

# **‘Adorned by fancy and blackened by prejudice’**

## **The ‘vices and follies’ of Elagabalus in modern historical research**

**By M. Icks, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen**

Edward Gibbon, who published his monumental work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is often considered to be the first modern historian. By making extensive use of primary sources, Gibbon set out to explain the downfall of the Roman empire. Although his rather moralizing account does not hold up to the standards of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century methodology, the ambitious scope of Gibbon’s work, his extraordinary accuracy, his remarkable insights and not least his brilliant, ironic style have made him a key figure in the study of Roman history, whose influence is still felt by historians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the study of Roman history can be divided into two parts: before and after the publication of the *Decline and Fall*.

In Gibbon’s view, the decline of the Roman empire was first and foremost a matter of character. Ultimately, the Romans did not fail because of factors beyond their reach, such as epidemics and barbarian invasions, but because they had lost the virtues of their republican ancestors. Their ‘immoderate greatness’ fell victim to foreign vices, undermining military discipline and leading to the inevitable ruin of the empire. This process was only hastened by the spread of Christianity, which buried ‘the last remains of military spirit (...) in the cloister.’ According to Gibbon, the real question was not *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, but why its fall took so long in the first place.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the death of Marcus Aurelius had the power and glory of Rome been in decline. The wise and benevolent rule of the five ‘good emperors’ had made way for misgovernment by depraved tyrants like Commodus, Caracalla and, of course, Elagabalus. The latter in particular was presented as iconic for the depths to which Rome had sunk. Gibbon hardly had a word to say in favour of the priest-emperor from Emesa, whom he described as ‘the Imperial fanatic’.<sup>2</sup> He did not hesitate to condemn the young monarch as the most depraved and incapable ruler ever to sit on a throne, commenting in his poetic prose:

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (ed. D. Womersley; London 2000) 435-437.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 7 volumes (ed. J.B. Bury; London 1896-1900) vol. I (1896) 145.

'It may seem probable the vices and follies of Elagabalus have been adorned by fancy and blackened by prejudice. Yet, confining ourselves to the public scenes displayed before the Roman people, and attested by grave and contemporary historians, their inexpressible infamy surpasses that of any other age or country.'<sup>3</sup>

As Gibbon himself admits, his views are largely based on the accounts of Cassius Dio and Herodian. Although he is to some extent aware of the biased nature of the works of these 'grave and contemporary historians', Gibbon nevertheless adopts many of the stereotypes and commonplaces they contain. He even gives credit to some of the fantastic stories in the *Historia Augusta*, a source infamous for its preposterous assertions.

Unfortunately, many modern historians have followed Gibbon's example, maintaining and strengthening the image of Elagabalus as a depraved, insane ruler who more than deserved the cruel and untimely death that fate had in store for him. Others have placed him in a less negative light, but have often been equally misguided in their assumptions. This paper seeks to address the different pictures which have been painted of the priest-emperor in studies of ancient history from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. In discussing the evolution of the emperor's image throughout this period, I hope to demonstrate that many stereotypes and commonplaces which can be found in Gibbon's work are still present in historical studies from the last decades. The prejudice of Cassius Dio, Herodian and the author of the *Historia Augusta* has gone a long way.

One of the most common elements in the discussion of Elagabalus's reign is the emphasis on the emperor's 'oriental' background. The roots of this notion lie in the ancient literary sources themselves. Both Cassius Dio and Herodian portray Elagabalus as a foreigner, set aside from the Romans because of his appearance, his character, his acts and his religion. In their eyes, Elagabalus possessed every trait of the stereotypical Syrian: they describe the young ruler as effeminate, subservient, perverted, superstitious and overtly attached to luxury.<sup>4</sup> Dio frequently refers to him as 'Sardanapalus', which was the name of a mythical Assyrian king who was notorious for his licentious, luxurious and effeminate lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> Herodian contrasts the emperor with his younger cousin and successor Alexander, who supposedly embodied 'true' Greco-

---

<sup>3</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* I, 147.

