

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*

Eliodoro Savino, *Ricerche sull'Historia Augusta*. Naples: Naus Editoria, 2017. Pp. 341. Paperback, €50.00. ISBN 978-88-7478-049-5.

**E**liodoro Savino's *Ricerche sull'Historia Augusta* provides a valuable introduction to a variety of important debates in the scholarship surrounding the *Historia Augusta*. Savino (henceforth S.) begins with the authorship and date (Ch. 1) and the *HA*-author's method of composition (Ch. 2), and then engages with various themes, including republican and imperial *exempla* (Ch. 3), Christianity (Ch. 4), and biography and historiography (Ch. 5). S., whose previous work has focused on republican and early imperial Rome, brings an outsider's eye to the study of the *HA*, and avoids the factionalism and partisanship that sometimes distorts it. His knowledge of the relevant secondary source material is deep, and the book is clearly written and organised. S.'s willingness to challenge conventional approaches makes *Ricerche* a stimulating read.

In the preface, S. announces his plan to attack the most significant problems in the interpretation of the *Historia Augusta*, and not to shy away from a 'global interpretation' of the work (v). I think this is the only way forward for *HA*-studies. As appealing as I find the notion that piecemeal exploration of isolated elements of the *HA* can lead to a new consensus, in practice the interpretation of almost every individual aspect of the work is predicated on a reader's preexisting assumptions of its nature and purpose. It is a strength of this book that it offers specific claims about the author, his audience, and his era. While S.'s arguments are never absurd (a qualification not to be taken for granted in studying the *HA*), I find some of them flawed in details and methods; this fruitful disagreement is only possible thanks to S.'s boldness.

### **The Date of the *Historia Augusta***

S. quickly strays from prevailing opinion by arguing for dating the *HA* to the second decade of the fifth century. The consensus date for the work, between 395 and 400, goes back to Dessau,<sup>1</sup> and is supported by the giants of the field

<sup>1</sup> Dessau (1918).

including Syme, Chastagnol, and Paschoud.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have argued for the first decade of the fifth century: Kolb and Birley place it after the death of Stilicho in 408, and Neri argues that important passages reflect the events of 409, an argument which I myself adopted and adapted.<sup>3</sup> There have always been outliers, such as Domaszewski, who believed it to be a product of the late sixth century, and Lippold, the last holdout for a Constantinian date; Cameron's recent argument for 374–83 is similarly unlikely to find followers, given his implicit denial of the influence of Ammianus and Jerome on the text.<sup>4</sup> Only a few prominent scholars, however, share S.'s suggestion of a date in the 410s. Straub argued that the *HA* represents a kind of 'History against the Christians' directly inspired by and in response to Orosius' *Historia adversus paganos*, which appeared around 417, but S. does not support Straub's unconvincing theory.<sup>5</sup> Mazzarino also preferred a date in the 410s because he saw the work as representing a struggle between powerful senatorial *gentes*, the pagan Symmachi and Nicomachi and the Christian Ancii and Probi.<sup>6</sup> S., however, rejects this theory, arguing that the author is in fact favourable towards all of the aristocratic families of the late empire, including the Anicii, the Ceionii, and the Probi (25–33).<sup>7</sup>

S. does make a good case that the author is familiar with the first decade of the fifth century. Some of his arguments derive from the administrative history of the empire; for example, the *HA* seems to refer to the province of *Flaminia et Picenum* (*Gord.* 4.6), which S. argues was created in 408 (3–7). S.'s arguments that the *HA*-author refers allusively and critically to the activities of Stilicho depend on an important article by Pottier.<sup>8</sup> Pottier himself felt that a date around 397 for the *HA* remained possible, if the author's commentary on Stilicho was contemporary, but S. reasonably enough prefers Pottier's second suggestion, that the *HA* postdates the fall of Stilicho in 408.

Pottier argues that the *HA*-author is familiar with the activities of Symmachus concerning the condemnation of Stilicho as *hostis publicus*, as revealed in *ep.* 4.5. Books 2 to 7 of Symmachus' letters were published by his son after his death. These must surely have been published before 409, since they include friendly correspondence with Attalus before his usurpation. Cameron

<sup>2</sup> Syme (1971) 16; Chastagnol (1994) xxxi; Paschoud (1996) xii–xviii (willing to go as late as 406); see also Velaza (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Neri (2002); Rohrbacher (2016) 158–69.

