

= Elagabalus =

Elagabalus / ˈɛl.ə.ɡəˈbæl.əs / or Heliogabalus (Greek : Ἡλιογάβαλος ; Latin : Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus ; c . 203 ? March 11 , 222) , was Roman emperor from 218 to 222 . A member of the Severan dynasty , he was Syrian , the second son of Julia Soaemias and Sextus Varius Marcellus . In his early youth he served as a priest of the god Elagabal in the hometown of his mother 's family , Emesa . As a private citizen , he was probably named Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus . Upon becoming emperor he took the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus . He was called Elagabalus only after his death .

In 217 , the emperor Caracalla was assassinated and replaced by his Praetorian prefect , Marcus Opellius Macrinus . Caracalla 's maternal aunt , Julia Maesa , successfully instigated a revolt among the Legio III Gallica to have her eldest grandson (and Caracalla 's cousin) , Elagabalus , declared emperor in his place . Macrinus was defeated on 8 June 218 at the Battle of Antioch . Elagabalus , barely fourteen years old , became emperor , initiating a reign remembered mainly for sex scandals and religious controversy .

Later historians suggest Elagabalus showed a disregard for Roman religious traditions and sexual taboos . He replaced the traditional head of the Roman pantheon , Jupiter , with the deity of whom he was high priest , Elagabalus . He forced leading members of Rome 's government to participate in religious rites celebrating this deity , over which he personally presided . Elagabalus was supposedly " married " as many as five times , lavished favours on male courtiers popularly thought to have been his lovers , and was reported to have prostituted himself in the imperial palace . His behavior estranged the Praetorian Guard , the Senate , and the common people alike . Amidst growing opposition , Elagabalus , just 18 years old , was assassinated and replaced by his cousin Severus Alexander on 11 March 222 , in a plot formulated by his grandmother , Julia Maesa , and carried out by disaffected members of the Praetorian Guard .

Elagabalus developed a reputation among his contemporaries for extreme eccentricity , decadence and zealotry . This tradition has persisted , and in writers of the early modern age he suffers one of the worst reputations among Roman emperors . Edward Gibbon , for example , wrote that Elagabalus " abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures and ungoverned fury " . According to Barthold Georg Niebuhr , " The name Elagabalus is branded in history above all others " because of his " unspeakably disgusting life " .

= = Family and priesthood = =

Elagabalus was born around the year 203 to Sextus Varius Marcellus and Julia Soaemias Bassiana . His father was initially a member of the Equites class , but was later elevated to the rank of senator . His grandmother , Julia Maesa , was the widow of the consul Julius Avitus , the sister of Julia Domna , and the sister @-@ in @-@ law of the emperor Septimius Severus . He had at least one sibling : an unnamed elder brother . His mother , Julia Soaemias , was a cousin of the Roman emperor Caracalla . Other relatives included his aunt Julia Avita Mamaea and uncle Marcus Julius Gessius Marcianus and among their children , their son Severus Alexander . Elagabalus 's family held hereditary rights to the priesthood of the sun god Elagabal , of whom Elagabalus was the high priest at Emesa (modern Homs) in Roman Syria .

The deity Elagabalus was initially venerated at Emesa . This form of the god 's name is a Latinized version of the Syrian Ilāh hag @-@ Gabal , which derives from Ilāh (a Semitic word for " god ") and gabal (an Aramaic word for " mountain ") , resulting in " the God of the Mountain , " the Emesene manifestation of the deity . The cult of the deity spread to other parts of the Roman Empire in the 2nd century ; a dedication has been found as far away as Woerden (Netherlands) , near the Roman limes . The god was later imported and assimilated with the Roman sun god known as Sol Indiges in republican times and as Sol Invictus during the second and third centuries CE . In Greek the sun god is Helios , hence " Heliogabalus " , a hybrid conjunction of " Helios " and " Elagabalus " .

