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OLIVIER HEKSTER

COMMODUS

AN EMPEROR AT THE CROSSROADS

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# COMMODUS. AN EMPEROR AT THE CROSSROADS



# COMMODUS

An Emperor at the Crossroads

Een wetenschappelijke proeve op het gebied van de letteren

## PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR  
AAN DE KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN,  
VOLGENS BESLUIT VAN HET COLLEGE VAN DECANEN  
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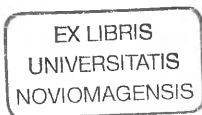
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To the memory of Thomas Wiedemann

(1950-2001)



## PREFACE

The mad monarchs of Roman history, with all their peculiarities and the countless anecdotes that surround their lives, form a fascinating topic of research. This book focuses on one of those 'insane despots'. The emperor Commodus was the first purple-born Roman emperor, and according to our literary sources an evil tyrant – Hollywood style. Dramatic stories about his life are easy to find. This 'political biography', however, aims to extend beyond mere trivia, though some spectacular details have been included. Anecdotal evidence, after all, can be fun. But anecdotes only form a small part of our understanding of the Roman world. Epigraphic, numismatic and sculptural sources are easily as relevant. They should be crucial to any analysis of Roman emperors' lives – or to other aspects of ancient history, for that matter. This study tries to mobilise different types of evidence, to come to a better understanding of the reign of Commodus.

Whether I have succeeded in drawing together diverse categories of research, and sketched a convincing picture of Commodus' reign, is not for me to say. But if I have somehow managed to avoid the pitfalls of interdisciplinary day-tourism, others owe praise for that. First and foremost my gratitude goes to Luuk de Blois, whose enthusiasm, trust and diligence have been a constant motivation for me, from the very first day that I started to get interested in ancient history. Eric Moormann saved me from many factual and methodological errors – and patiently corrected the text again, and again, and again. Two careful supervisors is as much as anyone could hope for. But I have been more fortunate still, with many others who have helped me along the way.

Fergus Millar must have repeatedly regretted the day that I became a member of Brasenose College, as it heralded the beginning of endless visits to his room, with questions, or work to read, often unannounced. He never complained or showed annoyance, which I took as encouragement to infringe upon his time even more often. I even usurped his secretary, Priscilla Lange, who, wonderful as she is, agreed to create a bibliography from the chaotic files which I provided her with, possibly without knowing what she was letting herself into. My apologies for that. Similarly, Jás Elsner, Bert Smith and Margareta Steinby were extremely generous with their time, and made me feel more at ease at Oxford than I had thought possible. Their support was topped only by the astounding willingness to help by everyone in the Heberden coin room in the Ashmolean museum. Discussions with Cathy King are always inspirational. Volker Heuchert and Christopher Howgego surpassed any possible expectation, and gave me, besides good advice, access to the immense database of their forthcoming



fourth volume of *Roman Provincial Coinage*. This book would not have been the same without them.

The list goes on. Edwin van Meerkerk, colleague and friend from when we started to study history together, has given continuous moral support, discussed history at length – and made computers do things with my text that I had not thought possible. Ted Kaizer and Pierre Sánchez, both fellow ancient historians, are such good friends that they have been relentless in their criticism (a favour which I have happily returned). In similar friendship, Gerhard Hoogers has taught me all I know about representation. Stephan Mols has advised and corrected me beyond the calls of duty. My father, as always, has spotted errors in the text that everyone else had missed. I had not expected anything less. Other friends and family have kindly pretended to listen when I told them more about Commodus than they can possibly have been interested in – so I will continue to do so, to the everlasting regret of all but my grandmother, who will continue to correct me and deny that she did so.

One more person must be explicitly named, before I will succumb to simple listings. Thomas Wiedemann helped to supervise this study until his death on 28 June 2001. His illness and death were a shock. I will never forget the many discussions we had, nor the generosity with which he provided me with a seemingly unending number of ideas. More important still, his unqualified kindness. I miss him. The dedication only begins to express this.

Many more people, at various institutions, have helped me over the years with ideas and advice. None of them should be held responsible for the contents of this book. Many of them disagree fiercely. It is, thus, more than a commonplace when I say that I am solely responsible for any remaining mistakes. I was probably warned against them. My thanks nonetheless: C. Ando, M. Beard, M. Bergmann, A. Birley, I. Bolognese, C. Bonnet, C. Bruun, L. Emmett, S. Evers, J. Gadeyne, C. Gâzdac, H. Geertman, G. de Kleijn, B. Kelly, W. Liebeschuetz, L. Morgan, S. Price, N. Purcell, C. de Raniera, J. Rich, R. Salomons, R. Tion and P. Zanker. Financial support was provided by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and in addition by the following institutions: The Arts and Humanities Research Board, Brasenose College Oxford, the Classics Department (Nottingham), the Dutch Institute at Rome (a welcome home at visits to Rome), The Faculty of Arts (Nijmegen), the Reiman-de-Bas Fonds, the Sub-Faculty of Ancient History (Oxford), and the VSB Foundation. An earlier version of much of chapter one was published in L. de Blois (ed.), *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies in the Roman Empire* (Amsterdam 2001).

Olivier Hekster

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviations of periodicals adhere to *L'Année Philologique*, those of ancient authors and texts to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996<sup>3</sup>). In addition, the following abbreviations may be unfamiliar to some readers:

<i>BMC</i>	<i>A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum</i> (London 1873-1927)
<i>BMCRE</i>	H. Mattingly, <i>Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum</i> . (London 1965-1975)
<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> (Berlin 1828-1877)
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> (Berlin 1863- )
<i>EAOR</i>	P. Sabbatini Tumolesi (ed.), <i>Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell' occidente romano</i> (Rome 1988- )
<i>EDH</i>	G. Alföldy (ed.), <i>Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg</i> < <a href="http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/institute/sonst/adw/edh/">http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/institute/sonst/adw/edh/</a> >
Gherardini, <i>Studien</i>	M. Gherardini, <i>Studien zur Geschichte des Kaisers Commodus</i> (Vienna 1974)
<i>GM</i>	F. Imhoof-Blumer, <i>Griechische Münzen. Neue Beiträge und Untersuchungen</i> (Munich 1890)
Gnecchi, <i>MR</i>	F. Gnecchi, <i>I medaglioni romani</i> . 3 vols. (Milan 1912)
Grosso, <i>Commodo</i>	F. Grosso, <i>La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo</i> (Turin 1964)
<i>IGRom</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes</i> (Paris 1906-1927)
<i>IK</i>	<i>Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien</i> (Bonn 1972- )
<i>ILS</i>	H. Dessau, <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i> . 3 vols. (Berlin 1954-1955 <sup>2</sup> )
Kaiser-Raiß, <i>Münzprägung</i>	M. Kaiser-Raiß, <i>Die stadtrömische Münzprägung während der Alleinherrschaft des Commodus. Untersuchungen zur Selbstdarstellung eines römischen Kaisers</i> (Frankfurt am Main 1980)



<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
Leunissen, <i>Konsuln</i>	P. M. M. Leunissen, <i>Konsuln und Konsulare in der Zeit von Commodus bis Severus Alexander (180-235 n. Chr.)</i> (Amsterdam 1989)
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (Zürich 1981-1999)
<i>LTUR</i>	E. M. Steinby (ed.), <i>Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae</i> . 6 vols. (Rome 1993-1999)
Millar, <i>ERW</i>	F. Millar, <i>The Emperor in the Roman World</i> (London 1992 <sup>2</sup> )
<i>RGA</i>	W. H. Waddington/ E. Babelon/ T. Reinach. <i>Recueil general des monnaies grecques d'Asie Mineure</i> . 4 vols. (Paris 1904-1912), Part 1 (Paris 1925 <sup>2</sup> )
<i>PIR</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> (Berlin 1933 <sup>2</sup> - )
<i>RIC</i>	H. Mattingly / R. Sydenham etc., <i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i> (London 1923-67)
<i>RPC</i>	<i>Roman Provincial Coinage</i> (London 1992- )
SNG, Aulock	H. von Aulock, <i>Sammlung v. Aulock. Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. Deutschland</i> (Berlin 1957-1981)
<i>Syll</i> <sup>3</sup>	W. Dittenberger, <i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> (Leipzig 1915-1924 <sup>3</sup> )
<i>TAM</i>	E. Kalinka etc. (eds.) <i>Tituli Asiae Minoris</i> (Vienna 1901-1944)
Traupman, <i>Commodus</i>	J. C. Traupman, <i>The life and reign of Commodus</i> (PhD; Princeton 1956)

Translations from Malalas are adapted from E. Jeffreys etc., *The Chronicles of John Malalas* (Melbourne 1986), and references (book number and paragraph) are to that version, with the pages in the Dindorf edition (Bonn 1831) included in brackets. Translations from Galen's *On Prognosis* are from V. Nutton, *Galen: On Prognosis* (Berlin 1979). References to Galen's works are all to the Kuhn edition (Leipzig 1821-33). Further translations are either adapted from the *LCL* (where available), or my own. The numbering of Dio's *Roman History* follows the *LCL* edition.

## INTRODUCTION

History is scarcely capable of preserving the memory  
of anything except myths.<sup>1</sup>

Lucius Aurelius Commodus was the first Roman emperor who was 'born in the purple'. His father, Marcus Aurelius, had already become emperor when Commodus was born. No other person in Roman history had so clearly emphasised the dynastic principle underlying succession in the Empire as this πορφυρογέννητος, who came to power after just over eighty years of 'adoptive' emperors. The beginning of Commodus' sole reign is an important moment in Roman history, foreshadowing, to an extent, the accession to the throne of child-emperors, such as the thirteen-year old Gordian III in AD 238. This aspect, however, is mostly overshadowed by Commodus' extremely bad reputation.

In both ancient and modern texts, the emperor is often mentioned alongside 'evil emperors', such as Gaius, Nero and Domitian. It is not difficult to see why. In ancient times, Commodus was accused of suffering from 'madness and insanity', indulging in 'cruel and murderous' habits, and of being guilty of 'many unseemly deeds'. He was also 'sinister and scandalous, cruel and obscene, filthy-mouthed, and perverted'.<sup>2</sup> The emperor Julian found Commodus, in his *Caesars* (312 C), 'not worth even ridicule'. Macchiavelli, thus, followed a well-established tradition when he described the emperor as 'cruel and inhuman', as did Gibbon, when he wrote how 'every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct from the mind of Commodus'.<sup>3</sup> Nor has Commodus' image improved over time. The latest edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* summarises him as 'dangerously

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind* (London 1947), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Herodian, 14.8: μανίας καὶ παρανοίας; Dio, 73.1.1: ἀσελγῆ καὶ μαιφόνον; 73.4.1; SHA, *Comm.* 1.7-8: *turpis, improbus, crudelis, libidinosus, ore quoque pollutus et constupratus*.

<sup>3</sup> N. Macchiavelli, *Il Principe*, G. Lisio (ed.) (Florence 1900), 19.17; E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, E. Bury (ed.) (London 1896-1900), I, 92 (= ch. 4).

deranged', whereas elsewhere the emperor is introduced as a 'morally deprived monster'.<sup>4</sup>

A number of particularly gory anecdotes was used to illustrate this point of view. Most of them are summed up in the fourth-century *Historia Augusta*, for instance how 'he cut open one corpulent person, down the middle of his belly, so that his intestines gushed forth' (*Comm.* 10.5), or how 'he even aped a surgeon, going so far as to bleed men to death with his scalpels' (*Comm.* 11.7). It is noticeable that these types of excesses were not actually described by any contemporary historians. All sources agree, though, on two signs of the emperor's insanity: his attempts to present himself as the demi-god Hercules, and the fact that he fought as a gladiator in the amphitheatre, sometimes even combining the two.

These two facets of Commodus' life have been noted in current scholarship, but not analysed. Commodus' reign as a whole, in fact, has been given little attention since the appearance of Fulvio Grosso's massive *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* in 1964, and Maria Gherardini's *Studien zur Geschichte des Kaisers Commodus*, ten years later (based on her PhD from 1964, with only some amendments and updating). Both books give a tremendous amount of epigraphic and prosopographical information (the number of references to Grosso in the footnotes of this book should speak for itself), but work mainly within a chronological structure, following (and discussing) the narrative sources, and trying to find out what 'happened' in each individual year. They do not try to establish a framework from which to analyse the emperor's actions. Yet Commodus prominently displayed his 'follies', in the amphitheatre, on statuary, and on coins. It would be useful to know who the addressees were. Still, questions about the different types of audiences at these manifestations have not been asked – let alone questions about possible (positive) receptions of the imperial behaviour.

Recent scholarship has focused much on imperial (self) representation. Paul Zanker's seminal *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (Munich 1987), and Tonio Hölscher's *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* (Heidelberg 1987) have put the notion of a *Bildprogramm*, and the importance of art and other 'visual imagery' in broadcasting ideas, firmly on the agenda. Jaś Elsner has added the viewer to the picture – or better, a variety of different viewers, all with

<sup>4</sup> Th. Kissel, 'Die Ermordung des Commodus und die Kaisererhebung des Pertinax' *AW* 30 (1999), 616-7; 617: 'moralisch depravierten Monstrum'.

different interpretations of a given 'image'.<sup>5</sup> The volumes of *Roman Provincial Coinage* (London 1992 - ) have provided a further voice for Roman subjects from many less well-documented areas. Gladiatorial games, too, have been looked at in the context of representation, with important work by (amongst others) Katherine Coleman and Thomas Wiedemann.<sup>6</sup>

These, and various other new notions, are of great importance for an analysis of the reign of an emperor who has been blamed for his (near) divine representation and his gladiatorial activities.<sup>7</sup> Newly found, or interpreted, inscriptions, coins and sculptures, and great progress in the prosopographical studies of the period, further stress the need for a new look at Commodus' reign as a whole. It must be noted that the aim of this book is not a rehabilitation of the person of the emperor. Commodus may well have been insane. He probably was not a particularly pleasant person. But even if he was a megalomaniac tyrant, there may still have been a method to his madness. It is such a method in Commodus' actions that this book is interested in.

The present study, then, tries to interpret the reign of the emperor Commodus by looking at the way the emperor was represented. It is not a biography in the strictest sense of the word. Only relatively little space has been devoted to a description of events in the emperor's life. The rest focuses on his representation and reception. In other words, it tries to answer the following questions: What were the messages, which were sent out from the centre towards the different layers of society of the realm, in Rome and the provinces? Do the different types of representation suggest disjointed imperial whims, or do they somehow cohere, and suggest systematic symbolism? If some sort of 'symbolic programme' can be discerned, who were its targets, and did they understand the message?

In order to answer these questions, the book is divided into two parts. The first is entitled 'Ruling the Empire'. It consists of two chapters, which focus on the development of structures of government, and the composition of groups involved in ruling, during, and just

<sup>5</sup> J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer. The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge 1995).

<sup>6</sup> K. Coleman, 'Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments', *JRS* 80 (1990), 44-73; Th. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London - New York 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for a successful attempt to re-evaluate Nero's reign along such lines, the collection of essays in J. Elsner / J. Master (eds.) *Reflections of Nero. Culture, History & Representation* (London 1994).



before, Commodus' reign. Chapter one provides an analysis of the 'emperors-designate' in the second century, arguing strongly in favour of the importance of dynastic considerations when appointing successors to the throne. Marcus' attempts to prepare his son for the emperorship are placed in this context. Chapter two sketches a narrative history of Commodus' sole reign (AD 180-192). Such a narrative history is, through the very nature of the enterprise, restricted by the outline which the literary sources provide, and only limited conclusions can be drawn from it. It is, however, a necessary preliminary to the rest of the book, and helps in establishing a number of themes, which can be further explored in the following chapters.

The second part of the book, 'Representing the rule', consists of the remaining three chapters. Here the application of new notions and methodology is most obvious. Chapters three and four look at, respectively, the place that divinity took in Commodus' visual representation, and at the role (and importance) of gladiatorial games and *venationes*. In these chapters the importance of 'legitimation of power' as a fundamental notion in understanding Commodus' self-representation will be brought forward. In reconstructing the message that the emperor wanted to present, one has to look beyond the deliberately biased literary sources. Much attention is therefore given to coinage, statues, and, in chapter four, to the concept of ritual and its importance to our understanding of the games. Chapter five, finally, attempts to establish what the reception was of Commodus' self-representation – and by implication of his reign in more general terms – by his contemporaries and successors. If, after all, a coherent visual programme existed, its success can only be measured by analysing people's awareness of, and reaction to, the imperial imagery.

### **The historiographical tradition: Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta***

I have just called the literary sources of Commodus' reign deliberately biased. Such a statement needs explanation. This is not a great problem for the most important contemporary source for the period: the Bithynian senator Cassius Dio (c. AD 164 – after 229).<sup>8</sup> Dio was, after all, a senator (and a son of a senator), and reacted strongly to anything affecting senatorial power and dignity.<sup>9</sup> Commodus does not

<sup>8</sup> On Dio's career and name: F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964), 7-27; A. M. Gowing, 'Dio's name', *CPh* 85 (1990), 49-54.

<sup>9</sup> U. Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo: subjetividad y objetividad en la antigua

seem to have cared much for either, and many of his policies effectively bypassed the senate. The emperor also executed and banished a great number of senators. This inevitably alienated the person who would write the main account of the history of his reign. Commodus was made into an 'anti-emperor'; the direct opposite of his philo-senatorial father Marcus Aurelius.<sup>10</sup> Any measures that the emperor took were ridiculed, and only the more extreme examples of his behaviour mentioned, often out of context. Part of the latter problem may be that for Commodus' reign we only have the *Epitome* of Dio's work by the monk Ioannes Xiphilinus, from the second half of the eleventh century, which is haphazard at best.<sup>11</sup>

Still, most of Dio's biases remain obvious. The dichotomy between good prominent senators, and the evil advisors to an incapable emperor, is all too clear.<sup>12</sup> If there was a coherent idea underlying the emperor's actions, it would have gone directly against Dio's opinions about how the Empire ought to be run. Commodus' emperorship was also the first that Dio had actually experienced in person, and there is a recognisable change in the work at the beginning of the reign.<sup>13</sup> Marcus' death becomes the breaking point in Dio's conception of the history of the empire; the moment in which 'the kingdom of gold' ended.<sup>14</sup> The description of Commodus as an incompetent tyrant need not come as a surprise.

Herodian (c. AD 175-250), the other contemporary historian whose work has been preserved, was not a senator. He may even have been from a relatively low class, though his outlook on history and society was firmly elitist.<sup>15</sup> His lack of direct involvement in the senate may be the reason that Herodian's account of Commodus is less negative than that of Dio, or, in fact, the life of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta*.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the description of the emperor is positive.

historiografía', *Gerión* 2 (1984), 113-149; 119; J. W. Rich, *Cassius Dio. The Augustan Settlement (Roman History 53-55)* (Warminster 1990), 1, 15; L. de Blois, 'Emperor and empire in the works of Greek-speaking authors of the third century AD', *ANRW* II.34.4 (1998), 3391-443; 3409.

<sup>10</sup> Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 116.

<sup>11</sup> Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Senatorial excellence: Dio, 73.1.2, 73.5, 73.8.6, 73.11.1-2, 73.20.1; bad advisors: Dio, 73.1.1, 73.10.2, 73.12; Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 132-3.

<sup>13</sup> M. G. Schmidt, 'Die "Zeitgeschichtlichen" Bücher im Werk des Cassius Dio – von Commodus zu Severus Alexander', *ANRW* II.34.4 (1998), 2591-649; 2602, 2608-10.

<sup>14</sup> Dio, 72.36.4.

<sup>15</sup> H. Sidebottom, 'Herodian's historical methods and understanding of history', *ANRW* II.34.4 (1998), 2775-836; 2822-3; G. Marasco, 'Erodiano e la crisi dell'impero', *ANRW* II.34.4 (1998), 2837-927; 2861-2.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hohl, 'Kaiser Commodus und Herodian', *SAWDDR(G)* 1954 (1), 3-46; 3.

Herodian seems to have objected to the appointment of child-emperors, as was happening in the mid-third century, when he was writing his narrative. This clearly affected his description of Commodus. Much of his account of the period AD 180-192 is influenced by the preconception that the emperor was too young when he came to the throne, and was therefore too easily swayed and corrupted by favourites.<sup>17</sup> He took the same approach when describing the reigns of Elagabalus (5.5.1), Severus Alexander (5.8.10), and Gordian III (8.8.8).

According to Herodian, Commodus descended rapidly into tyranny. When he had described this decline, the important division between good emperors and tyrants, a crucial theme in Herodian's work, began to dictate the portrayal of the emperor.<sup>18</sup> A good emperor ruled the empire in the form of an ἀριστοκρατία (2.3.10); a tyrant like an unmitigated autocrat. The more extreme self-elevating innovations of Commodus' reign are, unsurprisingly, described at length by a hostile Herodian – himself a firm traditionalist.<sup>19</sup> The perception of tyranny also explains the countless conspiracies that Herodian describes; Commodus was a tyrant, and thus everybody must have tried to get rid of him. There is, finally, the matter of Herodian's trustworthiness. Grosso was one of the few to think highly of it, and Herodian's account dominates his book.<sup>20</sup> Others have been less generous, and describe Herodian's work as little more than a historical novel.<sup>21</sup> This may well be true, but need not mean that the work is totally unreliable. Herodian dramatised events, and manipulated them in order to 'liven up' the narrative, but does not seem to have falsified the facts as such.<sup>22</sup> Still, one needs to be careful before trusting Herodian's stories.

The third important narrative was not written contemporaneously with Commodus' reign, though some of its sources were. Fergus Millar, in 1964, has described the *Historia Augusta* as a problem 'into

<sup>17</sup> Herodian, 1.1.6, 1.6.1; Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 120-1; Marasco, 'Erodiano e la crisi dell'impero', 2844.

<sup>18</sup> Herodian 1.1.4: τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων; Marasco, 'Erodiano e la crisi dell'impero', 2857. Herodian applies the term τυράννος to Commodus (2.1.8, 2.4-5).

<sup>19</sup> G. Alföldy, 'Die Krise des Imperium Romanum und die Religion Roms', in: Idem, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches. Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbetrachtung* (Stuttgart 1989), 349-87; 362-3; De Blois, 'Emperor and empire', 3417.

<sup>20</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 45-7.

<sup>21</sup> F. Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta*, (Bonn 1972), 160-1; G. Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', in: Idem, *Krise*, 69-80 (= *BJ* 171 [1971], 367-76); 69.

<sup>22</sup> Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 124; Sidebottom, 'Herodian's historical methods', 2829-30.

which sane men refrain from entering'.<sup>23</sup> Since 1964, however, much has been done. Apart from the many publications on the subject by Sir Ronald Syme,<sup>24</sup> various scholars have presented a great number of articles at the recurrent *Historiae-Augustae-Colloquia*, which have been held in Bonn from 1962 to 1989, and in various European cities from then onwards. General consensus exists now about the fact that only one author, writing towards the end of the fourth century AD, is responsible for the collection of biographies.

The discussion about which sources this author used, on the other hand, is far from over.<sup>25</sup> Not all of it concerns this study greatly. Whether or not there was an 'Ignotus', who, more than Marius Maximus, supplied the facts for the more trustworthy lives of the *Historia Augusta*, is less important than the authorial viewpoint of the person who composed the *Vita Commodi*.<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that the extent to which Maximus' lost history was used would not have made a difference. He was, after all, like Dio, a senator who lived during Commodus' reign, and must have written about events 'with some passion'.<sup>27</sup> But whoever was responsible, the *Historia Augusta* shows a strong pro-senatorial tendency. Any emperor who did not abide by senatorial conventions was likely to be described negatively. If he killed senators, incorporation in the group of *principes mali* was almost inevitable.<sup>28</sup> Commodus was shown as an example of how not to rule. He was portrayed in the worst possible way, and his *Vita* cannot be accepted as a 'true' representation of the reign, though many of the names and events which it mentions may be accurate.

To what extent the narratives of Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* are dependent on each other, is much more important

<sup>23</sup> Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> I will mention only R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1968), and its companion volume *Emperors and Biography. Studies in the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1971), but the list is far more extensive.

<sup>25</sup> T. D. Barnes, 'The sources of the Historia Augusta (1967-92)', in: G. Bonamente / G. Paci (eds.), *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Maceratense* (Bari 1995), 1-34 provides an excellent discussion of the state of scholarship concerning the sources of the *Historia Augusta*, and supplies a useful bibliography.

<sup>26</sup> H. W. Benario, 'Ignotus, the 'good biographer' (?)', *ANRW* II.34.3 (1997), 2759-72, sketches recent points of view. H.-G. Pflaum, 'La valeur de l'information historique de la vita Commodi à la lumière des personnages nommément cités par le biographe', in: A. Alföldi (ed.), *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1970* (Bonn 1972), 199-247; 246, considers the *Vita Commodi* one of the reliable lives.

<sup>27</sup> A. R. Birley, 'Marius Maximus: the consular biographer', *ANRW* II.34.3 (1997), 2679-2757; 2738.

<sup>28</sup> A. Scheithauer, *Kaiserbild und literarisches Programm. Untersuchungen zur Tendenz der Historia Augusta*. (Frankfurt am Main etc. 1987), 39, 52; Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 125-6.

for an analysis of the reign of Commodus than the possible existence of 'Ignotus'. The more they are inter-reliant, the less useful they are to find out what 'really happened'. If Herodian based himself mainly on what Dio had written, a statement of the former could hardly be used to support Dio's description of events. It seems that there is agreement on the idea, advocated most stringently by Frank Kolb, that the *Historia Augusta* made direct use of Dio and Herodian – and that for a number of later *Vitae*, Herodian was actually the main source.<sup>29</sup> The level of dependence in earlier lives on Dio and Herodian is less easily defined, but it seems other sources were at least as important, if not more so.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Herodian surely used Dio, but we cannot say quite how much.<sup>31</sup>

The main literary sources for Commodus' reign are, it appears, not only biased, but also interdependent, up to an unknown point. They also all wrote after the events, possibly interpreting earlier facts in light of later developments. All three present the emperor as a stereotypically bad emperor, simplifying his actions, and making them suit their own purposes and perception of history.<sup>32</sup> Their apparent correspondence does not make them reliable. To come to a better understanding of the reign of the last Antonine, one has to look at other information, textual and non-textual.

### **Sending out messages: Visual programmes and ideology**

Visual remains can help greatly in counterbalancing the historiographical tradition. Commodus' visual programme (*Bildprogramm*) will, hence, play a crucial part in this book. Coinage, sculpture, architecture and spectacles (such as the gladiatorial games) will be perceived as means to transmit 'ideology', with the aim of making it reach intended audiences. Visual imagery, in this understanding, functioned like a recognisable 'language', with the purpose of conveying a message, or, perhaps better, invoking an 'aura', which

<sup>29</sup> Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen*, 8-18, 160; idem, 'Cassius Dio, Herodian und die Quellen der *Historia Augusta*', in: Bonamente / Paci, *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Maceratense*, 179-91; Barnes, 'Sources', 9-12. Still, Birley, 'Marius Maximus', 2737, states that Herodian's work was not relevant to the writing of the *SHA*.

<sup>30</sup> Kolb, 'Quellen der *Historia Augusta*', 191.

<sup>31</sup> Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen*, 47, 160-1 sees Dio as the 'wichtigste Quelle für die Historien Herodians' (p. 160), but Sidebottom, 'Herodian's Historical Methods', 2826 doubts the importance (though not the application) of Dio in Herodian's work.

<sup>32</sup> Espinosa Ruiz, 'El reinado de Cómodo', 133, 137, 147. Cf. p. 138: 'El resultado no podía ser otro que la distorsión de la realidad'.

would be intelligible to the heterogeneous population that constituted the Roman Empire.<sup>33</sup> Whether such a language could be understood was, of course, intrinsically dependent on the interpretation of the symbols used, 'on the ways art is viewed and perceived in a society'.<sup>34</sup> Different groups, or even individuals, could find entirely different meanings in similar symbols. This need not have been a problem. One can easily imagine how imperial images were meant – or at least understood – to be differently interpreted by the layers of society in the Roman empire. Talking about a *Bildprogramm*, then, implies that the possible perception(s) of an image must have influenced its production. A discussion on the validity of these assumptions, and on who was ultimately responsible for the development of imperial images, can be found in chapters three and five.<sup>35</sup>

A visual programme also implies intended messages that need broadcasting: a centralised ideology. 'Ideology' is a much-contested term, but describing a 'complex and changing world that defies conceptual straitjackets',<sup>36</sup> does not mean one can avoid concepts altogether. Some modern ideas, although unknown to the Romans, may well help in clarifying aspects of their world. 'A twentieth century historian, writing for a twentieth century audience, cannot ignore modern concepts either, whether they come from political science, social anthropology, or social psychology'; a conviction of Peter Burke that I wholly support – also in the twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, while ideology might be a notion that is 'difficult to make use of', and one that 'cannot be used without circumspection',<sup>38</sup> avoiding it altogether would all too easily lead to a confusing array of equally circumspect semi-synonyms.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hölscher, *Römische Bildsprache*, 74: 'Das Formensystem der römischen Kunst hatte eine spezifische Leistung darin, daß es die Ansprüche einer gebildeten Elite ebenso zu erfüllen vermochte wie die Bedürfnisse der breiten Reichsbevölkerung. Die Bildsprache konnte sowohl als Ausdruck historischen Bildung und elitären Lebensführung wie auch als allgemein verständliches visuelles Kommunikationssystem dienen'. But cf. E. H. Gombrich, 'The visual image: its place in communication', in: Idem, *The Image & the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London 1982), 137-61, for the difficulties in using imagery for unambiguous communication.

<sup>34</sup> J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford 1998), 53. Cf. F. I. Zeitlin, 'Visions and revisions of Homer', in: S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge 2001), 195-266; 211-3.

<sup>35</sup> Especially. pp. 87-90, 106, 112-4, 128, 177-8. See also C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley – Los Angeles 2000), 209-245.

<sup>36</sup> K. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: an Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton 1996), 5.

<sup>37</sup> P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven – London 1992), 6.

<sup>38</sup> M. Foucault, 'Truth and power' in: C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77* (Harlow 1980), 109-133; 118.

Ideology is not, of course, some form of monolithic imperial doctrine, which permeated and dominated all forms of culture and society. It is much more flexible. By far the most important work to have influenced its interpretation in this book has been John Thompson's *Ideology and Modern Culture*. Thompson is explicitly aware that 'the interpretation of ideology not only involves a projection of possible meaning, but also the claim that such meaning serves, in certain circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of domination. The interpretation of ideology thus enters the realm of claim and counter-claim, of argument and counter-argument ...'.<sup>39</sup> Ideology is never a coherent whole, never totalised; it constantly adjusts and readjusts, being part of a living society. Thompson's definition of ideology, and the one here followed, therefore allows for interpretation and counter-interpretation. Ideology is understood as 'the ways in which the meaning constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain structured social relations from which some individuals and groups benefit more than others, and which some individuals and groups have an interest in preserving while others may seek to contest'.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, one has to be careful in identifying any new coherent ideology. It is only too easy for a historian to read too much into the evidence, and 'discover' a new programme where in reality there was perhaps only a slightly different use of conventional symbolic forms. Yet in the case of Commodus, it was the emperor himself who brought new symbolism to the foreground. After all, he was the person who fought in the arena and dressed like Hercules. However much popular expectation influenced Commodus in doing so, in the end it was his decision, and his alone, to step into the arena in the guise of Hercules. This particular behaviour was afterwards broadcast through a wide range of visual media. This suggests that in this case, 'ideology' originated at the top, and benefited the emperor personally. It seems also clear that the (senatorial) elite contested the new ideology.

<sup>39</sup> J. B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture. Critical Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford 1990), 294.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, 73.

## Being another? Association, assimilation and identification

When Commodus dressed up like Hercules the question of how far that comparison was meant to be taken, is of importance – as in all cases when a comparison between a person and a god is made. Was mere association intended, or did the emperor actually try to appear as the divinity in question? When does ‘association’ lead to ‘assimilation’, and what, if any, are the differences from actual ‘identification’? Is the use by an emperor of a certain divinity’s attributes a sign of an attempt to ‘identify’ with that divinity, or do the attributes have a more metaphorical character, merely comparing some of the emperor’s virtues with those of a particular god? These questions are crucial, but difficult to answer, as the lines between the different procedures are fine.

Some important distinctions need to be put forward. First of all, it is obviously fundamentally different to compare someone who is alive to a divinity, or somebody who is already dead. Using the comparison to a god to describe particular qualities of a deceased loved-one, was not at all uncommon in the Roman empire. When looking at these ‘private apotheoses’, a second feature becomes obvious: it seems to have been more common, and was hence probably perceived as less problematic, to draw comparisons to the divine world when women and children were involved, than when the subject of comparison was a man.<sup>41</sup> The reason for this may well have been that women and children would have been unable to participate in that what mattered most for the Romans: the functions of the state.<sup>42</sup> In their case it was clear that a comparison to a certain divinity was only meant to emphasise a particular quality, not to identify the person in question with the divinity as such.

A similar use of gods, or divine attributes, could be made by poets, even when it concerned emperors. In writing, some subtleties can be more unambiguously stated. Images leave more space for interpretation. A spectator could never tell for certain whether the emperor was trying to convey his own divinity, or merely emphasising how some of his qualities were quasi-divine.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, an emperor

<sup>41</sup> H. Wrede, *Consecratio in Formam Deorum. Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1981), 28, 180. Cf. J. C. Balty, *Portrait und Gesellschaft in der römischen Welt* (Mainz 1993), 14-5.

<sup>42</sup> M. Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher. Theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1998), 39.

<sup>43</sup> Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher*, 4: ‘Der bildlichen Darstellung war ... nicht anzusehen, ob sie einen Vergleich ausdrücken sollte, oder ob sie die Sache ernster zu



could not unequivocally direct the interpretation that a spectator could take. This made the use of divine attributes in sculpture and reliefs problematic for emperors – at least in the early empire. Much depended on the context. If, for instance, an emperor had himself depicted with the attributes of (or even as) a number of different divinities, it seems unlikely that he aimed to be identified with one particular god. If, on the other hand, one god was clearly preferred over all others, in a wide range of modes of communication, identification became a possibility. When Commodus consistently displayed himself with Hercules' attributes, and had coins minted, first, for Hercules *Commodianus*, and then, for Hercules *Romanus*, showing himself on the obverses with the lion-skin over his head, it seems permissible to perceive the emperor as trying to *become* the divinity. When 'divine representations' seem to have been metaphorical in character, I will use the term 'association'. When Commodus manifestly tried to go beyond mere comparison, and to present himself not only (in certain aspects) like a god, but as the new incarnation of that particular god, I will apply the term 'identification'. 'Assimilation' will be regarded as describing intermediate stages.

### **Hercules, an ambiguous divinity**

A substantial part of this book will be devoted to Commodus' relationship to Hercules. Few divinities, if any, were more popular than Hercules. Few were more ambiguous. He was simultaneously hero and (demi-)god, Chthonic and Olympian, protagonist in comedy and tragedy, symbol of philosophy and brainless brute force. This made him a useful, yet risky, tool in image-forming. Useful, as one could reach several different groups and broadcast several different messages through the application of just one figure. Army, intelligentsia, and the public at large, would all be aware of at least some qualities of the divinity that they would look favourably upon – qualities that the emperor also claimed to possess. Yet they would also remember Hercules' vices.<sup>44</sup> Even apparently negative qualities could, in some cases, be presented as positive. The (drunken) Hercules *bibax*, for instance, also alluded to the story of Hercules sailing the golden cup of the sun (Macr. *Sat.* 5.21, 16.19).

The origins of the Romans' Hercules are much debated. Jean Bayet's *Les origines de l'Hercule romain* (Paris 1926) is still

nehmen war ...'.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Appendix 3: 'Ridicule and criticism'.

invaluable, but recently new works of scholarship have re-opened the discussion.<sup>45</sup> For the purposes of this research the debate has been bypassed. I will hardly analyse the various local variations of Hercules-figures. Only when they were of specific importance (such as the Hercules from Lepcis Magna, in case of Commodus' successor Septimius Severus) will there be differentiation. Elsewhere, I will simply speak of Hercules. Central imagery rises above local discrepancies. For the Romans too, Hercules was before all else the figure who, born a man, reached deification on his pyre, through his deeds and behaviour on earth. He was an inherently ambiguous divinity who 'represented some of the things that most concerned – troubled, puzzled, united, divided – both Greeks and Romans. He was, as we have learned to put it, good to think with'.<sup>46</sup> He was also iconographically very easy to recognise, with the club and lion-skin his unmistakable attributes.

In the text, Hercules will be mostly described as 'demi-god' or 'divinity'. I realise that this is a slightly arbitrary decision, but one which I think deserves preference over endless asides about the exact divine status of Hercules in specific situations. Only rarely, when the emphasis in our sources is clearly on a specific manifestation of Hercules, will I emphasise the type of divinity that he displays. Almost equally arbitrary is my choice to use 'Hercules', rather than 'Herakles', throughout. One could, with some justification, argue that when analysing the Greek-speaking part of the realm, 'Herakles' ought to be used, and sometimes, on other occasions 'Melquart'. Then again, this is a book about a Roman emperor, and one might as well use Roman names. Only in citations, and in the titles of books and articles, will the name 'Herakles' be used.

<sup>45</sup> Esp. C. Bonnet / C. Jourdain-Annequin (eds.), *Héraclès: d'une rive à l'autre de la Méditerranée; bilan et perspectives* (Rome 1992); M. A. Levi, *Ercole e Roma* (Rome 1997).

<sup>46</sup> M. Beard / J. Henderson, *Classics. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 1995), 78. Cf. Arist. *Heracles*, 10: 'Yet if all men thus honour him in the belief that he is the same person, what greater proof could one mention of his power?'



## Part One

### *RULING THE EMPIRE*

His Supreme Majesty, a partisan of a strong state and centralised power, had to lead a cunning and skilful fight against the aristocratic faction, which wanted to rule in the provinces and have a weak, pliable Emperor. But he could not fight the aristocracy with his own hands, so he always promoted into his circle, as representatives of the people, bright young men from the lowest orders ... These 'personal people' of the emperor, dragged straight from our desperate and miserable provinces into the salons of the highest courtiers where they met the undisguised hatred of the long-established aristocrats, served the emperor with an almost indescribable eagerness, indeed a passion, for they had quickly tasted the splendours of the Palace and the evident charms of power, and they knew that they had arrived there, come within reach of the highest state dignities, only through the will of His Highness. It was to them that the Emperor would entrust the positions requiring greatest confidence.

(R. Kapuscinski, *The Emperor. The Downfall of an Autocrat*, 30)



## ADOPTIVE EMPERORS AND A PURPLE-BORN *PRINCEPS*

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. ... A just but melancholy reflection imbibed, however, the noblest of human enjoyments. They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching, when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people.<sup>1</sup>

Transformation does not take place in a void. Gibbon famously describes the period of the so-called adoptive emperors as the happiest for the human race, and blames a licentious youth, Commodus, for destroying it. Yet it was Gibbon's perfect *princeps*, Marcus Aurelius himself, who relentlessly pursued a course of action that would assure his son the throne. As a result, Commodus would be the first emperor 'born in the purple' – a son, born when his father had already come to power, who became sole *Augustus* at his father's death. Commodus' accession to the throne therefore marks a unique moment in the history of imperial Rome. In order to understand the last Antonine's reign, it thus seems important to analyse properly the context in which this accession took place. What was, in other words, the political 'system' in which Commodus grew up – if indeed a system it was – and what were the measures Marcus Aurelius took to guarantee that his son would succeed him?

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, I, 78 (= chap. 3). Cf. already Julian, *Caesars*, 312 A-B: 'his error in judgement in the case of his son ... he failed to see that his son was ruining the empire as well as himself'.

## The political 'system' of the adoptive emperors

The monstrous vices of the son have cast a shade on the purity of the father's virtues. It has been objected to Marcus, that he sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy; and that he chose a successor in his own family, rather than in the republic.<sup>2</sup>

According to Gibbon, the bliss of his 'happy and prosperous period', should be ascribed to a number of just rulers, whom he assumed had come to power through a conscious system of adoption, with childless emperors being free to choose anyone they deemed worthy as their successors. That perception keeps lingering on. Michael Rostovtzeff's adoptive emperors were *exempla* of virtuousness, putting the welfare of the state over their paternal love: 'In his family life the emperor had to disregard his love for his own children; he had to look for the best man among his peers and raise him to the throne by adoption'.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Pierre Grimal argued that it was Marcus' own emphasis on family and human warmth (φιλοστοργία) that led him to appoint his son Commodus as his successor, thus implying a positive choice, rather than an unavoidable act.<sup>4</sup> Most recently Richard Reece once more echoed Gibbon:

By the second century AD the family principle of the first emperor Augustus (27 BC - AD 14), had given way to a principle of adoption ... The dynastic principle wormed its way back into the system with the marriage of Marcus Aurelius to the daughter of Antoninus Pius, Faustina II. The dynastic principle immediately demonstrated its faults when their son, Commodus (180-192) proclaimed himself as the reincarnation of Hercules.<sup>5</sup>

The above authors denied the importance of a dynastic principle in a particular period of the Principate. Egon Flaig goes even further. In the last few years he has repeatedly tried to call the entire idea of a principle of dynastic succession into doubt. Flaig argues vehemently against such a principle, which according to him consistently failed to function properly in periods of crisis, and thus did not exist:

Ein dynastisches 'Prinzip' konnte daher nun so lange 'wirken', wie eben keine Usurpation erfolgte oder erfolgreich war. Das heißt, er versagte im Ernstfall. Aber der Ernstfall ist die Probe darauf, welche politischen Beziehungen wirken und welche nicht. Folglich war das dynastische 'Prinzip' in der römischen Monarchie – zumindest in der Prinzipat Epoche –

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, I, 84 (= chap. 4).

<sup>3</sup> M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1957<sup>2</sup>), 122.

<sup>4</sup> P. Grimal, *Marc Aurèle* (Paris 1991), 216.

<sup>5</sup> R. Reece, *The Later Roman Empire. An Archaeology AD 150-600* (Stroud 1999), 163.

wirkungslos und damit inexistent.<sup>6</sup>

This argument is flawed. Systems that do not work still can, and very often do, exist. The fact that dynastic factors were not always decisive in extreme circumstances – that they only worked till a usurpation removed the present ruling house – does not mean they were absent. Numerous examples can illustrate as much. In Britain a revolution caused the dynastic claims of the House of Stuart to fall short, after which they were duly replaced by the House of Hannover – now the house of Windsor. Here too, dynastic claims failed in an extreme situation. Yet nobody would claim that the dynastic principle was absent from the British monarchy. Just because a dynasty is occasionally replaced, does not mean dynastic succession is ‘inexistent’.

One may well agree with Flaig that there was no organ in the Roman state that could confer legitimacy on a *de facto* ruler; that the Principate was essentially an acceptance system, not one founded on constitutional legitimacy. But this does not disallow the existence of a dynastic principle. There are few, if any, situations in Roman history, in which dynastic claims were ignored. Which factors caused Claudius to come to power, other than his Julio-Claudian blood? Why was Claudius Pompeianus, a Syrian of relatively obscure origins, believed to have been offered the empire twice – first by Pertinax after Commodus’ death, and later when Didius Julianus asked him to be co-emperor – if not for the fact that Lucilla, Marcus’ second-eldest daughter, and Lucius Verus’ widow, was his wife?<sup>7</sup> Even an imperial candidate like Galba, whose ‘links with the Julio-Claudians were so tenuous as to be worthless in terms of loyalty’, still tried to make what he could of those links, strongly emphasising his links with Livia, putting her head on coins and calling himself ‘Lucius Livius Galba’ in at least one official document.<sup>8</sup> The systematic slaughter of members

<sup>6</sup> E. Flaig, ‘Für eine Konzeptionalisierung der Usurpation im Spät Römisches Reich’, in: F. Paschoud, / J. Szidat, (eds.), *Usurpationen in der Spätantike* (Stuttgart 1997), 15-34; 20. Cf. Idem, *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich* (Frankfurt am Main – New York 1992).

<sup>7</sup> *IGR* 1.1509; *SHA, Marc.* 20.6-7; *Herodian*, 1.8.3; *SHA, Pert.* 4.11; *SHA, Did. Iul.* 8.3; M. L. Astarita, *Avidio Cassio* (Rome 1983), 75-6 n. 60, 110; G. Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand unter den Antoninen. Prosopographische Untersuchungen zur senatorischen Führungsschicht* (Bonn 1977), 184. T. Hölscher, ‘Claudische Staatsdenkmäler in Rom und Italien. Neue Schritte zur Festigung des Principats’, in: V. M. Strocka (ed.), *Die Regierungszeit des Kaisers Claudius (41-54 n.Chr.). Umbruch oder Episode* (Mainz 1994), 91-105; 93, 103.

<sup>8</sup> *BMCRE* 1, nos. 201-2, Pl. 58.4; *SEG* 15.873: Λουκίου Λιβίου <Σ>εβαστοῦ <Σ>ουλπικίου / Γάλλα αὐτοκράτορος [= M. McCrum / A. G. Woodhead, *Select*



of the imperial family by reigning emperors further shows the perception that close relatives were a liability that could endanger one's own position.<sup>9</sup> In Andrew Lintott's words: 'Did not dynastic connections in themselves confer, if not legitimacy, acceptability?'<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of Trajan by Nerva appears to be the one instance in which dynastic connections did not operate. On this occasion family ties did not rule supreme. Nerva apparently actually passed over relatives in order to adopt his successor (Dio, 68.4.1), though we do not know their names – let alone what happened to them after Trajan came to power.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the circumstances surrounding Trajan's adoption were suspect. Nerva's authority had proved to be not all-encompassing, forcing the elderly emperor to punish Domitian's killers against his own will.<sup>12</sup> With the threat of anarchy, and an alleged break-up in army discipline, it should come as no surprise that the childless Nerva chose to adopt the governor of Upper Germany, a man of distinguished background and career – and the general whose troops could reach Rome most rapidly, if he so desired.<sup>13</sup>

One should also remember that there had not been much time for people to get used to Nerva – nor to develop dynastic sentiments towards any of his relatives. Trajan's adoption was, in many respects, extraordinary, and more like a self-imposed usurpation than standard succession. Quite how extraordinary is made clear by Pliny, who in his *Panegyric* to Trajan of AD 100 states that this is indeed a hitherto unheard-of way to become emperor.<sup>14</sup> Pliny puts a positive turn on affairs, unsurprising for someone presenting a panegyric in the emperor's presence:

No tie of kinship or relationship bound adopted and adopter; your only bond

*Documents of the Principates of the Flavian Emperors* (Cambridge 1961), no. 328]. Cf. also the behaviour of Nymphidius Sabinus, who started to spread rumours that he was Gaius' illegitimate son, the moment he began 'to think of himself as potentially more than a kingmaker'; Th. Wiedemann, 'From Nero to Vespasian', *CAH* 10<sup>2</sup> (1996), 256-82; 261-2.

<sup>9</sup> M. Corbier, 'La Maison des Césars', in: P. Bonte (ed.), *Epouser au plus proche. Inceste, prohibitions et stratégies matrimoniales autour de la Méditerranée* (Paris 1994), 243-91; 274-5, with references.

<sup>10</sup> A. Lintott, 'The Emperor and his Army', *CR new series* 44 (1994), 130-2; 131. Cf. P. Barceló, 'Die Macht des Kaisers – Die Macht Gottes: Alleinherrschaft und Monotheismus in der römischen Kaiserzeit', in: Idem (ed.), *Contra quis ferat arma deos. Vier Augsburger Vorträge zur Religionsgeschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Munich 1996), 79-101; 84-5.

<sup>11</sup> R. M. Geer, 'Second thoughts on the imperial succession from Nerva to Commodus', *TAPhA* 67 (1936), 47-54; 49. On Nerva: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 2 (1936), no. C 1227.

<sup>12</sup> Dio, 68.3.3; Plin. *Pan.* 6.1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 6.2: *Corrupta est disciplina castrorum.*

<sup>14</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 7.1: *O novum atque inauditum ad principatum iter!*

was that of mutual excellence, rendering you worthy either to choose or be chosen ... Nor is there a more fitting way to adopt a son, if the adopter is the *princeps* ... If he is destined to rule all, he must be chosen from all ... Not to adopt someone, who in the eyes of all could have proved a ruler even without adoption, would indicate the wanton tyranny of power.<sup>15</sup>

An anti-dynastic speech indeed, constructing an entirely new system of government. Then again, Pliny could hardly have told Trajan anything else to his face. To use it as evidence for common senatorial ideas as to how succession should be arranged, is pushing the argument too far.<sup>16</sup> Only a few years later Dio Chrysostom accentuated the importance of relatives, and the fact that one inevitably had to take their positions into account:

And should not a good king especially love his relations and kin (φιλοίκειος δὲ καὶ φιλοσυγγενής)? For he regards his kith and kin (τοὺς οἰκέλους καὶ τοὺς συγγενεῖς) as a part of his own soul, and sees to it that they shall not only have a share of what is called the king's felicity, but much more, that they shall be thought worthy to be partners in his authority (κοινωνεῖν τῆς ἀρχῆς)... and those kinsmen who live honourable lives he loves beyond all others, but those who do not so live he considers, not friends, but relatives. For other friends he may cast off when he has discovered something objectionable in them, but in the case of his kinsmen, he cannot dissolve the tie; but whatever their character, he must allow the title to be used (ἀνάγκη τοῦτο ἀκούειν τὸ ὄνομα).<sup>17</sup>

Trajan, though no kinsmen of Nerva, was still adopted before becoming emperor-designate, as all emperors without sons adopted their preferred successors, presenting them, in effect, as a son-by-law. This, at the most banal of levels, could be used as evidence to support the claim that throughout the principate (including the period of the adoptive emperors) succession was a dynastic affair. Yet even when there was no son to succeed, the emperor was in no way free to choose any successor he saw fit. Succession in the second century, under the so-called system of adoptive emperors, may appear to have been a simple choice of the best man amongst the emperor's peers, but those

<sup>15</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 7.4-7: *Nulla adoptati cum eo qui adoptabat cognatio, nulla necessitudo, nisi quod uterque optimus erat, dignusque alter eligi alter eligere ... Nec decet aliter filium adsumi, si adsumatur a principe ... Imperaturus omnibus eligi debet ex omnibus ... Superbum istud et regium, nisi adoptes eum quem conste imperaturum fuisse, etiamsi non adoptesses.* Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 1.15, where Galba's adoption of Piso, another choice outside of the family (without an alternative within the family at hand), in a situation of crisis is presented as break for the better: *Sed Augustus in domo successorum quaesivit, ego in re publica.* Galba's speech has many similarities to *Pan.* 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> H. Nesselhauf, 'Die Adoption des römischen Kaisers', *Hermes* 83 (1955), 477-92: '... damals gängige Gedanken ...'.

<sup>17</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* III, 119-21.

peers, out of necessity, had to belong to an exclusive group of imperial relatives.

Indeed, ignoring a relative could be dangerous. Those with imperial blood could be the natural focus-point for any who were discontented with a current ruler. An insurrection against an emperor was deemed to be far easier if an imperial relative would lead it. Often members of the imperial family were popular among the troops, sometimes also those fallen from favour.<sup>18</sup> Even if one wants to see, e.g., Tacitus' description of Tiberius' fear of a possible insurrection by Germanicus as mainly a literary invention, it would still be an invention along lines that the audience Tacitus was writing for could have believed in. A rebellion led (or at least endorsed) by a kinsman of the emperor was thought of as a possibility. Without such a leader, it was almost unthinkable that a rebellion could succeed. As Dieter Timpe showed years ago, the military, in particular, strongly supported the idea of a ruling family, and would form an immense obstacle to any non-relative who would claim the supreme power.<sup>19</sup> Though this did not inevitably mean that the *nearest* member of the family would succeed, it did imply the near-impossibility of a non family member taking preference over a relative. Elagabalus' alleged dynastic claims as Caracalla's son still earned him the support of the military in AD 218, and when their loyalty to him diminished, they transferred it to his adoptive-son Severus Alexander, who was also his cousin by blood.<sup>20</sup> The succession to Claudius by Nero is a clear example of an adopted, slightly more remote, family member taking preference over Claudius' natural son Britannicus. The fact that the military seem to have supported Nero does not, however, imply the lack of dynastic favouritism on their part that Flaig argues for.<sup>21</sup> Nero was, of course,

<sup>18</sup> G. Rowe, *Omnis Spes Futura Paternae Stationis: Public Responses to the Roman Imperial Succession* (DPhil; Oxford 1997), 174 [forthcoming as: *Princes and Political Cultures: The New Senatorial Decrees from the Reign of Tiberius* (University of Michigan Press)].

<sup>19</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 3.38; Tac. *Ann.* 1.42, and especially 2.76: *...penitus infixus in Caesares amor praevaleret*. Cf. Amm. Marc. 26.7.10, 16. D. Timpe, *Untersuchungen zur Kontinuität des frühen Prinzipats* (Wiesbaden 1962), 88: 'Aus diesem Grund ist er ἐπιεικής, weil und indem er aus βασιλικὸν γένος ist'; J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford 1997), 254: 'Soldiers felt a strong dynastic loyalty'.

<sup>20</sup> Dio, 79.14.1-2, 79.34.4; Herodian, 5.3.10, 5.4.2-4; SHA, *Macrinus*, 9.4, 14.2, 15.2; SHA, *Heliogab.* 1.4.

<sup>21</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.69; Flaig, *Den Kaiser herausfordern*, 203; M. Griffin, *Nero. The End of a Dynasty* (London 1984), 33.

as much as Britannicus, a member of the Julio-Claudian house. He was also adopted at a rather young age, the natural son of the reigning emperor's wife, and married to Claudius' daughter Octavia. Even more importantly, Nero was the great-grandson of Augustus himself, and closely related to the still immensely popular Germanicus, whereas the only alternative to the throne – Britannicus – was also under age. The support of the armies is therefore in no way comparable to that for a mere 'citizen' against an heir of the blood.

Earlier, the succession to the murdered Caligula had already shown the preference for a dynastic emperor on the part of, at any rate, the Praetorian guard. The discussion after Caligula's death (and, notably, that of his baby daughter, who was murdered along with him) had not so much been *whether* a member of the dynasty was to be the new *princeps*, but *which*. The Praetorians had recognised Claudius' *possessio* of the Julio-Claudian estate, and thus his status as head of the Julio-Claudian House. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for the senate to accept the claims put forward by Marcus Vinicius, who was also closely connected to the ruling dynasty.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, the *plebs* preferred the ruling house – and the stability it brought – over estranged usurpers. One could, rightfully, argue that the popularity of members of the *Domus Augusta* had much to do with the fact that they were the sole benefactors of the brilliant glory of the triumph, and, from Domitian onwards, the only ones who could please the populace with games and spectacles.<sup>23</sup> Yet this limitation of audience-pleasing in itself denotes the unwillingness to let power and popularity escape the boundaries of the imperial house.

A Roman house was, however, 'not a natural thing, but a deliberate construction, fashioned through marriages and adoptions and exclusions of undesirables'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, one could suggest, outsiders could be adopted into the dynasty, and 'natural' successors passed over, creating a 'dynastic system' which was as dynastic as the Empire was still the Republic. But though deliberately constructed, rules had to be obeyed. Adoption might seem an almost perfect way to make those who were suitable to rule through their qualities part of the ruling family, but there was always tradition to take account of. Jane Gardner

<sup>22</sup> Th. Wiedemann, 'Tiberius to Nero', *CAH* 10<sup>2</sup> (1996), 198-255; 231.

<sup>23</sup> Dio, 54.2.4; Suet. *Domitian*, 4.1. See *infra* p. 138 n. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Rowe, *Omnis spes futura paternae stationis*, 3. Cf. F. Millar, 'Ovid and the domus Augusta: Rome seen from Tomoi', *JRS* 83 (1993), 1-17; 17: '... an Imperial 'family' which was itself a succession of constructions'.

notes how in Roman society 'a definite preference is shown for adopting persons related by blood, or at least by marriage, where any are available'. Similarly, Corbier has stated that 'the choice of the adopted heir was normally made from amongst the closest relations: either consanguineals (paternal or maternal) or relations by marriage'.<sup>25</sup> To adopt someone when there was a close male relative – let alone a son – in the *familia* already, would be noted, and possibly criticised, as Tacitus makes implicitly clear:

He [i.e. Augustus] ordered Tiberius to adopt [Germanicus], though there was already an adult son in Tiberius' house.<sup>26</sup>

There were even those who kept track of the distinguished houses that had an 'undiluted' line of succession.<sup>27</sup> From that point of view, Claudius' adoption of Nero was an aberration – outstanding as Nero's ancestry may have been. It is again Tacitus who points out that:

It was noted by the experts that, prior to this [Claudius' adoption of Nero], there was no trace of an adoption in the patrician branch of the Claudian house, which had lasted without interruption from Attus Clausus onwards.<sup>28</sup>

If only for reasons of snobbery, prestige, and tradition, one would do well to keep adoption, and hence – in the case of the imperial house – succession to the supreme position, within the family. Loyalty of the part of the army and the people which was rooted in dynastic considerations formed an added reason – and one that should not be underestimated – to adopt an heir who was dynastically related anyhow.<sup>29</sup> This was indeed what second-century emperors did.

Trajan was Hadrian's father's cousin. After the latter's death, Trajan became Hadrian's guardian. Hadrian's wife was Vibia Sabina –

<sup>25</sup> J. Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford 1998), 115; M. Corbier, 'Divorce and adoption as familial strategies', in B. Rawson (ed.), *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Oxford 1991), 49-79; 67.

<sup>26</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 1.3: ... *per adoptionem a Tiberio iussit, quamquam esset in domo Tiberii filius iuvenis*... Cf. Corbier, 'Divorce and adoption', 66: 'The criticism seems perfectly understandable: the adoption seemed pointless, even suspicious, when the main obligation of head of the family, the transmission of name and possessions, was already assured'. See also Tac. *Ann.* 2.43: *Tiberius ut proprium et sui sanguinis Drusum fovebat*.

<sup>27</sup> R. P. Saller, 'Familia, domus, and the Roman conception of the family', *Phoenix* 38 (1984), 336-55; 351: 'For all Romans the domus was closely related to wives, children, and other relatives. For aristocrats it was also associated in a concrete way with lineage, for which it could stand as a symbol'.

<sup>28</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.25: *Adnotabant periti nullam antehac adoptionem inter patricos Claudios reperiri, eosque ab Atto Clauso continuos duravisse*.

<sup>29</sup> E. Champlin, 'Notes on the heirs of Commodus', *AJPh* 100 (1979), 288-306; 305: 'Thus the effectively hereditary nature of the principate can be seen as the result of two complementary elements, the will of the rulers and the preference of the ruled'.

Trajan's grandniece. The two probably married soon after Trajan's accession.<sup>30</sup> This wedding, like most royal weddings, must have been a public event. An occasion 'which embodied or provided opportunities for dynastic pronouncements'.<sup>31</sup> The title *Augusta*, bestowed on Vibia's mother and grandmother in AD 107, only further emphasised the dynastic importance of the union.<sup>32</sup>

To phrase family relations in terms of inheritance: 'Had Trajan been a private citizen who had died intestate, his property would have been distributed between Hadrian's wife, and her unmarried sister. If they had refused, Hadrian and his sister Domitia Paulina would have been the beneficiaries. Hadrian was thus the natural heir to any property of such a nature that a woman could not acquire it'.<sup>33</sup>

Not all second-century emperors were quite so unproblematically dynastic in appointing heirs. Hadrian's measures to facilitate succession remain, at first sight, somewhat enigmatic. The announcement of Lucius Ceionius Commodus as his heir in AD 136 raises a number of questions. They could all be solved by Carcopino's wonderfully romantic notion of Ceionius as Hadrian's bastard son, whose existence could only be disclosed after Vibia Sabina's death earlier in AD 136.<sup>34</sup> It could be true, of course, though it seems somewhat unlikely that the unknown author of the *Historia Augusta* would have missed gossip of quite such outrageous extravagancy. As it is, he has come up with a spectacularly scandalous theory of his own; Commodus' personal beauty was the sole reason for his election. Sir Ronald Syme suggested remorse, from Hadrian's side, for the execution of Avidius Nigrinus, Ceionius Commodus' stepfather, and father-in-law, as reason for the surprising choice.<sup>35</sup>

Anthony Birley answered the question 'why this man', by arguing

<sup>30</sup> Geer, 'Second thoughts on the imperial succession', 50.

<sup>31</sup> Rowe, *Omnis Spes*, 27, though he was talking of the Julio-Claudian period.

<sup>32</sup> *CIL* 11.1333; *CIG* 2576-7.

<sup>33</sup> Geer, 'Second thoughts on the imperial succession', 50 n. 12.

<sup>34</sup> J. Carcopino, 'L'hérédité dynastique chez les Antonins', *REA* 51 (3-4) (1949), 262-312. For the dissemination of the image of Ceionius Commodus as intended successor, see now: J. M. Højte, 'The epigraphic evidence concerning portrait statues of L. Aelius Caesar', *ZPE* 127 (1999), 217-38. For a refutation of Carcopino's notion: R. Syme, 'Ummidius Quadratus, capax imperii', *HSPH* 82 (1979), 287-310 = *Roman Papers* 3 (Oxford 1984), 1158-1178; 1170-1.

<sup>35</sup> SHA, *Hadr.* 23.8-11; Dio, 69.17.1; *CIL* 14.2.112 (= *ILS* 7.212); *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 2 (1936), no. C 605; A. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius. A Biography* (London 1987<sup>2</sup>), 233; R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958), 601. Cf. R. Syme, 'Antonine government and governing class', *Roman Papers* 5 (Oxford 1988), 668-88; 670-1.

that Hadrian was already trying to make the young Marcus Aurelius, who *was* related to him, a strong candidate for an eventual emperorship.<sup>36</sup> Marcus had been married at Hadrian's wish to Ceionia Fabia, one of Ceionius Commodus' daughters. Commodus was tubercular, and was not likely to reign for long. Since his own son was only five years old, the 15-year-old Marcus would have been a strong contestant for succession.<sup>37</sup> This argument is strengthened by Antoninus Pius' ensuing rise to power. Antoninus was Marcus' uncle, and Hadrian made Antoninus adopt his nephew, and Lucius Verus.<sup>38</sup> Marcus' bond to the now-dead Ceionius Commodus was dissolved; the betrothal to Ceionia Fabia was broken off, only to be replaced by a marriage to Faustina Minor – Antoninus' daughter.<sup>39</sup> Those with stronger dynastic claims to succeed Hadrian than Marcus on his own would have had (*i.e.* Hadrian's 90-year-old brother-in-law Julius Servianus, and the latter's grandson Pedanius Fuscus Salinator) were forced to commit suicide.<sup>40</sup> It should also be observed that two kinsmen of Marcus, C. Ummidius Quadratus and L. Catilius Severus, fell out of favour with Hadrian in the emperor's last year. This 'surely suggests the possibility of competition for the role of placeholder for Marcus'.<sup>41</sup>

This implicit, essentially dynastic, choice of Marcus Aurelius, would portray Antoninus Pius as a mere temporary solution – a sort of stop-gap emperor.<sup>42</sup> But, at the same time, it also strengthened Antoninus' position. By adopting Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus Pius created a dynastic claim to the throne of his own. He was the father and father-in-law of someone who was – although by no means directly – a member of the current ruling house. This dynastic web of power also safeguarded stability. Though the 52-year-old Antoninus had no children of his own, an easy succession was assured; after Faustina Minor had first given birth, even for two generations to come. Walter Ameling noted in this context: 'Kinder ... garantierten den Fortbestand der Dynastie und damit die politische Stabilität des

<sup>36</sup> On Marcus' kinship to Hadrian, see Dio, 6.21.2, which states that Hadrian preferred Marcus Aurelius over Lucius Verus amongst other reasons, 'on account of his kinship'.

<sup>37</sup> A. Birley, *Hadrian: the restless emperor* (London – New York 1997), 289–90. Further bibliography and sources can be found in Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, appendix 2, 'The Antonine Dynasty', 232–48.

<sup>38</sup> Birley, *Hadrian*, 295–6.

<sup>39</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 6.2. Cf. SHA, *Verus*, 2.4; M. Aur. *Med.* 1.17.2, 1.17.7.

<sup>40</sup> SHA, *Hadr.* 15.8, 23.1–3, 25.8; Dio, 69.17.1–3.

<sup>41</sup> Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 240.

<sup>42</sup> This notion of a 'stop-gap' emperor (often a son-in-law) can also be applied to Tiberius, though he, in fact, was to survive his intended successor.

Reiches. Eine eindeutige, sichere Regelung der Nachfolge erreichte man am leichtesten durch die Übertragung der Macht auf einen Sohn'.<sup>43</sup>

One should not fail to mention, here, the family-tree devised by Ginette di Vita-Evrard, in which she argues for direct kinship – though by no means close – between Antoninus Pius and Hadrian.<sup>44</sup> Though ties of blood between Hadrian and his successor would not further clarify the earlier choice for Ceionius Commodus (indeed, one could argue that they obscure the motives for this choice even further: in appointing Commodus, Hadrian would have ignored a candidate who appears to have been a family member), they would, once more, imply underlying dynastic considerations.

Behind the facade of a system of adoption, dynastic interests loomed large. These interests only became more noticeable as time went on. The fact that in the third century Rome saw child-emperors for the first time in her history firmly shows the ever-increasing importance of family ties. Little wonder, then, that when Commodus survived his childhood, his father made him the obvious emperor-to-be. The dynastic principle was too engrained in Roman imperial succession to ignore.

The offers to Ti. Claudius Pompeianus to take on the empire after Commodus' death, or partake in its rule, would, if true, show quite how deeply this principle was imbedded in Roman tradition. Pompeianus had retired from politics after a failed attempt to assassinate the emperor Commodus in AD 182/3 had involved several people close to him, though not himself. The conspiracy by Pompeianus' wife Lucilla and his brother's son Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus (who was also Lucilla's son-in-law through marriage to her daughter by Lucius Verus), once more showed the danger of imperial relatives.<sup>45</sup> According to the *Historia Augusta*, Pertinax, who was indebted to Ti. Claudius Pompeianus for much of his career,

<sup>43</sup> W. Ameling, 'Die Kinder des Marc Aurel und die Bildnistypen der Faustina Minor', *ZPE* 90 (1992), 147-66; 147.

<sup>44</sup> G. di Vita-Evrard, 'Des Calvisii Rusones à Licinius Sura', *MEFRA* 99 (1987), 281-338; Eadem, 'La famille de l'empereur: Pour de nouveaux "Mémoires d'Hadrien"', in: J. Charles-Gaffiot / H. Lavagne (eds.), *Hadrien. Trésors d'une villa impériale* (Milan 1999), 26-36; 32. Discussed by M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier, 'Nouvelles recherches sur les femmes sénatoriales du Haut-Empire romain', *Klio* 75 (1993), 257-71; 263-4.

<sup>45</sup> Dio, 73.4.4-6; Herodian, 1.8.3-6; SHA, *Comm.* 4.1-4; Grosso, *Commodo*, 148; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 6 (1998), 248, stemma 26, shows a family tree of the Claudii Pompeiani. For Ti. Claudius Pompeianus: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 2 (1936), no. C 973; Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 2 (1936), no. C 975; Lucilla: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 707. See *infra* pp. 17, 52-3.



called his old patron back to Rome and offered him the supreme position. Dio, though, who was present when Pompeianus returned to Rome, does not mention such an offer in any way. Nor is there further evidence to support the claim that Didius Julianus had asked Pompeianus to 'share the empire with him'.<sup>46</sup> Yet even if he was not offered the supreme position, he was apparently still considered a serious candidate for it.

The importance attached to dynastic considerations also seems to have been the reason for much of the hostility surrounding Marcus Aurelius' surviving 'relatives'. The *gentes* that through marriage connections had been allied to either Lucius Verus or Marcus were expertly traced by H.-G. Pflaum.<sup>47</sup> He noted that whenever any of those whose lineage could be followed back to either of the two *Augusti* showed any political ambition whatsoever, calamity struck, often instigated by the reigning emperor. Thus, Commodus killed off the entire *gens* of the Petronii Surae Mamertini, who were connected to Commodus' sister Cornificia, in AD 190.<sup>48</sup> Marcus Peducaeus Plautius Quintillius, husband to Fadilla, another sister of Commodus, survived Commodus' reign, but was killed, in his turn, by Septimius Severus in AD 205.<sup>49</sup> Younger generations were not safe either. Ti. Claudius Aurelius Pompeianus, son of Ti. Claudius Pompeianus and Lucilla, was killed by Caracalla, shortly after Geta had been murdered.<sup>50</sup> The list goes on. Of all the *gentes* that had sons marrying daughters of Marcus Aurelius, only the Claudii Severi stayed out of harm's way. That might have had to do with the premature death, preceding that of Marcus himself, of Annia Galeria Aurelia Faustina, who had married Cn. Claudius Severus. It seems, however, more probable to presuppose that their being undisturbed was a direct result of the fact that members from that particular branch of the family had sufficient common sense not to show any political ambition whatsoever. Indeed, they spent most of their time in residence on their property in Asia Minor.<sup>51</sup> It was wise to publicly keep a distance from

<sup>46</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 4.11; SHA, *Did. Iul.* 8.3; Dio, 74.3.1-2; Grosso, *Commodo*, 110 (n. 2 for further references). See for Pertinax' career: *CIL* 11.5743. On the complex dynastic network which existed after the death of Commodus, see Champlin, 'The heirs of Commodus'.

<sup>47</sup> H. G. Pflaum, 'Les gendres de Marc-Aurèle', *JS* (1961), 28-41 (a family tree between pp. 42-3).

<sup>48</sup> Pflaum, 'Les gendres de Marc-Aurèle' 40; 36-7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 33. Cf. Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Pflaum, 'Les gendres de Marc-Aurèle', 41; 29-31.

political ambitions for those with imperial blood in their veins, however diluted.

One important aspect of imperial succession has not yet been touched upon – the transference of the imperial possessions. These possessions were more magnificent in the second century than ever before, and their transfer from one emperor to the next already made it almost impossible for Marcus Aurelius to ignore Commodus when designating his successor. The immense property, which had accumulated ever since Augustus, in effect allowed the emperor to govern the realm. As Millar put it: ‘the possession of private wealth by the emperor, the various means which he deployed to increase it at the expense of some of his subjects, and the endless stream of gifts and liberalities in cash and kind which he conferred on others, were all fundamental elements in the nature of his regime, and were basic to the setting and style of his life, and to the pattern of his relations with his subjects’.<sup>52</sup> The imperial treasures were, occasionally, even put on display. Herodian recounts how Commodus exhibited the imperial wealth during a procession for the mother of the gods – apparently common practice at that particular festival:

All the tokens of people’s wealth and the treasures of the imperial house – things of marvellous material and workmanship – are paraded in honour of the goddess.<sup>53</sup>

The question of whether this wealth was, legally speaking, ‘private’ or ‘public’ property – a question with major repercussions for the mode of transference of possessions from one emperor to another – has been the cause of heated debate, most prominently between Fergus Millar and Peter Brunt.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately it appears impossible to solve. However, even if the bulk of the possessions may effectively have gone with the job, part of them were also perceived to belong to the family. Pliny, in his *Panegyric* shows how – at least to the public eye – the private property of the emperor (*fiscus*) is still seen as separate from the treasury (*aerarium*), during the reign of Trajan:

It may be thought that you are less strict in your control of the *fiscus* than of the treasury (*aerarium*), but in fact you are all the stricter through believing

<sup>52</sup> Millar, *ERW*, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Herodian, 1.10.5. Cf. Herodian, 5.6.8.

<sup>54</sup> Of the utmost importance in the debate: F. Millar, ‘The *fiscus* in the first two centuries’, *JRS* 53 (1963), 29–42; idem, ‘The *aerarium* and its officials under the Empire’, *JRS* 54 (1964), 33–40; idem, *ERW*, 175–201; P. Brunt, ‘The ‘*fiscus*’ and its development’, *JRS* 56 (1966), 75–91 [= *Roman Imperial Themes* (Oxford 1990), Ch. 7, 134–162]; idem, ‘Remarks on the imperial *fiscus*’, *LCM* 9.1 (1984), 2–4 [= *Roman Imperial Themes*, Ch. 16, 347–353].

that you have a freer hand to deal with your own money than with the public's.<sup>55</sup>

Whereas Ulpian stated that:

For the property of the *fiscus* is, as it were, the private property of the emperor.<sup>56</sup>

An automatic transference of the entire *patrimonium* from one emperor to another is, furthermore, contradicted by passages in the *Historia Augusta*, which explicitly state how Hadrian and Antoninus Pius drew up wills for, at least, part of their *patrimonium*.<sup>57</sup> Unreliable a source as the *Historia* may be, these passages do show a perception of the imperial possessions as being linked, at least partly, to the imperial family, rather than just to the job.

