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DOI
10.47743/CETC-2024-19.2.659

Publication date
2024

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Classica et Christiana

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Icks, M. (2024). The crimes and vices of Elagabalus: Building blocks for a character assassination. *Classica et Christiana*, *19*(2), 659-675. https://doi.org/10.47743/CETC-2024-19.2.659

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Download date:18 Nov 2026

Classica et Christiana, 19/2, 2024, ISSN: 1842-3043; e-ISSN: 2393-2961, 659-675
DOI: 10.47743/CetC-2024-19.2.659

THE CRIMES AND VICES OF ELAGABALUS. BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A CHARACTER ASSASSINATION[*]

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Keywords*: Elagabalus, crimes, vices, posthumous character assassination, character assassination, building blocks.*

Abstract: ***The crimes and vices of Elagabalus. Building blocks for a character assassination***. *The literary sources paint a very hostile picture of Elagabalus, scorning him for his alleged effeminacy, excessive luxury and circle of unworthy favourites, among many other points of criticism. While the veracity of these claims is sometimes hard to establish, it is clear that they are part of a discourse that seeks to discredit the emperor by emphasizing his flaws and downplaying or denying any positive traits he may have possessed. As such, they can be regarded as a posthumous character assassination, a term which refers to the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation. In this paper, I will examine various "building blocks" that contributed to this character assassination, tracing how allegations against Elagabalus built on well-worn tropes or contemporary concerns, and how they developed over time.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *Elagabal, crime, vicii, distrugerea postumă a caracterului, distrugerea reputației.*

Rezumat: ***Crimele lui Elagabalus. Elemente de bază pentru distrugerea reputației***. *Sursele literare pictează o imagine foarte ostilă a lui Elagabal, disprețuindu-l, printre multe alte aspecte, pentru presupusul său comportament efeminat, luxul excesiv și cercul de favoriți nedemni. În timp ce veridicitatea acestor afirmații este uneori greu de stabilit, este clar că ele fac parte dintr-un discurs care încearcă să-l discrediteze pe împărat subliniind defectele sale și minimizând sau negând orice trăsătură pozitivă pe care le-ar fi putut poseda. Ca atare,*

[*] This article represents an expanded version of a paper delivered at the *Symposium Internationale «Varius Antoninus Tiberinus». Millesimo octingentesimo anno a nece Marci Aurelii Antonini (Heliogabali) (in civitate Iassiensi, IV Kal. Decembris A.D. MMXXII). International Symposium «Varius Antoninus Tiberinus». 1800 years since the murder of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Elagabalus) (Iași, November 28th, 2022)*.

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ele pot fi considerate ca o distrugere postumă a caracterului, un termen care se referă la distrugerea deliberată a reputației unui individ. În această lucrare, voi examina diverse „elemente de bază" care au contribuit la distrugerea reputației acestui personaj, urmărind modul în care acuzațiile împotriva lui Elagabalus s-au construit pe tropi binecunoscuți sau opinii contemporane și cum s-au dezvoltat de-a lungul timpului.

'The life of Heliogabalus Antoninus, also called Varius, I should never have put in writing – hoping that it might not be known that he was emperor of the Romans – were it not that before him this same imperial office had had a Caligula, a Nero and a Vitellius.'[1] As these opening words of the *Vita Heliogabali* in the *Historia Augusta* indicate, Greco-Roman historiography and biography recognized a more or less canonical list of 'bad' Roman emperors. Next to the aforementioned names, several others such as Tiberius, Domitian and Commodus were frequently included. The list of 'good' emperors was also more or less stable. As the *Historia Augusta* biographer continued, 'the thoughtful reader may find himself some consolation for these monstrous tyrants by reading of Augustus, Trajan, Vespasian, Hadrian, Pius, Titus and Marcus.'[2] Heliogabalus – or Elagabalus, as he is more conventionally known to modern scholarship – evidently ended up on the 'bad' list. Through association with the likes of Caligula and Nero, the biographer framed the young ruler as an evil tyrant from the start, before even expanding on his many alleged crimes and vices.

This article will examine Elagabalus's negative reputation in ancient literary sources through the lens of character assassination. Building on my previous work on the topic, I will discuss how the emperor's image was deliberately destroyed by his detractors, who employed various literary strategies to cast him in a negative light.[3] My aim is not to rehabilitate Elagabalus, or even to establish truths and falsehoods, but to examine the process of image destruction in its own right. Before doing so, I will provide some general observations on the

[1] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 1.1. Unless indicated otherwise, all English translations of ancient sources are from the Loeb Classical Library, sometimes with slight modifications.

[2] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 1.2.

