

# The Severan Salutatio: Re-evaluating the Severan Age

## Introduction

The Severan Age is still often seen as one where the emperors ruled through soldiers in an untraditional fashion and prepared the ground for the subsequent developments under the soldier emperors.<sup>1</sup> A connected development is the alleged rise of the equestrians and side-lining of the senators. This would suggest that the ritual interactions between emperor and senators became less important in this period and Schöpe has indeed argued precisely this for the *salutatio*. The *salutatio* was an important ritualised early morning greeting that happened daily and in the imperial period, the emperor likewise had daily *salutationes*. Before the Severans, the *salutatio* had become increasingly formalised as participation in this ritual became less tied to personal relations with the emperor and was instead decided by traditional status based on factors such as offices, ancestry and age. Schöpe's chapter on the Severan *salutatio*, the only extensive work on this topic, clearly draws on the common negative perception of the Severans as he argues that the *salutatio* in this period underwent fundamental changes: Schöpe argues that the Severans removed the dominance of traditional status at the *salutatio* and that personal relations with the emperor came to dominate the hierarchy of this ritual instead.

However, there are grounds for questioning this interpretation. I have elsewhere argued that the available direct descriptions of the Severan *salutatio* suggest that this ritual was in fact not changed drastically under the Severans. I have put this evidence on the hand-out and will be happy to discuss it after the paper. However, these descriptions of the Severan *salutatio* are few in number and I will therefore today employ a different route to understanding the Severan *salutatio*. Recent research and the conferences of the Dio-network have demonstrated that Dio was a sophisticated and often consistent historian with independent interpretations. I will use this insight to analyse the language Dio used to describe the *salutatio* and through this further support the argument that the Severans retained a traditional *salutatio*: I will show that Dio consistently uses ἀσπάζομαι for formalised, traditional *salutationes* but also consistently deviates from this usage if the occasion is not

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<sup>1</sup> This position goes all the way back to Gibbon 1776. For newer restatements, see e.g. Sommer 2004, 23-29; Montalbò 2013, 344-346. For a good overview of the older research on the Severan period, see Walser 1973.

sufficiently formalised and traditional. This consistency of Dio's language when describing the *salutatio* is important as Dio in the Severan period only uses ἀσπάζομαι for *salutationes*. This indicates that the *salutatio* had not undergone fundamental changes in this period and that the senators continued to have a privileged and formalised position in this ritual.

Such a traditional *salutatio* with a formalised and privileged position for the senators in the Severan Age would nuance both the critical perception of the Severans as breakers of tradition and the supposed senatorial decline in the face of increasing equestrian power in this period.

## Analysis

The ancient sources, both Greek and Latin, generally employed a multitude of different words and phrases to denote the ritual of the *salutatio*. Especially Greek authors use a variety of expressions and words of which the most common are ἀσπάζομαι and θεραπεύω but also προσαγορεύω and different expressions denoting the process of going to someone's house are employed. Dio, by contrast, is strikingly exclusive in his language regarding the *salutatio* as he practically only uses ἀσπάζομαι. Furthermore, it is important to note that he was well-placed to evaluate the Severan *salutatio* since he, as a senator, presumably participated in this ritual.

Firstly, it is important to note that Dio never clearly mentions a *salutatio* for the Republican period. *Salutationes* were certainly important in this period<sup>2</sup> and Dio surely had the possibility of including these. For example, in relation to the assassination attempt on Cicero orchestrated by Catiline, both Cicero in his first Catilinarian Oration and Sallust explicitly assert that this was supposed to happen during a *salutatio*.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Plutarch clearly writes that the assassination attempt was planned to happen during a *salutatio* (1): Catiline “ordered Marcius and Cethegus to take their swords and go early in the morning to the house of Cicero on the pretence of greeting him (ἀσπασομένουσ)”<sup>4</sup> Plutarch talks of going in the early morning to the doors of Cicero and he uses ἀσπάζομαι, which quite clearly suggests that this is a *salutatio*. Thus, all sources that treat this event at some length assert that Cicero was to be murdered at the *salutatio*. Dio, by contrast, writes that the assassins (2) “promised to rush into Cicero's house at daybreak and murder him there.”<sup>5</sup> Dio, then, excludes any mention of *salutationes* here. Likewise, in relation to Cicero's rivalry with Clodius, Dio writes that Cicero (3) “went about in the garb of the knights, paying court (ἐθεράπευε)

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<sup>2</sup> Goldbeck 2010, 188-262

<sup>3</sup> Cic. Catil. 1.9; Sall. Cat. 28.1.

