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HERODIAN
HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE
BOOKS I-IV



Translated by
C. R. WHITTAKER

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BOOKS I-IV

WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY

C. R. WHITTAKER



HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

LONDON, ENGLAND

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First published 1969
Reprinted 1995, 2002

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ISBN 0-674-99500-7

*Printed in Great Britain by St Edmundsbury Press Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, on acid-free paper.*
Bound by Hunter & Foulis Ltd, Edinburgh, Scotland.

THE LOEB CLASSICAL LIBRARY

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EDITED BY

JEFFREY HENDERSON

HERODIAN

I

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PREFACE

Although there have been many editions of Herodian's *History*, few have seriously treated the author as a historian. Yet ironically the selection of fortune has preserved Herodian as one of only two historians who were contemporary writers of the turbulent period in the Roman empire following the death of Marcus Aurelius and whose work has survived to the present day. And even Cassius Dio, the other historian, can only be read in the distorted form of the later epitomes of his history. So by any account Herodian's *History* is an important document, for all its defects.

The first aim of this edition (other than the translation) has been to remedy the deficiency by providing an historical commentary on the text and an assessment of the value of Herodian's evidence. Inevitably much has been left unsaid, sometimes because of the exigencies of space, but often because the data are too sparse to admit of precise answers. Consequently, the second aim has been to collate the main evidence that exists and to provide a bibliographic guide for those who would go further. The problem has been to avoid, on the one hand, the oversimplified and confident statement of fact where only hypothesis exists, and on the other hand, overlengthy notes on all the *crucēs*.

There has been little attempt to discuss questions

PREFACE

of style and language, not because they are unimportant but because they have received attention fairly frequently in the past. Similarly, there are few novelties in the text or translation.

I am deeply grateful to John Graham for the valuable comments and corrections he has made and the time he has given up to restrain some of the wilder flights of my imagination; it is not his fault that some errors remain. Moses Finley and John Crook have both given me encouragement and Anthony Bulloch has generously assisted me in checking references. Above all, I must acknowledge my debt to the Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge, who made it possible for me to write this book under such ideal conditions.

C. R. WHITTAKER

*University of Ghana,
1967*

INTRODUCTION

THE LIFE OF HERODIAN

Facts about Herodian's life are few; therefore theories are many. Nothing is known for certain about the historian except what he himself says in his writings. And since he is given to imprecision, much of that is inadequate or obscured by linguistic ambiguities. The date of composition and exact dates when he lived, his social status and position, his nationality, even his name are matters for debate. The answers are bound to be speculative.

Date of life and composition

The *History* of Herodian extends from the death of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 180) to the accession of Gordian III (A.D. 238), a period of fifty-eight years which the historian claims fell within his own lifetime: "I have written a history of the events following the death of Marcus which I heard and saw in my lifetime" (1.2.5). In two places he adds to this statement. In the first he says, "In a period of sixty years the Roman empire was shared by more rulers than the years warranted" (1.1.5); and in the second, "My aim is to write a systematic account of the events within a period of seventy years, covering the reigns of several emperors, of which I have personal experience" (2.15.7). Hence arises the

INTRODUCTION

first ambiguity. If one assumes that the terminal dates of his life are at least 180 to 238,¹ how far either way must they be extended? Many editors have concluded that one of the figures of 60 or 70 in the MSS must be corrupt,² a hazard that one has to admit is of notorious incidence with respect to numerals.³ If both figures were in fact 60, they would roughly correspond to the period of fifty-eight years actually covered by the *History*.

It is possible that the inconsistency of the numerals is simply an error of Herodian; and if so, instructive, because it is not the only sign of hastily produced and carelessly checked work.⁴ By this argument Herodian wrote c. 250 (i.e. seventy years after 180), intending to bring the *History* right up to the date of writing. For one reason or another, perhaps simply because he was a very old man on the threshold of death, he decided, after starting, to terminate the *History* at 238; before final publication, while writing the *prooemium* to Book I, he failed to notice the inconsistency with what he had earlier written in Book II.⁵ The theory is not unattractive; but is there really any inconsistency?

