libellus non tam diserte quam fideliter scriptus?
Unreliable Narration in the *Historia Augusta**

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I. Introduction

"Ask an historian to explain something and they will usually tell you a story."[1] The general observation behind Geoffrey Roberts' pointed comment – that every historian, if he wants to communicate historical knowledge beyond mere facts, necessarily depends on narrative means – has stimulated the intense discussion of the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the last decades. This paper focuses on the special case of an author, who at first glance presents and explains his story in the traditional mode of historiography – or more precisely of imperial biography –, who at the second sight, however, apparently tells his story in such a way, that the reader is not able to believe in his reports or his explanations.

This applies to the so-called *Historia Augusta*, a collection of the lives of the Roman emperors from Hadrianus to Carinus, whose author retains his self-imposed anonymity to this day.[2] Despite this anonymity, a distinctive personality pervades the work, which Syme described as a 'rogue scholar', who aims not so much at communicating a fixed interpretation of events, but at entertaining his readers with his version of Roman history of the last cen-

[1] Cf. Roberts 2001, 3.
[2] For the recent attempts at an identification see below chapter II.

turies.[3] For this reason, Syme affiliated the *Historia Augusta* to the ancient historical novel.[4] In this paper I want to develop this characterisation of the text by exploring some of the devices employed by the author to destabilise the reader's confidence in the narrator and his story.

The numerous contradictions revealed by every reading of the text have traditionally been understood as a sign of the author's incompetence or his lack of skill in adapting the different sources.[5] Yet this can also be conceived as a deliberate strategy, aimed at producing a *frisson* of uncertainty in the reader and demanding a more active and discerning kind of reading. The concept of 'unreliable narration', originally developed by Wayne Booth[6] for the analysis of fictional texts, and adapted by Ansgar Nünning and others for the analysis of non-fictional texts,[7] is a useful framework within which to examine these techniques.

Furthermore I will show that the use of these devices can indeed be paralleled with the ancient novel. Above all, there are close parallels with the forms of narrative uncertainty in the *Aithiopika* of Heliodorus, written in the third or fourth century AD and therefore roughly contemporary with the *Historia Augusta*.[8] My analysis will highlight the importance of this kind of

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[3] Cf. esp. Syme 1968, 207: "The author of the HA was clever, but sly and silly, cynical and irresponsible; a rogue *grammaticus* alert for oddities of fact or language; …" and Syme 1971, 13: "This man is a kind of rogue scholar. Almost, one might say, a scholiast on a holiday from the routine of pedestrian tasks."

[4] Cf. esp. Syme 1968, 205: "Features of that genre in any age may be adduced for comparison. It is a mixture of fact and fiction. The opinions it reflects on state and society tend to be conventional, but not systematic and consistent: dramatic propriety brings in different points of view. Along with fabricated speeches and documents, bogus characters are required. One of them is the narrator himself, pretending to belong to an earlier age. … The author of the HA lets slip a number of hints to show that he does not expect to be taken seriously." and also Syme 1971, 263.284f. A similar approach had already been taken by Hohl 1914, esp. 706.

[5] According to largely missing sources for the years from 117 to 284 AD the central issue related to the *Historia Augusta* is, to what degree the information is historically reliable. Hence the method employed usually is strongly influenced by the tradition of source-criticism. This means, that individual passages are singled out and compared with a depiction of the same events in parallel sources. By contrast to this 'vertical' perspective, the present paper will aim at a continuous and 'horizontal' reading of the text, emphasising the intratextual references and thereby also the nature of the text as a work of literature.

[6] Cf. Booth 1961, esp. 158f.

[7] Cf. Nünning 1998, esp. 27f.

[8] For the discussion of the exact date of the *Aithiopika* cf. recapitulating Holzberg 2001, 140-142, who favours the second third of the third century AD. For the supposition that the author of the *Historia Augusta* was well acquainted with this novel, see Bowersock

presentation of events both for the function of narration in the *Historia Augusta* on the one hand, and for the relation of both genres in late antiquity on the other. I will focus on the *vita Aureliani* as a showcase example of such narrative slipperiness. Before examining this particular life, it will be helpful to recapitulate briefly the recent research done on the *Historia Augusta* as a whole.

II. The Historia Augusta – *the state of affairs*

The collection of biographies nowadays known as the *Historia Augusta*[9] poses more unresolved questions than nearly every other work of the ancient literature, including such basic elements as the original title of the work.[10] More relevant, however, are the following three questions: At which time has this text been written? Is it possible to identify its author? What is the purpose of this unique collection (e.g. is there any kind of bias)?

Prima facie the answers to at least the first two questions seem to be obvious: the biographies are written by six different persons at the time of the frequently addressed emperors Diocletian and Constantine I (ca. 293-330 AD).[11] This fits nicely with the content of the collection, which starts with Hadrian (117-138 AD) and ends with Carus and his sons (282-284/85 AD).[12] This masquerade worked quite well until the year 1889, when a famous paper by Hermann Dessau was published.[13] Dessau was not only able to show (by pointing to the numerous common features of the whole collection) that these six – otherwise completely unknown – persons are nothing more than ‚pseudonyms' used by the author of the *Historia Augusta*, but also to dem-

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1994a, 149-160, and Bowersock 1994b, 48-50, with reference to the description of the triumphs in HA *Aurel*. 33,4 and Hld. 10,25-27.

[9] The denomination stems from Isaac Casaubon, who in his Parisian edition (1603) coined the term *scriptores historiae augustae* (cf. HA Tac. 10,3).