This perception alone made it nearly impossible for Marcus to exclude Commodus as his heir. He could of course have adopted somebody else, and as in Roman law there was no legal distinction between adopted children and those born in lawful marriage, the adopted son would have had exactly the same rights as the natural one.<sup>58</sup> Yet this would not in itself have taken the rights of natural son away. In order to exclude Commodus from his will, Marcus would have had to expressly disinherit him, otherwise the will became void.<sup>59</sup> Even after explicit disinheritance, Commodus could still have challenged the will as 'undutiful'.<sup>60</sup> Such a course of action might have appeared justified to a large part of the populace, as 'society generally held that children should inherit – that disinheritance was to be avoided'.<sup>61</sup> When there was no son, a *paterfamilias* was also not entirely free to distribute his wealth as he saw fit. Many relatives could challenge a will, if they had been excluded, or sometimes just forgotten, and they could do so for a period of up to five years.<sup>62</sup> Though this could

<sup>55</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 36.3: *At fortasse non eadem severitate fiscum qua aerarium cohibes: immo tanto maiore quanto plus tibi licere de tuo quam de publico credis.*

<sup>56</sup> *Dig.* 43.8.2.4: *Res enim fiscales quasi propriae et privatae principis sunt.* Note, however, that this passage has been interpreted in diametrically opposed ways by on the one hand E. Lo Cascio, 'Patrimonium, ratio privata, res privata', *AJIS* 3 (1971/2), 55-121, and on the other P. Brunt. As Brunt himself puts it ('Remarks on the imperial *fiscus*', 3 [351]): '... no consensus will ever be reached on its implications'.

<sup>57</sup> SHA, *Hadr.* 24.1-2; SHA, *Ant. Pius*, 7.9-10, 12.8. For the use of 'patrimonium' in the ancient world see Millar, *ERW* 625-7.

<sup>58</sup> Gardner, *Family and Familia*, 117.

<sup>59</sup> Just. *Inst.* 2.13, pr.: *sed qui filium in potestate habet, debet curare ut eum heredem instituat vel exheredem nominatim faciat.*

<sup>60</sup> Just. *Inst.* 2.18.

<sup>61</sup> E. Champlin, *Final Judgements. Duty and Emotion in Roman Wills 200 BC - AD 250* (Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford 1991), 107.

<sup>62</sup> *Dig.* 5.2.1 (Ulpian): *omnibus enim tam parentibus quam liberis de inofficioso licet*

strengthen the case for dynastic considerations (if a near male relative was adopted, there would be one person less to challenge the will), the argument should not be pushed too far. The chances of anyone actually suing against the explicit wishes of a reigning emperor were minimal, if not absent. A final legal issue which can be taken into consideration is the loyalty of imperial freedmen, which was officially also part of the inheritance.<sup>63</sup> However, the freedmen at the court seem to have placed their loyalty with whomever was in charge, rather than anyone else.

With all of this in mind it becomes obvious that, for reasons of safety alone, emperors had little choice but to adopt someone who was already related to them. An adopted son who was no 'real' part of the dynasty would always run the risk of a 'true' member of family making a bid for the throne of his own. To rule out the risk of civil war, an heir needed to have as legitimate a claim as possible.<sup>64</sup> This meant there was only a severely limited group that the emperor could choose his successor from. Yet this is not to say that the years AD 96-180 were not noticeably different from the preceding period. All the emperors succeeding Domitian, until AD 180, had experience as a general and/or administrator. They may have been chosen from a restricted number of imperial relatives, but a choice they still were.

Marcus did not have such a choice. With the exception of the accession of Nero discussed above – with all its complications – there are no examples in the early Roman Empire of a natural son being passed over as heir to the throne. Marcus had not adopted any of the husbands of his daughters. He could not ignore his own son, without the severe risk of civil war. Only in AD 305 would a reigning Augustus and Caesar neglect their sons when appointing successors. The effects were disastrous, and the ensuing continuous wars, from AD 306 till 324, would only end with Constantine's final victory.<sup>65</sup> A

*disputare*; 5.2.5 (Marcellus); 5.2.8.17 (Ulpian); 5.2.9 (Modestinus).

<sup>63</sup> Through the *ius patronatus*. Cf. A. Winterling, *Aula Caesaris. Studien zur Institutionalisierung des römischen Kaiserhofes in der Zeit von Augustus bis Commodus (31 v. Chr. – 192 n. Chr.)* (Munich 1999), 23-6.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Corbier, 'La Maison des Césars', 247: '[Auguste] met en oeuvre toute une série de mesures nouvelles: l'invention d'un nom ... l'exécution des mâles concurrents; de nouvelles règles de transmission de la fortune et de la légitimité en vue de la transmission du pouvoir ...'.

<sup>65</sup> On this period, and in particular on the dynastic claims of Constantine and Maxentius, see: F. Kolb, *Diocletian und die Erste Tetrarchie. Improvisation oder Experiment in der Organisation monarchischer Herrschaft* (Berlin – New York 1987); T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1981); Idem, *The New Empire of*

living son could not be dismissed. John Traupman states that 'Marcus gave ample evidence of his unwavering decision to make Commodus his successor, and we may take this as proof that Marcus believed his son morally and intellectually capable of carrying on his own work ...'.<sup>66</sup> That conclusion cannot be maintained. When Commodus – and he alone of all of Marcus's sons – survived his infancy, Marcus had only two options left. He could make his son the undoubted heir, or he would have to kill him. That he chose to do the first does not necessarily imply a consciously considered decision, or a judgement on the moral and intellectual capacities of Commodus.

### Born to rule

No commoner's swaddling clothes for me; the imperial purple awaited me the moment I was born. At the same moment the sun shone on me as man and emperor (ὁμοῦ δέ με εἶδεν ἥλιος ἄνθρωπον καὶ βασιλέα). (Herodian, 1.5.5)

Commodus was born at Lanuvium on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 161, together with his twin brother Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus. Five years later Antoninus died. Only two of the sons of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina then remained; Commodus and his younger brother Marcus Annius Verus, who was born in AD 162.<sup>67</sup> Both of them were made Caesars in AD 166, on October 12.<sup>68</sup> Annius Verus died three years later, failing to recover from an operation to remove a tumour below the ear. Just some months before, Lucius Verus, Marcus' co-Augustus, son-in-law and the victor in the latest Parthian Wars (AD 162-6), had died, aged thirty-nine.<sup>69</sup> His only child was a daughter.<sup>70</sup> Marcus Aurelius

*Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1982); T. Grünewald, *CONSTANTINUS MAXIMUS AUGUSTUS. Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung* (Stuttgart 1990); M. Cullhed, *Conservator Urbis Suae. Studies in the Politics and Propaganda of the Emperor Maxentius* (Stockholm 1994); O. Hekster, 'The city of Rome in late imperial ideology: The tetrarchs, Maxentius, and Constantine', *MedAnt* 2 (1999), 717-48; 724-44.

<sup>66</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> T. Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 1512; Marcus Annius Verus: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 698; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 239, 247-8; Ameling, 'Die Kinder des Marc Aurel', 161.

<sup>68</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 16.1, 21.3; SHA, *Comm.* 1.10, 11.13-4; W. Szaivert, *Die Münzprägung der Kaiser Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus und Commodus* (Vienna 1986), no. 1048 (= Gnecci, *MR* II, 72/1), no. 1049 (= Gnecci, *MR* III, 151/8).

<sup>69</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 14.8, 21.3-5; SHA, *Verus*, 9.11; Galen, 14.649-50 (Kuhn); A. Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 132-94; 160-5.

<sup>70</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 21.3-5; Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', 170.

was now sole Augustus, with only the eight-year-old Commodus as his Caesar.

The different aspects that had constituted Lucius Verus' position of co-Augustus, were spread out over two loyal supporters. Lucilla, Marcus' second-oldest daughter and Lucius Verus' widow,<sup>71</sup> was married – even before mourning had ended – to a close advisor of the emperor, the Syrian Ti. Claudius Pompeianus.<sup>72</sup> This marriage was clearly intended to prevent too strong a candidate from becoming the emperor's son-in-law. Pompeianus, an elderly senator, was the son of a knight, and a native of Antioch. There was little doubt about his abilities – he was Marcus' chief military advisor, and had been governor of Lower Pannonia in 167 –<sup>73</sup> but his obscure origins ensured he would not make a bid to the throne of his own.<sup>74</sup>

The extraordinary military powers that Lucius Verus had also possessed went to another accomplished ally: Avidius Cassius, the governor of Syria, was given *imperium maius* for the East.<sup>75</sup> His origins, unlike those of Pompeianus, were far from humble. His father had been prefect of Egypt, and his family possibly descended from the royal family of Commagene.<sup>76</sup> Birley describes him as 'by Marcus' orders virtual ruler of the whole East'.<sup>77</sup> Though his influence, especially in the East, was undoubtedly tremendous, one should not forget that Pompeianus – as a successful general and a native of the area Cassius commanded – must have been intended to form a clear counterbalance to any hostile action Cassius could undertake. Furthermore, as a candidate for the succession, he would lack the dynastic claims of Commodus – or even Pompeianus. Neither of the two Syrians was to take over Verus' position alongside Marcus. That

<sup>71</sup> *IGR* 1.1509; Ameling, 'Die Kinder des Marc Aurel'.

<sup>72</sup> *SHA, Marc.* 20.6-7; Herodian, 1.8.3; M. L. Astarita, *Avidio Cassio* (Rome 1983), 110.

<sup>73</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 2 (1936), no. C 973; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 75-6; Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand*, 184.

<sup>74</sup> But see *supra*, pp. 17, 25; Hohl, 'Kaiser Commodus und Herodian', 6.

<sup>75</sup> Dio, 72.3.1<sup>2</sup>; Philostr. *VS*, 2.1.13; Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand*, 131, 181 n. 180; R. Syme, 'Avidius Cassius. His Rank, Age, and Quality', in: J. Straub (ed.), *Bonner H-A Colloquium 1984/5* (Bonn 1987), 207-221; 215. Avidius Cassius was, like Pompeianus, a Syrian. It may be worth considering the possibility that Marcus consciously appointed two people from the very area in which much of the military was based. In this way, even if one of them tried to rise to power, the 'regional loyalty' would not automatically fall away from the emperor. During Avidius Cassius' revolt (see below), however, Antioch – Pompeianus' place of birth – still instantly recognised Cassius as the new emperor, notwithstanding Pompeianus' support for Marcus.

<sup>76</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 1402; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 16-28. She also supplies a – highly speculative – family tree between pp. 32-3.

<sup>77</sup> Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 183.

position was strictly meant for Commodus.<sup>78</sup>

### *Promoting a prince*

With only one undeniable heir-apparent left, it appears that Marcus consciously tried to further enhance Commodus' profile.<sup>79</sup> He was given the victory name *Germanicus* on 15 October 172.<sup>80</sup> The best possible teachers were assembled to take care of the young prince; an 'abundance of good masters', as Marcus Aurelius writes in his *Meditations*. Latin was taught by Antistius Capella, Greek by Onesicrates, and for the art of rhetoric T. Aius Sanctus was found. Commodus' *tropheus*, or *educator*, was Pitholaus.<sup>81</sup> From these names, it appears that emphasis was on Commodus' intellectual education. Sanctus, for instance, was head of the Greek Secretariat, the *ab epistulis Graecis*. His function had 'no doubt been expected to be, more or less, concerned with peaceful matters'.<sup>82</sup> No mention is made of Commodus' military training. This need not be that much of a surprise. One important effect of the emphasis on *paideia* during the Second Sophistic was an ever decreasing physical education.<sup>83</sup> Fewer senators had adequate military training or 'even attempted to obtain military experience'.<sup>84</sup> What counted for young senators, may well

<sup>78</sup> One should be careful not to push the argument too far. Other daughters of Marcus did marry husbands of consular standing, though none of them military men of Pompeianus' status; Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', 169-70.

<sup>79</sup> J. P. Martin, *Providentia Deorum. Recherches sur certains aspects religieux du pouvoir impérial romain* (Rome 1982), 334.

<sup>80</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 16.1; SHA, *Comm.* 1.10, 12.1, 11.13; *CIL* 7 suppl. 11928.

<sup>81</sup> Dio, 73.1.2; Herodian, 1.2; SHA, *Comm.* 1.5-6; Galen, 14.650 (Kuhn). For epigraphic evidence confirming the status of Aius Sanctus: Gherardini, *Studien*, 9; H. G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le Haut-Empire romain* 1-3 (Paris 1960-6), 1002-5.

<sup>82</sup> Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres*, 178 *bis* (as revised pp. 1002-7); N. Lewis, 'Literati in the service of Roman emperors: Politics before culture', in: *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt. Collected Papers of Naphtali Lewis* (Atlanta 1995), 257-74; 259; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 184.

<sup>83</sup> On *paideia* and its importance in education during the Second Sophistic: Th. Schmitz, *Bildung und Macht. Zur sozialen und politischen Funktion der zweiten Sophistik in der griechischen Welt der Kaiserzeit* (Munich 1997) [= *Zetemata* 97], 44-50; Sidebottom, 'Herodian's Historical Methods', 2804-13. An emperor could also be too educated, as Hadrian found out: S. Goldhill, 'Setting an agenda: 'Everything is Greece to the wise'', in: idem *Being Greek under Rome*, 1-25; 11-2.

<sup>84</sup> L. de Blois, 'The reign of the emperor Philip the Arab', *Talanta* 10-11 (1978-9), 11-43, 24; E. Birley, 'Senators in the emperor's service', *PBA* 39 (1953), 197-214, 199, 207-8. On the growing discrepancy between the military tasks set for senators and their abilities, and the countermeasures that ought to be taken, Dio has a clear opinion in his 'Maecenas speech' (52.26.1), presumably arguing against common practice of the time. Outside of the

have been equally valid for the young members of the imperial family.

Even if the military facet was given only minor prominence during Commodus' earlier education, Marcus Aurelius clearly tried to make his son known to the soldiers, and to create some sort of military 'recognition' for him. The fact that Commodus shared his father's name *Germanicus*, presumably given to him in the presence of the soldiers, suggests that he was present at Marcus' victory over the Marcomanni. A dedication from the precinct of Jupiter outside Carnuntum shows that both he and his father were at least staying there on 11 June 172.<sup>85</sup>

Yet Commodus did not remain at the front. Galen describes how he treated Commodus, who had fallen ill. 'After leaving the *palaestra*, before eating, he was seized with quite a hot fever at the eighth hour, and it became clear to me on taking his pulse that some part was inflamed'. Galen mentions both the illness and the treatment, of which he states that 'it is said to be extremely remarkable, but in fact is far from it'.<sup>86</sup> On the third day, 'Annia Faustina, a very close relative of the emperor' called in. Impressed by the results that Galen had accomplished, she praised him in front of one of his rivals, stating that 'there is clear proof of his learning. Although the son of our emperor has been in a high fever for the last two days – his father is abroad – ... he has already treated him by giving him a bath and some food'.<sup>87</sup> Galen had looked after Commodus before. When Marcus Aurelius' was absent due to the German campaigns after Lucius Verus' death, Galen writes how: 'I decided to retire at different times to the various spots where his son Commodus resided. He was under the tutelage of Pitholaus, who had instructions from the emperor Antoninus [=Marcus Aurelius] himself to call me to attend his son, should he

military sphere, similar problems arose for the juridical aspects of the *cursus honorum* for senators. There too, senatorial 'mandarins' had to perform tasks they were not sufficiently qualified for.

<sup>85</sup> AE 1982.778; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 174, 252; Martin, *Providentia Deorum*, 333, sees the soldiers who were present at the ceremony in which Commodus was given the name *Germanicus* 'comme un condensé du peuple romain'. This seems to underestimate the importance of the fact that it is exactly the military which is involved.

<sup>86</sup> Galen, 14.661 (Kuhn). This episode probably took place somewhere between AD 172 and 175; V. Nutton, *Galen: On Prognosis* (Berlin 1979), 218.

<sup>87</sup> Galen, 14.662-3 (Kuhn). The identity of Annia Faustina has been hotly debated. Grosso, *Commodo*, 120 argued that she was no other than Faustina Minor, whereas A. Birley, 'A nickname for Commodus and the date of Fronto's death', *Chiron* 2 (1972), 463-73; 465-6 suggested Annia Galeria Aurelia Faustina, the emperor's eldest daughter. A more probable solution is the identification of her with the emperor's cousin, Annia Fundania Faustina; Pflaum, 'La valeur de l'information historique de la Vita Commodi', 223; Nutton, *Galen*, 222-3.



ever fall ill'.<sup>88</sup>

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 175 Commodus had been admitted into the college of *pontifices*; a first step in the slow process of officially entering public life (fig.1).<sup>89</sup> Yet this process suddenly needed acceleration; in early March 175 Avidius Cassius declared himself emperor of the Roman world after hearing a rumour that Marcus had died.<sup>90</sup>

### *The revolt of Avidius Cassius*

Many problems still surround Cassius' *coup d'état*. The author of the *Historia Augusta* and Dio both blame Faustina. She worried about Marcus' health, and as she expected:

that he would die at any moment, she was afraid that the empire would fall to someone else as Commodus was young and rather naïve – and that she would be reduced to a private station. Therefore she secretly persuaded Cassius to make his preparations so that, if anything would happen to Antoninus [= Marcus Aurelius], he might take over both her and the empire (Dio, 71.22.3 cf. SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 7.1).

However, almost inevitably things went wrong. Marcus – still at the Pannonian front – was rumoured to have died, and Avidius Cassius proclaimed himself successor. He had been governor of Syria for the last nine years, his father had been prefect of Egypt, and he was born in the area; hence he rapidly stirred up massive support.<sup>91</sup> When it turned out that Marcus Aurelius was still alive after all, Cassius continued what could, from now on, only be described as a usurpation.

If nothing else, it was clear that Marcus' attempts to make Commodus the only obvious successor had not worked properly. If the emperor had indeed died in early 175, it seems highly likely that Avidius Cassius would have been successful in succeeding him. By marrying Faustina, he could have created the necessary dynastic legitimation. Yet that is not to say that none of the fail-safe mechanisms that Marcus Aurelius had installed functioned properly. Martius Verus, the governor of Cappadocia and a former associate of

<sup>88</sup> Galen, 14.650 (Kuhn).

<sup>89</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 2.1; 12.1; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 187; 285 n. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Dio, 71.22.2-3; SHA, *Marc.* 24.6-8; SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 7.1-5; Amm. Marc., 21.16.11.

<sup>91</sup> Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand*, 78; 279-283. After Cassius' revolt Marcus forbade senators to become governor of the area in which they were born; Dio, 71.31.1. On the question of regional identity in this context: F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC- AD 337* (Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1993), 117-8.

Cassius, refused to join him, and sent the emperor word of what was going on. Many of the soldiers that had fought with Cassius during the Parthian wars had been transferred to the Danubian front, where they stayed loyal to Marcus.<sup>92</sup> None of the European provinces seem to have supported the usurper, and Herodes Atticus is reported to have sent a letter of just three words: 'Ἡρώδης Κασσίω· ἐμάνης' ('Herod to Cassius: you have gone mad').<sup>93</sup>

The situation still demanded action. Syria, Palestine, and Egypt had accepted Cassius as their emperor.<sup>94</sup> The latter especially was crucial. Egypt was, of course, the main granary of Rome, and anyone who controlled it could cause serious problems. Marcus immediately took counter-steps. Vettius Sabianus, the *legatus Augusti pro praetore Pannoniae Inferioris*, was sent to protect the city of Rome (*ad tutelam urbis*), whilst Alfenus Arignotus was given the explicit duty to survey the discharge of grain at Seleucia Pieria, the harbour of Antioch.<sup>95</sup> Marcus also employed some 'western barbarians' to fight Avidius Cassius – contrary to a statement by Dio Cassius (71.27.1a), who claims that the emperor refused their help.<sup>96</sup>

Military action aside, Marcus promoted, once more, the dynastic stability his emperorship brought with it. Commodus was called to the front to accompany his father. Before going he celebrated in anticipation his forthcoming assumption of the *toga virilis*. On some coins Commodus is shown distributing bounty to the people. He is depicted seated, with his right hand stretched out. *Liberalitas* stands before him holding an *abacus* and a *cornucopiae*. A citizen holds up the fold of his toga to catch the coins, while behind Commodus stands someone who is identified by Birley as 'maybe the prefect of the city'.<sup>97</sup> It seems probable that these benefactions and celebrations were meant to soothe the panic in Rome that Cassius' revolt had caused.

<sup>92</sup> Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 92-99, esp. 93 n. 8, 97-8; Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', 176-7.

<sup>93</sup> Philostr., *VS*, 2.1.13; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 185-7.

<sup>94</sup> A. Bowman, 'A letter of Avidius Cassius?', *JRS* 60 (1970), 20-26; 24-5.

<sup>95</sup> R. Cagnat, *Inscriptions Latines d'Afrique (Tripolitaine, Tunisie, Maroc)* (Paris 1923), 281; *IGR* 4.1213; J. Spieß, *Avidius Cassius und der Aufstand des Jahres 175* (PhD: Munich 1975), 47; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 99, 102; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 187.

<sup>96</sup> As follows from the following inscription, dedicated to M. Valerius Maximianus, published by H. G. Pflaum, 'Deux carrières équestres de Lambèse et de Zama', *Lybica* 3 (1955), 123-54; 134-6, ll. 12-4: *praep(osito) equitib(us) gent(ium) Marcomannor(um) Narist(arum) Quador(um) ad vindictam Orientalis motus pergentium*. On Maximianus; Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand*, 296-9; Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes*, I, 476-94 no. 181 bis.

<sup>97</sup> *BMCRE* 4, nos. 1517-22; SHA, *Marc.* 22.11; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 187.

Commodus left Rome on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May AD 175. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of July – the day Romulus had vanished from the earth in order to become a god – he assumed the *toga virilis* at the Danubian front.<sup>98</sup> That very day, Marcus recommended his son to the soldiers. Everything was arranged to start the campaign against Cassius, who had not responded to Marcus' peace-offers, nor to the promise to spare his life.<sup>99</sup> However, just before they were to leave, news arrived: Cassius had died, assassinated by one of his own centurions.<sup>100</sup> His rebellion had started somewhere between the middle of March and the last two weeks of April 175, and was over by the end of July of that year (according to Dio it lasted for three months and six days).<sup>101</sup> It had caused unrest, but no grave consequences. Marcus Aurelius could allow himself to be lenient.

He burnt Cassius' entire correspondence, without looking at it.<sup>102</sup> No one was to find out who had collaborated with the usurper. Many have believed this to confirm an implication of Faustina in the revolt.<sup>103</sup> Yet one should not forget that it may have saved the honour and life of a good many soldiers and senators as well. After all, many of those who had clearly been implicated were forgiven too.<sup>104</sup> In order to create stability, turning a blind eye to those who had been involved

<sup>98</sup> J. M. Heer, 'Der historische Wert der Vita Commodi', *Philologus Suppl.* 9 (1904), 1-209; 17 n. 33; H. Halfmann, *Itinera Principum. Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im Römischen Reich* (Stuttgart 1986), 92.

<sup>99</sup> Dio, 71.24.3-4, 71.26.2; SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 7.9; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 102-3.

<sup>100</sup> Dio, 71.27.2-3<sup>1</sup>, 71.28.1. Dio tells in detail how Cassius was wounded – but not lethally – by a centurion named Antonius, after which he was finished off by a decurion. Cassius' head was then brought to Marcus Aurelius, who refused to look at it. Cf. SHA, *Marc.* 25.2-3; SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 8.1.

<sup>101</sup> Dio, 71.27.3<sup>2</sup>; *SB* 10295; Bowman, 'A letter of Avidius Cassius?', 25; D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton 1950), 1536 n. 15.

<sup>102</sup> Dio, 71.29.1. One should note the precise parallel with the story of Pompey's burning of Sertorius' correspondence (also without looking) (Plut. *Pomp.* 20.4; *Sert.* 27.3), and be careful in accepting the story without further thought. Commodus was similarly said to have destroyed all documents that were still in possession of Manilius, the *ab epistulis* of Avidius Cassius (Dio, 73.7.4). See *infra* p. 51. The burning of (royal) correspondence was, however, of importance. Cf. Livy, 33.11.1 for Philip V's emergency-measures after loosing the battle of Cynoscephalae.

<sup>103</sup> A firm believer in Faustina's complicity is Maria Asarita, who lists a massive amount of evidence to suggest the *Augusta's* guilt (*Avidio Cassio*, 107-18). However, all of this evidence is circumstantial, and though her story seems convincing in itself, the matter remains unsolved.

<sup>104</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 25.5-7; SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 12.3-4; Dio, 71.28.2-3, 30.2. On the senators who had co-operated with Avidius Cassius, and Marcus' attitude towards them: Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 100-7.

in an – eventually unsuccessful – usurpation, that seemed to have started by mistake as a result of unfounded rumours, may have been the best course of action. In any case, Faustina died shortly afterwards.<sup>105</sup> The most tangible final effect of Cassius' revolt was, ironically enough, that Commodus' position was stronger than ever. Now he was about to be shown to the world.

### *The aftermath of the revolt*

A massive military operation against Cassius was no longer necessary, yet Marcus did not send Commodus back to Rome. They both embarked on a lengthy trip to the east, leaving the armies under the command of Condiannus and Maximus Quintilius, and visited some of the former strongholds of Avidius Cassius.<sup>106</sup> There has been a long debate amongst scholars on the itinerary of the trip, but the suggestion put forward by Astarita, that Marcus and Commodus first visited Cilicia (where Faustina died), then Syria, and eventually went to Egypt, seems to be conclusive.<sup>107</sup> After leaving Egypt, the emperor continued to travel by sea to Athens, stopping at Ephesus and Smyrna, only to return to Rome in the late autumn of AD 176.<sup>108</sup> Travelling round the area that had formed the heart of Cassius' uprising had obvious military purposes. Antioch, in fact, as seat of the rebellion, was explicitly punished for its support for Cassius. 'Spectacles, public meetings, and assemblies of any kind' were prohibited – though Commodus would restore the games to the people as early as AD 181. For a while, Marcus actually considered avoiding the city altogether, as he would do to Cyrrhus – Cassius' birthplace – which would have been a severe blow to the city's prestige.<sup>109</sup> Eventually he did visit Antioch, possibly induced to do so by Claudius Pompeianus, who was born there.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>105</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 26.4-9; Dio, 71.29.1, 31.1-2; M. Aur. *Med.* 9.3.1. Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 137-8, argues strongly for a death in autumn or winter 175.

<sup>106</sup> *CIL* 14.20; 14.40; Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 117; Halfmann, *Itinera Principum*, 215-6.

<sup>107</sup> Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 155-62. She combines the sequence Syria-Egypt, put forward by the SHA, and confirmed by Ammianus, with the sequence Cilicia-Syria, put forward by Dio, and confirmed by Philostratus. Taking into consideration the time and distance spent travelling, she rightly concludes that the sequence Syria-Egypt-Syria-Cilicia, as put forward by e.g. Magie, *Roman Rule*, 666, cannot be maintained.

<sup>108</sup> Philostr., *VS*, 2.1.9; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 162.

<sup>109</sup> SHA, *Marcus*, 25.8-26; Malalas, *Chron.* 12.3 (= Dindorf, 284); Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 141.

<sup>110</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 575; Astarita, *Avidio Cassio*, 156.

The emperor did not 'punish' other cities, yet the military aspect in the region, already strong, was further emphasised. It must have been a clear reminder that Marcus was in absolute control. Also, by being personally in the area, both he and Commodus showed themselves to their subjects, and could deal with requests. Millar has persistently and convincingly pointed out that 'the emperor was what the emperor did'.<sup>111</sup> In practice the daily government of the empire consisted mainly of replying to individual petitions and requests. The physical vicinity of an emperor made an impact, even more so in a zone that had recently opposed that very emperor. People would remember Marcus' being there, and also Commodus' presence at the occasion. The emperor did not need to punish people or use force to solve problems, though by bringing armies with him, people were made aware that he had that force at his disposal, if ever he would choose to use it.

In the spring of AD 176, before turning back to Rome, Commodus and his father visited Athens. Here, Marcus paid for the foundation of a chair in philosophy, and laid aside difficulties with Herodes Atticus. Both the emperor and Commodus were furthermore initiated in the Eleusian mysteries.<sup>112</sup> It was only several years later that Commodus, then sole emperor, would become *panegyriarch* of those very mysteries, being already the first emperor since Hadrian to hold the Athenian citizenship, and the first-ever emperor to accept that honour after coming to power.<sup>113</sup>

After an absence that had lasted for seven years, Marcus returned to Rome in the autumn of 176, finally exchanging his military cuirass for a toga. On 27 November Commodus was granted *imperium* and the name Augustus. Once more, after the joint rule of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, the empire knew two rulers, though Marcus, both as Commodus' father and as his *auctor imperii*, had undoubted superiority. Less than a month later, on 23 December, father and son celebrated a joint triumph. That very day, the new Augustus was also given tribunician power. To this, he added his first consulate – jointly with M. Peducaeus Plautius Quintillus – on January first, AD 177.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Millar, *ERW*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> Dio, 72.31.3; SHA, *Marc.* 27.1; Phil. *VS.* 2.1.12; *IG II<sup>2</sup>*, nos. 1110, 3620, 3632; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 194; Halfmann, *Itinera Principum*, 117 n. 429, 213.

<sup>113</sup> J. H. Oliver, 'Roman emperors and Athens', *Historia* 30 (1981), 412-23; 418, 420, 422; Grosso, *Commodo*, 528 n. 5.

<sup>114</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 2.4, 12.4-6; SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 13.4; SHA, *Marc.* 16.1-2, 17.3, 27.4-5; *CIL* 6.631, 6.745, 6.1024, 10.285, 14.328; R. Marino, 'Il problema cronologico della *tribunicia*

That made Commodus, at fifteen years of age, the youngest consul Rome had ever seen. He even had to be excused from the provisions of the *lex annalis* to take up office. Marcus might as well have proclaimed his intention officially to the public at large – which perhaps he did.<sup>115</sup> It was abundantly clear that after his death, he wished his son to be the undisputed emperor. From now on, Commodus reigned with powers similar to those his father possessed. He was – at least nominally – involved in taking decisions. After marrying Bruttia Crispina, the granddaughter of a friend of Hadrian,<sup>116</sup> Commodus accompanied Marcus to yet another period at the Danube front in AD 178.<sup>117</sup> There Marcus Aurelius died, on 17 March 180.<sup>118</sup> On his deathbed he had once more recommended his son to his friends and generals, though according to Herodian not without some advice:

Here is my son, whom you yourself brought up, who has just reached the age of adolescence and stands in need of guides through the tempest and storm of life ... You who are many must be fathers to him in place of me alone ... You must give my son this sort of advice and remind him of what he is hearing now. In this way you will provide yourselves and everyone else with an excellent emperor (ἄριστον βασιλέα), and you will be showing your gratitude to my memory in the best of all ways. Indeed, it is the only way you can keep my memory alive for ever. (Herodian, 1.4.3-6)

Commodus was also already in possession of the *tribunicia potestas* when Marcus died. No vote of power was required, and nothing stood in the way of a rapid ascension. Commodus was to be the first ever Roman emperor who had been ‘born in the purple’.

*potestas prima* di Commodo’, in: *Studi di storia antica offerti dagli allievi a Eugenio Manni* (Rome 1976), 223-39; 225-30; 238-9.

<sup>115</sup> Birley, ‘Hadrian to the Antonines’, 180; A. Birley, *Septimius Severus. The African Emperor* (London 1988), 54.

<sup>116</sup> *CIL* 10.408 (= *ILS* 1117); Dio, 72.33.1; SHA, *Marc.* 27.8; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), nos. B 165, 170.

<sup>117</sup> The *Expeditio Germanica Secunda* (*CIL* 2.4114, 6.8541) or *Expeditio Sarmatica* (*CIL* 10.408); Halfmann, *Itinera Principum*, 213.

<sup>118</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 18.1; Dio, 71.33.4-34.1; Tert. *Apol.* 25; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 16.12.

## COMMODUS' SOLE REIGN

Fate has given the empire to me as his successor, not as an adopted heir like my predecessors who prided themselves on the added power they gained, but as the only one of your emperors to be born in the palace (ἀλλὰ μόνος τε ὑμῖν ἐγὼ ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις ἀπεκυήθην) ... My father has gone up to heaven and now sits as a companion of the gods. We must concern ourselves with human affairs and govern affairs on earth (ἡμῖν δὲ χρὴ μέλειν τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς διοικεῖν).<sup>1</sup>

Though Commodus' position was secure, the empire was not. A multitude of problems beleaguered the Roman empire, from without and from within. Trouble on the Danube front, an uprising in Britain, brigandage throughout the empire, and the continuing effects of the devastating plague that had tortured much of Marcus Aurelius' reign; all of this was not going to disappear by being ignored. The new emperor and his advisors started work.

### The first few years

#### *A province beyond the Danube?*

Commodus' first real decision as sole emperor has been hotly discussed. He decided, after some initial military actions, to make peace with the Marcomanni and the Quadi, retain the Danube as the frontier of the Roman empire, and to return to Rome.<sup>2</sup> This has, more often than not, been seen as a dramatic break with the policy of expansion, which Marcus Aurelius was believed to have followed. Mommsen even argued that the new *princeps*' first decision was one of the crucial turning points of Roman history. In years of harsh struggle and short supply, Commodus threw away all the hard-fought benefits of Marcus' wars:

[Commodus] zog die Besatzungen vom linken Donauufer zurück und

<sup>1</sup> Herodian, 1.5.5-6. On the dynastic principle in the speech; G. Alföldy, 'Der Friedensschluß des Kaisers Commodus mit den Germanen' in: Idem, *Krise*, 25-68; 28, 50 n. 10 (= R. Klein [ed.], *Marc Aurel* [Darmstadt 1979], 389-428); Hohl, 'Kaiser Commodus und Herodian', 12-3.

<sup>2</sup> Dio, 73.2.3; SHA, *Comm.* 3.5; Herodian, 1.6.8-9.

verzichtete also auf die Früchte der vieljährigen Kriegsarbeit des Vaters.<sup>3</sup>

This point of view has come under discussion. Both Commodus' motives for forcing a treaty and Marcus' purposes in the Marcomannic wars have been the source of argument. As to the latter, some forty years ago, Franz Hampl first launched criticism of the traditional view, that Marcus was planning to capture new provinces, proposing that these provinces were nothing more than a well-established literary fiction.<sup>4</sup> Geza Alföldy, in an important article, gave crucial support to this criticism, convincingly indicating powerful biases in the literary sources.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Michael Stahl has analysed the different settlements between Rome and the tribes on the North of the Danube in the period AD 165-80.<sup>6</sup> According to him, indications that Rome was planning to take direct control of the area are absent from all treaties made by Marcus Aurelius.<sup>7</sup> Crucial policies towards future client-kingdoms, such as the annexation of land, marriage-alliances, the organisation of local leadership and succession, 'Romanisation', and, crucially, the bestowal of the Roman citizenship, were not undertaken.<sup>8</sup> Yet it must be noted that Dio, 72.19.1 quite explicitly mentions Marcus as bestowing 'citizenship' (πολιτείαν). Stahl notices the episode, but argues that both contextually and as far as formulation is concerned, the passage is too vague to draw conclusions from.<sup>9</sup>

From exactly the same material, however, Marcelo Schmitt has argued the exact opposite. He sees Dio, 72.19.1 as reflecting Marcus Aurelius' policy towards the tribes on the Danube.<sup>10</sup> The positive

<sup>3</sup> Th. Mommsen, 'Der Marcomanen-krieg unter Kaiser Marcus', in: E. Petersen/ A. von Domaszewski/ G. Calderini (eds.), *Die Marcus-Säule auf der Piazza Colonna in Rom*, (Munich 1896), 28, cited by Alföldy, 'Der Friedensschluß', 26.

<sup>4</sup> F. Hampl, 'Kaiser Marc Aurel und die Völker jenseits der Donaugrenze. Eine Quellenkritische Studie', in: W. Fischer (ed.), *Festschrift zu Ehren Richard Heuberger* (Innsbruck 1960), 33-40. A detailed summary of the discussion, with references can be found in Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 253-5. Basis for the discussion is formed by SHA, *Marc.* 24.5, 27.10 and Dio, 72.33.4<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Alföldy, 'Der Friedensschluß', 27-33; 41-2.

<sup>6</sup> M. Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration: Die Verträge der Kaiser Mark Aurel und Commodus mit den Völkern jenseits der Donau', *Chiron* 19 (1989), 289-317; 301-6.

<sup>7</sup> Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 313: 'Rom zeigte in keiner Weise Neigung, direkte Herrscherpflichten zu übernehmen'.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 314. But note how one of Commodus' conditions for the peace-treaty of AD 180 was the obligatory presence of a centurion at popular assemblies (*infra* p. 49). The similarity to the measures which were taken at the creation of a new province is striking – in those cases, too, a supervisor, often a *primus pilus*, was appointed to control an area without *poleis*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 314 n. 88.

<sup>10</sup> M. T. Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik des 2. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. Friedens-*



treatment of the envoys in this passage, then, becomes an argument in favour of Roman attempts to control and appease the local elite – the future aristocracy of a new Roman province.<sup>11</sup> Important evidence which supports the notion of new provinces is a medallion from ca. AD 178, which has on the reverse the legend PROPAGATORIBUS IMPERII, and on the obverse the facing portraits of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to read this legend as anything other than an expansionistic statement. An attempt to interpret it as a dynastic statement, pointing at succession and fertility, seems unconvincing.<sup>13</sup> It appears, thus, that Marcus Aurelius set out, on the third of August AD 178, to enlarge the Roman empire beyond the Danube.<sup>14</sup> He did not like the wars, though, as the one explicit reference to them in his own *Meditations* clearly indicates:

A spider is proud when it catches a fly, a man when he snares a hare, another when he nets a fish, another wild boars, another bears, another Sarmatians. If you test their principles, aren't they all brigands? (Marc. Aur. *Med.* 4.10.10)

### *Choosing to return*

Marcus may not have liked wars for conquered territory. His death, in any case, ended all attempts in that direction. Numerous literary sources claim that he had anticipated as much. 'When he began to grow ill, he summoned his son and besought him first of all not to think lightly of what remained of the war, lest he seem a traitor to the state'.<sup>15</sup> Commodus, according to these same sources, placed his own safety first. 'Tasks can be completed by a man in good health, if only gradually', he is alleged to have said; 'A dead man can complete

*sicherung oder Expansion* (Stuttgart 1997), 185. He maintains that πρεσβευομένων τῶν ἔθνων (Dio, 73.19.1) implies envoys sent by the conquered (German) tribes, *contra* Millar, *ERW*, 430, who argues in favour of an interpretation of 'embassies of the provinces'.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 185-6; Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', 184: 'If 'the nations' refers to people outside of the empire, the details of their various treatment suggests that Marcus did indeed have in mind annexation of territory'.

<sup>12</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 16, taf. 1.7

<sup>13</sup> Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 180; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 254. *Contra* Alföldy, 'Der Friedensschluß', 63-4, who argues that, if one denies the dynastic interpretation, also those who strengthened the position of the realm without annexation could describe themselves as *propagatores imperii*. If, however, as seems likely, the medallion was minted in AD 178, at the outset of the expedition, it is probable that the legend refers to the purpose of that very campaign.

<sup>14</sup> Dio, 71.33.3; SHA, *Comm.* 12.6. Cf. L. F. Pitts, 'Relations between Rome and the German 'kings' on the Middle Danube in the first to fourth century A.D.', *JRS* 79 (1989), 45-58; 49.

<sup>15</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 28.1.

nothing'.<sup>16</sup> Later authors were aware of Commodus' rapid return to Rome, and it is only too likely that this influenced their description of Marcus' death-scene. The *Historia Augusta* relishes the opportunity to emphasise how Commodus submitted to the enemy's terms in order to enjoy the luxuries of Rome.<sup>17</sup> This is gross exaggeration, but it is true that Marcus' death ended the *expeditio Germanica secunda* in everything but name. Perhaps there was the fear that the disease, which had killed Marcus, was contagious – after all, the disastrous Antonine plague was not over yet. Then again, Commodus did not instantly leave for Rome. If there still was a real risk of contagion, the fact that he did not leave at once seems more remarkable than anything else.

The plague, or more precisely its effects, could have been another reason to discontinue the northern wars. Manpower must have dropped dramatically since the outbreak of the plague in the mid-160's. Nor did the plague end rapidly.<sup>18</sup> As late as AD 178/9 'sudden mortality at Socnopaïou Nesos in Egypt reduced the taxpayers by about one-third within two months' – evidently the result of epidemic.<sup>19</sup> A continuous series of catastrophic plague losses can be attested from AD 165 to AD 182, in various zones of the empire.<sup>20</sup> Members of the imperial family were not immune. Lucius Verus died of the plague in January AD 169, although he had tried to flee a contaminated area, as Galen described:

When I reached Aquileia, the plague grew fiercer than ever, so much so that the emperors immediately went back to Rome with a few soldiers, while we, the majority, had difficulty in surviving. (Galen, 19.17-18 [Kuhn])

The deaths of so many inevitably led to increased recruitments, even

<sup>16</sup> *Epit. de Caes.* 17.2: *responderet ab incolumni quamvis paulatim negotia perfici posse, a mortuo nihil*; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 3.5

<sup>18</sup> Galen, 17.1.709, 17.1.741, 17.1.885 (Kuhn); Lucian, *Alex.* 36; *P Thmouis* I, 104.10-18; *P Berol.* 16036; R. P. Duncan-Jones, 'The impact of the Antonine plague', *AJA* 9 (1996), 108-36; 117, 121; R. J. Littman/ M. L. Littman, 'Galen and the Antonine plague', *AJPh* 94 (1973), 243-55; 243; J. F. Gilliam, 'The plague under Marcus Aurelius', *AJPh* 83 (1961), 225-51; 228-9; S. Kambitsis (ed.), *Le Papyrus Thmouis* 1, col. 68-169 (Paris 1985); N. Lewis, 'The tax concession of AD 168', *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt*, 244-9 (= *ZPE* 38 [1980], 249-54); N. Lewis, 'A reversal of a tax policy in Roman Egypt', *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt*, 357-74 (= *GRBS* 34 [1993], 101-18).

<sup>19</sup> Duncan-Jones, 'The impact of the Antonine plague', 117, 121 Cf. 115 n. 85; D. Rathbone, 'Villages, land and population in Graeco-Roman Egypt', *PCPhS* n. s. 36 (1990), 103-42; 114.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan-Jones, 'The impact of the Antonine plague', 116-7, 120-2, with references; E. Lo Cascio, *Il princeps e il suo impero. Studi di storia amministrativa e finanziaria romana* (Bari 2000), 297-302.

to the extent of arming bandits and gladiators.<sup>21</sup> This latter measure led to problems for the Gallic elite, who saw the price of gladiators soar. Eventually a senatorial decree, the *Senatus Consultum de pretiis Gladiatorum*, was passed, fixing the price of gladiators for the entire empire, and linking the measure explicitly with the plague.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the persecution of Christians in the area increased dramatically, providing many more criminals who could be put to death in the arena.<sup>23</sup> The problems of recruitment did not go unnoticed. Marcus' fame in fighting the Marcomannic War was all the greater for having fought it 'at a time when grave pestilence had carried off many thousands of civilians and soldiers (*multa milia et popularium et militum*)'.<sup>24</sup> The feat is impressive indeed, with not just a shortage of men to overcome, but also an inescapable plummeting morale amongst the soldiers.<sup>25</sup> It is not the type of campaign one would choose to fight – especially not at the beginning of a reign.

Commodus could not afford to loose his first major expedition as sole emperor. It would have meant too serious a loss of prestige, especially considering his lack of military experience.<sup>26</sup> The plague, furthermore, was not over yet. At Virunum (in Noricum) an inscription unequivocally mentions the death of a family from plague in AD 182.<sup>27</sup> A list of Mithras worshippers from there similarly shows how five out of thirty-five *socii* of that cult died in the first half of AD 184.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Duncan-Jones, in a fundamental article, has shown that the effects of the Antonine plague carried on well into Commodus' reign, with dramatic drops and consistent lows in the amount of leased

<sup>21</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 21.6.

<sup>22</sup> J. H. Oliver / R. E. A. Palmer, 'Minutes of an act of the Roman Senate', *Hesperia* (1955), 320-49, 328-34, Plate. 89. A copy from Aes Italicense reads (l.1): *tantam illam pestem nulla medicina sanari posse* ('that pestilence so great could not be cured by any medicine').

<sup>23</sup> Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.36-61; Birley, 'Hadrian to the Antonines', 182; Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 17.2

<sup>25</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 28.4; Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 191; Gherardini, *Studien*, 114.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. M. P. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies* (Amsterdam 1984), 184, 186, for the effects of a defeat for the actual fabric of government. According to Cornell, emperors had a vested interest in maintaining peace; T. Cornell, 'The end of Roman imperial expansion', in: J. Rich / G. Shipley (eds.), *War and Society in the Roman World* (London 1993), 139-170; 163: 'Major wars of expansion occurred only when emperors had specific ... reasons to undertake them'. On the importance of honour and prestige, especially for the military; Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 252-65.

<sup>27</sup> CIL 3.5567 (l.9): *qui per luem vita functi sunt Mamertino et Rufo co(n)s(ilibus)*.

<sup>28</sup> G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum* (Klagenfurt 1994), 23-4; L. D'Ambrosio, 'A proposito della tavola di Virunum', *RSA* 26 (1996), 135-92; 140-1. Cf. R. L. Gordon, 'Two mithraic albums from Virunum, Noricum', *JRA* 9 (1996), 424-6.

agricultural land, army diplomas (and documents in general), inscriptions, public buildings (both imperially and non-imperially financed), and brick- and coin production, in several areas of the empire.<sup>29</sup> Continued, or increased, army mobilisation in such a period could have caused serious problems, especially in winter, as Galen noted on another occasion: 'Most of us died, not merely from the plague, but because the epidemic was happening in the depth of winter'.<sup>30</sup> Continued warfare could also have led to popular disapproval of the young *princeps*, who would have had to continue with the unpopular practice of levying troops from amongst unwilling subjects, even in Italy – not to speak of extra taxes.<sup>31</sup> Many instances of banditry and uprisings, often by deserters, further showed the risk of raising too many troops, and focusing all of them at one point of the empire.<sup>32</sup>

Unpopularity in Italy, and especially in Rome, was something Commodus could scarcely afford so early in his reign. Direct interaction between emperor and subjects was crucial to the

<sup>29</sup> Duncan-Jones, 'The impact of the Antonine plague', figs. 2-11, 13, 16-8.

<sup>30</sup> Galen, 19.18 (Kuhn); Gherardini, *Studien*, 114.

<sup>31</sup> J. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul. The Three Provinces, 58 BC – AD 260* (London 1983), 80; F. Millar, 'Italy and the Roman Empire: Augustus to Constantine', *Phoenix* 40 (1986), 295-318; 308. The unpopularity of taxes was such, that Marcus held a public sale of imperial belongings, selling 'goblets of gold and crystal and murra, even flagons made for kings, and his wife's silken gold-embroidered robes' (SHA, *Marc.* 17.4. Cf. Eutr. *Brev.* 8.13; *Epit. de Caes.* 16.9-10). With the gold that this sale raised he was said to have financed the rest of the Marcomannic wars. Similarly, Vespasian made his heavy taxes more acceptable by leading a famously frugal life himself.

<sup>32</sup> On banditry and deserters: B. D. Shaw, 'Rebels and outsiders', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 361-403; 387-8; W. Riess, *Apuleius und die Räuber. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Kriminalitätsforschung* (Stuttgart 2001), 17 n. 56. For Commodus' reign, the army deserter Maternus, and his *bellum desertorum* are particularly important (*infra* pp. 65-7). As D. Kienast, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (review)', *Gnomon* 38 (1966), 596-606; 603 already noted, it seems likely that this *Bellum Desertorum* 'nur eine Folge der Zwangskonstruktionen Marc Aurels gewesen ist ...'. As late as AD 190 Commodus was undertaking action to suppress banditry (*AE* 1979.624), whilst the figure of Bulla Felix made life difficult during the first few years of Septimius Severus' reign (Dio, 77.10; Millar, 'Italy and the Roman Empire', 312-3). T. Grünewald, *Räuber, Rebellen, Rivalen, Rächer. Studien zu Latrones im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart 1999), 157-95 has made an interesting comparison between Maternus and Bulla Felix, and their depiction in Dio, which he describes as a juxtaposition between the 'noble' Felix, and the 'base' Maternus, the one an *exemplum bonum*, the other an *exemplum malum* (p. 195). Similar uprisings, like the Bucoli-revolt, had hindered Marcus' reign. Dio, 72.4.1-2 placed this revolt in AD 172-3. P. Thmouis 1 confirms the problems, but places them in AD 166/7 and 168/9 (col. 104, 114.6-10, 116.2-11); Lewis, 'A reversal of a tax policy in Roman Egypt', 369-70; Riess, *Apuleius und die Räuber*, 56-7. Cf. SHA, *Marc.* 21.2; Th. Pekáry, 'Seditio. Unruhen und Revolten im römischen Reich von Augustus bis Commodus', *AncSoc* 18 (1987), 133-50; 144.

functioning of the emperorship.<sup>33</sup> Commodus had ensured loyalty amongst the troops at the Danube by allowing some military action and by the ensuing awarding of *dona militaria*.<sup>34</sup> His dynastic claims were, in any case, always going to be more readily recognised by soldiers than by senators. He now needed to be in Rome itself, as any new emperor should, to be acclaimed by the people, and by the senate. During the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius senators had grown used to emperors who, at least in appearance, were also experienced senators. Commodus, the emperor by blood, evidently did not fit that category. Although there is no direct evidence suggesting a possible conspiracy against Commodus as early as AD 180, there is a noticeable passage in Herodian's work. In it, Pompeianus, who advises Commodus not to return to Rome, explicitly mentions the risk of a conspiracy, in order to minimise it:

Do not worry about anyone in Rome undermining your position. The senatorial nobility (ἄριστοι τῆς βουλῆς) are here campaigning with you, and the whole strength of the army is here to protect your rule. All the reserves of the imperial treasury are here as well (Herodian, 1.6.6).

It is doubtful whether there was nobody left in the capital who could, and wanted to, undermine the new emperor's position, and Commodus' haste to establish himself there is not surprising.<sup>35</sup> Once in Rome, his renowned ancestry and his youthful and striking appearance were sure to convince the crowds, as they had done for earlier emperors, and indeed did now.<sup>36</sup> The return of the emperor to the heart of the realm, accompanied by peace at the Danube, was greeted with great enthusiasm:

As he drew nearer to Rome, the whole senate and population of the city (πᾶσά τε ἡ σύγκλητος βουλὴ καὶ πανδημεὶ ὅσοι τὴν Ῥώμην κατέκουν ἄνθρωποι) were so anxious to be the first to see their new, noble emperor, that they could not restrain themselves, from coming out quite a distance from the city to meet him.<sup>37</sup>

By solid planning, or happy coincidence, another peace-settlement was concluded just before Commodus returned to Rome. On 13

<sup>33</sup> Millar, *ERW*, 368-9; Idem, 'Emperors at work', *JRS* 57 (1967), 9-19; 9-10, 18-9.

<sup>34</sup> *CIL* 4.1502-3, 4.1507, 5.1968, 5.2112. Cf. *CIL* 6.1501-1503; Gherardini, *Studien*, 93 n 169.

<sup>35</sup> Kienast, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica*', 598: 'Es gab in Rom viele Männer, die in dem 19jährigen nicht den Kaiser sahen, den das Reich in jener gefährlichen Situation brauchte'. Cf. Grosso, *Commodo*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> Herodian, 1.7.5 describes Commodus' entry in Rome in colourful terms. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 17.3. Cf. also the return to Rome of Gaius after Tiberius' death; Suet. *Calig.* 13.

<sup>37</sup> Herodian, 1.7.1-4 (esp. 1.7.3); Grosso, *Commodo*, 126; Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 192.

October AD 180, Canarta, king of the Baquatar, agreed with D. Veturius Macrinus, in Mauretania Tingitana, to become a client-king of Rome.<sup>38</sup> Other problems that had arisen during Marcus' reign had also been brought to an end.<sup>39</sup> Commodus could well present himself as the emperor who had finally brought peace. Unsurprisingly, he emphasised the military actions under his authority of AD 180, and celebrated a triumph.<sup>40</sup>

When blaming Commodus for his return to Rome, one should not forget how well the settlements with the Quadi and Marcomanni actually worked. Up to the calamitous years of Valerian and Gallienus (AD 253-260), no more serious threats from the area are reported.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, it is doubtful whether Rome would have been served by new provinces (if that had been Marcus' plan). Already during Marcus' life, there appear to have been *amici* of the emperor who were in favour of a return to Rome.<sup>42</sup> Now, especially after the battles of AD 179/180, the enemy was no longer a threat.<sup>43</sup> Forcing the defeated enemy to be incorporated in a new province involved massive logistical and political problems; the creation of a proper network of roads, buildings, political institutions and the 'romanisation' of the old tribal aristocracy. Militarily, annexing new territory was also different from overcoming an enemy. It could have been problematic for the inexperienced new monarch to anticipate the scenario – and it certainly would have been tremendously expensive. The expenses, in fact, would only much later, if at all, have been met

<sup>38</sup> AE 1953.79; Gherardini, *Studien*, 120. Cf. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres*, 454-6 no. 179 bis.

<sup>39</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 22.10-1; *ILS* 1327; Pekáry, 'Seditio. Unruhen und Revolten im römischen Reich', 144.

<sup>40</sup> *CIL* 14.2922 (= *ILS* 1420); SHA, *Comm.* 3.6; M. P. Speidel, 'Commodus and the king of the Quadi', *Germania* 78 (2000), 193-7, 193-4, fig. 1. Some late antique authors emphasise how Commodus personally fought in the fights of AD 180 (*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 17.2; *Eutr. Brev.* 8.15.1). This version of events is also current in the Christian tradition (*Eus. Chron. Rom.* 15.1; *Oros.* 7.16.2) and may reflect propaganda of the time. On the late antique reception of Commodus's reign, see *infra* p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> F. Millar, 'Emperors, frontiers and foreign relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378', *Britannia* 13 (1982), 1-23; 6-7, 15; Gherardini, *Studien*, 119; Pitts, 'Relations', 51-2. Cf. Traupman, *Commodus*, 179: '... there is some good indication that he refrained from aggressive war because of a policy which rested on the conviction that a lasting settlement could be reached through means differing from those employed by his father but equally effective.'

<sup>42</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 22.8; Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 190; J. Crook, *Consilium Principis. Imperial Councils and Counsellors from Augustus to Diocletian* (Cambridge 1955), 76;

<sup>43</sup> Gherardini, *Studien*, 118, and pp. 92-3, 102-3, 111 for the situation in and actions of AD 180.

by the profits from the new territory.<sup>44</sup> The benefits of full-scale military action were not decidedly clear, the risks were. Commodus settled for peace.

### *The peace settlement*

As has been often noted, the treaty that Commodus forced upon the Quadi and Marcomanni in AD 180 had many similarities to an earlier settlement between these tribes and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>45</sup> The conditions of the peace were perfectly honourable. Nor had Rome previously refrained from negotiations with the various tribes. In the period between AD 165 and AD 180 alone, the literary sources mention twenty-six official contacts. There were doubtless more.<sup>46</sup> Marcus Aurelius had already made treaties with the Jazyges and the Buri just before his death.<sup>47</sup> The latter were afterwards once more defeated, in one of Commodus' short campaigns of AD 180, and forced to commit themselves never again to use a forty-*stade* (ca. 7.5 km) strip of their territory next to the Dacian border. They were also to provide hostages to Rome and give back captives.<sup>48</sup> This settlement is a perfect example of negotiation through strength, for Rome only agreed on terms after the Buri had become too weak to be a risk. Previously, envoys had been sent back, 'because they were strong, and because it was not peace that they wanted, but the securing of a respite to enable them to make further preparations'.<sup>49</sup>

Negotiations with the Marcomanni and Quadi had followed a similar pattern. Continuing pressure, and successful battles at the beginning of Commodus' sole reign, had been too much for the tribes.<sup>50</sup> They were no longer in a position to make demands. Thus, the

<sup>44</sup> Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 190-2. Cf. Appian, *Prol.*7: 'Preserve their empire ... rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians'.

<sup>45</sup> Dio, 73.2.2; Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 306 no. 14; Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 193, 196.

<sup>46</sup> Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 300 n. 55, 301-7, with references.

<sup>47</sup> Dio, 72.18.1, 72.19; Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 301 no. 3, 305 no. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Dio, 73.3.2; Millar, 'Emperors, frontiers and foreign relations', 15; Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 306 no. 15; Pitts, 'Relations', 50-1.

<sup>49</sup> Dio, 73.3.1. Cf. R.J.A. Talbert, 'Commodus as diplomat in an extract from the *Acta Senatus*', *ZPE* 71 (1988), 137-47, for a formal ratification of peace with the Buri in the senate.

<sup>50</sup> Dio, 72.20; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 17.2; Eutr. *Brev.* 8.15.1; Gherardini, *Studien*, 112; Alföldy, 'Der Friedensschluß', 45.

conditions of the treaty were beneficial to Rome. Roman manpower was improved, both by the return of prisoners and deserters, and by a forced recruitment of 13,000 soldiers from the Quadi, and some 10,000 men from the Marcomanni.<sup>51</sup> Following earlier agreements, the tribes also had to give up part of their weaponry, and all of their ships, which they were not allowed to rebuild. They were further to keep away from the islands in the Danube and from the river itself, creating a 15 km wide 'forbidden' zone.<sup>52</sup> As a more direct form of compensation for the costs of the war, Rome was to receive an annual tribute of a stipulated amount of grain. Popular assemblies were, furthermore, restricted to once a month, and even then only when under supervision of a Roman centurion. Finally, the Quadi and Marcomanni were forbidden to wage war on the Jazyges, Buri, or Vandals, or to support enemies of Rome in any way. In return, the Roman troops retreated from the occupied territory on the north side of the Danube.<sup>53</sup>

The partial disarmament of Rome's former enemies, enough to ensure they would be no further threat to Rome, without making them overtly vulnerable to other potentially belligerent tribes, shows Rome's desire to create a peaceful *status quo* at the Danube. The prohibition on attacking other tribes indicates the same, as does the settlement by C. Vettius Sabianus of 12,000 Dacians in the zone bordering the province, avoiding further warfare.<sup>54</sup> The Roman side of the Danube was further strengthened, the riverbank fortified, and garrisons placed at easy crossings.<sup>55</sup> The Danube frontier was meant to be safe again. It worked. Whether it was Commodus' decision, or one taken by friends of his father who had not been able to convince Marcus himself, and whether it was a break with previous policy, or in keeping with it, does not matter as far as efficiency is concerned. The settlement ensured peace for a long time to come.

<sup>51</sup> Dio, 73.3.3. Gherardini, *Studien*, 116 believes that on top of these numbers, even more troops were demanded of the tribes (though less than in previous agreements) on a yearly basis. Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 194 n. 193 and Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 306 no. 14 f-g, however, argue that this one recruitment replaced yearly recruitments, as indeed Dio explicitly says.

<sup>52</sup> Stahl, 'Zwischen Abgrenzung und Integration', 306 no. 14 b, e, 302 no. 5, 303 no. 8; Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 194 IV 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 180-2.

<sup>54</sup> Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik*, 197.

<sup>55</sup> *CIL* 3.3330, 3.3332, 3.3385 (=ILS 395), 3.10312-3; *AE* 1910.145; J. J. Wilkes, 'The Danube provinces', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 577-603; 585; J. Fitz, 'Maßnahmen zur militärischen Sicherheit von Pannonia inferior unter Commodus', *Klio* 39 (1961), 199-214; K. Dietz, 'Kastellum Sablonetum und der Ausbau des rätischen Limes unter Kaiser Commodus', *Chiron* 13 (1983), 497-536; 527-9.



### *Commodus' return and the Lucilla conspiracy*

The return from the Danube may have been understandable, and was perhaps a wise course of action, but that does not mean it was well received amongst all of Marcus' former friends. Herodian emphasises how councillors of Commodus were filled with 'feelings of dismay as they gloomily bowed their heads'.<sup>56</sup> Claudius Pompeianus, in particular, is said to have opposed the new emperor's decision, but to no avail.<sup>57</sup> One needs to remember, though, that much of the opposition between the speeches of 'sound advice' of Marcus' friends, and the 'constant urging' of the imperial household appears to be a literary construction of Herodian.<sup>58</sup> Grosso's rather bleak description of the beginning of Commodus' reign seems somewhat overly austere.<sup>59</sup> But there is no denying that Commodus' return to Rome could have been handled better, as far as the relationship with senators was concerned. When he first addressed the senate, the new *princeps* apparently gave a speech that consisted of 'a lot of trivialities'.<sup>60</sup> He further, and maybe more damagingly to senatorial goodwill, allowed his *cubicularius* Saoterus to gain too much power and, according to the *Historia Augusta*, even had him sit next to him in his chariot during the triumphal procession celebrating the German victory.<sup>61</sup>

Still, Commodus did not set out to antagonise Marcus' powerful former friends in the unstable first period of his emperorship. He shared the first consulship of his sole reign (his own third consulship) with the thoroughly acceptable patrician Antistius Burrus, son of a

<sup>56</sup> Herodian, 1.6.4.

<sup>57</sup> Herodian, 1.6.5-7.

<sup>58</sup> The speech in which Pompeianus advises Commodus to stay, for instance, forms the centre of a beautifully crafted ringcomposition, of which Herodian was particularly fond; G. Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz und die antike Überlieferung', in: Idem, *Krise*, 81-126; 96-9.

<sup>59</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 102: 'il regno di Commodo iniziava con tristi auspici'.

<sup>60</sup> Dio, 73.4.2; R. J. A. Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton 1984), 422.

<sup>61</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 3.6. The *Historia Augusta*, unsurprisingly, emphasises the scandalous fact that Commodus regularly kissed his 'partner in depravity'. Traupman, *Commodus*, 41 rightly stresses that emperors from Augustus onwards had welcomed *amici* with a kiss, and that it was the fact that Commodus extended this practice to a freedman which offended people, especially senators. Commodus had granted Saoterus a 'fictive free birth', through the *ius aureorum anulorum*; CIL 6.2010a; R. P. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris. A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge 1972), 43, 282-3; C. Bruun, 'Some comments on the status of imperial freedmen (the case of Ti. Claudius Aug. lib. Classicus)', *ZPE* 82 (1990), 271-85; 283. On Saoterus' power; SHA, *Comm.* 5.1; Dio, 73.12.2; C. de Ranieri, 'La gestione politica di età Commodiana e la parabola di Tigidio Perenne', *Athenaeum* 86 (1998), 397-417; 400-1; Grosso, *Commodo*, 113-6.

consul, and the husband of one of his sisters.<sup>62</sup> Other marked moments of moderation characterised the beginning of Commodus' time in power. Dio writes, almost with surprise, about the emperor's treatment of Manilius, the former *ab epistulis Latinis* of Avidius Cassius, who had taken flight after Marcus' death, but had been captured. It seems clear that 'his pursuers acted out of enthusiasm for Commodus', and equally clear that they did so 'without his authority or approval'.<sup>63</sup> For when Manilius was brought before Commodus:

the emperor would not listen to a word from him, though he offered a great deal of information, and he burned all the conspirator's papers without reading them.<sup>64</sup>

Undoubtedly, many senators who had been involved in Avidius Cassius' usurpation sighed a collective sigh of relief. The magnanimity of Commodus' attitude towards the usurpation may have diminished later. The life of Avidius Cassius in the *Historia Augusta* mentions how the descendants of the usurper were burned alive after Marcus' death, 'as if they had been caught in a rebellion'.<sup>65</sup> As there is no mention of this in any other source, and as descendants of Cassius can be traced to well after Commodus' reign, the passage should be used with caution.<sup>66</sup> On all accounts, in the case of Manilius, Commodus showed clemency.

It was not enough. Perhaps Saoterus' position had become too politically important, excluding senators who were already worried about the attitude of the πορφυρογέννητος.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps, also, other elements of the state were discontented by the ending of the war, or by the fact that their emperor was such untested a youngster. Whatever

<sup>62</sup> Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 8 n. 30, 129, 371. Similarly the consuls *ord.* of AD 182, Q. Tineius Rufus and M. Petronius Sura Mamertinus were sons of consuls, as was one of the suffect consuls of that year, L. Attidus Cornelianus (Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 129, 371).

<sup>63</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Dio, 73.7.4. Cf. *supra* p. 36 n. 102. The passage clearly refers to a period early in Commodus' sole reign, and not to the direct aftermath of the Avidius Cassius revolt. *Contra* C. J. Simpson, 'Ulpian Marcellus again', *Britannia* 11 (1980), 338-9; 339.

<sup>65</sup> SHA, *Avid. Cass.* 14.7: *quasi in factione deprehensos*.

<sup>66</sup> *Cod. Iust.* 9.8.6; *IGRR* 3. 500 col. ii 75-7; Traupman, *Commodus*, 43; Grosso, *Commodo*, 134-6. Grosso argued that *quasi in factione deprehensos* implied that they were convicted for a conspiracy, which seems doubtful. It has been argued (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 [1933], no. A 1404) that the Heliodorus who figures in the *Acts of Appian* (P Oxy 1 33, col. I; ll. 6-14), is the son of Avidius Cassius, which if one would believe the *Acta Alexandrinorum* to be a reliable source, would indicate that he was still alive in (probably) AD 190; H.A. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs. Acta Alexandrinorum* (Oxford 1954), no. 11, 211. But Musurillo (p. 208) has convincingly argued that the son of Avidius Cassius would be too young to be addressed as τέκνος, as the Heliodorus in the *Acta* is (l.12).

<sup>67</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 400-1, believes Saoterus to be the first of a line of close collaborators who constituted 'un elemento extra-costituzionale'. See *infra* pp. 75-7.

the motive, reasonably soon after Commodus' return to Rome, a plot against his life emerged. The principle instigator was Lucilla, the widow of Lucius Verus and current wife of Claudius Pompeianus, and Commodus' second-oldest sister.<sup>68</sup> The conspiracy is shrouded in mystery.<sup>69</sup> Not even the date can be firmly established, though it certainly took place before the end of AD 182, and probably already towards the end of AD 181, very shortly after Commodus' entry in Rome.<sup>70</sup> Why Lucilla acted is highly disputed, with all sources giving different explanations. Herodian suggests animosity between Lucilla and Commodus' young wife Crispina, whose position as wife of the emperor was superior to Lucilla's.<sup>71</sup> Coins of the period seem to indicate that Crispina may have been pregnant, which would, if true, have further weakened Lucilla's position.<sup>72</sup> She complained bitterly to her lover, M. Ummidius Quadratus, and together they convinced Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus, a young member of the senate, 'to attack and kill Commodus'.<sup>73</sup> Dio, on the other hand, wrote that 'Lucilla, who was no more modest or chaste than her brother Commodus, detested her husband Pompeianus'. This, according to Dio, made her persuade her lover – who in his version is the very Claudius Pompeianus who was to strike, and who happened to be the fiancée of Lucilla's daughter – to make the attack upon her brother.<sup>74</sup> The *Historia Augusta*, for once, does not mention any lovers, but describes a politically motivated action, prompted by an alleged desire of Commodus to destroy the senate.<sup>75</sup>

Divided as the ancient texts are on why the conspiracy took place, they are surprisingly consistent in describing what actually happened.

<sup>68</sup> See *supra* pp. 25, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 126 appropriately refers in the context of the Lucilla-plot to a dictum of Dio: 'It is not possible, of course, for those on the outside to have certain knowledge of such matters' (54.15.2).

<sup>70</sup> For the *terminus ante quem* of December AD 182; Grosso, *Commodo*, 146-7. The earlier date has been put forward by Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 17-9, with criticism on earlier proposals, and references.

<sup>71</sup> Herodian, 1.8.4. On Crispina: D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle. Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie* (Darmstadt 1990), 150-1. See also *supra* p. 39.

<sup>72</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 666-7, 676-7, 680. Cf. *BMCRE* 4, clxxix: 'Nothing is known of any children of the marriage, but the types of *Diana Lucifera* and *Iuno Lucina* clearly indicate hope, and *Fecunditas*, if rightly reported, should mean an actual birth'. The theory was first developed by J. Aymard, 'La conjuration de Lucilla', *REA* 57 (1955), 85-91; 88-91.

<sup>73</sup> Herodian, 1.8.5.

<sup>74</sup> Dio, 73.4.5. There is a confusing array of Claudii involved in the conspiracy, usefully clarified by Heer, 'Der historische Wert der Vita Commodi', 61-2.

<sup>75</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 3.9: *in senatus odium ita venit ut et ipse crudeliter in tanti ordinis perniciem saeviret fieretque e contempto crudelis*; 4.1-2.

Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus hid in the shadows of the entrance to the Flavian amphitheatre, drew his dagger and sprang out at Commodus, shouting: 'See, this is what the senate sends you!' Unfortunately for the conspirators, by stating what he was about to do, Quintianus not only gave away the plot, but also allowed the emperor's bodyguards time to overcome him.<sup>76</sup> Commodus' reaction was reasonably restrained. Lucilla was banished to Capri, and Quintianus and Ummidius Quadratus were executed, alongside the further virtually unknown Norbana, Norbanus and Paralius. The mother of the latter was banished together with Lucilla.<sup>77</sup> Lucilla's family, however, remained unharmed, as is proved by the fact that Lucilla's son was still alive during the reign of Caracalla, who put him to death.<sup>78</sup> Yet the position of T. Claudius Pompeianus was destroyed, and the former general retired from public life.<sup>79</sup>

Though the events seem clear, the story as a whole remains confusing, with much of the information suspect. The various liaisons of Lucilla look like standard Roman statements about powerful women.<sup>80</sup> The role of the senate, furthermore, appears very innocent. This was certainly an image that was appealing to senatorial sources, which could emphasise how senators were innocent of Commodus' bad behaviour, but it relates uncomfortably to Quintianus' words.<sup>81</sup> If some senators were more fully involved, playing, perhaps, upon Lucilla's vanities, willing her to act, the words of the would-be-assassin would become more comprehensible.<sup>82</sup> Further events may well imply such involvement.

Shortly after the conspiracy had been disclosed, Commodus' favourite Saoterus was 'courteously escorted away from the palace' by the *frumentarii*, and executed.<sup>83</sup> This initiated what can only be described as a second stage of the conspiracy.<sup>84</sup> Those whose

<sup>76</sup> Herodian, 1.6.6; Dio, 73.4.4; SHA, *Comm.* 4.3. Amm. Marc. 29.1.17, however, mentions an 'almost fatal dagger wound from the hand of the senator Quintianus, a man of lawless ambition'. Marcellinus does not mention Lucilla.

<sup>77</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 4.4. Cf. 5.7.

<sup>78</sup> Herodian, 4.6.3; Dio, 73.20.1; Traupman, *Commodus*, 50.

<sup>79</sup> Dio, 73.3.2.

<sup>80</sup> *Contra* A. Bianchi, 'Lucilla Augusta: una rilettura delle fonti', *MGR* 13 (1988), 129-44; 138, who in an extremely speculative article states that both Quintianus and Quadratus were Lucilla's lovers. On Roman attitudes towards powerful women in general: N. Purcell, 'Livia and the womanhood of Rome', *PCPhS* 212, n. s. 32 (1986), 78-105.

<sup>81</sup> Gherardini, *Studien*, 141.

<sup>82</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 4.5. Cf. Dio, 73.12.1.

<sup>84</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 19; Grosso, *Commodo*, 155.

involvement in the first part of the conspiracy could still be doubted, now unambiguously came forward. Prime figure among them was the praetorian prefect P. Tarrutienus Paternus. Only the *Historia Augusta* explicitly involves him in the first stages of the plot, but as the official responsible for the emperor's safety, he would be a good person to have on one's side. Paternus' initial involvement would also explain the limited number of executions following the foiled attack at the amphitheatre. As praetorian prefect, a post he had held since AD 179 (having previously been Marcus' *ab epistulis Latinis*), Paternus took the investigation into the conspiracy on himself.<sup>85</sup> He was unlikely to incriminate his former fellow friends and soldiers, even if he had been previously unaware of the upcoming attempt. The involvement of the *frumentarii*, in any case, betrays his participation in the killing of Saoterus. The execution of the unpopular freedman cannot have been anything other than a political statement – to show the new emperor where real power lay. Commodus reacted furiously.

Paternus was relieved of the prefecture in order to be raised to senatorial rank. The honour, however, was very short-lived. Stripped of his power over the praetorians, he was put on trial only a few days later. One of the charges was, probably, complicity in the conspiracy of Lucilla, and attempting to prevent proper punishment for the guilty parties. Another charge was high treason. Paternus' daughter had been betrothed to the daughter of P. Salvius Julianus, and Commodus apparently accused them both of aiming to replace him with Julianus.<sup>86</sup> Others were put to death alongside these two, amongst whom the names of the *ab epistulis* Vitruvius Secundus, and of the brothers Sex. Quintilius Condianus and Sex. Quintilius Valerius Maximus are the

<sup>85</sup> AE 1971.534; Dio, 7.12.3, 73.5.1; SHA, *Comm.* 4, 14.8; M. Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode. 2 avant Jésus-Christ - 192 après Jésus-Christ* (Paris 1997), 182-3 no. 43; H.-G. Pflaum, 'La valeur de la source inspiratrice de la *vita Hadriani* et de la *vita Marci Antonini* à la lumière des personnalités contemporaines nommément citées', *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Collquium 1968/9* (Bonn 1970), 173-232; 217-8; W. Seston / M. Euzennat, 'Un dossier de la chancellerie romaine: La Tabula Banasitana. Étude de diplomatique', *CRAI* 1971, 468-90; 485-6. On the judicial function of the praetorian prefect: Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 67-76, especially 74-5. Herodian, 1.8.8 states that Perennis, not Paternus, held the enquiries. Paternus is known as the author of *de re militari*, a juristic work on, seemingly, the place of soldiers in legal procedures: *Dig.* 49.16.12, 50.6.7; *Lyd. Mag.* 1.9; *Veg. Mil.* 1.8; O. Lenel, *Palingenesia Iuris Civilis* (Leipzig 1889), II, 335-6; F. Millar, 'Government and law: Ulpian, a Philosopher in Politics?', in: G. Clark / T. Rajak (eds.), *Philosophy and Power. Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin* (forthcoming).

