

THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA

By Aelius Spartianus

Table of Contents

<u>THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA</u>	1
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I. The two sons left by Septimius Severus, Geta and Bassianus, both received the surname Antoninus, one from the army, the other from his father, but Geta was declared a public enemy, while Bassianus got the empire. The account of this emperor's ancestors I deem it needless to repeat, for all this has been fully told in the Life of Severus. He himself in his boyhood was winsome and clever, respectful to his parents and courteous to his parents' friends, beloved by the people, popular with the senate, and well able to further his own interests in winning affection. Never did he seem backward in letters or slow in deeds of kindness, never niggardly in largess or tardy in forgiving — at least while under his parents. For example, if ever he saw condemned criminals pitted against wild beasts, he wept or turned away his eyes, and this was more than pleasing to the people. Once, when a child of seven, hearing that a certain playmate of his had been severely scourged for adopting the religion of the Jews, he long refused to look at either the boy's father or his own, because he regarded them as responsible for the scourging. It was at his plea, moreover, that their ancient rights were restored to the citizens of Antioch and Byzantium, with whom Severus had become angry because they had given aid to Niger. He conceived a hatred for Plautianus because of his cruelty. And all the gifts he received from his father on the occasion of the Sigillaria he presented of his own accord to his dependents or to his teachers.

II. All this, however, was in his boyhood. For when he passed beyond the age of a boy, either by his father's advice or through a natural cunning, or because he thought that he must imitate Alexander of Macedonia, he became more reserved and stern and even somewhat savage in expression, and indeed so much so that many were unable to believe that he was the same person whom they had known as a boy. Alexander the Great and his achievements were ever on his lips, and often in a public gathering he would praise Tiberius and Sulla. He was more arrogant than his father; and his brother, because he was very modest, he thoroughly despised.

After his father's death he went to the Praetorian Camp and complained there to the soldiers that his brother was forming a conspiracy against him. And so he had his brother slain in the Palace, giving orders to burn his body at once. He also said in the Camp that his brother had made preparations to poison him and had shown disrespect to their mother. To those who had killed his brother he rendered thanks publicly, and indeed he even gave them a bonus for being so loyal to him. Nevertheless, some of the soldiers at Alba received the news of Geta's death with anger, and all declared they had sworn allegiance to both the sons of Severus and ought to maintain it to both. They then closed the gates of the camp, and the Emperor was not admitted for a long time, and then not until he had quieted their anger, not only by bitter words about Geta and by bringing charges against him, but also by enormous sums of money, by means of which, as usual, the soldiers were placated. After this he returned to Rome and then attended a meeting of the senate, wearing a cuirass under his senator's robe and accompanied by an armed guard. He stationed this in a double line in the midst of the benches and so made a speech, in which, with a view to accusing his brother and excusing himself, he complained in a confused and incoherent manner about his brother's treachery. The senate received this speech with little favour, when he said that although he had granted his brother every indulgence and had in fact saved him from a conspiracy, yet Geta had formed a most dangerous plot against him and had made no return for his brotherly affection.

III. After this speech he granted those who had been exiled or sent into banishment the right of returning to their fatherland.

THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA

From the senate he betook himself to the praetorians and spent the night in the Camp. The following day he proceeded to the Capitolium; here he spoke cordially to those whom he was planning to put to death and then went back to the Palace leaning on the arm of Papinian and of Cilo. Here he saw Geta's mother and some other women weeping for his brother's death, and he thereupon resolved to kill them; but he was deterred by thinking how this would merely add to the cruelty of having slain his brother. Laetus, however, he forced to commit suicide, sending him the poison himself; he had been the first to counsel the death of Geta and was himself the first to be killed. Afterwards, however, the Emperor frequently bewailed his death. Many others, too, who had been privy to Geta's murder were put to death, and likewise a man who paid honours to his portrait.

After this he gave orders that his cousin Afer should be killed, although on the previous day he had sent him a portion of food from his own table. Afer in fear of the assassins threw himself from a window and crawled away to his wife with a broken leg, but he was none the less seized by the murderers, who ridiculed him and put him to death. Pompeianus too was killed, the grandson of the Emperor Marcus, -- he was the son of his daughter and that Pompeianus who was married to Lucilia after the death of the Emperor Verus and made consul twice by Marcus and placed in command of all the most important wars of the time -- and he was killed in such a way as to seem to have been murdered by robbers.

