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CHAPTER I

Introduction

What moderns call the fourth dynasty of the Roman monarchy began with Septimius Severus' accession in 193 and ended in 235 when his great-nephew Alexander Severus was overthrown and killed. There was thus a generation born in the 160s whose longer-lived representatives experienced the entire era as adults. Their experience of imperial politics was entirely unlike that of their parents and grandparents, who had lived through the ninety-five years (97–192) from Nerva's accession to Commodus' death. In that earlier period, six Roman emperors had reigned, not counting subordinates who never attained sole rule. All but the last had died of natural causes and passed on the throne to his chosen successor. The Severan period lasted less than half as long, but in that time seven men were recognized in Rome as principal emperor. Only one of them, Septimius Severus, died of natural causes, and contemporaries speculated freely that his son and successor tried his best to hasten that death.[1] In that same interval there occurred two civil wars and a string of palace coups and overthrows of favorites and pretenders. The Antonine era had seen highly disruptive epidemics and barbarian raids, but the monarchy had been an element of stability, at least on the symbolic level. In the Severan period, by contrast, high politics was a realm of turbulence and periodic chaos. In a culture where all historiography was political narrative, the Severan generation would have lived through far more history, as they defined it, than had any generation in memory, and it would make a far more interesting story than had the preceding century.

That said, politics is not the only field in which the present is connected to the past, and the generation just mentioned might easily have identified continuities, political and otherwise, that managed to co-exist with the

[1] See Dio 77.[76].15.2 (Xiph.); Hdn. 3.15.2 for Caracalla's possible role in the death of Severus. Both treat the matter as uncertain, but Dio reports as fact two earlier unsuccessful attempts by Caracalla on his father's life (Dio 77.[76].14 [Xiph.]).

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appearance of chaotic change.[2] The Mediterranean core regions of the empire were if anything more free of external military threats than they had been under Marcus Aurelius. By the 220s, new and more powerful enemies were starting to emerge, especially in the shape of Sassanid Persia, but that change had yet to manifest itself in ways that registered widely in most parts of the Roman Empire. The political unity of the empire remained unquestioned; there was still one principal emperor at a time, located mostly in Rome. If Septimius and Caracalla had spent a lot of time with the army, so had Trajan and Marcus. The ruling classes at the imperial and local levels were still able to pass on what they saw, demographic realities notwithstanding, as their inherited class prerogatives. Even if turnover among the elite was relatively high, the new arrivals came from only a few rungs down the ladder, and could generally be assimilated into the shared elite culture based, above all, on a Greco-Roman literate education.[3] Even at the end of the 230s, a socially marginal figure like Maximinus Thrax still seemed like the exception as emperor, and the aristocrats who overthrew him still thought of themselves as the norm.

On an economic and cultural level, what change was occurring was incremental and less noticeable. Perhaps urban elites could sense that the civic life of their communities was slowing down, and that surplus wealth no longer flowed as it used to into euergetic largesse.[4] Nonetheless, this was a time of limited communications and rudimentary statistics. One's particular region would have had its own problems at some times and not at others, and people might have projected those problems onto their views of the empire as a whole, but that had always been the case. Even if there really were a reduction in the overall average, that would not automatically result in people's accurately perceiving that global fact and incorporating it into their view of imperial history.[5] The "growth" of Christianity is even harder

[2] For contemporary perceptions of these continuities, see Potter 1990, 3–18.

[3] For the demographic turnover of provincial elites, especially in the east, see Zuiderhoek 2011. For continuity and change within the imperial elite from the Severan period through the third century, see Mennen 2011.

[4] The economic dimensions of the "third-century crisis" remain a subject of considerable dispute, as does the question of when such a crisis began, if it existed. Duncan-Jones 2004 sets forth a considerable number of quantitative indices for economic disruption over the course of the third century. In some of these cases, notably those related to settlement density as determined by archaeological survey, evidence for change of some kind goes back to the first decades of the century; in others, such as those related to coinage, the problems do not become evident until the 250s or later. For the need to consider regional perspective in any assessment of an empire-wide crisis, see Witschel 2004. For the quantitative evidence of reduced levels of euergetism, see Zuiderhoek 2009, 18–22.

