

Herodian

Herodian, or Herodianus, of Syria lived from 170-240 CE. He was a contemporary writer, but not a political or social force, therefore little is known of him. His contribution to history was a work in Greek of eight books of the history of the Roman emperors, from the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE, to the accession of Gordian III in 238 CE.

Herodian's history is one of the most important sources of information for the third century, but it is said that his writings were poorly organized and lacked chronological uniformity. Because of this, the writings of Dio Cassius are preferred for this time period. For the history of events not covered by Dio Cassius, and for events more local to Syria and Parthia, Herodian's account has proven to be a worthy source for historians today.

-Ed. C. R. Whittaker, London, 1969-70.

-"Herodian" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. Ed. M.C. Howatson and Ian Chilvers. Oxford University Press, 1996. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Cal State Fullerton - Mission Viejo. 16 October 2004
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t9.e1404>>

-"Herodian," United Nations of Roma Victor- History: Roman Empire, 16 October 2004
<<http://www.unrv.com/culture/herodian.php>>

The revolt of Ardashir (c. 208-224)

Herodian VI, 2, 6-7: He (i.e. Ardashir) was the first Persian to dare to launch an attack on the kingdom of the Parthians and the first to succeed to recover the kingdom from the Persians. Indeed, after Darius had been deprived of his kingdom by Alexander of Macedon, the Macedonians and Alexander's successors divided up the territory by countries and ruled the nations of the East and all Asia for many years. 7. When these governors quarreled and the power of the Macedonians was weakened by continual wars, they say that Arsaces, a Parthian by race, was the first to persuade the barbarians in those regions to revolt from the Macedonians. Invested with the crown with the consent of the Parthians and the neighbouring barbarians, Arsaces ruled as king. For a long time the empire remained in his own family, down to Artabanus in our time; then Artaxerxes killed Artabanus and took possession of his kingdom for the Persians. After easily subduing the neighbouring barbarian nations, the king began to plot against the Roman Empire.

(Echols, 1961: pp. 155-7, revised)

Ardashir's invasion of Roman territory and his demand for the restitution of the Achaemenid possessions in Europe

Herodian VI, 2, 1-2: And so for thirteen years he (i.e. Alexander Severus) ruled the empire in blameless fashion as far as he personally was concerned. In the tenth (MS: fourteenth)¹ year (AD 222), however, unexpected dispatches from the governors of Syria and Mesopotamia revealed that Artaxerxes (i.e. Ardashir), the King of the Persians, had conquered the Parthians and broken up their Eastern kingdom, killing Artabanus who was

formerly called the Great King and wore the double diadem. Artaxerxes then subdued all the barbarians on his border and forced them to pay tribute. He did not remain quiet, however, or stay on his side of the Tigris river, but, after crossing its banks which were the borders of the Roman empire, he overran Mesopotamia and threatened Syria. 2. The mainland facing Europe, separated from it by the Aegean Sea and the Propontic Gulf, and the region called Asia he wished to recover for the Persian empire. Believing these regions to be his by inheritance, he declared that all countries in that area, including Ionia and Caria, had been ruled by Persian governors, from the rule of Cyrus, who first made the Median empire Persian, and ending with Darius, the last of the Persian monarchs, whose kingdom Alexander the Macedonian had destroyed. He asserted that it was therefore proper for him to recover for the Persians the kingdom which they formerly possessed.²

(Echols, p. 156, revised)

The reply of Alexander Severus to Ardashir

Herodian VI, 2, 3-4: When the Eastern revealed these developments in their dispatches, Alexander was greatly disturbed by these anticipated tidings, particularly since, raised from childhood in an age of peace, he had spent his entire life in urban ease and comfort. Before doing anything else, he thought it best, after consulting his advisors, to send an embassy to the king and by his letters halt the invasion and check his expectations. 4. In these letters he told Artaxerxes that he must remain within his own borders and not initiate any action; let him not, deluded by vain hopes, stir up a great war, but rather let each of them be content with what already was his. Artaxerxes would find fighting against the Romans not the same thing as fighting with his barbarian kinsmen and neighbours. Alexander further reminded the Persian king of the victories won over them by Augustus, Trajan, Verus, and Severus. By writing letters of this kind, Alexander thought that he would persuade the barbarian to remain quiet or frighten him to the same course.

