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Hommages à
Jean-Charles
Balty

Textes rassemblés par
Cécile Evers et Athéna Tsingarida

Lucius Verus in the Near East

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For Jean Charles Balty, in friendship and admiration

I dedicate these observations on an aspect of the Roman presence in Syria and Arabia to a friend and scholar whose profound knowledge of this region and its Graeco-Roman history has contributed greatly to illuminating the millennium between Alexander the Great and Muhammad.

Lucius Verus, the colleague of Marcus Aurelius as emperor at Rome, has often appeared, in both modern and ancient texts, as a kind of frivolous pendant to the much admired philosopher-ruler. Although Verus was in charge of a successful military campaign from A.D. 162-166 against belligerent Parthians – a campaign that evokes parallels with Corbulo and Trajan, the surviving record gives most of the credit to his commanders, notably C. Avidius Cassius and P. Martius Verus. It portrays Verus himself as a voluptuary in the flesh pots of the east. The rehabilitation of the biography of Verus in the *Historia Augusta* as one of the primary *vitae* and therefore a fundamentally reliable source of information has done nothing to improve the already maligned reputation of the emperor[1]. T. D. Barnes, who was the architect of this rehabilitation, did not extend his approval to the obviously tendentious depiction of Verus' excesses in the *Vita Veri*, but in general his restraint has not found much of an echo.

Yet Cassius Dio (71, 2, 4) affords a glimpse into the contemporary response to Verus' leadership immediately after the capitulation of Vologaeses, the burning of the royal palace at Ctesiphon, and the pillaging of Seleuceia. According to Dio, Lucius gloried in what had happened (τούτοις ἐπεκυδαίνετο καὶ μέγα ἐφρόνει). He had, at least momentarily, reached the peak of good fortune (τὰ τῆς ἄκρας εὐτυχίας). The treatise on writing history by the satirist Lucian calls up those sycophantic historians who tried to capture Verus' glory in rival accounts. C. P. Jones has been able to argue cogently that one of them, Crepereius, was a native of Pompeiopolis–Soli in Cilicia[2]. Even Fronto contemplated using his rhetorical brilliance in the service of celebrating one of his famous pupils. His *Principia Historiae* stand as an evocation of that unfinished project.

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[1] T. D. BARNES, "Hadrian and Lucius Verus," *JRS* 57 (1967), 65-79.

[2] C. P. JONES, *Culture and Society in Lucian*, Cambridge MA, 1986, 161-166, with reference to LUCIAN, *Quomodo hist. conscrib.* 15. Cf. the important discussion of Lucian's essay and its relevance to the Parthian campaign of Lucius Verus *in:* L. ROBERT, *À travers l'Asie Mineure*, Paris, 1980, 422-426. I wish to express here my gratitude to Christopher Jones for giving me comments and suggestions on the present paper.

Manifestly the defamatory polemic that infected the subsequent tradition had not yet overwhelmed Verus' name. Why and whence it came remain open questions. The good biographical source postulated by Barnes for a lost, independent life presumably would not have contained the scurrilous material we read today, but that material probably appeared in Marius Maximus' life of Marcus (he did not write one of Verus) and perhaps even in the *Parthica* of Asinius Quadratus, who is explicitly cited by the *Historia Augusta* (*Ver.* 8, 4). These were authors who wrote after Caracalla and Severus Alexander, whose eastern expeditions would have shone more brightly with Verus in the shadows.

The new *Cambridge Ancient History* (vol. XI) gives the received opinion about Verus in the Near East and devotes no space to questioning it: "Verus, indeed, had done little enough to earn any glory, staying mostly at Antioch... In 166, Lucius Verus was now able to prepare for his own departure – with some reluctance... The war resulted in a modest expansion of Roman territory with the annexation of land as far as Dura"[3]. But it has become increasingly evident that at the time, in 166, Verus' reputation was far more substantial. Cassius Dio clearly knew that those sycophantic historians, whom Lucian mocked, were riding the crest of the tide in the years immediately after 166. Then Verus died, and something happened in the Near East that called his entire achievement into question.

First, then, let us consider the dossier of documentation that can now be assembled from the Near East on the public renown of Lucius Verus. Most of it has emerged within the last quarter-century and has not yet found its way into standard narratives of the period. The five principal items are the following:

1) Dura-Europos. *SEG* 2. 817. The inscription attests a statue of Verus erected at Dura by a certain Aurelius Heliodorus ὁ ἐπιστάτης. The *Historia Augusta* asserts (*Ver.* 7, 6) that the emperor traveled as far as the Euphrates, but, as Barnes says, this statue would not constitute proof of an imperial visit[4]. But it does tell us something about local regard for Verus. There is no date, but the other testimonia below would point to 166.