[3] M. Icks, *Heliogabalus, a monster on the Roman throne: The literary construction of a "bad" emperor*, in I. Sluiter & R.M. Rosen (eds.), *KAKOS: Badness and Anti-Value in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden, 2008, 477-488; Idem, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor*, London, 2011, 92-122.

construction of 'bad' emperors in Greco-Roman literature and how this practice relates to the theoretical framework of character assassination.

Character assassination of emperors in Greco-Roman literature

Whether an emperor was remembered as 'good' or 'bad' was the result of complex negotiations in which the dynastic interests of the current regime as well as senatorial sentiments played an important role. A ruler who suffered posthumous *damnatio memoriae* was usually constructed as a 'bad' emperor or *princeps malus*, while a ruler who was posthumously deified usually received a good press as *princeps bonus*.[4] That is not to say that there was general consensus about their qualities as a ruler and a person. Aside from dissent among senators, the sentiments of the soldiers and the *populus Romanus* typically carried little weight. Domitian, for instance, appears to have been quite popular with the soldiers, to the extent that they rose in indignation upon first hearing about his assassination and later even forced Nerva to punish the conspirators who were responsible for his untimely death.[5] Nevertheless, in the long run such alternative views almost inevitably faded into oblivion and the (elite) perspective of historians and biographers prevailed. In their works, many emperors tended to become *exempla* of good or bad rulership, to be emulated or renounced by their successors.[6]

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[4] H. I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace & Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*, Chapel Hill, 2006, 197-275 (discussing Nero and Domitian); O. J. Hekster, *Volmaakte monsters. De extreme beeldvorming rond Romeinse keizers*, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 111, 1998, 337-351. The terms *princeps bonus* and *princeps malus*, along with *princeps medius*, have been used by Andrea Scheithauer to categorize the imperial portraits in the *Historia Augusta*: *Kaiserbild und literarisches Programm. Untersuchungen zur Tendenz der Historia Augusta*, Frankfurt am Main, 1987, 36-42.

[5] Suetonius, *Vita Domitiani* 23.1; J. D. Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis of AD 96-99*, London-New York, 2003, 94-95.

[6] C. S. Kraus, *From* exempla *to* exemplar*? Writing history around the emperor in imperial Rome*, in J. C. Edmondson, S. Mason & J. B. Rives (eds.), *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, Oxford, 2005, 181-200. On Roman *exempla* in general, see: K.-J. Hölkeskamp, *"Exempla" und "mos maiorum". Überlegungen zum kollektiven Gedächtnis der Nobilität*, in H.-J. Gehrke & A. Möller (eds.), *Vergangenheit*

The literary construction of 'bad' emperors often followed established patterns. Many *topoi* and stereotypes were applied to signal to the reader that the ruler in question was a *princeps malus*. One allegation that was often made was that of incest. For instance, Suetonius claims that Caligula 'lived in habitual incest with all his sisters', a story repeated by Cassius Dio. Other emperors who supposedly slept with their sisters or mothers include Nero, Commodus and Caracalla.[7] Such stories probably had their origins in contemporary gossip and rumour, but gained a long-term impact once they were recorded in writing.[8] Florian Sittig has devoted an expansive study to another trait often associated with 'bad' emperors, madness. With the exception of Augustus, all Julio-Claudian rulers, as well as several members of later dynasties, were portrayed as mad to a greater or lesser degree.[9] Other negative traits that often recur in hostile portrayals of emperors include cruelty, arrogance, lust, excessive luxury and a habit of surrounding oneself with corrupt underlings. However, there was room for more personalized allegations as well. Stories about Tiberius's seclusive paranoia, Nero's artistic pretensions and Vitellius's gluttony provide each of these 'bad' rulers with a distinct personality that may have roots in their actual character and behaviour, or at least in the ways they were represented and perceived in their lifetime.

Character, as the term is used in modern-day psychology and the social sciences, refers to the moral dimension of someone's personality. A person of 'good character' possesses traits that are valued positively by society, such as courage and honesty. Personality, in turn, refers

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und Lebenswelt. Soziale Kommunikation, Traditionsbildung und historisches Bewusstsein, Tübingen, 1996, 301-338; M. B. Roller, *Exemplarity in Roman culture: The cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia*, *CPh*, 99, 2004, 1-56; Idem, *Models from the Past in Roman Culture: A World of Exempla*, Cambridge, 2018. On the role of *exempla* in the works of Greek historians of the Roman Empire, including Cassius Dio, see: A. M. Gowing, *The Roman exempla tradition in imperial Greek historiography: The case of Camillus*, in A. Feldherr (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Historiography*, New York, 2009, 332-347.

