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Dio, Herodian, and Severus' Second Parthian War*

Despite the fact that three accounts of Severus' second Parthian war have come down to us it is still extremely difficult to form a clear picture of what transpired during this war. Herodian's account is universally discounted as worthless.¹ That of the HA is disfigured, as is habitual with this source, by omissions, displacements and intrusions of the later author.² We must therefore fall back on Dio's account, transmitted through Xiphilinus' epitome,³ and in one place also through an excerpt of the Valesiana,⁴ which however, adds nothing of consequence to Xiphilinus.

The present discussion does not presume to offer a fresh reconstruction. All it proposes to do is to dwell on a number of strange phenomena in the so to speak canonical account of Dio, especially in his description of the siege of Hatra,

* I am indebted to Dr. FERGUS MILLAR, Dr. T. D. BARNES, Mr. CURTIS CLAY, Prof. CHRISTIAN MEIER, Prof. Z. YAVETZ, Mr. Y. ZLATTNER, and Dr. A. U. STYLOW for much assistance and co-operation. None of them is responsible for the views herein expressed.

¹ At least insofar as the events which will occupy our attention in the present discussion, i. e. the fall of Ctesiphon and the siege of Hatra, are concerned, see M. PLATNAUER, *The Life and Reign of the Emperor L. Septimius Severus*, 1918, 114, n. 1: «Herodian's (sc. story) is so nebulous as scarcely to merit so incisive a title as incorrect»; cf. C. FUCHS, *Geschichte des Kaisers L. Septimius Severus*, 1884, 79; J. HASEBROEK, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Septimius Severus*, 1921, 113 f.; FLUSS, RE 2 A, 1970.

² The account of the departure for the Parthian war is introduced on three occasions (HA Sev. 14, 4. 11; 15, 1-3), but on each occasion a long digression follows. For this peculiar phenomenon the best explanation may be the interlacing of two biographical sources - i. e. Ignotus, an anonymous biographer who appears to have been the main source of the nine good Vitae from Hadrian to Caracalla, and Marius Maximus. The discussion about the identity of the sources of the HA cannot be entered upon in detail in the present study (see e. g. R. SYME, *Emperors and Biography*, 1971, 30 ff.; 113 ff. and cf. A. BIRLEY, *Septimius Severus, the African Emperor*, 1971, 308-326, and A. CAMERON, JRS 61, 1971, 262-267, for a possible though much less plausible theory). Only then does the author return to the Parthian war (HA Sev. 16, 1 ff.), but he does not resist the temptation of embroidering some fiction into his account (p. 427 below). And there is no mention of Hatra, a fact which renders the Vita Severi almost entirely useless for the purposes of the present discussion.

³ Dio 76 (75), 9-12 (= Xiph. 308, 21-311, R. St.).

⁴ 76 (75), 9, 1-2 (= Exc. Val. 345, corresponding to Xiph. 308, 25-28 R. St.). See BOISSE-VAIN, 347).

which will perhaps give us some idea as to how this abortive operation was reflected in the mirror of Severus' propaganda. An attempt will be made to show that only the assumption that Dio attempted to rectify the authorized version on the basis of his prejudices seems to tally with the inscriptional and numismatic evidence – and above all with the evidence of the arch of Septimius Severus. Only the second of Severus' two successive attempts to capture the city will be discussed in detail.

a. Dio and Hatra

It is hard not to be struck by Dio's special attitude towards the desert city Hatra which successfully defied two Roman emperors and a Persian king. He surrounds it with a mysterious nimbus of sacred invincibility. He seems to believe really and truly that she is rendered impregnable to any besieging foe by virtue of her special devotion to her sun-god (though he does not deny the impact of the advantages which she enjoys by virtue of her strategic position).⁵ It is therefore strange that such a strong belief on a historian's part in the sacredness of a city which he never saw has not led modern scholars to suspect that his description of campaigns around this city – campaigns of which he could have no personal knowledge – may contain an element of fiction.

Approached from this angle, all his three accounts of sieges of this city immediately betray one salient bewildering feature. They all seem so symmetrically analogous to one another in broad outline that suspicion arises as to the accuracy of their details. Moreover, the further back in the past the siege is put, the less plausible its details.

Trajan is the first protagonist whose attempt to capture the town Dio describes.⁶ The siege was conducted with heavy losses to the Romans and at one moment the emperor himself nearly lost his life. Then Trajan succeeded in overthrowing part of the city's wall,⁷ but the supernatural intervened and came to her rescue. A thunder-and-hailstorm prevented the Romans from occupying the city, driving them back as often as they made an assault. Even the plague of flies which Herodian attributes to a clever device of the Hatrans themselves⁸ is depicted by Dio as the scourge of the patron deity of the town.

⁵ 68, 31, 2: καὶ πρὸς τε αὐτῶν τούτων (i. e. the natural strategic advantages), ἀδύνατον τὴν προσεδρεῖαν πλήθει ποιούντων, πρὸς τε τοῦ Ἡλίου, ὃπὲρ πού καὶ ἀνάκειται, ὅυεται.

⁶ Ibid. 3–4.

⁷ See *ibid.* 2: The collapse of part of the wall is not mentioned expressly in the description of the siege, but in the introduction to this description, where Dio says that neither Trajan nor Severus succeeded in taking the city although they overthrew parts of her walls.

⁸ Herod. 3, 9, 5.

With Septimius Severus the legend loses some of its mysterious glamour, but only in order to be provided with a sting of irony.⁹ Once again a difficult siege is recorded. Once again we are told that part of the wall collapsed. But this time it was the Emperor himself who sounded the signal of retreat, allegedly in order to prevent his soldiers from looting the Sun-god's sanctuary. Thus he allowed a rare opportunity of taking the city slip out of his hands; for, contrary to his expectations, the barbarians did not come forward to negotiate a peace treaty, but rebuilt the part of the wall which had collapsed. Indignant at Severus' mishandling of the siege, the elite of the army refused to continue the fighting, and the attempt to subdue the invincible desert city had to be given up. On the surface there is nothing in this train of events which can be ascribed to the intervention of a supernatural power. Yet Dio insists: it was the guardian god of the city who used Severus himself as a tool in order to prevent him from capturing the city.¹⁰

Dio knows of yet another attempt to occupy Hatra, this time by the Persian King, Ardashir I. Except for an explicit mention of an intervention of the divine in the course of the siege, what survives of his account of it reads like a rough replica of the two former sieges: Ardashir failed to capture Hatra although he overthrew part of her wall.¹¹ There is a strong likelihood that the episode was not allowed to unfold without some mention of the Sun-god in Dio's original.

This symmetrical analogy in the descriptions of three different campaigns must give rise to a few doubts. Are we right in trusting Dio in everything he says? Neither his being a contemporary of the events he relates, nor his easy access to official documents as a Roman senator, may justify such an uncritical approach. Dio himself, it will be remembered, warns his reader that not everything he writes can be treated as an absolute truth, especially not when events that took place far away from Rome are concerned.¹² Senators in the capital depended frequently for information about occurrences in a remote front on the emperor's letters. That these did not invariably tell the truth, and that Dio was aware of the need to treat the information which they contained with great caution, is revealed by what he says about the letters sent by Trajan to the senate from the Eastern front.¹³

The data which Dio himself gives about his method of work must be brought

⁹ Dio 76 (75), 11, 1-2, 5

¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

¹¹ 80, 3, 2.

¹² 53, 19, 1-6.

¹³ 68, 29, 2: Extraordinary honours were voted to Trajan by the senate, διὰ γὰρ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἀεὶ σφισι γραφομένων οὔτε συνεῖναι τινα αὐτῶν οὔτε ὀνομάσαι καλῶς ἐδύναντο. These pompous letters flowed into Rome though Trajan was finding it difficult to cling to what he had conquered.

into consideration.¹⁴ Official reports (τὸ θρυλούμενον) were always suspect.¹⁵ If possible they should be rectified on the basis of what he knew from reading, of what he saw, and of what he heard. On all these he would rely when forming his own opinion of what happened.¹⁶ Almost every word is significant. When recording contemporary events a historian could be expected to have very little written material besides official documents. What Dio means when he says that he will use his reading in order to modify official reports can therefore have one meaning, when applied to the composition of the history of his own times: the example of the past will be used as a touchstone for the official version of current events. For the information he could glean from what he saw and heard could often prove no more trustworthy than the authorized version.¹⁷ Dio's δοξασία is therefore frequently no more than his own presumption.

