RETHINKING RELIGION IN HERODIAN

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Herodian has remained a relatively unexamined source amongst classical scholars. Previous and current analysis surrounding the author has largely been focused on the thorny topic of Herodian’s sources or Quellenforschung, notably in the thesis of Kolb, who argues that Cassius Dio was the main source for Herodian’s account. Kolb’s hypothesis has rightly come under recent attack, and this paper shall not reiterate the lengthy rebuttals of others. But for many scholars Herodian remains a passive author, hopelessly led by his sources. This article is an attempt to rethink these conceptions, with an analysis of a part of Herodian’s work that has not been subject to detailed modern examination: his treatment of Roman religion. Specifically this paper will deal with what Whittaker has described as Herodian’s religious digressions, those instances in which Herodian leaves his historical narrative to describe religious festivals or cults. These can be found at 1.9.2 (Ludi Capitolini), 1.10.5 (the celebration of the Hilaria), 1.14.4 (account of the Palladium), 1.16.1 (the Saturnalia), 4.2.1 (apotheosis of the emperor Septimius Severus) and 5.3.3 (a description of the Emesene god Elagabal). Of these, I provide two of the briefer digressions in full; the description of the festival of the Ludi Capitolini and Herodian’s description of the Hilaria.

Ludi Capitolini

The following digression is included by Herodian when describing a plot being formed against the emperor Commodus:

But news of the plot unexpectedly leaked out at the festival the Romans celebrate in honour of Capitoline Jupiter. On this occasion there are all kinds of artistic shows and athletic contests, to see which the people flock to the capital. The emperor attends the festival and acts as judge jointly with the


3 For example, Rubin (n.2) 98 who argues that Herodian is unable to ignore the pro-Severan bias of some of his sources and thus is forced to negate this through rhetoric.
other members of the priestly colleagues, who are designated each year in rotation.

**Hilaria**

The following description is also provided when Herodian is describing a plot against Commodus:

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 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.

The modern world knows precious little about Herodian’s life and circumstances. We know only what Herodian himself tells us:

I have written a history of the events following the death of Marcus which I saw and heard in my lifetime. I had a personal share in some of these events during my imperial and public service.\(^4\)

It is commonly accepted from this passage that Herodian had a minor role in the imperial service.\(^5\) Internal textual evidence also makes it clear that the author was not from Italy; his native city has variously been suggested as Alexandria, Antioch, Greece or Asia Minor.\(^6\) Considering the scarcity of evidence, it is fair to say that Herodian ultimately remains unknown.

Also contentious, and intrinsically linked to religion, is the date Herodian published his history. Central to the debate is Herodian’s apparent preoccupation with religious myths, cults and festivals. Whittaker suggests the Saecular Games of AD 248 as a perfect occasion for the presentation of the work, since the preparation and celebration of these games would create an interest in religion, a milieu reflected in Herodian.\(^7\) German scholarship has acknowledged the possibility of publication under the emperor Philip, but

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\(^4\) Herodian 1.2.5. (All translations are those of C.R. Whittaker, *Herodian* [London 1969-1970].) For an examination and interpretation of this passage, see G. Alföldy, ‘Herodians Person’, *Ancient Society* 2 (1971) 204-33.

\(^5\) See Whittaker (n 4) xix ff.

\(^6\) This is evident from his comment that the Alps “are a very high range of mountains, far bigger than anything in our part of the world” On the various interpretations of this statement, see Whittaker (n 4) xxiv-xxviii.

\(^7\) Whittaker (n 4) xvii argues for publication under Philip as the strongest possibility.
also suggests Decius. For Alföldy especially, Herodian’s discussion of traditional Roman religious festivals, coupled with his examination of the evils that deviation from this heritage brings with the emperor Elagabalus, was most likely formed during the Christian persecution of Decius. Alföldy’s point is an important one, but the total absence of Christians from Herodian’s work would suggest that the religious practices of this group had not yet been brought to the attention of the wider Roman public. Indeed, the religious policy of Decius was in keeping with the religious conservatism that marked many emperors of the third century; there is no way of distinguishing that emperor’s policies specifically from others. Also questionable is the extent to which Herodian was ‘preoccupied’ with religion. Herodian does enjoy digressions on religious topoi, but these are not particularly numerous in the larger context of the author’s work, and do not always necessarily concern traditional Roman religions. Unless new evidence appears, anything beyond what Herodian tells us himself about his life or work remains speculation.

