Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Emperor of Rome Marcus Aurelius

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THE THOUGHTS

OF

THE EMPEROR

MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

M. Antoninus was born at Rome, A.D. 121, on the 26th of April. His father, Annius Verus, died while he was praetor. His mother was Domitia Calvilla, also named Lucilla. The Emperor T. Antoninus Pius married Annia Galeria Faustina, the sister of Annius Verus, and was consequently the uncle of M. Antoninus. When Hadrian adopted Antoninus Pius and declared him his successor in the empire, Antoninus Pius adopted both L. Ceionius Commodus, the son of Aelius Caesar, and M. Antoninus, whose original name was M. Annius Verus. Antoninus then took the name of M. Aelius Aurelius Verus, to which was added the title of Caesar in A.D. 139: the name Aelius belonged to Hadrian's family, and Aurelius was the name of Antoninus Pius. When M. Antoninus became Augustus, he dropped the name of Verus and took the name of Antoninus. Accordingly he is generally named M. Aurelius Antoninus, or simply M. Antoninus.

The youth was most carefully brought up. He thanks the gods (i. 17) that he had good grandfathers, good parents, a good sister, good teachers, good associates, good kinsmen and friends, nearly everything good. He had the happy fortune to witness the example of his uncle and adoptive father Antoninus Pius, and he has recorded in his word (i. 16; vi. 30) the virtues of the excellent man and prudent ruler. Like many young Romans he tried his hand at poetry and studied rhetoric. Herodes Atticus and M. Cornelius Fronto were his

teachers in eloquence. There are extant letters between Fronto and Marcus,[A] which show the great affection of the pupil for the master, and the master's great hopes of his industrious pupil. M. Antoninus mentions Fronto (i. 11) among those to whom he was indebted for his education.

[A] M. Cornelii Frontonis Reliquiae, Berlin, 1816. There are a few letters between Fronto and Antoninus Pius.

When he was eleven years old, he assumed the dress of philosophers, something plain and coarse, became a hard student, and lived a most laborious, abstemious life, even so far as to injure his health. Finally, he abandoned poetry and rhetoric for philosophy, and he attached himself to the sect of the Stoics. But he did not neglect the study of law, which was a useful preparation for the high place which he was designed to fill. His teacher was L. Volusianus Maecianus, a distinguished jurist. We must suppose that he learned the Roman discipline of arms, which was a necessary part of the education of a man who afterwards led his troops to battle against a warlike race.

Antoninus has recorded in his first book the names of his teachers, and the obligations which he owed to each of them. The way in which he speaks of what he learned from them might seem to savor of vanity or self-praise, if we look carelessly at the way in which he has expressed himself; but if any one draws this conclusion, he will be mistaken. Antoninus means to commemorate the merits of his several teachers, what they taught, and what a pupil might learn from them. Besides, this book, like the eleven other books, was for his own use; and if we may trust the note at the end of the first book, it was written during one of M. Antoninus' campaigns against the Quadi, at a time

when the commemoration of the virtues of his illustrious teachers might remind him of their lessons and the practical uses which he might derive from them.

Among his teachers of philosophy was Sextus of Chaeroneia, a grandson of Plutarch. What he learned from this excellent man is told by himself (i. 9). His favorite teacher was Q. Junius Rusticus (i. 7), a philosopher, and also a man of practical good sense in public affairs. Rusticus was the adviser of Antoninus after he became emperor. Young men who are destined for high places are not often fortunate in those who are about them, their companions and teachers; and I do not know any example of a young prince having had an education which can be compared with that of M. Antoninus. Such a body of teachers distinguished by their acquirements and their character will hardly be collected again; and as to the pupil, we have not had one like him since.

Hadrian died in July A.D. 138, and was succeeded by Antoninus Pius. M. Antoninus married Faustina, his cousin, the daughter of Pius, probably about A.D. 146, for he had a daughter born in 147. He received from his adoptive father the title of Caesar, and was associated with him in the administration of the state. The father and the adopted son lived together in perfect friendship and confidence. Antoninus was a dutiful son, and the emperor Pius loved and esteemed him.

Antoninus Pius died in March, A.D. 161. The Senate, it is said, urged M. Antoninus to take the sole administration of the empire, but he associated with himself the other adopted son of Pius, L. Ceionius Commodus, who is generally called L. Verus. Thus Rome for the first

time had two emperors. Verus was an indolent man of pleasure, and unworthy of his station. Antoninus however bore with him, and it is said Verus had sense enough to pay to his colleague the respect due to his character. A virtuous emperor and a loose partner lived together in peace, and their alliance was strengthened by Antoninus giving to Verus for wife his daughter Lucilla.

The reign of Antoninus was first troubled by a Parthian war, in which Verus was sent to command; but he did nothing, and the success that was obtained by the Romans in Armenia and on the Euphrates and Tigris was due to his generals. This Parthian war ended in A.D. 165. Aurelius and Verus had a triumph (A.D. 166) for the victories in the East. A pestilence followed, which carried off great numbers in Rome and Italy, and spread to the west of Europe.