<sup>4</sup> Plut. Cic. 16.1.

<sup>5</sup> Cass. Dio 37.32.4.

meanwhile, as he went the rounds, day and night alike, to all who had any influence”.<sup>6</sup> Dio again refrains from mentioning the *salutatio*, although Cicero surely used these to gain influence, and Dio instead employs the vague ἔθεράπευε. It thus appears that Dio did not view the Republican *salutatio* as important in contrast to the imperial *salutatio* on which Dio focuses consistently. This is striking since scholarship generally asserts that it was exactly the Republican *salutatio* that had broader significance, while the imperial *salutatio* was an unimportant manifestation of the emperor’s power.

That Dio appears to have purposefully ignored the Republican *salutationes* is supported by the fact that Dio is consistently focused on the imperial *salutatio* and mentions it repeatedly. In this connection, Dio is highly consistent in his language of the *salutatio* as he practically refrains from using προσαγορεύω, θεραπεύω or verbal expressions and instead uses ἀσπάζομαι for formalised traditional *salutationes*.

However, ἀσπάζομαι is also often used to denote generic greetings and an analysis of Dio’s use of this word is therefore important. Dio uses ἀσπάζομαι 38 times and 22 of these refer more generally to a greeting. However, it is striking that 14 instances of this word, that is 37%, refer specifically to the *salutatio*.<sup>7</sup> In 1 case, it is unclear whether the word refers to a *salutatio* or a greeting.<sup>8</sup> Only once does ἀσπάζομαι not mean a greeting or a *salutatio*, namely in Cicero’s speech against Antony in Book 45 (4): “Did we order you to salute (ἀσπάσασθαί) any one as king?”<sup>9</sup> This might appear to contradict Dio’s general use of ἀσπάζομαι. However, it is important to note that it is inserted in a speech and might therefore be explained by embedded focalisation. This is a technique where speakers are made to use words appropriate to the individual and the historical situation,<sup>10</sup> and it is used frequently by Dio. Thus for example Dio’s Agrippa in his speech to Augustus portrays φιλοτιμία as a positive aspect of human nature although Dio in his previous narrative had shown φιλοτιμία to be inherently destructive. The atypical use of ἀσπάσασθαί by Dio’s Cicero should, then, be seen as something related to this particular speech and not to Dio’s broader use of ἀσπάζομαι. Once we remove this outlier, Dio only uses ἀσπάζομαι for either generic greetings or for the ritualised greeting of the *salutatio*.

This consistency in Dio’s language is further supported by Dio’s use of another word that could potentially be used to denote the *salutatio*, namely προσαγορεύω. The contemporary Herodian, for

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<sup>6</sup> Cass. Dio 38.14.7.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio 41.9.3, 56.26.2.

<sup>8</sup> Cass. Dio 56.1.1, 56.41.6. These greetings in the Senate by Augustus could be seen as an alternative form of *salutatio* in a time where this ritual had not been formalised.

<sup>9</sup> Cass Dio 45.32.2.

<sup>10</sup> This is the technique espoused by Thucydides: 1.22. On embedded focalisation, see also De Jong 2004, 113.

example, clearly uses *προσαγορεύω* for the *salutatio*, as exemplified in his narrative of Maximinus Thrax (5): “Some people had not yet come out, and others had already gone home after making their morning calls at dawn (*προσαγορεύσαντες*).”<sup>11</sup> Due to the context, this appears quite clearly to be a *salutatio*. Dio, by contrast, never employs *προσαγορεύω* for the *salutatio*. Instead, he uses *προσαγορεύω* 34 times and out of these, 32 instances refer to names of things or to acclamations of someone, for example as emperor.<sup>12</sup> Only twice is *προσαγορεύω* used to mean a greeting but never in the context of a *salutatio*.<sup>13</sup> Dio thus appears to have consciously rejected *προσαγορεύω* as a potential word for describing the *salutatio* in contrast to his contemporary Herodian.

