

Julia Hoffmann-Salz / Matthäus Heil /
Holger Wienholz (Eds.)

The Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans

Old Connections, new Beginnings?





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and Holger Wienholz

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Acknowledgments

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We are grateful for all the exciting papers and fruitful discussions that we shared with our contributors Nathaniel Andrade, Riccardo Bertolazzi, Hadrien Bru, Lucinda Dirven, Avner Ecker, Babett Edelmann-Singer, Florian Leitmeir, Felix Guffler, Simon Lentzsch, Susanna Lusnia, Giorgos Mitropoulos, Zahra Newby, Udo Hartmann, Ann-Christine Sander, Ziad Sawaya, Frank Schleicher and Giusto Traina as well as numerous participants. Not all of the contributors of the conference were able to join us in this volume, but we are excited to welcome additional papers by Kostas Buraselis and Werner Eck.

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Berlin and Mannheim in January 2024
Julia Hoffmann-Salz, Matthäus Heil and Holger Wienholz

The Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans – old Connections, new Beginnings?

An introduction

Julia Hoffmann-Salz, Matthäus Heil, Holger Wienholz

When studying the Severan dynasty, a paradox becomes immediately apparent: While the emperor Trajan, who was born in Italica in Hispania, is never considered as “the Spanish emperor”¹, scholarship calls Septimius Severus the “African emperor”² and his wife and her family the “Syrian empresses”³. Equally, the two final emperors of the dynasty, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, are also often framed within a narrative of oriental exoticism stressing their Syrian background.⁴ Even though there has been considerable scholarly interest in the Severan dynasty in the last 20 years, scholarship on the members of the Severan family has not been able to entirely shake off this ‘narrative of origin’, which often seems central to the interpretation of the members of the Severan family.⁵ In contrast, research on the cultural and literary production of the Severan age and in particular the study of Cassius Dio and Herodian has painted a quite different picture of the Roman Empire in Severan times, calling into question any relevance of the non-Italian origins of the Severans for their contemporaries. Thus, Adam Kemezis maintains that while the Severan age was a period of intense political insecurity and transformation due to the unprecedentedly fast and violent successions of emperors, there still was an intellectual consensus within the elite of the Roman Empire “that saw itself as an organic continuation of cultural traditions going back into the archaic past of Greece and Rome” with the Severan emperors trying – unsuccessfully – to claim a place in these traditions. In this framework, Kemezis argues that the geographic origins of the Severans did not set them apart from this elite, but “on the contrary, it made [them] typical of [...] the empire’s cosmopolitan Greco-Roman culture.”⁶ Within this cosmopolitan world, Christopher Mallan stresses that for Cassius Dio, the criteria to judge (and openly discriminate against) people were “class, rank, and

¹ Trajan is either connected to his military achievements, e.g., Jackson 2022; Burgeon 2019, or to his epithet of ‘best emperor’, e.g., Bennett 2001 or Seelentag 2004.

² Birley ²1999.

³ Babelon 1957.

⁴ E.g., Turcan 1985.

⁵ Daguet-Gagey 2000; Golfetto 2002; Icks 2014.

⁶ Kemezis 2014, 4–8, quotations 6 and 7.

learning”⁷ – not geographical origin. In a contribution on the usurpation of Avidius Cassius under Marcus Aurelius Kemezis concludes:

“In describing a potential breakdown of the benevolent, consensus-based order of Marcus’ reign, Dio reveals his ideas of the potential sources of tension in Roman society and how they changed over his lifetime. We can recognize both the factors Dio emphasizes (above all succession politics), those he ostentatiously occludes (factionalism within the elite) and those he seems genuinely to overlook (regional or ethnic divides).”⁸

However, the question of a person’s geographical origin did play a part in Cassius Dio’s treatment of the Severan family and in the other sources available on them and this may well be part of a broader debate on geographical origin and belonging potentially sparked (or simply intensified?) by Caracalla’s Antonine constitution.⁹ Thus, Oliver Hekster maintains that Herodian portrays Septimius Severus “dall’inizio come un non-romano: un libico [...]” and “outsider”.¹⁰

Modern and ancient perceptions thus have to be more clearly separated here: Of course, one of the means by which ancient authors made sense of the world for their readers was the employment of generally accepted and recognized, often ethnographic, stereotypes that allowed for an instant placement of people and peoples within a narratological and explanatory framework.¹¹ Famous and telling examples of this can be found e.g., in the construction of various peoples of Gaul in Caesar’s *De bello Gallico* as strong but not particularly clever Northerners¹² or in the treatment of Egyptians in the Roman sources, that often frame them within a discourse of ‘oriental exoticism’ expressed through religious or sexually deviant behaviour and love of luxury¹³. These stereotypes had a remarkable longevity in Roman literature, even though they experienced some changes over time. These in particular reflected the growing incorporation of formerly ‘barbarian’ territories into the Roman Empire and the increasing importance of the inhabitants of these

⁷ Mallan 2021, 284.

⁸ Kemezis 2021, 196.

⁹ Cf. Lavan 2021, 238–239.

¹⁰ Hekster 2017, 111–129.

¹¹ Cf. Adler 2011, 1 and 172.

¹² Cf. Allen-Hornblower 2014, 682–693; Schadee 2008, 163–165.

