

A few minor cavils

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 20 Jul 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 20 Jul 1998, 16:26

On Tue, 14 Jul 1998 mantis wrote:

Actually I believe raster's primary concern re: authentic autarchs is the same as my own--the brain eating bit.

[snip]

And thus, it doesn't matter what Valeria calls herself, she isn't a real autarch. The higher ups of Yesod would know it if they cared to look, and issues of sovereignty aside (though I agree with you on all or nearly all the points you've made--my intended point was that "Conan the Nomarch of Urth" and other pseudo-autarchs aren't going to be allowed to take the Test: the only recognized representative of Urth is the real autarch), that the common people know Valeria isn't a real autarch is extremely damaging to the domestic situation.

I didn't see anything either in the scene in Valeria's throne room, or in Severian's later talks with Odilo and Eata, to indicate that there is any domestic instability over Valeria's inability to take the test. All Eata says is that there is "talk," and this talk stems from her being a woman and not knowing the words of power, not over her inability to take the test (let alone her not having eaten her predecessor's brain, which I doubt the populace knows anything about; at any rate, Severian didn't).

In any case, if nobody took the test between Ymar and Appian, then the role of the test in legitimating the Autarchy can't have been that important.

I'll also agree that the autarchs inbetween were told that they would fail if they tried--this may be straight from the text (in any event, I know I've talked with people about it).

That's actually not what I had in mind, and the one passage I recall which bears on this question seems to tell against this: Severian tells Palaemon that his predecessors had often refused to take the test because they thought the enemy would gain an advantage from the New Sun (IV, ch. 34). My idea had been that the other Autarchs' Hierodule advisers had given the Autarchs ostensibly neutral advice which nevertheless highlighted this, and perhaps other, alleged disadvantages of taking the test.

The Byzantine model fails at this level, since Byzantine emperors had to be cunning, ruthless, etc., clawing their way to the top. Whereas we know that the autarchs often enough just stumbled into it--the Peter Principle crafts a "Claudiarchy" of common men and women, including second-rate scholars, farmwives, wantons, sailors, and artisans (V, ch. 34).

I'm sure you're right about the general mediocrity of the "found" Autarchs (though they need not be any more mediocre than those who succeeded through primogeniture, or than hereditary monarchs anywhere else, for that matter). But my impression is that this quote (which is in IV, not V) refers not just to the earlier Autarchs, but to all the personalities Severian now contains, only some of which are Autarchs. If they are all Autarchs, then since Severian

says ""Most are only common men and women, sailors and artisans, farmwives and wantons,"
that would seem to imply that the Autarchs who succeed via heredity are in the minority.

--Adam