρουσι τὸν φυλάσσοντα.

[96] 2.1.6: ἐν τοσαύτῃ γοῦν αὐτόν φασι μεῖναι ψυχῆς ἀταραξίᾳ ὡς μηδ' ἀναθορεῖν τοῦ σκίμποδος, μεῖναι δ' ἐπὶ τοῦ σχήματος. Note the parallel structure of μεῖναι… μεῖναι, possibly mirroring Pertinax's equanimity. For Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad loc*., these other reports refer to later propaganda through which Pertinax was made complicit in Commodus' murder; on this idea, see above, [53-54, n. 76 and 77].

convey instead a more general sense of salvation. As such, Laetus' appeal to Pertinax helps to reframe their plot against Commodus as a public service, replacing a tyrant by a worthy ruler (cf. 2.1.3).

According to Herodian, Pertinax was not convinced by Laetus' initial argument, believing that they were mocking him and merely drawing out the inevitable (2.1.10). Pertinax's answering speech, as Herodian presents it, certainly serves the dramatic aspect of the whole scene, but most importantly it emphasizes his unwillingness to assume power and his lack of involvement in the conspiracy. Faced with Pertinax's enduring suspicion, Eclectus showed him the tablet on which Commodus had written a list of proscriptions, so Pertinax could see for himself the incriminating evidence. Although Laetus and Eclectus are shown struggling to convince Pertinax with words, they do not resort to physical threats, but choose instead to rely on tangible proof. This, according to Herodian, is what finally persuades Pertinax of their story and of the legitimacy of their acts[97].

Once Pertinax, following Herodian's story, allied himself with Laetus and Eclectus, all three agreed that the first step should be to ensure the army's support, especially since the soldiers had been fiercely loyal to Commodus. In this part, Herodian tellingly makes use of an impersonal third person or of plural forms to describe the actions of the three men: ἀρέσκει, συμπαραλαβόντες, ἠπείγοντο, διαπέμπουσι (2.2.1-2)[98]. This suggests agreement and harmony between the soon-to-be emperor and his advisors, through which a return to senatorial aristocracy is already taking shape. If the preparations are implied to be a joint endeavour between the three men, Laetus is given centre stage to prepare the soldiers for Pertinax's assumption of power. This individualized action of Laetus, however, is not depicted as self-interested but is instead directed towards their common effort (2.2.1: πείσειν δὲ αὐτοὺς ὁ Λαῖτος ὑπισχνεῖτο). Laetus' speech to the army is similar to his earlier appeal to Pertinax, but it expands more fully on Commodus' failings and his well-deserved, and revised, fate[99]. Notably, this speech given to Laetus is tailored to his audience: to introduce Pertinax and encourage the soldiers' compliance, Laetus wilfully targets the virtues and achievements of Pertinax that are mainly military in nature (2.2.7-8). According to Herodian, Laetus even declared that

---

[97] According to Castelli 2008, 114, Laetus is creating a "realtà di comodo". At 2.1.10, Herodian comments that Pertinax was πεισθείς τε ἀνδράσι καὶ πρότερον αὐτοῦ φίλοις, which might translate very literally into "convinced by men who were also first his friends". Should πρότερον be understood here as "old" or as "former"? Both meanings express a certain personal connection between the three men, but an emphasis on duration, through 'old', might better frame Pertinax's easy acceptance of the tablet as proof (as opposed to his reaction in Cass. Dio 74(73).1.1, where he chose to send a trusted friend to see Commodus' body). Modern translations are varied: "these old friend of his" (Echols 1961); "che del resto già prima gli erano amici" (Càssola 1967); "die oude vrienden van hem waren" (Brok 1973/Hunink 2017); "his former friends" (Whittaker 1969-70); "que además eran antiguos amigos" (Torres Esbarranch 1985); "qui, auparavant déjà, étaient ses amis" (Roques 1990a); "die ja auch zuvor schon seine Freunde gewesen waren" (Müller 1996). On the tablet as a plot device, see also below, [230-4].

[98] *LSJ*, s.v. ἀρέσκει, IV: "used impers. to express the *opinion* or *resolution* of a public body" (emphasis original). In Cass. Dio 74(73).1.2, "Pertinax then betook himself secretly to the camp" (οὕτω δὴ ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον κρύφα ἐσεκομίσθη), after his messenger confirmed to have seen Commodus' body.

[99] Note that Pertinax was given the true cause of Commodus' death, adding to the goodwill of the private meeting held in his house, as discussed above. Cf. Castelli 2008, 114-15 on the language used by Laetus.

Pertinax's rule would be embraced by all Roman soldiers, whether in the capital and on the fringes of the Empire (2.2.8)[100]. With this speech, Laetus is shown to have successfully rallied the people into proclaiming Pertinax as emperor and bestowing him all the traditional titles. This, as Herodian relates, all happened without the man in question having to utter even a single word. This lack of activity on Pertinax's part is another key factor contributing to his portrayal as the unwitting and reluctant candidate who finally agreed out of duty. Pertinax's refusal, as we will see, is also consistent with the tradition of the *recusatio imperii*[101].

Despite these precautions taken to ensure the army's agreement, the military reception of Pertinax's nomination remains problematic. Trying to reconcile their hesitation with an otherwise general enthusiasm for Pertinax, Herodian punctuates the story of his proclamation with a series of omissions and ellipses. Herodian notes that Laetus' speech certainly reaped popular acclamation, "although the soldiers were still cautious and hesitant" (2.2.9: μελλόντων καὶ ὀκνούντων ἔτι τῶν στρατιωτῶν)[102]. According to Herodian, they finally agreed to proclaim Pertinax emperor because they "felt compelled to" (2.2.9: ἀνάγκη, cf. 2.2.4-5) join in the cheer once they realized they were outnumbered and unarmed. Just as Pertinax's initial deference to Laetus is depicted as a calculated move on the characters' part, his lack of any particular action following his military proclamation is similarly noteworthy. In addition to some sort of an inaugural speech (though one would take place during Pertinax's audience in the senate house)[103], Herodian also foregoes any mention of *donatiua* paid to the soldiers, while Dio records that the amount came up to twelve thousand sesterces apiece[104]. This editorial choice marks a strong contrast between Commodus and Pertinax, both in terms of imperial policies and of the army's corresponding loyalty, or lack thereof[105]. Looking at Herodian's whole account of Pertinax's rule, the military's coerced, lukewarm approval foreshadows the emperor's murder: the soldiers' simmering discontent would soon boil over into a coup[106].

If Pertinax's support within the military seemed shaky, his popular approval was high. According to Herodian, news had quickly spread about Commodus' death and Pertinax' imminent inauguration and was met with great joy throughout the city. In an echo of the

---

[100] This echoes the globality of Marcus' dominion over the Empire cited at 1.2.5 and 1.3.5.

[101] On *recusationes*, see e.g. Huttner 2004; cf. further below, [62-64] for a larger discussion of Pertinax's refusal and additional references on this 'accession ritual'.

[102] In Cass. Dio 74(73).1.2-3, the commotion created by Pertinax's appearance in the camp only cooled down due to the presence of Laetus' supporters and a large donative from the new emperor. Pertinax's closing statement, alluding to a repeal of the soldiers' privileges gained under Commodus, would soon rekindle their anger.

[103] Cf. 2.3.5-10, with below [63].

[104] Cf. Cass. Dio 74(73).1.2; with *SHA*, *Pert.* 4.6.

[105] And, as the reader progresses through the *History*, it also serves to set Pertinax against bad emperorship more generally, since large distributions of money to the army are typically associated with tyrants (e.g. Commodus, Caracalla), or problematic rulers (e.g. Severus).

[106] Suffice to say, Herodian does not mention, as we find in Cass. Dio 74(73).6.3; 8.1ff, any later plots of Laetus' allying with the praetorians against Pertinax, or his faked loyalty to the new emperor; cf. *SHA*, *Pert.* 10.8ff). As for Marcus, Herodian thus creates an image of universal approval of Pertinax, if somewhat unenthusiastic for some.

unanimous mourning provoked by Marcus' death[107], Herodian accentuates the shared rejoicing and general approval of Pertinax through similar expressions: "all the people" (2.2.3: πᾶς ὁ δῆμος); "everyone" (ἕκαστος); "most of the population" (2.2.4: πλεῖστον); "*en masse*" (2.2.5: πανδημεί)[108]. Excited so by the tyrant's death, the people are shown to have been equally enthusiastic support for Pertinax as their new emperor. Thrilled by the news, they were then rushing to the praetorian camp, expecting to find military resistance (2.2.4-5). Their numbers, as Herodian tells it, finally convinced the army to proclaim Pertinax emperor (2.2.9). There is similar popular acclamation in Dio (Cass. Dio 74(73).2), but the senators are featured more prominently than in the *History*. For Herodian, this greater importance given to the people helps to offset the army's discontent and cast Pertinax's inauguration in a more harmonious light. Better yet, the army's half-hearted acclamation is enclosed, in Herodian's story, by popular rejoicing and the upcoming senatorial ratification, which mirrors their physical encirclement within their own camp[109].

Becoming emperor

Since all of this had unfolded during the night and dawn, Pertinax is said to have remained in the imperial palace until he could head to the senate house at a more proper time. Significantly, it is only at the moment of his proclamation that Pertinax is made sole actor in the *History*'s version of the scene. As seen above, Herodian had, up until then, either grouped Pertinax with Laetus and Eclectus, or staged him as an object of the two men's actions. This technique of narrative 'promotion' was also used by Herodian in the story of Commodus' coming to power, but in the present case it produces a rather different effect. This disparity is grounded in the diverging modes of succession and the respective ages and experiences of the emperors. As Herodian tells it, Commodus, who was still young and boasting lineage as his primary means of legitimacy, had needed to rely on his father's advisers to guide and supervise him through the successional process. In this way, Marcus' friends were shown to fulfil the dying emperor's last wishes and support Commodus' claim to power. By contrast, Pertinax, a mature and proven candidate, is less chaperoned than promoted by friendly allies. Giving the lead to Eclectus and, especially, Laetus, contributes to the image of a 'found' candidate, rather than a complicit usurper.

According to Herodian, Pertinax spent the rest of the night mulling over potential senatorial objections (especially his modest origins) to his new appointment. The army's reluctance is also said to have weighed heavily on his mind. Pertinax feared not for his own life, "since he had often shown his disregard for more serious dangers", but for the fate of the people and the Empire[110]. He was worried that the "suddenness" (2.3.1: αἰφνίδιον) of his

[107] On Marcus' death, cf. 1.4.8, with below, [95-97].

[108] Cf. 2.4.1-3, with below, [60-62], for a similar framing strategy of Pertinax's appearance in the senate.

[109] For Marasco 1998, 2867, Pertinax's (temporary) general approval defines him as "l'esempio più perfetto e riuscito di successione" in Herodian's *History*.

[110] 2.3.1: κινδύνων γὰρ καὶ μειζόνων πολλάκις ἦν καταφρονήσας. Herodian again notes Pertinax's "reputation for iron nerves and courage" (2.3.1: καίτοι δοκοῦντα ψύχης εἶναι ἐρρωμένης καὶ πρὸς πάντα ἀνδρεῖον).

succession as well as his (lack of) status would meet some resistance within the senate and cause political unrest[111]. This self-denial is reminiscent of Marcus' last troubled thoughts about Commodus and the future of the Empire. This constant focus on popular well-being is yet another way for Herodian to show how much closer in spirit to Marcus he was. Commodus, in typical tyrannical fashion, had put his personal desires before the needs of the people. On the contrary, Pertinax, even pending his senatorial confirmation, is shown to have been deeply concerned with the common good. Significantly, his first moment to himself in the palace following his military proclamation is not the occasion for Pertinax to start enjoying the perks of imperial life. This key quality in Pertinax serves to define him as fundamentally un-Commodian and to outline how this new emperor would soon seek to reverse the 'new', subverted order that came to exist under Commodus[112]. If we look back at the story in itself, this short break between both appearances allows Herodian to slow down the narrative's rhythm, in a way defusing the growing resentment of the military towards the newly invested emperor. With this disjointed narrative sequence, Herodian can also take this moment to 'dismiss' Laetus and Eclectus in order to refocus the story on Pertinax, away from the tumult outside. This interlude in the *History* serves as a stepping stone to Pertinax's full assumption of power and narrative agency.

Herodian's story uses, for these events, a clear chronological progression: Pertinax was escorted to the palace "just as dawn was breaking" (2.2.10: τὸ περίορθρον; cf. 2.3.1: νύκτωρ), spent the rest of the night in deep thought (2.3.1), and went to the senate house "when daylight came" (2.3.2: ἡμέρας οὖν καταλαβούσης). By contrast, Dio relates that Pertinax went straight from the camp to the senate house "while it was still night" (Cass. Dio 74(73).1.4: νυκτὸς ἔτι οὔσης). There, Pertinax tried to recuse himself, but the senators wholeheartedly gave him their support. The *Historia Augusta* somewhat echoes Dio's version: "During the night he came from the camp to the senate" (*SHA*, *Pert*. 4.9: *de castris nocte cum ad senatum uenisset*). In the *Vita*, however, Pertinax, shown to be unable to find the watchman to open the *cella*, stopped instead in the temple of Concord, where he proposed the emperorship to Pompeianus. Upon Pompeianus' refusal, Pertinax finally went back to the senate house, still "in the middle of the night" (*SHA*, *Pert*. 4.11: *nocte*), accompanied by all the magistrates, who all hailed him as emperor. Herodian's version, composed of more distinct steps, also features a small break in the narrative, in between Pertinax's proclamation by the army and the people and his appearance in the senate house[113]. This pause in the story allows Pertinax to take some time alone, away from the excitement. Calling to mind privileged moments of philosophical

[111] Pertinax's worries were apparently well-founded, based on what we can read in Dio's *Roman History* and in the *Historia Augusta*: two ordinary consuls would later attempt to usurp Pertinax (Falco; cf. Cass. Dio 74(73).8 and *SHA*, *Pert*. 10) or participate in a public disruption right after his proclamation (Vibanius; *SHA*, *Pert*. 6.1-6); cf. Cass. Dio 74(73).3.4 (on general reservations among the "wealthy and vainglorious" (οἱ… πλούσιοι καὶ μεγάλαυχοι); with Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 2.3.1 and n. 1 *ad* 2.3.4.

[112] This restoration would prove to be short-lived, as self-interest quickly became the new tendency for most of the following emperors.

[113] See also Andrews 2019, 139: "Each stage of Pertinax's spatial progression is marked out by the three social groups [i.e. army, people, senate]."

introspection and access to specific kinds of knowledge, with a side of nocturnal fright[114], this was an occasion for Pertinax to think, and especially to worry, about his forthcoming meeting with the senators. While time was of the essence to secure the army's allegiance, this new audience now required propriety and is accordingly postponed until the morning[115]. As Herodian shows, Pertinax, along with Laetus and Eclectus, dealt with the army and the senate in notably different ways, adapted to each group both in terms of approach and timeliness. This dual strategy shows in Herodian's Pertinax (and in his associates) a practical understanding of politics, which acknowledges the diverging interests and types of power held by each audience. If Pertinax, as Herodian tells it, viewed the praetorians' as a pressing matter, and acted accordingly, he also deferred to the senators' approval and their moral authority[116].

Staging a refusal

Following the *History*'s account, Pertinax seemed to gain instant popular support and secure the army's compliance. For his appeal the senate, Pertinax is shown to fall back on convention. After waiting for an appropriate time to enter the senate house, Pertinax also refused to appear with the imperial insignia, since he was, according to Herodian, still ignorant, and wary, of the senators' opinion on his nomination[117]. Herodian emphatically shows that Pertinax's worries were unwarranted: "But as soon as (ἅμα) he made his appearance, the entire senate joined together (πάντες ὁμοθυμαδόν) in acclaiming him with the titles of Augustus and emperor"[118]. Pertinax, however, is said to have refused the honours bestowed upon him, claiming to be too old and that there were anyway others that would be better suited to the job (2.3.3). This action would contribute to his image as a worthy candidate to rule the Empire. A *recusatio imperii* had been somewhat of a staple of imperial accessions since Augustus, and especially so in literary accounts[119]. Though it may have become increasingly procedural (provided that it had not been so from the start), this gesture is typically supported by a respect for tradition and a disposition for order. With Maximinus (6.8.6) and Gordian I (7.5.7), Pertinax is one of the few emperors in Herodian's *History* to

[114] See Part 2 in Ker & Wessels (eds) 2020, with above [57].

[115] See Hellstrom 2015, 49-50 on this particular passage: "The historian tries his best to transfer the nightly events to respectable daytime".

[116] E.g. Buongiorno 2017, 218.

[117] One could argue, however, that Pertinax's accession signified the rise of military supremacy. Through Herodian's careful representation, Pertinax is shown to uphold senatorial ideals but, in fact, the senate's ratification seems perfunctory. Since Pertinax had already been proclaimed emperor by the army and installed in the palace, a senatorial veto seemed unlikely. Cf. Dondin-Payre 1993, 250-51.

[118] 2.3.4: ἐπεὶ δὲ αὐτὸν ἅμα τῷ ἐπιφανῆναι πάντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν εὐφήμησαν Σεβαστόν τε καὶ βασιλέα προσηγόρευσαν.

[119] On Augustus' refusal, cf. Suet., *Aug.* 28; Cass. Dio 53.3-10, but see also Tiberius' persistent one, cf. Tac., *Annal.* 1.7.1; 1.11; Suet., *Tib.* 24; Cass. Dio 57.2. For discussions on the imperial *recusatio*, often considered as an 'accession ritual', see Béranger 1953, 137-69; Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 36-37; Timonen 1993, esp. 133-4; Huttner 2004; Gotter 2015, 216-23; with Timonen 2000, 50-51 and Haegemans 2010, 147-8 on these particular scenes in Herodian's work.

appear in such a scene[120]. Stating old age as grounds for his refusal, Pertinax directed the senators towards men who were nobler than him (2.3.1)[121]. Singling out Glabrio, Pertinax even "urged him to sit on the emperor's throne"[122]. By contrast to Pertinax, who presented himself as "an upstart from a family without status and of humble origin"[123], Herodian describes Glabrio as "the most nobly born of all the patricians (εὐγενέστατος πάντων τῶν εὐπατριδῶν), since he traced his descent all the way from Aeneas son of Venus and Anchises"[124]. Possibly reflecting an actual claim of the *Acilii Glabriones*, this compelling image serves to emphasize the fact that Pertinax's concerns about his lower birth had no foundations: not even the most illustrious senator could rival him.

In Herodian's *History*, Glabrio too is given space to (successfully) refuse power: "Although you think I am the most eligible candidate (πάντων ἀξιώτατον), I at any rate renounce my claim to the empire in your favour, and all of us here (οἱ λοιποὶ πάντες) endorse the decision by conferring supreme power on you"[125]. While Herodian frequently glosses over supporting characters, here Glabrio is named and, above all, is allowed speech and agency. Herodian's Glabrio therefore becomes the mouthpiece for all the senators, while his own, lesser *recusatio* stands as the confirmation of Pertinax's accession[126]. Newly appointed, but "with great reluctance" (2.3.4: ὀκνῶν καὶ μόλις)[127], Pertinax then addressed the senators in a long inaugural speech, in which he promised a return to a moderate, aristocratic rule (2.3.5-10). Hearing Pertinax's words, the senators are once again said to have "all (πάντων) cheered and voted him full honours and marks of respect"[128]. As Herodian tells it, news of Pertinax's investiture in the senate house soon prompted the people to rejoice madly (2.4.1: ὑπερήδοντο πάντες)[129].

---

[120] Some authors record additional refusals for others emperors featured in Herodian: Albinus in *SHA*, *Alb*. 3.3, Severus in *SHA*, *Seu.* 5.1, Macrinus in Cass. Dio 79(78).11.6 (though see 4.14.2 for Adventus' refusal); *SHA*, *Macr.* 5.4, Gordian I in *SHA, Maximin.* 14.3; 16.2; *Gord.* 9.5-6.

[121] In Ps.-Vict. 18.1, Pertinax's refusal and distaste for the emperorship are used to explain his *cognomen*.

[122] 2.3.4: αὐτὸν καθίζεσθαι κελεύων ἐπὶ τοῦ βασιλείου θρόνου. Cf. Castelli 2008, 116-19 on the language used by Pertinax. Dio, who was one of the senators present at that moment, recounts a similar story: lacking an alternative nomination, Pertinax's refusal is quickly met with the senators' cheers; cf. Cass. Dio 74(73).1.4.

[123] 2.3.1: ἐς ἄνδρα ἐξ ἰδιωτικοῦ καὶ ἀσήμου γένους ἐπὶ τοῦτο ἐλθόντα.

[124] 2.3.4: ἦν δὲ ἐκεῖνος εὐγενέστατος μὲν πάντων τῶν εὐπατριδῶν (ἀνέφερε γοῦν ἐς Αἰνείαν τὸν Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Ἀγχίσου τὴν τοῦ γένους διαδοχήν). Herodian notes that Glabrio had been consul twice (ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὴν ὕπατον ἀρχὴν τελέσας δεύτερον). Dondin-Payre 1993, 289: "Cette mention est utilitaire: elle n'est pas invoquée pour elle-même, comme une anecdote indépendante, mais pour expliquer le choix de Pertinax, fondé sur deux critères, l'ancienneté et la célébrité de la lignée qui se renforcent l'une l'autre, mais ne se confondent pas."

[125] 2.3.4: ἀλλ' αὐτός, ἔφη, ἐγὼ ὃν σὺ νομίζεις πάντων ἀξιώτατον, σοί τε τῆς ἀρχῆς παραχωρῶ καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἐγὼ καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ πάντες ἐπευφημίζομεν σοι διδόντες. Both Glabrio and Pompeianus, Pertinax's counterpart in the *Historia Augusta*, are featured in Dio, but in a different context: according to Cass. Dio 74(73).3.3, Pertinax had great respect for them and granted them privilege to sit next to him in the senate house.

[126] Dondin-Payre 1993, 251: "[…] le refus de celui-ci [i.e. Glabrion] démontrait l'inanité de l'objection opposée à la promotion de Pertinax et donc la légitimité foncière de son choix."

[127] Cf. *SHA*, *Pert*. 13.1: *imperium et omnia imperialia sic horruit*; repeated at 15.6.

[128] 2.3.11: καὶ πρὸς πάντων εὐφημηθεὶς πάσης τε τιμῆς καὶ αἰδοῦς παρ' αὐτῶν. See Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad loc*., picking up the fact that Herodian "significantly omits the acclamations of the senate, although he gives those of the people earlier (2.2.3-4)".

[129] From this point onwards, there is a distinct lack of supporting characters, named or otherwise, in Herodian's account of Pertinax's rule. This feature underlines that emperor's ability to rule, while also enforcing a sense of unity that will soon be shattered by the praetorians.

Through a simple repetition of πάντες, Herodian is able to emphasize the unity created within the senate and the people by Pertinax's accession. This strategy is reminiscent of how the historian framed the universal grief caused by Marcus' death. According to Herodian, Pertinax was welcomed as the new emperor in a unified wave of delight at the prospect of "a respected and mild constitutional ruler and father" (2.4.1: σεμνὸν καὶ ἤπιον ἄρχοντα καὶ πατέρα)[130].

In spite of its problematic circumstances, Pertinax's accession in Herodian's *History* is presented as a good example of coming to power. Just as in his story of Commodus' advent, Herodian relies on a clearly defined narrative sequence and on character roles appropriate to story phases and types of action. Giving prominence to Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus for this brief moment makes them carry the full responsibility of Commodus' murder and the transition to Pertinax. Herodian's Pertinax thus appears as entirely innocent and even unaware of the plot, as well as very reluctant to assume power, but duty-bound. These strategies deployed by Herodian frame Pertinax's accession as a promising event and underline the similarities between Pertinax and Marcus. Moreover, through Pertinax's deference to the senate, Herodian can sketch out a predominant senatorial authority, which is reflected in later authors who tend to present Pertinax's accession as senatorial[131]. Since Herodian is a known, or at least commonly accepted, source for most of these authors[132], this image of senatorial pre-eminence found in the *History* may even have been distilled later on into a proper senatorial accession.

2.3.2 A contextual solution

As we can read in book seven of the *History*, the revolt leading to Gordian's accession broke out in North Africa shortly after Maximinus assumed power (7.4.2ff). According to Herodian, the African procurator, who owed his posting to Maximinus, was viciously persecuting and extorting the local élite, hoping to garner more favour from his emperor. At some point Maximinus' official targeted a group of young nobles with even more exactions as well as lawsuits meant to appropriate their family estates, causing the aristocrats to conspire against him. Joined by the procurators' many other victims and their own workers, they successfully overthrew him. In the wake of this achievement, the Libyan noblemen realized they needed to push their revolt even further (from 7.5.1). This sets the stage for Gordian's first appearance in Herodian's *History.*

---

[130] Note the transition from earlier celebrations of both Commodus' death and the 'rumour' that Pertinax was on his way to the praetorian camp (2.2.2-3). Though the technique used by Herodian is the same, the progression of events is clear: Pertinax has become sole emperor.

[131] Cf. *SHA*, *Pert.* 6.7: "He declared, also, that he had received from the senate the sovereignty which, in fact, he had already assumed on his own responsibility" (*suscipere se etiam imperium a senatu dixit, quod iam sponte inierat*); Eutrop. 8.16: "appointed emperor by senatorial decree" (*ex senatu consulto imperare iussu*; Auson., *Caes.* 19: "chosen by the Senate's verdict and decree" (*iudicio et consulto lecte senati*); Oros. 7.16.5: "was made [emperor] by the senate" (*a senatu creatus est*).