[10] The title was perhaps *de vita principum* (cf. HA *trig. tyr.* 33,8; *Aurel*. 1,2; *Prob*. 2,7 and Thomson 2007).

[11] Their names are: Aelius Spartianus, Iulius Capitolinus, Vulcacius Gallicanus, Aelius Lampridius, Trebellius Pollio and Flavius Vopiscus from Syracuse.

[12] The text has been transmitted almost completely. However, there is a large *lacuna* from 244 to 253 AD (cf. Birley 1976 and den Hengst 1981, 70-72). The surprising absence of any kind of proem to the collection has given rise to the *communis opinio*, that a *praefatio* originally existed and was lost thereafter (cf. e.g. den Hengst 1981, 14-16 and the research report in Fündling 2006, I 10-14; for the opposing view of a deliberate start with Hadrian see Meckler 1996).

[13] Cf. Dessau 1889.

onstrate (by pointing to the large number of anachronisms of various kinds), that the collection must have been written about hundred years later. In spite of lively opposition to this approach in the following years, an overwhelming majority follows Dessau, regarding the *Historia Augusta* as the work of a single person, and believing in a considerably later date of composition, presumably at the turn from the fourth to the fifth century AD.[14]

This single author, however, remains nameless to this day, in spite of attempts to identify him with various historically attested persons belonging mainly to the milieu of the pagan aristocracy of the late fourth and early fifth century (most of all members of the family of the Symmachi-Nicomachi),[15] or to their socially inferior satellites, especially scholars or *grammatici*.[16] The location of the author in this cultural context is closely connected to the assumption that the *Historia Augusta* shows a pro-senatorial and/or anti-Christian tendency,[17] although a successful demonstration that the collection at large, not just isolated passages in it, is characterized by such political and/or religious bias is still lacking.[18]

The most plausible explanation for this enigma is, that the author – despite his affirmations to the contrary[19] – is not in the first place interested in delivering a fixed interpretation of the related history.[20] The purpose of the *Historia Augusta* will rather be similar to that of an historical novel: an in-

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[14] The most important opposite standpoint is the assumption, that the collection originally dates from the beginning of the 4th century AD and then underwent an editorial revision at the end of the same century. This view was first developed by Mommsen 1890 and was, in a modified way, taken up by e.g. Momigliano 1960 and Lippold 1998. A detailed research report – including the various attempts at computer-aided analysis, which ultimately failed to prove a single or multiple authorship – can be found in Fündling 2006, I 32-40.

[15] Especially Nicomachus Flavianus Iunior (*praefectus urbi Romae* 393/94) was put forward several times (cf. most recently Festy 2007 and the research report in Fündling 2006 I 29f.), but also his more prominent father, Nicomachus Flavianus Senior (ca. 334-394), was suggested (cf. Ratti 2007).

[16] The identification of the author as a scholar or a *grammaticus* (cf. Hohl 1920, 308; Syme 1968, 183-186. 198 and recapitulating Fündling 2006 I 30f.) aimed not least at separating him socially from the Roman aristocracy, whose members were regarded as too serious-minded for this a kind of literature; despite the outmoded argument, the label usefully indicates the degree of literary erudition regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* for this author.

[17] Cf. esp. Baynes 1926; Straub 1963; Johne 1976 and Scheithauer 1987, esp. 126f. 142.

[18] Cf. the critical assessment of the different approaches by Fündling 2006 I 47-58.

[19] Cf. esp. HA *trig. tyr*. 33,8; HA *Prob*. 2,6-2,7 and *Car*. 21,2-21,3.

[20] Cf. e.g. den Hengst 1981, 161: "I do not believe that the author intended to teach his readers any lesson, moral or otherwise."

terweaving of more-or-less accurate knowledge of events with a story that is entertaining for its content as well its presentation.

In what follows it will be assumed that the *Historia Augusta* has been written by a single author, aptly described as a kind of 'rogue scholar' (although not necessarily socially below the aristocracy) at the turn from the fourth to the fifth century AD. In order to identify the purpose and the intended readership of the collection, it will be fruitful to compare it to the contemporaneous genre of the ancient novel.

III. 'divum Aurelianum ... posteri nescient?' (HA Aurel. 1,5)

The life of the emperor Aurelian (270-275 AD) showcases the different techniques aimed at destabilizing the reader's confidence in the narrator and his story. This *vita* is allegedly written by a certain Flavius Vopiscus of Syracuse, whom the reader encounters as the last of the six fictitious authors, who from a narratological point of view can also be seen as different narrators.[21] The *vita Aureliani* starts with the longest and most famous *praefatio* in the *Historia Augusta*, in which Vopiscus introduces himself to the reader by giving an account of his trip in the carriage of the *praefectus urbi* Iunius Tiberianus. During the ride this – incidentally historically attested[22] – prefect requests that Vopiscus write a biography of the emperor Aurelian.[23]

In the course of this conversation, which – pointedly – takes place at the *Hilaria*, the Roman Feast of Laughter which was celebrated on 25 March, and involved carnevalesque elements such as jokes and masquerades,[24] the

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[21] Once found to be fictitious, these *personae* were for a long time almost entirely disregarded as unimportant (cf. e.g. Syme 1968, 176: „The names have been assigned without much thought. It is a gain to disregard them."). More recently there have been some attempts to integrate them once again into the interpretation of the work as a whole (cf. e.g. Birley 2002 and for Flavius Vopiscus now also Burgersdijk 2007, 100f.).

