

Reading History Forward: Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus, and the Will of Hadrian

This paper offers a reappraisal of Hadrian's succession arrangements in the year 138 CE. In that year, the sudden death of Hadrian's first heir, Aelius Caesar, forced the aging emperor to adopt a new candidate, Antoninus Pius. As part of the arrangement, Antoninus was in turn obliged to adopt two sons of his own: his nephew Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, Aelius's son. This two-layered adoption has led to scholarly controversy, particularly over whom Hadrian viewed as his "ultimate successor," with some historians arguing for Marcus (Pflaum 1964; Birley 1987; Priwitzer 2009) and others for Lucius (Barnes 1967). Yet such a long-term succession scheme would have stood little chance of success and there is no concrete evidence to suggest that this was even Hadrian's goal (Levick 2014). Rather than favoring *either* Marcus *or* Lucius for the succession, I argue that these interpretations have been distorted by hindsight and that Hadrian's actions instead demonstrated his desire for political stability by creating equal heirs who bound together competing elite clans.

The arguments which seek to demonstrate preference for Marcus or Lucius tend to focus on two factors: the social position each enjoyed at the time of their adoption and their marriage engagements. Later attestations of Hadrian's favor for Marcus (Dio 69[68].21.2; *HA Marci* 1.10) as well as grants of honors (*HA Marci* 4.1-2) have served as the basis for inferring his favored status. Marcus had also been engaged to Ceionia Fabia, daughter of Aelius Caesar, in 136 and held the urban prefecture in that year through the intercession of his prospective father-in-law (*HA Marci* 4.5-4.6). By contrast Lucius, age seven at the time of his adoption, had no honors to his name.

This disparity, however, is not as telling as has been claimed (Birley 1987; Priwitzer 2009). Lucius was Aelius's son and, between his father's death and Antoninus's adoption, Hadrian's closest male relative: honors would in all likelihood have come in time. Before 138 it was Marcus, not Lucius, who needed honors to set him apart from other elite Roman youths. Such honors were also Hadrian and Aelius's tools for courting Marcus's influential kin, the *Annii Veri* (Barnes 1967). It was only when Antoninus adopted the two and leveled their status that Marcus's honors appeared to make him greater than Lucius. Their shared imperial brotherhood marked them as equals in the succession and any difference is illusory.

Beyond their equal status as imperial princes, another possible means of demonstrating preference was through their engagements. Marcus, as noted, had been engaged to Fabia, the daughter of Aelius and sister of Lucius. This engagement appears to have persisted into the reign of Antoninus (Barnes 1967). As part of the arrangement, Lucius was engaged to Antoninus's daughter (and Marcus's cousin) Faustina the Younger (*HA Aelii* 6.9; *HA Veri* 2.2-3). Although the evidence that this engagement took place has been contested (Priwitzer 2009), its factuality continues to be accepted (Levick 2014). Barnes (1967) has argued that the arrangements favored Lucius, giving him the "better" match, while Birley (1987) has countered that they favored Marcus, pairing him with the daughter of Hadrian's preferred successor.

Both camps miss the mark. Had Hadrian desired to show incontrovertible favor to Marcus he could have affianced him to Faustina. Had he wished to do so to Lucius, he could have broken Marcus's engagement to Fabia. Yet Hadrian did neither of these things. Instead, at his death, he left behind two imperial princes engaged to two imperial princesses.

From these actions we can conclude that Hadrian did not undertake these complicated adoption and engagement arrangements to favor one prince over the other in a multi-generational

succession plan. Instead, he sought to leave behind a legacy of peace and concord by joining together the scions of two powerful Roman families: the Ceionii (Lucius and Fabia) and the Annii Veri (Faustina and Marcus). Antoninus's adoption of Marcus and Lucius was meant to give each clan a prince to whom they could look as their own. Their brotherhood made them equals. The engagements ensured that one member of each family married a member of the other. Thus any children they bore would unite the blood of both. Antoninus's politics shattered this plan and history's adoration of Marcus saw its memory overshadowed.

Bibliography

Barnes, T. 1967. "Hadrian and Lucius Verus." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 57 (1/2):65–79.

Birley, A. 1987. *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*. Routledge.

Levick, B. 2014. *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*. Oxford University Press.

Pflaum, H-G. 1964. "Le Règlement Successoral d'Hadrien." In *Historia-Augusta-Colloquium Bonn 1963*, edited by Straub, 95–122.

Priwitzer, S. 2009. *Faustina minor - Ehefrau eines Idealkaisers und Mutter eines Tyrannen: quellenkritische Untersuchungen zum dynastischen Potential, zur Darstellung und Handlungsspielräumen von Kaiserfrauen im Prinzipat*.