

CLAH4006

**From Village to Empire: An
Introduction to the History of Rome**

**The Severans – AD 193-235
Macrinus to Severus Alexander**

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Sources

- Dio Cassius (AD 163-235) had senatorial career from Commodus to Severus Alexander – often rhetorical and anecdotal.
- Herodian (c.170-240) – frequently moralistic, superficial analysis.
- Marius Maximus (c. first half of third century AD) – wrote biographies of emperors from Nerva to Elegabalus – work is lost, used by author(s) of *Historia Augusta*.

“Alexander, however, paid no heed to them, but, on the contrary, honoured me [Dio] in various ways, especially by appointing me to be consul for the second time [AD 229], as his colleague, and taking upon himself personally the responsibility of meeting the expenditures of my office.” – **Dio Cassius 80.5.**

Macrinus and Diadumenian

- Rapidly losses favour of the soldiers;
 - Not sufficiently rewarded.
 - Recruitment mainly from Syria.
- Unpopular with Senate.
- Hostility of the people of Rome – “The populace, however, finding it easy to escape detection at the races and feeling emboldened by their numbers, raised a great outcry at the horse-race on the birthday of Diadumenianus, which fell on the fourteenth of September, uttering many laments and asserting that they alone of all mankind were without a leader and... king...” – **Dio Cassius 79.20.**



Diadumenian as Caesar – AE26
Pentassarion of Marcianopolis.



Diadumenian as Augustus –
RIC 79.

Tyrant?

“But his integrity threw even this drawback into the shade. As for his attitude toward law and precedent, his knowledge of them was not so accurate as his observance of them was faithful... insisting that it was impious to put a senator to death...” – **Dio Cassius 79.11.**

“... of humble origin and shameless in spirit as well as in countenance, and though hated by all, both civilians and soldiers, he nevertheless proclaimed himself now Severus and now Antoninus.” – **SHA**
Opellius Macrinus 2.1.

Death of Macrinus

- Rival power base in Emesa – Julia Maesa (sister of Julia Domna) – Julia Soaemis (mother of Elagabalus) – Julia Mamaea (mother of Severus Alexander).

“After the army went over to Elagabalus Antoninus, Macrinus fled, but he was defeated and killed in a rural district of Bithynia, while his followers were partly forced to surrender, partly killed, and partly put to flight.” - **SHA *Opellius Macrinus* 15.**

Elegabalus

**Reign 8th June AD 218 – 11th
March 222**

- Varius Avitus Bassianus.
- Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.
- Fictional claim to be son of Caracalla.
- Holds hereditary priesthood of El-gabal – Syrian Sun God.
- 14 years old when becoming emperor.



“He often showed contempt for the senate, calling them slaves in togas, while he treated the Roman people as the tiller of a single farm and the equestrian order as nothing at all.” - **SHA *Elagabalus* 20.1.**

Extravagance

“Among his pets he had lions and leopards, which had been rendered harmless and trained by tamers, and these he would suddenly order during the dessert and the after-dessert to get up on the couches, thereby causing an amusing panic, for none knew that the beasts were harmless... he fed parrots and pheasants to his lions and other wild animals... He flavoured his swimming-pools and bath-tubs with essence of spices or of roses or wormwood. And once he invited the common mob to a drinking-bout, and himself drank with the populace, taking so much that on seeing what he alone consumed, people supposed he had been drinking from one of his swimming-pools.” – **SHA *Elegabalus* 21.**

Controversial Sexual Antics

“...Moreover, he used to have the story of Paris played in his house, and he himself would take the role of Venus, and suddenly drop his clothing to the ground and fall naked on his knees, one hand on his breast, the other before his private parts, his buttocks projecting meanwhile and thrust back in front of his partner in depravity... he had his whole body depilated, deeming it the chief enjoyment of his life to appear fit and worthy to arouse the lusts of the greatest number.” - **SHA *Elegabalus* 5.**

“He carried his lewdness to such a point that he asked the physicians to contrive a woman's vagina in his body by means of an incision, promising them large sums for doing so.” – **Dio Cassius 80.16.7.**

