

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

In recent scholarship, there has been much discussion of Elagabalus as a scandalous figure, especially with regards to scandals of gender and sex. Equally worthy of examination are the reactions of ancient historians to Elagabalus' foreignness, which remain relatively unexplored by scholars compared to the emperor's gender and luxurious indulgences. As a member of the Severan dynasty, Elagabalus was of Syrian descent, and their ethnicity was a recurrent point of scrutiny in ancient historiography. Scholars have stressed the importance of appearance and presentation for maintaining imperial power (Icks 2006). In this paper, I examine the ways in which Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *scriptores* of the *Historia Augusta* present Elagabalus as foreigner in Rome. Rather than attempt to study all of Elagabalus' reported deviations from social norms, I focus on passages in which the authors tie those deviations directly to foreignness. I attempt to establish for each text a pattern of how each of the authors approach the topic of Elagabalus' foreign origins in a manner distinct to their own text.

Dio bases his depiction heavily on Sardanapalus, using this frame of reference to engage in a meticulous breakdown of the emperor's outrages. From the very start, Dio calls attention to Elagabalus' foreign origins, as well as the negative luxuriousness associated commonly with that origin (Balsdon 1979). This creates an extremely specific frame of reference for the audience, from which they can judge the actions of the emperor. Dio's explicit identification of Elagabalus as a Syrian emperor prefigures the extravagance and chaos; in this way, foreignness is an essential part of establishing the patterns of Elagabalus' tenure as emperor.

Herodian, in contrast, is much more general. Although he identifies Elagabalus as a Phoenician, this is as specific as he gets. His account is much less sordidly detailed than Dio's,

focusing on foreign appearance rather than a catalog of extravagances and atrocities (Scheithauer 1990; Bittarello 2011). By generalizing Elagabalus as an archetypal “Easterner,” Herodian eliminates the need to delve into the particulars of the emperor’s conduct—the effeminacy, indolence, and violence are left in part for the reader to fill in based on their assumptions about a stock foreigner.

Whereas Dio and Herodian are concerned with general decadence and archetype respectively, the *scriptores* are quite specific in when they broach the topic of Elagabalus’ foreignness. They highlight the emperor’s foreign origins in conjunction with religious offenses. Their Elagabalus is an insidious priest whose worship, steeped in foreign praxis and orientalist stereotypes (Rives 1995; Satterfield 2012), threaten to dismantle the state’s religion and aristocracy with new cults and child sacrifice, in a subversion of Roman syncretism.

I conclude by discussing the ways in which this kind of comparative character study is helpful for ascertaining the priorities and interests of authors. I also propose the next step of this project. Examining complex figures such as Elagabalus through the eyes of multiple historiographers can provide insight into underexplored aspects of both the ancient historians and the people about whom they wrote. A full ethnographic study of this sort would be especially helpful applied to the Severan dynasty as a whole, tracing historians’ interactions with the Syrian side of the family tree from Septimius Severus through the end of Alexander’s reign in 235 CE. A careful examination of what shifts in perception occurred, if any, of the Syrian imperials would be extremely useful for engaging with the history of the empire leading up to the Crisis of the Third Century.

## Bibliography

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