

Commodus' Court: Conspiracy and Consequences*

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Abstract: Many scholarly and popular studies of the reign of Commodus (180-192 CE) focus on his crimes and character. In the present article it is my intention to argue that Commodus' reign can instead be productively evaluated by using the concept of political culture. Using this concept, it is possible to reframe questions about Commodus' ability and success as an emperor along sociological lines and, via analyses of his succession and the conspiracy against him early in his reign (180-3), describe the structural features of Roman imperial society that were inimical to him as a young emperor. To accomplish this, I first highlight the differing historiographical treatment of the reigns of Marcus and Commodus. I next examine Commodus' succession and the conspiracy against him, using accounts of these inflection points to investigate the underlying Antonine political culture. Prosopography is used to nuance the literary evidence and demonstrate the real and lasting break by Commodus with his father's networks of supporters and the aristocracy more generally. My intention throughout is to show, with reference to previous work on the concept of political culture in imperial Rome, how the relationship between the emperor and the aristocracy in the Antonine period was characterised by mutual obligations and expectations which Commodus' youth left him unable to fulfil. The consequences for emperor and aristocracy alike was a violent conflict of interests with socio-political origins.

Keywords: Political culture, Antonine Rome, Commodus, conspiracies, prosopography

Introduction

During the early years of Commodus' reign (180-3 CE), many of his father Marcus Aurelius' *amici* — the most powerful part of the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy — were suppressed following an apparent conspiracy against the new emperor. Crises such as this conspiracy (real or manufactured) and its consequences are useful for the analysis and description of underlying socio-political phenomena. Accordingly, the goal of this article is to use accounts of this conspiracy to explore some structural features of imperial society that led to the rupture between emperor and aristocracy.

To accomplish this, I begin by tracing the real and imagined contrasts — historical and historiographical — between the reigns of Marcus and Commodus (I). I next discuss the concept of political culture as it relates to Commodus' succession and with reference to aristocratic expectations of an emperor in this period (II), and then examine the literary accounts of the conspiracy (III). Finally, I turn to prosopography to provide a framework for an historical analysis of the conspiracy and its aftermath in the years 180-3 (IV), and the literary significance of Saoterus, a favourite attendant of Commodus (V). I conclude with

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consideration of the parallel themes found in Winterling's analysis of Caligula's attempt to break free of the structural paradoxes of imperial society.

I. Contrast with Marcus

It is worth emphasising first the historiographical problems associated with accounts of Marcus and Commodus. Their reigns and characters are often portrayed in contrast: black and white, or, famously, gold and rust.¹ There is space between such literary constructions, the illumination of which requires a wider viewpoint than that of the senatorial or equestrian aristocracy.² It is helpful to glance at the wider circumstances of Marcus' reign, which began with famines and floods and ended in war and plague. It encompassed, in its 19 years:

- 1) The defeat of legions in the East, including the loss of commanders.
- 2) An invasion of Italy, in which commanders were killed in the field.
- 3) A plague of apparently unprecedented seriousness, which in particular affected the army and the city of Rome.
- 4) The beginning of a period of economic decline.³
- 5) A rebellion centred in the provinces of Syria and Egypt, which ended with the summary murder of the pretender, Avidius Cassius.⁴
- 6) Intermittent trouble along the Rhine frontier, including incursions into Roman provinces.
- 7) The long Marcomannic wars along the Danubian frontier, unfinished at the time of Marcus' death in March 180.

The point of such a stark and staccato measure of Marcus' reign (including the period of his co-rule with Lucius until 169) is unabashedly to emphasise its numerous crises and wars. An iteration of them serves as a makeshift counter to the sunshine-tinted historiography of the earlier Antonine period, detectable still in modern scholarship.⁵

Still, it is true that the list offered above is deliberately selective and emphasises the crises of the reign. It does not include outcomes, and these were mostly positive. The Parthian War was won by 165, the invaders were expelled from Italy by 171-2, and the Rhine

¹ Dio 72.36.4.

² Hekster 2011, 317-28 discusses the history of the perceived contrast between Marcus and Commodus and how their portrayals continue to influence evaluations of their reigns and deeds.

³ Harris' survey on trade in the *CAH* posits a probable decline in trade, possibly due to the Antonine plague and Marcomannic Wars, or beginning earlier under Antoninus. Harris *CAH*² 11.24 710-40; cf. Mattingly 2009, 283-97. Howgego 1992, 1-31 provides a useful survey of the economic conditions in the second century, noting the increasing problems with the supply of raw metals (7-8).

⁴ Cf. Michels 2017, 23-48 on Cassius' rebellion with modern citations.

⁵ E.g. Birley 1987², 23: "There is an air of the eighteenth century about the Antonine Empire. The aristocracy which had been ennobled in the struggles of the previous century wanted now to relax and enjoy their dignity and wealth." In contrast Kemezis 2010, 288 argues that for mid-century authors such as Fronto and Lucian, this sense of stability does not tell the full story, and derives from a concept of historiography in which "...the present constitutes a static world that is no longer involved in an ongoing historical narrative. Such a state of mind can be seen as a result of the relative tranquillity of the time but is also part of an ideological apparatus that emphasized and exaggerated that peace and ultimately created our stereotype of the Antonine period as one of stability and harmony."

and Danube frontiers held firm for the most part. For the internal crises, the extent and nature of the Antonine plague is still debated, though there is enough evidence to suggest that it made a considerable impact on the city of Rome at least.⁶ The most serious internal crisis Marcus faced, Avidius Cassius' rebellion in 175, was quickly put down and quietly played down. Whatever cracks it did reveal, it was swiftly and decisively suppressed. At the very least it was a sign that the universal admiration of contemporary historians for Marcus was not shared by all his socio-political peers — or else that only the person of Marcus stood between stability and civil war.

In the end, though, it seems that the numerous crises during Marcus' reign were successfully endured. But this is then the point: his reign might be defined — or defended — as the competent management of successive crises. Amidst these crises, for the aristocracy under Marcus life apparently continued in the emperor's orbit with all its usual intrigues and manoeuvring. Judgements were passed with the advice of his assembled *consilia*, philosophers were kept at court, and order was generally maintained in the cities and towns. The emperor himself, late in his life, reflected on the transient but ceaseless cycle of past courts and emperors as a way to remind himself to focus on the present.⁷ The Marcus that comes to posterity through his *Meditations*, his correspondence with Fronto, the works of Dio and Herodian, and the biographies of the *HA*, is almost universally moderate, compassionate, thoughtful and serious, competent in peace and war.⁸ The author of the *HA*, alert as always to rumour and scandal, does transmit whispers of another tradition — hints of resentment darkly expressed through gossip.⁹ Their provenance would be worth knowing. The same author also criticises Marcus for keeping his court above the usual society of the aristocracy, which increased its arrogance (*adrogantia*), but, as with other criticisms, this is not presented as a systemic problem or expanded upon.¹⁰

The point for now is that in the second century a capable and careful emperor could, in difficult internal and external circumstances, maintain the necessary balance in aristocratic society between two overlapping and competing hierarchies of proximity and tradition. Winterling's description of their interaction through the first century is instructive too for the Antonine period:

[B]oth hierarchies began to converge, in that the emperor arranged for those he trusted, mostly knights, to become members of the senate and holders of magisterial offices. Yet these hierarchies could not merge in any lasting manner since, first, the traditional stratification was reinforced again and again and, second, since by their promotion within the old hierarchy, the former favorites of the emperor turned into potential rivals for him and so tended to lose their status in the new hierarchy.¹¹

⁶ See e.g. Duncan-Jones 1996, 108-36; Ehmig 1998, 206-8; Bagnall 2000, 288-292; Greenberg 2003, 413-425; contra Duncan-Jones cf. Bruun 2003, 426-34 and 2007, 201-17.

⁷ *Med.* 8.5; on Marcus' *Meditations* as a source more generally, cf. Brunt 1974, 1-20.

⁸ Praise for Marcus' character and rule is frequent and wide-ranging, e.g. *Marc.* 6.10, 10.2, 11.1-3, 12.1-2, 13.6, 15.3, 17.1-18.8, 19.11-2, 24.1-3, 29.9; Dio 72.24-25.6; *Hdn.* 1.2.3-5.

⁹ E.g. *Marc.* 15.5, 20.3-5, 24.6-7.

¹⁰ *Marc.* 24.7.

¹¹ Winterling 2009, 32-3.

Under Commodus, however, the consensus between emperor and aristocracy ruptured. He was unable to maintain this balance. Why and how did this occur? Even though we may dispel the golden shimmer of Marcus' reign, the initial temptation might still be to consider the two reigns together, acknowledge that both had their share of difficult circumstances, and conclude that the crucial variable is the person of the emperor. Commodus' deficiencies are, by this logic, largely responsible for the conflict with the aristocracy that came to define his reign and legacy. But such a judgement would merely follow the well-trodden historiographical trail from the Roman sources themselves.¹² Even if the literary evidence for Commodus' deeds and disposition is taken at face value, the deeds themselves as reported take place in the main after his decisive break with his father's generals and advisers.

The trail thus leads back to the events of Commodus' early years as sole emperor. We return to the question of why and how the same individuals who formed the core of Marcus' advisers — the most powerful subset of the equestrian and senatorial aristocracy — found themselves, within a few short years of Commodus' undisputed accession, allegedly plotting against the young emperor and fearing for their lives and property. An explanation based entirely on the "policies" of Commodus does not completely convince; Millar forty years ago pierced the mirage of the purposeful, policy-making emperor.¹³ Indeed, quite apart from 180-3, for the entirety of Commodus' reign, internal and external crises were encountered and dealt with (or endured) in the same reactive manner as they were in previous reigns: enemies were paid off or defeated, restive legions were quieted, pretenders and rivals (real or apparent) were suppressed, petitions were answered.¹⁴ It is worth noting in this context that by the end of Commodus' reign tremors of unrest did ripple out from the imperial court. They affected first the grain supply of Rome,¹⁵ and eventually led to the deaths of three emperors in 192-3 and a consequent and consequential civil war. But to reach this point took almost thirteen years. Since the external pressures during the reign of Commodus were broadly similar or less serious than during the reign of Marcus, it was not these pressures alone that were the primary cause of the initial conflict between emperor and aristocracy.