<sup>4</sup> Domaszewski (1918); Lippold (1998); Cameron (2011b) 743–82.

<sup>5</sup> Straub (1963); early criticism in the review of Cameron (1965).

<sup>6</sup> Mazzarino (1966) II.2.221–3.

<sup>7</sup> See also Cameron (2011a).

<sup>8</sup> Pottier (2005).

suggests they were published shortly after his death in 402.<sup>9</sup> So this also is evidence for the first, not the second, decade of the fifth century.

S.'s argument for the second decade, rather than the first, is apparently based entirely on his understanding of its tone. He argues that the second decade of the fifth century represents a period of aristocratic unity and relative religious harmony which better fits the mood of the *HA*, in contrast with the passions of the usurpation of Eugenius or the regency of Stilicho or the 410 sack of Rome. While this is not an illegitimate approach, it is an extremely precarious one, which lends itself to circular reasoning. In particular, one's pre-existing sense of how anti-Christian the work is has a strong influence on how mentions of and allusions to Christianity are interpreted.

S.'s argument that the tone of the *HA* suggests that it was published at a particularly irenic period in late Roman history seems to challenge prevailing ideas of the reason for its peculiar self-presentation. The original romantic story to explain its deceptions about authorship and date features a subversive pagan Resistance forced to operate in the shadows and issue anti-Christian messages in secret for fear of persecution. Chastagnol, recognising that authors like Ammianus, Eunapius, and Rutilius Namatianus were able to express opinions critical of Christianity throughout the period, thought that the specific crisis brought on by the Frigidus was necessary to require a brief period of underground writing around 399.<sup>10</sup> Without beleaguered pagans, we need a different explanation for the bizarre nature of the *HA*.

The determination of its date, despite the necessary descent into the philological tedium it demands, is of great consequence for its interpretation. If the *HA* is a product of the 390s, then the anti-Christian decrees of Theodosius, the destruction of the Serapeum, and the battle of the Frigidus are contemporary events, and even the struggle over the Altar of Victory between Symmachus and Ambrose in 384 was only a decade or so old. By 420, these events clearly belonged to a previous generation; the idea of a return to public pagan cult would have seemed absurd, and newer events such as the sack of Rome in 410, the marriage of Gallia Placidia and Athaulf, and the expansion of Visigothic power would have preoccupied the author and his audience.

### **The Author of the *Historia Augusta***

Scholars since Hohl<sup>11</sup> have placed the author of the *Historia Augusta* within the 'circle of Symmachus'; in S.'s case, 'il milieu simmachiano–nicomacheo

<sup>9</sup> Cameron (2011b) 368.

<sup>10</sup> Chastagnol (1983) 118.

<sup>11</sup> Hohl (1920).

dell'HA' (24) or 'all'ambiente dei Simmachi Nicomachi' (33). But Cameron has deconstructed the various elements informing the traditional understanding of this circle in *The Last Pagans*, and it is no longer clear what this term represents. Macrobius' *Saturnalia* was once seen as a work of propaganda representing a circle of pagan diehards, including Symmachus and Nicomachus Flavianus, but Cameron recasts it as a literary dialogue celebrating antiquarianism and not at all meant to be representative of the real historical figures of a half century earlier.<sup>12</sup> The letters of Symmachus engage with Christians as well as pagans and provide no evidence for a particular interest in or knowledge of pagan cult.<sup>13</sup> The evidence of *subscriptions* has been used to portray Symmachus and Nicomachus as lovingly restoring and editing pagan texts, an activity conceived of as subversive and defiant, but this portrait too is apparently without foundation. There was nothing particularly pagan about copying Livy, and in any case Cameron shows that the *subscriptions* do not imply any kind of scholarly endeavour, but simply participation in the technical task of collation.<sup>14</sup> What, then, remains of the pagan reactionary circle of the Symmachi–Nicomachi? There are a couple of invented Nicomachi in the *HA* (*Aur.* 27.6; *Tac.* 6), just as there are invented figures with aristocratic names such as Anicius, Probus, and Ceionius, but nothing that speaks to this particular 'milieu' and certainly not much reason to place the *Historia Augusta* within it. The placement of the *HA* within this imagined milieu is predicated on the idea that Symmachus' circle was part of a pagan resistance, which Cameron refutes, and also on the idea that the *HA* is a document of pagan resistance, which is far from obvious.