¹³ On the image of Egypt and the Egyptians in ancient sources cf. the discussion in Nimis 2004, 34–67; Stephens 2003; and the contributions in Harrison 2002. Other examples would be the hot and dry climate of Libya that was considered to make its people stronger, the wet climate of Scythia was supposed to create small and weak peoples, the temperate climate of Asia Minor to create mildness and gentle temper. Climate was also supposed to determine appearance and intelligence: Irby/McCall/Radini 2016, 302–303; Campell 2016, 508–513.

territories to the running of the empire.¹⁴ Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the narratological technique of using ethnographic stereotypes to place people and peoples within an instantly relatable (imagined) framework also comes into play in the sources describing the rise and fall of the Severan dynasty: since the Severans were the first dynasty of Roman emperors with a non-Italian background, they would also be the first imperial family to be subjected to ethnographic stereotyping incorporating no longer regions of Italy and their presumed characteristics, but the vast array of available *topoi* for the Mediterranean world as a whole. From a purely narratological perspective, this offered new opportunities for historiographers to enrich their stories with the ‘colour’ of relatable stereotypes. Herodian seems to have been particularly fond of this, as already the rise to power of the founder of this dynasty, Septimius Severus, is framed within such a narrative of ethnographic stereotypes in his history. The author tells the story of the year 193 CE, when four contenders fought over the rule of the empire, as a battle between the different troops these contenders could muster for their support and attributes their success or failure to the geographically determined ‘characteristics’ of these troops. Thus, Herodian argues that Pescennius Niger lost, because he was supported by troops from Syria. He writes:

“The Syrians are naturally fond of holidays [...]. Because Niger had given them a succession of shows (about which they are particularly enthusiastic), and had granted them licence to have feasts and celebrations, which he knew were popular, he was obviously respected.”¹⁵

In the narration of Herodian, these party-loving friends of the high life were defeated by Septimius Severus’ army from Pannonia, about whom Herodian says:

“The inhabitants of the district of Pannonia are tall men of fine physique, natural and fierce fighters, but intellectually dull and slow-witted when it comes to crafty words and subtle actions. Accepting Severus’ [...] desire for the revenge of Pertinax’s murder, they [declared] him emperor [...].”¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Moralee 2008, particularly 75–76 on the changing narratives about barbarians depending on the political context of the author’s times. Cf. also Haley 1990 on the longevity of the stereotype of the ‘passionate’ Numidians.

¹⁵ Herodian. 2.7.9–10: φιλέορτοι δὲ φύσει Σύροι· [...] θέας τοίνυν αὐτοῖς συνεχῶς ἐπιτελῶν ὁ Νίγρος, περὶ ἅς μάλιστα ἐσπουδάκασι, καὶ διδοὺς ἄνεσιν ἐς τὸ ἐορτάζειν καὶ εὐφραίνεσθαι, ἅτε ποιῶν κεχαρισμένα, εἰκότως ἐτιμᾶτο. Translation by C. R. Whittaker.

¹⁶ Herodian. 2.9.11: ὡσπερ δὲ τὰ σώματα οἱ ἐκέισε ἀνθρώποι γενναιότατοί τε καὶ μεγάλοι εἰσὶ καὶ πρὸς μάχας ἐπιτήδειοι καὶ φονικώτατοι, οὕτω καὶ τὰς διανοίας παχεῖς καὶ μὴ ῥαδίως συνείναι δυνάμενοι, εἴ τι μετὰ πανουργίας ἢ δόλου λέγοιτο ἢ πράττοιτο. πιστεύσαντες γοῦν τῷ Σεβήρῳ προσποιουμένῳ χαλεπαίνειν καὶ θέλιν ἐπέξελθεῖν τῷ Περτίνακος φόνῳ ἐπέδοσαν αὐτούς, ὡς αὐτοκράτορά τε ἀποδείξει καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐγχειρίσαι. Translation by C. R. Whittaker.

So, it was these strong but rather dim men that were deceived by Septimius Severus into supporting his usurpation and ultimately managed to gain the empire for him. Not only does this reflect commonly accepted stereotypes on peoples from ‘the North’ and peoples from ‘the East’ and Herodian’s concept of opposing ‘fun-loving’ city populations with ‘bloodthirsty’ soldiers.¹⁷ This also set apart groups of actors as non-Roman that were, of course, part of the Roman Empire and created a strong link between geography and character, that strengthened existing ethnographic stereotypes. Thus, at least in the narration of Herodian, the establishment of the Severan dynasty through the successful usurpation of Septimius Severus was, from the start, explicitly or implicitly framed by ethnographic stereotypes and this is not only the case in Herodian – even though the various authors use this framework differently.

Cassius Dio as the only contemporary source does not take much note of Severus’ origins in Africa.¹⁸ The biography of Severus in the *Historia Augusta* only refers to this in the introductory passages as well as in the final evaluation of the emperor with a comment on the alleged ‘African’ accent in his Latin¹⁹. This same information is repeated in the *epitome de Caesaribus*.²⁰ Herodian remarks on the ‘Libyan origin’ of the emperor²¹ but does not explicitly connect his character to his geographical origins. Aurelius Victor, who also came from North Africa, mentions Severus’ North African origins and offers a very positive account of his rule. He states that *gentis nostrae* only had a small number of honourable men that succeeded to the top and uses Septimius Severus as his prime example.²² Eutropius stresses that Septimius Severus was the only emperor ever to come out of Africa,

¹⁷ Bérenger 2022, 235–238. Kemezis points out, that the successful manipulation of the Pannonian soldiers is also a testament to Severus’s particular character: Kemezis 2014, 241.