(Echols, pp. 156-7, revised)

Invasion of Mesopotamia and Cappadocia by Ardashir

Herodian VI, 2, 5-6: But Artaxerxes (i.e. Ardashir) ignored Alexander's written messages; believing that the matter would be settled by arms, not by words, he took the field, pillaging and looting all the Roman provinces. He overran and plundered Mesopotamia with both infantry and cavalry. He laid siege to the Roman garrison camps on the banks of the rivers, the camps which defended the empire. Rash by nature and elated by successes beyond his expectations, Artaxerxes was convinced that he could surmount every obstacle in his path. 6. The considerations which led him to wish for an expanded empire were not small.

(Echols, p. 157, revised)

Alexander Severus' preparation for his campaign and his speech before the troops

Herodian, VI, 3, 1-4, 3: When the bold actions of this Eastern barbarian were disclosed to Alexander while he was passing the time in Rome, he found these affronts unendurable. Though the undertaking distressed him and was contrary to his inclinations, since his governors there were calling for him, he made preparations for departure. He assembled for army service picked men from Italy and from all the Roman provinces, enrolling those whose age and physical condition qualified them for military service. 2. The gathering of an army equal in size to the reporting strength of the attacking barbarians caused the greatest upheaval throughout the Roman world. When these troops were gathered in Rome, Alexander ordered them to assemble on the usual plain. There he mounted a platform and addressed them as follows: 3. 'I wished, fellow soldiers, to make the customary speech to you, the speech from which I, speaking to the popular taste, receive approval, and you, when you hear it, receive encouragement.

Since you have now enjoyed many years of peace, you may be startled to hear something unusual or contrary to your anticipations. 4. Brave and intelligent men should pray for things to turn out for the best, but they should also endure whatever befalls. It is true that the enjoyment of things done for pleasure brings gratification, but good results from the manliness involved in setting matters straight when necessity demands. To initiate unjust actions is not the way of issuing a fair challenge, but it is a courageous deed to rid oneself of those who are troublesome if it is done with good conscience. Optimism stems not from committing injustice but from preventing injustice from being committed. 5. The Persian Artaxerxes has slain his master Artabanus, and the Parthian empire is now Persian. Despising our arms and contemptuous of the Roman reputation, Artaxerxes is attempting to overrun and destroy our imperial possessions. I first endeavored by letters and persuasion to check his mad greed and his lust for the property of others. But the king, with barbarian arrogance, is unwilling to remain within his own boundaries, and challenges us to battle. 6. Let us not hesitate to accept the challenge. You veterans remind yourselves of the victories which you often won over the barbarians under the leadership of Severus and my father, Antoninus. You recruits, thirsting for glory and honour, make it clear that you know how to live at peace mildly and with propriety, but make it equally clear that you turn with courage to the tasks of war when necessity demands. 7. The barbarian is bold against the hesitant and the cowardly, but he does not stand up in like fashion to those who fight back; it is not in set battles that they fight the enemy with hope of success. Rather, they believe that whatever success they win is the result of plundering after a feigned retreat and flight. Discipline and organized battle tactics favour us, together with the fact that we have always learnt to conquer the barbarian.'

4 When Alexander finished speaking, the cheering army promised its wholehearted support for the war. After a lavish distribution of money to the soldiers, the emperor ordered preparations for his departure from the city. He then went before the senate and made a speech similar to the one recorded above; following this, he publicly announced his plans to march out. 2. On the appointed day, after he had performed the sacrifices prescribed for departures, Alexander left Rome, weeping and repeatedly looking back at the city. The senate and all the people escorted him, and everyone wept, for he was held

in great affection by the people of Rome, among whom he had been reared and whom he had ruled with moderation for many years.

3. Traveling rapidly, he came to Antioch, after visiting the provinces and the garrison camps in Illyricum; from that region he collected a huge force of troops. On arrival at Antioch he continued his preparations for the war, giving the soldiers military training under field conditions.

(Echols, pp. 157-60, revised)

Renewed attempts at negotiation and their failure

Herodian, VI, 4, 4-6: He thought it best to send another embassy to the Persian king to discuss the possibility of peace and friendship, hoping to persuade him or to intimidate him by his presence. The barbarian, however, sent the envoys back to the emperor unsuccessful. Then Artaxerxes chose four hundred very tall Persians, outfitted them with fine clothes and gold ornaments, and equipped them with horses and bows; He sent these men to Alexander as envoys, thinking that their appearance would dazzle the Romans.