[5] The epidemic of the 160s may in reality have been an empire-wide event capable of serving as a turning point for a grand-historical narrative, but it says much about ancient ideas of history that we have little evidence of contemporaries using it for that purpose.

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to pin down as a perceived cultural phenomenon, and we should not assume that contemporaries would have attributed particular significance to what we in retrospect think of as the causes of that religion's eventual triumph. Much, in short, remained the same, but did people remark its failure to change or consider whether in future it might do so? There was a prestigious genre of literature devoted to narrating the vicissitudes of war and high politics, but there was no analogous privileged mode by which to describe the phenomena nowadays explored by social, economic and cultural historians. That absence (as it seems to us) did not of course prevent people from noticing such changes or from communicating what they noticed through the whole array of textual and other media at their disposal, even if that communication was not their sole or explicit objective, and neither have scholars been slow to find ways of bringing the resulting discourse to light.

The Severan era is fruitful ground for exploring the tension between these two different kinds of change, precisely because it is a moment when this odd disconnect emerges between instability in politics and relative stability elsewhere. Modern scholarship has thus found the period a little difficult to place. For political historians, it is typically the start of a narrative that extends through the third century and often on into late antiquity.[6] In literary studies, especially of Greek, it is typically seen as the end of a narrative that began in the early 1st century AD.[7] A body of recent scholarship, to which this book is intended to contribute, has looked at the Severan years as a self-contained period in which political change needs to be viewed alongside continuities elsewhere.[8] Particular attention has been paid to imperial self-presentation, to how the various emperors articulated relationships between themselves, their people, their predecessors and the gods: on the whole the focus has been more on non-literary than on literary sources.[9] This book will draw very heavily on this work, especially in Chapter 2. The

[6] As seen in the divisions in large-scale serial histories of the empire, which tend to begin a volume in either 180 or 193 and run up to a variety of later points, e.g. Christol 1997; Carrié and Rousselle 1999; Strobel 2001; Potter 2004; Bowman, Garnsey and Cameron 2005; Ando 2012.

[7] Thus such foundational studies of the "Second Sophistic" as Swain 1996, Schmitz 1997 and Whitmarsh 2001, for all their methodological diversity, agree tacitly or otherwise on a periodization of roughly AD 50–250. This is in no small part due to the continuing influence of Philostratus' presentation of the Second Sophistic, for which see Chapter 5. Surviving Latin literature from the period is exiguous enough to make periodization something of a non-issue: Conte 1999 in fact falls back on political events as a structuring device, but the result is that one chapter of twenty-eight pages (593–620) suffices to cover more than a century from 193 to 306.

[8] For the broad cultural perspective, see the various essays in Swain, Harrison and Elsner 2007.

[9] Considering only the last seven years, significant monographs include Cordovana 2007b; Handy 2009; Lichtenberger 2011; Rowan 2012; Langford 2013 and Lusnia forthcoming, as well as the essays in Swain, Harrison and Elsner 2007 and Faust and Leitmeir 2011 and two recent books on Elagabalus (Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010 and Icks 2012).

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main body of the book, however, aims in some sense to make this scholarly exercise reflexive by looking at the historiographical texts that have always been privileged as sources of facts about the Severan period and using them to consider how contemporaries approached the same problems of change and continuity that present themselves to moderns. The texts in question are the political-historical works of Cassius Dio and Herodian, as well as the two long narrative works of Philostratus, the *Apollonius* and the *Sophists*. Taken together, I argue, these constitute a re-emergence, in highly innovative and diverse forms, of critical narrative discourse on the recent past, a type of literature that had found little scope under the Antonines. This re-emergence came about because political events rendered unviable the consensus view of the political past that had prevailed under that earlier dynasty.