2) Ruwwāfa, in the Ḥijāz. A bilingual inscription (Greek and Nabataean) first published by J. T. MILIK *in* P. PARR, L. LANKESTER HARDING, and J. E. DAYTON, "Preliminary Survey in NW Arabia 1968", *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology* 10 (1971 [1972]), 54-57, and then discussed at length by G. W. Bowersock in *Le monde grec: Hommages à Claire Préaux*, (edd. J. BINGEN, G. CAMBIER, G. NACHTERGAEL), Wetteren, 1975, 513-22. Cf. *Bull. épig.* (1976) 739 and *SEG* 45. 2026. (Despite the Roberts' discussion *SEG* did not pick up this text until twenty years later.) The inscription records the foundation of a temple of the imperial cult by the *ethnos* of

[3] A. BIRLEY, *Cambridge Ancient History* XI, Cambridge, 2000, 162-164.

[4] BARNES, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 72.

the Thamudenoi under the auspices of the governor of Arabia, Q. Antistius Adventus, who is attested in that office exactly in 166[5]. M. C. A. Macdonald has reassessed the meaning of *ethnos* (Nabataean *šrkt*) in *La présence arabe dans le Croissant fertile avant l'Hégire*, (ed. H. LOZACHMEUR), Paris, 1995, 93-101. Additional fragments show that the temple was completed by Adventus' successor Claudius Modestus. The role of the two governors can only mean that the site lay within the Arabian province at this time. Those who prefer to believe that the region lay outside the province have not – and cannot – explain the presence of the governors in this text[6].

3) Palmyra, G. W. Bowersock in *Chiron* 6 (1976), 349-355[7]. Cf. *Bull. épig.* (1977) 536 and *SEG* 26. 1641. An inscription built into the bath at Qaṣr al Ḥayr al šarqî was clearly moved there from Palmyra. It is dated to 166, honors Marcus and Lucius, and appears to describe the functioning of the imperial cult. This text is therefore of the same date as the previous one and reflects a similar enterprise. We thus span the Near East from Palmyra to the northwestern Arabian peninsula.

4) Petra, near the Qaṣr al-bint. Fawzi Zayadine has unearthed a head of Lucius Verus' father, Aelius Caesar, in the vicinity of the temple, and French excavations have found a monumental inscription with the titulature of Lucius Verus himself[8]. Another inscription names Q. Antistius Adventus, whose name has already appeared at Ruwwāfa (see item 2 above). These discoveries remain to be published, and obviously their implications for the use of the Qaṣr al-bint will need to be explored. But the commemoration of Lucius Verus and his father by both epigraphy and image is another striking example of enthusiasm for this emperor in the Near East. The inscription mentioning Adventus implies a date close to the two preceding texts. In other words Verus was celebrated together with the memory of his father.

5) Petra, a monumental Latin inscription from the so-called Great Temple complex. The inscription has been published by S. V. TRACY in M. S. JOUKOWSKY, *Petra Great Temple*, vol. 1: Brown University Excavations 1993-1997 (Providence RI, 1998),

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[5] See the references that I cited in the article mentioned from *Le monde grec*, 516. This entire article was reprinted in G. W. BOWERSOCK, *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire*, Goldbach, 1994, 203-212.

[6] E. g., D. GRAF, "Qurā 'Arabiyya and Provincia Arabia," *in: Géographie historique du Proche Orient*, Actes de la Table Ronde de Valbonne, Paris, 1988, 171-191, especially 178-182, reprinted in D. GRAF, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier from the Nabataeans to the Saracens*, Ashgate, 1997.

[7] This paper was reprinted in BOWERSOCK, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 195-201.

[8] The head will be published in *Syria* by Detlev Keikenbom and Thomas Weber, where parallel commemorations of Aelius Caesar together with other imperial figures of the age are provided. The inscription of Lucius Verus is cited in this article but not the one mentioning Adventus, which was presented by Dr. Zayadine, along with the Verus text, at the British Museum conference on Herods and Nabataeans in April 2001.

371-375, and in *JRA* suppl. series no. 31, *The Roman and Byzantine Near East* vol. 2, (ed. J. H. HUMPHREY), Portsmouth RI, 1999, 56-57. The inscription is cut in monumental letters and clearly honored an emperor. The letters TRIB PO[T] in the first line establish this point. Tracy not unreasonably argues that this may be a reference to Trajan, who gave Petra its title of Metropolis, but, in view of the evidence in item 4 above, it is probably worth suggesting that Tracy's fragment may have been another tribute to Lucius Verus.