“He gathered together in a public building all the harlots from the Circus, the theatre, the Stadium and all other places of amusement, and from the public baths, and then delivered a speech to them, as one might to soldiers, calling them "comrades" and discoursing upon various kinds of postures and debaucheries. Afterward he invited to a similar gathering procurers, catamites collected together from all sides, and lascivious boys and young men. And whereas he had appeared before the harlots in a woman's costume and with protruding bosom, he met the catamites in the garb of a boy who is exposed for prostitution. After his speech he announced a largess of three *aurei* each, just as if they were soldiers, and asked them to pray the gods that they might find others to recommend to him.” – **SHA *Elegabalus* 26.3-5.**

Marriages



Julia Paula -
denarius



Aquilia Severa
- *denarius*



Annia Faustina
- *denarius*

“He violated the chastity of a Vestal Virgin, and by removing the holy shrines he profaned the sacred rites of the Roman nation. He also desired to extinguish the everlasting fire.” - **SHA *Elegabalus* 6.6.**

Religious Controversy

As soon as he entered the city, however, neglecting all the affairs of the provinces, he established Elagabalus as a god on the Palatine Hill close to the imperial palace; and he built him a temple, to which he desired to transfer the emblem of the Great Mother, the fire of Vesta, the Palladium, the shields of the Salii, and all that the Romans held sacred, purposing that no god might be worshipped at Rome save only Elagabalus. He declared, furthermore, that the religions of the Jews and the Samaritans and the rites of the Christians must also be transferred to this place, in order that the priesthood of Elagabalus might include the mysteries of every form of worship.” - **SHA**
Elegabalus 3.4-5.

Adoption of Severus Alexander

- Severus Alexander – 12 years old – is adopted as Caesar.

“Among the base actions of his life of depravity he gave orders that Alexander, whom he had formally adopted, he removed from his presence... he commanded the senate to take away from Alexander the name of Caesar. But when this was announced to the senate, there was a profound silence. For Alexander was an excellent youth...” - **SHA *Elegabalus* 13.1-2.**

Death of Elagabalus

“The soldiers, however, and particularly the members of the guard, either because they knew what evils were in store for Elagabalus, or because they foresaw his hatred for themselves, formed a conspiracy to set the state free. First they attacked the accomplices in his plan of murdering Alexander, killing some by tearing out the vital organs and others by piercing the anus, so that their deaths were as evil as their lives. Next they fell upon Elagabalus himself and slew him in a latrine in which he had taken refuge.” - **SHA *Elegabalus* 16-17.**

- Severus Alexander proclaimed emperor 11th March AD 222 – 13 years old.

The Severan Women

Julia Domna

- Under Caracalla given titles – *pia felix, mater Augustii, mater senatus, mater castrorum* and *mater patriae*.
- Influential in Rome during Caracalla's absence in the East.



Julia Domna AR Denarius. IVLIA AVGVSTA, draped bust right / IVNO, Juno standing half-left, holding patera & scepter, peacock standing left, head turned back. – **RIC 559**.

Julia Maesa

“Mamaea secretly distributed money to the praetorians to win their good will for her son; it was to gold that the praetorians were particularly devoted. When he learned this, Heliogabalus plotted against Alexander and his mother in every conceivable way, but Maesa, the grandmother of them both, foiled all his schemes; she was astute in every way and had spent much of her life in the imperial palace. As the sister of Severus' wife Julia, Maesa had always lived with the empress at the court.” – **Herodian 5.8.3.**



Julia Maesa Denarius. IVLIA MAESA AVG, draped bust right / IVNO, Juno standing left, holding patera and scepter. – **RIC 254.**

Julia Soaemis

Then, when he held his first audience with the senate, he gave orders that his mother should be asked to come into the senate-chamber. On her arrival she was invited to a place on the consuls' bench and there she took part in the drafting — that is to say, she witnessed the drawing up of the senate's decree. And Elagabalus was the only one of all the emperors under whom a woman attended the senate like a man, just as though she belonged to the senatorial order.” - **SHA *Elegabalus* 4.1-2.**

“...he [Elegabalus] was wholly under the control of his mother Symiamira, so much so, in fact, that he did no public business without her consent, although she lived like a harlot and practised all manner of lewdness in the palace.” – **(2.1).**