IV. Next, in the Emperor's own presence, Papinian was struck with an axe by some soldiers and so slain. Whereupon the Emperor said to the slayer, "You should have used a sword in carrying out my command." Patruinus, too, was slain by his order, and that in front of the Temple of the Deified Pius, and his body as well as Papinian's were dragged about through the streets without any regard for decency. Also Papinian's son was killed, who was a quaestor and only three days before had given a lavish spectacle. During this same time there were slain men without number, all of whom had favoured the cause of Geta, and even the freedmen were slain who had managed Geta's affairs. Then there was a slaughtering in all manner of places. Even in the public baths there was slaughter, and some too were killed while dining, among them Sammonicus Serenus, many of whose books dealing with learned subjects are still in circulation. Cilo, moreover, twice prefect and consul, incurred the utmost danger merely because he had counselled harmony between the brothers. For not until after the city-soldiers had seized Cilo, tearing off his senator's robe and pulling off his boots, did Antoninus check their violence. After this he committed many further murders in the city, causing many persons far and wide to be seized by soldiers and killed, as though he were punishing a rebellion. He put to death Helvius Pertinax, substitute consul, for no other reason than because he was the son of an emperor, and he would never hesitate, whenever an opportunity presented itself, to put to death those who had been his brother's friends. He often delivered insolent invectives against the senate and against the people, issuing proclamations and publishing harangues, and he even declared that he would be a second Sulla.

V. After doing all this he set out for Gaul and immediately upon his arrival there killed the proconsul of Narbonensis. Thereby great consternation was caused among all who were engaged in administering Gaul, and he incurred the hatred felt for a tyrant; and yet he would at times assume a kindly demeanour, despite the fact that by nature he was very savage. After many measures directed against persons and in violation of the rights of communities he was seized with an illness and underwent great suffering. Yet even toward those who nursed him he behaved most brutally.

Then he made ready for a journey to the Orient, but interrupted his march and stopped in Dacia. In the region of Raetia he put a number of the natives to death and then harangued his soldiers and made them presents quite as though they were the troops of Sulla. He did not, however, as Commodus had done, permit his men to call him by the names of the gods, for many of them had begun to address him as Hercules because he had killed a lion and some other wild beasts. Yet he did call himself Germanus after defeating the Germans, either in jest or in earnest, for he was foolish and witless and asserted that had he conquered the Lucanians he should have been given the name Lucanicus.* At that time men were condemned to death for having urinated in places where there were statues or busts of the Emperor or for having removed garlands from his busts in order to replace them by others, and some were even condemned for wearing them around their necks as preventives of quartan or tertian fever.

THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA

[*The point of the joke is not evident; possibly some pun on the meaning of Lucanicus as a variety of sausage is intended. — D.M.]

Then he journeyed through Thrace accompanied by the prefect of the guard. While he was crossing over from here into Asia the yard—arm of his ship broke and he ran great danger of shipwreck, so that, together with his bodyguard, he had to climb down into a lifeboat. From this he was taken up into a trireme by the prefect of the fleet and so was rescued. He took wild boars in great numbers and once he even faced a lion — an occasion on which he prided himself, writing to his friends and boasting that he had attained to the prowess of a Hercules.

VI. After this, turning to the war with the Armenians and Parthians, he appointed as military commander a man whose character resembled his own. Then he betook himself to Alexandria, and here he called the people together into the gymnasium and heaped abuse on them; he gave orders, moreover, that those who were physically qualified should be enrolled for military service. But those whom he enrolled he put to death, following the example of Ptolemy Euergetes, the eighth of those who bore the name Ptolemy. In addition to this he issued an order to his soldiers to slay their hosts and thus caused great slaughter at Alexandria.

