
A ROMAN EXPERIENCE WITH
HEAT STROKE IN 24 B.C.

THE caloric annoyance visited upon most of the United States each summer scarcely requires anything by way of special comment, since the subject is thoroughly presented in newspapers and is endlessly reiterated in radio broadcasts. The physician is aware of the burden that the heat inflicts on his more fragile patients, especially on those who already are troubled by circulatory or psychic disease. It is also observable that persons who come to the United States *from the tropics* sometimes find our summer climate intolerable and retreat to equatorial regions for relief. Despite its promoters, New York is not necessarily a "summer festival."

But if our thermal history has been intermittently grievous, we may reflect that others have had it worse. In the year 24 B.C. Aelius Gallus conducted a military campaign in Arabia. The following is a concise summary written by Dio Cassius* (ca. A.D. 150-235), an industrious Roman lawyer, senator, and historian.

While this was going on, another and a new campaign had at once its beginning and its end. It was conducted by Aelius Gallus, the governor of Egypt, against the country called Arabia Felix, of which Sabos was king. At first Aelius encountered no one, yet he did not proceed without difficulty; for the desert, the sun, and the water (which had some peculiar nature) all caused his men great distress, so that the larger part of the army perished. The malady proved to be unlike any of the common complaints, but attacked the head and caused it to become parched, killing forthwith most of those who were attacked, but in the case of those who survived this stage it descended to the legs, skipping all the intervening parts of the body, and caused dire injury to them. There was no remedy for it except a mixture of olive oil and wine, both taken as a drink and used as an ointment; and this remedy naturally lay within reach of only a few of them, since the country produces neither of these articles and the men had not prepared an abundant supply of them beforehand. In the midst of this trouble the barbarians also

*Dio, (*Roman History*) LIII.29.3-8. Loeb Library ed., transl. by E. Cary, vol. 6, pp. 269-71. Reprinted by kind permission of the Harvard University Press.

fell upon them. For hitherto they had been defeated whenever they joined battle, and had even been losing some places; but now, with the disease as their ally, they not only won back their own possessions, but also drove the survivors of the expedition out of the country. These were the first of the Romans and, I believe, the only ones, to traverse so much of Arabia for the purpose of making war; for they advanced as far as the place called Athlula, a famous locality.

The identity of Aelius Gallus, leader of the heat-struck military expedition described by Dio Cassius, is not entirely clear. Max Wellmann, writing in the Pauly-Wissowa *Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*,* vol. 1, p. 493, says that Gallus the soldier is very probably identical with one Marcus Aelius Gallus, a pupil of Asklepiades. This Gallus, a physician, is repeatedly mentioned by Galen and is said to have devised a theriac useful against scorpion stings.

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*Stuttgart, Metzler, 1894. See also Schiller, Hermann: *Geschichte der Römischen Kaiserzeit*. Gotha, Perthes, 1883-1887, vol. 1, pp. 198-202. A more recent treatment of the Arabian expedition will be found in Cook, S., Adcock, F. and Charlesworth, M. P.: *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1944, vol. 10, pp. 247-254.