

The Emperor's Two Bodies

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Abstract

In the early third century the body of the emperor came to play an increasingly important role in the dynastic politics of the Roman empire. But the role or, better, the function of the emperor's body became in the short reign of Elagabalus (218-222) a highly contested issue. For the Severan house Elagabalus' beautiful, youthful body was seen as a "natural" body that would support the dynastic claim. At the same time Elagabalus himself and perhaps his mother built a new conception of the emperor's body that was characterized by Elagabalus' quest to merge with his god. In this quest Elagabalus sought to transform his body and the imperial body in ways that certain powerful groups in Rome viewed as a religious and political danger for the empire.

In this thesis I combine diverse types of sources, such as coins, inscriptions, portraits, and literary accounts, to reconstruct the representation of the body of this emperor. I show how the cross-gender and the cross-behavior that the literary sources ascribe to Elagabalus' unrestrained sexuality helps to explain his immersion into worship, seeking a unity with his god. This brought the relation of Elagabalus' natural and imperial body to a breaking point, leading to his destruction.

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Chronology

The Life and Reign of Elagabalus

March 204	Birth in Rome
End of 217	Return of Julia Maesa, her daughters, and grandsons to Emesa
217/218	Elagabalus high priest of Emesa
16th May 218	Uprising in the camp of <i>Legio III Gallica</i> near Emesa.
8th June 218	Battle near Antioch, victory of Elagabalus and his supporters
14th July 218	Confirmation of imperial titles by the Senate
Winter 218-219	Elagabalus in Nicomedia
July or September 219 (evidence for the date is weak)	Elagabalus' return to Rome
219	Elagabalus married his first wife Julia Cornelia Paula
220	Dedication of the temple on the Palatine.
End of 220	Elagabalus divorces his first wife Julia Paula and marries Aquila Severa
26 June 221	Alexander Severus associated to power as Caesar
221	Elagabalus divorces Aquila Severa and marries Annia Faustina. Elagabalus remarries Aquilia Severa by the end of 221.
222	Joint consulship of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus

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INTRODUCTION

L'analisi delle rappresentazioni non può prescindere dal principio di realtà.

The analysis of representations must not ignore the reality principle.

Carlo Ginzburg *Il giudice e lo storico*, 1991

In the early third century the body of the emperor came to play an increasingly important role in the dynastic politics of the Roman empire. But the role or, better, the function of the emperor's body became in the short reign of Elagabalus (218-222) a highly contested issue. For the Severan house Elagabalus' beautiful, youthful body was seen as a "natural" body that would support the dynastic claim. At the same time Elagabalus himself, and perhaps his mother as well, built a new conception of the emperor's body that was characterized by Elagabalus' quest to merge with his god. In this quest Elagabalus sought to transform his body and the imperial body in ways that certain powerful groups in Rome viewed as a religious and political danger for the empire.

The relation of the natural and political body of rulers has been a central topic of analysis ever since the publication of Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) – a problematic that the study of J. Bernhard Meister, for example, has recently explored with attention to the emperor's body in the Roman empire.¹ I am indebted to both these scholars, but my argument develops less out of an

¹ Kantorowicz, Ernst H. *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016; first published 1957); Meister, J. Bernhard. *Der Körper des Princeps Zur Problematik eines monarchischen Körpers ohne Monarchie*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013.

engagement with theory than from a careful study of the primary sources from the period and the particular perspectives from which they represented the body. Thus, bringing together different types of sources – literary, visual, and documentary – my thesis aims to assess the representation of the body of the emperor Elagabalus. In so doing I highlight the tension between the emperor’s two bodies: the natural and the political one.

While taking into consideration the recent biographies and studies on this emperor that have sought to offer a more balanced account of the reign of Elagabalus than that offered by the ancient literary sources, my work is primarily in conversation with the scholarly analysis of visual and documentary materials.² This method proves to be useful in establishing connections within and among representations and in constructing my interpretation. This interpretation is open to a spectrum of probabilities and confutations. In this the work of the historian is particularly appealing.

Elagabalus, officially Avitus Varius Bassianus, was a descendant of the Severan house who ruled the Roman Empire from 218 to 222 CE.³ Born ca. 204 at Rome in the Severan house among the Syrian princesses of Julia Domna’s court, Elagabalus was the son of Julia Soemias, daughter of Julia Maesa and one of the two nieces of Julia Domna. When Macrinus took power following the assassination of Caracalla (April 217) and Julia Domna died (afterwards in 217), Julia Domna’s

² Among the most recent studies on the reign of Elagabalus see Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus. The Life and Legacy of Rome’s Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), Clare Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualization of Imperial Power in the Severan Period* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Adam Kemezis. “The Fall of Elagabalus as Literary Narrative and Political Reality,” *Historia* 65 (2016): 348-390.

³ Regnal name *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, but conventionally called by his popular nickname, Elagabalus. In this thesis I use this latter and “Elagabal” for naming his god. On the onomastic variations see Robert Turcan, *Héliogabale et le sacre du Soleil* (Paris: Édition Albin Michel, 1997), pp. 7-8 and Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 25-27.

sister, Julia Maesa, returned to her native Emesa (modern Homs, Syria) with her two daughters, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea, and her two grandsons, Bassianus (Elagabalus) and his younger cousin Alessianus, the future Severus Alexander. In Emesa Elagabalus, following the example of his great gran-father became the high priest of the main temple and devoted himself to the cult of a god named Elagabal, a Syrian god of the mountain and a sun god, whose iconostasis was a conical stone. Then, at the age of fourteen Elagabalus was catapulted into power as sole emperor by the army stationed near Emesa in a transition where, as we shall see, his bodily appearance would play a great part in persuading the army that he should be the future emperor. But following his arrival in Rome in the second half of 219, he started to promote his close relation with his aniconic god which he brought from the east. During his reign he displayed his imperial body as the faithful worshiper of his god in the Roman religious space. His bodily behavior, his clothing, and his transgression of gender norms raised disgust even among those who earlier had supported him. This led to his destruction in 222 when a group of conspirators within the praetorian guard, normally in charge of protecting the emperor, brutally murdered him and his mother.

In this thesis, I examine the three main literary sources through close readings. These sources are the reports of Cassius Dio, of Herodian, and of the author of the *Historia Augusta*. Their individual backgrounds and perspectives matter. Cassius Dio (ca 155-ca 235) was a senator from Nicaea, a city in Bithynia. He served as consul first in 206 and later in 229. He wrote in Greek a monumental *History of Rome* from its foundation to his own day: from the reign of Commodus on, he is reporting contemporary events. We read part of his work, including the section devoted to Elagabalus, in later epitomes. Dio's senatorial point of view is quite dominant in his reconstruction of events. A member of the senatorial elite, he lived in the Severan age when the good relations between the emperor and the senate of the previous century had to be recuperated. He thinks that the only true source of the

emperor's legitimacy is the senate. Accordingly, he shows the senatorial diffidence toward the army's power and he often underlines his departure from the point of view of soldiers and of the mass of people. His account of Elagabalus' rule is also framed within his general disdain for young rulers who, in his vision of Roman history, always heralded tyrannical power. It is also important to consider that in Elagabalus' period Dio was absent from Rome.

Herodian, somewhat younger than Dio, probably came from the eastern part of the Roman world and likely held a minor office within the Roman administration. He wrote in Greek a contemporary history, his *History After Marcus Aurelius*. We read the complete work which covers the years 180-238. His history partially depends on Cassius Dio, but he uses also other good traditions and oral ones. For the period of Elagabalus, he seems mostly independent from Dio. There are in fact divergences between the two authors and Herodian shows a more vivid interest in Elagabalus' cults and religion than does Dio. Herodian also expresses ambiguity in relation to this emperor. He seems critical of an emperor who, arriving from the eastern part of the empire, emphasized his otherness to the extreme. Herodian perhaps judges this as a missed opportunity on the part of Elagabalus to hellenize the center of the empire as the Antonines had done. According to the Greco-Roman tradition, he held a moral vision of history permeated by a pessimistic view: after Marcus Aurelius the Roman empire suffered decline. *Virtus* and *paideia* are the basis of a good ruler, as in the model of Marcus Aurelius, and older rulers, unlike younger ones, possessed the virtues necessary to rule the empire.

The third literary source is the biography of Elagabalus written in Latin nearly two centuries after his death by an anonymous author of a series of imperial biographies entitled by the humanists of the Renaissance *Historia Augusta*. According to the Latin tradition of the biographical genre, the

author of this work aims to write with a moral goal, as he makes clear in the *proemium* (introduction), stressing the comparison between good and bad emperors. He even explains the principle that while good emperors last long and die naturally, bad emperors are soon overthrown and murdered, *quorum nec nomina libet dicere* and “even their names are no more pronounced” (*Heliogab.* 1.1-1.3). Elagabalus is cast as a bad emperor and the author’s portrait of him serves as a contrast to that of Alexander Severus whom he presents as a good emperor. The environment in which this author wrote his work was the pagan senatorial elite: he may have used the bad life of Elagabalus as a nuanced criticism of Constantine’s preference for Christianity (an oriental religion in the pagan vision) and his disregard for traditional imperial rituals.

My chapter 1 offers an analysis of the visual representation of Elagabalus at the outset of his rule. The features of the body of this youth, his beauty, and his likeness to Caracalla (the previous Severan emperor) shaped a consensus among his contemporaries, who recognized in the youth’s natural body the imperial body, reinforcing the value of dynastic power. This chapter stresses the overall stability of meanings in all media: visual, documentary, and literary.

In chapter 2 we see a tension emerge in the court around the strategy of representing the body of the emperor upon his arrival in Rome. The literary sources express an anxiety related to the cult and the rituals that Elagabalus brought into the Roman landscape. The close connection that the emperor shows with his aniconic god proves to be a point of departure from traditional Roman religion.

Chapter 3 focuses on representations of what the literary tradition cast as Elagabalus’ transgressive behaviors in sexuality and gender. This representation, in part stereotyped by the literary invective, is in tension with the reconstruction emerging from analysis of other media. The religious practices

of Elagabalus, deeply involved the use of his body in his devotion to his god, challenged the idea of the body of the emperor and brought the relation of the natural and the imperial body to a breaking point.

CHAPTER 1

A Beautiful Beginning

The brief reign of the young emperor Elagabalus began in a moment of crisis.¹ When Caracalla was assassinated in 217, it was Macrinus, a leading member of the Pretorian Guard, who first claimed the imperial power. Soon afterwards, Macrinus' power was threatened by those who claimed "that [Elagabalus] was a natural son of Tarautas [Caracalla]" and who stressed his resemblance to the earlier emperor.² The legions stationed near Emesa, where Elagabalus was living with the Severan princesses, recognized this youth as the successor to Caracalla.³

According to contemporary sources, his appearance – his natural body – embodying the imperial figure played a significant role in pushing the soldiers to acclaim Elagabalus as the legitimate emperor and thus made their displeasure with Macrinus clear. Why was this? First, his striking resemblance to Caracalla, the late emperor, and the rumor that he was Caracalla's son conveyed the message that his power was legitimate and rooted in dynastic politics. Secondly the bloom of beauty of this boy produced a special attraction that captivated everybody, especially the soldiers, and fostered an appearance of legitimacy. The interlacing of Elagabalus' own beauty

¹ For essential data on Elagabalus, see PIR², VIII.2, 273.

² Cassius Dio 79.31.

³ "Pretending that he was a natural son of Tarautas (Dio's nickname for Caracalla) and dressing him up in clothing which the latter had worn as a child...[Elagabalus] exhibited some likeness of Caracalla when a child as bearing some resemblance to the boy, at the same time declaring [to the soldiers] that the latter was truly Caracalla's son, and the only rightful heir of the throne" Cassius Dio 79.31-32; "Because they (the soldiers) admired the boy, she (Maesa) told them that he was actually the natural son of Antoninus." Herodian 5.3.8-10.

and his likeness to the young Caracalla is found in visual and documentary sources as well as the literary sources referred to above.

The language that stressed the dynastic continuity of the Severan household at the advent of Elagabalus to imperial power was part of a far larger program of imperial representation that Elagabalus' court deployed to help legitimize the authority of the young emperor, who was only fourteen years old. In this chapter, I explore what we might call a politics of imperial representation through a close examination of the likenesses of Elagabalus with particular attention to statues, coins, and literary representations. We will see that, at this stage, the court was able to use Elagabalus' natural body in order to reinforce his political role together with the dynastic claim.

Among the representations of the young emperor that survived the *damnatio memoriae*⁴ is the head in the Capitoline Museum (*Fig. 1. 1*), the only portrait that – on the ground of the close resemblance to his coin profiles and based on the style of the head – is securely accepted as belonging to Elagabalus.⁵ This portrait of Elagabalus resembles portraits of Caracalla as youth, in part due to an echo of the former portraits' style. This style lasted until the time of Caracalla and presented as its main characteristics the contrast between the smooth, polished surface of the face and the ruffled hair. Nevertheless, precise features reveal the intention of the sculptor in stressing

⁴ The fact that Elagabalus' rule ended in infamy explains the dearth of Elagabalus' monumental portraits, as Vermeule states in Cornelius Vermeule, *Iconographic Studies: Art of Antiquity* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1980) vol. 4, part 1, p. 39.

⁵ Rome, Capitoline Museum, Stanza degli Imperatori, n° 55, inv. 470. The naturalistic texture and the plastic proportions of this head are elements that ascribe the artefact to the middle-Severan age: Susan Wood, *Roman Portrait Sculpture 217-260 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), p. 50. This head is listed as surely accepted in Wood (p. 123). Eric R. Varner has counted six unaltered sculpted likenesses of Elagabalus that survived the *damnatio memoriae*; see his *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*. Leiden: BRILL (2004), p. 189.

the likeness: the linear oval of the head, the tousled hair, and the puffy cheeks of the face resemble the childhood portraits of Caracalla (*Fig. 1. 2*).⁶



Fig. 1. 1: Portrait head of Emperor Elagabalus, Type II left view. Place: Rome, Musei Capitolini, Sala degli Imperatori, inv. MC0470.

Fig. 1. 2: Bust of Caracalla as a child, of the type created in 198 CE for the designation as Augustus. White marble, 198-204 CE. From the Vestals' House at Roman Forum, Rome. Place: Rome, Museo Nazionale delle Terme, inv. 641.

Moreover, Elagabalus' hairline on the forehead has the same shape framing the subject's big eyes as we see in the portraits of Caracalla, and the hairline on the forehead type is a decisive element of identification of an emperor.⁷ To be sure, Elagabalus' hair is in lower relief and its

⁶ Wood, *Roman Portrait Sculpture*, p. 50.

⁷ Annarena Ambrogi, "Un ritratto di Elagabalo nei Musei Vaticani" *XENIA* 20 (1990): 69; see also Jennifer Trimble "Corpore Enormi: The Rhetoric of Physical Appearance in Suetonius and Imperial Portrait Statuary" in *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture*, eds. Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 132 about this feature as an identifier of an emperor.

cropped coiffure is chiseled, while Caracalla's hair is drilled with deep long channels, its coiffure is longer and the pattern is more explosive.⁸ Nonetheless, the goal of the representation seems to be to stress the likeness of the two subjects by giving the later portrait the more distinctive features, even while preserving some characteristic features of the new emperor Elagabalus.

The beauty of Elagabalus' portrait is partially due to the style of the middle- and late-Severan age (218-235), which emphasizes the linearity and proportion of the texture and the harmony of the composition.⁹ Nevertheless, the intensity of the expression of the eyes and the mouth is striking. The eyes are large and underlined both by an upper crease, which goes over the external angle, and by a low crease, which outlines the lower lid, reinforced by a little swelling. The mouth is full and beautifully drawn. These devices invest the portrait with an effect of intense spirituality that it is not present in the portraits of either Caracalla or Alexander Severus.¹⁰ Some scholars identify Elagabalus with other portraits presenting the same features and the same intensity. The subject depicted in those pieces is younger than the Capitoline head, nearly childlike. The authenticity or attribution of these portraits is not unanimous, but Annarena Ambrogi's study of one of them is particularly convincing.¹¹ This portrait is the head preserved in the Vatican Museum.¹² It presents features of the first coin type of Elagabalus where he is

⁸ Wood, *Roman Portrait Sculpture*, pp. 50-51, 54. See also an accurate discussion on similarities and differences between Caracalla's and Elagabalus' portraits in Drora Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda. The Dynastic Aspect of the Imperial Propaganda of the Severi: The Literary and Archeological Evidence AD 193-235* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1996), pp. 58-60.

⁹ On the division of period in relation to the style of portraiture, see Ambrogi, "Un ritratto di Elagabalo," 68, footnote 12. Vermeule defines this age as revolutionary compared with the Roman traditional portrait style – Vermeule, *Iconographic Studies*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Ambrogi, "Un ritratto di Elagabalo," 70.

¹¹ Ambrogi, "Un ritratto di Elagabalo."

¹² Rome, Vatican Museum, Magazzino delle Corazze, inv. 4696.

portrayed as an unbearded boy, with his sideburns still short, puffy cheeks, large eyes with a peculiar swelling in the lower part, and full lips (*Fig. 1. 3*).¹³



Fig. 1. 3: RIC IV *Elagabalus* 184 – denarius, on the reverse: IMP ANTONINVS AVG(USTUS): Bust of Elagabalus, laureate, draped, right; RIC IV *Elagabalus* 3b – denarius, on the obverse: MP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG: Bust of Elagabalus, laureate, draped, right; RIC IV *Elagabalus* 136 – aureus, on the obverse: IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG: Bust of Elagabalus, laureate, draped, right.

