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Criticising the Benefactors: The Severans and the Return of Dynastic Rule

Jesper M. Madsen

Abstract: This chapter focuses on Dio’s critique of the Severan dynasty and on dynastic rule in general. The negative portrayal of the emperors of Dio’s own lifetime is here read as a frustration over how the rule of a new dynasty had replaced the practice of electing the next emperor through adoption among established members of the Senate, who had already proven their administrative and military skills. Even if the notion of how the adoptive emperors opened up their government and involved the senators in the decision making process was an illusion, Dio still portrays the better part of the second century as one of the most stable periods in Roman politics, in which the Senate both acted as the emperors’ trusted advisory board and formed the body from which the next emperor was chosen. When read in its entirety, Dio’s *Roman History* stands out as work of political history with the specific aim to convince the readers of how monarchical rule was the only safe form of government for a state the size of Rome. But, just as importantly, it needed to be a monarchy in which the emperor took into consideration the advice of a Senate recruited from across the entirety of the Empire.

Cassius Dio’s criticism of the Severan dynasty is well-known to those who study him as a historian of Rome’s political history in the High Empire. Most of the account from the years during which Dio served as both senator and as valued member of the imperial administration is devoted to the strained political climate between changing emperors and the senatorial elite, who were exposed to terror, mockery and prosecutions – often with very little actual substance behind the accusations.\(^1\) For his own part, Dio was a successful and well-placed member of the Senate who particularly in his later years joined the highest circles of the imperial administration.

\(^1\) On how numerous senators were prosecuted unfairly (for instance for the alleged support of Niger), see Cass. Dio 75[74].9.4; on Caracalla’s lack of interest in senatorial advice and pursuit of others’ lives and property during his reign, see Cass. Dio 78[77].10-11.5.
This ability to move in the hierarchy and stay close to power was a talent that not only testifies to his political skills but also to a remarkable endurance, which made one emperor after another choose him for a whole range of different tasks. The consular appointment in around 205 and the leading role in Caracalla’s visit to Bithynia were perhaps two appointments that were to be expected, while the post as curator in Smyrna and Pergamum in 218/9 during the reign of Macrinus was more surprising given that Dio had already been a consul by the time he was assigned to Asia. If Dio did experience a setback in these years, perhaps after some disagreement with Caracalla, he soon regained his lost status when appointed as the governor of Africa either under Elagabalus or in the reign of Alexander Severus; later, he was appointed to Dalmatia and Pannonia before he returned to Rome in 229, where he was given the consulship for the second time with Alexander Severus as his colleague.

The climb to the top was promoted by the same emperors which Dio criticises heavily throughout the last part of the *Roman History*. Even the second consulship, or Alexander Severus’ role in it, was a matter of strong resentment: Alexander Severus, according to Dio, felt unable to protect his fellow consul in the city of Rome after Dio as governor had disciplined the legions in Pannonia and so as a result had fallen out with the Praetorian Guard. That Alexander felt he had to ask Dio to serve his term of office from his villa on Capua was a decision which the historian saw as an example of Alexander Severus’ weakness and incapacity to rule. The inability to control the army was to Dio an example of how under the Severans the army had become too powerful. Yet he also uses the opportunity to underline how the young emperor overreacts as Dio, when visiting Alexander in Rome, says he felt not the least bit threatened by the soldiers.

Criticising emperors who in various ways had promoted the careers of later political commentators was common enough. Pliny and Tacitus both criticise Domitian for what they saw as his tyrannical form of government and both celebrated the political change they claimed Trajan enjoyed support from several influential members of the Senate; see Davenport 2012, 799-804, also on Dio’s (lukewarm) relationship with the inner circles of the reign of Severus and Caracalla, cf. Meckler 1999, 40; Siller 2001, 407. For the nature of Dio’s criticism of Caracalla as a widely-shared senatorial phenomenon rather than the attacks of an isolated senator who felt neglected by the current regime, see Scott 2015, 159.

2 It has been pointed out that Dio may have been ignored by Caracalla who like Septimius Severus enjoyed support from several influential members of the Senate; see Davenport 2012, 799-804, also on Dio’s (lukewarm) relationship with the inner circles of the reign of Severus and Caracalla, cf. Meckler 1999, 40; Siller 2001, 407. For the nature of Dio’s criticism of Caracalla as a widely-shared senatorial phenomenon rather than the attacks of an isolated senator who felt neglected by the current regime, see Scott 2015, 159.

3 For Dio’s career see Millar 1964, 193-194; Rich 1990, 2-3.

4 Cass. Dio 80[79].4.2.
represented when entering Rome in around the year 100.\textsuperscript{5} What made Dio different was how he criticised all the Severan emperors while the dynasty was still in power. This raises the question of double standards between Dio’s writing and his everyday life as a trusted magistrate, but the criticism also testifies to a political commentator who was very sceptical indeed towards the dynasty in power and the form of government they practiced – even if he served that same dynasty to the best of his abilities – as well as an attempt to challenge the version that the Severans themselves advertised.\textsuperscript{6}

This chapter focuses on Dio’s overall critique of the Severans and addresses why one of the dynasty’s valued magistrates was so repelled by a government that he served. It is standard among modern scholars to look for an explanation in the strengthening relationship between the senators, who once again felt the pressure and arrogance of a new family dynasty, where one emperor after another sidestepped the Senate; it is often assumed that Dio was trying to promote the interests of the senatorial order, his own social stratum, at a time when senators felt the pressure from both the soldiers and the equestrian order; a tension discussed, for instance, in the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue.\textsuperscript{7}

Even if the influence senators were allowed on the government was modest at best, the isolation of the Senate and the degrading treatment of its members all served as a reminder that Rome’s political elite was once again left out of the decision-making process. The killing of senators, the emperor’s disrespectful behaviour towards the Senate and the attack on Rome’s religious traditions, which different Severan emperors were “guilty” of, no doubt contributed to Dio’s negative portrait of the dynasty as a whole. But as shall be argued in this chapter, Dio’s criticism of the Severans went further than mere frustrations over how the Senate was no longer treated with the respect it enjoyed in the course of the second century.

When read in its entirety, the \textit{Roman History} offers the tale of how enlighten monarchy was the only form of government suitable for a state the size of Rome and Dio emphasizes that democracy, in the sense of free political competition among members of the elite would unavoidable lead to political instability and civil war (Cass. Dio 44.2.2-4.). Dio’s account of

\textsuperscript{5} Plin. \textit{Pan.} 48, 66 on Domitian’s unlawful exclusion of the Senate and prosecution of its members; Tac. \textit{Agr.} 45 on the killing of consuls and senators.

\textsuperscript{6} Kemezis 2014, 146.

