The Religious Legitimation of War in the Reign of Antoninus Pius*

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Introduction

Antoninus Pius (138–161) reigned twenty-three years, which makes him the longest ruling emperor between Augustus and Constantine the Great. Nowadays, he is almost entirely perceived as a lacklustre figure compared to his predecessors and successors, though generally credited as faithful administrator of the Empire, which rejoiced in an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity under his reign. While modern scholarship recognises stagnation or regression in Antoninus’ government, the ancient sources extol his foreign policy via diplomacy which guaranteed the compliance of Rome’s enemies. However, territorial gains in Britain and Germany contradict the opinion of an inactive emperor; even more puzzling are the many war-related themes on Antoninus’ coins. A close examination of the written sources, the reverses of the coins and the distance slabs of the Antonine Wall unveils a complex, though unparalleled system how the emperor combined his need for military glory with the emphasis on the concept of just war and the invocation of the protective function of the gods for Rome’s prosperity and security.

Historical Setting

When Trajan died in 117, the Roman Empire had reached its largest territorial extent after the conquest of Dacia (101–6), Armenia (114), Northern Mesopotamia (115), and the annexation of the Nabatean Kingdom (106). However, his expansionist policy overstressed the Empire’s resources due to the huge casualties in the Dacian and Parthian wars. Trajan’s successor Hadrian immediately concluded peace with the Parthians, relinquishing the Eastern conquests, as he faced the outbreak of revolts in several regions.1 Hadrian’s non-expansionist attitude, manifest through the building of walls in Britain, Germany, and Africa proconsularis, did not find favour with the senators’

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1 SHA Hadr. 5.1–4.
majority, vividly displayed by Hadrian’s negative stance in the historiography which was influenced by his difficult relationship to the senate. Except for the troubled early years and the undoubtedly severe Bar Kokhba revolt (132–5), his reign was peaceful.

On 25 February 138, Hadrian adopted the patrician T. Aurelius Antoninus, who succeeded him a few months later on 10 July. Antoninus’ *cursus honorum* only comprised civic functions—the proconsulship over Asia being the only post he had held outside Italy—and conformed to the typical career of a man of noble descent. It is likely that Hadrian chose him as he seemed a compliant continuator of his own defensive policies. Despite Antoninus’ long reign, there are only a handful of monographs on him, and accounts on the Roman imperial era dedicate just a few pages to him. This is certainly due to a remarkable lack of written testimonies which conveys the impression of an uneventful reign. As Cassius Dio’s *Roman history* is entirely lost for this period, the terse but reliable biography in the *Historia Augusta* is the main source. In his *Roman Oration*, delivered at Rome in 143, Aelius Aristides drew the most impressive picture of Antoninus’ reign and the peaceful state of the world, although the orator had to admit that wars did not entirely disappear, ‘as is only natural in the immensity of a great empire’. Likewise, the *Historia Augusta* or the emperor’s contemporaries Pausanias, author of a *Description of Greece*, and Polyaeus in his *Stratagems*, attest conflicts in remote regions of