This head is of the same type as the head of the bust now located in the Fine Art Museum of Boston, which was recognized as Elagabalus’ bust by Vermeule and is now tentatively accepted (*Fig. 1. 4*).¹⁴ These two artifacts, the head of the Vatican museum and the bust of the Museum in Boston, represent a former type of Elagabalus’ portrait, realized before the Capitoline type. The

¹³ On the obverse of the coins minted during his reign, Elagabalus had two distinct portrait types. The first one depicts him as a beardless youth with a closely cropped coiffure. The second type, minted later (since the second half of 219), is bearded, the hair is longer with tousled curls.¹³ Devine argues that this type depicts a Punic or Phoenician looking face, Katy Devine, “The Face of Elagabalus?” *Varian Studies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) vol. 3, p. 248; see also Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation*, p. 252; Varner also offers a detailed description of both types (p. 189). Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda*, p. 57 has individuated three types of coin, making a distinction among the first type for the coins showing certain signs of maturity.

¹⁴ Ambrogi, “Un ritratto di Elagabalo,” p. 70 agrees with Vermeule’s analysis of the portrait and states that it is realized in 219. In contrast, Wood considers the identification uncertain – Wood, *Roman Portrait Sculpture*, pp. 123-124.

earlier type seems to have been developed in the first years of the young emperor's residence in Rome (219-220), expressing his youth in the bloom of his beauty.¹⁵ This type gives a hint of how the court aimed to represent Elagabalus at the outset of his rule: a handsome young boy, stern in his new imperial role.



Fig. 1. 4: Portrait bust of the Emperor Elagabalus. Sculpture. Place: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, Mary S. and Edward J. Holmes Fund, 1977.337, <http://www.mfa.org/>. https://library-artstor-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/asset/AMICO_BOSTON_103831547.

¹⁵ Often it is impossible to give a precise dates of portrait types, but it is possible to establish their relative sequence. On this topic and in general on portrait types, see Klaus Fittschen, “The Portraits of Roman Emperors and their Families” in *The Emperor and Rome*, vol. XXXV of *Yale Classical Studies*, eds. Björn C. Ewald and Carlos F. Norena (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 221-246. In the case of Elagabalus’ sculpted portraits, scholars have identified two types, as I have explained in my text. The togate (wearing in a toga) bust of the statue in Boston has a section added later; see Cornelius Vermeule, *Iconographic Studies*, p. 38.

Beyond the physical similarities offered by the portraits, the presentation of Elagabalus as the heir of the Severan family is visible also in the title assumed by the new emperor as it is styled in inscriptions. Among the 153 inscriptions surely assigned to Elagabalus, the dynastic claim is present in 61 readings. Commonly we see the new emperor acclaimed as ‘*Divi Severi nepos Divi Antonini Magni filius,*’ or grandson of the deified Severus, son of the deified Antoninus the Great (i.e., Caracalla) with some variations in relation to position of the titles or extension of the claim.¹⁶ Although epigraphic material seems to convey less general and yet more extensive information than the legends on coins, we can make some observations. The frequency of inscriptions reporting the dynastic claim is constant until 220 CE; then, in the last two years of Elagabalus’ reign, it declines. Arrizabalaga y Prado notes that dividing by issuer these 61 inscriptions the most conspicuous group are inscriptions issued by eastern cities (16) followed by those issued by individual office holders (11).¹⁷ In the first years of his reign, the claim in which Elagabalus is presented as a son and a grandson of the previous legitimate emperors of the Severan line had been used quite extensively by his subjects eager to win his favor in the cities or in their individual administrative roles. In the same year, his portrait was developed stressing his likeness with Caracalla, who in inscriptions was styled as his *magnus* (great) father. The portrait type aimed to reproduce in marble the intensity of the beauty blooming in Elagabalus’ young years.

The connection of Elagabalus to his ancestors is also evident in coins. The obverse legend of Elagabalus’ coinage always has the name M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS or just ANTONINUS,

¹⁶ For accurate analysis of all the 153 inscriptions assigned to Elagabalus see de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, pp. 109-116.

¹⁷ De Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, p. 114.

which stresses the bond with Caracalla and implicitly with the Antonines.¹⁸ Rarely does the legend contain the more explicit DIVI ANTONINI PII FIL(IUS) – son of the deified Antoninus.¹⁹ A coin (*denarius*) noticed by Oliver Hekster makes more explicit the reference to Caracalla as divine father.²⁰



Fig. 1. 5: *Denarius*, from Rome, 222–235 (?). © Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., <<http://www.cngcoins.co>>

The obverse carries the legend DIVO ANTONINO MAGNO (for deified Antoninus Magnus) around Caracalla’s portrait, and the reverse an eagle on a globe surrounded by the legend CONSECRATIO (deification) (Fig. 1. 5). The coin is dated either from the time of Elagabalus or Alexander Severus and commemorates Caracalla’s deification. In the catalogue of Roman coins in the British Museum, Harold Mattingly identifies three types of coins (*sestertii*) from the period of Elagabalus. They all have on their obverse the same dedication to DIVO ANTONINO MAGNO, and on their reverses one includes the same configuration of the denarius observed by Hekster; the second shows a pyre surmounted by a quadriga and the legend CONSECRATIO;

¹⁸ De Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, p. 273.

¹⁹ Oliver Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors: Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 220.

²⁰ Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors*, p. 64.

and the third presents a woman wearing a towered crown, standing by an altar, and holding a patera and a sceptre.²¹ Though in a form implicit and synthetic, the bond with ancestors is thus represented also in coins, reinforcing the centrality and the coherence of the message in all media.²²

Taking a wider perspective and comparing Elagabalus' genealogical claims with those of previous emperors, one finds what is particular in Elagabalus' representation. Presenting himself as the son of Marcus Aurelius and brother of Commodus, Septimius Severus overturned the modality of the previous imperial adoptions in which the predecessor adopted his successor, based on the choice of the best man to hold the imperial power. Defeating the competitors in the civil war after Commodus' assassination in 192, Septimius Severus "adopted" his predecessors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus as father and brother, choosing the best and the most recent ancestors to legitimize a power acquired on the battlefield.²³ The case of Elagabalus is different. His claim is not totally invented, as Septimius Severus' claim had been. Elagabalus, after all, was already tied with the Severan house by a matrilinear link. Furthermore, his claim was shaped in contrast to Macrinus whom he and others saw as a usurper and who, as Scott pointed out, invented a genealogical claim with the Severan house which Elagabalus aimed to prove wrong.²⁴ Moreover, Elagabalus' self-representation stresses his resemblance to his predecessor Caracalla,

²¹ Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum), vol. V, p. 589.

²² On the deification of Caracalla after his death and on the coinage celebrating deification at the time of Elagabalus, see Baharal, *Victory of Propaganda*, pp. 45 and 53.

²³ Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors*, p. 205; de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, p. 273.

²⁴ Andrew G. Scott "The Legitimation of Elagabalus and Cassius Dio's Account of the Reign of Macrinus," *JAH* vol. 1(2) (2013): 242-253. Scott even labels Macrinus politics in connecting himself to the Severan dynasty as "aggressive." The scholar points out that Macrinus assumed the name of Severus and at some point his son assumed the name of Antoninus. Moreover, according to Dio, Macrinus' policies were in line with those of Septimius Severus (p. 244).

seeking to display in public his role as young heir inside the household. In this respect, the rumor of blood ties to Caracalla reinforced the idea that his body is a warrant of the continuity of the household. After the victory over Macrinus in the years 218-219, it is meaningful that coins were minted that had on the reverse the statue of *Roma* seated with a small Victory in the right hand and a sceptre in the left to offer an image of victory and eternity of the empire as well an assurance of the emperor's concern for Rome (*Fig. 1. 6*).²⁵ The continuity of the dynasty embodied the continuity of the empire. This concept was especially meaningful



Fig. 1. 6: RIC IV *Elagabalus* 1e – Antoninianus, on obverse: IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG: Bust of Elagabalus, radiate, draped, right; on reverse: P M TR P COS P P: Roma, helmeted, draped, seated left, holding Victory in extended right hand and sceptre in left hand; by her side, shield

to soldiers who had to decide to whom they were willing to pledge their lives.²⁶

²⁵ To see the frequency of this configuration on silver reverse types see Carlos F. Norena, *Imperial ideals in the Roman West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p 337; on bronze reverse types see again Norena, p. 343. There are also some *aurei* with this configuration. See Mattingly (1950) cccxxxi for the interpretation of this coin's image under Elagabalus.

²⁶ An inscription set up by veterans from the colony Sitifis in Mauretania Caesarensis traces Elagabalus' ancestors back to Nerva, showing that dynastic continuity is praised by soldiers: CIL VIII, 10347 = ILS, 469. See Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 334, fn. 9 and Agnès Béreger, "Empire et légitimité dans le livre V d'Hérodien: Macrin et Elagabal" in *Erodiano – Tra crisi e trasformazione*, ed. Alessandro Galimberti (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2017), p. 155.

Herodian and Cassius Dio, the two literary sources contemporary with Elagabalus, also emphasize the interweaving of dynasty, youth, and beauty at the very beginning of his rule. In 217, Elagabalus had returned from Rome to Emesa, the native city of his ancestors, along with the women of the imperial Severan house and his cousin Alessianus, the future Severus Alexander.²⁷ Elagabalus' ascent to power began in the camp close to Emesa, where the *legio III gallica* was stationed. The whole garrison saluted him as Antoninus – Herodian says – and put the imperial cloak on him (5.3.12).²⁸ This support from the army to Elagabalus' acclamation was the result of a strong attraction exercised by the boy on everybody and especially the soldiers. Herodian says that the soldiers used to go to the city to visit the temple of Emesa where Avitus Varius Bassianus (Elagabalus) performed sacrifices, dressed like high priest of Emesa.²⁹ These soldiers τὸ μειράκιον ἠδέως ἔβλεπον “enjoyed watching the youth” for two reasons: εἰδότες γένους ὄντα βασιλικοῦ “knowing that he was member of the imperial family” and because of τῆς ὄρας αὐτοῦ “the blooming grace of his body” (5.3.8-9). The author explains the military support by interlacing the dynastic motif and the mystic beauty of the boy which attract those who watch at him.³⁰

²⁷ There is some debate about the return of the Syrian group to Emesa: whether the members came back together, when they came back, and for how long they stayed in Emesa, but Kemezis convincingly maintains that they came back in a group after Julia Domna's death and that they spent less than one year in Emesa before starting the journey back to Rome; see Adam Kemezis, “The Fall of Elagabalus as Literary Narrative and Political Reality,” *Historia* (2016); 375.

²⁸ According to Herodian, the name of Antoninus was given to Elagabalus as a consequence of the admiration and sympathy of the soldiers for the imperial household and on account of his resemblance to the previous Antoninus.

²⁹ In Emesa, as noted above, Avitus Varius Bassianus was consecrated to the god Elagabal and became the high priest of this god as his great-grandfather Julius Bassianus had been: *Sacerdos Amplissimus Dei Solis Invicti Elagabal* (*Epitome de Caesaribus* 23/1)

³⁰ It is possible also that in depicting Elagabalus' attractiveness Herodian reflects the Greek cultural influence of the youthful *eromenos*.

This passage stresses the powerful of attraction of Elagabalus' body with a wording that emphasizes both its beauty and its youth.³¹ The word ὄρα means the grace of the blooming of beauty in a young body that could be picked like a blossoming flower. Herodian uses this word or a word with this same root a total of five times in his book dedicated to Elagabalus (Book 5), three times related to the young emperor himself.³² In the same passage Herodian uses also once κάλλους (beauty) and once its adjective καλός (beautiful) referring to the beauty of Elagabalus' body that, combined with the youth and his beautiful attire, makes him very similar to Διονύσου καλαῖς εἰκόσι “the beautiful statues of Dionysus” (5.3.7). The proximity of these two different wordings seems to suggest a distinction between a hieratic beauty that is the beauty in the religious space of both Dionysus' statue and Elagabalus dressed as priest performing his cult, and the grace of the boy in the blooming of his youth that attracts everyone.³³ The former is a beauty to admire and contemplate, the latter is a beauty that carries out an attraction which fascinates the watchers and, giving them pleasure, sways them.³⁴ In this passage the use of verbs and nouns referring to the action of watching is extensive. The verb βλέπω in various forms and the noun ὄψις recur four times, for example: Ἡδέως ἔβλεπον “the soldiers enjoyed watching the boy” (5.3.9). These soldiers were θαυμάζοντας “were in admiration” of the boy (5.3.10); the action of

³¹ The entire passage is in Herodian 5.3.7-10.

³² Herodian 5.3.7: ωραιότατος (the most beautiful) referring to Elagabalus compared to all the other youths; 5.3.8 ὄρα (the beauty of the boy); 5.3.10 ωραίας (in the youthful) referring to the two daughters of Maesa; 5.5.3. ὄρας (the season of the year); 5.6.10 ωραῖον (beautiful) referring to the face of the boy. Please, note that my Greek texts lack of the “subiotas” and “rough breathing.” This problem is due to a failure of my keyboard.

³³ Note that κάλλους and καλός also connotes the ethical idea of a moral beauty.

³⁴ A passage of Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) helps to fully understand the meaning of the word ὄρα: “Since then the forms of truth are two – the names and the things – some discourse of names, occupying themselves with the beauties of words: such are the philosophers among the Greeks. But we who are Barbarians have the things. Now it was not in vain that the Lord chose to make use of a mean form of body; so that no one praising the grace and admiring the beauty might turn his back on what was said, and attending to what ought to be abandoned, might be cut off from what is intellectual. We must therefore occupy ourselves not with the expression, but the meaning” *Stromata* 6.17.151.3. Speaking about Jesus Christ in this passage Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary of Herodian, stresses the word ὄρα as an attractive grace that Jesus aims to disregard because it is deceptive in relation to his moral message.

watching produces pleasure and admiration. So, soldiers, as noted before, looked with favor at this boy, recognizing him as a member of the imperial household and admiring his grace in the blooming of his youth. Maesa, Elagabalus' grandmother involved in the dynastic politics of the Severan house, and her clients exploited this kinetic admiration and, reinforcing it with the claim that Elagabalus was the natural son of Caracalla, brought the boy into the military camp. Herodian asserts that the soldiers saluted him as emperor and raised him up against Macrinus; the latter's attempt to quell the uprising was defeated mostly because the mass of his soldiers took Elagabalus' side (5.3.10-5.4.9).³⁵

Cassius Dio's account of Elagabalus' early rule presents both similarities and differences from the report of Herodian.³⁶ The large role Herodian gives to the women of the Severan household in organizing the uprising in the camp of legion *III gallica* near Emesa is not mentioned in Dio's account, which assigns the agency of the uprising to Eutythianus, a young man presented as an actor and an athlete who had gained the favor of the Severan women, and to his backers.³⁷ Nevertheless, like Herodian, Dio stresses the youth of Elagabalus along with his resemblance to Caracalla, but with a different nuance (79.31.2). In the passage, Dio reports the main strategy of this group, the backers of the coup against Macrinus, depicted more as conspirators against

³⁵ The displeasure of the soldiers to Macrinus stemmed in his disregard to his troops, in the decision to reduce their wages, and in the unsuccessful campaign against Parthians as well. Herodian stresses that a too luxurious behavior and extravagance of Macrinus disappointed soldiers also because this contrasted the shortage of food and commodities that they suffered (Herodian: 5.2.5-6). About affection of the soldier to Caracalla and disaffection to Macrinus see also Cassius Dio 79.31.3; 32.3.

³⁶ As noted in the Introduction, Dio was a contemporary of the history he reports from the rule of Commodus on. Herodian, although somewhat younger than Dio, was also a contemporary. Clare Rowan "Rethinking Religion in Herodian," *Ancient History Resources for Teachers* 25 (2002); 163-176 has challenged the earlier view that Herodian, especially in his account of Elagabalus, depended on Cassius Dio.

³⁷ The passage, quite corrupted, mentions a young man of humble origin that at one point seems to have gained visibility within the Syrian household in Emesa as leader of the uprising (79.31.1). About the identification of this Eutythianus, Béreger states "qu'il faut sans doute identifier avec Publius Valerius Comazon" (undoubtedly, we must identify him with Valerius Comazon) – Béreger, "Empire et légitimité," 154; so also Rowan, but in a form open to debate – Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 164.

Macrinus than as advocates of the future emperor.³⁸ Without the knowledge of his mother and grandmother, at night they brought the boy, παιδίον ἔτι ὄντα “still a child,” into the camp τῆ ἐσθήτι...κοσμήσας “dressed up in the same clothes” used by Caracalla as a child, to present him to the soldiers as the natural son of Caracalla and push them to revolt (79.31.3-4). The plan had a persuasive effect on the soldiers inside the camp, who were convinced by the appearance of the boy and, Dio adds, eager to revolt. The account of Dio seems oriented to depict the uprising in Syria as a conspiracy against the emperor Macrinus, who was legitimated by the senate, and Elagabalus as a usurper, a young puppet disguised with clothes that furthered the plan of the conspirators.

Dio’s senatorial point of view is quite dominant in his reconstruction of events and is combined with his dislike for young rulers who, in his vision of Roman history, always heralded tyrannical power.³⁹ However, his report presents some aspects that, perhaps not on purpose, reinforce some of the ideas emerging in Herodian’s account. In Dio’s account also, the body of the future emperor was exhibited in the public eye and its appearance conveyed a message, swaying the soldiers to rise up. Dio, in fact, gives an account of the siege of the camp by Macrinus’ army and of the defeat of the assailants, which suggests to the readers more than the author may have intended to convey.

