Dying by the Sword: Did the Severan dynasty owe its downfall to its ultimate failure to live up to its own militaristic identity?

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Fig. 1. Chart detailing the percentage of military coin types promoted by emperors from Pertinax to Numerian inclusive (Source: Manders, E. (2012), *Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, AD 193-284*, Leiden, p. 65, fig. 17).

Fig. 2. Portrait statue showing Caracalla in full military guise (Source: https://www.dailysabah.com/history/2016/08/02/worlds-only-single-piece-2nd-century-caracalla-statue-discovered-in-southern-turkey (Accessed 14/01/17).


Fig. 4. Roman soldier on the Great Trajanic Frieze (Source: Leander Touati, A.M. (1991), ‘Portrait and historical relief. Some remarks on the meaning of Caracalla’s sole ruler portrait’, in A.M. Leander Touati, E. Rystedt, and O. Wikander (eds.), *Munusula Romana*, Stockholm, 117-31, p. 120, fig. 4.).
Introduction

In the spring of AD 235, the overthrow of Alexander Severus at the hands of his troops marked the downfall of the Severan dynasty. For all the regime had already endured a short-lived usurpation when Macrinus deposed Caracalla in 217, this time there was to be no resurgence. Unanimous in their desertion of Alexander, the soldiers in Mainz cut short the dynasty their Pannonian counterparts had given rise to 42 years earlier in emphatic fashion. This dissertation strives to establish why.

While it is not my intention to promote a sole causational factor for the downfall of the Severan regime, I will argue that the dynasty owed its downfall to Alexander Severus’ failure to live up to the militaristic identity established by the first generation of Severan emperors. It is this causational link with which my first two chapters are concerned. The first seeks to establish three things: that Severus and Caracalla had a comprehensive martial persona, that it was instrumental to their sustenance, and that it had implications for the future. Chapter two examines the ways in which Alexander falls short of this militaristic paradigm, and explores the consequences of his divergence. Ultimately, it attributes the soldierly dissatisfaction that drives his dynasty-terminating overthrow to his non-conformity.

After having demonstrated this central premise, I pursue one further consideration – namely, the possibility that it is unreasonable to hold Alexander entirely responsible for his failings. In the interests of justice, chapter three assesses the extent to which the precedent set by Severus and consolidated by Caracalla is neither sustainable, nor easily emulated.

To dedicate a word to sources, this dissertation utilises both material and literary evidence. Coinage, portraiture and monumental architecture account for the majority of the

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1 Nor do I suggest that the early Severans propagated an exclusively military identity; the martial emphasis derives from the fact that it is the soldiers who exact Alexander’s murder.
2 Note that this dissertation lends itself to focus on Severus, Caracalla and Alexander. Though part of the Severan era, Geta, Macrinus and Elagabalus receive only incidental treatment.
former, and the ‘mainstream histories’ of Cassius Dio and Herodian, the latter. For all that the *Historia Augusta* provides biographies of every emperor I am concerned with, I have opted not to make use of it in view of its generally accepted unreliability and because its biography of Alexander is deemed largely fictitious. As far as the remaining historians are concerned, while we should take confidence from their contemporaneousness, they both have their complications. Dio’s account of the Severan era survives almost entirely in epitome and is naturally coloured by senatorial sensibilities and his own relationship with the emperors in question. Given the prevalence of the military in this study, his negative attitude towards the army is also necessarily acknowledged. In light of the *Historia Augusta*’s imaginativeness and the fact that Dio’s narrative dwindles and then ceases upon his promotion to major political posts, Herodian constitutes my main source for Alexander’s reign. Variously accused of being conflated and superficial, his narrative also has its weaknesses. As such, for all the flaws inherent in the written accounts need not preclude their use, they do necessitate vigilance.

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3 Sidebottom (2007), 74.
4 Browning (1982), 725; Rohrbacher (2016), 8.
5 Hose (2007), 462; Davenport (2012), 799.
6 Davenport (2012), 803.
7 Southern (2001), 60; Syme (1971), 146.
Chapter One – Living by the Sword

Septimius Severus’ proclamation by his troops in AD 193 set in motion a sequence of events that took him from an ‘efficient, vigorous administrator’ in Pannonia to the undisputed emperor of the Roman world (Herodian 2.9.2). Born of usurpation, deposition and two counts of civil war, his eponymous dynasty ascended Rome’s imperial throne to the sound of marching feet, clashing swords and peals of thunder above the Cilician Gates. Short of heralding a foregone conclusion, this martial cacophony makes it unsurprising that the early Severans would foster a strong militaristic identity upon receiving the purple.8 It is this militaristic identity with which this chapter is concerned. Paying particular attention to Severus’ and Caracalla’s projected image and activity, I will establish not only that the Severans had a martial identity, but that it was instrumental to the sustenance of the dynasty long after Severus eradicated his rivals. Beyond this, consideration of the implications of a close affiliation with the army will demonstrate why it is significant that Alexander Severus ultimately paled against the brazen militarism of the generation of Severans before him.

Considering first Severus’ and Caracalla’s projected image, it is clear that their literary characterisation and the emperors’ own material output combine to create perhaps the most obvious indicator of Severan militaristic identity. Textual and artistic media alike cast both Severus and Caracalla in the guise of blatant soldier. Strikingly, Dio’s account sees Severus don military apparel at the extremities of his reign. In a clear exposition of his military persona, the historian describes Severus approaching Rome ‘on horseback and in cavalry costume’ at the outset of his rule, and laid out ‘in military garb’ upon his death in 211 (Dio 75.1.3, 77.15.3). That Dio sees fit to note the details of Severus’ attire at these key junctures speaks volumes of the emperor’s prevailing identity.

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8 Hammond’s assertion that Severus’ career was not expressly military cautions against seeing Severus’ militaristic identity as inevitable. Hammond (1940), 166-7.
As far as Severus’ march on Rome is concerned, the fact that he does not remain in military guise for long complicates the image and, as such, requires exploration. That he enters the city and appears to the people only after removing the very cavalry costume Dio has just brought our attention to certainly appears to undermine the emperor’s opening statement of martial identity (Dio 75.1.3). Yet I argue that in reality it does not. Severus may have adopted civilian attire but in light of his conspicuously armoured escort, his militaristic image is by no means vastly diminished (Dio 75.1.3-4). Rome’s newly proclaimed emperor arrives immersed in the ranks of his entire army, from which his conformation to the practice of *mutatio vestis* simply cannot divert attention.9 Indeed, that Inglis likens Severus’ arrival to a ‘Triumphal return from battle’ very much supports the notion that his militarism is preserved despite his civilian dress.10

Severus’ soldierly identity at the end of his reign is by no means as fleeting. Deliberately arranged in military apparel following his death, Severus’ lasting image is unambiguously martial (Dio 77.15.3). The enduring nature of his militaristic identity is only strengthened further by the report that even the ghostly Severus is armed when he appears to Caracalla in a dream (Dio 79.7.1). While this episode clearly strays towards the fanciful, it nevertheless betrays Dio’s evaluation of Severus. In life and death, the emperor emerges as nothing short of a clear-cut military man.

In light of the accusations of militarisation and barbarisation that Dio levels against Severus in particular, it is reasonable to question whether the emperor’s cameos as a soldier are a reflection of reality or simply a vehicle for Dio’s own ends, however (Dio 75.2.2-6).11 Any enhancement of Severus’ own militarism would seemingly vindicate Dio’s grievances

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9 Manders (2012), 72.
10 This parallel is even more potent given that Severus at this stage has yet to fight any battles. Inglis (2011), 88.
11 McCann (1968), 47; Inglis (2011), 55.
against the Severan patriarch. Yet Severus’ characterisation in Dio is no anomaly. His explicitly military portrayal is corroborated both by Herodian and, perhaps most importantly, the emperor himself (Herodian 2.14.1).

Scrutiny of Severus’ material output – particularly his coinage and portraiture – reveals the emperor fitted in the same military costume described by the literary sources at his own prerogative. Portraits from the early years of his reign in particular showcase the emperor in full military guise, and his short-cropped hair only serves to authenticate his soldierly appearance. Though it lacks tunic and cuirass, a heroically nude bronze portrait statue from Cyprus also exhibits Severus as a soldier, his pose suggesting that he once carried a spear and trophy in an apparent allusion to Mars Victor. Severus is also seen bearing military attributes on his coinage at various points throughout his rule. Adventus and profectio types alike portray the emperor on horseback and carrying a spear in a clear show of his militarism (RIC IV.I, Severus, 91, 106, 248, 330). Inasmuch as these reverses commemorate actual military activity, they are a still stronger advert for Severus’ martial identity.

The fact that approximately 30% of Severus’ coin types promote martial representations such as these suggests that Dio is not being unduly inventive when it comes to Severus’ militaristic identity (Fig.1). There are certainly distinct parallels between Dio’s depiction of Severus’ arrival in Rome in 193 and the emperor’s own adventus coin types (Dio 75.1.3-5; RIC IV.I, Severus, 73, 74). When it is considered that this is the fourth highest percentage of 35

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12 While there is debate over how much input emperors actually had when it came to their material image, it is reasonable to assume that it is likely to have been satisfactory to them. O’Grady (2015), 11-2.
14 The military connotations of this cult figure are self-evident. McCann (1968), 89; Vermeule (1955), 351.
15 Manders agrees, asserting that Severus effectively ‘communicate[s] the military goal behind a profectio’ in particular by means of the iconography on his coinage. Manders (2012), 75-6.
16 Manders (2012), 65.
emperors between the years 193 and 284, it seems incontrovertible that the founder of the Severan dynasty had a militaristic identity.\textsuperscript{17}

![Figure 1: Chart detailing the percentage of military coin types promoted by emperors from Pertinax to Numerian inclusive.](image)

Despite propagating a notably lower percentage of military-themed coins than his father, Caracalla ensures that such an identity is not exclusive to Severus. Accounting for 23\% of his total output, Caracalla’s martial coin types are by no means sparse (Fig.1).\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, their proportion is significant enough to vindicate Mennen’s assertion that martial themes ‘occurr[ed] abundantly’ on his coinage.\textsuperscript{19} Trampling foes and throwing javelins from atop his horse, Caracalla cuts a dynamic figure on his military reverses as he embraces an unreserved

\textsuperscript{17} The sheer number of soldier-emperors in this period makes this statistic even more remarkable.