The consequences which such methods might have for his account of Severus' siege of Hatra ought to be stated with the utmost clarity. If there was anything in *Severus'* authorized version of the campaign which aroused his suspicions, what he had read about *Trajan's* campaign might be brought to bear in order to correct the picture. Furthermore, one of the soldiers who had participated in the campaign might be used as a private informant – not necessarily with benefit to the truth, since Dio himself admits that many of the soldiers who thought they had been robbed of a chance to loot the city were not in a very friendly mood towards Severus.¹⁸

And indeed a closer scrutiny of Dio's account reveals a major implausibility, which makes it more than likely that this is one case of an application of his δοξασία to the official reports. For on the one hand he asserts that the soldiers were prevented from storming the city only by Severus' signal,¹⁹ but on the other hand he himself admits that it was only the outer wall that collapsed.²⁰ Everything therefore looks as if Dio misinterpreted the facts as he knew them, in order to make room for the intervention of the divine, at the juncture where according to his preconceptions it should have occurred.

¹⁴ What Dio says «comes near to being a complete list of the critical weapons available to historian in Dio's time»; see F. MILLAR, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 1964, 38. It is therefore worth analysing exactly what it amounts to.

¹⁵ Dio 53, 19, 4 (cf. 6): καὶ κατὰ ταῦτο πολλὰ μὲν οὐ γινόμενα θρυλεῖται, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ πάνυ συμβαίνοντα ἀγνοεῖται.

¹⁶ Ibid. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.: πάντα δὲ ὥς εἰπεῖν ἄλλως πως ἢ ὥς πράττεται διαθροεῖται.

¹⁸ 76 (75), 12, 4–5. Severus himself was on record as saying that he could not prevail on even five hundred and fifty soldiers of his European army to obey an anonymous officer who declared that he could storm the town with such a force. If any officer did in fact make such a suggestion he must have been flagrantly overconfident; see p. 423 below.

¹⁹ Ibid. 1, cf. 4.

²⁰ Ibid. 1.

But if not the Sun-god, what else could cause Severus to order his soldiers to stop the fighting? Dio seems to give himself away when he asserts that the emperor expected, in vain, overtures for peace on the part of the barbarians.²¹ This should not be taken quite literally: Dio is misleading when he says that the soldiers had to make only one final assault in order to break into the city, though he knows full well that its inner wall *still stood in the way*.²² What is there to prevent us from thinking that this is not the only mistake? In fact, the only conceivable cause that could make Severus withhold a further attack on the city-walls at this juncture was precisely a barbarian request for a truce in order to negotiate some form of peace. It should be remembered that Severus was engaged in his second attempt to capture the city. The first attempt had been costly both in resources and in manpower – and its outcome was not particularly conducive to Severus' prestige.²³ Having spent nearly twenty days before the walls of the intransigent city in his renewed effort to subjugate her,²⁴ all that he could show for it was *merely the collapse of part of the outer wall*. The soldiers might feel elated, but Severus may have realized that this alone did not yet bring him any closer to final victory. He therefore might feel inclined to reach an accommodation with the city if only a face-saving formula could be found.

Severus had everything to gain from such an agreement but everything to lose should the continued siege prove abortive again. For too long a time Dio's description of the city as not very large and prosperous has been taken too seriously. Archeological investigations²⁵ reveal that she was an important commercial centre, situated on one of the most important routes which led from Ctesiphon and Seleucia to Singara, whence two alternative routes could be taken to the important crossing of the Euphrates at Zeugma – the one via Resaina and Carrhae, and the other via Nisibis and Edessa.²⁶ Furthermore, even the alternative route to Nisibis

²¹ Ibid. 2.

²² It is hard to see what could have induced anybody who viewed the battle-scene with cool consideration to think that overthrowing the inner wall would be an easier operation than overthrowing the outer one. That the city was surrounded by a double wall is attested by archaeological finds on the site. Archaeological excavations have likewise given ample confirmation for what Dio says about Hatra's hieratic character. A short and more or less up-to-date summary with a bibliography can be found in J. B. WARD-PERKINS, *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica* II, 1116, art. Hatra. For further details see H. INGHOLT, *Parthian Sculptures from Hatra*, *Mem. Connect. Acad.* 22 (July, 1954). Current reports on the excavations started appearing in *Sumer* 7, 1951, and notes and articles by NAJI AL-ASIL and F. SAFAR, who conducted them, are to be found in subsequent volumes up to 1956. Unfortunately a considerable part of the material is in Arabic.

²³ Dio 76 (75), 10, 1–3.

²⁴ 76 (75), 13, 1.

²⁵ Cf. n. 22 above.

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of the various routes, see L. DILLEMANN, *Haute Mésopotamie orientale et pays adjacents*, 1962, 133 ff.; 147–192, esp. 176 ff., and, for a more concise description, F. STARK, *Rome on the Euphrates*, 1966, 108–113, where the chart appended

which led up to the North along the Tigris, and could bypass Hatra by crossing the river in the vicinity of Mosul, could in fact be easily interfered with from Hatra.²⁷ This explains the great pains taken by both Trajan and Severus to reduce the city to submission. Dio himself describes with sufficient precision the straits in which Severus found himself when, having used up the supplies which he found on his way to Ctesiphon along the Euphrates, and having plundered Ctesiphon herself, he suddenly suffered from a dearth of provisions.²⁸ With Nisibis and Singara loyal to his cause,²⁹ an easy line of communication with Syria could be established but for Hatra, which stood in the way.³⁰

Yet even if Severus had every reason to hope for a durable peace settlement, is there anything to account for the hypothesis that the Hatrans might be interested in it as well? Some powerful indications do point in this direction. Two Roman inscriptions unearthed in Hatra and published by M. D. OATES reveal that, some time between the reign of Septimius Severus and that of Gordianus III, the city entered into the orbit of Roman influence and served as a buffer-state against Persia.³¹ The inscriptions are two dedications of Q. Petronius Quintianus, a tribune of the *cohors IX Maurorum*, which belonged to the *legio I Parthica*,³² and was stationed in all likelihood in Hatra. The dedications are to Sol Invictus (the local Sun-god, Shamash), and Hercules, who were the most popular deities of the town, as emerges from other archaeological evidence.³³ A. MARICQ improved the reading of the inscriptions and drew the conclusion that an alliance existed between Rome and Hatra towards the end of the latter's history.³⁴ Over-influenced by Dio's account he however overlooked the fact that there were strong motives for the co-operation between Rome and Hatra even before the rise of the Sassanids. Rome could only gain from Hatra's virtual independence, and Hatra could lose nothing, now that Severus' easy conquest of Ctesiphon exposed the weakness of the disintegrating Arsakid realm. On the contrary, with the Romans well established

to p. 107 is particularly useful. Cf. also the notes of NAJI AL-ASIL in *Sumer* 8, 1952, 150-1, and in the *London Illustrated News*, 1954, December 18, 1115.

²⁷ In other words, the route referred to by STARK as the 'Hellenistic Route' (op. cit. 103, cf. route 2 on the chart). By blocking the way near Asshur the Hatrans could seriously impede smooth traffic along this route from South to North.

²⁸ Dio 76 (75), 9, 4-5.

²⁹ See HASEBROEK, op. cit., 114.

³⁰ It is perhaps a further symptom of Dio's prejudice that he totally fails to see this reason for Severus' attempt to occupy the city, and ascribes to him a trivial motive instead (76 [75] 10, 1). For the strategic importance of Hatra see A. MARICQ, *Les dernières années de Hatra: l'alliance romaine*, *Syria* 34, 1957, 288 ff., and cf. BIRLEY, op. cit., 203. For her role in Trajan's campaign see also M. BONARIA, *RE* suppl. 10 (1965) 1101.

³¹ A Note on Three Latin Inscriptions from Hatra, *Sumer* 11, 1955, 39-43.

³² Stationed at Singara; see RITTERLING, *RE* 12, 1435.

³³ For details about the various cults practised in Hatra the reader may be referred to the bibliography given in n. 22 above.

³⁴ MARICQ, op. cit., 290 f.

in Nisibis and Singara she could only suffer from the continuation of her traditional enmity with Rome. Commerce seems to have been the basis of her economic strength. If she could help it she should see to it that regular traffic along the profitable commercial routes that passed through her was not too frequently interrupted by fighting. What would be needed in order to bring about an accommodation in such circumstances would be the rise of a pro-Roman party within the city. Such an event could only be precipitated by the collapse of the outer wall.