[7] Caligula: Suetonius, *Vita Caligulae* 24.1; Cassius Dio 59.11.1; 59.22.6. Nero: Tacitus, *Historiae* 14.2; Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 28.2; Commodus: *HA*, *Vita Commodi* 5.8; Caracalla: *HA*, *Vita Caracallae* 10.1-4.

[8] J. Meister, *Tales about the "sex life" of early Roman emperors: A case of character assassination?*, in M. Icks & E. B. Shiraev (eds.), *Character Assassination throughout the Ages*, New York, 2014 59-81.

[9] F. Sittig, *Psychopathen in Purpur. Julisch-claudischer Caesarenwahnsinn und die Konstruktion historischer Realität*, Stuttgart, 2018.

to the totality of a person's individual features, with the assumption that these are more or less stable.[10] While the ancient Romans did not use these terms, they evidently had a keen interest in the (perceived) personalities of their leading figures, including emperors. The imperial biographies of Suetonius and the *Historia Augusta* author, for instance, put the alleged virtues and vices of the rulers they discuss at the centre of their narratives. Greco-Roman historians and biographers almost invariably assessed an emperor's traits, actions and sayings in moral terms, weighing whether he was a 'good' or a 'bad' person. In their works, good character, as measured by their elite standards, often served as the ultimate yardstick of good emperorship – rather than, for instance, whether the monarch in question had managed to enact good policies and had solved important issues. Obviously, this does not mean that these authors strove to present their readers with sophisticated psychological profiles that laid bare the inner core of their subjects. As Jan Meister has argued, a biographer like Suetonius was not interested in the actual character of his 'twelve Caesars', but rather in their *fama* or reputation, although he did exhibit some awareness that *fama* and reality might not always match.[11]

In effect, what many Greco-Roman historians and biographers did was to shape the lives of the rulers they discussed to more or less fit established and recognizable moral templates. If they opted for a negative portrayal, an emperor's positive aspects would be downplayed, ignored, or spun in an unfavourable way, while his negative aspects would be emphasized, exaggerated, or even invented altogether. We can regard this practice as a form of *character assassination*, which is defined here as the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation or credibility through character attacks.[12] While the term character assassination is often associated with modern-day politics and so-called

[10] K. Danziger, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found Its Language*, London, 1997, 124-132. In Greco-Roman thinking, a person's character was also considered to be stable and unchanging. If someone's immoral behaviour only emerged later in life, that was supposedly because he had kept his vices hidden until then, or had been prevented from indulging in them by external circumstances; see for instance Suetonius, *Vita Tiberii* 42.1, commenting on Tiberius leading a shameful life on Capri in his old age.

[11] J. Meister, *Tales about the "sex life"…*, 70-71.

[12] M. Icks *et al.*, *Character assassination: Theoretical framework*, in S. A. Samoilenko *et al.* (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*, New York, 2020, 11-24.

negative campaigning, recent scholarship has emphasized that is in fact a cross-cultural phenomenon whose basic characteristics remain remarkably stable across cultures and historical periods.[13] According to the definition adopted here, character attacks are always intentional – that is, they have the goal to damage a person's reputation – and take place in public – that is, they are aimed at an audience other than the person under attack. Whether the smears and allegations are true or false is not a defining criterion; after all, a person's reputation can also be seriously damaged by focusing the audience's attention on his or her actual negative traits and actions.[14]

Each attempt at character assassination consists of five standard components or 'pillars'.[15] Firstly, there is always an *attacker*, which in our case would be the historians and biographers constructing the negative images of emperors. Secondly, the emperors themselves would be the *targets* of these attacks. Thirdly, the histories and biographies chronicling the lives of the emperors would be the *media* conveying the attacks, while fourthly, the readers of these works – both contemporaries and future generations – would constitute the *audience*. These readers would typically be highly educated men (and sometimes women) of the upper classes, members of the Roman and provincial elites. Finally, each attempt at character assassination takes place in a political and cultural *context*. In our case, we are dealing with an autocratic system of government which discouraged open criticism of the monarch, to put it mildly, but also with a sophisticated literary environment where vitriolic character attacks on rulers were par for the course, albeit almost always posthumously.[16]

With these things in mind, let us now move on to the case of Elagabalus. I will not discuss all aspects of the young ruler's various literary portrayals in the main sources, but will focus on a select number of 'building blocks' that contributed to his character assassination by historians and biographers.

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[13] M. Icks & E. B. Shiraev (eds.), *Character Assassination throughout the Ages*.

[14] M. Icks *et al.*, *Character assassination…*, 13.

[15] *Ibidem*, 16-20.

[16] An important exception, of course, would be character attacks on rulers in the context of civil wars, such as those launched against Mark Antony and Octavian by their rivals; see L. Borgies, *Le Conflit propagandiste entre Octavien et Marc Antoine. De l'usage politique de la uituperatio entre 44 et 30 a. C. n.*, Brussels, 2016. Another exception would be political pamphlets circulating under the radar.

