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THE OPIUM ADDICTION OF MARCUS AURELIUS

BY THOMAS W. AFRICA

Able monarchs being few and rarely saints, posterity has made the most of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus,¹ who, torn from his books, herded the Roman world amid mutiny, pestilence, and invasion, and embodied the ideal of the responsible philosopher-king far better than Dion, the Platonist turned tyrant. Unlike the paragon Severus Alexander,² Marcus Aurelius was plausible and both the Stoa and Rome claim credit for his austere virtue and devotion to duty. His failings, too, were Roman.³ Avoiding the vices of Octavian, he succumbed to the virtues of Augustus, respecting the gods and trusting in heredity, and abandoned the proven policy of succession through adoption to pass the purple unto an unworthy son.⁴ Similarly, he indulged the extravagance of his colleague, Verus, and ignored the infidelities of his own wife, Faustina.⁵ Stoic forbearance and Roman family pride do not account for such domestic myopia in the ruler who repelled barbarian invaders and quelled the formidable revolt of Avidius Cassius. The testimony of his physician and his own notebooks suggest that a wall of narcotics insulated the emperor from family disorders and all but public calamities.

Though the anecdotes of his life have the brittle quality of hagiography, Marcus displayed a consistent pattern of somber reserve and distaste for lesser mortals. A solemn child,⁶ he was overshadowed by the popular but shallow Verus. In an adolescent conversion, he adopted the dress and regimen of a Cynic ascetic⁷ and managed to avoid homosexual entanglements,⁸

¹ The most lyric expression of this veneration is Matthew Arnold's celebrated essay on "the most beautiful figure in history." Jacob Burckhardt included "among the imperishable ideal figures of antiquity the Stoic philosopher seated upon the throne of the world." *The Age of Constantine the Great*, translated by Moses Hadas (New York, 1949), 16.

² SHA Sev Alex 27.5-10; 30.1-3. Gibbon recognized this paradigm of accomplishments as "the mere idea of a perfect prince, an awkward imitation of the Cyropaedia." *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, (London, 1909), I, 171 n. 95. More recently Norman Baynes has proposed the emperor Julian as the model for Severus Alexander. *The Historia Augusta, Its Date and Purpose* (Oxford, 1926).

³ MA II 5; III 5.

⁴ Marcus absolved erring kin who required love though they strayed—XI 9; VIII 4; IX 42; X 4. Dio Cassius, however, observed that with Commodus Rome passed from a kingdom of gold to one of rust and iron (Dio 71.36.4).

⁵ Though conceding that Verus was the model of what not to be (I 17.4; cf. SHA Marc 15.3), Marcus proclaimed Faustina "docile and affectionate" (I 17.7) and played his cuckold's rôle with Stoic patience (SHA Marc 29.1-3) and perhaps a dash of worldly wisdom—the empire was "Faustina's dowry" (19.7-9; 29.6).

⁶ *Fuit a prima infantia gravis*. SHA Marc 2.1.

⁷ MA I 6; SHA Marc 2.6.

⁸ MA I 16; 17.6.

remaining uneasily celibate⁹ until his marriage to the vivacious daughter of Antoninus Pius. Repelled by the fetes of Verus and the escapades of Faustina, Marcus stood aloof and apart, yearning for the calm security of the philosopher's rôle. Both in anticipation and execution, he detested his imperial office,¹⁰ despising the sham power of his predecessors and the grotesque behavior of his colleague. As a Stoic, Marcus accepted the spiritual damnation of the mass of humanity¹¹ who lacked the spark of Divine Reason reserved for the Stoic elect;¹² as a Roman conservative, he was obliged to stay within the bounds of legislative tradition. Ruling was not an opportunity to ameliorate the absurdities and cruelties of the world, but rather a bondage to unworthy masters to whom the Stoic emperor was an unhappy shepherd and imperial slave.¹³

"Beware, lest you too be made a Caesar,"¹⁴ the philosopher warned, for his elevation was not only an odious honor but he acquired the opium habit in the bargain. Since Attalus III of Pergamum had researched the effects of toxins on condemned criminals,¹⁵ anxious monarchs had employed preventive antidotes against the possibility of poison administered by unscrupulous enemies or impatient relatives, and the great Mithridates Eupator became a legendary habitu  of immunizing drugs containing minute quantities of toxic material.¹⁶ Though based on sympathetic magic, some compounds may have been effective, if not to protect, at least to reassure a stricken ruler that he was receiving the latest scientific treatment. Nero's physician, Andromachus, is credited with adding viper's flesh to *mithridatium* possibly improving the flavor but hardly the efficacy of the potion which was then called *theriac*.¹⁷ As emperor, Marcus Aurelius took

⁹ MA I 17.2. He was disturbed by Benedicta, probably Hadrian's concubine (17.6), and entered Hadrian's household with reluctance (SHA Marc 5.3-4).