Hence, at least a *prima facie* case can be made for the theory that the beginning of cordial relations between Rome and Hatra is to be sought not under Severus Alexander,³⁵ but under Septimius Severus. The second siege of Hatra in 199 may well have been the turning point, though it is impossible to state with certainty how it came about. The barbarians may have offered some conditions for a nominal surrender and alliance. Severus may have tried to force them into making greater concessions by renewing the fight. It is likewise impossible to determine whether Dio is right in everything he says about the breach between Severus and his soldiers when he tried to make this show of force.³⁶ What can be said with certainty is that if such a breach did really occur, Severus succeeded in healing it pretty soon, for we do not know that it had any far-reaching consequences. There may have been some murmurs of discontent, which Severus may have appeased with the aid of a tribute made by the wealthy city, to be immediately distributed among them as a donative. And more important for our purposes, his attempt to harp on the divine authority of Helios-Shamash may have been not entirely unsuccessful.

These suggestions are attractive because they offer the most plausible explanation for two reliefs on the triumphal arch of Septimius Severus in the Forum Romanum, which otherwise must remain inexplicable.

b. Hatra, Herodian, and Severus' Triumphal Arch

The present discussion of the narrative panels of the arch of Septimius Severus will concentrate only on the two panels of the façade facing the Capitol, not on those of the façade facing the Forum (about the interpretation of which there does not seem to be much controversy). The two panels are the north-western one (left) and the south-western one (right). The discussion of the panels is based to a large extent on the excellent and well-illustrated description of the arch by R. BRILLIANT, published in 1967.³⁷ Following the traditional order of Roman pictorial narrative the north western panel will be the third in order (hereinafter

³⁵ As suggested by MARICQ, *ibid.*

³⁶ See esp. n. 18 above.

³⁷ The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum, MAAR 1967.

referred to as Panel III) whereas the south-western panel will be the fourth in order (hereinafter referred to as Panel IV).³⁸

Panel III³⁹ is coupled with the spandrel relief of the personification of Summer.⁴⁰ It shows in its first scene an attack on a city located on a river. Flight from the city takes place in both directions. Especially prominent among the fleeing figures is one riding on a horse (right). The second scene represents submission. Severus himself is standing on a platform (right), whereas the submission itself is conveyed by two crouching figures in front of the platform. In the left corner, partly submerged in the water, a headless figure is discernible, according to BRILLIANT either a desperate Parthian or a personification of a river.⁴¹ Two factors support the latter interpretation: first, a desperate Parthian would be more in place in scene A, representing a flight; second, the BARTOLI engraving⁴² of the panel shows quite clearly that the figure faces the city, and does not at all attempt to escape.

Panel IV⁴³ shows in its first scene a siege on a city situated on a hill. Part of the wall has collapsed, having been battered with a ram. The barbarians with their hands outstretched show an attitude of submission. There is one figure in the right corner which may be interpreted as fleeing (BRILLIANT interprets it as such),⁴⁴ but since his head and body are partly turned towards the besiegers (as is also indicated by the BARTOLI engraving) it may be nothing more than another figure in an attitude of submission. At any rate there is no sign that the city is being deserted in panic as on the third relief. Scene B shows the town with her walls intact. Barbarians are conspicuous by their absence, and this allows more room for the representation of the various buildings within the walls. A special stress is laid on one building, in the centre, with a strange vault, which, viewed from below, creates the impression of a rising sun. On the left an *adlocutio* scene is represented. The panel is coupled with a spandrel relief of the personification of Autumn.⁴⁵

Approached without misleading preconceptions, with nothing more than the reliable information that can be gleaned from the literary sources in mind, the two panels in question look like the representations of the capture of Ctesiphon (Panel III) and the siege of Hatra (Panel IV).

³⁸ Ibid. plates 76–95.

³⁹ Ibid. plates, 76–85.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 118 (text), and plates 39 a, 40 b. The spandrel reliefs are designed to indicate the correct order in which the reliefs should be viewed. Any assumption that they are a guide to chronology as well is bound to lead to great difficulties, for two campaigns, which required depiction on two different panels could take place in the same season; cf. also n. 60 below.

⁴¹ Ibid. 202 (text).

⁴² Ibid. plate 76.

⁴³ Ibid. plates 86–95.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 211 (text).

⁴⁵ Ibid. 118 (text) and plates 39 b, 40 c; cf. n. 40 above.

The interpretation of Panel III appears to be obvious enough. Ctesiphon was a fluvial city just as the one depicted on the panel. Her hasty desertion; the riding figure which in all likelihood represents the fleeing king; and finally her complete surrender; all these details tally perfectly with Dio's account of its occupation. One objection may indeed be raised. On the panel there is no indication of any resistance on the part of the barbarians whereas according to the *«Vita Severi»* Ctesiphon was taken *obsistentibus Parthis*.⁴⁶ But this detail is convicted as an imaginative digression of the late author by a doublet. It occurs together with another false detail (dearth of provisions before the siege of Ctesiphon)⁴⁷ after the flight of Vologaeses and the capture of Ctesiphon have been mentioned once,⁴⁸ and before they are mentioned again with a slight modification.⁴⁹

On the surface, Panel IV poses no serious difficulties either. When the city shown on it is identified as Hatra all the details of the relief are easily harmonized with what can be learned and inferred from the sources about the siege. The collapse of part of the wall and the fact that it was repaired are attested by Dio.⁵⁰ The strange domed building in the centre of the town is best identified as the temple of Shamash (especially in view of the fact that the dome is almost round, and looks very much like the rising sun). Furthermore illustrations of excavations at Hatra show great similarity in broad outline (though not in individual details) between the *iwans* in the temple zone and the buildings depicted in Panel IV scene B.⁵¹ The only fact which disagrees with the topographical realities is that the city is represented in the relief as situated on a hill. Yet it is precisely this inaccuracy which opens up a new unexpected line of interpretation. If the city on Panel IV is really Hatra, the arch has this false detail in common with Herodian, who describes the city as situated ἐπ' ἄκρας ὑψηλοτάτης ὄρους.⁵²

That the fourth panel of the arch depicts the siege of Hatra has been suggested by M. G. PICARD.⁵³ The idea that Severus would celebrate a rebuff on a public monu-

⁴⁶ HA Sev. 16, 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., but see Dio 76 (75), 9, 5, who states explicitly that sufficient provisions had been found on the way to Ctesiphon which were used up only after the capture of the city. The region of Ctesiphon and Seleucia was furthermore sufficiently rich. See Amm. 24, 7, 6: *alimenta adfatim opulentis suggerentibus locis*. Unless tactics of scorched earth (as the ones taken against Julianus, Amm. 24, 7, 7) were taken by the Parthians, no reason can be given why Severus' army should suffer from lack of supplies. And that the Parthians did take such tactics is indicated nowhere.

⁴⁸ HA Sev. 16, 1. *Ctesiphontem pulso rege pervenit et cepit* implies the correct order of events: first the expulsion of the king and then the capture of the city.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 16, 2: *oppidum cepit et regem fugavit*, is a deviation from the correct order of events.

⁵⁰ Dio 76 (75), 12, 2, cf. 3.

⁵¹ For good illustrations of the temple zone, see London Illustrated News 1951, 762–5, and esp. 763, fig. 5.

⁵² Herod. 3, 9, 4; cf. DILLEMANN, op. cit., 85.

⁵³ L'Arc de Septime Sévère au Forum Romain, CRAI 1962, 7–15.

ment is however not easily digestible. PICARD offers a possible solution: the artist conceals a Roman defeat, but avoids at the same time a gross lie by not representing the capture of the city.⁵⁴ Furthermore, transported with the apparent similarity between Herodian's description of Hatra and the city shown on the panel, PICARD recklessly reverses the correct order in which the reliefs of the arch should be viewed and places Panel IV before Panel III. Thus he arrives at the conclusion that the sequence of events as represented on the arch corresponds to Herodian's account, with the capture of Ctesiphon looming large at its end, as the glorious termination of the war, which throws minor setbacks into the shade.⁵⁵

Despite the fact that this interpretation of the arch is based on an error it does have its attractions. Herodian, it will be remembered, mentions some δημοσία γράφαι in which Severus' battles and victories of the Parthian war were celebrated.⁵⁶ In his loose language this can mean anything, even the relief of the arch, though it may also refer to some other representations with the same features, *which he viewed in the wrong order*. That Herodian saw them during a visit to Rome is neither impossible nor unlikely. He himself asserts that he was in Rome during the Ludi Saeculares.⁵⁷ True, his assertions are not always entirely trustworthy, and in our particular case it may be urged that a man who was in Rome in 204, and saw the arch (completed a year earlier),⁵⁸ could not have described the events which it commemorated as having taken place after the Ludi Saeculares. But a closer look at Herodian's description of the Ludi Saeculares shows that this is precisely the point where he seems to have relinquished any pretence of following chronological sequence. It is lumped, entirely in the manner of a biography, together with the description of other games which Severus celebrated in order to enhance his popularity.⁵⁹

The assumption that Herodian viewed the reliefs or some other pictures in the wrong order is consolidated by the consideration that a modern scholar like

⁵⁴ Ibid. 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 12–13.