<sup>86</sup> Dio, 73.5.1-2; SHA, *Comm.* 4.7-8; Traupman, *Commodus*, 50-1; On Julianus (not to be confused with the great jurist L. Octavius Cornelius Salvius Julianus Aemilianus) see Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 266, 399.

most striking.<sup>87</sup> The evidence for all the executions could be better, though Dio on the whole supports the more detailed but much less reliable *Historia Augusta*. Yet many of the names mentioned in the literary sources do disappear from our records, and inscriptions confirm the *damnatio memoriae* of the Quintilii.<sup>88</sup> Overall, it seems that Commodus struck back at all those who were in a position to seriously harm him, which included many former *amici* of Marcus. Traupman argued that the 'faction of the senatorial party which had received high commands in the Marcomannic wars was considered by Commodus the most dangerous to his security'.<sup>89</sup> This seems likely, especially considering the simultaneous removal from key-positions of powerful generals like Pertinax and, perhaps, Didius Julianus.<sup>90</sup>

### Change and continuity in government

For the ensuing years of Commodus' reign, up to AD 189, the sources focus mainly on the two great 'advisers' who dominated the political sphere: Tigridius Perennis and M. Aurelius Cleander.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Commodus is said to have retreated almost completely from government – leaving the supervision of the realm to others.<sup>92</sup> Stories of debauchery inevitably fill the *Historia Augusta*, describing how Commodus surrounded himself with three hundred concubines, one of whom he named after his mother, and who were collected 'solely on the basis of bodily beauty', and how he committed incest with his sisters whilst having an affair with his father's cousin.<sup>93</sup> Needless to say, this is standard invective.

The gradual transformation of the Roman empire in the second century towards a more powerful central authority had hardly left the emperor the possibility of distancing himself from politics. A

<sup>87</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 4.9-11; Dio, 73.5.3-4. Traupman, *Commodus*, 48 seems to over-interpret Dio, 73.5 when he claims that the brothers 'openly expressed their discontent at existing conditions'. Dio, 73.6, in a wonderful passage, describes in detail how the son of Maximus, Sextus Condianus, escaped, 'constantly changing his appearance', and that no-one knows whether he was eventually slain or not – 'though a great number of heads purporting to be his were brought to Rome'.

<sup>88</sup> *CIL* 6.1991, 14.2393. On the after-effects of the Lucilla-conspiracy and on the executions, with more details as to all individuals concerned; Grosso, *Commodo*, 153-63.

<sup>89</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 53.

<sup>90</sup> Pertinax: SHA, *Pert.* 3.3; Didius Julianus: Dio, 74.11.2; SHA, *Did. Iul.* 2.1-2. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 3.1: *Patris ministeria seniora summovit, amicos senes abiecit*.

<sup>91</sup> Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 184-5 no. 44; 226-31 no. \*17\*.

<sup>92</sup> Dio, 73.9.1; Herodian, 1.8.1; SHA, *Comm.* 5.1-3.

<sup>93</sup> Herodian, 2.7.1; SHA, *Comm.* 5.4-11.

politically inactive emperor would also have found it difficult to stay sufficiently vigilant and find enough support to stay in power for twelve years.<sup>94</sup> Anyway, Commodus' personal involvement in politics is still shown (amongst other evidence) by a letter to Athens of AD 186/7, in which a number of people are named, constituting a *consilium principis*.<sup>95</sup> If there was a group of advisers to the emperor, the emperor must have been involved. The list of names, however, shows how difficult relations between emperor and senate had become by that stage. It does not mention any senators, but includes the name of M. Aurelius Cleander – who was a freedman. And it had been an unwritten rule up to that date that freedmen were excluded from public activity in the *consilium*.<sup>96</sup> Of course, the *consilium principis* changed, depending on the question at hand, but a complete absence of senators at any one moment is striking nonetheless.<sup>97</sup>

Less than ten years earlier, in AD 177, a *consilium* of Marcus had still been much more traditional, including three patrician former consuls, two former suffect consuls, and a number of high ranking equestrians, as the *Tabula Banasitana* shows:

Signaverunt	41
M. Gav<I>us M. f. Pob(lilia tribu) Squilla Ga<I>licanus	
M'. Acilius M'. f. Gal(eria tribu) Glabrio	
T. Sextius T. f. Vot(uria tribu) Lateranus	
C. Septimius C. f. Qui(rina tribu) Severus	45

<sup>94</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 397, 399; Kienast, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica*', 599.

<sup>95</sup> *IG II<sup>2</sup> 1796 + 1800 (= AE 1952.6); IG II<sup>2</sup> 1109 + 2771 + 3412*; J. H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri* (Philadelphia 1989), 421-3 no. 209; J. H. Oliver, 'Three Attic inscriptions concerning the emperor Commodus', *AJPh* 71 (1950), 170-9; W. Eck, 'Der Kaiser, die Führungsschichten und die Administration des Reiches (von Vespasian bis zum Ende der Antoninischen Dynastie)', in: Idem, *Die Verwaltung des Römischen Reiches in der Hohen Kaiserzeit: ausgewählte und erweiterte Beiträge*, 2. Band (Basel 1997), 3-145; 13. On the *consilium principis* and its function: Crook, *Consilium Principis*, passim; M. Hammond, *The Antonine Monarchy* (Rome 1959), 370-82; W. Eck, 'The emperor and his advisers', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 195-213.

<sup>96</sup> Oliver, 'Three Attic inscriptions', 178 argues that the name of Acilius Glabrio, in Il. 13-14 of the document, does not imply that this senator formed part of the *consilium*, but that he is mentioned as part of the dating by consuls. The group, then, starts with Aurelius Cleander (l. 14: [Αὐρήλιος Κ]λέανδρος ὁ τροφεύς), 'and since senators would have been mentioned first, the list, if I am right about a dating by the consuls of AD 186, includes no senators whatsoever' (p. 179). The explanation has been accepted by Grosso, *Commodo*, 230-4, but refuted by F. Millar, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (review)', *JRS* 56 (1966), 243-5; 244; Idem, *ERW*, 81, and Eck, 'The emperor and his advisers', 209.

<sup>97</sup> Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 26, 104: 'THE *consilium principis* never existed'. It was in accord with tradition that the main bulk of advisers would always be senatorial; Talbert, *The Senate*, 163.

P. Iulius C. f. Ser(gia tribu) Scapula Tertul<l>us  
 T. Varius T. f. Cla(udia tribu) Clemens  
 M. Bassaeus M. f. Stel(latina tribu) Rufus  
 P. Taruttienus P. f. Pob(lilia tribu) Paternus  
 S. [Tigidius . f. -- ( -- tribu) Peren]nis  
 Q. Cervidius Q. f. Arn(ensi tribu) Scaevola  
 Q. Larcius Q. f. Qui(rina tribu) Euripianus  
 T. Fl(avius) T. f. Pal(atina tribu) Piso<sup>98</sup>

50

Having five or six senators amongst the imperial advisors, depending on whether or not T. Varius Clemens had been made a senator after his function as *ab epistulis*, was far more in keeping with the wishes of the senate than the lack of senators surrounding Commodus.<sup>99</sup> Nor had the adjustments in the composition of the *consilium* been the only change of the reign. Apparently, Commodus did not consult the senate as consistently as his father had done.<sup>100</sup> He also discontinued the practice of inviting magistrates and the chief members of the senate to banquets at the palace – surrounding himself once more with those of his own choosing, rather than with those who institutionally deserved to be near him.<sup>101</sup> Commodus even allowed freedmen to become senators, and patricians, as long as they paid all that they possessed in order to receive that honour. Dio mentions mockingly how a certain Julius Solon was said to have been ‘stripped of all his property, and banished to the senate’.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> AE 1971.534; Seston / Ezennat, ‘Un dossier de la chancellerie romaine’, 486; J. H. Oliver, ‘Text of the Tabula Banasitana, AD 177’, *AJPh* 93 (1972), 336-340; 337-8; Eck, ‘Der Kaiser, Die Führungsgeschichten und die Administration des Reiches’, 7-8. The name of Perennis is a restoration based on only the first and last letters. According to the editors, the damage to exactly this name can be ascribed to the *damnatio memoriae* which Perennis suffered after his death.

<sup>99</sup> On Varius Clemens: A. Birley, *Locus virtutibus patefactus? Zum Beförderungssystem in der hohen Kaiserzeit* (Opladen 1992), 51 no. A 8, 53. On Scaevola, see now W. J. Zwalve, ‘In re Iulius Agrippa’s estate’. Some observations on Q. Cervidius Scaevola, Iulia Domna and the estate of Iulius Agrippa’, in: De Blois, *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies*, 154-65.

<sup>100</sup> Talbert, *The Senate*, 491 n. 4 points to a request by Aphrodisias in AD 189 (J. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* [London 1982], 118-24 no. 16) which was dealt with by Commodus himself, whereas a similar request by Miletus in late AD 177 (p. 448 no. 125, chap. 15 sect. 5), was brought before the senate by Marcus.

<sup>101</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 6.2; Winterling, *Aula Caesaris*, 158-9: ‘Er schaffte die “unpersönlichen”, institutionalisierten und mittlerweile als *publica convivia* bezeichneten aristokratischen Gastmähler im kaiserlichen Palast ab und ersetzt die durch seine “Persönlichen” zu denen im Gegensatz zu jenen der politisch-soziale Rang als solchen dem einzelnen noch keinen Zutritt verschaffte’.

<sup>102</sup> CIL 9.1592 (= ILS 1126); Dio, 73.12.3; SHA, *Comm.* 6.9. Solon was executed by Septimius Severus in AD 197; Dio, 75.2.1; SHA, *Sev.* 13.4; G. Alföldy, ‘Eine Proskriptionsliste in der Historia Augusta’, in: Idem, *Krise*, 164-78; 167, 177.



Commodus, who never assumed *censoria potestas*, seems to have frequently employed *adlectio inter praetorios*, to an extent that Pertinax is believed to have made a distinction between those who had been appointed to the rank of praetor, and those who had secured it by actual service. The latter, unsurprisingly, outranked the former.<sup>103</sup> It did, seemingly, become less difficult to secure senatorial rank under Commodus, though it must be emphasised that epigraphic evidence suggests that many of those new appointments came from high municipal rank, or from the *equites*, and not from amongst the freedmen.<sup>104</sup> It may be that through drowning the senate by numbers, Commodus tried to create a power-base of adherents in that body, or that he tried to lessen the prestige of the senate, which would no longer represent Roman nobility.<sup>105</sup> But the rising power of the equestrians was also a sign of the times. The tendency to place new men in militarily and politically important jobs anticipated Commodus' reign. Pertinax, Septimius Severus, Vespasianus Candidus, Ulpianus Marcellus, Valerianus Maximianus; they were all men who had come to power through their ability in warfare, 'hard metallic men' who had been put in place by Marcus Aurelius.<sup>106</sup>

Positions of high social standing, though, remained territory of ancient senatorial families, and good birth guaranteed a rapid career, as it had always done. It is, in fact, noticeable that throughout Commodus' reign consulships were given to those of eminent families. Up to the very last years, patricians and sons of consuls

<sup>103</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 6.10-1. If the story is true, Pertinax must have created a lot of enemies, but see A. Chastagnol, *Le sénat romain à l'époque impériale. Recherches sur la composition de l'Assemblée et le statut de ses membres* (Paris 1992), 133-4 with some doubts as to Pertinax' measures.

<sup>104</sup> CIL 2.4114 (=ILS 1140), 10.7237 (= ILS 6770), 11.7748; ILS 1152; CIG 2933; AE 1915.28, 1954.58, 1961.280; Traupman, *Commodus*, 87-91. But cf. Chastagnol, *Le sénat romain*, 119 who sees only nine certain *adlectiones* by Commodus, compared to eight by Marcus, ten by Septimianus Severus and a grand total of twenty-two under Vespasian (pp. 117-8). An interesting case of steep social climbing under Commodus is Aquilius Felix, who rose from *centurio frumentarius* to a *censibus equitum Romanorum* (CIL 10.6657 = ILS 1387; AE 1945.80). This advance has been attributed to his particular employment as an assassin of senators (SHA, *Did. Iul.* 5.8; SHA, *Pesc. Nig.* 2.6; SHA, *Sev.* 5.8). If this is not an exaggeration of the *Historia Augusta*, and Commodus did indeed have people specialising in killing senators, the senatorial antipathy towards him becomes very understandable.

<sup>105</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 88.

<sup>106</sup> CIL 3.1092; AE 1956.124; SHA, *Did. Iul.* 5.6; P. M. M. Leunissen, 'Herrscher und Senatorische Elite. Regierungsstil und Beförderungspraxis im Zeitraum von 180-235 n. Chr.', *SIFC* 10 (1992), 946-54; 948; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 63-5; 102-25. The citation is from Syme, 'Antonine government', 687.

control the consular *fasti*.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Marcus' friends continued to have their impact, as is most noticeably clear from the career of Pertinax, who returned to imperial favour in AD 186.<sup>108</sup> Some others who had been of importance in the previous reign likewise retained influence. C. Aufidius Victorinus, who was an *amicus* and *comes* of Marcus, and had become *praefectus urbi* towards the end of the latter's reign, kept this position under Commodus, and even became *consul ordinarius* for the second time in AD 183, sharing the position with the emperor.<sup>109</sup> He committed suicide in AD 186, which shows how Commodus eventually distanced himself from him. Still, Victorinus remained of importance during the first half of the reign. Seius Fuscianus, *praefectus urbi* between Victorinus and Pertinax, from AD 185/6 to AD 190, had similarly been an *amicus* of Marcus, and had been suffect consul in AD 151. He obtained a second consulship in AD 188, and may even have retired in good grace. His grandson, at least, was killed by Macrinus in AD 218 'because he was rich and influential'.<sup>110</sup> Fuscianus' fellow consul of AD 188, M. Servilius Silanus, was also a former friend of Marcus, who fell out of favour as late as AD 190.<sup>111</sup> More names can be added.<sup>112</sup> Consulships and urban prefectures were held by distinguished senators as much as before. Still, senators did not feel that they were treated as well as they deserved. Maybe this was because by removing senators from his circle of personal advisors, Commodus had greatly diminished their power. Their role, to an extent, had been taken over by Commodus' 'regents', whom the sources so avidly condemn.

<sup>107</sup> Leunissen, 'Herrscher und Senatorische Elite', 948; idem, *Konsuln*, 108-9; 113; 129-32; 371-2.

<sup>108</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 3.5-9; Dio, 74.4.1; Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 77. Cf. *CIL* 11.5743.

<sup>109</sup> *CIL* 11.6334 (= *ILS* 1129), *AE* 1934.155, 1957.121; *Cod. Iust.* 4.57.2; Dio, 73.11.2-4; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 1393; Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 153 no. 43. He married Fronto's daughter; Fronto, *Ep.* 4.13 (= *LCL* I, 214), 5.10 (= *LCL* I, 194). Perhaps this was one of the years during Commodus' reign with many (monthly) consuls; Grosso, *Commodo*, 281; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 9, 130, 307. The multitude of consuls may be explained by pointing at the executions which followed the Lucilla-conspiracy, and the ensuing need to create a sufficient number of proconsular candidates.

<sup>110</sup> SHA, *Marc.* 3.8; SHA, *Pert.* 4.3; Dio, 80.4.6; Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 182 no. 295; Traupman, *Commodus*, 99; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 307.

<sup>111</sup> Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 131, 399; Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 183 no. 302a.

<sup>112</sup> Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 9, 150 no. 23, 154 no. 53, 155 no. 62, 160 no. 110, 177 no. 256, 178 no. 260a.

## The years of the two great ‘regents’

### *Perennis*

The name of Sex. Tigidius Perennis had already featured in the *Tabula Banasitana* of AD 177.<sup>113</sup> At that time his function was, in all likelihood, that of *praefectus annonae*, a crucial position in times of war, as the prefect was directly responsible for supplying food to the troops.<sup>114</sup> He then succeeded M. Bassaeus Rufus, probably directly after the latter’s death (still in Marcus’ reign), in the praetorian prefecture. A rise to prominence under Marcus Aurelius has been a problem for some authors, who have had difficulty explaining how someone appointed by that emperor could have acted so dramatically against Marcus’ pro-senatorial ideas.<sup>115</sup> The exact date of the beginning of Perennis’ period in office is somewhat problematic. Dio only notes that Perennis commanded the praetorians after Paternus, which does not necessarily exclude that there was another prefect between the two, though no other names are given.<sup>116</sup> Herodian explicitly states that Commodus himself gave ‘command of the praetorian guard’ to Perennis, but the fact that there is no mention in Herodian’s text of significant figures like Saoterus and Paternus raises doubts as to the author’s trustworthiness in this context.<sup>117</sup> The *Historia Augusta*, on the other hand, makes a clear distinction between Paternus and Perennis, and ‘the prefects whom he himself had appointed’.<sup>118</sup> This clearly indicates that the former two were ‘inherited’ from his father’s reign, even if the source, as always, is suspect.

A political position for Perennis under Marcus Aurelius does not cohere well with the image of Commodus as an incapable emperor who surrounded himself with wicked viceroys.<sup>119</sup> Then again, Perennis was not as close to the emperors as Paternus, and only came to the limelight after Paternus’ dubious behaviour in the Lucilla

<sup>113</sup> Seston / Euzennat, ‘Un dossier de la chancellerie romaine’, 486; Oliver, ‘Text of the Tabula Banasitana, AD 177’, 338 l. 50 (*supra* p. 57).

<sup>114</sup> Pflaum, ‘La valeur de la source inspiratrice’, 217-8.

<sup>115</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 139.

<sup>116</sup> Dio, 73.9.1: Περέννιον (*sic*) δὲ τῶν δορυφόρων μετὰ τὸν Πάτερνον ἄρχοντα.

<sup>117</sup> Herodian, 1.8.1; De Ranieri, ‘La gestione politica’, 402-3 n. 18.

<sup>118</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 14.8: *praefectos Paternum et Perennem non diu tulit, ita tamen ut etiam de iis praefectis quos ipse fecerat triennium nullus impleter* (my italics, OH); De Ranieri, ‘La gestione politica’, 402 n. 17.

<sup>119</sup> Again an example of standard attributions to a ‘*princeps malus*’; C. de Ranieri, ‘Retrospectiva politica e lotte dinastiche sullo sfondo della vicenda di Aurelio Cleandro’, *RSA* 27 (1997), 139-89; 163 nn. 81-5, with numerous examples.

conspiracy.<sup>120</sup> From that moment onwards, Perennis is described as almost omnipotent, governing the empire whilst Commodus indulged in his every whim. Discussion has consequently focussed on how good or bad Perennis really was, how corrupt and how capable, and on which of the two widely differing versions of his personality to believe in. Dio describes an honourable administrator, whose only flaw was his responsibility in the undoing of his colleague Paternus:

ἰδίᾳ μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲν πώποτε οὔτε πρὸς δόξαν οὔτε πρὸς πλοῦτον περιεβάλετο, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄδωρότατα καὶ σωφρονέστατα διήγαγε, τοῦ δὲ Κομμόδου καὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς αὐτοῦ πᾶσαν ἀσφάλειαν ἐποιεῖτο (For privately he never strove in the least for either fame or wealth but live a most incorruptible and temperate life; and as for Commodus and his imperial office, he guarded them in complete security) (Dio, 73.10.1).

Perhaps Dio had received favours from Perennis, or perhaps his description was fair.<sup>121</sup> A substantially different image, however, arises when reading other texts. According to them, the praetorian prefect was not quite incorruptible, but acted in 'an uncontrollable desire for money', corrupting the young emperor and seizing the property of the many people whom he condemned.<sup>122</sup>

A capable administrator, or an evil corruptor? The answer, as Millar already noted, cannot be found.<sup>123</sup> Nor is there an easy answer to the question about the alleged strengthening of the function of the praetorian prefect whilst Perennis held that position. There is, unfortunately, no evidence for any enlargement, *de facto* or *de iure*, of the responsibilities of the prefect.<sup>124</sup> Yet leading the praetorians *sine collega* undeniably raised the status of the one prefect, whose power could not be counterbalanced by a second opinion.<sup>125</sup> Perennis' personal power, thus, may well have been greater than that of his official function.

Notwithstanding his influence, Tigidius Perennis fell from grace in

<sup>120</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 403.

<sup>121</sup> Heer, 'Der historische Wert der Vita Commodi', 56-7.

<sup>122</sup> Herodian, 1.8.2; SHA, *Comm.* 5.3, 6, 13.

<sup>123</sup> Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 128.

<sup>124</sup> Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 75-6. Contra L.L. Howe, *The Praetorian Prefect from Commodus to Diocletian (A.D. 180-305)* (Chicago 1942), 12-3; Traupman, *Commodus*, 106-14.

<sup>125</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 165. De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 405-6 rightly stresses the vagueness of the sources that deal with Perennis' official powers, but seemingly underestimates (p. 404) the advantage of being sole prefect. It is true that having two prefects was not a written rule, and that leaving one person in sole command was not an 'innovazione inaudita', but historic precedent for sole responsibility did not make the person in charge less powerful. Cf. Herodian, 1.9.10. A prefect without colleague also had almost total liberty in deciding whose career he was going to advance.

AD 185. His fall, as everything in his life, is described by the sources in conflicting terms.<sup>126</sup> Both Dio and the *Historia Augusta* put much emphasis on events in Britain as the cause of Perennis' fall. In that province 'the greatest struggle' of Commodus' reign, a massive uprising of various tribes, had come to an end in AD 184 through the military activities of Ulpius Marcellus.<sup>127</sup> After the victory, Commodus obtained his seventh imperial acclamation, and the name *Britannicus*.<sup>128</sup> The problems, however, were not over yet. There was much unrest in the three British legions – either as a result of the over-harsh treatment of the soldiers by Marcellus, or because the soldiers were refused donatives after their victory.<sup>129</sup> The legions even tried to put forward a certain Priscus as emperor, but he refused.<sup>130</sup> Dio recounts how the soldiers, who were rebuked for this insubordination, vented their anger on Perennis, whom they held responsible for everything that went wrong, and selected fifteen hundred javelin men to send to Italy.<sup>131</sup> These soldiers came 'near Rome without any resistance', Dio continues (73.9.3-4), and were met by the emperor. They then falsely accused Perennis of plotting against Commodus, after which Perennis was rapidly, but undeservedly, put to death.

The *Historia Augusta*, predictably, finds the corrupt Perennis

<sup>126</sup> Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 129: 'It is one of the more alarming paradoxes in ancient history that two historians can produce not merely different interpretations but entirely different versions of events within their own lifetime with which they both equally claim personal acquaintance'.

<sup>127</sup> Dio, 73.8; M. R.-Alföldi, 'Nobilitas Augusti – Nobilissimus Caesar. Ein Beitrag zum Selbstverständnis römischer Kaiser', *Festschrift der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main* (Wiesbaden 1981), 337-348; 343. Dio, 73.8.2 claims that Marcellus was sent by Commodus to put down the rebellion. It seems, however, that he was already in charge of the province under Marcus Aurelius. After Marcellus' return to Rome, he was taken to court, but acquitted. The trial does not seem to have hampered his career; *RIB* I (1983), nos. 1329, 1463; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 221-2, 229-30; Simpson, 'Ulpius Marcellus again', *Britannia* 11 (1980), 338.

<sup>128</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 25-7.

<sup>129</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 59; Gherardini, *Studien*, 212.

<sup>130</sup> Dio, 73.9.2<sup>a</sup> (= *excerptum Vaticanum* 122). This event, as Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 25 recognises, happened in AD 184, and not during Pertinax' period in Britain. *Contra* Grosso, *Commodo*, 452. Cf. De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 413 n. 60.

<sup>131</sup> Dio, 73.9.2. The passage has been made more difficult by the translation of ὑπάρχοντες as 'lieutenants' by E. Cary (*LCL*) and Grosso, *Commodo*, 186 ('1 legati in Britannia'). In fact, as P. A. Brunt, 'The fall of Perennis: Dio-Xiphilinus 72.9.2', *CQ* 23 (1973), 172-7; 172 demonstrates, ὑπάρχοντες is here simply a synonym for ὄντες. The passage, thus, should be translated differently: 'The soldiers laid the blame on Perennius (*sic*) and vented their anger on him for anything that gave them dissatisfaction, and those actually in Britain, since they had been rebuked for their insubordination (they were not quiet until checked by Pertinax), chose 1,500 javelin men from their own number and sent them to Italy'.

himself responsible for his own fall. He had 'dismissed certain senators and had put men of the equestrian order in command of the soldiers'. When he was 'denounced by deputies of the army', he was declared an enemy of the state.<sup>132</sup> As Peter Brunt has noticed, the stories are not incompatible. Perennis may have replaced legates with *equites* to restore discipline, which the former were unwilling or unable to do. The soldiers, not best pleased, represented this measure as an attempt to place the legions under command of Perennis' partisans, with a view to usurpation.<sup>133</sup> The change from senatorial legates to *equites* can also be seen as a reaction to the near-usurpation of Priscus. Commodus, or Perennis, wanted supporters of the regime in command of a militarily relevant province. The strong opposition to this measure by both soldiers and senators led to the fall of the praetorian prefect, who was blamed and sacrificed by the emperor for a measure that proved so unpopular.<sup>134</sup>

Herodian's explanation of events is completely different, and states that Perennis was aiming for the principate itself, and conspired to bring down Commodus:

First, he persuaded Commodus to give the command of the Illyrian armies to his sons, even though they were still young men. Then, while he himself amassed a vast sum of money to win over the armies by large donatives, his sons secretly organised their forces in readiness for a coup d'état after Perennis had murdered Commodus (Herodian, 1.9.1. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 6.1).

The plan failed, however, as Commodus was warned of Perennis' murderous intentions in a dramatic encounter with a philosopher in the theatre at the festival of Capitoline Jupiter. Even then, Commodus did not immediately believe him, but was only convinced of Perennis' betrayal after some soldiers from the Illyrian armies showed him coins with Perennis' portrait on them.<sup>135</sup> This account looks largely fictional. Aspirations to the throne form a common denominator for all of Commodus' opponents in Herodian's history.<sup>136</sup> Neither Perennis, nor his sons, could ever have been a realistic candidate for the purple.

There could be more relevance in the comments about the Illyrian

<sup>132</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.1-2. In the translation 'deputies of the army', I follow Brunt, 'The fall of Perennis', 174, who opposes the idea that *legati exercitus* should be 'former legionary legates', and convincingly connects these deputies with 'the delegation of 1,500 soldiers recounted by Dio' (p. 175).

<sup>133</sup> Brunt, 'The fall of Perennis', 172. Gallienus, in AD 260, would standardise a similar measure: Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 33.34; L. De Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* (Leiden 1976), 40-1, 57-83.

<sup>134</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 413.

<sup>135</sup> Herodian, 1.9.2-7.

<sup>136</sup> Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 101.

armies. The name of the *legatus Pannoniae Inferioris* of AD 184-5, L. Cornelius Felix Plotianus, has been erased from an inscription, apparently as the result of a *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>137</sup> Was this a result from his connection to Perennis, or to the praetorian prefect's son, or were there problems on the Illyrian front as well as on the British? Cristina de Ranieri has proposed a reconstruction of events in which it was Plotianus who aimed to depose the emperor, and was convicted accordingly, bringing down Perennis' son in the process. After this, for obvious reasons, the relationship between emperor and prefect became problematic, leading to Perennis' fall.<sup>138</sup> This suggestion is attractive, in that it allows for some validity of all of the sources (as the events in Britain could still have unfolded as been sketched above). Unfortunately, it must remain a hypothesis, since none of the evidence sufficiently supports the theory.

One evident problem remains. Dio has fifteen hundred unauthorised soldiers marching through the empire, arriving almost unchecked in close vicinity of the capital itself. Can this be true? If there was instability in Illyricum, it could be added to a large list of disturbances affecting the empire in these exact years. Apart from the fighting in Britain, this included problems in Germany, and the so-called Maternus-revolt, or *Bellum Desertorum*, in Gaul.<sup>139</sup> In such chaotic circumstances, with many troops often on the move, a group of Roman soldiers could perhaps have gone a long way without being detected. If, as has been argued, they were taken to have been a *vexillatio* (though a large one), perhaps engaged in pursuit in the Maternus revolt, it becomes possible that they were allowed to proceed.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> CIL 3.3385 (= ILS 395); De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 410-1; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 277. Cf. CIL 3.10312; AE 1910.145.

<sup>138</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 412.

<sup>139</sup> AE 1956.90; J. C. Wilmanns, 'Die Doppelurkunde von Rottweil und ihr Beitrag zum Städtewesen in Obergermanien', *Epigraphische Studien* 12 (Cologne 1981), 1-180; 1-3, 8-9.

<sup>140</sup> Brunt, 'The fall of Perennis', 177 sees in the progress of the 1,500 'yet another premonition of the breakdown of military discipline in the third century'. Unconvincing are the proposals by Grosso, *Commodo*, 187, that the soldiers were allowed to proceed, exactly because they were aiming to bring down Perennis, and by De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 415-6 who argues that Commodus himself had sent for the troops, because he wanted reliable soldiers to counterbalance Perennis' praetorians. Surely there were loyal soldiers closer to Italy – or Commodus' position had become extremely weak.

## *The Bellum Desertorum*

There was a man called Maternus, an ex-soldier of notorious daring, who had deserted from the ranks and influenced others to escape service with him (Herodian, 1.10.1).

One of the more noticeable of the disturbances of the mid-180s AD was undoubtedly the revolt of Maternus, or the *Bellum Desertorum*. Dio does not mention it at all, but surviving texts give enough information to describe events with some degree of certainty.<sup>141</sup> Forced recruitments and general discontent with the existing (social) structures had led to a situation in which a charismatic leader could easily lead people in a fairly extensive uprising.<sup>142</sup> Herodian provides the name Maternus for the deserter who would become such a leader and assemble troops which were even to besiege a Roman legion.<sup>143</sup>

The latter event is clear from an inscription from Urvinum (Urbino), which shows how the legion VIII Augusta obtained the honorific name *Pia fidelis constans Commoda* as a reward for their persistence during a siege from internal enemies:

III vi(ro) viarum curandar(um)/ tribun(o) milit(um) leg(ionis) VIII  
Aug(ustae)/ quo militante cum liberata/ esset nova obsidione/ legio pia  
fidelis constans/ Commoda cognominata est/ ipse ut devotissimus  
im(peratori)/ Commodo Aug(usto) Pio Felici/ oblato honore quaestor/  
designatus est annorum XXIII/ (CIL 11.6053).

This siege (*obsidio*) took place after the second half of AD 185, and has been convincingly connected to the *Bellum Desertorum*.<sup>144</sup> The *terminus ante quem* for the attack follows from the Rottweil-tablet, which already refers to the legion as *Pia fidelis* on 12 August AD 186.<sup>145</sup> This particular table has been associated with the revolt, in an attempt to see the measures which it describes as a reaction to it – which would also imply that rebellion was widespread. Ultimately, however, the connection has proved erroneous, though that does not,

<sup>141</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 16.2; SHA, *Pesc. Nig.* 3.3-5; Herodian, 1.10; CIL 11.6053, 13.11757.

<sup>142</sup> Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 80.

<sup>143</sup> Herodian, 1.10.1; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 75-6.

<sup>144</sup> R. Egger, 'Die Wachstafel von Rottweil', *Germania* 36 (1958), 373-85; 380; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 71-2. The dating follows from the fact that Commodus is addressed as *Pius Felix* in the inscription. On that change of name see *infra* p. 93. Some confirmation of the date can be inferred from SHA, *Pesc. Nig.* 3.3-5 which dates the unrest during the period in which Severus was governor of Gallia Lugdunensis (from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of AD 185 to 189); Grosso, *Commodo*, 429-30.

<sup>145</sup> AE 1956.90; Wilmanns, 'Die Doppelurkunde von Rottweil', 69; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 73.



of course, affect the date provided.<sup>146</sup>

The real unrest, in Germany Superior, seems to have taken place from the beginning of AD 185 onwards, with widespread brigandage, and perhaps even attacks on cities. The siege of the VIII Augusta took place in the second half of AD 185. By the summer of AD 186, peace was restored.<sup>147</sup> The rebellion is not likely to have spread beyond the province, and appears to have been put down by the two legions (and the auxiliary units) from upper-Germany, under the command of M. Helvius Clemens Dextrianus, without the support of other troops.<sup>148</sup>

This, one would believe, was the end of it. Nevertheless, for Herodian the story had only just begun. Maternus, who avoided the force that was brought against them, 'was beginning to have plans of a grander design, including that of empire' (1.10.3). His men, assembled in small groups, slipped into Italy, but did not form

a large enough force to fight on even terms and meet Commodus in open battle, since his assessment was that the ordinary Roman people were still loyal to Commodus and the guards also supported him (Herodian, 1.10.4).

Maternus therefore devised a cunning plan, intending to disguise himself and his men as praetorians during the festival of the mother of the gods, in order to get close to Commodus and kill him. The plan failed because some of Maternus' men betrayed him, according to Herodian out of jealousy – resenting 'the prospect of having an emperor in place of a robber chief'. Afterwards, Commodus appeared in public even more rarely than before.<sup>149</sup>

Grosso believed the story, and saw it as an important step to the strengthening of the position of Cleander, as a result of Commodus'

<sup>146</sup> Egger, 'Die Wachstafel von Rottweil', 381-4, believed that the table provided details about the Maternus-revolt. The argument was followed by Grosso, *Commodo*, 437-9, who also followed Egger in using the date 14 August, which must be mistaken. Wilmanns, 'Die Doppelurkunde von Rottweil', 11, 69-70, has showed that the link with the revolt is spurious, which is accepted by Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 80. Millar, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica*', 244 already notes that there is no firm evidence to establish the relation. The VIII Augusta is also described as *Pia fidelis* on 8 August AD 187; *CIL* 13.11757; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 73 n. 22.

<sup>147</sup> Herodian, 1.10.2; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 73-4.

<sup>148</sup> *CIL* 13.11757; Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 74-75. If, however, *CIL* 5.2155 (= *ILS* 1574), which refers to the *expeditio III Germanica*, could be read in light of the rebellion, it appears other measures were taken. SHA, *Comm.* 13.8 recounts how Commodus was planning such a third expedition, seemingly unconnected to the *Bellum Desertorum*, but was persuaded by 'the senate and the people to give it up'. There may still be a link, as there could be an official *expeditio* against a rebellion, referring to the name of the location in which the rebellion took place. Thus the Saturninus-revolt is referred to as *Bellum Germanicum*; *CIL* 6.1347 (= *ILS* 1006); V. Rosenberger, *Bella et Expeditiones. Die antike Terminologie der Kriege Roms* (Stuttgart 1992), 110 n. 117.

<sup>149</sup> Herodian, 1.10.6-7, 1.11.5.

increasing absence.<sup>150</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, though more cautious than Grosso, also accepts the idea of an attempt on Commodus' life on the basis of a new type of *Hilaritas* coins in AD 187.<sup>151</sup> Geza Alföldy, on the other hand, has argued forcefully against any factual basis for the account. He sees Maternus' plot to the throne as a typical invention of Herodian.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, the time which elapsed between the end of the *Bellum Desertorum* and any possible conspiracy makes it improbable that the same figures would have been involved.<sup>153</sup> The story does, as a matter of fact, appear invented. No deserter could ever imagine to be able to aim for empire.

### *Cleander*

After the 'war of the deserters' was subdued, there was finally peace in the realm, which was widely proclaimed. Still, the political situation in Rome had not become any easier – conspiracies or not. Perennis may have been sacrificed in an attempt to satisfy the senators, but a next object of discontent was rapidly found in M. Aurelius Cleander, who had become Commodus' most noticeable freedman. Cleander was probably given his freedom by Marcus, and had grown to sufficient prominence in AD 182 to succeed Saoterus as *cubicularius*.<sup>154</sup> His star rose rapidly, and by AD 186 Commodus referred to him as 'my *nutritor*, entrusted with the care of my bedroom and my person'. He also occupied one of the more senior advisory positions to the emperor, quite possibly even leading a *consilium principis*.<sup>155</sup> He was, moreover, like Saoterus before him, given a 'fictive free birth by *restitutio natalium*', a rare privilege which raised

<sup>150</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 235-8.

<sup>151</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 150-1, 497-8. *BMCRE* 4, clxiii argues that legends proclaiming *Fidei Coh(ortium)* referred to the Maternus revolt, but Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 35-6 is justly cautious, noting the possibility of a reference to the restoration of order in Britain. Cf. *RIC* 3, no. 496.

<sup>152</sup> Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 78. Cf. *supra* p. 63 n. 136.

<sup>153</sup> Alföldy, 'Bellum Desertorum', 77.

<sup>154</sup> Dio, 73.12.1-2; Herodian, 1.12.3; SHA, *Comm.* 6.3. His full name is provided by *CIL* 15.8021 (= *ILS* 1737), now lost, and confirmed by *AE* 1952.6, 1961.280. Herodian states that Cleander was a Phrygian by birth, but this descent has been called in doubt (De Ranieri, 'Retrospecta politici', 140 n. 4). The argument that Herodian should know, as he was himself a Phrygian (G. Alföldy, 'Herodians Person', in: Idem, *Krise*, 140-272; 255-62, 271; Idem, 'Cleanders Sturz', 104), does not carry a lot of weight, as the attestation is contended.

<sup>155</sup> *AE* 1952.6; Millar, *ERW*, 81. Gherardini, *Studien*, 231 believes that for Cleander, *τροφεύς* was an honorific title, rather than a reference to his position as *nutritor*. On the *consilium principis* of AD 186, see *supra* p. 56 n. 96.

his status considerably.<sup>156</sup> Those of better descent were not pleased. Imperial freedmen already had a considerable position in society, doubtlessly through their close vicinity and easy access to the emperor.<sup>157</sup> Further emphasising a freedman's role by giving him a (semi)-official position as counsellor must have been an affront to the senators.

Cleander's position was undeniably strong. What he did with it is less clear. He is said to have been exceedingly greedy and insolent, and to have sold every possible political position to the highest bidder, 'senatorships, military commands, procuratorships, governorships, and, in a word, everything'.<sup>158</sup> The summit of this audacity would come in AD 190, when 'for the first time, there were twenty-five consuls in a single year'.<sup>159</sup> Commodus, in fact, opened the consular year, together with M. Petronius Sura Septimianus, a member of a consular family. The emperor stepped down as consul after a couple of days, after which new consuls were inaugurated on a monthly basis, bringing the total to twenty-five.<sup>160</sup> There was, then, a year in which twenty-five consuls were appointed, as mentioned by Dio and the *Historia Augusta*. Yet it seems extremely unlikely that Cleander sold the offices for his own benefit. The years leading up to AD 190 had seen numerous executions, and, more importantly, a resurfacing of the Antonine plague.<sup>161</sup> In the aftermath of the executions following the Lucilla-conspiracy, Commodus had raised the number of consuls of AD 183, thus ensuring that enough people of rank remained to occupy crucial offices in the empire.<sup>162</sup> The situation in AD 190 must have been worse than the one in AD 183, and increasing the number of

<sup>156</sup> *Dig.* 40.11.2; Bruun, 'Some comments on the status of imperial freedmen', 282. Famously, the same favour had been bestowed upon Narcissus and Pallas, and on freedmen of Galba, Vitellius and Vespasian (p. 282 n. 54); Weaver, *Familia Caesaris*, 283; De Ranieri, 'Retrosцена politici', 142 n. 12. Perhaps Commodus also rewarded L. Marius Doryphorus in the same manner: *CIL* 6.1847 (*anulos aureos consecutus a divo Commodo*); Traupman, *Commodus*, 93.

<sup>157</sup> On the position and status of imperial freedmen: Millar, *ERW*, 69-83; Weaver, *Familia Caesaris*, 43; Winterling, *Aula Caesaris*, 23-6. On senatorial snobbery towards freedmen: De Ranieri, 'Retrosцена politici', 139, 141-3, n. 12 with references.

<sup>158</sup> Dio, 73.9.3: βουλείας, στρατείας, ἐπιτροπείας, ἡγεμονίας, πάντα πράγματα; SHA, *Comm.* 6.10: *omnia Cleander pecunia venditabat*. Cf. Herodian, 1.12.3.

<sup>159</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.9: *viginti quinque consules in unum annum*; Dio, 73.9.4.

<sup>160</sup> Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 132 n. 18, 371; Grosso, *Commodo*, 280-3; De Ranieri, 'Retrosцена politici', 154-6.

<sup>161</sup> Dio, 73.14.3-4; Herodian, 1.12.1; Littman / Littman, 'Galen and the Antonine plague', 243 n. 3.

<sup>162</sup> See *supra* p. 59 n. 109.

consuls was a sensible reaction.<sup>163</sup> It should not be used as evidence for Cleander's audacity.

Freedmen who rose above their station were an easy target in a society where status was all-important. Having bad advisors was anyhow a characteristic of morally challenged tyrants, and the stereotype was used extensively in Graeco-Roman literature.<sup>164</sup> It need not come as a surprise that Cleander is described as an evil genius, corrupting the *princeps* and effectively ruling the empire.<sup>165</sup> It could of course be true. Cleander would not be the first corrupt advisor, and the fact that such corruption suited the agenda of the higher echelons of Roman society does not necessarily make it their invention.

Quite how high Cleander's position was is not entirely clear. He may have been responsible for at least a part of Commodus' building programme.<sup>166</sup> It is also maintained that he was *de facto* responsible for the appointment of many praetorian prefects, all effectively under his control. The *Historia Augusta* mentions that 'praetorian prefects were changed hourly and daily', with Niger, the successor of Perennis, holding the office for only six hours. All of this happened 'according to the whim of Cleander'. Cleander is even said to have made himself prefect, together with two others. 'Then, for the first time, there were three praetorian prefects'.<sup>167</sup> Yet, of the eight persons that are mentioned in the 'Life of Commodus' as successors of Perennis, only four have their existence confirmed by epigraphic evidence. These prefects also had long equestrian careers and substantial administrative experience.<sup>168</sup> There might still be some truth in the passages of the *Historia Augusta*. The events surrounding the fall of Perennis could

<sup>163</sup> Kienast, 'F. Grosso, *La lotta politica*', 603; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 10. Grosso, *Commodo*, 281 saw the rise in the number of consuls as a move to the extreme limit of existing social structures, which is also maintained by De Ranieri, 'Retrosceca politici', 155-6, who argues that the purpose of the action was to create 'una più solida base di alleanze'. I would propose a combination of arguments, with Commodus indeed extending normal procedure in order to strengthen his own position, but only when the calamities of the plague had provided him with a good excuse to do so.

<sup>164</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* III, 18, 129; IV, 15; Plin. *Pan.* 44.6-45.3; 46.8; Tac. *Hist.* 4.7; Suet. *Vit.* 12.1. De Ranieri, 'Retrosceca politici', 163, refers for these and further references to D. Lanza, *Il tiranno e il suo pubblico* (Turin 1977), 39-49, 203.

<sup>165</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.5-12; Grosso, *Commodo*, 199-200. De Ranieri, 'Retrosceca politici', 141 describes Grosso's point of view as: following 'fedelmente il punto di vista della storiografia senatoria'.

<sup>166</sup> Dio, 73.12.5; Herodian, 1.12.4. On the building programme, see *infra*, appendix 1.

<sup>167</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.6-8, 6.12-3; Grosso, *Commodo*, 212.

<sup>168</sup> Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 186-193, nos. 45-52. By comparison, of the previous forty-four prefects assembled by Absil, thirty-six are epigraphically attested (pp. 119-85 nos. 1-44); Traupman, *Commodus*, 122.

well have convinced Commodus not to confront the senate immediately with another powerful prefect, and thus to limit the prefects' power, possibly by leaving them in post for a more limited period of time.

A limitation of the prefect's power has been denied by De Ranieri, who finds the scenario incompatible to the fact that the powerful Cleander eventually came to occupy the post. She argues that prefects succeeded each other in rapid succession, because when they were replaced, they were automatically enrolled into the senate, and would form a substantial block supporting the emperor in that institution.<sup>169</sup> We do not know whether these former praetorians did arrive in the senate or not.<sup>170</sup> Cleander, however, was never made praetorian prefect, and the argument in favour of a limitation of power of the prefect can be maintained.

Only two non-contemporary sources, the *Historia Augusta* and Ammianus Marcellinus, explicitly say that Cleander became praetorian prefect, but Dio and Herodian merely state that he had much power, and commanded soldiers. Inscriptions give the title *a pugione*.<sup>171</sup> The position of a *pugione* implies a power similar to that of the praetorian prefect. It is not a name for that office. The *a pugione* is directly responsible for the protection of the emperor, thus even outranking the actual praetorian prefect.<sup>172</sup> The praetorian prefect, then, was made less powerful, possibly to placate the senate. At the same time Cleander, who was personally closely linked to the emperor, was effectively made the emperor's right hand, but in a position which was meant to cause less offence. This would also explain why, when Cleander finally fell, the praetorians did not fight on his side.<sup>173</sup> He had never been their direct commander.<sup>174</sup>

<sup>169</sup> De Ranieri, 'Retrospecta politici', 153-4.

<sup>170</sup> One can either accept or disregard SHA, *Comm.* 6.6.9: *aut retenti sunt aut occisi*, but there is the risk of arbitrarily picking the passages in the *Historia Augusta* that suit one's argument, and disregarding the rest. The epigraphic evidence just does not show what happened to the various men after their prefecture.

<sup>171</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.6-8; SHA, *Comm.* 6.12-3, which also mentions the title *a pugione*; Dio, 73.12.1; Herodian, 1.12.3; AE 1952.6, 1961.280; ILS 1737; Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 227.

<sup>172</sup> Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres*, 465-72 no. 180 bis; Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 229: '[Il] eut pratiquement les préfets du prétoire sous ses ordres'. Cf. Gherardini, *Studien*, 227-33; Millar, *ERW*, 82: 'Cleander gained the title *a pugione*, making him in effect a freedman colleague of the two praetorian prefects'.

<sup>173</sup> Dio, 73.13.5 mentions how the crowd was assisted by the strength τῶν δορυφόρων. Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 111 n. 55 shows that here, too, the word should mean praetorians.

By AD 190, Cleander had made a lot of enemies. There had been a substantial number of executions, many of them of prominent men. Most noticeably, Commodus' brother-in-law, L. Antistius Burrus, who had been consul *ordinarius* in AD 181, was put to death, 'on the suspicion of pretending to the throne', as was the reputable proconsul of Asia, C. Arrius Antoninus.<sup>175</sup> Following the chronology indicated by the *Historia Augusta*, the two trials have commonly been seen as separate. Recently, however, they have been persuasively placed together in one great trial for *adfectatio imperii*, which should be dated to the end of AD 189 or beginning of AD 189. A probable *terminus post quem* is provided by a dedication of 7 January 188, recording that the praetorian prefect Aebutianus, who seems to have perished alongside Burrus and Antoninus, was still in office.<sup>176</sup> The death of all these men created much of the antagonism that would lead to Cleander's end. But was he ultimately responsible for their deaths?

By AD 189/90 it was becoming increasingly unlikely that Commodus and Crispina would have an heir. They had been married for almost fourteen years, and apart from a possible pregnancy in AD 182, the marriage had remained barren.<sup>177</sup> With this in mind, De Ranieri has analysed the events leading up to Cleander's fall as a dynastic struggle. Arrius Antoninus may have been connected to the imperial family, while Burrus certainly was.<sup>178</sup> There were also grandsons of Marcus Aurelius still alive. One of them, a son of Ti. Claudius Pompeianus and Lucilla, even styled himself L. (or M.) Aurelius Commodus Pompeianus. The link with the imperial house could not be made any clearer. It is not certain that this was also his name at birth. If not, it would be interesting to know when he took it

<sup>174</sup> *Contra* Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 103 and Traupman, *Commodus*, 117, who argued that the fact that Cleander eventually took up the position of praetorian prefect, rather than governing through favourites, showed 'the ever growing authority inherent in the praetorian prefecture itself'. Traupman was not, of course, aware of *AE* 1961.280, which clearly mentions Cleander as a *pugione*. De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 167-8 accepts that the term *a pugione* does not correspond to the prefecture, but still assumes Cleander obtained that position.

<sup>175</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.11, 7.1. On Burrus: *supra* p. 51 n. 63. On Antoninus: *CIL* 6.2100a; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 221; Grosso, *Commodo*, 539-43; De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 171. Tert. *Ad Scapulam*, 5.1, mentions how Antoninus' proconsulate was famous for its anti-Christian measures. In a time of tolerance, this may have led to difficulties; P. Keresztes, 'A favourable aspect of the emperor Commodus' rule', in: J. Bibauw (ed.) *Hommages à Marcel Renard II* (Brussels 1969), 368-77.

<sup>176</sup> De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 172-3, using SHA, *Vit. Pert.* 3.7. Cf. Grosso, *Commodo*, 253-62, 289-90. On Aebutianus: *CIL* 6.31154; Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 118.

<sup>177</sup> See *supra*, pp. 39, 52.

<sup>178</sup> De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 174-6, n. 122.

up.<sup>179</sup> The many condemnations following Cleander's fall include a great number of possible dynastic troublemakers.<sup>180</sup> The executions after the death of Cleander may well have been a continuation of a dynastic 'clean-up', rather than acts of revenge after the fall of a favourite.<sup>181</sup>

What, then, were the events leading to Cleander's fall, following the suppositions stated above? Placed directly under the emperor, but outside of any normal *cursus honorum*, the freedman would always encounter strong opposition. He was, furthermore, seemingly caught up in dynastic upheavals, in which he, with his responsibility for the emperor's safety, inevitably caught the eye. Though he was not made praetorian prefect, his authority was too great to be acceptable to the traditional elite, especially when he became involved in the deaths of people like Burrus and Antoninus.<sup>182</sup> All of this made him the ideal scapegoat. Thus, plans were put in motion to eliminate him.

The actual plot that led to Cleander's fall is described extensively, but diversely, by Herodian and Dio Cassius.<sup>183</sup> Both mention how general discontent, caused by a grain-shortage, created popular unrest, which caused Commodus to kill Cleander, in order to retain his popularity with the plebs. In Herodian's opinion the famine was caused by Cleander himself, who wanted to become emperor and thought that

if he first caused a shortage of supplies and then won people over by generous distributions when they were desperately in need, he would gradually gain the loyalty of the people and the soldiers (Herodian, 1.12.4).

<sup>179</sup> *AE* 1976.794; J. F. Oates, 'A sailor's discharge and the consuls of A.D. 209' *Phoenix* 30 (1976), 282-7; 283-4; Champlin, 'The heirs of Commodus', 290-1 n. 14. Also noted by De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 175 n. 124.

<sup>180</sup> Such as M. Petronius Sura Mamertinus, who was married to Commodus' sister Cornificia, and his son Antoninus and brother M. Petronius Sura Septimianus, who had been consul *ord.* in AD 190. SHA, *Comm.* 7.5; Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 129, 132, 399; De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 175-6.

<sup>181</sup> The eventual disgrace of Crispina could well be connected with the wish to have an heir. The empress was not discarded after the Lucilla conspiracy, as follows from SHA, *Comm.* 5.9; Dio, 73.4.6. In fact, she figures in inscriptions from (at the earliest) AD 185 (*CIL* 8.16530), 187 (*CIL* 3.12487) and 191 (*CIL* 8.2366 = *ILS* 405); Grosso, *Commodo*, 663. On an inscription from Sabratha (*CIL* 8.22689) the name of Crispina was erased as late as (probably) autumn AD 192; G. Alföldy, 'Commodus und Crispina in einer Inschrift aus Sabratha', *Faventia* 20.1 (1998), 39-47; 43-4.

<sup>182</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 7.1.

<sup>183</sup> Dio, 73.13; Herodian, 1.12.3-13.6. Dio, 73.13.1 is also given by the *exc. Val.* which has the exact same formulations, which implies the original text of Dio is transmitted well; Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 85.

The Romans did not fall for the scheme, tried to see Commodus, who was out of the city, but were held back by Cleander's soldiers. The ensuing popular riot led to a full-scale civil war in the streets of Rome (1.12.5-9). Only then Commodus, who was completely unaware of what was going on, was warned by his sister Fadilla, after which he killed Cleander and his supporters, and restored peace (1.13.1-6). Geza Alföldy has analysed the structure of Herodian's version of events and compared it to other passages in his work with a similar composition. The organisation of Herodian's narrative turns out to be very strict, unavoidably leading to emphasis or eradication of facts for symmetry, and not for historical importance.<sup>184</sup> Alföldy further shows how fights between soldiers and civilians are an obsession for Herodian, obviously as a result of the events he himself witnessed in AD 238.<sup>185</sup>

Dio's version, which in Alföldy's opinion is the superior one, has the famine organised by Papirius Dionysius, rather than Cleander (73.13.1), does not mention any battle-scenes in Rome, and states that it was Marcia – Commodus' mistress – and not Fadilla who warned Commodus (73.13.5). Like Herodian, Dio mentions a great number of people who marched to Commodus in his villa near Rome 'invoking many blessings on him and many curses upon Cleander'. Cleander sent soldiers against them who 'wounded and killed a few' (73.13.4), but the masses, undeterred, reached Commodus. The emperor, 'ever the greatest coward', was terrified, and slew Cleander (73.13.6).

Alföldy agrees with Dio that it was Dionysius, as *praefectus annonae*, who organised the famine. He argues that the actions were motivated by a demotion, which Cleander may have been responsible for.<sup>186</sup> Dionysius did not act alone. Those who had over the years been

<sup>184</sup> Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 94-100. For Herodian's tendency to ascribe to all of Commodus' opponents the desire to become emperor see *supra* pp. 63, 66-7.

<sup>185</sup> Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 110.

<sup>186</sup> Ibidem, 105, following C. R. Whittaker, 'The revolt of Papirius Dionysius AD 190', *Historia* 13 (1964), 348-69 (similarly Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 130-1) who holds that Dionysius was appointed as *praefectus Aegypti* for 189, but was at the last moment retained as *praefectus annonae* (p. 106 n. 41 for references). Grosso, *Commodo*, thought that Papirius was recalled because he did not help Cleander in fraudulent affairs, but De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 184-5 demonstrates that Papirius in fact never set foot in Egypt. She maintains that his re-appointment as *praefectus annonae* may have been motivated by the need for a capable administrator in a time of crisis in Egypt (for which see Gherardini, *Studien*, 277). Whittaker, 'The revolt', 355 argues that both Dio and Herodian are partly right about the causes of the famine; Cleander had been buying up corn in AD 188/9, and when in AD 190 there was a famine, Papirius Dionysius blamed Cleander. Such a fraud with the grain-supply may be indicated by the trial of Appian in the (probably fictional) *Acta Alexandrinorum* (P.Yale Inv. 1536, col. ii : ll. 6-10; Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan*



offended by Cleander's position joined in a number of intrigues, of which the famine was one.<sup>187</sup> In the first half of AD 190 discontent over the lack of grain was used to provoke the masses in the circus into action.<sup>188</sup> The plan was well executed. Those involved in the plot enlisted the support of *clientes*, corporations, and perhaps the circus factions, and canvassed soldiers.<sup>189</sup> This undoubtedly lies behind the statement by Dio that 'children shouted in concert many bitter words, which the people took up and then began to bawl out every conceivable insult'.<sup>190</sup> Commodus was at that moment at the villa of the Quintilii, about eight kilometres south-east from the Circus Maximus.<sup>191</sup> As Pertinax, the urban prefect at the time of the events, was involved in the conspiracy, the *urban cohorts* did not intervene, and the enraged crowd reached the villa without many problems.<sup>192</sup> Cleander's soldiers tried to deter the mob, but their number, and the presence of the praetorians, gave the crowd courage.<sup>193</sup> Commodus

*Martyrs*, 65, 69): 'The emperor said: 'And who receives this money'/ Appian said: 'You do'/ The emperor said: 'Are you certain of that'/ Appian said: 'No, but that is what we have heard''. Whatever the final conclusion, Papirius Dionysus seems to have had a motive, and certainly had the means, to create (or at least increase) problems with the grain-supply. Cf. Hammond, *Antonine Monarchy*, 401-2 nn. 43-4. The famine is also mentioned by SHA, *Comm.* 14.1-2.

<sup>187</sup> Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 121.

<sup>188</sup> Dio, 73.13.3. Herodian, 1.12.5 has the crowds assemble in theatres, but this is improbable, and may be an attempt to create symmetry to the fall of Perennis, which in Herodian's narrative also started in a theatre (1.9.2-7); Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 106, 122. We may even know the exact date of the events. Alföldy (p. 123) combines the fact that on the day of Cleander's fall there needed to be chariot-races, with the notice that those races were presumably held in honour of a goddess (Dio, 73.13.3). He thus arrives at the *Ludi Cerialis* (with Ceres as a perfect goddess to invoke during a famine) on 19 April 190.

<sup>189</sup> Whittaker, 'The revolt', 369. Cf. De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 186.

<sup>190</sup> Dio, 73.12.4. J. Sünskes Thompson, *Demonstrative Legitimation der Kaiserherrschaft im Epochenvergleich: Zur politischen Macht des stadtrömischen Volkes* (Stuttgart 1993), 29-30; Z. Rubin, 'Mass movements in Late Antiquity – appearances and realities', in: I. Malkin / Z. W. Robinson (eds.) *Leaders and Masses in the Roman World. Studies in Honor of Zvi Yavetz* (Leiden – New York – Cologne 1995), 129-87; 129 n. 2.

<sup>191</sup> On the villa: A. Ricci (ed.), *La Villa dei Quintili. Fonti scritte e fonti figurate* (Rome 1998); R. Paris (ed.), *Via Appia. La Villa dei Quintili* (Milan 2000).

<sup>192</sup> On Pertinax' involvement, see Grosso, *Commodo*, 291, 300; Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 122. On the power of the urban prefect: R. E. A. Palmer, 'The *excusatio magistrati* and the administration of Rome under Commodus (1)', *Athenaeum* 52 (1974), 268-88; 275; Idem, 'The *excusatio magistrati* and the administration of Rome under Commodus (2)', *Athenaeum* 53 (1975), 57-87; 79.

<sup>193</sup> Dio, 73.13.5. Alföldy, 'Cleanders Sturz', 113, argues that it was Marcia and not Fadilla who warned Commodus, because Herodian wanted to 'save' Marcia for her role in Commodus' death, and thus inserted an alternative figure. This may be true, but I would argue that both texts might have invented a 'messenger'. An enraged mob on the Via Appia, shouting abuse at the emperor, would be quite audible, and not very common. Commodus was not likely to simply ignore this, even without being told that something was wrong.

was shocked by the idea of a revolt of the people of Rome. He had already a troublesome relationship with the senate, and did not want to lose popular support as well. Cleander was executed.

### All the emperor's men

Cleander and Perennis have often been at the centre of historical attention. But how much influence did they have? In two recent articles, Cristina de Ranieri has proposed an interesting context from which to interpret the rise and fall of the two famous henchmen. She rightly emphasises that both men received their mandate, and their status, from their close relationship with the emperor. It was Commodus who ultimately decided on how far their influence could stretch. He was, thus, always the one who was in power.<sup>194</sup> In De Ranieri's opinion, Commodus was not idle and careless, 'tardus et neglens', although that was the image that the senatorial elite transmitted.<sup>195</sup> He was an emperor who tried to continue the process of centralising power and, in order to do so, created an 'extra-constitutional' associate – someone who was fully dependent upon the emperor, but of too low a social status to form a threat.<sup>196</sup> This position, De Ranieri argues, which was occupied by, successively, Saoterus, Perennis, and Cleander, was meant to form a connection

<sup>194</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 403, 405, 408; Eadem, 'Retrospectiva politici', 146, 153. Cf. Winterling, *Aula Caesaris*, 192.

<sup>195</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 13.7. Cf. G. Vitucci, 'Commodus in subscribendo tardus et neglens', in: L. Gasparini (ed.), *Scritti sul mondo antico in memoria di Fulvio Grosso* (Rome 1981), 621-7. Traupman, *Commodus*, 85 already noted that the lack of records and legislative evidence from Commodus' reign need not be an indication of a lack of action by the emperor. A great fire in Rome at the end of Commodus' reign, which destroyed the state records (A. Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome (180-305 ap. J. C.)* [Paris 1997], 45-7, 58), and the *damnatio memoriae* after Commodus' death may well have caused a distorted view. More importantly, the fact that no constitution of Commodus was quoted in the Codex Justinianus (W. Williams, 'Individuality in the imperial constitutions: Hadrian and the Antonines', *JRS* 66 [1976], 67-83; 82), may well depend on Commodus' bad reputation amongst the higher classes, to which lawyers belonged. The same holds for the limited quotations of Commodus in the *Digest* (12.3.10; 22.3.26; 25.3.6.1; 27.1.6.8; 35.3.6; 40.10.3; 49.14.31; G. Gualandi, *Legislazione imperiale e giurisprudenza* [Milan 1963] I, 155-5). Similarly, Nero, and Domitian are quoted very rarely, and Gaius not at all (Gualandi, *Legislazione imperiale*, 4, 11). The almost total lack of inscriptions citing decisions by the emperor is harder to explain; perhaps the *damnatio memoriae* was of influence. Cf. T. Honoré, *Emperors and Lawyers* (Oxford 1994)<sup>2</sup>, 14 who sees it as a probable cause for the destruction of rescripts. Perhaps, also, Commodus was less interested in legal problems. That need not mean he was not aware of decisions with greater consequence.

<sup>196</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 400, 406.

between the emperor and his administration.<sup>197</sup> Nevertheless, Commodus at the same time tried to placate the traditional senatorial elite, and keep the system intact. He just wanted it to function differently.<sup>198</sup>

The concept is appealing. It would explain both the continuity and change in administration and representation during Commodus' reign.<sup>199</sup> The purple-born emperor wanted to make his power and position 'personal', but chose, in first instance, to do so using the existing structures. After the execution of Saoterus by the praetorian prefect Paternus, Perennis was made praetorian prefect in his place. When this also found too much opposition, Cleander was given an 'extra-curricular' position. Only later, after the latter's execution, was Commodus himself going to take direct control. The strong reactions to the various 'regents' may well result from the fact that they, more than anyone else, represented (and formulated) the changes in government. It is quite possible, indeed likely, that it was the emperor who directed them, rather than vice-versa. An 'official' low-status advisor to the emperor must have been difficult for the traditional elite of the empire. Senators had already lost much of their power. Losing the possibility of acting as advisers may have been too much to bear. In the words of Sir Ronald Syme:

The central authority grew stronger all the time. But the manner of its exercise, like the personality of the emperor, was now found tolerable by senators: they had known tyranny ... Henceforth the master of the world and his governing class abide in harmony, each observing their appropriate duties. That in brief is the Antonine settlement, or compromise.<sup>200</sup>

Replacing senators with those of lesser blood was more than a change of style. The emperor was no longer seen to observe his 'appropriate duties', and the settlement was compromised. The social structures, and some of the political ones, may have remained intact, yet the

<sup>197</sup> De Ranieri, 'Retrospectiva politici', 146. Cf. already Palmer, 'The *excusatio magisteri* (2)', 80: 'the prefecture of the watch functioned as a channel of communication'.

<sup>198</sup> De Ranieri, 'La gestione politica', 407: 'Lasciare intatto il sistema, cercando di farlo funzionare in modo nuovo'.

<sup>199</sup> Thus, for instance, the execution of Perennis did not stop the fortification of the Pannonian *limes*. Though the initiative is often ascribed to Perennis, it actually started in AD 182, and continued after AD 185; *CIL* 3.14370<sup>2</sup> (= *ILS* 5338). Similarly the 'dynastic executions' of AD 189/90 were not interrupted by Cleander's fall. The killings after April 190 will not have been a reaction to the conspiracy to bring Cleander down – Commodus would hardly prosecute those responsible for the fall of someone he had publicly condemned. See also *supra* pp. 71-2.

<sup>200</sup> Syme, 'Antonine government', 668-9. G. P. Burton, 'Was there a long term trend to centralisation of authority in the Roman Empire?', *RPh* 72 (1998), 7-24 notes that the alleged centralisation of power is not reflected in the relationship between Rome and provincial cities, which is largely characterised by a continuation of the status quo.

balance of power had shifted. Senators were still given almost all honorific positions, but the positions that were most relevant to rule the realm were given to those who were directly dependent on the emperor.<sup>201</sup>

## The final years

After Cleander's death, Commodus no longer put forward a second-in-command. He himself was now in control. It was not so much finally asserting his own authority, as a change in the way his authority was presented. Many of the earlier policies continued. Those who could form a threat to the throne, all members of aristocratic families, were still executed.<sup>202</sup> Capable *homines novi*, many of them already active under Marcus, were still appointed to crucial positions, by choice of the *princeps* or sign of the times. Some appointments are striking. It was now that Pescennius Niger became *legatus Augusti pro praetore Syriae*. Cornelius Annulius (later a close friend of Septimius Severus), and Asellius Aemilianus, a kinsman of Clodius Albinus, obtained the two consular proconsulships of Africa and Asia, whilst both Septimius Severus and his brother Geta likewise acquired the command of important provinces, respectively Pannonia Superior and Moesia Inferior.<sup>203</sup> Commodus also still relied on those who were personally close to him. Aemilius Pudens, brother of the praetorian

<sup>201</sup> Cf. De Blois, 'Emperor and empire', 3410: 'Dio was strongly against the appointment of uncivilized parvenus from the rank and file of the army or from other unworthy groups to distinguished posts or to the senate (52.25.6f.)'. The appointment of personal favourites or specifically capable persons should be seen in context of the discussion on the so-called *virii militares*. On this discussion, see noticeably: Birley, 'Senators in the emperor's service', *passim*; B. Campbell, 'Who were the "virii militares"?', *JRS* 65 (1975), 11-31; G. Alföldy, 'Consuls and consulars under the Antonines: prosopography and history', *AncSoc* 7 (1976), 263-99; R. P. Saller, 'Promotion and patronage in equestrian careers', *JRS* 70 (1980), 44-63; Birley, *Locus virtutibus patefactus?*, 31-40; Leunissen, 'Herrscher und Senatorische Elite', *passim*. The following articles in De Blois, *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies*, make a further contribution to the discussion, all arguing in favour of possible 'specialisation' in appointment policies: W. Eck, 'Spezialisierung in der staatlichen Administration des römischen Reiches in der hohen Kaiserzeit' (pp. 1-23); S. Demougin, 'Considérations sur l'avancement dans les carrières procuratoriennes équestres' (pp. 24-34); M. A. Speidel, 'Specialisation and promotion in the Roman imperial army' (pp. 50-61).

<sup>202</sup> Cf. R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford – New York 1939), 378; Champlin, 'The heirs of Commodus', 305-6.

<sup>203</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 89; Leunisse, *Konsuln*, 138-9, 231, 250, 258, 262, 351-2; Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 83-5, 241 n. 12; Grosso, *Commodo*, 345, 683, 685-7; K. Wachtel, 'Zu den Statthaltern von Moesia Inferior unter Commodus', in: A. Fol – V. Zhivkov – N. Nedjalkov (eds.), *Acta Centri Historiae Terra Antiqua Balcanica II* (= *Actes du IXe Congrès international d'épigraphie greque et latine*) (Trinovi 1987), 284-6; 285-6.

prefect Q. Aemilius Laetus, was chosen among the *comites Augusti*. He was one of the first examples of a person of equestrian rank rising so high, without any doubt through the support of his brother.<sup>204</sup> The family proved less grateful than Commodus must have hoped. Laetus was one of the protagonists in the conspiracy that killed the emperor.

Commodus' policy may have remained much the same, but the representation of his position changed significantly. One can suspect that the engineered riot that forced Commodus to discard Cleander convinced the emperor that his hold on the people of Rome was not as strong as was necessary. He therefore took measures to ensure their support, and that of the armies. The following two chapters will discuss how a change of representation, towards the depiction of a (near) divine emperor, can be interpreted in this light. But Commodus' tendency to depict himself in the guise of (especially) Hercules and to fight as a gladiator must have drastically alienated the more traditional layers of society.<sup>205</sup> It will not have helped that Commodus further stressed his overt superiority by renaming the senate, colonies, fleet, a month, armies, and also the city and people of Rome after himself.<sup>206</sup>

The latter event could also be connected to a great fire, which burned buildings along the Via Sacra, including the temple of Peace and the house of the Vestals, and ended on the Palatine, where it destroyed much of the state archives.<sup>207</sup> The *Historia Augusta* half-heartedly blames Commodus for the fire, but the reference to Nero is too obvious to take the passage seriously.<sup>208</sup> The fire is interpreted by all contemporary authors as an omen of Commodus' end, and the ensuing civil wars. In doing so, they overlook an earlier fire in Rome, which took place somewhere between AD 185 and 188 (probably around AD 186), and which is well documented by later Christian

<sup>204</sup> AE 1949. 38, ll. 5-6: [Ad]lecto in comitatu Imp./ [Com]modi Aug.; Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 150 no. 16; Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 83; Traupman, *Commodus*, 95-6; Absil, *Les préfets du prétoire d'Auguste à Commode*, 193 no. 52.

<sup>205</sup> Dio, 73.15.6, 73.19.2, 73.20.1, 73.36.4; Herodian, 1.14.8-9, 1.15.8-9; SHA, *Comm.* 8.5, 8.9, 9.13-8, 11.10-1, 15.5-6; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 17.4-6. The argument is summarised, in a slightly different form, in O. Hekster, 'Commodus-Hercules: The people's *princeps*', *SCI* 20 (2001), 51-83.

<sup>206</sup> Dio, 73.15.2; SHA, *Comm.* 8.6-9, 17.8; *CIL* 8.2495, 8.3163, 13.6728; M. P. Speidel, 'Commodus the god-emperor and the army', *JRS* 83 (1993), 109-114; *infra* pp. 95, 105 n. 89, 136, 166-7, 191. Cf. for the relation of power and the appropriation of time: R. Laurence / C. Smith, 'Ritual, time and power in ancient Rome', *Accordia Research Papers* 6 (1995-6), 133-51.

<sup>207</sup> Dio, 73.24; Herodian, 1.14.2-6; Euseb. *Chron. Rom.* 15.12; Oros. 7.16.3; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 45-6, 61-2, 251-4, pl. 3-5.

<sup>208</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 16.7, saying that Commodus gave the order to burn down the city 'as though it were his private colony', but that he was ultimately deterred by Laetus.

authors.<sup>209</sup> Presumably the earlier fire happened too early to be used as an omen, and was thus ignored. It did, however, lead to an innovation, the creation of a *curator aquarum et Minucia*, started by Commodus, and continued by Septimius Severus.<sup>210</sup> The change did not stop the fire of AD 192 from doing a lot of damage.

Much of that damage was on the Palatine. This may have been one of the reasons for Commodus' move away from the palace. Instead of living in the middle of restorations, the emperor left the Palatine, and perhaps went to the little known Villa Vectiliana on the Caelian hill.<sup>211</sup> Dio and Herodian also mention a move away from the Palatine, but give the emperor a very different reason for doing so.

ὁ γὰρ Κόμμοδος ἀμφοτέρους ἀνελεῖν ἐβούλετο τοὺς ὑπάτους, Ἑρῦκίον τε Κλᾶρον καὶ Σόσσιον Φάλκωνα, καὶ ὑπατὸς τε ἄμα καὶ σεκούτωρ ἐν τῇ νουμηνίᾳ ἐκ τοῦ χωρίου ἐν ᾧ οἱ μονομάχοι τρέφονται προελθεῖν· καὶ γὰρ τὸν οἶκον τὸν πρῶτον παρ' αὐτοῖς, ὡς καὶ εἶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ὢν, εἶχε. (For Commodus wished to slay both the consuls, Erucius Clarus and Sosius Falco, and on New Year's Day to issue forth both as consul and *secutor* from the quarters of the gladiators; in fact, he had the first cell there, as if he were one of them) (Dio, 73.22.2. Cf. Herodian, 1.15.8)

This intention, Dio writes, was the final straw. Laetus and Eclectus, one of the chamberlains whom Commodus 'executed with no compunction whatever' (SHA, *Comm.* 15.2), decided to kill Commodus, and they made Marcia, Commodus' mistress, their confidante.<sup>212</sup> In the chaotic period of New Year's Eve, whilst festivities were going on, they administered poison to the emperor, but his excessive use of wine made him throw up the poison, instead of being killed by it. The conspirators were not deterred, but sent in an athlete named Narcissus who strangled Commodus. 'Such was the end

<sup>209</sup> Euseb. *Chron.* Rom. 15.9; Oros. 7.16.3; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 46, 51-4, 56-7, 251-4.

<sup>210</sup> H.-G. Pflaum, 'Du nouveau sur les *agri decimates* à la lumière d'un fragment de Caupoue, CIL X 3872', *BJ* 163 (1963), 224-37; 233; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 52-4.