Next he advanced through the lands of the Cadusii and the Babylonians and waged a guerilla—warfare with the Parthian satraps, in which wild beasts were even let loose against the enemy. He then sent a letter to the senate as though he had won a real victory and thereupon was given the name Parthicus; the name Germanicus he had assumed during his father's lifetime. After this he wintered at Edessa with the intention of renewing the war against the Parthians. During this time, on the eighth day before the Ides of April, the feast of the Megalensia and his own birthday, while on a journey to Carrhae to do honour to the god Lunus, he stepped aside to satisfy the needs of nature and was thereupon assassinated by the treachery of Macrinus the prefect of the guard, who after his death seized the imperial power. The accomplices in the murder were Nemesianus, his brother Apollinaris, and Triccius, who was serving as prefect of the Second Legion, the Parthian, and commanded the irregular cavalry. Marcius Agrippa, too, the commander of the fleet, was privy to it, as well as many members of his staff acting on the instigation of Martialis.

VII. He was slain in the course of a journey between Carrhae and Edessa, when he had dismounted for the purpose of emptying his bladder and was standing in the midst of his body—guard, who were accomplices in the murder. For his equerry, while helping him to mount, thrust a dagger into his side, and thereupon all shouted out that it had been done by Martialis.

Now since we have made mention of the god Lunus, it should be known that all the most learned men have handed down the tradition, and it is at this day so held, particularly by the people of Carrhae, that whoever believes that this deity should be called Luna, with the name and sex of a woman, is subject to women and always their slave; whereas he who believes that the god is a male dominates his wife and is not caught by any woman's wiles. Hence the Greeks and, for that matter, the Egyptians, though they speak of Luna as a "god," in the same way as they include woman in "Man," nevertheless in their mystic rites use the masculine "Lunus."

VIII. Many, I know, have told the story of Papinian's death, but in such a way as to show that they did not know its cause, and each has given a different version. I, however, have preferred to record a variety of opinions rather than to remain silent about the murder of so great a man. It is generally reported that Papinian was a close friend of the Emperor Severus — related to him, some say, through his second wife — and that he had given instruction along with Severus under Scaevola's direction and later succeeded Severus as pleader for the privy—purse. It is further reported that Severus had particularly entrusted him with the care of his two sons, and for this reason he had always tried to reconcile the brothers Antoninus, and had even pleaded with Bassianus, when he accused his brother of treachery, not to put Geta to death; and for this reason he, together with Geta's supporters, was killed by the soldiers, not only with the consent but even with the encouragement of Antoninus. Many, again, relate that Bassianus, after killing his brother, commanded Papinian to explain away his crime for him in the senate and before the people; to which Papinian replied that it was not so easy to defend fratricide as to commit it. There is

THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA

also the story that Papinian refused to compose a speech in which, to improve the murderer's case, the brother was to be attacked; and that in his refusal he had declared that to accuse an innocent man who had been murdered was a second act of murder. All of which does not accord with facts; for the prefect of the guard may not compose speeches, and, besides, it is well established that Papinian was killed for being one of Geta's supporters. It is further related that Papinian, when, seized by the soldiers, he was being hauled to the Palace to be put to death, foretold the future, saying that whoever should succeed to his position would be an utter fool did he not take vengeance for this brutal attack on the prefecture. And this actually came to pass; for, as we have previously related, Macrinus murdered Antoninus; then, after he had been acclaimed emperor in the camp, together with his son, he gave the latter, who was called Diadumenianus, the name Antoninus, for the reason that an Antoninus was earnestly desired by the praetorian guard.

IX. Bassianus lived for forty-three years and ruled for six.* He was borne to the grave with a public funeral. He left a son, who afterward received, like his father, the name Antoninus — Marcus Antoninus Elagabalus; for such a hold had the name of the Antonines that it could not be removed from the thoughts of the people, because it had taken root in the hearts of all, even as had the name of Augustus. [*This is an erroneous statement based on the belief that he was the son of Severus' first wife Pacciana Marciana. He was actually twenty-nine years old at the time of his death. — D.M.]

His mode of life was evil and he was more brutal even than his cruel father. He was gluttonous in his use of food and addicted to wine, hated by his household and detested in every camp save that of the praetorian guard; and between him and his brother there was no resemblance whatever.

