

THE FALL OF PERENNIS: DIO-XIPHILINUS

72. 9. 2

DIO-XIPHILINUS, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* give three apparently contradictory accounts of the circumstances in which Commodus' all-powerful praetorian prefect, Sex. Tigridius Perennis, was overthrown in A.D. 185. My purpose here is not to try to decide between them, but primarily to correct what I think a patent misinterpretation, now current, of a crucial statement in that given by Xiphilinus in his epitome of Dio. In Boissevain's edition, of which the text is reproduced by Cary in the Loeb edition, the two relevant sentences have been separated by an excerpt from Dio's original text given by Petrus Patricius (see below), and this has perhaps helped to obscure the meaning of the epitomator. It will make for clarity to print the two sentences in the undisturbed sequence in which Xiphilinus wrote them (Boissevain's text):

Οἱ οὖν στρατιῶται, ὁπότε τι σφίσι μὴ καταθύμιον ἀπαντήσαι, τὴν αἰτίαν ἐπὶ τὸν Περέννιον ἀναφέροντες ἐμύημον αὐτῷ. καὶ οἱ ἐν Βρεττανίᾳ τοίνυν ὑπάρχοντες, ἐπειδὴ τι καὶ ἐπετιμήθησαν ἐφ' οἷς ἐστασίαζον (οὐ γὰρ πρὶν ἡσύχασαν ἢ αὐτοὺς τὸν Περτίνακα παῦσαι) χιλίους καὶ πεντακοσίους ἀκοντιστὰς ἀπὸ σφῶν ἀπολέξαντες ἐς τὴν Ἰταλίαν ἔπεμψαν· ὧν μηδενὸς κωλύοντος τῇ Ῥώμῃ πλησιασάντων κτλ.

ἀπαντήσαι R. St.: ἀπαντήσοι VC: ἀπαντήσκει fortasse Dio

Cary translated the second sentence thus: 'The lieutenants in Britain, accordingly, having been rebuked for their insubordination . . . now chose out of their number fifteen hundred javelin-men and sent them into Italy.' I do not know what he meant by 'lieutenants', but perhaps he thought that they were the *legati legionum* in Britain, and that is the view taken by F. Grosso in his valuable and exhaustive work, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (Turin, [1964], p. 186), and by some other recent writers.¹ But it must be wrong. The whole passage may be translated thus: 'The soldiers laid the blame on Perennis (*sic*) and vented their anger on him for anything that gave them dissatisfaction, and those actually in Britain, since they had been rebuked for their insubordination (they were not quiet until checked by Pertinax), chose 1,500 javelin men from their own number and sent them to Italy.' There is no mention of legates or 'lieutenants'. If *ὑπάρχοντες* were to be understood in that sense, then we should need not *ἀπὸ σφῶν* but *ἀπὸ τῶν σφετέρων* (*στρατιωτῶν*) or the like. For *ὑπάρχοντες* in the sense I propose, as a synonym for *ὄντες*, which is familiar enough in Greek (Liddell and Scott s.v. B 4), I have found by chance a pretty exact parallel in Xiphilinus, p. 55. 30 (Dindorf) *τούτους* (soldiers) *οὖν πολλοὺς κατὰ τὴν Ἰταλίαν ὑπάρχοντας παρεκάλει*. Zonaras, who

¹ e.g. G. M. Bersanetti, *Athen.* xxix (1951), 151 ff.; A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus* (London, 1971), p. 121 ('legionary legates, or rather ex-legates'; the alternative suggestion results from a conflation of Xiphilinus, misunderstood, and the *Historia Augusta*, see below). Xiphilinus was rightly inter-

preted by J. M. Heer, *Der historische Wert der Vita Commodi* (Philol. Supplementband, ix [1904]), 65 ff., whatever be thought of his historical reconstruction (Stein, *R.E.* viA. 953 f. follows Heer), and recently by S. S. Frere, *Britannia* (1967), p. 166.

in this part of his history simply followed Xiphilinus and therefore has no independent authority for the reconstruction of what Dio said,¹ but who may be presumed to have understood Xiphilinus' Greek, took the passage in the same way (12. 4, Dindorf iii, p. 88): *εἴ τι γούν τοῖς στρατιώταις ἀπήντα που δυσχερές, ἐπ' ἐκείνον τοῦτο ἀνέφερον καὶ ἐμήνιον αὐτῷ. οἱ ἐν Βρεττανίᾳ τοῖνυν στρατιῶται στασιάζοντες καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐπιτιμηθέντες χιλίους ἐπὶ πεντακοσίου ἐξ ἑαυτῶν εἰς τὴν Ἰταλίαν ἔπεμψαν.*

