

## PUNS, AELIUS MAURUS, AND THE COMPOSITION OF THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*

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The *Historia Augusta* (hereafter, *HA*) makes the point several times of (apparently) imparting trustworthy information and of outstripping its rivals and predecessors. To ensure credibility and to give the impression of careful and wide-ranging research, the *HA* deems it important to appear to have had much material at hand from which to sift and select.<sup>1</sup> To this end, it appeals to numerous documents, letters, and authorities. The *HA* already stands convicted of employing spurious texts,<sup>2</sup> and I will anticipate my argument somewhat by noting that it is significant that these texts increase in frequency in the later biographies (especially from the reign of Severus Alexander) and that many include various forms of word-play.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is with names in general and the “source” Aelius Maurus<sup>4</sup> in particular (*Sev.* 20.1) that this paper is concerned, and appropriately so, since Dessau’s misgivings about the nature and composition of the *HA* sprang primarily from his investigation of individuals therein who were otherwise unattested.<sup>5</sup>

Of the nine primary *Vitae* (Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, M. Aurelius, L. Verus, Commodus, Pertinax, Didius Julianus, Septimius Severus, and

<sup>1</sup> J. Burian, “Fides historica als methodologischer Grundsatz der *Historia Augusta*,” *Klio* 59 (1977) 285–98.

<sup>2</sup> L. Homo, “Les documents de l’Histoire Auguste et leur valeur historique,” *Rev. Hist.* 151 (1926) 161–98, and 152 (1926) 1–31.

<sup>3</sup> For example: *Avid. Cass.* 1.7, *Avidius Cassius avidus est . . . imperii* (from a letter of Verus); 9.7, *Verus mihi de Avidio verum scripserat, quod cuperet imperare* (from a letter of Hadrian to Faustina); *Prob.* 4.4, (*Probus*) *est adulescens vere probus* (from a letter of Valerian); 21.4, *Hic Probus imperator et vere probus situs est* (from his epitaph); similarly the epitaph of Pescennius Niger (12.6), *nigrum nomen habet, nigrum formavimus ipsi*; *Car.* 8.5, *Carus princeps noster vere carus* (from a letter of Julius Calpurnius).

<sup>4</sup> H. Peter, *HRR* (Stuttgart 1967 repr.) vol. 2, 120; *RE*, s.v. “Aelius” no. 91; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 220.

<sup>5</sup> H. Dessau, “Über Zeit und Persönlichkeit der Scriptores Historiae Augustae,” *Hermes* 24 (1889) 337–92.

Caracalla),<sup>6</sup> the first seven have of late been judged prosopographically sound.<sup>7</sup>

It has been said that the *Vita Severi* "marks the *Historia Augusta's* obvious declension into romance,"<sup>8</sup> despite the overall reliability accorded it. For example, it incorporates none of the pseudo-acta which manifestly were employed to pad those portions of the text for which no *bona fide* source(s) could not or would not be procured. Indications are that an abundance of evidence was available and this is confirmed by the fatigue, impatience and haste implicit at *Sev.* 17.5, *et quoniam longum est minora persequi, huius magnifica illa*. Still, this *vita* bears the mark of the punster as well. We are informed that Severus performed his duties as tribune of the plebs *severissime* (3.1), and that *ob severitatem*, along with other qualities, his tenure as governor of Lugdunensis was much appreciated by the provincials (4.1). Moreover, during his reign many were condemned to death *cur iocati essent, alii, cur tacuissent, alii, cur pleraque figurata dixissent ut ecce imperator vere nominis sui, vere Pertinax, vere Severus* (14.13).

Consider *Sev.* 13.1–7, 9. This chapter provides a list of forty-two *nobiles* executed on Severus' command upon his return to Rome after the defeat of Clodius Albinus. Only five of the persons mentioned are confirmed from other sources, and while most appear to be valid, there is room for doubt.<sup>9</sup> According to Dio 76.8.4, twenty-nine senators were put to death and thirty-five pardoned; only Erucius Clarus is common to the *HA* and to Dio (74.9.5–6). An attempt has been made to rehabilitate twenty-seven of the remaining thirty-seven individuals on the hypothesis that the entire

<sup>6</sup> R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971) 30–43.

