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Aspects of the Severan Empire, Part I: Severus as a New Augustus

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The two series of notes published here and in a subsequent issue of this journal focus on two central aspects of what David Potter has recently dubbed the Severan Empire. The first essay examines Septimius Severus' deliberate and consistent policy of presenting himself as a second Augustus, an aspect of his reign which has received less attention from modern historians of the period than the innovatory features of his regime. A subsequent essay will consider the emergence of Christians in Roman society between 193 and 260. This first essay begins with a brief review of alternative periodisations of the transition from the Early to the Later Roman Empire.

Potter's survey of the period from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the death of Theodosius was published in 2004 as part of the Routledge *History of the Ancient World* edited by Fergus Millar and uses a borrowed hunting metaphor in order to characterize the period 180-395 as "the Roman Empire at Bay."¹ It is one of two important narrative accounts that have recently appeared in English of the period of Roman history running from the murder of the emperor Commodus during the night of 31 December 192 to the capture of Valerian by the Persians in 260. The twelfth volume of the second edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, which has a trio of editors (Alan Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron), was published a year later and covers a stretch of years slightly longer than the first edition of 1939, but its sub-title marks a significant change of perspective. Whereas the first edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* styled the period 193-324 "Imperial Crisis and Recovery," the second edition presents the slightly longer period 193-337 as "The Crisis of Empire," thus implicitly postponing any notion of recovery until after the death of Constantine.²

The two recent volumes were conceived and completed entirely independently of each other, and both represent significant advances in historical understanding over previously published narratives of the

¹ D. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay AD 180-395* (London & New York, 2004), cf. S. Williams & G. Friell, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay* (London, 1998).

² *Cambridge Ancient History*, Second edition XII: *The Crisis of Empire, A. D. 193-337*, ed. A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey & Averil Cameron (Cambridge, 2005), cf. *NECJ* 34 (2007), 173-178.

period in English, such as the relevant chapters of the original edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*,³ H. M. D. Parker's contribution to Methuen's *History of the Greek and Roman World*,⁴ Michael Grant's provocatively entitled interpretation of the Roman world from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine, which formed part of Weidenfeld and Nicholson's *History of Civilisation* under the general editorship of Sir Ronald Syme.⁵ Potter's volume is the more adventurous in its interpretation of what is conventionally called "the crisis of the third century."⁶ For it applies the concept of "the Severan empire" (which Potter either has himself invented or at least is the first to apply systematically) to suggest that the disappearance around 260 of the military and administrative system which Augustus had devised, and which Septimius Severus modified without making fundamental structural changes, marks a more important historical watershed than either the end of the Severan dynasty in 235, which is often taken to mark a cultural as well as a political break in continuity,⁷ or any of the three later dates at which conventional periodisations mark a new beginning—the accession of Diocletian in 284, with which many historians of the Later Roman Empire begin;⁸ the conversion of Constantine in 312, which can be taken to define the boundary between pagan and Christian Rome;⁹ and Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324, after which he immediately founded the new (and emphatically) Christian city of Constantinople and thus on some interpretations inaugurated the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Potter

³ *Cambridge Ancient History XII: Imperial Crisis and Recovery, A. D. 193-324*, ed. S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, M. P. Charlesworth & N. H. Baynes (Cambridge, 1939).

⁴ H. M. D. Parker, *History of the Roman World from A. D. 137 to 337* (London, 1935: 2nd ed. revised by B. H. Warmington, 1958).

⁵ M. Grant, *The Climax of Rome. The Final Achievements of the Ancient World AD 161-337* (London, 1968).

⁶ Potter, *Empire at Bay* (2004), esp. 83-172, 215-262. Potter had earlier offered a survey of "The Economic and Political Situation of the Roman Empire in the Mid-Third Century AD" in his *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford, 1990), 3-69.

⁷ As in the recent volume *Severan Culture*, ed. S. Swain, S. Harrison & J. Elsner (Cambridge, 2007).

⁸ For example, E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire 1². De l'état romain à l'état byzantin (284-476)*, rev. J.-R. Palanque (Amsterdam, 1968); A. H. M. Jones, *Later Roman Empire, 284-602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (Oxford, 1964); A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike. Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian 284-565 n. Chr.* (Munich, 1989); Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire AD 284-430* (New York & London, 1993); S. Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641: The Transformation of the Ancient World* (Malden, MA & Oxford, 2007).

⁹ A. Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, trans. H. Mattingly (Oxford, 1948); A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Oxford, 1948).

¹⁰ The preface to *CAH 12* (1939) opens with the programmatic declaration that "The *Cambridge Medieval History* takes its beginning from the triumph of Constantine over his latest rival and the foundation of that city which for sixteen centuries was to be known by his name. This fact suffices to explain why this, the last volume of

suggests that on the contrary it was in the early 260s rather than at one of these conventional dates that the seismic historical shift occurred that was most significant for the development of the Roman Empire. Two powerful general considerations may be advanced in support of this interpretation. First, it was in 260 or very shortly thereafter that the Roman state granted *de facto* toleration to the Christian religion by recognizing the legal right of Christians to meet for worship and of Christian churches, or at least their bishops, to own property (Eusebius, *HE* 7.13). Second, in 260, as Potter aptly puts it, “the Severan empire had come to an end; the army that had supported it was in ruins,”¹¹ and it is widely recognized that the Late Roman army had its origins in the military reforms of Gallienus.¹²