¹⁸ Cassius Dio as an eye witness to Severan rule seems to have made no reference to Severus’ geographic origin in narrating his rise to power, but simply lists the contenders and their current positions as governors: Cass. Dio 74.14.3–4 = Xiphil. 291.8–292.2 R.St. The geographical origin of Pescennius Niger in Italy is, however, noted: Cass. Dio 75.6.1 = Xiphil. 296.32–297.5 R.St. Severus’ African origin also plays no part in Cassius Dio’s final evaluation of the emperor: Cass. Dio 77.16.1–17.4 = Xiphil. 324.25–325.32 R.St.

¹⁹ The geographical origins of Septimius Severus are reported at the beginning of the biography: SHA Sev. 1.1–2; further reference to this is made in a story on his early career that brought him to Africa as an office holder: SHA Sev. 2.5–8; the ‘African’ accent: SHA Sev. 19.9. There is no narratological difference to the reports of the Italian background of Pescennius Niger (SHA Pesc. 1.3) or the African background of Clodius Albinus (SHA Clod. Alb. 1.3–4).

²⁰ Epit. Caes. 20, 8.

²¹ Herodian. 3.10.6 when mentioning that Severus was from the same region as his childhood friend Plautianus.

²² Aur.Vict. Caes.20.6.

and this is followed by a positive assessment of his rule.²³ For our sources, then, Septimius Severus is an emperor who was born in North Africa, but his rule, that is frequently presented favourably, is neither explicitly caused by nor hindered by his geographical origins and any potential characteristics that may have caused.

This creates the impression that for a ‘good’ emperor, geography didn’t necessarily matter. And this impression is supported by the reports on the other members of the Severan dynasty. For Iulia Domna, the second wife of Septimius Severus, her Syrian origins are only referred to in passing in the *Historia Augusta*²⁴ and in Herodian²⁵, but Cassius Dio as her contemporary uses it to discredit first her son Caracalla²⁶ and then herself by claiming she intended to seize power of the empire as other (historical) women from the East had done before²⁷. Both references are connected to the very negative portrayal of Caracalla, where ethnographic stereotyping plays a prominent role in Dio’s account: Dio ‘explains’ Caracalla’s alleged enthusiasm for luxury, extravagance and public spectacles with his Syrian ancestry from his mother’s side,²⁸ thereby connecting the alleged misdeeds of the ‘bad’ emperor with well-known ‘oriental’ stereotypes. Dio goes even further when accusing Caracalla of having absorbed negative characteristics of three peoples:

“Antoninus belonged to three races; and he possessed none of their virtues at all, but combined in himself all their vices; the fickleness, cowardice, and recklessness of Gaul were his, the harshness and cruelty of Africa, and the craftiness of Syria, whence he was sprung on his mother’s side.”²⁹

²³ Eutr. Brev. 8.18.1.

²⁴ SHA Sept. Sev. 3.9.

²⁵ Herodian. 5.3.2 stating that Iulia Domna’s sister was a Phoenician from Emesa – reflecting the new provincial organization that placed Emesa in the province of Syria Poenicia. This presumably also meant for Herodian’s readers that Iulia Domna was from that city.

²⁶ Cass. Dio [77]78.10.2 = Xiphil. 330.32–331.21 R.St.

²⁷ Cass. Dio 79.23.3.

²⁸ Cass. Dio [77]78.10.1–10.4 = Xiphil. 330.32–331.21 R.St. Dio’s story, that some people started to call him Bassianus, was surely not meant as a geographical slur but as a negation of Severan propaganda to claim Antonine ancestry. Just as the also recounted name “Tarautas” was to equal him with an ugly and bloodthirsty gladiator: Cass. Dio 79.9.3.

²⁹ Cass. Dio 78.6.1a = Exc. Val. 361 (p.742): “Οτι τρισιν ἔθνεσιν ὁ Ἀντωνίνος προσήκων ἦν, καὶ τῶν μὲν ἀγαθῶν αὐτῶν οὐδὲν τὸ παράπαν τὰ δὲ δὴ κακὰ πάντα συλλαβῶν ἐκτέησατο, τῆς μὲν Γαλατίας τὸ κούφον καὶ τὸ δειλὸν καὶ τὸ θρασύ, τῆς Ἀφρικῆς τὸ τραχὺ καὶ ἄγριον, τῆς Συρίας, ὅθεν πρὸς μητρὸς ἦν, τὸ πανούργον. Translated by E. Carey and H. B. Foster. In different passages, Dio also criticises Caracalla for admiring Alexander the Great and wearing Macedonian dress (78.7.1–2 = Xiphil. 329.20–330.20 R.St.) while the emperor apparently wore Germanic dress in Syria (79.3.3).

Interestingly, Caracalla's biography in the *Historia Augusta* refrains from connecting any of his alleged misdeeds like cruelty³⁰ or even an affair with his (step) mother³¹ to his family origins. The story of an affair with his alleged stepmother Iulia is picked up by Eutropius³², Aurelius Victor³³ and the *epitome de Caesaribus*, that adds Caracalla's preference for German/Gallic dress and admiration of Alexander the Great³⁴, without any reference to geographical origins in either text. Equally, Herodian lambasts the emperor for dressing up as a German³⁵ or a Macedonian³⁶ and seeking a Parthian princess as his wife³⁷, but does not reference his family's geographical origins.