[22] A *praefectus urbi* with this name is actually attested twice (291/292 and 303/304 AD); most probably these were father and son (cf. Paschoud 1996, 63f.). There might have been an additional dedicatee addressed here (cf. *Aurel.* 43,1: *mi amice*), but the text as it is transmitted in the Codex Palatinus Latinus 899 allows no definite identification (cf. HA Aurel. 1,9: *parrumpiane* P; *parui Tiberiani* Peter; *parui mi Pi<ni>ane* Hohl; also Syme 1968, 192f.; Paschoud 1996, 67, and recently Burgersdijk 2007, 103f., who argues for Tiberianus).

[23] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 1,1-1,10. For the whole *praefatio* see den Hengst 1981, 94-110.

[24] Cf. Herodian 1,10,5: „On a fixed date in early spring each year the Romans celebrate a festival in honour of the mother of the gods. All the tokens of people's wealth and the treasures of the imperial house – things of marvellous material and workmanship – are paraded in honour of the goddess. Free licence is given to all kinds of revels; anyone can

prospective biographer and the prefect of the city discuss the truth-claims of historiography.[25] Tiberianus passes censure especially on Trebellius Pollio, none other than another of the fictitious authors of the *Historia Augusta*, whereas Vopiscus comes to the author's rescue declaring '*neminem scriptorem, quantum ad historiam pertinet, non aliquid esse mentitum*' ("there was no author, at least in the realm of history, who had not made some false statement"), and invoking an array of stellar witnesses for his bold thesis: Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, and Pompeius Trogus. Thereupon Tiberianus admits defeat: '*scribe, inquit, ut libet. securus, quod velis, dices. habiturus mendaciorum comites, quos historicae eloquentiae miramur auctores.*' ("Well then, write as you will. You will be free to write whatever you wish, since you will have as comrades in falsehood those authors whom we admire for the style of their histories.").[26]

With this quasi-official 'carte blanche', the biography of Aurelian begins. It seems that in the early fifth century AD knowledge about this emperor was more or less restricted to his most important military victories and his construction of Rome's great city wall, which was named after him; his biography therefore is a useful yardstick for measuring the manner in which the *Historia Augusta* deals with historical knowledge and ignorance.[27] This is true, to a greater or lesser extent, of all six lives attributed to Vopiscus, which form the last segment of the collection.[28] The exceptional position of these lives within the *Historia Augusta* has given rise to the suggestion that the person behind the pseudonym Vopiscus is after all distinct from the author of the remaining lives,[29] which dodges the hermeneutic challenge of

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disguise himself as any character he wants; there is no position so important or exclusive that someone cannot disguise himself in that dress and play the fool by concealing his true identity, making it difficult to tell the real person from the man in fancy dress." (translation by C.R. Whittaker, Herodian, Books I-IV, Cambridge Mass.-London: Harvard University Press 1969).

[25] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 2,1-2,2. For the allusions especially to the literature of the late republic see den Hengst 1981, 97f. (Cic. Brut. 42) and Burgersdijk 2007, 104f. (Nepos Att. 15,1).

[26] All translations of the *Historia Augusta* are taken from David Magie, Loeb Classical Library, 1932.

[27] For a critical evaluation of our knowledge about Aurelian today see esp. Watson 1999 and Sommer 2004, 58-64. A depiction of this emperor in a more popular scientific manner was recently presented by John F. White, who makes broad use of the *Historia Augusta* and defends this approach explicitly (cf. White 2005, esp. xvii-xxi).

[28] In addition to the *vita Aureliani* these are: the *vita Taciti*, the *vita Probi*, the so called *quadriga tyrannorum* and the collective biography of Carus and his sons.

[29] According to this theory it is also possible to identify the person behind Vopiscus (and sometimes Pollio) with the editor of the whole oeuvre, whose revision can be made re-

interpreting such evidently distinctive sections within the work. As an alternative, I propose that the increased intensity of certain aspects in the lives attributed to Vopiscus can be explained as purposeful augmentation, aimed at displaying to the reader the characteristic aspects of the whole work in an amplified way towards the end of the collection.[30] In my analysis of the *vita Aureliani* I will therefore single out the following three representative aspects: (1) the usage of fictitious documents, (2) the treatment of contradictory traditions, and (3) the multiple representation of the 'same' events.

1) *exstat epistula, quam ego ... fidei causa ... inserendam putavi*: fictitious documents of fictitious people

The utilization of certain fictitious elements is part of the vividness (ἐνάργεια) required from an ancient historian and therefore an integral part of the tradition of this genre. Even a historian like Thucydides, who rigorously contends to rely only on the historical truth, insofar as it can be discovered either from sources or autopsy, puts speeches into mouth of his historical persons, although the exact wording, as he himself concedes,[31] is of course his own. This applies *mutatis mutandis* also to biography, in which, however, speeches are not as important as letters of historical persons, which are supposed to illustrate the presented facts with their allegedly authentic wording. The *Historia Augusta*, however, at first glance exceeds the limit of fiction which was considered permissible in ancient historiography or biography, in two respects: by the mere quantity of allegedly authentic documents it contains, and by their often egregiously fictitious nature.[32]

The *vita Aureliani* occupies top position in both categories: it contains no fewer than 21 fictitious documents and also the plainest exposure of their fictitious nature.[33] These documents are at first used to establish the notoriously fabulous yet indispensable *omina imperii*: for this purpose the fictitious biographer refers in a distancing *praeteritio* to the authority of the –

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sponsible for the many of the especially irritating aspects of the collection (cf. Mommsen 1890, 270-273; Meißner 1993, 294; Lippold 1995, 194f., and den Hengst 2002, 193).

[30] Cf. esp. Syme 1968, 204f., and Syme 1971, 248-262.

[31] Cf. Thuc. 1,22,1-2.