Lastly, Dio also rejects *θεραπεύω* as a word to describe the *salutatio*: He uses the word 63 times of which 47 mean “to pay court” or “to flatter” in different ways,<sup>14</sup> while the rest refer to “curing”, “worshipping” or “treating”.<sup>15</sup> This word in Dio thus covers a range of interrelated meanings. Importantly, however, Dio never uses it to refer to the *salutatio*. This contrasts with the contemporary Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonius*. In this work, Apollonius walks to the imperial palace (6) and, “standing outside the palace, he saw some people receiving flattery and others paying it (*θεραπευομένους ὀρῶν, τοὺς δὲ θεραπεύοντας*), and the hubbub of people going in and out, at which he said: This place, Damis, seems to me like a bathhouse. I see those outside hurrying to get in and those inside hurrying to get out, and some look washed and others unwashed.”<sup>16</sup> The above appears to be a *salutatio* as shown by the throng of people waiting to be called inside the palace. Furthermore, Philostratus is polemical here and it is important to note the language that he employs to this end, namely *θεραπεύω*. This word appears to carry a negative meaning when employed in relation to the *salutatio*. Dio instead uses the neutral *ἀσπάζομαι* which shows that Dio, a participant in the Severan *salutatio*, did not view this ritual as merely flattery.

Dio thus consistently refrains from using *θεραπεύω* and *προσαγορεύω* for *salutationes*, except in embedded focalisation. This is striking since his contemporaries Philostratus and Herodian both employ *θεραπεύω* and *προσαγορεύω* and Dio’s predecessors had likewise used alternatives to *ἀσπάζομαι*. It thus appears that Dio consciously chose to be consistent in his description of traditional and formalised *salutationes* by refraining from using *θεραπεύω* and *προσαγορεύω*. However, Dio does in fact deviate five times from his use of *ἀσπάζομαι* to denote *salutationes*. In

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<sup>11</sup> Her. 7.6.8.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio 38.23.1, 41.42.7.

<sup>13</sup> Cass. Dio 59.7.6, 60.33.4. These instances can arguably be attributed to *variatio* since a form of *ἀσπάζομαι* in both cases is close by.

<sup>14</sup> Cass. Dio 36.22.5, 37.22.1.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Cass. Dio 40.8.1, 45.35.4, 50.24.6.

<sup>16</sup> Phil. *Apol.* 7.31.2.

all five cases, Dio seemingly deviates because he did not perceive these particular instances of *salutationes* as sufficiently traditional and formalised to merit the use of ἀσπάζομαι.

The first example is set in Tiberius' idealising funeral speech of Augustus (7): "How could one forget to mention a man [...] who on holidays admitted (προσδεξαμένου) even the populace to his house"?<sup>17</sup> Since we know that the *salutationes* on special holidays or festivals were grander, more inclusive affairs where the populace could be incorporated,<sup>18</sup> it would seem that Dio is referring to such an event here. Furthermore, such festive *salutationes* appear the only explanation as to why Augustus would repeatedly invite the populace to his house on holidays. That Dio is here referring to special holiday-*salutationes* might, in turn, explain why Dio is not using ἀσπάζομαι. It seems that Dio did not deem it fitting to describe Augustus' special holiday *salutatio* through ἀσπάζομαι since this affair was not formalised and traditional enough.