Even apart from the difficulty for Grosso's interpretation constituted by ἀπὸ σφῶν, ὑπάρχοντες is unusual for legionary legates, and I infer from their failure to cite this text for that sense of the word that it was not so translated either by Boissevain or by G. Vrind (*De Cassii Dionis Vocabulis quae ad ius publicum pertinent*, Hague, 1923). It is well known (Vrind, pp. 82 ff.) that Dio's normal word for legionary legates is *hypostrategoi*; there are over 30 instances of this in Boissevain's Index and a dozen of the related verb. Vrind (pp. 92 ff.) also shows indeed that the term *hyparchos* and the verb *hyparchein* are used by Dio to refer to holders of a subordinate command, and they may include legionary legates. Thus Catulus is made to speak of the many 'navarchs and hyparchs' who will exercise subordinate command under Pompey by the terms of Gabinus' law (τοὺς ὑπάρξειν ἐκείνῳ μέλλοντας, 36. 36. 1, cf. ib. 4 ἄρχοντας ἢ ὑπάρχοντας καὶ στρατηγούς ἢ ὑποστρατήγους) and Dio also speaks of the men sent out to imperial provinces with more than one legion as οἱ ὑπάρξοντές σφῶν, sc. στρατοπέδων; in the second passage (53. 15. 1) at least, he plainly means legionary legates, but the context (he has just been describing the governors) makes it plain that the term is chosen not as a technical equivalent for *legati legionis*, for which *hypostrategoi* would have been used, but (as in the former text) simply to indicate that the officers in question are subordinates. In the only other case recorded by Vrind from the pages of Dio, or by Liddell and Scott from any Greek writer in which *hyparchein* signifies 'to be *hyparchos*', it refers to the subordinate *imperium* enjoyed by Marcus in the reign of Pius (71. 34. 5). Thus in every instance the *verb* is used of a subordinate command in a context which indicates who has the superior command. But in 71. 9. 2 there is no allusion to the superior commander. The noun *hyparchos* is much commoner than the verb used in this rare sense, but again in 39. 39. 4, where it is used of Pompey's *legati* in Spain (incidentally more than legionary legates) who are elsewhere styled *hypostrategoi* (39. 39. 2), it seems to be chosen to indicate that they are under Pompey's orders. In some cases it seems to be deliberately vague, and to denote subordinate commanders of more than one class, or of a status not known to Dio.² Thus we are told that Pompey's *hyparchoi* in 67 were thwarted in recruiting sailors in Transalpine Gaul, but only one of his legates (called *hypostrategoi* in the same chapter, 36. 37) is known to have operated there (Broughton, *M.R.R.* ii. 148 f.), and probably inferior officers were commissioned to enlist sailors. Similarly Dio says that before the battle with Ariovistus in 58 Caesar addressed the *hyparchoi* and

¹ U. P. Boissevain, *Hermes*, xxvi (1891), 440 ff.

² In 48. 14. 1 it refers to Agrippa and Salvidienus Rufus in the Perusine war; their status is not known. In 52. 24. 4 it embraces all military officers in Italy, whom Dio (Maecenas) would subordinate to the praetorian prefects. 62. 23. 6 is another clear

case in which a man called *hypostrategos* is also termed *hyparchos*, to bring out his subordination to the governor. In 46. 46. 1 Pedius is described as *hyparchos* rather than as colleague of Octavian in the consulship; the Latin source was perhaps reminiscent of Sallust, *Hist.* 4. 48: 'collegam minorem et sui cultorem expectans'.

hypomeiones (38. 36. 3), and Vrind cites 47. 42. 2 to show that *hypomeiones* can refer to officers below the standing of *hypostrategoi*; however, Caesar's account (*B.G.* 1. 39 f.) shows that he summoned to his *consilium* centurions as well as legates, *praefecti*, and *comites*, and it may well be that Dio was denoting the centurions by *hypomeiones* and all the higher officers by *hyparchoi*. In 69. 13. 3, where we hear of 'the great number' of soldiers and *hyparchoi* which enabled Iulius Severus to get the better of the Jewish rebels, it is obvious that the word cannot be restricted to legionary legates. I suspect that in general Dio employed the term *hyparchoi* to refer to persons with a subordinate command which might be more (39. 39. 4, 48. 14. 1) or less than that of a legionary legate, sometimes rendering vague Latin terms, 'duces', 'qui praeerant', or the like. It may be said that in that case in 72. 9. 2 the verb might denote a class of officers in Britain wider than the legionary legates, including auxiliary commanders, but the other objections to taking *ὑπάρχοντες* to refer to officers at all will still stand.

Most of my parallels come of course from the original text of Dio, not from Xiphilinus, who can call Pompey's legates in Spain simply *strategoi* (14. 10 Dindorf), and who doubtless cared little for technicalities. Still, he too uses *hypostrategoi* (22. 25; 68. 2 Dindorf), and it seems unwarranted to suppose that in our text he departed from Dio's usage.

