CHAPTER ONE

Constructing a Narrative

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A narrative, you notice, not *the* narrative. The object of inquiry in this opening chapter is the literary material available to a historian desiring to produce a narrative history of the Roman Empire between the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BCE) and the death of Constantine (337 CE), the sort of thing you'll find, in fact, in Part II, ''The Narrative,'' where the demonstrative pronoun indicates ''the narrative used in this book,'' not ''the one and only narrative.'' A glance at that section will make it immediately clear that literary material is only one of many components currently used in constructing a narrative, but it is an appropriate place to begin, largely because it comes closest to supplying the organizational structure essential to any narrative, namely, a chronologically-arranged account of historically significant events. Such an account will almost certainly not be an adequate history of a period (hence Parts III, IV, and V), but it is generally a useful beginning. We will see below, however, that this linear structure sometimes fails even as a beginning, that there are periods when equally significant events are occurring in two or more areas simultaneously.

The narrative that our literary sources support most readily is the sort that the ancient authors were themselves trying to produce, namely, a narrative of power. Historically significant events were, to their way of thinking, either political or military. The historian asked Who had power? and How was power used, both internally and externally? In the imperial period such questions took him straight to the emperor, the ''guiding spirit,'' as one of Tacitus' characters put it, of ''the single body of the empire'' (*Ann.* 1.12.3). Tacitus himself discusses the consequence of the political structure for historiography later in the work (*Ann.* 4.32–3):

> I am well aware that many of the incidents I have narrated (and intend to narrate) seem unimportant and even trivial for a history. But one should not compare my *Annals* with the works of those who wrote on the affairs of the Roman people long ago. They treated great wars, cities being sacked, kings defeated and captured, and, when they turned to internal affairs, conflict between consuls and tribunes, laws about land ownership and the

> grain dole, the struggle between the plebeian and elite orders, all with a free hand. My task, however, is narrow in compass and without glory. . . . Now that the nature of our state is different, and security lies only in the rule of one man, it is worthwhile investigating and reporting these things.

With "these things" he refers to events from the narrative that preceded this digression, some trials of men charged (rightly or wrongly) with various offenses against the emperor, a sorry spectacle of ambition, betrayal, fear, favoritism, obsequiousness, and hidden agendas. In other words, a far cry from victorious battles and political convulsions. But however much Tacitus may regret the focus on the emperor and the diminution of the historian's opportunities, these realities could not be denied. The literary sources examined in the balance of this chapter are grouped by genre (history, biography, summary history, limited history), but in all of them the historically significant event is generally connected with the center of power, i.e. with the emperor (Pelling 1997).

