STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Edited by

ANDREW G. SCOTT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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PREFACE

This volume examines various aspects of contemporary historiography in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The term 'contemporary historiography' (Jacoby's *Zeitgeschichte*) is usually applied to historical works that cover, in whole or in part, the periods of time through which the historians themselves lived. These works are typically valued for their proximity to the events they narrate, though they are not without their problems of interpretation. Through various devices, authors might attempt to give the impression of eyewitness status even when they themselves were not present; contemporary events could shift authors' point of view and compel them to provide unrealistic or biased accounts; and memories of eyewitnesses were not always sharp. The papers in this volume examine how we might read and understand histories of this type. They demonstrate how contemporary historiography was practiced across time and how it was a constantly evolving part of the Greco-Roman historiographic tradition.

The papers on Herodotus and Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Cassius Dio, and Herodian originated in a session held at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in San Diego in 2019. To the original four papers presented there have been added chapters on Ptolemy I Soter, Sallust, and Tacitus.

My thanks go to the contributors to this supplement, for their dedication and persistence, and to John Marincola, for his help and patience in bringing this work to publication. I also thank the anonymous reviewers, who offered many criticisms and suggestions for the improvement of this volume as a whole.

A.G.S.
Philadelphia, November 2022

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8

THE IMAGES OF YOUNG TYRANTS: REPRESENTATION AND REALITY IN HERODIAN'S *ROMAN HISTORY**

Andrew G. Scott

Abstract: Herodian's *Roman History* engages with the tenets of ancient historiographic theory, particularly those set down by Thucydides. In general, he positions himself as a follower of these prescriptions, though particular eyewitness scenes strain the credulity of the reader. This paper explores Herodian's depictions of young emperors in these scenes as a way to understand how his pushing the boundaries of ancient historiographic theory allows him to stretch the truth as a way to enhance the overall thesis of his work.

Keywords: Herodian, Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, Thucydides, autopsy, eyewitness, vividness

Introduction

Sometime after 238 CE Herodian completed his Roman history, a work composed in Greek that covers the years 180–238 CE, from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the accession of Gordian III. Therein, Herodian positions himself as a contemporary of the events that he narrates and reaches back to the prescriptions of Thucydides when laying out his aims and research method, which focus on accuracy and autopsy, either his own or that of others. Although seemingly traditional in its approach, Herodian's work has had a poor reception, notably having been called an 'historical

novel' and impugned by many for its fictions.[1] Yet as scholars of ancient Greek and Roman historiography have become more sympathetic to the use of authorial invention within the genre, Herodian's work has undergone a certain reconsideration, mostly seen, more recently, as an ironic approach to a tumultuous age.[2]

The paper, taking seriously the thesis that Herodian outlines in his introduction, aims to better comprehend the role that fictionalised or invented scenes play in emphasising that thesis, while also understanding how these aspects of the history provide insight into how Herodian considered his work within the historiographic tradition. Herodian's explicit aim is to survey the many changes in power that he witnessed, which mixed older, wiser emperors with younger rulers who broke with established tradition. In this chapter, I hope to bring together these concerns of Herodian, namely the changes that were introduced by young emperors and the method of inquiry employed by the author. I will focus specifically on changes in imperial self-presentation, the visual aspect of being emperor and presenting oneself publicly to various constituencies throughout the empire.[3] These changes overlap with Herodian's method, which employs the vivid narration of a contemporary historian, derived primarily from autopsy, which provides a sense of 'being there'.

With an opening scene involving Marcus Aurelius and his visions of young tyrants to come, Herodian establishes his readers as the future viewers of the youthful emperors in his history, and he highlights their innovations through vivid descriptions of their self-presentation. Three episodes in particular then highlight the innovations of young emperors by explicit claims of autopsy, an increased use of visual vocabulary, or a combination thereof: Commodus' performance in the arena, to which Herodian claims to have been an eyewitness (1.15.4); Caracalla's adoption of an Alexander-persona, which Herodian claims to have observed in the emperor's public images (4.8.2); and Elagabalus' use of a painting to prepare the Romans for

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[1] Alföldy (1971a), esp. 431 has advanced the idea of Herodian's work as an historical novel; see also Kolb (1972) 160–1, who censures Herodian's history for its bloated rhetoric and factual poverty. These criticisms, and others, are collected in Bowersock (1975) 229–30.

[2] On the point generally, see Woodman (1988). Sidebottom (1998) 2778–80 has advanced this more ironic approach. For other recent approaches, see Kemezis (2014), ch. 6; Scott (2018); Chrysanthou (2020) and (2022); and Galimberti (2022).

[3] For the importance of 'visual representations' to both Herodian and his audience, see Kemezis (2016) 368.

his initial arrival into the city as emperor (5.5.6–7).[4] In these episodes, Herodian presents seemingly unbelievable events in a believable manner by vouching for their accuracy as an eyewitness (actual or virtual). The reader, however, might be sceptical of these reports, despite the fact that Herodian either states outright or insinuates that they are derived from his eyewitness status. Through an examination of these scenes, it is possible to see how Herodian intertwines method and subject matter to comment on the purpose and aim of his history.

Herodian, Contemporary Historian

In the introductory passages of the history, Herodian consciously engages with the main aspects of the ancient historiographic tradition, in specific imitation of Thucydides.[5] He sets himself apart from other writers who attempted to gain a reputation for themselves (1.1.1):

> οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν περὶ συγκομιδὴν ἱστορίας ἀσχοληθέντων ἔργων τε πάλαι γεγονότων μνήμην ἀνανεώσασθαι σπουδασάντων, παιδείας κλέος ἀίδιον μνώμενοι, ὡς ἂν μὴ σιωπήσαντες λάθοιεν ἐς τὸν πολὺν ὅμιλον ἀριθ-μούμενοι, τῆς μὲν ἀληθείας ἐν ταῖς ἀφηγήσεσιν ὠλιγώρησαν, οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ ἐπεμελήθησαν φράσεώς τε καὶ εὐφωνίας, θαρροῦντες, ὡς εἴ τι καὶ μυθῶδες λέγοιεν, τὸ μὲν ἡδὺ τῆς ἀκροάσεως αὐτοὶ καρπώσονται, τὸ δ' ἀκριβὲς τῆς ἐξετάσεως οὐκ ἐλεγχθήσεται.

> Most of those involved in the compiling of a history and eager to renew the record of past events, mindful of the everlasting glory of learnedness, that if they should be silent they would be forgotten, numbered among the great rabble, neglected truth in their telling, and not least of all cared for their manner of speech and being pleasing to the ear. They were confident that if they should also say something fabulous, they

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[4] See Zimmermann (1999) 222–32 for descriptions of imperial dress as part of Herodian's depiction of the emperors as tyrants. Potter (1999) 87–8 discusses the overall visual orientation of Herodian's narrative.