II. Imperial political culture and the problem of Commodus' youth

If not external circumstances, nor the defective personality or policies of Commodus, what factors can be drawn upon to explain the events of 180-3, from Commodus' sole accession through to the aftermath of the apparent conspiracy of Lucilla? They must be predominantly socio-political in nature. It was systems of interaction, formal and informal, that defined how different interests and conflicts in imperial society might be expressed. It is my contention that the chief explanation for the events of 180-3 lies therefore in the socio-political milieu in which the emperor and the aristocracy acted and reacted: the political culture. This concept incorporates the way in which imperial decisions were mediated and enacted, as well as the importance of the day-to-day interactions that comprised aristocratic life in

¹² Witschel 2006, 94-5.

¹³ Millar 1992², 6, but cf. also Lendon 1998, 87-93 for the influence of this conception upon modern scholarship.

¹⁴ Commodus made a lasting peace in the Danubian region: *Comm.* 3.5; *Marc.* 27.11-28.1; *Hdn.* 1.5.3-8; *Dio* 73.1.1-4. Commodus seemingly continued the pattern of 'petition and response' (e.g. *CIL* 8.14464), though he was apparently criticised for his lazy formulations, cf. *Comm.* 13.7.

¹⁵ The riots instigated by Papirius Dionysius in 190, in opposition to Cleander, cf. Whittaker 1964, 348-69.

Rome and near the emperor, wherever he was based. Additionally, it includes in a wider sense how the relationship and obligations between the emperor and aristocracy were conceived of by both parties. A recent definition with reference to ancient Rome is useful: political culture may be understood as the form and aesthetics of the institutions and political processes in imperial Rome, essentially “...the form of the participants’ behaviour, in contrast to the contents of their decisions.”¹⁶ If the senate and the aristocracy had vastly reduced political power in real terms compared to the republic, the institutions, rituals, and forms of their power persisted and had acquired a socio-political primacy as ways of competing, negotiating, and reinforcing status and relationships.¹⁷

For the application of this concept to the late second century, it is necessary to recognise first that the Antonine emperors themselves were drawn from the senatorial aristocracy. Their status before and after their accessions was essentially a function of their age and experience as well as their connections. For Commodus, even allowing his incompetence or disinterest regarding the minutiae of rule, this system was still the context in which he began his reign. To explore the problem of the transformation of political culture under Commodus and its consequences for emperor and aristocracy, then, the apparent contrast between Marcus and Commodus set out above is the starting point. But, as noted, their reigns were not dissimilar in terms of external pressures, and it would be simplistic to place the blame on Commodus’ character. To be clear, the point here is not to disregard entirely the role that Commodus’ character or nature may have played — though the literary sources may well exaggerate such factors — but rather to explore why the conflicts between aristocracy and emperor manifested themselves in such a mutually destructive fashion. The source of the rupture lies in the political culture of Marcus’ reign, and the manner in which this culture defined aristocratic interaction and judgements regarding Commodus in his early years as sole ruler.

The best place, then, to begin the investigation into the rupture between Commodus’ and his father’s advisers is the obvious structural change in imperial society: the transition of the imperial power, nominally shared by Marcus and Commodus, to Commodus alone. His accession took place in Sirmium, where his father died, in the spring of 180.¹⁸ For the first emperor born to the purple, all seemed to augur well. Given that he already possessed the *tribunicia potestas*, his accession was effectively automatic in a legal context; he had been named Augustus when he was fifteen, in December 176, ruling from that date jointly with his father.¹⁹ This was the culmination of a policy of promotion which Marcus pursued after the revolt of Avidius Cassius in 175. It is hardly necessary to reiterate that Marcus intended Commodus to be his heir, but it is worth emphasising that Cassius’ revolt catalysed Marcus’ plans. Commodus was, in the years immediately after it, granted the title of *pater patriae* — a title not granted to Lucius in 161 — and the *tribunicia potestas*. Marcus alone held the title *pontifex maximus*, as he had when he ruled alongside Lucius. In every legal and traditional sense, then, Commodus was co-emperor with his father from December 176 or January 177.

But in 180 Commodus, at eighteen, was still young. Three years previously he had been the youngest ever consul in Roman history. The young Caesar L. Aelius Aurelius Commodus

¹⁶ Tacoma 2020, 14.

¹⁷ Tacoma 2020, 14–17.

¹⁸ Following Tertullian for the location of Marcus’ death, cf. Tert. *Apol.* 25.5.

¹⁹ *Comm.* 2.4; but cf. *Marc.* 27.5. Commodus’ assumption of the tribunician power may date to January 177, when he was made consul. For epigraphic confirmation of Commodus’ nomenclature and titles under Marcus after January 177, cf. IAM 2.94, l. 30, from July 177; RMD 3.185.

Augustus, as he was then newly styled, shared the *fasces* with his brother-in-law, M. Peducaeus Plautius Quintillus.²⁰ A consulship held very young, together with a member of the imperial family: this resembles Marcus' first consulship, held when he was eighteen in 140, with Antoninus as his colleague.²¹ Explaining a simile to Marcus in a letter, Fronto gives an account of Marcus' role and position: as the younger partner in the empire, he was to be guided and protected, sheltered from the annoyances (*molestiae*) and difficulties (*difficultates*) of imperial power.²² For Marcus, this initial consulship was only the beginning of his long tenure as Caesar.²³ But circumstances did not align so favourably for Commodus, and the difference is crucial. He did not have the advantages of previous second-century emperors, who came to the throne as mature and established senators, generals, or both. Before him, the last emperor under forty at the time of his accession was Domitian. The accession of Commodus thus represented a set of circumstances outside the contemporary experience or living memory of the aristocracy.²⁴ The nearest precedent was not encouraging — and indeed the principate never really produced a successful young imperial heir. The political culture, the shared set of values that defined interaction and expectation among and between the emperor and the aristocracy, offered no contemporary paradigm or guide for either party.

A connected problem for Commodus was that he lacked a clear heir. This was not unprecedented, but, again, there had not been a precisely analogous situation in living memory. Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus in their final years regulated their successions from positions of relative strength, though Trajan's ambivalence to his cousin caused its own complications, as did Hadrian's own machinations in his final days. In each case, however, these emperors had no surviving sons or close male relatives, and hence eventually chose relatively mature heirs.²⁵ Had they had sons they may have had little choice in the matter; the hereditary principle remained strong even though the prevailing political culture guaranteed that a young ruler would encounter difficulties.²⁶ In each case a young successor whose possible heirs would be coeval family members was avoided, indicating that the risk of conflict or insecurity was understood. This was not an option available to Marcus unless he was willing to remove Commodus.²⁷ For Commodus as a young emperor, the alternative succession arrangements used by older emperors before him were not available: he could not adopt an heir at such a young age. Apart from the traditional barriers to this, and the fact of his marriage and presumable expectation of children, it would represent a concession of

²⁰ On Peducaeus and his importance, cf. Jarvis 2017, 1-20.

²¹ This was after 139, in which year his public promotion began as Caesar, cf. Harvey 2004, 46-60.

²² *Ad M. Caes.* 3.8.1 = 40 VdH.

²³ Michels 2017, 38-9 suggests that Antoninus Pius' and Marcus' long terms as Caesars and their deep socialisation in the senatorial class is linked to their conscience embodiment of the role of *civilis princeps* and lenient treatment of rebels.

²⁴ von Saldern 2003, 41.

²⁵ One obvious cause of contention between emperor and élite did not apply to Commodus: his accession to sole emperor was not the result of some coup or plot, but the culmination of his promotion by Marcus. This might be contrasted with the accession of Hadrian, promoted though never officially named Caesar. During the first year of his reign four consulars were killed. Cf. Bennett 1997, 205-7; Birley 1997, 87-9; Syme 1984, 31-60 = RP 4 295-324. For the literary perspective on Hadrian's arrangements in his final years see for Davenport and Mallan 2014, 637-68.

²⁶ Hekster 2001, 35-49 argues for the strength of the dynastic principle in the second century, regardless of its 'success' or not in selecting appropriate emperors, setting out (42-9) the possible dynastic considerations behind Hadrian's choices of Aelius and subsequently Antoninus Pius.

²⁷ This was presumably not considered by Marcus. Dio (77.14.7) records that Severus condemned Marcus for lacking the ruthlessness to do so, though Severus could not bring himself to remove Caracalla.

power. The corollary is of course that the lack of a clear heir to Commodus presented an opportunity to ambitious relatives. High-status relatives of Commodus were abundant in 180, not least in the persons of his brothers-in-law: Marcus had constructed a powerful familial nexus by marrying his five daughters to senators of prominent provincial families, one of whom, Pompeianus, was a prominent general.²⁸ An additional problem, thrown into relief by the achievements and experience of individuals like Pompeianus, was that Commodus was too young to have acquired military accomplishments of his own.