The character assassination of Elagabalus

When Elagabalus's regime was toppled in March 222 CE, this was probably due in part to his controversial religious policy and conduct, although other reasons have been suggested as well.[17] Whatever the cause, a *damnatio memoriae* was issued against the emperor and the god Elagabal was banished from Rome. All the literary assessments of the young ruler have to be regarded against this background, for although the *damnatio* did not completely determine his legacy, it was a factor that could not be ignored. That would certainly have been true for our first main source, Cassius Dio, who wrote during the reign of Severus Alexander and had close political ties to that emperor, whose legitimacy depended on the rejection of his predecessor. Even though one gets the sense that Dio's contempt for Elagabalus was very much genuine, he would have had little room to discuss the latter's reign in positive terms, if he had been inclined to do so.[18] Our second source, Herodian, wrote in the mid-third century, when the Severan dynasty was a thing of the past, but the reign of Elagabalus was still within living memory. In fact, it is possible that the historian was in Rome in the years 218-222 CE and was an eyewitness to some of the events he describes.[19] The *Historia Augusta* author, finally, probably composed his series of biographies in the late fourth century, when both Elagabalus and Severus Alexander were distant historical figures whose names no longer carried great significance. This allowed the biographer great

[17] M. Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*..., 37-43, 88-91; L. de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?*, Cambridge, 2010, 254-259; A. Kemezis, *The fall of Elagabalus as literary narrative and political reality: A reconsideration*, *Historia*, 65, 2016, 348-390.

[18] F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964; A. M. Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans: Cassius Dio, Philostratus and Herodian*, Cambridge, 2014, 90-149; A. G. Scott, *Emperors and Usurpers: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Book 79(78)-80(80) (A.D. 217-229)*, New York, 2018, 1-17.

[19] G. Alföldy, *Herodians Person*, in Idem, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches. Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbetrachtung. Ausgewählte Beiträge*, Stuttgart, 1989, 240-272; H. Sidebottom, *Herodian's historical methods and understanding of history*, *ANRW*, II 34.4, 1998, 2775-2836; A. M. Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire*..., 227-272.

artistic freedom to weave fantastical tales around the priest-emperor, while constructing Alexander as his virtuous counterpart.[20]

Although the literary portrayal of Elagabalus was by no means consistent across these sources, many stock traits of the 'bad' emperor are employed in their narratives, especially by Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta* author. In a perceptive article, Michael Sommer has discussed many of these traits, including sexual perversion, cruelty, excessive luxury, dependence on women and the breaking of religious taboos. He argues that Herodian's negative portrayal of the emperor stands apart from the other two, since it does not indulge much in *Tyrannentopik*, the standard charges used to characterize Roman emperors as tyrants, but emphatically paints a picture of Elagabalus as a foreigner and an 'Oriental' who does not merely violate Roman norms and traditions, but stands outside Roman culture altogether. As I have argued elsewhere, I think Sommer overstates the case, since Orientalizing elements are definitely present in Cassius Dio as well (less so in the *Vita Heliogabali*).[21] Nevertheless, it is certainly true that Herodian's portrayal of Elagabalus as a cultural alien goes well beyond the conventional character attacks against 'bad' emperors.

Two methods of character assassination that are clearly recognizable in the literary record are name-calling and ridicule. Name-calling, which entails the application of a negatively charged term to a person, is especially prevalent in Cassius Dio, who brands the emperor 'the False Antoninus', 'the Assyrian', 'Sardanapalus' and 'Tiberinus' – hence scorning his lack of legitimacy, his 'Oriental' decadence and the scandalous fate of his corpse.[22] Whether the author made these nicknames up himself is impossible to establish, although it certainly seems plausible that they reflect popular sentiments at the time and

[20] R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*, Oxford, 1986; A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford, 2011, 743-782.

[21] M. Sommer, *Elagabal. Wege zur Konstruktion eines "schlechten" Kaisers*, *SCI*, 23, 2004, 95-110; M. Icks, *Heliogabalus, a monster on the Roman throne*, 482-483.

[22] C. Bruun, *Roman emperors in popular jargon: Searching for contemporary nicknames (I)*, in L. de Blois *et al.* (eds.), *Impact of Empire III: The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power. Proceedings of the Third Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, c. 200 B.C. – A.D. 476)*, Amsterdam, 2003, 69-98, at 95-96. The nickname Heliogabalus, absent in third-century sources but employed by the *Vita Heliogabali*, is probably also negatively charged.

were in common use. The same may be true of the elements of ridicule woven through the literary accounts of Elagabalus's reign. These often take aim at the young man's supposed lack of masculinity, such as Dio's scoffing exclamation 'he who could not even be a man!' when discussing Elagabalus's marriage arrangements, or the scathing remark in the *Vita Heliogabali* that the emperor had to bring his grandmother along to the Senate house and the praetorian camp in order to gain the necessary respect.[23] Ridicule arguably sets the tone for much of this late antique biography, which strings together countless anecdotes painting its subject as a trivial, silly figure whose exploits are often more amusing than terrifying.