This dossier, despite its uncertainties, leaves little room for doubt that across the region of Syria and Arabia the conquest of the Parthians under the leadership of Lucius Verus was widely celebrated, either through commemorations of Verus personally or through support of the imperial cult[9]. Verus knew that he was indebted to Avidius Cassius and Martius Verus for his successes, and it cannot have been accidental that both men held suffect consulates precisely in 166[10]. Perhaps coincidentally with holding the fasces, they almost immediately moved into governorships, Cassius in Syria (later with an enlarged command that also encompassed Arabia) and Martius Verus in Cappadocia[11].

In Syria and Arabia Avidius Cassius was not only the brilliant general who took Ctesiphon and Seleuceia. He was a native Syrian (from Cyrrhus) who had been born into the Roman administrative hierarchy[12]. His father, a philosophical rhetor by the name of Avidius Heliodorus, had held equestrian rank and served as *ab epistulis* under Hadrian[13]. Heliodorus had subsequently moved on to the pinnacle of a prefecture of Egypt. Cassius' knowledge of the Near East was therefore matched by an excellent position within the Roman bureaucracy. Since his military success had helped to raise up Lucius Verus, the indigenous populations of Syria and Arabia – in Dura, Palmyra, Petra, and the Ḥijāz – must have seen one of their own behind the image of Verus. Verus himself died from an apoplectic seizure at the end of 168

[9] For commemorations of the successful war elsewhere in the Roman East, see particularly the so-called Parthian Monument at Ephesus, discussed at length by C.C. VERMEULE, *Roman Imperial Art in Greece and Asia Minor*, Cambridge MA, 1968, 95-123. Cf. *Ephesos: Der neue Führer* (ed. P. SCHERRER), Vienna, 1996, 134.

[10] For Martius Verus, see *PIR*²M348. On the consulate of Avidius Cassius, see G. ALFÖLDY, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand unter den Antoninen*, Bonn, 1977, 181-182.

[11] B. E. THOMASSON, *Laterculi Praesidum*, vol. 1, Göteborg, 1984, Syria no. 60, 312-3 [Cassius] and Cappadocia no. 34, 270-271 [Verus].

[12] Cf. H. HALFMANN, *Die Senatoren aus dem östlichen Teil des Imperium Romanum bis zum Ende des 2. Jh. n. Chr.*, Göttingen, 1979 [*Hypomnemata* 58], 177-179, no. 100.

[13] G. W. BOWERSOCK, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1969, 50-52 and 85-86. For the phenomenon of philosophical rhetoric see the same author, "Philosophy in the Second Sophistic," forthcoming in the Festschrift for Miriam Griffin, to be entitled *Philosophy and Power* and to be published by the Oxford University Press.

or the beginning of 169. By then Italy was already in the grip of a plague that his troops had brought back with them from the East.

With Verus dead, Avidius Cassius was appointed to an extended command beyond the confines of provincial Syria.[14] The Roman emperor to whom he had been beholden was no longer there, and Marcus' trust proved to have been misplaced. When Cassius joined a conspiracy to rebel against the government that had appointed him, the allegiance he could expect from the peoples of the Near East constituted a massive threat to the eastern empire. This is not the place to chronicle the suppression of Avidius Cassius' revolt, but it may be safely asserted that his ascendancy would have been generally and rightly perceived as the work of Lucius Verus. A backlash against memory of the late emperor was almost inevitable.

Far more than the plague, it was the revolt of Avidius Cassius that wiped out the short-lived glory of Marcus' late colleague, and the literary tradition of the following century was never able to recover the celebratory mood of those few years between 166 and 168. Other emperors on other eastern campaigns were only too pleased to leave Verus to the sensationalist biographers. The epitome of Cassius Dio's history, however, leads one to suspect that he at least might have given a more nuanced account.

[14] Note CASS. DIO 71,3,1: τὸν μέντοι Κάσσιον ὁ Μᾶρκος τῆς Ἀσίας ἁπάσης ἐπιτροπεύειν ἐκέλευσεν. See also PHILOSTR., *Vit. Soph.*, 563, OLEARIUS (ὁ τὴν ἑῴαν ἐπιτροπεύων Κάσσιος) with Herodes Atticus' famous rebuke to Avidius Cassius at the time of his revolt: ἐμάνης.