

Criticism of Defense.
The Blaming of "Crudelitas" in the "Historia Augusta"*

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The *Historia Augusta* (HA) is the collection of the biographies of the emperors and famous pretenders from Hadrian to Numerian. It constitutes an enigma in that we know neither its author nor the exact time of publication. For the purpose of this report, I have adopted the broad dating used by P. Soverini, as such a stance provides a general foundation in terms of the research of the history of mentalities and ideologies. Soverini dates publication of the compilation at about the fourth or the fifth century.¹

In this paper the concept of *crudelitas* – the use of "unnecessary" violence – shall be discussed with reference to the political situation in a historiographical sense. Of further interest here is the methodology used in the biographical historiography in that the author utilizes imperial propaganda for his own purpose of blaming a ruler, in this case L. Septimius Severus, of being cruel. To illustrate this concept, I shall interpret the author's comments on the autobiography of Septimius Severus as well as the author's excerpts which were inspired either by this very autobiography or by Severus' speeches to the senate. The author of the HA was well acquainted with the now-lost autobiography of Septimius Severus: *Uxorem tunc Marciam duxit, de qua tacuit in historia vitae privatae* (Sept. Sev. 3.2). *Vitam suam privatam publicamque ipse composuit ad fidem, solum tamen vitium crudelitatis excusans* (Sept. Sev. 18.6). *In vita sua Severus dicit...* (Pesc. 4.7). *Ad imperium venit natu iam grandior et maior Pescennio Nigro, ut Severus ipse in vita sua loquitur* (Alb. 7.1).²

However, not much is currently known about the autobiography of Septimius Severus. The references above may be second-hand information,

* I am grateful to Jeri L. Hill, Ph.D., for revision of the language of this manuscript.

¹ P. Soverini, *Scrittori della Storia Augusta*, vol. 1 (Torino 1983) 52.

² See also Alb. 10.1: *Et Severus quidem ipse haec de eodem loquitur, ut eum dicat turpem...* and 11.4: *Vini sane parcum fuisse dicit, quod Severus negat, qui eum adserit ebrium...*

perhaps selected from the writings of then-contemporary historians, such as Cassius Dio and Herodian. Other second-hand references, for instance from the lost history of the emperors, may also have been referred to.³ Z. Rubin insists that the autobiography was written in Latin.⁴ It is obvious that Severus did not write it himself. A. R. Birley names two men who may have assisted in the writing as Aelius Antipater (if it was, in fact, written in Greek) and Messius Saturninus (if it was, rather, written in Latin). The latter was the holder of the *a declamationibus* and made drafts of Severus speeches for delivery in court.⁵

The purpose of the autobiography was to justify one's actions. In this sense, it served the interests of Roman politicians and military men.⁶ In this particular case, it is of interest to determine what Septimius Severus wanted to justify.

The *HA* gives a straightforward answer: The purpose of Severus' autobiography is to apologize for his cruelty (Sept. Sev. 18.6: *Vitam suam privatam publicamque ipse composuit ad fidem, solum tamen vitium crudelitatis excusans*). The author continues on this theme, using the opinion of the senate (ibid. 18.7), *illum aut nasci non debuisse aut mori, quod et nimis crudelis et nimis utilis rei publicae videretur*. I interpret this statement to mean that the Severan violence was unavoidable but paradoxically

³ A comprehensive study on the sources of the *HA*: T. D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* (Brussels 1978); see also A. Chastagnol, *Emprunts de l'Histoire Auguste aux "Caesares" d'Aurelius Victor*, *Revue de Philologie de Litterature et d'Histoire Anciennes*, Ser.III, 41 (1967) 85–97; id., *L'Utilisation des "Caesares" d'Aurelius Victor dans l'Histoire Auguste*, *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1966/67* (1968) 53–66; on the "Historia-Augusta-Forschung" during 1963–1970, see id., *Recherches sur l'Histoire Auguste* (Bonn 1970); Z. Rubin, *Civil-War Propaganda and Historiography* (Brussels 1980); R. Syme, *Ignotus*, the Good Biographer, *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1966/67* (1968) 131–153; id., *The Historia Augusta. A Call of Clarity* (Bonn 1971).

⁴ Rubin, 26, note 29.

⁵ A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus. The African Emperor* (2nd ed., London 1988) 167–8.

