IV Greek Tradition in Herodian

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Herodian's History and the Distant Past

1 Introduction

Given the scope of Herodian's *History*, which covers a period of less than 60 years, beginning with Marcus Aurelius's death in 180 CE and ending with the ascension of Gordian III in 238 CE, it is not surprising that the historian has little to say about the Greek past. A bit more surprising that he has little to say about the Roman past. So little, in fact, that the evidence for both the Greek and Roman past can be gathered (if not definitively analyzed) within a single article.

As for Greek history: Herodian is writing of events taking place centuries after the Macedonian Wars, which would have been included in a universal history but are not necessary in a Severan one. Nevertheless, one might expect some attention to be paid to the Greek past based on larger trends we see in imperial literature, which often uses the distant classical or Homeric past as touchstones (hence its frequent characterization as "classicizing"). This is especially true because, as Harry Sidebottom has emphasized in his discussion of Herodian's *proemium*, the historian clearly views himself as a *pepaideumenos*[1] – indicated by the very fact of having composed a large-scale work in classical Attic and in his periodic anecdotal references to what we might call "insider knowledge".[2]

It does not seem, however, that Herodian thinks of *paideia* as definitively Greek. He is in fact so reticent about his ethnic loyalties that we cannot be sure that he self-identifies as Greek at all. Like other imperial Greek authors, Herodian self-reflexively evaluates the quality of the individuals who populate his writings by their level of *paideia*, which in normal circumstances would include having useful knowledge of the past. Because of the subject matter of this work, those whose *paideia* is of interest are mostly Romans. But, unusually – and ironically, in the hands of a writer steeped in the classical tradition – the person for whom the past is most useful (at least in the short run) turns out to be neither Greek nor Roman, but Persian: this is Ardashir (Artaxerxes), the founder of the Sassanid dynasty. When the Romans encounter Ardashir, we do not see the former using historical knowledge in a way that would help them. Conversely, certain decisions made in the past – even by someone like Augustus – will turn out to have been blinkered. What is missing from Herodian's *History*, it seems, is the typical Roman historian's belief in the importance and power of *exempla* from the past as a guide to the future. As Matthew Roller defines the term in the introduction to his

1 Sidebottom (1998) 2779.

2 These include *aitiai* for statues of Magna Mater (Hdn. 1.11.1–3), Vesta (Hdn. 1.14.4–5) and Severus (Hdn. 2.9.5), as well as the false Greek etymology of Latium's name, based on Herodian's story about Janus hiding (λαθεῖν) Saturn from his son Jupiter on this site (Hdn. 1.16.1).

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book on Roman exemplarity, these are "examples set by figures from the past who were famed for performing great deeds for the benefit of the community". These *exempla* had moral authority: "they provided norms for others to accept as their own and models for them to imitate." But their ability to persuade depended on "the belief that the past is accessible, understandable, and relevant to present concerns".[3] I will suggest here that Herodian replaces exemplarity with ironic references that highlight the impossibility of relying on the past to move positively into the future.

I begin (Section 2) by linking Herodian's one major and highly negative statement on Greek history to his positive presentation of Ardashir's actions and historical memory, and its inversion of the classical relationship between Greek and barbarian. Herodian is showing off his sophistic chops, but the inversion ultimately serves a more contemporary purpose: to undermine the efforts of emperors who dare to interact with Greeks and Persians – in this case, Niger and Alexander Severus – without understanding Greek and Persian history. A second set of passages (Section 3) involves Marcus' and Caracalla's understandings of ancient history both Greek and Roman – that is to say, their own versions of paideutic display – which are, alternatively, futile and damaging. While Herodian's audience will expect little good from the cruel Caracalla, they will also notice how Marcus' careful application of *paideia* to his understanding of Commodus' capacity to rule stands in ironic contrast to Commodus' failure as a ruler. A final section (4) discusses how Herodian appears to exalt Augustus while nevertheless emphasizing his responsibility for causing the Aquileians – who the historian presents as unambiguously heroic against Maximinus – to lose the military strength they would now need to prevail against the enemy. The vague reference to a time before Augustus that was better for the Aquileians raises the possibility that Herodian pines for the Republic. And yet he stages no real authorial intervention on the matter. In this respect he is even more cynical than his (plenty cynical) contemporary Cassius Dio, who famously considers the periods after Marcus Aurelius to be those of iron and rust falling away from Marcus' golden reign (72[71].36.4), but who also saw value in the Republic that fought against Hannibal.

2 Herodian the Classicist: Petty Greeks, A Heroic Persian, and Myopic Emperors

2.1 "The Ancient Failing of the Greeks"

One of Herodian's few truly memorable references to the Greeks characterizes them as, throughout their history, addicted to fighting one another (3.2.7–8):

3 Roller (2018) 1.

ὡς δὲ διέδραμε<ν ἡ> φήμη τῆς Σεβήρου νίκης, εὐθὺς ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐκείνοις στάσις καὶ διάφορος γνώμη ἐνέπεσε ταῖς πόλεσιν, οὐχ οὕτως τῇ πρὸς τοὺς πολεμοῦντας βασιλέας ἀπεχθείᾳ τινὶ ἢ εὐνοίᾳ ὡς ζήλῳ καὶ ἔριδι τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλας φθόνῳ τε καὶ καθαιρέσει τῶν ὁμοφύλων. ἀρχαῖον τοῦτο πάθος Ἑλλήνων, οἳ πρὸς ἀλλήλους στασιάζοντες ἀεὶ καὶ τοὺς ὑπερέχειν δοκοῦντας καθαιρεῖν θέλοντες ἐτρύχωσαν τὴν Ἑλλάδα. ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν ἐκείνων γηράσαντα καὶ περὶ ἀλλήλοις συντριβέντα Μακεδόσιν εὐάλωτα καὶ Ῥωμαίοις δοῦλα γεγένηται· τὸ δὲ πάθος τοῦτο τοῦ ζήλου καὶ φθόνου μετῆλθεν ἐς τὰς καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀκμαζούσας πόλεις.

When reports of Severus's victory spread, civil strife and factional conflict fell upon the cities of all the eastern provinces, resulting not so much from hatred or goodwill towards either of the warring emperors as from jealousy and rivalry towards one another, and due to the butchery and annihilation of their kinsfolk. This is a long-standing failing of the Greeks: existing in a state of constant inter-city strife and desiring to destroy any city that seemed too successful, they wore Greece out. But as their organizations aged and ground each other down, they become easy to capture by the Macedonians and enslaved to the Romans. This calamitous state of jealousy and envy has been passed onto cities that are in their prime, right into the present day.

