

Genitalia sibi devinxit

Iulian MOGA

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

Email: moga.iulian@gmail.com

Abstract: Issued from a rather insignificant Oriental sacerdotal dynasty of a semi-nomadic ancestry, Elagabalus seemed unfit to rule an Empire whose imagery of power and religious traditions varied considerably from those deeply embedded into the minds of his people of origin. His typical conduct, even if seen immoral, pervert, depraved, etc. could be perceivable through the perspective of a well-defined cultural Eastern legacy. It was not for the first time when the Romans encountered and coped with Oriental cults and customs on their soil, due to their having adopted the Idaean Mother along with her own *chorus cinaedorum* that dissuaded poets like Juvenal. But to fully support an Oriental-type sovereign trying to replace values of their own, that was hardly bearable.

Keywords: Elagabalus, depravity, ritual emasculation, Bassiani, circumcision

Rezumat: Provenit dintr-o dinastie sacerdotală orientală mai degrabă modestă, cu o ascendență semi-nomadă, Elagabalus părea nepotrivit să conducă un Imperiu ale cărui imagini ale puterii și tradiții religioase se deosebeau considerabil de cele adânc înrădăcinate în mentalitățile poporului său de origine. Comportamentul său tipic, chiar dacă era considerat imoral, pervers, depravat etc., ar putea fi perceput prin perspectiva unei moșteniri culturale orientale bine conturate. Nu era pentru prima dată când romanii aveau de-a face cu astfel de culte și trebuiau să facă față și obiceiurilor orientale pe teritoriul lor, dat fiind faptul că o adoptaseră deja pe Mama Ideană împreună cu propriul ei *chorus cinaedorum*, fapt care i-a dezamăgit pe unii poeți precum Juvenal. Dar să susțină pe deplin un suveran de tip oriental care încerca să le înlocuiască propriile valori cele ale sale, deja era un lucru greu de suportat.

Cuvinte-cheie: Elagabalus, depravare, emasculare rituală, Bassiani, circumcizie

©2024 Studia UBB Historia. Published by Babeș-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

When the Sun of the Bassiani was risen, Syria was far from being a homogeneous region. It was rather like Anatolia, a *melting pot*, where different types of populations, with their religious conceptions, social practices, and commercial routes met. Despite its positioning in close proximity to the sea, the Emesenes were rather continental-oriented. Emesa was at the crossroads of some important international trade routes. It had strong connections with Petra and its spice route, with Palmyra (situated only 60 kilometres North-East), with Hatra in Northern Mesopotamia, Edessa in Osroene and the kingdom of Commagene, all very important gateways for the commerce with the Middle East and Central Asia³⁰. This is how aristocratic families of Emesa became enormously rich.

When Strabo mentions the Emesenes, he includes them in the category of the 'Scenite' Arabs, because they were pastoralists living in the tents (*scenae*), an accentuation of their semi-nomadic origin. Both Cicero and Strabo designate their rulers as mere phylarchs of the Arabs, while Dio, when referring to their sovereign Iamblichos I, he reminds him as a 'king of some Arabs'³¹. Arethusa was still their capital during Sampsigeramus I, but then the capital was moved to Emesa. Their kings bore mostly theophoric names like Sampsigeramus (connected to the sun god Shamash)³², Iamblichus ('a hypochoristic of "Yamlik'el" which would mean "El reign"'³³), Sohaemus (connoting blackness, probably of the cult stone), or Azizus (one of the two Arab star deities, equivalent to the Greek Dioscuri)³⁴. According to Michaela Konrad, the inventory of some tombs from the Tall Abū Shābūn necropolis of Homs, especially those of Sampsigeramus II and his son, may indicate close connections to ceremonial clothing of kings and priest-kings of steppe cultures ('tunics, trousers and tiaras adorned with small golden fittings')³⁵, as well as with those of Palmyra and Hatrene kings³⁶. The members of the dynasty became reliable allies of Romans as client kings and had strong connections, including family ties, with all important client kings in the area (Cappadocian, Armenian, Commagenian and Pontic). It was most probably

³⁰ Pietrzykowski 1986, 1811; Levick 2007, 6-7.

³¹ Levick 2007, 10; Butcher 2003, 91-92.

³² Pietrzykowski 1986, 1812; Silva 2018.

³³ Levick 2007, 15.

