

THE EMPEROR COMMODUS

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Gladiator, Hercules or a Tyrant?

GEOFF W. ADAMS



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The Emperor Commodus: Gladiator, Hercules or a Tyrant?

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This study originated out of a long-standing fascination with the Emperor Commodus, who has intrigued a large audience since antiquity. It has not been written to answer all of the questions surrounding the life of Gaius Caligula, which is an impossible task when the limited sources of information are taken into consideration. This book is intended to provide a different interpretation of this character, which will come across as being agreeable to some readers more than others. It has been structured to take into consideration as much of the ancient evidence as was possible in the hope of creating the most viable examination of this Emperor. The opinions surrounding how to interpret the life and reign of Commodus will continue to be divided within modern scholarship, but it is hoped that this *libellum* will provide some interesting ideas for most readers and topical debate among others.

I would initially like to thank several people and institutions that have been instrumental in their assistance for the production of this work. Firstly, I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Tasmania for their support and opportunities for discussion about points of issue. I would also like to thank my family [Adams and Collie] friends for their support. I would also like to devote this study to my son and daughter, Callan and Charli, in the hope that in years to come you will find it both interesting and enlightening. Finally, I must thank my wife, Nicole, to whom I dedicate the following pages and thank deeply with love and gratitude for her patience and understanding throughout its development.

INTRODUCTION

The life and reign of Commodus has been the topic of much controversy both in antiquity and modern times. The difficulty with any evaluation of his life is that the literary sources who wrote about him were from a social group that was diametrically opposed to almost everything that he embodied. The surviving sources, and their anti-Commodus stance, were written from just after his reign until long after the assassination of Commodus and in many ways can be held responsible for the confusion and lack of understanding that arises when examining the life of this Roman *princeps*. Nevertheless, there must be some factual basis for these portrayals of Commodus because otherwise there would have been little support for these representations in antiquity, regardless of the prevalent anti-Commodus sentiment among both authors and their largely senatorial audience. The ‘reality’ should be present somewhere within the extant evidence, which is only attainable through a critical and holistic approach to the available literary and archaeological sources.

This difficulty has in turn affected the interpretation of the evidence within several modern studies, which has largely resulted in two schools of thought: those who have followed the line of the ancient literary sources, and those who have rejected them. The first interpretation is often criticised for taking the sources at face value without any critical reading of the texts, whereas the second view has been criticised as being a reactionary tendency that often results in a ‘defensive’ stance for the lives of so-called ‘bad emperors’. In many ways the latter is to be expected: the desire to study the life of an historical figure in any depth indicates an initial interest in the figure that usually results in a great deal of research and often a fair amount of affection for (or at least interest in) the individual.

Nevertheless, neither of these methods are sound practices as they tend to reflect the desire of each scholar to place their individual interpretation upon the evidence. This is clearly a natural tendency, illustrating the subjective interpretation that historians face which has

occurred since antiquity, as reflected in the ancient sources. It is impossible to write a purely objective historical work because the interpretation of historians is inherently subjective, particularly in relation to such a controversial historical character like Commodus Antoninus. But nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the researcher to weigh up the evidence and to present the most balanced analysis possible. It is for this reason that the prime focus of this book has been not only upon Commodus' actions, but also his heritage and the political climate that he lived in. This study has not been intended to serve as a biography, but rather as a thematic interpretation of the significant aspects of Gaius' life that provide insight into his personal inclinations and his approach to ruling Rome as Roman *princeps*.

The primary aim of the present study is to evaluate Commodus in light of his wider historical (and historiographical) context. He is often shown as being responsible for the end of a golden era¹ and is closely tied to other 'insane' emperors as well.² This could be entirely justified – or entirely fictional. The question remains about whether Commodus has simply suffered as an historical figure merely because his predecessors have been so loved in antiquity (or idealised for that matter). This is particularly plausible in view of the natural comparison that occurs between Commodus and his father, Marcus Aurelius. Commodus is also often attributed with being responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire in the 3rd Century AD,³ but of course some questions remain about this assumption. This relies entirely upon the supposition that there was no sign of decline at all during the reigns of his predecessors, which naturally also needs to be considered in order to comprehensively evaluate Commodus as both an administrator and as a political leader.

