



CARACALLA

CARACALLA, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, known as Caracalla (Caracallus in *Historia Augusta* 9.7ff.) because of his hooded robe, b. A.D. 4 April 188, d. April 217, who conducted a campaign against the Parthians. The most important source on his career is Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, of which only the last two cited passages (79.3.1, 79.4.1) are from his Greek original, however (best edition: U. P. Boissevain, *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum quae Supersunt* III, Berlin, 1901, including the quotations in the 5th- and 6th-century *Valesiana Excerpta* [p. 781] and the 11th-century *Epitome* of John Xiphilinus [pp. 713-18]; cf. Herodian 4.10-13, a highly fictionalized account (Loeb Classical Library, London and Cambridge, 1969), and the equally problematic *Vita* of Antoninus Caracallus [6.1-7.2] in the so-called *Historia Augusta* I, 4th ed., ed. E. Hohl with corrections by C. Samberger and W. Seyfarth, Leipzig, 1965).

Caracalla was the son of the emperor Lucius Septimius Severus (145?-211) and Julia Domna, daughter of a priest of the sun god at Hemesa (today Homs) in Syria. At the age of six years he probably accompanied his father on campaign in Syria against a rival claimant to the Roman throne, Pescennius Niger, and subsequently in Mesopotamia (*expeditio mesopotamena*; Speidel, cf. *L'année épigraphique*, 1985, pp. 230-31 no. 829); he definitely went along on Severus' campaign to repel a Parthian invasion in 197 (Xiphilinus 308.22-311.6; Herodian, 3.9.1-3.10, unreliable; *Historia Augusta*, "Severus" 16.3). After 198 Caracalla was occasionally called *Parthicus Maximus* in inscriptions, though he apparently did not officially adopt the title until 211 (Kneissl, p. 150; Mastino,



pp. 119-23). Beginning in 201 he was thus designated on denarii issued by the mint in Rome (Mattingly, nos. 262-64) and by an unidentified eastern mint as well (no. 730). Already in his father's lifetime, however, the expanded title *Victoria Parthica Maxima* was associated with Caracalla on coinage minted in Rome (e.g., an aureus possibly issued in 201, another issued in 204, and denarii of the years 201-06; nos. 265, 266, 468* and +, 296-99).

After his father's death on 4 February 211 Caracalla briefly shared the Roman throne with his brother Geta before having the latter murdered, probably on 26 December 211. As sources of the time attest, Caracalla was a passionate admirer of [Alexander the Great](#) (Xiphilinus, 329.21-330.21; Herodian, 4.8.1-3), and his ambition was to follow in Alexander's footsteps. Like many Roman emperors before him, he therefore undertook a campaign against the Parthians; that this campaign had been carefully planned well in advance is attested by extensive road repairs carried out in Asia Minor and findings from research on the *Itinerarium Antonini* (van Berchem).

After the death of the Parthian king Vologases V (207/8; see [balāš v](#)) civil war had broken out between his sons Vologases VI (see [balāš vi](#)), who minted coins in Ctesiphon, and Artabanus IV (q.v.), who minted coins in Ecbatana (modern Hamadān). Although little is known about this struggle, it is mentioned in *Valesiana Excerpta* (370 = Dio, 78.12.2^a) that Caracalla showed unusual interest in the dispute and reported to the Roman senate that the Parthian dynasty had suffered considerable losses through this fraternal strife (Xiphilinus, 332.16-19). Caracalla's awareness of the Parthian civil war must have encouraged him, in his "overwhelming desire for military glory" (Magie, p. 683), to turn the situation to his advantage and to hope for greater success against the Parthians than his father had achieved.

Caracalla probably left Rome in 212 or early in 213 and remained in his winter quarters at Sirmium (in modern Yugoslavia; Halfmann, p. 223) until spring 214, when he embarked on his Parthian campaign. On the basis of papyrus no. 28 from Dura Europos, A. Maricq has convincingly demonstrated that it was before the emperor's departure from Rome that he invited [Abgar IX](#), king of Osrhoene (the seat of which was Edessa, modern Şanhurfa, in Turkey), to the imperial capital and took him into captivity; the Arsacid king of Armenia was dealt with in the same way (Xiphilinus, 332.7-16; see [armenia and iran, ii](#)). In view of Caracalla's ambitions in the east, these moves are likely to have been designed to ensure stronger Roman control over these two client states; the reasons given in *Valesiana Excerpta* (369 = Dio, 78.12.1^a) for the deposition of



Abgar were probably only a pretext. Whatever the motivation, however, the results were that in 214 Edessa became a *colonia romana* and Armenia rose against Rome.

Contrary to what is often assumed (e.g., Levick), Caracalla's military campaign in Asia Minor appears not to have followed the itinerary of Alexander the Great (Johnston, pp. 58-76). Evidence suggesting that Caracalla first undertook preparations for the "Armenian and Parthian war" (*Historia Augusta* 6.1; Xiphilinus, 334.22-26) in 214-15 while he was at his winter headquarters in Nicomedia (modern İzmit, Turkey) is unconvincing.