¹⁰ MA VI 30.

¹¹ MA XI 18.11; V 17.

¹² MA XI 18.1. Marcus preferred the stars (XI 27), the visible gods (XII 28), who saw mankind in proper perspective (XII 24).

¹³ Marcus considered himself "a ram over sheep" (XI 18.1), "a spider catching flies," and "a bandit catching Sarmatians" (X 10).

¹⁴ MA VI 30.

¹⁵ The basic text on antidotes is Galen, *de Antidotis* and *ad Pisonem de theriaca*, 1-209 and 210-294 in *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia*, ed. C. K hn, (Leipzig, 1827), vol. XIV. See Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science during the First Thirteen Centuries of Our Era* (New York, 1929), I, 171-172, and George Sarton, *A History of Science, Hellenistic Science and Culture in the Last Three Centuries B.C.* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 402-403.

¹⁶ Galen XIV 2. Appian (XII) XIV 111 claims that these prophylactics made it impossible for the king to achieve suicide with poison, a story repeated by M. Cary *CAH* IX 391. If Mithridates did try to end his life with poison, he had less faith in his famous diet of toxins than Appian, Cary, and Housman.

¹⁷ Galen XIV 2. Ancient pharmacy and chemistry were not adequate for the preparation of effective antitoxins, least of all by stewing snake meat which is not poisonous. Ingredients, such as opiates, were beneficial for ends other than the prime purpose of *theriac* which as a preventive antidote might possibly save a

the precaution of a daily dose of *theriac*, the effects of which are described by Galen:

Every day he took as much as an Egyptian *kyamos* with or without water or wine. When he found himself getting drowsy at his duties, he had the poppy-juice removed [from the compound]. But, then, he was unable to sleep at night . . . [Galen explains that this was because his dry Humor was predominant]. So he was obliged to have recourse again to the compound which contained poppy-juice, since this was now habitual with him.¹⁸

What Galen ascribes to dry humors, a modern physician will recognize as the severe disturbances of opium "withdrawal." Galen placed the unsuccessful attempt to discontinue opium during a campaign on the Danube,¹⁹ where the emperor was apparently employing heavier dosages to combat the weather and strain of winter warfare. Dio Cassius corroborates the analgesic effects of *theriac*:

He could not stand the cold or even address the assembled troops and ate very little and only at night. During the day he took nothing but some of the drug called *theriac* which he used, not because he was afraid [of poison], but in order to ease his stomach and his chest. They say that this habit made it possible for him to endure this and other things.²⁰

Frail and sickly,²¹ Marcus lived with clenched fists,²² deeming life a desperate wrestling match²³ or a daily death in the beast pit.²⁴ For him, living was an endless circus of repellent spectacles²⁵ of squabbling, plotting courtiers²⁶ whose posed sincerity masked treachery.²⁷ Constantly Marcus had to restrain his loathing of life at court²⁸ where snapping puppies and quarreling children competed for empty prizes.²⁹ His own mind was the only citadel of the master of the world.³⁰ "Live as on a mountain," he counseled from long lonely habit, "If they do not like it, let them kill you—it is better than living their life."³¹ Forty years suffice to show the same vanity as ten millenia;³² there is nothing new under the sun.³³ The re-

trusting patient from cardiac arrest while his doctor was taking more effective means to extract venom or poison from his system. In such a case, *theriac* would have stopped panic not poison.

¹⁸ Galen XIV 4. In Galen's recipe for 'Ανδρομάχου ἀντίδοσι (XIV, 107), about 286 grains of opium are prescribed: ὁ πίου < δ' ὀβολοὺς β.'

¹⁹ Galen XIV 4.

²⁰ Dio 71.6.3-4.

²¹ Dio 71.1.2. Fronto *ad Caes.* IV 8. MA I 17.8 (tuberculosis?). Ill health underlies much of Marcus' distaste for life. A similar effect of sickness on a philosopher is seen in Dionysius the Renegade, who suffered so much from ophthalmia that he could not accept the Stoic dogma of the inconsequence of pain—Diogenes Laertius VII 166.

²² MA XII 9.

²³ MA VII 61.

²⁴ MA X 8.1.

²⁵ MA VI 46.

²⁶ MA IV 32. His mother had prayed for the death of Antoninus Pius, SHA Marc 6.9.