Dio aims to present the Roman soldiers as easily corrupted by the usurper’s supporters because they were prone to revolt and hopeful to receive monetary rewards. This interpretation of the

³⁸ Victoria Emma Pagan, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004) pp. 5-7 states that intrigue of a group of people, crisis of legitimacy, clandestine actions are all features of conspiracy in Roman history.

³⁹ See Josiah Osgood, “Cassius Dio’s Secret History of Elagabalus” in *Cassius Dio Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician*, ed. Carsten Hjort Lange and Jesper Majbom Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 176-190.

events is consistent with the diffidence of the senatorial class toward the army's power.

Nevertheless, reading against the grain of Dio's senatorial perspective, the sway of the bodily representation of Elagabalus visible in Herodian's report appears also here. In fact, the soldiers inside the camp easily succeeded in making the assailants defect from Macrinus' side, slay their commanders and eventually support Elagabalus. To obtain this result, the soldiers inside the camp exhibited the alleged young heir of Caracalla in person. They carried the boy round about upon the ramparts highlighting his resemblance to Caracalla as a child, they styled him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and they cried out to the assailants that he was *παῖδά τε ὄντως αὐτὸν ἐκείνου και διάδοχον τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀναγκαῖον* "the son of Caracalla, the heir to the throne connected by necessary ties" (79.32.2-3). This construction of the event allows us to infer that the soldiers had to be familiar with the image of Caracalla as a child, and also with the image of the imperial house as a whole. Following the tie between imperial family as a whole and the army in the Severan period, it is possible to explain the reasons underlying this visualization. Under the Severan rulers, the presence of the emperor and the imperial family in the eye of the army had increased. The women of the Severan imperial house with the young heirs travelled with the emperor in the provinces and their visibility was raised.⁴⁰ The young body of Elagabalus with his matrilinear link to the imperial family and his likeness to Caracalla as a child served to display the continuity of the imperial house and the rightfulness of its power.

⁴⁰ Motivated by the strong presence of the emperor in the battlefield, by the economic policy in favor of soldiers, and also by the more visibility of the women of the imperial family in the provinces following the emperor – see Mary T. Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome: Power, Gender, Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

It is important to note that both Dio and Herodian present the soldiers as eager to name Avitus Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and both the authors show the power of this appellation.⁴¹ Exactly at the end of this episode, in which Dio reports that the full name of Antoninus had been shouted out from the ramparts with the magic swaying effect on the soldiers, the author turns to a hostile tone in the episode, nicknaming Elagabalus for the first time *Ψευδαντωνίνω* “false Antoninus” and contrasting the soldiers’ point of view with this satirical characterization.⁴² In Dio we glimpse the disenchanted voice of a witty senatorial elite that contrasts sharply with the enthusiastic voice of the coarse soldiers in acclaiming their imperator.

In the last major literary source on Elagabalus, the *Historia Augusta* (*HA*), we also encounter a certain emphasis related to the Antoninus name, and even in paragraphs related to his childhood and early rule. This source is the *Vita Heliagabali Antonini* in the *Historia Augusta*, a biography written nearly two centuries after Elagabalus’ death.⁴³ According with the Latin tradition of biography’s genre, the author of this work aims to write with a moral goal, as he makes clear in the *proemium* (introduction) stressing the contrast between good emperors and bad emperors, and even explains the principle that good emperors last long and die naturally, while bad emperors are pretty soon overthrown and murdered, *quorum nec nomina libet dicere* and even their names are no more pronounced (1.1-1.3).

⁴¹ Herodian says that during the siege the soldiers inside the camp displayed the boy to the assailants up on the turrets and battlements, naming him son of Antoninus (5.4.3); Dio states that the soldiers besieged exhibited the boy styling him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (79.32.2-4).

⁴² In all his account Dio will label Elagabalus with nicknames such as *Pseudoantoninus*, *Assyrian*, *Sardanapalus*, *Tiberinus*. This modality starting in these passage sets “the mood for the rest of the book” as Rowan notes (2012) 169.

⁴³ On the debate around the attribution of the *HA* to a sole author rather than to a group of authors and on the discussion about dating: David Rohrbacher, *The Play of the Allusion in the Historia Augusta* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), pp. 3-15; Samuel C. Zinsli, “Variations in the *Historia Augusta*,” *Varian Studies Volume Three: A Varian Symposium*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 60-63.

In the *HA, Vita Heliogabali*, in the section devoted to Elagabalus' childhood and his early rule, the author stresses the power of the name Antoninus more than one time (1.4). We read that Elagabalus took on this name both in consideration of the ancestors and because *id nomen usque adeo carum esse cognoverat gentibus* "until this moment he had known that this was a name dear to the people" to the point that even the fratricide Caracalla was beloved because of this name.⁴⁴ A few lines later, the author says that Elagabalus took the name Antoninus and was the last of the Antonines to rule the empire (1.7). Then, referring to Constantine, to whom the work is dedicated, and stressing how Constantine venerated the name of the Antonines, the author expresses the purpose of no longer speaking about this name which Elagabalus *polluerit* "corrupted" (2.4). However, the author is not consistent with this purpose because in the following chapter he writes again about the name of Antoninus saying that, when Elagabalus sent the news of his acclamation to Rome, all the Roman orders and all the Roman people were excited at the mention of the name of Antoninus *quod non solum titulo, sed etiam in sanguine redditum videbatur* "because (this name) seemed be back not just as a title but also in a blood link" (3.1). So, despite the comments of the author despising this young ruler for moral reasons, his report of the advent of Elagabalus displays the magic of the name Antoninus and the overall good favor of the Romans toward this heir of the imperial household.

Focusing on the representation of Elagabalus at the outset of his rule, we have seen the overall stability of meanings in both material and literary sources. Elagabalus' early visual and textual

⁴⁴ Caracalla was widely reviled for having killed his younger brother Geta within a year of their joint rule after the death in 211 of their father Septimius Severus.

representations are compatible, and this contrasts with the situation of previous emperors.⁴⁵ In the eyes of contemporaries, the appearance and the external features of this young boy played a central role in legitimating him as an heir of the imperial household and served as a warrant of the continuity of power. We saw that all media were consistent in conveying this message through visual communication or synthetic verbal communication and they paid attention to appeal the audience. The blooming grace of this boy, his youth, and his resemblance to Antoninus (Caracalla) were emphasized to raise emotional consensus and to persuade the audience to act together in favor of this emperor. Herodian stresses that πᾶν τὸ στρατόπεδον (all the soldiers) πᾶν πλῆθος (all the multitude) ὁ τε στρατὸς πᾶς (all the army) expressed unified support for this emperor (5.312; 5.4.8; 5.4.5). The author of the *HA* stresses that *omnes ordines* (all classes) and *omnis populus* (all the people of Rome) expressed their favor in him (3.1). Moreover, this strategy of visual communication was displayed in a space apt to reach extensive groups of people. We saw the appealing young body of Elagabalus exhibited on the turrets and around the ramparts. His youth and grace were represented by broadly diffused media. These features shine through also in the account of his contemporaries, despite their biases. At the outset of his rule, Elagabalus' communication reached a universal audience and won it over through emotional consensus. In short, Elagabalus' subjects had come to read his natural body as the imperial body. The natural body of the emperor displayed in his youth, beauty, and resemblance to Caracalla, which implied the dynastic right, reinforced the imperial body.⁴⁶ As

⁴⁵ As Trimble convincingly points out, most imperial statuary representations in the first and second centuries are not compatible with the textual representation for instance in Suetonius because they convey divergent claims; see Trimble, "*Corpore Enormi*," pp. 117-123.

⁴⁶ J. Bernhard Meister in "Corps et politique: l'exemple du corps du prince. Bilan historiographique." *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*. Supplément n°14 (2015) 109-125, points out that in Rome there had been attempts to conceptualize the natural body of the *Princeps* as an imperial body despite the absence of regalia and emblems that would make visible the body of the *Princeps* as the imperial one, as will be the case later in the medieval and modern monarchies. In these attempts the natural body of the emperor was, on one side, object of projections of the imperial body and, on the other side, also of its

we saw, supporting the acclamation of the new emperor and turning away its support from Macrinus, it was the army that recognized the imperial body in this youth. We will see in the next chapter that Elagabalus' court, moving to Rome, embraced a politics of seeking the senate's legitimization. However, the way in which the natural body constructed the imperial body goes beyond the army's consensus and the senate's legitimization. It seeks an objectivization of the imperial body that could warrant a continuity of the imperial power also beyond the natural body itself.

deconstruction. In the case of Elagabalus at his outset, we can see active the attempt of seeing his natural body as object of this projection, see pp.: 118-120.

CHAPTER 2

A Representation in Tension

After Elagabalus' victory over Macrinus in June 218, it was immediately clear to the new emperor and his court that this was the moment to come back to Rome. On this journey, the bad weather forced him to spend the winter months 218/219 in Nicomedia. Only afterwards could he and his court continue to Rome.¹

But the weather was only one challenge. Elagabalus and his court were also preoccupied with the matter of how best to represent the emperor and his god to the Roman people – an especially delicate matter since the young emperor was a high priest of Emesa and would be, therefore, bringing his cult with him to the capital, although it was one unfamiliar to the Romans. This chapter will explore the various strategies – iconographic and performative – that the emperor used and, more precisely, what contemporary accounts of the emperor reveal about the tensions in imperial representation that these strategies provoked. Hence, we begin to see the imperial and political body in tension with one another.

Herodian describes a painting commissioned by Elagabalus to be sent to Rome before his arrival and to be hung *υπὲρ κεφαλῆς τοῦ ἀγάλματος τῆς νίκης* “above the statue of the Victory” in the senate house (5.5.6). This painting included both a portrayal of the Emesa god and a depiction of

¹ Dio describes the journey, but he doesn't mention the retinue and the transport of the sacred stone (80.3.1-2); Herodian says that he did not wait too long in going back to Rome (5.5.1).

Elagabalus performing a sacrifice in priestly garb. Thus, according to Herodian, the image of Elagabalus and his god had been exhibited to the public eye even before the emperor's arrival in Rome.

At the very least we know that in the eyes of contemporaries the new emperor and his god started to be associated with an imagery of the Emesa god represented as moving in a *quadriga*. This image appears on the reverse of coins of Elagabalus and was spread in time and space from the beginning of Elagabalus' reign (*Fig. 2. 1*). The image provides a representation of the aniconic god that was uncommon in Roman tradition used to represent anthropomorphic gods. This aniconic god was a stone with a conical shape, in this imagery surmounted by an eagle and set up in a quadriga, with a star in the field of the coin. Among literary sources, only Herodian provides a description of the sacred stone when he also describes its temple in Emesa (5.3.4-5). Some scholars have associated the widespread distribution of these coins with the journey of the emperor from Emesa to Rome, but the presence of this image in the provinces seems independent from the time and the passage of the emperor.² The examination of provincial coinage of this type shows, though with slight variations,³ that this image was adopted by some cities in the provinces. It might be explained with the intention of these cities to "highlight a connection with the emperor" in expressing their favor.⁴ The image of the sacred stone in the quadriga, backing the portrait of the new emperor and surrounded by a legend

² Icks, for instance, connects this coin type with the idea that the stone travelled with the emperor to Rome – Martin Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 335. Rowan maintains that the creation of this new imagery has a connection with the historical event of the transfer of the sacred stone to Rome, but the spreading of it in the provinces doesn't imply the passage or the presence of the emperor with the stone in the quadriga, see Clare Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualization of Imperial Power in the Severan Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 176-178.

³ Horses rearing upward, eagle on the top of the stone, eagle decorating the front of the stone, stone and quadriga in profile, a frontal quadriga, the stone between two legionary standards, between two parasols: Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 178.

⁴ Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 186.

proclaiming “The Preserver of the Emperor” (or possibly “The Imperial Preserver” since the Latin AUG is abbreviated) emphasized the connection between the emperor and his itinerant god in the minds of the subjects all over the empire.



Fig. 2. 1 – RIC IV.2 Elagabalus 61d. *Aureus* struck in Rome showing in the reverse the sacred stone in a *quadriga* and the legend CONSERVATOR AVGVSTI).

Rowan brought to attention another factor related with this image in coins that reinforced the connection of Elagabalus with the moving aniconic god. Referring to a quantitative examination, she noticed that the percentage of this silver type in hoards is very low, though the number of surviving dies is relatively large. The scholar suggests that this fact could be explained with the melting of these coins because of the *damnatio memoriae* after Elagabalus' death.⁵ This phenomenon highlights the link in the eyes of contemporaries between the emperor and his itinerant god, this time in addressing their displeasure. It is interesting to underline that after the *damnatio memoriae* the sacred stone was sent back to Emesa and at the same time the coins representing his itinerant

⁵ Attested also by sources and epigraphy Dio 79.21.2; for inscriptions and numismatic dating see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 176-7.

dimension were likely melted. Crossing the empire from east to Rome Elagabal had entered the *urbs* (the city) together with the emperor acquiring a universal dimension. At the fall of Elagabalus, the god lost his itinerant and universal dimension and had been brought back to the local and private one.

Some scholars have related this coin's type to the putative existence of the portrait commissioned by Elagabalus, but there is no evidence of this relation in the passage of Herodian. Coins and the portrait have in common the fact that there had been established a strict connection between Elagabalus and his god since the beginning.⁶ Nevertheless, the passage where Herodian mentions the portrait provides an interesting example of tension around the communication of the image of the emperor and around the identity that this non-verbal communication suggests. In the text the readers perceive a tension between Elagabalus, who exhibits in public his identity of high priest of Emesa by dressing and acting in the prescribed way, and his grandmother Maesa who recommends that he wear more traditional clothing now that he is going to Rome and entering in the senate house. The passage underlines that it is not the grandmother's worries, but his own eagerness to get people used to his exotic clothes push Elagabalus to commission the painting (5.5.5-6).

⁶ An *Antoninianus*, minted in Rome in 219, displays on its reverse the sacred stone and its eagle transported in a *quadriga*. A figure, perhaps Elagabalus, is shown making a sacrifice in the foreground. The legend reads CONSERVATOR AUG(USTI). This coin is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Bundesslg, Von Munzen, n° 43082. This coin is first described by H. R. Baldus "Das 'Vorstellungsgemälde' des Heliogabal, Ein bislang unerkanntes numismatisches Zeugnis," *Chiron* 19 (1989) 469-72 who reconnects it with the painting described by Herodian 5.5.6. For the debate on the relation of this coin and the painting, see also Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, 72-74 and Martijn Icks, "From Priest to Emperor to Priest-Emperor: The Failed Legitimation of Elagabalus." *Private and Public Lies. The Discourse of Despotism and Deceit in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. by Andrew J. Turner, et al., Brill (2010) 336 who supports Baldus' interpretation and inexplicably recognizes Elagabalus dressed as high priest in the figure sacrificing; see also M. Zimmermann, "Herodians Konstruktion der Geschichte und sein Blick auf das stadtrömische Volk" in *Geschichtsschreibung und Politischer Wandel im 3 Jn. N. Chr.* (Stuttgart: ed. M. Zimmermann, 1999), pp. 228-30 who contrasts Baldus thinking that the painting itself is an invention of Herodian; see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 181-2 who expresses uncertainty about the connection of the painting and the image on this coin; de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, pp. 83-84 concludes that "the pictorial convention of this mint were not bound by material reality".

Furthermore, a second tension is evident stemming from the point of view of the author. In his report, Herodian twice describes the clothes of the young Elagabalus in his priestly performances. In the first instance, when he is presenting the boy at the beginning of his account, Herodian offers an accurate description of Elagabalus' outfit as high priest of Emesa, after he describes the sacred stone (5.3.5-6).⁷ In this passage Herodian casts as barbarian (σχήματι βαρβάρω) the clothes worn by the boy, but as a matter of fact and without stressing the young emperor's "otherness." As noted above, Herodian generally notes the attractiveness of the young graceful boy to everyone.⁸ The second time is in the passage where the painting is mentioned. Herodian says that Elagabalus, delayed in Nicomedia because of the winter, εὐθέως τε ἐξεβακχέυετο "immediately started to excite to Bacchic frenzy" in practicing his priesthood and he started to dance περιεργότερον "too officiously" (5.5.3). Then Herodian again offers a description of the clothing, but this time, without casting Elagabalus' outfit as barbarian, the author stresses the "otherness" through other devices such as ethnicity and luxury.

The wording of the two descriptions appears quite similar, but some important differences stand out highlighting the point of view of the author. Although in both descriptions Herodian states that Elagabalus wore a crown glittering with gold and precious stones, in the second passage he adds that the crown had the shape of a τιάρα (tiara: 5.5.3). This detail is not irrelevant. The τιάρα was the headgear that the Persian king traditionally wore in a more rigid fashion compared with other people and was encircled by a crown.⁹ At the time of Herodian, through the literary mediation, wearing a

⁷ Herodian, as noted, is the only source who mentions the temple at Emesa and describes the sacred stone.

⁸ See above, pp. 11-12.

⁹ Xenophon *Cyropaedia* 8.3.13 describes this fashion in relation to Cyrus the Great.

