

THREE NOTES ON THE *VITA PROBI*

IN 1883 Alexander Enmann demonstrated the existence of 'eine verlorene Geschichte der römischen Kaiser'.¹ Not all of his arguments or conclusions were valid, but one fundamental postulate is undeniable: Aurelius Victor in 359/60 and Eutropius a decade later independently used a common source, a lost *Kaisergeschichte* of relatively brief compass.² This lost work (it ought now to be clear) went down to the death of Constantine in 337,³ and traces of it can also be discovered in other writings of the late fourth century: in Festus' *Breviarium*, in Jerome's revision of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, in the *Epitome de Caesaribus*—and in the HA.⁴ If the HA used the *Kaisergeschichte*, its composition postdates 337—as Otto Seeck stated plainly in 1890.⁵ But the HA has also drawn on both Victor's *Caesares* and Eutropius' *Breviarium*.⁶ Some scholars therefore deny that the HA ever consulted the *Kaisergeschichte*, and hold that its resemblances to Victor and Eutropius are always the result of direct imitation.⁷ Others admit in principle that the HA might have consulted the lost work, but in practice explain every particular resemblance by derivation from one of the two extant authors.⁸ The HA's use of the *Kaisergeschichte* has bulked large in the long controversy over its date, and scepticism is very welcome. But where does the truth lie? Three passages of the *Vita Probi* (1. 6; 13. 1; 18. 8) bear closely on the question. The third, it will be contended, does indeed derive from the lost *Kaisergeschichte* and not from Victor and Eutropius. So too might the second—were it not pure fiction. As for the first passage, it introduces a complication: besides Victor and Eutropius, the HA shows an awareness of Festus which cannot be ignored in any discussion of its sources.

1. *Probus* 1. 6

The HA laments the regrettable dearth of information about Probus: 'scriptorum inopia iam paene nescimus' (*Prob.* 1. 3). But he will soon be rescued from oblivion:

neque ego nunc facultatem eloquentiamque polliceor sed res gestas, quas perire non patior (1. 6).

And, to forestall suspicion that he is romancing, the author names his sources. He has used books from the *Bibliotheca Ulpia* and the *Domus Tiberiana*, and archives—'regestis scribarum porticus porphyreticae, actis etiam senatus ac populi'.⁹ But above all he is indebted to the *ephemeris* of his friend, the old and honest 'Turdulus Gallicanus' (2. 1–2).

¹ *Philologus*, Supp. iv (1884), 335 ff.

² Cf. E. Hohl, *Bursians Jahresbericht*, cclvi (1937), 147.

³ *J.R.S.* lviii (1968), 265.

⁴ Cf. 'The lost *Kaisergeschichte* and the Latin historical tradition', to appear in the volume *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1968*. It is there argued that *Carus* 8. 1 and the factual framework of the *Vita Alexandri* are derived from the *Kaisergeschichte*.

⁵ *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie*, cxli

(1890), 638.

⁶ See, most recently, A. Chastagnol, *Rev. phil.* 3 xli (1967), 85 ff. = *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1966/67* (1968), pp. 53 ff.

⁷ Thus T. Damsholt, *Class. et Med.* xxv (1964), 146 ff.

⁸ As G. Alföldy, *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1964/65* (1966), 24; Chastagnol, *op. cit.*

⁹ Cf. W. Hartke, *Römische Kinderkaiser* (1951), 40.

The promise to retail facts is ostentatiously given, and the pretence of genuine research is assiduously maintained:

feratur in senatu Tacitus dixisse, cum eidem offerretur imperium, debere Probum principem fieri. sed ego senatus consultum ipsum non inveni (7. 1).¹

But the product of this 'research' is mainly flowing rhetoric and conscious fiction—'eloquentia, non res gestae'. The initial promise, therefore, is surely parody. Can its target be identified?

At first sight, the antithesis between facts and verbiage has the familiarity of a commonplace. But where precisely is it expressed thus in ancient historical writing outside the HA? Perhaps in one place only.² Dedicating his *Breviarium* to the emperor, Festus declares bluntly:

brevem fieri clementia tua praecepit. parebo libens praecepto, quippe cui desit facultas latius eloquendi; ac morem secutus calculonum, qui ingentes summas aeris brevioribus exprimunt, res gestas signabo, non eloquar (I).

