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Meditations

A New Translation, with an Introduction, by Gregory Hays

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CHRONOLOGY

| | HISTORICAL | LITERARY / PHILOSOPHICAL |
|-----------|--|--|
| 500 | | Heraclitus Empedocles Democritus |
| 400 | | Socrates Plato Diogenes |
| 300 | Alexander the Great | Zeno, Epicurus Chrysippus |
| 200 | | |
| 100 | | |
| | Pompey, Caesar Augustus | |
| B.C./A.D. | Tiberius Nero Vespasian Domitian | Thrasya Paetus Helvidius Priscus Epictetus |
| 100 | Trajan Hadrian Antoninus Pius Marcus Aurelius | Fronto |
| 200 | | |

Meditations

Introduction

Gregory Hays

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

States will never be happy until rulers become philosophers or philosophers become rulers.

—PLATO, *The Republic*

Marcus Aurelius is said to have been fond of quoting Plato's dictum, and those who have written about him have rarely been able to resist applying it to Marcus himself. And indeed, if we seek Plato's philosopher-king in the flesh we could hardly do better than Marcus, the ruler of the Roman Empire for almost two decades and author of the immortal *Meditations*. Yet the title is one that Marcus himself would surely have rejected. He never thought of himself as a philosopher. He would have claimed to be, at best, a diligent student and a very imperfect practitioner of a philosophy developed by others. As for the imperial throne, that came almost by accident. When Marcus Annius Verus was born, in A.D. 121, bystanders might have predicted a distinguished career in the Senate or the imperial administration. They could hardly have guessed that he was destined for the imperial purple, or seen in their mind's eye the lonely bronze horseman whose upraised hand greets us from the Capitoline hill in Rome across two thousand years.

Marcus sprang from a distinguished enough family. The year of his birth coincided with his grandfather's second tenure of the consulship, in theory Rome's highest office, though now of largely ceremonial

importance. And it was to be his grandfather who brought him up, for his father died when he was very young. Marcus makes reference in the *Meditations* to his father's character as he remembered it or heard of it from others, but his knowledge must have been more from stories than from actual memories. Of the remainder of his childhood and his early adolescence we know little more than can be gleaned from the *Meditations*. The biography of him in the so-called *Historia Augusta* (a curious and unreliable work of the late fourth century probably based on a lost series of lives by the third-century biographer Marius Maximus) tells us that he was a serious child, but also that he loved boxing, wrestling, running and falconry, that he was a good ballplayer and that he loved to hunt. None of these are surprising occupations in an upper-class youth.

Book 1 of the *Meditations* offers glimpses of Marcus's schooling, and we can fill out the picture by what is known of upper-class education generally at this period. His first instructors, like the unnamed teacher mentioned in *Meditations* 1.5, were probably slaves, from whom he would have mastered the rudiments of reading and writing. At a later stage he would have been handed over to private tutors to be introduced to literature, especially, no doubt, Vergil's great epic, the *Aeneid*. But literature served only as a preparation for the real goal. This was rhetoric, the key to an

active political career under the empire, as it had been under the Republic. Under the supervision of a trained rhetor, Marcus would have begun with short exercises before progressing to full-scale practice declamations in which he would have been asked to defend one side or another in imaginary law cases, or to advise a prominent historical figure at a turning point in his career. (Should Caesar cross the Rubicon? Should Alexander turn back at the Indus? Why or why not?)

Such training was conducted in Greek as well as Latin. Since at least the beginning of the first century B.C. the Roman upper classes had been essentially bilingual, and Marcus's spoken and written Greek would have been as fluent as the French of a nineteenth-century Russian aristocrat or the Chinese of a Heian Japanese courtier. Marcus would have read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the tragedies of Euripides side by side with the *Aeneid*, and studied the speeches of the great Athenian orator Demosthenes as intensively as those of the Roman statesman Cicero. It was Greek writers and artists who constituted the intellectual elite at the capital; when in later life the emperor conversed with his court physician, Galen, he would have done so in the latter's native tongue. Above all, Greek remained overwhelmingly the language of philosophy. In the late Republic and early empire, writers like Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca had worked to create a

philosophical literature in Latin, with notable success. But the great thinkers—Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Zeno, Chrysippus, Epicurus, etc.—had all been Greeks. Serious philosophical investigation required a familiarity with the language they wrote in and the terminology they developed. That Marcus composed his own *Meditations* in Greek is natural enough.

