CHAPTER ONE

GRANDSON OF A EUNUCH 155–189

The problems of Later Han
The Cao family and the eunuch connection
Young man about town
Yellow Turbans
Ruin of Government

Chronology

155  birth of Cao Cao
174  Cao Cao is nominated Filial and Incorrupt and becomes a gentleman cadet
175  Commandant of the Northern Division of Luoyang county
177  Magistrate of Dunquiu county in Dong commandery
     Cao Ang born to Cao Cao’s wife the Lady Liu
178  Cao Cao dismissed from office and retires to Pei
179  Cao Cao takes the Lady Bian as a concubine
180  Cao Cao returns to Luoyang as a Consultant
184  Yellow Turban rebellion; Cao Cao becomes Commandant of Cavalry, then Chancellor of Ji’nan; rebellion in Liang province
187  Cao Cao resigns office and retires again to Pei [conspiracy of Wang Fen?]; birth of Cao Pi, Cao Cao’s eldest son by the Lady Bian
188  Cao Cao appointed a Colonel of the Western Garden
189  death of Emperor Ling; massacre of the eunuchs; Dong Zhuo seizes power; Cao Cao flees the capital to join the “loyal rebels”

The problems of Later Han

In the mid-second century AD, the empire of Han was matched only by that of Rome, at the opposite end of the Eurasian continent. Its

1 Much material on the second half of the second century AD is discussed in deC, Huan and Ling, and deC, Establish Peace, which present an annotated translation
power extended from the Korean peninsula to the coast of Vietnam, and there was a claim to authority over the oasis states of present-day Xinjiang. Except for these last, the territory was controlled by thirteen provinces supervising the administration of a hundred commandery units. Below the commanderies were some 1100 counties, and the registered population was just under fifty million. Provinces, commanderies and counties were governed by inspectors, administrators and magistrates appointed from the capital, Luoyang, and the empire as a whole was managed by a bureaucracy of some seven and a half thousand commissioned, literate officials.2

The structure was remarkably successful, but its effect was limited. The average population of each county throughout the empire was between forty-five and fifty thousand, with some very much larger, and each was governed by a single magistrate, appointed for a limited term, and guided by local staff. Taxes were collected, corvée service was enforced, and most major crimes could be dealt with—frequently by brutal means—but otherwise the day-to-day life of the community was largely unaffected by official intervention, and magistrates were vulnerable to pressure, particularly from the leading families of their territory whose members were either colleagues in the imperial service or who provided the officers who advised and assisted them. As a result, behind a façade of country peace, there was endemic exploitation of the poor by the rich, punctuated by oppressive violence and family feuding, and illustrated now by the tomb-models of fortified houses and texts advising land-owners about weapons and training.3

of the Zizhi tongjian chronicle compiled by Sima Guang for the years 157 to 220. A short account of Later Han is provided in the introductory material of deC, LH3K, xvi–xxxi.

2 The Treatise on the Bureaucracy 百官志, HHS 114/24–118/28, is discussed by Mansvelt Beck, Treatises, 196–226. Bielenstein, Bureaucracy, and deC, LH3K, 1216–1241, describe the administrative structure based upon the Treatise and other texts. Below the commissioned officials were a further 145,000 officers of lesser rank, ranging from senior and trusted clerks to guards, police and yamen runners: deC, “Recruitment Revisited,” 5, citing Tong dian 36:205c.

The Treatise on Administrative Geography 郡國志, HHS 109/19–113/23, lists the provinces, commandery units and counties of the empire in the early 140s, with their population. Based upon household returns, they are arranged by provinces and commanderies with figures precise to the last digit, and total figures are given at 113/23:3533 with commentary citing additional records. See Bielenstein, “Census,” and Mansvelt Beck, Treatises, 175–195.

3 The Simin yueling almanac, a guide for the management of a country estate compiled in the mid-second century by the gentleman Cui Shi, identifies the times