THE ORIENT IN HERODIAN*

Abstract

This paper investigates appearances of the Orient in Herodian. Firstly, through the way in which the East, the Orient, and the opposition between West and East, appears and reappears as a literary theme throughout Herodian's *History* and as such triggers its readership's interpretation. Secondly, it analyses Herodian's use of the notion of the Orient as literary signposting in his work: what the author knows, or claims to know, about the Orient, and to what degree the information he provides is reliable.

I: Introduction

Herodian has been much maligned. He was deemed a historical novelist, who chose to liven up his narrative at the cost of historical accuracy, someone 'fluent and superficial' with a 'ubiquitous distaste for facts'. Even those coming to his defence did so warily, accepting that 'no reasonable person ... will argue that Herodian is a historian of any great merit' but that he might be more trustworthy than others held him to be.[1] There have been a few attempts in the past decades to resuscitate Herodian's reputation, yet his *History of Rome* continues to be used with great scepticism. Almost all scholars focussing on the third century prefer the apparently more sophisticated Cassius Dio, though there seems to be some sort of consensus that Herodian's relative trustworthiness is much better for the period after 235 – conveniently coinciding with the cut-off date for Dio's work.[2] Recently, however, Herodian has made a come-back. There have been structural analyses of the text and its narrative structures, contextualisation through a study of third-century conceptions of history, and discussions of Herodian's use of time and space. Consequently, scholarly focus is no longer on whether the text is reliable, but on the historiographical thinking and concerns that animate Herodian's work as a whole. An international group of scholars is currently working on the first historical commentary of Herodian's text, and Herodian scholarship can almost be said to be booming.[3]

* Acknowledgements. Text and translation follow the Loeb edition by C.R. Whittaker (1969-70), with modification where relevant.

[1] Kolb 1972: 160-1; Alföldy 1971a: 69; Syme 1972: 275; Barnes 1972: 62; Bowersock 1975: 230; Sidebottom 1998: 2829-30. Hidber 2006: 45-71 provides a good overview of the previous scholarship.

[2] Potter 2011: 338, already noted by Börm 2008: 74-5.

[3] Zimmermann 1999; Kuhn-Chen 2002; Hidber 2006; Kemezis 2014; Galimberti 2017; id. 2022; cf. also Andrews 2018. A literary commentary is being prepared by Mario Baumann and Maria-Eirini Zacharioudaki. The first volume of the multi-authored historical commentary on Herodian's *History* was published, on book 1,

Important in these recent discussions of Herodian is the understanding that one needs to look at Herodian's work as a whole to understand what the author is doing. Surprisingly enough, this is not what scholars have done so far. To an extent, that is a consequence of the way in which Herodian's text works. It is extremely episodic, made up of clearly divided self-contained scenes that figure like 'historical tableaux'. One can understand each scene without referring to the rest of the work. The detachment is such that only two figures who are not members of the imperial family (the praetorian prefect Plautianus and the Parthian king Artabanus) act as significant players in several scenes, and appear by name in these scenes.[4] Herodian, to all appearances, wrote a sequential 'history of the emperors' looking at how power was won and lost.[5] As a result, analyses of his work have covered the text ruler by ruler, focussing on what Herodian describes in individual episodes and rules, rather than on how the work functions as a whole.

This is ironic, considering the fact that most of our third-century material is fragmentary, and we here have, for once, a complete text at our disposal. As Graham Andrews has thoughtfully formulated: '[There] is a tendency to look at the *History* in terms of its individual episodes. That is, much like Dio's fragmentary narrative is read as if it were coherent, Herodian's fully extant *History* is treated as a collection of fragments'.[6] Yet, looking at Herodian's work as a whole helps us to understand the historian's underlying choices. It has, for instance, been recognised that Herodian took Marcus Aurelius as an exemplary ruler, and judged all his successors against this perfect example. But parallelism plays a much larger part in the work than is commonly recognised. There are evident connections between the various assassination scenes in the work, between the various invasions into Italy, the descriptions of imperial deaths and accessions, and even in the ways in which emperors move and dress.[7] There are, moreover, recognisable guiding principles through which Herodian seems to have set out to describe history.

One of these guiding principles is the key role of geographical contrast between centre and periphery.[8] Throughout the work, there is emphasis on contrasts between Rome and the rest of the empire, and between contenders for rule who fitted into a Roman cultural framework and

by Galimberti 2014. The current authors are working on the commentary on book 3, for which this contribution counts as a Vorstudie.

[4] Bekker-Nielsen 2014: 228-30 on 'historical tableaux'; Andrews 2018: 122.

[5] Hidber 2007: 203, with Hidber 2006: 124-31 for the different scenes.

[6] Andrews 2018: 123.

[7] Pitcher 2012: 280-2; Hekster 2017a; Scott 2018; Laporte and Hekster 2022.

[8] Kemezis 2014: 227-72, esp. 245ff.

those who were from a geographically and culturally different background.[9] This article looks into the ways in which Herodian engages with what was probably the most important Roman periphery, certainly in the third century: that of the *Orient*.[10] How coherent was the author's conception of the East? And did he assume an opposition (politically, culturally) between the East and the rest of the Roman world? Through these questions we foreground the importance of the Orient as an area of interest in Herodian's *History* as a whole.

II: Herodian and an (in)coherent East

The contrasts between Rome and the rest of the empire is emphasised from the very outset of Herodian's work, perhaps not surprisingly considering the author's provincial perspective.[11] Explaining the importance of the period on which he will focus, from Marcus Aurelius to Gordian III, Herodian writes (1.1.4) that in the two hundred preceding years of the principate, 'no such similar succession of reigns' had been revealed, nor such a 'variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars', but neither the amount of 'disturbances among the provincial *ethnē*, and destruction of cities in both Roman territory and many barbarian countries.' It is notably the eastern half of Rome's empire – and also the territory east of that eastern half – which forms the backdrop of large parts of the *History*.

Can 'the East' in these contexts simply be defined as 'not Rome', or does it have its own distinctive characteristics and qualities? Importantly, one needs to pick up on the fact that not all parts of that 'East' are to be considered similar. The area that in the high empire was commonly considered as the East covered Greece, Asia Minor (i.e. the western half of Turkey, or western Anatolia), and the Levant (the Orient proper, the Near East in most current scholarship, starting from eastern Anatolia and going into the Syrian and Mesopotamian lands).[12] Indeed, at three occasions Herodian seems to group together – in good Herodotean fashion[13] – the lands from Asia Minor and the Levant: in 2.8.7, Pescennius Niger's claim to the throne is said to have 'spread like wildfire to all the *ethnē* located on the landmass opposite Europe' (διιπταμένη ἡ φήμη πάντα ἐπῆλθεν ἔθνη ὅσα τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον τῇ Εὐρώπῃ κατοικεῖ); in 2.14.7 Severus amasses a large force realising 'that no small armament was needed

[9] See already Hekster 2017a: 121. Cf. Ruiz del Árbol Moro 2022.
[10] For a recent overview, see Marek 2023.
[11] Hdn 1.2.5. on his work and origin. Outsider perspective: Kuhn-Chen 2002: 251. See below, p.4.
[12] Belayche 2000 has argued that in the Roman period the Syrian Orontes river became a metonym for influences from a Greek world that also encompassed mainland Greece, the Aegean islands and Asia Minor. The main study of the combined eastern Mediterranean provinces of Rome's empire remains Sartre 1991.
[13] For the delineation of Europe and Asia in Herodotus' *Histories*, and the associated claims by the various historical actors, see still Thomas 2002: 75-101. Cf. Purves 2010: 118-158 and van Rookhuijzen 2017 on the ideological underpinnings of Herodotus' topographical descriptions.

to oppose the entire landmass opposite Europe (πρὸς πᾶσαν τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον Εὐρώπῃ) which favoured Niger's cause'; and in 6.2.2 the new Sasanian leader Ardashir (or Artaxerxes as Herodian calls him) staked a claim to 'the entire landmass which lies opposite Europe contained by the Aegean Sea and the Propontis Gulf, the whole of what is called Asia' (πᾶσάν τε τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον Εὐρώπῃ καὶ διαιρουμένην Αἰγαίῳ τε καὶ τῷ πορθμῷ τῆς Προποντίδος, Ἀσίαν τε πᾶσαν καλουμένην).[14]