⁶ B. Baldwin, *The Roman Emperors* (Montreal 1980) 117; C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1983) 101, 179–181; more comprehensively on autobiography in Antiquity, see G. Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie* (Leipzig 1931) and A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971) 93.

unnecessary. The emperor himself was necessary for the empire, but he was also cruel.⁷

The *HA* author describes Severus as a ruler who, after the civil war, does not implement clemency. Nevertheless, he uses the *clementia* catchword in his propaganda (Sept. Sev. 12.9: *Post hoc de sua clementia disseruit, cum crudelissimus fuerit*). The Severan biography lists 41 senators sentenced by Severus to death, one of the bloody results of the war of 195–197 against Clodius Albinus. Albinus proclaims himself *Augustus* and is thus declared, at the instigation of Severus, a public enemy (*hostis publicus*). After the battle of Lugdunum in 197, Severus comes to Rome to punish the supporters of Albinus. Some sixty members of the senate are arrested.⁸

The *HA* author uses Severus' own propaganda of *clementia*, criticizing it and giving an example of his mental depravity: Severus personally violates the corpse of Clodius Albinus (Sept. Sev. 11.8). Violation of the bodies of traitors of the state was usual. However, direct participation by the emperor himself was not. In the *HA*, Severus is the only infamous emperor so designated. The signs of violence connected with the decisions of *damnatio memoriae* are common in the compilation.⁹ Unnamed soldiers and *plebs* dishonor and humiliate their rulers during the rituals (*caput unco trahatur; corpus in Tiberim*).¹⁰ Official permission is given

⁷ I agree with B. Mouchová, *Crudelitas principis optimi*, *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1970* (1972) 182, 191.

⁸ The names of the executed *nobiles* in Sept. Sev. 13.1–7; see also Alb. 12.2; on the executions after Lugdunum, see Dio 75(76).8.4, and after the revolt of Pescennius Niger, in 194, see *ibid.*, 74(75).8.2–3; on the list of the executed, see G. Alföldy, *Eine Proskriptionsliste in der Historia Augusta*, *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1968/69* (1970) 1–11 [= *Die Krise des Römischen Reiches* (Stuttgart 1989) 164–178] and D. Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, vol. I (1979, repr.) 401, footnote. 2; on the politics between Severus and the senate, see Alföldy, *Septimius Severus und der Senat*, *Bonner Jahrbücher* 168 (1968) 112–160.

⁹ Commodus (Comm. 18–19); Opellius Macrinus (Diadum. 9.4); Elagabal (Heliog. 17.1–7) and Maximinus Thrax (Maximin. 16 and 23.7).

¹⁰ *Damnatio memoriae*, see F. Vittinghoff, *Der Staatsfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Untersuchungen zur "damnatio memoriae"* (Berlin 1936); on the measures passed against emperors and their families derived from penalties for *maiestas*, see R. J. A. Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton 1984) 356 ff.; on Roman executions, see especially the articles of J.-P. Callu, F. Hinard and J. Scheid in: *Du châiment*

by the representatives of the state who themselves, nevertheless, take no direct part in these acts of gruesome violence. In the *HA*, Severus is a notorious exception.

The portrait of Septimius Severus in the *HA* is that of a man who creates rule by war. Likewise, it is a comparison between Severus and his enemies. Thus, when considering the historiographical motives for labeling him as “cruel” in the compilation, it is imperative to closely examine his rivals. These are identified as M. Didius Julianus, the emperor from late March to early June of 193, and the two “Gegenkaiser”, L. Pescennius Niger and D. Clodius Albinus.

M. Didius Julianus is a rich senator.¹¹ He is known as the winner of the great auction at which the empire was sold by the praetorian officers who, in 193, murdered Helvius Pertinax. Cassius Dio regards the auction as most disgraceful and beneath Roman dignity. He records that Didius wins over his rival Flavius Sulpicianus, the prefect of the City, by bidding at one time five thousand sesterces, so that the final price exceeds 20,000 sesterces per soldier.¹² Dio adjudges Didius to be aggressive in this unique acquisition of rulership. He describes how Didius hurries from Mediolanum (where he had been exiled by Commodus as a revolutionist) to Rome as soon as the news of the murder of Pertinax reaches him. The historian continues that this rich senator is blatantly eager at the auction, shouting in a loud voice and holding up his fingers.¹³

According to Herodian, who also regards the purchase of the empire

dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique, Collection de l'École française de Rome 79 (1984) and K. M. Coleman, Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments, *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990) 44 ff.

