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THE WORLD OF ELAGABALUS

by

JAY CARRIKER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History
Department of Political Science and History

Edward Tabri, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
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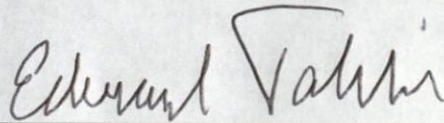
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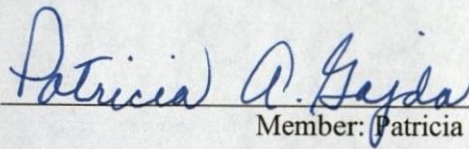
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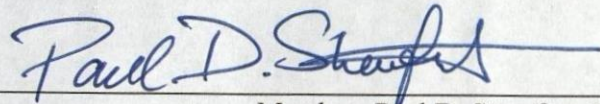
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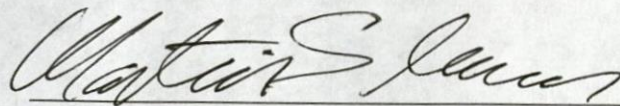
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Abstract

After his assassination in 222 the Roman Emperor Elagabalus served as Rome's whipping boy—an embodiment of all the vices that led to the decline and fall of Rome; but through placing his policies in the context of a Julio-Severan Dynasty, the religious boundaries that he disregarded reveal a Varian Moment as a critical period in the Easternization of Roman religion which makes him one of the most significant figures in Roman History.

Preface

In his standup routine, the comedian Lewis Black tells the audience of his ordeal trying to learn economics in college at eight o'clock in the morning; after flunking the second test, Black grabbed the professor and yelled, "Who are you trying to keep this stuff a secret from?"¹ Often histories are written in a way that is inaccessible to an educated reader—much less an interested reader. In my graduate reading, I have often found myself thinking of Lewis Black's routine and asking myself, "Who are they trying to keep this a secret from?" As a result, I decided early on to write my thesis in a way that was accessible to the educated and interested reader—in other words, I aspire to write in the style of a popular-academic history. Thus, unlike most graduate theses, I have made no assumption that the reader knows what a term means, what a topic is, or who a person was. Part of this was borne out of the necessity of having few readers that are experts in the field available. In fact, there are only two living Varianists—Elagabalus specialist scholars—published in English, only one of who is a Classical academic. However, the accessible style of a popular-academic history is also desirable, because while microhistory or niche history is valuable, it often remains lost or ignored when it is not attached to a macrohistorical—broad, big, epic—context. The topic of Elagabalus, like any biographical topic, is essentially microhistory, but it is a microhistory that intersects with macrohistorical themes broader than only the Roman Empire. Elagabalus is relevant to LGBT researchers and Southern Baptist seminarians, among others, and this

¹ Lewis Black. *Black on Broadway*. Streaming. Directed by Paul Miller. Los Angeles: HBO, 2004.

thesis is written deliberately to be accessible to them. All history is our history; it belongs to all of us and must be as accessible as possible.

Scope and Methodology

This study is the basis for two original macrohistorical paradigms which require intense exploration that are beyond the scope of a graduate thesis with a microhistorical focus; their inclusion is necessary because they were vital parts of Elagabalus' world, but full elaboration would pull the focus away from Elagabalus into world-systems of the *longue durée*. The simplest and most relevant is that rather than a single Third Century Crisis, there were two crises about how Rome would be socially organized: a cultural one from Elagabalus to Aurelian and a political one from Severus Alexander to Diocletian. The political crisis was resolved in the establishment of the Dominate, while the cultural crisis was resolved by the process associated with the Constantinian Shift.

While the Constantinian Shift on its own has been correctly dismissed in orthodox historiography as overly simplistic, that a transformation took place around the time of Constantine is uncontroversial. However, the idea of a shift around a central figure has been dismissed in favor of prosopographical networks. Constantinian scholar, Peter Leithart, refutes the grand idea of a Constantinian shift but acknowledges that a “brief, ambiguous 'Constantinian moment' in the fourth century.”² Religious and cultural evolution are constants stretching back into pre-history and Deep Time through the present and into the far future. However, the *long durée* of Roman Christianization was punctuated by *histoire événementielle* which serve as milestones—the most famous is the Constantinian shift or

² Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 287.

using Leithart's correction, moments. These moments occurred after the formation of the Early Church and, therefore, this work does not discuss figures such as John the Baptist's or Paul's as transitional moments. While the *zeitgeist* favored Christianization, each moment was a pulse of movement from Augustus towards Gregory that was permanent; the vulnerability of the old *mos maiorum* was exposed by the innovations of the Varian Moment and they were never again secure. Averil Cameron writes that the *long durée* is suited to the study of the Ancient World.³

Unsurprisingly, the first of the moments—the Varian moment—began when the shock of Elagabalus' religious reforms which ended the guaranteed dominance of traditional Roman religion over the Roman state. The second moment came with Aurelian's renewal and veneration of the cult of Sol Invictus. The third is the Constantinian moment; when Constantine explained his attribution of the victory to Christianity he did so in imagery and language that acknowledge the Varian and Aurelian moments. The fourth moment occurred under the reign of Theodosius, when Pagan religions were outlawed. The fifth and final moment occurred with Pope Gregory's reforms which were the transition from the world of Late Antiquity to the Medieval Church. Thus, in the Christianization of Rome there are five moments—Varian, Aurelian, Constantinian, Theodosian, and Gregorian. This study analyzes only the first of these, the Varian moment.

Classics and Ancient history have always been interdisciplinary subjects and this work draws from traditional sources. Turabian does not always have a perfect fit for sources; many sources have established citation style and I have attempted to blend them with

³ Averil Cameron, "Conclusion," *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 396-600*, 1993: 197.

Turabian in the absence of a specific citation model so that the sources such as coins are easily cross-referenced with other works of Ancient History. Some classical sources—such as Cicero, Herodian, and Dio—have long standing citation schemes established by their editors; this scheme is similar to Biblical citations and I have adapted Turabian’s style for Biblical citation to the these works. Where a classical source is so obscure as to not have an established citation style I have used Turabian’s style for textual or electronic sources.

There is no grand ideological impulse I have sought no ideological purity of any school of historical thought, but I do acknowledge a particular debt to the Annales School and its concepts of *longue durée*, *mentalité*, and *histoire totale* which I have adapted. It is the historian’s job to connect the dots using and that means qualified evidence based speculation; to leave the dots unconnected is to dabble in chronicles rather than history.

Terminology

The adjectival form of Elagabalus is Varian; it was coined by Leonard Arrizabalaga y Prado and is derived from one Elagabalus’ names—Varius. Elagabalus never used the word Elagabalus to refer to himself; in his lifetime it exclusively referred to his god El-Gabal. This has led to some confusion and reinforced the idea that Elagabalus thought of himself as a god. More confusingly in some languages and time periods due to El-Gabal’s association with the sun an H has slipped into the word rendering Heliogabalus in an association with the Greek solar deity Helios. Like Elagabalus, Heliogabalus can refer to either the emperor or the god. There have been several attempts to differentiate the names, for instance Martijn uses Elagabal for El-Gabal, and Arrizabalaga y Prado proposes using the name Varius for the Emperor. However, in this work the word El-Gabal will be used to refer the deity due to the

exposure of Americans through names of Yahweh, such as El-Shaddai—God the provider—
or El-Sabaoth—Lord of Hosts, as aspects of a single god.

Chapter One

Introduction: The Curious Emperor

Historiography

The opening line of *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus* is, “The life of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, generally known to the world as Heliogabalus, is as yet shrouded in impenetrable mystery.”⁴ John Stuart Hay wrote those words in 1911 work and they still rings true. Not until the end of the twentieth century did historians adopt a healthy skepticism of ancient sources for the reign of Elagabalus. Among modern historians, even relatively positive accounts of Elagabalus' life such as Hay's accept much of what the ancient historians wrote at face value, Hay simply puts a positive spin on them.⁵ Not until 1989, when Martin Frey published *Untersuchungen zur Religion und Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* did a work on Elagabalus that meets modern historiographical standards of criticism emerge. Frey's work concentrates on the cult of El-Gabal rather than Elagabalus' rule.⁶ Unfortunately the work is in German and has not yet been translated into other languages—limiting its influence outside of Europe. The first attempt at something approaching a full biography was Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado's 2010 work *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* which is important for bringing together a number of

⁴ John Stuart Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), v.

⁵ Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

⁶ Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*. (Stuttgart: FranzSteiner, 1989), 11.

diverse sources for the first time. However, Arrizabalaga's history is mostly an idiosyncratic digression on his personal theory of epistemology. This epistemology is so radically reductionist that it veers inadvertently into *reductio ad absurdum*; by the end of the work Arrizabalaga concludes that one of his propositions that “Elagabalus could not have been a man” is ultimately unverifiable.⁷ Thus, the usefulness of the work as a whole is greatly undermined. In 2012, another major narrative Varian history was published in English, Martijn Icks’s *The Crimes of Elagabalus*. Icks’s primary concern is Elagabalus’ *nachleben*—or cultural afterlife.⁸ Nevertheless, Icks spends three chapters examining the life of Elagabalus and includes the emperor's historiographical afterlife alongside his literary afterlife for the remainder of the book. Icks's book is the closest thing to a biography on Elagabalus using modern standards of historiography that exists—as a result Icks remains the definitive work on Elagabalus in any language.

Despite the adoption of skepticism towards the accounts of Elagabalus' rule by ancient historians by modern historians, an important ancient source with an alternative narrative has been overlooked—Christianity. Frey concentrates on religion exclusively in the context of the cult of El-Gabal. The earliest extant Christian sources such as Eusebius do not vilify Elagabalus.⁹ Arrizabalaga and Icks only mention Eusebius in passing. Christian sources such as Eusebius are remarkable in their relative neutrality towards Elagabalus and for the brevity with which he is mentioned in their works. Thus, the common assumption that all ancient sources are hostile to him is erroneous. Extant pagan sources—which are the

⁷ Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 314-315.

⁸ Icks, 5.

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1998) 6.21.2.

ancient sources most heavily consulted—are hostile to Elagabalus in the extreme. The best ancient textual sources on Elagabalus are in Greek. For Byzantine historians, Greek was a living language long after even knowledge of reading Greek had died out in what had been the Western Roman Empire. Thus, the *Historia Augusta*—written in Latin—became the primary source on Elagabalus outside of the Byzantine world. Despite the Byzantine adoption of the hostility of Herodian and Dio Cassius to Elagabalus the earliest Christian sources rejected this Anti-Varian sensationalism.

Modern historiographical consensus is that Elagabalus was not only deeply religious if not a zealot, but this ignores evidence that the emperor tolerated and was curious about the religious beliefs of others. Frey has disentangled the exotic orientalism—both ancient and modern—from the cult of El-Gabal by placing it in context. Icks has demonstrated that the emperor not only made no move to abolish other pagan gods, but he made it a point to honor them. Surviving ancient Christian sources do not paint the image of a great persecutor. In fact, on closer inspection the same curiosity that Elagabalus had shown towards other pagans can be glimpsed in the Christian sources. Elagabalus' spirituality was at its core was curious and tolerant; the emperor engaged and honored Christians, pagans, as well as his own god.

There are only two surviving sources, from Elagabalus' lifetime but there is good evidence that Eusebius was working off of an early source for his histories, Sextus Julius Africanus.¹⁰ Of the two surviving sources Dio Cassius is the only one who was a historian. Dio spent the reign of Elagabalus in Bithynia as an administrator and the current historical consensus is that he never met Elagabalus—although if Elagabalus was raised at court it is

¹⁰ Icks, 136.

possible Dio was more personally acquainted with the boy than the current consensus acknowledges.

The second source is the poet and philosopher Philostratus, who as a favorite of Elagabalus' great-aunt, Julia Domna, probably had met Elagabalus as a child and was also present in Rome during his reign.¹¹ Assuming that Dio never met Elagabalus, Philostratus and Africanus would remain as the only people that personally knew Elagabalus that wrote about him whose writing has survived in some form today. If Eusebius was heir to the tradition of Africanus, which was not hostile to Elagabalus, this partially explains Christian neutrality in the earliest church sources.



Figure 1. Golden Aureus: Front, Elagabalus; Reverse, Betyl of El-Gabal in a Quadriga

¹¹ Icks, 83.

Elagabalus' Place in History

Like the fall of the Roman Empire, the end of the Principate was not a singular moment but a process. Just as modern historians for centuries have romantically seen the end of Rome as the moment when Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustulus, so too did ancient historians and their followers view the reign of Elagabalus as the ultimate and final corruption of the Principate resulting in the subsequent descent into the chaos of the Third Century Crisis and the establishment of the Dominate. Elagabalus was the most hated of Roman emperors—more so than either Nero or Caligula—and from the perspective of the ruling class of Romans there was much to hate. Elagabalus was a dangerous Oriental whose unapologetic Otherness struck at the very heart of *Romanitas* or Romanness with his oriental dress and oriental religion.

For the ruling elite, Elagabalus was a promiscuous pathic who openly bragged about taking a woman's sexual role.¹² He also had complicated relationships with women and power—relying on women for support and at other times being bullied by them. He was a capricious murderer whose bloodlust was only interrupted by his extravagant pleasure-seeking; a legacy enshrined in the appropriation of his name as the words for hedonist in Spanish—*heliogábalo*—and other Romance languages.¹³ Romans who knew about the Christian *Book of Revelation* openly laughed at the notion of antichrist, but in their minds Elagabalus became something very similar—the antithesis of all that was good and Roman.

¹² Dio Cassius, *Roman History, Books 71-80*. trans. Earnest Cary. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927) 80.13.2-3.

¹³ *Diccionario de la lengua española*, s.v. “heliogábalo,” by Real Academia Española, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://dle.rae.es/?id=K6gdfoF>.

