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Methods of Remembrance: The Images of Septimius Severus

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*To my friends and loved ones:
Your tireless efforts to keep me sane
have proved invaluable.*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to the *Historia Augusta*, while Septimius Severus was a child:

“...nullum alium inter pueros ludum nisi ad iudices exercuit, cum ipse praelatis fascibus ac securibus ordine puerorum circumstante sederet ac iudicaret.”

“...he would engage in no game with the other children except playing judge, and on such occasions he would have rods and axes bore before him, and surrounded by the throng of children, he would take his seat and thus give judgments.”¹

The author of the *HA* shows Severus using the fasces, a traditional symbol of Roman power, in order to compel his friends to submit to his authority. In this anecdote, a youthful Severus uses public ceremony and Roman iconography to declare his position of power. The author of the *HA* perceived Severus as keenly aware of the importance of public ceremony in asserting authority. Severus would have embraced the way the author of the *HA* portrayed him in this vignette. Severus promoted himself as a disciplined adherent to Roman customs. Although Severus's official image agreed with this vignette, this is not the only way in which Severus is remembered. As this thesis will argue, Severus's official representation of his rule does not align with representations of his rule as depicted in third and fourth century literary sources.

Furthermore, while modern historiography debates the amount of influence Severus's African origins had on his policies, I will demonstrate that his origins were not

¹ *SHA Sev. 1.4*. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* Vol. 1, trans. David Magie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). I have made minor adjustments where word usage was inappropriate.

a major factor in assessments of Severus and his actions in antiquity. I will argue that the ancient historians did not criticize Severus because he was not Roman, but rather because Severus disregarded the senatorial elite. This is more evident in the fourth century; where third century authors portrayed Severus as being of bad character, by the fourth century his characteristics were only negative if they affected the senatorial elite. By examining this shift, I will show that the lasting criticism of Severus's reign was that his actions interfered with the ambitions of the senatorial elite. His disregard for the Senate's interests created unwillingness among the ancient historians to accept the official view of his reign.

I. Scholarly Debate on the Influence of Severus's Origins

Many modern scholars agree that Severus's understanding of Roman culture gave him the ability to rule.² David S. Potter argues further, that he was aware of the power of public display and propaganda. The vignette at the beginning of this chapter shows that Severus wanted to show awareness of the power of display and that he was comfortable using Roman customs to do so.³ Severus realized the importance of promoting an image of control, and the power these images would have over the people who viewed them. Though Severus may not have always thought through his actions, he was keenly aware that all of the empire watched the moves he made, interpreted, and mimicked them

² Haywood, 177; Hammond, 171. Haywood shows how Severus would have protected the grain supply as the good emperors would. Hammond suggests that Severus was a Roman bureaucrat who adapted to the changing conditions around him. For discussion of what a good Emperor is see Chapter 2 below.

³ See above Note 1.

accordingly.⁴ Severus's inability to completely understand the ramifications of his actions is shown when he publically melted down statues of Plautianus. Several governors followed suit, assuming that this would please the emperor after the apparent falling out between the two. However, Severus punishes the governors for their precipitous deed.⁵ In this instance, Severus was not aware of the consequences of his actions, but this was not the norm; he generally understood the importance and power behind public displays.

Severus used this knowledge to secure his position. In fact, "...it appears that Severus's time at Rome was marked by a string of public events to demonstrate the stability of his regime..."⁶ For instance, he used his first entrance into Rome, the funeral procession for Pertinax, and the Secular games in 203 CE for the nine hundredth anniversary of Rome's founding to display his largesse and power. Commanding public perception was important for the success of an emperor at preventing uprisings and opposition, and Severus knew this well.

According to Dio, Severus understood that he would be competing for the seat of empire upon Julianus's demise.⁷ Therefore, he sought to form alliances at the proper time, and to manipulate the army, senate, and the people to secure his position. Once Severus had captured Rome, he promised the Senate many things to secure their loyalty.⁸ With his western flank secured through alliances with Albinus, and the seat of empire

⁴David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay: AD 180-395*(London: Routledge, 2004)119.

⁵ Dio 76.16.2.

⁶ Potter, 119.

⁷ Dio 74.15.1.

⁸ Dio 75.2.1-2; Herodian 2.14.2-3;Hammond, 153. Hammond suggests that the actions Severus takes on entering Rome are those which someone foreign to Roman customs may not have understood were important to make. The ability to deliver upon this loyalty will be discussed in chapter 4.

secured through these tactics, Severus felt secure enough to fight a civil war with Niger in Africa.⁹ Defeating Niger, he soon turned his attention to Albinus, breaking the alliance he had earlier formed by declaring his son Caesar.¹⁰ He defeated Albinus, and secured his position in Rome by 197 CE.

Once in power, according to Brian Campbell, Severus established order, preserved tradition, and provided orderly succession.¹¹ The way in which modern scholars seem to understand Severus gives credit to the effect of the propaganda that he produced for his reign. Severus used coinage, monuments, and other portraits of himself to relate his reign with that of successful and beloved emperors of the past, such as Marcus Aurelius, Trajan, and Augustus.¹² These connections allowed Severus to associate admirable characteristics to himself and his rule, as well as connect the success and continuation of his dynasty with the future success of Rome. Through extensive propaganda, Severus also tried to associate his rule with the divine. He showed himself as favored by the gods as the executioner of their will and nearly declared himself divine as well. Associating with deified emperors of the past as well as powerful Roman deities, Severus hoped to portray his dynasty as necessary to Rome's prosperity as part of the new golden age he was responsible for reestablishing.

⁹ Albinus was the commander in Britain and first choice of the senate to replace Julianus. Niger was commander in Africa and the choice of the people.

¹⁰ Dio 76.4.1; *SHA* 10.3.

¹¹ Brian Campbell, "The Severan Dynasty," in Alan K. Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193-337* vol. 12 of *CAH* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 14.

¹² Severus's associations with these emperors, as well as any links to divinity he promotes, will be discussed in Chapter Two.

However, studies of Severus's reign leave many questions unanswered. Since criticism of Severus persisted through the third and fourth centuries, how successful was he in his attempts at controlling images of himself as a traditional Roman? If the focus of Severus's actions was to show the legitimacy of his reign, and he was a master of propaganda, why was there residual contempt towards him in the fourth century?

When addressing criticism in the ancient sources, Modern scholarly debates focus on the influence of Severus's African origins, and the extent to which favoritism towards Africa would have affected his policies as emperor. If Severus's African origins did affect his policies, it could explain some of the hostility towards his reign that third and fourth century authors show. Indeed, Dio says:

"μάλιστα δὲ ἐπεκάλουν αὐτῷ τινὲς ὅτι, καθεστηκότος ἔκ τε τῆς Ἰταλίας καὶ τῆς Ἰβηρίας τῆς τε μακεδονίας καὶ τοῦ Νορικοῦ μόνον τοὺς σωματοφύλακας εἶναι, κακὸν τούτου καὶ τοῖς εἵδεσιν αὐτῶν ἐπιεικεστέρων καὶ τοῖς ἡθεσιν ἀπλουστέρων ὄντων, τοῦτο μὲν κατέλυσεν, ἔκ δὲ δὴ τῶν στρατοπέδων ὁμοίως πάντων τὸ ἀεὶ ἐνδεὲς ὄν ἀντικαθίστασθαι τάξας..."¹³

"...some found fault with him particularly because he abolished the practice of selecting the body-guard exclusively from Italy, Spain, Macedonia, and Noricum—a plan that furnished men of more respectable appearance and of simpler habits,—and ordered that any vacancies should be filled from all the legions alike."

Dio expresses discontent with Severus's actions, but Dio's criticism does not reveal that Severus had a pro-African bias, nor does it show an anti-African bias on Dio's part. Mason Hammond argues that the discontent arises from Severus's policy of

¹³ Dio 75.2.4. All translations are from Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Roman history*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006). I have made minor adjustments where word usage was inappropriate.

removing Italians from prominent positions, and not because he fills these positions with Africans.¹⁴ Severus's appointment of Flavius Juvenalis as the prefect of the guard has been interpreted as evidence of Severus's favoritism towards Africa simply because Juvenalis was from Africa.¹⁵ However, there is no evidence in the sources that Severus promoted Juvenalis because he was from Africa. On the contrary, Dio Herodian and the author of the *HA* are not even concerned with this possibility.

There are some comments in the ancient authors about Severus's accent, but in modern historiography, this aspect of Severus character has become a focus for academic debate. Barnes, Birley, and Hammond argue that his Punic accent may have caused dissent in the ranks of Severus's constituents.¹⁶ Although Hammond admits that a Punic accent would not indicate Punic origin, it is used to show that Severus's biographers label him non-Roman¹⁷

Anthony R. Birley is one of the staunch proponents of the view that the emperor's African origin played a role in how he administered the empire.¹⁸ In regards to Juvenalis's appointment to prefect of the guard, Birley thinks that, "it would have made an appropriate choice for Septimius to have put an African who had risen through the

¹⁴ Hammond, 171-2.

¹⁵ *SHA Sev.* 6.5. For more on this interpretation see discussion of Anthony Birley below, Note 20.

¹⁶ Timothy D. Barnes, "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte*. 16 (1): 96; Anthony Richard Birley, preface to *Septimius Severus; the African emperor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988),131.

¹⁷ Hammond, 146-8. Hammond shows that having an accent was not singularly an anti-Roman trait. Severus's sister could have been Roman stock, but staying in Lepcis Magna, and living with household attendants who would have been locals, would have left her with an ability to speak Punic with far more fluidity than Latin.

¹⁸ A. Birley 1988, xi.

centurionate in command of the Guard.”¹⁹ It would follow that Severus would have more readily appointed African-born Romans to positions of authority despite the individual’s qualifications. Birley argues that Severus's promotion of people with African heritage, as well as his self-representation as a devotee of Serapis, are primary aspects of his reign that reveal his African influences.²⁰ Birley also suggests that the huge number of statues and inscriptions dedicated to Severus in Lepcis Magna reveal the close connection that existed between Severus and his hometown.²¹ However, modern historiography does not support Birley’s claims. His discussion of Flavius Juvenalis does not explain why it was appropriate for Severus to appoint him, Serapis was not new to Rome, and the evidence in Lepcis is the continuation of a trend in the provinces that began in the second century.

Most modern authors have argued, on the contrary, that Severus minimized connections to his African heritage in order to promote his connections with Roman traditions. Bowman argues that Severus was from a typical municipal aristocracy, and therefore would have appreciated Roman values. He says, “There is no reason to think he had any African bias.”²² Hammond seconds this stating that “...a family which had two consulars at Rome could hardly have been unaffected by Roman traditions and ideals.”²³ Severus’s choice to become a senator illustrates his compliance to Roman traditions. Severus had started a career as an equestrian by taking on the position of *aduocatus fisci*

¹⁹ A. Birley 1988, 103.

²⁰ A. Birley 1988, 135. Although I feel Severus did personally have reverence for Serapis, I disagree with the importance of Serapis which Birley attributes to Severus's reign, and present my Arguments in Chapter Two.

²¹ A. Birley 1972, 149.

²² B. Campbell, 3.

²³ Mason Hammond, "Septimius Severus, Roman Bureaucrat," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 51 (1940): 145.

(Counselor of the Imperial Purse).²⁴ Hammond suggests that if Septimius had been alien to Roman traditions, he would not have entered into the senate, and would have remained an equestrian, as it seemingly "...offered more interest, opportunity, and promise of power..."²⁵ Though there is no knowing why he entered the senate instead of pursuing the equestrian career, "...the action was hardly that of one who was ignorant of Rome's traditions..."²⁶ Clearly, Severus was influenced more by his need to assert his *Romanitas* than he was by his African heritage.

T.D. Barnes takes this one-step further, reporting that, "...there is no evidence of an African patriotism or of African senators regarding themselves as thereby joined by any common bond."²⁷ In one example, Barnes shows that although one-half of the men Severus adlected into the Senate were from Africa, the total known is only eight. He therefore argues that the evidence we have of an African bias is too nominal for us to give it any major credence.²⁸ In place of an African bias, Barnes suggests a simpler answer for the success of the Severan dynasty: opportunism.²⁹ As an example, Barnes discusses the life of Laetus, an African-born Roman who was Praetorian prefect through 193 CE. Barnes states that Laetus supported appointing Severus to Pannonia. By expanding his network of people in prominent positions who owed their position to him, like Severus, Laetus was trying to increase his own power base. Barnes concludes that

²⁴ Eutropius, *Breviarum* 8.18.2; *SHA Geta* 2.4; Diz. Epigr., vol. 1: 125-131. The *advocatus fisci* was often the first step into an equestrian career.

²⁵ Hammond, 152.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 153.

²⁷ T. D. Barnes, "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 16, no.1 (1967): 89.

²⁸ Barnes 1967, 97.

²⁹ *Ibid* 1967, 103.

Laetus did not promote these men out of a sense of kinship.³⁰ In turn, Severus would have promoted people from similar motives. Severus would have thought to strengthen his position before promoting someone simply because that person was from Africa.

Haywood also asserts that Severus's African origins would not have influenced Severus because there is no evidence of any feeling of common nationality or common patriotism among the Africans.³¹ Even the favoritism shown towards Lepcis Magna, Severus's hometown, is explained as "...part of a program for giving the provinces a new dignity in relation to Italy" and "...an application of the usual imperial policy in Africa."³² Africa had always been an important province because of the amount of grain it supplied to Rome. Severus's attitude towards Africa was not any different from that of previous emperors. According to Haywood, Severus's military measures, the granting of the *ius Italicum*, and the raising of the *municipa* to colonial rank, were all continuations of second century policies,³³ which were policies aimed at giving important imperial territories the respect that they deserved. Severus's policies do not represent favoritism to his homeland or to people from Africa. On the contrary, Severus's actions suggest an attempt to embrace Roman culture and to diminish signs of an African heritage.

Still, third and fourth century criticisms of Severus are not explained. What modern scholars have not explored is how criticism of Severus changed over time, and what that change suggests about the values and status of the elite Roman authors. The

³⁰ Ibid 1967, 100.

³¹ Richard M. Haywood, "The African Policy of Septimius Severus," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 71 (1940): 175.

³² Haywood, 178,180.

³³ Haywood, 176-8; Barnes 1967,107.

changing political climate over the third and fourth centuries must be taken into account in any analysis of Severus's reign. His reign marks a shift in the relationship between the Roman emperor and the aristocratic senatorial elite. Knowing that he was not the Senate's first choice to succeed Julianus, Septimius entrusted his reign and safety to the hands of the military rather than to the aristocracy.³⁴ This act showed a marked increase in the trend toward a centralized and militarized government. This action ultimately left Severus with a reputation for being brutish, disingenuous, and crude.

The ancient sources portrayed Severus as un-Roman for many of his actions during his rise to power and early years. Dio Cassius, one of the main contemporary sources for this period, records many of Severus's actions as ribald, uncouth, and outright un-Roman. Dio criticizes Severus for his ruthlessness in war, his disregard for the senate, and his frivolous use of money.³⁵ These attacks form the basis of how Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* criticized Severus through the fourth century.³⁶

II. The Ancient Sources

Dio: A Contemporary source

Dio is the closest contemporary to Severus's reign. Dio began gathering information for his history in 197 CE, and likely published his work no later than 235

³⁴ Dio 75.2.2-3.

³⁵ Dio 75.2.3: "δαπάνη χρημάτων περιττῆ τὸ κοινὸν βαρῦναι..." (burdening the state with excessive expenditures), 75.14.4: the actions he commanded were perpetrated by "ὑπ' ἄλλων τινῶν ἀλλ' οὐχ ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων..." (some other people rather than by the Romans), 75.2.3-4: "καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ὅτι μὴ ἐν τῆ τῶν συνόντων οἱ εὐνοίᾳ ἀλλ' ἐν τῆ ἐκείνων ἰσχύι τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς σωτηρίας ἐποιεῖτο." (For placing his hopes of safety in the strength of his army rather than in the good will of his associates).

³⁶ For Herodian and the *HA* Severus's frivolity became a problem because it was focused on appeasing the people, see Chapter Five.

CE.³⁷ It is likely that Dio would have been highly influenced by the official image that Severus promoted in his propaganda.³⁸ However, Dio's account of Severus's contains much criticism. Dio reveals that Severus's propaganda did not succeed. For Dio, Severus's focus on the military made him a ruthless emperor. Furthermore, Severus's military achievements were negligible, and Dio questions Severus's motivations for these campaigns.

Despite Dio's bias against Severus, as Fergus Millar argues, Dio's narrative is accurate.³⁹ In 189 CE, Dio entered the Senate through his *quaestorship*, and at that point his narrative gains in force, detail, and clarity.⁴⁰ According to Moscovitch, this is because "...being on the periphery of power, so to speak, likely gave Dio access to a number of individuals who were closer to the emperor and his family."⁴¹ Barnes concurs: "under Severus, Dio was not only consul but also an *amicus* (friend) of the emperor..."⁴² Dio's access to imperial family and their friends would have only continued to grow, allowing Dio to become even more involved in what was going on in his world. Though it can be difficult to decipher what Dio's sources were, his access to Severus and the personal testimony he provides, makes Dio an important source for Severus's reign.

³⁷ Fergus Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1964), 30. Millar claims a publishing date in 219; T.D. Barnes "The Composition of Dio's Roman History" *Phoenix* 38, No. 3 (Autumn. 1984): 241. Barnes asserts a date closer to 235, allowing for revisions of his work; M. James Moscovitch, "Cassius Dio's Palace sources for the Reign of Septimius Severus" *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 53, No. 3 (2004): 356. Moscovitch asserts an earlier date in the 220's.

³⁸ See Z. Rubin, *Civil war Propaganda and Historiography*, vol.173 of *Collection Latomus* (Brussels: Editions Latomus, 1980).

³⁹ Millar 1964, 131.

⁴⁰ Millar 1964, 131.

⁴¹ Moscovitch, 358.

⁴² Barnes 1984, 243.

Herodian: A Change in Perspective

Criticism of Severus continued in the late third century with Herodian's account of Severus's reign. Herodian had access to Dio's work, but his criticisms of Severus have to be considered on their own. For although it is clear that Herodian used Dio, he often has details which Dio lacks.⁴³ Herodian claims to have had access to a wide variety of sources.⁴⁴ Herodian would have had access to Antipater of Hierapolis, Asinius Quadratus, and Severus's own autobiography at the very least. The possibility that he used the lost *kaisergeshichte* and Marius Maximus cannot be ruled out.⁴⁵ What is clear is that Herodian's criticisms are representations of his own perceptions of Severus, and not simply transcribed from other sources.⁴⁶ Herodian emphasized treatment of the senatorial elite and the peoples of the empire, amidst the changing relationship between emperor and senatorial elite. If 253 CE is the latest possible publishing date, as is the *communis opinio* according to A.R. Polley, then Herodian was finishing his composition as emperors were easily replaced.⁴⁷

Rome adapted to face the constant overturning of emperors and incessant civil wars in the third century. This resulted in shifting roles of both the emperor and the senatorial elite. By the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, the senate became more of a metaphorical "rubber stamp" for the will of the emperor.⁴⁸ The

⁴³ Barnes 1978, 84; Roos, 201; A. Birley 1974, 267.

⁴⁴ Herodian 2.15.6; Barnes 1978, 84.

⁴⁵ Barnes 1978, 84; Whittaker, lxiv-lxvi.

⁴⁶ Rubin, 96; Whittaker, lxii.

⁴⁷ A.R. Polley, "Date of Herodian's History," *Ant. Class.* 72 (2003):208.

⁴⁸ Peter Heather, "Senators and Senates," in *The Late Empire A.D. 337-425*, vol. 8 of *CAH*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 197.

senatorial elite relied more on individual wealth and influence rather than on institutional power.⁴⁹ The individuals who held the confidence of the emperor would often affect how the emperor used his power.⁵⁰ A product of these times, Herodian was more inclined to support an emperor who possessed military prowess; Herodian is therefore less critical of Severus's displays of military might.

Indeed, according to A.G. Roos, Herodian does not offer any valuable insight into Severus reign.⁵¹ Roos felt that “Herodian adorns the simple stories preserved to us in the *Vitae* of the *Historia Augusta* with touches borrowed from Dio...”⁵² This sentiment is echoed by F. Kolb, and affirmed by A.R. Birley.⁵³ H.W. Bird shows how in Herodian's accounts, Severus is juxtaposed with Niger in order to display the difference Severus's vigorous and decisive character represents.⁵⁴ This is important because Severus himself was the product of civil war and focused on the army. Herodian is a product of civil war and therefore disregards much of Severus's ruthlessness in war. Although Herodian lacks details that Dio had, Herodian's "adorned stories" give key insight into how perceptions of Severus changed.

Both Dio and Herodian represent the viewpoint of the senatorial aristocracy and both their accounts criticize Severus for his treatment of the aristocracy. However, as the

⁴⁹ Heather, 184; Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire From Severus to Constantine* (London: Routledge, 2001), 254. Southern argues that the Senate lost power in the third century.

⁵⁰ Christopher Kelly, "Emperors, Government and Bureaucracy," in *The Late Empire A.D. 337-425*, vol.8 of *CAH* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998),163.

⁵¹ A.G. Roos, "Herodian's Method of Composition," *JRS* 5 (1915): 191-202.

⁵² Roos, 201.

⁵³ Frank Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen Zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta* (Bonn: Habelt, 1972); A. Birley, Review of *Literarische Beziehungen Zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta*, by Frank Kolb, *JRS* 64 (1974): 266-268.

⁵⁴ H.W. Bird, "Herodian: Some Additional Considerations," *CB* 52 (Nov. 1975- Apr., 1976): 83-84.

atmosphere of the third century turned violent, Severus's military prowess became less a point of contention for Herodian. The biggest criticism these authors share is how Severus's mistreatment of the senatorial elite affected their ambitions.

The Historia Augusta: Fourth Century Fiction

In the fourth century, the roles between the senatorial elite and the emperor changed. The senatorial elite began to grow in number due to the emperor's efforts to reincorporate the elite.⁵⁵ However, while the senatorial order was expanding, access to the senatorial body in Rome or Constantinople continued to be reserved for the most prominent members.⁵⁶ Although the body of the Senate, limited to around 600 senators, held less direct political sway than in the first century, as individuals the senatorial elite were highly influential.⁵⁷ The senatorial elite were not required to spend long terms of service in the central government, and in the West they were not even required to live in Rome. Instead, they were highly visible as leaders in their local communities.⁵⁸ They often had the ear of local governors, and they exercised influence via patronage in their towns and regions.⁵⁹ The emperor could only act on information he was given and the elites often controlled what information the emperor received.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Michele Renee Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002): 22; Heather, 186,196.