<sup>4</sup> For the Roman stereotype of the Syrian, see: B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton – Oxford 2004) 335–351.

<sup>5</sup> Cassius Dio LXXX, 11; 13,1; 15,1.

Roman ideals like a moderate constitution and a love for philosophy, wrestling and other ‘manly exercises’.<sup>6</sup>

When he discusses Elagabalus’s reign, Gibbon remarks in a footnote that ‘in this episode, the opposition between East and West was probably an important element.’<sup>7</sup> It certainly looms large in his account of the period 218-222 AD. On several occasions, Gibbon mentions such commonplaces as ‘the soft luxury of Asia’ and ‘the licence of an eastern monarch’.<sup>8</sup> He remarks that Elagabalus was ‘corrupted by his youth, his country, and his fortune’ and ‘abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury’, soon finding ‘disgust and satiety in the midst of his enjoyments.’<sup>9</sup> On his journey from Syria to Italy, the emperor supposedly ‘wasted many months in luxurious progress’, allowing his attention to be ‘diverted by the most trifling amusements.’<sup>10</sup> But these were hardly his only crimes. As a typical oriental, Elagabalus did not shrink from openly displaying his effeminate nature. Moreover, he favoured his male partners at the expense of the state:

‘The master of the Roman world affected to copy the dress and manners of the female sex, preferred the distaff to the sceptre, and dishonoured the principal dignities of the empire by distributing them among his numerous lovers; one of whom was publicly invested with the title and authority of the emperor’s, or, as he more properly styled himself, of the empress’s husband.’<sup>11</sup>

All in all, Gibbon paints a very colourful, but utterly condemnatory picture of Elagabalus’s four year-rule, making no effort to conceal his shock and disgust. One has no doubt that he heartily agrees with the ‘grave senators’, when he lets them sigh that, ‘after having long experienced the stern tyranny of their own countrymen, Rome was at length humbled beneath the effeminate luxury of Oriental despotism.’<sup>12</sup>

It is true that Elagabalus’s Syrian heritage was a significant factor during his short, but eventful reign. However, it is primarily of importance because of the emperor’s attempt to make the local cult of Elagabal part of Roman state religion. Many Romans undoubtedly regarded this as a grave insult to their religious traditions. As Cassius Dio remarks, he thought that Elagabalus’s offence consisted ‘not in his introducing a foreign god into Rome or in his exalting him in very strange ways, but in placing him even before Jupiter himself and causing

<sup>6</sup> Herodian V, 7,4-6.

<sup>7</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* I, 143 n. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 143, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, 144.

himself to be voted his high priest'.<sup>13</sup> Yet in other areas, the perceived clash between 'East' and 'West' is less plausible. For instance, why does Gibbon not consider Elagabalus to be a countryman of the Roman senators who complain about his rise to power? The emperor's parents may have been native Syrians, but both his father's and his mother's family were in the possession of Roman citizenship. It is even conceivable that Elagabalus was born and raised in Rome. Considering that Gibbon seems to regard the emperor's non-Italian predecessors, like Trajan, Hadrian and Septimius Severus, as 'Roman', it seems rather arbitrary of him to single Elagabalus out as a 'foreigner'. But even if we accepted this doubtful interpretation, there is no plausible reason to connect the emperor's supposed effeminacy, decadent lifestyle and love for luxury to his Syrian origins.