The two-centuries following Elagabalus' death were the most violent and transformative in Roman history. In Alexandria during 202 Origen's father was murdered by a mob for being Christian.¹⁴ By 415 a Christian mob in the same city murdered Hypatia for being a pagan.¹⁵ The trauma stems from complex causation, but Christian and Pagan scholars alike found a shorthand in the name Elagabalus. The pagan writer—traditionally called by the plural *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* after his many pseudonyms—of the *Historia Augusta* portrayed Elagabalus as a religious zealot bent on forcing the entire world to bend to the will of his god—a not so subtle jab at the Christianizing policies of the Constantinian dynasty.¹⁶ However, Elagabalus was not a monotheist but a henotheist—he believed in many gods but venerated one, El-Gabal, above all others. Later Christian historians and thinkers viewed him as the expression of every vice that naturally resulted from paganism—forgetting Elagabalus received known Christians at his court. This shorthand scapegoated Elagabalus for every problem the empire faced—he became a historiographical whipping boy.

However, this is not the story of how Elagabalus came to be the scapegoat and whipping boy of Roman historians. Despite the complexity of the dissolution of the Principate into anarchy and the misinformation caused by the creation of the Elagabalus shorthand, there is something fitting in viewing his reign as the most pivotal in the transition from Principate to Dominate. Elagabalus's assassination and the beginning of Severus Alexander's sole rule falls around the statistical mid-point between the Battle of Actium and

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.1.1.

¹⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, "Ecclesiastical History," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series II, Vol. II*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890), 7.15.

¹⁶ Ronald Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12-13.

the deposition of Romulus Augustulus.¹⁷ Furthermore, the onus and emphasis that the ancient historians found so emotionally appealing adds strength to a contention that Elagabalus was emperor at the crucial mid-point in Roman history.

Table 1: Roman Emperors of the Third Century

Emperor	Reign	Regnal Name
Septimius Severus	193-211	Imp. Caesar L. Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus
Caracalla †	198-217	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Antoninus Augustus
Geta † ¹	209-211	Imp. Caesar P. Septimius Geta Augustus
Macrinus †	217-218	Imp. Caesar M. Opellius Macrinus Augustus
Diadumenianus †	218	Imp. Caesar M. Opellius Antoninus Diadumenianus Augustus
Elagabalus †	218-222	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Antoninus Augustus
Severus Alexander †	222-235	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Severus Alexander Augustus
Maximinus I Thrax †	235-238	Imp. Caesar C. Julius Verus Maximinus Augustus
Gordian I †	238	Imp. Caesar M. Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus Africanus Senior Augustus
Gordian II †	238	Imp. Caesar M. Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Africanus Junior Augustus
Balbinus †	238	Imp. Caesar D. Caelius Calvinus Balbinus Augustus
Pupienus †	238	Imp. Caesar M. Clodius Pupienus Augustus
Gordian III †?	238-244	Imp. Caesar M. Antonius Gordianus Augustus
Philip I Arabs †	244-249	Imp. Caesar M. Julius Philippus Augustus
Phillip II †	247-249	Imp. Caesar M. Julius Philippus Severus
Trajan Decius †	249-251	Imp. Caesar C. Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Augustus
Herennius Etruscus †	251	Imp. Caesar Q. Herennius Etruscus Messius Decius Augustus
Hostilian	251	Imp. Caesar C. Valens Hostilianus Messius Quintus Augustus
Trebonianus Gallus †	251-253	Imp. Caesar C. Vibius Trebonianus Gallus Augustus
Volusianus †	251-253	Imp. Caesar C. Vibius Afinius Gallus Veldumianus Volusianus Augustus
Aemilianus †	253	Imp. Caesar M. Aemilius Aemilianus Augustus
Valerian †	253-260	Imp. Caesar P. Licinius Valerianus Augustus
Gallienus †	253-268	Imp. Caesar P. Licinius Egnatius Gallienus Augustus
Claudius II Gothicus	268-270	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Claudius Augustus
Quintillus †?	270	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Claudius Quintillus Augustus
Aurelian †	270-275	Imp. Caesar Domitius Aurelianus Augustus
Tacitus †?	275-276	Imp. Caesar M. Claudius Tacitus Augustus
Florianus †	276	Imp. Caesar M. Annius Florianus Augustus
Probus †	276-282	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Probus Augustus
Carus	282-283	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Carus Augustus
Carinus †	283-285	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Carinus Augustus
Numerianus †	283-284	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Numerius Numerianus Augustus
Diocletian †?	284-305	Imp. Caesar C. Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus Augustus
Maximian †	286-305	Imp. Caesar M. Aurelius Valerius Maximianus Augustus

† Died a violent death (assassination, suicide, possibly death and humiliation in captivity)

†? Circumstances unclear or debated, possibly a violent death.

¹The exact date of Geta's death is unknown, making the length of his reign uncertain but numerically a shorter reign than Elagabalus is probable.

¹⁷ Battle of Actium: 31 BCE, Deposition of Romulus Augustulus, 476 CE: $\frac{31+476}{2} - 31 = 222.5$

This work seeks to strip away millennia of overstatement, simplification, and lies to place the reign of Elagabalus in the context of the world in which his life unfolded. It is a microhistory set in a macrohistorical context. It is an interesting story, broad in exposing trends that Elagabalus personifies which were influential decades before his birth but focused enough to explore the power struggle between a boy and his greatest enemy—his grandmother. Elagabalus' greatest fault was that rather than adapt to the world, he tried to adapt the world to him. For all of his flaws, the image of an excitable, stubborn, curious—even likable—teenager emerges who was shaped much more by the world in which he lived than he shaped it.

Chapter Two

Rome's Whipping Boy

In the year 221 CE the elite of Rome were on edge—agitated by the emperor Elagabalus' exotic Eastern religion and fearful that he would soon sweep aside all gods but his own. The year before, the boy-emperor had elevated his god, El-Gabal, to head of the pantheon of Roman state religion displacing Jupiter as the central cult figure.¹⁸ The Roman elite had always been fascinated and disturbed by the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, and at the moment, the elites of the capital were more disturbed than fascinated. It was during these tensions that the Christian scholar Sextus Julius Africanus arrived in Rome as leader of an embassy from the Palestinian city of Emmaus to the court of the emperor.¹⁹ Emmaus along with many cities in Palestine—including the busy port of Caesarea—had been heavily damaged during an earthquake.²⁰ Africanus' delegation hoped to receive an audience with the teenage emperor and request aid for rebuilding the city. To all appearances the odds were stacked against Africanus and his delegation. Christianity was illegal, Emmaus—as the traditional site of the ascension of Jesus into heaven—was a Christian pilgrimage site, Africanus was a known Christian, and the rumor that the very man they had come to see was

¹⁸ Herodian, *History of the Empire, Books 5-8*. trans. C.R. Whittaker. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.), 5.7.

¹⁹ Vincent and Abel, *Emmaüs, Sa Basilique Et Son Histoire* (Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1932), 257-58.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Chronicon*, trans. Malcolm Drew Donalson. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1996), 226.15.

plotting to destroy all gods but his own was sweeping the capital.²¹ Yet appearances were wrong. Not only did Elagabalus receive Africanus' delegation, he granted their request for aid and elevated Emmaus to the status of polis with the new Greek name of Εμμαούς Νικόπολη (EMMAVS NICOPOLIS)—Emmaus, City of Victory.

Julius Africanus and Emmaus-Nicopolis

Eusebius is the main source for the life of Africanus, but Eusebius ascribes the embassy and the elevation of Emmaus to a polis to the reign of Severus Alexander—an error which Jerome corrects in his Latin translation of Eusebius.²² However, this is not due to any hostility, but because Eusebius frequently misdated events in his work.²³ However, the Byzantine historian George Syncellus repeated this error in his ninth-century work, *Extract of Chronography or Ekloge Chronographias* (Ἐκλογὴ Χρονογραφίας) by explicitly stating that the embassy went to Severus Alexander.²⁴ This error is repeated ad nauseum cheating Elagabalus out of one of his most interesting accomplishments. Despite this neutral minimalism about Elagabalus, Eusebius was rather passive-aggressive towards Africanus—praising him as learned while offering only criticism of his work.²⁵ Jerome had good reason for placing the Africanus' embassy during the third year of Elagabalus' reign—he was familiar with Africanus' books.²⁶ The works are now lost and with them any content that

²¹ Aubrey Stewart, *The Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux* (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1887), 33.

²² Heinrich Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie*. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1898), 6.

²³ Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 398-400.

²⁴ Gelzer, 6.

²⁵ William Adler, "Eusebius' Critique of Africanus," in *Julius Africanus und die christliche Weltchronik*, ed. Martin Wallraff (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 149.

²⁶ Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 63.23.

gave Jerome doubts about Eusebius' dating. However, one of Africanus' major works, *Chronographiai*, is a world history which purportedly ends in the third year of Elagabalus rule, 221. The fact that the final year of his Chronography ends in 221 offers two possibilities—that Chronography was dedicated to the Emperor or otherwise offered as a gift on his arrival or less extravagantly wrapping up a long term project before a difficult trip across the Roman Empire.

More securely archaeological evidence from Emmaus points directly at a massive construction program under Elagabalus. The Trappist Monks Vincent and Abel published the definitive study of the archaeological ruins of Emmaus in 1932. They argue that a primitive church on the site dates from the period because its architecture appears third-century.²⁷ Vincent and Abel provide examples of two inscriptions relating to Elagabalus. One is from a Temple to El-Gabal built at Emmaus and part of the god's name, ΕΛΑΓΑ..., survives.²⁸ The other is a fragment of an inscription which they reconstruct as "Under the reign of Antoninus (Elagabalus)."²⁹

²⁷ Vincent and Abel, 257.

²⁸ Vincent and Abel, 257-258.

²⁹ Vincent and Abel, 429-30.



Figure 2. Elagabalus Inscription Fragment

Emmaus is shown on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a map of the Roman public road system.³⁰ The *Tabula Peutingeriana* is derived from the geographic studies in Agrippa's *Commentarii* and a public version was included in the construction of Porticus Vipsania begun by Agrippa's sister Vipsania Polla and completed by Augustus.³¹ The building and its

³⁰ Konrad Miller, *Iteneraria Romana* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schroder, 1916) 835-36.

³¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History, Books 50-55*. trans. Earnest Cary. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), 55.8.

map were near the Ara Pacis and the Horologium Augusti making them part of Augustus' over all reform scheme—both administrative and ideological. It is a highly anachronistic work updated unevenly and sporadically for hundreds of years—Pompeii appears in the *Tabula* despite an estimation of its source dating from the Fourth century.³² Glen Bowersock has found numerous anachronisms in the *Tabula*'s depiction of the province of Arabia.³³ Emmaus appears on the map under its pre-Severan name of Amavante along with several other Levantine cities placing the last revision of that portion of the map to the mid to late Second century.³⁴

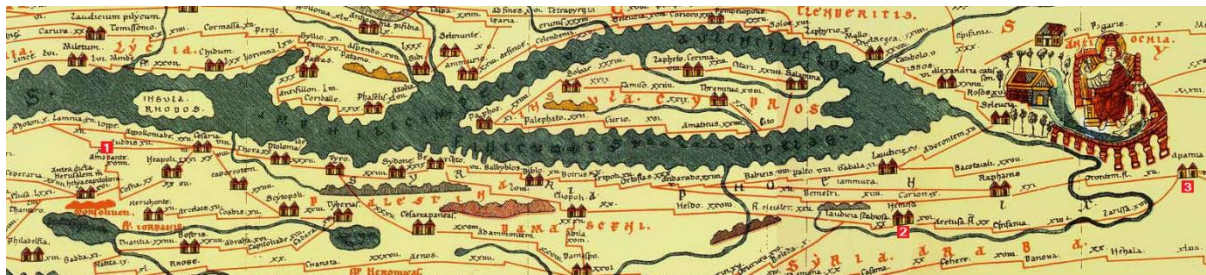


Figure 3. Tabula Peutingeriana

The purpose of *itineraria* was to list connections between cities and rest stops along Roman roads, many were simply text. Caracalla is the likely patron of the few surviving examples the Antonini Itinerarium.³⁵ The *Tabula* is the only surviving visual representation of an *itinerarium* and they were likely rare in Antiquity. In the *Tabula* the shape of land masses is warped to better highlight connections—Rhodes appears just off the coast of

³² Colin Amery and Brian Curran Jr., *The Lost World of Pompeii*. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), 30.

³³ G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*. (Harvard University Press, 1994), 185.

³⁴ Avner Raban and Kenneth G. Holum, *Caesarea Maritima*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 552.

³⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica 11th ed., s.v. "Antonini Itinerarium."

Caesarea. It thus provides a mental map of Romans and their sense of space about their own land. The section of the *Tabula* between Antioch and Jerusalem depicts not only Emmaus but Emesa, Apamea, and Lydda—which received city status in 199 or 200 from Septimius.³⁶ Itineraria evolved into pilgrimage travelogues in Late Antiquity and the first surviving example the fourth-century *Itinerarium Burdigalense* the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux's travels to Emmaus. The presence of Emmaus in the *itineraria* demonstrates the city's importance as a regional center—albeit a minor one as can be seen from the more impressive depictions of neighboring cities. The patronage of Elagabalus enhanced the prestige of the city and enabled it to become the pilgrimage center that would draw pilgrims from as far away as Gallia Aquitania in the next century.

Chaos on the World Stage

The *Tabula Peutingeriana* shows more than the location of Emmaus—it demonstrates a fundamentally different mental map and conception of space from the Modern West. The traditional methodology of Classicists maintains that Rome be studied in near isolation from then contemporary world history, but trends in Eurasia were impacting the world of Elagabalus. In the century preceding Elagabalus trade was booming across Eurasia. Copper smelting during the period even left emission traces in the Greenland Ice Sheet.³⁷ Archeological evidence of Roman trade has been found as far south as modern Tanzania.³⁸ Roman coins have been found as far east as the ruins of Oc Eo in the Mekong

³⁶ Aharon Oppenheimer, "Jewish Lydda in the Roman Empire" *Hebrew Union College Annual*, (1988), 115.