All the same, it would be foolish to try and argue that he should be completely absolved of all responsibility for any ensuing political instability. As mentioned previously, this study is not intended to simply defend Commodus without question. It is evident that he was a flawed character, but it is also quite clear that he was not as inept or evil as shown in many of the ancient literary sources. The question about whether or not he should have attained the supreme political position in Rome remains, but in many ways this is irrelevant for the

¹ Dio 72.36.4; Herodian 1.1.4.

² *HA Marcus* 28.10 for example.

³ Dio 72.36.4; Herodian 1.1.4.

present study. The main aim here is to establish the benefits and pitfalls of Commodus' reign in each instance and to contextualise his principate within a broader historical context. By doing this it should be possible to evaluate the reign of Commodus Antoninus as a ruler while hopefully limiting the preconceived notions or agendas of the modern scholar.

Previous Studies of Commodus

There are six previous studies that have been of particular use for the current analysis of the Emperor Commodus. These are works by: Traupman (1954), Grosso (1964), Gherardini (1974), Kaiser-Raiß (1980), Leunissen (1989) and Hekster (2002). All of these studies have contributed to the modern scholarship on the Emperor Commodus, but each has largely focused upon specific aspects rather than a holistic approach to the extant evidence. All the same, each of them has contributed to the present analysis, and each of them should be considered at this point in order to determine both their benefits and limitations that make the present study original and essential for an understanding of this *princeps*.

The first significant piece to be produced on Commodus was by Traupman,⁴ which was largely intended as a defence of his reign. While the success of this line of argument is limited, this doctoral thesis still provides a good overview of the period from AD 180-192 and outlines the support structure that existed for Commodus during his principate. The next significant study, *La Lotta Politica al Tempo di Commodo*, by Grosso is probably the most protracted analysis of his reign, and largely focuses upon the literary representations and prosopographical evidence for Commodus' principate.⁵ As Millar has noted,⁶ the main benefit of this work is its use for reference material, with the actual argument of Grosso being lost within the expansive nature of the text itself. All the same, Millar's view that Commodus is unworthy of analysis⁷ seems to underestimate the possible worth of

⁴ J.C. Traupman, *The Life and Reign of Commodus*, PhD Diss., Princeton University, 1956.

⁵ F. Grosso, *La Lotta Politica al Tempo di Commodo*, Accademia delle Scienze: Turin, 1964.

⁶ F. Millar, "La Lotta Politica al Tempo di Commodo (Review)", *JRS* 56, 1966, p. 245.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 244.

considering Commodus as *princeps* during such a transitional phase of the Roman Empire.

Maria Gherardini's *Studien zur Geschichte des Kaisers Commodus*,⁸ takes a different approach with the primary focus being upon the Praetorian Prefects and their relationship with Commodus during his reign. She also examines the question of the succession and the declaration of terms in AD 180, but the conclusions are not entirely different to those of the previous two scholars, Traupman and Grosso. Kaiser-Raiß (1980)⁹ has taken another approach in *Die stadtrömische Münzprägung während der Alleinherrschaft des Commodus* by focusing almost entirely upon the numismatic material from Commodus' reign. While the inherent value of this form of evidence is unquestionable, the intention of the author is to provide another defence of Commodus, which highlights the limitations in its focus even further. Both of these texts provide additional analysis for the present study in these regards, but it is also evident that there is still more work to be done on Commodus' principate.

Konsuln und Konsulare in der Zeit von Commodus bis Severus Alexander (180-235 n. Chr.) by Paul Leunissen,¹⁰ is another important study for the present analysis, which provides a survey of the consular positions during Commodus' reign. The intention of the work in general is not to analyse Commodus himself, but it does provide some useful insight into the administrative policies of his principate. Leunissen's scholarship is sound and has certainly added to the analysis of Commodus' role as *princeps* in the present study. The most recent study of Commodus is by Oliver Hekster (*Commodus: an Emperor at the Crossroads*),¹¹ which has largely focused upon the iconographic representations of this *princeps*. However, the limitations in this study are evident through the limited consideration taken for the other

⁸ M. Gherardini, *Studien zur Geschichte des Kaisers Commodus*, Verband der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs: Wien, 1974.