While religion has been central to dating Herodian, his descriptions of the religious practices of the third century have not yet been subject to a detailed study. Before this analysis continues though it is necessary to define both Herodian’s concept of ‘religion’, and his concept of ‘Roman’.

What constituted ‘religion’ for Herodian? As E.A. Judge has illustrated, the current modern concept of religion bears no correlation to the concept as it existed within the Roman Empire. No Greek or Latin term corresponds to this Western, Christianised word and thus we must attempt to regain the concept of ‘religion’ as the author himself saw it. As will be illustrated throughout this paper, for Herodian ‘religion’ was mainly composed of rituals and festivals. This in fact reflects the essence of religion in ancient

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9 See H.A. Pohlander, ‘The Religious Policy of Decius’, Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II 16.3 (1986) 1841 who argues that “Decius ... followed a religious policy which was in keeping with the conservative spirit of the age and with his own conservatism.”

10 For instance the discussion on the Aquileian deity of Beilinus (8 3 8).

Rome, where the fulfilment of rituals and the practice of festivals meant more than personal belief or piety.\textsuperscript{12}

Also important to this analysis is the realisation that Herodian almost always discusses ‘Roman’ religion. For Herodian, the ‘Romans’ celebrate the festival of Jupiter Capitolinus; it is normal ‘Roman’ ethos to deify emperors; the ‘Romans’ celebrate the festival of Magna Mater.\textsuperscript{13} Considering the prominence of this signifier in Herodian’s discourse, an examination of its meaning is warranted. A closer look at Herodian’s use of ‘Roman’ in his work indicates that it could have two different connotations. One of these occurs when Herodian’s narrative is focused on barbarian groups or foreign powers. In these sections of his work, ‘Roman’ is used with the meaning ‘not barbarian.’ An example of this can be seen in Herodian’s description of Alexander Severus’ Parthian war:

It should be explained that the barbarians do not have a paid army like the Romans, nor do they have permanent, standing garrisons, trained in military techniques.\textsuperscript{14}

A second sense of the word, however, emerges when Herodian describes events that take place inside the empire. Here Herodian uses ‘Roman’ to refer to the inhabitants of the city of Rome itself. When Septimius Severus approached Rome during the civil war of AD 193 “the Romans were absolutely terrified at his appearance.”\textsuperscript{15} So too in his description of Commodus’ entry into Rome Herodian describes how the emperor looked to the ‘Romans.’\textsuperscript{16} It is this latter meaning of the word which must be understood when approaching Herodian’s description of ‘Roman’ religion. An analysis of the instances where Herodian discusses religious practices of the ‘Romans’ shows that these all concern festivals or rituals which occur inside the city of Rome. Thus the festival of Capitoline Jupiter, the Hilaria, and the Saturnalia, described as ‘Roman’ festivals, are events that in Herodian’s narrative take place in Rome.\textsuperscript{17} This perhaps reflects the civic nature of religion in the Roman empire; with the exception of the cult of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] See Judge, ‘The Absence of Religion …’ (n.11) 297 for his distinction between the different characteristics of religion and philosophy
\item[13] Herodian 1.9.2, 1.10.5, 4.2.1
\item[14] Herodian 6.5.4. For other examples of this specific sense, see 3.9.1ff., 3.14.10, 4.10.1ff., 4.14.7ff., 6.6.5ff.
\item[15] Herodian 2.14.1
\item[16] Herodian 1.7.6. For other examples of ‘Roman’ specifically referring to incidents in Rome or the inhabitants of the city, see 1.11.3, 1.11.5, 1.12.5, 1.15.3, 1.16.3, 2.7.5, 2.8.2, 2.11.9, 2.15.2, 5.5.8, 8.2.4, 8.8.7
\item[17] Herodian 1.9.2, 1.10.5, 1.16.1
\end{footnotes}
emperor, rituals and festivals were performed at a local level. Herodian’s description of the religious practices of the ‘Romans’, and his authorial separation from his descriptions reminds us that the Roman Empire was not a homogeneous entity. Herodian himself was not from Rome, and as such he may not have identified strongly with the religious practices of another city, even his political capital.

