

THE COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIA AUGUSTA: RECENT THEORIES

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I

The student of the Roman Empire cannot do without the HA. For the years 117–284 it is the sole Latin source of any compass. Hence a double challenge. First, to segregate fact from fiction. Second, to ascertain the purpose and date of the enigmatic product. If that were done the result would contribute to understanding another period of imperial history.

In the process, in the long controversy that began in 1889 (the epochal year of Hermann Dessau) the literary approach suffered neglect and obscurity. It would have been advisable to start from structure, composition and authorship. The larger part of the HA is fabrication. If the inventions were put under scrutiny, the path lay open to uncover the manner and methods of the imposture, to deduce a personality—and to divine a purpose, if any.

Such was the main argument of the book *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Historia Augusta* (1968). It was announced in the preface, it was repeated in later pages and elsewhere. The historian Ammianus, given prominence by the title, was in fact chosen as the point of departure. He was adduced for two reasons. First, influences from a single book of Ammianus were surmised in three passages of the HA standing in close propinquity. Influences or inspiration (be it added for clarity), not ‘copying’ or ‘borrowing’, but arising from reminiscence and perhaps from a recitation. Second, if that were not to be conceded, Ammianus by resemblance or contrast could still be put to good employ, like Symmachus and Jerome, in order to illustrate life and letters in the season when the HA was written. That is, in the vicinity of 395, that year on so many counts momentous and memorable.

Reviewers sometimes fail to pay due attention to express declarations of an author and may prefer to concentrate their effort on what he had in fact stated to be subsidiary. However, let that pass. The long and careful review from the pen of Alan Cameron acknowledges at the outset the primacy of the literary approach.¹ Also what follows from it. That is welcome, timely, important. No serious design (he agrees) of propaganda for any cause in politics or religion. Moreover, the thing is not properly to be described as a forgery. Rather impersonation, and even a hoax. Indeed, the impostor is not at all loath to be seen through before the end—he lifts the mask gently for a moment in the preface of the *Vita Aureliani*. The perpetrator of a hoax gains double delectation from the act of deceit. Not, therefore, a ‘genuine fraud’. In the beginning Dessau declared ‘eine Mystifikation liegt vor’.

II

There are further consequences. The true nature of the HA being recognized, the notion of several hands in the composition, or long intervals of time, will appear less and less plausible. Finally, a firm corollary. Once it is seen that the HA is not just bad biography, and dishonest, but something diverse in kind, perhaps to be defined as ‘mythistoria’ (a term which crops up in the HA and nowhere else in ancient literature), many of the canons that are normally honoured in the assessment of historical writing cease to apply. Two examples are pertinent.

First, an earnest enquirer setting out to compose biographies of Septimius Severus and his rivals for the power (Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus) might have been impelled to consult the copious narration of Cassius Dio.² Observe on the contrary that the imperial biographies which this author was compiling were fuller than he needed. He interrupts the exposition of Severus’ life and actions with the words ‘quoniam longum est minora persequi’ (*Sev.* 17, 5), and proceeds to give a summary of the whole reign, taken from the

¹ A. D. E. Cameron, *JRS* LXI (1971), 254–67.

² Use of Dio is credited by several scholars, and is now argued by F. Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen*

zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta (1972). Not accessible at the time of writing.

epitomator Aurelius Victor (as Dessau discerned, and nobody in the sequel has been able to refute).

Again, Herodian: shorter, easier and more attractive than Dio. Herodian could have supplied some facts about Pescennius. No certain trace, unless it be the casual item that this person was getting on in years.³ About Pescennius the author formed a conception all his own, which he developed through lavish and coherent fabrications (see further below).

Second, the lost books of Ammianus. This work must have furnished useful and abundant information about emperors of the Third Century. Yet there is no sign that the HA drew upon a source of this order. Instead it used Victor and the source of Victor, namely that 'Kaisergeschichte' the existence of which Enmann established through concordances with other epitomators. Where lies the explanation? Cameron suggests and argues that those books of Ammianus were not available to the writer—because they had not yet seen the light of day. The notion is seductive and worth canvassing for it concerns the date of each work.

None the less, hesitation is in place. Published and also accessible, that raises two questions about the first part of Ammianus' History. It is better to eschew the unverifiable and stand by a plain fact: the author of the HA is not a historian but a romancer. The best source is no concern of his, he is not after facts, they might only encumber or annoy. His delight and his practice goes to creative invention, as exhibited in the so-called 'secondary *Vitae*', the biographies of princes and pretenders—which are to be regarded as primary in the author's conception.

Therefore the very exiguity of the Latin sources available after 217 or 222 was no impediment, rather an incentive. The author employs them (it may be noted) not merely for a factual framework. He takes up a hint and it becomes an inspiration. One example may suffice. Victor, registering the brief usurpation of the ironworker Marius, stated that the famous C. Marius of the ancient days had followed the same profession (which no extant source attests). The alert and artful author took note. He developed the theme, with echoes of Sallust. Marius, a 'vir strenuus', delivers a harangue to the troops, beginning with 'scio, commilitones', and he describes the Romans as a 'ferrata gens'.⁴

Instances of this type have a wider relevance. If one looks in the HA for traces of the historian Ammianus, the thing to go for (it must be repeated) is not any mere reproduction or direct imitation. By contrast, reminiscence (which may be vague and inaccurate), or the associations called up by personal names (often casual, remote or devious). That is to say, the familiar 'science' of source-criticism, as applied to historians or copyists, is in abeyance, or aberrance. The poet and the novelist show the way to understanding.⁵

III

To move towards problems of composition. If all that survived of the HA had been the biographies after Severus Alexander down to the end (that is, by chance and convenience, the second volume in the Teubner edition), the task of analysis and evaluation ought not to have strained the resources of modern scholarship, so it may be supposed. The earlier *Vitae* import manifold complications. Some offer hope of solution, but others continue to baffle, and even the formulation is not easy or unequivocal. Now that after long neglect the literary approach (sources, structure and authorship) comes into its own, the problems have to be faced—with courage in default of full confidence.

