CHAPTER 4
THE REJECTED RULER

‘Nor emperor he, nor Antoninus, nor citizen, nor senator, nor man of noble blood, nor Roman’
- Historia Augusta, Vita Severi Alexandri

During his reign, Elagabalus had presented himself as a good and worthy ruler: first as a benevolent monarch in the tradition of the Antonines, later as the invincible priest-emperor of Elagabal. After he had been violently overthrown by the praetorians, this positive image was discarded in favour of another, far less flattering view. To what extent this change reflected a genuine dislike for the priest-emperor, and to what extent it was merely keeping in line with the propaganda of Severus Alexander, who had little choice but to condemn his predecessor, is a question which remains ultimately unanswerable. However, this chapter will not only describe the negative images which emerged in Greek and Roman literature after Elagabalus’s death, but will also offer possible explanations for the reasons why particular authors chose to portray the emperor in particular ways. What we are interested in, is the construction of a fictional Elagabalus, an imperial monster who surpassed Caligula, Nero and Commodus in alleged wickedness and vice.

Starting with Xenophon in the fourth century BC, who wrote a panegyric on the Spartan king Agesilaos, many Greek and Roman authors had defined the boundaries of good and bad rule. A good ruler typically came from a line of noble and worthy ancestors. He respected the gods, loved his country and ruled wisely and justly, taking heed of the advice of good and worthy councilors. Although he was not aggressive, he showed valour in battle and invoked fear in his enemies. To his subjects, he set an example by means of his modesty and moderate way of life. He was accessible, gave attention to their problems, and earned their enduring love and respect by always placing their interests before his own, acting as a shepherd or a father. A bad ruler, on the contrary, possessed none of these characteristics, but was defined by their exact opposites. He was cruel, foolish, megalomaniac and extravagant, repressed his subjects and was hated and feared by all. Tacitus’s Tiberius and Nero are prime examples of bad rulers, as are Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian in the work of Suetonius.

The negative images of Elagabalus in the works of Cassius Dio, Herodian and the author of the Vita Heliogabali can be placed in this tradition. The authors make use of many
literary *topoi* or *loci communes* (commonplaces) to cast the emperor in an unfavourable light. These *topoi* are usually ‘not (...) devoid of any connection with reality’, as Lukas de Blois has pointed out, but tend to over- or underexpose facts, connections, and actions, place them in a traditional frame of reference or label them. Literary commonplaces are part of an inflated moralizing discourse, following rather special rhetorical and sociological principles. I will point out some of these principles when we encounter them.

Following the example of Suetonius, imperial biographers usually broke the emperor’s life up into mostly synchronic rubrics, including everything from physiognomy and familial relations through to spectacles, building projects, and legislation. Cassius Dio and Herodian combine this approach with Tacitus’s annalistic year-by-year structure, whereas the *Historia Augusta* fully adopts the model of Suetonius. In this chapter, I will discuss the works of Dio and Herodian and the *Vita Heliogabali* separately, structuring my account by the many recurring themes and *topoi* they have in common, such as favouritism, cruelty, and sexual excesses. These themes can also be found in the works of other ancient and Byzantine writers, who devote considerably less attention to Elagabalus. Therefore, their works will be grouped together in one section and discussed thematically. This should make any patterns and developments in the manifold image of the priest-emperor obvious.

Finally, the images of Elagabalus in ancient and Byzantine literature will be briefly compared with the conclusions drawn from the first three chapters. Which aspects of the emperor’s person and reign are exaggerated, distorted or ignored in the historical and biographical records, and what does this signify?

**Elagabalus in the work of Cassius Dio**

Cassius Dio was not in Rome during the reign of Elagabalus and had to base his description of this period on the accounts of others, yet he showed no hesitation in condemning the young monarch in the most negative terms. Elagabalus emerges from his work as ‘one by whom nothing was done that was not evil and base’, and his reign as a period in which ‘everything got turned upside down’. It is clear that Dio did not strive to give an accurate portrayal of the emperor, but modeled him after the stereotypical bad ruler who can be found in many Greek and Roman works.

For Dio, the paradigm of a good ruler was Augustus. In a key passage of his work, he describes how the young Octavian, after having defeated his political opponents, plans to lay down his arms and restore the Republic. When he discusses this intention with his loyal friends Agrippa and Maecenas, Agrippa approves, but Maecenas urges him to stay in power
as sole ruler. He gives a long speech on how an emperor should rule, undoubtedly voicing Dio’s own opinion. Many elements in this speech confirm the standard of good rule set by previous authors. Octavian is urged to work together with the senate and the knights, avoiding extravagance and squandering. He should refrain from treating his subjects as slaves, but should set an example to them, distinguishing himself by means of *virtus* (manly virtue) rather than by marks of honour. He should be like a father to his subjects, always using his power to their benefit; successful in war, but striving for peace. Moreover, he should honour the gods and – an interesting addition – abhor and punish those who want to replace old divinities with new ones, since that was not only an insult to the gods, but would also cause conspiracies and intrigues. This last remark is probably anachronistic, inspired by the flourishing of foreign religions in Rome during Dio’s own lifetime.

In the funeral speech which Dio has Tiberius make after Augustus’s death, it is made clear that the deceased emperor has managed to live up to the high standard which had been set by Maecenas. In addition, he is also praised for keeping the soldiers in check – another reference to problems from the Severan age, when the power of the military was rising and could not always be kept under control. This is a notable difference between Augustus and Elagabalus, who gained the purple because of a revolting legion and was therefore the product of that same military disobedience which Dio despised. Not coincidentally, the historian keeps stressing that Elagabalus is an illegitimate ruler, calling him the ‘False Antoninus’ and brandishing him as a usurper. The boy is characterized as an upstart by the remark that Macrinus had not even known his name before the revolt. Even more telling is the passage in which Dio describes how many men of low birth made a bid for the throne after Elagabalus had come to power, ‘being encouraged thereto by the fact that many men had entered upon the supreme rule contrary to expectation and to merit’. This comment possibly refers to both Macrinus and Elagabalus.

It is no surprise that Cassius Dio portrays the young emperor from Emesa as completely incapable of governing the empire. He mentions that Elagabalus was merely ‘a boy’ when he was elevated to the throne. From the start, it is obvious that the upstart ruler shows little respect for Roman traditions, granting himself imperial titles before they have been voted; entering his name in the list as consul instead of Macrinus, without having held any office previously; and not wearing the triumphal dress on the Day of Vows. Curiously, Dio regards these as only minor crimes, being of simple character and mostly harmless. Presumably, that lenient verdict does not concern the emperor’s religious reforms, which are discussed immediately afterwards.
Following Dio’s account, few things demonstrate Elagabalus’s inability to govern better than his favouritism. The most blatant example of this is the career of Comazon, who was richly rewarded for his support in the revolt against Macrinus. Dio paints a very black picture of this man, accusing him of having a bad character and ‘a name derived from mimes and buffoonery’. He counts it as ‘one of the greatest violations of precedent’ that Comazon, who, with the exception of his command of an army camp, had never been tried in any position of responsibility, became prefect of the praetorian guard, received the rank of consul and later even held that post. On top of that, the man also became city prefect no less than three times, ‘for just as a mask used to be carried into the theatres to occupy the stage during the intervals in the acting, when it was left vacant by the comic actors, so Comazon was put in the vacant place of the men who had been city prefects in his day’. This is the second time that Dio associates Comazon with ‘buffoonery’ and the stage, which underlines the bad opinion the historian had of him. After all, actors had a very low status in Rome and were often perceived, in the words of Catherine Edwards, as ‘paradigms of the low’.6

Other favourites likewise acquired great power under Elagabalus, some, according to Dio, ‘because they had joined in his uprising and others because they committed adultery with him’.7 Several examples of this are given. Apart from the notorious Comazon, there is Zoticus, who was appointed cubicularius before the emperor had even seen him, for no other reason than that he had a beautiful body and a large member. Elagabalus allegedly also had the intention of granting his foster father, Gannys, the position of Caesar. Later, he wanted to bestow this extraordinary honour on his ‘husband’, Hierocles, who had been a charioteer and slave before he gained the emperor’s love.

The impression arises that Dio’s portrayal of Elagabalus’s cronies is a parallel to his criticism of Elagabalus himself. As the latter had gained the throne ‘contrary to expectation and to merit’, so did men like Comazon, Zoticus, Gannys and Hierocles aspire to, and in many cases attain, positions for which they were both unworthy and unfit. By putting his trust in them, Elagabalus ignored an important guideline; namely, that a good ruler should surround himself with capable, trustworthy friends. In the words of Dio Chrysostom:

For no one, of and by himself, is sufficient for a single one of even his own needs; and the more and greater the responsibilities of a king are, the greater is the number of co-workers that he needs, and the greater the loyalty required of them, since he is forced to entrust his greatest and most important interests to others or else to abandon them. (…) Consequently, it is not a safe policy for him to share his power carelessly with the first men he meets; but the stronger he makes his friends, the stronger he becomes himself.8
Augustus, as Cassius Dio makes clear, paid close attention to the advice of his loyal friends and councilors, Maecenas and Agrippa. Many of his successors, however, did not live up to this good example. Some, like the young Commodus, were simply led astray by bad companions; others, like Caracalla, dismissed or killed their tutors and servants for no apparent reason, thus displaying the characteristics of a tyrant. Dio puts Elagabalus in the second category, recounting how the boy kills his foster father Gannys with his own hand, just because the latter tried to force him into living a temperate and prudent life. Clearly, the young emperor did not tolerate anyone who questioned his character and behaviour – which, according to Dio, left much to be desired. Instead, he kept away from virtuous men, preferring the company of those whose standards were as low and despicable as his own.