In 137, when Marcus was sixteen, a crucial event took place. The reigning emperor, Hadrian, was childless. An illness had brought him near to death a year previously, and it was clear that he would not live forever. Hadrian owed his throne to his adoption by his predecessor and distant relative, Trajan. Following Trajan's example, Hadrian had designated the distinguished aristocrat Lucius Ceionius Commodus to succeed him. In 137, however, Ceionius died unexpectedly, and Hadrian was forced to cast about for a new successor. His choice fell on the childless senator Antoninus, whom he selected with the proviso that Antoninus should in turn adopt Marcus (his nephew by marriage) along with Ceionius's son Lucius Verus, then aged seven. Marcus took on the family name of his adopted father, becoming Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Hadrian's death the following year left Marcus first in line for the throne. His education and that of the younger Verus were now matters of still greater concern, and it is clear that no expense was spared. For training

in Greek rhetoric, he was entrusted to Herodes Atticus, a fabulously wealthy Athenian rhetorician whose tempestuous relations with his family, fellow citizens and the imperial court itself would have furnished ample material for a soap opera. His instructor in Latin oratory was Marcus Cornelius Fronto, a prominent rhetorician from Cirta in North Africa. By an accident of fate, many of Fronto's letters to Marcus have survived, and they illustrate the close relationship between student and teacher. They also suggest Fronto's regret at seeing Marcus move away from rhetoric to delve ever more deeply into philosophy. The first book of the *Meditations* pays tribute to a number of philosophers from whom Marcus learned, both formally and informally, and he is likely to have studied with or listened to many others.

Marcus would have learned much outside the classroom as well. For training in legal and political matters, an informal apprenticeship bound aristocratic youths to older public figures—men like Junius Rusticus, whose influence Marcus chronicles in 1.7. But the single greatest influence was surely Marcus's adopted father, Antoninus Pius. Marcus would have watched as Antoninus received embassies, tried legal cases and dictated letters to his deputies. Meanwhile Marcus's own position as heir apparent was signaled in various ways. In 140 he served as consul (at the age of

nineteen), and would serve again in 145. In the same year he married Antoninus's daughter Faustina, to whom he pays tribute in *Meditations* 1.17.

Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* describes the reign of Antoninus as "furnishing very few materials for history, which is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." It furnishes equally little material for Marcus's biography. In the decade and a half between 145 and 161 we learn little of Marcus's occupations, and our only glimpses of his inner development come from his correspondence with Fronto. But the two poles that would govern the remainder of his life—the court and philosophy—seem by this point to be fully established. There is no evidence that Marcus experienced anything like the "conversion" to philosophy that some ancient figures experienced (or affected), but it is clear that by the middle to late 140s philosophy was becoming increasingly central to his life.

On August 31, 161, Antoninus died, leaving Marcus as his sole successor. Marcus immediately acted to carry out what appears to have been Hadrian's original intention (perhaps ignored by Antoninus) by pushing through the appointment of his adopted brother, Lucius Verus, as co-regent. Verus's character has suffered by comparison with Marcus's.

Ancient sources, in particular the gossipy *Historia Augusta*, tend to paint him as a self-indulgent degenerate—almost another Nero. This may be unfair; it is certainly not the picture of him we get from Marcus's own reminiscences in the *Meditations*. It does seem clear, however, that Marcus functioned as the senior emperor in fact if not name. It would be surprising if he had not. He was almost a decade older, and had been trained for the position by Antoninus himself.

What kind of ruler did this philosopher-king prove to be? Not, perhaps, as different from his predecessors as one might have expected. Though an emperor was all-powerful in theory, his ability to control policy was in reality much more limited. Much of his time was spent fielding problems that had moved up the administrative ladder: receiving embassies from the large cities of the empire, trying appeals of criminal cases, answering queries from provincial governors and dealing with petitions from individuals. Even with a functional system of imperial couriers, news could take weeks to travel from the periphery of the empire to the center; imperial edicts took time to move down the chain of command. While the emperor's decision had the force of law, enforcement was almost entirely in the hands of provincial governors, whose diligence might be affected by incompetence, corruption, or an understandable desire not to antagonize

local elites.

We get occasional glimpses of Marcus's day-to-day duties from the evidence of imperial decisions preserved in letters, inscriptions and the legal codes. Surviving legislation shows a certain interest in the freeing of slaves and in regulations relating to the guardianship of orphans. Attempts have been made to tie the first to Marcus's philosophical convictions and the second to his own memories of life without a father. But it remains unclear how much of the policy is due to Marcus himself, and how far it differs from that of Marcus's predecessor, Antoninus. Perhaps more interesting are the traces of Marcus's personality to be discerned in the phrasing of imperial documents, where we find a scrupulous attention to detail and a self-consciousness about linguistic usage that seems to differentiate Marcus from his predecessors. Neither trait surprises in the author of the *Meditations* or a student of Fronto, whose extant letters place great stress on the quest for the *mot juste*.

