

# Herodian's Roman Empire: "An Alien Monarchy"?

## 1 Introduction

Recent decades have seen ever growing scholarly interest in and extensive literature on Herodian and his *History of the Roman Empire from the Death of Marcus Aurelius*<sup>1</sup> that has substantially advanced our understanding of many aspects of this previously underestimated work, mostly of its narrative specifics and literary technique, and the author's historiographical thought, as well as his characterization of individual rulers and attitudes towards the main political players and moving forces of history.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there are continuing debates on some important issues of more general nature, among which are the questions of how Herodian, as a Greek author of provincial origin, treated the Roman empire as a whole and the domination of the Romans, and what was his attitude to things Roman. These questions immediately concern not only the key problem of the historian's intentions in writing contemporary history, his political preferences and biases, but also the cultural politics of Herodian's text as a reflection of what it meant to be a Greek under Roman imperial rule, or, more broadly, the correlation between "Greekness" and "Romanness" in the person of a Greek intellectual who experienced imperial service, witnessed and described the times of "iron and rust," or the story of τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων βίοι ("the lives of tyrants and kings"), as he himself defines his subject in the very first lines of his *opus* (1.1.4).

My point of departure for considering these questions is one of the most provocative statements on Herodian's attitude to the Roman power, which was made by Harry Sidebottom in his seminal 1998 article on "Herodian's Historical Methods and Understanding of History". As Sidebottom claims, "Herodian does not easily fit into the modern orthodoxy that under the principate Greeks were reconciled to, or even identified with, Rome. Herodian does not identify with the Romans. For Herodian the Roman empire was an alien monarchy [...]"<sup>3</sup>. This means that his outlook on Rome was that of an

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1 To name only the most important works of the last ten years, one should refer to Kemezis (2014), Galimberti (2017), Andrews (2019), Chrysanthou (2022), Galimberti (2022a).

2 For general trends in the study of Herodian see Sidebottom (2007) 79–81; Galimberti (2022b).

3 Sidebottom (1998) 2824–2826. Cf. Sidebottom (2007) 81: "[Herodian's] frequent explanations of very obvious Roman things [...] should be seen as a collusive game offered by the text to its elite Greek readers; 'let us pretend we know nothing about the Roman empire'. Rome is 'defamiliarised' and presented as if it were an 'alien monarchy'".

unsympathetic Greek who lived under a foreign rule, represented the values and views of the Greek elite and judged each emperor on the basis of his παιδεία which is central to Herodianic text. Consequently, his contemporary history was a history of an alien monarchy and should be seen as a kind of Greek resistance to Roman power, that is “political literature” aimed at legitimating the Greeks’ position in relation to the Romans – “the foreigners who had enslaved the Greek”<sup>4</sup>.

A similar viewpoint, although in less peremptory form, is expressed in some other works. Thus, Denis Roques, who had studied the political vocabulary of Herodian, came to the conclusion that by refusing Latinate terminology and the technicality that it conveys, Herodian defends not only his own identity, but more generally – to the same extent as the universality of his narrative which tells the history of the Graeco-Roman *oikoumenē* – that of Hellenism, to illustrate the culture of which the latter is a bearer. The Greek historian was more interested in pinpointing enduring traces of the Hellenic political and cultural world under Roman rule and despite that rule, and was therefore at the beginning of a broad movement of protest which will find its completion in the 6th century in the “Roman” but Greek-speaking Empire of the East, because his reactionary attitude prefigures the new times of the growing divorce between culture and power, that is to say between Hellenism and Romanness.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, according to Graham Andrews, “Herodian presents an external view of Rome,” although he was free from the social biases which are common in the elite world of literature.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, most other scholars reject the assumption that Herodian as a Greek historian takes an anti-Roman point of view. For example, Martin Zimmermann argues that Herodian regarded himself and his audience as residents of the common polity: he did not view Rome’s empire as an “alien monarchy”, but rather constructed the Roman imperial state against the backdrop of Greek rhetorical traditions.<sup>7</sup> Lukas de Blois considers Herodian, like Cassius Dio, although less explicitly, to be an advocate of a strong monarchical government in a fixed hierarchical socio-political system. At the same time, he finds in Herodian’s work “a kind of double perception of the Roman imperial system,” and notes: “Harsh reality comes to light in passages on the fickleness of the Roman mob and in chapters on incompetent emperors, military tyranny, and military misbehavior, but in spite of that the influence of the *exemplum Marci* and of the organic model of an imperial polity that Herodian implicitly advocates is manifestly present”.<sup>8</sup> In Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen’s opinion, Herodian was not only Greek, but also Roman<sup>9</sup> in the sense of being a citizen of the Roman Empire, pursuing a career in

4 Sidebottom (1998) 2776, 2804, 2805.

5 Roques (1990) esp. 71.

6 Andrews (2019) 137.

7 Zimmermann (1999b) 142 n. 129; Zimmermann (1999c) 31–34.

8 De Blois (2003) 149–150.

9 Cf. Alföldy (1971b) 220, who highlighted that Herodian clearly felt personally involved in Roman state affairs and considered the Empire his native land (*seine Heimat*).

what he calls the "imperial and public service"; whatever the precise nature of his Greek roots was, he was an author who "takes the point of view attributed to the Romans and makes it his own".<sup>10</sup>

Also Adam Kemezis does not find in Herodian any accentuation of Hellenic identity and explains this by saying that the diverse urban and elite populations of the empire developed a "shared discursive space" within which Easterners and Westerners "could communicate meaningfully (in Latin or in Greek) about what it meant to be an inhabitant of the Roman *oikoumenē*."<sup>11</sup> He points out that "Herodian's text is, in its way, just as remarkably un-Greek as Dio's,"<sup>12</sup> and it does not reveal "anything that would promote a closer identification with Hellas, does not in itself constitute a claim of Hellenic identity," so that "the Roman-Greek cultural divide is not a defining factor in how Herodian portrays the empire."<sup>13</sup>

Most recently, Laura Mecella has suggested that even though Herodian's geographic and social origins remain unknown, the "provincial" perspective of his work is an established fact, but this does not mean that he expressed exclusively and specifically Greek attitudes: rather, Herodian was "the spokesman of the opinions and petitions of local notables (especially in the eastern part of the Empire), i.e., of the political and economic middle class, which constituted the mainstay of municipal life."<sup>14</sup> Finally, Agnès Arbo, having thoroughly studied Herodianic political vocabulary, goes further and comes to conclusion that "Herodian was not the Graeco-Oriental writer, far removed from the realities of a Roman power that mattered little to him, as he is often described; he was, indeed, inspired by an extremely traditional Roman political ideology. [...] Perhaps Herodian's ideas were even closer than is generally assumed to those of senators like Pliny and Cassius Dio, who defended an openly senatorial ideology."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Arbo has hypothesized – against the canonical representation of Herodian as having obscure origins – that our historian may have been a newly appointed senator.<sup>16</sup> Such a bold guess, were it right, would radically change the general assessment of historian's attitude to the Roman empire, but this conclusion, being based primarily on the similarities in views of Herodian and some Roman authors, does not seem fully convincing. Rather we have to speak about shared cluster of political concepts and ideas, which by the time of Herodian long ago were common for Greek and Roman elites.

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10 Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 224, 225. Thus, among other things, "he sometimes underscores his own *Romanitas* with a pedantic-didactic excursus on some aspect of Italian geography, customs or religion". This statement is directly opposite to that of Sidebottom cited above (n. 3).