= = Rise to power = =

When the emperor Macrinus came to power , he suppressed the threat against his reign from the family of his assassinated predecessor , Caracalla , by exiling them ? Julia Maesa , her two daughters , and her eldest grandson Elagabalus ? to their estate at Emesa in Syria . Almost upon arrival in Syria , Maesa began a plot with her advisor and Elagabalus ' tutor Gannys , to overthrow Macrinus and elevate the fourteen @-@ year @-@ old Elagabalus to the imperial throne .

His mother publicly declared that he was the illegitimate son of Caracalla , therefore due the loyalties of Roman soldiers and senators who had sworn allegiance to Caracalla . After Julia Maesa displayed her wealth to the Third Legion at Raphana they swore allegiance to Elagabalus . At sunrise on 16 May 218 , Publius Valerius Comazon , commander of the legion , declared him emperor . To strengthen his legitimacy through further propaganda , Elagabalus assumed Caracalla 's names , Marcus Aurelius Antoninus .

In response Macrinus dispatched his Praetorian prefect Ulpius Julianus to the region with a contingent of troops he considered strong enough to crush the rebellion . However , this force soon joined the faction of Elagabalus when , during the battle , they turned on their own commanders . The officers were killed and Julianus ' head was sent back to the emperor .

Macrinus now sent letters to the Senate denouncing Elagabalus as the False Antoninus and claiming he was insane . Both consuls and other high @-@ ranking members of Rome 's leadership condemned Elagabalus , and the Senate subsequently declared war on both Elagabalus and Julia Maesa .

Macrinus and his son , weakened by the desertion of the Second Legion due to bribes and promises circulated by Julia Maesa , were defeated on 8 June 218 at the Battle of Antioch by troops commanded by Gannys . Macrinus fled toward Italy , disguised as a courier , but was later intercepted near Chalcedon and executed in Cappadocia . His son Diadumenianus , sent for safety to the Parthian court , was captured at Zeugma and also put to death .

Elagabalus declared the date of the victory at Antioch to be the beginning of his reign and assumed the imperial titles without prior senatorial approval , which violated tradition but was a common practice among 3rd @-@ century emperors nonetheless . Letters of reconciliation were dispatched to Rome extending amnesty to the Senate and recognizing the laws , while also condemning the administration of Macrinus and his son .

The senators responded by acknowledging Elagabalus as emperor and accepting his claim to be the son of Caracalla . Caracalla and Julia Domna were both deified by the Senate , both Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias were elevated to the rank of Augustae , and the memory of both Macrinus and Diadumenianus was condemned by the Senate . The former commander of the Third Legion , Comazon , was appointed commander of the Praetorian Guard .

= = Emperor (218 ? 222) = =

Elagabalus and his entourage spent the winter of 218 in Bithynia at Nicomedia , where the emperor 's religious beliefs first presented themselves as a problem . The contemporary historian Cassius Dio suggests that Gannys was in fact killed by the new emperor because he was forcing Elagabalus to live " temperately and prudently " . To help Romans adjust to the idea of having an oriental priest as emperor , Julia Maesa had a painting of Elagabalus in priestly robes sent to Rome and hung over a statue of the goddess Victoria in the Senate House . This placed senators in the awkward position of having to make offerings to Elagabalus whenever they made offerings to Victoria .

The legions were dismayed by his behaviour and quickly came to regret having supported his accession . While Elagabalus was still on his way to Rome , brief revolts broke out by the Fourth Legion at the instigation of Gellius Maximus , and by the Third Legion , which itself had been responsible for the elevation of Elagabalus to the throne , under the command of Senator Verus . The rebellion was quickly put down , and the Third Legion disbanded .

When the entourage reached Rome in the autumn of 219 , Comazon and other allies of Julia Maesa and Elagabalus were given powerful and lucrative positions , to the outrage of many

senators who did not consider them worthy of such privileges . After his tenure as Praetorian prefect , Comazon would serve as the city prefect of Rome three times , and as consul twice . Elagabalus soon devalued the Roman currency . He decreased the silver purity of the denarius from 58 % to 46 % . 5 % ? the actual silver weight dropping from 1 @. @ 82 grams to 1 @. @ 41 grams . He also demonetized the antoninianus during this period in Rome .