¹¹ See the negative remarks of Dio 73(74).11.2; on Didius Julianus' senatorial ancestry, see D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle* (Darmstadt 1990) 154; more comprehensively G. Alföldy, *Senatoren aus Norditalien. Regionen IX, X und XI, Epigrafia e ordine senatorio* II, Tituli 5 (Rome 1982), 354 and Birley, 40–41.

¹² Dio's bitter comments on the auction in 73(74).11.3 ff.; cf. Herod. 2.6.5 ff.; perhaps the best modern account is in Birley, 93–96; Dio tells about Q. Aemilius Laetus, the praetorian prefect of Pertinax and his betrayal, see 73(74).9 ff., but see also Birley, 94; on Laetus's prefecture, see L. L. Howe, *The Pretorian Prefect from Commodus to Diocletian* (Chicago 1942) 68; on the obvious role of some senators, see J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army 31 BC–235 AD* (Oxford 1984) 117–120.

¹³ Dio 73(74).11.2–5.

as scandalous, Didius is considerably more indecisive than Dio intimates. Herodian describes how luxurious, feasting and wine-drinking Didius is encouraged and persuaded by his wife, daughter, clients and some officers to take part in the contest which is ultimately to come between him and Flavius Sulpicianus. Sulpicianus cannot prevail, as his financial resources are limited. Moreover, he is the father-in-law of the murdered Pertinax. It is this close relationship between these two men that makes the praetorians suspicious: Sulpicianus might revenge the murder of Pertinax. And although Didius is not presented as an agreeable man in Herodian's text, neither is he depicted as an unscrupulous ruler.¹⁴

As for the events of 193, the *HA* author agrees more with Herodian than with Dio. The *HA* accounts that the proclamation of Septimius Severus as an emperor is a surprise to Didius. He therefore fears only Pescennius Niger's popularity among the troops.¹⁵ Didius is the puppet of the praetorians. Indeed, he is no formidable competitor for Severus. His political decisions are desperate and insane. He is a lonely man when Severus overthrows him.¹⁶ In Dio, before his death, Didius Julianus asks, "What evil have I done? Whom have I killed?" Even so, the senators put him to death, name Severus emperor and consecrate Pertinax. The decision of the senate is founded on the military sovereignty of Severus.¹⁷ Both Dio and Herodian ridicule that Didius causes his own misfortune. He depends only on his financial means; and, in all other respects, he is virtually incompetent and an easy victim for Severus. That is also the opinion presented in the *HA*. None of our sources, on the other hand, sympathizes with Severus, either. The texts present a pessimistic narration of the time when military leaders shaped politics in a ruthless manner, and the decisions of the senate are explained as reasonably as possible under those conditions.

During his rule, Severus had two more prominent rivals than Didius Julianus. They were Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus. Pescennius

¹⁴ Cf. the account of Herodian, 2.6.6–11 and his judgments, 2.6.14; on the portrait of Didius Julianus in the *HA*, see I. Moreno Ferrero, *La caracterización de Didio Juliano en la HA*, *Symbolae L. Mitxelena oblatae* (Vitoria 1985).

¹⁵ *Did. Jul. 5.1–3 timens praecipue Syriacos exercitus... sed cum ei nuntiatum esset Severum descivisse, quem suspectum non habuerat, perturbatus est...*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 7.9–11; 8.6–7

¹⁷ *Dio 73(74).17*; cf. *Herod. 2.12.6–7*.

