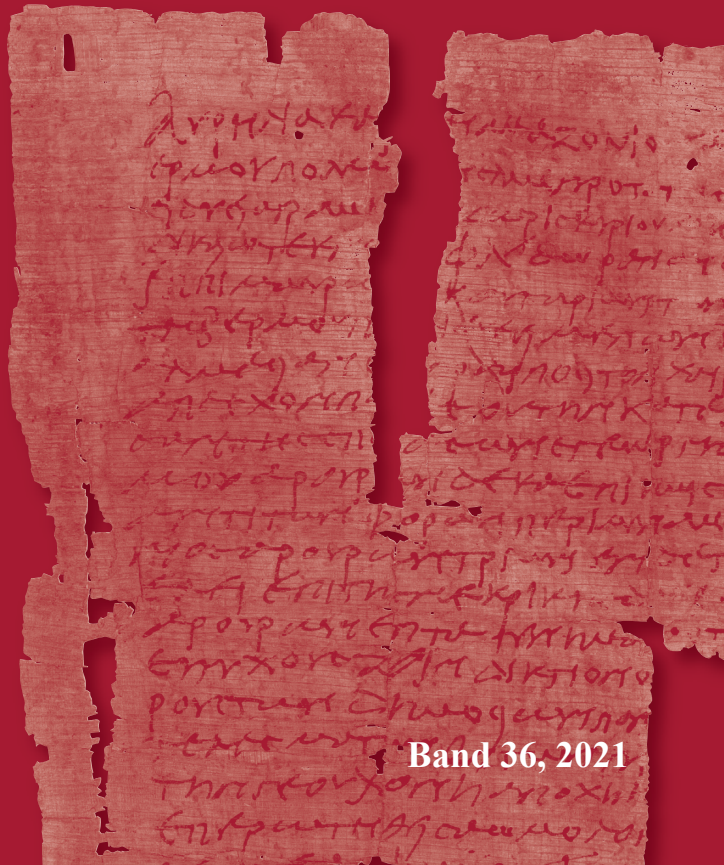


TYCHE

Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte
Papyrologie und Epigraphik



HOLZHAUSEN

Der Verlag

Band 36, 2021

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NIKOLAOS GONIS

Caracalla's Titulature, Geta's Murder, and Egypt Some Chronological Considerations

In the wake of the death of Septimius Severus on 4 February 211, Caracalla assumed the victory title *Parthicus maximus* and his father's surname Severus. This article sets out to examine how these changes in Caracalla's titulature are reflected in papyri from Egypt, and what the papyri in their turn may tell us about the drama that took place in Rome. The issue of the knowledge in Egypt of Geta's death will also be addressed.

I

Inscriptions and papyri tell us that in the first few months after Severus' death Caracalla and Geta bore only one victory title: they were both styled *Britannici maximi* / Βρεταννικοὶ μέγιστοι.¹ This soon changed: a handful of inscriptions datable to 211 show Caracalla with the titles *Britannicus maximus*, *Parthicus maximus*.² The evidence from the papyri suggests that the title *Parthicus maximus* first appeared in Caracalla's victory titulature towards the end of 211. The latest dated Egyptian document attesting the two emperors as *Britannici maximi* only is P.Lond. II 349.1–3 of 27 November 211.³ From 4 January 212 (P.Hib. II 216) onwards, the titles *Britannicus maximus* and *Parthicus maximus* become a permanent feature of Caracalla's titulature in the papyri. Geta, however, remains *Britannicus maximus* only. This is where the motive behind Caracalla's assumption of the title *Parthicus* lies. With two victory titles, he would have appeared superior to his brother in the eyes of his subjects. We do not know whether there was an official explanation of the new titulature. It is generally held that Caracalla was elevated to Augustus on 28 January 198, the day when his father was proclaimed *Parthicus maximus*.⁴ The fact that the title *Parthicus maximus* was occasionally, though

¹ This victory title was bestowed on the emperors in 210; see M. Heil, *On the Date of the Title Britannicus Maximus of Septimius Severus and his Sons*, *Britannia* 34 (2003) 268–271.

² See P. Kneissl, *Die Siegestitulatur der römischen Kaiser*, Göttingen 1969, 157f.; A. Mastino, *Le titolature di Caracalla e Geta attraverso le iscrizioni (indici)*, Bologna 1981, 52f. According to D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *Römische Kaisertabelle. Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, Darmstadt 2017, 157, the title *Parthicus maximus* was 'offiziell geführt seit 4. Febr. 211', but this is a mere theoretical possibility.

