

BOOK REVIEW

Studies in the Historia Augusta. By MARK THOMSON. Bruxelles: Editions Latomus, 2012. Pp. 155. Softcover, € 27,00. ISBN 9782-87031-2780.

The curiosity (or, perhaps better, curiosities) that is the *Historia Augusta* remains an understudied enigma for most classicists, even for some of those scholars with interests in imperial history. For most anglophone students of imperial biography and related fields, the Penguin Classics edition (incomplete, and with newly composed lives of Nerva and Trajan to craft something of a seamless continuation from Suetonius) and the aging three-volume Loeb are likely the most frequently consulted volumes; the ongoing Budé edition represents the most significant modern achievement of scholarship on the thirty books that have come to be preserved under the mysterious moniker of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*.

Mark Thomson's brief volume is an introduction to this difficult work, a slender guide to its problems and riches. Like most *prolegomena*, the present study is essentially a reappraisal and reexamination of the available evidence on a host of problems, the first of them the question of authorship, where Thomson reasonably concludes that a single scholarly "imposter" was responsible for the collection, though with what amounts at times to a "crudely paraphrased" record of a variety of disparate sources.

Authorship is followed by date. Thomson posits a composition after about 395 CE, though with nothing approaching a definitive case for just how wide a spread of years should be imagined—very late fourth or early fifth (i.e. during the reign of Honorius) is as precise as analysis of the textual and stylistic evidence would seem to allow. The chronological context allows Thomson to explore something of the problem of who the author of the collection was in the sense of: for whom was he writing and why did he craft such an ambitious program of literary hoax and spurious support for the prerogatives of the late antique senate.

Here Thomson concludes that the author was part of a senatorial aristocracy that sought to acquire a certain degree of added prestige and importance by indulgence in a fair amount of fabricated and indeed invented documents and embellished, elaborated imperial biographies. Herein there may be more oppor-

tunity for disagreement than over the relatively simpler questions of authorship and date; what may be most valuable is Thomson's consideration of the genre of imperial lives in the context of the historical realities of the last decades of the western empire.

Questions of literary fakes inevitably lead to the problem of author identification. The fourth chapter of Thomson's monograph discusses one obscure figure, Junius (or Julius) Naucellius. Thomson does not aspire to anything approaching a definitive case for Naucellius' responsibility for the *Historia Augusta*, but he does present an intriguing web of evidence and analysis as part of an avowed wish to stir further discussion and debate.

Thomson's consideration of the problems of the redaction of the collection as we have received it is where the most controversial conclusions of the volume are perhaps to be found. Here, the author cautiously raises the thesis that the mysterious compiler of the work may well have been responsible for at least some of the seemingly incoherent mess that is the *Historia*, by the deliberate inclusion of *lacunae* and other acts of "deviousness": Thomson's biographer/redactor is a literary imp of playful sensibilities, and an imp not immune from the hazards to his own work by editing and reordering his material to include a host of minor imperial figures, imposters like the author who aspires to memorialize them. The conclusion reached is that the collection we can read today was likely the result of its author's own reworking, not the product of the accidents of a poor later textual tradition.

What exactly happened to the *Historia Augusta* in the five centuries between roughly 400 and 900 is next for Thomson's succinct and lucid exploration. Here, brevity is in part a natural concomitant of extremely limited evidence and sparse citation and testimony.

Much of this material on dating and reception is fairly technical and certainly specialized in its study of both vocabulary and scattered references. The last section of the volume neatly draws together the accumulated evidence so as to address something of the problem of what exactly we mean by literary impostures and "fakes," especially in terms of what such concepts and notions meant to those of literary and scholarly sensibilities in the late antique western empire. The last pages of Thomson's book provide a valuable guide to a difficult, indeed seriously vexed topic, and one where the author's common sense approach and clear writing are especially welcome (the important work of Irene Peirano on "Roman pseudepigrapha" appeared too late for consideration).

The appended bibliography is a most welcome survey of the still reasonably moderately sized repertoire of work on the *Historia*. An *index locorum* concludes the volume.

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