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**MARCUS
AURELIUS**

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Preface

Another *Companion* . . . At the beginning, the idea of editing a *Companion to Marcus Aurelius* seemed to be unattractive to me. Colleagues pointed out that this would imply an enormous amount of work and that there are already many, if not too many, companions. Not really amazed by the fact that the latter was mentioned even by those who had already edited (or written for) a companion, I started a survey that revealed to me that the initial idea was not about editing *another* companion on Marcus, but the first one. That changed my mind and I quickly realized that all of my colleagues were quite right about the amount of work this project meant. On the one hand, I had to plan the volume without being able to glance at previous companions to Marcus Aurelius and on the other, I envisaged a volume bringing together as many disciplines as necessary in order to present as much as possible of Marcus Aurelius. Therefore, I would not have been able to start or finish this without the help of many kinds of persons and I would like to thank at least some of them.

The most important gratitude belongs to the contributors. They wrote the volume, so it is theirs, not mine. As this volume tries to gather perspectives from many academic disciplines, and I am only a historian of philosophy, I sometimes was in need of the expertise of the contributors, on which to base my editorial decisions. Many contributors were enthusiastic about the volume and supported me by making helpful suggestions.

Christopher Gill was the first to convince me that such a companion would be a good idea. He intensively discussed my plans for the volume and my own work on Marcus with me. All of this was very helpful.

The Fritz Thyssen Foundation generously financed a three-year research period devoid of any administrative or otherwise distracting duties and thereby enabled me to develop my own ideas on Marcus' *Meditations* and to work on this volume.

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Though all the credit for the content of the book belongs to the contributors, without Mareike Hauer and Lee Klein there would be no book, but only an enormous amount of emails and digital files. They transformed all of this into uniform chapters and finally into a book.

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Marcel van Ackeren

Abbreviations

<i>AE</i>	<i>L'Année Épigraphique</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CRAI</i>	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres</i>
<i>FGrHist</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>Historia Augusta</i>
<i>HRR</i>	<i>Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
<i>IGR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
<i>IMS</i>	<i>Inscriptions de la Mésie supérieure</i>
<i>Inscr.It.</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Italiae</i>
<i>IvEph</i>	<i>Inschriften von Ephesos</i>
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i>
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>MIR</i>	<i>Moneta Imperii Romani</i>
<i>MSS</i>	<i>Manuscripts</i>
<i>OGIS</i>	<i>Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae</i>
<i>PIR</i>	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i>
<i>RIC</i>	<i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i>
<i>RIT</i>	<i>Römische Inschriften von Tarraco</i>
<i>RIU</i>	<i>Die Römischen Inschriften Ungarns</i>
<i>RMD</i>	<i>Roman Military Diplomas</i>
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>SIG</i>	<i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i>
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>
<i>ThesCRA</i>	<i>Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum</i>
<i>TitAq</i>	<i>Tituli Aquincenses</i>
<i>TRH</i>	<i>Tituli Romani in Hungaria reperti</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

The Study of Marcus Aurelius

Introduction

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Marcus Annius Verus was born in April, AD 121, at Rome. Under his later name, Marcus Aurelius, he is still a well known figure. How do we account for that? He was heir to the throne for 23 years (from 138) and then Roman emperor (from 161 until his death in 180). However, not all Roman emperors are as well known as Marcus beyond the small circle of ancient historians. Marcus Aurelius was also a philosopher; in fact the last important Stoic philosopher of antiquity. His philosophical work – the *Meditations* – is one of the most widely read philosophical texts from antiquity (it is not read only by scholars). Images of him, such as the equestrian statue, are familiar icons that have often been copied and which have inspired subsequent artworks. From Cassius Dio (71.1.1) and Herodian (*History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus 2, 10, 3*) to Machiavelli (*Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy I, ch. 10*) and modern rulers, he has been considered a paragon of a good political leader. Especially since early modern times, ruling politicians, for instance Frederick the Great or Bill Clinton, have wanted to be known as enthusiastic readers of Marcus' work and have announced that Marcus is their favorite philosopher and their paradigm (whatever that means and whatever consequences that might have had – or not had – on their own actions). The figure of Marcus Aurelius has even featured in popular novels (*The World According to Garp* by John Irving) and Hollywood blockbusters (*The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) and *Gladiator* (2000)).

1. The Conjunction of Philosophy and Politics

Marcus' reception and reputation does not rest on the two independent pillars of being an emperor and being a philosopher. It is their combination that intrigues, and has always intrigued. Most famous and influential was Plato's demand for philosopher-kings (*Republic* 473c–e). The 'conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophic intelligence' can be obtained in two ways, for 'either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately'. During his reign, Marcus quickly gained a reputation as the personification of a conjunction of this sort.