To what extent does Dio depict Elagabalus as a cruel character? The historian accuses the emperor of drifting into ‘the most murderous practices’ and gives a detailed account of Elagabalus’s ‘actions that were tainted with bloodshed’, listing all the eminent men who were executed during his reign. However, many of these killings seem to have happened for political reasons, as Dio himself indicates: the victims are often former supporters of Macrinus, or men the emperor deemed untrustworthy for other reasons. Sometimes, Dio suggests, the official reason which was given for an execution was only a pretext; for example, in the case of Pomponius Bassus, who was condemned to death on the charge of being displeased at what the emperor was doing, ‘the real motive lay in the fact that he had a wife both fair to look upon and of noble rank’. Yet even in this case, Elagabalus does not display cruelty for cruelty’s sake: he stands to gain something, namely Pomponius’s wife, and is prepared to kill to get her. Although such calculated ruthlessness is a valid point of criticism in itself, it is still a far cry from the sadism of Tacitus’s Nero, who used condemned Christians as torches to illuminate his garden at night, or that of Suetonius’s Domitian, who tortured his victims by sticking a glowing poker in their anus and chopping off their hands. Even Dio’s offhand remark that Elagabalus secretly sacrificed boys to his god seems more a slur against the cult of Elagabal than an accusation of cruelty.

It seems that Cassius Dio is actually more concerned about something else: Elagabalus’s disrespect for the senate. The relation between the emperor and this traditional body of government was a delicate one. While the emperor was truly in charge, he needed the support of the senate to lend legitimacy to his reign, whereas the prestige of the senate depended on the extent to which the emperor sought its consent in making important decisions. Elagabalus, as Dio indicates, totally failed to appreciate this careful balance. Instead of confiding
in the senatorial body – of whom Dio, of course, was himself also a member – he executed senators at will, often not even leaving them the dignity of a trial by their peers. Dio records that, among others, the governors of Syria, Arabia and Cyprus were put to death by Elagabalus, without any statements about them being communicated to the senate. Silius Messalla and Pomponius Bassus were condemned by their peers, but only after Elagabalus had written the senate a letter, saying: ‘The proof of their plots I have not sent you, because it would be useless to read them, as the men are already dead.’ The emperor, in short, ruled as a tyrant, abandoning even the illusion of sharing his power with anyone but his favourites.

Not all of Dio’s criticism was directed against Elagabalus’s illegitimacy and ruthless, but incapable way of ruling. Working in light of the convention that a good ruler ought to set an example to his subjects, he also heavily criticized the flaws in Elagabalus’s character. Many of these flaws are linked to the emperor’s Syrian descent. The Greeks and Romans considered Syrians to be foreigners, who were formally, but not culturally part of the Roman Empire. Like the Persians, another typically ‘Oriental’ people, they were associated with extravagance, luxury and a servile mentality, making them more fit to be slaves than warriors. Syrians were no real men, it was thought, but immoral, sexually perverted effeminates who drenched themselves in perfume and were surrounded by eunuchs. Although they possessed a certain cunning and craftiness, which made them notoriously untrustworthy, they were also very superstitious. At best, it could be said that Syrians were generally supposed to be intelligent, but apart from that, they did not have much going for them.

Dio may not have credited Elagabalus with much intelligence and craftiness, but apart from that, the young monarch is portrayed as a typical ‘Syrian’ – or, rather, as a typical ‘Oriental’, for in the Greco-Roman mindset, most ‘Oriental’ people shared the same basic traits. The emperor is explicitly modeled after Sardanapalus, a mythical Assyrian king by whose name Dio regularly calls him. Sardanapalus, who was credited with having brought about the fall of Assyria, represented all the Greco-Roman stereotypes about ‘Oriental’ monarchs. His story was first told in detail in Ctesias’s Persica, which is now lost, except for some fragments preserved in the works of other authors, mainly Diodorus Siculus. The mythical monarch also appears in Athenaeus’s Deipnosophistae, where he is portrayed as one of the eastern ‘female-kings’, combining the ‘manly’ position of king with behaviour and characteristics normally attributed to women.

The similarities between Sardanapalus, as presented by these two authors, and Dio’s portrayal of Elagabalus are immediately obvious. Concerning the effeminacy of the Assyrian monarch, Diodorus Siculus remarks that:
(...) he lived the life of a woman, and spending his days in the company of his concubines and spinning purple garments and working the softest of wool, he had assumed the feminine garb and so covered his face and indeed his entire body with whitening cosmetics and the other unguents used by courtesans, that he rendered it more delicate than that of any luxury-loving woman. He also took care to make even his voice to be like a woman’s, and at his carousals not only to indulge regularly in those drinks and viands which could offer the greatest pleasure, but also to pursue the delights of love with men as well as with women; for he practiced sexual indulgence of both kinds without restraint, showing not the least concern for the disgrace attending such conduct.  

Athenaeus paints a similar picture, but gives a few details which do not occur in the account of Diodorus: for instance, he mentions that Sardanapalus painted his eyelids and blackened his eyebrows. He also adds that the king had his beard shaved close.

Cassius Dio combines details from both these accounts – or, perhaps more likely, took them from Ctesias’s original text – in his description of Elagabalus:

When trying someone in court he really had more or less the appearance of a man, but everywhere else he showed affectations in his actions and in the quality of his voice. For instance, he used to dance, not only in the orchestra, but also, in a way, even while walking, performing sacrifices, receiving salutations, or delivering a speech. (...) He worked with wool, sometimes wore a hair-net, and painted his eyes, daubing them with white lead and alkanet. Once, indeed, he shaved his chin and held a festival to mark the event; but after that he had the hairs plucked out, so as to look more like a woman.

Except for the dancing, which the Roman elite frowned upon, Elagabalus’s behaviour would have been perfectly acceptable for a Roman woman. In fact, working with wool was considered a very appropriate activity for women from the higher classes, to such an extent that it was part of the image of the ideal matrona. Men, however, were not supposed to engage in such domestic chores – least of all kings and emperors, who had kingdoms and empires to rule. Sardanapalus, as Diodorus and Athenaeus make clear, completely neglected this duty, preferring to spend his time with his concubines. According to Diodorus, the king ‘was not seen by any man residing outside the palace’. The only time he could be said to take the role of a man was in making love to women.

Interestingly, Cassius Dio’s Elagabalus does not completely neglect his duties as ruler. Dio grudgingly admits that the emperor had ‘more or less the appearance of a man’ when he was trying someone in court. However, it seems clear that Elagabalus is not being true to his
effeminate, ‘Oriental’ nature here, but is putting up an act, born out of necessity. Although he ‘appears both as man and as woman’, Dio definitely puts more emphasis on his female side, remarking that ‘he (...) could not even be a man’. Thus Elagabalus, when presented with the well endowed Zoticus, bends his neck in a feminine pose, treats the man to a melting gaze and says: ‘Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady.’ He also commits himself to a ‘husband’, the brute charioteer Hierocles, who beats him up on a regular basis, so that he walks around with black eyes. The reversal of the social order seems complete: the emperor of Rome, consenting to physical abuse by a former slave!¹⁸

Yet Dio finds even more explicit ways to hammer home his point. After he has mentioned that Elagabalus circumcized himself, an act which he links to the cult of Elagabal, he remarks that the emperor ‘had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether’, adding: ‘but that desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy’. In two inserted passages, it is stated that the young monarch wanted a vagina implanted in his body by means of an incision.¹⁹ These inserted passages are from the works of the Byzantine authors Cedrenus and Zonaras, who have summarized Dio’s account of the period 218-222 AD. The vagina anecdote may be their addition, but that does not seem likely. For one thing, Cedrenus explicitly states that he got the information from Dio. Moreover, Cedrenus and Zonaras hardly add any other new elements to their summaries of Elagabalus’s reign, except for some factual remarks concerning ecclesiastical matters. They certainly do not come up with any other anecdotes as colourful and outrageous as the story about Elagabalus’s desire for a vagina. Considering this, and taking into account how well the story fits with other remarks that Dio makes about the emperor’s effeminacy (like the plan to castrate himself), it seems safe to assume he is the original author of the vagina anecdote, as well.