\textsuperscript{7} Aalders 1986, 295. For the Maecenas’ speech as Dio’s view on the ideal organisation of the Principate, see Reinhold 1988, 165; Bleicken 1962, 447, 454; De Blois 1998/1999, 3406.
Rome’s political history should therefore be read as a contribution to what may well have been a contemporary attitude or debate within Rome’s political elite about how to establish or re-establish a more stable form of government than was currently the reality under the leadership of the Severans. The solution Dio offers is that the best form of government was the one where power and political responsibility rest with the experienced and dedicated monarch who is chosen from among the most capable and esteemed men in the Empire, the proven senators. Unlike the young and often less interested prince, the experienced senators had the required political and military skills to govern Rome and ensure the desired political stability both in relation to the Senate in Rome and in the provinces.

In the course of the work, Dio presents the reader with a narrative aimed to show the problem of democracy and free political competition and how only a monarch in cooperation with the Senate could lift the task of ensuring political stability and peace. He is therefore not the copyist who read as much as possible and then after ten years of study turned other writers’ thoughts and his own notes into a work of history. Dio had, in addition, higher hopes than a short-term wish to improve the status and security of the senatorial elite in the third century – a time where the Senate was under considerable pressure; and even if the *Roman History* was a considerable challenge and the analysis not always impressive, there was a political agenda and strong ambition behind the attempt to write Rome’s political history from the foundation of the city to the moment Dio withdrew from the political scene in 229.

The *Roman History* was no doubt influenced by political atmosphere in Dio’s own lifetime and by what he himself saw from the benches in the Senate house. To see the government of the young, inexperienced, brutal and largely indifferent emperors unfold was surely a source of much

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8 Kemezis 2014, 133-135.
9 On how Dio did not simply copy the works of others, see Millar 1964, 28. Yet, Millar holds that Dio had “no explicit framework in terms of which he interprets the events he narrates” and claims that Dio had no aim with the work other than composing the text itself (73). On Dio’s use of a range of sources and his use of this material to compose his own analysis, see Rich 1990, 5.
10 On Dio’s hope that the senators would enjoy the deserved social status and security, see Millar 1964, 117-118. See also Wirszubski 1950, 166-167. For the benefit of stability, law, and order enjoyed by senators in the second century, see Ando 2012, 6, Gleason 2011, 37.
11 Scott 2015, 159.
frustration both to Dio and to the other members of the Senate, and the criticism of the Severans was in that sense predictable.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet there are elements in the \textit{Roman History} to suggest that Dio’s criticism was more profound than an old senator’s frustration over young and ungenerous emperors.\textsuperscript{13} What seems to have been a matter of more concern was how a new family dynasty managed to establish itself and consequently replaced the practice of choosing the next emperor from among members of the Senate. The young Severans were in many ways intolerable, but were the result of Septimius Severus’ decision to pursue dynastic rule after both the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties, in Dio’s eyes, had proven unfit to rule and after, as we shall see below, it was clear to Severus how Caracalla would turn out.\textsuperscript{14} Severus was therefore the one responsible for abolishing the political practice of adopting the next emperor from among the senators and in that sense, a form of government in which the senators were represented by one of their own, allowing them real influence in the political process.

In the following, the \textit{Roman History} is read as a work with a politicising agenda. In the course of the work, Dio tells the story of a political system; it can be seen as a contribution either to a contemporary debate or as a source of inspiration for how to achieve the most stable form of government. How bold Dio was and how strong an impact he could have had on debate in Rome depends on when he began to share his thoughts. The question of how to date the work is a challenging one and rests on Dio’s own words about how he spent ten years collecting the material and another twelve years writing the text. The key question is when Dio started organizing his thoughts. It is generally assumed that that process began in the late 190s immediately after he had published his other two scripts on the accession of Septimius Severus and the civil wars after the fall of Commodus.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, there are elements in \textit{Roman History} to suggest that the main text, from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}Scott 2015, 162-163.
\item \textsuperscript{13}On Julia Domna’s position as Caracalla’s secretary and her government on his behalf, see Cass. Dio 78[77].18.2. For the central role at court played by both the mothers and grandmothers of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus, see Cass. Dio 80[79].11.1; 80[79].14.2. and Cass. Dio 80[79].19.2 respectively.
\item \textsuperscript{14}On Caracalla’s intention to kill his brother and to the plot against Severus, see Cass. Dio 77[76].14.1.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Millar 1964, 28-32; Edmondson 1992, 24-28; Swan 2004, 36; Murison 1999, 8-12.
\end{itemize}
the foundation of Rome to the death of Severus, was either written or substantially revised in 220s and the early 230s after Dio’s return to Bithynia.

If Dio finished the work after his the return to Nicaea, it is unclear what kind of impact his thoughts would have had on the political elite in Rome. Like Fergus Millar one may reasonably ask how many readers Dio could have had outside the circle of his immediate friends, the lettered elite in Nicaea and other interested readers who came across one of the few copies in circulation. Every historical work is of course a product of the author’s own time. But what part of Dio’s lifetime that served as his source of inspiration depends on the time of composition or at least on whether he had an opportunity to return to the text before its publication.

If the *Roman History* was published as whole in the 230s after Dio was safely back in his hometown or maybe even dead, then his thoughts on Roman politics and the political system in general may well have had a limited impact on the political debate, not least in Rome, where access to the text would have been limited. Now, even if the work was published sometime in the early 230s, Dio and the extracts of the work could still have raised a voice in political debate. As Pliny the Younger did when he rewrote his speech to Trajan after delivering the first version in front of the emperor, Dio may well have invited likeminded friends to hear him read passages from the work; and it is only to be expected that he would have shared at least some of his thoughts on Roman politics and the current form of government with other senators.16 In the attempt to date the completion of the work, Millar suggests that the main part of the text was written sometime between 207 to 219 and that later on at the end of his life Dio covered the last part of his years in Rome, from Caracalla to Alexander Severus.17 According to Millar, Dio did not return to the text afterwards, which again, if true, suggests that the main part of the work was not influenced by what he lived to see after 219.18

A different approach to when the *Roman History* was composed is offered by Timothy Barnes who argues in favour of a much later date of completion. With references to the account of Octavian’s campaign in Pannonia in 35 BCE, where Dio seems to draw from his own experiences, Barnes suggests that book 49 was not written until after Dio arrived to the province, which points to a publication date sometime after 231.19 A middle ground between the early publication date with

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18 Millar 1964, 30.
19 Barnes 1984, 248.
no or few revisions to the main text and the suggestion that Dio finished the work sometime after 231 favours an early date but acknowledges that substantial revision could have been made in the 220s.  