⁵⁶ Heather, 197.

⁵⁷ Kelly, 163.

⁵⁸ Heather, 206. Heather points out that the senatorial order was not simply open to anyone, but only down to the higher *curiale* class, and thus did not take away from the elite's hold on influence in Rome; Southern, 255; Potter, 276.

⁵⁹ Heather, 199; Salzman, 30.

⁶⁰ Kelly, 157.

This shift in power was coupled with an effort by emperors, such as Constantine and his successors, to establish the elite as a unified group who were aware of the preeminence of the emperor.⁶¹ These changes created a unique perspective on Severus's reign. The Senate in Rome had local authority, but the influence it had on imperial policy was limited; the emperor relied instead on the support of the military and the imperial bureaucracy. Severus was a focal point for the beginning of this change. As a result, he became a key figure in fourth century historical critiques.

Treatment of Severus's reign in these fourth century sources shifts. For instance, Eutropius and Aurelius Victor, two fourth century authors, reveal that Severus was cruel. However, they do not elaborate on their intentionally brief character sketches.⁶² Treatment of Severus's reign in these fourth century sources shifts. Not included are the detailed descriptions of how Severus dispatched his rivals, or how he treated those who he considered threats. Whether this lack of detailed criticism is intentional or simply a result of the brevity of their works, it shows that fourth century authors were not as concerned with Severus's military ruthlessness as they were with his cruelty towards the Senate.

The *Historia Augusta* is one fourth century source that does elaborate on Severus's reign. However, in keeping with what seems to be a fourth century perspective, the *HA* does not portray Severus's military actions as inappropriate. The *HA* was written

⁶¹ Heather, 186, 195; Southern, 255; Potter, 386.

⁶² Eutropius 8.18: "Parcus admodum fuit, natura saevus." (He was parsimonious by nature, and cruel by nature); Aur. Vic. 20.10: "Horum infinita caede crudelior habitus et cognomento Pertinax" (Because of these limitless murders he was considered too cruel, and was given the surname Pertinax).

with a distinctly senatorial bias. Although the exact purpose of the *HA* is hard to ascertain, it is clear that the author intended to reassert senatorial authority, particularly in the West.⁶³ The author of the *HA* claimed to be writing in the early fourth century, before Constantine's reign,⁶⁴ but the actual date is probably closer to the late fourth century.⁶⁵ In Chapter Four I show the author's concern with grain crises, which suggests a possible 397 publication date. Though hardly conclusive it is definite that the author was not writing early in the fourth century. Indeed a publication before 369 is plausible as the author of the *HA* shows distinct knowledge of, and agreement with, both Aelius Victor (361 CE) and Eutropius (369 CE).⁶⁶ Alan Cameron has argued that many of the arguments for a 390's publication date fit better in the 370's.⁶⁷ Indeed Cameron suggests that the author's presentation of the lineage of Probus was designed to win the favor of Petronius Probus in the 370s-not Probus's descendents. If written in 395, the author would have praised the Anician lineage into which Probus's descendents married.⁶⁸ While this in itself is convincing, Cameron discredits his own arguments by stating that the author of the *HA* was a "frivolous ignorant person with no agenda worthy of the name at all."⁶⁹ If the author had no agenda and no intentions of winning favor, then writing in the

⁶³ Ronald Syme, "Propaganda in the *Historia Augusta*" chap. 8 in *Historia Augusta Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 120.

⁶⁴ *SHA Ael.* 1.1-3; Ronald Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 265.

⁶⁵ Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 608. Alan Cameron asserts that the dating must be between 361 and 386; See also Klaus-Peter Johne, *Kaiserbiographie und Senatsaristokratie: Untersuchungen zur Datierung und sozialen Herkunft der Historia Augusta* (Berlin: Akad.-Verl, 1976), 139,178; Syme 1983, 200. These last two authors date the *HA* to the 390's.

⁶⁶ Barnes 1978, 91: see also Chapter 3 below.

⁶⁷ Alan Cameron 2011, 614.

⁶⁸ Alan Cameron 2011, 637.

⁶⁹ Alan Cameron 2011, 641.

390's and not referring to the Anician lineage is more in line with the nature of his work. I cannot rule out a possible publication date in the 390's. I would argue that the *HA* could have been written any time after 369 CE but no later than 397/8.

The *HA* reports to be written by many hands, but is more likely to have been written by one person.⁷⁰ The deceitfulness of the *HA* is not limited to its authorship and date, but also occurs in its biographies. The author of the *HA* mixes fact and fiction in order to present a more plausible account of the emperors' lives while maintaining its entertainment value.⁷¹ It is possible that the author did this in order to present satirical accounts of the emperors. If so, then the author of the *HA* is presenting Severus's actions in a way that becomes almost comical. If one knew that Severus was a usurper, and considered unjustified in his actions by Dio and Herodian, then one would laugh when reading in the *HA* that Severus was justified in his actions because Niger and Albinus were responsible for the wars and were, in fact, threats to the Empire.

The author of the *HA* uses satire to display most of his criticisms of Severus. In doing so, he aligns himself with earlier authors such as Dio and Herodian.⁷² However, his biography of Severus focuses on Severus's actions against the senatorial elite in the West and their detrimental effects. Where the author of the *HA* differs from his

⁷⁰ Alan Cameron 2011, 608; J.N. Adams "On the Authorship of the *Historia Augusta*," in *CQ* 22, no. 1, (1972): 186-194; Ian Marriott, "The Authorship of the *Historia Augusta*: Two Computer Studies," *JRS* 69 (1979): 65-77.

⁷¹ Eric Birley, "Military Intelligence and the *Historia Augusta*" in *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium* (Bonn; Rudolf Habelt Verlag, 1966), 36.

⁷² Barnes, T. D., and Frank Kolb. 1975. "Review of Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der *Historia Augusta*," *Gnomon*. 47, no. 4: 368-373. While Barnes disagrees with Kolb's conclusions that the *SHA* derives much of his information from Dio when it correlates to both Dio and Herodian's accounts, it is still concluded that the *SHA* does in fact show knowledge of Dio as a source. See also Kolb 1972, and Barnes *Sources of the Historia Augusta* (Bruxelles; Collection Latomus, 1978).

predecessors in his critiques of Severus, it is usually in an attempt to maintain his focus on the western elite and Severus's attacks on that body. The author of the *HA* does not portray Severus's ruthlessness in war as unacceptable. Instead, Severus's preference for the people over the senatorial elite became the focus of criticism. Although Severus attempted to establish himself as a "good emperor," his recorded legacy would counter these attempts with accounts of the outrages he inflicted upon Rome, and—more specifically—upon the senatorial elite.

I will argue that the shifting balance of power between senate and emperor was a major reason for the differing perceptions of Severus in the third and fourth century. The key was the fact that the senatorial aristocracy was not satisfied with Severus's actions as emperor. Severus's ruthless military tactics become less appalling, and instead, the criticism of his reign is more blatantly placed where it belongs—Severus's treatment of the senatorial order. Though he may not have set out to debase the senate's authority, he did not attempt to aggrandize their status either. His actions towards the senate left him open to the criticisms first presented by Dio.⁷³

III. Chapter Summaries

Chapter One has examined the historiography on Septimius Severus. I have argued that modern historiography does not address the criticism found in third and fourth century sources, or how these criticisms change over time. I have shown that Severus's African bias is a red herring. It has distracted scholarship from the real concern

⁷³ These criticisms continued into the fourth century. However, they focused more heavily on Severus's slights against the Senate. I will address aspects of this in chapters 3-5.

of Severus's biographers, namely that Severus did not address the senatorial elite's needs during his reign. This study has undertaken the task of examining the shift in criticism, and what that shift expresses about the changing values of the senatorial elite.

The second chapter will look at how Severus shapes his own image through imperial propaganda. Through an examination of imperial coinage, portraits of Severus, and monuments erected for Severus, I will argue that Severus aimed to link himself with traditional "good emperors" and, more specifically, with a very Roman, legitimized dynasty by presenting himself as the son of Marcus Aurelius. I develop the official image of Severus in order to show the contrast that the literary criticism creates with this image.

In chapter three, I will consider how Severus's favoritism towards the military earned him a reputation as brutal and ruthless from the senatorial sources of the third century. By the fourth century, this criticism was muted. What was considered heinous to Dio was justified to the author of the *HA*. This criticism is the only one that shifts so dramatically between Severus's third and fourth century biographers. Dio felt Severus was unfit to rule because of his actions. Herodian emphasized the effects his actions in war had on the elite. However, the *HA* passes dispassionately over Severus's wartime activities. I will argue that Severus's military actions did not affect the author's opinion of Severus's reign. Instead, the *HA* is more openly critical of Severus's disregard for the senatorial elite.

Chapter four will examine the criticism of Severus's interactions with the senatorial elite. Severus linked himself with Marcus Aurelius and traditional customs of

"good emperors"; however, for the elites recording his reign, he did not deliver on these promises.⁷⁴ Severus promised the senatorial elite clemency and a time of prosperity, but Severus's critics did not record his reign as favorable to the elite. Criticizing Severus for disregarding the senate is consistent throughout the third and fourth centuries. The ancient historians wanted to record this disparity in order to counter Severus's propaganda and reveal their discontent with his reign. I will argue that this was the main concern of the senatorial elite and it became more emphasized in the fourth century.

Chapter Five will show how criticism of Severus shifted to adapt to the author's changing need through an examination of how the ancient historians selected their criticism to focus on contemporary issues. Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* all stress various criticisms to focus their readers on what they were concerned about. This reveals the effect that the changing political atmosphere of the late third and fourth century had on Severus's image.

My conclusion will show that the extant literary sources criticize Severus because of his disregard for the senatorial elite. This criticism is more focused in the fourth century, as the senatorial elite gained more authority, local and empire wide. I will argue that the shifting focus of criticism shows that Severus's propaganda was not effective. I will further argue that Severus's biography was used by each author in order to express their contemporary concerns.

⁷⁴ Dio 75.2.1-2; Herodian 2.14.3-6.

Chapter 2

Imperial Propaganda: Severus's preferred image

In 193, when Didius Julianus took the title of Emperor of Rome, Septimius Severus had a lot of work to do in order to seize that title from Julianus.⁷⁵ Though the troops had hailed Severus as emperor, Severus still had to move on Rome before his main rivals, Albinus or Niger, could do so.⁷⁶ With the Praetorian Guard auctioning the seat of emperor to Julianus, a “legitimate” successor to the Antonine dynasty was hard to find.⁷⁷ Albinus, who had the support of the elites, was in Britain with a sizeable force.⁷⁸ Niger, in Africa, had the support of the people and a sizeable force as well.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Severus was the closest to Rome and, according to Dio, was the shrewdest.⁸⁰ Through clever tactics, and force of arms, Severus secured the seat of emperor for himself. However, strength of arms alone would not secure the loyalties of Rome's citizens, elite and common alike.

in order to establish a traditional, legitimate, and seamless succession to the Antonine dynasty, Severus followed a method that past emperors had used and became, in the turmoil of the third century, a typical way to legitimize one's reign.⁸¹ It was important for a new emperor, established heir to the throne or usurper alike, to solidify

⁷⁵ Dio 74.11.6.

⁷⁶ For the title see *SHA Sev.* 5.1, for Severus's opponents see Dio 74.14.3.

⁷⁷ Commodus was killed and replaced by Pertinax, who was in turn killed by the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian guard then auctioned the seat to Julianus. See Dio 73.22.5-74.11.3; *SHA* Severus 5.1-3; Herodian 2.2.6-9, 2.5.9, 2.6.7-11.

⁷⁸ Herodian 3.5.2; Dio 74.14.3.

⁷⁹ Dio 74.13.5; A. Birley 1988, 98.

⁸⁰ Dio 74.15.1.

⁸¹ Sviatoslav Dmitriev, "'Good Emperors" and Emperors of the Third Century," *Hermes* 132, no.2 (2004): 211-224; David Shotton, "Gods, Emperors, and Coins," *Greece and Rome* 26, no. 1 (Apr., 1979): 49.

his position by attaching to it an air of tradition. The simplest way to achieve this was to associate oneself with an emperor, or emperors who had been successful in the past. More importantly, it was necessary to maintain the traditional characteristics of a "good emperor" as valued part of one's reign. For instance, even hostile sources show that Severus attempted to portray himself as the adopted son of Marcus Aurelius.

Another way of securing one's position as emperor was to associate oneself with a powerful and protective divinity.⁸² In the case of Severus, the patron deity was Jupiter himself.⁸³ Severus's association with Jupiter and other gods allowed him to claim a degree of "divine right." Dio's history shows that Severus promoted divine aid in his ascension to power through various signs, dreams, and portents.⁸⁴

The recording of his association with Marcus Aurelius, and the portents predicting Severus's rule are aspects of Severus's propaganda. The archaeological evidence of Severus's reign reflects the image he tried to create as the son of Marcus Aurelius, as having been granted the right to rule by Jupiter, and as having brought peace and prosperity to Rome. This chapter will examine select friezes from the Triumphal arch of Severus (both in Rome and in his home town Lepcis Magna), and various coins and portraits of Severus. I will show the emphasis that Severus placed on trying to create a traditional, legitimate image for his ascension.

⁸² Augustus himself had promoted Apollo as his patron god versus the eastern miscreant Dionysus, or Antony. See Paul Zanker, *The power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1988). The line between Olympian gods and the divine ruler was blurred by Septimius's time; see Inez Scott Ryberg, *Rites of the State Religion in Roman Art*, vol. 22 of *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1955) 134.

⁸³ McCann 64-65; Plate 11 Shows Severus seated as Jupiter.

⁸⁴ Dio 75.3.2-3.3; Dio relates several accounts of dreams that portended Severus's future.

I. Traditional Connections

Since Severus was the first usurper of the imperial throne in over a century, he strove to obtain the favor of Rome's senatorial elite, military, and the masses.⁸⁵ One of the major pillars of Severan propaganda was Severus's attempt to link himself to prominent emperors of the past.⁸⁶ By claiming to be the son of Marcus Aurelius, Severus gained the imperial throne through succession. He also promoted the image of himself as a good military leader, like his adoptive father, as well as a fair man when dealing with the senatorial elite and the people.⁸⁷ His association with Trajan was equally important. It granted him a connection to someone with an implacable record of success against Parthia and congeniality with the elites. Severus' association with Augustus allowed him to claim a re-founding of Rome, in which he was responsible for the new "golden age".

In choosing to associate himself with Augustus, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius, Severus attempted to link himself to a rich tradition of savior emperors, who possessed god – like attributes, and on whose well being the safety of Rome depended. In short, Severus's propaganda maintained that his reign was a traditional continuation of good and popular emperors before him. In design and placement of monuments, he attempted to identify with the good emperors Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustus.

Severus's Triumphal Arch

⁸⁵ Potter, 107. Vespasian had been the last to seize power through civil war.

⁸⁶ Shotter, 49.

⁸⁷ Southern, 42.

The Triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus, in the Northeast corner of the Roman Forum, is a spectacular symbol of the image Severus tried to establish of himself. The arch itself stood between the *Rostra Augusti* and the *Curia Senatus*.⁸⁸ It was only accessible to pedestrian traffic, which strengthened its role as an independent monument. It is also the first building project inside the Forum since the reign of Hadrian.⁸⁹ Its central arch rose diagonally opposite that of Augustus and balanced the north end of the forum by sitting opposite the Rostra and Tiberius' triumphal arch.⁹⁰ The fourth corner of the forum held monuments commemorating the "unfortunate Augustan heirs who were closely associated with Augustus' eastern policies."⁹¹ This meant that all the corners of the Forum displayed monuments of Roman victory in the east, particularly over Parthia. Severus' Arch was the largest in the forum and he had taken on the title *Parthicus Maximus* or "greatest of Parthian conquerors".⁹² This connection was not accidental; Severus and his architect used it to enforce Severus's "rightful" position as emperor.

Not only did Severus present himself as one who suppressed a foreign enemy and restored peace to Rome, but also showed himself as greater than many emperor's of the

⁸⁸ Richard Brilliant, *The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum* (American Academy in Rome, 1967), 85; Samuel Ball Platner and Thomas Ashby, *A topographical dictionary of ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1929), 43-44.

⁸⁹ Brilliant 1967, 85; Platner and Ashby, 597-8.

⁹⁰ Brilliant 1967, 87.

⁹¹ Ibid 1967, 87.

⁹² Brilliant 1967, 88; A. Birley 1988, 155: "Thus Septimius would be linked with the first emperor and perhaps subtly be shown to have surpassed him." For coins bearing witness to this see Harold Mattingly and Edward A. Sydenham, *Pertinax to Geta*, vol. 4, Pt.1 of *The Roman imperial coinage* (London: Spink, 1998), 68.

past. From top to bottom, the arch was designed to stress the importance of the Severan reign, the legitimacy acquired through the Parthian campaigns, and the prosperity Rome would gain under Severan leadership.

The middle zone of the monument is especially important in order to understand the arch. It celebrated Severus's victory over Parthia.⁹³ The Parthian conquest not only gave him a military success, but it helped connect Severus to those who had been successful against the Parthians in the past and who had created peace for Rome.⁹⁴ The spandrels and keystones of the arch are important symbols that emphasize Severus's connections to the past. The central spandrels contained the image of winged victory accompanied by one of the seasons. This is similar in design to both Augustus' arch for his victory over Parthia and Trajan's arch at Benevento.⁹⁵ A season portrayed as a young winged child holding specific seasonal items accompanies each victory. Often associated with *felicitas temporum*, the purpose of the seasons on this monument served to represent the good fortune Severus was bringing to Rome.⁹⁶ In the Arch's frieze, the good fortune represented by the season follows victory. Severus is stressing the themes of victory and

⁹³ Dio 75.3.2. Dio tells us how Severus often boasted of having added extensive territory to Rome. Though Dio disagrees with the importance of this territory, it is an important component to the image Severus is trying to establish.

⁹⁴ The honor of having a victory over Parthia was one that linked Severus to many of the good emperors of the past. Severus used this connection to emphasize the continuity of his reign, and the importance of his dynasty to the future prosperity of Rome. For the emphasis Severus placed on the prosperity he brought to Rome. See Zahra Newby, "Art at the crossroads? Themes and styles in Severan art," in *Severan Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 201-249.

⁹⁵ For reference to Augustus' arch see Brilliant 1967, 109; For similarity in design of Trajan see Brilliant 1967, 110-111; Michael Grant, *The Severans: The Changed Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1996), 67. Grant associates the design with the column of Marcus Aurelius; Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis, "Landscape, transformation, and divine epiphany," in *Severan Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 259; Plate 1 and 2.

⁹⁶ Brilliant 1967, 120; Petsalis-Diomidis, 264.

abundance that his success in Parthia has brought.⁹⁷ Severus is advertising his legitimacy through his victory over Parthia and the prosperity it was to have brought to Rome. The location of Severus's arch completed the architectural balance in the Forum. Visually bringing order to the forum, the Arch represented the order Severus restored.

Portraits of Severus: Medallions, Coins, and Statues

Severus's use of imagery on his arch is also reminiscent of panel reliefs assumed to be from a lost arch belonging to Marcus Aurelius. The stately figures on the pedestal reliefs of Severus's arch are sculpted in similar style.⁹⁸ Connecting himself to Marcus Aurelius was a major element of Severus's propaganda. Dio tells us that Severus was not only scoffed at by a popular senator who was quick with puns, but also that it pained the Senate to hear Severus relating himself to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.⁹⁹ The climatic miracles, which saved Severus in his battle against Niger resemble those of Marcus Aurelius.¹⁰⁰ Baharal argues that Severus's connection with Marcus Aurelius is what allowed Severus's dynasty to rule for forty-two years.¹⁰¹ Dio's account of Severus's

⁹⁷ Newby, 204; Petsalis-Diomidis, 258, 262; Michael Grant, *The Roman Forum* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 171.

⁹⁸ Brilliant 1967, 153; Newby, 204. Newby adds that it is innovative to place this particular style (the combination of bird's eye and frontal perspective, figures in vertical tiers, and isolation of the figure of the emperor) on flat panels is innovative, but nevertheless a deliberate attempt to link Severus with the Antonine dynasty.

⁹⁹ Dio 77.7. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Drora Baharal, *Victory of propaganda: the Dynastic Aspect of the Imperial Propaganda of the Severi : the literary and archaeological evidence, AD 193-235* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum. 1996), 22; Dio 75.7.6-8; Herodian 3.3.7-8. Herodian reminds us that all Cappadocia has hard winters, especially in the Taurus Mountains, before explaining that Severus's army's spirits were raised because of an act of nature which they believed was divine providence. Herodian seems to insinuate a little more chance to this occurrence, rather than providence.

¹⁰¹ Baharal, 19.

connection to Marcus Aurelius is evidence of the effect Severus's official image had on Dio's interpretations of events. Severus's portraiture shows how much effort Severus exerted to promulgate this image.¹⁰²

Portraits of Severus often fluctuated between the realistic and idealized versions.¹⁰³ Early in his rule, coins depicted Severus as the forceful soldier, but later many busts of Severus are very similar to those of Aurelius, especially in their idealized features.¹⁰⁴ If we look at a bust of Severus found in the national Museum of Rome and compare it to a relief from the Triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius, it becomes apparent that there was an attempt to visually link Severus to the family of Marcus Aurelius once he became emperor.¹⁰⁵ Emperors who were part of a dynasty would often portray similar characteristics, such as hairstyle, in their portraiture as their predecessors.¹⁰⁶ Baharal agrees that Severus's hairstyle and beard are in fact "...characteristic of the portraits of the Antonine emperors."¹⁰⁷ The curly locks of Severus are similar to those of Marcus Aurelius.

Severus's coinage stressed the links he had to Marcus Aurelius, often outright proclaiming that he descended from Aurelius. Coins dating to 195 are inscribed with the title "*DIVI M PII F P M TR P III COS II PP*" (indicating that he was the pious son of

¹⁰² Newby, 223. Newby says there is a desperate attempt to stress Severus's legitimacy found in his portraiture.

¹⁰³ Baharal, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Marguerite McCann, *The portraits of Septimius Severus, A.D. 193-211* (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1968); Plate 3.

