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Edited by
ANDREW G. SCOTT

HISTOS SUPPLEMENT 15

2023

Oxford • Edmonton • Tallahassee

Published by

HISTOS

ISSN (Online): 2046-5963 (Print): 2046-5955

www.histos.org

Published online 28 April 2023

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PREFACE

This volume examines various aspects of contemporary historiography in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The term ‘contemporary historiography’ (Jacoby’s *Zeitgeschichte*) is usually applied to historical works that cover, in whole or in part, the periods of time through which the historians themselves lived. These works are typically valued for their proximity to the events they narrate, though they are not without their problems of interpretation. Through various devices, authors might attempt to give the impression of eyewitness status even when they themselves were not present; contemporary events could shift authors’ point of view and compel them to provide unrealistic or biased accounts; and memories of eyewitnesses were not always sharp. The papers in this volume examine how we might read and understand histories of this type. They demonstrate how contemporary historiography was practiced across time and how it was a constantly evolving part of the Greco-Roman historiographic tradition.

The papers on Herodotus and Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Cassius Dio, and Herodian originated in a session held at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in San Diego in 2019. To the original four papers presented there have been added chapters on Ptolemy I Soter, Sallust, and Tacitus.

My thanks go to the contributors to this supplement, for their dedication and persistence, and to John Marincola, for his help and patience in bringing this work to publication. I also thank the anonymous reviewers, who offered many criticisms and suggestions for the improvement of this volume as a whole.

A.G.S.
Philadelphia, November 2022

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AUTOPSY FROM A BROKEN MONARCHY: TRAUMA-BASED READINGS FROM CASSIUS DIO'S CONTEMPORARY ROME*

Jesper Majbom Madsen

Abstract: Cassius Dio's contemporary books are often held to be for historians a particularly useful part of his Roman History. As a senator in Rome, Dio was well placed to describe what he saw during a long career in Roman politics. Dio's eyewitness reports bring us right into the middle of the action but his own personal investment in the affairs raise the question of reliability and accuracy. In this article I read Dio's contemporary books as a trauma-based narrative, where Dio uses personally invested autopsy accounts to paint the picture of a political collapse that follows the death of Marcus Aurelius. In Dio's narrative, Rome is falling apart at the hands of tyrannical emperors who humiliated, pursued, prosecuted, or murdered members of the political elite who for their part were gradually losing their moral compass. Dio criticises the emperor of his time but the scope seems bigger. By sharing his traumatic experience from Roman politics, Dio's trauma-based narrative serves to mobilise sympathy for the senators and thus a united front against the emperor of the time and the form of reign they choose.

Keywords: Cassius Dio, autopsy, eyewitness, trauma, Commodus

U pon his return to Rome after the civil war against Clodius Albinus (197 CE), an enraged Septimius Severus entered the Senate to address the conscript fathers. In the speech, Severus repeated the claim that he was the son of Marcus Aurelius, and so Commodus' brother, before praising earlier Roman leaders for their swift punishment of disloyal

* I would like to express my profound gratitude to Andrew G. Scott for organising the session at the SCS in 2019 and for his many valuable comments and suggestions on this paper. I am also grateful to the two external readers and to Jennifer Gerrish for discussing an earlier draft of this paper. All translations of Dio's *Roman History* are from Ernest Cary's Loeb Classical Library edition (1914–27), at times modified.

senators in previous civil wars.¹ One of the senators present that day was the historian Cassius Dio, who some twenty years later recorded an eyewitness account of the episode (Cass. Dio 76[75].7.4–8.3):²

μάλιστα δ' ἡμᾶς ἐξέπληξεν ὅτι τοῦ τε Μάρκου υἱὸν καὶ τοῦ Κομμόδου ἀδελφὸν ἑαυτὸν ἔλεγε, τῷ γε Κομμόδῳ, ὃν πρόφην ὕβριζεν, ἠρωικὰς ἐδίδου τιμὰς. πρὸς τε τὴν βουλὴν λόγον ἀναγινώσκων, καὶ τὴν μὲν Σύλλου καὶ Μαρίου καὶ Αὐγούστου αὐστηρίαν τε καὶ ὠμότητα ὡς ἀσφαλεστέραν ἐπαινῶν, τὴν δὲ Πομπηίου καὶ Καίσαρος ἐπιείκειαν ὡς ὀλεθρίαν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις γεγενημένην κακίζων, ἀπολογία τινὰ ὑπὲρ τοῦ Κομμόδου ἐπήγαγε, καθαπτόμενος τῆς βουλῆς ὡς οὐ δικαίως ἐκείνον ἀτιμαζούσης, εἶγε καὶ αὐτῆς οἱ πλείους αἴσχιον βιοτεύουσιν. 'εἰ γὰρ τοῦτο ἦν' ἔφη 'δεινόν, ὅτι αὐτοχειρία ἐφόνευεν ἐκείνος θηρία, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑμῶν τις χθὲς καὶ πρόφην ἐν Ὀστίοις, ὑπατευκῶς γέρων, δημοσίᾳ μετὰ πόρνης πάρδαλιν μιμουμένης ἔπαιζεν. ἀλλ' ἐμονομάχει νῆ Δία. ὑμῶν δ' οὐδεὶς μονομαχεῖ; πῶς οὖν καὶ ἐπὶ τί τὰς τε ἀσπίδας αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ κράνη τὰ χρυσᾶ ἐκείνα ἐπρίαντό τινες;'

It especially caused us panic that he declared himself the son of Marcus and the brother of Commodus and bestowed divine honours upon the latter, whom he had recently been abusing. While reading to the senate a speech, in which he praised the severity and cruelty of Sulla, Marius and Augustus as the safer course and abused the mildness of Pompey and Caesar as having proved the ruin of those very men, he introduced a sort of defence of Commodus and assailed the Senate for dishonouring that emperor unjustly, in view of the fact that the majority of its members lived worse lives. 'For if it was disgraceful', he said, 'for him to slay wild beasts with his own hands, yet at Ostia only the other day one of your number, an old man who had been consul, was consorting with a prostitute who imitated a leopard. But, you will say, Commodus actually fought as a gladiator. And does none of you fight as a gladiator? If not, how and why is it that some of you have bought his shields and those famous golden helmets?'

¹ Dio's surprise should be read against the fact that Severus made the claim in 195 CE when he issued bronze coins with the message that he was the son of the divine Marcus Aurelius: see Birley (1988) 117 and Kemezis (2014) 56.

² On the dating of Dio's *Roman History* see Kemezis (2014) 282–93 and Lindholmer (2021).

Although Dio was not the only source to cover the meeting, his autopsy report from inside the Senate house is unique.³ The reader is offered a sense of the tense atmosphere between the Senate and the emperor in the aftermath of the civil war in 197 CE as well as glimpses of both the criticism delivered by Severus and the clear threats directed at the senators whom the passage presents as a fairly united group. The emperor's threats were in sharp contrast both to his promise upon arriving in Rome after Julianus' fall that he would not kill any senators, and to his edict outlawing any who did the same (75[74].1–2).

