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**Eliodoro Savino, *Ricerche sull'Historia Augusta*. Napoli: Naus Editoria, 2017. Pp. 341. ISBN 9788874780495. €50,00 (pb).**

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Savino's book is a contribution to a growing number of studies trying to grasp the meaning of the evasive collection of imperial biographies that goes under the name of *Historia Augusta* (henceforth: *HA*). The studies by Rohrbacher (2016) and Thomson (2012) may be mentioned as forerunners that serve as points of reference for Savino to build upon.<sup>1</sup> Savino's book, however, is rooted more deeply in existing scholarship, and consequently it is also more traditional in its approach. Every aspect raised in the study is contextualized and accounted for with discussion of the state of scholarship and with reference to varying opinions. This surely enhances the book's value because, for almost every opinion or hypothesis raised, there has been one scholar or another to have tackled the problem.

The main and varied problems have developed ever since Dessau, who some 130 years ago formulated the hypothesis that the *HA* had been composed and transmitted to posterity by one author. This one author, who worked circa 395 AD, wrote under six different names and pretended to write around the turn of the fourth century, when Christianity as the dominant religious factor on the highest state levels was only just emerging. The questions are well known to any scholar working on late antique literature: is the *HA* as we read it today the entire product as delivered by its author(s), or is there any damage by the loss of, e.g., a preface, the *vitae Nervae* and/or *Traiani*, a hole gaping in the narrative material between the years 244 and 260 CE (better known as 'the *lacuna*'), and perhaps even *vitae* following the lives of Carus, Carinus and Numerian, which constitute the end of the transmitted corpus? Furthermore: what to do with the six author names to which the individual books have been attributed, and with the incoherent internal references to authors and books? Who is responsible for the contradictory statements within the work regarding scope, structure, and historiographical method?

Savino treats the problems in his own clearly structured book, elaborately accounted for in notes, graphs and references. However adequate the treatment of the problems selected by Savino, there remain some aspects that do not however surface in the analysis but which might have deserved treatment. Whereas the contents of the books (Roman imperial history) and the structure of the whole, as well as its literary models and approach are sufficiently covered, the more than superficially important question of sources, which for a large part explain the structure of the collection, is largely neglected. Moreover, little or no use has been made of research on philological aspects, which offers an equally large and important insight in the interpretation of the text (at least, if a structural and literary approach is the chosen angle). Thus, the *magna opera* by Fündling (2007) and Zinsli (2014) are not cited at all, and the most of the indispensable Budé commentaries are also missing.<sup>2</sup> For the use of Suetonius as a literary model (to mention an example important to Savino's treatment of literary models in chapter 5), these and other works are vital. The study adopts a bird's-eye approach to the problems that haunt the *HA*, although in the use of details, the book is selective.

As to the established *communis opinio* (by lack of better guesses) about date and origin, Savino adheres to the theory that is *en vogue* in especially French scholarship that the *HA* originates from a pagan Roman ambiance around the prominent senatorial families of the Symmachi and Nicomachi Flaviani. Whereas others have identified the *HA* as a product by Nicomachus Flavianus, either Jr. or Sr., himself, Savino hypothesizes an *éminence grise* for which he has found the figure of Tascius Victorianus, on the basis of a mention by Sidonius Apollinaris (*ep.* 8.3.1; p.44). This author is known to have made a transcript of Philostratus' biography of Apollonius of Tyana, from another transcript (either in Latin or Greek) by Flavius Nicomachus Sr. Since Apollonius prominently figures in the *HA* (*vita Aureliani* 24, attributed to the fictitious author Vopiscus in the ms.) as a kind of surrogate Christ in imitation of Constantine's vision of the cross as retold by Eusebius (*vita Constantini* 1.27-32), pseudo-Vopiscus' apparent interest in this figure is equated with the author's own taste. That author may be Tascius Victorianus, as Savino suggests. This candidate has not been identified before as the author of the *HA* perhaps either because the *HA*-scripture was unfinished, or because it was insulting to prominent persons at Theodosius' court and kept in private libraries—the Anicii are brought in—in order to avoid destruction.

The insulting content, primarily directed against Theodosius' general Stilicho (pp. 7-16), takes a hostile approach towards Christianity, which indeed is a defining characteristic of the *HA*. The book devotes significant attention to this aspect in individual passages (chapter 3), most prominently taken from the lives of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus. This observation might have profited from the conclusion in earlier studies that especially the *vita Heliogabalim* might contain hidden polemics against the first Christian emperor Constantine.<sup>3</sup> Savino's analysis however is embedded in the contemporary, Theodosian situation of the postulated

author rather than considered in its Constantinian narrative context. Constantine's claim of descent from the *optimus princeps* Trajan might explain the absence of the biography of the best of emperors from the series (apart from a thematic reasoning, Hadrian uniting both the best and worse characteristics an emperor can have - p.65).

The second chapter of the book is devoted to the structure of the *HA*, the starting point, the lacuna, the pseudonyms (which may rather be defined as heteronyms, although without distinguishing characteristics and writing styles) and programmatic statements. The contradictions in programmatic statements (as to authorship, content, scope, order, cross references) are explained by the idea that the *vitae* were composed in a different order than they have been transmitted, reminding one of the idea as recently expressed by Thomson (among others) that the 'original' *HA* had the *vitae* in a different order and was changed to a chronological order in a later stage of transmission or composition. The problem with both views is that any attempt to make sense of these contradictions and inconsistencies is an extremely daunting task (as proven on p.76-78 / 98-103). Again, no further decisive step can be taken following Dessau's unresolved view that the author was either careless about his own composition and, with or without premeditated intention, did not make any effort to address incoherent references. Syme later added that the author delighted in clouding the readers' perceptions, and consequently that no rationale is to be expected at all.