[32] The study of these documents is dominated by the questions of source-criticism (cf. e.g. Barnes 1978 and Syme 1983, 98-108); for a more literary approach see esp. Szelest 1971 and den Hengst 1987.

[33] Cf. Paschoud 1996, 4f.

also very probably fictitious – historian Callicrates of Tyre.[34] In this way the
rather gory deeds of the young emperor are validated by (*inter alia*) child-
ren's songs, which are supposed to have been transmitted in their original
Latin wording by a certain – otherwise unknown – Theoclius, *Caesareano-
rum temporum scriptor*.[35] Aurelian's military career is documented by a
large number of letters, which Vopiscus claims to have found in the *libri
lintei*, which Tiberianus is said to have put at his disposal – a historical
source already regarded as suspect by the time of Livy.[36]

The climax of this series is marked by the detailed description of an au-
dience with the emperor Valerianus, in the course of which his designated
successor, Ulpius Crinitus, adopts Aurelian, thus making him third in the
succession for the throne. The alleged source for this is the verbatim record
of the audience by the – once again otherwise unattested – Acholius, *magis-
ter admissionum* of Valerianus.[37] The overtly fictitious details of this scena-
rio, the pseudo-authentic wording of the speeches, and – most of all – the
completely invented figure of Ulpius Crinitus, sketched with great care as
the descendant of Trajan,[38] conspire to expose the dubious truth-value of this
whole episode.

With the transmission of the supreme command against the Goths to
Aurelian (270 AD) we reach a new level of 'creative historiography': an
alleged letter by Claudius II is adduced as proof of this event, the document
introduced as follows: *exstat epistula, quam ego, ut soleo, fidei causa, immo
ut alio<s> annalium scriptores fecisse video, inserendam putavi*. ("There is
still in existence a letter, which, for the sake of accuracy, as is my wont, or
rather because I see that other writers of annals have done so, I have thought
I should insert.").[39] After the remarks in the *praefatio* about the trustworthi-
ness of historians, an introduction like this must be seen as an indication of
the fictitious nature of the following account. The conflicting reader res-
ponses generated by this introduction as well as by the apparently fictitious
content of the letter are exacerbated by the fact that the author not only here,

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[34] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 4,3-5,6; for Callicrates as an invention of the *Historia Augusta* see
Paschoud 1996, 72f.

[35] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 6,3-7,2.

[36] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 7,3-12,2. For the *libri lintei*, allegedly found in the *bibliotheca Ulpiana*,
see HA *Aurel*. 1,7-1,11; also Wiseman 1993, 124f.

[37] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 12,3-15,6. For the question whether this Acholius is supposed to be the
same person as the Acholius mentioned in the life of Alexander Severus (cf. HA *Alex*.
48,7; 64,5), see Paschoud 1996, 93f.

[38] Cf. Syme 1971, 100f. and Lippold 1995, 197f.

[39] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 17,1-17,4, esp. 17,1.

but at several other places as well praises the *fides historica* of his own work[40] and at the same time criticizes other writers for their lack of historical diligence.[41] Tellingly, this criticism of his – in a large part fictitious[42] – predecessors centers upon the very aspects which are eminently characteristic for the *Historia Augusta* itself. Such discrepancies between explicit assertion and implicit presentation, in addition to the obvious falsification of historical documents, constitute evidence for the phenomenon known as 'unreliable narration'.[43]

To sum up, the *vita Aureliani* – to an even greater extent than the rest of the collection – contains a whole series of only allegedly authentic historical documents (esp. letters, speeches, official records).[44] Admittedly in doing so the *Historia Augusta* employs a technique of presentation, which it has in common with ancient historiography and in which a certain degree of fiction for reasons of vividness is usually tolerated. However, the use of this technique in the *Historia Augusta* exceeds by far the normal limit accepted in the historiographical genre, due to the higher intensity of fictional documents cited, and to their more egregiously suspect nature, which is enhanced by quotation (allegedly) of their exact wording, and precise details about their condition and location; moreover, even whole persons are invented. It is

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[40] Cf. e.g. HA *trig. tyr*. 11,6 and 33,8, see also Burian 1977.

[41] Cf. e.g. den Hengst 1981, 44-46, and Scheithauer 1987, 139-143.

[42] For the impact of these inventions see Long 2002, 183: "The biographies do not merely reproduce good or bad information: they create. One fictitious creation is a bigger, livelier tradition of biographical writing than the third century actually supported. Another is a larger body of work by the authors supposedly represented within the *Historia Augusta* than the collection itself. Implicitly, if more authors were researching and composing biography, more people were also reading and engaged with emperors' lives: the *Historia Augusta* invents its own buzz of attention." For similar forms of 'pseudo-documentarism' in ancient literature see also Ní Mheallaigh 2008.

[43] Against the initial conception developed by Wayne Booth, which was centered upon the moral judgment of the narrated events (cf. Booth 1961, esp. 158f.), I will follow the enlargement as proposed by Ansgar Nünning (cf. Nünning 1998, esp. 27f.), which includes the following criteria: "explizite Widersprüche des Erzählers und andere interne Unstimmigkeiten innerhalb des narrativen Diskurses"; "Unstimmigkeiten zwischen den expliziten Fremdkommentaren des Erzählers über andere und seiner impliziten Charakterisierung bzw. unfreiwilligen Selbstentlarvung"; "multiperspektivische Auffächerung des Geschehens und Kontrastierung unterschiedlicher Versionen desselben Geschehens"; "Häufung von Leseranreden und bewußten Versuchen der Rezeptionslenkung durch den Erzähler"; "explizite, autoreferentielle, metanarrative Thematisierung der eigenen Glaubwürdigkeit (...)".