This idea is especially interesting considering Herodian’s stated purpose in his digressions: in one of his early digressions on Magna Mater he justifies his lengthy explanation “in view of the lack of knowledge about this among some Greeks.” Whittaker found it impossible that Greeks should have no knowledge of Roman religion, and as such viewed these digressions as a rhetorical device. But considering the very local nature of religion perhaps those festivals and processions which took place in Rome may not have been widely known or understood in other parts of the empire. Herodian does not spend as much time explaining other features of Rome or her empire; the Roman mob is explained in a few lines, and the functions of officials are allocated a few words. Religion may have been an appropriate topos for discussion, but this does not necessarily mean that those outside Rome were particularly knowledgeable on the religious affairs of the city.

Herodian possesses a critical attitude to religion, from which he carefully separates himself in his narrative. There is distinct criticism of prognostications in 2.9.4 and the author’s cynicism is certainly present in his account of the siege of Aquileia. Here the image of the city’s god, Belinus, reportedly appeared in the sky in aid of the besieged polis. Herodian comments:

I am not sure whether the god really appeared to some of the men or whether it was their imagination. They were anxious to avoid the disgrace of being unable to resist a crowd of townsfolk that was numerically smaller, and wanted it to appear that they had been defeated by gods and not men. The unusualness of the incident makes anything credible.

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18 During this period this can be especially seen on the Roman provincial coin types, which traditionally depicted local deities and cults. See K.W. Harl, Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East AD 180-275 (Berkeley 1987) 52-70.
19 Herodian 1.11.1
20 Whittaker (n.4) xxix-xxx.
21 For the mob, Herodian 7.7.1; on the functions of the consuls who normally take over business when there is a crisis in succession, see 2.12.4.
22 Herodian 8.3.9. This comment is directly used by the author of the Historia Augusta in his account of The Two Maximini (22.1ff). Some of Herodian’s critical attitude might also be seen in his description of the deification of Septimius Severus (4.2.1), where he wryly notes
Herodian was also critical of Commodus and other emperors who aligned themselves with heroes or the divine. Commodus' association with Herakles was a sign of his mental derangement, while the superstitious nature of Caracalla leads directly to his downfall in Herodian's narrative. Herodian notes that Caracalla was anxious not only to know all human affairs, but also matters "concerning the gods and spirits." As a result, the emperor "made full use of every oracle and summoned wise men and astrologers and interpreters from every land; no one who offered this kind of sorcery escaped him." During this process an individual named Macrinus was forecast to assume to the throne, but the letter giving the prediction fell into Macrinus' hands; as a result Macrinus felt it expedient to stage a revolt, eventually becoming emperor. Yet seemingly in spite of his criticism, Herodian makes several digressions on religious topics. These digressions deserve close examination since not only do they highlight Heronian's conception of 'Roman' religion, but they also occur when the authority and power of the emperor are directly threatened.