τιάρρα had become a mark of oriental ethnicity.¹⁰ The clothes described here are more or less the same as in the previous description, but this time Herodian stresses their extreme costliness and their lavish accessories such as bangles and necklaces (5.5.3). So, here Herodian is not just describing the clothes of the high priest of Emesa as previously, but he is suggesting that, by acting and dressing in this way, Elagabalus embodied the oriental luxury that the Greco-Roman tradition associated with an oriental king.¹¹ The following opposition between silk clothes – called “serica” in ancient Greek and Latin – and wool clothes (5.5.4) is not just a question of difference between Greco-Roman and oriental fashion, but in Herodian’s view embodies two different identities and two contrasting communications of the political body of the emperor for his subjects: the luxurious autocrat and the austere *princeps*.¹² In the Roman world the dressed body was a powerful non-verbal communication of social status. Therefore, religious clothing worn by the young emperor Elagabalus and labelled as eastern was perceived as a deconstruction of the positive relation between the natural and the political body that, as we saw in chapter 1, had been prominent at the start of his rule.¹³

¹⁰ See the study on the use of garments to mark ethnicity in Lucian’s works by Claudia Piccolo, “Vestire l’etnicità,” *Historiae* (2012): 89-109.

¹¹ Icks suggests that the myth of the luxurious oriental king derives from the figure of Sardanapalus, the mythical Assyrian king, whose portrayal we can read in Diodorus Siculus 2.23.1-2, see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, pp. 98-99. Later the scholar goes deeper in this analysis, stressing that Sardanapalus provides the oriental icon of cross-dressing for Greco-Roman mentality, see Icks in “Cross-dressers in Control: Transvestism, Power and Balance between the Sexes in the Literary Discourse of the Roman Empire.” *Transantiquity, Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*, eds. Domitilla Campanile, Filippo Carlà-Uhink, and Margherita Facella (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 67-68.

¹² The “serica” in Rome had a huge diffusion both in clothing and in furniture, e. g. Plinius N.H. 6.54 sees in the Roman matrons the best consumer of silk. In literary sources the use of this kind of cloth is often associated with luxury and debauchery and condemned on moral ground, e. g., Seneca in *De Beneficiis* 7.9.5 denounces the indecency of silk that is too transparent to cover the body; mentioning Caesar’s use of silk to provide shelter against the sun for spectators at the spectacles organized for his triumph, Cassius Dio opens a moral denigration of use of silk in which we read his misogyny (women indulge in luxury) and his bias against barbarian voluptuousness (48.24.2); Tacitus refers to a *lex* (law) against “serica” released by the emperor Tiberius in order to reduce immorality (*Annales* 2.33). This moral contempt for use of silk intensified in Christian authors of the fourth century. With regard to silk clothes in Rome for prostitutes, see chapter 3, p. 46.

¹³ Meister provides a historiography on the significance of dressed body in Roman society and at the same time stresses the search during the Principate of the best communication through emperor’s garments in absence of a consolidated tradition, see “Corps et politique” pp. 115-117.

Moreover, as reported above, this time Herodian also casts the religious performance of the boy dancing to the music of all kinds of instruments at the altar of his god in a negative way, a performance that previously he had described as a facet of the youth's attractiveness (5.3.8). The verb ἐκβακχεύω in the Greco-Roman vision suggests a foul and boundless behavior typical of Dionysiac orgiastic cult and that in Roman world was often condemned and pushed outside the civilized boundaries.¹⁴ The following adjective περιεργότερον "officious" reinforces this idea of an inconvenient excess above all for an emperor (5.5.3).

Whether or not this information is true, Herodian's report about the painting sent to Rome for display above the statue of the Victory reveals a strategy of visual communication by the emperor seeking to accustom his subjects to his image even before his arrival in Rome:

Βουλόμενος ἐν ἔθει γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ σχήματος ὄψεως τὴν τε σύγκλητον καὶ τὸν δῆμον Ῥωμαίων, ἀπόντος τε αὐτοῦ πείραν δοθῆναι πῶς φέρουσι τὴν ὄψιν...

Desiring that the senate and people of Rome should get use to the sight of his dressing and to test how they react to the sight before his arrival (5.5.6).

So, the function of the painting is to advertise his image as high priest of Emesa and to give a representation of his god as well. Moreover, in Elagabalus' strategy his subjects must associate his

¹⁴ During the Republic orgiastic cults appeared in a significant way in Rome on at least three occasions; the state invariably suppressed them as a danger to the *mos maiorum* (the custom of the ancestors) and as a *superstitio*. They reappeared in the second century CE, see Michel Meslin, *L'uomo romano. Uno studio di antropologia* (Milano: Mondadori, 1981), pp. 158-162.

image with that of his god. This is the communication strategy of the picture described by Herodian. In this respect only can we find a relation between the coin type of Elagabalus tied on the reverse with the image of the sacred stone moving in a quadriga. The centrality of this link with his god, as we pointed out above, was an issue advertised without interruption since the beginnings of his reign.

What appears without doubt in Herodian's presentation is the tension he portrays in the early reign of Elagabalus concerning the representation of the body of the emperor. In this respect, Herodian adopts the traditional point of view of the Greek and Roman tradition, which cast eastern cultures as "other". Nevertheless, Herodian expresses a striking anxiety around the image of this emperor related to his outfits and his acting. Herodian's eastern origin and his Greek *paideia*, as well as his awareness of Roman elite environment, perhaps allow him to better understand the relevance of clothing in marking ethnicity and otherness at least as much as do culture and language.¹⁵ There is evidence in material sources that Elagabalus publicized his image in priestly clothes from late 219 on.¹⁶ Herodian registers this impact, expressing his anxiety about it. This tension determines his representation of Elagabalus who, unconcerned with the suggestions of his grandmother, persists in practicing his dancing and dressing in a fashion that Herodian considers excessive and inappropriate for a Roman emperor. Herodian's underlying traditional moral biases against the east suggests to his eastern audience educated in the Greek/Roman *paideia* that he has gone beyond his eastern culture embracing the same vision of his audience and a moral vision of the history: perhaps he nuances a slight disappointment towards an heir of the imperial household coming to Rome from the east, who

¹⁵ Despite the scarcity of data for Herodian's biography, scholars incline to think that he had at one point a low rank appointment in Rome, perhaps as *scriba* in the imperial service, see Richard Miles, "Rivalling Rome: Carthage" in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, eds. Catharine Edwards and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 140.

¹⁶ On inscriptions and coins Elagabalus styled himself as *sacerdos amplissimus dei Invicti Solis Elagabali* and represented himself on the reverse in priestly clothes from late 219: see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 211-213.

displayed an image unsuitable for a Roman emperor.¹⁷ In Herodian's vision of imperial history, in decline since Marcus Aurelius, Elagabalus seems another failed opportunity for renovation.¹⁸

Despite Herodian's anxiety, Elagabalus arrived in Rome preceded by a politics in line with the traditional propaganda of a *princeps*. The literary sources, except for Herodian, mention a dispatch to Rome by Elagabalus and his advisers before their arrival, along with the coinage policy discussed below, which was part of Elagabalus' strategy to develop his imperial image. In different terms, both Cassius Dio and the author of the *Historia Augusta* speak about this dispatch. In much more detail, Cassius Dio emphasizes three themes that emerge from the content of the dispatch: hatred of the defeated Macrinus, the use of former emperors as a model, and the titles that Elagabalus adopted. The communication is well shaped for the senatorial audience and is in line with the best propaganda of a *princeps*. Macrinus, the murderer of Caracalla, is despised not just as traitor usurper, but as one "who dared become emperor without even being senator." By contrast, Elagabalus aimed to stress his link with the Roman aristocracy.¹⁹ The emperor, indeed, chosen as model by Elagabalus is Augustus "to whose youth he linked his own" (80, 1, 2-3). This is a strategic move for a young emperor brought to Rome by the military power in order to broaden consensus, and it is also meaningful in relation to both emperors' emphasis on the

¹⁷ Rowan sees a clash between foreign *paideia* and Greek *paideia* in Herodian: Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," *Papers of the British School of Rome* 29 (2011): 172-173.

¹⁸ If it is true that Herodian's audience was more specifically the Greek nobility residing not at Rome but in the Hellenistic world, this failure could acquire a stronger meaning in a missed occasion for a renovation coming from the Hellenistic world. See Jussi Rantala "Ruling in Purple...and Wearing Make-up: Gendered Adventures of Emperor Elagabalus as seen by Cassius Dio and Herodian" in *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World: Intersectionality in Classical Antiquity*, eds. Jennifer Surtees and Jennifer Dyer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 118-128, and p. 120 for the debate around relation between Herodian and his Greek audience.

¹⁹ Icks notes the coin type with the legend *nobilitas* (RIC IV.II *Elagabalus* 124) and connects it with Elagabalus' attempt to tie himself with the high social circles – see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 65; Scott explains this claim in relation to the vilification of Macrinus, see Scott, "The Legitimation of Elagabalus," p. 246. Both scholars reconnect the marriage politics with Elagabalus' intent to establish link with the Roman aristocracy.

youth. The titles assumed by Elagabalus revealed that this subtle propaganda in the dispatch was addressed mostly to the senate: “καὶ αὐτοκράτορα καὶ Καίσαρα, τοῦ τε Ἀντωνίνου υἱὸν καὶ τοῦ Σεουήρου ἔγγονον, εὐσεβῆ τε καὶ εὐτυχῆ καὶ Αὐγουστον” or “Emperor Caesar, Son of Antoninus, Grandson of Severus, Pius and Felix and Augustus” (80, 2, 2).²⁰ With these titles Elagabalus and his advisers fashioned the image of a new young emperor who embraces the best imperial tradition and who is part of a house destined to rule the empire. Coins were struck to commemorate the advent of the new emperor and they employed a traditional imagery suggesting his role of *imperator*.²¹ The titles also conveyed the image of a ruler who will bring, through his religious respect for deity, happiness and prosperity to all in the Roman world, a notion underscored by the three final titles *Pius* (devote), *Felix* (prosperous), and *Augustus*.²²

Among the first acts as an emperor and in the line of his predecessors, Elagabalus implemented his program of construction in Rome starting by building a house for his god. Herodian writes that Elagabalus νεὼν τε μέγιστον καὶ κάλλιστον κατασκευάσας τῷ θεῷ “provided an enormous and magnificent temple to his god,” and the author of *HA* says that the emperor *Heliogabulum in Palatino monte iuxta aedes imperatorias consecravit* “consecrated a *Elagabaliu*m on the Palatine

²⁰ The author of the *Historia Augusta* mentioning the messengers sent to Rome, emphasizes on the stressing the name of Antoninus and on the defeat of a usurper (*HA, Heliogab. 2, 4*).

²¹ Such as the emperor in horseback raising right arm: RIC IV.2 *Elagabalus* 57-8, legend ADVENTUS AUGUSTI; see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 190. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire*, ccxxxvii, dates to 219 two types of this imagery.

²² For the meaning of the imperial titles see: Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, pp. 64-65; Carlos F. Norena, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 168. Norena also noticed a formulaic phrase in official inscriptions of Elagabalus from north Africa that reads: “*felicissimus atque invictissimus ac super omnes retro principes indulgentissimus*” (the most prosper and the most invincible and the most indulgent beyond all previous emperors) (CIL 8.10304=ILS 471 near Rusicade (Skikda), 219 and CIL 8.10308 near Rusicade, 220). The superlatives were already used by predecessors such as Septimius Severus, but the wording “*super omnes retro principes*” (beyond all previous emperors) is unique and underlines a praise that stands out not just in comparison as Norena says, but also in contrast with the predecessors. See Norena, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West*, pp. 221-228.

near the imperial palace.” But Dio doesn’t mention the temple.²³ What we know from the literary sources seems to be supported by numismatic materials.²⁴ Archeological investigations carried on since the beginnings of 1900s located the “magnificent” temple on the eastern slope of the Palatine (*Fig. 2. 2*).²⁵ This long and deep activity around the findings of an *Elagabalium* on the Palatine have given us by now a growing certainty about its existence in the area of Vigna Barberini, though discussions around the phases of its construction continue.²⁶

²³ HA 3.4; Herodian 5.5.8. Other ancient sources are useful to confirm the existence of a consecrated spot: Jerome, *Chronicle Ad. Abr.* 296g; *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 23.

²⁴ A bronze medallion of Elagabalus, now in the Münzkabinett of the State Museum of Berlin (Object Number 18205364) shows the *Elagabalium* on the Palatine. This piece has been noticed since the last decade of the nineteenth century and its configuration is so far unique. The mention of Elagabalus’ fourth consulship on the obverse dates the coin to the final months of his reign (December 221-March 222). This coin is described and reconnected with the *Elagabalium* by Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 193; and de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, pp. 81-82.

²⁵ The archeological excavations dated from 1930 and indicated a Palatine’ location in the area of *Vigna Barberini*. Excavations in this area had continued until 1999 basically confirming the location. See Leonardo De Arrizabalaga y Prado *Varian Studies Volume Two: Elagabal*. Edited by Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado and Raul de la Fuente Marcos. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2017) 3-34.

²⁶ Giuseppe Restaino, “Il tempio di *Elagabal* ‘έν τῷ προαστείῳ,’” *Bollettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* (2020), p. 233, fn. 4 summarizes the literature on the phases of construction of this temple.

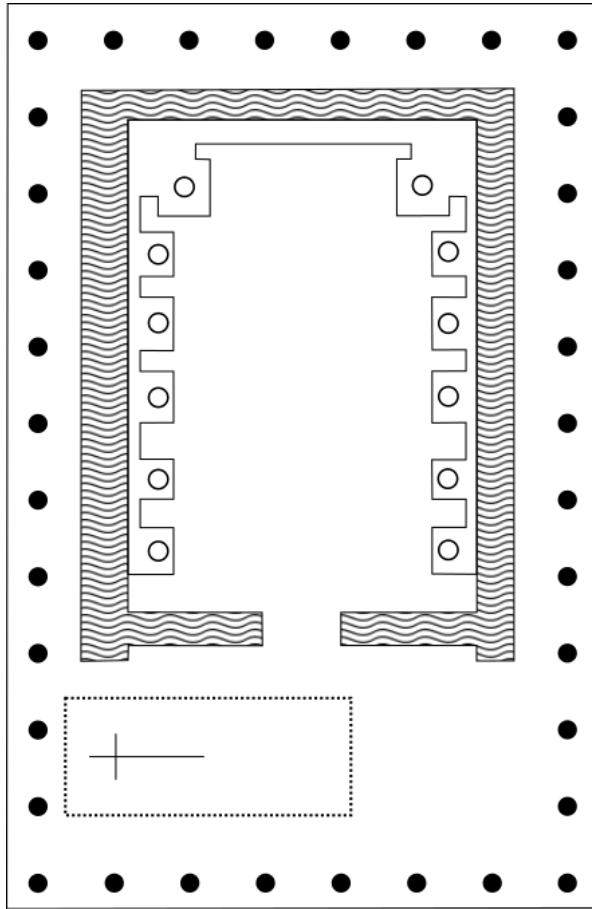


Fig. 2. 2 – Plan of the *Elagabalium*. On the lower-left the plan of the Church of San Sebastiano al Palatino. From “Elagabalium,” *Wikipedia*.

Moreover, the sources mention another temple consecrated to the Emesa god.²⁷ About this second place of worship information is scarce and its location is an unsettled question, though a majority of scholars take its existence for granted.²⁸ The recent study of Giuseppe Restaino, who provides a complete and updated report of the status of the question, supports the more traditional hypothesis of location which is that the second temple was built in the area where the church of S. Croce in Jerusalem now stands.²⁹ This area corresponds to the *Horti Spei Veteris*, mentioned also by the *HA*,

²⁷ Herodian 5.6.1; *HA* 1.6. On the reference in *HA* and the difficulties of a location on its basis see Restaino (2020) 236.

²⁸ The archeological campaigns and studies located the spot in opposite places of Rome. So far, the most respected locations are three: in *Trastevere*, on the *Quirinal*, or in the area of *Horti Spei Veteris*.

²⁹ Giuseppe Restaino, “Il tempio di *Elagabal*, 233-267. The area of the *Horti Spei Veteris* remained of imperial possession down to the time Constantine; Helena, Constantine’s mother, used to live there and the

a huge imperial residence started under Settimius Severus, finished by Caracalla and remodeled by Elagabalus.³⁰ This hypothesis is supported by archeological and philological evidence.³¹ This location would locate the Emesian cult inside the walls of Ancient Rome, inscribing the ceremonial center of the cult between the Palatine, the official residence of the imperial house, and the *Horti*, the private space of the Severian family (*Fig. 2. 3*). If this is true, the construction policy of Elagabalus gave monumental visibility to his god, novel in Rome, by emphasizing his presence wherever the imperial and the Severan presence were already established. In these locations we see again a message that in the public eye tied the relation between emperor and god. Where there is the emperor, there is the god. In other words, the space of the emperor is also the space of worship.

Church of the Santa Croce had been constructed on this site, see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 200. If the hypothesis could be proved, this would provide interesting implications about the destination of the temple.

³⁰ *HA, Heliogab.* 13.4-5; 14.2-8; 27.1.

³¹ This hypothesis stems from the link that sources convey between Elagabalus and the suburban spot of the city to which, according with the *HA*, the emperor used to withdraw. The space of the spot matches the description in Herodian of the festival that occurred around the temple, and archeological investigation demonstrated that this space had been remodeled under Elagabalus' reign as well as a Severan imperial residence had been built in this area since Septimius Severus, the *Horti Spei Veteris*. Unfortunately, so far is no archeological evidence of the presence of Elagabalus' second temple in this area. But a philological analysis of Herodian's passage supports the hypothesis of its location in this area. The term προάστειον in Herodian's work means often "estate, residence, suburban residence." Restaino maintains that this is the best translation of the passage in Herodian, and it is an allusion to the suburban Severan residence. For the entire explanation see Restaino, "Il tempio di *Elagabal*," 253-258.