In order to gain a better understanding of the way in which the process of Elagabalus's character assassination worked, it pays to place our three main accounts in comparative perspective. There are clear indications that Herodian was familiar with Dio's account and that the *Historia Augusta* biographer knew the works of both his predecessors.[24] These authors, then, were able to engage with each other's portrayals of the emperor, adapting them to their own agenda and circumstances as they saw fit. In the following, we will take a closer look at two examples of allegations against Elagabalus and how they were developed by our sources to cast him in a negative light.

Unworthy favourites

It was a common trope in Greco-Roman literature that a good prince should surround himself with worthy friends.[25] In historiographic and biographic texts, 'bad' emperors are invariably estranged from their senatorial peers and prefer the company of shady, often low-born figures who reflect their own rotten character. Commodus, for instance, according to Herodian initially listened to the good advice of his father's friends, but was soon corrupted by the 'parasites at his

[23] Cassius Dio 80.9.1; *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 12.3.

[24] A. Scheithauer, *Die Regierungszeit des Kaisers Elagabal in der Darstellung von Cassius Dio und Herodian*, *Hermes*, 118, 1990, 335-356; F. Kolb, *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der Historia Augusta*, Bonn, 1972, 159-160. It is possible that the *Historia Augusta* biographer only knew Dio's work through an intermediary account.

[25] *E.g.* Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 3.87, 89; Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 45.1-4.

table' and other malicious agents, such as the praetorian prefect Perennius, who persuaded him 'to spend his time in a life of pleasure and drunkenness'.[26]

In his account of Elagabalus, Cassius Dio mentions several unworthy favourites. Among these, the Carian slave and charioteer Hierocles takes a prominent place: according to the historian, the emperor fell so madly in love with him that he took him for a husband, made him 'exceedingly powerful', and even planned to appoint him as *Caesar*.[27] Their union seems to echo the scandalous marriage of Nero and the freedman Doryphorus, except that it is even more outrageous: while Nero's imitation of 'the screams and moans of a girl being deflowered' on his wedding night signalled his submissiveness and lacking masculinity, he at least did not allow himself to be beaten up by his husband – unlike Elagabalus, who allegedly walked around with black eyes and did not even become vexed because of this harsh treatment, but only loved Hierocles the more for it.[28] Another of the emperor's notable lovers in Dio's account is Zoticus, a cook's son who gains imperial favour because of his athletic body, and especially because of his large member. He is immediately brought to the palace and made *cubicularius*, but dismissed once he fails to perform in the bedchamber.[29] In both these same-sex relations, Elagabalus is cast in the role of the passive sexual partner, emphasizing his effeminacy – a theme we will discuss in more detail in the next paragraph.

Then there is Comazon, who was apparently not one of the emperor's lovers, but played an important role among the regime's supporters.[30] Dio sketches this man in very harsh terms, commenting that it was a great violation of precedent that he was made praetorian prefect and consul and even repeatedly obtained the post of urban prefect. After all, he sneers, Comazon had 'a character and a name derived from

[26] Herodian 1.6.1-2; 1.8.1.

[27] Cassius Dio 80.15.1-4.

[28] Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 29; Cassius Dio 80.15.3.

[29] Cassius Dio 16.1.6.

[30] P. Valerius Comazon was probably the commander of Legio II Parthica, which lent Elagabalus crucial support in his revolt against Macrinus; see H.-G. Pflaum, *Les Carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le Haut-Empire romain*, 5 volumes, Paris, 1960-1982, no. 290.

mimes and buffoonery'.[31] Seeing that the Greco-Roman elite tended to associate the world of the theatre with lewdness and prostitution, it is clear that the historian regards him as a parvenu from the dregs of society. The theatrical association is brought up again when Comazon takes over from Fulvius as urban prefect, with Dio commenting, '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 urban prefects in his day.'[32]

Neither Comazon, nor Hierocles and Zoticus are mentioned by name in Herodian's account. The latter does not go into detail about Elagabalus's sexual exploits and only discusses his favouritism in general terms. As he writes:

> The emperor was driven to such extremes of lunacy [ἐς τοσοῦτον δὲ ἐξώκειλε παροινίας] that he took men from the stage and public theatres and put them in charge of most important imperial business. A man who in his youth had been a dancer in public in the theatre at Rome was appointed as praetorian prefect. Similarly, another was raised from the stage and put in charge of the training and morals of the youth and the census qualifications of members of the senatorial and equestrian orders. He assigned posts of the highest responsibility in the Empire to charioteers and comedy actors and mimers. His slaves and freedmen, who perhaps excelled in some foul activity, he appointed as governors of consular provinces.[33]

Several elements reminiscent of Dio are recognizable in this passage. It seems likely that Herodian was inspired by his older colleague, but took great liberties with the material he found there, distorting it and placing it in the service of a new narrative. Whereas in Dio's account Comazon's association with the stage occurred in a metaphorical context, here he has become a former public dancer in the

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[31] Cassius Dio 80.4.1-2: τοῦτο τοὔνομα ἔκ τε μίμων καὶ γελωτοποιίας. Allegedly, Comazon had once also been sent to the galleys for an unspecified crime (80.3.5).

[32] Cassius Dio 80.21.2. For the low status of actors in Roman society, see: C. Edwards, *Unspeakable professions: Public performance and prostitution in ancient Rome*, in J. P. Hallet & M. B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities*, Princeton, 1997, 66-95.

[33] Herodian 5.7.6-8. See M. Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus…*, 22-23 for the emperor's political appointments. Except for the reward of some loyal allies like Comazon, it was mostly business as usual.

literal sense.[34] And whereas Dio's version of Elagabalus never assigned important political offices to sexual favourites, Herodian has generalized and exaggerated the stories about Hierocles and Zoticus to create the caricature of an emperor appointing charioteers, actors, slaves and freedmen as high court officials and provincial governors – unmistakable signs of his alleged 'lunacy'.

The *Vita Heliogabali* continues in the same vein, remarking that Elagabalus 'made his freedmen governors and legates, consuls and generals, and brought disgrace on all offices of distinction by the appointment of base-born profligates.'[35] As the author alleges, 'a dancer who had been on the stage at Rome' is appointed as praetorian prefect, again referencing Comazon, while a charioteer named Cordius and a barber named Claudius are made prefect of the watch and prefect of the grain supply, respectively. The latter is not attested elsewhere, but Cordius must have been inspired by Gordius, the almost identically-named charioteer Dio mentions in association with Hierocles, although without any reference to a political appointment.[36] According to the *Vita Heliogabali*, the emperor awarded other important posts to men 'whose sole recommendation was the enormous size of their privates', a remark that in all likelihood originates from Dio's story about Zoticus's appointment as *cubicularius* because he was so well-endowed, but which has been blown out all of proportion in the late antique biography.[37] Clearly, then, many of the same building blocks are used by all three authors to sketch Elagabalus's scandalous favouritism and outrageous appointments, but they are put together in various ingenious ways to create ever more fanciful narratives.

Effeminate appearance and behaviour

If the association with unworthy favourites was a staple of Greco-Roman *Tyrannentopik*, the same can be said of accusations that

[34] *PIR*[1] III V 42 identifies Comazon with Eutychianus, a man 'who had given people pleasure in amusements and gymnastic exercises'. The latter is briefly mentioned in a damaged passage at the start of Dio's Elagabalus narrative (79.31.1), but should probably be identified with Elagabalus's foster father Gannys.

[35] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 11.1.

[36] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 12.2; Cassius Dio 80.15.1.

[37] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 12.2: *commendatos sibi pudibilium enormitate membrorum*. Zoticus, rather than Hierocles, is mentioned as Elagabalus's husband (10.5).

an emperor lacked the manliness expected of a true Roman *vir*. In ancient Rome, there was a strong discourse associating masculinity with power, dominance and physical impenetrability, while femininity was associated with weakness, submissiveness and penetrability – characteristics the ruler of the known world should definitely *not* display.[38] Since the emperor's manliness was never a given, but could always be contested, it presented an ideal target for character attacks.

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, Cassius Dio modelled Elagabalus after the cross-dressing Assyrian king Sardanapalus, a mythical figure who had become an emblem of 'Oriental' effeminacy and decadence in Greco-Roman literature.[39] His characterization of the young emperor closely resembles descriptions of Sardanapalus in Diodorus Siculus and Athenaeus, indicating that Dio was either referencing these authors directly or made use of the same source.[40] Like his Assyrian counterpart, Elagabalus allegedly liked to dress and behave in a feminine manner: although Dio does not explicitly accuse him of cross-dressing, he does mention that the emperor wore make-up, affected his voice and used to have his beard hairs plucked out 'so as to look more like a woman'. He also shared Sardanapalus's fondness for wool-working, which was typically seen as a feminine activity.[41] Last but not least, the Assyrian king's infamous habit of indulging in physi-

[38] J. Walters, *Invading the Roman body: Manliness and impenetrability in Roman thought*, in J. P. Hallet & M. B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities*, 29-43; L. Brisson (trans. J. Llloyd), *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2002, 41-71; L. van den Hengel, *Imago. Romeinse keizerbeelden en de belichaming van gender*, Hilversum, 2009, 164-179.