For his successor Elagabalus, however, his portrayal in the literary sources seems to do nothing but stereotyping – but not all of this is ethnographic stereotyping.³⁸ Cassius Dio reports the Emesene origin of Iulia Maesa, Elagabalus' grandmother and the sister of Iulia Domna, in the introductory passages on the ascension of Elagabalus.³⁹ In Dio's subsequent report of the events that would eventually see Elagabalus as the new emperor, he is called either "the son of Tarautas"⁴⁰, or "the false Antoninus, or the Assyrian, or Sardanapalus, or even Tiberinus (this last appellation he received after he had been slain and his body had been thrown into the Tiber)"⁴¹ – mixing ethnographic with other derogatory names in order to frame Elagabalus as a bad emperor from the start. This is compounded by a rather detailed report on the emperor's many failings – cruelty⁴², shunning of Roman customs and traditions, in particular religious traditions⁴³, planned self-castration and other 'un-Roman' activities like prostitution, marriage to a man or participation in chariot-races.⁴⁴ The emperor's downfall, however, is not connected to any of these deeds, but to the rivalry with his cousin Severus Alexander.⁴⁵ Equally, the biography of Antoninus Heliogabalus, as the *Historia Augusta* calls him, is full of typical ty-

³⁰ E.g. SHA Caracalla 5.2; 9.3.

³¹ SHA Caracalla 10.1–4.

³² Eutr. Brev. 8.20.1 on the affair with Iulia.

³³ Aur.Vict. Caes. 21.3.

³⁴ Epit. Caes. 21.2 on Gallic dress; 21.4 on admiration for Alexander; 21.5 on an alleged affair with his stepmother.

³⁵ Herodian. 4.7.3.

³⁶ Herodian. 4.8.1–2.

³⁷ Herodian. 4.10.4–6.

³⁸ Cf. Kemezis 2014, 246.

³⁹ Cass. Dio 79.30.2–3.

⁴⁰ Cass. Dio 79.30–33.

⁴¹ Cass. Dio 80.1.

⁴² Cass Dio. 80.4 ff.

⁴³ Cass. Dio 80.8; 80.9–11 = Xiphil. 348.21 ff. R.St.

⁴⁴ Cass. Dio 80.13.1.–14.2 = Xiphil. 349.31–350.26 R.St.

⁴⁵ Cass. Dio 80.19.1²-20.1 = Xiphil. 353.15–354.8 R.St.

rannical *topoi* such as sexually ‘deviant’ behaviour including the blurring of gender categories⁴⁶, religious digressions⁴⁷, extravagance⁴⁸ or the trust in ‘unworthy’, that is socially inferior, cronies⁴⁹. But even though this is at least in part blamed on his alleged parents Caracalla and Iulia Soemias, it is not their geographical origin but their moral depravity that is highlighted as a cause.⁵⁰ Although many of these *topoi* would work well within an ‘orientalising’ framework, as they were often employed for people and peoples of the east, the *Historia Augusta* does not make this connection. The emperor is not explicitly called a Syrian, and Syria is named only twice: once when the biography narrates that the emperor brought the god Elagabalus from Syria to Rome and once when Syrian priests allegedly gave him a prophecy about his death.⁵¹ The emperor is thus portrayed as the worst possible tyrant – but as a Roman tyrant, following in the footsteps of ‘bad’ emperors like Caligula, Nero, Vitellius and Tiberius.⁵² This ‘line of reasoning’ is also followed in Aurelius Victor. This author stresses that the emperor was called Elagabalus because as a priest to the Syrian sun god Heliogabalus, he had been given special protection by this god and therefore brought the god to Rome and got his name. But the emperor’s subsequent (sexual) misdeeds are not explicitly connected to this geographical background.⁵³ A similar account is found in Eutropius⁵⁴ and the *epitome de Caesaribus*⁵⁵, both texts equally do not link the emperor’s alleged depravity to his geographical origin. Herodian, however, escalates the use of ethnographic stereotypes in the course of his report on the emperor: at the beginning, he mentions that the emperor’s grandmother was the sister of Iulia Domna from Emesa in Phoenicia, thereby naming not an ethnographic but an administrative origin reflecting the new provincial organization in the East effected by Septimius

⁴⁶ E.g., Iulia Soemias allowed to participate in senate sessions, introduction of a ‘senate for women’ that makes decisions on women’s lives: SHA Elag. 4.1–4; Grandmother allowed to participate in senate sessions: SHA Elag. 12.3; sexually ‘deviant’ behaviour of the emperor including circumcision and potential castration: SHA Elag. 5.2–5; 6.5; 8. 6–7; 18.4–33.1.

⁴⁷ E.g., Elagabalus to be the highest god, with the holiest objects of Rome to be transferred to his new temple and Jewish and Christian worship also to be centered there: SHA Elag. 3.4–5; 6.6–9; human sacrifices and magic: SHA Elag. 8.1–2.

⁴⁸ SHA Elag. 18.4–19.9; 20.4–22.3; 18.4–33.1.

⁴⁹ E.g., alleged sale of offices and honors and ‘inferior’ friends: SHA Elag. 6.1–4; 11.1; 12.1–2. On the literary *topos* of ‘bad’ emperors trusting in the ‘wrong’ people and its use in the portrayals of Elagabalus cf. Langford 2022. 198–225.