To understand the significance of political narratives for broader cultural history, we need to examine the role they played in the ideology and workings of Roman monarchical government. After all, one might suppose, in a society of limited communications, great linguistic and cultural diversity and conservative agrarian social structures, that people not directly involved in the ups and downs of high politics at the imperial center would take little cognizance of them. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence from inscriptions, art and literature that at least the elites of the empire, and those non-elites who participated in urban culture, did indeed register these events. They did so in media ranging from civic architecture to sub-literary prophecy, speaking from all kinds of perspectives to all kinds of audiences.[10] What is most important for our immediate purposes, however, is how in imperial political culture the past functioned as a means of communication between the emperor and his various constituencies of subjects. Many recent studies of the Roman monarchy have stressed the ideological importance of expressions of broad consensus.[11] From Augustus' time on, the validity of the emperor's rule rested heavily on repeated demonstrations of enthusiastic assent by his various groups of subjects, from the Senate through the equestrian order and the citizen communities of Italy to the provinces and the frontier armies. He was acclaimed not simply with loyalty as the holder of a political office, but with gratitude and veneration as the guarantor of peace and prosperity, the embodiment of divine providence and the exemplar of his society's cardinal virtues. The point is not whether these expressions reflected genuinely held

[10] For imperial history in Sibylline prophecy, see Potter 1990, esp. 132–40. For local communities incorporating imperial narratives in their architectural environment, see Revell 2009, 103–7.

[11] Important contributions here include Ando 2000; Rowe 2002; Lobur 2008. Cordovana 2007b explicitly uses Severan Africa as a case study of such models. For the personal ethical status of emperors as a key component of their self-presentation, see Noreña 2011.

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beliefs. What mattered was that people integrated the emperor into their collective identities, into how they defined their own communities, their personal roles within them and their collective needs and aspirations. The emperor's need for these expressions of consensus gave his subjects a critically important avenue of ideological communication through which to respond to his initiatives and seek recognition of their own various agendas.

Narrative was an essential component of that communication. Part of what emperors needed consensus approval of was their own version of their personal and dynastic histories and the significance of those stories within the larger history of the Roman people. Augustus' various modes of self-presentation, as classicizing avatar of Apollo, as righteous exponent of traditional morality or as populist representative of *tota Italia* all make sense only if one accepts a series of historical narratives. These include recent events in which Octavian was directly concerned, such as the career and death of Julius Caesar and the founding of the Second Triumvirate, but also the story of more distant eras, the virtuous early years of Rome succeeded by a period of moral decline that Augustus reversed. Augustus wanted to emphasize both those aspects of his rule that preserved Rome's continuing identity as an imagined community and those that emphasized progress, expanded horizons and new achievements. Narrative served to delineate key elements of continuity and change in the new monarchy.

These stories are told by Augustus himself, in the *Res Gestae* and the architecture of his forum, but they were repeated and commented on by his subjects, from Virgil and Livy through the communities whose public discourse survives in epigraphic form. Once again, these expressions did not need to be sincere to be significant. Even if one reads in them subversion or covert dissent, the Augustan narrative remains dominant even as the object of negative reaction. After Philippi and Actium, there was no affirmative way to deploy an equally powerful alternative. Later changes of dynasty would call forth additions to this foundational narrative, most notably Trajan's story of how he redeemed Rome from the tyranny and corruption of the Flavians and later Julio-Claudians. The literature of that period artificially emphasizes the idea of Domitian's death as a watershed, and virtually the whole Tacitean corpus can be read as a comment on the narrative put forth by the *optimus princeps*.[12] The critical point for the emperor was not so much that people should believe the factual truth of these narratives, although evidently that was useful, but rather that they should spontaneously repeat and augment them, that they should incorporate his version of events into how they defined their

[12] On Domitian's death as an artificial watershed in literature, see Coleman 1990.

