Avidius Cassius and Maecianus in the *Historia Augusta*

In CE 175¹ C. Avidius Cassius, governor of Syria and possessing *imperium maius* in the East, mounted an ill-fated rebellion against Marcus Aurelius.² Just over three months later, Cassius was murdered by his own soldiers. A supporter of Cassius was also killed: an individual recorded in the *Historia Augusta* only as Maecianus.³ Maecianus is now typically considered by scholars to be a son of Cassius.⁴ I hope to demonstrate that there are contextual and historical reasons to identify this man with L. Volusius Maecianus, a tutor of Marcus, noted jurist, and probably the father-in-law of Cassius, and that this identification has implications for the significance of the rebellion.⁵

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¹ I should like to extend my warm thanks to *Mnemosyne*’s referee, whose corrections and suggestions were greatly appreciated. Henceforth all dates are CE unless otherwise noted.

² The rebellion of Avidius Cassius has been much analysed in modern scholarship, but continues to confound. See esp. Millar 1993, 115-118; Birley 1987, 184-198; Astarita 1983; Spiess 1975.

³ *Marc.* 25.4; *Av. Cass.* 7.4.

⁴ The Maecianus mentioned in the *HA* is considered a son of Cassius by the following: *PIR²* A 1406; Bowman 1970, 24, n. 24; *Pflaum* 1970, 221; Birley 1987, 192; Syme 1984/1985 (= 1987), 218; Sidebottom 2005, 325-326; Spiess 1975, 61. Notable exceptions are D. Magie in the Loeb edition of 1921 (194, n. 1), who notes that Maecianus is ‘possibly, though not probably’ to be identified with the jurist L. Volusius Maecianus; and Schwartz 1978, 177. For an older view which captures the confusion around the issue, cf. Ballou 1921, 108.

⁵ Henceforth Volusius. See *PIR¹* V 657, where Volusius is identified as the Maecianus killed in the rebellion of Cassius; Alföldy 1977, 182; *Pflaum* 1960 (1982), no. 141. 333-336. On Volusius’ term as prefect of Egypt see Bastianini 1975, 295. Alföldy rightly sounds a note of caution concerning the career of Volusius: “Es ist nicht auszuschließen, daß er noch vor dem Antritt seines Konsulats verstarb, da seine Ämter in jener Inschrift aus Ostia, die seinen *cursus honorum* enthält, nur bis zum *consul designatus* aufgezählt warden.” For the inscription itself, see *AE* 1955, no. 179, esp. line 3; cf. *CIL* 14.5347-5348. The problem of the identification of Maecianus in the *vitae* of Marcus and Cassius is discussed below. See also Syme 1987, 218, n. 59; *Pflaum* 1970, 221-222. Pflaum interprets *Marc.* 25.4 to mean not the city, but the daughter, of Cassius: “Parmi eux Maecianus qui avait la garde de sa soeur Alexandria”. This does not, however, alter the problem of the identification of Maecianus.
Cassius in the *HA* provide muddled accounts of Maecianus, the rebellion, and subsequent events. It is thus necessary to examine the problem of Maecianus’ identity in three ways: i) the context of Cassius’ career and his rebellion; ii) the textual difficulties concerning Maecianus in the *HA*; and iii) the career of Volusius.

Before proceeding, it is important to remark briefly on the rebellion itself. It was a more serious threat to Marcus than is apparent from the extant sources. There are indications of this threat in the scope and swiftness of Marcus’ response: he concluded a hasty treaty on the Danubian frontier in order to free the veteran legions there to fight the usurper, and a force of veteran cavalry was dispatched immediately under a trusted officer to Rome. In its aftermath, the rebellion required Marcus to undertake a tour of the East and adopt a more aggressive policy regarding the promotion of Commodus. In this context, the attempt to identify precisely the supporters of Cassius is worthwhile: not enough is known of their number or identities, and the threat of the rebellion seems therefore muted. An investigation of Maecianus, as well as being a useful case-study, is the first step in a long road.

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6 Marc. 24.6, 25.1; Av. Cass. 7.4. The difficulties of the *Historia Augusta* are legendary and seductive. See Millar 1993, 124: “The problem of the *Historia Augusta* is one into which sane men refrain from entering”; and Syme 1970, 285: “Nature in all her freaks and sports never brought forth anything like the *Historia Augusta*. It is a monster.” On the *vitae* of Cassius, see Schwartz 1964, 135-164; Syme 1970, 292ff.

7 D.C. 71.17, 71.23.

8 D.C. 71.17, 71.23; Marc. 24.5-25.12; Av. Cass. 7.1-9; Hekster 2002, 34-39; Millar 1993, 115-118; Birley 1987, 184-198; Spiess 1975; Astarita 1983. The rebellion certainly disrupted the prosecution of the Marcomannic War and compelled Marcus to undertake an Eastern tour. According to Dio, Cassius was proclaimed emperor in Egypt, and this is supported by A.K. Bowman’s analysis of *SB* 10295. See Bowman 1970, 20-26.

9 D.C. 71.17; Millar 1993, 123. Marcus was usually scrupulously respectful in his dealings with the senate and the upper classes.

10 Marc. 25.2; cf. *AE* 1920, no. 45. The commanding officer was Vettius Sabinianus, possibly from Thuburbo Maius.

11 The point is made forcefully by Hekster 2002, 32-39.

12 A son-in-law of Cassius, Dryantianus, was spared by Marcus after the rebellion. His role in the rebellion gives a glimpse of a base of noble support from the region which Cassius drew upon in 175. Dryantianus’ father, Claudius Agrippinus, was consul *suffектus* after 151, perhaps c. 160, close to the time Cassius himself was praetor. Dryantianus was connected through his consular father to two wealthy Lycian dynasties, one from Oenoanda and the other from Patara. His paternal grandmother’s family, the Licinnii, could trace their enfranchisement back to Nero. The union no doubt enhanced Cassius’ own Eastern