One example is Adam Kemezis’ conclusion that Dio began working shortly after he received positive attention for his first published works; this would suggest that he started to collect his material sometime between 195-197 but then returned to the work later on in the second half of the 220s.  

How thoroughly Dio reworked the original text or whether he went through some or most of the initial draft is impossible to say. Much of what Dio wrote between 207 and 217 may not have been influenced by the political chaos after the death of Severus, even if Dio went back to look at some of what he had already written. But what matters here is not so much whether Dio’s view of Roman politics and history in general was influenced by the rule of the later Severans when he wrote the parts on the republican period or the books on the imperial period. Even if he started collecting the material sometime around 195, he would still have experienced Commodus, the reign of Septimius Severus, new rounds of civil wars and the rule of Caracalla when the main text was composed. In that sense, Dio’s experience from his years as senator would therefore still have had a considerable impact on the way he perceived and portrayed Rome’s political history.

Dio’s narrative about how Roman government and constitutional history developed over time opens with a point about competition for power and prestige and how the lack of honesty and modesty within Rome’s political elite had always been a challenge to the political system. After the tyranny of the kings was replaced by what Dio refers to as a democracy and after a period of relative political stability, where members of the Senate were capable of laying aside mutual differences, Rome entered a century of political chaos and civil war. Dio offers no simple

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20 See Dio 49.36.4; Kemezis 2014, 288; Barnes 1984, 248. Kemezis with Barnes also notes that Dio’s brief remark on his governorship in Africa suggests that the reader had already heard of the appointment before Dio mentions it, perhaps in the part of book 36 that has not survived. In addition, the description of Thapsus may also be seen as a product of Dio’s own experience from Africa (Barnes 1984, 248).

21 Kemezis 2014, 284. For further discussion and full bibliography on the date of composition, see 2014, 282, 285-287.

22 For the tyranny of the early kings see Dio’s remarks on Romulus at Cass. Dio 1.11, and on Tarquinius, see Cass. Dio 2.11.2-4. On the senators’ supposed attentiveness to the needs of the
explanation but points to how the lack of a strong external enemy meant that the political elite lost its sense of unity in the competition to secure political prestige and military glory. The turning point is dated to the second half of the second century BCE when Carthage and Macedonia were finally defeated (Cass. Dio frg. 52). Dio’s remark on the modesty among Rome’s leaders and determination to protect the state as well as the commonwealth in the Early and Middle Republic serves as a kind of statement that makes the crisis in the late republican period even more pronounced. The notion of how both moderation and morality were greater at times when Rome felt military pressure from foreign states and how members of the political elite turned on each other as soon as that threat diminished is a view Dio shares with Sallust – whom he mentions explicitly in the text. As a contemporary eyewitness to the political crises in the first century BCE and a strong critic of his peers, Sallust offers exactly the kind of thinking and evidence to prove the point of how Rome’s political elite was irresponsible.23

To prove his point, Dio ties Rome’s victories and the Romans’ newly acquired role in the Mediterranean to the political crisis by showing how first Tiberius and later Gaius Gracchus were the first Roman aristocrats to use the democratic constitution to follow their own political ambitions. He opens the account of the Late Republic on the rather depressing note (Cass. Dio frg. 71):24

ὅτι Μάρκος ጒকwishioς τό Γράκχῳ διὰ φιλονεικίαν συγγενικήν ἐκών ἀντηγωνίζετο. καὶ ἐκ τούτου οὐδὲν μέτριον ἐπράττετο, ἀλλ᾽ ἀντιφιλονεικοῦντες περιγενέσθαι μᾶλλον ἀλλήλων ἢ τὸ κοινὸν ὑφελῆσαι, πολλὰ μὲν καὶ βίαια, ὥσπερ ἐν δυναστείᾳ τινὶ ἀλλ᾽ οὐ δημοκρατίᾳ, ἐπραξαν, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἄτοπα, ὥσπερ ἐν πολέμῳ τινὶ ἀλλ᾽.

Marcus Octavius, because of a family feud with Gracchus, willingly became his opponent. Thereafter there was no semblance of moderation; but zealously vying, as they did, each to prevail over the other rather than to benefit the state, they committed many acts of violence more appropriate in a despotism than in a democracy, and suffered many unusual calamities commonwealth in the Early Republic, see the example of Fabius who when dictator allowed Rufus, his master of horse, to share the command against Hannibal (Cass. Dio 14.57.6).

23 On Sallust thoughts on Roman ambition, see Sall. Cat. 10-12. On Dio’s mention of Sallust, see Cass. Dio 40.63.4.

24 All translations are from Earnest Cary’s translation in the Loeb Classical Library.
appropriate to war rather than to peace.

From here the account moves on to narrate Rome’s political history as a story that moves between periods of political chaos in the Late Republican period, where the Empire was on the brink of dissolution, to the years of stability in the reign of Augustus. The enlightened rule of Rome’s first princeps was followed by two dynasties, the Julio-Claudians and the Flavians, where the emperors with Vespasian and perhaps Titus as the only real exception ruled as tyrants without much cooperation with the senatorial elite. With the accession of Nerva and the adoptive emperors, Rome reached its golden age in the second century until the political chaos and instability following the accession of Commodus brought back tyranny and a new period of dynastic rule. Dio’s criticism of Septimius Severus and the later Severan Emperors will here been read not as an isolated response to a regime that Dio thought was unacceptable but rather as part of a larger study of Rome’s political history and as a contribution to a debate about how to organise the best form of government for Rome. To follow Dio’s perception of Roman politics we start with the first political crisis and how a system where free competition and untamed ambition provided the recipe for political instability and eventually the disaster of civil war.

How democracy will always fail

That Rome’s democratic constitution was unable to ensure much-needed political stability is a key theme throughout Dio’s account of Late Republican Rome. In book 44 the reader is offered a comparison between democracy and monarchy. In the passage Dio argues that democracy might sound better as it gives the impression that everyone is equal by law, while monarchy, on the other hand had a more unpleasant ring to it although it has the potential to free the state from the agonies of open political competition. One thing Dio points at is how moderation was difficult in a democracy, at least in the case of Rome, where the political power was shared by relatively few families (Cass. Dio 44.2.1-5). Fear of instability and civil war is a theme Dio returns to, for instance in his conclusion to Augustus’ years in power. According to Dio, the Romans praised their leader for combining monarchy and democracy into a new form of government which freed Rome from the brutality of tyranny as well as the instability of democracy (Cass. Dio 56.43.4).