Dio's autopsy reports from Senate meetings and different public gatherings are rare in Roman historiography. Other writers such as Pliny and Tacitus describe their own experience as senators and refer to meetings they attended. But even if they comment on their own fear during the reign of Domitian, neither Pliny nor Tacitus describe the atmosphere at specific meetings they attended, nor share their own state of mind in the same personalised fashion as Dio does in his reports. Tacitus does express guilt about remaining silent and fears for his own life when his fellow senators were prosecuted in mock trials, but he does not take the reader through the same self-critical process as Dio.⁴ Altogether, our historian firmly believed in his own qualities as a witness to contemporary Roman politics, as is evident from his coverage of Commodus' adventures in the arena (73[72].18.3–4):

Καὶ μὴ μέ τις κηλιδοῦν τὸν τῆς ἱστορίας ὄγκον, ὅτι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα συγγράψω, νομίση. ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἂν εἶπον αὐτά· ἐπειδὴ δὲ πρὸς τε τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἐγένετο καὶ παρὼν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ καὶ εἶδον ἕκαστα καὶ ἤκουσα καὶ ἐλάλησα, δίκαιον ἠγησάμην μηδὲν αὐτῶν ἀποκρύψασθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτά, ὥσπερ τι ἄλλο τῶν μεγίστων καὶ ἀναγκαιοτάτων, τῇ μνήμῃ τῶν ἐσέπειτα ἐσομένων παραδοῦναι. καὶ μέντοι καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα τὰ ἐπ' ἐμοῦ πραχθέντα καὶ λεπτοργήσω καὶ λεπτολογήσω μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ πρότερα, ὅτι τε συνεγενόμην αὐτοῖς, καὶ ὅτι μηδένα ἄλλον οἶδα τῶν τι δυναμένων ἐς συγγραφὴν ἀξίαν λόγου καταθέσθαι διηκριβωκότα αὐτὰ ὁμοίως ἐμοί.

³ In his coverage of the address, Dio's younger contemporary Herodian describes how Severus spoke to the Senate shortly after his return to Rome in June 197 CE (3.8.6–8). See also Birley (1988) 127–8; Grant (1996) 8–13; Potter (2004) 11–12; Imrie (2018) 20–3.

⁴ See Plin. *Pan.* 66 on the fear of Domitian. For Tacitus' sharing the responsibility for the persecutions of Helvidius and Senecio see *Agr.* 45.

And let no one feel that I am sullyng the dignity of history by recording such occurrences. I would not have otherwise spoken of them, but because it was given by the emperor himself, and since I was present myself and saw, heard, and discussed each of them, I have thought proper to suppress none of the details, but to hand them down, trivial as they are, just like any events of the greatest weight and importance. And, indeed, all the other events that took place in my lifetime I shall describe with more exactness and detail than earlier occurrences, for the reason that I was present when they happened and know no one else, among those who have any ability at writing a worthy record of events, who has so accurate a knowledge of them as I.

Here, Dio reveals a Polybian ideal: that autopsy is more accurate an historical source than accounts written by historians removed by distance of space or time who have to rely on the accounts of others.⁵ Although Dio covered Rome's history from its foundation to his withdrawal from politics in 229 CE, he believed the contemporary parts of the *Roman History* to be more accurate than the parts where he had to rely on earlier historical texts and a 'step up' from his books on Imperial Rome, where the lack of openness in the decision-making process challenged the writing of political history (53.19). However, despite the unique nature of Dio's eyewitness observations and his indispensable insight into Roman politics over a period of more than four decades, there are a number of issues that challenge Dio's authority as an historical source and suggest that it may be just as useful to read his contemporary books as a highly personalised attack on the emperor and political culture of his time. This does not mean that what he writes is wholly incorrect. But what it does mean, as the discussion to follow will demonstrate, is that Dio reserved a significant portion of his narrative for hostile and partisan accounts of Roman politics during his political career which, *as a source for history*, are less useful than we might wish. Instead, I suggest that Dio's contemporary books have more to offer when read as part of an attempt to unite the empire's political elite against authoritarian emperors, chiefly (but not solely) by means of slandering those of their own day.

Setting aside Dio's bias against most contemporary emperors—a fact which certainly calls into question his desire to write a nuanced account of the politics of the period—the state of the autopsy reports themselves is

⁵ Pol. 12.27.1–3. Marincola (1997) 23.

another key challenge. Written sometimes more than twenty years after the episodes took place and after Dio's attitude to Severus seemingly changed from favourable or even hopeful to highly critical, the eyewitness accounts are not snapshots or neutral recordings of what was said and done at the time. Instead, they are reconstructed stories that made sense to Dio or served his purpose as he wrote down that specific part of the *Roman History*. Studies in psychology have demonstrated that the accuracy of eyewitness reports fades quickly over time—even in the course of a few days—after the observations are made. Furthermore, the human memory is not organised in a way that allows us to recall a stored version of a certain episode but is largely reconstructed from the witness' personal expectations in forms that make sense to that person at the time they are retold. Other studies again have demonstrated that inaccurate observations often make their way into later autopsy reports because they make sense to witnesses when asked to recall what they have seen.⁶ When Dio recalled the speech Severus gave in the Senate sometime in the late 210s or in the 220s, his memory and assessment of the meeting would have been influenced by his overall impression of Severus at that moment in time and by his experience of Severus and the reign of the Severan dynasty.

The study of Dio's contemporary books is further complicated by the fact that they have come down to us in epitomes written by the eleventh-century Byzantine scholar Xiphilinus. From parallel analysis of those parts of the epitome which match a surviving section of the direct tradition, we know that Xiphilinus shortened the text by removing sentences and paragraphs rather than writing summaries in his own words.⁷ Only rarely does he interpolate the text with his own thoughts.⁸

An alternative approach to Dio's contemporary narrative is to read the books as a trauma-based narrative of one of the most turbulent periods in the age of the empire, marked by civil war and emperors who chose more explicit forms of authoritarian rule than their predecessors seemingly did in the second century.⁹ Inspired by the social scientist Jeffery Alexander's thoughts on trauma as a social theory, I shall offer here a reading of Dio's contemporary books as a trauma-based narrative: the historian seeks to

⁶ On eyewitness reports see Loftus–Loftus (1976) 159–60; Loftus (1979) 20–2, 117; Crombag, et al. (1996) 95–7, 102–4. See also Madsen (2021).

⁷ Murison (1999) 2–3; Berbessou-Broustet (2016) 82–3, 89–90.

⁸ Mallan (2013) 611–12, 617–18, 624–5.

⁹ For the nostalgia of men of letters for the second century and the reign of Marcus Aurelius see, e.g., Kemezis (2014) 35, 39–41, 227, 238.

demonstrate how different emperors terrorised members of the Senate into a state of slavery, unable to give free and qualified advice and therefore incapable of upholding legal standards to protect legitimate government from the emperor's arbitrary will.

To Dio this principle is what differentiates a legitimate monarchy—in which the courteous and respectful emperor rules in agreement with the Senate as a *civilis princeps*—from a tyranny which excludes the Senate from the decision-making process.¹⁰ By means of eyewitness reports and first-hand observations from his seats in the Senate and Severus' *consilium principis*, and from his everyday life in Rome, Dio offers a narrative designed to convey the impression that he and his fellow senators were continuously abused by threats, mock trials, unjustified killings and confiscation of property. In Dio's coverage, the senators always come across as victims in a hostile and violent political climate that the emperors, or their soldiers, were responsible for creating.

In Alexander's outline of trauma-based writing, Dio qualifies as a literary agent who tries to turn the social crisis that he and his fellow senators suffered from a systematic abuse perpetrated by different emperors into a cultural trauma relevant for Roman society as a whole.¹¹ According to Alexander, the transformation from a social crisis to a cultural trauma occurs over time and depends on whether members outside the group come to share the suffering of the originally-abused group. To succeed, literary agents must deliver persuasive answers to four questions. First, the nature of the painful experience being related; secondly, the identity of the victims; thirdly, the relationship between the victims and the outside world; and finally, the identity of the perpetrators.¹² Furthermore, the agents must make the case that the acts were in fact evil and should evaluate the degree to which they were so. According to Alexander, there is also a need to control the narrative so that the atrocities in question stand out clearly enough to persuade the intended audience—in Dio's case his contemporaries in the Senate, equestrians, members of the provincial elite in general, and perhaps also learned officers in the in the army, who by the late 220s CE were becoming

¹⁰ Dio uses the term *δημοτικός* (57.8.3) to signal the 'civil' emperor who respected the Senate, their opinion, and role as trusted advisors in the decision-making process: Wallace-Hadrill (1982) 44; Bono (2018) 94–7.