<sup>211</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 16.3; Oros. 7.16.4. On the restorations, and Commodus' public works in general, see appendix 1: 'Commodus' buildings and statues'.

<sup>212</sup> Dio, 73.22.4. Marcia Aurelia Ceionia Demetrias appears to have been the mistress first of M. Ummidius Quadratus, and then of Commodus. She later married Eclectus; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 5.2 (1983), no. M 261. Tradition has it that her pro-Christian attitude strongly influenced Commodus (Dio, 73.4.7; Hippolytus, *Confut.* 9.11-2). Extremely unlikely is the suggestion by L. Tomassini, 'La congiura e l'assassino di Commodo; i retroscena', *Acme* 47.3 (1994), 79-88; 81-2, that Marcia sought support from Christians to strengthen her own position, because she was aware that Commodus' position was becoming increasingly unstable. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 17.1-2 which names Marcia and Laetus as responsible for Commodus' death, though it gives very little further information.

of Commodus ... and with him the line of the genuine Aurelii ceased to rule'.<sup>213</sup>

### *The final conspiracy*

It is always difficult to reconstruct a conspiracy, which is inherently a secret affair. Add to this the 'flood of confusing lies and half-truths' which must have accumulated in the bewildering period of changing power-balances and alliances following Commodus' death, and it becomes increasingly clear how complicated it is to find out what really happened.<sup>214</sup> It need not be a surprise that Herodian's story differs from Dio's. He states that it was not the consuls who were going to be executed, but Marcia, Laetus and Eclectus, because they had opposed Commodus' intention to come forth from the gladiators' barracks dressed as a gladiator to open the consular year (1.16.3-5). The emperor, infuriated by their resistance, decided to execute them, but wrote the order for their execution on a writing-tablet, which was found by Marcia after a small boy, a favourite of Commodus, had taken it up to play with.<sup>215</sup> The events from then onwards follow more or less the same course as in Dio's narrative. There has been much discussion about which author is more trustworthy. Herodian's tale is more extensive (as, presumably, was Dio's original), but is strikingly similar to the story of the death of Domitian in Dio, 67.15.3-5.<sup>216</sup> To a great extent, though, the stories of the two authors are compatible, and the discussion focuses on details. In basic treatment, the narrative is similar. Commodus planned a 'bloody charade' on 1 January AD 193, which would be an ultimate break with senatorial tradition, and place

<sup>213</sup> Dio, 73.22.4-6.

<sup>214</sup> A. R. Birley, 'The coups d'État of the year AD 193', *BJ* 169 (1969), 247-80; 250.

<sup>215</sup> Herodian, 1.17.1-5. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 9.3.

<sup>216</sup> E. Hohl, 'Die Ermordung des Commodus. Ein Beitrag zur Beurteilung Herodians', *Philologische Wochenschrift* 52 (1932), 191-200, mounted a strong attack on Herodian's trustworthiness, wondering amongst other things who would execute the praetorian prefect if there was no replacement to carry out the order (p. 197-8). Grosso, *Commodo*, 399-405, supports Herodian, and reflects (p. 399) that in that case Dio, too, is erroneous, since only a few hours before Commodus wanted to appear as sole consul, both consuls-elect were still alive, and not sentenced. C. R. Whittaker, *Herodian* I (Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1969) [= *LCL* 454], 109-10, also champions Herodian, suggesting that the death of Domitian and Commodus may actually have been similar (Cf. Tert. *Apol.* 25.9), with Dio emphasising the similarities between the two. As a possible reason for Dio's behaviour, Whittaker proposes Julia Domna's interest in Apollonius of Tyana, who prophesied Domitian's death. This would explain why Dio defends his decision to vary his account from that of Phil. *VA.* 8.25-7 (Cf. Grosso, *Commodo*, 400-1). Millar, *Cassius Dio*, believes that Dio's account is factual.

him far beyond anyone else. Those who were in danger from the emperor's intention, either because they opposed him, or because their existence threatened his plans, killed him to save themselves.<sup>217</sup>

The emperor was dead, and a successor needed to be appointed. It turned out to be P. Helvius Pertinax, whose involvement in the conspiracy to kill Commodus has been a matter of debate. Herodian and Dio emphasise that Pertinax was only chosen after the deed, and was in no way aware previously of what was about to happen.<sup>218</sup> Already in antiquity, however, this analysis was questioned.<sup>219</sup> It was, of course, very much in Pertinax's interest to be considered free from any murderous intent. It would look much better if he was only approached when the emperor was already beyond rescue.<sup>220</sup> If, however, Pertinax had been involved in the planning of the plot, the coup d'état must have been planned thoroughly, the date chosen with care, and various people placed in strategic positions.<sup>221</sup> The date was, as it happens, extraordinarily convenient. On the first of January, soldiers did not bear arms, a fact that is explicitly mentioned by Herodian. The loyalty of the praetorian cohorts lay with the emperor, and to find them disorganised and without weapons was imperative for success.<sup>222</sup>

Various more direct indications may also imply that Pertinax was acutely aware of what was going on, and thoroughly involved in the conspiracy. Anthony Birley has established clear links, either through personal connections or through the region of birth, between all those recently appointed to important positions by the time of Commodus' death, and Laetus and Pertinax.<sup>223</sup> He further describes the rapid

<sup>217</sup> Birley, 'The coups d'État', 248-50.

<sup>218</sup> Herodian, 2.1.5-7; Dio, 74.1.1-2.

<sup>219</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 4.4; Julian, *Caes.* 312 C.

<sup>220</sup> P. Carini, 'Considerazioni sull'assassino di Commodo', *RSA* 6/7 (1976/7), 361-8; 366-8; Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 88. Even the conspirators themselves preferred not to take responsibility, and tried to present Commodus' death as a natural one; Herodian, 2.1.3, 2.2.6; SHA, *Pert.* 4.7. The lie may have spread wide and could perhaps explain Malalas' statement that Commodus died a natural death (Malalas, *Chron.* 12.13 (= Dindorf, 290).

<sup>221</sup> F. Càssola, 'Pertinace durante il principato di Commodo', *PP* 20 (1965), 451-77; 476; Birley, 'The coups d'État', 250-1.

<sup>222</sup> Herodian, 2.2.9; Grosso, *Commodo*, 390-1. The fear of the reaction from the praetorians from the part of the conspirators, obvious in all sources, is noticeable, considering the involvement of Laetus. Is this perhaps an indication that the prefect's power had diminished after Perennis' fall? Cf. *supra* p. 70.

<sup>223</sup> Birley, 'The coups d'État', 252-71. The persons involved in this 'African connection' were (apart from Laetus and Pertinax), Septimius Severus and his brother Geta, C. Fulvius Plautianus, the *praefectus vehiculorum*, who was a kinsman of Severus, Clodius Albinus, L.



reaction of Septimius Severus after Pertinax' death as a hint that behind Commodus' murder lay a strict organisation. He assumed that 'some contingency plan was put into action', and that there had, thus, been previous appointments; in case of failure by Pertinax, the governor of the nearest military province was to come to Rome 'in readiness to redress the balance'.<sup>224</sup>

If both the urban and the praetorian prefect were involved, they should not have had any problems convincing Commodus to appoint 'their' men at the right places. That does not necessarily imply that they governed in his place. 'The master of the world depends upon his ministers and agents'.<sup>225</sup> Commodus continued to appoint *homines novi* to strategic positions, which meant that he could no longer simply rely on the traditional *cursus honorum* to bring forward candidates for a great number of positions. Surely somebody needed to advise him on whom to appoint instead. Under Marcus Aurelius a similar function appears to have been fulfilled by the *ab epistulis*, Varius Clemens.<sup>226</sup> The probable promotion of Clemens to the senate, and the execution of his successor Vitruvius Secundus after the Lucilla-conspiracy, may well have left a gap in the system.<sup>227</sup> The militarily supremely qualified Pertinax would appear to be a good person to listen to. It seems he was not.

Commodus' trust in those directly surrounding him must have been based on the fact that they were completely reliant on him for their position. That, effectively, formed the basis of his entire system of government. It turned out to be both true and false. False, because he was ultimately killed by the persons who had most to lose from his death: his mistress, chamberlain, and the praetorian and urban

Mantennius Sabinus (the prefect of Egypt) and perhaps Q. Aurelius Polus Terentianus. Birley also notes a curious slip in two manuscripts of Dio (74.3.1); rather than λίγυς they read λίβυς. It should be emphasised that Birley does not imply a nationalistic identity of any sort, but implies that people from the same (reasonably marginal) region are more likely to have known each other. Birley's argument is copied by Tomassini, 'La congiura e l'assassino di Commodo', who adds the unlikely notion that Laetus originally wanted to put himself forward as possible successor to Commodus.

<sup>224</sup> Birley, 'The coups d'État', 272-3.

<sup>225</sup> Syme, 'Antonine government', 676.

<sup>226</sup> Birley, *Locus virtutibus patefactus?*, 18, 51 no. A 8, 53; L. de Blois, 'Roman jurists and the crisis of the third century A.D. in the Roman empire', in: De Blois, *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies*, 136-53; 149. Cf. *supra* pp. 57 n. 99, 77 n. 201.

<sup>227</sup> See *supra* p. 54; Birley, *Locus virtutibus patefactus?*, 51 no. A 9, 53. The appointment of Hadrianus of Tyre (Phil. VS 2.10) and the further unknown [Aureliu]s Larichus (AE 1952.6) may also indicate a change back to a more literary function of the *ab epistulis* – though they were both specifically appointed as *ab epistulis Graecis*, rather than undivided *ab epistulis*; Birley, *Locus virtutibus patefactus?*, 50 nos. C 11-2.

prefects. Their motives, in the end, cannot be known.<sup>228</sup> But Commodus was not entirely wrong in his assumption, for none of those directly involved in his death survived for long.<sup>229</sup> Similarly, the empire itself had difficulties coping with a situation in which the centre of government had been removed. It has recently been remarked that 'Commodus' reign had left the situation in Rome in such a shambles that no person or group was able to put together a government with enough *auctoritas* to retain power in the fashion that was customary in the principate'.<sup>230</sup> That may well have been the very aim of Commodus' reign. The ways of exercising *auctoritas* had changed. Severus, in response, would rule the empire very differently from the way the 'adoptive emperors' had done. His government, too, was intrinsically connected to the person of the emperor. For senators, the age of gold had surely turned into an age of iron.<sup>231</sup>

### *The provinces*

Elsewhere, though, Commodus' image appears to have been different. Many subjects must have benefited from the emperor's emphasis on a policy of peace. The governors who were appointed, furthermore, may not always have been senators of prominent birth, but seem to have been quite capable as far as those who were directly involved were concerned. Senatorial sources accuse Commodus of assigning the worst possible candidates, or those who paid most for the post.<sup>232</sup> Many of the men in question were, nevertheless, already active under Marcus, and continued to be so under Severus.<sup>233</sup> There was, furthermore, not a single charge *de repetundis* made against Commodus' provincial governors during the reigns of succeeding

<sup>228</sup> Did they believe that Commodus' increasingly solistic rule had created too many enemies and would not survive for long – forestalling any uprising by their own conspiracy? Perhaps, but maybe they were just afraid of the emperor who, even if he was in control, may still have been dangerously deranged in his personal relationships.

<sup>229</sup> Dio, 74.16.5; SHA, *Pert.* 11.10-11; SHA, *Did. Iul.* 6.2.

<sup>230</sup> J. C. Morgan, '193, Severus and traditional *auctoritas*', in E. dal Covolo / G. Rinaldi (eds.), *Gli imperatori Severi* (Rome 1999), 31-8; 31.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. Dio, 72.36.4. For continuity between the rule of Severus and Commodus, though mainly focusing on the representation of the emperorship, see *infra* pp. 186-94. It may, tentatively, be noted that Severus, like Commodus in the first part of his reign, left much power in the hand of his praetorian prefect (C. Fulvius Plautianus), who could almost be considered a 'regent'; Dio, 76.14-6; Amm. Marc. 26.6.8; *CIL* 6.1074 (= *ILS* 456), 6.224 (= *ILS* 2185); *ILS* 9003; Crook, *Consilium Principis*, 166 no. 156.

<sup>232</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 3.8, 6.9; SHA, *Pesc. Nig.* 1.5; Dio, 73.12.3, 75.6.1.

<sup>233</sup> Leunissen, *Konsuln*, 213-4, 221-2, 229-31; 234-6, 240-2, 245-8, 250, 258, 260-2, 265-7, 272-4, 277-8, 280, 283-5, 288-94, 297, 300-2, 304-5.

emperors.<sup>234</sup>

The central authority also supported local cities in difficulties. Capable people were sent to help. Commodus' father-in-law, C. Bruttius Praesens, was made *curator rei publicae* at Urso in Spain, whilst Appius Sabinus became ἐπανορθῶτης (*corrector*) of the free cities of Africa. Ti. Claudius Candidus, finally, who was a senator under Commodus, was also the *logistes* of Nicomedia and Ephesus.<sup>235</sup> The latter two cities received large sums of money for restorations, after an earthquake had damaged them in AD 182.<sup>236</sup> Antioch was also helped by imperial beneficence. Commodus, in AD 181, reversed his father's punishment of the city for their support of Avidius Cassius. Malalas claims that Commodus also built a public bath (named Commodianum), a temple to Olympian Zeus, and a Xystos with seats and colonnades next to the temple of Athena, which he restored. Commodus, he continues, also provided money for the re-organisation of the Olympic Games and other festivals in the city.<sup>237</sup>

Malalas' report cannot simply be ascribed to the (more positive) Christian accounts of Commodus' reign, as Malalas tended to use local sources from the earlier empire. The emperor's reputation in Antioch seems to have remained positive.<sup>238</sup> A similar attitude can be detected in Africa. Apparently the attention to the grain-supply, strengthening of the *limes*, building of roads, and restoration of public works had not gone unnoticed.<sup>239</sup> Commodus' direct intervention in this province is further attested by the well-known inscription in which the *coloni* of an imperial estate (the *saltus Burunitanus*) appealed directly to the emperor, who replied – albeit by simply restating a previously established rule.<sup>240</sup> It may be relevant that the

<sup>234</sup> Traupman, *Commodus*, 166.

<sup>235</sup> *CIL* 2.1405; *AE* 1912.136 (= *ILS*, 9467); *CIL* 2.4114 (= *ILS* 1140); Traupman, *Commodus*, 170-1.

<sup>236</sup> *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 16.12; Malalas, *Chron.* 12.11 (= Dindorf, 283); Grosso, *Commodo*, 551-3. Cf. Dio, 73.12.2 who ascribes the funds to the influence of Saoterus, who was originally from Nicomedia.

<sup>237</sup> Malalas, *Chron.* 12.2-3 (= Dindorf, 283-6); F. Yegül, 'Bath and bathing in Roman Antioch', in C. Kondoleon (ed.), *Antioch. The Lost Roman City* (Princeton 2001), 146-53; 148-9. On Marcus' punishment of the city: *infra* p. 37. It seems prudent to suggest that the emperor's goodwill to the city can be ascribed to Pompeianus' influence, who was, after all, born in Antioch.

<sup>238</sup> E. Jeffreys, 'Malalas' sources', in Eadem (ed.) *Studies in John Malalas* (Sidney 1990), 167-216; 170, 174-5, 178, 204-5, 208-9, 214-6; A. Moffatt, 'A record of public buildings and monuments', in: Jeffreys, *Studies in John Malalas*, 87-109; G. Marasco, 'Commodo i suoi apologeti', *Emerita* 64 (1996). 229-38; 235. Cf. *infra* pp. 175, 185.

<sup>239</sup> Marasco, 'Commodo i suoi apologeti', 237; Grosso, *Commodo*, 616-8, 621-2.

<sup>240</sup> *CIL* 8.10570 = 14464 (= *ILS* 6870); R. Soraci, '«Voluntas Domini» e gli *inquilini*-

one voyage that Commodus planned (though did not undertake) whilst in power, was to Africa.<sup>241</sup> The positive reactions appear to have lasted long, and may still be referred to by Dracontius, at the end of the fifth century.<sup>242</sup>

It must be stressed that most of the above events took place in the early years of Commodus' reign. Nothing that happened later in Commodus' reign superseded those good impressions in the provincials' eyes. The peaceful conditions, which were the result of Commodus' systematic defensive policy, were much more important in the provinces than his attitude to senators. Besides, Commodus' new mode of representation may well have been accepted in the provinces, as will be suggested in the next chapters.

### Amici, advisors, and the emperor

Much of the description of the narrative history of Commodus' reign has been a discussion about which source is more trustworthy at any particular moment. In the end the bias in the sources is such that only a partial analysis of the events which characterised the period can be given. It is clear, however, that the first half of Commodus' sole emperorship reign was plagued by unrest, revolts, and conspiracies. The peace-settlement at the Danube was, to all appearances, a break away from Marcus Aurelius' strategy, and though it may have been a necessary course of action, it will not have been popular in all circles. The Lucilla conspiracy and the death of Saoterus in AD 181/2 were further factors in alienating the young emperor from Marcus' old advisors (including many leading senators). This was a gradual process, with many of the old *amici*, and indeed a great number of other prominent senators, continuing to hold office up to the last years of the reign.

Problems in the provinces, noticeably in Britain, Gaul, and Germany, especially in AD 185 when the *Bellum Desertorum* broke out, brought many new men, often capable generals, to the foreground, limiting the number of distinguished senators in crucial military positions. This process had already started in earlier periods, but Commodus combined it with a diminishing advisory role of senators, as the letter to Athens of AD 186/7 shows. Those directly

*coloni* sotto Commodo e Pertinace', *QC* 16 (1986), 261-339; 300-8; Millar, *ERW*, 181, 246.

<sup>241</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 9.1. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 17.8 which states that Commodus also wanted to rename Carthage *Alexandria Commodiana togata*.

<sup>242</sup> Dracontius, 187-190. Cf. *infra* p. 185.

surrounding the emperor, including his freedmen, became ever more important. It seems permissible to argue that, rather than seeing this as a result of a presumed incapacity of the monarch, the influence of men like Saoterus, Perennis and Cleander ought to be interpreted as an attempt by Commodus to strengthen his own position through placing power in the hands of people who could never make a claim to the throne. A dynastic power struggle may well have formed the background to this, and to the executions in the last part of the reign. In these years, the empire knew a well-advertised peace, and Commodus' reputation in the provinces appears to have grown.

After the fall of Cleander (AD 190), there was a change in Commodus' legitimisation of authority, though not, as far as can be seen, in his policies. The emperor increasingly 'personalised' the supreme position, and widely broadcast his superhuman status. This led to an even more antagonistic senate. In the end, Commodus was killed in a conspiracy which seems to have involved a great number of people, including the urban and praetorian prefects.

## Part Two

### *REPRESENTING THE RULE*

When Heracles was passing from boyhood to youth's estate, wherein the young, now becoming their own masters, show whether they will approach life by the path of virtue or the path of vice, he went out into a quiet place, and sat pondering which road to take.

(Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21)

Reputation of power, is Power; because it draweth with it the adhaerence of those that need protection.

(Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 10)



## IMAGES OF DIVINITY

Vast numbers of statues were erected representing him in the garb of Hercules. And it was voted that this age should be named the *Golden Age* (Dio, 73.15.6).

Commodus' emphasis on his superhuman status went hand in hand with a further change in imperial self-representation. But it may simply have been the moment in which the emperor finally went insane. The emperor's disposition towards his own divinity, and in particular the far-reaching comparison between Commodus and Hercules, has, in fact, been the most regularly used 'evidence' for Commodus' insanity. What did this 'identification' actually consist of? Can it be used as evidence for madness, or might there be another message that can be deduced from it? In order to understand Commodus' attitude towards the gods more fully, one would do well to turn to analysing the evidence that depicts the emperor as, and with, the gods.

### Coining an image

There are some obvious reasons to start research into Commodus' divine representation by looking at the depictions on the emperor's coinage. Many coins are, first of all, easy to date. Almost inevitably the year of mintage can be deduced from the imperial titulature which formed part of the legend. Coins were also very much part of everyday life. The images on coins would be accessible to a large number of people – thus forming a perfect medium to reach several layers of society.<sup>1</sup> To what extent these images broadcast ideology, or

<sup>1</sup> R. Scheiper, *Bildpropaganda der römischen Kaiserzeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Trajans-Säule in Rom und korrespondierender Münzen* (Bonn 1982), 34: 'Sie [coinage] ist ... eines des ältesten Kommunikationsmittel, wahrscheinlich sogar das mächtigste von allen'. Cf. C. King, 'Roman portraiture: images of power', in: G. Paul (ed.), *Roman Coins and Public Life under the Empire. E. Togo Salmon Papers II* (Ann Arbor 1999), 123-36; 123-4: 'The fundamental concept underlying coin design, and by extension the coin portrait, is that it will be an object existing in multiple copies that will be distributed to a large number of people who may be scattered over a wide geographical



even formed a sort of 'propaganda', has been hotly debated.<sup>2</sup> However, it is beyond doubt that the ancients themselves were, at least, aware of some of the representations on the coins. Most famously this is shown in Mark 12.17-8:

They brought him a *denarius*, and he said to them, 'whose portrait is this? and whose inscription?' and they said to him: 'Caesar's'. Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet more than just noticing an imperial portrait, people saw a bond between an emperor and the coins on which his features and titles figured.<sup>4</sup> Such a bond could even result in a value judgement.

The stamps with which a man comes imprinted on his disposition [are] like the stamps we look for on coins too: if we find them, we accept their value, if we don't, we throw them out. 'Whose stamp does this sesterce bear? Trajan's? Take it. Nero's? throw it out.' (Arrian, *Discourses of Epictetus*, 4.5.15-17)

It is not all that likely that people actually did 'throw them out'. Yet Arrian's statement does presume an awareness of whose face was of the coins, and a perceived relationship between that face and the real emperor. When people 'condemned Nero's character, they condemned his coins ... the image depends on an appeal to values the user shares'.<sup>5</sup> Hence the rabbinical prohibition for Jews to use coins of Hadrian, after the emperor had put down the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132-5).

The emperor's face was what made the coin a coin, and so the face was – to the public perception – intimately connected to the coins it validated. This even led to the misconception that if it was the imperial portrait which gave a coin its value, then the greater the portrait on a coin was, the greater its value; a misconception that some laws explicitly warned against.<sup>6</sup> The imperial portrait could also be, and regularly was, changed within an emperor's reign – often betraying political motives.<sup>7</sup> When Herodian wanted to emphasise that Perennis was aiming for the throne, he mentioned coins with the latter's portrait on them, which convinced Commodus of his prefect's

area'.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently, summarising the different sides in the debate: B. Levick, 'Messages on the Roman coinage: types and inscriptions', in: Paul, *Roman Coins and Public Life*, 41-60.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Matthew 22.21, Luke 20.24.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lendon, 'The face on the coins and inflation in Roman Egypt', *Klio* 72 (1990), 106-34; 116.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Image and authority in the coinage of Augustus', *JRS* 76 (1986), 66-87; 66-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 9.22; Lendon, 'Coins and inflation', 115.

<sup>7</sup> King, 'Roman portraiture', 127.

betrayal.<sup>8</sup> More bizarrely, Dio mentions (78.16.5) how during Caracalla's reign, a young knight was condemned to death for bringing a coin with the imperial image on it into a brothel, only to be released because the emperor had died before the time of execution.

But every coin has two sides. Only one depicts the imperial portrait. It has been argued that though the *princeps*' head was of importance, the reverse types were of utmost triviality,<sup>9</sup> but equally emphatically this distinction has been opposed. According to Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, the images that people would see – obverse and reverse – were 'value-laden', 'persuasive', and represented 'images of authority'.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, the reverses have been seen as interacting with their own obverses, in some cases representing 'a sophisticated use of both obverse and reverse to portray the ruler as linked to heavenly powers, good fortune and the like', basically showing imperial power by what was incorporated on the coin, and what was not.<sup>11</sup> It seems most reasonable to suggest, with Barbara Levick, that the actual purpose of issuing coinage was intentionally kept ambiguous by the very people issuing the coinage, because 'they might not have wished to be too clear about what it meant to have one's head on a coin, where one's peers stood in relation to that, or whether designs were intended to sway public opinion'.<sup>12</sup>

The question then arises who those people were who decided which images would be depicted on the imperial coinage. Whatever the 'true' answer to that, to the public eye it must have been the emperor himself. Authors from Suetonius to the anonymous author of *de rebus bellicis* all ascribe the selection of coin-types to the *princeps* proper.<sup>13</sup> It is equally clear that the images on the coins would not go against the emperor's wishes. They must display the emperor as he wished to be perceived. The authority of the *princeps* over the mints becomes clear through an example from the reign of Hadrian. The first series of coins minted for that emperor, in AD 117, displayed all the titles that Trajan had used at the time of his death. On the second series, however, all those titles were disbanded. Some of them were only to be taken up again much later – like *Pater Patriae* in AD 128 – some

<sup>8</sup> Herodian, 1.9.7. See *supra* p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> M. Crawford, 'Roman imperial coin types and the formation of public opinion', in: C. Brooke e.a. (eds.), *Studies in Numismatic Method Presented to Philip Grierson* (Cambridge-New York 1983), 47-64; 59.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, 'Image and authority', 69.

<sup>11</sup> King, 'Roman portraiture', 129; 127.

<sup>12</sup> Levick, 'Messages on the Roman coinage', 58.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, 'Image and authority', 68, with references: 68 n. 6.

not at all. The change in titulature on the coinage coincided with Hadrian's return from the East, where he still had been when the first minting was issued.<sup>14</sup> It seems clear that the changes were a result of Hadrian's orders.

Coins were, thus, scrutinised by the powers that be. In the following attention is focused on the tendencies that these coins show for certain modes of depiction of the ruler, for association with particular deities, and for the broadcasting of particular religious policies. How did Commodus present himself through his coinage? In answering this question, it is essential to differentiate between the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the joint reign of Marcus and Commodus, and the period in which Commodus was sole *Augustus*. For the first two periods it seems prudent to suppose that the person taking final decisions was Marcus rather than Commodus. It thus shows the way Marcus wanted to show himself and his son, rather than the way Commodus wanted to portray himself. Only after his father had died, could Commodus start imprinting his own authority on the choice of coin-types.

### Princeps *Iuventutis*

As one would expect from an emperor who tried strongly to present his son as a certified successor, Marcus Aurelius made good use of coinage as a way to communicate the qualities of his son to the Roman public.<sup>15</sup> The birth of Commodus and his twin brother Antoninus was celebrated with a coin type proclaiming the SAECVLI FELICITAS whilst showing the infants lying under a star.<sup>16</sup> The TEMPORUM FELICITAS that Marcus' heirs would bring was also emphasised on coins from AD 166, the year in which the twins were made *Caesares*.<sup>17</sup> After Antoninus' death, Commodus was absent from the coinage for a while. Only when Marcus started to grant his son various honours (from AD 172 onwards) did the heir-apparent resurface on the coinage. The bestowal of the name *Germanicus* was indicated on a medallion from AD 172/3, the reverse of which showed a youthful bust of Commodus with the legend COMMODVS CAESAR

<sup>14</sup> BMCRE 3, cxxiv, cxxvi.

<sup>15</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 13: 'Der "Regierungsantritt" als Alleinherrscher war für Commodus seit dem Tag seiner Geburt vorbereitet und propagiert worden'.

<sup>16</sup> BMCRE 3, nos. 136-140, 936-941. Similarly, the FECVNDITATIS AVGVSTAE was praised: BMCRE 4, nos. 89-95, 902-910, 980-981.

<sup>17</sup> BMCRE 4, nos. 155-158, 949-955; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 14; W. Szaivert, *Die Münzprägung der Kaiser Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus und Commodus* (Vienna 1986) [=MIR 18], no. 1048-9 (= Gneecchi, *MR* II, 72/1, III, 151/8).

GERM ANTONINI AUG GERM FIL.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Commodus' admission to the college of *pontifices* and his assumption of the *toga virilis* were broadcast through coins.<sup>19</sup> Marcus' coinage also emphasised the final step towards making Commodus *Augustus* – like Gaius and Lucius before him, Commodus became the *princeps iuventutis* (on the seventh of July 175), and a multitude of coins, from various mints, celebrated the event.<sup>20</sup>

As to the role of the divine in Marcus' mints, there seem to be no striking particularities. If anything, in light of the well-known later preference of Commodus for Hercules, the absence of the deity from Marcus' coinage is peculiar – especially since Hercules was a popular divinity on Antonine coins. Yet during Marcus Aurelius' reign not a single coin was minted for the senior Augustus which featured Hercules. Perhaps the deity was to be linked solely to the junior emperor, Lucius Verus. Under his auspices, at least, appear four *aurei* and a sesterce figuring Hercules.<sup>21</sup> If one would reason from that argument, Hercules only became 'available' to Commodus after Verus' death. A gem and some medallions might strengthen the suggestion, as after Commodus' accession to the throne there appears to be some association between Hercules and the new Augustus. A gem from, arguably, AD 176 (the year in which Commodus became 'Augustus'), actually depicts the young Commodus with Hercules' lion-skin.<sup>22</sup> In the same year, a medallion coined in Commodus' name carried an image of Hercules.<sup>23</sup> Another medallion, which should be dated somewhere between AD 177 and 179, shows the demi-god, although the suggestion that Commodus' features are recognisable from the small Herculean image cannot be maintained.<sup>24</sup> The slight comparison between Hercules and Commodus was, furthermore, not at all traceable to the normal coinage. Ordinary coins, far more than

<sup>18</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 14; taf. 1.6; K. Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse antoninischer Zeit* (Mainz 1999), 53; fig. 110j. See *supra* pp. 32-3.

<sup>19</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 14; Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse*, 54; fig. 111b-c.

<sup>20</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 308-309; 336-337; 342-343; 347; Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse*, 54; fig. 111d. Commodus was contemporaneously proclaimed the SPES PUBLICA; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, no. 344.

<sup>21</sup> RIC 3, nos. 510, 517-9, 1391; H. Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus im Spiegel seiner Münzen', *RQA* 70 (1975), 1-31; 21.

<sup>22</sup> A. Giuliano, 'Un cammeo con Commodus-Herakles', *MDAI(R)* 102 (1995), 327-329, Taf.76; G. Devoto / A. Molayem, *Archeogemmologia: Pietre antiche, glittica, magia e litoterapia* (Rome 1990), 49 fig. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, no. 1072 (= Gneccchi, *MR* II, 60/5).

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, no. 1083 (= Gneccchi, *MR* II, no. 141). Gneccchi believed that he could identify Commodus' features, but see Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 47: 'Dies läßt sich angesichts des kleinen Formats der Darstellung und der mäßigen Erhaltungszustandes ... nicht beweisen'.

medallions and gems, should be perceived as depicting the public image. Such coins featuring Hercules were conspicuously absent for the entire co-regency of Marcus and Commodus. The only noticeable mythological figures to play roles of some importance on coins were Castor and Romulus.<sup>25</sup> Their appearance, however, coheres perfectly with the presentation of Commodus as Marcus' presumed successor – as indeed does the earlier incidental appearance of Hercules.

### *Commodus Pius Felix*

After Marcus' death, Commodus, like any *pius filius* (and especially one whose own position depended mainly on the standing of the dynasty), started his sole reign with a commemorative type to his deceased father, who was made a god, and for whom he also built the column which is still intact on the Piazza Colonna in Rome.<sup>26</sup> On the whole there is precious little which characterises the earlier Commodian coins as in any way extraordinary. The first 'innovation' can be dated to between the 10<sup>th</sup> of December AD 182 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January AD 183. From this period onwards, Commodus had the word PIUS added to his titulature, including the coin legends. This has been taken as an attempt to connect himself more strongly to Antoninus Pius by styling himself M COMMODVS ANTONINVS AVG PIVS – possibly taking a distance of the policies from Marcus Aurelius in the process.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, one could argue that by naming himself Pius, Commodus tried to emphasise the *impietas* of those connected to Lucilla's conspiracy.<sup>28</sup> Of course one argument does not exclude the other.

<sup>25</sup> Castor: Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 403; 420 (=RIC 3, nos. 1578, 1579, 648); Romulus: BMCRE 4, nos. 1726-27. Castor was a well-known rolemodel for princes: E. La Rocca, 'Memore di Castore: principi come Dioscuri', in: L. Nista (ed.), *Castores. L'immagine dei Dioscuri a Roma* (Rome 1994), 73-90; 77-87; B. Poulsen, 'Ideologia, mito e culto dei Castori a Roma: dall'età repubblicana al tardo-antico', in: Nista, *Castores*, 91-100; 97-8. Cf. P. F. Mittag, 'Commodus als Pollux?', *JNG* 48/49 (1998/9), 165-76.

<sup>26</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 17; taf.2.6-7; RIC 3, nos. 264-75. See appendix 1, no. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 145-6; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 17-18; P. Kneissl, *Die Siegestitulatur der römischen Kaiser. Untersuchungen zu den Siegerbeinamen des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 1969), 112-113; BMCRE 4, clvii. Cf. *CIL* 6.2099. One should not forget, however, that in Rome filial duty was one of the key-characteristics of a pious person. Commodus, therefore, did certainly not distance himself from the *person* of his father, for whom he was building the column, and to whom he owed his position.

<sup>28</sup> Th. Ulrich, *Pietas [Pius] als politischer Begriff im römischen Staate bis zum Tode des Kaisers Commodus* (Breslau 1930), 74; Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur*, 113. But see Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 18. In Egypt Commodus was already called *Pius* in AD 181: E. Van't Dack, 'Commode et ses épithètes *Pius Felix* sous les Sévères', in: G. Bonamente / N. Duval (eds.), *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Parisinum. Atti dei Convegni sulla Historia Augusta I* (Macerata 1991), 311-35; 334; P. Bureth, *Les titulatures impériales dans le papyrus*, les

Whatever the direct cause for Commodus' assumption of the name *Pius*, one should not ignore the religious-political connotation of the term. After all, being *Pius* reflected not only someone's relation with his family, but also with the state, and the gods.<sup>29</sup> In James Oliver's words: '[Commodus] justified his own policy as *pietas* to the gods on the highest level, not just in the official sense. He adopted the element 'Pius' as part of his name. He thus claimed to be at the head of a *pietas* movement ...'.<sup>30</sup> Though it may seem slightly exaggerated to assume the existence of an actual 'movement', a reverse type minted in AD 187 does indicate an emphasis on a connection between the emperor's *pietas* and traditional religiosity. On it, the legend AVCTOR PIETATIS accompanies a sacrificing *Pietas*. Doubtless, it was Commodus who was supposed to be the *Auctor Pietatis*, bringing *pietas* to the wider Roman realm.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Commodus' coinage started to mention the emperor's position as *Pontifex Maximus* only after he took up the name *Pius*, further strengthens the suggestion that this name was of (some) religious importance to Commodus.<sup>32</sup>

Only two years later, or perhaps even earlier, another epithet with religious associations was added. From AD 185 onwards the emperor was *Felix* as well.<sup>33</sup> *Felix* could imply some sort of divine protection, and incorporating the term into the imperial name seemed to connect Commodus explicitly to such a superhuman guardianship.<sup>34</sup> Rather than merely relating this imperial appropriation of *Felicitas* to the

*ostraca et les inscriptions d'Égypte (30 a.C.- 284 p. C.)* (Brussels 1964), 90-2. On the conspiracy, see *supra* pp. 52-3.

<sup>29</sup> A. Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche* (Darmstadt 1980), 206; Ulrich, *Pietas*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> J. H. Oliver, 'The piety of Commodus and Caracalla and the Εἰς Βασιλέα', *GRBS* 19 (1978), 375-388; 379.

<sup>31</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 36. There is, however, no evidence for the supposition put forward by Ulrich, *Pietas*, 79, that Commodus 'als Auctor Pietatis eine religiöse Politik trieb, bei welcher in erster Linie weniger altrömische, als hauptsächlich griechische, orientalische, allgemein provinzielle Kulte eine Steigerung erführen'.

<sup>32</sup> *BMCRE* 4, clviii n. 1: 'This would fit in well with the dominant religious signification of 'Pius', even where it is not restricted to the actual worship of the gods'; Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur*, 113, already detects the first traces of a presumed extreme religiosity: 'Zugleich kündigen sich in dem neuen Titel die religiösen Neigungen des jungen Herrschers an'.

<sup>33</sup> Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur*, 115-6; Van't Dack, 'Commode et ses épithètes *Pius Felix*', 334; Bureth, *Les titulatures impériales*, 91; *SEG* 20.654: 'Εὐτυχῆς Εὐσεβῆς'.

<sup>34</sup> J. Beaujeu, *La religion romaine à l'apogée de l'empire I. La politique religieuse des Antonins* (Paris 1955), 395; Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur*, 116; J. R. Fears, *Princeps a Diis Electus. The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* (Rome 1977), 322: 'The epithet *felix*, first adopted by Commodus, conveyed an image of special divine sanction ...'. Cf. now: C. de Ranieri, 'Salus, Felicitas, Fortuna: Le virtutes di un imperatore Romano. Analisi di alcune monete Comnodiane', *RIN* 102 (2001), 167-91.

tense situation arising from Perennis' fall, it seems more likely to suggest, with Kaiser-Raiß, a connection to the festivities celebrating the first ten years of Commodus' rule.<sup>35</sup> These were celebrated with *Ludi Primi Decennales*. A *denarius* with a reverse reading D.P.R.C, and showing an image of Roma with a *Cornucopia* and *Victoriola*, adjacent to an ear of corn, must be seen in this perspective. This legend could be interpreted as 'Decennales Primi Romae Constituti'.<sup>36</sup> More explicitly, some *asses* showed an oak-wreath circled round the legend PRIMI DECENN(ALES)<sup>37</sup>

These same *Decennales* were the subject of a coin-series depicting Victoria, on whose shield were inscribed the letters VO(TA) DE(CENNALIA), the legend of which proclaimed SAEC(VLI) FEL(ICITAS) – or SAEC(VLVM) FEL(IX).<sup>38</sup> In the same period, a new *Felicitas*-type was issued (*RIC* 109), the *Felicitas Augusti*, on which rather than the standard *Caduceus* and *Cornucopia*, *Felicitas* was depicted with a *Caduceus* and *Victoriola*. When one combines all of the above, the image arises of a victorious and *felix* emperor, whose rule warranted well-being and abundance to the people of Rome.<sup>39</sup>

The combination of *Pius* and *Felix* which Commodus started, would become part of the imperial titulature of all emperors from Caracalla onwards.<sup>40</sup> It has been suggested that the two adjectives together took on a new meaning, which was strongly connected to the imperial attitude towards the provinces.<sup>41</sup> Such a change in attitude had become necessary, the argument continues, as there were problems in the provinces. Many provincial subjects no longer saw the empire as a coherent whole. 'The chief problem was therefore not a purely political or even military problem but a spiritual one; that is to say, a politico-religious one. The emperor had to show that he was not only

<sup>35</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 27, contra *BMCRE* 4, clix; Z. Rubin, 'The *felicitas* and the *concordia* of the Severan house', *SCI* 3 (1976), 153-72; 162.

<sup>36</sup> *RIC* 3, no. 96. Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 27. *BMCRE* 4, clviii proposes CONSTITUTI instead of CONSTITUTI. Another reading could be CONDITI.

<sup>37</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 249, 78+; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 113, 449, 561; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 28; taf. 12. 9; 82+; 83+; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 679-680; 697. This was the first time Commodus' coinage mentioned any kind of 'Saeculum Felix'.

<sup>39</sup> Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 381, 395-6; Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> Van't Dack, 'Commode et ses épithètes *Pius Felix*', 311; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Oliver, 'The piety of Commodus', 375.

the chief priest of Rome, but the religious champion of all'.<sup>42</sup> Trouble was, indeed, growing in the provinces.<sup>43</sup> It will not have helped that Commodus did not travel outside of Italy, once he had become sole emperor (though he had of course journeyed together with his father). We cannot know the reason for this lack of travelling, but it may well have necessitated an alternative way to involve his subjects.<sup>44</sup>

One could argue that even the eventual re-founding of Rome as the *Col(onia) An(toniniana) Com(modiana)* ought to be seen in this perspective. In AD 192, Commodus renamed Rome the ἀθάνατον εὐτυχὴ κολωνίαν τῆς οἰκουμένης, while two years earlier, a medallion had already been coined for *Roma Felix*.<sup>45</sup> The 'construction' of this new colony must surely be connected to the restoration-works after the great fire of AD 192. But making Rome the 'immortal, fortunate colony of the whole earth' also implied that not just those people who happened to live in the city itself, but all the inhabitants of the realm could take symbolic 'possession' of the capital. Commodus' Rome thus became 'the common capital of the civilized world'.<sup>46</sup> The emphasis on this capital as essential symbol of unity for the realm could counter the loss of status which Rome would suffer from becoming 'just' a colony.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Oliver, 'The piety of Commodus', 378.

<sup>43</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 373-4.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *OGIS* 519 (= *CIL* 3.14191); *Syll*<sup>3</sup>, no. 888; De Blois, 'Emperor and empire', 3397 (on the third century AD): 'Contemporary inscriptions ... reveal a childlike trust in the effect of the emperor's charisma: if only the emperor is there in person ... there is hope for better times'.

<sup>45</sup> Dio, 73.15.2. Cf. SHA, *Comm*, 8.6-9, 15.7; *RIC* 3, nos. 247, 629; H. D. Schultz, *Antike Münzen. Bildheft zur Ausstellung des Münzkabinetts in der Antikensammlung im Pergamonmuseum* (Berlin 1997), no. 592; fig. 14.5a. On *Roma Felix*: H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'empire Romain. III. Médailles Impériales* (Leipzig 1930), no. 651: *ROMAE FELICI*; C. de Ranieri, 'Renovatio Temporum e 'rifondazione di Roma' nell'ideologia politica e religiosa di Commodo', *StudClassOr* 45 (1995), 329-68; 333. On the date AD 192: P. H. Martin, 'Hercules Romanus Conditor'. Ein seltener Aureus des Kaisers Commodus in Karlsruhe und Wien', *Jahrbuch der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen in Baden-Württemberg* 12 (1975), 51-64; M. A. Levi, 'Roma Colonia e Commodo Conditor', *CRDAC* 11 (1980/81), 315-20. See also *infra* p. pp. 107-8, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Oliver, 'The piety of Commodus', 379; Levi, 'Roma Colonia', 316: '... uno dei motivi rilevanti della politica romana del tempo era la posizione di Roma-*urbis* rispetto all'Italia e alle province'. Cf. Dio, 52.30.1-8, who proposes to enhance the status of, and activities in, Rome, whilst diminishing the autonomy of the cities in the provinces: L. de Blois, 'The world a city: Cassius Dio's view of the Roman empire', in: L. Aigner (ed.), *L'ecumenismo politico nella coscienza dell'Occidente II* (Rome 1995), 359-70; 361-2; C. Ando, 'Was Rome a polis?', *CIAnt* 18 (1999), 5-35; 27-30. Already Frontinus called Rome *regina et domina orbis* (Front. *de Aq.* 2.88.1). See also Arist. *Rom.* 61.

<sup>47</sup> Levi, 'Commodo Conditor', 319; De Ranieri, 'Renovatio Temporum', 353.



A centralising ideology of this sort would fit in well with the type of authoritarian ruler that has been described by Paul Veyne. Such a ruler uses his residence as an imperial court – as Commodus used Rome as the central focus-point of the realm, of which the splendour radiated throughout the empire.<sup>48</sup> Rome's regeneration as the 'immortal colony of the world' thus mirrored a rebirth of the empire under its emperor.<sup>49</sup> From this new centre, the absolute monarch ruled over all of his subjects. It need not be a surprise that this centralising attitude coincided with a steady decrease of the privileged position of Italy in the empire.<sup>50</sup> In a way, Caracalla's *constitutio Antoniniana* could be considered the final stage of this development. As the difference between emperor and subject increased more and more, the difference between citizens and non-citizens became of less importance.

The emphasis on Commodus' coins on his dynastic claim coheres with this image. Commodus was, after all, the first emperor 'born in the purple'. When, from AD 186 onwards, coin legends mentioned the NOBILITAS AVG(VSTI), the connotation might have gone beyond a mere reminder that the emperor's ancestors – from Nerva to Marcus – were people to take pride in.<sup>51</sup> This *nobilitas* was crucial in legitimating Commodus' position, which after the fall of Perennis and the *Bellum Desertorum* may not have been quite so strong as the emperor wanted. On the other hand, with the *Bellum Desertorum* won, and the unrest in Britain subdued, the Roman empire finally knew proper peace. The massive number of coins stressing *nobilitas*, just when peace was accomplished, was intended to show how only Commodus could have accomplished the task. His *nobilitas* guaranteed Roman power.<sup>52</sup>

Commodus had inherited the throne in a society in which one was

<sup>48</sup> P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris 1976), Ch. 4: 'L'empereur et sa capitale', 539-792, especially, 682-685: 'La ville éternelle tient lieu de cour'. Cf. N. Purcell, 'Rome and Italy', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 405-443; 412-23: 'The religion of centrality in the greatest Antonine city'.

<sup>49</sup> De Ranieri, '*Renovatio Temporum*', 352: '...un atto simbolico, con il quale l'imperatore mirava ad operare una rinascita, una rigenerazione della capitale...'.  
<sup>50</sup> F. Millar, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours* (London 1996<sup>2</sup>), 127.

<sup>51</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 715-716; 732-733; *BMCRE* 4, clci. Cf. *CIL* 5.4867-8, 10.307.

<sup>52</sup> Alföldi, 'Nobilitas Augusti', 343: 'Der Sieg und die Nobilitas des Kaisers gehören zusammen'. The stories that Commodus was Faustina's illegitimate son, begotten after an affair with a gladiator, were thus aimed at a crucial aspect of Commodus' self-presentation. Cf. SHA, *Marc. Ant.* 19.7; SHA, *Comm.* 8.1; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 16.2.

officially not allowed to appoint a political successor by testament. He had furthermore not yet been able to prove his (military and administrative) qualities.<sup>53</sup> It would have been impossible for Commodus simply to display his sovereignty as the choice of the *SPQR*; his election depended on the status of the dynasty. Indeed, Commodus consistently underlined his right to the throne as a result of being born, rather than adopted, into the dynasty.<sup>54</sup> But, as Veyne recognised, of all forms of leadership, only that of the monarch by absolute right ('de droit subjectif') can be dynastic. Such a monarch, argued Veyne, has to present himself as a divinely chosen ruler, a σωτήρ and an εὐεργέτης, who mirrors the 'divine father of gods and men', and whose private life is of public importance.<sup>55</sup>

This message of being divinely chosen, Commodus broadcast through the great emphasis on *Providentia Deorum* in his coinage. From the beginning of his reign, up until the middle of AD 184, she appeared uninterruptedly on *denarii*, sesterces, *dupondii*, and *asses*.<sup>56</sup> Between the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 183, and the 1<sup>st</sup> of November of that year, the goddess was even mentioned for the first time in Roman history in the Arval Acts:

Pro salute Imp(eratoris) Caes(aris) M. Aureli Commodi Anto[nini Aug(usti)  
pii Sarm(atici) Germ(anici) Max(imi)] ... Fratres aruales convenerunt ... Iovi  
o(ptimo) m(aximo) ... Iunoni reg(inae) ... M[inervae] ... Saluti... Providentiae  
deorum.<sup>57</sup>

Commodus presented himself as the pre-ordained emperor, destined to rule. 'La *Providentia deorum* se ne manifeste plus dans le choix judicieux d'un successeur, mais dans la naissance heureuse du dauphin .. on naît dieu comme on naît prince, de père en fils'.<sup>58</sup> It

<sup>53</sup> Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*, 594; 607. Th. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* II (Berlin 1878), 770. Cf. Appian, *B. Civ.* 3.18: 'The Roman people never surrendered the government to anybody to dispose of in succession, not even when they had kings (οὐδέ τῶν βασιλέων)'.

<sup>54</sup> De Ranieri, 'Providentia Deorum', 312.

<sup>55</sup> Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*, 540-589, especially 542, 553-560, 565, 575-580. Cf. L. de Blois, 'De erfenis van de Romeinse burgeroorlogen en de opbouw van de monarchie van Augustus', *Lampas* 13 (1980), 23-39; 24.

<sup>56</sup> Martin, *Providentia Deorum*, 339-340, nn. 235-49, with references; De Ranieri, 'Providentia Deorum', 325.

<sup>57</sup> J. Scheid, *Recherches archéologiques à la Magliana. Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium qui superunt. Les copies épigraphiques des protocols annuels de la confrérie Arvale (21 Av. - 304 Ap. J.-C.)* [Roma Antica 4] (Rome 1998), 265 no. 94, III 15-18 = *CIL* 6.2099, col. III, ll. 15-8; Martin, *Providentia Deorum*, 340 n. 258; 340-1 n. 259 mentions another possible dedication to *Providentia Deorum* in the Acts in AD 186. (Scheid, *Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium*, 271 no. 95b, II 5 = *CIL* 6.2100 b) That reference, however, is more ambiguous, as the entire name of the goddess is a restoration.

<sup>58</sup> Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 383; De Ranieri, 'Providentia Deorum', 315.

might be worth adding that the limited survival chances for new-borns and children may have been of importance in invoking *Providentia Deorum*. Commodus was the only surviving son out of eight brothers. This might have made the claim of divine involvement in exactly Commodus' survival more understandable. It ought also to be noted that the role of *Providentia deorum* decreased rather dramatically from AD 184/5 onwards; the exact period from which onwards Commodus proclaimed himself *Pius Felix*. One form of self-presentation appears to have made a previous form superfluous. Whatever the way in which Commodus made it explicit, the message was the same throughout: the divinely chosen ruler rose far above his subjects, whether from Italy, or other parts of the Roman world.

One way to show divine imperial superiority was to emphasise the Golden Age that the emperor – and only the emperor – could bring about. That must be the message that the combination *Pius Felix* tried to communicate. The emperor's divine *felicitas* would bring his subjects happiness. This was the *Saeculum Felix* that the *Ludi Primi Decennales* served to introduce.<sup>59</sup> The figure of Tellus, who started to appear on the coinage a year later (from AD 186 to 188), transmitted the same idea.<sup>60</sup> On the one hand references were made to Hadrian, who also used Tellus in his coinage, and likewise proclaimed a Golden Age.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, Commodus' coins created a symbolic message of their own. *Pius Felix, Tellus Stabilita, Cornucopiae* and *Victoriola*; they all emphasised the peace and plenty the emperor would bring to his people. 'In diesem Glaubenssatz des Kaiserkultes ist auch die bei Commodus zum ersten Male auftretenden Vereinigung von *pius* und *felix* zu einem doppelten Beinamen des Kaisers vorhanden ... denn nur den Frommen wird es gegeben, das *aureum saeculum* zu erleben'.<sup>62</sup> The devout who would be able to enter this age of happiness were connected to each other in their dedication to Commodus. All were his subjects. The emperor would lead them.

<sup>59</sup> Dio's famous sentence that Commodus' succession marked the descent from an age of gold to one of iron and rust (72.36.4) becomes all the more poignant if Commodus presented his reign as precisely such an age of gold; Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 122-3.

<sup>60</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 1120; 1123; 1128 (= Gneccchi, *MR II*, 84/8, 86/8-87/1).

<sup>61</sup> M. Grant, *Roman Imperial Money* (Amsterdam 1972), 211-214; 267. Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, 72 erroneously states that on coinage: 'Sie [Tellus] ist absolut neu und begegnet ausschließlich auf Medaillonen des Commodus'. Already under Hadrian a medallion was minted with Tellus on the reverse and Hadrian, covered by a lion skin, on the obverse. Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 62: 'Die Sache ist mit Temporum Felicitas durchaus zu vergleichen ...'; Gneccchi, *MR III*, no. 90.

<sup>62</sup> Alföldi, *Die monarchische Repräsentation*, 207; Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 371.

### *A divine emperor and his gods*

An emperor whose status was so elevated clearly stood in a special relation with the gods. In Commodus' coinage there are four gods with whom the association seems to stretch beyond standard imperial practice: Janus, Jupiter, Sol, and Hercules. Commodus had himself depicted on coins or medallions with the attributes of all of the above gods at one time or another – or, alternatively, had the deities depicted with his own features. These gods are not, however, necessarily, the divinities that are most often depicted on Commodus' coins. Janus, for instance, only appeared on Commodus' coinage during the two years succeeding the celebrations of Commodus' ten years of rule, in two diverse types. To compare; there are two Sol-types attested for Commodus' reign, five types with Apollo, nine with Mars and equal numbers for Minerva and Felicitas, twelve with Venus (though, unsurprisingly, all obverses of the coins which have Venus on their reverse show female members of the imperial family), fourteen different Hercules- and fifteen Jupiter-types, and twenty-one different ways of depicting Victoria.<sup>63</sup>

Though the diversity and quantity of Janus coins was relatively small, the image they depicted was striking.<sup>64</sup> A well-known medallion from AD 187 showed a double Janus-head on the obverse (fig. 2). One of those heads was unmistakably Commodus.<sup>65</sup> The other head of the deity has been interpreted as Hercules. There is, however, no real reason to suppose Herculean connotations for this image.<sup>66</sup> The

<sup>63</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, 43-55.

<sup>64</sup> Janus was a deity that was scarcely present on imperial coinage anyhow. Before Commodus, only Hadrian had him depicted on his *aurei*, and Antoninus Pius on sesterces and *asses*. The latter might be related to the fact that Janus was the standard deity depicted on the reverse of *asses* in the Republic. It is possible that Commodus here, as elsewhere in his coin types, followed Hadrian's example (Cf. p. 98 n. 61.); P. Bastien, *Le buste monétaire des Empereurs Romains*. 3 Vols. (Wetteren 1992-4), I, 323, Pl. 53.1-2; *BMCRE* 3, nos. 100, 1335; *BMCRE* 4, nos. 1317, 1319.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies*, no. 717; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 61-2; fig. 15.5; M. Bergmann, *Die Strahlen der Herrscher. Theomorphes Herrscherbild und politische Symbolik im Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1998), 265; fig. 51.4. Cf. *LIMC* 5.1, 618-23; 621, no. 13, a Spanish *as* on which both faces of the deity are replaced by that of Pompey. The *triumvir*, however, was only so depicted after his death.

<sup>66</sup> Gneecchi, *MR* II, no. 131; *BMCRE* 4, clxxxi; Grosso, *Commodo*, 239. Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 376, saw the medallion as the first step of 'assimilation de Commode à Hercule – association étroite en 187 sous le signe de l'Age d'or'. Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 23-4 already noted that the identification with Hercules is untenable. Also taken up by Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 61: 'Seit Gneecchi geistert ein solches Monstrum

'Hercules-part' of the Janus-head is in no way different from the 'normal' Janus reverse type which was produced in the same year

Rather than putting emphasis on an alleged association to Hercules, attention should be focused on the medallion as a whole. It is noticeable that surrounding the Janus/ Commodus-faces the legend displayed Commodus' normal titulature, as if it were simply the emperor's face that adorned the medallion. The emperor seems to have presented himself as one side of the deity whose double head, looking both forward and backward, symbolised a new era. Commodus' face, furthermore, was the one that looked forward – suggesting the future he would bring forth. Perhaps it was the future of his reign that the medallion expressed, instead of the desire to be seen as Commodus-Janus, referring, possibly, to the peace associated with the closing of the gates of Janus.<sup>67</sup> Peace was definitely what Commodus' reign brought, and if one could not boast great military victories, restoration of peace and order after the horrors of the plague and the extensive wars in Marcus' reign, could be considered the next-best thing. In any case, the contents of the future were explained on the reverse of the medallion. Tellus Stabilita unequivocally symbolised the golden days that could be expected; the *Temporum Felicitas* that were advertised elsewhere.

As much as Janus, Sol was a deity who could be intimately connected to the inauguration of a new age. It was not, therefore, so surprising that this deity too was closely associated to the emperor in his coinage. This may be the case on a medallion from AD 190/91 (fig. 3). On its reverse, a standard depiction of Sol – the deity wearing a radiate crown is mounting a *quadriga*, which is about to charge off towards the right top of the coin, whilst in the right bottom corner Tellus rests with a horn of plenty – was slightly, but significantly, altered. The figure of Sol, beardless in all other known examples of this reverse-type, suddenly became bearded – according to Marianne Bergmann a clear sign that the figure was intended to signify the emperor.<sup>68</sup> She assumes that this medallion ought to be connected to

denn auch durch die Forschung'.

<sup>67</sup> Commodus issued four different Pax-types in his sole rule, against one type during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, and one during Marcus' and Commodus' co-regency. None of Commodus' types, however, was issued in AD 187; Szaivert, 51, 71. One of the omens forecasting Commodus' death, as mentioned in the SHA, *Comm.* 16.4, was that *Ianus geminus sua sponte apertus est*.

<sup>68</sup> Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 247; Fig. 46.2-3; R. Pera, 'Omaggio a Commodo su una moneta di Apamea di Bitinia', *NAC* 16 (1987), 251-64; 261.

the Golden Age, which Commodus is indeed recorded to have officially declared during the last years of his reign.<sup>69</sup> Whether people will have sufficiently scrutinised the medallion to see the association that the small figure put forward, is, of course, a legitimate question, to which no clear-cut answer can be given. Yet to say that people might not have fully realised the implication of an image does not take that image away. Whatever the reception of the Sol-with-beard may have been, the association was broadcast all the same.

The Golden Age was not, however, all that Commodus broadcast through his coinage, and all the gods that received special attention need not be (and should not be) fitted into one great overlapping scheme. As far as Sol is concerned, the connection to a Golden Age seems convincing. But Commodus' attitude towards the gods was more diverse. A good example of this are the various images of Jupiter on Commodus' coins. On Commodus' coinage of the years AD 186/7 a new type of Jupiter can be found. *Aurei*, *denarii*, and *asses* were minted reading IOVI EXSVPER(ATORI).<sup>70</sup> It might well be more than a coincidence that *denarii* of the same year, which display Commodus with the new title of *Pater Senatus*, show the emperor with a branch in his right hand, and an eagle-tipped sceptre in the left. These were the exact same attributes as had been given to the Jupiter *Exsuperantissimus* – and the god, though seated as opposed to the standing emperor, had held the attributes in the same hands.<sup>71</sup> The parallel between the ruler of the gods and the ruler on earth may well have been understood, though perhaps only later. An inscription from Trevi, from AD 192, made Commodus himself *omnium virtutum exsuperantissimus*.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 252; Dio, 73.15.6, 73.16.1; SHA, *Comm.* 14.3. Cf. Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 371: 'Plusieurs indices d'un premier tournant dans la politique religieuse du règne se révèlent dans la numismatique des années 185-186: le thème de l'Age d'or s'enrichit de motifs inédits...'

<sup>70</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, 69; nos. 712-3, 730-1 (=RIC 3, nos. 152-3, 508; BMCRE 4, nos. 205, 213); Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 62. There is no reason to assume with C. De Ranieri, 'Commodo-Mercurio. Osservazioni sulla politica religiosa Commodiana', *PP* 51 (1996), 422-41; 430: 'una fusione tra il 'Signore del cielo' Siriaco (Ba'al Shamîn) e Iuppiter Optimus Maximus', especially not since, as she herself recognises, Commodus 'rinunciò a fornire una veste iconografica originale alla nuova divinità'. Rather than in the light of Oriental symbolism, it appears worthwhile to look at the 'new god' as a supreme variant of Jupiter Optimus Maximus – fitting, perhaps, for a supreme emperor. Cf. *CIL* 6.2099, Col I. l. 13 (Arval Acts); *AE* 1958.179; J. R. Fears, 'The Cult of Jupiter and Roman Imperial Ideology', *ANRW* II.17.1 (1981), 3-141; 113.

<sup>71</sup> BMCRE 4, nos. 222-5; R. Pera, 'Note sul culto di Giove nelle monete di Commodo', *RIN* 92 (1980), 109-122; 117.

<sup>72</sup> *CIL* 14.3449 (= *ILS* 400): *IMP CAES L AELIO AURELIO COMMODO AUG ...*

In AD 189, a step further was taken. Coins and medallions displayed Jupiter *Iuvenis*. Mattingly already suggested that one should see this type as a commemoration of the young Jupiter, with references to the young emperor.<sup>73</sup> It has been argued that this was overstating the case, yet it seems more realistic to suggest an unnecessary understatement on the part of Mattingly.<sup>74</sup> For, as Marianne Bergmann has recently brought forward forcefully, the young Jupiter on the coins undeniably bears the emperor's features (fig. 4).<sup>75</sup> The larger eyes and slightly different beard leave no room for doubt – the face is that of Commodus. One might even want to go one step beyond this. The physique of the Jupiter-figure appears slightly less muscular than that in other depictions of the supreme god. Especially in the light of later coins, which transfer the emperor's features to the body of Hercules, whilst maintaining the over-muscular body of the demi-god, this seems peculiar. A possible solution could be that here the difference between 'emperor with attributes of a god', and 'god reincarnated in the emperor' was made specific. Such an argument must, however, remain highly tentative, and cannot make any claims as to the reception of such subtleties.

Still, the association with Jupiter was firmly put forward. In this case, rather than a Golden Age, it was the emperor's superior position which was emphasised. Commodus ruled on earth like Jupiter in heaven. This point was, though indirectly, also made by the issues from AD 191, which mentioned Jupiter *Defensor Salutis Augusti*, and Jupiter *Optimus Maximus Sponsor Securitatis Augusti*.<sup>76</sup> A Jupiter who protected the emperor's welfare cannot have been the emperor himself in the guise of Jupiter. But a supreme god who personally protected his emperor certainly implied divine consent to that emperor's rule. Chantraine sees these issues as a reaction to Perennis' plot, which according to Herodian was reported to the emperor during the festivities for Jupiter Capitolinus.<sup>77</sup> An explanation for the fact that they had not have been coined far earlier, in AD 185/6, would be to

*pACAtORi ORBIS FELICI INVICTO ROMAN HERCULI ...OMNIUM VIRTUTUM EXSUPERANT/ ORDO DECURIONUM COMMODIANOR...* Cf. CIL 6.420 (= ILS 398).

<sup>73</sup> BMCRE 4, clxxv; nos. 253-5, 264, 623-4, 635: IOVI IVVENI; Gneccchi, MR II, nos. 43-4.

<sup>74</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 62: 'Mattingly geht zu weit ... numismatische Überinterpretationen'.

<sup>75</sup> BMCRE 4, nos. 253-5, 264, 623-4; Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 265; Fig. 51.5-6. Also Pera, 'Omaggio a Commodo', 261: 'Iuppiter Iuvenis si è incarnato nell'imperatore'. Cf. BMC, Mysia, 151; fig. 30.4. Cf. *infra* p. 170.

<sup>76</sup> RIC 3, nos. 596-7; Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 14; Figs. 3.8-9.

<sup>77</sup> Herodian, 1.9.2-3.

place them within the new (religious) policy of the years AD 190-2 – a form of gratitude in retrospect to the gods that had supported the emperor up till then.<sup>78</sup> The coins may certainly be an expression of gratitude, but it seems unwise to connect them with Perennis' 'plot', since the reliability of Herodian for these events is highly questionable.<sup>79</sup>

In all of the above cases, Commodus' association with a specific deity was made explicit through, at the most, a small number of images. These images were also almost inevitably found on medallions, which, as has been mentioned above, were minted in smaller numbers, and aimed at a limited (and for the emperor well-defined) audience; an audience of 'insiders', who were in all probability somehow educated and aware of the emperor's wishes. Medallions, finally, appear to have been more flattering anyhow – almost as if they were the visual equivalent to panegyric (though not to the extent of gemstones). Up to the last three years of his reign, Commodus could thus have defended his visual programme as not being very different from 'standard' imperial self-presentation. In the last three years of Commodus' regime, however, from AD 190 to the very end of AD 192, the association of the emperor with the demi-god Hercules went well beyond what all but the most extravagant Roman emperors had put forward.

There is no proper evidence that this role of Hercules was very clearly anticipated in the coinage.<sup>80</sup> The Janus-medallion of AD 187 turned out not to have Herculean connotations. Nor has Rostovtzeff's argument that the 'identification' of Commodus with Hercules already started in AD 185 survived modern criticism.<sup>81</sup> As crucial evidence for an early stage in Commodus' coinage, in which Hercules was slowly

<sup>78</sup> Chantaine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 14 n. 73.

<sup>79</sup> See *supra* p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> Nor is there evidence that Hercules was otherwise publicly put forward. The establishing of the *sodales Herculanii*, known from two inscriptions, only took place some time after AD 186. In one of the inscriptions Commodus is addressed as *Pius Felix* (CIL 6.1339 = ILS 1121). The other inscription (CIL 6.31691 = ILS 1120) mentions M. Atilius Severus, consul of AD 183, in the context of the *sodales Herculanii*. Though Atilius Severus was exiled in AD 183 (SHA, *Comm.* 4.11), he may well have returned to favour later; Grosso, *Commodo*, 160-1 n. 4: 'Evidentemente, dopo l'esilio, Severo rientrò a Roma, come altri'. On the *sodales* in this period: H.-G. Pflaum, *Les Sodales Antoniniani de l'époque de Marc-Aurèle* (Paris 1966), 1-2.

<sup>81</sup> M. I. Rostovtzeff, 'Commodus-Hercules in Britain', *JRS* 13 (1923), 91-109, criticised by Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 404-405; W. Derichs, *Herakles. Vorbild des Herrschers in der Antike* (PhD – Cologne 1950), 25-27. Cf. Chantaine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 25.



'introduced' as the emperor's divine guardian there is an undated (!) rare issue which is variously dated somewhere between AD 186 and 191 (though commonly between AD 186-9), on which Hercules was explicitly mentioned as Commodus' *comes*, and an equally difficult to date sardonix intaglio from the British Museum, on which the deity was also so depicted.<sup>82</sup> Finally, a medallion from AD 186/7 shows on its reverse Hercules standing in front of Commodus, who was making a sacrifice.<sup>83</sup> Hercules thus did figure on Commodian coins before AD 190, but these appearances were few, and of little consequence. Especially compared to the ongoing association with Janus, Sol, and Jupiter in the years immediately preceding AD 190, there appears to be nothing noticeable in the way Commodus had Hercules depicted on his coins in this period. Still, some scholars have presupposed a slow 'assimilation' between emperor and deity, which eventually led to full 'identification'.<sup>84</sup> Yet if one tries to look at the coinage without prior knowledge of the succeeding period, it seems that rather than a slow assimilation between Commodus and Hercules, the demi-god suddenly appeared in the emperor's visual programme in a way unparalleled by any other (earlier) deity.

It must be stressed at this point that it was not the fact that Commodus used Hercules as a 'paradigm' which was noticeable *per se* – many rulers in antiquity, from Alexander the Great onwards, had strongly associated themselves with the demi-god.<sup>85</sup> Commodus, however, shunned ambiguity, and unequivocally declared himself the new incarnation of Hercules. Some development may be seen in the legend which was used on the coinage of AD 190-2. It first said

<sup>82</sup> RIC 3, no. 634; BMCRE 4, no. 616; British Museum 2019; E. Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica antoniniana dalla collezione del palazzo Ducale di Mantova* (Florence 1989), 109, G; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 48, O. Palagia, 'Imitation of Hercules in ruler portraiture. A survey from Alexander to Maximinus Daza', *Boreas* 9 (1986), 137-151; 147. On *comites* see still: A. D. Nock, 'The emperor's divine comes', *JRS* 37 (1947), 102-116. Now also: L. Possenti, 'Le divinità comites', *AFLM* 28 (1995), 141-70; 142-4.

<sup>83</sup> Gneccchi, *MR* II, no. 95; Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica*, 108, E 1.

<sup>84</sup> Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 376: 'Les deux étapes de l'assimilation de Commode à Hercule – association étroite en 187 sous le signe de l'Age d'or, identification complète en 192 ...'; Palagia, 'Imitation of Hercules', 147: 'the assimilation was effected in a number of stages'; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, 68. Most extremely, Giuliano, 'Un cammeo con Commodo-Herakles', 328: 'La sua assimilazione a Herakles si accentua durante tutto il principato sino a divenire quasi esclusiva negli ultimi anni'.

<sup>85</sup> Palagia, 'Imitation of Hercules'; U. Huttner, *Die politische Rolle der Heraklesgestalt im griechischen Herrschertum* (Stuttgart 1997); S. Ritter, *Hercules in der römischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis Augustus* (Heidelberg 1995); Derichs, *Herakles*; O. Hekster, 'Propagating power: Hercules as an example of Roman emperors in the second century AD', in: H. Bowden / L. Rawling (eds.), *Herakles-Hercules in the Ancient World* (forthcoming).

HERCULI COMMODIANO, on medallions, sesterces, *dupondii*, and *asses*. Only some time later, from December 191 on, medallions and coins from all values read HERCULI ROMANO AUGUSTO.<sup>86</sup> One could, perhaps, argue that the Hercules *Commodianus* was not so different from Hercules as a *comes*, whilst with the Hercules Romanus true identification between Commodus and Hercules was acknowledged.<sup>87</sup> Yet such an argument would neglect the fact that as late as AD 192 a medallion was coined in which Commodus wears the lion-skin (though not over his head) but is named L AELIUS AURELIUS COMMODUS AUG PIUS FELIX, and has his normal titulature on the reverse. A *dupondius* from AD 191-2 has a similar obverse, but a reverse reading HERCULI ROMANI AUG SC.<sup>88</sup> Apparently, arguing for a direct chronological development is an oversimplification.

Simply equating the *comes* Hercules and the Hercules *Commodianus* would also fail to take into account the parallelism between the Hercules *Commodianus*, and the similarly-called senate, cities, legions, and other institutions.<sup>89</sup> Surely these reclassifications implied more than mere association to the *princeps*. It may be telling that a rare *aureus* of AD 190/1, the reverse of which was identical to the coins mentioning the Hercules *Commodianus*, read HERC COM.<sup>90</sup> It seems odd (though not impossible) to argue from this fact that the *comes* Hercules and the Hercules *Commodianus* were interchangeable. The coins of smaller denomination consistently mentioned HERCULI COMMODIANO. Only the *aurei* were different. The difference in size between the *aurei* and the *asses* is negligible, so lack of space on the gold coins cannot be the reason for the abbreviation.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> HERCULI COMMODIANI: Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 1144-5 (= Gneecchi, *MR* II, 79/5-6); *BMCRE* 4, nos. 669, 676-7; p. 831 \* (= *RIC* 3, nos. 581, 586, 591). HERCULI ROMANI AUGUSTO: Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 1162-70 (= Gneecchi, *MR* II, 77/2, 79/7-10, 80/3-7); *RIC* 3, nos. 250-4b, 637-40, 643-4; Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica*, 110, N, 1-3.

<sup>87</sup> M. Jaczynowska, 'Le culte de l'Hercule romain au temps du Haut-Empire', *ANRW* II.17.2 (1981), 631-661; 639.

<sup>88</sup> Bastien, *Buste monétaire* II, 375; pl. 72.3, 72.5; J. Toynbee, *Roman Medallions* [= *Numismatic Studies* 5] (New York 1944), 75 (= Gneecchi, *MR* II, no. 114).

<sup>89</sup> *Supra* p. 78. Cf. also CONCOR(DIA) COMMODI(ANA) (*BMCRE* 5, no. 668, 675\*) the *Flamen Comm(odianus)* (*CIL* 6.1577); the *ordo decurionum commodianor(um)* (*CIL* 14.2449 = *ILS* 400, addressed to Commodus as *Invictus Romanus Hercules*), and the FELIC(itas) COM(modiana) (*BMCRE* 4, p. 746). Cf. *EDH* no. HD000480 (= *AE* 1982.958).

<sup>90</sup> *BMCRE* 4, no. 300 (= *RIC* 3, no. 221).

<sup>91</sup> *Aureus*: *RIC* 3, no. 221 (= *BMCRE* 5, no. 300): 112.6/7.30. *As*: *RIC* 3, no. 591 (= *BMCRE* 5, no. 677): 134.2/8.70.

It might be permissible to see this difference in the light of 'audience-control'. Gold coins would be far more likely to come to the direct attention of the senatorial elite, for whom the divine claims of their *princeps* would seem a direct affront. Images, furthermore, are 'encoded in such a way as to communicate specific things to specific cultures or groups'.<sup>92</sup> This is not to say that senators would have been unaware of Commodus' message, just because he limited it to medallions (which were only given to those subjects chosen by the emperor), and coins of lesser value.<sup>93</sup> Yet a differentiation of messages from one medium – aimed at one audience – to another, could be a reason for the diverse legends on the different coins. Not all layers of society were thus, initially, made irrevocably aware of Commodus' Herculean claim. Such limitation of audience (if that was indeed what was going on) points at some development in the way the emperor's claims were introduced, though not, necessarily, at an assimilation by steps.

Anyhow, from (probably) the end of AD 191 onwards, almost all forms of 'coinage unequivocally read HERCULI ROMANO AUGUSTO'.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, numerous new reverse types were issued featuring Hercules. On them, the various strands of auto-representation that had been introduced earlier in Commodus' reign seem to have been drawn together. The 'official' change of Commodus' name in AD 191, to Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix, fits the pattern. The emperor turned back to his full name of birth – the name that Lucius Verus had given up after Antoninus Pius' death.<sup>95</sup> Hercules, like Commodus, ruled the earth by divine (birth)right. Through his deeds he had freed the world of monsters, and brought peace and abundance to the people he cared for; a Golden Age like the one Commodus had promised to his

<sup>92</sup> D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago 1989), 23.