S. recounts how the scholarly association of the *HA* with the circle of Symmachus and Nicomachus has caused some to attribute the work to a family member, such as Nicomachus Flavianus senior, Nicomachus Flavianus junior, or Memmius Symmachus. Another proposed author, the poet Naucellius, was a correspondent of Symmachus (33). Rejecting these proposals, he offers his own: Tascius Victorianus, a *litteratus* who worked on Livy manuscripts at Symmachus' behest.

The argument for Victorianus is complicated and tenuous. A letter of Sidonius Apollinaris (8.3.1, around 476 CE) describes a life of Apollonius of Tyana:

Apolloni Pythagorici vitam, non ut Nicomachus senior e Philostrati sed ut Tascius Victorianus e Nicomachi schedio exscripsit, quia iusseras,

<sup>12</sup> Cameron (2011b) 231–72.

<sup>13</sup> Cameron (2011b) 353–98.

<sup>14</sup> Cameron (2011b) 399–526.

misi; quam, dum parere festino, celeriter eiecit in tumultuarium exemplar turbida et praecepta et opica translatio ...

I have sent you the Life of Apollonius the Pythagorean, since you requested it, not in the transcription that Nicomachus the Elder made from Philostratus's copy but in the one that Tascius Victorianus made from Nicomachus'. I was in such a hurry to obey you that a crude, rushed, and uncouth translation has tossed it into an improvised version.<sup>15</sup>

The meaning of this sentence is unclear and controversial.<sup>16</sup> According to Mommsen, we are to understand that Nicomachus translated the Greek of Apollonius into Latin, Tascius Victorianus edited the translation, and Sidonius transcribed it hastily.<sup>17</sup> Others cited by S. have argued that Nicomachus transcribed the text, and Victorianus translated it. Cameron's argument is most convincing: no translation at all occurred, but rather each figure made a transcription of Apollonius' Greek. The point of Sidonius' letter, then, is to explain that at first he thought he was transcribing directly from the transcription of Nicomachus senior (because his name was part of the *subscriptio*), but reading more closely he realised that his copy was actually Victorianus' transcription of Nicomachus'.

But those who believe Nicomachus was a translator point to two passages in the *HA Life of Aurelian* which they argue supports their contention (*Aur.* 24.2–9 and 27.6). The *HA*-author tells us that Aurelian, having captured Tyana, considered destroying it, but it was spared through the mystical intervention of Apollonius himself, who pleads for mercy. The author himself announces his firm belief in the reality of this intervention, provides extravagant praise for the philosopher, encourages readers to learn about his deeds through Greek books, and announces his intention to write his own short book in Latin about him. After this first passage, the author recounts Aurelian's success against Zenobia near Emesa, which he credits to the Sun God, and his building of a temple to the sun; his march toward Palmyra; a letter in which he describes the challenges he faces in fighting Zenobia; a letter to Zenobia herself, asking her to surrender; and a letter of Zenobia's refusing to surrender. After these events, in the second passage we learn that a certain Nicomachus translated a letter of Zenobia from Syriac into Greek.

The discussion of the life of Apollonius and the mention of a translator named Nicomachus have led many, including S., to suggest an allusion by the

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Jones (2006) 46–64.

<sup>16</sup> S., 34–6; Cameron (2011b) 546–54; Paschoud (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Mommsen (1887) 420, *MGH AA VIII*.

*HA*-author to the supposed translation of Nicomachus. But the mechanics of this allusion are puzzling. The two passages appear at some distance and have little to do with each other. Nicomachus is said to translate from Syriac to Greek, while the narrator, under the guise of Vopiscus, plans not a translation, but a brief account, of the philosopher's life. What does the author mean to say about Nicomachus' supposed work?

The comic aspects of these passages would seem to overwhelm any sincere nod to Nicomachus Flavianus and Taurus Victorianus and their supposedly fervent pagan devotion to Apollonius. The inclusion of the detail that Apollonius spoke in Latin to be understood by a Pannonian humorously deflates the epiphany. The suggestion that Aurelian was able to recognise Apollonius, another comic-realistic concern, thanks to seeing his portrait in temples, is another joke. There is no reason to believe that portraits of Apollonius were ever erected in temples—this is an internal reference to the absurd *lararium* Severus Alexander is said to have constructed, with portraits of Apollonius, Christ, Orpheus, and Abraham (*Alex.* 29.2). The narrator believes that the story of the epiphany is true because he read about it in the Ulpian library, a location the author evokes repeatedly and ironically as a source for his fictions. Finally, there is humour in the suggestion that 'Nicomachus', the name evoking an illustrious family of the Roman nobility, is an apparatchik of Zenobia and a speaker of Syriac.