In this context, Herodian pays particular attention to the location of Byzantium as Europe's outpost looking out over its opposing continent. Niger (3.1.5) was 'anxious to be the first into the city', not only because of its economic benefits but even more because 'it was so powerful' (ὅθεν αὐτὴν οὖσαν δυνατωτάτην), situated where it was 'at the narrowest point of the straits of the Propontis' (κειμένη γὰρ ἐπὶ τῷ στενοτάτῳ τῆς Προποντίδος πορθμῷ).[15] In their plan to divide their father's empire, Caracalla was supposed to station his army at Byzantium, opposite Geta's forces at Chalcedon in Bythinia – an intended division of imperial power that, as will be seen below, was believed to have been anticipated on a divine level by the creation of the Propontis (4.3.6).[16] And when Macrinus (with his son and Caesar Diadumenianus) attempted to escape from Caracalla's pursuing detachment, he almost made it safely to Europe, where it not for 'a contrary wind which blew him back to his fate' shortly before he could reach Byzantium (5.4.11). In these passages, Herodian clearly contrasts all of the East against all of the west, with Byzantium at the centre of the divide.[17]

Although Herodian does not show much concern for the actual contemporary administrative boundaries and uses regional labelling nearly only in a geographical sense,[18] the historian is, in some contexts, aware of an alternative sort of regional differentiation. This may be linked with Herodian's own origin.[19] There seems to be a consensus that Herodian came from one of the eastern provinces. One cannot say much more, especially since the author never explicitly identifies with parts of the world that he described.[20] Still, in his work, there is clear

[14] See also below, p.9 and p.14.
[15] Severus would later take his revenge by starving out Byzantium's population, by destroying all the public monuments in the city and by relegating it to the status of κώμη to the neighbouring town of Perinthus (3.6.9).
[16] See also below, p.12.
[17] As Kemezis 2014: 269 has noted, "this would of course mean that the 'old Greek' heartland would be in the Western zone under Caracalla, while most of the rest of the Hellenistic world was under Geta" and, therefore, a "Roman-Greek cultural divide is not a defining factor in how Herodian portrays the empire."
[18] E.g., Byzantium was attached to Bithynia at least a century earlier, see Jones 1971: 164.
[19] It is commonly assumed that Herodian came from Asia Minor, following Alföldy 1971b, but the evidence is thin. See Bérenger 2022: 222.
[20] Hidber 2006: 18 noted that Herodian rarely uses the first person plural, which would have offered to a Greek readership an opportunity to identify with a Greek author, with Baumann 2022: 79 listing rare occasions where Herodian's narrator does use that form. For Kemezis 2014: 20, he is "a self-effacing narrator who seems

variation in how he describes different parts of the 'East'. Noticeably, Herodian deplores the competition amongst the cities of the provinces in Asia Minor in the immediate aftermath of Severus' victory over Niger.[21] This was, Herodian claims, an age-old sphere rivalry which had spilt over in contemporary enmity (3.2.8): '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.'[22] The East, here, is the Greek cities.

Herodian is also aware of further subdivisions, which feature when he discusses the animosities between the cities in more detail. Herodian refers to the hatred between the two Tetrapolis cities Laodicea and Antioch, and to the animosity between two cities on the Phoenician coast, Tyre and Berytus (3.3.3). These comments seem to link up with Herodian's comments on Greek inter-city struggles, but also connect to his stereotypical framing of regional peoples, again showing subdivisions in what constitutes 'the East'. In this context, much attention has gone to Herodian's characterisation of the people from Syria, especially in the first half of his work – often in order to discuss the author's origin. Herodian, other than is often maintained, is hardly complimentary to Syrians. They may be 'fairly sharp-witted' as are 'all easterners' (3.11.8: οἱ ὑπὸ τὴν ἀνατολὴν ἄνθρωποι, with regard to a military tribune who was τῷ γένει Σύρος), but they are also 'characteristically erratic and always ready to upset established rule' (2.7.9), so fond of their 'daily life of luxury' that they make 'elegant witty remarks' (μάλιστα οἱ τὴν Ἀντιόχειαν οἰκοῦντες, 'particularly the people of Antioch'), rather than take up arms (2.10.6-7). The youth in Antioch, furthermore, may have been enthusiastic for their cause (i.e. support of Niger), but that really summed up their qualities and lack of experience (3.1.3).[23] These stereotypical descriptions of Syrians cohere with what we find in many other near-contemporary texts and may help us write some sort of cultural history of oriental preconceptions – even if in reality no such Syrian identity existed.[24]

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deliberately to avoid any identification with specific elements of the world outside his text." Cf. ibid.: 233-4 and 260-72.

[21] Having described, in 3.2.6, how Niger's army disintegrated over Armenia, Galatia and Asia and how Severus' troops progressed towards Bithynia, Herodian follows this up in 3.2.7 by stating how the reports of his victory caused local strife between the cities in all those provinces. Note Whittaker's slightly different rendering of ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐκείνοις ... ταῖς πόλεσιν with 'in the cities of all the eastern provinces'.

[22] Cf. Kemezis 2014: 268-9, who referred to this passage as "Herodian's only significant discussion of Greeks collectively."

[23] De Blois 2003: 150; Whittakker, *Herodian*, 4-5 n.3 and *ad loc.* (2.7.9, with 187 n.3; 3.11.8 with 337 n.3; 2.10.6-7 with 211 n.2).

[24] Millar 1993: *passim*; Andrade 2013: 314-15; Isaac 2004: 335-51.

Of course, these characterizations must be seen as part of Herodian's well-known tendency to use ethnic stereotypes more widely. In this, he appears to follow historiographical precedent, most prominently that of Herodotus.[25] Other peoples, not exclusively from the East, are likewise sketched in cursory terms. Thus, Egyptians are 'characteristically given to act upon their impulses and be controlled by their emotions' (1.17.6), with the Alexandrians in particular 'extremely frivolous and easily roused for very trivial reasons' (4.8.7). Pannonians are 'tall men of fine physique, natural and fierce fighters, but intellectually dull and slow-witted when it comes to crafty words or subtle actions' (2.9.11). There are more frequent remarks about the people from Syria than from the other groups, but this may have more to do with the way Herodian has organized his work and the point he is trying to make about the problems that the Roman empire was facing in the period he is describing.

Herodian's 'East', then, is a fairly fluid concept, apparently inconsistently applied depending on Herodian's arguments at specific points in his narrative. Yet tracing the way 'Easternness' is ascribed to specific individuals and in specific situations allows us to recognize underlying patterns that help us better understand Herodian's outlook on his world.

III: Herodian, imperial struggles and frontiers of the Orient

One of the main problems which Herodian is describing is the struggle for power between various contestants to the Roman throne, again and again. In these struggles, a few locations stand out. The ways in which Herodian portrays and positions them help us understand the role of the Orient in his writing.

The first location that stands out is Issos. It was a town at the south-eastern edge of Cilicia, located on a strategic coastal plain in what is now known as the Hatay region and built on both sides of a small river, just below the mountains rising up behind it.[26] As it is difficult to steer one's way through those mountains, Issos can very much be considered one of the main border crossings into Syria. It was, of course, here that Alexander the Great defeated the army of the great king Darius III in 333 BC. And it was here too that in AD 194, Pescennius Niger and Septimius Severus disputed who was to rule the Roman world.[27] Describing the 'very broad, long plain at the bay named Issos' (3.4.2), Herodian states that 'nature might have constructed a course for battle, with the ridge of hills that ran around the bay in the shape of an

[25] Bekker-Nielsen 2014: 227.
[26] Cf. Laporte 2021.
[27] On the date, see already the debate between Platnauer 1918 and Harrer 1920. Cf. Potter 2014: 103-4 and 107-8.

amphitheatre and the extensive beach that ran down to the sea.' This is noticeably different from Cassius Dio's text, where the battle is not set at the bay of Issos but further southwards, at a narrow pass through the Amanus mountains known as the Cilician or Syrian Gates.[28] The reason that Herodian describes this site at length becomes clear from the text (3.4.3): 'This is the site, we are told, where Darius too, having fought his last and greatest battle with Alexander, was defeated and captured' (ἐκεῖ φασὶ καὶ Δαρεῖον Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τὴν ὑστάτην καὶ μεγίστην μάχην συμβαλόντα ἡττηθῆναί τε καὶ ἁλῶναι). It may well be that evocation which made the bay of Issos interesting for Herodian as the location where the battle for the Roman throne took place. In any case, he makes much of the parallelism, emphasising how this was the site 'where the people of the northern regions on that occasion, too, defeated the easterners' (τῶν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρκτῴων μερῶν καὶ τότε τοὺς ἀνατολικοὺς νενικηκότων). Severus, therefore, much like Alexander before him, would fight against the East on behalf of 'the people of the northern regions' – expanding the East-West dichotomy by complicating the picture of relations and conflicts between different parts of the ancient world[29] – at a site that had come to epitomise the limit of the Orient.[30] It ought to be noted that, whereas here Herodian portrays Severus as coming from the North/West, later in his narrative he makes Severus as a representative from the East against Clodius Albinus' western perspective, which reflects on the changing perspective and the effect that the historical process can have on East-West affiliations.