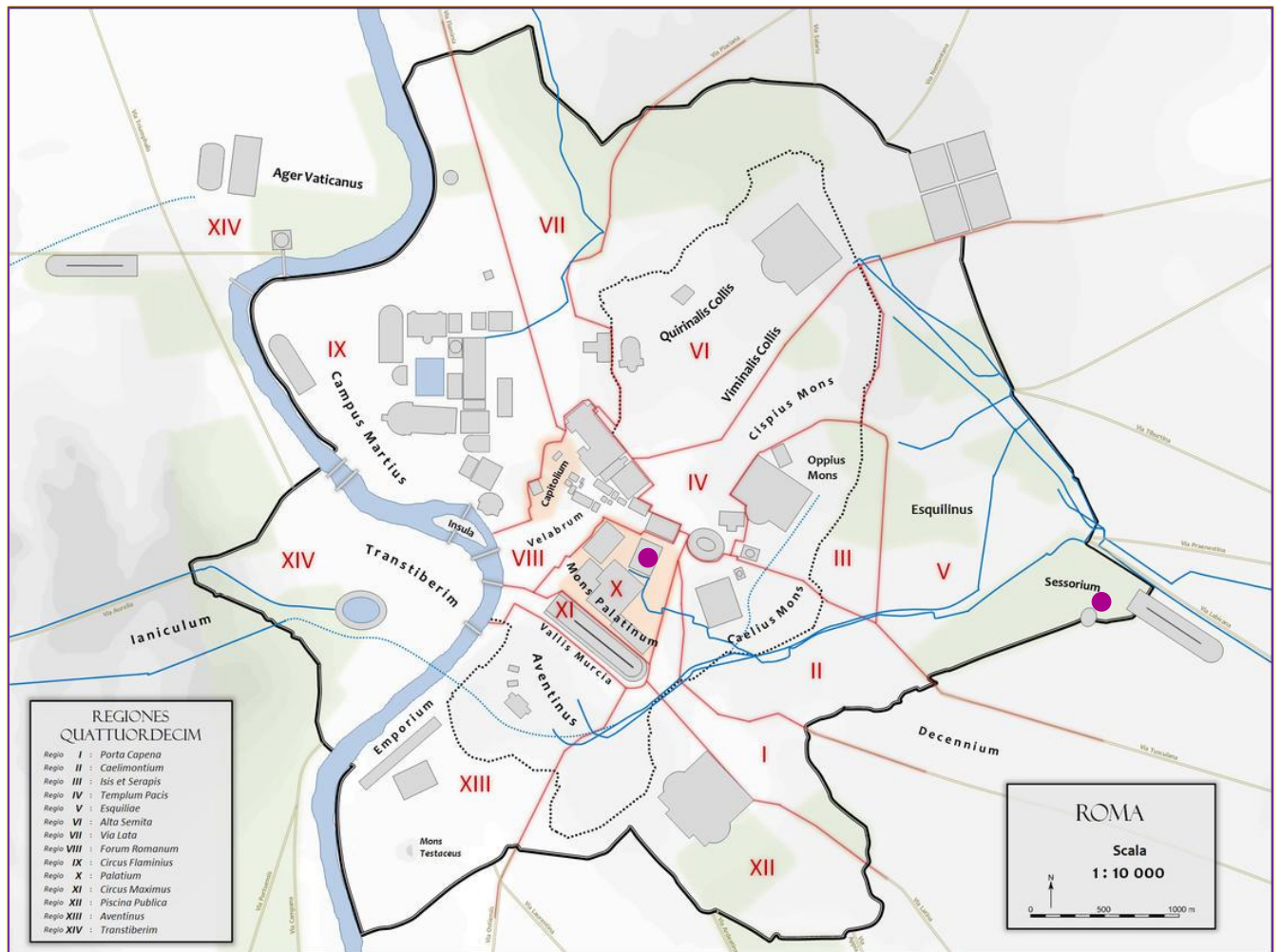


Fig. 2. 3 – Map of the ancient city of Rome. The round dot in the center indicates the main temple on the Palatine; the round dot on the right indicates the presumed location in the *Horti Spei Veteris*. Map based on a reworked version from ancient-rome-map.pjpeg.jpeg.

Roman religion is better defined by ritual obligations than by doctrine or belief. In a polytheistic environment, individuals established multiple relations with divinities meaningful to them. The result was a multitude of gods increased by decisions of individuals with specific worship intentions, or by groups of foreign people with the same religious tradition.³² In the city of Rome during the imperial age, an extensive series of cults found their sites of worship and this plurality

³² Jörg Rüpke “Roman Religion – Religion of Rome” in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. by Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p 5; John Scheid, *The Gods, The State, and The Individual*, trans. Clifford Ando. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 63

was an expression of the Roman imperialism. In this context of an “embedded religion,” as Rüpke aptly calls it, also the Emesian cult would have found its space inside a group of individual worshippers before Elagabalus sought to make the cult more official.³³

Arriving in Rome Elagabalus brought to the fore one of the many oriental cults already practiced in the capital giving it a prominence in the religious activities of his time. The coinage featuring on the reverse a temple built or restored by the emperor shows the emperor’s devotion to gods and maintenance of Roman religious life. Scenes on the reverse of coins of the emperor in the act of sacrificing are rare under Augustus, but become frequent with Caligula, though reverses of coins of Julius Caesar or other moneyers with sacrificial implements are attested earlier.³⁴ Coins with the representation of the god on the reverse who had a close relation with the emperor became frequent in the imperial period.³⁵ Elagabalus’ coinage displays all these types, showing the adoption of a religious politics that was expected by a *pius* emperor: he built or restored temples, he performed sacrifices (*Fig. 2.4*), he displayed in public his aniconic god transported in a quadriga and he exhibited it in a cult space.³⁶

³³ In the early Severan age private devotion to Elagabal is attested in Trastevere by epigraphic evidence, see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 202 and Restaino, “Il tempio di *Elagabal*,” 245-247. It is more likely that the cool indifference of the Roman people reported by Herodian at the Elagabalus’ arrival in Rome was a result of the inclusive attitude of the capital of the empire rather than the vision of the painting Herodian described as having been sent to prepare the subjects to the sight of the emperor dressed as high priest of Emesa and sacrificing to the sacred stone: οὐδὲν παράδοξον εἶδον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι “the Romans saw nothing unusual in it,” (5, 5, 7)

³⁴ Jonathan Williams “Religion and Roman Coins.” *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. by Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 148-157.

³⁵ Specifically, for the Severan dynasty, see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 1-6.

³⁶ Coins display two configurations of the emperor sacrificing. One shows the emperor sacrificing in Roman garb, wearing a toga that veil his head, on behalf of the state (VOTA PUBLICA); see Marcel Thirion *Le monnayage d’Élagabale*, Bruxelles, 1968, 218-222 where this kind is represented by coins n° 374-379. The other starting from the end of 219 shows the emperor sacrificing in Syrian priestly clothes. See De Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, pp. 78-80 and Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 210.



Fig. 2. 4: RIC IV *Elagabalus* 49. Obverse: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG: Bust of Elagabalus, horned, laureate, draped, right. Reverse: P M TR P IIII COS III P P: Elagabalus, in Syrian priestly robes, standing left, sacrificing with a patera in right hand over lighted altar, and holding branch in left hand; to right, two standards; in left field, star. This type is frequent from the end of 219.

In the cultic space of his god, Elagabalus carried out sacrifices and staged sacred processions.³⁷

Among the literary sources, Herodian displays the most detailed information about Elagabalus' religious practices, in accordance with his interest on religious rites notable elsewhere in his work.³⁸

Most of the features of Elagabalus' performances reported by Herodian are in line with the Roman tradition in sacrificing to gods. At dawn, in the open space in the edge of the cult area, the official for the sacrifice, supported by his attendants and sometimes in the presence of senators, offered libation and then immolated (sacrificed) sacrificial victims, accompanying gestures with prayers and sounds of the flute and other instruments. The *exta* (the most prominent internal organs) of the victims were offered to the divinity and then, when the sacrificial offering had been consumed by the flame in a portable hearth, the rest of the sacrificed animals was served to humans in a banquet.

³⁷ The *Chronicle* of Jerome states that the temple on the Palatine was dedicated in 220, probably converting a precedent structure, see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 195-7. According to scholars the construction of the second temple, destination of the procession (Herodian), had been completed in 221: Turcan (1985) 138; Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 199-201.

³⁸ Rowan (2005) 163-176 comments the passages in Herodian work centered on description of cultic rituals and festivals, stating that they are proof of his interest in treating Roman religion. Moreover, since on these subjects there is no correspondence in Dio, they are proof of his independence from Dio.

In Roman belief, the banquet expressed the meaning of the sacrifice: in dividing food with gods, humans became familiar with the divine, defining the relation of worship in exchange of divine benevolence. Great sacrificial rites often continued with festivals, that included games with either theatrical performances or circus races.³⁹ Herodian's account of Elagabalus' rites shows all these features.

In the case of Elagabalus, Herodian describes a performance generally in line with this tradition. However, while keeping this traditional framework, he also underlines something different. In practicing the sacrifice, Elagabalus manifested devotion not with ritual prayers but with dances performed around the altar to the sound of many instruments. In these dances he was surrounded not by attendants but by γυναῖα τε ἐπιχώρια "women belonging to his same country" moving in a dance with him. Larger numbers of people of high ranks participated, such as the entire senate and the equestrian order. These people gathered not as private citizens, but in their public offices, ranked in a precise order as Herodian points out saying that "they stood round the priest and the dancing women in the order they set at theatre" (5.5.9).⁴⁰ Military prefects and important officials also joined the sacrifice, bringing bowls filled with the *exta* of the victims to the altars. They too were dressed in Syrian style (5.5.8-10). These features were a departure from what was expected by the emperor in Rome. It is not the case, as some scholars argue, of a description that includes nothing Roman, but rather a description which stresses striking differences within a wider Roman contest.⁴¹

³⁹ On this theme of the sacrifices in Rome see the synthesis provided by Scheid "Sacrifices for Gods and Ancestors" in *A Companion in Roman Religion*, pp. 263-271.

⁴⁰ The seating at theater was determined by social status – see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 324-5.

⁴¹ I disagree with Icks who states in his *Crimes of Elagabalus* (p. 106), that there is nothing Roman in Herodian's description and that the rites are described as ecstatic and orgiastic. The passage in Herodian quoted by Icks is not part of the description of the rite, but it is related to the tension between Elagabalus and Maesa indeed (5.7.2).

The body of the emperor is exhibited in the public space, performing devotional dances under the eyes of everyone and intermingling in the rite male and female, dressed in Syrian style. Herodian seems to suggest an excess not in the rite itself, but in the officialization that the eastern rite acquires through the presence of the emperor and in the universal participation in the rite.⁴²

Herodian also writes explicitly about processions when he mentions the second temple ἐν τῷ προαστείῳ (in the private suburban estate)⁴³ to which every year at mid-summer Elagabalus brought his god.⁴⁴ On these occasions Elagabalus instituted many different festivals enriched by theatrical performances and circus races. Traditionally, not only great sacrificial liturgies but also Syrian rites were characterized by spectacles and festivals of this kind.⁴⁵ What seems unique is the description of the sacred stone set up on the chariot, and leading the procession driving by itself. The emperor was walking backward, gazing ecstatically at his god, and never turning his back to it: this is the evident position of a humble worshiper.⁴⁶ It was this unique connection between the aniconic moving god on a chariot and the emperor acting as the first of worshipers that determined the imagery of the coins with the sacred stone in a quadriga on the reverse. According to Herodian, the procession continued with a long exhibit of images of all the other gods, precious temple dedications, imperial standards, and costly heirlooms. People ran following the emperor along both side of the route with wreaths and flowers. The cavalry and all the army

⁴² Public and private in Rome were legal categories extended also to religion. A public religious act was intended an act celebrated by a representative of the city community, not necessary in public (meaning in the eyes of everyone), as an expression of the will of the whole community and in favor of the good of everyone. Private act was displayed in private space and in accordance with private law. See for a detailed explanation John Scheid, *The Gods, The State, and The Individual*, pp. 40-42.

⁴³ The given translation is in accordance with Restaino's interpretation – see his "Il tempio di Elagabal," 253-258.

⁴⁴ M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*. (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989) 71; Turcan (1997)138 and Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 205 states that the procession took place once in 221 when the temple system would had been completed.

⁴⁵ John Scheid, "Sacrifices for Gods and Ancestors," 269.

⁴⁶ In the Persian ritual the subordinate could not turn the shoulders to the superior.

joined in (5.6.8). Among all this display the emperor stood out alone, in ecstatic adoration of his god, though he was surrounded by a crush of people whom Herodian describes at times as a community of worshipers, at times as a mob.

Though less extensively, the account of Cassius Dio also reports Elagabalus' religious practices. As noted above Dio doesn't mention any temple or shrine built or restored by Elagabalus for his god. Some details on Elagabalus' practices provided by this historian are the same as in Herodian, but they are not connected with a religious discourse. Dio speaks, for instance, about banquets for the populace, gladiators' contests, and the slaying of various beasts, but these details come as Dio speaks of Elagabalus' marriage with Julia Cornelia Paula.⁴⁷ At one point Dio reports about performances in honor of the Emesian god such as barbaric chants by the emperor together with his mother and grandmother and secret sacrifices, but he refers to them as a ἀνοσιουργός “unholy” rites mostly practiced in the private space (80.11).⁴⁸ The only explicit passage commenting on Elagabalus' religious policy is a passage integrated between 80.8 and 80.9 in the epitome of Xiphilinus. Here Dio lists the irregularities of Elagabalus in relation to the behavior expected upon acceptance of the title of consul. In this list, Dio includes the emperor's conduct in the matter of his god. The author does not judge it negatively because of the introduction of a new god to Rome, an action that in a polytheistic context is completely accepted. Surprisingly, Dio does not refer negatively to the otherness of Elagabalus' performances in exalting his god. Meaningfully here the verb in Greek for “exalting” is μεγαλύνειν, a word that implies negativity

⁴⁷ 80.9.2-3.

⁴⁸ Attilio Mastrocinque convincingly identifies the extravagant ritual involving a lion, a monkey, a snake, and human genitals, which Dio describes at this point to give an example of unholy rites, with the Egyptian cult of Kronos-Suchos and a Syrian cult of Athargiatis-*Dea Syria* – Attilio Mastrocinque, “Heliagabalus, Saturnus, and Hercules” in *Divinazione, culto del sovrano e apoteosi: tra antichità e medioevo*, eds. T. Gnoli and F. Muccioli (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2014), pp. 321-330.

when referring to a human, but not when referring to a god. Using the parallel construction οὐχ ὄτι... οὐχ ὄτι... ἀλλ' ὄτι at last he characterizes as αἰδοῖον “shameful,” the fact that Elagabalus put his god before Zeus and devoted himself completely to his god even at the point of adopting practices that affected the imperial body such as circumcision or diet abstinence (80.11.1). Hence Dio casts as negative exactly the connection that Elagabalus holds with his god in which the god is a powerful entity, even more than Zeus, and the emperor is his humble faithful servant. This lack of proportion and blurring of boundaries between human and divine power, even in the case in which the human is the emperor, is cast as a threat to the traditional relation with gods guaranteeing the *pax deorum* and the safety of the empire.⁴⁹ In this transformation we see the emergence of a proto-monotheism.

From different sensibilities and points of view, then, both Herodian and Dio are critical of Elagabalus' religiosity, representing his image as unsuitable. Dio sees a loss in the balance between the emperor and the divine that had prevailed in previous centuries. In Herodian there is a hint of anxiety in representing the emperor who goes beyond his role of priest or *pontifex maximus* and in his adoring enthusiasm, in his dancing, and in his clothing threatens both his role and his majesty. Moreover, in the account of Herodian stands out the lively participation of people of all social classes in his religious program that combine sacrifices, banquets, processions, and festivals – all practices that are traditional in Rome and appeal specifically the low rank of people. This aspect perhaps is seen with anxiety by Herodian, who at times describes this multitude of people as a mob more than a community of worshipers (e. g. 5.6.10). Dio in an earlier passage of his monumental *History* expresses his suspicion towards those who, importing

⁴⁹ In this attitude of Dio some scholars have seen a nuanced critique to the advent of Christianity – Giuseppe Zecchini, “Il santuario della dea Caelestis e l’*Historia Augusta*” in *Santuari e politica nel mondo antico*, ed. Maria Sordi (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1983), p. 187.

into public practices a foreign god, contaminate the Roman religion with foreign ritual practices. Moreover, Dio thinks that gathering multitudes of people in the worship of the sacred stone would form an association that is illicit. Finally, the historian thinks that the Elagabalus' religious practices do not serve the good of the monarchy.⁵⁰

Most significantly, Elagabalus not only brought his religious practices out from their traditionally private venues into public, performed under the eyes of everyone, but also – and there was scandal here – intermingled male and female in the rites without any distinction of sexual and social boundaries. In other words, this open access to rites and the universalization of a local cult were departures from the traditional polytheistic context in which religion had been practiced by small communities of individuals in relation to the deities to which each felt attached.⁵¹

We saw a change in the communication of the image of the emperor tied to Elagabalus' priesthood. After all, in the imperial age, priesthood in various forms had become part of the imperial image,⁵² but Elagabalus represents a departure from the expected public role of the emperor as *pontifex maximus*, in which the imperial body was increased in power by the religious role. Since the beginnings he exhibited a strong unity with his aniconic god, venerated *in primis* and in public by the emperor acting as a humble, faithful servant of a god perceived as a divine entity rather than, as was traditional with previous emperors, as a divine *comes* (companion)

⁵⁰ Dio 52.36.1-2

⁵¹ Scheid, *The Gods, The State, and The Individual*, p. 63.