The history of Greek "self-destruction" is not a directly classicizing *topos*, as it is a product of future hindsight. Herodian's claim that internecine struggle "is" – i.e, still today – the Greeks' "long-standing weakness" also appears to be an imperial product. But this was not, of course, the only view of the past available to imperial Greeks. In his *Panathenaic Oration*, for example, Aelius Aristides celebrates the Athens of his own day as the natural successor to ancient Athens at its most glorious. According to Aristides, the Athenians deserve to be praised eternally as panhellenic heroes because of the important role they played during the Persian Wars, which seem to have been fought between Persia and Athens alone (*Panath.* 79). Aristides is not concerned with the behavior of cities during and after the Peloponnesian War – that most infamous moment of inter-*polis* strife Herodian is alluding to.[4] Pausanias, on the other hand, is less idealizing of the ancient Greeks than Aristides, and like Herodian he laments the inter-*poleis* strife that led to the rise of Macedon and the disaster at Chaeronea. But like Aristides, he privileges Athens (a city that was beautified by Hadrian, for whom Pausanias shows much admiration) and emphasizes the city's role in leading panhellenic charges against both the Persians and the Macedonians.[5] Herodian, by contrast, does not find a place for the Greek triumph against the Persians, whom he will paint in Book 6 (as we shall see below) as longtime underdogs now fighting valiantly against a Roman incursion.

4 The view that one should ignore the 4th century inter-*poleis* warfare was earlier implied by the Augustan writer Dionysius of Halicarnassus who in his *Letter to Pompeius Geminus* 3.3 complains that Thucydides should have focused on the same subject Herodotus did, bringing together into a single history the deeds accomplished by Greeks and barbarians.

5 On Hadrian and Athens, see, e.g. Kouremenos (2022). See Asirvatham (2022) 75 – 77 for a brief survey of pro-Athenian sentiments in Pausanias. Paus. 8.52.3 makes a strong inverse statement that critiques the Peloponnesians for their attacks on Athens, which the author equates with Greece: "Someone might call the Peloponnesians, as attackers of Athens, virtual murderers and destroyers of Greece" (φαίη τις ἂν αὐτόχειρας καὶ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα καταποντιστὰς εἶναι σφᾶς τῆς Ἑλλάδος).

There may also be a more specific connection between Herodian's words and those of the Trajanic author Dio Chrysostom. Herodian's generalized historical criticism of the Greeks, as we have seen, comes after we learn of the aftermath of Severus' defeat of Niger at Cyzicus in the provinces: dissension based on their "jealous inter-city rivalry and because of the slaughter and destruction of their compatriots." (Hdn. 3.2.7) After his critique of the Greeks at 3.2.8, Herodian resumes the narrative from immediately after Cyzicus, in 193, when Nicomedia allies with Severus, and Nicaea, "out of hatred for the Nicomedians (τῷ πρὸς Νικομηδέας μίσει)", sides with Niger. Herodian goes as far as to characterize the two armies as "clashing as from two camps rather than from two cities" (ἑκατέρωθεν οὖν ἐκ τῶν πόλεων ὡς ἀπὸ στρατοπέδων ὁρμώμενοι: Hdn. 3.2.10), and Severus wins another victory against Niger. The mention of Nicomedia and Nicaea is brief, but its proximity to the comment about Greece is worth noting. The high status of both cities is well attested – in the Julio-Claudian period, Nicaea, alongside Nicomedia, had been declared "the first city" of Bithynia – as is Nicaea's fate after Niger's defeat, when Severus would strip the city of her titles "first", "metropolis", and *neokoros* (which designated a city's acquisition and guardianship of imperial cult).[6] The rivalry between Nicaea and Nicomedia went back to the 3rd century BCE but was most famously addressed by Dio Chrysostom in his Oration 38, entitled "To the Nicomedians on Concord with the Nicaeans", in which he urges the cities not to draw the attention of the Romans by fighting over minor honors. Herodian uses the same word Dio does for the inter-*poleis* rivalry: "φθόνος" (Hdn. 3.2.7; D.Chr. *Or.* 38.43).[7] Whether or not Herodian is echoing Dio Chrysostom, we should note that the rivalry between Nicomedia and Nicaea does not appear in the *HA* or surviving portions of Cassius Dio (the latter of which many scholars see as Herodian's main source).[8]

It seems possible that Herodian is here taking advantage of two tropes simultaneously: one pertaining to warring Greeks in general and a more specific one concerning the long-standing Roman-era rivalry between Nicomedia and Nicaea, whose importance he inflates to make a point about the Greek lack of focus on (and therefore loyalty to) their Roman allies and the self-deluded nature of certain Romans who rely on Greeks despite their historic unreliability. Soon after the battle of Nicaea and Nicomedia, we hear that Niger's allies in Laodicea in Syria have left him out of hatred for the people of Antioch and that the people of Tyre have rebelled out of hatred for the people of Berytus. (This is nothing personal against Niger, who is somewhat be-

6 For a history of the use of these titles, see Heller (2006) 241–341. On the effects of Severus and Niger's war on Nicomedia and Nicaea, see Robert (1977); also Burrell (2004) 164–165.

7 There is also evidence from Dio's speech to the people of Alexandria (*Or.* 32) that Herodian read Dio's work. In Book 4.9.3, Herodian mentions that Caracalla massacred the people of Alexandria for their habit of joking around at others' expense (παίζειν). Dio similarly uses the word in *Or.* 32.1, 13, etc.), in which he chastises the Alexandrians for their frivolity. On Caracalla, see below.