The first digression made by Herodian is in relation to the festival of Jupiter Capitolinus. The first thing to be noticed is that Herodian emphasises that this was a festival that the 'Romans' celebrate and indeed here Herodian's history is set in the city of Rome. The digression on the festival by the historian serves to set the scene for a philosopher who eventually warns Commodus of a plot against him. Herodian next includes a digression on the Hilaria because, given the "free licence" and fancy dress of the festival, Maternus believed it the perfect opportunity to kill the emperor. Similarly, Herodian's description of the Saturnalia forms the backdrop for Commodus' successful assassination, while the Capitoline Games of AD 238 provide the date for the deaths of Maximus and Balbinus at the hands of the praetorians. Interestingly enough, where Herodian's account can be compared with that of Dio, these festivals are not mentioned in the latter. Dio records that Commodus received news of Perennius' treachery through rumour; the

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24 Herodian 4.12.3
25 Even here Herodian is critical, noting that either the spirits really had made a prediction, or otherwise someone else was involved in a scheme (4 12.5).
26 Herodian's date for this festival has aroused much criticism, yet it may be that the historian is correct. See Herodian 1.9.2 with Whittaker's (n 4) note.
27 See Herodian 1.9.3ff.
28 Herodian 1.10.5ff, 8.8.3.
29 Herodian 1.16.1ff.
Hilaria, Maternus’ plot or the Saturnalia are not recorded in his account of Commodus.\textsuperscript{30} Admittedly, the original text of Dio does not survive for this particular reign, and it may be that Xiphilinus chose not to include this information in his epitome.\textsuperscript{31} But it is evident from the surviving original of Dio that on many occasions there are differences between the two accounts, and the inclusion in Herodian of information not found in Dio suggests at the very least that Herodian was not dependent on Dio.\textsuperscript{32}

The placement of Herodian’s digressions on religion perhaps indicates a conscious or unconscious association of religion with a challenge to social norms or the status quo. The main digressions concerning religion occur when the authority of the emperor is undermined, either by assassination attempts, or through the actions of the emperor himself. For example, Herodian includes an explanation of the Temple of Peace and the statue of Pallas as part of his wider discussion of omens that accompanied Commodus’ corruption as emperor.\textsuperscript{33} After describing the corruption of Commodus, Herodian lists portents that coincided with the emperor’s unsavoury behaviour; one of these was a fire in the temple of Vesta that resulted in the statue of Pallas being exposed to view. Herodian provides an explanation of the inherent evil in this to his readers:

The image, reputedly brought from Troy by the Romans, is venerated and kept concealed. Our generation were the first ones to see it since it had been brought to Italy from Troy.\textsuperscript{34}

Similarly, a description of Pallas also accompanies Elagabalus’ religious excesses. While chronicling the emperor’s many marriages, Herodian notes that Elagabalus also made a mockery of divine marriage, by marrying his own local, Eastern deity to Pallas. At this stage, Herodian states “[this] statue is revered by the Romans but kept hidden out of sight and never moved since it came from Troy (apart from when the temple caught fire).”\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[30]{For Perennius, see Dio 73 11.1}
\footnotetext[31]{While we are dependent on the summary of Zonaras for books 1 to 21 of Dio’s work, after this stage his work declines in importance, since he only occasionally supplements what is in Xiphilinus (another epitomator) and in the original manuscript of Dio. Xiphilinus is the chief authority for books 61 to 80 of Dio, and was a monk living in Constantinople in the eleventh century.}
\footnotetext[32]{A clear example of this can be seen in the differing accounts of Herodian and Dio concerning Caracalla’s activities along the Danube. Contrast Herodian 4.7.2 (a positive assessment of his reception by the people of the area) against Dio 78.13.3ff (an account which is decidedly negative).}
\footnotetext[33]{Herodian 1.14.1-6}
\footnotetext[34]{Herodian 1.14.4}
\footnotetext[35]{Herodian 5.6.3}
\end{footnotes}
emperors’ actions transgressed those of societal and expected norms and as such undermined their claim to absolute power.

The only digression on religion that cannot be placed in this context is Herodian’s description of the Roman practice of apotheosis. This too is the only digression to have a comparable passage in Dio, and it is possible that Herodian was deliberately writing a parallel. Whittaker suggests the idea but no systematic study appears to have been performed. A close examination of the two passages suggests that Herodian does not merely copy Dio’s account. Herodian analyses the process in much more detail, in keeping with his purported purpose of explaining these rites to his uninformed audience. Both authors describe the Roman practice of apotheosis, Herodian describing the rites that were held for the emperor Septimius Severus in AD 211, while Dio/Xiphilinus describes the process that took place for the emperor Pertinax (AD 193).