The combination of these problems meant essentially that Commodus from the outset could not fulfil aristocratic assumptions or expectations of the role of an emperor.²⁹ One consequence of this manifested almost immediately: he was unable to select his own advisers. Being eighteen, he had no real circle of *amici* of his own among his socio-political peers. He had in fact no real peers in the sense of previous emperors who had benefited from long tenures as Caesar, or long and prominent senatorial careers before their elevation. In the initial years of his sole reign, Commodus' advisers and his court were thus, by default, drawn mainly from Marcus' advisers and court-on-the-frontier. In contrast, as Caesar to Antoninus Pius for two decades, Marcus had enjoyed the advantage of receiving prominent members of imperial society into his *salutatio*, cultivating personal relationships he later relied on while emperor.³⁰ His closest circle included the highest aristocracy, as had been customary since Hadrian, but many of his confidants also fell slightly outside that definition. Claudius Pompeianus and Claudius Severus, the husbands of his two eldest daughters, are two contrasting examples of the breadth of Marcus' provincial connections.³¹ Pompeianus was promoted to the status of imperial son-in-law based on his military acumen and was drawn into a more prominent role after his marriage in late 169 to Lucilla, Marcus' daughter and Lucius' widow. Claudius Severus, the son of a friend of Hadrian, was an intellectual from a consular family who attended the demonstrations of Galen.³²

Importantly, Marcus' immediate circle, in Rome or on campaign, comprised many colleagues and peers he had known virtually his entire adult life — and even Marcus was to suffer one serious rebellion during his rule, led by a man whom he had advanced and promoted. The same pattern of experience largely holds for the other emperors of the second century. Trajan, when he assumed the imperial power in a kind of bloodless coup, was a seasoned commander of 44.³³ Hadrian, whatever his level of responsibility concerning the executions of consulars that occurred upon his accession — which even Marguerite Yourcenar left ambiguous — was 41 and similarly experienced. Antoninus Pius was 52, a senator of some standing, and adopted two male heirs on Hadrian's instruction.

Commodus in 180, however, possessed none of the advantages that a mature age and past career could bring. His security and rule depended almost entirely on his status as the son of Marcus, and the notionally consequent support of his father's *amici*. Given Marcus' reputation in the sources, at first glance this might appear sufficient. But not for a century had the dynastic principle been tested, removed from the supporting socio-political

²⁸ On Marcus' sons-in-law and their importance and connections see Pflaum 1961, 28–41; Jarvis 2017, 1–20.

²⁹ Witschel 2006, 92–4; cf. Suet. *Aug.* 99.1.

³⁰ Winterling 2009, 92–3.

³¹ Birley 1987², 247 nos. 4–5, on Lucilla's primacy as the elder daughter.

³² Claudius Pompeianus: PIR² C 973. Claudius Severus: PIR² C 1024. On Severus' intellectual pursuits see Gal. *Praen.* 2.24–7, 5.17; cf. Nutton 1979, 166–7.

³³ Grainger 2003, 95–102; Bennett 1997, 205–7.

foundation of the emperor's status and record as a prominent participant in aristocratic society. Commodus was essentially unable to participate credibly in the forms and rituals of imperial society, with the consequence that he lacked a network of connections whom he had known for decades. This placed him outside the expectations and norms for an emperor, and in turn meant that from the start of his reign he was at least informally subordinated to the networks and status of his deceased father. The dynastic principle, always important in the construction of legitimacy — as would become clear when alternatives to Commodus were explored — proved inadequate against the power of the interlocking set of expectations, norms, and obligations between emperor and aristocracy.

III. The literary accounts of Commodus' accession

Before the conspiracy itself is discussed, the literary accounts which concern Commodus' succession must be considered. Several anecdotes of Commodus' relationships with his father's *amici* are of interest. They are presented with the hindsight of an aristocracy unable or unwilling to explain Commodus' actions and reign beyond assigning blame to an evil or foolish nature. What Marcus may have actually said or done to commend Commodus on his deathbed is at this point less important than the manner in which the sources have depicted the succession, and attempted to reconcile the image of Marcus with the notion that such an ideal emperor left the empire to Commodus.

Cassius Dio

Dio (via Xiphilinus) states that he has heard (ὥς ἐγὼ σαφῶς ἤκουσα) that Marcus' doctors poisoned him to gain favour with Commodus. Marcus himself while still living tried to absolve his son of this suspicion, and commended him to the soldiers.³⁴ Dio reports also that Marcus wanted to continue the war for punitive rather than expansionist reasons.³⁵ Commodus' nature is described as foolish rather than evil, and Dio mentions that Marcus was disappointed that Commodus' education did not rectify his flaws.³⁶ Commodus rejects the advice of his father's friends, who are composed of the best men of the senate.³⁷ Concerning the return to Rome from the frontier, a familiar story is told about Commodus' indolence and desire for luxury.³⁸ According to Dio, his settlement with the Quadi and Marcomanni imposed more conditions upon them than Marcus had, though the forts in their territory were abandoned.³⁹ Harsh terms were also imposed on the Buri, with whom Commodus negotiated from a position of strength.⁴⁰

Herodian

³⁴ Dio 72.34.1

³⁵ Dio 72.20.1-2.

³⁶ Dio 72.36.4. Cf. 73.6.4-5; Pertinax's good character was ennobled by education but Commodus' poor character, despite his high birth, could not be helped by education; likewise Caracalla, cf. 78.11.2-3.

³⁷ Dio 73.1.2.

³⁸ Dio 73.2.2; cf. Hdn. 1.6.1-3.

³⁹ Dio 73.1.1-4.

⁴⁰ Dio 73.3.1-2.

Herodian's work contains a similar account of Marcus' anxiety about Commodus. It is part of Herodian's literary programme to portray Marcus as the near-perfect emperor, while Commodus and other young emperors are fickle and corruptible.⁴¹ The peoples across the frontier will also be tempted by what they see as a young, and therefore weak, emperor.⁴² In Herodian, Marcus' commendation of Commodus is sincere, unspoilt by the whiff of poison. He asks his friends to guide and protect the young emperor.⁴³ It is the one mistake that Marcus makes, and it foreshadows the chaos and danger to come. This is perhaps the first hint of what Kemezis has articulated about the methods and approach of Herodian:

[Herodian's] characters are familiar emperors, and the sequence of events is as it ought to be, but the portrayal of those events is bizarre. Nothing happens in the way one would logically suppose, and characters are constantly making wrong decisions based on faulty reasoning. They do this not because they are stupid or ignorant, but because they rely on assumptions and rational expectations carried over from the Antonine age that are now defunct.⁴⁴

This includes Marcus, planning in vain for a post-Marcus world. That is, Herodian's Marcus bases his commendation of Commodus on the apparently rational basis of the political culture of his own reign. Herodian has, through his confected account of the succession, nevertheless arguably captured something of the real contrast between the socio-political circumstances of the reigns of Marcus and Commodus. Marcus during his reign was able to maintain the required balance at the imperial court between the hierarchies of proximity to the emperor and traditional rank. This was something that Commodus, perhaps partly due to his nature but certainly due to socio-political realities, was conspicuously unable to do.⁴⁵

There are some further scenes of interest in Herodian's account of the first years of Commodus. The new emperor received initial advice from Pompeianus, the most prominent of his brothers-in-law, and Marcus' chief general. Pompeianus, from an equestrian background, was likely in his mid-fifties. His speech to Commodus takes place in the narrative after Commodus has addressed the assembled soldiers, emphasised his own royal birth and right to rule, and confirmed their loyalty with a donative.⁴⁶ Previously, according to Herodian, Commodus had followed the advice of his father's friends for a time. These friends were at his side almost constantly: a detail from which more than one interpretation could be drawn.⁴⁷ Despite this good counsel, Commodus began to be corrupted by members

⁴¹ Hdn. 1.1.6, 1.3.2, cf. 2.10.3. Galimberti 2013, 43-5 discusses the vocabulary Herodian uses regarding Commodus' youth and inexperience.

⁴² Hdn. 1.3.5.

⁴³ Hdn 1.4.2-8.

⁴⁴ Kemezis 2014, 229.

⁴⁵ Winterling 2009, 92-3.

⁴⁶ Commodus addressed the soldiers (Hdn. 1.5.3-8, at the urging of his advisors), authorised military expeditions, issued a donative (cf. CIL 5.1968, 5.2112) and held a triumph (Hdn 1.6-8-9; cf. *Comm.* 3.5-6), and emphasises his right to rule by birth (1.5.5-6), emphasising his birth (rather than selection by adoption) directly to the soldiers; cf. Galimberti 2013, 64-6.

⁴⁷ Hdn. 1.6.1.

of the imperial household, who reminded him of the luxuries of Rome.⁴⁸ At this point Pompeianus, to counter Commodus' desire to return to Rome, urges on him the importance of the war. He informs the young emperor not to fear a conspiracy at Rome since the senatorial nobility⁴⁹ were campaigning with him on the frontier.

The scene and sentiment, apocryphal or not, serve Herodian's objectives. But contemporaries of Commodus were also surely aware of the unprecedented nature of the situation. Pompeianus was the father of at least one grandson of Marcus and had therefore at least nominally a personal interest in ensuring Commodus' smooth accession and rule. A point worth emphasising is that variables which might work to the advantage of a mature successor — such as the support of subaltern members of the imperial family — could not do so for Commodus; indeed, in his case the presence of credible and legitimate alternatives made his position more precarious. The only situation in which Pompeianus' interests diverged from Commodus' was one in which Commodus could be replaced by a legitimate relative of Marcus whom Pompeianus supported. To return to Herodian's account: he alludes, through the advice Commodus receives, to the implicit fact that Pompeianus, in effect, was ideally situated to provide assurances to Commodus that there was no plot against him. According to Herodian such a plot was in fact afoot, but Lucilla did not inform her husband Pompeianus due to his initial devotion to Marcus' son.⁵⁰ Whatever the truth of Pompeianus' involvement in the plot of 182, it seems certain that he was central to the assassination of Commodus in December 192.⁵¹

Herodian also sets up a distinction between the noble advisers of Marcus and the corrupt members of the imperial household. This is related to his objectives in displaying young emperors as foolish and easily corrupted.⁵² But his narrative nevertheless captures something of an aristocratic society in an uneasy state of transition. Along with the literary accounts, the compositions of two imperial *consilia*, almost a decade apart, do indeed suggest that Commodus' court and inner circle were less senatorial and aristocratic than those of Marcus,⁵³ and hence less traditional in the sense of aristocratic expectations. Even if the nature of the advice delivered by Pompeianus was not accurate — it is not clear whether Marcus planned to create new provinces, or desired to continue the war, though these sentiments are consistent with the account of the *HA* — Herodian has highlighted the developing tensions between the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy on the one hand, and the household of Commodus on the other.