8 It is possible that Cassius Dio's original text includes something about this rivalry, especially given that Dio was from Nicaea (see Kemezis [2020] 274–275). In the extant text, at any rate, Dio only mentions Nicaea as the site of battle (75[74].6.4).

side the point.) Hearing that Niger was in flight, these cities stripped him of his honors and came out with public support for Severus (Hdn. 3.3.3). Niger does not remain entirely without help – in March 194, he collects a huge army of enthusiastic youths from Antioch – but we learn immediately that these soldiers are "much inferior to Severus' Illyrians in both 'experience and bravery'" (τοῦ […] ἐμπείρου καὶ γενναίου πολὺ τῶν Ἰλλυριῶν ἀπέλειπον: Hdn. 3.4.1) and that his army is routed in Issus. After his final defeat, Niger returns to Antioch, sees the anguish of the survivors of the rout, flees, and is caught and beheaded by the horsemen in pursuit (Hdn. 3.4.6). While Herodian says that Niger was not known to be hateful as either an emperor or a man, "he paid the penalty for his delaying and indecisiveness" (μελλήσεως καὶ βραδυτῆτος δοὺς δίκας: Hdn. 3.4.7). One might add – for his choice of allies as well. As Herodian notes, Issus is where the original great defeat of East by West – that of Darius by Alexander – had already been accomplished (Hdn. 3.4.3). Herodian remarks that this new Battle of Issus had "the same outcome" (τὴν τύχην ὁμοίαν: 3.4.4) as the original. That is to say: the conflict between Severus and Niger is one of West vs. East – a formulation that, ironically, makes the Greeks the Eastern barbarians and the Illyrians (Philip and Alexander of Macedon's first "barbarian" enemies) the representatives of Severus' West (even still as barbarians).

2.2 Ardashir the Pepaideumenos

What is missing in Herodian's version of Greek history is, again, significant. When writers like Aelius Aristides and Pausanias refer to the late-5th-and-4th-century conflicts between *poleis*, they make an implied contrast between this moment and the glorious 5th-century "panhellenic" defeat of the Persians. Herodian, on the other hand, replaces the praise of 5th-century Greece with what amounts to the rather stunning "heroization" (even if momentary) in Book 6 of Ardashir I, who founded the Sassanid dynasty and was the new champion of Persian independence. It is worth reading the bulk of this passage (6.2.1–7), as it contains the longest description of any ancient history – including Roman – in Herodian's work, and the repetitions from beginning to end enforce the reader's attention to the historical details.

Hdn. 6.2.1–2 begins with the author describing a report, from the Roman governors of Mesopotamia and Syria, of how Ardashir took over the Parthian empire by killing the Arsacid king Artabanus and now wished to reclaim control of the lands which the Romans now ruled. At the end of this section, we learn of Ardashir's view that these lands were his birthright.

> τῷ δὲ τεσσαρεσκαιδεκάτῳ ἔτει αἰφνιδίως ἐκομίσθη γράμματα τῶν κατὰ Συρίαν τε καὶ Μεσοποταμίαν ἡγεμόνων, δηλοῦντα ὅτι Ἀρταξάρης ὁ Περσῶν βασιλεὺς μετὰ τὸ Παρθυαίους καθελεῖν καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολὴν ἀρχῆς παραλῦσαι, Ἀρτάβανόν τε τὸν πρότερον καλούμενον [τὸν] μέγαν βασιλέα καὶ δυσὶ διαδήμασι χρώμενον ἀποκτεῖναι, πάντα τε τὰ περίοικα βάρβαρα χειρώσασθαι καὶ ἐς φόρου συντέλειαν ὑπαγαγέσθαι, οὐχ ἡσυχάζει οὐδ' ἐντὸς Τίγριδος ποταμοῦ μένει, ἀλλὰ τὰς ὄχθας ὑπερβαίνων καὶ τοὺς τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς ὅρους Μεσοποταμίαν τε κατατρέχει καὶ Σύροις ἀπειλεῖ,

πᾶσάν τε τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον Εὐρώπῃ καὶ διαιρουμένην Αἰγαίῳ τε καὶ τῷ πορθμῷ τῆς Προποντίδος, Ἀσίαν τεπᾶσαν καλουμένην προγονικὸν κτῆμα ἡγούμενος τῇ Περσῶν ἀρχῇ ἀνακτήσασθαι βούλεται, φάσκων ἀπὸ Κύρου τοῦ πρώτου τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐκ Μήδων ἐς Πέρσας μεταστήσαντος μέχρι Δαρείου τοῦ τελευταίου Περσῶν βασιλέως, οὗ τὴν ἀρχὴν Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μακεδὼν καθεῖλε, πάντα μέχρις Ἰωνίας καὶ Καρίας ὑπὸ σατράπαις Περσικοῖς διῳκῆσθαι· προσήκειν οὖν αὐτῷ Πέρσαις ἀνανεώσασθαι πᾶσαν ὁλόκληρον, ἣν πρότερον ἔσχον, ἀρχήν.

But in the tenth year,[9] Severus Alexander unexpectedly received letters from the governors of Syria and Mesopotamia. They revealed that Ardashir, the king of the Persians, having conquered the Parthians and detached their Eastern empire, killed Artabanus, who was formerly called the Great King and wore the double diadem, and conquered all the neighboring barbarians, forcing them to pay tribute. And he did not stay quiet nor keep to his side of the Tigris River, but climbing its banks and crossing the borders of the Roman empire, he ravaged Mesopotamia and menaced Syria. **The entire continent lying opposite Europe and separated from it by the Aegean Sea and the Propontic Gulf, and the region called Asia, Ardashir wanted to regain for the Persian Empire, believing them to be his inheritance, and declared that everything as far as Ionia and Caria had been ruled by Persian satraps from the time of Cyrus, who changed the empire from Median to Persian, up until the reign of Darius, the last of the Persian kings, whose empire Alexander the Macedonian conquered. And that therefore it was fitting for him to conquer for the Persians the whole entire empire that they had previously had.**

This passage describes, through the Roman governors' reports, Ardashir's fast and unexpected conquest of the Parthian lands and the king's desire to win back what remained of the Persian empire from the Romans. The vivid description of the landscape indicates the scale of Ardashir's ambitions. Alexander[10] and the Macedonians appear here as the conquerors of Persia, but not (as we might expect from the point of view of classicism) in the name of Greek freedom, but rather as part of Ardashir's call for Persian freedom.