Another connection between the circle of Symmachus and the *HA* has been proposed based on a passage in the sixth-century *Getica* of Jordanes. S.'s discussion is more balanced and reasonable than some others, but still demands too much from the evidence (37–43). The *Ordo generis Cassiodororum* tells us that Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, the grandson of the epistolographer Symmachus, wrote a *Roman History* in seven books.<sup>18</sup> It was published perhaps around 519 at Constantinople. Sections 83 to 88 of Jordanes' *Getica*, which discuss the emperor Maximinus, are attributed by Jordanes to Symmachus' *Roman History*; sections 83 to 86 present fictional material from the *HA Life of Maximinus* 1–5. Whether Jordanes used Symmachus directly, or through an intermediary, perhaps Cassiodorus, is impossible to say. This has inspired many theories, up to and including the theory that Memmius Symmachus was himself the author of the *HA*,<sup>19</sup> but S. avoids excessive speculation. Still, he sees this connection as one further piece of evidence that the *HA* is written 'dall'ambiente dei Simmachi Nicomachi' (43). This claim, as elaborated in the conclusion of the book, outpaces the evidence. Symmachus' use of the *HA* in no way entails that the manuscript was 'conservato per generazioni nella biblioteca della sua famiglia' (258). What

<sup>18</sup> Gallonier (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Mastandrea (2011).

other sources do we think of in this way? Tacitus uses Pliny, and Martial uses Catullus, without scholars finding any need for positing family archives, which are similarly unnecessary here.

S. provides additional arguments for Tascius Victorianus being a good candidate for author of the *HA*: (1) he was an expert philologist (2) whose work on Livy and Apollonius suggests a pagan; (3) his presence in the entourage explains his knowledge of letters of Symmachus edited by Memmius, never cited by other authors; (4) he was particularly familiar with the urban prefecture; (5) he held the title *vir clarissimus*, like Vulcacius Gallicanus, one of the six hypostases of the author; and (6) the ethnic ‘Syracusius’ attached to the pseudo-author Flavius Vopiscus represents either a hypothetical Syracusan origin or, less probably, points to his participation in the edition of Livy promoted by the Nicomachi in Sicily (44).

This is far from compelling. To take S.’s points in order: (1) Is the *HA*-author an expert philologist? Is Tascius Victorianus? (2) copying manuscripts of Livy is not a marker for paganism,<sup>20</sup> although perhaps copying Nicomachus Flavianus’ Apollonius is; (3) these letters of Symmachus were published between 402 and 408 for the whole world to read; (4) the *HA*-author is not, I believe, particularly interested in or knowledgeable about the urban prefecture;<sup>21</sup> (5) too insubstantial for discussion; (6) even less substantial.

### **Text and Structure of the *Historia Augusta*; the Republican and Imperial Past**

Chapter 2, on the text and structure of the *HA*, is by necessity very speculative. S. argues, reasonably, that the manuscript tradition is quite corrupt. This leads him to reject the existing attributions of the pseudo-authors to two particular lives, reassigning the Clodius Albinus and Diadumenianus to follow their primary life in sequence and authorship; his reattribution is more logical and elegant, but in the absence of a fuller understanding of the purpose for the creation of pseudo-authors it is hard to feel confident. S. also argues that the loss of the lives from Philip in 244 to the end of Valerian in 260 resulted from normal manuscript failure, rejecting theories, most fully elaborated by Birley, that the author himself created the lacuna.<sup>22</sup> He argues that the cross-references to Gallienus and Saloninus in the life of Valerian and the Thirty Tyrants presuppose their earlier inclusion in the lost section. I remain on Birley’s side of this argument, influenced in particular by the false attribution of several details from the life of Philip as reported in the *KG*-tradition to other

<sup>20</sup> Cameron (2011b) 498–526.

<sup>21</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 152, in response to Johne (1976).