¹⁰⁶ Baharal, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Baharal, 25.

deified Marcus Aurelius)¹⁰⁸ Other coins of Severus portray him with hair brushed up on the forehead just as in Marcus Aurelius's. The way the beard curls on the front is also strikingly similar. On the reverse of these coins is a further connection to Marcus Aurelius; Severus adopts the same imagery of an eagle alighted on the leg and thigh of an animal.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Marcus Aurelius is often portrayed with a "...melancholic expression typical of the philosopher emperor, especially in the dreamy look of the eyes."¹¹⁰ Several *aurei* of Severus's invoke this same pious and idealized expression.¹¹¹ Severus also has medallions that are similar in design to Marcus Aurelius's medallions. These appear as early as 195, and display the emperor viewed from behind with his head turned to reveal his profile. These medallions show him with a bare back, but adorned with the armor strap over the left shoulder.¹¹² This quite possibly was to show the link between the emperor and his position as *imperator*, on which both Aurelius and Severus were dependent.¹¹³

The medium that was most widespread was, of course, coinage. Severus's reign saw the minting of several coin groups, whose date we discern based on the titles

¹⁰⁸ Newby, 224, McCann, 50-1.

¹⁰⁹ McCann, 103; Plate 6; Newby 224 adds that these same traits can be seen in portraits found in Copenhagen.

¹¹⁰ Anthony Bonanno, *Portraits and Other Heads on Roman Historical Relief up to the Age of Septimius Severus* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 1976), 117.

¹¹¹ McCann, 64; Plate 4. McCann says "Severus is now the restorer of peace and the idealized, pious expression is in keeping with the new image of himself as a descendant of the good Antonine emperors." Also compare this to Plate 5. The first image has more of a lofty and philosophical air, much like Aurelius. Whereas the countenance of Severus in the second, with his protruding chin, is more resolute.

¹¹² McCann, 62; Baharal, XXII fig 53; Plate 7.

¹¹³ Aurelius depended on them because he was often on campaign, Severus because he owed his position to the power of his army.

displayed on the coins.¹¹⁴ An interesting point here is that there should be a gap between advancing to 'TR. P. X Cos III' from 'TR.P. X Cos II', but there is no evidence of a gap in these coin groupings. According to Mattingly, this suggests that there was a change in the acceptance date of 'TR. P.' from December 9 to January 1. These changes would make succession from the family of Marcus Aurelius appear seamless.¹¹⁵ Much of the coinage links Severus to Marcus Aurelius' lineage.¹¹⁶ From the year 196 Caracalla is referred to as 'M Aur Antoninus' (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus) on Severan coinage to proclaim his association with the Aurelian dynasty.¹¹⁷ Severus had Caracalla raised to Augustus in 198, and Geta named Caesar and '*noblissimus*' or 'born to the purple' after Severus was accepted as adopted into the Antonines by the senate. This was clearly propaganda designed to consolidate the new dynasty, because it allowed Severus's son Geta to claim the rank of Augustus as a right of birth.¹¹⁸

Severus's portraiture can also be associated with the African god Serapis.¹¹⁹

Although Severus's portrait shares similar characteristics as images of Serapis, they are more akin to the Romanized Jupiter-Serapis form.¹²⁰ This suggests that Severus did not

¹¹⁴ Mattingly 1998, 60. Mattingly says that the title IMP II was won in 193 and appears on coins in 194. IMP III and IV are attributed to the 194 campaign season for victories at Nicea, and Issus respectively. IMP V can be seen on coins in 195, IMP VI and VII for victories over Niger's allies the Arabians and Adiabiani. IMP VIII was awarded for the fall of Byzantium, IMP IX for the fall of Albinus at Lugdunum in 197, IMP X for the raising of Nisbis, and XI for Ctesiphon in 198/199.

¹¹⁵ Mattingly 1998, 61. Mattingly says this is because Severus began counting from his accession, but soon changed his system of counting so as to consider Pertinax and Julianus' reigns as an interregnum until his reign began.

¹¹⁶ Mattingly 1998, 185 no. 8658, 182 nos. 700-702a.

¹¹⁷ Baharal, 21; Mattingly 1998, 83.

¹¹⁸ Duncan Fishwick, *The imperial cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult of the Western provinces of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, Pt.2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 330.

¹¹⁹ H.P. L'Orange, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture* (New York: Caratzas Brothers, Publishers, 1982), 73-86.

¹²⁰ McCann, 53.

try to impose an African image in Rome, but attempted to make another connection to Marcus Aurelius, who also portrayed himself as Jupiter. By likening his image to Romanized Jupiter-Serapis, Severus was likely following the precedent established by Aurelius.¹²¹ Severus's association with Marcus Aurelius was far more profitable in Rome than an association with Serapis. It is therefore, arguably, the reasons why Severus's imperial portraiture was similar to Marcus Aurelius's.¹²² This connection was vital to the legitimacy of Severus's reign.

II. Divine Authority

Though it imbued him with several traditional characteristics, all of which promised the reputation of a "good emperor," Severus did not leave the security of his reign to a delicate association with Marcus Aurelius. Instead, he also strove to establish a connection with divine support. Severus wanted to portray himself as the restorer of the republic and peace and as the bringer of another 'golden age'. Therefore, Severus chose gods that would help him create this association. He chose to represent his regime as associated with Jupiter, Hercules, and Roma. These three gods allowed Severus to attach himself with the tradition of demigods. As we have seen, Severus had also linked himself with Augustus, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius, all of whom the senate had deified, and all of whom participated in the tradition of apotheosis. Severus's goal in doing this was to establish security for himself and his dynasty by further connecting his well being and success with the success and fortune of Rome.

¹²¹ McCann, 104.

¹²² As we know it was not accepted without contention. See Dio 77.7.3.

The way Severus incorporates Roma into his propaganda exhibits his efforts to raise himself to the level of the gods. On the arch commemorating his Parthian victory, the defeated soldiers supplicate Roma rather than Severus.¹²³ Severus was showing veneration to Roma, and was declaring that his success was a sign of Rome's strength. Severus was clearly the victor at Parthia; his displacement of an image of himself with an image of Roma expresses his deferment to Roma as the benefactor of his victory.

As noted above, Severus uses coinage to link himself to the legitimate line of rulers. It also shows his attempts to follow the patterns set by Augustus and Marcus Aurelius and establish both his rightful place among the gods, and the link between his success and Rome's prosperity. Severus stresses the peace achieved by his victories and suggests a coming policy of *Aequitati Augg.*, correct organization of supply lines, and *Libertas*, a constitutional government. Severus is also given the title '*fundator pacis*' and '*restitutor urbis*,'¹²⁴ in Severus's attempt to display himself as traditional, peaceful, and as the willing servant of the senatorial elite and the people.¹²⁵ In a time where the relationship between emperor and deity was blurred, Severus attached himself to the rich tradition of apotheosis and the 'good emperors' who became gods.¹²⁶ He does this in an effort to emphasize his right to rule and divinity.

¹²³ Brilliant 1967, 146; Plate 8.

¹²⁴ Mattingly 1998, 68. "Founder of the peace" and "Restorer of the city."

¹²⁵ Something which the *Princeps* had long learned was necessary if he were to be secure in his position; see Baharal, 13.

¹²⁶ For more on the line between emperor and deity being blurred see Inez Scott Ryberg, *Rites of the State Religion in Roman Art*; S.R.F. Price, *Rites and Rituals: Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 246.

According to Duncan Fishwick, in the Imperial Cult at Lugdunum under Severus, there is a stress placed on the living emperor. Revolution, insecurity, and hard times can explain this new stress on the living emperor, as "...coins, inscriptions and bas reliefs record the association, assimilation or outright identification of the emperor and his house with....Jupiter, Hercules and Bacchus, and Jupiter-Serapis." In fact, the "Roman emperor stood appreciably closer to the gods than was ever the case before"¹²⁷ At the Altar of the Three Gauls, Roma was now confined to the temple, whereas the altar was given '*ad aram Caesaris nostri*' or "*ad aram Caesarum nostrorum*' with no mention of Roma.¹²⁸ This version of the imperial cult is more prominent in Lugdunum, a place where Fishwick feels Severus needed to win over the supporters of Albinus. Associating himself with the gods would have been a simple way to generate adherence to his policies. Severus's victory arch, and the image of Roma receiving suppliants, and his taking over of the altar at Lugdunum, shows that Severus claimed divine support and that he had achieved feats worthy of the gods.¹²⁹

Severus also used the relationship between Jupiter and Hercules to promote the august nature of his dynasty. Early in his reign, Severus showed himself as ruling under the auspices of Jupiter,¹³⁰ and represented himself as Hercules, who was the divine

¹²⁷ Duncan Fishwick, *The imperial cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult of the western provinces of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3, Pt.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 198.

¹²⁸ Fishwick 2002, 203.

¹²⁹ Newby, 204. Newby says that the use of Roma as the official whom the Parthians must supplicate before, allows Severus to place his victories into a "...wider context of the benefits that these have brought to the empire as a whole." I am suggesting that Severus would have wanted himself to be seen as equal to the gods since he was responsible for this victory.

¹³⁰ Fishwick 1987, 337; Mattingly, BMC 5, p.31 no. 07.

executioner of Jupiter's rule.¹³¹ Hercules was the perfect association to promote the image of Severus as both savior of Rome and as approaching divinity himself through his super-human accomplishments.¹³² Hercules had been a demigod, who achieved divinity through great works of civilization. Hercules had built roads, founded cities, and he was considered a world ruler and the protector of humankind.¹³³ Severus's victory over Parthia, and building in Rome linked him to these aspects of Hercules.¹³⁴

Severus took his efforts for deification further by shifting the god he associated with to Jupiter instead of Hercules. In the Lepcis Magna Arch, Severus is in the midst of the Capitoline Triad with the eagle of Jupiter at his feet. This relief displays Severus seated, and he resembles the image of Jupiter-Serapis.¹³⁵ He is trying to connect himself to Jupiter in order to accomplish two things. First, he moved himself closer to divinity by depicting himself as the greatest of the gods.¹³⁶ Second, he attempted to establish divine sanction for his dynasty in hopes of securing it from opposition. He gave his son an association with Hercules in order to show a progression towards divinity for him and his heirs. Caracalla, who would exploit the association with Hercules more directly than

¹³¹ McCann, 65. A medallion shows Severus distinctly dressed in the lion headdress of Hercules; Plates 9 and 10.

¹³² Shotter, 51.

¹³³ Andrew Runni Anderson, "Heracles and His Successors: A Study of a Heroic Ideal and the Recurrence of a Heroic type," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 39 (1928): 9; Harold Mattingly, "Jovius and Herculus," *The Harvard Theological Review* 45, no. 2 (Apr., 1952): 132. Mattingly suggests that representations of Hercules were intended to show the divine *virtus* that rested inside the emperor, which all "good emperors" had.

¹³⁴ Alexander the Great, considered to have a reputation as Hercules, also had success against Parthia. More closely related to the Roman era, Augustus also had a reputation as Hercules and had diplomatic success against Parthia; see Anderson, 41.

¹³⁵ Baharal, 53. Plate 11 and 12.

¹³⁶ In later years emperors would consider themselves to be harboring the spirit of the deity rather than merely being protected by them. See Mattingly 1952, 131.

his father, has Severus deified in order to strengthen his own regime.¹³⁷ Thus, Severus accomplished his agenda in this regard. Severus gave prosperity to Rome and became a god; he gave Rome to his son in the hopes of offering him the same fate and offering Rome continuing good fortune.

The extant literary sources show that divine association was a large part of Severus' propaganda. Dio and Herodian relate that divine inspiration predicted Severus's ascension, and intervened through miraculous weather to help his campaigns.¹³⁸ Indeed, Dio displays Severus's propaganda in his writings.¹³⁹ Dio relates that Severus dreamed that a she-wolf suckled him in the same manner as Romulus, that water sprang from his hand like from a spring as he slept, that Severus dreamed he had been taken up on a horse (who had thrown Pertinax from his back) while in the Roman forum, and that Severus had taken the imperial throne in ignorance when he was a youth.¹⁴⁰ All these portents echo Severus's claim that his reign was determined by fate and favored by the gods.

It is clear that Severus's objective was to establish supernatural sanction for his reign through manifestations of divine favor, or by insisting that fate had decreed his rise to power. Rumors of remarkable occurrences like those listed above would have been encouraged by Severus; having them written into record by people like Dio would have been even more pleasing to him. Severus intended these omens as propaganda because he

¹³⁷ Inez, 134. Inez shows how in the Lepcis Arch of Severus, he stands among the gods in place of Jupiter of the Capitoline triad.

¹³⁸ Dio 75.7. 6-8; Herodian 3.3.7-8. The story relating to the weather also has ties to Aurelius who overcame an opponent under similar circumstances; see Dio 72.8.1-4.

¹³⁹ Dio 73.23.1.

¹⁴⁰ Dio 75.3.2-3.3.

erected monuments to commemorate them. One example is the statue of him on horseback on the spot where the horse was supposed to have thrown off Pertinax in his dream.¹⁴¹ Severus replaced this monument when he erected his Triumphal arch.

Severus's propaganda declared that Severus was the restorer of peace and the Republic. He gave his regime legitimacy through an association with a tradition of demigods, and apotheosis. The gods favored Severus. Without Severus, Rome would lose the *pax deorum*. Severus's propaganda attempted to secure his reign and the dynasty he hoped to create. His military victories and the prosperity he brought to Rome were proof that he was fated to rule, and that the gods sanctioned his reign.

III. Conclusion

As a usurper to the throne, Severus's primary focus in his propaganda was to legitimize his reign. In order to do so he joined a rich tradition of emperors presenting themselves as Hercules and through his great services to Rome he achieved divinity. He directly linked himself with traditional "good emperors" and professed divine aid in the acquisition of his position. His Parthian victory was essential to both these attempts. In positioning and styling his victory arch, he related himself to emperors of the past who had been successful against the Parthians. In doing so, he was also able to profess himself to be responsible for the beginning of a new Golden Age. The prosperity Rome would have was available only because of him and his success.

¹⁴¹ For Dio's role in Severus' propaganda see Rubin 1980, 38-9. The equestrian statue Severus had erected in order to commemorate the dream of being Pertinax's successor, and the painting of his horoscope on his ceilings are a few examples Rubin gives to show how Severus wanted these omens to be remembered.

Severus was able to use his success and the idea of a promised golden age to link himself to the gods. Fortune had foretold his ascension to the throne and the gods supported his reign. His position as the executor of Jupiter's will and as favored by the gods placed Rome's success directly in relation to the safety and success of his family. This transition placed the emperor and his family closer to the gods than ever before. Initially Severus had no support from the masses and the senate; so, he used propaganda to make himself a vital component to Rome's well being and to establish that the safety of Rome and its citizens depended on him. This image, though well argued and reinforced through extensive propaganda, is not one that the literary sources support. As I will show, the Senatorial elite did not buy the 'golden age' promises, divinity, or importance of Severus.

Chapter 3

The Ruthless Emperor at War: Changing Perceptions of Imperial

Authority

Since the time of Julius Caesar, the key to power was control of the army. This meant that the emperor was required either to be successful as a military leader or to be crafty enough to supply the army with enough funds and competent generals.¹⁴² This was no different, and arguably more important in the late second and early third centuries as emperors were replaced at the whim of the army. For the first time in Roman history, Roman citizens saw the seat of emperor auctioned off to the highest bidder; he who grappled with other ambitious contenders for the support of the only legion in Rome: the Praetorian Guard.¹⁴³ Like the emperors immediately preceding him, Severus rose to power with the support of his legions. In his struggle to gain power, his ability to command won him praise from the military but opprobrium from the senatorial elite.

The distaste felt by the senatorial elite is vocalized by Dio Cassius and Herodian, both third century authors, who freely criticized Severus's excessively ruthless military tactics. They portrayed him as brutally treating his adversaries, destroying the walls of Byzantium, and thirsty for glory (*gloriae cupiditas*).¹⁴⁴ In the third century, the senatorial elite criticized Severus for his treatment of rivals, especially when they were Roman

¹⁴² Southern, 268-271; Potter, 276.

¹⁴³ Dio 74.11.3.: "ὡςπερ γὰρ ἐν ἀγορᾷ καὶ ἐν πωλητηρίῳ τινὶ καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ αὐτῆς πᾶσα ἀπεκηρυχθή." (For, just as if it had been in some market or auction-room, both the City and its entire empire were auctioned off).

¹⁴⁴ Dio 75.1.1: "ἐπιθυία δόξης ἐστράτευσε" (out of a desire for glory); Herodian 3.8.10-9.2: "βουλόμενος δόξαν ἄρασθαι νίκης" (wanting to win a reputation); *SHA Sev. XV*: Severus planned the war with Parthia "gloriae cupiditate non aliqua necessitate deductum." (led by a desire for glory rather than from necessity).

citizens as Dio and Herodian aver. For these two authors, Severus's actions rendered him un-Roman and unfit to rule because traditional values held that crushing a suppliant was an act of cruelty: as Barton notes, "not to destroy, when one could do so easily, was a noble act."¹⁴⁵ Interestingly, there was a shift in fourth century criticism. The author of the *HA* muted his criticism of Severus at war in order to focus his attack on how Severus treated the elite. These differences are important because they show that third and fourth century authors shaped Severus's reputation to fit their rhetorical needs and changing contemporary values.

I. Civil War and the Treatment of Foes

To grant clemency to an opponent after proving one's military prowess was an action highly respected by the Romans. *Clementia* became a virtue that was traditionally associated with a "good emperor."¹⁴⁶ Severus, who sought to associate himself with "good emperors," tried to portray himself as imbued with *clementia*. Dio and Herodian, however, see little evidence of mercy; instead, in their works, they paint a picture of a man of unforgiving nature. The way these sources portray Severus during his civil wars shows their belief in Severus's inclination towards retaliation.

¹⁴⁵ Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001), 142.

¹⁴⁶ Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome During the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 154; David Konstan, "Clemency as a Virtue," *Classical Philology* 100, no. 4 (October 2005): 344-5.

Dio on the Civil Wars of Severus

In Severus's struggle for power, he stamped out any source of opposition to his rule and used his conquered foes as examples for any other would be rivals. The civil war against Niger shows Severus's attempts to discourage opposition to his reign. Niger was the proconsul of Africa and a strong contender for the throne. The people in Rome called him to the throne before Severus took the city.¹⁴⁷ However, Severus defeated Niger at the Cilician Gates, and made an example of Niger.¹⁴⁸ Instead of treating Niger's body with *dignitas*, as Dio records, he used it in a rather savage way. "έάλω δέ υπό τῶν καταδιωξάντων καί ἀπετμήθη τήν κεφαλήν. Καί ταύτην ὁ Σεουήρος ἐς τὸ βυζάντιον πέμπμας ἀνεσταύρωσεν, ἵν' ἰδόντες αὐτήν οἱ Βυζάντιοι προσχωρήσωσι" (Severus caused the head to be sent to Byzantium and to be set up on a pole, that the sight of it might induce the Byzantines to join his cause.)¹⁴⁹ The tactic of displaying the defeated foes in order to discourage further resistance is not in itself against the norm of ancient warfare.¹⁵⁰ Our third century authors considered these acts ruthless and illegal because they were committed against a Roman citizen.

The civil war between Severus and Albinus further illustrates this point. When Severus announced the promotion of his son to the rank of Caesar, he removed Albinus's hopes of holding any further power in Rome.¹⁵¹ Britain's governor thus chose to rally his

¹⁴⁷ Dio 74.15.2.

¹⁴⁸ Dio 75.7.1.

¹⁴⁹ Dio 75.8.3.

¹⁵⁰ Brilliant, Richard, "Let the Trumpets Roar! The Roman Triumph" in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bergmann, B. and C. Kondoleon (Washington : National Gallery of Art, 1999) 228. Brilliant discusses how visual violence against an enemy could often work to coalesce Rome's multitude into a cohesive group.

¹⁵¹ Dio 76.4.1; *SHA* 10.3.

troops to rebellion against Severus.¹⁵² Albinus had support from the Senate, a strong force of legions, and the realization that the only way to secure his future was to fight for it.¹⁵³ With this mindset, he battled with Severus. However, Severus was able to defeat Albinus at Lugdunum.¹⁵⁴

Once again, Dio presents Severus's treatment of his foes, only this time, he spells out the depraved nature of this action for the reader:

"ἰδὼν δ' οὖν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, καὶ πολλὰ μὲν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς πολλὰ δὲ τῇ γλώττῃ χαρισάμενος, τὸ μὲν ἄλλο ῥιφῆναι ἐκέλευσε, τὴν δὲ κεφαλὴν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην πέμψασ ἀνεσταύρωσεν. ἐφ' οἷς δῆλος γεγόμενος ὡς οὐδὲν εἶη οἱ αὐτοκράτορος ἀγαθοῦ..."

"The emperor, after viewing the body of Albinus and feasting his eyes upon it to the full, while giving free rein to his tongue as well, ordered all but the head to be cast away, but sent the head to Rome to be exposed on a pole. As this action showed clearly that he possessed *none of the qualities of a good ruler...*" (Italics are mine).¹⁵⁵

Dio expresses two perceived elements of Severus's nature in this quote. First, he displays the caving-in of Severus's will to his impulses and emotions. He explains this act as an uncontrolled outburst by Severus. He gives "free rein" to his tongue, allowing it to curse the body of the deceased-an outburst unbecoming of a Roman, much less the Emperor of Rome.¹⁵⁶ Secondly, he reveals his true thoughts about Severus's character. Dio explicitly states that Severus was showing "none of the qualities of a good ruler."

If we connect these two accounts, we see Dio's pattern of discrediting Severus's ability to rule. Severus had dispatched Niger and sent his severed head to warn against

¹⁵² Dio 74.14.3 tells us that Albinus was Governor of Britain and commanded three Roman legions others.

¹⁵³ Herodian 3.5.8.

¹⁵⁴ Dio 76.6-7; Herodian 3.7.5; A. Birley 1988, 126-127.

¹⁵⁵ Dio 76.7.3.

¹⁵⁶ Sen *De Clem* 1.7.1: "...regi vociferatio quoque verborumque intemperantia non ex maiestate est." (in a king, even loud speech and unbridled words ill accord him his majesty).

opposition. Later in his reign, he cut off Albinus and sent it to the Roman senators for the same purpose. The similarities in Dio's portrayals of the treatment of the corporeal remains of Severus's political rivals are striking. If one unsavory action left Severus unfit to rule, and he performed this deed on more than one occasion, it erases all doubt that Severus was unfit to rule.

Herodian on the Civil Wars of Severus

Herodian echoes many of Dio's sentiments. Like his fellow chronicler, Herodian sees Severus as ruthless and cruel and often appalling to the Roman elite.¹⁵⁷ Herodian uses some of the same evidence discussed by Dio, but shifts his. For instance, in Herodian's account of the conflict with Niger, a beheading still takes place.¹⁵⁸ However, it is just a brief statement. Whether Dio was exaggerating or whether Herodian simply left part of the story out, the silence suggests that in the third century the fate of Niger's head was no longer a central concern. Instead, criticism of Severus was much more concerned with how Severus interacted with, and affected, the senatorial elite.