\textsuperscript{18} Manders (2012), 65.

\textsuperscript{19} Mennen (2006), 259.
soldierly identity (RIC IV.I, Caracalla, 431, 446, 449a, 449b).\textsuperscript{20} This identity is not unique to his coinage, however, as a recently discovered portrait statue in Antalya shows (Fig. 2). Clad in full military guise, it is precisely this image of an emperor glittering and cuirassed that Caracalla reportedly takes care to preserve, even when he can ‘no longer bear […] the weight of armour’ (Dio 79.3.2). That Caracalla substitutes metal breastplates for tunics tailored to give the impression of armour arguably indicates his commitment to a martial identity.

In stone, Caracalla’s militarism is projected by his expression as well as his equipment. Both the Antalya statue and, to a greater extent, a bust of the emperor in Berlin show a countenance made stern by heavy brows and a contorted face (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{21} While this expression

\textsuperscript{20} That such types are not Caracallan innovations need not detract from their potency. Rather, they place him among the ranks of other overtly martial emperors – including Vespasian and Trajan – who play the part as well as wearing the kit (RIC. II, Vespasian, 523; Trajan, 208). Manders (2012), 75.

\textsuperscript{21} Leander Touati (1991), 119.
is often erroneously attributed to Caracalla’s reported cruelty and ruthlessness, Leander Touati makes a convincing argument that it is actually a manifestation of militarism, highlighting the iconographic parallels between the emperor’s visage and those of exemplary soldiers adorning the Great Trajanic Frieze (Fig. 4). By emulating the countenance of soldiers on state relief, Caracalla effectively shares in the martial virtue their stern faces are designed to showcase. As such, the emperor’s expression contributes as much to his militaristic image as the mantle and sword strap detailed on the Berlin bust.

While Newby sees a further suggestion of Caracalla’s martial persona in this particular portrait, asserting that it echoes Alexander the Great with its intense gaze and dynamic head-tilt, such a comparison is dubious. Scrutiny of the two men’s portrait types arguably reveals more differences than similarities: Caracalla’s countenance is noticeably sterner and, as Baharal highlights, the direction of their respective gazes also diverge. Yet, forced as it may be, the assimilation Newby proposes is not unsupported by literary sources stressing an association between Caracalla and the Macedonian warrior that is by no means as discreet. Dio reports Caracalla’s claim to be Alexander reborn, and Herodian the phenomenon of Janus-like portraits of the emperor and his famously militarist role-model (Dio 78.7.2; Herodian

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22 Ball goes so far as to conclude that Caracalla’s portrait reveals a ‘thoroughly brutalised tyrant’; this is surely not the emperor’s intended message. Ball (2016), 462; Leander Touati (1991), 121-3.
23 Leander Touati agrees, observing a multiplication of features with the ‘power to communicate a military message’. Leander Touati (1991), 128.
24 Newby (2007), 224.
26 Baharal states that the ‘literary evidence leaves no room for doubt as to Caracalla’s adulation of Alexander’. Baharal (1994), 532.
4.8.2). For all that such associations thus seemingly equate to a clear statement of Caracalla’s own martial identity, the untempered hostility of these sources towards the emperor makes it necessary to treat such evidence with caution, particularly given the lack of corroborative archaeological material.\textsuperscript{27} Widespread talk of Caracallan ‘Alexander-mania’ itself suggests that the picture our sources paint is somewhat hyperbolic, if not entirely sensationalised.\textsuperscript{28}

Nevertheless, it remains reasonable to argue that the emperor did assimilate himself to Alexander the Great on some level. Hyperbole – malicious or otherwise – naturally requires a basis in truth, and it so happens that in this case, that basis is not entirely obscure. Taking both Alexander and Caracalla as their subjects, the so-called Aboukir medallions attest to an association between the two men strong enough to be made independently of both the literary tradition and official propaganda machine.\textsuperscript{29} Further to this, the fact that Caracalla’s eventual successor receives the name Alexander in what Kemezis argues is a bid to forge a dynastic link to his alleged father, is revealing (Herodian 5.7.3).\textsuperscript{30} A recognised synonymy between Caracalla and the Macedonian king is surely necessary for this to be effective as a dynastic tie. As such, while Caracalla likely stopped short of pronouncing himself Alexander reincarnated, there is evidence to suggest that he did assimilate himself on some level. Ultimately, this association – whether a deliberate tactic or a by-product of idolisation – allows Caracalla to share in the image of a man renowned for his militarism and thus reinforce his own military identity.

Severus’ militaristic image is likewise enhanced by association and assimilation with individuals of martial repute. Alexander the Great, Pertinax, Marcus Aurelius and, of course,

\textsuperscript{27} We have none of the dual portraits Herodian describes despite his insistence on their abundance. Kemezis (2014), 76; Carlsen (2016), 325.
\textsuperscript{28} Kemezis (2014), 63; Boteva (1999), 181-2; Dahmen, (2007), 142.
\textsuperscript{29} Vermeule (1982), 61-2.
\textsuperscript{30} Kemezis (2014), 77; Hekster (2015), 154.
Augustus are all figures with whom Severus forges a connection; together they form quite the martial roster. To consider his association with Pertinax in more detail, it is clear that by borrowing his predecessor’s name and numismatic portrait features, Severus draws ties between himself and a man ‘formidable in war’ (RIC IV.I, Severus, 1-24; Dio 75.5.6; Herodian 2.10.1, 2.14.3). In doing so, the founding father of the Severan dynasty makes an implicit statement about his own identity.

Like his nomenclature, Severus’ titulature also contributes to his military image. Where his grand-nephew Elagabalus asserts his aversion to ‘titles derived from war and bloodshed’, Severus – and indeed Caracalla – have no such qualms, not only accepting senatorially-awarded titles, but unashamedly advertising them through official channels (Dio 80.18.4; RIC IV.I, Severus, 62, 90, 346; Caracalla, 55, 65). Combinations of titles including Parthicus Maximus, Britannicus Maximus and Germanicus Maximus are all attested to. Public-facing and prominent, these military titles promulgate exactly what these early Severans pride themselves in and, as such, make for a strong indicator of their militaristic persona.

Between military tunics and titles, it is clear that Severus and Caracalla both project a martial image. Yet, while this image is seemingly straightforward evidence of their militaristic identity, one need look no further than Caracalla and Geta to see that propagated imagery can be misleading; it is a strange Concordia that results in fratricide. Nevertheless, I argue that the image propagated by the early Severans is in fact reflective of a real militaristic identity. That is to say, the emperors’ military image is not a case of false advertising. Where accounts of the relationship between Caracalla and his brother are disparate, there is consensus between

31 McCann (1968), 60-1.
32 In light of Manders’ assertion that titulature ‘could reflect the armies’ importance’, this point has traction. Manders (2012), 63.
33 Severus’s initial refusal of the title Parthicus in 195 is anomalous in this respect. Manders (2012), 85; Mennen (2006), 259.
34 The widely reported enmity between the two brothers belies the claims of Concordia Augustorum advertised on their coinage (RIC IV.I, Geta, 73a, 73b). Bingham (2013), 148.
the literary and material output as far as Severus’ and Caracalla’s characterisations are concerned. More than this, scrutiny of both emperors’ actions confirms that the militarism they promote is not a case of all bark and no bite.

The sheer number of campaigns – civil and otherwise – that Severus and Caracalla conduct between them is forthright evidence that their military image is no façade. This is especially true in light of the fact that the majority of these wars were by no means thrust upon them. Campaigns in Parthia, Britain and Germany did not see the emperors reluctantly don their military apparel in order to respond to any immediate threat. Rather, the impetus for these wars lies very much with Severus and Caracalla as they invade territory armed with pretext alone. Macrinus certainly believes Caracalla ‘chiefly responsible’ for the war against the Parthians (Dio 79.17.3). When such exchanges are not a case of needs must, they reveal a militaristic tendency that speaks volumes of the early Severans’ persona.\(^{35}\) Hawks must surely have a militaristic identity.

Beyond simply instigating military campaigns, both emperors also prove their martial authenticity by participating in the battles they provoke, albeit to differing degrees. Certainly, against the gung-ho Caracalla’s ready engagement and alleged hunger for single-combat with enemy leaders, Severus’ martial involvement appears conservative, not to mention infrequent (Dio 78.13.1-2, 78.13.6). Yet for all he is guilty of opting to send generals to fight in his stead, Severus is no perpetual battleground absentee (Dio 75.7.1). Indeed, even Dio, keen though he is to criticise Severus’ distance from the frontline, acknowledges the emperor’s fighting presence at Lugdunum and reports his preparations to ‘make war upon [the Caledonians] in

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\(^{35}\) While Severus’ Parthian campaign was arguably a means to further legitimisation, the campaign in Britain and Caracalla’s military exploits as sole ruler very much constitute war for the sake of war. Gradoni (2013), 4, 13.
person’ (Dio 76.6.1, 76.6.6-7, 76.12.1, 77.15.2). Thus, by means of direct martial involvement, both Severus and Caracalla show themselves the consummate militarist.

If a propensity for travelling is symptomatic of soldier-emperors, then Severus’ and Caracalla’s itchy feet are as telling as their campaigning. Neither emperor spent much time static in Rome, instead dedicating themselves to a life of warring and touring in the outer reaches of the empire. Severus graced the capital with his presence for a mere six years as emperor, while a reported loathing of life in the city drove Caracalla to provincial territories for the majority of his reign (Herodian 4.7.1). Problematic though it is to reconstruct the emperors’ respective journeys, it is clear that their travels saw them attending to military affairs – whether combative or administrative – and, in Caracalla’s case in particular, no small amount of martial sightseeing (Herodian 4.7.1-2, 4.8; Dio 78.16.7). Such activity showcases not only a commitment to, but a broader interest in military matters that very much substantiates their projected image.