11 Kemezis (2014) 28.

12 Kemezis (2014) 267.

13 Kemezis (2014) 269.

14 Mecella (2022) 280.

15 Arbo (2022) 125–126.

16 Molinier Arbo (2021) 216–219.

In any event, the image of Herodian, as follows from our brief overview of scholarship, is far from unambiguous, precisely in his authorial persona's attitudes to the Roman empire as a whole, with its Graeco-Roman duality. On the one hand, he appears to be a person alien to the empire of Romans, a latent Greek oppositionist criticizing Roman power and providing Greek vision of imperial realities (Sidebottom), or the spokesman for the views and agendas of local notables (Mecella). But, on the other hand, he is also a Roman, a loyal citizen of the world empire, who was pursuing a career in the "imperial and public service" (ἐν βασιλικαῖς ἢ δημοσίαις ὑπηρεσίαις) (1.2.4), or, at least, was a provincial eager to be a Roman (Bekker-Nielsen). His *History* does not in itself constitute a claim of Hellenic identity (Kemezis). Moreover, he is not a Graeco-Oriental writer, but a Roman Greek "inspired by an extremely traditional Roman political ideology" and, supposedly, a newly made Roman senator (Arbo).

Thus, there are great discrepancies, and even contradictions, in current scholarly assessments of Herodian's specific vision of the Roman empire, the nature and extent of his "Greekness" and "Romanness". Of course, this state of affairs is conditioned primarily by the fact that the evidence of his personality is provided only by his text itself,<sup>17</sup> and the scarcity of the historian's explicit observations and judgements does not permit satisfactory answers to many important questions (although his own opinions, perhaps, can be implied in the numerous fictitious speeches he inserts in the mouths of his characters, but there are no universally recognized criteria for distinguishing in these speeches the authorial voice from judgments corresponding to the situation and the nature of those persons to whom these speeches were attributed<sup>18</sup>). My contribution aims to evaluate the arguments in favor of or against the noted points of view and, by clarifying some nuances of Herodian's narrative, to accentuate the author's specific "Greek Romanness" (*une romanité grecque*, as Denis Roques defines it<sup>19</sup>) in his perception and representation of the Rome's empire – ἡ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχή. So, in the next sections, three pivotal points will be elucidated: firstly, Herodian's view of the Roman world as a kind of common fatherland and ecumenical empire in its spatial and ethnic dimensions; secondly, his "constitutional" vision of the Empire in its social and political constraints and driving contradictions; and thirdly, the historian's positive ideal of the imperial statehood.

17 Whittaker (1969) xxv–xxvi; Alföldy (1971b) 219–225.

18 Cf. Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 235: these speeches are "[...] consciously or unconsciously voicing the concerns and hopes of their author. They may thus provide some important clues to Herodian's view of the imperial office and of those who held it during his time."

19 Roques (1990).

## 2 The Empire as γῆ ἡμετέρα and an Ecumenical Entity

To unravel the general and personal attitude of Herodian to the Roman empire, first of all, it should be emphasized that in some of his remarks concerning imperial geographical and political realities he uses the first person, in fact identifying the Greeks (and himself) with the Romans and designating the Roman empire as "our country." This is the case in passage 1.14 where he itemizes the principal subject matters of his work:

εἰ γοῦν τις παραβάλοι πάντα τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ χρόνον, ἐξ οὗπερ ἡ Ῥωμαίων δυναστεία μετέπε-  
σεν ἐς μοναρχίαν, οὐκ ἂν εὑροί ἐν ἔτεσι περί που διακοσίοις μέχρι τῶν Μάρκου καιρῶν οὔτε βασι-  
λειῶν οὕτως ἐπαλλήλους διαδοχὰς οὔτε πολέμων ἐμφυλίων τε καὶ ξένων τύχας ποικίλας ἐθνῶν τε  
κινήσεις καὶ πόλεων ἀλώσεις τῶν τε ἐν τῇ ἡμεδαπῇ καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς βαρβάροις, γῆς τε σεισμούς καὶ  
ἀέρων φθορὰς τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων βίους παραδόξους πρότερον ἢ σπανίως ἢ μὴδ' ὅλως μνη-  
μονευθέντας.

A comparative survey of the period of about two hundred years from Augustus (the point at which the regime became a monarchy) to the age of Marcus would reveal no such similar succession of reigns, variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars, disturbances among the provincial populations, and destruction of cities in both Roman territory and many barbarian countries. There have never been such earthquakes and plagues, or tyrants and emperors with such unexpected careers, which were rarely if ever recorded before.<sup>20</sup>

The first part of the phrase "in both Roman territory and many barbarian countries" (ἐν τῇ ἡμεδαπῇ καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς βαρβάροις) should be more precisely translated as "in our country," since here ἡμεδαπῇ is an adjective synonymous with the first person possessive pronoun "our" (sc. γῆ – "country, empire, territory, land"). The context of the phrase undoubtedly implies the territory under the Roman rule, in opposition to barbarian lands (this opposition is one of constant motifs in Herodianic narrative), and this territory for Herodian is his own.<sup>21</sup> Besides, the word *ethnoi* in the expression ἐθνῶν τε κινήσεις seems to mean not only "the provincial populations," but barbarian tribes outside the Roman borders as well.

As another instance of such word usage we can consider the passage 2.11.8 where Herodian mentions the Alps, which he calls "a very high range of mountains, far bigger than any other **in our part of the world**" (μέγιστα ἐκεῖνα ὄρη, καὶ οἷα οὐκ ἄλλα ἐν τῇ **καθ' ἡμᾶς γῇ**). Whittaker saw in this phrasing the only indication Herodian gives that he is living in the East in his retirement,<sup>22</sup> although he omitted in his translation the word ἄλλα and overlooked that Herodian means that the Alps also belong to "our

<sup>20</sup> All translations from Herodian, unless otherwise specified, are by Whittaker (1969–1970) in the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hidber (2006) 107 who, contrary to Sidebottom (cited in note 133), puts that Herodian identified himself and his intended readers with residents of the Roman empire.

<sup>22</sup> Whittaker (1969) 220 n. 1.

part of the world.”<sup>23</sup> Sidebottom also presumes that the historian probably refers here not to the whole Roman empire, but to the Greek world, and the cities mentioned at 1.1.4 are “our”, that is Greek.<sup>24</sup> But Géza Alföldy seems nevertheless to be closer to the truth in interpreting this expression as an indication of the Roman empire as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Given Herodian’s contradistinction between the imperial and barbarian territories at 1.1.4, the wording καθ’ ἡμᾶς γῆ may have implied the common Graeco-Roman world. Similarly, at 3.8.9, in his note on spectacles staged by Septimius Severus in Rome, Herodian writes about hundreds of wild animals collected “from all over the world, from the Roman empire and from foreign countries” in Whittaker’s translation, or “from all parts of the empire and from foreign lands as well”, as Edward Echols translated.<sup>26</sup> But the Greek text literally runs: ἀπὸ πάσης γῆς ἡμετέρας τε καὶ βαρβάρου – “from all our land and from barbarian territory.” What is significant here is that in both translations Herodian’s γῆ ἡμετέρα is identified with the empire, and this is a correct interpretation that means that the Greek historian saw the Roman imperial polity at least as a territorial entity to which he himself belonged too,<sup>27</sup> and it was the world opposed to that of barbarians. Here, as in the above cited passages, we again see the clear distinction between two parts of the global world: γῆ ἡμετέρα, “our land” (= empire), and γῆ βάρβαρος, “barbarian land.” The former belongs not only to the Romans (residents of the capital, Italians, or Roman citizens in the provinces), but also to the Greeks whom Herodian through his narrative clearly distinguishes from the Romans. However, it is noticeable that both peoples are not infrequently mentioned alongside each other, as an inseparable pair, sometimes in direct opposition to other ethnic groups, first and foremost the barbarians, but the Eastern peoples too. To give only a few examples, one can cite Herodian’s account of Elagabalus, where the historian points out that the Syrians in Emesa had “no actual man-made statue of the god, the sort Greeks and Romans put up [...]” (5.3.5). And in another passage he observes that Heliogabalus loathed any Roman or Greek dress (Ῥωμαϊκὴν δὲ ἢ Ἑλληνικὴν πᾶσαν ἐσθῆτα ἐμυσάττετο), preferring “something between the sacred garb of the Phoenicians and the luxurious apparel of the Medes” (5.5.4).