Niger, the governor of Syria¹⁸ was hailed emperor by the Syrian legions when the news of Pertinax' death reached Antioch. It is evident that Niger knew nothing about the proclamation of Severus in Pannonia. The *HA* accounts that Niger declares himself emperor, in opposition to Didius Julianus. But it also tells, rather contradictorily in my opinion, that Niger has learned of Severus' success.¹⁹ However, Niger has never enjoyed Severus' confidence. In fact, Severus soon leaves Rome to campaign against him. Niger is declared an enemy of the state in mid-193, after the fall of Didius Julianus. After three fights (Cyzicus, Nicaea and Issus) during 193 to 194, Niger is captured and hanged in Antioch.²⁰

The biography of Niger concentrates, with numerous illustrations, on his military career, *auctoritas* and *severitas*. He is compared to legendary military heroes, such as Hannibal and Marius.²¹ In contradistinction, historians Cassius Dio and Herodian show no interest in his military career. Dio says that he was remarkable for nothing either good or bad.²² Niger fails to make preparations to withstand Severus' challenge, describes Herodian, "remaining inactive amidst the pleasures of Antioch".²³ Both historians emphasize Niger's incompetence in the face of Severus' challenge at the crucial battle of Issus, and against thunder.²⁴ Had, as the *HA* tends to put forth, *Fortuna* abandoned this man?²⁵ Herodian, in fact, blames Niger himself for his gruesome end: he merely pays for his sloth, procrastina-

¹⁸ Dio 73(74).14.3-4, Herod. 2.7.4; Kienast, 159.

¹⁹ On his proclamation, see Sept. Sev. 6.7-8 and especially Pesc. 2.1: *Is postquam comperit occisum Commodum, Iulianum imperatorem appellatum eundemque iussu Severi et senatus occisum ... appellatus est imperator, ut quidam dicunt, magis in Iuliani odium quam in aemulationem Severi*; cf. also Herodian, 2.7.5-6 and the comments of C. R. Whittaker, Herodian, vol. 1 (London 1969) 187; Dio 73(74).14.3 ff. is not very accurate of Niger's actions; see also the modern accounts of J. Hasebroek, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Septimius Severus* (Heidelberg 1921) 19-21 and Birley, 108 ff.; on the chronology see Kienast, 156, 159.

²⁰ See the account of Dio 74(75).6.1-8.3; the *HA* is much more summarizing, Sept. Sev. 7.6-9.8; Pesc. 5.2-6.4.

²¹ Ibid. 6.10-7.9 and 10-12.

²² 74(75).6.1.; most of his military career is unknown, see Whittaker, 182-183, note 3 and Kienast, 159.

²³ Herod. 2.14.6, the translation is Whittaker's, 241.

²⁴ Dio 74(75).7-8.2; Herod. 3.4.1-9.

²⁵ Pesc. 6.10: *imperator infeliz*.

tion and idleness. Despite all this, Herodian also mentions that Niger is regarded neither as a bad leader nor a bad man.²⁶ Cassius Dio says that Niger is somewhat foolish and vainglorious.²⁷

Pescennius Niger is, according to the *HA*, one of the victims of Severus' cruelty. In the *HA*, the reader is reminded of the friendly terms between Severus and Niger under Commodus. However, when Commodus later appoints not Severus, but Niger, as consul, the anger of the former is aroused.²⁸ Niger does not instigate the revolt, but he declares himself emperor at the insistence of his troops. In the author's opinion, it is not Niger who initiates the war; it is Severus. Even though Severus is said to guarantee Niger's safety in exile (on the condition that Niger will lay down his arms), the author nevertheless places greater emphasis on Severus' revenge on Niger and his family.²⁹ The "criminal" is Severus, not Niger. Clodius Albinus meets with success in his military career under Commodus. Severus appoints Albinus as the British governor *Caesar* after the overthrow of Didius Julianus. Severus further nominates Albinus for *cos.II* in 194. But already by the following year, Albinus is regarded as *hostis publicus*. Has Albinus become too powerful? Does Severus deem it safer to eliminate him? For whatever reason, Cassius Dio claims that Severus initially favors Albinus, because Severus wants to maintain peace and stability in the western part of his empire until he can subdue the revolt of Pescennius Niger in Syria.³⁰ According to the *HA*, it is Severus who is responsible for all the violence. As a matter of fact, he intends to create a dynasty, and is, therefore, anxious about Albinus' popularity among the senators. The *HA* author describes Severus' suspicions of this "son of the senator Ceionius Postumus". His nobility and his support by the senate are a great challenge to Severus' envisioned dynasty.³¹ The author sides with Albinus and vindicates him of *cupiditas imperii*, telling of Severus' refusal of the nomination to *Caesar* offered by Commodus. To be sure, the real reason for such, his caution, is also mentioned.³²

²⁶ Herod. 3.4.7.

