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Legitimization strategies of Gordian III

The Paper seeks to highlight the legitimisation-strategies of Gordian III by exploring the situation leading up to his reign and his self-representation thereafter. A focal point of this study will be Gordians engagement with his predecessors, mainly his grandfather and uncle Gordian I and Gordian II as well as his former co-rulers Pupienus and Balbinus, additionally we will see how Gordian's strategy evolved during his comparably long rule for third-century standards. Therefore, two key issues represent the focus of this paper: Firstly, the use of divine ancestry to legitimise Gordian's rule, essentially represented by epigraphical material mentioning Gordian I and Gordian II who had been divinised by the senate after their death at the hands of the Numidian legate Capelianus. Secondly, Gordian's propagation of the Persian war in Rome by ritualistic means. The key premise underpinning this study is a break in the continuity of imperial rule after Maximinus Thrax had violently ended the Severan dynasty, and by extension the Antonine monarchy, with the murder of Alexander Severus in 235 AD. As a consequence of this and the chaotic situation of 238 subsequent emperors had to explore new strategies to legitimise their rule, leading to experimentation and reform. Gordian III perfectly exemplifies the issue that divine ancestry alone was not enough to legitimise one's position as emperor, rather it became increasingly necessary to combine ancestry with competence, personal deeds and virtue to make a convincing case for one's rule.

Keywords: Roman Empire; Gordian; Legitimization; divi; third century

Introduction

The following paper seeks to explore the lead-up to the sole rulership of Gordian III, as well as his legitimisation strategy at the beginning of his reign. After the rule of the military man Maximinus Thrax, the reign of the Gordians and Pupienus and Balbinus represents a shift back to a 'Severan'

order. The rule of the Gordians was sanctioned by the senate and whilst Gordian I. and II. were killed after a very short reign, Gordian III managed to cling to power for around six years. The main purpose of this paper is to show, how Gordian III. dealt with his predecessors in constructing his own imperial legitimacy. Methodically the investigation will mainly rely on the rich epigraphic evidence that is still extensive for the reign of Gordian III.

The year of the six emperors: 238 AD

In the last year of the reign of Maximinus Thrax, a usurpation occurred in the North African province of Africa Proconsularis. The comparatively minor political significance of the uprising is based on the fact that it occurred in a province without any notable military presence, which meant that there was little potential to carry out a successful coup. Nevertheless, this was the situation in 238, when the provincial population, presumably under increasing pressure from the taxes levied by Maximinus Thrax to finance his prolonged campaigning, rose up and murdered the imperial procurator.¹ Herodian's report points to a rather spontaneous action carried out by the local *iuvenes* and supported by the wealthy *decuriones*, which seems plausible, especially since the planning of a usurpation in a legionless province must be considered hardly feasible. After the murder of the procurator, the conspirators found themselves in a tight spot and had to reckon with imperial reprisals, which is why they tried to win the provincial governor over to their cause, i.e. they now intended to consolidate their uprising as a usurpation against the emperor.² M. Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus, the governor, came from a senatorial family probably from Galatia or Cappadocia and was rather at the end of his career at the time of his proconsulship of Africa Proconsularis. From a military point of view, he was not a blank slate, especially as he had held the praetorian governorship of Britannia Inferior in 216, but his further career was increasingly

¹ Hdn. 7, 4–5; HUTTNER (2008: 169).

² Hdn. 7, 5, 1.

of a civil-administrative nature.³ According to Herodian's account, which remains the main source for the period under discussion, Gordian was already about 80 years old at the time of his proconsulship. Against this background alone, the author's narrative that Gordian was more or less forced into his elevation seems more obvious than the alternative.⁴ Older research had sometimes seen a larger-scale initiative by senatorial elites,⁵ but in this case one ought to follow the ancient author in his assessment that it was a spontaneous uprising, a fact that is also emphasised by Dietz, who correctly states that a usurpation in the province of Africa Proconsularis can hardly be a well-planned conspiracy.⁶