Three other deviations from Dio's normal use of ἀσπάζομαι for *salutationes* are set in the time of the praetorian prefect Sejanus where Dio uses phrases to denote the *salutatio*. Dio first writes how (8) "the leading citizens [...] regularly went to and from his house at dawn (ἐξ τε τὴν οἰκίαν [...] ἐφοίτων)"<sup>19</sup> and how there was "rivalry and jostling about the great man's doors (περὶ τὰς θύρας αὐτοῦ)".<sup>20</sup> Dio's assertion that these men went there regularly at dawn suggests that this is in the context of a *salutatio*. Likewise, the emphasis on the jostling at Sejanus' doors parallels Philostratus' previously mentioned description and suggests that this is also a *salutatio*. Lastly, Dio writes that (9) "on a New Year's day, when all were assembling at Sejanus' house, the couch that stood in the room which is used for receptions (ἐν τῷ δωματίῳ, ἐν ᾧ ἡσπάζετο) utterly collapsed under the weight of the throng seated upon it".<sup>21</sup> Dio does here use ἡσπάζετο but it is not used specifically for Sejanus' *salutatio*. Rather, Dio uses it to denote the room in which *salutationes* normally took place and the *salutatio* itself is again described via a phrase, namely "assembling at Sejanus' house". Dio thus consistently deviates from his normal use of ἀσπάζομαι in relation to Sejanus' *salutatio*.

Importantly, this contrasts clearly with the unambiguous depiction in Tacitus. This Roman historian calls Sejanus' *salutatio* a (quote) "*salutantur turba*"<sup>22</sup> and thus uses standard Latin vocabulary to describe it. Dio, then, appears to have purposefully deviated from both the parallel

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<sup>17</sup> Cass. Dio 56.41.5.

<sup>18</sup> Winterling 1999, 125-127.

<sup>19</sup> Cass. Dio 57.21.4. Adapted from Cary 1914-1927.

<sup>20</sup> Cass. Dio 58.5.2.

<sup>21</sup> Cass. Dio 58.5.5.

<sup>22</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4.41.

sources and his own normally exclusive use of ἀσπάζομαι in relation to Sejanus' *salutationes*. Arguably, Dio did not view the *salutatio* of a praetorian prefect under Tiberius as sufficiently formalised and traditional to merit the use of ἀσπάζομαι. That this is indeed the case is further supported by Dio's use of ἀσπάζομαι to describe the *salutatio* of the praetorian prefect Plautianus under Septimius Severus: He writes of (10) "those who came to greet Plautianus (ἀσπαζομένων)".<sup>23</sup> It is generally argued that the *salutatio* became increasingly formalised, at least up until the Severans. It appears that Dio's language is tied to this formalisation and that it continued in the Severan Age since Dio clearly refrains from describing the *salutatio* of a praetorian prefect through ἀσπάζομαι under Tiberius but uses this word for the praetorian prefect Plautianus under Severus.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, Dio seems to refrain from using ἀσπάζομαι if the *salutatio* was not sufficiently formalised and traditional.

That Dio consistently chose not to use ἀσπάζομαι about certain *salutationes* that in his eyes lacked formalisation is supported by his description of Vespasian's new second *salutatio* where a small select group before the general *salutatio* was admitted on the basis of personal relations with the emperor. Suetonius writes that Vespasian (11) "admitted his friends, and while he was receiving their greetings (*salutabatur*) [...] he dressed himself."<sup>25</sup> Suetonius thus uses standard Latin vocabulary for this new second *salutatio*. This is mirrored by Aurelius Victor who likewise describes this new *salutatio* using a form of *salutare*.<sup>26</sup> Dio, by contrast, merely writes that Vespasian (12) "would hold converse even before dawn while lying in bed with his intimate friends."<sup>27</sup> This is clearly the same new *salutatio* as described by Suetonius and Victor but Dio deviates drastically from the parallel sources not only by not using ἀσπάζομαι but by not even describing this as a *salutatio* at all.

The reason for this might be gleaned from Dio's narrative of Marcus Aurelius: The second more intimate *salutatio* started by Vespasian became a standard part of the overall *salutatio*. By the time of Marcus Aurelius, this second *salutatio* had become formalised to a degree where not personal relations with the emperor, as under Vespasian, but traditional status became the key factor for deciding participation.<sup>28</sup> This process of formalisation is mirrored in Dio's narrative: (13) Marcus Aurelius "used always to greet the most worthy men (ἠσπάζετό τε τοὺς ἀξιωτάτους) in the House of

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<sup>23</sup> Cass. Dio (Xiph.) 77.5.3.

<sup>24</sup> Cass. Dio (Xiph.) 77.5.3-4. As argued by Winterling 1999, 117-144.