<sup>93</sup> The earlier mentioned AD 192 medallion (*supra* p. 105 n. 88), which still used the traditional titulature of the emperor, though in combination with a lion-skin, could in this interpretation have been intended for someone who would not unequivocally have supported a far-going assimilation between emperor and deity, such as most of the senators. An unusual sesterce (*RIC* 3, no. 613) from the first half of AD 192 might imply that Commodus had not yet abandoned all relations with the senate. On it, the emperor, clad in toga, greets the Victoria of the Curia – and thus the senate itself. Is this a sign of good-will, or a message of final victory over the senators? The message is not clear, and very much in the eye of the beholder, both now and in antiquity; M. R.-Alföldi, *Bild und Bildersprache der römischen Kaiser. Beispiele und Analysen* (Mainz 1999), 163-5 Abb. 210.

<sup>94</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 853-859 (= *RIC* 3, nos. 251-254d, 637-640, 643-644, 721); Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica*, 110, N.

<sup>95</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 58-9.

subjects. A multitude of coins from AD 190 reading SAECULI / TEMPORUM FELICITAS), and depicting a *caduceus* between crossing *cornucopiae* strengthened this image.<sup>96</sup> The idea was further illustrated on a medallion from AD 191/2. On it, the obverse of the emperor with the lion-skin was combined with a reverse depicting the seasons in the guise of four children, and with the legend TEMPORUM FELICITAS.<sup>97</sup> The suggestion that it was the emperor in the form of Hercules who would bring those happy seasons along was clear.

The *Temporum/Saeculi Felicitas* mintage of 190 had, however, another connotation as well. It should be seen, as Kaiser-Raiß already realised, in combination with Commodus' thirtieth birthday.<sup>98</sup> In that very same light a series of sesterces and *asses* ought to be analysed. Their reverse showed Commodus, in priestly gown, ploughing and accompanied by two oxen. This was undeniably a *conditor* scene. The legend stated COLLANCOM and has almost inevitably been interpreted in connection to Commodus' renaming of Rome.<sup>99</sup> Yet doing so gives rise to two major problems. First of all, these coins would be two years too early.<sup>100</sup> Secondly, the legend ought then to be COL(ONIA) L(UCIA) AN(TONINIANA) COM(MODIANA).<sup>101</sup> But in AD 190 Commodus' official name still incorporated Marcus, not Lucius. The naming of a colony could not deviate from the emperor's official name. This problem has been long recognised, and as an alternative, the idea has been put forward that there were two different foundations. Rome was only the second of these. The first was the COL(ONIA) L(ANUVINA) AN(TONINIANA) COM(MODIANA).<sup>102</sup>

<sup>96</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 565, 573, 145+; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 48; Fig. 22.1.3.

<sup>97</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 51; fig. 26.2; Gneccchi, *MR* II, nos. 135-7, 87/3); Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica*, 110, L 2.

<sup>98</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 209, 214, 565-67, 573-5; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 48-9. Cf. W. Schmidt, *Geburtstag im Altertum* (Giessen 1908), 63-4, 69.

<sup>99</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 560, 570; Beaujeu, *Religion romaine*, 398-9; Grosso, *Commodo*, 319-20; Heer, *Vita Commodi*, 101-2.

<sup>100</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 320 unconvincingly explains the two year gap away by assuming these coins to anticipate the event of AD 192. Jaczynowska, 'Le culte de l'Hercule romain', 638, without further evidence, claims Rome was already renamed in AD 190.

<sup>101</sup> Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 30 n. 140, and Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 49, n. 347, list various alternatives for *Antoniana*, with the authors who have put the readings forward.

<sup>102</sup> Martin, 'Hercules Romanus Conditor'; Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 30 n. 140; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 49; De Ranieri, 'Renovatio Temporum', 348. Perhaps Ostia was renamed *Colonia Felix Commodiana* alongside Rome, as a lead-fistula seems to imply. The fistula was announced in 1856 by Visconti, but disappeared thereafter. Grosso, *Commodo*, 370-1 (with references) argued in favour of its genuineness, though he believed its provenance may well have been Rome itself. See now C. Bruun, 'L'amministra-

Commodus, like Antoninus Pius, was born in Lanuvium. The emperor also returned there, and even performed in the town's arena: 'He was also called the Roman Hercules, because he had killed wild beasts in the amphitheatre at Lanuvium' (*appellatus est etiam Romanus Hercules, quod feras Lanuvii in amphitheatro occidisset*).<sup>103</sup> It would, then, hardly be surprising that for his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday he raised the status of the municipality to that of a colony. One might add that Lanuvium is one of the few places from which we have epigraphic evidence that testifies to practical usage of Commodus' new month-names, referring to the *Idus Commodas*.<sup>104</sup> Lanuvium, also, was well-known for its local Hercules cult.<sup>105</sup> Kaiser-Raiß suggests an interesting reconstruction. For his birthday, the emperor made Lanuvium a colony, and during the ensuing festivities, he appeared in the guise of Hercules in the arena. As a result, he was named Hercules Romanus.<sup>106</sup> One should add that the demi-god was a mythological founder of cities anyhow. On his return from Gades, after performing the labour of stealing the cattle of Geryon, he founded a great many settlements – Herculanum only being one of the more obvious amongst them.<sup>107</sup> Hercules even started the ancient cult at the Ara Maxima in Rome itself on this journey, after defeating the monster Cacus.<sup>108</sup> The demi-god thus linked the Golden Age the emperor would bring, his superhuman function as *conditor* (both of Lanuvium and Rome),<sup>109</sup> and the ruler's right of reigning through divine birth.

zione imperiale di Ostia e Portus', in: Idem/ A. G. Zevi (eds.), *Ostia e Portus e i rapporti con Roma* (forthcoming), who reasons that renaming Ostia with the same name as Rome, could be seen as further evidence for the close relationship between Rome and Ostia.

<sup>103</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 8.5.

<sup>104</sup> *CIL* 14.2113. See *infra* p. 166 n. 13.

<sup>105</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 333.

<sup>106</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 49. It seems, however, unlikely that Commodus was called 'Hercules Romanus' without any prior anticipation, and it appears that the *Historia Augusta* mixes its chronology. Yet the general argument is attractive. On Commodus' actions in the amphitheatre, see *infra* Ch. 4: 'An emperor on display', *passim*.

<sup>107</sup> Diog. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.44. Cf. Pompeii, which may have been named after Hercules' triumphal procession; Serv. *Aen.* 7.662. Cf. T. P. Wiseman, 'Domi Nobiles and the Roman cultural elite' in: M. Cébeillac-Gervasoni (ed.), *Les «Bourgeoisies» municipales italiennes aux II<sup>e</sup> et I<sup>er</sup> siècles av. J.-C.* (Paris – Naples 1983), 303-4; 303: 'Wherever Herakles went in his western journeys, he fathered genealogically significant children'.

<sup>108</sup> F. Coarelli, *Il foro Boario dalle origini alla fine della repubblica* (Rome 1992<sup>2</sup>), 61-77. Cf. M. A. Levi, 'Erocle al Foro Boario e le origini di Roma', *RAL* ser. 9 vol. 7.4 (1996), 665-76, on the (possible) importance of the Forum Boarium (and Ara Maxima) as the area from which the city of Rome originated.

<sup>109</sup> Levi, 'Roma Colonia', 320: '... la rifondazione di Roma come colonia ecumenica Commodiana avrebbe messo Commodo nella posizione di *conditor* che la tradizione di tutto il mondo classico considerava sovrumana benemerenda'. Cf. E. S. Ramage, 'Augustus' propaganda in Spain', *Klio* 80 (1998), 434-90; 439-48.

Hercules, of course, had been a man turned god – yet the divine status that Commodus was trying to assume seems to have not been so far removed from actual divinity. Indeed, a divine example of a mortal who through his deeds for mankind reaches immortality was all too appropriate for a monarch by divine right. More than ever before, Hercules' labours themselves were depicted on the coins.<sup>110</sup> More than ever before, also, Hercules was used in coin-types that bore little or no relation to the deity's mythological narrative. 'Even the type of Commodus and Africa, illustrating the 'Providence of Augustus', shows Commodus in the guise of the god'.<sup>111</sup>

From AD 190 onwards, the comparison between emperor and god was pontifically put forward. Possibly there was a slight development in the gradation of identification, and in the composition of the enveloped audience, but, if any, it concerned subtleties. Far more obvious was the increase in Hercules-depictions on the coinage, both quantitatively (Szaivert recognises six new Hercules-types in the years AD 190-2, compared to, for instance, one new Jupiter-type; the Jupiter *Defensor*), and as far as the actual assimilation between emperor and god was concerned. Earlier associations, as has been said, had inevitably been few, and somewhat ambiguous. Sol had been hinted at by the presence of a beard, and Jupiter by slight (though clearly recognisable) changes of the features. The image of 'Commodus-Janus' had been on the obverse of a medallion, and the comparison between Janus and Commodus more explicit. Yet one could argue that it was the future the deity would bring about, rather than Janus himself, that Commodus tried to identify with – a symbolic passing of the threshold to peace. As with Sol and Jupiter, the Commodus-Janus medallion was, at most, extremely rare – possibly even unique. All of this changed with Hercules. Now the emperor was fully, and repeatedly, depicted with Hercules' lion-skin and club. These images were not limited to medallions, nor to reverses. Nobody could fail to notice the suggestion that the emperor was putting forward. He was the god incarnate.

Such a sudden bombardment of images is unlikely to have appeared without a cause. Tentatively, one could suggest a change in self-presentation related to Commodus' thirtieth birthday, which more or less coincided with ten years of sole rule. Much as the *Saeculum Felix*

<sup>110</sup> R. Volkammer, 'Die Zwölf Arbeiten des Herakles in der römischen Reichsprägung', in: T. Hackens / G. Moucharte (eds.), *Proceedings of the XIth International Numismatic Congress II* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1993), 313-20; 314, 316-7, figs. 15-6.

<sup>111</sup> *BMCRE* 4, clxxviii; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, no. 861.

had been announced in relation to the *Ludi Primi Decennales*, the emperor's Herculean divinity might well have been connected to a new set of festivities. However, another possibility should also be brought under consideration. The powerful freedman Cleander fell, as has been discussed, in AD 190, in the course of an organised popular riot. Cassius Dio (73.13.1) explicitly mentions that 'It was not the soldiers ... that killed him [Cleander], as in the case of Perennis, but the populace'. To which Herodian adds:

Commodus now feared there would be popular violence (ὁ δὲ Κόμοδος δεδιὼς μὲν τὴν τοῦ δήμου κίνησιν) and an attempt to remove him by revolution. (Herodian, 1.13.7)

The events had shocked Commodus. A number of reverse types from ensuing years emphasised the divinities that had personally protected Commodus – from dangers just past, or longer ago. Jupiter was explicitly made the *Defensor* and *Sponsor Securitatis* (or *Salutis Augusti*).<sup>112</sup> Kybele and Sarapis were introduced as *Mater Deum Conservatrix Augusti*, and *Serapis Conservator Augusti*.<sup>113</sup> The latter should be interpreted in light of Sarapis' function as protector of the transport of Egyptian corn. In AD 190 the deity had already been explicitly portrayed as such.<sup>114</sup> The uproar that caused Cleander's fall, was, of course, connected to a shortage of corn in Rome. Kybele's strong agrarian character, and her function of fertility deity might be of importance as well.<sup>115</sup>

It seems reasonable to suggest a change of policy from the side of Commodus, as a result of the tumultuous period that caused Cleander's death. The *Historia Augusta* actually implies as much:

A great famine arose in Rome (*inopia ingens Romae exorta est*)... because those who then ruled the state were plundering the food supply (*annonam*

<sup>112</sup> See *supra* p. 102.

<sup>113</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 599, 601, 605, 607; Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 15, figs. 3.10-1. Cf. possibly also *LIMC* 5, 'Ianus', no. 19: A *denarius* from the very beginning of the reign of Pertinax, and therefore probably still selected under Commodus, which is coined *Iano Conservatori*.

<sup>114</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 41, Taf. 20.9, 21.1; S. A. Tacács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman world* (Leiden – New York – Cologne 1995), 113: '... the reverse legend Serapidi Conservatori, which refers to the function of protecting the transport of cereals'; L. Vidman, *Serapis bei den Griechen und Römern: epigraphische Studien zur Verbreitung und zu den Trägern des ägyptischen Kultes* (Berlin 1970), 77.

<sup>115</sup> Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 16, noted that the Maternus-conspiracy ought to have taken place during festivities for Magna Mater, had it not been discovered on time; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 43: 'Die Bezüge Kybele/Maternus Attentat und Serapis Cleander sind evident'. The trustworthiness of a possible Maternus-conspiracy in Rome is, however, highly doubtful (see *supra* pp. 66-7), and the connection is tentative at best.

*vastarent ii qui tunc rem publicam gerebant*)... but for the time he [Commodus] pretended that a golden Age had come, with the name 'Commodianum' (*ipse vero saeculum aureum Commodianum nomine adsimulans*) (SHA, *Comm.* 14.1-3. Cf. Dio, 73.15.6).

A popular riot would have emphasised the need to keep the Roman *plebs* contented. As we shall see, it appears worth while to look at Commodus' behaviour as a gladiator in that perspective. With popular acclamation in doubt, and senatorial good-will long lost, a Commodian Golden Age, and divine legitimation that went further than even earlier suggestions in that direction, would be a logical reaction. Hercules, the man turned god, who combined so many of the aspects Commodus was trying to put forward, was an obvious choice. The god-emperor would bring prosperity. He could even protect the corn-supply. That is what the coin-type showing Commodus and Africa, which emphasised the 'Providence of Augustus', put forward in AD 192 – Commodus-Hercules protected the *classis Africana*, the Egyptian corn fleet that was established by the emperor and aptly renamed the *Africana Commodiana Herculeae*.<sup>116</sup>

The extent to which the emperor went to claim his divine authority may have been new, and somewhat excessive. Yet it remains of importance to realise that the majority of the changes – but for the most extreme examples of sycophancy – could easily be incorporated within traditional Roman religious thought and ritual.<sup>117</sup> Commodus' coinage, in the last three years of his reign especially, sent out a new message. The style chosen to broadcast this message, however, was fully embedded in Roman tradition, though pushed to the limits of the permissible.

<sup>116</sup> BMCRE 4, clxxviii; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, no. 861 (see *supra* p. 109 n. 111); Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 59. But see H. Pavis d'Escurac, 'Réflexions sur la *classis Africana Commodiana*', in J. Thérèux (ed.), *Mélanges d'histoire ancienne offerts à William Seston* (Paris 1974), 397-408; 402-7, who argues that there never was a specific Egyptian corn fleet, and that the fleet which was renamed was the *Classis nova Libyca* (CIL 8.7030), established for surveillance of the African coast, and therefore a type of *Classis Aficanae*, but not for grain. The argument of Traupman, *Commodus*, 137, that the reconstruction of the 'Piazzale delle Corporazioni' in Ostia (the offices of the shipping corporation which were responsible for the *annona*) showed Commodus' interest in delivery of grain does not hold, as the reconstructions appear to have been Hadrianic; I. Pohl, 'Piazzale delle Corporazioni ad Ostia. Tentativo di ricostruire del portico Claudio e la sua decorazione', *MEFRA* 90 (1978), 331-57; 333. Still, Commodus did pay attention to grain-storage in Ostia; G. Rickman, *Roman Granaries and Store Buildings* (Cambridge 1971), 41-3, 130.

<sup>117</sup> Grant, *Roman Imperial Money*, 226.



## Statuary and the message from the coins

πλήρεις εικόνων αἱ πόλεις, αἱ μὲν πινάκων γραπτῶν, αἱ δὲ που καὶ τιμιωτέρας ὕλης (Full of images are the cities, some in the form of painted tablets, some maybe of more precious material) (Menander Rhetor §377, 29)

A visual programme consists of more than merely coinage. Statuary, too, could be used as a medium to broadcast the imperial image. Prior to discussing how to connect the relation to the gods that Commodus broadcast through his coinage to the (imperial) statues, it is necessary to discuss the function of those statues in the Roman world. To what extent did they influence the perception of the emperor? This should not be underestimated. The imperial portrait was almost omnipresent. These statues, or even the attributes that the emperor used repeatedly when presenting himself, did not just depict the emperor; they represented him and his position.<sup>118</sup> One could easily use them to transmit certain messages. The most obvious was to emphasise the emperor's divinity. The postures and features of the imperial statues were very much mirrored on statues of the gods. When creating an imperial portrait, artists regularly based themselves on statues of the gods. They equally used divine attributes, in combination with imperial imagery so as to raise the emperor to a divine level.<sup>119</sup>

The choice of materials was of importance as well. Gold, silver and ivory statues expressed divine power from, at least, the Hellenistic time onwards.<sup>120</sup> The literary tradition claims that it was just the 'mad' emperors (Gaius, Nero, Domitian, Commodus) that used these materials to form their image. It is, however, quite likely that this was common imperial practice. Gold and silver statues are known, for instance, from the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. The latter is, indeed, the only emperor of whom we know for a fact that he had a golden bust fabricated of himself, as it has been preserved.<sup>121</sup>

Imperial statues were more than mere objects. To an extent, they not only represented the emperor, but were believed to contain the

<sup>118</sup> Scheiper, *Bildpropaganda*, 23.

<sup>119</sup> S. F. R. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1984), 180-181; M. Fuchs, 'Römer in Göttern- und Heldenpose', *JRA* 3 (1990), 279-285.

<sup>120</sup> H. Niemeyer, *Studien zur statuarischen Darstellung der römischen Kaiser* (Berlin 1968), 19.

<sup>121</sup> Niemeyer, *Studien zur statuarischen Darstellung*, 20; T. Pekáry, *Das Römische Herrscherbild*, III, *Das Römische Kaiserbildnis in Staat, Kult und Gesellschaft, dargestellt an hand der Schriftquellen* (Berlin 1985), 69; 78.

emperor's presence – to have a direct bond with their 'prototype'.<sup>122</sup>

The imperial image, too, is called the emperor; and yet there are not two emperors (ὅτι βασιλεὺς λέγεται καὶ ἡ τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκών, καὶ οὐ δύο βασιλεῖς): neither is the power cut asunder nor the glory divided. And as the authority which holds sway over us is one, so the glorification we address to it is one and not many, since the honour shown to the image is transmitted to its model (διότι ἡ τῆς Εἰκόνης τιμὴ ἐπὶ Πρωτότυπον).<sup>123</sup>

This did not mean that the statue *was* the emperor. The ambiguity is nicely illustrated by Tacitus:

*Tum placuit Tiridaten ponere apud effigiem Caesaris insigne regium nec nisi manu Neronis resumere ... medio tribunal sedem curulem et sedes effigiem Neronis sustinebat. Ad quam progressus Tiridates, caesis ex more victimis, sublatum capiti diadema imagini subiecit, magnis apud cunctos animorum motibus...* (It was then agreed that Tiridates should lay down his royal crown before Caesar's image, and resume it only from the hand of Nero ... In the centre, a tribunal bore a curule chair, and the chair a statue of Nero. To this Tiridates advanced, and after the usual sacrifice of victims, he removed the crown from his head, and set it at the feet of the statue; whereupon all felt a deep thrill of emotion ...).<sup>124</sup>

The statue of Nero symbolised the emperor to a degree which caused a 'deep thrill of emotion' when Tiridates lay down his crown. Yet it was clear that only the real 'hand of Nero', could give Tiridates his royal crown back. A comparison to the statues of the gods is apt, for people believed at one and the same time that those statues actually were gods, and that they were not.<sup>125</sup>

Statues of the emperors could be compared to statues of the gods in another respect as well. Both could be used to claim *asylum*. Gaius still explicitly used the phrase '*ad statuas principum confugiunt*', but Ulpian did not hesitate to use the shortened phrase '*ad statuas confugere*' without differentiating between imperial statues and those of the gods. Even as late as AD 386, a law quoted in the Theodosian Code expressly acknowledged this right of asylum.<sup>126</sup> All the same,

<sup>122</sup> Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 170.

<sup>123</sup> St. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18.45. This passage must be seen in the context of the debates on the nature of the Trinity (Price, *Rituals and Power*, 203). Still, the quoted comparison with worshipping imperial images suggests that people understood the practice he referred to. Cf. Athanasius, *Oratio III contra Arianos*, 5: 'The shape and the form of the king are in the image, and the form in the image is in the king'.

<sup>124</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.

<sup>125</sup> R.L. Gordon, 'The real and the imaginary: production and religion in the Graeco-Roman world', *Art History* 2 (1979), 5-34; 16. Cf. E. Kitzinger, 'The cult of images in the age before iconoclasm', *DOP* 8 (1954), 83-150; 117: 'Among the broad masses the concept that divine forces were present in religious images was deeply rooted in the pagan past'.

<sup>126</sup> Gaius, *Inst.* 1.53; Dig [Ulpian], 21.1.19,1; *Cod.Theod.* 9.44.1. On asylum at imperial

these rights of sanctuary did not help the young Antony, the eldest son of Mark Antony, who was dragged away from – of all places – the statue of the divine Julius, as Suetonius tells us in *Augustus*, 18. Then again, the sanctuary of Athena's cult statue had not helped Cassandra against Ajax. But 'the imperial image, had, in fact, a specific constitutional and legal role which had been laid down in Roman times and was not affected by the advent of Christianity ... *Ad status confugere* was a traditional right of any person seeking the protection of imperial law, a right that was clearly circumscribed but not eliminated in the codifications of Theodosius and Justinian'.<sup>127</sup>

Even in terminology the difference between the statues of emperors and gods was not entirely clear. As Simon Price pointed out, in the Greek east, images of the emperor were not only described in 'secular terms' but equally as ἄγαλματα, a term normally used for the more important temple-statues of deities. However, it was mainly the statues of the emperor in temples and shrines that were so addressed, whilst 'more secular terms', ἀνδριάς and εἰκὼν were similarly applied to statues which were displayed in the public sphere.<sup>128</sup> Similar distinctions do not seem to have existed in Latin.

These statues, now, were ubiquitous to the Roman eye, as Fronto reminded the young Marcus Aurelius:

*Scis ut in omnibus argentariis mensulis pergulis tabernis protectis vestibulis fenestris usquequaque ubique imagines vestrae sint volgo propositae.* (You know how in all money-changer's bureaux, booths, bookstalls, eaves, porches, windows, anywhere and everywhere there are likenesses of you exposed to view). (Fronto, *Ad M Caes*, 4,12.4)

It is probable that in 'house-shrines', too, statues of the emperor were a frequent characteristic.<sup>129</sup> Even nowadays, in both democratically and authoritatively governed countries, images of the leaders are widespread. In Rome images of the emperor must have been unavoidable.

statues, especially for slaves; Plin. *Epist.* 10.74, 1; Price, *Rituals and Power*, 192; Pekáry, *Das römische Herrscherbild*, 130.

<sup>127</sup> Kitzinger, 'The cult of images', 122-23; *Cod.Iust.* 1. 25,1; *Dig.* 47.10.38; 48.19.28,7.

<sup>128</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 177.

<sup>129</sup> J. R. Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy 100 BC – AD 250. Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 1991), 6-9; Niemeyer, *Studien zur statuarischen Darstellung*, 25: 'Der Brauch, das Bild des Kaisers in Statuettenform im Hausaltar zu verehren, war offenbar im ersten wie im zweiten Jahrhundert n. Chr. allgemein verbreitet'.

*Commodus, Janus, Jupiter and Sol*

Commodus' coinage showed a number of deities with whom the emperor extensively associated himself, prior to the emphatic choice of Hercules in the last years of his reign. It seems reasonable to assume that imperial statues followed a similar pattern. For Janus, however, an exception may be made. This divinity was rarely, if ever, the subject of statuary. It need not be surprising that there are no known Janus-statues from Commodus' period either – let alone one with the emperor's features.<sup>130</sup> Statues of Jupiter, of course, existed in great numbers. None of them, though, resemble Commodus. A statue in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, has been speculatively described by Vermeule and Von Bothmer as possibly Commodus as Zeus, yet this very statue was more recently dated to the 160's. The attribution – such as it is – was made without any arguments, mentioned as an aside in connection to another allegedly god-like Commodus-sculpture, and cannot be maintained.<sup>131</sup>

This latter god-like statue, from the Canterbury Royal Museum and Slater Gallery, Vermeule and Von Bothmer deemed to be 'a splendid Sarapis-like likeness of Commodus, with a wreath of vine leaves in the hair and the remains of the fillets on the back of the head ... This representation of the emperor as Bacchus recalls the Salting bronze in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he appears as Dionysos Sabazios'.<sup>132</sup> As to the Salting bronze, they referred to earlier notes, where, however, the statue was described without further ado as 'the oft-published bronze bust called that of Commodus Mithras'.<sup>133</sup> This bronze bust depicts neither Mithras, nor Dionysos Sabazios, nor indeed Commodus, as has long been recognised.<sup>134</sup> Nor should the bust

<sup>130</sup> LIMC 5.1, 618-23.

<sup>131</sup> Inv nr. 2117; C. C. Vermeule / D. von Bothmer, 'Notes on a new edition of Michaelis: Ancient marbles in Great Britain. Part three: 1', *AJA* 63 (1959), 139-166; 146. R. Winkes, *Clipeata Imago. Studien zu einer römischen Bildnisform* (Bonn 1969), 173 dates the sculpture at the end of the 160's.

<sup>132</sup> Vermeule / Von Bothmer, 'Notes, 3.1', 146; pl. 36, fig. 15. How one can have a 'Sarapis-like' representation of the emperor as Bacchus (Sarapis and Bacchus being iconographically quite divers) is not further explained.

<sup>133</sup> C. C. Vermeule, 'Notes on a new edition of Michaelis: Ancient marbles in Great Britain', *AJA* 59 (1955), 129-50; 141.

<sup>134</sup> K. A. Esdaile, 'The 'Commodus-Mithras' of the Salting collection', *JRS* 7 (1917), 71-3; against C. B. Smith, 'A bronze bust of Commodus', *The Burlington Magazine* 13 (1908), 252-7; 252: 'But, withal, this is the face of such a one as we know Commodus to have been; the mouth is small and weak, and the features betray both self-indulgence and egotism'. See also: M. Wegner, *Die Herrscherbildnisse in antoninischer Zeit* (Berlin 1939), 258; M. Wegner / R. Unger, 'Verzeichnis der Kaiserbildnisse von Antoninus Pius bis

from Canterbury be considered a representation of either Commodus-Sarapis, or Commodus-Bacchus. It does not really look like either, and its attestation as Commodus is not entirely certain.

As there appear to be no Jupiter portraits with Commodus' features, one should assume that the suggestion that the medallion of Jupiter *Iuvenis* had raised, was not developed any further. In case of Sol, however, the opposite seems to be true. Whereas on the medallion, only a beard denoted the fact that it was Commodus-Sol, rather than just the deity, that was depicted, an over-lifesize marble head which is now in the *Museo delle Terme* in Rome, actually assimilated the physiognomy of deity and emperor.<sup>135</sup>

This head, though showing atypically long hair, clearly represents the emperor. As Bergmann shows through detailed comparison of the different hairstyles which Commodus used in his portraiture during his reign, and the actual shape of the *Terme*-head, the sculpture must be dated around AD 190.<sup>136</sup> However, unlike all other portraits of Commodus of this period, the head is beardless. Here, if nowhere else, the beardless face and longer hair of the god Sol are combined with the longer face of the emperor and his particular fifth-type hairstyle just over the forehead. The face is unmistakably Commodus', yet the divine connotations are equally obvious. This is Commodus-Sol, once more emphasising the Golden Age that the emperor was to bring forth.<sup>137</sup> The particular differences between the bearded medallion mentioned before, and the beardless marble portrait, are easily explained by looking at the two different media in their own right. Whereas on the medallion the figure had to be bearded in order to be recognisably the emperor, the marble head allowed for more freedom in detail whilst retaining specific imperial features. In the head, the relation between emperor and divinity could thus become clearer than anywhere else. The amalgamation between imperial and divine physiognomy showed the emperor as superhuman.<sup>138</sup> Spectacular as the *Terme*-head may be, its provenance remains unknown and one cannot tell for which audience it was intended. It also remains a unique piece of evidence. One should therefore be careful not to draw too far-reaching conclusions from a piece that might have been seen by

Commodus. II. Teil', *Boreas* 3 (1980), 12-116, 84.

<sup>135</sup> Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 248-52; figs. 47.1-3, 48.1-3.

<sup>136</sup> Ibidem, 250

<sup>137</sup> Ibidem, 251. But see the cautionary remarks in the review of R. R. R. Smith, 'Nero and the Sun-god: divine accessories and political symbols in Roman imperial images', *JRA* 13 (2000), 532-42; 538-9.

<sup>138</sup> Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 251-2.

just the chosen few. Still, it was there.

The Commodus-Sol head aside, it seems as if the association between emperor and deities was almost wholly absent from statuary display. The case of the Venus and Mars group in the Museo delle Terme in Rome, which has been thought to depict Commodus and Crispina, cannot just be added to the unsuccessful identifications mentioned above, but the attribution is doubtful, at most.<sup>139</sup> Thus, there is only one convincing Commodus-god sculpture, amongst the almost fifty portraits of Commodus that have been recognised as authentic by Max Wegner.<sup>140</sup> That is apart, of course, from those portraying Commodus with Hercules' attributes and/or features: the famous Capitoline bust, the bust of Commodus-Hercules with short hair from Mantua, and an often ignored statue of the Farnese Hercules type with the features of Commodus in Florence.<sup>141</sup> Another type should be added. Leander-Touati has showed how a bust of Commodus as Hercules in the museum of Stockholm cannot be – as has been previously maintained – a modern (and slightly divergent) copy of the Capitoline Bust, since that work was only found in 1874, and the known history of the Stockholm bust goes back further. It must either be a faithful copy of another original, or an overworked ancient bust.<sup>142</sup> A number of provincial statuettes, furthermore, show a reception of the Commodus-Hercules images, which presupposes a clear central iconographical message.<sup>143</sup> More even than in the coinage, the difference between the use of Hercules, and that of other deities, becomes obvious through analysing the imperial statuary.

### *Commodus-Hercules*

#### Herakliskos-Commodus

For those who want to redeem Marcus Aurelius from any guilt for Commodus' Hercules-mania, a Herakliskos-statue in the Museum of

<sup>139</sup> Wrede, *Consecratio*, 133-5, 268-9 no. 194; R. Thomas, 'Zur Selbstdarstellung der römischen Provinzbevölkerung in der Wandmalerei der Mittleren Kaiserzeit', in: R. Rolle / K. Schmidt (eds.), *Archäologische Studien in Kontaktzonen der antiken Welt* (Göttingen 1998), 733-55; 752-3.

<sup>140</sup> Wegner / Unger, 'Verzeichnis der Kaiserbildnisse', 76-97. Cf. Wegner, *Herrscherbildnisse in antoninischer Zeit*, 252-74.

<sup>141</sup> *Infra* pp. 121-2, 127, 129, Figs. 5, 6, 8.

<sup>142</sup> A. Leander-Touati, 'Commodus wearing the lion skin. A "modern" portrait in Stockholm', *ORom* 18 (1990), 115-125; 115-7, 120; Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, inv. NM SK 100.

<sup>143</sup> *Infra* pp. 167-8.

Fine Arts in Boston seems to present a problem (fig. 5).<sup>144</sup> Though this statue is heavily damaged (the right arm, left hand, and major part of both legs are missing), it still clearly depicts a young Hercules, strangling two snakes. The face of the Herakliskos in question, as the hairstyle shows, is none other than that of the young Commodus.<sup>145</sup> Walter Gross, in a frequently quoted study, dated it AD 166. The moment that Commodus became *Caesar*, formed, according to him, the first possible occasion for the creation of a public image.<sup>146</sup> Such an image, needless to say, would have been decided on by the reigning emperor, Marcus Aurelius.<sup>147</sup>

The idea that the statue formed part of an official public image is confirmed by the fact that the use of this statue-type was wide-spread. A passage in Dio Cassius implies, according to Gross, that henceforward the Roman people associated Hercules with Commodus. In this passage Dio recounts how, in AD 183, Sextus Condius went to the oracle of Amphilochus at Mallus (Cilicia), responses of which came by means of dreams. Condius had his particular dream painted and, 'the picture which he had put on the tablet represented a boy strangling two serpents and a lion pursuing a fawn', from which Dio interpreted that it was Commodus who had killed Condius' father and uncle.<sup>148</sup> This led Gross to conclude that in AD 183 a reference to Herakliskos was interpreted – by at least a part of the population – as one to Commodus.<sup>149</sup>

This conclusion is not all that convincing. Dio mentions how at the

<sup>144</sup> Inv. 1971.394. The statue is said to have been found in Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli 'where the Antonine Emperors continued to reside from time to time'; C. C. Vermeule, 'Baby Herakles and the snakes: three phases of his development', in: G. Capecchi (etc.) (eds.), *In memoria di Enrico Paribeni* (Rome 1998), 505-13; 510. It is, however, not mentioned in: J. Raeder, *Die statuarische Ausstattung der Villa Hadriana bei Tivoli* (Frankfurt am Main – Bern 1983). On the Herakliskos type in general: H. P. Laubscher, 'Der schlangenwürgende Herakles. Seine Bedeutung in der Herrscherikonologie', *JDAI* 112 (1997), 149-60.

<sup>145</sup> W. H. Gross, 'Herakliskos Commodus', *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen I. Philologisch-historische Klasse* 4 (1973), 83-105; 86. Recently repeated by Giuliano, 'Un cammeo con Commodo-Herakles', 328: 'Sin dall'infanzia Commodo è rappresentato come Herakliskos'.

<sup>146</sup> Gross, 'Herakliskos Commodus', 87.

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, 99: 'Denn soviel ist ... klar, daß ein solches Bildnis des offiziellen Erben der Macht nicht ... ohne Zustimmung des kaiserlichen Vaters geschaffen worden sein kann'. This notwithstanding the fact that Marcus (p. 100): 'unter allen Kaisern des 2. Jahrhunderts allem Anschein nach die geringsten unmittelbaren Beziehungen zur Verehrung des Herakles hatte ...'.

<sup>148</sup> Dio, 73.7.1-2; G. Weber, *Kaiser, Träume und Visionen in Prinzipat und Spätantike* (Stuttgart 2000), 342-4. On the deaths of the two Quintilii brothers; Dio, 73.5.3; Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand*, 237-8; 252. See *supra* pp. 54-5.

<sup>149</sup> Gross, 'Herakliskos Commodus', 98-9.

time of the oracle in AD 183 he was unable to explain the incident: '[I] could not comprehend what the figures meant until I learned that the brothers had been strangled, so to speak, by Commodus, who later (μετὰ ταῦτα) emulated Hercules'.<sup>150</sup> He thus explicitly states that the association of Commodus with Hercules post-dates AD 183. Gross, in fact, cites this very sentence, but still argues that it would show the identification of Commodus with Herakliskos to have been well-known in 183.<sup>151</sup> According to him that follows from the fact that the meaning of the picture was 'generally understood', in 183.<sup>152</sup> Yet Dio never says so. He states that he personally understood what the painting meant, and only after the event.<sup>153</sup> It would, furthermore, be difficult to explain why this creation of a public image found no echo whatsoever in the imperial coinage, throughout Marcus' reign, not even on medallions.<sup>154</sup>

Why Marcus Aurelius would want people to associate Commodus with Herakliskos, seems a valid question anyhow. Considering the youthful death of Commodus' twin brother such an image seems neither sensible nor tasteful. Gross realised as much, and argued that it was not the mythological story, but the *virtus* of Hercules that was referred to. According to him mythology was ignored so as to make people forget that Commodus' dead twin could easily be compared to Iphikles, Hercules' twin brother who was killed by the snakes.<sup>155</sup>

This seems, at best, a feeble argument. Other options appear to be more convincing. The figure of Hercules was a popular one to put at a child's grave – not least in court circles.<sup>156</sup> Such popularity is quite understandable: 'The assimilation of a deceased child to Hercules is ... appropriate because the hero ultimately conquered death and achieved immortality'.<sup>157</sup> With that popularity in mind it might be conceivable that the Herakliskos depicted is not Commodus, but his twinbrother Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus. There are no known portraits of Fulvus Antoninus. The age of the person on the statue cannot be strictly

<sup>150</sup> Dio, 73.7.2.

<sup>151</sup> Gross, 'Herakliskos', 99: 'daß die Identifikation des Commodus mit Herakliskos 183 noch immer bekannt und verständlich war'.

<sup>152</sup> Gross, 'Herakliskos', 98: 'allgemein erkennbar'.

<sup>153</sup> The argument that Dio spoke on personal title, and not as a representative of the senate, was already taken up by Chantraine, 'Zur Religionspolitik des Commodus', 25.

<sup>154</sup> See *supra* p. 91.

<sup>155</sup> Gross, 'Herakliskos', 87, 96.

<sup>156</sup> D. Kleiner, *Roman Imperial Funerary Altars with Portraits* (Rome 1987), 86; Wrede, *Consecratio*, Taf. 17, figs. 1-4.

<sup>157</sup> Kleiner, *Roman Imperial Funerary Altars*, 86.



specified, at least not to the year. Hair-style supports identification of the statue with Commodus, but possibly, at the earliest age, both princes were portrayed with similar hair-styles. Interpreting the Boston Herakliskos as a cult statue for the deceased heir would cohere with the idea that 'in the Roman period only deceased junior members of the imperial house are termed heroes'.<sup>158</sup>

Alternatively, it seems possible that the statue was made later in the reign of Commodus, when the identification of the emperor with Hercules was more fully developed. If, as we shall see later, Commodus attempted to present himself as a 'new Hercules', it seems feasible that he wanted to show that he had been the 'hero incarnate' from infancy onwards.<sup>159</sup> This theory has recently also been put forward by Klaus Fittschen,<sup>160</sup> who points at the fact that typologically the Boston statue differs from the portraits depicted on medallions coined in the period AD 166, and 172/3-174/75.<sup>161</sup> Those portraits can be recognised in other statues, which means that the portrait-type of the Boston statue needs to be an earlier one.<sup>162</sup> In that case, however, Antoninus must still have been alive, which would make it impossible to compare either of the two twins with Hercules, as that would mean presenting the other brother as deceased. A later 'reconstruction' of the statue to accommodate to Commodus' wishes seems a more reasonable option. Such a late date for the statue would also, according to C. C. Vermeule, explain the 'extravagant style' of the statue.<sup>163</sup> Both the option of a reconstruction, and that of a posthumous Antoninus-type, circumvent the main problems of Gross' theory. Marcus Aurelius may well be blameless after all.

<sup>158</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 34; C. C. Vermeule, *The Cult Images of Imperial Rome* (Rome 1987), 52. In Thessalonica, T. Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus was, in fact, worshipped as a god. The Fulvus Antoninus in question was either one of the sons of Antoninus (who died before he became emperor), or Commodus' twin brother; L. Robert, 'Le dieu Fulvus à Thessalonique', *Hellenica* II (1946), 37-42; 42. On the posthumous portrait types for the sons of Antoninus Pius: Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse*, 46-52.

<sup>159</sup> To an extent, this can be compared to the legitimating strategy of *reification*: 'A transitory, historical state of affairs is presented as if it were permanent, natural, outside of time'; Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, 65-6. Cf. Hekster, *Propagating power*.

<sup>160</sup> Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse*, 61-2. Now also emphatically put forward by Vermeule, 'Baby Herakles and the snakes', 510.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibidem*, 61; 53 n. 296; Taf. 110 j.

<sup>162</sup> Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, inv. 13253; Copenhagen, NCG 713; Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse*, 5-7, types H1, J1-2.

<sup>163</sup> C. C. Vermeule, 'Commodus, Caracalla and the tetrarchs. Roman emperors as Hercules', in: U. Höckmann / A. Krug (eds.), *Festschrift für Frank Brommer* (Mainz 1977), 289-294; 291-2. But the still-undrilled eyes are anything but extravagant, and seem to point at an earlier date.

### The Capitoline bust

Easily the best known amongst the 'multitude of statues' constructed of Commodus that depicted him in the guise of Hercules is the bust that is now on display at the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome (fig. 6).<sup>164</sup> It was presumably originally placed within the *horti Lamiani* – which was imperial property.<sup>165</sup> In this extremely well preserved statue – there is only slight damage to the left hand, and to the two small kneeling figures on the pedestal – Commodus is depicted with the long beard, deep eyes and open gaze of a philosopher-emperor.<sup>166</sup> He also clearly displays all the attributes of Hercules. The lion skin is draped over the emperor's head, and he holds Hercules' club in his right hand, while holding the apples of the Hesperides in his outstretched left hand. The statue so seems to attempt to stress the emperor's divinity without breaking away altogether from the imperial image of Commodus' philosopher-father.

The size of the bust, and, more importantly, the addition of arms, make the bust unique as a sample of Antonine portrait art. That has been put forward as an argument for seeing the sculpture as a 'posthumous representation of Commodus'.<sup>167</sup> Yet A. Leander-Touati, through analysing the above-mentioned bust of Commodus-Hercules in Stockholm, has convincingly shown that typologically, at least, the Capitoline should be dated to an earlier phase in Commodus' 'Herculean image'.<sup>168</sup>

The pedestal of the bust further emphasised the emperor's universal rule. The statue rests on a globe, which is adorned with zodiacal signs that could well refer to important dates in both Commodus' and Hercules' life.<sup>169</sup> Two adjacent cornucopias seem to symbolise the peace and abundance that Commodus' reign has brought, with the two

<sup>164</sup> Dio, 73.15.6; Herodian, 1.14.8-9; SHA, *Comm.*, 8.5, 8.9, 11.13-8; Palazzo dei Conservatori: Inv. 1120; K. Fittschen / P. Zanker, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom* (Mainz 1985), I, 85-90; M. Cima / E. La Rocca (eds.), *Le tranquille dimore degli dei. La residenza imperiale degli horti Lamiani* (Rome 1986), 88-91. Typologically the statue displays Commodus' fifth (and last) hairstyle, commonly dated to the period AD 191-2.

<sup>165</sup> M. Beard, 'Imaginary *horti*: or up the garden path', in: E. La Rocca / M. Cima (eds.), *Horti Romani*, (Rome 1998), 23-32; 31. See *infra* p. 155.

<sup>166</sup> P. Zanker, *Die Maske des Sokrates. Das Bild des Intellektuellen in der antiken Kunst* (Munich 1995), 206-221; notably 212.

<sup>167</sup> O. Palagia, 'Imitation of Hercules', 137-151; 149 n. 133.

<sup>168</sup> See *supra* p. 117, n. 142; Leander-Touati, 'Commodus wearing the lion skin', 125.

<sup>169</sup> R. Hannah, 'The emperor's stars: The Conservatori portrait of Commodus', *AJA* 90 (1986), 337-342.

statues of kneeling Amazons further strengthening that suggestion.<sup>170</sup> The emperor is also flanked by two tritons, emphasising that Commodus ruled the seas as well. They equally draw attention to the Herculean labour of the apples of the Hesperides. In order to obtain these apples of eternal youth, Hercules sailed the ocean in Sol's golden cup.<sup>171</sup> Finally, those tritons held a *parapetasma* over Commodus' head, a design which was common for sarcophagi of the time, thus suggesting that 'Commodus himself had become immortal'.<sup>172</sup> The message was unavoidable: Commodus was more than a mere mortal.

Such immortality is further strengthened by the above-mentioned apples of the Hesperides, which are strikingly present in the left hand. Harry Erckell phrases their possible meaning thus: 'Are they here, perhaps, the symbols of immortality and eternal youth?'<sup>173</sup> That could be easily combined to the notion of the χρυσοῦς Hercules, the god who resides in the 'immortal, fortunate colony of the whole world', the god-emperor Commodus.<sup>174</sup>

### The Colossus of Commodus

Slightly more massive in size (over a hundred feet high) was the Colossus that Nero had built representing himself, and which was transformed by Vespasian into a statue of Sol. Commodus changed its features yet again, so that it now resembled himself as Hercules.<sup>175</sup>

He actually cut off the head of the Colossus and substituted for it a likeness

<sup>170</sup> Fittschen / Zanker, *Katalog I*, 87; Elsner, *Imperial Rome*, 202. It is tempting to connect the two statuettes to Dio, 73.15.3-4, where it is said that Commodus renamed one of the months *Amazonius* and wanted to be so addressed. Amazons formed an apt symbol for the barbarism which both Hercules and the emperor conquered. Alföldi, *Bild und Bildersprache*, 55-6 claims the female figure depicts Virtus, though she mentions 'eine entblößte Brust wie eine Amazone'.

<sup>171</sup> Macr. *Sat.* 5.21.16-19.

<sup>172</sup> D. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven – London 1992), 277; Fittschen / Zanker, *Katalog I*, 90. But mind Cima / La Rocca, *Le tranquille dimore degli dei*, 92, arguing that the two tritons could equally have held a *clipeus*, shell, or even a zodiac. The sculpture-group would have emphasised Commodus' superiority in any of those scenarios as well, though stressing his power as a general, over water or the universe at large, rather than underlining his 'immortality'.

<sup>173</sup> H. Erckell, 'L'imperatore Commodo ed Ercole-Melcart', *ORom* 19 (1993), 39-43; 43: 'Sono forse simboli di immortalità e giovinezza eterna?'

<sup>174</sup> Dio, 73.16.1.

<sup>175</sup> M. Bergmann, *Der Koloß Neros, die Domus Aurea und der Mentalitätswandel im Rom der frühen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1994), 5-11; Eadem, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 190; C. Lega, 'Colossus: Nero', *LTUR* 1, 295-298. C. Lega, 'Il Colosso di Nerone', *BCAR* 93 (1989-90), 339-78; 364-8 gives exhaustive listings of ancient sources related to the Colossus.

of his own head; then, having given it a club and placed a bronze lion at his feet, so as to cause it to look like Hercules, he inscribed on it ... these words: 'Champion of *secutores*; only left-handed fighter to conquer twelve times (as I recall the number) one thousand men' (Dio, 73.22.3).

Herodian confirms this story, although he mentions 'only' one thousand gladiators, while the *Historia Augusta* does not name a number, but relates how on the inscription Commodus named himself *Gladiatorius*.<sup>176</sup> There is, however, also a possibility that the Colossus was a statue of Sol from the very moment of its construction, and that it remained unaltered throughout succeeding reigns. It is striking that whenever anyone recounts how a certain emperor had the face of Nero's Colossus changed into his own, that very modification was inevitably undone by the time the historian was writing. Dio Cassius mentions how:

In the sixth consulship of Vespasian [AD 75]... the so-called Colossus was set up on the sacred way. This statue is said to have borne the features of Nero according to some, or those of Titus, according to others (Dio, 65.15.1).

When some people believed that the statue looked like Nero, and others that it looked like Titus, it only shows that it looked like neither.<sup>177</sup> A similar argument had been raised earlier by Albertson, who argued that a proper 'Neronian' Colossus never existed. According to him the statue was only completed after Nero's reign had come to an end.<sup>178</sup> Albertson pointed out that it took Zenodorus, who constructed Nero's Colossus, ten years to make his equally colossal statue of Mercury for the Arverni, whereas the famous Colossus of Rhodes took twelve years to construct. As Zenodorus came to Rome in AD 64, that would never leave him enough time to finish the statue, which was fabricated with the same techniques as the earlier ones, before Nero's death.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, a more likely date would be AD 75, which fits in well with Dio's text.

If Nero never lent his features to the statue, it seems unlikely that

<sup>176</sup> Herodian, 1.15, 9; SHA, *Comm.* 17.9-11. SHA, *Comm.* 15.8 confirms the title 'champion of *secutores*'.

<sup>177</sup> A point also made by R. R. Smith in his paper: 'Images of Nero in the art of the first century', held 23-2-79, as part of the seminar-series: 'Culture and society in the age of Nero', organised by Miriam Griffin and Matthew Leigh at Somerville College, Oxford.

<sup>178</sup> F. Albertson, (review) 'Der Koloß Neros, die Domus Aurea und der Mentalitätswandel im Rom der frühen Kaiserzeit', *AJA* 100 (1996), 802-3, 803. Similarly sceptical: Smith, 'Nero and the Sun-god', 536-8.

<sup>179</sup> Plin. *HN.* 34.45-6, explicitly mentioning how the statue was *intended* to be an image of the emperor (*destinatum illius principis simulacro*); D. Haynes, *The Technique of Greek Bronze Statuary* (Mainz 1992), 121-8.

Commodus would have. Drastically rearranging the features of statues of such massive scale to the emperor's whims fits in only too well with the literary *topoi* for 'evil emperors'.<sup>180</sup> Yet that need not mean that Commodus never made it into a colossal Hercules by more minor changes, noted by Dio.<sup>181</sup> Such a change may be confirmed by coins from AD 192, which have on the obverse the emperor's head covered by a lion skin, and on the reverse a depiction of a standing Hercules, resting his right hand on his club, and dragging a lion by its back paws with his left hand (fig. 7). This standing figure has been tentatively identified by Marianne Bergmann as the transformed Colossus.<sup>182</sup> If that is indeed what it depicts, the towering figure must have been unavoidable to anyone passing by or visiting the Colosseum, standing as it did in the close vicinity of the *amphitheatrum Flavium*.

It is therefore hardly surprising, indeed, appropriate, that Commodus had his actions in the amphitheatre inscribed in the pedestal of the statue.<sup>183</sup> The *Historia Augusta* tells that the title *Effeminatus* was also added there. Presenting oneself as effeminate seems odd behaviour for an emperor. Yet Herodian and another passage in the *Historia Augusta* appear to confirm such a presentation.<sup>184</sup> Often, this behaviour has been interpreted as a sign of homosexuality, but that would still not explain why Commodus would want to explicitly exhibit this behaviour.<sup>185</sup>

It ought to be noted that a man wearing women's clothing was not, to Roman eyes, necessarily associated with effeminacy or homosexuality. The emperor Gallienus, for instance, had himself represented as the goddess Demeter or Korè on a series of coins, with the legends GALLIENAE AUGUSTAE and VICTORIA AUG(USTI/A).<sup>186</sup> Gallienus' purpose with these coins was, according to Luuk de Blois, in his studies on the subject, to present himself: 'as an intermediate power between the supreme god and humanity, capable of manifesting himself in both male and female form'.<sup>187</sup> Gods transcended gender.

<sup>180</sup> See also the allegations that Gallienus wanted his own Colossal *Sol*-statue: SHA, *Gall.* 16.3-4, 18.2.

<sup>181</sup> Lega, 'Il Colosso di Nerone', 352.

<sup>182</sup> Gnechchi, *MR* II, no. 32, 80/4; Bergmann, *Der Koloß Neros*, 12: 'Es ist also durchaus wahrscheinlich, daß die Multiplumserie uns auch den Koloß überliefert.'; Fig. 2.4-5.

<sup>183</sup> On Commodus' gladiatorial performances, see Ch. 4: 'An emperor on display', *passim*.

<sup>184</sup> Herodian, 1.14.8; SHA, *Comm.* 9.6: *Clava non solum leones in veste muliebri et pelle leonina, sed etiam homines multos adflixit*. Cf. Grosso, *Commodo*, 340.

<sup>185</sup> Erkell, 'Commodo e Ercole-Melcart', 39 likewise wonders why Commodus, who so strongly displays masculinity, wanted to show such a radical breach of image.

<sup>186</sup> *RIC* 5.1, nos. 74, 82, 128.

<sup>187</sup> De Blois, 'Emperor and empire', 3435. Cf. *idem*, *Gallienus*, 151-5; F. Taeger,

When Caligula showed himself as Venus, he might well have had the intention to demonstrate that he was not bound by gender either.<sup>188</sup> It could be argued that Commodus, too, acted with a similar aim.<sup>189</sup> However, in that case one would have expected an explicit reference to a specific goddess, as with Caligula and Gallienus. Such a reference is conspicuously absent.

Another explanation for Commodus' female clothes has been developed by Erkell. The basis for his theory is a relief from Tivoli, depicting Hercules in what appear to be women's robes. This so-called Hercules Tiburtinus was closely related to the Hercules Victor (or Invictus) that was worshipped at the Ara Maxima,<sup>190</sup> who in his turn formed the foundation for Commodus' Hercules Romanus. According to Erkell, it is therefore absolutely clear that Commodus did not dress in female robes as a result of some personal desire, but because he took on the role of Hercules Romanus – the god of the Ara Maxima.<sup>191</sup> The 'female robes' could have still formed the basis of the 'Effeminatus'-claim in the *Historia Augusta*. Yet a more detailed analysis of the origins of the god makes Erkell conclude that Commodus' robes were in reality a sacerdotal costume, derived from the East.<sup>192</sup> Likewise, the apples of the Hesperides formed part of these garments, linking the Eastern attire, once more, closely to the Roman hero's labours.

*Charisma. Studien zur Geschichte des antiken Herrscherkultes* (Stuttgart 1960), II, 442.

<sup>188</sup> Suet, *Caligula*, 52.

<sup>189</sup> Taeger, *Charisma*, II, 397.

<sup>190</sup> K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960), 214 n. 3.

<sup>191</sup> Erkell, 'Commodo ed Ercole-Melcart', 39: 'È fuori dubbio che Commodo indossava la veste femminile, non per ragioni personali, ma perché interpretava la parte di *Hercules Romanus*, il dio dell'Ara Massima'.

<sup>192</sup> Ibidem, 42. This conclusion is close to that of J. Gagé, 'La mystique impériale et l'épreuve de «jeux». Commode-Hercule et l'«anthropologie» héracléenne', *ANRW* II.17.2 (1981), 662-683, 676: 'Que dire de l'Hercule féminin de Commode? Tuer lions en ce costume n'était évidemment pas le fait d'un volontaire *Efféminé*. Rappelons-nous plutôt quelle importance avait eue, dans l'Asie Mineure, cette grande *potnia thérón* ... c'est évidemment cette puissance que Commode prétendait représenter, fondue, comme la mythologie le permettait, dans l'énergie d'Hercule'. For Gagé, however, the inevitable sexual motives are still essential, though he gives no argument for that contention: 'Mais nous retenons ici que sans doute, pour Commode, les bizarreries de l'ambivalence sexuelle et des superstitions liées au tilleul n'étaient pas séparables ...'. Cf. also the idea of transvestism as an initiation-rite: C. Bonnet, 'Héraclès travesti'; in C. Jourdain-Annequin / C. Bonnet (eds.), *Il rencontre Héracléenne. Héraclès: les femmes et le féminin* (Brussels – Rome 1996), 121-131, 125: 'La religion grecque connaît divers phénomènes passagers de 'transsexualité'...'. Bonnet, too, acknowledges the importance of Eastern influences (p. 126): 'On notera qu'en outre cet épisode est significativement localisé en Orient ...'.

## Lysippus' Hercules

Possibly less striking at first sight than an emperor 'in veste muliebri', the regular use of copies of Lysippean statues when depicting Hercules is nevertheless noteworthy. The prime example of such a copy is surely the colossal Farnese Hercules, now in the national archaeological museum of Naples (fig. 8).<sup>193</sup> This renowned work, a copy of an extremely popular type in antiquity, depicts the 'weary Hercules', exhausted from his last labour, holding the apples of the Hesperides behind his back; powerful, yet motionless, muscular, yet pensive.<sup>194</sup> Its construction should be dated in the late second or early third century. The original function and position of the statue are unknown.<sup>195</sup>

C. C. Vermeule believed it to have been a cult statue that stood at a – for Commodus – conveniently near, and holy, place, to which the emperor came to make offerings.<sup>196</sup> The fact that it was eventually found in the Baths of Caracalla does not necessarily contradict the sanctity of the statue, but makes it very improbable that it had been a cult statue before. As Zanker recently pointed out, even statues of the gods placed in secular areas like the Baths, remained 'Götterbilder'.<sup>197</sup> Yet it seems extremely unlikely that a statue was taken away from a *templum* to be placed in such a secular zone. Cult statues were too divine for that. It would have been a serious insult to the god.

Hercules was an extremely apt divinity to place in *thermae* anyhow. He was 'ubiquitous in bath culture'.<sup>198</sup> He was a patron of the *palaestra*, and a god of therapeutic hot springs. He was also 'an important symbol of moral as well as physical energy'.<sup>199</sup> Manderscheid, how-

<sup>193</sup> Naples ; Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 6001.

<sup>194</sup> D. Krull, *Der Herakles vom Typ Farnese. Kopienkritische Untersuchung einer Schöpfung des Lysipp.* (Frankfurt am Main – Bern – New York 1985), I. P. Moreno, *Lisippo, l'arte e la fortuna* (Rome 1995).

<sup>195</sup> Moreno, *Lisippo, l'arte e la fortuna*, 244-6 no. 4.36.4.

<sup>196</sup> Vermeule, *Cult Images*, 25; idem, 'Herakles crowning himself: New Greek statuary types and their place in Hellenistic and Roman art', *JHS* 77 (1957), 283-299; Fig. III.12.

<sup>197</sup> P. Zanker, *Der Kaiser baut fürs Volk* (Opladen 1997), 25: 'Auch hier blieben die Statuen der Götter Götterbilder'. I. Nielsen, *Thermae et Balnea. The Architecture and Cultural History of Roman Public Baths* (Aarhus 1990), I, 146, however, believes: 'Though [the baths] often contained statues of the gods, these were no doubt more for decoration than objects of worship'. This does not seem to correspond to the pagan ideas of images of the gods; Gordon, 'The real and the imaginary', 5-34; R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London 1986), 133.

<sup>198</sup> M. Marvin, 'Freestanding sculptures from the baths of Caracalla', *AJA* 87 (1983), 347-384; 379.

<sup>199</sup> Marvin, 'Freestanding sculptures', 379; J. Bayet, 'Les statues d'Hercule des grands thermes de Lambèse', in: Idem, *Idéologie et plastique* (Rome 1974), 405-10.

ever, believes that these 'thermal' functions were less important than Hercules' position as a state god.<sup>200</sup> If this is so, it seems apparent that those visiting the Baths of Caracalla would, on noticing the massive statue of the Hercules Farnese, easily remember Commodus who, as a leader of state, had so much identified with that very Hercules. Whether the actual statue was or was not constructed during the reign of Commodus, and whether it had had an alternate function before being placed in Caracalla's baths, thus becomes less important for the associations people would have watching it.

There is even material evidence for an explicit association between Commodus and the 'weary-Hercules' type. In a niche next to the courtyard of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence there is a copy of a Lysippean resting giant, of which the head is actually replaced by that of Commodus, who thus presented himself as the deity (fig. 9).<sup>201</sup> The statue was found on the Palatine, near the *Domus Augustana*, and must therefore have been displayed in the imperial residence – at least during Commodus' reign. It is striking that notwithstanding the *damnatio memoriae* following the emperor's death, the statue was not destroyed, though it may have been buried.<sup>202</sup>

Lysippus was, of course, the court-artist of Alexander the Great, and copies of his statues undoubtedly made reference to that famous Hellenistic leader, an association that Commodus' contemporary Athenaeus seems to have understood:

τί οὖν θαυμαστὸν εἰ καὶ καθ' ἡμᾶς Κόμμοδος ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ ἐπὶ τῶν ὀχημάτων παρακείμενον εἶχεν τὸ 'Ηράκλειον ῥόπαλον ὑπεστρωμένης αὐτῷ λεοντῆς καὶ 'Ηρακλῆς καλεῖσθαι ἤθελεν, 'Αλεξάνδρου τοῦ 'Αριστοτελικοῦ τοσούτοις αὐτὸν ἀφομοιοῦντος θεοῖς, ἀτὰρ καὶ τῇ 'Αρτέμιδι; (What wonder, then, that the emperor Commodus of our time also had the club of Hercules lying beside him in the chariot, with the lion's skin spread beneath him, and desired to be called Hercules, seeing that Alexander, Aristotle's pupil, got himself up like so many gods, to say nothing of the goddess Artemis?).<sup>203</sup>

<sup>200</sup> H. Manderscheid, *Die Skulpturenausstattung der kaiserzeitlichen Thermenanlagen* (Berlin 1981), 34: 'Hercules' Funktion als offizielle, als Staatsgottheit steht im Vordergrund, seine Bedeutung als Quell- und Heilgott tritt dahinter zurück'. Similarly emphasising the function of the *thermae* as expression of imperial benevolence and supremacy: N. Zajac, 'The *thermae*: policy of public health or personal legitimation', in: J. DeLaine / D. E. Johnston (eds.), *Roman Baths and Bathing. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Roman Baths* (Portsmouth 1999), 99-105; 101-5.

<sup>201</sup> P. Moreno, 'Il Farnese ritrovato ed altri tipi di Eracle in riposo', *MEFRA* 94 (1982), 379-526; 448-452; 503 no. B.3.4.

<sup>202</sup> Moreno, 'Il Farnese ritrovato', 449, 452.

<sup>203</sup> Ath. *Deipn.* 12.537f. Alexander's name remained famous throughout antiquity. Even after Commodus' reign, there were holy men who claimed that they were an incarnation of



Yet by using Lysippus as a prototype, Commodus may have sent out another message as well. Tonio Hölscher has analysed the different contexts in which statues by certain artists were used in the Roman empire. He found that though Lysippus was used for depicting gods and heroes, as an artist he was known for transmitting truth and beauty rather than divine characteristics, and therefore mainly applied for depicting humans.<sup>204</sup> Of course such a strict semantic sculptural analysis can easily be overstated. One of the advantages of using images as a means of broadcasting messages is their very ambiguity, enabling different individuals to discern the different messages that they can relate to. Lysippean Hercules-copies were, furthermore, highly popular, and it is well conceivable that the popularity of the type, rather than any of its specific ideological connotations, led Commodus to apply these Lysippean images in his visual programme, including his coinage.<sup>205</sup> Yet that is not to say that none of these ideological connotations existed. To those who knew Lysippus as an artist who mainly depicted human figures, Commodus, while indeed depicting himself as the demi-god, at the same advertised his awareness of being a mere mortal. At the same time, to those who knew Lysippus had been Alexander's court sculptor, the reference to Alexander the Great must have been obvious. Those subjects who did not know either, still saw a statue of high quality, depicting their emperor as a demi-god.

### The gladiatorial haircut

A final peculiarity that Commodus' (Herculean) statues seem to have referred to, is the emperor's performance as a gladiator. The earlier-mentioned title 'Gladiatorius' in the pedestal of the Colossus aside, some of the statues themselves also suggest the importance of those performances for the emperor, and for his public image. From about AD 190 onwards, the massive Antonine haircut that had characterised the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, and much of Commodus' own reign as well, was eradicated in favour of a very short cut. This clear break is made even more significant by a passage

the Hellenistic ruler; G. Anderson, *Sage, Saint and Sophist. Holy Men and their Associates in the Early Roman Empire* (London – New York 1994), 2; 7.

<sup>204</sup> T. Hölscher, *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* (Heidelberg 1987), 56-8.

<sup>205</sup> Vermeule, *Cult Images*, 24, states that the only precedent for this usage on regular coinage had been a Hadrianic *cistophorus* (*BMCRE* 3, no. 1062\*). During the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius Lysippus' Hercules could be found on medallions from the east of the empire; Moreno, *Lisippo, l'arte e la fortuna*, 56, nos. 4.4.5-7.

in the *Historia Augusta* which claims that Commodus paid much attention to his hair which 'was always dyed and made lustrous by the use of gold dust'. Blond (or golden) hair was, according to physiognomics, a reference to a person's lion-like qualities: 'brave, a bold hero, angry when hurt, long-suffering, modest, generous, great-hearted and ready to spring'.<sup>206</sup>

This image, now, Commodus replaced by the short hair that one can see on the portraits (figs. 10-11). Such a short style was common amongst athletes and gladiators.<sup>207</sup> Although Fittschen and Zanker compare the new haircut to that of the more militarily-based third-century imperial portraits, the comparison to gladiators seems equally feasible – considering Commodus' fascination for the Games, possibly even more so.<sup>208</sup> On the emperor's coinage, too, the new 'gladiatorial' hairstyle is distinctly visible.<sup>209</sup> Through statues and coinage, Commodus could emphasise his gladiatorial abilities to those who could not personally come to the arena as well. A centrally issued change in hairstyle could also imply that the Capitoline bust, with its traditional Antonine curls, was fabricated before that change took place – some time before Commodus' death. Alternatively, if the bust was contemporary with the new hairstyle, but unaffected by it, this might once more point at a differentiation of imperial messages.

### Mercury and Mithras, the invisible identification

As far as the gods depicted were concerned, Commodus' visual programme seems to have been reasonably consistent. Both Sol and Hercules, the deities that the emperor associated with in his statuary, were prominently present as 'related' to the emperor in his coinage as well. The superiority of the number of Hercules statues, against the

<sup>206</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 17.3; Polemo, F.1.172, 5-7; H. Bonn (ed.), *Damnatio Memoriae: Das Berliner Nero-Porträt* (Mainz 1996), 46; T. Barton, *Power and knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1994), 127; M. Gleason, *Making Men. Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton 1995), 29-37.

<sup>207</sup> Flisi, *Questioni di ritrattistica*, 93-112; Wegner, *Herrscherbildnisse*, 72-73; M. Junkelmann, 'Griechische Athleten im Rom', in: E. Köhne / C. Ewigleben (eds.), *Caesaren und Gladiatoren. Die Macht der Unterhaltung im antiken Rom* (Mainz 2000), 81-90; 83 fig. 73; M. Bergmann, 'Zeittypen im Kaiserporträt?', *WZBerlin* 31 (1982), 143-147; Leander-Touati, 'Commodus wearing the lion skin', 124. She consistently – but wrongly – translates Bergmann's terminology of 'Schwerathlet' with 'sword-athlete'.

<sup>208</sup> Fittschen / Zanker, *Katalog*, I, 87.

<sup>209</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 55-56; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 853-9, 1144-5, 1162-70; Leander-Touati, 'Commodus wearing the lion skin', 124; Bergmann, 'Zeittypen im Kaiserporträt?', 146.

one Sol-Commodus statue, also cohered with the image the coins had brought forward. Of course not all gods which Commodus had used extensively in his various coin issues found reflection in statues – the absence of Jupiter is noticeable (though the argument could be raised that, on the medallion discussed, it was the emperor with the god's attributes, rather than an identification as such, which was purported). There are, however, no examples of divinities whom Commodus strongly emphasised in his statues, who had not been already proclaimed through the emperor's coinage.

Still, Dio claims that Commodus: 'carried a herald's staff like that of Mercury', and that he 'would enter the arena in the garb of Mercury'.<sup>210</sup> Mercury was a very apt divinity for the arena. He was often used in gladiatorial names, probably as a result of his versatility and erotic attraction. The deity was also the *psychopompos*, who carried off the slain gladiators.<sup>211</sup> In this light, a passage from Tertullian (*Apol.* 15.5), written only six years after Commodus' death, in AD 198, appears of interest. In it, the author described how at a spectacle, the spectators themselves were dressed up like Mercury, whilst someone dressed like Charon appeared in the arena to collect the fallen gladiators. Mercury had also, in the guise of Hermes Aërios, been of the utmost importance to Marcus Aurelius. He was, after all, the god responsible for the rain miracle, which was depicted on Marcus' column.<sup>212</sup>

Notwithstanding all these possible motives for a prominent position of the deity in Commodus' visual programme, there is no evidence – the above mentioned passage of Dio excepted – that Commodus did indeed emphasise Mercury's importance in any way. Mercury was even entirely absent from Commodus' Roman coinage. He only appeared, without making any reference to the emperor, on some Alexandrian coins, but those coins should surely be seen in connection to Hermes' identification with the popular Egyptian god Thot.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, Cristina de Ranieri has recently argued strongly in

<sup>210</sup> Dio, 73.17.4. Cf. 73.19.4.

<sup>211</sup> H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three Studies in Henotheism* (Leiden 1990), 207-8.

<sup>212</sup> Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, 172-173, with references; I. Scott Ryberg, *Panel Reliefs of Marcus Aurelius* (New York 1967), 93; T. Hölscher, 'Die Säule des Marcus Aurelius: Narrative Struktur und ideologische Botschaft', in: J. Scheid / V. Huet (eds.), *Autour de la colonne Aurélienne. Geste et image sur la colonne de Marc Aurèle à Rome* (Turnhout 2000), 89-105. On the place of Mercury in imperial ideology: B. Combet-Farnoux, *Mercure Romain. Le culte public et la fonction mercantile à Rome de la république Archaique à l'époque Augustéenne* (Rome 1980), 433-71.

<sup>213</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, 50.

favour of a 'Commodus-Mercurius'. She agrees there is little evidence for this (and that the coins from Alexandria should not be used as such), but claims that one cannot refute the fact that the emperor wanted to identify himself with the deity.<sup>214</sup> She even speaks of a *novus Mercurius*, though without quoting any material supporting this claim. According to her, the theme of a 'New Mercury', should be put in the context of an 'encounter between East and West'; an encounter which followed on from 'new spiritual times'.<sup>215</sup> The question of why Commodus did not actually try to make people aware of this theme through images or inscriptions not only remains unanswered; it is not even posed. The second part of her argument, in which she discerns a 'Mercurian' philosophical doctrine which 'must have influenced' Commodus, makes more sense, but still does not form proof for (an attempt to) identification with Mercury from the part of Commodus.<sup>216</sup> The emperor might, as Dio stated, have gone to the arena with Mercury's attributes, but, if so, it should be seen solely in connection to that very arena, presumably in light of the Mercury *psychopompos*. Commodus apparently made no attempt to broadcast a further association with Mercury to a wider audience. That should be sufficient evidence against presupposing such a further association.

The same lack of proof applies to Commodus' alleged preference for Mithras – or mystery cults in general. De Ranieri's 'new spiritual times' found reflection in Commodus' adhesion to the mystery cults, but again evidence is scarce – at most. As for the Mithras cult, only the *Historia Augusta*, not the most reliable of sources, mentions that Commodus was initiated in them; and this only to show that he desecrated even those:

*Sacra Mithriaca homicidio vero polluit, cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi soleat.* (He polluted the Mithraic rites with real murder, while it was customary in them to only say or pretend something that would produce an impression of terror) (SHA, *Comm.* 9.6).

<sup>214</sup> De Ranieri, 'Commodo-Mercurio', 433: '... non si può negare la volontà dell'imperatore di identificarsi con il dio'. Already Grosso, *Commodo*, 334: 'Ma Commodo ... intendeva riferirsi a Mercurio, simbolo della ricchezza e abbondanza, alludendo all'era commodiana'.

<sup>215</sup> De Ranieri, 'Commodo-Mercurio', 424; 'l'influenza della nuova temperie spirituale'; 432: 'un tale incontro fra Oriente e Occidente è sicuramente alla base ... dell' imperatore come *Novus Mercurius*'. Cf. already Grosso, *Commodo*, 344: 'politica religiosa di compromesso tra la sua infatuazione tipicamente orientale e il compassato e tradizionale rito romano ...'.

<sup>216</sup> Ibidem, 441: 'Non vi è dubbio ... che anche Commodo sia stato influenzato da queste dottrine'.

Dio, though never indolent in slurring Commodus, is conspicuously silent on this point, and Mithras – or even any distinctive reference to him – was entirely absent from the mint of Rome. The latter problem has been argued away by claiming that in the Roman Empire the name and image of Mithras were so secret that only initiates in this highly secluded cult were authorised to use them.<sup>217</sup> If so, that would at least have made it difficult for Commodus to have shown his fondness for the cult – or for the unknown author of the *Historia Augusta* to be aware of it.

Silvio Panciera has claimed that the fact that a Mithraeum was constructed during the reign of Commodus in the *Castra Peregrina* provided new confirmation of the emperor's favouring the cult. Moreover, one of the first religious leaders of the temple was A. Caedicius Priscianus, an *eques Romanus* who was also *sacerdos* of the *domus Augusta*. According to Panciera, it would have been unthinkable for a Mithraeum to have been established in *castra* in the capital, involving people of a rather elevated rank, without the emperor supporting the cult.<sup>218</sup> This argument seems to be, untypically for Panciera, methodologically unsound. The construction of a Mithraeum in a military camp only shows that at least some in the camp worshipped the deity. If somebody who was reasonably close to the emperor was initiated in the cult, this shows nothing beyond the fact that at least one person of rather elevated rank was initiated. Other facts might further undermine Panciera's argument. The first phase of the Mithraeum is dated in the years immediately surrounding AD 180.<sup>219</sup> Such a date coheres with the idea that the inscription which mentions Priscianus as a *sacerdos* should be dated between AD 180-4.<sup>220</sup> This would be early for a favourable interest in the Mithras cult by Commodus, and equally early for people in Rome to be aware of any (alleged) support of the cult by the emperor, who only started to emphasise divinity in his representation much later in the reign. Also,

<sup>217</sup> D. W. MacDowall, 'Sol Invictus and Mithra. Some evidence from the mint of Rome', in: U. Bianchi (ed), *Mysteria Mithrae. Atti del Seminario Internazionale su 'La specificità storico-religiosa dei misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia'* (Leiden 1979), 557-571; 558, 560. This did not stop Mithras figuring on coins in the provinces, for example on a coin from Trapezus in the reign of Severus Alexander; F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (Brussels 1896), II, 190 fig. 12 (I owe this reference to Ulla Lehtonen).