¹ Not necessarily true if H. is being less than literal; but unless some credence is given to his words, there is no starting-point for study.

² E.g. L. Mendelssohn, edit., Leipzig, 1883, in *app. critic.* to 2.15.7 *ἐξήκοντα*, *volebant homines docti plures*; cf. R. Sievers, *Philol.* 26 (1867) 31.

³ Therefore the temptation to emend rather than explain is strong; e.g. 5.8.10n.

⁴ See p. 418 n. 1.

⁵ This is the argument of, among others, J. Blaufuss, *Observationes ad Herod. rerum Romanarum scriptoris libros V et VI* (Erlangen, 1893) 4 ff.; cf. F. Cassola, *NRS* 41 (1951) 217.

INTRODUCTION

A closer examination of the two passages in question shows that they are reconcilable. In the first Herodian speaks of sixty years of social and political revolution covered by his *History*. In the second he states that this period fell *within* his own lifetime of seventy years. But by clutching at straws one sometimes crushes them. The ages of sixty and seventy are conventional, round figures to describe old age,¹ and the historian may mean no more than this. Certainly the exact dates of his life are made no more precise by the figures.

There are, however, other references in the *History* which help to date the author, since they refer to events that Herodian himself witnessed. The first of these is the games of Commodus in 192 (1.15.4) and the second the Secular Games of Severus in 204 (3.8.10). It has often been noticed that the first book in particular is much concerned with occasions in the theatres or festivals²—often with attendant riots—just the very events most likely to impress a young

¹ E.g. the ages given by Philostratus (almost exactly contemporary with H.) of the sophist Alexander "Peloplaton" and Aelius Aristides at the time of their deaths; "some say that he reached the age of sixty, others that he was seventy"; Philos. *VS* 2.6.576 (Olearius), 2.6.570(01); cf. Diog. Laert. 1.60, Lucian, *Alex.* 34, etc.

² By, for example, Wolf and Poblocki (quoted on p. xii, n. 2). But Kreutzer's argument (see p. lxvi) that H. is following the order and selection of events in Dio's history of Commodus's reign, while not necessarily inconsistent with Poblocki's view, could also mean that H. did not witness most of these events personally. One should also note the remarks of H. Nesselhauf, *H.-A. Colloquium Bonn 1964/5* (Bonn, 1966) 134, who quotes SHA, *Comm.* 15.4, to the effect that many of the circus and theatre appearances of the emperor were recorded in the *acta urbis*, where H. could have read of them.

INTRODUCTION

boy. If Herodian witnessed the games of 192, he probably wore the *toga virilis* by that date, since younger children were not normally admitted. That is to say, in 192 Herodian must have been in his fourteenth year at least and have been born before 178. Perhaps these were the first big games that he had attended.¹

Many commentators have favoured a date of composition of about 240, just after the last events described in Book VIII. The argument is that, if Herodian was seventy at the time of composition and if one accepts his word that he personally witnessed the events of his *History*, then he must have been about ten years old in 180 when the *History* begins, since he could hardly claim to remember anything if he were only two or three at that date.² But this really does strain the meaning of Herodian's words—even if he had claimed to have witnessed every incident, which in fact he does not. If that had been the case, how could he have written of activities in Africa, Pannonia, North Italy and Rome, all within the year 238? There are furthermore some quite strong arguments against a date of composition in the reign of Gordian III (238–44), certainly as far as Books VII and VIII are concerned.³ For instance, the portrait of Gordian's grandfather, Gordian I, is far from

¹ The point is made by F. Grosso, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (Torino, 1964) 31.

² The argument of J. v. Poblocki, *De Herodiani vita, ingenio, scriptis* (Monasterium, 1864) 5, quoting similar views held by F. A. Wolf; cf. E. Volkmann, *De Herodiani vita, scriptis fideque* (Königsberg, 1859) 11.

³ See Blaufuss 9, Cassola 218.