⁵⁰ SHA Elag. 2.1–2.

⁵¹ SHA Elag. 1.6; 33.2.

⁵² E.g., SHA Elag. 1.1; 33.1.

⁵³ Aur.Vict. Caes. 23.1–2.

⁵⁴ Eutr. Brev. 8.22.

⁵⁵ Epit. Caes. 23.2–3.

Severus with Emesa now belonging to the new province of Syria Phoenice.⁵⁶ Herodian goes on to mention the priesthood for the sun god Elagabalus – without any evaluation other than the gullibility of the worshippers⁵⁷ – but then uses this priesthood and the rites performed by the emperor as priest to this god to frame the emperor within a narrative of oriental exoticism⁵⁸ that included the blurring of gender roles⁵⁹, disrespect for Roman religious traditions⁶⁰, extravagance⁶¹, cruelty⁶² and the elevation of ‘unworthy’ persons to high offices⁶³. Thus, for Herodian, the “madness”⁶⁴ that made the emperor a ‘bad’ emperor may not have originated in his Eastern origins, but it was certainly driven by his Eastern religion.⁶⁵

For the final Severan emperor, Severus Alexander, who was born in Arca on the Lebanon⁶⁶, Cassius Dio acknowledges his geographical origin and goes on to praise him in particular for the honours he bestowed on Cassius Dio himself.⁶⁷ The biography in the *Historia Augusta* is at pains to underline that this emperor actively tried to distance himself from his geographical origin – and this is considered a fault!⁶⁸ Herodian does not mention the emperor’s geographical origin and instead stresses his careful education⁶⁹ and condemns his dependency on his mother, which would bring his downfall.⁷⁰ This aspect of an overbearing mother causing the demise of the emperor is also repeated in the *epitome de Caesaribus*⁷¹ while Eutropius counts his devotion to his mother among the positive assets of this emperor, about whose geographical origin he is silent.⁷² Aurelius Victor mentions that Severus Alexander was a Syrian, born in Arca Caesarea⁷³, but this has no bearing on his

⁵⁶ Herodian. 5.3.2. On the differences in the role of Iulia Maesa in the accounts of Cassius Dio and Herodian compare Bertolazzi 2022, 279–300.

⁵⁷ Herodian. 5.3.4–9.

⁵⁸ Herodian. 5.5.3–5.5.5.

⁵⁹ Herodian. 5.5.5.

⁶⁰ E.g., Herodian. 5.5.6–10; 5.6.2–5.

⁶¹ E.g., Herodian. 5.5.8–5.5.9.

⁶² Herodian. 5.6.1.

⁶³ Herodian. 5.7.6–8.

⁶⁴ Herodian. 5.7.6.

⁶⁵ Galimberti stresses that Herodian criticizes Elagabalus for religious practices that undermine his ideal of government as cooperation between emperor and elite/aristocracy as the ‘best men’: Galimberti 2022, 160–161. Rantala argues that Elagabal is portrayed as an ‘oriental other’ in both Cassius Dio and Herodian: Rantala 2022, 121–126.

⁶⁶ SHA Sev. Alex. 1.2.

⁶⁷ Geographical origin: Cass. Dio. 79.30.2–3; career of and honours for Cassius Dio: 80.22.1–5 = Xiphil. 356.6–357.9.

⁶⁸ SHA Sev. Alex. 28.7; 44.3; 64.3.

⁶⁹ Herodian. 5.8.2; 6.1.5.

⁷⁰ Herodian. 6.1.10; 6.5.9; 6.8.3; 6.9.8.

⁷¹ Epit. Caes. 24.4.

⁷² Eutrop. Brev. 8.23.

⁷³ Aur.Vict. Caes. 24.1.

subsequent praise for the emperor. In fact, he concludes his description of the life of Severus Alexander with stating that from the reign of this emperor onwards, the apogee of the Roman Empire ended and it went into decline with civil wars and “good and bad, noble and ignoble, often even barbarian” men claiming rule.⁷⁴ So the Severans, notwithstanding their diverse geographic background, were considered to be true Romans by Aurelius Victor.

This brief survey shows that, yes, there was ethnographic stereotyping in the sources on the Severan dynasty, and this was, interestingly, particularly evident in the contemporary source Cassius Dio. This author already remarked on the non-Italian origin of the emperor Trajan, who was born in Italica in Hispania. Since this was a Roman colony, his family was Roman, but nonetheless Cassius Dio stressed the extraordinary adoption of a ‘foreigner’ to become Nerva’s successor:

“But Nerva did not esteem family relationship above the safety of the State, nor was he less inclined to adopt Trajan because the latter was a Spaniard instead of an Italian or Italot, inasmuch as no foreigner had previously held the Roman sovereignty; for he believed in looking at a man’s ability rather than at his nationality.”⁷⁵

The alleged foreign origin of Trajan here was outweighed by his personal qualities – evidently not determined by ethnographical origins – and a similar approach is even taken by Cassius Dio towards Macrinus, the short-lived successor of Caracalla:

“Macrinus was a Moor by birth, from Caesarea, and the son of most obscure parents, so that he was very appropriately likened to the ass that was led up to the palace by the spirit; in particular, one of his ears had been bored in accordance with the custom followed by most of the Moors. But his integrity threw even this drawback into the shade.”⁷⁶

Even though Macrinus was from North Africa and – shockingly – had his ears pierced, his character and integrity again outweighed his geographical origins. But if personal character could ‘make up’ for geographical and thus ethnographical

⁷⁴ Aur.Vict. Caes. 24.9.