Elagabalus tried to have his presumed lover , the charioteer Hierocles , declared Caesar , while another alleged lover , the athlete Aurelius Zoticus , was appointed to the non @-@ administrative but influential position of Master of the Chamber , or Cubicularius . His offer of amnesty for the Roman upper class was largely honoured , though the jurist Ulpian was exiled .

The relationships between Julia Maesa , Julia Soaemias , and Elagabalus were strong at first . His mother and grandmother became the first women to be allowed into the Senate , and both received senatorial titles : Soaemias the established title of Clarissima , and Maesa the more unorthodox Mater Castrorum et Senatus (" Mother of the army camp and of the Senate ") . They held the title of Augusta as well , indicating that they may have been the power behind the throne . Indeed , they held much influence over the young emperor throughout his reign , and can be found on many coins and inscriptions - a rare honor for Roman women .

= = = Religious controversy = = =

Since the reign of Septimius Severus , sun worship had increased throughout the Empire . Elagabalus saw this as an opportunity to install Elagabal as the chief deity of the Roman pantheon . The god was renamed Deus Sol Invictus , meaning God the Undefeated Sun , and honored above Jupiter .

As a token of respect for Roman religion , however , Elagabalus joined either Astarte , Minerva , Urania , or some combination of the three to Elagabal as wife . A union between Elagabal and a traditional goddess would have served to strengthen ties between the new religion and the imperial cult . In fact , there may have been an effort to introduce Elagabal , Urania , and Athena as the new triad of Rome - replacing that of Jupiter , Juno , and Minerva .

He stirred further discontent when he himself married the Vestal Virgin Aquilia Severa , claiming the marriage would produce " godlike children " . This was a flagrant breach of Roman law and tradition , which held that any Vestal found to have engaged in sexual intercourse was to be buried alive .

A lavish temple called the Elagabalium was built on the east face of the Palatine Hill to house Elagabal , who was represented by a black conical meteorite from Emesa . Herodian wrote " this stone is worshipped as though it were sent from heaven ; on it there are some small projecting pieces and markings that are pointed out , which the people would like to believe are a rough picture of the sun , because this is how they see them " .

In order to become the high priest of his new religion , Elagabalus had himself circumcised . He forced senators to watch while he danced around the altar of Deus Sol Invictus to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals . Each summer solstice he held a festival dedicated to the god , which became popular with the masses because of the free food distributed on such occasions . During this festival , Elagabalus placed the Emesa stone on a chariot adorned with gold and jewels , which he paraded through the city :

A six horse chariot carried the divinity , the horses huge and flawlessly white , with expensive gold fittings and rich ornaments . No one held the reins , and no one rode in the chariot ; the vehicle was escorted as if the god himself were the charioteer . Elagabalus ran backward in front of the chariot , facing the god and holding the horses ' reins . He made the whole journey in this reverse fashion , looking up into the face of his god .

The most sacred relics from the Roman religion were transferred from their respective shrines to the Elagabalium , including the emblem of the Great Mother , the fire of Vesta , the Shields of the Salii and the Palladium , so that no other god could be worshipped except in company with Elagabal .

= = = Sex / gender controversy = = =

The question of Elagabalus ' sexual orientation is complicated and confusing , due in large part to salacious and unreliable sources . Elagabalus married and divorced five women , three of whom are known . His first wife was Julia Cornelia Paula ; the second was the Vestal Virgin Julia Aquilia Severa .

Within a year , he abandoned her and married Annia Aurelia Faustina , a descendant of Marcus Aurelius and the widow of a man recently executed by Elagabalus . He had returned to his second wife Severa by the end of the year . According to Cassius Dio , his most stable relationship seems to have been with his chariot driver , a blond slave from Caria named Hierocles , whom he referred to as his husband .