[132] See Hidber 2006, 20-28 for an overview of Herodian's reception in antiquity, until Photios in the ninth century; with above, [1, n. 1 and 2].

The instigators

To tell Gordian's accession story, Herodian uses a sequencing quite similar to his account of Pertinax's scene, but the method generates a vastly different image of the new emperor [133]. Pertinax, following Herodian's account, is emphatically separated from Commodus' rule and murder to prove that he played no part in the plot, nor that he knew anything about it. As Herodian tells it, this works to Pertinax's advantage, since his nomination as the next emperor is not shown to be the endgame of the conspiracy against Commodus. Rather, the choice of Pertinax becomes the result of a genuine deliberation and is based solely on the man's own merit. By contrast, although the transition from the Libyans' revolt to Gordian's proclamation is also clearly defined, the order of events in this particular case works firmly against Gordian.

As Herodian shows, Gordian was promoted by a provincial faction lacking any support, whether senatorial or military. Coming from the local landowning families and backed by their workmen and neighbouring farmers, none of them were particularly close to the imperial court, or even the regional administration (7.4.3-5)[134]. In Herodian's view, this is precisely the reason why they turned to Gordian, who was at the time the African proconsul. Though the choice of Gordian as their 'champion' may seem like a solid, even self-evident decision, Herodian tries to undermine its validity using the identity and motivations of the instigators. Considering the tension between youth and old age which pervades the *History*, Herodian's indication on the rebels' *iuventus* serves to underline the self-serving nature of their action against the procurator, as well as the rashness of their plans against Maximinus[135]. The Libyan nobles of the *History* also remain an impersonal mass. Only one of them, "noted for his high birth and rhetorical ability", is granted an individualized action, as well as a rather long speech to Gordian to pressure him into accepting the emperorship[136]. This character, however, is not identified further and one could argue, as will be discussed shortly below, that he merely acts as the mouthpiece of the group, not as a fully fledged player[137].

---

[133] The parallel has been noted by Opelt 1998, 2949; Zimmermann 1999a, 274; Hidber 2006, 186; Davenport & Mallan 2019, 7-8.

[134] In *SHA*, *Gord.* 7.2-4, the revolt stemmed less from a direct affront against a specific group than from the accumulation of injuries against the whole population. Notably the biographer designates the rebels with a generic *Afri* and one *rustici*. They are also said to have been assisted in the plot by "a number of soldiers" (*plerisque militibus*), whereas Herodian only features an *ad hoc* militia. According to Vict., *Caes*. 26.3, Gordian was "suddenly" (*repente*) made emperor "by the army" (*ab exercitu*), albeit *in absentia*; somewhat echoed in Eutrop. 9.2 (*consensu militum*).

[135] Gordian's supporters are depicted in a similar way as were Niger's (cf. 3.3.1; 3.4.1). Herodian raises the issue of the erratic character of youth already in the work's preface, cf. 1.1.6 (with below, [74, with n. 173; 92-93].

[136] 7.5.4: ὃς ἦν αὐτῶν γένει καὶ δυνάμει λόγων προύχων. For Chastagnol 1994, n. 3 *ad SHA*, *Gord.* 7.4, the decurion featured in the *Historia Augusta*, a certain Mauritius, "a municipal councillor, who had great influence with the Africans" (*potens apud Afros decurio*), must be inspired by Herodian's young nobleman who addresses Gordian.

[137] In addition to Commodus' murderers, a comparison with Crispinus and Meniphilus (8.2.5ff), during the Aquileian siege, also shows how other secondary characters might be used to their 'full' potential, as actors in their own right; see below, [161-2].

The anonymity of the Libyan supporters in the *History* is, in itself, mostly unremarkable. As mentioned above, Herodian often gathers secondary or tertiary characters together in one homogenized group (the army, the senate, the emperor's friends, the Syrians, etc.), so as to simplify the storyline[138]. Taken independently, these 'Libyan nobles' could well be just another of these many amalgamated bodies. But if we compare this story with Pertinax's own accession, the named trio of conspirators composed of Marcia, Eclectus, and Laetus clearly stands out against Gordian's nondescript supporters. The combination of background history, positions, names, and overall activity within the story arguably gives a more positive outlook on Pertinax's mode of accession and, more broadly, on his character, than the Libyans do for Gordian's[139]. Typically, within Herodian's *History*, a focus on the emperor and a lack of secondary characters, especially named, are signs of that ruler's authority. Gordian's initiative in this affair, however, is shown to be non-existent, namely through a clear transition from plot to proclamation. Whereas Pertinax's lack of involvement was meant to express his innocence, Gordian's inaction is damning. Gordian, in Herodian's story, is made to relinquish power to his anonymous promoters in all aspects of his eventual assumption of power.

Choosing Gordian

Following the *History*, Gordian's selection as the next emperor appears to have been based chiefly on his position and was, as such, purely circumstantial. First, the rebels' plot to get rid of the Carthaginian procurator is depicted as a relatively spontaneous reaction to the wave of extortions. Despite their request for a three-day delay from the procurator to pay their fines, Herodian calls the rioters' action an "improvised war" (7.4.3: αὐτοσχεδίου πολέμου)[140]. As such, their decision to expand the revolt to the whole province emerges from "a desperate situation" (7.5.1: ἐν ἀπογνώσει)[141]. Their discussion, driven by the threat of imminent retribution, seems rushed and the process is cut short: "they realized there was only was one way (μόνην) to save themselves, which was to add to their audacity by still more extreme actions"[142]. According to Herodian, the Libyan noblemen determined that, in order

[138] This practice also helps to set the stage for dramatic scenes, as we will see in chapter 4.

[139] It should be noted, however, that Pertinax's accession, even in Herodian's account, is possibly not entirely positive, since court intrigues will come to be particularly damaging under Severus (and perhaps already under Commodus). Andrews 2019, 202-3 discusses the possibility of Pertinax's entire career and rise to prominence being the result of "pre-existing senatorial contacts" rather than pure merit; see also Strobel 2004, on Pertinax's ambitions.

[140] Was Gordian's accession planned in connection with the revolt? According to Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad* 7.5.7, Gordian's eagerness to accept the emperorship would support such a theory. Townsend 1955 argues that "the rebellion of 238 was in fact organized and set in motion by prominent Roman senators aided by some influential equestrians" (quote at 50). On the possible reasons behind the choice of Gordian, see also Haegemans 2010, 144-8.

[141] Exceptionally, I follow here Lucarini 2005 (after Mendelssohn 1883; with Müller 1996), against Whittaker 1969-70, who prints instead ἐν ἐπιγνώσει.

[142] 7.5.1: οὕτως δὴ προχωρήσαντος τοῦ ἔργου, οἱ νεανίσκοι ἅπαξ ἐν ἐπιγνώσει γενόμενοι μόνην ἤδεσαν ἑαυτοῖς σωτηρίαν ὑπάρχουσαν εἰ τὰ τολμηθέντα αὐτοῖς αὐξήσαιεν ἔργοις μείζοσι. According to *SHA*, *Gord.* 7.3, the Africans conferred on how the ongoing conflict might be "appeased" (*placaretur*). Their motivations are more or less

to pursue their rebellion on a larger scale, they would need the endorsement and protection of a high-ranking official. Compared to Pertinax's selection, which was grounded in a need for a virtuous and qualified candidate and the desire to break away from the previous tyranny, the rebels' decision is said to have only depended on the political position of the contender and his ability to act as a buffer between them and Maximinus. Accordingly, their urgent need for protection found Gordian to be the most convenient and obvious choice.

Noticeably, Gordian, in his first appearance in the *History*, is only identified by his function: as Herodian tells it, the Libyans decided they should ally themselves with the "provincial governor" (7.5.1: τὸν ἡγούμενον τοῦ ἔθνους). Similarly, once they resolved to make him their emperor, the *iuuenes* are said to have come "at the proconsul's house" (7.5.2: ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ ἀνθυπατεύοντος οἰκίαν). It is only then that Gordian is finally named and properly introduced (7.5.2: Γορδιανὸς δὲ ἦν ὄνομα)[143]. Gordian's presentation gives prominence to the other similar offices he held (7.5.2: πολλῶν δὲ πρότερον ἀρξας ἐθνῶν) and a capacity that has been demonstrated through these notable postings (ἔν… πράξεσι μεγίσταις ἐξετασθείς)[144]. Compared to Pertinax's well-rounded portrayal, mixing career, achievements, and character, Gordian's introduction reflects neither on the candidate's realisations nor his personal quality (cf. 2.1.5). While Herodian generally ignores elements of an emperor's private life, character is a key aspect of his imperial portrayals. Gordian's presentation in the *History* only includes brief mentions of his age and ambition. As Herodian puts it, Gordian was "an old man already pushing eighty" (7.5.2: πρεσβύτης ἐς ἔτος ἤδη περί που ὀγδοηκοστὸν ἐληλακώς, trans. mod.)[145]. Constantly valued in the *History*, experience would typically come with age and maturity. Yet in this particular case, Gordian's age apparently exceeds an acceptable cap, at least in Herodian's view, for one to become emperor[146]. Herodian's marked contrast between Gordian and his young supporters strengthens the image of a man too old to become emperor, but chosen out of necessity and convenience to be made into a figurehead[147]. As noted above,

---

the same, that is to secure their survival through the nomination of a new emperor (8.2: *nisi facto imperatore salui esse non possumus*).

[143] On this introductive formula, see also below, [214-15].

[144] Roques 1990b, 60: "de coloration tout à fait neutre", the terms πρᾶξις and πρόνοια are used to denote functions of authority, in addition to ἀρχή. In some cases, they can refer to actions and feats (Roques cites for instance 2.3.2, talking about Pertinax's 'exploits'), but generally indicate (provincial) offices, and Roques cites here 7.5.2. As such, Gordian's "important achievements" (ap. Whittaker 1969-70) might be better translated as "important functions".

[145] The combination of Gordian's current office with his advanced age is peculiar, since it seems to hint at a fairly late start in his career, for reasons left unexplained; cf. *SHA*, *Gord.* 18.5. Gordian's background remains fairly unknown, if we rule out most of his biography recorded in the *Historia Augusta*. See e.g. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 7.5.2; with Birley 1966; Grasby 1975; Dietz 1980, 56-73; Chastagnol 1994, 693-4. On Herodian's use of πρεσβύτης, namely in combination with ἤδη, see below, [103, with n. 305].

[146] Cf. Tac., *Hist*. 1.16.1. According to Tacitus, Galba spoke in such terms to Piso: "my old age cannot give more to the Roman people than a good successor" (*ut nec mea senectus conferre plus populo Romano possit quam bonum successorem*). Galba's laudable awareness, however, is weighed down by a physical weakness and old-fashioned views, cf. Tac., *Hist*. 1.6.1; 1.7.3; 1.12.1; 1.18.3; 1.35.1. A similar wisdom is credited to Nerva in Vict., *Caes.* 12.

[147] For a brief overview of Herodian's treatment of age in emperors, see Conde Guerri 2006, esp. 189-90, 192-3, though Gordian is (oddly?) not mentioned; with Schlumpf 2011, 297-302 (on Commodus and Elagabalus).

Herodian does not discuss Gordian's character, apart from his ambition. The general opinion among the Libyan rebels was that Gordian "would be glad to accept the empire as the crowning achievement of his eventful career"[148]. Gordian's agreement, following Herodian's account, is taken for granted not on the basis of duty, but of vainglorious aspirations: with this first appearance, his selection is shown to have been a matter of titles and positions, of pretence over substance.

Home invasion

In the *History*, the meeting between the Libyans and Gordian is set in broad daylight, at mid-day (7.5.2: ἤδη μεσαζούσης ἡμέρας). According to Herodian, Gordian just so happened to be "spending time quietly at home, allowing himself rest and respite from work and duties"[149]. Against usual associations of day vs. night activities in the *History*, night time, for Pertinax, proved to be a moment of level-headed deliberation and friendly discussion[150]. Gordian's scene also plays with these 'norms': here the day time setting serves to cast both the audacity of the Libyans and Gordian's leisurely demeanour in a questionable light. While such an endeavour might have warranted cautiousness, even stealth, the conspirators took action as soon as they decided to make Gordian their emperor, despite the fact that it happened to be mid-day. This impatience, admittedly founded on some measure of urgency, prevented any sort of preparations, either concerning their appeal to Gordian or the steps that would need to be taken in its aftermath. Moreover, Gordian's idleness may hint at limitations due to his age and will mirror the emperor's lack of involvement during the fatal siege of Carthage, as well as his final moments[151].

In Herodian's version the conspirators are shown rushing to Gordian's house, flanked by the crowd of workmen and farmers they had gathered earlier in their plot against the procurator. According to Herodian, they entered Gordian's house "forcing their way" (7.5.3: βιασάμενοι), "bursting in" (εἰσπηδήσαντες), "with swords drawn" (ξιφήρεις). Gordian is "caught" (7.5.3: καταλαμβάνουσιν αὐτόν) as he was lounging about[152]. Even when they reached Gordian, the rebels are shown to have remained belligerent: following Herodian's account, the mob was soon "crowding round him" (περιστάντες), in order to cover him with a purple cloak and salute him as emperor. Herodian also insists on their large numbers, repeating twice that the

[148] 7.5.2: ὅθεν αὐτόν τε ἡδέως ὑποδέξεσθαι τὴν ἀρχὴν ᾤοντο ὥσπερ κορυφαῖον τέλος τῶν προγενομένων πράξεων.
[149] 7.5.3: οἴκοι τὸν Γορδιανὸν διατρίβειν ἡσυχάζοντα, δεδωκότα τοῖς καμάτοις ἀνάπαυλαν ἀργίαν τε ταῖς πράξεσιν, trans. mod. In *SHA*, *Gord.* 8.5, Gordian was resting in bed, "returned from the law-courts" (*post iuris dictionem*). See Pitcher 2012, 280 on the first appearances of Pertinax, Julianus, and Gordian I in the setting of their private houses. The accession scene of Gordian III might also be added to this discussion, as we will see in the next section.
[150] E.g. Hellstrom 2015, 49-50; with above, [57 and 61-62], on the positive and negative values of nighttime.
[151] Procrastination is the trademark, in Herodian's work, of mediocre emperors, like Niger (2.8.9-2.9.1; 3.4.7; with below, [79-80; 125-6]), Julianus (2.12.1-4; with below, [126-7]), or Macrinus (5.2.3; 5.4.12; with below, [134-5]). Alexander's mildness tends to turn into procrastination in a military context: e.g. 6.4.4; 6.6.6; 6.7.5, with below, [152-4].
[152] Although the expression is often understood figuratively, it certainly contributes to the violent atmosphere of this scene.

instigators were followed by "the whole crowd" (σὺν παντὶ τῷ πλήθει, at 7.5.2 and 7.5.3). To convince him to accept these honours, they resorted to force and "pressed around him with their swords" (7.5.4: οἳ μὲν ξιφήρεις ἐνέκειντο). Similarly, the Libyan noble who addressed Gordian did so "with his sword held at the ready" (7.5.4: ἔχων πρόκωπον τὴν δεξιάν). In the *History*'s scene, Gordian seems to be facing an arrest, even an execution, rather than a promotion and a plea for help. Herodian accentuates the scene's physicality and violence, spotlighting swords and bodily threats, quite unlike what he did with Pertinax's calm and wordy audience with Laetus and Eclectus. To these actions, Gordian also responded in kind. According to Herodian, Gordian was "shattered" (7.5.4: ἐκπλαγείς) and "threw himself off the couch down at their feet" (ῥίψας ἀπὸ τοῦ σκίμποδος ἐς γῆν) to beg for his life. For one thing, Gordian's agitated reaction contrasts sharply with his initial *otium*: the resulting image is one of utmost despair, more suited to a death scene than an accession scene[153]. For another, it stands in clear opposition to Pertinax's attitude in a similar context, as the man even encouraged the intruders to execute him without delay.

As mentioned earlier, Herodian inserts a single speech in Gordian's episode, which is given to one of the Libyans offering the throne to Gordian[154]. In that particular passage (7.5.1ff), Gordian himself is reduced to a few speech-verbs (7.5.4: ἐδεῖτο; 7.5.7: παραιτούμενος), but does not actually speak out[155]. The speech in question, as recorded by Herodian, is less a proposal to Gordian, than it is an ultimatum: Gordian would either risk joining the Libyans' rebellion and becoming emperor, or would die now at their hands. There is little reassurance given to Gordian, and the offer is in fact mostly composed of threats, both verbal and physical. The structure of the speech also contributes to this hostility. Through a basic ring composition, Gordian's so-called merits (7.5.5: καὶ ἐν ταῖς προγενομέναις πράξεσιν εὐδοκίμησις…) are sandwiched between a first iteration of the ultimatum (7.5.5: δύο κινδύνων προκειμένων…) and a second one (7.5.6: ἀντειπόντι δέ σοι…/ ἐφ᾽ οἷς ἦν μὲν ἡμῖν συνάρῃ…), acting as opening and closing statements. In a way, this construction mirrors Gordian's physical encirclement by the

---

[153] Compare Gordian's "state of panic and ignorance" (7.5.4: ὑπὸ δέους καὶ ἀγνοίας) here with his attitude in his final scene, at 7.9.4 (cf. below, section 3.4.1). This is, in Herodian's work, a frequent reaction to an imminent attack, which usually leads to that emperor's death.

[154] That is, excluding Maximinus' speech at 7.8.4-8 in a parallel storyline.

[155] The idea that Herodian's work may have been unfinished, or at least unrevised, considering the number of speeches slowly decreasing as the narrative progresses, is certainly attractive; see e.g. Whittaker 1969-70, lviii-lxi ("Although the major set speeches had been written, the graphic colour that was added to the incident of the night visit to Pertinax (2.1) or Plautianus' unsuccessful plot (3.11-12) had not yet been included in the later episodes"); with n. 2 *ad* 2.1.6. This might resonate with Lucian's prescriptions on the process of history-writing, cf. *conscr. hist.* 48 (gathering and sorting of facts, bare framework, embellishments). On the completion (or not) of Herodian's *History*, see also Sidebottom 1998, 2813, esp. n. 183; 2817; with Hidber 1999, 148-53. Overall, I tend to agree with Kemezis 2014, 302 that "most of these arguments are overstated, and furthermore, incompleteness is very much a matter of degree." For this particular episode, it may even be argued that the disposition of speeches is, to an extent, deliberate, since their limited number helps emphasize the physicality of Gordian's accession and the man's lack of agency, especially in comparison with Pertinax's own such scene. According to Hidber 1999, 153 and Castelli 2008, 110-11, it is entirely possible that Herodian instead focused on different strategies for the later books; so Kemezis 2014, 303: "the description of the events of 238 in Book 7 and 8 is by any reckoning some of Herodian's best work." On the work's ending, see the general conclusion.

crowd gathered in his house. As Herodian tells it, the Libyans' offer of emperorship to Gordian was not a peaceful one, but a threat made out of fear and recklessness: the Libyans knew they had nothing to lose.

Herodian's account of the Libyans' proposal to Gordian also bears some similarities with Niger's inaugural speech to his troops (2.8.2-5; also 3.4.1 on the eve of the battle of Issos[156]). Namely, both pieces contain promises of considerable glory, proportional to the risks involved in the whole enterprise. But in Gordian's episode, the roles are reversed, and the aspiring emperor can only listen, while leadership and speech are given to a secondary character, soon-to-be forgotten. As stated above, the idea of emperorship was vastly appealing to Gordian. In addition to a strong sense self-preservation, glory is shown to be the other main incentive for Gordian. Gordian's motivations, following Herodian's depiction, stand in stark contrast with Pertinax's: in the latter's case, the historian had stressed a blatant disregard for his personal safety, a deep concern for the Empire, a strong sense of duty, and a lack of personal ambition. For Herodian's Gordian, self-preservation, fear, and a certain amount of vanity would win out in the end.

Compared to Laetus' first speech to Pertinax, this appeal to Gordian takes place in an entirely different situation. Following the *History*'s timeline, this comes down to the fact that Maximinus was still officially emperor and that the Libyans were looking for immediate protection against his impending wrath. In Pertinax's case, Herodian had marked a clear separation between Commodus' murder and Pertinax's selection[157]. Gordian's nomination, by contrast, is too closely linked to the ongoing revolt, devised as a safeguard against Maximinus. In the wake of their plot against the Carthaginian procurator, the Libyans decided to pre-empt the emperor's inevitable: "for we have undertaken a deed of daring that needs a still greater act of desperation"[158]. Gordian's competency and good reputation are not cited, in the *History*'s account, as the qualities of a worthy ruler, but as the assets of the rebels' champion. Gordian's selection is understood here as a response to a direct threat, rather than as an effort to establish profound changes in the government. Furthermore, Herodian does not depict Gordian's reduced authority as a positive sharing of power between an emperor and a local aristocracy. Gordian's nomination is instead framed as a means to the Libyans' immediate survival. If Commodus' murderers, in Herodian's *History*, also expressed some concerns over their personal fate due to their actions, their worries are soon extended to the common good and they become involved in a much wider project to save the Empire. Though similarly expanded, the Libyans' revolt remains, at least according to Herodian, self-interested.

Like Pertinax before him, Gordian is shown in the *History* to have tried rejecting the emperorship offered to him by citing old age (cf. 7.5.3; 7.5.7). Compared to Pertinax's refusal, Gordian's *recusatio* is neither described in detail, nor particularly well defined as a scene: it is

---

[156] See further below, section 3.2, for an extensive discussion of this whole episode.

[157] As seen above, there is such a division between plot and accession in Gordian's episode, but it is merely the procurator's death, while Maximinus is only minimally involved in the whole affair. This may in fact participate in Herodian's portrayal of Gordian as essentially 'cosmetic'; see also below section 4.5.

[158] 7.5.5: ἔργον γὰρ ἡμῖν τετόλμηται μείζονος ἀπογνώσεως δεόμενον, which echoes the Libyans' resolution at 7.5.1.

only expressed through a participial clause (7.5.7: παραιτούμενος δὲ καὶ γῆρας προϊσχόμενος ἐκεῖνος… οὐδὲ ἀηδῶς ὑπέστη). Following the *History*'s account, Gordian's refusal gets lost in between his proclamation and Herodian's remark on his ambitious character. One could certainly argue that *recusationes* had become more ritualized over the years and accordingly receive a standardized treatment by Herodian. These scenes in the *History*, however, are not systematic and, as stated above, are only given to three emperors. Out of the three, only Pertinax's refusal is portrayed as genuine[159]. By contrast, Gordian's rejection appears rather perfunctory, even more than strictly ceremonial. If the historian lends some credibility to Gordian's initial surprise at the Libyans' irruption in his home, he clearly indicates that the ensuing *recusatio* is feigned: "he [i.e. Gordian] was actually ambitious for power and not reluctant to accept it"[160]. Again, Gordian is kept mute by Herodian: the new emperor is given neither voiced consent nor inaugural speech, even indirectly[161]. Gordian's involvement in his own inauguration is thus shown to have been minimal at best. The initial revolt is depicted in the *History* as the Libyans' sole doing, while Gordian is merely threatened into becoming their figurehead.

Finally, it should be noted that, compared to Pertinax, Gordian assumed power in a more complicated context. Gordian came to power while Maximinus, however unpopular he may have been, was still the reigning emperor. Gordian is also in the difficult position of being a successful usurper (having been acceted by the senate), who turned out to be an unsuccessful emperor, since he did not ultimately outlive the incumbent. This tension, in conjunction with Gordian's senatorial approval and Maximinus' relative absence, makes this rule a complicated element to integrate to the *History*'s main narrative since Herodian's portrayal of Gordian is not focalized through another emperor[162]. Overall, though they are set to a similar sequence, Gordian's accession story is noticeably less clear-cut than that of Pertinax. Roles are somewhat less defined, while groups and not only individuals are given greater attention and come to overshadow the rulers, which creates the impression of a

---

[159] In the course of the *History*, two other characters successfully reject the emperorship: Glabrio (2.3.4, in favour of Pertinax, as seen above, [62-64]) and Adventus (4.14.2, in favour of Macrinus). Although similar in form and phrasing, these refusals have a different function, due to their success and to the status of the characters. They are distinct from the other *recusationes* of Pertinax, Maximinus, and Gordian I, because they serve to characterize less the agent than another individual, namely the emperor-to-be.

[160] 7.5.7: ἄλλως δὲ φιλόδοξος ὤν, οὐδὲ ἀηδῶς ὑπέστη. Herodian goes on to say that Gordian "did not find the prospect of a possible death while holding imperial honours such a terrible thing" (οὐ πάνυ τι δεινὸν νομίζων, εἰ δέοι, ἐν βασιλικαῖς τιμαῖς καὶ τελευτῆσαι). Compare with his account of Maximinus' refusal: Herodian also implies that it was faked, suggesting that Maximinus had in fact planned the whole scene (6.8.6, with below, [205-7]).

[161] Interestingly, none of these *recusationes*, except for Glabrio's (2.3.4), are set in direct speech in the *History*. Another element of note, in both Maximinus' and Gordian's cases, is the fact that there is no other candidate presented by the refusing candidate; it might well be that both *are* the alternative to the living emperor at the time (Alexander, for Maximinus; Maximinus himself, for Gordian).