It seems evident that brandishing Elagabalus's alleged negative characteristics as 'oriental', as Gibbon does, has less to do with trying to find a valid model of interpretation for the events during the emperor's reign and more with applying western prejudice about what being 'oriental' means. In his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines the titular term as 'a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience'.<sup>14</sup> He continues:

'The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.'<sup>15</sup>

Said's 'orientalism' is present in many historical studies concerning Elagabalus. With the rise of anti-Semitism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many German scholars used the word 'orientalisch' as a synonym for 'Semitisch'. According to Johann Schiller, who published his *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit* in 1883, Elagabalus's 'oriental' upbringing made him 'geistig unbedeutend, ohne jede Würde, ein abgesagter Feind jeder ernsthaften Thätigkeit'.<sup>16</sup> As Gibbon had done more than a century earlier, Schiller condemned Elagabalus as the worst ruler in the history of the Roman empire. In his own words:

'Nie wurde das Kaisertum in gleicher Weise herabgewürdigt, wie unter diesem unreifen, tollen Knaben (...) Der Kaiser trat auch äußerlich am Hofe ganz als orientalischer Despot mit dem Diadem auf

---

<sup>13</sup> Cassius Dio LXXX, 11,1.

<sup>14</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978) 1.

<sup>15</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> J.H.K.F.H. Schiller, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Gotha 1883) 762.

und verlangte die Adoration. Was von Elagabals Thätigkeit überliefert wird, beschmutzt lediglich die Blätter der Geschichte, und seine Regierung ist ein wahrer Hexensabbat von Unzucht, Aus-schweifungen und Luxus.<sup>17</sup>

In his work *Abhandlungen zur römischen Religion*, published in 1909, Alfred von Domaszewski went one step further. He regarded not just the reign of Elagabalus, but the entire period of Severan rule as ‘die späte Rache der Semiten an der griechisch-römischen Kultur, deren Fesseln sie durch Jahrhunderte stumm getragen hatte’.<sup>18</sup> In describing this supposed culture clash, he made it quite clear on whose side he stood. Like Gibbon and Schiller, Von Domaszewski identified himself with the ‘western’ values of Greece and Rome, which he saw corrupted by oriental influences. As he comments with a profound sense of drama: ‘Die Nacht der Barbarei ist es denn auch, die seit Septimius Severus die griechisch-römische Welt bedeckt.’<sup>19</sup>

Studies post-1945 tend to be somewhat more hesitant and less condemning in their ‘orientalism’, but the trend definitely continues. In G. Ray Thompson’s 1972 dissertation *Elagabalus: Priest-Emperor of Rome*, which has never been published, the author assures us that ‘Syrian customs were not introduced into the Roman Empire solely by Elagabalus or by the members of his immediate family.’<sup>20</sup> Since Rome had undergone Syrian influences for three centuries before the time of the priest-emperor, Thompson explains, ‘there was no great new and unexpected influx of oriental Syrian customs and ideas into Rome as a result of the rise of Elagabalus to power.’<sup>21</sup> While this seems to downplay the notion of a culture clash, which had been so emphasised by previous writers, Thompson nevertheless describes both Elagabalus and his mother Julia Soaemias as persons in whom ‘there was, in fact, nothing Roman nor even occidental.’<sup>22</sup> He compares their religious zeal to ‘the old spirit of Canaan against which the prophets of Israel rose with great energy.’<sup>23</sup> Robert Turcan, whose book *Héliogabale et le sacre du soleil* appeared in 1985, merely remarks that Elagabalus’s reign gave his subjects ‘un goût de despotisme oriental’.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, it is important to note that the stereotyping of Elagabalus as ‘oriental’ is not limited to the field of historiography. This is evident from Helga von Heintze’s article

<sup>17</sup> Schiller, *Geschichte*, 762-763.

<sup>18</sup> A. von Domaszewski, *Abhandlungen zur römischen Religion* (Berlin, Leipzig 1909) 148.

<sup>19</sup> Von Domaszewski, *Abhandlungen*, 213.

<sup>20</sup> G.R. Thompson, *Elagabalus, Priest-Emperor of Rome* (University of Kansas 1972) 70.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, *Priest-Emperor*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 146.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> R. Turcan, *Héliogabale et le sacre du soleil* (Paris 1985) 86.