Like Augustus, and subsequently Vespasian, Septimius Severus achieved supreme power by defeating rivals in civil war. After the Battle of Actium, Caesar’s heir attempted to disguise that unpleasant fact by pretending that the last campaign in the civil wars which had begun with Julius Caesar’s crossing of the River Rubicon in 49 B. C. was really a war of Italy, which had freely chosen him as its champion, against the oriental queen Cleopatra and her sinister allies: on 13-15 August 29 B. C. he held a triple triumph to celebrate victories *de Dalmatis*, *ex Actio* and *ex Aegypto* (Livy, *Per.* 133; Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 22; Dio 51. 21.5-8).¹³ When Vespasian faced a similar problem after the civil wars of A. D. 69, he and his advisers devised a double response. Antonius Primus, who had led the invasion of Italy on Vespasian’s behalf and defeated the generals of Vitellius, was sidelined and made the scapegoat for the sack of Cremona after the Flavian victory (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.86; 3.2-33; 4.2.1, 11.1, 80.2-3), while the suppression of the Jewish revolt and the destruction of the Jewish

the *Cambridge Ancient History*, ends where it does” (CAH 12 [1939], v). The general editors, J. B. Bury, S.A Cook and F. E. Adcock, had explained in their preface to the first volume that: “The *Cambridge Ancient History* is designed as the first part of a continuous history of European peoples. The last part, the *Cambridge Modern History*, has long since been complete, and the middle section, the *Cambridge Medieval History*, is in the course of publication. . . The *Ancient History* will go down to the victory of Constantine the Great in A. D. 324, the point at which the *Medieval* takes up the story” (CAH 1 [1923], v).

¹¹ Potter, *Empire at Bay* (2004), 257.

¹² R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* (Berlin, 1920), 1-18; A. Alföldi, “Der usurpator Aureolus und die Kavalleriereform des Gallienus,” *ZfN* 37 (1927), 191-212, reprinted in his *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des dritten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Darmstadt, 1967), 1-15; L. de Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* (Leiden, 1976), 26-47; R. S. O. Tomlin, “The Army of the Late Empire,” *The Roman World*, ed. J. Wachter (London & New York, 1987), 107-120; P. Sothorn & K. R. Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (New Haven & London, 1996), 9-15; M. J. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire. The Roman Army from the Reign of Diocletian until the Battle of Adrianople* (Amsterdam, 1998), 35-38; B. Campbell, *CAH*² 12 (2005), 115-119.

¹³ For the epigraphic evidence of contemporary fasti, see A. Degrassi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.1 (Rome, 1947), 344-345, 570; 13.2 (Rome, 1963), 208, cf. 496.

Temple in Jerusalem by Titus was presented as a victory over foreign foes:¹⁴ Vespasian and Titus celebrated a formal triumph over the Jews and the Colosseum was built [*ex*] *manub(i)is*, that is, from the spoils of the Jewish War, as its dedicatory inscription proclaimed (Josephus, *BJ* 7.121-157; *CIL* 6.40454a).¹⁵

Septimius Severus, who was proclaimed emperor by the legions of Pannonia on 9 April 193 when news arrived of the assassination of Pertinax, confronted three rivals, whom he successively defeated.¹⁶ Severus at once marched on Rome and by early June he had easily overthrown Didius Julianus, who had been proclaimed emperor by the praetorians in the imperial capital after the death of Pertinax, but whose power never extended beyond Italy (and perhaps very briefly Africa). The other two provincial governors besides Severus who had three legions under their command were also proclaimed emperor when news reached their provinces that Pertinax was dead. Pescennius Niger, the governor of Syria, seized Asia Minor and the city of Byzantium: troops loyal to Severus at once laid siege to the city, then won victories near Cyzicus and Issus, after which Niger committed suicide, apparently in the spring of 194 (though Byzantium held out much longer). Clodius Albinus, the governor of Britain, also donned the imperial purple, and in the spring of 193 Severus recognised him as Caesar, which implied designation as Severus' successor in the supreme power. But Severus carefully refrained from turning against Albinus until he had first won military glory as a victor over foreign foes.

Severus left Rome before the end of 193 and proceeded to the East. Before he returned westwards and attacked Albinus, whom he defeated

¹⁴ T. D. Barnes, "The Sack of the Temple in Josephus and Tacitus," *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. J. Edmondson, S. Mason & J. Rives (Oxford, 2005) 129-144.

¹⁵ For this reading, see G. Alföldy, "Eine Bauinschrift aus dem Colosseum," *ZPE* 109 (1994), 195-226. On the two arches commemorating Titus' victory (the surviving arch erected after his death and the lost arch which stood at the entrance to the Circus Maximus), see F. Millar, "Last Year in Jerusalem: Monuments of the Jewish War in Rome," *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome* (2005), 101-128. The most important modern discussions of both arches and their inscriptions are registered by G. Alföldy & V. Rosenberger, *CIL* 6.8.2 (1996), pp. 4308/4309, on *CIL* 6.944-946, who aptly observe that some of the phrases reported by the medieval pilgrim who is the sole authority for the text of the dedication on the lost arch in the Circus Maximus "veritatem excedunt" (p. 4308, on *CIL* 6.944 = *ILS* 264).

On the long-term ramifications of the decision, originally taken for short-term political gain, to treat Jews as if they were external enemies and foreign foes, not rebellious provincials, see esp. M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea. The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A. D. 66-70* (Cambridge, 1987), 235-239; *Mission and Conversion. Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994), 42-45.

¹⁶ For the events summarized in this and the next two paragraphs, see the more detailed accounts in A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*² (New Haven & London, 1988), 89-169; Potter, *Empire at Bay* (2004), 101-115; B. Campbell, *CAH*² 12 (2005), 9-15.

and killed in a hard-fought battle at Lugdunum on 19 February 197 (though a date of 19 February 196 has been proposed),¹⁷ he deliberately waged an aggressive campaign outside the existing frontiers of the Roman Empire and added a new province. Severus marched into Mesopotamia with his army, which included legions which had supported Niger against him, and annexed the kingdom of Osrhoene, apparently without fighting: the king of Osrhoene was allowed to retain his capital Edessa and its territory, but the equestrian C. Julius Pacatianus was installed as governor of the new Roman province of Osrhoene.¹⁸ Although the fragmentary state of our evidence means that the details of Severus' activities in Mesopotamia are unclear, it seems that he first accepted the submission of Arab tribes, for which he took the titles *Arabicus* and *Adiabenicus*, then won three victories in battle during 195, for which he renewed the title of *imperator* for the fifth, sixth and seventh times.¹⁹ The Senate in Rome decreed a triumph for Severus, which he rejected in terms that recalled Caesar's heir:

triumpho delato appellatus est Arabicus Adiabenicus Parthicus.
sed triumphum respuit, ne videretur de civili triumphare victoria.
excusavit et Parthicum nomen ne Parthos laceraret (*HA, Sev.* 9.10-11).