[162] Severus' introduction in the *History* is focalized neither through Julianus nor Niger, who were both already emperors according to Herodian's main sequence; it follows instead the storyline of imperial power, and not of one particular individual. This may serve to strengthen the image that power at that point was his to take (cf. 2.9.3), as well as the idea that Herodian's whole *History* might be the story of emperorship, rather than emperors.

'decentralized' emperorship. In Herodian's account of Gordian's accession, for instance, this narrative confusion speaks to both Gordian's questionable character and the period's general atmosphere.

2.3.3 Out of options

In the wake of Maximus and Balbinus' premature deaths at the hands of the praetorians, a very young Gordian was promoted from Caesar to Augustus. This is the final scene of Herodian's *History*. The last emperor to be appointed in the year 238, Gordian III had first been associated to the Empire as Caesar, as a way for the senators to placate the population who was violently objecting to the election of Maximus and Balbinus. Due in part to the shorter period covered in the last books of the *History*, these events overlap more than earlier, self-contained episodes: a popular revolt and Gordian III's ensuing caesarship interrupt Maximus and Balbinus' proclamation, whereas Gordian's accession quickly follows the murder of the co-*Augusti* (8.8.7; and in between, Maximus and Balbinus are made to deal with Maximinus, who is then killed by his own soldiers)[163]. In one breath, Herodian explains that the praetorians had killed the emperors, abandoned their bodies, found and proclaimed Gordian, convinced the people to endorse their choice, took the new emperor to their camp, and locked the gates[164]. In Herodian's retelling, Gordian III's inauguration sequence is set in a context quite similar to both Pertinax's and Gordian I's accessions. It also relies on the tension between the levels of activity of the conspirators/supporters and of the new emperor, but pushes even further the resulting impression of passivity of the latter.

Gordian Caesar

Before examining more closely Herodian's story of Gordian III's proclamation, a look into his earlier association as Caesar will be helpful, since it announces, even duplicates, his imperial accession (7.10.7-9). After the Gordians' defeat at Carthage, the senate decided to elect two new emperors from their own ranks (7.10.2ff). But, as Herodian shows, the people vehemently opposed this action and the nomination of Maximus, whom they thought to have been too harsh during his previous tenure as *praefectus urbi*. According to Herodian, the population especially wished for the emperorship to stay within Gordian I's family, "under his house and name" (7.10.6: *ἐκείνῳ τῷ οἴκῳ καὶ ὀνόματι*, trans. mod.)[165]. The idea to make Gordian Caesar is reported to have come about as a way to trick the mob into accepting the senate's

---

[163] See section 4.5. for a discussion on Maximus and Balbinus' investiture, and Gordian's association to the Empire.

[164] 8.8.7: *καὶ καταλιπόντες τὰ σώματα ἐρριμμένα ἐπὶ τῆς λεωφόρου, ἀράμενοι δὲ τὸν Γορδιανὸν Καίσαρα ὄντα, αὐτοκράτορά τε ἀναγορεύσαντες, ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἄλλον οὐχ εὗρον, βοῶντές τε πρὸς τὸν δῆμον ὅτι ἄρα εἴησαν ἀπεκτονότες οὓς ὁ δῆμος ἐν ἀρχῇ οὐκ ἐβούλετο ἄρξαι, Γορδιανόν τε ἐπελέξαντο ἐκείνου τε ἀπόγονον καὶ ὃν αὐτοὶ Ῥωμαῖοι ἐξεβιάσαντο, ἔχοντες αὐτὸν ἀπελθόντες ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον, κλείσαντες τὰς πύλας ἡσύχαζον*. Note the oppressive accumulation of participles, reflecting the praetorians' haste and confusion.

[165] See Marasco 1998, 2865; with Buongiorno 2017, 227: "Questa prova di forza della plebe urbana, che rivendica il principio dinastico, è il segno dei tempi."

decision (cf. 7.10.7: ἐσοφίσαντο)[166]. To placate popular displeasure, they located another member of Gordian I's family: "There was a young lad, the son of Gordian's daughter, named after his grandfather"[167]. This new Gordian's introduction matches his whole portrayal in the *History*: Gordian III is only ever obliquely identified, a figure of interest for the story and his supporters strictly due to his family and name.

According to Herodian, Maximus and Balbinus sent for the young Gordian, "who was found playing at home" (7.10.8: οἳ δὲ εὑρόντες αὐτὸ ἀθῦρον οἴκοι). Gordian was then carried towards the Capitol, perched high on the shoulders of the co-emperors' supporters, so that everybody could see him, while he was being touted as the "heir of Gordian" (7.10.8: Γορδιανοῦ… ἔγγονον) and called "by Gordian's name" (τῇ αὐτοῦ προσηγορίᾳ)[168]. Gordian was acclaimed by the people and voted Caesar by the senate (7.10.9), after which the mob was pacified. In Herodian's story, Gordian III is entirely objectified, used by one party to appease another who only wanted him on the basis of his house and name. Accordingly, Gordian III is never made the grammatical subject in the entire sequence (so κομισθῆναι, εὑρόντες, ἀράμενοι, δεικνύντες, λέγοντες, ἀποκαλοῦντες, ἀνάγουσιν, ἀποδειξάσης); whether civilian, Caesar, or emperor, Gordian always appears as the object to others' actions or thoughts, except in one instance at the beginning of the sequence (7.10.7: ἦν τι παιδίον νήπιον) and another at the very end (7.10.9: ἐπειδὴ διὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν οὐχ οἷός τε ἦν προΐστασθαι τῶν πραγμάτων). Though the first acts as his introductory sentence, Gordian III is arguably not his own person: he remains the 'son of the daughter of Gordian', while his name is not even his own. The second, a causal clause, is subordinate to the genitive absolute τῆς τε συγκλήτου Καίσαρα αὐτὸ ἀποδειξάσης, itself a complement of ὁ δῆμος ἐπαύσατο ἠνέσχοντό τε. Through this sentence, Herodian illustrates the power hierarchy in this particular episode: first the people, then the emperors and the senate, with Gordian well below. Both phrases are notably grounded in linking verbs (ἦν), not action, or dynamic, ones, which supports the impression of Gordian as a token leader.

The account given by Herodian of Gordian III's nomination as Caesar largely follows the accession patterns examined above for Pertinax and Gordian I: a non-military revolt, the selection of the 'best' candidate by the rebels, the fetching of said individual at home and unsuspecting, and finally his proclamation. Pertinax's sequence highlighted his innocence in the plot against Commodus, the merits of his nomination, his reluctance to rule, and his respect of institutions. Through a similar succession of events, Gordian I revealed questionable character traits (namely, cowardice, ambition, weakness) and was only nominally involved in his own bid, while the Libyan noblemen took the lead in the revolt and his own proclamation. For Gordian III's appointment as Caesar, Herodian takes this passivity

[166] The nature of this 'trick' is unclear. Whittaker 1960-70, n. 2 *ad loc.* suggests that it was "perhaps because someone not called Gordian was found". Gordian III was Gordian I's grandson through his daughter, Maecia Faustina, who, according to *SHA*, *Gord*. 4.2, had married Junius Balbus. Dexippus is said to have made Gordian III the son of Gordian II, ap. *SHA*, *Gord*. 23.1 and Zosim. 1.14.1.

[167] 7.10.7: ἦν τι παιδίον νήπιον, τῆς Γορδιανοῦ θυγατρὸς τέκνον, τῷ πάππῳ ὁμώνυμον.

[168] Herodian's use of προσηγορία might suggest that Gordian III's did not bear Gordian's name, since this term can also designate titles, nicknames, or derivatives (ap. *LSJ*, A.II).

one step further: perhaps less figurehead than puppet, the young Gordian only lives through other parties, is never identified directly by his name, but 'through' Gordian I (or designated as 'the child' or with pronouns), has in fact no voice or discernible character[169]. A compelling image, Gordian III is fetched, hoisted, and carried, like a mere political tool.

Gordian emperor

According to Herodian, Gordian III's promotion to Augustus happened along the same lines as his nomination as Caesar to Maximus and Balbinus. As shown in the *History*, the praetorians chose Gordian purely out of convenience. The main objective of their rebellion against the senatorial emperors was to get rid of them; installing a new emperor is not presented as an immediate priority. With this in mind, Gordian III is shown to have been the simplest choice, since he was already Caesar and was physically present at that moment. In fact, Gordian's nomination might have been meant as a temporary measure: Herodian explains that the praetorians chose him "for want of someone else at this stage (πρὸς τὸ παρόν)"[170]. Gordian's young age might have been one of the reasons for this, since Herodian had previously mentioned that Gordian had been too young to be made emperor (7.10.9: ἐπειδὴ διὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν οὐχ οἷός τε ἦν προΐστασθαι τῶν πραγμάτων) and was instead appointed Caesar[171]. Without experience and reputation due to his age, unconcerned by politics, Gordian lacked significant support and resources as his own person, left, at the end of Herodian's story, entirely dependent on the praetorians' goodwill.

Following the *History*, the praetorians are depicted as the driving force behind these final scenes. After proclaiming Gordian emperor, they are said to have dragged him in their camp, closing the doors and shutting themselves in. In doing so, they were establishing their full control over the Empire, through the physical domination and seclusion of the new emperor. Meaningfully, Gordian does not appear as the subject in this sequence (8.8.7), only as the object (τὸν Γορδιανόν, Γορδιανόν, αὐτόν) of the praetorians' actions (ἀράμενοι, ἀναγορεύσαντες, ἐπελέξαντο, ἐξεβιάσαντο, ἔχοντες). Gordian only assumes full agency in the very last sentence of the whole story: "Gordian, aged about thirteen, was saluted (ἀνεδείχθη) as emperor and took over (ἀνεδέξατο) the Roman empire"[172]. As the very last moment of the *History*, this creates a powerful, lasting image: the military proclamation of a 'child' emperor, put into power in name only and only on the basis of his name[173].

---

[169] As we have seen, Herodian uses a similar technique to stage Commodus' accession, see above, [43-46].

[170] 8.8.7: ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἄλλον οὐχ εὗρον.

[171] Compare with *SHA*, *Gord*. 22.5 (*et a militibus et populo et a senatu et ab omnibus gentibus ingenti amore, ingenti studio et gratia Augustus est appellatus*), in which Gordian's nomination is definitive and universally supported. This affection is not grounded in Gordian's own merits, but in those of his father and grandfather in their fight against Maximinus. In this version, the name Gordian, which led to Gordian III's rise to power, is not a mindless desire for dynastic continuity, but is based on actual deeds.

[172] 8.8.8: ὁ δὲ Γορδιανὸς περὶ ἔτη που γεγονὼς τρισκαίδεκα αὐτοκράτωρ τε ἀνεδείχθη καὶ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ἀνεδέξατο; though notice how that first verb is still a passive (ἀνεδείχθη).

[173] On Herodian's representation of child emperors, see e.g. Sidebottom 1998, 2805-7 (Commodus); 2808-10 (Caracalla and Geta); 2810-11 (Elagabalus and Alexander); 2812 (Gordian III). This preoccupation is clearly set out in the *History*'s preface (1.1.6) and Marcus' worries about Commodus (1.3.1-5); see also

Significantly, Herodian depicts Gordian's association as Caesar and proclamation as emperor in a highly similar way: a lack of agency, the weight of his name, the convenience of his proximity, and an overall faceless presence. Even though Gordian, at 13, was more or less the same age as Alexander when he became emperor, Gordian appears perhaps even younger in Herodian's story: found 'playing' (7.10.8: ἀθύρον), called 'child' (7.10.7: παιδίον νήπιον; 7.10.8: τέκνον; τὸ παιδίον – note the neuter gender of these terms), deemed too young to be emperor (7.9.10), denied both speech and action, bodily carried and dragged around, Gordian seems to be pushed back to infancy, rather than being promoted to adolescence through his assumption of power. One could interpret, optimistically, Gordian's blank portrayal as a way for Herodian to signal his potential to mature and gain experience on the way to becoming a good emperor. Admittedly uncommon, though not impossible, there are two such examples in Herodian's *History*, Geta and Alexander, but even if Alexander was gratified with a long reign, both are ultimately unsuccessful. However, the marked absence of sensible advisors around Gordian combined with the praetorians' absolute dominion over him can only have sinister implications for the future of the new emperor. Looking at the *History* more generally, Herodian may well be using Gordian's figure as the embodiment of the period's general atmosphere – new, unstable, and uncertain[174].

2.4 Strategic tempo: walking or racing to power?

Some of Herodian's emperors, as we have just seen, are emphatically presented as having come to power through the scheming and actions of third parties; this marked dissociation from their own accessions could serve, for instance, to assert their innocence from criminal acts or denote a problematic passivity. Other emperors, like Pescennius Niger and Septimius Severus, two of the main actors of 193, are shown, following their portrayal in the *History*, as having taken the lead from the very beginning of their imperial story. The implications of the agency imputed to these contenders are not based on good or bad involvement, but rather on the level of activity, the strategy, and planning exerted by them.

It is important to note, before any further exploration, that, while the civil wars of 193 were certainly complicated political moments, they are also, within the particular context and format of the *History*, difficult events to tell. In addition to the inherent complexity of their subject, the stories of these wars are made especially problematic by the single-strand scheme that Herodian tends to apply throughout the work[175]. One strategy on the historian's part meant to palliate these narrative and chronological intricacies is to use the plurality of protagonists and places in combination with the *History*'s usual episodic format. Herodian breaks down this period into several distinctive episodes, each taking place in a different geographical location and featuring a different main character. Despite the relative

below, [92-94]. On Commodus as the *History*'s paradigmatic young ruler, see below, [235-6], with references.

[174] See Hidber 2006, 176-80. I will come back to the work's ending in the general conclusion.

[175] For Herodian's mode of storytelling, the account of the year 238 presents the same narrative problems.

concomitance of all these events, Herodian can then focus on one proclamation at a time. This creates a succession of three complete accession episodes, starting in Rome (Julianus) and moving the story from Rome to Antioch (Niger), and from Antioch to Pannonia (Severus). With all three men proclaimed emperors each in their respective spots, the story then chases after Severus from Pannonia to Rome and from Rome to Antioch, where Severus first wins against Julianus and afterwards triumphs over Niger.

Though these three inaugural scenes are certainly linked, Julianus' accession is, in the *History*'s sequence, set apart from the other two since it occurred in Rome and, according to Herodian, through wholly novel means. In a way, it is more Julianus' advent, rather than the murder of Pertinax, that is made the triggering event of these civil wars: against a seemingly secure proclamation in Rome itself, Julianus' incompetence, false promises, and general lack of interest in his new duties are shown to have left the door wide open for new contenders, even ones coming from the provinces. Niger and Severus, the two more serious aspirants to the throne in Herodian's *History*, are given similarly structured accession stories[176]. In addition to schematizing a complex period of time, this parallel sequencing also serves to define clearly each character when faced with the same type of situations[177].

2.4.1 Easy does it?

Niger's introduction in the *History* comes in the form of a popular appeal within the story. As Herodian explains, Julianus' vastly unpopular government pushed the citizens in Rome to turn to another potential ruler:

> At the circus, where the people principally gather to express their opinions, they cursed Julianus, invoking (ἐπεκαλοῦντο) Niger as the protector of the empire and calling upon (ἠξίουν) him to help them as soon as he could because they were being treated so outrageously[178].

Niger's introduction integrates seamlessly into the story: the people are not only calling Niger from Syria to Rome, but they are also pulling him onto the (political) stage and into the narrative[179]. It is only after this first internal reference that Herodian draws up for Niger the

---

[176] Neither Niger nor Albinus have their own sections in the *Caesares* or the *Epitome*, but are featured briefly in the Severan passages (Vict., *Caes.* 20.8-9: *uictos coegit mori*; in Ps.-Vict. 20.2, Niger was a *hominem omnium turpitudinum*). Niger also appears in *Or. Sib.* 12. 318-28, between Julianus and Severus. The character of Albinus in Herodian's work is treated like an unsuccessful usurper, much like Niger in most sources.

[177] The structure, content, and phrasing of Herodian's accounts of Niger's and Severus' rise to power are very similar; see e.g. Zimmermann 1999a, 171-3 who even sets the corresponding passages face to face on the basis of the two episodes having been laid out 'with careful narrative technique' ("erzähltechnisch sorgfältig").

[178] 2.7.3: ἔς τε τὸν ἱππόδρομον, ὅπου μάλιστα τὸ πλῆθος συνιὸν ἐκκλησιάζει, τὸν Ἰουλιανὸν ἐβλασφήμουν, ἀρωγὸν δὲ τῇ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῇ καὶ σεμνῆς βασιλείας προστάτην Νίγρον ἐπεκαλοῦντο, βοηθεῖν τε αὐτὸν τὴν ταχίστην ἠξίουν ὡς ἐφύβριστα πάσχουσιν.

[179] According to Zimmerman 1999a, 130-1, Herodian presents Niger as a *Volkskaiser*: he links him to the Roman and Syrian people, sets his first mention in the circus, and insists on the festive context of Niger's proclamation. All of this seems to have doomed Niger to failure from the start. For his part, Meulder 2002, 85-87 notes that Herodian's portrayal of Niger features several similarities with the Platonic democrat; see also Meulder 1994, 45-63. Kemezis 2014, 259 argues that even though Herodian refers to Niger's popular support (see too 2.7.5; 2.8.1-5), "nowhere in the subsequent account of Niger does this alleged popular

usual portrait of a new protagonist, listing achievements and personal qualities. Herodian underlines the vast range of Niger's power and influence through a string of adjectives expressing relative quantity in describing the province of Syria, of which he had the command (2.7.4: Συρίας… πάσης; πολλὴ δὲ ἦν καὶ μεγίστη ἀρχὴ τότε; τοῦ τε Φοινίκων ἔθνους παντὸς καὶ τῆς μέχρις Εὐφράτου γῆς). According to Herodian, Niger had the dual advantage of a brilliant career (2.7.5: εὐδοκιμήσας δὲ ἐν πολλαῖς καὶ μεγάλαις πράξεσι) and a mild character (2.7.5: ἐπιεικοῦς καὶ δεξιοῦ)[180]. Most importantly, Niger conducted himself "as though he had modelled his life on the example of Pertinax" (2.7.5: καὶ τὸν τοῦ Περτίνακος βίον ζηλοῦντος)[181]. With this explicit comparison between Niger and Pertinax, Herodian can attest directly to Niger's good character[182]. But another, perhaps stronger, comparison can be made, if we look beyond the figure of Pertinax: by associating Niger to Pertinax, who himself is said to have patterned his life after that of Marcus (2.4.2: τῆς Μάρκου ἀρχῆς ζήλῳ τε καὶ μιμήσει), Herodian can also generate a second connection, between Niger and Marcus, and this reinforces even further Niger's positive image[183]. After this auspicious introduction, Herodian reiterates the people's unanimous rejection of Julianus and their call for Niger[184]. Niger's entrance in the *History* presents him as a promising imperial candidate, most unlike the current emperor Julianus.

Following Herodian's story, Niger, established in Antioch, was notified of the situation in Rome through the people's continuous appeal (2.7.6: τῆς ἐπαλλήλου ἐν ταῖς συνόδοις βοῆς). With such alleged support, Niger came to expect an easy campaign against Julianus (2.7.6: ῥᾷστα), banking both on the support of the people and the praetorians' scorn of Julianus. For Herodian, Niger's decision was in direct response to the people's needs[185]. Although said to have been fairly confident in his success, Niger started out simply by consulting local leaders and generals in small groups to assess their interest in his bid for the emperorship[186]. According to Herodian, Niger was looking to increase the number and range of his supporters through gossip and word of mouth (2.7.7-8). It seems that Niger hoped to play up the idea of

consensus affect any events." As Herodian recounts, Niger was first informed of the support he had in Rome, but then took action on his own. Niger was not offered the Empire by the people, but was instead proclaimed emperor by his troops, as a result of his own efforts. See also Buongiorno 2017, 219 ("Le salutazioni di Pescennio come imperatore da parte della plebe di Roma (2.7.5) non hanno evidentemente alcuna rilevanza") and Andrews 2019, 141-2, 146, the latter discussing which particular portion of the 'people' is shown by Herodian to support Niger.

[180] See Cass. Dio 75(74).6.1-2a, for a different outlook on Niger.

[181] See comparable passages on Pertinax's personal virtues at 2.7.9; 2.8.2; 3.3.4.

[182] In *SHA*, *Nig.* 11, 3-6, Niger is instead said to have admired emperors such Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, Antoninus, Marcus, and military generals such as Marius, Camillus, Cincinnatus, and Coriolanus (12.1). There seems to be a valorization of military success, even for the emperors cited.

[183] Herodian's note on Niger's mature age (2.7.5: τὴν ἡλικίαν ἤδη μετρίως) serves to establish another point of comparison with Marcus and Pertinax. Cf. 1.1.6, on the dichotomy old age/youth; with 1.3.1 (Marcus) and 2.1.3-4 (Pertinax).

[184] 2.7.5: ἐκάλουν τε αὐτὸν συνεχῶς ἐν ταῖς τοῦ δήμου συνόδοις, καὶ βλασφημοῦντες τὸν Ἰουλιανὸν παρόντα ἐκεῖνον βασιλικαῖς φωναῖς εὐφήμουν ἀπόντα. Herodian picks up, for Niger's proper introduction, most of the key words from the people's appeal at 2.7.3.

[185] On personal ambition and motivation to covet the emperorship in Herodian's work, Joubert 1981, 310-16; Kuhn-Chen 2002, 289-91.

[186] 2.7.7: κατ' ὀλίγους ἡγεμόνας τε καὶ χιλιάρχους τούς τε τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐξέχοντας οἴκαδε μεταπεμπόμενος διελέγετο καὶ ἀνέπειθε.

a noble rescue, rather than a self-interested pursuit. This strategy worked in his favour to a certain extent, or so Herodian records: Niger gained the loyalty of the soldiers and the people of the eastern provinces[187].

When, according to Herodian, Niger felt secure enough in his bid, he summoned the troops in Antioch, where the people were also gathered round. Herodian's reconstructed version of Niger's speech repeats the main ideas set out earlier in the narrative: Niger is shown insisting on his proven character, his sense of duty, and his lack of personal ambition. In Herodian's story, Niger makes clear that, "without some creditable motive" (2.8.3: *οὐκ οὔσης εὐλόγου προφάσεως*), he would have never even considered such an enterprise. Niger's official position, according to Herodian, was that "he for his part not making some insidious bid for power, but going to assist the Romans in response to their call"[188]. To ignore the Romans' calls, argued Niger, would then amount to "cowardice and betrayal all at once" (2.8.3: *ἀνανδρίας ἅμα καὶ προδοσίας*, trans. mod.)[189]. In an effort to emphasize his reluctance to seize power for himself, as well as his caution, Herodian's Niger adds that he only convoked them to learn their opinion on the matter (2.8.3: *πευσόμενος ὑμῶν τίνα γνώμην ἔχοιτε καὶ τί πρακτέον ἡγοῖσθε*). Supposedly, Niger's only intention going in was to gain "consultants" and "partners" (2.8.3: *συμβούλοις*; *κοινωνοῖς*), not make an actual bid for the emperorship. But, in Herodian's retelling, Niger's speech led to his immediate proclamation by the troops (2.8.6). To support the idea that Niger was acting in good faith, Herodian underlines the spontaneous character of his proclamation: "after such a speech the entire army and the assembled crowd at once (*εὐθέως*) proclaimed him emperor and hailed him with the title of Augustus"[190]. According to Herodian, Niger was then given the purple and all the other imperial insignia, was escorted across the city to the temples, and installed in the 'palace' (2.8.6-7). Further attesting to the unplanned character of Niger's accession, Herodian notes that the imperial tokens had been assembled for the occasion and that the palace was actually Niger's house, which had been converted into an imperial residence[191].

---

[187] According to Herodian, Syrians supported Niger for several reasons: "fickle by nature" (2.7.9: *φύσει… κοῦφον*, trans. mod.; cf. below, [199-201], on the portrayal of Syrians more generally), they also had "a real affection" (*πόθος*) for him, given his "mild" (*ἠπίως*) government and the great number of shows he put on for them. Zimmermann 1999a, 174 interprets this as "eine folgenreiche Fehleinschätzung des politisch Notwendigen".

[188] 2.7.8: *μὴ αὐτὸς ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς μνᾶται τὴν ἀρχήν, ἀλλὰ καλούμενος καὶ βοηθήσων ἅπεισι Ῥωμαίοις δεομένοις.*

[189] Halfway through, Niger's tone changes slightly, as he claims that he is being called upon by "the empire too" (2.8.4: *ἥ τε ἀρχή*). For Niger, however, this seems to emphasize the idea of duty and public service, quite unlike Severus who uses similar words to promote the predestined nature of his emperorship (cf. 2.9.7ff; with below, [81-2]).

[190] 2.8.6: *τοιαῦτά τινα εἰπόντος αὐτοῦ, εὐθέως τὸ στρατιωτικὸν πᾶν καὶ τὸ συνειλεγμένον πλῆθος αὐτοκράτορά τε ἀνεῖπε καὶ σεβαστὸν προσηγόρευσε·*

[191] One could also argue that Herodian's description of Niger's inauguration is perhaps less about impressing a sense of spontaneity than one of (enforced) staging. These two views are not necessarily in complete opposition, if we consider their combined implications of appearances and cosmetic power; on this aspect, see below, [195-6]. For Andrews 2019, 141-2, Niger's accession is problematic on all levels: the procession occurs in the wrong place, the palace is a fake, his support comes from a second-rate base.