A second crucial site in Herodian's description of imperial struggles is formed by the Taurus mountains. They appear as an explicit East-West divide. As part of his preparations for the show-down with Severus, Niger 'issued orders that the passes and heights of the Taurus mountains should be barricaded with strong walls and fortifications, since he believed that this inaccessible range was an important barrier along the eastern routes' (3.1.4). Herodian then focuses on the geography: 'The Taurus range lies between Cappadocia and Cilicia, dividing the *ethnē* in the North from those in the East' (ὁ γὰρ Ταῦρος μεταξὺ ὢν Καππαδοκίας τε καὶ Κιλικίας διακρίνει τά τε τῇ ἄρκτῳ καὶ τὰ τῇ ἀνατολῇ ἔθνη προσκείμενα). At an earlier stage in the conflict between Niger and Severus, the former had suffered defeat at Cyzicus, in the northwest of Asia Minor.[31] Fleeing from Cyzicus, some of Niger's forces 'made for the foothills

[28] Dio 74 (75) 7.1. It is noticeable how Dio's text seems to be preferred in modern scholarship over Herodian's, notwithstanding clear problems within Dio's account. Cf. Kolb 1972: 70-7 on 'die Schlacht bei den kilikischen Toren zwischen Septimius Severus und Pescennius Niger und der Exkurs über die Stadt Byzanz bei Dio und Herodian'.

[29] Note how elsewhere in Herodian, the North features as an area of barbarism and desolation, for instance when stressing the foreignness and inhospitable terrain of Britain in the context of Septimius Severus' death at York: Hekster 2017a: 126; Pitcher 2012: 270-272.

[30] See below, p.12.

[31] Birley 1988: 109-110. Cf. Chrysanthou 2022: 199.

of Armenia, others for the territory of Galatia and Asia, in an attempt to cross the Taurus mountains before the enemy and have the protection of the fortifications there' (3.2.6). Weather conditions are recorded to have been notably harsh in the Taurus, as when Severus' forces suffered in the mountains (3.3.7) but were eventually aided by snow-caused streams transforming into potent torrents which demolished Niger's defences. Much later in his work, Herodian similarly describes the climate in Mesopotamia as different from that in the rest of the Roman empire, forcing Severus Alexander to cut short his Persian campaign (6.6.2): 'His whole army was suffering from sickness, but particularly the Illyrian troops, who were seriously ill and dying because they were used to a healthy, wintry climate and normally ate more food.' Many soldiers are said to have died on the return trip from Media, 'several suffering mutilation of the hands and feet from the wintry conditions of the country' (6.6.3), which, for Adam Kemezis, is "perhaps the clearest indication that Alexander's problem is locational."[32]

If Herodian marks the transition from West to East by Byzantium, it seems that Issos and the Taurus mountains are used by the author to denote the entrance into Syria, into the Orient proper, as it were, going from the East into the Near East. Even further eastwards, another (double) frontier appears, separating that part of the Orient which had become part of Rome's empire from a more 'barbarian' Orient: the Euphrates and the Tigris. Herodian often (though not always) links them in one phrase, and sometimes simply groups them together as 'the rivers'. Herodian's point in these cases seems to be that across the river, or the rivers, one reaches 'barbarian territory'. Thus, Severus Alexander is said to have 'prepared to cross the rivers and invade barbarian territory with his army' (6.4.7: παρασκευαζομένου τε τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ διαβῆναι τοὺς ποταμοὺς ἔς τε τὴν βάρβαρον γῆν τὸν στρατὸν διαγαγεῖν)[33] and later sends out a column of soldiers 'to spy out the eastern parts of the barbarian territory (πρὸς τὰ ἑῷα μέρη τῆς βαρβάρου γῆς βλέπουσαν), where reports say the rivers Tigris and Euphrates at their confluence drain into extensive marshes, making them the only rivers whose mouths are concealed' (6.5.2). Already earlier in the *History*, in the context of Niger's defeated army, Septimius Severus decides to offer amnesty to 'fugitive soldiers [who] were crossing the Tigris and deserting to the barbarians' (3.4.7). Herodian links this mass departure of Roman soldiers, many of whom did not return following their flight, directly to developments within the barbarian armies, arguing (3.4.8) that the crossing of the Tigris by these soldiers was 'a major

[32] Kemezis 2014: 249. Cf. Laporte 2021.
[33] Regardless of whether the emperor actually crossed the Tigris as well as the Euphrates in this particular instance, see Whittaker's Loeb edition, *ad loc.*, n.1.

reason for the later development of these barbarians' skill in close-quarter fighting against the Romans. Up to this time their only tactical knowledge was of mounted archery ...'.[34]

Although the two rivers formed the divide between Roman and barbarian territory, they did not end the sphere of Roman influence. 'Satraps and kings from beyond the Tigris and the Euphrates', for instance, 'sent messages of congratulations and promises of assistance, if it were needed' (2.8.8) after Pescennius Niger was proclaimed emperor at Antioch. This explicit reference to support from the barbarian Orient helps Herodian to set up Niger as a 'foe from the East'. The rivers indicate where the 'true' East begins, and crossing it is a sign of dangerous ambition from those in charge on the eastern side. Hence, Severus Alexander needs warning by the governors of Syria and of Mesopotamia about the rise of the Sasanians, when Artaxerxes (Ardashir) had killed the last Arsacid king Artabanus and 'was causing unrest by refusing to be contained by the river Tigris and was crossing the banks which were the boundary of the Roman empire. Mesopotamia was being overrun and Syria threatened' (6.2.1). The Sasanian king staked a claim to what he considered his ancestral belongings.[35] Herodian has him express the sentiment emphatically through an embassy consisting of 'four hundred of his tallest Persians, decked in gold and sumptuous clothing and equipped with horses and bows' (6.4.4). They declared (6.4.5) that the great king wished the Roman emperor 'to abandon Syria and the whole of Asia opposite Europe (ἀφίστασθαι ... Συρίας τε πάσης τε Ἀσίας τῆς Εὐρώπῃ ἀντικειμένης), allowing Persian rule to extend as far as Ionia and Caria and the peoples contained within the Aegean-Pontus seaboard; for these were the traditional possessions of Persians' (εἶναι γὰρ αὐτὰ Περσῶν προγονικὰ κτήματα) – Herodian once more applying a Herodotean *topos*. It is clear that eastern rulers crossing the rivers posed an immediate threat to Rome.

A final case study in how Herodian geographically locates imperial campaigns in the East is the city of Hatra.[36] In fact, the siege of Hatra is the linchpin on which Herodian's account of Severus' Parthian campaign turns. Following his description of the emperor's botched attempt to capture the stronghold, he reports how, on their way back from the abortive siege, Severus' forces are carried down the river by the current to the opposite shores and end up -

[34] This matches well the reference to Parthian and other Oriental archers throughout the text, such as the description of Commodus' personal trainers as 'the finest Parthian archers' (1.15.2). The only other comment Herodian makes about the army of the Orientals is that the Persian military 'was not an organized standing force' (6.7.1), repeating a point made previously in 6.5.3: 'the barbarians do not have a paid army like the Romans, nor do they have permanent, standing garrisons, trained in military techniques. Instead there is a general muster of all males, and sometimes women, too, when the king gives the order.'

[35] Hdn 6.2.2, on which see also above, p.3, and below, p.14.