INTRODUCTION

flattering; a mild but weak man (7.5.4 ff.) whose *refus de pouvoir* is treated with scepticism (7.5.7), and about whose death a most unfavourable story is repeated (7.9.4). Neither is the accession of the young boy in 238 regarded with any great enthusiasm by the historian. The youthful emperor, aged only thirteen, followed in a line of *principes pueri* whom the whole *optimus princeps*—ideology of the *History* discredits (e.g. 1.1.6, 1.3.1–5, 2.1.3, 2.10.3, etc.). Gordian attained power first with the aid of the urban mob (7.10.5) and then of the praetorian guard (8.8.7), both of whom are systematically represented in an unfavourable light throughout the *History* (e.g. *plebs infima*—1.12.1, 7.7.1; praetorians—2.6.2, 4.5.1, etc.). The faction of the Gordiani used the strained relations between the senate and praetorians and senate and urban plebs in a cynical bid for power that nullified the senatorial revolution. Gordian III became emperor against the wishes of the majority of the senate.¹ If the *vita Gordianorum* is to be trusted for a period of frustrating obscurity, the early years of the boy-emperor were ones of internal graft and corruption and external revolt and secession, in which the freedmen at court and the empress mother played some part.² So Herodian's remarks about

¹ L. Homo, *Rev. Hist.* 131 (1919) 251–2; “L'avènement de Gordien III se fait en opposition complète à la politique du sénat”; although a group of senators supported Gordian. The rest acquiesced in the inevitable after the murder of Pupienus and Balbinus, and a compromise lasted until Timesitheus' rise to power in 241.

² SHA, *Gord.* 23.7; P. W. Townsend, *YCS* 4 (1934) 61 ff., makes a spirited attempt to whitewash the early years, largely on the basis of rescripts and petitions from provincials,

INTRODUCTION

imperial freedmen at court (1.6.8), or about an empress that dominates her young son (6.1.10, etc.) might have been dangerous to publish between 238 and 241 at least. After that date Timesitheus, the praetorian prefect and father-in-law of Gordian, dominated the reign until his death in 244. Though he was an efficient administrator in dealing with the problems of the frontier, the prefect's regime represented a counter-revolution and a return to the anti-senatorial appointments initiated by Perennis (unsuccessfully) and continued by the Severi.¹ Herodian's unfavourable comments on Perennis and more especially on another prefect who was also father-in-law to a young Augustus—Plautian, the prefect of Severus—might have suggested comparison with Timesitheus. It is easier to believe that the date of composition was subsequent to 244.²

such as that contained in the Scaptopare inscription (*IGRR* 1.674). But Severus had passed measures against delation and Commodus had received petitions from the *coloni* of Africa, yet both dealt viciously with senatorial opposition.

¹ E.g. the appointment of an unknown centurion of the praetorians as *dux leg(ionum) Daciae* (*ILS* 2773), much as Perennis had appointed L. Artorius Castus over the British legions; H. G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres* (Paris, 1960) no. 334, A. v. Domaszewski, *Die Rangordnung des röm. Heeres* (reissue B. Dobson, Köln, 1967) 187 and 229.

² I believe that H.'s remark in 6.6.6 about renewed Persian activity refers to the period immediately preceding the expedition of 241, and was therefore written after that date. It is usually assumed that a Persian invasion on N. Mesopotamia took place in the reign of Maximinus on the basis of Zon. 12.18, Syncellus 1.681 (Bonn) and SHA, *Max. and Balb.* 13.5. But in 7.8.4 the speech of Maximinus explicitly denies this—surely better evidence, especially if H. were living in the East (see p. xxvi). The absence of coinage from Mesopotamian