Analysis of the early *Vitae* of emperors discloses a Latin biographical source, accurate and sober, that was used as far as Caracalla: abridged, supplemented and revised. The biography of the next ruler, Macrinus, shows a sharp change. It draws on a Greek source, Herodian (who is not named), for most of the few facts; and novel features occur, such as a programmatic preface and new fabrications of several types.

One will not lightly conceive that this Latin author turned to a Greek source until he had

³ HA, *Pesc.* 5, 1, cf. Herodian II, 7, 5. The passage in the HA, however, purports to render a verdict of Septimius Severus. Comparison of the context (4, 7) with *Clod. Alb.* 3, 4 indicates Marius Maximus as the source.

⁴ *Tyr. trig.* 8, cf. Victor 33, 9 ff. For the talent here displayed see *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 251 f.; *The Historia Augusta. A Call for Clarity* (1971), 41 f.

⁵ Not all critics have taken the point.

to. I therefore assumed (and have since offered the full argument) that the basic source of nine imperial biographies as extant (from Hadrian to Caracalla, and including L. Verus) was an *Ignotus* who terminated at the year 217.⁶ To be sure, standard opinion in the recent time invokes and exploits a known name, Marius Maximus (*Cos. II* 223): known as a writer, but only from the citations in the HA, from Ammianus (xxviii, 4, 14), and from the scholiast on Juvenal iv, 53 (a collocation not without instruction). The compass of his work is deduced from the *Caesares* of Ausonius: after verse quatrains describing the Twelve Caesars of Suetonius comes a second set which comprises twelve emperors from Nerva to Elagabalus. The second twelve are generally taken to represent the product of the consular biographer. From which it appears that L. Verus was not accorded separate treatment (but the brief rule of Macrinus earns entry, and with him the total tallies).

Cameron is not drawn to the *Ignotus*. He prefers to stand by Maximus, adducing in support arguments various in cogency.⁷ The matter is intricate, it cannot suitably be debated in this place, the more so because two ingenious notions are now brought into play. Reviving a century-old conjecture, Cameron denies that Maximus ever wrote a biography of Macrinus: he chose to discard him as a usurper.⁸ On the other hand, T. D. Barnes discovers an allusion to Ausonius in the phrase 'versus extant cuiusdem poetae' in the *Vita Macrini* (7, 7): the theme is the 'nomen Antoninorum', traced from its inception with Pius down to the 'sordes ultimas', to Elagabalus, who is here designated 'Antoninorum ultimus' (7, 8).⁹ It was only at this stage in the composition of the HA that the author became aware of Maximus, so Barnes suggests; and Maximus was then put to employ, he is the factual source used in the next imperial biography, that of Elagabalus.¹⁰

IV

So far, in compressed statement, the basic source of the 'Nine Vitae', as they may for convenience be styled. A laudable preoccupation with facts needing to be established in the period entailed a no less natural dispraisal of the 'secondary Vitae', which are all but total fiction. In this context they are to be defined as the biographies of two princes and three pretenders.¹¹ It will be of use to keep in mind the position each occupies in the received text.¹² Aelius Caesar follows Hadrian, Cassius is inserted after L. Verus. Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus interrupt the sequence of Severus and Caracalla, while Geta is appended to his elder brother.

Further, another *Vita* of this type occurs a little later, the biography of Diadumenianus, the son of Macrinus, put after his father and before Elagabalus. But the son of Maximinus is not allocated a separate book: he is subjoined to his parent in the biography which opens the second half of the HA (as here defined according to the standard edition).

If proper attention had been devoted to the genesis of the HA, there was a pertinent question to be raised at least if not to be resolved. In the first place (and clear enough) it should not be assumed that each of the five 'secondary Vitae' (Aelius to Geta) was in fact written separately in the immediate sequel to the imperial *Vita* to which it stands as a pendant. The manner of the writing deters—fluent invention in contrast to hasty and messy compilation.

Hence a hypothesis. Since a Latin biographical source ran out with the *Vita Caracallae* (so it appears), since the next biography of an emperor, that of Macrinus, announces a new turn, the composition of the five 'secondary Vitae' might be assigned without discomfort to the interval between the two. That hypothesis, first briefly indicated in the book, was

⁶ *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 30 ff. The chapter is reprinted from *HAC* 1966/67 (1968), 131 ff.

⁷ On this side see now A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus* (1971), App. 2.

⁸ Macrinus, however, has his quatrain in the catalogue of the twelve emperors recorded by Ausonius. The reviewer does not discuss this item.

⁹ T. D. Barnes, *JRS* LVII (1967), 70.

