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Historia Augusta, volumes 1-3

David Magie, David Rohrbacher, *Historia Augusta, volumes 1-3. Loeb classical library, 139-140, 263*. Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2022. 3 vols. Pp. 1586. ISBN 9780674997448

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The first edition of the Loeb *Historia Augusta* (then *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*) appeared between 1922 and 1932. Subsequent reprintings saw the addition of augmented bibliographies, and even a change of title on the dust jacket and spine to *Historia Augusta*. Now, one hundred years after the appearance of Magie's first volume, we have a fully revised edition. These volumes follow the recent trend of revising (or entirely replacing) some of the more venerable editions of Greek and Latin prose texts in the series. David Rohrbacher, the author of an excellent study of on the *Historia Augusta*,^[1] has taken on the task of revising Magie's edition.

The most overt change to the existing edition is in the introduction. Rohrbacher has produced a new introduction, which, with considerable economy (just on twenty pages),^[2] introduces the reader to the state of the question regarding the *Historia Augusta*. Appropriately for a text such as the *Historia Augusta*, Rohrbacher's approach is broadly literary-historiographical. After establishing the imposture at the heart of the work and thus the unity of the *Historia Augusta* (one author, not six), Rohrbacher turns to 'sources', 'the techniques of fabrication', 'purpose', and 'date'. This is rounded off with a very brief discussion of the text.

In each of these areas, Rohrbacher presents a clear account, suitable for the lay reader, student, or academic coming to the text for the first time. Contentious issues (is there anything about the *Historia Augusta* that is not contentious?) are dealt with in a manner that allows for multiple points of view. Thus, for the question of the date of the composition, Rohrbacher acknowledges that a date 395–400 has the support of the 'most influential' of modern scholars on the *Historia Augusta* (Syme, Paschoud, Chastagnol), and supplies a brief overview of some of the key arguments, while also presenting the opinion of 'a smaller group of scholars' (of which Rohrbacher is one), who place the work in the opening decades of the fifth century.

Comparison of the introductions to the two editions reveals just how much the scholarly consensus has shifted between 1922 and 2022, and why Magie's introduction (spread across Volumes 1 and 2), despite its virtues, is no longer fit for

purpose. For Magie, the Diocletianic/Constantinian date of the collection was the basis from which he worked. The anachronisms and material patently derived from later authors such as Victor and Eutropius were the results, so Magie believed, of a later editor. Few now would subscribe to such a position. The shift is seen also in the ways Magie and Rohrbacher handle the question of the *HA*-author's sources. Whereas Rohrbacher (like Magie) recognises the importance of Marius Maximus to the early *vitae*, Junius/Aelius Cordus, thought by Magie to be a major source behind the biographies between *Vita Macrini*[3] and *Maximus et Balbinus* is now rightly presented as a product of the author's imagination whose primary function is as a literary foil (1.xxii-xxiii). One thing missed from the new introduction is a replacement for Magie's treatment of the reception of the *Historia Augusta* after antiquity.

The revised text makes use of several recent editions of the *Historia Augusta*, including Hohl's Teubner, the edition of Soverini, and Paschoud's contributions to the Budé edition. Overall, Rohrbacher's presentation of the text marks an improvement on the previous edition, and there is consideration of some of the recent work by Justin Stover on the text of the *Historia Augusta* (1.xxii, xxxi).[4] As is common in the Loeb series, the reader is provided with an abbreviated *apparatus criticus*. On the whole, Rohrbacher's editorial decisions are judicious. However, in one or two places a fuller apparatus would have been welcome. For example, at *HA Gall.* 6.1 Rohrbacher follows the long-established editorial consensus by tacitly emending the name of the Roman commander in Achaia 'Marcianus'. However, the MSS (*Palatinus lat.* 899 and the Σ -class) present the name of the Roman commander in Achaia as 'Marianus'. This is of historical significance, as the publication of the Vienna Dexippus suggests that the MSS are correct, and the name of this individual at *HA Gall.* 6.1 was indeed Marianus, and is distinct from the (Aurelius?) Marcianus of *HA Gall.* 14.1, 14.7, and 15.2.[5] In this case, one feels that even if Rohrbacher did not wish to dispense entirely with the editorial convention (established at least as far back as Salmasius) it would have been useful to note the readings of the MSS in the *apparatus*.