On top of their travels, the emperors’ army reforms confirm that their approach to military affairs is by no means minimalist. The creation of three new legions and an overhaul of the praetorian guard demonstrate Severus’ proactivity, while Caracalla’s passing of the Constitutio Antoniniana can reasonably be conceived as a piece of military problem-solving (Dio 75.2.4-5, 75.3.2). Such initiatives provide insight into Severan preoccupations and as

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36 Dio’s account even contradicts the claim by fellow historian Herodian that Severus ‘turned tail’ during the course of this particular battle (Herodian 3.7.3). Rubin (1980), 22.
37 Though Hadrian, as a ‘roving diplomat’, ensures that not all emperors who travel are quintessentially soldier-emperors, the fact remains that all soldier-emperors travel. Speller (2003), 64.
38 Inglis (2011), 81; Davenport (2012), 806.
39 There is no real consensus in the literary sources as far as the details of Severus’ and Caracalla’s individual tours are concerned, and attempts to reconstruct them using material evidence is itself problematic. Johnston (1983), 58-9; Hekster (2015), 34.
40 Caracalla’s recreational pursuits – ‘driving chariots, slaying wild beasts [and] fighting as a gladiator’ – reaffirm his interest in all things bellicose (Dio 78.17.4).
41 Though the motives behind the Constitutio Antoniniana are much debated and multifarious, the edict certainly had the potential to alleviate problems of legionary recruitment and supplement funds for the army. In fact, Rocco argues it was very much intended to. Rocco (2010), 134-5.
such, firmly situate both father and son in the role of soldier-emperor.\textsuperscript{42} To elaborate, their innovation attests to an engagement with military affairs that both reflects and promotes their martial personae.

Coloured by campaigns, reforms and extensive travelling, Severus’ and Caracalla’s imperial activity not only corroborates their martial identity as we find it in their projected image, but ultimately acts as evidence for it in its own right. Severan imagery and action consistently paint them military men. Having established, then, that the early Severans had a militaristic identity, I turn now to matters of its significance. Since their identity must be instrumental to the dynasty’s success for it to be relevant to its collapse, it is necessary to establish that this is in fact the case.

Severus’ final words to his sons as we read them in Dio seemingly identify the army as the basis of Severan imperial power.\textsuperscript{43} That he advises the men whose task it is to sustain his dynasty to ‘enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men’ certainly suggests that he believes the soldiers to have been integral to his own longevity (Dio 77.15.2). Despite his claims to have recounted the emperor’s ‘exact words without any embellishment’, Dio’s report must be treated with caution, however (Dio 77.15.2).\textsuperscript{44} Not only was he not privy to this last exchange between father and sons – but the disapproving senator is all too keen to advertise that the army is Severus’ prop. Yet, for all I accept the need to be sceptical of the word of a man harbouring an undisguised disapproval of army and senate-snubbing emperor alike, the fact remains that Severus himself does little to quell the accusation that he placed ‘his hope of safety in the strength of his army’ (Dio 75.2.3).\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} McCann (1968), 48.
\textsuperscript{43} Southern agrees that Severus ‘had made the army the mainstay of his power’. Southern (2001), 51.
\textsuperscript{44} In fact, one might argue that Dio’s pointed assurances make it especially necessary to exercise caution. Rantala (2017), 149-50.
\textsuperscript{45} Davenport (2012), 802-3.
On the contrary, the close association between dynastic and militaristic iconography on public monuments such as the Severan Arch at Lepcis Magna shows the emperor very much promoting the army’s position as a key pillar for his imperial aspirations. Lusnia agrees, asserting that ‘battle scenes and dynastic succession are related issues within Severan propaganda’. The fact that martial imagery appears on an arch primarily designed to celebrate the imperial family and their dynastic ambitions suggests that the military has more than an incidental relevance to their sustenance.

If we accept that the army is the basis of Severan success, then their militaristic identity is absolutely instrumental. Far from being an aesthetic choice with little bearing on matters of real import, it instead forges ties with the entity that supports them. A martial identity naturally speaks to the soldiers, and as such, the early Severans’ emulation of them in both image and action makes them fundamentally relatable. Indeed, since the soldiers constitute the largest demographic to utilise coinage, it seems the emperors’ projected image is very much designed to engage with their troops as the military coin types they produce in abundance find their primary audience in the soldiery. Manders’ claim that imagery ‘propagat[ing] the emperor as imperator was deployed to develop strong ties’ very much supports the notion that such imagery had the capacity to forge a meaningful bond between soldiers and emperor. That sharing in their soldiers’ image was a viable and effective means of establishing such a connection is arguably demonstrated by the sheer volume and persistence of Severan militaristic imagery; the end surely justifies the means.

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48 Clearly the army is not the sole support for Severan success, but its frequent singling-out attests to its predominance.
49 Manders (2012), 63-4.
50 Manders (2012), 70.
That the first generation of Severan emperors back up their military image with action only serves to further increase their relatability. Soldiers can identify with the emperor they find in cavalry attire on their coins and even more so the one who travels with them, campaigns alongside them and grafts in their midst as both Severus and Caracalla reportedly do. Caracalla’s dramatic claim that ‘I am one of you’ at the outset of his sole rule is vindicated by the report that he ‘would march with the soldiers and run with them, neither bathing nor changing his clothing, but helping them in every task and choosing exactly the same food as they had’ (Dio 78.3.2, 78.13.1). In this regard, Caracalla appears to follow his father’s example as Herodian describes Severus sharing in his soldiers’ hardships in similar fashion (Herodian 2.11.2).

Between Dio and Herodian, then, a picture emerges of two emperors wholly integrated with their soldiers. Certainly, neither can be accused of aloofness amid accounts of them sleeping in cheap tents and eating standard fare. Such comprehensive engagement effectively increases their popularity and thus fosters strong links between the troops and their respective emperors. Herodian certainly sees a correlation between Severus’ down-to-earth rejection of a ‘specially luxurious imperial standard of living’ and his ‘increased […] popularity with his fellow-soldiers’ (Herodian 2.11.2). As for Caracalla, he earns his troops’ delight and adoration by ‘shar[ing] in all of their duties as an ordinary soldier’ (Herodian 4.7.4). Recurring talk of ‘fellow-soldiers’ itself betrays these links, attesting to camaraderie on the one hand, and ultimate affiliation on the other (Herodian 2.11.2; Dio 78.3.1).^{51}

Beyond making Severus and Caracalla fundamentally relatable, their militaristic identity also forges ties by assuring the soldiers of imperial interest in martial affairs, and indeed, their own wellbeing. To elaborate, commitment to campaigning and involvement on

the frontline indicate a genuine interest in the soldiers’ way of life that is unlikely to have gone unappreciated, while Severus’ ground-level reforms undoubtedly render him something of a benefactor. Granting his troops the right to marry, wear the gold ring and belong to *collegia* – not to mention their first pay rise since Domitian – Severus shows a concern for the welfare of his soldiers and thus emerges as a military man who not only understands their needs, but acts upon them (Herodian 3.8.4-5). For all that Smith endeavours to paint Severus’ reforms not as a popularity stunt, but as carefully considered measures designed to combat ‘serious military crisis’, it is difficult to see how such allowances would not have positively impacted the emperor’s reputation among his men, even if only collaterally. As such, I argue that Severus’ empathetic reforms can only have boosted his popularity and drawn soldiers and emperor closer together as a result.

Far from being a short-term means of improving imperial approval ratings, the link between the emperors and their men is designed to be strong enough to last. That Severus shares victory titles which ultimately help advertise his own militarism with his sons despite them being non-combatant, makes a clear statement of their prospective character. To elaborate, the two boys’ militaristic identity, and thus, their connection to the troops is bolstered by association with their victorious father. Severus’ indication that Caracalla and Geta are cut from the same martial cloth as their *paterfamilias* signifies to the soldiers upon whom the dynasty depends that they will find his successors acceptable. As such, by sharing his

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52 That Caracalla, too, takes on the role of military benefactor is made explicit by Dio; the soldiers refer to Elagabalus as their ‘benefactor’s son’ (Dio 79.32.3). Like Severus, Caracalla offers the army a pay rise. Develin (1971), 687; Smith (1972), 496-7.
53 According to Smith’s interpretation, Severus’ ground-level reforms are motivated by nothing more than cold pragmatism. Smith (1972), 481, 484-5.
54 It is unlikely that the soldiers shared the historians’ criticism of Severus’ reforms (Dio 75.2.4-5; Herodian 3.8.5). Perhaps only the praetorians cashiered by Severus in 193 had reason to be dissatisfied with his alterations (Dio 75.1.1-2).
55 Manders (2012), 84-5.
56 Since the decision to share titles is made in the interests of promoting his dynasty, this is precisely what Severus is trying to convince them of.
militaristic identity with his sons, Severus forges both immediate and enduring links between his bloodline and the soldiery; he makes assurances to the army that they will be able to identify with emperors from his house into the future.\footnote{In light of the aforementioned association between militaristic and dynastic iconography, this is arguably no gross extrapolation.}

A similar promise of continuity is inherent in the iconography of the Severan arch at Rome. Featured on a monument that in part proclaims the Severans’ dynastic prospects, the ‘tropaeophonic, youthful Mars’ adorning the spandrels of the centre arch not only recognises those victories already achieved, but makes promises of those to come.\footnote{Brilliant notes the ‘special relevance’ of such an image on an arch promoting dynastic expectations. \cite{Brilliant1967}.} This arguably equates to a statement of intent that says Severan emperors will be doing more of the same in the years ahead – namely campaigning and conquering. The reliance between Severans and soldiers, then, is reciprocal. While the emperors rely on the army for support, Severus ensures that the soldiers know they can rely on their Severan imperators both to be relatable, and to keep them active and thus well-financed. In short, it seems their fates and interests are bound.

To reiterate, military identity is instrumental to the success of the dynasty because it forges strong links to the demographic which Severus identifies as the basis of their power. Relatability, commitment and a genuine interest in martial affairs undoubtedly make possible Severus’ natural death, while Caracalla actively utilises his martial persona to navigate the problematic transition to sole rule following Geta’s murder \cite{Dio78.2-4}. In addition to offering the troops a substantial payout, he appeals to comradeship and their shared martial identity in the wake of the fratricide in a bid to preserve their favour and garner their unreserved support \cite{Dio78.3}.\footnote{The transition is problematic because the soldiers were of the understanding that Caracalla and Geta would rule as co-emperors after Severus’ death, and they were at least as fond of Geta as they were his brother \cite{Dio78.1.3, Herodian4.3.3}.} Caracalla’s reasonably lengthy tenure as sole ruler attests to the
effectiveness of this tactic. The bond he establishes with his soldiery by brotherhood and benefaction ultimately facilitates his immediate and continuing success.