³ For the date see R. Ziegler, *Bemerkungen zur Datierung dokumentarischer Papyri und Ostraka*, *ZPE* 114 (1996) 160.

⁴ This is Caracalla's *dies imperii*, though he may have been promoted to Augustus already in 197; see Kienast et al., *Kaisertabelle* (n. 2) 156.

unofficially, applied to Caracalla during Severus' lifetime may have played a role;⁵ after all, he was his father's nominal co-ruler at the time of the Parthian victory, and victory titles of emperors were sometimes given to their underage sons too. There is no reason to think that Geta and those around him were content with Caracalla's expanded titulature; the earlier version gave the two brothers equal status. Caracalla had won a battle from his brother.

II

Dio (78.2.2) writes that Geta was lured into his deathtrap on the pretext of a reconciliation meeting with his brother. To judge from the accounts of Dio (78.1.1–78.2.1) and especially Herodian (4.3.1–4.4.1), Caracalla's manipulation of his titulature would have been only a minor issue by that time. Geta was probably assassinated some time in late December 211.⁶ It took a while for the news to travel to Egypt, and in the Fayum as late as 31 January 212 someone still dated by both Caracalla and Geta (CPR I 239). Geta's death must have become known in Egypt no later than the beginning of March 212. There are two documents taken to date from early March 212 and in whose dating clauses Caracalla figures as sole emperor.⁷ The earlier of the two would appear to be CPR VIII 11, a declaration of uninundated land dated Phamenoth 5, Year 20, that is, 1 March 212. However, the date of this text is not as precise as it appears in the edition. In l. 19 the editors transcribe [Φα]μενωθ ε, but the online image makes it clear that nothing was written after [Φα]μενωθ. The text is dated only by month and year, and its date range is 25 February–26 March 212.

The other text is P.Oxy. XXXVI 2777, a slave sale dated Phamenoth 8 in a year whose number is lost. Caracalla's titulature and the known dates in office of the strategus Didymus made the editor decide in favour of Year 20. A further argument was that 'Caracalla's sole reign begins with his 19th year', but this is not true.⁸ Even if 'Year 19' saw the beginning of the rule of Caracalla *and* Geta, Caracalla's sole rule did not start before Geta's murder in late December 211, that is, in the course of 'Year 20'. We may

⁵ On Caracalla called *Parthicus maximus* before the death of Severus, see Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur* (n. 2) 148–151, who points out that, even if the title sporadically occurs in coins and inscriptions, it was not officially conferred on Caracalla during his father's lifetime.

⁶ For a summary of the evidence and references, see M. Meckler, *Two Papyri and Events in the Life of Caracalla*, ZPE 105 (1995) 258 n. 7. This had happened by 7 January 212; see P. Weiss, *Ausgewählte neue Militärdiplome. Seltene Provinzen (Africa, Mauretania Caesariensis), späte Urkunden für Prätorianer (Caracalla, Philippus)*, Chiron 32 (2002) 510f.

⁷ J.-Y. Strasser, « *La Bonne Nouvelle* ». *La nouvelle de l'avènement d'un empereur et de la mort de son prédécesseur en Égypte*, Brussels 2017, 76, adds P.Grenf. II 50m (4.iii.212), but the text only mentions the regnal year and not the emperor(s). Meckler, *Two Papyri* (n. 6) 258 is not right in stating that 'the earliest papyrus from after Geta's murder that shows Caracalla as sole emperor is *P.Lond.* III 164a [*sic*, for 1164a, now SB XX 15188] ... with a date of 28 March 212 (2 Pharmouthi in the 20th year of Caracalla's reign)'.

⁸ The suggestion recorded in BL X 150 is likewise erroneous. A different argument against a date in 211 was adduced in P.Oxy. XLVII 3346.1 n.

safely date the papyrus to 4 March 212, which is the *terminus ante quem* for the knowledge in Egypt of the new realities.⁹

There is one other reason for dating this text to 212: Caracalla is called Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, a name he was given around 195.¹⁰ He figures with the same name and victory title as late as 24 April 212 (P.Lond. III 1164k, from Antinoopolis).¹¹ If P.Oxy. 2777 dated from 213, there would be one further element in Caracalla's name: Severus. The name Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus first appears in P.Diog. 38, dated Pachon 3,¹² year 20, or 28 April 212. After that, no papyrus attests the earlier version of Caracalla's name.¹³