More importantly, in the characterization of Marcus Aurelius Herodian highlights that “in his love of ancient literature [he] was second to none, whether Greek or Roman” – λόγων τε ἀρχαιότητος ἦν ἐραστής, ὡς μηδενὸς μήτε Ῥωμαίων μήτε Ἑλλήνων ἀπολείπεσθαι (1.2.3). He also notes that Mamaea gave Severus Alexander “both a Latin and a Greek education” (παιδεῖαν τε τὴν Ἑλλήνων καὶ Ῥωμαίων ἐπαίδευεν). Given the

23 I am grateful to Adam Kemezis for pointing out this omission of Whittaker’s and the possible implication of the Greek text.

24 Sidebottom (1998) 2824 n. 229.

25 Alföldy (1971b) 220 n. 62.

26 Echols (1961). Cf. Cassola (2017): “catturate in tutto l’impero e fra i barbari”.

27 Cf. Herodian “hat nicht die römische und griechische Welt voneinander getrennt [...] Herodian hielt das ganze römischen Reich für seine Heimat” (Alföldy [1971b] 220 and n. 62 with reference to Palm [1959] 83).

undeniable centrality of *paideia* in Herodian's treatment of the imperial throne-holders and pretenders,<sup>28</sup> it is reasonable to agree with Zimmermann's conclusion that for our historian *paideia* ideally was a combination of Roman and Greek traditions.<sup>29</sup> This dual cultural unity can be seen as a recognition of the fundamental political unity of the empire.<sup>30</sup>

No less important and demonstrative is that Herodian, as Agnès Arbo argues, may have inserted in his narrative the excursus on the origins of the cult of Cybele in Rome (Hdn. 1.11), not so much to satisfy the curiosity of his Greek readers (διὰ τὴν παρ' Ἑλλήνων τισὶν ἀγνωσίαν, as he announces in 1.11.1). But this story allows to show a great affinity between Hellenes – or, more generally, Greek-speaking easterners – and Romans, to affirm, beyond cultural differences, the unity of the Graeco-Roman world, reminding Romans that the distant roots of their greatness lay in Asia. Thus the etiological myth about the cult of the Great Mother in Rome reveals the position of Herodian in relation to the Romans' civilization and their Empire: far from alienation from one and subordination to the other, he saw the fates of the Greeks and Romans as closely connected in a single world. Therefore, the stability of the Empire was of primary importance to him and determined his perception of imperial power and rulers.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Herodian's attachment to the Empire explains his interest in the emperors, whether they are young *porphyrogenitoi*, objects of first admiration and then ridicule, and his desire to see in power only those good *principes* who deserve their subjects' real admiration, that serves as the best proof of their merits as rulers.<sup>32</sup> All this by no means fits in with the alleged explicit or implicit anti-Roman position of Herodian.

Meanwhile, Herodian is quite critical of his Greek compatriots and highlights the implacable jealousy between Hellenic cities, their mutual hatred and rivalry, which, in a frequently cited passage at 3.2.7–8, are treated as their innate characteristics and the main cause of their enslavement by the Romans:

ὥς 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 ἀπεχθεῖα τινὶ ἢ εὐνοία ὥς ζήλῳ καὶ ἐριδι τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλας φθορᾷ τε καὶ καθαιρέσει τῶν ὁμοφύλων. ἀρχαῖον τοῦτο πάθος Ἑλλήνων, οὗ πρὸς ἀλλήλους στασιάζοντες αἰεὶ καὶ τοὺς ὑπερέχειν δοκοῦντας καθαιρεῖν θέλοντες ἐτρέχωνσαν 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 μετήλθεν ἐς τὰς καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀκμαζούσας πόλεις.

28 The central importance of Greek *paideia* as the ideological underpinning of Herodian's *History* is universally recognized in scholarship. See Zimmermann (1999a) 17–41; Sidebottom (1998) 2803–2812; 2825–2826; Kuhn-Chen (2002) 273–277. For the role of *paideia* in Herodian, see in particular Roberto (2017) and (2022).

29 Zimmermann (1999c) 34.

30 Cf. Marasco (1998) 2874.

31 Arbo (2017) 212, 214.

32 Arbo (2017) 216.



When news of Severus' victory spread, its immediate effect was to cause an outbreak of civil strife and factional politics in the cities of all the eastern provinces, not really because of partisanship for or against one of the warring emperors so much as jealous inter-city rivalry and because of the slaughter and destruction of their compatriots. This continual inter-city struggle and the desire to ruin a rival who seems to have grown too powerful is a long-standing weakness of the Greeks and sapped the strength of Greece. But as their organizations grew feebler and were mutually destructive, they fell easy victims to Macedonian domination and Roman enslavement. This same disease of jealous envy has been transmitted to the cities that have prospered right up to the present day.

It is of principal importance here that the “Roman enslavement” (Ρωμαίοις δοῦλα γεγένηται) obviously refers to the past,<sup>33</sup> on the same level as the reference to Macedonian domination, while the prosperity of Greek cities belongs to the times of the author (καθ' ἡμᾶς), even if the Greeks continue to compete jealously with each other. Of course, as Sidebottom asserts, “it cannot be said that Herodian's text was particularly in favor of the foreigners who had enslaved the Greek”,<sup>34</sup> but the text equally and foremost implies the idea that, in spite of the innate and irreducible vice of the Greeks, it is Roman rule that ensures their well-being within the imperial order. It is worth noticing that this mutual envy and inter-city rivalry of the Greeks,<sup>35</sup> as well as the peacekeeping role of Rome, had been completely recognized both by Greek intellectuals and by Roman authority long before Herodian's times. Indications in this regard are the considerations in one of Dio Chrysostom's “Nicomedian” orations, where the speaker coins the expression “Greek failings” (Ελληνικά ἀμαρτήματα) in the sense of a fault or inability of Greeks to avoid mutual dissensions (D. Chr. 38.37–38). The destructiveness of rivalry and mutual enmity among the Greeks was also the subject of Plutarch's treatises where he underscored the beneficence of Roman rule, which ensured internal and external peace, granting the Hellenes as great a share of liberty as their Roman masters admitted (*Praec. ger. reip.* 32 = *Mor.* 824C; cf. *De Pyth. or.* 15 = *Mor.* 401C). The subjection of Greeks either to external power or to each other is mentioned in emperor Nero's speech on the occasion of his so called “liberation of Greece” (*SIG*<sup>3</sup> 814 = *ILS* 879, v. 15). Thus, in stating this malady (τὸ δὲ πάθος τοῦτο τοῦ ζήλου καὶ φθόνου) inherent in the Greeks, Herodian hardly intended to reproach the Romans in any way; rather, he, like Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom, well understood the inevitability and necessity of imperial governance over so culturally different a world as the Roman empire was.