³⁷ Sungmin Hong, et al., "History of Ancient Copper Smelting Pollution During Roman and Medieval Times Recorded in Greenland Ice," *Science, New Series*, 272, no. 5259 (Apr. 12, 1996): 246.

³⁸ Felix A. Chami, "The Early Iron Age on Mafia island and its relationship with the mainland." *Azania* 34, No. 1, (1999): 1.

Delta.³⁹ However, of the four great empires along the Silk Road, three experienced political turmoil in or near the reign of Elagabalus.

China began its own Third Century Crisis when the Han Dynasty collapsed into three kingdoms after the death of Chancellor Cao Cao in 220.⁴⁰ Rome's great rival Parthia was in a state of civil war for almost all of Elagabalus' life. When the rightful heir of the Arsacid dynasty—Vologases VI—assumed the throne his brother—Artabanus V—rose up against him, and Vologases was left with a rump state in Babylonia. Severus and Caracalla waged war and meddled in the affairs of Parthian client states like Armenia and Osroene, destabilizing the Arsacids further. The year Elagabalus was assassinated, Ardashir I became the head of a simmering rebellion centered in Persia. When Artabanus confronted Ardashir in 224, the Arsacid dynasty was destroyed and the Sassanid Empire replaced Parthia on the world stage. Only the Kushan Empire under Vasudeva I was relatively stable, but Vasudeva was also the last Kushan ruler to enjoy such prosperity and stability.⁴¹

Middle Powers in Eurasia and Africa were also experiences instability. To the southeast of the Kushan Empire in Central India the Satavahana Kingdom experienced territorial losses and instability under the incompetent kings Chandashri (209-219) and Pulona (219-227).⁴² In Kush, dating is so confused that Nubiologists have no orthodox chronology and uncertainty predominates.⁴³ Despite the popularity of *The Romance of*

³⁹ Milton Osborne, *The Mekong*. (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 25.

⁴⁰ Ryan Hackney, "Cao Cao" in *China at War*, ed. Xiaobing Li. (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2012), 27-28.

⁴¹ B.N. Mukherjee, *Disintegration of the Kushana Empire* (Varanasi: India Banaras Hindu University, 1976) 51-52.

⁴² Alain Daniélou, trans. Kenneth Hurry, *A Brief History of India*. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2003) 137.

⁴³ P. L. Shinnie, "The Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, c. 660 BC to c. AD 600," ed. J. D. Fage, *The Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 2*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229-231.

Alexander or the growing acceptance of the *Book of Acts* among Christians—which features an unnamed *Kandake* or queen-regent/queen-mother, Latinized as Candace in the Vulgate—Kush was in decline and the time when a powerful *Kandake* like Amanirenas could meet initial success challenging Rome under a strong Emperor like Augustus was over.⁴⁴ Archaeological evidence from Axumite king lists suggests that in 219 the usurper Ella Azguagua ended his somewhat suspect seventy-six year reign and was succeeded by Ela Herka, but those same king lists presuppose the existence of the mytho-historical Menelik I—son of Makeda, Queen of Sheba, and Solomon, King of Israel.⁴⁵ A bronze scepter bearing the name “Gadarat” was found near Axum in layers datable to the first quarter of the Third Century.⁴⁶

Much of the world was still pre-literate, and archaeology is the only witness to events which affected the great powers such as Rome. The Goths were slowly migrating southeastward into what is now the Ukraine and merging with the local populations to form the Chernyakhov culture during the Antonine and Severan dynasties.⁴⁷ Japan was first introduced to the Chinese script in the First Century but did not adopt writing until the Fourth Century.⁴⁸ Thus, Japan was emerging from pre-history during the reign of Elagabalus and this is reflected in the historiographical tension between the legendary Empress Jingu and the historic Queen Himiko. The Empress Jingu was traditionally ascribed a reign contemporary

⁴⁴ Strabo, *Geography*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 17.53-54.

⁴⁵ E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Vol. I* (Oxford and New York: Routledge: 2014), 209.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hay-Munro, *Aksum* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 75.

⁴⁷ Peter Heather, “Goths and Huns, c. 320–425,” *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume 13*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 488.

⁴⁸ Marc Hideo Miyake, *Old Japanese*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 8.

with Elagabalus, but the orthodox Japanese accounts are considered unreliable today.⁴⁹

Historians prefer the late Third century text *Records of the Three Kingdoms* or *Sān Guó Zhì* (三國志) and other Chinese texts which include accounts of embassies sent by the shaman-queen Himiko to the court of Cao Cao's son—Cao Wei.⁵⁰

Like Kush, Japanese history from the period is muddled, but events in Japan are coming into focus as Japan adopts writing and interacts with literate cultures while in Kush—which had had been a literate culture for millennia—history goes out of focus as the kingdom withers. Himiko was bringing stability after decades of war and misrule.⁵¹ The identification of Himiko's kingdom of Yamatai in Japan, remains controversial but linguistic and archaeological evidence show increasing centralization and complexity in the region of Yamato, identifying it as Yamatai.⁵² On closer inspection, the muddled history of Axum under Gadarat mirrors that of Himiko and Yamatai—Axum was not declining it was rising. Gadarat is the first Axumite king whose name appear in inscriptions in South Arabia and probably the first to have substantial dealings there.⁵³ Far removed from the man-made systems of Eurasia, the Mayan king Yax Ch'aktel Xok founded a dynasty that would rule Tikal for six-hundred years.⁵⁴

The decay of the four large empires and several established states was simultaneous and spread instability throughout Eurasia and Africa, but growing strength in newer states

⁴⁹ R. H. P. Mason and J.G. Caiger, *A History of Japan*. (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 25-26.

⁵⁰ Ryusaku Tsunoda and L. Carrington Goodrich, *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories* (South Pasadena, CA: P. D. and Ione Perkins, 1951), 8.

⁵¹ Tsunoda, et al, 13.

⁵² Mason et al, 27.

⁵³ Hay-Munro, 72.

⁵⁴ Christopher Scarre and Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient Civilizations* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016), 394.

demonstrates that the causes must have been widespread but could not have been global as with the Late Bronze Age Collapse. The Indian subcontinent was divided between squabbling kingdoms like the Satavahana during a “Dark Age,” but this Dark Age produced aesthetics which found their way to Rome via the silk roads or the Roman entrepôts on the Arabian Sea and Indian cultural and commercial influence had already spread as far into Southeast Asia as Vietnam.⁵⁵ Technology continued to progress, Ma Jun pushed the boundaries of mechanization and hydraulics with a puppet theatre and irrigation system at the Court of Wei.⁵⁶ Coins bearing the likeness of Elagabalus have even been found in what is now Andhra Pradesh.⁵⁷ While the chaos certainly had economic and cultural repercussions its instability was primarily political. The causes of this pan-Eurasian instability merit further study, but are beyond the boundaries of this thesis; it is sufficient to demonstrate the instability of the world stage during Elagabalus’ life.

Eurasia was volatile and Rome was vulnerable and Elagabalus was put forward as an alternative by his grandmother—Julia Maesa—to the reigning emperor—Macrinus—who had violently taken power from their family—the Severans. Yet the young emperor had a strong personality and soon was actively implementing his own policy to the horror of his handlers. Less than a year after Africanus' delegation arrived in Rome, Elagabalus was assassinated, his religious reforms were revoked, his god El-Gabal exiled from Rome to its Syrian homeland and cities throughout the empire which had been enthusiastic supporters of

⁵⁵ John Keay, *India* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 104.

⁵⁶ Victor Cunrui Xiong, “Ma Jun” in *Historical Dictionary of Medieval China*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009.), 351.

⁵⁷ D. R. Reddy “The Emergence and Spread of Coins in Ancient India” in *Explaining Monetary and Financial Innovation*, ed. by Peter Bernholz and Roland Vaubel, (New York: Springer, 2014), 72.

the emperor had their honors and privileges revoked—though Emmaus was spared this fate.⁵⁸ The emperor suffered *damnatio memoriae*; his name was stricken from public records and physically defaced across the empire. Under the reign of his cousin Severus Alexander, Elagabalus was branded a monster, a sexual deviant, cruel tyrant, and religious zealot par excellence—a persecutor, not only of other pagan gods, but of Jews and Christians too. This of course raises the question, if Elagabalus so enjoyed persecuting other religions why did the Emmaus embassy end successfully rather than as some grim footnote about the Christians crushed to death under rose petals at a dinner party in a Late Classical martyrology?

The Carnuntum Elagabalus Statue

The Romans thoroughly disapproved of Elagabalus' sexuality and readily sensationalized it to condemn him.⁵⁹ Surviving evidence hints that for his part Elagabalus had a very active sex life which he very much wanted people to know. In at least one instance, Elagabalus sexualized a statue of himself.

The statue of Elagabalus as High Priest of El-Gabal found at Carnuntum in Austria shows in exquisite detail what was portrayed in thousands of coins and probably the Ara Victoriae portrait.⁶⁰ The body survives intact but the statue has been decapitated and lost both arms. The body is draped in lavishly textured priestly vestments. A stole with a swirl pattern is tied around the waist, pulled up tight around the left shoulder of the statue, while the stole is draped freely from the right shoulder—hanging down below the knees. Under the stole is a priestly robe, which gives the illusion of being a thin or sheer fabric, revealing the texture of

⁵⁸ Icks, 87.

⁵⁹ Dio, 80.13.2-3.

⁶⁰ H. R. Baldus, 'Das 'Vorstellungsgemälde' des Heliogabal, Ein bislang unerkanntes numismatisches Zeugnis.' *Chiron*, no. 19, 1989: 471

clothing below and the flesh and bone under that. The figure wears pants and small boots under the robe and stole.



Figure 4. Elagabalus as High Priest

Surviving coinage similar to the coin analyzed by Baldus indicates that the left arm would have been extended in offering with a *patera* in the emperor's left hand.⁶¹ The left side of the statue is consistent with a pose of this type. Iconography similar to the Baldus coin on

⁶¹ Baldus, 471.

three Varian coins offer several possibilities for the positioning of the right arm—only two of which are plausible. The first coin—on the left—portrays the right arm as bent with *fascēs* resting in the crook of the arm. The second coin—in the center—depicts the exact same pose but with a scepter in place of the *fascēs*. The third coin—on the right—is a pose has a supine right arm with foliage dangling from the right hand. The extant portions of the right arm attached to the torso; rule out any pose other than one with bent arm. Given the width of the extant portion and the martial nature of Carnuntum—a *fascēs* seems the most likely reconstruction.



Figure 5. Coin Comparison

The statue is both veristic in that it shows the body of a thin adolescent priest rather than heroic musculature of an emperor, but idealized in that, despite the intervening layers of cloth, little of Elagabalus' legs and especially his thighs, is left to the imagination. The statue confirms two textual assertions made by Dio and Herodian. That Elagabalus wore pants as part of his bizarre Syrian costume as high priest and the revealing nature of the body in the portrait hints at an emperor with an unorthodox public expression of his sexuality.⁶²

⁶² Dio, 80.13.3.

To Roman eyes, this statue would not only have been odd but disturbing. A Roman Emperor highlighting his patronage of a bizarre oriental god in Italia was bad enough, but the image reeks of weakness to the Roman mentalité. Dio and Herodian took note of Elagabalus' decision to sport pants, not just because it was part of the regalia of an un-Roman cult, not because pants were associated with the national dress of Rome's Parthian arch-nemesis, but because in Rome wearing pants was something that only women did—Dio drives this point home by repeatedly referring to Elagabalus as Sardanapalus—a figure serving as a classical topos for effeminacy.⁶³ Placed this in the context of an adolescent boy whose grandmother's scheming placed him on the throne—a boy who also had strong mother on whom he also relied as an adviser, and the myth spread by the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* that Elagabalus put out notice and offered a reward to any doctor who could provide him with a sex-change—or at least a reasonably facsimile thereof.⁶⁴

Making matters worse in unrealistic and revealing emphasis places on Elagabalus' thighs. In the cultures surrounding the Ancient Mediterranean—thighs were a much more erotic body part than they are in Modern Western societies. In Greek homoeroticism—intercrural sex or frottage of the penis and thighs was a popular—if not the default sex position for male homosexuality.⁶⁵ Roman homoeroticism had different sexual norms.⁶⁶

Dio's image of Elagabalus the prostitute standing at a door soliciting clients is easily evoked by this image, even though Dio's claim is almost certainly a lie, it is easy to see

⁶³ C.R. Whitaker, trans. *History of the Empire Books 5-8*.

⁶⁴ Dio, 80.15-17.1

⁶⁵ K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 91-100.

⁶⁶ John Pollini. "The Warren Cup: Homoerotic Love and Symposial Rhetoric in Silver" *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 81 (1999): 21.

where Roman contemporaries got the idea. The impression left is distinctly one of at least a *pathic*—a passive male in sex—though the seeds of a more extreme and weaker hermaphroditic interpretation are certainly there. Contemporary sources exploited both views to paint Elagabalus as a dissipated fop—the emperor was at least in part damned by his own imagery.

Homosexuality, cross-dressers, and intersex people were recognized to a degree and Transgender people who expressed their gender were forced into existing gender and sexual spaces within the minds of Ancient Romans. In other words, Ancient Rome did not recognize transgender as a legitimate gender construction. Some gender scholars have asserted that Elagabalus was a transgender person.⁶⁷ Ancient sources also make that same assertion always sensationalizing the point and playing off the disgust of an assumed transphobic audience. However, it is very unlikely that Elagabalus was a transgender person as despite his flaunted effeminacy, he never officially had himself depicted or referred to as female. There is no hard evidence that suggests that Elagabalus wanted to be a woman, but some of his behavior by Roman cultural conventions easily explains why it was believable.