More parallels can be drawn between Sardanapalus and Dio’s Elagabalus with regard to their excessive love for luxury and pleasure, although the similarities are less striking in this area. Diodorus Siculus records that Sardanapalus went to ‘such an excess (...) of luxury and the most shameless sensual pleasure’ that he composed a funeral dirge for himself, in which he urged readers to enjoy the pleasures of life while they still could.²⁰ The first lines went as follows:

Knowing full well that thou wert mortal born,
Thy heart lift up, take thy delight in feasts;
When dead no pleasure more is thine.²¹
In addition, both Diodorus and Athenaeus mention the story of Sardanapalus’s extraordinary death. According to them, the king decided to take his own life when his kingdom was under attack and he feared to fall into enemy hands. Therefore, he made an enormous pyre in the palace and burned himself with his concubines (and, depending on the author, either his queen or his eunuchs) and all his riches. ‘And so’, Athenaeus remarks, ‘Sardanapalus, after he had enjoyed pleasure in strange ways, died as nobly as he could.’

Surprisingly, Cassius Dio only hints at Elagabalus’s love for luxury. He mentions that a gold statue of the emperor was erected, ‘distinguished by its great and varied adornment’. The emperor’s marriage to Julia Paula is celebrated with a huge banquet for the soldiers and the populace, and games at which an unprecedented number of fifty-one tigers are killed. Also, there is Gannys’s demand that Elagabalus should live more moderately, which seems an indication that the boy was living in the lap of luxury.

Much more is made of Elagabalus’s licentious behaviour. Dio explicitly connects this flaw to Sardanapalus, remarking:

But this Sardanapalus (...) lived most licentiously himself from first to last. He married many women, and had intercourse with even more without any legal sanction; yet it was not that he had any need of them himself, but simply that he wanted to get accomplices in his wantonness by associating with them indiscriminately.

The emperor is said to have ‘used his body both for doing and allowing many strange things, which no one could endure to hear of’. According to Dio, he visited the taverns of Rome by night, just as Nero had done – but where Nero had gone around in disguise to molest people, Elagabalus played the prostitute. Later, he set up his own brothel in the palace and stood in the doorway naked, awaiting customers. In this, he outdid even Caligula, who had only forced aristocratic women and children to prostitute themselves in the palace, but had not taken up the role of harlot himself. In other things, too, Elagabalus surrendered to pleasures unworthy of an emperor: like several ‘bad’ emperors before him, he took up chariot driving (although not in public spaces), and even begged gold coins from the senators, knights and imperial freedmen who were watching him.

Finally, there is the aspect of the emperor’s religion, the cult of Elagabal. As has already been remarked, Dio expressed his dislike of foreign cults when he has Maecenas warn Octavian about them. According to the councilor, who is speaking on behalf of Dio himself, such cults would insult the gods and cause conspiracies and intrigues. That warning could
certainly be applied to Elagabalus, who exalted his foreign god in ‘very strange ways’, chant-
ing ‘barbaric chants’ to him, circumcizing himself and, for some unclear reason, ‘actually shutting up alive in the god’s temple a lion, a monkey, and a snake, and throwing human geni-
tals among them’.26 Dio obviously had no wish to understand the cult of Elagabal, but chose to present it as bizarre and obscene. He dubs the marriage of the sun god to the Punic goddess Urania an ‘extreme absurdity’, exclaiming ‘as if the god had any need of marriage and chil-
dren!’27 In his description of Elagabalus’s priestly garb, he underlines that the cult of Elagabal is an ‘Oriental’ religion:

Furthermore, he was frequently seen even in public clad in the barbaric dress which the Syr-
ian priests use, and this had as much to do as anything with his receiving the nickname of
‘The Assyrian’.28

However, not much attention is devoted to the ‘Oriental’ character of Elagabalus’s religion. Michael Sommer has pointed out that Dio mainly uses the cult of Elagabal to demonstrate that the emperor had no respect for traditional Roman state religion, or even for his own body (re-
fering to his circumcized member and desire for castration). These characteristics define him as a morally objectionable person, suffering from what Sommer calls ‘Caesarenwahn’; the madness which also plagued emperors like Caligula and Vitellius.29 Elagabalus possessed this ‘Caesarenwahn’ in great quantities, even going so far as to defile a Vestal Virgin. Nero had done that as well, but had not dared to lay a finger on the high priestess, as Elagabalus did. ‘Thus he plumed himself over an act for which he ought to have been scourged in the Forum, thrown into prison, and then put to death’, Dio remarks, but Elagabalus goes even further: he divorces his newly wed wife, only to take her back later.30 In an equally shocking insult to Roman religion, the emperor dethrones Jupiter in favour of a foreign god, causing himself to be voted Elagabal’s priest. Clearly, Elagabalus’s impiety knew no boundaries. It is therefore no wonder that the gods arranged for a more suitable successor: Severus Alexander, whose rule was foreshadowed by the appearance of the spirit of Alexander the Great, appearing in Moesia Superior with hundreds of ghostly companions. Like the Persian king Darius, the False Antoninus in Rome would soon be vanquished.

In conclusion, Dio refused to take the reign of Elagabalus seriously, portraying the emperor as negatively as he could. The young priest from Emesa was presented as embodying everything Dio despised. Elagabalus had no right to the throne and came to power only by means of a military uprising. Even worse, he was not a proper Roman, but a foreigner; an
intruder who violated Roman traditions and had no respect for the senate, executing senators without trial and giving power to unworthy favourites – in short, ruling as a tyrant. His violation of traditional Roman state religion also fits this pattern. In his character and behaviour, Elagabalus showed traits which were deemed typical of an ‘Oriental’: effeminacy and licentiousness. All of these points support Dio’s opinion that the rule of Elagabalus was an affront to Roman dignity, a period of unprecedented madness in which ‘everything got turned upside down’. Only with the reign of Severus Alexander would the empire return to a normal state of affairs.

**Elagabalus in the work of Herodian**

Herodian makes much use of the work of Cassius Dio in his description of Elagabalus’s reign. Nevertheless, the inventive historian adds many details to the account of his predecessor – derived from memory, eye-witnesses, his imagination or a combination of the three – and paints a picture of Elagabalus which, although often reminiscent of Dio’s portrayal, is distinctly his own.

Like Dio, Herodian had a model emperor to whom all others were compared. His *optimus princeps* is not the historically distant Augustus, but a ruler from a more recent past: Marcus Aurelius. At the start of the first book, Marcus is dying and summons his advisers and relatives, asking them to keep his adolescent son and successor Commodus on the straight and narrow path of virtue. According to Herodian, the old emperor himself had set the perfect example of good rule, cultivating every sort of virtue. He had been merciful, fair and accessible to his subjects, and had displayed courage, moderation and capability in the fields of politics and warfare. Moreover, he possessed a great love for ancient literature and lived according to his philosophical ideals; that is, in sober and dignified fashion. Of course, Commodus fails to live up to his father’s high standards. He gives in to flattery and temptation and ends up as a wicked tyrant, thereby introducing one of the main themes in Herodian’s work; namely, that the realm suffers when children or young men are put ‘in control of absolute, unchecked power without parental authority’.

If Herodian is to be believed, Elagabalus did not fare any better than Commodus. The boy from Emesa is bluntly characterized as ‘an emperor who was a disgrace’. However, unlike Dio, Herodian does not connect this harsh verdict to accusations of illegitimacy. He mentions that Julia Maesa told the soldiers stationed near Emesa that her grandson was the natural son of Caracalla, adding that it was assumed that Elagabalus had a different father. The historian does not confirm or reject Maesa’s story, commenting that it ‘may or may not
have been true’ and leaving it at that.34 Throughout his account, he refers to Elagabalus as Antoninus. Evidently, Herodian was less concerned with matters of legitimacy than Dio. This can probably be explained by the fact that he was not a member of the senatorial elite. Therefore, he had less interest in the preservation of the traditional system of imperial succession, which provided the senate with much of its prestige.

In keeping with his distrust of child emperors, Herodian portrays Elagabalus as an irresponsible brat who abuses the power entrusted to him. After the boy’s armies had defeated Macrinus, it is remarked that ‘the immediate business in the East was dealt with by his grandmother and his circle of advisers because he was young and without administrative experience or education’.35 The emperor shows more interest in idle pursuits than in governing the empire, wasting his time with chariot driving, dancing, and, of course, the worship of his strange god, which I will discuss in more detail later. He is ‘in most matters a thoughtless, silly young man’ who can be easily manipulated by those who are older and more politically shrewd, such as his able grandmother.36 However, there are times when even she is powerless to change his mind, for instance when Elagabalus decides to enter Rome in his ‘Oriental’ priestly garb.