The recognition of the new ruler needed to be announced throughout the empire and military and political support had to be gathered if Maximinus and his partisans were to be successfully opposed. What turned the comparatively insignificant elevation into a matter of political significance was the surprising reaction of the senate in Rome, which unequivocally sided with Gordian and his son. The recognition of Gordian was followed by the declaration of Maximinus and Maximus as *hostes publici*, which ultimately legalised the coup.⁷ This seems surprising insofar as the members of the senate tended to support usurpations rather hesitantly, due to understandable fear of countermeasures from the imperial side. In the case at hand the senate as an institution had immediately sided with the obviously militarily weaker candidate and burnt all bridges between him and Maximinus, who was on the Danube with a massive force.⁸ As far as the senators' motivations are concerned, it can only be conjectured what motivated them to react so quickly in favour of the Gordians. In addition to the resentment of the senators themselves against Maximinus, later events such as the murder of the

³ OKOŃ (2017: n. 79); KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 180); HÄCHLER (2019: n. 24; 269–273); BIRLEY (1981: 181–186); A possible governorship of Syria Coele under Alexander Severus is uncertain, cf. BIRLEY (2005: 340).

⁴ Hdn. 7, 5, 3–6.

⁵ See especially TOWNSEND (1955: 83–97).

⁶ DIETZ (1980: 320–321).

⁷ Hdn. 7, 7, 2; HUTTNER (2008: 171).

⁸ PISO (1982: 232–233).

Praetorian prefect Vitalianus and other supporters of the emperor such as the *praefectus urbi* Sabinus,⁹ seem to indicate that the mood of the population was also clearly directed against Maximinus. One could see either an overlap of the interests of senators and the population in this matter, or a reaction of the senate to an already existing and visibly discharging resentment towards Maximinus among the population. In this context, it is of particular interest that the senate appears to act as "the senate", which is remarkable because it did not usually act as a unified body in political matters, but rather as individual interest groups of senators. The senate (or the senators in Rome) may have overestimated the sentiment against Maximinus, for the call to the provinces that was issued seemed to meet with less response outside Rome than in the city itself.¹⁰ Basically, it is difficult to decide to what extent the provinces fell away or remained loyal to Maximinus; in any case, a uniform reaction cannot be assumed.¹¹ Ioan Piso credibly shows that the Danubian provinces remained loyal to Maximinus, since otherwise it would have been almost impossible for him to march on Italy.¹² John Drinkwater, too, considers it likely that a majority of the military provinces sided with Maximinus.¹³ In view of some of the inscriptions from Asia Minor and Gaul for the Gordians, one could also assume that they were more popular in the non-military sector, but it is not possible to verify to what degree this was the case.¹⁴ The changes of allegiance from Maximinus to the Gordiani by some provinces is attested on milestone inscriptions, but these are inscriptions in honour of Pupienus and Balbinus. In principle, it would be obvious

⁹ Hdn. 7, 7, 4; whether it was really the city prefect is unclear: on the person of Sabinus see DIETZ (1980: 227).

¹⁰ At least Decius' and Capelianus' loyalties do not seem to have wavered; the extent to which this was the case for other provinces cannot be reliably ascertained. Moreover, the answer from the provinces will probably not have reached Rome before the death of Gordians (see WHITTAKER (1970: 203, n. 1).

¹¹ WHITTAKER (1970: 204–205, n. 1).

¹² PISO (1982: 232–233).

¹³ DRINKWATER (2005: 31).