⁹ M.R. Kaiser-Raiß, *Die stadtrömische Münzprägung während der Alleinherrschaft des Commodus: Untersuchungen zue Selbstdarstellung eines römischen Kaisers*, P.N. Schulten: Frankfurt, 1980.

¹⁰ P.M.M. Leunissen, *Konsuln und Konsulare in der Zeit von Commodus bis Severus Alexander (180-235 n. Chr.): Prosopographische Untersuchungen zur senatorischen Elite im Römischen Kaiserreich*, J.C. Gieben: Amsterdam, 1989.

¹¹ O. Hekster, *Commodus: an Emperor at the Crossroads*, J.C. Gieben: Amsterdam, 2002.

forms of ancient evidence,¹² which should have been discussed in much greater detail. This study also attempts to defend Commodus, which seems to have been a consistent theme for the majority of modern works that have focused upon his principate. It is the contention of the present study that a complete absolution of Commodus' reign is entirely untenable, and that a more considered approach in relation to the ancient evidence is necessary for any analysis of this controversial historical figure.

Another significant text that has contributed greatly to the present work is *Fronto and Antonine Rome* by Edward Champlin.¹³ This study not only considers the social and political contexts in which Fronto's correspondence was produced by examining the letters themselves, but he also commendably includes a large amount of epigraphic evidence,¹⁴ which is very useful for the analysis of the careers of prominent figures throughout the period. A large part of its focus is upon the aristocratic world of Roman North Africa,¹⁵ from which Fronto himself derived, thus illustrating the rising prominence of political and social figures from this province. Champlin's work here addresses this period, however, from a different angle to the current analysis of Commodus and his principate. All the same, it still provides an excellent source of insight and discussion about the workings of the Antonine imperial *consilium*.¹⁶

Following from these works, the present study is significant because it incorporates the most comprehensive amount of the available evidence in order to evaluate Commodus' principate. While previous studies have had clear focus points within the corpus of ancient sources of evidence, none of them have addressed all of them, which make the present analysis both unique and necessary. It is vital to critically consider as much of the available evidence as possible. While the ancient literary sources have provided the most vivid portrayal of Commodus as an emperor and as a person, it is also one of

¹² H. Elton, "Commodus: an Emperor at the Crossroads (Review)", *JRS* 93, 2003, p. 397.

¹³ E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1980.

¹⁴ A.K. Bowman, "Fronto and Antonine Rome [Review]", *Phoenix* 36.3, 1982, p. 279.

¹⁵ K.R. Bradley, "Fronto and Antonine Rome [Review]", *CJ* 77.4, 1982, p. 370.

¹⁶ R. Mellor, "Fronto and Antonine Rome [Review]", *Journal of Philology* 103.4, 1982, p. 461.

the most affected by authorial subjectivity. Therefore, it is essential to weight these representations against the archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic and sculptural forms of evidence that can either support or reject the views of the ancient authors. All the same, each of these forms of evidence also requires different methods of analysis in order to determine their importance for an understanding of Commodus' principate.

Methods Used within this Study

In order to gain the most accurate and comprehensive understanding of Commodus Antoninus many different sources of information must be utilised. This entails use of the literary sources as well as archaeological, numismatic and epigraphic data. Archaeological evidence, such as the palaces on the Palatine Hill or the Villa of the Quintili on the *Via Appia*, can provide a further insight into both the public and domestic priorities of the emperor. Particularly in relation to the Imperial palace, a statistical method has been used to establish the social priorities of the Emperor,¹⁷ which may in turn cast further light upon the principate of Commodus, when compared to the residences of his predecessors and successors. The numismatic evidence, when used as a corpus, can illustrate the public propaganda that was clearly important to Commodus. The epigraphic evidence can also illustrate aspects of the reign of Commodus, particularly in relation to his associations with the élite members of Roman society in the second half of the 2nd Century AD. This evidence adds significant amounts of information to this study in particular, with there certainly being good examples for his administration, and also in the form of religious dedications, such as the inscription showing a festival to Apollo at the Greek city of Acraephiae,¹⁸ which can also provide some insight into the foreign and religious policies of the Emperor.