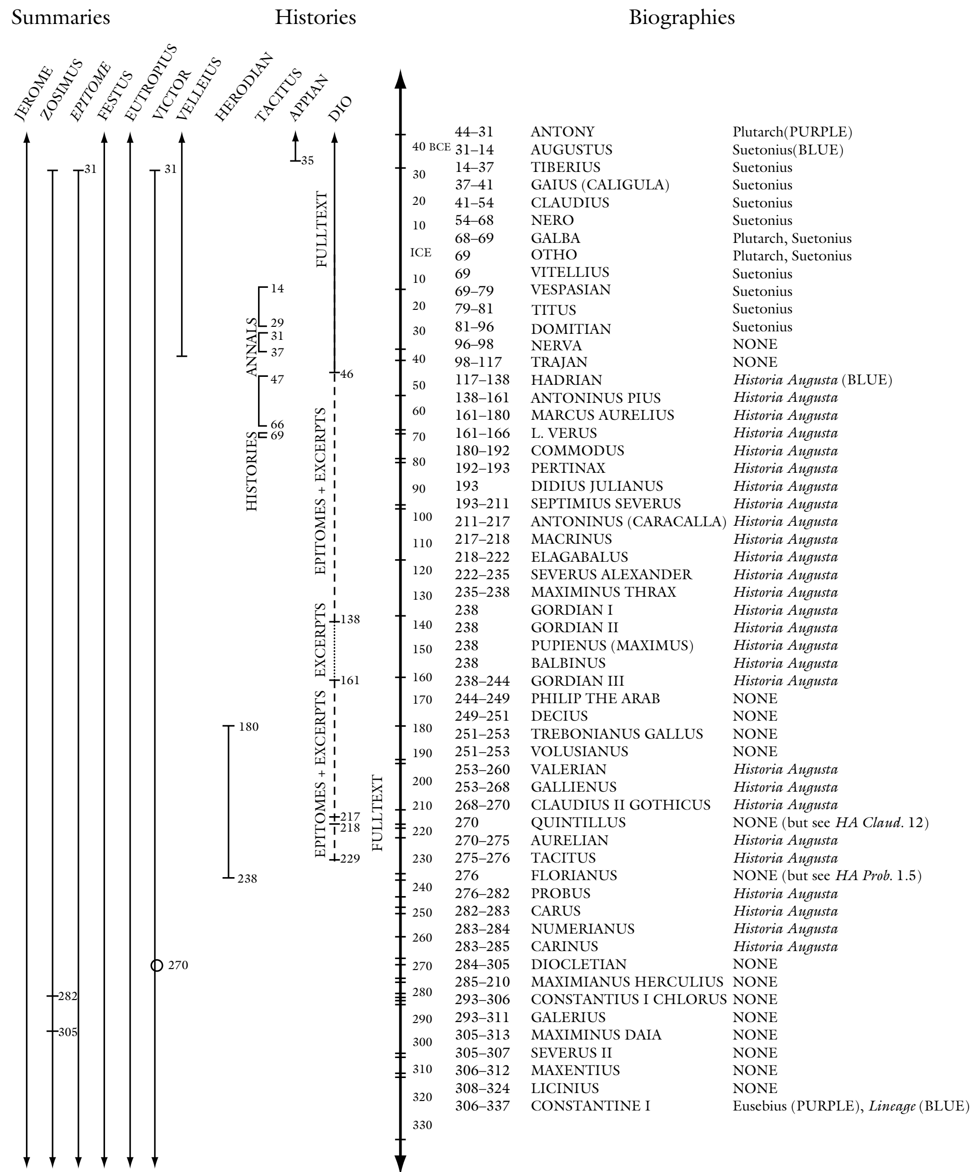
The exceptions only prove the rule. Suppose, for example, you want to know about the political situation in January of 69 CE. Tracking the emperor, Galba, will take you to Rome. There you will find that his hold on power is tenuous, since a coup is being planned under his very nose. The machinations of an erstwhile supporter and some praetorian guardsmen go unnoticed, however, since Galba's attention is drawn to another challenge to his power, this one mounted by the legions in Germany and a provincial governor. Galba's rivals, Otho and Vitellius respectively, are not acting in tandem, so the historian cannot subordinate one to the other. But a text, at least as texts are traditionally presented, cannot narrate simultaneous events simultaneously. In the best surviving account of this period, Tacitus' *Histories*, the historian reports the two coups sequentially, as he must, putting first the coup that came to fruition first, Otho's (*Hist.* 1.21–47; Vitellius' movement begins at 1.51). A different arrangement was possible. Indeed when Tacitus is faced with another set of parallel events, the two-pronged invasion of Italy by Vitellius' two commanders, Valens and Caecina, he puts second the narrative of Caecina's route, which reached Italy first (Valens: 1.63–6; Caecina: 1.67–70). Tacitus deals perfectly competently with these small challenges to the single linear narrative format. Both Otho's coup and Vitellius' were decided within a span of a few months, and the invasion of Italy took less time than that. But the political chaos of the mid-third century, roughly 235–84, posed a far greater challenge to linear narrative, with consequences to the literary tradition that will become apparent below (Potter, this volume).

1 The Sources

Roman histories, 44 BCE–337 CE

Most helpful for the construction of a narrative are works that themselves give a narrative. Those covering the period of this study are few in number and lacunose. (The coverage of the sources discussed in these first three sub-sections IA–C is summarized in Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Coverage of Roman history by historians



Dates	Emperor	Biography
44–31	ANTONY	Plutarch(PURPLE)
31–14	AUGUSTUS	Suetonius(BLUE)
14–37	TIBERIUS	Suetonius
37–41	GAIUS (CALIGULA)	Suetonius
41–54	CLAUDIUS	Suetonius
54–68	NERO	Suetonius
68–69	GALBA	Plutarch, Suetonius
69	OTHO	Plutarch, Suetonius
69	VITELLIUS	Suetonius
69–79	VESPASIAN	Suetonius
79–81	TITUS	Suetonius
81–96	DOMITIAN	Suetonius
96–98	NERVA	NONE
98–117	TRAJAN	NONE
117–138	HADRIAN	*Historia Augusta* (BLUE)
138–161	ANTONINUS PIUS	*Historia Augusta*
161–180	MARCUS AURELIUS	*Historia Augusta*
161–166	L. VERUS	*Historia Augusta*
180–192	COMMODUS	*Historia Augusta*
192–193	PERTINAX	*Historia Augusta*
193	DIDIUS JULIANUS	*Historia Augusta*
193–211	SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS	*Historia Augusta*
211–217	ANTONINUS (CARACALLA)	*Historia Augusta*
217–218	MACRINUS	*Historia Augusta*
218–222	ELAGABALUS	*Historia Augusta*
222–235	SEVERUS ALEXANDER	*Historia Augusta*
235–238	MAXIMINUS THRAX	*Historia Augusta*
238	GORDIAN I	*Historia Augusta*
238	GORDIAN II	*Historia Augusta*
238	PUPIENUS (MAXIMUS)	*Historia Augusta*
238	BALBINUS	*Historia Augusta*
238–244	GORDIAN III	*Historia Augusta*
244–249	PHILIP THE ARAB	NONE
249–251	DECIUS	NONE
251–253	TREBONIANUS GALLUS	NONE
251–253	VOLUSIANUS	NONE
253–260	VALERIAN	*Historia Augusta*
253–268	GALLIENUS	*Historia Augusta*
268–270	CLAUDIUS II GOTHICUS	*Historia Augusta*
270	QUINTILLUS	NONE (but see *HA Claud*. 12)
270–275	AURELIAN	*Historia Augusta*
275–276	TACITUS	*Historia Augusta*
276	FLORIANUS	NONE (but see *HA Prob*. 1.5)
276–282	PROBUS	*Historia Augusta*
282–283	CARUS	*Historia Augusta*
283–284	NUMERIANUS	*Historia Augusta*
283–285	CARINUS	*Historia Augusta*
284–305	DIOCLETIAN	NONE
285–210	MAXIMIANUS HERCULIUS	NONE
293–306	CONSTANTIUS I CHLORUS	NONE
293–311	GALERIUS	NONE
305–313	MAXIMINUS DAIA	NONE
305–307	SEVERUS II	NONE
306–312	MAXENTIUS	NONE
308–324	LICINIUS	NONE
306–337	CONSTANTINE I	Eusebius (PURPLE), *Lineage* (BLUE)