Some judgements and statements of Herodian, perhaps, give reason to consider him as an Eastern Greek patriot,<sup>36</sup> but this patriotism, as Bettie Forte noted, did not make him blind to the faults of the Greeks, and his loyalty to Rome did not make

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Zimmermann (1999c) 33.

<sup>34</sup> Sidebottom (1998) 2825.

<sup>35</sup> On this topic in general see Heller (2006). For a collation of Dio's and Herodian's attitudes see Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 232–233, and the important suggestions in Luke Pitcher's contribution in this volume, especially pp. 291–294 with a comparative analysis of Herodian's and Dio's views.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, Herodian is impressed by the size, wealth and festivals of Antioch (2.7.9), as well as the bravery of its youth in battle (3.4.1).



him less an eastern Greek.<sup>37</sup> By and large, it is understandable that, based only on the incidental remarks of the author, it is impossible to speak with certainty about any kind of eastern Greek cultural identity in Herodian. Rather, Agnès Bérenger is absolutely right in claiming that the eastern provinces are not particularly valued by Herodian, even though he is said to have originated from this part of the empire and destined his work for the Greek aristocracy.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere in his work does he give any hint that the Romans as a whole are malign, injurious or inimical to their Greek subjects. However, Herodian writes with apparent condemnation of the fickleness and vices of the urban mob of Rome (*plebs urbana*), which not unfrequently took active part in political disturbances and other events as a significant political force, along with the soldiers who frequently played a crucial role in emperor-making,<sup>39</sup> but these troops are mostly depicted as (semi-)barbarians (see below), while the urban crowd of Rome is portrayed in a negative way, as ὄχλος, not as δῆμος.<sup>40</sup> Given all this evidence, it is hardly possible to recognize him as an unambiguously pro-Greek or pro-Roman author.

It is important, further, to pay attention to Herodian's view of the Roman empire as a specific imperial space embracing the whole *oikoumenē*. As recent scholarship has demonstrated,<sup>41</sup> Herodian was fully aware of the complicated character of Roman imperial space and constructed his narrative in such a way as to present this world space as a stage on which the events that were the main subject of his history unfolded – "succession of reigns, variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars, disturbances among the provincial populations, and destruction of cities in both Roman territory and many barbarian countries" (1.1.4). These thoughtful studies of the spatial aspects of the Herodianic narrative technique and worldview allow me to highlight just the salient points, without going into detail.

In Herodian's eyes, the Empire as a whole is a very complicated space with considerable ethnic diversity. He essentially identifies the empire with the *oikoumenē*, which, according to common tradition, has, or must have, the Ocean as its boundaries (1.5.6; 1.6.6).<sup>42</sup> This world empire arose back in the days of the Republic, when "the Italians [...] gained control of lands and seas in wars against Greeks and barbarians. There was no corner of the earth or region in the world where the Romans did not extend

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<sup>37</sup> Forte (1972) 457.

<sup>38</sup> Bérenger (2022) 237.

<sup>39</sup> Motta (2022) 174. For a more nuanced picture and the interest of Herodian in the political role of the plebs in Rome see Roques (1990) 49–50; Zimmermann (1999b); Mecella (2017) 189–191; Motta (2017) and especially (2022).

<sup>40</sup> Motta (2022) 191.

<sup>41</sup> See Pitcher (2012); Markov (2018); Molinier Arbo (2018); Bérenger (2022); Mecella (2017) and (2022); Ruiz del Árbol Moro (2022).

<sup>42</sup> For this topos see, e.g., Verg. *A.* 1.286; 7.100–101; D. H. *Ant. Rom.* 1.3.3; Liv. 36.17.14–15; Plu. *Pomp.* 38.2; App. *Praef.* 9; Aristid. *Or.* 26.10; 28; *Anth. Lat.* 424. At the same time, Herodian acknowledges that there is a powerful Parthian kingdom in the East and that without subjecting it or uniting it with the Roman empire Rome's domination would not embrace the whole *oikoumenē* (4.10.1).

their sway.”<sup>43</sup> With the establishment of the Principate, this *oikoumenē*, as the historian points out, was providently transformed by Augustus, so that the Italians were stripped of arms and enjoined to peace, while in the frontier provinces, there was organized “a defensive system of camps for the empire, and in which were stationed mercenary troops on fixed rates of pay to act as a barricade for the Roman empire.” Augustus also fortified the empire by natural and artificial obstacles: “rivers and trenches and mountains and deserted areas which were difficult to traverse”.<sup>44</sup> Although the whole of this passage serves as an antithesis to the warlike character of the Pannonians, marked in a chapter above (2.9.11),<sup>45</sup> its rhetoric directly echoes the well-known claims of Aelius Aristides’ *Roman Oration* (Or. 26.28; 61; 75; 78; 80–84 Keil) and also can be understood as “unequivocal legitimization of Rome’s supremacy,” as Aldo Schiavone defined Aristides’ famous speech.<sup>46</sup>

There is the absolute centrality of Rome in Herodian’s image of the Empire,<sup>47</sup> and the city of the Romans is inseparable from the *oikoumenē* subjected to Rome: “Rome itself and nearly the whole of the Roman empire”<sup>48</sup> (ἡ τε Ῥωμαίων πόλις καὶ ὁσχεδὸν πᾶσα ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίους οἰκουμένη) [...] lived in security and the semblance of freedom for that single year while Macrinus was emperor”, as the historian claims in Book 5 (5.2.2). Severus in one of his speeches calls Rome “the very seat of the Empire” (ἐνθα ἡ βασιλείος ἔστιν ἑστία, 2.10.9). At the same time, Rome is a ἡ κοινὴ πατρίς – “common fatherland”, at least for those who serve the Empire in the provinces (7.7.5).<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, “Rome is where the emperor is” (ἐκεῖ τε ἡ Ῥώμη, ὅπου ποτ’ ἂν ὁ βασιλεὺς ᾖ), as Claudius Pompeianus enunciates to Commodus (1.6.5), but this sentence rather

43 Hdn. 2.11.4: [...] Ἰταλιῶται [...] καὶ γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν ἐκτίσαντο, Ἑλλήσι πολέμησαντες καὶ βαρβάροις οὐδέ τι ἦν γῆς μέρος ἢ κλίμα οὐρανοῦ ὅπου μὴ Ῥωμαῖοι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐξέτειναν.

44 Hdn. 2.11.5: ἐξ οὗ δὲ ἐς τὸν Σεβαστὸν περιῆλθεν ἡ μοναρχία, Ἰταλιώτας μὲν πόνων ἀπέπαυσε καὶ τῶν ὅπλων ἐγύμνωσε, φρουρία δὲ καὶ στρατόπεδα τῆς ἀρχῆς προυβάλετο, μισθοφόρους ἐπὶ ῥητοῖς σιτηρεσί-οις στρατιώτας καταστησάμενος ἀντὶ τείχους τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς ποταμῶν τε μεγέθεσι καὶ τάφων ἢ ὁρῶν προβλήμασιν ἐρήμῳ τε γῇ καὶ ὁ δυσβάτῳ φράζας τὴν ἀρχὴν ὠχυρώσατο.

45 Whittaker (1969) 216 n. 1.

46 Schiavone (2000) 15.

47 See Mecella (2017) 188–192 (with bibliography) and Mecella (2022) 281. This centrality of Rome, according to Buongiorno (2017), is connected with the role of the Senate and the people of Rome for the legal attainment of imperial power.