¹¹ Alexander (2012) 15–16. For a similar recent approach, see Gerrish (2019) 50–5.

¹² Alexander (2012) 17–18.

an ever-more influential part of Roman politics.¹³ As we shall see from the following five case studies, Dio identifies the trauma that he and his peers suffered as the continuous mishandling of members of the political elite. He codes the pressures of unfair trials, confiscations, and groundless politically motivated persecutions as arbitrary evils and evaluates such tyrannical behaviours as sufficient to break the free will of the senator; such pressures, in his view, reduced them to an almost servile condition.

Reading Dio's contemporary books as parts of a trauma-based narrative allows us to approach the texts not only as a source for Roman history in the period between 180 to the end of the 220s, but rather as Dio's personal contribution to an ongoing debate about the crisis of monarchical rule after the death of Marcus Aurelius. Although the issues of accuracy remain relevant, it is the predisposed nature of Dio's contemporary books that becomes essential in the effort to determine what the historian hoped to achieve by writing the history of contemporary Rome in the way he did.

We may question the added value of Dio's trauma-narrative of his contemporary times; after all, what he offers ultimately resembles a traditional critique of unfit monarchs. It is true that in Dio we perceive a criticism of young and inexperienced emperors similar to that of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Herodian. However, the essential difference between the *Roman History* and its competitors is the author's *involvement* in the episodes, as well as the way in which he depicts himself as both vulnerable and terrified in these eyewitness scenarios.¹⁴ This feature is markedly less pronounced in Tacitus, Suetonius, and Herodian. This is particularly evident in Dio's account of the Senate-meeting in which its members were threatened by the Praetorian guard if they did not support the accession of Didius Julianus, and also when Apronianus was tried for treason because of the dream his nurse had about his future accession to the throne. In the latter case, Dio, like the rest of the senators, was so frightened and repressed that he lost all sense of justice, silently and with relief accepting the swift execution of one Baebius Marcellinus, a man implicated in the affair and punished without a fair trial. Our historian is not just a critic who objects to the conduct of different tyrannical emperors; he is directly involved not only as a victim of

¹³ Alexander (2012) 18. On the increased importance of men of non-senatorial background see Mennen (2011) 135–7. See also Birley (1988) for examples of Severus replacing senators with his own trusted men (114) or for the equestrian commander given to the *Legio II Parthica* (129).

¹⁴ See also Kemezis (2014) 228 for the way Dio built up a complex personality of himself.

threats and terror but also as one of its perpetrators, who passively accepts and thus facilitates the tyrannical nature of the Severan dynasty.

Traumatic Memories

The first of Dio's eyewitness episodes dates to November 192 CE when Commodus—during what was probably the *Plebeian Games*—performed in the arena as both a hunter and gladiator. The senators present that day celebrated the emperor's many victories as instructed; on the other hand, the people turned up in fewer numbers than usual, not only because Commodus' acts were becoming trivial but also because they feared that he, in his Herculean guise, was planning to turn his bow against the spectators. This fear was not unfounded, at least in Dio: the emperor had recently dressed up as snakes disabled men who had lost their feet to illness and killed them with a club, again costumed as Heracles. The senators, whose relationship with the emperor was becoming more and more strained, feared the emperor's next potential move (73[72].21.1–2):¹⁵

οὗτος μὲν ὁ φόβος πᾶσι κοινὸς καὶ ἡμῖν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἦν· ἔπραξε δὲ καὶ ἕτερόν τι τοίονδε πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς βουλευτάς, ἐξ οὗ οὐχ ἥκιστα ἀπολείσθαι προσεδοκήσαμεν. στρουθὸν γὰρ ἀποκτείνας καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ ἀποτεμὼν προσήλθεν ἔνθα ἐκαθήμεθα, τῇ τε ἀριστερᾷ χειρὶ ἐκείνην καὶ τῇ δεξιᾷ τὸ ξίφος ἡματωμένον ἀνατείνας, καὶ εἶπε μὲν οὐδέν, τὴν δὲ κεφαλὴν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σεσηρῶς ἐκίνησεν, ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτι καὶ ἡμᾶς τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο δράσει. κἂν συχνοὶ παραχρῆμα ἐπ' αὐτῷ γελάσαντες ἀπηλλάγησαν τῷ ξίφει (γέλως γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἀλλ' οὐ λύπη ἔλαβεν), εἰ μὴ δάφνης φύλλα, ἃ ἐκ τοῦ στεφάνου εἶχον, αὐτὸς τε διέτραγον καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τοὺς πλησίον μου καθημένους διατραγεῖν ἔπεισα, ἵν' ἐν τῇ τοῦ στόματος συνεχεῖ κινήσει τὸν τοῦ γελᾶν ἔλεγχον ἀποκρυψώμεθα.

This fear [of being killed as part of Commodus' performances] was shared by all, by us [senators] as well as by the rest. And he did something else to us senators, on account of which we not least of all expected to die. Having killed an ostrich and cut off its head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his

¹⁵ On the incident with the snake-dressed men see Dio 73[72].20.3. On Commodus' impersonation of Hercules see, e.g., Birley (1988) 85; Hekster (2002) 146–8; Meyer-Zwiffelhofer (2006) 201–8; Kemezis (2014) 50; Scott (2018) 242.

right hand raising aloft his bloody sword. He said nothing, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. And many would indeed have perished by the sword at that moment for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than indignation that overcame us), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I got from my garland, myself, and persuaded the others who were sitting near me to do the same, so that in the steady movement of our jaws we might conceal the fact that we were laughing.

In this eyewitness report from his seat in the Colosseum, Dio and his fellow senators come across as afraid that they too would be the victims of the emperor's evil madness. Humiliated by their instructions to cheer on the emperor, they did their best to please him not as partners but as subjects whose presence and symbolic appreciation of what occurred in the arena mattered more than their actual support. Now, even though they were scared when the emperor came over to their seats and held aloft the head of his vanquished foe, it was apparently laughter rather than panic that struck the senators: they followed Dio's lead in suppressing their mirth.

When Dio wrote this account some twenty-five years after the event, he made himself and the Senate appear largely on top of the situation, even if they feared for their lives. The author comes across as particularly calm: though still junior in the senatorial hierarchy, he had the wherewithal to help those around him to conceal their scorn and so escape what is projected as certain death. In her approach to the episode, Mary Beard points out that laughter can be political and uses the scene to identify three types of laughs. First there is the nervous laugh, which in this case is the reaction to the threats and uneasy atmosphere Commodus' performance provoked: a way of disarming what was surely a potentially dangerous situation. Another kind of laughter is the spontaneous reaction to a bizarre situation so absurd that it is impossible to suppress even if the danger were real enough. This is patent in the silliness of the whole scene here: it was the proud emperor holding up the severed ostrich head and his gesticulations that triggered the senators' unwilling amusement. The third kind of laughter Beard discusses is a more conscious laughter used as a protest or peaceful opposition, where the weaker part objects against the display of superior power.¹⁶

We have no way of knowing whether Dio and his fellow senators did in fact laugh when Commodus threatened them in the arena. The historian

¹⁶ Beard (2014) 5–8.

may have felt an urge to overplay the resourcefulness of himself and the senators in their effort to show some form of resistance towards the ludicrous emperor, whose ultimate downfall Dio could treat in hindsight when writing later. Yet, it is crucial for the trauma-based reading of the episode that Dio admits that he and his fellow senators *were* afraid and that *they*, like the rest of the Roman public, feared for their lives. Now, the presentation of the senators' laughter shows not only their courage but also such strength of mind as to see the absurdity in the scenario. The senators at Commodus' games that day were not broken, yet nor were they paralysed by fear of Commodus. When threatened with the same destiny as the one suffered by the ostrich they replied with laughter—noiseless, certainly, for to do otherwise was perilous—but among themselves the senators knew they had stood up to the tyrant.