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own world and their place in it. To be the emperor's loyal subject was to have a memory of suffering with him under previous bad rulers, or being rescued by him from their tyranny, and that memory needed to be uniform or at least compatible across all sorts of status, class and ethnic lines within imperial society. By the reigns of Antoninus and Marcus, as I will argue in the next chapter, the key consensus narrative was in fact a completed story, in which a series of peaceful transitions of power from one ostensibly virtuous ruler to the next gave the impression of a present free from the forces of historical change, and a world where history had all but ended with Augustus.

The Severan emperors spent the whole of their era trying to achieve this sort of consensus acceptance of a narrative. They never succeeded, and the literary works studied in this book are a testament to their failure. Septimius Severus was a skilled propagandist, but he found it very difficult to put forth a consistent and generally acceptable version of his own rise to power, or of the future dynastic stability that his various possible successors would represent. Those successors in turn had still harder tasks that they approached in most cases less competently than Septimius. By the 220s, the empire had fallen into a pattern in which the emperor was an adolescent cipher, and the various interest groups that held power around his throne were finding it harder and harder to construct an ideologically adequate narrative of how he got there. The principal narrative works of Dio and Philostratus are all products of this late phase, while Herodian's work was produced during a still later period when the cycle of boy-emperors had gone through its last iteration with Gordian III. Their works are thus in dialogue with three decades of constantly changing dynastic propaganda, and they all parallel the emperors' own efforts to relate recent history to the larger narrative of the Roman world. What is new and remarkable is that, where the literature of other periods of the Principate had largely worked within the same overall consensus narratives as the rulers, even when authors questioned and subverted them, each of these four narratives differs greatly in its basic premises from those put forth by any emperor, and from the other three narratives under study.

It is not that they reflect widely differing ideologies or segments of society. All four author-narrators (the distinction between constructed and historical authors is a point to which I will return) present themselves as members of a unified imperial elite that saw itself as an organic continuation of cultural traditions going back into the archaic pasts of Greece and Rome, although in practice it was defined according to norms laid down in the second century. They all still operate within an ideology of imperial consensus whose roots can be traced back to Augustus. There are thus many things on which they do

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not disagree, either with one another or their rulers. None of these narratives will meaningfully question the appropriateness of placing all political and cultural power in the hands of a classically educated elite; nor the essential primacy and self-sufficiency of the dominant Greek and Roman traditions of the empire's Mediterranean core in answering all important cultural questions, and the need for other influences to be subordinated or translated into a Greco-Roman idiom; nor the necessity, permanence and, at least as an ideal, the beneficence of the Roman imperial system as the political guarantor of social and cultural order.[13] On the whole, the emperors' ideological agendas were also relatively traditional, and the parties in the various conflicts differed little in what they wished to do with the empire once they gained control of it.[14] We are still far from the ideologically fragmented world of the later third and fourth centuries. Nonetheless a crack is emerging in the edifice of imperial elite unity. For all that these authors and their rulers agreed on, they disagreed on the significance of recent historical events, and how those events were to be integrated into a larger story.

To understand why this is, one must realize how large a role political stability played in Antonine consensus ideology, and how much it supported even aspects of that ideology that had little explicitly to do with imperial politics. Marcus and his immediate predecessors presented themselves as virtuous figures who were fully integrated into a beneficently ordered social, economic and cultural landscape based on the elite cultural assumptions I have just identified as persisting in Severan narratives. Their unbroken sequence of peaceful successions, accompanied by constant expressions of political consensus, guaranteed that order, but also represented and affirmed it. Subscribing to the consensus surrounding the ruler implied accepting the ruler's claim to guarantee a beneficent order, which in turn implied agreeing that such an order existed. Since the series of relatively peaceful successions was a demonstrable fact that was easy to affirm, it could do a lot of ideological work by standing in for the larger order of things.[15] Having everything seem right in the political sphere made the entire system seem more right, and, crucially, provided a narrative to explain that rightness, as a product of the process of expansion and political stabilization that

[13] The one apparently explicit exception to the second point is that Philostratus has Apollonius insist repeatedly on the Indian origin of his teachings. This point will be discussed fully in Chapter 4, but it suffices for now to stress that those teachings contain little or nothing that contemporary readers would have recognized as genuinely alien to the dominant traditions in which they lived.