³⁴ Levick 2007, 18.

³⁵ Konrad 2017, 270.

³⁶ Konrad 2017, 273-5.

during the rule of Azizus in AD 53 that the habit of circumcision was adopted, because of his marriage to Drusilla, the sister of Agrippa II, who was a nephew of Herod³⁷.

The pantheon and cultural traditions of the Emesenes were in fact very eclectic with mostly west-Semitic, Arab and Aramaic deities, but of different origins³⁸. Barbara Levick even states that 'Investigations into the religious life in the area surrounding Emesa revealed the same mix of west Semitic, Babylonian, and Arab as at Hatra and Palmyra, though they conclude that the range of deities on offer there are restrained by comparison. Chaldaean influence has also been detected at Emesa, and the mausoleum of Sampsigeramus is described as being of Mesopotamian type. Topmost is the Semitic, Arab, and originally Babylonian deity El or Il'³⁹. Ilah hag-Gabal, or the god of the mountain, has paradoxically the same type of meaning as Dushara/Dusares of the Nabateans, translated similarly as 'Lord of the mountains' and represented by an aniconic black stone⁴⁰. In fact, the cult of baetyls was widespread in the entire Orient, mostly to the Semitic populations, a reality that made authors like Clement of Alexandria to comment that 'the Arabs worship stones'⁴¹. Other deities venerated in Emesa, like Astarte, Azizos, Monimos, Allath or Atargatis are encountered basically in many local pantheons in the area⁴².

The function of high priest of Elagabal was transmitted to the descendants of the Bassiani, whose family name came from 'bassus', which denominated exactly this kind of function, even if it resonated like a Roman common one. Like their grandfather on matrilineal side, whose name was Julius Bassianus, Varius Avitus (the future Elagabalus) and his cousin Gessius Alexianus (the future Severus Alexander) became also priests of this god. It is probable that they were connected to the royalty, but that is not yet certain.

Of all the main literary contemporary sources related to Varius Avitus Bassianus, none has a minimum of objectivity or at least impartiality in reflecting the image of the emperor. All of them have an interest in vilifying his image and are not concerned at all in explaining the possible motivations of his actions, whether he was or not urged by a specific cultural heritage or a certain

³⁷ Sullivan 1978, 211-5; Butcher 2003, 95-96.

³⁸ Frey 1989, 45-65.

³⁹ Levick 2007, 15; Silva 2018, 37-8.

⁴⁰ Le Bihan 2015, 61. Hammond 1973, 95: "Lord (*dhu*) of the Shara (Mountains)".

⁴¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos*, IV, 46, 2; Sanchez Sanchez 2018, 49-50.

⁴² Frey 1989, 65.

Oriental religious *paideia*. In our opinion, as we shall see, it was not only the question for him of *what* he did, but *how* and *why* he was driven and motivated in doing so. And this was probably the most intriguing part. It is worth noting that neither Herodian, nor Cassius Dio were in Rome at the moment of the emperor's accession to the throne or during his short reign. Besides, the 79th book of Dio that we have is merely an abbreviation of Xiphilinus.

Of these literary sources, Herodian seems to come with a more sober and balanced story. In other instances, due to the errors he makes, Herodian is not credited as a full trustworthy source, but in this specific situation, due to Dio's clear hostility and emotional involvement, he seems more reliable than Dio. As an Antiochian, Herodian knew very well the religious and cultural context associated with the cult of Elagabal, and therefore does not try to judge the emperor and his obscenities like Dio, but limits himself to the presentation of facts being, as Pietrzykowski states, 'a more objective and better-informed source'⁴³. He knew Dio's writing very well. Chrysanthou and Rowan insists on the interdependence, if not even intertextuality, of these literary sources. In many instances, Herodian seems to correct Dio's views and stories that seem different to him. There are also numerous details that we only know from Herodian, like the description of the baetyl of Emesa, the great procession involving the black stone in Rome, or the image sent by the emperor from Nicomedia to Rome to be placed on the Senate house above the altar of the goddess Victoria (so that the entering senators to offer the traditional sacrifice and pay their homage both to the emperor and his god)⁴⁴.

