

CASSIUS DIO ON SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS’ *DECENNALIA* AND *LUDI SAECULARES**

Abstract: The epitome of Cassius Dio’s book 77[76] contains a description of various celebrations that took place in 202–4 CE. The lack of clarity in this passage has led scholars to attribute certain spectacles to the wrong celebrations and to posit various hypotheses about the nature of the epitome of this section of Dio’s history. This paper suggests that Dio intentionally conflated the celebrations of these years into one passage, which functions as part of his narrative of the rise and fall of Plautianus and calls into question the public image of the house of Septimius Severus at this time.

Keywords: Cassius Dio, Septimius Severus, Plautianus, Caracalla, Severan historiography, *ludi saeculares*

The beginning of the epitome of book 77[76] of Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* includes a detailed description of the celebrations that Septimius Severus carried out in the early 200s.¹ This account has continually perplexed scholars who have hoped to employ the passage to date the various celebrations of Septimius Severus and his family in this period. The problem lies in the fact that Dio’s text, as it survives, appears to conflate two, or even three, events and shows a disregard for chronological order.² This paper will explore this problem, survey the possible explanations, and offer an alternative understanding of the passage in Dio, based on the author’s historiographical aims.

It will first be helpful to look closely at the passage in Dio’s history (77[76].1.1–5, excerpted):

ὁ δὲ Σεουήρος ἐπὶ τῆς δεκετηρίδος τῆς ἀρχῆς αὐτοῦ ἔδωρήσατο τῷ τε ὀμίλῳ παντὶ τῷ σιτοδοτουμένῳ καὶ τοῖς στρατιώταις τοῖς δορυφόροις ἰσαρίθμους τοῖς τῆς ἡγεμονίας ἔτεσι χρυσοῦς ... ἐποιήθησαν δὲ καὶ οἱ γάμοι τοῦ τε Ἀντωνίνου τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Σεουήρου καὶ τῆς Πλαυτίλλης τῆς τοῦ

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¹ References to Cassius Dio’s text are according to the conventions of Boissevain (1895–1931). Books are cited by Boissevain’s reformed book numbers, followed by the traditional book numbers in square brackets.

² As noted by Millar (1964) 145, though his claim that Dio does not mention the *ludi saeculares* seems incorrect. While Dio does not mention them explicitly, his description at 77[76].1.4–5 seems to derive from this celebration; see further below.

Πλαυτιανοῦ θυγατρὸς· καὶ τοσαῦτα τῇ θυγατρὶ οὗτος ἔδωκεν ὅσα καὶ πεντήκοντα γυναιξὶ βασιλίσσαις ἤρκεσεν ἄν. εἶδομεν δὲ αὐτὰ διὰ τῆς ἀγορᾶς ἐς τὸ παλάτιον κομιζόμενα ... ἐγένοντο δὲ καὶ θέαι τηνικαῦτα παντοδαπαὶ ἐπὶ τε τῇ ἀνακομιδῇ τοῦ Σεουήρου καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ δεκετηρίδι αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ ταῖς νίκαις. ἐν ταύταις ταῖς θέαις καὶ σῦες τοῦ Πλαυτιανοῦ ἐξήκοντα ἄγριοι ἐπάλαισαν ἀλλήλοις ὑπὸ παραγγέλματος, ἐσφάγησαν δὲ ἄλλα τε πολλὰ θηρία καὶ ἐλέφας καὶ κοροκότας ... τῆς δὲ δεξαμενῆς ἀπάσης τῆς ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ ἐς πλοίου σχῆμα κατασκευασθείσης ὡς τετρακόσια θηρία καὶ δέξασθαι καὶ ἀφείναι ἀθρώως, ἔπειτα ἐξαίφνης διαλυθείσης ἀνέθορον ἄρκτοι λέαιναι πάνθηρες λέοντες στρουθοὶ ὄναγροι βίσωνες (βοῶν τι τοῦτο εἶδος, βαρβαρικὸν τὸ γένος καὶ τὴν ὄψιν), ὥστε ἐπτακόσια τὰ πάντα καὶ θηρία καὶ βοτὰ ὁμοῦ καὶ διαθέοντα ὀφθῆναι καὶ σφαγῆναι· πρὸς γὰρ τὸν τῆς ἐορτῆς ἀριθμὸν ἐπταήμερου γεγонуίας καὶ ἐκεῖνα ἐπτὰκίς ἑκατὸν ἐγένετο.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his coming to power Severus presented to the entire populace that received the grain dole and to the soldiers of the pretorian guard gold pieces equal in number to the years of his reign ... The nuptials of Antoninus, the son of Severus, and Plautilla, Plautianus' daughter, were also celebrated at this time; and Plautianus gave as much for his daughter's dowry as would have sufficed for fifty women of royal rank. We saw the gifts as they were being carried through the Forum to the palace ... At this time there occurred, too, all sorts of spectacles in honour of Severus' return, the completion of his first ten years of power, and his victories.³ At these spectacles sixty wild boars of Plautianus fought together at a signal, and among many other wild beasts that were slain were an elephant and a corocotta ... The entire receptacle in the amphitheatre had been constructed so as to resemble a boat in shape, and was capable of receiving or discharging four hundred beasts at once; and then, as it suddenly fell apart, there came rushing forth bears, lionesses, panthers, lions, ostriches, wild asses, bisons ... so that seven hundred beasts in all, both wild and domesticated, at one and the same time were seen running about and were slaughtered. For to correspond with the duration of the festival, which lasted seven days, the number of the animals was also seven times one hundred.⁴