Unlike Severus, however, Caracalla’s success does not extend to a natural death, and the fact that his assassination is exacted not by disaffected senators, but ostensibly by the military threatens the basic premise that militaristic identity is key to the regime’s prosperity. To elaborate, that Caracalla is killed by soldiers despite adhering to his father’s example suggests that martial identity actually holds little value for the army. Yet when we consider that Caracalla was not in fact overthrown by the army proper, this supposition must prove erroneous. Murdered by officers of the praetorian guard at the instigation of their prefect, Macrinus, the emperor was hardly ousted by a popular consensus (Dio 79.5.5). Not only is his deposition not remotely comparable to the large-scale mutiny Alexander suffers nearly two decades later, but the praetorian officer class cannot reasonably be considered representative of the wider soldiery. Certainly, we need look no further than the soldiers’ reaction in the immediate aftermath to establish that his overthrow was not widely endorsed; they are reportedly ‘bitterly angry about the crime’ (Herodian 4.13.7). For all that Caracalla’s assassination highlights that a martial persona does not make Severan emperors impervious to attack from self-interested parties, the events of April 217 should not diminish its relevance to their longevity. As I have shown, on account of the relationship it builds with the soldiery, Severus’ and Caracalla’s martial identity is inescapably significant.

Clear though it is that Severus and Caracalla benefit from their militaristic identity, it is also apparent that it has further and enduring implications. Between them, the early Severans set a precedent that impacts upon their Emesene successors as, established by Severus and

61 Bingham (2013), 47.
62 A privileged unit with differing terms of service, the actions and interests of the guard in general are not usually considered paradigmatic of the army itself, let alone those of its officer corps. Bingham (2013), 3.
consolidated by Caracalla, their martial identity becomes something of a blueprint for Severan emperors. The intertwining of military and dynasty creates a clear idea of what it means to be Severan. Ultimately, this fashions a set of real expectations as far as the soldiers are concerned and renders the quality of Alexander Severus’ militaristic identity hugely significant. Conditioned – and indeed privileged – by Severus’ and Caracalla’s example, the soldiers expect their Severan emperors to comport themselves in a certain way.63 Such expectations are only galvanised by the aforementioned allusions to continuity that permeate Severus’ dynastic propaganda in the regime’s formative years. It is these expectations – as I will go on to argue – that Alexander Severus ultimately contravenes to the cost of not only his life, but the Severan dynasty itself.

63 That the soldiers reap prominence and profit from Severus’ and Caracalla’s military identity only encourages them to hold the later Severans to their standards. Potter (2006), 155; Campbell (1984), 409.
Chapter Two – Dying by the Sword

In March 235, the murder of Alexander Severus at the hands of his own soldiers in a tent in Mainz brought four decades of Severan rule to a violent and abrupt end. Effected not by some lone assassin with a personal grievance, but by those troops he had gathered at the northern frontier, Alexander’s overthrow is strikingly unanimous. Herodian recounts the emperor’s complete abandonment as the last of his should-be defenders step aside to ensure that the usurper Maximinus Thrax is ‘universally acclaimed’ by the soldiers stationed on the Rhine (Herodian 6.9.5-6).64 Comparing Alexander’s character, action and approach to military affairs to that of Septimius Severus and Caracalla before him, I will investigate the shortcomings that led the soldiers – with whom the Severan emperor should arguably have had a ready-made affinity – to take this course of action. In doing so, I will argue that the Severan dynasty owed its downfall in part to Alexander’s ultimate failure to live up to the militaristic identity of his predecessors.

No painstaking inquiry is necessary to establish that Alexander cuts a very different profile to Severus and Caracalla in the literary sources.65 His mildness contrasts with Severus’ ‘fiercely antagonistic’ nature and Caracallan hot-headedness, while his propensity ‘to show sympathy’ is not something he inherits from his forebears (Herodian 6.1.6, 3.8.3; Dio 78.10.2). That Alexander spares even those convicted of serious crimes from execution attests to a clement personality; he is, as Herodian says, ‘naturally gentle and docile’ (Herodian 6.1.6-7). No trace of his reputed benevolence and humanity can be found either in Severus’ dispatch of his civil war enemies or in Caracalla’s instigation of the massacre at Alexandria (Herodian 6.9.8; Dio 75.8.3, 75.9.4, 76.7.3-4, 78.22-3). Even allowing for some exaggeration of

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64 There was no outcry at Alexander’s death and no retribution was exacted on his killers as in Caracalla’s case (Herodian 4.13.6-7).
65 In light of Dio’s polarised relations with the emperors concerned, it is significant that the more distant Herodian corroborates this dichotomy.
unsavoury traits by generally hostile sources, the first generation of Severans remains distinct from their eventual successor; there can be no mistaking Alexander for his bellicose predecessors.

Guided by compassion and gentleness, Alexander does not possess the temperament we associate with the quintessential military man, let alone his ardent predecessors. Indeed, I argue that the sheer fact Dio approves of the emperor confirms Alexander’s unwarlike nature, given the historian’s undisguised resentment of those emperors who champion the cause of a soldiery with whom he has a long-standing animosity (Dio 80.4.2-5.1). Yet the suggestion that Alexander deliberately diverged from the early Severans’ martial idiosyncrasies in order to diminish the prominence of the army in favour of more upright senatorial associations, is questionable. The emperor’s coinage certainly betrays no radical change in allegiance. There is no explosion of types alluding to the senate, and issues promoting FIDES MILITVM and FIDES EXERCITVM show that Alexander sets out neither to disregard nor distance himself from the army.

Furthermore, contrary to Potter’s claim that the emperor attempted to ‘reverse the very close relationship with the army that had been asserted under Caracalla and Severus’, Alexander actually draws attention to it. Addressing the troops ahead of the Persian campaign, he asks the more senior among them to remember their many triumphs under Severan imperators, albeit perhaps unwisely (Herodian 6.4.6). In doing so, he makes explicit his own familial connection to Severus and – ‘father’ – Caracalla and thus attempts to share in their martial personae (Herodian 6.4.6).

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66 Davenport (2012), 803.
67 Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland (1938), 62.
68 Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland (1938), 63.
69 I will revisit the questionable wisdom of this decision. Potter (2006), 155.
For all that Alexander does not deliberately fashion himself as a non-militarist with a view to rebellion against traditional Severan identity, the fact remains that his character stands in stark contrast to his predecessors’. Herodian first gives a sense that Alexander’s temperament might be a problem when he states that the emperor is ‘over-mild’, while the soldierly perceptions visible at the end of his reign confirm that this difference in character is a sticking point (Herodian 6.2.10). Lambasted as a ‘mean little sissy’ and a ‘timid little lad’, soldierly attitudes towards Alexander are plain (Herodian 6.9.5). In their eyes, docility translates to timidity, and the emperor’s sympathetic nature is incompatible with the type of successor they were promised by Severus. A mild Severan is simply a contradiction in terms as far as the soldiers are concerned.

This disparity is by no means inconsequential when it comes to Alexander’s ultimate downfall. In fact, according to Herodian, the soldiers highlight the emperor’s character failings precisely in order to persuade their comrades to desert him (Herodian 6.9.5). On a basic level, they do so because his unwarlike persona makes him fundamentally unrelatable to a demographic who are themselves battle-hardened and belligerent. Add to this the extent to which the emperor pales against the example of Severus and Caracalla – and, indeed, the promise of soldier-emperor Maximinus – and it is more than reasonable to assert that Alexander’s disposition is instrumental in his downfall. Campbell goes so far as to state that Maximinus knowingly utilised the differences between himself and Alexander for his own advancement.

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70 Personality, not policy renders the emperor a non-militarist. The only identity he conscientiously reacts to is that of immediate predecessor Elagabalus, as he strives to replace eccentricity with normality. Rowan (2012), 219-20.
71 It is also clear that Alexander’s military coin types and familial connections are not enough to convince the soldiers otherwise (RIC IV.II, Alexander Severus, 43, 105, 225).
72 Maximinus is characterised in much the same vein as Severus and Caracalla; he, too, is an enthusiastic militarist with the credentials to match (Herodian 6.8.1-3, 6.8.4).
73 Campbell (1984), 69.
that Alexander’s character contributes to the soldierly dissatisfaction that prompts his overthrow in the spring of 235.

I recognise, however, that Alexander’s long reign poses something of a challenge to this conclusion in light of the fact that he has never been the brash militarist exemplified both by his predecessors and the incoming Maximinus.\(^{74}\) That is to say, his divergent character was clearly not cause enough to incur the army’s disaffection and bring about his own deposition during the course of the first decade of his rule. Far from being an insurmountable objection, however, Alexander’s longevity can be explained by its correlation to peace in the empire.\(^{75}\) To elaborate, he survives only until the pressure of emerging military threats exposes his character and leaves his soldiers feeling estranged and thus dissatisfied.

Turning now to Alexander’s action, it is clear that he once again falls short of the Severan paradigm. The sources present an emperor who demonstrates neither an enthusiasm for, nor a commitment to, military life. He spends the first nine years of his reign static in Rome, leaving only when he is forced to by Persian incursions on the eastern frontier (Herodian 6.3.1, 6.4.2).\(^{76}\) Compare this to Severus’ and Caracalla’s fleeting residency in the capital and it is clear that Alexander is the antithesis of his roving, soldier-emperor predecessors.\(^{77}\) There are no imperial tours or voluntary campaigns to report, and when he is finally compelled to leave Rome in 231, he is hardly exuberant at the prospect.\(^{78}\) Herodian recounts how he set out, ‘continually looking back to the city with tears in his eyes’ (Herodian 6.4.2). This cuts a

\(^{74}\) His character did not undergo any radical Jekyll-and-Hyde-esque transformation during his tenure as emperor.

\(^{75}\) From Elagabalus, Alexander inherited an empire enjoying one of its ‘most tranquil and peaceful periods’ (Herodian 6.2.3, 6.3.3). Icks (2011), 88.