¹⁴ Some of the cities of Asia minor seem to have fallen to the Gordiani rather quickly, as indicated by several inscriptions for them: CIL XIII 592 = AE 1987, 768; AE 1961, 127 = RRAM 3.2, 54a; RRMAM 3.2, 41.

that the provinces in question had already fallen away under the Gordians, but lacking evidence doesn't allow us to confirm this. The provinces in question are Galatia and Cappadocia.¹⁵

Numidia, The neighbouring province of Africa proconsularis, was particularly problematic for the Gordians, especially as *legio III Augusta* was stationed there under the praetorian legate Capelianus, who sided with Maximinus.¹⁶ The sources agree on a personal enmity between Capelianus and Gordian due to a legal dispute, whether this is actually true or was of significant importance for the partisanship of the Numidian governor cannot be determined here. Nonetheless the story provides, if it is taken as accurate, further evidence that the usurpation of Gordian was not planned, for Gordian would undoubtedly have known who the governor of the neighbouring province of Numidia was and would not have placed himself at the mercy of a personal enemy.¹⁷ Herodian also reports that Gordian immediately tried to have the Numidian legate deposed, but failed, prompting Capelianus to move against him.¹⁸

As was to be expected, the offensive against the Gordians went well for Capelianus, whose trained legion and auxiliary troops soon overcame the makeshift units of Africa proconsularis. The son of the elder Gordian died in the fighting, after which he hanged himself in Carthage.¹⁹ The usurpation of Gordian I and Gordian II ended around the 20th of January 238 and thus lasted about 20 days,²⁰ but its consequences were far-reaching in having pushed the senate into a clear position against Maximinus Thrax, which is why there was now an urgent need for action in Rome.

After the unambiguous partisanship of the senate for the Gordians and against Maximinus, the possibility of returning to the emperor's favour was

¹⁵ Cappadocia e.g.: CIL 3 6953; Galatia e.g.: AE 1961, 127.

¹⁶ That Capelianus was the senatorial governor of Numidia is now undisputed. The author of the *Historia Augusta* still tries to make him appear differently as *cum Maurois Maximini iussu regeret veteranus* (SHA Gord. 15, 1); on the person: DIETZ (1980: 109–120).

¹⁷ Cf. SHA Gord. 15, 1; Hdn. 7, 9, 1–3; 10–11.

¹⁸ Hdn. 7, 9, 3–2; cf. DIETZ (1980: 320–322).

¹⁹ Hdn. 7, 9, 4–9; HUTTNER (2008: 172).

²⁰ KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 180).

no longer open to the senate, even after the Gordiani's deaths. In this respect, it was necessary to establish an opposition to Maximinus' regime, i.e. the renewed elevation of a counter-emperor in order to meet the *hostes publici* on an equal footing. In a sense, this was a unique situation, as it was one of the last occasions of the senate becoming active as a body in matters of imperial policy. However, this did not happen based on a unique contempt for Maximinus, but out of political necessity. In any case, one must not interpret this as a rebellion of the old aristocracy against the new type of "soldier-emperor", but rather an emergency measure to save one's own skin. The first step of the senatorial opposition to Maximinus was the divinisation of the Gordiani.²¹ The new emperors acclamated by the senate were M. Clodius Pupienus Maximus und D. Caelius Calvinus Balbinus heading a committee of 20 senators the *XXviri rei publicae curandae*.²² Ultimately the senatorial candidates managed to succeed against Maximinus Thrax, when his troops murdered him during the siege of Aquileia.²³

Pupienus, Balbinus and the acclamation of Gordian III.

The main theme of the new dual leadership was the unanimity of the two Augusti. This is advertised to the greatest extent by the reverse legends of their first coin-emission, which read for example *CONCORDIA AVGG*,²⁴ *FIDES MVTVA*,²⁵ *PIETAS MVTVA AVGG*.²⁶

With regard to the epigraphic findings, the same applies as in the case of the Gordians. The reign of the new emperors lasted about 3 months (99 days) and there is no extensive epigraphic material here either.²⁷ In addition,

²¹ Vgl. HUTTNER (2008: 171–173).

²² *XXviri*: SHA *Max.* 32, 2; Aur. Vict. 26, 7; Hdn. 7, 10, 3; SHA *Max.* 5, 9; Hdn. 8, 6, 6; 8, 7, 8; BARBIERI (1952: n. 99; 108; 974; 1006; 1496; 1532); KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 183); SHA *Max.* 5, 9; Hdn. 8, 6, 6; 8, 7, 8; OKOŃ (2017: n. 359); BARBIERI (1952: n. 99; 974; 1496).