In Herodian's account of the civil wars between Severus and Niger, Herodian criticized the way in which Severus deceived Niger's allies. Herodian states:

"διαβεβλήκεσαν γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὸ ἦθος αἰ πρὸς τοὺς ἡγεμόνας τοῦ Νίγρου πράξεις· πείσας γὰρ αὐτοὺς διὰ τῶν παιδῶν, ὡς προείρηται, προδοῦναι τὰ τοῦ Νίγρου πράγματα, μετὰ τὸ ἀποχρήσασθαι αὐτῶν τῆ ὑπηρεσία καὶ

κατορθῶσαι πάντα ἃ ἐβούλετο ἀνεῖλεν αὐτοῦς τε καὶ <τοὺς> παιδᾶσ. Τὸ οὖν ὑπουλον αὐτοῦ ἦθος μάλιστα ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ἐδελοῦτο."

"Severus's actions against Niger's generals had detracted from his

¹⁵⁷ Rubin, 92. Rubin discusses that Herodian and Dio may have used sources which echoed Severus's propaganda. Because of this, the criticisms found in Herodian can be seen as Herodian's opinion of Severus.

¹⁵⁸ Herodian 3.4.6: "...σλληφθεῖς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀπετμήθη" (caught and beheaded).

reputation because, after putting pressure on them through their children to betray Niger (as explained earlier), he made use of their services; but once he had achieved his aims he destroyed them and their children. It was these acts that really showed up his underlying character.”¹⁵⁹

Herodian is presenting a different image than that found in Severus's propaganda. He is showing Severus as destructive rather than the restorer of peace. Even more revealing is how this criticism has shifted from Dio's time. Instead of focusing on Severus's character, Herodian criticizes Severus because he was adversely affecting the senatorial elite. Of course, the use of children as pawns in politics and war was not a new development.¹⁶⁰ Still, his actions were remembered as the opposite of his official image.

Like the story of Niger, Herodian's account of Albinus also differs from Dio in the severity he attributes to the events. Herodian says, "...τόν τε 'Αλβῖνον συλλαβόντες καὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀφελόντες, κομίσαντες αὐτὴν τῷ Σεβήρῳ δισσά..." "Albinus was taken prisoner, executed and his head carried to Severus ..."¹⁶¹ Herodian uses a simple, declarative statement. He does not portray any deprecation in the way that Albinus' body was treated, nor does he comment on Severus's outburst. Instead, Herodian shows how Severus used Albinus's head for political purposes:

"ὁ δὲ Σεβήρος θυμῷ καὶ ὀργῇ εὐθέως πρὸς τοὺς ἐν "Ρώμῃ φίλους αὐτοῦ ἐχρήτο. καὶ πέμψας τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ 'Αλβίνου δημοσίᾳ ἀνασταυρωθῆναι κελεύει· γράμμασί τε τῷ δήμῳ τὴν νίκην ἑαυτοῦ δηλώσας ἐπὶ τέλει καὶ τοῦτο προσέθηκε, πεπομφέναι τὴν κεφαλὴν

αὐτοῦ δημοσίᾳ περίοπτον, ἵνα αὐτὸς οἷόν περ ἔδεικνυεν αὐτοῦ τὸν θυμὸν ἴδη καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἐκείνους ὀργήν."¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Herodian 3.5.6-8. Unless otherwise noted all translations of Herodian are taken from Herodian *History of the Empire Books I – IV*, trans. C.R. Whittaker. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁶⁰ Herodian 3.2.2-4. Herodian shows this was a practice at least under Commodus.

¹⁶¹ Herodian 3.7.3-7.

¹⁶² Herodian 3.7.8-8.

“Immediately after this Severus turned his full anger on Albinus’ friends in Rome. Severus sent the head of Albinus to Rome with orders that it should be publicly displayed on a pole...so that the Roman people could see for themselves the measure of his temper and his anger with Albinus’ friends”

The focus of criticism here is not simply that Severus put Albinus' head on a pole.

Instead, Herodian stresses Severus's orders that it be used to express his dissatisfaction with Albinus's senatorial allies. If Severus had just sent a letter home to announce his anger at Albinus's friends, it would have been equally egregious to Herodian. The focus is not on what Severus did to Albinus, but rather on how Severus used Albinus's head to encourage fear in the elite.¹⁶³

HA on the Civil Wars of Severus

The *HA* has a very different tone when discussing Severus's military actions. Writing in the fourth century, the political climate, as discussed above, was different. It is true that the *HA* has a senatorial bias similar to that of Dio and Herodian. However, as has been discussed, the senatorial elite were in a different position in the fourth century. There was an effort by emperors to reincorporate the elite into the government, and senatorial elites across the board gained local authority in their communities.¹⁶⁴ The emphasis on the disposition of the elite, as seen in the *HA*, is a result of the changing powers of the senatorial elite. The resurgence of the senate in Rome was more of a concern in the *HA*. In order to emphasize the effects Severus's actions had on the senatorial elite, the author of the *HA* does not focus on Severus's treatment of his foes. Instead, the author actually gives explanations that help validate Severus's actions.

¹⁶³ Severus is using Albinus's head to instill obedience in the senate much the same way Dio portrays him as using Niger's head to instill obedience in the people of Byzantium as noted above.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 1 above.

The author of the *HA* blames Niger for the war, which the author portrays as a necessary measure to protect the grain supply from interference by Niger: “*ne...populo Romano penuria rei frumentariae perurgetur*” (to not...distress the Roman people with a scarcity of grain).¹⁶⁵ Severus was not going to war to rid himself of a potential enemy nor was he starting civil war out of any perceived threat to himself. Rather, the author represents Severus as justified in going to war because he was doing it for the benefit of Rome.¹⁶⁶ It was important for a good emperor to take action to ensure that grain was continuously and adequately supplied.¹⁶⁷ Neither Dio nor Herodian offers this justification for Severus's actions. Dio states that Severus made a campaign against Niger but provides no explanation. Dio states that Severus was involved in war with Albinus because he would no longer allow Albinus to be Caesar.¹⁶⁸ Herodian states that Severus moved immediately on Niger to catch him off guard, and that he attacked Albinus who was a nuisance for whom he no longer had time.¹⁶⁹

It is possible that the author of the *HA* was using this to explain his expectations for the emperor who ruled over him. The *HA* was most likely written in the mid to late 390's.¹⁷⁰ The author's stress on the importance of the grain supply supports a later fourth century publication date and possibly even confirms a date near 397. Grain crises became

¹⁶⁵ *SHA Severus* 8.7.

¹⁶⁶ Seneca *De Clem.* 1.12.1-4. Seneca says using force to protect Rome is one of the only reasons to chose violence over mercy.

¹⁶⁷ G.E. Rickman, "The Grain Trade under the Roman Empire". *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*. 36 (1980): 261-275. Rickman discusses the difficulties of importing grain, and the role that the state took in order to ensure its delivery; Wm. Adams Brown, "State Control of Industry in the Fourth Century." *Political Science Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1887).

¹⁶⁸ Dio 75.6.1, 76.4.1.

¹⁶⁹ Herodian 2.14.6, 3.5.1-2.

¹⁷⁰ Klaus-Peter Johne, *Kaiserbiographie und Senatsaristokratie: Untersuchungen zur Datierung und sozialen Herkunft der Historia Augusta* (Berlin: Akad.-Verl, 1976); Syme 1983, 220.

an incessant problem in the latter half of the fourth century. One instance of crisis was in 397CE when a usurper named Gildo rebelled in Africa.¹⁷¹ His actions disrupted the grain trade, and resulted in a grain crisis in Rome.¹⁷² If the author of the *HA* published his work in or after 397 CE, it would explain the importance he places on protecting the grain supply and offers a reason to excuse Severus's war with Niger. The *HA* accepted Severus's authority by claiming that Niger, and later Albinus, rebelled against Severus. By painting Niger as a usurper in Africa from whom Rome needed protection, the author may be revealing his awareness of the 397 CE crises. Although this is hardly conclusive evidence for dating the *HA* to 397 CE, it does show that the author was concerned with the grain crisis in the fourth century. This could be why, unlike earlier authors, he offers an excuse for Severus's wars.

Secondly, the author of the *HA* does not attribute the war with Albinus, which earlier authors attributed to Severus's deception of Albinus, to Severus. The *HA* says "...*aliud bellum civile Clodii Albini nuntiatum est, qui rebellavit in Gallia*" (another civil war was begun with Clodius Albinus, who had rebelled in Gaul).¹⁷³ The war against Albinus was begun because Albinus "*rebellavit*." The author of the *HA* acknowledges Severus's authority and appropriate response to the situation. Placing blame on the

¹⁷¹ Claudian *De Bellico Gildico*; Peter Garnsey, "Famine in Rome," in *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Peter Garnsey and C.R. Whittaker (Cambridge, Cambridge Philological Society, 1983), 58; Alan E. Wardman, "Usurpers and Internal Conflicts in the 4th Century A.D.," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 33, no. 2 (1984): 223,239.

¹⁷² Garnsey 1983, 56; Whittaker, 119;

¹⁷³ *SHA Sev.* 10.1.

shoulders of Severus's opponents, diminishes any sympathy a reader might have for Niger or Albinus. No longer are they the victims of Severus's aggression, but dangerous threats to which Severus is responding.

The author of the *HA* portrays the accounts of Niger's and Albinus's remains with a lack of concern. The author simply states "dein confluxit cum Nigro eumque apud Cyzicum interemit caputque eius pilo circumtulit" ("Not long afterwards he met with Niger near Cyzicus, slew him, and paraded his head on a pike).¹⁷⁴ Whereas Dio and Herodian stress this matter as a major affront to senatorial sympathies, the author of the *HA* mentions the fate of Albinus' head without ornament: "Deinde Albinus corpore adlato paine seminecis caput abscidi iussit" (Then, when Albinus's body was brought before him, he had him beheaded while still half alive).¹⁷⁵ The primary critique of Severus is not that he abused Albinus's remains, but that his wrath is saved for, and unleashed on, Albinus' supporters in Rome.¹⁷⁶

Since the *HA* used Dio and Herodian in parts of his biographies, it is possible that the *HA*'s readers would also have been familiar with their versions.¹⁷⁷ With a backdrop of Dio and Herodian's more critical accounts, an educated reader might find the image of an innocent Severus, concerned only with the safety of the empire as humorous, especially as the author of the *HA* follows this by stressing the violent nature of Severus's retribution against the elite.¹⁷⁸ Even if the author of the *HA* mocks Severus by supporting Severus's

¹⁷⁴ *SHA Sev.* 9.1.

¹⁷⁵ *SHA Sev.* 11.6.

¹⁷⁶ *SHA Sev.* 11.7.

¹⁷⁷ Syme 1983, 270, 1971, 272; Timothy D. Barnes *The sources of the Historia Augusta* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1978), 84.

¹⁷⁸ *SHA Sev.* 12.1-2.

actions, it still reveals the emphasis the author of the *HA* places on the plight of the senatorial elite under Severus. Severus's maltreatment of the senatorial elite remained deplorable in the fourth century.

Summary

Severus knew he was neither the people's nor the Senate's first choice.¹⁷⁹ The generals, Niger and Albinus, could have been a source of opposition to Severus; he could not risk granting them clemency.¹⁸⁰ Severus used the army to rid himself of these two threats. However, Dio and Herodian criticize Severus for the way he eliminated his rivals. Dio describes him as merciless and causing alarm amongst the senate for the brutal way he treated his foes.¹⁸¹ Herodian shows Severus to be deceptive and unreliable.¹⁸² Both these authors criticize Severus's cruelty towards his enemies.

The *HA*, on the other hand, portrays Severus as justified in wars and their outcomes.¹⁸³ Though the *HA* does mention the same acts as Dio and Herodian, there is little hostility behind the discussion of these acts. Instead, the author of the *HA* blames Severus's opponents and glosses over Severus's treatment of them once they have been defeated. It is possible that the silence in the *HA* is intentional, and that the author intends to mock Severus. However, it also serves to draw the reader's attention to the actions

¹⁷⁹ Dio 74.13.5. Dio shows that the people called for Niger as a replacement, Herodian 3.5.2. Herodian shows the desire of the senate to have Julianus succeeded by Albinus.

¹⁸⁰ Niger and Albinus were both generals under Commodus and through Julianus's brief reign. Niger had command of Africa and Albinus of Britain.; see Dio 74.14.3. These will be discussed at length later in this section.

¹⁸¹ Dio 75.8.4, and 76.7.3.

¹⁸² Herodian 2.9.11-10.1.

¹⁸³ *SHA Sev.* 8.7, and *Sev.* 10.2.

which the author of the *HA* does criticize: his treatment of the senatorial elite, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Here it is sufficient to note that the author of the *HA* does not directly criticize Severus for being ruthless.

II. Byzantium's Walls: A case of changing perceptions and intentional omission

During the war with Niger, cities around Rome were aligning themselves with the person whom they felt was most likely to be victorious, or, in some cases, whoever was closest in proximity. As a result, several prominent provincial cities sided with Niger instead of Severus. Later, many of these cities would pay for this mistake with the loss of certain rights that they had previously held in respect to their status in the empire.¹⁸⁴

Byzantium was one such city. Byzantium aligned with Niger, who left Antioch right when the war broke out in order to secure Byzantium and advance on Perinthus.¹⁸⁵ While most cities felt the power of Severus's displeasure after the war, Byzantium felt the repercussions of this action during the war itself.

Though Dio seems to criticize Severus throughout his writings, he places much emphasis on Severus's destruction of the walls. Dio states:

"ταῦτα μὲν οὖν δικαίως πως ποιῆσαι ἔδοξε· τὰ δὲ δὴ τείχη τῆς πόλεως διαλύσας ἐκείνους μὲν οὐδὲν πλέον τῆς στερήσεως τῆς δόξης ἦν ἐκ τῆς ἐπιδείξεως αὐτῶν ἐκαρποῦντο, ἐλύπησε.."

"Thus far he seemed, in a way, to be justified in what he did; but in demolishing the walls of the city he failed to cause the inhabitants any greater grief than was involved in the loss of the glory which they had derived from the displaying of their walls..."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ *SHA Sev.* 9.4-8. Severus deprived Antioch and other communities of their civic rights.

¹⁸⁵ *Dio* 75.6.3.

¹⁸⁶ *Dio* 75.14.4.

According to Dio, destroying the walls of Byzantium was the greatest grief Severus could cause its inhabitants. Dio has a long description of the greatness of these walls and the safety they provided for their city.¹⁸⁷ Municipalities relied heavily on their architecture to assert their sense of pride. By destroying the walls, Severus was taking their identity.¹⁸⁸ Coupled with loss of political esteem and legal status after the wars, Severus left the city of Byzantium decimated.¹⁸⁹

Dio reveals that he deplores this action as something foreign, un-Roman, and perhaps even barbarian. "καὶ εἶδον ἐγὼ τὰ τε τείχη πεπτωκότα ὥσπερ ὑπ' ἄλλων τινῶν ἀλλ' οὐχ ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων ἐαλωκότα" (I myself saw the walls after they had fallen, looking as if they had been captured by some other people rather than by the Romans).¹⁹⁰ As honor in battles, won on behalf of emperors was bestowed on the emperor himself, so too could dishonor cloud the reputation of the emperor as the commander in charge. Although Severus did not have a direct hand in the destruction of the walls, Dio still attacks his "Romanitas" because he had commanded the un-Roman action. Dio seems convinced that Severus's reign was detrimental to the rule of Rome, claiming that many of his conquests were useless to the state,¹⁹¹ but more importantly, he worked to ensure that Severus's legacy was that of ruthless and un-Roman behavior.

¹⁸⁷ Dio 75.10.3-6.

¹⁸⁸ Ine Jacobs, 2009. "Gates in Late Antiquity in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* : *Babesch*, 84: 197. Jacobs discusses how walls and gates were particularly important in expressing the identity of a city.

¹⁸⁹ *SHA Sev.* 9.7-9.

¹⁹⁰ Dio 75.14.5.

¹⁹¹ Dio 75.3.2.

It is noteworthy that Herodian's account of the fall of Byzantium differs from Dio's. Herodian, whose opinion of Severus softens from the stern view held by Dio, considers the destruction of the walls a show of strength by Rome. Herodian states, "ἔτι γοῦν καὶ νῦν τὰ μένοντα αὐτοῦ ἐρείπια καὶ λείψανα ἰδόντι θαυμάζειν ἔστι καὶ τὴν τέχνην τῶν τὴν ἀρχὴν κατασκευασάντων καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν τῶν ὕστερον καθηρηκότων." (Even when one sees the ruins of the wall (of Byzantium) as they are today, one has to admire the skill of the first builders and the power of those who later destroyed it).¹⁹² The difference in emphasis here is immediately apparent in the author's vocabulary. Herodian uses *ἀρετή* to describe his opinion of the destruction of the walls. It is a compliment to the Romans that they were able to dismantle Byzantium's great work. Herodian's approval of the military's actions is a dramatic change from Dio's criticism.

What Dio considered un-Roman in the early third century and Herodian considered a strong indicator of the military power in the later third century, the author of the *HA* disregarded in the fourth century. In fact, the author of the *HA* is silent about Byzantium's walls being brought down. The *HA* had access to Dio and Herodian, and in fact, used them for many of his accounts-including the lives of Elagabalus, Pertinax, Severus, and Caracalla.¹⁹³ The fact that the author does not feel the need to discuss it is odd but not out of line with what is known about the *HA*.

¹⁹² Herodian 3.1.7.

¹⁹³ Barnes 1975, 369. Barnes disagrees with Kolb's conclusions that the author of the *HA* derives much of his information from Dio when it correlates to both Dio and Herodian's accounts, he still concludes that the author of the *HA* does in fact show knowledge of Dio as a source. See also Kolb 1972.

As was noted above, the author of the *HA* was trying to appear to have written before Constantine's reign in the early fourth century, when in reality he wrote in the latter part of the fourth century. This has interesting implications for this study. First, it means that at the time the *HA* was written, Byzantium had been rebuilt as Constantinople. However, the *HA* was purportedly written before Constantinople had been established and therefore to not comment on Severus's actions in Byzantium seems odd, especially since we know the *HA* used sources that stressed this part of Severus's military campaigns.

It seems unlikely that the author of the *HA* is trying to be satirical here simply because of the total silence. If he wanted to present an outrageous account of Severus's attack on Byzantium, it seems more likely that he would include something about the Byzantine citizens welcoming Severus, which would indicate that there was no need to destroy the walls. No comment seems more likely to be an intentional omission. Yet, it is of note that neither of the other two fourth century sources, Eutropius and Aurelius Victor, comment on Severus's destruction of Byzantium. Would it be necessary to discuss the fall of a city that later became a capital? It seems that in these later fourth century writers, who admittedly offer abbreviated accounts, the answer was that it was not necessary. His compliance with the other fourth century others in remaining silent about the walls of Byzantium reveals the *HA*'s later fourth century publication date.

However, it is still possible that this was an intentional omission. It is known that the *HA* was predominately focused on promoting the status of the senatorial elite in the

West, and he focuses his narrative on Severus's actions in that region.¹⁹⁴ It seems likely that his lack of comment on Severus's destruction of Byzantium is an attempt to maintain this focus. Whether hiding his true date of publication or not, the author certainly did not intend to remind his readers of Byzantium, especially since it had been rebuilt and was now the capital of the empire. Instead, he was content to be silent, and keep his readers focused on the plight of the western empire.

III. Glory Seeking: an Unnatural Roman Characteristic

While the *HA* author did not discuss the fall of Byzantium, he did criticize other elements of Emperor Severus's military endeavors. Severus spent several years on campaign against various tribes on the fringes of the empire. Severus, also, could not resist waging war against Rome's traditional enemy, Parthia. This campaign was important support for Severus's claim that he had restored prosperity to Rome. However, all the sources, even the *HA*, portray Severus' motivations for these acts as selfish, and not done for the benefit of Rome.¹⁹⁵ Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* agree that personal glory drove Severus to make these campaigns, and worse still, for Dio, the campaigns accomplished nothing. It was not justifiable to undergo these wars, risk the lives of Romans, spend Rome's money, and be away from Rome simply for the sake of fame. These sources universally considered Severus's desire to seek glory through these military measures as unbecoming of an emperor.

¹⁹⁴ Alan Cameron "Literary Allusions in the *Historia Augusta*," *Hermes* 92, no. 3 (1964): 363.

¹⁹⁵ Dio 75.1.1: "ἐπιθυμία δόξης ἐστάρτευσεν" (out of a desire for glory); Herodian 3.9.1; *HA Sev.* XV: "gloriae cupiditate non aliqua necessitate deductum." (led by a desire for glory rather than from necessity).

Dio's view of Severus's actions in Byzantium, as we have seen, is not favorable. Even worse to Dio was that while securing Byzantium, Severus sought further prestige in facing a foreign enemy. Dio states, "Σεουῆρος δέ, ἐν ᾧ ταῦτα ἐπολιορκεῖτο, κατὰ τῶν βαρβάρων ἐπιθυμία δόξης ἐστράτευσε..." (But while this siege (of Byzantium) was going on, Severus, out of a desire for glory, made a campaign against the barbarians).¹⁹⁶ Here, the slur that Severus campaigned simply for glory is not, in itself, very telling. Seeking glory had been a staple of Roman campaigns since the days of the Republic. The desire to win military glory, so the senate could award them a Triumph drove many senators to go out on campaign in the Republic.¹⁹⁷ However, in the days of the Republic and early empire, the senate only considered conquests worthy of a Triumph if they accomplished something for the State.

Republican senators sought glory for themselves through achieving glory for Rome in hopes that their efforts would culminate in a Triumph. Dio's criticism is that Severus's actions achieved nothing for Rome. Dio argues that, "ἔλεγέ τε μεγάλην τέ τινα χώραν προσκεκτῆσθαι καὶ πρόβολον αὐτὴν τῆς Συρίας πεποιῆσθαι. ἐλέγχεται δὲ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἔργου καὶ πολέμων ἡμῖν συνεχῶν, ὡς καὶ δαπανημάτων πολλῶν, αἰτία οὖσα." (He [Severus] used to declare that he had added a vast territory to the empire and had made it a bulwark of Syria. On the contrary, it is shown by the facts themselves that this conquest has been a source of constant wars and great expense to us.)¹⁹⁸ Severus put considerable emphasis on the benefits that his campaigns had brought to Rome; he

¹⁹⁶ Dio 75.1.1.