[44] This has of course been noted since long; for a representative selection see e.g. Syme 1971, 263-280.

especially this last aspect which draws the *Historia Augusta* into the vicinity
of the historical novel.

This liberty extends not only to the invention of minor characters; even
some of the emperors depicted in separate biographies are completely ficti-
tious.[45] If we furthermore consider that even the six narrators are invented by
the author, the result is a narrative arrangement which is very near to that of
the ancient novel, whose characters and narrators are usually likewise acting
in a historically more or less authentic setting.[46]

2) *sed hoc in medio relinquendum puto*: contradictory tradition and its ap-
    praisal

Discussion and evaluation of the contradictions between the different ac-
counts of important events in the sources or the works of the predecessors is
also among the features traditionally required of ancient historiography or
biography. At first glance the *vita Aureliani* appears to fulfill this expecta-
tion as well. Yet closer analysis reveals a range of significant deviations
from the common praxis in both genres. The reader's suspicions are raised
both by the unusually dense concentration of such discussions in itself, but
also by their uneven distribution: some of the events discussed in this way
are of central importance for the reign of Aurelian – e.g. his involvement in
the murder of the pretender Aureolus,[47] his eventual execution of his rela-
tives[48] or his reasons for sparing the inhabitants of Tyana.[49] However, the
application of this highly elaborate and dignified device to events of meager
importance denaturalizes the technique and renders it suspect.

Good examples of this are the question about the existence of an Indian
class of purple, which is discussed in great detail and with the aid of a letter
of the Persian king, allegedly rendered verbatim,[50] or the investigation into
Valerianus' precise reason for ordering Ulpius Crinitus to adopt Aurelian

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[45] The exact number of invented emperors especially among the so-called '*triginta tyran-
norum*' is hard to establish; but at least Saturninus (*trig. tyr.* 23), Trebellianus (*trig. tyr.*
26) and Censorinus (*trig. tyr.* 33) are fictitious. For a survey of the recent research on this
topic cf. Brandt 2006, esp. 19f.

[46] Cf. e.g. Treu 1984, 458; Holzberg 2001, 46f., and Morgan 2007, 554.

[47] Cf. HA *Aurel.* 16,1-16,3 and also HA *trig. tyr.* 11,1-11,7, esp. 11,5 (Aurelian is not men-
tioned).

[48] Cf. HA *Aurel.* 39,9.

[49] Cf. HA *Aurel.* 22,5-24,9.

[50] Cf. HA *Aurel.* 29,1-29,3.

(because of his military qualities or to compensate for his poverty).[51] Given that Crinitus himself is entirely an invention of the *Historia Augusta*, and this discussion relies *inter alia* on a verbatim reported speech, this latter case is particularly conspicuous, – an impression reinforced by the narrator's abrupt termination of the discussion with the formula: *sed hoc in medio relinquendum puto*.[52]

These words recall a formulation, which is frequently documented in Latin historiography since Claudius Quadrigarius and usually aims at emphasizing the cautious and skeptical method of the historian facing contradictory traditions.[53] To use this formulation in an obviously fictitious context raises a number of questions. Because it is associated with a deliberately undecided approach concerning the different versions or explanations of an event, it can only grasp at nothing in a context like this. Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* provides a good example of an analogous technique: the detailed description of the siege of Syene in book 9 is delivered in a historiographical manner,[54] to the extent that the narrator reports several different explanations for the rupture of a dam and even refuses – in an assumed skeptical air – to decide for any one of them.[55] This passage – at first glance surprising in a work of fiction – has been much discussed recently.

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[51] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 14,4-15,2, esp. 15,1-15,2: "It would be too long to include every detail in full. For Valerian expressed his gratitude to Crinitus, and the adoption was carried out in the required form. (15,2) I remember having read in some Greek book what I have thought I ought not to omit, namely, that Valerian commanded Crinitus to adopt Aurelian, chiefly for the reason that he was poor; but this question I think should be left undiscussed.".

[52] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 15,2. This formulation reappears (in a slightly modified form) twice more in the following sections: cf. HA *Aurel*. 15,6 and 16,3.

[53] Cf. FRH 14 F 25 (= Gell. 17,2,11): *nos in medium relinquemus*; and also Paschoud 1996, 104 (with further instances).

[54] Cf. Hld. 9,3-9,11; for the impact of this description on the dating of the novel cf. Holzberg 140f.

[55] Cf. Heliod. 9,8,2: "About midnight a section of the dike where the previous evening the Ethiopians had begun to dig an outlet ruptured without warning: it may be that the earth in that section had been piled up loosely and not properly tramped down, so that the base gave way as the water soaked into it; or those excavating the tunnel may have created an empty space into which the base of the dike could collapse: or possibly the workmen had left the place where they had started their digging somewhat lower than the rest of the dike, so that the water level rose during the night, causing a fresh influx, the water was able to find a way out through the place where the earth had been shoveled away, and, once that had happened, the channel grew deeper without anyone being aware of the fact; alternatively one might ascribe the event to divine intervention." (translation by J.R. Morgan, in: Bryan P. Reardon (ed.), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, University of California Press 1989, 542).

Scholars have so far mainly focused on the implications of this contrived ignorance for the reliability of the omniscient narrator, and for possible insights into the shared origin of novel and historiography.[56] But it is also possible to interpret the use of the same technique of representation in analogous contexts in Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* and in the *Historia Augusta* as an indication of a comprehensive interest at this time in such forms of narration, which reached across even the boundaries separating genres.