<sup>22</sup> Birley (1976).

emperors in extant lives (the Secular Games, *Gord.* 33.1–4; his attack on male–male sex, *Elag.* 32.6, *Alex.* 24.4), and the author's failure to mention any of the usurpers that would have appeared in this section (Jotapianus, Marinus Pacatianus, Lucius Priscus, and Uranius Antoninus) in the Thirty Tyrants.

S.'s discussion of the order of composition adds to the large bibliography on the subject, with which he engages fully. Scholars have tended to agree that the author did not compose the lives in the order that they are presented to us, but rather that at some point after concluding the primary lives he returned to add the derivative and fictional secondary lives, which resemble the late fictional lives much more than the primary ones. At what point did the author double back? And in what order were the later books composed? There are a variety of suggestive clues throughout the text, yet almost every reconstruction of the order of composition requires various points in the process where the whole work is revised, making a definitive answer impossible. S. provides a convenient chart with the orders proposed by six different scholars, and proceeds to offer a seventh (79–80). The existence of so many schemes is enough for us to suspect that no mutually agreed upon answer is possible. I am not certain that confidently learning the order of composition would help us interpret the work, in any case.

In discussing the author's method of work, S. adopts a model proposed by Schlumberger, which accepts the author's discussion of stenography and revision at face value, although the language seems to allude to a passage of Jerome.<sup>23</sup> The discussion of the *HA*-author collecting notes, using a stenographer, and making final revisions seems to me again to be too speculative to engage with. S. says nothing that is clearly contradictory or impossible, but I cannot see the exercise as either convincing or productive. We lack this sort of knowledge for nearly all ancient authors, not only the author of the *Historia Augusta*.

In the third chapter of the book, S. offers a comprehensive study of the author's use of *exempla* from the monarchical, republican, and finally imperial eras. There have been many studies of this sort, but it is hard to see how any could be more thorough than S.'s. This could, therefore, be the ultimate resource for the aspiring researcher, except for the extraordinary level of cliché and conformity that the use of these *exempla* reveals. The piety of Numa, the cruelty of Sulla, and the *clementia* of Caesar all make appearances. The *HA*-author is uninterested in reconsidering the established representation of the past, and S. has done us a favour by revealing the author's banality in such a systematic fashion.

<sup>23</sup> Schlumberger (1976).



### Christianity in the *Historia Augusta*

When S. considers the question of Christianity in the *Historia Augusta* in Chapter 4, he again turns to a list-and-chart format. While it was relatively easy in the previous chapter to simply collect the proper names of historical figures and evaluate their use, to treat Christianity in this manner is a far more challenging problem. First, as Syme pointed out, there are very few explicit references to Christianity in the work.<sup>24</sup> Scholars going back at least to Straub, however, have supposed that the author's deceptions were rooted in his being a pagan in a Christian world, and have thus been primed to look for hidden Christian allusions. So S. must first exercise his judgement in considering whether these postulated allusions even exist. In addition, the category 'Christian' is a very broad one, including references to Christian cult and practice as well as the Bible and other Christian authors. There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that the *HA*-author would approach these different kinds of allusions in the same way.

S. next proposes to sort these allusions into three groups: hostile, neutral, or positive. This too is a great challenge. Judging a remark as hostile or positive is deeply dependent upon context, which hidden allusions tend to lack. Hostility is also importantly a matter of degree; mild irritation or good-natured spoofing is quite different from hatred or contempt. For this reason, S.'s conclusion that references to Christianity are 2.9% positive, 17.1% neutral, and 80% hostile (229), is less valuable than watching him work individually through the thirty-five references to Christianity that he sees and about a dozen that he rejects.

To get a feel for S.'s approach to analysing Christian allusions in the *HA*, I will consider for the sake of example the passages that he treats in the Life of Alexander Severus, which will reveal how difficult it is to achieve consensus in this area. The life is almost entirely fictional and designed to present Alexander as the ideal emperor. It contains a mix of explicit references to Christianity and hidden allusions, and includes the single mention of Christianity that S. evaluates as 'positive' as opposed to 'neutral' or 'hostile'.

First S. considers explicit references to Christianity in the life. His first passage reveals the interpretative difficulties. The emperor is said to have reserved certain privileges for the Jews, and to have tolerated Christians (22.4). S. counts this as a neutral passage, since it merely reflects the facts of the Severan empire. But could one not claim it was a positive reference, as it reveals that Christianity had been licit for centuries by the time of the *HA*? Or could one not claim that it was a negative reference, following Straub, because it contrasts the tolerant behaviour of pagans with the contemporary intolerance of Christians?