INTRODUCTION

If not writing during the reign of Gordian, it is likely that Herodian composed the *History* in the reign of Gordian's successor, M. Julius Philippus (244–9), for he was seventy years old by the time Philip's rule ended.¹ But apart from the argument of age, there are some circumstances of Philip's life (however little is known of this period) which are aptly paralleled by the subject matter of the *History*. For instance, Philip rose to the purple from being an equestrian and a praetorian prefect, very much like the first equestrian emperor, Macrinus. Herodian, in marked contrast to Dio, finds nothing objectionable in an equestrian emperor as such. It was only Macrinus' failures that he criticized. Instead of defeating the Parthians, he bought them off with a subsidy (4.15.8); though he should have hastened to return to Rome, he led a life of luxury and ease in Antioch; he neither employed the soldiers in war nor satisfied them enough to control them (5.2.3–7). But Philip fought and concluded an advantageous peace with the Persians;² he then wasted no time in getting

cities from 235 to 238 and the independence of Edessa, which is used as an argument (e.g. A. R. Bellinger, *The excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VI* (New Haven, 1949) 208 and *YCS* 5 (1935) 144–6), could be explained if Alexander had never recovered Nisibis and Carrhae (see 6.5.2n).

¹ R. L. Burrows, *Prolegomena to Herodian* (Diss. Ann Arbor, 1956) 13, suggests the reign of Decius (c. A.D. 251), but only on the basis of an entirely hypothetical ninth book which H. supposedly projected to imitate Herodotus. Apart from the unexplained reason why a ninth book should run from 244 to 251, H.'s model was, if anyone, Thucydides—and he wrote eight books.

² Details and refs. to Philip are in E. Stein, *RE* (Philippus 386) 755–70, *PIR*²J 461. The famous Kaaba inscription of

INTRODUCTION

to Rome (before 20th July 244) to establish his claim to the principate. His military qualities are shown by the fact that before the next year he was on the Danube, where he remained until 247 winning victories, restoring the province of Dacia and Moesia Inferior and assuming titles from wars against the Germans (Quadi?) and Carpi. In 247 he returned to Rome to make his son co-emperor on terms of equality such as had only been known before in the reign of Pupienus and Balbinus.¹ In April 248 the millennial games celebrating the founding of Rome were held with great pomp. "Das war die Höhepunkt in Philipps Regierung," says Stein, before the storm broke in the following year. Herodian approved of the double principate (e.g. 4.3.9, 8.7.6); he was opposed to subsidies for the barbarians (e.g. 1.3.5, 1.6.5, 2.2.8, 6.3.7); and he praised emperors of low status whose *virtus* was worth more than *nobilitas*. The stereotype of the *optimus princeps*, so often formulated by the sophists and philosophers in the post-Flavian empire, and thematic in Herodian's *History* (e.g. 1.5.6, 2.3.2-5, 5.1.6-8), was particularly relevant to Philip. When Macrinus says, "No one

the so-called history or *res gestae divi Saporis* alleges a crushing defeat of Philip and the payment of a large subsidy by him; if there is any truth in the words, the agreement was immediately abrogated, as Zon. 12.19 suggests; quotations and discussions are in A. T. Olmstead, *CP* 37 (1942) 255 ff., who points out the territorial gains of Philip. M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Berytus* 8 (1943) 31, denies even the loss of Armenia and says (p. 44), "Shapuhr certainly respected Philip."

¹ The title of *pontifex maximus*, normally reserved for the senior partner, was taken by both; cf. 8.8.4n for possibly one instance of the elder Gordiani holding the title together.

INTRODUCTION

should think I am unworthy or consider it a mistake of fortune that I have risen from the equestrian order to this position" (5.1.5), it might have been Philip speaking. Immediately before these words the letter of Macrinus says, "As long as I hold power everyone shall live free from fear and bloodshed, and this shall be a rule of the aristocracy rather than a tyranny." Philip's rule, too, was an attempt to return to the days of partnership between emperor and senate that had prevailed under Severus Alexander.¹

The centennial games of 248—actually the millennial games to celebrate the thousandth year of Rome²—was not only the occasion for reinforcing the dynastic claims of Philip but probably regarded by writers as an opportunity for winning imperial favour by publicizing the new dawn.³ One Greek historian, Asinius Quadratus, wrote a work called the *Χιλιετηρίς* (*Millennium*), a history from earliest times to Severus Alexander, to coincide with the event.⁴ This may

¹ Stein, *loc. cit.* 765, Pflaum, *Carrières* 847; cf. also Pflaum, p. 876, for the conservatism of Philip's appointments; *CAH* XII. 89 (Ensslin).