[14] Caracalla's military posturing and Elagabalus' religious activities are partial exceptions, but less so than the literary tradition would suggest, for which see Chapter 2.

[15] Some political unrest was associated with the succession to Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus, but never to a degree that created real difficulties for a consensus narrative.

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supposedly ended when Augustus created the existing monarchical state. In the decades after 180, however, that appearance of rightness became ever less sustainable, much as emperors tried to preserve it. The claim of political stability was too much at odds with observable reality to serve as a supporting explanation for anything. It is not that there was a widespread sense of complete crisis: it was still possible, indeed often desirable, to assert that the basic order of things was functioning, but it was no longer possible to use political events as proof of that claim.

So what did one use instead? The four narratives examined in this book represent four different answers. They are all still invested in consensus imperial ideology as it existed in the late second century (the period that all the narrators present as their own youth), even though the political circumstances that gave that ideology narrative coherence are gone. Thus their shared focal point is the idealized status of the Antonine age. They all agree that Marcus was an ideal emperor, and they all state (or in the case of the Philostratean works imply) that the current regimes are failing to meet his standard. In some cases, they do suggest, explicitly or implicitly, how this situation might be remedied, but what is of more interest is how they construct literary worlds in which some other element fulfils the function that political stability used to, namely that of providing a narrative of how change and continuity affect the existing order. The significant differences are in the selection of the key elements, and the kinds of story that can be built around them. It will be the task of this book to illuminate those differences.

Literature and methodology

After the next chapter, which deals with the narratives put out by the various emperors, the core of this book consists of four chapters, one each on the historical works of Dio and Herodian, and one each on Philostratus' *Apollonius* and *Sophists*. In each case, I will be asking how the text constructs the Roman Empire as a narrative world, and how in each world political change, especially that from the Antonine to Severan dynasties, manifests itself and relates to change or continuity in cultural structures. This question leads on to a larger one, namely how the Antonine-Severan dynastic change affected the cultural landscape of the Roman Empire, or at least its urban and elite segments. That second question is very much a historical one, relating to a reality outside the texts. This is not a "literary" study in the sense that my overall aim is not to produce a poetics of Severan historiography, nor to place these works within the development of the historiographical or any other

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genre.[16] Nonethless, my methods will be mostly literary ones, including at times poetic and formal analysis. As will be evident from my language to this point, this is to be a study not of authors but of narratives, and those narratives will be spoken of as creating different Roman empires rather than differently reflecting a single external one. Thus in this book, ancient histories and other non-fiction works will be read "as fiction" in the restricted sense that I will focus on those literary characteristics that are shared by historical and fictional narratives. This is no longer in itself an innovative or unorthodox stance, nor is it an ideological choice based on any conviction of mine that the past is radically unknowable or unreal, or that traditional historical methodologies are inadequate to apprehend it. As already noted, this book aims to answer historical questions about how people in the past understood and conceived of their own past and present. My methodology has been chosen as the one most suitable to the particular historical problem posed by the literature addressed in this study.