The north of Italy was also threatened by the rude people beyond the Alps, from the borders of Gallia to the eastern side of the Hadriatic. These barbarians attempted to break into Italy, as the Germanic nations had attempted near three hundred years before; and the rest of the life of Antoninus, with some intervals, was employed in driving back the invaders. In 169 Verus suddenly died, and Antoninus administered the state alone.

During the German wars Antoninus resided for three years on the Danube at Carnuntum. The Marcomanni were driven out of Pannonia and almost destroyed in their retreat across the Danube; and in A.D. 174 the emperor gained a great victory over the Quadi.

In A.D. 175, Avidius Cassius, a brave and skilful Roman commander who was at the head of the troops in Asia, revolted, and declared himself Augustus. But Cassius was assassinated by some of his

officers, and so the rebellion came to an end. Antoninus showed his humanity by his treatment of the family and the partisans of Cassius; and his letter to the Senate, in which he recommends mercy, is extant. (Vulcatius, Avidius Cassius, c. 12.)

Antoninus set out for the East on hearing of Cassius' revolt. Though he appears to have returned to Rome in A.D. 174, he went back to prosecute the war against the Germans, and it is probable that he marched direct to the East from the German war. His wife Faustina, who accompanied him into Asia, died suddenly at the foot of the Taurus, to the great grief of her husband. Capitolinus, who has written the life of Antoninus, and also Dion Cassius, accuses the empress of scandalous infidelity to her husband, and of abominable lewdness. But Capitolinus says that Antoninus either knew it not or pretended not to know it. Nothing is so common as such malicious reports in all ages, and the history of imperial Rome is full of them. Antoninus loved his wife, and he says that she was "obedient, affectionate, and simple." The same scandal had been spread about Faustina's mother, the wife of Antoninus Pius, and yet he too was perfectly satisfied with his wife. Antoninus Pius says after her death, in a letter to Fronto, that he would rather have lived in exile with his wife than in his palace at Rome without her. There are not many men who would give their wives a better character than these two emperors. Capitolinus wrote in the time of Diocletian. He may have intended to tell the truth, but he is a poor, feeble biographer. Dion Cassius, the most malignant of historians, always reports, and perhaps he believed, any scandal against anybody.

Antoninus continued his journey to Syria and Egypt, and on his return to Italy through Athens he was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries.

It was the practice of the emperor to conform to the established rites of the age, and to perform religious ceremonies with due solemnity. We cannot conclude from this that he was a superstitious man, though we might perhaps do so if his book did not show that he was not. But that is only one among many instances that a ruler's public acts do not always prove his real opinions. A prudent governor will not roughly oppose even the superstitions of his people; and though he may wish they were wiser, he will know that he cannot make them so by offending their prejudices.

Antoninus and his son Commodus entered Rome in triumph, perhaps for some German victories, on the 23d. of December, A.D. 176. In the following year Commodus was associated with his father in the empire, and took the name of Augustus. This year A.D. 177 is memorable in ecclesiastical history. Attalus and others were put to death at Lyon for their adherence to the Christian religion. The evidence of this persecution is a letter preserved by Eusebius (E.H. V. I; printed in Routh's Reliquiae Sacrae, vol. i, with notes). The letter is from the Christians of Vienna and Lugdunum in Gallia (Vienna and Lyon) to their Christian brethren in Asia and Phrygia; and it is preserved perhaps nearly entire. It contains a very particular description of the tortures inflicted on the Christians in Gallia, and it states that while the persecution was going on, Attalus, a Christian and a Roman citizen, was loudly demanded by the populace and brought into the amphitheatre; but the governor ordered him to be reserved, with the rest who were in prison, until he had received instructions from the emperor. Many had been tortured before the governor thought of applying to Antoninus. The imperial rescript, says the letter, was that the Christians should be punished, but if they

would deny their faith, they must be released. On this the work began again. The Christians who were Roman citizens were beheaded; the rest were exposed to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre. Some modern writers on ecclesiastical history, when they use this letter, say nothing of the wonderful stories of the martyrs' sufferings. Sanctus, as the letter says, was burnt with plates of hot iron till his body was one sore and had lost all human form; but on being put to the rack he recovered his former appearance under the torture, which was thus a cure instead of a punishment. He was afterwards torn by beasts, and placed on an iron chair and roasted. He died at last.

The letter is one piece of evidence. The writer, whoever he was that wrote in the name of the Gallic Christians, is our evidence both for the ordinary and the extraordinary circumstances of the story, and we cannot accept his evidence for one part and reject the other. We often receive small evidence as a proof of a thing we believe to be within the limits of probability or possibility, and we reject exactly the same evidence, when the thing to which it refers appears very improbable or impossible. But this is a false method of inquiry, though it is followed by some modern writers, who select what they like from a story and reject the rest of the evidence; or if they do not reject it, they dishonestly suppress it. A man can only act consistently by accepting all this letter or rejecting it all, and we cannot blame him for either. But he who rejects it may still admit that such a letter may be founded on real facts; and he would make this admission as the most probable way of accounting for the existence of the letter; but if, as he would suppose, the writer has stated some things falsely, he cannot tell what part of his story is worthy of credit.

The war on the northern frontier appears to have been uninterrupted

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