At first glance it is easy to see why this is so. Marcus was born into a rich and politically influential family, and his ancestors had already held high office; however, this fact alone would not have guaranteed that he became emperor. At a very young age, Marcus won the favor of Hadrian, which might be explained – at least partially – by Marcus' character. Hadrian nicknamed him *Verissimus* (the most true, *HA Marcus* 1.10, 2.1). And it was Hadrian himself who picked Marcus for the highest office. When Hadrian adopted Antoninus Pius in order for Pius to become his successor, he made Pius adopt the young Marcus in order for Marcus to become Pius' successor (*HA Pius* 4.4–7). According to his biographer, young Marcus was not only an eager student of philosophy; he literally wanted to live like a philosopher (*HA Marcus* 6.1–4). From letters, which Marcus wrote to his Latin teacher Cornelius Fronto, we also know that he preferred (Stoic) philosophy to rhetoric, which was at that time a highly respected art (*Fronto* 1.1.214, 2.66.17). That Marcus was regarded as a special, philosophical ruler is highlighted in the *Historia Augusta*, by the fact that his biography is the only one with a title that does not only list his name but also characterizes him: *vita Marci Antonini philosophi* (Life of Marcus Antoninus the Philosopher).

Although Marcus allegedly liked to quote Plato's dictum (*HA Marcus* 27.7), we may not assume that Marcus was a Platonic philosopher-king or thought of himself as such. He was less ambitious:

So set to work, if you are able, and do not look around you to see if anyone will notice. You should not hope for Plato's ideal state, but be satisfied to make even the smallest advance. . . . The work of philosophy is simple and modest; do not seduce me into vain ostentation. (*Meditations* 9, 29)

In fact, it is not clear that Marcus thought of himself as a philosopher. In the *Meditations* he bluntly states that he had 'resigned any hopes of excelling in dialectics and natural philosophy' (7, 67). Though Marcus' education was excellent, he had to abandon his plans of a life devoted entirely to philosophy.

He knew that he could not have become a professional philosopher, and he was aware that the philosophers in Plato's *Republic* need more than five decades of training before they can engage in political affairs. Hence Marcus did not regard himself as sufficiently well educated to be a Platonic philosopher-king. But there are two more substantial reasons why Marcus was not a *Platonic* philosopher-king. Plato naturally assumed that it should be *Platonic* philosophy that guides our political affairs. However, Marcus was a Stoic philosopher. Marcus' contemporaries knew that he had philosophical ambitions; but the most important and detailed source of Marcus' philosophical convictions, the *Meditations*, was – as far as we know – a completely private work. We do not have any evidence that anybody else knew about its contents or even its existence before the end of the fourth century. It is only from the work itself that we (modern readers) know for certain that Marcus was definitely a Stoic philosopher. This conviction may have been in contrast to his public actions as emperor, since in this role he did not openly favor Stoicism over other philosophical schools or above rhetoric. As an emperor he was always eager to be impartial. He founded chairs of philosophy (for Platonists, Peripatetics, Epicureans, and Stoics) and rhetoric in Athens, which were enormously prestigious positions; however, Marcus did not pick the persons who held these chairs himself (Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 2.2.566). In public he even avoided criticizing the Sophists openly or arguing with them (Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 2.1.652–53). In the *Meditations* (1, 7; 1, 16; 6, 30), however, he shows he despised them. This already indicates that, in the case of Marcus, the relation between philosophy and politics is a complex one; although Marcus had clear-cut philosophical ambitions, he somehow concealed his firm convictions, probably for the sake of his political duties. This leads to the second reason why one should not too hastily assume that Marcus Aurelius was a *Platonic* philosopher-king: Plato called for a direct application of philosophy in the realm of politics. The objects of knowledge with which the philosopher has become acquainted were also supposed to function as paradigms, that is, guidelines for his policies. Knowledge will automatically turn into politics (*Respublica* 500a–501e).

It is open to question whether Marcus really thought that philosophy had this kind of direct and dominant impact on his reign. This is not the place to decide if we can find actual traces of his philosophy in his political decisions and to pinpoint influences. It is enough to claim that, from a methodological point of view, it is very difficult to find traces of his philosophical beliefs in his political and judicial decisions. Results are rare, despite the fact that we moderns are in a better position than Marcus' contemporaries, since we know the *Meditations*. It seems more plausible to think that Marcus had some kind of confidence in philosophy, or that the philosopher Marcus was supporting the emperor Marcus by stressing that one has to do one's duty, no matter what one's nature is or what place one has in society.