It is the numismatic evidence that is particularly important for this study. Numismatic sources provide one of the best portrayals of how Commodus wanted to be seen by the Roman public throughout the Empire, which in turn presents a view of how he may have wanted to (or did) see himself. However, this understanding can only be achieved if the historical and numismatic contexts for each issue are

¹⁷ See G.W. Adams, *The Suburban Villas of Campania and their Social Function*, Archaeopress: Oxford, 2006.

¹⁸ Bockh, Inscr. No. 1625.

taken into consideration; otherwise this can provide an unrealistic image of the significance of various numismatic issues. So in order for the context to be kept firmly in mind these issues have also been compared to the imagery on the coins of his predecessors and successors.

The aim of this study is to make comprehensive use of all of these varying forms of evidence in order to establish that there was some truth behind the portrayal of the ancient literary sources, such as Herodian, Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*, but that it was their lack of understanding for his personal perspectives (or unwillingness to understand them) that resulted in such a biased representation. In addition to this, there was also the appeal of a simple ‘good-bad’ division within such representations. Being able to classify well-known figures in this fashion makes it easier to understand them, be it to an ancient or a modern audience. If a ‘bad’ emperor was evil from the very beginning of their life it makes the unpopularity of their later actions easier to comprehend. All the same, it is evident that individual personalities and their motives for acting in various ways are not always so black and white – in most instances there is a definite grey-scale that also exists between their various decisions. While it is quite clear that Commodus Antoninus may not have been the best candidate for the principate, it is also evident that he was not as consistently malicious as he was often portrayed.

The historical biographies of antiquity, particularly those written in relation to the Imperial household, frequently fall into two categories: ‘good’ emperors and the ‘bad’ emperors. These biographies were mostly intended to educate, instruct and entertain their audiences rather than to give accurate accounts of the emperors as they actually were. The ‘good’ emperors were often portrayed in such a positive light that they were ‘super-humans’ whereas the ‘bad’ emperors had evil, wicked dispositions often from the time of their births that were frequently accompanied by portents and omens of the ensuing wickedness that was about to be inflicted upon the world. The actual motives, intentions and desires of both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emperors would seem to be somewhere between these views that exist between the various pieces of evidence about their reigns.

Overall Objectives of this Study

It is the intention of this work to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Commodus Antoninus that aims to understand this controversial figure, rather than simply defending or impeaching him for his ac-

tions. It is evident that he viewed his role within the political system of Antonine Rome in a different fashion to his predecessors, but this should not be taken as a definitive indictment against him either. This is not intended to be a defence of his actions or to provide an argument that he was in fact a highly efficient administrator and a brilliant general. Instead the intention is to examine the evidence: to view his more extreme actions in their historical and socio-political contexts in order to try and understand them. In his mind, Commodus would have viewed his position as *princeps* as being his birth-right and this would have in turn affected his view of how this power could be wielded. He was the son of the great Marcus Aurelius, which would have further accentuated the importance this birth-right.

Naturally, when it comes down to it all, this study is inflicted with the same difficulties that have beset all previous analyses of Commodus Antoninus: the reliance on the sources and the unfortunate subjectivity that exists in their interpretation. These difficulties are impossible to remove completely, but they have been abridged in this study. By using the widest possible array of evidence it has exhibited both the advantages and disadvantages that existed throughout the reign of Commodus. The second difficulty has been overcome by an acceptance of not only the evidence that complements this theme, but also the evidence that is at odds with it. Unfortunately, history will always be influenced by a degree of interpretation/argument – but it is the variance within its reading that makes it ultimately more personal.

But as mentioned previously, the primary aim of the present study is to consider as much of the extant evidence as possible in order to determine the general efficacy of Commodus' principate. The holistic approach in relation to the available ancient evidence should hopefully minimise the impact of the rather biased literary representations of him, but at the same time these opinions are not entirely ignored either. There must have been some grounding for these negative views of Commodus, so it would be negligent to entirely reject them on the basis of their pro-Senatorial sentiments. In all likelihood, Commodus' rejection (or persecution) of this social group was accentuated by the ultimate comparison that was drawn between himself and his father, Marcus Aurelius, and this would have in turn effected the accounts of this twelve year reign.

