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REVIEW–DISCUSSION

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES IN
THE SEVERAN PERIOD

Adam M. Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans: Cassius Dio, Philostratus, and Herodian*. Greek Culture in the Roman World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 340. Hardback, £70.00. ISBN 978-1-107-06272-6.

Adam Kemezis' first book, which arrives as an expansion of his 2006 PhD thesis,¹ adopts a welcome set of innovative approaches to three Greek authors of the Severan age whose literary originality has only come to be recognised in recent decades: Cassius Dio, Philostratus, and Herodian. This is not a study of literature as such, nor is it the author's intent to shed light upon the ways in which these historians (broadly defined, 19) moulded and adapted different historical methods. Rather, this book aims to understand the kinds of Roman history these historians created in response to the vicissitudes of their Severan age. In short, this is not a study of how Severan historiography was written, but why it was written.

Kemezis' argument is that the string of political upheavals at the highest level, which marked the transition from the Antonine to the Severan dynasties, generated a vacuum of consensus between the ruling *princeps* and the ruled elite. This vacuum led these Greek authors to begin to reinterpret both the recent past and the *longue durée* in a way that may not be detected in the historiography of the comparatively peaceful Antonine dynasty. In previous periods, high-level literary narratives of the past were a means of creating consensus around the legitimacy of the ruling power and its capacity to deliver positive change and continuity. The Severan dynasty, however, failed miserably to assert this element. In the absence of such consensus, Kemezis argues that these authors composed their narratives without the assistance of a persuasive imperial line to follow. Rather, they did the job of finding continuity and positive change in the Severan age for themselves; and, predictably, used their works to advertise their interest-groups as the replacement for that element (4–8).

¹ Kemezis (2006).

The book is divided into seven chapters. An introduction and conclusion book-end a comparison of the Antonine and Severan dynasties and their historians, which provides essential historical background to Kemezis' argument. This is followed by four case-studies on Cassius Dio's history, Philostratus' *Apollonius*, Philostratus' *Sophists*, and Herodian's eight-book history of the emperors from Marcus Aurelius to Gordian III. A full index (335–40) records all major and many minor points covered in the book with appreciable specificity. This is additionally complemented by a very substantial bibliography with only a couple of surprising omissions, and by three appendices—one for each of the historians under discussion (281–308). Above all these appendices focus on determining the date of composition of the texts and on elucidating further the biographical material surrounding each author.

In his Introduction, Kemezis shelves the traditional author-based approach which treats the historian in light of who he 'is'—*pepaideumenos*, administrator, Roman, monarchist—and reads the text from that perspective (21–6). All three historians under discussion in this book can be placed within those 'categories' on the basis of the statements they make; but this adumbrates only the similarities, and not the distinctive differences, in the way in which they reinterpreted Roman history from the Severan standpoint. By leaving aside the author-based approach and relegating the requisite material to the appendices, Kemezis is better able to demonstrate that these three historians wrote very different narratives in spite of their similar backgrounds and ideological assumptions. The difference, Kemezis shows, lies in the way in which the three historians located their interest-groups as loci of continuity between Antonine and Severan, and re-interpreted Roman history accordingly.

In giving this methodological overview, Kemezis' Introduction furthermore circumvents a number of familiar traps. Firstly, there is nothing new in approaching Severan historiography as a response to the vicissitudes of the contemporary situation. Cassius Dio's history has often been read as a response to the Severan age.² But in arguing that these three authors used their histories to advertise their interest-groups as the vessels of positive continuity and change, Kemezis re-invents the now slightly moth-eaten approach to the texts as a response to contemporary Rome in a very sympathetic way. Secondly, by abandoning an author-based approach, Kemezis avoids falling into dichotomies between 'Greek' and 'Roman' (25–9), except in so far as Philostratus defines that dichotomy as one of culture and politics. Thirdly, Kemezis places very welcome limitations on the snowball of 'sophistic historiography' (esp. 150–1). Some recognition of the three historians' shared identifi-

² Most notably the speeches of Maecenas and Agrippa, among other passages. Cf. Bleicken (1962), Millar (1964) 102–18, Espinosa Ruiz (1982), Reinhold (1988) 219–21.

cation with *paideia* and of their use of Attic is obviously inevitable. But Kemezis is consistent in viewing the texts as works of historical narrative whose agendas extended far beyond the rhetorical artifice so often criticised in ‘sophistic’ historiography.³