²⁷ MA XI 15.

²⁸ MA VIII 9; cf. V 16; VI 12.

²⁹ MA V 33.

³⁰ MA VIII 48.

³¹ MA X 15.

³² MA VII 49.

³³ MA VII 1; cf. II 14.

membered and the rememberer are alike ephemeral,³⁴ lost in the abyss of time.³⁵ In the grave, philosophers and scientists³⁶ crowd prophets, doctors, and tyrants;³⁷ their fame is but "smoke, ashes, and a fading lie."³⁸ These views are not expressions of philosophic detachment but cries of anguish from "a soul dragging about a corpse,"³⁹ who feeds on corpses and covers himself with "sheep hair dyed with the blood of shell fish."⁴⁰ In the mirror, Marcus saw "scum and gore in a bag of skin,"⁴¹ the sum of all life as "dirty bath water,"⁴² and the world of nature as a fetid flux of clots of caked blood and dirt.⁴³ The world of man was "shallow pomp, masques, sheep and herds, sham battles, bones flung to little curs, crumbs on a fish-pond, the fearful labor and burdens of ants, the scramble of scared mice, and puppets on strings."⁴⁴ Death frees us from sense impressions, puppet strings, confused thoughts, and the bondage of the flesh.⁴⁵ "Hurry, death," the philosopher begged, "lest I too forget myself."⁴⁶ . . . Sham, war, anxiety, narcosis, and slavery erode my holy beliefs."⁴⁷

Though he often lay despairing in bed,⁴⁸ sleep was a welcome refuge for the interior émigré⁴⁹ who hated to rise because he preferred the warm covers⁵⁰ to meeting vicious vulgar people.⁵¹ Heraclitus had denounced sleepers as damp and private souls,⁵² but Marcus unconsciously revised the Ephesian to credit even sleepers with passively cooperating in the work of the universe.⁵³ Since dreams had long provided him with a partial escape from life, Marcus hailed them as god-sent,⁵⁴ but with the acquisition of the opium habit, his dreams took bizarre forms—though repelled by man and nature, the emperor came to see beauty in poison, thorns, and noxious things⁵⁵ and even in the foam of a wild boar and the gaping jaws of beasts in the arena,⁵⁶ but Dio reports that normally he could not bear to watch the grisly performance in the circus.⁵⁷ With drugs, Marcus cut the puppet strings, isolating the present,⁵⁸ and found at last how easy it was to dismiss everything disturbing and be at perfect peace,⁵⁹ untroubled even by "a lion in the path."⁶⁰

Coleridge confirms the sense of release which opium brings:

³⁴ MA IV 35; II 17.

³⁵ MA IV 50; 3.3.

³⁶ MA VI 47.

³⁷ MA IV 48; cf. VIII 31.

³⁸ MA XII 27.

³⁹ MA IV 41.

⁴⁰ MA VI 13.

⁴¹ MA VIII 37; cf. V 28.

⁴² MA VIII 24.

⁴³ MA IX 36.

⁴⁴ MA VII 3; cf. IX 24.

⁴⁵ MA VI 28.

⁴⁶ MA IX 3.

⁴⁷ MA X 9.

⁴⁸ MA X 28.

⁴⁹ Fronto *ad Caes.* I 4.

⁵⁰ MA V 1.

⁵¹ MA II 1.

⁵² Plutarch *de superstitione* 166. See John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London, 1930), 152-153 (para. 74).

⁵³ MA VI 42 is apparently a distortion of the theme cited by Plutarch *consolatio ad Apollonium* 106. Even the memory of a great scientist is subjected to unconscious pressures; Darwin admitted a proclivity to recall what agreed with his views and to confuse or forget what did not. *Charles Darwin's Autobiography*, ed. Sir F. Darwin (New York, 1950), 56.

⁵⁴ MA I 17.8; IX 27. Fronto *ad Caes.* III 9.1.

⁵⁵ MA VI 36.2.

⁵⁶ MA III 2.

⁵⁷ Dio 71.29.3. cf. SHA Marc 15.1.

⁵⁸ MA VII 29.

⁵⁹ MA V 2.

⁶⁰ MA VIII 47.

Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep; but you, I believe, know how divine that repose is, what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountain and flowers and trees in the very heart of a waste of sands.⁶¹

Marcus' vision of time as a raging river carrying all before it⁶² into the abyss of the future⁶³ was no school doctrine of life viewed from the Porch but an attempt to express the extended perspectives of time and space which opium had opened to him.⁶⁴ Temporal and spatial dimensions were accelerated⁶⁵ until Europe was but a speck and the present a point⁶⁶ and men insects crawling on a clod.⁶⁷ History was no longer a reference but an actual pageant of the past⁶⁸ and Marcus shared the exacerbated sensations of his fellow-addict, De Quincey:

The sense of space, and in the end the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, etc., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive. Space swelled and was amplified to an extent of unutterable and self-repeating infinity. This disturbed me very much less than the vast expansion of time. Sometimes I seemed to have lived for seventy or a hundred years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a duration far beyond the limits of human experience.⁶⁹

Marcus' image of the cosmos as the City of Zeus⁷⁰ has the intellectual and emotional appeal of any glimpse of the City of God but its locale was, like Coleridge's Xanadu, in the land of the lotus eaters where dreams and realities were indistinguishable.⁷¹

As emperor, Marcus could afford the personal vice of drug addiction but not as an intellectual. Neither as a man⁷² nor a ruler⁷³ was Philip of

⁶¹ E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, A Biographical Study* (Oxford, 1938), 102. Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth in tones worthy of Marcus at his Stoic best: "Mortal life seems destined for no continual happiness, save that which results from the exact performance of duty" (182).

⁶² MA IV 43.

⁶³ MA V 23.

⁶⁴ MA XII 24. Tremendous vistas of time were paramount in the world-picture of the Maya intelligentsia who also induced visions by the use of narcotics. J. Eric Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (Norman, Okla., 1954), 250. The use of *soma* by Vedic priests was not without influence on the staggering time concepts of Indic civilization.

⁶⁵ MA IX 32; XI 1.2.

⁶⁶ MA VI 36.1.

⁶⁷ MA XII 32.

⁶⁸ MA X 27; cf. IV 32. Marcus had intended to write history (Fronto *ad Caes.* IV 3.8) and apparently produced a didactic selection of edifying deeds in antiquity (MA III 14).

⁶⁹ Thomas De Quincey, *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (London, 1907), 234. Cf. the allusion to Piranesi's fever-inspired etchings, 237-238.

⁷⁰ MA IV 23.

⁷¹ MA VI 31.

⁷² Alexander was less fortunate (Athenaeus X 434F-435A).

⁷³ Antiochus II Theos, however, succumbed in the dregs of alcoholism (Athenaeus X 438CD). His degradation may be exaggerated by the anti-Seleucid teetotaling bias of Phylarchus.

Macedon handicapped by heavy drinking, but Freud almost destroyed his genius with cocaine.⁷⁴ Drugs incapacitated Marcus less than they insulated his natural reserve and fired his philosophic insight to the fever pitch of vision. Perhaps his friend and mentor, Fronto, was aware of the effects of *theriac* when he assured the emperor that Jupiter had compounded soporific juices from *securitatis et voluptatis herbae* and a pinch of death,⁷⁵ but bade him dream freely until life could realize his dreams.⁷⁶ According to Polybius, religion was the opium of the Roman people,⁷⁷ but in the Golden Age of Marcus Aurelius, opium sustained the religion of the master of that people.⁷⁸ The presence of disease or vice in a great man should not detract from, but rather aid in understanding, him. Though it did not incapacitate Caesar and Richelieu, epilepsy played a significant rôle in the personalities and convictions of St. Paul, Muhammad, and Dostoievski. While Nietzsche was an astute critic of the XIXth century, Zarathustra was the product of paresis as well as of genius. The mind of Marcus, too, dwelt in the mountains because part of him cried from the depths.

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⁷⁴ Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1953), I, 78-97.

⁷⁵ Fronto *de Fer. Als.* 3.9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.12.

⁷⁷ Polybius VI 56. St. Augustine agreed (*de Civitate Dei* IV 27; 32; VI 5; 10).

⁷⁸ The question naturally arises—did the *theriac* of other emperors contain narcotics and perhaps contribute to the wild megalomania of the worse and the calm dignity of the best? The Severi released the compound for common use (Galen XIV 217). Admittedly the amounts of opium could vary, and, on the basis of the antidote of the younger Andromachus (Galen XIV 42), a *kyamos* (Marcus Aurelius' daily dose) would contain about 0.033 gram of opium, hardly sufficient for addiction. However, among the ancients, exact measurements were not the physician's or chemist's forte, and the physical effects of withdrawal on the emperor suggest heavier dosage. His melancholy can easily be ascribed to ill health and an unhappy life, but his known use of an opiate (strength undetermined) offers an explanation for Marcus' bizarre visions and extraordinary insulation from domestic reality.