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Oriente imperium: A Note on the Dating of the Historia Augusta

Ronald Syme famously called the *Historia Augusta* (hence HA) “the most enigmatic work that Antiquity has transmitted”.¹ While there might be a couple of worthy competitors, the HA is undoubtedly a puzzling book, which has provided scholars with plenty of issues for discussion for almost two centuries.² As is commonly known, the six different writers who allegedly authored the imperial biographies included in the HA claim to have composed them between the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, a chronology that was commonly accepted until 1889, when Dessau argued that the HA was written by a single author around the end of the fourth century. This reconstruction sparked an animated scholarly debate which lasted for almost a century, but today almost all agree on single authorship. However, the dating of HA is still controversial. A few scholars have recently argued for an early fifth-century date, but the majority prefers to opt for the late fourth century, possibly the 390s.³ A brief study of an unusual expression occurring in the life of Aurelian may contribute to the ongoing debate.

Flavius Volpiscus (or whoever wrote the biography of Aurelian) reports that the emperor decided to move against Zenobia after starting the construction of Rome’s walls. According to this source, the queen “ruled over the Eastern Empire in the name of her sons” (*filiorum nomine Orientale tenebat imperium*).⁴ The expression *Oriente imperium* may look obvious to modern readers, who are used to the concept of an “Eastern (Roman) Empire”, but it was highly uncommon in classical and late antique Latin, with as few as eleven/twelve occurrences up to the sixth century, which become only four/five if we limit the search to works written in or before the fifth century (see the Appendix).⁵

The uncertainty about the number of occurrences derives from the fact that *Oriente imperium* is possibly attested by the lives of the Thirty Tyrants as well, again in a passage dealing with Zenobia. Emperor Claudius (II) Gothicus is said to have allowed Zenobia to rule over the East because he was occupied with the campaigns against the Goths. Thus, he focused on the Balkan theatre, while Zenobia “kept guard over the eastern frontiers of the Empire / over the territories of the Eastern Empire” (*illa servante Orientalis finis imperii*).⁶ Unfortunately, the wording of this passage is uncertain, since the earliest surviving codex of the HA (Pal. Lat. 899, usually called P) reads *Oriente finis*, witnesses belonging to a class of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts (conventionally designated Σ) *Oriente fines*, while Hohl’s standard edition prefers *Oriente finis*.⁷

A quick look at the occurrences of *finis* / *fines* in the HA allows to settle the issue as far as this word is concerned. Leaving aside the passage under discussion, there are seven occurrences of *finis*, which is always used to indicate the end of a life or a war, whereas *fines* occurs three times, referring to lands, territories and borders.⁸ The *usus scribendi* indicates that P’s reading (*finis*) is not

1 Syme 1971, 1.

2 A good introduction to the vast bibliography on the HA up to the early 1990s is offered by Chastagnol 1994, ix–clxxviii. For an overview of more recent studies, see Savino 2017 and Shedd 2021.

3 For a summary of the scholarly discussion on the dating and authorship of the HA, see Kulikowski 2021.

4 *Aurelian*. 22.1. All Latin quotations from the HA are taken from Ernst Hohl’s Teubner edition unless stated otherwise. In the HA, *imperium* refers in most cases to “l’empire, considéré comme l’état romain”, as argued by Gaudemet 1970, 92.

5 On other occurrences of the adjective *Orientalis* in the HA, see Lessing 1901-1906, 415.

6 *Trig. Tyr.* 30.11. On Zenobia in the HA, see Burgersdijk 2004-2005.

7 Hohl 1965, 128. On the HA manuscript tradition, see most recently Dorfbauer 2020 and Stover 2020.

8 *Finis*: *Comm.* 7.1 (*sed et Cleandro dignus tandem vitae finis inpositus*), *Heliog.* 33.8 (*hic finis Antoninorum nomini*), *Maximin.* 24.1 (*hic finis Maximinorum fuit*), *Gord.* 23.1 (*hic finis belli intestini fuit*), *Valer.* 4.4 (*atque hic interim finis belli fuit Persici*), *Aurelian.* 37.1 (*hic finis Aureliano fuit, principi necessario magis quam bono*), *Car.* 18.3 (*hic trium principum fuit finis, Cari, Numeriani et Carini*). *Fines*: *Pert.* 9.4 (lands: *avaritiae suspicione privatus non*

correct, since the author(s) of the HA used *finis* only to refer to the end of a life / war, without employing an (unlikely) poetic accusative plural ending in *-is*.⁹ However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the original text read *Orientalis fines imperii* or *Orientalis fines imperii*. The former is attested by Σ, which is followed by Paschoud's edition,¹⁰ yet the latter is not only a *lectio difficilior*, but finds a parallel in the above-mentioned passage of the life of Aurelian. The issue has to be left open, although I would opt for *Orientalis fines imperii*.¹¹