Context and Comparison

Dancing for God

The Senatorial elites' ideals were ossified and far more removed from the popular culture of their day than the exemplars of Romanitas of the Republican and Augustan ages; in reality their own lives were probably not so far removed as their professed ideals. Roman traditionalists such as Cicero did not care for pageantry as demonstrated by his assessment of the Theatre of Pompey, "What pleasure is there in getting a Clytemnestra with six hundred

⁶⁷ Richard Green, *Transsexualism*. (New York: Julian Press, 1966), 98.

mules or a Trojan Horse with three thousand mixing bowls or a variegated display of cavalry and infantry equipment in some battle or other?”⁶⁸ However, even Augustus enjoyed a good pantomime.⁶⁹ Perhaps the most succinct opinion of the Elagabalus’ penchant for public spectacle was probably a factor in coming to the attention of legions of Syria from the start.⁷⁰ Sarcophagi from Palmyra demonstrate that the Arab-Roman elite dressed in syncretic Romano-Parthian fashion.⁷¹ Both Dio and Herodian describe Elagabalus’ priestly regalia as conforming to this model. In fact these garish outfits—from the Roman perspective—were common as religious regalia in Syria.⁷² Elagabalus danced in religious rites wearing these costumes and it horrified the elites. When Cato accused Murena of dancing, it was such an un-Roman and un-Manly act that Cicero—though denying that Murena ever danced—said that it would be shameful and scandalous if Murena had.⁷³ Elaborate costumes, talented dancing, natural good looks, and charisma conspired to elevate Elagabalus to the purple. However his inability to adapt to a new environment and refusal to consider context, were fatal and decisive in his downfall. There could be no new Cincinnatus as the chaos of the retirement of Diocletian confirmed a century later.

⁶⁸ Cicero, “Letters to His Friends 7.1.2-3” in *Ancient Rome*, ed. Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7.1.2-3.

⁶⁹ Yvette Hunt, “Roman Pantomime Libretti and their Greek Themes,” in *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime*, ed. Edith Hall and Rosie Wyles. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169.

⁷⁰ Herodian, 5.3.8.

⁷¹ Maurice Sartre. *The Middle East Under Rome*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 282.

⁷² Jean Charles Balty, “Palmyre entre Orient et Occident: Acculturation et résistances,” *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes* 42, (1996): 437-44.

⁷³ Cicero, *Pro Murena*, trans. C. D. Yonge, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856) accessed October 23, 2015, Perseus Digital Library, 6.13.

Misunderstanding Elagabalus' *Depositio Barbae*

In his history, Dio Cassius records that Elagabalus threw a lavish festival to mark the shaving of his beard; this is a hostile and deliberate misinterpretation of Elagabalus' *depositio barbae*. The *depositio barbae* was an ancient coming of age ceremony that marked a Roman boy's entry into manhood. Traditionally this ritual took place during the festival of Liberalia—a festival in honor of Liber the god of fertility and vegetation—after a boy had reached puberty and was old enough to grow the beard that the ritual required.⁷⁴ During the ceremony the boy would put on his *toga virilis* and thus become a man.⁷⁵ By the late Empire this fluidity had standardized to a boy's sixteenth Liberalia.⁷⁶ Since Liberalia always fell on March 17, a boy's actual age continued to vary as his birthday fell before or after Liberalia. Only during the rarest cases did a *depositio barbae* not coincide with Liberalia, such as that of Augustus.⁷⁷

The boy's clippings from his first shave were placed in his *bullae*—an apotropaic talisman akin to a locket—as an offering to the household gods—or *lares*—of a boy's father. He then immediately took off his *toga praetexta*—another symbol of childhood—and put on his *toga virilis* a symbol of manhood. This was more than empty ritual to Romans; its completion had tangible legal obligations and consequences. Augustus assumed a priesthood—engineered by his uncle Julius Caesar, the *pontifex maximus*—after his *depositio*

⁷⁴ Mary Beard, et al. *Religions of Rome, Volume I*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.), 50.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Everitt, *Cicero*, (New York: Random House, 2001), 30.

⁷⁷ Anthony Everitt, *Augustus* (New York: Random House, 2006), 31.

barbae and Augustus immediately took off his *toga virilis* and assumed the regalia of a priest and conducted a sacrifice in honor of Jupiter.⁷⁸

In the case of a later contemporary of Augustus, Atilius, the ceremony had tragic results. On the day of his *depositio barbae*—and thus legal accountability—Atilius' name was placed on a proscription—a list of enemies of the state who forfeited their lives and assets to the state. Atilius escaped Rome, only to be found and beheaded within months of his coming of age ceremony.⁷⁹ As a major Roman rite of passage, Elagabalus and his family must have celebrated his *depositio barbae* during his reign and Dio's mention is only a dim memory of Elagabalus' *depositio barbae* with a hostile spin.

Despite Dio's hostile misinterpretation, there is evidence that Elagabalus' *depositio barbae* was celebrated or at least commemorated in Rome. Elagabalus came to power at the age of fourteen in 218. If Elagabalus celebrated his *depositio barbae* two years later at the age of sixteen, logical extrapolation, or rather simple addition, results in 220 as the year of Elagabalus' *depositio barbae*. From 220 on, Elagabalus begins to be depicted with facial hair on coins and in busts. His most radical religious reforms begin in 220. El-Gabal replaces Jupiter on coinage.⁸⁰ As high priest of El-Gabal, Elagabalus must have already reached the age of majority by the traditions of the cult.

One of the requirements of the cult of El-Gabal was abstention from the consumption of pork.⁸¹ If there were more ritualistic similarities with Judaism, it is possible that the

⁷⁸ Everitt, *Augustus*, 31.

⁷⁹ Appian, *Roman History, Volume 4*, trans. Horace White. (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 4.5.30.

⁸⁰ Harold Mattingly and R.A.G. Carson, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum: Pertinax to Elagabalus* v. 5 (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1965), ccxxxiv.

⁸¹ Herodian, 5.6.9.

accusation of gender reassignment was actually a willful misinterpretation of some circumcision ritual or just the fact that Elagabalus was circumcised. However, it is also possible that similarities such as the ban on the consumption of pork and circumcision are simply misattributions of Jewish law and customs to those of the cult of El-Gabal, but if they were not then the age of majority in the cult might have been equivalent to when Jewish boys were bar mitzvahed—thirteen. Since Elagabalus was already high priest of El-Gabal at the time of his accession to the throne, he must have already achieved the age of majority from the perspective of the devotees of El-Gabal. When he came to power, Elagabalus was the youngest emperor in Roman history and at fourteen only two years away from the standard age of majority for the early third century.

A public and commemorated *depositio barbae* had two propagandistic effects: it showed respect for Roman tradition while reminding the Roman senate and people that the Severans might have Syrian origins but were, first and foremost, Romans. Secondly, it showed that Elagabalus was a man and not a boy and was fully capable of ruling the empire. The first intention was probably the most significant in the minds of Elagabalus' handlers, especially his grandmother Julia Maesa. However, it was the second intention, that Elagabalus was a man and thus capable of ruling in his own right that was most significant to him and he used his age of majority to break free of his handlers and set policies that diverged sharply with the conservatism of Maesa. The use of iconography shows understanding, respect, and use of Roman tradition.

Chapter Three

A Julio-Severan Dynasty

In the spring of 218 a new star appeared in the sky. The historian Yuán Hóng recorded in the Annals of the Later Han or Hòu Hàn-jì (後漢紀) that Chinese astronomers tracked the new star for twenty days as it moved from west to east through various constellations.⁸² At the other end of the Silk Road, the historian Cassio Dio made enthusiastic—but inaccurate—observations of two stars in the sky. For Dio, when paired with an earlier eclipse in retrospect, it was a sign that portended the doom of the Emperor Macrinus.⁸³ While Dio's observation can be easily dismissed as superstition, he was not entirely wrong. Halley's Comet reached perihelion around April 6, 218.⁸⁴ This is consistent with the observation of Chinese astronomers.⁸⁵ However, the surviving Severan dynasts—whom Macrinus had deposed—were watching the same sky. Astrology was a serious business in the Ancient Mediterranean; the elite channeled wealth and resources into keeping the leading astrologers in their households or investing in astrological devices—a remarkably sophisticated example being the Antikythera Mechanism. The Severans were known patrons of astrologers and to an unknown extent astrology was a function of the High Priest of El-

⁸² W. S. Tsu, "The Observation of Halley's Comet in Chinese History," *Popular Astronomy* Vol. 42, 1934: 194.

⁸³ Dio, 79.30.1

⁸⁴ Ian Ridpath and Terence Murtagh, *A Comet Called Halley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 48.

⁸⁵ Tsu, 194.

Gabal. Indeed, when Elagabalus orchestrated his impromptu coronation at the camp of the he chose the most auspicious hour—dawn.⁸⁶ The exact motivations and mechanizations of the Severan restoration that was about to take place cannot be known, but the spectacular appearance of a new star and the mystical power it held for the ancients is part of the context in which a dramatic, ambitious, and superstitious boy was place on the throne by his grandmother and it gave him confidence—perhaps even a sense of destiny—that would shake Rome to its foundations.



Figure 6. Severan Tondo; Julia Domna, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla

⁸⁶ Dio, 79.33.

Great Uncle Septimius Severus

Septimius Severus was a graft onto an Emesene Julii tree; four of five emperors carried their royal blood, but Elagabalus and Severus Alexander had no genetic relationship to the first the Severi.

The Septizodium

Severan architectural innovations under Septimius Severus show a marked influence from the East. The Septizodium was a remarkable monument that show the Eastern influence melded to the official propaganda of the Severi. Recent reconstructions compare the monument to the many *nymphæa* of Asia Minor.⁸⁷ The capital city of the home province of the Emesene Julii was home to one of the most famous nymphæa in the Empire at Antioch's infamous sexual haunt the *Paradeisos of Daphne*.⁸⁸ Even Elagabalus' grandmother Julia Mæsa's hometown of Apamea had a nympheum.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Susann L. Lusnia. "Urban Planning and Sculptural Display in Severan Rome: Reconstructing the Septizodium and Its Role in Dynastic Politics," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 108, (2004): 521.

⁸⁸ Anthony Everitt. *Hadrian*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 150.

⁸⁹ Maurice Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome*, 172.

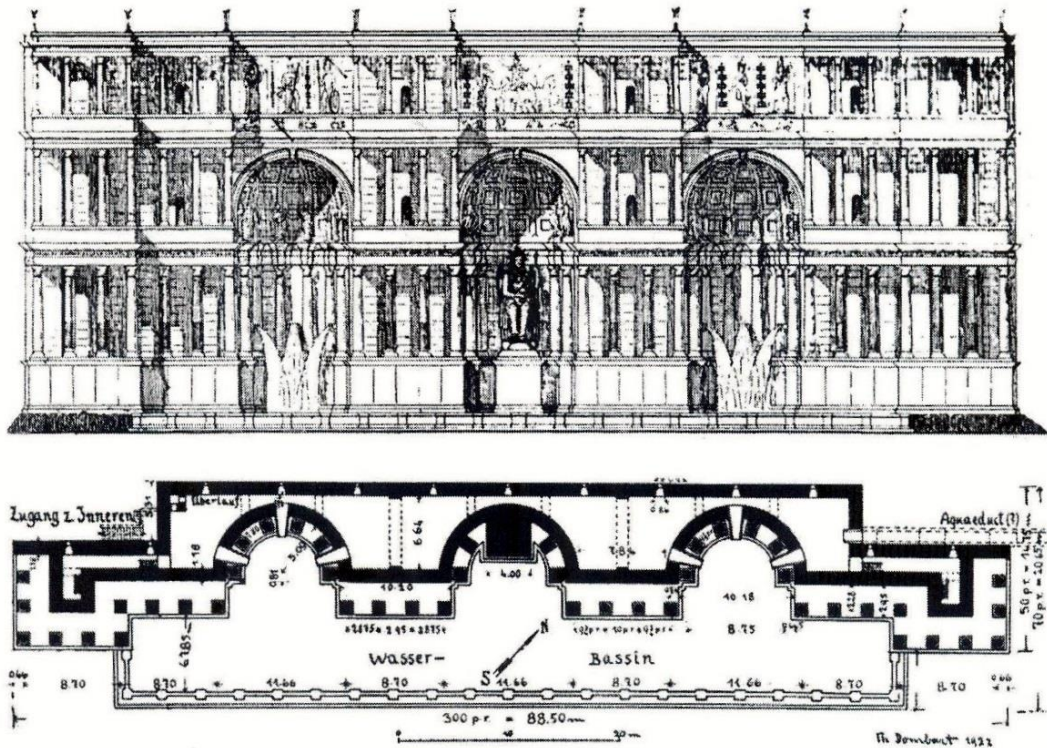


Figure 7. Reconstruction of the Septizodium

The Septizodium wedded the religious beliefs of Severus and Julia Domna, architectural influence of Asia Minor, and an homage to his African roots. The Septizodium was part of Severus' remodeling of the Domus Flavia and the Domus Augustana, serving as a façade along the Via Appia. While the Septizodium was demolished for materials to use in restoration projects for other ancient buildings, surviving written descriptions, Renaissance sketches, and a modern excavation of its foundations give shape to the vanished structure. The monument greeted people approaching the Palatine from the direction of Africa, thus reminding them of Severus' origins.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Michael Grant, *The Severans*. (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 65.