\(^{76}\) Southern (2001), 80-1.

\(^{77}\) Inglis (2011), 81; Davenport (2012), 806.

\(^{78}\) De Blois (2006), 51.
striking contrast to Caracalla whose apparent loathing of life in Rome meant he could not extract himself from the city quickly enough (Herodian 4.7.1).79

These discrepancies are far from inconsequential. By neglecting to follow the early Severans’ intrepid example, Alexander shows himself at best grossly disinterested in, and at worst entirely detached from, his soldiery. Certainly, the little contact he has with the army undermines his claim to be ‘fellow-soldier’ ahead of the Persian campaign (Herodian 6.3.3). That the emperor pays nothing more than lip-service to notions of comradeship is arguably demonstrated by the scale of the desertion he suffers in 235.80 Alexander does not establish enough of a connection to impel the troops to defend his life, never mind avenge his death as they had done for his ‘father’ before him (Herodian 6.4.6, 6.9.3-6, 4.13.6). There is absolutely no trace of the soldierly outrage that follows the murder of ‘comrade’ Caracalla in the aftermath of Alexander’s assassination (Herodian 4.13.7, 6.9.5-8).81

Beyond earning him no saviours, Alexander’s distance from the soldiery and lack of devotion to military life itself contributes to his demise. Since Severus’ and Caracalla’s imperial blueprint dictates that Severan emperors engage with the army, his remoteness contravenes soldierly expectation and leaves them dissatisfied. The fact that the soldiers themselves highlight Maximinus’ ‘devot[jion] to a life of military action’ indicates both what they desire – and are thus currently lacking – and what they expect (Herodian 6.9.5). In the absence of any substantial devotion from Alexander, they proffer a candidate who they believe will fulfil Severus’ promise that they will find their future emperors not only relatable, but involved. To the dynasty’s downfall, there is simply no Severan option left to succeed. As such, Alexander’s failure to immerse himself in the martial world must prove ruinous. He does

79 It is also arguable that Caracalla simply did not have the patience or the inclination to handle the senate and attend to the business of administration. Campbell (1984), 413.
80 Campbell highlights the corresponding ‘wide scale’ of soldierly discontent. Campbell (1984), 55.
81 Campbell (1984), 54.
not live up to the early Severans’ comprehensive militaristic identity to the ultimate cost of his life and his dynasty.

It is reasonable to question, however, why Alexander’s martial absenteeism provoked no action from detached and disaffected troops earlier in his reign. Again, his longevity raises issues, seemingly undermining the extent to which his martial remoteness can be considered a causational factor in his downfall. Yet, at least for a time, it seems youth must excuse him; there can be little expectation for a juvenile emperor to assume the roving, marauding role of a fully-fledged soldier-emperor, touring provinces and living among the legions.82 Alexander’s age accounts for the disparity between himself and his predecessors and protects him from being usurped. Furthermore, the fact that the soldiers did not take action against the emperor for over a decade is not necessarily a guarantee of their satisfaction. Indeed, contrary to Alexander’s assertion that the soldiers have lived under his rule for ‘fourteen years without complaint’, murmurs of soldierly discontent bleed through the sources (Herodian 6.9.3).

Universal contentment cannot be assumed amid reports of revolt and desertion perhaps as early as 227. Dio writes of Mesopotamian troops deserting the Roman army and joining the Persian king Artaxerxes, or else simply not defending themselves, even before Alexander has had the chance to prove his martial incompetency proper (Dio 80.4.1-2). Herodian also adds to the picture, reporting a mutiny by Egyptian and Syrian troops that allegedly did aim to effect a ‘change of emperor’ (Herodian 6.4.7).83 The proliferation of coins stressing the loyalty of the troops should therefore arouse suspicion (RIC. IV.II, Alexander Severus, 138, 139, 279).84 Such a blatant contradiction of contemporary reports suggests a concerted effort by the regime

82 While Gaius lived among the legions, he did so as boy, not boy-emperor. The young Caracalla is no exception either; though he features on campaign as Augustus, he has the support of senior co-emperor, Severus. Winterling (2011), 19.
83 Whittaker notes that this may be a misplaced retelling of the aforementioned Mesopotamian mutiny, but nevertheless acknowledges that Herodian’s account is in keeping with Dio’s claim that there were ‘many uprisings’ (Dio 80.3.1). Whittaker (1970) on Herodian 6.4.7, 107.
84 Rowan (2012), 230; Southern (2001), 61.
to belie reality and propagate a more reassuring alternative. Clearly all is not well in the ranks of Alexander’s army, and it is not unreasonable to conjecture that the emperor’s aloofness is an aggravating factor, if not an outright cause.

The soldierly discontent that arises as a result of non-military disciplinarians Dio and Ulpian on the other hand, is undoubtedly caused by the aloofness of Alexander and his regime. Unpopular appointments are symptomatic of an out-of-touch emperor, and there can be no doubting that these two officials in particular incur the soldiers’ displeasure. Ulpian is murdered by the praetorian guard in 223, and Dio cannot undertake his second consulship in Rome for his own safety after aggrieving those troops under his jurisdiction in Pannonia to such an extent that the praetorians complain of him in the capital (Dio 80.2.2, 80.4.2-5.1). While I question De Blois’ labelling of Ulpian as one of the emperor’s ‘favourites’, I accept that the regime’s appointment policies seem to render him no ‘friend of the military’.

Against Severus’ implicit promises that the army will find his successors reliable, this is simply not acceptable. Under Severus and Caracalla, emperor and soldiery look after each other’s interests – often at the expense of everything else, much to the detriment of their reputation (Dio 78.9.1). By contrast, in Alexander we have an emperor whose priorities appear to lie elsewhere. His decision to appoint Dio consul in 229 certainly seems systematically at odds with the soldiers’ desires as he employs the senator despite their complaints. As such, the emperor not only proves himself inattentive, but in doing so undermines the reciprocity that helped sustain his predecessors. Since failure to live up to

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85 Claudius and Justinian demonstrate this phenomenon, alienating senate and people respectively with unpopular appointments. Barker (1966), 84; Alston (1998), 117.
87 It is difficult to see how the jurist could be a favourite of Alexander’s when his murder comes a mere year into the reign of the now 14 year-old emperor. De Blois (2006), 52.
88 Smith (1972), 493.
89 At 21 years of age, the emperor takes full responsibility for this appointment.
Severus’ and Caracalla’s solicitude equates to a betrayal as far as the soldiers are concerned, it must therefore be considered instrumental to his downfall.90

The events of March 235, then, should be viewed as the culmination of years of underlying soldierly discontent. Lengthy though it may have been, Alexander’s reign was not entirely acceptable and ultimately Maximinus proves to be the catalyst that finally prompts the soldiers to address their latent dissatisfaction. Following his advent, it does not take the troops long to realise what they have been missing – namely, a ‘fellow-soldier’ who is concerned first and foremost with their interests and committed to their way of life (Herodian 6.8.4). Maximinus’ martial devotion throws the emperor’s inadequacies into sharp relief, earns the soldiers’ allegiance and satisfies the Severan brief, ironically at the expense of the Severan dynasty itself.

For all Alexander fails to immerse himself voluntarily in the military world, he does respond, albeit ‘[r]eluctantly’, to military crisis after receiving summonses from governors on the eastern and later the northern frontiers (Herodian 6.3.1, 6.7.2-3, 6.7.5). By leaving Rome when the situation demands it, Alexander can be credited for his adherence to the long-established expectations surrounding the emperor’s role as imperator, but little else beyond that.91 Taking the Persian campaign as a case study, it is clear that there is a gulf between expectation and reality when it comes to Alexander’s military conduct as he again diverges from the Severan formula.

As has already been established, both Severus’ and Caracalla’s conduct on campaign extends to active involvement on the field of battle. Severus shows face at Lugdunum and

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90 That the troops are taken by a ‘general inclination to revolt’ ahead of Alexander’s assassination indicates their upset (Herodian 6.8.3-4).
91 Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland agree, stating that Alexander’s Persian campaign in particular ‘brought little credit to the Roman army and still less to the Emperor in the role of military commander’. Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland (1938), 67; Lusnia (2006), 274; Peachin (2006), 151.
Caracalla backs up his proclamation that he wishes to die alongside his troops with his presence in the fray (Dio 76.6.1, 78.3.2).\(^{92}\) Add to this the report that even Elagabalus has a cameo on the frontline in the war against Macrinus and it is clear that Severus and his successors set a precedent for martial participation (Dio 79.38.4). Severan emperors are consummate campaigners.

Alexander Severus is no such thing. While I acknowledge the role he takes in battle preparations, in particular his involvement in ‘training the soldiers’ and ‘practicing manoeuvres’, the fact remains that the emperor never makes the transition to actual combat (Herodian 6.4.3). To envisage the emperor emulating Caracalla’s brazen pursuit of single-combat is certainly to tax the imagination (Dio 78.13.1-2). Alexander’s martial activity by contrast is fundamentally peripheral and his failure to make good on his promise to ‘accompany and lead in person’ a contingent against the barbarians ensures that he is only ever on the cusp of real military action (Herodian 6.5.2).\(^{93}\) He is scarcely the ‘companion in battle’ that Severus and Caracalla were and that Maximinus promises to be (Herodian 6.9.5). Alexander’s non-combatant status also discredits his own military image. Martial medallions and coin types propagated ahead of the Persian campaign are rendered insubstantial as his shortcomings are exposed (RIC IV.II, Alexander Severus, 43, 210, 225-6).\(^{94}\) As such, the emperor not only pales against the militarism of his Severan predecessors, but single-handedly demolishes his own military façade.

In light of the fact that Alexander’s non-participation is directly responsible for the disastrous end to the Persian campaign, I argue that this discrepancy contributes to his ultimate downfall. Herodian – and indeed the soldiers themselves – are under no illusion that anything

\(^{92}\) Compare Caracalla’s dramatic will to Alexander’s observable reluctance to risk life and limb, and the difference is dramatic; this is no case of like ‘father’, like son.

\(^{93}\) The only place Alexander leads them is back to Antioch (Herodian 6.6.2-3).