In Chapter Two (‘From Antonine to Severan’, 30–89), Kemezis places his broader argument against the backdrop of the many regime changes from the death of Marcus Aurelius to that of Severus Alexander. The author maps these changes across three periodisations: the ‘true Aurelii’, ‘from Commodus to Severus’, and ‘the later Severans’. This provides an effective overview of the gradual disintegration of the consensus narrative surrounding the ruling dynasty. In ‘the true Aurelii’, Kemezis argues that 100 years of peaceful transfers of power through adoption and legitimate successions ensured an Antonine consensus narrative which needed neither confirmation nor challenge. As such, Antonine historiography was static, ‘timeless’, and averse to explaining the recent past and its place within Roman history: there was simply no need for that. A further explanation Kemezis provides for the ‘timelessness’ of Antonine literature is the close affinity between Augustan and Antonine ideology. The notions of the *civilis princeps* and the renunciation of expansion met no real refutation, he argues, in the period from Nerva’s accession to Marcus Aurelius’ death.

In the second section, however (‘from Commodus to Severus’), Kemezis explores the fragmentation of that consensus with the reign of Commodus. This poses an obvious stumbling-block: Commodus, the first porphyrogenitus, was the personification of dynastic continuity. How can his reign have been the rupture which prompted our authors to revisit the past? Kemezis argues that, in fact, Commodus constituted a rupture precisely *because* he was a porphyrogenitus: the contrast between himself and his natural father was simply too pronounced. The author takes his cue from Cassius Dio, who clearly did feel that the new *princeps* was a turning-point (72.35.4). However, it is also notable that the same author refers to him as the last of the ‘true Aurelii’ upon his death (73.22.6), which perhaps complicates Kemezis’ picture without necessarily compromising it. The absence of Béranger’s now old *Recherches sur l’aspect idéologique du Principat* (Basle, 1953, esp. 137–69) is surprising, particularly in Kemezis’ discussion of the undesirability of imperial adoption from the Antonine perspective (45–8). Nevertheless, this part of the author’s historical overview persuasively locates the transgressive reign and bloody downfall of Commodus as an important point of transition for our authors. Finally, in the third part of his historical survey (‘the Later Severans’), Kemezis presents the complete disappearance of consensus surrounding the probity of the ruling dynasty with Caracalla, Elagabalus, and others.

³ E.g. Reardon (1971) 206, Anderson (1993) 105–14, and Lintott (1997) 2501–2, to name but a few examples.

Through this summary, Kemezis provides the context within which Dio, Philostratus, and Herodian were inspired to locate continuity in their own times by revisiting the past.

The third chapter ('Cassius Dio: The Last Annalist', 90–149) suggests that Cassius Dio re-evaluated almost all of Roman history, from the early Republic to his own time, in light of the Severan situation. Kemezis here argues that Dio looked especially to the Late Republic and its transition to the Augustan Principate to locate continuity and stability in the present. In the process, he asserted that this continuity and stability could be found in elites such as himself: senators and magistrates with a conservative outlook. To demonstrate this, Kemezis periodises Dio's history into four 'narrative modes': the 'Republican' mode, the '*dynasteia* mode', the 'Principate' mode, and the 'eyewitness' mode. These are discussed in turn, though not at all at comparable length: comments on the 'Republican' and 'eyewitness' modes are brief, but this is a reasonable choice, in view of the fragmentary state of the former,⁴ and the number of studies which already treat Dio's handling of the latter. It would be interesting to know where Dio's Regal Period and the preceding Archaeology fit within this schema of modes, as these are not mentioned. However, the prohibitively lacunose state of that narrative and its heavy epitomisation certainly support Kemezis' choice.

It is clear from Kemezis' analysis that each 'narrative mode' expresses a particular set of preoccupations, structuring devices, frameworks of historical causation, and literary techniques on the historian's part. The 'Republican' mode of Dio's work takes the reader from the expulsion of the Tarquins to the late second century BCE. It is characterised by Dio's presentation of an overall political climate of harmony and concern for the public interest, in which collective action succeeds thanks to the intervention of virtuous individuals. But then, the '*dynasteia*' mode constitutes the opposite end of the spectrum. At some point in his narrative of the late second century, Dio begins to present collective action in the public interest as impossible as events are driven by the ambition of a very few powerful dynasts. It could be argued that Kemezis draws a more idealistic contrast between Dio's Early-Mid and Late Republic here than is necessarily the case: the narrative of at least the fifth century BCE abounds in internecine conflict, and more so than many other sources.⁵ However, Kemezis' comparison of the character of public speech in both of these 'modes' is especially effective at confirming the dissimilarities between the two periods in Dio's view (106–7, 111–5).