<sup>24</sup> Syme (1968) 139.

Next is the shrine which Alexander is said to have established, with images of emperors and holy men, including Apollonius, Abraham, Christ, and Orpheus (29.2–3). S. rates this reference as hostile, arguing that it denigrates Christ to be included with the others, but how could the suggestion that the best pagan emperor worshipped Christ be an attack on Christianity? Best, I think, is to deny that a comment on Christianity *per se* is implied, but rather a joke derived from the extravagance of holiness that the *HA*-author has been associating with Alexander.

Alexander is said to have considered building a temple to Christ, but the haruspices convinced him that if he did, everyone would become Christian and the temples of the gods would be deserted (43.5–7). S. rates this as neutral, but he takes the whole thing too seriously. This is, again, a joke, a retrospective prophecy with contemporary irony; there is also perhaps humour in the professional sacrifice specialists being worried about losing their jobs.<sup>25</sup>

In selecting public officials, Alexander follows the practice pioneered by Christians and Jews (45.6–7); while S. calls this neutral, it seems positive to me. In a dispute over property between a restaurant and a church, Alexander favours the church, thinking it better that any god be worshipped than an eating place be established (49.6). S. rates this as neutral and suggests that it derived from an actual dispute of some sort. Nothing in the life, though, derives from reality, and I think S. overestimates the author's research here. The story comically denigrates Christianity, but not in a zealous or sectarian way, so perhaps it should be called mildly hostile. Alexander attributes to 'some Christian or Jew' the maxim 'do not do to someone what you do not want to be done to you' (51.7). This is S.'s sole positive rating; again he suggests the possibility, which I think unlikely, that the conversation really took place. Why does S. feel that the author has included a single positive reference to Christianity here, when all other references are neutral at best? He does not say.<sup>26</sup>

S. accepts several hidden allusions to Christianity that I would not. First, S. claims that Alexander's excellence in astrology should be read as a hostile comment on Christianity (27.5). This seems not far from assuming that any mention of ancient religion is anti-Christian, even in a third-century setting. Second, S. follows Schwartz in interpreting a story about an old woman and a carpenter as a reference to a blasphemous version of the birth of Christ recounted by Origen, and to a phrase from a letter of Jerome.<sup>27</sup> How well known was this story in the fifth century? What audience would understand the allusion? Are there any similar allusions in the rest of the *HA*? Why was

<sup>25</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 92.

<sup>26</sup> I have argued that the passage forms part of an elaborate Biblical allusion: Rohrbacher (2016) 126–8.

<sup>27</sup> Schwartz (1989).

this allusion deployed in this life and in this place in this life? I have a similar reaction to the claim that the mention of a certain Aelius Serenianus, praised as *omnium vir sanctissimus* (68.1), alludes to the Serenianus recorded in a letter of Cyprian (*ep.* 75) as a terrible persecutor of Christians (in 235 CE). Who would make this connection? Where else does the author provide evidence of knowledge of Cyprian's letters?

Last are the passages, proposed by Straub and Paschoud, which S. denies are actually meant to allude to Christianity. First, Straub proposed that a variety of *omina imperii* of Alexander were reminiscent of the birth of Christ, particularly the appearance of a star burning in the day at Arca Caesarea (13.5); but Arca Caesarea was the native city of Alexander's father, and the different *omina* are not distinguishable from those provided to other emperors in the *HA* and beyond. Second, Straub saw the prophecy of imperial rule at 14.1–4 as a polemical reference to Christian texts, which S. rejects as unconvincing. I saw the phrase *te manet imperium caeli terraeque* as a possible allusion to *Matthew* 28:18, although I recognise that this is not the most compelling case.<sup>28</sup> If you believe that the author was familiar with Matthew, then this allusion becomes more plausible. Third, S. rejects Straub's suggestion that the emperor's apostrophe to the god Marnas (17.4) is meant to demonstrate Alexander's admirable religious tolerance, as do I; but I saw the reference to Marnas as part of a larger allusion to Jerome in the *Life of Hilarion*, which we know he was otherwise familiar with.<sup>29</sup> He also rejects, as do most scholars, Straub's suggestion that Alexander's reduction of interest rates comments religiously on the policy of Arcadius and Theodosius II (26.3). Finally, he rejects a suggestion of Paschoud's about the punishment of a certain Turinus, burned to death for the crime of 'selling smoke', that is, corruption. Alexander has the herald announce, 'he who sold smoke, let him be punished by smoke'. This reminds Paschoud of Jesus' words, *omnes enim, qui acceperint gladium, gladio peribunt* (*Matt.* 26:52).<sup>30</sup> I do not find Paschoud's suggestion compelling as it stands, either, but as with many such proposed allusions, I would be prepared to accept it if a good story could be told explaining in what way and to what end it parodies or satirises Christianity in the broader context of the passage.

