REVIEW

CASSIUS DIO AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Andrew G. Scott, *An Age of Iron and Rust: Cassius Dio and the History of His Time*. Historiography of Rome and Its Empire 18. Leiden: Brill, 2023. Pp. x + 258. Hardback, €109.00. ISBN 978-90-04-54111-5.

Andrew Scott's monograph more than achieves the goals of the series of which it is a part, *The Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* (Brill), as articulated by the editors Carsten Lange and Jesper Madsen in its preface: Cassius Dio should be counted among historians 'worth exploring not just as sources, but for their own concerns and reinterpretations of their material, as well as their place within the tradition'. Scott takes up Lange and Madsen's cause, setting his sights on Dio's so-called contemporary books, or, those sections concerning the period in which he himself lived and served as a senator. From the start, Scott's aim is to dismantle an influential thesis expounded at length by Fergus Millar,[1] that Dio's contemporary accounts, roughly from Commodus to Severus Alexander, were haphazard in construction, simply raising one event after another as if in real time and with little by way of historical analysis. Rather, Scott argues that Dio's shifting of gears in these later books reflects an intentional and artful historiographical strategy: in order to show 'how monarchy degenerated' in his time, Dio 'produc[ed] a history that also degenerates', thus 'mirror[ing] the disintegration of political life' (4–5).

In a sense Scott's organisation matches that of Dio's. That is, a first section, Chapters 1 to 3, constitutes an overview of principal historiographical themes in the non-contemporary books, which form the bulk of his corpus. Many issues are covered, rather like the *τᾶλλα πάντα* that Dio used to describe his own monumental narrative (73[72].23.3 [Xiph.], as in Scott, 19). Following is a liminal Chapter 4, which continues the discussion of Dio's method to the reign of Marcus Aurelius, whom the historian experienced early in his career, but then pivots to analyse Dio's abrupt change in tone and approach as he reached Commodus; here Scott raises themes of contemporary history and the

[1] F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964).

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role of autopsy that will persist throughout the rest of the book. Chapters 5 to 8 then consider Dio's contemporary books largely (but not entirely) in sequence.

Coming after an introduction that includes useful surveys of the problem-laden text and of scholarship on Dio, including its resurgence in the past decade, Chapter 1 considers the historian's two early works, on the signs and portents of Septimius Severus' ascent and on the civil wars that followed the death of Commodus. Nothing survives of either of these, though Scott sees vestiges in Dio's later work, such as his account of Severus' entrance into the city where he changed out of military gear into civilian clothes before making his first appearance (115). Arguing against an earlier grain, Scott proposes to read the minor works not as ingratiating or sycophantic appeals to the new power on the throne, but rather in the vein of Pliny's *Panegyric* or Tacitus' *Agricola*, as a way for a senator 'to show acceptance and build consensus' (22), and thus to open up avenues of 'negotiation … over the next steps forward after the civil wars' (27).

Chapter 2 turns to Dio's major, multi-volume history, whether as epitomised, excerpted, or extant, and positions it in relation to three themes that pervade Roman historiographic tradition—writing history 'from the origins' (what Scott calls 'history *ab urbe condita*'); the influence of autocracy on the historian's craft and public role; and the close analysis of constitutional forms, especially as borrowed from Greek thought. Scott makes a convincing case for Dio's several innovations in these regards, and demonstrates how an understanding of the departures from form is critical to uncovering Dio's larger objectives. For example, Dio's famous Agrippa–Maecenas debate, to Scott, presents a kind of idealised Polybian mixed constitution in nascence, and one in which Agrippa, in promoting democratic principles of government, pointedly assails 'tyranny', not monarchy, the latter being Dio's desired paradigm (60–1). From the fictive debate emerge policy suggestions for successful government, not character traits of a good or bad emperor, which could be less defensible before an ill-disposed and looming autocrat—always in the background for historians during the Principate. One way to put it is that Dio, as Scott avers, sought to create a possession for all time, Thucydides-style, only as inflected through the exigencies of his third-century Roman context—a narrative that lays out the best practices (my unsatisfactory term) for imperial rule. Chapter 3 then tracks how Dio put this new 'possession' to work in his accounts of various Julio-Claudian, Flavian, and Antonine emperors in the post-Augustan books. Scott argues here for a 'civil war scheme' on Dio's part (86; or 'rubric', 74), where civil strife between reigns had (ironically, in terms of Thucydidean analysis) an *ameliorative* effect, which served to replace irresponsible practitioners of monarchy with conscientious ones. Thorough, yet succinct and clear, Scott's second and third chapters could stand alone as a broad introduction to problems in Roman historiography for any graduate

survey, spending as much time as they do (especially Chapter 2) on Livy, Tacitus, and others, in addition to Dio.

