CHAPTER TEN

THE SECOND AND THIRD CENTURY

Richard Westall and Frederick Brenk

INTRODUCTION

The age of the Antonines and Severans, broadly defined as extending from the accession of Nerva to the imperial throne to the fall of Severus Alexander from power (AD 96–235), is traditionally viewed as the golden age of imperial Rome.¹ The reasons for this particular view of history are variegated and multiple. It is of no little interest that this view can be traced back, in part, to the vision that contemporaries themselves had of the period in which they lived.² Whatever their convictions, senators and authors such as Pliny the Younger and Cornelius Tacitus lauded the felicity that obtained under a series of emperors who came to the throne mature in years and capable of avoiding the worst errors of youth and

¹ There is no English-speaking reader who will not be acquainted with the classic, somewhat more restricted enunciation of this view in 1776 by Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. D. Womersley (London, 1994), 1.103. The view is exquisitely literary in derivation but finds plentiful corroboration within the material record.

a monarchy based upon filial descent. Establishing a new dynasty, Septimius Severus sought to hide that fact and to secure his own hold on power through fictive continuation of that of the Antonines. Consequently, within an age noted for felicitas temporum, it might be thought that circumstances limited the need for polemic, with an accompanying, sensible decrease in political autobiography.

Close inspection of the literary remains, however, reveals that such was not the case. Rather, there are five instances discernible amidst the fragments. Four of these were produced by or in the name of emperors—Trajan (AD 98–117), Hadrian (117–138), Septimius Severus (193–211), and Caracalla (211–217)—who were faced with the menace of civil war or sought to secure their hold upon power in the wake of victory and civil bloodshed. The fifth was the confident production of a provincial—the sophist Appian of Alexandria—so dedicated to the idea of imperial Rome that he wrote an innovative history of the genesis and course of events under the empire. Together they represent a continuing tradition of autobiographical literature in various subgenres of history, including not only the commentarius (Trajan and Caracalla) but also the, possibly, epistolary autobiography (Hadrian) and the apologia (Appian, Septimius Severus). Naturally, earlier models such as those furnished by Julius Caesar, Augustus, and, perhaps, Flavius Josephus can be perceived to have influenced these polemical portrayals of recent history. As will be seen in what follows, the times were not so felicitous and life was far more interesting than is often believed.

1. Trajan

Trajan’s account of his conquest of Dacia and destruction of the kingdom of Decebalus, achieved through two separate wars conducted in the years 101–102 and 105–106, was of necessity autobiographical in nature. However, it was far too restricted in temporal coverage and too generous in terms of protagonists other than Trajan to be deemed a work De

---

3 Thus, for example, Plin., Pan. 74.1, 4; Tac., Agr. 3.1–3.
4 See sections 4 and 5 below, for Severus’ evolving presentation of himself and his older son Caracalla.
5 As will emerge in the following discussion, however, it would be an egregious mistake to think that these works can be understood only from the vantage point of one particular subgenre. For example, when published rather than merely maintained for ordinary administrative purposes, commentarii have distinct features in common with letters.