If it is not the strict Platonic version of the conjunction of philosophical intelligence and political power, what kind of combination of these two things made Marcus so attractive? Marcus personifies something that has been appealing for many centuries, in which the understanding both of politics and philosophy has changed substantially many times. Although the *Meditations* do not contain any narrative of specific events or references to the current state of affairs, Marcus clearly exhibited a certain type of character or attitude towards the world and politics. Also, according to historical sources, he managed to a large extent to live up to his ideals. Marcus was given the title of ‘Caesar’ in 140 (Dio 71.35.5; *HA Marcus* 6.3) and held it for more than 40 years, that is, for more than two-thirds of his life. However, in the *Meditations*, written after more than 30 years of being a Caesar, he still worries about the effects this might have on him:

Take care that you are not turned into a Caesar, that you are not stained with purple; for such things do come about. Keep yourself simple, then, and good and sincere, dignified, free from affection, a friend to justice, reverend to the gods, affectionate, and firm in performance of your duties. Struggle to remain such a man as philosophy wished to make you. Honour the Gods, protect your fellows. Life is short; and our earthly existence yields but a single harvest, a holy disposition and acts that serve the common good. (6, 30)

This commitment to doing his duty, simply and modestly, even when he was the most powerful person in the Roman Empire, could at least partially explain the attraction Marcus has had on readers in high-ranking positions and on those who longed for politicians like that. Thus, even if our judgments about Plato’s theory of philosopher-kings, Stoicism, and the absolute power of Roman emperors may have changed over time and are in any case matters of continuing debate, the idea that political leaders should fulfill some moral requirements and should have at least an ethically decent character is still very appealing. Consider the following quote as stark contrast: In 1948 Stalin was proofreading his *Short Biography*. In his own handwriting he added the following sentence:

Although he did his duty as leader of the party and the people with perfect virtuosity, . . . Stalin never allowed this perfection to be outshone by any kind of vanity or haughtiness or self-laudation. (Stalin (1947), 46; translation mine)

Instead of misusing his wide-ranging powers, Marcus had a philosophically based and serious interest in his character, his duty, and the world. If we compare Marcus with Stalin, and other examples of political degeneration or if we compare him with much better examples of leadership, many people can still appreciate Marcus’ attitude. But, leaving aside these speculations about why

Marcus Aurelius is still a popular figure today, let us turn to the picture of Marcus offered by recent scholarship.

2. Scholarship on Marcus Aurelius

The first and most important fact about academic literature on Marcus Aurelius is that there is no single body of research on Marcus. In the modern period, the academic world has become highly specialized and this applies to work on Marcus Aurelius.

Sometimes it is claimed that scholarship on ancient history has evolved, bringing a shift of focus from the great actions of major rulers to social structures and cultures. It is also sometimes stated that scholarship on ancient philosophy has shifted from focusing on certain central texts by major philosophers to exploring new topics and periods and neglected texts. If these generalizations are true, how do they bear on Marcus Aurelius and scholarship on him?

The first development has not affected the study of Marcus Aurelius. He might not be as important and influential as Julius Caesar or Augustus, but Marcus Aurelius still belongs to the group of so-called ‘great men of history’ who have fascinated people during their lifetime and have been remembered, or even achieved iconic status, afterwards. Correspondingly, academic interest in Marcus the emperor has been and remains lively. This also holds true for the various disciplines concerned with Marcus. There has been and still is ongoing research regarding coins, architecture, art, and epigraphy as well as the political, cultural, or judicial aspects of Marcus’ reign. Our knowledge of Marcus the emperor has deepened, partly due to new archaeological discoveries (for instance in Turkey or Austria), but also due to the ongoing and improved study of sources such as the *Historia Augusta* and the work of Cassius Dio.

As regards the second general trend noted earlier, the broadening of focus in the study of ancient philosophy, the position is more complex and uneven as regards work on Marcus’ *Meditations*. Since the earliest editions and translations, the *Meditations* have been widely read, if not being exactly popular. But there has not been corresponding scholarly interest, at least until very recently.

The older research was primarily interested in the form of the *Meditations* (e.g. Hirzel (1895)) and at same time often ignored or devaluated the content; it thus mirrored Seneca’s complaint that ‘what was philosophy has become philology (*quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est*)’ (*Epistula* 108, 23). The *Meditations* were taken to be ‘traditional in content, but original in form’ (Zuntz (1946)).

Even nowadays scholarship is often divided between philological and philosophical studies, each addressing their respective topics, and, until very recently, philological research was the overly dominant branch. And both

types of studies do not only provide analysis and accounts; they were also driven by evaluations. Judgments have been made about Marcus' capacities as an author, since some have admired the effect his self-addressed words can have on the reader, but more often his work has been regarded as dull, unimportant, badly written. A group of scholars did not rate Marcus the philosopher very highly for the contents of the book were explained in terms of the many bodily or psychological diseases its author is alleged to have had (see the summary in van Ackeren (2006) 54). And sometimes it has simply been denied that Marcus can be regarded as a philosopher, because the content and style of his *Meditations* are not what one expects from academic philosophy (for instance, Rist (1983)).

