

Teaching the Year of the Six Emperors

Herodian claims that his history of the Roman Empire after Marcus Aurelius contains “more emperors than the years warranted” (1.1.5, trans. C. R. Whittaker), culminating in the so-called Year of the Six Emperors in 238. Teaching the crisis of the third century can be particularly challenging because the tortuous political history can overshadow everything else, especially for students accustomed to memorizing facts for use on exams. In my own history of the Roman Empire course, students anticipate that they will arrive at the “right answer” by re-creating a chapter from *The Roman Empire at Bay* (or even Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*). Against this tendency, I have reoriented my teaching to emphasize the contingency of this complex series of events, which offers the added benefit of encouraging critical assessments of Herodian as a primary source.

My basic intervention has been to separate the narrative into competing perspectives represented by each emperor, and then to assign groups of students to explain to their classmates what happened from that narrow point of view. Prescott Townsend’s venerable article on “The Revolution of A.D. 238,” despite some methodological shortcomings, provides the foundation for this approach. While students are not able to alter history as in some other roleplaying exercises, they quickly discern that the distinction between “tyrant” and “emperor” was fluid and that senatorial independence depended upon selective remembering of earlier periods of Roman history. In contrast to the civil war of AD 69, for which Suetonius guides students toward an analysis of imperial personalities, students must imbue the *dramatis personae* of 238 with their own insights drawn from Herodian’s history. The result captures Herodian’s sense of the period as a “tug of war,” but imperial chronology, and with it the lingering sense that the chaos must

end in a predetermined result, detracts from the historical contingency that I want students to grasp. To accomplish this goal, I needed to add more historical agents.

An underappreciated strength of Herodian as a historian is his inclusion of a host of supporting characters alongside the profusion of emperors. For example, among the defenders of Aquileia against Maximinus Thrax, students encounter the general (Rutilius Pudens) Crispinus, who is elsewhere attested in an inscription that recounts his long career in the service of various emperors. Adding these people to the assigned perspectives, for a total of 15 different named actors in the year 238, has finally produced the sense of a complex and uncertain civil war that I wanted. With the historical contours set, I can also introduce the largely fanciful biographies of the principals in the *Historia Augusta*, which prompt students to see how Herodian informs or misinforms later interpretations of the third century.

Bibliography

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