² That was by one reckoning. There were two interpretations of the *magnus annus*, one of 110 years followed by Augustus, Domitian and Severus in the celebration of their Secular Games; the other of 100 years followed by Claudius and Antoninus Pius before Philip.

³ Cf. Vergil *A.* 6.792, *Augustus Caesar divi genus aurea condet Saecula*; and, of course, the official *carmen saeculare* of Horace.

⁴ The *Suda* "Κοδρᾶτος"; Schwartz, *RE* (Asinius 31) 1603-4, rightly believes the work to have been written for the occasion, even though it terminated with Severus Alexander; Christ-Schmid-Stählin, *Gesch. d. griech. Litt.* (München,

INTRODUCTION

have been the occasion too when the Athenian author and sophist, Nicagoras, led a delegation to Philip to deliver a congratulatory address.¹ So Herodian may have thought the Secular Games a useful occasion to produce his *History*, though there is no need to assume it was written specially for the event. Indeed one would guess that the collection of material and writing had taken two or three years and had been begun perhaps on the death of Gordian.² The announcement of the Secular Games, probably on Philip's return to Rome in 247, may account for the signs of haste in the *History*, hurriedly completed for the event. An ill-assimilated and unchronological reference to the Secular Games of Severus in 204 (3.8.10) may be accountable to the same cause, written after the main passage had been drafted. But the later written *prooemium* at the beginning of Book I has an air of *fin de siècle* about it. "A comparative survey of the period of about two

1924) 2.2.801, suppose that a quotation of Quadratus in Dio (Xiph.) 73.3.3 must derive from Dio, thereby proving an earlier date of composition; but the quotation was probably added by Xiphilinus, F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964) 62. Quadratus was probably the senator, C. Asinius Protinus Quadratus, a benefactor of Ephesus, *PIR*²A 1244-6.

¹ The *Suda* "Νικαγόρας" does not give a date, but the other possible date of 244 must have seemed less auspicious for Philip, troubled by frontier crises; in 247/8 he had returned to Rome in triumph after securing the provinces of Macedonia, Thrace and Moesia Inferior—a matter of concern to the Athenians.

² Cassius Dio had taken ten years of preparation and twelve years of writing to produce his much longer work; Dio (Xiph.) 72.23.5.

INTRODUCTION

hundred years from Augustus . . . to the age of Marcus ” (1.1.4) is compared to the recently by-gone period. Year 1 of the reign of Marcus was 148, the first year of the new *saeculum*. Like Asinius Quadratus, however, Herodian did not venture into the reign of Gordian III, which would have involved embarrassing circumlocutions to describe Philip’s accession to power, over the heads of Timesitheus, who had shown him and his brother favours, and of Gordian, his newly acquired protégé. Whether or not Philip had murdered them both, there were ugly rumours about the incidents.¹ Philip officially claimed legal succession to Gordian, who was duly deified.

The position and status of Herodian

Herodian makes two statements about his personal position in relation to the events he narrates. In 1.2.5 he says, “ I have written a history of the events following the death of Marcus which I saw and heard in my lifetime. I had a personal share in some of these events during my imperial and public service.” The second passage in 2.15.7 has already been quoted, repeating the claim of a personal knowledge of the events he relates. The words “ imperial and public service ” have caused the historian to be described as a senator, an equestrian procurator or an imperial freedman. Few would follow Volckmann² in attribu-

¹ S. J. Oost, *CP* 53 (1958) 106–7, believes that Porphyry’s account of the “ escape ” of Plotinus and the Sibylline oracle’s so-called prophecy of the betrayal of Gordian, prove Philip’s guilt, but the case is still non-proven; Walser-Pekáry, *Die Krise des röm. Reiches* (Berlin, 1962) 20.

² Volckmann, *de Herod. vita*, 6.