[36] See Kaizer forthcoming on the way in which Herodian and Dio describe the botched attempts by first Trajan and then Severus to capture Hatra.

contrary to the emperor's intention - near the royal seat in Ctesiphon,[37] where the Parthian king is described as 'inactive' and 'not expecting any trouble' (Hdn 3.9.9: ἡσύχαζεν οὖν μηδέν τι δεινὸν προσδεχόμενος). Concerning the description of the extensive Severan siege of Hatra itself, Herodian overlooks, as so often in his work, the actual military detail and does not provide the reader with information on the various stages of the battle. In contrast to Dio's account (in Xiphilinus' epitome, where there is reference to two separate attacks), in Herodian's text only one siege is mentioned, and as has been noted set within a different chronological framework.[38]

If Herodian's text lacks military detail, a lot can be learnt about how the author positions the siege of Hatra within his *History*. Earlier in the text, Herodian had recorded how 'letters were also sent (by Niger) to the kings of Parthia and Armenia and Hatra requesting alliances (against Septimius Severus)' (3.1.2), and that the Hatrene king Barsemius responded by sending a contingent of archers (3.1.3). As soon as the situation in the eastern provinces had been settled, Severus planned for a revenge mission, 'to attack the king of Hatra and invade Parthia, since he alleged that both were guilty of alliance with Niger' (3.5.1). As Niger in Herodian's text was framed as a 'foe from the East', so revenging himself on the East becomes, for Herodian, Severus' major motive for his eastern campaign.

Preparations got shelved until Severus had managed to safeguard control over the whole empire. By now, however, his apparent motives had changed: he set out for the East, in Herodian's words (3.9.1), 'using the friendship that Barsemius, king of Hatra, had shown for Niger as an excuse', but in reality because 'he wanted to win a reputation for himself not just for winning a civil war over Roman armies (which he was ashamed to celebrate as a triumph), but also by raising monuments for victories against the barbarians'. Hatra in this manner becomes a symbol for an eastern victory; Severus had crossed the Issos against Niger, and now started to besiege cities in the eastern heartland. But the East was not so easily conquered. Arriving at Hatra, Severus found a city 'encircled by enormous, strong walls and teeming with archers' (3.9.4: τείχει μεγίστῳ καὶ γενναίῳ περιβλημένη, πλήθει τε ἀνδρῶν τοξοτῶν ἀκμάζουσα). Archaeological remains support the claim of the fortifications, as they do – through the discovery of a ballista at Hatra[39] – the notion that 'every kind of siege engine was used against the walls and no technique of siege operation was left untried' (3.9.4) – a point also emphasized by Dio (76.11.1). There is, however, no external support for Herodian's claim

[37] A detail which also, with Chrysanthou 2022: 212, 'serves the purpose of characterizing this success as a powerful counterweight to Severus' defeat in the siege of Hatra.'
[38] Dio 76.10.1 (first siege) and 76.11-12 (second siege); Hdn 3.9.3-6. Cf. Isaac 2013; Sommer 2013; Kaizer forthcoming.
[39] Baatz 1978.

that the Hatrene defence mechanism included 'clay containers filled with little flying insects that had poisonous stings, which were then fired off. When these missiles fell on to Severus' army, the insects crawled into the eyes and exposed parts of the skin of the soldiers without being noticed and stung them, causing severe injuries'.[40] Herodian, clearly, portrays Hatra as exotic and alien, with even the weather helping the defenders. Ultimately, the imperial soldiers 'could not stand the stifling atmosphere caused by the excessive heat of the sun' (3.9.6: καὶ μὴ φέροντες τὸ πνιγῶδες τοῦ ἀέρος διὰ τὸ ὑπερβάλλον τοῦ ἡλίου πῦρ) and, succumbing to these conditions, withdrew.

Herodian attempting to sketch Hatra as outlandish and remote as possible may also be a reason for his extraordinary geographical claim when he records Severus' movements before the emperor arrived 'in the territory of the Hatreni' (3.9.3): 'After crossing Mesopotamia and the territory of Adiabene, Severus hurried on to Arabia Felix (ἐπέδραμε καὶ τὴν εὐδαίμονα Ἀραβίαν).' Arabia Felix is, of course, the Yemen, and as has been seen above with reference to 'the people of the northern regions', here the East-West opposition seems once more enriched by a North-South dimension.[41] The geographical statement, erroneous as it appears, is furthermore made explicit by Herodian's specification that this name (Felix, εὐδαίμων) 'comes from the fact that the country produces aromatic herbs, which we use for perfumes and incense' (φέρει γὰρ πόας εὐώδεις, αἷς ἀρώμασι καὶ θυμιάμασι χρώμεθα). But there is nothing in our sources to suggest that Severus ever went as far south as the Yemen.[42] The royal city of Hatra was located in the north Mesopotamian Jazirah region, and Aramaic inscriptions from Hatra itself make clear that the surrounding territory and its inhabitants were referred to as 'Arabya' and 'Arabs', with the local monarchs styling themselves as 'king of Arab' or 'king of the Arabs', which might explain Herodian's error.[43]

Severus certainly was aware of the correct terminology, as he seems to have taken the victory title *Arabicus* in 195 following success early on in his campaign across the Euphrates; the victory title was, to be more precise *Parthicus Arabicus*: it was neither Parthicus on its own, nor Arabicus on its own, "emphasising that the peoples who had surrendered were vassals of

[40] 3.9.5: σκεύη τε κεράμου πεποιημένα πληροῦντες πτηνῶν, μικρῶν μὲν ἰοβόλων δὲ θηρίων, ἐπέβαλλον αὐτοῖς· τὰ δὲ ἐμπίπτοντα ταῖς ὄψεσι, καὶ εἴ τί που παραγεγύμνωτο τοῦ σώματος, λανθάνοντα καὶ παρεισιόντα τιτρώσκοντά τε αὐτοὺς ἐλυμαίνετο. Dio 76.11.4, instead, specifies how the Hatrene defenders hurled down upon the Roman besiegers poisonous mixtures (τὸ νάφθα τὸ ἀσφαλτῶδες), but at 68.31.4 – in the context of a previous unsuccessful siege of Hatra under Trajan – he refers to insects bothering the Roman soldiers as unconnected to the siege itself and linked rather to the extreme climatological conditions of the town's desert location. Cf. Kaizer forthcoming.

[41] See above, p.7.

[42] For Severus' imperial itinerary, see Halfmann 1986: 50-1 and 216-23.

[43] Hauser 1998: 515-6 for all references. See also Cameron 2019: 30-35 on Hatra's place in the 'borderland'.

the Parthians".[44] Perhaps, then, Herodian's positioning of Hatra as extremely eastern can be linked with Severan notions. The Arch of Septimius Severus on the forum in Rome, after all, presented the emperor's great victory over the East with stereotypical barbarian imagery – notwithstanding the fact that his in-laws came from an indigenous town in the Levant. And the narrative on the Arch may even have incorporated the siege of Hatra in its panels.[45]

IV: Herodian, the East and alternative empires

Herodian, apparently, intermittently uses 'Orient' as shorthand for an alien (and potentially hostile) East, as a series of contested locations, and as a varied interstruggling part of the empire. Matters become even more complicated when taking into account formulations, and the way in which specific episodes are placed in a larger narrative framework. Clearly, as has been seen, East and North/West are used to contrast Niger and Severus, as illustrated by the sequential frontiers crossed by Severus, or the reference to the battle of the Issos. Herodian even explicitly defines Niger's troops as 'those from the East' (3.2.2: τῶν ἀνατολικῶν), whose hopes were shattered in a single blow by Severus' Illyrian troops.

This division between East and West returns when Herodian discusses Severus' sons. In a much-discussed scene, Geta and Caracalla discuss dividing the empire in the presence of their mother: 'Antoninus was to have all the provinces in Europe, and Geta was to receive all the landmass which lies opposite, known as Asia. This was the division of continents, they said, which had been foreseen even by the gods when they created the Propontis flowing between them. It was decided that Antoninus should station his army at Byzantium and Geta at Chalcedon in Bithynia.'[46] The geographical split is further articulated by the brothers' intention 'that all the senators who came from Europe should remain [i.e., in Rome], but that those from the East [lit. 'from there', ἐκεῖθεν] should go with Geta.'[47] The passage has been used to date Herodian's work,[48] but, more importantly in the context of the present discussion, it is

[44] Birley 1988: 116.

[45] The classic study of the Arch remains Brilliant 1967. See also Hinterhöller 2008; Lloyd 2013; Gorski and Packer 2015: 133-46. The inclusion of the siege of Hatra on the Arch's panels has been claimed by Rubin 1975 (contra Lusnia 2006: 277-83) and more recently by Lloyd 2013, though with reference to different panels. Both scholars suggested diplomatic achievements behind the alleged inclusion of Hatra on the Arch.