⁷⁵ Cass. Dio 68.4.1–2: ἀλλ’ οὐ γὰρ τῆς τῶν κοινῶν σωτηρίας ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν συγγένειαν προετίμησεν, οὐδ’ αὖ ὅτι Ἴβηρ ὁ Τραϊανὸς ἀλλ’ οὐκ Ἰταλὸς οὐδ’ Ἰταλιώτης ἦν, ἡττόν τι παρὰ τοῦτο αὐτὸν ἐποιήσατο, ἐπειδὴ μηδεὶς πρόσθεν ἀλλοεθνῆς τὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων κράτος ἐσχέκει· τὴν γὰρ ἀρετὴν ἀλλ’ οὐ τὴν πατρίδα τινὸς ἐξετάζειν δεῖν ὤφειτο. Translated by E. Carey and H. B. Foster.

⁷⁶ Cass. Dio 79.11.1–2: Ο δὲ δὴ Μακρίνος τὸ μὲν γένος Μαῦρος, ἀπὸ Καισαρείας, γονέων ἀδόξοτάτων ἦν, ὥστε καὶ σφόδρα εἰκότως αὐτὸν τῷ ὄνῳ τῷ ἐς τὸ παλάτιον ὑπὸ τοῦ δαιμονίου ἐσαχθέντι εἰκασθῆναι· τὰ τε γὰρ ἄλλα καὶ τὸ οὐς τὸ ἕτερον κατὰ τὸ τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν Μαύρων ἐπιχώριον διετέθητο· Translated by E. Carey and H. B. Foster.

origin, so an already bad character could be worsened by the influence of geography as we have seen with Cassius Dio's assessments of Caracalla and Elagabalus. Thus, ethnographical stereotyping – like any other stereotyping in ancient literary sources – could be used as a narratological tool to underline the author's argument in depicting an emperor as either 'good' or 'bad'. It lent an additional dimension to the *topoi* of *exempla* and allowed for more 'colour' in the storyline. Within an increasingly cosmopolitan world, it could offer an instantly relatable framework for a person's character – and character was understood as the major driving force of historical development in ancient literary sources.⁷⁷ But as a literary tool, it was employed when it suited the narrative, it was a "creative choice"⁷⁸.

These findings make it rather astonishing that scholarship has for a long time been so focused on this aspect of geographical origin when dealing with the Severan dynasty – however, important progress has been made with recent studies on individual emperors⁷⁹ and empresses⁸⁰ of the dynasty as well as on different aspects of their reign⁸¹. Thus, aspects of Severan administration – in particular the famous *constitutio Antoniniana* – and military policy have received scholarly attention and re-evaluation.⁸² Equally, important new studies have stressed the innovative framing of imperial propaganda and self-representation under the Severans⁸³ and the dynasty's so far underestimated impact on Roman culture as a whole.⁸⁴ Rantala even goes so far as to claim in the title of his book on the *ludi Saeculares* that the Severans instituted "a new Roman Empire"⁸⁵.

To date, however, no study has comprehensibly looked at the impact of Severan rule on the Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire was, of course, also affected by the Severan refashioning of empire – from administrative changes in Egypt and Syria to building activities across the Eastern provinces⁸⁶ and several military campaigns against the Eastern neighbours, the Severans left

⁷⁷ Cf. Chrysanthou 2022, 315.

⁷⁸ Kemezis 2014, 248 on the selection of what to report on Elagabalus and Severus Alexander in Herodian.

⁷⁹ Spielvogel 2006, Gräf 2013, Frey 1989, Kissel 2006, de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, McHugh 2017.

⁸⁰ Langford 2013, Nadolny 2016.

⁸¹ Studies on the dynasty as a whole: Grant 1996, Ando 2012, Mennen 2011, Pasek 2014.

⁸² Administration: Coriat 1997, Buraselis 2007, Wankel 2009, Okoń 2013, Barnes/Pferdehirt 2013, Strobel 2014, Coriat 2014, Corbo 2018; Imrie 2018; military policy: Chiarucci 2006, Handy 2009, Whatley 2016.

⁸³ Cordovana 2007², Leitmeir 2009, Pfeiffer 2010, Lichtenberger 2011, Faust/Leitmeir 2011, Rowan 2012, Schöpe 2014, Lusnia 2014, Gensheimer 2018, de Pury-Gysel/Giumlia-Mair 2017, Lorenz 2019.

⁸⁴ Swain/Harrison/Elsner 2007, Cordovana 2007, Kemezis 2014, Zinsli 2014.

⁸⁵ Rantala 2017.

⁸⁶ Administrative measures e.g., city status elevations in Palestine: Eck/Koßmann 2016, 223–238; Dąbrowa 2012, 31–42; building activities e.g., Wienholz 2016, 229–252.

their mark on a region they should – in the logic of the ‘narrative of origin’ adopted by previous scholarship – have been particularly partial to. But were they? Do administrative measures of the Severan emperors show a particular insight into matters of the Eastern part of the Empire? Could the new dynasty draw on local connections to develop and institute these? Did the communities of the Eastern Empire in their turn profit from the fact that the emperors and empresses hailed from their part of the world? Did they built more or honour the emperors of the Severan dynasty more because they felt a special connection to them? Did the peoples of the Eastern parts of the Empire refashion their identities because of the ‘Syrian empresses’ and emperors?⁸⁷ Are the developments in the Eastern Roman Empire truly determined by the geographical origin of parts of the dynasty or does not a focus on that hinder a more expedient analysis of cause and effect of Severan measures in the East?