In the sections that follow (6.2.3–4), we can contrast Ardashir's understanding of the history of the Persian empire and its lands with Severus Alexander's limited perspective on both the nature of the enemy and the geographical scope of his own empire. Herodian blames the young emperor's ignorance on the fact that he grew up in Rome, and in a time of peace:

τοιαῦτα τοίνυν δηλωσάντων καὶ ἐπιστειλάντων τῶν ὑπὸ ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς ἡγεμόνων, πρὸς τὴν αἰφνίδιον καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδα κομισθεῖσαν ἀγγελίαν οὐ μετρίως ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος ἐταράχθη, καὶ μάλιστα εἰρήνῃ ἐκ παίδων ἐντραφεὶς καὶ τῇ κατὰ τὴν πόλιν ἀεὶ σχολάσας τρυφῇ. τὰ μὲν οὖν πρῶτα ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ κοινωσαμένῳ τοῖς φίλοις πρεσβείαν πέμψαι καὶ διὰ γραμμάτων κωλῦσαι τὴν ὁρμὴν καὶ ἐλπίδα τοῦ βαρβάρου. **ἔλεγε δὲ τὰ γράμματα δεῖν μένειν τε αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς τῶν ἰδίων ὅροις καὶ μὴ καινοτομεῖν μηδὲ ματαίαις αἰωρούμενον ἐλπίσι μέγαν ἐγείρειν πόλεμον, ἀγαπητῶς τε ἔχειν ἕκαστον τὰ αὐτοῦ**· μηδὲ γὰρ ὁμοίαν ἔσεσθαι μάχην αὐτῷ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους οἵαν σχεῖν πρὸς τοὺς γειτνιῶντας καὶ ὁμοφύλους βαρβάρους. **ὑπεμίμνησκε δὲ τὰ γράμματα τῶν τε τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ καὶ τῶν Τραϊανοῦ Λουκίου τε καὶ Σεβήρου κατ' αὐτῶν τροπαίων.** τοιαῦτα μὲν δή τινα ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος ἐπιστείλας ᾤετο πείσειν ἢ φοβήσειν ἐς τὸ ἡσυχάζειν τὸν βάρβαρον.

9 The main manuscripts have τεσσαρεσκαιδεκάτῳ ἔτει (fourteenth year) but this is emended by Cassola (1963) and accepted by Whittaker in his Loeb edition (1970).

10 For Alexander the Great in Herodian, see Baron in this volume.

When the Eastern governors revealed these developments in their dispatches, Alexander was greatly shaken by the suddenness of the announcement, which defied his expectations, especially since he had been raised from childhood in a state of peace, living in Rome and in continual luxury. So he thought it was best, first of all, having consulted his councilors, to send an embassy and, by means of his letters, stave off the inrush and foil the barbarian's hopes. **The letters conveyed that Ardashir should stay within his own borders and not try anything new, and that he should not get carried away with vain hopes and stir up a great war. Instead, each of them should be happy with what he had.** For he would not find fighting against the Romans to be the same as fighting against neighbors and barbarian kinsmen. **The letters also reminded Ardashir of the victories won over them by Augustus, Trajan, Verus, and Severus.** Having sent such a letter, Alexander believed he would either persuade the barbarian into keeping quiet or frighten him into it.

Severus Alexander's list of emperors who won victories in the East – Augustus, Trajan, Verus, and Severus – certainly shows a partial knowledge of the past (although we shall see below the perils of the Augustan peace). But his words also demonstrate that he does not really know his "Persians" and cannot distinguish properly among peoples beyond the Eastern border – a particularly interesting choice of presentation on Herodian's part given that Alexander was from Syria. While Alexander is vaguely aware of the conflict between Ardashir and his "barbarian kinsmen and neighbors", he lumps Ardashir together with the Parthians against whom earlier Romans had fought and who (unbeknownst to Alexander) are the enemy of both himself and the Sassanid king. Ardashir's perspective naturally differs. After describing Ardashir's overrunning of Roman territory in the most extreme terms possible (6.2.5), Herodian resumes his discussion of the king's motivation and recaps the history of rule over former Persian territories, from Alexander's defeat of Darius III to the narrative present (6.2.6–7). In doing so, he reinforces the distinction between the Parthians and the newly revived Persians:

ἦν δὲ αὐτὸν τὰ ἀναπείθοντα οὐ μικρὰ ἐς ἐπιθυμίαν ἀρχῆς μείζονος. πρῶτος γὰρ Περσῶν ἐτόλμησε τῇ Παρθυαίων ἀρχῇ ἐπιθέσθαι Πέρσαις τε τὴν βασιλείαν ἀνανεώσασθαι. **μετὰ** γὰρ **Δαρεῖον** τὸν ὑπ' Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνος τῆς ἀρχῆς παραλυθέντα, παμπλείστοις ἐν ἔτεσι **Μακεδόνες μὲν καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου διάδοχοι** τῶν ὑπὸ ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς ἐθνῶν καὶ κατ' Ἀσίαν ἅπασαν, νειμάμενοι κατὰ χώρας, ἐβασίλευσαν. ἐκείνων δὲ πρὸς ἀλλήλους διαφερομένων, πολέμοις τε συνεχέσι τῆς Μακεδόνων δυνάμεως ἐξασθενούσης, πρῶτος **Ἀρσάκης** λέγεται, **τὸ γένος Παρθυαῖος**, ἀναπεῖσαι τοὺς ἐπέκεινα βαρβάρους ἀποστῆναι Μακεδόνων· περιθέμενός τε τὸ διάδημα ἑκόντων Παρθυαίων καὶ τῶν προσχώρων βαρβάρων αὐτός τε ἐβασίλευσε, καὶ τοῖς ἐξ ἐκείνου τοῦ γένους ἐπὶ πλεῖστον παρέμενεν ἡ ἀρχή, **μέχρις Ἀρταβάνου** τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς γενομένου, **ὃν Ἀρταξάρης ἀποκτείνας** Πέρσαις τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀνεκτήσατο, τά τε γειτνιῶντα ἔθνη βάρβαρα χειρωσάμενος ῥᾳδίως ἤδη καὶ τῇ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῇ ἐπεβούλευσεν.

The deliberations that fostered in Ardashir a desire for a greater empire were hardly trivial. He was the first Persian who dared attack the Parthian Empire, and the first to revive the empire for the Persians. **After Darius** (the one who had been deprived of his kingdom by Alexander of Macedon), for many years **the Macedonians and Alexander's Successors** ruled over the nations of the East and all of Asia, having divided up the territory. But these men fought with each other; with the power of the Macedonians exhausted by constant warring, **Arsaces the Parthian**, they say, was the first to persuade the barbarians in those areas to revolt against the Macedonians. As-

> suming the crown, he himself ruled over whoever was willing of the Parthians and neighboring barbarians, and the empire for a long time stayed in his family – up **until Artabanus**, who lived in our time. **Ardashir killed Artabanus** and took hold of the kingdom for the Persians. Having already easily subdued the neighboring barbarian tribes, he began to plot against the Roman empire.