News of Niger's proclamation are said to have "spread like wildfire" (2.8.7-8: διιπταμένη… ἐπῆλθεν) throughout Asia Minor and, as a result, the man would receive multiple messages to congratulate him and offer him backup, which he ultimately declined. According to Herodian, Niger "was absolutely delighted" (πάνυ τὴν ψυχὴν ηὐφραίνετο) by his easy proclamation in Antioch and the immediate response of the eastern provinces. Said to have been convinced early on of a smooth victory, Niger let himself believe that this first achievement was already the endgame. As such, he would even refuse the reinforcements offered to him by the neighbouring kings because "the empire, he said, was already definitely assured (βεβαίως ὠχυρῶσθαι) and he would rule without bloodshed (ἀναιμωτί)"[192]. Confident that his power was secure, Niger is then said to have lost sight of his initial purpose: "elated by his optimism, Niger began to grow careless about his administrative duties; he turned to a life of idle luxury and enjoyment with the people of Antioch"[193]. This is the turning point in Niger's story: although Niger would put up a considerable fight against Severus across Asia minor, this moment is emphasized, in Herodian's *History*, as having sealed his fate.

Despite Herodian's positive introduction, Niger's failure is revealed early on in the *History*. Herodian openly criticizes Niger for holding off on a journey to Rome, "to where he needed to make haste"[194], and for underestimating the importance of the Illyrian troops, to whom he should have reached out "as soon as possible and have been the first to cultivate their acquaintance"[195]. According to Herodian, Niger instead relied on his earlier strategy of word of mouth, expecting that the Illyrians, "if they did find out" (2.8.10: εἴ ποτε καὶ μάθοιεν), would take his side, just like the Roman people and the eastern troops had already done[196]. Herodian is critical of this inaction, indicating that upon his proclamation, Niger should have abandoned caution and acted without delay. Niger's caution at the start of his campaign was potentially laudable, especially considering that his only 'opponent' was the ruling emperor (that is, the situation was more or less stable). But once he was officially declared as a contender to the throne, Niger's status changed decidedly; at that point, as Herodian suggests, Niger would have needed to secure the capital, because it was still officially held by Julianus, regardless of how unpopular he was. It seems that, in Herodian's view, both these moves would have gone a long way to protect Niger's bid against other pretenders. For Herodian, then, Niger's failure to recognize either action as critical to his leadership, let alone execute them, betrays the man's ignorance of the particulars of civil war.

More generally, Herodian's portrayal of Niger conveys the tension between old ideals and a changing system – just like Pertinax before him, on whom Niger had allegedly based his way of life. Largely unsuited to a context of civil war, Niger's mildness and caution might yet

---

[192] 2.8.8: τὴν γὰρ ἀρχὴν αὐτῷ βεβαίως ὠχυρῶσθαι, ἀναιμωτί τε ἄρξειν; on Niger's mildness, cf. below, [118, n. 31].
[193] 2.8.9: ὑπτίαζε τε πρὸς τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐπιμέλειαν, καὶ ἐς τὸ ἁβροδίαιτον ἀνειμένος τοῖς Ἀντιοχεῦσι συνευφραίνετο; cf. 2.14.5-6.
[194] 2.8.9: ἐφ' ἣν μάλιστα ἐχρῆν σπεύδειν.
[195] 2.8.10: δέον ἐπιφοιτῆσαι τὴν ταχίστην καὶ φθάσαι οἰκειωσάμενον αὐτά.
[196] Based on Herodian's criticism, it also seemed quite foolish to think news from Syria would travel unaided all the way over to Pannonia, to "the soldiers on that frontier" (2.8.10: τοὺς ἐκεῖ στρατιώτας), especially when time was of the essence.

belong to another place and time[197]. This temporal displacement is an important theme in the *History*, with average to good emperors always at least a little at odds with the general mood of their time[198]. In Herodian's story, Niger's moderate character quickly becomes a liability, making him vulnerable to procrastination and the easy life of Antioch. Niger himself, as Herodian depicts, seems caught in between two world orders, believing his proven merits, offshore proclamation, and (alleged) popular support in Rome were assets largely sufficient to establish himself as sole emperor. If power, as can be seen throughout the *History*, could emerge more and more from outside Rome and Italy, Herodian also insists that the capital (and by extension, the senate) still held determining authority[199]. Niger's main rival, Severus, understood this perfectly.

2.4.2 Pre-emptive tactics

Niger's idleness in Antioch is depicted in the *History* as the main reason for Severus' involvement[200]. Leaving Niger to his games and shows, the story shifts to a new location and a new character. This transition was already taking shape through Herodian's criticism of Niger, which was set on two fronts: Niger's delayed departure for Rome and his indifference towards the Pannonian troops. With the events in Rome already known, the story now turns to the north, where "the whole of Pannonia was under the united command of Severus"[201]. According to Herodian, Severus "was an efficient (γενναῖος), vigorous (θυμοειδής) administrator, well used to a tough (σκληρῷ), harsh (τραχεῖ) life and not afraid of undertaking physical hardship (πόνοις… ἀντέχων ῥᾷστα); but he was quick (ὀξύς) to make decisions and acted upon his decisions promptly (ταχύς)"[202]. Herodian's portrayal immediately sets the rivals apart: Severus seemed to have all the qualities Niger lacked to achieve lasting power. In fact, several elements of Severus' description, as many scholars have pointed out, liken him to the figure of the successful leader[203]. Most specifically, Severus' energy serves to distinguish him from

---

[197] In a slightly different context and in a different position, Severus' feigned mildness becomes a useful political tool to secure the senators' support, as Herodian shows at 2.14.2-4.

[198] Similarly, Pertinax, cf. below, [165-7], as well as Maximus and Balbinus, cf. below, [171-3].

[199] A similar criticism is addressed to Macrinus, cf. 5.2.3 and 5.4.12. These passages, with 6.7.10 (Alexander's failure to retaliate against the Germans), might be considered as some sort of 'belated advice' given to certain emperors. Interestingly, all three (Niger, Macrinus, Alexander) are depicted by Herodian as relatively promising new emperors who eventually gave in to procrastination and idleness, perhaps out of excessive mildness; these comments may well betray a certain disappointment on Herodian's part.

[200] Following *SHA*, *Nig.*, esp. 5.1 (according to Severus); 6.10; 7.7-9; 10-11 (of which several passages echo Herodian's Caracalla), and Cass. Dio 75(74).6-8, Bersanetti 1938, 359-61 concludes that Niger's military incompetence must be considered as another of Herodian's rhetorical fabrications meant to play up the differences between Niger and Severus. This idea is opposed by Rubin 1980, 92ff, who argues for a tension between Herodian's own negative perception of Severus and his use of pro-Severan sources; Rubin is in turn somewhat criticized by Zimmermann 1999a, 177-88.

[201] 2.9.1: ἡγεῖτο δὲ Παιόνων πάντων (ὑπὸ μιᾷ γὰρ ἦσαν ἐξουσίᾳ) Σεβῆρος.

[202] 2.9.2: ἐς δὲ πραγμάτων διοίκησιν γενναῖος ἅμα καὶ θυμοειδής, σκληρῷ τε βίῳ καὶ τραχεῖ ἐνειθισμένος, πόνοις τε ἀντέχων ῥᾷστα, νοῆσαί τε ὀξὺς καὶ τὸ νοηθὲν ἐπιτελέσαι ταχύς.

[203] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 5 *ad* 2.9.2; see too Fuchs 1895, 226-8; Bersanetti 1938; Rubin 1980, 92ff ("a grudging admission" of Severus' qualities); Marasco 1998, 2852 (in spite of Severus' immense military success, Herodian's opinion remains "aspramente ostile"); Zimmermann 1999a, 175-6; Hekster 2017, 120. But see Hellstrom 2015, 52: "Herodian depicts Severus as capable beyond the human, with an inborn spirit

the other two proclaimed emperors, who were either helpless or wasting their time[204]. Severus was thus establishing himself as a serious contender to both the ousted Julianus and the daydreaming Niger.

That being said, Herodian's introduction, with its heavy focus on military qualities, may not be wholly favourable to Severus. In the current context of civil war, these character traits certainly give Severus an advantage over his less military-inclined rivals. One could wonder, however, how well these context-specific virtues would transfer to peacetime activity in the event of Severus' double victory[205]. Most of the attributes credited to Severus in this passage can be interpreted in a positive or negative light, depending on the situation: for instance, haste might easily become impatience, while energy could turn into cruelty[206]. As Hellstrom notes, "speed was effective, if despicable."[207] While Herodian's initial depiction favourably distinguishes Severus from his opponents, it also serves to foreshadow the man's future shortcomings as the established emperor (cf. 2.14.4). Admittedly, Severus' vigour, however harsh, seemed, in a context of civil war, a better option than the inaction of his competitors. But transposed to the political, that is civilian, sphere, Severus' military virtues were liable to being misused, as Herodian would show later on.

Severus' decision to seek the emperorship unfolded, according to Herodian, in much the same way as Niger's: "when he learnt from reports that the Roman empire hung in the balance he decided to seize it (*ἁρπάσαι διενοήθη*)"[208]. Severus' two rivals were, so he argued, guilty of "procrastination" (2.9.3: *ῥᾳθυμίαν*) and the other, "dogged by ill-fortune" (*δυσπραγίαν*). This passage is heavily corrupt and there is quite some discussion among scholars as to whom these accusations refer to[209]. Regardless of the exact identity of the 'lazy' and of the 'unlucky',

---

that makes him unstoppable. This characterization is not positive, but rather frames him as dangerous: he is goal-oriented and quick of mind, temperament and foot; he is also full of guile and utterly ruthless."

[204] Through a frequent use of adverbs such as *ἤδη* and *ἔτι*, Herodian emphatically contrasts Niger's inaction and Severus' action. This can also be seen in comparisons between Severus and Julianus or Albinus, cf. Joubert 1981, 324ff. According to Sidebottom 1998, 2808, Herodian has designed Niger's and Severus' images conjointly, building upon the peace/war dichotomy.

[205] As we will see in the next section, one of Severus' main flaws, at least in the *History*, is his conflation of military and political affairs. This transfer of "la ferocia e i metodi violenti che sono propri della guerra" into domestic policy is a key element of Herodian's criticism towards military emperors; see Marasco 1998, 2855 and below, section 2.5.2.

[206] Cf. Cass. Dio 75(74).5.6.

[207] Hellstrom 2015, 51.

[208] 2.9.3: *οὕτος τοίνυν παρὰ τῶν ἀγγελλόντων πυνθανόμενος τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν μετέωρον φερομένην ἁρπάσαι διενοήθη.*

[209] The rest of the passage is corrupt. Whittaker 1969-70 prints *ad* 2.9.3: *οὕτος τοίνυν παρὰ τῶν ἀγγελλόντων πυνθανόμενος τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν μετέωρον φερομένην ἁρπάσαι <διενοήθη> καταγνοὺς τοῦ μὲν ῥᾳθυμίαν τοῦ δὲ δυσπραγίαν, … [τοῖς πράγμασιν]*. Lucarini 2005 emends as follows: *… φερομένην <τὸν Νίγρον καὶ τὸν Ἰουλιανὸν πειρωμένους> ἁρπάσαι, καταγνοὺς τοῦ μὲν ῥᾳθυμίαν τοῦ δὲ δυσπραγίαν, <ἐπιθέσθαι διέγνω> τοῖς πράγμασιν*. The assumption that it was Niger and Julianus, and in that order, led Schwartz-Stavenhagen 1922 (ap. 2.12.2; followed by Echols 1961) to correct *δυσπραγίαν* with *ἀνανδρίαν*, in an effort to better fit the characters. Most translators restore, at least implicitly, the phrase *τὸν Νίγρον καὶ τὸν Ἰουλιανόν* (*πειρωμένους*) between *φερομένην* and *ἁρπάσαι*. Following this, they were able to charge Niger with *ῥᾳθυμία* and Julianus, with *δυσπραγία*. Admittedly, while 'procrastination' easily fits either, 'ill-fortune' still confounds. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad loc*. suggests that the two individuals in question may be instead Julianus ('procrastinating', ap. 2.11.8) and Pertinax ('ill-fated'), since Severus may have only known that Niger was being solicited by the

these charges made by Severus contribute to his self-representation. Against idleness and hesitation, the first allows Severus to promote his own efficiency. The second supports another important aspect of Severus' carefully crafted image: the fated nature of his emperorship. As Herodian shows, Severus claimed that he was being summoned to power "by divine providence" (2.9.7: θείᾳ προνοίᾳ)[210]. Among the many other portents that Severus professed to have convinced him of his imperial destiny, one in particular holds Herodian's attention[211]. On the night of Pertinax's inauguration, Severus is said to have dreamt that the emperor's horse, arriving at the entrance of the forum, threw off its rider and instead chose to carry Severus inside so everyone could see and celebrate him (2.9.5-6)[212]. Broadcasting this story, Severus could claim some sort of spiritual connection and a legacy with the good emperor Pertinax and even imply a divine *preference* over this worthy ruler.

A familiar plan of action

Like Niger, Severus too is shown to have first canvassed his troops on the topic of his imperial bid. Also calling high-ranking officers in small groups to his quarters, Severus is then recorded talking about "the ruinous state" (2.9.8: παντάπασιν ἔρριπται) of Rome, caused in his view by a lack of capable leaders, ongoing civil wars, and the shameful murder of Pertinax. According to Herodian, Severus took full advantage of this last point when he realized that the Illyrian troops were still embittered by Pertinax's death. Severus easily won them over, by pretending to be more interested in justice than in snatching power for his own personal gain[213]. Although Severus' touted cause could perhaps be measured against Niger's duty-bound bid, Herodian makes clear that personal ambition was Severus' true motivation. Herodian constantly points out the disconnect between Severus' public claims and private thoughts. According to the historian, avenging Pertinax becomes an "excuse" (2.9.10:

---

people in Rome, not that he had already been proclaimed emperor in Syria. Other solutions from scholars exploring the meaning of δυσπραγία are: "inetto" (ap. Càssola 1967); "miserabele bestuur" (ap. Brok 1973/Hunink 2017); "desgracia" or "fracaso" (ap. Torres Esbarranch 1985); "incapacités" (ap. Roques 1990a); "Untüchtigkeit" (ap. Müller 1996).

[210] Cf. 3.3.7-8, during the war against Niger; with below, [118-19]. Severus' victory over the Parthians at Hatra and Ctesiphon is similarly ascribed more to the emperor's "good luck" (3.9.12: τύχῃ) than his "good judgement" (γνώμῃ); see e.g. Ward 2011, 171-8. Although Herodian is not usually very enthused by dreams and portents, his long explanation may align with Severus' official propaganda; see e.g. Rubin 1980, 23ff, 117ff; Marasco 1998, 2899-900; Manders 2012, 162-5. More generally, on omens and fortune in Herodian's work, see Marasco 1998, 2897-903; Kuhn-Chen 2002, 308-13; Gleason 2011, 76; Molinier Arbo 2017.

[211] Citing several earlier omens to that effect, Herodian chooses to record in detail only "the most recent and most important of these dreams" (2.9.4: τὸ δ' οὖν τελευταῖον καὶ μέγιστον). This appears to be the keystone of Herodian's method of composition, cf. 2.15.7; with above, [37-40].

[212] According to Herodian, a bronze statue was erected there in commemoration; though see Richardson 1992, s.v. "Equus Severi", 145: "No certain trace of it has ever been found." Coarelli (*LTUR*, s.v. "Equus: Septimius Severus", 231-2) posits that the statue was located at the *comitium*, where the dream would have taken place; he also suggests that it might have been transformed into a monument to Constantine.

[213] Herodian describes the Pannonians as "intellectually dull and slow-witted when it comes to crafty words or subtle actions", which would work well in favour of Severus' deception (2.9.11: οὕτω καὶ τὰς διανοίας παχεῖς καὶ μὴ ῥᾳδίως συνεῖναι δυνάμενοι, εἴ τι μετὰ πανουργίας ἢ δόλου λέγοιτο ἢ πράττοιτο). As seen above, Herodian had similarly explained part of Niger's popularity and the success of his endeavour through the Syrians' propensity to change and their love of games, cf. 2.7.9-10.

προφάσεως), for which Severus merely "pretends" (προσποιούμενος) to seek justice[214]. Herodian does not comment on Niger's own goals, sticking instead to relating the proceedings of Niger's initial appeal. Herodian had shown how Niger, in similar meetings, relied on a more cautious approach, almost letting the officers come to their own conclusions from the 'unprocessed' news arriving from Rome. By contrast, Severus is given a much more aggressive attitude: by giving his own spin on the news from Rome (and possibly Syria), Severus could overplay the gravity of affairs and exploit the unresolved affair of Pertinax's murder. As Herodian presents it, Severus constructed a bold, self-serving narrative to promote his bid. And what is more, Severus' call to power, at least in the *History*'s retelling, was not founded in popular action, but came to him by way of dreams. By having Severus declare Pertinax's murder to be at the root of the empire's critical situation, Herodian could then stage this new contender as claiming power in a self-proclaimed quest for justice. Framing this specific goal with the more universal idea of public service would allow Severus to extend his initial goal, by essence finite, to a more permanent office.

As Herodian shows, the consultations held by Niger led to a popular show of support of his eventual campaign[215]. Severus' interviews, by contrast, had a more conclusive outcome: already his troops "put themselves in his charge by declaring him emperor (αὐτοκράτορα… ἀποδεῖξαι) and entrusting him with the supreme power (ἀρχήν)"[216]. Niger's proclamation, following the *History*'s sequence, had only come after a speech delivered to the army, which was initially presented as a sort of referendum. Despite being out of sync, both imperial proclamations are said to have been directly followed by some sort of communication with the adjoining provinces. According to Herodian, neighbouring kings had reached out to Niger with offers of friendship and support. Conversely, Severus, once proclaimed by his troops, sent out himself various requests and outrageous promises to the northern provinces (2.9.12)[217]. Through contrasting details within a similar frame, Herodian was already implying fundamental differences between Niger's and Severus' approaches and, more broadly, their character. From the moment of their respective proclamations, the distinction becomes unequivocal, reinforced by the contrasting structure of the two stories.

After gaining the support of the Illyrian provinces, Severus summoned all of the troops to him. Before calling the soldiers to action, the new emperor is said to have taken, on his own

---

[214] Cf. 2.9.10-11. Herodian also notes that Severus was "an absolute expert at deception and giving assurance of his good will, but he had no respect for an oath if, after he had lied to secure some advantage, he had to break it. He would make protestations by word of mouth which did not represent his feelings" (2.9.12: ἱκανώτατος δ' ἦν ἁπάντων ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα προσποιήσασθαί τε καὶ πιστώσασθαι εὔνοιαν, μήτε ὅρκου φειδόμενος, εἰ δέοι τούτου καταφρονῆσαι, ψευσάμενος πρὸς τὸ χρειῶδες, διά τε γλώττης προΐετο ὅσα μὴ ἔφερεν ἐπὶ γνώμης). Compare with Severus' infiltration of Rome, 2.12.1. Other mentions of Severus' lies in the *History*: e.g. 2.9.13; 2.14.4; 2.15.2-4; 3.5.3-4; 3.8.7; with Sidebottom 1998, 2817; Hidber 2004, 202-3 and 2007, 209; Ward 2011, 155-7, Hekster 2017, 121-3, etc. Cf. also, [82-83, with n. 214].

[215] 2.7.8: ἐκλιπαροῦντες καὶ αὐτοὶ ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι τῶν πραγμάτων.

[216] 2.9.11: ἐπέδοσαν αὐτούς, ὡς αὐτοκράτορά τε ἀποδεῖξαι καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐγχειρίσαι. This appears to be Severus' *dies imperii*, see further below, [88-89].

[217] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 2.9.12: "Note the sequence of events here as contrasted with those in Antioch", but this remark seems to concern mostly factual chronology, not narrative structure.

initiative, the name of Severus Pertinax (2.10.1: ἑαυτὸν ὀνομάσας)[218]. According to Herodian, this was a deliberate move from Severus, designed to please his base and attract even more followers through the memory of the beloved Pertinax (2.10.1). Since Severus had already been proclaimed emperor by his troops, his following address to the army, as Herodian records it, combines elements of an inaugural speech and of a pre-battle exhortation. This dual function namely derives from the context of civil war in which Severus assumed power, in addition to Herodian's usual considerations of streamlined sequencing. In the opening of his speech, Severus first replays the contents of his earlier audiences, talking about the current state of affairs, explaining what he held to be its causes, and presenting his reasons for seeking the emperorship. Switching to a more exhortative mode, Severus then praises his troops for their large numbers, their vast training, and their endurance – all of which had been proven through actual hardships and combat. These merits he easily pitches against the weaknesses of their prospective enemies: arrogance, pomposity, and indolence for the praetorians, with charges of timidity, levity, and inexperience against Niger's forces. This leads Severus to express great confidence in their military superiority over both rival armies[219]. Concerning his personal opponents, Severus quickly deals with Julianus with one swipe of a dismissive τις (2.10.4)[220]. Though he gives more attention to Niger, recognizing that some might be worried about the man's successes, Severus downplays his rival's popularity and questions the sincerity of his allies (2.10.7: "reported to be enthusiastic supporters", φασι… ἐσπουδακέναι). Severus argues that Niger was only their preferred candidate because there was, "so far" (2.10.7: μέχρι νῦν), no one suitable enough for the job. According to Severus Niger's allies were simply "pretending" (2.10.8: προσποιοῦνται) to endorse him pending the arrival of a worthy contender – cue Severus. The speech ends with a call to action to "be the first to take Rome" (2.10.9: τὴν Ῥώμην προκαταλαβόντες). Following these closing words, Herodian records how "the soldiers cheered (εὐφημήσαντες) Severus, calling (καλοῦντες) him Augustus and Pertinax"[221]. Notably, the army's cheers lack the weight of the usual proclamation verbs seen throughout the *History*, and just recently for Severus (cf. 2.9.11: ἀποδεῖξαι)[222]. Likewise, after delivering this speech, Severus is not given the purple, conducts no sacrifices, nor is he escorted to a palace, even 'makeshift' as were Niger's new tokens of imperial power. Instead, reinforcing the idea of an exhortation to battle, Severus' speech leads directly to preparations for a march on Rome (2.11.1-2).

---

[218] Severus eventually also styled himself as *diui Commodi frater*; the earlier (currently known) material evidence is dated to 195, cf. *CIL* 8.9317; 10.7271, and Cass. Dio 76(75).7.4; with Ando 2000, 186-8; Cooley 2007, 385-7; Hekster 2012, 242-3.

[219] It should be noted, however, that Severus is often depicted as lying, perhaps especially to his own troops; see also [81-82; 86-88; 103-4; 126; 193-4, with n. 57], with further references.

[220] On a similar technique, regarding Maximinus, cf. below, [203, with n. 120].

[221] 2.10.9: τὸν Σεβῆρον εὐφημήσαντες οἱ στρατιῶται, καλοῦντες Σεβαστὸν καὶ Περτίνακα.

[222] Roques 1990b, 40 gives an overview of the terms usually found in Herodian. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 2.10.9 remarks that "there may be significance in the fact that the word *autocrator* is not used here", but see too n.1 *ad* 2.2.9; with Roques 1990b, 35-42, on Herodian's varying use of Σεβαστός, αὐτοκράτωρ, and βασιλεύς. Cf. also Freyburger-Galland 1997, 131-3 on Dio: except for certain passages only known to us in fragments or through the later epitomes, Dio never uses βασιλεύς to designate the emperor, only αὐτοκράτωρ.

Hostile takeover

Compared to other accessions featured in Herodian's *History*, Severus' entire campaign is presented as a fairly long process, split in multiple (military) phases[223]. Severus would come to face three rivals on three different battlefronts in his claim to the throne: Julianus in Rome, Niger in Syria, and Clodius Albinus in Gaul. Following the *History*'s sequence, Severus, who had effectively rallied the northern provinces under his command, now turned to Rome. By making haste towards the capital, Severus was seeking to (legally) establish himself as the new emperor through the senate's ratification of a military proclamation that had taken place on the periphery. However legitimate Severus may have already considered his imperial proclamation, he clearly understood, as Herodian shows, that the senate (still) held significant, if only moral, authority and that Rome remained "the very seat of the Empire" (2.11.9: *ἡ βασίλειος… ἑστία*)[224]. This persistent ideal of the capital is perhaps a way for Herodian to grapple with the tension between this (new) reality and old values. In any case, if Severus were to reach Rome first, before Niger that is, he could also easily undermine Niger's popular support in the capital. In Herodian's story, Severus' journey to Rome is depicted as a fast-paced affair, jumping quickly from preparations in Pannonia to the troops' entrance in Rome. Severus' arrival in Italy seems not to have met strong opposition: according to Herodian, the Italians had been so used to the peaceful life established by Augustus that they sided with Severus out of fear and confusion. Herodian also records that Severus did not linger much in the border cities, except to conduct sacrifices and make speeches (2.11.6).