With that being recognised, it is also essential to note that Commodus was hardly a fitting character for the principate. His

personal views seem to have brought about some of the more extreme elements within his policies, which in turn encouraged the opinions of him as a megalomaniac. So in many ways, neither the defensive nor the accusatory perspectives in his analysis are accurate, with Commodus' personal qualities as *princeps* probably being somewhere in the middle of these widely contrasting views. All the same, this is difficult to argue – with it being natural to have either a positive or negative opinion of such characters. Nevertheless, it is the intention of this study to simply evaluate the evidence, and to follow it wherever it leads. After all, it would be negligent to take a singular 'one-eyed' approach when considering such a figure and the ensuing reaction to him.

CHAPTER I

THE ANCIENT SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

Any in depth inquiry into the life of an historical figure such as the Emperor Commodus, needs to be undertaken based upon a well-founded understanding of the evidence within its historical context. There are several sources of information that can be used for an analysis of Commodus: the ancient literary texts, the archaeological data stemming from the reign of Commodus, the numismatic evidence and the epigraphic records that are dated from his reign. Each source of information has particular benefit for the insight that they can provide into the features of Commodus' reign, but none of them are perfect sources of historical reality. The best that can be achieved is through the combined use of each source, intending to balance their advantages and disadvantages while keeping the historical context firmly in mind. This requires the use of a varied number of methodologies which necessitates some caution.

If these methods of historiography and archaeological theory are applied consistently, while not giving overt preference to a particular source of data, this will establish an optimal basis for any historical analysis. Naturally certain types of evidence provide a greater amount of detail for any understanding of Commodus, such as the ancient literary and numismatic evidence, but they must still be used in conjunction with the other sources in order to establish the most informed type of analysis possible. Therefore, to clearly evaluate the various sources on the life and reign of Commodus, each has been briefly scrutinised in order to establish their different benefits and difficulties, and thereby providing a solid foundation upon which to analyse this Emperor of Rome.

The Ancient Literary Sources

There are several ancient literary sources that provide evidence on the life and reign of Commodus, but there are six authors in particular who have focused more comprehensively upon him and provide the greatest

amount of information to be analysed. These authors are: Marcus Cornelius Fronto, Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. There is evidence taken from other literary sources than these, but these authors provide the greatest amount of available evidence and need to be analysed both individually and collectively to successfully carry out a comprehensive analysis of Commodus. Each of these authors cover a wide period of time within their works and each of their works were written for different purposes. The intentions behind each piece must be kept in mind in order for each text to be used effectively. The time of composition is also an important factor with the temporal distance, or the lack thereof, having a clear effect upon the reliability of each text. This is also affected by the intended audience for each author, with each biographer or historian being influenced by the disposition of their particular audience. Each of these seven authors has been considered in order of both chronology (Fronto, Dio Cassius, Herodian) and importance to the study (The *Historia Augusta*), followed by a brief overview of other literary sources that provide further important information (Aurelius Victor, the *Epitomator*, Eutropius).

As mentioned previously, the prevailing attitude of these ancient sources was negative towards the Emperor Commodus. Therefore, it is imperative to use their accounts of his reign with some caution, but this does not preclude the importance of their opinions either. The lasting impressions from Commodus' reign are just as important for this study as the facts that are attainable from these various accounts. While this does not mean that the ancient literary sources can be taken as giving a precise portrayal of Commodus in the literal sense, it is still important to recognise that he was not popular within some circles – in fact, he was viewed as a vile, megalomaniac. Even with the senatorial parochialism being taken into consideration, there needed to have been some basis for these negative views to provoke such a fervent response against him. It should also be noted that there is a significant difference in the details of Commodus' behaviour as portrayed by these ancient authors, which highlights the degree of *interpretation* within these accounts. All the same, they all offer some insight not only into Commodus himself, but also how he was perceived by others.