<sup>7</sup> T. D. Barnes, "Hadrian and Lucius Verus," *JRS* 57 (1967) 65–79; *id.*, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* (Brussels 1978) 32–48. H. G. Pflaum, "La valeur de la source inspiratrice de la Vita Pii à la lumière des personnalités nommément citées," *BHAC* 3 (1964/65) 143–52; *id.*, "La valeur de la source inspiratrice de la Vita Hadriani et de la Vita Marci Antonini à la lumière des personnalités contemporaines nommément citées," *BHAC* 7 (1968/69) 173–232; *id.*, "La valeur de l'information historique de la Vita Commodi à la lumière des personnages nommément cités par le biographe," *BHAC* 10 (1970) 199–247; *id.*, "Les personnages nommément cités par la Vita Pertinacis de l'Histoire Auguste," *BHAC* 11 (1971) 113–37; *id.*, "Les personnages nommément cités par la Vita Didi Juliani de l'Histoire Auguste," *BHAC* 11 (1971) 139–56.

<sup>8</sup> T. D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* 48.

<sup>9</sup> Such prosopographical studies (with their implications) require caution, however; see, e.g., A. J. Graham, "The Limitations of Prosopography in Roman Imperial History (with special reference to the Severan period)," *ANRW* II.1 (Berlin 1974) 136–57. Overconfident assertions of an earlier age have been occasionally waylaid by a more recent circumspection; note E. Birley's remarks in "Military Intelligence and the *Historia Augusta*," *BHAC* 3 (1964/65) 37–38, on A. von Domaszewski's "Die Personennamen bei den Scriptoribus Historiae Augustae," *SHAW* 13 (1918). Further, A. Birley, "The Augustan History," in *Latin Biography*, ed. T. A. Dorey (New York 1967) 132–33, and A. E. Cameron in *JRS* 55 (1965) 249–50, reviewing the *Atti del Colloquio Patavino sulla Historia Augusta* (Rome 1963).

catalogue is “eine unschätzbare Quelle.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, ten names can be regarded as definite fabrications and it is asserted that they were added in order to portray Severus in the worst possible light, perhaps echoing the opinion, especially visible in the *HA*, held of the emperor by his enemies and the Senate.<sup>11</sup> This view has no support in Dio or Herodian, where the cause of the assassinations is expressly traced to the justifiable wrath of Severus at the treasonable correspondence between several members of the Senate and the rebel Caesar, Albinus.<sup>12</sup> Convinced of the accuracy of both Dio and Herodian in this matter, Alföldy has surmised that this proscription list contains the genuine names of some of Albinus’ supporters in the anti-Severan cabal. Furthermore, it is sure that not all were *summi viri* as stated at 13.9, and that approximately eleven of the victims were either of African descent or had strong connections with that province.<sup>13</sup> Two points emerge: (a) these eleven seem to have favored another African, Clodius Albinus,<sup>14</sup> and (b) the arguments of those who have challenged the assumption that Severus always had an all-pervasive, pro-African policy, with no native opposition, are corroborated.<sup>15</sup> We are thus left with two apparently contradictory conclusions: (1) there is indeed much valuable and authentic information in the *Vita Severi*, and (2) this core is combined with unreliable material, maybe tententiously.

This series of forty-two unfortunates contains no less than six Pescennii, and the author has outdone himself with the inclusion of the ludicrous “Pescennius Albinus.” Dessau, in reviewing the many puns throughout the *HA*, wondered how six ostensibly different authors could display such similarly playful tendencies.<sup>16</sup> In fact, such foolishness helped to stamp the unitary *Fälscher*; he is a rogue scholar—a *grammaticus*, writing to deceive and to entertain.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> G. Alföldy, “Eine Proskriptionsliste in der *Historia Augusta*,” *BHAC* 7 (1968/69) 1–11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Dio 76.8.4; Herodian 3.5.2; 3.8.6.