Herodian then describes in detail how Severus chose to enter Rome through a secret military operation and how this sent Julianus into a frenzied panic. By playing off the covertness of Severus' entrance in Rome (2.12.1: *παρεισδύεσθαι*; *νύκτωρ λανθάνοντες*; *ὑποκρύπτοντες*; *σχήματι*) against Julianus' ignorance (2.12.2-3: *ἔτι ὑπτιάζοντος*, *ἀγνοοῦντος*), Herodian can allude once again to Severus' deviousness. Faced with a spineless emperor or a determined challenger, the senators easily chose to side with Severus, eventually voting him full powers. According to Herodian, they then sent a delegation, comprised of its most prominent members, to inform Severus of their decision, while dispatching a tribune to execute Julianus. This easy victory encouraged Severus to carry out his plan to punish Pertinax's murderers: with the help of bribed officers, Severus was able to trick the praetorians into surrendering themselves (2.13.1-12). This scheme, in Herodian's retelling, was conducted as another operation combining covertness and military tactics[225]. Made

[223] In the *History*, Severus' succession wars tellingly get more than two-thirds of the textual space devoted to that emperor; see Hidber 2006, 136-42 and 2007, 209-10; Kemezis 2014, 236; Hekster 2017, 115-17.
[224] On Rome's imperial status, see e.g. Millar 1977, 15-57; Christol 1990; Mayer 2002, esp. 1-3; with below, [98]. De Blois 1998, 3420, talks about the Empire being seen "as a commonwealth of nations" by Herodian.
[225] Cf. Hellstrom 2015, 52. Interestingly, the 'trap' becomes, in Herodian's description, a literal one: Severus' sword-wielding soldiers surrounded the unarmed praetorians and held them "ringed about with weapons" (2.13.4: *φράξαντας ἐν κύκλῳ τοῖς ὅπλοις*). Herodian even pictures how Severus had them "netted like fish in his circle of weapons" (2.13.5: *αὐτοὺς ὥσπερ σαγηνεύσας ἐντὸς τῶν ὅπλων δοριαλώτους*, trans. Echols 1961). This image is also used to depict how the Alexandrians were caught by Caracalla's vengeful trick (4.9.6: *ὥσπερ ἐν δικτύοις σεσαγηνευμένους*), how Alexander's army ended up surrounded by the Persians (6.5.9: *ὥσπερ σαγηνεύσας*), and how Maximinus' army "kept the city encircled in a tight net" (8.4.7: *ὥσπερ σαγηνεύσαντος*

prisoners of war (2.13.5: δοριαλώτους; 2.13.6: ἑαλώκατε) through a play of secret letters, payoffs, and a summon under false pretences, the praetorians were then lectured at length by Severus. The emperor, according to Herodian, decided to exile them, unwilling to commit a crime such as their own[226]. Afterwards, Severus entered Rome "with all the rest of his army, fully armed" (2.14.1: σὺν παντὶ τῷ λοιπῷ στρατῷ ὡπλισμένῳ)[227].

A military emperor

In Herodian's account, Severus' first *aduentus* is depicted as half triumph half inauguration, reflecting the man's earlier hybrid speech given to the Illyrian troops. Severus' armed appearance in the capital segues into the *History*'s usual accession sequence: a procession to the temples to conduct the proper sacrifices, followed by an ascent to the imperial palace[228]. The day after, Severus also delivered a promising speech in the senate house, in which he vowed to restore an aristocratic system, put an end to untried executions and confiscations, and generally model his rule on those of Marcus and Pertinax (2.14.2-3)[229]. With these promises, Severus managed to convince most of the senate, though certain older members are said to have remained wary of him, since they were already familiar with his deceitful character (2.14.4: γνωριζόντων αὐτοῦ τὸν τρόπον)[230]. As Herodian shows, Severus took care to adhere to the usual proceedings for his inauguration or, at the very least, he made sure to look like he was doing so. With this in mind, the emperor's choice of costume, such as it appears in Herodian's retelling, is extremely peculiar. Emphasizing Severus' predominantly military attributes, this atypical dress also creates a very vivid image of the problematic invasion, to be seen throughout Severus' rule, of military tactics into politics and other civilian affairs. By appearing in full armour within the city walls and for this particular ceremony,

---

τὴν πόλιν). A failed attempt at a similar manoeuvre is recorded at 4.15.4, during the confrontation between Artabanus' troops and Macrinus' army. According to Sidebottom 1998, 2816, this *topos* likely comes from Dio's work, where it frames the story of Caracalla trapping the Alamanni (78(77).13.5); with e.g. Roos 1915, 195-200 (who, at 199, compares this practice to Herodian's "transfer" of Dio's story of Domitian's death to his own account of Commodus' murder; though see below, [231-2], on this passage). On the image of 'netting the enemies', I would point out Herodot. 6.31.4 (ὡς ἑκάστην αἱρέοντες οἱ βάρβαροι ἐσαγήνευον τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, talking about a Persian military strategy), cited by Strabo 10.1.10; with Plato, *Laws* 698d.

[226] This scene is rounded off by yet another "stratagem" (2.13.12: σοφίσματι) devised by Severus: worried that the disgraced praetorians would try and strike back, the emperor sent ahead trusted men to their camp to retrieve their weapons and guard the site.

[227] In Cass. Dio 75(74).1.3, Severus stopped at the city gates, dismounted, and "changed to civilian attire" (τήν τε πολιτικὴν ἀλλαξάμενος), while his army remained "in full armour" (ὡπλισμένοι). On costume changes, see also below, [193-6].

[228] As seen in the previous sections, esp. 2.2. and 2.3.1. See also Hellstrom 2015, 52 on this particular transition.

[229] It may be worth noting that, in the *History*, Severus' inaugural speech to the senate does not warrant cheers from his audience, though the majority is said to have been convinced by the emperor's promises. Admittedly, the senators had already given Severus full powers when they had also declared Julianus public enemy and had him executed (cf. 2.12.6), but their lack of plaudits might also be taken to express certain reservations on their part.

[230] Herodian passes off his criticism of Severus as an intradiegetic impression (2.14.4: οἳ προύλεγον λανθάνοντες ὅτι…), not as an authorial comment, and supports it further with a prolepsis: "This was later, in fact, proved to be true" (ὅπερ καὶ ὕστερον ἔργῳ δέδεικται).

Severus is shown to be laying siege to traditional views of emperorship. Taking over some of its most significant tokens, and above all the purple, Severus was broadcasting what he held to be the core of his own power: military force.

As Herodian makes clear, Severus did not linger in Rome, but headed off to Syria soon after (cf. 2.14.5). Before leaving, however, Severus made Albinus Caesar, since he worried that the other man would attempt to seize the emperorship in his absence. This is framed by Herodian as yet another stratagem of Severus (2.15.2: *σοφίσματι*), who was clearly only biding his time, since the emperor deemed Niger to be the more pressing threat[231]. After beating Niger near Antioch, Severus would eventually turn against Albinus (again through a 'trick' of secret letters and meetings, cf. 3.5.3-8) and defeated him in a final battle at Lugdunum[232]. As Herodian recounts, Severus marked both of these victories with another triumphal entrance in Rome[233].

On the surface, this second *aduentus* very much resembles the first: procession, sacrifices, ascent to the palace (3.8.2-3). If both *aduentus* follow, in Herodian's *History*, a similar sequence, elements within are in stark contrast with each other. On both occasions, Severus came in haste to Rome. The first time, he needed to reach the capital before Niger in order to be first to dethrone Julianus and establish his claim to the emperorship with the senators. The second time, Severus had just defeated his last two enemies, at least one of whom had also been proclaimed emperor by his troops, and could now establish himself as sole ruler, secure in his complete dominion. Severus then made his way from Lyon to Rome "at his usual high speed" (3.8.3: *ὥσπερ ἦν ἔθος αὐτῷ*), intent on punishing Albinus' allies back in the capital. Whereas Severus' first entrance, at least according to Herodian, inspired both dread in the crowd and admiration from the senators (2.14.1-2)[234], all were terrified of him when he returned from Gaul[235]. The senators, especially, feared for their lives, since Severus was planning to retaliate against those who had endorsed Albinus. Unlike the mild speech he had delivered in the senate house the first time around, Severus could now be seen bitterly accusing the senators for having supported either Albinus or Niger against his own bid.

---

[231] In *SHA*, *Did. Iul.* 5.1, Julianus is even said to have feared Niger more than either Albinus or Severus; see also below, [128].

[232] On the war between Severus and Albinus, see below, [130-3].

[233] Along with two victory monuments, cf. 3.7.7; with below, [122; 125].

[234] The senators were even impressed by the lack of bloodshed and struggle (2.14.1: *ἀναιμωτί τε καὶ ἀκονιτί*). Cf. Joubert 1981, 324-6; also Kemezis 2014, 241-2; see also below, [117, with n. 31].

[235] Cf. Cass. Dio 75(74).1.3-5; *SHA*, *Seu*. 7.1-3. See, among others, Millar 1964, 139-40; Rubin 1980, 57-58, 113-14; Zimmermann 1999a, 58-59 on this oft-cited comparison. In Herodian's story, Severus appears in three *aduentus*: after Julianus' execution (2.14.1ff); after his victories over Niger and Albinus (3.8.3ff); after his victory over the Parthians at Ctesiphon (3.10.1ff). Herodian arguably casts Severus' three *aduentus* in an increasingly monarchical light; on this idea, and how this affects the historian's depiction of the shift from Severus' wartime to peacetime activities, cf. below, [109-11]. Lange 2016, 113 notes "…the striking failure of both Dio and Herodian (Hdn 3.10.1-2) to mention a triumph in their rather detailed accounts of his return." While this poses the question, once again, of oversight vs. editorial choice, in this particular instance, Herodian does mention that Severus "made a generous distribution of money and held special victory games" (3.10.2: *νομάς τε μεγαλοφρόνως ἐπιδοὺς καὶ θέας τελέσας ἐπινικίους*). This, admittedly, does not amount to a proper triumph, but certainly suggests it, especially considering Herodian's tendency to both amalgamate and schematize certain events.

Although Severus had initially promised them to end violence and bloodshed (cf. 2.14.3-4), the emperor ended this speech by putting to death a large number of them[236]. This, according to Herodian, was another occasion of deceit on Severus' part: he "pretended" (3.8.7: προσεποιεῖτο) to take revenge on the traitors, "but in fact" (τὸ δ' ἀληθές) he was really angling for their money. This disingenuous purge echoes the stratagem Severus had previously used to trick the praetorians who had murdered Pertinax. This time, however, Severus did not content himself with a lecture and exile, but sentenced these senators to death. Only the soldiers were treated well by Severus and were even granted incredible privileges "that they had not had before" (3.8.5: ἃ μὴ πρότερον εἶχον)[237]. Supremely confident in his position, Severus could now act as freely as he wished and quickly established himself as a ruler who would rather rely on "intimidation not affection" (3.8.9: φόβῳ… μᾶλλον τῶν ἀρχομένων ἢ εὐνοίᾳ).

Who came first?

In Herodian's story, Niger's and Severus' accessions are closely linked: presented as more or less simultaneous, they are also based on highly similar narratives. When considering these episodes together and their place within the *History*, it is worth noting the order in which they appear in the work. While the date of Niger's accession is uncertain, the consensus is that it happened after Severus' proclamation in Carnuntum, which has been set on 9 April[238]. This would put Niger's assumption of power at the earliest in mid-April, since news from Rome would have reached Antioch later than Pannonia[239]. It may be that Herodian believed that Niger's accession came first, given the uncertain but close dates, and that he is simply mistaken in his timeline. Another way to interpret this sequence of events is to look at it as an editorial choice grounded in the *History*'s narrative structure and character representation[240]. As already discussed, the *History* is normally subjected to a rather strict narrative linearity, both in terms of chronology and causality. If Herodian had placed Niger's proclamation after that of Severus, the work's narrative flow would have naturally pushed Niger into the role of another usurper, like Albinus. Right from the outset of Herodian's account, Albinus has been made secondary to Severus, coming into and existing in the story only through his perspective; his episode is merely embedded into the story of Severus' rule[241]. Niger, on the contrary, is

[236] According to Cass. Dio 76(75).8.4, Severus released thirty-five senators accused of siding with Albinus and had twenty-nine others executed, among whom was Sulpicianus. *SHA*, *Seu*. 13.1-7 names forty-one allies of both Niger and Albinus who were condemned to death by Severus. Another purge of Niger's friends was ordered some time later, under the advice of Plautianus, cf. *SHA*, *Seu*. 15.4.

[237] Herodian notes that Severus was "certainly the first" (3.8.5: πρῶτός γε) to push the army to such corruption, although he had already described the praetorians especially in similarly negative terms; cf. 2.6.14 for similar accusations against Julianus. See e.g. de Blois 1998, 3421-3 on the army's portrayal.

[238] So Fink, Hoey & Snyder 1940, 100-1; 130 n. 557; 131: based on the *Feriale Duranum*, col. 2.3, indicating the ides of April. See also more recently Kienast, Eck & Heil 2017[6], 149.

[239] E.g. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 4 *ad* 2.7.6 and n. 1 *ad* 2.9.11.

[240] For Bersanetti 1938 and 1949, 79, Herodian purposefully predates Niger's accession to emphasize the character's ῥᾳθυμία. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 2.8.6 rightfully refutes this idea: "there is no need to see a sinister significance in the fact that H. recounts Niger's proclamation first". Though certainly not 'sinister', this particular disposition in the *History* must be significant, as will be argued just below.

[241] In the *History*, this is usually the case for usurpers, who fail to overthrow the current power, like Perennis, Maternus, Cleander, Plautianus, Magnus, Quartinus, etc. Successful contenders generally make their

given in the *History* a narrative autonomy and his own episode: as a character, he is, however temporarily, a rightful emperor. When Niger makes his entrance, he is made fully independent from Severus, who at that time does not even exist within the scope of the *History*. Until Severus' own appearance, Niger moves within the story like a proper main character (or emperor, for that matter). From a purely narrative perspective, this is perhaps an attempt to present Niger and Severus as equally possible victors in this race for power, even though the actual outcome must have been well known to most readers (cf. 1.1.3). From the angle of representation, the considerable space and attention given to Niger, enabled by the position of his episode within the main sequence, contribute to shaping both his own figure and Severus' character.

The parallels between Niger and Severus in Herodian's work have long been noticed and, to some extent, detailed[242]. Due to a marked interest in scholarship for Severus, readings of these passages were usually carried out through (or focalized) a strong Severan lens, which was also the victor's perspective. Consequently, Herodian's representation of Niger was interpreted mostly as a foil to Severus' swiftness and success. However, based on Niger's narrative importance within the *History*, the complementary nature of these characters, as well as their corresponding stories, should be reassessed as a reciprocal portrayal: Niger, in Herodian's story, is as much of a foil to Severus as Severus is to him[243]. While Herodian is certainly more admiring (at least in this particular context) of Severus' success, and accordingly of his efficiency, he appears far less convinced about the man's methods and his moral character in general. Conversely, Herodian is considerably more sympathetic to Niger, especially in terms of character, while being rather critical of his activity, or lack thereof[244]. More broadly, these antithetic portrayals may well have implications going beyond the individual conducts of Niger and Severus. Presented in succession and set in similar sequences, these two plans of action lead to substantially different results, but taken together, could perhaps outline what Herodian holds to be the best approach in such a situation: a combination of speed and caution.

2.5 Affairs in (dis)order: preparing a legacy

The previous three sections have dealt with the structure of accession stories and how sequence and rhythm, both in action and in narrative, could translate into characterization

---

entrance through a shift in the story (often both narrative and spatial), such as Severus himself, Maesa, or Maximinus. Accordingly, Herodian remains vague on Albinus' actual proclamation (cf. 3.5.2).

[242] Among others, Müller 1870, 184-91; Fuchs 1895, 226-8, 230-2; Bersanetti 1938; Rubin 1980, 92-123; Marasco 1998, 2851-3; Sidebottom 1998, 2808; Zimmermann 1999a, 172-88; Pitcher 2017, 243, 246; Hekster 2017, 121-2.

[243] That said, both portrayals also work independently, and in connection to others, but their comparison is especially meaningful, since it targets their accession episodes, which are as argued in the previous chapter 'strategic points' of an emperor's story.

[244] Though consider the shift in character when Niger prepares for Severus' arrival in Syria, cf. 3.3.1ff, with below, [117-19]. Herodian's efforts to modulate Niger's overall portrayal during the proceedings of the war he waged against Severus would also support the idea of a bilateral characterization.

patterns. In this last section, I now turn to the second type of key imperial stories featured in the *History*: death episodes. As mentioned in the first chapter, only Marcus and Severus, out of all the emperors appearing in Herodian's work, would die naturally. In practice, what this means is that these two, unlike the other rulers who passed prematurely, had more than enough time to prepare their succession, especially considering that they would leave the emperorship to their own sons. Like the parallel narratives analyzed above, this pair is also framed within a very similar story structure, and this choice cannot only be explained through historical context or setting. As we will see, here too is sequence an essential part of the representation.

2.5.1 A model emperor

The story of Marcus' death does not fall within the *History*'s scope, or so Herodian claims. Herodian states in the work's preface to be interested strictly in the events coming "after the death of Marcus" (1.2.5: *μετὰ τὴν Μάρκου τελευτήν*), as if that episode was meant to exist outside the main narrative[245]. But everything around it, from its very presence and the allocated textual space to its tone and themes, points to its major importance for the whole story. What is implied to be an external backstory, designed to set the stage for the 'actual' opening scene that is Commodus' accession and what followed, proves to be a core element, essential to understanding not only Commodus' reign, but the entire work[246].

Most, if not all, scholarship on Herodian notes the fundamental aspect of the passages dedicated to Marcus for the interpretation of the whole *History*[247]. The importance of Marcus' figure has been accurately and repeatedly stressed in connection with Herodian's appraisal of other emperors and his general conception of good emperorship. Yet by focusing on its function as it relates to Herodian's story on a larger scale, some of the narrative and thematic particularities of Marcus' death scene have been somewhat glossed over. Keeping in mind earlier conclusions on the role of Marcus' figure in Herodian's work, the following section will examine more closely the particular structure and composition of the episode.

---

[245] At the beginning of the work, Herodian defines the chronological boundaries of his subject and stresses the period's uniqueness: "a comparative study of the period of about two hundred years from Augustus (the point at which the regime became a monarchy) to the age of Marcus (*μέχρι τῶν Μάρκου καιρῶν*) would reveal no such similar succession of reigns" (1.1.4: *εἰ γοῦν τις παραβάλοι πάντα τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ χρόνον, ἐξ οὗπερ ἡ Ῥωμαίων δυναστεία μετέπεσεν ἐς μοναρχίαν, οὐκ ἂν εὕροι ἐν ἔτεσι περί που διακοσίοις μέχρι τῶν Μάρκου καιρῶν οὔτε βασιλειῶν οὕτως ἐπαλλήλους διαδοχὰς*). Consider too the work's several titles, most of them including this same temporal marker: for the list, see Lucarini 2005, ix, n. 1. Cf. also below, [97, with n. 284].

[246] Hidber 2006, 154 notes that Marcus' death serves as a 'hook', designed to catch the readers' attention and interest, as it purposefully raises questions regarding the future of the Empire and Commodus' rule.

[247] Whittaker 1969-70, lxxii-lxxv; Joubert 1981, 210-22; Roques 1990a, 13-14; de Blois 1998, 3416; Marasco 1998, 2840-57; Sidebottom 1998, 2804-7; Zimmermann 1999a, 21-41; Kuhn-Chen 2002, 266-74; Hidber 2006, 188-235; Galimberti 2014, 54-62 (*ad* 1.3-4); Kemezis 2014, 234-5, etc. Analyzing this particular scene, Alföldy 1973 argued for a complete fabrication: heavily inspired from Xenophon's depiction of the death of Cyrus, full of drama and rhetoric, and aimed solely at presenting the general outline of the work. However, the meticulous composition of this scene does not completely exclude historicity, as most scholars have argued since, e.g. Galimberti 2014, 54-55 (*ad* 1.3.1); 61 (*ad* 1.4.2-6).

An idealized portrayal

Noticeably, Marcus' death is that emperor's only narrative sequence in the *History*. As such, the first part of the episode is perhaps less a lead-up to the actual event, like the work's other death scenes, than a general presentation of the character. This first section (1.2.1-5) is more descriptive than diegetic, making use of anecdotes to illustrate personality instead of relying on a continuous narrative belonging to the main storyline[248]. Since it has no corresponding accession episode in Herodian's *History* and does not follow from an account of the emperor's rule, Marcus' death episode presents, rather than repeats, critical information about the character. This part also calls to mind certain biographical *species*, such as family, values, and personal interests, and constitutes a panoramic view of the character, mostly unconcerned with chronology or geography. Moreover, due to its position on the edges of the main narrative and its function as backstory, this account of Marcus' life is necessarily schematic. It is, however, worth noting that key conflicts of that emperor's reign, as well as strong but problematic figures, are conveniently left out: the complicated co-emperorship with Lucius Verus[249], Avidius Cassius' usurpation (and, by extension, Faustina's rumoured implication)[250], even Marcus' elevation of Commodus (which, among other things, deviated from the earlier practice of adoptive succession)[251]. Though Herodian's omission of potentially damaging stories is not exclusive to Marcus' portrayal, its application in that character's depiction is unmitigated and contributes to the emperor's idealization. While the episode is unparalleled in terms of absolute glorification, its overall shape and function, however, are similar to what we find for the *History*'s other death episodes: encapsulating an emperor's rule and emphasizing the key elements of his character.

After introducing Marcus at length, Herodian sets up his first and final narrative appearance: "when Marcus was an old man (γηραιὸν ὄντα Μᾶρκον), worn out (τετρυχωμένον) not just by age but also by hard work and worries, he was taken seriously ill in Pannonia"[252]. Significantly, the first word of Marcus' entire narrative sequence is γηραιόν and this emphasis allows Herodian to play up Marcus' old age, even though the emperor died before he was even sixty[253]. Herodian is also mindful of noting, with an expressive perfect (τετρυχωμένον), how

[248] On this function of anecdote, see Goldhill 2009.

[249] Marcus and Verus were co-emperors from 8 March 161 (their joint accession) to Verus' death in early 169 in northern Italy. Separating Marcus' power from Verus also helps to dissociate him from Verus' (perceived) character, such as portrayed in 4.5.6 (though in a self-apology by Caracalla), or in later accounts like *SHA*, *Marc.* 15.3-5; *Ver.* 1.4-5.

[250] Cf. Cass. Dio 72(71).22-31; *SHA*, *Marc.* 24.5-25.12, with Cassius' own biography in the *Historia Augusta*, esp. at 7.

[251] Commodus was made Caesar in 166 and co-emperor in 177, cf. Kienast, Eck & Heil 2017[6], 140. Caracalla and Geta's association as co-emperors, as Herodian shows (3.9.1), first serves to designate them as Severus' heirs; see above, [40-42]. They do not, in the story, gain much effective power with this title, at least until the campaign in Britain, where a sick Severus split administration and military command between the two. On the title of 'Caesar' in Herodian, see Roques 1990b, 39.

[252] 1.3.1: γηραιὸν ὄντα Μᾶρκον, καὶ μὴ μόνον ὑφ' ἡλικίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ καμάτοις τε καὶ φροντίσι τετρυχωμένον διατρίβοντά τε ἐν Παίοσι νόσος χαλεπὴ καταλαμβάνει. Cf. 3.15.1 (Severus, with similar phrasing); on the representation of Severus' age, more generally, see below, [103-6].

[253] Old age is an ambivalent attribute in the *History*. In most cases, Herodian praises the matching experience and wisdom, but he is also disapproving of Gordian's eighty-odd years (cf. above, [67-68]). Given that

Marcus had grown weary from many years of toil at the helm of the Empire. Marcus' old age can then be linked with a long and prosperous rule, and this also forestalls the idea that he might have died prematurely. This helps substantiate the image of an old emperor having reached the natural end of a long and laborious rule, ready to pass on the reins to a new emperor.

In Herodian's story, Marcus spends his last moments contemplating the possible outcomes of Commodus' rule. To illustrate the extent of Marcus' concerns towards his son's imminent accession, Herodian inserts a long excursus on past young tyrants, such as Dionysos, Ptolemy, Antigonos, Nero, and Domitian, whose past misdeeds were recalled by Marcus with great agitation (1.3.2: …ἐτάραττε μνήμη). Through well-known and striking examples, Herodian adds weight, and even confirms, the old emperor's apprehensions[254]. This passage also echoes similar themes discussed by Herodian earlier in the preface, presenting real accounts of how young rulers might lead rather undisciplined and unruly lives (1.1.6: κομιδῇ… ῥᾳθυμότερον βιώσαντες/ πολλὰ ἐκαινοτόμησαν)[255]. Taken together with Herodian's introductory claim, these historical examples called back to mind by Marcus also look to the future, both of the Empire and of this specific story: they serve to foreshadow Commodus' downfall and, more broadly, they set up certain expectations about the conduct of other teenage rulers to be featured in the rest of the work.

Looking at Marcus' characterization in Herodian's story, the placement, length, and content of this digression all contribute to present the emperor as a "well-read man" (1.3.2: πολυίστορα μάλιστα) and this valuing of knowledge is given as an important element of his good character. "Second to none" (1.2.3: ὡς μηδενὸς… ἀπολείπεσθαι) in his love of both Greek and Latin literature, Marcus was also a writer himself, whether in official or personal texts (cf.

Herodian's criticism of Gordian's age made in the context of an accession, it appears that one can be too old to assume power. On Herodian's use of terms related to old age, Grasby 1975, 124-5 comments: "He does not use them in any technical sense, nor with any consistency, and they therefore give little clue to the actual ages of the persons concerned". See also Conde Guerri 2006, for a short discussion of the representation of old age in Herodian's work and in the *Historia Augusta*; with Schlumpf 2011, 297-303.