Among the public works which he left at Rome was the notable Bath named after himself, the *cella soliaris* of which, so the architects declare, cannot be reproduced in the way in which it was built by him. For it is said that the whole vaulting rested on gratings of bronze or copper, placed underneath it, but such is its size, that those who are versed in mechanics declare that it could not have been built in this way. And he left a portico, too, named after his father and intended to contain a record of his achievements, both of his triumphs and his wars. He himself assumed the name Caracallus, taken from the garment reaching down to his heels, which he gave to the populace and which before his time had not been in vogue. Hence at this present day, too, the hooded cloaks of this kind, affected especially by the Roman plebs, are called Antonine. He also constructed a new street at the side of his bath (that is to say, the Antonine Bath), one more beautiful than which it were hard to find among all the streets of Rome. He brought the cult of Isis to Rome and built magnificent temples to this goddess everywhere, celebrating her rites with even greater reverence than they had ever been celebrated before. In all this, however, it is a source of wonder to me how it can be said that it was he who first brought the rites of Isis to Rome, for Antoninus Commodus celebrated them too, and he even carried about the statue of Anubis and made all the ritualistic pauses. Perhaps, however, Bassianus merely added to the renown of the goddess and was not actually the first to bring her to Rome.

His body was laid in the tomb of the Antonines, in order that the resting-place which had given him his name might also receive his remains.

X. It is of interest to know the way in which they say he married his stepmother Julia.* She was a very beautiful woman, and once when she displayed a considerable part of her person, as it were in carelessness, Antoninus said, "I should like to, if I might," whereupon, they relate, she replied, "If you wish, you may; are you not aware that you are the emperor and that you make the laws and do not receive them?" By these words his violent passion was strengthened for the perpetration of a crime, and he contracted a marriage, which, were he in truth aware that he made the laws, it were his sole duty to forbid. For he took to wife his mother (by no other name should she be called), and to fratricide he added incest, for he joined to himself in marriage the woman whose son he had recently slain. [*The fabrication of an incestuous relationship between Caracalla and Julia Domna, and the equally false statement that Julia was the Emperor's stepmother, appear together in a definite historical tradition. — D.M.]

THE LIFE OF ANTONINUS CARACALLA

It is not out of place to include a certain gibe that was uttered at his expense. For when he assumed the surnames Germanicus, Parthicus, Arabicus, and Alamannicus (for he conquered the Alamanni too), Helvius Pertinax, the son of Pertinax, said to him in jest, so it is related, "Add to the others, please, that of Geticus Maximus also"; for he had slain his brother Geta, and Getae is a name for the Goths, whom he conquered, while on his way to the East, in a series of skirmishes.

XI. Many omens predicting Geta's murder occurred, as we shall relate in his biography. For although Geta was the first to depart from this life, we shall none the less follow our usual plan, that the first to be born and the first to begin his rule shall be the first to be described.

On that occasion, moreover, when the soldiers hailed him as Augustus though his father was still alive, because it seemed to them that Severus, now afflicted with a disease in his feet, could no longer rule the Empire, Severus, it is said, when the plot of the soldiers and tribunes was crushed, had thought of putting him to death; this, however, was opposed by the prefects, who were men of great influence. Some, on the other hand, say that the prefects wished to have him killed, but Severus refused, for fear that the severity of the act might be misrepresented as a piece of mere cruelty, and that, whereas it was in reality the soldiers who were guilty, the young man might pay the penalty for an act of rash folly with the stigma of a punishment so severe — namely, of seeming to have been put to death by his father.

Nevertheless, this emperor, the most cruel of men, and, to include all in a single phrase, a fratricide and committer of incest, the foe of his father, mother, and brother, was raised to the rank of the gods by Macrinus, his slayer, through fear of the soldiers, especially the praetorians. He has a temple, he has a board of Salii, he has an Antonine brotherhood, he who himself took from Faustina not only her temple but also her name as a goddess — that temple, at least, which her husband had built her in the foot-hills of the Taurus, and in which this man's son Elagabalus Antoninus afterwards made a shrine, either for himself or for the Syrian Jupiter (the matter is uncertain) or for the Sun.