Regarding the time of writing, Savino supposes that the final phase of the project (which was never fully completed) must have been in the second decade of the fifth c. AD (after Stilicho's death in 408). He sees it perhaps linked to the ideologically related author Rutilius Namatianus, but placed before the writing of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (p. 22-4 and 256-8). Thus, Savino raises important questions that have vexed *HA* scholars for a long time, and about which only beginnings of answers have been attempted. These questions include things such as the relationship between *HA* and the collection of *Panegyrici Latini*, collected in the last quarter of the fourth century. Savino suggests similarities in collective series editing (speeches in *PanLat* and *vitae* in *HA*, but one can also think of letter collections, or *declamationes*), but he only devotes three pages to the problem (pp.88-91). The remarkable fact that the *HA* exactly fills the gap between Pliny's panegyric to Trajan (the first of the *PanLat* series) and the eleven speeches from the era from Diocletian to Theodosius goes unmentioned, let alone the consequences for composition and interpretation of the *HA* as a—partly—panegyric work.

Another methodological problem derives from the attribution of the work to a single author—for which the best of arguments are available—while throughout the book the division of the work between six different authors guides the analysis of individual problems. For example, when one considers anti-Christian polemic, there is no clear way to see the involvement of six authors; instead, the two *vitae* of *Hel.* and *AS* (that go under the name of Aelius Lampridius, alongside the *vita*

*Commodi* and *Diadumeniani*) are those that contain most of the material of this sort. Thus, while Tascius is already indicated as the author in the first chapter, in the subsequent chapters the authors of the individual biographies are still being indicated as pseudo-Vopiscus, pseudo-Lampridius, etc. For the sake of comparison, it would be equally sensible to attribute the individual books of Herodotus as pseudo-Clio, pseudo-Melpomene, etc., while trying to identify distinct writing styles in the individual books. The method is still the preferred one for several *HA*-scholars (or editors and librarians who still adhere to the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*).

It is therefore laudable that Savino emphasizes the more valid and profitable division in 'primary', 'secondary' and 'intermediary' *vitae* before the lacuna, and the later lives (although he does not mention the latter part explicitly) thereafter. This was a division made by Mommsen, and taken further by Syme and Chastagnol, and it offers the advantage that source profiles underlying the text are surfacing, and may reveal aspects of the author's working method (his use of Marius Maximus in particular, but also such important sources as Herodian, Cassius Dio, Dexippus and their likes).<sup>4</sup> Still, the consequences of the method do not fully carry through in, for example, the analysis of the use of Roman history (republican as well as imperial) in the *HA* in chapter 4. The statistics composed by Savino are, however, useful to mold an idea about the author's preferred *exempla*, which also might prove their value if compared to contemporary texts (e.g. Ammianus, or the collection of *PanLat*). Also, the monarchic and republican past of Rome (tables 2-4 on p.111-15)—measured along the scale of the *aetates Romae*, and prefiguring the discussion of good and bad emperors and the ultimate *Roma aeterna* ideal as celebrated by the late-Roman aristocracy—does provide a clear picture of the ideological program underlying the *HA*'s structure and goals.

The strength of the book under review lies in the neat treatment of discussions that have become classical in the history of *HA*-research, ever since Dessau's seminal contribution from 1889. Several viewpoints are diligently expounded for every question that is raised. Still, not all vexing problems are tackled. The question of sources remains largely untouched, apart from a more literary and structural approach to the question to what extent Marius Maximus has been used. This turns the book into a useful research tool for advanced *HA*-scholars, but it falls short as an introduction to the interested reader of *HA*. The apparatus (appendices, bibliography, abbreviations, indices of geographical, ancient and modern names, of literary, epigraphical and juridical sources) is as varied as it is useful. The writing style is clear enough, especially given the latitude of the argument and supporting scholarship. Typo's (type: *Cassiododum* instead of *Cassiodorum*, p.33n232) occur just a bit too frequently to go unmentioned. The audacity of pinpointing an author for the *HA* may be appreciated, but is hardly supported by any compelling evidence—the attempt is bound to remain a shot in the dark. This does however not detract from many useful parts of the study.

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**Notes:**

- [1.](#) D. Rohrbacher 2016 *The Play of Allusion in the 'Historia Augusta'*. *Wisconsin studies in classics* Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016 (reviewed by Samuel Zinsli in BMCR [2016.08.33](#)) and M. Thomson 2012, *Studies in the Historia Augusta* (collection Latomus 337), Brussels.
  - [2.](#) J. Fündling 2006 *Kommentar zur Vita Hadriani der Historia Augusta* (2 vols., *Antiquitas* IV.3.4 [Beiträge zur Historia-Augusta-Forschung], Bonn: R. Habelt; S.C. Zinsli 2014 *Kommentar zur Vita Heliogabali der Historia Augusta* (*Antiquitas* IV.3.5 [Beiträge zur Historia-Augusta-Forschung]), Bonn: R. Habelt.
  - [3.](#) See my overview of the discussion in D. Burgersdijk 2013, 'Praise Through Letters: Panegyric Strategies in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine and the Historia Augusta*', *Talanta* XLV, 25-40.
  - [4.](#) Notably G. Martin 2006 *Dexipp von Athen. Edition, Übersetzung und begleitende Studien* (Classica Monacensia 32), Tübingen, with plenty attention for the *HA*, and several important subsequent studies.
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