[254] The main ideas are repeated in the speech Marcus delivered to his friends on his death bed (1.4.3-6), as we will see below. Zimmermann 1999a, 136-9, sees the vices of these past tyrants as foreshadowing Commodus' own faults, while Kuhn-Chen 2002, 299-300, matches them with some of Commodus', Caracalla's, and Heliogabalus'. A similar recourse to past figures is used in the *Historia Augusta*, when the dying Marcus gathered his friends to voice "the same opinion about his son that Philip expressed about Alexander when he too thought poorly of his son" (*SHA*, *Marc.* 27.11). There were apparently rumours that Marcus had wished for Commodus' death "lest, as he said himself, should become another Nero, Caligula, or Domitian" (28.10). In this case, however, the reference serves more to illustrate the fact that Commodus' character was already problematic (27.9; 27.12), instead of projecting possible outcomes and outlining a gradual decline. For Rubin 1980, 221-2, similarly to the *SHA*'s comparison with Alexander, Herodian's so-called "rhetorical digressions are based rather on dim recollections and vague impressions than any precise knowledge." See also Pitcher 2009, 43, who considers Marcus as "an example of someone using historiography *within* a historiographical text" (emphasis original) and Ward 2011, 119-22, for an interpretation of this passage through concepts of viewing and memory.

[255] Note the seemingly neutral, or even positive, πολλὰ ἐκαινοτόμησαν; however, other occurrences of καινοτομέω or καινοτομία in the *History* (cf. 2.7.9; 5.4.2; 6.2.4; 6.4.7; 6.8.4; 7.7.1; 7.8.2) always refer to the idea of "rebelling", applied mainly to soldiers, barbarians, or the lower class (all groups not particularly held in high esteem by the historian).

1.2.3-4)[256]. However, Herodian admires Marcus' vast culture not for the sake of pure erudition, but for the way this emperor alone (1.2.4: μόνος) understood that knowledge must be used to guide one's conduct[257]. This idea of a practical philosophy, drawing from Stoicism, can also be observed in how Marcus personally saw to Commodus' education "with great care" (1.2.1: μετὰ πάσης ἐπιμελείας)[258]. In addition to his own teachings, Marcus is said to have provided Commodus with expensive lessons from the "most distinguished scholars" (ἐπὶ λόγοις δοκιμωτάτους) from all corners of the Empire[259]. It seems that in so doing Marcus hoped that Commodus would, like himself, "[cultivate] every kind of virtue" (1.2.3: ἀρετῆς δὲ πάσης ἔμελεν αὐτῷ), in both his duties and his personal life. As is highlighted in Herodian's retelling, good conduct and good character had proven key elements of his own successful rule[260].

A beloved emperor and father

Herodian's account of the death of Marcus is straightforward and unconcealed: being the excellent emperor he was, Marcus would die naturally and peacefully, surrounded by his close relations[261]. To emphasize Marcus' excellence further, any problematic element recorded elsewhere is either toned down, twisted positively, or ignored entirely. For instance, while we can read in Cassius Dio that Marcus' physicians had poisoned him as a (possibly unprompted) favour to Commodus, Herodian makes no mention of this at all, even indirectly[262]. Furthermore, Marcus' fatal illness takes nothing away from the positive impression of his last moments in the *History*. This condition instead supports the inevitability of the emperor's death, whom Herodian depicts as a man having reached the natural end of his life. Here the emperor's illness easily becomes the logical outcome of a long life and

[256] According to Sidebottom 1998, 2805-11, Marcus' learnedness serves as the basis for the interpretation of Herodian's work through *paideia* (or lack thereof). Zimmermann 1999a, 17-40 has a similar focus on *paideia*, which is used to argue that Herodian does not view character as innate. Centrality of *paideia* in the work is however questioned by Hidber 2006, 236-7 and Kemezis 2014, 231, n. 10 and 270, n. 116.

[257] Cf. 1.2.2: ταῦτα γὰρ μόνα ψυχῆς ἴδια καὶ ἀναφαίρετα ἡγεῖτο κτήματα. Looking to Marcus' more positive legacy, Herodian claims that "the product of the age of Marcus was a large number of scholars" (1.2.4: πολύ τε πλῆθος ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν ἤνεγκε τῶν ἐκείνου καιρῶν ἡ φορά). Pitcher 2009, 43-44 sees a similar relation between Commodus and the cultural production during his reign, arguing that what Herodian sets out in the preface as the "failing of historians becomes the failing of an emperor, and the defective methodology of Herodian's targets mirrors the defective morality of Commodus."

[258] Cf. Cass. Dio 72(71).36.4.

[259] 1.2.1: πάντοθεν τοὺς ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐπὶ λόγοις δοκιμωτάτους ἐπὶ συντάξεσιν οὐκ εὐκαταφρονήτοις καλῶν, ὅπως συνόντες ἀεὶ παιδεύοιεν αὐτῷ τὸν υἱόν. Cf. *SHA*, *Comm.* 1.4-5 on the identity of these teachers. This expenditure may be, within Herodian's *History*, one of the very few charges laid against Marcus, even considering the euphemistic turn οὐκ εὐκαταφρονήτοις (lit. "not negligible").

[260] More generally, Herodian's portrayal of Marcus might draw on Hellenistic ideals of good kingship or, perhaps more accurately. on the imperial reinterpretation of these standards; see e.g. Marasco 1998, 2840-3.

[261] This passage, from Commodus' perspective, cf. above, [42-43].

[262] Cf. Cass. Dio 72(71).33.4[2]; with Zimmermann 1999a, 200-2 (on the contrast between the attitudes of Commodus and Caracalla towards their dying fathers). Dio even writes that Marcus had sent his son away from his side "for he did not wish his death to appear to be due to Commodus" (Cass. Dio 72(71).34.1: οὐ γὰρ ἤθελε δοκεῖν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ θνήσκειν). In general, Herodian does not acknowledge any sort of internal conflict in the duration of Marcus' rule, be it the co-emperorship with Lucius Verus, Avidius Cassius' earlier revolt, or a tension between father and son.

dynamic rule. To that effect, the author seems to imply that Marcus' sickness only occurred at that point: "he was taken (καταλαμβάνει) seriously ill on a campaign in Pannonia"[263]. In other ancient accounts, however, Marcus' poor physical condition is presented as an ongoing affliction and is generally discussed throughout the emperor's life. For instance, Dio notes that Marcus, at the end of his life, "*still* suffered" (Cass. Dio 72(71).33.4[2]: καὶ τότε ἐνόσησεν), though the nature of the disease is left unspecified. According to Dio, Marcus would even rely heavily on theriac to alleviate his many ailments (Cass. Dio 72(71).6.3-4). The emperor himself acknowledged his condition, whether in official speeches[264] or in letters to friends[265]. The *History*, unlike other records, links Marcus' illness strictly to hard work carried out over a long period and this contributes to Marcus' idealized image in that narrative.

The story of Marcus' death allows Herodian to discuss new aspects of the emperor's character, such as the state of his relations with the senate, people, and army. Sensing that his final moments were upon him, Marcus is said to have summoned his closest friends and family to his deathbed to discuss the future of the Empire and the care of his son[266]. Some of these friends were his sons-in-law, to whom he had entrusted the care of his daughters through marriage, said to have been chosen on the basis of their "orderly habits and sober lives" (1.2.2: τὸν τρόπον καὶ σώφρονας τὸν βίον), and not their nobility or their wealth[267]. As Herodian recounts, Marcus extended the same confidence to all of his *amici* by urging them to guide and counsel Commodus as surrogate fathers (1.4.4: ἀνθ' ἑνὸς ἐμοῦ πατέρες πολλοί). What is more, Marcus' exhortation to his friends is presented as being grounded in the principles of reciprocity: "my own emotions towards you make me reasonably confident there is a return of goodwill (ἀμοιβαίαν εὔνοιαν)"[268]. As such, this relationship, which is said to eclipse even the affection between blood family members (1.4.2: τι καὶ πλέον), is also validated by social norms[269]. This was, as Marcus argues, "the perfect opportunity" (1.4.3: καιρὸς εὔκαιρος, trans. mod.) for his friends to repay the favours received from him. Playing on this strong sense of community,

---

[263] 1.3.1: διατρίβοντά τε ἐν Παίοσι νόσος χαλεπὴ καταλαμβάνει; cf. Oros. 7.15.12 (*repentino morbo*); Eutrop. 8.7 is silent on the cause of death.

[264] Cf. e.g. Cass. Dio 72(71).24.4.

[265] Among others, Fronto, *Ep. ad M. Caes.* 5.28-35. On Marcus' 'actual' condition, see for instance Fleury, 2012, 68-70.

[266] According to Grosso 1964, 37: "Herodiano sa cogliere i temi dominant del momento, e, specialmente, le generali ansie e incertezze per la successione di Commodo." Whittaker 1969-70, adds that it also illustrates "the important part played by the *amici*". As has been often noted in scholarship, certain parallels can be drawn between Marcus' speech in the *History* and Sall., *Jug.* 10 and Xen., *Cyr*. 8.7; see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 1.4.1; n. 1 *ad* 1.4.4; Sidebottom 1998, 2787, 2789; Hibder 2006, 196-201, with 73-75 on parallels between 1.2.1 and Xen., *Anab*. 1.1; Galimberti 2014, 54-55 (*ad* 1.3.1); 61 (*ad* 1.4.2-6; Galimberti argues that Marcus' worries were inserted by Herodian after the fact); Laporte 2021b (for a more detailed breakdown of the correspondences). See just below for other similarities pertaining more specifically to the manner in which Marcus is shown dying.

[267] Listing Marcus' five sons-in-law, Pflaum 1961, 39, concludes that, besides Plautius Quintillus, "tous les autres gendres sont étrangers au cercle de famille, mais une fois qu'ils y sont entrés, tous deviennent patriciens." More generally on the composition of Marcus' council, see Crook 1955, 69-76.

[268] 1.4.3: ἐκ γὰρ ὧν αὐτὸς διάκειμαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς, ἀμοιβαίαν εὔνοιαν εἰκότως ἔλπικα.

[269] For a recent overview on reciprocity in Roman society, drawing on e.g. Cic., *Amic.*, Cic., *Off*., and Sen., *Ben.*, see Verboven 2011, with further references to modern scholarship.

Marcus even presents Commodus' upbringing as a responsibility already shared between themselves (1.4.2: ὃν αὐτοὶ ἀνεθρέψασθε)[270]. According to Herodian, the emperor also promised them that the outcome of such a mentorship would surpass even the bounds of their relationship and serve a greater good: they would "provide [themselves] and everyone else with an excellent emperor"[271]. Marcus was thus entrusting his friends with his son, both on a personal level and as the embodiment of the Empire's future. As Herodian shows, this was the ultimate token of faith, respect, and affection the emperor could ever bestow upon them.

The extent to which the *philoi* reciprocate this sentiment is illustrated, in the *History*, by their strong response to Marcus' suffering and passing. According to Herodian, "everyone (πάντας) present was so affected by the sad occasion that some of them could not help groaning aloud"[272]. Marcus himself had remarked early on their affliction, claiming that "it is normal (φύσει) for men to feel pity when misfortune strikes their own family (τῶν ὁμοφύλων)"[273]. Compellingly, the more visceral reactions to Marcus' pain belong, in Herodian's story, to the emperor's friends and not the dying man himself. In a way, Marcus' suffering is shared and even transferred, through this intimate community, onto his friends, allowing the emperor a peaceful death. As Edwards notes: "Often the companions exhibit excesses of emotion which throw into still sharper relief the calm of the central subject."[274] Ever the equanimous figure, Marcus remains notably composed, in spite of his own physical weakness and his imminent death. Moreover, a spiritual community, as argued above, was created between the emperor and his friends, through the (alleged) joint upbringing of Commodus during Marcus' lifetime and its expected perpetuation after his death, all of them becoming a single father figure to the future emperor. The lines between Marcus and his friends are blurred even further with this "somatic transference" of the emperor's pain, as this fusion now transpires on a physical level.

But, as Herodian shows, Marcus' death did not only affect the emperor's close entourage. When Marcus exhaled for the last time,

> the whole (πᾶν) army that was with him and the common people (τὸ δημῶδες πλῆθος) alike (ὁμοίως) mourned for him. There was not a single (οὐδέ τις) subject throughout

[270] As noted above, this idea is also found in Commodus' accession speech found in the *History* (1.5.3-4). Marcus compares their role in this new charge as captains in the face of a storm (1.4.3). This metaphor resonates with Plat., *Rep.* 488a-e, in which the philosopher compares the court sycophants to a pernicious crew, and, consequently, the state to a ship. Herodian also replays this nautical image in 2.8.4 (in Niger's speech: the Empire was "tossed about" (σαλεύουσα) by great waves instead of being "anchored" (ἱδρυμένη) to a single person), and in 5.1.4 (in Macrinus' speech: Caracalla's Parthian war "had tossed about" (ἐσάλευεν) the Empire). See also Meulder 2002, 84, esp. n. 34.

[271] 1.4.6: ὑμῖν τε αὐτοῖς καὶ πᾶσιν ἄριστον ἀποδείξετε βασιλέα.

[272] 1.4.7: οἶκτος δὲ πάντας ἐλάμβανε τοὺς παρόντας, ὡς μηδὲ κατασχόντας αὐτῶν τινὰς ἐς οἰμωγὴν ἀναβοῆσαι. Echoed in Vict., *Caes*. 16.14 (*maximo gemitu mortalium omnium*); Ps.-Vict. 16.13 (*luctu publico*), but compare with *SHA*, *Marc.* 18.2: nobody was mourning Marcus since it was believed that he was simply returning to where he belonged (*quod ab diis commodatus ad deos redisset*), echoing the sentiment around Augustus' death as expressed by Tiberius (Cass. Dio 56.41.9; Swan 2004, comment. *ad loc*.).

[273] 1.4.2: φύσει τε γὰρ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἐλεεινὸν ἐν ταῖς τῶν ὁμοφύλων συμφοραῖς, τά τε δεινὰ ὑπ' ὄψιν πεσόντα οἶκτον προκαλεῖται μείζονα.

[274] Edwards 2007, 145.

> the Roman Empire that did not grieve at the news and join together (πάντες) with one voice (ὥσπερ ἐκ μιᾶς φωνῆς) to proclaim his praise[275].

Just like Marcus' closest friends, the whole population was struck by a deep sadness. This compelling image of mourning subjects not only underlines their great affection for their emperor, but also illustrates the unity within the various socio-political groups of the Empire through their universal grief[276]. This complete harmony would not be seen anywhere else in the story. For the emperor's subjects, Marcus' death even becomes, in Herodian's *History*, the death of a loved one. This relationship is presented as reciprocal, as Commodus would later claim to the soldiers that Marcus had loved them all equally (1.5.3: πάντας ἡμᾶς ὡς ἕνα ἠγάπα). The conventional links between Marcus and his subjects have evolved, within Herodian's story, into something more intimate and personal. To that effect, although usually public and institutionalized, this bond is shaped into something that might be closer to a family relationship[277]. Every individual, according to Herodian, felt a strong connection to Marcus: "some praised his kindness as a father (πατέρα), some his goodness as an emperor (βασιλέα), other his noble qualities as a general (στρατηγόν), still others moderation and discipline as a ruler. And all spoke with complete sincerity (οὐδεὶς ἐψεύδετο)"[278]. Accomplished in every capacity and in every sphere of his life, Marcus was therefore universally loved. Interestingly, Herodian's verdict on the emperor is not given in the form of an authorial comment, as will be most of his later ones, but is instead "focalized through his grieving subjects"[279]. Though a formal *consecratio* ceremony is not cited by Herodian, this image of a deep, universal appreciation of the emperor might stand for his apotheosis – at the very least, it is certainly a literary consecration, presenting an (already) idealized memory of Marcus.

Everything in its right place

In the world of Herodian's *History*, Marcus' death seemingly takes place over a short time span: following his final speech, "the emperor lived for another day and night" (1.4.7: νυκτός τε καὶ ἡμέρας ἐπιβιώσας μιᾶς)[280]. This creates the clear impression that Marcus' death

---

[275] 1.4.8: πᾶν τε τὸ παρὸν στρατιωτικὸν καὶ τὸ δημῶδες πλῆθος ὁμοίως πένθει κατείχετο, οὐδέ τις ἦν ἀνθρώπων τῶν ὑπὸ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ὃς ἀδακρυτὶ τοιαύτην ἀγγελίαν ἐδέχετο. πάντες δ' ὥσπερ ἐκ μιᾶς φωνῆς […].

[276] On the over-arching theme of concord in Herodian, see e.g. Marasco 1998, 2855-7.

[277] According to Commodus, Marcus even called him "'fellow-soldier' rather than son" (1.5.3: μᾶλλον συστρατιώτην με ἢ υἱόν; cf. 1.5.4: συμφοιτητὰς τῶν ἐν ὅπλοις ἔργων; with above, [43-45]). Marcus also readily welcomed all who wanted to approach him (1.2.4).

[278] 1.4.8: οἱ μὲν πατέρα χρηστόν, οἱ δ' ἀγαθὸν βασιλέα, γενναῖον δὲ ἕτεροι στρατηγόν, οἱ δὲ σώφρονα καὶ κόσμιον ἄρχοντα ἀνεκάλουν, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐψεύδετο; see Marasco 1998, 2857-9; Zimmermann 1999a, 30-31; Kemezis 2014, 234-5. The *Historia Augusta* has a similar impression: Marcus "had been named and beloved variously as brother, father, or son, by various men according to their several ages" (*SHA*, *Marc.* 18: *ab aliis modo frater, modo pater, mode filius, ut cuiusque aetas sinebat, et diceretur et amaretur*; note the central position of *pater*).

[279] Pitcher 2017, 248. On Herodian's verdicts, see Laporte & Hekster 2021.

[280] According to Sidebottom 1998, 2798, n. 73, Herodian entirely stages Marcus' death, creating false immediacy through visual (such as physical reactions) and temporal cues. See chapter 4 on the inner workings of 'scene' creation in Herodian's work.

happened at a due moment, neither too soon nor too late[281]. Conversely, in the *Historia Augusta*, Marcus' death spans over seven days. The many temporal cues in the passage (*SHA*, *Marc.* 28.2-9: *paucos dies*, *sexta die*, *septimo die*, *nocte*) might also suggest a longer process, especially considering that Marcus had to physically hurry his death. According to the biographer, the emperor, "being eager to die (*mori cupiens*), refrained from eating and drinking, and so aggravated the disease"[282]. Herodian records, by contrast, that Marcus expired in a timely fashion, the very day after he had settled his imperial business and personal affairs to his satisfaction. Convinced that he was leaving both his son and the Empire in good hands, Marcus could thus pass away at peace[283].

Marcus' episode acts as the starting point of the *History*, and is at the core of Herodian's reflection on emperorship and character[284]. From Marcus' idealized figure, Herodian can assess the character and achievements of the following emperors. To that end, Marcus is conveniently featured first in the story, and in a portrayal striking enough that it may stay with the reader throughout the rest of the work, as a sort of mental afterimage of the good ruler. Comparisons, either positive or negative, may be explicitly cited, as in the case of Commodus, Pertinax, or Alexander. But they can also be suggested within the emperors' portrayals, through matching or clashing character traits. For instance, Marcus' toil and sense of duty is easily contrasted with the procrastination, negligence, or disinterest of unsuccessful emperors, like Julianus, Niger, Caracalla, Macrinus, and Elagabalus. Conversely, most of the *History*'s decent emperors exhibit a mildness of character similar to that of Marcus: Pertinax and Maximus and Balbinus, certainly, but also Niger and Alexander to more mitigated results. Presented as the ideal *princeps*, Marcus becomes the model against which Herodian can appraise the following emperors and this paradigmatic status is crystallized by the well-crafted, picture-perfect story of the emperor's death[285].

---

[281] This matches the ideal of *exitus facilis*, or εὐθανασία, that Augustus so yearned, a death that would happen "swiftly and painlessly" (Suet., *Aug.* 99.1: *cito ac nullo cruciate*; though compare with Tac., *Ann.* 1.5 and Cass. Dio 56.20) – we may also note the idea of 'fatedness' expressed through the turn *sortitus exitum facilem* used by Suetonius. Likewise, Numa's death had been "not a speedy nor a sudden death, but wasting away gradually from old age and a mild disorder" (Plut., *Numa* 21.7: οὐ ταχείας οὐδ' αἰφνιδίου γενομένης αὐτῷ τῆς τελευτῆς, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μικρὸν ὑπὸ γήρως καὶ νόσου μαλακῆς ἀπομαραινόμενος, trans. Perrin 1914). For a more general reflection on natural death and old age, cf. e.g. Cic., *Cat. mai.*, esp. 66-84.

[282] *SHA*, *Marc.* 28.3: *deinde abstinuit uictu potuque mori cupiens auxitque morbum.* On *inedia*/ἀποκαρτερία, see van Hooff 2002, 38-39.

[283] Alluding to internal struggles, Dio (ap. Xiph.) also notes that the dying emperor gave to the tribune this watchword: "Go to the rising sun; I am already setting" (72(71).34.2: ἄπελθε πρὸς τὸν ἀνατέλλοντα· ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤδη δύομαι). In *SHA*, *Marc.* 28.1-2, Marcus is said to have discussed directly with his son matters around the ongoing war against the Germans and around the broader future of Rome. Upon Marcus' death, a similar scene follows, although Marcus' speech is less a benevolent exhortation than a philosophical gibe (28.4-6). Popular reaction to news of his death is only mentioned in regards to the army (28.7).

[284] See Hidber 2006, 153-7, 188-95: Marcus acts as the 'focalizer' (at 188). Bekker's title of his 1855[2] edition (followed by Mendelssohn 1883 and Stavenhagen 1922), *Ab excessu diui Marci*, possibly has Tacitean resonances; see Hidber 2006, 70, n. 348 and 188, n. 1.

[285] Herodian's whole portrayal of Marcus, and not only his death scene or obituary, features certain aspects of a funeral oration, cf. Men. Rh. 418.5-422.4. Other ancient assessments of Marcus found in Cass. Dio 72(71).34-6; *SHA*, *Marc.* 1.1 (*qui sanctitate uitae omnibus principibus antecellit*); Eutrop. 8.6 (*uir quem mirari facilius quis quam laudare possit*); see a brief overview of Marcus' reception in Bruch & Hermann 2012. Though Dio, like Herodian, is vastly appreciative of Marcus, it is Augustus who, in the *Roman History*, is given

Arguably, it is not Marcus himself, but already the *idea* of Marcus that drives these comparisons, whether they are expressed on an authorial level or put in the minds or mouths of the story's characters. It is the memory of this excellent emperor that lingers and offers the key elements to interpreting the *History*. One might consider that the oft-decried historical inaccuracies and the so-called shameless idealization of Marcus are entirely the point. This ambiguity between historical character and exemplary figure may be connected with the bordering position of the episode of Marcus' death within Herodian's *History*: neither fully part of the main story, nor entirely detached from it. Admittedly, Marcus' episode is used as the exposition to Commodus' accession, alleged to be the 'actual' beginning of the history: this scene introduces Commodus, prepares his coming to power, and lays out the course of his moral corruption which would eventually lead to his murder. But the attention given to Commodus in the survey of his father's life is not only oriented towards the representation of the son: for instance, in this glimpse of Commodus' childhood, Marcus' care for his son's education and foresight for his succession also shine through. More importantly, Marcus' death becomes an episode in itself, similar to the other imperial deaths, and Marcus is shaped into a full protagonist, just like the other emperors featured in the *History*. As argued above, this scene and this character, from their strategic position within the work as well as their idealized nature, not only impact the next rule, but determine the entire history.

Finally, the chronological boundaries serving to exclude Marcus' episode from the main narrative also mark, on an ideological level, the end of an era. According to Herodian, there were, "after Marcus", changes so significant they prevented any return to the Antonine golden age[286]. Marcus' death is certainly an ending, but it is also a beginning. Conceived as the opening scene of the *History*, this strategically placed episode represents, under the pretence of continuity through hereditary succession, the start of an entirely new era[287]. This idea is made even more powerful by the particular setting of the episode: this work dealing with the history of the Roman Empire does not open in Rome, nor even in Italy, but on the frontier.

---

exemplary duties for the assessments of following emperors and their rules. This function is similarly explained through the story of that emperor's death (Cass. Dio 56.34-47), his successor's eulogy (56.35-41), and the historian's direct appraisal (56.44).

[286] Clearly and famously expressed in Cass. Dio 72(71).36.4: after Marcus, the period passed "from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust" (*ἀπὸ χρυσῆς τε βασιλείας ἐς σιδηρᾶν καὶ κατιωμένην*). Marcus' episode in Herodian's work might also be related to the function of Thucydides' *Archaeology*; see Hidber 2007, 198: "The 'prehistory', however, in this case is not so much a narrative but rather a shady and quite non-historic portrait of the ideal ruler and of his perfect kingship." In some ways, however, it does constitute a mythical preamble to the work, given Marcus' idealized portrayal and its distance (here perhaps more ideological than strictly temporal) with the rest of the story. Herodian's Marcus may well be processed through what Cornford 1907 called "infiguration", that is "the moulding of fact into types of myth contributed by traditional habits of thought" (quote at 132). The episode, in any case, also plays with the very fine lines between the past and present of these sixty-odd years of contemporary history: Marcus' rule, or at the very least his death, may have been in the recent memory of Herodian's immediate audience, but is treated, for the work's purposes, as an event belonging to a distant past.

[287] Hidber 2006, 157. Kemezis 2014, esp. 234-5 explains this choice as a way to emphasize the disconnect between "Antonine expectations" and this new world order.

This tension between centre and periphery will prove to be another important concern throughout the *History*, in connection with the clash between an old and a new system[288].