For the triumviral period and the reign of Augustus the best surviving narrative source is the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio, an 80-book work written in Greek by a senator and consul from Bithynia in the early part of the third century. The *History* began with the foundation of the city and ended in 229 CE, the year of its author's second consulship. Much of it is now lost, but for 44–10 BCE (books 45–54) the text is complete, and for 9 BCE–14 CE (books 55–6) it is nearly so. Dio lived some two centuries after the reign of Augustus but based his narrative on sources written nearly contemporaneously with these events. For the early part of the triumviral period (44–35 BCE) we also have Appian's *Civil Wars* (books 2.118–5.145), which end with the death of Sextus Pompeius after his defeat at the hands of Octavian. The *Civil Wars* constitute a section of Appian's *Roman History*, a war-centered narrative that takes as its theme the way Rome's wars contributed to the growth of its empire (pr. 14) and, in the case of its civil wars, to the origins of the principate (*BC* 1.6). Like Dio, but writing under the Antonine emperors, Appian was from the Greek part of the Roman world (Alexandria) and wrote in Greek. Like Dio again he had experience of public life, though his perspective was that of a financial official (he was a *procurator*), rather than of a senator and consul.

For the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero the fullest history is the *Annals* of Tacitus, written in Latin early in the second century CE. Tacitus, too, was a senator of consular rank; his origin seems to have been in the western part of the empire (Syme 1958a: 611–24). As the title suggests, the *Annals* present Roman history in a year-by-year format within the larger division of imperial reigns (Tiberius in books 1–6, Claudius in books 11–12, Nero in books 13–16). The narratives for each year vary in length (the longest is 49 chapters [14 CE], the shortest, three chapters [57 CE]; the average is 17 chapters per year) and focus (domestic politics: Senate meetings, trials; imperial bureaucracy; dynastic intrigues; diplomatic efforts; military affairs: campaigns, seditions, foreign invasions, etc.), but are fuller than anything else we have. To a greater degree even than in Dio's *History* the senatorial viewpoint of the author dominates the selection and presentation of material, so that there is a constant tension between the necessary focus on the emperor and the historian's sense of Rome's political past, when the Senate and an ever-changing parade of aristocrats ran the state (Smith, this volume). The *Annals* have come down to us missing a section of Tiberius' reign (29–31 CE), all of Gaius' and the beginning of Claudius' (37–47), and the end of Nero's (66–8). Where Dio's *Roman History* is substantially complete (14–46 CE, books 57–60) the gaps in Tacitus can be filled. But after book 60 the manuscript tradition of Dio lapses and our "text" becomes a congeries of excerpts and summaries preserved by other authors (see further below).

Tacitus also supplies, in his *Histories*, a detailed account of the troubled year 69 CE with its four emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian) and the beginning of the Flavian dynasty. The *Histories*' five extant books (389 chapters) go only as far as the autumn of 70; for the rest of the Flavian dynasty (69–96: Vespasian, Titus, Domitian), and for the Antonine (96–192: Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus), and part of the Severan periods (193–235: Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Macrinus, Elagabalus, Severus Alexander) we rely again on the remnants of Dio's *Roman History*. Dio's record of the reign of Pius (138–61), in particular, is very thin indeed, owing to the loss of this section in the work of his principal epitomator, Zonaras (see Dio 70.1.1). For the latter part of this period Dio was himself a

participant in public affairs; starting with the reign of Commodus, he says, his facts are drawn "not from the accounts of others but from my own observation" (72.4.2).