Apart from the HA, the only other fifth-century works including this expression are Orosius' *History*, which was written in the late 410s,¹² the *Gallic Chronicle of 452*, which was in all likelihood finished in 452,¹³ and the so-called *Continuatio Ovetensis* of Prosper of Aquitaine, possibly written shortly after 451.¹⁴ *Orientalis imperium* surfaces then in the preface to the *Chronicle* of Marcellinus Comes (whose first version was circulated around 518/519), in Cassiodorus' *Chronicle* (finished in 519), in the *Tripartite History* (possibly written at Constantinople under the supervision of Cassiodorus between 544/545 and 551/552), in the so-called *Laterculus imperatorum ad Iustinum I* (completed after 527), in Jordanes' *Getica* (written by late 551 and based upon Cassiodorus' lost *Gothic History*) and in his *Romana* (finished shortly afterwards).¹⁵ The HA is therefore the earliest work including an occurrence (or possibly two occurrences) of this expression. If we take into consideration *Occidentale imperium*, we are faced by a very similar situation (see the Appendix), since it occurs five times up to the sixth century, starting from Orosius' *History* and the *Chronicle* of Prosper. It can be found in Cassiodorus' *Chronicle*, Marcellinus Comes' *Chronicle* and Jordanes' *Getica* as well.¹⁶

Both *Orientalis imperium* and *Occidentale imperium* are always referred to recent episodes of Roman history and indicate one of the two parts of the divided Roman Empire except for the HA, where the former is used to describe – rather anachronistically – the eastern regions controlled by Zenobia around 270-272. It is obvious that the author(s) who wrote the life of Aurelian and possibly the biographies of the Thirty Tyrants made use of terminology which is at odds with the political situation of the Roman world in the second half of the third century.¹⁷

Furthermore, the choice of *Orientalis imperium* instead of *Orientalis imperium* is striking, as the author of the life of Aurelian seems to rely upon a previous source for this passage. It could be Festus' *Breviarium (post mortem mariti feminea ditione Orientalis tenebat imperium)*, which was written between 369/370 and 375,¹⁸ or Jerome's *Chronicle (quae occiso Odenato marito Orientalis*

caruit, cum apud vada Sabatia oppressis fenore possessoribus latius suos tenderet fines), *Alex.* 45.2 (territories: *tacebantur secreta bellorum, itinerum autem dies publice proponebantur, ita ut edictum penderet ante menses duos, in quo scriptum esset: illa die, illa hora ab urbe sum exiturus et, si di voluerint, in prima mansione mansurus, deinde per ordinem mansiones, deinde stativae, deinde ubi annona esset accipienda, et id quidem eo usque quamdiu ad fines barbaricos veniretur*), *Car.* 9.1 (borders: *hanc ego epistulam idcirco indidi, quod plerique dicunt vim fati quandam esse, ut Romanus princeps Ctesifontem transire non possit, ideoque Carum fulmine absumptum, quod eos fines transgredi cuperet, qui fataliter constituti sunt*).

9 Such usage is quite widespread in e.g. Vergil, see Gaebel 1982.

10 Paschoud 2011, 38. See also Magie 1932, 137 (“she kept guard over the eastern frontier of the empire”), Agnes 1960, 447 (“mentre sapeva i confini orientali difesi da lei”), Roncoroni 1972, 717 (“mentre ella continuava a difendere i confini orientali”), Chastagnol 1994: 907 (“elle défendrait les frontières orientales de l’Empire”).

11 See also *ThLL* 9.2.974, 80.

12 *Oros. Hist.* 7.36.2; see Van Nuffelen 2012, 1.

13 *Chron. Gall. ad a. 452 post.* 11; see Kötter & Scardino 2017, 4.

14 *MGH, AA* 9, 489. See Van Nuffelen & Van Hoof 2020, 581-582.

15 Cassiod. *Chron.* 1328; Marcell. *Chron. praef.*, see Croke 2001, 27; Cassiod. *Hist. Trip.* 9.4 (titulus), see Zecchini 2019, 346, and Van Hoof & Van Nuffelen 2020, 195; *Laterculus imperatorum ad Iustinum I* (*MGH, AA* 13, 422, l. 36, and 423, l. 24); Iord. *Get.* 244 and *Rom.* 339, see most recently Van Nuffelen & Van Hoof 2020a, 9-13. For a more detailed comparison between these passages, see the Appendix.