‘Studien zu den Porträts des 3. Jht. n. Chr., Caracalla, Geta, Elagabal und Severus Alexander’, published in the *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* of 1966-1967. While discussing the coinage of Elagabalus, Von Heintze remarks that the emperor is idealized on coins which have been minted in Rome, but looks quite different on coins from the east, where he is portrayed with ‘ein orientisch, viel persönlicheres, sehr charakteristisches Aussehen’.<sup>25</sup> She describes his expression as ‘knabenhaf-frech, scham- und hemmungslos, vieldeutig und undeutbar’. When she compares these coins with a bust in the Capitoline Museum which is often identified as a portrait of Elagabalus, she does not recognize these intriguing features, but instead describes the bust as ‘orientisch-dumpf, ja langweilig’, promptly identifying it as Severus Alexander.<sup>26</sup>

The same bust is identified as Elagabalus in the first volume of Klaus Fittschen and Paul Zanker’s *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und die andere kommunale Sammlungen der Stadt Rom*, published in 1985. Fittschen and Zanker remark that ‘die Wiedergabe ethnischer Merkmale’ of the bust emphasises the emperor’s origins and his devotion to the cult of Elagabal.<sup>27</sup> This probably refers to the portrait’s protruding lips, which can also be seen on later busts of Severus Alexander.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, the authors fail to explain what is particularly ‘ethnic’ about this feature. Their remark seems to be little more than another attempt to establish Elagabalus as a ‘foreigner’, underlining his innate ‘un-Romaness’.

Partially as a consequence of the emperor’s reputation as a perverted, decadent oriental, far too much credit has been given to many of the outrageous stories about Elagabalus in Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. While it is true that it is often impossible to disprove these stories, the explicitly negative tone in which these writers discuss the period 218-222 AD should make us very wary of accepting their colourful claims. Yet the lack of scholarly criticism which is often applied to their stories is astounding. Edward Gibbon does not go into much detail, but mentions the ‘confused multitude of women, of wines, and of dishes, and the studied variety of attitudes and sauces’ which were served to revive the emperor’s ‘languid

---

<sup>25</sup> H. von Heintze, ‘Studien zu den Porträts des 3. Jht. n. Chr., Caracalla, Geta, Elagabal und Severus Alexander’, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 73-74 (1966-1967) 190-231, at 217.

<sup>26</sup> Von Heintze, ‘Studien zu den Porträts des 3. Jht.’, 218.

<sup>27</sup> K. Fittschen, P. Zanker, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und die andere kommunale Sammlungen der Stadt Rom. Band I. Text. Kaiser- und Prinzenbildnisse* (Mainz 1985) no. 98 (Taf. 120-121) p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Fittschen, Zanker, *Katalog der römischen Porträts I*, 116.

appetites'.<sup>29</sup> In addition, he gives credit to the story that Elagabalus distributed important administrative posts among his lovers and publicly invested one of them with his own title and authority.<sup>30</sup>

For a long time, ancient historians were hesitant to describe the ‘vices and follies’ of Elagabalus in too much detail, lest it damage their own reputation. John Hay, who published *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus* in 1911, commented on the *Vita Heliogabali* in the *Historia Augusta*:

‘In the latter portion of the life there is a wealth of biographical detail, which, in plain English, means an account *in extenso* of what has been already described too luridly in the foregoing sections. It is written in Latin, and has never been translated into English, to the writer’s knowledge, nor has he any intention of undertaking the work at this present or any other time, as he has no desire to land himself, with the printers and publishers, in the dock at the Old Bailey, in an unenviable, if not an invidious and notorious position.’<sup>31</sup>