²³ Hdn. 8, 5, 8–10.

²⁴ RIC 4.2, Balb. 1 (Balbinus); RIC 4.2, Pup. 1.

²⁵ RIC 4.2, Balb. 11.

²⁶ RIC 4.2, Balb. 12; DIETZ (1976: 385–386); HUTTNER (2008: 174).

²⁷ KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 187).

the dual leadership proved to be politically unsustainable and during the senate session on the elevation of Pupienus and Balbinus, riots broke out in the city in which the population, according to Herodian, at the instigation of friends and relatives of the Gordians, demanded representation of the family.²⁸ To what extent the impetus for the installation of Gordian I's grandson and Gordian II's nephew as Caesar came from the people or from agitators of a Gordian "lobby" is difficult to assess.²⁹ It can certainly be assumed that the Gordians had some supporters in Rome, who, however, had to be at least to a large extent congruent with the party of Pupienus and Balbinus, especially since the real concern of the approaching Maximinus created a unified grouping of interests. Sünskes Thompson's suggestion that the people feared a cut-off of the food supply from Africa, the centre of Gordian usurpation, if they took sides with Pupienus and Balbinus and did not recognise Gordian, seems unlikely. First, Africa was no longer under Gordian control at this point, but was back in Maximinus' hands,³⁰ which must also have been known to the population, otherwise the recent acclamation of new emperors in Rome would have made little sense. Secondly, it seems unlikely that the people analysed the reciprocal connections of the real political circumstances so precisely in advance of their activities. On the other hand, one can agree with the statement that a certain dynastic orientation seemed to have permeated the population since the time of the Iulian-Claudian dynasty.³¹ Thus, a general mood of the people for the elevation of a descendant of the Gordians, especially after their divinisation, seems to be indicated.

In the present situation we see that the dynastic idea had obviously permeated the population on a large scale, how else should one evaluate its insistence on the consideration of the Gordiani? These were *de facto* obscure emperors who had reigned for barely three weeks and had not been to Rome since their elevation (a circumstance Maximinus is regularly reproached

²⁸ Hdn. 7, 10, 6.

²⁹ Cf. HUTTNER (2008: 175); SÜNSKES THOMPSON (1993: 47).

³⁰ See HERZ (1978: 1188–1189) for the chronology.

³¹ SÜNSKES THOMPSON (1993: 47); on the importance of the dynastic system see also DE BLOIS (2020: 238–239).

for).³² Their popularity had nothing to do with personal achievements, but with an opposition to Maximinus Thrax, whose harsh fiscal policies had apparently turned the population against him.³³ But the function of opposition against Maximinus Thrax could just as well have been filled by Pupienus and Balbinus, so for what reason should the *plebs urbana* insist on Gordian III. The question of a Gordian lobby has already been discussed above and this may have played a role, but central here, is the divinisation of Gordian I and II carried out by the senate and the associated sacralisation of Gordian III's family tree. It seems almost like an oversight on the part of the senate to divinise the Gordians and not take them into account in the future appointment of emperors. However, one must bear in mind the familial situation of Gordian III., for he was not the son of Gordian II, but his nephew and thus a grandson of Gordian I.³⁴ Perhaps the faction of Pupienus and Balbinus therefore believed that they could bypass the nephew of Gordian II, for it should be assumed that the lobby of the Gordians was not considered too strong and one could reasonably suppose that the loyalties within the senate were sufficiently known during such central events. In contrast, it should be noted that the "finding" of Gordian III by the *plebs*, as described by Herodian,³⁵ was certainly no coincidence. The senate here perhaps did not sufficiently consider the receptivity of the population to the maintenance of dynastic continuity, especially after the official legitimisation and divinisation of the Gordians. The fact that the young Gordian III was subsequently "found" was certainly due to the efforts of a pro-Gordian faction. Herodian also makes the curious remark that the people had been duped (ἑσοφίσαντο) by presenting the young Gordian to the people. Whittaker notes that it does not seem clear in what way the people were duped here and suggests that this was due to the fact that his name was not yet Gordian at this point and he was only acclaimed as such.³⁶ However, this does not alter the fact that

³² Cf. SHA *Max.* 8, 6; BURIAN (1988: 239).