16 See *Oros. Hist.* 7.37.1; *Prosp. Chron.* 1286; Cassiod. *Chron.* 1209; Marcell. *Chron. s.a.* 392.1; Iord. *Get.* 236.

17 Gaudemet 1970, 96: “l’expression d’*imperium Orientalis* est certainement anachronique et même pour la fin du IVE siècle inexacte. [...] Les rédacteurs, de l’Histoire Auguste se montrent donc ici plus sensibles aux réalités politiques de leur temps que respectueux des principes juridiques”. Anachronisms are by no means rare in the HA and have been investigated quite often, see e.g. Syme 1968, 112-113, more recently Rohrbacher 2016, 6-8, and Kulikowski 2021, 25-28.

18 *Ruf. Fest.* 24 (see Fele 2009, 25-30, for the dating). *Eutr.* 9.13 (*quae occiso Odenatho marito Orientem tenebat*)

tenebat imperium), which was composed around 380.¹⁹ If either of them is the source of the HA, as it may be indicated by the very similar wording of the passages, the dating of these works and the fact that there are no other occurrences of *Orientis / Orientale tenebat imperium* up to the end of the fourth century, then the author of the life of Aurelian changed *Orientis imperium* into *Orientale imperium*, a decision which may seem puzzling, since the expression *Orientis imperium* is attested several times before the fifth century, unlike *Orientale imperium*. It is used for instance by Titus Livius, Tacitus, Lactantius and Justin in his epitome of Pompeius Trogus.²⁰ Then, it occurs more than once in the *Historia Augusta* and in (possibly) contemporary or slightly later works.²¹ The choice made by the author of the life of Aurelian can be justified only if he adopted a term which was sufficiently widespread in the political communication of his times to be considered as a perfectly understandable synonym of *Orientis imperium*.²²

The occurrences of *Orientale imperium* may therefore indicate a later dating for the HA, or at least for the passage(s) where it appears, which could be chronologically closer to Orosius' *Histories* than to Festus' *Breviarium* or Jerome's *Chronicle*.²³ Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the author(s) of the HA first coined this expression in the 390s, yet it is difficult to explain why *Orientis imperium* had to be substituted with a couple of words without parallels in previous works. On the other hand, *Orientale imperium* and *Occidentale imperium* started to be used to define the two parts of the Roman Empire from the early fifth century onwards, thereby becoming an alternative to more traditional definitions. If the HA in its present form is the work of a single author, the occurrence(s) of *Orientale imperium* should at least be taken into consideration in the debate about its dating. If however we entertain the possibility of multiple authorship and/or a later revision,²⁴ then the passage(s) about Zenobia may offer some valuable clues.

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seems less likely to be the source.

19 Hier. *Chron.* a. 273. On the dating, see Kelly 1975, 33. This passage is the source of Prosp. *Chron.* 905 (MGH, AA 9, 442: *quae occiso Odinato marito Orientis tenebat imperium*) and possibly Iord. *Rom.* 291 (MGH, AA 5, 37: *quem uxor sua occisum Orientis tenebat imperium*); see also *Chron. Gall. a. 511*, 431 (MGH, AA 9, 642: *praesumentem Orientis imperium*).

20 Liv. 26.37.5 (*velut despondente fortuna Romanis imperium Orientis*), Tac. *Ann.* 6.34.3 (*Parthus imperium Orientis, claritudinem Arsacidarum contraque ignobilem Hiberum mercenario milite disserebat*), Lact. *Inst.* 1.11.31 (*regnum orbis ita partiti sortitique sunt, ut Orientis imperium Iovi cederet*), Iust. 41.1.1 (*Parthi, penes quos velut divisione orbis cum Romanis facta nunc Orientis imperium est*).

21 *Hist. Aug. Gall.* 1.1 and 10.1, *Trig. Tyr.* 30.8 (*cum sibi vel liberis suis Orientis servaret imperium*; a passage which is clearly related with *Aurelian.* 22.1), *Prob.* 18.4. See also e.g. Oros. *Hist.* 3.2.13, Rufin. *Hist.* 11.13, Sulp. Sev. *Dial.* 2.14.2, *Exc. Val.* 5. The most common alternative to designate the Eastern (and Western) Empire was *pars/partes Orientis* or *Occidentis*. See e.g. Paul. Pell. *Euch.* 271; Paul. Med. *Vit. Ambr.* 22.1; Vict. Vit. 3.68; *Cod. Theod.* 7.6.3, 12.1.158, 16.1.3, *Exc. Val.* 20, Eugipp. *Sev.* 1.1. Gaudemet 1970, 96, argues that "l'expression officielle à la fin du IVe siècle est celle de *pars Orientalis (Occidentalis)*, non pas celle d'*imperium Orientis*", but there are very few occurrences of these expressions, mostly after the fifth century and without any relations with the Roman Empire.