RIC 243

Julia Mamaea

“Now left alone with her son, Mamaea tried to govern and control him in the same fashion. Fearing that his vigorous young manhood might plunge him into the errors of adolescence because his power and position were assured, Mamaea kept the palace under close guard and allowed no one suspected of debauchery to approach the youth... She therefore induced him to serve as judge in the courts continually and for most of each day; occupied with important matters and the necessary business of the empire, he would have no opportunity to indulge in scandalous practices.” – **Herodian 6.1.6.**

“Toward his mother Mamaea he showed singular devotion, even to the extent of constructing in the Palace at Rome certain apartments named after her... And he founded an order of girls and boys, to be called Mamaeanae and Mamaeani, as Antoninus had founded the Faustinianae” – **SHA Alexander Severus 26.9, 57.7.**

Severus Alexander
Reigned 11th March AD 222 –
18th March 235

War Against the Sassanids

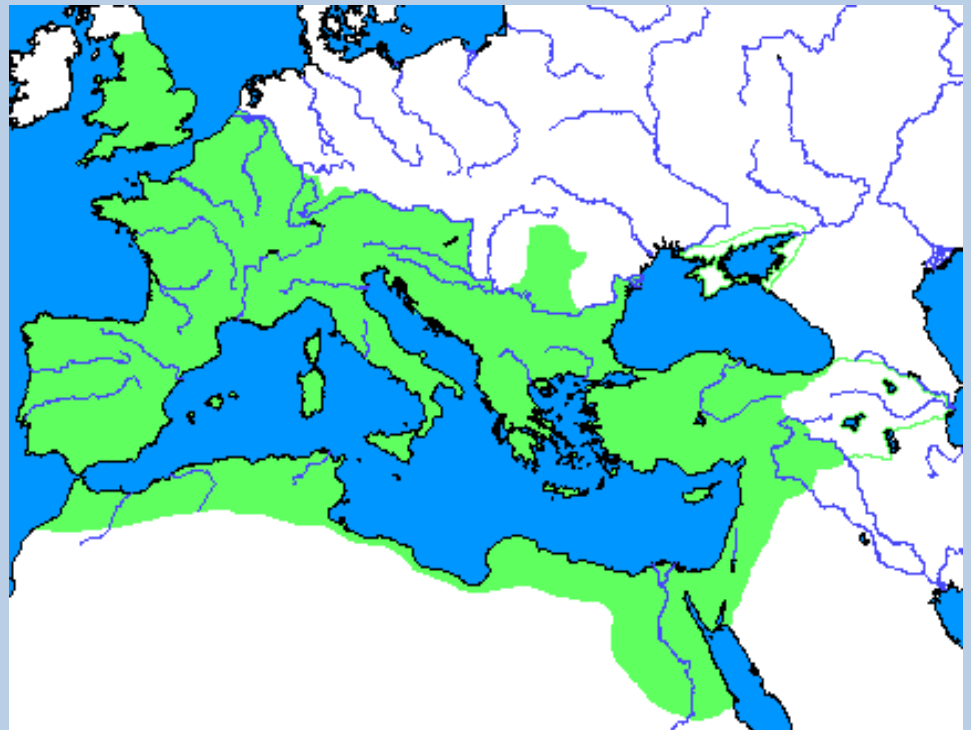
- Sassanid Ardashir destroys Parthian dynasty – AD 224.



“The gathering of an army equal in size to the reported strength of the attacking barbarians caused the greatest upheaval throughout the Roman world.” – **Herodian 6.3.2.**

“The envoys said that the great king Artaxerxes [Ardashir] ordered the Romans and their emperor to withdraw from all Syria and from that part of Asia opposite Europe; they were to permit the Persians to rule as far as Ionia and Caria and to govern all the nations separated by the Aegean Sea and the Propontic Gulf, inasmuch as these were the Persians' by right of inheritance.” – **(6.4.5).**

- Some Roman troops desert and other mutiny in northern Mesopotamia.
- AD 230 - Ardashir attacks Nisibis and raids Cappadocia.
- Severus Alexander departs from Rome with army in Spring AD 231.
- Three pronged Roman attack – Alexander wins back Roman Mesopotamia and Oshroene, but accompanying attacks into Mesopotamia and Armenia fail.