The Augustan History claims that he also married a man named Zoticus , an athlete from Smyrna , in a public ceremony at Rome . Cassius Dio reported that Elagabalus would paint his eyes , epilate his hair and wear wigs before prostituting himself in taverns , brothels , and even in the imperial palace :

Finally , he set aside a room in the palace and there committed his indecencies , always standing nude at the door of the room , as the harlots do , and shaking the curtain which hung from gold rings , while in a soft and melting voice he solicited the passers @-@ by . There were , of course , men who had been specially instructed to play their part . For , as in other matters , so in this business , too , he had numerous agents who sought out those who could best please him by their foulness . He would collect money from his patrons and give himself airs over his gains ; he would also dispute with his associates in this shameful occupation , claiming that he had more lovers than they and took in more money .

Herodian commented that Elagabalus enhanced his natural good looks by the regular application of cosmetics . He was described as having been " delighted to be called the mistress , the wife , the queen of Hierocles " and was reported to have offered vast sums of money to any physician who could equip him with female genitalia . Elagabalus has been characterized by some modern writers as transgender , perhaps transsexual .

= = = Fall from power = = =

By 221 Elagabalus ' eccentricities , particularly his relationship with Hierocles , increasingly provoked the soldiers of the Praetorian Guard . When Elagabalus ' grandmother Julia Maesa perceived that popular support for the emperor was waning , she decided that he and his mother , who had encouraged his religious practices , had to be replaced . As alternatives , she turned to her other daughter , Julia Avita Mamaea , and her daughter 's son , the thirteen @-@ year @-@ old Severus Alexander .

Prevailing on Elagabalus , she arranged that he appoint his cousin Alexander as his heir and be given the title of Caesar . Alexander shared the consulship with the emperor that year . However , Elagabalus reconsidered this arrangement when he began to suspect that the Praetorian Guard preferred his cousin over himself .

Following the failure of various attempts on Alexander 's life , Elagabalus stripped his cousin of his titles , revoked his consulship , and circulated the news that Alexander was near death , in order to see how the Praetorians would react . A riot ensued , and the guard demanded to see Elagabalus and Alexander in the Praetorian camp .

= = = Assassination = = =

The emperor complied and on 11 March 222 he publicly presented his cousin along with his own mother , Julia Soaemias . On their arrival the soldiers started cheering Alexander while ignoring Elagabalus , who ordered the summary arrest and execution of anyone who had taken part in this display of insubordination . In response , members of the Praetorian Guard attacked Elagabalus and his mother :

So he made an attempt to flee , and would have got away somewhere by being placed in a chest ,

had he not been discovered and slain , at the age of 18 . His mother , who embraced him and clung tightly to him , perished with him ; their heads were cut off and their bodies , after being stripped naked , were first dragged all over the city , then the mother 's body was cast aside somewhere or other while his was thrown into the [Tiber] .

Following his assassination , many associates of Elagabalus were killed or deposed , including his lover Hierocles . His religious edicts were reversed and the stone of Elagabal was sent back to Emesa . Women were again barred from attending meetings of the Senate . The practice of *damnatio memoriae* ? erasing from the public record a disgraced personage formerly of note ? was systematically applied in his case .

= = = Augustan History = = =

The source of many of these stories of Elagabalus 's depravity is the Augustan History (*Historia Augusta*) , which includes controversial claims . The *Historia Augusta* was most likely written toward the end of the 4th century during the reign of emperor Theodosius I. The life of Elagabalus as described in the Augustan History is of uncertain historical merit . Sections 13 to 17 , relating to the fall of Elagabalus , are less controversial among historians .

= = = Cassius Dio = = =

Sources often considered more credible than the Augustan History include the contemporary historians Cassius Dio and Herodian . Cassius Dio lived from the second half of the 2nd century until sometime after 229 . Born into a patrician family , he spent the greater part of his life in public service . He was a senator under emperor Commodus and governor of Smyrna after the death of Septimius Severus . Afterwards he served as suffect consul around 205 , and as proconsul in Africa and Pannonia .