As suggested by Beard, when Dio described the incident with the ostrich some twenty years later, he would probably have remembered the laughter as a sign of resistance. But while the scene may have been absurd and laughable, there was nothing amusing about Commodus' regime in general. If the episode is read in the light of Alexander's model, the gruesome killings of the disabled men was an act of evil, which, together with the very public threats against the members of the Senate, served to terrorise not just members of the Senate but the entire Roman people. In the epitome, Commodus' abuse comes in many forms. Killing defenceless disabled men dressed up as snakes was not just another brutal day in the arena, it was gruesome even for the 'bad' emperor. As he killed the footless men, he became the antithesis of the *pater patriae* figure whose objective was to defend and protect his subjects. The disabled men were disposed of and used as props in the arena. It signalled a kind of madness every sensible man would fear, and it gave life to rumours that Commodus, again in the role as Hercules, would shoot arrows at the spectators—his own citizens—again as a form of mad amusement.

For their part, the senators were abused when Commodus threatened them publicly in a very direct manner. Everyone in the arena—members of the general public, Praetorians, equestrians, foreign guests and members of the court, freeborn, freedmen and slaves alike—saw how the Senate sat before the emperor and his bloody sword. They heard no laughter and would assume, correctly according to Dio, that the conscript fathers were afraid and feared the worst, just as many in the audience had done when deciding whether or not to attend the show despite the dark rumours concerning Commodus. When issuing threats like these, Commodus was

miles away from the ideal of the *civilis princeps*. Dio uses the episode to illustrate the degeneration from an age of gold—in which the emperor protected and respected his people, and ruled in harmony with members of the empire’s elite—to one of iron and rust, in which Romans were subject to the arbitrary will of tyrants (72[71].36.4).¹⁷

The second example dates to the spring of 193 CE, three months after Commodus’ assassination. His successor Pertinax aspired to cooperate with the Senate, but had just been murdered by members of his guard unhappy with the discipline that the new emperor had imposed on the army.¹⁸ Dio describes how the Praetorians, having shut themselves up in the camp, auctioned the throne to the highest bidder, who turned out to be Didius Julianus—a wealthy senator who in Dio’s depiction had made his money from disreputable businesses.¹⁹ In the following episode, we shall see the historian’s description of Julianus’ actions: having bought the support of the Praetorian guard, he summoned the senators to formally acknowledge him as Rome’s new emperor. In Dio’s version of events, the news that it was Julianus who had won the auction was particularly disturbing as Dio had previously proved the new emperor guilty in trials presumably related to his financial affairs (Cass. Dio 74[73].12.2–5).²⁰

ἡμεῖς δὲ πυνθανόμενοι ταῦτα, ὡς που ἐκάστω διηγέλλετο, ἐφοβούμεθα μὲν τὸν Ἰουλιανὸν καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας καὶ μάλιστα ὅσοι τι ἢ πρὸς τὸν Περτίνακα ἐπιτήδειον ... (καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἦν, ἐπειδὴ ὑπό τε τοῦ Περτίνακος τά τε ἄλλα ἐτετιμήμην καὶ στρατηγὸς ἀπεδεδείγμην, καὶ ἐκείνους πολλὰ πολλάκις ἐν δίκαις συναγορεύων τισὶν ἀδικοῦν-τα ἐπεδεδείχην). ὅμως δ’ οὖν καὶ διὰ ταῦτα (οὐ γὰρ ἐδόκει ἡμῖν ἀσφαλὲς εἶναι οἴκοι, μὴ καὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τούτου ὑποπτευθῶμεν, καταμείναι) προήλθομεν, οὐχ ὅτι λελομένοι ἀλλὰ καὶ δεδειπνηκότες, καὶ ὡσάμενοι διὰ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐς τὸ βουλευτήριον ἐσήλθομεν, καὶ ἠκούσαμεν αὐτοῦ τά τε ἄλλα ἀξίως ἑαυτοῦ λέγοντος, καὶ ὅτι ‘ὕμᾱς τε ὄρω ἄρχοντος δεομένους, καὶ αὐτός, εἰ καὶ τις ἄλλος, ἀξιώτατός εἰμι ὑμῶν ἡγεμονεύσαι. καὶ εἶπον ἂν πάντα τὰ προσόντα μοι ἀγαθὰ, εἰ μὴ καὶ ἦδειτε καὶ πεπειραμένοι μου ἦτε. διὸ οὐδὲ ἐδεήθην πολλοὺς στρατιώτας ἐπάγεσθαι,

¹⁷ Scott (2020) 335; Noe (2020) 150–2.

¹⁸ On the plot against Pertinax see Birley (1988) 93–4.

¹⁹ For Didius Julianus counted among the senior members of the Senate see Birley (1988) 96.

²⁰ Scott (2018) 243.

ἀλλ' αὐτὸς μόνος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἀφίγμαι, ἵνα μοι τὰ ὑπ' ἐκείνων δοθέντα ἐπικυρώσητε.' μόνος' τε 'γὰρ ἦκω' ἔλεγε, πᾶν μὲν ἔξωθεν τὸ βουλευτήριον ὀπλίταις περιεστοιχισμένος, πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ συνεδρίῳ στρατιώτας ἔχων, καὶ τοῦ συνειδότος ἡμᾶς τοῦ περὶ αὐτὸν ἀνεμίμησκειν, ἐξ οὗ καὶ ἐμισοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐφοβούμεθα.

When we [senators] learned of these things as the news was brought to each of us individually, we were possessed by fear of Julianus and the soldiers, especially all of us who had [done] any favours for Pertinax [or anything to displease Julianus] ... I was one of these, since I had received various honours from Pertinax, including the praetorship, and when acting as advocate for others at trials I had frequently proved Julianus to be guilty of many offences. Nevertheless, we made our appearance, partly for this very reason, since it did not seem to us to be safe to remain at home, for fear such a course might in itself arouse suspicion. So when bath and dinner were over we pushed our way through the soldiers, entered the senate-house, and heard him deliver a speech that was quite worthy of him, in the course of which he said: 'I see that you need a ruler, and I myself am best fitted of any to rule you. I should mention all the advantages I can offer, if you were not already familiar with them and had not already had experience of me. Consequently, I have not even asked to be attended here by many soldiers, but have come to you alone, in order that you may ratify what has been given to me by them.' 'I am here alone' is what he said, though he had actually surrounded the entire senate-house outside with heavily armed troops and had a large number of soldiers in the chamber itself; moreover, he reminded us of our knowledge of the kind of man he was, in consequence of which we both feared and hated him.

What Dio describes is another step towards the collapse of civil monarchical rule. Julianus' ability to buy the throne from the guard illustrates the depth of the political crisis. After a short revival under Pertinax, the Senate was once again relegated to delivering altogether symbolic gestures—little different from those offered Commodus in the arena—as they ratified the choice made by the Praetorians. True, the Senate's approval was important

to Julianus, as it had been to Pertinax three months earlier.²¹ Without ratification from the senators, Julianus could easily be challenged by ambitious army commanders stationed in the provinces such as Septimius Severus, Pescennius Niger, and Clodius Albinus, who were all eager to use the lack of a formal mandate as an excuse to turn their armies towards Rome.