Marcus Cornelius Fronto

Marcus Cornelius Fronto was originally from Numidia,¹⁹ and he may have had some relationship with Plutarch.²⁰ He was clearly a leading

¹⁹ C.R. Haines, "Fronto", *CR* 34, 1920, p. 14.

literary figure during his lifetime,²¹ with his letters with Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus being published. These letters have been dated to the years between AD 161 and 176,²² and they provide some useful evidence for the reign of Marcus Aurelius. This is evident through both his friendly relationship with Marcus and also as his *magister*.²³ This correspondence with the Imperial household has provided evidence that occasionally substantiates some of the episodes mentioned in the other ancient sources. These letters provide a useful insight into not only the principate of Marcus Aurelius, but they also give some indication of the familial relationship between him and his son, Commodus. While this literary source is not the most extensive form of evidence, it does provide some useful insight into this relationship, or at least some indication of how Marcus viewed his parental role. This is of course of great significance when considering how Marcus Aurelius influenced the development of his son and its possible later impact.

Cassius Dio

Cassius Dio was reportedly born around AD 164/5 at Nicaea in Bithynia.²⁴ Dio has also provided a great amount of information concerning the lead up to Commodus' reign, as well as the period of his rule. In structure his text is annalistic, but by the time it focuses upon the Imperial period it becomes essentially biographical,²⁵ focusing upon the major events surrounding each of the successive Roman Emperors. It has been argued that the outlook of Dio was essentially Roman,²⁶ and yet throughout the *Roman History* it is quite evident that he has combined sympathies: both Roman and Greek.²⁷

²⁰ C.J. Webb, "Fronto and Plutarch", *CR* 11.6, 1879, pp. 305-6.

²¹ E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1980, p. 2; F. Portalupi, *Marco Cornelio Frontone*, Giappichelli: Turin, 1961, pp. 103-22.

²² cf. E. Champlin, "The Chronology of Fronto", *JRS* 64, 1974, pp. 136-59.

²³ Champlin 1980, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-130.

²⁴ C.L. Murison, *Rebellion and Reconstruction*, Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1999, p. 6.

²⁵ C. Pelling, "Biographical History? Cassius Dio on the Early Principate", in M.J. Edwards and S. Swain (eds.), *Portraits: biographical representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997, p. 117.

²⁶ Murison 1999, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

²⁷ S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1996, pp. 404-5.

This is exhibited not only through his use of Thucydidean style,²⁸ but also in his insistence about the influence and importance of Greek culture.²⁹ In relation to this research it is pertinent to note this duality in Dio's perspective; this is, for the most part, owing to the religious sympathies that Commodus himself possessed.

Considering that, in all likelihood, Dio probably spent a great amount of time in Rome,³⁰ he would have been intimately aware of the nature of Commodus' reign from an early stage and it is quite clear that his account of Commodus' principate would have been influenced by his own personal experiences. It is also important to note that the use of the *Roman History* by the biographer of the *Historia Augusta* is almost unquestionable.³¹ The divergences between Cassius Dio and the author of the *HA* shows the different intentions behind their works,³² so the impact of Dio's work on the later biographer still should not be doubted (even if it was unintentional). It is also significant that the later author Herodian also used Cassius Dio as a source of information,³³ which further illustrates the importance of his impact within the later historiographical tradition for Commodus Antoninus. Therefore, it is also quite evident that his views affected some of the most extensive sources on Commodus' reign used numerous other sources as well.

All the same, Cassius Dio was also quite selective in what he deemed worthy of comment throughout the *Roman History*.³⁴ While his early rise up the *cursum honorem* would have seemingly occurred during the reign of Commodus,³⁵ it is also evident that his writings were largely focused upon the decline of the Roman Empire with the

²⁸ F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1964, p. 7.

²⁹ Swain 1996, *op.cit.*, pp. 406-7.

³⁰ T.D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta*, Collection Latomus 155, Latomus Revue d'Etudes Latines: Brussels, 1978, p. 81.

³¹ A.R. Birley, "Kolb, Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio und Herodian (Review)", *JRS* 64, 1974, p. 267; J. Straub, "Cassius Dio und die Historia Augusta", *HAC* 1970, 1972, pp. 271-85.