Severus Alexander held him in high esteem and made him his consul again . His *Roman History* spans nearly a millennium , from the arrival of Aeneas in Italy until the year 229 . As a contemporary of Elagabalus , Cassius Dio 's account of his reign is generally considered more reliable than the Augustan History , although by his own admission Dio spent the greater part of the relevant period outside of Rome and had to rely on second @-@ hand accounts .

Furthermore , the political climate in the aftermath of Elagabalus ' reign , as well as Dio 's own position within the government of Alexander , likely influenced the truth of this part of his history for the worse . Dio regularly refers to Elagabalus as *Sardanapalus* , partly to distinguish him from his divine namesake , but chiefly to do his part in maintaining the *damnatio memoriae* and to associate him with another autocrat notorious for a dissolute life .

= = = Herodian = = =

Another contemporary of Elagabalus was Herodian , who was a minor Roman civil servant who lived from c . 170 until 240 . His work , *History of the Roman Empire since Marcus Aurelius* , commonly abbreviated as *Roman History* , is an eyewitness account of the reign of Commodus until the beginning of the reign of Gordian III . His work largely overlaps with Dio 's own *Roman History* , but both texts seem to be independently consistent with each other .

Although Herodian is not deemed as reliable as Cassius Dio , his lack of literary and scholarly pretensions make him less biased than senatorial historians . Herodian is considered the most important source for the religious reforms which took place during the reign of Elagabalus , which have been confirmed by numismatic and archaeological evidence .

= = = = Edward Gibbon and later historians = = = =

For readers of the modern age , *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1737 ? 94) further cemented the scandalous reputation of Elagabalus . Gibbon

not only accepted and expressed outrage at the allegations of the ancient historians , but might have added some details of his own ; he is the first historian known to state that Gannys was a eunuch , for example . Gibbon wrote :

To confound the order of the season and climate , to sport with the passions and prejudices of his subjects , and to subvert every law of nature and decency , were in the number of his most delicious amusements . A long train of concubines , and a rapid succession of wives , among whom was a vestal virgin , ravished by force from her sacred asylum , were insufficient to satisfy the impotence of his passions . The master of the Roman world affected to copy the manners and dress of the female sex , preferring the distaff to the sceptre , and dishonored 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 , the empress 's husband . 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 .

Two hundred years after the age of Pliny , the use of pure , or even of mixed silks , was confined to the female sex , till the opulent citizens of Rome and the provinces were insensibly familiarized with the example of Elagabalus , the first who , by this effeminate habit , had sullied the dignity of an emperor and a man .

Some recent historians argue for a more favourable picture of his life and reign . Martijn Icks in *Images of Elagabalus* (2008 ; republished as *The Crimes of Elagabalus* in 2012) doubts the reliability of the ancient sources and argues that it was the emperor 's unorthodox religious policies that alienated the power elite of Rome , to the point that his grandmother saw fit to eliminate him and replace him with his cousin . Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado , in *The Emperor Elagabalus : Fact or Fiction ?* (2008) , is also critical of the ancient historians and speculates that neither religion nor sexuality played a role in the fall of the young emperor , who was simply the loser in a power struggle within the imperial family ; the loyalty of the Praetorian Guards was up for sale , and Julia Maesa had the resources to outmaneuver and outbribe her grandson . According to this version , once Elagabalus , his mother , and his immediate circle had been murdered , a wholesale propaganda war against his memory resulted in a vicious caricature which has persisted to the present , repeated and often embellished by later historians displaying their own prejudices against effeminacy and other vices which Elagabalus had come to epitomize .