It is hard not to take Herodian's description of Ardashir's accomplishments as at least somewhat flattering to the Persian king – even if Herodian describes him as "rash by nature" (φύσει […] ὢν ἀλαζών: 6.2.5), and even if the historian's positive characterization of the Ardashir's mission seems motivated by a desire to undermine the image of Severus Alexander. The historical importance of Ardashir 's task – Herodian highlights that he is the "first Persian" to attack the Parthians since their ancestor Arsaces won Iranian territory back from the Macedonians, creating an empire that persisted over generations until Ardashir killed Artabanus – is driven home by the repetition between 6.2.1–2 and sections 6.2.6–7. These history lessons, which are presented from Ardashir's (and Herodian's own) perspective, are given to the audience, but remain unknown to Severus Alexander. Finally, I note that Herodian and Cassius Dio are the only extant contemporary sources for this episode, but even in epitome form, Cassius Dio's presentation of this moment in Severan history (80[80].3.1–4 [Xiph./*Exc. Val.*]) comes across quite differently. Far from taking either the Sassanid king or Roman emperor's point of view, Dio articulates, from his own (senatorial) viewpoint, a general fear of Ardashir when he was threatening to win back the ancient Persian empire: "The situation in Mesopotamia felt even more dangerous and more truly frightening, not only for those living in Rome but for the rest of humanity as well" (τὰ δὲ ἐν τῇ Μεσοποταμίᾳ καὶ φοβερώτερα, καὶ ἀληθέστερον δέος σύμπασιν, οὐχ ὅτι τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις D.C. 80[80].3.1); Ardashir became "fearsome to us" (φοβερὸς ἡμῖν) due to the hugeness of his army encamped in Mesopotamia as well as the sorry state of the Roman armies in the east, who in fact went over to the Persian king to fight – but "not because he seemed particularly consequential" (οὐχ ὅτι αὐτὸς λόγου τινὸς ἄξιος δοκεῖ: D.C. 80[80].4.1).[11] Herodian's presentation of Ardashir as a figure of some consequence, by contrast, should be taken as a manifestation of his own art and an ironic commentary on Severus Alexander's ignorance.

3 Lessons of the Past, Useless or Badly Learned

It is not certain, however, that Herodian thinks historical knowledge would have benefited Severus Alexander. Consider the cases of Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla. Herodian's first references to the distant past appear in 1.3.2–5, when Marcus is on his deathbed fretting over the prospect of Commodus' youthful ascension, "for the minds of the young, as they glide off towards pleasures, are very easily diverted from the virtues of

11 For this passage see Scott (2018) 150–151.

education" (ῥᾷστα γὰρ αἱ τῶν νέων ψυχαὶ ἐς ἡδονὰς ἐξολισθαίνουσαι ἀπὸ τῶν παιδείας καλῶν μετοχετεύονται).[12] His mind turns to those whose ascents to power as youths had disastrous results:

> οἷα δὴ ἄνδρα πολυίστορα μάλιστα ἐτάραττε μνήμη τῶν ἐν νεότητι βασιλείαν παραλαβόντων, τοῦτο μὲν **Διονυσίου τοῦ Σικελιώτου τυράννου**, ὃς ὑπὸ τῆς ἄγαν ἀκρασίας καινὰς ἡδονὰς ἐπὶ μεγίστοις μισθοῖς ἐθηρᾶτο, τοῦτο δὲ αἱ **τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου διαδόχων** ἐς τοὺς ὑπηκόους ὕβρεις τε καὶ βίαι, δι' ὧν τὴν ἐκείνου ἀρχὴν κατῄσχυναν, **Πτολεμαῖος** μὲν καὶ μέχρις ἀδελφῆς γνησίας ἔρωτος προχωρήσας παρὰ[τε] τοὺς Μακεδόνων καὶ Ἑλλήνων νόμους, **Ἀντίγονος** δὲ Διόνυσον πάντα μιμούμενος καὶ κισσὸν μὲν περιτιθεὶς τῇ κεφαλῇ ἀντὶ καυσίας καὶ διαδήματος Μακεδονικοῦ, θύρσον δὲ ἀντὶ σκήπτρου φέρων· ἔτι δὲ καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτὸν ἐλύπει τὰ μὴ πρὸ πολλοῦ <γενόμενα> ἀλλ' ὑπόγυον ἔχοντα τὴν μνήμην, τά τε **Νέρωνι** πεπραγμένα ὃς ἐχώρησε μέχρι μητρῴου φόνου παρεῖχέ τε τοῖς δήμοις ἑαυτὸν καταγέλαστον θέαμα, τά τε **Δομετιανῷ** τετολμημένα, τῆς ἐσχάτης ὠμότητος οὐδὲν ἀπολείποντα. τοιαύτας δὴ τυραννίδος εἰκόνας ὑποτυπούμενος ἐδεδίει.
>
> Being the well-read man that he was, Marcus fretted over the recollection of rulers of the past who ruled as young men. He thought about **Dionysius, the Sicilian tyrant**, for example, who out of a lack of moderation paid lots of money for novel pleasures. And then there were the excesses and violent acts perpetrated by **Alexander's successors** against their subjects, through which they brought dishonor onto Alexander's rule. **Ptolemy** went as far as having sex with his own sister, acting in defiance of Macedonian and Greek laws, and **Antigonus** mimicked Dionysus in every way, wearing ivy on his head instead of the Macedonian *kausia* and diadem, and wielding a *thyrsus* instead of a scepter. Gnawing at him still more were events of the not-too-distant past but of recent memory – like the things **Nero** did, going as far as plotting his mother's death and making himself a ridiculous spectacle in front of the people, and the things **Domitian** dared to do, leaving behind not the cruelest of acts. Having formed such images of tyrants in his mind, he was alarmed.

The examples that spring to Marcus' mind come from Greek, Macedonian, and Roman history, and include Dionysius of Syracuse, Alexander's successors, Nero and Domitian. Herodian uses the "thought-bubble" technique (or, more formally, free indirect discourse)[13] in order to demonstrate, in a quite literal way, the emperor's *paideia*, and he is explicit on the link between *paideia* and Marcus' thought: Marcus' worries over Commodus's youthful ascension to power are a result of his being a well-read, literally "much-historied" (πολυίστορα) man. Marcus thinks about Dionysius's lack of self-control; the successors' excesses and violence, including Ptolemy's incest and Antigonus' imitation of Dionysus; Nero's matricide and buffoonery; and Domitian's outrageous cruelty. In this way, Herodian makes this ruler-*pepaideumenos* look like a Roman historian with a penchant for exemplarity. The idea of Antigonus imitating Dionysus, however, is curiously incongruous. Plutarch, for one, attributes this behavior to

12 In his preface, Herodian notes as a general pattern among the rulers of his chosen period that older rulers were better than younger ones (Hdn. 1.1.6).