<sup>25</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 21.

<sup>26</sup> Victor 9.15.

<sup>27</sup> Cass. Dio (Xiph.) 65.10.5. Adapted from Cary 1914-1927.

<sup>28</sup> Winterling 1999, 134-135.

Tiberius, [...] receiving them in the very apartment where he slept.”<sup>29</sup> Since Dio uses ἡσπάζετο and since he stresses that this event happened consistently, it appears that this is a *salutatio*. Furthermore, the fact that Marcus received people “where he slept” shows that this is the second more intimate *salutatio* instituted by Vespasian. It is striking that Dio here quite clearly portrays this as a *salutatio* and uses ἀσπάζομαι. It thus appears that Dio’s language mirrors the process of formalisation since he refuses to use ἀσπάζομαι about the second *salutatio* when it was instituted but then elects to employ exactly this word after the second *salutatio* had been formalised and had become a traditional part of the overall *salutatio*.

## Conclusion

Thus, based on Dio’s language of the *salutatio*, his narrative appears finely tuned to reflect the increasing formalisation of this ritual: Firstly, Dio’s consistency in his use of ἀσπάζομαι for the *salutatio* in itself suggests that Dio viewed this not merely as an undistinguishable part of the broader interaction with the emperor but as a distinctive, formalised ritual in itself. Secondly, Dio appears highly selective as he consistently uses ἀσπάζομαι only of formalised and traditional *salutationes*: Thus, Augustus’ holiday *salutatio* is not described through this word and on three different occasions, Dio likewise refrains from using ἀσπάζομαι for the *salutatio* of Sejanus. However, after a long process of formalisation, Plautianus’ *salutatio* is indeed described through ἀσπάζομαι. Furthermore, the novel second *salutatio* of Vespasian is not even described as a *salutatio* by Dio in contrast to the parallel sources. However, the exact same ritual, after undergoing formalisation and becoming a traditional part of the *salutatio*, is described through ἀσπάζομαι by Dio during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Dio’s language thus appears to mirror the process of formalisation for the *salutatio* as Dio only uses ἀσπάζομαι for traditional and formalised *salutationes*.

This insight becomes absolutely central when exploring the Severan *salutatio* through Dio, since 5 out of 14 instances of *salutationes* described through ἀσπάζομαι are incorporated in Dio’s short and abbreviated narrative of the Severan period.<sup>30</sup> In fact, all *salutationes* of the Severan Age are described through ἀσπάζομαι. This not only continued but greatly increased use of ἀσπάζομαι for Severan *salutationes* in itself indicates that the *salutatio* continued its formalised form and did not undergo fundamental changes in this period. Essentially, Dio’s continuity of language to describe the *salutatio* in the Severan Age indicates a continuity in the functioning of this ritual – a clear

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<sup>29</sup> Cass. Dio (Xiph.) 72.35.4.

<sup>30</sup> Cass. Dio (Xiph.) 75.3.2, 77.5.3, 78.17.4, 78.18.3, 80.14.4, 80.15.1.

contrast with current scholarly opinions. As previously mentioned, I have elsewhere argued that this continuity is likewise borne out by the direct descriptions of the *salutatio*, placed on the hand-in. However, it is absolutely central for supporting this position that Dio likewise appears to have perceived the *salutationes* of the Severan Age as traditional. This is especially important since Dio through his position as a senator and participant in the Severan *salutationes* was exceptionally well-positioned to note changes in these. Thus, the analysis of Dio's language of the *salutatio* not only facilitates our use of him as a source but also illuminates the perception of the *salutatio* among the actual participants in the Severan Age.

Firstly, this nuances the supposed rise of the equestrians and connected side-lining of the senators in this period as the senators through the unchanged *salutatio* could count on consistent status manifestation and influence even under supposedly hostile emperors. Secondly, this re-evaluation of the Severan *salutatio* suggests that the Severans continued to use this ritual in a traditional form, which in turn provided dynastic legitimacy and authority. This constitutes a clear continuity with the Antonines and undermines the common position that the Severans merely based their power on the soldiers and through this prepared the ground for the soldier emperors.