\(^{94}\) Rowan (2012), 238-9.
other than Alexander’s failure to lead his column in support of the troops marching on Media ‘brought about the end of the invading army’ (Herodian 6.5.2, 6.5.8-10).\(^{95}\) That the Romans would likely have otherwise secured an outright victory only serves to confirm the emperor’s blameworthiness. Herodian’s assertion that the troops ‘had only been destroyed insofar as they were fewer in number’ makes it reasonable to suppose that the Romans would have been successful had Alexander kept to the plan that was ‘theoretically sound’ (Herodian 6.6.1, 6.6.5-6).\(^{96}\) Recall that the emperor headed the ‘strongest and largest group’ (Herodian 6.5.7).

Naturally, the disaster has consequences of its own for the accountable Alexander. Not only do the soldiers inevitably lose confidence in him, but his failure to follow the Severan blueprint for direct martial involvement – with all its costs – incurs their fury and damages his reputation irreparably.\(^{97}\) Their anger and resentment endures beyond the Persian campaign and adds fuel to the fire of 235. The emperor’s ineptitudes are easily recalled and can be considered a direct motive for his overthrow: the troops ‘[remind] themselves of the eastern disasters’ while those from Illyricum in particular renew their wrath as the situation in the north deteriorates (Herodian 6.7.3, 6.8.3).\(^{98}\) Alexander’s handling of the Persian campaign ultimately shows him to be unacceptable to the soldiery.\(^{99}\) Since this is fundamentally at odds with the troops’ expectation that they will find their Severan emperors satisfactory, it must contribute to the disaffection that drives his murder three years later.

\(^{95}\) Despite being deemed to have written a favourable account of Alexander’s tenure, the historian makes explicit the emperor’s culpability in this instance (Herodian 6.5.8, 6.6.1). Campbell (1984), 54.

\(^{96}\) Southern (2001), 390.

\(^{97}\) Campbell certainly believes the troops’ loss of confidence to be instrumental in Alexander’s demise, arguing that it opens the door for Maximinus. Campbell (1984), 54-5.

\(^{98}\) The acute suffering of the Illyrian troops in the east is compounded by the news that their homeland is being threatened by Germanic tribesmen (Herodian 6.6.2, 6.7.2-3).

\(^{99}\) That the Romans’ strife is compounded by disasters of disease and cold ensures that ‘the soldiers’ morale and the emperor’s reputation […] sink to their lowest point’ (Herodian 6.6.3). He is not looking after them as he should.
Though official propaganda claims otherwise, victory itself is another characteristic of Severan campaigning that Alexander, to his detriment, fails to emulate comprehensively. Numismatic depictions of the Victory-crowned emperor standing over the Tigris and Euphrates, and attestations to the title Parthicus Maximus contradict Herodian’s account of a military disaster mitigated only by the fact that the Persians, too, retreated (Herodian 6.6.6-6.7.1). Hardly indubitable, then, Alexander’s ‘victory’ is not akin to those won by Severus, Caracalla and even Elagabalus. While it would be erroneous to suggest his Severan predecessors boasted a 100% success rate, they nevertheless have a strong association with martial success. The dynasty was founded on victory in civil war and, between them, Severus and Caracalla accumulate quite the collection of military titles in the years that follow (RIC IV.I, Severus, 62, 90, 346; Caracalla, 55, 65). Moreover, the Arch of Severus in Rome certainly strives to establish and advertise a synonymy between the concepts of Severan and victory.

Ahead of the Persian campaign, Alexander is guilty of revitalising this association. He not only reminds the assembled troops of triumphs won under Severus and Caracalla, but mints coins anticipating victory (Herodian 6.3.6; RIC IV.II, Alexander Severus, 180, 211-6, 226). Since the emperor proves unable to equal the successes of his forebears, we might retrospectively question the wisdom of his decision to reinforce soldierly expectations of victory. By accentuating the gap between expectation and reality in this way, Alexander amplifies the soldiers’ discontent and the inevitable backlash.

To summarise, Alexander defies expectations of how Severan emperors conduct themselves on campaign. He fails not only to register an unequivocal victory against the

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100 Even Herodian appreciates that this reassurance only comes with hindsight, however (Herodian 6.6.6). Southern (2001), 62; Rowan (2012), 243.
101 Campbell (1984), 54.
102 Brilliant (1967), 35, 104.
103 Alexander disseminates several Victory types which are ‘anticipatory and not commemorative’. Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland (1938), 66.
Persians, but to show himself a consummate military man in the vein of Severus and Caracalla. The soldiers are left furious and disaffected with an emperor whose ‘negligence’ and ‘cowardice’ disgraces the Severan name and leaves them wanting (Herodian 6.7.3). Given the opportunity in 235, the soldiers address their dissatisfaction and set about fulfilling their own expectations.

Having scrutinised Alexander’s character and action, I now consider the nature and implications of his approach to military crisis. In the first instance, the emperor’s reaction to the prospect of conflict is much in contrast to that of his war-seeking predecessors. Unmistakable reluctance characterises his response to news of the emerging barbarian threats; he is reportedly ‘badly upset’ by tidings of Artaxerxes’ expansionist exploits, while dispatches from the north ‘demoralised him and threw him in a greater state of anxiety’ (Herodian 6.2.3, 6.7.2-5). The emperor’s disposition very much informs his practical response to these crises as his innate aversion to conflict appears to drive him to diplomacy.\textsuperscript{104} Negotiation rapidly establishes itself as Alexander’s default approach as he sends representatives to the Persians and later the Germans in an attempt to quell their aggressions (Herodian 6.2.3-4, 6.4.4, 6.7.9).\textsuperscript{105} While we cannot know what Severus or Caracalla would have done given Alexander’s situation as they never faced a comparable military threat, his ready diplomacy is undoubtedly incongruous with their belligerent example as we read it in the sources. The emperor’s approach to military affairs can therefore be described as essentially non-Severan.

Once again, his divergence from Severan identity can be shown to be instrumental in his downfall. His non-Severan approach to the military challenges of his reign incurs soldierly

\textsuperscript{104} Herodian makes no suggestion that straightforward prudence was also a factor in Alexander’s attempts to avoid war, though this omission may be made in the interests of a polished narrative.

\textsuperscript{105} Given that Alexander sent not one, but two diplomatic missions to the Persian king, the first should not be mistaken for an ultimatum.
dissatisfaction in light of the inevitable implications it has for them.\textsuperscript{106} Courtesy perhaps of the historians’ less than complimentary picture of the army, much is made of the soldiers’ ire at being denied the opportunity to acquire glory and plunder on the Rhine, and its relevance to Alexander’s overthrow.\textsuperscript{107} Such deprival is in itself a violation of the soldierly expectation that Severan emperors will keep them active and well-financed. Severus permits his soldiers to plunder Ctesiphon, while Caracalla sanctions the pillage of Alexandria and even Rome’s own treasuries (Dio 76.9.4, 78.23; Herodian 4.4.7). Moreover, given the reports of Alexander’s diminishing munificence, I argue that there is an even greater need to allow the soldiers opportunity to amass their own spoils and thus a greater dissatisfaction when it is denied to them (Herodian 6.8.4).\textsuperscript{108} Yet while I support the notion that Alexander’s fruitless strategy contributes to the discontent that motivates his assassination, it is clear that the soldiers are aggrieved by more than a lack of material gain.

In fact, by contrast, material loss is a particularly acute grievance, especially for those troops whose hinterland homes have been pillaged by the very people their emperor now proposes to discuss peace terms with (Herodian 6.7.2-3, 6.7.9-10).\textsuperscript{109} For the Illyrian soldiers, distress rapidly becomes anger before Alexander has even mounted an expedition for the Rhine; his ‘procrastination’ galls (Herodian 6.7.2-3). His pursuit of a diplomatic solution upon arrival, then, can hardly have been acceptable. It undoubtedly demonstrates a lack of loyalty, not to mention an indifference to his soldiers’ plight that is grossly un-Severan. By showing

\textsuperscript{106} The soldiers reportedly view Alexander’s diplomatic tactics as a ‘ridiculous waste of time’ and resent them accordingly (Herodian 6.7.10).
\textsuperscript{107} De Blois (2006), 51; Southern (2001), 63.
\textsuperscript{108} Numismatic evidence from Upper Germany showing a general decrease in the proportion of coins per annum during Alexander’s reign supports these reports. Kemmers (2009), 853.
\textsuperscript{109} Since Severus’ military reforms ensured that ‘many military properties’ were situated in these lands, it seems no small number of troops were affected. De Blois (2006), 51; Campbell (1984), 54; Southern (2001), 63.
himself unwilling to avenge their losses, Alexander again violates the principle of reciprocity between army and emperor and invites his own destruction.\textsuperscript{110}

Beyond failing to defend the interests of sections of his soldiery, the emperor’s approach also means he is unable – or worse, unwilling – to defend Roman honour in general. Against the expectation that emperors defend not only Roman land, but Roman honour, this is a serious transgression.\textsuperscript{111} Herodian certainly reports a strong feeling among the troops that Alexander Severus ‘should have marched out to punish the Germans for their previous insolence’ and in so doing, safeguard Rome’s repute (Herodian 6.7.10).\textsuperscript{112} Severus’ punitive campaign against the Parthians for their support of Niger confirms that this course of action would be more befitting of a Severan emperor. As such, Alexander’s response is neither in keeping with Severan identity nor acceptable against a wider Roman ethos.