22 It is unlikely that *Orientale* is a scribal mistake for *Orientis*, since no such reading is attested in the manuscript tradition and a very similar expression occurs in the lives of the Thirty Tyrants, as it has been shown.

23 It would therefore corroborate the reconstruction outlined by Savino 2017, who argues for the 400s or 410s.

24 See e.g. Zecchini 1993, 47.

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Appendix: The occurrences of *Oriente imperium* and *Occidentale imperium* up to the sixth century.

<p><u>Oros. Hist. 7.37.1</u>: Interea cum a Theodosio imperatore seniore singulis potissimis infantum cura et disciplina utriusque palatii commissa esset, hoc est Rufino Orientalis aulae, Stiliconi Occidentalis imperii, quid uterque egerit, quidve agere conatus sit, exitus utriusque docuit.</p> <p><u>Prosp. Chron. 1286</u> (MGH, AA 9, 470): Theodosius Valentinianum consobrinum suum Caesarem facit et cum Augusta matre ad recipiendum Occidentale imperium.</p> <p><u>Cassiod. Chron. 1209</u> (MGH, AA 11, 155): His cons. Theodosius Valentinianum consobrinum Caesarem facit et cum Augusta matre ad recipiendum Occidentale imperium.</p> <p><u>Marcell. Chron. s.a. 392.1</u> (MGH, AA 11, 63): Arbogastes Valentiniano imperatore extincto et Eugenio Caesare facto innumeras invictasque copias undique in Gallias contraxit, Occidentale sibi imperium utpote vindicaturus.</p> <p><u>Iord. Get. 236</u> (MGH, AA 5, 118): Post quem iussu Marciani imperatoris Orientalis Maiurianus Occidentale suscepit imperium gubernandum.</p>	<p><u>Hist. Aug. Aurelian. 22.1</u>: contra Zenobiam, quae filiorum nomine Oriente tenebat imperium, iter flexit.</p> <p><u>Hist. Aug. Trig. Tyr. 30.11</u> [?]: illa servante Orientalis fines imperii.</p> <p><u>Oros. Hist. 7.36.2</u>: [...] Gildo comes, qui in initio regni eorum Africae praecerat, simul ut defunctum Theodosium comperit, sive (ut quidam ferunt) quadam permotus invidia Africam Orientalis imperii partibus iungere molitus est.</p> <p><u>Chron. Gall. ad a. 452 post. 11</u> (MGH, AA 9, 646): Maximus timens Orientalis imperii principem Theodosium cum Valentiniano foedus iniit.</p> <p><u>Prosp. Chron. cont. II</u> (MGH, AA 9, 489): Marcianus adsumit imperium Orientalem post Theodosium sororemque eius Pulceriam coniugem sumit.</p> <p><u>Cassiod. Chron. 1328</u> (MGH, AA 11, 159): Eodem anno Zeno occubuit, cui Anastasius in Orientali successit imperio.</p> <p><u>Cassiod. Hist. Trip. 9.4</u> (titulus): De Theodosii ducatu, et quomodo a Gratiano imperatore fuerit ordinatus et ad Oriente missus imperium, orthodoxis profuit, et rettudit hereticos.</p> <p><u>Marcell. Chron. praef.</u> (MGH, AA 11, 60): Ego vero vir clarissimus Marcellinus comes simplici dumtaxat computatione, Oriente tantum secutus imperium, per indictiones perque consules infra scriptos [...].</p> <p><u>Iord. Get. 244</u> (MGH, AA 5, 120-121): Gyzericus etenim Vandalorum rex suis eum muneribus ad ista committenda inlicuit, quatenus ipse Leonis vel Zenonis insidias, quas contra eum direxerant, praecaveret, egitque, ut Oriente imperium Ostrogothas, Hesperium Vesegothae vastarent.</p> <p><u>Iord. Rom. 339</u> (MGH, AA 5, 43-44): Sic quoque Leo Leonem iuniorem ex Ariagne filia nepotem suum in imperio ordinans Oriente anno regni sui sexto decimo obiit.</p> <p><u>Laterculus imperatorum ad Iustinum I</u> (MGH, AA 13, 422, l. 36): Theodosius iunior Oriente imperium tenuit per annos XLVIII.</p> <p><u>Laterculus imperatorum ad Iustinum I</u> (MGH, AA 13, 423, l. 24): Anastasius Oriente gubernans imperium regnavit annos XXVII menses duos.</p>
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