

CASSIUS DIO AS A MILITARY HISTORIAN

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While Dio wrote a complete history of Rome from its earliest days to his own time, one facet of history which intrigued him was military affairs. A concentration on examples drawn primarily from Octavian's time because Dio's history of this period is extant, and from the Severan era because he was an active participant in many of those events providing the best means to gain an understanding of him as a military historian.

Cassius Dio Cocceianus was born in Nicaea about 163 or 164 A.D.;¹ his father was Cassius Apronianus, a Roman senator and consul, who served as governor of Cilicia and Dalmatia.

Educated as the son of a Roman senator, consul and provincial governor, Dio probably followed the *cursus honorum*.² His first office would have been that of *tribunus militum laticlavus*.³ Having served in military and minor magistracies, he would have become eligible for major posts after his election to the *quaestorship* and admission to the senate. He was praetor-designate for 194 and after serving in that office he probably became the praetorian governor of an eastern province between 197 and 202.⁴ From 202 until 208 he was in Rome, where he probably served as *consul suffectus*, perhaps 205 A.D.⁵ At some point, probably 208 A.D. with Septimius Severus' departure to Britain, he withdrew to Capua to write his history.⁶ Remaining at Capua or returning to Rome, he related events at Rome until he went to Caracalla's court at Nicomedia during the winter of 214/215.⁷ He returned to Rome in the spring of 215 A.D.⁸ He was appointed and served as *curator* (supervisor of finances) of Pergamum and Smyrna from 218 until 221 A.D.⁹

From Asia Dio went to Bithynia (probably Nicaea), where he fell sick, thus extending his period of absence from Rome. On recovering he went directly to his proconsular governorship in Africa. Upon his return to Rome, he was immediately appointed governor (imperial legate) of Dalmatia and Upper Pannonia.¹⁰

1. The date is disputed. Cary (Loeb), I, vii and Millar, *Study*, 13, present different views.

2. Dio, LIX, 9, 5. The first person in the statement may give a clue that he did follow the *cursus honorum*.

3. *OCD*, 923 and H. M. D. Parker, *The Roman Legions* (Oxford, 1928), 188-189.

4. F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1949) p. 17.

5. Dio, LXXVI, 16, 4. Millar, *Study*, 204-207, has an extensive discussion of Dio's first consulship. Schwartz, *PW*, proposes the view given here.

6. Dio, LXXVI, 2, 1.

7. Dio, LXXVII, 17-18; LXXVIII, 8, 4.

8. Dio, LXXVII, 20; LXXVIII, 1, 4-5 and Millar, *Study*, 22.

9. Dio, LXXIX, 7, 4; LXXIX, 18, 1-3; Millar, *Study*, 23 and *OCD*, 245.

10. Dio, LXXX, 1, 1-2, 1.

While he was in Upper Pannonia, he was made consul-designate for 229 A.D. The hostility of the Praetorian guard, based upon reports of his strictness as governor of Upper Pannonia, probably caused the emperor to allow him to serve his two month consulship outside Rome.¹¹ After a short visit to Campania, Dio pleaded ill health and returned to his home in Nicaea. He remained at home treating his leg ailment and completing his history until his death, sometime after 299 A.D.¹²

These events in Dio's life show him to have been a member of a provincial senatorial family who had risen to a place of rank and to have been knowledgeable in both political and military matters.

Possessing a background of governmental and military service, he was influenced by three other factors in writing his history—his attitude towards history, the availability of sources and his attitude toward the military.

His attitude toward history can best be seen in his stated and implied purposes when writing history. One purpose was to encourage Septimius Severus in his struggle for power, which was accomplished by a pamphlet on the dreams and portents favorable to Severus and which was later incorporated into his larger history.¹³ To present a lasting universal history of Rome was a second stated purpose, since the goddess Fortune enticed him to write such a history.¹⁴ The last stated purpose was to provide an accurate description of contemporary events.¹⁵

A close examination of Dio's stated purposes reveals three implied reasons. First was his effort to gain Septimius Severus' favor with the pamphlet on dreams and portents. Having found he had a talent for writing which pleased the emperor, he decided to continue for personal glory. Finally, Dio was a man of action and he thought he could write a more accurate account of events than others of his day, for he felt only a man of affairs could write accurate history.

Three characteristics mark his effort to fulfil his purposes. One is thoroughness, since he claimed to have read widely, collected material extensively (for ten years) and written after evaluation (for twelve years).¹⁶ Secondly, a popular writing style (Attic) stamps our author's work, for he wanted to write a history people would read.¹⁷ Nonetheless, accuracy was never to give way to popularization.¹⁸ Accuracy became Dio's watchword.

