

ВСЕОБЩАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

УДК 94 (3)

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THE SUCCESSION OF POWER AFTER THE DEATH OF COMMODUS*

On January 1, 193 A.D. M. Acilius Glabrio, consul for the years 173 and 186 A.D., descendant of an ancient consular family faced the biggest challenge of his life — he was handed over the imperial power by Emperor P. Helvius Pertinax. Glabrio's selection for the emperor was prompted by the ancient character of his family line, its connections with the house of the Antonini, and his own unquestioned position of the leader of the Senate. It is assumed that Glabrio was related by blood to the family of Marcus Aurelius and this fact could have heavily influenced Pertinax's nomination. Glabrio was a symbol of the modern authority of the Senate as well as the tradition and permanence of the Roman Empire. As the leader of the Senate he gained widespread respect, and both the position of his gens and relationships with the Antonine family made him a real *capax imperii*. The resignation from the imperial power proved him to be also a prudent man as much as it gave Acilii Glabrones a chance to function in the elite of the Roman Empire in the centuries to come. Refs 6.

Keywords: Roman Empire, Pricipate, Succession of power, M. Acilius Glabrio, P. Helvius Pertinax, Roman Senate, elite of Roman Empire.

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НАСЛЕДОВАНИЕ ВЛАСТИ ПОСЛЕ СМЕРТИ КОММОДА

1 января 193 г. М. Ацилий Глабрион, консул 173 и 186 гг., потомок древней семьи консуляров встретил наибольший вызов в своей жизни: император П. Гельвий Пертинакс вручил ему императорскую власть. Выбор Глабриона в качестве императора основывался на его происхождении из древнего рода, на его связях с императорским домом Антонинов и на его собственной бесспорной позиции лидера сената. Считается, что Глабрион состоял в кровном родстве с Марком Аврелием и что этот факт мог оказать значительное влияние на выбор, сделанный Пертинаксом. М. Ацилий Глабрион был символом обновленного влияния сената, так же как и традиций и преемственности Римской империи. Как лидер сената он пользовался огромным уважением, а знатное происхождение и высокое положение его рода и родство с Антонинами превращало его в реального претендента на власть. Однако Ацилий Глабрион

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* I have been conducting the research on the senatorial order of the Severan period within the frames of the National Science Centre entitled “The Album of Senators from the Age of Severan Dynasty (A.D. 193–235)”. The project has been financed by the funds provided by the National Science Centre granted on the basis of the decision no. DEC-2011/01/B/HS3/01273.

отказался от власти. Это характеризует его как благоразумного человека и в последующие столетия дало семейству Ацилиев Глабрионов возможность остаться в элите Римской империи. Библиогр. 6 назв.

Ключевые слова: Римская империя, принципат, наследование власти, М. Ацилий Глабрион, П. Гельвий Пертинакс, римский сенат, элита Римской империи.

On December 31 192 A. D. Emperor Commodus — the last of the Antonine family — was murdered. A group of conspirators, who wanted to avoid being killed by the Emperor's order, was responsible for his sudden death. The death sentence was a threat to the persons closest to the ruler (concubine Marcia, Praetorian prefect Aemilius Laetus, and his butler Eclectus) and some dignitaries of the state (e.g., the consuls of the year 193, Q. Pompeius Sossius Falco, C. Iulius Erucius Clarus Vibianus), the direct cause of this being inter alia the dispute over the course of the New Year holidays. Ancient historians (Cassius Dio, 72, 22, 4–6, Herodian, 1, 16–17, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* — *SHA*, vita Commodi, 15–17) would have us believe that the plot was rather an *ad hoc* action, not a real conspiracy, and P. Helvius Pertinax — Commodus' successor, chosen by the killers — did not expect such distinctions. This fact is justified by Pertinax's lowly social origin as, being the son of a freedman, he was unlikely to count on the exceptional favour of Fortune. In the difficult situation, the conspirators pronounced him the new *princeps*, as he was commonly respected and served as prefect of the city. In my opinion this version of the well-known historiographical record is not completely reliable, and the candidate for the new emperor was originally the highest representative of the senatorial aristocracy, related to the imperial house (Q. Pompeius Sossius Falco?) [1, p. 109–113], but Commodus' killers changed their minds, perhaps fearing the consequences of such a choice.

P. Helvius Pertinax was the perfect candidate for these people's needs, and his weak position allowed them to count on the fact that he would permanently need a group of advisors. As Pertinax was probably aware of these conditions, he agreed to appear before praetorians as the new emperor and took their oath of office, but on that same night he requested a meeting of the Senate.