The heart of this chapter within the overall purpose of the book lies in Kemezis' evaluation of the transition between Republic and Principate in

⁴ On which see the forthcoming symposium *Cassius Dio's Secret History of Early Rome* (Glasgow, April 25th 2016) and the forthcoming volume of the same title.

⁵ As Libourel (1974) has shown. Cf. also Lange (forthcoming, 2017).

Books 52–3 (126–49). Here, Kemezis confronts Books 52–3, in which are placed the constitutional debate of Agrippa and Maecenas, Octavian's *recusatio imperii* to the Senate and his ratification as Augustus, and then the first *princeps*' reforms to the provincial and domestic administration. The critical questions asked (and answered) are these: after the long narrative of ambition and envy of the *dynasteia* mode, how could things ever change? And what did it mean for the Severans to attempt to assert 'continuity' with the Augustan consensus-narrative which followed this change? Through his analysis, Kemezis shows that for Dio such continuity was invested not in the character of individual emperors, but rather in the character of their interactions with the senatorial order. Those who preserved the systems recommended in Maecenas' long exhortation fulfilled Dio's expectations, by retaining the prestige of the Republican magistracies and by restricting them to *hoi aristoi*. The point, as Kemezis states, is not that the magistrates of Dio's time continued to wield real power vis-à-vis the emperor. Rather, by narrating the way in which Augustus reapplied the offices of the Republic to the new monarchy ('in loving detail', 139), Dio located stability and true Romanness within the link that connected himself as a senator and magistrate to Augustus and to the old Republic.

In Chapter Four ('Philostratus' *Apollonius*: Hellenic Perfection on an Imperial Stage', 150–95), Kemezis argues that Philostratus used his biopic of the sophist Apollonius to show the way in which exponents of *paideia*, rather than emperors, could have a transformative effect upon both centre and periphery. In so doing, Philostratus used this text to assert not only the autonomy of Greek culture, but its predominance, and in a narrative largely independent of dynastic history. As Kemezis notes, the inclusion of Philostratus' works between the formal narrative histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian seems at first glance an odd choice. These latter recorded conventional history, while Philostratus was the biographer of a cultural phenomenon (150–5). But it is precisely by using the unlikely text of the *Apollonius* as a case-study that Kemezis demonstrates the different ways in which Severan authors located continuity and positive change within their particular interest-groups: for Dio, senators and magistrates; for Philostratus, *pepaideumenoï*.

Kemezis' approach is to read the biopic as a work of fiction: a fictional story-world which nevertheless articulates Philostratus' argument about the continuous and stable link to the past to be found in the *pepaideumenoï* of the real, Severan world. Although this approach frees the book from much speculation about what in the work is 'true' or 'untrue' (159), there is still a risk of becoming entangled in questions of probability. In the exchange between Apollonius and the future emperor Titus, for example (*VA* 6.29–33), the sophist predicts Titus' impending assassination by Domitian through an allusion to Homer, which Titus fails to understand, with fatal consequences.

This, Kemezis writes, needs to be the case in this fiction, ‘because allowing Titus to live would introduce into the *Apollonius*’ world an unacceptable historical impossibility’ (193). Yet Nerva can be virtually ignored (‘on the grounds that he was a historical nonentity’, 195) and Trajan completely absent (‘Philostratus is ostentatiously rejecting the chance to give his hero credit for the founding of the Antonine dynasty’, *ibid.*). The issue is not that plausible and implausible fictions co-exist in Kemezis’ reading of the *Apollonius*, but that these fictions seem to be rationalised rather selectively. Nevertheless, Kemezis’ treatment of these more fabulous episodes—especially the showdown between Apollonius and Domitian, in which the emperor is defeated by the sophist and his regime collapses to Nerva—convincingly shows that Philostratus turned to the further past to assert the transformative potential of Hellenic cultural capital, even at the highest level.