How the quest for power and prestige created a political environment in which Rome’s elite lost track of what was in the best interests of the state is another central element in the account of the Republic. Pompey’s extraordinary command against the pirates is, according to the
way Dio tells it, the story of how personal ambitions and nepotism provoked political decisions that were, if not against the law, then at least an example of how a democratic constitution was vulnerable when exposed to the ambitions of strong individuals who were able to use their public support to sidestep the Senate.25

In criticism of Pompey, Dio suggests that Gabinius, when tribune in 67, proposed Pompey for the extraordinary command against the pirates, not because of the general’s military credentials or because Gabinius had an eye for the commonwealth, but because Gabinius hoped that the support of Pompey could have a positive effect on his own career. Dio goes on to describe a dysfunctional political system in which a political elite would rather endure the raids of pirates on Italy’s shores than allow Pompey to solve the problem, as the achievement would make him even more popular to the Roman public (Cass. Dio 36.23-24).

Caesar’s land reforms of 59 are another example of how the political elite was incapable of setting personal ambitions and political differences aside to carry through much-needed redistribution of land. In a very politicised account of the events, Dio describes how the Senate refused to support Caesar, even if they found no fault with the law itself. Dio emphasizes the ways in which the senators had been included and their awareness that the land in question would not have to be confiscated. When they failed to support the law it was not because they did not recognize the need for a solution but because they feared or envied the popularity Caesar would gain should he be the one to pass the reforms (Cass. Dio 38.1-2). The law was finally carried through the assembly but not without violence, as is illustrated by the hurling of Bibulus, Caesar’s fellow consul, down the steps to the temple of Castor while attempting to speak in opposition to the measure (Cass. Dio 38.6.2-3). Now even if Caesar was the one behind the law that finally gave Pompey’s troops the land they had been promised, he does not appear as the visionary figure who found a solution to one of Rome’s many pressing problems. Instead, Caesar appears as just as selfish as his fellow senators, thinking more about how the reform would advance his own cause than about what was in the best interests of the state (Cass. Dio 38.2.3). It is characteristic of Dio’s perception of Roman politics in the Late Republic that Cato the Younger was the only honest man who, interestingly enough, was largely without any real power and who fell short the moment when (for all the wrong reasons) he failed to support the law (Cass. Dio 38.1-2.3).26 When seen

25 See also Coudry in this volume.

26 On Cato’s singular honesty, see Cass. Dio 37.57.3. For similar examples on how in Dio’s eyes the Late Republic was a dysfunctional political system, see the recall of Lucullus and the people’s
collectively, the account Dio offers of the republican period is of a time marked by dissolution, individual ambitions and political irresponsibility. It is worth noticing that none of the senators in Dio’s version was sincere, except perhaps Cato; but he fails when he tries to stop Caesar. Dio’s account of how every Roman politician was manipulative, looking to promote their own political career at all costs or at the very least trying to stop others in their tracks is overstated. Yet the many examples where members of Rome’s political elite used their military powers and influence with the masses to achieve personal ends help Dio prove the point of democracy’s dysfunctionality. According to the historian democracy would eventually promote the rise of strong individuals – men like Sulla, Pompey and Caesar – who he refers to as dynasts that would use their military powers and popularity to bypass the both the Senate and the constitution.27 A narrative in which dynasteia replaced democracy and caused a situation in which strong individuals fought each other in brutal civil wars was therefore a way to lead the reader to the logical conclusion that monarchy was the only way to ensure political stability and maintain internal peace.

The blessing of one-man rule
In Dio’s version the accession of Augustus meant that political competition was a thing of the past. At the beginning of the Principate, the senators were not Augustus’ peers and not by any means his equal partners in the government. After more than a century of political chaos, unhealthy competition, hatred and self-promotion, Rome’s political elite had first to recover their former decision to grant Pompey the command against Mithridates VI and Tiganes. Here, Dio underlines the lack of military rationale behind the change of command, which Manilius, the tribune behind the law, proposed to avoid prosecution for a law that he himself was behind (Cass. Dio 36.42). Another example of how the political elite is seen to have served their own interests is illustrated by the description of the support of ambitious senators, such as Cicero and Caesar, for Manilius’ measure in the hope that they too would benefit from Pompey’s popularity (Cass. Dio 36.43). Hatred and envy was also, in Dio mind, the reason why the Senate, let by a vindictive Lucullus, failed to ratify Pompey’s acts from the East – a move which easily could have led to a new civil war (Cass. Dio 37.49.4). Another example of the Senate’s irresponsibility were the many excessive honorary decrees voted to Caesar, of which some had obvious divine connotations. To Dio these honours had the potential to undermine the dictator’s authority and are presented as an important step towards Caesar’s assignation and the civil war that followed (Cass. Dio 44.1).

27 Kemezis 2004, 104-105, 115-156.
virtues (Cass. Dio 52.19.1) and Dio describes a process in which senators had to be gradually reintroduced to the decision making process. 28

Dio relates that the senators had lost interest in politics after they had handed their powers over to Augustus and many even stopped attending Senate meetings, perhaps as reaction to their loss of power. 29 In a long paragraph, the readers are told how Augustus made an effort first to change the senators’ attitude and then to include the senate in the political process. To ensure a larger turn out, two meetings were scheduled for each month well in advance and Augustus introduced fines for not attending just as he ensured that other public meetings or court days were not held on the same days. This effort to include the Senate is further exemplified by the new rule that a fixed number of senators had to attend the meetings before resolution could pass; the emperor had the number of senators counted when he was unable to attend the meetings himself (Cass. Dio 55.3.). 30 Another example of how Augustus worked to include the Senate was the decision to advertise new laws well before Senate meetings so that the members were given the opportunity to prepare and form an opinion before the actual discussion; at the meetings, Augustus would withhold his own views until the Senate had had a chance to speak freely without being influenced by his opinion (Cass. Dio 55.4; 55.34.1). 31

Dio offers a tale of the enlightened monarch who takes advice from Rome’s magistrates and from members of the Senate. It is worth noticing how Dio on the one hand portrays Augustus as wanting to appear as what Dio laconically calls a democrat, such as when he goes to court to defend a friend in the regular manner and has to accept the frankness of the opposing side as any other advocate (Cass. Dio 55.4.2) while he at the same time leaves no doubt that Augustus ruled Rome as an absolute monarch, in full control of the decision making process (Cass. Dio 53.17; 53.21.3). To Dio, Augustus’ version of the Principate was unconditionally a positive

28 For Augustus’ attempt to reduce the number of senators, see Cass. Dio 54.13-14. On how Augustus encouraged senators who had been elected to or installed in the ordo during the civil wars to withdraw, see Cass. Dio 52.42.