Ultimately, the young monarch becomes more and more willful and recalcitrant, making it impossible for Julia Maesa to keep him under control. Herodian remarks that Elagabalus ‘was driven to such extremes of lunacy that he took men from the stage and the public theatres and put them in charge of most important imperial business’. In all likelihood, this remark was inspired by Dio’s comments on Comazon, who attained several high offices and is twice associated with the stage, although Dio never claims the man had formerly been an actor. If so, it is a neat example of the way in which Herodian twists the account of his predecessor to enhance the story, rendering historical accuracy subordinate to his desire to entertain and/or shock his audience. To stress this point even further, he adds that Elagabalus ‘assigned positions of the highest responsibility in the empire to charioteers and comedy actors and mimes’, and appointed slaves and freedmen as governors of consular provinces. Thus, ‘all that was once held in respect was reduced (…) to a state of dishonour and frenzied madness’.37

To an ever lesser extent than Dio, Herodian presents Elagabalus as a cruel ruler. He records that the emperor ‘executed very many distinguished and wealthy men, after information was laid that they disapproved and made fun of his way of life’.38 The inspiration for this comment is probably Dio’s list of executed senators, although Dio does not present the victims as making fun of Elagabalus’s way of life. Once again, the accusation seems to be ruthlessness rather than sadism. There are only a few other passages in Herodian’s account which
could hint at the emperor’s cruelty. The most intriguing of these is the scene in which Elagabalus throws presents to the crowd from the tops of high towers, leading to a scramble in which many are trampled to death or impaled on the spears of soldiers. However, Herodian does not state that this unfortunate result was intentional. Since there is no indication that the event should be regarded as anything but a regrettable accident, it seems plausible to interpret it as an example of Elagabalus’s carelessness, rather than of his sadism.

Much more is made of the depiction of Elagabalus as an ‘Oriental’, that is, again, as an effeminate, luxury-loving individual who singled himself out as a foreigner through his appearance, behaviour and religion. Unlike Dio, Herodian does not compare the emperor to the Assyrian king Sardanapalus. Nevertheless, he, too, records that the young ruler went out ‘with painted eyes and rouge on his cheeks, spoiling his natural good looks by using disgusting make-up’. The soldiers of the praetorian guard were ‘revolted at the sight of the emperor with his face made up more elaborately than a modest woman would have done, and effeminately dressed up in golden necklaces and soft clothes, dancing for everyone to see in this state’. Curiously, Elagabalus’s effeminacy is not demonstrated by means of his sexual exploits, except for the vague remark that some of his slaves and freedmen, ‘who perhaps excelled in some foul activity’, rose to great heights.39 Hierocles, Zoticus or other male lovers are completely absent from Herodian’s tale. In fact, the subject of sex is hardly touched at all, and so the topos of Elagabalus’s licentious way of living is not made clear to the reader. This is typical of Herodian, who shows the same hesitance to discuss sexual matters in his accounts of the reigns of other emperors.

The typical ‘Oriental’ love for luxury does feature in Herodian’s account. It mainly manifests itself in Elagabalus’s elaborate style of dress, which is explicitly characterized as un-Roman and is associated with the ‘East’:

He wore the most expensive types of clothes, woven of purple and gold, and adorned himself with necklaces and bangles. On his head he wore a crown in the shape of a tiara glittering with gold and precious stones. The effect was something between the sacred garb of the Phoenicians and the luxurious apparel of the Medes. Any Roman or Greek dress he loathed because, he claimed, it was made out of wool, which is a cheap material. Only seric silk was good enough for him.40

The point is stressed even further when Herodian records that Elagabalus refused to wear a Roman toga on entering the capital. Instead, the emperor chose to send a portrait of himself ahead, so the citizens could get used to his outlandish appearance.
Not only Elagabalus is portrayed as foreign and exotic – so is the cult of Elagabal. Herodian goes into much more detail about the emperor’s religion than Cassius Dio, providing – among other things – the information that the god is worshipped in the form of a black stone. He takes pains to describe the rites performed in honour of Elagabal as ‘ecstatic and orgiastic’. Although he does not go so far as to accuse Elagabalus of making human sacrifices, there is clearly nothing Roman about his description of the daily slaughtering of cattle for the sun god, which was accompanied by music, dancing women, spices and wine. To underline how much of an intrusion this sort of extravagant ritual was to traditional Roman religion, Herodian mentions that all senators and equestrians had to be present at these sacrifices, and that military prefects and important officials actually had to partake in it, wearing ‘Phoenician style’ clothing. The same ‘Oriental’ splendour can be found in the passage describing the black stone’s ritual journey from one temple to the other, seated in a chariot adorned with gold, led by the emperor himself and preceded by a lavish procession of divine images, precious temple dedications, imperial standards and costly heirlooms. On top of that, ‘also the cavalry and all the army joined in’. It seems that Herodian is deliberately parodying a military triumph here, suggesting that, under Elagabalus, this was the closest thing to an actual triumph Rome was likely to see.

To counterbalance Elagabalus’s ‘Oriental’ extravagance, the author introduces the virtuous figure of Severus Alexander, whom the emperor is persuaded to adopt as Caesar. Not surprisingly, Elagabalus immediately wants his cousin to be trained in ‘his own pursuits of leaping and dancing’, wishing for him ‘to share his priesthood by wearing the same dress and following the same practices’. According to Herodian, both Elagabalus and Alexander had been dedicated to the sun god when the family was still living in Emesa. However, now that Alexander has been made Caesar, his mother keeps him far away from the worship of Elagabal. Instead, she summons teachers to give her son a ‘Latin and Greek education’, which includes wrestling and ‘manly exercises’. Once again, Elagabalus acts as the enemy of all things Roman: he becomes absolutely furious and chases the teachers away, executing some of them and sending others into exile. The charge is that they are ‘not allowing him [i.e. Alexander] to dance or go into a frenzy, but teaching him moderation and manly arts’. The differences between Greco-Roman and ‘Oriental’ culture – at least, the differences which Herodian perceived – could hardly be made more obvious.

Sommer has argued that the portrayal of Elagabalus’s religious practices in the work of Herodian has a completely different function than their description in the work of Dio. Whereas Dio uses the cult of Elagabal as a means to depict the emperor as a tyrant, who disre-
pects Roman laws and traditions, Herodian uses it to underline the emperor’s ‘Oriental’ nature. However, it should be noted that the ‘Oriental’ nature of the cult of Elagabal is touched upon by Dio as well, just as Herodian does not completely ignore the violation of traditional Roman state religion.

Sommer continues to argue that Dio’s Elagabalus is basically portrayed as yet another mad tyrant, whereas Herodian’s version is emphatically presented as a non-Roman, a foreigner. This interpretation fails to take into account that Dio, time and time again, compares Elagabalus to Sardanapalus – a distinctively ‘Oriental’ monarch who displayed distinctively ‘Oriental’ traits, such as effeminacy and licentiousness. The polarization between Greco-Roman and ‘Oriental’ is therefore certainly present in the work of Dio, although it is arguably more explicit and important in the work of Herodian. The latter, Sommer argues, may have been a Greek living in Syria, in which case he probably distinguished himself from the native population by defining Syrians as non-Greeks. Moreover, being much younger than Dio, Herodian experienced the frequent wars between the Roman Empire and the neighbouring empire of the Persians, which had been re-established in 226 AD. Sommer thinks that the ancient historian associated Elagabalus with these enemies from the East, turning the emperor into an image of ‘the other’. This argument seems far-fetched, considering that Herodian never explicitly associates Elagabalus with the Persians in his work. An additional explanation for the historian’s depiction of the emperor as an ‘Oriental’ may be the fondness for ethnic stereotypes he displays throughout his work.

There are more differences between Dio’s and Herodian’s images of Elagabalus. As we have seen, Herodian does not show much interest in the legitimacy of the emperor’s claim, nor in the many executions of senators. He hardly touches upon the licentious behaviour of the young monarch. However, he agrees with Dio that Elagabalus was completely unfit to rule, appointing the most despicable favourites to govern the empire and reducing everything that was once respected ‘to a state of dishonour and frenzied madness’. According to Herodian, Elagabalus was not just an effeminate ‘Oriental’, but also that which he possibly despised even more: a child emperor who could not be kept under control.

Elagabalus in the *Vita Heliogabali*

As can be deduced from the text of the *Vita Heliogabali*, the anonymous author used both Cassius Dio and Herodian as sources for this life. However, he seems even less interested in giving an accurate account of the events of the period 218-222 AD than his predecessors, instead preferring to paint a picture of Elagabalus which defies all credibility. Scheithauer has
distinguished three types of emperors in the *Historia Augusta*: the *princeps bonus*, who possesses just about every virtue imaginable, with Marcus Aurelius as the prime example; the *princeps malus*, whose vices are diametrically opposed to the virtues of the *princeps bonus*; and the *princes medius*, who combines traits of both types.\(^{46}\)

Elagabalus is without doubt a *princeps malus*, ‘a man so detestable for his life, his character, and his utter depravity that the senate expunged from the records even his name’.\(^{47}\) In the introduction to the *Vita*, he is placed in the tradition of Caligula, Nero and Vitellius. Elagabalus is presented as the worst emperor the Roman Empire has ever experienced: his vices will never be surpassed. Indeed, the *Historia Augusta* remarks that ‘worse than Commodus is Elagabalus alone’, condemning the emperor as ‘that filthiest of all creatures, both two-footed and four-footed’, who ‘in baseness and debauchery outdid a Nero, a Vitellius, a Commodus’.\(^{48}\) To counterweight this evil tyrant, Severus Alexander is portrayed as a virtuous and benign prince, whose admirable character and deeds are constantly compared with the vices of his notorious predecessor.