³³ Hdn. 7, 3, 5–6; SHA *Max.* 13, 5.

³⁴ KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 187).

³⁵ Hdn. 7, 10, 7–8.

³⁶ Hdn. 7, 10, 7–8; WHITTAKER (1970: 231, n. 2).

he was still the closest relative of the deceased emperors; in the absence of a party being duped, it is difficult to see any trickery in this. The subterfuge in question, in my opinion, could be understood from Herodian's point of view as referring to the Caesar's age, since he was only 12 years old and Herodian emphasises this ('ἦν τι παιδίον νήπιον [...]').³⁷ One might suppose that the ruse against the people was that Gordian's involvement consisted in the appointment of a child easily controlled by the two Augusti. One may assume that the classification as a ruse does not necessarily constitute a negative evaluation of it. At any rate, this must become clear when one considers the concluding words of Herodian's work, in which, in the context of the death of Pupienus and Balbinus, he contrasts their achievements and high birth with the rule of a child emperor.³⁸

The end of Pupienus and Balbinus came by the hands of the Praetorians, who feared that they would be disarmed and deprived of their position, as Septimius Severus had once done after their murder of Pertinax.³⁹ Herodian sees the main reason for their downfall as the waning of the *concordia* of the two Augusti, which had been so strongly advertised. In the context of their murder, he refers to an episode in which Balbinus interpreted the warning of the approaching Praetorians as a ruse of Pupienus, which ultimately resulted in both being murdered.⁴⁰

Gordian III as Augustus

After the death of the two Augusti, the Praetorians now raised the remaining Caesar to the rank of Augustus in May/June of the year 238.⁴¹ One of the earliest measures taken by the young emperor was the reversal of the *damnatio memoriae* of Alexander Severus and his divinisation. The literary sources are

³⁷ Hdn. 7, 10, 7.

³⁸ Hdn. 8, 8; WHITTAKER (1970: 310–311, n. 1): His dislike of very young emperors is already visible in the vitae of Commodus, Caracalla, Elagabal and Alexander Severus.

³⁹ Hdn. 8, 8, 2.

⁴⁰ Hdn. 8, 8, 4–8.

⁴¹ Hdn. 8, 8, 8.

basically silent on this, but in the *Codex Iustinianus* there is a mention of *divus* Alexander by Gordian.⁴² First and foremost, this is a conscious distancing from the supposed arbitrary tyranny of Maximinus with a restoration of the previously existing, Severan order.⁴³ The invocation of Alexander Severus, however, never reached the level of a genuine dynastic connection, but can rather be subsumed under a fundamental *pietas* motif of the emperor. The dynastic connection rather followed his real family ties, meaning that Gordian III officially showed himself as the successor of his divinised grandfather and uncle; this is expressed primarily on milestones, but absent in the coinage. In Gordian's case, the phrases *divi Gordiani nepos divi Gordiani sororis filius*⁴⁴ and *nepos divorum Gordianorum*⁴⁵ or merely *divi nepos* are preserved.⁴⁶ The greatest accumulation of these inscriptions is found in North Africa (Africa Proconsularis, Mauretania Caesariensis and Numidia),⁴⁷ probably due to the prominence of the older Gordians in this area. The exact specification of the filiation as *divi nepos* and *sororis filius* is interesting insofar as the official line takes into account the exact familial relationships. This means that the existing family connections must have been known to such an extent that Gordian could not simply call himself *divi filius*.⁴⁸ The importance of Gordian's descent, especially in the African provinces, becomes apparent not only through the milestones, but also through honorary inscriptions, which adopt the filiation several times. In fact, most of the inscriptions containing this phrase come from the above-mentioned provinces.⁴⁹ Apart from the large accumulation of these inscriptions in Africa, we find the filiation

⁴² Cod. Iust. 9, 51, 6.