But unlike the episode with the ostrich, Dio and those of his fellow senators who made their way to the Senate house that evening were not nearly as resourceful as they had been six months earlier when they quietly laughed at Commodus. On a personal level, Dio feared Julianus' revenge for their previous controversies, while the senators as a group, in Dio's version that is, were intimidated by soldiers posted both outside and within the Senate house itself. None of the senators, apparently, wanted to attend the meeting, but they thought it would be worse to stay away than to appear and approve Julianus as their new emperor. What was different in this episode—or so it seems from Dio's description of Julianus' accession—was the unsettling course of events from the moment of Pertinax's murder to the moment the Praetorians openly displayed their power in occupying both the forum and the Senate building.

Rome was now openly ruled as a military tyranny, where one regiment in the capital decided who was to be emperor and for how long. Admittedly that had already been the case when Pertinax succeeded Commodus earlier that year. But as he replaced a tyrant and took the initial steps to cooperate with the Senate, Rome was not, yet, in the hands of the Praetorian Guard, despite their collusion with Pertinax.²² Since the death of Marcus Aurelius, the Praetorians had been implicated first in the death of Commodus and then in the accession and, later, killing of Pertinax before they accepted Julianus' bid for the throne and accompanied him to the meeting. In Dio's version, Julianus was little more than a strawman whom the Praetorians were able to remove at their leisure, either by murdering him as they did Pertinax or by withdrawing their support, as they would later do, from Julianus when he proved unable to pay what was promised.

²¹ For Pertinax's implication in Commodus' murder and later accession to the throne, the likely concern this would have caused outside of the Senate and Praetorians, and the new emperor's power-base in the Senate, see Kemezis (2014) 51–2.

²² Dio mistakenly celebrates Pertinax for not accepting dynastic titles for his son and wife (Kemezis (2014) 54). See also Birley (1988) 90 also on how Pertinax communicated with the senators when accepting the titles *pater patriae* and *princeps senatus*.

In a trauma-based reading of Dio's report from Julianus' first Senate meeting as emperor, the historian and his fellow senators were not merely pressured but essentially physically forced to acclaim a man they all allegedly resented. The abuse in this case lies in the threat of repercussions should they fail to take part in the ritual, and the humiliation of being manhandled into offering their approval to the object of their hatred. By occupying the Senate and the forum, the Praetorians not only demonstrated their power to decide who was to become emperor and for how long; in addition, both they and Julianus stripped from the Senate what little remained of their illusory prerogative to formally approve the new emperor.

Compared to the episode with Commodus in the arena, what happened at Julianus' accession was a display of raw and unconcealed power on the part of the Praetorian Guard. Certainly this was far from the first time that soldiers had forced senators to comply; but the moment the Praetorians accepted Julianus' bid for the throne and later accompanied him into the Senate house, it was clear to all political men that the civil monarchy—the ideal of *civilitas* which in the eyes of the empire's intellectuals had characterised the second century—had now broken down and been replaced by military tyranny.²³ Gone was even the appearance that the emperor leaned on the Senate for advice and support; even the pretence that the senators had chosen Julianus freely was impossible. The display of power on the part of the Praetorians was apparently more important than the symbolic gesture of allowing the Senate to reach its own foreseeable conclusion that Julianus was worthy of becoming the next emperor.

In the next eyewitness report we are back in the arena on 15 December 196. Julianus had been killed a mere two months after his accession. Septimius Severus had dissolved the Praetorian Guard, punished Pertinax's murderers, and defeated Niger in 194. Caracalla had been announced as the new Caesar, which effectively ended the alliance between Severus and Albinus; the latter, upon hearing the news, took the field and announced that he too was Rome's Augustus. The event that Dio relates is a horse race on the last day before the Saturnalia. Dio took his seat in what was presumably the Circus Maximus as the consul's guest, some two months before the battle between Severus and Albinus at Lugdunum and about six months prior to Severus' speech in the Senate (76[75].4.2–6).²⁴

²³ See, for instance, Plut. *An seni* 784F; Paus. 1.3.2, 5.5; 8.43.1–6; Ael. Aristid. *Rom.* 33; *Or.* 20.5–8; 27.40.

²⁴ Campbell (2005) 11; Scott (2018) 241–2.

συγκινουμένης οὖν διὰ ταῦτα τῆς οἰκουμένης ἡμεῖς μὲν οἱ βουλευταὶ ἡσυχίαν ἤγομεν, ὅσοι μὴ πρὸς τοῦτον ἢ ἐκεῖνον φανερώς ἀποκλίναντες ἐκοινώνουν σφίσι καὶ τῶν κινδύνων καὶ τῶν ἐλπίδων, ὁ δὲ δῆμος οὐκ ἐκαρτέρησεν ἀλλ' ἐκφανέστατα κατωδύρατο. ἦν μὲν γὰρ ἡ τελευταία πρὸ τῶν Κρονίων ἵπποδρομία, καὶ συνέδραμεν ἐς αὐτὴν ἄπλετόν τι χρῆμα ἀνθρώπων. παρῆν δὲ καὶ ἐγὼ τῇ θεᾷ διὰ τὸν ὕπατον φίλον μου ὄντα, καὶ πάντα τὰ λεχθέντα ἀκριβῶς ἤκουσα, ὅθεν καὶ γράψαι τι περὶ αὐτῶν ἠδυνήθην. ἐγένετο δὲ ὧδε. συνῆλθον μὲν ὥσπερ εἶπον ἀμύθητοι, καὶ τὰ ἄρματα ἐξαχῶς ἀμιλλώμενα ἐθεάσαντο, ὅπερ που καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Κλεάν-δρου ἐγεγόνει, μηδὲν μηδένα παράπαν ἐπαινέσαντες, ὅπερ εἶθισται· ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐκεῖνοί τε οἱ δρόμοι ἐπαύσαντο καὶ ἔμελλον οἱ ἠνίοχοι ἑτέρου ἄρξασθαι, ἐνταῦθα ἤδη σιγάσαντες ἀλλήλους ἐξαίφνης τὰς τε χεῖρας πάντες ἅμα συνεκρότησαν καὶ προσεπεβόησαν, εὐτυχίαν τῇ τοῦ δήμου σωτηρίᾳ αἰτούμενοι. εἶπόν τε τοῦτο, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο τὴν Ῥώμην καὶ βασιλίδα καὶ ἀθάνατον ὀνομάσαντες 'μέχρι πότε τοιαῦτα πάσχομεν;' ἔκραξαν 'καὶ μέχρι ποῦ πολεμούμεθα;' εἰπόντες δὲ καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ τοιουτότροπα τέλος ἐξεβόησαν ὅτι 'ταῦτά ἐστιν', καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἀγῶνα τῶν ἵππων ἐτράποντο. οὕτω μὲν ἔκ τινος θείας ἐπιπνοίας ἐνεθουσίασαν· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἄλλως τοσαῦται μυριάδες ἀνθρώπων οὔτε ἤρξαντο τὰ αὐτὰ ἅμα ἀναβοᾶν ὥσπερ τις ἀκριβῶς χορὸς δεδιδαγμένος, οὗτ' εἶπον αὐτὰ ἀπταιστως ὡς καὶ μεμελετημένα.

While, then, the entire world was disturbed by this situation, we senators remained quiet, as many of us did not openly incline to the one or the other and share their dangers and their hopes. The populace, however, could not restrain itself, but indulged in the most open lamentations. It was at the last horse-race before the Saturnalia, and a countless throng of people flocked to it. I, too, was present at the spectacle, since the consul was a friend of mine, and I heard distinctly everything that was said, so that I was in a position to write something about it. It happened this way. There had assembled, as I said, an untold multitude and they had watched the chariots racing, six at a time (which had been also the practice in Cleander's day), without applauding, as was their custom, any of the contestants at all. But when these races were over and the charioteers were about to begin another event, they first enjoined silence upon one another and then suddenly all clapped their hands at the same moment and shouted, praying for good fortune for the public welfare. This was what they first cried out; then, applying the terms

‘Queen’ and ‘Immortal’ to Rome, they shouted: ‘How long are we to suffer such things?’ and ‘How long are we to be waging war?’ And after making some other remarks of this kind, they finally shouted, ‘So much for that’, and turned their attention to the horse-race. In all this they were surely moved by some divine inspiration; for in no other way could so many myriads of men have begun to utter the same shouts at the same time, like a carefully trained chorus, or have spoken the words without a mistake, just as if they had practised them.