The treatment of the emperor's country of provenance in the *vita Aureliani* provides further evidence for the thesis that this 'enchantment of uncertainty' is a deliberately cultivated effect.[57] The protagonist's place of birth is an absolutely essential point in every biographical work in antiquity and of course features prominently also in the *Historia Augusta*.[58] All the more astonishing, then, that Vopiscus again refuses to opt for one of the different reported versions.[59] Instead, he converts the whole discussion into a general observation that the place of birth is of little importance to men who are renowned for their deeds, while hinting that Aurelian himself is to blame for the existence of this plurality of traditions: *et evenit quidem, ut de eorum virorum genitali solo nesciatur, qui humiliore loco et ipsi plerumque solum genitale confingunt, ut dent posteritati de locorum splendore fulgorem*. ("... and, indeed, it often comes to pass that we are ignorant of the birthplaces of those who, born in a humble position, frequently invent a birthplace for themselves, that they may give their descendants a glamour derived from the luster of the locality.").[60] This juxtaposition hints at a more radical disavowal of historiographical certainty underlying such authorial agnosticism.

To sum up, there are three significant aspects of the discussions of contradictory traditions in the *Historia Augusta*: the unusually large number of contradictory versions reported, their connection with obviously fictitious elements, and the narrator's emphatically skeptical treatment of them, which could be interpreted as a parody of the usual habits of historiography. These give rise to the suspicion that many of the contradictions in the *Historia Augusta* are artificially constructed, therefore also belonging to numerous fictions in this work.[61] Although this is fairly obvious for us today, the con-

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[56] Cf. e.g. Holzberg 2001, 137f., and Morgan 2004, 528f.

[57] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 3,1-3,5.

[58] For the importance of Rome as place of birth of an emperor in the *Historia Augusta* see Long 2002, 194-206.

[59] Cf. similarly HA *Car*. 4,4 and Cameron 2004, 144.

[60] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 3,2.

[61] For the impact of the fabrication of constructions cf. Long 2002, 184: "Its effect is to destabilize the authority of biography, self-reflexively."

temporary reader must have had his doubts much more often – for instance whenever an otherwise completely unknown historian is cited as authority for a variant version.[62] This artificially created uncertainty concerning the content is enhanced by the emphatically skeptical attitude of the narrator in the face of the presented 'facts'. Both techniques of presentation also contribute to further bewilderment of the reader regarding the reliability of the narrator.

3) *ut in vita eius docebitur*:[63] the multiple presentation of the 'same' events

The narration of several simultaneous events presents a challenge, which has to be negotiated in historiography as well as in the novel. With the exception of the rigorous annalistic kind of historiography, the preferred solution is usually the successive narration of more or less completed events relying on the help of previews and flashbacks. The author of the *Historia Augusta* has already made this decision by choosing to arrange his work as a collection of lives. This manner of presentation results in a focus on the life of the actual protagonist, in regard to which the historical events are narrated. And if this collection consists of a chronologically continuous series of Roman emperors, it is inevitable that several events multiply not only in terms of the frequency of narration, but also in terms of narrative point of view. The author of the *Historia Augusta*, however, has increased this impact significantly by his decision to narrate not only the lives of the 'regular' rulers, but also of the co-emperors and usurpers, attributing to each his own biography. These so-called 'secondary lives' constitute – as discussed already in the text itself[64] – an important innovation distinguishing the *Historia Augusta* from similar works in the biographical tradition.[65]

This technique of multiple presentation plays an important part as well in the life of Aurelian, as becomes clear, for example, by a comparison of the two accounts of Aurelian's triumph over Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra and usurper of the eastern Roman empire (267/68-272 AD). Whereas the *vita*

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[62] For similar strategies in some historiographical and mythographical works see Cameron 2004, 124-163.

[63] Cf. HA *Marc. Ant.* 19,5 (i.e. *vita Commodi*).

[64] Cf. esp. HA *Ael.* 1,1-1,3; *Ael.* 7,4-7,5; *Avid.* 3,1-3; *Pesc.* 1,1-2; 9,1-2; *Opil.* 1,1-1,5; *quadr. tyr.* 1,1-4.

[65] The denomination as 'sekundäre Biographien' or 'Nebenviten' goes back to Mommsen and was originally linked to his assumption of a secondary revision of the collection (cf. Mommsen 1890, esp. 243f.), but the term has since been more generally adopted, without implying a revision (cf. Syme 1971, 54-77).

Aureliani only briefly touches on her role in the otherwise detailed descrip-
tion of the triumphal procession,[66] her own biography places special empha-
sis on her personal fate.[67] This – by itself perhaps not surprising – shift of
attention is accompanied also by a changing opinion about the queen: whe-
reas she is judged to a large extent positively in her own biography, her cha-
racterization in the other lives is strongly influenced by the usual polemics
against a woman on the throne.[68]

Apart from these changes of focus and judgment in the case of Zenobia,
we also encounter variances on the level of the facts proper. The two ac-
counts of the death of Quintillus, the brother of Aurelian's predecessor
Claudius II, offer an illustrative example for this: according to the *vita Aure-
liani*, Quintillus committed suicide after the death of his brother, because the
soldiers decided to follow Aurelian instead of him.[69] The *vita Claudii*, in
contrast, confronts us with two other versions of the same event (murder by
the soldiers and natural death by illness), without any discussion or even
attempt at reconciliation of these contradictions.[70]

With the third example we reach new levels in the creation of contradic-
tions to provoke the reader's suspicions: in the *vita Aureliani* we learn in
passing about the rebellion of an – otherwise not attested – *Firmus quidam,
qui sibi Aegyptum sine insignibus imperii, quasi ut esset civitas libera, vindi-
cavit*. ("… a certain Firmus, who laid claim to Egypt, but without the im-
perial insignia and as though he purposed to make it into a free state.").[71] Yet

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[66] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 32,4-34,6, esp. 34,3: "And there came Zenobia, too, decked with jewels
and in golden chains, the weight of which was borne by others.".