Chapter Five (‘Philostratus *Sophists*: Hellas’ Antonine Golden Age’, 196–226) elucidates still further Philostratus’ advertisement of an Hellenic *paideia* which can be both serenely independent from Roman dynastic politics while also making it into an admiring audience. It is clear that this and the preceding chapter need to be read together, as Kemezis’ concluding syncretism of the *Sophists* and *Apollonius* shows (218–26). Unlike this latter text, Philostratus’ *Sophists* clearly has historical perspective, drawing an explicit distinction between the ‘Old’ and the ‘Second’ Sophistic: that is, the further past of Classical Athens on the one hand, and its more recent imitators in the declamatory *agon* on the other (*VS* 481). The critical link between these two worlds, Kemezis writes, is Aeschines, Philostratus’ deputed founder of the Second Sophistic. As such, while the biographer draws a clear distinction between the further and more recent history of Greek culture, this is by no means a separation. Rather, ‘we get a chronological scheme in which the last five hundred years are all part of one era, whose earliest figure [Aeschines] overlaps with the classical period itself’. That scheme, moreover, is not defined by dynastic changes or political and military events, but by the sophistic art, which continues uninterrupted into Philostratus’ own Severan day (201). This observation frames Kemezis’ thesis throughout the chapter: that Philostratus consciously eclipsed Roman dynastic politics, and presented Rome as a recipient vessel of *paideia* which is transformed into a cultural centre by the sophists. In this way, Kemezis argues that Philostratus presents ‘sophistic’ culture as both stable and transformative, redrawing the timeline of previous centuries with landmarks of Greek culture as the frame of reference.

The critical part of Kemezis’ fifth chapter arrives with his analysis of the role Philostratus’ envisaged for sophists under the Severans (218–26). Here, he argues that like Dio, Philostratus saw the mid-second century as a golden age: where Dio had Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, Philostratus had Polemo and Herodes. Unlike that historian, however, the biographer of the

sophists used his text to assert that the golden age was certainly not over yet ('the *Sophists* continues its story well on into the reigns of Commodus, Severus, and the later members of the Severan dynasty', 220). In contrast to the beleaguered senators of Dio's contemporary history, no sophist in Philostratus' text will be actively victimised or tyrannised by an emperor. Kemezis shows convincingly that, where for Dio the essential locus of continuity between Antonine and Severan lay in a respectful relationship between a *civilis princeps* and his elites, for Philostratus, stability lay within the realm of sophistic *paideia*, still functioning independently of dynastic politics and in uninterrupted continuity in the contemporary scene.

The absence of Brunt's seminal article is surprising earlier in this chapter, particularly in the author's rationalisation of the large gap between Aeschines and Nicetes of Smyrna in the text (201) and in his discussion of the sophists' public activities (208–12). Fundamentally following Bowersock's approach,⁶ the author suggests that in describing Herodes Atticus' euergetic and political activities, Philostratus asks the audience to see these as '*an integral part of his sophistic persona*' and that he makes this a defining area of sophistic activity (209).⁷ But as Brunt has already shown, by Philostratus' own count only a very small proportion of his sophists—six out of forty-two—were munificent, and only fourteen discharged civic functions. Herodes and Polemo are the beacons of the sophistic for Philostratus precisely because they are exceptional.⁸ Acknowledging this now widely-accepted work may lend some caution to the author's claims. Nevertheless, this chapter is excellently suited to Kemezis' overall project. It acts as a welcome coda to the previous *Apollonius* discussion, whose purpose, beyond showing that Philostratus presented Hellenism functioning independently of Roman politics through Apollonius, is not immediately clear. That ambiguity is fully resolved by this next chapter. Apollonius' sophistic, which was only one part in a continuous and independent link running back to Aeschines, continued to thrive even under the fractious Severans. It therefore constituted for Philostratus a single historical period in its own right whose practitioners deserved a history of their almost unbroken continuity, divorced from dynastic politics.

In his final case-study ('Chapter 6: Herodian: A Dysfunctional Rome', 227–72), Kemezis argues that Herodian deliberately mis-matched Antonine convention with a narrative of Severan and post-Severan chaos. In this way, the historian created a narrative which lurches rapidly from crisis to crisis while at the same time operating within a distinctly Antonine 'mode'. The history thereby emphasised the complete collapse of consensus ideology be-

⁶ Bowersock (1969).

⁷ Kemezis' emphasis.

⁸ Brunt (1994) 26, 33–5.

tween Antonine and Severan. It asserted that the halcyon ways of thinking—and indeed communicating, orally and verbally—were no longer viable in this new world of decline and instability.