³ At first glance, it seems strange that Dio repeats his reference to Severus' *decennialia*. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that he at first discusses Severus' distribution of money, which was strictly tied to the *decennialia*. He then seems to state that there were many celebrations, of which the *decennialia* spectacles were merely one example.

⁴ There is an odd discrepancy in this passage, namely that Dio first says that the device could hold four hundred animals at once, and then that once it burst open seven hundred

Interpretations of the passage have differed, especially regarding Dio's description of the ship that dispensed seven hundred animals and the event that it celebrated. Birley, perhaps because of the passage's consistent nature, believes that the episode describes the celebration of Severus' *decennalia*.⁵ Levick, on the other hand, sees the celebration in honor of the royal family's return to Rome in 203, after a sojourn in Africa.⁶

Such views, however, are hard to square with an inscription that describes the *ludi saeculares* of 204.⁷ The relevant section reads:

postqu[am] / [circenses erunt perfecti, uenati]onem parabimus
fer[a]rum septingentarum. cupiente[s] machinarum eventum
proui[dere 5 q]uamquam securit[a]ti vestrae p[roui]derimus [alac]ri
manu ubique, uos [hortamur ut custodes atten]– / [te se]ctemini.
munificen[tia] nostra leones lea[e] leopardi ursi bisones onagri
str[uthiones 8] centeni erunt.⁸

Despite various efforts to supplement the text, it must be admitted that an exact restoration is impossible. Still, the extant text matches very closely Dio's description above. It discusses what is most likely a hunt of seven hundred animals (*[uenati]onem ... fer[a]rum septingentarum*), and the subsequent list names lions, lionesses, leopards, bears, bisons, wild asses, and ostriches, in what seems to be numbers of one hundred each (*leones lea[e] leopardi ursi bisones onagri str[uthiones 8] centeni*). It also discusses the issuing of the animals from some sort of device or holding pen (*machinarum eventum*).⁹ Since it is indisputable that Severus and his family celebrated the *ludi saeculares* in 204, and that this commentary describes these celebrations, the conclusion must be that Dio is also describing these games, though seemingly in the context of the *decennalia* celebrations of

were in the amphitheater at the same time. It is not clear if this is a mistake (either by Dio or Xiphilinus), or if Dio first gives the full capacity, followed by the total number hunted during the celebration. The translation is from Cary's Loeb edition.

⁵ Birley (1988) 144–5.

⁶ Levick (2007) 53. This also seems to be the suggestion of Bingham and Simonsen (2006) 51–2.

⁷ The *acta ludorum* of Septimius Severus, *CIL* 6.32326–35, supplemented by fragments discovered in 1930, on which see Romanelli (1931), Hülsen (1932), and Diehl (1932). The following excerpt from the inscription derives from this later find.

⁸ The text is that Pighi (1965) 161, V^a.42–3.

⁹ For *machina* as 'holding pen', see *OLD* s.v. *machina* 5a–b. The term can mean more generally 'apparatus' or 'mechanism'. In each sense, it indicates some sort of device built for holding the animals.

202, or even the celebration of the family's return to Rome in 203.¹⁰ Still, problems of interpretation of Dio's text remain. Carlson has posited that perhaps several pages of Dio's text were omitted in the epitome, and that the epitomator (in this case, Xiphilinus) combined two descriptions of different celebrations.¹¹ Alternatively, Rowan has suggested that Dio intentionally transposed his description of the *ludi saeculares* to his account of the *decennalia* celebration in order to highlight Severus' extravagance.¹²