For the reigns of Commodus, the Severans, and the short-lived emperors who preceded Gordian III (238) there is also contemporary testimony in Herodian's *History of the Empire from the Time of Marcus*, a work written in Greek, perhaps under Gordian's successor, Philip the Arab (244–9): "a systematic account of events . . . covering the reigns of several emperors, of which I have personal experience" (2.15.7). As with all of the authors discussed so far, so with Herodian public service informed his history (1.2.5), but we cannot now ascertain his office(s) or rank. He mentions, as an additional guarantee of fidelity, that his initial audience was itself familiar with the events reported (1.1.3), but neither his access to information (via personal experience and written sources) nor his rhetorical style (which tends to the colorful) is such as to make his work as useful a source for the purposes of constructing a chronological narrative as others in this section.

Our list of narrative histories ends here, nearly a century before the death of Constantine. In the middle of the third century the historiographical tradition in which Tacitus, Appian, Dio, and Herodian wrote fell into abeyance, not to be revived until the end of the fourth century, with Ammianus Marcellinus, whose *History* began (in its original state) with Nerva (31.16.9), where Tacitus' *Histories* (again, in their original state) left off. (The former has lost its beginning, the latter its end.) Another type of source helps fill some of the large gaps in the narrative tradition.

Biographies

The biographical tradition is a rich one. The concentration on the emperor noted above in connection with the narrative tradition is given free rein in imperial biographies, which survive for every emperor from Augustus to Constantine except Nerva, Trajan, a cluster of short-lived emperors in the middle of the third century (see Table 1.1), and Diocletian and the Tetrarchs. Their quality varies enormously (see below). The principal collections are Suetonius' *Caesars* (Julius Caesar to Domitian) and the *Historia Augusta* (Hadrian to Carinus). Plutarch adds *Lives* of Galba and Otho, and, for the triumviral period, an important biography of Octavian's opponent Antony. Constantine is the subject of two biographies, one by his contemporary Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, the other by a now-unknown author writing at the end of the fourth century (oddly titled *The Lineage of the Emperor Constantine*, since it focuses on the years of Constantine's reign, 305–37). Besides the imperial biographies (and the fairly unreliable biographies of imperial heirs and rivals in the *Historia Augusta*; see below) there is also a biography of C. Julius Agricola by his son-in-law Tacitus, which focuses on Agricola's conquests in Britain under the Flavians (77–84).

Biography is a less-than-ideal contributor to narrative since its organizational principle is generally topical (background, education, career, achievements, virtues, vices, idiosyncrasies, personal appearance, etc.) rather than chronological. And biographies of successive emperors inevitably overlap. The information considered relevant may also be different from that suitable to histories: Plutarch, for example, eschews "the accurate reporting of everything that occurred," which he calls "the stuff of political history," in favor of the memorable deeds and experiences of

the emperors (*Life of Galba* 2.3). Not surprisingly, both he and Suetonius omit from their respective biographies of Otho military campaigns led by subordinates rather than by the emperor himself, while Tacitus in the *Histories* records both (1.79, 2.12–15). At the other end of our period we find that the political history of the last decade of Constantine's reign cannot be reconstructed from the literary sources alone, despite his two biographies (Averil Cameron 1997). On the other hand, the biographical genre allows for the inclusion of documents in a way that history proper does not, a feature to which we owe some precious items preserved by Suetonius (especially letters of Augustus) and some wild forgeries in the *Historia Augusta* (see, e.g., Syme 1968: 60–5 on a "letter of Hadrian" and Potter 1999a: 200 n. 86 for a partial list).

Suetonius' 11 imperial biographies – the 12 *Caesars* commence with Julius – supply some of the history that is lost in the gaps in the texts of Dio and Tacitus for the period from Augustus to Domitian. Like Tacitus, Suetonius wrote in the early second century CE. He was not a senator, but a man of equestrian rank who rose through the imperial bureaucracy to be an important secretary ("head of department") under Hadrian (Wallace-Hadrill 1983). The *Lives* are fullest at the beginning of the series, while the treatment of the Flavians (where Dio is fragmentary and Tacitus lost) is disappointingly brief. Much of historiographical value can be learned by comparing Suetonius' biographies of Galba and Otho with those of Plutarch and with Tacitus' narrative treatment of the same period (*Hist*. books 1–2; Damon 2003, Appendix 1).

Forged documents are only the tip of the problematical iceberg that is the *Historia Augusta*. Though it offers *Lives* of some 20 emperors, five imperial heirs who never became emperor, and 40 pretenders to imperial power (the first and last numbers are rounded because the labels "emperor" and "pretender" are artificially simplistic in this period), and though it is the fullest source for many of these reigns, it has to be used with great caution. To list the problems briefly:

1 Authorship and Date: Although the *Historia Augusta* purports to be written by six different authors in the time of Diocletian and Constantine, it is now agreed, with few dissenters, that the work was written at the end of the fourth century by a now unknown author under six different pseudonyms.