While Dio/Xiphilinus begins his description of the deification of Pertinax from the events that occurred in the Roman forum, Herodian’s description of Septimius Severus’ apotheosis begins with the emperor’s death, followed by the burial of his body, the creation of the wax effigy, and the rites in which doctors pretend to be attending the ‘patient’. Both Dio/Xiphilinus and Herodian describe the rites that took place in the old forum and on the Campus Martius, but there are differences here also. Herodian describes two choirs, one of children and one of women; Dio tells of choruses of “boys and men”. Both give different descriptions of the funerary pyre, and while Dio reports that the consuls lit the pyre, Herodian records that it was the heir to the principate. Where there are these differences of fact, it can be safely assumed that Xiphilinus was reliant on Dio for his information, and thus the differences must have also existed between Herodian and the original text of his Bithynian contemporary. It is clear that Herodian is using another source for this account; even Kolb was unable to find any connection between the two authors here. These divergences may not necessarily reflect any inaccuracies on behalf of either Dio or Herodian, but perhaps echo the divergences of the rites of apotheosis themselves; each author writes about the deification of different individuals, and therefore a completely different

36 Herodian 4.2.1ff.
37 Dio 75.4.1-6
38 See Whittaker’s note (n.4) on Herodian 4.2.1
39 An account only available to us through Xiphilinus
40 Dio 75.4.2; Herodian 4.2.1-4.
41 Herodian 4.2.5; Dio 75.4.5.
42 Herodian 4.2.6ff.; Dio 75.5.3. In AD 211 the consuls were Pomponius Bassus and Q. Hedius Rufus Lollianus Gentianus.
event. It has been recently demonstrated that it is a mistake for the modern scholar to assume that rites and rituals remained static;\(^{43}\) the same event might have different 'stagings' and have had different meanings for different individuals in different years. This is abundantly demonstrated in Dio's other description of apotheosis, where the text of the author survives in the original (56.34). Not only does this description have different meaning and purpose for the author, providing him with the opportunity to give a summary of Augustus' life and achievements through the speech of Tiberius; but the description also hints that the procedure was not a mirror of the deification of Pertinax. Dio describes the funeral of Augustus:

Then came his funeral. There was a couch made of ivory and gold and adorned with coverings of purple and gold. In it his body was hidden, in a coffin down below; but a wax image of him in triumphal garb was visible. This image was borne from the palace by the officials elected for the following year, and another of gold from the senate-house, and still another upon a triumphal chariot. Behind these came the images of his ancestors and of his deceased relatives (except that of Caesar, because he had been numbered among the demigods) and those of other Romans who had been prominent in any way, beginning with Romulus himself. An image of Pompey the Great was also seen, and all the nations he had acquired, each represented by a likeness which bore some local characteristic, appeared in the procession.\(^{44}\)

Dio then provides a long speech given by Tiberius, before he describes the rest of the ceremony. The body was carried to the Campus Martius, where all the priests marched round it first; and then the knights, not only those belonging to the equestrian order but the others as well, and the infantry from the garrison ran round it; and they cast upon it all the triumphal decorations that any of them had ever received from him for any deed of valour. Next the centurions took torches, conformably to a decree of the senate, and lighted the pyre from beneath. So it was consumed, and an eagle released from it flew aloft, appearing to bear his spirit to heaven.\(^{45}\)

For Pertinax, the consuls or \(\omicron \upsilon \alpha \tau \omicron \omicron \iota \omicron \\ (hoi hypatoi)\) lit the funerary pyre (Dio 75.4.5), but in the description of Augustus' funeral (see above) it is the centurions or \(\epsilon \kappa \alpha \tau \omicron \nu \tau \alpha \rho \chi \omicron \iota \ (hekatonarchoi)\) who performed the deed. The differences within Dio himself should caution scholars against an unfavourable comparison between Dio and Herodian.