<sup>218</sup> S. Panciera, 'Il materiale epigrafico dallo scavo di S. Stefano Rotondo', in: Bianchi, *Mysteria Mithrae*, 87-126; 88, 90, 92; fig. 1.

<sup>219</sup> E. Lissi Caronna, 'Castra Peregrina', *LTUR* 1, 249-50; idem, 'Castra Peregrina: Mithraeum', *LTUR* 1, 251.

<sup>220</sup> *CIL* 6.2010 II 22; Panciera, 'Il materiale epigrafico', 90.

in the *Castra Peregrina* soldiers of provincial armies were temporarily stationed.<sup>221</sup> This might further complicate the argument. Even if the emperor *did* know of the existence of the Mithraeum (which implies an unparalleled religious control) his lack of explicit objection to the existence of the cult need not mean he adhered to it. Mithraea were more often than not constructed in military camps, or other public buildings, during the reigns of several emperors, none of whom are considered to have been Mithras-initiates.<sup>222</sup> The absence of prosecution need not imply devotion.

Likewise, Merkelbach suggested that the mere fact that Caedicius Priscianus could have been initiated would confirm a positive attitude towards the cult from the side of the emperor. This tends towards a circular argument, as does similar reasoning in the cases of C. Caerellius Sabinus and Q. Caecilius Laetus – two generals under Commodus.<sup>223</sup> If there is no evidence for Commodus' preference for the cult, other than epigraphical material showing the popularity of the cult with the higher echelons during the emperor's reign, one cannot explain that popularity from the emperor's preference for the cult.<sup>224</sup> Doubtlessly, Mithraism was strong, and growing stronger, under the reign of Commodus. One passage in the *Historia Augusta* is not enough to place responsibility for that rise with the emperor.

Commodus' adherence to Mithraism could still be 'rescued' by pointing to an assimilation between Sol and Mithras.<sup>225</sup> It has been argued, from dedications to *Mithras*, *Soli Mithra*, and *Soli Invicto Mithrae*, that Mithras was for the major part of his worshippers also Sol *Invictus*, whereas Sol *Invictus* could be (but was not necessarily) equalled to Mithras.<sup>226</sup> Commodus' self-presentation as Sol, could then, in this light, be considered a hidden way of proclaiming himself

<sup>221</sup> Lissi Caronna, 'Castra Peregrina', 249; M. Clauss, *Untersuchungen zu den Principales des römischen Heeres von Augustus bis Diokletian* (Bochum 1973), 59-79; 82-115; 158.

<sup>222</sup> F. Coarelli, 'Topografia Mitriaca di Roma', in: Bianchi, *Mysteria Mithrae*, 69-79; 79: 'sempre o quasi sempre ... in edifici di carattere pubblico'.

<sup>223</sup> R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Hain 1984), 176; 162-3.

<sup>224</sup> Similarly, D'Ambrosio, 'A proposito della tavola di *Virunum*', 165-75, especially 171, sees Commodus' initiation in the Mithras-cult as a central step, both for the expansion of the cult, and for Commodus' religious policies, without questioning the initiation itself. Again the expansion of the cult and mithraic dedications *pro salute Commodi* are used as evidence for imperial intervention, simply because the imperial intervention is held responsible for the expansion of the cult.

<sup>225</sup> A statue in the Victoria and Albert Museum once thought to have depicted Commodus-Mithras is neither Commodus nor, probably, simply Mithras, as the used cap is an exceptional one for the deity. See p. 115 n. 134.

<sup>226</sup> MacDowall, 'Sol Invictus and Mithra', 561.

a devotee of Mithras.<sup>227</sup> Commodus, however, applied 'Invictus' in connection to Hercules (who also bore the epithet), and used Sol rather to promote a new Golden Age.<sup>228</sup> Furthermore, had there been a hidden message, one would expect to find it reciprocated, even if only within the circle of Mithras worshippers themselves. There is, however, no significant rise in the number of times Mithras and Sol are epigraphically connected during the reign of Commodus. The one inscription which is explicitly to *Soli invicto Mithrae*, dates from AD 183, long before the emperor showed himself in the guise of Sol.<sup>229</sup> If there was indeed a hidden Mithraic message behind Commodus' Sol-association, not even the Mithras worshippers from Rome and Ostia themselves seem to have picked it up.

Finally, it needs to be emphasised that Commodus' initiation in the Mithras cult has often been placed within the wider context of the emperor's general involvement in mystery cults.<sup>230</sup> Here, too, the evidence is extremely thin. Again, the *Historia Augusta* is the major source. It portrays Commodus as a worshipper of Isis, going as far as shaving his head and carrying a statue of Anubis, like a proper devotee. The three passages which mention these events come from the lives of Commodus, Pescennius Niger and Caracalla. They bear more than a passing resemblance:

1. *sacra Isidis coluit, ut et caput raderet et Anubin portaret* (SHA, *Comm.* 9.4)
2. *inter Commodi amicissimos videmus sacra Isidis ferentem; quibus Commodus adeo deditus fuit, ut et caput raderet et Anubin portaret et omnis pausas expleret* (SHA, *Pesc.Nig.* 6.8-9)
3. *cum Antoninus Commodus ita ea celebraverit ut et Anubin portaret et pausas ederet* (SHA, *M. Ant.* 9.11)

It seems evident that the author, almost literally, just copied the same words three times. They should not be used as separate and unrelated statements. As further evidence, a passage from Cassius Dio (73, 15.3)

<sup>227</sup> I. L. Colombo, 'Sol invictus o Mithra (per una rilettura in chiave ideologica della teologia solare del mitraismo nell'ambito del politeismo romano)', in: Bianchi, *Mysteria Mithrae*, 649-672; 668-9.

<sup>228</sup> F. Coarelli, 'Hercules Invictus (Ara Maxima)', *LTUR* 3, 15-7; E. M. Steinby, 'Hercules Invictus Esychianus, Aedes', *LTUR* 3, 17; Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 266: '... des Beinamens Invictus ... den Commodus ... im Zuge des Vergleichs mit Hercules annahm'.

<sup>229</sup> M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* I (Den Haag 1956), no. 510.

<sup>230</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 343-4; Traupberg, *Commodus*, 73-4.

has been used. In it, Dio, mentions how 'in [Commodus'] honour, a gold statue was erected ... representing him together with a bull and a cow'. As this is a standard *conditor* depiction, and as the passage immediately succeeds the mentioning of Rome's renaming, the reference to Commodus as the new founder of Rome is made absolutely obvious (cf. fig. 12). This notwithstanding, Takács claims: 'A gold statue of Commodus as Horus between a bull (Osiris-Apis) and a cow (Isis-Hathor) is not only further evidence of his cultic activities, it can also be considered in the light of the Egyptian cult of succession and dynastic rule'.<sup>231</sup>

The numismatic evidence that hints at a connection between Commodus and Isis and/or Sarapis can be taken more seriously. Indeed, from the coins it seems obvious that there was indeed such a connection. Reverses of gold, silver, and bronze coins repeatedly showed Sarapis – or sometimes Isis and Sarapis.<sup>232</sup> However, they appear to have had little to do with cultic reverence. Rather, the coins ought to be connected to the transport of corn from Egypt, and perhaps seafaring more in general.<sup>233</sup> As evidence for Commodus' love for mystery cults, they cannot be used. That leaves those who would want to see Commodus as an adherent of Isis and Sarapis with a lack of proper proof. As there appears to be no real evidence supporting the claim that Commodus was more than very circumstantially involved in any mystery cults, it seems safest to assume that he was not. Even if he was, this supposed involvement cannot be used to support the notion of an explicit policy concerning the cults from the side of the emperor. Even those who, for one reason or another, desperately want Commodus to have been involved in all sorts of secret sects and rites, must concede that the emperor kept it a private affair. For the way he presented himself, the mystery cults were of no importance.<sup>234</sup>

## Representing the emperor

From AD 190 onwards Commodus prominently portrayed himself with the attributes of Hercules, eventually even becoming the latest incarnation of the deity, who had already been addressed as Hercules

<sup>231</sup> Takács, *Isis and Sarapis*, 113; Already: H. P. l'Orange, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture* (Oslo 1947), 72.

<sup>232</sup> *RIC* 3, nos. 261, 601, 605, 607, 614a, b, 621, 630; *BMCRE* 4, nos. 706, p. 841\*, p. 845\*.

<sup>233</sup> See p. 110 n. 114.

<sup>234</sup> Still, Traupman, *Commodus*, 213 argued without further evidence: 'Commodus sought a new basis for his authority in the dogma of oriental religion, especially Mithraism'.



*Commodianus* – Commodus now was Hercules Romanus Augustus. The identification was broadcast through a variety of media, to a number of different audiences. There were slight modifications in the way this was put forward, perhaps as some sort of ‘audience-control’. The principal message, however, was always similar: Commodus-Hercules would bring a new Golden Age to the Empire, with peace and abundance for all the emperor’s loyal subjects.

These last years, with the epithet *Commodianus* not just awarded to Hercules, but also to the senate, legions, cities, and other institutions, formed an extreme innovation as against standard imperial representation. The apparent re-founding of Rome as *Col(onia) An(toniniana) Com(modiana)* in AD 192 was unparalleled – and excessive. But it needs to be appreciated that the final identification with Hercules, and the far-reaching personalisation of the emperorship and of many of the institutions of the empire, linked different aspects that had been emphasised in Commodus’ visual programme from the very beginning.

The *Providentia Deorum*, and the *pietas*, *felicitas*, and *nobilitas* of the emperor; all stressed how Commodus could count on divine support. The assimilations to Jupiter and Sol, with strong associations to a new Golden Age, and the coins of Commodus and Janus, with their references to the peaceful future that the emperor would bring, were variations to the same theme. Commodus could not, after all, point to experience or demonstrated capability, to legitimate his position. The ways in which this divine sanction was represented changed over time, perhaps under the influence of political events, such as the Lucilla conspiracy and the fall of Perennis. Oriental influences seem to have been of no consequence.

It seems likely that the fall of Cleander in AD 190, and especially the popular unrest in that period, led to the undeniable superhuman representation of the last years. Several strands of representation were brought together in Hercules, a deity of ambiguous status, who gave his life, and obtained immortality, through his deeds to help mankind. This was an apt model for Commodus, who could thus show that his status and divine support were the one warrant for the well being of the empire. Commodus’ coins and statues sent out a coherent, though untraditional, message. The next chapter will analyse whether the emperor’s gladiatorial displays, too, fitted the same pattern.

## AN EMPEROR ON DISPLAY

Who put the glad in gladiator? Hercules!

(Walt Disney, *Hercules*)

Commodus' claims as regards divinity are only one of the reasons why the last Antonine emperor has been severely condemned by ancient and modern historians. The emperor's behaviour in the arena, especially in the last years of his reign, has also commonly been perceived as a clear sign of his presumed insanity and megalomania. That Commodus had indeed presented himself as a gladiator, and fought as such in the arena, appears beyond doubt. Cassius Dio records – with horror – how Commodus fought as a gladiator during games that lasted for fourteen days. The *Historia Augusta* notices how the emperor regularly 'engaged in gladiatorial combats and accepted the names usually given to gladiators with as much pleasure as if he had been granted triumphal decorations' (*gladiatorium etiam certamen subiit et nomina gladiatorum recepit eo gaudio quasi acciperet triumphalia*). Aurelius Victor adds that while the emperor himself fought with iron weapons, his opponents were given lead ones.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the earlier-described 'gladiatorial' hairstyle might also be used as an indication for Commodus' connection to the games.<sup>2</sup>

It is not, thus, so much the fact *that* Commodus fought in the arena, but the possible reason *why* he did so, which needs analysis. In recent years the gladiatorial games (and other spectacles in the arena) have been subject of a drastic change in interpretation, which must surely have an impact on our view of those who acted in, and showed themselves in connection to, those very spectacles. Current scholarship on the *ludi* has shed new light on a discipline that had been, till then, largely ignored or dismissed. Michael Grant, in his *Gladiators*, is horrified by the games, which according to him

<sup>1</sup> Dio, 73.19.2; 73.20.1; SHA, *Comm.* 11.10-11, 15.5-6; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 17.4-6. Cf. Herodian, 1.15.8-9.

<sup>2</sup> See *supra* pp. 128-9.

exemplify the fact that 'extremely few epochs of human history ... have achieved cruelty on a scale as numerically lavish as ancient Rome'.<sup>3</sup> These 'bloodthirsty holocausts in the arena', those 'orgies of cruelty', cannot be sufficiently condemned, argues Grant.<sup>4</sup> Roland Auguet likewise distances himself from the Romans' 'unseemly and maddest extravagances'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the substantial shedding of blood that characterised the games does not cohere with modern taste. Yet modern taste should not be the criterion to judge an ancient phenomenon by. Especially not a phenomenon that was so important in the Roman world.

Gladiatorial games were crucial to Roman identity. In the provinces watching the fights formed a good way to emphasise being Roman.<sup>6</sup> When that was impossible (e.g. for legions located far into the 'uncivilised' part of the realm) solutions had to be found. This at least seems to explain why during the principate some army-divisions possessed gladiators.<sup>7</sup> The importance is further shown by Louis Robert's classic notion that the spread of gladiatorial games in the East coincided with an acceptance (and even highlighting) by the elite of their place in the empire.<sup>8</sup> The popularity of the games in Rome seems beyond doubt; emperors who failed to throw extensive and expensive shows lost popularity, whereas those who held lavish *munera* gained widespread support – though possibly only for a limited period of time. From the reign of Domitian onwards nobody but the emperor, his direct family, or those magistrates appointed by the emperor, were allowed to organise gladiatorial shows at Rome.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently the *princeps* wanted to limit access to such a source of popularity. The reasons for this popularity, and the possible symbolic meanings of the spectacles, have been the focus of recent research. Especially in the last ten years historians, trying to evaluate Roman spectacles through 'ancient eyes' and using sociological and anthropological theories, have once more looked into the symbolism of the arena, and its function in Roman society. Their analyses, as we

<sup>3</sup> M. Grant, *Gladiators* (Suffolk 1967), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, *Gladiators*, 118.

<sup>5</sup> R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization. The Roman Games* (London 1994), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Th. Wiedemann, 'Single combat and being Roman', *AncSoc* 27 (1996), 91-103; 100-1.

<sup>7</sup> *CIL* 7.1335.3, 13.8639; Tac. *Ann.* 1.23; Wiedemann, 'Single combat and being Roman', 101.

<sup>8</sup> L. Robert, *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec* (Paris 1940).

<sup>9</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 11.22; Suet. *Dom.* 4.1; Dio, 54.2.4, 55.32, 59.14, 60.5; Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 8. Cf. Fronto, *Principia Historiae*, 17 (= LCL, II, 216) for the popularity of the games.

shall see later in this chapter, are of great importance when looking at Commodus' behaviour, and may place 'Commodus the gladiator' firmly within the model of legitimation that seems to explain the emperor's attitude towards his own superhuman status.

### Gladiatorial games: spectacles of power

A structure of action, now bloody, now ceremonious, the *negara* was also, and as such, a structure of thought. To describe it is to describe a constellation of enshrined ideas.<sup>10</sup>

Crucial to the development of the study of gladiatorial games – as to so many other fields of research – are Clifford Geertz' anthropological studies. Especially his concept of the 'theatre state', coined in the context of nineteenth-century Bali, has been of immense importance. Geertz emphasised the symbolic importance of state-controlled spectacle, 'in which kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience'.<sup>11</sup> Though one ought to be careful about simply transposing a set of ideas from one cultural context to the next, the interaction which Geertz recognised between spectacle and the 'symbolology of power', applies well to the situation in the arena of imperial Rome, and has been so applied by many scholars:

[They] were metaphysical theatre: theatre designed to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and, at the same time, to shape the existing conditions of life to be consonant with that reality; that is, theatre to present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen – make it actual.<sup>12</sup>

Geertz sees spectacle in this context as a form of ritual. He is, however, not alone in the importance he attaches to ritual. Furthermore, the interpretation of quite how ritual works in and for society differs significantly from one anthropologist to the next. If one sees the gladiatorial games as a form of ritual, different approaches to the interpretation of ritual become crucial for the interpretation of the Roman games. Thus, for example, Eric Wolf has recently accentuated

<sup>10</sup> C. Geertz, *Negara. The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton 1980), 135.

<sup>11</sup> Geertz, *Negara*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 104. Cf. 102: 'It was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to the divine ... What the Balinese state did for Balinese society was to cast into sensible form a concept of what, together, they were supposed to make of themselves: an illustration of the power of grandeur to organize the world'.

the role of ritual as a 'vehicle of ideology':

In the ritual process, the participant enters a spatially and temporally structured environment and moves through it guided by a prescribed script that dictates bodily movement and emotional responses'.<sup>13</sup>

Different analyses of ritual create interesting new angles from which to look at the gladiatorial games. Yet there is an inevitable risk in viewing activities in the arena as ritual without further ado. There are distinctions to be made between 'pure' ritual and different forms of spectacles – of which gladiatorial shows are one.

Athletic contests bear some similarity to both theatre and ritual, and both theatre and games have sometimes been associated with ritual ... In sum, ritual is one member of an extended family of performance forms, to some of which it seems on the face of it to be more closely related to others.<sup>14</sup>

Exactly how closely related ritual and gladiatorial games are, is a difficult question to answer. But perhaps the question whether the games *were* ritual or not is less important than whether or not they functioned (to an extent) *like* ritual. Here the work of Catherine Bell becomes of importance. She has tried to connect some of the more important of the different approaches to ritual, which has led her to conclude that: 'ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations'.<sup>15</sup> If this becomes the 'minimum' definition of ritual, then gladiatorial games can certainly be perceived as ritual – at least at a minimum level – and analysed as such.<sup>16</sup> Notions that have been developed in the light of the theory of ritual appear to actually help in clarifying our understanding of the spectacles that took place in the Roman arena. So one might as well try to apply these notions. This, indeed, seems to be what has been done. Of course not all anthropological theories that have been used are derived from the study of 'ritual'.

The first footnote of Keith Hopkins' chapter on the gladiatorial games leaves no doubt as to the importance of Geertz for his

<sup>13</sup> E. R. Wolf, *Envisioning Power. Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1999), 57.

<sup>14</sup> R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge 1999), 38. Rappaport explores some aspects of closeness to ritual of different types of performances (pp. 39–50).

<sup>15</sup> C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York – Oxford 1992), 197.

<sup>16</sup> A clear indication of the importance of such power relationships within the structure of the gladiatorial games is the strict hierarchical seating arrangement in the amphitheatre, reflecting the social order in Rome, wonderfully analysed by E. Rawson, 'Discrimina Ordinum: The *Lex Iulia Theatralis*', *PBSR* 55 (1987), 83–114 (= *Roman Culture and Society* [Oxford 1991], 508–45).

reinterpretation of the games: 'I have been much influenced by C. Geertz' brilliant essay 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight' ... Indeed, in some respect this chapter is written in direct imitation of that essay'.<sup>17</sup> That reinterpretation is in many ways the first serious study of the phenomenon. Hopkins looks at the gladiatorial shows as political theatre, and sees gladiators 'as glamour figures, culture heroes'.<sup>18</sup> Essentially, he argues that the spectacles formed a platform for institutionalised violence, whilst, at the same time, they reminded spectators that they themselves were unaffected by such horrors.<sup>19</sup>

Carlin Barton, ten years later, further investigated the Roman arena in relation to the Romans' collective psychology. Her aim was to clarify 'the emotional life of the ancient Romans'.<sup>20</sup> In order to do so she embraced a multitude of theoretical frameworks, and incorporated a wide array of, mainly literary, sources. The way she has tried to apply and incorporate modern theoretical frameworks is commendable and well-defended, yet in the use of the ancient sources themselves she has a rather unorthodox methodological approach. For instance, Barton argues that for her purposes, all the different types of sources used (which are mainly, if not only, literary ones), are 'equally true and equally fictive'.<sup>21</sup> Equally, she argues that there are 'no "right" contexts for any symbolic expression'.<sup>22</sup> But when the court flatterer Martial describes to the emperor the magnificence of that particular emperor's hobby, one cannot simply use that statement outside of its context.

The audience and goals of an author, and even the range of his *de facto* free speech, should be explored before concluding anything from that author's remarks. When Barton concludes that 'the "gladiatorial madness" of the Romans was simply a distillation of the parching liquors of despair and desire that had, elsewhere within that culture,

<sup>17</sup> K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal. Sociological Studies in Roman History. Volume 2* (Cambridge 1983), 1 n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> C. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans. The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton 1993), 3. Cf., on the same page: 'I have written in an effort to address some of the darkest riddles of the Roman psyche, because I suspected they were some of the riddles of my own life and perhaps of human life'.

<sup>21</sup> Barton, *The Gladiator and the Monster*, 4: 'As possible clues to the "physics" of the emotional world of the Romans, the metaphor, the fantasy, the deliberate falsehood, the mundane and oft-repeated truism, the literary *topos*, the bizarre world of schoolboy declamations, and the "cultural baggage" taken over from the Greeks are as valuable as a report of Tacitus or an imperial decree'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

reached a point of saturation', the foundations for such a generalising conclusion are not strong enough.<sup>23</sup> This is illustrated by the example with which she chooses to finish her conclusion; the notorious find, at the excavations of the gladiatorial barracks of Pompeii, of the body of a well-jewelled woman among several male bodies. Barton wonders in what category of gladiator-lovers the woman should be placed. Yet she mentions seventeen men, some of whom were shackled, whereas in the barracks only four men were found, all firmly bound in chains.<sup>24</sup> Whether there were men around who could actually move, is surely of some importance when discussing the type of preference for gladiators by upper-class-ladies. Perhaps the woman sought shelter in the barracks when the Vesuvius erupted. Perhaps, also, the room was used as a prison – not necessarily for gladiators.<sup>25</sup> Of course it is possible that the woman had some sort of liaison with an imprisoned gladiator, but one should be careful not to over-interpret the evidence.

Thomas Wiedemann, in his book on gladiatorial games and *venationes*, was less explicitly (but still recognisably) influenced by modern theories surrounding ritual and spectacle. Incorporating epigraphical and archaeological evidence, he expanded on Hopkins' notion of 'surviving disaster'. According to Wiedemann, gladiators in the arena represented order in its constant battle against chaos. This meeting of culture and lawless nature in the amphitheatre even symbolised the order of the cosmos itself.<sup>26</sup>

The arena was also the place in which the emperor's authority over life and death was emphasised through the execution of criminals in 'fatal charades', as Coleman called them; the re-enactment of fatal myths, often preceding the gladiatorial games proper, in which the

<sup>23</sup> Barton, *The Gladiator and the Monster*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 81. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 23 also talks about eighteen skeletons. For the number of four shackled men: J. Overbeck / A. Mau, *Pompeji in seinen Gebäuden, Alterthümern und Kunstwerken* (Leipzig 1884<sup>4</sup>), 631 n. 9; H. Eschebach, *Pompeji. Erlebte antike Welt* (Leipzig 1978), 62. Cf. H. Eschebach, *Gebäudeverzeichnis und Stadtplan der antiken Stadt Pompeji* (Cologne etc. 1993), 145. The number of eighteen bodies, mainly richly dressed women with their slaves, was instead found in the so-called Villa of Diomedes: E. La Rocca / M. de Vos / A. de Vos, *Pompeii* (Milan 1994<sup>2</sup>), 353-4; E. M. Moormann, 'Una città mummificata: qualche aspetto della fortuna di Pompei nella letteratura europea ed americana', in: P. G. Guzzo (ed.), *Pompeii. Scienza e società* (Milan 2001), 9-17; 13-4. For the attractions of gladiators, see *infra*, p.150.

<sup>25</sup> Eschebach, *Pompeji. Erlebte antike Welt*, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 179. Cf. M. Clavel-Lévêque, *L'empire en jeux. Espace symbolique et pratique sociale dans le monde romain* (Paris 1984), 179: '[Les jeux] sont, à tous leurs niveaux, visualisation d'une vision du monde complexe, voire hétérogène, des rapports des hommes entre eux et avec la nature ...'.

criminal played the part of the unfortunate protagonist.<sup>27</sup> The amphitheatre symbolised, in either case, the border-zone between normality and abnormality. It was an area that was simultaneously the centre of one of the Romans' most important social activities and the 'non-Roman space' of the uncivilised earth.<sup>28</sup> In this anomalous space gladiators performed their spectacle. Of course the barbarism that was fought off did not form a real threat to Rome. Yet through 'theatralising' a potentially real danger, that danger was, in a way, overcome. By institutionalising chaos and disorder, the breach of normality was included in the fabric of society.<sup>29</sup>

For Wiedemann, however, the symbolism of the games went beyond even this maintenance of order and authority. According to him, gladiators symbolically challenged death itself. By winning a battle, a gladiator could win back the life that he forfeited at the beginning of the games. Through showing bravery and fighting skill, even death itself could be defeated. If he won the battle, he won his life. If he lost, the all-powerful emperor could yet save him, with a mere motion of the hand. The worst that could happen to him was of course dying. But even then he had at least decided the moment of dying himself, and embraced it whilst displaying his *virtus*. 'In that sense, even the gladiator who died in the arena had overcome death'.<sup>30</sup>

Wiedemann based himself upon an impressive array of documentation. He pointed to the importance, even for a gladiator who had lost, of dying heroically, so as to set a good example.<sup>31</sup> Such examples were deemed important, as Pliny testifies, when he

<sup>27</sup> Coleman, 'Fatal charades'. Cf. D. Potter, 'Martyrdom as spectacle', in: R. Scodel (ed.), *Theatre and Society in the Classical World* (Ann Arbor 1993), 53-88; 54. 'Executions and trials were intimately connected with the exercise of authority by the government of Rome'.

<sup>28</sup> E. Gunderson, 'The ideology of the arena', *ClAnt* 15 (1996), 113-151; 134. Cf. R. Laurence, 'Emperors, nature and the city: Rome's ritual landscape', *Accordia Research Papers* 4 (1993), 79-87; 84.

<sup>29</sup> P. Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome. Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Winconsin 1995), 32: 'Real threats cannot be gotten rid of in complete safety, and so the efficacy of ritual depends on how strongly their reality is felt'. Cf. P. Zanker, 'Die Barbaren, der Kaiser und die Arena. Bilder der Gewalt in der römischen Kunst', in: R. P. Sieferle / H. Breuninger (eds.), *Kulturen der Gewalt. Ritualisierung und Symbolisierung von Gewalt in der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main - New York 1998), 53-86; 79: 'Die Sorge um die innere Sicherheit war ebenso groß wie die um die äußeren Grenzen'.

<sup>30</sup> Wiedemann, 'Single combat and being Roman', 103. Cf. L. Robert, 'Une vision de Perpétue martyre à Carthage en 203', *Opera Minora Selecta* V (Amsterdam 1989), 791-839, in which Robert emphasised the importance of death and eternity for Christian martyrs who were about to be put to death in the arena. Although 'conquering death' had of course entirely different connotations for these Christians, Robert's article does once more stress how closely related activities in the arena and conquering death could be.

<sup>31</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 38.



describes how Trajan's spectacles 'inspire the manly spirit ... [to face] honourable wounds and contempt of death' (*animos virorum ... ad pulchra vulnera contemptumque mortis accenderet*), or as Libanius admits, admiring the bravery of the gladiators who had fought at his uncle's games.<sup>32</sup> Wiedemann further showed that the prospects of survival for gladiators were far greater than has often been assumed. Inscriptions from Pompeii, for instance, seem to imply that gladiators could acquire some sort of hero-status. If he fought well enough to survive the first few matches, a gladiator's popularity became such that the crowd would support him when he finally did lose. In that way, he might well avoid being killed in the arena altogether.<sup>33</sup> Several inscriptions record men who had died – and not always in the arena – only after several years of gladiatorial fighting.<sup>34</sup> Not all of them had won all of their fights. One instance records a man, who died at thirty, and had performed 34 fights, of which he had won 21, 'drew' (*stans*) 9, and lost – but was allowed to survive – 4 times (*missus*).<sup>35</sup> A certain Pardus, who was a professional gladiator, even lived to be forty-eight and died of natural causes. He participated in twenty-five (or thirty-five) combats, winning only nineteen of them.<sup>36</sup> Finally, a *paegniarius* named Secundus lived to the incredible age of ninety-five.<sup>37</sup> Not all gladiators were slaves, and references in the law codes to ex-gladiators furthermore show that those who had been gladiators could sometimes return to civil life.<sup>38</sup> Rather than seeing gladiatorial games as an occasion during which somebody was inevitably going to die, it might be worthwhile to see them 'as giving a condemned man the opportunity to regain his physical and social life'.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the

<sup>32</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 33.1; Liban, *Orat.* 1.5. On the importance of display of *virtus* in the arena: M. Wistrand, *Entertainment and Violence in Ancient Rome. The Attitudes of Roman Writers of the First Century AD* (Göteborg 1992), 15–29. See *infra* p.156–7.

<sup>33</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 120. Cf. Plin. *HN.* 35.52, describing how a wall in a portico was covered with 'life-like portraits of all the gladiators' in a certain show.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 120–2, referring to: *ILS*, 5086, 5089, 5093–7, 5101–2, 5107, 5109, 5111–2, 5114–5, 5117, 5120, 5125, 6122. Cf. V. Hope, 'Fighting for identity: The funerary commemoration of Italian gladiators', in: A. Cooley (ed.), *The Epigraphic Landscape of Roman Italy* (London 2000), 93–113; 102–3 on the emphasis on numbers, especially age, on gladiatorial tombstones.

<sup>35</sup> *ILS*, 5113: *Flamma s[e]c., vix. an. xxx, / pugnat xxxiiii, vicit xxi, / stans viiii, mis. iiii, nat. S[y]rus. / Hui Delicatus coarmio merenti fecit.*

<sup>36</sup> *EAOR* I, 65–6 no. 64 (= *CIL* 6.33983).

<sup>37</sup> *EAOR* I, 73 no. 79 (= *CIL* 6.10168, *ILS* 5126).

<sup>38</sup> *Digest*, 38.1.38; Wiedemann *Emperors and Gladiators*, 122. For the number of *gladiatorii liberti*; *EAOR* I, 116–7 (tab. 11); III, 136–7 (tab. 7). Cf. also Petron. *Sat.* 45: 'we are to be given superb spectacles lasting three days, not simply a troop of professional gladiators, but a large number of them freedmen'.

<sup>39</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 120.

evidence shows that gladiatorial games were associated with the end of the year. 'The year's end is also a new beginning. Death and killing were essential associations of the arena: but so also was rebirth'.<sup>40</sup>

Not all scholars have agreed with Wiedemann's proposal that gladiatorial shows should be perceived as a medium for defeating death, rather than as a means of killing. Shelby Brown found that there was too little evidence to support the claim, though she did concede that 'gladiatorial combat undoubtedly brought watchers face to face with death, and the origins of gladiatorial combat and funerals may suggest an element of comfort offered to the dead, the survivors or both ... The acceptance and ritualization of death does take its power to frighten us'.<sup>41</sup> Surely, the interpretation of the games may have differed from person to person. Some would see the centrality of the warrior ethos at Rome, and the importance of the military domination of the realm,<sup>42</sup> whilst others may have thought that the games should be perceived as a form of *devotio*; a sacrifice in which Roman citizens gave their life for the realm in order to appease the divine.<sup>43</sup> Along these last lines, one can perceive gladiatorial games as being given on behalf of the welfare of the emperor.<sup>44</sup> An emperor fighting for his own welfare would be interesting in itself – especially as the division of gladiators into different categories, recognisable by their masks and weaponry (which could also cover an individual's features), meant depersonalising the individual. A gladiator-emperor who fought as a person, rather than as a gladiator, for his own welfare, must have been a particular phenomenon. Yet Wiedemann's model of conquering death might have an added interest in explaining Commodus' behaviour as a gladiator.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 47. Also taken up by Plass, *The Game of Death*, 37, 194 n. 15.

<sup>41</sup> S. Brown, 'Explaining the arena: did the Romans "need" gladiators?', *JRA* 8 (1995), 376-86, 383.

<sup>42</sup> J. C. Edmondson, 'Dynamic arenas: Gladiatorial presentations in the city of Rome and the construction of Roman society during the early empire', in: W. J. Slater (ed.), *Roman Theatre and Society. E. Togo Salmon Papers I* (Ann Arbor 1996), 69-112; 72.

<sup>43</sup> H. S. Versnel, *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual. Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II* (Leiden-New York- Cologne 1993), 224. Cf. Zanker, 'Die Barbaren, der Kaiser und die Arena', 80-1: 'so konnte man ... vielleicht sogar von einer pervertierten Form von Reinigung der Gesellschaft durch Opfer sprechen'.

<sup>44</sup> Versnel, *Transition and Reversal*, 222. Cf. Ibidem, 226: 'in *Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant* the *salutatio* regained its etymological connection with *salus* ... The development was, of course, fostered by, and embedded in, the general ritual of the *vota pro salute principis*...'

<sup>45</sup> A final point of criticism on Wiedemann comes from David Potter, who recently challenged Wiedemann on the meaning of *sine missione*. According to Potter this does not

## Commodus the gladiator

The hero acclaimed by a crowd is a veritable god for that crowd<sup>46</sup>

Commodus presented himself in the arena with the attributes of Hercules (and perhaps those of Mercury).<sup>47</sup> The connection between Commodus the gladiator and Commodus-Hercules must have been noticeable. Indeed, the *Historia Augusta* remarks that Commodus 'was also called the Roman Hercules, on the grounds that he had killed wild beasts in the amphitheatre at Lanuvium' (*appellatus est etiam Romanus Hercules, quod feras Lanuvii in amphitheatro occidisset*).<sup>48</sup> Hercules had been famous for the deeds he performed to save mankind, and for his crossing the boundary of immortality, thus becoming one of the gods. Commodus seems to have intended to indicate clearly that he was trying to emulate the demi-god's deeds through mythological replication of them in the arena. According to Dio:

ἐπειδὴ ποτε πάντας τοὺς τῶν ποδῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει ὑπὸ νόσου ἢ καὶ  
ἐτέρας τινὸς συμφορᾶς ἐστερημένους ἀθροίσας δρακόντων τέ τινα  
αὐτοῖς εἶδη περὶ τὰ γόνατα περιέπλεξε, καὶ σπόγγους ἀντὶ λίθων

indicate a fight to the death, but one in which *missio* ('release from the authority of the person who was offering the combat to the public') 'without a clear victory was not permitted' (D. Potter, 'Entertainers in the Roman Empire', in: D. Potter / D. J. Mattingly (eds.), *Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1999), 256-325; 307). This is also one of Potter's major points of criticism on Wiedemann in his review of *Emperors and Gladiators*, in *JRS* 83 (1993), 229-31, especially 231. If thus, in general, combats were not fought to the death, than surviving such a combat would not be quite the defeating of death which Wiedemann made it out to be. Potter might be right in principle (but cf. *Liber Spectaculorum*, 29.3; Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 156-6 n.1), yet at least in the case of Commodus the argument does not apply, as we are explicitly told that the games became 'so serious that great numbers of men were killed' (Dio, 73.19. 5: ὥστε πᾶν πολλοὺς ἀποθνήσκειν).

<sup>46</sup> Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 74.

<sup>47</sup> But cf. *supra* pp. 130-1. In the arena, Commodus both engaged in gladiatorial combat (*munera gladiatoria*) and in fighting wild beasts in the arena (*venationes*). Both incorporated many of the same characteristics and symbolism, noticeably risking one's life through physical danger, being acclaimed by the audience in the arena, and fighting 'wild nature'. They also often formed part of a single series of spectacles (Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 56, 97 n.1), and were perceived by the Romans themselves as being strongly related. They are simultaneously represented on the 'Villa di Dar Buc Amméra' mosaic (Zliten, Libya), and the goddess Nemesis 'had a special, if not exclusive, relation to the Roman *munus*, *venatio*, and other related animal controlling displays' (M. Hornum, *Nemesis, the Roman State, and the Games* [Leiden 1993], 56), whilst there is virtually no evidence for a link between Nemesis and other Roman spectacles (Hornum, *Nemesis*, 55).

<sup>48</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 8.5. See further on this passage, *supra* p. 108.

βάλλειν δοὺς ἀπέκτεινέ σφας ροπάλῳ παίων ὡς γίγαντας (After he had once assembled all the men in the city who had lost their feet as the result of a disease or some accident, he then, after fastening about their knees some likenesses of serpents, and giving them some sponges to throw instead of stones, had killed them with blows from a club, pretending that they were giants).<sup>49</sup>

After thus symbolically rescuing the cosmic order from the attack of fearsome giants, the emperor was apparently planning to enact the story of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds (Dio, 72.20.2). Dio happily adds that many spectators shunned the arena out of fear of being shot in the course of the emperor's masquerade.

Yet if Wiedemann's notion of death-conquering gladiators holds, it would not only be when shooting Stymphalian birds or defeating giants in the arena that Commodus manifested himself as a new Hercules; the very notion of fighting in the amphitheatre in Hercules' garb would be a symbolical re-enactment of the deity's triumph over death. This would, then, explain some highly enigmatic statements in our literary sources. Dio states:

μέλλων αὐθις μονομαχῆσαι παρῆγγειλεν ἡμῖν ἔν τε τῇ στολῇ τῇ ἱππᾷ καὶ ἐν ταῖς μανδύαις ἐς τὸ θέατρον ἐσελθεῖν, ὅπερ οὐκ ἄλλως ποιοῦμεν ἐσιόντες ἐς τὸ θέατρον εἰ μὴ τῶν αὐτοκρατόρων τις μεταλλάξειε, καὶ ὅτι ἐν τῇ τελευταίᾳ ἡμέρᾳ τὸ κράνος αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὰς πύλας καθ' ἃς οἱ τελευτῶντες ἐκφέρονται ἐξεκομίσθη (When he was intending to fight once more as a gladiator, he bade us enter the amphitheatre in the equestrian garb and in our woollen cloaks, a thing that we never do when going to the amphitheatre except when one of the emperors has passed away; and on the last day his helmet was carried out by the gates through which the dead are taken out). (Dio, 73.21.3)

To which the *Historia Augusta* adds:<sup>50</sup>

*ipse autem prodigium non leve sibi fecit; nam cum in gladiatoris occisi vulnus manum misisset, ad caput sibi deterisit, et contra consuetudinem paenulatos iussit spectatores non togatos ad munus convenire, quod funeribus solebat, ipse in pullis vestimentis praesidens. Galea eius bis per portam Libitinensem elata est* (He was himself responsible for a not inconsiderable omen relating to himself; for after he had plunged his hand in the wound of a slain gladiator he wiped it on his own head, and, contrary to custom, he ordered the spectators to attend his gladiatorial shows clad not in togas but in cloaks, a practice used at funerals, while he himself presided in the vestment of a mourner. Twice, moreover, his helmet was borne through the Gate of Libitina).

Commodus made his subjects come to the amphitheatre as if they

<sup>49</sup> Dio, 73.20.3. Cf. SHA, *Comm.* 9.6, which replaces the club with bow and arrows.

<sup>50</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 16.6-7. Cf. Herodian, 4.2.3; Kolb, 'Quellen der *Historia Augusta*', 186-8.

were already mourning his death. He then wiped the blood of a dead gladiator – blood renowned for its magic value<sup>51</sup> – on his head, before having his helmet carried off through the gates of the goddess of death and funerals<sup>52</sup> – gates through which slain gladiators were customarily carried off. All of this took place during a spectacle that was strongly associated with death and rebirth. It seems highly likely that Commodus was here, in terms that were not to be misunderstood, challenging death itself, much as Wiedemann's model presumed that gladiators did. The emperor's survival could be presented as a sign of his superhuman status. By thus symbolically challenging – and conquering – death, Commodus presented himself as rising far above the crowds.

In doing so, Commodus did identify with a group of people whose social status was, at best, dubious. By performing as a gladiator a citizen risked *infamia*; even the 'complete deprivation of citizenship rights'.<sup>53</sup> Calpurnius Flaccus wrote about a war hero, who had been kidnapped by pirates and then bought by the manager of a group of gladiators who made him perform in the arena, and has him declare that no rank in the common masses is lower than the status of a gladiator.<sup>54</sup> When members of the upper class personally participated in the games, it always led to consternation. The higher the position of the contestant was, the greater was the reversal of the established order.<sup>55</sup> Still, this never stopped some members of the higher echelons of society from performing in the arena, though financial motives of bankrupt *equites* or senators cannot always be excluded. Caligula too enjoyed fighting in the arena, and numerous other emperors, amongst them Hadrian and Lucius Verus, are said to have practised as gladiators.<sup>56</sup> There is a significant difference between being trained as a gladiator, and actually performing in the arena. Yet the latter was not as uncommon as one might expect. Augustus, in AD 11, even allowed *equites* to fight as gladiators. 'For inasmuch as there proved to be no

<sup>51</sup> W. Weismann, 'Gladiator', in: T. Klauser et. al. (eds.), *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* X (Stuttgart 1981), 23-45; 33.

<sup>52</sup> Hor, *Carm.* 3.30, 7; *Epist.* 2.1, 49; G. Radke, *Zur Entwicklung der Gottesvorstellung und der Gottesverehrung in Rom* (Darmstadt 1987), 184-6.

<sup>53</sup> B. Levick, 'The *Senatus Consultum* from Larinum', *JRS* 73 (1983), 97-115; 108.

<sup>54</sup> Calp. Flaccus, *Declamationes*, 52.20-1. Cf. Quint. *Decl. Min.* 302.

<sup>55</sup> Barton, *The Gladiator and the Monster*, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Caligula: Suet, *Calig.* 54.1; Dio, 59.5.5; Hadrian: SHA, *Hadr.* 14.10; Lucius Verus: SHA, *Marc.* 8.12. For further emperors, and discussion on the reliability of the sources in this context: Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 110-1.

benefit from forbidding it ... they were granted permission to take part in such contests'.<sup>57</sup> Others were less lenient. In AD 19 a *Senatus Consultum* known from an inscription at Larinum (SCL) explicitly stated:

That it pleased them [the senate] that no one should bring on the stage a senator's son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, great-grandson, great-granddaughter, or any male whose father or grandfather, whether paternal or maternal, or brother, or any female whose husband or father or grandfather, whether paternal or maternal, or brother had ever possessed the right of sitting in the seats reserved for the knights, or induce them by fee to fight to the death in the arena (*auctoramentove ro[garet ut ?in harena depugna-]/ret*).<sup>58</sup>

Vitellius, too, unambiguously forbade knights to perform as gladiators. According to Tacitus such a ban had become necessary since people had been corrupted by the behaviour of previous emperors.<sup>59</sup> But new restrictions on gladiatorial performances were consistently evaded, leading to ever new bans, never quite managing to curb public performance by knights and senators.<sup>60</sup> Septimius Severus apparently even rebuked senators for their, in his opinion hypocritical, denunciation of Commodus' gladiatorial activities. They themselves were anything but blameless:

'For it was disgraceful', he said, 'for him [Commodus] with his own hands to slay wild beasts, yet at Ostia only the other day one of your number, an old man who had been consul, was publicly sporting with a prostitute who imitated a leopard. But, you will say, Commodus actually fought as a gladiator. And does none of you fight as a gladiator? If not, how and why is it that some of you have bought his shields and those famous golden helmets?' (ὁμῶν δ' οὐδεὶς μονομαχεῖ; πῶς οὖν καὶ ἐπὶ τί τὰς τε ἀσπίδας αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ κράνη τὰ χρυσᾶ ἐκεῖνα ἐπρίαντο τινες;) (Dio, 76.8.2-3).

The social position of gladiators and *bestiarii* was deeply ambivalent.<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding their legal inferiority, they could become

<sup>57</sup> Dio, 56.25.7.

<sup>58</sup> SCL, ll. 7-10; Levick, 'The *Senatus Consultum*', 98-9 (with translation); *EAOR* III, 18-26 no. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 2.62.4.

<sup>60</sup> Levick, 'The *Senatus Consultum*', 105-10; G. Ville, *La gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien* (Rome 1981), 255-62; E. Baltrusch, *Regimen morum. Die Reglementierung des Privatlebens der Senatoren und Ritter in der römischen Republik und frühen Kaiserzeit* (Munich 1988), 147-9, with references.

<sup>61</sup> G. L. Gregori, 'Aspetti sociali della gladiatura romana', in: A. La Regina, *Sangue e arena* (Milan 2001), 15-27; 22-4. On the development from professional hunters (*venatores*) and those condemned to fight wild beasts with knife or spear, to trained 'beast-gladiators', see D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London - New York 1998), 79-80.

highly popular. One need only to look at Pompeian graffiti to see how importantly gladiatorial names figured. Those fighting in the arena could also be perceived as sex symbols. The aristocrat's wife, falling for the gladiator, became a well-known stereotype: 'his face looked a proper mess, helmet-scarred, a great wart on his nose, an unpleasant discharge always trickling from one eye. But he was a gladiator. That word made the whole breed seem handsome'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, dreaming of gladiatorial games was deemed to indicate marriage.<sup>63</sup> The attraction of gladiators went beyond their sexual appeal. Fighting, like racing and acting, brought glamour and allure with it, though also debasement. Tertullian sums up with wonder:

Take even those who give and who administer the spectacles. Look at their attitude to the charioteers, players, athletes, gladiators (*arenarios*), most loving of men, to whom men surrender their souls and women their bodies as well ... on one and the same account they glorify them and they degrade and diminish them .. The perversity of it! They love those whom they punish, they despise those whom they approve (*Amant quos multant, depretiant quos probant*) ... What sort of judgement is this – that a man should be blackened for what he shines in?<sup>64</sup>

Gladiators were looked at with admiration.<sup>65</sup> Whatever the legal implications, gladiators still held a special status. Fighting in the arena remained a popular Roman activity.

It was a very well attended Roman activity as well. The amphitheatre was one of the few areas in which so many representatives of several different social stratifications assembled simultaneously with the emperor. This allowed them to express political opinions, as well as more detailed requests. In a number of ways the assembled masses took over the role of a formal assembly.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 6.16-10, quoted by Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Artem. 1.5. Also Artem. 2.32 which explains how dreaming of a *retarius* signified taking as a wife 'a woman who roams about consorting very freely with anyone who wants her', while dreaming of a Thracian means his wife will be 'rich, crafty, and fond of being first; rich because the Thracian's body is entirely covered by his armor; crafty, because his sword is not straight; and fond of being first, because this fighter employs the advancing technique'. Yet, as always, one had to be careful when interpreting dreams; the dream-interpreter Antipater told someone 'who once dreamt that he had intercourse with a piece of iron that he would be condemned to fight in a gladiatorial contest. The dream did not however come true in this way. Instead, the dreamer's penis was cut off'; Artem. 4.65. Cf. J. P. Toner, *Leisure and Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1995), 36.

<sup>64</sup> Tert. *De spect.* 22; S. Goldhill, 'The erotic eye', in: idem, *Being Greek under Rome*, 154-94; 181-4.

<sup>65</sup> Robert, *Gladiateurs*, 255: 'on sent l'admiration qu'il y a dans le membre de phrase: ἐπιπτόντε καὶ ἐνίκων, ces morts et ces victoires également glorieuses'.

<sup>66</sup> Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 166-9. Cf. O. Hekster / H. G. Hoogers, 'Eine Ortung auf Rom – Carl Schmitts Katechon-Begriff im Rahmen des römischen Reiches',

It is obvious that the all-powerful emperor could, as *editor* of the games, grant a fighter life or death, by a mere motion of the finger.<sup>67</sup> Yet that decision was hugely influenced by the public reaction to a fight. The public's approval or disapproval was not to be ignored; not even by the emperor. Caligula famously made himself unpopular by threatening the audience, telling them that he wished they 'had but a single neck'.<sup>68</sup> Hadrian was slightly more polite in a similar situation:

Once at a gladiatorial contest, when the crowd was demanding something very urgently (καί ποτε ἰσχυρῶς αἰτοῦντί τι ἐν ὀπλομαχίᾳ), he not only would not grant it, but also asked the herald to proclaim Domitian's command 'Silence'. The word was not uttered, however, for the herald raised his hand and by that very gesture quieted the people as heralds are accustomed to do ... and then, when they had become quiet, he said: 'That is what he wished' ("τοῦτ' ἐθέλει"). And Hadrian ... actually honoured him for not uttering the rude order. (Dio, 69.6.1-2)

Public reactions in the arena were sometimes problematic for the emperor, as they could rapidly evolve into a political statement, going far beyond requests regarding the games themselves. In the amphitheatre people would give their opinion about an emperor and his policies freely. Moreover, as Alan Cameron realised over twenty-five years ago (though talking about the Circus Maximus, rather than the Colosseum): 'any request made publicly in front of up to 250,000 fellow citizens was potentially political – and not easy to resist'.<sup>69</sup> To an emperor who personally fought as a gladiator, requests could not be so easily made; his very actions in the arena protected his people as he (symbolically) risked his life in order to save his subjects. In doing so, he rose far above those subjects, making them more and more his to command. It may not be accidental that the *Historia Augusta* explicitly connects Commodus' exploits in the arena with his

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<sup>67</sup> Coleman, 'Fatal charades', 73: 'There were people and animals available who, by dying violently, could earn [the emperor] popular acclaim and demonstrate his authority over life and death'. S. Brown, 'Death as decoration: Scenes from the arena on Roman domestic mosaics', in: A. Richlin (ed.) *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York – Oxford 1992), 180-211; 206-7 discusses the importance on mosaics of the, often unseen, *editor*, who alone could intercede in a fight, and to whom requests for *missio* should be directed.

<sup>68</sup> Dio, 59.13.6; Suet. *Calig.* 30.2: *Utinam populus Romanus unam cervicem haberet*. Cf. R. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainment of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven – London 1999), 182: 'The threat about the collective Roman neck became proverbial for its provocative insolence', referring to Sen. *Brev. Vit.* 18.5; *Ira*, 3.19.2.

<sup>69</sup> A. Cameron, *Circus Factions. Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford 1976), 162; P. Ciancio Rossetto, 'Circus Maximus', *LTUR* 1, 272-7; 274. The Colosseum would have been able to seat between 40,000 and 45,000 people. R. Rea, 'Amphitheatrum', *LTUR* 1, 30-35.



renaming of the Roman people as the 'Commodians'.<sup>70</sup> The audience had nothing left to do but to acclaim the gladiator-emperor who could be seen as defending civilisation.

Slaying wild beasts similarly showed how the emperor took care of his subjects' well being. When people of high status publicly killed fierce creatures, they might be perceived as trespassing on imperial territory. Commodus' reaction to Julius Alexander may indicate as much. Alexander was known to have killed a lion with a javelin from horseback, and was condemned to death for it. There is an echo here of the reign of Domitian, another emperor known for his fondness of the games. Domitian even ordered Manius Acilius Glabrio, who had been consul *ordinarius* together with Trajan in AD 91, to kill a lion in his Alban amphitheatre, after which the emperor put Glabrio to death on the charge of fighting with wild beasts.<sup>71</sup> Nobody was allowed to deny the emperor the position which was rightly his. By embracing the peculiar socio-hierarchical status of gladiator, Commodus placed himself outside – or perhaps above – the normal rules of society. This behaviour could even be conceived as that of the stoic *sapiens*; the sage who undertook his actions independently of, and unaffected by, any form of social order.<sup>72</sup> As the new incarnation of Hercules, Commodus owed nobody an explanation. He was the only one who could bring a new Golden Age for his people.

The connection between gladiators and Hercules was a powerful one. The deity was popular amongst fighting men. Hercules' image as an

<sup>70</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 15.5: 'He entitled the Roman people, in whose presence he often fought as a gladiator, the "people of Commodus"' (*Commodianum etiam populum Romanum dixit, quo saepissime praesente gladiator pugnabit*). Were the *Commodiani* perhaps comparable to the *Prasiniani* and the *Venetiani*; the circus-factions of the Greens and the Blues? The separation into these *factiones* does not seem to have applied at gladiatorial games and *venationes* (Cameron, *Circus Factions*, 1-23, 78, 206-7). Perhaps this, more than shame, was the reason that Commodus never publicly appeared as a charioteer (Dio, 73.17.1). In the circus, Commodus, and his audience, would have had to choose a colour. In the amphitheatre there were no such sides. All supported the emperor.

<sup>71</sup> Julius Alexander: Dio, 72.14.1-3; SHA, *Comm.* 8.2-3; Glabrio: Dio, 67.14.3. Cf. C. Letta, 'Dal leone di Giulio Alessandro ai leoni di Caracalla. La dinastia di Emesa verso la porpora imperiale', in: S. Bondi (ed.), *Studi in onore di Edda Bresciani* (Pisa 1985), 289-302; 290-2, who argues that both these occasions should be seen as examples of the 'royal hunt', and thus as direct challenges to the emperor. Glabrio, according to this argument, was forced to reveal himself as a pretender to the throne in waiting by killing the lion. The event may be connected to the dynastic struggles of the years AD 189/90 (see *supra* pp. 71-2.) Slaying wild beasts was also a symbol of *virtus*: W. Raack, *Modernisierte Mythen. Zum Umgang der Spätantike mit klassischen Bildthemen* (Stuttgart 1992), 27-32, 95-7.

<sup>72</sup> Barton, *The Gladiator and the Monster*, 34.

'invincible hooligan' made him a hero to soldiers.<sup>73</sup> When gladiators retired, they dedicated their weaponry, sometimes with depictions of the deity on it, to Hercules.<sup>74</sup> Vitruvius even saw a direct topographical link between temples of Hercules, amphitheatres and circuses.<sup>75</sup> At Rome many Hercules-temples were near the Circus Maximus. 'Alcides', 'Herakles', and 'Hercules' were popular names amongst gladiators.<sup>76</sup> In literature too, the association between gladiators and Hercules was emphasised, indeed, in Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*, Hercules' last words are those of the gladiator: 'Habet. Peractum est'.<sup>77</sup> Finally, when in AD 177, under Commodus and Marcus Aurelius, the *collegium gladiatorii* was founded, it was dedicated to the god Silvanus.<sup>78</sup> Although at first sight there is no apparent link between Silvanus and the spectacles in the arena, Patrizia Sabbatini Tumolesi argued that in this context Silvanus unified characteristics of Mars and Hercules.<sup>79</sup> Equally important, the entire name was *collegium Silvani Aureliani*, vividly expressing the relation to Commodus. Well into the sole reign of Commodus the central statue of this very *collegium* was restored. The entire *familia gladiatoria* contributed to the repair, and the dedicatory inscription states how the health of the emperor guaranteed the gladiators' happiness: *salvo Commodo, felix familia!* The procurator in charge even had the epithet *Commodianus* added to his name.<sup>80</sup>

The *venationes*, too, were strongly tied to the figure of Hercules.

<sup>73</sup> T. Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (Amsterdam 1998), 113.

<sup>74</sup> Naples, *Museo Archeologico Nazionale*, inv. 5640, 5657; R. Bosso / V. Moesch, 'Gli spettacoli', in: *La Regina, Sangue e arena*, 355-97; 375 no. 100, 379 no. 103; *Hor. Epist.* 1.1, 5; Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 178.

<sup>75</sup> *Vitr. De arch.* 1.7.7; L. Morgan, 'Assimilation and civil war: Hercules and Cacus. Aeneid 8', in: H.-P. Stahl (ed.), *Vergil's Aeneid: Augustan Epic and Political Context* (London 1998), 175-97; 187. There seems to have been a statue of Hercules in the Colosseum: *Musei Vaticani*, inv. 9997; R. Bosso / V. Moesch, 'I Flavi e la costruzione del Colosseo', in: *La Regina, Sangue e arena*, 320-7; 326 no. 15.

<sup>76</sup> W. Ameling, 'Maximinus Thrax als Herakles', in: J. Straub (ed.), *Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium 1984/5* (1987), 1-12; 6 nn. 29-34.

<sup>77</sup> *Sen, Herc. Oet.* 1472; Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 179; Morgan, 'Assimilation and civil war', 187-8.

<sup>78</sup> *CIL* 6.631 = *EAOR* I, 53-5 no. 45.

<sup>79</sup> *EAOR* I, 54. Ville, *Gladiature*, 333 n. 236 sees no special report between gladiatorial games and Silvanus. According to P. F. Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus. A Study in Roman Folk Religion* (Leiden - New York - Cologne 1992), 51, there was a close connection between Hercules and Silvanus in Rome, but less of a relation outside of the city. Cf. *CIL* 6.329 which describes Hercules as Silvanus' grandson.

<sup>80</sup> *CIL* 6.632 = *EAOR* I, 55-6 no. 46: *Felici Imperatori omnia felicia salvo Commodo, felix familia/ Silvanum Augustum familia restituit dedicante/ Severiano Maximo procurante feliciter ordini/ potestatum et cultis doctoribus/ Curante Marco Aurelio Augusti liberto Euporan/ Maxime Commodiane abias propitium Caesarem*

His labours with animals naturally suggested an animal-fighter, as Martial made clear when he praised the well-known *bestiarius* Carphorus: 'Let the glory of Hercules' achievement be numbered: it is more to have defeated twice ten beasts at one time'<sup>81</sup> Both those fighting in the arena and Hercules fought to protect the order of society against the chaos of nature and barbarism, very much as an emperor defended his realm against the chaos from without. They were the perfect symbols for a ruler who wanted to show his power to his subjects, who tried to rule by general acclamation rather than by trying to persuade traditional institutions like the senate of the legitimacy of his reign. An emperor who chose a new style of government as a god-emperor, as 'the people's *princeps*'.

### The games and their spectators

It is hardly surprising that especially Cassius Dio, one of the senators who were made almost superfluous in such a new system of government, depicts all of this in extremely negative tones. When introducing Commodus' games into his narrative, he uses a form of words already mentioned when discussing Gaius – οὗτος οὖν ὁ χρυσοῦς, οὗτος ὁ Ἡρακλῆς, οὗτος ὁ θεός.<sup>82</sup> He then tries to make Commodus' actions in the arena look ridiculous. Most notoriously, he does so by recounting how Commodus approached the senators with a freshly severed head of an ostrich in his left hand, and a bloody sword in his right. This implicit threat, according to Dio, only made the emperor look ridiculous, and the senators present had difficulties containing their laughter.<sup>83</sup> He also uses a more subtle way of making the emperor's action look absurd. Dio (73.19.5) compares the emperor fighting in the arena to child's play: παιδιᾶς. As the emperor was never truly going to be injured, his fighting as a gladiator was merely amphitheatrical pseudo-fighting.<sup>84</sup> Popular with the *plebs* perhaps, but not the real thing.

<sup>81</sup> Mart. *Spect.* 32 (28, *prius* 27).11-2. Cf. 17 (15).5-6.

<sup>82</sup> Dio, 73.16.1: 'Now this golden one, this Hercules, this god'. Noted by Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 132.

<sup>83</sup> Dio, 73.21.1-2. Laughter can, of course, also be a product of terror and hysteria. That, however, is not the image that Dio wishes to transmit. It is also noticeable that Commodus, a left-handed fighter, suddenly holds the bloody sword in his right hand (as was pointed out to me by Liv Yarrow).

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Herodian, 1.15.8: 'He had no difficulty overcoming his opponents by merely wounding them, since they all looked upon him as the emperor rather than as a gladiator, and let him win'.

It is of course impossible to tell whether this was Dio's private opinion, the general perception by senators (or larger sections of society), or a later reflection on how Dio would, in retrospect, have wanted to have interpreted the matter. What one can say is that Commodus presented his behaviour in the arena as more than mere play-acting, and used senatorial acclamation as one of the ways to accomplish this. Commodus received the *salutatio* of senators dressed in gladiatorial costume, and the senators were to celebrate the emperor's gladiatorial efforts, in prescribed expressions:

You are the lord; you are the first of all men and the most fortunate. You conquer; you will conquer, Amazonius; you will conquer for eternity.<sup>85</sup>

The reference to Commodus as 'Amazonius' once more shows how a connection was presented between Hercules (whose labours had included stealing the girdle of Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons), and the emperor as gladiator. This connection was broadcast through senatorial acclamation. It was about as public an expression of ideology as possible, with the senatorial elite supporting the image of a conquering gladiatorial emperor in front of the assembled Roman people. Different layers of society were thus mobilised to broadcast Commodus' message. Though the senators were not the intended audience, they certainly formed part of the spectacle.

Another possible audience for such self-presentation has not been mentioned yet. Convincing most people in the known world that the emperor of Rome was their master was difficult enough in itself. But, as Mary Beard recently emphasised, understanding quite what such power meant must have been even more difficult for the emperor himself. How does one cope with ruling the world? In this context she explicitly mentions the above-noted Capitoline bust, and its presumable location within the *horti Lamiani*. This bust would have been as visible to Commodus himself as it was to any possible visitor.<sup>86</sup> Presenting himself – and being acclaimed by his subjects – as a gladiatorial god-emperor may well have been a way for Commodus to formulate, and understand, the power that he could wield.

Also, in choosing to appear as a gladiator, Commodus might have been trying to avoid the mistakes which Nero had previously made. Nero too had used the divine to legitimate himself, having had much

<sup>85</sup> Dio, 73.17.2, 73.20.2: καὶ κύριος εἶ καὶ πρῶτος εἶ καὶ πάντων εὐτυχέστατος. νικᾷς, νικήσεις. ἀπ' αἰῶνος, 'Ἀμαζόνιε, νικᾷς. On acclamation during the games: D. Potter: 'Performance, power, and justice in the high empire', in: Slater, *Roman Theatre and Society*, 129-59; 132-142.

<sup>86</sup> Beard, 'Imaginary *horti*', 31.

the same problems of legitimation that Commodus would have over a century later. He had even presented himself as Hercules, acting the role of 'Hercules *insanus*' whilst wearing a mask of the deity, which was fashioned to look like Nero himself. A very interesting form of self-representation, to say the least, which indeed caused one soldier 'who was posted to guard the entrance' to run up and 'rescue' the emperor when Nero was 'bound with chains, as the plot demanded'.<sup>87</sup> In Shadi Bartsch's words: 'Nero's mask of himself serves as a catalyst of confusion, making it seemingly impossible for the spectator to apply either "representation" or "reality" as a consistent frame for viewing'.<sup>88</sup> Nero had constantly related himself to such confusion and strangeness, loving the theatre and making a long tour in Greece which ended in his infamous entry into Rome, celebrating his 'theatrical triumph'.<sup>89</sup> He had thus underplayed the military aspect that formed part of the 'imperial image', and neglected the cardinal Roman quality of *virtus*.

This very quality figured strongly in the spectacles in the arena. Whatever other associations people may have had whilst watching the games, the fighting qualities of those performing must have always been obvious. Thus the gladiator Hermes is described as 'martial delight of the ages', whilst the word *virtus* is regularly employed by those portraying gladiatorial games.<sup>90</sup> Seneca, who is often held to have disliked gladiatorial games, in fact used gladiators as an example of those who valued bravery and contempt for death.<sup>91</sup>

For death, when it stands near us, gives even inexperienced men the courage not to seek to avoid the inevitable. So the gladiator, who throughout the fight has been no matter how fainthearted, offers his throat to his opponent and directs the wavering blade to his vital spot. (Sen. *Epistulae*, 30.8)

Dying well was of the utmost importance for gladiators. Spectators wanted to see strong and committed fighters continuing to the bitter

<sup>87</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 21.3. Cf. Dio 63.9.5. On Nero-Hercules: C. Pascal, *Nerone* (Milan 1923), 29, 145-7; Rostovtzeff, 'Commodus-Hercules in Britain', 102-3.

<sup>88</sup> S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (London – Cambridge [Mass.] 1994), 49.

<sup>89</sup> Suet. *Nero*, 25; Dio, 63.20.1-6.

<sup>90</sup> Mart. *Spect.* 5.24. Martial obviously had his reasons to make the spectacles look as acceptable and praiseworthy as possible. He was however, not alone in emphasising the courage of the gladiators. On *virtus* in ancient texts on gladiatorial games: Wistrand, *Entertainment and Violence*, 20; 86 n.18. Cf. Toner, *Leisure and Ancient Rome*, 45-6.

<sup>91</sup> References to authors suggesting that Seneca was anti-gladiatorial are assembled, and proved wrong, by M. Wistrand, 'Violence and entertainment in Seneca the Younger', *Eranos* 88 (1990), 3-46; 42-4.

end, showing their bravery and skill.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, the *venationes* showed manly superiority:

People like racing and enjoy stage shows, almost nothing attracts them as much as men fighting animals; escape from the beasts seems impossible, yet through sheer intelligence the men succeed. (Lib. 199.9)

Through intelligence, man conquers over mindless animals. Hence the resentful reaction of the mob when at Pompey's games numerous elephants were killed.<sup>93</sup> The elephants in question ceased to fight after they were injured, and walked around with uplifted trunks, making so much noise that people believed they were consciously complaining about their harsh treatment. Some people even 'declared that in addition to understanding the language of their native country they also comprehend what is going on in the sky'. They were effectively too human for the symbolism to work.<sup>94</sup> Still, even tameness of animals in the arena could be turned into a positive quality, if, like Martial, one wanted to flatter the emperor on his spectacular shows. This very tameness, Martial argued, resulted from a power far greater than nature itself; the imperial divinity:

Devoted and suppliant the elephant adores you, Caesar, he who but lately was so formidable to the bull. He does so unbidden, no master teaches him. Believe me, he too feels our god (*nostrum sentit et ille deum*). (Martial, *De Spectaculis Liber*, 20 [17])

Not only elephants are subject to the emperor's power. The lion too, 'the lord and king of the forests' (*nemorum dominus et rex*), is obedient to the emperor.<sup>95</sup> In all respects, the imperial power transcended the laws of nature.

Even those who did not have Martial's fondness for flattery in describing the spectacles recognised the courage and skill of those performing in the amphitheatre. Herodian's reception of Commodus' appearances in the arena shows how closely related the concepts of military courage and ability and the games were at the end of the second century. As Herodian describes the first day of the spectacles in which the emperor himself performed, he laments that spearing animals from a special enclosure, as the emperor did, was 'a

<sup>92</sup> Wistrand, *Entertainment and Violence*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Cic. *Fam.* 7.1.

<sup>94</sup> Dio, 39.38.2-4; Toner, *Leisure and Ancient Rome*, 44: 'The docility and intelligence of the elephants made them almost too human, too Roman. Elephants expressed Roman virtues – size, splendour and discipline'.

<sup>95</sup> Mart. *Epigr.* 1.60; 1.14: 'How comes it that a greedy lion can spare his captive prey? Ah, but he is said to be yours (*sed tamen esse tuus dicitur*). Therefore he can'. Wistrand, *Entertainment and Violence*, 20-1.

demonstration of his skill but not of his courage (ἀνδρείας).<sup>96</sup> His marksmanship however, Herodian continues (1.15.5), was ‘generally agreed to be astonishing’. Slightly later, the lack of courage that Herodian complained about is suddenly forgotten:

So far Commodus was still quite popular with the mob, even if his conduct, apart from his courage (ἀνδρείας) and marksmanship, was unfitting for an emperor. (Herodian, 1.15.7)

Whatever Herodian thought about Commodus’ display, the emperor’s performance did not go unnoticed. However shameful that performance was, the emperor was capable of performing military feats. His behaviour may have been revolutionary, but the framework within which Commodus placed it was a conventional Roman one.

As emphasised before, Commodus had no experience as a general before coming to power. During his reign, he promoted a policy of peace, rather than war. He thus lacked military credibility. Hadrian, who had similarly substituted the offensive policies of Trajan with peaceful settlements, promoted the image of himself as a hunter. The famous reliefs that are even now visible on the Arch of Constantine are but one example of many more. An emperor had to show his valour as a warrior. If, for one reason or another, he could (or would) not do so on the battlefield, he had to show his military abilities in a different context. Being a prolific hunter – in the woods or the arena – or even becoming an accomplished gladiator can thus be seen as an idiomatic variant for leading the troops – different symbols for the same message. The emperor was a courageous and able fighter. Commodus displayed his *virtus* in the arena.

Different groups of people could, of course, interpret the emperor’s behaviour in different ways. One group may have seen an emperor showing his martial virtue, whilst another noted a ruler protecting his realm from chaos. Some people, amongst whom was Dio Cassius, may also have seen a megalomaniac youngster indulging in a whim.<sup>97</sup> Yet whatever the audience saw, at least the emperor was there to be

<sup>96</sup> Herodian, 1.15.2. Cf. Dio, 73.18.1; SHA, *Comm.* 13.3.

<sup>97</sup> There is, in fact, some evidence, which may imply that Commodus’ interest in *venationes*, though not his participation in it, anticipated the final period of his reign. In AD 186 a certain Marcius H[...] was granted immunity from the offering of *venationes* through direct intervention by Caecilius Servianus and Aufidius Victorinus (Palmer, ‘The *excusatio magisteri* [1], 270-2’). This has been interpreted as an attempt to put a ‘financial limit to the emperor’s passion for wild animal exhibitions’ (Palmer, ‘The *excusatio magisteri* [2], 84). Would this, perhaps, be one of the reasons for Victorinus’ fall from grace, and cause of his suicide in the same year? Cf. *supra* p. 59.

seen. Commodus is often said to have crossed the line between spectacle and spectators; to have moved 'the game into the stands by making the public itself both target of violence and centre of action'.<sup>98</sup> Yet the only occasion at which Commodus actually directly involved the audience in the spectacle was when threatening senators (see above, p. 154), and even then, he did not act upon the threat. Objectionable as the emperor's maltreatment of certain individuals and groups of people may have been, the people who were going to be maltreated seem to have been picked out before the games themselves started. Kyle claims that Commodus 'forced viewers into the arena'.<sup>99</sup> Though he quotes passages on similar behaviour from the reigns of Caligula and Domitian, references from Commodus' rule are conspicuously absent.<sup>100</sup> Surely one can argue that compelling people who came to watch the games actually to participate in them 'threatened the social order of the amphitheatre and hence Roman social order itself',<sup>101</sup> but there is no evidence that Commodus actually did so.

Commodus did cross a line, of course, by stepping into the arena. Yet in doing so, he threatened neither the social order of the amphitheatre, nor that of Rome itself. On the contrary, Commodus redefined his own position in the social hierarchy. He showed himself and his qualities to the Roman people. Placing the emperor so much in the centre of attention, if anything, took the decisions about the game away from the audience, though their reaction to it became of more importance. One had to favour a gladiator, if that gladiator was the emperor. Hence the specific orders to senators on how to acclaim the victorious ruler in the arena.<sup>102</sup> Whilst watching the games, the spectators were themselves being watched. Yet whatever people were forced to shout and whatever the control on their behaviour, their interest in the spectacle of an emperor fighting in the arena appears to have been unrestrained:

Commodus now gave orders for the celebration of public shows, at which he promised he would kill all the wild animals with his own hand and engage in gladiatorial combat with the stoutest of young men. As the news spread,

<sup>98</sup> Plass, *The Game of Death*, 76.

<sup>99</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 225.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, 225; 239 n. 82. Kyle might be referring to Dio, 73.21.1-2 (the ostrich-scene), or 73.20.2 (the Stymphalian birds, see *supra*, p. 147), as he deals with these passages shortly before making the quoted statement. Yet even Dio himself makes clear that both occasions were perceived as a *possible* danger to members of the audience. The threats (if Dio, 73.20.2 should be so interpreted) were never actualised.

<sup>101</sup> Edmondson, 'Dynamic arenas', 83, quoted by Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 239 n. 82.

<sup>102</sup> Dio, 73.20.2. See also *supra* p. 155.



people flocked to Rome from all over Italy and the neighbouring provinces to be spectators at something they had never seen or heard of before ... At last the day of the show came and the amphitheatre was packed. (Herodian, 1.15.1-2)

People assembled in massive numbers to see their monarch display himself and his abilities to those present. If indeed people came from the provinces to see the spectacle, it would be one of only a few occasions on which they would see the emperor. Commodus' gladiatorial performances thus became apparent to all. Indeed, that must have been the aim of the exercise. People were to see what Commodus was all about.<sup>103</sup> What they saw depended a great deal on what they wanted to see. But whatever it was, it was embedded in a thoroughly Roman spectacle.

Hercules, who was amongst the most popular divinities in the Roman world, could of course be equally Roman, having founded the ancient cult-site on the Ara Maxima after defeating the monster Cacus.<sup>104</sup> The Hercules worshipped at this place in the Forum Boarium, the Hercules *Romanus* (or *Invictus*) with whom Commodus identified so strongly, was repeatedly represented as having brought peace and order, much as the emperor did in the arena.<sup>105</sup> Nobody could doubt the position which the immortal gladiator-emperor Commodus-Hercules held. Still, this immortal god-emperor was killed on New Year's Eve AD 192. Commodus had planned to slay both consuls, and afterwards to enter on the new consular year dressed as Hercules, accompanied by gladiators. That, at least, was reported afterwards. It would have made eminently clear that power was no longer with the consuls, but with the emperor who was acclaimed in

<sup>103</sup> To an extent this system of watching whilst being closely watched can be compared to Bentham's Panopticon. But where in Bentham's construction a hidden, unidentified, power looks at and controls its subjects, Commodus' behaviour creates reciprocity – rather than being an anonymous supervisor, the emperor is there to be looked at. Those who are being guarded can see whom they are being guarded by, and what he does to merit his position at the top. Cf. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris 1975), 201-10, esp. 209: 'Ce panoptique, subtilement arrangé pour qu'un surveillant puisse observer, d'un coup d'oeil, tant d'individus différents permet aussi à tout le monde de venir surveiller le moindre surveillant. La machine à voir était une sorte de chambre noire où épier les individus; elle devient un édifice transparent où l'exercice du pouvoir est contrôlable par la société entière'. Similarly Foucault, *Power / Knowledge*, ch. 8: 'The Eye of Power', 146-65; 156-8.

