

ALEXANDER SEVERUS AND THE *EXSOLETI*: AN UNFULFILLED INTENTION

At *Alex. Sev.* 24.4 (cf. 39.2) the *Historia Augusta* alleges that the emperor Alexander Severus intended to ban the *exsoleti*: *habuit in animo ut exsoletos vetaret, quod postea Philippus fecit, sed veritus est, ne prohibens publicum dedecus in privatas cupiditates converteret, cum homines illicita magis prohibita poscant furore iactati* (ed. Hohl)¹). A. Chastagnol has recently shown that this notice is derived from Aurelius Victor, *Caes.* 28.6–7: *Imperator Philippus... usum virilis scorti removendum honestissime consultavit. verumtamen manet: quippe condicione loci mutata peioribus flagitiis agitur, dum avidius periculosa quibusque prohibentur mortales petunt* (ed. Pichlmayr)²). The *Historia Augusta* attributes to the far-sighted Alexander an adapted form of Victor's personal observation on why male prostitution is rampant in his day despite Philip's ban. In R. Syme's judgment, this is one of the clearest signs yet detected that the *Historia Augusta* had recourse to Victor³).

After Chastagnol, any comment on the substance of *Alex. Sev.* 24.4 will seem anticlimactic. However, we may profitably turn our attention to the *form* of statement that the biographer has chosen for his historical fabrication, namely an unfulfilled intention. "No statement of unrealized intentions is a safe guide to history, for it is unverifiable and therefore the most attractive form of misrepresentation"⁴). Statements of unfulfilled intention frequently support the desired *Tendenz*: they can show how

1) *Alex. Sev.* 34.4, ...*exsoletis omnibus deportatis, aliquibus etiam naufragio mersis, cum quibus illa clades* [sc., *Heliogabalus*] *consuetudinem habuerat funestissimam*, does not contradict 24.4 provided that at 34.4 *cum quibus* etc. refers to *exsoletis omnibus* as well as to *aliquibus*. Cf. I. Casaubon, *In Aelium Spartianum* etc. ... *emendationes ac notae* (1603) 368.

2) "Zosime II, 38 et l'Histoire Auguste," *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium* 1964/1965 (1966) 54–56; "Emprunts de l'Histoire Auguste aux 'Caesares' d'Aurelius Victor," *Revue de Philologie* 41 (1967) 95–97.

3) *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (1968) 107.

4) R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (1939) 53, commenting on Julius Caesar's ultimate designs. Cf. J. Straub, *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium* 1964/1965 (1966) 239n, commenting on SHA, *Aurel.* 49.6: "Wann immer in der H[istoria] A[ugusta] von... einer Absicht (*voluerat*) die Rede ist, haben wir es in der Regel mit einem Einfall, einer 'Erfindung' des Autors zu tun." Cf. N. Baynes, *The Historia Augusta: Its Date and Purpose* (1926) 76.

much more potential for good there was in the good and how much more potential for bad in the bad. We would have been suspicious of *Alex. Sev.* 24.4 before Chastagnol's discovery and not exclusively out of general considerations about the historical quality of the *vita*, but simply on account of the form of statement employed in that passage by the biographer.

Alex. Sev. 24.4 does not merely record an intention⁵). It goes on to say why that intention was not fulfilled. The urge to provide this kind of explanation is illustrated in a particularly interesting way at *Alex. Sev.* 43.4: *habuit in animo* [sc., Alexander Severus] *ut munera per totum annum dispergeret, ut per XXX dies munus populo daretur, sed cur id non fecerit in occulto habetur*. Here the biographer admits ignorance, though in the process he betrays that he would like to have had an explanation at hand. Elsewhere in the *Historia Augusta* there is no lack of plausible reasons why plans go unrealized. Rarely does the subject change his own mind; generally someone or something obstructs or dissuades. Praetorian prefects allegedly kept Commodus from burning down Rome (*Comm.* 15.7), restrained Severus from killing Caracalla (*Carac.* 11.3, cf. Cass. Dio 76.14.7), and caused Alexander Severus and Aurelian to modify plans (*Alex. Sev.* 27.1–2, *Aurel.* 48.3). It is said that an urban prefect prevented Severus from completing an architectural plan (*Sev.* 24.4). Priests and unfavorable omens stand in the way of alleged intentions on three occasions (*Sev.* 24.5, *Alex. Sev.* 43.6–7, *Tyr. Trig.* 22.10)⁶). Elagabalus could not build a monument to his god because building material was unavailable to match his grandiose plan (*Heliog.* 24.7). Often, according to the biographer, it is nothing less than death that frustrates an individual's intentions (*Marcus* 27.10 [contrast *Marcus* 24.5], *Pert.* 15.7, *Heliog.* 20.3, *Alex. Sev.* 26.7, *Maxim.* 13.3–4, *Gall.* 18.2⁷), *Aurel.* 48.3⁸), *Quadr. Tyr.*

5) In contrast to passages such as *Hadr.* 4.8–9, 14.1, 19.13, *Heliog.* 7.5, *Alex. Sev.* 44.8, *Gord.* 32.6–7, *Gall.* 18.5, *Aurel.* 45.2, 46.1, 49.6, which say that so-and-so had a wish or plan without commenting on why it was not carried out or, in some cases, without making clear whether it was carried out. Cf. *Carus* 7.3, 17.6, which quote "Onesimus."