One of the recurring themes in the *Vita Heliogabali* is that Elagabalus styled himself Antoninus without a valid claim to that name. The author remarks that the emperor ‘had merely assumed the name Antoninus’, although he confirms the story that Symiamira – as he calls Julia Soaemias – had had an affair with Caracalla. The main point of this criticism does not seem to be that Elagabalus had no right to the throne, but that he dragged the noble name of the Antonines through the mud. The author of the *Vita Heliogabali* remarks that Elagabalus was ‘a disgrace to the name of Antoninus, on which he had laid violent hands’, commenting that ‘his life was as false as his claim’.\(^{49}\) Interestingly, the author also claims that Severus Alexander was more closely related to Caracalla than his predecessor. However, Alexander was too modest to accept the name Antoninus when it was offered to him by the senate. Being virtuous and being an Antonine are thus connected to each other; Elagabalus, of course, was neither one, nor the other.

Like all bad emperors, Elagabalus showed no respect for the senate. He acted as a tyrant, calling the senators his ‘slaves in togas’, and making fun of them whenever he could. No mention is made of executions, but the *topos* of favouritism, already present in the works of Cassius Dio and Herodian, receives much attention. According to the *Vita Heliogabali*, the emperor ‘made his freedmen governors and legates, consuls and generals, and (...) brought disgrace on all offices of distinction by the appointment of base-born profligates’.\(^{50}\) Very interesting is the following passage:
As prefect of the guard he appointed a dancer who had been on the stage at Rome, as prefect of the watch a chariot-driver named Cordius, and as prefect of the grain-supply a barber named Claudius, and to the other posts of distinction he advanced men whose sole recommendation was the enormous size of their privates.  

Here, the author of the *Vita Heliogabali* takes several elements from the account of Cassius Dio, and embellishes them. The prefect of the guard, who is presented as an actor and a dancer, must be based on Comazon, whom Dio associates with the stage. A chariot-driver named Gordius is also mentioned by the third-century historian, although it is never mentioned that he became prefect of the watch. The barber Claudius seems to be an invention of the *Vita Heliogabali*, but the remark that Elagabalus advanced men because they had large members has clearly been inspired by Dio’s anecdote about Zoticus, who gained the emperor’s favour for exactly that reason. However, the *Historia Augusta* also adds a new element to the platitudes concerning the bad appointment policy of Elagabalus: the young monarch is accused of selling positions of power for money.

Most of the time, the *Vita’s* Elagabalus does not seem interested in governing the empire at all. He prefers to spend his days with frivolous and morally dubious activities such as singing, dancing, and playing all kinds of instruments. Some of his pastimes are even worse, such as his habit of harnessing naked women to a wheel-barrow and driving them about, while usually being naked himself. Typical is his fondness for practical jokes. Allegedly, Elagabalus loved to frighten his dinner guests by unleashing lions and leopards among them during the end of a meal. Since his guests were not aware that the beasts were tame, their sudden appearance caused an amusing panic.

Many of the emperor’s jokes in the *Historia Augusta* have a malicious streak, and some of them are downright cruel. For instance, Elagabalus is said to have loosed snakes when the populace was assembled for games. Unlike the lions and leopards he unleashed on his dinner guests, these animals were not tame and injured many people with their fangs. Another passage describes Elagabalus binding his parasites to a water-wheel and turning it around, so that they plunge into the water. However, as is the case with the accounts of Dio and Herodian, the *topos* of cruelty remains underdeveloped – as if it were only added for the sake of completeness. The most noticeable exception is the story that the emperor sacrificed children. This accusation probably originates from a similar remark in the work of Cassius Dio. But where the latter primarily seems to be attacking the cult of Elagabal, the author of the *Vita Heliogabali* puts the emphasis on the cruelty of the act (and thus of the emperor): he adds
that for his sacrifices, Elagabalus collected beautiful, noble-born children whose parents were both alive, ‘intending, I suppose, that the sorrow, if suffered by two parents, should be all the greater’.52

It was not just his favouritism and frivolous nature which made Elagabalus unfit to rule – he was also dependent on others and unable to act on his own. Allegedly, the emperor did no public business without the consent of his mother, whom he even invited to come into the senate-chamber to witness the drawing up of a senate decree. As if this violation of precedent was not bad enough, he also established a ‘women’s senate’ on the Quirinal Hill, presided over by Soaemias, to make decisions about matters concerning protocol and etiquette. Apart from demonstrating Elagabalus’s contempt for the traditional senate, this anecdote also serves to make another, perhaps even more important, point: namely, the notion that Rome was actually ruled by women when the boy from Emesa sat on the throne. According to the Vita Heliogabali, Elagabalus had to take his grandmother with him whenever he went to the praetorian camp or the senate house, ‘in order that through her prestige he might get greater respect – for by himself he got none’.53 To a Roman, a more blatant form of character assassination would hardly be imaginable: any man who needed a woman’s help to gain respect, could not be much of a man at all.

Indeed, the reversal of gender roles in the Vita Heliogabali is also attested in the portrayal of Elagabalus himself. While women were entering the ‘manly’ domain of government, the emperor displayed many characteristics of a woman. For instance:

In the public baths he always bathed with the women, and he even treated them himself with a depilatory ointment, which he applied also to his own beard, and shameful though it be to say it, in the same place where the women were treated and at the same hour.54

In addition, Elagabalus dressed up as Venus and wished to wear a jeweled diadem, ‘in order that his beauty might be increased and his face look more like a woman’s’. He also marries another man, although here his spouse is not Hierocles, as in Dio’s account, but Zoticus. Interestingly, the Vita Heliogabali does not make an explicit connection between the emperor’s effeminacy and his Syrian background. The only remark which could perhaps be interpreted as such is the comment that Elagabalus ‘infibulated himself, and did all that the galli are wont to do’.55 The galli were the eunuch-priests of Magna Mater, a deity who had originated in Asia Minor. They were known for their ecstatic singing and dancing, self-chastisement and ritual castration.
Eunuchs, who were associated with the ‘East’, are mentioned several times in the *Vita Alexandri*, and always in connection to Elagabalus. Allegedly, Alexander removed many eunuchs from important positions, in which they had been installed by his predecessor. The new ruler did not trust these members of the ‘third sex’, as he regarded them, for they wanted to let emperors live ‘in the manner of foreign nations or as the kings of the Persians’. Indeed, it is remarked that Elagabalus ‘had begun to receive adoration in the manner of the king of the Persians’.\(^56\) He even dressed as such, bedecking his garments and footwear with jewels. Much of the *Vita Heliogabali* is filled with stories concerning Elagabalus’s unrivalled love for luxury and pleasure: the young ruler had urinals made of murra or onyx, held a naval spectacle in canals filled with wine, and made plans for a ‘luxurious suicide’, which included the building of a ‘suicide tower’:

And he also built a very high tower from which to throw himself down, constructed of boards gilded and jewelled in his own presence, for even his death, he declared, should be costly and marked by luxury, in order that it might be said that no one had ever died in this fashion.\(^57\)

Especially noteworthy are the emperor’s extravagant banquets, at which such exotic dishes as camels’ heels, peacock and nightingale tongues, the heads of parrots, pheasants and peacocks, mullet beards and flamingo brains were served, while even the dogs were fed on goose-livers. Once again, however, this unworthy behaviour is not explicitly connected to Elagabalus’s Syrian background. In fact, the emperor himself declares that his role models were the famous cook Apicius and the ‘bad’ emperors Otho and Vitellius. In addition, there is the anecdote that, ‘in a banqueting-room with a reversible ceiling he once overwhelmed his parasites with violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death, being unable to crawl out to the top’. The story is clearly inspired by a passage in Suetonius, who, while describing the extravagant decadence of Nero’s Golden House, remarks that the ceilings were reversible, so that flowers could be sprinkled through them.\(^58\) Elagabalus is merely outdoing Nero with his avalanche of flowers – there is no indication that there is anything ‘Oriental’ about his cruel joke.