A triumph was voted and the titles Arabicus Adiabenicus Parthicus. But he rejected the triumph in order to avoid appearing to celebrate a triumph for victory in a civil war. He also declined the title of Parthicus to avoid provoking the Parthians.

It may be added that the soldiers took Severus' emulation of Augustus seriously. When he was in Rome in 193, the soldiers demanded a donative of 10,000 sesterces apiece, which was precisely the sum given to the soldiers who had escorted Caesar's heir to Rome in 44 B. C. (*HA, Sev.* 7.6: *exemplo eorum qui Augustum Octavianum Romam deduxerant tantumque acceperant*, cf. Appian, *BC* 3.94; Dio 46.46.7).

After the defeat of Albinus, Severus proceeded again to the East, this time by sea. He waged a second campaign in Mesopotamia in 197-199, and won a second *victoria Parthica*, whose date was officially fixed as 28 January 198, the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Nerva and the advent of Trajan to sole rule (*Feriale Duranum* = *P. Dura* 54, col. 1.14-16). Severus also added a second new province, which he named Mesopotamia after Trajan's

¹⁷ T. D. Barnes, *Gnomon* 47 (1975), 373; *The Sources of the Historia Augusta. Collection Latomus* 55 (Brussels, 1978), 87. This redating is dismissed as "too implausible to require discussion" by Birley, *Septimius Severus* (1988), 248 n. 13.

¹⁸ M. P. Speidel, "Valerius Valerianus in charge of Septimius Severus' Mesopotamian Campaign," *CP* 80 (1985), 321-326.

¹⁹ Birley, *Septimius Severus* (1988), 115-117.

short-lived province of 115-117.²⁰ The victories of both Parthian wars were commemorated in Rome by the erection of a triumphal arch, which the Senate had probably voted after the first.²¹ It was dedicated in 203 on the occasion of Severus' *decennalia* and it still stands at the north-east corner of the forum, dominating its immediate surrounds, in a location chosen for its symbolic significance, next to the senate house and the Temple of Concord and "diagonally opposite the arch erected to celebrate Augustus' diplomatic success over the Parthians" two centuries earlier.²² Moreover, an inscription in gilded letters informed those who entered the forum that the Senate and people of Rome had erected the arch to honour the emperor and his sons

ob rem publicam restitutam imperiumque populi Romani
propagatum insignibus virtutibus eorum domi forisque

on account of the restoration of the state and the extension of the empire of the Roman people by their outstanding virtues at home and abroad (CIL 6.1033 = ILS 426).

The triumphal arch honoured Severus for exactly the same achievements as the *Res Gestae* of Augustus had trumpeted most loudly. Like Augustus, Severus had restored the *res publica*—whatever precisely that tendentious phrase may have meant in either case.²³ And like Augustus, Severus too was a *propagator imperii*, a bringer of concord and deferential to the Roman

²⁰ For the new province and Severus' reorganization of the eastern frontier, see F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1993), 121-141.

²¹ On the arch and its reliefs, see esp. R. Brilliant, *The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum* (Rome, 1967); Z. Rubin, "Dio, Herodian and Severus' second Parthian War," *Chiron* 5 (1985), 419-441; Z. Newby, "Art at the crossroads? Themes and styles in Severan art," *Severan Culture* (2007), 201-249, at 202-206; A. Petsalis Diomidis, "Landscape, transformation and divine epiphany," *ib.* 250-289, at 258-265.

²² Birley, *Septimius Severus* (1988), 155.

²³ The eulogy of an unknown senatorial woman composed between 8 and 2 B. C., which was formerly styled the *Laudatio Turiae*, asserts that "pacato orbe terrarum, res[titut]a re publica, quieta deinde n[obis et felicia] tempora contigerunt" (ILS 8393 = M. Durry, *Éloge funèbre d'une matrone romaine (Éloge dit de Turia)*², rev. S. Lancel [Paris, 1992], 19, Pagina II, 25-26). The terminology used in 28-27 B. C., when Emperor Caesar Divi filius "transferred the *res publica* from his *potestas* to the *arbitrium* of the Senate and People of Rome" and in return received the name or title of Augustus (*Res Gestae* 34.1-2) was subtly and significantly different: most earlier treatments of this much discussed subject have been rendered out of date by the publication of a coin minted in Asia during the year 28 on which the obverse reads IMP CAESAR DIVI F COS VI and the reverse LEGES ET IURA P R RESTITUIT, where P R is probably to be taken as an abbreviation for the dative P(opulo) R(omano) rather than the genitive P(opuli) R(omani): J. W. Rich & J. H. C. Williams, "Leges et Iura P. R. restituit: A New Aureus of Octavian and the Settlement of 28-27 BC," *Numismatic Chronicle* 159 (1999), 169-213.

Senate—even if he could not equal Augustus’ boast of extending the boundaries of every province that abutted on non-Roman territory (*Res Gestae* 26.1).

Severus’ imitation of Augustus went far deeper than surface symbolism.²⁴ It can hardly be a coincidence that Severus composed an autobiography to justify his actions during the civil wars through which he had won supreme power as Augustus had (Dio 76.7.3; *HA, Sev.* 18.6; *Pesc. Nig.* 5.1; *Clod. Alb.* 10.1, 11.4).²⁵ Moreover, early in his reign, Severus renewed Augustus’ marriage legislation, thereby earning the mockery of the Christian writer Tertullian, who held up to ridicule this ostentatious re-enactment of legislation which had fallen into desuetude:

Nonne vanissimas Papias leges, quae ante liberos suscipi cogunt quam Iuliae matrimonium contrahi, post tantae auctoritatis senectutem heri Severus, constantissimus princeps, exclusit? (*Apol.* 4.8)

Why those absurd Papian laws which require people to have children at an earlier age than the Julian laws require them to be married—did not the valiant emperor Severus clear them out but yesterday for all their old age and authority? (trans. T R. Glover)

The generalising plurals refer specifically to the *Lex Papia Poppaea* of 9 A. D. and the earlier *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* of 18 B. C., which it reiterated and probably expanded. Ancient legal writers often treat the two as a single law (Gaius 1.145; *Frag. Vat.* 158: “*Lex Julia Papiave*”) and modern students of Roman law have not succeeded in completely disentangling the distinctive provisions of the two original laws.²⁶ Tertullian’s jibe dates Severus’ modification of Augustus’ marriage legislation to 198 at the latest.²⁷ But his subversive suggestion that Severus abolished the two Augustan marriage laws relating to senators and *equites* must be false. For, whereas he implies that Severus rescinded the *Lex Papia Poppaea* of A. D.

