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DIO'S ROMAN HISTORY

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WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY
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ON THE BASIS OF THE VERSION OF
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IN NINE VOLUMES

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INTRODUCTION

CASSIUS DIO COCCEIANUS was a near relative, perhaps a grandson, of the famous orator, Dio Chrysostom, after whom he took the names Dio and Cocceianus, and like him was a native of Bithynia. His father was Cassius Apronianus, a Roman senator, who served as governor of Cilicia and of Dalmatia.¹ It is now established² that the correct order of Dio's names, if we follow the normal Roman usage, is that just given, his *praenomen* being unknown. The common Greek order, however, was Δίων ὁ Κάσσιος, and this order has become so thoroughly familiar to English readers that it bids fair to remain the popular usage.

The few details known regarding Dio's life are derived from casual statements occurring in his history. The date of his birth has been variously placed between 155 and 164 A.D., according to the time assumed for his admission to the senate. We learn that he was with his father during the latter's governorship of Cilicia,³ and that after his father's

¹ Books LXIX, 1, 3; LXXII, 7, 2; XLIX, 36, 4.

² See *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, i. pp. 313 f.

³ LXXII, 7, 2.

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death he came to Rome, apparently about the year 180. In describing the behaviour of Commodus toward the senate and others at the beginning of his reign, he states that his account is henceforth the result of personal observation and not hearsay. It seems a reasonable inference, therefore, that he was already a member of the senate at this time, and therefore at least twenty-five years of age. Pertinax in 193 nominated him to the praetorship for the following year;¹ but in the meantime both Pertinax and his successor Julianus were overthrown, and Dio thus assumed the office under Septimius Severus. The mild course of the new ruler at the outset of his reign, taken in connexion with his past record, was such as to win the enthusiastic admiration of Dio and to encourage in him the hope that a new era was now dawning.

It was at this point, apparently, that Dio's literary work began. He wrote and published a little book, as he tells us,² containing an account of the dreams and portents which had foretold to Severus his future greatness.³ The details he had doubtless learned from the emperor himself, and he presumably had implicit faith in all these signs, to judge from his fondness for reporting omens and prodigies in general. Upon receiving a gracious letter from Severus in acknowledgment of a presentation copy, he seemed to be admonished by a dream the following night to

¹ LXXIII, 12, 2. ² LXXII, 23. ³ A brief list of these he later inserted in his history (LXXIV, 3).

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write history. Accordingly he compiled an account of the events leading up to the accession of Severus.¹ This work also met with a cordial reception, both on the part of the emperor and of the public, and Dio soon formed the resolve to cover the whole period of Roman history. It has been conjectured that his original intention was to have the work find its fitting climax in the splendour of the new era inaugurated by Severus; if such was the case, his plan must have been changed very promptly. He presently withdrew largely from public affairs for the remainder of Severus' reign, and spent the greater part of his time in retirement at his country-seat in Capua.² During these years he gathered his material and wrote a considerable part of the history. In a certain vague passage³ he seems to imply that he had been consul (*suffectus*, naturally) under Severus; but this first consulship should probably be dated some years later (*circa* 222), shortly before his proconsulship in Africa. Indeed, it seems altogether probable that his retirement from public life was the direct outcome of the changed policy of Severus, which could no longer command his support.

Caracalla, the successor of Severus, took Dio along as a member of his retinue on his Eastern expedition in 216, and the following winter was spent at Nicomedia;⁴ but Dio did not accompany the

¹ Later incorporated in his larger work, as he tells us.

² LXXVI, 2, 1. ³ LXXVI, 16, 4. ⁴ LXXVII, 17-18; LXXVIII, 8, 4.

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emperor to the Parthian war. By Macrinus he was placed over the cities of Pergamum and Smyrna as *curator ad corrigendum statum civitatum*,¹ and he was continued in this position by Elagabalus. Under Alexander Severus he became proconsul of Africa, and upon his return was sent out as governor successively of Dalmatia and Upper Pannonia,² both imperial provinces. In 229 he became consul for the second time (*consul ordinarius*) with Alexander himself as colleague. But his disciplinary measures in Pannonia had made him unpopular with the praetorians, so that he found it advisable to remain away from Rome much of the time; and he soon obtained permission to retire to Nicaea, his native city, on the plea of an ailment of the foot.³ This is the last he tells us about himself, and we can only conjecture how many years of leisure he enjoyed in his native land; inasmuch, however, as he was presumably already past the age of seventy at the time of his retirement, it is probable that his death occurred soon afterwards.