¹⁹⁷For more on how the Triumph functioned under the Republic and how this ceremony changed when the government shifted to empire see Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁹⁸ Dio 75.3.2.

wanted Rome to praise him for providing peace and prosperity. As we have seen, these campaigns were crucial to linking him to a tradition of savior kings, or demigods.¹⁹⁹ Dio, however, refutes Severus's claims of achievement. He contends that Severus did not add anything good to the empire. Instead, he sees Severus's search for glory as detrimental to Rome and Roman esteem, as the territories gained became a nuisance for Rome. Severus only added to the problem with his war with Albinus in 197 where "Ο μὲν δὴ Σεουήρος οὕτως ἐνίκησεν, ἡ δὲ δύναμις ἢ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἰσχυρῶς ἔπταισεν ἅτε ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἀναριθμητῶν πεσόντων" (Thus Severus conquered; but the Roman power suffered a severe blow, inasmuch as countless numbers had fallen on both sides).²⁰⁰ The expense and the loss of life from the foreign and civil wars were not offset by any gain for Rome. In this instance, Dio directly contradicts the imperial propaganda.

After these wars, Severus continued to pursue useless and unruly campaigns. His target was the kingdom of Parthia and Volgaesus. Dio writes, "οὐ μέντοι οὔτε τὸν Οὐολόγαισον ἐπεδιώξεν οὔτε τὴν Κτησιφώντα κατέσχευε, ἀλλ' ὡς περ ἐπὶ τούτῳ μόνον ἐστρατευκῶς ἴν' αὐτὴν διαρπάσῃ ᾗχετο, τὸ μὲν ἀγνωσία τῶν χωρίων τὸ δ' ἀπορία τῶν ἐπιτηδείων" (He did not, however, pursue Volgaesus, nor even occupy Ctesiphon, but, just as if the sole purpose of his campaign had been to plunder this place, he was off again, owing partly to lack of acquaintance with country and partly to the dearth of provisions).²⁰¹ This illustrates the point made above: Dio shows that desire for glory controlled Severus, and, even worse, his campaigns brought no glory for him or for

¹⁹⁹ For discussion of Severus's propaganda see Chapter Two.

²⁰⁰ Dio 76.7.1.

²⁰¹ Dio 76.9.4.

Rome. These campaigns did not even conquer territory but simply provided an opportunity for the soldiers to indulge in plunder. Dio portrays Severus more as a brigand than as an honorable general.

Herodian echoes some of Dio's criticisms; Severus's campaign proved him an inept military leader. For instance, Herodian says:

"ὁ δὲ Σεβῆρος καθελὼν τὸν Νίγρον, τοὺς μὲν φίλους αὐτοῦ, καὶ εἴ τινας οὐ μόνον ἐκ προαιρέσεως ἀλλὰ δι' ἀνάγκης προσέθεντο αὐτῷ, πάντας ἀφειδῶς ἐκόλασε, τοὺς δὲ στρατιώτας, ὅσοι διδεδράκεσαν, πυνθανόμενος περαιουμένους τὸν Τίγριδα ποταμὸν διὰ τε τὸ ἐκ Σεβήρου δέος ἀπιόντας πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους, <οὐ> πάντας ἤγαγε δούς ἀμνηστίαν. Πολὺ γὰρ πλῆθος αὐτῶν ἀνεχώρησεν ἐς τὴν ἀλλοδαπήν."²⁰²

“Now that Niger was out of the way, Severus ruthlessly punished all Niger’s partisans, regardless of whether they had joined him voluntarily or had been forced to so...when he heard that the fugitive soldiers were crossing the Tigris...he granted them an amnesty. But he failed to get them all back, since there were a great many that had gone to that foreign territory. Indeed, this was a major reason for the later development of these barbarians’ skill in close-quarter fighting against the Romans.”

Severus's refusal to forgive his enemies caused Rome to lose its strength, and increased the strength of the barbarians. Herodian holds Severus directly responsible for this.

Severus’s domineering attempts to exact revenge forced citizens to leave Rome and flee into the hands of the enemy giving them knowledge of tactics and technology of which they would have otherwise been deprived. Like Dio, Herodian views Severus's campaigns as problematic.

Herodian's account of the Parthian campaigns is also very negative about Severus's ability to lead: "οὕτω μὲν δὴ Σεβῆρος, τύχη μᾶλλον ἢ γνώμη, τῆ κατὰ

²⁰² Herodian 3.4.7-5.1.

Παρθυαίων νίκη κεκόσμητο" (So more by good luck than good judgment Severus won prestige with his victory over the Parthians).²⁰³ This one line, in an otherwise simple account of the Parthian wars, reveals that Herodian credits Severus with very little of the glory he sought: "ὁ δὲ Σεβήηρος ἀσμένως ταῦτα ἀκούσας, φύσει μὲν καὶ ἄλλως φιλόδοξος ὑπάρχων, καὶ μετὰ τὰς ὑπὸ ἀνατολαῖς καὶ ἄρκτω νίκας καὶ προσηγορίας βουλόμενος καὶ κατὰ Βρεττανῶν ἐγεῖραι τρόπαια..." (This was welcome news for Severus, partly because he was a man who naturally liked glory in any case and wanted to win some victories in Britain after the titles and conquests that he had won in the eastern and northern provinces.)²⁰⁴ Herodian, while not discounting Severus's success, undercuts Severus's military prowess by attributing the success to *τύχη*, chance, instead of *γνώμη*, judgment. Herodian's opinion of Severus's merit as a strategist is clearly not high. Here again Dio and Herodian are in accord; both of them perceive Severus to have been selfishly motivated by the desire for glory, which he obtained in name only, but in reality, he never actually secured any benefit for Rome.²⁰⁵ By basing Severus's victory on chance or luck, Herodian also undercuts Severus's image as the man who secured peace for Rome through military prowess and victory over Rome's enemies.

The author of the *HA* shares this view of Severus's wartime actions. The *HA* states "*erat sane in sermone vulgari parthicum bellum adfectare Septimium Severum,*

²⁰³ Herodian 3.9.12.

²⁰⁴ Herodian 3.14. 2. This is a description of Severus at the end of his reign, when the governor of Britain sought help from Severus, and compelled Severus to leave Rome and embark on campaign once more.

²⁰⁵ *SHA Sev.* 9.9-11. Severus had received the titles "Arabicus, Adiabenicus, and Parthicus." After his exploits in Parthia after defeating Niger. However, he merely bought regions that had sided with Niger back into allegiance with Rome and himself. Severus himself did not accept the triumph awarded him for these exploits, the author's explanation that this was to avoid seeming to triumph over Romans seems plausible.

gloriae cupiditate non aliqua necessitate deductum."²⁰⁶ The key phrase here is "*gloriae cupiditate*", which reveals the anti-Roman nature of Severus's campaigns. *Gloriae cupiditas* does not have to be a criticism. *Cupiditas* can have positive values. *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *cupiditas* as "passionate desire or longing," but when allowed to run to excess, as "immoderate desire, cupidity or greed."²⁰⁷ The positive and negative connotations are also true for the cognate noun *cupido*, which means "passionate desire" or "longing", but can also mean "carnal desire," "greed," or "lust."²⁰⁸ In this context, the *HA*'s implication is negative; Severus's actions were not based on need, but rather on an excessive desire for glory. Indeed, the negative implications of this phrase are reminiscent of Sallust's *Catiline*.

Sallust sees Cataline's *cupido* as violent, and shows that his passions lead him into vice.²⁰⁹ *Gloriae Cupido* was something that both the noble and the base sought, but the base pursued it through deception.²¹⁰ Digest 42.5.6.2 uses *cupiditas*, like *cupido*, to indicate wantonness, or an unrestrained yielding to one's pleasures.²¹¹ Since at least the first century BCE, *cupiditas* had negative connotations; Cicero claims that it led men to satisfy their desires, and that it dominates the soul.²¹² This perception of *cupiditas* persists

²⁰⁶ *SHA Sev.* 15.1.

²⁰⁷ *OLD* 472.

²⁰⁸ *OLD* 472.

²⁰⁹ *Sall. Cat.* 4.4-5, 3.5.

²¹⁰ *Sall. Cat.* 11.2.

²¹¹ David D. Daube, "A meaning of cupiditas," *Studi in onore di Pietro De Francisci* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1956), 123.

²¹² Sarah Spence, *Rhetoric of Reason and Desire: Vergil, Augustine, and The Troubadours* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 19; *Cic. Inv. Rhet.* 1.2.2.

into the fifth century; St. Augustine labels *cupiditas* as a shameful love of transitory things, it sets one person against another, and is a demeaning of the self.²¹³

I argue that the use of *cupiditas* in the *HA* coincides more with Sallust's understanding of *cupido* as destructive. Indeed, Sallust was read and studied in every school in the later fourth century empire, and as such the author of the *HA* would have had an understanding of his use of *cupido*.²¹⁴ The close correlation between the usages of *cupiditas* and *cupido* in conjunction with the use of *gloriae* as the genitive defining the object of desire is striking. Although the *HA* uses "*gloriae cupiditate*" instead of "*gloriae cupido*," it still shows that Severus was a man acting on his impulses rather than on reason and moderation.²¹⁵ According to the *HA*, in a truly Sallustian Roman tradition, Romans should not be controlled by *cupiditas* even of glory, because it taught them cruelty and neglect of the gods.²¹⁶ In fact, it was cruelty for which the sources criticize Severus.²¹⁷

Moreover, whenever the *HA* uses the word *cupiditas*, the author generally uses it with a negative association. So for instance when discussing the lives of the pretenders he describes Victorinus demonstrating that his "*cupiditas mulierariae voluptatis*" (desire of the pleasure of women) offset all his good qualities.²¹⁸ Again in his account of Niger, the *HA*'s author says that Niger was "*....libidinis effrenatae ad omne genus cupiditatum*."

²¹³ William S. Babcock, *The Ethics of St. Augustine* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991) 47.

²¹⁴ See Alan Cameron 1964, 364.

²¹⁵ Daube, 124.

²¹⁶ Sall. *Cat.* 10.4, 11.4.

²¹⁷ Severus's inability to show clemency made him cruel in the eyes of Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA*. See Chapter Four.

²¹⁸ *SHA Tyr. Trig.* 6.7.

(unbridled in indulgence in every manner of passion).²¹⁹ Furthermore, when discussing the barbarian invasion under Claudius the *HA* reports that the barbarians "*praedae cupiditate in Romanum solum intruperunt*" (burst into Roman territory in desire for plunder).²²⁰ Given the context and grammar usage, it is most likely that the author of the *HA* used *cupiditas gloriae* with its negative associations when describing Severus.

However, it is necessary to note that the *HA*'s author contradicts his own perceptions of Severus. Earlier in the life of Severus, for instance, the author of the *HA* shows Severus living moderately.²²¹ The *HA* opens with comments on Severus's composed nature and ends with descriptions of a man who led his life well.²²² However, in the middle of the text, the author of the *HA* reveals aspects that damage Severus's image. He desired glory, he killed over forty senators, and he wasted his attentions on the masses.²²³ Severus's actions towards the elites and populace belie the composure and reserved nature the *HA*'s author portrays in the beginning and end of his work.

IV. Conclusions

As seen in chapter two, Severus portrayed his military endeavors as beneficial to Rome. This perception was necessary in order for Severus to link himself with peace and to show himself essential to Rome's success. However, the records of third century historians reveal that his propaganda was not accepted. There is a consistent effort to show that Severus's military efforts were not only useless, but also detrimental to Rome.

²¹⁹ *SHA Niger 1.4.*

²²⁰ *SHA Clod. 6.2.*

²²¹ This in contrast to *SHA Sev. 19.1*, in which the author of the *HA* portrays Severus as disciplined and controlled in his mannerisms.

²²² *SHA Sev. 19.7-20.1.*

²²³ *SHA Sev. 13.1-8*; see also Chapter Five.

Dio is the first to stress that Severus's campaigns brought nothing to Rome, and this criticism continued through the third century. Clearly, Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* seek to portray Severus not as a just and powerful bringer of peace, but rather as a ruthless and cruel leader.

In the later third and fourth century sources, Severus's military image recovers slightly. Favorable points for Severus's reign appear in Herodian, Eutropius, Aurelius Victor, and the *HA*.²²⁴ Nonetheless, he is criticized especially for the effects his wartime actions had on the senatorial elite. As will be shown, authors of the third and fourth century consistently stress Severus's failure in this regard. As I will argue, it was because of his mistreatment of the senatorial elite that the writers with pro-senatorial biases do not accept Severus's official propaganda

²²⁴ *SHA Sev. 4, Sev. 17* "Prope a nullo congressu digressus nisi victor."

Chapter 4

Critiquing Severus: An Elite Activity

Despite Severus's attempts to portray an image of the ideal Roman leader in his propaganda, our senatorial sources do not receive his reign well. Their criticisms center on Severus's character and how he tries to secure his position as emperor. Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* portray Severus's rise to power as full of deceit.²²⁵ These authors also attribute these same characteristics to Severus's reign. The sources reflect Severus's drive to secure his power while showing a complete disregard for the senate's role in the governing of Rome.²²⁶ His treatment of the senate distressed our authors. They, in turn, deemed Severus unfit to be emperor, and did everything they could to discredit and counter Severus's propaganda.

Severus's treatment of the senate is one criticism that was consistent in the third and fourth century sources. Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* note that Severus was not the preferred candidate for the seat of Empire. Severus was from an obscure background and was therefore not noble enough to be emperor. His success in becoming Emperor was dependent on his ability to deceive the weak minded (senators and common people alike). Severus based his rule on benefiting the army, which put him into power rather than on cooperation with the senate. This disregard for the senate is visible how he treated that body in regards to his promises of

²²⁵ Rubin; Barnes, 1978; Syme, 1971, 272; all show that these authors share a similar source, possibly the *Kaisergeschichte*, but regardless their accounts are filled with individual critiques that suggest they agreed with the source they consulted.

²²⁶ This contradicts the image Severus was trying to give his regime. It was tradition for the Emperor to at least feign a partnership with the senate in the governing of Rome.

Clementia. Ancient sources consistently reveal that this was an empty promise. Severus's deceitful behavior, and disregard for the senate, created distrust among Rome's elite. This in turn fostered an atmosphere in which the senate feared to interact with Severus.

Severus spent considerable time outside of Rome on campaign. In his stead, he allowed Plautianus to run Rome as prefect of the guard.²²⁷ The inscription of Roman Tripolitania, number 572, refers to Plautianus, and shows that Plautianus began his career as the *praefectus vehicularum*, and the *procurator xx hereditatum*.²²⁸ What is definite is that by 195 he was *praefectus vigilum* and became *praefectus praetorio* under Severus in 197. His daughter was married to Caracalla in 202, and thereafter he was known as "*necessarius dominorum nostrorum, socer et conoser Augostorum*" Plautianus had statues of himself erected near the Senate.²²⁹

Whatever his titles and history, Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* portray the elites as less supportive of Plautianus than Severus because Plautianus flaunted his power. They blamed Severus for Plautianus's audacity in publicly displaying his assumed superiority to the Roman Senate.²³⁰ These authors criticize Severus for not controlling Plautianus, and stress that the elite were unable to turn to Severus for

²²⁷ Dio 76.14.1. Plautianus was prefect of the guard and shared Severus's power; Herodian 3.10.6-11.3. Herodian shows the excessive power Severus allowed Plautianus to have, and the fear created in Rome by Plautianus.

²²⁸ Joyce Marie Reynolds, and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *The inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* (Roma: British School at Rome, 1952).

²²⁹ *Prosopographia* iii (1933) F554.

²³⁰ Herodian 3.11.3. Herodian shows that people would not even look at Plautianus for fear of his power.

help; they feared reprisals. These authors show that Severus's relationship with the senatorial elite was characterized by a lack of cordiality and mutual respect.

I. Origins and Deceit: Characteristics unfit for an Emperor

While Herodian is the only source that directly called Severus deceitful, all his biographers show that Severus was not honest with the senatorial elite.²³¹ Dio says that he broke his promises to the senate, by showing that he was the first to break his own laws.²³² Herodian produced a long tirade saying Severus was an expert at deception, and the *HA* concurs that he did not intend to keep his word.²³³ The criticisms these authors have of Severus stem from the fact that, in their view, he never had a legitimized position.

In the second and third centuries an emperor could assert the strength of his reign by a display of his military strength. However, to display his imperial legitimacy he often turned to one of two ways. One was by claiming to have the same virtues as one's predecessor who had chosen him as successor; the other was showing that a divine figure had granted him the right to rule.²³⁴ As has been shown above, Severus attempted both of these tactics. However, the senatorial elite writers of Severus's history were not convinced. Anytime Severus enacted a policy, or failed to control his

²³¹ Herodian 2.14.3-6. Herodian states that Severus was capable of acting out any sort of deception, but as I will show later, this becomes a major theme of Herodian's critique.

²³² Dio 75.2.1-2.

²³³ Herodian 2.9.11-10.1; *SHA Sev.* 7.5,12.1-3.

²³⁴ See Dmitriev, cited above, note 81.

court, his biographers use it to discredit his legitimacy further. Despite any arguable benefits Severus may have made to the state during his reign, he could not escape the perception of being unfit for the position of emperor.

Dio and Herodian are meticulous at showing why Severus was not supported by the elite. Severus was reportedly not of noble birth. Herodian shows that “ἤροῦντο γὰρ οἱ εὐπατρίδαι ἐκεῖνον μᾶλλον ἄρχοντα, ἅτε ἐκ προγόνων εὖ γεγονότα καὶ χρηστὸν τὸ ἦθος εἶναι λεγόμενον.” (The nobles preferred to have him [Albinus] as emperor because he traced his noble birth back to a long line of ancestors and was said to be honest.)²³⁵ By implication, this comment indicates quite a bit about Herodian’s interpretation of Severus’s family. As his enemy in the civil war, Albinus represented Severus’s counter point. Herodian describes Albinus as “χρηστὸν” or “honest”, whereas he described Severus as sufficient at “προσποιήσασθαί” or “deception.” Herodian implies that as Albinus’s opposite, Severus could neither trace his lineage to noble ancestors nor was he honest.

Dio supports Severus’s lack of noble lineage by relating a speech purportedly made by Auspex, who, according to Dio, was the cleverest at making jokes. He is quoted by Dio as saying “ὦν ἐν καὶ τοῦτο· ἐς φὰρ τὸ γένος αὐτοῦ τὸ τοῦ Μάρκου ἐγγραφέντος 'συγχαίρω σοι, Καῖσαρ,' ἔφη, 'ὅτι πατέρα εὔρες,' ὡς καὶ ἀπάτορος αὐτοῦ τὸν ἔμπροσθεν χρόνον ὑπ' ἀφανείας ὄντος.” “When the emperor was enrolled in the family of Marcus, Auspex said: ‘I congratulate you, Caesar, upon finding a father,’

²³⁵ Herodian 3.5.2-6.

implying that up to that time he had been fatherless by reason of his obscure birth.”²³⁶

There is no guarantee that Auspex said this, but the important thing here is that Dio and Herodian both depict Severus's purportedly obscure background. This attack on Severus's origins was an attempt to undercut his claimed legitimacy. As we've seen, Severus's coins and portraiture claimed that he was the son of Marcus Aurelius.²³⁷

however, Dio makes it a point to call Severus's lineage into question. Dio shows that Severus's ascension did not take place as part of natural dynastic succession and tried to impress upon his readers that Severus was not a member of the elite. This is pure slander because Severus's origins are not as ambiguous as Dio records them to be.²³⁸

Agreeing with Dio, Herodian writes that Severus acquired his position not through merit but through trickery and deceit. Herodian depicts Severus as one who convinced people to align with him through tricks and deceit. For instance, in his rise to power Severus was not able to win support through the merit of his character. Instead, Severus was only able to win them over "μεγάλαις τε πάντας ὑποσχέσσει καὶ ἐλπίσιν ἀναπειθῶν ῥαδίως ὑπηγάγετο." "By dint of extravagant promises to raise their hopes..."²³⁹ Herodian seems to suggest that these promises were fruitless, and they often were. Also according to Herodian, Severus was not above using "underhand

²³⁶ Dio 77.9. 4.

²³⁷ See Chapter Three.

²³⁸ *SHA Sev.* 1.2. The author shows that Severus had two uncles serve as consuls in the past.

²³⁹ Herodian 2.9.12-3.

subterfuge” in order to quell opposition and encourage cooperation.²⁴⁰ The overall impression is that Severus was untrustworthy; he sacrificed integrity in order to secure the position of emperor.

More revealing of his disdain is how Herodian attributes Severus's accomplishments to "τύχη" or "luck". Having luck, or achieving victory by chance or fate, was not necessarily a bad thing. There was a common perception that the child of chance was favored by the gods.²⁴¹ Herodian, however, did not intend to paint Severus as the child of chance. Herodian makes this clear by pairing Severus's luck with accounts of his opponents' ineptitude. For instance Herodian tells us that Severus was anxious to trick Albinus into giving his support "τιμῇ τοίνυν προσποιήτω δελεάζει τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ ἄλλως μὲν ὄντα τὴν γνώμην χαδῶνον καὶ ἀπλοϊκώτερον, τότε δὲ καὶ πολλὰ διὰ γραμμάτων ὁμόσαντι τῷ Σεβήρῳ πιστεύσαντα" (By pretending to pay him honor, Severus won over Albinus, *who in any case was vain and rather simple*, and on this occasion was taken in by the many promises which Severus made in his letters).²⁴² According to Herodian, Severus did not win Albinus over through

²⁴⁰ Herodian 3.5.3.

²⁴¹ Douglas J. Stewart, "Sallust and Fortuna." *History and Theory* 7, no. 3 (1968): 298-317. Stewart discusses this dichotomy, especially as used by Sallust in his *Bellum Catilinae*. See also Rubin 1980, who discusses the capricious nature of *Fortuna*.

²⁴² Herodian 2.15.3. Italics are mine.

political prowess or cunning; he was lucky that Albinus was so gullible. Like Severus's war victories, Herodian sees the locus of Severus's success as somewhere other than in Severus himself.²⁴³

The theme of Severus's luck and the ineptitude of the opposition is again illustrated when Herodian discusses how Severus won over the district of Pannonia. Again, it is not because Severus is a powerful speaker, or has any sort of political sway. Instead, Severus is successful because it is easy to dupe the Pannonians. Herodian states:

"ταύτης δὴ τῆς προφάσεως λαβόμενος ὁ Σεβῆρος εὐμαρῶς αὐτούς ἐς ἃ ἐβούλετο ὑπηγάγετο, προσποιούμενος οὐχ οὕτω τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀντιποιεῖσθαι, οὐδ' αὐτῷ τὴν ἐξουσίαν μνᾶσθαι, ὡς θέλειν ἐπεξελεθεῖν τοιούτου βασιλέως αἵματι."