[5] On the connections to Thucydides, see Sidebottom (1998) 2777–80; Hidber (2006) 72–115; Pitcher (2009) 40–3; Kemezis (2014) 230–4.

themselves would enjoy the benefit of the pleasure of their audience, and that the accuracy of the inquiry would not be put to the test.[6]

A few sentences later, Herodian lays out his own approach (1.1.3):

ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἱστορίαν οὐ παρ᾽ ἄλλων παραδεξάμενος ἄγνωστόν τε καὶ ἀμάρτυρον, ὑπὸ νεαρᾷ δὲ τῇ τῶν ἐντευξομένων μνήμῃ, μετὰ πάσης [ἀληθοῦς] ἀκριβείας ἤθροισα ἐς συγγραφήν, οὐκ ἀτερπῆ τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ τοῖς ὕστερον ἔσεσθαι προσδοκήσας ἔργων μεγάλων τε καὶ πολλῶν ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ γενομένων …

I have not adopted from others any unknowable or unwitnessed information (ἱστορίαν); rather, I have gathered everything into a history (συγγραφήν) with every accuracy, within the recent memory of my readers, believing as well that the knowledge of important deeds and those that occurred within a limited period of time will be not unpleasant (οὐκ ἀτερπῆ) to future readers …

After an interlude, in which he provides some background on the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Herodian makes further remarks about his method. There he reiterates his claim of producing a contemporary history, this time including a detail about his work in imperial service (1.2.5):

ἃ δὲ μετὰ τὴν Μάρκου τελευτὴν παρὰ πάντα τὸν ἐμαυτοῦ βίον εἶδόν τε καὶ ἤκουσα—ἔστι δ᾽ ὧν καὶ πείρᾳ μετέσχον ἐν βασιλικαῖς ἢ δημοσίαις ὑπηρεσίαις γενόμενος—ταῦτα συνέγραψα.

I have recorded the events after the death of Marcus entirely from what I saw and heard during my life, as I had experience of them since I was in the imperial and public service.

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[6] I have translated μυθῶδες in this passage as 'fabulous material' and have attempted to remain consistent with this translation throughout (see further, below). By 'fabulous' I mean to suggest exaggerated or unbelievable material: see Flory (1990). For the association of pleasure and 'fabulous material' (and likewise the rejection that such fabulous material brings pleasure), see Luc. *Hist. Conscr.* 10. Hidber (2006) 102–4 discusses Herodian's use of this term, especially with regard to Thucydides but also with other references to the historiographic tradition.

Herodian's comments should be read in light of Thucydides' introductory remarks, especially the passage at 1.22.2–4:

τὰ δ' ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἠξίωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ἀλλ' οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρῆν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατὸν ἀκριβείᾳ περὶ ἑκάστου ἐπεξελθών. … καὶ ἐς μὲν ἀκρόασιν ἴσως τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες αὐτῶν ἀτερπέστερον φανεῖται· ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὖθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἀρκούντως ἕξει.

Having learned what happened in the war, I considered it worthwhile to commit it to writing not from a chance individual or as it seemed best to me, but by investigating each event at which I myself was present or from others who were with the greatest accuracy as possible. … Perhaps the lack of fabulous material will seem less pleasing to my readers; but whoever wishes to discover the truth of what happened and of what is bound to happen, in an exact or similar way, in accordance with human nature, it will be sufficient for me that they consider these matters useful.

Reading these passages all together, we see Herodian associating himself with Thucydides' approach to writing history. Like Thucydides, Herodian stresses that he will use his own autopsy, and also suggests that he will rely on the eyewitness testimony of others. His claim of experience in the imperial bureaucracy mimics the belief that 'men of affairs' can produce the best histories.[7] These statements place Herodian in the tradition of Thucydides, the example *par excellence* for writing contemporary history.[8]

One aspect of Herodian's preface, however, seems curious at first, namely his claim that his work will be 'not unpleasant'. This comment recalls Thucydides' seeming rejection of immediate pleasure, seen above.[9] Through

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[7] As most strongly stated perhaps in Polybius (12.25g). For the importance of an historian's experience informing his work, see also Marincola (1997) 133–48 (with mention of this passage in Herodian at p. 147).

[8] Jacoby (2015) 31: '[O]nly with Thucydides did Greek historiography reach τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν ['its true nature', a phrase taken from Arist. *Poet.* 1449a15], in that it creates the genre that now permanently remains the noblest and most significant, which actually alone truly ranks as "historiography", namely contemporary history'.

[9] Although Thucydides' statement has been taken as a strict rejection of pleasure in his work, that is certainly an over-reading; rather, Thucydides merely states that his work might

his rejection of fabulous material, Thucydides elevates autoptic investigation over stories from the past. Autoptic descriptions aimed for accuracy, which would aim to show that '… there was no need for argument: you could simply *see* the thing was true'.[10] These depictions also created a sense of vividness (ἐνάργεια), which could also bring pleasure. For the specific connection between vividness and pleasure, we might rely on Duris' approach to the pleasure that can be derived from mimetic representation. Duris criticised Ephorus and Theopompus for using 'neither any kind of representation (μιμήσεως) nor pleasure (ἡδονῆς) in the recounting, but concerned themselves solely with the writing itself'.[11]

Like Thucydides, Herodian aimed for vividness in his narrative, and also like Thucydides he rejected the use of fabulous material in pursuit of pleasure (1.1.1, above). At issue in this chapter is the fact that Herodian at times seems to include fantastical material in his work, and, as noted in the introduction above, Herodian has long been faulted for his novelistic tendencies; and indeed the episodes that I will discuss in this paper strain the credulity of the reader.[12] If we accept the connection of autoptic description, vividness, and pleasure, we will see in what follows that Herodian has taken the maxims of Thucydides and stretched them a bit. While his narrative might at times stray from strict accuracy, the purpose is to highlight a theme of his history, namely the innovations in self-presentation made by the young emperors of his day. What Herodian describes, then, is not fantastical or fictional *per se*, but rather a reflection of the changes that occurred, amplified

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be perceived as less pleasing: see Woodman (1988) 28–9. With respect to Herodian specifically, see Kemezis (2014) 231.

[10] Wiseman (1993) 146 (italics in original); see also Damon (2010) 354: the effect of vividness 'is that an "audience" (listener or reader) should see what participants saw and feel what they felt'. In antiquity Thucydides was praised for the vividness of his narrative; see, e.g., Plut. *Mor.* 347A.

[11] *BNJ* 76 F 1; translation from Marincola (2017) 40. There is still some disagreement over how Duris uses the term μίμησις in this fragment: see Gray (1987) for a survey and an argument for the term denoting appropriate representation of character; see also Pownall's commentary at *BNJ* 76 F 1. Whether we take Gray's meaning or the 'vivid representation' offered by others (see Walbank (2002) 235, with reff.), the general outcome is the same for the purposes of the discussion here. For the treatment of the passages of Plutarch and Duris with regard to Thucydides' preface, see Woodman (1988) 25.

[12] In addition to the criticisms adduced above, we can add Hidber's (2006) 104 observation that Herodian mentions the pleasure of his work without a reference to its usefulness, which defies the expectation for historiography and is more similar to what one finds in ancient novels.

to stress their importance.[13] They also allow Herodian to test the boundaries of historical narrative aimed at an accurate accounting of the past, while still working within the historiographic tradition, just as his young emperors push the boundaries of normative modes of imperial self-presentation.