²⁷ Dio 74(75).6.1-2.

²⁸ Pesc. 4.6; *consul suffectus* in 183; Kienast, 159.

²⁹ Pesc. 5.8-6.1-2; cf. Sept.Sev. 10.1.

³⁰ 75(76).4.1; so also Herod. 2.15.1-6.

³¹ Alb. 7.2; 12.1.; but see on his ancestry Magie, 466-467 and Kienast, 160.

³² Alb. 2.1-3.1 and 6.4-5.

The *HA* reveals that the conflict between Severus and Albinus is due to Severus' plans for a dynasty. On the contrary, Cassius Dio records that Albinus aspires to the glory of the emperor. In the *HA*, the conflict is said to have had its origin in Severus' envy; Dio says it is a mere struggle for power between these two. Herodian agrees with Dio and reports that Albinus boasts with the title of *Caesar* and that many senators, because of his noble ancestry, prefer him as emperor.³³ For this reason, Severus feels compelled to dispose of him. First he tries to murder Albinus; but when that attempt fails, he declares Albinus an enemy of the state.³⁴

Although it seems that the *HA* is the most invective against Severus, faults of his enemies are also presented. The enemies are not characterized as totally innocent victims, but rather as victims of their own lust for power or their incapacity. Nevertheless, the highest guilt is reserved for Severus; therefore, the *HA* author judges him as cruel.

The very fact that the biographies of Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus are included in the collection of the biographies of the emperors is as noteworthy as the charges against Severus.³⁵ Niger is characterized as better than Severus in all respects: He is severe, but in an acceptable manner (Pesc. 12.3: *Apud omnes constat quod, si rerum potitus fuisset, omnia correcturus fuerit, quae Severus vel non potuit emendare vel noluit, et quidem sine crudelitate, immo etiam cum lenitate, sed militari, non remissa et inepta atque ridicula.*). Niger's superiority is based on his being authoritarian and demanding. He is *commilito* in the positive sense, like Severus Alexander, the ideal *princeps* of the compilation.³⁶

In his autobiography, Severus assaults Pescennius Niger, accusing him

³³ Herod. 3.5.2.

³⁴ Ibid. 3.5.3–6.9.

³⁵ Although the author apologizes for his including in the collection a biography of a man like Pescennius Niger (Pesc. 1.1–2), the attitude is totally different from, e. g., the biography of Opellius Macrinus (Opil. 1.1–2), in which he (or maybe another) says there is nothing worth telling in the private lives of the pretenders and unworthy emperors. The emperor Macrinus is, in the opinion of the *HA* author, a tyrant. Niger is neither.

³⁶ On the concept of *commilito* of Severus Alexander, see e.g. Heliog. 29.5; Alex. 12.4–5; 21.6–8; 25.1–2; 45.1–3; 47; 50.1; 51.5–8; 52.1–4; 53; 54; 59.4–5; 64.3; Maximin. 7.6; *commilito* in the imperial propaganda, see Tac. Hist. 1.29; 1.37; Agric. 33; Suet. Iul. 7; Aug. 25.1; Plin. Ep. 10.53; 10.101; 10. 103; Herod. 1.5.3; 4.7.6; 4.14.4; 6.8.4 (Maximinus); *commilito* as a title of *optimus princeps*, see H. Instinsky, Wandlungen des römischen Kaisertums, Gymnasium 63 (1956) 260–8; Campbell, 32–59.

of usurpation (Pesc. 5.1): Niger was *gloriae cupidus, vita fictus, moribus turpis, aetatis provectae, cum in imperium invasit*. However, the *HA* author is somewhat doubtful of Severus' defense (ibid.: *si Severo credimus*) and attempts to reveal his real thoughts (ibid. 4.6–8). Indeed, the *HA* author regards Niger as a genuine representative of Roman military virtue, a *vir militaris*. Severus, on the contrary, found it difficult to keep his troops under control without offering donatives.³⁷ The increased donatives to the troops result in decreased *liberalitates* to the senators. It is certainly no wonder that, in the opinion of the *HA* author, Severus' *adventus* in 193 to Rome is terrifying and massive!