One can see that he was a man possessed with a desire to write a popular, but accurate, history of the Roman people from their beginning to his own day. His purpose of writing for personal glory and for personal safety did not deter him

11. Millar, *Study*, 24.

12. Dio, LXXX, 4, 2-5, 3.

13. Dio, LXXII, 23, 1-3.

14. Dio, LXXII, 23, 3-4.

15. Dio, LXXII, 18, 3-4.

16. Dio, I, 1, 1-2.

17. Dio, I, 1, 2.

18. Dio, LXVI, 35, 1; LXXII, 4, 2; LXXX, 1, 2-2, 1.

from thoroughness and accuracy. His extensive study of literary sources added to his own insight.

Quellenkritik in ancient works poses many problems. Since any effort to delve too deeply into this area would lead too far from the main topic of discussion, it will be necessary to offer some judgments upon the availability of sources to Dio and to comment on his use of them.¹⁹ A detailed study of these sources will lead to the conclusion that he followed the trends of historical writing current in the early third century. He depended chiefly upon literary sources amplified by some hearsay and eyewitness accounts. He appeared to be uncritical of some sources. Since he used Livy and Cicero, along with Thucydides as a model, he was acquainted with good historical analysis. His acceptance of Plutarch's folksy, moralistic approach should serve as a warning about the standards of historical methodology during the Severan era. Nevertheless, Dio's great desire to set down popular, but accurate, history leads the modern observer to the conclusion that he was as critical as he saw he had to be to please his readers.

His attitude toward and knowledge of military affairs manifests itself through a study of military policy, discipline, the power of the soldiers, military strategy and tactics and battle descriptions. He paid particular attention to these points when writing on military history.

Although he was undoubtedly influenced by Octavian's propaganda, his account of the reason the senate voted war against Cleopatra and not Antony showed he understood the influence of political policy upon military policy.²⁰ The soldiers would not have fought as readily with Octavian, if the declaration had been made against Antony. In his speech by Maecenas, favoring a standing army, Dio showed a keen awareness of the relation of the military to the state policy.²¹ Even if one recognized this as hindsight, he still realized the need for a military force. Augustus' adjustment of the terms of service for the soldiers, the discussion of the various legions, Augustus' shift in policy to cover Varus' defeat, Julianus' (Domitian's appointed commander) decree that soldiers inscribe their names and those of their centurion upon their shield, so that they might be more easily identified, Hadrian's reorganization of forts and Septimius Severus' use of six hundred trusted body guards are policies which drew Dio's approval.²² He could also be critical of military policy. He criticized Septimius Severus' change in policy for the selection of Praetorian guards, because he felt it had corrupted the youth of Italy and had filled Rome with uncouth soldiers.²³

Due to his practical experience as a governor in Upper Pannonia, Dio

19. For a detailed discussion of Dio's sources, see: Jesse Drew Harrington, *Cassius Dio: A Reexamination* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1970), Chapters II and III.

20. Dio, L, 6.

21. Dio, LII, 27-28.

22. Dio, LIV, 25, 5-6; LV, 23-25; LXVI, 23, 1-4; LXVII, 10, 1; LXIX, 9; LXXIII, 15, 3.

23. Dio, LXXIV, 2, 3-5.

recognized the importance of discipline in military life. He wrote, 'I commanded the soldiers with a strong hand'.²⁴ The men he chose to call good commanders, such as Marcellus, Caesar, Pompey, Calvinus, Agrippa, Decebalus and Trajan, were marked by courage to demand discipline of their men.²⁵ Moreover, he condemned as poor leaders those who failed to maintain discipline, such as Cornificus, Otho, Julianus and Caracalla.²⁶ At several places in his narrative, he commented on the laxity of the soldiers and the detrimental effects this had upon the state.²⁷

Even though he believed in a disciplined army, he recognized the power of the soldiers and recounted several examples of their misuse of power. Octavian had trouble with the soldiers; even his payment to them was misunderstood as bribery and served to encourage them to demand more.²⁸ The troops forced Brutus and Cassius to fight at Philippi,²⁹ and acted as arbiters between Octavian and Antony in 41 B.C.³⁰ These are but a few of the stories of the misuse of power by the soldiers.³¹ Of all the stories the one Dio felt to be the most disgusting was the soldiers' sale of the throne to the higher of two bidders, Sulpicianus and Julianus.³² He was never happy when the troops commanded their commanders.