[39] M. Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus…*, 98-102; see also Idem, *Cross-dressers in control: Transvestism, power and the balance between the sexes in the literary discourse of the Roman Empire*, in D. Campanile, F. Carlà-Uhink & M. Facella (eds.), *TransAntiquity: Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*, Routledge, London-New York, 2017, 65-82, at 67-68, 74. My analysis of the emperor's effeminacy in this paragraph relies heavily on these two earlier publications.

[40] Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 2.23.1-2; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 12.528f-529a.

[41] Cassius Dio 80.14.3-4: ὥστε καὶ ἐκ τούτου γυναικίζειν. Cross-dressing is strongly implied in another passage, where Dio claims Elagabalus wore a wig to visit taverns and brothels at night to play the female prostitute (80.13.2); compare Nero's nightly exploits (Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 26.1).

cal pleasures of any kind without restraint finds a clear echo in Elagabalus's lascivious behaviour.

Of course, if the intertextuality is obvious to us, it will also have been obvious to Dio's highly literate readership. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the historian's use of literary models would have made his assault on the emperor's reputation less credible (and therefore less effective). Sardanapalus embodied the *mollitia* which many Greeks and Romans imagined to be typical of 'Orientals': that is, effeminate softness, induced by excessive luxury and pleasure.[42] As a young man of Syrian background promoting a Syrian sun cult with at least some distinctly un-Roman features, Elagabalus could easily be tarred with the same brush. Dio thus provided his readers with a familiar template to make sense of the ruler's behaviour, framing him in a way that they expected decadent 'Oriental' monarchs to behave, anyway. The portrait's persuasiveness relies not so much on the factuality of the alleged details as on the bias-confirming appeal of the overall picture.

Another passage highlighting Elagabalus's effeminacy is his encounter with Zoticus, with whom he hopes to enjoy a night of passion. According to Dio, the emperor immediately bent his neck in a 'ravishing feminine pose' when he met his new favourite, treated him to a melting gaze and announced, '"Call me not Lord, for I am Lady."'[43] Allegedly, Elagabalus was so effeminate that he planned to cut off his genitals – and even promised physicians rich rewards if they could equip him with a vagina by making an incision in his body.[44] The former of these claims is made in a passage discussing customs related to the worship of Elagabal, and even though Dio points out that the emperor's desire for castration was 'prompted solely by his effeminacy', readers would inevitably have been reminded of the *galli* and their practice of ritual castration. After all, they, too, were a distinctly exotic

[42] For Greco-Roman stereotypes of Syrians and other 'Orientals', see: B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton-Oxford, 2004, 335-351, 371-380. For *mollitia*: C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge, 1993, 63-97; A. Corbeill, *Dining deviants in Roman political invective*, in J. P. Hallet & M. B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities*, 99-128.

[43] Cassius Dio 80.16.3-4: θαυμαστῶς τόν τε αὐχένα γυναικίσας.

[44] Cassius Dio 80.11.1; 80.16.7; 80.17.1. Note the contradiction with Dio's claim that the emperor wanted to have 'godlike children' with Aquilia Severa (80.9.3). Claims about the desire for an artificial vagina have only been preserved in later Byzantine epitomists, but likely originate with Dio.

presence in Rome, worshipping a goddess of Asian origin and notorious for dressing and behaving like women.[45] Once again, therefore, it appears that Dio is deliberately placing Elagabalus's effeminacy in an 'Oriental' context, marking him as a cultural alien violating Roman gender standards.

Remarkably, almost none of these elements can be found in the work of Herodian, even though he places much emphasis on the Syrian character of the emperor and his god. There is no mention of Sardanapalus, working with wool, identification as a woman, plans for castration, or desire for an artificial vagina. The emperor's dress receives a lot of attention, but is first and foremost characterized as luxurious and foreign-looking, although the author notes that the Romans 'considered this kind of finery more appropriate for women than men'.[46] The clearest overlap with Dio's account is the allegation that Elagabalus wore make-up, which Herodian touches upon twice: first in remarking that the use of cosmetics spoiled his good looks, later in stating that the praetorians took offence at the emperor's face 'made up more elaborately than a modest woman would have done'.[47]