⁴³ Cf. LORIoT (1975: 728–729).

⁴⁴ See e.g.: AE 2016, 1897 and AE 2015, 1819.

⁴⁵ CIL 08, 22593 in the Mauretania Caesariensis.

⁴⁶ AE 2012, 1712 in Cappadocia.

⁴⁷ HUTTNER (2008: 180).

⁴⁸ On the importance of divinisation for imperial legitimization see GESCHE (1978: 377–390).

⁴⁹ Inscription bearing the reference to Gordian III.'s divine ancestry in North Africa: Africa proconsularis: CIL VIII 25371; CIL VIII 922; CIL VIII 848; CIL VIII 11138; AE 2016, 1882; AE 1942/43, 40; CIL VIII 00907 = CIL VIII 11169; AE 2013, 2087 = AE 2015, 1819; Mauretania Caesariensis: AE 1973, 653; CIL VIII, 22586 (Gordian III. still as Caesar) Numidia: AE 1969/70, 708; AE 1969/70, 708.

on three milestones in Cappadocia,⁵⁰ on three more in Pontus and Bithynia, all in Nicomedia,⁵¹ as well as one on a building inscription in Sardinia.⁵² In Greek inscriptions we see this reference to Gordian's ancestors on two inscriptions at Kainepolis in the Peloponnese ('θεῶ[ν Γορδιανῶν υἱωνόν, Σε]βασ[τόν]')⁵³ and at Aigiai in Lycia et Pamphylia ('καὶ θεοῖς Γορδιανοῖς 8 προγόνοις τοῦ κυρίου Ἀυτοκράτορος Γορδιανοῦ Σεβ(αστοῦ)')⁵⁴. The former inscription is, however, largely reconstructed, especially concerning the relevant lines, and is therefore not compelling evidence, but the divine filiation seems to be indicated by the 'θεῶ' being still quite legible and can quite plausibly be interpreted in this manner. The latter inscription from Aigiai, however, can be seen in the context of coins which may have been minted there for Gordian I and II already during their reign, although there is also the possibility that these were minted as commemorative coins only under Gordian III.⁵⁵ It is difficult to determine how widespread this form is in Asia Minor compared to Africa, especially since we find far fewer inscriptions there, but what can be considered certain is the fact that the filiation played no role whatsoever in either the Western or the Danubian provinces.

In principle, this shows the elasticity of imperial self-portrayal, which takes local conditions into account and accordingly finds an echo in less official media, especially in North Africa. Certainly here, it was the case, that the elder Gordiani were prominent enough not to require an introduction via imperial messaging. It was rather the case that the emperor could build upon his well-known family ties within this geographical area.

In this context, the *Historia Augusta* notes in the Vita of Balbinus and Pupienus, as well as in that of Gordian III, the latter's supposed popularity with the people and the soldiers and provides the reason that his grandfa-

⁵⁰ RRMAM 3.3, 50a; RRMAM 3.3, 44; RRMAM 3.3, 40= AE 2012, 1712 (text restored on the basis of RRMAM 3.3, 44).

⁵¹ AE 1983, 898; RRMAM 2.1, 582; AE 1983, 899.

⁵² CASAGRANDE (2019: 2).

⁵³ IG 5.1 1242; generally the attribution to Gordian III is not in question since his full name is mentioned ahead of the filiation in question.

⁵⁴ SEG 32:1312.

⁵⁵ SALLET (1880: 140).