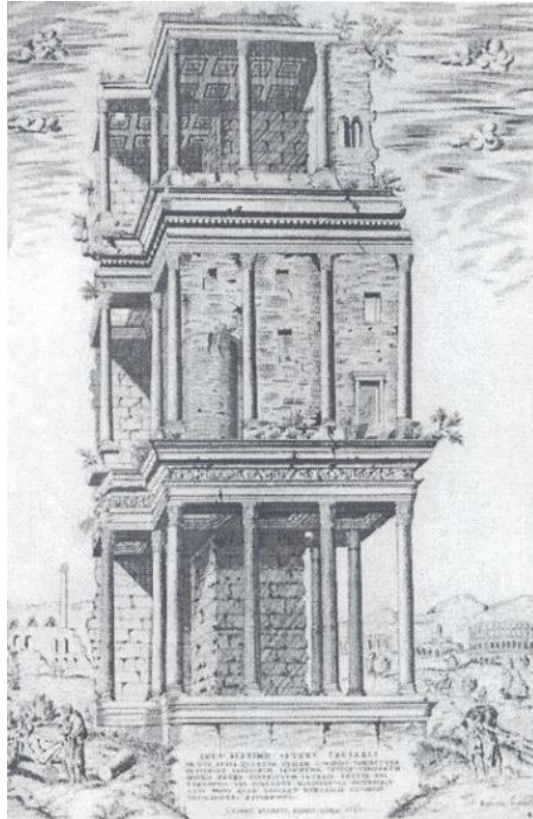


Figure 8. Engraving of the Septizodium Ruins

Perhaps most significantly for Varian iconography is that Severus was styled as a sun-god in the center of the monument.⁹¹ The portrayal of Severus in the guise of a solar deity in the center of the Septizodium is critical proof that the Severi were already promoting the worship of a sun god prominently as part of their dynastic propaganda in the very center of Rome.⁹² A small temple to El-Gabal existed in suburban Rome at Trastevere already received Severan patronage.⁹³ The Septizodium incorporated this reverence, worship, and identification of El-Gabal in a way that was acceptable to the Roman people of their capital

⁹¹ Grant, 65.

⁹² Grant, 55.

⁹³ Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, 150.

city. Thus, the solar iconography of Sol and Helios should be interpreted as a gloss for El-Gabal.

Cousin Caracalla

The Severi were less cautious of directly linking their dynasty to El-Gabal in the East. Greek had remained the language of commerce and government and the then Latin veneer was slowly peeled away. In 216 some farmers from Goharia traveled to Caracalla's court in Antioch to air their grievances with some local priests; when he ruled in their favor he had the verdict installed in the Temple of Dmeir—only the title is in Latin.⁹⁴ This was not an example of Severan favoritism, Greek replaced Latin on the coinage of Antioch during the reign of Trajan.⁹⁵ One of the most explicit examples is a coin minted by Caracalla—albeit with a little discretion at Emesa. The coin depicts the betyl—or the physical incarnation of a god in a sacred stone—in the Temple of El-Gabal at Emesa.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Bruno Rochette, *Le latin dans le monde grec*, (Brussels: Latomus, 1997), 114.

⁹⁵ Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome*, 276.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.



Figure 9. Betyl of El-Gabal.

Neither the taste for eastern styles nor the identification of El-Gabal with the Severan dynasty were innovations of Elagabalus. The Greek tradition of identify foreign gods with their own gods was readily adopted by the Romans and the Etruscans before them. This tradition allowed the Severi the conceit of glorifying El-Gabal ambiguously. Elagabalus—with great hubris—dropped this conceit and entered dangerous new territory.

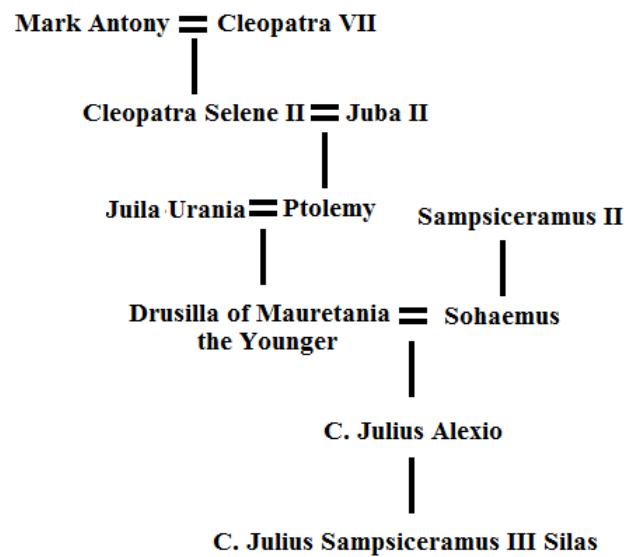
Kings of Emesa

The kings of Emesa issued coins exclusively in Greek, but that was a convention also found in the coinage of Edessa, Nisbis, and others.⁹⁷ However, Emesa had no Greek contests

⁹⁷ Maurice Sartre “Les colonies romaines dans le monde grec: Essai de synthèse,” *Electrum* 5, 2001, 111-152.

and according to Maurice Sartre was of a class of city that had a “deficit of Hellenism” that was never remedied.⁹⁸ However, they had a long relationship with Rome; the Emesene Julii were so associated with Pompey’s Eastern settlement that in his letters to Atticus Cicero refers to Pompey as Sampsiceramus—the name of the contemporary King of Emesa.⁹⁹

Table 2. Ptolemaic and Gens Antonia Relationship to the Emesene Julii



Great Grandfather Bassianus

Perhaps one of the most unusual examples of the tastes of the Severi is a marble and bronze bust of Julius Bassianus, the great-grandfather of Elagabalus. Bassianus was depicted wearing a breastplate with a beard in the typical Antonine style but his hair was styled with an ushnisha—a bump on the top of the head symbolizing the wisdom and understanding of

⁹⁸ Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome*, 188.

⁹⁹ Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, trans, Dr. Shackleton Bailey. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.14.

the Buddha.¹⁰⁰ Warwick Ball includes the identification as Bassianus but dismisses it because the evidence for Indianizing trends among the Emesene Julii had “little more grounds than that of finding a suitable worthy Oriental.”¹⁰¹ However, Ball does not elaborate on either the circumstances of the original identification—probably because they are too obscure to find—or its absence in available evidence. Since the bust itself proves the existence of Indianizing trend if it is Bassianus and if it is not him disproves Indianization, both the dismissal of Ball and original identification are unsatisfyingly circular. However, it was Arabs and other Easterners like the Emesene Julii that controlled trade between Indian kingdoms and Rome.¹⁰² It was through Eastern intermediaries like the Julii that the Indianesque style reached Rome. Furthermore, the man in the bust looks like a relative of Julia Domna and Elagabalus; the jaw line, the mouth, and the eyes all bear a family resemblance to the bust. A grave relief of a boy in Syria at Mambij also is styled with an *ushnisha* establishes that Romano-Buddhist influenced Indianesque style flourished in Syria outside of the family of Julia Domna.¹⁰³ Thus the bust was found in Italy, follows a trend which was centered in Syria, and resembles members of the Emesene Julii. The dismissal of the bust as just as likely some random Paullus or Sextus as Julius Bassianus by Ball is excessively cautious. Especially when he also argues from an absence of countervailing evidence in favor of circumstantial—but strong—evidence that Julia Domna came from the Emesene Julii.¹⁰⁴ Identifications of the provincial elite from this period are often tentative—even busts of

¹⁰⁰ Kurt A. Behrend. *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 51.

¹⁰¹ Warwick Ball. *Rome in the East* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 486.

¹⁰² Chris Gosden. *Archaeology and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111.

¹⁰³ Klaus Parlasca, “Roman Art in Syria,” *Ebla to Damascus*, ed. Harvey Weiss, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1985), 408. (386-408)

¹⁰⁴ Ball, 487.

Emperors and Empresses are contested. The identification is not a certainty, but the identification fits the available evidence and the falls within orthodox methodology.



Figure 10. Comparison of Elagabalus, Bassianus, Julia Domna.

This resulted in the portrayal of a member of the provincial Roman elite and high-priest of El-Gabal at Emesa styled in the guise of a *bodhisattva*—a Buddhist saint who has postponed nirvana to guide others to enlightenment.¹⁰⁵ Other examples of *ushnisha* occur in Roman art from the First and Second Centuries CE as a small trend of Indianesque sculpture.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Dhammapada* (Tomales, CA: Nilgri Press, 2008), 256.

¹⁰⁶ Ball, 401.

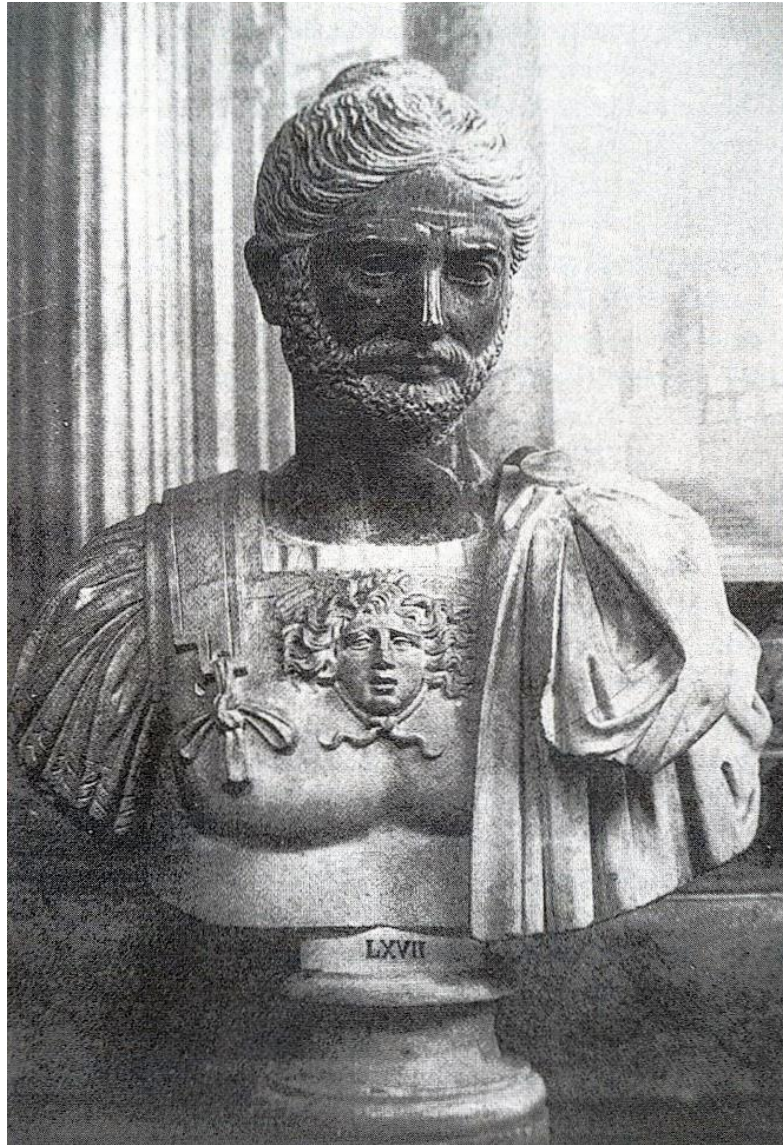


Figure 11. Bust of Julius Bassianus in the Indianesque Style

The breast plate depicts a *gorgoneion*—an apotropaic invocation of Medusa—similar to the breastplate said to have been worn by Alexander the Great.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore the

¹⁰⁷ Eleni Vassilika, *Greek and Roman Art in the Fitzwilliam Museum*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

gorgoneion was used by Zeus and Hera for its power to ward off evil and was adopted as part of the iconography by Hellenistic monarchs drawing explicit parallels between themselves and gods. The Emesene Julii descended from the client kings of Emesa and Apamea—receiving their Roman citizenship and names from their Roman patrons the Julii.¹⁰⁸ Thus, inclusion of the *gorgoneion* could be a subtle Severan reminder of their royal past.

In Rome, the style would be seen as nothing more than the use of a common styling of Alexander the Great. Indeed, a Severan interest in Alexander as part of their dynastic propaganda is known from a gold medallion minted by Severus Alexander, depicting Alexander the Great on one side and Caracalla.¹⁰⁹ However, the message to the people of Emesa would have carried subtle overtones of royalty and the merger of monarch with godhead—a crime for which Elagabalus would be singled out due to its presumed unique outrageousness by the ancient historians and their followers.

A Tradition of Religious Curiosity

The historians Porphyry and Stobaeus record that the Gnostic Christian Bardaisan encountered a delegation of Hindu Yoginis—Gymnosophists—and Jains—Samanaeans—traveling from India to the court of Elagabalus.¹¹⁰ Porphyry is clear that delegation was sent, but the purpose of the delegation seems to be more philosophical or religious rather than political. Whereas, Africanus embassy was clearly political in nature, given the summons

¹⁰⁸ Icks, 124.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Grant, 54.

¹¹⁰ Esmee Wynne-Tyson, *Porphyry on Abstinence From Animal Food*, (Whitefish, MN: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 196.

received by Origen, it is plausible that Elagabalus might have inquired about Africanus' views as well.

Regardless of its aims by the time that the Indians would have reached Greece, hundreds of miles to the west of Antioch where Bardaisan encountered them, they would already have sent word of their arrival and intent. Thus it is unlikely that they would have proceeded on a dangerous and expensive trip had they not had a reasonable expectation of being received by the emperor. A possible reception of Yoginis and Jains at the court of Elagabalus is yet more proof of the innate tolerance and curiosity of the emperor.

Hereditary Priests of El-Gabal

Elagabalus was the High Priest of El-Gabal, but there was also another priest of El-Gabal in Rome, Titus Julius Balbillus, although his specific duties as *sacerdos Solis Elagabali*—or priest of sun of El-Gabal are not known.¹¹¹ Balbillus was *sacerdos Solis*—or priest of Sol—during the reigns of Severus and Caracalla.¹¹² The inscriptions identifying Balbillus as *sacerdos Solis Elagabali* cannot be precisely dated. Martijn Icks contends the probability that the distinction of *sacerdos Solis* to *sacerdos Soli Elagabali* happened during the reign of Elagabalus, while suggesting that the distinction could have been made earlier under the influence of Julia Domna.¹¹³ While either is plausible, the distinction ignores a more important point—the Severans were worshiping and honoring El-Gabal at Rome before the religious reforms of Elagabalus.

¹¹¹ Arthur Ernest Gordon, et al. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum VI*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 2129.

¹¹² Ibid. 2269.

¹¹³ Icks, 26.

