# CASSIUS DIO IN HIS TIME

KEMEZIS (A.M.), BAILEY (C.), POLETTI (B.) (edd.) *The Intellectual Climate of Cassius Dio. Greek and Roman Pasts*. (Historiography of Rome and its Empire 14.) Pp. xviii + 506, colour ills. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022. Cased, €145, US$174. ISBN: 978-90-04-51048-7.

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This volume accounts for the last of a series of symposia dedicated to the Severan historian Cassius Dio in the framework of an international programme funded by the Danish National Research Foundation and directed by J.M. Madsen and C.H. Lange between 2016 and 2018. It adds to the impressive number of papers that have abounded over the past decade and refreshed the knowledge of a historian once neglected but henceforth assured the place he deserves in the classical historiographical tradition.

The purpose of the volume is to consider Dio's literary and intellectual background, hitherto neglected because he was long studied mostly by historians, and to figure out the exchanges the Severan author may have sustained within his intellectual milieu, with his peers and forerunners. As they reassert that Dio's *Roman History* is placed within the continuation of, sometimes the confrontation with, his forerunners and contemporaries, the editors seek to close the debate around Dio's Romanness vs Greekness, which has now run its course, and to analyse more closely the interactions the author enjoyed with the literary genres, political ideas and rhetorical culture of the day, whether in Greek or in Latin. They keep up the research undertaken in this field over the past decade, notably by the French *Dioneia* Network (directed by V. Fromentin), a whole section of which also considered these features (see V. Fromentin, E. Bertrand, M. Coltelloni-Trannoy, M. Molin, G. Urso [edd.], *Cassius Dion. Nouvelles lectures* [2016], second part: 'Écrire l'histoire de Rome sous les Sévères', pp. 111–414). In this respect one particular interest of this volume is the mature reflexion it shows in not seeking to conceal contingent divergence between the programme participants (e.g. J.S. Perry vs Madsen in Chapter 2), but offering an in-depth and nuanced vision that also takes into account the difficulties caused by the text's transmission via Byzantine abbreviators.

The volume comprises eighteen chapters organised around four themes: 'Political Theory and Commentary' (five chapters); 'Rome and the Imperial Court' (six chapters); 'Literary Heritage' (four chapters); and 'Hellenistic Culture' (three chapters). The first theme already benefits from a plethora of research on account of its centrality to understanding the author's historiographical project; here several chapters offer a useful reminder of the foundation of Dio's political thought and his originality in regard to classical political theories. The analysis of the degradation of the Republican regime and the genesis of imperial institutions already widely explored elsewhere is probed afresh by D. Potter (Chapter 1), from the angle of the singular attention that Dio grants to Pompey the Great, his extraordinary commands, his legislation and his confrontation with Caesar. Dio's reflexion on the best form of government – a government capable of ensuring a fear-free relationship between the senate and the *princeps* – is refined by Perry (Chapter 2) via the *Lex Iulia de senatu habendo*. His defence of the monarchy – unquestionably, criticisms of bad *principes* notwithstanding – is as remote from the mixed monarchy in the Greek tradition proposed by Polybius or Dionysius of Halicarnassus as from the Roman concepts of *libertas* or Principate as found in Pliny or Tacitus; nevertheless, it is, according to Madsen (Chapter 3), who diverges from many

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modern authors in this respect, an absolute monarchy, part and parcel of a consistent political thought particular to this historian: Dio, who had direct experience of Pertinax' death and the ensuing instability, does not concede to the Senators the competence to govern, even if their role remains important as provincial governors, councillors to the *princeps* and a pool from which a successor must be chosen on the basis of their experience. Dio equally departs from Aristides' and Philostratus' theories advancing the role of provincial elites, as K. Markov shows in a detailed comparison of the three authors (Chapter 4). A fresh approach to questions of the legitimacy of succession in Roman history is set forth by A. Pistellato (Chapter 5): the comparison between the *Historia Augusta* around the use of the *nomen Antoninianum* points to Dio's attention to questions about the legitimacy of power, but it also reveals that in eschewing discussions of the thorny issue raised by the Severans' use of this title, Dio, whose career was at its height under Severus Alexander, had no intention of highlighting the failure of the Severan strategy, which would cast aspersions on his own career and work.