²⁴ See recently A. Cooley, “Septimius Severus: the Augustan emperor,” *Severan Culture* (2007), 385-397.

²⁵ On Severus’ autobiography, see further Z. Rubin, *Civil-War Propaganda and Historiography. Collection Latomus* 173 (Brussels, 1980), 133-144, 190-192. Augustus’ autobiography terminated with his campaign against the Cantabri in 25 B. C., after which he closed the Temple of Janus for the second time: Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 85.1, cf. H. Malcovati, *Imperatoris Caesaris Augusti Operum Fragmenta*⁵ (Turin, 1969), xlvi-l, 84-97.

²⁶ Hence the single rubric “*Leges Iulia et Papia Poppaea* (18 a Chr. et 9 p. Chr.)” in the modern collection of *Acta Divi Augusti* (Rome, 1945), 166-198. On Augustus’ marriage legislation, see briefly S. Treggiari, *CAH*² 10 (1996), 887-893.

²⁷ The *Apologeticum* was written some months after the Battle of Lugdunum, which is normally dated to 17 February 197: T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian. A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford, 1971), 33-34.

9, at least in part, both the contemporary evidence of the historian Cassius Dio and a fragment of a speech of Severus to the Senate, quoted from Ulpian's *De excusationibus* by a legal writer a century later show that, even if Severus modified the Augustan marriage legislation in some particulars, he reaffirmed it in principle.

According to Dio, Severus insisted on the strict enforcement of the Augustan *Lex Julia de adulteriis*, at least initially. For the historian reports that, when he was consul, that is, in 205 or thereabouts,²⁸ he found no fewer than three thousand cases of adultery under the *Lex Julia* pending in the court calendar:

[Severus] rebuked those who were not chaste, even going so far as to enact some laws in regard to adultery. In consequence, there were very many indictments for that offence: when I was consul, I found three thousand entered on the docket, but, since very few prosecuted these cases, not even he himself concerned himself with them any longer (77[76].16.4, trans. E. Cary, with modifications).

Severus' loss of interest in continuing to enforce the Augustan law concerning adultery in the upper classes later in his reign might suggest that his legislation of the 190s was more a propaganda exercise than a real attempt to restore traditional moral standards.

Tertullian can be construed as reliable evidence that Severus removed a real or apparent contradiction between the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *Lex Papia Poppaea*.²⁹ The only other direct evidence for Severus' modification of the two laws appears to be a quotation from Ulpian in the *Fragmenta Vaticana*, which reads as follows:

Pars orationis imperatoris Severi
promiscua facultas potioris nominandi nisi intra certos fines
cohibeatur, ipso tractu temporis pupillos fortunis suis privabit. cui
rei obviam ibitur, patres conscripti, si censueritis, ut collegae patris
vel pupilli in decuria vel corpore, item cognati vel affines utriusque
necessitudinis, qui lege Iulia et Papia excepti sunt, potiozem non
nominent, ceteri cognati vel adfines amicive atque municipes eos
tantummodo nominent, quos supra complexus sum, vicinitatis
autem iure nemo potior existimetur.

Part of a speech of the emperor Severus
Unless the unrestricted ability to nominate a more suitable person
is confined within well-defined limits, it will deprive wards of their
fortunes through the mere passage of time. This will be prevented,

²⁸ F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964), 17, 204-207; R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford, 1971), 143-145.

²⁹ See R. Astolfi, *La Lex Iulia et Papia*⁴ (Padua, 1996), 1-2, cf. 337, 367-368, 388, 389.

members of the Senate, if you resolve that the colleagues of the father or the ward in a jury panel or corporation, and also the relatives by blood or marriage of either father or ward who are exempt by the Lex Julia et Papia, may not nominate a more suitable person, while other relatives by blood or marriage, friends and fellow-townsmen may only nominate those whom I have included above, and that no-one may be deemed more suitable simply because he is a neighbour. (*Fragmenta Vaticana* 158 [FIRA² 2.497-498] = Ulpian, frag. 1834 Lenel)

Severus' speech to the Senate, which will have been duly ratified by a doubtless unanimous *senatus consultum*, comes from the first years of his reign before he made his son Caracalla Augustus in 198: the immediately following quotation in the *Fragmenta Vaticana* from Ulpian's *De excusationibus* quotes an imperial rescript issued by "[imperatores] nost[ri]," that is, a rescript issued in the joint names of Severus and Caracalla (*Frag. Vat.* 159 = Ulpian, frag. 1835 Lenel).

What exactly does Tertullian mean when he alleges that Severus has abolished the "Papian laws"? The changes that Severus made in the Augustan marriage legislation may be inferred by analogy. Severus allowed serving soldiers to contract legal marriages (Herodian 3.8.5). This constituted a radical break with a long and hallowed legal tradition, which treated serving soldiers as outside civil society, but it was also a realistic recognition of the fact that many, perhaps most, legionaries formed permanent unions which were before legitimised only on their discharge, assuming that they lived until then.³⁰ Severus' modifications of the Augustan marriage laws, whatever their precise content, surely had the same purpose of bringing the law more closely into line with the social conditions of the time.

