

The Prologue in Rome

The Alexandrian drama had a prologue in Rome.

The catastrophe of the Egyptian capital was due to Antoninus Caracalla. The emperor's personality was certainly not without influence upon that disaster; also the atmosphere of the beginnings of his reign as a sole emperor had certainly prepared the future tragedy.

The biographers of the emperor stress the negative features of Caracalla's character that already appeared in his youth. The most important of our authors, Cassius Dio, hated Caracalla so much that his bias influenced the reliability of his account of Caracalla's reign.¹ However, Dio's text is absolutely irreplaceable. No elements of his testimony should be underestimated, including even his biased statements concerning the emperor's vicious and bloodthirsty temper.

Suffice it to quote a few fragments of that account:

Ἐξέπλεττε δὲ αὐτὸν (i.e. Septimius Severus) ὁ Ἀντωνίνος καὶ ἐς φροντίδας ἀνηγνύτους καθίστη, ὅτι τε ἀκολάστως ἔζη, καὶ ὅτι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν δῆλος ἦν, εἰ δυνηθείη, φονεύσων, καὶ τὸ τελευταῖον ὅτι καὶ αὐτῷ ἐκείνῳ (i.e. against the father) ἐπεβούλευσε.²

ἦν γὰρ ἐς πάντα καὶ θερμότατος καὶ κουφότατος, πρὸς δὲ τοῦτοις εἶχε καὶ τὸ πανοὔργον τῆς μητρὸς καὶ τῶν Σύρων, ὅθεν ἐκείνη ἦν.³

¹ A.R. Birley, *Septimius Severus, The African Emperor*, London 1971, p. 272: "Dio's hatred of him was so strong that his account of his reign is of questionable value. But there is little evidence to correct it. Herodian has one or two good words to say for him."

² Cassius Dio LXXVII 14.1.

³ Cassius Dio LXXVIII 10.2.

Herodian, although sometimes more lenient with Caracalla, describes him as νέος θρασὺς θυμοειδής τε.⁴ He also states that Caracalla was worse than Geta: μάλιστα δὲ ὁ Ἄντωνίνος ἀφόρητος ἦν.⁵

The following description of Caracalla by Herodian agrees with the contents of other extant sources:

ὁ δ' Ἄντωνίνος ἐμβριθῶς τὰ πάντα καὶ θυμοειδῶς ἔπραττε, πολὺ δὲ ἀπάγων ἑαυτὸν τῶν προειρημένων στρατιωτικοῦ τε καὶ πολεμικοῦ βίου ἐραστῆς εἶναι προσεποιεῖτο ὀργῇ τε πάντα πράττων καὶ ἀπειλῶν μᾶλλον ἢ πείθων, φόβῳ καὶ οὐκ εὐνοίᾳ φίλους ἐκτάτο.⁶

In the *Vita* of Caracalla we find the following description of the emperor: “egressus vero pueritiam seu patris monitis seu calliditate ingenii sive quod se Alexandro Magno aequandum putabat, restrictior, gravior, vultu etiam truculentior factus est, prorsus ut eum, quem puerum scierant, multi esse non crederent.⁷ patre superbior fuit; fratrem magna eius humilitate despexit.⁸ fuit male moratus et patre duro crudelior.”⁹

According to Eutropius, who probably used various sources but generally approaches the tone of the *Vita Caracalli*, Antoninus: morum fere paternorum fuit, paulo asperior et minax.¹⁰

Georgius Syncellus says about Caracalla:

φωνικώτερος γεγωνῶς Κομόδου καὶ πολλοὺς ἀνέλων ἀδίκως.¹¹

Then he describes him as: ἀκόρεστος ὧν αἱμάτων καὶ μηδὲν ποτε πράξας ἀξιόλογον.¹²

Undoubtedly, he became an audacious young ruler very early.¹³ That happened even before the period of his sole rule. The assassination

⁴ Hdn III 6.10.

⁵ Hdn III 13.2.

⁶ Hdn IV 3.4.

⁷ SHA Carac. II 1.

⁸ *ibid.* II 3.

⁹ *ibid.* IX 3.