ther and uncle had fallen in Africa for the Roman people (and the senate) in opposition to Maximinus.⁵⁶ The author may be correct that this was in fact partly in line with public opinion. The relative inconspicuousness of the elder Gordiani's reign, which lasted barely three weeks, thus takes a back seat to the heroic death in confrontation with a "tyrant". This dynastic legitimacy of Gordian, which is based purely on this circumstance⁵⁷, is also never disputed in the literary sources. Eutropius only knows that Pupienus and Balbinus were of obscure origin (*'obscurissimo genere'*), but Gordian was of nobility (*'Gordianus nobilis'*). He explains Gordian's noble descent with the proclamation of the elder Gordian, whom, however, he describes as the father of Gordian III, the reason probably being a confusion with Gordian II.⁵⁸ We also see the *Historia Augusta* imbuing the family of the Gordiani with extended noble ancestry by dynastically linking Gordian I's father to the Gracchi and his mother to Trajan.⁵⁹ The short report of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* does not make any explicit assessment of Gordian's reign, but it does give the correct origin of the emperor.⁶⁰ Aurelius Victor's report summarises Gordian II and III in one person, the report on Gordian's sole rule is short and basically has a positive connotation, here too we again encounter Gordian's assassination by Philip.⁶¹

Of further interest is also the treatment of Gordian's immediate predecessors Pupienus and Balbinus, who in any case, unlike the older Gordians, are not divinised. It is also probably not the case that they were subject to a *damnatio memoriae*; their names are eradicated in isolated cases, but not consistently enough to assume a *damnatio memoriae*.⁶² The treatment of Pupienus and Balbinus is difficult to interpret, but it seems understandable not to base one's own legitimation on the predecessors murdered by the Praetorians, possibly to account for their preferences. On the other hand, the lack

⁵⁶ BRANDT (1996: 185); SHA *Gord* 22, 6; SHA *Max. et Balb.* 9.5.

⁵⁷ Hdn. 7, 10, 7–8; KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 187).

⁵⁸ Eutr. 9, 2, 1

⁵⁹ SHA *Gord.* 2.

⁶⁰ Epit. de Caes. 27.

⁶¹ Aur. Vict. 26–27.

⁶² KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 185).

of *damnatio* certainly indicates incomplete distancing from their reign, for it remains to be considered that it is a decidedly rare phenomenon to carry out neither divinisation nor *damnatio memoriae*.⁶³ One could speculate that there was a senatorial faction of supporters of the "senatorial emperors" whom the princeps intended to favour, but on the one hand there is no concrete evidence of such a faction, and on the other hand the question arises as to whether their appeasement would be satisfied with half measures. One indication of such a faction could be seen in the usurpation of Tullius Menophilus, whose name was eradicated on Moesian inscriptions, which is why such a faction seems at least conceivable.⁶⁴ Menophilus was presumably Moesian governor and he is secured as a member of the college of the *XXviri ex senatus consulto rei publicae curandae* under Pupienus and Balbinus, in which capacity he had also defended Aquileia together with Rutilius Pudens Crispinus.⁶⁵ However, none of this can be proven with sufficient certainty.

Moreover, a notable aspect of Gordian III's reign is the opening of the temple of Janus Geminus in the run-up to his Persian campaign in 242, which involved the symbolic commencement of martial activities.⁶⁶ This event is documented by Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, the *Historia Augusta* and Orosius, who cites Eutropius as a source.⁶⁷ Augustus had made use of the symbolic closing of the temple of Janus three times,⁶⁸ and after him only Vespasian, who had the temple closed in 72 after the end of the Jewish war. This news again comes from Orosius, who reproduces Tacitus.⁶⁹ If we assume that the event is historical, the measure represents first and foremost a charming anachronism, which was last carried out 170 years earlier. It speaks to a certain sense of tradition on the part of the government on the one hand and

⁶³ See KIENAST–ECK–HEIL (2017: 72; 206).

⁶⁴ AE 1902, 115; AE 1926, 99 (name erased); In FHG IV 186–187, Frg. 8: referred to as *δοῦξ μυσίας* [ACCENTS?]; GERHARDT–HARTMANN (2008: 1146); HÄCHLER (2019: n. 274; 601–603).

⁶⁵ SHA *Max.* 21, 6–22, 1; SHA *Max. et Balb.* 12, 2; Hdn. 8, 2, 5; HÄCHLER (2019: n. 274; 601–603).

⁶⁶ Regarding the historicity of the various closures of the temple see: SYME (1979: 188–212).