In the case of the German crisis, Alexander’s diplomatic approach is undoubtedly made worse by his ‘promise to meet all [the Germans’] requirements’ and declaration that he has ‘plenty of money’ as he attempts to buy peace with gold (Herodian 6.7.9).\textsuperscript{113} That the ‘most inappropriate gift in a military context was the grant of subsidies to barbarians in return for peace’, makes Alexander’s chosen policy particularly offensive.\textsuperscript{114} The fact that Caracalla himself pays ‘a large sum of money’ to a barbarian tribe in 213 without repercussions should not threaten our ability to connect Alexander’s decision to pay off the enemy to his overthrow (Dio 78.14.1-2). Key differences between the two emperors and their respective situations

\textsuperscript{110} Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland agree, going so far as to assert that ‘disaffection on the part of the Illyrian regiments proved more disastrous to the Emperor than the German invasion’. Mattingly, Sydenham and Sutherland (1938), 68.
\textsuperscript{111} To quote Peachin: ‘[Roman emperors] were responsible for protecting the Roman Empire, both physically, and in terms of its honour’. Peachin (2006), 152.
\textsuperscript{112} The Germanic tribes were certainly made to ‘[pay] the penalty’ for crimes committed at Teutoburg Forest in order to salvage Rome’s reputation two centuries earlier (Strabo, Geography 7.1.4). Mattern (1999), 189.
\textsuperscript{113} It is on these grounds that I question De Blois’ argument that Alexander did not have the financial latitude to ‘reconcile the military with the regime’. He appears to have had sufficient money to gift the Germans. De Blois (2006), 48, 52.
\textsuperscript{114} Phang (2008), 188.
ensure that this apparent challenge is not insurmountable. Crucially, when Caracalla sends funds to the Alamanni, he is buying victory and not excusal.\footnote{Note also that the campaign he finishes in this manner is offensive, not defensive.} To elaborate, since he has already engaged with the enemy, Caracalla’s action cannot be construed as an evasion tactic and as such, is arguably more respectable than Alexander’s blatant bribery. Furthermore, it is also possible that Caracalla suffers no consequence because he has already proven himself in a military capacity and established a strong enough connection with the soldiery for them to forgive any transgression. By contrast, Alexander Severus simply has not forged the ties to allow him to successfully diverge from expected practice.\footnote{Additionally, in practical terms, Alexander has not compensated his troops with any previous opportunity to secure the spoils they are interested in; the same accusation cannot be levelled at Caracalla.}

If Alexander had channelled his efforts into meeting his soldiers’ requirements – namely, their desire to win booty, to fight for Rome’s honour, and to defend their homeland – rather than those of the marauding Germans, he may not have met his end in Mainz.\footnote{Southern (2001), 63.} All things considered, his approach is not what the troops have been conditioned to expect from Severan emperors; they cannot relate to a pacifist.\footnote{Naturally, there is an ideological disjoint between soldier and peace-seeker.} Diplomacy fosters disgust and disillusionment in the ranks and does nothing to falsify the claim that he is a ‘mean little sissy’ (Herodian 6.9.5). It is astonishing then that Alexander is left ‘utterly dumbfounded by the extraordinary news’ of Maximinus’ proclamation as, given the apparent ubiquity of soldierly discontent, it can hardly be considered a surprising turn of events (Herodian 6.9.1). Indeed, the soldiers’ bitter resentment of Alexander’s approach is such that they terminate his contract as soon as a viable alternative presents itself (Herodian 6.7.9-10). Alexander Severus’ ultimate failure to live up to the Severan exemplar, and thus the troops’ expectations, gifts the empire to the Thracian usurper with the courage, the commitment and the camaraderie.
Chapter Three – Of Rocky Ground and Great Expectations

The preceding chapter aimed to establish a causational link between Alexander Severus’ failure to live up to the early Severans’ militaristic identity and the dynasty’s downfall in 235. Without wishing to dilute this central premise by downplaying Alexander’s deficiencies, this chapter will consider the possibility that the emperor cannot be held wholly responsible for his failure to live up to his predecessors’ example and its associated soldierly expectations. Scrutinising Severus’ misguided intimations and Caracalla’s overzealousness, I will investigate the extent to which the soldiers hold Alexander to a precedent that is not only unsustainable, but by no means easily emulated.

Since dynastic propaganda is necessarily concerned with the future, the intertwining of military and dynasty in the formative years of the Severan regime suggests that Severus’ militaristic identity will endure.119 By way of shared victory titles, Severus extends his martial persona to his sons, while the blending of militaristic and dynastic iconography on the monumental arches at Rome and Lepcis Magna arguably makes implicit promises regarding the nature, priorities and future exploits of his imperial descendants.120 Contrary to Severus’ intimations of continuity, however, the militaristic identity that privileges the soldiers and sustains the early Severans is itself unsustainable on account of certain variables. The character of successive emperors, as well as their experience and access to resources, all influence their ability to live up to Severus’ example and the related soldierly expectations.

To consider first the impact of character, it is clear that Campbell’s claim that the ‘tenor and direction of the government depended to a large degree on the character of the individual emperor’ is one to which Alexander himself lends weight.121 The benignity and uprightness

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120 Severus’ promises may be implicit, but displayed on arches described as ‘bill-boards’ by Brilliant, they are hardly obscure. Brilliant (1967), 35, 104; Manders (2012), 84-5; Newby (2007), 207-11.
121 Campbell (1984), 414.
betrayed by his judicial practice undoubtedly channels him away from both pursuing the expansionist policies practised by his forebears, and immersing himself in a martial lifestyle that is, by definition, bellicose (Herodian 6.1.6-7). More specifically, Alexander’s disposition arguably also shapes his response to the military crises of 231 and 235. As such, he not only supports the general premise that an emperor’s personality has a bearing on imperial policy, but demonstrates that the continuity of the Severan regime’s martial association is subject to the character of its succeeding emperors. In light of this, Severus’ allusions to the continuance of his militaristic identity – and indeed, the soldierly expectations those allusions galvanise – must be misguided. The militarism that sustains the dynasty under the early Severans is hardly imperishable.

While Alexander’s sternest critic might expect him to override his peaceable instinct for the sake of soldierly satisfaction and his own survival, the fact remains that he also lacks the experience necessary to effectively maintain Severus’ paradigm. His conduct in the Persian campaign reveals as much, as a ‘theoretically sound’ battle plan crumbles under his hesitancy (Herodian 6.5.8-10).122 Alexander’s uncertainty is attributable as much to his inexperience as his disposition.123 Unhabituated and unversed in the art of war, the emperor is not at ease at the head of an army. Since Alexander was only 13 at the time of his accession, this should come as no surprise. The ‘manly education’ he received prior to his proclamation can scarcely have extended to warfare proper, and his training in the years since concerns matters of court, not combat (Herodian 5.7.5-6, 6.1.6).124 Unlike Caracalla, this Severan simply did not have the support and tutelage of a soldier-emperor father. He therefore lacks the necessary exposure to allow him to deal with the military challenges of his reign in a proficient manner, let alone

122 Southern (2001), 390.
123 Kennedy (1987), 287.
124 Normally, recruits were enlisted to the imperial army ‘between the ages of 18 and 21’. Le Bohec (1994), 73.
comprehensively imitate his predecessors’ soldierly identity. Demonstrably incompatible with military inexperience, the early Severans’ militaristic example is thus by no means durable.\footnote{125}{The emperor can hardly be held to account for the circumstances of his upbringing and accession.}

The fact that not all emperors have access to the same resources also renders the early Severans’ militaristic identity unsustainable in the long-term and makes dangerous the soldiers’ perception that the Severans are the ‘guarantor[s] of their privileges’\footnote{Poter (2006), 155.}.\footnote{126}{Indeed, for all Severus makes provision for his immediate successors to enable them to gratify the soldiers and preserve the reciprocity he established, there is no guarantee that this will last (Herodian 3.13.3-4, 3.15.3). In fact, Herodian reports that Caracalla ‘squander[ed] in one day all of the funds which Severus had amassed in eighteen years’ (Herodian 4.4.7-8). While this claim should be treated with a healthy scepticism, the point itself still stands; the resources upon which the bond between emperor and army are in part built are hardly infinite. Replenishment cannot be guaranteed either. Certainly, Alexander’s personality and inexperience prevents him raising funds through campaigns in the way that Severus and Caracalla can, which may help to explain why his munificence ‘dried up’ (Herodian 6.8.4).\footnote{Caracalla openly boasts that his sword is the financial basis of his empire (Dio 78.10.4).}}.\footnote{127}{As such, just as military benefaction is liable to decline, the martial persona of which it is a key facet is likewise susceptible; Severus cannot reasonably guarantee its durability.}

Despite Severus’ intimations, then, it is clear that the early Severans’ militaristic identity is unsustainable in light of the fact that the nature of imperial rule is affected by certain changeable factors. Indeed, it seems continuity of character, military experience, and resources are necessary for the parallel continuation of the dynasty’s martial identity. It is no coincidence that the only one of Severus’ successors to live up to all facets of his military persona shares similar capital and credentials. Caracalla’s anomalousness thus attests to the long-term
unsustainability of Severus’ militaristic identity.\textsuperscript{128} Paradoxical though it seems, the identity that shores up the Severan dynasty must therefore make it precarious. Alexander inherits a situation wherein soldiers erroneously assured of continuity hold Severus’ successors to their duty of care, regardless of whether or not they are adequately equipped to honour it.\textsuperscript{129} At his predecessors’ invitation, the soldiers expect a perpetuity that is improbable, if not entirely impossible. Insofar as he is effectively charged with sustaining the unsustainable, I argue that Alexander cannot be held wholly responsible for his failure to meet example and expectations. Independently of his failings, the Severan dynasty is built on deceptively rocky ground.

Having established the instability of the situation that Alexander ultimately accedes to, I turn now to matters of Caracalla’s overzealousness. Comparison of Severus’ and Caracalla’s respective martial identities reveals a trend wherein the latter takes his father’s military affiliation to new heights, and with it, the expectations of the troops. Scrutinising Caracalla’s extravagance with respect to his military benefaction and participation in soldierly life, I will illustrate this trend and in so doing, demonstrate the ways in which the emperor exacerbates an already difficult task.

As far as military benefaction is concerned, Severus’ practice is not particularly outrageous. His use of donatives is moderate, and the pay rise he grants his troops can hardly be viewed as gratuitous in light of the fact that it is their first since the reign of Domitian.\textsuperscript{130} Caracalla’s martial benefaction, by contrast, can hardly be considered reasonable. In short, it seems he ‘follow[s] his father’s advice too well’, enriching the soldiers not only with regular donatives, but with a further pay rise of his own (Dio 78.9.1, 78.10.1, 78.12.4, 78.24.1; 128 Though allusions to continuity undoubtedly serve his dynastic purposes in the formative years of his regime, they have less advantageous implications for his descendants. 129 The soldiers are apparently vindicated by Severus’ blending of military and dynasty. 130 Smith deems the rise numerically unremarkable, asserting that it ‘barely compensated for the inflation’. Smith (1972), 492; Develin (1971), 687; Rantala (2017), 153.}
Herodian 4.4.6-7, 4.7.4).\textsuperscript{131} Coming less than 20 years after Severus’, and hardly negligible at 50%, Caracalla’s rise is not quite so obviously necessary.\textsuperscript{132} Caracalla thus shows himself a blithe and bountiful benefactor, taking the terms of Severus’ reciprocal relationship with the army to new and undue heights.\textsuperscript{133} In view of this, it seems the emperor must bear some responsibility for the dynasty’s collapse. By overstepping the mark, he increases demand and makes it more challenging for his successors to maintain Severan militaristic identity and satisfy soldierly expectations.