This is not modesty, but truthfulness.³ The HA echoes it closely: no easy flow of words, no eloquence, just plain facts. Why should the author of this empty boast not have had Festus in mind?

Two other passages of the HA are now relevant:

hos ego versus a quodam grammatico translatos ita posui, ut fidem servarem, non quo <non> melius potuerint transferri, sed ut fidelitas historica servaretur, quam ego prae ceteris custodiendam putavi, qui quod ad eloquentiam pertinet nihil curo. rem enim vobis proposui deferre, non verba, maxime tanta rerum copia ut in triginta tyrannorum simul vitis (*Tyr. Trig.* 11. 6–7);

da nunc cuivis libellum non tam diserte quam fideliter scriptum. neque ego eloquentiam mihi videor pollicitus esse, sed rem (*ibid.* 33. 7–8).

'Trebellius Pollio' clearly refers to an undertaking given in a lost address (presumably the preface to the *Vita Valeriani*) to the friend who received the dedication of 'his' *vitae*, and whose relative 'Herennius Celsus' aspires to become consul (*Tyr. Trig.* 22. 12). Secure conclusions about the order of composition of the three extant passages quoted (*Tyr. Trig.* 11. 6–7; 33. 7–8; *Prob.* 1. 6) are therefore impossible. None the less, the last two chapters of the *Tyranni Triginta* (32–3) are an obvious appendage and appear to reproduce the parody of Festus in a less pointed form, omitting 'facultas'. Perhaps, then, they were written after the preface to the *Vita Probi*. That hypothesis would provide a valuable insight into the HA's method of composition and help to establish the true explanation of its pervasive untidiness—successive revisions by a single author. The first passage quoted from the *Tyranni Triginta* does not necessarily count against it: for, unless it has received a subsequent addition, its logic seems inexplicable.⁴

¹ Cf. R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (1968), 98–9.

² The reason is obvious and simple. In this pointed form, the sentiment is appropriate only for the writer of a *breviarium*—a literary genre which hardly began before Eutropius. But Eutropius was unpolemical: 'res

Romanas . . . brevi narratione collegi strictim . . . ut tranquillitatis tuae possit mens divina laetari . . .' (*praef.*).

³ A. Momigliano, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (1963), 86.

⁴ D. Magie, Loeb Classical Library,

II. *Probus* 13. 1

By definition, a good emperor favours the Senate and defers to it. Thus Tacitus wrote to the Senate:

ego cuncta ex vestra facere sententia et potestate decrevi (*Tac.* 9. 1).

And there was a prophecy that one of his descendants would become emperor: he would rule the Persians, Sarmatians, Franks, and Alamanni, send governors to Ceylon and Ireland, conquer the whole world,

postea tamen senatui reddat imperium et antiquis legibus vivat (15. 2).

Probus, who restored the Roman Empire to peace and safety (*Prob.* 1. 3-4), was undoubtedly a good emperor, perhaps even the perfect emperor. As 'Manlius Statianus' is made to say,

omnia in uno principe constituta sunt, rei militaris scientia, animus clemens, vita venerabilis, exemplar agenda rei p. atque omnium prae-rogativa virtutum (12. 2).

Probus therefore favoured the Senate; and if evidence did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it.

Probus resembled the emperor Claudius, who

habuit et senatus iudicia, priusquam ad imperium perveniret, ingentia (*Claud.* 18. 1).

Besides the commendation of Valerian, Gallienus, Claudius, Aurelian, and Tacitus (*Prob.* 5. 1-7. 5), Probus had earned the warm respect of the Senate (6. 3; 7. 3). This respect he reciprocated. No sooner was he saluted emperor by the soldiers than he wrote to the Senate, calling its members 'mundi principes' (11. 1 ff.). His request was humble:

quaeso, ut de meis meritis <iudicetis>, facturus quicquid iusserit vestra clementia (11. 4).

The Senate's response was predictable: 'Manlius Statianus' spoke for all when he declared that the Gods had given an emperor such as the Senate always prayed for (12. 1), and Probus was voted all the usual powers (12. 8). It was now the emperor's turn to be gracious:

accepto igitur hoc s.c. secunda oratione permisit patribus, ut ex magnorum iudicum appellationibus ipsi cognoscerent, proconsules crearent, legatos <ex> consulibus darent, ius praetorium praesidibus darent, leges, quas Probus ederet, senatus consultis propriis consecrarent (13. 1).