One of Marcus's priorities was to preserve good relations with the Senate. The goal was to disguise the absoluteness with which the emperor ruled: to preserve a facade—and sometimes, no doubt, even to achieve the reality—of consensus and cooperation. A hundred years before, aristocrats might have dreamed of a restored Republic (as some certainly did). But by

the second century it was clear that there was no alternative to the principate. The Senate expected deference in public and hoped for influence behind the scenes; “good” emperors were willing to play along. In cultivating the upper classes Marcus was following in the footsteps of Antoninus and Trajan, rather than of Hadrian, whose relations with the Senate had been prickly. And it is this, as much as anything else, that is responsible for his reputation as a benevolent statesman. An emperor might do as he liked while he lived, but it was the senatorial historians—men like Cornelius Tacitus in the 120s or Cassius Dio in the generation after Marcus’s death—who had the last word.

Another area where Marcus’s policy continued that of his predecessors related to a small and eccentric sect known as the Christians. In the course of the next century they would become an increasing problem for the imperial administration, and they were prominent enough in Marcus’s day to attract an extended denunciation from a certain Celsus, part of whose work “Against the Christians” still survives. The sect met with contempt from those intellectuals who deigned to take notice of it (Marcus’s tutor Fronto was evidently one), and with suspicion and hostility from ordinary citizens and administrators. The Christians’ disfavor stemmed from their failure to acknowledge the gods worshipped by the community around

them. Their “atheism”—their refusal to accept any god but their own—endangered their neighbors as well as themselves, and their reluctance to acknowledge the divine status of the emperor threatened the social order and the well-being of the state.

Christianity had been illegal since the early second century when a query from Pliny the Younger (then governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor) prompted the emperor Trajan to establish a formal policy: While Christians were not to be sought out, those who confessed to the faith were to be executed. But empire-wide persecution did not become a reality until a much later date. The main threat to Christians in the second century came from individual provincial governors, acting either on their own initiative or under pressure from local communities. In the late 170s, for example, civic unrest at Lyons resulted in a virtual pogrom of Greek-speaking Christians resident there. Marcus’s mentor Junius Rusticus had tried and executed Christians (the apologist Justin Martyr among them) in his capacity as city prefect. Marcus himself was no doubt aware of Christianity, but there is no reason to think that it bulked large in his mind. The one direct reference to it in the *Meditations* (11.3) is almost certainly a later interpolation, and the implicit references some scholars have discerned are surely illusory.

Marcus, in any case, had more serious concerns than this troublesome

cult. Soon after his accession, relations between Rome and its only rival, the Parthian empire in the East, took a dramatic turn for the worse. Since at least the time of Trajan the two states had been locked in a cold war that would continue for the next two centuries, and that once a generation or so flared up into a military conflict. The death of Antoninus and the accession of two new and untried rulers may have tempted the Parthian ruler Vologaeses III to test the waters. In 162 his forces occupied Armenia and wiped out a Roman garrison that had gone to the rescue. Syria itself was threatened. Rome had no choice but to respond.

It was Verus, the younger emperor, who was sent east, where he remained for the next four years. Neither he nor Marcus had any military experience to speak of (Antoninus's peaceful reign had given little scope for it), and the day-to-day conduct of the war was no doubt left to the professionals. After initial setbacks the Romans rallied and, under such commanders as the dynamic young Avidius Cassius, forced the Parthians to sue for peace. Parthia would remain a threat, but one that could be dealt with by diplomatic means for the immediate future.

Verus and his senior colleague had no time to bask in their triumph, however. Within a year the empire was in the grip of a devastating plague, apparently brought back from the East by Lucius's troops. Its effects may

not have been quite as apocalyptic as later writers suggest, but the death toll was certainly high, and it also delayed the emperors' response to a second threat. This was the increasing instability on the empire's other border, the northern frontier that separated Rome from the barbarian peoples of Germany, eastern Europe and Scandinavia. During this period a number of these tribes were under pressure from peoples farther north and reacted by moving across the empire's borders—not for conquest, but in search of land to settle. Rome's reaction alternated between aggressive resistance and attempts at accommodation; its failure to develop a workable policy would eventually result in the collapse of the Western empire some three centuries later.