III

When did Caracalla add his father's surname to his own? It is commonly held that this took place after Severus' death.¹⁴ According to Kneissl, the papyri indicate that Caracalla changed his name 'etwa 211/212, aber noch vor dem Tode des Geta'.¹⁵ Kneissl's Egyptian evidence, drawn from Bureth,¹⁶ consists of two texts thought to date from Year 19, viz. P.Harr. I 83 and SB V 8472. The first of the two has to be discounted: it has been republished as P.Diog. 27 with a revised date to Year 22 = 213. The other text, a tabula ansata from Dodekaschoinos,¹⁷ is headed Μάρκος Αὐρηλιος (l. Μάρκου Αὐρηλίου) Σεουήρου Ἀντωνίνου (l. 1), and is dated (ἔτους) ιθ Τῶβι κ (l. 9), i.e. 15 January 211; Septimius Severus was still alive at that time. As Zucker has pointed out, the emperor's name is a later addition, and this removes the difficulty. In short, no

⁹ This probably has no bearing on the dating of BGU XI 2056, a fragmentary edict of the prefect Baebius Iuncinus announcing the *damnatio memoriae* of Geta. The earliest testimony that the *damnatio* was put into effect is the altered seal of SB VI 9234 (15.vi.212), on which see E. M. Husselman, *Two Customs House Receipts from Egypt*, TAPA 82 (1951) 166, and P. Mertens, *La damnatio memoriae de Gêta dans les papyrus*, Coll. Latomus 44 (1960) 544.

¹⁰ See Mastino, *Le titolature* (n. 2) 28, 44f.; K. Buraselis, *ΘΕΙΑ ΔΩΡΕΑ. Das göttlich-kaiserliche Geschenk. Studien zur Politik der Severer und zur Constitutio Antoniana*, Vienna 2007, 25.

¹¹ T. M. Hickey, *A Penthēmeros Certificate from the Reign of Caracalla* (P.Lund. inv. 12), ZPE 178 (2011) 240f., discusses the absence of the name Severus from Caracalla's titulature in papyri of the early months of his sole reign.

¹² The day number is dotted (γ), but a check of the original in the British Library (cf. also Pl. XXI) does not contradict the editor's reading.

¹³ P.Oxy. XXXVIII 2876 contains an oath by the *genius* of Caracalla, who is called M. Aurelius Antoninus Pius Augustus. In view of the discussion above, the date of the text should be placed in February–April 212 (cf. J. Bingen's comment, recorded in the edition, 14–16 n.).

¹⁴ See Mastino, *Le titolature* (n. 2) 35f. with notes 53–58.

¹⁵ Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur* (n. 2) 159.

¹⁶ P. Bureth, *Les titulatures impériales dans les papyrus, les ostraca et les inscriptions*, Brussels 1964, 102f.

¹⁷ F. Zucker, *Von Debod bis Bab Kalabsche III*, Cairo 1912, 131, L368; the date is discussed on p. 64f.

Egyptian document can be used as evidence that Caracalla assumed the name Severus before 212.¹⁸

Kneissl asserts that there are no inscriptions from before 212 in which Caracalla has the name Severus. He could not take account of an inscription from Side in Pamphylia whose revised edition was published in 1993. This is I.Side 39, read as follows:

[A]ὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα
 [M]ἄρκ[ο]ν Ἀὐρ[ή]λιον
 [Σεουήρο]ν Ἀντωνίνον
 [Εὐ]σεβῆ Σεβαστὸν
 5 [Βρετ]αννικὸν μέγιστον,
 ἀρχιερέα μ[έγιστον,]
 δη[αρχικ]ῆς
 ἐξο[υσίας τ]ὸ ἰδ'
 - - - - -

The inscription is datable by Caracalla's 14th tribunician power to 10 December 210–9 December 211, which is in harmony with the fact that he is merely called Βρεταννικὸς μέγιστος. The editor notes: 'Da Caracalla das väterliche Cognomen ‚Severus‘ erst nach dem Tod des Septimius Severus in seine Titulatur aufnahm ... ist die Inschrift in die Zeit von Februar bis Dezember 211 zu datieren.' Viewed against the Egyptian evidence, Caracalla's titulature appears anomalous. He is not given the title Παρθικὸς μέγιστος but already has the name Severus. We might consider whether the two new elements of Caracalla's titulature were disseminated to Pamphylia in reversed order in comparison to Egypt, or whether the title Παρθικὸς μέγιστος was inadvertently omitted. But there is much in this text that depends on restoration, and the inscription consists of several separate fragments brought together on the basis of the lettering (it may be relevant that the lettering in I.Side 40 is very similar to that in 39). All this is not very reassuring; could it be that some of the fragments do not belong, or that we should posit a lacuna after line 5? Although I do not see how to dismiss the evidence of this inscription, I would consider it doubtful.