“Seizing upon this excuse, Severus had no difficulty in winning the soldiers over to his objective, though he pretended that his aim was not so much to lay claim to the empire or to win personal power as the desire to avenge the murder of so fine an emperor. The inhabitants of the district of Pannonia are tall men of fine physique, natural and fierce fighters, *but intellectually dull and slow-witted* when it comes to crafty words or subtle actions.”(Italics are mine).²⁴⁴

Herodian shows how Severus beguiles those whom he wins over. He relies on tricks, and false promises rather than personal merit to achieve his ends. Moreover, Herodian places the reason for success of these tricks on the “slow-witted” nature of the inhabitants of Pannonia rather than on Severus's persuasive abilities. As shown in Chapter Three Herodian attributed Severus's military victories to "τύχη," showing

²⁴³ Herodian consistently portrays anything that Severus accomplishes, as having been accomplished by some other means than Severus's skill. See also the discussion of Severus's success in war as discussed in Chapter Three.

²⁴⁴ Herodian 2.10.1.

Severus to lack the judgment of a good general. Likewise, he attributes Severus's ability to gain support not to his merits as a candidate for emperor, but to the inability of his allies to see through his deception.

Dio and Herodian make it clear that they do not consider Severus a proper emperor. He was not the preferred candidate of the elite, was deceitful and, even worse was only able to trick the easily fooled. Modern scholarship suggests Severus was a master of propaganda. Modern historians depict Severus as a Roman bureaucrat, a crafty politician, and one well versed in Roman customs and traditions.²⁴⁵ Indeed, as was seen in Chapter Two, he tried to use traditional propaganda to legitimize his position. However, the ancient writers reveal that his official propaganda was not convincing. Herodian gave a statement that reveals his understanding of Severus's character. "ικανώτατος δ' ἦν πάντων ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα προσποιήσθαι τε καὶ πιστώσασθαι εὖνοιαν, μήτε ὄρκου φειδόμενος, εἰ δέοι τούτου καταφρονῆσαι, ψευδάμενος πρὸς τὸ χρειῶδες..." (He [Severus] was an absolute expert at deception and giving assurance of his goodwill, but he had no respect for an oath if, after he had lied to secure some advantage, he had to break it).²⁴⁶ A man of little integrity and thinly disguised immorality, Severus was not viewed as a fit ruler. Dio and Herodian felt that his obscure birth precluded his ascension to the throne. In addition, Herodian demonstrated that Severus's brute force acquisition of the position of emperor lacked the finesse needed to quell senatorial opposition.

²⁴⁵ See Hammond, 145,153.

²⁴⁶ Herodian 2.9.11-10.

II. *Clementia*

Severus's inability to show "...respect for an oath..." was an issue for Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* alike, especially in regards to the promises he made the elite. According to the third and fourth century authors, Severus lacked *Clementia*, a traditional characteristic of "good emperors."²⁴⁷ One of the deeply seeded points of contention was the Senate's, and our sources', disappointment and disapproval of the emperor's treatment of the senatorial elite. This criticism took shape over his false promises of *Clementia* for the senate. The discontent over Severus's inability to extend clemency to the senatorial elite reveals several things about the values that Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* share.

The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *clementia* as "1) a disposition to pardon, leniency" and "2) mildness, or genial character."²⁴⁸ It notes that clemency is a special attribute of the Caesars. *Clementia* became important in politics once the emperors had power over the senate and Rome's citizens.²⁴⁹ *Clementia* began to be used in political rhetoric after the civil wars of Caesar and Pompey because Caesar was surprisingly lenient to his adversaries.²⁵⁰ An emperor's *Clementia* was the only

²⁴⁷ See Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Emperor and His Virtues," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 3 (1981): 298-323.

²⁴⁸ *OLD* 427.

²⁴⁹ Wirszubski, 151. *Clementia* became the people's hope against punishment rather than a reliance on *iustus*.

²⁵⁰ Wirszubski, 151; Richard A. Bauman, *Human Rights in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 75-76.

restraint placed on his wrath, as he was not subject to the law. From Augustus onward, *clementia* became an institutionalized part of the idealized ruler, but it was up to the individual ruler how he would use his power of *clementia*.²⁵¹

Although earlier than the period covered in this topic, Seneca's descriptions of what is right and wrong in his work *De Clementia* can bring into focus some of the criticisms seen in Severus's biographers. Seneca defines clemency as "*temperantia animi in potestate ulciscendi vel lenitas superioris adversus inferiorem in constituendis poenis*" (mental self-control in one who has the power to exact revenge or the mildness of someone higher toward someone lower in deciding on punishment).²⁵² Seneca stresses that the emperor is the soul of the empire, and the state is the body. It is therefore essential that the soul be merciful to the body, so that the body does not act out against the soul.²⁵³ Seneca says that since one cannot be equally merciful and equally stern, one should lean toward being kinder.²⁵⁴ "The inclination to vent one's rage should be less strong than the provocation for it", and that cruel and inexorable anger is not seemly for a king.²⁵⁵

Seneca shows that some emperors were moved to kill, but were still considered divine for their mercy.²⁵⁶ He attributes their cruelty to youth, and justifies it because

²⁵¹ Bauman, 77; Wirszubski, 152; Konstan, 342.

²⁵² Sen. *De clem.* 2.3.1.

²⁵³ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.5.1-4.

²⁵⁴ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.2.2-3.3.

²⁵⁵ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.8.5-9.2.

²⁵⁶ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.10.1-11.1; Augustus is the example Seneca gives, because his mercy shown in later years was enough to earn him deification.

they were "...induced to do so for the good of the state."²⁵⁷ Seneca believes that if there was a need to punish, then the "...hand must be held under control to keep it from cutting deeper than may be necessary"²⁵⁸ The point here is that although cruelty may at times be necessary, an emperor should show restraint in his actions. There should be temperance present in the emperor's soul in order to protect him from enemies. For Seneca it was better to be loved than feared, because fear creates enemies for the emperor, and disgruntled subjects.

It is clear that Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* see Severus as not having restraint. In 193 CE, Severus secured a decree from the senate that prohibited an emperor to kill any senator without the senate's consent²⁵⁹ A big part of Severus's propaganda was his promise to establish a golden age full of peace and economic security. Severus promised a time of prosperity, and swore he would show clemency towards the senators.

Dio recounts this promise with disdain. After Dio's elaborate portrayal of Severus's entrance into the city in 193, he digresses about Severus's deceitfulness:

" ἔσελθὼν δὲ οὕτως ἐνεανιεύσατο μὲν οἷα καὶ οἱ πρόηιν ἀγαθοὶ
αὐτοκράτορες πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ὡς οὐδένα τῶν βουλευτῶν ἀποκτενεῖ...
πρῶτος μέντοι αὐτὸς τὸν νόμον τουτονὶ παρέβη καὶ οὐκ ἐφύλαξε..."

²⁵⁷ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.10.1-11.1, 1.12.1-4.

²⁵⁸ Sen. *De Clem.* 1.5.1-4.

²⁵⁹ *SHA Sev.* 7.5. "*feri etiam senatus consultum coegit, ne liceret imperatori inconsulto senatu occidere senatorem.*" (He secured also the passage of a senatorial decree to the effect that the emperor should not be permitted to put any senator to death without first consulting the senate.)

“having entered the city in this manner, he made us some brave promises, such as the good emperors of old had given, to the effect that he would not put any senator to death...yet he himself was the first to violate this law instead of keeping it...”²⁶⁰

To emphasize that this action disturbed him, Dio says that Julius Solon, the man who wrote this decree, was one of those murdered later.²⁶¹ Dio divulges this anecdote, and makes Severus appear fraudulent in his actions against the senate. Dio, disillusioned, finds Severus’s promises empty and he feels that it shows the hypocrisy of Severus's claims.

Severus needed to eliminate those who threatened his position in the senate.²⁶²

However, Severus does not try to reconcile the actions he took against the senators. He shows no remorse, and for Dio, that is an even bigger transgression against the senatorial elite. Severus vents his wrath and then praises the cruelty of past emperors:²⁶³ “...καὶ τὴν μὲν Σύλλου καὶ Μαρίου καὶ Αὐγούστου αὐστηρίαν τε καὶ ὠμότητα ὡς ἀσφαλεστέραν ἐπαινῶν, τὴν δὲ Πομπηίου καὶ Καίσαρος ἐπιείκειαν ὡς ὀλεθρίαν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις γεγενημένην κακίζων...” (he [Severus] praised the severity and cruelty of Sulla, Marius and Augustus as the safer course and deprecated the mildness of Pompey and Caesar as having proved the ruin of those very men).²⁶⁴ In effect, Severus denies the very importance of *Clementia* in the first place. Dio gives the impression here that Severus was not at all in line with maintaining traditional

²⁶⁰ Dio 75.2.1-2.

²⁶¹ Dio 75.2.2.

²⁶² Even Seneca understood that at times it would be necessary for the emperor to inflict punishment because “...it is as much a cruelty to pardon all as to pardon none” (Sen. *De Clem.* i.2.2-3.3.).

²⁶³ Dio 76.7.9-8.

²⁶⁴ Dio 76.8.1.

virtues of previous emperor's of Rome. Whether or not this anecdote is accurate, it nevertheless portrays Severus as disrespectful towards Rome's customs. This image of Severus is used to discredit Severus's propaganda and to criticize Severus as being unfit to rule.

Herodian records a similar story and says that "τοιαῦτά τινα λέγων ὑπηγάγετο τοὺς πλείστους ἐς εὖνοιαν καὶ πίστιν ὧν ὑπισχνεῖτο." (By this speech he enticed most senators into adopting a favorable attitude because they believed in his promises). revealing that Severus was a persuasive liar. He was not, however, able to deceive all. Herodian continues:

"ἦσαν δέ τινες τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ γνωρίζοντων αὐτοῦ τὸν πρόπον, οἱ προύλεγον λανθάνοντες, ὅτι ἄρα εἶη ἀνὴρ πολύτροπός τις καὶ μετὰ τέχνης εἰδῶς προσφέρεθαι πράγμασιν, ὑποκρίνασθαι τε καὶ τὸ λυσιτελεῖς αὐτῷ· ὅπερ καὶ ὕστερον ἔργῳ δέδεικται."

"There were some more senior men who knew Severus's character and privately circulated their opinion that he was really a crafty man and a master of the art of contrivances, who was absolutely accomplished at acting out any kind of deception but in the end obtained his own benefit and advantage. This was later, in fact, proved to be true."²⁶⁵

In the text, the promise of *Clementia* is a trick, and those who are tricked are the more impetuous, unpracticed, and youthful senators. The senior senators knew better, and in their wisdom, saw Severus's claims for what they were. Herodian not only provides the rumor, but personally affirms it by acknowledging that it was "proved to be true." It is hard, however, to see this as anything other than anachronistic. Herodian, seeing that the *Clementia* of Severus did not hold up over the years, has the luxury to look back and impose the voice of reason onto the elite, to suggest that Severus did not

²⁶⁵ Herodian 2.14.4-6.

deceive all the elite with his promises. Regardless of how the senate saw Severus's character at the time, Herodian records an image of Severus that is deceitful, beguiling and untrustworthy.

Though the *HA* does not have nearly as much malevolence to impute against Severus's character, it reveals its disdain for his actions regarding the senatorial elite by recounting the list of men killed by Severus.²⁶⁶ The *HA* first lists the names of nearly fifty prominent senators who were put to death by Severus's actions. The *HA* is direct in accusing Severus of being bloodthirsty,²⁶⁷ however, this list contains many non-existent figures.²⁶⁸ Neither Dio nor Herodian includes lists of names of the people killed. In fact, Dio says only twenty-nine people were killed by Severus at this time, whereas the list in the *HA* contains nearly fifty. Thus, the author of the *HA* emphasizes the appalling nature of Severus's attack on the senatorial rank by adding to the number of senators killed by Severus.

Inclusion of this list accomplishes more for the author of the *HA* than simply displaying the author's criticism. The inclusion of "facts" help to support his claim to accuracy. It is much easier to believe an inaccurate account if it includes partial facts. Therefore, because Severus had in fact killed senators, the inclusion of false names among the real was all the more believable. On the other hand, the author of the *HA* used these bogus names to criticize the expanding class of senatorial elites, and to

²⁶⁶ This list is very similar to the proscription lists of Augustus and Antony.

²⁶⁷ *SHA Severus* 12.9.

²⁶⁸ A. Birley 1988, 199; Syme *BHAC* 270, 1973, 126; E. Birley "Military Intelligence and the *Historia Augusta*," *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium* (Bonn: R. Habelt: 1964/1965), 37.

poke fun at how the aristocracy paraded their newly acquired rank and birth.²⁶⁹ The inclusion of fake names in his list of elites attacked by Severus can be seen as an attack itself on the legitimacy of the new aristocracy. It therefore attacks Severus on two points. First, it argues that Severus was cruel and not clement to the aristocracy. Second, it criticizes him as the locus of change that allowed service to the state to be rewarded with access into the senatorial order of the early third century.²⁷⁰

Severus's efforts to rid himself of political rivals is portrayed as useless and harmful to Rome. Severus's relentless procurement of funds, and ultimately the misplacement of these funds, is regarded as irresponsible. Dio relates that after the defeat of Niger, Severus attacked Niger's supporters: "τῶν δὲ δὴ βουλευτῶν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀπέκτεινε μὲν οὐδένα, τοὺς δὲ δὴ πλείους τὰς οὐσίας ἀφείλετο καὶ ἐς νήσους κατέκλεισεν. ἠργυρολόγησέ τε δεινῶς..." (of the Roman senators he slew none, but deprived most of them of their property and confined them on islands. He was merciless in his raising of funds).²⁷¹ Dio relates that he extracted four times the amount of money each individual had given to Niger. He did this regardless of whether they had contributed these funds of their own volition or not. Dio asserts that the consequences of these actions, namely a bad reputation, would have been known to Severus, but that he paid no attention because he "πολλῶν δὲ δὴ χρημάτων χρήζων..." (required large sums of money).²⁷² In this case, Severus is recorded as

²⁶⁹ Syme *BHAC*, 269.

²⁷⁰ See introduction above.

²⁷¹ Dio 75.8.4.

²⁷² Dio 75.8.5.

being interested in neither the well being of Rome nor in the approval of his own image. He is instead thinking only of how to maintain the support he had, which he paid for with funds procured from the senatorial elite.

It is also telling that Dio uses a speech by Cassius Clemens, a senator on trial after the defeat of Niger, to reveal the hypocrisy he sees in Severus's actions. Dio has Clemens defend himself by saying:

"πᾶν γὰρ ὃ τι ἄν ἡμῶν καταγνώσῃς, τοῦτο καὶ σεαυτοῦ καὶ τῶν σῶν ἐταίρων καταψηφίῃ· καὶ γὰρ εἰ τὰ μάλιστα μήτε δίκη μήτ' ἀποφάσει τινὶ ἀλώσει, ἀλλὰ τῇ παρὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις φήμῃ, ἣς ἐξ αἰδίου μνήμη καταλείπεται, δόξεις ταῦτα ἐφ' οἷς συνέβη ἑτέροις ἐγκαλεῖν."

"for in every point in which you condemn us you will be passing sentence against both yourself and your associates; since, however secure you may be from conviction in any suit or verdict, nevertheless, in your reputation with mankind, the memory of which will last forever, you will be represented as bringing against others the very charges to which you yourself are liable."²⁷³

This reveals two things. First, a main criticism of Severus is the hypocrisy surrounding his reign. In this instance, it is the fact that he punished others for his own crimes. We have seen this same criticism of hypocrisy in his claims to *Clementia*. The validity of Severus's official image is consistently discredited. Second, it shows that Dio recorded this image of Severus so that he could represent Severus as a hypocrite for posterity, "the memory of which will last forever." This

²⁷³ Dio 75.9.3-4. Although Clemens was able to get off with only half his property lost, many others were not as lucky.

was quite simply a direct message to Severus (or any other emperor to read the work) that no matter how he represents himself, his actions will be recorded. Furthermore, it will be his actions that are remembered, and by which he will be judged.

Indeed Dio's predictions are correct, because later in the third century Herodian too records Severus's actions as having had a negative impact on Rome. He shows that the harsh treatment of Niger's supporters actually led to the enrichment of barbarian knowledge of warfare. As Herodian puts it, the ruthless punishments that Severus was inflicting on the partisans of Niger, compelled them to flee to barbarian-controlled territories. Many of these were skilled craftsmen, who taught the barbarians how to wield and produce many of the weapons of the Romans.²⁷⁴ Not only is Severus's ruthless procurement of funds from the supporters of Niger hypocritical, as Dio asserts, now it is also detrimental to the security of Rome.

The *Historia Augusta* has a different account of what became of the supporters of Niger after the war. The *HA*'s author states "*Litteras ad senatum de victoria dedit. Neque quemquam senatorum qui Nigri partium fuerant praeter unum supplicio adfecit*" ("He sent a letter of victory to the senate. And he did not afflict with punishment any of the senators who had sided with Niger, except for one man.).²⁷⁵ The *HA* showed a completely different picture in this regard; the events after Niger's defeat bear little resemblance to Dio's portrayal. There is no discussion of the ruthless

²⁷⁴ Herodian 3.4.7-5. This is not said by anyone else that I have read. Whittaker notes that it is extremely hard to trace whether this was a real effect of Severus's actions. See Whittaker's translation of Herodian page 281, fn 2.

²⁷⁵ *SHA Sev.* 9.3.

procurement of monies from senators, nor is there any discussion of the benefits his ruthlessness lent to the barbarians. Time, and the author's perception and changing concerns, alters the view of Severus's actions. It shows that in the fourth century, Severus's policies upon the death of Niger were not considered as alarming as they were to Dio.

The third and fourth century sources agree when they discuss the fate of Albinus. Fourth century criticism of Severus's reign mainly focused on his treatment of the senate. The author of the *HA* portrays Severus as excessively ruthless only in his treatment of the senate or those who the senate supported, but not towards Niger who was supported mainly by the people. The author of the *HA* was not concerned with Severus's ruthlessness so much as he was concerned with Severus's ruthlessness towards the senate.

It was not until after the death of Albinus, who was the Senate's candidate for emperor, that Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* agree that Severus's treatment of Albinus' supporters becomes unacceptable. Herodian characterizes the attack on Albinus' allies in exactly the same way he characterized the earlier actions against Niger's allies:

Ἰπάντας τοὺς ἐξέχοντας τότε τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς καὶ τοὺς κατὰ ἔθνη πλούτῳ ἢ γένει ὑπερέχοντας ἀφειδῶς ἀνήρει, ὡς μὲν προσεποιεῖτο, χαλεπαίνων πρὸς ἐχθροὺς, τὸ δ' ἀληθές, ὑπερβαλλούσης ἐν αὐτῷ φιλοχρηματίας· οὐδεὶς γοῦν βασιλέων οὕτω χρημάτων ἠττήθη᾽

“All who were prominent at that time in the senate or who were richer and more noble in the provinces were destroyed ruthlessly. He pretended that he was furious with his enemies, but in fact his dominant motive was to gain their wealth. There was never an emperor so obsessed with money.”²⁷⁶

This indicates the major theme of criticism against Severus: his cruelty was directed at the more noble and richer of his opponent's allies; his error was that he attacked the higher ranked senators rather than showing the clemency which they preferred.

The *HA* continues to elaborate on this uneven handling of the surviving members of the opposition: "*Interfectis innumeris Albini partium viris, inter quos multi principes civitatis, multae feminae inlustres fuerunt, omnium bona publicata sunt aerariumque auxerunt*" (Countless persons who had sided with Albinus were put to death, among them numerous leading men and many distinguished women, and all their goods were confiscated and went to swell the public treasury).²⁷⁷ Severus clearly targeted and destroyed the leading men and women of the elite. We have seen that the author of the *HA* includes many false names in his list of condemned senators, and it may be that mentioning them here is another way to criticize Severus. Nonetheless, it shows that the author of the *HA* is stressing Severus' impact, real or fictional, on the elite of Rome. The fact that these actions remained in recorded history, while those of Niger's allies are disregarded, reveals the bias one would predict the *HA's* author to have towards the elite. The assault on Albinus, the senate's candidate for replacing

²⁷⁶ Herodian 3.8.7.

²⁷⁷ *SHA Sev.* 12.1.

Julianus, and his supporters remains in the *HA* as a criticism of Severus. Arguably, it is therefore a stronger criticism, and reveals the motivations behind criticizing Severus's actions.

It is more likely that the senatorially biased sources were more distraught by the fact that Severus was procuring money from the leading men and women whom they would have seen in power, than simply that he was procuring money. In fact, Dio says:

ἡκαὶ πολλὰ μὲν ἡμῖν οὐ καταθύμια ἔπραττεν, αἰτίαν τε ἔσχεν ἐπὶ τῷ πλήθει στρατιωτῶν ὀχλώδη τὴν πόλιν ποιῆσαι καὶ δαπάνη χρημάτων περιττῇ τὸ κοινὸν βαρῦναι, καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ὅτι μὴ ἐν τῇ τῶν συνόντων οἱ εὐνοία ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ ἐκείνων ἰσχύι τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς σωτηρίας ἐποιεῖτο·"

"There were many things Severus did that were not to our liking, and he was blamed for making the city turbulent...and for burdening the state by his excessive expenditures of money, and *most of all, for placing his hope of safety in the strength of his army rather than in the good will of his associates...*"²⁷⁸

It is this slight towards leading senators and elite, that remained unacceptable to the literary sources through the fourth century.

III. Severus incapable of ruling?

As has been shown above, Severus promised a time of peace for the elites of Rome. However, Severus's attempts to establish his position failed to secure the "golden age" he had promised to the elites, and which he claimed to have achieved in his official propaganda.²⁷⁹ Severus's frequent absence from Rome, and his treatment of the elite while in Rome, led to an atmosphere of fear and cruelty, instead of peace

²⁷⁸ Dio 75.2.2-3 (Italics mine).

²⁷⁹ See Chapter Two above.

and prosperity.²⁸⁰ Severus was only in the city of Rome for six of the thirteen years he ruled after he had defeated Albinus in 197.²⁸¹ This allowed the people he placed in charge of Rome to hold considerable power while he was away. Despite his absence, Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* hold Severus responsible for what transpired in Rome.²⁸² Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* portray Severus as submissive to Plautianus and portray the elite as afraid to involve Severus in their affairs. In short, they all portray Severus as unfit to Rule.

Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* are critical of Severus for having allowed Plautianus, Praetorian Prefect in Rome, to have too much power. If Severus only subtly disregarded the senate, Plautianus flaunted his power before them. Plautianus had statues of himself erected near the senate itself, without the senate's consent, as a display of his licentious power.²⁸³ Dio even shows that Plautianus' arrogance was so grand that he attempted to outshine Severus himself. "Ἡνείχετό γέ τοι ὀρθῶν καὶ ἐν ταῖς καταλύσεσιν αὐτὸν ταῖς κρείττοσιν ἀλιζόμενον καὶ τὰ ἐπιτήδεια καὶ ἀμείνω καὶ ἀφθονώτερα αὐτοῦ ἔχοντα..." (The emperor submitted to seeing him lodge in better lodging-places and enjoy better and more abundant food than he himself had).²⁸⁴

While Severus himself might not openly taunt the senate with his power, as emperor, he should have ensured that Plautianus knew his place. By failing to do so, Severus

²⁸⁰ Potter, 113. After defeating Albinus, Severus leaves Rome in 198 CE for five years (Dio 76.9.1), then returned to celebrate the *Secular Games* in 202 CE (Dio 77.1.1). Severus leaves again in 208 CE for his campaigns in Britain (Dio 77.11.1).

²⁸¹ There was a dedication set up in 197 to 'Unconquered Hercules and the other gods and goddesses' and for Septimius after this victory. See A. Birley 1988, 128; Dio 76.7-8.

²⁸² Dio 76.15.1.

²⁸³ Dio 76.14.7-15.1.

²⁸⁴ Dio 76.15.3.

may as well have been abusively wielding power himself. It is clear that Dio holds Severus responsible for his lack of action in curtailing Plautianus' power. "Αἴτιος δὲ τούτων αὐτὸς ὁ Σεουήρος μάλιστ' ἐγένετο, ὃς οὕτως αὐτῷ ὑπεῖκεν ἐς πάντα ὥστ' ἐκεῖνον μὲν ἐν αὐτοκράτορος αὐτὸν δὲ ἐν ἐπάρχου μοίρα εἶναι." "...the one chiefly responsible for this situation was Severus himself, who yielded to Plautianus in all matters to such a degree that the latter occupied the position of emperor and he himself that of prefect."²⁸⁵ Dio is once again attacking Severus's character, in this case his meekness, as the reason he should not be in charge of the entire empire. Figurehead, or power yielding monarch, Severus should not be surpassed by an underling, especially one who abused the Senate with his displays of power.

Herodian regards Severus in no better light than Dio for his actions regarding Plautianus. When discussing the wife Severus found for Caracalla, Herodian states "τούτου οὖν τὴν θυγατέρα ζεύξας Σεβήρος τῷ υἱῷ τὸν οἶκον ἤνυσεν." "This, then, was the man whose daughter Severus linked with his son to make a union of the two families"²⁸⁶ Herodian is referring to a man whom he saw as misusing his power, and committing many acts of cruelty.²⁸⁷ It was one thing to give Plautianus power by granting him the properties of the senators Severus had condemned. It was something

²⁸⁵ Dio 76.15.1.

²⁸⁶ Herodian 3.10.7.

²⁸⁷ Herodian 3.10.7 "ἥπερ ἐκεῖνος ἀποχρώμενος οὔτε ὠμότητος οὔτε βίας ἐν πᾶσιν οἷς ἐπραττεν ἀπέχετο..." (But he misused this power to commit all kinds of acts of cruelty and violence in everything he did).

far more disturbing to allow a man who abused his position to establish further connections with imperial power. Herodian clearly did not approve of Severus linking Plautianus to the imperial family.

The *HA*'s portrayal of Severus's relationship with Plautianus is interesting in its brevity. The author merely states that Severus was friendly towards Plautianus. A few lines later, Severus declared that Plautianus was an enemy of the state, but ultimately forgave him. However "*...quamvis et ipsum procedenti tempore occiderit.*" (although in the course of time he [Severus] killed him [Plautianus]).²⁸⁸ The rapidity with which the author of the *HA* covers Plautianus's involvement in Severus's affairs is interesting. It serves to show the vacillating support Severus gave his friends; now supporting them, and now turning on them in anger. The author again dispalsys his agreement with our other sources by showing how much sway Plautianus had over Severus. The author of the *HA* says that Severus killed off other of his friends "*...Plautiano auctore...*" or "with Plautianus's advice."²⁸⁹

For Dio there was one more point of criticism. He portrays the senatorial elite as fearful of involving Severus in Rome's affairs. As we have seen above, destructive retaliation against the senatorial elite accompanied Severus's early visits to Rome. According to Dio, fear of repeated retaliation from Severus led to a "witch hunt" atmosphere among the elites. The fate of one Baebius Marcellinus is enough to show with what kind of trepidation the senate approached matters that might upset Severus.

²⁸⁸ *SHA Sev.* 14.7.

²⁸⁹ *SHA Sev.* 15.4.

Apronianus, a prominent senator, was accused of desiring to be emperor. In the mist of the evidence, another man was accused of having known of the dream that had depicted Apronianus as emperor. The dream was the source of Apronianus' crime and concealing it was the crime of the here-to-for-unnamed man. This man was said to have been a bald headed Senator, which caused all those who were bald to fear for their safety. Finally, Baebius Marcellinus, the man who had been *aedile* at the time this dream was supposed to have occurred, was fingered as the man who had knowledge of the dream. Without further evidence, he was led off to be beheaded, before Severus even knew he had been condemned. This story of the bald senator's "trial" reveals the anxiety and fear the senate is recorded to have had of Severus.²⁹⁰ They were so concerned that he would be upset, and they did not want to have renewed retaliation against them, so they quickly put the senator to death before Severus really knew what was going on.

This episode reveals the fear the senators felt under Severus. Dio illustrates the atmosphere that he perceives to have existed under Severus's reign with the speech he gives the senator. Dio reports that the senator said to his children, "ἔν με τοῦτο λυπεῖ, τέχνα, ὅτι ὑμᾶς ζῶντας καταλείπω." (There is only one thing that causes me sorrow, my children, and that is that I leave you behind alive).²⁹¹ The senator's children would have to suffer under Severus's reign. Dio is trying to portray the concern the elite had for the future of Rome with Severus as emperor. Dio stresses that it would be better to

²⁹⁰ Dio 77.8.

²⁹¹ Dio 77. 9.1.

die than to have to face the future. The ease, and swiftness, with which this senator was condemned to death, would have caused great anxiety among the senators. The fearful and destructive atmosphere that Dio records as existing under Severus's reign suggests that peaceful existence was not something that Severus could deliver as emperor. This anecdote is not repeated in either Herodian or the *HA*.

IV. Conclusion

The histories of Severus are rife with disdain, and displeasure from the senatorial elite authors who wrote them. The attacks focus on Severus's character, and attempt to discredit the image he put forth of himself through official propaganda. His attitude toward the senate, submissiveness towards Plautianus, and inability to keep his word skew the image he would have presented of himself. Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* go to great lengths in order to debase Severus's propaganda, and instead, to show him as unfaithful to tradition, disrespectful to the Senate, and generally incapable of ruling. Severus's inability or unworthiness to rule based on the flaws in his character continue to be a theme of criticism throughout third and fourth century sources.

What is telling about the different criticism for the fourth century as opposed to the third, is what the *HA* leaves out. Like earlier sources, the *HA* is critical of Severus for being deceitful and for lack of the right moral quality for an emperor. However, the *HA* stresses only Severus's actions which affect the senatorial elite. Therefore, the *HA* focuses on Severus's retaliation against Albinus and his supporters. Albinus's

adherents would have been full of senatorial elite members as he was their choice as successor to Julianus. The senatorial bias is naturally found in an elite author's writings, but the renewed emphasis placed on the senate, and more particularly the senate of Rome, is a sign of political changes in the fourth century. This new emphasis overshadows some of Severus's actions, but never when those actions directly affected the senate and their desires.

Chapter 5

The People, Commodus, and the Army: The Senate left Behind

Severus's propaganda attempted to persuade Rome of a specific idealized image of his reign, but Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* did not accept this view. According to Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* Severus was cruel and tricked the elite. Moreover, they claim that Severus turned from the senate, and disregarded its authority. This can be seen in the stress they place on criticizing his excessive largesse to the people, his inability to maintain discipline in the army, and the attack on the senate they portray his deification of Commodus to be. These criticisms, however, are not consistently found in the three main authors examined in this thesis. The way that these criticisms are intermittently used by these authors shows that Severus's image was not set, but rather consistently changed to fit each author's contemporary concerns.

I. Severus and the Populace

Severus's interactions with the people of Rome is a point which Herodian and the *HA* attack in order to show that Severus made a poor decision in turning to the people for support. They do this by first portraying how the people feared his succession to the throne, and then emphasize how much effort Severus makes in order to gain back their support. The monetary concessions made to the people in the form of donatives and games became an issue for Herodian and the author of the *HA*. Whereas Severus would regard his actions towards the populace as showing reverence to a tradition of largesse and beneficence, I will show that Herodian and the *HA* deem it a betrayal of the

senatorial elite. I will argue that it is not Severus's largesse that is the problem; it is rather that he attacks the senate and uses the funds procured to appease the masses. It is the disparity in treatment of these two groups that is a criticism of Severus's actions. However, not all the sources feature this as a prominent criticism of Severus's reign.

Dio, unlike Herodian and the *HA*, does not represent Severus as an object of fear to populace, nor does he criticize Severus for his largesse to the general public. Dio, instead, is actually enthusiastic about Severus's take over, and portrays the populace as equally receptive to Severus. Severus's arrival is painted as gloriously as a Triumphal return from battle. Dio says:

"πάρξας δὲ Σεουήρος ταῦτα ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἐσήει, μέχρι μὲν τῶν πυλῶν ἐπὶ τε τοῦ ἵππου καὶ ἐν ἐσθῆτι ἱππικὴ ἐλθῶν, ἐντεῦθεν δὲ τὴν τε πολιτικὴν ἀλλαξάμενος καὶ Βαδίσας· καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ὁ στρατὸς πᾶς, καὶ οἱ πεζοὶ καὶ οἱ ἱππεῖς, ὀπλισμένοι παρηκολούθησαν. καὶ ἐγένετο ἡ θεὰ πασῶν ὧν ἐόρακα λαμπροτάτη· ἦ τε γὰρ πόλις πᾶσα ἄνθεσσι τε καὶ δάφναις ἐστεφάνωτο καὶ ἱματίοις ποικίλοις ἐκεκόσμητο, φώσι τε καὶ θυμιάμασιν ἔλαμπε, καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι λευχειμονοῦντες καὶ γανύμενοι πολλὰ ἐπευφήμουν, οἳ τε στρατιῶται ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις ὥσπερ ἐν πανηγύρει τινὶ πομπῆς ἐκπρεπόντως ἀνεστρέφοντο, καὶ προσέτι ἡμεῖς ἐν κόσμῳ περιήειμεν."

"...but there he changed to civilian attire and proceeded on foot; and the entire army, both infantry and cavalry, accompanied him in full armor. The spectacle proved the most brilliant of any that I have witnessed; for the whole city had been decked with garlands of flowers and laurel was ablaze with torches and burning incense; the citizens, wearing white robes and with radiant countenances, uttered many shouts of good omen; the soldiers, too, stood out conspicuous in their armor as they moved about like participants in some holiday procession; and finally, we [senators] were walking about in state."²⁹²

²⁹² Dio 75.1.3-5.

Dio actually seems excited by the developments of Severus's take over. There is no discussion of unpopularity or fear among the people. Dio mentions games and celebrations, but has no cause to show Severus as one who seeks the people's approval. Therefore, when he discusses the *Saturnalia* Dio shows that the populace speaks out against Severus's civil wars.²⁹³ Severus, in Dio's account, does not try to win them over to his cause, but instead he passes in silence and allows the games to continue. Rather than criticize Severus for his actions in this instance, Dio's narrative maintains a panegyric tone.

This enthusiasm for Severus's ascension recedes later in the third century. This change can first be seen in Herodian, who, like Dio, shows that Niger was the people's choice, whereas Severus was only supported by his own troops.²⁹⁴ However, Herodian's tone differs from Dio, and he has a starkly different narrative of Severus's arrival in Rome. Whereas Dio portrayed Severus's entrance as glorious and triumphant, Herodian reports that his arrival created apprehension in the populace. Herodian suggests that the only reason for celebration was fear of his ruthless nature. Herodian states:

"ὅθεν τὸν Σεβῆρον προσιόντα πυνθανόμενοι τότε μετὰ τοσούτου στρατοῦ εἰκότως ἐταράττοντο τῷ ἀήθει τοῦ πάργματος οὔτε δὲ ἀντιστῆναι ἢ κωλύσαι ἐτόλμων ὑπήντων δὲ δαφνηφοροῦντες καὶ πύλαις ἀναπεπταμέναις ἐδέχοντο."

²⁹³ Dio 76.4.1.

²⁹⁴ This is mentioned by Dio (74.1.5-2), Herodian (2.7.4-6), and the *SHA* (*Sev.* 6.6-11), but becomes a bigger issue later in the third and into the fourth century as will be shown below.

“When therefore the Italians now heard the news of Severus's approach with a large army, they were naturally panic-stricken at such an unusual event. Not daring to offer any opposition in his way, they went to meet him with garlands of laurels and opened wide their gates to admit him.”²⁹⁵

Herodian shows that the people only accepted Severus because they lacked an alternative.

Herodian paints Severus's arrival in Rome itself in a similar vein. After Severus entered Rome, the people “...were all in a complete panic, and, for fear of Severus's force, they pretended to support him by condemning Julianus' cowardice and Niger's negligent delay.”²⁹⁶ In this narrative, the people do not support Severus for any reason other than that they had no alternative. Herodian reiterates this when he reports the reception Severus receives when he brought his troops into Rome:

"δίκην μὲν δὴ ταύτην ἔδοσαν οἱ τοῦ Περτίνακος φονεῖς (14.) ὁ δὲ Σεβῆρος σὺν παντὶ τῷ λοιπῷ στρατῷ ὀπλισμένῳ ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἀφικνεῖται, ἐκπληξίν τε καὶ δέος ἅμα τῷ ὀφθῆναι τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις ἐνέβαλε τοῖς οὕτω τετολμημένοις τε καὶ εὐτυχηθεῖσιν ἔργοις. ὁ δὲ δῆμος καὶ ἡ σύγκλητος δαφνηφοροῦντες ὑπεδέχοντο..."

“After the murderers of Pertinax had been punished, Severus approached Rome with all the rest of his army fully armed. The Romans were absolutely terrified at his appearance because of the reputation for what he had achieved with such daring good fortune. The people and the senate went out with garlands of laurels to greet him...”²⁹⁷

According to Herodian, therefore, the people on the borders of Italy and those in Rome itself undergo exactly the same reaction to Severus's appearance at the gates.

²⁹⁵ Herodian 2.11.3-6, Dio(74.1.6-5) simply says Severus arrived. This occurs in the borders of mainland Italy, not in Rome, but as we shall see the actions in the provinces would be mimicked by Rome itself.

²⁹⁶ Herodian 2.12.1-3. Earlier Herodian shows that the people were asking for Niger as ruler instead of Julianus. Herodian depicts the people as not supporting Severus until he seizes power. The Senate responds the same way, by supporting Severus instead of Albinus once Severus is in power.

²⁹⁷ Herodian 2.14. 1.

For Herodian, fear was the motivating factor behind the people's actions, not any sense of genuine support for Severus's reign. Why would the understanding of Severus's approach on Rome undergo this change? Dio, writing during the reign of Severus, may have been more highly influenced by Severan propaganda and could have had a pro-Severan bias. However, as he is willing to criticize other aspects of Severus's reign, this explanation alone is unsatisfactory. The difference must be found in Herodian's circumstances. Herodian published no later than 253.²⁹⁸ He was publishing during a time of civil strife, where emperors were dispatched at whim, often by their own generals or soldiers. Equally important is the fact that, as C.R. Whittaker puts it, "in the third century social mobility between senatorial and equestrian orders was increasing and there was no general senatorial outlook."²⁹⁹

As senatorial traditions were ignored in an efforts to assert a professionalized bureaucracy, the importance of affirm senatorial prestige became even more pressing. It is for these reasons that Herodian presents such a unique understanding of Severus's reign. Although it may never be possible to tell exactly where Herodian originated, or whether or not he was in fact a Senator, the consensus is that he had a senatorial bias.³⁰⁰ The idea of the ideal emperor drives his narration. Whittaker notes that for Herodian, "Severus ... possesses many admirable qualities of diligence, shrewdness and bravery. But he deceives and cheats; his motive is personal glory, love of money and therefore he

²⁹⁸ A.R. Polley "Date of Herodian's History," *Ant. Class.* 73(2003): 203-208.

²⁹⁹ C.R. Whittaker, Introduction to Herodian, XX.

³⁰⁰ Whittaker, Introduction to Herodian, XXVII.

murders and confiscates, ruling by terror not good will.”³⁰¹ Herodian's portrayal of Severus contradicts Severus's own propaganda. He was not the restorer of peace, and the melancholic emperor who brought prosperity to Rome. For Herodian, he was much more a cruel and selfish emperor, who disregarded the elites for the aggrandizement of himself.

It is to create the ideal prince ideology that Herodian emphasizes these criticisms of Severus. A.G. Roos contends that Herodian offers nothing more to the understanding of Severus's reign than is available in the *HA* or Dio's account. I would argue, to the contrary, that Herodian reveals the shifting emphasis of criticism placed on Severus that leaves him for posterity as a “bad emperor”.³⁰² As H.W. Bird observed, Herodian juxtaposes Severus with Niger in order to display Severus's vigorous and decisive character.³⁰³ This is important because, like Severus himself, was the product of civil war. Both men knew the importance of a strong military leader. This explains why Severus's supposed ruthlessness would escape Herodian's notice. Severus's actions as military leader were acceptable to Herodian since it had granted Rome a lapse in civil wars.

It was of continued importance for the author of the *HA* to depict Severus's arrival as a source of fear to the people. The author of the *HA* states that “*fuitque ingressus Severi odiosus atque terribilis, cum milites inempta diriperent, vastationem urbi minantes.*” (Severus's entry inspired both hate and fear, for the soldiers seized goods they

³⁰¹ Whittaker, lxxiv.

³⁰² For more on Herodian's uselessness in understanding Severus see A.G. Roos. “Herodian's Method of Composition,” *JRS* 5 (1915):191-202. Also, F. Kolb. *Literarische Beziehungen Zwischen Cassius Dio. Herodian und der Historia Augusta*; Anthony Richard Birley, “Review of Literarische Beziehungen Zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta,” *JRS* 64 (1974): 266-268.

³⁰³ Bird, 84.

did not pay for and threatened to lay the city waste).³⁰⁴ According to the author of the *HA* Severus enters the city with armed men and with the standards of the Praetorian Guard dragging on the ground behind him.³⁰⁵ This is an affront to Roman customs on two points. First, armed men were traditionally not allowed past the *pomerium* unless approved by the Senate.³⁰⁶ This was a clear break with tradition, and while the presence of armed men can be safely assumed to have caused fear in the populace, the contention could stem from the insults Severus's actions made against the senate. By entering the city with armed men, and without the Senate's consent, Severus was breaking with a tradition that customarily maintained the prestige of the senate. Second, the elites criticized him for insulting the Praetorian Guard, since he "ruined the Italian youth" by dissolving the Praetorian guard and recruiting a new one from provincial legionnaires.³⁰⁷ Dragging the standards of the Praetorian Guard on the ground was adding insult to injury.

Severus created fear among the populace, but also, as I have shown in chapter 4, among the elite as well. Yet according to Herodian and the *HA*, Severus did nothing to appease the elite and everything to regain the favor of the people. The author of the *HA* shows Severus's dotting nature when he states that while Severus was *praetor* he threw games even when he had been absent from the city.³⁰⁸ Even before he achieved imperial status, Severus was concerned with upholding traditions that pleased the populace. Severus must have taken great pains to ensure that the responsibilities he had in Rome

³⁰⁴ *SHA Sev.* 7.3.

³⁰⁵ *SHA Sev.* 7.1.

³⁰⁶ J.S. Richardson, "The Triumph, the Praetors and the Senate in the Early Second Century B.C.," *JRS* 65 (1975): 59.

³⁰⁷ *Dio* 75.72.4.

³⁰⁸ *SHA Sev.* 3.6. As praetor he threw games "*Ludos absens edidit.*"

were taken care of. Yet, Herodian and the author of the *HA* are appalled by Severus's persistence in pandering to the people to win their support. Both accounts reinforce the idea that Severus's largesse to the people was excessive.

Herodian says that “He [Severus] tried to make himself popular with the common people by putting on continuous shows of all kinds and slaughtering hundreds of wild animals from all over the world...”³⁰⁹ This stands in stark contrast to his treatment of the senate. Right before this comment, Herodian discusses Severus's slights against the senate. The fact that he follows this up with the lavishness of Severus's interactions with the people suggests criticism. Some of the money Severus used to appeal to the people came from the foreign campaigns he undertook. However, most of the money for this was likely collected from the seizure of property from the elite.³¹⁰ Indeed when discussing the attacks on Julianus' supporters, the *HA* says, “Yet as a result of these confiscations, he left his sons a fortune greater than any other emperor had left to his heirs...”³¹¹ These authors portray Severus as having gained many riches from his defilement of the senatorial elite. For Severus to distribute these funds carelessly among the populace in such lavish displays of grandeur was an affront to the senatorial order.³¹²

Likewise, in the *HA* the contrast in treatment of Severus's treatment of the elite and the people is made evident. As has been discussed above, the *HA* provides evidence

³⁰⁹ Herodian 3.8.8-10. This leads to the Secular Games.

³¹⁰ For more on Severus's foreign campaigns, and the role of the funds raised from them see chapter 2 above. For more on Severus's extolling of monies from the elite see chapter 3 above.

³¹¹ *SHA Sev.* 11.

³¹² Dio on the other hand does not offer evidence that Severus's actions towards the people were at all offensive, which insinuates that this became more of a problem later in the third and into the fourth century.

for Severus's cruelty by giving a list of the men he put to death after promising the senate clemency.³¹³ Immediately after this, the author of the *HA* states that Severus took over the postal service and transferred it to the cost of the privy purse because he was "...*cum se vellet commendare hominibus...*" (wishing to ingratiate himself with the people).³¹⁴ The author of the *HA* makes it clear that the privy purse consisted of funds procured from the men listed as murdered by Severus. Like Herodian, the author of the *HA* feels that Severus's efforts to appease the people were detrimental to the senatorial elite.