The biography of Clodius Albinus is an *encomium* on the cooperation between a military leader and the senate. His nobility is respected; he exemplifies a good soldier, a consul who deserves his post, one who is on confidential terms with the senators. The biography renders incredulous the information given by Severus and Aelius Junius Cordus about Albinus' habits.³⁸

The biographies of Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus serve the express purpose of assailing the politics of Severus. In each of these works, Severus is depicted as a villain. Even the corrupted Didius Julianus behaves more respectfully than Severus towards the senate. According to the *HA* author, Severus writes his autobiography in order to vilify his rivals and disprove the charges of his cruelty. This is the case. The *HA* author was eclectic in his use of official propaganda.

The autobiography of Severus was used as a source for two purposes: i) to describe the fallacy of Severan propaganda of clemency and ii) to use this very propaganda as a weapon against Severus himself in criticizing his ruthless policy towards his rivals. Indeed, the rivals are praised, because they are not enemies of the senators. In the *HA*, it is said that Severus is

³⁷ Sept. Sev. 7.1–9.

³⁸ See Alb. 1.3; 3.5–6; 4.1–7; 7.2; 7.4; 9.6; 10.1–3; 11.2–8; 12.1–12; 13.3; 14.2; Sept. Sev. 11.3. Catilina, the prototype of a revolutionist, is romanticized in the features of Albinus, see Alb. 13.2: *Armorum sciens prorsus, ut non male sui temporis Catilina diceretur*; there is some sympathy in the author's *iudicium* on Albinus, as has already remarked N. Criniti, L'Uso propagandistico del topos catilinario nella "Historia Augusta", in: Propaganda e persuasione occulta nell'antichità, Contributi dell'Istituto di storia antica 2 (Milano 1974), 97–106; on the "Catilinian myth" in literature, see id., "Catilina" e "catilinario", in: Storiografia e propaganda, Contributi dell'Istituto di storia antica 3 (Milano 1975), 121–135.

“Sulla” and “Marius” (Pesc. 6.4: *tunc cum innumeros senatores interemit Severus et ab aliis Sullae Punici, ab aliis Marii nomen accepit*), without further explaining the graphic usage of these two personifications of cruelty. Comparisons with these symbols of cruelty come from the similarity of politics, the civil wars and the proscriptions on the senators. In callously using this analogy, the *HA* author makes Severus’ policy appear to be awkward by not allowing him the opportunity to defend his point of view. Even so, not even Cassius Dio understands the cruelty of Severus; but in telling the opinions of the emperor himself, Dio allows the reader to draw his own conclusions. The *HA* author is much more selective and assailing than is Dio.

If we are to believe the *HA*, cruelty was a common feature of the Roman military emperors during the third century. In its biographies, cruelty is defined as the main vice of Septimius Severus (as a military leader and the oppressor of the senators who was cruel), of Caracalla (as the murderer of his brother, the *parricida Bassianus*, who was cruel), of Opellius Macrinus (as a lowbirth emperor who was cruel), of Maximinus (as a semibarbarian militant who was cruel), of Aurelian (as a military minded ruler who was cruel). It is a by-product of the depraved, luxurious idler, such as the cruel Elagabal and Gallienus.³⁹

The blame of cruelty is placed in the context of an emperor’s accession to the throne or his politics to maintain himself in control of rule. The concept of cruelty in the *HA* is primarily an inner political term. It is a political concept which, nevertheless, is not explained politically, that is, not in rational terms. It is explained as a predestined feature of the ruling military character.

One of the main themes in the *HA* is the relationship between the senate and the emperor. Was the senate able to maintain its old *libertas*,⁴⁰ prestige and, perhaps more importantly, the privilege to rule during the crises of the third century? The basis for the criticism against the so-called “soldier” emperors was the uncontrolled division of ruling power between

³⁹ On the concept of *crudelitas* in the *HA*, see Mouchová, 167–194; id., Zum literarischen Porträt des Opilius Macrinus in der *Historia Augusta*, *Graecolatina Pragensia* X 3 (1983) 29–34.

⁴⁰ On *libertas*, see C. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (New York 1950).

the emperors and his armies and the senate.⁴¹ However, the *HA* author makes no thorough analyses of the state, as does Cassius Dio and, to some degree, Herodian. In biographical form, as presented by the *HA* author, the rationale for violence is ultimately, and perhaps exclusively, found in the mind of the ruler.