That he was in Nicomedia on his twenty-seventh birthday (4 April 215) is documented by Xiphilinus (335.19ff.). Later in 215 he transferred his headquarters to Antioch in Syria (modern Antakya, Turkey). The subsequent sequence of events is, however, very difficult to trace, owing to the loss of Cassius Dio's original text. According to Xiphilinus (335.10ff.), before Caracalla's departure from Nicomedia he demanded that Vologases VI return to him two defectors, Tiridates (apparently an Armenian prince) and a certain Antiochos; Vologases refused, and Caracalla seized upon this pretext to launch his war against the Parthians. Vologases later relented, however, and Caracalla—at the time not interested in war—temporarily abandoned his military campaign (Xiphilinus, 335.32-336.2). If the sequence of relevant excerpts in Xiphilinus is correct, the emperor next marched against the rebellious Armenians (see above), but, according to hostile accounts, his troops met with total disaster (cf. Xiphilinus, 336.2ff.). He then postponed the campaign against the Parthians once again and led a punitive expedition to Egypt (cf. Kolb, pp. 97-111), returning to Antioch in the spring of 216 (his presence there on 27 May is documented in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* XVII, 1960, no. 759).

In the same year, according to Xiphilinus (337.18-22), Caracalla did undertake a military campaign against the other branch of the Parthian ruling house, this time on the pretext that Artabanus IV had denied him his daughter in marriage. The sincerity of the Roman emperor's desire for the marriage is certainly debatable. In any event, neither Dio nor Herodian considered it a serious political project, viewing it rather as a ploy to justify an invasion of Parthian territory. Modern scholarly explanations of this marriage project are contradictory. Such a marriage would have established Caracalla's rank as equal to that of the Arsacids, thus strengthening his claim to world supremacy, whereas the marriage contract did serve as a means to acknowledge the



Arsacids as being of equal rank. It is more probable, however, that the scheme was inspired by the emperor's "Alexander mania," specifically his wish to emulate Alexander's marriages with the Iranian noblewomen Stateira and Parysatis (cf. Vogt, 1969, p. 303). Other, more comprehensive motives have also been suggested, but they should be viewed with extreme skepticism, particularly as Cassius Dio attached little importance to the marriage scheme. It is conceivable, however, that Caracalla wished to capitalize on the internal conflicts in the Parthian dynasty and had approached Artabanus, who had apparently extended his sphere of influence into Susiana (modern Kūzestān; Timpe, pp. 492f.), with an offer of an alliance against Vologases, to be cemented by a marriage. Such a plan would have corresponded to the strategy of his predecessor Trajan (a.d. 53-117; Timpe, p. 493). The rejection of the offer could very well have provoked Caracalla's decision to invade [Adiabene](#), part of Artabanus' territory, rather than southern Babylonia, where Vologases ruled.

Herodian's account of the Roman emperor's jubilant invasion of the Parthian empire is totally unreliable, as he seems to have dramatically misconstrued a note by Cassius Dio (Kolb, p. 112). According to this account, Artabanus consented to his daughter's marriage with the emperor, and the unarmed Parthians awaited Caracalla's arrival on a plain near the royal palace. The emperor then allegedly ordered that they be massacred (Herodian, 4.11.1-7).

Reports of Caracalla's campaign of retaliation against Artabanus, the destruction of vast areas "on the western border of Media" (Kolb, p. 115), and the plundering of numerous fortresses are found in Cassius Dio. In [Arbela](#) (modern Erbil, Iraq), the capital of Adiabene, Caracalla ordered the army to open the graves of the local kings and to scatter the bones, not those of the Arsacid kings, as he himself maintained in his dispatch (cf. Herodian, 4.11.8). This act of vengeance was perhaps also modeled on similar actions by Alexander the Great (Xiphilinus, 337.18-25).

Little is known about Caracalla's actual route on this campaign. The report in *Historia Augusta* that the army had marched (from Alexandria!) through Babylonian territory and the lands of the [Cadusii](#) (cf. Syme) southwest of the Caspian Sea is implausible. Equally exaggerated is Herodian's account (4.11.8) of a military campaign across the entire Parthian empire, a campaign that supposedly had to be discontinued when Caracalla's army became weary of pillage and murder. In fact, Caracalla does not seem to have reached even as far as Media, which was probably his objective (Timpe, p. 488). Indeed, no battle ever took place there (Xiphilinus, 337.25ff.; cf. *Historia Augusta* 6.4). Nor



are the archeological and numismatic findings sufficient to support Ernst Herzfeld's thesis that the Romans conquered and destroyed Aššur (see [assyria iii](#)) in 216 (cf. Reusch, p. 48; Schippmann, 1980, p. 72; Debevoise, p. 265 n. 123). Instead, the emperor proceeded to winter quarters in Edessa. Nonetheless, the invasion was commemorated on coins as a victory over the Parthians (e.g., on a double denarius; Mattingly, no. 198).

A report that the Roman senate awarded Caracalla the title *Parthicus* on the basis of the victory speech (*Historia Augusta* 6.5) is clearly false, for he had already adopted it in 211 and had used it consistently since that time (Kneissl, p. 158; Mastino, pp. 119-23). Herodian's claim (4.10.1) that Caracalla wished to have the title Parthicus after the events in Egypt is thus also incorrect (Bureth; cf. Widmer, p. 20 n. 95).

Cassius Dio reports that the "Parthians and Medes" were embittered by the treatment that they had endured and frightened Caracalla by arming themselves heavily (79.3.1). As a result, he began preparations for a new Parthian war (Dio, 79.4.1), but, after his departure from Edessa on 8 April 217, he fell victim to a plot near [Carrhae](#) (modern Harran, Altinbaşak, Turkey; cf. Kolb's detailed account, pp. 118-35). By that time, apparently, the Parthians had already invaded the Roman province of Mesopotamia; it remained for the next Roman emperor, Marcus Opellius Macrinus (d. 218), to negotiate a peace acceptable to Rome.

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