Setting the Scene: Marcus Aurelius' Visions

Just as the introduction establishes Herodian as a contemporary historian who will rely on eyewitness testimony and his own observation to chart the changes in power in his own day, so the opening scenes of the work expand on the importance of sight and judgement of emperors in the history, especially youthful ones. Within the preface Herodian lays out his theme, which points to the uniqueness of his work (1.1.5–6):

> μερισθεῖσα γὰρ ἡ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴ ἐν ἔτεσιν ἑξήκοντα ἐς πλείους δυνάστας ἢ ὁ χρόνος ἀπήτει, πολλὰ καὶ ποικίλα ἤνεγκε καὶ θαύματος ἄξια. τούτων γὰρ οἱ μὲν τὴν ἡλικίαν πρεσβύτεροι διὰ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἐπιμελέστερον ἑαυτῶν τε καὶ τῶν ὑπηκόων ἦρξαν, οἱ δὲ κομιδῇ νέοι ῥᾳθυμότερον βιώσαντες πολλὰ ἐκαινοτόμησαν.

> The Roman empire was divided, over sixty years, among more rulers than the time permitted, and many events were unexpected and worthy of wonder. For the older rulers, because of their experience of affairs, ruled themselves and their subjects more temperately, whereas the younger ones lived more carelessly and instituted many new things.

Instead of a history of Rome as a whole, Herodian will focus on a period of only sixty years and, more specifically, on the issue of changes in power and the differences between mature and young emperors.[14]

This theme is highlighted at first through the figure of Marcus Aurelius an ideal *princeps* against whom all future emperors are to be judged.[15]

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[13] This view is in line with Sidebottom's claim ((1998) 2821–2) that Herodian's history, while at times dealing in authorial invention, presented a history that was 'true enough'.

[14] At 2.15.7, Herodian states that he will cover a period of seventy years. The history deals with the period 180–238 CE, about sixty years, so the latter citation of seventy years may be a corruption in the text. For a discussion, see Whittaker (1969) I.ix–xix, and Alföldy (1971b) 204–9.

[15] See Sidebottom (1998) 2804–6; Hidber (2006), esp. 188–272.

Herodian describes Marcus as possessing all virtues and as a lover of ancient literature (1.2.3–4). He was a clement and upright emperor, and indeed was the only philosopher-king.[16] In addition, Herodian expects Marcus' reputation to precede him: he goes on to relate that many writers have already written histories of Marcus (1.2.5). As these comments mark the end of the introduction proper, the history begins with scenes detailing Marcus' final days and the emperor's concerns about the future, specifically the passage of power to his son Commodus.[17] In a poignant passage, Marcus reflects on examples from the past that demonstrate the folly of handing power to young rulers. Here, Herodian has Marcus draw on his education; since Marcus was 'a very learned man' ($\mathring{a}\nu\delta\rho\alpha$ $\pi o\lambda\upsilon\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau o\rho\alpha$, 1.3.2), he became anxious when he thought about past rulers who came to power as young men, such as Dionysius II of Syracuse; the successors of Alexander; and Roman emperors such as Nero and Domitian.[18] Importantly, Marcus visualised these examples. Herodian writes that 'having formed a notion of these images of tyrants, he was alarmed and scared' ($\tau o\iota\alpha\acute{\upsilon}\tau\alpha s$ $\delta\grave{\eta}$ $\tau\upsilon\rho\alpha\nu\nu\acute{\iota}\delta os$ $\epsilon\mathring{\iota}\kappa\acute{o}\nu\alpha s$ $\mathring{\upsilon}\pi o\tau\upsilon\pi o\acute{\upsilon}\mu\epsilon\nu os$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\delta\epsilon\delta\acute{\iota}\epsilon\iota$ $\tau\epsilon$ $\kappa\alpha\grave{\iota}$ $\mathring{\eta}\lambda\pi\iota\zeta\epsilon\nu$).

This scene functions programmatically, even as a sort of second preface embedded within the narrative proper. Marcus' deathbed vision alerts the reader to the importance of sight and appearance in the descriptions of the reigns to come.[19] When read in combination with Herodian's preface, this passage indicates that the reader will view the tyrannical behaviour of young emperors and therefore be conditioned to judge that behaviour appropriately. As Herodian's history unfolds, one of his concerns, as indicated in this 'second preface', is the behaviour of young tyrants. Herodian will highlight deviations from normative modes of visual self-representation through public spectacles and scenes of personal autopsy. At the beginning of the story, such innovations lead to the almost immediate removal of an emperor, but by the end we see a thirteen-year-old ascending the throne. Thus, I will argue, in his analysis of kings and tyrants, Herodian will use vividness both to prove his thesis about young emperors and to demonstrate

[16] While Herodian does not use the term 'philosopher-king' specifically, he places the words side by side at 1.2.4: $\mu\acute{o}\nu os$ $\tau\epsilon$ $\beta\alpha\sigma\iota\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega\nu$ $\phi\iota\lambda o\sigma o\phi\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$ $o\mathring{\upsilon}$ $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma o\iota s$ $o\mathring{\upsilon}\delta\grave{\epsilon}$ $\delta o\gamma\mu\acute{a}\tau\omega\nu$ $\gamma\nu\acute{\omega}\sigma\epsilon\sigma\iota$, $\sigma\epsilon\mu\nu\hat{\omega}$ δ' $\mathring{\eta}\theta\epsilon\iota$ $\kappa\alpha\grave{\iota}$ $\sigma\acute{\omega}\phi\rho o\nu\iota$ $\beta\acute{\iota}\omega$ $\mathring{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\omega}\sigma\alpha\tau o$.

[17] For analysis of this passage and its historiographic implications, see Pitcher (2012) 269–70. Hidber (2006) 196–201 reviews the literary forebears to this passage.

[18] Pitcher (2009) 44 comments on the self-consciousness of this scene, 'as an example of someone using historiography *within* a historiographical text' (italics in original).

[19] Hidber (2006) 244 n. 235.

how young emperors and their idiosyncratic self-presentations became normalised and led to further instability for the empire. This is all the more striking, because as Herodian's vivid depictions of emperors become more and more improbable to the audience, the actors in his story become all the more credulous.[20] With this technique, Herodian put the reader in a better position than the characters within the story itself to make appropriate judgements of emperors.[21] With these considerations in mind, it will be useful to turn to some specific examples.