⁴¹ On the crisis of the third century, see e.g. A. Alföldi, *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des 3. Jahrhunderts nach Christus* (Darmstadt 1967); G. Alföldy, *Die Krise der Römischen Reiches* (Stuttgart 1989); M. Mazza, *Lotte sociali e restaurazione autoritaria nel III secolo d. C.* (Bari 1973); id., *Il principe e il potere rivoluzione e legittimismo costituzionale nel III sec. d.C.*, *Atti di un incontro tra storici e giuristi*, Firenze, 2-4 maggio 1974 (Milano 1976); K. Dietz, *Senatus contra principem* (München 1980).

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GERHARD JARITZ

SONDERBAND II

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in the Ancient and Medieval World

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Preface

The present volume is a collection of the papers read at the conference which was held in May 1991 at the University of Turku on the theme *The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*. The general aim of the conference was to advance interdisciplinary and international collaboration in the fields of humanistic studies and particularly to bring together scholars who have common interests in the study of our past. The choice of the subject of cruelty naturally resulted from different study projects concerning the political and social history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages – the Roman imperial propaganda, the conflict between paganism and christianity, the history of the Vandals, the Byzantine empires, the Medieval miracle stories, to name some of them. Perhaps also contemporary events had an influence on the idea that cruelty could be the theme which conveniently would unite those various interests. And the idea emerged irrespective of considerations whether or not we should search for models in the Ancient World or join those who, as it seems to have been a fashion, insist on investigating what we have common with the Middle Ages.

One might argue – and for a good reason indeed – that cruelty is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, not for philologists and historians. Where does the student of history find reliable criteria for defining the notion of cruelty in order to judge the men of the past and their actions, to charge with cruelty not only individuals but also nations and even ages (“the *crudelitas imperatorum*”, “the Dark Ages”, “the violence of the Vikings”, “the cruel Muslims”)? Is it not so that the only possibility is to adapt our modern sensibilities to the past and to use our own prejudices in making judgements about others? The prejudices – yes, but this is just what makes the theme interesting for the historian because our prejudices – our conception of cruelty, for instance – are part of the heritage of past centuries. The events of our own day – maybe more clearly than ever – have demonstrated that we live in a historical world. When we investigate the history of the concept of cruelty we, as it were, look ourselves at a mirror and learn to understand ourselves better. The concept of cruelty has two sides. It is a subjective concept used to define and describe those persons

and those acts that according to the user of the term are negative, harmful, humiliating, harsh, inhumane, primitive and unnatural; in everyday life it is associated with religious habits – with crude remnants of primitive religion, it is associated with passion, an uncontrolled mental state, or with violence and with the exercise of power without justice. On the other hand the term is used to classify people by their ethical and social habits, to accuse, to invalidate and injure others; therefore the accusation of cruelty refers to basic features of ancient and also Medieval thought, to the fear of anything foreign, to the aggressive curiosity to define and subsume others simply by their otherness.

Such were the considerations which gave inspiration for arranging the “cruelty”-seminar. The conference was accommodated by the Archipelago Institute of the University of Turku, in the island Seili (“Soul island”), in an environment of quiet beauty of the remote island and sad memories of the centuries when people attacked by a cruel fate, lepers or mentally ill, were banished there from the civilized community.

The conference was organized by the Department of Classics of the University of Turku in collaboration with the Departments of Cultural History and Italian language and culture of the same university. It is a pleasure to us to be able to thank here all those who helped to make the congress possible. We would like especially to express our gratitude to Luigi de Anna and Hannu Laaksonen for their assistance in preparing and carrying out the practical arrangements. The financial assistance given by the Finnish Academy and by the Turku University Foundation was also indispensable. Finally, we close by expressing our gratitude to Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* for the *Gesellschaft für Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters*, for his kind co-operation and for accepting this collection of papers to be published as a supplement to the series of the studies on the Medieval everyday life. One of the starting-points for organizing the “cruelty”-conference was the firm conviction that the Graeco-Roman Antiquity did not end with the beginning of the Middle Ages, but these two eras form a continuum in many respects, and the continuity was felt not only in the literary culture, in the Greek and Latin languages which were still used, but also in the political, social and religious structures of the Middle Ages. We think that this continuity is amply demonstrated by the studies of the present volume.

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