⁴⁸ Hdn. 1.6.1-2. A topos, but perhaps not entirely devoid of truth in this case. Neither Sirmium nor Carnuntum could have offered anything like the lifestyle available to an emperor in Rome. Imperial confidants such as Saoterus are presumably meant (on whom more below), cf. Galmiberti 2013, 69-71.

⁴⁹ Hdn. 1.6.5-6: ἄριστοι τῆς βουλῆς, surely to be understood as the senior advisers and generals of Marcus; Galimberti 2013, 73: 'I senatori più eminenti'.

⁵⁰ Hdn. 1.8.4.

⁵¹ Champlin 1979, 296.

⁵² Kemezis 2014, 239.

⁵³ Hekster 2002, 55-60; on the *tabula Banasitana* and the *consilium* of 177: Oliver 1972, 336-40; on the *consilium* of 186/7: Oliver 1950, 177-79 on IG II² 1109, 2771, 3412; Oliver 1989 no. 209. The difference in the type of advisers employed by Marcus and Commodus can be seen in the contrasting composition of imperial *consilia*. Compared to Marcus' and Commodus' carefully balanced *consilium* of 177, Commodus' own *consilium* in 186/7 contained a freedman. Hekster suggests there were in fact no senators in the later *consilium*, but cf. the objections of Witschel 2004, 257-8. The decisive point should be Oliver's 1989 reading, which restores the eminent Acilius Glabrio to participation in the *consilium* of 186/7, and very possibly also Aufidius Victorinus (II. 13-14). Both were pillars of the senatorial establishment.

The Historia Augusta

In the *Historia Augusta*, the manner of Marcus' commendations of his son — or lack thereof — are instructive in an historical and historiographical sense. The biographer records that two days before his death Marcus summoned his *amici* and expressed his pain at leaving such a son behind.⁵⁴ When he spoke to Commodus, he warned him to continue the war lest he seem to betray the republic (*ne videretur rem publicam prodere*).⁵⁵ Commodus' reply did him no credit: he wished first for his own good health.⁵⁶ On another occasion, closer to his death, Marcus once again summoned his *amici*, who asked him to whom he commended his son. Marcus replied *vobis, si dignus fuerit, et dis immortalibus* (to you all, if he will be worthy, and to the immortal gods).⁵⁷ Marcus is also said — in a device characteristic of the biographer — to have foreseen what his son would become and hoped that Commodus would die rather than become another Caligula, Nero, or Domitian.⁵⁸ When read together — and these anecdotes are proximate in the text — it is easy to spot an antipathy to Commodus, deriving from the biographer or his source. Perhaps it also reflects some awareness on the part of Marcus that Commodus was unprepared. In the *HA* Marcus, the beloved philosopher-emperor, leaves an unworthy son as his heir despite his own high character and almost against his better judgement. But the attitude attributed to Marcus by the *HA* and its various sources is not consistent with his clear policy in the final five years of his reign, during which Commodus was aggressively promoted as the only possible heir via titles, coins, tours, shared triumphs, and presentations to the military.⁵⁹

For the present context, however, the last anecdote is the most interesting, particularly considering the events of the first years of Commodus' reign. Commodus was commended to his father's *amici*, after they — performatively, or perhaps ceremonially — asked Marcus to whom he commended his son. Marcus imposes the condition that Commodus prove himself worthy (*si dignus fuerit*). The phrase and occasion seem formulaic in nature, but the exchange, true or not — performative ritual or not — hints at the notion that historians, also usually senators or members of the aristocracy, could pass judgement on emperors.

The ritualistic nature or reception of this exchange might be best considered relative to other similar occasions. If the scene were shifted to 161, and the emperor on his deathbed were Antoninus, such a phrase would be *prima facie* performative or ritualistic, the assent of the emperor's advisers to the accession of Marcus a given: Marcus had had twenty years to prove his worth to his peers as Caesar, and neither his legal status nor his socio-political standing could be in any doubt.⁶⁰ Together with Marcus' warning to Commodus about not

⁵⁴ Marc. 27.11.

⁵⁵ Marc. 28.1.

⁵⁶ Marc. 28.2.

⁵⁷ Marc. 28.7.

⁵⁸ Marc. 28.10.

⁵⁹ Hekster 2002, 38-9.

⁶⁰ The biographer's account of Antoninus' last moments contains no exchange between the emperor and his prefects (Ant. 12.5-6): *tertia die, cum se gravari videret, Marco Antonino rem publicam et filiam praesentibus praefectis commendavit Fortunamque auream, quae in cubiculo principum poni solebat, transferri ad eum iussit*. Antoninus commends the empire and his daughter to Marcus, and orders that he receive a golden statue of Fortuna, which seemingly had some personal value to the emperor, having often been placed in his bedchamber. A personal statue of a goddess, who in her guise as Fortuna Redux was associated with the

abandoning the war, it is clear that, for the biographer of the *HA* and his sources, Commodus' merit depended on following the policy of his father, and deferring to the prominent aristocratic members of his father's court, who in fact were implicitly required to endorse his succession. The explicit comparison to Caligula, Nero, and Domitian alludes not only to the nature, but also to the fate — literal and literary — of emperors judged unworthy of their position. The persons passing judgement were usually members of the aristocracy, contemporaries or historians, wielding the dagger or the pen.

The literary accounts together

Commodus' rejection of his father's advisers is consistent across the three literary sources. The types of tensions that Herodian constructs between the traditional aristocracy and Commodus' personal household and favourites are likewise present in Dio's account. The *HA* too offers hints of these tensions, casting them as resulting from Commodus' unsuitable character.⁶¹ This difference between Marcus and Commodus in character is usually depicted as extreme in the sources. Indeed, the effect of this difference in character goes beyond a lack of deference to the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy. It in fact encroaches on their physical safety. Commodus' reign and conduct seem to have provoked in Dio an existential dread about the very essence of aristocratic status: when the norms of aristocratic society were so wantonly transgressed by the emperor, it meant less to be of high status, to the point where imposters might credibly lay claim to aristocratic pedigree.⁶² Such anxiety pervaded the reign of Commodus, and was a symptom of an unmoored political culture affecting imperial society.⁶³

Taken together, these three sources, as well as amply demonstrating the hostility of the historical tradition to Commodus, offer a glimpse of an aristocracy unprepared for a youthful emperor at the point of transition. Commodus' evil or foolish nature did not matter as much as the structural features of an imperial society that could not accommodate him. In the present context, the rupture between Commodus and his father's advisers represents an initial breakdown of the norms and political culture nurtured by Marcus. It is possible to argue that this occurred precisely because of Marcus' success in maintaining the balance of imperial society: the emperor's authority rested on abstract ideas of socio-political and cultural status, mutually supported by legal status, precedent, and the cultivation and participation of the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy. The success of this system, personified by Marcus in difficult and changing circumstances, indirectly created a situation where Commodus' lack of the abstract aspects of imperial authority weakened the whole

emperor's safe return to Rome, was bequeathed to Marcus simultaneously with the empire and Faustina (to whom he was already married). Its inclusion in this scene lends a ritual aspect and demonstrates the blend of the public and private spheres of the emperor, a key characteristic of the imperial system. The coins of Marcus' reign invoked *Fortuna Redux* numerous times: cf. RIC 3.229 nos. 204-5, 220; 240, nos. 343-4 (343 with *Fortuna Duci*, referring to Marcus' tour of the East following Cassius' rebellion); 241, no. 360 (depicting an altar inscribed with *Fort. Reduci*); 263 no. 618 (again an altar inscribed *Fort. Reduci*, text around *principi iuventutis*). On the dedication of the altar of *Fortuna Redux* under Augustus and the connection with the protection of the emperor, RG 11; cf. Coarelli LTUR 2.1, 275-6.

⁶¹ *Comm.* 3.9.

⁶² Gleason 2011, 33-51.

⁶³ This might be highlighted by contrast: later Christian sources such as John Malalas and Jordanes depict Commodus in a more positive light, and lack the socio-political concerns present in contemporary Roman elite sources. Hekster 2002, 185 nn. 120-3.

edifice. The ideological space between aristocratic expectations of an emperor and the reality of Commodus' youth is where the source of the rupture might be found. Both parties were forced to confront the paradoxes of the imperial system, which previously could be passed over discreetly by successful emperors: an emperor both needed the confirmation of the senate, and transcended it.⁶⁴

IV. The court in 180, and Lucilla's conspiracy and aftermath, 182-3

On the present argument, the underlying cause of the rupture between Commodus and his father's advisers is the inability of the political culture to incorporate a young emperor. But more immediate causes must also have played some role. The men around Commodus when he became sole emperor had served his father for twenty years, through war, plague, and rebellion. Commodus soon cast them away. Some division between Commodus and his father's friends, then, perhaps combined with the allegedly malign influence of Commodus' personal household, must form the initial impulse for the dramatic break which Commodus made from his father's supporters. As far as the immediate causes for any conspiracy go, the logical speculation, in the absence of sufficient evidence, is that an unwillingness to accept Commodus on the part of some members of the aristocracy was combined with imperial ambitions by other members of the dynasty.⁶⁵ An alternative possibility is that there was not really a conspiracy at all: only the suspicion by Commodus that there was a plot afoot.⁶⁶ Perhaps aristocratic discontent was exaggerated, then utilised by Commodus as an excuse to break the influence of his father's advisers. A variation on this is the possibility that there was some plot, but Commodus' reprisals, driven by paranoia or opportunism, caught up more persons than were actually involved. The theatrical nature of the abortive assassination attempt recorded in the *HA* may lend credence to the suggestion that the plot was poorly planned, at the very least. However, the confluence of names connected to the Antonine dynasty who appear to have suffered as a result of the alleged conspiracy is striking.