⁵² See Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome. Volume 2 – A Sourcebook*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 194 on the many types of priesthood at Rome; and on the radical overturning of the association between imperial power and official religion in Elagabalus' time, p. 256 in the same volume.

whose anthropomorphic aspect could be assimilated to the physical appearance of the emperor.⁵³ Thus the body of the emperor – dressed in exotic ways, purified by corporal practices and moving into dance as a prayer, and in the presence of the civic community gathered as a whole – no longer symbolizes the power of the empire, but was rather subsumed and transformed by the omnipotence of his god, with its power rooted in this immersion in its god. In these public rituals, in short, Elagabalus' body was both the agent of the transformation of Roman religion and itself an object of this transformation. For Elagabalus, this transformation may have served the goal of fashioning a new imperial body. For contemporary sources representing traditional elites, however, this transformation constituted nothing else than political blasphemy.

⁵³ Arthur Darby Nock "The Emperor's Divine Comes," *The Journal of Roman Studies* (1947): 102-116 analyzed the formula of a divine *comes* (companion) in the several kinds of relation between human and god; Ernst H. Kantorowicz, in *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 503, refers also to Nock and proposes that the relation between emperor and god/*comes* is represented by a likeness or "super-face" into the divine, associated with the emperor's identity. More recently Rowan refers to this concept showing the association on coins between divinities and emperors – see her *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 1-6. For the assimilation between emperors and deities in portraits see Eric R. Varner "Transcending Gender: Assimilation, Identity, and Roman Imperial Portraits," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes* (2008): 185-205.

CHAPTER 3

Two Bodies in Conflict

With the concision that marks his writing, Cassius Dio observes:

πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἄτοπα, ἃ μῆτε λέγων μῆτε ἀκούων ἄν τις καρτερήσειεν, ἔδρασε τῷ σώματι
καὶ ἔπαθε.

“Using his body, [Elagabalus] carried out and underwent many strange things which no one could endure to tell or hear of” (80.13.2).

In this passage, the accent is not, notably, on what this emperor did or said, but rather on the use of his body – a use that, as we shall see, challenged the traditional/normative concept of the imperial body.¹ We saw in Chapter 1 how the attractiveness of Elagabalus’ beautiful body and its exhibition in public played a significant role in his ascent, helping to establish his dynastic claim. Chapter 2 underlined the communication strategy of the representation of this emperor involving the strict connection with his god in shaping his own identity as a faithful worshiper. In this third

¹ Scholars unanimously agree in understanding Dio’s representation of Elagabalus as deeply biased by his senatorial hostility towards an emperor who relied more on claim of dynastic power rather than senate legitimization. See Josiah Osgood, “Cassius Dio’s Secret History of Elagabalus” in *Cassius Dio Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician*, eds. Carsten Hijort Lange and Jesper Majborn Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 180, for example, where he states that Dio models Elagabalus figure on the stereotypical bad ruler of the traditional Greco-Roman satire. See also Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome’s Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 102 where he argues that Dio refuses to take the reign of Elagabalus seriously and emphasizes as much as he can a negative portrayal of him. Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualization of Imperial Power in the Severan Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 169 states that Cassius Dio’s account of Elagabalus is a mix of “reliable evidence and literary exaggeration.”

chapter, as we shall see, Elagabalus' natural body breaks completely from conventional representations of the imperial body and begins to put his rule at risk.

What Dio casts as ἄτοπα (strange things) is a list of Elagabalus' behaviors that imply gender shifts in relation to normative expectations.² Dio uses this word to generalize a set of behaviors that are difficult to categorize, marking with this term the fluidity of the Elagabalus' sexual and gender identities. Here I offer a list of the behaviors Dio cites:

- cross-dressing: Elagabalus went into a tavern at night wearing a wig (80.13.2); he painted his eyes and plucked out his hair like a woman (80.14.4)
- cross-gender comportment: he appeared both as man and as a woman (80.5.5); he told his lover "Call me not Lord for I am a Lady" (80.16.5); he worked with wool (80:14:4)
- imitation of women: he had intercourse with many women not because of his own needs, but because he wanted to imitate their actions when he was with his lovers (80.13.1); he played the role of a prostitute while men were instructed to play their part (80.13.3-4); acting as a loved mistress, he took dinner in his lover's bosom (80.16.6)

² The attempt to give a theoretical definition to these behaviors, extensively attested in the classical world, in relation to modern categories is not an easy task, though many scholars have made a praiseworthy attempt to do so – see, for example, *Transantiquity, Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World* eds. Domitilla Campanile, Filippo Carlá-Uhink, and Margherita Facella (New York: Routledge, 2017). It is notable that a categorization of experiences of gendered inversion had its first conceptualization in the last decade of the last century and struggled to differentiate expressions of homosexual identity from transgender identities. The struggles in defining a transgender identity are well described in the work of David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender. An Ethnography of the Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 15: "If in the contemporary United States "transgender" describes a deviation from gender norms, then "homosexuality" indexes same-sex eroticism between gender-normative people." Valentine's investigation among transgender groups shows that confusion between same-sex desire and gender-variant expressions is a reality. Susan Styer provides a list of terms and definitions, specifying that they are nearly all definitions in progress, in her *Transgender History* (New York: Seal Press, 2009), pp. 15-24.

- affectation: he modulated the quality of his voice and he behaved with affectation moving always into dance (80.14.3-4); he bent his neck so as to assume a ravishing feminine pose, turning his eyes upon others with a melting gaze (80.16.5); he sprang up with rhythmic movement in presence of men (80.16.4).
- a desire of moving away from his sex given at birth: he decided to cut off his genitals παντάπασιν or completely (80.11.1); he thought it was worthy to ask the physicians to contrive in his body a vagina by the means of an incision (80.16.7)

Dio presents these actions as deviations from the Roman ideal of masculinity, which in his view caused a disgraceful shift to femininity, the passive and inferior gender in ancient male perspective. Dio's view reinforces the gender norms, offering topics to his invective against an emperor who degrades the martial and masculine image of a good emperor. So, cross-dressing, affectation of normative female gestures and roles, cross-behavior, passive intercourse with men and imitation of women, and what seems to have been the lowliest activity of all in Dio's view, the emperor's assumption of the role of a prostitute (Dio signals his disapproval by pleonasm in 80.13.3-4), have the effect not to blur the gender boundaries as Elagabalus had done, but to reinforce them, casting the emperor in an unfavorable light in the eyes of his readers. The image that would have shocked his readers the most is that of the young emperor who, acting as a woman, chose a Carian slave as his husband (80.15.1). It is the apex of the invective when an emperor is described in a sexually passive role with a slave in the active role: a subversion of sexual, social and culture norms. Here the power imperial discourse is turned upside down.³

³ Mattingly shows how in the imperial age sexual behaviors were classified as decent not in relation of what one did, "rather it was a question of whom one did it and what role was played" – David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 108. Social status, political power and cultural superiority determined the relation dominance-submission in the three principal forms of sexual intercourse Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, p. 106-112.

Herodian also provides examples of cross-dressing and cross-behavior as a deviation from normative masculinity, but he nuances his presentation by describing this as a lack of restraint in the young emperor Elagabalus. The most significant instance is when he remarks Elagabalus' excess in dancing and in painting his eyes and cheeks with "disgusting" make-up.⁴ In Herodian this behavior – strongly associated with women – spoils Elagabalus' natural grace and beauty φύσει τε πρόσωπον ωραῖον υβρίζων βάφαις ἀσχήμοσιν "making violence to his naturally graceful face using disgusting make-up" (5.6.10). We have already seen how Herodian had underlined the blooming beauty of this youth at the outset of his reign.⁵ Now, he is depicting an emperor who distorts his natural body to a stage that he finds unacceptable and labels disgusting. The same shift of the author is underlined in the feeling of the soldiers he reports. They too "at the sight of the emperor with his face made up more elaborately than a modest woman" and "effeminately dressed up in golden necklaces and soft clothes," change their sentiments feeling no longer attraction to the emperor, but rather repulsion (5.8.1). Elsewhere Dio makes clear what any reader of Roman history understands from Herodian's report, that this signals the end for the young emperor (80.16.1): in Rome imperial power rested on military support.

⁴ The use of cosmetics and perfume that degrades the natural male beauty has other references in Greco-Roman literature. The same meaning as in Herodian we read in Lucian *How to Write a History* 8 and 10. Lucian provides two examples of degradation of male beauty because the use of female make-up and dressing. In chapter 8 the proportion and strength of an athlete is spoiled with make-up, purple gown and decorations as a little prostitute; in chapter 10 Lucian offers a revisit of the myth of Heracles in Lydia enslaved by Omphale. According with the tradition of this myth, Lucian describes a case of cross-dressing in both directions, but in contrast with the myth there is no meaningful reference to a proof which will pass the hero at a divine stage. Rather, Lucian highlights how ridiculous is Heracles wearing a saffron and purple gown, carding wool and getting rapped with Omphale's sandal. His divine masculinity is disgraceful feminized. There is only degeneration in Lucian's use of the myth.

⁵ See above, p. 11.

Among the striking behaviors attributed to Elagabalus by the author of the *HA* aiming to underline the lack of restraint and the megalomania of this bad emperor, two passages refer to his sexuality and cross-behaviors. One (5.1-5) starts with the rhetorical question: “*quis enim ferre posset principem per cuncta cava corporis libidinem recipientem, cum ne beluam quidem talem quisquam ferat?*” “who would tolerate an emperor who has passive intercourse through all holes of his body, such as even a beast would not tolerate?” The paradoxical tone of the image is an appropriate introduction to a series of extravagant behaviors in which Elagabalus searches throughout all Rome for well-endowed men, cross-dresses, makes-up his face, removes his body hair, and takes the part of Venus in a theatrical performance of the *Fabula Paridis* (“Judgement of Paris”) (5.1-5). Another passage shows Elagabalus choosing only silk garments and despising linen ones.⁶ Further, Elagabalus gathered from all sides of Rome in the *aedes publicae*, or public buildings, prostitutes, procurers, catamites, and lascivious boys addressing them as they were an army, his special army of profligate people (26.1-5).⁷ By the time of nearly two centuries after the real Elagabalus, the literary stereotypes concur and grow in building the image of a megalomaniac and lunatic tyrant, exactly the opposite of the model of the good *Princeps* that the *HA* author aims to suggest to his audience. In these passages, biography yields to fiction.⁸

⁶ Silk was notoriously used by prostitutes, but linen for official robes. We recognize the same tone of moral condemnation of the use of silk that we underlined in various passage of ancient literature, see chapter 2 p. 25.

⁷ Martijn Icks, “The ‘Vices and Follies’ of Elagabalus in Modern Historical Research” in *A Varian Symposium*, vol. 3 of *Varian Studies*, ed. Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2017), p. 175 thinks that the author constructs a gathering as an *allocution* (exhortation of a general to a summoned army).

⁸ As a fictional example, see the preposterous passage about the emperor collecting 10,000 lbs of spider webs gathered from the city of Rome (*HA, Heliogab.* 26.6), which in fact comes in one of the chapters in which the *HA* author denounces Elagabalus’ sexuality.

The prevalent image of Elagabalus that comes out from these literary sources finds parallels in the image of the effeminate already stereotyped by a literary tradition and about which the intellectual elite used to make mockery.⁹ To provide an example not far away in time, in the portrayal of the priests of the goddess Atargatis (*Dea Syria*) that Apuleius mocks in the *Metamorphoses* (mid-second century CE) we read more or less the same elements: cross-dressing, imitation of extravagant women, affectation and sexual insatiability.¹⁰ However, Dio's report of Elagabalus' desire to cut off his genitals and to have a vagina constructed by means of a surgery is a significant departure from the traditional stereotype of effeminacy.¹¹

Considering their significance, it is fair to go through these two passages in a more detailed way. The first passage is Dio's list of the various irregularities of this emperor in relation to normative imperial behavior. Among these Dio mentions the desire to circumcise himself and to abstain from swine's flesh in order to be pure in his devotion to his god. Then Dio adds a further clarification:

ἐβουλεύσατο μὲν γὰρ παντάπασιν αὐτὸ ἀποκόψαι

ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μὲν τῆς μαλακίας ἔνεκα ποιῆσαι ἐπεθύμησε

⁹ In Michel Foucault *L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 23-25, I found the most synthetic and efficient exposition of the passage of this image among centuries since the portrayal of the *effeminatus* in the ancient world.

¹⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 8.24-31 "These girls (so called the priests) were a troupe of male trollops... They raised a racket of dainty, grating, prissy yells, obviously thinking that he'd actually purchased a human slave to service them" (8.26) "On the following day, they donned multicolored raiment and cosmetically confounded their features, besmearing their faces with mucky pigment and applying greasy eyeliner" (8.27) "filthy perverts that they were, they ran amok, indulged their depraved urges, and committed the worst abominations of illicit lust" (8.29).

¹¹ It is fair to notice that both are passages integrated in the epitome of Xiphilinus. Icks maintains that the anecdote of the vagina is not an insertion of Cedrenus (a Byzantine scholar), but derived from Dio – see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 100. Icks attributes to Dio two passages mentioning that Elagabalus wants "a vagina implanted in his body by means of an incision," but in fact there is only one such passage; the other operation on his body is a castration, as reported above.

“he [Elagabalus] had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether, but this desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy.”

It is worth noting that Dio switches from a religious explanation to one based on sexuality. Dio seems reluctant to keep Elagabalus’ ἄτοπα inside a religious discourse as well as a gender one. The mention of effeminacy brings back his disapproval to a moral stage that more easily denoted a bad emperor. Finally, Dio comes back to explain this practice as part of Elagabalus’ priestly ritual, specifying that the mutilation was a circumcision, and this had been practiced by all the companions in his cult (80.11.1-2).

The other passage is reported at the end of the account of Elagabalus’ relations with his two “husbands” Hierocles, a Carian slave, and Zoticus, a man from Smyrna:

ἔς τοσαύτην δὲ συνηλάθη ἀσέλγειαν ὡς καὶ τοὺς ἰατροὺς ἀξιοῦν αἰδῶ γυναικείαν δι’ ἀνατομῆς αὐτῷ μηχανήσασθαι, μεγάλους ὑπὲρ τούτου μισθοὺς αὐτοῖς προΐσχύμενος.¹²

“He carried his lewdness to such a point that he asked the physicians to contrive a woman’s vagina in his body by means of an incision, promising them large sums for doing so.” (80.16.7)

These references to a voluntary change of sex represent a transgender desire to move away from the gender assigned at birth, crossing even the anatomic boundaries that typically contain that

¹² The passage, as noted above, is an insert from the works of Byzantine authors Cedrenus and Zonaras: Zon. 12, 14 p. 569, 19-570, 2 B. (p. 118, 30-119, 3 D.).

gender.¹³ In the ancient world this transition was impossible for humans, but was possible for deities or when enacted by deities.¹⁴ Calling for this transition for himself, Elagabalus entered a territory beyond the human in a way perceived as transgressive. According to his senatorial point of view, Dio denies to the emperor the search of this super-human power and, though he cannot completely disregard the divine sphere mentioning Elagabalus' cult, he considers these actions evidence of Elagabalus' unrestrained debauchery.¹⁵

Some eastern cults were characterized by ecstatic castrations. There is evidence that the priests of the Great Mother, the *galli* of Cybele, practiced ritual castration, in this case either the surgical removal or, less dramatically, the tying off the testicles. Such operations in any case didn't prevent the *galli* to engage in sexual activities if castrated after puberty.¹⁶ There is no evidence that the priest or guardian of the temple of the Phoenician love goddess (Astarte/Aphrodite) practiced ritual castration as did *galli* of Cybele. However, it is possible to find the presence of emasculated priests in the cults of the Syrian area connected both with Astarte/Aphrodite and Atargatis/*dea Syria*, and literary evidence attests to interferences among the cults of this area and extends the custom of castration to the priests of Adonis.¹⁷

¹³ According to the recent definition of "transgender" – a word whose meaning is in any case still under construction – see Susan Stryker *Transgender History*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Filippo Carlá-Uhink (2017) 15-19.

¹⁵ Varner notes that the passage about the request to physicians to contrive a vagina is significantly offered just before the account of Elagabalus' assassination, I would say indeed before the beginning of Elagabalus' loss of consensus which further would lead to his assassination, see Eric R. Varner "Transcending Gender," p. 201. Mary Beard connects this Elagabalus' desire of a vagina with his eastern cult, see "The triumph of the absurd; Roman street theatre." *Rome the Cosmopolis*, ed. by Catharine Edwards and Greg Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003) 39.

¹⁶ Aline Rousselle, in her *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Phaesant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p 123, reports an eloquent passage of Basil of Ancyra *De verginitate* in which he prevents the virgins from frequenting eunuchs "because they could defile any woman without risk."