When Severus married Julia Domna, he knew he was marrying into a family of hereditary priests worshipping the Semitic solar deity El-Gabal. One of the family names was Bassianus, which ultimately derives from the Phoenician word for priest *bassus*.¹¹⁴ The Latin suffix -anus or -ianus added to a name denoted an origin. Thus, Africanus means “of Africa” or “Bassianus means “of priests.” Romans were legally obligated to have three parts—the *tria nomina*—consisting of a *praenomen*, a *nomen*, and a *cognomen*. *Praenomina* were personal names, *nomina* were family names, and the *cognomina* were the name of the specific branch of a family name—similar to the nineteenth century American naming convention of using geography to distinguish a familial branch, such as the Roosevelts of Oyster Bay. Some names carried an honorific called an *agnomen*.

These *agnomina* were granted as honors but once granted were inherited from father to son. Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado explores the names attributed to Elagabalus and convincingly concludes that Varius was likely his *nomen*.¹¹⁵ Arrizabalaga contends that Avitus and Bassianus were *cognomina*. However, Bassianus fits the format of an *agnomen*. The orthodox reconstruction of all of Elagabalus surviving names as Varius Avitus Bassianus. As Arrizabalaga rightly points out Varius Avitus Bassianus is a merely euphonic resemblance to a *tria nomina* rather than a valid *tria nomina*.

The reconstruction lacks a *praetexta* because there is no extant record of a *praenomen* for Elagabalus. Given the Roman naming conventions, Elagabalus' *praenomen* was probably Sextus—after his father—or Gaius—after his grandfather. Sextus is most plausible assuming

¹¹⁴ Anthony R. Birley, *Septimius Severus*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 118.

¹¹⁵ Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, “Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for *Studia Variana*,” *Area Studies Tsukuba* 23 (2004): 15-45, www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M72/M729463/5.pdf.

that Elagabalus was the firstborn son. However, even though Elagabalus almost certainly was the only living child of his father—Sextus Varius Marcellus—and mother—Julia Soaemias at the time of his ascension to the throne, it is important to remember that he was not an only child. The inscription on the sarcophagus of Elagabalus' father in Velitrae commissioned by Julia Soaemias says that she dedicated it with her children not child or son.¹¹⁶

If his praenomen was Sextus, his name can be reconstructed as Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus. This reconstruction, Arrizabalaga, and the orthodox reconstruction all place Bassianus in a location that lends it to identification as an agnomen. The female form Bassiana is part of Julia Soaemias full name and the male form Bassianus appears in several of Elagabalus' male relatives—including his uncle the emperor Caracalla.¹¹⁷ If Bassianus was an agnomen passed down through the branch of the Emesene Julii attached to the High Priesthood of El-Gabal, Septimius Severus must have known that when he married Julia Domna he married into the hereditary priesthood of El-Gabal and that his descendants would bear the name Bassianus.

Great Grandfather Alexianus

In fact, Gaius Julius Avitus Alexianus, the grandfather of Elagabalus, husband of Julia Maesa, and thus the brother in law of Julia Domna and her husband the emperor Septimius Severus has left solid evidence of the henotheism of the Emesene Julii. Nepotism was nothing new in Roman politics—in fact the very word has a Latin etymology, from *nepos* or nephew—and Julius Avitus Alexianus benefited greatly from the marriage between his sister

¹¹⁶ Thomas Mommsen, et al. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum X*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), 6569.

¹¹⁷ Anthony Birley “Caracalla,” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 139.

in-law and the emperor. He was a close companion of the emperor, traveling with him extensively on official trips—going as far as Britannia. Septimius Severus honored him with a priesthood of Apollo.¹¹⁸

A monotheistic or religious fanatic would not have accepted such an honor in the cult of another god. This could be attributed to lax religious views, except that Julius Avitus Alexianus was deeply devoted to the cult of El-Gabal.¹¹⁹ Septimius Severus trusted Julius Avitus Alexianus enough to grant him the governorship of Rhaetia—in modern Austria. While he was overseeing the administration of Rhaetia, Julius Avitus Alexianus dedicated an altar to El-Gabal.

Table 3. Altar of El-Gabal, Inscription, Transliteration, Translation

Inscription	Transliteration	Translation
DEOPATRO SOLELGABAL GIVLAVITVS ALEXIVNVS SODALFLAV TITIALIS LEGANGPP PROVRAET ¹²⁰	DEO PATRIO SOLI ELAGABALO <i>Gaivs IVLivs AVITVS</i> ALEXIANVS SODALis FLAVialis TITIALIS <i>LEGatvs AVGvsti Pro Praetore</i> <i>PROVinciae RAETiae</i> ¹²¹	To the god of his fatherland, the Sun Elagabal, [has] Gaius Julius Avitus Alexianus, priest of the deified Flavian Titus, imperial envoy with praetorian powers of the province of Raetia [dedicated this] ¹²²

In the inscription Julius Avitus Alexianus dedicates the monument not just his god, but the god of his country. Thus, Julius Avitus Alexianus identifies El-Gabal specifically with

¹¹⁸ Icks, 50.

¹¹⁹ Alfred Merlin and Jean Gagé. *L'année épigraphique*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962) 229.

¹²⁰ Lendering, Jona. "Dedication to Elagabal (AE 1962, 229)" Accessed April 1, 2016.

<http://www.livius.org/pictures/germany/augsburg-augusta-vindellicorum/dedication-to-elagabal/>

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

his Emesene homeland and makes the unusual move of leaving a monument to El-Gabal in Rhaetia far removed from Syria. This is an act both of piety and sentimentality, Julius Avitus Alexianus was quite devoted to El-Gabal. Julius Avitus Alexianus was a principled man with a strong sense of duty; he died serving Septimius Severus as an advisor to the governor of Cyprus despite his advanced age.¹²³

¹²³ Icks, 56.



Figure 12. Altar to El-Gabal dedicated by Julius Avitus Alexianus

Julius Avitus Alexianus did not make any moral compromise when he accepted the honor of the priesthood of Apollo offered to him by Septimius Severus. Like all of the Severans—including Elagabalus—Julius Avitus Alexianus was a henotheist. Elagabalus did

not know his grandfather well, but the old man's religious pluralism need not have been acted out before him because henotheism was well established not only as a family trait, but a trait of the ruling elite.

The Severi were less cautious of directly linking their dynasty to El-Gabal in the East. One of the most explicit examples is a coin minted by Caracalla—albeit with a little discretion at Emesa. The coin depicts the *betyl*—or the physical incarnation of a god in a sacred stone—in the Temple of El-Gabal at Emesa.¹²⁴ Neither the taste for eastern styles nor the identification of El-Gabal with the Severan dynasty were innovations of Elagabalus. The Greek tradition of identifying foreign gods with their own gods was readily adopted by the Romans and the Etruscans before them. This tradition allowed the Severi the conceit of glorifying El-Gabal ambiguously. Elagabalus—with great hubris—dropped this conceit and entered dangerous new territory.

Grandmother Julia Maesa

The Maesan and Varian Poles

The imagery and iconography falls into two phases Type I was design to establish Elagabalus as the legitimate heir to Caracalla. Thus the features of Caracalla take precedence over Elagabalus own features and his desire to be portrayed in the regalia of his office as high priest of El-Gabal. Type II which begins to overtake Type I around 220 shows natural and detailed focus on bust. Type II busts and coins both show Elagabalus in the midst of religious activities.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus*, 89.

¹²⁵ K. Fittschen and P. Zanker, *Katalog der römischen Portrats in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom*, (Mainz: Mainz, 1985), 4.

Maesa tried to moderate Elagabalus' religious policies, she had no intention of losing her or her family's position, especially after she had worked so hard to give it all back. She suggested Severus Alexander as an adopted son and presumptive heir to Elagabalus. When Elagabalus was not allowed to instruct Alexander in the ways of El-Gabal, he was furious.¹²⁶ In Syria, Alexander was being groomed along with Elagabalus as a priest of El-Gabal.¹²⁷ With Alexander banned from further lessons and even kept away from Elagabalus, and began to suspect that he and his reforms were in danger.

¹²⁶ Herodian, 5.8.3.

¹²⁷ Herodian, 5.3.4.

Chapter Four

The Varian Moment

On receiving honors from the Senate in 221, Elagabalus announced to the Senators that, “I do not want titles derived from war and bloodshed. It is enough for me that you call me Pius and Felix.”¹²⁸ However, martial themes are more prominent on Varian coins than either those of Caracalla or Severus Alexander.¹²⁹

A Previous Shift: So long Quirinus

One of the most obvious shifts in Roman religion was the reduction of the role of the god Quirinus from a major god to a marginal divinity. Quirinus originated as the Sabine god of war and was incorporated into the Roman pantheon before intense Hellenization. He was included in the pre-cursor to the Capitoline Triad.¹³⁰ Quirinus was not only gradually absorbed into other gods, but also into deified mythological figures like Romulus.¹³¹ Cicero confirms this view in *De Legibus* that Quirinus was comparable to other mortals that were deified through virtue.¹³² Quirinus was gradually subsumed into aspects of Jupiter and Mars in the Capitoline Triad. His legacy survived through his namesake the Quirinal Hill and through the primacy of the *Flamen Quirinalis* over the *Pontifex Maximus* as one the

¹²⁸ Dio, 80.18.4.

¹²⁹ Clare Rowan. *Under Divine Auspices*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 256-257.

¹³⁰ Inez Scott Ryberg, “Was the Capitoline Triad Etruscan or Italic?” *The American Journal of Philology* 52, No. 2 (1931), 145-46.

¹³¹ Beard, *Religions of Rome, Volume II*, 1.6a.

¹³² Cicero, “On the Laws II.19-22” in *Religions of Rome, Volume II*, 13.3.

Flamines Maiores. Thus, even before the fall of the Republic a major figure in Roman religion had been reinterpreted and reduced.

Henotheism

Septimius used solar iconography on his coinage as part of his imperial propaganda as did his son Caracalla.¹³³ Regardless of whether or not Septimius intentionally married into the Emesene Julii due to their connection with the hereditary priesthood of El-Gabal or as a consequence of it he embraced the cult—at least under the acceptable Roman gloss of advancing the cult of Sol. Septimius enthusiastically elevated and promoted the cult of Sol as a personal god.¹³⁴

This practice of venerating one god above all other gods while still acknowledging or even honoring their existence is called henotheism. Caracalla even dropped the pretense on a coin he commissioned in the eastern half of the Roman Empire that depict the *betyl*—or cult object—of El-Gabal in its temple at Emesa.¹³⁵ Henotheism was widely practiced and accepted if not embraced by pagans during the lifetime of Elagabalus.¹³⁶ The use of Sol and Sol Elagabali by Septimius and Caracalla was nothing more than an expression of henotheism.

Elagabalus practiced henotheism, not monotheism. He was passionately dedicated to El-Gabal and enthusiastically honored his personal god, but he was never a monotheist. Despite removing Jupiter from his coinage in favor of El-Gabal, Elagabalus continued to

¹³³ Icks, 89.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, (Zurich: Artemis & Winkler, 1997), 164.

¹³⁶ Charles Freeman, *Egypt, Greece, and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 572.

portray traditional Roman themes such as the goddess Fortuna and an anthropomorphization of Fideles.¹³⁷ As Martin Frey has argued the “marriage” of El-Gabal to Vesta and Urania was an attempt on the part of Elagabalus to recreate the Emesene Triad at Rome. As clumsy as Elagabalus’ reforms were, the creation of a triad does not a monotheist make.

The Ara Victoriae Portrait

In his mind Elagabalus was first and foremost the High Priest of El-Gabal, Emperor of Rome and veneration of other deities were a distant second.¹³⁸ That is they came in second if they had to be mutually exclusive, but Elagabalus viewed the empire and the veneration of other gods as an extension of his priesthood. One of his first significant interactions with the Senate was to send to the portrait that he had commissioned of himself in his full priestly regalia with the *betyl* of El-Gabal. Hans Baldus believes that the image of this portrait survives on a coin minted early during Elagabalus’ reign.¹³⁹

Elagabalus asked that the portrait be placed above the Ara Victoriae—the Altar of Victory—in the Senate House. His reasoning was that as the Senate made regular offerings before the Ara Victoriae, the Senatorial elite would become accustomed to his priestly vestments and the idea of participating in the rites of El-Gabal.¹⁴⁰ The original painting no longer exists but a coin and portrait sculpture of Carnuntum may have been based on the Ara Victoriae portrait.¹⁴¹ According to Dio Cassius he had it sent ahead of him to prepare the

¹³⁷ Mattingly, ccxxxiv.

¹³⁸ Icks, 73.

¹³⁹ Robert Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43.

¹⁴⁰ Herodian, 5.5.6-8.

¹⁴¹ H. R. Baldus, ‘Das ‘Vorstellungsgemälde’ des Heliogabal, Ein bislang unerkanntes numismatisches Zeugnis.’ *Chiron*, no. 19, 1989, 471.

Senate for seeing him dressed as the High Priest of El-Gabal after Julia Maesa warned him against it.¹⁴² At the Battle of Antioch, when the army had faltered, Elagabalus grabbed a sword and charged headlong towards the enemy lines on horseback.¹⁴³ El-Gabal was with him; El-Gabal protected him. It was placed above the Ara Victoriæ in the Senate House or Curia to ensure that every senator would see it. The size, composition, and location of the Ara Victoriæ within the Curia is debated, but if Diocletian's Curia has a comparable floor plan to the Senate during Elagabalus' life and if the Neapolitan Victoria is an accurate copy of the Tarentum Victoria that Augustus placed in the Senate, the statue would have been at the back of the Curia and the bronze Tarentum Victoria could have easily sat on the altar.¹⁴⁴ However, the size and positioning had to be such that the portrait would not have obscured it.

¹⁴² Dio, 80.15.4.

¹⁴³ Dio, 79.38.4.

¹⁴⁴ Pohlsander, H. A. "Victory: The Story of a Statue." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, no. 18: 1969, 591.



Figure 13. Tarentum Victoria

Given the prestige of the intended location of the portrait, it seems unlikely that the portrait would have been made in any other media than a panel. Most likely it would have been tempera or encaustic, but if the Severan *tondo* is a representative sample of Severan portraiture, encaustic is most probable. Thus the size of the portrait could not logically have been more than two meters in height and less in width—if rectangular rather than square—to be able to fit through the doors without bending the wood and damaging the encaustic.