Further to this, I argue that Caracalla’s material overzealousness also makes the soldiers resistant to change. He indulges them to such an extent that future emperors cannot safely moderate the terms of their association even when it is prudent to do so.\textsuperscript{134} Macrinus – though not himself a Severan – demonstrates as much when he bemoans the catch-22 that makes it impossible for him to grant the troops the pay and donatives they are accustomed to, and impossible for him not to (Dio 79.36.1-4).\textsuperscript{135} Though he is not reported to have cut the soldiers’ pay, Alexander’s apparent attempt to revert to a fiscal policy typified by ‘old-fashioned Antonine reliability’ is met with discontent as the troops take issue with the emperor’s diminishing munificence (Herodian 6.8.4).\textsuperscript{136} Considering the relative mildness of Alexander’s reform, I argue that it is only against Caracalla’s extremes that he gains a reputation for meanness. Irrespective of its gentleness, Alexander’s conservatism is unviable within a Severan paradigm made monstrous by Caracalla. To the dynasty’s doom, Caracalla

\textsuperscript{131} While we must be mindful of the resentful Dio exaggerating Caracalla’s munificence, coins emphasising \textit{liberalitas} corroborate the general picture of Caracallan generosity. It is noteworthy that he propagates a higher percentage of \textit{liberalitas} types than any of his Severan peers (RIC IV.I, Caracalla, 134-6, 158). Campbell (1984), 412; Noreña (2011), 91.

\textsuperscript{132} It is only necessary insofar as it secures Caracalla’s sole rule following Geta’s murder. Dio notes the ‘great sums of blood-money’ he gave to the soldiers (Dio 78.12.4). Develin (1971), 687.

\textsuperscript{133} He certainly ensures that military expenditure reaches unprecedented levels under the early Severans. De Blois (2006), 48.

\textsuperscript{134} Southern (2001), 57.

\textsuperscript{135} Far from detracting from the point, Macrinus’ non-Severan status shows the extent to which Severus and Caracalla have redefined emperorship in general. It also betrays the height of soldierly expectation; if this is what they demand of a non-Severan, how uncompromising must their demands be of an emperor with Severan blood?

\textsuperscript{136} De Blois (2006), 52; Syme (1971), 161.
has not only swollen the soldiers’ demands, but made them utterly uncompromising in the process. Alexander, then, is left with no easy task and little room for manoeuvre.

As far as participation in soldierly life is concerned, Caracalla again raises the bar. Though he is by no means the only emperor to forgo imperial privilege and immerse himself in the martial world ‘on terms of equality with the rest’, he is the first to go so far as to claim that he ‘loved being called comrade instead of emperor’ by his troops (Dio 78.13.1; Herodian 4.7.6). This is certainly a gross violation of Augustus’ policy never to ‘address any soldiers as his ‘comrades’’ and as such can be deemed excessive (Suetonius, Augustus 25). Furthermore, Caracalla’s almost singular devotion to military affairs also outstrips his father’s example. Where Severus concerns himself with administrative and judicial affairs, Caracalla shows no such interest, holding court ‘rarely or never’ and leaving matters of administration to his mother (Dio 77.17, 78.17.1, 78.18.2-3). While we should of course refrain from branding Caracalla’s principate one-dimensional, military matters are sufficiently predominant to privilege the soldiers, heighten their expectations and intensify the precedent with which Alexander must later compete.

Perhaps the most pressing question when it comes to Alexander’s campaign conduct and subsequent demise is why, after having satisfied the governors’ demands for his presence, did he not stop short of assuming a combatant role (Herodian 6.3.1, 6.7.2-3)? By leaving the fighting to competent generals with more experience and less concern for self-preservation, he could have avoided disaster in the Persian campaign, disgraceful diplomacy in Mainz, and assassination in 235 (Herodian 6.5.8-10, 6.8.9-10, 6.9.7). That the emperor does not do so

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137 Trajan is reported to have shared in the toils of his soldiers and, as chapter one established, Caracalla follows his father’s lead (Pliny, Panegyricus 13). Campbell (1984), 52.
138 Fuhrmann (2012), 133.
139 Peachin (2006), 141.
140 In a related point, Caracalla’s extreme example steepens the drop-off to eventual successor Alexander, and makes his shortcomings more pronounced.
suggests he perceives that it is not a viable option, despite Severus having adopted much the same strategy in the civil wars four decades earlier.\textsuperscript{141}

To explain why what is feasible for the first Severan emperor is not feasible for the last, we can again look to the ever-bellicose Caracalla.\textsuperscript{142} Contrary to Julia Mamaea’s assertions that it is not Alexander’s job ‘to get involved in the battle’, his faux-father has ensured that in reality it is (Herodian 6.5.9). With his thirst for single-combat and his complete martial immersion, Caracalla has again extended the boundaries of the precedent set by Severus and redefined soldierly expectations pertaining to the emperor’s role in battle (Dio 78.13.1-2). To this end, he unwittingly removes Alexander’s non-combatant safety-net and forces him to commit to a course of action with which he is ill-equipped to deal.

When Caracalla does not so much consolidate Severus’ militaristic identity as magnify it, it is clear that he must adversely affect the ability of his successors to live up to the Severan example. Put succinctly, his overzealousness makes an unreasonable task monstrous as it swells the soldiers’ expectations and privileges them to such an extent that they become resistant to change. In light of this, it is arguably unreasonable to hold Alexander wholly responsible for his failure to live up to the Severans’ militaristic identity. The precedent that he falls short of is by no means easily emulated.

\textsuperscript{141} Dio ensures we know that Severus opted to direct his campaigns, rather than physically lead them (Dio 75.7.1, 76.6.1).

\textsuperscript{142} While I recognise that Severus’ use of generals may not be wholly acceptable – it is a cause for criticism in Dio – it is clearly viable (Dio 75.7.1, 76.6.1).
Conclusion

By the time of his overthrow in 235, Alexander Severus had shown himself unable to live up to the early Severans’ militaristic identity. He had discredited the propaganda that endeavoured to paint him fellow-soldier and soldier-emperor, devastated an army by reneging on agreed battle plans and proved at best indifferent to his soldiers’ interests. Indeed, for all Alexander is the last of his kind, he falls short of the Severan example to such an extent that we might reasonably question whether he was ‘of his kind’ at all. The literary sources certainly highlight major discrepancies between the emperor and his forebears. He is hardly the all-action militarist that Severus and Caracalla were, and his character profile as we read it in Herodian is similarly divergent.

As I have demonstrated, this failure to emulate the comprehensive militaristic identity established by the first generation of Severan emperors ultimately results in the downfall of the dynasty. It does so because in violating the Severan blueprint, Alexander also contravenes the associated expectations of a soldiery privileged by Severus’ and Caracalla’s martial personae. Assured that they will find their Severan emperors acceptable, the soldiers expect Severus’ successors not only to continue to campaign and conquer, but to look after their interests, financial and otherwise. These are demands that Alexander does not fulfil. He is neither a consistent benefactor, nor a military enthusiast, and his conduct on necessary campaigns leaves much to be desired as far as the soldiers are concerned, as sheer incompetency in the east is backed up by a diplomacy that denies them their due in the west.

Alexander is certainly not what the troops have been conditioned to expect and his non-conformity is accordingly met with disillusionment and discontent. Since it is this dissatisfaction which drives his overthrow, we can draw a causational link between his failure to fulfil the Severan brief and the downfall of the dynasty. That is to say, the gap between
expectation and reality renders Alexander’s transgressions terminal. Thus, it seems that when the soldiers on the northern frontier kill the last of the Severans and make Maximinus emperor in his stead, they are fulfilling their own expectations. To the dynasty’s doom, the Thracian promises to embody the early Severans’ militaristic identity better than Alexander does.

For all that the dynasty collapses on Alexander’s watch and as a result of his shortcomings, we must consider the possibility that the soldiers hold the emperor to a precedent that is unsustainable. Since imperial rule is affected by such changeable factors as temperament, experience and access to resources, Severus’ and Caracalla’s militaristic identity cannot be – and indeed, is not – imperishable, as Alexander and Macrinus prove. In light of this, the notions of continuity implicit in Severus’ blending of military and dynasty are misguided. Caracalla exacerbates what is an already precarious situation by consistently surpassing Severus’ martial example. His overzealousness thus heightens soldierly expectation further and renders Alexander’s task all the greater.

In a 42 year rush of blood marked by civil war and expansion, fratricide, usurpation and invasion, the Severan dynasty lives and dies by the sword. The adage, though familiar, is befitting of a dynasty which places its hopes of survival on the military. Indeed, while Severus and Caracalla live by the sword in a very literal sense, immersing themselves in the martial world and propagating images to advertise it, it is also clear that the regime is itself sustained by their militarism. Severus’ and Caracalla’s militaristic identity is instrumental to the success of the dynasty on account of the fact that it speaks to – and indeed, privileges – the very demographic upon which Severan power relies. Far from being an insignificant aesthetic, the early Severans’ martial persona is in many ways its lifeblood.

In the context of the proverb’s intended message, it is perhaps incongruous that the dynasty should die by the sword when it ceases to live by it, but nevertheless it does. Under
Alexander’s custodianship, the dynasty deviates from its winning – if not imperishable – formula when he proves unable to maintain its militaristic reputation. Though blame for Alexander’s failings can be variously apportioned, the fact remains that the Severan dynasty owed its downfall in part to its ultimate failure to live up to its own militaristic identity. Paradoxical though it is, the martial persona designed to preserve the Severan dynasty ultimately has a hand in its undoing. As the dynasty born amid a clamour of swords goes out to the same score in 235, the taste of irony lingers.
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