But there has been other, new, and stimulating research treating Marcus as a serious and interesting philosopher. After an important commentary by Farquharson (1944) and the brilliant study by Rutherford (1989), the works by P. Hadot (1998, original French 1992) have put Marcus Aurelius the philosopher on the agenda. In the modern context too, we have witnessed a renaissance of practical philosophy, in particular practical ethics. In turn the older interest in the ancient forms of life (see Rabbow (1954) and I. Hadot (1969)) was revived and turned in new directions (e.g. by Foucault (2005)). For these or independent reasons, Hellenistic philosophy and the Roman Stoics have been rehabilitated. Given these developments, it seems quite natural that scholars have finally engaged more fully with the philosophy of the *Meditations*. There also has been a growing interest in specific aspects of Marcus' philosophy, e.g. his anthropology and his notion of the relation of physics and ethics (e.g. Annas (2004); Gill (2007a and b)).

Nonetheless we still lack a unified scholarly account of Marcus Aurelius. And we do lack it in many respects. There is no unified description and analysis of his philosophy that pays attention to all aspects and no unified account of the relation of form and content of the *Meditations* (see the attempt in van Ackeren (2011)). There is no overall analysis of how his philosophy relates to other aspects and disciplines. This volume is the first to try to combine all this.

With Marcus Aurelius, there is more to be found than philosophy, politics, and possible connections between these two areas. There have been specialized studies of topics which go beyond these spheres. Usually, students and scholars alike approach their chosen topic from an angle which is specific to their discipline. This can be an effective method, for Marcus as for other topics, and the results speak for themselves. But closer scrutiny shows that Marcus Aurelius is special for another reason. He seems to be a unique figure because there are an extraordinary number of disciplines which bear on Marcus Aurelius: history, numismatics, epigraphy, sociology, archaeology, philosophy, history of law, art history, social studies, philology, political studies, theology, and religious studies. A situation of this kind, even with fewer disciplines involved, usually

leads to conferences and studies under headings such as ‘interdisciplinarity’, ‘multi-disciplinarity’, or ‘trans-disciplinarity’. Such terms imply the existence of quite distinct disciplines (an assumption which is not always valid). In the case of Marcus Aurelius it is obvious that research combining several academic disciplines is highly desirable. It is also clear that Marcus Aurelius has often been neglected from this standpoint (Barnes and Griffin (1997)) and attempts to form a synthesis are rare (Klein (1979) and van Ackeren, Boschung, and Opsomer (2012)). That is the rationale for the project of this *Companion*.

3. This Volume and Its Aims

As there is no previous collection that tries to give an overview of every essential facet of contemporary studies on Marcus Aurelius, this volume tries to fill that gap. Since it is a compendium, the volume has interdisciplinary ambitions, but it also aims to show the specialist work being done in different areas. Thus, some chapters necessarily overlap with others as regards the material or texts they refer to; but they are written from different angles, dealing with different questions which are sometimes specific to a certain academic discipline.

The first section of the book offers a study of the core source material for the history of Marcus’ life and reign, including the reports by Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*, archaeological evidence, Marcus’ own writings, such as the *Meditations* (including an account of its transmission) and the correspondence with Fronto, as well as the epigraphic record.

The second section seeks to locate Marcus’ life within his own time and place with special emphasis on the political situation and Marcus’ cultural and intellectual background.

The third section has as its main focus Marcus the emperor, discussing his legislation, jurisdiction, and administration, as well as the wars and revolts that had a considerable impact on his reign. Two chapters take up questions of special interest in connection with Marcus, on the relationship between politics and philosophy in his reign and on religion, especially Christianity. The final chapter of this section aims to give an overview of the state of the Roman Empire after Marcus’ death.

Discussions of the various types of material representation of Marcus Aurelius constitute the fourth section. The column of Marcus Aurelius, the equestrian statue, coins, statues, and busts are discussed in separate chapters.

The fifth section is devoted to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. This will discuss the form and structure of Marcus’ text, its style and character as a kind of autobiography; the question is also raised whether the work has an oral dimension. As Marcus was a Stoic philosopher, three chapters will consider Marcus’ place within the Stoic tradition and explore his views on the main

branches of Stoic philosophy, that is, physics, logic, and ethics. Key features of his thought, namely social ethics and politics as well as questions concerning the idea of self in the *Meditations* are treated in further chapters.

The sixth and final section is devoted to the reception of Marcus Aurelius, considering to what extent he was seen as a good emperor in late antiquity and in medieval times and studying how the first translations and commentaries have contributed to the popular image of Marcus. The last two chapters examine his reception in early modern philosophy, especially in Neostoicism, and Marcus' role in contemporary philosophy.

FURTHER READING

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