48 Here Whittaker’s translation is imprecise identifying “empire” and οἰκουμένη, so the expression κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν οἰκουμένην would be better interpreted as “almost all the world under the Romans.” Remarkably, a similar wording is used in the Greek version of Caracalla’s edict of 212 AD (*Constitutio Antoniniana*) extending the Roman citizenship: in *P. Giss.* 40, v. 8, we find an expression which is usually read [κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν] οἰκουμένην.

49 This phrasing (strikingly reminiscent of Latin *communis patria* in the well-known phrase of Modestinus’ “Roma communis nostra patria est” in *Dig.* 50.1.33) occurs in the letters the Senate sent to provincial governors after Pupienus and Balbinus had become emperors, in order “to urge governors to join sides with those who were planning for their common state and its senate.” Seemingly, the word “state” in Whittaker’s translation should be replaced by the word “fatherland” or “homeland,” which more accurately conveys the Greek term πατρίς and its Latin equivalent *patria*.

relates to idealized times of Marcus Aurelius, as it is evident from the subsequent account on failings of such emperors as Niger, Albinus, Macrinus or Maximinus.

The Empire depicted by Herodian is a commonwealth of nations, as Lukas de Blois puts it.<sup>50</sup> Its provinces are populated by many nations, tribes and city populations, such as Greeks, Syrians, Libyans, Alexandrians, Pannonians, Carthaginians, dwellers of Berytus and Tyre, most of which are given specific ethnic characteristics based on commonplaces frequent in the literature of the period, as for example, passionate, fickle Egyptians (1.17.6), Syrians, witty, prone to unrest, fond of entertainments (2.7.9; 2.10.7), strong, brave but slow-witted Illyrians (2.9.11), and Greeks who are inclined to quarrel with one another (3.2.8).<sup>51</sup> This fascination is reminiscent of Herodotus.<sup>52</sup> However, except for this last characterization and above mentioned references to Greek *paideia* and the necessity to explain some Roman customs to Greek readers, Hellenes as such are quite rarely present on the pages of Herodian's *History* as active participants in events, in contrast to barbarians who often appear as enemies or essential opposite to true Greeks and Romans and, in turn, are divided into external (Britons, Germans, as well as undefined "eastern barbarian tribes", οἱ ὑπὸ τὴν ἀνατολὴν βάρβαροι, i.e. Parthians and later Persians, in 2.1.5; cf. 3.4.7–9; 4.10.1, etc.) and internal (Mauretanians, Thracians,<sup>53</sup> Illyrians, Pannonians), to whom Herodian repeatedly refers as barbarians, notwithstanding that they were part of the auxiliary troops and, by his times, had long ago become Roman citizens, like all free inhabitants of the Empire since the Antonine constitution.<sup>54</sup> Noticeably, in his eyes, the mass of soldiers appear to be barbarians.<sup>55</sup> So, it is true that Herodian "was completely alienated from Rome's soldiers, for they were barbarian mercenaries", as Sidebottom stressed.<sup>56</sup> But this bias does not imply that this alienation did expand on the Roman imperial system as a whole. Negative stereotypes of "barbarians" in arms were a characteristic for the Roman elite's vision of the imperial army's rank and file long before Herodian wrote his *History*, as for instance in Tacitus' depiction of Vitellian German legionaries at the streets of Rome (*Hist.* 2.88; cf. also 1.69, 2.20, 2.93, 2.99, 3.71–72), or in Cassius Dio's characterization of Pannonian soldiers who entered the City with Septimius Severus (74[73].2.6; cf. *HA Did. Iul.* 6.5: *barbaros milites*).<sup>57</sup>

However, in the narration of principal internal political events, the ethnic differences mostly fade into the background, because major actors such as the army and,

<sup>50</sup> De Blois (1998) 3420.

<sup>51</sup> See Pitcher (2018) 237–238; for more details: Markov (2018) 41–43 (and his contribution in this volume); Sánchez Sánchez (2020); Bérenger (2022).

<sup>52</sup> Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 227.

<sup>53</sup> Some Thracian tribes are called semi-barbarous – Maximinus Thrax was from one of them: τὸ μὲν γένος τῶν ἐνδοτάτω Θρακῶν καὶ μιξοβαρβάρων (6.8.1).

<sup>54</sup> Bérenger (2022) 235.

<sup>55</sup> Marasco (1998) 2877–2880.

<sup>56</sup> Sidebottom (1998) 2824. Cf. especially Herodian's remark that no power could equal the Ἰλλυρικὴ δύναμις (2.10.8). For Herodian's treatment of Illyrians see Mecella (2019).

<sup>57</sup> See Makhelaiuk (2002); Phang (2008) 79–80.

sometimes, the civilian population and the Senate are moved into the forefront. It is a game of opposition between civilians and soldiers that, as Béranger rightly points out, the Roman world of Herodian is based on.<sup>58</sup> Several times the historian explicitly connects soldiers with *tyrannis* (2.5.1; 2.6.2; 4.13.7; 7.1.3).<sup>59</sup> According to him, the soldiers were a dangerous, greedy group, which was difficult to keep under control and more readily supported a tyrant who gave them everything they wanted than a good but strict emperor (2.5–6; 5.2.3; 6.7–8; 7.1; 7.3; 8.8.1 ff.). Herodian regarded the greed and lack of discipline of the soldiers as the root of much evil, and in his opinion these vices were growing stronger (2.6.14).<sup>60</sup> This perversity of the military is engendered by the connivance of individual emperors, such as Septimius Severus, who, in Herodian's obviously exaggerated assertion, "was certainly the first to undermine the tough austerity of their diet, their obedience in face of hardship and their disciplined respect for commanders, by teaching the men to be greedy for riches and seducing them into a life of luxury" (3.8.5).

In any event, it is convincingly noted that Herodian's narrative is built around three monolithic social groups: the army, the Roman people and the Senate, who act as independent, homogenous entities, and that tripartite structure is closely linked to imperial characterization.<sup>61</sup>

As for the Empire in general terms, in its spatial and ethnic dimensions, one more point worth stressing – that Roman power is confronting the new enemy in the East, the Sassanid Persian empire, wars against which were, in Herodian's view, no longer struggles to secure the frontiers but to save the very existence of the Empire.<sup>62</sup> In this respect, the Roman empire of his times substantially differs from that of the Augustan age when the strong defense system had been built to protect imperial frontiers and Italy itself (2.11.5, cited above).<sup>63</sup>

### 3 The "Constitutional" Parameters of the Empire

For Herodian, the emperors were the backbone of the state and the polity,<sup>64</sup> and the very nature of the Roman empire with its one-man rule established by Augustus, in general could only be either tyranny, or kingship which could take the form of, or

<sup>58</sup> Béranger (2022) 222.

<sup>59</sup> De Blois (2018) 178.

<sup>60</sup> De Blois (1998) 3421.

<sup>61</sup> See Andrews (2019) 194.

<sup>62</sup> Hdn. 4.14.6: οὐ γὰρ περὶ ὄρων γῆς οὐδὲ ρείθρων ποταμῶν ἡ φιλονεικία, περὶ τοῦ παντὸς δέῃ... ("This is not a territorial dispute about frontiers and rivers, but about everything in general [...]"). See Alföldy (1974) 102–103.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Hdn. 8.2.4: "[...] after the extension of the Roman empire, the cities of Italy did not need walls or weapons anymore, and in place of war enjoyed complete peace and a share of Roman citizenship."