It is doubtful if the text would have been ever thought to relate to legionary but for *H.A. Commodus* 6. 2: 'hic tamen Perennis, qui tantum potuit, subito quod bello Britannico militibus equestris loci viros praefecerat amotis senatoribus, prodita re per legatos exercitus hostis appellatus lacerandusque militibus est deditus.'

This passage is normally taken to mean that Perennis' transference of legionary commands in Britain to Equites was 'denounced by the (legionary) legates of the army' to Commodus and that Perennis' fall followed. It is not clear to me that the relevant words cannot be translated 'denounced by deputies of the army', or that the author is not referring to the deputation of 1,500 soldiers recounted by Dio.¹ In Dio's version, as we have it in Xiphilinus' abbreviated and hardly intelligible form, the soldiers were angry with Perennis because they had been censured for insubordination and their 'deputation' alleged to Commodus that he was plotting to make his son emperor; no details are given of the way in which they tried to make this charge plausible, and succeeded (though Cleander is said to have poisoned Commodus' mind against the prefect). The story in the Augustan History is just as odd. Why should it have been fatal to Perennis when Commodus learned that he had replaced senatorial legates by Equites? But it is just conceivable that this step was taken by Perennis in an attempt to restore discipline in the British army, if we assume that the senatorial legates had been unwilling or unable to do so, that this inflamed the soldiers, and that they represented the measure as one intended to place the legions under the command of Perennis' partisans with a view to usurpation. Naturally, if that were the truth, it could not be the whole truth; more telling accusations must also have been preferred, for instance by Cleander, and Dio's full account doubtless supplied more information.

If, however, it is thought that in the *Historia Augusta* we must take 'legatos exercitus' to denote the legionary legates in Britain, then the biographer's

¹ He did not necessarily trouble to understand what he found in his source.

account is hardly to be reconciled with Dio's, on the assumption that *ὑπάρχοντες* in Xiphilinus means 'legates'. As Grosso himself observed (p. 179), the biographer says that the senatorial legates had been removed, but in Dio's version (on this interpretation) they were in command. We have therefore to assume that the equestrian prefects had in turn been once more replaced by senatorial legates, or if we take *ὑπάρχοντες* to have a wider sense (above), capable of including any subordinate commanders in Britain such as the prefects, that the very men whom Perennis had recently favoured were now conspiring against him. Indeed, even on the former view, it would appear that newly appointed legates, who presumably owed their preferment to the minister, now encompassed his ruin. Grosso also points out (pp. 180 f.) that the substitution of Equites for legates as legionary commanders in Britain is dated in the Life to the *bellum Britannicum* and cannot be later than the autumn of 184. If it were placed as late as this *terminus ante quem*, it would be hard to understand why legates had been restored to command early in the following year, when Perennis fell. Grosso would naturally place the appointment of Equites earlier, perhaps in 183. But then it must surely be assumed that they returned at once to Rome, and their denunciation of Perennis could not have been delayed till 185, and could not have had the important result ascribed to it by the *Historia Augusta*. It would not greatly disturb me to find that the account given in that work is wrong, since it seems to me careless and unreliable even when derived from its 'good' source, but it would be convenient to suppose that it is giving a garbled version of the truth, to be found in what is generally the incomparably superior narrative of Dio. And its statements *can* be reconciled with Dio, if 'legatos exercitus' denotes not 'former legionary legates' (it will be observed that the formulation is even on this view inexact)¹ but 'deputies from the army in Britain'. Furthermore, on this interpretation we are not bound, once *ὑπάρχοντες* is given its proper meaning in Xiphilinus, to suppose that Perennis ever reversed the substitution of Equites for senators in command of the British legions.

There would indeed be another reason for thinking that he did reverse it, if Boissevain was justified in associating the excerpt from Petrus Patricius (*exc. Vat.* 122) with the events described, for there we hear of an attempt made by the troops in Britain to proclaim a legionary legate (*hypostrategus*) named Priscus as emperor. But Grosso (11-13, 452 ff.) was surely right to put this incident in the governorship of Pertinax, which followed the death of Perennis, and in which he had great difficulty in quelling military *émeutes*, as the soldiers 'quemcumque imperatorem vellent habere et ipsum specialiter Pertinacem' (*H.A. Pert.* 3. 5-9, cf. *Comm.* 8. 4; here the *Historia Augusta* is to some extent confirmed by the vague allusions in Dio-Xiphilinus, 72. 9. 2, 73. 4. 1). At any rate the incident cannot be certainly placed in 184/5; at best we can only be sure that it occurred between 177 and 189/90.