Likewise, the emperor’s licentious behaviour is set in a distinctly Roman tradition. Elagabalus allegedly ‘went beyond the perversities of the debauchees of old, and was well acquainted with all the arrangements of Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero’.\(^59\) The author of the *Vita Heliogabali* may very well have been inspired by Cassius Dio and Herodian to portray the emperor as a licentious, luxury-loving individual, but he seems to have taken these negative
characteristics out of their ‘Oriental’ context. Curiously, it is only in the *Vita Alexandri* that Elagabalus’s ‘Oriental’ background is stressed. This happens not only by associating him with eunuchs and remarking that he wanted to be honoured in the manner of a Persian king, but also by the repeated remark that his cousin Severus Alexander was ashamed of his Syrian descent and claimed to have Roman ancestors. The fact that he turned out to be a good ruler, although he was a Syrian, is presented as a paradox which needs to be explained. Of course, this reflects on Elagabalus, too: apparently, he *did* act as one would have expected of a Syrian. The question remains, though, why this point is made explicit only in the *Vita Alexandri*, and not in the *Vita Heliogabali*.

Only twice in the *Vita Heliogabali* are the emperor’s religious acts presented as ‘Oriental’. Firstly, it is remarked that Elagabalus adopted the cult of the goddess Magna Mater. Allegedly, he ‘would toss his head to and fro among the castrated devotees of the goddess’ and infibulated himself, causing the author to compare him to the *galli*. Secondly, Elagabalus is also said to have celebrated the rite of the Semitic goddess Salambo, which he did ‘with all the wailing and the frenzy of the Syrian cult’.\(^6\)

Nowhere in the *Vita Heliogabali* – nor in the *Vita Alexandri*, for that matter – is the worship of Elagabal characterized as a stereotypically ‘Oriental’ religion, or is it even mentioned that the god is of local Syrian origin. Nevertheless, it is made very clear that the cult poses a threat to traditional Roman state religion. As soon as he arrives in Rome, Elagabalus builds a temple for Elagabal on the Palatine, ‘to which he desired to transfer the emblem of the Great Mother, the fire of Vesta, the Palladium, the shields of the Salii, and all that the Romans held sacred, purposing that no god might be worshipped at Rome save only Elagabal’. The religions of the Jews, Samaritans and Christians should also be brought together in the Palatine temple, ‘in order that the priesthood of Elagabal might include every form of worship’.\(^6\)

The *Vita Heliogabali* ascribes monotheistic tendencies to Elagabalus, but the image is not consistent. At one point, it is stated that the emperor wants to abolish ‘not only the religious ceremonies of the Romans but also those of the whole world, his one wish being that the god Elagabal should be worshipped everywhere’.\(^6\) At another point, he is said to regard all other gods as servants of Elagabal. That does not stop him, however, from worshipping Magna Mater and Salambo, or from dressing up as Venus. Moreover, Elagabalus never seems to succeed in destroying other religions. Allegedly, he ‘desired’ to extinguish the everlasting fire of the Vestals and ‘attempted’ to take away their holy shrine, but it is never confirmed that he actually achieved the first goal, while a trick of the Senior Vestal definitely prevented him from achieving the second. In fact, the *Vita* makes it very clear that ‘the cult did not suf-
fer at his hands’. However, this remark is proved false by an earlier passage, which states that the emperor ‘violated the chastity of a Vestal Virgin, and by removing the holy shrines (...) profaned the sacred rites of the Roman nation’.63

Theo Optendrenk speculates that the author of the *Vita Heliogabali* is reluctant to state that Elagabalus managed to lay his hands on the symbols of traditional Roman state religion because he is a pagan himself: by admitting that those symbols have been subject to harm, he would admit that his religion has been damaged.64 However, as we have seen, the author does admit that damage has been done, which means that he is once more inconsistent. The juxtaposition probably derives from the fact that, on the one hand, he wants to imply that Elagabalus did not manage to weaken the pagan cults of Rome; while on the other hand, he wants to portray the emperor as an intolerant monotheist who does not want any god but his own worshipped in the empire.

It has been speculated that the *Vita Heliogabali* is meant as a pagan attack against the intolerance of Christianity, which had become the dominant religion by the end of the fourth century AD. Supposedly, Elagabalus is likened to Constantine, the first Christian emperor. In constrast, the *Vita Alexandri* presents its subject as a paragon of religious tolerance, claiming that Alexander had busts of Orpheus, Abraham, Apollonius of Tyana and Jesus Christ in his personal lararium (shrine), and that he ‘respected the privileges of the Jews and allowed the Christians to exist unmolested’.65 Supposedly, his exemplary behaviour mirrors that of Julian, the last pagan emperor.

Samuel Zinsli has shown that many parallels can be drawn between the *Vita Heliogabali* and Eusebius’s biography of Constantine.66 Although it is not certain that the author of the *Historia Augusta* had read Eusebius’s work, Zinsli’s analysis makes it seem likely that he knew it in some form. *De vita Constantini* expresses the thought that God punishes wicked rulers with miserable lives and gruesome deaths, while virtuous rulers are rewarded with happy lives and enviable deaths. A similar philosophy – but with the Roman people instead of God as the rewarding or punishing instance – occurs in the introduction of the *Vita Heliogabali*, where the author states that good rulers reign long and die of natural causes, while bad rulers are murdered and dragged through the streets. However, some of the given examples are so obviously false – Nero, who ruled for fourteen years, is named among the bad emperors, while Titus, who barely ruled for two, is named among the good ones – that they cannot be taken seriously. Therefore, Zinsli argues that we should distinguish between the actual, anonymous author of the *Vita* and his alter ego, Aelius Lampridius, who contradicts himself on several occasions and is deliberately presented as untrustworthy. By using Lampridius as
his mouthpiece, the author of the *Vita* manages to criticize Constantine without ever explicitly saying anything negative about him.

While it seems plausible that the *Vita Heliogabali* implicitly likens Elagabalus to Constantine, especially where the matter of religion is concerned, we should not consider it to be primarily a religious pamphlet. Although the emperor is called by the name of his god, indicating that the author closely links the two, the cult of Elagabal does not play a big role in the *Vita*. In fact, the subject of religious intolerance seems to be only of minor importance, with the bulk of the text describing the emperor’s licentiousness and extravagance. Elagabalus’s alleged desire to destroy all other gods is but one of the many faults of this tyrant, who is presented as the pinnacle – or, more appropriately, the nadir – of a long tradition of ‘bad’ emperors. ‘Worse than Commodus is Elagabalus alone’, the author states. ‘Nor emperor he, nor Antoninus, nor citizen, nor senator, nor man of noble blood, nor Roman’.67 The eldest self-proclaimed son of Caracalla had nothing going for him – he was the ultimate monster.

**Elagabalus in the works of other authors**

Although many Greco-Roman and Byzantine authors have discussed the reign of Elagabalus, Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* provide us with the most detailed and complete images of the controversial emperor. Apart from John of Antioch, Xiphilinus and Zonaras, whose accounts of the period 218-222 AD mostly consist of detailed summaries of Herodian and Cassius Dio respectively, no other author devotes more than a few short paragraphs to the reign of the unfortunate ruler. However, that very brevity makes them interesting, since it requires them to be highly selective in choosing which elements to include in their account, and which to discard. What, according to these authors, were the defining characteristics of Elagabalus? And how do the images of the young monarch develop in late antiquity and the Byzantine period?

One of the elements many authors touch upon is the issue of the emperor’s legitimacy. The fourth century-poet Ausonius, who wrote a poem in which he addressed many emperors, insulted Elagabalus by sneering at him:

Dost thou also defile the sanctuary of the Augustan palace,
Falsely bearing the names of the Antonines –
Thou, than whom no fouler or more filthy monster
Ever filled the imperial throne of Rome?68
The historian Aurelius Victor, who finished his work around 360 AD, paints a picture of Elagabalus which is just as unfavourable, but does not question his right to the throne. Although he used Cassius Dio as a source, and could therefore have been aware of the doubts surrounding Elagabalus’s parentage, he unambiguously states that Caracalla was the emperor’s father. The same goes for the anonymous author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, who wrote about forty years later and may have been familiar with Dio’s work as well. However, the *Epitome* puts Elagabalus’s parentage in a negative light by remarking that he was ‘Caracalla’s son from the secret violation of his niece Soemea’.69

Other authors are more careful when addressing the topic. The historian Eutropius, who wrote his Roman history some years after Aurelius Victor, states that Elagabalus ‘was considered to be the son of Antoninus Caracalla’.70 Zosimus, whose account about the decline of the empire was written between 498 and 518 AD, merely records that the emperor was related to Caracalla’s mother. The Byzantine chronicler Cedrenus, writing after 1057 AD, repeats Dio’s slur ‘False Antoninus’. So do Dio’s epitomizers, the Byzantine monks Xiphilinus and Zonaras, writing in the eleventh and twelfth century AD respectively. The accusation of illegitimacy thus kept haunting Elagabalus as long as the Roman empire existed in some form, although not all authors took a stance on it and some even gave credit to the story that he had been sired by Caracalla.

Most authors do not discuss Elagabalus’s favouritism or lack of interest in affairs of government. The seventh-century chronicler John of Antioch, whose account of the period 218-222 AD relies heavily on Herodian, mentions that the emperor appointed actors, slaves and freedmen in important positions, made a dancer military prefect and put a charioteer in charge of the cavalry. Xiphilinus mentions favouritism in general and the career of Comazon in particular, also adding that Elagabalus planned to make his husband *Caesar*. That last story can also be found in the work of Zonaras, who derived his information at least partially from Xiphilinus.