¹⁰ T. D. Barnes, *HAC* 1968/69 (1970), 31; *HAC* 1970 (1972), forthcoming. For Maximus as the source of *Elag.* 13–17, R. Syme, *Hermes* xcvi (1968), 500; *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 118 ff. Barnes

suggests that 'this was the first occasion on which the HA employed Maximus, and the references to him in the earlier vitae were added after the Elagabalus was finished' (o.c. 31 f.). In my theory that operation (along with others) fell earlier between the *Caracalla* and the *Macrinus*.

¹¹ The *Vita Veri* can no longer be relegated to that category. See the arguments of T. D. Barnes, *JRS* LVII (1967), 65 ff.

¹² The *Codex Palatinus* exhibits a peculiar order more than once between the biographies of Verus and Severus Alexander. Its 'index' is reproduced on p. ix of Hohl's edition of the HA (1927).

expounded in detail not long afterwards. At the same time, however, I came to conceive dubitations, which were not withheld: might not these biographies belong to a later stage, after the *Vita Alexandri*?¹³

For two reasons. First, Alexander had a liking for Hadrian's game-pie, the *tetrafarmacum*, which Marius Maximus mentions in his biography of that emperor (*Alex.* 30, 6, cf. *Hadr.* 21, 4, where Maximus is not named). Now in the *Vita Aelii* Maximus is cited and corrected: the pie in fact had five ingredients, not four, and Hadrian's heir was the culinary innovator (*Ael.* 5, 4 f.). The author thus creates a perverse variant or elaboration, faithful to his fashion. This item might therefore be subsequent to the notice in the *Vita Alexandri*.

However, reflection counsels a counter-doubt. In the *Vita Aelii* the author is in fact referring expressly to the passage in the *Vita Hadriani* (21, 4). He says 'de quo genere cibi aliter refert Marius Maximus, non pentefarmacum sed tetrafarmacum appellans, ut et nos ipsi in eius vita persecuti sumus' (*Ael.* 5, 5). Citations of Maximus in 'secondary Vitae' sometimes furnish a clue to nameless pieces of Maximus in the 'Nine Vitae' of emperors. For example, Hadrian's alleged expertise in astrology (*Hadr.* 16, 7; *Ael.* 3, 9). These pieces, like the named citations, were inserted when the 'Nine Vitae' were revised and supplemented, so I assume and argue.¹⁴

How then does the matter stand? Composing his *Alexander* and registering Marius Maximus on the *tetrafarmacum*, the author (it may be) forgot, or rather chose to neglect, an earlier exhibition of virtuosity in the *Vita Aelii*. The impostor can be guilty of worse. He cites a document from the Bibliotheca Ulpia and then says that he had not been able to find it (*Tac.* 8, 1; *Prob.* 7, 1).

Second, the deleterious biographer 'Junius Cordus' whom the author conjured up as a whipping-boy (the word goes back to Mommsen), and referred to in five *Vitae*. 'Cordus' benefits from a stylized entrance in the preface of the *Vita Macrini*. But he appeared in one of the 'secondary Vitae', briefly introduced as 'Aelius Cordus' (*Clod. Alb.* 5, 10), under which name he recurs once later on (*Maximin.* 12, 7), soon to revert to 'Junius' (27, 7) and remain so (as far as *Max. et Balb.* 4, 5). A pretty problem. It would be an attractive notion that the *Macrinus* is anterior to the *Clodius Albinus*.

Something ought to have been added, as relevant though no proof of any thesis. Rather a contribution to uncertainty. The preface of the *Vita Macrini* is detachable, as was seen by the sagacious Hohl, who left a space after it in his edition. The same holds for the 'prologus' (as the author calls it) of the biography of Aelius Caesar, which repeats and expands what was enounced in the epilogue (7, 4 f.), but is introduced by the invocation of the Emperor Diocletian. Therefore added later. In the next of the 'secondary Vitae' Diocletian is put in the body of the text (*Avid.* 3, 3)—but the piece is also perhaps detachable. As concerns the *Macrinus*, there is further food for thought. 'Junius Cordus' happens not to occur in the body of that biography or in those of Macrinus' son, of Elagabalus, of Alexander.

A third piece for the dossier has recently been produced by Barnes, that acute investigator into the problems that infest this area. It is the pair of references to the careers of the jurists Ulpian and Paul. The statement in the *Vita Pescennii* (7, 4) is brief and vague. It might derive from the fuller, but complicated, account in the *Vita Alexandri* (26, 5 f.). Indeed Barnes concludes firmly that it does. In consequence he puts the composition of the 'secondary Vitae' subsequent to the *Vita Alexandri*.¹⁵

V

However, by ill fortune or good, there is something more to be said about the *Vita Pescennii*, and a clear sign that on the contrary it is prior in date to *Alexander*. The author's design is to embellish the rival of Severus and put him on parade as a military saint and fanatic for discipline, after the type and precedent of his Avidius Cassius. This conception lacks proper warrant in the sources as extant. Yet there may be a faint clue. According to

¹³ *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 64; 71; 75. The chapter is reprinted from *HAC* 1968/69 (1970), 285 ff. See also, later in the book, pp. 87; 282.

¹⁴ For Maximus as the source of the scandalous items inserted in the *Vita Marci*, see *Emperors and*

Biography (1971), 128 ff.; 'Marius Maximus Once Again', *HAC* 1970 (1972), forthcoming.

¹⁵ T. D. Barnes, *HAC* 1968/69 (1970), 35 f. In the paper 'Three Jurists' published in the same volume I chose to waive the question (ib. 315).