\(^{44}\) Dio 56 34 1ff.

\(^{45}\) Dio 56 42 2ff.
Indeed, it seems that in the description of the funerary pyre at least Herodian is essentially correct. His description matches coinage that was issued to commemorate the event. Herodian describes the pyre as decorated with "gold-embroidered drapery, ivory carvings and a variety of paintings" and describes five tiers, each smaller than the other, with the second tier possessing windows and doors. This description can be compared with RIC 191F (shown below).

The differences between the authors, however, do not exclude the possibility that Herodian took the idea or topos of emperor apotheosis from Dio; it is remarkable that two accounts of the process should occur so close in time to each other. The most logical conclusion is that Herodian knew of Dio's work even if he did not directly use it as a source.

How accurate are Herodian's religious digressions? Modern scholars have been decidedly sceptical about Herodian's religious knowledge. Given the lack of other reliable evidence that survives concerning these festivals it is difficult to be determinately negative about the little information Herodian imparts. Moreover, it is a fallacy to attempt to gauge the 'accuracy' of one author's religious perceptions and recollections. Dio's description of apotheosis illustrates that individual celebrations were subject to change, and

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46 Herodian 4.2.7
47 H. Mattingly et al (eds), Roman Imperial Coinage (London 1923-1994).
48 See D. Baharal, Victory of Propaganda The Dynastic Aspect of the Imperial Propaganda of the Severi: the literary and archaeological evidence AD 193-235, BAR Series 657 (Oxford 1996) 88 who concludes that Herodian's knowledge of "religions and different cults common throughout the empire was quite shallow". Zimmermann (n 8) 311 is also sceptical of the religious information that Herodian imparts.
therefore Herodian’s description cannot be faulted simply because it does not comply with one from another era. The paucity of literary evidence describing religious festivals also means that scholars should refrain from hasty evaluation. Herodian’s description of the Ludi Capitolini is only paralleled by two other authors, neither of whom wrote in the third century, and whose descriptions do not contradict our author’s report.\(^{50}\)

The same can be seen for Herodian’s description of the festival for Magna Mater, most commonly believed to be the Hilaria. Sceptical modern scholars have argued against identifying the festival Herodian describes as the Hilaria, since “there is no evidence for a procession on the Hilaria of the kind Herodian describes in his account of the plot.”\(^{51}\) Yet once again the fluidity of these festivals and cults needs to be taken into account. The Roman festivals in honour of Magna Mater changed under Claudian and most likely again under Antoninus Pius; Herodian was describing the festival of his day.\(^{52}\) Indeed, the few other surviving literary references make no mention of a festival; each author has his own concerns and focuses.\(^{53}\) Thus each author’s account is different, and the fact that Herodian’s account has no parallel should not mean that it is immediately discounted. Herodian’s description of the festival is provided at the beginning of this article, but after this the author goes on to give a history of the goddess: the different stories surrounding the origin of her statue and its introduction to Rome.

When the Roman state was growing powerful, it is said that an oracle announced to the Romans that their empire would endure and grow still greater if they brought the goddess of Pessinous to Rome. Whereupon they sent an embassy to the Phrygians asking for the statue. They gained their

\(^{50}\) Plutarch (Romulus 25) only notes the date of the festival, while Suetonius (Domitian 4) describes Domitian’s additions to it, once again illustrating the mutability of such events.

\(^{51}\) D. Fishwick, ‘The Cannophori and the March Festival of Magna Mater’, Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 97 (1966) 202 n.31. If we discount Herodian’s account then the first literary reference to the Hilaria is in the Historia Augusta, Alexander Severus 37.6. However, there is also evidence for a procession in honour of the Magna Mater found in a Pompeian fresco painting – whether this depicts the occasion of the Hilaria or not is impossible to determine. See M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, Religions of Rome vol 2 (Cambridge 1998) 133.