With respect to the revisions to the translation, Rohrbacher set out to provide a 'more straightforward English style', while also aiming to translate 'more clearly certain passages of a sexual nature that the conventions of Magie's times had obscured'. We can see the results of Rohrbacher's efforts in the latter category in his revisions to that 'farrago of cheap pornography' (as Sir Ronald Syme put it), the *Vita Heliogabali*. Take the following (*HA Heliogab.* 6.5):

Hieroclen vero sic amavit ut eidem inguina oscularetur, quod dictum etiam inverecudum est, Floralia sacra se adserens celebrare.

Magie translates:

And such was his passion for Hierocles that he kissed him in a place which is indecent even to mention, declaring that he was celebrating the festival of Flora.

Rohrbacher translates:

He lusted so greatly for Hierocles that he used to kiss his genitals, which is indecent even to mention, declaring that he was celebrating the festival of Flora.

In a similar vein, (and I think appropriately for the text) Rohrbacher has opted for a colloquial register for some words and phrases. Thus, we get ‘well-hung’ for *bene vasatos*, the term *exsoletus*, incorrectly rendered as ‘catamite’ by Magie, is now translated ‘old queen’ by Rohrbacher, and Elagabalus’ exhortation ‘*Concide Magire*’—addressed to his lover, the one-time athlete and son of a cook, Aurelius Zoticus—is translated ‘It’s skewering time, Cook!’.

Turning from the translation to the notes, Rohrbacher has endeavoured to condense and occasionally replace Magie’s extensive notes. Sensibly, Rohrbacher has removed Magie’s references to supposedly interpolated material in the *vitae*. Most importantly—for the sake of avoiding confusion—Magie’s note concerning the ‘interpolation’ of Eutropian material at *HA Marc.* 15.3–19.9 has been rightly expunged, as the passage is now generally accepted as the *HA*-author’s change of sources rather than the insertion of a later editor. Inevitably, given that there are just under 1500 pages of text with notes, there are minor quibbles. To pick one, the expression *fimum/fumos vendere*, is glossed in a note as ‘the practice of officials soliciting bribes for imperial access’ (1.108, fn. 45), perhaps misses the crucial element of the additional layer of dishonesty involved in ‘selling smoke’, in so far as the phrase usually applies to those who take bribes for imperial favour without following through with the promise (thus, *HA Heliogab.* 10.3; cf. *Alex. Sev.* 36.2). Overall, the notes serve their purpose of helping the reader.

The task of editing and revising the work of another scholar cannot be an easy task. Yet Rohrbacher has handled his endeavour with admirable skill and respect. The result is a welcome and, one might add, needed addition to the Loeb Classical Library, and will surely serve anglophone readers of this most beguiling of texts for years to come.

Notes

[1] D. Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016). Reviewed in [BMCR 2016.08.33](#)

[2] Magie's introductory material amounted to some 45 pages across two volumes.

[3] Although first appearing in the *HA Clod.* 5.10.

[4] J. Stover, 'New Light on the *Historia Augusta*', *JRS* 110 (2020), 167-198.

[5] Thus, C. Mallan and C. Davenport, 'Dexippus and the Gothic Invasion: Interpreting the New Vienna Fragment (*Codex Vindobonensis Hist. gr.* 73 ff. 192^v-193^r)', *JRS* 105 (2015), 203-226; W. Eck, 'Marianus, vice agens proconsulis Achaiae, im Dexippus Vindobonensis', *ZPE* 208 (2018), 248-250.