<sup>104</sup> Liv. 34.18-19; Verg. *Aen.* 8, 190-279; Ov. *Fast.* 1, 543-86; Prop. 4. 9; R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven-London 1981), 6; F. Coarelli, 'Hercules Invictus, Ara Maxima', *LTUR* 3, 15-7.

<sup>105</sup> Erckell, 'L'imperatore Commodo ed Ercole-Melcart', 39; A. Breebaart, 'Rome en de weg van Hercules Romanus', *Lampas* 8 (1975), 102-114.

the arena. It would have been the ultimate display of his god-like power. Instead, he was assassinated.<sup>106</sup>

The vehemence with which the senate instantly condemned Commodus' memory emphasises the animosity towards the emperor among many senators.<sup>107</sup> In the senatorial acclamations that the author of the *Historia Augusta* recorded (and which might, or might not, go back to Marius Maximus), Commodus' gladiatorial performances figure alongside his other crimes.

The foe of his fatherland, the murderer, the gladiator, let him be mangled in the charnel-house. ... let the honours of the murderer be taken away; let the murderer be dragged in the dust... He is foe to the gods, slayer of the senate, foe to the gods, murderer of the senate, foe of the gods, foe of the senate ... Cast the gladiator into the charnel-house (*gladiatorem in spoliario*)... He who slew the senate, let him be dragged by a hook (*qui senatum occidit, unco trahatur*); he who slew the guiltless, let him be dragged by a hook – a foe a murderer, verily, verily ... On all sides are statues of the foe, on all sides are statues of the murderer, on all sides are statues of the gladiator. The statues of the murderer and gladiator, let them be cast down (*gladiatoris et parricidae statuæ detrahantur*) ... More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero (*saevior Domitiano, impurior Nerone*) (SHA, *Comm.* 18.3-19.3).

The tone of the senatorial acclamations, if not their literal content, is confirmed by Cassius Dio. He too noticed that no one named the now-dead ruler 'Commodus', or even 'emperor', but labelled him with terms like 'the tyrant', 'the gladiator' or 'the left handed'. Dio also sensed similarities between the chanting at Commodus' death, and the rhythmic shouting that the crowds were wont to express in the amphitheatre.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps the acclamations that the senators had previously been forced to utter in the amphitheatre to support Commodus' behaviour are of importance here as well. Apart from implying a sort of amphitheatrical acclamation, the constant repetition in the senatorial statements also reminds us of a formal curse.<sup>109</sup> The memory of the foul gladiator-emperor should be banished in every possible way.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Dio, 73.22.4-6; Herodian, 1.16-17; SHA, *Comm.* 17.1-2.

<sup>107</sup> The destruction of Commodus' portraits was noticeably aggressive; P. J. Davies, 'What worse than Nero, what better than his baths?: *Damnatio Memoriae* and Roman Architecture', in E. R. Varner (ed.), *Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* (2000), 27-44; 35.

<sup>108</sup> Dio, 73.2.2-4.

<sup>109</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 226-7.

<sup>110</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 19.1: 'Let the memory of the foul gladiator (*impuri gladiatoris*) be utterly wiped away'.

By presenting himself as a gladiator Commodus had shown why he, and just he, should lead the Roman people. In the arena the emperor demonstrated his *virtus*, his military ability, and his position in the order of the world. To some, he even emphasised his power of death itself. By incorporating the divine figure of Hercules into the spectacles of the amphitheatre, different strands of representation were drawn together. As with coins and statuary, the superior position of the emperor was emphasised.<sup>111</sup> Commodus' public appearances in the arena, furthermore, coincided with the manifest change in representation that characterised his last years in power. As in so many other contexts of Commodus' reign, it was the personal quality of the *princeps* that was presented as crucial. The emperor presented himself to his people, rather than using the 'body politic' as intermediate institutions.<sup>112</sup> The emperor fought, in person, for the greater good of the realm. He alone could lead his people.

<sup>111</sup> For a further exploration of Commodus' performance as a gladiator in terms of 'ceremony', just another medium to propagate a carefully orchestrated message, see Hekster, 'Propagating Power' (forthcoming).

<sup>112</sup> Such ignoring of the 'standard' hierarchical social and political conventions goes straight against the 'political philosophy' that Cassius Dio put forward in his 'Maecenas-speech' (52.19-39). Cf. L. de Blois, 'The perception of emperor and empire in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*', *AncSoc* 29 (1998-9), 267-81; 271: 'Dio emerges from his work as an advocate of strong central monarchical government, in a fixed hierarchical order in which the various groups each have their own functions and positions, like organs in a body'.

## IMAGES AND UNDERSTANDING

Auch tote Götter regieren

(Christa Wolf, *Medea*)

However negative the senatorial reaction to Commodus' reign may have been, that does not necessarily imply that all layers of Roman society were quite as adamant in condemning the last Antonine. Our image of Commodus is inevitably determined to a great extent by the literary accounts of Commodus' life – which were entrenched in senatorial and other historiographical traditions, and tried to ridicule the emperor's attempts to pass over the senate in legitimating his power.<sup>1</sup> But the negative image that has accompanied Commodus ever since need not mean that the programme described above was not understood, or accepted by various segments of society. Indeed, there is significant evidence that numerous groups of people responded favourably to Commodus' visual programme. Clearly, it is true that 'the way people represent their rulers is a key to understanding how the positions of those rulers were conceived'.<sup>2</sup> Such patterns of reception can be separated into different groups. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the reaction of soldiers to Commodus' (near) divine claims ought to be looked at. There is also sufficient evidence to suggest some sort of reaction in the provinces, both by local authorities, and even by some private individuals.<sup>3</sup> More positive literary responses further clarify the image. Finally, the reaction of Commodus' successors to his name and imagery should be taken into account. It seems logical that only popular policies were continued,

<sup>1</sup> See *supra*, pp. 4-8. Cf. Grosso, *Commodo*, 376-7; Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen*, 25-47.

<sup>2</sup> Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 159.

<sup>3</sup> These private individuals inevitably form part of the richer layers of society, as only they could afford the types of evidence (mosaics, statuary and sarcophagi) that have survived. As to the reactions of the *plebs* and the populace as large, one can say little. The popularity of the Games, and the public reactions to Nero (and the later Nero-impersonators), to whose public image that of Commodus seems to have been related, suggests support, as also follows from Herodian, 1.15.7. Cf. the cautionary methodological remarks by Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 303-313.

whereas an unpopular mode of representation was going to be abandoned. The way in which Septimius Severus and Caracalla reacted to Commodus' visual programme must therefore be crucial to our understanding of the reception of Commodus' 'personalised' emperorship.

## Commodus and the soldiers

When he had climbed up the ladder, Julian promised first to reinstate Commodus' reputation by restoring the honours and statues, which the senate had removed (ὁ δ' ἀνελθὼν τὴν τε Κομόδου μνήμην αὐτοῖς καὶ τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς εἰκόνας, ἃς ἡ σύγκλητος καθεῖλεν, ἀνανεώσεσθαι ὑπέσχετο), then to allow them as much freedom as they had had under Commodus, and finally to give each man more money than he dreamt of asking or getting ... This was enough for the soldiers ... and they hailed Julianus as emperor, and in addition to his family and gentile name they voted him the name of Commodus (καὶ πρὸς τῷ οἰκείῳ καὶ ἐκ γένους ὀνόματι Κόμοδον ἀξιούσιν ἀποκαλεῖσθαι). Then they lifted up their standards upon which the portraits of Commodus had been restored and hurried to set off in procession.<sup>4</sup>

This passage has often been quoted in arguments emphasizing how the position of emperor was 'for sale'. Yet it is clear that it also shows Commodus' posthumous popularity amongst the praetorians. That popularity in itself, however, does not necessarily imply a positive reception of Commodus' ideological stance. Raising the soldiers' pay or engaging in massive military campaigns could equally make an emperor popular. Commodus did neither.<sup>5</sup> He did increase the ease with which soldiers earned promotion, appointed his own officers, listened to the complaints of ordinary soldiers, and allowed a loosening of discipline.<sup>6</sup> All were ways to bind the troops.<sup>7</sup> It cannot

<sup>4</sup> Herodian, 2.6.10-2. Cf. SHA, *Did. Iul.* 2.6-7: *deinde scripsit in tabulis se Commodi memoriam restitutum*; Dio, 73.12.1.

<sup>5</sup> P. A. Brunt, 'Pay and superannuation in the Roman army', *PBSR* (18) 1950, 50-71; 56.

<sup>6</sup> SHA, *Comm.* 6.2; Dio, 73.9.2-3; Herodian, 2.2.5, 2.6.10; Brunt, 'The fall of Perennis'; Speidel, 'Commodus the god-emperor', 114. Cf. Traupman, *Commodus*, 128-34; Grosso, *Commodo*, 629-30.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 2.55 (Piso's popularising measures): *largitione, ambitu, infimos manipularium iuvando, cum veteres centuriones, severos tribunos demoveret locaque eorum clientibus suis vel deterrimo cuique attribueret, desidiam in castris, licetiam in uribus, vagum ac lascivientem per agros militem sineret, eo usque corruptionis provectus est, ut sermone vulgi parens legionum haberetur*; Speidel, 'Commodus the god-emperor', 114 n. 49. Still Rostovtzeff, *SEHRE*, 399 believed Commodus to have been unpopular amongst the soldiers for not having called them to arms, or given them a pay-rise. For the importance of military propaganda; J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army*. 31

have harmed Commodus' posthumous reputation that Pertinax, in the few months of his reign, overemphasised military discipline and – out of reputed stinginess – spent too little on donatives.<sup>8</sup>

Still, there is evidence that Commodus' self-presentation, too, helped him to gain popularity with the military. Epigraphic evidence shows that his names and titles were followed conscientiously, and his renaming of the months applied. That need not mean that soldiers and officers accepted the extravagances of the young emperor outside of a military context, but it does imply an awareness, and some sort of understanding, of what the emperor was trying to broadcast.<sup>9</sup>

Crucial to the argument is an altar which was dedicated by Aelius Tittianus, a *decurion* at Dura-Europos. It was set up in the main gateway, where the road to Palmyra left the fortress. It was placed against the wall of the south watch-tower, and was accompanied by two other altars, both honouring the Genius of Dura.<sup>10</sup> The altar was first excavated in 1928, but has only recently been convincingly deciphered by Michael Speidel. According to this latest reconstruction, the text reads:

Pro salu-	
te Com(modi)	
Aug(usti) Pii F(elicis)	
et victo-	
riam d(omini) n(ostris)	5
imp(eratoris), Pac(atoris)	
Orb(is), Invict(i)	
Rom(ani) Her[c(ulis)].	
Ael(ius) Tittia-	
nus, dec(urio) coh(ortis)	10
II Ulp(iae) eq(uitatae) Com(modianae),	
Genio Dura/ votum solv(it)	
(ante diem) XVI Kal(endis) Piis,	
Flacco et Claro	
co(n)s(ulibus) <sup>11</sup>	15

BC–AD 235 (Oxford 1984), 120–56.

<sup>8</sup> SHA, *Pert.* 10.10, 14.6, 15.7; Dio, 73.8.1, 73.8.4.

<sup>9</sup> On the relationship between the religiosity of soldiers in camp and in the private sphere: J. Helgeland, 'Roman army religion', *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978), 1470–1505; 1488–1495.

<sup>10</sup> Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 109.

<sup>11</sup> P. Baur / M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of the First Season of Work, Spring 1928* (New Haven – London – New York 1929), 20, 42; Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 110. Line 14, *Flacco* should read *Falcone* (cos. AD 193). Cristian Gazdac kindly pointed out to me that instead of *II Ulp(iae) eq(uitatae) Com(modianae)*, it might be possible to expand line 11 as *II Ulp(iae) eq(uitatae) Com(magenorum)*. Yet the only cohortes with *Commagenorum* in the name are the *I Flavia*

For the safety of Commodus Augustus Pius Felix and the victory of our lord the emperor, Pacifier of the World, Invincible, the Roman Hercules. Aelius Tittianus, decurion of the cavalry cohort II Ulpia Commodiana, paid his vow to the Genius of Dura, on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of the month Pius, under the consuls Flaccus and Clarus.

The inscription closely follows Commodus' official Herculean titles, though it reads *Romanus Hercules* instead of *Hercules Romanus*.<sup>12</sup> It is also one of the few known instances in which the emperor's new names for the months were used for dating.<sup>13</sup> The date on the altar is all the more interesting in that it happens to be 17 March 193, the *dies imperii* of Commodus' reign, thus establishing that (at least in this case) the emperor's anniversary was celebrated in the fort with an altar.<sup>14</sup>

Equally important, the altar testifies to the fact that (at least some of) the army units bore the name *Commodiana*. Two legions, the Twenty-second Primigenia in Mainz, and the Third Augusta in Lambaesis, were similarly named after the emperor.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the latter legion, one might want to point to the nearby *Burgus Speculatorium Commodianus*, founded by Commodus in AD 188,<sup>16</sup> though it might be a coincidence that the *Burgus* was founded, and the legion stationed, in close vicinity of *Ad Calceum Herculis* and *Ad*

*Commagenorum* and the *II Flavia Commagenorum*. *CIL* 16.46, 16.50, 16.54, 16.107; *ILS* 9054, 9273.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *CIL* 14.3449 (= *ILS* 400); Dio, 73.15.5

<sup>13</sup> The other examples are a text which can be found on a wall in the house of Jupiter and Ganymede at Ostia, reading: *VII KAL COMMODAS* (See also J. R. Clarke, 'The decor of the house of Jupiter and Ganymede at Ostia Antica: Private residence turned gay hotel?', in E. Gazda (ed.), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere. New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa and Insula* [Ann Arbor 1994], 89-104; 92), and an inscription from Lanuvium referring to the *Idus Commodas*: *CIL* 14.2113.

<sup>14</sup> P. Herz, 'Kaiserfeste der Prinzipatszeit', *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978), 1135-1200; 1175-7. Cf. Dio, 72.33.4<sup>2</sup>; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 697 (p. 122). Sacrifices on behalf of Commodus continued after the emperor's death: *Feriale Duranum* Col. 3.1; R. O. Fink / A. S. Hoey / W. F. Snyder, *The Feriale Duranum* (Yale 1940), 48-9, 154-5; G. Bonamente, 'Il senato e l'apoteosi degli imperatori da Augusto a Teodosio il Grande', in: K. Rosen (ed.), *Macht und Kultur im Rom der Kaiserzeit* (Bonn 1994), 137-64; 159 n. 91.

<sup>15</sup> *CIL* 8.3163, 13.6728; Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 113 n. 39; Traupman, *Commodus*, 131-3; Grosso, *Commodo*, 503, 602-11. The Legion VIII Augusta had earlier been awarded the name *Commoda*, see *supra* p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> *CIL* 8.2495; S. Gsell, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie* (Paris 1911), I.37, 4-5 no. 54; R. J. A. Talbert (ed.), *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World. Map-by-Map Directory* (Princeton – Oxford 2000), 520-1; Soraci, '«Voluntas Domini»', 336-7. Cf. S. Soproni, 'Zu den Burgusbauinschriften von Commodus', in: G. Fülöp (ed.), *Festschrift für Jenő Fitz* (Székesfehérvár 1996), 91-4.

*Aquas Herculis*.<sup>17</sup> Of more importance could be an inscription from Lambaesis testifying to worship of Commodus-Hercules in Lambaesis itself.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the case, the altar further strengthens Dio's claim (73.15.2) that the legions were given the title *Commodiana*. It was, thus, Commodus, 'who began a tradition that was to flourish greatly, strengthening and proclaiming for all to see the bond between the emperor and his army'.<sup>19</sup>

Near the altar from Dura, the excavators found a small bust of Commodus, which may have belonged to it.<sup>20</sup> They also found a marble relief, showing an unclothed man holding a club in his right hand, and an up-reaching lion. The relief has been thought to depict the colossal statue of Commodus-Hercules which stood next to the Colosseum.<sup>21</sup> If so, it would be a strong testimony to the extent of the dissemination of Commodus' Herculean (and perhaps even gladiatorial) image.

The altar (with its surrounding sculptures) is not the only evidence for the suggestion that the emperor's identification with Hercules was an established public fact, known literally at the furthest corners of the empire, at least as far as the military was concerned. A statue which may well depict Commodus with Hercules' attributes has been found in the headquarters building of the fort at Kӧngen in Germany,<sup>22</sup> whilst a centurion dedicated an altar to the Roman Hercules at Volubilis (Mauretania), in the close vicinity of a (near) contemporary mosaic

<sup>17</sup> *CIL* 8.2496, 8.2498; *Gsell, Atlas Archéologique*, I.37, 4 no. 52 (cf. no. 51); I.37, 5 no. 58. There was a garrison stationed (at least from the reign of Caracalla onwards) at *Ad Calceum Herculis*.

<sup>18</sup> *AE* 1911.99. Cf. *CIL* 8.4212 (= *ILS* 402), a contemporary inscription honouring *divus Commodus*. Perhaps significant is the construction of an honorary arch to Commodus in Lambaesis, implying, possibly, some sort of personal connection between emperor and city, which had been made a *municipium* during Commodus' reign; *CIL* 8.18247; M. Janon, 'Lambaesis. Ein Überblick', *AW* 8.2 (1977), 3-20. On Commodus and Lambaesis: Grosso, *Commodo*, 614-18, 622.

<sup>19</sup> Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 113.

<sup>20</sup> Baur / Rostovtzeff, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos*, 21, 48-9, fig. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 75-77, pl. 4.3; Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 113. The identification is opposed by S. B. Downey, *The Heracles Sculpture. The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report III, Part I, Fascicle I* (New Haven - New York 1969), 42 no. 28, though her argument that 'there is no evidence at Dura for the worship of Commodus as Hercules' cannot be maintained. On the Colossus, see *supra* pp. 122-4.

<sup>22</sup> Württemberg Landesmuseum (Stuttgart): Inv. R 102,2; Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 113; P. Zanker, *Provinzielle Kaiserporträts zur Rezeption der Selbstdarstellung des Princeps* (Munich 1983), Taf. 25.4; E. Künzl, 'Der Steindenkmälerfund von Benningen, Kreis Ludwigsburg', *FBW* 3 (1977), 286-327; 319. Abb. 27.



depicting Hercules' labours.<sup>23</sup> A bronze figure of Hercules, wearing a short tunic, a broad belt and a helmet with curved helmline – all features of the gladiatorial dress – has been discovered near Hadrian's Wall. Because of the unusual depiction of Hercules as, possibly, a gladiator, it has been claimed to represent Commodus.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the features of a statue of Hercules in the villa of a Roman veteran at Ajka (in Pannonia), bear a striking resemblance to those of Commodus.<sup>25</sup> If this last example indeed depicts a Herculean Commodus, it would be a particularly striking case, as it is found in the private sphere.<sup>26</sup> Apparently at least some of the soldiers supported the idea that their emperor was a superhuman victor.

## Provincial attitudes

### *Local coinage and imperial policy*

The military does not seem to have been the only layer of society to have understood Commodus' superhuman claims. Regional authorities, too, broadcast the emperor's messages on their coinage. Provincial and civic coinage (which since the reign of Claudius was limited to the eastern cities of the empire), was, in fact, an important form of communication.<sup>27</sup> They did not always follow the imperial

<sup>23</sup> Speidel, 'Commodus the god emperor', 113; *IL.Afr.* 612 (= *IAM* 2.363); K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa. Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford 1978), 277, 6a; S. Muth, *Erleben von Raum – Leben im Raum. Zur Funktion mythologischer Mosaikbilder in der römisch-kaiserzeitlichen Wohnarchitektur* (Heidelberg 1998), 406-7, no. A 47.

<sup>24</sup> British Museum, inv. 1895.4-8.1; J. C. Coulston / E. J. Phillips, *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani. Great Britain* 1.6 (London 1988), 77-8 no. 190.

<sup>25</sup> E. B. Thomas, *Römische Villen in Pannonien. Beiträge zur pannonischen Siedlungsgeschichte*, Budapest 1964, 14-15, Taf. II, III; E. Bickerman, 'Consecratio', in: W. de Boer (ed.), *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire Romain* (Genève 1973), 1-39; 6.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *CIL* 6.1333 (= *ILS* 1077), 6.1503, 6.1517 (= *ILS* 1080), 6.1531 (= *ILS* 1190); all examples of officers honouring 'status set senators' in their own house; De Blois, 'Roman jurists', 146 n. 3 (referring to S. Panciera, 'Onorare l'amico nella sua casa. Amicitia e topografia a Roma e nel suo suburbio, in A. Chaniotis / M. Peachin (eds.), *Aspects of Friendship in the Graeco-Roman World* [forthcoming]). If senators were given honorary monuments in private homes, the emperor was surely similarly honoured.

<sup>27</sup> *RPC* 1, 14, 18-9; *RPC* 2, 14-5; Kenneth W. Harl, *Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East. AD 180-275* (Berkeley etc. 1987), 12. Cf. Dio, 52.30.9 for an awareness (Severan, rather than Augustan) of the problems of leaving cities to furnish their own currency: 'None of the cities should be allowed to have its own separate coinage or system of weights and measures'. Cf. M. R. Kaiser-Raiß, 'Ein bimetalisches Medaillon des Commodus aus Carnuntum', *NZ* 98 (1984), 27-35; 31, who notices a striking discrepancy between the number of surviving medallions from the eastern and western parts of the empire during Commodus' reign, with a particularly noticeable absence of medallions from the Iberian peninsula. On the practical working of provincial government, see now W. Eck,

examples. Nor did local coins honour the emperor as extensively as one might have expected 'given the mass of evidence for the attitudes of the cities to the emperors' cult'.<sup>28</sup> In fact, representations of the emperor with divine attributes are not particularly common (though not a rarity either). This would make reproductions or variations of Commodus' imagery with the attributes of Sol, Jupiter and Hercules all the more striking. Cities were free to decide upon the subject-matter on their coinage. There was, as a rule, no systematic central policy towards non-imperial coinage, apart, perhaps, from letting it follow its course.<sup>29</sup>

Still, sometime people put forward honours to the emperor on their own initiative. That does not necessarily imply a reaction to imperial 'broadcasting'. Indeed, fusion between local and Roman themes formed an ideal way to establish a city as a place in the Roman empire, whilst maintaining a strong local identity.<sup>30</sup> Representing Commodus crowned by the *tyche* of Mytilene says at least as much about the way the town perceived itself, as it does about the way they saw their emperor.<sup>31</sup> All the same, one would do well not to underestimate covert pressure from Rome where provincial images of the emperor were at stake.<sup>32</sup> Rome could, and did, intervene when necessary.<sup>33</sup>

It is striking that long before Commodus could have begun to think about systematic symbolism, local coins already depict the young emperor as Olympian. Thus, on coins from Silandus (Lydia) a youthful Commodus deploys Zeus' thunderbolt to punish a German, symbolically depicting the emperor's 'German Victory' at the beginning of his reign.<sup>34</sup> The city of Ephesus even explicitly named Commodus as ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΚ ΚΟΜΟΔΟΚ.<sup>35</sup> They had similarly

'Provincial administration and finance', *CAH* 11<sup>2</sup> (2000), 266-92; G. P. Burton, 'The imperial state and its impact on the role and status of local magistrates and councillors in the provinces of the empire', in: De Blois, *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies*, 202-14.

<sup>28</sup> *RPC* 1, 47-8; Harl, *Civic Coins*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> *RPC* 1, 53.

<sup>30</sup> *RPC* 2, 36; Harl, *Civic Coins*, 58, 171 n. 54.

<sup>31</sup> *BMC*, Troas, 169 nos. 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> M. Beard / J. North / S. Price, *Religions of Rome* I (Cambridge 1998), 318, 348-50.

<sup>33</sup> *RPC* 1, 54; Cf. Lucian, *Alex.* 58. Similarly, the central authorities occasionally intervened in activities relating to the imperial cult, though here, too, initiative from the provincials themselves was important; Beard / North / Price, *Religions of Rome* I, 356; Price, *Rituals and Power*, 239-48.

<sup>34</sup> *SNG*, Auloc, no. 3175; Harl, *Civic Coins*, 43, 159 n. 53, Pl. 15.5. See *supra* pp. 46, 47.

<sup>35</sup> *BMC*, Ionia, 82, no. 255-6; 110 no. 402; T. Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques, grecques et romaines avec leur degré de rareté et leur estimation* IV (Paris 1807), 127 no. 724; Suppl. VI (Paris 1831), 153 no. 482; R. Pera, 'Commodo ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΣ su alcune

addressed Hadrian, both on coins and inscriptions, and it appears that in the east the epithet had become part of Hadrian's official titles.<sup>36</sup> In case of Ephesus, it is tempting to connect the honorary titles to Hadrian's residence in the city, during which he started the construction of an Olympeion, diverted the river Kaystros, and made a substantial sacrifice to Artemis, all events for which the city wanted to show its gratitude.<sup>37</sup> It is likely that by addressing Commodus as Ὀλυμπιος they hoped for similar benefits from the young prince, who had stayed at Ephesus in AD 176.<sup>38</sup>

None of this, of course, is a sign of receptiveness to Commodus' claims. Rather, it shows how in the eastern part of the empire people may well have been receptive to some of the more prominent assertions of the emperor.<sup>39</sup> After all, the claims were not so far removed from honours that had already been given. There are also coins that show a more direct link between Commodus' claims and provincial authorities. Commodus' association with Jupiter *Iuvenis* was reciprocated on a coin from Pergamum, where the features of the supreme god are recognisably Commodus'.<sup>40</sup> Evidence from Ephesus is even more interesting. In fact, the city provides the earliest known proof for Commodus' being named Hercules Romanus, through a medallion which should be dated somewhere before August 191 (since it refers to Commodus by an early name).<sup>41</sup> It reads: ΑΥ(ΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ) Μ(ΑΡΚΟC) ΑΥ(ΦΑΙΟC) ΚΟΜΜΟΔΑC CΕΒΑΣΤΟC ΗΛΙΟC ΗΡΑΚΛΗC ΠΟΜΑΙ(ΩΝ). This bronze medallion was minted in Commodus' honour by Ephesus, Pergamum and the thirteen cities of the Asian league, under the authority of the *asiarch*

monete della città di Efeso', *Studi per Laura Breglia* II (Rome 1987), 125-132; 126 nn. 6-10.

<sup>36</sup> *BMC*, Ionia, 77, nos. 224-8; *BMC*, Troas, Aeolis, Lesbos, 102, no. 2; *BMC*, Phrygia, 218 no. 52, 271 no. 3, 310, no. 195, *BMC*, Lycia, Pamphilia, Pisidia, 242 no. 12; Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques* II (Paris 1806), 468 no. 315, 539 no. 173; Suppl. VI, 42 no. 266; *IGRom* 4.122, 138-9, 212, 519 (= 1157), 640, 869, 986, 1174, 1301, 1319, 1551, 1594; *CIL* 3.374 (= *ILS* 320); Pera, 'Commodo ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟC', 127 nn. 12-26; D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* I-II (Princeton 1950), 1478-9 no. 28. Cf. Fears, 'The Cult of Jupiter', 85-9.

<sup>37</sup> *Syll*<sup>3</sup>, no. 839; *CIG*, no. 2963; Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, 619.

<sup>38</sup> *IK* 12 (Ephesus 2), 87-90 no. 287; Pera, 'Commodo ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟC', 130-1; Grosso, *Commodo*, 551-2, 556-8.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. coins from Bithynia (Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques*, IV 421 no. 105) stating 'with Commodus as a sovereign the cosmos prospers' (ΚΟΜΟΔΟΥ ΒΑCΙΑΕΥΟΝΤΟC Ο ΚΟCΜΟC ΕΤΥΧΕΙ); Harl, *Civic Coins*, 39, 154 n. 6.

<sup>40</sup> *BMC*, Mysia, 151 no. 307, fig. 30.4.

<sup>41</sup> For the date and importance of Commodus' change of name to L Aelius Aurelius Commodus: Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 57-9.

and *archiereus* M. Claudius Fronto.<sup>42</sup>

This early issue, coined prior to any evidence from Rome, might raise the question as to whether the name Hercules Romanus was given to Commodus in the east, and only later imposed on Rome. It could be that sometimes names and epithets started 'in the wild', and were only later made official. In this case, however, that seems unlikely. One should not forget that as early as AD 190 coins were issued mentioning Hercules *Commodianus*, indicating that Commodus was already broadcasting a Herculean message. There are, furthermore, suggestions that Commodus was named Hercules Romanus as far back as his thirtieth birthday – August 31<sup>st</sup> AD 190.<sup>43</sup> That would have given the Ephesians ample time to react. It seems, therefore, more probable that the medallion from Ephesus was either a very early reaction from an area which had already accepted Commodus' Olympian status, or perhaps even an attempt by those in power to start promulgating their message in an area which was likely to react positively.<sup>44</sup>

Other cities followed suit, and likewise mentioned Hercules Romanus on their coinage. Coins from Cyzicus combined obverses showing Commodus wearing the lion-skin, and with the legend ΠΩΜΑΙΟC ΗΡΑΚΛΗC with reverses depicting Attis, Demeter, Dionysos, Poseidon, and the local hero Kyzikos.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the Roman Hercules appears on coins from Iuliopolis.<sup>46</sup> The Alexandrian

<sup>42</sup> M. Squarciapino, 'Medaglione Efesino di Commodo', *BCAR* 69 (1941), Appendice, 139-48, figs. 1-2; Grosso, *Commodo*, 559-600; Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 54 Taf. 30.2; R. Ziegler, *Städtisches Prestige und kaiserliche Politik: Studien zum Festwesen in Ostkilikien im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Düsseldorf 1985), 70 n. 27. M. Claudius Fronto was already in function during the reign of Antoninus Pius: R. Münsterberg, 'Die Beamtennamen auf den griechischen Münzen geographisch und alphabetisch geordnet', *NZ* 5 (1912), 1-111, 17. He cannot have been the same as M. Claudius Ti. F. Quirina Fronto, Marcus Aurelius' general, who died in the 170s (*CIL* 3.1457 = *ILS* 1097; *CIL* 6.1377 = *ILS* 1098). *Contra* Groach, 'Claudius, 157', *RE* III.2, 2722-3. It has been argued that the coin is a forgery, most recently by Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 260-1, but it is considered genuine in *RPC* 4 (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> *Supra* pp. 108, 109, 111.

<sup>44</sup> Kaiser-Raiß, *Münzprägung*, 54: 'Derartige Prägungen besaßen nicht den hochoffiziellen Charakter der Produkte der stadtrömischen Münzstätte'.

<sup>45</sup> R. Martini / N. Vismara, *Monetazione provinciale romana II. Collezione Winseman Falghera II* (Milan 1992), no. 1162; *BMC*, Mysia, 51 nos. 237-8; G. MacDonald, *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection*. 3 vols. (Glasgow 1899-1905), II, 268, no. 31; *GM*, 615, no. 170. All references from *RPC* 4 (forthcoming).

<sup>46</sup> Paris, *Bibl. Nat. inv.* 741; *Sammlung Walter Niggles*, Auktion 3-4/10/1965. 2 Vols. (Basel 1965), II, no. 590 (*non vidi*); Harl, *Civic Coins*, 157 n. 31. The issue from the Koinon of Ionia, dedicated to ΗΡΑΚΛΗC ΠΩΜΑΙ (sic), as published in J. U. Gillespy, 'ΚΟΙΝΟΝ ΙΓ ΠΟΛΕΩΝ. A study of the coinage of the «Ionian League»', *RBN* 102 (1956), 31-53; no. 25, pl. 7.25, is a forgery; *RPC* 4 (forthcoming).

mint, too, mentioned the ΠΩΜΑΙΩΝ ΗΡΑΚΛΕΑ (*sic*), on the reverse, with the accompanying image of Commodus as Hercules, either holding Victoria, or crowned by her.<sup>47</sup> Hercules was, of course, among the more popular heroes to feature on civic coins. Tempting as it is to connect many local 'Herculean' issues from Commodus' reign to the imperial ideology, more often than not a local tradition explains the presence of the hero.<sup>48</sup> Only when coins figuring Hercules are known solely (or mainly) from the later period of Commodus' reign can one assume a possible response to central imagery. Even then, specific legends or apparent changes in iconography are needed to go beyond mere speculation.<sup>49</sup> And even these more specific coins do not necessarily show that many people accepted Commodus' assimilation to Hercules (and Jupiter). They do show that the image was spread far and wide, and that people accepted the new names.

Provincial coinage does not only show a reasonably widespread acceptance of the Commodian titles. It also explicitly testifies to an increasing tendency to connect local festivals with imperial celebrations. Several cities in fact celebrated *Kommodeia*, events which found a prominent place on the relevant city's coins.<sup>50</sup> In other ways, too, the relationship between locality and emperor was developed, making it possible for the image of the emperor to function in a primarily local context.<sup>51</sup> Thus, a coin shows Commodus and the

<sup>47</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat. inv. 2765; BMC, *Alexandria and the Nomes*, 176 no. 1411 (references from *RPC* 4 [forthcoming]); Ziegler, *Städtisches Prestige*, 70 nn. 26-7.

<sup>48</sup> Thus, for instance, coins from Heraclea (*RPC* 1, nos. 2089, 2091, 2093, 2852; *RPC* 2, nos. 623, 688-9, 1238) or Tyre (*RPC* 1, nos. 4619-719; *RPC* 2, nos. 495, 2057-66), where a multitude of Hercules-issues were coined during Commodus' reign (references in *RPC* 4 [forthcoming]), go back to the fact that Hercules was the mythical founder of both cities – and of many more cities in the empire.

<sup>49</sup> Two coins from, respectively, Marcianopolis and Ulpia Anchialus could perhaps be mentioned here (F. Imhoof-Blumer, *Die antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands* (Berlin 1898-1935) [= *AMNG*], I.1, 196 no. 536, 198 no. 542, II.1 229 no. 447). Both date from the years 191-2, and have similar iconography. On the reverse they show a nude Hercules, standing left, strangling the Nemean lion. In case of the coin from Anchialus, this is noticeably different from the only other representation of Hercules in local coinage, where Hercules is shown standing right, resting his arm on the club, and holding lion-skin and bow (*AMNG*, II.1, 222 no. 421). On the importance of Hercules in civic coinage: Harl, *Civic Coins*, pl. 32.1-11.

<sup>50</sup> *SNG*, Aulock, nos. 2109, 5997; *Sammlung Walter Niggler*, II no. 593 (*non vidi*); *RGA* I, 437 nos. 305-6, 310; 438 nos. 316, 320; BMC, Lycaonia, Isauria, Cilicia, 192 nos. 169-70; Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques*, III 628 no. 439; Harl, *Civic Coins*, 69, 181 n. 149; H. Karl, *Numismatische Beiträge zum Festwesen der Kleinasiatischen und Nordgriechischen Städte im 2./3. Jahrhundert* (Saarbrücken 1975), 80-1. On the *Kommodeia*, see *infra* pp. 174-7.

<sup>51</sup> See *supra* p. 169 n. 31.

*tyche* of Mytilene, capital and mint of the league of the cities of Lesbos, standing together, whilst an unknown river god is depicted lying down.<sup>52</sup> In Corinth, one or two temples were erected in Commodus' honour,<sup>53</sup> whilst a number of cities represented the genius of Commodus on their coinage, either being crowned by a personification of the city, or otherwise connected to it.<sup>54</sup> Quite a number of cities went as far as to add the epithet KOMOΔΙΑNH to their name, something which was inevitably reflected in their coinage.<sup>55</sup> It must be emphasized here that similar honours were not traditionally given to previous emperors – nor did Commodus' successors receive them.<sup>56</sup> Athens strengthened the connection between city and emperor in a different way, by making him *archon* in AD 188/9.<sup>57</sup> The city was helped by the fact that Commodus had previously assumed Athenian citizenship, inscribing himself in the same tribe and deme that Hadrian had been a member of – though Hadrian had still been a 'mere' senator when doing so.<sup>58</sup> Commodus was the first emperor to take the Athenian citizenship whilst already emperor; an important step in linking the ruler of the Roman world to the traditional 'cultural capital' of the Graeco-Roman world. In doing so he established a tradition which was followed at least up to the reign of Gallienus.<sup>59</sup>

The bond between emperor and the provinces, emphasised by both provincial reactions to the imperial image, and the bestowal of honorary names and positions on the emperor (and the acceptance of them by the emperor), could be connected to Commodus' emphasis on the unity of the realm under a supreme ruler.<sup>60</sup> The more elevated an

<sup>52</sup> *BMC*, Troas, 170 no. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 532-6, with references.

<sup>54</sup> *BMC*, Pontus, Paphlagonia, Bithynia, Bosphorus, 112 no. 26; Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques*, III 35 no. 25, 235 no. 1318; Pera, 'Omaggio a Commodus', 252-4, 255 nn. 26-7.

<sup>55</sup> *BMC*, Lycaonia, Isauria, Cilicia, 23 no. 23, 191 no. 168; Pera, 'Omaggio a Commodus', 259 n. 50.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Harl, *Civic Coins*, 52: 'It was not ... until the reign of Commodus (180-192) that designs illustrating the piety of the emperor towards local gods and his celebration of civic festivals and games gained widespread popularity'.

<sup>57</sup> *IG* 2/3<sup>2</sup> 1832, I. 8; J. H. Oliver, 'Athenian citizenship of Roman emperors', *Hesperia* 20 (1951), 346-9; 348-9; Grosso, *Commodo*, 527.

<sup>58</sup> *IG* 2/3<sup>2</sup> 1832, I. 7; Oliver, 'Athenian citizenship of Roman emperors', 348-9. Ephesus might have done likewise, as Commodus is remembered as an *archon* (perhaps of the *synodos*) in an inscription related to festivals: *IK* 14 (Ephesus 4), 1106 A. Cf. J. and L. Robert, 'Bulletin Epigraphique', *REG* 94 (1981), 362-485; 440-1 no. 462.

<sup>59</sup> Oliver, 'Athenian citizenship of Roman emperors', 348-9; Grosso, *Commodo*, 527.

<sup>60</sup> *Supra* pp. 94-5.

emperor was, the more important it became to establish a good relationship with him – in reality or symbolically. It has been noted that civic coins between the reigns of Commodus and Aurelian pay special attention to piety towards, and visits by, specific emperors.<sup>61</sup> Yet it was not only the physical presence of an emperor in the east that increased the importance of his attitude to local deities.<sup>62</sup> Commodus did not travel after the death of his father, and was, thus, much less widely personally visible than, for instance, Septimius Severus or Caracalla. As a new incarnation of Hercules, however, the founder of so many Greek cities, Commodus was still an obvious candidate for worship and obedience.

### *Celebrating the emperor: the Kommodeia*

Images on provincial coins were only one reflection of attitudes amongst provincial populations.<sup>63</sup> They may be the most obvious way of gaining some insight in what these attitudes were, but they are not the only evidence for a more positive reception of Commodus' divine claims than Dio and the author of the *Historia Augusta* would want to make us believe. Unsurprisingly, under an emperor who put (gladiatorial) games in a central place in his religious legitimization, many cities founded, or renamed, games in Commodus' honour. More surprising, if one is to believe the often assumed universal disdain for Commodus and his games, is the continuation of these games – with the epithet *Kommodeia* – in many places up to the mid-third century.

The establishment of some of the festivals clearly precedes Commodus' love for the games. Like the early Olympian coins from Ephesus, *Kommodeia* might be inaugurated as a reaction to favours given, or those hoped for. In fact, many of the cities installing early *Kommodeia* are the same that celebrated the emperor on their coinage. Miletus almost certainly requested permission to transform their *Didymeia* into the *Didymeia Kommodeia* as early as AD 177. Undoubtedly this request followed Marcus' and Commodus' visit to the east.<sup>64</sup> Other cities reacted to benefits received from the emperor

<sup>61</sup> Harl, *Civic Coins*, 53. Cf. Alföldi, *Bild und Bildersprache*, 141-4.

<sup>62</sup> Of course material help and building activities of emperors did help to make him popular in the provinces. See *infra* pp. 84-5.

<sup>63</sup> For a general discussion of local reactions: Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 168-74.

<sup>64</sup> L. Robert, 'Les inscriptions', in: J. des Gagniers et. al. (eds.), *Laodicée du Lycos. Le nymphée* (Paris 1969), 247-389; 286 n. 3; Oliver, *Greek Constitutions*, 389-401 no. 192; E. Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui Kommodeia', *Scienze dell'antichità. Storia Archeologia Antropologia* 6-7 (1992/3), 69-88; 77-9; N. Ehrhardt, 'Ein milesischer Festkalender aus

during the reign. Ephesus seems to have renamed two different festivals after Commodus, the *Artemisia* and the *Hadrianeia*.<sup>65</sup> They also worshipped the emperor in a rather striking way by naming him a new Dionysos (νέος Διόνυσος), and associating him to Artemis *Soteira*.<sup>66</sup> All of this could well be a form of gratitude for the emperor's help after the earthquake of AD 181/2.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Antioch founded new *Kommodeia* after Commodus lifted the ban on public spectacles that his father had imposed on the city after they had supported Avidius Cassius.<sup>68</sup> Athens celebrated Marcus' and Commodus' visit to the city in AD 176 with the creation of games for *epheboi* named after Commodus.<sup>69</sup> Again particular circumstances decided the founding of Commodian Games. Not even clear changes in worship of the emperor, or the renaming of games in the emperor's honour, need always be a reaction to imperial ideology. Local context remains of the utmost importance.

Sometimes, though, the foundation of *Kommodeia* does seem to result from a reaction to central policy.<sup>70</sup> The city of Tarsos, for instance, built a second temple for the imperial cult, dedicated to Commodus, in AD 190/1. In the same year, the emperor approved of the establishment of a Κομόδειος οἰκουμενικὸς ἄγών, and accepted the position of *demiurge* of the city.<sup>71</sup> It can hardly be accidental that a coin of the same period depicts a club behind a bust of Commodus in the costume of the city's *demiurge*.<sup>72</sup> It would only be apt to celebrate the new Herculean status of the emperor with a festival in Tarsos – a city which, according to mythology, was founded by Hercules.<sup>73</sup>

Severischer Zeit', *MDAI(I)* 34 (1984), 371-404; fr. I. 2. Cf. *supra* pp. 37-8.

<sup>65</sup> *TAM* II, no. 587; Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*', 74-5 nn. 33-4.

<sup>66</sup> *IK* 12 (Ephesus 2), 45-6, no. 293.

<sup>67</sup> *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 16.12; Malalas, 12.11 (= Dindorf, 289). See *supra* p. 84.

<sup>68</sup> L. Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche* (Rome 1953), 226-8 no. 78, 237-9 no. 81, 253-7 no. 86; Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*', 69-70. Cf. *supra* p. 37.

<sup>69</sup> *IG* 2/3<sup>2</sup> 2113, l. 53; 2116, l. 10; 2119, l. 19, ll. 200; 2193, l. 25; 2196, l. 8; 2199, l. 34; 2201, l. 54; 2203, l. 72; 2208 ll. 105; 3015 l. 15; Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*', 70-3.

<sup>70</sup> Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*', 87: 'motivi di opportunismo religioso determinati dall' autoidentificazione di Commodo con divinità come Ercole e Giove'. Cf. the influence of the imperial cult on the founding of the games at Oinoanda in AD 125: S. Mitchell, 'Festivals, Games and Civic Life in Roman Asia Minor', *JRS* 80 (1990), 183-93. See also O. van Nijf, 'Local Heroes: athletics, festivals and elite self-fashioning in the Roman East', in: Goldhill, *Being Greek under Rome*, 306-34; 318-20.

<sup>71</sup> Ziegler, *Städtisches Prestige*, 68-71 nn. 16-18, 21 with further references.

<sup>72</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat. inv. 1246 (= Ziegler, *Städtisches Prestige*, 22 A 4, Taf. 1.3).

<sup>73</sup> *CIG* 4472, *IGR* 3.1012; Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche*, 249-53 no. 85; Miranda, 'Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*', 85. Perhaps cities with particular Herculean connotations were also granted imperial *agones* more easily in the latter years of Commodus' reign; S.



Paying homage to the supreme position which Commodus occupied appears to have been unproblematic – nor were there problems with identifying oneself as ‘Commodian’.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, the Commodian games continued long after Commodus himself had been murdered. In Antioch a certain Demetrios of Salamis won the local *Kommodeia* as late as, perhaps, AD 237. He also won two victories in Ephesus.<sup>75</sup> Athens continued their *Kommodeia* up to at least AD 212 – and perhaps even more than a decade longer.<sup>76</sup> The list continues. Caesarea Mauretania held its *Commodia* till the middle of the third century.<sup>77</sup> An inscription from Miletus listing participants of the Μεγάλα Διδύμεια Κομμόδεια mentions a certain Appius Sabinus, identified as the consul of AD 240.<sup>78</sup> In Tyros, finally, the *Heraikleia Kommodeia* similarly continued well into the third century.<sup>79</sup>

This is not to say that all these festivals continued undisrupted for the entire period of their existence. In Athens, Thebes and Miletus, the epigraphic record suggests a suspension of the *Kommodeia* for the period of Commodus’ *damnatio memoriae*. It is probable that the same happened in other cities, though there is no evidence for it.<sup>80</sup> This might, but need not, indicate unpopularity of the emperor, and relief at his death. It is equally possible that it merely reflects acute awareness of the political opinion of those in power. The resumption of the games, more likely than not connected to Septimius Severus’ restoration of Commodus’ good name, may reflect a similar awareness.

So do the foundation, suspension, and restoration of festivals give any information as to the popularity, perception, and reception of Commodus in the provinces? They do. Renaming existent festivals or

Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men and Gods in Asia Minor* (Oxford 1993), 221.

<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the Ὀλύμπια Κομμόδεια in Sparta, too, were elevated to the status of ἱερὸς ἀγών in the latter years of Commodus’ reign. A. J. S. Spawforth, ‘A Severan statue-group and an Olympic festival at Sparta’, *ABSA* 81(1986), 311-32; 331: ‘This ... possibility seems allowed by an inscription from Sardis ... recording the promotion of an unidentified Spartan ‘talent-festival’ to ‘sacred’ status, sometime in the early third century or the last years of the second.

<sup>75</sup> Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche*, 253-7 no. 86; Miranda, ‘Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*’, 70 n. 2, 74 A2.

<sup>76</sup> Miranda, ‘Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*’, 72-3; Robert, ‘Les inscriptions’, 284 n. 4.

<sup>77</sup> *CIL* 14.474 (= *ILS* 5233).

<sup>78</sup> D. F. McCabe / M. A. Plunkett, *Didyma Inscriptions. Texts and Lists* (Princeton 1985), 54 no. 240; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 1 (1933), no. A 952; Miranda, ‘Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*’, 78 B3 n. 45.

<sup>79</sup> Moretti, *Iscrizione agonistiche*, 249-53 no. 85; Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques*, V no. 720; Miranda, ‘Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*’, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Miranda, ‘Testimonianze sui *Kommodeia*’, 86-7.

founding new ones named after the emperor, often out of gratitude of services rendered, shows that adding the emperor's name as an epithet was not unheard of in great parts of the realm. This might have made Commodus' renaming of legions, months, and the city of Rome itself seem less extravagant to some contemporaries than it has appeared to modern scholars.

Furthermore, even though Commodus' philhellenism must have been as important in establishing the emperor's popularity in the East as his image (if not more so), there are festivals like the one in Tarsos, where the founding of *Kommodeia* is contemporary with a change in imperial representation. Here, it seems, a city recognised, and related positively to, Commodus' ideological claims – showing once more quite how wide-spread awareness of these claims was. Also, the restoration of festivals after temporary abolition suggests at the most minimalist, but not the least important, level the extent of Severus' reinstatement of his posthumously adopted brother (of which more below). Finally, many cities continued to celebrate their *Kommodeia* long after Septimius Severus had died. Any possible imperial pressure to proclaim Commodus' glory must have vanished with him. Still the cities did not distance themselves from the last Antonine. It may have been that people had simply got used to the festivals' names. That would, at least, contradict the notion of a continuing negative association to the name of Commodus. Maybe that association had never been quite so negative as we have been led to believe.

## Opinions of private individuals

### *Seeing and believing*

In this way Pertinax was declared emperor and Commodus a public enemy, after both the senate *and the populace* (καὶ τοῦ δήμου) had joined in shouting many bitter words against the latter.<sup>81</sup>

Whether or not the populace hated Commodus quite as badly as Dio regularly proclaims can be doubted. It is, however, extremely difficult to draw sound conclusions from the widely divergent pieces of evidence which indicate any form of private perception of the emperor and his image. Surely, describing a visual programme presupposes

<sup>81</sup> Dio, 74.2.1, my emphasis. See for the different ways in which Dio referred to the *plebs*: L. de Blois, 'Volk und Soldaten bei Cassius Dio', *ANRW* II.34.3 (1997), 2650-2676; 2655-60; M.-L. Freyburger-Galland, *Aspects du vocabulaire politique et institutionnel de Dion Cassius* (Paris 1997), 84-90.

'the crucial role of the viewers as recipients of the imperial image'.<sup>82</sup> If so, reactions to 'political' images become political statements in their own right. Most obviously, the mutilation of statues could function in that way. The death of a 'tyrant' would form an appropriate moment to do so, as Pliny explained:

It was our delight to dash those proud faces to the floor, to smite them with the sword, and savage them with an axe, as if blood and agony could follow from every blow.<sup>83</sup>

Alternatively, overturning imperial images by soldiers often effectively indicated the beginning of an insurrection.<sup>84</sup>

When he saw the armed force close upon him, the standard bearer of the cohort escorting Galba, ... tore Galba's portrait (*Galbae imaginem*) from the standard and threw it on the ground. This signal made the feeling of all the soldiers for Otho evident (Tac. *Hist.* 1.41)

Similarly, soldiers in the legions of Lower Germany rebelled against Galba: 'The First and Fifth were so mutinous that some stoned Galba's images', whilst four centurions of the Twenty-second Legion who tried to protect Galba's images were 'swept away by the onrush of soldiers ... and were thrown in chains' (*Hist.* 1.55). By damaging an image, one rebels against the prototype.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, by honouring a particular image, or by copying a specific change in iconography that was started in the political centre, one shows agreement, or at least wants to appear to show agreement, with the ideology the image aims to convey.

What sort of private reactions followed on Commodus' public displays? Apart from a number of inscriptions testifying to Commodus being addressed, already during his lifetime, as *divus* or *θεός*, or even *Romanus Hercules*,<sup>86</sup> there is a small statue of unknown provenience in Verona which may depict Commodus with the attributes and posture of Sol Invictus.<sup>87</sup> More noticeable, perhaps, but

<sup>82</sup> Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 161.

<sup>83</sup> Plin. *Pan.* 52.4. Cf. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 183 n. 106: '(abuse of statues in general) was surrogate corpse abuse, whether by blows, hook, fire, or casting into water'.

<sup>84</sup> A. Gregory, 'Powerful images': responses to portraits and the political uses of images in Rome', *JRA* 7 (1994), 80-99; 95.

<sup>85</sup> On iconoclasm in general (though not specifically focused on the ancient world): D. Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and their Motives* (Maarsen 1985) and idem, *The Power of Images*, 407-28. Still indispensable, Kitzinger, 'The Cult of images'.

<sup>86</sup> *CIL* 8.4212 (=ILS 402), 10.1116 (=ILS 403), 14.3449 (=ILS 400); *IGRom*, 3.1014, 4.550, 881. The number of dedications to *divus Commodus* in all parts of the empire after the *restitutio memoriae*, also suggests that the animosity of the senate was not shared by all; Traupman, *Commodus*, 176:)

<sup>87</sup> Verona, Museo del Teatro Romano, inv. A 4, 523; Bergmann, *Strahlen der Herrscher*, 255-9 n. 1538.

certainly more complicated to interpret, are two mosaics from North Africa. They might suggest a more than fleeting reception of the emperor's visual programme in the private sphere.<sup>88</sup>

The first mosaic is from the house of Asinius Rufinus in Acholla (Tunisia).<sup>89</sup> On this T-shaped mosaic the labours of Hercules are depicted in small medallions, which are connected by geometrical elements. Hercules is depicted vanquishing an opponent on all medallions but the one which forms the centre of the middle axis, on which the divinity is depicted alone (fig. 13). This is not an uncommon layout – it shows the deity as a 'personality' surrounded by the deeds from which he derives his superhuman status. But the iconography of the centre-piece is peculiar. Hercules is standing, his right leg stretched to the side, the lion-skin hanging over his left shoulder. He holds his bow in a slightly bend left arm, whilst with his right arm he holds the club which leans against his body in a line parallel with the right leg. This iconography is only paralleled by a coin from Commodus' reign, minted in AD 184, which the mosaic follows in detail (fig. 14)<sup>90</sup> Though there are a few minor differences between the Hercules on the mosaic and the one on the coin, the similarities are far more obvious.<sup>91</sup>

Close to the mosaic, an inscription has been found naming a certain M. Asinius Rufinus as the owner of the house. It reads:

M(arco) Asinio Sex(ti)/ fil(io) Hor(atia) Rufino/ Valerio Vero Sa/biniano,  
ad/lecto inter praet(orios)/ ab imp(eratore) M. Aurelio/ Commodo Antoni/no  
Aug(usto) Pio, exorn(ato)/ sacerd(otio) fet(iali), curat(ori)/ Viae App(iae),  
co(n)s(uli),/ cultores do/mus ob merit(a).<sup>92</sup>

As Commodus is named *Pius*, but not yet *Felix*, one can conclude that the inscription should be dated somewhere between AD 183 and 185.<sup>93</sup> The mosaic was almost certainly laid out at the same time, as archaeological research also suggests.<sup>94</sup> In these years, too, Rufinus

<sup>88</sup> On the problems of methodology in interpreting the theme's and iconography of mosaics: Muth, *Erleben von Raum*, 36-43.

<sup>89</sup> Tunis, Musée National du Bardo, inv. 3588; Muth, *Erleben von Raum*, 352-4 no. A 1; S. R. Zwirn, 'The Hercules mosaics from Acholla: Addenda au dossier des mosaïques héracléennes', *Association Internationale pour l'Etude de la Mosaïque Antique* 10 (1985), 117-124; 123 figs. 1-2; Dunbabin, *The mosaics of Roman North Africa*, 25, 41, 248; S. Gozlan, 'Les mosaïques de la Maison d'Asinius Rufinus à Acholla (Tunisie)', in: P. Johnson (ed.), *Fifth International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics* 1 (Ann Arbor 1994), 161-173.

<sup>90</sup> Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, no. 600 (= *RIC* 3, no. 427; *BMCRE* 4, nos. 505, 525, pl. 104.5).

<sup>91</sup> G.Ch. Picard, 'Deux sénateurs romains inconnus', *Karthago* iv (1953), 121-35; 124.

<sup>92</sup> Picard, 'Deux sénateurs', 121-2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, 122.

<sup>94</sup> Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, 25; Gozlan, 'Les mosaïques de la Maison d'Asinius Rufinus', 171. There was substantial reworking on the house in the late

must have been suffect consul, which considering the fact that he was only appointed to the rank of praetor in AD 180 is noteworthy.<sup>95</sup> Commodus, however, did not start to use Herculean imagery publicly until AD 190. It is, therefore, difficult to see the mosaic as a straightforward reaction to a visual programme that had not yet taken off. Thus the mosaic raises as many questions as it answers.

The depiction of Hercules on the central image of the mosaic is undoubtedly related to the coin of AD 184, but to what purpose is much less clear. A number of possible solutions present themselves. Perhaps Commodus' personal interest in Hercules antedated his use of the deity in systematic symbolism. Someone close to the emperor (as Rufinus seems to have been) may have been aware of it and used it in the decoration of his house. One of the functions of such private visual decoration was, furthermore, to commemorate 'the owner's relationship with the imperial house'.<sup>96</sup> The room in which the mosaic was found, may have been a *triclinium*.<sup>97</sup> Using references to the emperor in an area where the select few (who would understand the message) could come, makes sense.

Rita Amedick, however, has pointed out how dining-rooms were appropriate places for depicting Hercules. Not only was the deity a notorious eater, but his deeds also referred to the hunt, which was a fitting context for a great number of meals. Thus, the choice of the theme of the mosaic could easily have been decided by the events that were going to take place in the room itself, though this did not affect the function of the deity as a symbol of *virtus*.<sup>98</sup> The similarities between the two images might mean as little as (but no less than) that people looked at the images on imperial coins, and used them as *exempla* to be incorporated in their private decorative schemes. Perhaps the reception was even more indirect. It is not known what caused Commodus to mint a new Hercules type in AD 184. Could not both the image of the coin and that of the mosaic go back to a common prototype – perhaps a restored statue? Without further evidence, one simply cannot tell. Here, then, is the tantalising situation

second century. It seems logical to connect both inscription and mosaic with this reconstruction: Muth, *Erleben von Raum*, 352-3.

<sup>95</sup> Chastagnol, *Sénat romain*, 119 no. 2.

<sup>96</sup> E. Bartman, 'Sculptural collecting and display in the private realm', in: Gazda, *Roman Art*, 76-77. Cf. E. W. Leach, 'Reading signs of status: recent books on Roman art in the domestic sphere', *AJA* 96 (1992), 551-7; 555.

<sup>97</sup> Gozlan, 'Les mosaïques de la Maison d'Asinius Rufinus', 161.

<sup>98</sup> R. Amedick, 'Herakles im Speisesaale', *MDAI(R)* 101 (1994), 103-119; 106, 113, 119; Muth, *Erleben von Raum*, 38, 43.

that although it is clear that somebody reasonably close to the emperor laid down this mosaic around AD 184, apparently referring to central imagery, it is still not clear what it all means.

Another African mosaic showing Hercules is problematic in different ways. It was found at Oudna (Uthina) (fig. 15), and was probably made in the late second or early third century.<sup>99</sup> Hercules is being crowned by Victoria; an unusual image, which begins to be regularly depicted on coins only during the Tetrarchy.<sup>100</sup> There are, however, examples of medallions from the reigns of Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, and Commodus that show the scene (fig. 16).<sup>101</sup> Also, a relief in the ceiling of an entrance to the theatre of Ostia incorporates Victoria crowning Hercules (fig. 17).<sup>102</sup> This relief must almost certainly be Commodian in date, since the building of the theatre was started by Commodus and completed by Septimius Severus very early in his reign, which makes Severan changes to the theatre unlikely.<sup>103</sup> The relief seems to go back to the earlier medallions. Apart from Hercules' right arm – which is stretched out and holding the club on the medallion, whilst it is bent and resting on Hercules' temple on the relief – the imagery on medallions and relief is very similar. In both Hercules is standing, facing to the front, at the left, naked but for the lion skin over his right shoulder. Victoria, at the right, is also facing to the front, holding a palm branch in her left hand, whilst holding a wreath over Hercules' head.

There are more substantial differences between the image on the mosaic from Oudna and the images from the centre. The former shows a Hercules whose body is turned inwards, rather than outwards, and

<sup>99</sup> Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, 266, no. 6a; P. Gauckler, *Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule et de l'Afrique II* (Paris 1910), 139 no 413.

<sup>100</sup> T. Hölscher, *Victoria Romana. Archäologische Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Wesenart der römischen Siegesgöttin von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 3. Jhs.n. Chr.* (Mainz 1967), 20-21; *RIC* 5.2, nos. 565-67.

<sup>101</sup> *LIMC* 5, 'Herakles', no. 3487; Szaivert, *Münzprägung*, nos. 1058, 1071; Bastien, *Buste monétaire*, III, pl. 70.6. There is also a gem from the early-imperial period with the same iconography: Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kunstbesitz, inv. FG 1302-1303; *LIMC* 5, 'Herakles', no. 3486; A. Furtwängler, *Beschreibung der geschnittenen Steinen im Antiquarium* (Berlin 1896), 80.

<sup>102</sup> *LIMC* 5, 'Herakles', no. 3485; H. Mielsch, *Römische Stuckreliefs* (Heidelberg 1975), 182; K 129. The above-mentioned Alexandrian coin which showed Victoria crowning Commodus in the guise of Hercules (*supra* 172 n. 47) is subtly different, as it depicts the emperor, be it in a (near) divine manifestation, being crowned by Victoria rather than simply the god. The iconography of the coin type is also substantially different from the one described below.

<sup>103</sup> *CIL* 14.114; Mielsch, *Römische Stuckreliefs*, 99. If, however, the relief ought to be seen as a 'finishing touch', which was decided upon by Septimius Severus, it would further strengthen the 'Herculean' tendencies of Severus. See *infra* pp. 191-3.

who is looking away from Victoria, rather than at her. On the mosaic, furthermore, the goddess is crowning Hercules with her left hand, whilst in Ostia and on the medallions she is doing so with her right hand. This does not, however, seriously change the composition of the scene. The main difference is the object held by Hercules in his right hand. In Oudna this is a *cantharus*, rather than the common club.<sup>104</sup> This drinking cup does not imply that the figured deity is a drunken Hercules. The type of Hercules does not support that view, as he is standing upright, on his own.<sup>105</sup> The mosaics in the rooms immediately adjacent, all showing solemn deities, make the notion of a drunken Hercules more unlikely. It is more probable that the *cantharus* refers to the function of the room as a *triclinium*.<sup>106</sup>

Again the difficulties of interpretation are manifold. Is the unknown owner of the 'maison d'Industrius' reacting to imperial imagery – or even accepting the underlying messages? Who was this owner? One cannot tell. What is clear is that the *triclinium* was one of the key areas of the *domus*, and that its decoration manifested a multitude of social statements.<sup>107</sup> It has been argued that these statements were somehow connected to imperial power, and the relationship, perceived or real, between the *dominus* of the house, and the ruler of the realm.<sup>108</sup> Whether the Hercules of Oudna broadcast a similar message must remain doubtful, but it is striking how this new iconographical scheme from Rome found its way into the imagery of an African *domus*.

These indications, tentative as they are, may point at some reception of Commodus' visual programme at an individual level. There is, however, another change in Herculean iconography which appears more structural, though it is far from clear whether or not it can be connected to imperial imagery. For, in the 180's AD, there was a change towards a more Lysippean depiction of Hercules on

<sup>104</sup> As the (object in the) right arm of the deity is differently depicted on medallions, mosaic, and relief, it appears that there was no standard iconography for that part of the depiction.

<sup>105</sup> The drunken Hercules is inevitably supported by one or more figures, mostly satyrs: *LIMC* 5.1, 158-60.

<sup>106</sup> Surrounding mosaics figure a hunting Diana, Venus Anadyomene, Neptune, and Apollo with the lyre: Gauckler, *Inventaire des Mosaïques*, 139-141 nos. 414, 416, 417, 419.

<sup>107</sup> Y. Thébert, 'Private life and domestic architecture in Roman Africa', in: P. Veyne (ed.), *A History of Private Life: 1. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1987), 313-405; 364-78.

<sup>108</sup> Thébert, 'Private life and domestic architecture', 404-5; S. Ellis, 'Power, architecture, and decor: How the late Roman aristocrat appeared to his guests', in: Gazda, *Roman Art*, 117-134; 126: 'creating an analogy between the *dominus* and the Roman emperor, whose *virtus* ensured the prosperity of the realm'.

sarcophagi. Though it is impossible to tell whether sarcophagi depicting Hercules and his labours became more or less popular during or immediately after Commodus' reign,<sup>109</sup> this iconographical transition is interesting in itself, as there is a clear break in style and iconography from earlier sarcophagi depicting Hercules.<sup>110</sup> The date of the change is difficult to establish, but Jongste agrees that 'seen historically this change could well have been determined by the reign of Commodus known for his worship of the hero'.<sup>111</sup>

Of course it is possible that economic reasons were influential in causing the change. Jongste in fact believes that economic, rather than political, motives led to the new iconography. He stresses the importance of a cost-effective standardisation of images, so as to lower the production costs and speed up production.<sup>112</sup> This may be true. Yet even so, a change towards Lysippean images during the reign of Commodus is significant, in that it must have been difficult to ignore the emperor and his visual programme, whilst looking at the Hercules-figures on sarcophagi. Commodus, after all, regularly deployed copies of statues by Lysippus – the famous court-sculptor of Alexander the Great – when depicting Hercules.<sup>113</sup> This does not mean that the choice of the new iconography was necessarily dictated by, or even a direct reaction to, the emperor's application of Lysippean images in his imagery.<sup>114</sup> Hercules, was, after all, an immensely popular deity, and an obvious figure to invoke in matters concerning

<sup>109</sup> P. Jongste, *The Twelve Labours of Hercules on Roman Sarcophagi* (Rome 1992), 11, recognises 70 examples, spread over an extended period of time, up to the middle of the third century. Especially in light of the total number of Roman sarcophagi depicting mythological scenes, this group is too small to draw conclusions as to a rise or fall in popularity of Hercules-sarcophagi, also because often they can be dated only within a margin of approximately ten years (Jongste, *Labours*, 139). Cf. G. Koch, *Sarkophage der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Darmstadt 1993), 72: 'Eine große Zahl stadtrömischer Sarkophage, zusammen etwa 1200, ist mit Darstellungen von Sagen geschmückt'. The figures of Dionysos (380), Meleager (200) and Endymion (120), are substantially more often represented on sarcophagi than Hercules; Koch, *Sarkophage*, 74; 78; 80-81.

<sup>110</sup> Clear examples of the type: Mantua, Galleria e Museo del Palazzo Ducale, inv. G 6751; Paris, Musée National du Louvre (depot), inv. MR 795-796; Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. 1914 n. 145; Jongste, *Labours*, 27, nos. F 2-4. Cf. P. Moreno, *Vita e arte di Lisippo* (Rome 1987), 201-230; Idem, *Lisippo, l'arte e la fortuna*, (Rome 1995) 270-277.

<sup>111</sup> Jongste, *Labours*, 27. Jongste dates the transition earlier, but he still describes a coin from AD 192 as 'from the same period' (27). Apparently the exact date of the change is rather flexible.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, 29, 31.

<sup>113</sup> See *supra*, pp. 126-8.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Amedick, 'Herakles im Speisesaale', 103: 'Ob eine Verbindung zwischen dem mythologischen Bild und seinem Verwendungszweck intendiert war, läßt sich häufig nur dann erweisen, wenn das Bild im Vergleich zu verwandten Darstellungen modifiziert wurde, mit dem erkennbaren Ziel, es einer gegebenen Funktion anzupassen'.



death and afterlife. Yet the use of a Lysippean iconography does seem to suggest that the visual programme (and by implication the message it broadcast) was not despised either. After all, if a particular type of imagery is unacceptable, it is hardly probable that it should contemporaneously start to appear on people's final resting places.<sup>115</sup>

*In word and deed: The literary reception*

All of this does seem to suggest that the reception of Commodus' Herculean visual programme was not limited to the military or pseudo-official sphere alone. So much seems also to be confirmed by Athenaeus, who was a contemporary author, and explicitly identifies himself as such. He talks about Commodus' association with Hercules in neutral terms, neither mocking the identification nor properly accepting it.<sup>116</sup> But it does appear that at least he, and those surrounding him, understood the emperor's use of symbolism, and its purpose. The people in question, it must be added, were not totally unrelated to Commodus. The host of the *Deipnosophistae*, P. Livius Larensis, was the emperor's *procurator patrimonii*, and in this capacity handed over Commodus' body for burial to the consul-elect Fabius Cilo.<sup>117</sup> Larensis must have been well aware of the emperor's religious measures. He was *pontifex minor* during Commodus' reign, and had, according to Athenaeus, been 'placed in charge of temples and sacrifices' by Marcus Aurelius, whilst being 'well versed in religious ceremonies ... and learned in political institutions'.<sup>118</sup> It is hardly surprising that he, at least, understood Commodus' religious legitimization. Other contemporary authors similarly seem to show awareness of Commodus' ideological claims – without actually overtly distancing themselves from them.<sup>119</sup>

Later authors were even more specific about the positive sides of Commodus' character. Indeed, some texts show that the story of the

<sup>115</sup> Unless the iconography on sarcophagi was adapted to flatter the emperor, in which case one would expect a stop of the production of this type of sarcophagi after Commodus' death. Such a stop did not take place. Cf. Jongste, *Labours* F 5-7.

<sup>116</sup> Ath. *Deipn.* 12 537f: 'What wonder, then, that the emperor Commodus of our time also had the club of Hercules lying beside him in the chariot, with the lion's skin spread beneath him, and desired to be called Hercules'. See *supra* p. 127.

<sup>117</sup> SHA, *Comm.*, 20.1; Ath. *Deipn.* 1.1a; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 5.1 (1970), no. L 297. Larensis had earlier been the 'procurator of the Lord Emperor (Κυρίου αὐτοκράτορος) in Moesia' (*Deipn.* 9.398e).

<sup>118</sup> *CIL* 6.2126; Ath. *Deipn.* 1.2c.

<sup>119</sup> O. Hekster, 'Of mice and emperors. A note to Aelian, *De natura animalium*, 6.40' (forthcoming).

god-emperor Commodus lived on for a long time. A passage in Dracontius from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century describes Commodus in a very different way from Dio's evil tyrant:

*Alter ait princeps modico sermone poeta Commodus Augustus, vir pietate bonus: "Nobile praeceptum, rectores, discite post me: sit bonus in vita qui volet esse deus"* (Another princeps, the poet Commodus Augustus, a good man through his pietas, states in a short discourse: "A good advice, teachers, repeat after me: be good in life if you want to be a god") (Dracontius, *Satisfactio*, 187-190).

It is undoubtedly 'Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius' who is referred to here – the passage cannot be explained away by referring to an authorial error.<sup>120</sup> Commodus is presented as an imperial *exemplum bonum*, complementing a group which further constituted Caesar, Augustus and Titus. According to Dracontius, the last Antonine 'set to verse the expectation that he would become a god, and urged other leaders to follow his example of goodness'.<sup>121</sup> The passage may be linked to a more positive reputation of Commodus in the provinces, or to the emperor's tolerant attitude towards Christianity – leading to a slightly more friendly historiography.<sup>122</sup>

Jordanes' and Malalas' descriptions of Commodus are much more positive, and though they are not the most trustworthy of sources, they do testify to a tradition in which Commodus was perceived as a good emperor, at least in the provinces, and one who deserved divinity.<sup>123</sup> It is, finally, noticeable that Malalas (12.1; 283) explicitly states that Commodus was an 'avid builder and religious man (ἱερός)'. Not only is the similarity to Dracontius' *pietate bonus* striking, there is also an almost direct opposition to senatorial criticism, which condemned both Commodus' religious attitude, and his lack of building activities

<sup>120</sup> As is shown by F. Clover, 'Commodus the poet', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 32 (1988), 19-33 and B. Baldwin, 'Commodus the good poet and good emperor', *Gymnasium* 97 (1990), 224-231; 227.

<sup>121</sup> Clover, 'Commodus the poet', 21. Cf. Baldwin, 'Commodus the good poet', 224; C. Moussy, *Dracontius. Oeuvres* II (Paris 1988) [Budé], 212-3. See on the *Satisfactio*: W. Schetter, 'Über die „satisfactio“ des Dracontius', in: K. Rosen (ed.), *Macht und Kultur im Rom der Kaiserzeit* (Bonn 1994), 181-90.

<sup>122</sup> Beda, *Chron.* 333-6; *Chronica Gallica ann. 511*, 376-7; Prosp. Tir. *Epit. Chron.* 701-29; V. Cicala, 'Problemi di storiografia tardoantica', *Antiqua* 4 (1979), 31-35, 33; Marasco, 'Commodo e i suoi apologeti', 237-8. The argument should not be pushed too far; G. R. Stanton, 'Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus, and Commodus: 1962-1972', *ANRW* II.2 (1975), 478-559; 532: 'But there is scarcely enough evidence to call the absence of martyrdoms after Apollonius a 'policy' of Commodus; and it is purely speculative to assume that this 'policy' reflects influence of Marcia in favour of the Christians ...'. *Contra* Grosso, *Commodo*, 669-678. On Commodus' provincial policy, see *supra* pp. 83-5.

<sup>123</sup> Jordanes, *Rom.* 372; Malalas, *Chron.* 12.1-13 (Dindorf 283-90); Clover, 'Commodus the poet', 29-30; Baldwin, 'Commodus the good poet', 231.

in Rome.

### *Marcus Aurelius Prosenes*

A final source that may imply that Commodus' attempts to present himself as the new incarnation of the mythological figure of Hercules were not perceived as an aberration by those surrounding him, at least after his death, can be found on a sarcophagus which now stands near the entrance of the Villa Borghese (close to the Piazzale Flaminio), in Rome. It is the sarcophagus of Marcus Aurelius Prosenes, and reads:

M. Aurelio Augg(ustorum) lib(erto) Proseneti a cubiculo Au(gusti),  
proc(uratori) thesaurorum, proc(uratori) patrimoni, proc(uratori) munerum,  
proc(uratori) vinorum, ordinato a divo Commodo in kastrense, patrono  
piissimo liberti bene merenti sarcophagum de suo adornaverunt.<sup>124</sup>

Prosenes, it seems, had been Caracalla's chamberlain, and was previously responsible for the games as a *procurator munerum*. He also explicitly mentions the importance of Commodus for his career. Not only, then, could someone associated with Commodus remain a prominent member of the imperial household, there appears to have been no awkwardness in combining this with emphasis on Prosenes' responsibility for the *ludi*. If the policies of the gladiator-emperor were such a complete failure as has often been assumed, this pride in Commodus would be difficult to explain. Why would one willingly associate oneself for eternity with an emperor who was universally hated? Apparently a more positive picture of Commodus survived.