Commodus in the Arena

As he moves to the end of Commodus' reign and life, Herodian uses the games that the emperor celebrated in 192 CE as an important turning point that precipitated the emperor's fall. In his prefatory remarks, Herodian highlights the novelty of the event, writing that people came from all over the empire to 'witness things which they had never seen nor heard before' (θεασόμενοι ἃ μὴ πρότερον μήτε ἑωράκεσαν μήτε ἠκηκόεσαν, 1.15.1). He also states that 'he gathered animals from all quarters; we saw those which we had marvelled at in paintings then for the first time' (τὰ δὲ πανταχόθεν ζῷα ἠθροίζετο αὐτῷ. τότε γοῦν εἴδομεν ὅσα ἐν γραφαῖς ἐθαυμάζομεν, 1.15.4).[22] The insistence on the uniqueness of the events and his stress on seeing the activities first-hand relate to the passages discussed above. It connects to the preface with its insistence on the author's claim of autopsy as one of his major methods of research, as well as the sense of marvel that Commodus' games produced, an aspect of his history that Herodian specifically says will be part of his work. The sense of wonder or amazement also sets up the importance of visuality in the narrative to come and indicates that the reader should be paying particular attention to appearances.[23] Furthermore, we are reminded

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[20] For the relationship between vividness and probability see Woodman (1988) 28.

[21] Sidebottom (1998) 2817–19 notes that Herodian's readers are frequently more knowledgeable than the characters in the work.

[22] This passage has been frequently employed to judge the extent of Herodian's dependence on Cassius Dio's history. Perhaps most forcefully, Kolb (1972) 25–34 has argued that Herodian lifted the passage from Dio and fabricated his autoptic claim. Sidebottom (1998) 2782 seems to allow that Herodian used Dio here, though he does not take up the issue of whether or not Herodian was present at the events. Galimberti (2014) 15–17 is more circumspect and does not rule out the possibility that Herodian could have been there.

[23] This runs counter to the analysis of the extraordinary or marvellous in Herodian in Molinier Arbo (2017), who sees Herodian as more similar to Thucydides than Herodotus.

of the visions of Marcus Aurelius and his concerns about his son. Now those concerns are realised, and Herodian (and his readers) becomes the real-life witness of the behaviour that caused Marcus such anxiety.

As Herodian's narrative progresses from his description of these games, we can observe how Commodus' new appearance as a performer was evidence of his becoming a tyrant (1.15.7):

> μέχρι μὲν οὖν τούτων, εἰ καὶ βασιλείας τὰ πραττόμενα ἦν ἀλλότρια, πλὴν ἀνδρείας καὶ εὐστοχίας παρὰ τοῖς δημώδεσιν εἶχέ τινα χάριν. ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ γυμνὸς ἐς τὸ ἀμφιθέατρον εἰσῆλθεν ὅπλα τε ἀναλαβὼν ἐμονομάχει, τότε σκυθρωπὸν εἶδεν ὁ δῆμος θέαμα, τὸν εὐγενῆ Ῥωμαίων βασιλέα μετὰ τοσαῦτα τρόπαια πατρός τε καὶ προγόνων οὐκ ἐπὶ βαρβάρους ὅπλα λαμβάνοντα στρατιωτικὰ ἢ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῇ πρέποντα, καθυβρίζοντα δὲ τὸ ἀξίωμα αἰσχίστῳ καὶ μεμιασμένῳ σχήματι.

> Up to then he still held popular favour, even if his actions were foreign to the kingship, except for his courage and skill in shooting. But when he went naked into the arena and carried the weapons for fighting as a gladiator, the people saw this depressing spectacle, that a noble Roman king, after such successes of his father and ancestors, did not bring his weapons against the barbarians or do something fitting for the Roman empire, but rather degraded his reputation with this shameful and dishonourable appearance.

The transformation of the emperor, witnessed by the spectators in the arena, became reality when, because of his madness (μανία) Commodus actually took up residency in the gladiatorial barracks, took the name of a gladiator (in place of his previously preferred name of Hercules), and refashioned the Colossus statue in his image (1.15.8–9).[24]

Commodus' madness would eventually lead to his death. At the conclusion of the transformation of Commodus' image, Herodian includes an important comment that serves as a transition to Commodus' assassination narrative: 'And so it was necessary to stop his madness and the tyranny he held over the Roman empire'.[25] There follows a description of the scheme carried out by Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus. What is significant here is that

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[24] For an analysis of Commodus as Hercules, see Hekster (2001) and Cadario (2017).

[25] 1.16.1, ἔδει δὲ ἄρα ποτὲ κἀκεῖνον παύσασθαι μεμηνότα καὶ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν τυραννουμένην. Commodus' 'madness' is also mentioned at 1.15.8, just prior to this notice.

it was the public appearance of the emperor that demanded his removal. Just prior to his public shows, public opinion turned against Commodus. The emperor no longer hid his behaviour in private, but dared to exhibit it publicly (ταῦτα καὶ δημοσίᾳ δεῖξαι ἐτόλμησεν, 1.14.7). He was so mad and acting in such a drunken craze (ἐς τοσοῦτόν τε μανίας καὶ παροινίας προὐχώρησεν) that he refused to use his family name, had himself called Hercules instead, and, tellingly, took off the clothes of a Roman emperor in favour of a lion skin and club, or wore garments of purple and gold that were feminine and laughable (1.14.8). Herodian also discusses the statues that Commodus set up for himself around Rome, ending the section with the notice that after Commodus' death the Senate took down the statue he had placed in front of the curia and put up one of liberty instead (1.14.9–15.1).

With his focus on autoptic detail throughout this section, Herodian highlights Commodus' irregular self-presentation and the public reaction to it. His description not only produces a vivid picture for the reader, but it also confirms the anxieties that Marcus Aurelius had about passing power to a young tyrant. Yet just as Marcus did not learn the appropriate lesson from his education and knowledge of historical precedent, so will his successors make the same mistake, as we will observe in the accessions of Caracalla and Elagabalus to come.

Caracalla as Alexander

Marcus Aurelius' misgivings about passing the throne to his son are mirrored in the later transition of power from Septimius Severus to his sons Caracalla and Geta. Herodian discusses Severus' concerns about his sons (3.13) and he notes that Severus tried to use an expedition to Britain as a way to reform their behaviour (3.14.1–2). It was not long, however, before Severus was dead, his sons succeeded him (3.15.4–5), and Caracalla murdered Geta (4.4.3).[26] On his deathbed, Severus is described as 'destroyed mostly by grief' (λύπῃ τὸ πλεῖστον διαφθαρείς, 3.15.2). This grief is surely related to the situation of his heirs, for Herodian notes Severus' status as the most militarily accomplished emperor and the great wealth that he passed on, both of which are presented as noble accomplishments and stand in contrast to the passage of power to two young and rivalrous heirs.

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[26] Herodian devotes a significant section in the interim (4.1–2) to the return of the brothers from abroad and especially a description of the funeral of Septimius Severus.