The meeting began on the morning of January 1 in the Temple of Concordia where the Senate used to assemble in the Republic period (and which was certainly a deliberate choice). Pertinax informed the Senators about the praetorians' decision and resigned from the newly held office giving his age and state of health as the reasons for this move. Simultaneously, according to Herodian, he took the hand of one of the senators, M. Acilius Glabrio, and urged him to accept the office of *princeps*; yet Glabrio reasonably refused (Herodian, 2, 3, 3–4). It is also important to mention that, according to *SHA*, Pertinax suggested Claudius Pompeianus — a twice-appointed consul, Marcus Aurelius' son in law, and, above all, his long-time patron (*SHA*, vita Pertinacis, 4) — as worthy of wearing purple.

However, Cassius Dio, then in Rome, does not mention that Pertinax attempted to hand over the power to one of the senators. In the context of further information, to explain the lack thereof one can assume that such a lack occurred due to the fact of Dio's work being preserved only fragmentarily, in recapitulations and copies. Apart from omitting the impressive scene of Pertinax rejecting the imperial distinction, the historian also describes the attitude of the new emperor towards the mentioned two senators: how much respect he had for them, and how privileged they were (Cassius Dio, 73, 1–3). It is hard not to assume that this description somehow evidences an attempt on the part of the emperor to cede the

power to them, whereas the senatorial rejection of this power could equal to their deciding that, for them, Pertinax was the more suitable imperial candidate.

It needs to be considered why, along with his patron, (Claudius Pompeianus) Pertinax indicated M'. Acilius Glabrio, a senator, with whom he had no close relationship. First of all, the nomination of Glabrio can be explained by the "ancient" status of his family. As early as in 191 B. C., M'. Acilius Glabrio was on the list of consuls. The successive representatives of this family were consuls in the years: 154 (as *cos. suff.*) B. C., 67 B. C., 33 B. C., 54 A. D., 91 A. D., 122 A. D., 124 A. D., 152 A. D., around 173 and in 186 A. D.¹

The senator whom Pertinax indicated belonged to the *gens* cherishing their consular status since at least the second century B. C. Thus, in 193 A. D. Acilius Glabrio could boast that he belonged to a family whose representatives sat for 400 years in the Senate and held the highest state offices. Herodian (2, 3, 3—4), who was partly a contemporary of Acilius Glabrio, wrote that the *Acilii Glabrones* descended from Aeneas, which undoubtedly was part of the then generally functioning family genealogy.

Glabrio himself was the son of the ordinary consul for the year 152 A. D. and the grandson of the consul for the year 124 A. D. His brother, a consul for 179 A. D., M'. Acilius (Vibius?) Faustinus and sister Faustina bore *cognomen* so far unusual among the so far unusual among the *Acilii*². It is clear, therefore, that the nickname came from the mother of the two consuls, a person so important that it resolved about changes in the standard nomenclature of the family. The *cognomen* Faustinus is quite obviously associated with Faustina, the older (Faustina maior), wife of Antoninus Pius and Faustina, the younger (Faustina minor), wife of Marcus Aurelius. None of them became a part of the house of *Acilii*, thus it is assumed that the nickname "Faustinus" was brought as a heritage by yet another representative of the same family, related to the *domus divina*. E. Champlin suggested that this representatives could be Ummidia Cornificia Faustina, Marcus Aurelius' [5. P. 291–297.] niece, the daughter of C? Ummidius Quadratus and Annia Cornificia Faustina, although M.-Th. Raepsaet-Charlier treats this hypothesis with caution (for chronological reasons) and suggests Faustina to be the 152 A. D. consul's wife and mother of Acilius Glabrio [4. no. 358; no. 394]. She would come from the lineage of L. Fundanius Lamia Aelianus and Aurelia Fadilla, daughter of Antoninus Pius and Faustina the older. The weakness of this suggestion is both its being completely hypothetical and lacking in any confirmation of the existence of such *clarissima femina*. Regardless of the proposed solutions, we can assume that Glabrio was related by blood to the family of Marcus Aurelius and this fact could have heavily influenced Pertinax's nomination. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that in the Empire there lived both sons-in-law and grandsons of Marcus Aurelius (relatives of the daughters)³ and they had a much stronger basis for attempting to fall heir to the Commodus⁴ heritage.

¹ In 54 A. D. and 122 A. D. the offices of consuls were held by the *Acilii* with *cognomen* Aviola, of *Acilii Glabrones* family. On the *Acilii* consular offices see [2; 3, p. 187 ff., *passim*, especially p. 190].