⁶⁷ Aur. Vict. 27, 7; Eutr. 9, 2, 2; SHA *Gord.* 26, 3; Oros. 7, 19, 4.

⁶⁸ SYME (1979: 188–205).

⁶⁹ Oros. 7, 3, 7; SYME (1979: 205).

demonstrates the function of the Persian War for it on the other. It was not so much a measure of crisis management, as was so often the case in the advancing third century, but an imperial expedition, ostentatiously for domestic as well as foreign policy purposes, with the traditional goal of conquering Ctesiphon.⁷⁰ In my view, the central theme of imperial self-portrayal was to be constructed from an extensively advertised Persian war, which Gordian could use throughout the empire. Gordian apparently had no central legitimising theme that he used empire-wide to define his rule. His divine descent, or rather the older Gordians seem to have been too little known outside North Africa, as demonstrated above, to propagate his rule on the basis of dynastic continuity, and since, unlike Maximinus before him and Philippus Arabs after him, he did not yet have an heir, dynastic stability aiming at the future could not be brought to bear either. In addition, Gordian's reign probably suffered from the fact that he was only 16 years old at the beginning of his reign, which was undoubtedly associated with a certain stigma, to which our literary sources often bear witness.⁷¹ In any case, a personally led campaign as an instrument of emancipation was a good way for Gordian to rid himself of the stigma associated with child emperors. In this respect, it makes sense to celebrate the beginning of the war with every available ritualistic pomp and to strive for a triumph along with a renewed closure of the temple of Janus. As a comparison, the Persian War of Iulian comes to mind, whose focus was also probably more on domestic rather than on foreign policy.⁷² It is also the case that Gordian is to some degree remembered in this manner, as one of victors over Persia, as laid out by Ammianus Marcellinus in a speech by the emperor Julian addressing his troops.⁷³

The *Agon Minerviae* in Rome, initiated by Gordian, should be seen in the same context. Like the opening of the temple of Janus, it was held immediately

⁷⁰ The conquest of Ctesiphon was one of the greatest achievements of Septimius Severus, see CAMPBELL (2005: 7).

⁷¹ Cf. SHA *Tac.* 6, 4–5.

⁷² WIRTH (1978: 461).

⁷³ Amm. Marc. 23, 16–17.

before the start of the Persian campaign, probably in June 242.⁷⁴ Louis Robert has convincingly argued that these Greek agon were games in honour of *Athena Promachos*, the deity who had helped the Athenians to victory at Marathon. They are thus to be seen explicitly in the context of the planned Persian campaign, with an archaising element that places it in the tradition of the Persian wars.⁷⁵ The sources for the Agon are, on the one hand, Aurelius Victor, who recognises here a continuation of the Neronian games of the year 60, while the so-called Chronograph of 354 explicitly refers to it as *Agon Minerviae*.⁷⁶

Conclusion

At first glance Gordian III.'s legitimation scheme seems to rely on his kinsmen Gordian I. and Gordian II., whilst completely ignoring his former co-rulers Pupienus and Balbinus. As indicated by the epigraphic evidence, it seems to be the case though, that Gordians divine ancestry was not as heavily advertised as one might think would be the case, rather this seems to have been concentrated first and foremost in the North African provinces, which makes sense considering the fact that the elder Gordian's usurpation originated there. Outside of a few inscriptions in Greece, Asia minor and Sardinia, the divine filiation is conspicuously absent, especially in the western part of the empire. This shows in my view two things, firstly that the emperor and his staff had a clear understanding of local sensibilities and knew exactly what messaging would be best received in different places. Secondly it shows more specifically for Gordian that his main legitimation strategy was not based in dynastic continuity. Rather Gordian was aiming to present himself as a conqueror when he ostentatiously prepared to defeat the Persians in a large-scale military campaign, a view that is also reproduced by later sources.

⁷⁴ Regarding chronology see: WALLNER (2004: 228).

⁷⁵ ROBERT (1970: 15–17; 27).

⁷⁶ Aur. Vict. 27, 7; Chron. Min. I, 147.

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