Chapter 4 serves as a fulcrum between the book's first and second halves. It begins in the vein of the previous chapters in its discussion of Marcus Aurelius' 'fit' with the Dionian paradigms of monarchy, but soon, in moving to Dio's account of Commodus, Scott demonstrates that Dio's self-avowed methodology as an historian morphs abruptly, in step with the changing political landscape between an imperial ideal and his lousy heir. Scott shows that Dio drew careful attention to both changes, historiographical and political, by means of 'a sort of secondary introduction' (112) to the contemporary books, which comes prominently after the death of Commodus (73[72].23 [Xiph.]). Hereafter Dio repeatedly refers to his role as an eye-witness (historiography) to depravity (politics); as a senator (politics) who writes (historiography). Both the act of autopsy and his access to power endow Dio with legitimacy as a decoder of pretence and deception on the part of the throne.

Chapters 5 to 8 trace trends in the historian's self-conscious use of his status as a firsthand observer of the bizarre, the mediocre, and ultimately, the dangerous. Chapter 5 focuses entirely on Dio's depiction of Septimius Severus, the emperor who receives the most attention in his entire corpus, as much as the remaining members of the dynasty combined. Scott takes his start from Dio's division of the reign into three distinct episodes—Severus' entry into the city after the civil wars; his early military campaigns, in both civil and foreign conflicts; and his *decennalia*. In all of these, as Scott shows, Dio emphasises the ways in which Severus toyed with his public image for political purposes, thus exposing how a leader could paper over his true nature with a façade. Dio's privileged vision is key to undercutting Severus in this way, but in order for Scott to make the case for reproach on Dio's part, he needs further to contend with the historian's 'obituary' of the emperor, which reads as fawning on the surface, and this is where Scott begins Chapter 6. The surprise of Dio's encomium, following shortly on withering criticism of the emperor in previous passages, has prompted many scholars to discount the historian in various ways—as confused, as complacent, as compromised by politics—but Scott's close reading reveals that the passages of approval in the obituary were aimed mainly at Severus' *private* life, and it is about his deeds in *public* contexts where Dio is more disparaging. With this observation Scott can continue his case that Dio's larger concern was in an emperor's 'difficulty of translating personal virtues into positive action' (143). Again, Dio's autopsy is close to heroic. The rest of Chapter 6 applies a similar scrutiny to Dio's 'mixed' assessments of Pertinax and Macrinus, though it departs from the discrepancy between image and reality that characterised the study of Severus; rather, the problems with Pertinax and Macrinus, as Dio saw it, were that the decline of the Principate was too advanced for them to reverse it in the short span of their reigns. They were 'almost acceptable' (159) to Dio and 'flawed, but not strictly evil' (158),

lacking the superhuman qualities of Dio's Augustus and Marcus Aurelius. Chapter 7 moves to Caracalla and explicates another shift in Dio's historiographical technique. Throughout the 'Caracalla-narrative' (179), Dio cites his sources, which are mostly generated by Caracalla himself. In writing also about how these accounts were flawed—as rumour, fancy, or military bloviation—Dio has returned, obliquely but unmistakably, to a bad emperor's dependence on illusion and faulty self-representation. Chapter 8, after returning briefly to Macrinus, concludes with Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, but with appropriate space also for Dio's Julia Domna. Scott shows that Dio's objective here was to accentuate the dwindling dynasty's foreignness, both in terms of social status (Macrinus, the equestrian) and ethnicity (the Syrians). Expanding a biographical approach, Scott's Dio is 'speak[ing] to the surfeit of problems that Rome faced that made his age one of iron and rust' (201). As Scott articulates in a substantial Conclusion, Dio sees the act of writing history as a form of public service, and one that he embraced as a substitute for his senatorial career after its inglorious end and his marginalisation back to Bithynia.

Thanks in large part to Scott's book and the series of which it is a part, gone are (or, should be) the days of uncritically mining Dio's corpus for tidbits and gewgaws to be cobbled together in service to a modern narrative. As Scott has shown, Severus proclaimed a renewed stability, but Dio begged to differ. And Dio, as he constantly reminds his readers, should know because he lived through it, and is writing about it. Scott has shown that the way Dio communicated stability's opposite was through narrative, which was one of chaos and clouds. Looking at clouds from both sides (now), Dio depicts emperors as grandly shape-shifting and even entertaining (Commodus' swinging of the head and neck of a decapitated ostrich as Dio chewed leaves to keep from laughing), but also as ominous and redolent of coming storms (Commodus' executions, expenses, and vicious caprice). This vacillation by Dio, Scott argues, is deliberate, as the historian sought to put on a display of 'knowledge sets colliding' (211)—the proper conduct of a 'good' emperor, which Dio had told of in his accounts of earlier times, juxtaposed with the corruption of his present, which was brought about, in part, by historical blindness in his age, and the ignorance of Rome's previous worthies—the very ailment that Dio's writing endeavours to remedy. As a result of Scott's insightful new book, we have a better understanding not only of Dio, but also of life in the early third century CE in general, as we encounter the options available to an intellectual who was grappling with a changing world and seeking to interpret it—and correct it—in words. As Scott argues, making sense, for Dio, meant sometimes writing nonsense, and at other times, writing about it.

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