29 On the grant to Augustus of full control over the state by both Senate and people Cass. Dio 53.11-12.

30 For comment on the text, see Swan 2004, 51-53.

31 See Swan 2004, 56-57, 219-220. The last example is comparable to a similar remark on how Tiberius by following the same strategy terrorised the Senate, because the senators feared to disagree with the emperor (Cass. Dio 57.7.2-4).
development. He enacted the laws (Cass. Dio 53.12) and controlled the provinces in which the legions were stationed as well as the public funds. Now, because the people and the Senate granted Augustus his powers and because these were renewed every five or ten years (Cass. Dio 53.13.1), he was no tyrant.

Dio would naturally have been influenced by Augustus’ own version of how he was the one to have ended the civil wars, ensure peace and prosperity and reconstruct the political system by introducing a form of government, where he as a monarch respected both the laws and the senatorial elite. Yet, apart from following the official version made available by Augustus, Dio takes his tale of Rome’s first princeps a step further when he stages Augustus as the modest leader, who accepted his extensive powers but only reluctantly, not because he desired power but because the state needed his protection. In the description of Augustus’ alleged modesty, Dio draws a distinction between the enlighten monarch and dynasts like Pompey and Caesar who both come across as men with great ambitions and considerable appetite on the power and glory provided by the prestigious military commands and the victory that would hopefully follow (Cass. Dio 53.16.2-3). Dio also downplays the young Octavian’s role in the proscriptions when describing how the young triumvir had less experience in Roman politics and so little need to kill large numbers of senators or other members of the elite (Cass. Dio 47.7-8). The portrait of the modest, fair and generous monarch, who ruled because it was needed of him is far away from the version offered by Tacitus in the first chapters of the Annals. Here Augustus comes across as tyrant who threatened, manipulated and bribed the Roman people and the elite into granting him absolute powers (Tac. Ann. 1.1-9). That Tacitus did not share the notion of the modest Augustus is further underlined by the comment on how the princeps’ desire to be worshipped in temples and by priests left little room for the worship of the gods. Even if Dio believed that the Principate may have reached its golden age in the reign of the learned Marcus Aurelius, Augustus was still the ideal (Cass. Dio 71.36.4).  

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32 *Res Gestae* 34, 35 shows that one part of Augustus’ version was how he was Rome’s first citizen, the forgiving and enduring father, who exceeded everyone in influence but held the same powers as his colleagues when serving as consul. See also Lange 2009, 125-157.

33 Tac. *Ann.* 1.10. Tacitus’ comment on Augustus’ desire to be worshipped as a god stands in strong contrast to the claim of Suetonius and Dio that the emperor reluctantly allowed cult in Asia and Bithynia but not in Italy and in Rome. See Suet. *Aug.* 52 and Cass. Dio 51.20.6-8.

34 Scott 2015, 170.
It was he who ended the reign of the dynasts when he introduced enlightened monarchy and it was his form of government that Dio measured later emperors against.

It is in their failure to uphold the balance between being strong leaders who were responsible for the government, on the one hand, and being the first among equals with a sense of modesty, on the other, that Augustus’ Julio-Claudian successors disappoint. For different reasons, they all got it wrong and the enlightened and legitimate monarchy introduced by Augustus quickly turned into tyrannies. Dio’s biographies of the Julio-Claudian emperors are rich in examples of how dynastic rule was dysfunctional and therefore to be avoided. The stories follow similar patterns. The new emperor starts out well, promises to respect the law and listened to the advice of the Senate. Yet, when met with differences of opinion, the emperors turned on the Senate and, corrupted by their absolute powers, governed with their freedmen as the backbone of their administration.35

With the reign of Nero, the Principate reached its low point. Dio points to how the young emperor showed little interest in administrative tasks when he left the government in the hand of Seneca and his mother. But when Nero finally stepped into the political scene he proved to be even more brutal than Caligula (Cass. Dio 61.5.1.).36

Finally he lost all shame, dashed to the ground and trampled underfoot all their precepts, and began to follow in the footsteps of Gaius. And when he had once concerned a desire to emulate him, he quite surpassed him; for he held it to be one of the obligations of the imperial power not to fall behind anybody else even in the basest deeds.

35 For the troubled soul of Tiberius and the way in which he terrorised Rome’s political elite, for instance by sending mixed signals to the senators, see Cass. Do 57.1.1-6. On Caligula’s massacre of the Roman elite in order to acquire funds, see 59.10.7. Similarly, see Cass. Dio 59.22.3-4 for comments on the random killing of members of the elite in Gaul. On how Claudius was ruled by women and freedmen, see Cass. Dio 60.2.4.

36 Cass. Dio 61.4.
How young and incompetent emperors acceded to the throne is a fundamental issue in Dio’s reconstruction of how the reigns of family dynasties were organised, which would always depend on the qualities of the emperor’s son or male relatives. Dio exemplifies the inadequacy or the vulnerability of the family dynasties when emphasising how all of Augustus’ successors in different ways were unable to meet the task. Tiberius may have had the right military and political experience from his many years in Senate and in the army, but he lacked the necessary charisma to govern. Caligula and Nero were brutal tyrants with little political experience, no military training, and a general lack of interest in what it required to be a competent, responsible, and moderate leader. Claudius for his part was competent in administrative and military matters and was a dedicated emperor, but he failed when he chose to rely on his freedmen instead of his associates (Cass. Dio 60.2.4).

**Between monarchy and tyranny**

With the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Dio sets a scene in Rome in which the Senate was now once again included in the government. In the narrative, the reign of Vespasian represents a shift in the history of the Principate: Vespasian is presented as an inclusive emperor who participates in Senate meetings, respects the laws and, perhaps most importantly, as a leader who seeks the advice of his former peers (Cass. Dio 65.10.5). Vespasian comes across as the experienced senator who, after having ended the civil war, steps in and introduces not a new constitution per se, but a form of government in which the Senate was once again a part of the political process. The reign of Vespasian was still a monarchy; but the Senate was now given the liberty to speak freely, parrhésia, as illustrated by how Vespasian, according to Dio, accepted and even welcomed criticism. Dio’s account is corroborated by Tacitus, who mentions that the emperor chose to forgive several senators after having faced open criticism in the Senate. Yet, Dio’s account still largely ignores the execution of Helvidius Priscus, which is seen more as result of the latter’s misused his right to speak freely or frankly and as result of his lust for power than something for

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37 For further discussion on the term parrhésia and how it is used in Dio’s account of both the Republic and in respect of the reign of Vespasian see Mallan in this volume. On Vespasian’s refusal to carry out maiestas trials and his immunity to personal insult and abuse, see Cass. Dio 66.191-2.
which Vespasian should be blamed.\footnote{On Vespasian’s attempt to move on from the incident in the Senate, see Tac. Hist. 4.44.1. On the execution of Helvidius Priscus, see also Suet. Vesp. 15 for the account of how Vespasian tried at any means to avoid the prosecution.} Dio and the other ancient commentators go far to maintain Vespasian reputation as the open-minded emperor who listened to the Senate and, when necessary, as someone who dealt with the criticism and insults he faced. Vespasian does not come across as weak but as the moderate emperor who, like Augustus, opened up the government and let the senators back into the discussion. In that sense some degree of liberty was restored to the senators, who in Dio eyes had to be careful not to abuse the Emperor (65.12.3).