Severus' most obvious and most explicit evocation of Augustus came with the Secular Games over which he presided in 204 in deliberate imitation of the more famous games of 17 B. C.³¹ About the celebrations of Secular Games during the Roman Republic, two divergent traditions were known to writers after Augustus.³² Censorinus, who states that he is

³⁰ R. E. Smith, "The Army Reforms of Septimius Severus," *Historia* 21 (1972), 481-500, cf. S. E. Phang, *The marriage of Roman soldiers* (13 B.C.-A.D. 235): *Law and family in the imperial army. Columbia studies in the classical tradition* 24 (Leiden & Boston, 2001), esp. 115-138, 381-382.

³¹ On the precise context of the games of 204, see further J.-L. Desniers, "Omina et realia. Naissance de l'urbs sacra sévérienne (193-204) ap. J.-C.," *MEFR(A)* 105 (1993), 547-620. The ancient evidence relating to all the celebrations of the *ludi saeculares* is conveniently collected and reproduced by J. B. Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus populi Romani Quiritium libri sex*² (Amsterdam, 1965), 33-228.

³² For discussion of the pre-Augustan celebrations (and full bibliography), see now B. Schnegg-Köhler, *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele. Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 4 (Munich & Leipzig, 2002), 156-170.

writing in the consulate of Pontianus and Pius, that is, in the momentous year 238, gave a full account of the divergent dates at which *ludi saeculares* had been held before Augustus in which he cited authorities for each and every date, but the relevant chapter of his *De die natali* is badly corrupt (17, cf. 21.6). Much later, c. 500, the anti-Christian history of Zosimus included a long digression on the *ludi saeculares* to illustrate the long tradition that Constantine had set at naught when he failed to celebrate the games which were due very shortly after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge on 28 October 312 (2.1-7).

The pre-Augustan traditions reported by Censorinus and Zosimus, which are confirmed by scattered evidence from elsewhere, recorded that the first games that could be called secular were held by the consul P. Valerius Publicola either in the first year of the Roman Republic after the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus (Valerius Maximus 2.4.6; Censorinus 17.10; Zosimus 2.3.3) or five years later in 504 B. C. (Plutarch, *Publicola* 21.1: “Publicola . . . renewed certain games that had been enjoined by Apollo”). According to these same traditions, Secular Games proper were held in 348 and thereafter that at intervals of almost exactly one hundred years.³³ The specific dates attested are:

348 Festus 440.22-23 Lindsay; Censorinus 17.10³⁴; Zosimus 2.4.1³⁵

³³ On the games of 348 B. C., which Livy does not record, see esp. L. R. Taylor. “New Light on the History of the Secular Games,” *AJP* 55 (1934), 101-120; S. Oakley, *Commentary on Livy VI-X 2* (Oxford, 1998), 778-779. Contrast S. R. F. Price, *CAH* 10 (1996), 836: “The only well-attested republican celebrations were in 249 and 146 B. C., with a cycle of 100 years.”

Under the year 1563 of Abraham = Olympiad 81.3, which corresponds to 454 B. C., Jerome’s *Chronicle* has the entry: *Romae clariorum agonum centenarius primum actus* (112^b Helm). Both the peculiar wording and the fact that the same notice also appears in Syncellus (470.12 Bonn = 297.4 Mosshammer: ἐν Ῥώμῃ Κλαρίων ἀγῶν ἑκατονταετῆς ἤχθη α’) indicate both that Jerome took the entry from Eusebius’ *Chronicle* and that Eusebius himself had misunderstood an original σηκλαρίων. Since Eusebius’ dates are often imprecise, while the notice refers to a cycle of 100, not 110, years, this may be putative evidence for a celebration of the *ludi saeculares* in 449, as inferred by Schnegg-Köhler, *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele* (2002), 160.

³⁴ Censorinus’ statement of both his authority for the pre-Augustan date for the second secular games and its consular date is lost in a lacuna, after which the text as transmitted resumes as follows: “anno post urbem conditam octavo et quadragesimo, ut vero in commentariis XV virorum scriptum est, anno CCCC et decimo M. Valerio Corvino II C. Poetelio cons(ulibus).” Since the latter year is clearly 346 B. C. (T. R. S. Broughton, *Magistrates of the Roman Republic* 1 [New York, 1951], 131), Lachmann conjectured *octavo* for *decimo* and *sexto* for *octavo*. The recent editions by Klaus Sallman (Leipzig: Teubner, 1983) and C. A. Rapisarda (Bologna, 1991) both print the erroneous manuscript numbers.

³⁵ Although Zosimus states the year as 502 *ab urbe condita* = 252 B. C., he gives the name of the second consul (the name of the first consul has been lost in transmission) as M. Popilius for the fourth time—which is correct for 348 B. C., cf. F. Paschoud, *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle, Livres I et II* (Paris, 2000), 70-71, 197-198.

249 Varro, according to Censorinus 17.10; Livy, *Periocha* 49.6;³⁶ Pseudo-Acro on Horace, *Carmen saeculare* 8, reporting Verrius Flaccus,³⁷ cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 3.18 (reporting that *ludi saeculares* were celebrated during the Punic Wars and that the cycle was 100 years long)

149 or 146

149 Livy, Book XLIX;³⁸ Valerius Antias, Varro and Livy as cited by Censorinus 17.11³⁹

146 Cassius Hemina, the annalist Piso the censor and Cn. Gellius as cited by Censorinus 17.11.

When Augustus held *ludi saeculares* in 17 B. C., however, the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* produced a systematically divergent chronology of earlier celebrations, according to which a *saeculum* comprised 110 years, not 100, as asserted by both Varro and Livy (Censorinus 17.8-9):⁴⁰ the emperor proclaimed the new computation in edicts (Censorinus 17.9), Horace enshrined it in his *Carmen saeculare* which was commissioned and composed for the occasion (21-22: *certus undenos decies per annos / orbis*), and a series of notices was added to the list of consuls engraved on the Capitol in Rome (the *Fasti Capitolini*) recording dates of the *ludi saeculares* held on the Augustan computation in the consular years 456, 346, 236, 126 and 17 B. C. (*CIL* 1², p. 29; *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.1, pp. 62-63, cf. Tab. XLIII: only the notices for the third and the fifth games are preserved).⁴¹ At first sight, Augustus' innovation might seem to be an example of the phenomenon of "the invention of tradition," which is well documented in modern times and has been illuminated by a justly famous volume. But, in the case of the Secular Games, Augustus neither invented a tradition where none had previously existed nor gave precise form to something previously

³⁶ P. Jal, *Abrégés des livres de l'histoire romaine de Tite Live = Tite Live: Histoire Romaine* 34 (Paris, 1984), 1.68: the *ludi saeculares* of 149 were preceded by games held "<ante> annum centesimum primo Punico bello, quingentesimo et altero anno ab urbe condita."

