

## Citation style

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Andrew G. Scott: *Emperors and Usurpers. An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History. Books 79(78)–80(80) (A.D. 217–229)*. New York: Oxford University Press 2018 (American Classical Studies 58). XVIII, 191 p. £ 86.00/\$ 115.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-087959-4.

Over the last decade, the historian Cassius Dio (c. AD 165 – after 229) has been the subject of a surge in scholarly publications. This has been spurred in large part by the work of an international research network devoted to Dio, with dozens of chapters and articles stemming from its membership. Prominent in this regard is Andrew Scott, who has produced a variety of works on different aspects of the *Roman History*: from examinations of Dio's characterisations of individuals such as Caracalla and Julia Domna to studies of his authorial voice and self-representation.

In *Emperors and Usurpers*, Scott presents a commentary of books 79(78)–80(80) of the *Roman History*, the final books of the work and those covering the period of just over a decade leading up to Dio's retirement from public life. This is the fourth commentary emanating from the Society for Classical Studies' Dio Project, following on from those of Meyer Reinhold (1988), Charles Leslie Murison (1999) and Peter Michael Swan (2004).<sup>1</sup> This latest addition to the herculean effort to offer a commentary for all 80 books of the *Roman History* is the first to deal with a portion from Dio's contemporary period. The result is a work which offers an appealingly accessible entry route into Dio's work for the new reader, and a laudably convenient historical deconstruction of these difficult books for the more initiated.

The books which Scott has tackled in this volume cover a dramatic and yet often thorny collection of episodes: from the rise of Macrinus (the first emperor of equestrian status), through the controversy-laden reign of the young Elagabalus and concluding during the reign of Severus Alexander. As Scott notes (p. 14), the lattermost of these figures is presented by other surviving

1 M. Reinhold: *From Republic to Principate. An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History. Books 49–52 (36–29 B.C.)*. Atlanta, GA. 1988 (Philological Monographs of the American Philological Association 34); C.L. Murison: *Rebellion and Reconstruction. Galba to Domitian. An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History. Books 64–67 (A.D. 68–96)*. Atlanta, GA 1999 (Philological Monographs of the American Philological Association 37); P.M. Swan: *The Augustan Succession. An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History. Books 55–56 (9 B.C. – A.D. 14)*. Oxford/New York 2004 (American Classical Studies 47).

authors, namely Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*, in glowing terms akin to a new golden age and yet, while Dio remained positively inclined towards the final Severan emperor, his account is far more muted and permeated with a sense of personal foreboding.

Given the excitement to be found in these passages, it would be easy to become carried away by Dio's prose and offer something of a passive reading of the author's twilight years. Mercifully, however, Scott resists such a temptation and argues persuasively for the historical value in these books, and for situating this portion of the *Roman History* within any consideration of Dio's political outlook and literary agenda. These books are doubly important, so Scott observes (p. 2), owing to the survival of *Codex Vaticanus Graecus* 1288, which contains a significant section of Dio's prose (all of 79 (78) and an opening section of 80(79)) free from the often-swingeing hand of later epitomizers. Thus, when we read of Macrinus' short-lived regime, we are offered a tantalising potential snapshot of how Dio originally constructed his text of an emperor's reign in its entirety.

Scott begins with a concise but detailed introduction to Dio and his prose. While much of this material will not be new to those already immersed in Dio scholarship, it provides an important base of knowledge for anyone approaching Dio's work anew. For example, Scott tackles the vexed issue of the fundamental numbering system, demystifying the 'standard' and 'reformed' numbering in a brief section (pp. 2–3) which will no doubt bring relief to many a student reader. There is also a succinct and measured refresher on key debates even for the more seasoned consumer, with a diplomatic consideration of the work's composition (pp. 10–14) and a discussion of Dio's potential relationship with other sources (pp. 17–21). Most engaging in this section is Scott's argument for a later composition, and his careful rejection of the suggestion that Dio utilised the biographies of Marius Maximus in his own work. Indeed, in this section and others, we see Scott advancing a case for viewing Dio as having an individual and consistent literary objective, even when Dio's personal connection to events peters out at the end of his opus.

Following this opening, the remainder of Scott's volume is dedicated to the commentary itself. Each of the books under consideration is given an introduction: in the case of books 79(78) and 80(79) these include a chapter breakdown as well as a consideration of the sources which informed Dio at each point. As the commentary progresses, Scott offers smaller summaries

of what is to follow throughout, another helpful feature for the non-expert, in particular. The introduction to Book 80(80) is understandably much more condensed, by contrast, owing to the relative brevity of the final handful of chapters in Dio's work. While this is eminently understandable, the reader might have benefitted from a more extensive discussion of Dio's own position and proximity to the events described here, particularly since Dio himself raises a note of caution concerning the material presented in his final section (80(80).1.2–2.1). This is a minor observation, however, that will be noted more by those particularly interested in the Severan era specifically, rather than by imperial history more widely.

Some of the most important supporting material within the commentary concerns Scott's digression on Elagabalus' regime, building on the brief introduction offered earlier (pp. 22–23). Self-evidently aware of the "general obsession among ancient accounts with the character and actions of Elagabalus" (p. 105), Scott devotes short sections to the reign, religious expression and downfall of the young priest emperor. Again, this is something that will particularly benefit the student reader, but it is nevertheless a welcome reminder of the major themes which we must bear in mind when undertaking any assessment of this period.

The content of the commentary itself is of a consistently high standard. Any commentary such as this must draw a limit on the level of depth and digression into wider historical topics, but Scott has teased out a number of interesting observations concerning the material covered by Dio's prose. As at least one other reviewer of this volume has pointed out, Scott offers a particularly incisive response to the thorny question concerning the identity of the individual Eutygianus (pp. 86–88), a figure whom Dio alleges was instrumental in persuading legionaries to switch allegiance from Macrinus to Elagabalus' cause. Another example of Scott's attention to detail in a more conservative fashion can be found in his consideration of the disintegration of the relationship between Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, with Scott noting Dio's changing mode of reference to the praetorian guard (pp. 144–145).

On the subject of the commentary more widely, it immediately becomes apparent to the reader that this is an unabashedly historical study. The use of highly abbreviated *lemmata* means that those looking to engage with Dio on a more linguistic level will undoubtedly require simultaneous consultation of a Greek edition. This is hardly a great imposition though, since, from its very

title, the reader should be aware of the character of Scott's volume. It offers readers of Dio a sturdy historical guide to the events being described.

Except for some minor typos, Scott is to be congratulated for producing a handsome work of no small quality. It has the appeal of being accessible to those approaching Cassius Dio for the first time, and yet offers the chance to engage with his text in historical terms on a granular level. The treatment of the historical figures surrounding Elagabalus is measured, and some of Scott's observations (such as his consideration of Eutyhianus or the introductory discussion of Dio's composition) will be of interest even to Dio's aficionados. It is a worthy addition to the growing commentary set on this extraordinary history and will hopefully prompt further publications in its wake.

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