In Part 2 the authors focus more narrowly on the imperial court and its part in the exercise of power: the analysis Dio offers of the interactions between court members, the emperor and the Senate provides an indication, as the authors of this section say, of his views on the imperial government, the *principes*' respective capabilities and more broadly on imperial legitimacy. This section remains focused on political themes. The role of women in the imperial family, at the heart of the delineation of dynastic politics, though hitherto skimmed over in Dionian historiography, is addressed both as a sign of some degradation of imperial power (according to K.S. Tate in Chapter 6 it is the reason why Livia's aedilician actions – notably her part in the construction and dedication of the *Porticus Liviae* – are minimised by Dio as against other sources – and why Octavia's are simply left out, thus not diminishing Augustus' public action and upholding his Good Princeps image). It is also perceived as a latent threat to the Senate's authority and influence and thereby a way to discredit the *princeps* and the dynastic succession: such is the case, as shown by J. Langford (Chapter 7), of Julia Domna after the death of the *princeps* and her sons. It is also the case when they partake, in the same quality as other members of the imperial court, in the *salutatio*, a ritual that for Dio is a marker of imperial power (M.O. Lindholmer, Chapter 8). Julia Maesa stands out as an exception to this mostly negative perception of women courtiers: as R. Bertolazzi shows (Chapter 10), her manoeuvres and intrigues, notably on the occasion of Elagabalus' rise to power and his adoption of Bassianus – soon to be Severus Alexander –, appear to be minimised by Dio, who, contrary to Herodian, spotlights the significance of divine portents and the troops as measures of the empire's level of instability – which incidentally protects his career partly owed to the power enjoyed by Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea.

Chapter 9, dedicated by F. Pownall to the *principes*' *imitatio Alexandri*, contributes to the analysis of imperial legitimacy during the Severan period. Dio parts with the conqueror model in the Hellenic tradition championed by his contemporary Arrian: Caracalla's stance is ridiculed, the adoption of Alexander Severus by Elagabalus is handled by the cartoonish apparition of an Alexander figure, and the imitation of the Macedonian by Septimius Severus is a failure, which raises fresh questions about the legitimacy of the dynasty's *principes*, their military prowess and conquest ambitions especially in the east of the empire. The place granted by Dio – contrary to historiographic and literary tradition – to divine portents also contributes, as shown by S. Stewart (Chapter 11), to underscoring the risks to Rome's stability.

Part 3 addresses more specifically Dio's literary project. Dio draws from various sources and genres – rhetorical and legal texts, novels and short stories – to establish a dialogue with readers he considers able to read hints, and to provide food for thought

on the elaboration of history. It is worth mentioning the hitherto scarcely acknowledged borrowings from other literary genres that the authors register: novel-specific features such as ethno-geographic digressions, rhetorical pieces such as the *consolatio*, divine portents, bandit figures, peregrinations; these extra-historical borrowings help Dio to expose the instability of his times (B. Jones, Chapter 12) and to escape the chaos of a reality upturned by the bad emperors (J. Allen, Chapter 13). Dio uses a range of strategies to invite reflexion, especially in the dialogue with Philiscus, in which, through the diverse versions set before him, he gives readers leave to reflect on historical 'truth'. Dio's reflexion also delves into the dangers run by the senator-historian as can be judged by his perception of some of his forerunners (R. Porod, Chapter 14). In Chapter 15 Kemezis shows that the four instances presented in Dio's account – Sallust, Rutilius Rufus, Cicero and Cremutius Cordus – offer a wholly consistent image of the retired statesman who has quit because political action has become too dangerous or fruitless and proposes, through his writings, to continue to serve the state – misguidedly according to Dio, who shows, through his portrayal of them, that writing can also foster danger.

In Part 4 the authors consider the way in which Dio uses Hellenistic culture beyond the Roman senator/Greek scholar dichotomy. S. Asirvatham (Chapter 16) looks into Dio's bilingualism: probing his assessment of the emperors' proficiency, she concludes that, for Dio, the emperors' bilingualism neither vouchsafes a good emperor nor is it prerequisite; it is, by contrast, necessary for a good senator so that he may ensure provincial government; this preconception lets Dio show off his triple authority as an author, experienced senator, Eastern provinces senator and a Greek-Roman thinker. In the same way the passages, be they historical events, natural disasters or *mirabilia*, touching on Asia Minor, with which Dio kept up close links and where his career frequently took him, make it possible for Dio to reinforce his authority as an author, as C.T. Kuhn shows in Chapter 17. The account of the 204 Secular Games (J. Rossiter and B. Brother, Chapter 18) brings out the way in which Dio or his abbreviator stressed the Roman aspects of the ritual, notably the *venatio*, whereas the Secular Games' inscription leans on the *ludi circenses*: this option apparently points to Dio's intent to show the emperor as respectful of Roman traditions and to draw a more nuanced portrait of him.

Through the diverse cases studied, the volume's authors propose to show the originality and the coherence of Dio's project by setting it against literary tradition. Neither do they refrain from outlining the shadowy side or the preconceptions of an author who is also a public figure mindful of his career and reputation (Pistellato and Bertolazzi). The authors offer thorough case studies and thereby contribute to a better understanding of some specific themes (notably Tate and the aedilician actions of imperial women; Lindholmer and the *salutatio* ritual). The aim to cast new light on an author currently enjoying many recent publications was ambitious and is partly successful, notably in Parts 3 and 4 more clearly dedicated to Dio's literary choices and his position as a writer; the chapters by Jones, Kemezis and Asirvatham are novel on this score and deserve special mention within the context of this volume, which brings to a useful conclusion a programme whose outcomes will have increased the knowledge of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* significantly.

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