Given the evidence, it seems impossible to ignore the fact that Dio's description matches that of the *ludi saeculares*. Yet why does this description seem to be part of Dio's account of Severus' *decennalia* or *reditus* celebration? While Carlson's hypothesis might be attractive, the passage as it is preserved in the epitome does not betray an obvious break, nor does it conform to an identified method of Xiphilinus for combining such types of passages.¹³ There are also the considerations of the actual events themselves and Dio's narrative method. It may have been the case that Severus himself combined some of these events into one celebration. On the other hand, Dio only mentions the *ludi saeculares* once in his extant text, noting that Augustus held their fifth celebration in 17 BCE.¹⁴ Notably, Dio does this in his end chapter for the year, which simply enumerates important events. His discussion of the celebrations of 202–4, on the other hand, is part of his description of Severus' reign and thus serves a different function. Thus, Rowan appears to be on the right track in this matter,

¹⁰ Suggested already by Romanelli (1931) 327, and followed by Pighi (1965) 185 and, in general terms, by Gagé (1934) 70 n. 2; it is disputed by Hülsen (1932) 373, although he seems to incorrectly understand the celebration as lasting only three days. As Gorie (2002) 463 points out, the rites spanned three days and nights, followed by a certain number of days of games. Romanelli (1931) 325 and Pighi (1965) 185, 358–65 provide a more accurate schedule. Lusnia (2014) 106 n. 447 cites evidence for the dating of the *ludi saeculares* to 204. There is also extensive numismatic evidence; see Hill (1964) 175–8, Pighi (1965) 96–9, and Bingham and Simonsen (2006). Herodian (3.8.10) briefly mentions Severus' *ludi saeculares*, though his eyewitness claim is likely untrustworthy; see Sidebottom (1997) 273 n. 15.

¹¹ Carlson (1969) 20–1. Birley (1988) 160, in a somewhat similar vein, has suggested that Dio's description of the *ludi saeculares* has been lost altogether.

¹² Rowan (2012) 52.

¹³ Xiphilinus generally follows Dio's wording exactly or very closely; cf. Millar (1964) 2, Brunt (1980) 492. As Mallan (2013) 616–17, 626, 630 has observed, he also exhibits a primary interest in character and biography. While there is evidence that Xiphilinus transposed passages of Dio to different sections of his epitome (see, e.g., Mallan (2013) 626 n. 49), it does not seem to be the case that Xiphilinus combined passages that he found to be similar. On the latter point, Mallan's (2013) 610 comment is instructive: 'Moreover, Xiphilinus' laborious and uninspired method of composition, which saw him copy and abbreviate large swathes of Dio's *History* verbatim, has meant that he has won few admirers as an author'. Millar (1964) 2 also notes 'Xiphilinus' inability to digest and condense Dio's material'.

¹⁴ 54.18.2. See Swan (1997) 2538, with n. 40, for similar end chapters.

though I think her thesis can be expanded by appealing to the scene's placement within Dio's larger narrative of the reign of Septimius Severus. In what follows, I will attempt to situate this passage in such a way.

Dio's description of these celebrations comes amid his narrative of Plautianus' rise and fall. As such, it should be considered a discrete section of the overall narrative of Severus' reign, in line with Dio's use of a similar structuring procedure elsewhere in his history.¹⁵ This is a lengthy segment that stretches over the end of book 76[75] and into the beginning of book 77[76]. In Dio's account, Plautianus' power began to grow around 200 CE with the death of his fellow praetorian prefect Aemilius Saturninus. Dio insinuates that Plautianus carried out this murder, and that Plautianus, now sole prefect, desired to become eternal prefect (*ἀθάνατος ἑπαρχος*, 76[75].14.2). Dio also introduces Plautilla and her upcoming marriage to Caracalla (76[75].14.5), and states that Plautianus was the most powerful man, equal even to the emperors themselves (76[75].14.6). His numerous statues, which outnumbered even those of Severus, indicated his power (76[75].14.7).

Dio goes on to blame Severus for Plautianus' rise, claiming that the emperor wanted Plautilla for Caracalla's wife, despite the fact that it meant passing over noble women (76[75].15.2). Dio even states that Severus wished Plautianus to be his successor (76[75].15.2). Multiple examples of Plautianus' power, and his abuse of it, follow (76[75].15.3–7). Severus, however, eventually became displeased with his prefect, and Dio reports several ominous signs (76[75].16.2–5).

It is at this point in Dio's text that we find the description of Severus' celebrations quoted above. What is notable in this description is the presence of Plautianus. Dio of course mentions the marriage between Caracalla and Plautilla, to which he had earlier referred, but he also makes note of the enormous dowry that Plautianus provided on this occasion, claiming to have seen all of the gifts carried through the Forum himself (77[76].1.2). Dio also mentions that the boars seen in the spectacles were Plautianus'. These two details follow Dio's charting of Plautianus' rise to power in the previous book, and his eyewitness notice increases his authority as an interpreter of these events.¹⁶ The prefect continues to display his influence, both in monetary wealth and through the wedding of his daughter to Severus' heir and appointed successor.