His comments upon strategy and tactics are numerous and exhaustive. Because of the limitation of time, we shall confine ourselves to examples drawn from two major areas—Octavian's period and Dio's own lifetime. Octavian's fleet was so weakened by a storm in 38 B.C. that he commanded Agrippa to build a new fleet and to train men from all parts of Italy.³³ Agrippa built superior ships and trained the men who would be needed to defeat Octavian's enemies.³⁴ Dio appreciated strategy, even when employed by the barbarians against the Romans. His friend, Septimius Severus, fell for Caledonian strategy.³⁵ The enemy kept drawing Severus and his soldiers into the British swamps by placing sheep and cattle in front of them and by this means they killed many Roman soldiers. Dio criticized Septimius Severus' strategic lapse of failing to occupy the captured city of Ctesiphon in 198 A.D.³⁶

In his account of Antony against the Parthians and the Medes (36 B.C.), he

24. Dio, LXXX, 4, 2.

25. Dio, XV, 33; XLI, 55, 1-4; XLII, 52-55; XLVIII, 42, 2-3; LIV, 11, 2-5; LXVII, 6, 1; LXVIII, 8-14; LXVIII, 23.

26. Dio, XLIX, 7, 4-6; LXIV, 9, 2-3; LXXII, 8, 2-6; LXXIII, 16 and LXXVII, 13, 1.

27. Dio, LXV, 4, 4; LXV, 10, 224; LXXVIII, 26, 3-27, 4; LXXVIII, 28-29; LXXVIII, 38, 3-4.

28. Dio, XLVI, 46, 5-47, 1.

29. Dio, XLVII, 38, 4-39, 5.

30. Dio, XLVIII, 12.

31. Dio, LVII, 4, 1-5; LVII, 5, 1-6, 2; LXV, 9, 3; LXXII, 9, 1-10, 1; LXXIII, 9-10; LXXIII, 12.

32. Dio, LXXIII, 11.

33. Dio, XLVIII, 49-51.

34. Dio, XLIX, 1, 1-4.

35. Dio, LXXVI, 13.

36. Dio, LXXV, 9 and Grant, *Climax*, 23.

related in precise detail the Roman military formation, the *testudo*, and then commented on the tactical use of the latter.

They used it two ways: either they go against a garrisoned fort to attack, even causing many men to ascend its walls, or having been surrounded by archers, they all stoop down together (for even the horses have been taught to kneel or lie down), and by this their enemies think they are exhausted, and come near them, when suddenly the Romans arise and throw them into panic.³⁷

As a historian he even appreciated tactics which worked against the Romans. He told how Decebalus was afraid the Romans would attack his palace; he therefore cut trees and placed armor on the trunks to make it appear as if they were soldiers and thus fooled the Romans.³⁸

His battle descriptions have brought the historian the most criticism. These criticisms vary from Edward Schwartz and W. W. Tarn, who claim his battle descriptions as 'worthless', to Harold Mattingly, a more sympathetic critic, who says that Dio is 'not valued highly enough by modern historians'.³⁹ While our author presented many thorough battle descriptions, five examples will suffice to show his ability and skill.

On at least three occasions he wrote long accounts of naval battles which are more reminiscent of Thucydides than a factual record of the encounters. He explained the battle of Mylae (36 B.C.) between the forces of Sextus Pompey and Octavian in a long passage which included his opinions on its causes and the strength of each side, and a standardized account of the actual fighting. The long passage, so like Thucydides, concluded with the following: 'While the naval battle was going on Caesar, as soon as he knew Sextus had gone from Messana and the straits were destitute of guards, did not pass up this new thing of war, . . .'⁴⁰ Another passage reminiscent of Thucydides related the record of the contest of Artemisium (36 B.C.) between the same opponents. The formalized account began, 'Now as the signal agreed upon was made and the war-trumpet gave the signal, all the ships made battle near the land, and the land forces on both sides lined themselves along the banks, so that the spectacle was a most noteworthy one.'⁴¹ Dio's story of Septimius Severus' capture of Byzantium resembles Thucydides' account of the battle of Syracuse harbor.⁴² These passages suggest that Dio may have had a standardized file on sea battles, which was based upon Thucydides' work and constituted nothing more than a literary device which he could and did use on occasions.

37. Dio, XLIX, 25-31.

38. Dio, LXVII, 10, 3.

39. E. Schwartz, *PW*; W. W. Tarn, 'The Battle of Actium,' *JRS* XXI (1931), 182, and H. Mattingly, *Roman Imperial Civilization* (London, 1959), 253.

