

Sir Ronald Syme's "rogue grammarian" has loomed over modern study of the *Historia Augusta* much like the colossi of divinized emperors the *Life* of Severus Alexander asserts he erected in the Forum of Nerva so as to assimilate himself to the thoroughly Roman model of Augustus: improbable in the space and distracting to the viewer (Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* [1968] 207; *VSevAlex* 28.6-7). If the biographies' trivialities gushed at random from a superabundance of etymologies, verbal animal-noises, and Vergilian tags (*VAel* 2.3-4, *VGet* 5.5, *TyrTrig* 24.3), no coherent purpose need inform them (cf. Cameron, *JRS* 61 [1971]: 255). Yet whimsy is a slender motive to sustain a series of thirty extant biographies spanning some one and two-thirds centuries. The characterization licensed historians to winnow facts from frippery in the *Lives* without considering what they were doing in their combinations. This paper will press beyond the sketch of A. Cascón (*HAC* n.s. 4 [1996]) and the "notes" set forth as markers by T. Reekmans (*AncSoc* 28 [1997], 32 [2002]) and examine synthetically how the *Historia Augusta* uses laughter both to characterize emperors and the biographies' own project (e.g., *VGall* 6.3-8; *TyrTrig* 31.10).