The *Vita Heliogabali* contains several references to its subject's effeminacy, but with barely a trace of the Orientalizing context so prominent in Dio – except for the remark that Elagabalus 'infibulated himself and did all that the *galli* are wont to do'.[48] It is claimed that the emperor had his whole body depilated and liked to wear a jewelled diadem to increase his beauty and make his face appear more feminine. In the public baths, he preferred to bathe with the women rather than the men.[49] The story that he liked to re-enact the judgment of Paris, with himself taking on the role of Venus, is reminiscent of the exploits of Caligula and Nero, emperors who also liked dressing up as

[45] For the *galli*, see: L. E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, Berkeley, 1999, 301-325; L. Dirven, *Galli van de grote moeder. Vrouwen, hanen en haantjesgedrag in de Romeinse wereld*, *Tijdschrift voor Mediterrane Archeologie*, 34, 2005, 7-13.

[46] Herodian 5.5.5. See also 5.8.1: 'effeminately dressed up in golden necklaces and soft clothes'.

[47] Herodian 5.6.10; 5.8.1: τὸ μὲν πρόσωπον καλλωπιζόμενον περιεργότερον ἢ κατὰ γυναῖκα σώφρονα.

[48] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 7.2.

[49] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 5.5; 23.5; 31.7.

goddesses and female mythological characters.[50] Finally, the *Vita* mentions two speeches parodying *adlocutiones* which Elagabalus allegedly delivered to Rome's female and male prostitutes; in case of the former, he made his appearance 'in a woman's costume and with protruding bosom'.[51] Again, the association is with the world of the theatre rather than the East, which fits the overall pattern of the *Vita Heliogabali*: a few stray remarks aside, the author is not much interested in painting Elagabalus as a typical 'Oriental', but prefers to relate his alleged crimes to those of previous 'bad' emperors – usually with the implication that he was even worse than they had been.

Conclusion

The numerous allegations in the ancient sources with regard to Elagabalus's effeminacy and association with unworthy favourites can be regarded as so many building blocks, contributing to the construction of negative images that would be persuasive to an elite Greco-Roman audience. As we have seen, Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* biographer employed *Tyrannentopik* as well as cultural-ethnic stereotypes to assassinate Elagabalus's character, providing their readers with recognizable models and tropes that matched their worldview and biases. The evolvement of the favouritism theme over time clearly shows how room for invention grew as historical memory faded and the interests of the persons involved ceased to matter. For Cassius Dio, writing just a few years after Elagabalus's downfall and a member of the senatorial class himself, it would have been awkward to claim that the recently toppled ruler had 'assigned posts of the highest responsibility in the Empire to charioteers and comedy actors and mimers' and had assigned consular provinces to slaves and freedmen, since he would frequently encounter fellow senators who knew that this was patently false. But Herodian, writing about two decades later and moving in less exalted circles, had no qualms making such a claim. The author of the *Vita Heliogabali* ventures even further into absurd territory, alleging that penis size was a defining selection criterion for high political office.

[50] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 5.4; Caligula: Suetonius, *Vita Caligulae* 52; Cassius Dio 59.26.6-7; Nero: Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 21.3; Cassius Dio 63.9.5.

[51] *HA*, *Vita Heliogabali* 26.3-5.

In case of the effeminacy theme, it is actually the contemporary Cassius Dio who makes some of the most elaborate and extravagant claims. However, it should be noted that several of the things he alleges, such as Elagabalus's submissive conduct in his relations with Hierocles and Zoticus, would have occurred in the secluded environment of the emperor's private quarters, and would therefore have been based on little but rumour and hearsay. Allegations that the young man wished to castrate himself or have a vagina implanted in his body would have been even harder to verify, since these wishes never materialized. Therefore, claims about Elagabalus's public appearances aside, Dio had a lot more leeway here to spin fancy tales than he had in case of the regime's political appointments. Herodian and the *Vita Heliogabali* abandoned the Sardanapalus template which played such an important role in Dio's account, preferring to place different accents in their narratives. In Herodian, Elagabalus's effeminate dress and make-up are remarked upon, but not developed into a major theme, whereas the *Vita Heliogabali* appears more interested in tall tales about the teenager's *luxuria* and practical jokes, while losing the 'Oriental' aspect of his effeminacy.

As the literary fate of Elagabalus attests, little stood between a dead emperor and unbridled vilification. The young ruler's character assassination in the annals of history was not a coordinated effort, but branched out in various directions. Some of the initial allegations were picked up and embellished over time, while others faded away, to be replaced by new scandalous stories. Each author played his own game, although their toolboxes contained many of the same tropes and conventions. The resulting portraits are painted in different colours, but express the same hostility. There may not have been many ways to be a 'good' emperor in ancient literature, but there were plenty of ways to be a 'bad' one.

Amsterdam, 11 August 2023