Despite his descent from a worthy emperor (at least in Herodian's presentation), Caracalla faced problems almost immediately due to the murder of his brother and the brutal purge that followed (4.6.1–5). According to Herodian, the emperor was troubled by a guilty conscience and decided to leave Rome to handle management of the provinces (4.7.1). Once there, Caracalla altered his dress to suit local customs and presented himself as a *commilito* to his soldiers. Herodian writes that while Caracalla was among the Germans he wore Germanic clothing and a blond wig (4.7.3). The result was that he became popular among provincials in Germany and the military (4.7.4).[27]

Caracalla decided to continue this experiment during his travels, but when he reached Macedonia his previously successful self-presentation turned into excessive Alexander-mania.[28] It is in this section that Herodian claims to have seen a peculiar image meant to connect, quite literally, Caracalla and Alexander. Herodian writes that (4.8.2):

ἔσθ' ὅπου δὲ καὶ χλεύης εἴδομεν ἀξίας εἰκόνας, ἐν γραφαῖς ἑνὸς σώματος ὑπὸ περιφερείᾳ κεφαλῆς μιᾶς ὄψεις ἡμιτόμους δύο, Ἀλεξάνδρου τε καὶ Ἀντωνίνου.

In some places we saw images worthy of jest, in paintings of one body below the circumference of a single head that had been split into two faces, of both Alexander and Antoninus.[29]

This sentence contains two important verbal repetitions from the passages discussed earlier. First, Herodian refers to these images as εἰκόνας, the same word that he uses in the passage about Marcus Aurelius' visions upon his death bed.[30] This repetition suggests that Caracalla has become one of the bad young emperors whom Marcus Aurelius envisioned. Herodian also

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[27] Herodian notes here that the soldiers liked Caracalla because of the donatives, but especially because he acted like a fellow soldier.

[28] For an analysis of Caracalla's Alexander-persona, see Baharal (1994).

[29] Based on this description, it does not seem that Herodian intends that the reader imagine a double-headed herm, though perhaps he is drawing on that idea. As far as I am aware, there are no material parallels to what Herodian describes in this passage.

[30] The language that Herodian uses here is also similar to that of Cassius Dio (78[77].7.1 [Xiph.]: 'He was so passionate about Alexander that … he had images (εἰκόνας) of him set up both in the camps and in Rome itself …' (περὶ δὲ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον οὕτω τι ἐπτόητο ὥστε … εἰκόνας αὐτοῦ πολλὰς καὶ ἐν τοῖς στρατοπέδοις καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ Ῥώμῃ στῆσαι …).

claims to have seen these images themselves, just as he claimed to have seen Commodus in the arena. As with the Commodus episode, one would not be faulted for being sceptical about this particular claim, since the pictures that Herodian describes are certainly unique and perhaps unlikely to have ever been produced, at least as a sort of official medium of communication.

The potentially fictive nature of these images raises an important point. Because Herodian has already established himself as a contemporary historian, specific claims of autopsy would generally only be necessary to quell any sense of disbelief at what he was reporting.[31] Yet these episodes call extra attention to the shifting modes of self-representation developed by these young emperors and thus bring the reader back to Herodian's thesis about the instability of his age. Indeed, Caracalla's unfitness for ruling is in evidence in the following chapters. After a stay in Pergamum's Asclepion for incubation treatment, Caracalla made his way to Troy, mimicking the behaviour of Alexander the Great there but taking it even further.[32] Rumour had it that a freedman named Festus was poisoned there so that they could celebrate a funeral like Patroclus' (4.8.3–5). Caracalla then travelled through Asia and Bithynia to Antioch and then onto Alexandria, where he wanted to visit this city founded by Alexander and to worship the local god (4.8.6–7). There he was greeted warmly, and he visited the tomb of Alexander (4.8.8–9). The Alexandrians, however, had been mocking Caracalla, especially for the death of Geta, and calling Julia Domna Jocasta; they also made fun of his imitation of Alexander and Achilles (4.9.2–3). When the young men of the city were gathered, ostensibly to be enrolled in a Macedonian phalanx, the emperor used their assembly as a trap to slaughter them (4.9.4–8).[33] After the slaughter, Caracalla departed Alexandria and returned to Antioch, where he began to plan his Parthian campaign. He claimed to wish to marry the daughter of Artabanus and thereby unite the Roman and Parthian empires; when his overtures were eventually accepted, Caracalla used the gathering as a way to carry out a mass murder of Parthians. After the news was communicated to the Senate and honours were voted to Caracalla, Herodian begins Caracalla's assassination narrative.

[31] For this general phenomenon, see Marincola (1997) 82–3, 86.

[32] For Alexander at Troy, see, e.g., Plut. *Alex.* 15.

[33] For the massacre, see, e.g., Harker (2008) 133–8, with references to the relevant literature.

After the death of Geta, Herodian's Caracalla narrative focuses on the emperor's travels in the East and especially his playing the new role of Alexander. Herodian brings that vision to the fore with his depiction of the strange images, which he claims to have seen, with heads half of Caracalla and half of Alexander. These images serve as a sort of metaphor for an emperor who does not seem to know exactly who he is or what role to play, and they are a visual manifestation of the emperor's derangement. His desire to be a new Alexander leads to the massacre in Alexandria and then the ridiculous Parthian campaign. It follows, in Herodian's narrative, that the culmination of Caracalla's Alexander-mania would result in his assassination at the hands of Macrinus and his co-conspirators.

Elagabalus, Eastern Priest in Rome

The power of images returns to the centre of the story in Herodian's Elagabalus narrative and connects the young emperor with Caracalla. This reign begins with a deceptive first appearance, when Elagabalus claimed to be the son of Caracalla, a connection that Herodian says was important to the soldiers who would eventually elevate Elagabalus to the throne. When Macrinus' forces made an attack on Elagabalus' camp, the soldiers showed the boy to the attacking legions, and once they were persuaded that Elagabalus was Caracalla's son and looked just like him, they killed their commanding officer and joined the revolt. Herodian includes the aside that the soldiers 'wished to see him in this way' (5.4.3–4), a comment that touches on the unreliability and fungibility of eyewitness accounting.

Although this trick worked to fell Macrinus, other image problems began to emerge for Elagabalus. Herodian stresses Elagabalus' youth, inexperience, and lack of education, which caused his grandmother and advisors to take control of affairs (5.5.1). He also states that Maesa was anxious to get back to the imperial palace, but that the news of Elagabalus' accession was received poorly in the capital; the public only grudgingly accepted the new emperor, who had been elevated by the army (5.5.2).

The royal family soon departed Syria but were compelled to winter in Nicomedia. There Elagabalus assumed the role of priest of Elagabal, and Herodian describes the emperor's dress: purple and gold clothing, necklaces and other jewellery, including a tiara. Herodian then focalises the scene through Maesa, the boy's grandmother (5.5.5):

ἡ δὲ Μαῖσα ταῦτα ὁρῶσα πάνυ ἤσχαλλε, πείθειν τε λιπαροῦσα ἐπειρᾶτο μεταμφιέσασθαι τὴν Ῥωμαίων στολὴν μέλλοντά [τε] ἐς τὴν πόλιν ἀφίξεσθαι καὶ ἐς τὴν σύγκλητον εἰσελεύσεσθαι, μὴ ἀλλοδαπὸν ἢ παντάπασι βάρβαρον τὸ σχῆμα ὀφθὲν εὐθὺς λυπήσῃ τοὺς ἰδόντας, ἀήθεις τε ὄντας καὶ οἰομένους τὰ τοιαῦτα καλλωπίσματα οὐκ ἀνδράσιν ἀλλὰ θηλείαις πρέπειν.