### **Succeeding a god**

When Prosenes' freedmen mentioned Commodus on his tombstone, they referred to him as a god. Only three years after the senate issued a *damnatio memoriae*, Septimius Severus deified Commodus, reinstated his memory, and called himself *Divi Commodi Frater*.<sup>125</sup> This reaction to Commodus' rule is of importance. Succeeding emperors, like the military, the local authorities and the people at large, could show their reception of an earlier emperor's self-

<sup>124</sup> CIL 6.8498 (=ILS 1738) = EAOR I, 19-20 no. 1. For the function of *procurator munerum*: P. Sabbatini Tumolesi, *Gladiatorium Paria: Annunci di spettacoli gladiatorii a Pompei* (Rome 1980), 56. In general on Prosenes, and the possibility that he was a Christian: H. U. Instinsky, 'Marcus Aurelius Prosenes – Freigelassener und Christ am Kaiserhof', *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz. Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* (1964) no. 3, 113-129.

<sup>125</sup> See *infra* pp. 189-91.

presentation. A sudden change of direction, or the absence of such a change, might be perceived as an indication of the previous emperor's (un)popularity – or of the effectiveness of his visual programme. One would have had to distance oneself from a hated predecessor, whilst continuing those policies and messages that would strengthen support.<sup>126</sup> The public images of Commodus' successors thus become relevant for an analysis of Commodus' posthumous reputation.

The last Antonine's immediate successors, however, reigned for such limited periods of time that it becomes almost impossible to discern any traceable reception of Commodus' visual programme. Of Pertinax' attitude towards Commodus' divine claims, for instance, we know little more than that he had been *flamen Commodianus* (*Hercules*) earlier in his career.<sup>127</sup> Yet that says very little about how the emperor Pertinax reacted to Commodus' style of auto-representation. Pescennius Niger's emphasis on a new Golden Age could be seen in the context of Commodus' comparable claims, but the evidence is slim.<sup>128</sup> Even the fact that the coinage of Didius Julianus shows some sort of continuum with that of Commodus is not necessarily relevant. Fashion, or uneasiness by those devising the coins in stating too clearly whom they thought was the rightful emperor in a situation in which it was not clear who was eventually going to occupy the throne, may well have been responsible for such superficial similarities.<sup>129</sup>

### *Fighting for Hercules*

Two types of coins which were minted during the war between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus ought to be mentioned here. In the years AD 196/7 Severus suddenly started to issue coins in Rome and the East, in almost all denominations, showing on the

<sup>126</sup> Thus, Severus Alexander ended the sun-cult of Elagabalus, and Gallienus changed his attitude to the Christians after Valerian was captured (Flaig, *Der Kaiser herausfordern*, 94). Ideological messages of predecessors are also crucial for understanding imperial ideology at the beginning of the fourth century AD: Hekster, 'The city of Rome', 718, 731-3, 737-42.

<sup>127</sup> CIL 6.577; Derichs, *Herakles*, 82.

<sup>128</sup> G. Alföldy, 'Das neue *Saeculum* des Pescennius Niger', *Die Krise des Römischen Reiches* 128-38.

<sup>129</sup> D. Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda. The Dynastic Aspect of the Imperial Propaganda of the Severi: the Literary and Archaeological Evidence AD 193-235* (Oxford 1996), 26, 36, 38: 'doubts of the various artists and craftsmen, and indeed perhaps their desire to protect themselves', fig. 52 V. Zedelius, *Untersuchungen zur Münzprägung von Pertinax bis Clodius Albinus* (Münster 1975), 38.

reverse Hercules, holding club and bow, with the legend *HERCULI DEFENS*.<sup>130</sup> These coins are noteworthy for two reasons. First of all, the iconography of Hercules is substantially different from the Hercules-figure on earlier Severan coins, in which the deity clearly resembled one of the two patron-deities of Lepcis Magna – Severus' birthplace. Secondly, the legend is a complete innovation, instantly raising the question against whom Hercules has to defend. The answer appears to be the counter-emperor Clodius Albinus. The *Hercules Defens*. coins were only issued in AD 196 and 197. Clodius Albinus made his claim to the throne late in AD 195 and was comprehensively defeated on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February AD 197, at the battle of Lugdunum.<sup>131</sup> The coins thus coincide with the struggle between Albinus and Severus. In these years there was no other particular threat to the empire.<sup>132</sup> The enemy of Severus' Hercules seems clear. It must be relevant that in the middle of a struggle for the leadership of the realm, Commodus' favourite deity was called to arms, especially considering that Severus had just adopted himself into Commodus' family, and deified his new brother.

A second interesting coin type was issued, in turn, by Albinus. On the reverse of a *denarius*, minted in Lugdunum, Hercules is visible, dressed in the lion skin, leaning on the club, and holding either a globe, or the apples of the Hesperides. The legend of the coin reads *FORTITUDO AUG INVICTA*.<sup>133</sup> Again this is a legend that had hitherto not been used in connection with Hercules on the imperial coinage. Was Clodius Albinus trying to show how Hercules was on his side, rather than Severus'? Only a couple of years after Commodus had proclaimed himself the Roman Hercules, the two remaining competitors for his inheritance placed Hercules on their side. The connection was unavoidable. Referring to Hercules in this period must have brought 'Commodus-Hercules' to mind. It seems the memory of the former emperor could still whip up some support.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>130</sup> *BMCRE* 5, nos. 162\*, 218-20, 246, 451.

<sup>131</sup> Dio, 76.4.1; SHA, *Sev.* 10.1; Herodian, 3.5.2-8; Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 121-6; Z. Rubin, *Civil War Propaganda and Historiography* (Brussels 1980), 75-6, 80-1, 208-10; Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda*, 34-5.

<sup>132</sup> The first Parthian war of Septimius Severus had already ended in AD 195, whereas the second did not start until the summer of AD 197. On the political relation between Clodius Albinus and Septimius Severus, and its reflection in coinage, see U. Schachinger, 'Clodius Albinus. Programmatischer Friede unter der Providentia Augusta', *RSÄ* 26 (1996), 95-122, 118-121.

<sup>133</sup> *BMCRE* 5, 70 no. \*.

<sup>134</sup> Grosso, *Commodo*, 581-4, fig. 3, argued that Pescennius Niger went even further, commemorating the *conditor* Commodus-Hercules by issuing a unparalleled coin which

*Divi Commodi Frater*

He caused us especial dismay by constantly styling himself the son of Marcus and the brother of Commodus, and by bestowing divine honours upon the latter.<sup>135</sup>

The popularity of Commodus in some quarters would form a good reason for Severus' extraordinary posthumous self-adoption into the Aurelian family – and for the ensuing deification of his new 'brother' Commodus. Of course dynastic motives may equally well have dictated Severus' choice to present himself as a new member of the former ruling family. To ensure loyalty from the troops and the people, dynastic legitimation was undoubtedly useful.<sup>136</sup> One should not forget Severus' famous last words of advice to his sons: 'Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men'.<sup>137</sup> Free popularity from the armies must have sounded even better. To ensure loyalty from senators, however, it was not a particularly good strategy, especially as the senate was presented with a *fait accompli*. Already in AD 195, Severus issued numerous coins placing himself within the *gens Aurelia*, and a dedicatory inscription from Mauretania Caesariensis of the same year traced Severus' lineage back as far as Nerva.<sup>138</sup>

Imp. Caesari divi M. Antonini/ pii Sarmatici Germanici filio/ divi Commodi fratri/ divi Antonini/ Pii nepoti divi [Hadria]ni pronepoti/ divi [Traiani Parthici ab]nepoti divi/ [Nervae adnepot]i.

This self-adoption into the house of the Antonines was accompanied by the renaming of Caracalla as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.<sup>139</sup> These

renamed Jerusalem COL(ONIA) AEL(IA) CAP(ITOLINA) COMM(ODIANA) P(IA) F(ELIX). This coin, however, appears to be counterfeit; L. Kadman, 'When was Aelia Capitolina named 'Commodiana' and by whom?', *IEJ* 9 (1959), 137-40; 137 n. 6. Jerusalem was renamed after Commodus, though by Septimius Severus, see *infra* p.191.

<sup>135</sup> Dio, 76.7.4. Cf. SHA, *Sev.* 10.6, 11.4; Aur. Vict. 20.30.

<sup>136</sup> Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda*, 21. See *supra* p. 20.

<sup>137</sup> Dio, 77.15.2: ὁμονοεῖτε, τοὺς στρατιώτας πλουτίζετε, τῶν ἄλλων πάντων καταφρονεῖτε.

<sup>138</sup> *CIL* 8.9317; *RIC* 4.1, nos. 686, 700-702a, 712. *Divi Commodi frater* recurs on a great number of inscriptions: e.g. *EDH* nos. HD000984, HD003033, HD012205, HD012601, HD020066, HD023734, HD025838, HD028663, HD028732. Cf. Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 185-6.

<sup>139</sup> *ILS* 8805; *RIC* 4.1, 74-5; Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda*, 21. The imperial portrait-types also show a continuation of Antonine practice: J. Raeder, 'Herrscherbildnis und Münzpropaganda. Zur Deutung des 'Serapistypus' des Septimius Severus', *JDAI* 107 (1992), 175-96; 194-6.

dynastic claims were directly responsible for the war between Severus and Clodius Albinus, whose title of Caesar had obviously become irrelevant.<sup>140</sup> Only after winning the battle of Lugdunum did Severus present the senate with the situation.

At the same time, in AD 197, he forced senators, including Dio, to accept the deification of Commodus. This, too, was a long time after the facts. The inscription from Mauretania explicitly referred to Severus as *divi Commodi frater*, and Commodus' divine status was celebrated on coins of the same year. As early as AD 196, the deification was widely known throughout the empire.<sup>141</sup> But only when Severus' military position had become secure, did he confront the senate with the now-established divinity of their erstwhile enemy, whose memory they had condemned less than five years earlier. The adoption into the Antonine family could still be explained by military motives, or by a desire to be the legally correct heir to the Antonine wealth.<sup>142</sup> The fact that the Antonine dynasty was still appealing for a claimant to the throne does not necessarily entail the personal popularity of Commodus. Yet Commodus' deification is not quite the same. It was possible to pass over deification of a predecessor, without distancing oneself entirely from him.<sup>143</sup> Merely arguing for an attempt by Severus to secure his position by making himself a legitimate member of the previous officially ruling household also does not explain the exceptional length to which Severus went to disseminate

<sup>140</sup> Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 118.

<sup>141</sup> *RIC* 4.1, 72a; *IGRom*, 361-2 no. 967 (= *CIL* 3.218); R. Merkelbach, 'Ephesische Parerga 25: Commodus als Bruder des Septimius Severus', *ZPE* 33 (1979), 189-90; Rubin, *Civil War Propaganda*, 213-4.

<sup>142</sup> H. Nesselhauf, 'Patrimonium und Res Privata des römischen Kaisers', in: A. Alföldi (ed.), *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1963* (Bonn 1964), 73-93; 88-9. Champlin, 'The heirs of Commodus', 306 argues for political and financial motives: 'he simply adopted himself into the closest possible relationship with the Antonine dynasty, one closer than that of any other claimant to the inheritance of Commodus'. Against military motives: Oliver, 'The piety of Commodus', 381: '[Severus] boldly proclaimed himself the brother of Commodus, which from a purely military sense was quite unnecessary'. Cf. O. Th. Schultz, *Das Kaiserhaus der Antonine und der letzte Historiker Roms* (Leipzig 1907), 201: 'Es ist charakteristisch für die Skrupellosigkeit des Afrikaners auf moralischen Gebiete, daß er sich später als einen Bruder des Commodus bezeichnete, daß er ... die eigene Dynastie an die der Antonine mit ihrem noch immer die Welt erfüllenden Glanze anknüpfte ...'. On the importance of the *nomen Antoninorum*, see Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, 78-89.

<sup>143</sup> Of the sixty emperors between Augustus and Constantine, twenty-four (excluding Commodus) were not deified, of whom Tiberius was the most noticeable example of an emperor who was succeeded from within a ruling house, but was not deified; S. R. F. Price, 'From noble funerals to divine cult: the consecration of Roman emperors' in: D. Cannadine / S. R. F. Price, *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge etc. 1987), 56-105; 57. Cf. Bonamente, 'Il senato e l'apoteosi degli imperatori', 164.

the name and image of the divine Commodus – especially as this meant reversing a *damnatio memoriae*, a hitherto unheard of action.

Nor was emphasis on Commodus' divine status limited to the earliest stages of Severus' reign, when the military support for his regime could still have been in doubt. In all probability, the name COL(ONIA) AE(LIA) C(APITOLINA) COM(MODIANA) P(IA) F(ELIX) was only bestowed upon Jerusalem in AD 201. The name is amply attested in the coinage of the colony. Coins celebrating Septimius Severus and Julia Domna invariably use the new name of the city.<sup>144</sup> The name then remained on the coinage of the colony until the reign of Hostilian in AD 251.<sup>145</sup> Yet coins from the reign of Commodus consistently name Jerusalem *Colonia Aelia Capitolina*. Commodus, therefore, did not rename the colony himself.<sup>146</sup> In all likelihood the full new name of the city was granted during a visit of the Severan family to the area in AD 201 – perhaps as a token of goodwill towards the province.<sup>147</sup> Even as late as that, in such circumstances the memory of Commodus' re-founding of Rome as the *Colonia Antoniniana Commodiana*, or of his renaming legions, months, and the senate in his own honour, must have been unavoidable. Being associated with the divine Commodus was once again an imperial favour.

### *Septimius Severus and Hercules*

Referring to the 'divine Commodus' was one thing, following his visual programme quite another. Yet Hercules, the deity whom Commodus had monopolised in the last years of the reign, and who had been so important a symbol of the superhuman position that Commodus had tried to occupy, figured largely in Septimius Severus' imagery. Then again, Severus had ulterior motives to emphasise his support by Hercules. As mentioned above, Melquart-Hercules was one

<sup>144</sup> Y. Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina* (Jerusalem 1989), 62; 88 nos. 81-81a. Cf. *EDH* no. HD001985 (= *AE* 1984.914)

<sup>145</sup> Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina*, 60-1; 116 no. 184. The abbreviations used differ considerably in length, ranging from COLACCPF, under Elagabalus and Severus Alexander (p. 104 no. 136; p. 108 nos. 150-1) to COLONIA AELIA CAP COM P FELIX, under Geta (p. 88 no 84-5).

<sup>146</sup> Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina*, 60; 84-6 nos. 66-7.

<sup>147</sup> Kadman, 'When was Aelia Capitolina named 'Commodiana'?', 140; Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina*, 62-3. Cf. H. M. Cotton / W. Eck, 'Ein Ehrenbogen für Septimius Severus und seine Familie in Jerusalem', *Electrum* 1 (1997), 11-20; 15; 19; Taf. 1. Already in AD 195 one additional name was bestowed on Jerusalem, but it seems improbable that it was 'Commodiana'; Meshorer, *The Coinage of Aelia Capitolina*, 62-3; 88 nos. 78-9.



of the *di patrii* of Lepcis Magna, together with Liber-Bacchus. The two deities appeared extensively on Severan iconography, and were given a temple of exceptional size in Rome.<sup>148</sup> They figured on Severus' coinage as early as AD 194.<sup>149</sup> If Commodus' assimilation with Hercules had been unpopular, Septimius Severus did precious little to dissociate himself from it. In AD 200 onwards Severus even strengthened the association, and went so far as to depict himself on the obverse of two *aurei* with the lion skin of Hercules over his head, very much as Commodus had done.<sup>150</sup> He did so again in AD 202 on a medallion which was minted in honour of the wedding between Caracalla and Plotina (fig. 18).<sup>151</sup> Here, as with the Hercules *Defens.* coin-type, the explanation that Severus merely represents his *Di Auspices* does not suffice. Such specific references to a connection between Hercules and the emperor quite shortly after Commodus' death undoubtedly called the former emperor to mind.

Even when Severus did limit himself to depicting his patron deities, the case was not always straightforward. A number of striking particularities present themselves when looking at the role of Hercules and Bacchus during the Ludi Saeculares that were organised in AD 204. By placing the Games in that year, Severus returned to the Augustan cycle, as opposed to Claudius (who celebrated the Games in 47 AD, on the eight-hundredth birthday of Rome), and Domitian (who had celebrated the Games six years early in AD 88).<sup>152</sup> Severus did not altogether follow the Augustan model. For one thing, Septimius himself presided over all rituals and sacrifices, assisted by both of his sons, and emphasised this point emphatically on his coinage, whereas

<sup>148</sup> Dio, 76.16.3; R. Santangeli Valenzani, 'Hercules et Dionysos, Templum', *LTUR* 3, 25-26; Derichs, *Herakles*, 83; R. E. A. Palmer, 'Severan ruler cult and the moon in the city of Rome', *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978), 1085-1120; 1094. Cf. also the depiction of the two deities on the *Arcus Argentariorum* in the Forum Boarium; S. Diebner, 'Arcus Septimii Severi (Forum Boarium); Arcus Argentariorum; Monumentum Argentariorum', *LTUR* 1, 105-6.

<sup>149</sup> *BMCRE* 5, nos. 58, 63, 499, 501, 505-507; Derichs, *Herakles*, 83.

<sup>150</sup> *RIC* 4.1, nos. 155a, 161b.

<sup>151</sup> Bastien, *Buste monétaire*, II, 376, III, pl. 78.2; Gneccchi, *MR* III, no. 1, 152/6; A. M. McCann, *The Portraits of Septimius Severus (AD 193-211)* (Rome 1968), 65, pl. 9.1.

<sup>152</sup> Livy, *Per.* 49; Hor. *Cram. Saec.*; Val. Max. 2.4.5; Zosimus 2.1-7; *CIL* 6.32323-36 (= *ILS* 5050); G. B. Pighi, *De Ludis Saecularibus* (Amsterdam 1965<sup>2</sup>); D. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome. Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge 1998), 28-31; J. Gagé, 'Les jeux séculaires de 204 Ap. J.-C. et la dynastie des Sévères', *MEFR* 51 (1934), 33-78; P. V. Hill, 'Notes on the Ludi saeculares', *Congresso internazionale di numismatica*. II. *Atti* 1961 (Rome 1965), 275-82; J. Scheid, 'Cultes, mythes et politique au début de l'Empire', in F. Graf (ed.), *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft. Das Paradigma Roms* (Stuttgart - Leipzig 1993), 109-27; 11-4. Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 156-60 gives a useful overview, though he still bases himself on the first edition of Pighi.

on the Augustan coinage the Games themselves had been the focusing point.<sup>153</sup> More important even, also prominently present on all types of coins were Hercules and Bacchus.<sup>154</sup> The only possible *ritual* explanation of the presence of Severus' patron gods on these coins would have been that they were to receive a part of every sacrifice, but even if they merely showed a symbolic divine attendance, the emphasis on deities who formed no official part of the ritual is striking.<sup>155</sup> They almost appeared to be the 'presiding deities over the entire occasion'.<sup>156</sup> Essentially, the gods were there because of a personal connection to the emperor – not because of anything they had done for him. This may have been a step towards the religious policies of Elagabalus. It certainly followed from Commodus' personal connection to Hercules, especially as this very god was again involved.

In other respects as well, Septimius Severus continued the way Commodus had legitimated his position on the throne.<sup>157</sup> As Commodus had presented himself as *Felix*, and made his reign and even the city of Rome dependent on his own *Felicitas*, so too the notion that the *Felicitas* of the realm was closely connected to that of the imperial household was well-advertised in Severus' coinage.<sup>158</sup> Nor did the emperor underplay the concept of imperial divinity. The opposite seems to be closer to the truth, with Severan ruler cult being more designed to 'render public homage to the ruler himself, to his own divinity, and to the divinity of his entire dynasty' than ever before.<sup>159</sup> Severus also continued the practice, started by Commodus,

<sup>153</sup> J. Scheid, 'Déchiffres de monnaies. Réflexions sur la représentation figurée des Jeux séculaires', in: C. Auvray-Assayas (ed.), *Images romaines* (Paris 1998), 13-35; 16-7, 20-1.

<sup>154</sup> *BMCRE* 5, nos. 314-7, 843, 845-6, p. 341 nos. \*, \$, pl. 35.1-2; Bastien, *Buste monétaire*, 376; Derichs, *Herakles*, 83.

<sup>155</sup> Bacchus was even mentioned in the hymn for the AD 204 Games; Pigghi, *De Ludis Saecularibus*, 224 verse 33sq.; Scheid, 'Cultes, mythes et politique' 113. Cf. Scheid, 'Déchiffres de monnaies', 20-3. I owe this point, and most of the ideas in this paragraph, to professor John Scheid, who kindly discussed matters with me following his paper 'Deciphering images: the Ludi Saeculares represented on coins', which formed part of his seminar-series *Aspects of Roman Religion* (Oxford, Trinity Term 2001). Rubin, 'The *Felicitas* and the *Concordia*', 156 argues that 'even when giving the gods of his *patria* a place of honour in the Roman Pantheon, Severus was careful not to disturb any time-hallowed tradition ...', referring to I. Mundle, *Untersuchungen zur Religionspolitik des Septimius Severus* (PhD-Freiburg 1957), 175 *non vidi*.

<sup>156</sup> Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 159.

<sup>157</sup> Already Grosso, *Commodus*, 653.

<sup>158</sup> *BMCRE* 5, nos. 22-3, 25-9, 255, 379-80; Rubin, 'The *felicitas* and the *concordia*', 163-4. On Commodus' use of *Felix* and *felicitas*, see *supra* pp. 93-4.

<sup>159</sup> Palmer, 'Severan ruler cult', 1087.

of naming army units after himself.<sup>160</sup> A number of his subjects did refer to the living emperor as a god.<sup>161</sup> This superhuman status of the emperor was further accentuated through emphasis on the divine ancestors of the imperial house, as is clear from the many attestations of *domus divina* during the reign of Septimius Severus.<sup>162</sup> Other evidence suggests the same, as a gold dish from Rennes/ Lugdunensis makes clear. The edge of this dish is adorned with sixteen *aurei*, depicting the imperial family in the company of the deified Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Faustina the Elder, Marcus Aurelius, Faustina the Younger, and Commodus.<sup>163</sup> Commodus was a clear companion in the divine family that Severus now formed part of.

The death of Severus did not put an end to the importance of Commodus, or Hercules, for the legitimization of the Severan dynasty. During Caracalla's reign too, Hercules appeared extensively as a reverse-type on coins.<sup>164</sup> Three cameos of the period even depict the emperor himself, wearing the lion-skin over his head.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Caracalla appeared in the guise of Hercules on some statues.<sup>166</sup> Whether, so long after Commodus' death, one could still argue that this was a form of reception of Commodus' programme, or whether one should simply assume that the role of Hercules as a useful role-model had become standardised during Septimius Severus' reign, is a difficult question. Two statements in our literary sources may be relevant. Dio writes how Caracalla did not want to be called Hercules. Not because he did not want to be called a god, 'but because he did not want to do anything worthy of a god'.<sup>167</sup> Though any reference to Commodus is very indirect at most, it does bring to mind a passage in the *Historia Augusta*.

*Deorum sane se nominibus appellari vetuit, quod Commodus fecerat, cum multi eum, quod leonem aliasque feras occidisset, Herculem dicerent.* (He

<sup>160</sup> AE 1934.212, 1975.170, 1978.550 (= EDH no. HD004582); CIL 6. 32877; M. P. Speidel, 'Severiana as a title for army units and the three *legiones parthicae* of Septimius Severus', *Proceedings of the African Classical Association* 17 (1983), 118-23, 118-9.

<sup>161</sup> CIL 8.21614, 8.5329, 13.5682; M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott. Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart – Leipzig 1999), 167-8. Cf. SHA, Sev. 13.9.

<sup>162</sup> E.g. EDH nos. HD015530 (= AE 1968.518, 1975.853), HD016963 (= AE 1962.304), HD022430 (= CIL 8.25808), HD026967 (= AE 1913.46).

<sup>163</sup> G. Lerouz / A. Provost, *L'Ile-et-Villaine. Carte archéologique de la Gaule* 35 (Paris 1990), 198-9; Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott*, 175.

<sup>164</sup> D. Baharal, 'Caracalla and Alexander the Great: a reappraisal', in: C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History VII* (Brussels 1994), 524-567; 556.

<sup>165</sup> M. Henig, 'Caracalla as Hercules? A new cameo from South Shields', *The Antiquaries Journal* 66 (1986), 378-380; 378 nn. 51-52.

<sup>166</sup> Vermeule, 'Commodus, Caracalla and the tetrarchs', 292-293.

<sup>167</sup> Dio, 78.5.1: ἀλλ' ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄξιον θεοῦ πράττειν ἠθέλεν.

did not, however, as Commodus had done, permit his men to call him by the names of the gods, for many of them had begun to address him as Hercules because he had killed a lion and some other wild beasts) (SHA, *M. Ant.* 5.5).

At least in retrospect, then, Caracalla's Herculean image could be compared with that of Commodus, in this case favourably. Whether Caracalla himself tried to copy or avoid copying Commodus, is, to an extent, immaterial. When someone was named Hercules for killing wild beasts, Commodus became a valid example – for good or ill. It seems probable that Caracalla's contemporaries thought likewise. Maybe, then, Caracalla's use of Hercules in his own visual programme was more than incidental. If it did refer to Commodus, the example was well-chosen. After all, the style of rule that Commodus had promoted, as a superior emperor with strong divine claims, had been followed, in more ways than one, by the Severan dynasty – and the divine claims of a personal god would be pushed further than ever by the next Severan emperor.



## Conclusion

«Sire ... sur quoi réglez-vous ?

- sur tout, répondit le roi, avec une grande simplicité.

- sur tout ? »

Le roi d'un geste discret désigna sa planète, les autres planètes et les étoiles.

« Sur tout ça ? dit le petit prince.

- sur tout ça ... », répondit le roi.

Car non seulement c'était un monarque absolu mais c'était un monarque universel.

(A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Le petit prince*, 35)



## *SAEVIOR DOMITIANO, IMPURIOR NERONE?*

Commodus was assassinated on New Year's Eve, AD 192. In the aftermath of his death, the story that he had been planning to kill the new consuls, and open the year himself, coming forth from the gladiatorial barracks as a victorious gladiator-emperor, must have sounded entirely convincing. The last years of the emperor's reign had seen a bombardment of images stressing Commodus' superhuman status, and his closeness to – even identification with – Hercules. The emperor had also publicly killed wild beasts and gladiators in the amphitheatre. He had, to put it mildly, not behaved along conventional lines. 'More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero', was the reaction of the senate after Commodus was assassinated, in a ferocious acclamation. History has judged him accordingly.

This book has argued that such a senatorial representation of the regime may have been one that was not generally recognised – and that both ancient and modern descriptions of the reign have been limited by historiographical conventions, which ensured that the senatorial picture remained dominant. The application of a new methodological framework, incorporating modern views on visual programmes and audiences, was necessary to counterbalance biased literary reporting. This has resulted in a reconstruction of the emperor's actions in which the images that were broadcast by the central authorities, and the reciprocation of these images by the emperor's subjects, have been placed in the foreground, and one which is quite different from that of earlier studies.

In order to do so, the first part of the book has sketched a historical context. It started by showing the predominant role of dynastic considerations at imperial successions. Family ties ruled supreme. Still, the fact that the emperors from Nerva to Antoninus Pius did not have children of their own, meant that for all of the second century up to AD 180, emperors were succeeded by experienced relatives. Commodus lacked those qualifications. Marcus Aurelius had ensured that his one surviving son would succeed him, but had not yet been able to provide him with military experience. At the moment of Marcus' death, Commodus was a virtually untrained youngster – but



still the undoubted new emperor.

This is a crucial factor in understanding Commodus' reign. Nobody's claim to power was even remotely close to that of Commodus, but he had yet to establish his authority. The apparent break with his father's plans for provincial expansion beyond the Danube, sensible for a number of reasons, may well have resulted from Commodus' desire to steer an own course. Fear of the effects on his position of military loss, and of being away from Rome for too long, may also have been a factor. The conspiracy of his sister Lucilla, in the beginning of his reign, in which many senators and leading men appeared to be involved, further emphasised the discrepancy between Commodus' status as Marcus' son, and his practical power and popularity amongst the elite. Much of the developments of the almost thirteen years of the emperor's rule can be seen from this perspective. Commodus seems to have attempted to limit the power of the traditional social-political elite of the empire as much as he dared, by excluding them from advisory positions, and by placing his own favourites – people who were wholly dependent on him – in positions of power. The experiment failed, and the 'regents' fell in different plots, with dynastic struggles perhaps of influence in the second half of the reign. The emperor struck back, and the very last years of the reign were characterised by an ever-increasing 'personalisation of power'. In the end, even the offices with high social prestige, though little military importance, were no longer to go automatically to those of prominent birth. The emperor represented himself as superhuman, with his own welfare the only important factor to the peace and stability of the realm. It was at that stage that he was assassinated.

Such a re-reading of the political development of Commodus' reign is undeniably tentative, and limited by the biased reporting of the literary evidence. It is, however, supported and strengthened by the changes in representation, as demonstrated by imperial imagery on coins and statuary, which have been analysed in the second part of the book. From the very beginning of Commodus' sole reign, the emperor's superior position and the divine consent that accompanied it were markedly emphasised. First, the number of appearances of *Providentia Deorum* on coins and inscriptions increased. This seems to have been intended to demonstrate the role of the divine will in Commodus' rise to the throne. It was no mere accident that Commodus alone, as the only one out of eight sons of Marcus Aurelius, had survived infancy. Then, shortly after the Lucilla conspiracy, though not necessarily

related to it, Commodus presented himself as *Pius*. Two years later he became *Pius Felix*. Both were terms with strong connotations of divine support, which all emperors from Caracalla onwards would likewise incorporate in their name. *Providentia Deorum* disappeared from the imperial imagery when *Pius Felix* was taken up. The change coincided with the celebrations of Commodus' first ten years as *Augustus* (including the period in which he was joint-emperor with his father), and with a number of problems in the provinces, which were also part of the cause of the fall of Commodus' favourite Perennis. When the problems had been overcome, Commodus' *nobilitas* was stressed.

From then on, the role of the emperor in bringing about a new Golden Age was highlighted. He was a new hope for society. The figure of Janus was mobilised to show the peace and abundance that the future would bring, whilst a quite far-going assimilation of Commodus with Sol should be connected to the importance of this god to the coming about of a new golden era. Some assimilation to Jupiter, furthermore, accentuated the emperor's superior position. Commodus ruled his subjects, as Jupiter ruled the gods. From AD 190 onwards, this reasonably subtle and traditional representational model of assimilation and allusion was abandoned. The figure of Hercules, only marginally present in earlier years of the reign, began to dominate the scene. First the Hercules *Commodianus* appeared. This epithet was also added to the senate, armies, and cities, whilst the months were equally renamed in the emperor's honour. Towards the end of AD 191 the relation between Commodus and Hercules became more pronounced still, and coins were minted for Hercules Romanus Augustus. Commodus also systematically appeared with Hercules' attributes on coinage and statuary, to an extent which went far beyond the earlier assimilations to Sol and Jupiter. He even wore the lion-skin and club at public manifestations. This important change in imperial image forming may well have been connected to the fall of Cleander in AD 190, in a well-orchestrated popular riot. Loss of support from the non-senatorial layer of society, with the senate already thoroughly alienated, would be a danger enough in itself. Apparently, though, praetorians too fought on the side of the people. The threat was apparent. The reaction seems to have been to place yet more emphasis on the emperor's irreplaceability. Commodus' superhuman status, always implied in earlier imagery, was made much more explicit.

Hercules was a useful deity to invoke in this context, and had been used as an imperial role-model before. He was, after all, a deity

who was born as a man, but had achieved immortality through his deeds to help mankind, though being the son of Jupiter had been a helpful factor. In Commodus' sculptural programme similar aims were expressed. There was emphasis on a new period of peace and plenty that would be, or perhaps already had been, accomplished within Commodus' lifespan – through imperial intercession. There may even have been suggestions as to the emperor' immortality. The re-founding and renaming of Rome itself, after the great fire of AD 192, were incorporated in the scenario. Coins, and a massive golden statue, were issued, celebrating Commodus-Hercules as *conditor*. The new *Colonia Antoniniana Commodiana*, the 'immortal, fortunate colony of the whole earth', was portrayed as the centre of the realm because it was the emperor' residence. His splendour kept the realm together. Again, the figure of Hercules was opportune, as the deity played an instrumental part in the foundation-myths of Rome. The new mythology of rule was a Roman affair. There is no need to assume influence of eastern mystery cults. The evidence for any presumed initiation of Commodus in the cults of Mithras and Isis has proved negligible. Nor were 'eastern' notions explicitly incorporated in any form of central broadcasting. If concepts from the east were important in Commodus' self-definition, they were never indicated – and thus irrelevant to his public *persona*, except in rumours.

The role of Roman values may also have been influential in Commodus' decision to participate in gladiatorial games and *venationes*. It was certainly not the only factor at play there. Recent analyses of the events in the arena, often using anthropological frameworks, have emphasised the importance of the amphitheatre as a border-zone between normality and abnormality, in which culture and barbarism clashed, and the emperor's authority over life and death could be expressed. The games were political theatre; spectacles of power that showed order in its constant battle against chaos. It is even possible to see gladiatorial shows as a medium for symbolically defeating death through the demonstration of *virtus* and fighting skills. It thus becomes possible to see Commodus' behaviour in the arena in light of his portrayal as Hercules. Indeed, the emperor seems to have tried to re-enact the deity's deeds, possibly even Hercules' obtaining of immortality. By manifesting himself in this way, Commodus also showed to possess the martial qualities that every emperor needed to demonstrate – comparable, perhaps, to Hadrian's emphasis on the hunt, after that emperor, too, had turned to a policy of peace. This was direct presentation to the people, without interference of the 'body

politic'. The emperor was physically present, and ensured positive acclamations, even by forcing senators to celebrate him in pre-arranged expressions. The gladiatorial games, like every facet of the representation of the last years of Commodus' reign, showed the emperor's supremacy.

The changes in Commodus' self-representation can be interpreted as a logical development; an attempt to become the people's *princeps*, by an ever-increasing personalisation of the role of the emperor. This does not exclude that Commodus ended up believing he was a deity. The line to insanity is a narrow one. But much more relevant than the unanswerable question if Commodus was mad, and, if so, how mad, was the perception of the emperor by the ancients themselves.

It turned out that images of the emperor as Hercules, which were not centrally disseminated, were widespread. Similarly, dedications to *divus Commodus*, and even to Commodus-Hercules, were reasonably common, and also present in the private sphere. The military seem to have appreciated the emperor. Some slight indications on mosaics, inscriptions and sarcophagi may suggest awareness, and some acceptance, of Commodus' imagery and message among the higher echelons of society – though the senators who did not owe their career to the emperor were appalled. There was even a literary tradition, which portrayed Commodus, and his way of presenting himself, much more positively than the tradition in which Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *Historia Augusta* wrote. Commodus' reputation in parts of the provinces also appears to have been quite positive. Coins of numerous cities emphasised the emperor's divine status. They also reacted directly, and apparently favourably, to the central imagery. The number of *Kommodeia*, and their continuation after the emperor's death, further seem to oppose the notion that everyone simply believed that the emperor was mad. The continuation of many of these local games in honour of Commodus was closely connected to Septimius Severus' unparalleled *restitutio memoriae* of his retroactively adopted brother. The divinisation of Commodus by Severus makes it problematic to see some of the later sympathy for the former as spontaneous. Praising Commodus in Severus' reign meant supporting the emperor who was in charge. Yet that divinisation, by its very existence, implies that at least some sections of the empire still looked favourably upon Commodus. The soldiers appear to have been one of those sections. Legal motives may, up to a level, explain Severus' self-adoption into the Antonine family. They cannot have been the

reason for the explicit emphasis on Commodus. Nor was there any legal benefit in continuing so many of Commodus' forms of representation. Severus renamed legions after himself, and was shown on coinage with Hercules' lion-skin over his head. He, too, connected his emperorship to his person and his *domus divina*. Severus' behaviour was much less excessive than that of Commodus, but his style of government owed much to that of his divine brother.

There is an inherent danger in any study that centres on one person to see its 'own' protagonist as more important than he really was. Many of the characteristics that Commodus epitomised followed from changes in the position of the emperor, which had been set in motion long before his reign. Commodus' experimental mode of representation was not an entire novelty. 'More savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero'. The comparisons that the senate chose whilst condemning Commodus are revealing. Like the notorious examples among his imperial predecessors, Commodus went far beyond what was conventional, ignoring senatorial goodwill as a principal mode of legitimation. Like these notorious predecessors, he was also the last of a dynasty, although the Antonine house was afterwards restored. Those responsible for Commodus' death had to portray a monster in order to defend their own rule. The portrayal was not accepted by all. Septimius Severus continued the changed style of emperorship. Whether he would have reigned in quite the same way if Commodus had not ended up presenting himself as Hercules incarnate, is one of those questions to which history simply does not provide an answer.

## - APPENDIX 1 -

### COMMODUS' BUILDINGS AND STATUES

- 5 *Opera eius praeter lavacrum, quod Cleander nomine ipsius fecerat, nulla extant* (No public works of his exist, apart from the bath which Cleander built in his name) (SHA, *Comm.* 17.5)

There are remarkably few indications of public buildings that Commodus constructed or restored in Rome. Part of this may be the result of the *damnatio memoriae* of AD 193, during which the senate erased Commodus' name from buildings.\* The fire of AD 192 may have been an added factor for scarce remains. Still, if there had been many buildings, more evidence ought to have been found. Commodus did not build as much as one would expect, considering the emphasis on the people and city of Rome in the way he presented himself. He did, on the other hand, certainly construct the temple and great column to his father (nos. 2-3), and a bath-complex (no. 5). The fact that these baths remained known (and probably used) for a very long time, counters the notion that they were not good enough for a capital (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 17.3). The conception that Commodus built too little is explicitly contradicted by Malalas (see *supra* p. 192), though his statements testify more to the existence of a different tradition of perceiving Commodus, than of an active building policy on the part of the emperor.\*\* Maybe the depleted treasury, following many years of war, limited building policy. Perhaps, also, games and festivals were taking over from building-munificence, as an alternative way of appeasing the people. The reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius were also characterised by the construction of few public buildings.\*\*\*

\* SHA, *Comm.* 17.6, which mentions that the measure was aimed to eradicate Commodus' name from buildings which he had not constructed, but simply appropriated; Davies, 'What worse than Nero', 35.

\*\* Commodus also constructed baths in Beneventum; *EAOR* 3, 85 no. 55 = *CIL* 9.1596. The number of *miliaria* for Commodus' reign is strikingly low: *CIL* 2.1725, 2.13566, 12.2343, 12.5509, 3.14150<sup>9</sup> (= *AE* 1900.166), 3.14173, 8.10307, 8.22629, *AE* 1904.64, 1922.53, 1930.141; *CIRh*, 1964a, 1019, 2035. More prominent senators occupied themselves with the *cura operum publicorum* during Commodus' reign than before; A. Kolb, *Die kaiserliche Bauverwaltung in der Stadt Rom. Geschichte und Aufbau der cura operum publicorum unter dem Prinzipat* (Stuttgart 1993), 67-9. This seems an indication of the loss of crucial offices by the senatorial elite, rather than showing that the emperor considered building policies of prime importance.

\*\*\* This could also be explained by insufficient funds, or few events to celebrate.

### *Constructed buildings*

#### 1) **Arcus, Marci Aurelii** (?) (regio IX [?])

Various hypotheses exist about the original placement of Marcus Aurelius' panel reliefs. It is likely that a quadrifons was constructed in AD 176, perhaps near the column and temple of Marcus, on which Commodus' elevation to the joint-emperors was celebrated. If the arch existed, it was thus constructed before Commodus' sole reign.

E. Angelicoussis, 'The panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius', *MDAI(R)* 91 (1984), 141-205; 188 fig. 2, 190-3 figs. 3-6; S. de Maria, *Gli archi onorari di Roma e dell' Italia Romana* (Rome 1988), 136-9, 159, 303-5; M. Torelli, 'Arcus Marci Aurelii', *LTUR* 1, 98-9.

#### 2) **Columna Marci Aurelii Antonini** (Regio IX)

The Column of Marcus Aurelius is still standing in the *Piazza Colonna*. It seems highly probable that it was erected after Marcus' death in AD 180, as a funerary monument, like its obvious models: the columns of Trajan and Antoninus Pius. The images on the frieze narrate the two campaigns on the Danube, implying a *terminus post quem* of AD 179. The *terminus ante quem* is AD 193, following epigraphic evidence.

*CIL* 6.1585a-b = *ILS* 5920; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 16.13; *Epit. de Caes.* 16.14; C. Caprino etc., *La Colonna di Marco Aurelio* (Rome 1955); S. Maffei, 'Columna Marci Aurelii Antonini', *LTUR* 1, 302-5; F. Pirson, 'Style and message on the column of Marcus Aurelius', *PBSR* 64 (1996), 139-79; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 335. Scheid/ Huet *Autour de la colonne Aurélienne*; P. J. E. Davies, *Death and the Emperor. Roman Imperial Monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge 2000), 42-8, 165-71.

#### 3) **Marcus, Divus, Templum** (Regio IX)

Constructed by Commodus to the west of Marcus Aurelius' column.

SHA, *Marc.* 18.8; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 16.13; *Epit. de Caes.* 16.14; G. De Spirito, 'Marcus, Divus, Templum', *LTUR* 3, 212; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 337.

Alternatively, the centre of Rome was growing rather full, following the construction of Trajan's Forum, and the temple of Venus and Roma by Hadrian.

#### 4) 'Passagio di Commodus' (?) (Regio III)

A cryptoporticus leading from the Amphiteatrum Flavium to, perhaps, the *Ludus Magnus*. The luxurious decoration of the underground passage bears parallels with stucco-reliefs from Commodus' reign, and may well be contemporary with it.

I. Iacopi, 'Il passaggio sotterraneo cosiddetto di Commodo', in: *La Regina, Sangue e Arena*, 79-87.

#### 5) *Thermae Commodianae* (Regio I)

The bathcomplex is alleged to have been built by Cleander, though this may well result from an attempt to diminish Commodus' deeds as much as possible. Eusebius places the construction in AD 183, but dates up to AD 187 have been suggested. The building may have been somewhere on the south of, and near, the *Thermae Antoninianae*.

Dio, 73.12.5; Herodian, 1.12.4; SHA, *Comm.* 17.5; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 17.3; Eus. *Chron. Rom.* 15.4; *Chron. Pasc. Comm. an.* 9; Cassiod. *Chron.* AD 184; A. Capodiferro, 'Thermae Cleandri/ Commodianae', *LTUR* 5, 49; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 371.

### Restorations\*

#### 6) *Iuppiter Dolichenus, Templum* (Regio XIII)

Some building-activities, including the construction of a roof (?) seem to have taken place during Commodus' reign.

P. Chini, 'Iuppiter Dolichenus, Templum', *LTUR* 3, 133-4; 133.

#### 7) *Iuppiter Heliopolitanus, Templum* (Regio XIV)

Epigraphical attestations from the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus onwards; perhaps restoration-activities under Commodus.

*CIL* 6.420 = 30764; J. Calzini Gysens, 'Iuppiter Heliopolitanus (Reg. XIV)', *LTUR* 3, 138-43; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 86.

#### 8) *Palatinus, Domus Commodiana* (Regio X)

Probably only a renaming of the imperial palace, but perhaps related to the fire of AD 192.

SHA, *Comm.* 12.7; D. Palombi, 'Domus Palatina Commodiana', *LTUR* 2, 150.

#### 9) *Thermae Agrippae* (Regio IX)

The restorations seem Severan in date, but from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the complex is often referred to as 'Commodianae'.



G. Ghini, 'Thermae Agrippae', *LTUR* 5, 40-2.

### *Statues*

10) **Colossus Neronis** (adaptation)

(See *supra* pp. 122-4).

11) **Commodus with attribute of Hercules**

Dio, 73.15.6; SHA, *Comm.* 9.2; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 367.

12) **Commodus as an archer** (in front of Curia)

After Commodus' reign replaced by a statue of Liberty.

Herodian, 1.15.1.

13) **Commodus**

An unknown number, destroyed during the *damnatio memoriae* of AD 193.

Dio, 74.5.4 Herodian, 1.14.9; SHA, *Comm.* 18.12-3, 19.1, 20.5; SHA, *Pert.* 6.3; Daguet-Gagey, *Les opera publica à Rome*, 367.

14) **C. Aufidius Victorinus**

Dio, 73.11.1; see *supra* p. 59.

## - APPENDIX 2 -

### RIDICULE AND CRITICISM

Only few forms of representation cannot be parodied. Portraying oneself as a new incarnation of Hercules is not one of them. Most striking amongst possible satire on the emperor's new role, are some coins that were minted in AD 192. They are, at first appearance, the same as other coins from that year, with on the reverse Commodus' final names (*Hercules Romanus Augustus*) fully spelled out, divided into two parts by Hercules' club.\* It has been noted, however, that in a few cases, the way the name was split was somewhat peculiar, making a bawdy interpretation of the legend possible. Reading the right part of the legend from the top down, the words *culi ano usto* appear (fig. 19).'' This might have been an accident, of course. Coins with a slightly different layout, or with an abbreviated name on the legend, could then be seen as an improvement on this type after the 'wrong' interpretation was spotted.\*\*\*

Perhaps it was no accident. Passages in Herodian portray Commodus as effeminate, and the *Historia Augusta* accuses him of homosexual behaviour.\*\*\*\* It further describes how Commodus:

had in his company a man with a penis larger than that of most animals, whom he called Onos. This man he treated with great affection, and he even made him rich and appointed him to the priesthood of the rural Hercules (SHA, *Comm.* 10.9).

This is most likely later rhetoric, but perhaps not so far removed from contemporary gossip. After all, Marius Maximus was said to have preserved, in his biography of Commodus, all the jokes and verses on 'a conspicuous growth' on Commodus' groin (SHA, *Comm.* 13.1-2). In such an atmosphere, coins mentioning something which could be interpreted as 'arsehole rubbed sore' must have been noticeable. The club in the middle of the coin did not lessen the association.\*\*\*\*\* People

\* RIC 3, no. 638; BMCRE 4, nos. 713.

\*\* W. Derichs, 'Eine Spottmünze auf Kaiser Commodus', *RhM* 95 (1952), 48-52; 48.

\*\*\* RIC 3, nos. 637, 644.

\*\*\*\* Herodian, 1.14.8; SHA, *Comm.* 9.6, 5.11. See *supra* pp. 124, 125 n. 192. That Commodus did not *wish* to represent himself as effeminate, does not mean that those who wanted to portray the emperor badly, could not have taken his behaviour out of context to ridicule him. This is, effectively, what Dio has done to Commodus' entire representational programme.

\*\*\*\*\* Derichs, 'Spottmünz', 50. It must be noted that *culi anus* does not appear in the

may not have picked up on all possible connotations of the terminology, but having rude words on coins celebrating the emperor's superhuman status can have done little for the dignity of his position.

We do not know who designed these coins.\* If it happened during Commodus' reign, the emperor will not have been pleased, and the person designing the coin took a great risk. He could not, after all, hide in anonymity, like authors of verses, pamphlets, or graffiti directed against the emperor could. Such verses, aimed directly against Commodus' Herculean claims, are transmitted in the fictitious life of Antonius Diadumenianus in the *Historia Augusta*:

*Commodus Herculeum nomen habere cupit, / Antoninorum non putat esse bonum, / expers humani iuris et imperii, / sperans quin etiam clarius esse deum, / quam si sit princeps nominis egregii. / non erit iste deus nec tamen ullus homo.* (Commodus wished to have Hercules' name as his own, / that of the Antonines did not seem good enough, / not experienced in common law nor ruling, / hoping, indeed, to acquire greater renown as a god / than by remaining a prince with an excellent name. / He will be neither a god, nor, for that matter, a man (SHA, *Ant. Diad.* 7.3)

If this was not criticism of the time, it certainly shows the later reception of Commodus' claim in certain circles. A fragment of Dio, however, gives a more contemporary (allegedly well-known) verse:

<ὁ τοῦ> Διὸς παῖς καλλίνικος 'Ηρακλῆς / οὐκ εἰμι Λούκιος, ἀλλ' ἀναγκάζουσί με (Jupiter's son, the victorious Hercules / not Lucius, I am, even though forced to bear that name) (Dio, 73.22.3a = *Exc. Vat.* 124)

Some people clearly understood what the emperor was trying to do. They just did not agree.

*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. Then again, if there was a conscious attempt to ridicule the emperor, it was obviously limited to a play on the names which were provided. V. Pisani, 'Noch einmal die Spottmünze auf Commodus', *RhM* 95 (1952), 286-7 emphasises the phallic importance of the club.

\* Cf. *supra* p. 89.

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1) Courtesy, Sovraintendenza Comunale – Musei d'Arte Antica:  
Musei Capitolini, Roma (photo: O. Hekster)



2) Courtesy, British Museum, London (cast)



3) Courtesy, British Museum, London (cast)



4) Courtesy, Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali – Musei d'Arte Antica:  
Museo della Civiltà Romana, Roma (cast)





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6) Courtesy, Sovrintendenza Comunale – Musei d'Arte Antica:  
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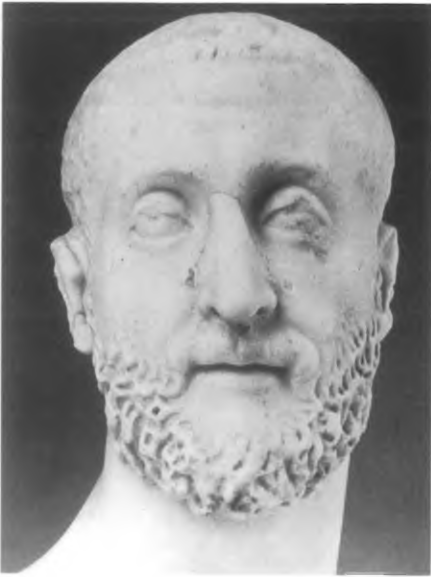
7) Courtesy, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris (cast)



8) Courtesy, Soprintendenza per i  
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12) Courtesy, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris (cast)



13) From: S. Gozlan, 'Les mosaïques de la Maison d'Asinius Rufinus à Acholla (Tunisie)', fig. 13.



14) Courtesy, British Museum, London (cast)

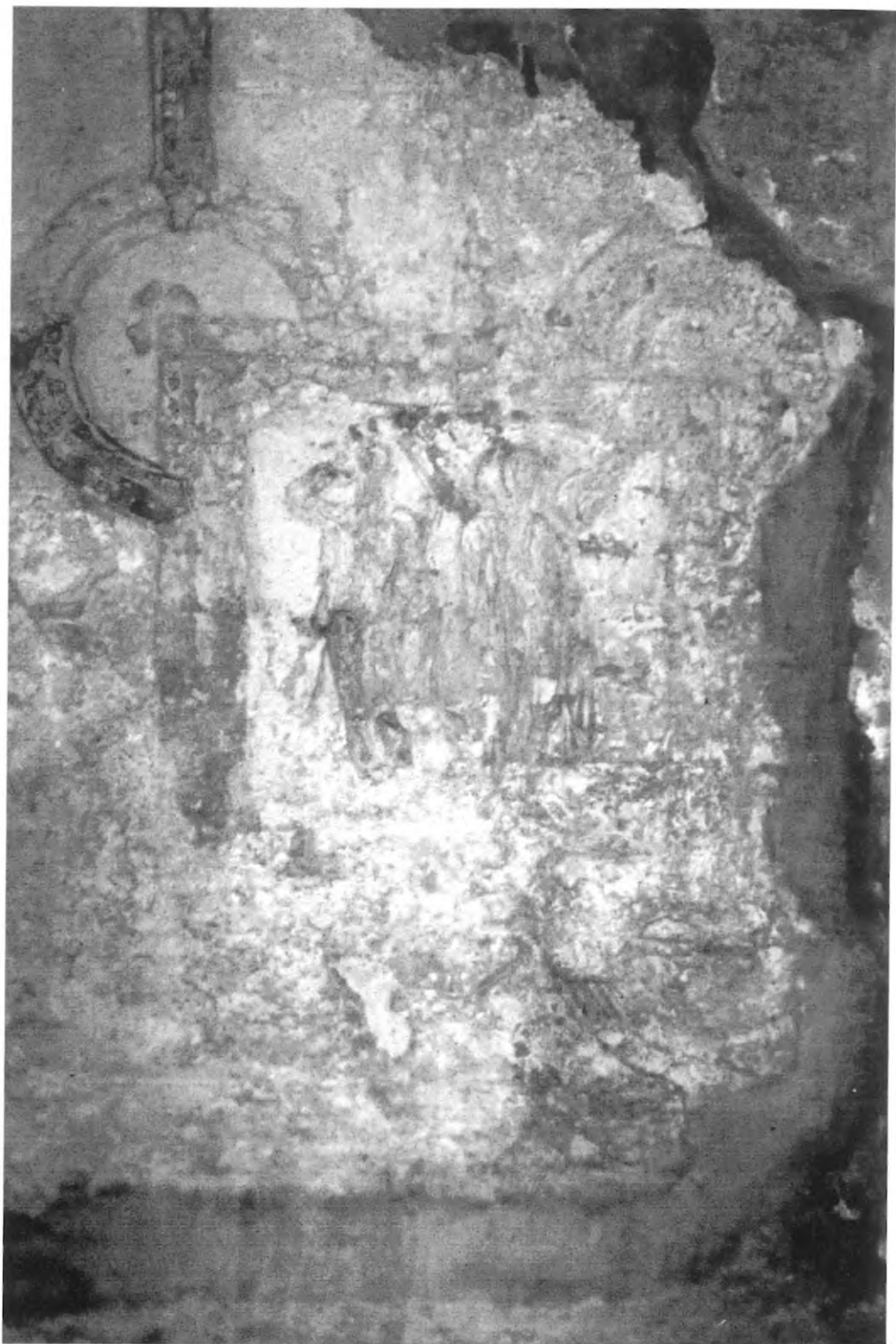


15) Courtesy, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – Abteilung Rom  
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16) Courtesy, British Museum, London (cast)





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19) Courtesy, British Museum, London (cast)



## SAMENVATTING

“Hoe wilt ge ooit een land besturen, als ge de beslissing over één enkel leven nog niet durft te nemen? Een koning moet verantwoordelijk zijn. Kiest gij!”

(Thijs Goverde, *De Purperen Koningsmantel*)

Dit proefschrift doet een poging een nieuwe interpretatie te geven aan het bewind van Lucius Aurelius Commodus, de keizer die vanaf AD 176 tot AD 192 het Romeinse rijk bestuurde (de eerste jaren als co-Augustus met zijn vader Marcus Aurelius, tot diens dood in AD 180). Commodus was de eerste Romeinse keizer die ‘in het purper’ geboren werd; nooit eerder had een zoon van een keizer, geboren nadat diens vader aan de macht was gekomen, zijn vader opgevolgd. Dit is een cruciaal element voor begrip van Commodus’ gedrag tijdens zijn regeerperiode. Dat deze regeerperiode tot nu toe weinig serieus is genomen, komt vooral door het beeld dat bevooroordeelde antieke teksten van Commodus geschetst hebben. De – vooral senatoriale – geschiedschrijving heeft Commodus als een megalomane maniak geportretteerd. Dit beeld is door latere historici relatief kritiekloos overgenomen. Nadere analyse van de motieven van de relevante antieke auteurs suggereert echter dat die beschrijving overdreven negatief zou kunnen zijn. Deze suggestie wordt versterkt door onderzoek waarin materiële bronnen (met name munten, standbeelden en mozaïeken) centraal staan, en moderne theoretische kaders toegepast worden.

Een herinterpretatie van Commodus’ regeerperiode staat niet gelijk aan een rehabilitatie van de keizer als persoon. De centrale vraag van dit boek is of het beeld dat Commodus publiekelijk naar voren bracht te begrijpen valt zonder er *a priori* van uit te gaan dat de keizer gek was – en of tijdgenoten de bedoeling van een dergelijke beeldvorming konden begrijpen. Over de persoonlijkheid van Commodus doet dit boek geen uitspraak.

Het boek is gesplitst in twee delen, waarvan het eerste zich richtte op de manier waarop het Romeinse rijk tijdens het bewind van Commodus daadwerkelijk geregeerd werd. Het tweede deel beschouwde de representatie en receptie van dat bewind. In het eerste hoofdstuk lag de nadruk op het politieke systeem onder de zoge-

naamde 'adoptief-keizers' (AD 98-176). Hierbij bleek dat bij het benoemen van opvolgers dynastieke overwegingen cruciaal waren. Slechts bij hoge uitzondering, en met goede reden, werden erfgenamen buiten de directe familiekring gezocht – de enige reden voor adoptie was het ontbreken van mannelijke nakomelingen. Toen Commodus, zoon van de heersende keizer, bij de dood van zijn vader nog leefde, was er geen mogelijkheid een andere keizer te benoemen, zonder een groot risico op burgeroorlog. Zijn positie was onomstreden, maar desalniettemin tot op zekere hoogte minder sterk dan die van zijn voorgangers, die allen op latere leeftijd geadopteerd waren, en voor hun troonsbestijging al militaire en administratieve kwaliteiten hadden kunnen tonen.

Het tweede hoofdstuk begon met Commodus' beslissing, direct na de dood van zijn vader, om de oorlog waarin het rijk onder Marcus Aurelius verwickeld was niet voort te zetten. Het gebrek aan militaire ervaring van de jonge keizer zou goed aan diens beslissing, waarmee lang niet iedereen het eens geweest zal zijn, ten grondslag hebben kunnen liggen. Het risico van gezichtsverlies bij een nederlaag was te groot. Commodus keerde terug naar Rome, waar korte tijd later een moordaanslag op hem gepleegd werd, waarbij zijn zus Lucilla en prominente senatoren en generaals betrokken waren. Dit maakte eens te meer de discrepantie duidelijk tussen Commodus' status als de zoon van Marcus Aurelius, en zijn geringe populariteit onder de elite. Veel van de sociaal-politieke veranderingen in Commodus' regeerperiode vallen vanuit die discrepantie te verklaren. Commodus probeerde de macht van de traditionele elite in te perken, door persoonlijke favorieten, die voor hun positie volledig van de keizer afhankelijk waren, op belangrijke posities te benoemen. Deze politiek faalde uiteindelijk, waarna de keizer op een andere manier het gezag van de senatoriale elite verkleinde. Hij 'personaliseerde' zijn macht, en legde grote nadruk op zijn 'godgekozen' status, en bovenmenselijke positie. Kort daarop werd hij vermoord.

Het is weinig verrassend dat de senatoren, wier positie onder Commodus sterk erodeerde, de nieuwe politiek van de keizer, en vooral diens nadruk op goddelijk gezag, als waanzin beschreven. Maar de manier waarop de keizer zich op munten en standbeelden presenteerde is niet zo onsamenhangend als vaak gesteld wordt. De ontwikkeling in de manier waarop de keizer op munten en standbeelden naar voren gebracht werd, suggereert een zorgvuldig opgebouwd 'beeldprogramma'. Het is dit 'beeldprogramma' dat in het

tweede deel van het boek centraal stond.

Vanaf het begin van de alleenheerschappij van Commodus werd de verheven positie van de keizer op verschillende wijzen naar voren gebracht. In eerste instantie was vooral het veelvuldig voorkomen van *Providentia Deorum* op munten en inscripties opvallend. Hiermee maakte de keizer duidelijk dat het geen toeval was, maar de wil van de goden, dat hij als enige van de acht zonen van Marcus Aurelius en Faustina was overgebleven. Later werden vooral Commodus' eigen *pietas* en *felicitas* benadrukt, waarbij ook de *nobilitas* van de keizer geroemd werd. Deze eigenschappen, zo suggereerden munten en standbeelden, maakten het de keizer mogelijk de problemen van het rijk op te lossen.

Vanaf ongeveer AD 185 stelde Commodus zich meer en meer op als de enige persoon die een nieuw Gouden Tijdperk kon inluiden. Hij vergeleek zich met verschillende godheden, die allen duidelijk moesten maken hoe enkel Commodus voor vrede en overvloed kon zorgen. Mobilisatie van Janus, Sol, en Jupiter als keizerlijke *comites* brachten de verschillende kwaliteiten van de keizer onder de aandacht. Na AD 190, het jaar waarin Commodus' pogingen door persoonlijke favorieten te regeren definitief faalden, verving een vergaande identificatie met Hercules de eerdere, meer traditionele, pogingen om keizerlijke goddelijkheid aan te duiden. Dit jaar kenmerkte zich door onrust bij het volk van Rome, en bij de Praetoriaanse garde. Dit waren elementen van de staat waarvan de keizer de steun niet kon missen. Meer dan ooit benadrukte Commodus zijn onmisbaarheid.

De identificatie met Hercules in de laatste twee jaar van Commodus' keizerschap was een verandering ten opzichte van de eerdere beeldprogramma's, maar lag tegelijkertijd in hun verlengde. De godgeworden mens die door zijn daden op aarde de mensheid welvaart gebracht had, en zelf daarmee de onsterfelijkheid had verworven, was in essentie niet ver verwijderd van de godgekozen keizer wiens daden een Gouden Tijdperk inluiden. Het belang van Hercules in de stichtingsmythe van de stad Rome kan ook van belang zijn geweest voor de keuze van Hercules als rolvoorbeeld. In AD 192 hernoemde Commodus de hoofdstad van het rijk de *Colonia Antoniniana Commodiana*. Commodus-Hercules vormde de kern van de nieuwe rijksmythologie.

Hercules was ook een belangrijke godheid voor gladiatoren, en het vierde hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift probeerde in dit kader Commodus' beruchte gedrag in de arena binnen de nieuwe

‘rijksmythologie’ te plaatsen. Veel aandacht is daarbij uitgegaan naar nieuwe, op antropologische theorieën gebaseerde, interpretaties van de gladiatorengevechten. Mogelijk probeerde de keizer in de arena de daden van Hercules symbolisch na te volgen. Misschien was echter ook de presentatie van Commodus als capabele vechter van belang; in het amfitheater toonde hij zijn *virtus* en militaire kwaliteiten aan zijn onderdanen. Ook ‘de gladiator-keizer’ kan gezien worden als een poging om de superieure kwaliteiten van Commodus te benadrukken.

Het laatste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift stelde de receptie van het hierboven geschetste beeld centraal. Werd het concept van de god-keizer Commodus-Hercules begrepen, en wellicht zelfs geaccepteerd? Inscripties, mozaïeken en misschien zelfs sarcofagen suggereerden een positieve receptie door verschillende legeronderdelen, en zelfs door sommige leden van de elite (maar nauwelijks door senatoren). Vooral in de provinciën bleek Commodus, ook na zijn dood, populair geweest te zijn, met inscripties aan, en feesten voor, de goddelijke Commodus. Een aantal laatantieke auteurs schreef zelfs sterk positief over de laatste Antonijnse keizer. Ook de vergoddelijking van Commodus door Septimius Severus (AD 193-211), de manier waarop deze zich als de broer van Commodus presenteerde, en het veelvuldig gebruik van Hercules in het Severische beeldprogramma, lijkt op postume populariteit van ‘Commodus-Hercules’ te duiden.

Commodus’ zelfpresentatie lijkt consistent, sterk verspreid, en voor grote delen van de bevolking aanvaardbaar geweest te zijn. De nadruk op de persoonlijke macht van de keizer, en diens bovenmenselijke status, valt goed te verklaren vanuit de positie van Commodus, die zijn keizerschap niet als de keuze van de *SPQR* kon presenteren. Zijn machtslegitimatie richtte zich niet op senatoriale welgezindheid, maar op de steun van het volk, en de soldaten. Dit bracht hem geen populariteit bij hen die geschiedenis schreven. Zij beschreven een waanzinnige en door allen gevreesde tiran. Andere bronnen vertellen een ander verhaal.

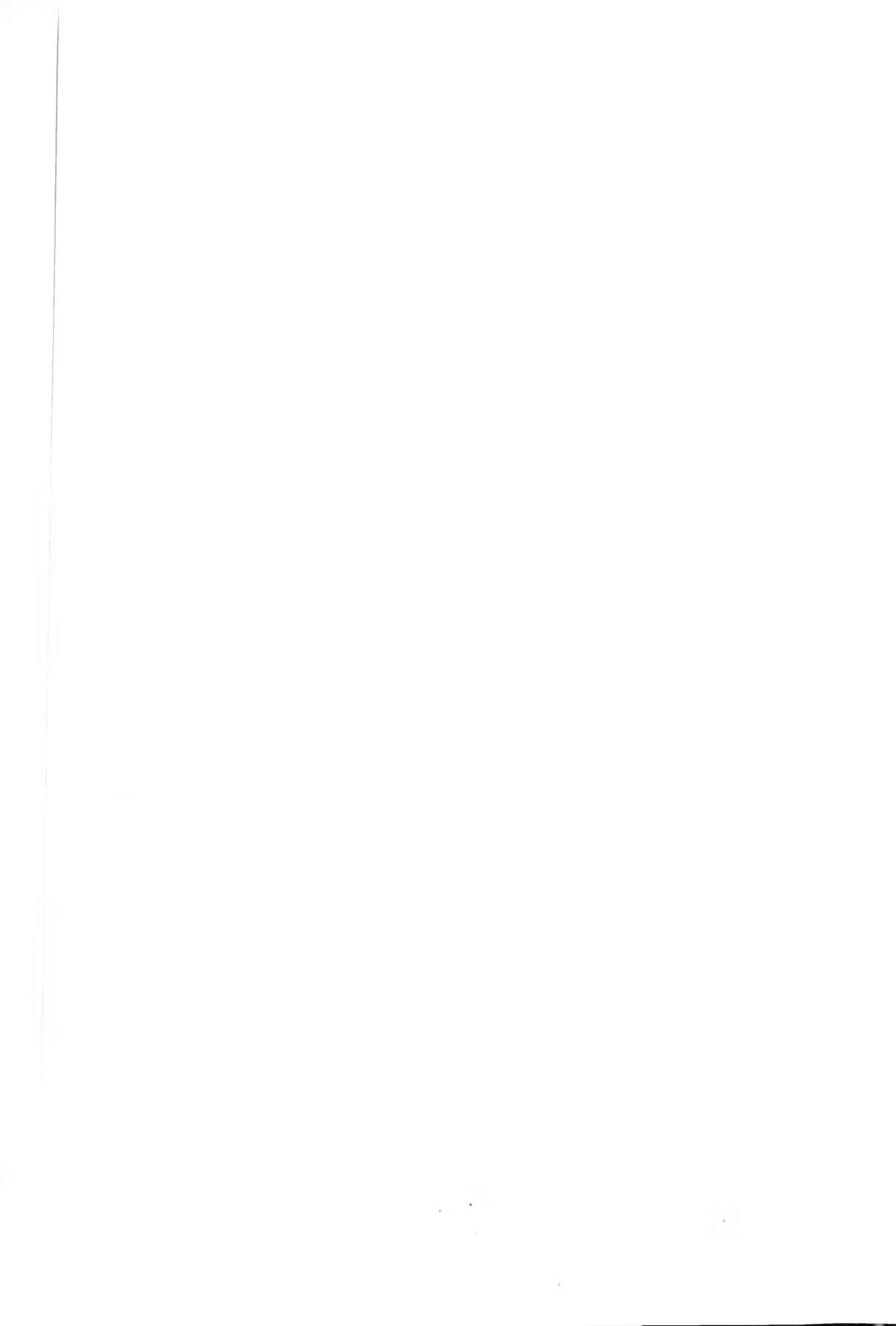
## CURRICULUM VITAE

Olivier Hekster werd geboren op 8 mei 1974, te Leiden. Na zijn eindexamen, aan het Stedelijk Gymnasium Nijmegen, ging hij in 1992 Geschiedenis studeren aan de Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, waar hij in augustus 1997 zijn doctoraalexamen (*cum laude*) behaalde. Van september 1995 tot augustus 1996 verbleef hij als 'Erasmusstudent' aan de Terza Università di Roma. April en mei 1997 bracht hij met een onderzoeksbeurs voor studenten aan het Nederlands Instituut te Rome (NIR) door.

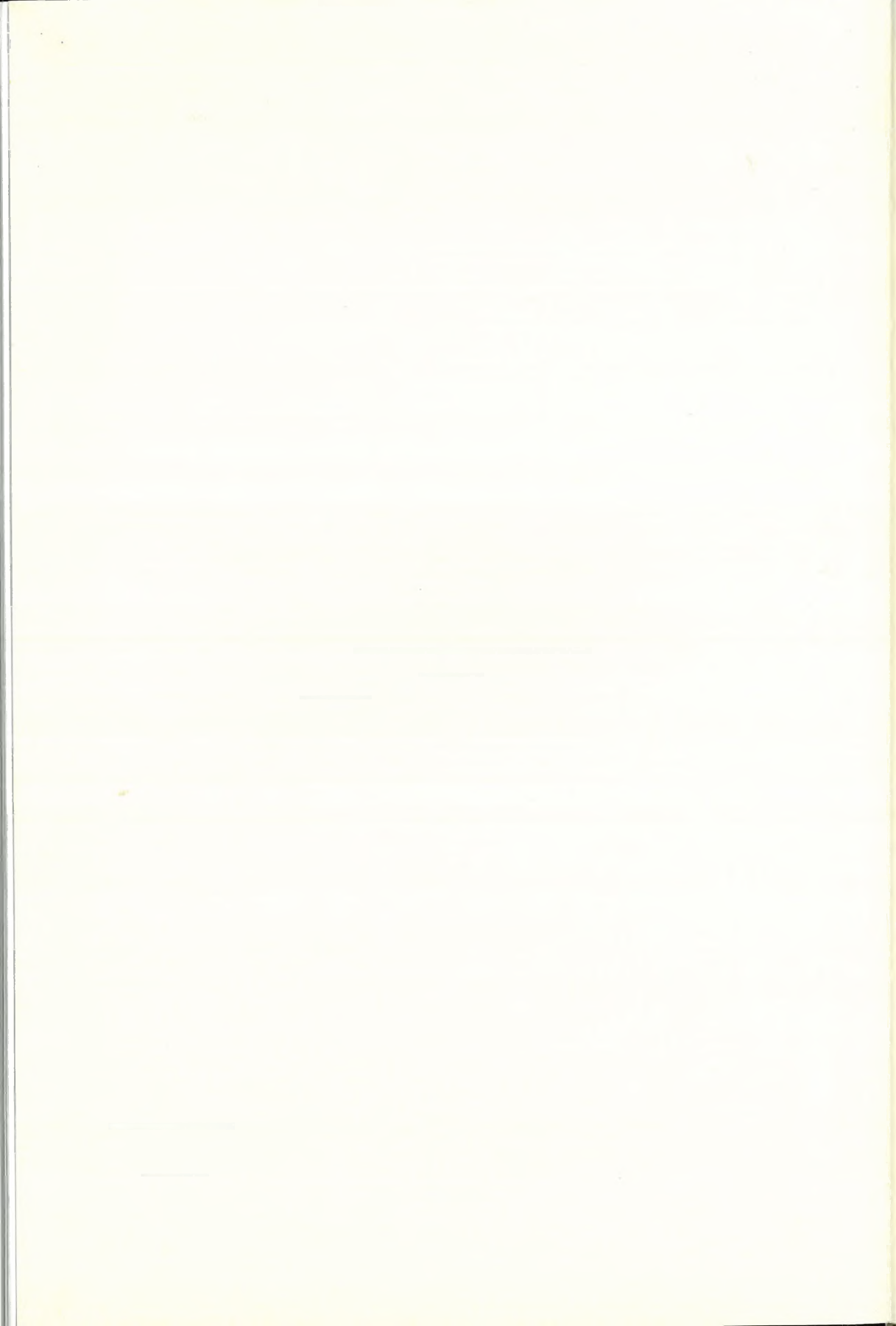
Sinds september 1997 verblijft hij het merendeel van de tijd in het Verenigd Koninkrijk, eerst in Nottingham, waar hij in 1998 een MA in Roman History (*distinction*) behaalde, en daarna in Oxford. Van oktober 1998 tot september 1999 was hij als 'visiting student' aan Brasenose College, Oxford, verbonden. Ook na zijn aanstelling als assistent in opleiding aan de K. U. Nijmegen (betaald door NWO) in september 1999 bracht hij veel tijd voor onderzoek in Oxford door, waar hij onder andere het 'Ancient History Work-in-Progress Seminar' organiseerde. Een onderzoeksbeurs voor onderzoekers van het NIR stelde hem in de gelegenheid om december 1999 en januari 2000 in Rome te zijn.

Momenteel (sinds oktober 2001) is hij werkzaam als Lecturer in Ancient History aan Wadham College, Oxford.











OLIVIER HEKSTER

COMMODUS. AN EMPEROR AT THE CROSS

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