⁵⁶ Herod. 3, 9, 12.

⁵⁷ 3, 8, 10. PICARD's theory that Herodian did not see the finished reliefs, but some paintings in a public exhibition, is therefore not very likely. Steph. Byz. s. v. γράφῃ (II 775) has a series of examples of this word *de sculptis seu caelatis imaginibus*.

⁵⁸ ILS 425.

⁵⁹ Herod. 3, 8, 9. It may be added that the expression εἶδομεν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτοῦ (3, 8, 10) with which the description of the Ludi Saeculares starts, while being vague as nearly all descriptions of time in Herodian, is hardly one which would be used to create the impression of chronological sequence with foregoing events. On the contrary it creates the impression that the author is relinquishing for a moment the chronological order, to relate something else which took place under Severus' reign, in the broad sense of these words. For the suggestion that in this section of his history Herodian is not strictly speaking chronological see further C. R. WHITTAKER's note ad loc. in his translation of Herodian in the Loeb edition (1969); this work will hereinafter be referred to by author's name only.

PICARD could commit the same error, though not unaware of the correct order in which they ought to be read.⁶⁰ If it is assumed that Herodian did see the reliefs themselves, one possible explanation for his error could be that *he* was not aware that the arch should be circumambulated, but thought that it should be traversed through the central archway. For in this case, emerging from the archway to the façade which faces the Capitol, he would instinctively turn to his left, in order to face panel IV before viewing panel III.⁶¹

The river-genius in the second scene of Panel III makes this hypothesis even more likely. Herodian assigns a remarkable role to the Euphrates in the capture of Ctesiphon. According to his story, when Severus retired from Hatra and was about to cross the Euphrates back into Syria, the boats in which his soldiers sailed were pulled downstream with an irresistible force until they ran ashore in the vicinity of Ctesiphon.⁶² It is needless to expend too much time in exposing the absurdity of this account. Yet it seems strange that Herodian's fancy should run wild in this way. True, he was quite capable of confusing the Tigris with the Euphrates, but on the other hand, he is never very credulous of stories in which the supernatural is made to take an active part in human affairs. Even here his account is rationalized to the best of his ability.⁶³ There is no mention of the Sun-

⁶⁰ PICARD, *op. cit.*, 8: «Pour l'étude de reliefs nous adopterons l'ordre traditionnel, qui part de celui de gauche du côté du Forum et tourne autour du monument pour aboutir au panneau de droite en face du Capitole». This order is also clearly indicated by the season reliefs on the spandrels; see BRILLIANT, *op. cit.*, 118 ff., and cf. n. 40 above.

⁶¹ It must be stressed immediately that the assumption that Herodian's only source of information was a monument is bound to lead to unsurmountable difficulties. A much more plausible theory is that Herodian had the reliefs of the arch explained to him by somebody, or that he had some superficial knowledge of what happened during the Parthian wars and used the arch (which he completely misinterpreted) as a source of further information. Otherwise it would be inexplicable how he could preserve such useful and credible details as the one about Abgarus king of Osroene (3, 9, 2) and the one about peace negotiations with Armenia (*ibid.*, and cf. WHITTAKER's notes *ad. loc.*, and FLUSS, *RE* 2A, 1969–1970). Herodian is likewise the only source which records the name of the King of Hatra. See 3, 1, 3 and 3, 9, 1, where (in both places) his name is in the genitive; this makes it impossible to decide whether the nominative was Barsemios or Barsemias. The latter possibility is the more attractive, for it would bring it into close connection with the heaven god Samya; the theophoric names like Abd-Samya were quite common in Hatra. Barsemias would then be the Greek for Bar-Samya (the son of Samya). For a detailed discussion see INGOLT, *op. cit.*, 21. All these plausible though imprecise details Herodian could not learn just from viewing reliefs or paintings, but he may have turned to them for more details.

⁶² Herod. 3, 9, 9–10.

⁶³ See his cynical remark about Severus' *omina imperii* in 2, 9, 3: ἀπερ πάντα ἀψευδῆ καὶ ἀληθῆ τότε πιστεύεται ὅταν ἐξ τὴν ἀπόβασιν εὐτυχῇ. See also 1, 9, 5: when he suggests that the philosopher who warned Commodus against Perennis was inspired by a δαμόνιος τύχη he immediately raises an alternative possibility: the anonymous philosopher may have acted out of a desire for glory or for gain.

god of Hatra. And although the capture of Ctesiphon is ascribed to the guidance of «Fortune, who was then supporting Severus' cause»,⁶⁴ the theme is debunked a few passages afterwards, when Herodian asserts that he triumphed *τύχη μᾶλλον ἢ γνώμη*.⁶⁵ In view of this fundamental scepticism, the role which he allows the river to play is perhaps best explained on the assumption that he took his cue from the relief in which the river-genius presides over a victory scene, though we do not know the significance of this genius on the relief itself.

Yet even if all this is dismissed as mere speculation it remains a solid fact that Herodian did see *some* δημόσιαι γράφαι, commemorating Severus' victories.⁶⁶ The strong likelihood that Hatra was represented arises from the fact that Herodian, who never misses an opportunity to accuse Severus of falsehood,⁶⁷ does not mention any gross suppression of the truth. This likelihood will in turn strengthen the probability that Hatra was depicted on the arch, for if it could be depicted on officially exhibited paintings why not on the arch itself?

The problem cannot be evaded. According to Dio Severus suffered a serious rebuff near Hatra. Herodian, who has very little useful material about this campaign, which can be drawn on by the modern scholar, is likewise aware of such a rebuff. Nevertheless, to all appearances, the city depicted on Panel IV of Severus' arch is none other than Hatra. How is this to be explained?

Two ways to solve this problem are open: either to assume that the campaign near Hatra was described by Severus' propaganda as a complete victory, or to reject the identification of the city on Panel IV with Hatra altogether.

In the most up-to-date interpretation of the arch, R. BRILLIANT⁶⁸ has opted completely for the latter possibility. He starts on the *a priori* assumption that Hatra is not represented on the arch,⁶⁹ and interprets the reliefs of Panel III as the depiction of the capture of a town which is a conflated representation of Babylon and Seleucia.⁷⁰ The town on Panel IV is then identified as none other than Ctesiphon.⁷¹ Hence all manner of difficulties crop up.

- a. There is no outstanding topographical feature to facilitate the identification of the town on Panel IV with Ctesiphon. The river is absent and the hill is obviously a disturbing element. The building with the sun-like dome may be interpreted with extreme discomfort as Vologaeses' palace and

⁶⁴ 3, 9, 8: ἡ συναιρουμένη τότε τοῖς ἐκείνου πράγμασι τύχη.

⁶⁵ 3, 9, 12.

⁶⁶ See nn. 57–59 above.

⁶⁷ 2, 9, 13; 2, 14, 4; 2, 15, 1 ff.; 3, 5, 3 ff.; 3, 8, 7 ff.

⁶⁸ For the historical interpretation of the relief panels see op. cit., 171–182, and esp. 180 ff.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 172.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 180.

⁷¹ Ibid. 181 ff.

treasury,⁷² though Herodian, the sole authority for this identification, does not speak of a single treasury but of treasuries.⁷³ On the other hand, the battering of the wall which implies a barbarian resistance has definitely no place in the depiction of the conquest of Ctesiphon,⁷⁴ and the figure on the right, partly turned towards the besiegers, can be interpreted only with great difficulty as that of Vologaeses IV, deserting Ctesiphon in panic.

