COMMODUS

O. HEKSTER: *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads*. Pp. vi + 250, pls. Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 2002. Cased, £68. ISBN: 90-5063-238-6.

In recent years there has been a rash of biographical treatments of emperors from a range of authors suggesting a revitalization of the biographical form in Roman historiography. Biography became intellectually unfashionable in the 1970s, but is now both popular and academically respectably among our modernist colleagues, often based on solid research in extensive documentary and epistolary archives. Biographers of ancients face different methodological problems. Even though there is a wealth of epigraphic and artistic evidence, the biographical narrative depends overwhelmingly on literary sources. As the first lesson we are taught as undergraduate ancient historians is to beware the distortions of these suspect narrative sources, any remotely competent historian turned biographer (and H. is clearly more than competent) is plunged into a sea of anxiety. The ancient sources are not independent, they draw inspiration from a relatively narrow range of sources, and they share a common social background. But what in the literary sources are we to believe? If we believe that the sources that have come down to us are not written by fantasists (or rather are not transmitting the work of the fantasists who were their sources), some of it must be true, and we can make the naïve assumption that most of the historians whose works have survived were not deliberate fabricators of historical fact. Nevertheless, the Commodus presented to us by our literary sources is sufficiently unusual that the line between respectable historical fact and shameful gossip is not obvious. We may edit out the implausible, using the good sense with which we are born and the historian's discretion, but even with Nero, for whose reign we have full narrative sources, a good biographical record, and plenty of supporting incidental material, the problems are intractable. The sources for Commodus are much less full and, if possible, more hostile. On what grounds are we to recognize the facts in these accounts to write a narrative account of the reign? Very few historians have sufficient experience of life under an absolute monarchy to understand how such a system could throw up characters like Nero, Domitian, and Commodus, and still less understand the experience of life under their rule. Common sense can only be an unreliable guide. Even if one was to develop some system by which to understand this material and extract the factual wheat from the fabricated chaff, how could one convince others that our winnowing of the material is any more plausible than anyone else's?

It is perhaps a reflection of these difficulties that historians have recently concentrated more on the representations of imperial figures than any putative historical reality and it is to this theme that H. turns in the second half of the book. Commodus, as the first 'bad' emperor since the death of Domitian, is particularly interesting in that although the images he used to display his reign often had powerful precursors in the imperial imagination, his use of gladiatorial combat and the divine, especially Hercules, appears to have been unusual. H. shows that Hercules was an appropriate divinity for Commodus, and further that the imagery was widely accepted in the 'popular imagination'. In fact, judging from the iconography, Commodus was rather more popular than his reputation within the narrative sources would have us believe. It is in the study of the iconography of the imperial position in the late second century that this book has most to offer. H. demonstrates that the Commodan image

was coherent and possibly programmatic, and a seemingly widespread acceptance of that imagery suggests that this imagery was understood.

H. argues that the literary sources are senatorial and dispose us to dislike the emperor, distorting a rational political programme. Similar stories could be told of Domitian and Nero. Like Nero, Commodus was not universally unpopular and his reputation was at least in part recalled by some of his successors, eager to win some of his legitimacy and prestige. To see Commodus as a populist done down by aristocratic *littérateurs* may appeal, but if one places any credence in the events as recalled by the literary sources, it is difficult not to see Commodus as an emperor whose political and personal abilities were so refined that he led a politically stable dynastic system, operating without significant strain or ideological dispute, through a series of crises so severe that eventually it brought about his own downfall. The iconography does not radically change this story.

H. presents Commodus as a thoughtful monarch experimenting with different ways of representing his power, and one supposes that the metaphoric use of 'crossroads' could suggest the various stylistic choices open to the emperor. H. hints, however, that the crossroads is one for the empire at which a decision was taken to take the empire down a certain route which resulted in the Severan monarchy and, presumably, all that followed. I wonder whether, if one is interested in the great historical watersheds, biography will provide much insight; a Roman empire and even an imperial position which could withstand Gaius, Nero, and Domitian is unlikely to have crumbled because of Commodus. It seems difficult to believe that Commodus had a decisive effect on the course of the Roman empire. We may be looking not so much at a crossroads as a pothole.

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CAH XIV

A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, M. Whitby (edd.): *The Cambridge Ancient History. Second edition. Vol. XIV. Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600*. Pp. xx + 1166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Cased, £110. ISBN: 0-521-32591-9.

This is the second of the two volumes which extend the coverage of the second edition of this series beyond its original completion date at A.D. 324 until A.D. 600. It covers the period A.D. 425–600, and is the concluding volume of the new edition of *CAH*, although not the last actually published. It consists of five parts—'Chronological Overview', 'Government and Institutions', 'East and West: Economy and Society', 'The Provinces and the Non-Roman World', and 'Religion and Culture'—containing thirty-five chapters penned by twenty-eight different contributors. For the most part, these are senior scholars whose views are well known already. Hence *CAH* 14 follows the same basic pattern as in *CAH* 13, except that it includes religion and culture together in the one part, whereas the editors of *CAH* 13 had treated these separately in two parts. There is one noticeable improvement, however, in that *CAH* 14 contains many more maps (twenty-three) and figures (sixty-three) than does *CAH* 13 (seven maps and twelve figures). In particular, this makes the chapters on art and architecture much more intelligible.

The latest items cited in any of the bibliographies date to 1999, but the weighting of

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