6) For my construing of *Alex. Sev.* 43.6–7 (*sed prohibitus est* etc. refers to Alexander Severus, the subject of the sentence *Christo templum... recipere*), see *Vigiliae Christianae* 31 (1977) 229–30.

7) *sed ea imperfecta perit* is mistranslated in Magie's Loeb edition. *ea imperfecta* is an ablative absolute.

8) *sed multi dicunt Aurelianum ne id faceret praeventum. praeventum* is surely to be understood as *morte praeventum* (cf. Magie's Loeb translation).

12.4; cf. *Comm.* 7.8, 9.3 [*multos...interimere*], and *Quadr. Tyr.* 3.4, all three of which passages can be taken as implicit “fecisset si vixisset” statements⁹⁾.

What distinguishes *Alex. Sev.* 24.4 from the other examples given in the preceding paragraph is that Alexander changes his own mind about the *exsoleti*; it is not an extraneous factor that impinges. To have the emperor change his own mind is more useful for the creation of a *Tendenz* than to assert that the emperor’s intention was frustrated by a person or by an event beyond his control. Not only is a praiseworthy or reproachful intention attributed to the emperor; there is also occasion to analyze his decision not to actualize the intention, again to the emperor’s praise or reproach. At *Alex. Sev.* 24.4 the ideal Alexander appears in a good light not only for desiring to ban the *exsoleti*, but also for having the vision to see why it might not be in the best interests of the state to effect such a ban.

An exact formal parallel, though in denigration of an emperor, may be found at *Carac.* 3.3: *cum flentem matrem Getae vidisset* [sc., *Caracalla*] *aliasque mulieres post necem fratris, mulieres occidere conatus est, sed ob hoc retentus, {ne} augetur fratris occisi crudelitas*. In telling why Caracalla decided not to murder his mother and other women, the *Caracalla* goes beyond the simple *velle* statement of *Geta* 7.3: *occidere voluit et matrem Getae, novercam suam*¹⁰⁾, *quod fratrem lugeret, et mulieres quas post reditum de curia flentes reperit*. Caracalla did indeed murder women (*Cass. Dio* 77.4.1, *Herod.* 4.6.1–3), but that he wished to murder his own mother Julia Domna for mourning her son Geta is reported only in the *Historia Augusta* and should be suspected as a late accretion to the tradition¹¹⁾. Note the absence of the allegation especially at

9) Cf. J.M.Heer, *Philologus* Supplbd. 9 (1904) 85, 113; F.Grosso, *Memorie dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino*, Classe di scienze mor., stor. e filol. 4a:7 (1964) 397.

10) For the *Historia Augusta’s* misconception about the relationship between Caracalla and Julia Domna, cf. *Sev.* 20.2, 21.7, *Carac.* 10.1; also *Eutrop.* 8.20; *Aur. Vict.*, *Caes.* 21.3; *Epit. de Caes.* 21.5.

11) Commenting on *Carac.* 3.3 but quoting only *mulieres occidere conatus* etc., A. von Domaszewski noted that the truth – that women were killed (*Cass. Dio* 77.4.1) – is distortedly represented in the *Historia Augusta* as an unfulfilled desire: *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Kl., 9:13 (1918) 67. Cf. the virtually identical comments of W. Reusch, *Klio* Beiheft 24 (1931) 21. Both von Domaszewski and Reusch overlooked the more remarkable distortion: Caracalla the gynocide has become Caracalla the would-be matricide. Cf. H. Heinen, *Chiron* 1 (1971) 432.

Herodian 4.6.3, *τὴν τε Κομμόδου ἀδελφὴν...ἀπέκτεινεν, αἰτίαν ἐπαγαγὼν ὡς δακρυσάση παρὰ τῆ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῷ τοῦ παιδὸς φόνῳ*. Cassius Dio 77.2 tells us that Julia was forced to suppress any expression of grief over her murdered son Geta, but there is no indication there or in the following narrative that Caracalla at any point intended to do away with her. By asserting that Caracalla changed his own mind about murdering his mother and some other women, the author of the *Caracalla* fashions for himself an occasion not only to impute a despicable wish to the “bad” emperor but also to show the self-serving thinking that restrained him from murder: Caracalla had already murdered Geta and did not want his reputation for *crudelitas* to increase. Compare, also, *Hadr.* 9.3: *cum Attiani, praefecti sui et quondam tutoris, potentiam ferre non posset [sc., Hadrianus] nisus est eum obtruncare, sed revocatus est, quia iam quattuor consularium occisorum, quorum quidem necem in Attiani consilia refundebat, premebatur invidia. Carac.* 11.4 is also pertinent (*aliqui contra dicunt praef. voluisse id fieri [cf. Carac. 11.3], sed Septimium noluisse, ne et severitas illius crudelitatis nomine inquinaretur...*), though it is not an exact formal parallel since here Severus stands in the way of his prefects, not of himself.

At *Alex. Sev.* 24.4, then, we can observe the biographer shaping what he took from Aurelius Victor into a common form of statement (the unfulfilled intention) – more precisely, into a version of the general form that especially contributes to the desired *Tendenz*. When we are confident that the *Historia Augusta* is fabricating or has inherited a fabrication, careful attention should be given to the form in which the fabrication is given. It will not be *Historia Augusta Forschung* alone that will profit from the lessons thereby learned.

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