- b. As already shown above, all the distinguishing features of the capture of Ctesiphon are easily identifiable on Panel III. It may be added that if the town on this panel is indeed a conflation of two, it is rather a conflation of Seleucia and Ctesiphon than a conflation of Babylon and Seleucia. For whereas the two former towns face each other from the two banks of the Tigris and may conveniently merge into each other in a plastic representation, Babylon is about 40 miles distant from Seleucia as the crow flies, and is situated near the Euphrates. Furthermore, there are many indications that Babylon was uninhabited at the time,⁷⁵ though it retained some antiquarian fascination.⁷⁶ This could account for its being mentioned by Dio, but hardly for its being depicted on the arch.

One possibility remains open, to associate Panel IV with the siege of Hatra. But if the siege of Hatra is indeed represented on the arch of Septimius Severus, it must have been described by his propaganda as a victory. Before it can be shown how this could be done, and on the basis of what real facts, a strange phenomenon in the *«Feriale Duranum»* must be dwelt on – a phenomenon which would shed some light on the manner in which Severus' propaganda depicted his Eastern wars.

c. The *«Feriale Duranum»* and the *Victoria Parthica Maxima*

The entry for January 28 on the *«Feriale Duranum»*⁷⁷ is usually interpreted as a reference to the capture of Ctesiphon. It is on the other hand hardly ever noticed

⁷² Ibid. 268. The possibility that it is the palace cannot be discounted altogether, but the dome makes the interpretation suggested above (p. 427) much preferable.

⁷³ Herod. 3, 9, 11.

⁷⁴ See p. 427 and nn. 44–49 above.

⁷⁵ See Strabo 16, 138; cf. Pliny, NH 6, 122. BRILLIANT, op. cit., 180, conjectures that τὴν Βαβυλῶνα in Dio 76 (75), 9, 3, stands for the entire region. This explanation must be ruled out since the difference between Babylon (the city) and Babylonia (the region) is well defined. See Strabo, 16, 6 (χώρα τῆς Βαβυλωνίας) and 16, 8 (ἡ χώρα τῶν Βαβυλωνίων). In Pliny, loc. cit., the reference to Seleucia, *quae tamen Babylonia cognominatur*, is clearly adjectival and is meant to convey the idea that she belongs to the region of Babylonia though she is *libera hodie ac sui iuris Macedonumque moris*.

⁷⁶ That the glory of her past was all Babylon could boast of emerges from Dio himself; see 68, 30, 1: καὶ γὰρ ἐκείσε (i. e. to Babylon) ἦλθε (sc. ὁ Τραϊανός) κατὰ τε τὴν φήμην ἧς οὐδὲν ἄξιον εἶδεν ὅτι μὴ χώματα καὶ λίθους καὶ ἐρείπια. A sudden resurrection of Babylon after the period of Trajan is extremely unlikely.

⁷⁷ Quoted on p. 435 below.

that this dating conflicts with the combined evidence of the HA and Severus' coins. For whereas the coins show that Caracalla was Augustus already in 197 (i. e. AVGG – two Augusti coupled with IMP X),⁷⁸ according to the HA he received this appellation immediately after the capture of Ctesiphon.⁷⁹ The fact can hardly be ignored, and hence it is amazing how frequently 198 is taken for granted as the year when Ctesiphon fell, without a serious attempt to explain it.⁸⁰

One way of getting around the difficulty would have been to dismiss HA altogether. For since the appellation AVGG occurs on Severus' coins together with the tenth imperial acclamation,⁸¹ the ascription of this acclamation either to the relief of Nisibis⁸² or to the battle of Lugdunum⁸³ would clearly contradict the confident statement of the *Vita Severi*. It would therefore be difficult to quarrel with anyone who has the courage to face the full consequences of this discrepancy and condemn the date given by the HA for Caracalla's elevation to the rank of Augustus as a mistake, or worse, as an invention.

⁷⁸ See BMC V, 59, nos. 239–243; 60, no. 245; 61, nos. 255–256; 62 no. 258; and 154 †, for coins on whose reverse AVGG appears, whilst on the obverse Severus' tenth imperial acclamation is celebrated. That IMP X belongs to 197 emerges from *ibid.* 58–59 nos. 236–238; 153–154 nos. ¶ – 621. A small number of issues with IMP X belong to 198 (*ibid.* 62, nos. 263–265; 154 nos. §–f), but the frequency with which AVGG occurs with the tenth acclamation testifies that Caracalla was Augustus not long after his father had been acclaimed for the tenth time – i. e. still in 197.

⁷⁹ HA Sev. 16, 3.

⁸⁰ For a characteristic example of the confusion arising from this discrepancy see MATTINGLY, BMC V, p. xcvi: «The types that mention two Augusti are, of course, subsequent to the elevation of Caracalla to imperial rank» (see also *ibid.*, p. c); but cf. *ibid.* 156: «Caracalla certainly became Augustus in 198». FINK, HOEY, and SNYDER, *YCIS* 7, 1940, 79–81, ignore this difficulty altogether, and so do J. MURPHY, *The Reign of the Emperor L. Septimius Severus from the Evidence of the Inscriptions*, 1945, 25 f., cf. 104, and BIRLEY, *op. cit.*, 202. Some scholars will undoubtedly feel tempted to connect the AVGG of the coins of 197 with the title *imperator destinatus*. This possibility is already adumbrated by BIRLEY, *op. cit.*, 193, n. 1, who, following H. U. INSTINSKY, *Studien zur Geschichte des Septimius Severus*, *Klio* 35, 1942, 215, n. 12, tends to accept 196 as the date when this title was conferred upon Caracalla, in a context which implies that this title may explain the fact that some edicts of 196 were issued by two Augusti. But the fact that *imperator destinatus*, whether assumed in 196 or in 197, was associated with the title *Caesar*, not *Augustus*, is clear from the inscriptions on which it occurs, and above all precisely from ILS 447, where *Aug.* is added as an afterthought in an unnatural position, after *destinato imp.*, whereas *Caesari* occurs as a *cognomen*, not as a *praenomen* together with *imp.*, as ought to have been the case after Caracalla's assumption of the title *Augustus* (cf. DESAU's note ad loc.). The close connection between *imperator destinatus* and *Caesar* emerges with great clarity also from those inscriptions on which *Caesar destinatus* appears by mistake (see CIL VI 1984; VII 210).

⁸¹ N. 78 above.

⁸² Thus e. g. MATTINGLY, BMC V, p. xcvi.

⁸³ See O. HIRSCHFELD, *Kleine Schriften*, 1913, 433, followed by HASEBROEK, *op. cit.*, 99. On this theory, the ninth acclamation is ascribed to a minor skirmish near Tinurtium.

Yet it is symptomatic that such a course is taken by almost no one. The story about Caracalla's assumption of the appellation Augustus occurs in a fairly sound context in the HA.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the ascription of the tenth acclamation to Nisibis or Lugdunum can be effectively challenged. As for Nisibis, no serious battle took place upon Severus' arrival to relieve Laetus, for the barbarians had retired before.⁸⁵ The ascription of IMP X to Lugdunum leaves IMP IX unexplained, unless a skirmish said to have taken place near Tinurtium is adduced.⁸⁶ Yet, there is no certainty that at Tinurtium there was in fact a separate battle, as distinct from the battle of Lugdunum. For all we know, Lugdunum may be the rough and imprecise description of the neighbourhood where the decisive battle between Severus and Albinus took place (πρὸς τῷ Λουγδούνῳ are Dio's precise words),⁸⁷ whereas Tinurtium would be the exact place. HIRSCHFELD who was the first to speak of two battles rather than one,⁸⁸ may have misinterpreted a statement in the *«Vita Severi»*:⁸⁹ *multis interim varie gestis in Gallia primo apud Tinurtium contra Albinum felicissime pugnavit Severus*. According to HIRSCHFELD *primo* implies that another battle followed. Yet if not read out of its context, this word renders itself to a different interpretation: after a number of indecisive battles Severus fought against Albinus, *for the first time with complete success*, at Tinurtium (in this case *primo* is not used to anticipate another battle, but draws a contrast between the first time when Severus was entirely successful and the times that preceded it, when his success was only partial).⁹⁰

If this interpretation is accepted the ninth acclamation must be related to the battle of Lugdunum, and the first important occasion which followed it for the tenth acclamation would be none other than the capture of Ctesiphon. The eleventh imperatorial acclamation at the beginning of 198 can then be related to the quelling of a rebellion in Judea or in Samaria, dated by the *«Chronicon»* of Hieronymus in 199, a dating which may be erroneous.⁹¹ This suggestion may perhaps help to remove another difficulty. Some time after the capture of Ctesiphon, Severus was honoured with the title *Parthicus Maximus*.⁹² It occurs on at least two coins

⁸⁴ HA Sev. 16, 5 may be compared with Dio 76 (75), 9, 4, and Herod. 3, 9, 11.