The work for which Dio is known to the modern world is his Roman History (*Ῥωμαϊκὴ ἱστορία* or *Ῥωμαϊκά*), originally in eighty books, covering the period from the landing of Aeneas down to the year of his own (second) consulship in 229 A.D. The last seven years, however, were treated very summarily, having been added, apparently, as an afterthought. He informs us that he spent ten years in gathering his

¹ LXXIX, 7, 4. ² XLIX, 36, 4; LXXX, 1, 3. ³ LXXX, 5.

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material for the period down to Severus' death,¹ that he had read everything of importance on the subject,² and that twelve years was the time occupied in composing the work.³ The period of these labours may be roughly estimated as the years 200–222. The lexicographer Suidas attributes five other works to Dio; but it is practically certain that only one, or possibly two, of these shorter works can have been written by him. The Life of Arrian, who was a fellow-Bithynian as well as a fellow-historian, may actually have been the work of Dio. If he ever wrote an account of Hadrian's reign, it was doubtless incorporated in his large work, as was the case with his first two treatises; but it is strange that he should have made no mention of it.

The whole period of nearly a thousand years covered by his history falls into three main divisions according to his own statements.⁴ The first is the period of the republic, when political action rested with the senate and the people; the facts were public property, and even if distorted from personal motives by some writers, could readily be ascertained from others or from the public records. The second period extends from the establishment of the monarchy to the death of Marcus Aurelius. Under the emperors action was no longer taken openly, and such versions as were given to the public were naturally received with suspicion. Dio must now

¹ LXXII, 23, 5. ² *Frg.* 1, 2; cf. LIII, 19, 6.

³ LXXII, 23, 5. ⁴ LIII, 19; LXXI, 36, 4; LXXII, 4, 2.

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content himself in the main with giving the published reports of events, although he proposes now and then to express his own opinion based on what he has heard and read. The third period is that of his own day; he now writes of events of which he had first-hand knowledge, and, as might be expected, introduces more of detail into this portion of his work. Incidentally he states that with the accession of Commodus his history makes a sheer descent from the golden to the iron age. There are traces of a division of the work into decads. Book XLI begins the Civil War, LI the monarchy (if we accept Dio's view, here stated, that the battle of Actium marked the beginning of the reign of Augustus¹), and LXXI, apparently, the reign of Marcus Aurelius; while it is very probable that Book XI began the First Punic War, XXI the Third Punic War, and perhaps XXXI the First Mithridatic War.

Dio followed the annalistic order of treatment, so popular among the Romans, according to which all the events of a given year, in whatever part of the world they occurred, were grouped together. The eponymous consuls of each year are regularly named at the appropriate points in the text, and in addition there is prefixed to each book, even for the imperial age, a table of the consuls for the period covered.

¹ It must be admitted, however, that the introductory words of Book LII read much more like the transition to a new period.

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When he comes to the empire, moreover, he is very careful to specify to a day the exact duration of each emperor's reign, and in certain other matters aims at equal exactness. Yet in spite of all his pains in this regard it would often be extremely difficult or impossible to extract a consistent chronology from his data. For it frequently happens that in his desire to trace the causes or results of a given series of events he is led to exceed the limits of a single year by a considerable margin; occasionally also this same motive is responsible for an inversion of the actual order of events.

Unfortunately the value of his history is greatly diminished for us as the result of his blind devotion to two theories governing historical writing in his day. On the one hand a sense of the dignity¹ and true value of history demanded that mere details and personal anecdotes should give place to the larger aspects and significance of events. On the other hand the historian was never to forget that he was at the same time a rhetorician; if the bare facts were lacking in effectiveness, they could be adorned, modified, or variously combined in the interest of a more dramatic presentation. These two principles, as applied by Dio, have resulted all too frequently in a somewhat vague, impressionistic picture of events, in which precisely those data which the modern historian eagerly looks for are either largely wanting

¹ LXXII, 18, 3.

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