It is with these questions in mind that we came together for our digital conference “The Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans – old Connections, new Beginnings?” at the Free University Berlin in June 2022 and that the participants here offer their contributions. Our collective papers aim to question the ‘narrative of origin’ for the Severan policies in the East from different angles: Our starting point is this ‘narrative of origin’ itself that is examined in the first two articles. In his contribution, Matthäus Heil asks about the origins of an interpretation of the empresses of the Severan dynasty as ‘Syrian’ or ‘Oriental’. He can show that this kind of framing in particular for Iulia Domna was not created from a careful study of the ancient sources that only reference her geographical background in passing. On the contrary, it is in particular German scholarship in the late 19th and early 20th century that deliberately created an ‘Oriental’ identity for Iulia Domna. Shockingly, these ideas have for a long time been influential, even though scholarship is finally starting to overcome them with our volume contributing to this welcome trend.

Next, Julia Hoffmann-Salz discusses the role of Emesa and Arca as imperial birthplaces under the Severans. Summarizing first the use and meaning of a person’s origins in the literary traditions of the ancient sources, where particularly a ‘Syrian’ origin could be used positively in self-presentation, she analyses the way that Emesa and Arca could have been and were actually used in the sources. She argues that the literary sources did not use any independent knowledge about Emesa and Arca, but reacted to the role these places were given in the self-presentation of the emperors, particularly for the emperor Elagabal and his strategic use of the high priesthood in Emesa.

The following two articles look at developments in the province of *Syria Phoenice*, newly created by Septimius Severus. Bringing together the numismatic evidence of Severan interaction with the cities of Phoenicia, Ziad Sawaya demonstrates how not

⁸⁷ On the identity of the Syrians see the study of Andrade 2013.

only the Severan emperors honoured selected cities with colonial status, *ius Italicum* and the right to – sometimes for the first time in their history – mint coins, with each of these new privileges commemorated on the coins. But the cities also closely monitored imperial activities and quickly picked up policies like the elevations of the sons of Septimius Severus to the ranks of Caesar and later Augustus on their coins. As Sawaya demonstrates, their choices were rooted in the intense rivalry between the cities and their attempts at showing off a (perceived) closer connection to members of the imperial family than their neighbours.

This local agency is also evident in the next contribution: Holger Wienholz offers a new reading of a passage in Malalas that tells of building activities of an emperor with the name Antoninus in the Eastern provinces, including in Heliopolis/Baalbek. Arguing from the archaeological and epigraphical record in Heliopolis/Baalbek, Wienholz proposes to see this Antoninus as Caracalla and to read the account of Malalas as an account of building activities of this emperor on his way from Syria to Egypt. His approach offers the exciting possibility to find evidence for Caracalla's building activities not only in Asia Minor but in Syria, too, that would stress his policy of continuity with the activities of his father.

The two subsequent contributions deal with Palmyra, that remained in the province of Syria and allegedly had a close connection to Emesa, home of Iulia Domna and her sister, via the famous Palmyrene caravan trade.⁸⁸ Udo Hartmann establishes that the period of Severan rule was a period of intense transformation for Palmyra as the elevation to the rank of a Roman colony tied the city more closely to the empire and shifted the attention of its inhabitants towards a career in Roman administration and the military. At the same time, the city received increased imperial attention due to the reorganization of the Eastern provinces and the subsequent changes to the border to Rome's Eastern neighbours. Hartmann convincingly explains that this development offered new opportunities for the Palmyrenes that would eventually enable the city's prominence in the second half of the third century.

Looking at Palmyra from the indigenous point of view, Ann-Christine Sander stresses a polymorphic structure of Palmyrene society and its increasing integration into functional roles for the Severan administration and border organization. Sander uses the concept of "frontier warriors" to describe the position of the local elite males that could offer resources and men at a time when the Severan emperors reshaped the defence of the empire along the Syrian desert. Both papers suggest that it was the administrative measures of Septimius Severus and his successors, born out of primarily military considerations, that affected Palmyra.

This aspect offers an interesting point of comparison to developments in Asia Minor which also was an arena of Severan activity due to its role as a communication link between Rome and the East in particular for the military campaigns of the Severans. Hadrian Bru uses inscriptions from Phrygia and Pisidia to evaluate

⁸⁸ Cf. Plin. nat. 5.89; Millar 1998, 134–135; Sommer 2005, 91 and 139.

how Severan rule impacted local communities in these regions on different levels from administrative interventions that responded to local initiatives or requests from provincial governors to expressions of loyalty by local communities towards the new dynasty showcasing the acceptance of their rule. These interactions were often linked to military campaigns of Severan emperors in the East, when the imperial administration was particularly active in the Eastern half of the empire.

Dismissing approaches that interpret Severan policies in the Eastern empire along identitarian lines, Babette Edelmann-Singer takes a closer look at the elites of Asia Minor that came together in the provincial assemblies, the *koina*. Their interactions with the Severan dynasty are traced in the epigraphic and numismatic record to determine if there were specific Severan policies towards the *koina*. Edelmann-Singer argues, however, that noticeable changes were the result of developments since the 1st century CE and in particular the elite's own agendas in the changing political landscape of the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries CE.