2 Purpose: Why this elaborate charade? No good answer has been found.

3 Sources: Citations are given both to actual (now lost) sources and to sources that never existed (Syme 1971a: 1–16; 1983: 98–108). Furthermore, some of the work's sources (e.g. Herodian) are not named (Potter 1999a: 146). There may have been no useful sources for short-lived emperors such as Quintillus (whose very brief reign is incorporated in that of his brother Claudius II Gothicus [*HA Claud*. 12]) and for imperial heirs and rivals, whose *Lives* tend to be derived from the *Life* of the relevant emperor. But an absence of information did not prevent composition. The *Lives* of emperors in the Antonine and early Severan periods are generally accounted more reliable than the later ones; the *Lives* of Macrinus (an interloper in the Severan dynasty) and the last of the Severans, Alexander, are counted with the latter group.

Scholarship on the *Historia Augusta* and on the history of the third century has done much to identify the facts in this work that stand up to scrutiny, facts that are of some use for the purpose of constructing a chronological narrative (Peachin and Potter, this volume). Extensive reliance on this source, however, is certainly perilous.

Between them narrative histories and imperial biographies provide us with information (of varying quality) about most of the years between the death of Julius

Caesar and the death of Constantine. To fill in the remaining gaps (the reigns of Philip the Arab and his successors, and of Diocletian and his co-rulers) and to supplement the record where it is thin (on Nerva, Trajan, Pius, and the whole period for which the *Historia Augusta* is the sole authority), we have recourse to texts that cover the whole of this period (and a good deal more) within an abbreviated (sometimes extremely brief) narrative.

Summary histories

The earliest of the summary histories belongs to the reign of Tiberius. In the space of two books Velleius Paterculus, a soldier and senator, treats the history of Rome from the mythological period to 29 CE. The scale of discussion expands as he gets closer to his own time; the chapters relevant to our period are 2.59–131. The work is dedicated to one of the consuls of 30, a family connection, and is highly flattering to the emperor Tiberius, under whom Velleius served on numerous campaigns. Its contemporary and pro-Tiberius point of view makes a sharp and useful contrast with the darker colors of the Tiberian books of Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius (Smith, this volume).

Not until the fourth century is there an extant successor to Velleius for the imperial period, but here we find four. The first (by ending point) is Sextus Aurelius Victor's *Book on the Emperors*, which runs from Augustus through Constantius II (361, with a small gap in the text around 270 (from the end of Claudius II through Quintillus to the beginning of Aurelian). Victor was a member of the imperial bureaucracy and served as governor of a Pannonian province (360s) and as urban prefect in Rome (388/9). The starting point for his work is "the end of Livy" (preface; actually, 31 BCE), but its scope is much reduced: each emperor gets about a paragraph (long or short). Eutropius' *Abbreviated History of Rome* is about half the length of Victor's book for the imperial period, but begins with the foundation of the city and carries the narrative up to (but not into) the reign of Valens (364–78), by whom it was commissioned (preface), covering in all 1118 years (10.18). He describes his work as a chronological arrangement of "the outstanding achievements of the Romans, in war and peace . . . and the distinctive elements in the lives of the emperors" (preface). Valens also commissioned the third work, the even shorter *Abbreviated History* of Festus, which has the same *termini* as Eutropius' work and was completed in 369/70. Festus promises a text so brief that Valens will be able to "count the years and events of Roman history" without having the trouble of reading much about them (ch. 1). Besides being brief, Festus' work is uneven in its coverage, allotting more space to the provinces and conflicts with Parthia/Persia than to Rome and Italy. Hence it is (relatively) abundant on Augustus and Trajan (see below), but omits the long reign of Antoninus Pius (138–61) altogether. From the very end of the fourth century comes the *Epitome on the Emperors*, a work similar in scope to Victor's by a now unknown author. Beginning with the reign of Augustus, it continues into that of Theodosius, ending in 395. A later work in this category is the early sixth-century *New History* of Zosimus, written after the dissolution of the Western Empire by a pagan author to chronicle, in a mirror-image of Polybius on Rome's growth, Rome's decline. From Augustus through the Severan dynasty its coverage is very brief indeed; thereafter it is increasingly (but irregularly) detailed, and has lost its section on Diocletian. The work ends, unfinished, at 410 CE.