¹⁷ See Giovanni Casadio, "The Failing Male God: Emasculation, Death and Other Accidents in the Ancient Mediterranean World" *Numen* (2003): 252-254: at the time of the Antonines, in the area of Dura-Europos on the borders between Roman and Sassanian empires almost all cults of the Roman empires had locations. Here Atargatis, the *dea Syria*, was worshipped in the temple of Adonis and vice versa. Eusebius in *De vita Const.*

The author of the *HA* notes that Elagabalus also adopted the rites of the Great Mother, celebrated the rite of taurobolium and of Salambo, a goddess associated to Aphrodite/Tanith-Caelestis and characterized by a ritual of lamentation like the mourning for Adonis. In the same passage the author says that Elagabalus: “genitalia sibi devinxit et omnia fecit quae *galli* facere solent,” “Tied off his testicles and did all that *galli* were used to do” (7.1-3). The context here may be related to the implied critique to the henotheistic subordination of all gods to a superior one that the author addresses to the following religious reformation of Constantine.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it could be also a reference to the interference between cults originating from the same area and characterized by the same religious sensibility and practices as the Emesian cult.

Elagabalus’ gender instability was reflected also in the young emperor’s marriages. Settled down in Rome in the summer 219, Elagabalus started to be involved in a compulsive marriage politics that can be cast as unique in relation to the significant number of wives in the short time of his reign. The chronology of his marriages is the following. In 219 Elagabalus married Julia Cornelia Paula,¹⁹ an aristocratic woman of the Cornelian gens, whom he honored with the title of *Augusta*. Soon thereafter (220) he divorced Julia Cornelia Paula. Then he brought from the Vestal temple to his palace the Vestal Virgin Julia Aquilia Severa²⁰ to make her his wife (220). Again, he quickly

3.55.3 describes a situation that “was the result of a custom, the castration of the priests of Adonis, which went back in time at least two or three centuries, when in the Syrian-Anatolian areas, unified once and for all under the Roman empire, interference between the cults of the great goddesses and their listless partners was an everyday occurrence” 254.

¹⁸ Robert Turcan “Héliogabale précurseur de Constantin?” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* 47 (1988): 38-52 focuses on the previews in Elagabalus’ account by the author of the *HA* related to the following times.

¹⁹ PIR ², J 660

²⁰ PIR ², J 648

divorced to remarry a third time, now to Annia Faustina,²¹ a descendant of Marcus Aurelius (221). Soon he divorced this third wife, and in 221 he married Julia Aquilia Severa for a second time.²² This maneuvering was carried out under the public eye, accompanied by large celebrations as was expected for the imperial house, and it seems directed by a political tension that it is worthy to explore.

We have numismatic evidence for these wives and marriages. Though only briefly part of the imperial household, all the wives of Elagabalus are represented in coinage, as Rowan pointed out on the basis of a quantitative analysis on silver hoards.²³ The coinage of Julia Cornelia Paula, his first wife, emphasizes the virtue of *Concordia* either with a seated Concordia or with the portrait of both Elagabalus and Julia Paula with joined hands.²⁴ There is also another type showing Venus seated holding a globe and sceptre with the legend VENUS GENETRIX, which conveys a wish of prosperity and offspring. Julia Paula's coinage offers a message in conformity with the emphasis of the tradition of imperial marriages voted to propagate the dynasty in harmony.²⁵

But Aquilia Severa is the wife Elagabalus married twice. What pushed the sources to say more about her than the few words used for the others is the fact that she had been a Vestal Virgin – that is sworn to virginity for 30 years. This fact spurs both Herodian and Dio to cast these marriages as

²¹ PIR ², A 710

²² Cassius Dio 80.5.4; 80.9.1-4; Herodian 5.6.1-2; *HA Heliogab.* 6.6-9. Cassius Dio does not follow the chronology displayed here and mentions other marriages between the third and the fourth, as we will see below in a more detailed way.

²³ Clare Rowan “The Public Image of the Severan Women,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* (2011): 241-273.

²⁴ RIC 214 and RIC 216 with *Concordia*; RIC 222 with *Venus Genetrix*. See Rowan, “The Public Image of the Severan Women,” p. 258.

²⁵ This seems recall the statement that we read in Dio about the eagerness of Elagabalus in becoming a father with this marriage, but in this passage the intention of the author is to mock the emperor who wished to be a father “he who could not even be a man” (80.9.1).

acts of great impiety.²⁶ In the coinage there is no hint of the dramatic report of the sources about this marriage. The silver coinage associates this empress with the personification of *Concordia* engaged in sacrifice, except for a very little percentage that shows a personification of *Laetitia*:²⁷ again a message of harmony and prosperity, but also a reference to her sacred duties.²⁸ The third marriage with Annia Faustina lasted only a few months and was not celebrated with a huge issue of coins. We have only a silver type with on the reverse Elagabalus, togate, and Annia Faustina, draped, standing right and left, facing each other, clasping right hands (RIC IV *Elagabalus* 232). As the coins' official topical pronouncements, the visual representation of Elagabalus' marriages emphasizes the most desirable and traditional virtues for an imperial marriage and does not hint at the dramatic account that we read in the literary sources.

In this respect the account of Dio is the most interesting and detailed although he does not follow the chronological flow of events.²⁹ In discussing Elagabalus' wives, Dio suggests the same absence of restraint in Elagabalus' sexual behavior he emphasizes elsewhere (as we saw above). He writes that Elagabalus married his first wife, who was fair to look at and of noble rank, without giving her the time to mourn her previous husband who had been condemned to death by the senate (80.5.4-5).³⁰ Then Elagabalus celebrated the wedding with Cornelia Paula with a huge

²⁶ Herodian writes that Elagabalus "sent a letter to the senate excusing his great impiety and sin but saying he had fallen victim to manly passion and was smitten with love for the girl" (5.6.2), Dio writes that taking Aquilia "he most impiously defiled her" (80.9.3).

²⁷ RIC 228 – Concordia; RIC 229 – Laetitia, Rowan (2011) 259-260

²⁸ For this specific interpretation see Mattingly *Coins of the Roman Empire*, ccxxxvii.

²⁹ Herodian presents the topic commenting that Elagabalus sought to make a mockery of the marriage. His report is more consistent with the marriages' chronology. First, he married an aristocratic woman who named as Augusta and soon he divorced her. Then Herodian describes with a lot of drama how he pretended to fall in love with a Vestal Virgin, how he wrote to the senate excusing his impiety, how he justified his act with the sacrality of this marriage between a priest and a priestess. Then the girl was sent away, and he married a woman descendant from Commodus (5.6.1-2). The author of the *HA* just mentions, as an example of impious behavior, that Elagabalus violated a Vestal Virgin (6.6).

³⁰ This woman is said to be descendant of Claudius Severus and Marcus Antoninus. This senatorial condemnation suggests that the senate was part of this marriage politics in some way.

largess of donatives, banquets, spectacles, and public sacrifices (80.9.1).³¹ He soon divorced her, allegedly because she had some blemish in her body. Then he defiled the Vestal, with the avowal that from a union of a high priest with a high priestess might spring godlike children. Afterwards, according with Dio's account, he married a second, a third, and a fourth wife, and, at the end of this row of wives, he came back to the Vestal (80.9.3). Despite the hostile presentation, which even increases implausibly the number of wives Elagabalus married and divorced, it is not difficult to catch the impression that this young emperor's politics was conflicted between the search of the best wife in terms of dynastic power – who could be the aristocratic Julia Cornelia Paula or even better Annia Faustina, the relative of Marcus Aurelius – and Elagabalus' search of a human perfection in order to reach through the marriage a divine condition. This would be the union with the high priest of Elagabalus with the Vestal, the priestess of Vesta.³² Dio hints at Elagabalus' conception that the wedding with the Vestal Virgin elevated from the human stage the union of two bodies, by the unity with their god.

The compulsion of this young emperor for choosing the right bride, as we saw, is also confirmed by numismatic evidence. It is important to understand what was at stake in this unusual marriage program. In the Severan imperial household (starting with the accession of Septimius Severus in 193), in which the female line had acquired a significant importance and empresses held the representative power of the continuity of the dynasty, this choice might be particularly emphasized.

³¹ Cornelia Paula, indeed, is supposed to be the first wife of Elagabalus, and Anna Faustina, a descendant from imperial household, is the third wife.

³² Discussing the relation with the Vestal virgin, Gualerzi refers that according to the Roman law an intercourse with a Vestal was equated to an incest and punished with the flogging. But this was not the case because Elagabalus, acting as *pontifex maximus*, should had been already bound with the vestal in a relation similar to the marriage, Saverio Gualerzi, *Né uomo, né donna, né dio, né dea. Ruolo sessuale e ruolo religioso dell'imperatore Elagabalo* (Bologna: Patron, 2005), pp. 67-70.

We can speculate about the role of Julia Maesa (Elagabalus' grandmother, and the matriarch after the death of Julia Domna in 217) in this choice. The large proportion of Maesa's coinage minted in the reign of Elagabalus is more than suggestive. Her silver coins are characterized by the best virtues of a traditional empress. The personification of *Pudicitia* (modesty) is the most present in the silver coin's types, communicating a virtue that embodies sexual restraint and morality. Other personifications with a significant presence are *Pietas* (devotion), *Fecunditas* (fertility) and *Felicitas* (prosperity). The goddess mostly represented is Juno, which suggests an idea of majesty and power.³³ So, Maesa's coinage struck during Elagabalus' reign conveys a political message, signaling a virtuous empress who embodies the power and the prosperity of the dynasty. Herodian corroborate this image, underlining Maesa's attempts to lead her grandson towards traditional choices in order to strengthen the imperial power.³⁴ Of course we have no definitive evidence of it, but a Maesa who would have encouraged and sponsored marriages, stressing the dynastic claim (such as the marriage with Annia Faustina) or the aristocratic traditional lineage of the household (such as the marriage with Julia Cornelia Paula), fits particularly well with her coinage's message.

Furthermore, the numismatic evidence shows that in the reign of Elagabalus some women of the imperial household had an individualized imagery inside an overall representation that reinforced the general norm.³⁵ While the Severan empress coinage generally follows earlier empress coinage in the choice of legend and of reverse types, an inconsistency represented by Julia Soaemias'

³³ Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," pp. 265-267.

³⁴ Herodian 5.6.5; 5.7.1-2; 5.8.3

³⁵ On the basis of a quantitative analysis of silver coinage, Rowan offers some important observations on the presence of empresses on coins, stating that the phenomenon, increased since Hadrian, gained a stability in the following period and becomes significant in the Severan period with points of continuity and also with differences – see her "The Public Image of the Severan Women," pp. 244-248

coinage stands out.³⁶ This empress, the eldest daughter of Julia Maesa and mother of Elagabalus, is connected on coins almost exclusively with the image of Venus Caelestis, a deity unique in previous Roman coinage including that of the Severan empresses, except for a coin of Aquilia (RIC IV, *Elagabalus* 230).³⁷ This type has two different iconographies: one represents Venus standing, holding apple and sceptre, in the other Venus, with apple and sceptre in her hands, is seated and a child stands at her feet (*Fig. 3. 1*). The unique quality of this imagery consists in the legend VENUS CAELESTIS that is a change in relation to the Julia Cornelia Paula type analyzed above (p. 51) or the type of Julia Domna that presented a similar seated Venus with Cupid in front, but the legend VENUS GENETRIX. The connection on coins between Elagabalus' mother and Venus Caelestis, the inconsistency with the other empresses and specifically with the coinage of Maesa, Soemias' mother, are features worthy to be better understood within a broader picture.



Fig. 3. 1 – RIC IV, *Elagabalus* 243. Denarius with on obverse IVLIA SOAEMIAS AVG: Bust of Julia Soemias, hair waved and turned up low at the back, draped, right; on reverse: VENVS CAELESTIS: Venus, diademed, draped, seated left, holding apple in extended right hand and sceptre in left hand; at feet, child

³⁶ Julia Soemias Bassiana, PIR ², J 704; the author of the *HA* reports the variant of her name Symiamira (*HA, Macr.* 9,2). She was married with the equestrian Sextus Varius Marcellus who led a powerful career under Septimius Severus and Caracalla and entered the senate, in 217 he was probably already dead. There is epigraphic evidence of the presence of Soemias in Rome at the secular games celebrated in 204, near the date of birth of Elagabalus.

³⁷ Rowan, “The Public Image of the Severan Women,” p. 261. Harold Mattingly offers a complete description of Soemias' coinage in his, *Coins of The Roman Empire in The British Museum*. Vol. V (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1950), Vol. V, ccxxxiii.

The presence of Caelestis in Soaemias' coinage also brings into the conversation further considerations concerning the traditional role of the Severan women in religious action. The cult of the *Dea Caelestis* is one that the Romans had known since the time of their historic wars with Carthage in the third and second centuries BCE.³⁸ This deity was worshipped in Syria as Astarte³⁹ and in Africa as Urania (Tanit), and she was tied to the cult of the foundation of Carthage.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the third century, as Septimius Severus advocated greater *concordia* between Carthage and Rome, Julia Domna was associated with Dea Caelestis on coins. This contributed to the diffusion in Rome of Caelestis's cult and, thanks to her action, the cult spread outside the local African region.⁴¹ The empress Julia Domna was identified with Venus Caelestis as reported in an inscription.⁴² New studies on Caelestis' prophecies, particularly about the so-called oracle of the eight Antonines (*HA, Macrinus*, 3.1-4), suggest a relation between Caelestis and the advent of Elagabalus, the eighth and last "Antoninus," and open up the possibility that these prophecies should not be completely disregarded.⁴³ So, it is possible that the cult of Caelestis connected with the Severan house was fostered by the Severan women, acting as *theologoi* (preachers about god) at court and introducing new cults and deities.⁴⁴

³⁸ For the debate on when exactly the cult of *Dea Caelestis* was introduced and established in Rome and the prevalent thesis that collocate the introduction after the third Punic war, see Richard Miles "Rivalling Rome: Carthage" in *Rome the Cosmopolis* edited by Catharine Edwards and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p 141, fn. 87.

³⁹ Astarte or Astartegatis, also called *Dea Syria* and like *Dea Caelestis* also equated with Magna Mater, Aphrodite, Venus.

⁴⁰ Herodian reports the tradition the Dido set up the statue of this goddess at the foundation of Byrsa, the Carthage' citadel (5.6.4). Dio also mentions this goddess calling her Urania like Herodian (80.12.1).

⁴¹ For the strong relationship between the Antonine and the Severan emperors with the Carthage's elite, see Miles (2003) 134.

⁴² *CIL* 13. 6171. For the connections between Dea Caelestis and Julia Domna, see also Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), p. 126.

⁴³ See Attilio Mastrocinque, "Juno Caelestis and Septimius Severus," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 57, 3 (2017): 1-5 and Giuseppe Zecchini, "Il santuario della dea Caelestis e l'*Historia Augusta*, pp. 150-167 where he maintains that these prophecies were not invented by the *HA* but reported by some more ancient authors.

⁴⁴ Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians*," p. 193; on the religious politics of Julia Domna see: Gloria Viarengo, "Il circolo di Giulia Domna tra proiezione e realtà storica" in *Materiali per una storia*

Coming back to the marriage politics, numismatic evidence connects Maesa's reverse types and legends with the reverse types and legends of the Elagabalus' wives in the line of the traditional imperial wives. The exclusion of Soaemias from this discourse and the uniqueness of her reverse type are striking. Nevertheless, we shall see a link between Soaemias and the marriage politics related to the fact that it included also a sacred marriage between Elagabal and the goddess chosen as the god's wife. This choice proved to be Venus Caelestis. This link would imply a different role of Soaemias at court, less involved in policy and more involved in religious discourse.

Both Cassius Dio and Herodian report that Elagabalus sought a wife for his god. Searching for a wife for his god was not an extravagance; rather it was an act of a high priest who put the worship of his cult first, joining his god with a complementary goddess. At first, he planned to celebrate a *ἱερός γάμος* between his god and Vesta. Then he decided that Athena would be a more suitable wife, and finally Caelestis (Urania/Tanith/Astarte) prevailed for the holy union (Herodian 5, 6, 3-5; Dio 80, 12; *HA, Heliogab.* 3 and 7).⁴⁵ It is possible to see the same quest in both the human and the divine weddings. The passage from Vesta to Athena and finally to Caelestis can be interpreted as a search for a divine wife with the most praiseworthy features possible. Caelestis was simultaneously a fertility and a warrior goddess, she was worshipped elsewhere in Syria as

della cultura giuridica, Anno XXXVII (2007), p. 200. In this religious role of the Syrian women perhaps we have to read the later invitation of Julia Mamea addressed to Origen to come over to the court in Antioch because she wanted to understand his faith, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagans and Christians in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton & Norton, 1970), p 107, David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 209, Barbara Levick, "Julia Domna Syrian Empress" in *Women of the Ancient World*, eds. Ronnie Ancona and Sarah Pomeroy (London: Routledge, 2007), p.122, and Emily A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta. Educated women in the Roman elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London: Routledge, 2004) 126.

⁴⁵ Zecchini, "Il santuario della dea Caelestis e l'*Historia Augusta*," pp. 160-1.