Figure 14. In Situ Reconstruction of the Ara Victoria Portrait, Jasmine Wabington

News of Elagabalus' passion reached Rome and made the ruling elite nervous. Anything from the east was inherently exotic and suspect. An emperor sending a portrait of himself complete in the guise of priest of some bizarre foreign god was seen as not only a provocation, but a sign of things to come.

The Arval Brothers and Elagabalus

The Arval Brothers worshiped Dea Dia at a complex of buildings in the countryside near Rome, but the site was more than a simple rustic *aedes* or shrine with a cult object—the grounds included a *lucus* or sacred grove, a *Caesareum* where the Imperial family was venerated, a circus, and a *tetrastylum* used as a dining hall.¹⁴⁵ They were one of the most ancient and prestigious public cults in Rome and were responsible for rituals to ensure bountiful crops as their name attests—Varro gives an etymology from FERRE (to bear) an ARVA (field) with a dissenting origin of the former from the Neapolitan usage of the Greek φράτρες (*phratres*) meaning a subdivision of citizens.¹⁴⁶ Their rituals involved the sacrifice and consumption of lambs, pigs, and cows; various officials changing clothes into a toga praetexta, a veil, a crown of roses; and culminated in leapers and charioteers competing at the circus with the winners receiving palms and silver wreaths.¹⁴⁷ The Emperor was an automatic member of the Arval Brothers and Martijn Icks argues that the Brothers were initially concerned that Elagabalus would end or alter their rites, but that inscriptions had returned to their previous patterns by 220.¹⁴⁸ The inscription included the processional chant of the Brothers, the Carmen Arvale, but the inscription is so poorly done Phillip Baldi argues that the work is undateable and done by someone ignorant of the content being inscribed.¹⁴⁹ Even considering the lack of spaces in Latin epigraphy and the inclusion of magical words the inscription is obviously riddle with errors without close inspection as shown in the following

¹⁴⁵ Mary Beard, et al. *Religions of Rome, Volume II*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 87.

¹⁴⁶ Varro, “On the Latin Language V.83-5” in *Religions of Rome, Volume II*. Ed. Mary Beard, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.1a.

¹⁴⁷ Beard, *Roman Religions*, Volume II, 4.5.

¹⁴⁸ Icks, 81.

¹⁴⁹ Phillip Baldi, *The Foundations of Latin* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1999), 223.

excerpted three lines:

“|[E] NOS LASES IVVATE E NOS LASES IVVATE NEVE LVAE RVE MARMA(R)
SINS INCVRRERE IN PLEORES NEVE LVE RVE MARMAR |[S]INS INCVRRERE IN
PLEORIS NEVE LVE RVE MARMAR SERS INCVRRE IN PLEORIS SATVR FV RERE
MARS LIMEN |[SA]LE STA BERBER SATVR FV FERE MARS LIMEN SALL STA
BERBER SATVR FV FERE MARS LIMEN SNI STA BERBER |”¹⁵⁰

Substitutions which are explicable such as archaic LASES for the classical LARES are overshadowed by issues such as the correct PLEORES slipping into PLEORIS and SALE alternately butchered into SALL and SNI. While idiosyncrasies and mistakes are common in Latin inscriptions the Carmen Arvale is one of the most mangled of the surviving examples.¹⁵¹ Baldi’s contention that the inscription is of poor quality is secure but his contention that it is undateable is not shared by Arthur E. Gordon whose transliteration he used in his work.¹⁵² While Icks does concede the possibility that the inscription was a coincidence; the orthodox dating of 218 and the low quality of the inscription hint at the possibility that the inscription may have been rushed, which supports Icks original contention that the Arval Brothers were initially rattled by the rumors about Elagabalus reaching Rome. The Brothers’ fears did not come to fruition and by 224 they were recording mundane repairs to their grounds.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Arthur E. Gordon, *Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraph*. (Berkley and Los Angeles: Univeristy of California Press, 1983), 160.

¹⁵¹ Gordon, 37.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Beard, *Religions of Rome, Volume II*, 6.2



Figure 15. Carmen Arvale Inscription

Elagabalus firmly believed that El-Gabal had a divine purpose for him and that purpose was to establish him in a place of honor at Rome, but never did it include erasing other gods from the face of the earth.

The Roman elite were already expecting the worst and every clumsy thing that Elagabalus did during his reign would be viewed in that light. A passage from the *Historia Augusta* perfectly illustrates the mix of truth, misinterpretation, and outright lies that swirled around the elite social circles during the reign of Elagabalus.

He also adopted the worship of the Great Mother and celebrated the rite of the taurobolium; and he carried off her image and the sacred objects which are kept hidden in a secret place. He would toss his head to and fro among the castrated devotees of the goddess, and he infibulated himself, and did all that the eunuch-priests are wont to do; and the image of the goddess which he carried off he placed in the sanctuary of his god. He also celebrated the rite of Salambo with all the wailing and the frenzy of the Syrian cult—thereby foreshadowing his own impending doom. In fact, he asserted that all gods were merely the servants of his god, calling some its chamberlains, others its slaves, and others its attendants for divers purposes. And he planned to carry off from their respective temples the stones which are said to be divine, among them the emblem of Diana, from its holy place at Laodicea, where it had been dedicated by Orestes.¹⁵⁴

It is quite plausible that Elagabalus initiated himself into more than one cult, just as his grandfather Julius Avitus Alexandrianus had a generation before him. The cult of the Great Mother—Cybele—would have especially appealed to him due to similarity to the cult of El-Gabal as a fertility and generative cult. Dancing was an ancient form of worship in the east—even King David danced to honor Yahweh—and was an intrinsic part of the worship of El-Gabal. Elagabalus probably would not have thought twice about dancing in honor of Cybele and his public dancing shows that he was dismissive of the Roman disdain for dancers.

The claim that he circumcised himself seems likely, but he did so as a result of his own initiation rites into the cult of El-Gabal. Jews and Egyptians were practitioners of circumcision, so an association with ritual purity in the cult of El-Gabal is likely. However, according to Josephus at least one of Elagabalus' Emesene ancestors was uncircumcised until he had to undergo the procedure as a condition of marrying into the Herodian dynasty.¹⁵⁵ The

¹⁵⁴ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* [pseud.], "Vita Heliogabali," *Historia Augusta*. (Cambridge, MA and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1924), 6.7.1-5.

¹⁵⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. Louis H. Feldman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 20.7.1.

galli or eunuchs of Cybele castrated themselves—they did not stop at circumcision.¹⁵⁶ The possibility of the high priest of a fertility cult that bragged about his ability to sire sons—despite his alleged passive homosexuality—is remote at best.

Salambo was a Syrian incarnation of Mesopotamian myth of Ishtar and Dumuzi, better known in the West in its Hellenized form as the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis. The ritual wailing mourned the death of Adonis/Dumuzi—a practice specifically forbade in the Bible as the condemnation of the women weeping for Tammuz. The cult of Salambo would have been quite familiar to Elagabalus, but the mourning rituals were almost exclusively reserved for women. If Elagabalus did participate in the ritual and there was no tradition of priest joining the women during the ritual, this is one of the credible examples of Elagabalus disregard for traditional gender roles.

The charge that he viewed other gods as servants and slaves of his god is a misunderstanding, perhaps willfully so, of Elagabalus' henotheism. As a henotheist Elagabalus did view other gods as subordinate to his own, but this was nothing exclusive to his worldview. Hermes was subordinate to Zeus, Attis waited on Cybele, and Ma'at was subsumed into a facet of the Hellenized syncretic Isis. Notions of Olympian or Isidaic primacy as opposed to other belief systems were nothing new.

Where Elagabalus crossed the line was with his religious syncretism and his clumsy manner of expressing his ideas. When he rounded up all of the cult objects in Rome and placed them in the Elagabalium—the great temple to El-Gabal he built in Rome—he was

¹⁵⁶ Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, trans. A. M. H. Lemmers, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 115.

establishing an assembly of the gods presided over by El-Gabal.¹⁵⁷ The gods were there as members of the great Roman pantheon—El-Gabal was merely the first among equals.

The Elagabalium

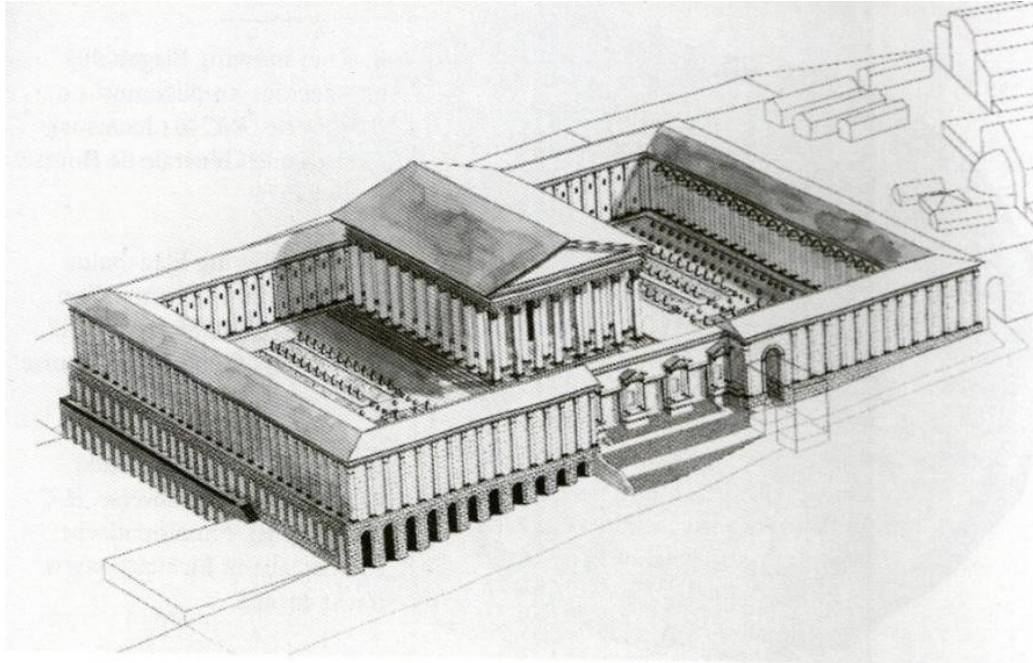


Figure 16. Elagabalium Reconstruction.

The Elagabalium was the physical manifestation of Elagabalus' religious reforms placing El-Gabal at the center of Roman religion. When he dropped the pretense that Sol Invictus was soul or the manifestation of some god other than El-Gabal, he removed the scaffolding that had supported Severan patronage of the worship of El-Gabal at Rome—and the Elagabalium was the physical and monumental manifestation of the boy emperor and his pretender god's grip on Rome.

¹⁵⁷ Dio, 12.9.

More massive than the pokey but ancient temple to Jupiter and the enormous Temple of El-Gabal at Emesa, the building's terraced foundation dwarfed the pumpkin domes of Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Rome with massive its dimensions.¹⁵⁸ However, it would have been a paled in comparison to the Temple of Emesene El-Gabal if the identification with the Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek is accurate.¹⁵⁹ The temple itself was in the style of the Hellenized East—a peristyle temple in the center of a *temenos* encircled by a peristyle. It was not without some Roman elements, the juxtaposition of rows of trees in the *temenos*, the peristyle to the sides, and the façade of the temple rising up in the center echoes Vespasian's Temple of Peace. It was contemporary with the fourth incarnation of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol, and the image that they cut on the skyline of ancient Rome would have been impressive—the temples *quadrigae* mirroring each other. The Elagabalium was a fitting space for the greatest god and Rome—in fact on his restoration to the head of the pantheon Jupiter would be worshiped there until paganism was eclipsed by Christianity.

¹⁵⁸ Chausson, François. "Vel Iovi vel Soli: études autour de la Vigne Barberini (191-354)." *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome*, no. 107: 1995, 669.

¹⁵⁹ Ball, 37-47.

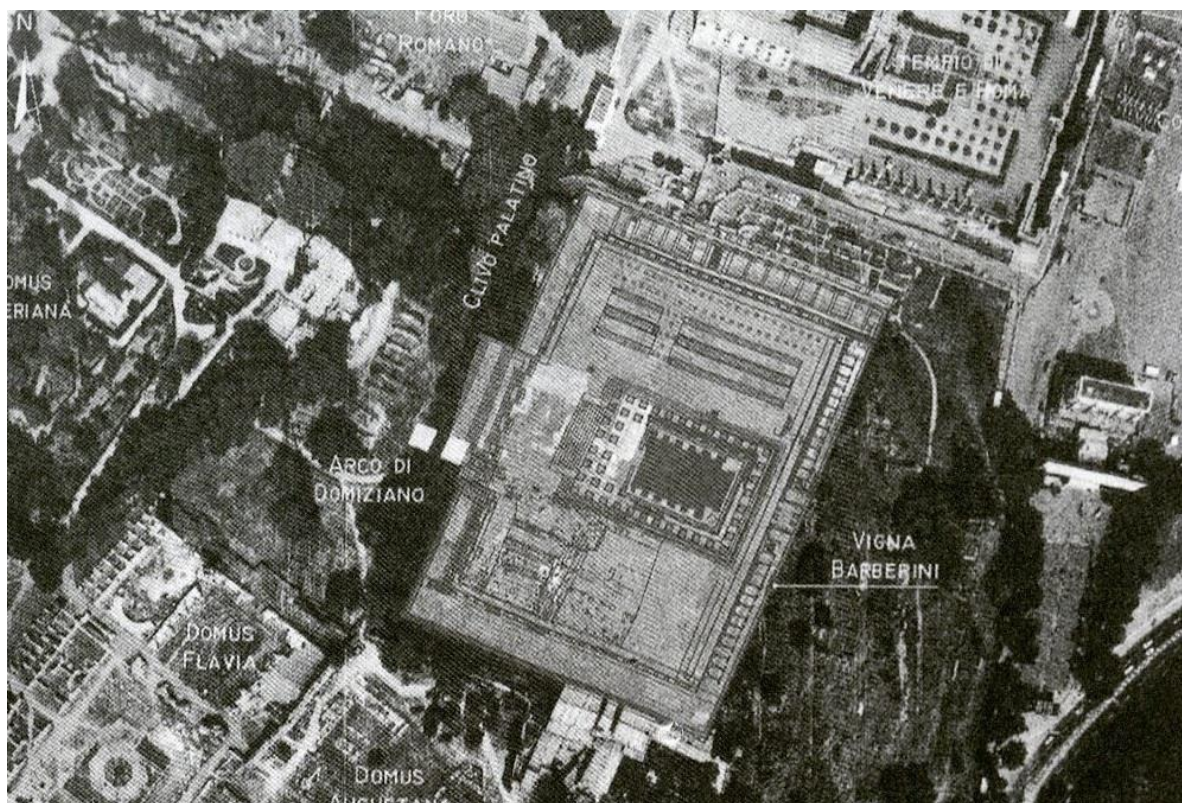


Figure 17. Elagabalium Ruins.