[46] Hdn 4.3.5-6: καὶ τὰ μὲν ὑπ' Εὐρώπην πάντα ἔχειν τὸν Ἀντωνῖνον, τὴν δὲ ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον Ἀσίαν τε καλουμένην πᾶσαν Γέτᾳ παραδοθῆναι· οὕτω γὰρ ἔλεγον καὶ θείᾳ τινὶ προνοίᾳ τὰς ἠπείρους διῃρῆσθαι τῷ Προποντίδος ῥεύματι. ἤρεσκε δὲ τὸν μὲν Ἀντωνῖνον ἐπὶ τῷ Βυζαντίῳ ἱδρῦσαι στρατόπεδον, τὸν δὲ Γέταν ἐν Χαλκηδόνι τῆς Βιθυνίας.

[47] Hdn 4.3.6: ἐδόκει τε τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς τοὺς μὲν Εὐρωπαίους πάντας ἀπομεῖναι, τοὺς δὲ ἐκεῖθεν ἀπελθεῖν σὺν τῷ Γέτᾳ.

[48] Alföldy 1971b: 219, arguing that Herodian was the first imperial writer to discuss such as territorial division, and – not being an original thinker – must have been inspired by a historical reality; that is, the military situation

illuminating to compare it with the way in which Herodian has characterized the struggle between Severus and Niger. The similarities include a key role for Byzantium; armies facing one another; and one ruler holding all of the West whilst the other held all of the East – thus including the explicit division of their respective supporters, concerning Caracalla and Geta as well as with regard to Severus and Niger: Herodian states that Niger had recruited senators from the East (3.8.6: ἐξ ἀνατολῆς – in contrast to those coming from the opposite part of the empire who supported Albinus) and describes Niger's support in 2.8.7 as coming from all 'the territory which lies opposite' (τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον) of Europe, thus using the precise same wording as when he discusses the divisions between Severus' two sons in 4.3.5.[49]

Even the emphasis on the Issos in the civil war may be relevant here, in light of Herodian's pronounced emphasis on Caracalla's Alexander imitation, of which he lists more examples than other authors.[50] Caracalla, like his father, would win this struggle for power. In many ways, Herodian characterizes him like a perverted version of Severus – and it appears that the East-West division signposts this, rather than anything else.

In this context it is useful to briefly return to the two earlier-mentioned non-imperial figures to appear by name in more than one scene. The first is Plautianus, Severus' influential Praetorian Prefect and Caracalla's father-in-law. He is dominant in a long section of book 3, in which he plots against the emperor, and is subsequently mentioned twice, noticeably as the father of Caracalla's wife. The second figure is Artabanus, the Parthian king who figures in the wars of Severus, Caracalla and Macrinus. In the passages in which these two individuals figure, Herodian regularly emphasises betrayal, linked to the relation between fathers (in-law) and sons, and focusing on the Orient.[51]

Artabanus figures prominently in the section that deals with Caracalla's proposal to marry the king's daughter.[52] The story also appears in Dio, who simply notes (79.1.1) that Artabanus recognised the offer as a subterfuge and refused it, but Herodian dedicates a lot more space to the report (4.10.1-11.8). When Caracalla is rebuffed, he presses on, and Artabanus ultimately gives in. Herodian then describes how Caracalla comes to claim his wife, crosses

during the reign of Valerian and Gallienus: 'die erste De-facto-Zweiteilung des Armeekommandos im Westen und im Osten im Jahre 253'; Sidebottom 1997: 274-5.

[49] Zimmermann 1999: 204-5.

[50] Herodian 4.8.1-3 with Whittaker's notes in the Loeb edition, *ad loc.*, and Zimmermann 1999: 209 n.270. Cf. Levick 1969; Millar 1993: 142-3; Baharal 1994; Kühnen 2008: 176-8; Langford 2017.

[51] Plautianus: 3.10-12; 3.13.2; 4.6.3; Artabanus: 3.9.11; 4.10-11; 4.14.3-15.9; 6.2.1. A list of not even forty names to figure in Herodian's text can be found in Sidebottom 1998: 2790-1.

[52] Cf. Baumann 2022, who cleverly discussed Herodian's account of Caracalla's activities with regard to the Parthians, and indeed the emperor's reign in general, as an example of how Herodian produces a 'dramatic historiography' to interact with his readership.

'the rivers without opposition' and how Artabanus comes 'to greet him as the bridegroom of his daughter and his own son-in-law' (δεξιούμενος νυμφίον μὲν τῆς θυγατρὸς γαμβρὸν δὲ αὑτου) – a show of welcome which the King of Kings soon came to regret (4.11); with the Parthian soldiers relaxing and anxious to get a good view of the proceedings, Caracalla 'gave the signal to order his army to set upon the barbarians and kill them' (4.11.5).

Caracalla abused the situation and treacherously tried to kill the king, much in the way his own father-in-law Plautianus, the other prominent non-emperor in Herodian's work, had tried to treacherously kill Severus at Rome. The king himself managed to escape, but his forces suffered a massacre. Afterwards, Caracalla 'marched throughout the length and breadth of the Parthian territory (ἐπὶ πολὺ τῆς Παρθυαίων γῆς), until even his soldiers were exhausted from looting and killing, and he returned to Mesopotamia' (4.11.8). He then 'sent a dispatch to the Senate and the Roman People announcing the subjugation of the entire East (πᾶσαν ἀνατολὴν κεχειρῶσθαι) and the submission of everyone in the kingdom east of Mesopotamia' (4.11.8). Although Senators are said to have realised this victory was built on treachery, they voted Caracalla 'full triumphal honours out of fear and flattery' (4.11.9).

Herodian again positions Caracalla as an 'anti-Severus': Septimius Severus had been prolific in war with major victories (though not without an element of good fortune), but much less at ease at Roman politics, where Plautianus almost outwitted him;[53] Caracalla used Plautianus' tricks to gain a fake victory in the East. The passage, like Caracalla's and Geta's division of empire, has been used to date Herodian's text, through parallels with Shapur's capture of Valerian in AD 260.[54] Yet, Herodian's purpose in the passage makes more sense as a way to characterise Caracalla by looking at his abject behaviour in the East, rather than as a reference to contemporary politics.

The same contrast between trickery and honourable war is at issue when Herodian puts forward Artabanus by name for the penultimate time, launching an attack on Roman troops under Macrinus (4.14.3-4.15.9). In a speech to his soldiers, Macrinus explicitly recognises this as a reaction 'to our aggression and violation of a treaty in stirring up a war in time of complete peace'. Again there is massive slaughter in the text, though this time not in the form of a massacre but through prolonged warfare. It only ends when Artabanus is made aware that Caracalla is dead. Only then a new treaty can be forged.

Artabanus' name is mentioned for the last time at the beginning of book 6, when Herodian discusses the rise of the Sasanians, by stating that in 231: 'unexpected dispatches

[53] On Severus in Rome, Hekster 2017a.
[54] Sidebottom 1997: 275, with Potter 1990: 331-7.

from the governors of Syria and Mesopotamia revealed that Artaxerxes, the Persian king, had conquered the Parthians and seized their eastern empire, killing Artabanus, who was formerly called the Great King and wore the double diadem'.[55] Again, unlawful disposal of a monarch, and, again, war would follow. In the subsequent paragraph, as has been seen above, Artaxerxes is said to have wished to recover 'the entire landmass which lies opposite of Europe (πᾶσάν τε τὴν ἀντικειμένην ἤπειρον Εὐρώπῃ) separated from it by the Aegean Sea and the Propontic Gulf, the whole of what is called Asia' (6.2.2).[56] The formulation is reminiscent of that describing the planned division of empire between Caracalla and Geta. Herodian then writes how Artaxerxes' claim was based on the past in which Persians held those areas 'up to Darius, the last of the Persian kings ... so it was his right to restore and reunite the whole empire as it had once been'. Artaxerxes subsequently attacked Mesopotamia. This forced Severus Alexander to stand up against 'the bold action of the barbarian in the East' (6.3.1: τὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀνατολὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ βαρβάρου τολμώμενα), and Herodian has the emperor address his men by first stating how Arataxerxes had 'murdered his own master, Artabanus' (6.3.5), before encouraging the older soldiers by reminding them of the triumphs they had won against the barbarians 'under Severus or Antoninus, my father' (6.3.6). The mention of fatherhood is striking. Herodian had introduced the claim that Alexander was Caracalla's bastard son earlier in the text (5.7.3), explicitly linking it to Alexander's being renamed because of his alleged father's preference for Alexander the Great.[57]

In all these cases, Herodian discusses Artabanus and 'the territory opposite of Europe' in a context of betrayal and unification and annexation of empire. There are, furthermore, references to Alexander, Darius and fatherhood and to both Septimius Severus and Caracalla. It seems, then, that in these various episodes, the Parthians, Persians and 'the East' were shorthand for alternative empires and illustrate imperial behaviour, exemplified through interaction with the only other major empire that was around. There are continuous references in the passages to bringing two empires together, splitting up the Roman empire, cooperation and betrayal. This has a bearing on how one should interpret the episodes between Severus and Niger, and between Severus and Plautianus, which may well have been composed to anticipate the struggles between Caracalla and Geta, Caracalla and Artabanus, and perhaps even Severus Alexander and Artaxerxes.