Astarte⁴⁶ and in Africa as Urania, and she was tied to the cult of the foundation of Carthage (Herodian 5.6.4-5). This sacred union settled in Rome between a god arriving from the east and a goddess connected with the most famous foundation in the southern part of the empire may also foster a politic unity between the east and the south to give a new order to the Roman empire.⁴⁷ Moreover, as we saw, Caelestis was a significant presence among the Severan empresses and especially so for Elagabalus' mother, who is presented to the public eye as connected with the deity who ended up chosen as the best wife of the Emesian god.⁴⁸ If we can make these conclusions from the admittedly indirect evidence, we can see Soaemias as actively encouraging the new cult, while her mother Maesa was more involved in political decisions. It is difficult to understand whether that was a balanced choice inside the court or the result of rivalries. What is undeniable is that Maesa survived when her daughter Soaemias was slain together with Elagabalus. This suggests that the two women held or were considered to hold two different policies, one more palatable to the praetorians and others than the other.⁴⁹

To highlight the connections implied in the *ἱερός γάμος* and the involvement of his mother in Elagabalus' worship, we need to take a broader perspective. Cults that originated broadly in the same eastern area as Emesa and were shaped on the same mythic-ritual pattern can illuminate the

⁴⁶ Astarte or Astargatis, Phoenician deity, equated with Magna Mater, or Aphrodite, or Venus.

⁴⁷ The anxiety that, as we saw, emerges from the literary sources labelling with luxury and autocracy the identity of this emperor may reflect the fear of a different set up of the empire.

⁴⁸ Herodian and Dio report about the sacred marriage after the account of the marriage with Annia Aurelia Faustina, but it is not sure that they follow a chronological flow. If so, the sacred marriage with Venus Caelestis happened in 221. Potter states that the first procession from the temple of Elagabal on the Palatine to the second one happened in 221 and this is consistent with the possible dating of the construction of the second temple. Potter adds that the procession described in Herodian as a triumph was the occasion to celebrate sacred marriage with Venus Caelestis. The 221 is also the date of the second marriage to Aquilia Severa. If so, it might be a concomitance among the first procession to the second temple, the great festival organized for this occasion, the sacred marriage with Venus Caelestis and the return of the emperor, the high priest to the Aquilia Severa, the priestess. See Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 156-157.

⁴⁹ See Rowan's hypothesis about the relations between the two women: Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 267.

issue. These are the cult of Attis which originated in Asia Minor and that of Adonis which originated in the Phoenician environment.⁵⁰ The pattern could be outlined as follows in a very simplified way without considering variations: a sacred marriage connected in an exclusive way the male deity/beloved/son (Attis, Adonis) to his female goddess/mother/lover (Cybele, Astarte/Aphrodite); the young male lover endures vicissitudes and dies after suffering castration (undertaken by himself, by the betrayed Great Mother, or by a cut of a tusk). Yielding his virility, the male survives regenerated to a new life of a worshipping servant of his goddess and as a new creature, who having tamed the libido's impulses, reaches the primordial androgyne/or the prepubertal condition.⁵¹

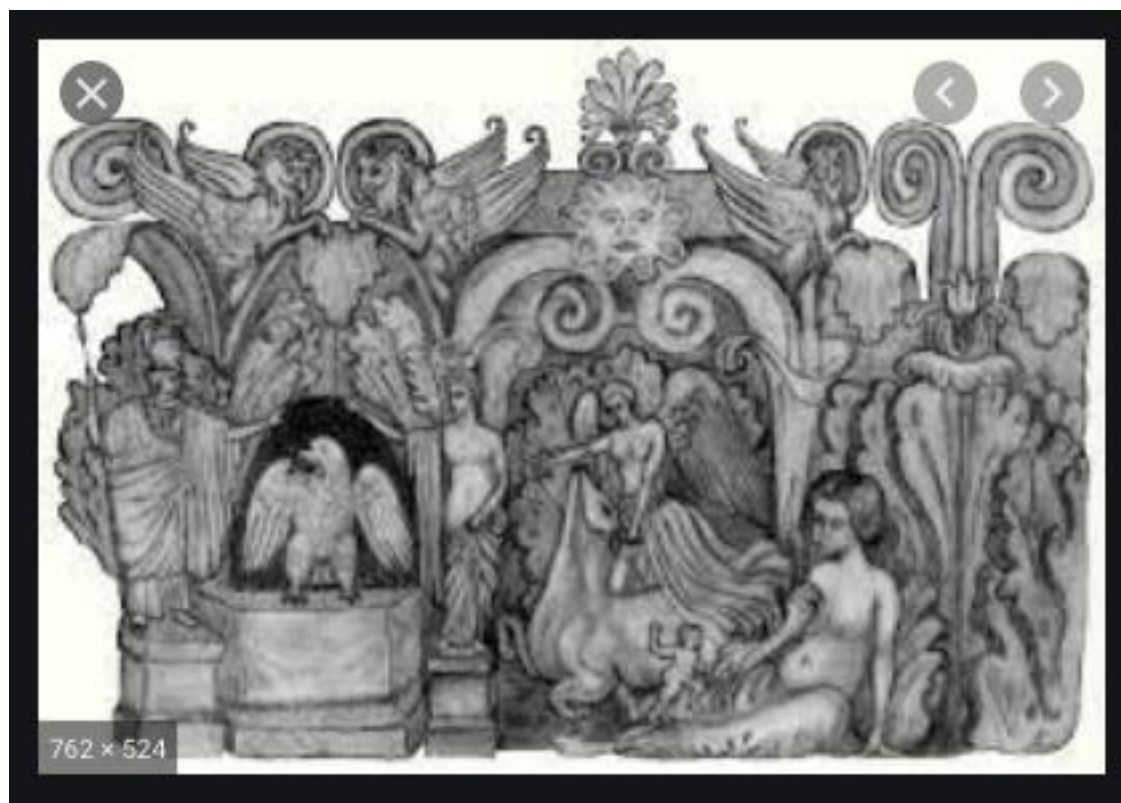
We suggest that the above pattern, which discloses similarities among rituals and cults of the eastern area, overlaps also with some aspects of the practices and actions Elagabalus implemented in worshipping his god. The search for a wife for his god and the sacred marriage with Venus Caelestis, the connection between the emperor's mother (Soaemias) and the deity wife (Venus Caelestis), the practices of ecstatic mutilation and the crossing of gender boundaries in search of a purification or better a sublimation of his human being and body – all these elements come out through the analysis of sources and are consistent with the pattern shown above. These elements concur to set the religious context in which both the bodies of Elagabalus and of Julia Soaemias are charged with a new identity that are more consistent with their natural body rather than the imperial one. Inside the cult of the sacred stone a parallel between humans and deities had been established:

⁵⁰ There is a long scholarly tradition which compares the myth and the ritual of Attis, Adonis and Osiris underlining remarkable similarities which explain archetypes and ideas about masculine and feminine identity. For a synthetic updating on this literature see Giovanni Casadio "The failing Male God," pp. 231-268. In my comparison with the Elagabalus' cult, I did not consider Osiris to keep the observation in a more restricted range.

⁵¹ Rousselle, *Porneia*, p. 122

the male is the emperor/beloved/son, and the female is the empress/lover/mother; the act of castration, practiced as explained above and considering the youth of Elagabalus, seems an attempt to preserve the prepubertal condition. This understanding fits perfectly in preserving a close relation for Elagabalus with the body of the mother and in imitating the asexual nature of his aniconic god.⁵²

An artefact provides a glimpse of the presence of all these elements in the Emesian cult. This is a Corinthian capital, named Capital A, found in the forum area close to Vigna Barberini where the main temple of Elagabal has been located.



*Fig. 3. 2 – The photocomposition triptych of “Elagabal’s Idyll.” A reconstruction from *Varian Studies*, vol. 2, 253.*

⁵² Rousselle, *Porneia*, p. 120

This capital has been intently studied by scholars and now is broadly attributed to Elagabalus' time and, if not from the main temple because of its size smaller than expected for a capital of a temple, it is connected to a possible secondary location in the forum.⁵³ Most impressive is the photocomposition triptych of the artefact called "Elagabal's Idyll" (Fig. 3. 2), which reveals an amazing iconography.⁵⁴ It shows a string of deities, among whom is visible the sacred stone (the blackness behind the eagle), surrounded by griffons, volutes, and acanthus foliage, under the stamp of the sun. The deities are four: two next to the sacred stone, one on the right and the other on the left, both standing on a plinth; the other two are engaged in action on the ground, one sacrificing a bull and the other, seated, observing the scene with an infant standing at her feet. Although identifications of the deities have been the subject of intense debates for over 20 years, there is now consensus that the goddess on the left of the sacred stone is Pallas/Minerva and that the goddess sacrificing a bull on the ground along one side of the capital is Victory. The identity of the goddess on the right side of the conical stone is still debated. The most frequent suggestions are Juno or Urania/Venus Caelestis.⁵⁵ For the second deity on the ground Tellus has been suggested, a hypothesis that is consistent with the luxuriant setting. The figure is largely missing, but her seated posture, an object in her right hand (cornucopia? sceptre?) and a child standing at her feet with his arm raised are evident.

⁵³ For this secondary location see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 198; for the reconstruction of all the four stages of the debate around this artefact see *Elagabal*, vol. 2 of *Varian Studies*, eds. Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado and Raul de la Fuente Marcos (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2017), pp. 73-252.

⁵⁴ De Arrizabalaga y Prado, "Elagabal's Idyll" in *Elagabal*, vol. 2 of *Varian Studies* pp. 51-72; on Capital A see in the same volume, pp. 253-273.

⁵⁵ *Elagabal*, vol. 2 of *Varian Studies*, p. 265. For a counter-thesis see Zecchini, "Il santuario della dea Caelestis e l'*Historia Augusta*," p. 161. For a synthesis of the debate see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 198.

The features of this figure recall the iconography of one variant of the Venus Caelestis' types in Soaemias' coins (*Fig. 3. 1*). I suggest that the more likely identification is, in fact, Venus Caelestis. If so, we have a confirmation not just of the presence of the empress in the religious cult of Elagabal, but also an emphasis on her presence in the cult as mother.

In the end, the totalizing immersion of the emperor, and arguably of the empress as well, in the cult of the aniconic god brought the dialectic between the natural and the imperial body to a breaking point, creating an untenable political situation. The supernatural qualities subsumed by the natural bodies of the emperor and his mother, as well as the search for new, fluid, even transgender identities represented an attempt to strengthen the imperial power at the beginnings of the third century. The novelty of the means, however, constituted too much of a departure from the normative discourse of previous rulers and in particular from the Roman sensibility that, if assimilation to the divine was conceded to the emperor, it was to be exclusively in terms of enhancing his likeness to a chosen anthropomorphic deity in order to enhance his imperial power. Elagabalus, by contrast, presented himself in the public space as the humble worshiper of a divine entity which enhanced a new order and a new source of power. Ultimately this departure led to the destruction of the young emperor and of his mother in 222.

EPILOGUE

From the beginning of his rule Elagabalus sought unity with his god – a search that led, in the long term, to subsuming his body into the divine dimension. In the private realm, this change could have been accepted or tolerated, but Elagabalus brought this religious dimension, alien to Roman sensibility, into the public eye and in his role of emperor. This called for a public acknowledgment of this novelty, but the new public religion generated tensions around the image and meaning of the imperial body that surface in the historians' accounts of the young emperor's reign and life.

Herodian is clear in showing that by the fourth year of Elagabalus' rule the soldiers got "bitterly angry" with the emperor and turned their favor to his cousin. The reason, Herodian insists, was the public exhibition of his body altered by the cross-dressing and the cross-behavior in his cult (5.8.1-2). Dio shows how an initial love of the soldiers and the populace, secured by the "attractiveness" of the teen-age Severan, turned into hate in the wake of Elagabalus' *μαρτία* "defilement." Thus, the historian frames the assassination as a just punishment (80.17). According to these statements, Elagabalus failed to negotiate a public acknowledgment of the changes that he was enacting, and this failure was crucial to bringing about the end of his rule.

The murder took place in 222, probably in March. We read the more dramatic description of the emperor's death in Cassius Dio's account:

καὶ ἔμελλεν εἰς τύλλον ἐμβληθεὶς ἐκδρᾶναί ποι, φωραθεὶς δὲ ἀπεσφάγη,
ὀκτωκαίδεκα ἔτη γεγονώς, καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ [περιπλακεῖσα γὰρ
ἀπριξ εἴχετο] συναπώλετο. καὶ αἱ τε κεφαλὰὶ αὐτῶν ἀπεκόπησαν,
καὶ τὰ σώματα γυμνωθέντα τὸ μὲν πρῶτον διὰ πάσης τῆς πόλεως
ἐσύρη, ἔπειτα τὸ μὲν τῆς γυναικὸς ἄλλως πως ἐρρίφη, τὸ δὲ ἐκεί-
νου εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ἐνεβλήθη.

Elagabalus made an attempt to flee and would have got away somewhere by being placed in a chest, had he not been discovered and slain, at the age of eighteen. His mother, who embraced him and clung tightly to him, perished with him; their heads were cut off and their bodies, after being stripped naked, were first dragged all over the city, and then the mother's body was cast aside somewhere or other, while his was thrown into the Tiber (80.20.1-2).

The scene is striking for two reasons. First is the dual assassination. The mother, clinging “tightly to him, perished with him,” as Dio notes. This slaughter of the emperor and the empress mother is unique, particularly the following insult upon her corpse. This common destiny of mother and son killed by the soldiers who were in charge of protecting them suggests that their natural bodies had already been disconnected from the imperial body, and that the “imperial” body now transcended the emperor’s own individual and physical form to include the imperial household.

But the scene is equally striking for the emphasis the sources place on the dismemberment, desecration, and defilement of the bodies, the *iniuria cadaveris* as writes the author of the *HA* (17.1). A particular hatred was enacted cruelly on their natural bodies. According to all sources,

they were stripped naked (Dio), decapitated (Dio), mutilated (Herodian) and then dragged all over the city (Herodian, Dio, and the author of HA), thrown into a sewer (Herodian, author of HA), and finally hurled into Tiberim (Dio, author of HA).¹ The slaying happened at the camp of the praetorian guards in a temple of Mars. Herodian writes that believing that the opportunity was right and the cause just, soldiers killed Elagabalus and Soemias, who was with him as Augusta and his mother (5.8.8). Only Herodian suggests that the savagery was wreaked on their imperial bodies if we note the mention of the title of Augusta at the moment of Soemias' slaying. Dio concedes just a hint of piety in the scene of the mother clinging the body of the son, that, if anything, stresses the natural role of the two bodies. The author of the *HA*, according with the point of view of all the account on this emperor, describes the carnage as a just reward of their depravation.²

Elagabalus's body continued to be a locus of political symbolism and struggle beyond his death. And, indeed, as I have argued, the relationship between the ruler's natural and imperial body had always been in tension during his short four-year reign. To be sure, there were periods when the natural body seemed to support the political body, particularly at moments of Elagabalus' acclamation and when the natural body served dynastic ends by celebrations of marriage.

Yet, more often, the actions of the emperor had upset the ideal harmony between the natural and the imperial body. This had been the case early on with his first divorce and his decision to join with a Vestal, but it became clear in Elagabalus' efforts to introduce the eastern cult of Emesa into the official religious life of Rome.

¹ In the three literary sources the passages reporting Elagabalus' and his mother' deaths are the following: Cassius Dio 80.20.1-2; Herodian 5.8.8-9; *HA, Elagabalus* 16.2-17.1-3.

² With the paradoxical tone that we already stressed for this author, he reports that also the supporters of Elagabalus were killed in an evil way matching their lives: some by having their vital organs turn out, others by the piercing of their anus (16.5.1).

A *damnatio memoriae* followed the deaths. In this case, an operation of systematic denigration is evident in the literary sources: in certain aspects it even seems unique compared with other young emperors also cast as bad rulers.³ This infamy is shown also in visual and documentary source for both the emperor and his mother Soaemias. The well-known representation of Elagabalus, the Capitoline portrait (chapter 1, *Fig. 1. 1*), was a head worked for insertion into a statue or a bust from which it had been removed after the *damnatio memoriae*.⁴ Soaemias shared the same downfall: her name was erased from inscriptions and her coins have been countermarked like many of her son.⁵ As we saw the disproportion between the low presence of a silver coin's type in hoards and the high number of dies of the same type leads to the presumption that a number of Elagabalus' coins had been melted as a result of the infamy.⁶

The whole saga fosters the idea that Elagabalus embodied differences that generated anxiety and even repulsion in the elite Roman settings. His official appointments of people regardless of social and gender differences, his public gathering of every kind of person regardless of behavior, gender and social status, people he would mix together with the official ranks of the state and the court surrounding the emperor, his different religious conception and practices – all these acts constituted a departure that was perceived as a danger to the traditional set up of the empire.⁷

³ *HA Elagabalus* 17.4. On this subject see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, pp. 165-6.

⁴ Eric Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 193 supports this statement with visual evidence. The integrity of this head would foster the presumption that it was removed by a secret supporter.

⁵ Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation*, pp. 194-5.

⁶ See above, p. 22.

⁷ It is fair to stress that both Herodian and Dio connect the loss of consensus of the emperor with the account of Elagabalus' inclusion in officer ranks of freedmen, low rank people, even slaves (5.7.6-7).

Elagabalus' loss of legitimacy, which I have argued is inextricable from his failure to develop and uphold an imperial body in keeping with elite Roman expectations, led to his tragic destiny. He was murdered: his natural body died, but the ideal of the imperial body survived in the very same dynastic conception that four years earlier had established Elagabalus as the rightful ruler of the Romans. His younger Severan cousin Alexander Severus, promoted by Severus' mother Julia Mamaea and by Julia Maesa, whom he shared with Elagabalus as grandmother, was acclaimed and ruled effectively until 235. In this sense the policy of the imperial women in favor of the dynasty was a success. To be sure, a particular branch of the dynasty was eliminated through the destruction of the natural body of Elagabalus and that of his mother, but the Severan household would survive for another thirteen years. In this dynastic conception of power, the imperial body of the emperor achieves a continuity over the natural body of the ruler.

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