Even if the reign of Vespasian marked a turning point in Dio’s history of imperial Rome and some kind of intermezzo in the political chaos, Dio is well aware of the fact that the Flavians ruled as a dynasty. The criticism of dynastic rule is particularly evident in the biographies, where Titus, who is portrayed positively, follows the experienced and mild Vespasian. Still, there is a twist when Dio sums up the emperor’s talents. Even if Titus had managed to transform his own image from the brutal general in the civil wars to the mild and respected emperor, and so met what was supposed to be the ideals of the good emperor set out in the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue, the historian still undermines Titus’ legacy when speculating on whether the emperor would have turned out for the worse had he had the opportunity to rule for a longer period of time (Cass. Dio 66.18.3-4):\footnote{On Titus’ changed of character from general in the civil war to the mild and rightful emperor, see Murison 1999, 179-181.}

\begin{verbatim}
هة δὲ καὶ ὅτι ἐπὶ βραχύτατον, ὥς γε ἐς ἡγεμονίαν εἰπεῖν, ἐπεβίω, ὥστε μηδ᾽...καὶ αὐτὸν ἐξ ἱσοῦ κατὰ τὸ τοῦ Ἀὐγούστου πολυετίᾳ ἄγουσι, λέγοντες ὅτι οὔτ᾽ ἂν ἐκεῖνος ἐφιλήθη ποτὲ εἰ ἐλάττω χρόνον ἐζήκει.
\end{verbatim}

Again, his satisfactory record may also have been due to the fact that he survived his accession but a very short time (short, that is, for a ruler), for he was thus given no opportunity for wrongdoing …. In this respect, indeed, he is regarded as having equalled the long reign of Augustus, since it is maintained that Augustus would never have been loved had he lived a shorter time, nor Titus had he lived longer.
With the accession of Domitian, the Principate reaches the next low point. In Dio’s version the young emperor was behind Titus’ death and became emperor only because Titus was hesitant or too weak to remove his brother when he realized that Domitian was plotting against him. Family ties and the weakness they resulted in are here presented as the main reason not only for the death of Titus but also for the reintroduction of tyranny (Cass. Dio 66.26). Now, despite the dark years under Domitian, the reign of Vespasian had changed Roman politics for good. Again in Dio’s version, the Senate was now accustomed to having a role in the political process and therefore less willing to accept a new period of tyrannical rule. And after the reign of Domitian, the Senate was soon back in a central role in Roman politics, when it managed to have Nerva elected (an emperor with years of political experience); and the Senate as an institution managed to keep its leading position when Nerva disregarded family and ethnic considerations when choosing Trajan as his successor.40

In the narrative, Nerva appears as a man of the Senate, who recalled those exiled by Domitian and was quick to put an end to maiestas trials (Cass. Dio 68.1.1). He avoided extravagant honours when he refused gold and silver statues set up in his image and he abolished sacrifices and spectacles to save money. The references to Domitian are obvious and Nerva is cast in the role of the modest emperor, the former senator, who always consulted his peers before making his decisions (Cass. Dio 68.1-2). Like Vespasian and Augustus, he respected the laws and included the Senate in the government but Nerva chose his successor from among the most qualified senators – a choice which again took the Principate to a new stage of development.

In the account of the second century, Dio tells the story of a more stable political atmosphere and a form of government where the emperors invested in the upkeep of a mutually respectful relationship with the Senate. Trajan is praised for not having killed honest men and for never having suffered from jealousy. Age is again an issue. The reader is reminded how Trajan was forty-two and at his height both physically and mentally by the time he became emperor (Cass. Dio 68.6.3). He was not reckless as a youth or sluggish as an old man and his lust for wine and boys coursed nobody any harm. Hadrian on the other hand, is described rather differently. He is criticised for having killed members of the Senate and was not believed by Dio nor by most others to have been Trajan’s chosen successor (Cass. Dio 69.1). He is described as both temperamental and envious, traits that set him apart from Trajan; but at the same time he is praised for his

40 Nerva is praised for not having disregarded family relation when choosing Trajan as his successor (Cass. Dio 68.4.1-2).
administrative skills, his commitment to the provincial communities, and for his ability to discipline the army (Cass. Dio 69.2-3 and 69.9.4). The Hadrian of Dio’s narrative has his share of flaws but is nonetheless presented as a competent and experienced emperor whose administrative talents and ways with the army outweighed his shortcomings. 41 He did not collaborate with the Senate and he never managed to win the trust of his former peers, who were by now getting used to a more generous treatment from the emperor and to the illusion that the next emperor was to be found among the members of the senatorial elite. By acquiring the throne and by killing both senators and others for standing in the way, for questioning his legitimacy, or simply out of envy, Hadrian revived a form of government that was not that far from the regime Dio ascribes to Domitian. That there was a strained relationship between Hadrian and the Senate is further illustrated by the emperor’s determination to spend as little time in Rome as possible, and Antoninus Pius’ need to force the deification of Hadrian through the Senate (Cass. Dio 70.1.1).

That Hadrian did not live up to Dio’s standard for what constituted the ideal form of government is clear enough also from the historian’s description. Instead, Dio emphasizes that despite the fact that Hadrian’s accession could be questioned, he made considerable efforts to ensure that the principle of adopting the next emperor from among the senators would continue also after his death. The attempt to control whom Antoninus Pius would choose as his successor failed; but the focus in Dio’s version on the need to ensure no dynastic succession presents Hadrian in the role of the concerned emperor, anxious to make sure that government remained the responsibility of the most able members of the Senate (Cass. Dio 69.20.5-21.1).