Herodian, suitably vague after his fashion, Pescennius won fame in many transactions of signal consequence. Further, the report went that he was clement and able, that he had modelled his life on that of Pertinax.¹⁶ The chance might be admitted that the author took a hint from Herodian's mention of Pertinax, although he neglected to develop the notion with any explicit parallels in his fabrications about the career and habits of Pescennius. In the next (and related) biography, that of Clodius Albinus, Herodian happens to stand on named record as a good authority (12. 14), and he is used in one episode (7,2-8,1 ff.). Further, Herodian was to be needed almost at once to supply, abridged, the historical core of the *Vita Macrini* (8,3-10,4).

Composing his *Pescennius*, the author reverts to his leading idea after the biography seemed to reach a suitable and explicit conclusion. The theme appealed, and he had to fill up space. A generous exposition follows (10 ff.). In its course the comportment of Pescennius in the field is depicted with warm approbation (11, 1 f.). In allocution to the troops Pescennius affirms on oath that he has always behaved like a simple soldier, and always will, with Marius and other great generals ever before his eyes (11, 3). He would talk only of Hannibal and his peers (11, 4). Finally, when proclaimed Emperor, Pescennius rebuked an importunate panegyrist, urging him to write about the deeds of Marius and Hannibal as incentives to emulation: 'nam viventes laudare inrisio est, maxime imperatores, a quibus speratur, qui timentur, qui praestare publice possunt, qui possunt necare, qui proscribere' (11, 6).

The whole piece coheres admirably, and it terminates on a powerful aphorism disallowing laudations of the living, especially emperors, with sound reasons in support. Observe now the *Vita Alexandri*: 'oratores et poetas non sibi panegyricos dicentes, quod exemplo Nigri Pescennii stultum ducebat, sed aut orationes recitantes aut facta veterum canentes libenter audivit' (35, 1). Alexander approves the judgement of Pescennius. But this is not any Pescennius known to history or a verdict safely consigned and transmitted to posterity. Only the fabricated Pescennius of the *Vita*. All too often the plain logic of argument is baffled and subverted by the author's caprice and perversity. This time the case seems cogent. The *Alexander* makes a precise allusion to the *Pescennius*, which is thus proved anterior; and that biography surely carries with it the partner, the *Clodius Albinus*.

Proof, be it confessed, is seldom a term of ready application in study of the HA, and it runs the risk of turning out premature and infelicitous. However that may be, on the present showing no valid reason counsels a placing of the five biographies of princes and pretenders after the writing of the *Alexander*. Between Caracalla and Macrinus, that hypothesis may be allowed therefore to stand, provisionally. The hypothesis assumed that those biographies were composed about the same time, in a run or a cluster. It might not hold for all of them. The interrelation between 'secondary *Vitae*' and 'primary' is a dire imbroglio, complicated by a revision, or even revisions, perpetrated on the basic text of the latter category.¹⁷

Nor should the *Vita* of Macrinus' son be left out of the count. On a first presumption, it would be written at once as sequel or appendix to that of the parent. A doubt may be conceived. The author may have preferred to go on at this point with his narration of the transactions from 217 to 222, for it was all one story, reinforced by the theme of the 'nomen Antoninorum' and the 'ingens desiderium' provoked by the murder of Caracalla. In fact, three murders form a link, compare *Macr.* 2, 1: 'occiso ergo Antonino Bassiano'; *Elag.* 1, 4: 'igitur occiso Macrino'; *Alex.* 1, 1: 'interfecto Vario Heliogabalo'. The minor biography may have been postponed until the completion of the *Alexander*, though it is contemplated in the *Macrinus* (10, 6).

The problems of the 'secondary *Vitae*' may have to be gone into once more. To enter these bad lands and tread again their treacherous soil is not an exhilarating prospect. For present purposes, enough. Given the large and general problem of the HA, the matter is not central or vital. And the true relevance of the biographies of princes and pretenders is of a different and superior order. They furnish a link forwards to the broad tracts of fiction in the second half of the work. By language, technique and doctrines they foreshadow the

¹⁶ Herodian 11, 7, 5. Pescennius had in fact earned military credit in Dacia c. 185 (Dio LXXIII, 8, 1).

¹⁷ For a list of seven problems see *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 52.

mature manner of the genial impostor. There ensues a visible and verifiable enhancement in invention and audacity. Hence a clear clue to authorship—and to the personality of the author.¹⁸

VI

In the recent age a wealth of erudition has been expended on the HA. At least on certain aspects, and notably in the hunt for anachronisms. Eager curiosity or assiduous search would often disinter some promising item, only to be disallowed if not demolished by scepticism or common sense. And some topics continued to preoccupy, and to alimnt discussion that ended in the sands.

One specimen affords instruction and entertainment. In the exordium of the *Vita Aureliani* the Prefect of the City invites 'Flavius Vopiscus' (for that is the mask now donned by the impostor) to share his company, takes him up into the state carriage, namely the *carpentum*, and embarks on amicable discourse about biographies of emperors. The *carpentum* did not fail to detain and captivate the zealous affection of several scholars: is it admissible for the epoch of Diocletian, or is it not? Intent on that high debate, some of them neglected to notice and exploit a signal revelation. The scene is staged at the carnival season, 'Hilaribus, quibus omnia festa et fieri debere scimus et dici' (*Aur.* 1, 1). Masks and disguises were worn at this festival, the highest in the land might be travestied—and it was not at all easy to tell the person from the impersonator.¹⁹

Once it is seen and conceded that the HA was written later than the year 360, for Aurelius Victor is detected in disparate sections of the work,²⁰ furnishing inspiration as well as facts, the arguments based on anachronisms (or on their absence) forfeit validity and value. Especially such as made heavy appeal to administrative terminology.²¹ By the same token, and by a shift of emphasis, the literary problem regains its rightful primacy.