<sup>64</sup> De Blois (1998) 3419.

be combined with, aristocracy. Accordingly, Roman monarchy, from Herodian's point of view, changed from *aristokratia* and *basileia* (kingship) to *tyrannis* / *despoteia*. In point of fact, this is proclaimed at the very beginning of his Book 1 in the list of the subject-matter of the whole work: "incredible lives of tyrants and kings" – τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων βίους παραδόξους (1.1.4). And it is this opposition between *basileia* / *aristokratia* and *tyrannis* that serves as one of the principal leitmotifs of Herodian's history. By the same token, he repeatedly contrasts the enlightened behavior of good rulers based on *paideia* and experience to the tyrannical *habitus* and misbehavior of vicious or unexperienced young holders of the throne. However, in some cases, as Agnès Arbo notes, the term δεσποτεία ("absolute power", "despotism") "becomes a synonym of the unconditional and absolute hegemony of the Roman people, placed above the βασιλεύς ('king') himself, being the only master of a βασιλεία ('kingship') that it can bestow or take back at its own initiative".<sup>65</sup>

Most scholars agree that the key concept that characterizes the political ideal of Herodian is "aristocracy".<sup>66</sup> But there are some differences and nuances in the understanding of this category in current scholarship. Thus, Bekker-Nielsen supposes that, although Herodian never clearly defines *aristokratia*, in his eyes, it is not the co-rule of the Senate and *princeps*, as in Pliny the Younger, but rather the vision of the good *basileus* advised by his wise and loyal *philoi*, as described by Dio Chrysostom.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, Arbo considers Herodian's ideas to be even closer than is generally assumed to those of senators like Pliny or Cassius Dio,<sup>68</sup> so that the *aristokratia* he aspired to was rather "a kind of participatory kingship, a joint rule by the Senate and the prince(s) – what he saw as the most accomplished form of βασιλεία ('kingship')," and this aristocracy is compatible with "kingship", when the emperor is also ἀρίστος / *optimus* himself, like Marcus Aurelius. What is more, in Herodian's view, a good βασιλεύς is the equivalent of *optimus princeps*.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, the historian, using the language borrowed from Greek political thought on kingship, from Plato to the Second Sophistic, advocated "a return to a more balanced principate, more respectful of traditional state institutions", and such understanding of an aristocracy is certainly "an unlikely stance from an author that is now routinely described as hostile to senatorial aristocracy".<sup>70</sup>

Pointedly, Herodian's vision of aristocracy mostly finds its expression not in his own explicit judgment, but in the speeches he puts into mouths of pretenders and emperors. For example, Pertinax's speech to the senators after his acclamation (2.3.10) contrasts *aristokratia* with tyranny:

<sup>65</sup> Arbo (2022) 121.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., de Blois (1998) 3417, 3423; Kuhn-Chen (2002) 303–305; Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 244–245; and most recently Gangloff (2019) 321–322; Arbo (2022) 128–129.

<sup>67</sup> Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 245; cf. Alföldy (1971a) 435–436; Kuhn-Chen (2002) 303–304.

<sup>68</sup> Arbo (2022) 126, with reference to Gangloff (2019) 174–208, 342–396.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Marasco (1998) 2857.

<sup>70</sup> Arbo (2022) 128–129.

[...] χρῆ συναίρεσθαι καὶ κοινὴν τῆς ἀρχῆς τὴν διοίκησιν νομίζοντας, ἀριστοκρατίαν τε ἀλλ' οὐ τυραννίδα ὑπομενούντας αὐτοὺς τε ἀγαθὰς ἔχειν ἐλπίδας καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ἀρχομένοις ταῦτα ὑπισχνέσθαι.

But now you must join me in the administration of the empire under an aristocracy and not allow a tyranny to exist. You must be optimistic and hold out the same hope to all the subject people of the empire.

A similar intention is proclaimed by Septimius Severus in his speech to the Senate after entering Rome when he announces that “his rule would also mark the beginning of an aristocracy (τὴν ἀρχὴν παρέξειν καὶ εἴσοδον ἀριστοκρατίας)”. And further Severus claims that following Marcus’ and Pertinax’s ideas of rule will be a model for him: καὶ πάντα πράξειν ἐς ξῆλον τῆς Μάρκου ἀρχῆς, ἔξιν δὲ τοῦ Περτίνακος οὐ μόνον τοῦ νομα ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν γνώμην (“making the reign of Marcus a model for all his actions and adopting both the name and outlook of Pertinax”) (2.14.3). A letter sent to the Senate by Macrinus also provides a case in point. He contrasts aristocracy with kingship (βασιλεία): “As long as I hold power, everyone shall live free from fear and bloodshed, and this shall be a rule of the aristocracy rather than a **tyranny**” (5.14).<sup>71</sup> Whittaker in his translation seemingly goes too far when interpreting βασιλεία as “tyranny,” since such an understanding of the term loses sight of a distinctively Roman idea of *res publica* (or *principatus*) as opposed to *regnum*, that is the contraposition of aristocracy and kingship.<sup>72</sup> Macrinus also assures the senators that he will do nothing without their approval and will make them his partners and advisers in the administration of the state, and promises to restore their security, freedom and rights, as Marcus and Pertinax had tried to assure them (5.1.8).

Such an exemplary aristocracy, according to Herodian, was most closely embodied not only in the rule of Marcus Aurelius,<sup>73</sup> but also in the reign of young Severus Alexander,<sup>74</sup> who ruled together with a council of sixteen respectable and experienced senators whose approval was required for every action. Our historian does not hesitate to stress that this institution found recognition from three main political actors: “this form of the principate, which changed from a high-handed tyranny to an aristocratic type of government, was approved by the people and the soldiers as well as the senate” (6.1.2).<sup>75</sup> So, in Herodian’s view, the ideal emperor, being reliant on the support of skill-

71 ἐμοῦ δὲ κρατοῦντος ἐν ἀδείᾳ τε καὶ ἀναιμωτῇ πάντες βιώσονται, ἀριστοκρατία τε μᾶλλον ἢ βασιλεία νομισθήσεται.

72 Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 240.

73 Alföldy (1971a) 435.

74 On Herodian’s view of Alexander see Roberto (2017).

75 Ἦρεσκέ τε τῷ δήμῳ καὶ τοῖς στρατοπέδοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῇ συγκλήτῳ βουλῇ, τὸ σχῆμα τῆς βασιλείας ἐκ τυραννίδος ἐφυβρίστου εἰς ἀριστοκρατίας τύπον μεταχθείσης. On this passage see Roques (1990) 44–45.

ful advisers, has to be successful in gaining the consent (εὐνοία) of all his subjects: Senate, people, soldiers.<sup>76</sup>