That problem, in its broadest terms, is as follows. All these texts, simply by their existence as critical narratives of the imperial Roman past, are instances of the same phenomenon, the cultural effect of dynastic political change. For most of the second century after Tacitus and Suetonius, Roman literature in either language all but ceased to produce large-scale narratives of the post-Augustan period.[17] In the 220s to 240s, we see several such narratives emerge, all ambitious and innovative in form. It is an easy intuitive leap to connect this emergence to the new political instability of the period, and Chapter 2 will argue for making that leap. It is more difficult to get at the specifics of what each work has to tell us about political and cultural change. None of them gives an adequate explicit account of how recent events have altered the world-view of the author and his peers. This is hardly surprising: ancient historians are above all concerned with events and never pay as much

[16] Whitmarsh 2011, 5–12 cautions sensibly against over-reliance on cultural-historical events to explain literary phenomena, in his case the emergence of the Greek novel. In my case, the phenomena relate specifically to representation of the historical past and are spread over works from several different genres. Many of the specific textual features that I will be examining would certainly repay a more strictly literary analysis (in terms of intertextuality, for instance), but their commonalities and simultaneous appearance still seem better explained by historical means.

[17] A point that will be further argued in Chapter 2, but see also Kemezis 2010. For a different but fruitful approach to the question of changing perceptions of the past, see Grethlein 2010, who uses concepts adapted from Koselleck 1985a and examines how the past is used to understand contingency in the present and form expectations for the future. He posits "developmental" approaches as one of four possibilities (the others being exemplarity, tradition and the force of chance) that are used (or not used) to varying degrees in different cultural-historical contexts. In his terms, my contention would be that developmental approaches are largely absent under the Antonines and become again common under the Severans.

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attention to structural factors as their modern heirs would wish. Cassius Dio does have some valuable analysis, Herodian considerably less, and Philostratus scarcely any at all. But one cannot conclude from this either that Dio's explicit statements represent a complete account of how his own times affected him, or that Philostratus' comparative reticence means he and people like him were relatively unaffected by those same times. One cannot narrate events without at least implicitly describing the structures within which they take place.[18] The problem for a modern interpreter is how to talk about that description in four such different narrative works.

For reasons that will be discussed presently, traditional methodologies that focus on the views of authors as historical individuals are not well suited to the task, hence the need to look at these texts as literary narratives. The last few decades of scholarship have hugely expanded the number of available methodologies, mostly by employing various forms of rhetorical analysis. This study is heavily indebted to these methodological advances, and my standard approach throughout will be to examine the structure of narratives, the function of various elements within them and the techniques employed by narrators to gain authority for their material.[19] The particular methodologies involved will vary from text to text according to what aspects of the narrative are most relevant to my overall historical question, i.e. which aspects best reveal, explicitly or otherwise, the effects of dynastic change. For Dio and Herodian, for instance, I will pay rather more attention to issues of formal generic structure than with either of the Philostratean texts. Cultural geography will be a major part of my analysis of the *Apollonius* and of Herodian, but considerably less for Dio or the *Sophists*. None of my readings will be based primarily on intertextuality or word-and-sentence-level stylistics,

[18] As argued by Koselleck 1985b.

[19] The notion that the structure of a historical narrative is a key part of its meaning is of course a key insight of Hayden White, and my own readings will be heavily indebted to his typologies of plots and rhetorical tropes (e.g. White 1973, 1–42), especially throughout Chapter 2 and in my characterization of Dio's and Herodian's contemporary narratives as tragic and ironic respectively. I do not, however, apply his methodology of viewing types of narrative as reflecting sharp ideological differences. This is because in my view the literate elites of high empire operated in a far narrower ideological space than the nineteenth-century Europeans who are White's primary subjects. As will be outlined below (pp. 21–2), I do not read any of these narratives as substantially departing from the dominant imperial ideology based on explicit consensus regarding Roman monarchical rule and the primacy of traditional Greco-Roman elite culture in its various forms. The diversity of narrative views reflects not ideological fragmentation, but differences of emphasis as to how to read recent history within a broadly shared ideological framework. Thus where ironic readings of Tacitus, such as Henderson 1989 and O'Gorman 2000, see him as a destabilizing critique of imperial ideology as such, my own reading of Herodian, while also basically deconstructive, sees him as critiquing not the ideology, but the claims that various recent emperors based on it.

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