When she saw these things, Maesa was exceedingly worried, and she kept on trying to persuade him to put on the dress of the Romans when he was about to enter the city and come before the Senate, for he would immediately cause offense if they saw his outfit that was perceived as foreign and altogether barbarous, as they were not used to such things and thought such ornaments were appropriate not for men but for women.

This passage uses two instances of autopsy: first Maesa's, then the prospective viewing by the people of Rome. Maesa realised that the emperor had to be seen by the people of Rome in order to be accepted, and she feared that his outrageous behaviour in the East would not pass muster in the capital.

Elagabalus, however, refused to take the advice of his grandmother and continued to present an appearance that Herodian calls 'in every way barbarous' (παντάπασι βάρβαρον τὸ σχῆμα, 5.5.5). Yet the new emperor also became concerned that his appearance might not be accepted in Rome. To solve this problem, he decided to have a painting sent to the capital, which Herodian describes in the following way (5.5.6):

… βουλόμενος ἐν ἔθει γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ σχήματος ὄψεως τήν τε σύγκλητον καὶ τὸν δῆμον Ῥωμαίων, ἀπόντος τε αὐτοῦ πεῖραν δοθῆναι πῶς φέρουσι τὴν ὄψιν τοῦ σχήματος, εἰκόνα μεγίστην γράψας παντὸς ἑαυτοῦ, οἷος προϊών τε καὶ ἱερουργῶν ἐφαίνετο, παραστήσας τε ἐν τῇ γραφῇ τὸν τύπον τοῦ ἐπιχωρίου θεοῦ, ᾧ δὴ καλλιερῶν ἐγέγραπτο, πέμψας τε ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην, ἐκέλευσεν ἐν τῷ μεσαιτάτῳ τῆς συγκλήτου τόπῳ ὑψηλοτάτῳ τε τὴν εἰκόνα ἀνατεθῆναι ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς τοῦ ἀγάλματος τῆς νίκης …

… wishing that the Senate and people of Rome get used to the sight of his appearance, and also to test out how they received the sight of it while he was not yet present, he had a huge image made of himself that showed him going forth and performing sacred rites. In the painting he

also had placed an image of a local deity, in which he appeared making a sacrifice. He had this sent to Rome and ordered that the image be placed high up in the middle of the Senate house, above the head of the statue of Victory …

This passage stresses the importance of sight and images, through the repeated use of the terms ὄψις and εἰκών. The latter term carries further significance, since it connects back to the opening scenes of the history, in which Marcus Aurelius views the images of young tyrants. Herodian also repeatedly stresses the young emperor's appearance (σχῆμα), which suggests that he is thinking beyond merely the clothes that Elagabalus wore and is pointing to the entire role or character that the emperor has adopted.

Elagabalus' use of such an image is in some ways an inversion of how similar images are used elsewhere in Herodian's history. We see, for example, that Septimius Severus, after his Parthian campaign, wished to advertise his successes while he was absent from Rome. Severus therefore sent a letter detailing the campaign to the Senate and people, and also had paintings of the battles and victories made and set up in public (3.9.12). Severus, of course, was a known quantity at the time, and his actions are meant to advertise his successes abroad. Similarly, Maximinus Thrax advertised his successes against the Germans by sending a report to the Senate and people, and had large images of it set up in front of the Senate house, whereby the Romans might not only be able to hear what happened, but see it, too (7.2.8). When Elagabalus uses a similar ploy to show himself to the Romans for the first time, the move in general is a sort of perversion or reversal of the actions of Severus and Maximinus.

Yet in a turn of events that I think is contrary to the reader's every expectation, Elagabalus' ruse actually worked. Herodian writes (5.5.7):

ὡς δὲ ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἀφίκετο τῷ προειρημένῳ σχήματι, οὐδὲν παράδοξον εἶδον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι, τῇ γραφῇ ἐνειθισμένοι.

When he entered Rome in his aforementioned get-up, the Romans saw nothing troubling, since they had been become accustomed to it by the painting.

Herodian goes on to describe Elagabalus' strange behaviour, including the emperor's elaborate sacrifices, dancing, irregular marriages, including to a Vestal Virgin, the marriage between Pallas and Elagabal, the installation of

Elagabal in a temple outside of the city, and its attendant celebrations, which included the distribution of money, goods, and animals and resulted in a deadly human stampede (5.5.8–6.10).[34]

Elagabalus, however, could not play this game for long. As Maesa observed his behaviour, she worried that the soldiers would become upset, and she began to plan for Elagabalus' successor (5.7.1). The anger of the soldiers indeed came to pass; Herodian writes that (5.8.1):

> οἵ τε ἄλλοι πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ μάλιστα οἱ στρατιῶται ἤχθοντο καὶ ἐδυσφόρουν· ἐμυσάττοντο δὲ αὐτὸν ὁρῶντες τὸ μὲν πρόσωπον καλλωπιζόμενον περιεργότερον ἢ κατὰ γυναῖκα σώφρονα, περιδεραίοις δὲ χρυσίνοις ἐσθῆσί τε ἁπαλαῖς ἀνάνδρως κοσμούμενον, ὀρχούμενόν τε οὕτως ὡς ὑπὸ πάντων ὁρᾶσθαι.

> Everyone, and especially the soldiers, were vexed and became impatient; when they saw him, they were disgusted at his face made up with greater care than was fitting for a chaste woman, effeminately decorated with golden necklaces and delicate clothes and dancing in such a way that he could be seen by all.

In an ironic twist, the acceptance of Elagabalus, which hinged on being seen as suitable by the Romans, turned to rejection on the same basis. Herodian here uses the soldiers as a stand-in for his own autopsy. Their sight, seemingly restored, informed them that their emperor was unfit. At this point the royal house also turned against Elagabalus, and it was not long before he was murdered and Alexander Severus took his place (5.8.2–9). Strikingly, however, the problem was not solved, as the young Alexander Severus acceded to the throne. We will look at Alexander's reign in more detail below, but first it will be necessary to consider in closer detail the three reigns just surveyed.

The Instability of Image and Reality

In each of the passages analysed thus far, Herodian presents an image of a young emperor, viewed by Herodian himself and/or others, that would eventually lead to that emperor's demise. Commodus took on the role of

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[34] For Elagabalus' initial appearance as signalling his incompatibility with Roman tradition, see Sommer (2004) 105–7.

arena performer and gladiator, and soon met his death. Caracalla adopted a series of innovative identities, including wearing Germanic dress and pretending to be Achilles at Troy. His adoption of the Alexander-motif, and especially the advertisement of that identity through the bizarre images that Herodian claims to have seen, foreshadow his demise at the hands of Macrinus. Elagabalus took on the image of eastern priest-ruler, and with some success: by first getting the Roman people used to this character through the display of an enormous painting, Elagabalus was able to maintain his position for some time. These episodes move from the almost immediate removal of the emperor upon the assumption of a new image in the case of Commodus to the delayed removal of Elagabalus, who ruled for four years and almost managed to create a new visual paradigm by which the emperor would be known.