[55] Hdn 6.2.1, 6.2.7, 6.3.5.
[56] See also above, p.3 and p.8.
[57] Caracalla's fictitious fatherhood of Severus Alexander was not invented by Herodian, as we know from Alexander's coinage: Hekster 2015: 62-3 with fig.26. For the earlier, identical claim regarding Elagabalus, see Hdn 5.3.10.

V: Herodian and Oriental religion

In various places of the text, Herodian employs parallelism to portray the Orient as the realm of an alternative empire. In other passages, however, the 'otherness' of the East is emphasised in different terms. Prime amongst those is the notion of a divine world from outside the empire (especially the East) that became integrated within a wider Roman framework.[58] This can be illustrated through a number of examples.

Much discussed is Herodian's account of the Roman festival in honour of the Mother of the Gods, during which the soldier Maternus made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Commodus.[59] The reference is followed by a long excursus in which the author explains the reason for the goddess' popularity in Rome, 'in view of the lack of knowledge about this among some Greeks' (1.11.1). It is one of a number of places in the text where Herodian seems to address the inhabitants of the eastern half of the empire – the presentation to a non-Roman audience of a non-Roman cult incorporated into Rome's state religion.[60] Having learnt from an oracle that Rome's empire would last and grow if the goddess of Pessinous was brought to the imperial city, Roman ambassadors were sent to Phrygia and returned with the statue of the deity. 'When the statue had been transported by ship and reached the mouth of the river Tiber … some supernatural force made the vessel run aground' (1.11.3). A sandbar obstructed any attempts to tow the ship off, and in the end a Vestal Virgin charged with adultery came to the rescue: 'she took off her sash and threw it on to the prow of the ship with a prayer that, if she were still an innocent virgin, the ship would respond to her' (1.11.4). Herodian's late version of the story takes its origin in passages from Livy (29.10.4-6, 14.5-14) and Ovid (*Fasti* 4.247-348) where the lady, not a Vestal Virgin but a *matrona*, is named as Claudia Quinta. The cult statue (ἄγαλμα) is said to be διοπετὲς, 'that fell from Zeus', with Herodian presenting an etymology of Pessinous from the image's fall out of the sky (1.11.1), but his account lacks the explicitness of Livy (29.11.7) that it concerned a sacred stone.[61]

[58] See e.g. Ando 2008: 100-5. On the scholarly notion of 'Oriental cults', propagated since Cumont, see e.g. Bonnet, Rüpke and Scarpi 2006, and on the perceived unity of religious life in the Levantine lands, see Kaizer 2006.

[59] Hdn 1.10.5-7, with Galimberti 2014: 113-6.

[60] Hekster 2017b: 18-22.

[61] Or, in splendid detail, the much later text by Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 7.49: *Si verum locuntur historiae neque ullas inserunt rerum conscriptionibus falsitates, adlatum ex Phrygia nihil quid aliud scribitur missum rege ab Attalo, nisi lapis quidam non magnus, ferri manu hominis sine ulla inpressione qui posset, coloris furvi atque atri, angellis prominentibus inaequalis, et quem omnes hodie ipso illo videmus in signo oris loco positum, indolatum et asperum et simulacro faciem minus expressam simulatione praebentem*, 'If the histories tell the truth, and do not insert what is false in their accounts of events, nothing else truly is said to have been brought from Phrygia, sent by King Attalus, than a stone, not large, which could be carried in a man's hand without any pressure – of a dusky and black colour – not smooth, but having little corners standing out, and which today we all see put in that image instead of a face, rough and unhewn, giving to the figure a countenance by no means lifelike.' Cicero

This excursus on the Mother of the Gods is noticeable since Herodian does not usually spent much time on religious aspects. In his account of the siege of Hatra, for example, he simply states (3.9.6) that 'the soldiers could not stand the stifling atmosphere caused by the excessive heat of the sun and began to fall ill and die' – failing to make a link with the main cult at Hatra of the Sun god in the way that Cassius Dio does.[62] Herodian misses an opportunity here to bring in providence, though he does emphasise, in his account of mountain torrents destroying Niger's fortifications in the Taurus range, how 'Severus' army was delighted at the event and their spirits rose because they believed they were being guided by divine providence' (3.3.9).

Notions of Oriental religion shimmer through Herodian's account of Caracalla, whom he describes as leaving 'for Pergamum in Asia, where he was anxious to have treatment at the shrine of Asklepios' (4.8.3-4), whence he travelled to Ilium.[63] Likewise, Herodian discusses Caracalla's motives to visit the moon temple in Carrhae-Harran, on his way to which he famously found his death. The passage foreshadows the negative consequences of his successor's infatuation with Oriental religion, functioning as an 'overture to book 5 of the *History*, where misplaced veneration for an oriental deity will have disastrous consequences … for the whole empire.'[64]

Oriental religion is at the core of Herodian's account of the young emperor Elagabalus. Herodian places almost all the emperor's actions in the context of religious excess, paying only marginal attention to his political measures, most of which seem derived from Dio's account.[65] The introduction of book 5 focuses on the ancestral god from the emperor's hometown of Emesa (nowadays Homs on the Orontes). This is the most specific discussion by Herodian of a so-called 'Oriental god'. He introduces his readers to the 'huge temple built [at Emesa], richly

(*Har. resp.* 24: the Megalesia games as performed *in ipso Matris Magnae conspectu*, 'under the very eyes of the Magna Mater') and Ovid (*Fasti* 4.345: *ipsa sedens plaustro*, '[the goddess] herself seated in a wagon') are among those authors who refer to the cult statue of the goddess as anthropomorphic. An altar from the first century AD, dedicated 'to the Mother of the Gods and to the saviour ship' (*CIL* 6.492: *matri devm et navi salviae <salviae>*), shows Claudia Quinta (not identified as such) pulling in the boat which carries the anthropomorphic statue of Magna Mater, see Beard, North and Price 1998: 45-6, 2.7b. Cf. esp. Ando 2008: 25-6 and 41-2; Satterfield 2012: 382-3. On the introduction of the cult of the Great Mother in Rome in general, see Gruen 1990: 5-33; Burton 1996.

[62] Dio 68.31.2 states, in the context of Trajan's reign but with reference also to Septimius Severus, that a siege of Hatra was made impossible both by climatological factors and by the fact that the city was consecrated to the Sun-god. At 76.12.2, he attributes Hatra's great fame to the vast number of offerings which were made there to the Sun-god.

[63] This forms part of a larger section describing the emperor's infatuation with Alexander the Great and with Achilles.

[64] Bekker-Nielsen 2014: 228. Cf. Hekster and Kaizer 2012: 102, who argued for a 'combination of religious notions and individual, 'political' needs and conveniences which would have made it impossible for this emperor *not* to go to a deity whose local cult stood for total, universal power.'

[65] Zimmermann 1999: 232-3. Already Syme 1971: 119.

ornamented with gold and silver and valuable stones' and to the cult which 'extended not just to the local inhabitants', but which attracted the attention of 'satraps of all the adjacent territories and barbarian princes [who] tried to outdo each other in sending costly dedications to the god every year' (5.3.4-8). The god was worshipped in the shape of a conical stone and the later Elagabalus, then still known as Bassianus, served as one of his priests, 'dancing at the altars to the music of flutes and pipes and all kinds of instruments in the barbarian fashion'. On his way to Rome a few paragraphs later (5.5.3-7), stopping at Nicomedia for the winter, the boy 'began straight away to practise his ecstatic rites and go through the ridiculous motions of the priestly office belonging to his local god in which he had been trained.' Rather than adhering to his grandmother's advice and dress and behave in more appropriate, Roman fashion, the young emperor decided to prepare the Senate ahead of his arrival and commissioned a painting of himself as priest of Elagabal and of the aniconic cult image itself.