\(^{52}\) This transition has been the subject of numerous works. For a recent summary, see G. Thomas, ‘Magna Mater and Attis’, Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II 17.3 (1984) 1500-33, who notes that the changing activities are reflective of the fact that “religion is a dynamic institution for which one single phenomenological statement cannot suffice” (1503); and G.S. Gasparro, Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the cult of Cybele and Attis (Leiden 1985) 56-63.

\(^{53}\) For example, Julian, Or. 5.168D, 169D, 175A; Sallustius, Concerning the Gods and the Universe 4; Historia Augusta, Alexander Severus 37 6, Deified Aurelian 1.1.

\(^{54}\) Herodian 1.11.1ff.
request without difficulty by citing their kinship with the Phrygians and outlining how they were descendants of Aeneas the Phrygian. When the statue had been transported by ship and had reached the mouth of the River Tiber (which the Romans used to use as their harbour) some supernatural force made the vessel run aground. The Roman people turned out in force and spent a long time trying to tow the ship off but it was held fast by a sandbar and refused to sail upstream. Finally they brought to the scene the priestess of the goddess ... who was under a vow of chastity but was being charged with adultery. Since judgement was on the point of being passed on her, the priestess begged the people to allow the goddess of Pessinous to give the verdict. She took off her sash and threw it onto the prow of the ship with a prayer that, if she were still an innocent virgin, the ship would respond to her. When the ship with the sash tied to it followed her without hindrance, the Romans were full of awe at this manifestation of the goddess and the holiness of the maiden.  

Herodian’s account of the introduction of the cult from Phrygia, the marooned vessel, and the actions of the Vestal Virgin does not contradict the accounts of other Roman writers. Admittedly the author betrays no knowledge of the fact that the focus of these rites was Attis as seen in the Calendar of Philocalus. Yet once again Attis appears to be a late development in the cult, present in the calendar of 354, but not necessarily a large component of the festival in Herodian’s era. Moreover, Thomas’ study has suggested that only the funerary aspect of the rites concerned Attis; the celebration of the resurrection (of which the Hilaria was a part) alluded to the celebration of Cybele.  

There is no valid reason for dismissing Herodian’s testimony concerning the Hilaria; on the contrary, he provides an insight into a festival in which literary commentary is severely lacking.

Herodian’s religious digressions thus do not deserve the censure of modern scholarship. Indeed, in the present day modern authors have gone beyond simplistic tests of accuracy to a wider understanding of how the construction of religion in ancient accounts reflects the concerns of that author’s society. Accounts of religion and deities were framed inside an assumed context that readers understood. Ancient concerns about religion were not those of the present day. As Davies’ recent work has illustrated, ancient audiences were not concerned over the existence of particular gods, but how deities should be understood, the impact of the divine on everyday life, how gods should be

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55 Thomas (n 52) 1517 Photius also records that the Hilaria is celebrated on the order of the Mother of the Gods (Bibliotheca 345a).
56 No other ancient author describes the procession as Herodian does and his account should no longer be ignored in modern treatments of the cult (as it is, for example, by C.R. Phillips, ‘Hilaria’, in S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth [eds], Oxford Classical Dictionary [Oxford 3rd ed. 1996] 706 and Gasparro [n 52]).
placated and “the consequences of failing to do so.” Herodian’s concerns were not those of Dio; it is not Herodian’s accuracy that is the concern, but rather the use and construction of religion in his work and what this reflects about religion in the third century. Herodian’s history was by no means substandard; he is one of the few historians commended by the Byzantine scholar Photius. It has been established that Herodian’s account is not as shallow as is generally believed, and given that often Herodian is our only literary source for religious rites and festivals, his testimony should no longer be ignored in modern scholarship.

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58 “... different ages posed different questions and a similar issue might be addressed in a very different way as the time and context varied.” (Davies [n.57] 3 )

59 Photius Bibliotheca 99.

60 For instance, he provides the only description of the conical black stone of Emesa worshipped by Elagabalus (5.3.5)