Few of the warriors in the long warfare had asked the proper questions about the genesis of the HA.²² It is therefore pleasant and welcome if a new and comprehensive hypothesis be put out. Also, to annex a peculiar locution of the HA, 'rarum atque difficile' (*Pesc.* 1, 1; *Tac.* 1, 1). Even should the notion run into hazard and dispute it may have something to reveal about composition and authorship.

A hypothesis of this order has now been formulated by Cameron. The first of the biographies to be written was the *Alexander*, he opines. After that the author went on to the end of his enterprise, as far as the year 284. Then he turned back to polish off earlier emperors from Hadrian to Elagabalus, adding biographies of princes and pretenders. That is, seventeen in all.

At first sight a solution eminently seductive. It is fresh and novel, it takes its origin from a phenomenon observed in the text itself, not from the familiar theories of erudite disputation, from the old cabbage dished up ever again and the stale gobbets. Briefly as follows.

The *Vita* of Severus Alexander carries five references to Marius Maximus—who, however, did not write a biography of that ruler. Five, among which Cameron puts special emphasis on Hadrian's *tetrafarmacum* as indicating that this *Vita* was composed before that of Aelius Caesar.²³ Cameron concludes that the first design of the author was to produce a continuation of Maximus from Alexander down to the accession of Diocletian, which design completed, this industrious practitioner went back to the earlier period, he adapted *Maximus* and also supplemented his output with new biographies. This he was able to do 'without much effort after such virtuoso performances as the *Tacitus* and the *Quadrigae tyrannorum*'.

VII

The next reaction is surprise, and a paradox. On this showing, the first of the biographies is *Alexander*, the last *Elagabalus*. Yet the two products appear to belong together,

¹⁸ Not all critics recognize or concede this evolution in a single author.

¹⁹ Herodian 1, 10, 5.

²⁰ A. Chastagnol, *HAC* 1966/67 (1968), 53 ff. Similarly in *Rev. phil.* XL1 (1967), 85 ff.

²¹ Thus A. H. M. Jones, *JTS*, n.s. xx (1969), 320 f.

²² As pointed out at a late date by Hohl, *Wiener Studien* LXXI (1958), 152.

²³ On which see above, p. 126.

in a single, plain and explicit design: the evil Syrian emperor matched and compensated by the good. As the author says, 'soles quaerere, Constantine maxime, quid sit quod hominem Syrum et alienigenam talem principem fecerit' (*Alex.* 65, 1). He duly supplies the answer, which is the epilogue of the book. Not only character, education and training but the choice of good ministers and wise counsellors (65-8).

The one biography takes its point and meaning from the other, and in fact it names Elagabalus nearly thirty times. Both carry the same label, that of 'Aelius Lampridius' (not that it matters); and, despite marked divergences in technique (various types of invention absent from *Elagabalus* but proliferating in *Alexander*), no critic has doubted that they are by the same hand. In the detail, sundry points of close contact offer. Let four only be registered.

(1) Elagabalus thinks of creating a *praefectus* for each region of the city. There would be fourteen of them; and had he lived he would have nominated 'omnes turpissimos et ultimae professionis homines' (20, 3). Alexander appoints 'curatores urbis quattuordecim'. They are to be ex-consuls and act in concert with the *praefectus urbi* (33, 1).

(2) The Emperor Philip's measure against male prostitution is referred to: 'tunc, ante Philippum utpote, licebat' (*Elag.* 32, 7). That is, briefly and casually, with no indication that the measure was abortive. Alexander, however, proposes to adopt the policy later followed by Philip, but gives it up (*Alex.* 24, 4). His motives are explained, which happen to correspond with the reasons which Aurelius Victor assigns to the failure of Philip's enactment.²⁴

(3) The expression 'fumum vendere' as signifying the traffic in state secrets or governmental favour. Peculiar in this sense to the HA, it occurs once in the *Pius* (11, 1), five times in the twin biographies (*Elag.* 10, 3; 15, 1; *Alex.* 23, 8; 36, 2; 67, 2). The erudite author lifted the phrase from Martial (IV, 5, 7) and wilfully extended its meaning, so it is conjectured.²⁵

(4) The second part of the epilogue to the *Elagabalus* mentions the brief reigns of emperors subsequent to Severus Alexander: 'semestris alii et vix annui et bimi' (35, 2). The next biography also carries the theme, in an expanded version: 'aliis semenstribus, aliis annuis, plerisque per biennium, ad summum per triennium imperantibus' (*Alex.* 64, 1).

VIII

To proceed therefore. In order to impugn the new hypothesis it will be expedient to look for signs which show that the seventeen biographies (Hadrian to Elagabalus inclusive) were in fact composed before the *Vita Alexandri* and the second half of the HA. Fabrications furnish the main clues. In general, one constates a progression in skill and variety, in audacity and in humour, as the author evolves along with his enterprise and creates his 'persona', which he gaily advertises before the end. The rhetoric also improves—observe orations of senators. And, another matter, as the author goes on he acquires an interest in Roman history, a taste for evidence and procedures of verification.