<sup>13</sup> G. Alföldy (above, note 10) 10–11.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, “Herkunft und Laufbahn des Clodius Albinus in der *Historia Augusta*,” *BHAC* 4 (1966/67) 19–38.

<sup>15</sup> For the controversy, see A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus* (New York 1972) 3.

<sup>16</sup> H. Dessau (above, note 5) 384–85.

<sup>17</sup> Further, Syme, *Emperors and Biography* 1–16. Interesting in this regard is the anecdote concerning the origin of Regalianus’ name: *credimus quod a regno. Tum is qui aderat scholasticus coepit quasi grammaticaliter declinare et dicere, rex, regis, regi, Regalianus* (*Tyr. trig.* 10.3–5). This episode is qualified (significantly) by the words *capitali ioco* (10.3), for which see pp. 112–13 below.

The number of “jokes” discernible in the *HA* continues to increase.<sup>18</sup> *Comm.* 6.8 alludes to the praetorian prefect Marcius *Quartus*<sup>19</sup> as having held office *quinque diebus*. *Pert.* 6.4 makes mention of a certain Triarius Maternus *Lascivius*, not positively attested elsewhere;<sup>20</sup> it seems that the praetorian guard desired to establish him as emperor, but *ille nudus fugit*. Now, a touch of humor does not necessarily invalidate the authenticity of the one involved, yet it must also be clearly understood that the author of the *HA* readily engaged in the willful deception of otherwise recognizable names,<sup>21</sup> and thus there is no absolute need to expend energy trying to emend, as, e.g., Barnes does.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the *HA* can be facetious to a fault.

Among the more than 200 figures unique to the *HA* are thirty-five historians or biographers cited as “authorities.”<sup>23</sup> Many stand revealed for what they are, as playful fantasies; e.g., Maeonius Astyanax (*Tyr. trig.* 12.1). Some are condemned from the context in which they appear; e.g., Callicrates of Tyre (*Aurel.* 4.2).<sup>24</sup> Cameron,<sup>25</sup> while asserting that it would be excessive or naïve to label all thirty-five as either fictitious or genuine, reminds us that the “historian” Cornelius Capitolinus (*Tyr. trig.* 15.8) and Vulcacius Terentianus (*Gord.* 21.5) bear a suspicious resemblance to two of the *Scriptores* themselves—Julius Capitolinus and Vulcacius Gallicanus.

Of these “authorities,” the first occurs in a secondary *Vita* (*Avid.* 5.1), Aemilius Parthenianus,<sup>26</sup> who is said to have composed a history “from ancient times to the present of pretenders to the throne.” On the face of it, this little item might seem harmless were it not for the fact that it is precisely the biographies of pretenders which most clearly exhibit the high degree of utter nonsense and fabrication of the later lives.

Forewarned is forearmed; the imposter sometimes leaves clues to his fancies. What, then, might one make of Aelius Maurus (*Sev.* 20.1), the first (and only) “source” of the nine primary *Vitae* to be nowhere else on record?<sup>27</sup> Was he inspired by the grammarian Aemilianus Maurus, one of

<sup>18</sup> From Dessau to E. Hohl, “Vopiscus und die Biographie des Kaisers Tacitus,” *Klio* 11 (1911) 292, note 3, to, most recently, B. Baldwin, “The Vita Avidi,” *Klio* 58 (1976) 104–109.

<sup>19</sup> Doubtful, according to L. L. Howe, *The Praetorian Prefect from Commodus to Diocletian* (Chicago 1942) 112–13; uncertain, in the view of H. G. Pflaum, “La valeur de l’information de la Vita Commodi” (above, note 7) 240.

<sup>20</sup> H. G. Pflaum, “Les personnages nommément cités par la Vita Pertinacis” (above, note 7) 126 f., 129, 134.

<sup>21</sup> R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1964) 165–75.

<sup>22</sup> T. D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* 33–38.

<sup>23</sup> R. Syme, “Bogus Authors,” *BHAC* 12 (1972/74) 311–21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>25</sup> A. E. Cameron (above, note 9) 250.

<sup>26</sup> B. Baldwin (above, note 18) 104–105.