Herodian's description of the actual religious excesses once in Rome, which follows from 5.6.1, focusses on the emperor marrying a Vestal Virgin, and – in a parallel ceremony to his own outrageous wedding – on his arrangement of a holy marriage between his own god and an appropriate goddess (first the classical Minerva, then the Carthaginian Urania, for which he ordered a statue to be brought to Rome from Libya) as one between the Sun and the Moon, possibly in order to integrate his own ancestral deity within the Roman state cult (5.6.2-5).[66] It is clearly designed to link the emperor's failure as a ruler to his adherence to these utterly un-Roman religious notions. But the descriptions themselves remain rather timid when compared with Dio's coverage of the emperor's behaviour, where different variants in the epitomes reveal an obsession with genitals, either throwing them amongst wild animals kept in the god's newly built temple or having circumcision performed on himself and his companions.[67] Though Herodian uses Oriental religion in book 5 as the wrong imperial choice, and uses Elagabalus' Oriental orientation to highlight the emperor's wrongful otherness, his account of effeminate dancing, dressing and applying make-up never comes close to the abhorrence shown by Cassius

[66] Icks 2008: 79-83, esp. 83: "In the end, the emperor's motivations for the divine marriage(s) of Elagabal remain a puzzle without any evident solution."
[67] Dio 80.11. A peculiar item stuck on the emperor's head on state coinage has even been explained by Krengel 1997, against the background of Dio's account, as a dried bull's penis - with the help of preparations produced by the veterinary institute of the Free University of Berlin. Cf. Kaizer 2005: 189-91.

Dio.[68] Herodian seems less interested in religion *per se* and more in how religious behaviour affects the emperor.[69]

VI: Herodian and Oriental characterisations

Throughout this article, we have seen how Herodian uses the Orient to emphasise various types of otherness, always linking the Orient to the behaviour or actions of emperors, often through parallelism. At first sight, this seems to have been different for the way in which Herodian uses the Orient in his characterisations of peoples.[70] These ethnic characteristics function in Herodian's work as an explanation for historical developments. Non-Roman peoples are described by what makes them unsuited for gaining power. The Romans' success, in this way, is the result from the inherent failings of their opponents.[71] Clear failings are there among the people of the East, to which Egypt can conceptually be linked. The Orient, again, is failed-Romanness, but at first sight not linked to emperors.

Herodian, however, does on occasion use stereotyping to create contrasts between what he tells us as author, and what he has emperors tell their followers. For instance, Herodian as an author comments on the soldiers from Britain, who were feared by Severus, because they were 'a large and powerful force of extremely good fighters' (2.15.1). Later, however, Severus describes the British troops to his own soldiers as 'small and island bred' (3.6.6), only for Herodian to note briefly afterwards, in his auctorial voice, that 'the bravery and bloodthirsty courage of the British are certainly not inferior to that of the Illyrians' (3.7.2).[72] Severus misrepresents and lies here, as elsewhere, and it is tempting to see Herodian's description of the Brits as fierce fighters as a foil to set up Severus' lack of trustworthiness, certainly in two passages that are so closely placed together.[73]

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[68] Kemezis 2014: 246 noted that, "when Herodian goes on to describe Elagabalus' behavior, the behavior is clearly meant to strike readers as bizarre, but negative audience reaction is oddly absent." See, on the differences between Dio's and Herodian's portraits of Elagabalus, also Sommer 2004; Icks 2008: 131-65.

[69] Also, as Kemezis 2014: 246 argued, Elagabalus' conduct may be shameful and uncalled-for from an imperial perspective, "but Herodian does seem alert to the possibility that we are dealing here with a cultural misunderstanding."

[70] See above, p.5.

[71] Kuhn-Chen 2002: 325. Cf. the speech given by Marcus Aurelius to his soldiers in reaction to Avidius Cassius' revolt, according to Dio 72 (71) 25.1: 'surely Cilicians, Syrians, Jews and Egyptians have never proved superior to you and never will' (οὐ γάρ που κρείττους Κίλικες καὶ Σύροι καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι ὑμῶν οὔτε ἐγένοντό ποτε οὔτε ἔσονται).

[72] Whittaker, *Herodian*, 242 n.1 and 291 n.2.; Hekster 2017a: 122.

[73] Lying rulers in Herodian: 2.2.6; 2.9.13; 2.14.4; 2.15.1-3; 3.5.3-5; 3.6.1-7 (Severus' speech against Albinus); 3.8.7; 4.4 (Caracalla's murder of Geta); 4.14.4-5; 7.8.7, as collected by Hidber 2007: 202; Hidber 2004: 209, with n.28-9, and Sidebottom 1998: 2817.

Herodian also links claimants to the throne to their followers. Niger had his Syrian troops, Severus his Pannonian men, Maximinus' followers stemmed from Illyria and Thrace, Gordian's support from Africa, even leading to him being 'given the name of Africanus' (7.5.8). Perhaps not surprisingly, these are the peoples of whom we have seen ethnic stereotypes in Herodian's text.[74] Are Herodian's comments about the Pannonians' slow wits a warning about how they are going to be lied to by Severus about their British opponents? Is the Egyptian emotional impulsiveness an indication that Gordian was not to have a solid reign? Must we see Herodian's comment that Africa 'has many farmers' (7.4.4.) as a premonition that Gordian's military support was going to fall short? In other words, can we read Herodian's characterizations of specific peoples as characterizations of the leaders that they follow?

If so, that has repercussions for the way in which we interpret Herodian's asides on the Syrians. Are they an indication of his own preconceptions about easterners, or a mode to differentiate various claimants and styles of holding power? The one ruler, after all, who was supported by all peoples was Herodian's exemplary emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was universally acclaimed (1.4.8). Syrian stereotypes in Herodian, if this is true, are *also* a way to describe Niger, Geta, Elagabalus, and to differentiate them from other rulers, none of whom came close to Marcus and his universal support.

Noticeably, Severus Alexander, who by lineage was as oriental as Elagabalus, is *not* portrayed as 'eastern'.[75] Herodian explicitly notes how he was 'educated in both the Greek and the Roman ways' (5.7.5), how he was elevated to power by the praetorians (5.8.5-8) and how his *concilium principis* consisted of sixteen senators of the greatest dignity (6.1.2; 7.1.3). Only at the very end, when the emperor is about to be toppled by Maximinus, his supporters become eastern, and we are told that Alexander 'brought with him very many Moroccans and a huge force of archers from the East' (6.7.8) who are contrasted to Maximinus' Pannonians, who blamed Alexander for 'being under his mother's control' (6.8.3). Soon after, the emperor is killed. Again, it seems that Herodian's description of the Orient changes meaning when seen as integral part of his whole work, rather than within the context of an individual episode.[76]

This applies in a somewhat similar way to how Herodian characterizes cities. Hatra and Byzantium, as we have seen, became focal points in the struggles between Niger and Severus

[74] See above, p.5.
[75] Kemezis 2014: 247-8.
[76] Of course, Herodian's Moroccans cannot be viewed outright as Easterners. The position of Africa in the ancient East-West dichotomy was complicated and would remain so for a long time. Note for instance the later attempts to make Tunisia into "a crossroads or bridge between Eastern and Western cultures", see Quinn 2018: 13.

and Geta and Caracalla. Other cities, often in the East, are also put forward as potential alternatives to Rome, only for all of them to fall short. Perhaps the best example is Herodian's discussion of Pescennius Niger in Antioch. It has long been recognized that Niger's staying in Antioch shows that he was idle, in contrast to Severus as a man of action.[77] But Herodian does do much more: his description of Niger's accession at Antioch shows that the pretender's actions are wrong on all levels: 'After such as speech, the entire army and the assembled crowd immediately proclaimed him emperor and hailed him with the title of Augustus. They also put the purple cloak of an emperor on him and provided him with all the other tokens of imperial dignity made out of makeshift materials, including the carrying of fire before him in processions. After conducting him to the temples of Antioch, they installed him ceremoniously in his own house, which was now regarded as the imperial court and no longer as a private house. Outside it was decorated with all the insignia of office' (2.8.6).[78]