The envoys said that the great king Artaxerxes 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. When the Persian envoys delivered these demands, Alexander ordered the entire four hundred to be arrested; stripping off their finery, he sent the group to Phrygia, where villages and farm land were assigned to them, but he gave orders that they were not to be allowed to return to their native country. He treated them in this fashion because he thought it would violate their sanctity and it would be cowardly to put them to death, since they were not fighting but simply carrying out their master's orders.

(Echols, p. 160, revised)

Suppression of mutinies by Alexander Severus

Herodian, VI, 4, 7: This is the way the affair turned out. While Alexander was preparing to cross the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and lead his army into barbarian territory, several mutinies broke out among his troops, especially among the soldiers from Egypt; but revolts occurred also in Syria, where the soldiers attempted to proclaim a new emperor. These defections were quickly discovered and suppressed. At this time Alexander transferred to other stations those field armies which seemed better able to check the barbarian invasions.

(Echols, p. 160)

The Persian campaign of Alexander Severus (231-3)

Herodian, VI, 5, 1-6, 6: After thus setting matters in order, Alexander, considering that the huge army he had assembled was now nearly equal in power and number to the barbarians, consulted his advisers and then divided his force into three separate armies. One army he ordered to overrun the territory of the Medes and to reconnoitre the northern regions and pass through Armenia, which seemed to favour the Roman cause.³ 2. He sent the second army to the eastern sector of the barbarian territory, where, it is said, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at their confluence empty into very dense marshes; these are the only rivers whose mouths cannot be clearly determined.⁴ The third and most powerful army he kept himself, promising to lead it against the barbarians in the central sector.⁵ He thought that in this way he would attack them from different directions when they were unprepared and not anticipating such strategy, and he believed that the Persian horde, constantly split up to face their attackers on several fronts, would be weaker and less unified for battle. 3. The barbarians, it may be noted, do not have a paid army as the Romans do, nor do they maintain trained standing armies. Rather, all the available men, and sometimes the women too, mobilize at the king's order.⁶ At the end of the war each man returns to his regular occupation, taking as his pay whatever falls to his lot from the general booty. 4. They use the bow and the horse in war, as the Romans do, but the barbarians are reared with these from childhood, and live by hunting; they never lay aside their quivers or dismount from their horses, but employ them constantly for war and the chase.

Alexander therefore devised what he believed to be the best possible plan for action, only to have fortune defeat his design. 5. The army sent through Armenia had an agonizing passage over the high, steep mountains of that country.⁷ (As it was still summer, however, they were able to complete the crossing.) Then, plunging down into the land of the Medes, the Roman soldiers devastated the countryside, burning many villages and carrying off much loot. Informed of this, the Persian king put up as strong a resistance as he could, but met with little success in his efforts to halt the Roman advance. 6. This is rough country; while it provided firm footing and easy passage for the infantry, the rugged mountain terrain hampered the movements of the barbarian cavalry and prevented their riding the Romans or even making contact with them. Then men came and reported to the Persian king that another Roman army had appeared in eastern Parthia and was overrunning the plains there.

7. Fearing that the Romans, after ravaging Parthia unopposed, might advance into Persia, Artaxerxes left behind a force which he thought strong enough to defend Media, and hurried with his entire army into the eastern sector. The Romans were advancing much too carelessly because they had met no opposition and, in addition, they believed that Alexander and his army, the largest and most formidable of the three, had already attacked the barbarians in the central sector. They thought, too, that their own advance would be easier and less hazardous when the barbarians were constantly being drawn off elsewhere to meet the threat of the emperor's army. 8. All three Roman armies had been ordered to make a flanking assault on the enemy's territory, and a final rendezvous had been selected where they would meet after the regions in between them had been brought under control. But Alexander failed them: he did not bring his army or come himself into barbarian territory, either because he was afraid to risk his life for the Roman empire or

because his mother's feminine fears or excessive mother love restrained him. 9. She blocked his efforts to behave bravely by persuading him that he should let others risk their lives for him, but that he should not personally fight in battle. It was this reluctance of his which led to the destruction of the advancing Roman army.⁸ The king attacked it unexpectedly with his entire force and trapped the Romans like fish in a net; firing their arrows from all sides at the encircled soldiers, the Persians massacred the whole army. 10. The outnumbered Romans were unable to stem the attack of the Persian horse; they used their shields to protect those parts of their bodies exposed to the Persian arrows. Content merely to protect themselves, they offered no resistance. As a result, all the Romans were driven into the one spot, where they made a wall of their shields and fought like an army under the siege. Hit and wounded from every side, they held out bravely as long as they could, but in the end all were killed. The Romans suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old.⁹ The successful outcome of these important events encouraged the Persian king to anticipate better things in the future.