¹⁵ As observed by Pelling (1997) 118–22, who notes, for example, a Germanicus-phase and Sejanus-phase of Tiberius, a Messalina-phase of Claudius, and a Seneca-phase of Nero. This Plautianus-phase is noted by Millar (1964) 145, though he does not employ the same terminology.

¹⁶ Further enhanced by his claim that he heard the sounds coming from Mount Vesuvius while in Capua, which portended Plautianus' demise (see the following paragraph). See Kemezis (2014) 96–7, 103, 141 for Dio's eyewitness mode.

After the description of the celebrations, Dio continues with his Plautianus narrative. Again, signs foretold the prefect's demise (77[76].2.1–3), and soon Plautianus' plans for seizing sole power for himself were revealed in a deathbed 'confession' by the emperor's brother (77[76].2.4). This scene, heavily dramatized, pulls Severus back into the orbit of his family, and he begins to shun his prefect. Severus then reduced Plautianus' power, and the prefect began to harass Caracalla as a result (77[76].2.5). These actions caused Caracalla to plot against Plautianus, both because of the prefect's slights against him and because of his loathing of Plautilla (77[76].3.1). Plautianus' fall occurs soon after.

As elaborated here, this section of Dio's history is noteworthy because Dio surrounds the celebrations of 202–4 with his narrative of the rise and fall of Plautianus. Certainly, Severus would have understood these events, and their accompanying festivities, as a high point of his reign.¹⁷ With his foes long vanquished, he could properly celebrate his legitimate rule, buttressed by the coming of age and marriage of his elder son and his own successes in the East. It is certain, however, that Dio felt quite differently about these events. Dio describes the marriage between Caracalla and Plautilla in hostile terms, suggesting that it was hardly the success that Severus hoped it would be.¹⁸ Even without Dio's account, the failure of this union is obvious from its quick dissolution and inability to produce an heir. Dio thought little of Severus' eastern campaigns as well. Dio claims that Severus pursued military conquest only for the sake of his own reputation (*ἐπιθυμία δόξης*, 75[75].1.1), and he mocks Severus' 'victories', stating that the emperor thought himself great and superior to all men in knowledge and valor (75[75].2.4). Finally, contrary to Severus' claims, Dio says that the eastern campaigns, and land acquisitions, were only a source of wars and expense for Rome (75[75].3.3).

The celebrations of 202–4 might therefore be seen as another example of Severus' pretending to be greater than he actually was, at least in Dio's eyes, putting it in line with Dio's overall project of writing a history of the Severans bent on overturning the royal house's self-presentation.¹⁹ It seems that, in the very least, celebrations occurred in 202 and 204, possibly with an additional

¹⁷ Cf. Kemezis (2014) 70: '... the spectacle of the wedding, along with the Secular Games in 204, would still communicate a powerful message of dynastic renewal as the agent of a Roman future that would replicate all the best aspects of the past'. See also Gorrie (2002) 468 for a similar sentiment, as well as Daguet-Gagey (2006) 188 for 202–4 CE as the high point of the reign of Septimius Severus.

¹⁸ After the death of Plautianus, Plautilla and her brother were exiled, then later killed when Caracalla became emperor (77[76].6.3; cf. 78[77].1.1). Dio himself calls Plautilla a most shameful woman (*τῇ τε γυναικὶ ἀναιδεστάτῃ*, 77[76].3.1).

¹⁹ Cf. Kemezis (2014) 146–9.

celebration in 203 for the royal family's return from Africa.²⁰ By constructing his narrative in such a way, Dio suggests that these celebrations were a sham, a false pronouncement of the successes of the Severan house.²¹ This claim is buttressed by the placement of the celebrations within Dio's account of Plautianus' rise and fall. In Dio's scheme, the celebrations serve as an outward claim of stability, whereas the Severan house was in reality threatened by a powerful praetorian prefect and a soon-to-be failed marriage. Dio seems to highlight in stark terms the threats to the strength and continuity of the royal house that were projected publicly by the celebrations. Therefore, the blending of celebrations into one section serves a thematic purpose for Dio's narrative. Because there is not an obvious break in the epitomized version of Dio's account, and because the descriptions of the games seem to be interrelated and to flow naturally, it is better to allow that the epitome of this section was made faithfully, and to attribute the seeming chronological confusion to Dio's narrative method.

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²⁰ When Dio states that the celebrations were made for Severus' return, it is possible that this refers to his return to Rome from his eastern campaigns, not the family's return from Africa.

²¹ Elsewhere in his contemporary history Dio uses scenes at the games to project negative judgments upon various characters and situations; see, e.g., Commodus (73[72].18–21); the civil war between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus (76[75].4); Caracalla (78[77].10.3); and Macrinus (79[78].20). On these and similar passages, see Newbold (1975) 590–1, 594–5, 600–1.

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