The list of victims does not of course speak to the veracity of the conspiracy itself; there is a risk here of being diverted by a circular argument. But this knot may be cut: whether real or confected, both Commodus and the aristocracy could ascertain from where any potential conspiracy might come. It would require the participation of members of the imperial family, support from within the aristocracy, and the co-operation of the praetorian guard or the palace household. Lucilla, whose political inclinations the *HA* has recorded elsewhere, was either the prime suspect or the best scapegoat. After the accession and marriage of Commodus, her status had been somewhat reduced and her son stood farther from the imperial power, though she maintained her imperial title.⁶⁷ She, along with her husband and her son, was a natural focus for aristocratic discontent with Commodus. The intention of any actual conspiracy in the first years of Commodus' reign, judging from the victims of its

⁶⁴ Winterling 2009, 26-7.

⁶⁵ Càssola 1965, 452. Cf. also Galimberti 2010, 510-17. He suggests that Pompeianus was concealing the existence of a conspiracy in Rome, that Commodus was conscious of how much support Avidius Cassius had for his rebellion in 175, and that war and peace factions existed in the senate. This places the return of Commodus to Rome in October 180, and the trial and execution of 'the Cassians' in 181 before the conspiracy. It is an attractive hypothesis, but for now inadequately supported by evidence, cf. Jarvis 2015, 666-76.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Comm.* 8.2. The biographer indeed alleges that Commodus later invented a conspiracy in order to purge the aristocracy of his enemies, though when this might have occurred is unclear.

⁶⁷ *Hdn.* 1.8.3, cf. Varner 2001, 73-5.

repression, can only have been to replace him with a more suitable Antonine emperor. In a dynastic sense then Commodus' legitimacy was unquestioned, or rather Marcus' legitimacy and that of the dynasty was still acknowledged. A suitable alternative to Commodus was the young son of Lucilla and Pompeianus, who was aged around ten in 180, and later carried the names L. Aurelius Commodus Pompeianus.⁶⁸ He survived Commodus' reign only to be executed by Caracalla after the murder of Geta.⁶⁹ A potential placeholder emperor would be a necessary part of any transition involving a child-emperor, and the elder Pompeianus was surely the natural choice.⁷⁰ The dowry of his wife Lucilla would be the empire, as Marcus is reported to have remarked concerning Faustina.⁷¹

But the details of Lucilla's involvement in any plot are unclear. Her status and connections alone provided a threat to Commodus if he were inclined to fear a conspiracy — or to manufacture one. The type of dynastic claim embodied by Lucilla was, thanks to the prestige of Marcus, probably an important element of any conspiracy. Lucilla may in fact have been politically active; she is subjected in all three sources to the usual calumnies that in Roman history attach themselves to women who participated publicly in politics and fell afoul of the reigning emperor.⁷² Whether or not there was a real conspiracy, she represented, through her son with Pompeianus and previous status as Augusta, at least a potential counter-claim of legitimacy. Pompeianus, the foremost general and adviser of Marcus, twice consul and imperial son-in-law, could provide credibility and influence in the aristocracy and with the legions.

The fact that Commodus exiled Pompeianus and Lucilla, and subsequently had only Lucilla executed, is significant. Dio records the distance between Lucilla and Pompeianus, whom Dio himself saw in the senate on the occasion of Pertinax's accession in 193.⁷³ This suggestion, and their different fates, indicate that the sources may be correct to describe the couple as estranged, but it also implies that Commodus felt he could mount reprisals against his immediate family (later in his reign he executed his wife, Bruttia Crispina, and two of his brothers-in-law) but not against Pompeianus. Other commanders who had been prominent under Marcus were executed, demonstrating that the status of Pompeianus, who was clearly implicated by the alleged involvement of his wife and a son or nephew, must have been exceptional for him to survive. His status was then of a different nature to Lucilla's, and he may well have benefited from his long association with the legions.

Any differences over policy which were a factor in creating an atmosphere of suspicion or conflict probably involved the conclusion of the Marcomannic wars. Marcus' intentions along the frontier are unclear. Commodus' policy, however, of making peace on the northern frontier is condemned by the *HA* and Herodian, though Dio, while questioning Commodus'

⁶⁸ PIR² P 568. On his nomenclature, cf. Oates 1976, 282-7.

⁶⁹ *M. Ant.* 3.8.

⁷⁰ Molinier Arbo 2007, 127 makes the salient point that the successions from Trajan to Commodus were driven and defined by maternal connections. In this case, though Pompeianus was estranged from Lucilla, it was the fact of his marriage to Marcus' daughter which confirmed and enhanced his own status as the pre-eminent military advisor to Marcus. He was on two occasions after Commodus' death actually offered the imperial power, by Pertinax and then Didius Julianus, cf. *Pert.* 4.11; *Did. Iul.* 8.3; *Hdn.* 1.8.3.

⁷¹ *Marc.* 19.8-9.

⁷² Varner 2001, 72-78 on the political nature of Lucilla's *damnatio*.

⁷³ Dio 73.4.1-7.

motives, is more neutral.⁷⁴ Other evidence indicates its relative success.⁷⁵ Under Marcus differences concerning priorities between the emperor and the aristocracy are difficult to discern: but when they did occur, Marcus dealt with them from a position of strength.⁷⁶ Here the concept of political culture again offers a way in which to understand the difficulty of Commodus' situation as a function of socio-political factors, not character. The success of any decisions he made is not the point, nor is the fact that he had the power to make such decisions. Rather it is their reception by aristocratic society that is important: not the content, but the form and mode of expression mattered. Commodus went against his father's advisors, overturning the careful and normative precedents of the past. The calumnies against his character recorded after his death are a logical result of alienating the most powerful members of the aristocracy.

In this sense, Commodus' conduct in an aristocratic socio-political sphere cannot be wholly divorced from any political differences with the aristocracy and court.⁷⁷ His personal conduct and his political decision-making are two sides of the same coin: it is impossible to separate them in a second-century aristocratic context from consideration of the political culture of the aristocracy. A judgement on a decision of Commodus— or on the act or manner of his deciding — was not made in isolation from a judgement on his character or age. Rather, what followed from the judgement depended entirely upon the status of the emperor in a sense that was not defined by dynastically conferred powers and titles, but rather an assessment of something like his *auctoritas*.⁷⁸ For any imperial action or decision the possible socio-political consequences and range of responses were greater in the case of a young ruler. There was, for Commodus, an impossibly large gap between legitimacy and credibility: his rule was legal and proper by all the aristocratic traditions of Roman imperial society, but he was nonetheless unable to perform credibly as the emperor according to aristocratic expectations.

The consequence of dynastic ambition, perhaps mixed with discontent at the form if not the content of Commodus' decisions, was that in 181/2, either the *amici* of Marcus conspired against Commodus, or that Commodus came to consider them as a bloc immediately inimical to his prospects for survival. The result of this was the exile and execution of many connections and advisers of Marcus. The extent of the break that the crisis represented with Marcus' *amici*, including members of Commodus' own family and his wife, may be understood succinctly from a list of individuals who were executed or exiled, immediately after the conspiracy or in the second wave of reprisals, spanning the years 182-3:

⁷⁴ *Comm.* 3.5; *Marc.* 27.11-28.1; *Hdn.* 1.5.3-8; *Dio* 73.1.1-4.

⁷⁵ For the success of the settlement, see Galimberti 2010, 503-17, who contrasts the opinions of Dio, the *HA*, and Herodian with the actual success of the policy, the timing of Commodus' return to Rome (later in 180, after some campaigns), and the judgements of other authors such as Aurelius Victor; and Wilkes *CAH*² 11.585, esp. the epigraphic evidence cited for the fortification of the border, e.g. RIU 5.1127 from Intercisa (Dunaújváros).

⁷⁶ E.g. when sending troops to Rome upon learning of Cassius' rebellion, and promptly concluding a treaty that freed him for the looming civil war. *Dio* 72.17.1, cf. *ILAFr* 281.

⁷⁷ Cf. Meyer-Zwiffelhofer 2006, 203-4, who discusses the connection between Commodus' personal behaviour early in his reign and its political aspects.

⁷⁸ Moran 1999, 31, argues that for Severus, following the reign of Commodus, the political environment was such that no one person or group possessed enough *auctoritas* to retain power "in the fashion that was customary in the principate."

- 1) Lucilla, exiled and later executed. Commodus' sister, the widow of Lucius Verus and wife of Ti. Claudius Pompeianus. *Augusta* since 164.⁷⁹
- 2) the four Quintilii, at least three executed, one disappeared. They were two aged brothers, consuls together in 151, and their two consular sons, noted commanders under Marcus.⁸⁰
- 3) P. Salvius Julianus, executed. He was *cos. suff.* 175 and the legate of a province in 181-2, perhaps Germania Superior or Pannonia Superior.⁸¹ His daughter was betrothed to Paternus (4), below.
- 4) P. Tarrutienus Paternus, executed. Praetorian prefect since 177. He was at first responsible for investigating the apparent conspiracy, but was soon a victim of Commodus' reprisals for the death of Saoterus.⁸²
- 5) Vitruvius Secundus, executed. A friend of Paternus and *ab epistulis*.⁸³
- 6) Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus, executed. The would-be assassin. A close relation of Ti. Claudius Pompeianus, married to a daughter of Lucilla and Lucius.⁸⁴
- 7) Ti. Claudius Pompeianus, exiled. The experienced general and son-in-law of Marcus. His prestige and his estrangement from Lucilla probably saved his life.⁸⁵
- 8) Quadratus, executed. This *cognomen* implies connection to the Ummidii, and thus likely kinship with the imperial family.⁸⁶
- 9) Pertinax, recalled from Syria and exiled until 185.
- 10) Vitrasia Faustina, executed. She was the daughter of Marcus' cousin Annia Fundania Faustina, who was herself executed by Commodus ten years later.⁸⁷
- 11) D. Velius Rufus, executed. *Cos. ord.* 178.⁸⁸
- 12) Egnatius Capito, executed. A senator of consular rank.⁸⁹

⁷⁹ Dio 73.4.4-5; Hdn. 1.8.4-8; *Comm.* 4.1-4, 5.7, 8.3. PIR² A 757; Raepsaet-Charlier, no. 54.

