

A. Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-107-06272-6. Pp. xi, 340.

In this study, Adam Kemezis attempts to understand how contemporary authors responded to the problems of change and continuity that existed in the Severan period. To this end, he provides readings of the histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian, as well as two works of Philostratus (*Apollonius* and *Sophists*), which are set against the “official” narratives of the Severan emperors. Overall, the book provides engaging and illuminating analyses of these works, while also offering an important synthesis of how these texts function as reactions to the political and cultural world of the Severans.

Kemezis’ approach is to view the texts as “narrative worlds,” essentially narrative constructs of the Roman empire that do not necessarily hew closely to external reality. This method allows Kemezis to read the texts as independent versions of the Roman world that can then be read against the narratives that were constructed by the Severan emperors. Kemezis argues against the older view that Greeks continually adapted to Roman domination, and prefers a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Roman empire that tried to make sense of the world in the Severan period through the creation of alternative narratives.

One of the main themes of this work, developed in some of the author’s previous publications, is the wide divergence, politically and culturally, between the Antonine and Severan dynasties.¹ The Antonine dynasty was marked by stability and peace, and its authors were generally uninterested in the contemporary or recent past. During the Severan period, which was characterized by instability and turbulent dynastic change, there began to appear literary works which responded to these changes and whose narratives were shaped by the tempestuous political situation. Kemezis argues that such worlds could not have been conceived of under the Antonines, but become suitable responses under the Severans.

In the first chapter, Kemezis examines the “official” narratives of the Antonine and Severan emperors and lays the groundwork for his assessment of the competing narratives of Cassius Dio, Philostratus, and Herodian. The Antonine dynasty came to be known in the third century as a time of peace and prosperity, primarily because of the nonviolent transfers of power. While Marcus Aurelius and his predecessors developed imperial *personae* based on a connection to the positive elements of an indefinite past, Commodus broke with the traditional ideal of developing his imperial persona in the idiom of the Roman aristocracy. Subsequent emperors tried to reconnect to this Antonine past, but for various reasons had difficulty succeeding.

Kemezis next moves to an analysis of Cassius Dio’s Roman history. He contends that Dio’s work is more unique than generally recognized, as it is an annalistic, senatorial

¹ E.g. “Lucian, Fronto, and the absence of contemporary historiography under the Antonines,” *AJP* 131 (2010) 285–325; “Commemoration of the Antonine aristocracy in Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*,” *CQ* 62 (2012) 387–414.

history produced in a Greek idiom and enhanced by extensive excurses and debates. Kemezis identifies four narrative modes in Dio's text (Republic, *dynasteiai*, Principate, contemporary) and observes that the contemporary mode and its problems mirror those of the *dynasteiai* (the period of the late Republic). This enhances the sense of a lack of continuity between the principate and contemporary periods, and thus makes the contemporary mode an "oppositional history" and counter-narrative to image of the Severan dynasty.

The following two chapters deal with Philostratus' *Apollonius* and *Sophists*, respectively. Kemezis justifies including these texts with Dio and Herodian on the grounds that his study is of a cultural phenomenon rather than a genre, and argues that Philostratus' works are historical in the sense that they show how present relates to past, even if they are devoid of a narrative of political events. Also like the works of Dio and Herodian, they present narratives on a large scale (chronologically and spatially). While Philostratus does not place the emperors at the center of his narrative worlds, the interactions between Apollonius and the characters in *Sophists* and the emperors themselves are particularly significant. In an earlier time, the power of a figure like Apollonius is apparent in his bringing about the fall of Domitian and the rise of the Antonine dynasty, whereas the interactions between sophists and Severan emperors (especially Caracalla) result in miscommunication and failure. This change suggests that the earlier model of sophistic political activity is superior, and although sophists previously had the ability to transform, that power is lost under the Severans.

Kemezis' final chapter argues that Herodian's history, with its traditional style and detached author, recalls the idealized period of Antonine rule. Herodian achieves this goal by presenting a story that was likely well known to his audience in an approachable way, and then going on to dismantle this expectation. Kemezis sees Herodian as an author who was writing in the mid-third century and thus had more to explain about the problems in his contemporary world than he did about praising the successes of the past. Thus, Herodian's depiction of the Severan world is both confused and fragmented. Herodian's methods for undermining his readers' expectations include geographic dislocation and the failure of traditional rhetoric, both of which are emphasized frequently by pairing. In addition, Herodian possesses a "vague narrative personality," which does not allow his readers to latch on to a distinct viewpoint and thus enhances his story's sense of fragmentation.

In a brief conclusion, Kemezis argues against the viewpoint that all of the change in Severan period was not reflected in literature. Instead, the texts considered in this book provide examples of how elites in the Severan period might write about the relationship between past and present. Their options were greater than under the Antonines, which projected a consensus view of stability that did not allow for narratives on a large scale. On the other hand, Severan literature demonstrates "a new and heightened awareness of change" that was closely tied to the political events of the period. Rather than the positive view of the emperors under the Antonines, the Severan rulers become a negative part of the contemporary narratives.

This book is a welcome addition to recent work that has reinterpreted various aspects of the Severan period.² Kemezis frees the texts from the constraints of earlier scholarship and the bonds of genre. That is not to say that the author is dismissive of previous scholarship (quite the opposite), but rather that his approach is not limited by earlier criticisms of these authors (e.g. Dio is a poor historian, Herodian wrote a historical novel). Instead, Kemezis is able to provide valuable, positive analysis of the works as documents of the Severan period. The author's approach avoids reading the texts through the authors themselves, and understands the narratives on their own, in order to flesh out the possibilities of readings among ancient audiences. Although some might argue that Kemezis has attempted to cover too much ground, it is exactly the placing of these texts in conversation with one another that gives the analysis further appeal. Although the scope of the work is too large to always get into great detail in the texts, Kemezis' overall arguments are convincing in each chapter, and taken together they provide a satisfying whole.

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² E.g. M. Icks, *The crimes of Elagabalus: the life and legacy of Rome's decadent boy emperor* (Harvard, 2012); J. Langford, *Maternal Megalomania: Julia Domna and the imperial politics of motherhood* (Johns Hopkins, 2013); S. Lusnia, *Creating Severan Rome: The Architecture and Self-Image of L. Septimius Severus* (Latomus, 2014); C. Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices: divine ideology and the visualisation of imperial power in the Severan period* (Cambridge, 2012).