13 See Chrysanthou (2022) 99. Free indirect discourse (FID) is what Laird (2008) 202 describes as the "*merging* of the voices of narrator and character".

Antigonus' son Demetrius Poliorcetes rather than to Antigonus;[14] even stranger, in context, is the fact that Antigonus was in his mid-70s when he ruled, so he is hardly an example of youthful folly. Is this Herodian's mistake?[15] Or is he signaling to the audience that, for all his *paideia*, Marcus cannot keep his history straight? Whatever the case may be, the fact that Marcus is the first and last person in Herodian's text to offer a set of cautionary examples, and that they fail in their intended effect, is a sign that Herodian does not find historical *exempla* to be very valuable. Specifically: the most arduous learner cannot implant good moral character in someone like Commodus. To the degree that a *pepaideumenos*'s presentation of the *paideia* of others must be at least partly self-reflexive, the fact that Marcus' historical knowledge fails to prevent disaster does not say much for Herodian's chosen pursuit. But we are also reminded that Herodian does not claim that his work puts forth historical lessons. His limited aim, as he puts it, is to tell the truth to present-day readers and provide pleasure for future audiences (1.1.3).

A clearer indication that historical knowledge does not automatically lead to good outcomes is found in Caracalla's actions in Book 4.8.1–4.9.8, where the emperor finds himself in the provinces, having guiltily escaped the bloodbath that he himself perpetrated on his brother Geta and Geta's allies in Rome. Unlike in Marcus's case, it is not that knowledge is *insufficient* for Caracalla's purposes. The problem is that Caracalla's purposes are immoral: self-aggrandizing at best, murderous at worst. Upon entering Thrace, Herodian tells us that Caracalla "immediately became Alexander the Great" (εὐθὺς Ἀλέξανδρος ἦν), and – in the style of that early master self-publicist – ordered statues and paintings of Alexander to be put on public display in all cities, including the Capitol and the entirety of Rome, which would emphasize his connection to the Macedonian king (Hdn. 4.8.1). Herodian claims to have seen ridiculous (χλεύης […] ἀξίας) statues with one body and two faces: Caracalla's on one side of the head and Alexander's on the other. Caracalla also dresses like a Macedonian and creates a "Macedonian phalanx" with officers named after Alexander's generals (Hdn. 4.8.2), and forms from chosen Spartan youths what he calls a "Laconian and Pitanetan battalion" (Hdn. 4.8.3). He seeks healing from Asclepius in Pergamum and visits the ruins of Troy and the tomb of Achilles, where he imitates Achilles and finds his Patroclus in the form of a freedman Festus, who, when he dies (either by poison, so as to serve as a new Patroclus, or from illness) is buried in a huge sacrificial ceremony (Hdn. 4.8.4).[16] Caracalla also sets up statues and paintings of "Roman Sulla" and the "Carthaginian Hannibal," whom he also admires (Hdn. 4.8.5). He leaves Troy and travels through the rest of Asia. He stays at Antioch, where he is welcomed warmly and stays a while (without event).

14 Plu. *Demetr.* 2.3. Müller (2009) 43 suggests that there may have been a grain of historical truth here. The association with Dionysus was related to his relationship with the prostitutes Lamia and Leaina, which she suggests were a positive part of Demetrius' political representation at Athens.

15 As Hohl (1954) 35 n. 37 believed, followed by Galimberti (2014) 56.

16 See Pownall (2022) 259–265 on the Roman tradition of associating Alexander with Achilles, starting with Plutarch.

The situation is different at Alexandria. Caracalla sends letters to the Alexandrians pretending to be eager to worship their god and honor Alexander's memory, and is received with great fanfare (Hdn. 4.8.6–9). His ruse is motivated by a report that the Alexandrians made fun of him for murdering his brother and sleeping with his mother (Herodian says they referred to her as "Jocasta"),[17] and for styling himself as a new Alexander and Achilles, who were taller and stronger than he was (Hdn. 4.9.1–3). As revenge, Caracalla tells the Alexandrians that he wants to organize an Alexandrian phalanx to honor Alexander, similar to his Macedonian and Spartan phalanxes. The Alexandrians accordingly send youths to Caracalla, who has his soldiers encircle and massacre them (Hdn. 4.9.4–6). The dead are thrown into a huge trench, as well as some who are still alive, who dragged some of Caracalla's soldiers in with them (Hdn. 4.9.7–8).

Herodian's emphasis appears to be less on Caracalla's cruelty than on his ridiculousness and the way that he perverts the legacies of great warriors like Alexander, Achilles, and the Spartans: after narrating the slaughter at Alexandria, Herodian simply notes that Caracalla left Alexander for Antioch, "having done such things" (τοιαῦτα δὴ ἐργασάμενος: Hdn. 4.9.8). There are two other important figures from the past who also appear here as potential models of cruelty for Caracalla: Sulla and Hannibal, whom Herodian labels "Roman Sulla" and "Carthaginian Hannibal" – the first epithet perhaps ironically hinting to Caracalla's own non-Romanness by contrast (his mother Julia Domna was Syrian).

Herodian does not comment further on these two figures, who are simply two more "tough guys" whom Caracalla admires.[18] The mention of Sulla is interesting, however, because he is associated by writers from Lucan to Cassius Dio with a brutal moment in pre-Augustan Roman history: the Republican civil wars.[19] Herodian, however, in his one mention of Republican Rome shows a completely novel attitude towards those who engaged in civil war. If there is a criticism to be leveled at those men, it is that their warring is nothing compared to what Severus has accomplished (3.7.7–8):

> μηδὲν ταῖς Σεβήρου μάχαις ἢ νίκαις παραβάλλεσθαι μήτε πλήθει δυνάμεως μήτε ἐθνῶν κινήσεσιν ἀριθμῷ τε παρατάξεων ὁδοιπορίας τε μήκει καὶ τάχει. μεγάλαι μὲν γὰρ καὶ αἱ Καίσαρος πρὸς Πομ-

17 On the two very different traditions about Caracalla's sexuality, (1) that he slept with Julia Domna and (2) that he was impotent and took on a passive homosexual role, see Davenport (2017) 78–79, who supports the contention of Marasco (1996) (see also Levick [2007] 101–102) that the Alexandrian rumor about Domna is historical (but not the incest).