Hay stated that the common ‘caricature’ of Elagabalus was ‘absurd’ and ‘purely grotesque’, complaining that the world would rather ‘gaze on a mask that allures’ than to make a sincere effort to understand him.<sup>32</sup> Although this sentiment seems like a step in the right direction, even a short glance at *The Amazing Emperor* makes clear that the author has not managed to put all prejudice aside. Especially with regard to the emperor’s sexuality, Hay seems to take many of the stories of the ancient authors at face value. Thus, he describes Elagabalus as ‘by nature abnormal’, but hastens to add: ‘as were almost all the Emperors of Old Rome.’<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, he defines the emperor as a ‘Psycho-sexual Hermaphrodite’, remarking that characters like him ‘have occasionally appeared, and are still known in history. They are almost curiosities of nature, and are rarely if ever responsible for their own instincts, neither are they cruel nor evil by nature.’<sup>34</sup> Instead of questioning the validity of the ancient anecdotes about Elagabalus, Hay seems more concerned with attacking their negative bias – replacing it with a positive reinterpretation which is just as arbitrary and lacking in evidence as the scorn put on the priest-emperor by many of his contemporary colleagues.

Although scholars have become more aware of the biased and untrustworthy nature of ancient literary sources in the last decades, several studies from the post World War II-period

<sup>29</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* I, 146.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> J.S. Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus* (London 1911) ix-x.

<sup>32</sup> Hay, *The Amazing Emperor*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 126-127.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 230, 234.

still repeat ancient stories about Elagabalus without considering their reliability. Thompson reflects that the Roman public may have felt revulsion at the sexual display of Elagabalus and his mother, but would not have been shocked. After all, as he comments: ‘Prostitution within the palace was certainly not an innovation of Elagabalus for it had been practiced by the imperial ladies from the beginning of the principate.’<sup>35</sup> Turcan goes even further in his credulity, remarking that the emperor appointed people in important functions because of the size of their sex organs, presided over ‘congrès de prostitution’ in drag, built a suicide tower, completely covered his dinner guests in a rain of flowers, or scared them to death by confronting them with tame lions, leopards and bears.<sup>36</sup> Especially amusing is Turcan’s remark that ‘de nos jours, Héliogabale aurait créé un ministère de la Prostitution.’<sup>37</sup>

Once again, this prejudiced thinking affects other areas of ancient scholarship, as well. A telling example can be found in Wolf-Rüdiger Megow's catalogue *Kameeën von Augustus bis Alexander Severus*, published in 1987. In this catalogue, Megow discusses a peculiar cameo which shows a naked man with an erection, standing in a chariot which is drawn by two women, naked except for their breasts. The man holds the reins in his one hand and a raised whip in the other. Since the scene is reminiscent of a passage in the *Vita Heliogabali*, where the anonymous author states that Elagabalus drove around in a chariot pulled by naked women, Megow identifies the man on the cameo as Elagabalus. Supposedly, this conclusion is confirmed by the cameo's legend ☈. Megow makes ☈ into ☈C, which could be translated as 'stranger'.<sup>38</sup> However, the only thing which is certain is that the cameo can be dated to the mid-Severan age on stylistic grounds. Not only is there no convincing reason to identify the depicted man as Elagabalus, we do not even have any reason to assume that he is a Roman emperor. Instead of using the highly dubious *Vita Heliogabali* to interpret the cameo, it seems more plausible to assume that this cameo – or others like it – have provided the inspiration for the story about Elagabalus and his chariot pulled by naked women in the first place.

A third common trend is to see Elagabalus as a precursor to Constantine, namely as an emperor who wanted to unify the empire by means of a monotheistic religion. ‘The triumph of the god of Emesa over all the religions of the earth, was the great object of his zeal and vanity’, writes Gibbon.<sup>39</sup> Von Domaszewski speaks of ‘die dem Monotheismus zustrebende

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Priest-Emperor*, 195.

<sup>36</sup> Turcan, *Héliogabale*, 174-175, 182-183, 189-190.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, 176.

<sup>38</sup> M.R. Megow, *Kameeën von Augustus bis Alexander Severus* (Berlin 1987) A164; Taf. 50,5.

<sup>39</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall I*, 145.

religiöse Entwicklung der Zeit', while Hay describes Elagabalus as an 'Eastern monotheist', striving to 'impress men with his vivid monotheism'.<sup>40</sup> However, Elagabalus clearly acknowledged the existence of more than one deity, as is shown by the divine marriages he arranged for the invincible sun god. Moreover, we do not know to what extent the emperor strove to make the cult of Elagabal into the universal religion of the empire. Although several cities seem to have adopted the worship of the Emesan sun god during his reign, this measure may well have been taken on their own initiative, in an attempt to please the emperor.<sup>41</sup> It is not enough to proof a universalizing religious policy from the centre.