The reader will discover as the chapter unfolds that this Antonine ‘mode’ can be divided into two broad categories. First there is Antonine literary convention. Unlike Dio and Philostratus, Herodian did not invent a new kind of formally original grand narrative to describe a changed world. Rather, Herodian’s remarkably conventional work adhered to numerous literary precepts set out in the Antonine Lucian’s manual on the writing of history. For example, in contrast to Dio and Philostratus this historian almost completely effaced his own identity, providing only a few ambiguous words on his background. Additionally, Herodian prefers a narrative rapidity, moving swiftly from one subject to the other with little bridging material; and he largely shuns the ethnographic and geographical digressions which punctuate historical narrative (229–39). This paring-down of the text and the anonymity of its author inevitably create the effect of moving swiftly from accession to assassination, accession to assassination. There is little glimpse of a reprieve, less still a positive outcome. Moreover, unlike our other two historians Herodian cannot lay claim on behalf of himself or ‘those like him’ to the mantle of continuity and stability, since the identity of the historian and his interest-group are simply not present. The end-product is markedly pessimistic. Kemezis here demonstrates effectively the way in which Herodian’s ‘Antonine’ style, which emerges from a conscious literary choice, underscores the historian’s overall interpretative focus of dramatic and destructive change.

Secondly, there is the weight of Antonine consensus ideology and the way in which a string of emperors still attempted fruitlessly to operate within it. The choice to begin his work with a brief overview of the reign of Marcus Aurelius is, as the author notes, a loaded one (234–5): Marcus is an idealistic counterpoint to the decline that will follow. He epitomises criteria which all later emperors will fail to meet. Marcus’ philosophical leanings and ‘contagious’ virtue, which filter downward into his subjects, are praised; his associates are of good station and character; he can move seamlessly between Roman centre and provincial periphery, remaining still in essence himself, but responding correctly to the respective demands of each; as an orator, he is effective in persuading and unifying his audience; and his death is met by unanimous grief. The loci of praise of Marcus are conventional and unsurprising, and a number can easily be reapplied to earlier Antonine emperors.

Kemezis’ point is not that these criteria are original, but that Herodian’s choice to begin with them is the beginning of a compelling internal argument. By beginning his work with Marcus, the historian can better move on to show at length how ill-adapted such Antonine expectations are to the new, chaotic order. Thus Commodus’ first speech asserts his dynastic legitimacy as Marcus’ son, the first emperor born in the purple—but Herodian’s audience

know that the character of his reign will be antithetical to the previous one. Pertinax and his prefect Laetus give respective speeches to the Senate and Praetorians, but focus on issues which are simply not relevant to the new times. Macrinus, similarly, will attempt to imitate Marcus' philosophical leanings, but this is rightly perceived as a shambolic pantomime. Furthermore, several short-lived emperors fail to adapt themselves to the boundaries between centre and periphery: they are categorically unable to be the paradigmatic *civilis princeps* of the Greco-Roman elite at home and the decisive war-leader abroad. In the round, this exploration of the ways in which Herodian consciously presented all Marcus' successors attempting to adapt an Antonine ideology to a post-Antonine world is effective. Indeed, it is all the more so when viewed in light of the chaotic overall impression of that world, which is created by the literary techniques through which the historian organises his narrative. In this respect, I find it difficult to agree with Alexander Makhlaiuk's more sceptical comments on this chapter and the extent to which any of this effect was intentional on the historian's part.⁹ The contrasts between the symbolically loaded reign of Marcus Aurelius which opens Herodian's history and those of the successor emperors which occupy the remainder are clear; and much as one may speculate on the history's intent, the author makes a convincing case for its effect.

Kemezis' discussion of Cassius Dio, Philostratus, and Herodian is a persuasive and enjoyable volume which sheds valuable light on historically under-valued sources. The text is almost completely unmarred by typographical errors (there are comma-splices at 19, 42, 206, 247; and 'account' at 183). It is a pleasure to read. It is assuredly an essential read for specialists in the Greek prose-writing of the second and third centuries CE; and it equally provides a welcome historical overview of the nexus of problems which generated later crisis and the way in which these historical problems were perceived by contemporaries. From that perspective it will be an invaluable resource for advanced undergraduate libraries as well as for specialist historians and philologists.

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⁹ Makhlaiuk (2015).

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