18 Manfredi Zanin (2020) has argued that Caracalla's emulations of Alexander and of Sulla are historical (and not simply slander) and are inspired by his desire to court two different audiences (the eastern provinces, and the Senate); he was also inspired by Septimius Severus' presentation of Sulla as a model for (cruel) rule.

19 Cassius Dio's entire work can be seen as a commentary on civil war as endemic to Roman history. He sees the war against Hannibal as the only true moment of *concordia* (ὁνόμοια ἀκριβῶς: D.C. 13.52.1) in Roman history (that is to say: the Roman equivalent of the panhellenic moment for the Greeks against the Persians).

> πήιον ἑκατέρωθεν στρατοπέδων Ῥωμαϊκῶν μάχαι, καὶ αὖ τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ πρὸς Ἀντώνιον ἢ τοὺς Πομπηίου παῖδας, εἴ τέ τι πρότερον Σύλλᾳ ἢ Μαρίῳ ἐν ἐμφυλίοις καὶ Ῥωμαϊκαῖς μάχαις ἢ ἄλλοις πέπρακται· ἕνα δὲ ἄνδρα τρεῖς καθελόντα βασιλέας ἤδη κρατοῦντας [...] χειρωσάμενον ἀνδρείᾳ, οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλον ῥᾳδίως εἰπεῖν.
>
> Nothing can be compared to the battles and victories of Severus, neither in the size of the forces nor in the revolutions of nations, nor in the number of battles and the distance and speed of the marches. Massive were the battles of Caesar against Pompey, of Roman armies on both sides, as were those of Augustus against Antony and the sons of Pompey. Even before that there were the civil wars at Rome of Sulla and Marius and others. But this one man destroyed three emperors who were already reigning [Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger and Albinus] [...], overpowering them with courage. One would look far to find another like him.

The value Herodian places on Severus' warring does not square easily with his complaints about the Greeks. It does, however, bring us back to the original claim of his history, that we would not find at any other time such "unexpected careers of tyrants or emperors" (τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων βίους παραδόξους: Hdn. 1.1.4.). The larger historical (negative) consequences of Severus' warring do not emerge as an explicit concern.

4 Augustus: The Real Beginning of the End?

Perhaps of a piece with his unusual attitude towards the Roman Republic is Herodian's treatment of Augustus, who he suggests brought peace to the world at the expense of the kind of warriorhood – specifically that of the Italians – that was necessary to survive in today's world. In what a reader might experience as "bookending",Herodian emphasizes in Book 2 and again in Book 8 that the Italians were world-conquering warriors before Augustus gave them peace and replaced them with what the historian calls "mercenaries" (μισθόφροι) to guard the boundary walls of the Roman empire.[20] This first reference arises in 2.11.4–5, when Severus passes through Italy:

> ἐς ὅσον μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ δημοκρατίας τὰ Ῥωμαίων διῳκεῖτο καὶ ἡ σύγκλητος ἐξέπεμπε τοὺς τὰ πολεμικὰ στρατηγήσοντας, ἐν ὅπλοις Ἰταλιῶται πάντες ἦσαν καὶ γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν ἐκτήσαντο, Ἕλλησι πολεμήσαντες καὶ βαρβάροις· οὐδέ τι ἦν γῆς μέρος ἢ κλίμα οὐρανοῦ ὅπου μὴ Ῥωμαῖοι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐξέτειναν. ἐξ οὗ δὲ ἐς τὸν Σεβαστὸν περιῆλθεν ἡ μοναρχία, Ἰταλιώτας μὲν πόνων ἀπέπαυσε καὶ τῶν ὅπλων ἐγύμνωσε, φρούρια δὲ καὶ στρατόπεδα τῆς ἀρχῆς προυβάλετο, μισθοφόρους ἐπὶ ῥητοῖς σιτηρεσίοις στρατιώτας καταστησάμενος ἀντὶ τείχους τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς.
>
> For as long as Roman affairs were administered by the Republic and the senate was in charge of sending out army commanders, all Italians used to bear arms and obtained control of land and sea by fighting against Greeks and barbarians. There was no part of the earth or region in the world

20 It is not entirely clear what Herodian means by μισθόφροι, since by Augustus' time mercenaries would have been formalized within the auxiliary troops that served alongside the legions. In the immediate context, at any rate, Herodian's word choice emphasizes that they are a foreign presence of some sort in an Italian city.

> where the Romans did not extend their rule. But when sole rule came into Augustus' hands, he made the Italians cease their duties, and denuded them of their arms, and exchanged those for garrisons and camps for the empire, stationing mercenary troops on specified rates of pay to defend the walls of the Roman empire.

Herodian's use of γυμνάω to describe Augustus's action – he "denuded" the Italians of arms – offers the reader a strong visual that bodes ill for these formerly well-protected men.

We revisit Augustus' transformation of the Italians at the battle of Aquileia in 8.2.3–6. This episode is a rare "happy story" in Herodian. For one thing, as Daniela Motta points out, it is the only place in Herodian's work in which the *demos* is seen in a positive light.[21] But the situation is a bit strange. While the prosperity and self-sufficiency of the Aquileians is the result of their bustling commerce, they are forced to rebuild their walls in order to battle Maximinus' soldiers, a necessity that is directly due to Augustus' innovations. That is to say: in order to survive, the Italians have to go back to a pre-Augustan past:

> ἔνθεν πολύ τι πλῆθος ἐπεδήμει οὐ πολιτῶν μόνον ἀλλὰ ξένων τε καὶ ἐμπόρων. τότε δὲ μᾶλλον ἐπολυπλασιάσθη τὸ πλῆθος, τῶν ὄχλων πάντων ἐξ ἀγρῶν ἐκεῖσε συρρυέντων, πολίχνας τε καὶ κώμας τὰς περικειμένας καταλιπόντων, πιστευσάντων δὲ αὐτοὺς τῷ τε μεγέθει τῆς πόλεως καὶ τῷ προβεβλημένῳ τείχει, ὃ παλαιότατον <ὂν> ἐκ τοῦ πλείστου μέρους πρότερον μὲν κατερήριπτο, ἅτε μετὰ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν μηκέτι τῶν ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ πόλεων ἢ τειχῶν ἢ ὅπλων δεηθεισῶν, μετειληφυιῶν δὲ ἀντὶ πολέμων εἰρήνην βαθεῖαν καὶ τῆς παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις πολιτείας κοινωνίαν·πλὴν τότε ἡ χρεία ἤπειξε τὸ τεῖχος ἀνανεώσασθαι τά τ' ἐρείπια ἀνοικοδομῆσαι, πύργους τε καὶ ἐπάλξεις ἐγεῖραι. τάχιστα οὖν φράξαντες τῷ τείχει τὴν πόλιν, τάς τε πύλας κλείσαντες, πανδημεὶ ἐπὶ τῶν τειχῶν νύκτωρ τε καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν ἱδρυμένοι τοῖς προσιοῦσιν ἀπεμάχοντο.
>
> There was a huge number of people living permanently there, not only citizens but also foreigners and merchants. At that time [when Maximinus invaded] the number multiplied significantly, as all the crowds from the country streamed into the place, having left behind their small towns and neighboring villages and entrusting themselves to the magnitude of the city and its defensive wall, although the wall was very old and had for the most part fallen into ruins. Under the Roman empire, the cities in Italy no longer needed walls or weaponry, enjoying complete peace instead of wars and partaking in Roman citizenship. But now necessity urged the Aquileians to renew their wall and rebuild the broken parts and erect towers and battlements. After very rapidly fencing in their city with a wall, they closed the gates, and, with the entire population standing on the walls all night and day, they fought back their attackers.