⁸⁵ Dio 76 (75), 9, 3: τῶν δὲ Πάρθων οὐ μεινάντων ἀλλ' οἴκαδε ἀναχωρησάντων.

⁸⁶ See n. 83 above, and nn. 87–89 below.

⁸⁷ 76 (75), 6, 1.

⁸⁸ See n. 83 above.

⁸⁹ HA Sev. 11, 1.

⁹⁰ The HA has the detail about indecisive battles that preceded the battle of Lugdunum in common with Herodian 3, 7, 2. Dio 76 (75), 6, 2 knows of one defeat suffered by Severus' general Virius Lupus. The Numerianus episode (Dio 76 [75], 5, 1–3) confirms that not all the setbacks were Severus'.

⁹¹ Hieron. Ab. Abr. 2216, Euseb. Chron. II, 177 (SCHOENE).

⁹² Caution is always imperative when such titles are ascribed to one particular event. It will be demonstrated below that no small confusion arises from the fact that Severus' *Victoria Parthica Maxima* is too closely associated with the fall of Ctesiphon only,

together with the *tenth* imperial acclamation. MATTINGLY dismissed these coins, at least one of them, it seems, for no better reason than his preconception about the date of the surrender of Ctesiphon.⁹³ The legend of this coin is transcribed by COHEN⁹⁴ as IMP X PART MAX. MATTINGLY examined it and he half-heartedly suggests that the coin (with the reverse legend of AEQVITATI AVGG) actually reads IMP XI ART MAX. He therefore postulates an error in the die, i. e., an omission of the P of PART.⁹⁵ It is however much more plausible that the upper part of the P got worn off, so as to give the impression of an I.⁹⁶

This is however a suggestion which the sceptical may be justified in rejecting. If it is rejected the incontrovertible fact that Caracalla was Augustus before the end of 197 remains. The fact that Severus did not assume the title *Parthicus Maximus* immediately after the fall of Ctesiphon would then have to be explained, and the explanation, so it seems, is provided by the «Feriale Duranum». If it is accepted, it is precisely the gap of time between the first occurrence of the title on Severus' coins and its second occurrence (late in 198, according to MATTINGLY) which would have to be explained. There is no proof that the Emperor was always personally aware of what was going on in his mints, and that he was personally responsible for every theme publicized upon his coinage under all circumstances. Stray issues

instead of being related to the Parthian war in its totality. However, what can be said about the title *Parthicus Maximus* is that it had no place in 197, unless the only really impressive victory against the Parthians was won already in that year. If this is proved (and indeed only then) there will be no other choice but to relate this title to the fall of Ctesiphon.

⁹³ The coins are quoted in COHEN, nos. 19 and 38.

⁹⁴ Ibid. no. 19.

⁹⁵ MATTINGLY, BMC, 63.

⁹⁶ In which case the legend should be transcribed IMP X [P]ART MAX. I am indebted to Dr. T. D. BARNES for this suggestion. As for the other coin in question (COHEN, no. 38) things are slightly more complicated. MATTINGLY, *ibid.*, describes it as «very doubtful» without stating on what grounds. This is a pity, since it forces the scholar who is not an expert in numismatics to reject a possible item of evidence solely on MATTINGLY's authority. Such authority must prevail if the expert numismatist finds that on grounds of metal content, style, or texture a coin must be rated as a forgery, if he decides that it is a hybrid coin, or if he finds that the legend is illegible. In our case, the coin belongs to a private collection, and it may have been inaccessible for further examination. This would be enough to justify MATTINGLY's scepticism. But if the sole reason for MATTINGLY's rejection of the coin is his preconception about the date of the capture of Ctesiphon, his reader is entitled to his own judgment, and should be provided with the data that would enable him to form it. Since I have written these lines Mr. C. CLAY has given me better reasons against the ascription of *Parthicus Maximus* to 197, but so long as he has not published a full statement of those reasons I permit myself to maintain my interpretation as a possibility. It may only be added that even if it is proved that this title was voted on January 28, 198, to coincide with the official date of the *Victoria Parthica Maxima* (pp. 435 f. and n. 99 below), the occurrence of AVGG with the tenth acclamation would still point to the end of 197 as the date of the fall of Ctesiphon.

celebrating Severus as *Parthicus Maximus* already at the end of 197 may be the consequence of a too prompt reaction to the news of the capture of Ctesiphon on the part of an overzealous mint official. On the other hand, the regular appearance of the same title in 198 may again be explained by the same considerations that induced Severus to celebrate his *Victoria Parthica Maxima* on January 28.

That this official date is not necessarily connected with the capture of Ctesiphon, but with the totality of Severus' campaigns in Mesopotamia, it is our purpose to show in the sequel. In order to do this a re-examination of the 'Feriale Duranum' will be necessary, and facts that justify it ought to be recapitulated with the utmost clarity. The coins prove that Caracalla was elevated to the rank of Augustus before the end of 197. This tallies well with the assertion of the HA that this event as well as the fall of Ctesiphon, which occasioned it, took place *hiemali prope tempore* – a phrase which is apparently little more than a periphrasis for autumn.⁹⁷

With this ostensible contradiction to the 'Feriale Duranum' in mind, let us turn to what it really says.

The entry for January 28 reads as follows:

V K[a]!(endas) [Feb]rarias ob v[i]çtor[i]as Arabicam et Adiabenicam et Parthica]m
 Maxi-
 m[a]m Divi Seve[ri e]t ob [imperium Divi Traiani, Victoriae Part]hiç[a]e
 b(ovem) [f(eminam), D]ivo Traian[o b(ovem) m(arem)].⁹⁸

Two facts are immediately obvious. First, the entry marks the celebration of all of Severus' victories in Mesopotamia, both those of 195 and those of 197 and not any one particular victory.⁹⁹ Second, the celebration falls on the *dies imperii* of Trajan, one of Severus' fictitious ancestors, who had also distinguished himself with a Parthian victory. This peculiar symbolism has aroused even the suspicion

⁹⁷ This assertion is thus interpreted by HASEBROEK, op. cit., 111–112.

⁹⁸ Feriale Duranum, col. I, ll. 14–16 (YCLS 7, 1940, 41–42 = C. B. WELLES, and others, The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report V, 1959, 198).

⁹⁹ The sacrifice to *Victoria Parthica Maxima* is not only for the *Victoria Parthica*, but also for the *Victoria Arabica* and the *Victoria Adiabenica*. *Arabicus* and *Adiabenicus*, it should be remembered, are characteristic components of Severus' titulature in 195; see HASEBROEK, Untersuchungen, 81; MATTINGLY, BMC V, p. lxxxviii. Interestingly enough, the titulature of 195 *Parthicus Arabicus et Parthicus Adiabenicus* appears also on the arch of Septimius Severus, dedicated in 203. See also BRILLIANT, op. cit., 91 ff. P. KNEISSL, Die Siegestitulatur der römischen Kaiser, Hypomnemata 23, 1969, 143, is therefore possibly wrong when he convicts Herodian of an erroneous reference to Severus' προσηγορία από τῶν ἐθνῶν τῶν κεραιρωμένων, i. e. more than one people (3, 9, 12). The possibility that Herodian saw the arch or some monument related to it has to be born in mind, see pp. 428 f. above. The reading of the lines in question in the 'Feriale' has been challenged by J. GUEY, 28 janvier 98–28 janvier 198, ou le siècle des Antonins, REA 1948, 66 ff., whose alternative reading is too hypothetical, but even if accepted will not affect the main argument herein advanced (see the following note). See also KNEISSL, ibid. 144. I am grateful to Dr. A. U. STYLOW who has brought KNEISSL's work to my attention.

of FINK, HOEY, and SNYDER,¹⁰⁰ who otherwise almost automatically connect the entry with the capture of Ctesiphon.¹⁰¹ In fact the entry looks very much like a clever device of Severus' propaganda which consists in a conflation of all of Severus' victories in Mesopotamia into one, and in celebrating this victory on the *dies imperii* of Trajan.¹⁰²

