*Sardanapalus Romanus*: A Study of the Foreignness of Elagabalus

CASSIUS DIO

1. LXXX.3.3-4

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| ἐπεξῆλθεν᾽, ἐς δὲ δὴ τἆλλα πάντα καὶ αἰσχρουργότατα καὶ παρανομώτατα καὶ μιαιφονώτατα ἐξοκείλας, ὥστε τὰ μέν τινα αὐτῶν **μηδ᾽ ἀρχὴν πώποτ᾽ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ γενόμενα** ὡς καὶ πάτρια ἀκμάσαι … ἐφόνευσε μὲν γὰρ **ἐν τῇ Συρίᾳ** τόν τε Νέστορα καὶ Φάβιον Ἀγριππῖνον τὸν ἄρχοντα αὐτῆς … | But he[[1]](#footnote-1) proceeded headlong into all manner of other acts most shameful, criminal, and bloody, such that some of them, **never before known in Rome**, flourished as traditions … For **while still in Syria**, he killed both Nestor and Fabius Agrippinus, the governor of that province …  |

2. LXXX.11.1-2

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| … ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι καὶ πρὸ τοῦ Διὸς αὐτοῦ ἤγαγεν αὐτόν, καὶ ὅτι καὶ ἱερέα αὐτοῦ ἑαυτὸν ψηφισθῆναι ἐποίησεν, **ὅτι τε τὸ αἰδοῖον περιέτεμε, καὶ ὅτι χοιρείων κρεῶν** … **ἀπείχετο**. … τοῦτο δὲ ὡς καὶ τῇ τοῦ Ἐλεγαβάλου ἱερατείᾳ προσῆκον ἔπραξεν: ἐξ οὗ δὴ καὶ **ἑτέροις τῶν συνόντων συχνοῖς ὁμοίως ἐλυμήνατὀ**: καὶ μέντοι καὶ ὅτι **τὴν ἐσθῆτα τὴν βαρβαρικήν**, ᾗ οἱ τῶν Σύρων ἱερεῖς χρῶνται, καὶ δημοσίᾳ πολλάκις ἑωρᾶτο ἐνδεδυμένος: ἀφ᾽ οὗπερ οὐχ ἥκιστα καὶ τὴν τοῦ Ἀσσυρίου ἐπωνυμίαν ἔλαβεν. | … but that he even celebrated him above Zeus, and that made it that he himself would be elected as his priest, and **that he circumcised himself, and that he abstained from eating pork** … He performed the circumcision as initiation for the priesthood of Elagabal; hence he even likewise **mutilated many of his companions**, and indeed that he was often seen **in public dressed in foreign raiment**, in which the priests of the Syrians consult their oracles, because of which most especially he received the titled “the Assyrian.”  |

HERODIAN

3. V.5.3-4

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| ὀ δὲ Ἀντωνῖνος **ἀπάρας τῆς Συρίας** **ἐλθών** τε **ἐς τὴν Νικομήδειαν** ἐχείμαζε, τῆς ὥρας τοῦ ἔτους οὕτως ἀπαιτούσης. εὐθέως τε ἐξεβακχεύετο, **τήν τε ἱερωσύνην τοῦ ἐπιχωρίου θεοῦ**, **ᾗ ἐντέθραπτο**, περιεργότερον ἐξωρχεῖτο, σχήμασί τε ἐσθῆτος πολυτελεστάτοις χρώμενος … ἦν τε αὐτῷ τὸ σχῆμα **μεταξὺ Φοινίσσης ἱερᾶς στολῆς καὶ χλιδῆς Μηδικῆς**. Ῥωμαϊκὴν δὲ ἢ Ἑλληνικὴν πᾶσαν ἐσθῆτα ἐμυσάττετο, ἐρίου φάσκων εἰργάσθαι, πράγματος εὐτελοῦς· τοῖς δὲ Σηρῶν ὑφάσμασι μόνοις ἠρέσκετο. | And [Elagabalus], **departing from Syria and coming to Nicomedia** he spent the winter there, compelled to do so by the time of year. And immediately he began practicing ecstatic rites, and underwent the ridiculous **priesthood of his native god, for which he had been raised**, wearing the most expensive sorts of clothes … he had an appearance somewhere between **the priestly dress of the Phoenicians and the effeminacy of the Medes**. He hated all Roman and Greek clothing, supposedly because it was made of wool, a cheap material; he tolerated only the silks of Asia.  |