40. Dio, XLIX, 2, 1-5, 1 and Thucydides, III, 30.

41. Dio, XLIX, 9, 1-11, 1, and Thucydides, VII, 70-71.

42. Dio, LXXIV, 13-14, and Thucydides, VII, 71.

In 194 A.D. the army of Septimius Severus fought the troops of Niger at a pass called the 'Gates', near Issus.⁴³ Dio's description of the contest may serve as one example of his land battles. He listed Valerianus and Anullinus as Severus' commanders, while Niger was his own commander. Niger pitched camp on a well-fortified hill. When time for the battle came, Niger stationed his heavy-armed troops in the front line, next the javelin and stone-throwers and finally the archers behind all the other soldiers, because they could shoot over the heads of the others. The sea and the forest protected Niger's flanks, but he placed his baggage-carriers in the rear to stop any possible flight. Anullinus countered by placing his heavy-armed men in front, with his light-armed troops behind them, so that the archers could shoot over the heads of the front lines as they fought their way up the hill. At the same time he sent his cavalry with Valerianus to try to get around the forest. As the two sides approached, some of Severus' troops held their shields in front, while others formed a *testudo*. The battle remained undecided for a long time, but Niger's superior numbers and dispositions began to take their toll of Severus' troops. However, a driving rainstorm blew into the faces of Niger's men and into the backs of Severus' troops. Severus' army took this to be a sign of divine pleasure, while Niger's men interpreted it as divine displeasure and so they fled. Valerianus and the cavalry stopped this flight. Forced to fight Niger's troops broke formation and were beaten by Anullinus. Niger was beheaded and his followers were punished.

A battle about which Dio claimed to have personal knowledge was fought between Septimius Severus and Albinus at Lugdunum (197 A.D.) with 150 000 men on each side and with both leaders present.⁴⁴ (Severus had not been present at previous battles.) Although Albinus had a better background and education and had already beaten one of Severus' generals, Lupus, Septimius Severus was superior in warfare and military leadership. The battle at Lugdunum also showed the shift of fortune. Albinus' left wing was defeated and driven back to its camp, which was plundered. His right wing dug concealed trenches and pits in front of themselves. They went as far as these traps and hurled their javelins at long range. This caused Severus' men to pursue them and to fall into the traps. Those who tried to draw back did so rapidly and caused those behind them to fall into a ravine, where they were bombarded with many missiles and arrows. Severus brought the Praetorian guard to assist the troops, but they were almost destroyed, Severus barely escaping with his life. He tried to rally his fleeing men by joining them in the thick of battle. Some did turn to fight, but it was the arrival of the cavalry under Laetus, who had held back hoping each leader would kill the other so that he could step into power, that saved the day for Severus. Since many men were killed on both sides, Roman power was weakened. The scene was one of mutilation. Albinus was surrounded and

43. Dio, LXXIV, 7, 1-8, 3.

44. Dio, LXXV, 6-7.

committed suicide. The shift of fortune in this battle which brought Severus to the throne caused Dio to conclude:

Now, I am not relating what Severus wrote about it, but what actually occurred. The emperor after examining Albinus' body and fully feasting his eyes upon it, while giving free rein to his tongue also, ordered the body, except for the head, to be cast away. He sent the head to Rome to be exposed on a pole. This action showed clearly that he possessed none of the qualities of a good ruler. He alarmed both us and the populace more than ever by the orders he sent; because having overcome all armed opposition, he was venting upon the unarmed all the wrath he had felt toward them in the past.

Dio later changed his mind about Severus' qualifications to be emperor. From these accounts one must conclude that while he did not recount many details which fascinate modern military historians, he did write battle narratives which captured the attention of his readers.

What conclusions can be drawn about Dio as a military historian? He was a man of action trained in political and military matters. He wrote his history for popular consumption, and he recounted military affairs in a literary style which appealed to them. Policy, strategy, discipline and battle descriptions seemed to interest him most for they challenged his military knowledge and literary skill. He succeeded admirably and deserved the reward he felt the goddess Fortune had promised:

And this goddess encourages me toward the history when I become affected by timidity and by vexation toward it; and when I tire and would leave the work, she lures me back through dreams; and she gives good hopes to me concerning the future time that my history will remain and in no wise become obscure; she is the guardian of the course of my life, and because of this, I have dedicated myself to her.⁴⁵

45. Dio, LXXII, 23, 3-4.

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