From what is left of the biographies of Antoninius Pius and Marcus Aurelius the picture is much the same. Pius was an aged, experienced and an esteemed emperor who ensured stability for more than two decades before he handed the throne to Marcus, who was young at the time of his adoption but well-educated and experienced when he succeeded Pius, and one of Dio’s favourite emperors – no doubt because he was well versed in Greek and philosophy. Yet, with the coming of the Severan dynasty, the practice of adopting the next emperor from among the senators came to an end. Commodus’ accession in 180 disrupted the previous practice, but the brief reign of Pertinax, who Dio was able to say was chosen by the senators, offered some hope that the reign of

41 Davenport & Mallan 2014, 661-662.
Commodus would be an exception, for which Marcus Aurelius, who left the empire to what he believed to be a competent successor, could not really to be blamed (Cass. Dio 73[72].1.1-2).42

Dio’s view of the second century as a golden age is in many ways shared with most ancient commentators who generally see the period under the adoptive emperors as a period marked by enlightened emperors and political stability.43 The second century as a peaceful period, where the Senate and emperor ruled together in mutual respect and harmony, was no doubt an illusion. Trajan was adopted by Nerva but it is doubtful that the old emperor had many alternatives if he wanted to avoid a new civil war; and, together with Marcus’ choice of Commodus, opposition against Hadrian underlines that the practice of adopting one’s successor from outside the family was more a matter of circumstances than a well-established political reality.44

Still, in Dio’s narrative and in the way he sees Roman politics, the practice where the next emperor was chosen from among the most qualified members of the Senate meant, at least in an ideal sense, that the political power now rested with the senators. Absolute executive powers were in hands of the monarch - they had to be in order to avoid political chaos - but as he was recruited among the most proven senators, the Principate had become a sort of representative monarchy, where the emperor represented the Rome’s political elite – a social group, which Dio in book 52 presents as the Empire’s administrative backbone and the source to ensure stability across the provincial landscape.45

42 For how the Senate chose Pertinax after he had ensured the soldiers’ support, see Cass. Dio 74[73].1.
43 On Plutarch’s reception of the early stage of the second century as a time without tyranny, see An Seni. 784f; similarly, for Dio of Prusa’s positive slant on the reign of Trajan as blessed, see Dio Chrys. 3.49-50; Pausanias’ approval of the emperors of his own lifetime is also expressed at 1.3.3, 1.5.5, 8.43.1-6; cf. Madsen 2014.
45 Cass. Dio 52.19.1-3. How Augustus was to build the Senate and the imperial administration through men from the provinces is of course anachronistic in the sense that no one in the first century BCE could have imagined the important administrative role men form the provinces were to assume in the centuries to come. There is, therefore, little doubt that what Dio talks about in this passage are circumstances related to the third century, where the privileged position or status of the senatorial elite was under pressure from the equestrian order that was becoming still more influential, both in the army and in the civil administration. For the increasing opportunities of the
The notion that the emperor as a former peer represents the Senate is far away from the political reality in the Imperial period. But what matters here is the ideal Dio creates as a counterbalance to the political reality of his own time, where one emperor after another ruled in a way in which the Senate was not only left without any real influence on the decision making process but was also repeatedly terrorized and humiliated. What mattered to Dio and what made the second century an age of political stability was the way Rome was governed by more experienced emperors with a senatorial background and a better knowledge of what it meant to be senator. The more experience an emperor had from the Senate, the more Dio has that emperor master the complicated balance between absolute powers and shows of modesty.

It was that delicate balance Septimius Severus definitively put to rest when, after winning the civil wars against Niger and Albinus, he reintroduced dynastic rule. Obviously, an aged and experienced senator like Dio would find plenty of flaws with the later Severans; but it seems to be the acts of Septimius Severus and the efforts to return to dynastic rule that caused the historian the most concern. As an experienced senator, Severus still went ahead and left the Empire in their hands even though he knew of their immoral behavior and ambitions.

The Severan disappointment
Dio’s attitude towards Septimius Severus is by no means straight-forward. There is much to suggest that the historian was initially hopeful that Severus would offer an alternative to the chaos which followed the death of Marcus Aurelius. As a senator and consul, Severus had the required political experience and the military qualities to reintroduce a form of government in which the Senate was once again allowed a role in Roman politics. Dio and Severus were off to a positive start when the latter approved of Dio’s writings (Cass. Dio 73[72].23.2). Yet much seems to have changed from the time Dio started on the Roman History, probably sometime in the late 190s, to the moment Dio wrote the section on Severus’ years in power, sometime in the reign of Caracalla.

The portrait Dio offers of Severus is of a deceptive leader who did and said all the right things at the beginning of his reign, when he needed the Senate’s support in civil wars against Niger and Albinus; yet the moment he had freed himself from that opposition, he too turned on the Senate in the effort to pave the way for his sons’ succession. Dio’s strong reservations towards Severus are apparent right from the beginning of book 75 where he describes Severus’ modesty and humility equestrian order in even the highest levels of the imperial administration, see Mennen 2011, 137-138.
when entering Rome for the first time as emperor. He dismounted his horse, changed to civil clothing and walked into the city as an ordinary citizen (Cass. Dio 75[74].1.3).

It was not until after the death of Albinus, a respected senator, that Severus’ true nature was unveiled. Dio asserts that the mutilation of Albinus corpse and the decision to have his head sent to Rome on a pole showed that Severus did not possess the qualities of the good leader, and Dio now enter the part of the narrative, where the Senate was exposed to a series of prosecutions (Cass. Dio 76[75].7-8). One of the more aggressive assaults on the Senate was the attempt to establish family relations between Severus, his sons, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Severus’ attempt to establish himself as Commodus’ brother and so as a kind of legal heir to the Antonine dynasty appears, in the way Dio’s tells it, as ridiculous and heavily misguided, as if Severus was not aware that the overall ideal of the second century was the practice by which the next emperor was found outside the family of the emperor’s family (Cass. Dio 76[75].7.4-8.1):

μάλιστα δ’ ἡμᾶς ἐξέπληξεν ὅτι τοῦ τε Μάρκου υἱὸν καὶ τοῦ Κομμόδου ἀδελφὸν ἔστων ἔλεγε, τοῦ τε Κομμόδῳ, ὅν πρόφην ὑβρίζεν, ἡρωικάς ἐδίδου τιμάς. πρός τε τὴν βουλήν λόγον ἀναγινώσκων, καὶ τὴν μὲν Σύλλου καὶ Μαρίου καὶ Αὐγούστου αὐστηρίαν τε καὶ ὀμότητα ὡς ἀσφαλεστέραν ἐπαινῶν, τὴν δὲ Πομπηίου καὶ Καίσαρος ἐπείκειαν ὡς ὀλεθρίαν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις γεγενημένην κακίζων, ἀπολογίαν τινὰ ἐπῆγαγε, καθαπτόμενος τῆς βουλῆς ὡς ἀτιμαζούσης, εἶναι καὶ αὐτῆς οἱ πλείους αἰσχρὸν βιοτεύουσιν.

He caused us especial dismay by constantly styling himself the son of Marcus and the brother of Commodus and by bestowing divine honours upon the latter, whom but recently he had been abusing. While reading to the senate a speech, in which he praised the severity and cruelty of Sulla, Marius and Augustus as the safer course and deprecated the mildness of Pompey and Caesar as having proved the ruin of those very men, he introduced a sort of defence of Commodus and inveighed against the senate for dishonouring that emperor unjustly, in view of the fact that the majority of its members lived worse lives.