War Against the Germans

“Now unexpected messages and dispatches upset Alexander and caused him even greater anxiety: the governors in Illyria reported that the Germans [the Alamanni] had crossed the Rhine and the Danube rivers, were plundering the Roman empire, and with a huge force were overrunning the garrison camps on the banks of these rivers, as well as the cities and villages there. They reported also that the provinces of Illyricum bordering on and close to Italy were in danger.” – **Herodian 6.7.2.**

“Alexander was thus occupied with these matters. He thought it wise, however, to send an embassy to the Germans to discuss the possibilities of a peaceful settlement. He promised to give them everything they asked and to hand over a large amount of money... The soldiers, however, were not pleased by his action, for the time was passing without profit to them, and Alexander was doing nothing courageous or energetic about the war; on the contrary, when it was essential that he march out and punish the Germans for their insults, he spent the time in chariot racing and luxurious living.” – **(6.7.9-10).**

Death of Alexander Severus

” There was in the Roman army a man named Maximinus whose half-barbarian family lived in a village in the most remote section of Thrace. They say that as a boy he was a shepherd, but that in his youthful prime he was drafted into the cavalry because of his size and strength... He won their devotion by giving them all kinds of gifts and rewards. Consequently, the recruits, who included an especially large number of Pannonians, praised the masculinity of Maximinus and despised Alexander as a mother's boy. Their contempt for the emperor was increased by the fact that the empire was being managed by a woman's authority and a woman's judgment, and by the fact that Alexander had directed the campaigns carelessly and timidly.”
– **Herodian 6.8.3.**

“When the army of Maximinus came into view, the clamouring recruits called upon Alexander's soldiers to desert the miserly woman and the timid, mother-dominated youth... Convinced, Alexander's troops deserted him for Maximinus, who was then proclaimed emperor by all... Trembling with fear, Alexander was scarcely able to retire to his quarters. Clinging to his mother and, as they say, complaining and lamenting that she was to blame for his death, he awaited his executioner. After being saluted as emperor by the entire army, Maximinus sent a tribune and several centurions to kill Alexander and his mother, together with any of his followers who opposed them.” – **Herodian 6.9.6.**

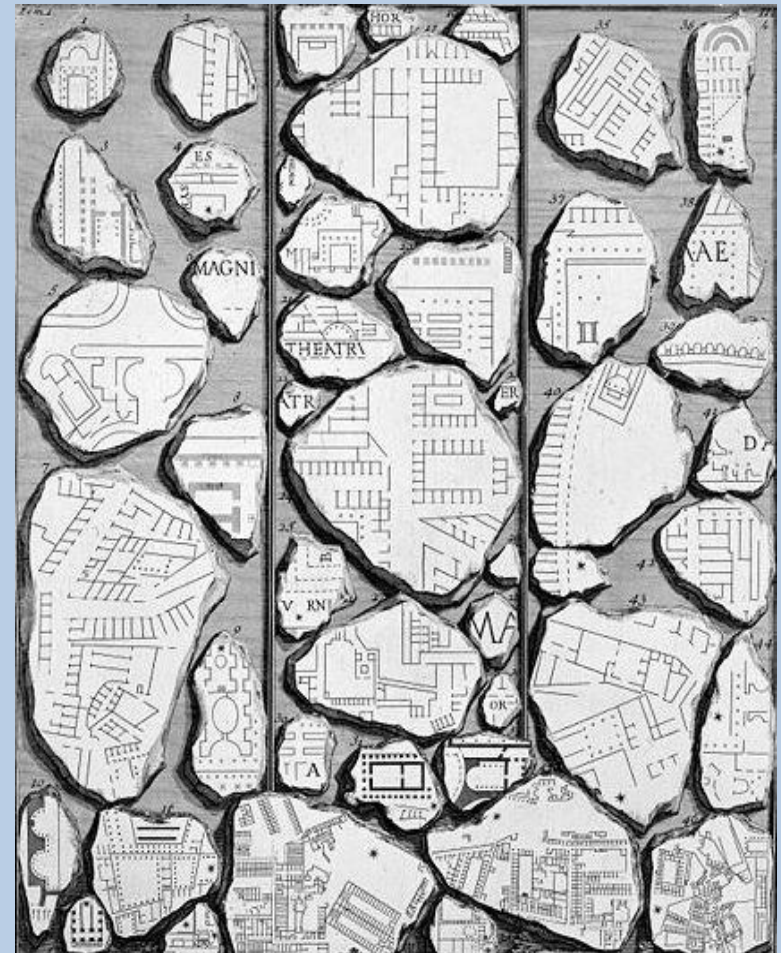
The Severan Building Programme

Fire of AD 191

“...a fire that began at night in some dwelling leaped to the temple of Peace and spread to the storehouses of Egyptian and Arabian wares, whence the flames, borne aloft, entered the palace and consumed very extensive portions of it, so that nearly all the State records were destroyed... the conflagration could not be extinguished by human power, though vast numbers both of civilians and soldiers carried water, and Commodus himself came in from the suburb and encouraged them.” — **Dio Cassius 72.24.**

