

# Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus

Translated with an introduction  
and commentary by  
H. W. BIRD



LIVERPOOL  
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Front cover drawing: Representation of a fourth-century Alamannic soldier.

Translated Texts for Historians  
Volume 17

LIBER DE CAESARIBUS  
OF  
SEXTUS AURELIUS VICTOR

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND COMMENTARY  
BY  
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Liverpool University Press

First published 1994 by  
Liverpool University Press  
PO Box 147, Liverpool, L69 3BX

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A British Library CIP Record is available  
ISBN 0 85323 218 0

Printed in the European Community by  
Bell & Bain Limited, Glasgow

has the concern for the city of Rome diminished day by day.<sup>4</sup> In fact they say that this was announced at that time by prodigies and portents, one of which I would like to mention briefly. For when some victims were being sacrificed according to pontifical law, female genitals appeared on a hog's abdomen. This the soothsayers interpreted to predict the decadence of later generations and the aggravation of vices. The emperor Philip, because he thought that this would prove false and then again because he had caught sight of a young boy prostitute resembling his son as he happened to walk past him, took very honourable measures to abolish the practice of male prostitution. Nevertheless it still survives, for if circumstances are altered it is practised even more outrageously as long as men seek more avidly whatever is dangerous and forbidden.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore the Etruscan arts had predicted something quite different, since they asserted that when good men for the most part lie helpless, the most effeminate men would be happy. But I, for one, categorically believe that they were wrong. The fact is that however successfully everything turns out, who can still be happy if he has lost his sense of decency? Yet if that has been retained everything else is bearable.<sup>6</sup> After completing these projects he left his son in the city and set out in person against Decius, even though he was physically weak because of his age. He fell at Verona after the defeat and loss of his army.<sup>7</sup> When news of this had reached Rome his son was killed in the praetorian camp. They had enjoyed five years of power.<sup>8</sup>

29. However Decius, who was born in a village near Sirmium, had conspired to gain the imperial power by virtue of his military position<sup>1</sup> and, overjoyed at the death of his enemies,<sup>2</sup> had appointed his son, named Etruscus, as Caesar.<sup>3</sup> He immediately sent the latter ahead to Illyricum while he remained behind at Rome for a time in order to dedicate the monuments which he had constructed.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime the head of Jotapianus was suddenly brought to him, as is the custom. He, boasting of his descent from Alexander, had been

killed on the authority of the soldiers as he was attempting a rebellion in Syria,<sup>5</sup> and at the same time during those very days the supreme power was offered to Lucius Priscus, who was ruling Macedonia as governor, as a result of an incursion of the Goths, after they had plundered most of Thrace and penetrated that far.<sup>6</sup> When Decius had left Rome as quickly as he could for that reason Julius Valens seized the imperial power at the urgent insistence of the common people.<sup>7</sup> However both were soon killed since the nobility had decreed Priscus an enemy of the state.<sup>8</sup> The Decii, while pursuing the barbarians across the Danube, died through treachery at Abrittus after reigning two years.<sup>9</sup> But very many report that the deaths of the Decii were honourable; that, in fact, the son had fallen in battle while pressing an attack too boldly; that the father, however, while his dejected soldiers were saying many things to console their emperor, had strenuously asserted that the loss of one soldier seemed to him too little to matter. And so he resumed the war and died in a similar manner while fighting vigorously.<sup>10</sup>

30. When the senators had learned of this they voted the rank of Augustus to Gallus and Hostilianus and appointed Volusianus, the son of Gallus, as Caesar.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter a plague broke out and while it raged ever more violently Hostilianus died but Gallus and Volusianus won popular favour because they meticulously and assiduously arranged the burials of all the poorest folk.<sup>2</sup>
31. Consequently while they were kept at Rome Aemilius Aemilianus seized the supreme power by suborning the soldiers.<sup>1</sup> They set out to attack him but were cut down at Interamna by their own soldiers who hoped for a greater reward from Aemilius, to whom victory came without labour or losses,<sup>2</sup> and also because they lacked restraint through their self-indulgence and wantonness and had perverted the duties they owed for the benefits they received.<sup>3</sup> While all of these were in power, however, two years elapsed.<sup>4</sup> For Aemilianus,

too, ruled moderately for three months before being carried off by sickness and although at first the senators had declared him an enemy, afterwards, when his predecessor had died, in the face of circumstances, as is usual, they acclaimed him Augustus.<sup>5</sup>