According to the above sources, Severus disregarded the senate, and maliciously took money from them only to lavish it upon the people. His benevolence towards the people went too far. Herodian and the author of the *HA* portray it as a reliance on the will of the people and a slight to the senate. Herodian, and the author of the *HA* malign Severus's image by contrasting his disparagement of the Senate with his excessive doting on the people. In the later third and fourth century, Severus's actions were not the *beneficium* one would expect to find as a virtue of a 'good emperor,' but rather they were the actions of an emperor obsessed with being loved by the populace. Severus's actions are shown in a light that set him against the will of the senatorial elite, something which Herodian and the author of the *HA* found deplorable.

II. Severus and the Military

Severus's debasement of the military is another example of how critiques of Severus were selectively employed in order to achieve their author's ends. This is

³¹³ *SHA Sev.* 13.1-9. See also Chapter 4 above.

³¹⁴ *SHA Sev.* 14.2.

because his debasement of the military is not cited as a point of contention in all our sources. For Dio, this is not a factor in what made Severus so deplorable. Although Dio mentions that Severus destroyed the Praetorian Guard, he was quick to show that this was a problem because it debased the Italian youth.³¹⁵ More precisely, it made it difficult for elite youth to enter into an easy military position to advance their careers. Dio also quotes Severus on his deathbed telling his sons to enrich the soldiers and scorn all others.³¹⁶ However, this merely shows that Severus turned to the military more than to the Senate. It does not condemn Severus for corrupting the military.

On the other hand, for Herodian and the author of the *HA*, Severus's persistence in appeasing the military, and their requests, resulted in the weakening of the military. Severus was even more generous to the army than he was the people. He gave heavy donatives to the military and was lax in the enforcement of their discipline. Herodian tells us that Severus gave the military an increase in pay, the right to wear a Gold ring-which was the mark of equestrian rank-and the right to live at home with their wives.³¹⁷ Herodian deprecates these actions: "ἅπερ ἅπαντα σωφροσύνης στρατιωτικῆς καὶ τοῦ πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον ἐτοίμου τη καὶ εὐσταλοῦς ἀλλότρια ἐνομίζετο." (All these things are usually considered to be inimical to military discipline and to a state of prompt readiness for action).³¹⁸ Herodian criticizes Severus's appeasement of the military because it affects their discipline.

³¹⁵ Dio 75.2.4.

³¹⁶ Dio 77.15.2.

³¹⁷ Herodian 3.8.4-5.

³¹⁸ Herodian 3.8.5.

Severus's relationship with the military is depicted as one of complete disarray and lack of control. Even in the fourth century, this criticism holds firm. The *HA* reports an instance where Severus's lack of control was blatantly displayed before the Senate:

“Se cum in senatu esset, milites per seditionem dena milia poposcerunt a senatu, ex parte eorum qui Augustum Octavianum Romam deduxerant tantumque accepserat. Et cum eos voluisset comprimere Severus nec potuisset...”

“But while he was still in the senate-house, his soldiers, with threats of mutiny, demanded of the senate ten thousand sesterces each, citing the precedent of those who had conducted Augustus Octavian to Rome and received a similar sum. And although Severus himself desired to repress them, he found himself unable...”³¹⁹

Later in his reign, the *HA* says that Severus *“denique militibus tantum stipendiorum quantum nemo principum dedit”* (gave his soldiers sums of money such as no emperor had ever given before).³²⁰ This information immediately follows an account of the elite from whom he took money through violence.³²¹ Severus's power rested on the military and not the support of the Senate. His public display of his need for the military was unacceptable because he scorned the senate, but worse still was the weakening it caused within the military.

III. Severus Deifies Commodus

Deification of a ruler was nothing new by Severus's time.³²² Since the age of Augustus, emperors were claiming descent from divine lineage. Therefore, they sought

³¹⁹ *SHA Sev.* 7.6-7.

³²⁰ *SHA Sev.* 12.3.

³²¹ *SHA Sev.* 12.1-2.

³²² A. E. R. Boak, "The Theoretical Basis of the Deification of Rulers in Antiquity," *CJ.* 11, no. 5 (1916): 293-297.

official deification of their predecessor through the senate.³²³ In fact, it became an expected virtue for a new emperor to insist upon the deification of his predecessor even if the senate did not want to accept the request.³²⁴ The Senate, however, could deny deification in order to repudiate an emperor's reign, as when they refused to deify Caligula.³²⁵

The fact that deification of an emperor needed the approval of the Senate was yet another point of criticism for Dio and the *HA* when Severus elected to deify Commodus. If there was an emperor whom the Senate should have refused to have deified it should have been Commodus. They preferred to have him murdered rather than endure his rule.³²⁶ Severus, as the pious successor to the Antonine dynasty, insisted on having his "predecessor" deified. Severus announced the deification of Commodus to the army first and then to the Senate.³²⁷ This ensured that his plan would be carried out, because with the army's backing no one would be able to oppose him. However, this also undermined the senate's authority. He took away from the Roman Senate the privilege of deifying emperors, and placed that power into his own hands.

Dio and the author of the *HA* represent this as an attack on the Senate. These two authors show this to have caused alarm to the senate. Dio says that his insistence upon

³²³ Senatorial approval of deification was standard practice; see Brian K. Harvey, "Two Bases of Marcus Aurelius Caesar and the Roman Imperial Succession," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004):59; Larry Kreitzer, "Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 53, no. 4 (1990): 211; Duncan Fishwick, "The deification of Claudius," *CQ* 52, no. 1 (2002): 341; Tac. *Ann.* 12.69.4.

³²⁴ Such as happened when Trajan sought deification of Nerva, see Harvey, 59.

³²⁵ Kreitzer, 215.

³²⁶ Herodian 2.10.4.

³²⁷ *SHA Sev.* 11.3.

deifying Commodus caused the senate "μάλιστα δ' ἡμᾶς ἐξέπληξεν" (especial dismay).³²⁸

The author of the *HA* shows the deification to be an attempt to get back at the Senate for their support of Severus's rivals; "...*Commodum inter divos referendum esse censuit, quasi hoc genere se de senatu posset ulcisci.*" (and issued a decree that Commodus should be placed among the deified, as though he could take vengeance on the senate by this sort of thing).³²⁹ For these two authors, Severus was not showing traditional piety by seeking deification of Commodus, but was instead attacking the Senate.

What is interesting here is how selectively this criticism is employed. Whereas Dio and the author of the *HA* show it to be an affront to the Senate, Herodian fails to even mention it. Herodian does discuss how Severus defended Commodus. He reports that Severus said:

"ἐς Κόμμοδον δὲ μεταπεσοῦσα, εἰ καὶ τινα ὑπ' ἐκείνου διανεότητα ἐπλημμελεῖτο, ἀλλ' οὖν τῇ εὐγενείᾳ καὶ τῇ τοῦ πατρὸς μνήμῃ ἐπεσκιάζετο· καὶ πλέον ἦν ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ ἐλεούμενον ἐφ' οἷς ἐσφάλλετο ἢ τὸ μισούμενον..."

"Under Commodus it changed; but even if he did make some mistakes because of his youthful inexperience, they were obscured by his noble birth and the reputation of his father; his errors were more a matter for sorrow than anger..."³³⁰

However, this statement is made when Severus addresses his troops, and is used to rally them to his cause in taking Rome before Niger or Albinus can. Herodian's silence in regards to Commodus's deification shows that this affront to the senate was not a universal concern. Whereas Dio had little concern to discredit Severus's status among the populace, Herodian remains silent on the issue of Commodus's deification.

³²⁸ Dio 76.7.4.

³²⁹ *SHA Sev.* 11.3-5, *Commodus* 17.2. The author says that Severus was moved by hate for the senate.

³³⁰ Herodian 210.3-5. To Herodian's disdain, Severus defends Commodus's actions.

IV. Conclusion

Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* may have agreed that Severus was cruel toward the senate, and was guilty of disregarding their authority. These authors, however, used their criticism of the emperor in order to show that Severus was guilty of these crimes. I have shown how Severus's military ruthlessness was an issue for Dio in the early third century, but that it was only an issue when it pertained to its effects on the elite in Herodian's later third century account. For the author of the *HA* in the fourth century, this was not a point of criticism. Conversely, Severus's largesse to the people and debasement of the military were not issues for Dio, but became points of criticism in the later third and fourth centuries. Herodian and the *HA* stress that Severus's generosity to the people was not the normal *munificentia* of an emperor, but rather present it as a form of groveling to obtain their favor. They do this by contrasting the disparity in his generous treatment of the people with his maltreatment of the senatorial elite. Herodian and the *HA* also portray Severus's dependence on the military as unnatural and harmful to Rome.

Furthermore, the way that the authors portray Severus's insistence on deifying Commodus shows how each chose criticisms of Severus to reflect contemporary concerns. In deifying Commodus, Severus was showing the piety to his predecessors that had become customary at this point. However, Dio and the author of the *HA* show him as taking this decision away from the Senate, and forcing it upon them rather than requesting it be done. It was a criticism in the early third century in Dio's writings, and again in the fourth century for the author of the *HA*, however, it does not show up as a

criticism in Herodian's later third century history. In Severus's biographies, certain criticisms loses focus, some gain focus, and others are irregularly applied in order to create the image of Severus each author wanted portrayed.

Chapter Six Concluding Thoughts

Septimius Severus promoted an image of himself as divine and divinely ordained, as a successful military commander who carried on traditions of the past, and as the restorer of peace and order to Rome. Third and fourth century authors have countered this image by producing an emperor who was cruel, ruthless, and dependent on the wrong political elements, namely the cruel prefect Plautianus, the masses, and the military. As I have argued, the primary criticism of Severus focuses on his effects on the senatorial elite. I have further shown that criticism of Severus shifts over time, by tracking attacks on him in Dio, Herodian, and the *HA*. Each author shaped their image of Severus in order to promote their contemporary concerns. Modern historiography has not accounted for the shift in these criticisms. Instead, modern historians have, in my view, wrongly focused on Severus's African background as the cause for the concern in the ancient authors. The emphasis on ethnography reflects the contemporary concerns of the investigating historian far more than the values of the ancient writers on Severus.

Severus's official image attempted to link him with Roman traditions. In the construction of his monuments and use of iconography on his coins and portraiture, Severus stressed continuity with the Antonine dynasty. Severus portrayed himself as the son of Marcus Aurelius, who had defended Rome from threats to its security, such as that presented by Parthia.³³¹ He brought peace to Rome. Modern historiography supports this image. Many modern historians agree with the idealized image of Severus's reign. They have argued that Severus was capable of ruling and was well aware of the customs of

³³¹ See Chapter 2 above.

Rome.³³² Haywood sees Severus's policies as continuations of second century policies.³³³ If coins, monuments, and portraiture were the only evidence from Severus's reign to have survived, this perception of Severus would be the only possible construction a historian could create.

The image of Severus as an expert propagandist who understood Roman customs and traditions only accounts for the official image promulgated by Severus. It fails to take into account the differences found in the sources. It also does not account for the motivations, which I have demonstrated lie behind these differences. The literary sources that have survived show that this view of Severus is not in agreement with the ways in which ancient historians saw this ruler. Dio was concerned with how Severus acted as commander of the military, and saw his campaigns as useless to Rome. Herodian saw some benefits in his conquests, but was critical when Severus's actions hurt Rome and Rome's senatorial elite. The author of the *HA* on the other hand, is not at all concerned with Severus's military tactics.

While all the sources agree that Severus's actions hurt the interests of the senatorial elite, fourth century criticism stresses Severus's negative impact on the elite. As the senatorial elite became more powerful in local affairs, criticism of Severus's actions towards the elite became more relevant. Where criticism of Severus can be found in the *HA*, it is linked to elite concerns. The image of Severus as one who disregarded the Senate, put too much trust in the people, and was lax towards the military is a major

³³² See Chapter 1.

³³³ Haywood, 178,180.

concern for the third and fourth century writers. Modern studies need to address the ways in which the ancient authors shape their biographies to stress sides of Severus that fit ancient concerns.

In my research, I have examined a broad range of evidence. I have looked at Severus's coins, monuments, and portraiture. I have reviewed the literary evidence of Dio, Herodian, the HA, Eutropius, and Aurelius Victor. I have also examined the extant modern historiography, which has offered its various interpretations of this evidence. My examination of the evidence for Severus's reign has led me to construct my own image of Septimius Severus. The image I construct takes into account the inherent biases I have found in the evidence, as well as attempted to account for my own presumptions.

I contend that Severus was not in Rome often because he engaged in foreign wars. We know these wars were brief and the third and fourth century authors dispute their importance. Severus wanted to achieve glory so that he could follow a tradition of restoring peace through victories in war; this would enable him to establish his dynasty as well. Severus had enough success in war to stay in power, and claim supremacy in that regards. His support of the army, as shown in the donatives, pay increases, and privileges he gave to the military, was an important aspect of his reign. The army had put him in power, and he clearly could not disregard the value of their continued support. To say, however, that he created leniency in the army which debilitated the army's discipline and productivity is absurd. This same criticism was leveled at Sulla three centuries earlier.³³⁴

³³⁴ Melissa Barden Dowling, "The clemency of Sulla," *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte*. 49, no. 3 (2000): 303-340.

The army clearly remained strong enough to keep Severus's family in power for another forty-two years.

Severus's relationship with the people and the senate is also more nuanced than the ancient authors suggest. Severus promoted a restored peace by celebrating the Secular Games, and continued tradition by showing largesse to the people. Likewise, his ability to spend so lavishly came from confiscating the property of his opponents. Yet he was not as incapable of clemency as his biographers try to make him out to be. For instance, Severus saw it fit to forgive Cassius Clemens.³³⁵ He appeased the people through taking the mail under imperial care, protecting the grain supply, and giving games. All these, again, are criticisms that arise because he turned against the Senate; otherwise, they would simply be seen as continuations of tradition.

Severus was indeed an opportunist, but he was one who had the foresight to act upon the right opportunities. I contend that he was well acquainted with Roman customs and used traditional imagery and ceremony to quiet opposition to his rule. I believe that he did fail, on occasion, to take the right actions. One instance of this is when he failed to uphold *clementia* to the extent that the elite desired. If he had shown more clemency, he would have lessened the scorn he received from the senatorial elite. I have shown that the image he presents of himself is not the image created in third and fourth century writers. Because of his inability to win over all opposition, he used violence and the army to secure his reign.

³³⁵ Dio 75.9-10. Dio shows that he let Cassius Clemens off, confiscating only half his property.

R. G. Collingwood has argued that each examination into the past reflects the concerns of the present.³³⁶ He has stated that the only historical question that one can answer is how did this world come to be?³³⁷ In order to answer that question historians must always turn towards the evidence. Indeed, the only thing one can rely upon is that which the historian perceives that the evidence proves, and whether that historian accurately argues his case; any historical recreation, therefore, is subject to a present perception of the evidence.³³⁸ Therefore, any historical examination says as much, if not more, about the present than it does the past. This was true for Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA*, who have become the present evidence for modern historiography on Severus. In turn, modern historiography expresses its contemporary concerns. My examinations are also a construct of my present. I am subject to the same sort of forces that compelled Dio to stress Severus's military ruthlessness, Herodian to focus on his debasement of the military, or the *HA* to focus on his maltreatment of the senatorial elite. I have brought my biases and concerns into this study, but I have tried to be conscious of how my biases have shaped my perception of the past.

³³⁶ R. G. Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge" in *Essays in the philosophy of history* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 102.

³³⁷ Ibid 101.

³³⁸ Ibid 99-103.

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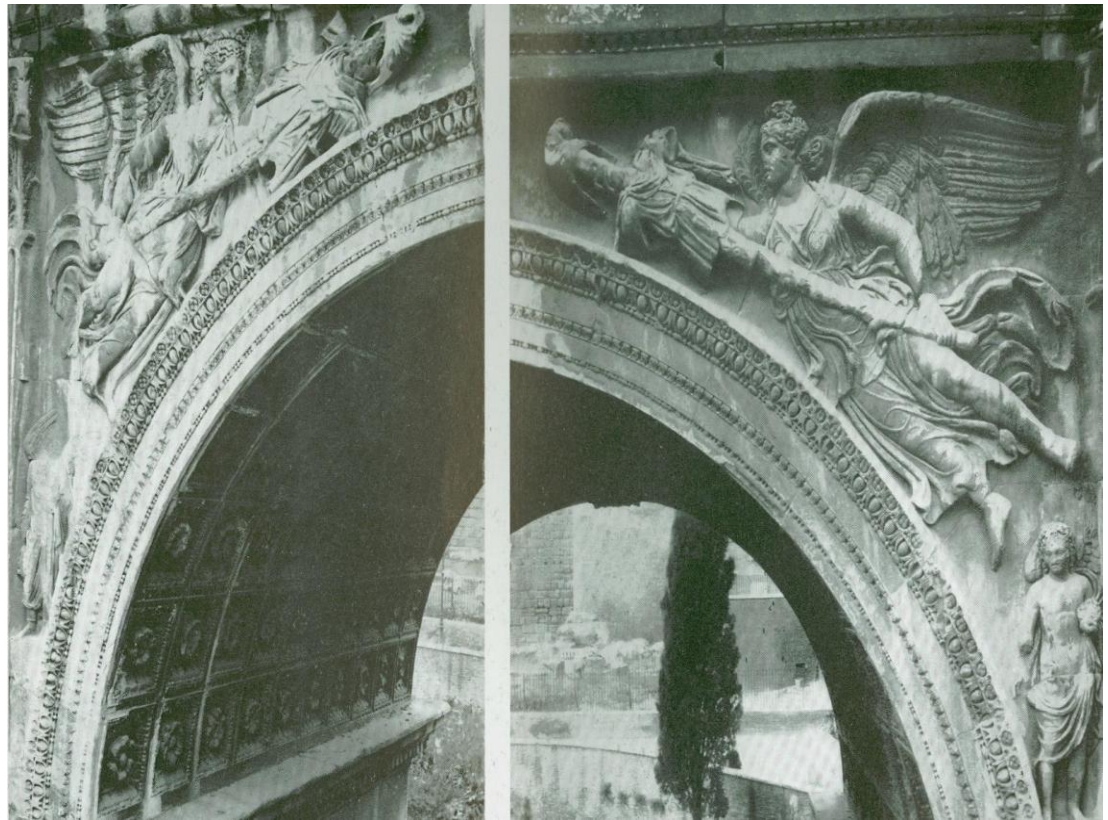
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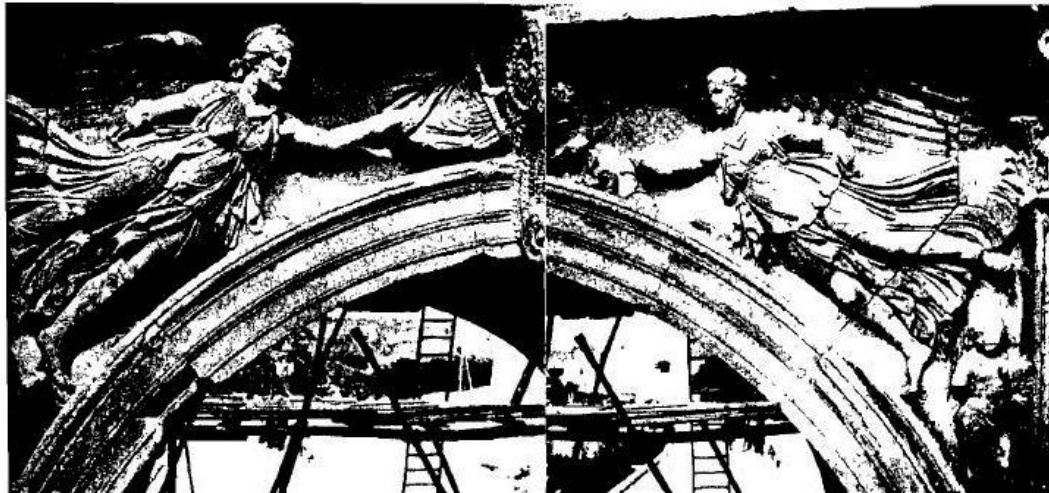
Plate 1



Left and Right Spandrels of central arch of Severus on east with Victories and Seasons, Winter and *Spring*

Source: Brilliant, Pl. 35 (a and b)

Plate 2



Top: Arch of Titus, Rome, Spandrel Victories and Keystone.
Bottom: Arch of Trajan, Benevento Left and Right Spandrel and Season
Source: Brilliant Fig. 23-25.

Plate 3



**Top: Septimius Severus. Rome, Museo Nazionale Inv. 345
Bottom: Marcus Aurelius, detail from relief of Triumph of Marcus Aurelius
Source: McCann pl. XLI**

Plate 4



Top: Septimius Severus with aegis of Jupiter, *aureus*, 200-201 and detail of fig 1.
Middle: Septimius Severus with aegis of Jupiter, *aureus*, 200-201 and *aureus* of Severus from 202.
Bottom: Septimius Severus, bronze coin, 202-206 and Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus with animals-reverse of bronze coin.
Source: Baharal Pl. VIII

Plate 5



Top: Septimius Severus, *aureus* 193 and Didius Julianus, *aureus* 193.
Middle: Septimius Severus, *aureus* 194 and Clodius Albinus, *denarius* 194-5.
Bottom: Septimius Severus, *aureus* 193 and Pescennius Niger, *aureus* 193-4.
Source: McCann Pl. II

Plate 6



Top: Septimius Severus, silver coin 202 and Marcus Aurelius, silver coin.
Bottom: Septimius Severus silver coin 206-7 and Septimius Severus, *aureus* 207.
Source: McCann Pl X

Plate 7



Fig

Top: Septimius Severus, bronze medallion 194-5
Bottom: Marcus Aurelius bronze medallion.
Source: Baharal Plate XXII

Plate 8



Top: Triumphal, register, on the west, right section.

Bottom: Detail of the same, *Roma*.

Source: Brilliant, Pl 47 (a and b)

Plate 9



Top: Septimius Severus with lion-skin hood of Hercules, bronze medallion, 202 and Liber and Hercules, aureus of Severus 204

Bottom: Commodus with lion-skin hood of Hercules, sestertertius 192 and Hercules and Liber, sestertertius of Severus 194.

Source: McCann Pl. IX

Plate 10



**Left: Bronze Medallion of Commodus, Hercules
Right: Bronze Medallion of Severus, Hercules and Liber
Source: Brilliant, Fig. 36,37.**

Plate 11



Top: Capitoline Triad. Lepcis Magna, arch of Severus
Bottom: Septimius Severus, detail from Capitoline Triad with restored fragment. Lepcis Magna, arch of
Severus and Serapis.
Source: McCann Pl. XX

Plate 12



Cult-Statue of Jupiter: London, British Museum
Source: Baharal, Plate XI, fig. 21.