Elagabalus’s alleged cruelty also receives little attention outside the works of Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. John of Antioch makes the passing remark that the emperor killed many distinguished men. Syncellus, who wrote in the ninth century AD, claims that he was ‘exceedingly murderous’, but does not provide any anecdotes to illustrate his point.71 Xiphilinus and Zonaras give several examples which derive from Dio, such as the many executions (only Xiphilinus provides names) and the child sacrifices to Elagabal. Neither of them mentions the story that Elagabalus stabbed his own foster father.
Better attested is the topos of effeminacy. In the fourth century AD, the author of the *Epitome* records that Elagabalus ‘turned himself into a woman and commanded to be called by the (female) name Bassiana instead of Bassianus’. Quite possibly, this remark has been inspired by Dio, who states that the emperor wanted to be addressed as ‘Lady’ rather than ‘Lord’ by Zoticus. John of Antioch repeats Herodian’s comment that the emperor spoiled his natural good looks by using make-up. Syncellus calls him ‘a thoroughly effeminate man, who had changed to the ways of a woman, adorning himself with and affecting the trappings of females’. Cedrenus remarks that Elagabalus was so effeminate that he married Hierocles. Even worse, he allegedly wanted to be made hermaphrodite by means of an incision – a story which also occurs in Zonaras, but, for unknown reasons, has been omitted by the usually more exhaustive Xiphilinus. Many other examples of the emperor’s effeminacy, like the comments that he was termed ‘mistress’ and ‘queen’, worked with wool, wore a hairnet and painted his eyes, are recorded by both Byzantine monks.

Extravagance and love of luxury do not feature in most of the images of Elagabalus. Xiphilinus and Zonaras use the name Sardanapalus for the emperor, but we can only speculate how well informed they were about the implications of this name. Apart from that, the only thing which could qualify as an illustration of Elagabalus’s luxuriant lifestyle is Xiphilinus’s description of the lavish festivities surrounding the marriage between Elagabalus and Julia Paula. On the other hand, few authors fail to address the emperor’s alleged licentiousness. If Philostratus’s love letter no. 19 can indeed be read as an attack on the recently deceased emperor, as has been argued in the third chapter, it is telling that Elagabalus is likened to a male prostitute. As we have seen, Ausonius condemns him as the foulest and filthiest emperor of them all in his poem, while Aurelius Victor remarks that ‘not even the wicked or frivolous women were more indecent’. Eutropius comments that the emperor ‘defiled himself with all vices’, his life being ‘very shameless and depraved’. A few decades later, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* makes a similar comment, stating that Elagabalus ‘defiled himself with all vices’ after he had arrived in Rome.

The topos stayed popular after the fourth century AD. The Christian author Orosius, who wrote his *Historiae adversus paganos* in 417–418 AD, says that the priest from Emesa ‘left no memory of himself except one notorious for its defilements, crimes, and every obscenity’. Zosimus informs us that Elagabalus ‘led a revolting and ignominious life’, in which licentiousness prevailed. John of Antioch follows Herodian in steering clear of the topic, even omitting the latter’s allusion that the emperor appointed slaves and freedmen ‘who perhaps excelled in some foul activity’. However, Cedrenus describes Elagabalus as a licentious
individual, a trait he connects to the young man’s marriage with Hierocles. Xiphilinus and Zonaras, following Dio, mention the emperor’s sexual escapades several times. Both of them give extensive accounts of how Elagabalus prostituted himself and seduced Zoticus, apparently considering these stories important enough to record in detail.

Since most of the authors who are discussed here devote only a few lines or short paragraphs to the reign of Elagabalus, it is hard to discern to what extent they want to portray the emperor as a stereotypical ‘Oriental’, and to what extent they are merely copying stories about his effeminacy and licentiousness from Dio and Herodian, without any ethnic implications. To Byzantine authors, at least, classical Greco-Roman notions of the ‘East’ and its inhabitants were probably meaningless.

The same is true for the topic of religion. Many authors mention that Elagabalus was a priest of Elagabal – or Heliogabalus, as both god and emperor are often called – but they do not always take care to specify that Elagabal was a Syrian god. Even if they do, however, that information may be neutral in their context. Other authors may not explicitly mention Elagabal and Syria at all, but may still imply that the cult of the sun god possessed typical ‘Oriental’ traits. This could well be the case with Philostratus’s letter no. 19, in which he seems to be mocking Elagabalus by comparing him to a boy prostitute. The sophist tells his fictional beloved that his house is ‘a citadel of beauty’, that those who enter are priests, that those who are garlanded are sacred envoys, and that their silver is tribute money. Moreover, he remarks that ‘the sun is a public god’. It is possible to read this letter as a slur against the cult of Elagabal, associating it with prostitution and licentiousness – both aspects which Greeks and Romans often deemed typical of ‘Oriental’ cults.

Other authors are less subtle. In the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, which claims that Elagabal is a Phoenician sun god, it is mentioned that Elagabalus cut off his genitals and sacrificed to Magna Mater. The anonymous author is also one of the few to refer to the emperor’s pairing with a Vestal Virgin, although he claims they did not actually marry. Aurelius Victor, writing several decades earlier, specifies that Elagabal is a Syrian god, but does not seem to attach any verdict to this information, nor does he present the emperor as displaying typically ‘Oriental’ religious behaviour. Eutropius and Orosius merely mention the god by name, opting not to inform us about his origins or the characteristics of his cult. Zosimus does not refer to Elagabal at all, but states that the emperor spent his time with magicians and swindlers.

John of Antioch follows Herodian in stressing the foreign character of the cult, for instance remarking that Elagabalus dressed in ‘barbarian’ clothes as a priest and was accompanied by flutes and drums. However, he leaves out many important details, such as the mar-
riage to Aquilia Severa and the black stone. In fact, it is never specified that Elagabalus worships Elagabal: at one point, it is mentioned that the emperor had ‘his gods’ – plural – transported to a different temple. Probably, John, as a Christian, was just not interested in the ‘clash’ between different pagan gods and considered it unnecessary to specify which deity – or deities – Elagabalus worshipped. Syncellus goes even further, omitting both the cult of Elagabal and the emperor’s priesthood from his short account. Cedrenus, on the other hand, does mention the Emesene deity, remarking that Elagabalus was circumcized and refused to eat pork. Xiphilinus and Zonaras give the same negative details as Dio, such as the emperor’s child sacrifices and his violation of Aquilia Severa (unnamed by Zonaras). They also mention that Elagabalus acquired the nickname ‘the Assyrian’ by wearing the same clothes as Syrian priests.

On the whole, the authors discussed in this paragraph add little to the images of Elagabalus as he is presented by Cassius Dio and Herodian. No developments can be discerned in the portrayal of the controversial monarch. Since most accounts are very brief, emphasis is put on a few elements: the emperor’s effeminacy, his licentiousness and his devotion to Elagabal, whose cult is on occasion depicted as typically ‘Oriental’. All of the images of the priest-emperor are very negative. When the emperor Julian (361-363 AD) describes a banquet for which the gods and all the emperors had been invited, he recounts that Elagabalus was expelled as soon as he tried to enter. In the company of his more dignified colleagues, there was no room for the ‘pretty boy from Emesa’.

There is, however, one noticeable exception to all these negative accounts. This is provided by Theodoros Skoutariotes, a thirteenth-century Byzantine chronicler whose work covers history from the birth of Adam to 1261 AD. His Elagabalus is completely unrecognizable, for the emperor is described as ‘eloquent, an excellent man, fierce in battle, gentle, wise, swift, conciliating all and justifiably loved by all’. This characterization of Elagabalus has obviously not been inspired by any previously discussed account of the ruler’s character and deeds. Theodoros proceeds to record that the emperor cancelled the debts owed to the treasury, promulgated a law that senators would no longer have to pay for the war expenses of the state – thereby abolishing constitutions dating back to Julius Caesar – and burnt all the relevant documents on the (non-existing) Forum of Hadrian.

The story is reminiscent of an earlier passage, in which Theodoros records that Antoninus Pius likewise changed a law which Caesar had introduced to extract money from senators, and burnt the relevant documents. This earlier passage appears to be based on a very similar passage in the Chronographia of the sixth-century chronicler Malalas, who was one of
Theodoros’s sources.\textsuperscript{82} It seems likely that the same is true for the passage in which Elagabalus cancels senatorial debts, especially since the style and vocabulary Theodoros uses here are reminiscent of Malalas. Unfortunately, the only surviving manuscript of the \textit{Chronographia} has a lacuna between the reigns of Caracalla and Valerian, so no definite conclusions can be drawn.