2.5.2 Expedited farewells

Marcus' death, as it is presented in the *History*, is paralleled most easily with the story of Severus' final moments: at the end of a long rule, these emperors died naturally and successfully installed their sons on the throne. As mentioned previously, these are the only two such cases in the span of Herodian's work. Their contexts are similar enough in themselves, but their particular treatment in the *History* serves to bring these episodes even closer together so that even the smallest of details may become highly significant in contrast.

A troubled emperor and father

Whereas only Marcus' death was included in the work, for reasons examined above, now Herodian slowly builds up to Severus' death and his succession throughout the account of that emperor's rule[289]. In Herodian's story, Severus' troubles really start to take shape when the emperor came back to Rome, following a successful campaign against the Parthians. With Severus' many victories in civil and external wars, the Empire returned to a general state of stability and this meant the emperor could now settle in the capital. For Severus, however, Rome proved to be a place of restlessness, filled with court intrigues, political discord, and family troubles[290]. Above all, Severus' sons, who had then become young men (cf. 3.10.1: ἐς ἡλικίαν ἐφήβων ἤδη τελοῦντας; repeated at 3.10.3: ἤδη μειράκια ἦστην), were constantly quarrelling. This persistent and violent feud was enabled, so Herodian shows, by the easy life afforded by the city and the numerous occasions in which they could compete against each other (3.10.3-4; cf. 3.13.2)[291].

---

[288] Pompeianus says to Commodus that "Rome is where the emperor is" (1.6.5: ἐκεῖ τε ἡ Ῥώμη, ὅπου ποτ' ἂν ὁ βασιλεὺς ᾖ), but Severus, in his accession speech, maintains that it is "the very seat of the empire" (2.10.9: ἔνθα ἡ βασίλειος ἔστιν ἑστία) and that he must reach it first. Cf. Maximus' speech, given to the Aquileians after Maximinus' death: "It is in the hands of the city of Rome that the fate of the empire is placed" (8.7.5: καὶ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ πόλει ἡ τῆς βασιλείας ἵδρυται τύχη). In this transition period, Herodian recognizes that imperial power comes more frequently from outside of Rome (cf. Tac., *Hist*. 1.4) and of Italy, but argues that emperors still need to assert their claim in the capital itself: failure to do so serves to explain Niger's defeat (2.8.9) or Macrinus' (5.2.3). Cf. above, [85, with n. 224].

[289] Cf. [85, n. 223; 192] on the textual space given to Severus' reign. On the parallels between these episodes in Herodian's story, see recently Hekster 2017, 111-15.

[290] For Herodian, Severus spent "a few years" in Rome (3.10.2: ἐτῶν οὖν ὀλίγων ap. Whittaker 1969-70 or ἐτών οὐκ ὀλίγων ap. Lucarini 2005, but the difference has arguably little bearing on the overall narrative), overlooking the emperor's so-called African tour (cf. Cass. Dio 76(75).13, who records that Severus went to Africa on his way back from Hatra and through Palestine; see Birley 1999, 133-5, with Rowan 2012, 77-84, for a review of the discussion surrounding the date of Severus' visit). This omission is in line with Herodian's economical storytelling: having triumphed over his enemies, both domestic and foreign, Severus should, in principle, have been able to rule peacefully in Rome. Yet the catalyst to Severus' failure, according to Herodian, is precisely the emperor's incompatibility with urban lifestyle. Regardless of Severus' actual itinerary, inserting a trip to Africa, especially at this moment in the *History*'s timeline, would likely have detracted from this key dichotomy between periphery/war and Rome/peace in Severus' imperial dealings. See Pitcher 2012, 275-6; Kemezis 2014, 241-2 (Severus is identified with the frontier); Hellstrom 2015, 52.

[291] Kemmers 2011, 271-4.

According to Herodian, Caracalla was also openly antagonistic to Severus' praetorian prefect, Plautianus, whose daughter he had been forced to marry (3.10.5-8; 3.12.3). Said to have had a close relationship with his prefect, Severus was caught in the middle of this conflict between Caracalla and Plautianus[292]. Fearing for his life in the event of Severus' death and Caracalla's accession, Plautianus allegedly sought to usurp Severus first, since the emperor was old and plagued by illness (3.10.5-3.12.2)[293]. At first unconvinced by Saturninus' testimony, the military tribune who had come to denounce Plautianus' actions, Severus suspected a trick from Caracalla, whom he knew to be notably hateful to his prefect (3.12.3-4). Ultimately, Severus came to believe the evidence presented to him, the (supposed) plot was thwarted, and Plautianus was executed under Caracalla's orders[294]. In the wake of his successful removal of Plautianus, Caracalla would quickly become "particularly insufferable" (3.13.2: *μάλιστα… ἀφόρητος*)[295]. As for Severus, he would appoint two praetorian prefects and resolve to deal more directly with his sons' education. Concluding that the solution to end Caracalla and Geta's feud once and for all was a quiet and honest life away from Rome (3.13.1: *χρηστῆς δὲ ἀπολαύειν*), Severus decided to move his family out of the capital to the suburbs and the Campanian coast[296].

---

[292] Beyond personal affinity, this tension was also likely due to Plautianus' tremendous power, as the prefect had essentially been granted "a share of the Empire" (3.10.9: *μερισάμενος… τὴν ἀρχήν*). According to Dio, Severus relied so much on Plautianus "that the latter occupied the position of emperor and he himself that of prefect" (76(75).15.1: *ὥστ᾽ ἐκεῖνον μὲν ἐν αὐτοκράτορος αὐτὸν δὲ ἐν ἐπάρχου μοίρᾳ εἶναι*). Plautianus had even been addressed as "the fourth Caesar" (Cass. Dio, ap. Petr. Patr., 76(75).15.2a), and the prefect might have been led to expect to succeed Severus (cf. 77(76).4.5). For Dio, Plautianus' predominance was at the root of Caracalla's hostility, whereas Herodian credits it to Caracalla's forced marriage to Plautilla, the prefect's daughter (3.10.8). Chrysanthou 2020, 641-2 argues that Herodian's choice to give the initiative of a plot to Plautianus, instead of Caracalla as in Dio's version, is in line with his "wider thematic interest in exploring the threat that the praetorian prefect posed to imperial power." (at 642) On this last point, cf. Scott 2018b.

[293] 3.11.1: *ὁ δὲ Πλαυττιανὸς ὁρῶν τὸν μὲν Σεβῆρον πρεσβύτην τε ἤδη καὶ ὑπὸ νόσου συνεχῶς ἐνοχλούμενον*; note already the similarities with 1.3.1. Working against Severus and Caracalla, Plautianus may have been pushing for Geta; see Kemmers 2011, 280-2, based on numismatic evidence. Cass. Dio 77(76).3.1-3 suggests that Caracalla, to whom the historian was especially hostile, had fabricated the whole plot, whereas in Herodian this is only Severus' belief (cf. 3.12.3-4). Dio's version is followed namely by Hohl 1956, 33-46 and Birley 1999, 162-3 (noting that Herodian has blindly adhered to Severan propaganda), but questioned by Whittaker 1969-70, n.1 *ad* 3.11.1.

[294] According to Herodian, "Severus reproached Plautianus for all the benefits and honours he had given him, but Plautianus in return reminded Severus of the loyalty and goodwill he had shown in the past" (3.12.10: *πολλὰς δὲ τοῦ μὲν Σεβήρου ὀνειδίζοντος εὐεργεσίας τε καὶ τιμάς, τοῦ δὲ πίστεώς τε καὶ εὐνοίας τῆς ἄνωθεν ὑπομιμνήσκοντο*). Note how this contrasts with the positive, reciprocal relationship Marcus had enjoyed with his own friends, cf. 1.4.2-3. Herodian also records that, in addition to Plautianus being a fellow Libyan, certain authors held him to be related to the emperor and others even wrote that he had been his "boy-lover" during their youth (3.10.6: *παιδικά*).

[295] Cf. Cass. Dio 77(6).7.1, who extends a similar image to Geta. Like most translators, Whittaker 1969-70 *ad* 3.13.2, prints, ap. Mendelssohn 1883: *ᾐδεῖτο δέ καί ἐφοβεῖτο <τὸν πατέρα πρᾶξαί τι ἀνήκεστον>* ("but he feared and respected <his father, which prevented him from doing anything rash>). Nevertheless, Roques 1990 maintains a lacuna, while Müller 1996 follows Schwartz-Stavenhagen 1922: *<τοῦ Πλαυτιανοῦ τὸν υἱόν καίπερ ἡσυχάζοντα>*. Most recently, Lucarini 2005 suggests *<ὃν ἐμίσει>*.

[296] Perhaps to Severus' credit, his was not a complete retreat from public life and duty (3.13.1: *δικάζων τε καὶ πολιτικὰ διοικῶν*), as had done Commodus following Maternus' plot (1.11.5: *ἑαυτὸν δικαστηρίων ἀπείργων καὶ βασιλικῶν πράξεων*); cf. below, [249-51].

According to Herodian, Severus had already started "training his sons in the art of self-control (*σωφρονίζων*)", though to no avail: an urban lifestyle, even outside of Rome, continued to provide all sorts of opportunities for the brothers to bicker[297]. Still, Severus was persistent in urging his sons to reconcile (3.13.3: *αὐτός δέ ἐπειρᾶτο… ἀεί*). Just like Marcus had looked to famous examples of past young rulers when he was worrying about Commodus, Severus would cite famous stories "always [ending] in disaster as a result of the enmity (*ἐκ στάσεως*) between royal brothers"[298]. Severus would also display all the assets at their disposal, namely the immense wealth he had gathered and an army so powerful as to be able to overcome any "external" trouble (3.13.4: *ἔξωθεν*; stressed twice). As Herodian shows, Severus was hoping that his sons would come to value their highly desirable position over their personal differences[299]. Still, neither their relocation outside the city nor Severus' enduring pleas for peace made an impact on his sons: "but they simply would not listen and grew worse as they threw off all restraint"[300]. Like Marcus, Severus' fatherly worries are shown to be tied to the emperor's concerns about the future of the Empire, even though Severus seems to be more invested in his own legacy than in Rome's general welfare. Marcus, as Herodian shows, was committed to Commodus' education in the pursuit of virtue, from which would follow good emperorship. By contrast, Severus' lessons to his sons are shown to be more practical, already directed towards ruling. In Herodian's *History*, Severus' main concern is for Caracalla and Geta to get along, in order to maintain the empire he had established. For Herodian's Severus, concord and stability are valued in their narrowest sense: a familial harmony in the self-serving interest of dynastic succession.

All these events are presented, in Herodian's story, as an accumulation of factors which forced the emperor further away from Rome and the civic sphere. As such, they also become stages on the way to Severus' death. This push is certainly physical, or geographical, since it caused Severus to relocate outside the city (and eventually outside of Italy), but it also operates on an ideological level. Although Severus continued to handle administration and justice while he was away from Rome, he remained unsuccessful in reconciling his sons and securing his legacy. This persistent failure may seem completely at odds with Severus' many

---

[297] 3.10.2: *τούς τε υἱεῖς παιδεύων καὶ σωφρονίζων*; cf. 3.10.4: *σωφρονίζειν ἐπειρᾶτο*. According to Herodian, Caracalla's marriage to Plautilla, Plautianus' daughter, was also an attempt from Severus to "sober" (3.10.5: *σωφρονίσαι*) his wayward heir.

[298] 3.13.3: *ἀεὶ βασιλέων ἀδελφῶν συμφορὰς ἐκ στάσεως διηγούμενος*. In later accounts, Severus is said to have been quite learned (Vict., *Caes*. 20.22; Eutrop. 8.19.1; Ps.-Vict. 20.8; *SHA*, *Seu.* 1.4); to a lesser extent, cf. Cass. Dio 77(76).17.2. Caracalla would also use, later in Herodian's work, famous such examples to justify Geta's murder: Romulus and Remus, Germanicus and Tiberius, Britannicus and Nero, Titus and Domitian, and even Marcus and Verus (4.5.5-6; see Whittaker 1969-70 n. 1 *ad loc.* about the possible identity of this Germanicus).

[299] 3.13.5: *πλὴν οὐδὲν ὄφελος τούτων πάντων ἔλεγε στασιαζόντων πρὸς ἀλλήλους, τοῦ τε πολέμου ἔνδον ὄντος*. Cf. Severus' famous last words in Cass. Dio 77(76).15.2: "Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men" (*ὁμονοεῖτε, τοὺς στρατιώτας πλουτίζετε, τῶν ἄλλων πάντων καταφρονεῖτε*). According to Chrysanthou 2020, 630-32, this 'displacement' of Severus' teachings from his death, in Dio's account, to a moment between Plautianus' death and the British expedition "adds to his role as pedagogue of his two sons." (quote at 631) Zimmermann 1999a, 17-40 sees education as a predominant theme in this work; cf. above, [41, n. 22; 93, n. 256].

[300] 3.13.5: *οἳ δ' οὔτι γε ἐπείθοντο, ἀφηνίαζον δὲ καὶ ἐπεδίδοσαν ἐς τὸ χεῖρον*.

earlier victories, but these took place in a fundamentally different context, which called for military virtues such as Severus undeniably possessed. These qualities, however, could not be easily transferred to matters of family, succession, and city politics in general. The gradual move of Severus away from Rome, as depicted by Herodian, reinforces the impression that city life and peacetime activity heavily clashed with the emperor's militarism. During the civil wars, Rome was a clear mission objective for Severus in his quest for sole power. As soon as this goal was reached and Rome was 'acquired', the capital became an ambiguous asset for Severus in a context of peace. Shown in Herodian's *History* to lack purpose outside of warfare, Severus grappled with civilian problems, such as family and city politics, for which he proved to be deeply unsuited.

Following Herodian's account, Severus had briefly settled in Rome twice before: after his proclamation at Carnuntum (2.14.1-5[301]) and after his victories against Niger and Albinus (3.8.3-3.9.1). In both cases, these trips to the capital are, in Herodian's story, only meant to be temporary stops. In the first case, Severus had two more opponents to confront in his quest for absolute power; in the second, he decided to head back east, claiming to strike back against Niger's foreign allies. Just as Severus' three *aduentus* are depicted, in Herodian's *History*, as increasingly monarchical acts[302], the emperor's stays in Rome are also subjected to an increase in (represented) length, occupied textual space, and overall importance of civic activity. According to Herodian, Severus "made only a brief stay" (2.14.5: διατρίψας οὖν ὀλίγον χρόνον) in the capital the first time around, before hurrying to Syria to face Niger. On his second stop, Severus then stayed in Rome "for some time" (3.9.1: διατρίψας… ἱκανοὺς χρόνους). It is at this point, according to Herodian, that Severus associated his two sons to the Empire (3.9.1). Several actions recorded during Severus' first stay in Rome are mirrored in the *History*'s account of the emperor's second stay, but are described through a more questionable filter. While Severus had merely demoted and exiled the praetorians responsible for Pertinax's murder during his initial appearance in the capital (2.13.1-12), the emperor now ordered the execution of all the rich and eminent senators and provincial nobles (3.8.6). On both occasions, Severus is said to have made generous distributions to the people and the army and put on shows for the general enjoyment. But the same actions, first cited without any particular colour, are described extensively, and quite negatively, in their second incarnation. Herodian uses this second occasion to present Severus' military reforms, through which the emperor granted unprecedented privileges to the soldiers and thus contributed to the army's decline (3.8.4-5). Similarly, games and shows were staged without a care for money, but with the explicit aim of making himself popular (3.8.9: τῷ μέντοι δήμῳ ἐπειρᾶτο ποιεῖν κεχαρισμένα)[303].

---

[301] Disregarding Severus' covert activity around Rome, this range starts at his official entrance in the city (2.14.1: ὁ δὲ Σεβῆρος… ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἀφικνεῖται).

[302] Cf. above, [87, with n. 235].

[303] According to Herodian, Severus put on "continuous shows of all kinds" (3.8.9: θέας πολυτελεῖς καὶ παντοδαπὰς συνεχῶς) and staged "hundreds of wild animals, from all over the world, from the Roman empire and from foreign countries" (θηρίων ἑκατοντάδας… πολλάκις τῶν ἀπὸ πάσης γῆς ἡμετέρας). The image might call to mind how Marcus, earlier in the *History*, had spared no expenses to summon the best teachers from all across the Empire to take part in Commodus' education (cf. 1.2.1; above, [93]). Whereas Marcus'

Severus' third stay in Rome, which is said to have lasted "a few years" (3.10.2: ἐτῶν οὖν ὀλίγων), is given considerable textual space in the *History* (3.10 to 3.13) and is used to discuss more comprehensively matters of politics, court intrigues, and family, especially as they might pertain to the emperor's eventual succession. This new focus on Severus' peacetime activity serves, in Herodian's story, to dredge up all of the ruler's shortcomings, while setting the stage for his final scene.

A perfect excuse

A rebellion in Britain, as Herodian records, provided Severus with the perfect reason to take his sons far away from Rome and the easy life it allowed[304]. Taking advantage of this unexpected revolt, Severus eagerly prepared for a journey to Britain (3.14.1ff). This final episode of Severus' rule is indicated in terms similar to those used to introduce Marcus' own death scene: "by now he was an old man and suffering from gout"[305]. This depiction of Severus echoes Marcus' condition at the end of his life, which was linked to a long rule and many hardships. Herodian's portrayal of Severus appears to be similarly positive, since it conforms to Marcus' description and, more largely, to the classical image of the aged, dying ruler. In Herodian's work, Severus' age is also shown to be a source of tension between mind and body, and past and present: Severus may have been physically weakened, "but in spirit he was tougher (ἔρρωτο) than any youth"[306]. With his usual drive, Severus is even said to have reached Britain "sooner (θᾶττον) than they were expected and before the news of his arrival"[307]. According to Herodian, Severus' movements ultimately were not impeded by his physical limitations: "and even though he made most of the journey carried on a litter, he never halted in one place for very long"[308]. If Severus now had to rely on new means of locomotion, he could

expenditures might be considered as an investment for the future of the Empire, note how Severus' profligacy is, by contrast, directed towards a strategy of increasing his own popularity.

[304] This echoes the many excuses alleged by Severus to achieve his ends, as shown throughout Herodian's account of his rule.

[305] 3.14.2: πρεσβύτης τε ἤδη ὢν καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς ἀρθρίτιδος νόσου κάμνων. See Conde Guerri 2006, esp. 190. Is ἤδη meant as a somewhat neutral "by this time" or a more negative "already"? Its repeated use in combination with Severus' old age in the last chapters of book three (3.11.1; 3.15.1; cf. 2.15.4, Severus' deceitful letter to Albinus, in which he would entice him to accept the caesarship) might mimic its earlier recurrence in more positive depictions of Severus' haste. Moreover, though Herodian tends to use πρεσβύτης and γηραιός/γερῶν somewhat indiscriminately, it might be of some significance that the former can be considered an earlier stage of life for some authors; cf. Philo 1.26, citing Hippocrates: one was πρεσβύτης from 49 to 56 and γερῶν after that. There does not seem to be much distinction between the two words in Herodian, although out of the four terms applied to Severus to qualify his age, the first two describe him as πρεσβύτης and the last two γερῶν (but, then again, the older Gordian is also said to be πρεσβύτης, even though he was nearly 80). It should also be noted that Herodian uses a very similar wording to Marcus' γηραιὸν ὄντα… (1.3.1) just before staging Severus' dying breath at 3.15.1 (τὸν δὲ Σεβῆρον γηραιὸν ὄντα ἤδη…), so perhaps the disparity between these two characters on the basis of age should not be overstated (and Severus was in fact older than Marcus by a few years at the time of their respective deaths). On Severus' illness, and how it drew out his death, cf. below, [105, with n. 319].

[306] 3.14.2: ἀλλὰ τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ ἔρρωτο ὑπὲρ πάντα νεανίαν. Cf. Cass. Dio 77(76).16.1; *SHA*, *Tac.* 5.2: *Seuerus dixit caput imperare non pedes*.

[307] 3.14.3: ἀνύσας δὲ τὴν ὁδὸν ἅμα τοῖς παισὶ παντὸς λόγου καὶ ἐλπίδος θᾶττον; cf. 3.14.3: αἰφνιδίῳ ἐπιδημίᾳ.

[308] 3.14.3: τὰ πλεῖστα γοῦν καὶ φοράδην φερόμενος τῆς ὁδοιπορίας εἴχετο, οὐδὲ πώποτε ἐπὶ πολὺ μένων ἀνεπαύετο.

still make use of the same haste displayed in earlier campaigns which had proved to be a determining factor of his repeated success[309].

And yet, despite these practical similarities, Severus' last march to battle, as it appears in the *History*, has deviated significantly from his previous expeditions. True to form, the emperor, "who naturally liked glory" (3.14.2: φύσει… φιλόδοξος), is first said to have sought more military victories. However, as Herodian notes, Severus had, once again, an ulterior motive: "but a more important reason (ἔτι δὲ καί) was that he was anxious to get his sons out of Rome so they could return to their senses, leading a sober military life (ἐν στρατιωτικῷ βίῳ καὶ σώφρονι) away from the luxurious delicacies"[310]. According to Herodian, a quest for glory had also motivated Severus to declare war upon Hatra some years prior. Severus had apparently wanted to prove himself against foreign armies, not only in civil wars of which he reportedly "was ashamed" (3.9.1: ᾐδέσθη). The pretext (3.9.1: πρόφασιν ποιούμενος) was to punish the Hatrenian king Barsemios for allying himself with Niger, while Severus' φιλοδοξία stood as the campaign's true catalyst. Again, Severus' expedition to Britain deviates from his previous wars, since the emperor's pursuit of military glory, which had been his main incentive, is now downgraded to the status of excuse.

Following Herodian's story, Severus, in this final endeavour, seems to be driven more by the idea of getting *away from* Rome than of getting *to* Britain. This atypical behaviour of Severus is in line with the discrepancy between his earlier and current motivations, marking the difference between actively seeking military glory and only pretending to be. As Herodian shows, this new mindset undoubtedly shaped the emperor's dealings with the Britons. Informed of Severus' abrupt arrival, the Britons are said to have attempted to negotiate peace with the emperor before any hostilities could take place (3.14.4). Severus, however, dismissed their embassy because he still coveted that victory and, more importantly, "was anxious for a delay (διατριβάς… χρόνου ζητῶν) to prevent him from marching back (μὴ… ἐπείγοιτο) to Rome again"[311]. Against the efficiency displayed in his past campaigns, Severus is now shown to engage in an unnecessary war, when peace was readily offered by the opposing party[312]. If Severus had been interested only in glory, one might imagine that he would have easily

[309] Cf. 2.11.3; 2.12.2; 3.2.1; 3.6.10.

[310] 3.14.2: ἔτι δὲ καὶ τοὺς υἱεῖς ἀπαγαγεῖν τῆς Ῥώμης θέλων, ὡς ἂν ἀνανήψειεν ἐν στρατιωτικῷ βίῳ καὶ σώφρονι ἀπαχθέντες τῆς ἐν Ῥώμῃ τρυφῆς καὶ διαίτης. Note the repetitive ἀπαγαγεῖν/ἀπαχθέντες. Severus' view that his sons would 'become sober again' (ἀνανήψειεν) seems to be at odds with how Herodian has, from the start, consistently shown them as unrestrained boys. Cf. a similar concern for Severus in Cass. Dio 77(76).11.1: "seeing that his sons were changing their mode of life and that the legions were becoming enervated by idleness" (τούς τε παῖδας ἐκδιαιτωμένους ὁρῶν καὶ τὰ στρατεύματα ὑπὸ ἀργίας ἐκλυόμενα).

[311] 3.14.5: διατριβάς τε χρόνου ζητῶν, ὡς ἂν μὴ πάλιν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἐπείγοιτο. Severus' eagerness to leave for Britain may also have been for his own sake, since peacetime Rome became a difficult terrain to navigate, full of political traps; see Hekster 2017, 126-7.

[312] Severus is constantly depicted as calculating, choosing to engage (or not) in the right war at the right moment: making Albinus Caesar to march against Niger (2.15.5); crossing into Asia minor at Cyzicus instead of Byzantium, already held by Niger (3.2.1); delaying a war on Hatra to deal with Albinus (3.5.1); besieging Byzantium after defeating both Niger and Albinus (3.6.9); accepting the offers of alliance from the Armenian and Osrhoene kings on his way to Hatra (3.9.2); retreating from Hatra with only a partial success, "for fear [his] entire army would be destroyed" (3.9.7: ὡς μὴ διαφθαρείη πᾶς).

accepted the Britons' proposal, instead of risking a gratuitous depletion of his troops. A victory gained through a fearful reputation was not disgraceful, at least in Herodian's view, since, for both Marcus and Pertinax, certain wins against foreign enemies are credited to their formidable military personae[313]. As Herodian shows, Severus' decision to pursue a war against the Britons, in order to postpone his return in Rome, marks a striking contrast with his usual haste, energy, and cost-benefit reasoning[314].