[67] Cf. HA *trig. tyr*. 30,24-27: "And so she was led in triumph with such magnificence that
the Roman people had never seen a more splendid parade. For, in the first place, she was
adorned with gems so huge that she laboured under the weight of her ornaments; (25) for
it is said that this woman, courageous though she was, halted very frequently, saying that
she could not endure the load of her gems. (26) Furthermore, her feet were bound with
shackles of gold and her hands with golden fetters, and even on her neck she wore a
chain of gold, the weight of which was borne by a Persian buffoon. (27) Her life was
granted her by Aurelian, and they say that thereafter she lived with her children in the
manner of a Roman matron on an estate that had been presented to her at Tibur, which
even to this day is still called Zenobia, not far from the palace of Hadrian or from that
place which bears the name of Concha.".

[68] For our knowledge of Zenobia as an historical person see Sommer 2004, 60-62; for her
depiction in the *Historia Augusta* see Krause 2007.

[69] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 37,5-37,6.

[70] Cf. HA *Claud*. 12,5-12,6. For an analysis of these contradictions against the backdrop of
the assumption of a plurality of authors of the *Historia Augusta* see Lippold 1992, esp.
389f. and 394.

[71] Cf. HA *Aurel*. 32,2. For a detailed account of the rebellion see HA *quatt. tyr*. 3-6.

it is just this Firmus who becomes the object of a famous disputation in the *praefatio* of the so-called *quadriga tyrannorum* (a collection of the lives of four usurpators).[72]

There Flavius Vopiscus renders an argument, which he had had with four other – presumably altogether fictitious – historians about whether Firmus had offically proclaimed himself emperor or not. Astonishingly, Vopiscus here explicitly renounces his own former account: *ipse ego in Aureliani vita, priusquam de Firmo cuncta cognoscerem, Firmum non inter purpuratos habui, sed quasi quendam latronem; quod idcirco dixi, ne qui<s>, me oblitum aestimaret mei*. ("I myself, indeed, in my Life of Aurelian, before I learned the whole story of Firmus, thought of him not as one who had worn the purple, but only as a sort of brigand; and this I have stated here that no one may think that I am inconsistent.").[73] This acknowledgement of his own faults is in principle, of course, commendable, but approaches very near to parody in view of the fact that Vopiscus and his interlocutors, and also Firmus, the object of the discussion, are fictitious.[74] We have therefore reached an almost unsurpassable degree of uncertainty regarding the reliability of the narrator.

Whereas in this case one and the same person contradicts himself, in the other two examples we have also to deal with the change of the narrator: both the *vita Claudii* and the life of Zenobia are supposed to be written by that Trebellius Pollio, whom we already encountered in the *praefatio* of the *vita Aureliani*. But to the attentive reader, the actual identity of both allegedly distinct biographers is transparent in the text;[75] this is therefore just another move in the same game aimed at undermining the reliability of the narration. This technique of presentation is comparable to the use of secondary narrators in the novel, whose fictitious nature is suspected by the reader. Again the *Aithiopika* of Heliodorus offers a close parallel: the Egyptian priest Calasiris – acting as internal narrator for large sections of the first half

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[72] Cf. HA *quadr. tyr*. 2,1-2,3 and also e.g. den Hengst 1981, 140f. and Poignault 2001, esp. 255f.

[73] Cf. HA *quadr. tyr*. 2,3.

[74] The possible identifications of the usurper with other persons attested under this name are discussed and rejected by Caldwell / Gagos 2000.

[75] The identification emerges most notably from the prolepsis in HA *trig. tyr*. 31,8, a biography allegedly written by Trebellius Pollio, but which refers to a biography rendered under the name of Flavius Vopiscus; cf. Hohl 1912, esp. 481 (who first made this observation), and e.g. den Hengst 1995, 162f., but also against the by now established *communis opinio* Lippold 1995, esp. 194f.

of the novel – recounts his own previous history to different recipients, giv-
ing two versions, which contradict each other in one decisive point.[76]

Both the *Historia Augusta* and the *Aithiopika* therefore use this kind of
presentation to depict people and events from multiple angles, often provid-
ing multiple opinions as well, and usually without any advice about which
version is to be preferred, or how the resulting contradictions can be solved.
On the contrary; this decision is left to the reader, who is therefore encour-
aged into a more active kind of reading, which includes not only the detec-
tion of factual contradictions, but also the recognition of different narrative
techniques employed in this connection. The latter challenge is an integral
component of the literary appeal of both texts.[77]

IV. Conclusion: verum est nec dissimulare possum *(HA Tac. 7,5)*

After this inevitably sketchy tour through the *vita Aureliani*, it is worth tak-
ing a brief look at the biography of his successor Tacitus (275-276 AD). The
Historia Augusta reports that he was the first emperor for a long time to have
been elected by the senate. The decisive meeting of the senate, together with
the laudable but ultimately unsuccessful *recusatio* of the candidate, is ren-
dered in great detail.[78] But at the end of this description – covering no less
than three and a half Teubner-pages – we encounter the following words:
*hoc loco tacendum non est plerosque <in> litteras rettulisse Tacitum absen-
tem et in Campania positum principem nuncupatum: verum est nec dissimu-
lare possum.* ("At this point I must not leave it unmentioned that many writ-
ers have recorded that Tacitus, when named emperor, was absent and
residing in Campania; this is indeed true, and I cannot dissemble.").[79] Pas-
sages like this one illustrate with the utmost clarity that the *Historia Augusta*,
far from aiming to narrate a simple story in a straightforward way, repeated-
ly alerts the reader to the dangers of trusting too readily the version of the

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[76] The decisive point is Calasiris' journey (real or invented) to Meroe in Ethiopia and his
resulting knowledge about Charikleia's background story; cf. Winkler 1982; Baumbach
1997 and recapitulating Morgan 2004, 534f.