One wonders whether Malalas (or Theodoros), for whom both Elagabalus and Antoninus Pius must have been figures from a distant past, had somehow mixed them up because they were both called Antoninus. This would explain the remarkably flattering tone of the characterization quoted above. If so, we have at least one case in which Elagabalus’s claim to the name of the Antonines caused him to be associated with this prestigious dynasty. Unfortunately for him, though, other authors did not make the same mistake. Many centuries would pass before the priest-emperor was once again cast in a positive light.

\textbf{Facts and fiction}

Although we have been dealing with the construction of images in this chapter, these images did not originate in a historical vacuum. A determining factor for the hostile tone of the literary accounts was Elagabalus’s \textit{damnatio memoriae}, which left little room to portray the emperor positively. Living memory also provided limitations. Contemporary authors like Dio and Herodian wrote their histories for an audience that, for the most part, had lived through the years 218-222 AD and may even have experienced Elagabalus and his actions at first hand. These historians could not completely disregard the facts if they wanted to keep their credibility. The author of the \textit{Historia Augusta}, for whom Elagabalus was a long-dead and probably mostly forgotten ruler, was not bound by such restraints. This is clearly reflected by the many fantastical stories which we find in the \textit{Vita Heliogabali}.

Several elements in the literary representations of Elagabalus can, to a greater or lesser extent, be linked to concrete events and developments during the priest-emperor’s reign. The accusations of illegitimacy are evidently a response to Elagabalus’s claim to be the son of Caracalla. As has been pointed out, the way in which the young ruler came to power – inciting Roman soldiers to revolt against their current emperor – robbed the senate of even the pretence that it had any say in the imperial succession. This made Elagabalus’s relation with the senatorial elite problematical from the start.

Stories about the emperor’s disrespect for the senate, the execution of senators and the promotion of unworthy favourites to important positions can probably also be connected to Elagabalus’s military rise to power. It seems likely that the new administration deemed it nec-
essary to remove some of the politicians and commanders who had opposed Elagabalus in his uprising or might form a threat to his weak position, while rewarding men who had played a key role in the revolt against Macrinus. Although the promoted favourites were probably no mimes and charioteers, they did include the likes of P. Valerius Comazon and …atus, who under Elagabalus rose far above their initial rank and status.

The heavy emphasis on the ‘Oriental’ character of the emperor and the cult of Elagabal in the literary sources also has some factual basis. Elagabalus’s parents were native Syrians and the boy himself acted as priest of a local Syrian cult. Moreover, coins and inscriptions from the period 218-222 AD clearly show that the priesthood and cult of Elagabal were not presented in a traditional Roman way, but retained many strikingly Syrian features, such as the emperor’s foreign dress as sacerdos amplissimus, the name Elagabal and the god’s depiction as a black stone. Elagabalus’s violations of Roman state religion, such as the elevation of Elagabal to the head of the Roman pantheon and his marriage to a Vestal Virgin, would only have strengthened the impression that he was a foreigner who knew little about Roman culture and traditions, and cared even less.

Finally, there are the accusations of effeminacy, luxury and licentiousness, which play a large role in the ancient accounts of Elagabalus. As has been pointed out, these were standard topoi to characterize ‘bad’ emperors. Since they were also applied to ‘Oriental’ people, Elagabalus seems to have become the victim of two condemning discourses, which merged in the images ancient authors constructed of him. We can only speculate about a possible core of truth. In general, sexual excesses and displays of personal wealth are mostly restricted to the private sphere. Therefore, accusations of misconduct in these matters are easy to make and hard to disprove. In all likelihood, many, if not most of the stories about Elagabalus’s effeminate, luxurious and licentious behaviour have sprouted from the imaginations of ancient authors, or are based on the gossip and jokes of contemporaries. More than any facts, though, they have defined the reputation of the emperor. Real or imaginary, Elagabalus’s excesses have never ceased to haunt his memory.

2 L. de Blois, ‘Emperor and empire in the works of Greek-speaking authors of the third century AD’, *ANRW* II 34.4 (1998) 3391-3443, at 3394.

3 Cassius Dio LXXIX, 29.2; LXXX, 7.2.

4 Cassius Dio LXXX, 7.2-3.

5 Cassius Dio LXXIX, 40.3: παιδαρίου.


7 Cassius Dio LXXX, 15.3.

8 Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* III, 87, 89.

9 Cassius Dio LXXX, 3.3: μη ταυρονόμητα; 8.1.

10 Cassius Dio LXXX, 5.4.

11 Cassius Dio LXXX, 5.2.


15 Cassius Dio LXXX, 14.3-4.


17 Diodorus Siculus II, 23.1. It was a commonplace in Greco-Roman literature that sexual indulgence sapped a man of his strength and made him like a woman, unable to take part in public life (Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 86).

18 Cassius Dio LXXX, 14.3: ὃτι ἐν τῷ δικάξειν τινὰ ἄνδρα ποιεῖν ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ. LXXX, 5.5; 9.1; LXXX, 16.4.

19 Cassius Dio LXXX, 11.1; LXXX, 16.7; p. 471.

20 Diodorus Siculus II, 23.3.

21 Diodorus Siculus II, 23.3.

22 Atheneaeus XII, 529d.

23 Cassius Dio LXXX, 12.2: πολλά καὶ ποικίλῳ κόσμῳ διαπρέπουν.


25 Cassius Dio LXXX, 13.2. As Edwards notes, it is an oft-recurring paradox in Roman literature that effeminate men are supposed to be sexually passive, taking the ‘female’ role, but at the same time have a great, ‘manly’ urge for sex (The Politics of Immorality, 81-84).

26 Cassius Dio LXXX, 11.1; 11.

27 Cassius Dio LXXX, 12.1: τὸ γελοιότατον (…) καθάπερ καὶ γάμου παιδίν τοῦ δειμένῳ.

28 Cassius Dio LXXX, 11.2.


30 Cassius Dio LXXX, 9.4.

31 Cassius Dio LXXX, 7.2.

32 Herodian I, 3.1.

33 Herodian V, 8.8: ἀσχημονούντα βασιλέα.

34 Herodian V, 3.9-10.

35 Herodian V, 5.1.

36 Herodian V, 7.1.

37 Herodian V, 7.6; V, 7.7; V, 7.8: πάντων δὲ οὗτος τῶν πάλαι δοκοῦντοι σεμνῶν ἐς ύβριν καὶ παροινίαν ἐκβεβληθεμένουν.

38 Herodian V, 6.1.

39 Herodian V, 6.10; V, 7.8; V, 7.7.

40 Herodian V, 5.3-4. It is interesting to note that, while Dio’s Elagabalus works with wool (LXXX, 14.4), Herodian’s version looks down on wool as a cheap material.

41 Herodian V, 7.2: βασιλείας καὶ ὀργίων.

42 Herodian V, 6.6-8.
43 Herodian V, 7,4; V, 7,5; V, 7,5-6.
45 Herodian V, 7,8.
46 A. Scheithauer, Kaiserbild und literarisches Programm. Untersuchungen zur Tendenz der Historia Augusta (Frankfurt am Main 1987) 36-42.
47 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 18,1.
48 HA, Vita Sev. Alex. 9,4.
49 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 1,5; 2,1; 9,2: nomen (...) Antonini pollueret, in quod invaserat; 33,8: tam vita falsumuisse quam nomine.
50 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 20,1; 11,1.
52 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 8,1-2.
53 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 12,3.
54 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 31,7.
55 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 5,4-5; 23,5; 7,2.
56 HA, Vita Sev. Alex. 23,7: tertium genus hominum; 66,3; 18,3.
58 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 21,5; Suetonius, Vita Neronis 31,2.
61 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 3,4-5.
62 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 6,7.
63 HA, Vita Ant. Heliog. 6,6-8.
64 Optendrenk, Die Religionspolitik, 16-17.
65 HA, Vita Sev. Alex. 29,2; 12,4.
67 HA, Vita Sev. Alex. 7,4.
68 Ausonius, De XII Caesaribus 24,97-100.
69 Epitome de Caesaribus 23,2-3.
70 Eutropius VIII, 22.
72 Epitome de Caesaribus 23,10-11: in se convertens muliebri nomine Bassianam se pro Bassiano iussuerat appellari.
74 Philostratus, Epistulae, no. 19.
75 Aurelius Victor 23,2: impurius ne improbae quidem aut petulantes mulieres fuere ; Eutropius VIII, 22: probis se omnibus contaminavit, impudicissime et obscenissime ; Epitome de Caesaribus 23,8.
76 Orosius, Historiae adversus paganos VII, 18,5; Zosimus I, 11,1; John of Antioch 138; Herodian V, 7,7.
77 Philostratus, Epistulae, no. 19.
78 John of Antioch 136, 138; John of Antioch 137: τούς τε θεοὺς αὐτοῦ.
79 Julian, Caesares 313A: ἐκ τῆς Ἐμέσης παιδάριοι.
81 Theodoros Skoutariotes 31,18-22.
82 Malalas, Chronographia XI, 281. See 158 n. 25. For the original Greek, see: L.A. Dindorf (ed.), Ioannis Malalae Chronographia (Bonn 1831) 281,11-17.