¹⁰ Eutropius, *Breviarium a.U.c.* VIII 20.

¹¹ Georg. Syncell., *Ecloga chronographica* 672, 2–3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 672, 11–12.

¹³ On the chronology of the early phase of Caracalla's rule cf. A.K. Bowman, *Papyri and Roman Imperial History*, 1960–1975, *JRS* 66, 1976, p. 153 ff.; P. IFAO 12 (AD 197).

of Geta was not only a result of a political calculation. Behind Caracalla's desire to become the sole ruler there was a discernible emotional background of hatred and rivalry.¹⁴ However, after the murder of Geta, the situation required some kind of a program. The slaughter of Geta's supporters had to come to an end and after it, a formal declaration from the new government could be expected.

Undoubtedly, some elements of a program were already present in the policy of Septimius Severus, and Caracalla could easily use these patterns. He certainly found support in the army. The military aspect of his future activities was easy to foresee.

The sources enhance the differences between the father and the son. One important difference was Caracalla's attitude toward the main duty of an emperor, i.e. to the administration of justice (δικάζειν). Cassius Dio criticizes Caracalla, since the emperor:

Ἐδίκασε μὲν οὖν ἢ τι ἢ οὐδέν, τὸ δὲ δὴ πλεῖστον τοῖς τε ἄλλοις καὶ τῇ φιλοπραγμοσύνῃ ἐσχόλαζε.¹⁵

Herodian, equally eloquent, but less critical than Dio, seems to be closer to reality:

γυμνάσια τοῦ σώματος ποιούμενος ἡνιοχείας καὶ θηρίων παντοδαπῶν συστάδην ἀναιρέσεις, δικάζων μὲν σπανίως, πλὴν νοῆσαι τὸ κρινόμενον εὐφυῆς ἦν εὐθίκτως τε πρὸς τὰ λεχθέντα ἀποκρίνασθαι.¹⁶

Even a writer as unfriendly to him as Dio was unable to deny Caracalla's intellectual occupations and interest in culture. The young ruler had been brought up in a milieu aspiring to be a centre of philosophy:

ὥστε καὶ αὐτοκράτορα ἤδη ὄντα καὶ διδασκάλους συνεῖναι καὶ τὸ πολὺ τῆς ἡμέρας φιλοσοφεῖν.¹⁷

¹⁴ Among the studies of the problem the most important is H. Heinen, *Zur Tendenz der Caracalla-Vita in der Historia Augusta*, *Chiron* 1, 1971, p. 421-436; see also P. Mertens, *La damnatio memoriae de Géta dans les papyrus*, in: *Hommages a Léon Herrmann*, (Coll. Latomus 44), Bruxelles-Berchem 1960, p. 541-552.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio LXXVIII 17. 1.

¹⁶ Hdn IV 7.2.

¹⁷ Cassius Dio LXXVIII 11. 3 (cf. *ibid.* 11.4); on the philosophical milieu of Julia Domna see G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1969; Cassius Dio LXXVIII 18.3.

Caracalla did not avoid the inconveniences of military life, and enjoyed popularity among soldiers.¹⁸

He was of low stature¹⁹ and almost completely bald²⁰. After a period of excessive sexual activities, he suffered from some psychical disturbances also affecting his sexual life. That disease certainly caused additional stress (if the information on this subject from our biased sources is not a gossip and may be taken for granted):

τῶν ἀειπαρθένων τέσσαρας ἀποκτείνας ὦν μίαν αὐτός, ὅτε καὶ ἐδύνατο, ἠσχύκει· ὕστερον γὰρ ἐξησθένησεν πᾶσα αὐτῷ ἢ περὶ τὰ ἀφροδισία ἰσχύς, ἀφ' οὐπερ καὶ ἕτερόν τινα τρόπον αἰσχρουργεῖν ἐλέγετο κτλ.²¹

His resistance to hard life in the camp does not indicate that his health was really good:

ἐνόσει μὲν γὰρ καὶ τῷ σώματι τὰ μὲν ἐμφανέσι τὰ δὲ καὶ ἀρρήτοις ἀρρωστήμασιν, ἐνόσει δε καὶ τῇ ψυχῇ, πικροῖς τισὶ φαντάσμασι καὶ πολλακίς γε καὶ ἐλαύνεσθαι ὑπὸ τε τοῦ πατρὸς ὑπὸ τε τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἐδόκει.²² Even if his hidden ailments were magnified in gossip,²³ it is, nevertheless, sure that Caracalla beseeched help of the healing gods: Apollo Grannus, Asclepius, and Sarapis (the latter will be often mentioned below in the Alexandrian context), and did not obtain it.²⁴

Caracalla's biographer in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* suggests a connection between Caracalla's opprobrious deeds and his disease.

¹⁸ Hdn IV 7. 4–7.

¹⁹ Hdn IV 7.7: καὶ γὰρ ἦν θαύματος ἄξιον ἐν μικρῷ πάνυ τὸ μέγεθος σώματι γενναίων πόνων ἄσκησις τοσαύτη.

²⁰ Hdn IV 8.5: πάνυ ὦν ψιλοκόρησις, πλόκαμον ἐπιθεῖναι τῷ πυρὶ ζητῶν ἐγελάτο. πλὴν ὦν εἶχε τριχῶν ἀπεκείρατο.

²¹ Cassius Dio, LXXVIII 16.1–2, cf. *ibid.*, 16.4: G. Turton, *The Syrian Princesses*, London 1974, p. 118 sees in that issue a problem with a great impact on Caracalla's personality.

²² Cassius Dio LXXVIII 15. 3.

²³ Cassius Dio LXXVIII 15. 6: “ἐν κρυφίοισι τόποισιν ἔχων δυσαλθέα νοῦσον.”

²⁴ Cassius Dio LXXVIII 15. 6: οὔτε γὰρ ὁ Ἀπόλλων ὁ Γράννος οὔθ' ὁ Ἀσκληπιὸς οὔθ' ὁ Σάραπις καίπερ πολλὰ ἰκετεύσαντι αὐτῷ πολλὰ δὲ καὶ προσκατερήσαντι ὠφέλησεν.

According to him, that illness began in Gaul soon after his assuming power: “et cum multa contra homines et contra iura civitatum fecisset, morbo implicitus graviter laboravit.”²⁵

The sources quoted above show a very disturbed personality. In these biased statements, the image of the emperor is rhetorically exaggerated and coloured by the authors’ animosity to Caracalla. Still, we can see glimpses of historical truth in the sources. Already in his childhood, Caracalla was spoiled by flattery and desire of power. On the other hand, he received education appropriate for a future princeps. It seems that one of Caracalla’s main obsessions was the desire to achieve military success. In order to appear as a perfect warlord, Caracalla shared with soldiers the inconveniences of their life. Such an image of the emperor was obviously very useful for the official propaganda. Otherwise, however, Caracalla was a whimsical, capricious and cruel tyrant, ready to loose his temper at any opportunity.

Only Herodian gives us a testimony of an extremely interesting political project, created within the brief time of less than a year of the joint rule of Caracalla and Geta. The essence of the project was the partition of the Empire:

καί ποτε ἔδοξεν αὐτοῖς, ἵνα δὴ μὴ μένοντες ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ ἀλλήλοις ἐπιβουλεύοιεν, νείμασθαι τὴν ἀρχήν.²⁶

Antoninus was to keep Europe; Geta’s share would be Asia. The borderline was to be the Propontis. Senators from the European provinces would stay in Rome, while those from the East were supposed to follow Geta. Geta’s capital would be Antioch or Alexandria.²⁷ The failure of the project was allegedly the result of the resistance of the mother of the rivalling brothers, Julia Domna. There are some doubts as to the historicity of that project.²⁸ Angela Pabst is undoubtedly

²⁵ SHA, Carac. V 3.

²⁶ Hdn IV 3.5.

²⁷ Hdn IV 3.5–7.

²⁸ It is interesting to observe how the motive of division in two equal parts becomes in the third century a characteristic theme both in literature and in the arts. Suffice it to mention Dio’s anecdote of soldiers who contended about a seized