Most likely, the alleged 'monotheism' of Elagabalus can be traced back to the *Historia Augusta*, which claims that the emperor either wanted to destroy all other religions, or regarded all other gods as the slaves of Elagabal.<sup>42</sup> The *Historia Augusta* was probably written by a pagan author at the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the state religion.<sup>43</sup> It could therefore be read as a criticism on the intolerance of monotheistic religions. In historical studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars approached the cult of Elagabal from a slightly different angle. Here, orientalism came into play again. There was a notion that the 'pure' religion of Greece and Rome became corrupted by oriental influences in the late second and third century, ultimately attributing to the fall of the empire. Their criticism was therefore not so much aimed at the alleged monotheistic character of Elagabalus's religion, but at the fact that it was the 'wrong' religion. According to Von Domaszewski, the cult of Elagabal was nothing more than a relic from a primitive past, 'ein Nachtgespenst einer versunkenen Urzeit'.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, several other authors regarded the religion of Emesa as the way forward, providing an attractive and more sophisticated alternative to traditional Greco-Roman religion. As Hay laments:

'Had Elagabalus lived; had the beauty and impressiveness of his Semitic ritual made its way; had time been given for men to grasp his idea of one vast, beneficent, divine power, into the empire of whose central authority men might escape from the thousand and one petty marauders of the spirit world, they might have been attracted to the worship of life and light instead of enmeshed by the se-

<sup>40</sup> Von Domaszewski, *Abhandlungen*, 205; Hay, *The Amazing Emperor*, 286, 281.

<sup>41</sup> A. Dupont-Sommer, L. Robert, *La déesse de Hiérapolis Castabala (Cilicie)* (Paris 1964) 79-82.

<sup>42</sup> *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Vita Antonini Heliogabali* 6,7; 7,4.

<sup>43</sup> R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1968) 73, 211, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Von Domaszewski, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiser* II (2nd edition; Leipzig 1914) 278.

ductive force of obscure and impossible dogmas, tempted by the bait of an elusive socialism and a problematical futurity.<sup>45</sup>

This obvious stab at Christianity betrays the author's personal agenda. Although he seems to regard all religions, including the cult of Elagabal, as the products of neuroticism, Hay clearly has more sympathy for the supposedly grand, daring lifestyle of Elagabalus than for the dogmatic Christian values of his own society, painting a picture of the priest-emperor as the icon of a happier age, when, as he tartly remarks, 'the knowledge and worship of Xiphilinus' God was, for all practical purposes, confined in Rome to washerwomen or to people of their mental calibre.'<sup>46</sup>

Gaston Halsberghe, who published *The Cult of Sol Invictus* in 1972, saw traces of a deep, philosophical theology in the worship of Elagabal, arguing that the cult could provide a sense of purpose to the lives of its participants.<sup>47</sup> In the same year, Thompson remarked that 'there is a certain degree of validity to the statement that the old Roman religion was finally shattered under Elagabalus, for his religion showed how empty and formulaic the Roman religion was'.<sup>48</sup> Thompson added that 'by assimilating aspects of many religions Elagabalus had prepared the way for the triumph of Christianity'.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, as has been rightfully pointed out by Turcan, nothing suggests that the cult of Elagabal had an initiation rite, a special agreement between the worshippers and the god, the promise of an afterlife, or any other such features.<sup>50</sup> The notion that the cult offered a more attractive and spiritually fulfilling alternative to traditional Greco-Roman religion therefore seems completely misplaced. Nor is it very likely, considering the negative reputation of Elagabalus, that the priest-emperor prepared the way for Christianity in the fourth century. Scholars who favour these opinions do not only vastly overestimate Elagabalus's importance as a third-century emperor; they also seem to suffer from the disadvantage of knowing how history has turned out. In the period 218-222 AD, the eventual triumph of Christianity was anything but certain – we cannot interpret every religious event as leading up to this supposedly inevitable conclusion.