Simon Lentzsch analyses the sources for an apparent restauration of the tomb of Hannibal in Libyssa in *Bithynia* by Septimius Severus and discusses previous interpretations in scholarship that mainly understood this as an act of 'ethnic' solidarity because of the Punic/North African background of both Hannibal and Septimius Severus. However, Lentzsch can show that since the late Republic, Hannibal had gained a prominent place in discourses about successful military leadership and a visit to his tomb and its renovation by Septimius Severus fits in well with other activities of the Severans that honour local traditions and other well-known historical figures.

The papers on Asia Minor make it plain that it was military considerations, local agency and a general interest in local traditions that determined Severan policies in this region. And this can also be seen in the following papers on Moesia Inferior, Thrace and Greece: On the basis of dedications for the women of the Severan family from *Moesia Inferior* and Thrace, Riccardo Bertolazzi interprets the titles of the Severan women as 'Fortune of the inhabited World' or 'Mistress of the inhabited World' in these inscriptions as signs of the inter-city rivalry of the local towns. In this, the cities strove to outdo each other in their praise for the empresses and by doing so reflect the perceived prominence of the empresses in the eyes of the local towns – in particular in moments when the imperial family was passing through the wider region.

Collecting literary and epigraphic evidence for Severan interaction with the cities of the Roman province of *Achaia*, Giorgios Mitropoulos posits that Septimius Severus and his successors were heavily influenced in their policy towards Athens and the other towns of *Achaia* by Hadrianic and Antonine precedents as part of their self-fashioning as descendants of the Antonines. At the same time, local communities seem to have been eager to honour the members of the Severan dynasty and to claim a relationship with them, in particular as some cities had sided with Pescennius Niger.

The next group of papers takes a look at the Eastern neighbours of the Romans with two papers addressing developments in Armenia and another paper focusing on Hatra. Frank Schleicher discusses the evidence for Severan interest in the region of Armenia both in the Graeco-Roman and local sources and concludes that this interest was less intense than before and after the Severan period, unless there was internal unrest. He argues that this may have been a consequence of a shift in importance of the routes that Roman military expeditions took towards the East, as the Severans preferred to march south along the Euphrates towards Ktesiphon rather than through Armenia.

Giusto Traina focusses more closely on the history of Trdat II. Collecting the available evidence on this local ruler and his potential connections to the Iranian aristocracy, Traina can show the difficulties in reconstructing events beyond the Roman frontier even though Armenia – in contrast to the vast majority of other regions beyond the empire – actually offers indigenous sources. Traina's contribution, however, highlights how Roman military intervention in Armenia reacted to developments in the region, but was only one aspect of the complex interplay of local power plays and foreign intervention.

Lucinda Dirven studies the attempts by Septimius Severus and other emperors to capture Hatra and offers a thorough analysis of the reasons why the city managed to hold out until the successful siege by Shapur I. For this analysis, she presents new insight into the natural surroundings of the city and the consequences of this on both the economic and social situation of the city and its hinterland, where the local sedentary and non-sedentary population played a crucial part in the defence of the region and the city. The key to their success against first Roman and later Sassanian armies was their mounted archers fighting with guerilla tactics that compromised the siege armies.

The final section of our volume shifts the focus from the Eastern part of the empire to its centre. First, Susann Lusnia examines the evidence for influences in art and architecture at Rome under the Severans, that could be attributed to the East. She points out that already in the reign of Trajan and his successors, Eastern influences and in particular Eastern knowledge were used in imperial building projects in Rome. This continued under the Severans first of all because Syria and Asia Minor were regions with an established tradition of large-scale building projects that generated knowledge and experience sought after at Rome. Lusnia also, however, identifies potential for more direct Syrian influences.

Analysing the military diplomas for soldiers from the times of the Severan emperors, Werner Eck can show that the Severan emperors practiced a much greater continuation to policies of their predecessors than scholarship previously acknowledged. This is particularly true for the regulations on marriages and the legitimization of children of active and retired soldiers, that were not changed as extensively as the literary tradition makes us believe. Thus, the change in recruiting for the Praetorians, that Septimius Severus no longer recruited solely in Italy but

from the Danubian provinces, is the only real modification that would go on to have significant effects.

And finally, Kostas Buraselis offers conclusions that can be drawn from our findings. He stresses that the focus of Severan policy on matters of the East with administrative measures but more importantly with military activities was born out of political necessity, as the main rival of Septimius Severus, Pescennius Niger, had to be defeated in the East and this was also where Rome's frontier with its main military opponent, first the Arsacids and later the Sassanians, was located.

Thus, the contributions in this volume make it clear that it was this strategic necessity to engage with the Eastern provinces and their frontier that shaped Severan policy in the ancient Near East and the regions *en route* to it. This military necessity and the high frequency of military activities in the East by the Severan dynasty offered local elites and city communities unprecedented opportunities to either personally engage with Severan emperors or at least seek communication with them and receive privileges. These were used in the self-presentation of the cities as a means of besting their neighbours and show the strong local agency in regional developments. Again, however, this local agency was not particularly connected to a Syrian origin of members of the Severan family, but to the opportunities their frequent presence in the East offered. It was thus not old (family) connections that shaped the Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans, but the many new beginnings that Severan policies offered for local communities.

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