³⁷ O. Keller, *Pseudacronis Scholia in Horatium vetustiora* 1 (Leipzig, 1902), 471.1-10.

³⁸ Jal, *Abrégés de Tite Live* (1984), 1.68 (*Periocha* 49.6); 2.121 (the Oxyrhynchus epitome).

³⁹ Whence P. Jal, *Tite Live: Histoire Romaine* 33 (Paris, 1979), 212, frag. 14.

⁴⁰ The Greek translator of *Res Gestae* 22.2 missed the innovation when he added a gloss which put into Augustus' mouth the statement that "I celebrated the games that occur every 100 years and are called secular in the consulate of C. Furnius and C. Silanus" (Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² [1965], 73).

⁴¹ The *commentarium* of Severus' games states that *ludi saeculares* were first celebrated in 456 B. C. (I.14 in Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² [1965], 141). No completely satisfactory explanation has yet been given why the Augustan games were held in 17 rather than 16 B. C.: Schnegg-Köhler, *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele* (2002), 158-159 attempts to explain it as a result of transposing a calculation made in Varronian into "Capitoline" years.

vague and undefined.⁴² What he did was to recalibrate the celebrations. Augustus' contemporaries may well have believed that his *ludi saeculares* of 17 B. C. were the fifth in a series of which there had been four previous celebrations. But the emperor instructed compliant scholars who desired to please the ruler of Rome to change the dates of the first four celebrations retrospectively, in other words, to falsify them.⁴³ Theodor Mommsen saw long ago that we are dealing with official falsification of history.⁴⁴

Livy's treatment of the *ludi saeculares* deserves a brief mention in its own right, since its relevance to evaluating the historian's relations with and attitude towards Augustus appears to have passed largely unnoticed in the recent age,⁴⁵ even though Mommsen duly noted long ago that he expressly contradicted the new official chronology.⁴⁶ Livy does not record the games allegedly celebrated by Valerius Publicola in his account of either 509 or 504 nor is any record of secular games included in either his very brief account of the year 348 B. C. (7.26.13-27.2) or in the *periocha* of Book XIX, which covered the year 249 B. C. But Livy expressly accepted the traditional length of a *saeculum* and he emphatically reasserted the traditional dates for the *ludi saeculares* of the mid-third and mid-second centuries B. C. reported by Republican historians and antiquarians who wrote before Augustus' chronological adjustments. Book XLIX of his history recorded *ludi saeculares* in 149 B. C. and stated that the previous celebration had occurred one hundred years earlier during the First Punic War (*Periocha* 49.6). Now Book XLIX must have been written either not long before or, more probably, not long after Augustus' *ludi saeculares* of 17 B. C.⁴⁷ Furthermore, when Livy

⁴² E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 1-2, define the central characteristic of invented traditions as their attempt to establish a factitious continuity with a suitable historic past where there is no genuine continuity.

⁴³ Schnegg-Köhler, *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele* (2002), 156-164, starts from the proposition "es ist jedenfalls nicht anzunehmen, dass Augustus und sine Mitarbeiter eine Reihe früherer Säkularfeiern etablierten."

⁴⁴ T. Mommsen, *Die römische Chronologie bis auf Caesar*² (Berlin, 1859), 185: "die berühmte augusteische Saecularfeier vom J. 737 und die damit zusammenhängende officiële Fälschung."

⁴⁵ It is not discussed in the classic paper "Livy and Augustus" by R. Syme, *HSCP* 64 (1959), 27-76, reprinted in his *Roman Papers* 1, ed. E. Badian (Oxford, 1979), 400-454. Syme merely observed in a general way that "as an artistic historian" Livy must have included a learned digression when he came to narrate Augustus' *ludi saeculares* because it would have combined "tradition and variety" (63 = 439).

⁴⁶ Mommsen, *Chronologie*² (1859), 186-187: "Dieses augusteische System fand zwar bei den Zeitgenossen Widerspruch."

⁴⁷ Livy published Books I-V before the Battle of Actium in 31 B. C. and the preface to Book CXXI referred to the death of Augustus, which implies that he had only published as far as Book CXX during the lifetime of Augustus: see A. Klotz, *RE* 13 (1927), 819-823; R. Helm, *Hieronymus' Zusätze in Eusebius' Chronik und ihre Wert für die Literaturgeschichte. Philologus*, Supp. 21.2 (Leipzig, 1929), 52-53; T. J. Luce, "The Dating of Livy's First Decade," *TAPA* 96 (1965), 209-240. Jerome, *Chronicle* 171^f Helm,

came to the games of 17 B. C. in Book CXXXVI, which was written after Augustus' death, to which the preface to Books CXXI had referred (*Periocha* 121),⁴⁸ he explicitly stamped the new calculation as contrary to Republican tradition:

eodem anno ludos saeculares Caesar ingenti apparatu fecit, quos centesimo quoque anno—his enim terminari saeculi <modum>⁴⁹— fieri mos fuit.

In the same year with an enormous show Caesar put on Secular Games, which it had been the custom to put on every hundred years (for this used to be defined as the length of a *saeculum*).⁵⁰

So Censorinus, quoting Livy's exact words (17.9), which show that Livy continued to assert the intellectual independence of the regime that he had shown when, in a passage which he added to Book IV after he had sent it forth into the world (4.20.5-10), he reported Augustus' claim to have seen a linen corselet more than four hundred years old in the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius, on the basis of which the claim of P. Licinius Crassus (cos. 30 B. C.) to have won the *spolia opima* as proconsul of Macedonia had been disallowed (Dio 51.24.4, 25.2).⁵¹ Livy added a passage to the previously published Book IV in which he noted that, while he had followed all his authorities (*omnis ante me auctores secutus*) in stating that A. Cornelius

reports that Livy died in A. D. 17, and there is no good reason whatever to doubt that this date is at least approximately correct.