That general theme and thesis about the HA has been expounded elsewhere. It remains in this place to select and register some specific items of argument. Seven will do for the rubric.

(1) Pescennius on panegyrics. As demonstrated above, Alexander's agreement with the 'exemplum Nigri Pescennii' (*Alex.* 35, 1) derives from no source in history. It depends on a coherent piece of fiction with the splendid aphorism 'videntes laudare inrisio est' (*Pesc.* 11, 6). There is something else. In the sequel the author had not forgotten the rôle of military saint he contrived for Pescennius. He comes out with 'Pescennia Marcellina' as a suitable name for the mother by adoption of Maximus: an emperor who 'semper virtuti militari et severitati studuit' (*Max. et Balb.* 5, 6).

(2) Recurrent names. Characters from the 'Nine Vitae' of emperors turn up as figments later on. Thus Baebius Macer, *praefectus urbi* in 117 (*Hadr.* 5, 5), becomes the

²⁴ Victor 28, 7. The consequences for the dating of the HA were first drawn by A. Chastagnol, *HAC* 1964/65 (1966), 54 ff.; *Rev. phil.* XLI (1967), 95 f.

²⁵ W. Goffart, *Class. Phil.* LXV (1970), 149 f.

praefectus praetorio of 258 (*Aur.* 13, 1). He also supplies one of the ten bogus instructors of Severus Alexander, viz. 'Baebius Macrianus' (*Alex.* 3, 3). And Catilius Severus, the 'maternus proavus' of Marcus (*Marcus* 1, 9), recurs as a relative of that prince (*Alex.* 68, 1). By a similar device, Scaurinus, who taught an emperor (*Verus* 2, 5), acquires a son in the same profession (*Alex.* 3, 3), as does Serenus Sammonicus (*Carac.* 4, 4, cf. *Geta* 5, 6; *Alex.* 30, 2), whose son instructs Gordian II and bequeaths the famous library of 62,000 volumes (*Gord.* 18, 2).

(3) Trajan and 'Homullus'. Giving advice to Constantine in the epilogue of the *Alexander*, the author enlists a maxim about rulers and their friends which the Emperor has read in Marius Maximus, so he now reminds him (65, 4). It is the comment Homullus made on Trajan's observation about Domitian (65, 5). The identity of this person might inspire legitimate curiosity. To judge by the familiar habits of the impostor, 'Homullus' looks like a figment, not an authentic consular of the reign of Trajan.²⁶ On that showing he owes his existence to a homonym who was named earlier in two anecdotes. Homullus administers a rebuke to Pius (*Pius* 11, 8); and Valerius Homullus is guilty of an ugly imputation against the mother of Marcus (*Marcus* 6, 9). The person is the eminent M. Valerius Homullus, the consul of 152.

Now Maximus happens to be cited in the near vicinity of the first anecdote; and the second is patently an accretion on the basic text. Both can be claimed for that biographer.²⁷ The references to Maximus in the *Vita Alexandri* are not all of one kind. They call for careful assessment.²⁸ Another piece of dishonesty is revealing and amusing. After relating a lengthy fable about 'Ovinius Camillus', the conscientious author reports that the story is not to be found in the *Vita Traiani* of Marius Maximus—or for that matter in three other biographies of the emperor (48, 6). The three authors are named, and are bogus.

(4) Invocations of Constantine. The *Vita Elagabali* proffers an explicit report about the relations between author and emperor. At an early point it carries a brief reference to Constantine's veneration for Pius and Marcus, where his ancestry is noted, 'Constantios Claudiosque tuos' (2, 4), but it concludes with a full exposition. An epilogue, or rather a double epilogue (34 f.), the second part of which was added later (no need to suppose much later) as the elaboration of an attractive theme. In the first part, addressing Constantine, the author alludes to the nastiness of Elagabalus, virtuously commends the modesty and restraint of his own narration ('cum multa improba reticuerim'), and goes on to mention rulers who bore the 'nomen Antoninorum' (34). In the second he asserts that he is writing under express injunction from the Emperor, albeit reluctant to take on the task (35, 1). He next proceeds to indicate the later extension of his work, with especial prominence for 'auctor tui generis Claudius' (35, 2). But only the truth about the great ancestor, nor will he wish to be accused of adulation (35, 3). Then further remarks about his project, and his veracity (35, 4 ff.).

By contrast, the lucubrations in *Alexander* (65–8). They are presented without introduction, without any explanation of the 'special relationship' that obtains between patron and client or friend. Which of the two passages was composed first, therefore, appears clear enough on a candid and rational estimate—which, however, is not always applicable to the HA.

In passing, but pertinent, a brief remark must be interpolated. Constantine is in fact cursorily mentioned at an earlier stage in the HA: in the body of one 'secondary Vita' (*Clod. Alb.* 4, 2) and at the beginning of another (*Geta* 1, 1). Hence perhaps perplexity and some encouragement for the notion that the biographies of this category were composed after the pair *Elagabalus* and *Alexander*. But an instant remedy is available—if credit goes to an affirmation from the author in the 'second epilogue' of *Elagabalus*. That was not the first Vita to be dedicated to Constantine: 'haec sunt de Heliogabalo, cuius vitam tibi offerri voluisti, cum iam aliorum ante tulerimus' (*Elag.* 35, 1).