<sup>27</sup> This, incidentally, is a strong indication that the author had plenty of legitimate source material upon which to draw for this portion of the biographies.

the *Deipnosophists*, as Baldwin speculates?<sup>28</sup> This character is used to introduce two “rubbishy”<sup>29</sup> chapters, blatantly grafted onto the main narrative, complete with an invocation to Diocletian, and incorporating themes common to other late insertions to the text.<sup>30</sup> There follow the *signa mortis* (*Sev.* 22) which are more of an appendix than an integral and coherent portion of the *Vita*, and if they are not pure invention, they at least betray the marks of thematic borrowing from Suetonius.<sup>31</sup> Parallels are easily detectable; *Sev.* 22.1–2 with Suet. *Iul.* 81.3; cf. Dio 44.17.1. *Sev.* 22.5 with Suet. *Vesp.* 23.4. More tenuous is the link between *Sev.* 22.3 and Suet. *Aug.* 97.2; cf. Dio 56.29.4.

Hohl’s Teubner text (1971) of the third omen (*Sev.* 22.4–5) reads:

post m[a]Iurum apud vallum vis[s]um in Brittannia cum ad proximam mansionem rediret non solum victor sed etiam in aeternum pace fundata vol<v>ens animo, quid [h]om̄inis sibi occurreret, Aethiops quidam e numero militari, clarae inter scurras famae et celebratorum semper iocorum, cum corona e cupressu facta <e>idem occurrit. quem cum ille iratus removeri ab oculis praecepisset et coloris eius tactus [h]om̄ine[s] et coron<a>e, dixisse ille dicitur ioci causa: ‘totum fu<d>isti, totum vicisti, iam deus esto victor.’

Although this section is corrupt, internal consistency and an acquired enlightenment of the author’s purpose combine to assure a sound and different reading of the first line, which has a special interest. The preferred reading should be that of Peter’s first Teubner edition (1865):<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> B. Baldwin, “The Minor Characters in Athenaeus,” *AC* 20 (1977) 39–40. I am grateful to Professor Baldwin for having alerted me to this article after having kindly read a draft of this piece.

<sup>29</sup> R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* 72.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *M. Aurel.* 19.12; *Ver.* 11.4. J. Béranger, “L’Hérité dynastique dans l’Histoire Auguste: Procédé et tradition,” *BHAC* 11 (1971) 1–20.

<sup>31</sup> B. Moučková, “Omina mortis in der Historia Augusta,” *BHAC* 7(1968/69) 132–39; 147–49. It may be correct to believe with J. Hasebroek, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Septimius Severus* (Heidelberg 1921) 148, that the omens in *Sev.* 22 originated with or were influenced by the full account of Dio, with which one might compare his monograph (73.23) on the dreams and portents which presaged the ascent of Severus to his position as emperor. In the epitome of Xiphilinus only one foreshadowing of death occurs (77.11.2), and it has features in common with *Sev.* 22.3. The similarities with Dio and with Suetonius have escaped the notice of both F. Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta* (Bonn 1972), and A. Chastagnol, “L’Histoire Auguste et les ‘Douze Césars’ de Suétone,” *BHAC* 10 (1970) 109–23.

<sup>32</sup> In his second edition of 1884, he altered this portion to *post murum apud Luguwallum visum*. In returning to Peter’s original reading, I in no way wish to imply that the manuscripts do not support *maurum* and *missum*, nor that I am the first to adopt this preference (see, e.g., A. R. Birley [above, note 15] 265); rather, that both internal sense and external considerations demand it.