Even if Dio mentions that there were senators who sided with one of the two generals, we get the impression from the epitome that the Senate as whole hoped to remain neutral. As usual, we are at the mercy of what Xiphilinus decided to keep in his resumé, but judging from what little we have, Dio does not seem to criticise the senators for their lack of courage at the race. Criticising the war could only be read as an attack on Severus, whom the Senate was formally obliged to support as illustrated by Albinus’ declaration as *hostis patriae*.²⁵ In any case public protest would be beneath their dignity, since this was the medium through which the people expressed their dissatisfaction. In Dio’s view, the popular protest against the wars was not the result of a coordinated effort on the part of the people, but a sign from higher powers that war-mongering had gone too far. It is the widespread but, in the eyes of the historian, understandable silence on the part of the Senate that Dio compares to people’s heavenly protest against yet another civil war in a couple of years and the inescapable instability that followed.

In this incident nobody suffers direct abuse. There are no dealings with the emperor, who may not even have been present at the race. Yet once again, fear of speaking up is the key issue in the available version of Dio’s text. Judging from the epitome, the senators were too afraid to protest against civil wars in which most of them had no part. In what we can deduce from the text, the senators are passive. Repressed by fear of repercussions, they were (unlike the people) unable to speak their mind freely and offer Severus their best advice by arguing against a new civil war—a view, we gather from their silence, they believed to be dangerous.²⁶ Their fear of fulfilling their role as the emperor’s honest advisors was the result of Severus’ authoritarian rule. Even if the emperor had initially resisted the impulse to prosecute Niger’s partisans, Dio has already reminded his readers that

²⁵ Birley (1988) 120.

²⁶ Scott (2018) 241–3.

Severus did not keep his promise of not killing senators for very long (75[74].2.1). This broken promise, together with Severus' reliance on the support from the army rather than his associates in the Senate and his use of soldiers to render the city unsafe, underpinned the impression of Severus' authoritarian rule (75[74].2.2-3). The senators, for their part, were helpless victims not to be blamed for tyranny that was already taking form well before the battle at Lugdunum.

The next example dates to the year 205 CE. Dio is back in the Senate House on the day Apronianus, then governor of Asia, was tried for treason in absentia. The episode is a key moment in the epitomised narrative of Dio's contemporary Rome, as here the reader sees the consequence of the continued abuse perpetrated against the political elite. As we shall see in Dio's eyewitness report from the trial of Apronianus, members of the Senate, including Dio himself, had now lost what was left of their legal, political, and personal integrity. Stunned by fear, their aim was merely to stay alive in what had become a regime of terror where prosecutions of alleged political opponents had become the norm. The civil form of monarchical rule that Dio held as his ideal form of constitution was definitively dissolved, leaving the fate of Rome in the hands of an increasingly tyrannical Severus, who was laying the groundwork for authoritarian rule (77[76].8.1-6):

καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο τὰ περὶ τὸν Ἀπρωνιανὸν ἐτελέσθη, παράδοξα ὄντα καὶ ἀκουσθῆναι. ἔσχε γὰρ αἰτίαν ὅτι ποτὲ ἢ τήθη αὐτοῦ ὄναρ ἐορακέναι ἐλέχθη ὡς βασιλεύσει, καὶ ὅτι μαγεία τινὲ ἐπὶ τούτῳ χρήσασθαι ἔδοξε· καὶ ἀπὼν ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ τῆς Ἀσίας κατεψηφίσθη. ἀναγινωσκομένων οὖν ἡμῖν τῶν βασιάνων τῶν περὶ αὐτοῦ γενομένων, καὶ τοῦτ' ἐνεγέγραπτο ὅτι ὁ μὲν τις ἐπίθετο τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς ἐξετάσεως τεταγμένων τίς τε διηγήσατο τὸ ὄναρ τίς τε ἤκουσεν, ὁ δὲ τις ἔφη τά τε ἄλλα καὶ ὅτι 'φαλακρόν τινα βουλευτὴν παρακύψαντα εἶδον'. ἀκούσαντες δὲ τοῦθ' ἡμεῖς ἐν δεινῷ πάθει ἐγενόμεθα· ὄνομα μὲν γὰρ οὐδενὸς οὔτε ἐκεῖνος εἰρήκει οὔτε ὁ Σεουῆρος ἐγεγράφει, ὑπὸ δὲ ἐκπλήξεως καὶ οἱ μηδεπώποτε ἐς τοῦ Ἀπρωνιανοῦ πεφοιτηκότες, οὐχ ὅτι οἱ φαλακροὶ ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ἄλλως ἀναφаланταί, ἔδεισαν. καὶ ἐθάρσει μὲν οὐδεὶς πλὴν τῶν πάνυ κομίωντων, πάντες δὲ τοὺς τοιούτους περιεβλέπομεν, καὶ ἦν θροῦς 'ὁ δεινὰ ἐστίν· οὐκ, ἀλλ' ὁ δεινὰ.' οὐκ ἀποκρύψομαι τὸ τότε μοι συμβάν, εἰ καὶ γελοιοτάτον ἐστίν· τοσαύτη γὰρ ἀμηχανία συνεσχέθη ὥστε καὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς τὰς τρίχας τῇ χειρὶ ζητῆσαι. τὸ δ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο καὶ ἕτεροι πολλοὶ ἔπαθον. καὶ πάνυ γε ἐς τοὺς φαλακροειδεῖς ἀφερωῶμεν ὡς καὶ ἐς ἐκείνους τὸν ἑαυτῶν κίνδυνον ἀπωθούμενοι, πρὶν δὴ προσανεγνώσθη ὅτι ἄρα περιπόρφυρον ἱμάτιον ὁ φαλακρὸς ἐκεῖνος εἶχε.

λεχθέντος γὰρ τούτου πρὸς Βαίβιον Μαρκελλῖνον ἀπείδομεν ἡγορανομήκει γὰρ τότε καὶ ἦν φαλακρότατος. ἀναστὰς γοῦν καὶ παρελθὼν ἐς μέσον ‘πάντως που γνωριεῖ με, εἰ ἑώρακεν’.

After this came the dénouement of the case of Apronianus—an incredible affair even in the hearing. This man was accused because his nurse was reported to have dreamed once that he should be emperor and because he was believed to have employed some magic to this end; and he was condemned while absent at his post as governor of Asia. Now when the evidence concerning him, taken under torture, was read to us, there appeared in it the statement that one of the people conducting the examination had inquired who had told the dream and who had heard it, and that the man under examination had said, among other things: ‘I saw a certain bald-headed senator peeping in’. On hearing this we found ourselves in a terrible position; for although neither the man had spoken nor Severus written anyone’s name, yet such was the general consternation that even those who had never visited the house of Apronianus, and not alone the bald-headed but even those who were partially bald, grew afraid. And although no one was especially confident, except those who had full heads of hair, yet we all looked round at those who were not so fortunate, and a murmur ran about: ‘It’s So-and-so.’ ‘No, it’s So-and-so.’ I will not conceal what happened to me at the time, ridiculous as it is. I was so disconcerted that I actually felt with my hand to see whether I had any hair on my head. And a good many others had the same experience. And we were very careful to direct our gaze upon those who were more or less bald, as if we should thereby divert our own danger upon them; we continued to do this until the further statement was read that the bald-head in question had worn a purple-bordered toga. When this detail came out, we turned our eyes upon Baebius Marcellinus; for he had been aedile at the time and was extremely bald. So he rose, and coming forward, said: ‘He will of course recognise me, if he has seen me.’