4. V.5.9-10

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| τὰ δὲ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἱερουργηθέντων τά τε ἀρώματα ἐν χρυσοῖς σκεύεσιν ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς οὐκ οἰκέται δή τινες ἢ εὐτελεῖς ἄνθρωποι ἔφερον, ἀλλ᾿ οἵ τε ἔπαρχοι τῶν στρατοπέδων καὶ οἱ ἐν ταῖς μεγίσταις πράξεσιν, **ἀνεζωσμένοι [οἱ] μὲν χιτῶνας ποδήρεις καὶ χειριδωτοὺς νόμῳ Φοινίκων, ἐν μέσῳ φέροντες μίαν πορφύραν**· ὑποδήμασι δὲ λίνου πεποιημένοις ἐχρῶντο, ὥσπερ οἱ κατ᾿ ἐκεῖνα τὰ χωρία προφητεύοντες. | Some house slaves or poor men did not carry herbs and guts of the sacrificial victims on their head in golden bowls. Rather, they were commanders of the military and men of greatest import, **wearing long-sleeved tunics down to their feet, after the Phoenician custom, with a purple stripe down the middle;** and they wore linen shoes, such as the oracles wear in that land.  |

*SCRIPTORES* *HISTORIAE AUGUSTAE*

5. XVII.3.3-5

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| *Sed ubi* ***primum ingressus est urbem****, omissis quae in provincia gerebantur, Heliogabalum in Palatino monte iuxta aedes imperatorias consecravit eique templum fecit, studens et Matris typum et Vestae ignem et Palladium et ancilia et omnia Romanis veneranda in illud transferre templum et id agens,* ***ne quis Romae deus nisi Heliogabalus coleretur****. dicebat praeterea Iudaeorum et Samaritanorum religiones et Christianam devotionem illuc transferendam,* ***ut omnium culturarum secretum Heliogabali sacerdotium teneret****.*  | But when **he first entered the city**, the affairs of the provinces forgotten, he consecrated Elagabal on the Palatine, joined to the imperial palace, and made him a temple, eager to move the emblem of Magna Mater, the flame of Vesta, the Palladium and shields, and all the holy things of the Romans into it, doing it **so that no god could be worshiped in Rome without Elagabal**. Meanwhile he decreed that the religions of the Jewish and Samaritan peoples and the service of Christians be transferred there, **so that the priesthood of Elagabal might hold the mysteries of all cults within it**.  |

6. *Historia Augusta* XVII.7.1-4

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| *Matris etiam deum sacra accepit et tauroboliatus est, ut typum eriperet et alia sacra quae penitus habentur condita.* ***iactavit autem caput inter praecisos fanaticos et genitalia sibi devinxit et omnia fecit quae galli facere solent,*** *ablatumque sanctum in penetrale dei sui transtulit. Salambonem etiam* ***omni planctu et iactatione Syriaci cultus*** *exhibuit, omen sibi faciens inminentis exitii. omnes sane deos sui dei ministros esse aiebat, cum alios eius cubicularios appellaret, alios servos, alios diversarum rerum ministros.*  | He also adopted the worship of Magna Mater, and participated in her *taurobolium*, so that he carried off her emblem and other sacred objects which are held deep in a secret location. **Moreover, he shook his head among the castrated zealots and tucked his own genitals and did all the things which the castrated priests are accustomed to do,** and transported the emblem to be placed in the inner sanctum of his own god. He also worshipped Salambo **with all the wailing and thrashing of the Syrian cult,** foretelling his own imminent death. Indeed, he said that all the gods were the ministers of his own deity, when he would call some his chamberlains, others slaves, and others attendants of various responsibilities.  |

7. *Historia Augusta* XVII.8.1-2

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| *Cecidit et humanas hostias, lectis ad hoc pueris nobilibus et decoris per omnem Italiam patrimis et matrimis, credo ut maior esset utrique parenti dolor … cum inspiceret exta puerilia et* ***excruciaret hostias******ad ritum gentilem suum****.* | He also slaughtered human victim, having chosen beautiful children for this purpose from noble families throughout Italy, whose parents yet were living, I think so that the grief would be greater for both parents … while he inspected the children’s innards and **torture his victims for the purpose of his own native rite.**  |

1. Despite the dubious nature of Elagabalus’ gender identity and expression, and an increased interest in the emperor as a potentially transgender figure, I use masculine pronouns throughout this presentation to follow academic convention, as well as the grammatical convention of the ancient historians. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)