Various attempts have been made in the past to rescue the credit of this passage, at least in part.¹ But Probus' alleged favours to the Senate accord so well with the tendency of indisputable inventions (like the *senatus iudicia*) that

Scriptores Historiae Augustae, iii (1932), 93, avoids the difficulty by taking 'fides' as accuracy of translation. That is very forced: the natural run of the words is for 'ita posui ut fidem servarem' (not 'translatos ita') to cohere together. In which case, the author repeats himself, awkwardly.

¹ E. Dannhäuser, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Probus* (276-282) (Diss. Jena, 1909), 43 ff.; L. Homo, *Rev. hist.* cxxxviii (1921), 40 ff. G. Vitucci, *L'imperatore Probo* (1952), 87 ff., wisely displayed greater scepticism.

they must be presumed fictitious until specific evidence proves the contrary. Nor should it ever be forgotten that the modern picture of Roman constitutional law and practice is still basically that of Theodor Mommsen's *Römisches Staatsrecht*—a work whose publication was complete before Hermann Dessau first fully exposed the mendacity of the HA.¹

A recently published inscription, however, appears to provide the required specific confirmation. It reveals in full detail the career of L. Caesonius Ovinus Manlius Rufinianus Bassus, one of whose distinctions was to be

electo a divo Probo / ad pre[side]ndum iud. mag.

At least, that is the reading of the published transcript, and it is already enshrined in a standard work of reference.² If correct, it might demonstrate that not all of Probus' alleged reforms can be rejected outright.³ But the reading is almost certainly wrong. In reality, the inscription has:

electo a divo Probo / ad pre[side]ndum lud. mag.⁴

What does the abbreviation represent? Hardly 'lud(o) mag(no)': the *ludus magnus* was an establishment for training gladiators.⁵ Therefore, 'lud(is) mag(nis)'. What games are they? Perhaps the *ludi Romani*, celebrated every September.⁶ Hence the new inscription may indicate both that the emperor normally presided at these games in person and that Caesonius Ovinus served as Probus' deputy. But there is another possibility. The Chronographer of 354 records, under the reign of Probus,

hoc imp. senatores agitaverunt in circo maximo missos xiiii.⁷

These could be the games presided over by Caesonius Ovinus.

III. *Probus* 18. 8

The HA, Victor, Eutropius, and Jerome all report Probus' concern for viticulture:

Gallis omnibus et Hispanis ac Britannis hinc permisit, ut vites haberent vinumque conficerent. ipse Almam montem in Illyrico circa Sirmium militari manu fossum lecta vite conseruit (*Prob.* 18. 8);

namque ut ille [sc. Hannibal] oleis Africae pleraque per legiones, quarum otium reipublicae atque ductoribus suspectum rebatur, eodem modo hic [sc. Probus] Galliam Pannoniasque et Moesorum colles vinetis replevit (*Caes.* 37. 3);

vineas Gallos et Pannonios habere permisit, opere militari Almam montem apud Sirmium et Aureum apud Moesiam superiorem vineis conseruit et provincialibus colendos dedit (*Brev.* 9. 17. 2);

¹ *Hermes* xxiv (1889), 337 ff. Mommsen cited *Prob.* 13. 1 twice, as genuine evidence: *Römisches Staatsrecht* ii³ (1887), 254, 914–15.

² G. Barbieri, *Akte des IV. Internationalen Kongresses für griechische und lateinische Epigraphik* (1964), 40 ff.; whence *Ann. épig.* 1964, no. 223.

³ Barbieri, op. cit. 44 ff.; A. Chastagnol, *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1966/67* (1968), 67 ff.

⁴ The published photograph (*Akte*, Plate I) clearly shows a horizontal stroke at the bottom of the disputed letter.

⁵ O. Hirschfeld, *Die kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbemten bis auf Diocletian*² (1905), 289.

⁶ The evidence for these games is collected by A. Degraasi, *Inscr. Ital.* xiii. 2 (1963), 506–7.

⁷ *Mon. Germ. Hist., Auct. Ant.* ix. 148.