---

<sup>45</sup> Hay, *The Amazing Emperor*, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 96.

<sup>47</sup> G.H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden 1972) 79-84.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, *Priest-Emperor*, 160-161.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Turcan, *Héliogabale*, 165.

Finally, two monographs about Elagabalus take a radically different approach from most other things which have been written about the priest-emperor. Instead of presenting him in a mostly negative light, they go out of their way to praise the controversial monarch. The first of these peculiar works is Hay's aforementioned book *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, published in 1911. Convinced that Elagabalus had been severely wronged by posterity, Hay sets out to salvage the emperor's reputation. In his book, Elagabalus becomes 'a prince for whose sovereignty the world was too small' and who was 'possessed of a genius for the aesthetic and the religious that his historians wished to decry'.<sup>51</sup> The author admits that his subject displayed 'a congenital twist towards the evil tendencies of his age', discreetly referring to Elagabalus's homosexual contacts, but adds that he also showed 'more than flashes' of a brave, honest and just character.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, Severus Alexander is described as 'stupid', 'namby-pamby', and 'a nincompoop of twelve', who lived his life 'as a vegetable'.<sup>53</sup> As an emperor, he naturally paled in comparison with his predecessor, in whom, according to Hay, 'the glow of the purple reached its apogee'.<sup>54</sup> To top it all off, Elagabalus's fish sauce is lauded as 'a triumph of the culinary art, which is utterly lost'.<sup>55</sup>

Even the most uncritical reader could not take Hay's strange, euphoric book seriously as a work of scholarship. The same goes for Antonin Artaud's *Héliogabale ou l'anarchiste couronné*, published in 1934, although in this case we can wonder to what extent the author intended his work as a historical study in the first place.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, Artaud is perfectly sincere in his discussion of the 'crowned anarchist', but the book is written in the style of an essayistic novel and distinguishes itself by the creativity of its ideas, rather than by their plausibility. Artaud regards Elagabalus in a positive light because the emperor supposedly tried to destroy the established order – hence deserving the qualification 'anarchist' – to reveal the reality it concealed. If Artaud is to be believed, Elagabalus deliberately inverted many Roman values to break down the reductive binarism which characterised Roman society; for instance by taking on a female role while emperors were supposed to be male. Ultimately, this deliberate disrespect for Roman values caused a backlash against Elagabalus, rendering him a martyr for his 'anarchistic' cause. In creating this image, Artaud combines, reinterprets and even re-writes many stories about Elagabalus to make them fit his own imaginative, but historically unsound ideas.

---

<sup>51</sup> Hay, *The Amazing Emperor*, 76, 229.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, 229.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 142, 148-149.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, 244.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, 259.

<sup>56</sup> A. Artaud, *Héliogabale ou l'anarchiste couronné* (Paris 1934).

To be fair, not all scholarly works discussing Elagabalus show the same degree of prejudice and lack of critical attitude. In general, the growing awareness of the often unreliable nature of the literary sources seems to have decreased the bias against the priest-emperor in the last decades. Martin Frey's *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, published in 1989, is probably the most objective and historically sound monograph on the young ruler to date.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, many stereotypes and commonplaces about Elagabalus can still be found in modern studies, even if they are perhaps less evident than in older, more openly hostile works. As long as cameos are still attributed to the emperor because they are reminiscent of some scandalous story in the *Historia Augusta*, and as long as authors like Turcan still reproduce many of the negative allegations of the ancient sources without calling them into question, there is work to be done. Modern scholarship does not need to redeem Elagabalus; however, it does have the obligation to construct a rational, objective image of this oft-scorned monarch.

Oxford, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2005

---

<sup>57</sup> M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* (Stuttgart 1989).