³² Barnes 1978, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁴ L. De Blois, "Volk und Soldaten bei Cassius Dio", *ANRW* 34.3, 1997, p. 2652.

³⁵ Millar 1964, *op.cit.*, pp. 15-16.

onset of his principate.³⁶ As Millar has noted,³⁷ one of the major themes that exists within Dio's portrayal of Commodus is the natural comparison with his father, Marcus Aurelius. For Cassius Dio, Marcus was the 'ideal' *princeps*, which was epitomized in his consideration for justice,³⁸ leniency,³⁹ and piety.⁴⁰ This is in direct contrast to the representation of Commodus in the *Roman History*, whereby he is depicted as being corrupt,⁴¹ impious,⁴² and murderous.⁴³ A similar approach is also noticeable in Herodian,⁴⁴ who is another vital historical source on the Emperor Commodus.

Herodian

One of the most important sources used for any analysis of Commodus is Herodian, who influenced the development of the various biographies in the later *Historia Augusta*.⁴⁵ As with Cassius Dio, Herodian wrote more from the perspective of an eye-witness,⁴⁶ which he emphasised with the claim that he confirmed all of his evidence personally.⁴⁷ It seems apparent that Herodian used Cassius Dio as a source,⁴⁸ which influenced the biographer of the *HA*.⁴⁹ It has already been established that Herodian was a major source for the Severan period in the *Historia Augusta*,⁵⁰ particularly in relation to the *Maximiani Duo* and the *Maximus et Balbinus*.⁵¹ It is important to note that Herodian was primarily used by the *HA* biographer for the period after

³⁶ W. Ameling, "Griechische Intellektuelle und das Imperium Romanum: das Biespiel Cassius Dio", *ANRW* 34.3, 1997, pp. 2472-96.

³⁷ Millar 1964, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

³⁸ Dio 72.6.1-2.

³⁹ Dio 72.28.3-4.

⁴⁰ Dio 72.34.2.

⁴¹ Dio 73.6.1-5.

⁴² Dio 73.16.1-3.

⁴³ Dio 73.4.1.

⁴⁴ Millar 1964, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ G. Alfödy, "Eine Proskriptionsliste in der *Historia Augusta*", *HAC* 1968/9, 1970, pp. 1-11.

⁴⁶ Barnes 1978, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ Herodian 1.1.3, 2.5.

⁴⁸ Barnes 1978, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

⁴⁹ cf. F. Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio und Herodian*, Bonn: *Antiquitas* Reihe 4.9, 1972.

⁵⁰ Barnes 1978, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

⁵¹ T. Mommsen, "Die Scriptorum *Historiae Augustae*", *Hermes* 25, 1890, pp. 260ff.

Marcus Aurelius' death,⁵² which indicates that he was another influential scholar for the period of Commodus' principate and its negative tradition.

As mentioned previously, the portrayal of Commodus by Herodian was largely focused upon his comparison with Marcus Aurelius,⁵³ who was commonly viewed as the 'ideal' *princeps*. The use of Marcus as the initial focus in the text⁵⁴ served to provide a direct contrast with Herodian's account of Commodus' principate, which was shown as excessive and fantastical,⁵⁵ but also entirely deplorable. This representation is accentuated in Section 1.5.5, where Herodian epitomizes the arrogance of Commodus' reign:

ἔδωκε δὲ μετ' ἐκεῖνον ἐμὲ βασιλέα ἢ τύχη, οὐκ ἐπέισακτον, ὥσπερ οἱ πρὸ ἐμοῦ προσκλήτω σεμνυνόμενοι ἀρχῆ, ἀλλὰ μόνος τε ὑμῖν ἐγὼ ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις ἀπεκνήθην, καὶ μὴ πειραθέντα με ἰδιωτικῶν συναργάνων ἅμα τῷ τῆς γαστροῦς προελθεῖν ἢ βασιλείου ὑπεδέξατο πορφύρα, ὅμοῦ δὲ με εἶδεν ἥλιος ἄνθρωπον καὶ βασιλέα.

'To follow him, Fortune has given the empire not to an adopted successor but to me. The prestige of those who reigned before me was increased by the empire, which they received as an additional honor, but I alone was born for you in the imperial palace. I never knew the touch of common cloth. The purple received me as I came forth into the world, and the sun shone down on me, man and emperor, at the same moment.'