The writer's procedure may perhaps be divined. He hit upon the idea of dedications to Diocletian and to Constantine about the time when the five 'secondary Vitae' were being composed and the abridged source of the 'Nine Vitae' was augmented and jollified with

²⁶ *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 97.

²⁷ *ib.* 38.

²⁸ See now 'Marius Maximus Once Again', *HAC*

1970 (1972), forthcoming. Further, the context of the sole reference in the *Vita Elagabali* (11, 6) suggests that it may well be fraudulent.

useful or scandalous particulars: the three invocations of Diocletian in the latter series of biographies (let it be recalled) all occur in notoriously 'bad passages', viz. *Marcus* 19, 12; *Verus* 11, 4; *Sev.* 20, 4.

For the most part the earlier invocations of the two emperors are short and formal. They do not proclaim or insinuate any personal nexus. Active patronage and a kind of dialogue is a subsequent elaboration, a product of the author's developing impudence. He can now impart counsel to Constantine, with the reminder that he had once been under the domination of eunuchs (*Alex.* 67, 1).²⁹

To recapitulate. The subject is involved and vexatious. But nothing so far emerges to discountenance the theory that the five 'secondary *Vitae*' belong in the vicinity of the *Vita Macrini*.³⁰

(5) 'Iudicia principum'. Letters from an emperor bear witness to the virtues of some future ruler (or even pretender), sometimes at several removes in advance. These testimonials occur in the biographies of Avidius Cassius, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus. The second half of the HA exhibits an enormous advance and a master-stroke of constructive talent. Good emperors are linked and interlocked by various artifices in a long sequence extending from Decius and Valerian to Carus, and beyond, to the Tetrarchy.³¹

(6) Four programmatic prefaces. The *Macrinus* is the first imperial *Vita* to be thus equipped. Good biography and bad are set in contrast, with 'Junius Cordus' as a horrid example. Later on the author grows bold and free, rising to unexpected heights. First, the craft of history comes under gentle mockery. After discourse on biography with the City Prefect, 'Flavius Vopiscus' comes out with the assertion that the classic historians of Rome should all four be arraigned for manifest mendacity. The Prefect concurs, and 'iocando', incites our friend to write as he pleases, for he will be in good company as a liar: 'habitus mendaciorum comites quos historicae eloquentiae miramur auctores' (*Aur.* 2, 2). Next, biographers win the primacy over historians. The latter may practice the high style (the four are again named), but the former tell the truth. They write 'non tam diserte quam vere' (*Prob.* 2, 7). Finally, sharp (or comic) censure is passed on Marius Maximus, 'homo omnium verbosissimus, qui et mythistoricis se voluminibus implicavit', while the diligence and accuracy of 'Trebellius Pollio' is warmly commended (*Quadr. tyr.* 1, 2 f.). After which, 'Vopiscus' evokes a debate once held with congenial friends on problems and methods in historical scholarship. Coins were produced, and documents; and the candid author confesses that he had been in error about the usurper Firmus. It is a melancholy thought that after three such exhibitions of bravura a writer regressed to the preface of the *Vita Macrini*.

(7) The Gordiani. At first the author assumed two emperors of the name. Thus 'duo Gordiani' (*Macr.* 3, 5) and 'duos Gordianos, patrem et filium' (*Diad.* 6, 3; *Elag.* 34, 6); and he proposes to write about them (*Elag.* 34, 6). That is to say, he followed a version (reproduced in Victor and in Eutropius) which conflated the son of the old proconsul with Gordian III. In fact, that boy was his grandson, by a daughter. Later on, when the author came to narrate those rulers he rounded on his source: 'Gordiani non, ut quidam imperiti scriptores locuntur, duo sed tres fuerunt' (*Gord.* 2, 1). That source (it is to be presumed) was Aurelius Victor, for the 'scriptorum imperitia' is again shown up. Those ignorant fellows fancied that the boy Gordian was *praefectus praetorio* (*Max. et Balb.* 15, 6, cf. Victor 27, 2).³²

IX

So far the reasons which debilitate the theory that in the original design the HA led off with Severus Alexander, that the author went on to the end before turning back and dealing with the earlier history. More might have been said. To sum up. The argumenta-

²⁹ Some scholars once maintained that the 'six biographers' were courtiers.

³⁰ It is perhaps worth stating that the present paper was not written with the design and desire of defending that theory. The enquiry brought out more than I expected.

³¹ *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (1968), 135 f.; *Emperors and Biography* (1971), 215 ff.

³² The author does not confess that he had been taken in himself. He is serious for once. By contrast, the avowal about Firmus in *Quadr. tyr.* 2, 3 is a joke.

tion is dual and convergent. First, in general, the superior technique of invention and fantasy displayed in the second half of the work. Second, in detail. A pair of heterogeneous items would perhaps suffice for conviction. The *Alexander* alludes to the verdict of Pescennius Niger on imperial panegyrics; and the author abandons that error about the Gordiani to which he had previously in all innocence succumbed, not once but three times.

The new hypothesis was enunciated at the conclusion of a long and ample review. It operates with the express assumption of a single author and a continuous run of composition. That comes as a surprise, for more reasons than one.³³ In his second paragraph the reviewer said 'I suspect, though would not insist, that there is only one author'. In the first, however, stands the phrase 'the SHA were'; and later on one observes 'our authors' and 'they'. An exacting devotee of 'Quellenforschung', taking heart from what in past years has been done to and with the HA, might be impelled to proclaim different strata, intervals of time, or even multiple authorship. . . .