I add one further argument against Grosso's interpretation of 72. 9. 2. It would be extremely odd that legates should have been merely censured and not removed, if we understand *ἐστasiaζον* to mean 'acting in a revolutionary or mutinous way' and not 'being at variance with each other'; in the latter case of course it would have been odd if they were able to answer a reprimand by uniting against Perennis. On the other hand it is easy enough to assume that mutinous troops were simply reprimanded. Moreover, whoever were

¹ Cf. Birley, cited p. 172 n. 1.

reprimanded for *stasis* were the same persons who remained in that state until Pertinax quelled them. But we know that Pertinax had to quell the insubordination of his *soldiers*. Once again a combination of linguistic and historical considerations shows that *ὑπάρχοντες* should not denote the legates (or other officers).

Finally, I turn from the meaning of what Xiphilinus says to the question of what actually happened. Herodian gives a quite different account (whatever interpretation be put on the *Historia Augusta*) of the circumstances of Perennis' fall. He tells that Perennis' plot (in which he believes) was exposed by soldiers of the Illyrian army in which Perennis' son held a high command (1. 9). He has not a word of the army in Britain. Some scholars have preferred his version and rejected that in Xiphilinus.¹ Grosso prefers to believe that there is truth in both versions (pp. 185 ff.), and this view may be right, once we have got rid of his notion that legionary legates were concerned. However, certainty is unattainable, more particularly because we cannot be sure that Dio, who could hardly have been entirely wrong, has not been utterly distorted in abbreviation; Dio's story of the reign of Commodus must have been at least twice as long as that Xiphilinus vouchsafes. The critics of Xiphilinus' version can hardly credit that 1,500 soldiers should have marched unopposed all the way from Britain to Italy to denounce Perennis, and von Domaszewski ingeniously conjectured that he or Dio misunderstood the dispatch of a British *vexillatio* to the eastern front via Italy.² But, as Grosso rightly observed (p. 187), the oddity of the unimpeded march is actually noted in the text of Xiphilinus. Furthermore, if it was the soldiers themselves who 'selected' the 1,500 men, we can hardly think that they constituted a *vexillatio* dispatched on official command; at best we could guess that the detachment was allowed to proceed because it was wrongly taken to be such a *vexillatio*. However that may be, we know that the army in Britain was in a prolonged state of mutiny, perhaps caused by the over-harsh discipline of Ulpius Marcellus c. 182–4,³ and we can readily assume, in the light of the difficulty that Pertinax found in restoring order, that the governor and legates (or equestrian prefects) were impotent to restrain their men. Such insubordination seems less incredible in the light of Herodian's story of the 'conspiracy' of Maternus (1. 10) and the strange document of 186 discovered at Rottweil (*A.É.* 1956, 90), not to speak of the licence permitted under Commodus to the praetorian soldiers at Rome itself, which had such dire consequences after his assassination.⁴ Indeed the allusions to desertions to the enemy in Marcus' northern wars are sinister.⁵ If we can believe Xiphilinus, we

¹ e.g. Heer (p. 172 n. 1).

² Ap. Heer, n. 149a.

³ Dio-Xiph. 72. 8. We do not know when or why he was tried for his life (Grosso's date of 184 [pp. 183 f.] seems too early to me), but perhaps he was blamed for the breakdown of discipline; he was hardly still governor in 185.

⁴ Hdn. 2. 2. 5, 2. 4. 1 and 4 etc. (all making nonsense of the judgement in 2. 6. 14 that the soldiers were first corrupted by the circumstances in which Didius Iulianus was proclaimed emperor); cf. Dio 73. 8; *H.A. Pert.* 5. 7, 6. 3.

⁵ Dio 71. 11. 2 and 4, 72. 2. 2. For deser-

tion see *Dig.* 49. 16. 3 *passim*, *h.t.* 4. 9 and 13, 5 *passim*, 7 (Tarrutenius Paternus, Marcus' praetorian prefect: 'proditores <et> transfugae plerumque capite puniuntur et exauctorati torquentur: nam pro hoste, non pro milite habentur'), 10. 1, 13. 5 f., 14, 15. Naturally desertion would at any time have figured prominently in writings on martial law, but desertion to the enemy, barbarians outside the empire, is less expected; for this, besides 7, see 3. 10–12 (Modestinus), 5. 5 ff. (Arrius Menander, citing Hadrian), cf. 6. 4 (for betrayals by *exploratores*.) It is not so strange that deserters should turn into common criminals, 5. 2.

have in his story of the fall of Perennis yet another premonition of the breakdown of military discipline in the third century.

Brasenose College, Oxford

P. A. BRUNT

The juristic evidence is mostly Severan (as usual), but the texts of Dio show that it may be carried back into the second century.

See also Grosso, 235 ff., 435 ff. (whose use of statements in the lives of Niger and Albinus appears to me injudicious).