Commodus was consistently shown as being excessive,⁵⁶ corrupt,⁵⁷ and murderous,⁵⁸ which was intended to further illustrate the depraved nature of his character. Herodian also explains the anti-senatorial sentiments of Commodus as being a result of a failed assassination attempt,⁵⁹ which may have been intended to absolve this elite group of any anti-Commodus responsibility. All the same, the main advantage of Herodian's account is that he was a contemporary of Commodus, but it is also evident that this did not preclude him from an entirely negative portrayal of this *princeps*. A similar theme is

⁵² See Kolb 1972, *op.cit.*

⁵³ Millar 1964, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

⁵⁴ Herodian 1.1.1-4.8.

⁵⁵ cf. Kolb 1972, *op.cit.*, pp. 25-9.

⁵⁶ Herodian 1.12.4-5.

⁵⁷ Herodian 1.13.8.

⁵⁸ Herodian 1.12.6-9.

⁵⁹ Herodian 1.8.5-7.

also evident in the later biography of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta*.

The *Historia Augusta*

There are many difficulties that face modern scholars when approaching the *HA*, particularly in relation to the question of its authorship. This has been dealt with in numerous studies previously,⁶⁰ and will only be discussed briefly because it is not the prime aim of this examination. It is important for this rather significant question to be addressed. The presence of the six names of supposed authors (Aelius Spartianus, Julius Capitolinus, Vulcacius Gallicanus, Aelius Lampridius, Trebellius Pollio, Flavius Vospiscus) has been difficult to explain, but as argued by Dessau and Syme, the linguistic and stylistic similarities indicate a single author.⁶¹ With this in mind, the dating of the *Historia Augusta* is difficult,⁶² considering that at various stages the biographer addresses the Emperors Diocletian, Constantius and Constantine.⁶³ In response to this, Syme has also argued that an approximate date for its composition should be around AD 395,⁶⁴

⁶⁰ P. White, "The Authorship of the HA", *JRS* 67, 1977, pp. 115-33; J.N. Adams, "The Authorship of the HA", *CQ* 22, 1972, pp. 186-94; "The Linguistic Unity of the HA", *Antichthon* 11, 1977, pp. 93-102; D. Den Hengst, "The Discussion of Authorship", *HAC* 2000, 2002, pp. 187-95; R. Syme, "The Secondary Vitae", *HAC* 1968/9, 1970, pp. 306-7; "The Composition of the *Historia Augusta*: recent theories", *JRS* 62, 1972, pp. 123-33; *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1968, pp. 176-91; I. Marriott, "The Authorship of the *Historia Augusta*: two computer studies", *JRS* 69, 1979, pp. 65-77; D. Sansone, "The Computer and the *Historia Augusta*", *JRS* 80, 1990, pp. 174-7; J.H. Drake, "Studies in the *Historia Augusta*", *AJPh* 20.1, 1899, pp. 40-58; M. Meckler, "The Beginning of the *Historia Augusta*", *Historia* 45.3, 1996, pp. 364-75; T. Honore, "Scriptor *Historiae Augustae*", *JRS* 77, 1987, pp. 156-76.

⁶¹ H. Dessau, 'Über Zeit und Persönlichkeit der Scriptores *Historiae Augustae*', *Hermes* 25, 1889, pp. 378ff; R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1968, pp. 176ff.

⁶² cf. H. Brandt, *Kommentar zur Vita Maximi et Balbini der Historia Augusta*, *Antiquitas* 4.2: Bonn, 1996, pp. 35-38.

⁶³ T.D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta*, Collection Latomus 155: Brussels, 1978, p. 13; "Some Persons in the *Historia Augusta*", *Phoenix* 26.2, 1972, p. 141.

⁶⁴ Syme, 1968, *op.cit.*, pp. 72-9; "Propaganda in the *Historia Augusta*", *Latomus* 37, 1978, p. 175; N.H. Baynes, *The Historia Augusta: its date and purpose*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1926; "The *Historia Augusta*: its date and