It is therefore expedient to insist once again on an axiom. In dealing with the HA the first call is for clarity. By the same token, given the intricacy of the problems and the vicissitudes in the long controversy, with so many theories perishing, no reproach can adhere to a change of opinion in large things or small, and everything is to be gained by prompt avowals. Of such there have been notable instances in the past, for example the desertions from Dessau to Baynes, but not many can be documented from the serried but insecure ranks of conservative critics and historians.

Consecrated in common usage, the term 'Scriptores Historiae Augustae' is tenacious of survival. It offers manifest convenience or refuge to the sceptical, the cautious, the crafty. Likewise the assignment of the work to 'the Fourth Century'. That device evades the problem, to sheer perfection. It covers anything from the last quinquennium of Diocletian to the five years following the decease of Theodosius; and it subsumes the most extreme and discordant convictions.

There are still classical scholars who maintain both the ostensible date (or rather 'dates') of the HA and the reality of 'six biographers'. Others more subtle, by employing the term 'scriptores', imply or advocate a plurality of authors without troubling to specify how many they mean between the limits of two and six.

To be sure, some sort of case might have been made out for three or four. Nothing of the kind has been essayed in the recent time. On the other hand, nobody seems to have been tempted to go above six. Why not? 'Julius Capitolinus' might be whipped into service. In the first epoch of the controversy he was called to play a high role by Hermann Peter: not only a veteran biographer reverting to his trade after a long efflux of years, but the man who edited the whole collection late in the reign of Constantine. Nor has faith in 'Capitolinus' yet faded out entirely.³⁴

The nine biographies that bear the label of 'Julius Capitolinus' are heterogeneous products. They range from the sober *Pius* to *Clodius Albinus* and the unsatisfactory *Macrinus*, to end with inventive talent on high show in *Maximus et Balbinus*. It might not seem too late for an alert critic to resolve sundry perplexities by a bold stroke in the conservative interest. 'Capitolinus' could be split into two, possibly three. One method of fission would operate with the dedications to Diocletian and Constantine, three of each. Better, source and value. Four rulers can be segregated, whose *Vitae* derive from the basic source. Namely Pius, Marcus, Verus, Pertinax. Five biographies are then left to be disposed of somehow.

But enough. Operations of this kind are only 'portions and parcels of the dreadful past . . .' As Dessau demonstrated, the imperial dedications are a patent fraud; and the first four name-labels (it may be argued) were not devised until the work was well under way. The author now decided to multiply his identity, but the labels were attached without care or discrimination.

³³ The reviewer recently stated that 'the Historia Augusta as we have it was not all written at the same time, . . . and no theory that it was merits serious consideration' (*CQ* xviii² (1968), 18, cf. 20).

³⁴ At least the fact that 'Capitolinus' alone of the six cites 'Junius Cordus' is regarded as significant

and even mentioned as one of the arguments for plural authorship by Momigliano, *EHR* lxxxiv (1969), 568; *Atti Acc. Torino* 103 (1968/69), 435. On which, *The Historia Augusta, A Call for Clarity* (1971), 62 ff.; 96 ff.; 105 f.

X

Epilogue. The appellation 'SHA' brings no luck to any that use it, as witness the performance in this area of the recent *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (1971). Suspect names and persons were on parade in the contest from the first days. The editors therefore adopt the practice of designating by emphatic stigmata dubious characters from the HA, also from *Acta Martyrum* and kindred sources. That is proper and useful, being necessary guidance for the reader. The execution betrays a lack of diligence and principles. A number of characters are left out. For example, one looks in vain for 'Gallus Antipater, ancilla honorum et historicorum dehonestamentum' (*Claud.* 5, 4), dear old Turdulus Gallicanus, the author's helpful friend (*Prob.* 2, 2), and four of the five 'amatores historicorum' with aristocratic nomenclature who conducted a learned and ingenious debate (*Quadr. tyr.* 2, 2). Again the treatment of two ladies masquerading under the names of men. While the Gothic princess 'Hunila' is impugned, no doubts attach to the strong woman 'Samso', previously known as 'Vituriga' (15, 7; 12, 3).

Curiosity at once asks how the 'six biographers' will fare in *PLRE*. The result passes hope or fear or human understanding. 'Aelius Lampridius' is presented without the stigmata. Quite a lot is said about his writings and even his beliefs. For example, 'he refers to Christianity more often and in a less hostile spirit than the other biographers'.³⁵ 'Lampridius' is assigned to the earlier part of the Fourth Century. 'Vopiscus', however, is damned, though his products find a date. The phrase 'est quidem iam Constantius imperator' (*Aur.* 44, 4) is taken to indicate the second ruler of that name, not the first. The discrepancy amounts to over thirty years.

Of the ostensible 'six' the remaining four are erased without excuse or explanation from the book of life and learning. Bitter is the fate that excludes 'Vulcatius Gallicanus'. Only one biography to his credit, but he alone bears a title of rank: he is 'v(ir) c(larissimus)'. There is no justice anywhere.

The innocent reader is in for a hard time, and salubrious lessons. Error and iniquity may prove beneficial. Anyone who wants certain facts about the HA will have to distrust manuals (even if recent and reputable); and he will be well advised to go slow on bibliography and the 'literature of the subject'. Instead, read the text.

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³⁵ The remark is superfluous unless it was intended to convey an opinion about the authorship of the HA.