For all of his faults, Elagabalus is not the monster that he has been made out to be. He received the Christian Africanus at court and granted his request for aid and at a minimum didn't oppose Origen's presence at this court. Ancestors of Elagabalus such as Julius Bassianus showed openness to adapting the iconography of other religions. The Temple to El-Gabal in Trastevere, the Septizodium, and the Caracalla coin show a Severan veneration for El-Gabal at Rome that predates Elagabalus. The Elagabalium and other Varian innovations destroyed the ambiguity crafted under the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, a move that and created such hostility that historians are still disentangling the

misinformation of his *damnatio memoriae*. Elagabalus exhibited a single-minded piety that proved fatal to him rather than to others.

Elagabalus was so insistent in his vision, that he set up a disastrous scenario in which the Roman elite saw the end of their privilege of the head of their pantheon at the head of Roman religion as the prelude to a monotheistic religious fanatic's drive to purge the world of every god but his own.

Intolerance vs. Ignorance

Educated Romans were aware enough of the traditions of major religions to understand superficial traits. Two-hundred years before Elagabalus was born, the Roman senator Cicero made a mildly anti-Semitic pun. The Roman *nomen* Verres means “a castrated boar.” When a Jewish slave forced his way as a hostile witness to Cicero in defense of the man, Verres, whom Cicero was prosecuting, Cicero wryly quipped, “What can a Jew have to do with a pig?”¹⁶⁰ The average Roman got the joke immediately—it was a play on Verres’ name and the Latin word “VERREM” meaning boar and the prohibition of the consumption of pork in Judaism.¹⁶¹ However this was usually the extent of their understanding.

Like most people Romans tended to generalize and the tended to generalize Jews and Christians as monotheistic threats through exotic othering and ridicule as absurdity. The cult of El-Gabal shared superficial similarities with Judaism and only several generations before, the Jews had risen against Rome only for Judea to be utterly destroyed. To the Roman mind Jews and their god were dangerous and defeated enemies and now there is a Roman emperor

¹⁶⁰ Cicero, *Cicero's Verrine Oration II.4*, trans. Sheila Kathryn Dickison. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 43.95.

¹⁶¹ Dickison, 175.

passionate about a religion similar to that of the Jews. The threat was apparent to Romans and despite warnings from Maesa, Elagabalus was too inexperienced and naïve to see how his religious zeal was perceived.

Worse, the emperor cavorted around with all sort of rabble from the Roman perspective. When Elagabalus received the embassy of Africanus, it must have been comparable to an American reaction to a Scientologist president granting a billion dollars to a Raelian faith-based initiative. Elagabalus was a threat to the Roman way of life—the *mos maiorum*—the ways of the ancestors. Thus, Elagabalus had to be stopped by any means necessary. Elagabalus was the embodiment of monotheism and an enemy of Rome.

Religious Toleration of Christians

Christians enjoyed relative peace under the reign of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, though neither moved to officially legalize Christian worship and they would remain insecure until Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313.

A Christian *apologia* written in Syriac and wrongly attributed to Melito of Sardis is addressed to either Caracalla or Elagabalus.¹⁶² This Pseudo-Melito has a Syrian perspective and relentlessly attacks idolatry, but despite Pseudo-Melito is not completely hostile to the addressee of his apologia—he is trying to save his soul. On the contrary, he implores the addressee, for the sake of his children, to turn away from idolatry.¹⁶³ Neither Caracalla nor Elagabalus had children, but Elagabalus had quipped about his desire to have children with

¹⁶² Jane Lightfoot, "The Apology of Ps.-Meliton," on *Academia.edu* Accessed April 1, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/5822880/THE_APOLOGY_OF_PS.MELITON

¹⁶³ "Spicilegium Syriacum (1855)," *Tertullian.org*, last modified 2003, accessed April 1, 2016, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/spicilegium_5_melito.htm.

Cornelia Paula when challenged by a hostile Senator.¹⁶⁴ More to the point Pseudo-Melito writes, “if they wish to dress you in a female garment, remember that you are a man.”¹⁶⁵ Effeminacy and cross-dressing are allegations more apt to be directed at Elagabalus than Caracalla. It is thus most likely that the addressee of Pseudo-Melito is Elagabalus.

Eusebius, whom wrongly accepted this apologia as genuine work of Melito of Sardis assumed that it was delivered in person. This is almost certainly wrong, no emperor, not even one as curious as Elagabalus would tolerate being chastised in their presence—especially by a member of an outlawed group. A non-religious conversation or in the case of Elagabalus or in that of his cousin and successor Severus Alexander a friendly religions exchange with a Christian was one thing, but to be challenged and upbraided by a Christian in person would have crossed a line that anyone bold enough to attempt would surely have quickly and painfully regretted.

Origen

Early Christian sources praise Elagabalus' Aunt Julia Mamaea as a *religiosa*—or most religious woman—for inviting the theologian Origen to a meeting.¹⁶⁶ If this meeting took place early during the reign of Elagabalus, it could only have gone forward with his approval. Origen would have had to have met with Mamaea and her son Alexander sometime between 218 and 228. Origen met with Mamaea at Antioch. Taking into account the known movements of Mamaea and Origen, they would only have been able to meet at Antioch twice in their lives.

¹⁶⁴ Dio, 12.9.

¹⁶⁵ Ps. Meliton, on *Terullian.org*, “Spicilegium Syriacum (1855).”

¹⁶⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.21.3.

The first opportunity was after Elagabalus had been declared emperor and the boy emperor and his family settled in Antioch for a time as they conducted reconnaissance and mop up operations to eliminate Macrinus' remaining supporters—both political and martial. Origen was briefly teaching and giving sermons in Caesarea before the Bishop Demetrius wrote to him tersely demanding that he leave immediately.

The second opportunity was late in the reign of Severus Alexander, many years after Elagabalus was assassinated, when the emperor Alexander and his mother were touring the province of Syria. Origen was no longer at Caesarea, but was living in Alexandria. This added distance, plus the fact that Alexander had long ago completed his education, makes the second window of opportunity when Origen could have met Mamaea less plausible than a meeting in 218 soon after Elagabalus had come to power. This presents several interesting possibilities.

First, as the new leader of the Roman Empire, security around the new emperor and his family had to have been very tight. This makes it highly unlikely that Origen could have met with Mamaea, without the explicit consent of Maesa and the knowledge of Elagabalus. If Origen did visit the court at Antioch in 218, that would have set a precedent for a Christian visit from which Africanus benefitted. Origen and Africanus knew each other, so it might even have been possible that Origen was used as a reference for Africanus to gain access to the emperor. Second, given Elagabalus' interest in religion and personality he may well have taken advantage of the opportunity and met with the Christian scholar.

Mamaean Appropriation

An anecdote about Severus Alexander mentioned in the *Historia Augusta* state that amongst his personal gods Alexander had statues of Orpheus, Abraham, Jesus, and Apollonius of Tyana.¹⁶⁷ Such a clumsy display of interfaith solidarity was more typical of Elagabalus' personality than Alexander's. The equivocation of Abraham and Jesus to pagan gods and saviors would have been inherently offensive to Jews and Christians. Alexander would have realized with it while such a thought did not occur to Elagabalus or at least was dismissed. Indeed, Elagabalus did exactly the same thing when he gathered the cult objects of all the gods in Rome together in the Elagabalium—the great temple to El-Gabal that he built in Rome.¹⁶⁸

Elagabalus tried disinheriting Alexander; he tried faking Alexander's death; and killing Alexander—all attempts failed. When the Praetorian Guard heard of these events they mutinied because they preferred Alexander to Elagabalus and what they perceived to be un-Romaness and anti-martial values; Elagabalus only escaped execution this point by going to Praetorians with Alexander and surrendering many of his court favorites to the angry mob of soldiers—though he was able to save his husband Hierocles by begging for his life.¹⁶⁹ After the Praetorians learned that Elagabalus was conspiring against Alexander again, he went with his adopted son and co-emperor to their camp as a show of reconciliation and to calm them down.¹⁷⁰ Elagabalus went willingly to the camp but he was hunted down and killed after he had

¹⁶⁷ Scriptores Historiae Augustae [pseud.], "Vita Alexandri" in *Historia Augusta*. (Cambridge, MA and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1924), 29.1.

¹⁶⁸ Scriptores Historiae Augustae, "Vita Heliogabali" 3.4.

¹⁶⁹ Dio, 80.19.

¹⁷⁰ Dio, 80.19.3-4.

arrived.¹⁷¹ He died in his mother's arms; she too was killed, and a bloody purge of his friends and allies followed.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Dio, 80.20.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Chapter Five

Conclusion: Not a Minor Emperor

For Romans like Dio Cassius, Elagabalus was the personification of the end of the qualities that had made Rome great: the end of *virtus*, the end of *dignitas*, the end of *pietas*. Elagabalus was not a good emperor, but he was not as bad an emperor as he has historically been portrayed. Elagabalus was not a good emperor, but he was not an insignificant emperor. He was the most consequential emperor of the Severan Dynasty because Romans looked back on him as the transitional figure between the stability of the Principate and the chaos of the Third century.

Transitional Figure

With the exceptions of Augustus and Constantine, Elagabalus is perhaps the most important transitional figure in the mental space of the Roman Empire. His religious reforms failed and were seemingly overturned, but when Aurelian restored order after the Third Century Crises it was El-Gabal that he would thank.¹⁷³ When Constantine explained divine intervention of the Christian god at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge he explained it using the iconography of Sol Invictus, which the soldiers were already familiar with. This is not to suggest that Aurelian and Constantine were direct heirs of Elagabalus' religious policies, but

¹⁷³ Scriptores Historiae Augustae [pseud.], "Vita Aureliani," in *Historia Augusta*, trans. David Magie, (Cambridge, MA and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1932), 25.4.

rather the Varian Moment was a challenge to Roman religious orthodoxy from which it never fully recovered. Despite all of the efforts of Alexander and Mamaea to reverse what Elagabalus did—they too were murdered by the Praetorian Guard.¹⁷⁴ The void that Elagabalus created between Rome and her gods would be incrementally increased until Theodosius damned the Roman pantheon forever.

Forty years later after the collapse of the Severan Dynasty, the emperor Aurelian defeated the army of Zenobia, leader of the secessionist Palmyrene Empire at the Battle of Emesa. Aurelian ascribed his victory to El-Gabal and revived the cult of Sol Invictus.¹⁷⁵ The emperor Constantine couched his Christian conversion narrative in the iconography of Sol Invictus after his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, but he was a longtime devotee of Sol Invictus and the Arch of Constantine is even aligned to show the Colossus Solis through the central arch.¹⁷⁶ El-Gabal as part of a syncretizing Sol Invictus was rehabilitated, but Elagabalus remained the most hated emperor in Roman history.

Elagabalus does not deserve this fate. He was a failure as an emperor, but even as a failure, his iconographic legacy continued until the prohibition of pagan religions under the Theodosian Code.¹⁷⁷ Elagabalus was clumsy and stubborn, but he was also passionate, tolerant, and curious—traits that earned him good will among his often oppressed Christian contemporaries. His reforms were neither as innovative nor as radical as they have been made out to be in orthodox historiography. He came to the throne before he had even attained

¹⁷⁴ Scriptorum Historiae Augustae, Vita Alexandri, 6.9.4-8.

¹⁷⁵ Scriptorum Historiae Augustae [pseud.], "Vita Aureliani," in *Historia Augusta*, trans. David Magie, (Cambridge, MA and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1932), 25.4.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Marlowe, Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 233.

¹⁷⁷ Theodosius, et al., "Codex Theodosianus," in *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, ed. Clyde Pharr, et al. (Clark, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, 2001), 16.10.11.

the age of majority under Roman law and as soon as he came of age he broke free of his handlers and charted his own course as disastrous as it might have been for him personally, his family, and the Roman state. Elagabalus inadvertently brought the Augustan project of the Principate to an end, setting Rome on course for emergence of the Dominate and subsequent; the Anti-Augustus destroyed the Rome of Augustus in the mentalité of the Senatorial elite and that was his greatest crime.

While the reign of Severus Alexander was longer and his assassination directly caused the Crises of the Third Century, his reign was nothing more than the cadaveric spasm of the dead Principate which was brought down by the shock of its would-be-savior, Elagabalus, being the living embodiment of its dementia. In Palestine and Arabia alone twenty-three of thirty seven mints never again issued coinage after the fall of Elagabalus.¹⁷⁸ His failure came at a critical time for the Roman Empire, the failure of the milder and well-liked Severus Alexander after him not only set in motion the Crisis of the Third Century when Rome nearly collapsed it also reveal the intrinsic inability of the Roman elite to the challenges the Empire faced. It is one of history's great ironies that the first emperor to establish order out of the chaos attributed his victory to the god of Elagabalus.

¹⁷⁸ Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome*, 255.

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