

Emperor Elagabalus and Traditional Roman Religion

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus is best-known to history as Elagabalus due to his affiliation with the Syrian god of the same name. As a youth he became a priest of Elagabalus in Syria, and he brought the worship of this god along with himself to the Roman capital. There the god Elagabalus was assimilated with different aspects of the Roman sun-god Sol (especially *Sol Invictus* or the “unconquered sun”). This, in turn, led to affiliation with the Greek sun-god Helios, from which we get an alternative name for both the emperor and god, Heliogabalus. Recent scholarship has also pushed to reclaim the identification of this emperor by his birth-name, Varius Avitus Bassianus, and examinations of his life as Varian studies (de Arrizabalaga y Prado, 2005). All of these distinctions are used for an emperor who only ruled the Roman Empire for four years (218-222 CE), and is most noted for his religious preference for the god Elagabalus, a questionable sexual identity, and a lack of mental stability.

This paper examines Elagabalus and his interactions with traditional Roman religious practices. As emperor he was also *pontifex maximus* or high priest of and responsible for overseeing Rome’s traditional cults, festivals and sacred objects. Holding multiple priesthoods would not have been in and of itself a problem for most Romans. However, Elagabalus showed overwhelming preference for his god, who was relatively unknown in the capital but at the clear expense of Rome’s traditional religions. The *Historia Augusta* provides the fullest account of Elagabalus’s outrages including the transfer of sacred objects to his god’s temple including the emblem of the Mother Goddess, fire of Vesta, Palladium, and sacred shields (3.4). It goes on to discuss the Emperor’s violation of the temple of Vesta in order to extinguish the eternal flame and his attempt to remove the sacred inner shrine (6.8). Elagabalus also removed from the temple an image he believed to be the Palladium and the list goes on. According to this source his desire

was to abolish the religious ceremonies of Rome and the entire world so that the god Elagabalus was worshipped everywhere (6.7): *nec Romanas tantum extinguere voluit religiones, sed per orbem terrae, unum studens, ut Heliogabalus deus ubique coleretur*. The *Historia Augusta* also mentions his violation of a Vestal Virgin. Elagabalus in fact took the Vestal priestess Aquilia Severa as his second wife, divorced her, and remarried her. For such a crime she should have been buried alive and he beaten to death—but, of course, this did not happen.

My project reconsiders such claims and explores alternative approaches to the study of Elagabalus and traditional Roman religion. The main goal is not to prove or disprove that the events took place since documentary sources for this period are so few, and in the case of the *Historia Augusta* notoriously unreliable. Rather, I will approach this topic from the perspective of why out of all the things that could and were claimed to destroy the image of this Emperor, that those of a religious nature receive considerable attention. I will also consider other available evidence. For example, a coin series with the image of Aquilia Severa on the obverse clearly does not portray her as a Vestal Virgin even though the sources claim Elagabalus married her in order to create a divine union and have god-like children (Cassius Dio 80.9; the reverse of the coin displays the image and word “Concordia”). Further, I will re-evaluate relevant secondary scholarship on this issue. In particular I will review Fowden’s intriguing argument that parts of the *Life of Elagabalus* should be read as a veiled joke to attack the later emperor Constantine, specifically his refusal to ascend the Capitol to perform customary ceremonies, preference for one particular god, and the confiscation of sacred objects belonging to other deities—especially the Palladium (Fowden, 1991). In so doing, my goal is not to rehabilitate the image of this emperor, only to more accurately present his authentic one.

Bibliography

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