Probus Gallos et Pannonios vineas habere permisit Almamque et Aureum montem militari manu consitos provincialibus colendos dedit (*Chronicle*, under A.D. 280).¹

Only the HA mentions Spain and Britain. The truth of its statement has been impugned on two grounds. First, it was held that 'Vopiscus' and Eutropius were in error, with Victor alone preserving the truth: since vines must have been grown even without imperial fiat, Probus' permission is fictitious—in fact, he merely planted vines in Gaul, Pannonia, and Moesia.² Secondly, the idea of British wine was ridiculed as a thing unknown to mortal man.³ Both arguments are *a priori* and invalid. The reasoning which proves Probus' permission fictitious could equally well prove Domitian's edict forbidding viticulture fictitious. In this case, however, the evidence is beyond all suspicion: an allusion in a contemporary poet,⁴ Suetonius (*Domit.* 7. 2), and Philostratus, who relates that Scopelian secured exemption from its terms for the province of Asia (*Vit. Soph.* 1. 21. 6).⁵ Moreover, it is Eutropius, not Victor, who is the more likely to reproduce the common source accurately—especially when Victor concentrates on Probus' planting of vines in order to draw a comparison with Hannibal. Again, there is a mass of medieval and even modern evidence for British viticulture.⁶ Even if the evidence for Roman times is slender, it is nevertheless sufficient.⁷

If British wine was produced in Roman times, that is by no means direct confirmation of the HA's words. Its veracity can still be impugned. Some of the HA's inventions are highly plausible and deceive even today.⁸ Having found Gaul in his source, the author was quite capable of adding Spain and Britain simply in order to provide spurious detail. The three names reappear together in the *Quadrigae Tyrannorum*, in indubitable fiction:

Bonus domo Hispaniensi fuit, origine Britannus, Galla tamen matre, ut ipse dicebat, rhetoris filius, ut ab aliis comperi, paedagogi litterarii (14. 1).⁹

On the other hand, the fiction here could be modelled on a genuine occurrence of the three names in the *Probus*.¹⁰ And, if Probus encouraged viticulture in Gaul and the Balkan lands, why should he omit to do the same for the remaining wine-producing provinces of the west?

The question is nicely balanced. Students of Roman Britain and of the economic life of the Empire accept the testimony of the HA.¹¹ Such acceptance has an important corollary. If the HA has a genuine fact not in Victor,

¹ *Gr. Chr. Schr.* xlvii. 224.

² J. Brunner, *Büdingers Untersuchungen zur römischen Kaisergeschichte* ii (1868), 93–4.

³ Enmann, op. cit. 392–3: 'dass in Britannien je weinbau getrieben worden sei, hat noch kein sterblicher gesehen, man müsste denn wie der Londoner Cockney glauben, dass Port und Claret auf dem boden Albions wüchsen'.

⁴ Statius, *Silvae* 4. 3. 11–12.

⁵ Also Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 6. 42; Eusebius, *Chronicle* (*Gr. Chr. Schr.* xx. 217); and the later evidence cited by R. Helm, *Gr. Chr. Schr.* xlvii. 410.

⁶ E. M. Carus-Wilson, *Bull. Inst. Hist. Res.* xxi (1946–8), 145 ff. And, for a later

period, note *Parliamentary Debates, Standing Committees, Session 1967/68*, i: Finance Bill, cols. 271–2 (6 May 1968).

⁷ See S. S. Frere, *Britannia. A History of Roman Britain* (1967), 293.

⁸ e.g. Severus Alexander's private chapel (*Alex.* 29. 2): W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (1965), 329; E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), 107.

⁹ Cf. *P.I.R.*² B 146.

¹⁰ Note also *Prob.* 18. 5.

¹¹ R. G. Collingwood, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed. T. Frank), iii (1937), 78; J. J. van Nostrand, *ibid.* 217; Frere, op. cit. 293.

Eutropius, or Jerome (Festus having nothing relevant here), and that in a passage whose wording is very close to theirs, then the HA cannot simply have copied the extant authors—it must have consulted their source, the lost *Kaisergeschichte*. However, the same conclusion could still be argued even if the mention of Spain and Britain were invention: the verbal similarities of Eutropius, Jerome, and the HA might in themselves be held decisive.¹

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¹ Cf. *Alex.* 26. 9. A. Chastagnol, *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1966/67* (1968), 60, holds this passage copied from Eutropius, *Brev.* 8. 23—but fails to cite Jerome, *Chronicle*, under A.D. 232 (*Gr. Chr. Schr.* xlvii. 215).