32. On the other hand the soldiers, who had been gathered from all sectors and were detained in Raetia because of the impending war, bestowed the empire on Licinius Valerianus.<sup>1</sup> He, although he was of a reasonably distinguished family, was nevertheless pursuing a military career, as was still the custom at that time.<sup>2</sup> The senate made his son, Gallienus, Caesar, and straightway, though it was high summer, the Tiber overflowed as if it were in spate.<sup>3</sup> Wise men predicted disaster for the state on account of the changeable nature of the young man, because he had been summoned and had come from Etruria, from where the aforementioned river flows.<sup>4</sup> This, in fact, immediately occurred.<sup>5</sup> For when his father was engaged in an indecisive and prolonged war in Mesopotamia, he was captured through the treachery of the Persian king, whose name was Sapor, cruelly mutilated and died in the sixth year of his reign while still a robust old man.<sup>6</sup>
33. At the same time, although he was strenuously attempting to drive the Germans out of Gaul, Licinius Gallienus hurriedly descended on Illyricum.<sup>1</sup> There at Mursa he defeated Ingebus, the governor of Pannonia, who had conceived a desire to be emperor after learning of Valerian's disaster,<sup>2</sup> and subsequently Regalianus, who had renewed the war after rallying the soldiers who had survived the disaster at Mursa.<sup>3</sup> Since his suppression of these was fortunate and beyond what he had prayed for, like men who are lucky he became excessively careless and together with his son, Saloninus, on whom he had conferred the rank of Caesar, he shipwrecked the Roman state, so to speak, to such a degree<sup>4</sup> that the Goths freely penetrated Thrace and occupied Macedonia, Achaia and the border regions of Asia, the Parthians seized Mesopotamia and bandits,

or more accurately a woman, controlled the east. At that time, too, a force of Alamanni took possession of Italy while tribes of Franks pillaged Gaul and occupied Spain, where they ravaged and almost destroyed the town of Tarraconensis, and some, after conveniently acquiring ships, penetrated as far as Africa. Even the territories across the Danube, which Trajan had secured, were lost.<sup>5</sup> Thus throughout the whole world the mightiest things were mixed with the small, the lowest with the highest, as if by winds violently gusting from all directions.<sup>6</sup> And at the same time the plague was ravaging Rome, which often occurs in times of unbearable anxieties and spiritual despair.<sup>7</sup> During these events Gallienus himself frequented taverns and eating-houses, kept up his friendships with pimps and drunkards and abandoned himself to his wife, Salonina, and to his shameful love-affair with the daughter of Attalus, a king of the Germans, whose name was Pipa.<sup>8</sup> For this reason civil wars also broke out which were far more frightful.<sup>9</sup> For first of all Postumus, who happened to be in charge of the barbarians in Gaul, seized the imperial power.<sup>10</sup> After he had driven off a horde of Germans he was involved in a war with Laelianus, whom he routed just as successfully, but he then perished in a revolt of his own men supposedly since he had refused to allow them, despite their insistence, to plunder the inhabitants of Mainz because they had supported Laelianus.<sup>11</sup> At his death, therefore, Marius, a former blacksmith who was not even then particularly well-known to the military, seized power.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly everything had degenerated so far that imperial powers were bestowed on such individuals and the dignity of all noble qualities was an object of derision. Indeed it was because of this that the joke was told that it was hardly surprising if a Marius was attempting to restore the Roman state, since a Marius of the same trade and the founder of the family and name had consolidated it.<sup>13</sup> When he had been murdered after two days Victorinus was chosen, who equalled Postumus in military expertise but was a compulsive lecher. Although he restrained himself at the beginning, he forcibly violated very many women and after a