6. When the disaster was reported to Alexander, who was seriously ill either from despondency or from the lack of acclimatization to the unfamiliar climate, he fell into despair. The rest of the army angrily denounced the emperor because the invading army had been betrayed as a result of his failure to carry out the plans faithfully agreed upon. 2. And now Alexander refused to endure his indisposition and the stifling air any longer. The entire army was sick and the troops from Illyricum especially were seriously ill and dying, being accustomed to moist, cool air and to more food than they were being issued. 3. Eager to set out for Antioch, Alexander ordered the army in Media to proceed to that city. This army, on its return journey, was almost totally destroyed in the mountains; a great many soldiers suffered mutilation in the wintry condition of the region, and only a handful of the large number of troops who started the march managed to reach Antioch. The emperor led his own large force to that city, and many of them perished too; so the affair brought the greatest discontent to the army and the greatest dishonour to Alexander, who was betrayed by bad luck and bad judgement. Of the three armies into which he had divided his total force, the greater part was lost by various misfortunes – disease, war, and cold.

4. In Antioch, Alexander was quickly revived by the cool air and good water of that city after the acrid drought in Mesopotamia, and the soldiers too recovered there. The emperor tried to console them for their sufferings by a lavish distribution of money, in the belief that this was the only way he could regain their good will. He assembled an army and prepared to march against the Persians again if they should give trouble and not remain quiet. 5. But it was reported that the Persian king had disbanded his army and sent each soldier back to his own country. Though the barbarians seemed to have conquered because of their superior strength, they were exhausted by the numerous skirmishes in Media and by the battle in Parthia, where they lost many killed and many wounded. The Romans were not defeated because they were cowards; indeed, they did the enemy much damage and lost only because they were outnumbered. 6. Since the total number of troops which fell on both sides was virtually identical, the surviving barbarians appeared to have won, but by superior numbers, not by superior power. It is no little proof of how much the barbarians suffered that for three or four years after this they remained quiet and did

not take up arms. All this the emperor learned while he was at Antioch. Relieved of anxiety about the war, he grew more cheerful and less apprehensive and devoted himself to enjoying the pleasures which the city offered.

(Echols, pp. 161-5, revised)

Causes of Alexander Severus' withdrawal from the East

Herodian VI, 7, 1-6: 1. Alexander thought that Persian affairs would remain quiet and peaceful for the duration of the truce which would delay and hinder the barbarian king from launching a second campaign. For the barbarian army, once disbanded, was not easily remustered, as it was not organized on a permanent basis. More a mob than a regular army, the soldiers had only those supplies which each man brought for himself when he reported for duty. Moreover, the Persians are reluctant to leave their wives, children, and homeland. 2. Now unexpected messages and dispatches upset Alexander and caused him even greater anxiety: the governors in Illyria reported that the Germans 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 the villages here. They reported also that the provinces of Illyricum bordering on and close to Italy were in danger. 3. The governors informed the emperor that it was absolutely necessary that he and his entire army come to them. The revelation of these developments terrified Alexander and aroused great concern among the soldiers from Illyricum, who seemed to have suffered a double disaster; the men who had undergone many hardships in the Persian expedition now learned that their families had been slaughtered by the Germans. They were naturally enraged at this, and blamed Alexander for their misfortunes because he had betrayed affairs in the East by his cowardice and carelessness and was hesitant and dilatory about the situation in the North. 4. Alexander and his advisers, too, feared for the safety of Italy itself. They did not consider the Persian threat at all similar to the German. The fact is that those who live in the East, separated from the West by a great continent and a broad sea, scarcely ever hear of Italy, whereas the provinces of Illyricum, since they are narrow and very little of their territory is under Roman control, make the Germans actually neighbours of the Italians: the two peoples thus share common borders. 5. Although he loathed the idea, Alexander glumly announced his departure for Illyria. Necessity compelled him to go, however, and so, leaving behind a force which he considered strong enough to defend the Roman frontiers, after he had seen that the camps and outposts were given more efficient defences, and had assigned to each camp its normal complement of troops, the emperor marched out against the Germans with the rest of his army. 6. Completing the journey quickly, he encamped on the banks of the Rhine and made preparations for the German campaign. Alexander spanned the river with boats lashed together to form a bridge, thinking that this would provide an easy means of crossing for his soldiers.