If Livy composed Books I-V before 2 August 31 B. C. and completed Book CXX shortly before 19 August A. D. 14, then his average rate of production was three books each year: a strict arithmetical calculation gives early summer 16 B. C. as the probable date of composition of Book XLIX.

⁴⁸ For proof that Livy's history comprised 140, not 142, books, with the corollary that he continued throughout to publish in pentads and decades, see T. D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation and Historical Reality* (Ithaca & London, 1998), 209-212.

⁴⁹ I quote Rapisarda's text: the addition of *modum* after *saeculi* was proposed by F. Hultsch in the preface to his Teubner edition (Leipzig, 1867), although in his text Hultsch marked a lacuna (pp. vii, 33.8). Klaus Sallmann in the revised Teubner edition (Stuttgart, 1983), which falls regrettably short of modern editorial standards (A. Grafton, *CR*, N. S. 35 [1985], 46-48), prints *terminari saecula* without postulating any lacuna. Fortunately for the present argument, Censorinus' sense is clear whatever the correct reading may be.

⁵⁰ I have translated *fuit* as a pluperfect on the grounds Livy chose to write *fuit* rather than *erat* in order to emphasise that the old custom was not observed.

⁵¹ For discussion of the passage, see R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy Books 1-5* (Oxford, 1965), 563-567, 784. The lengthy study by J. W. Rich, "Augustus and the spolia opima," *Chiron* 26 (1996), 85-127, argues that Augustus' discovery of the corselet was genuine and that "Livy was honestly convinced of the correctness of Augustus' view."

Cossus was a military tribune with consular power when he won the *spolia opima* by killing Lars Tolumnius, the king of Veii, in single combat in 437 B. C., Augustus had told him that, during his restoration of the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius (*Res Gestae* 19), he saw the linen corselet which Cossus had dedicated together with the spoils and that this described Cossus as consul. Livy humbly confessed his error which presumed to be due to a misdating of Cossus' exploit, which really occurred in one of the years in which he was consul. But Livy made no changes in his narrative of Cossus' exploit and left unchanged a later passage which referred back to his exploit and repeated the assertion that he won the *spolia opima* as military tribune (4.32.4: *A. Cornelium . . . qui priore bello tribunus militum, Larte Tolumnio rege Veientium in conspectu duorum exercituum occiso, spolia opima Iovis Feretri Templo intulerit*). Hence, when Livy concludes his digression by dismissing speculation about the cause of the presumed error and observing that Cossus described himself as consul while gazing on the statutes of Jupiter and Romulus, who would have been witnesses of a lie, it must be suspected that he deliberately left it open to his readers to speculate about the veracity of Augustus.

The *commentarii* of the *ludi saeculares* held by Augustus in 17 B. C. and by Severus exactly 220 years later in A. D. 204 both survive in part,⁵² and the surviving fragments make it clear that Severus modelled his celebration on that of Augustus.⁵³ In these 220 years between the *ludi saeculares* of Augustus and Severus there had been not one, but two celebrations. In 47 Claudius celebrated *ludi saeculares* only sixty-three years after Augustus and on a different computation, alleging that Augustus' computation was completely wrong (Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.2: *fecit et saeculares, quasi anticipatos ab Augusto nec legitimo tempore reservatos*).⁵⁴ What calculation then did Claudius use? Was he perhaps celebrating the completion of eight *saecula* of 100 years from the foundation of Rome in 753 B. C.? But no ancient author before Aurelius Victor three centuries later construes the games of 47 as a celebration of the 800th anniversary of the foundation of Rome, and he did so in order to emphasize that the pagan emperors Claudius, Antoninus Pius and Philip had celebrated the 800th, 900th and 100th anniversaries of Rome while the Christian emperors had not celebrated the 1100th (*Caes.* 4.12, 15.4, 28.1). Otto Hirschfeld therefore suggested that Claudius accepted the Augustan redefinition of the length of a *saeculum* as 110 years, appealed to his own antiquarian expertise for proof that P. Valerius Publicola celebrated the first

⁵² For the preserved fragments, see Pigghi, *De ludis saecularibus*² (1965), 107-119, 137-175.

⁵³ C. Huelsen, "Neue Fragment der Acta ludorum saecularium von 204 nach Chr.," *Rh. Mus.*, N. F. 81 (1932), 366-394; Birley, *Septimius Severus* (1988), 155-160.

⁵⁴ On the computations behind the imperial *ludi saeculares*, see O. Hirschfeld, "Das Neujahr des tribunischen Kaiserjahres," *Wiener Studien* 3 (1881), 97-108, reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 1913), 438-448, at 440-445.

ludi saeculares in 504 B. C. and reckoned five *saecula* from them.⁵⁵ No one has yet produced a better explanation of how Claudius justified holding his secular games.⁵⁶ Whatever Claudius' calculation was, however, his games were subsequently excluded from the canonical series on the grounds that he had disregarded "the prescribed number of years" (Zosimus 2.4.3). A further addition to the Capitoline Fasti made between A. D. 88 and 96, most of which was erased after the death of Domitian, records that the sixth *ludi saeculares* were held *a(nno) p(ost) R(omam) c(onditam) DCCCXXI*, that is, in A. D. 88 (CIL 1², p. 29; *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.1, pp. 62-63, cf. Tab. XLIII), and the *commentarium* of the *ludi saeculares* in 204 proclaims that they were the seventh of the series (I. 1, 17).⁵⁷