In some places a line could be drawn. Hadrian's great wall, stretching across Britain, was intended to secure the empire's most distant frontier; under Antoninus it had been briefly superseded by a second line farther to the north. But such fortifications were impracticable on the continent, and it was there that the threat was concentrated. Rome still remembered the catastrophe of A.D. 9, when the Roman general Varus and three legions had marched into the forests of Germany, never to return. In the second century, the greatest source of anxiety was the area farther south, roughly corresponding to modern-day Romania and Hungary. Trajan's conquest of

Dacia two generations before had cleared out a possible source of trouble, but the potential for friction remained. In Marcus's day three peoples presented a special problem: the Quadi, the Marcomanni, and the Jazyges, also called Sarmatians. The removal of three legions to Parthia had seriously weakened the Roman position on the northern frontier, and barbarians took advantage of the situation. In 168, Marcus and Verus marched north to deal with them.

Much of the remainder of the reign would be spent on intermittent warfare, first in the so-called Marcomannic Wars of the early 170s and then in a second campaign later in that decade. And most of the burden was to be borne by Marcus alone, for Verus died suddenly (apparently of a stroke) in early 169. It was a very different kind of war than the traditional campaign Verus's armies had waged. The conventional military and diplomatic tactics that worked against the Parthians were of limited use here. Instead, the Romans had to negotiate with individual chieftains whose authority was limited and whose reliability was always in doubt. When negotiation failed, the only alternative was a slow and bloody succession of small-scale engagements rather than pitched battles. The progress of the campaign is recorded on the column erected in Rome to commemorate the close of the Marcomannic Wars. In spite of its triumphal purpose, the engraved scenes

that spiral around the monument paint a grim picture of brutal fighting, devastation and execution. “Spiders are proud of catching flies,” Marcus notes mordantly, “men of catching hares, fish in a net, boars, bears, Sarmatians” (10.10). The gruesome vignette that opens *Meditations* 8.34 (“a severed hand or foot, or a decapitated head”) may well reflect Marcus’s own experience.

By 175 the Romans seemed to have gained the upper hand. But at this point disturbing news arrived. Avidius Cassius, who had distinguished himself as a general during the Parthian War and who as governor of Syria now served as virtual regent of the Eastern empire, had revolted and declared himself emperor. Some of the Eastern provinces (notably Cappadocia) remained loyal to Marcus, but Cassius was recognized as emperor throughout much of the East, and in particular in Egypt, whose grain supply was crucial to the capital. Civil war seemed inevitable, and was prevented only by Cassius’s assassination at the hands of a subordinate. Marcus was nevertheless obliged to travel east to reassert his authority, taking with him Faustina (who died in the course of the journey). He visited the major cities of the East, Antioch and Alexandria, arriving finally at Athens, where he was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, a set of mystic rites connected with the worship of Demeter, the goddess of

agriculture.

Now in his fifties, Marcus was in declining health, and the revolt of Cassius had only underlined the need to make arrangements for the succession. Faustina had borne at least thirteen children, many of whom had died young. By the mid-170s, Marcus had only one surviving son, Commodus, just entering his teens. There was no reason for Marcus to continue the policy of adoption followed by his predecessors, and there is no reason to think he even considered it. The years that follow see Commodus's rapid promotion to a position not far short of co-emperor. He was consul in 177 at the age of fifteen. In the same year he was accorded all the major imperial privileges, except for the post of Pontifex Maximus, the head of the Roman state religion, held by the reigning emperor alone, and for life.

The gains of the Marcomannic Wars had not proved permanent, and in 178, Marcus and Commodus marched north again. Two years later Marcus died at age fifty-eight, the first emperor to pass on the throne to his son since Vespasian a century before. Sadly, Commodus's performance did not bear out whatever promise Marcus had discerned in him. He was to be remembered as a dissolute tyrant, a second Caligula or Nero whose many defects were only emphasized by the contrast with his father. His

assassination after a twelve-year reign would usher in the first in a series of power struggles that would burden the empire for the next century.

Philosophical Background

The composition of the *Meditations* is normally dated to the 170s—Marcus's last decade. That this was a dark and stressful period for him can hardly be doubted. In the ten years between 169 and 179 he had to cope with constant fighting on the frontier, the abortive revolt of Cassius, and the deaths of his colleague Verus; his wife, Faustina; and others. Though he could hardly have anticipated the century of turmoil that would follow his death, he may have suspected that his son and successor, Commodus, was not the man he hoped. That in these circumstances Marcus should have sought consolation in philosophy is only natural. But understanding what Marcus looked for from his philosophical studies requires a certain amount of orientation. To understand the *Meditations* in context, we must familiarize ourselves not only with Stoicism, the philosophical system that underlies the work, but also with the role of philosophy in ancient life more generally.

Today philosophy is an academic discipline, one that few people other than professional philosophers would consider central to their everyday existence. While we may think of ourselves as having a “philosophy of