The Aquileians are assigned two competent consulars to be their generals, and these men show great forethought in supplying the city for a siege (Hdn. 8.2.5–6). When the Aquileians are tempted into believing Maximinus' false promises of friendship upon surrender, one of the consulars, Crispinus, dramatically runs along the parapets, urging them not to break faith with the Senate and the Roman people. This harks back to the rhetoric of an earlier age that, again, reminds us of Augustus' early actions at

21 Motta (2022) 193–194.

Aquileia: his "peace" was not simply an ideal moment in time that imprinted itself positively on the future, but one in which a well-meaning policy could have unintended consequences. Again, we have a contrast with Cassius Dio, whose Augustus (if not Octavian) is an idealized figure,[22] representing one of two high points, alongside Marcus, of the empire. While Herodian criticizes neither Marcus nor Augustus, it seems significant that their greatest narrative significance is not their success but their failure, and specifically their failure to understand the trajectory of history.

5 Conclusion

Herodian's limited references to the ancient past do not make it easy for his readers to see what he thought the "best part" of it was. The Aquileian episode suggests a nostalgia for the Republic, but this is tempered by the historian's admiration for Severus' civil warring as superior to that of the Republic. Marcus is clearly a benchmark, as Herodian praises him at the beginning of the work (1.2.1–4). But the almost singular emphasis on the emperor's *paideia* automatically limits our vision of Marcus' good works. It is also inevitably ironic considering the insufficiency of Marcus' reliance on *exempla* to ensure Commodus' good rule.

Again, Herodian does not claim utility as a reason to read his work; and yet, as we have mentioned, Roman readers were long accustomed to the presence in historiography of *exempla.* Herodian not only undervalues them but shows throughout his history that the past (and knowing about it) can be useless or even damaging, as with Caracalla. Both Herodian and Cassius Dio tell the story of decline, but in the latter we detect some exemplary figures: the Republican Romans unified against Hannibal; Augustus; and Marcus. By contrast, references to the Roman past are so vague it is often hard to tell what period is being referred to. Most of the remaining references to the Roman past are put in the mouths of various emperors, all of whom attempt to rouse their audiences with talk of the good old days. But when were those days? Severus' words seem to best reflect Herodian's idea that Marcus was the last of the good emperors (2.10.3). But when Pompeianus encourages Commodus to continue his German campaign by appealing to earlier Romans who became famous and gained renown by conquering barbarians and extending the boundaries of the empire (Hdn. 1.6.6), he could well be speaking of Julius Caesar. Niger's reference in Hdn. 2.8.2 to his soldiers to the "empire made famous by our ancestors from the earliest times" which he fears will lie in ruins, is also non-revealing. Caracalla's sense of history, on the other hand, goes all the way back to the founder of Rome, but for dubious reasons: he defends his murder of Geta to the Senate on the grounds that Romulus, Tiberius, Nero, Domitian, and even Marcus Aurelius himself had all committed fratricide (Hdn. 4.5.5–7). Macrinus' and Pupienus' view of history is notably class-

22 Reinhold and Swan (1990).

conscious, with Macrinus seeing Marcus and Pertinax as representatives of those born of common cloth who tried to restore to the Romans the rights they had previously had (Hdn. 5.1.8); Pupienus (who will soon die) calls the empire the common possession of the Roman people, whose fate is in the hands of the city of Rome (Hdn. 8.7.5). The final reference to the past, in Hdn. 8.8.2, exists in the collective thought-bubble of the praetorians, who murder Pupienus and elevate Gordian III: "The example of how Severus disarmed the murderers of Pertinax served as a reminder to them." (τό τε Σεβήρου ὑπόδειγμα, ὃς τοὺς Περτίνακα ἀποκτείναντας ἀπέζωσεν, εἰσῄει αὐτούς).

We are left, then, with an extremely narrow vision of the past. In the end, no matter how any of these men see Roman history and their place in it, those who come to power in this period are doomed to fail. Beyond that: Herodian's few references to Rome's Trojan origins imply that they are worthy of respect.[23] But Herodian is not embarking on the same project as Vergil. Ultimately, his references to the deep past do not really edify the reader. The Ancient Greeks may offer a superior literary canon, but their eternal defects make them unreliable allies, and the Romans who rely on them show their lack of historical understanding. Herodian's unexpected elevation of Ardashir as the most reliable knower of history in the work has a negative effect on our image of Severus Alexander, who is hampered by his lack of knowledge of Persian history and geography. Even the putative best of the Roman emperors, Marcus, fails to provide a positive historical model for Commodus. Caracalla uses his knowledge of the past for bad ends. Augustus sits ambiguously at the head of "the tradition", as both bringer of peace and damager of Italian warriorhood, and Herodian appears to tout Severus' decidedly unpeaceful civil war victories more vigorously as any other moment in Roman history. Herodian's attitude towards the past – and his doubts that knowledge of it can help make a better future – may be best summed up as one of knowing irony in the face of a total societal crisis and decline.

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23 Herodian said his generation was the first to see a statue of Pallas Athena since it had come from Troy (Hdn. 1.14.4 – 5). In Hdn. 5.6.3 – 4 we discover why: Herodian writes that the statue was revered by the Romans but kept hidden and never moved after coming from Troy, except for when the temple caught fire and it was moved by Elagabalus to the royal palace for marriage to his namesake god.

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