Where Marcus Aurelius is excused for choosing Commodus, as the true nature of the son was not revealed until after the Marcus’ death, Severus did live to experience the reign of Commodus first
hand. He was, therefore, well aware what sort of character with which he was attempting to establish family relations.

The way Dio shapes his account of Severus portrays the emperor as the antithesis to the ideal emperor who includes and listens to the advice of his peers. The emperor appears as a manipulative tyrant whose aim it was to establish dynastic rule, even if he knew that his sons were not equipped for the task. Even if he in many ways fits the tale of the experienced senator who as Vespasian and Augustus won the civil wars and introduced stability in Rome as well as across the Empire, Severus does not fall in to the same category as the first founders of family dynasties. Instead, Dio proves his points in a number of paragraphs in book 77, for example when describing the degree of concern Caracalla and Geta caused their father. The first paragraph comes right after the fall of Plautianus, in which Dio describes how the sons were now set free from the control of the fallen prefect (Cass. Dio 77[76].7.1):

οἱ δὲ τοῦ Σεουήρου παῖδες, ὅ τε Αντωνῖνος καὶ ὁ Γέτας, οἰον παιδαγωγοῦ τινὸς ἀπηλλαγμένοι τοῦ Πλαυτιανοῦ… οὐδὲν ὃ τι οὐκ ἐποίουν. καὶ γὰρ καὶ γυναῖκας ἔσχυνον καὶ παιδᾶς ὑβρίζον χρήματα τε παρεξέλεγον, καὶ τοὺς μονομάχους τοὺς ἁρματηλάτας προσηταιρίζοντο, τῇ μὲν ὁμοιότητι τῶν ἔργων ζηλούντες ἀλλήλους…

The sons of Severus, Antoninus and Geta, feeling that they had got rid of a pedagogue, as it were, in Plautianus, now went to all lengths in their conduct. They outraged women and abused boys, they embezzled money, and made gladiators and charioteers their boon companions, emulating each other in the similarity of their deeds, but full of strife in their rivalries…

The other example involves only Caracalla and is used to show the true character of the future emperor as well as Severus’ unconditional desire to make sure that the Empire would pass to Geta and Caracalla. (Cass. Dio 77[76].14.1):

ἐξέπληττε δὲ αὐτὸν ὁ Αντωνῖνος καὶ ἐς φροντίδας ἀνηνύτους καθίστη, ὅτι τε ἀκολάστως ἔζη, καὶ ὅτι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν δῆλος ἦν, εἰ δυνηθείη, φονεύσων, καὶ τὸ τελευταῖον ὅτι καὶ αὐτῷ ἐκεῖνο ἐπεβούλευσε.
Antoninus was causing him alarm and endless anxiety by his intemperate life, by his evident intention to murder his brother if the chance should offer, and, finally, by plotting against the emperor himself.

And later in the same paragraph, where Dio describes a public and rather clumsy attempt on Severus’ life (Cass. Dio 77[76].14.3-4):

On another occasion, when both were riding forward to meet the Caledonians, in order to receive their arms and discuss the details of the truce, Antoninus attempted to kill his father outright with his own hand… At this juncture, while all were proceeding in silence and in order, Antoninus reined in his horse and drew his sword, as if he were going to strike his father in the back.

Later when Severus fell ill – according to Dio not without help from his ambitious son – the dying emperor advised his sons to keep together, reward the soldiers handsomely and disregard everyone else (Cass. Dio 77[76].15.2). It is here in the determination to leave the power to Geta and Caracalla that Dio’s criticism of Severus springs. Unlike Marcus Aurelius, who, allegedly, could not have known how wrong a choice Commodus would turn out to be, Severus knew of his sons’ shortcomings, particularly of Caracalla’s flaws and that he had tried to kill his him with his own hands. The criticism of Severus for being soft or too weak to punish Caracalla carries a clear parallel to how Titus, still in Dio’s eyes, failed to remove his brother when it had become clear that Domitian was plotting against him. Titus and Severus both appear as weak. Both were unable to punish family members when they plotted against them and both failed to act after it had become clear what sort of person or leader-figure their relatives had already turned out to be. Both emperors prioritised family members over the stability and well-being of both the state and the commonwealth. In Dio’s world, it is in that particular mechanism, the urge to ensure that one’s
family would remain in power, that dynastic rule had its limitations – precisely because it brought men like Nero, Domitian and Caracalla to power.

The rule of the later Severan emperors was no doubt unbearable to most members of the Senate, who like Dio must have been disgusted by the arrogance and extravagance of Caracalla’s endeavours in the arena, by Elagabalus’ attempt to remodel the hierarchy of the Roman pantheon, or by the weaknesses of Alexander Severus, who like the other young Severans ruled under the strong influence of his mother. Yet the young Severans were all the consequences of Severus’ decision to pass the Empire to Geta and Caracalla in the hope that they would rule together in harmony and ensure a positive legacy for the Severans. After a promising start, probably motivated by a positive reception of Dio’s early texts, Severus soon turned into a disappointment. As a man of considerable experience, Severus had the potential to lead Rome back on track and resume the practice of adopting the emperor form among members of the senatorial elite, at least when it became clear what kind of emperor Caracalla would be.

If Dio did finish the main part of the text sometime in the reign of Caracalla, he would have been a strong critic of the Severan dynasty already by the time one of its most brutal emperors was still in power. That Dio revisited parts of the work in the 220s is evident from the examples where he draws on what seems to have been first-hand knowledge from his travels to Africa and Pannonia, and he may have gone through the account of Severus’ reign and on that occasion turned-up his criticism of the emperor’s years in power. In that light, Dio need not have been particularly brave or have put himself at risk (and surely not if his Roman History was published as a whole in the early 230s after he was back in Nicaea). In any case Dio would or could not in the reign of Caracalla have been a loud critic at a time when numerous senators met a premature death for offences much more trivial than criticism of the regime or its leaders. Yet, judging from his own words, Dio was already writing his history and so the history of Severus when he lived in Italy, for instance in his villa in Capua. Here and in his house in Rome, he may have shared both his thoughts and his writing with some of his peers, and even if he kept the most critical parts about the Severans mostly to himself, his thoughts on Rome’s political history may very well have contributed to the political debate in Rome and have had an impact on the opinion of senators. In any case, even if he was not particularly outspoken when still in Rome or when serving as an important member of the imperial administration in the 220s, Dio nevertheless offers dedicated analysis on the ideal form of government and would have hoped that his text would have an impact on the future organisation of Roman politics.