Our divergent evaluations have several sources. First, the categories 'hostile', 'neutral', and 'positive' are insufficient in evaluating how the author engages with Christianity. Sometimes the *HA*-author, I believe, is satirising or criticising the beliefs of radical Christians, a common target of criticism by pagans and Christians alike. Other times the *HA*-author seems to be making

<sup>28</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 128.

<sup>29</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 108–11.

<sup>30</sup> Paschoud (2003) 366.

an anachronistic joke about the changes in the religious atmosphere from the third to the fifth centuries; such jokes could be interpreted as a serious commentary on religion, but they need not be. Since the author is composing fiction, every mention of Christianity is by choice, which makes the category 'neutral' questionable. The *HA*-author may not mean to be passing judgement on the Christian religion with each mention, but he must have some particular reason for including it.

In considering hidden allusions, as opposed to explicit mentions of Christianity, S., like many working in this area, is insufficiently clear in defining what an allusion to Christianity entails. Is the allusion to a passage in a text written by a Christian such as Lactantius or Jerome, which the audience is supposed to recognise? These allusions have parallels with those to non-Christian authors such as Cicero or Ammianus, and it is necessary to explore whether knowledge of such texts is likely and whether other allusions to these texts exist. Or are the allusions to Christian practices or beliefs that the author and audience have learned by virtue of living in the fifth century or even, as Paschoud once suggested, by being apostate Christians?<sup>31</sup> Then it is necessary to explore how widespread such ideas or practices were. The modern scholar, with a library of texts and archaeological reports at his or her disposal, often knows much more than the *HA*-author and his audience could be expected to have known.

Most of all, though, the interpretation of these passages is fundamentally dependent on the interpreter's framework. S. is forthright about his vision of the *HA*-author's ideology, which is based on two often-analysed sections of the *HA* (147–9, 227–32). He highlights the fictionalised exchange between the senate and the emperor Tacitus (*Tac.* 2–9) in which the senate is restored to its ancient authority and peaceful harmony ensues, and the author's claim that the emperor Probus would have inaugurated a new age of peace and prosperity, if he had not been killed by soldiers, imagining a golden age free from war (*Prob.* 32–3). Together, these passages represent an ideal senatorial world where the power of the army and the emperor have been cast aside. S. believes that the author is sincerely motivated by this vision, and thus his disdain for Christianity represents scorn for the alternative utopian vision pursued by Constantine and his followers.

While S. sees in these passages the key to the work as a whole, it is not clear how a hypothetical reader would know to privilege them. They come very late, at which point the reader would already of necessity have developed some strategies for interpreting the text. Why would a reader not have, for example, seen the great praise of the author for Severus Alexander and assume that the *HA* represents a call for ecumenism, as exemplified by the *lararium* dedicated

<sup>31</sup> Paschoud (2003) 362–8.

to Christ and Abraham and the good emperors? Where is the key that allows the reader to know what is satire or irony and what is sincere?

Neither the *Tacitus* passage nor, especially, the *Probus* passage is easy to take seriously. Most readers, as S. allows, have understood the utopian digression in the *Probus* as a joke or a dream, not as a practical programme (147 n. 384). To the extent that the life of Probus contains any factual information, it is derived from the *KG* tradition, and the dream of a world without soldiers is taken from there (*pace parata dixit brevi milites necessarios non futuros*, Eutr. 9.27). So it can easily be read as the kind of fantastic expansion of a few nuggets of information from other sources that the *HA*-author often pursues. The celebration of senatorial power in the *Tacitus* is more likely to reflect the inclinations of the author and his audience, but there are other possible readings. I argued, for example, that the scene parodies the kind of insincere, pro-senatorial rhetoric proclaimed by Attalus when he was installed by Alaric.<sup>32</sup>