² Apart from those two persons Glabrio had a prematurely deceased sister [Prisc]illa Aciliana. See e.g. [4, no. 657]. The second chapter of the work of M. Dondin-Payre [3] was dedicated to the *Stemma* of the family.

³ The sons-in-law: the already mentioned Tib. Claudius Pompeianus, M. Peducaeus Plautius Quintillus, consul for 177 A. D., and probably Cn. Claudius Severus, consul II for 173 A. D., the grandsons: Ti. Claudius Severus Proculus, later consul for 200 AD and several *Claudii Pompeiani*, holding offices during the Severan rule.

⁴ E. Champlin [5, p. 296–297] acknowledged the fact that Pertinax was only a temporary emperor who was to hand over the power to the adolescent representatives of the dynasty, e.g.: the eldest son of Pompeianus. This view seems extreme, especially since there is no evidence which suggests that Pertinax intended to render the power as the author implies.

However, the relationship with family of the murdered *princeps* was not a decisive factor in appointing his successor; Pertinax was suggested by the conspirators precisely because he did not have any connections and was thus a safe candidate posing no threat of ancestral revenge. However, as he was pronounced emperor, first by praetorians, the appeal to the Senate was a politically canny decision. The new emperor wanted to obtain purple from *patres conscripti* for it was a condition of the future successful cooperation between the two parties additionally ensuring the legitimacy of his rule to Pertinax; the gesture towards Glabrio and Pompeianus was putting power in the hands of the Senate and also recognizing the tradition, authority and decision-making power of the body.

In such a situation, Acilius Glabrio can therefore be assumed to not only constitute a symbol of the Senate, but also become its informal leader, probably head of the opposition against Commodus, and (owing to his *gens*) *capax imperii*. This latter conclusion is based not only on the knowledge of Acilius Glabrio's genealogy, but also on arguments derived *ex silentio*, a category which contains the information on Glabrio's *cursus honorum*. Despite the good knowledge of careers of the *ordo senatorius* members in the period in question, we know little of the offices held by Glabrio (apart from the two consulates). Thus, we can assume that his career had a typical patrician course — quaestorship, praetorship and consulate (*anno suo* — when he was about 32 years old). The first Glabrio's consulate was *suffectus* as in 173 A. D., when he should hold this office because of his age, Cn. Claudius Severus and Tib. Claudius Pompeianus (both Marcus Aurelius' sons-in-law) were appointed *consules ordinarii*. Therefore, Glabrio was granted *consulatus ordinarius* in 186 A. D., consistent with the position of his family, which may indicate that his discontent had already been demonstrated and that Commodus had been trying to satisfy by granting a new dignity.

It is interesting that despite the almost complete *fasti* of various Roman provinces it is impossible to find Glabrio as a governor of any of them. This seems puzzling, especially in the case of proconsulates in Asia and Africa which were granted by the Senate.

As a long-time consular, Glabrio should have held such a proconsulate. The lack of any information confirming of holding any legation of a province is surprising and can lead to the conclusion that Glabrio fell into disfavour, perhaps because of the same factor which later became the reason for his attempted nomination — the ancient lineage. There is some evidence hinting on the aforementioned disfavour and allowing to take it for granted, namely, the fact that Acilius Glabrio permitted his daughter Acilia Fristana to marry Ti. Claudius Cleobulus, *homo novus* of Ephesus, the son of a local prytan, who, probably because of this affinity, acquired a consulate [6, p. 45–62]. The reason for the marriage of one of the *Acilii* with a bumpkin without connections is unclear — M. Dondin-Payre suggests the family affluence to be of importance [3, p. 159]. In my opinion, However, the affluence of the bridegroom and his family was an unlikely factor as the *Acilii* were wealthy and famous enough; moreover, among the *gentes senatoriae* there certainly were many better candidates for marriage. It is also difficult to accept that the basis for the new affiliation was the Ephesus connections of the bride's grandfather established around 149–150 A. D. during the legation and before the quaestorship⁵. The marriage of Acilia and Cleobulus can be explained logically by the fact of Acilia's father having fallen into political disgrace as well as by the desire to establish favourable (and financial) alliances with representatives of the Eastern Empire.

⁵ As suggested by M. Dondin-Payre [3, p. 159–160, especially in the footnote no. 15].

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Статья поступила в редакцию 26 марта 2014 г.

⁶ At the end of the Roman Empire there were offices held by Anicius Acilius Glabrio Faustus, consul in 438 A. D. and his sons: Anicius Acilius Aginatius Faustus, consul in 483 A. D., and Rufius Achilius Sibidius, consul in 488 A. D.