= = Legacy = =

Due to the ancient tradition about him , Elagabalus became something of an (anti-) hero in the Decadent movement of the late 19th century . He often appears in literature and other creative media as the epitome of a young , amoral aesthete . His life and character have informed or at least inspired many famous works of art , by Decadents , even by contemporary artists . The most notable of these works include :

= = Literature and biographies = = =

L'Agonie (*Agony*) (1888) , the best known novel by the French writer Jean Lombard , featuring Elagabalus as the protagonist

In 1903 Georges Duviquet published what purports to be a faithful biography of the emperor : *Héliogabale : Raconté par les historiens Grecs et Latins* , [avec] dix @-@ huit gravures d'après les monuments original .

The previous pair of works inspired the Dutch writer Louis Couperus to produce his novel *De Berg van Licht* (*The Mountain of Light*) (1905) , which presents Elagabalus in a sympathetic light .

Algabal (1892 ? 1919) , a collection of poems by the German poet Stefan George

The Sun God (1904) , a novel by the English writer Arthur Westcott

The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus (1911) , a biography by John Stuart Hay

Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste couronné (Heliogabalus or The Anarchist Crowned) (1934) by Antonin Artaud , combining essay , biography , and fiction

Family Favourites (1960) , a novel by the Anglo @-@ Argentine writer Alfred Duggan in which Heliogabalus is seen through the eyes of a faithful Gaulish bodyguard and depicted as a gentle and charming aesthete , personally lovable but lacking in political skills .

Child of the Sun (1966) , a novel by Lance Horner and Kyle Onstott , better known for writing the novel that inspired the movie Mandingo

Super @-@ Eliogabalo (1969) , a novel by the Italian writer Alberto Arbasino

Boy Caesar (2004) , a novel by the English writer Jeremy Reed

Le Scandaleux Héliogabale : Empereur , Prêtre et Pornocrate (2006) , by the novelist Emma Locatelli

== = Plays == =

Zygmunt Krasiński . " Irydion " (1836) , in which Elagabalus is portrayed as a cruel tyrant

Mencken , H.L. and Nathan , George Jean . Heliogabalus A Buffoonery in Three Acts . New York : Alfred A. Knopf , 1920

de Escobar Fagundes , C.H. Heliogabalo : O Sol é a Pátria . Ed . Devir . Rio de Janeiro , 1980

Gilbert , S. Heliogabalus : A Love Story . Toronto , Cabaret Theatre Company , 2002

Ferreira , Shawn . Elagabalus , Emperor of Rome , 2008

Arelis . Heliogabalus , (2008)

== = Paintings == =

Heliogabalus , High Priest of the Sun (1866) , by the English decadent Simeon Solomon

One of the most notorious incidents laid to his account is immortalized in the 19th @-@ century painting The Roses of Heliogabalus (1888) , by the Anglo @-@ Dutch academician Sir Lawrence Alma @-@ Tadema . It shows guests at one of his extravagant dinner parties smothered under a mass of " violets and other flowers " dropped from above .

Heliogabalus (1974) , by Anselm Kiefer

Antonin Artaud Heliogabalus (2010 ? 11) , by Anselm Kiefer

== = Music == =

Eliogabalo , an opera by Venetian Baroque composer Francesco Cavalli (1667)

Héliogabale , an opera by French composer Déodat de Séverac (1910)

Heliogabalus imperator (Emperor Heliogabalus) , an orchestral work by the German composer Hans Werner Henze (1972)

Artaud , an album by Luis Alberto Spinetta (1973)

Eliogabalus , Second album of the Italian @-@ Slovenian experimental band Devil Doll

Six Litanies for Heliogabalus , an album by American musician John Zorn (2007)

== = Dance == =

Héliogabale , a modern dance choreographed by Maurice Béjart

== = Film == =

Héliogabale , a 1909 silent film by the French director André Calmettes

A Roman Orgy (Héliogabale , ou L'orgie romaine) , a 1911 silent short by the French director Louis Feuillade

Elagabalus is portrayed by Mathew Baynton in the CBBC series Horrible Histories .

= = = Vocabulary = = =

The Spanish word heliogábalo means " a person overwhelmed by gluttony " .

= = = Secondary material = = =