S. supports his contention of the author's utopianism by discussing two prophecies that seem to me to point in the opposite direction. When statues of Tacitus and his brother were destroyed by lightning, the haruspices predicted that in a thousand years, descendants of the emperor would conquer the world and in a new golden age would cede power to the senate (*Tac.* 15–16). The utopia described is immediately undercut and mocked by the author's sardonic note that the period of a thousand years was surely chosen in the knowledge that the validity of the prophecy could never be known. Then, again sarcastically, it is remarked that the many descendants of Tacitus are undoubtedly eagerly awaiting the passing of the millennium. The author later says that some claim that Carus was struck down by lightning because he violated a prophecy forbidding the emperor to go to Ctesiphon, but he rejects this interpretation in his confidence that Galerius Maximianus will succeed in Persia (*Car.* 9). This claim is humorous since the author pretends to be predicting the future when he is simply recounting the past. The failure of Julian in Persia in 363 may be evoked in this context, but not in a way that would lead one to think that the author is serious about haruspices and prophecies. It is the same humour found in the oracle in the life of Probus (*Prob.* 24), which purports to be cynical about the possibility of the descendants of Probus holding high office when contemporaries are aware that they have.

All attempts to find a positive programme underlying the *HA* suffer, I believe, from the difficulty of determining that one particular passage is sincere but that another one is a joke. They also are challenged by the difficulty of explaining what all the other bizarre elements of the work are for—allusions to Cicero and Martial, the bogus authors and the phony dedications, the comic

<sup>32</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 163–5; cf. Sozomen 9.8.2, which derives from Olympiodorus.

reflections on historical truth. A fabricator with a message to get across would surely avoid these distractions.

### Conclusion

In his conclusion, S. develops a theory of composition that seeks to explain the difference between the primary lives and the rest. Noting that there were several works of history written in the fourth century, but none of biography, he states (255):

È ipotesi credibile che l'A. si sia inizialmente proposto di colmare la lacuna e di riscrivere, migliorandola ed aggiornandola fino ai suoi tempi, l'opera di Mario Massimo, nella speranza di replicarne il successo. Constatata l'impossibilità di realizzare il suo progetto originario, per la carenza di documentazione sul periodo dell' 'anarchia militare' e le difficoltà del contesto politico e religioso del IV sec., secondo il modello di Svetonio e di Mario Massimo, l'A. ritenne opportune una profonda rielaborazione della struttura dell'opera, contestuale alla maturazione di un non convenzionale e dissacrante punto di vista sulle finalità della storiografia e sulla natura delle opere di storia e di biografia, illustrati in passi deliberatamente ambigui delle ultime vite della raccolta.

Again we can be thankful to S. for making his assumptions explicit and clear. His comments on historiography and biography, developed in the fifth chapter, are provocative. When we read all of the *HA*-author's comments on the two genres together, it seems to me that they are confused and contradictory enough to suggest that his purpose is a kind of mock literary criticism, rather than the development of a substantive position on the genres. S.'s suggestion, however, that the author is theorising a new kind of biography, *mythistoria*, is worthy of further consideration. S.'s brief comments on the origin of the work are less convincing. The author cannot have set out at first to improve on the lives of Marius Maximus, since the primary lives do not reveal any signs of original research and seem hastily excerpted rather than augmented or improved. And while it is common in *HA*-studies to suggest that the author was forced to fabricate in the absence of sources for some emperors, and certainly for some usurpers and Caesars, this suggestion cannot explain the lives of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus. The author followed Marius Maximus for the first eighteen chapters of the Elagabalus, but then chose to add another seventeen of his own invention. And despite having Herodian's account of the career of Alexander Severus, he chose instead to present an

elaborate fantasy based on, among other sources, extensive allusion to the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>33</sup>

Overall S. offers an ambitious and stimulating take on the *Historia Augusta*, which could serve as a useful starting point for someone interested in the work and its controversies. Its weaknesses are those of the field as a whole: excessive dependence on an antiquated model of pagan–Christian interactions in late antiquity, and the persistent habit of taking the *HA*-author too seriously. The recognition that world historical events were transpiring at the end of western antiquity makes it more difficult to accept, perhaps, that many contemporaries had less elevated interests and concerns.

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<sup>33</sup> Rohrbacher (2016) 146–50.

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