The informer was brought into the Senate and with help from one of the senators he identified Marcellinus as the man who peeped in during the interrogation. The unfortunate senator is now escorted out of the Senate house, away from the forum, and is executed publicly in front of his children, whom he assured that his only regret was to leave them behind in such a world.

From their presentation in the epitome we perceive that it was in fact the senators themselves who convicted Marcellinus without proper trial, following their own estimation of how Severus would have ruled had he been in court that day. That senators could be convicted for treason based on someone else's dream was a sign of tyranny, but not in itself a novelty. Since the reign of Tiberius, members of the Senate had been tried for similarly unconvincing offenses.²⁷ What makes the execution of Marcellinus particularly traumatic to those present in the Senate that day was not only the swiftness with which their colleague was executed without trial and without having committed any real crime, but also the passivity and terror of the senators. As they sat waiting for the unfortunate member to be identified, none objected when the sentence was carried out.²⁸

Dio is clear in his assessment of what Roman politics had become when he has Marcellinus say to his children that Rome was no longer a world worth living in. The political climate was now so evil that decent men were killed without reason or trial, and not always on the emperor's command. That Marcellinus is not given the opportunity to defend himself or to appeal the verdict to the emperor demonstrates how both Rome and even the senators had lost their sense of justice. The conviction of Apronianus based on his nurse's dream was bad enough, but the circumstances surrounding Marcellinus' conviction exemplifies the senators' submission to, and slavish pursuit of, what they believed to be Severus' bidding.

It is a terrified, almost pathetic, Senate that Dio describes. The members were frightened that they too would be falsely implicated simply due to their lack of hair. This absurd account of their anxious glances to one another in order to establish the balder culprit is as tragic as it is comical. When Marcellinus comes forward and is identified, their instant reaction is relief that they are now free of suspicion, not anger over the injustice they had just witnessed. The way in which mock trials and unfair convictions had become the order of the day is further illustrated by Marcellinus' acceptance of his

²⁷ For accounts of *maiestas* trials in the reign of Domitian see Plin. *Pan.* 42, 48. On Caligula's intimidation of the senators see Dio 59.10, 22.1–8; for Commodus' pursuit of the same see Dio 73[72].6.3. See also Madsen (2014) 25. For Dio's view that *maiestas* trials should be left in the hands of the senators see 52.31.1–3. On Dio and the Senate's role as juries in trials of treason see also Reinhold (1988) 204; Ando (2016) 570.

²⁸ Dio's later positive account of Severus' behaviour in times of peace, where the emperor is said to have listened to advice he got from what was presumably the *consilium principis*, has led some scholars to assume that his record with the Senate improved after the civil war—also in the eyes of Dio (Birley (1988) 165–6 and Campbell (2005) 11). One is here wise to recall Dio's general assessment of Severus' reign in the opening of Book 75[74].

destiny and his yielding, without objection, to the executioners who lead him to his sentence.

It is in this episode that Dio's trauma-based narrative peaks. It is worth noticing the way Dio uses *himself* to illustrate just how abused and traumatised he and his fellow senators were in 205. In contrast to the episode with Commodus and the ostrich, there is nothing heroic about Dio. Like his fellow senators he is paralysed by fear as he checks whether he, a man blessed with good hair, had sufficient to avoid suspicion. Marcellinus, on the other hand, is the hero. When his fearful peers themselves and the Roman state more broadly fail him, he gracefully accepts his destiny and says his stoic goodbyes to his children.

In the framework of trauma-based narration, the senators assume the role of victims of a terrorist regime under whose authority they served when Apronianus and Marcellinus were convicted. Obviously, Severus is the perpetrator. He was the one responsible for the pursuit of senators through unconvincing treason trials in the unsettling political climate driven forward by his authoritarian attempt to cling to power. Yet the senators were actively participating in the abuse when they voiced aloud who the guilty senators might be, *willing it* to be someone else, accepting unfair trials and random executions. Even in default of this respect, the senators could at least have been courageous—and Dio and his colleagues, the historian freely admits, failed in this regard also.

The last of Dio's eyewitness reports to be considered here dates to the winter 214–215 CE which Caracalla spent in the Bithynian metropolis of Nicomedia. As a Bithynian senator from the city of Nicaea and as one of the *consulares*, Dio was a natural member of the emperor's entourage. This account is of a more general nature (78[77].17.3–4) than the previous four examples:

ἐκεῖνος δὲ ἐπήγγελλε μὲν ὡς καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἕω αὐτίκα δικάσων ἢ καὶ ἄλλο τι δημόσιον πράξων, παρέτεινε δὲ ἡμᾶς καὶ ὑπὲρ τὴν μεσημβρίαν καὶ πολλάκις καὶ μέχρι τῆς ἐσπέρας, μηδὲ ἐς τὰ πρόθυρα ἐσδεχόμενος ἀλλ' ἕξω που ἐστῶτας· οἷψέ γάρ ποτε ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ μηκέτι μηδ' ἀσπάζεσθαι ἡμᾶς ὡς πλήθει. ἐν δὲ τούτῳ τά τε ἄλλα ἐφιλοπραγμόνει ὥσπερ εἶπον, καὶ ἄρματα ἤλαυνε θηρία τε ἔσφαζε καὶ ἐμονομάχει καὶ ἔπινε καὶ ἐκραιπάλα, καὶ τοῖς στρατιώταις τοῖς τὴν ἔνδον αὐτοῦ φρουρὰν ἔχουσι καὶ κρατῆρας πρὸς τῇ ἄλλῃ τροφῇ ἐκεράννυε καὶ κύλικας καὶ παρόντων ἡμῶν καὶ ὀρώντων διέπεμπε, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ ἐδίκασε.

As for Antoninus himself, he would send us word that he was going to hold court or transact some other public business directly after dawn, but he would keep us waiting until noon and often until evening, and would not even admit us to the vestibule, so that we had to stand round outside somewhere; and usually at some late hour he decided that he would not even exchange greetings with us that day. Meanwhile he was keeping himself busy in various ways, as I have said, or was driving chariots, slaying wild beasts, fighting as a gladiator, drinking, nursing the resultant headaches, mixing great bowls of wine—in addition to all their other food—for the soldiers that guarded him inside the palace, and passing it round in cups, in our presence and before our eyes; and after this he would now and then hold court.

The idea that the Senate had a political role to play in the rule of empire was no longer tenable. Instead, the conscript fathers were the emperor's servants whom he could treat as he pleased. Dio relates the story as if he and his peers now ranked below the soldiers—the emperor's real companions with whom he dined and entertained himself. Standing sentry outside Caracalla's quarters in a bizarre role-reversal, sometimes for the entire day, it was now evident to everyone that the senators had lost their symbolic role as trusted advisors. Rome was now obviously a military tyranny, where the emperor made no effort to uphold even the appearance that his power rested on more than the support of his soldiers. That was already the case in the short reign of Didius Julianus, but it did not make a lasting impression thanks to the extreme brevity of his reign and the charade of the Senate's approval. Severus, too, had based his power on his soldiers and appointed his own followers, many of them from the army; but he had at least upheld the illusion that the senators mattered. Caracalla, in contrast, humiliated them by letting them stand outside his quarters for hours. Where Caracalla in Dio's version patronised the senators in his entourage, Severus insisted that the Senate formed a meaningful part of the political process. According to Dio he listened to their advice and, surely with underlying motives in mind, implicated them in his regime by letting them oversee *maiestas* trials. Where Caracalla despised the Senate, Severus gave the impression that he was hurt by their support of Albinus. From the perspective of a trauma-based narrative, threat and humiliation is once again embedded in Dio's account of Caracalla's behaviour as emperor. The abuse suffered by Dio and his peers is rooted both in the underlying threat from soldiers and gladiators who were closer to the emperor, and in the demeaning treatment undergone

by members of the Senate who were forced to obey Caracalla's iniquitous demands or face repercussions for anything perceivable as disobedience or an insult to the throne. Caracalla is the perpetrator who terrorised the senators through threats of violence and humiliation; but he furthermore so upset the hierarchy that gladiators and soldiers held a superior position in his entourage.