The «Feriale» may be referred to for another item which is not irrelevant. The *dies imperii* of Caracalla is celebrated on February 4,¹⁰³ the date of Severus' death, and not on January 28, as one might have expected, had it really been the date of the fall of Ctesiphon. FINK, HOEY and SNYDER suggest a solution.¹⁰⁴ The date of Caracalla's *dies imperii* was changed after his death. In his life-time he celebrated it according to the accounts record of the temple of Jupiter at Arsinoë, on an unspecified date between January 26 and February 3.¹⁰⁵ This seems to tally with the date of the *Victoria Parthica* on the «Feriale Duranum», and to raise again the whole question of the date of the fall of Ctesiphon. In fact the problem is not as serious as it appears on the surface. The «Feriale Duranum» shows that official dates of this kind could be changed and modified in order to fit the convenience of the moment. Caracalla's *dies imperii* was closely associated with the capture of Ctesiphon. When the date of this operation ceased to be an individual date, and its commemoration was transposed together with that of Severus' other campaigns in Mesopotamia to Trajan's *dies imperii*, Severus might find it convenient to celebrate the *dies imperii* of his own son on that same symbolic date. Later, Severus Alexander's administration might feel that the celebration of two *dies imperii* on the same date was confusing and might therefore decide to separate them again.

In all this confusion, the coins offer the real yardstick for the re-arrangement of the events in what may be plausibly described as their correct order. Ctesiphon was conquered in the autumn of 197, and the tenth imperial acclamation celebrates none other than this victory. The date of the *Victoria Parthica Maxima* on the «Feriale» is therefore in all likelihood no more than the result of a deliberate manipulation of the calendar on the part of Severus' government. This is significant, for it suggests that the triumph of Severus in the Eastern front somehow

¹⁰⁰ YCIS 7, 1940, 81, cf. WELLES, op. cit., 206. The hypothesis of GUEY, loc. cit., that not only Trajan's *dies imperii* fell on that day, but also the anniversary of his Parthian victory, can be accepted only on the assumption that the «Feriale» betrays a wholesale manipulation of imperial dates. Otherwise there would be too many peculiar coincidences connected with the date of January 28.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 79 ff.

¹⁰² See also nn. 106, 111–119, and 128–129 below. It is remarkable that even scholars who are aware of this device (e.g. KNEISSL, op. cit., 144–145) are mesmerized by the precise date of the «Feriale» to the extent that they ignore the possibility of the much more plausible, though less precise dating in the autumn of 197.

¹⁰³ Feriale Duranum, col. II, l. 2 (YCIS 7, 1940, 45 = WELLES, op. cit., 198).

¹⁰⁴ YCIS 7, 1940, 81–82, cf. WELLES, op. cit., 206.

¹⁰⁵ BGU, 362, III ll. 24–26.

failed to make the requisite impression on public opinion, and that the glamour of Trajan's memory was needed in order to fire the imagination of the masses. A recently published coin of 201 shows on its reverse Severus riding a horse. It is inscribed OPTIMO PRINC S. P. Q. R. PM TRP VIII. On the obverse Severus is celebrated as *Parthicus Maximus*.¹⁰⁶ The association with Trajan cannot be missed – and, as will be shown below, the year 201 was in all likelihood a landmark in Severus's propaganda concerning the Parthian War.

d. The second Parthian war and the invincibility of Severus

It has been shown above that Dio's account of the siege of Hatra suppresses and distorts a number of facts. It has further been suggested that an accommodation with the Hatrans is in all likelihood one of these details. Finally it has been shown that the conjunction of Severus' *Victoria Parthica Maxima* with Trajan's *dies imperii* is best explained as a deliberate measure, which does not point to any particular date in the course of the war, but shows that Severus' propaganda was in no small difficulty over the representation of the campaign as a whole. The awareness of both Dio and Herodian of Severus' failure to storm the city shows what these difficulties might be.

If these suggestions are correct a major difficulty in interpreting Severus' arch is removed. For, if Augustus' administration could celebrate with great elation the recovery of the *signa* lost by Crassus to the Parthians,¹⁰⁷ though this remarkable achievement was brought about with the aid of diplomacy and not by force of arms,¹⁰⁸ why could not Severus boast of a diplomatic achievement obtained in the wake of actual warfare? The fact that the military campaign that led to the agreement was not itself a spectacular success could be veiled. In scene A of Panel IV, it will be remembered, heavy stress is laid on the collapse of part of the wall, and on the barbarians in an attitude of submission. In scene B, on the other hand, no barbarians are in sight, the city walls are intact, and all the stress is laid on Severus, haranguing his troops, and on the temple of Shamash. Thus the fact that the city was not really reduced to submission is ignored, and the fact that the terms of the agreement did not (in all likelihood) do much credit to Severus is glossed over.

On the other hand, the temple of Shamash represents the habitual appeal to supernatural sanction when the Emperor's position is not very strong. Dio ascribes to Severus two motives in checking the assault of his soldiers on the city. First,

¹⁰⁶ C. VERMEULE, *Four Important Sestertii: Trajan, Hadrian, and Septimius Severus*, Num. Circ. 73, 1965, 133.

¹⁰⁷ BMC I, 3–4, nos. 10–17; 8, nos. 40–42; 11, nos. 56–59; 110, nos. 679–681.

¹⁰⁸ See especially Dio 54, 8, 1–2.

he did not want the temple to come to any harm, and second, he expected the Barbarians to seek terms of peace.¹⁰⁹ The strong probability that they did in fact seek such terms is the core of the present argument. The invocation of Shamash may well have been devised to appease the soldiers fretting about what they considered a good chance to loot a wealthy city. Severus may have claimed that in allowing the Romans to overthrow part of the wall the god demonstrated to the inhabitants of the city that he favoured the Romans, whose might they would not be able to withstand, and thereby caused them to establish relations of peace and alliance with the invincible Empire. It would therefore be a manifest sign of ingratitude which would only call forth the wrath of the god if his sanctuary were to be looted, and the city where it was situated were to be treated with indignity.¹¹⁰ Thus Shamash could be celebrated as the author of Severus' victory also in his arch in the Forum Romanum.

There are a few more indications that this is the correct solution to the problem of the siege of Hatra.

In Severus' propaganda there was no room for frank admission of failure on the battlefield. In the East, his adversary, Pescennius Niger, had been hailed as *invictus imperator*, a theme duly celebrated on his coins.¹¹¹ Great though the temptation to associate this title with the oriental sun-cults¹¹² may be, the reverse types with which it occurs prove that its immediate associations were entirely down to earth: various trophies suggest the Emperor's triumph over his mundane enemies on the battlefield and quite often this implication is made clear by the exact wording of the legend itself – *invicto imperatori tropaea*.¹¹³ Some connection between this title and Niger's *imitatio Alexandri* cannot be ruled out.¹¹⁴ What is certain is that Severus, who had no particular taste for the Alexander-theme,¹¹⁵ adopted both

¹⁰⁹ 76 (75), 12, 2–3.

¹¹⁰ Dio 72 (71), 8, 1 ff. and 75 (74), 7, 7 (cf. Herod. 3, 3, 8) are only two of the many examples that can be given of the superstitious nature of the *miles gregarius*. They are herein referred to because of their closeness in time to the events under discussion.

¹¹¹ BMC V, 73, no. 926; 77, no. §; 8.

¹¹² See e. g. A. ALFÖLDI, Die Ausgestaltung des monarchischen Zeremoniells am römischen Kaiserhofe, MDAI(R) 50, 1935, 90 = Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche, 1970, 208; L. BERLINGER, Beiträge zur inoffiziellen Titulatur der römischen Kaiser, Diss. 1935, 21.

¹¹³ Thus e. g. BMC V, 73, no. 296, and see also the references marked with an asterisk in no. 116 below.

¹¹⁴ I. MUNDLE, Untersuchungen zur Religionspolitik des Septimius Severus, Diss. 1957, is undoubtedly right in ascribing the introduction of this title into the emperor's titulature by Commodus to his Hercules-mania. But its resumption by Niger and by Severus may be due to somewhat different motives. On the connection between *invictus* and Alexander the Great, see S. WEINSTOCK, Victor and Invictus, HThR 50, 1957, 211.