IV

Caracalla's assumption of the name Severus is in line with a time-honoured imperial tradition: almost every emperor before him had assumed the surname of his immediate predecessor.¹⁹ It has been suggested that in doing so Caracalla intended to present himself as the sole heir to the throne.²⁰ This is plausible, especially if he took the name only

¹⁸ W. H. M. Liesker, *Tax Documents from Soknopaiou Nesos*, *Tyche* 8 (1993) 77, states that the 'title Severus sanctioned his leadership of the Severan dynasty after he had killed his brother Geta', but does not elaborate.

¹⁹ Even more, Macrinus assumed the name 'Severus' upon his elevation to Augustus, and the same happened with Severus Alexander shortly thereafter.

²⁰ Kneissl, *Siegestitulatur* (n. 2) 159. See also A. Abaecherli Boyce, *Caracalla as "Severus"*, *Museum Notes* (American Numismatic Society) 8 (1958) 85f.

after Geta's assassination. When Geta was alive, either brother could lay claim on the name Severus, but it seems that neither did. It is significant that the new name does not occur in any document in which Caracalla is associated with Geta.²¹ Geta was popular,²² and his murder was followed by a purge of Caracalla's enemies, real or perceived. Caracalla's need to solicit support and blunt the opposition was acute. The assumption of his father's surname, the declaration of Geta as public enemy and the ensuing *damnatio memoriae*²³ were manifestations of Caracalla's propaganda in his effort to consolidate power.²⁴

In conclusion, I present the evidence from the documentary evidence from Egypt concerning these events in the life of Caracalla in tabular form below:

27 November 211	latest reference to Caracalla (and Geta) as <i>Britannicus maximus</i> only
4 January 212	earliest reference to Caracalla as <i>Parthicus maximus</i>
31 January 212	latest reference to joint rule of Caracalla and Geta
4 March 212	earliest reference to sole rule of Caracalla
24 April 212	latest reference to Caracalla as M. Aurelius Antoninus
28 April 212	earliest reference to Caracalla as M. Aurelius Severus Antoninus

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²¹ This was first pointed out by Abaecherli Boyce (n. 20) 87, 89. It is worth noting that there are references to Geta with the *cognomen* Severus in a few Latin inscriptions of 202–204; see Mastino, *Le titolature* (n. 2) 36. This may not be unrelated to his importance in imperial coinage of the early 200s; see F. Kemmers, *Out of the Shadow: Geta and Caracalla reconsidered*, in: S. Faust, F. Leitmeier (eds), *Repräsentationsformen in severischer Zeit*, Berlin 2011, 276, 279.

²² Cf. Dio 7.1.3; Herodian 4.3.2–3. See Kemmers, *Out of the Shadow* (n. 21) 271–274.

²³ We do not know the official version of the events alleged to call for the *damnatio*. The edict BGU XI 2056 is too fragmentary, but enough survives to tell us that Geta was branded ἀσεβέστατος. It seems less likely that Geta's alleged attempt on Caracalla's life would have sufficed to account for the use of the epithet.

²⁴ I have considered whether Caracalla's assumption of the name Severus coincided with Geta's *damnatio*. The new name first appears in the papyri some two months after the time when Geta's murder was known in Egypt. The *damnatio* would not necessarily have been announced immediately after the murder; it would have followed the elimination and/or annihilation of any potential dissenting voice in the Senate. The time that elapsed between the murder and the *damnatio* of Geta may be these two months. Hickey, *A Pentēmeros Certificate* (n. 11) 241 has suggested that 'The shorter-lived Egyptian titlature without Σεουήρου probably reflects ad hoc modification of the former joint titlature with Geta [n. 10: ... Μάρκου Αὐρηλίου Ἀντωνίνου Παρθικοῦ μεγίστου καὶ Ηοὐβλίου Σεπτιμίου Γέτα Βρεταννικῶν μεγίστων Εὐσεβῶν Σεβαστῶν, with the plurals transformed into singulars]; in the wake of Geta's winter murder, instructions concerning Caracalla's new titlature may have been slow to reach Egypt.'