⁸⁰ Dio 73.5.3. The two consular brothers: Sex. Q. Valerius Maximus, *cos. ord.* 151 (PIR² Q 27), and Sex. Q. Condianus, *cos. ord.* 151 (PIR² Q 21). Their respective sons: (Sex.) Q. Maximus, *cos. ord.* 172 (PIR² Q 24), and Sex. Q. Condianus *cos. ord.* (PIR² Q 22, cf. esp CIL 14.2393 = CIL 6.1991 where his name is erased but the name of his fellow consul, Crispina's father C. Bruttius Praesens, is retained, perhaps a further point suggesting Crispina's exile and execution did not occur as early as 182-3). The younger Condianus perhaps escaped; the account is doubtful but has great historiographical significance, cf. Gleason 2011, 39-42.

⁸¹ PIR² S 135.

⁸² *Comm.* 4.7; PIR² T 35.

⁸³ *Comm.* 4.8. On his possible origins see Daguet 1988, 3-13.

⁸⁴ Dio 73.4.4; *Comm.* 4.2, cf. 5.12; Hdn. 1.8.1-6; cf. *Amm. Marc.* 29.1.17; PIR² C 975. Herodian gives his name only as Κωντιανός and notes his youth; Ammianus (via Herodian) as Quintianus, and the *HA* as Claudius Pompeianus, the son of a certain Claudius (not the husband of Lucilla). Some connection to the Claudii Pompeiani is confirmed by the confluence of the literary record, and by the nomenclature of an individual who might be his son, Ti. Claudius Quintianus, *cos. ord.* 235 (PIR² C 992).

⁸⁵ PIR² C 973. For his survival and career under Commodus, see Kemezis 2012, 387-414.

⁸⁶ *Comm.* 4.1-4; Dio 73.4.3; Hdn. 1.8.4. Presumably an Ummidius Quadratus, and therefore descended from Marcus' sister who had married into that family. Syme 1968, 102-3 identifies him as the son of Cn. Claudius Severus from his first marriage — that is, before his marriage to Marcus' daughter Annia Faustina — who was adopted by Marcus' nephew (his sister's son) Ummidius Quadratus, *cos. ord.* 167. The name 'Quadratus' in the context of the conspiracy of 182-3 is striking, and indicates again the extent to which Commodus' own family, biological and adopted, was swept up in the events and aftermath.

⁸⁷ Vitrasia Faustina: *Comm.* 4.10; Dio 73.5.1; Raepsaet-Charlier, no. 820. Annia Fundania Faustina: *Comm.* 5.8, 7.7; Raepsaet-Charlier, no. 60; PIR² A 714.

⁸⁸ *Comm.* 4.10; PIR² V 349.

⁸⁹ PIR² E 17.

- 13) Aemilius Juncus, exiled. *Cos. suff.* 179. On the basis of a restored inscription he returned to Athens, where he had family connections, in 183.⁹⁰
- 14) Atilius Severus, exiled. A senator of praetorian rank, perhaps *consul designatus* for 183.⁹¹

The above list — which omits individuals who are attested only in the *HA*⁹² — comprises a trusted core of Marcus' senior military commanders and family connections, with a scattering of consular senators. The rupture and break from the reign of Marcus was on the surface one of personnel: a prominent group within the aristocracy was removed. But the socio-political causes and implications are deeper. Each side, emperor and aristocracy, posed existential questions to the other beyond a merely political power struggle. The Quintilii are an excellent example of this. Dio suggests that Commodus was envious of them "for they had a great reputation for learning, military skill, brotherly accord, and wealth, and their notable talents led to the suspicion that, even if they were not planning any rebellion, they were nevertheless displeased with existing conditions."⁹³ These qualities are precisely the aristocratic virtues that the young emperor is said to have lacked, or did not have the opportunity to acquire and display. Whether or not they possessed such qualities is immaterial; the point for Commodus — and for Dio, one might suspect — is that such contrasts could be identified and articulated by contemporaries. Such powerful and well-connected individuals as the Quintilii were capable of presenting a real threat to Commodus; if not by action, then by existential rebuke. Their socio-political status, unlike his, was legitimised by the traditional senatorial markers of rank and service. This is utterly distinct from Commodus' reliance on his name and birth alone. Dio's silence on the involvement of the Quintilii in any conspiracy is not entirely credible; he also absolves Pertinax, another of his favourites, of participation in Commodus' eventual assassination.⁹⁴

More immediately, in the context of the political culture under Commodus, the conspiracy, real or justification for a purge, marked a point of no return. Among the other victims of the two waves of executions were Paternus, the praetorian prefect and highest-ranking equestrian official, entrusted with the emperor's personal safety, and Vitruvius Secundus, one of the imperial secretaries, responsible for the emperor's correspondence. They would have had frequent and close contact with Commodus on a day-to-day basis, together with knowledge of his movements and correspondence. The consequence of overcoming an actual conspiracy, or transmuting aristocratic discontent into a reason to

⁹⁰ *Comm.* 4.11; Oliver 1967, 42-56, cf. above 104-5. It seems that the family was originally from Tripolis in Phoenicia, but in the generation before the exile of 183 became citizens of Athens. Aemilius Juncus eventually returned to favour at the latest under Pertinax: the consul of 179 was probably the same individual who was proconsul of Asia in 193/4, whose actions are recorded following Pertinax's response to a petition by the citizens of Tabala, cf. Malay 1988, 47-52 = SEG 38.1244.

⁹¹ *Comm.* 4.11; *PIR*² A 1309.

⁹² The list excludes on evidentiary grounds the otherwise unknown Norbana, Norbanus, Paralius, and Paralius' mother, all mentioned in the *HA* at *Comm.* 4.4. The last well-known Norbanus was perhaps complicit in the murder of Domitian, cf. *PIR*² N 162. Another important exclusion from the list is Crispina, Commodus' wife (*PIR*² B 170; Raepsaet-Charlier, no. 149). Though she was eventually exiled and executed, and the biographer implies this occurred around the same time as the second wave of executions following Lucilla's apparent conspiracy, it seems to have been because of adultery (*Comm.* 5.2; Dio 73.4.5-6; cf. Hekster 2002, 72 n. 181, for her survival until at least 185). However, her status and that of her family place her in the same social category of many of the victims of Commodus' reprisals, cf. Varner 2001, 72-80.

⁹³ Dio 73.5.3-4.

⁹⁴ It is difficult to believe that Pertinax could know nothing of the planned plot. See e.g. Appelbaum 2007, 198-207; Potter 2014², 93-4, esp. n. 61; Hekster 2002, 80-3; Birley 1988², 84-8; Champlin 1979, 288-306.

purge his father's advisers, was that Commodus exiled or executed his secretary, protector, his father's closest generals and advisers, as well as his sister. His relationship with the aristocracy never recovered. It is little wonder that he relied thereafter entirely on personal favourites.

Suetonius uses Domitian to give voice to a very real dilemma for a ruling Roman emperor: no one believed in conspiracies against the emperor unless one succeeded and he was killed.⁹⁵ Perhaps it has the wrong sense here for Commodus' circumstances: having grown to maturity in the shadow of Cassius' rebellion, Commodus knew full well that conspiracies could be real; so, too, did the aristocracy. Some of them were probably involved in some way with Cassius' rebellion, though there is little to link the two events causally.⁹⁶ In the wake of the purges it was entirely reasonable for Commodus to surround himself with personal favourites whom he felt he could trust, some of whom came from the usual sources of evil influence upon an emperor in Roman historiography: women, freedmen, and slaves. But in ensuring his immediate security by choosing his favourites and ignoring the existing socio-political hierarchies of imperial society, Commodus openly upset the delicate balance between emperor and aristocracy, carefully maintained by his father. The understandable favouritism Commodus displayed confirmed retrospectively the judgement of Rome's aristocracy. Rank and socio-political status no longer dictated the identities of persons with access to the emperor, who could thereby gain status and become power-brokers themselves. The web of interlocking obligations and expectations between the aristocracy and the emperor, and how these were expressed and negotiated — the political culture — fractured. The aristocracy were forced to confront the reality of an autocracy not on their terms, and collectively comprehended their own loss of status, disempowerment, and physical danger.

It was this contradiction at the core of the relationship between the aristocracy and the emperor — the emperor's need for social, political, and legal legitimacy via the aristocracy, and his subsequent transcendence of that very requirement — that Commodus' accession at the age of 18, and the apparent conspiracy of Lucilla in the early years of his reign, dragged into the open. Previously the contradiction was concealed by a political culture that emphasised the shared origins, overlapping interests, and separate spheres of the emperor and aristocracy. But it was a near impossible task for an emperor who could not also pass as a *princeps senatus* or *imperator*. If, in another time, Caligula had broken the illusion of the imperial settlement "communicatively" with his reaction to a conspiracy, and was eventually called mad by historians,⁹⁷ Commodus after the apparent conspiracy responded savagely and materially, in several stages. Again, a contrast with Hadrian is relevant, this time rather to his accession. In 118, Hadrian was either directly or indirectly responsible for the executions of four consuls. His distance from the events in question perhaps allowed

⁹⁵ Suet. *Dom.* 21.1.

⁹⁶ Avid. *Cass.* 13.7. Even if the motivation for Cassius' rebellion is accepted — that he mistakenly believed Marcus to be dead — he presumably could count on some senatorial support. Cf. Galimberti 2010, 510-7, who is more bullish on the existence of a Cassian faction which remained relevant into Commodus' reign.