Even more, within such relationships, the *princeps* is thought to be "not so much an emperor (βασιλεύς) as a mild and pious ruler and father" (σεμνὸν καὶ ἥπιον ἄρχοντα καὶ πατέρα) (2.2.1), or, in other words, "benevolent father and revered protector" – πατέρα τε ἥπιον καὶ χρηστὸν προστάτην (2.6.2).<sup>77</sup> Thus, it is fair to say that Herodian clearly distinguishes such a supreme *archon*, a kind of prince-magistrate, from the βασιλεύς and sees the embodiment of this ideal ruler in Marcus and Pertinax.<sup>78</sup> Such statements confirm that Herodian in general follows a classical model of ruler, which is ultimately rooted in the Hellenistic and Roman kingship literature.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, he could by no means be an opponent, overt or covert, of the Roman monarchy as such, the more so as he had been an eyewitness of the reign of emperors who embodied this ideal or were close to it. The image of the prince-magistrate, portrayed by Herodian, is a far cry from Hellenistic kingship, but eminently compatible with traditional meritocratic principles of the *res publica*,<sup>80</sup> which could revive and function, though ephemerally, even in the most extreme situations, such as the uprising against Maximinus Thrax, when the elder Gordian was proclaimed the emperor in Carthage "as the crowning achievement of his eventful career" (ὥσπερ κορυφαῖον τέλος τῶν προγενομένων πράξεων) and on the basis that "the senate and people of Rome would welcome a man who was nobly born and had held many commands in a sort of regular promotion" (7.5.2). The same considerations underlie the choice of Pupienus and Balbinus as co-emperors whose rule may be treated as the most accomplished form of *aristokratia*, since they were the eminent members of the Senate who had made a successful career and were going to rule collegially under the supervision of the *curia*. That being said, one cannot but agree with the general conclusions of Arbo: "the picture of the emperor Herodian sketches is not that of an absolute monarch through birthright or army support – instead he describes him as the City's first magistrate, having reached the highest level of the state following a long civilian and military career, ultimately embodying the προστάτης / *princeps*."<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that for Herodian the imperial state remains a genuine monarchy, as demonstrated by his use of accustomed monarchical language, inherited from Hellenic thought on king-

<sup>76</sup> Roberto (2022) 148. See also Davenport/Mallan (2019) who convincingly demonstrate that, for Herodian, the lack of a deep and broad consensus among these key constituencies leads to the fail of potential candidates for the imperial throne.

<sup>77</sup> For these passages as reflection of Herodian's ideals see Molinier Arbo (2021) and Arbo (2022) 122 n. 118.

<sup>78</sup> Arbo (2022) 122. Cf. Molinier Arbo (2021).

<sup>79</sup> Herodian's dependence on the Hellenic *peri basileias* tradition is universally recognized in scholarship. See Stein (1957) 76–90; Roques (1990) 42–46; Sidebottom (1998) 2776–2780; de Blois (1998) 3443; Zimmermann (1999c) 19–21; Kuhn-Chen (2002) 253–260; Bekker-Nielsen (2014) 233–245; Galimberti (2014) 33–45; Kemezis (2014) 229–234.

<sup>80</sup> Arbo (2022) 123.

<sup>81</sup> Arbo (2022) 122.



ship, in referring to the emperor's Senate seat as a βασιλῆος θρόνος ("royal throne") and designating his mother and his spouse as βασίλισσαι ("queens"), but in general his βασιλεία ("kingship") is not only absolute monarchy, it is also an ideal concerning qualities and behavior of a monarch.<sup>82</sup> It should be added that, within such vision of the supreme power, the emperors' inadequacy is the primary reason for the imminent crisis of the imperial system, in which the Senate, despite its institutional role, is marginalized and can do nothing in the long run to stem this tendency.<sup>83</sup> In Herodian's opinion, the Senate was not capable of ruling the state alone, precisely because the dominance of the Senate presupposes the assertion of private interests, the violation of the *concordia ordinum*.<sup>84</sup> Also, it merits notice that Herodian, in contrast to Cassius Dio, "evidently does not turn the social crisis of the time into a trauma of his own",<sup>85</sup> that may be explained by the social status of Herodian who most likely did not belong to the senatorial class and could perceive the process of its political emasculation and decline with more detachment, albeit this does not make him a "populist" of any sort.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, ideally, for Herodian the primary source of the supreme power in the Empire is the Roman people (ὁ Ῥωμαίων δῆμος), which in some cases includes not only lower classes, but also knights and senators, and represents all Romans without social differentiation,<sup>87</sup> as in the narrative of acclaiming Pertinax.<sup>88</sup> It is this people "into whose hands the gods have given the sovereignty over all things including the office of emperor" (ὥδ' ἔστιν δεσποτεῖαν τὴν πάντων ἐνεῖμαν θεοὶ καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν), as Pescennius Niger claims in his speech (2.8.4). And Herodian provides this theory of popular sovereignty elsewhere.<sup>89</sup> At 4.15.7, in the letter addressed to the Parthian King, he makes Macrinus assert that "the Romans, to whom the power belonged, had entrusted the principate to him [...]" (Ῥωμαίους δέ, ὧν ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρχή, ἐαυτῷ ἔτε) τὰ τῆς βασιλείας ἐγκειρικέναι). The newly proclaimed emperor Pupienus in his address to the army that has besieged Aquileia, uses similar expressions: "The empire is not the private property of a single man but by tradition the common possession of the Roman people. It is in the hands of the city of Rome that the fate of the principate is placed" (8.7.5).<sup>90</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Arbo (2022) 113, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Buongiorno (2022) 217–218.

<sup>84</sup> Marasco (1998) 2862.

<sup>85</sup> Madsen (2023) 185.

<sup>86</sup> Bekker-Nielsen reconstructs Herodian's social ideal as a petit-bourgeois one – a society "where able men, irrespective of their geographical or family background, can make a career for themselves [...] mind their business and do not let themselves be led astray by excessive ambition [...] that would naturally be attractive to new men from the provinces [...] but it is also a very Roman idea, echoing the advice of Horace, himself an equestrian: enjoy the quiet life and be content in your social position" (Bekker-Nielsen [2014] 235).

<sup>87</sup> Zimmermann (1999b) 133.

<sup>88</sup> Motta (2022) 182.

<sup>89</sup> Whittaker (1969) 191 n. 1. Cf. Arbo (2022) 121.

<sup>90</sup> Οὐ γὰρ ἑνὸς ἀνδρὸς ἴδιον κτῆμα ἡ ἀρχή, ἀλλὰ κοινὸν τοῦ Ῥωμαίων δήμου ἄνωθεν καὶ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ πόλει ἡ τῆς βασιλείας ἰδρυται τύχη.

Whittaker discerns here "republican sentiments about *consensus omnium* and *libertas*," which were "part of the theory of the principate" but "implied no limitation on the absolute power of the emperor". Thus, this rhetoric allows Herodian to highlight the contrast between this "republican" type of *princeps* and military tyranny.<sup>91</sup> Certainly, such sentences are no more than a tribute to tradition, "only lip service to a political ideal because [...] in Herodian's work the emperor is the central element of the state."<sup>92</sup> In any event, these passages suggest that Herodian was by no means alien to Roman political theories and considered the mechanisms of empire along the same lines as Roman authors like Pliny and Tacitus. In another place (7.7.5), he emphasizes that this power of the Romans, from ancient times on, was exercised over the provincials, who, in their turn, "had been friendly subjects from the time of their forefathers" ([...] Ῥωμαίοις, ὧν δημόσιον ἄνωθεν τὸ κράτος ἐστίν, αὐτὰ τε φίλα καὶ ὑπήκοα ἐκ προγόνων). Regarding this passage, it is important that the phrase is addressed by the Senate to the provinces, after the imperial acclamation of Gordianus, encouraging them to rebel against Maximinus, which the provincials do "unhesitatingly because they hated his tyranny" (7.7.6). Thus, on the one hand, Herodian's wording reveals the typically Roman conception of the popular sovereignty that remained vital in the principate; on the other hand, in his eyes, the Roman imperial power over subject peoples and cities was a very ancient (even primordial) and natural institution, accepted and approved by the subjects themselves who were essential in maintaining loyalty to the emperors.