Marble Plan of Rome

- 150 slabs mounted on the interior wall of the Temple of Peace – scale c.1-240.
- Created between AD 203-211.
- About 10% of original surface survives.

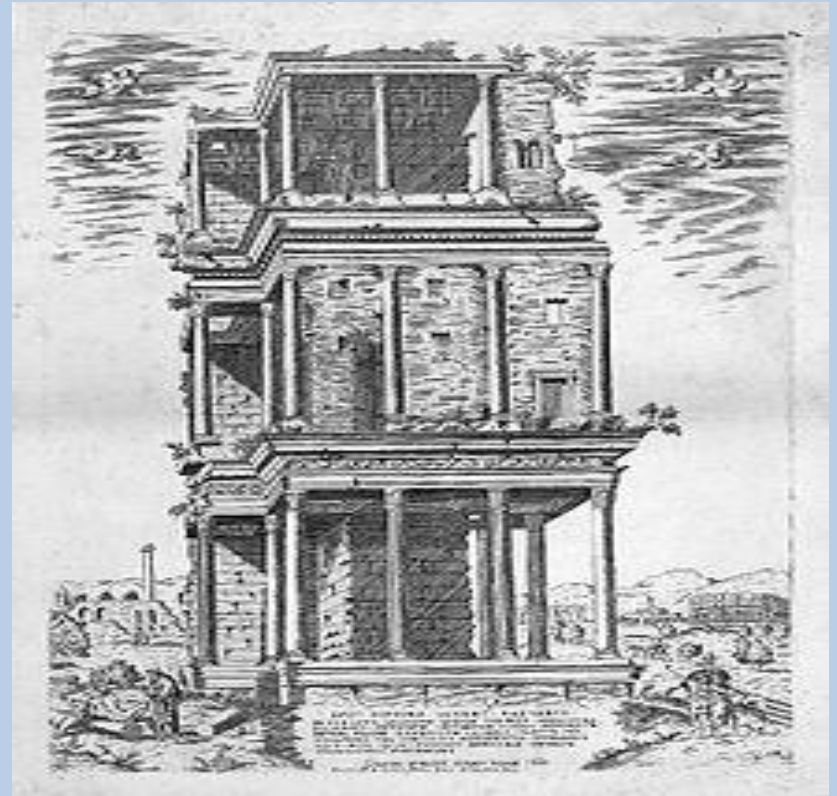


Septizonium – AD 203

- Designed to give a monumental front to the Imperial Palace (new wing been added to Domus Augusta) – monumental fountain house.

“...he intended the monument to greet Africans arriving by the Appian Way.” – **SHA Severus 24.3.**

“[reporting a riot in AD 355] And a few days later the people again, excited with their usual passion, and alleging a scarcity of wine, assembled at the Septemzodium, a much frequented spot, where the emperor Marcus Aurelius [Severus] erected a Nymphaeum of pretentious style.” – **Ammianus Marcellinus 15.7.**



- Engraving of part of the Septizonium, dating to AD 1582.

Arcus Argentariorum

“To [Septimius Severus]... and to [Carcalla]... the bankers and cattle-traders of this place [dedicated this arch], out of devotion to their divine powers.” – *ILS 426*.



Baths of Caracalla

“In Rome, the Emperor Caracalla left behind him the great baths in his name. In these baths is a heated tub-room (*cella solearis*), whose manner of construction the architects say cannot be imitated. – **SHA *Caracalla* 9.4.9.**

- Occupies an area of around 30 acres.





hot rooms		caldarium		hot rooms	
palaestra	services	tepidarium		services	palaestra
	social	frigidarium		social	
entrances	dressing	natatio		dressing	entrances

Useful Reading

- Potter, D. S. (2004) *The Roman Empire at Bay AD 180-395*. – Chapter 4.