⁹⁷ Winterling 2009, 113-9, cf. 104-6. Winterling draws on the accounts of madness given by Celsus, Galen, and legally in the *Digest* to define what was meant by ancient sources, and how it led to an exclusion from society (106): "a construct of reality by an individual diverging from that which is universally accepted as valid by society around them." He cites the various ancient authors who called Caligula mad, the first two themselves senators: Seneca (*furor, de Ira* 3.21.5, 1.20.9); Tacitus (*turbata mens, Ann.* 13.3.2); Suetonius (*valitudo ei neque corporis neque animi constitit, Cal.* 50.2); Philo (μαρία, *Leg.* 76.93); Josephus (μαρία, *AJ* 18.277, 19.1, 19.193); Pliny the Elder (*insania, HN* 36.113).

his disavowal of the executions, and he was able to repair somewhat his relations with the wider aristocracy.⁹⁸ This was despite the doubtful circumstances of his accession.⁹⁹ The clear differences to Commodus are Hadrian's age and status on the one hand, and Commodus' position as the previously acknowledged and legitimate successor on the other. The legality and legitimacy of Commodus' accession was revealed to be nothing more than an illusion: desirable for the parvenu general or military adventurer to gild a violent transition,¹⁰⁰ but insufficient alone to guarantee credibility as an emperor.

A further underlying problem for Commodus, once his impossible position was identified, was that the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy formed a large class which could not practically be replaced in terms of their roles in the governance of the empire. There was no other system or group with which to replace them, and nor could their cultural, economic, social, and political capital be disregarded.¹⁰¹ After 183 this meant, essentially, a divergence of objectives without the possibility of resolution between aristocracy and emperor. Such a division had not occurred under Antoninus or Marcus. Under Hadrian it was at least minimised: despite the difficult start to his reign, Hadrian was to some extent able to avoid the appearance of dependency on the senatorial aristocracy by removing himself from Rome for long periods through his peregrinations, and by locating his villa at Tivoli. But again, the emperor-as-outsider model was an option available to Hadrian because he in the first place fitted, as a mature commander and senator, many of the criteria required of a successful emperor.

For Commodus his paranoia, however justified, became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The consequence was a deepening gulf between emperor and aristocracy. It is here that Winterling's analysis of the reign of Caligula may offer tools for our current analysis.¹⁰² Commodus' early reign and the rupture with his father's advisers exposes, as Winterling noted of Caligula's reign, the manner in which the "structural paradoxes" inherent in imperial politics and society "caused unintentional consequences for the protagonists when the results of their actions ran counter to their aims."¹⁰³ He highlights a speech, according to Dio given by Caligula in early 39, which exposed these paradoxes, and the senate's hypocritical honouring of Tiberius, in a "metacommunication about the ambiguous communication."¹⁰⁴ But this only revealed the senate's powerlessness without allowing them to respond. Caligula's stated intention to designate his horse consul was their final

⁹⁸ Von Saldern 2003, 41, sees Hadrian's situation as not dissimilar ('nicht unähnlich') to Commodus' in the sense that both were opposed by the marshals of the previous dynasty. The point here however is that Hadrian's actions did not lead immediately to a permanent and violent break with the aristocracy.

⁹⁹ Freisenbruch 2010, 194-7.

¹⁰⁰ And gilding was all it was; Severus' acquisition of Antonine nomenclature was viewed cynically by the aristocracy. For Dio's hostility to Severus' adoption as Marcus' son, cf. Madsen 2016, 154-8.

¹⁰¹ Winterling 2009, 110-1.

¹⁰² Winterling 2018, 61-80; cf. Witschel 2006, 98-103. The historic parallels to Commodus align also with a figure such as Nero, but the point here is to examine the analytical tools employed. Both Winterling's and Witschel's accounts of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian present relevant points concerning their interactions with the senatorial establishment and traditional expectations of the emperor, each evincing different programmes: Caligula to destroy, Nero to subvert, and Domitian to dominate.

¹⁰³ Winterling 2009, 115, cf. 107-119; cf. Winterling 2011, 90-6. He suggests Caligula's speech to the senate, criticising their hypocrisy under Tiberius, and reinstatement of the *maiestas* trials, indicate the existence of a conspiracy in early 39, passed over in silence by Dio in book 59. Though this initial conspiracy cannot be established, Caligula's message is the point here.

¹⁰⁴ Winterling 2009, 115; cf. Jones 1992, 196-8 on Domitian.

humiliation, the supreme mockery of the traditional socio-political order, which was defined by degrees of honour derived from offices held.¹⁰⁵ In Winterling's analysis, Caligula's open contempt for the existing norms and expectations led to a serious conspiracy later in 39, suppressed with numerous executions, after which he refused to accept any honours from the senate, as accepting them would reduce rather than enhance his prestige. He further attempted to circumvent their political and administrative functions with freedmen and procurators.¹⁰⁶ Following his assassination, the senate eventually took their ultimate revenge: "Similar to how he had put them on a par with horses, they, in turn, posthumously excluded him from human society. Soon it was said that he had been mad."¹⁰⁷ Allowing for the different circumstances of their reigns, a similar pattern may yet be observed in Commodus' case: a young emperor, initially conforming to aristocratic expectations, breaks with the senate due to a conspiracy or the suspicion of one. The response to the real or apparent conspiracy damages the relationship between the emperor and aristocracy beyond repair, and produces further conspiracies which culminate in assassination.

To assign the blame for Commodus' eventual assassination to his paranoia or incompetence, just as to blame the madness of Caligula for his own assassination, is to mistake the identification of the problem for its solution. Commodus' incompetence and paranoia — or the aristocratic perception of these deficiencies — derived directly from his inability as emperor to rely on the existing socio-political norms and mutual expectations of emperor and aristocracy. That he attempted to define himself as emperor in a new way is clear from the time of the initial apparent conspiracy and subsequent purges. Commodus' actions as an emperor fall in a similar category to those of Caligula, in that he was attempting to present himself as an emperor in a different way, at the cost of the delicate balance with the aristocracy.¹⁰⁸ It is simplistic to blame Commodus' apparent character defects for his failure as an emperor, or to explain his fate without considering the full context of the politically integrated imperial society ruled over by Marcus.

V. Saoterus and his significance, 180-2

An analysis of the portrayal in the sources of Commodus' *cubicularius* Saoterus offers a case-study of some of the specific socio-political factors in the breakdown of the accord between emperor and aristocratic society.¹⁰⁹ Saoterus is best understood as a literary stand-in for those members of Commodus' household to whom the young emperor's ear was inclined. An expression of the tension between reality and expectation is Commodus' early behaviour towards Saoterus, and the aristocratic response. The elevation of his private attendant to a perceived position of influence (and to the formal status of senator; Saoterus may almost certainly be identified with an Aelius Saoterus found on a contemporary inscription) is an act that Marcus' advisers probably found disturbing.¹¹⁰ In addition, Commodus is reported to

¹⁰⁵ Winterling 2009, 115; Winterling 2011, 96-107. But cf. Woods 2014, 772-777, who argues that Winterling's explanation is too complex, and suggests a play on words between the names of Incitatus (the horse in question), and a suffect consul of 38, Asinius Celer.

¹⁰⁶ Winterling 2009, 117, esp. nn. 39-41.

¹⁰⁷ Winterling 2009, 118, cf. above, n. 429.

¹⁰⁸ Hekster 2002, 137-167.

¹⁰⁹ *Comm.* 3.6, 4.5-8, 10.1; Dio 73.12.1-2.

¹¹⁰ CIL 6.2010 = AE 2000 159; cf. *Comm.* 4.5. The inscription lists members of the *ordo sacerdotum domus Aug. Palat*; Aelius Saoterus is listed as a *clarissimus vir*, col. a, l. 24.

have shown his favourite great public affection, kissing him openly as he rode behind the emperor in his chariot during his triumph.¹¹¹ Apart from leading to standard accusations of licentiousness, such conduct could damagingly be perceived as the elevation of a freedman to the social status of a senator.¹¹² This is worth emphasising: such a public display of intimacy and affection with an inferior directly and immediately threatened aristocratic status on an ideological level.

The portrayal of Commodus' relationship with Saoterus reflects anxiety in the senatorial sources about the privileged nature of the relationship between an emperor and his attendant. There are two distinct lines of senatorial tradition preserved in Dio and the *HA* (in this text perhaps via Marius Maximus), but both are inimical to the elevation of a personal slave. Dio's portrayal of the senate and senators is based on the autonomy of the senate as an institution from the emperor, and looks back toward an idealised reign of Marcus, when senators could realise their ambitions through "recognition mechanisms that are either controlled by the Senate or part of its well-regulated relationship with good emperors."¹¹³ For the *HA* — and through the *HA*, Kemezis argues, for Marius Maximus — the civil wars after 193, horrifying for Dio, represented opportunity for advancement for Maximus' generation in a similar manner to the previous (foreign) wars of Marcus.¹¹⁴ Both these historiographical traditions laud the achievements of men of relatively humble origins such as Pertinax and Pompeianus, and, though their interests and outlook differ, the primacy of the role of the senate and aristocracy is not in question. Both are aristocratic traditions, and abhor the intrusion into the aristocratic sphere of foreigners, slaves, freedmen, and women.

The relationship between Commodus and Saoterus fell beyond the bounds of what the members of the aristocracy prominent under Marcus were prepared to accept: neither equestrian general nor senatorial aristocrat could countenance a slave or freedman with the ear of the emperor through proximity and favour alone.¹¹⁵ Such closeness to freedmen was tolerated in an emperor like Lucius, but then, Marcus was the senior partner and chose in that case to indulge his adoptive brother, though he disapproved.¹¹⁶ Commodus was by the accounts of the sources more blatant in his behaviour than Lucius, of whom accounts of scandalous behaviour in Antioch came to Rome with news of the Parthian war.¹¹⁷ But the crucial difference was that the range of possible aristocratic responses was larger due to Commodus' youth and lack of socio-political prestige. In this case, the *HA* suggests that Paternus is responsible for ordering the *frumentarii* to deceive and assassinate Saoterus, apparently because the people (not defined beyond *populus Romanus*) despised the influence

¹¹¹ *Comm.* 3.6. The position of Saoterus in the chariot was traditional enough, but Commodus' actions were not — an example of Commodus retaining traditional forms and rituals, but altering their expression and purpose.