In addition to a decreased physical capacity and (more) questionable motives, Herodian's account of Severus' final expedition also presents a tainted image of the emperor's leadership[315]. Once in Britain, the emperor split his imperial duties between his sons, leaving Geta in the city and taking Caracalla with him to the battleground[316]. This division of power emphasizes the clash between the brothers, making it not only ideological, but also physical. An image of dissent, rather than of cooperation, it announces the impending power struggle between the heirs[317]. Under the guise of pragmatism, Herodian may also be hinting at Severus' growing inability to assume political and military duties together[318]. Admittedly, Severus' physical condition had not, at first, particularly affected his military activity and he had reached Britain in record time. For the actual fight, however, things had changed: "but Severus was an old man and was now attacked by a more prolonged illness that forced him to remain in his quarters", instead of leading the charge himself against the Britons[319]. Present at the front but compelled to stay behind, Severus would finally send Caracalla to head the assault

313 Cf. 1.3.5 (Marcus) and 2.2.8 (Pertinax, in Laetus' introductory speech to the praetorians).

314 This passage may even foreshadow Caracalla's own quest for personal glory in which the young emperor would trick the Parthian king into a fake alliance through marriage, cf. 4.10-11.

315 Dio also undercuts Severus' cleverness, one of his main strengths, with two stories of bandits who were successful in passing off as others. After defeating Niger, Severus was approached by a certain Claudius, a notorious robber across Judea and Syria, who was dressed as a military tribune and who kissed him; according to Dio, Claudius was "neither discovered at the time nor caught later" (75(75).2.4, ap. Xiph.: *οὔτε εὐθὺς ἐφωράθη οὔθ' ὕστερον συνελήφθη*). In the second story, another infamous robber, Bulla, had banded together six hundred men and had been successfully looting Italy for the past two years. Bulla was "was never really seen when seen, never found when found, never caught when caught, thanks to his great bribes and his cleverness" (77(76).10.2: *οὔτε δὲ ἑωρᾶτο ὁρώμενος οὔτε εὑρίσκετο εὑρισκόμενος οὔτε κατελαμβάνετο ἁλισκόμενος· τοσαύτῃ καὶ μεγαλοδωρίᾳ καὶ σοφίᾳ ἐχρῆτο*). Not even Severus could manage to catch him. Impersonating a governor, Bulla freed some of his imprisoned men, he also posed as an informer denouncing himself in order to get capture a centurion who was after him, and he pretended to be a magistrate to conduct a trial for his pursuer (77(76).10.1-7). Gleason 2011, 56-60, argues that these stories (along with the account of Numerianus' unprompted intervention against Albinus) serve to delegitimize Severus' authority: Claudius' collegial kiss brought Severus (back) down to the status of usurper, while Bulla's successful raids underlined his incompetence – the witty had been outwitted.

316 Cf. 3.14.9, on the brothers' rise to power. In Dio, Geta seems to have been with Caracalla at Severus' side, since the emperor is said to have told both of them his famous last words, cf. 77(76).15.2, with above, [105, n. 316], on the disparity of placement of these teachings between Dio and Herodian. According to Cass. Dio 77(76).14.3; 15.2, Severus was still in charge of the operations.

317 See Hekster 2017, 124. It also foreshadows the brothers' plan to split the Empire, cf. 4.4.3.-5-7.

318 In this new world order where one ruler cannot fully execute all imperial duties anymore, Herodian seems at least curious about the possibility of a joint rulership, see esp. his portrayal of co-emperors Maximus and Balbinus, at 7.10; 7.12.1-2; 8.7-8. Cf. also below, [260, n. 373], on the idea of shared power.

319 3.15.1: *τὸν δὲ Σεβῆρον γηραιὸν ὄντα ἤδη νόσος ἐπιμηκεστέρα καταλαμβάνει, ὅθεν αὐτὸς μὲν ἠναγκάζετο μένειν οἴκοι*. Coupled with similar mentions at 3.11.1, 3.14.2, and 3.15.2, this formula might replicate the persistence of Severus' illness.

in his place[320]. Caracalla, however, "was not really interested" (3.15.1: μετρίως ἐφρόντιζεν) in waging this war, preferring to start courting the army's exclusive loyalty[321]. Caracalla's failure to assume even this (seemingly) temporary role casts a rather bleak light on his forthcoming rule. This disinterest also challenges Severus' decision-making skills for this particular task, while throwing into doubt his choice of successor from a long-term perspective[322].

The lone ranger

As stated earlier, Herodian makes use of established common circumstances between Marcus' and Severus' deaths to shape their final episodes along a shared sequence. While this parallel flow of events renewed Marcus' good image, it also serves to highlight all the negative aspects of Severus' character and rule through a gloomier take on certain key moments in the episode. Herodian explains, for instance, that Severus "was suffering from a drawn-out illness (ἐπὶ πολὺ νοσῶν) and taking a long time (βραδύνων ἐπαχθής) to die"[323]. Though equally marked by illness, Marcus' death was, by contrast, 'timely' and imbued with peacefulness. By contrast, Severus is implied, in Herodian's story, to have suffered not only physically, but perhaps also mentally. Whereas Marcus, as Herodian shows, had died surrounded by his loved ones, Severus is given a rather lonely death, which is interestingly one of the hallmarks of the tyrant's death. According to Herodian, Geta and Julia Domna had stayed behind, while Caracalla, who had accompanied him to the battle site, was only interested in plotting his death[324]. While this scheme resonates with Dio's account of both Marcus' and Severus' deaths, it clashes with Herodian's versions of the same events[325]. Marcus, in Herodian's story, was universally loved, well surrounded, and had prepared his succession with care. The dire outcome of Commodus' rule is depicted in the *History* (mainly) as the result of external causes, entirely unrelated to Marcus and happening years later after that emperor's death. With Severus, on the other hand, Herodian can already illustrate his failed legacy by bringing

[320] There seems to have been two campaigns, the first led by Severus and Caracalla (3.14.10: συμβολαὶ καὶ ἀκροβολισμοί), the second only by Caracalla (3.15.1: τὸν δὲ Ἀντωνῖνον ἐπειρᾶτο ἐκπέμπειν διοικήσοντα τὰ στρατιωτικά); see Birley 1999, 180-3. For the first 'wave', Herodian only records that "the barbarians were put to flight" (3.14.10: τροπαί τε τῶν βαρβάρων), but were able to "easily" (ῥᾳδία) escape and hide out, since they were familiar with the terrain. Herodian makes no distinction between the command of Severus and Caracalla, nor does he praise again Severus' fortitude.

[321] So Hekster 2017, 114: Severus' constant warmongering "rafforza quanto di peggio è in Caracalla"; this image is emphasized namely by the large textual space given by Herodian to Severus' wars, see Hidber 2007, 209; Kemezis 2014, 236.

[322] For Cass. Dio 77(76).14.7, Severus knowingly doomed Geta and his own legacy by not getting rid of Caracalla himself, such as he had often criticized Marcus for not pre-emptively removing Commodus. According to Dio, Severus "allowed his love for his offspring to outweigh his love for his country" (φιλότεκνος μᾶλλον ἢ φιλόπολις ἐγένετο).

[323] 3.15.1: ἐπὶ πολὺ νοσῶν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θάνατον βραδύνων ἐπαχθής; cf. 3.15.2 and below.

[324] Cf. 3.15.2, with above, [46-48], on Caracalla's motivations. In Herodian's text, Julia Domna is only mentioned after Severus' death, cf. 3.15.6.

[325] It has been argued that Herodian is transferring some details of Dio's story of Commodus' attempted patricide (73(72).33.4[2]), esp. the part about doctors and attendants, to his own account of Caracalla's attempts in order to compare, to Severus' disadvantage, the fathers' parenting: see most recently Chrysanthou 2020, 627-9, with Zimmermann 1999a, 201.

Caracalla much earlier into the narrative, through appearances that leave no doubt as to the quality of the future ruler.

Moreover, there seems to have been, following Herodian's account, neither friend nor ally present at Severus' bedside. Featured as an unnamed and mostly inconsequential mass in the *History*, Severus' advisors appear only briefly; the oldest are said to have been left with Geta in the city (3.14.9), but this is the extent of their (narrative) presence and activity[326]. This appointment, unlike Marcus' request to his friends about Commodus, appears to have been temporary and set up with regards to practical matters in very particular circumstances[327]. The rest of Severus' friends may well have followed the emperor, but none are explicitly featured in Herodian's account of Severus' final moments. The emperor, during the story of his coming to power and all throughout his reign, had been heavily individualized and isolated, in order to highlight his agency and his (military) *capacitas*. Severus was given no true allies, and it is significant that Plautianus, his first friend mentioned at length (or at all) by Herodian, was also entangled in a feud with Caracalla and ended up betraying the emperor. Julia Domna, as mentioned, is conspicuously absent from the story and only gains (the slightest) narrative presence during their sons' short-lived rule. Severus' death, while processed in a similar manner to the rest of his life, produces quite the opposite effect, leaving the emperor alone and bereft, instead of superior and all-powerful. This gives the impression that Severus, through his quest for absolute power, created a void around himself, where there was no place left, even for friends or family. As Herodian shows, Severus' own disconnect with his close relations becomes symptomatic of the general disharmony within his family and more generally within the Empire, as a result of his failure to secure his legacy.

Aftermath and legacy

There is, in Herodian's *History*, a marked non-resolution of Severus' imperial and personal affairs. While the feud between Caracalla and Geta persisted and his calls for reconciliation fell on deaf ears, Severus sought to remove his sons from Rome by launching an expedition to Britain. According to Herodian, the emperor saw the easy life they enjoyed in the capital as both the source and enabler of their discord. Failing to instil in them the value of ruling harmoniously, Severus took no particular measures to facilitate his succession. Although Geta was given a (seemingly) temporary council to assist him in his duties in the city, Severus did not purposefully make any lasting arrangement for their continued tutelage after his death, such as Marcus had done. Shown to have been mainly concerned with the upcoming battle against the Britons, Severus ended up leaving his sons to their own devices – despite his initial motivations for this campaign[328]. It seemed the change of scenery and

[326] These *amici* appear once again in trying, together with Julia Domna, to reconcile the brothers; cf. above, [51, with n. 69], on their overall function in the story. They remain ineffective, but Domna is given a fairly long and somewhat successful speech in her attempt of reuniting her sons.

[327] Dio's version, by contrast, makes clear that Severus did not expect to return from this expedition, see Cass. Dio 77(76).11.2.

[328] See Zosim. 1.9.1 for a more positive account of Severus' death, in which the emperor appointed Papinianus (said to be ἀνδρα δικαιότατον) as tutor to his sons. Both Dio and the *SHA* give greater roles to

physical separation of the brothers were deemed good enough measures to settle their feud (or at least for the time being while the war took precedence). Lacking the successional security Marcus had personally seen to, Severus would leave an unresolved war to his sons and unprepared, quarrelling *Augusti* to the rest of the Empire[329]. And so, amidst great uncertainty, the emperor drew his last breath: "finally and slowly Severus did die, though really broken with grief (λύπῃ τὸ πλεῖστον διαφθαρείς)"[330]. When, in the *History*, his father died, Caracalla's unsuitability to rule was not hypothetical, unlike that of Commodus in a similar context: as Herodian makes clear, Caracalla's cruelty, his dishonesty, his thirst for power, and his negligence of imperial duties had manifested well before Severus' death.

Like Marcus, Severus died away from Rome, during an ongoing campaign on the frontier. But, for his part, Severus' death on the outskirts of the Empire serves to accentuate, in Herodian's story, the emperor's alienation from urban and civic life[331]. Severus' physical distance from the centre, whether Rome or Eboracum, mirrors his disconnect with family and *ciuilitas*[332]. To drive this point further, Severus is shown to have died alone, without a voice, and in uneasy circumstances. Marked by a lack of internal response, Severus' death scene in the *History* is instead immediately followed by a notice from Herodian on the emperor's unparalleled military glory (3.15.2: ἐνδοξότατα βιώσας… πώποτε), his many victories, both in civil and external wars[333], and his legacy to his sons, that is unfathomable wealth (μηδεὶς πώποτε) and an invincible army (δύναμιν… ἀνανταγώνιστον)[334]. Though, admittedly, Severus is said to have posed himself as a predominantly military emperor, his relations with the military hardly fared better in his very last moments. For such a war-oriented emperor, it is significant that Severus' disappearance is not, in Herodian's account, mourned at least by the army, whom he had favoured most during his life. While Severus had advocated throughout his rule (and emphasized as his legacy) the importance of a strong military force, so Herodian

---

Severus' friends (esp. Papinianus), which leads to Caracalla murdering them when he got rid of Geta. In the *History*, Caracalla's purges are more explicitly about Geta's friends and allies (4.6.1-2; 4), but Herodian does mention that he also killed anyone "from a patrician family in the senate." (4.6.3: ἐν συγκλήτῳ ἐξ εὐπατριδῶν).

[329] But see Cass. Dio 77(76).13.4: ἐς ὁμολογίαν τοὺς Βρεττανούς, ἐπὶ τῷ χώρας οὐκ ὀλίγης ἐκστῆναι, ἀναγκάσας ἐλθεῖν; *SHA*, *Seu.* 19.1: *perit Eboraci in Britannia subactis gentibus*. In both these accounts, the war seemed to have been mostly settled before Severus' death.

[330] 3.15.2: πλὴν ἀλλὰ μόλις ποτὲ Σεβῆρος, λύπῃ τὸ πλεῖστον διαφθαρείς, ἀνεπαύσατο τοῦ βίου. A markedly different version in Cass. Dio 77(76).15.2. Notably, while Severus is given many speeches throughout the *History* (see 2.10.2-9; 2.13.5-9; 2.14.4 (*orat. obl.*); 3.6.1-7; 3.8.6 (*orat. obl.*); along with many instances of speech-acts), he has no final voice (by contrast, cf. Cass. Dio 77(76).15.2; 17.4 and *SHA*, *Seu.* 20.10).

[331] Hekster 2017, 126-7: Herodian's long description of Britain could in fact serve to stress once again Severus' military prowess, especially against his failure in family matters. See too Pitcher 2012, 271, with below, section 3.2, more generally on the use of space and landscape in the *History*.

[332] Hekster 2017, 125-6: "Settimio Severo, Erodiano sembra suggerire, è più a suo agio sul campo di battaglia e quando ha a che fare con non-romani, piuttosto che nello stare a Roma dovendosi accordare con la familia imperiale, e anche (o soprattutto) con i suoi parenti."

[333] Praising Severus' success against his three opponents, Herodian notes that the emperor even surpassed Caesar, Augustus, and Sulla, cf. 3.7.8. This seems to echo references made by Severus himself in a speech delivered to the Senate after his victory over Albinus, in which he was praising the cruelty of Marius, Sulla, and Augustus in their approaches to civil war, cf. Cass. Dio 76(75).8.1. See Urso 2016 and Hekster 2017, 124.

[334] This contrasts sharply with Marcus' view that moral virtues were the only "real possessions" (1.2.2: ἀναφαίρετα… κτήματα); cf. above, [92-93].

shows, it seems that ultimately this relationship between emperor and army was at best mercantile, at worst one-sided[335].

In the *History*, the aftermath of Severus' death is only fully discussed when Caracalla and Geta had returned to Rome. As seen above, Herodian's long description of Severus' obsequies is a confirmation as much of Severus' ambivalent character as it is of Caracalla's badness. According to Herodian, both the new emperors and the urn containing their father' ashes received official greetings by the senators and population upon entrance in the city (4.1.3: τὴν κάλπιν προσεκύνουν)[336], in an echo of Severus' several earlier *aduentus*. A lengthy explanation of the *consecratio* ceremony right after creates a break in the narrative. This placement, as previously argued, serves to emphasize the chaotic sequence of succession from Severus to his sons, and especially Caracalla. Through tone, shape, and content, this digression also contributes to disconnecting Severus' funeral from the main story. With this long description of the apotheosis ritual, Herodian shifts from a narrative to an explanatory mode, swapping the past tense for the present (all throughout 4.2)[337]. This transition is also made clear with the explanatory phrase "it is normal Roman practice…" (4.2.1: ἔθος γάρ ἐστι Ῥωμαίοις…) placed right at the beginning. To reinforce the generic aspect of this description, Severus is not named anywhere in this long passage, nor does it refer in any way to the ongoing ceremony[338]. Like his treatment of Marcus' death, Herodian uses Severus' funeral and consecration to convey a certain imperial universality, but in Severus' case, the tone is distinctly impersonal, even abstract. There seems to be, in Herodian's *History*, no love lost for Severus himself, only a generalized sense of loss for an emperor having ruled for some twenty years and, perhaps even more, for the stability his reign provided.

There is one last element of particular significance in Herodian's posthumous treatment of Severus: the emperor's final resting place. When Caracalla and Geta returned to Rome with their father's ashes, a procession then escorted the urn to be laid "in the temple where the sacred memorials of Marcus and his imperial predecessors were displayed"[339].

---

[335] Conversely, see the soldiers' reaction to Marcus' death (1.4.8), and even to Caracalla's murder (4.13.7).

[336] Such an honour was apparently rare, cf. Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 4.67; also Plut., *Demetr*. 53, noting the spectacular aspect of Demetrius' funeral (τραγικήν… καὶ θεατρικήν), comparable to the staging of Severus' final moments in Herodian's account, where an effigy plays the part of the dying emperor, visited by doctors for a week (4.2.3-4); see e.g. MacCormack 1981, 104-5, 117-18. Cf. above, [48-50], on the implications for the brothers' own entrance in the capital.

[337] That is, from 4.1.11 (ἐπετέλεσαν δὲ πρὸ ἁπάντων τὴν ἐς τὸν πατέρα τιμήν) to 4.3.1 (ταύτην δὴ τὴν τιμὴν ἐκθειάσαντες οἱ παῖδες τὸν πατέρα ἐπανῆλθον ἐς τὰ βασίλεια). Note the similar phrasing, though resumptive in the latter instance.

[338] See the oft-compared apotheosis ceremony of Pertinax in Cass. Dio 75(74).4-5. Although it too presents much information on the ritual, Dio's version is, by contrast, well anchored to the event of Pertinax's *consecratio* (told in the past tense, citing names, and embedding descriptions of *realia* in the narrative). Arce 2010, 309, explains these differences by the fact that, unlike Dio, Herodian did not attend the ceremony and that this passage had didactic purposes for his eastern audience. This take does not, to my sense, preclude my own interpretation of Herodian's more impersonal description of the same event.

[339] 4.1.4: ἐν τῷ νεῷ ἔνθα Μάρκου τε καὶ τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ βασιλέων ἱερὰ μνήματα δείκνυται; cf. 3.15.7: ἐς τὰ βασιλέων ἱερὰ μνήματα. The material of Severus' urn is variously recorded in ancient sources: "alabaster" in Herodian 3.15.7: ἐς κάλπιν ἀλαβάστρου; "purple stone" in Cass. Dio 77(76).15.4: ἐς ὑδρίαν πορφυροῦ λίθου (suggested to be porphyry by Cary 1927, n.1 *ad loc.*, and Derbyshire Blue John, a rare, semiprecious mineral, by Birley 1971, 269); "gold" in *SHA*, *Seu.* 24.1.2: *urnulam auream* (though dismissed by Birley as "an ignorant guess"

Though it had been the custom since Hadrian (and up to Caracalla), this practice is only mentioned once in Herodian's work[340] and, as such, must be taken as an indication of the historian's closing assessment of the emperor. In spite, perhaps, of prior misgivings, this mention might validate Severus' imitation of Pertinax, who was in Herodian's opinion, second only to Marcus[341]. But this imitation, as it appears in the *History*, might be viewed as a manipulative strategy of self-representation, rather than an entirely genuine pursuit of virtue. It then becomes difficult to argue that the cited connection to Marcus, which can usually be taken as the historian's unilateral approval, is directed here at a wholly positive appraisal of Severus[342]. With this in mind, it might also be useful to come back to Herodian's final words about Severus, which define the emperor's legacy as great military victories, vast amounts of wealth, and feuding successors. Severus is shown to have been chiefly interested in glory and material assets, which was what he handed over to his heirs. But, as Herodian shows, Severus also passed down, perhaps unwittingly, certain of his most problematic personal characteristics: from father to sons (and especially Caracalla), greed, cruelty, impatience, and vainglory would thus become markers of dynastic continuity. Marcus' immaterial legacy, by contrast, consisted of knowledge and virtue imparted to his son, but also his friends and subjects throughout his rule, since he had held spiritual qualities as the only real, everlasting possessions. Although Marcus had left both his son and the Empire in good hands, his succession would eventually turn out to be a failure. The consequences of Severus' lack of proper safeguards, however, were already visible during the emperor's life and were made especially clear in the story of his last moments. Having deliberately separated himself from Rome, civility, and most of his family, the dying Severus was left with a son who could not be rid of him fast enough.

To shape his stories of Marcus' and Severus' deaths, Herodian builds on existing similarities in context and creates uncannily parallel narratives. Like the other comparisons of this chapter, this last one also serves the representation of character. However, since Marcus' episode does not belong to the main narrative and has instead a programmatic value as established above, this third case must also be considered from the wider perspective of the whole work. Marcus (and Marcus' figure) functions, within the *History*, as the ideal to

---

or, in the second edition, 256, n. 1, as an attempt to "be different"). According to Di Leo 1989, 52, the use of alabaster (such as Herodian depicts Severus' urn) "revives the stone's funeral associations traditional to Etruscan art as well as confirming the position of the person commissioning it".

[340] But so were Commodus (*SHA*, *Comm.* 17.4; *CIL* 6.992 = *ILS* 401), Geta (Cass. Dio 79(78).24.3), and Caracalla (Cass. Dio 79(78).9.1; *SHA*, *Carac.* 9.12; *Macr*. 5.2), although Herodian makes no mention of them.

[341] Herodian glosses over Severus' Antonine self-representation, namely his 'auto-adoption' as Marcus' son and the *renouatio memoriae* of Commodus, recorded in Cass. Dio 76(75).7.4; 77(76).9.4 and *SHA*, *Seu*. 10.6; 19.2-3. See Hekster 2017, 124.

[342] Modern readings of Herodian's Severus are accordingly varied: e.g. Widmer 1967, 5 (strictly bad); Alföldy 1971b, 436-7 (shaped as the later *Soldatenkaiser*); Rubin 1980, from 92 (for Herodian, clearly bad, but ambivalence in treatment comes from pro-Severan sources); Joubert 1981, 324 (embodies "le triomphe de l'intelligence"); de Blois 1998, 3417 (as Dio's Severus, but pushed to "dramatic extremes"); Marasco 1998, 2851-3 (Herodian is "aspramente ostile" to Severus); Zimmermann 1999a, 179-88 (unequivocally bad); Arand 2002, 138 (one of the nine bad emperors in Herodian); Meulder 2003, 76-83 (shaped as a Platonic tyrant); Hidber 2006, 207-8 (great general, overall successful); Hellstrom 2015, 52 (dangerous, guileful, ruthless); Chrysanthou 2020, 639-41 ("a more or less favourable treatment" at n. 61).

which all emperors should aspire and the benchmark against which Herodian measures them, whether through named comparisons or contrasting portrayals. In the case of Marcus' and Severus' parallel deaths, Herodian breaks down their sequences in order to confront their elements almost one by one. In a way, by dissecting the narrative structure of both episodes, Herodian is able to illustrate in great detail how such an appraisal using Marcus' standard can work. This comparison of Marcus' and Severus' final moments is not only in service of the emperors' characterization in itself, but it is also an example of how Marcus' idealized figure can be used as a key to understanding Herodian's representation of the *History*'s other emperors.

In this chapter, we have seen how the *History*'s repeated storylines are neither rhetorical exercises nor the product of lazy writing, but are instead an important part of Herodian's literary programme. In addition to making a complicated story easier to follow by resorting to narrative schemata, Herodian can also create essentialized, high-impact portrayals that can work towards interpreting the history as a whole. Broadly put, the two or three separate episodes processed through a similar storyline can be treated as an overarching unit that illustrates one aspect of emperorship from contrasting perspectives. This, as we will see in the remaining chapters, is a consistent aspect of Herodian's writing.

A close comparison of these selected narrative sequences has revealed how timing and order were, in Herodian's view, important considerations in seeking and establishing imperial power. As Herodian persistently shows, these same qualities could also extend to preparing and securing a promising succession. Whether looking to start or end one's reign, failure or refusal to play by the rules inevitably marked bad character and poor leadership. Commodus and Caracalla (with Geta), in a similar position after the deaths of their fathers, approached their accessions in vastly different ways, the former respectful of traditions, the latter far too impatient. Chosen for their merits, out of necessity, or even for lack of a better alternative, Pertinax, Gordian I, and Gordian III are given very similar accession sequences, in order to highlight their agency or passivity at each phase of their coming to power. In a context of civil war and of a growing tension between senatorial and military control, Niger is shown to employ unsuitable, even dated, politics to secure power, while Severus appears to better understand the ongoing changes. Severus' insight, however, is revealed to be effective only in warfare, whereas his endeavours in civic and familial affairs end in failure. Ultimately, not even Marcus, Herodian's ideal emperor, can boast a complete success. Although Herodian goes to great lengths to eschew potential sources of blame concerning Marcus, Commodus' fall from grace is difficult to entirely separate from his father. Despite Marcus' teachings, Commodus' imperial lifestyle was, according to Herodian, instrumental in bringing about his downfall. Like Marcus, who is made into the expression of a past ideal, Commodus' episode in the *History* is also programmatic to a certain extent, since it becomes a paradigmatic warning to and about future young emperors supplied with absolute power. If Marcus himself could not guarantee a worthy successor to the Empire, then its future seemed quite bleak.

Having now considered the structural workings of the *History*'s accessions and deaths, I will next delve deeper into the composition of these episodes by looking at Herodian's use of models, whether literary, thematic, historical, or all of those at once. If the main idea in this chapter was to examine the process of how an action came to be through its careful deconstruction, the next chapter will focus rather on the action itself, exploring how Herodian (re)uses classical motifs or well-known stories not through sequencing, but thematizing.