(Echols, pp. 165-6, revised)

Eastern troops taken by Alexander Severus to Germany

Herodian VI, 7, 8: Alexander had brought with him many Moorish javelin-men and a huge force of archers from the East and from the region of Osrhoene, together with Parthian deserters who had offered their help; with these he prepared to battle with the Germans.¹⁰

(Echols, p. 166)

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¹ The emendation from 'fourteen' to 'ten' is generally accepted even though it has no manuscriptal support. Herodian states elsewhere (e.g. VI, 9, 8) that Alexander Severus ruled for fourteen years – though most modern scholars would subscribe to thirteen (i.e. 222-35). It is difficult to imagine that both the Persian and German campaigns could have undertaken in the space of one year, especially when the former clearly spanned at least one winter. The date of 231/2 for the Persian campaign is also suggested by the numismatic and epigraphic evidence. Cf. Cassola, 1968: 284n.; Whittaker, 1970: 88-9, n. 1; and Felix, 1985: 32-3.

² It is questionable whether Ardashir had intended so early in his reign to restore the Persian Empire to its Achaemenid frontiers. Herodian was likely to have tried to explain present Persian intentions in the light of traditional Graeco-Roman (especially Greek) historiography. The desire of Ardashir to establish Sassanian control over the frontier client kingdoms like Hatra and Armenia would have inevitably embroiled him in conflict with Rome, which saw them as an essential buffer zone for its defences in the east. Cf. Potter 1990: 371-80.

³ The northern column or 'wing' of the expedition under the command of Julius Palmatus probably took the road from Zela (modern Sille) to Sebastopolis (modern Sulusaray), as evidenced by the inscriptions translated on p.352. The route links the Pontic port of Amisos and the metropolis of Amasia with the main thoroughfare to Armenia passing through Sebastopolis.

⁴ The route of this southern column appears to be designed to bypass the Sassanian capital-complex of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and to ravage Mesene and Elymias. It would later reunite with the main force under the emperor. The difficulty of ascertaining the precise route of this column is intrinsic to Herodian's weak grasp of geography of the more outlying areas of his known world. Cf. Cassola, 1968: 298.

⁵ The most natural route for the central column, the main thrust of Alexander Severus' attack, would have been to cross the Euphrates at Zeugma and then march across Mesopotamia via Carrhae to the Tigris. Cf. Dillemann, 1962: 209. However, the mention of a visit by Alexander to Palmyra (see p. 23) suggests a more southerly route, perhaps a feint march to convince Ardashir that the main attack would come in the south. The latter appeared to have swallowed the bait as it was against the southern column that he directed his main counterattack. The central column may have sailed down the Euphrates past Dura Europos where the holder of the recently created post of *dux ripae* may have been in charge of transit arrangements. The army then marched across the Syrian desert to Singara.

⁶ The presence of substantial numbers of women in Persian expeditionary forces is often noted by Roman writers. See, e.g., Zonaras XII, 23 (ii, p. 596, 1-4), Libanius, *or.* LIX, 100 and Julian, *or.* I, 27A. Cf. Lieu, 1986b: 480.

⁷ The hostility of the Arsacid royal house in Armenia to the Sassanians would have undoubtedly assisted the passage of this column through the kingdom. The close connection between Rome and Armenia in this period is also attested by the appearance of 'Arta[xata]', an important Armenian city, in a list of satrapies inscribed on a Roman shield found under the 'Tower of the Archers' at Dura Europos. Cf. Cumont, 1926: 331 (Les Parchemins IX, line 12).

⁸ This blaming of the domination of Alexander by his mother Mamaea for the disaster is typical of Herodian's understanding of the last year of the emperor's reign. Cf. Whittaker, 1970:114, n. 1.

⁹ The tradition of the annihilation of the southern column appears to have come from a source hostile to Alexander Severus and is inconsistent with Herodian's own statement that the Persians failed to exploit

their victory and agreed to a truce. Cf. VI, 6, 5-6. It is possible that the battle was bitter but indecisive, causing serious losses to both sides. Cf. Welles, 1941:100-1.

¹⁰ The Osrhoenean archers later plotted against Maximinus after the murder of Alexander Severus. The plot fizzled out after the execution of the *praepositus* (?) of the Osrhoeneans, a certain Macedo, by Maximinus. Cf. Herodian VII, 1, 9-11. The Roman camp at Zaguræ (Ain Sinu, on the main route between Singara and the Tigris) might have been the recruiting and training ground for these mounted archers. Cf. Oates 1968b: 91-2.