Conclusion

To sum up Dio's eyewitness reports, the contemporary books offer a strong, personally invested account of the political climate in Dio's Rome. The historian's autopsy serves to demonstrate the senators' continual exposure to abuse from civil wars, direct threats against their lives and property, unfair trials, and humiliation in various forms. Even if the senators were not entirely blameless, they were the primary victims in Dio's trauma-based narrative, overpowered by the violence of different emperors.

Judging from the epitomes, Dio's coverage of his contemporary Rome is not balanced, nor does he seem to offer his readers a multi-layered narrative or a nuanced analysis of the years he was politically active in the city. Dio had too much at stake in the episodes he described to write a balanced narrative of the period between 180–217 CE. His assessments of the political climate suffer from hindsight and a retrospective urge to distance himself from the Severan dynasty—particularly from Septimius Severus, who, after a promising start, became in retrospect a disappointment and a liability who handed the throne over to Caracalla.²⁹ Where traditional source-criticism leaves the modern historian with the impression of a tendentious narrative of questionable value as a source to the study of political culture in the reign of Commodus and the Severans, a trauma-based reading offers another approach to what Dio hoped to achieve with his unilateral account of politics in contemporary Rome: one that allows us to disregard, for a moment, the issue of accuracy and lack of nuance. By using his own eyewitness observations where he is both vulnerable and terrified, Dio lures the reader into sharing the many traumatic experiences he and his colleagues were exposed to in the arena, in the Senate house, or in Caracalla's entourage.

Even if Dio and his peers appear at times pathetic, it is the emperors who in their role of perpetrators are the ones responsible for the deteriorating political culture that characterised Rome at the time. It was also Commodus,

²⁹ Madsen (2016) 154–8.

Severus, and Caracalla who chose terror and humiliation as political tools over dialogue with the Senate. In that light, Dio's reports from the many tense situations he witnessed serve at least two purposes. One is to remind his readers how damaging tyranny and repression are to a political culture. The depiction of what happened at the trial of Apronianus and Marcellinus is testimony to the elite's potential to lose its integrity and rectitude if exposed to terror and arbitrary rule over long periods. The senators who sat in the chamber on the day Apronianus was tried for treason, and those who stood outside Caracalla's quarters in the Bithynian winter, were incapable of speaking their minds and therefore no longer free political actors able to do what was in the best interest of the commonwealth. They were symbols of the degeneration of Rome's monarchical constitution from a state of *civilitas* in which the ruler, respecting political tradition, rules in harmony with the Senate.³⁰ The second and more ambitious purpose was to generate sympathy for Dio and his fellow senators and to unify, or mobilise, contemporary and later readers against the military tyranny for which the Severans were responsible.

This leads to the question of impact and the extent to which Dio's trauma-based narrative inspired later historians' treatment of the fifty years of Roman political history from the sole reign of Commodus in 180 to the end of Severan Rome. It is now well established that Herodian did rely on the *Roman History* as one of several sources.³¹ Yet Herodian did not adopt the one-sided approach to Roman political history that we perceive so clearly in the epitome of Dio. Like Dio, Herodian criticises most of the emperors from Commodus to Alexander Severus who in one way or other fall short in comparison to Marcus Aurelius. Still, the way he covers Albinus' support among leading senators, and his more nuanced approach to the reign of Commodus, underline clear differences in the two historians' approaches. Dio's younger contemporary evidently does not turn the social crisis of the time into a trauma of his own, nor does he act as a literary agent in the same fashion Dio does when the latter shares his own traumas with his readers.

Neither did the author of the *Historia Augusta* adopt Dio's trauma-based narrative. Commodus' fighting in the arena is a theme in the biography and held to be a marker of the emperor's troubled nature. Yet none of Dio's eyewitness accounts from Commodus's affairs in the arena has found its way into the otherwise colourful narrative of the reign of Marcus Aurelius'

³⁰ Wallace-Hadrill (1982) 44; Bono (2018) 94–7.

³¹ Scott (2018) 437.

disturbed son (SHA *Com.* 14.3–7). More interesting in the present context is the biography of Didius Julianus. Where both Dio and Herodian censure Julianus' purchase of the throne from the Praetorians, the author of the *Historia Augusta* offers a portrait of Pertinax's successor that is much less damaging than that laid out by his two predecessors. That Julianus acquired the throne at an auction held by the Praetorians is not related in the text. What we hear instead is that the new emperor paid each Praetorian thirty thousand sesterces; at the same time, it was through negotiation rather than bribes that Julianus won over the Guard (2.3.4–3.3.6). The relationship with the Senate is not as strained or marked by fear as that described by Dio, and Julianus was not as arrogant as he comes across in the speech attributed to him in the *Roman History*. Instead, Julianus is said to have addressed the senators in a respectful manner as he thanked them for their support (3.3.3–6). When Severus moved towards Rome, the Senate is said to have sided, at least initially, with Julianus, sending out a delegation to instruct Severus' army to abandon their general, whom they had just declared an enemy of the state (4.5.1–6).

Compared to the version we get from the epitome of the *Roman History*, the Severus who enters Rome in 193 CE was much more arrogant. Where Dio describes the way in which the victorious general changed into civilian clothes before walking into the city, the *Historia Augusta* depicts Severus riding into the city in full armour. On the relationship between the Senate and the emperor, the *Historia Augusta* seems to follow Herodian's lead and relates that Albinus was the Senate's favourite because he allegedly believed it was the senators who were to rule Rome. They were the ones to enact new laws and choose Rome's magistrates (SHA *Alb.* 8.3–10). Severus' executions and plundering of several members of the Senate is a point of reference but the reader is never invited to see the political crisis from a senatorial point of view.³² As in the narrative by Herodian, there are faults on both sides and nowhere is the author of the *Historia Augusta* sharing Dio's traumas. Instead, he is more occupied with Severus' brutal nature and how he navigated a hostile climate, the creation of which the senators bore at least some responsibility (SHA *Sev.* 11.1–7).

If Dio's intention was to invoke sympathy among other men of letters, he seems to have had little luck with authors whose texts have come down to us. Both Herodian and the author of the *Historia Augusta* cover the brutality that many of the emperors showed towards the Senate just as they censure

³² On Severus' cruelty see SHA *Clod. Alb.* 12.1–4 and *Sev.* 12.1–13.9.

the unfair trials and murders of members of the Senate. But neither Herodian nor the *Historia Augusta* treats the senators as a unified group systematically abused by tyrannical emperors. Although this question requires further study, it is particularly noteworthy in the case of Herodian: the difference from Dio in his approach to the relationship between emperor and Senate lends further support to the growing notion that the historian operated with his own perceptions of Roman history. That Dio failed to persuade Herodian and the author of the *Historia Augusta* does not change his role as a literary agent who offers a one-sided narrative of almost every emperor in his contemporary Rome. His books on Roman politics in his day and age are particularly relevant when read as a personal history, and as a critical response to the way emperors and members of the political elite—men like Julianus and Severus—in the urge for power and dynastic succession traded in the legitimacy that dialogue and cooperation offered the civil emperor.

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