The hostility of both Dio and the writer of *Historia Augusta* is shown overtly: 'He was the last of the Antonines (though many think that later the Gordians had the cognomen Antoninus, whereas they were really called Antonius and not Antoninus), *a man so detestable for his life, his character, and his utter depravity that the senate expunged from the records even his name*. I myself should not have referred to him as Antoninus save for the sake of identification, which frequently makes it necessary to use even those names which officially have been abolished.' (HA, 18) The same idea is expressed in the introductory passage of the HA: 'The life of Elagabalus Antoninus, also called Varius, I should never have put in writing—hoping that it might not be known that he was emperor of the Romans—, were it not that before him this same imperial office had had a Caligula, a Nero, and a Vitellius. But, just

⁴³ Pietrzykowski 1986, 1809.

⁴⁴ Frey 1989, 9; Pietrzykowski 1986, 1815.

as the selfsame earth bears not only poisons but also grain and other helpful things, not only serpents but flocks as well, so the thoughtful reader may find himself some consolation for these monstrous tyrants by reading of Augustus, Trajan, Vespasian, Hadrian, Pius, Titus, and Marcus. At the same time he will learn of the Romans' discernment, in that these last ruled long and died by natural deaths, whereas the former were murdered, dragged through the streets, officially called tyrants, and no man wishes to mention even their names'⁴⁵.

The opposition between Elagabalus and Severus Alexander is very well contrasted both by the Bithynian senator and Herodian. The latter even comforts us with the idea that Alexander was of a kind character and characterized by clemency and philanthropy (Herodian 6, 1, 6-7), and if it hadn't been for the greed of his mother, his rule would have been perfect (Herodian 6, 1, 6-7)⁴⁶.

Like the author of the *HA*, Dio does not follow the same narrative techniques in order to discredit the image of the emperor, in the sense of promoting mostly the **ethnic stereotype** of a *barbarian* that came to the throne of Rome. Thus, even when he uses the epithets that make reference to the foreigners (besides that of the most common 'pseudo-Antoninus'), i.e. the 'Assyrian' and 'Sardanapal', they concern most specifically his effeminacy, passive sexual orientation, debauchery, lack of self-control and his excesses of all kinds due to his passionate frenzy nature of his character.

The emperor was chasing his own chimeras by utterly neglecting the values of the Roman citizens and treating them as subjects in a manner that the Oriental sovereigns did. This attitude not only displeased the aristocratic conservative layers of the society, but managed to outrage them. The passage from *HA*, 20 states that: 'He often showed contempt for the senate, calling them slaves in togas, while he treated the Roman people as the tiller of a single farm and the equestrian order as nothing at all. He frequently invited the city-prefect to a drinking-bout after a banquet and also summoned the prefects of the guard, sending a master of ceremonies, in case they declined, to compel them to come'. But what we are dealing with in this case is a **double cultural misunderstanding** or, as Martin Frey named it, '**a mutual misunderstanding**': 'Elagabal's attempt at religious reform thus initially failed due to mutual misunderstanding, but also due to the lack of

⁴⁵ See Gariboldi 2008.

⁴⁶ Furtado 2020, 194.

willingness on both sides to discard their own traditions and preconceived codes of behaviour'⁴⁷. Because Elagabalus chose to neglect his duties as a Roman emperor and as a *pontifex maximus* as he was expected to do mostly by the senatorial elite, the reaction was that they did not even bother to understand his own personal motivations, as we can see in Cassius Dio's attitude mostly. Both Frey and Sanchez Sanchez underline the fact that it would have been no major problem if the emperor had not had introduced the cult of Elagabal in such an abrupt manner, due to the Roman tolerance regarding foreign cults in general⁴⁸. The alternative was either to introduce the god through the backstage door as Sulla did with the Anatolian Ma while erecting her a sanctuary on the Tiberine island as *Bellona pulvinensis* or *insulensis* or to follow the common Roman procedure of summoning the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* with a petition to formally introduce Elagabal into the Roman pantheon, as few centuries before this procedure was performed to adopt Kybele as Magna Mater deum Idaea. Yet, an aniconic deity like Elagabal 'proved to be diffuse in its conceptualization by the Romans'⁴⁹. But time was not running in emperor's favour. So he acted giving mostly pre-eminence to his cult, to the despair of Dio and conservative members of the society. Thus, according to Cassius Dio (79, 11, 1): 'Closely related to these irregularities was his conduct in the matter of Elagabalus. The offence consisted, not in his introducing a foreign god into Rome or in his exalting him in very strange ways, but in his *placing him even before Jupiter himself* and causing himself to be voted his priest, also in his circumcising himself and abstaining from swine's flesh, on the ground that his devotion would thereby be purer. *He had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals* altogether, but that desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy; *the circumcision* which he actually carried out was a part of the priestly requirements of Elagabalus, and he accordingly *mutilated* many of his companions in like manner. Furthermore, he was frequently seen even in public clad in the barbaric dress which the Syrian priests use, and this had as much to do as anything with his receiving the nickname of "The Assyrian"'. As we can see, for Cassius Dio, even circumcision itself was perceived as an act of mutilation.