When Domitian celebrated *ludi saeculares* in 88, a mere 41 years after Claudius, he claimed to be reverting to Augustus' original computation (*Domitianus* 4.3: *fecit et ludos saeculares, computata ratione temporum ad annum non quo Claudius proxime, sed quo olim Augustus ediderat*). But 110 years from 17 B. C. brings one to A. D. 94, not 88, which is attested as the year by irrefragable evidence.⁵⁸ The historian Tacitus was one of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* who officiated in 88 and he fully expounded the differing calculations of Augustus and Claudius in his account of that year (*Ann.* 11.11). Unfortunately, the later books of Tacitus' *Histories* are lost, so that it remains unclear how Domitian could claim to be using the same computation as Augustus or how a later writer could believe that Domitian "decided to respect the rule that had been transmitted from the start" (Zosimus 2.4.3). A persistent theory suggests that Augustus originally intended to celebrate his *ludi saeculares* in 23 B. C. (which would be exactly 110 years before Domitian's celebration in 88 A. D.), then postponed the celebration for political and perhaps other reasons, and that Domitian disregarded the date of the actual celebration in 17 B. C. in order to revert to Augustus' original calculation.⁵⁹ But the postulated "crisis in party and state," which was often surmised to have occurred in 23 B. C.,⁶⁰ was effectively dismantled in 1967 by Peter Swan's analysis of the

⁵⁵ Hirschfeld, *Kleine Schriften* (1913), 442-443.

⁵⁶ Claudius' games are construed as celebrating 800 years from the foundation of Rome by B. Levick, *Claudius* (London, 1990), 87, 121; S R. F. Price, *CAH* 10 (1996), 837.

⁵⁷ Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² (1965), 140, 141.

⁵⁸ Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² (1965), 80-87, esp. coins with the obverse legend CO(n)S(ul) XIII LVD(os) SAEC(ulares) FEC(it) (*BMC, Roman Empire* 2 [London, 1930], 130-132, 135) and the addition to the Capitoline Fasti discussed above.

⁵⁹ Hirschfeld, *Kleine Schriften* (1913), 443-445, with appeal to T. Bergk, *Augusti rerum a se gestarum index* (Göttingen, 1873), 75-78; H. Mattingly, "Virgil's Golden Age: Sixth *Aeneid* and Fourth *Eclogue*," *CR* 48 (1934), 161-165; R. Syme, *Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), 339; R. Merkelbach, "Aeneas in Cumae," *Museum Helveticum* 18 (1961) 83-99, at 90-99.

⁶⁰ Most eloquently in a chapter with precisely that title by Syme, *Roman Revolution* (1939), 331-348.

Fasti Capitolini, which Mommsen had imaginatively restored to show that Augustus' colleague as consul that year died in office:⁶¹ a series of similar entries preserved in full shows that A. Terentius Varro Murena must be presumed to have died late in 24 after he had been formally elected consul for 23 as Augustus' colleague, but before he entered office on 1 January 23.⁶² Hence it remains unknown exactly how Domitian justified his choice of 88 rather than 94 for the celebration of his Secular Games.

It was therefore with conscious and deliberate symbolism that Severus celebrated Secular Games in 204, on the cycle employed by Augustus, exactly two hundred and twenty years after the *ludi saeculares* of 17 B. C. These earlier games had the good fortune not only to be recorded in Augustus' *Res Gestae* (22.2), which any inhabitant of Rome or visitor to the city could read at the entrance to the mausoleum of Augustus, but also to be immortalised in the poem of nineteen Sapphic stanzas which the poet Horace composed for the occasion.⁶³ The name of the poet of 204 is lost and only meagre fragments of his poem have been preserved: it was in hexameters, it was slightly less than fifty lines in length, and it appears to have ended with an evocation of the emperors' martial prowess.⁶⁴

The historical parallels between Augustus' victories in civil war and those of Septimius Severus more than two centuries later were too obvious for the latter to ignore. He therefore set out to emphasize the positive and favourable aspects of the inevitable comparison and to present himself as a second Augustus. He presumably did so in more ways than those for which evidence has survived in the extant historical record. This exercise in public relations was successful at least as long as Severus lived: much as he might have wished to mock it, Tertullian felt obliged to praise the prosperity and felicity of the present age when writing for pagans in his *De Pallio* (2.7) and even used it as a basis for argument when writing for a Christian audience (*De Anima* 30.3). After Severus' failure to conquer

⁶¹ Mommsen, *CIL* 1 (Berlin, 1863), p. 441: *Fasti consulares Capitolini*, frags. xxxiii-xxxv, restored "[in mag(istratu) mort(uus)] est." Mommsen's supplement was accepted by W. Henzen & C. Hülsen, *CIL* 1² (Berlin, 1893), p. 28, but Degraasi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.1 (1947), 59, cf. 137, following Vaglieri, preferred "[in mag(istratu) damn(atus)] est." Mommsen declared that the Capitoline *Fasti* disproved Dio's date of 22 for the conspiracy of Varro Murena and hence that "sic, ut feci, supplendum est" (*CIL* 1 [1863], p. 455).

⁶² P. M. Swan, "The Consular *Fasti* of 23 B. C. and the Conspiracy of Varro Murena," *HSCP* 71 (1966, pub. 1967), 235-247.

⁶³ The *acta* of 17 B. C. record "carmen composuit Q. Hor[ati]us Flaccus" (Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² [1965], 117 line 149); the poem survives with the rest of Horace's poems.

⁶⁴ C. Huelsen, *Rh. Mus.*, N. F. 81 (1932), 379-380. The treatment of the poem by Pighi, *De ludis saecularibus*² (1965), 165-166, 222-227, is unsatisfactory. Allusions to the birth of a daughter to Caracalla and his wife Plautilla late in 203 were detected by J. Gagé, "Les jeux séculaires de 204 a. J.-C. et la dynastie des Sévères," *MEFR* 51 (1934), 33-78.

Scotland and his death in York on 4 February 211, things changed. First came political instability at the centre, then increasing military pressure on the northern frontiers and in the East and finally a waning of economic prosperity in most parts of the Roman Empire. When Cassius Dio looked back from the 230s at the history of his lifetime, he saw a sudden descent from the golden age of the Antonines to an age of iron which supervened with the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 (72[71].36.4). But if we wish to understand the reign of Septimius Severus, we need to look beyond Dio's pessimism to the optimism which permeated Roman society around 200: at that date many contemporaries could reasonably believe that Septimius Severus had inaugurated a new Augustan age.