In each of these episodes, Herodian plays on the confusion between image and reality.[35] Indeed, in each we can find the repeated vocabulary of εἰκών and γραφή in the scenes in which the emperor brings such an image to life. In the Commodus passage, Herodian reports that 'we' marvelled at animals that we had only seen in paintings (ἐν γραφαῖς). This notice sets the scene for the unreal coming to life, namely in the form of the emperor as arena performer. In the case of Caracalla, Herodian explicitly connects the words εἰκών and γραφή as practical synonyms. He again writes that 'we' saw 'images' (εἰκόνας) worthy of jest in paintings (ἐν γραφαῖς) with a head half of Caracalla and half of Alexander. In the Elagabalus episode, Herodian again connects εἰκών and γραφή. In order to make the Roman people accustomed to the priest-emperor's appearance, a huge painting was made (εἰκόνα μεγίστην γράψας, 5.5.6), and Herodian goes on to refer to the painting as both a γραφή and εἰκών in the following section (5.5.7).

With these episodes, the images of young tyrants foreseen by Marcus Aurelius come to life in the figures of Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus. The youthful emperors attempt to build legitimacy by altering the traditional norms of self-presentation. This is especially striking, since the first two, Commodus and Caracalla, descended directly from more mature emperors who receive a generally positive treatment by Herodian. In a similar way, Elagabalus is presented as having turned away the wise advice of his female handlers in favour of this new form of self-presentation (5.5.5). For those who viewed these images, there were various responses.

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[35] On the connection among these visual representations in Herodian, see also Chrysanthou (2022) 242–3.

Commodus' entertainment at first produced wonder, and then rejection. Caracalla's images resulted in mockery from the narrator, but he continued to live out this persona for a few years. Elagabalus' image also allowed for acceptance, at least for some time. In the instance of Commodus, the innovation, once witnessed, was immediately noticed and rejected. But in the cases of Caracalla and Elagabalus, the innovations are witnessed but the young emperors permitted to continue with these new forms of self-presentation a while longer, when, according to Herodian's scheme, they should have been recognised as the young tyrants of Marcus' initial vision.

This discussion brings up the related question of whether or not Herodian's account constitutes an accurate depiction of events. The answer in each case seems to be no, or probably not, for different reasons. In the first instance, it is unlikely that Herodian himself witnessed Commodus' antics in the arena. Herodian's history was written sometime after 238 CE and perhaps as late as the 250s, making his presence at games sixty years earlier unlikely (or during his boyhood).[36] Herodian also did not need to be there to get material for his history: scholars have long believed that Herodian borrowed his description of Commodus' performance in the arena from Cassius Dio's Roman history.[37] Though there is still debate about the extent of it, Herodian surely used Dio as a source for his history, up through the reign of Elagabalus.[38] While there is more happening here than simply Herodian 'stealing' his information from Dio, the point is that there is reason to doubt Herodian's autoptic claim.

In the later episodes, disbelief is perhaps even more appropriate. The split-head image of Caracalla and Alexander immediately strains credulity, as it is such a fantastical image and serves to demonstrate the emperor's (failed) attempt at merging the two identities. As for Herodian's description of the painting of Elagabalus hung in the curia, some have taken the report at face value.[39] But there has also been scepticism, and it should be noted

[36] For a date of between 244 and 253 CE, see Kemezis (2014) 300–1.

[37] Kolb (1972) 25–34. For doubt that Herodian witnessed Commodus' arena performance, see Alföldy (1971b) 206.

[38] Kolb (1972) takes the most extreme view, that Dio is Herodian's main source, and this view is, in general, followed by Zimmermann (1999) and Hidber (2006); see recently Scott (2018) and especially Chrysanthou (2020) for Herodian's re-working of material from Dio. Bowersock (1975) and Sidebottom (1998) 2780–92 prefer to see Herodian using a multiplicity of sources.

[39] The passage is taken literally, for example, by Frey (1989) 73 and has also been employed for other uses. For example, Baldus (1989) uses the painting in his analysis of Elagabalus' coinage, though Zimmermann (1999) 228–32 argues against this approach.

that Herodian is the only source to make such a report.[40] Even if we believe that the painting is historical, the motivation for putting it up, to convince the soldiers and people to accept the innovative new emperor, is less believable, especially in light of Herodian's thematic use of this and other images, as observed above.

Even if we dismiss these suspicions of fabrication, these cases function on a thematic level, allowing the reader to 'see' the succession of young tyrants come to life, just as Marcus Aurelius did at the beginning of the history. Herodian's claims of autopsy, traditionally meant to forestall disbelief, function to draw attention to key moments in each reign when imperial self-presentation was shifting.[41] These shifts both highlight the innovations of young emperors, as mentioned in the preface, and demonstrate how Romans were becoming more accepting of them. Thus, the episodes help to prove Herodian's thesis about the innovations of young emperors and allow Herodian to make a comment about the future of the principate in his chosen ending for the history.

The End of the History: the Triumph of the Young Emperor

After the fall of Elagabalus, the young emperor Alexander Severus attempted to return to the norms of the past. More correctly, Herodian writes that whereas Alexander had 'the appearance and title of kingship' (τὸ <μὲν> σχῆμα καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς βασιλείας, 6.1.1), it was actually the female members of his family who were trying 'to make everything more moderate and statelier' (τὸ σωφρονέστερον καὶ σεμνότερον πάντα, 6.1.1). A council of senators was thus created to advise the youthful Alexander (6.1.1). The statues of gods were returned to their temples, irregular appointments were rescinded, and civil and military affairs were managed by qualified and experienced individuals (6.1.3–4). The appearance of the government changed from tyranny to an 'aristocratic' kind, and it was approved of by the people, the soldiers, and the Senate (6.1.2).

Similarly, Bowersock (1975) 234, in an attempt to rebut Kolb (1972) 11–12 n. 76a, argues that its uniqueness to Herodian's account demonstrates Herodian's superiority as a source for the reign of Elagabalus, and suggests that Herodian was mistaken about the location of the painting because he was not a senator.

[40] For scepticism of the portrait of Elagabalus in the Senate house, however, see Kemezis (2016) 365.

[41] See Marincola (1997) 86 for the claim of autopsy as a pledge of believability.

There is, of course, a certain irony in this section, since it is a young emperor trying to play the role of a mature one, thus adding to the sense of destabilisation that Herodian has been developing thus far. Indeed, this theme is picked up on in the following chapters, wherein Herodian recounts the death of Maesa, the emperor's grandmother, and the anxieties of his mother Mamaea about the boy being impressionable and perhaps wanting to repeat the crimes of his predecessors (6.1.4–5). These predecessors must of course be Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus. Mamaea, however, was able to keep Alexander away from unsavoury types and direct him toward the business of governance; so successful was she that Herodian even compares Alexander to Marcus Aurelius with regard to the dispensation of justice (6.1.5–7). But through it all, it was clear that Mamaea was ruling, not Alexander. So even in this case we have a young emperor with the 'appearance' of kingship, even though it was he who did little of the ruling himself. On the other hand, his reign, which was well received (as Herodian relates) in some ways legitimised the status of young kings and allowed for more to come.