⁴⁷ Frey 1989, 71.

⁴⁸ Frey 1989, 73-79; Sanchez Sanchez 2018, 48-49.

⁴⁹ Sanchez Sanchez 2018, 50.

But maybe it was not only all about this introduction of his personal and dynastic local cult that matter. He tried to equate and venerate all the aspects of sacredness that could be put in connection to his religious system of values from the region of origin, by imagining theogamies between his god and two different goddesses, trying to make an offspring from a sacred union between him as high priest and a Vestal virgin as the purest representative of another important goddess, and becoming interested in the cults that had similar religious practices and representations like grandiose processions and exotic ceremonies, that involved games with ostentatious display of luxury (*tryphē*), betylic idols, ritual emasculations, effeminate priests, etc. and trying to gather as many as sacred objects from very different religious systems that could have a resonance into his sacred imagery (i.e. the Palladium, the sacred shields of the Salii etc.). According to the *HA*, the same would do Severus Alexander years later in his private prayer room and nobody got scandalized because of that. Elagabalus would thus try to integrate all these useful elements of sacredness in his own system of values. It is not thus by hazard that two curious passages of Cassius Dio and *HA* mention his adoption of the cult of the Anatolian Cybele. Dio's text that we mentioned above (79, 11, 1-2) associates his supposed ritual emasculation to the idea of physical softness, effeminacy, and weakness to pleasures. Yet, the passage of the *HA* (7, 2) seems to be more accurate regarding the ritual dances he was performing together with the emasculated *galli* of Cybele: '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.' Yet, it could not be the case of infibulation or castration or any form of genital mutilation. Such an operation was totally forbidden to a Roman citizen, whose body was considered inviolable. He should thus imitate the ritual gestures of Archigalli, high priests of Cybele that were normally chosen among the Roman citizens, could have their own families, but were never got emasculated. Besides, the text here clearly specifies *genitalia sibi devinxit*, which actually means that he bound up or fastened up the genitals in order to reduce their external visibility to the minimum condition.

According to Frey's theory, Elagabalus did not try from the very beginning to impose this pre-eminence of his god. This religious experiment

was perceived by Pietrzykowski and Turcan as a clear attempt to introduce henoteism in Rome⁵⁰. In the first place, he tried to win the favours of the Roman aristocracy by marrying a very wealthy noblewoman, Julia Cornelia Paula, whom he eventually divorced because of a mark on her body. Even if this could be seen as a stupid arbitrariness, in Semitic religious traditions, flawlessness imposed on the body of the priests or priestesses must have been a prerequisite, hence his decision. And this could also explain his need to marry Aquilia Severa as she was the highest and the most distinguished priestess in Rome, flawless in every respect⁵¹. But his impetus to impose Elagabal above the other gods must have come after the beginning of 220, when even on the military diplomas his title of '*Sacerdos amplissimus dei invicti Solis Elagabali*' started to precede that of the *pontifex maximus*⁵².

Elagabalus was the only emperor who succeeded the performance of being twice consecrated. First, when he became the high priest of his personal god of Emesa, whom he so assiduously served. Then, at the moment of his earthly ending, when the Romans beat him to death, cut his body into pieces and threw the remains into the Tiber. By doing so, he became the scapegoat of the Romans, filthy and impure, for he was doomed and consecrated as a *sacer* to the gods of the netherworld⁵³. The *Cloaca Maxima* thus became the *mundus* of their propitiatory offering to appease the supernatural powers in order to restore the natural peace with the gods⁵⁴. Double was the *damnatio* as well⁵⁵. Not only the name of the emperor was erased from the epigraphic documents, but also the local initiatives like those of the Anatolian cities or Alexandria ceased. The black stone was returned to its sanctuary of origin and the cult endured having only a regional importance as before.

References:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Barrett 1977 | A. A. Barrett, <i>Sohaemus, King of Emesa and Sophene</i> , <i>AJA</i> 98.2, 1977, 153-159. |
| Berrens 2004 | S. Berrens, <i>Sonnenkult und Kaisertum von den Severern bis zu Constantin I. (193-337 n. Chr.)</i> , Stuttgart 2004. |

⁵⁰ Pietrzykowski 1986, 1823-24.

⁵¹ Frey 1989, 87-90.

⁵² Frey 1989, 80.

⁵³ Kunst 2015.

⁵⁴ Gariboldi 2008.

⁵⁵ Rowan 2012, 217.

- Le Bihan 2015 A. Le Bihan, *Rites et identité religieuse en Syrie romaine*, in Zeugma VI. *La Syrie romaine. Permanences et transferts culturels*, Lyon 2015, 55-74.
- Butcher 2003 K. Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, London 2003.
- Frey 1989 M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, Stuttgart 1989.
- Furtado 2020 M. Furtado, *Em torno do principado de Severo Alexandre : a senatorialização da imagem do príncipe e o campo de Marte*, Cadmio 18, 2020, 193-215.
- Gariboldi 2008 A. Gariboldi, *Elagabalo e il culto della pietra di Emesa: a proposito dei culti orientali nell'impero Romano*, HIRAM 4, 2008, 9-30.
- Gariboldi 2013 A. Gariboldi, *Elagabalo Invictus Sacerdos: L' imperatore fanciullo e la centralizzazione del sacro attraverso lo specchio delle monete*, in: E. C. De Sena (ed.), *The Roman Empire during the Severan Dynasty: case studies in history, art, architecture, economy and literature (American Journal of Ancient History 6-8, 2007-2009)*, Piscataway N. J. 2013, 515-539.
- Hammond 1973 Ph. C. Hammond, *The Nabataeans: Their History, Culture and Archaeology*, Gothenburg 1973.
- Handy 2009 M. Handy, *Die Severer und das Heer*, Berlin 2009.
- Herodian Herodian in *Two Volumes*, II (Books V-VIII), ed. C. R. Whittaker, London – Cambridge, Mass. 1970.
- Konrad 2017 M. Konrad, *The Client Kings of Emesa: A Study of Local Identities in the Roman East*, Syria 94, 2017, 261-295.
- Kunst 2015 Chr. Kunst, *Tod auf der Latrine — Zum Ende von Caracalla und Elagabal*, in B. Ego, U. Mittmann, *Conceptions of the Human in Biblical, Early Jewish, greco-Roman and Egyptian Literature*, Berlin – Boston 2015, 313-331.
- Levick 2007 B. Levick, *Julia Domna. Syrian Empress*, London – New York 2007.
- Pietrzykowski 1986 M. Pietrzykowski, *Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, in ANRW, II, 16.3, 1986, 1806-1825.
- Rowan 2012 C. Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices. Divine Ideology and the Visualisation of Imperial Power in the Severan Period*, Cambridge – New York 2012.

- Sánchez Sánchez 2018 J. I. Sánchez Sánchez, *El Gabal en Roma. Convulsión social e inestabilidad política*, *Revista Historia Autónoma* 12, 2018, 43-60.
- Sánchez Sánchez 2020 J. I. Sánchez Sánchez, *Los no romanos en la obra de Herodiano; prejuicios y estereotipos étnicos*, in G. Bravo, E. Sánchez Medina (eds.), *Percepciones romanas del otro*, Salamanca 2020, 237-265.
- HA *The Scriptorum Historiae Augustae*, II, ed. D. Magie, Cambridge, Mass. - London 1993.
- Silva 2018 S. C. Silva, *Uma mulher síria como imperatriz romana: considerações sobre elementos do poder e da identidade cultural de Júlia Domna (século III EC)*, *Hélade* 4.1., 2018, 32-55.
- Sullivan 1978 R. D. Sullivan, *The Dynasty of Emesa*, in *ANRW*, II.8, 1978, 198-219.
- Vanoyeke 1993 V. Vanoyeke, *Les Sévères. Une dynastie maudite*, Paris 1993.
- Young 2003 G. K. Young, *Emesa and Baalbek: Where is the Temple of Elahagabal?*, *Levant* 35, 2003, 159-62.