¹¹² Kissing on the mouth was a greeting between equals in both Roman and Greek elite contexts, cf. Paterson 2007, 147–8. Emperors who did not kiss senators, or who held out their hand to be kissed, could be seen as tyrants (Dio 59.27.1; Suet. *Gaius* 56.2). Pliny's praise of Trajan (*Pan.* 24.2) includes a reference to his respectful treatment of his former senatorial peers, since as emperor he continued to greet them as social equals with a kiss.

¹¹³ Kemezis 2012, 406.

¹¹⁴ Kemezis 2012, 406–13.

¹¹⁵ There were of course always individuals willing to flatter and profit by association with the emperor's favourites, as with Martial's cultivation of Parthenius under Domitian, cf. Jones 1992, 61–2. The prevailing elite attitude remained negative, however, particularly in the context of Marcus' reign.

¹¹⁶ *Verus* 8.6–9.

¹¹⁷ *Verus* 7.1–4.

he had with Commodus.¹¹⁸ The anecdotes concerning Commodus' conduct towards his attendant may be partly apocryphal, but there is little reason to doubt the basic outline of Saoterus' career offered in the *HA*: he was promoted by Commodus, and sometime in late 182 killed against the emperor's wishes.

The death of Saoterus precipitated the second wave of executions after Lucilla's apparent conspiracy, as Commodus responded to the murder of his favourite by executing and banishing individuals whom he suspected of involvement. The series of reprisals now included the execution of Paternus himself. As Hekster has outlined, the murder of Saoterus should be viewed as a power-play — or statement — on the part of the aristocracy, with Commodus' reaction motivated by self-preservation, political considerations, and grief.¹¹⁹ The notion that the *populus Romanus* did not accept Saoterus' influence over Commodus is easily unmasked for what it is: aristocratic justification for an extra-judicial murder, organised and carried out through deception by agents of the praetorian prefect, a proxy in this case for the political interests of a section of the aristocracy.

Saoterus' fate demonstrates that the aristocracy knew they had much to lose from an emperor who privileged the slaves and personal companions around him. In doing so, such an emperor defied long-accepted socio-political hierarchies and norms, which, cast and stamped in the names and titles of Republican office, had remained the major currency of influence and favour under previous Antonine emperors.¹²⁰ Under Marcus and before him Antoninus, freedmen and slaves had played their part but known their place.¹²¹ A rare exception demonstrates Marcus' attitude: Lucius permitted the marriage of Marcus' widowed cousin Annia Fundania to L. Aelius Agaclytus, one of his favourite freedmen. Marcus refused publicly to sanction the marriage and did not attend.¹²² In contrast to Marcus' measured approach, Commodus' brazenly preferential treatment of Saoterus implied too clearly an abrupt break from Marcus' careful and apparently deferential treatment of the senate and the aristocracy.¹²³

Commodus' treatment of Saoterus is perhaps best understood as an act of defiance against the conventions of the political culture that defined aristocratic society. Despite the attrition among members of the aristocracy under Marcus due to external circumstances, a political culture was nurtured and maintained that was in the interests of emperor and aristocracy alike. Commodus may not have understood or cared how his treatment of Saoterus struck at its foundations. An alternative explanation is that Commodus understood his position only too well, and his conduct towards Saoterus is an example which indicated that he did not intend to be bound by the contradictions of the role he had inherited. If Caligula showed his contempt for the senate by refusing to receive honours from it and openly planning to designate his horse a consul, Commodus demonstrated his own disdain by kissing his favourite during a sacred public spectacle, making him the social equal of a

¹¹⁸ *Comm.* 4.5.

¹¹⁹ Hekster 2002, 53-4.

¹²⁰ Winterling 2009, 29-33.

¹²¹ *Ant. Pius* 11.1-2.

¹²² *Marc.* 15.2; *Verus* 9.3-4, 19.5; *PIR*² A 452. On Lucius' death Marcus cashiered his freedmen (*Verus* 9.6), and later made marriages between women of senatorial status and freedmen illegal, cf. *Dig.* 23.2.16.

¹²³ For Marcus' respectful treatment of the senate: *Med.* 8.30; *Marc.* 10.1-9; *Av. Cass.* 12.3-4. As Caesar he was careful and thoughtful about how he was perceived, cf. *ad M. Caes.* 3.17 = 50 Van den Hout = Haines 1.107-8; *Marc.* 29.4-5. On the connection between Marcus' stoicism and the legal and political history of his acts, cf. Stanton 1969, 570-87; 1968, 183-95, and, in opposition, Hendrickx 1974, 254-6.

member of the high-status elite, and thereby undermining the values of aristocratic society. He had already made efforts to cultivate the army and the people, which were the only possible counter-balance to aristocratic socio-political influence. Given his efforts in this direction, it follows that he was aware of the high stakes of his public behaviour and private decisions. The public nature of his conduct recorded on this occasion was an important factor in the history and the historiography: the handsome young triumphator, by lavishing such attention on an attendant, publicly derided the socio-political values of the senatorial aristocracy. He signalled thereby his open defiance— or ignorance, on a more sympathetic reading — of a system which rendered his own position as a young emperor untenable.

Conclusion

It is possible that Commodus had a vicious nature, or that he was foolish and in the thrall of his favourites. It is a fact that he became sole emperor at the age of 18. In his early twenties he either suppressed a conspiracy or manufactured one to justify the removal of his father's cadre of advisers. This experience surely affected how he saw himself as a ruler in relation to his immediate advisers and personal security. The immediate outcome of his conflict with Marcus' advisers was the purge of powerful and well-connected members of the aristocracy. His sister was eventually executed as a result. Those generals not executed — Pompeianus and Pertinax among them — were exiled from public life, the former only to return once Commodus had been assassinated (and suspiciously present in Rome when the assassination occurred); the latter, though eventually allowed to resume his career by Commodus, was to become an agent of his eventual murder and then his successor.

The immediate reasons for the initial apparent conspiracy and purges of 180-183 must remain unclear. A dynastic struggle is the most reasonable argument. A legitimate imperial alternative was at hand, in the persons of Lucilla and her son. Any specific political differences may lie in Commodus' decision to return to Rome, and the apparently unfavourable peace he made along the Danube, undermining Marcus' efforts.¹²⁴ Yet a strategic case can also be made for ending the costly and lengthy war.¹²⁵ Again, attention should be drawn to the manner in which the decisions were made, issued by ukase by an untried emperor in defiance of his notional advisers who represented a bloc of class interests. If the resulting conspiracy was some construct of Commodus, or derived from existing discontent exaggerated by him, he had in any case correctly identified from where threats to his authority and life might come. More importantly, the two waves of executions represented the rupture of the balance of aristocratic imperial society, and the initial and crucial break from the political culture fostered by Marcus. It was the violent, public, and irreversible expression of the problem of a young emperor, or any emperor, who did not conform to aristocratic expectations for a ruler. Any defects Commodus showed were compounded fatally by his youth and the consequent lack of his own credibility as emperor. In an aristocratic setting, he had little socio-political standing independent of his legal status or ancestry. The other qualities required — a network of powerful and proven *amici*, military experience, a reputation for learning, a history of apparently deferential acknowledgement of the senate — he simply had not had time to acquire. Too much rested on his status as Marcus' son, and his status with the soldiers. He was missing, crucially, the tacit approval and consensus of a powerful enough group within the aristocracy, and he was missing it on

¹²⁴ *Comm.* 3.5; *Marc.* 27.11-28.1; *Hdn.* 1.5.3-8; *Dio* 72.1.1-4.

¹²⁵ Hekster 2002, 48-9.

personal but also structural terms: concerns about his character aside, there was little capacity for the political culture to absorb and integrate a young ruler who could fulfil none of the aristocratic expectations of an emperor.

Considering such socio-political factors, we may see the fundamental weakness of the carefully mediated socio-political imperial system through the troubles of 180-3, the way the sources report them, and Commodus' treatment of Saoterus. Political and military power resided in one man, but was of necessity modulated, communicated, and interpreted through an existing structure of aristocratic power-brokers. This system was the result of an uneasy and, at best, invisible compromise between the positions of the emperor and the aristocracy. It could not function without trust on both sides, or at least a tacit understanding sufficient to prevent the break-down of the political culture in aristocratic society. It had succeeded under mature emperors who were grounded by cultural upbringing in the senatorial aristocracy. The system also functioned more effectively in periods when there was a clear external enemy, when the emperor — and therefore the most important members of imperial society, along with the emperor's household — was removed from Rome. This allowed the emperor to be conspicuously active and in close contact with the legions, as well as providing opportunities for commanders of senatorial and equestrian rank to earn military renown. Their achievements were naturally funnelled through the person of the emperor, who took the titles of the conquered peoples and rewarded his generals with consulships and promotions. As a young emperor, Commodus did not have the background or time to build his own circle of *amici* from his socio-political peers, and thus relate on genuinely equal terms with his generals and advisers.

Dynastic claims as the sole foundation for rule had been untested for a century and were revealed as too weak. The conspiracy and purges of 180-3, whatever their provenance, meant that it was essential for Commodus to find a new way to ensure his own security. The only way he could do so was by actively subverting the carefully tended political culture of the Antonine system, essentially exacerbating the rupture of the abrupt change of personnel with a deeper break from the accepted norms and obligation between emperor and aristocracy. His dynastic and legal status did not, in the end, prevent his assassination, which might be read as a dramatic and final kind of delegitimization: a personal and political rejection that confirmed his socio-political failures as an emperor and a member of the aristocracy. These failures were almost inevitable, guaranteed by the nature of the political culture and the circumstances of his accession. It was a lesson and a model not lost on Severus, in many ways the perfect subject for Herodian's history: he framed his actions and words in Antonine norms, and seemed on the surface to possess the correct qualities and experience for an emperor. His deeds, on the other hand, conformed to a new political culture which had developed during the reign of Commodus.

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