Nothing is quite as it should be. The material is makeshift and a private house pretends to be a court. The temples are specifically described as the Antioch ones (τὰ ἱερὰ τῆς Ἀντιοχείας). Like the so-called court, they might look proper from the outside, but the reader knows better. Even the assembled crowd is wrong. As Graham Andrews has pointed out, the groups supporting Niger in Antioch are the soldiers and the assembled πλῆθος, whereas in earlier processions, Herodians talks about the δῆμος.[79] In fact, as Andrews notes, Herodian mentions the δῆμος just before, when Niger learns of the opinions of the Roman people (τοῦ δήμου Ῥωμαίων; 2.7.6). Moreover, as noted above, Herodian limits Niger's support explicitly to people and senators from the East,[80] yet in his speech in Antioch, Niger twice refers to how he is 'summoned by the Romans' (2.8.2) and by 'the Roman people' (2.8.4), again described as the δῆμος. In combination with the above-mentioned characterisation of people from Antioch as enthusiastically incapable, it seems clear that Antioch, as a seat of power, is above all 'not Rome'. Noticeably, Herodian states that both Byzantium and Antioch were completely destroyed, deprived of their 'splendour and honour' and reduced to the status of a village, though there is no evidence for the destruction of Antioch.[81] Herodian's story of Antioch is one

[77] Zimmermann 1999: 171-6.
[78] τοιαῦτά τινα εἰπόντος αὐτοῦ, εὐθέως τὸ στρατιωτικὸν πᾶν καὶ τὸ συνγειλεγμένον πλῆθος αὐτοκράτορά τε ἀνεῖπε καὶ σεβαστὸν προσηγόρευσε· τήν τε βασίλειον πορφύραν ἐπιβαλόντες, καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῆς σεβασμίου τιμῆς ἐξ αὐτοσχεδίου παρασκευῆς ἀθροίσαντες, καὶ προπομπεύοντος τοῦ πυρός, ἔς τε τὰ ἱερα τῆς Ἀντιοχείας τὸν Νίγρον ἄγουσι καὶ ἐς τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν καθιστᾶσιν, οὐκέτι αὐτὴν ἰδιωτικὴν ἀλλα βασίλειον αὐλὴν νομίζοντες, πᾶσι κοσμήσαντες ἔξωθεν βασιλικοῖς συμβόλοις.
[79] Andrews 2018: 140-1.
[80] See above, p.12.
[81] 3.6.9, with Whittaker's comments in the Loeb edition, 294 n.1-2. Cf. de Giorgi and Eger 2021: 129 and 179 n.5.

of failure. It is unlikely that a reader will have forgotten this when Herodian has Geta suggest that Antioch would be a 'suitable capital' to his eastern part of the empire (4.3.7).

The other city considered by Geta as capital of an eastern empire was Alexandria – again a city of which the inhabitants were explicitly and negatively described by Herodian in the context of his ethnic stereotyping. Herodian describes as a 'natural feature' of theirs that they 'indulge in lampoons ... caricatures and jokes belittling the authorities' (4.9.2). These very traits would lead to the destructions of the Alexandrians under Caracalla, during his infamous massacre of 216.

Herodian's vivid descriptions of that massacre start with a procession, which brings Pescennius Niger in Antioch to mind. Again, there is the emperor going to the temple, after which he places his imperial cloak (χλαμύδα ἁλουργῆ) on the tomb of Alexander (4.8.9). Again, matters are not what they seem, since the celebrations were, according to Herodian, part of Caracalla's 'secret intention' to 'massacre a large number of them'.[82]

Both possible capitals of the eastern empire are, in Herodian's text, symbols of inversions, lies and destruction. The textual context further highlights this: following his description of the massacre of the Alexandrians, Herodian continues to describe Caracalla's betrayal of Artabanus, which as we saw led to another bloody massacre in the East. Looking at the eastern cities, Herodian's *Oriens* is again mainly one of betrayal and failure.[83]

VII: Failure of the Orient?

Failure in Herodian is not limited to the East. Carthage, too, is presented by Herodian as a failed alternative to Rome.[84] The parallels to Niger in Antioch are striking, with yet another procession in which local men pretend to be Roman praetorians, garlanded *fasces*, and fire carried before the empire 'so that for a short term the city of Carthage was a kind of replica of Rome' (7.6.2). Carthage pretended to be Rome, much like Gordian could only pretend to be emperor, something which Herodian has Maximinus explicitly state in a speech to his troops. In it, Gordian's claim to be emperor is described as 'a game in a procession', their weapons are 'the lances used by gladiators against wild beasts' and their military training consists of holding 'witty speeches' and rhythmic dancing.[85] When it comes to fighting, the Carthaginian mob (πλῆθος) throws away its makeshift weapons and runs (7.9.7); they are massacred by

[82] On the historicity of the massacre: de Blois 2019: 49.
[83] Concerning the fluidity of the dichotomy, it must be emphasised that in this case it is the East that serves as the victim of betrayal – with the perspective changing, different episodes tell different stories.
[84] Miles 2003: 140-3.
[85] 7.8.5, with Miles 2003: 142. Cf. Buongiorno 2017: 225-6.

Maximinus' troops and Gordian commits suicide, meeting his end, as Herodian writes, 'masquerading as an emperor' (7.9.10). Describing failure and drawing parallels between cities and emperors is not something Herodian does only when dealing with the East, but the notions of trickery and betrayal seem more dominant in the more extensive descriptions of the mock eastern capitals than elsewhere in his work.

The contrast becomes even sharper when the above-discussed cities are placed against the way Herodian deals with Aquileia in book 8, the final book of his history. Aquileia decides to defend against the tyrant Maximinus, and more than half of the book is taken up by a description of the city, the way it prepares itself for the onslaught of Maximinus' troops, and the ultimately successful defense of the city, leading to Maximinus' death and the election of Pupienus and Balbinus.

Where Byzantium, Antioch, Alexandria and Carthage had failed, the people of Aquileia did everything right: the walls were repaired, bridges demolished hampering the attacking troops, and 'with great foresight' they had brought so much food in water into the city (8.2.5-7) that even at the end of the siege, they could still offer 'any commodity, all kinds of food and drinks' (8.6.3-4), being much better off than the starving troops who had besieged them (8.5.3). The Aquileians, in Herodian's description, are said to have fought 'vigorously and enthusiastically' and with a united front: 'the entire population, including women and children, joined in the resistance' (8.4.7).

Herodian discusses betrayal here, too, but in a speech of Crispinus – the consul in charge of the defense of the city – warning the Aquileians *against* trusting promises from the part of Maximinus: 'do not believe the promises of a tyrant who breaks his word and deceives people. Do not be enticed by fine words into surrendering yourself to certain destruction' (8.3.4). Threats and deceit get Maximinus nowhere. He can only destroy areas outside of the city wall.

There is inversion too, with the besieging soldiers starved and under attack. From the city walls, the Aquileians throw a mixture of 'pitch and oil mixed with sulfur and bitumen' which penetrated the soldiers' armour, so that they tore off their burning breast-plates: 'so one had the spectacle of soldiers who had actually stripped themselves and weapons that had been abandoned' (8.4.9-10). The contrast with the fleeing Carthagenians who dropped their weapons without so much as a fight must be clear. The Aquileians, not helped by alien weather conditions (unlike the Hatrenes), defeated Maximinus pure and simple. Moreover, after Maximinus was killed, Aquileia kept up its guard, and the army remained outside of the city, leading to yet another inversion: 'the two sides', as Herodian writes, 'communicated with each other in conditions of peace and friendship, even if it looked like a siege still' (8.6.4).

At first sight, this final case study seems somewhat removed from this article's overall focus on the Orient. Yet, in Herodian's extensive focus on Aquileia, there is a surprising number of references to a united Roman empire, not divided into East and West: Crispinus urges his people to become the 'saviours and defenders of all Italy' (8.3.4), and during the siege, Herodian states in awareness of the exaggeration,[86] 'the entire Roman people (πᾶς ὁ δῆμος ὁ Ῥωμαίων) were up in arms, joined by the whole of Italy (Ἰταλία τε πᾶσα)', with 'the Illyrians and the barbarian nations in the East and South' raising an army (8.5.6). The success of Aquileia thus highlights the failures, in Herodian's writing, of the eastern cities and of the unsuited emperors who were supported by the eastern peoples and their cities.

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[86] φῆμαι δὲ μείζους ἐξ ὑποψίας ἀληθείας <δι>εδίδοντο, 'exaggerated rumours were spread, because there was a hint of truth'.

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