Just how abbreviated these summary histories are can be seen from the number of *words* they devote to the reigns of a sampling of emperors:

Trajan (98–117): Victor 312, Eutropius 405, Festus 86, *Epitome* 298, Zosimus 1
Pius (138–61): Victor 92, Eutropius 137, Festus 0, *Epitome* 222, Zosimus 4
Philip the Arab (244–9): Victor 222, Eutropius 50, Festus 9, *Epitome* 72, Zosimus 477 Diocletian (284–305): Victor 1058, Eutropius 775, Festus 126, *Epitome* 176, Zosimus 0 (lost)

Some patterns emerge (e.g. Festus is always briefer than Eutropius, Zosimus' detail increases as time goes on; his narrative on Diocletian is a particularly unfortunate loss), but variation is also evident, as in Victor's surprisingly voluminous (relatively speaking) narrative on Philip the Arab and the *Epitome*'s surprisingly brief section on Diocletian. All of these accounts are interrelated by derivation from common sources, but each contributes unique information – sometimes erroneous or fictitious, but more often useful – to our understanding of the imperial period.

Even briefer than the summary history is the ''chronicle'' genre, the most influential representative of which for our period is Jerome's Latin translation of (and supplement to) Eusebius' (lost) Greek *Chronological Canons with an Epitome of Universal History, both Greek and Barbarian*. For a period running from the birth of Abraham (2016 BCE) to 378 CE Jerome gives synchronized timelines (e.g., for the imperial period, Olympiads, an emperor's regnal year, years from the birth of Abraham) accompanied by brief notes on political and cultural history. His criteria for selection are somewhat broader than those of the summary historians – the emperors yield a little historiographical territory here – but his reports are generally very brief. Under Tiberius' reign, for example, consecutive entries include: a fire in the Theater of Pompey at Rome, the political advancement of Tiberius' son Drusus, Drusus' death by poison, the death of a noted orator at the age of 90, the suicide of someone on trial, city foundations by a client king in the Near East, and the appointment of Pontius Pilate as governor of Judaea. Jerome's report is complete in 57 words, exactly as many as I have used here. Eusebius' chronicle ended at 326; in about 380 Jerome supplemented the historical portion of the work and added the years 327–78.

Somewhat different in nature from both summary history and chronicle is the epitome, an abbreviated version of (generally) a single source. An early example is the book-by-book epitome of Livy known as the *Periochae* (*Summaries*). Livy's books on the triumviral and early Augustan periods are lost, but the *Periochae* give us a glimpse of them – only the merest glimpse, however, since a whole book of Livy is sometimes summarized in as little as a sentence or two. From book 138, for instance, all that remains is ''The Raeti were defeated by Tiberius Nero and Drusus, Augustus' stepsons. Agrippa, Augustus' son-in-law, died. A census was conducted by Drusus.'' Another epitome source for the triumviral period is Florus' *Epitome of Seven Hundred Years' Worth of Wars*, which begins with Romulus and ends in the reign of Augustus (2.13–34 is the portion relevant to this book). Florus, who wrote in the second century, focuses on Rome's wars and applauds their renewal under Trajan after a too-long period of peace (pr. 8). Where possible he arranges his material by the theater of war: under Augustus, for example, he has separate sections on wars in Noricum,

Illyricum, Pannonia, Dalmatia, Dacia, Sarmatia, Germany, Spain (two sections), and Armenia. On the Alpine campaign mentioned in the epitome of Livy 138 he reports, "Augustus pacified all the peoples in that part of the world – the Breuni, Ucenni, and Vindelici – through the wars of his stepson Claudius Drusus," and adds a brief anecdote about the ferocity of Alpine women. Dates are few. Much more useful than either of the above is the *Epitome of the Histories from the Creation to 1118* by John Zonaras. Writing in twelfth-century Byzantium, Zonaras draws on several texts, including Dio for long stretches, and abbreviates less severely. Where Zonaras' text has gaps our knowledge of Dio becomes vanishingly small (e.g. the reign of Pius), but his is one of the longest reports on the reign of Diocletian (12.31–2).

Limited histories

Long or short, full or thin, the works mentioned in the preceding sections all treat wide swaths of imperial history and, with the exception of Jerome, focus on things Roman. The works mentioned briefly and for the sake of example here lack one or the other trait, or both. An important work with a narrow chronological scope is Josephus' *Jewish War*, which narrates a single war in a single Roman province, but does so with the advantage of personal involvement (Josephus commanded troops against the Romans at the beginning of the war and spent its later years as a prisoner in the Roman general's entourage). The bulk of the work (books 1–6) is spent on five years' events (66–70); Book 7 continues the narrative of the rebellion's somewhat sporadic course (including the siege of Masada) subsequent to the fall of Jerusalem (see further Smith, this volume). Narrowness of focus rather than chronological scope characterizes works such as Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (from Jesus to the fourth century) and Orosius' *History against the Pagans* (from creation to the early fifth century). In both works the events of Roman history reported are tangential to the author's main purpose: Eusebius was sketching the history of the church, Orosius trying to show that life was worse before Christianity. Lactantius' *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* is limited in both temporal scope – principally 303–13 CE – and purpose: pointing to the moral that those emperors who persecute the Christians pay in the end. It is nevertheless an important source for the political history of Rome in that period, giving, to cite just one example, a detailed account of the abdication of Diocletian in 305 (18–19). Many more works could of course be mentioned here, but it is sufficient to have indicated the category.