It is also noteworthy that Herodian shows a strong sense of the empire's unity, so strong that in an age that was disturbed by numerous local rebellions, his history seems to record no trace of separatist ambitions or anti-Roman uprisings in the provinces.<sup>93</sup> This sense of the unity should be kept in mind when assessing the reasons for Herodian's silence on the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, which extended Roman citizenship to almost all free inhabitants throughout the empire. In Marasco's opinion, this silence reflects the insufficient importance of Roman citizenship by Herodian's time, but, above all, the feeling of the unity of the empire made the Constitution unimportant for Herodian, since it did not change the real relations between Rome and its subjects in the times of Caracalla, characterized by imperial absolutism, and did not provide a greater possibility of political influence for new citizens.<sup>94</sup> Besides, in his representation of Caracalla, Herodian focuses on portraying the imperator as a violent and bloody tyrant only interested in military affairs, and intentionally excludes all the civil measures of his reign.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, it is difficult to agree with Pierangelo Buongiorno who finds in Herodian's statement at 7.7.5 "the difficulty for an imperial functionary, active before the *constitutio Antoniniana*, to think according to new categories, of a

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<sup>91</sup> Whittaker (1969) 191 n. 1.

<sup>92</sup> De Blois (1998) 3423.

<sup>93</sup> Marasco (1998) 2870.

<sup>94</sup> Marasco (1998) 2874–2875.

<sup>95</sup> Galimberti (2016).

now ecumenical empire, and especially to justify why it was the *populus* in Rome to decide – albeit formally – the fate of the entire empire.”<sup>96</sup> Herodian noticeably fails to mention Roman citizens as a political body at all;<sup>97</sup> provincials are always “subjects,” ὑπήκοοι or ἀρχόμενοι,<sup>98</sup> in spite of the fact that the inhabitants of provinces had been romanized long before; and most of their territories, long ago included in the Roman empire, are still considered by him to be conquered lands.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the term Πωμυαίων δῆμος does not always imply the metropolitan *plebs* or the inhabitants of Rome; in some cases, as noted, it can mean the Roman people as a whole (2.8.4; cf. 2.2.2–5)<sup>100</sup>, including cases closely adhering to the traditional formulaic combination with the Senate, that is *SPQR* (e.g., 4.11.8; 5.1.1; 8.3.4; cf. 7.11.5).

So, it is perhaps not wrong to suppose that Herodian had a well-defined – and positive – political ideal: it lay in enlightened monarchy with a good ruler and a state that could be strong and beneficial when based on aristocracy. And this model of monarchy was not an utopia, but was embodied in the figure of Marcus Aurelius<sup>101</sup> and, to some extent, in such emperors as Pertinax and Severus Alexander (although the latter’s political failure in 235 AD might have confirmed Herodian’s deeply pessimistic view of an irreversible decline of the Roman empire<sup>102</sup>).

## 4 Conclusion

Assessments of Herodian’s attitudes to the Romans and their Empire, as we have noted, remain controversial in current scholarship. Recent works, however, incline to see in Herodian a cosmopolitan “Roman Greek” from the cadres of the imperial bureaucracy, and such a status, characterized with a mixture of Greekness and Romanness, fits well with his authorial persona and thought-world as sketched above. In many respects his view of the imperial space, ethnic and social structures are stereotypical. He constructs his Roman empire as political entity through traditionally Greek political concepts, which by his epoch had long since been adopted by the Romans. Nevertheless, one should stress that Herodian – unlike Cassius Dio – used such a category as *basileia* (kingship) for the principate in opposition to *tyrannis*, or *regnum* in Latin terms, and prefers *basileus* instead of *autocrator*. In his statements, there are no any anti-

<sup>96</sup> Buongiorno (2022) 214–215.

<sup>97</sup> Term *politai* is used only in 7.2.4 and 8.3.2 for the citizens of Aquileia; also the Aquileians are specially mentioned as those who owned Roman citizenship (8.2.4).

<sup>98</sup> Arbo (2022) 113–114.

<sup>99</sup> Béranger (2022) 237–238.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Zimmermann (1999b) 133.

<sup>101</sup> As Whittaker underlined, “Dominating the History is the absent figure of Marcus Aurelius” (Whittaker [1969] lxxii). For the crucial significance of the figure of Marcus in Herodian’s narrative and thought, see Widmer (1967) 16–27; Alföldy (1973); Zimmermann (1999b) 123–125; Kuhn-Chen (2002) 324; Hidber (2006) 188–195; Laporte (2015).

<sup>102</sup> Roberto (2022) 133.

Roman biases, nor any unequivocally and purely Greek-oriented stance towards the realities of Rome's world empire or any explicit feeling of Hellenic (cultural) superiority (even when he focuses on *paideia* as a determinant feature of a good ruler: in his eyes, the *paideia* could equally be Greek and Roman). Surely, Herodian's vision of the Roman empire was conditioned by the harsh realities of his age and his own historical experience as well, although he may be defined as a *reiner Stubengelehrter*,<sup>103</sup> and the term "Political philosophy" may be putting the ideals of Herodian on too high a plane, since there is nothing very profound about what is said".<sup>104</sup>

His "sense of crisis" (if it is correct to speak of a *Krisenbewusstsein* at all<sup>105</sup>) concerns not so much the dysfunctions of the imperial system as such, but mostly the vices of individual rulers with tyrannical proclivities or young inexperienced emperors, who are unable to obtain the loyalty and consent of all constituent parts of the state: Senate, Roman people (mostly *plebs urbana*) and the army;<sup>106</sup> so that frequent changes of power holders led to "eine Labilität der Macht," that was for Herodian the main symptom of the crisis.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, it was the self-seeking, undisciplined military and marginalized, powerless senate that made Herodian's view of the principate from Commodus to Severus Alexander negative and pessimistic.<sup>108</sup> However, this does not necessarily imply that the monarchy of those emperors was an alien one. One can admit that Herodian could have hopes for renewal of the empire under the government of an educated ruler who would be able to achieve stability and peace in the Roman world. In any event, it was not Herodian who branded the post-Marcus empire as "kingdom of iron and rust," but Cassius Dio who felt this turn as a personal trauma and was far more pessimistic than his younger contemporary. On the whole, it must be acknowledged that Herodian not only was reconciled to, but even identified himself with Rome and saw its Empire as his own world, that is the Graeco-Roman *oikoumenē* where the power was Roman and the culture was Greek.<sup>109</sup>

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103 Zimmermann (1999a) 327.

104 Whittaker (1969) lxxii. Cf. Marasco (1998) 2840.

105 Some scholars deny that Herodian shows a *Krisenbewusstsein* on the basis that there is the general trend in scholarship to doubt contemporary awareness of a "total crisis" or even the very existence of the crisis. See Sidebottom (2007) 80. For Herodian's "sense of crisis," see Buongiorno (2015) and (2017).

106 Cf. Marasco (1998) 2856. However, as Alföldy noted, Herodian saw the reason for the transformation of the monarchy into a tyranny not only in the personality of the "tyrannical" rulers. In his thought, Commodus, the first tyrant, was much more a victim of the historical development of his time than its driver. He initially ruled according to his father's intentions, but was driven to the point of frenzied tyranny by a chain of unfortunate and inevitable events. See Alföldy (1971a) 436. This suggestion seems to be correct in the case of Commodus, but obviously does not fit to Herodian's characterization of other emperors (Caracalla, Elagabalus, Maximinus Thrax).

107 Alföldy (1971a) 437.

108 Roberto (2022) 149.

109 Veyne (2005) 11.

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