## post maurum apud vallum missum in Britannia

*Apud vallum* provides a satisfactory geographical location, and, while it may be true that the *HA* displays eccentric Latinity, the combination of *apud vallum* with *post murum* seems unduly awkward (if not quasi-redundant<sup>33</sup>). Moreover, it is not unusual that *post* should be introducing a phrase which includes a perfect passive participle; similar constructions can easily be cited.<sup>34</sup>

Hasebroek considered *maurum* "sinnlose," and emended it to *militem*.<sup>35</sup> *Maurum*, however, should be considered quite correct and deliberate. In the first place, there is evidence for a *numerus Maurorum* as part of the garrison at Burgh-by-Sands (Aballava) in the middle of the third century.<sup>36</sup> *Missum*, consequently, refers to the discharge of a soldier, in this case a *maurum*. Secondly, since chapter 22 is throughout concerned with omens of death,<sup>37</sup> the reading *maurum* takes on additional significance and it agrees in tone with the mention of black sacrificial animals at 22.7 and with that of *cupressu* in its own section, since the cypress was a tree sacred to Pluto and was used at funerals.<sup>38</sup> Thirdly, and most importantly, *maurum* is to be connected with the *Aethiops*<sup>39</sup> whose presence Severus wished to avoid since his color was a foreshadowing of death.<sup>40</sup>

There is more, and the words *iocorum*, *ioci* offer hints. From his investigation of Hadrian's farewell to life (*Hadr.* 25.9–10), Barnes initially inferred that the author's penchant for *ioci* contributed to our awareness of his falsifications.<sup>41</sup> It is interesting that a study of Lessing's lexicon to the *HA* reveals the following tally: *iocari*, 11 times; *iocularis*, 4; *iocus*,

<sup>33</sup> On the distinction, see D. J. Breeze and B. Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (New York 1978) 43–51.

<sup>34</sup> *Comm.* 6.4, *post interfectum Perennem eiusque filium*; *M. Aurel.* 12.12, *funambulis post puerum lapsum, culcitas subici iussit*; *Pert.* 5.1, *post laudes suas a consulibus dictas et post vituperationem Commodi adclamationibus senatus ostensam*; see further, C. Lessing, *Scriptorum Historiae Augustae Lexicon* (Leipzig 1901–6), s.v. "post" B.b.

<sup>35</sup> J. Hasebroek (above, note 31) 148.

<sup>36</sup> A. R. Birley (above, note 15) 266; G. Simpson, *Britons and the Roman Army* (London 1964) 133–34.

<sup>37</sup> Hence *ominis*, and not *hominis*, in line 3 of our text; cf. line 7.

<sup>38</sup> The adjective *ferialis* is frequently coupled with it; Vergil, *Aen.* 6.216; Ovid, *Trist.* 3.13.21.

<sup>39</sup> See F. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. 1970) 11–12, on the virtual equivalence of *maurus-aethiops*.

<sup>40</sup> B. Mouchová (above, note 31) 37.

<sup>41</sup> T. D. Barnes, "Hadrian's Farewell to Life," *CQ* 18 (1968) 384–86; followed by J. Schwartz, "Éléments suspects de la Vita Hadriani," *BHAC* 12 (1972/74) 252; *contra*, B. Baldwin, "Hadrian's Farewell to Life: Some Arguments for Authenticity," *CQ* 20 (1970) 372–74. Barnes has since changed his mind, without full explanation; *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* 125, note 5.

30.<sup>42</sup> With the playful nature and verbal silliness of the *HA* beyond dispute, should one not associate our *Aethiops/maurus*, so celebrated for his humor, with Aelius Maurus and conclude that he is fraudulent? He is the product of sheer imagination, fashioned by the author in order to have his fun and, at the same time, to provide the false impression of diligence and learning. Significantly, the first instance of a truly bogus source in the primary *Vitae* ushers in trash and is linked with an extended pun. It thus paves the way for the compiler of the *HA* to give more and more vent to his willful concoctions and trickery. The analogy to the personality and intention of “Aemilius Parthenianus” is strong and vivid.

One final item remains. At *Sev.* 20.1, Maurus is styled *Phlegontis Hadriani libertum*. Now Phlegon makes his first appearance at *Hadr.* 16.1, where his biography of Hadrian is in fact attributed to the emperor himself. We are informed that Hadrian insisted that his own material be published under the names of his freedmen. Does this attempted imposture mirror the circumstance of six “authors” for the *HA*? Or is it the case that the *iocum* is still on us?

<sup>42</sup> C. Lessing (above, note 34), s.vv.