Reckoning together all of the literary sources, we have some information about the whole of the period between the death of Caesar and the death of Constantine. Most richly documented is the early Julio-Claudian period, for which we have Tacitus' *Annals*, Dio (complete), biographies by Suetonius, the contemporary report of Velleius, and two epitomes of Livy's last books (not to mention all of the later summary histories). Next best is the period from Commodus to Elagabalus, where in addition to contemporary reports by Dio (whose full text of the years 217–18 is preserved in a somewhat damaged manuscript of 79.2–80.10) and Herodian, we have reasonably reliable biographies in the *Historia Augusta* and six summary histories. In about 222, however, the evidence begins to thin: first the *Historia Augusta*'s quality falls off, then Dio's text ends, then Herodian ends. From 238 up to the reign of Constantine the literary sources are frustratingly scant.

2 Source Criticism

Beyond determining the genre, length, and focus of the various strands of the literary tradition, the historian needs to assess their reliability. What is a text's purpose? What are its sources of information? How good are those sources? How does it use the sources? What is the state of its transmission and preservation? And so on. This scrutiny, or source criticism, allows the modern student to use the available information effectively and to cope with conflicting information. A historian's answers to source criticism questions will of course depend on his or her own purpose in writing. Our focus here is simply on the capacity of the sources mentioned above to supply the chronological backbone, so to speak, of the imperial period (for a broader treatment see Smith, this volume).

The question of purpose is basic. Sometimes an author supplies the answer, or at least *an* answer. Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, for example, was written as ''an unstinting account of good things'' (1.10.2), particularly of deeds ''dear to God'' that fell outside the normal scope of political and military history (1.11.1). Eusebius' purpose is explicitly laudatory (''unrestrained praises in varying words'' 1.11.2) and the work as a whole is designed as a counterweight to the histories that record the misdeeds of emperors such as Nero (1.10.2). ''Good things'' do not include the execution of Constantine's eldest son Crispus or the (forced?) suicide of his first wife Fausta, which are accordingly absent from the biography, though attested elsewhere (e.g. Jerome on 328 CE ''Constantine killed his wife Fausta,'' one of three entries for the year). Given Eusebius' purpose in writing, the omission of these events in the *Life* does not in itself cast doubt on the authenticity of reports elsewhere on the deaths of Crispus and Fausta. The dedications to the emperor Valens that open the summary histories of Eutropius and Festus provide similarly helpful information (see above). Frequently, however, and particularly with full-scale histories, there is less to guide us. Reputable historians, as Tacitus tells us in the preface to his *Histories*, are responsible to the truth (1.1.4), not to a patron or the powerful. We would like to believe him, but at no period during the empire does a historian give evidence of being able to feel what he wants and say what he feels, particularly about contemporary events. Tacitus, who asserts that such was the happy condition of the historian under Nerva and Trajan (*Hist.* 1.1.4), did not write about Nerva or Trajan. And Tacitus was aware that there was danger in writing even on non-contemporary events, as is shown by his extended discussion (*Ann.* 4.34–5) of the fate of the historian Cremutius Cordus, who died under Tiberius for his history of the end of the republic. The first question to ask, then, is whether the writer can tell the truth about an event, should he happen to know it.

The second, of course, is whether he can know it (Potter 1999a: 79–119). We do have some contemporary reports: Velleius on parts of the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, Dio and Herodian on the reigns of Commodus and the Severan emperors, Eusebius on Constantine. Josephus was a participant in the Jewish War of 66–70, Lactantius a contemporary of the persecutions he reports in the greatest detail. Tacitus, Plutarch, and Suetonius were alive, but not yet adult, during some of the periods they reported on; they will have had access to surviving contemporaries. But contemporary evidence, even when obtainable, is necessarily shaped by the prevailing political climate, particularly in authors (e.g. Velleius and Josephus) writing about emperors who are still alive. Few did so.