¹¹⁵ The closure of Alexander's tomb in Alexandria (Dio 76 [75], 13, 2) can by no stretch of imagination be interpreted as a show of favour towards his cult.

the type and the legend when he came into the possession of Niger's Eastern mints.¹¹⁶

But if the adaptation of Niger's types and legends to Severus' needs in the East may be regarded as devoid of any real importance, one cannot fail to see the significance of the sudden occurrence of the *invictus*-theme on Severus' Roman coins after the second Parthian War – and in a manner which hardly leaves any doubt as to its immediate purpose. On two *aurei*¹¹⁷ Septimius Severus and Caracalla are represented facing each other with the legend IMPPP INVICTI PII AVGG. The reverse of these coins makes the meaning of the obverse legend entirely plain: VICTORIA PARTHICA MAXIMA is shown, running with a wreath in her right hand and a palm in her left hand. Unfortunately the *aurei* are undated. If issued already in 199 they have an immediate relevance to a wave of rumours which undoubtedly started circulating immediately after the failure of Severus' second attempt to conquer Hatra. But even if MATTINGLY's dating is correct, and the coins really belong to 201, the emphatic insistence on a complete victory in the Parthian War is still best interpreted as an endeavour to stop this surging wave of rumours. Severus returned to Rome only in 202.¹¹⁸ But already on his way to the capital he may have found to his dismay that for all the efforts to depict his Parthian war as a full success his rebuff near the walls of Hatra was a topic of common talk. The coins under discussion may therefore mark a renewed propaganda campaign, undertaken in order to contravene damaging hearsay.¹¹⁹

A confusion on some inscriptions concerning Severus' twelfth imperatorial acclamation may constitute a further indication that this is the correct solution. Officially Severus seems to have accepted no more acclamations after he had been saluted as imperator for the eleventh time in 198.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, *imp. XII* is attested on milestones in the region of Sitifis (Mauretania Caesariensis) from as early as 198.¹²¹ After 207 *imp. XII* suddenly appears in Severus' titulature in places

¹¹⁶ BMC V, 88, no. 335*; 94, nos. 365–369*; 106, d–e. See also *ibid.*, 112, f., where *invictus* is the title of Jupiter. The implicit association with an Eastern Ba'al is possible, though not provable on the basis of the coin itself.

¹¹⁷ BMC V, 205, nos. 265–266.

¹¹⁸ For the evidence see BIRLEY, *op. cit.*, 221.

¹¹⁹ Cf. also BMC V, 219, no. 340, where a reverse type of an uncertain date between 201 and 210 shows Severus on horseback brandishing a javelin at a prostrate foeman in a characteristic oriental garb. The legend describing this type is INVICTA VIRTVS. For a similar type and legend on Caracalla's coins see *ibid.* 256, no. 505. Thus, even if the suggestion of KNEISSL, *op. cit.*, 142, that Severus was inclined to eschew bombastic titles for diplomatic reasons is correct, considerations of public opinion will have led him to assume just these titles. This is also the best explanation for the belated occurrence of the title *Parthicus Maximus*, not immediately after the fall of Ctesiphon, but a few months later.

¹²⁰ See BMC V, p. cxxix, clxxix, and clxxxiii. Cf. ILS 429, n. 3.

¹²¹ MURPHY, *op. cit.*, 101, n. 7.

where *imp. XI* had been the rule before.¹²² In both cases the appearance of the twelfth acclamation can be explained by the suppression of a local uprising or by a repulse of a minor barbarian inroad. Aurelius Victor has preserved an interesting piece of information concerning such an inroad into Tripolitania: *Quin etiam Tripoli cuius Lepti oppido oriebatur, bellicosae gentes submotae procul*.¹²³ This war is conveniently dated in 203,¹²⁴ but 207 cannot be ruled out altogether.¹²⁵ On the other hand, the fact that the invading tribes were *submotae procul* implies that the trouble was not confined to one place or to one time. Fighting may have taken place in Mauretania as early as 198,¹²⁶ which may account for the occurrence of the twelfth acclamation in that region already at that early date. An alternative explanation for the twelfth acclamation of 207 is that it may be related to a victory won in Britain by Severus' generals.¹²⁷

There is however one case in which the appearance of *imp. XII* cannot be properly explained and no clues are to be found either in the literary sources or elsewhere. A twelfth acclamation is attested on one *miliarium* of 201 from Asia Minor, and on all the *miliaria* of the same year from Noricum and Raetia.¹²⁸ There is a strong temptation to explain this sudden occurrence of *imp. XII* in relatively quiet provinces, at a time when no trouble is known to have taken place either inside those provinces or anywhere else, as a response to the extensive campaign, aimed at obviating the rumours that Severus had suffered a setback near Hatra, and at depicting the operations against this city as a complete success. In the same year, it will be recalled, Severus is attested as *optimus princeps*, and this is possibly when the association of his victories with Trajan's name was initiated – an association whose consequences are discernible on the 'Feriale Duranum'.¹²⁹

If such a propaganda campaign really took place its success must have exceeded Severus' own expectations. Herodian, it will be remembered, is aware of the failure to reduce Hatra to submission, but in his résumé of Severus' reign he treats Severus as the greatest warrior-emperor Rome had ever had until his own times.¹³⁰ Another contemporary writing only a few years after the second Parthian war, knows of nothing in Severus' reign which cannot be celebrated as a spectacular success; and it is a contemporary who cannot be suspected of adulation even by the most cautious critics – none other than the Christian Tertullian. *Quantum reformavit orbis saeculum istud*, he says in his 'De pallio'. *Quantum urbium aut*

¹²² Ibid. 38 ff.

¹²³ Victor, Caes. 20, 19.

¹²⁴ See BIRLEY, op. cit., 219 f.

¹²⁵ Cf. n. 122 above.

¹²⁶ BIRLEY, op. cit., 217, n. 1.

¹²⁷ Dio 77 (76), 10, 6, on which see HASEBROEK, op. cit. 139, and cf. BIRLEY, op. cit., 249.

¹²⁸ MURPHY, op. cit., 101, no. 7. Cf. ILS 429, n. 3.

¹²⁹ See pp. 435 f. above.

¹³⁰ Herod. 3, 15, 2–3.

*produxit aut auxit aut reddidit praesentis imperii triplex virtus! Deo tot Augustis in unum favente quot census transcripti, quot populi repurgati, quot ordines illustrati, quot barbari exclusi! Revera orbis cultissimum huius imperii rus est, eradicato omni aconito hostilitatis et coacto et rubo subdolae familiaritatis, consultus et amoenus super Alcinoi pometum et Midae rosetum.*¹³¹ Aurelius Victor¹³² and Eutropius¹³³ show that even if the author of their common sources, the lost *Kaiser-geschichte*,¹³⁴ could learn from his source (or sources) something which did not tally with the representation of Severus as an invincible emperor, he chose to ignore it totally. *Felix ac prudens, armis praecipue, adeo, ut nullo congressu nisi victor discesserit.*¹³⁵

e. Conclusion

The suggestions made in this study may now be recapitulated.

The hypothesis that the town depicted on the fourth panel of Severus' Arch is none other than Hatra gains in likelihood when the inadequacy of Dio's account is taken into consideration. There is moreover a strong probability that Herodian saw this town represented on some δημόσια γράφαι, though it is not entirely clear whether these γράφαι had anything to do with the reliefs of the arch or not. Both Dio and Herodian seem to have distorted the authorised version: the former appears to have 'corrected' it on the basis of oral information (which in some cases may not have been any better than simple rumours) and his own knowledge of Trajan's siege, whereas the latter seems to have interpreted some sort of public monument on the basis of inadequate information which he had from other sources.

The representation of Hatra on the arch (if true) would be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the government to publicize some sort of accommodation with Hatra as a major triumph. Both the *Feriale Duranum* and the coins converge to prove that the second Parthian war was depicted by Severus as a complete success. If events at Hatra could not be entirely suppressed (and both Dio and Herodian are the best proof that they could not) the only way to cope with the problems posed by the failure to capture the city was to describe an agreement as a victory for Severus.

The subsequent history of Hatra proves that such an agreement was possible. An attempt has been made to show that interests common to Rome and to Hatra may have brought about a reconciliation between them already under Severus.

¹³¹ Tertull. de pallio, 7.

¹³² Victor, Caes. 20, 14.

¹³³ Eutrop. brev. 8, 18, 4.

¹³⁴ Whose existence was proved by A. ENMANN, Eine verlorene Geschichte der römischen Kaiser, Philologus Suppl. 4, 1884, 337.

¹³⁵ Victor, loc. cit.