[77] For Heliodorus see Morgan 2004, 543: „If we are looking for a narratological study from
the ancient world, we are more likely to find it in Heliodorus' novel than anywhere else."
The *Historia Augusta* as a whole has so far not been analysed according to this question;
but for a similar interpretation of the biographies of Marcus Aurelius and his contempo-
raries see Pausch 2007.

[78] Cf. HA *Tac*. 3,1-7,4 (~ 800 words).

[79] Cf. HA *Tac*. 7,5.

historical events presented to him. With repeated reading of the work, such passages also affect the reception of other sections of the text which at first glance perhaps seem unsuspicious.

To recapitulate: the various strategies of representation which are showcased in the *vita Aureliani* – the use of fictitious documents, the deliberately undecided manner of dealing with contradictory versions and the multiple presentation of the 'same' events – cumulatively serve two purposes: to undermine the reader's certainty regarding the related events, and to entertain and stimulate the reader with a challenging narrative presentation that demands a more active manner of reading for its decoding.

Such 'polyphonic' presentations of a story from multiple angles are to be found in the ancient novel, too. Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* in particular contains a spectrum of analogous narrative techniques; this novel not only employs fictitious letters of fictitious persons, but also – in a work of fiction which is *per se* artificially fabricated – contradictory versions of its own story and at least one clear example of unreliable narration. But whereas in the novel, the uncertainty generated by these devices has consequences only for the reader's conjectures about the further plot, his judgment about the characters, or his insight into the narrative structure of the text, a historiographical text offers an additional level of meaning: it is possible to understand such a presentation of historical facts as an implied lesson about the limitations of historical knowledge itself, which aims at making the reader aware of the difficulties resulting from the inevitably linguistic form of all related knowledge about the past.

Apart from this additional 'meta-historiographical' level, however, we have observed an ample intersection in form and content between the novel and historiography in Late Antiquity, especially if this genre is conceived more broadly than the narrow scope of the Thucydidean-Tacitean tradition alone. If one takes historians like Herodian into account as well, it becomes plausible, that in this time there must have been a readership, which was interested in a special kind of prose literature across the boundaries of genres. The existence of an – at least partially – common readership in late antiquity for historiography and the novel would also help to explain the efforts made by the emperor Julian to separate both genres in his reading advice for the new pagan priests.[80] The works belonging to this category of

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[80] Cf. Julian, epist. 89, 301b-c: "But for us it will be appropriate to read such narratives [ἱστορίαι] as have been composed about deeds that have actually been done; but we must avoid all fictions in the form of narrative [ἐν ἱστορίας εἴδει] such as were circulated among men in the past, for instance tales whose theme is love, and generally speaking

literature are united by their content (fate of individual persons in an historical setting) as well as the manner of presentation (ambitious narrative, demanding an active, interrogative way of reading) and thus form a coherent group, depite their varying portions of historical truth and literary fiction.

The *Historia Augusta* has plenty to offer to such an readership, although the text in most of its programmatical statements affects to have quite the opposite goal, aligning itself with the most serious tradition of historiography and estimating its historical content far higher than its literary form. Taking into account, however, that its most pointed self-definition as a *libellus non tam diserte quam fideliter scriptus* is found – of all places – in the biography of the fictitious emperor Censorinus,[81] the *Historia Augusta* exposes its own disingenuousness, colluding with the sophisticated reader that it wants to be seen primarily as a literary work with historical contents. It was only through the subsequent loss of the many conventionally arranged historical works still available around the turn from the fourth to the fifth century AD that the *Historia Augusta* was – *faute de mieux* – mainly used as an historical source – and consequently criticised for not offering a reliable account.[82] Concentrating less on the reliability of the facts, and more on the techniques of presentation in this text, however, the *Historia Augusta* not only proves to be fascinating reading, but also offers insights relevant to our conception of both historiography and the novel in antiquity.

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everything of that sort." [translation by William Cave Wright, The Works of the Emperor Julian, vol. 2, London: Heinemann 1913], and e.g. Morgan 2007, 556, but see also Whitmarsh 2005, 607f., who doubts that this passage is about novels at all. For the general problems in figuring out the real and/or imagined readership of the ancient novels see also Bowie 1996.

[81] Cf. HA *trig. tyr.* 33,8: "Now bestow on any one you wish this little book, written not with elegance but with fidelity to truth [*da nunc cuivis libellum non tam diserte quam fideliter scriptum*]. Nor, in fact, do I seem to myself to have made any promise of literary style, but only of facts, for these little works which I have composed on the lives of the emperors I do not write down but only dictate, and I dictate them, indeed, with that speed, which, whether I promise aught of my own accord or you request it, you urge with such insistence that I have not even the opportunity of drawing breath."; see also HA *Prob.* 2,6-2,7 and *Car.* 21,2-21,3.

[82] For the complementary relationship of the *Historia Augusta* to the historiographical literature at the turn to the fifth century AD cf. Pausch 2007, 147-153.

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