Authors writing and publishing after their subjects are safely dead depended on earlier (now lost) narrative sources, sometimes a chain of such sources. If these were modern historians we would begin our assessment of their reliability by looking to the sources they cite. But generic decorum discouraged citation of sources in the historians (the biographers, as we have seen, had a little more freedom here). Occasionally Dio will cite a source by name (e.g. the memoirs of Septimius Severus at 75.7.3), but usually to challenge its information. On the victory in 197 CE for which he cites Severus, for example, he says, "my account represents not what Severus wrote about it, but what actually happened." How he knows what actually happened he does not say. (Similarly for a reference to Augustus' memoirs at 44.35.3.) More common are general references to "earlier accounts," which are often occasioned by implausible or discrepant stories. On the identity of Galba's assassin, for example, in Tacitus: "There is no agreement as to the killer. Some say it was a bodyguard named Terentius, others one Laecanius; the more common report says that a soldier of the 15th legion named Camurius applied his sword and slit Galba's throat" (*Hist.* 1.41.3). This kind of citation does little to help us identify Tacitus' sources. In fact this particular passage looks even less helpful when we set beside it Plutarch's report: "The man who killed him, according to most writers, was a certain Camurius from the 15th legion. Some report that it was Terentius, others Lecaenius, still others Fabius Fabullus" (*Life of Galba* 27.2). We have to conclude that both authors took the reference to conflicting reports from their common source. The content of the statement – that Galba's assassin was variously identified – may well be true, but there is nothing to suggest that either Tacitus or Plutarch verified it for himself. In fact, the identification of a literary source's own sources, a procedure known by its German name "Quellenforschung," relies less on the rare specific or general references in a work than on a painstaking analysis of the content-based and thematic and stylistic "fingerprints" of those sources (the introductions to commentaries on historical works generally supply details and bibliography on these sources).

References to documentary information are even rarer than references to literary sources, in part for the same reasons of stylistic decorum, but also because historians of the empire were conditioned to disbelief in official records. Appian, for example, reports that in 35 BCE Octavian ordered written records of the civil wars then ending (so he thought) to be destroyed (*BC* 5.132), thereby ensuring that his version of events had the advantage in future histories. And Tacitus, when faced with the official record of the Senate's implicit verdict on the death of Tiberius' heir Germanicus (natural causes, despite Germanicus' belief, which the Senate duly records, that one Gnaeus Piso caused his death; we have a version of this document in the recently published *Decree of the Senate on Cn. Piso the Elder*), could see as clearly as we can that it offered not the truth about events, but rather the truth about what the Senate felt it could safely and appropriately say on that occasion (Damon and Takács 1999: 143–62). The involvement of Piso in the prince's death, though discredited by the Senate's verdict, is attested in literary sources (Suet. *Cal.* 2, *Tib.* 52.3; Dio 57.9) and survived as a rumor down to Tacitus' own day:

> [Germanicus'] death was the subject of all sorts of rumors not only among his contemporaries but for subsequent generations as well. So much in the dark are we about even the most important events, since some people treat what they hear as the truth, no

> matter the source, and others take the truth and turn it into lies. And the stories continue to develop as they are handed down. (*Ann.* 3.19.2)

Tacitus accepted neither the Senate's verdict nor the rumor, but gave both an airing in his narrative. In a similar circumstance Dio can be more decisive, since he was himself present at a Senate meeting that produced some highly dubious official documents in 205. Presented with trumped-up evidence "justifying" the summary execution of a praetorian prefect, the Senate issued decrees praising its authors (76.3–5). In fact, it was clear to all concerned that such decrees were liable to have been issued "under the influence of necessity or awe" (Suet. *Aug.* 57.1).

In general the ancient historian staked his authority, his claim to a reader's belief, on the *persona* he conveyed as an author – his moral character, analytical power, and literary skill – not on his sources, literary or documentary. We prefer to have evidence, especially non-literary evidence, providing independent confirmation. Thus we believe the *Historia Augusta*'s unique report that Hadrian built a wall 80 miles long in Britain (*HA Had.* 11.2) because the troops to whom Hadrian gave the task left records of their progress, including dates and segments built, at the wall itself. Source criticism requires asking many more questions than those illustrated here, particularly when one wants to go beyond simply establishing a chronological sequence, but for these the detailed studies of the various sources for imperial history listed in the bibliography are a more appropriate venue.

3 Conclusion

After adding up all the sources and doing everything possible to assess their reliability, the historian is still faced with the unpalatable fact that there is a limit to how much of the political history of the empire can be known. This limit was already felt, clearly and disturbingly, by ancient writers. Dio's statement of the problem is the most famous:

> Actions taken after this date (27 BCE) cannot be reported in the same way as what went before. Formerly all matters were brought before the senate and the people, even things that occurred far away. Therefore everyone learned about them and many recorded them, and for this reason the truth of the accounts, even if they generally spoke out of fear or favor, friendship or enmity, could after a fashion be found by comparing them with others written on the same subject and with official records. But from that time things began to be done secretly and in a manner not to be made public. (53.19.1–3)

Dio dates this fundamental shift to the reign of Augustus, and to judge by Tacitus' *Annals*, the cloud cloaking the emperor was already quite opaque by the time of Tiberius, as we saw above. To a greater degree than ever before in Roman history public events of a political nature (elections, Senate meetings, trials, etc.) were for show, while the real business of power was transacted "in a manner not to be made public." Like Dio, we have to use "what we have read and seen and heard" (53.19.6) to assess the evidence that survives.