Despite the changes that occurred during the reign of Alexander Severus, the problem of young emperors would not be solved, as Herodian stresses at the conclusion of his work. Following the death of Alexander Severus, there ensues a confusing struggle for power among the Senate, army, and the people (notably the three groups who had all approved of the changes that occurred under Alexander). Herodian details the reign of Maximinus Thrax in Book 7, claiming that the emperor reversed the changes of Alexander Severus, turning the moderate monarchy into a tyranny (7.1.1). Although he achieved military success, no one appreciated his viciousness or his ignoble character, and the people of Africa chose their proconsular governor, Gordian, an eighty-year-old senator, in his place (7.5.1–3). It was not long before Gordian was proclaimed emperor at Rome and Maximinus was deposed (7.7.2). Gordian, however, did not survive an attack on Carthage by a partisan of Maximinus, and Herodian reports that he hanged himself (7.9.4). Herodian eulogises Gordian by noting his good fortune at first but that he died 'in the semblance of royalty' (ἐν εἰκόνι τε βασιλείας, 7.9.10), a phrase that highlights the divide between image and reality yet again.

With Gordian dead the confusion continued. The Senate chose Pupienus and Balbinus as co-emperors (7.10.3). The people, on the other hand, demanded that a relative of Gordian be named (7.10.6), and eventually Gordian's grandson was found and made Caesar (7.10.8–9). Maximinus, still recognised as emperor among the legions, invaded Italy but met resistance

at Aquileia; there he was assassinated by the soldiers (8.5.8–9). Under
Pupienus and Balbinus, with Gordian at their side, good order was re-
established at Rome (8.8.1). The praetorians, however, disliking having their
emperor chosen for them, plotted against and killed them both (8.8.4–7).
The people's wishes eventually won out, when the soldiers elevated Gordian
III to the throne. In fact, it is at this point that Herodian brings his history to
an end, with a final ominous statement (8.8.8):

> τέλει μὲν δὴ τοιούτῳ ἐχρήσαντο ἀναξίῳ τε ἅμα καὶ ἀνοσίῳ σεμνοὶ καὶ
> λόγου ἄξιοι πρεσβῦται, εὐγενεῖς τε καὶ κατ᾽ ἀξίαν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν
> ἐληλυθότες· ὁ δὲ Γορδιανὸς περὶ ἔτη που γεγονὼς τρισκαίδεκα
> αὐτοκράτωρ τε ἀνεδείχθη καὶ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ἀνεδέξατο.

> These old men, august and worthy of account, who had held power
> because of both their nobility and merit, met such an end that was
> unworthy and at once wretched. Gordian, who was about thirteen at
> the time, was made emperor and received command of the Roman
> empire.

This conclusion, coming as it does at the beginning of a reign, gives the
history as a whole a sort of open-endedness. Herodian began his work by
stating that he would highlight the many changes of power and especially
the contrast between older and younger emperors. By closing with the
accession of the young Gordian III, Herodian gives the impression that,
instead of addressing this problem directly, the crisis of young emperors will
continue to affect the Roman empire negatively.[42]

Conclusion

Herodian's preface demonstrates that he was well aware of the tradition
within which he was working, as well as his penchant for play within those
prescriptions. He tells us that he will produce the best kind of contemporary
history, in the mode of Thucydides, but also that his will provide pleasure.

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[42] Hidber (2007) 206: 'This is hardly an auspicious ending, given that the narratees by
now are well aware of the fatal problems that are in store for adolescent rulers. In fact, a
narrative that ends with the accession to the throne by the youngest emperor ever, brought
to power by the praetorians, is the somber counter-piece to the evocation of the glorious
days of M. Aurelius' reign at the beginning'.

This pleasure derives, at least in part, from the vividness of his narration, which is in turn tied up with the sense of 'being there'.

The purpose of vividness is to draw in one's audience and also to claim authority; events become more believable the more they seem realistic. Herodian plays with this notion, since the events that he describes vividly, going so far as to explicitly claim eyewitness testimony, are quite hard to take at face value. In the first instance, we are in amazement that a Roman emperor would present himself in the arena in such a manner. Later, we doubt whether Caracalla had images painted of himself with half of Alexander's head, or if Elagabalus really had an enormous picture of himself dressed in eastern priestly garb sent to Rome ahead of his arrival. We are equally perplexed that these characters could continue to lead the Roman empire. In Commodus' case, the reign came to a quick end after his new image was revealed. In the cases of Caracalla and Elagabalus, however, their reigns continue, and they are only replaced by internal coups against them. The fact that the history ends with yet another accession of a young emperor suggests that more chaos is to come.[43]

By appealing to Thucydides' maxims in his introduction, Herodian suggests to the reader that a sober account of his age will follow. The material that Herodian 'witnessed', however, defies this expectation. What we get instead is a narrative that forces us to question the connection between image and reality. Herodian's depictions of young emperors effectively delegitimise those characters for the reader, while at the same time they demonstrate how the innovative young emperor came to be in his age, and how that character brought instability to the Roman empire.

Herodian has been criticised for being more of a writer of fiction that of history. The idea that Herodian fictionalised these eyewitness experiences gives the impression that he was an unserious historian more interested in entertainment than truth. This reading, however, does not properly understand Herodian's goal in telling these stories. It is more fruitful to understand these fictions as Herodian's way of probing the boundary between the real and unreal. Once Commodus upset the norms of imperial self-presentation, what would become unbelievable? Where is the line between image and reality? Herodian therefore appears to be intentionally pushing the boundaries of the ancient historiographic tradition, while also working within them, on a methodological level.

[43] Xenophon's *Hellenica*, with its final remark (7.5.27) about the Greek world descending into more 'confusion and disorder' (ἀκρισία δὲ καὶ ταραχή) than ever before, offers a point of comparison.

Herodian's goal is to work within the tradition and to exploit the tradition's conventions to prove his own thesis about his time. His visually orientated narrative reflects one of his main concerns, namely how one can tell a good emperor from a bad one. This judgement lies mostly in appearance, and throughout his work we see that the Romans and the peoples of the empire have a diminishing ability to do so. The reader, however, is clued into Herodian's concerns from the beginning and thus retains a proper sense of judgement throughout.

The argument of this paper finds some middle ground between the condemnatory critique of many earlier commentators on Herodian, who dismissed the work as an 'historiographic novel', and a more generous approach that values Herodian's use of sources and historical outlook. In the instances included here, Herodian provides examples of innovations of self-presentation by young emperors that produced wonder and, one should assume, pleasure among his readers. Because of the fact that Herodian pronounces himself a contemporary historian who relied on the eyewitness testimony of his own or of others, these episodes test the credulity of the reader and add a playful or ironic twist to his work. Their presence, however, is still tied to his thesis, and we see that Herodian uses vividness to enhance his own claims—stretching the truth, but never undermining it.

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