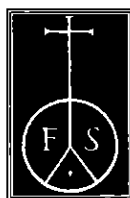


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THE CHALLENGE OF ANICONISM: ELAGABALUS AND ROMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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MOST of us will wish for a less unpleasant way of dieing: «Next they fell upon Elagabalus himself and slew him in a latrine in which he had taken refuge. Then his body was dragged through the streets, and the soldiers further insulted it by thrusting it into a sewer. But since the sewer chanced to be too small to admit the corpse, they attached a weight to it to keep it from floating, and hurled it from the Aemilian Bridge into the Tiber, in order that it might never be buried. The body was also dragged around the Circus before it was thrown into the Tiber.»¹ The *Historia Augusta's* narrative of the events taking place in Rome in the year 222 follows roughly the lines of the descriptions provided by other sources: Herodian, Cassius Dio, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius.² The logic behind such untold cruelties is straightforward: a bad emperor faces a bad end, and an emperor as monstrous as Elagabalus – that is how I will call him in the following for the sake of simplicity – requires, no wonder, a particularly disgraceful death.³

The reasons why the senatorial and equestrian elites who were largely responsible for the composition of historical narratives wanted to have a deceased emperor pegged as 'bad' were manifold.⁴ Sufficient could be a simple change of dynasty by means of usurpation. If for this or another reason the successor preferred to dissociate himself from his direct predecessor, historiographers were well-advised to vilify the deceased emperor. However, senators themselves were – at least at the beginning of the imperial period – a strong pressure-group which could bring about a bloody change in the empire's top position. Whatever the reason, taking

¹ HA *Elag.* 17, 1-3: *post hoc in eum impetus factus est atque in latrina ad quam confugerat occisus, tractus deinde per publicum; addita iniuria cadaveri est, ut id in cloacam milites mitterent. sed cum non cepisset cloaca fortuito, per pontem Aemilium, adnexo pondere ne fluitaret, in Tiberim abiectum est, ne umquam sepe- liri posset. tractum est cadaver eius etiam per Circi spatia, priusquam in Tiberim praecipitaretur.*

² Hdt. v 8, 8-10; C.D. LXXX 20, 2 (Xiph.); Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 23, 3; Eutr. viii 22. See also Hier. *chron.* 2238; Oros. *hist.* vii 18, 5; Zos. I 11, 1.

³ On the presentation of Elagabalus' death in Roman historiography T. Arand, *Das schmäbliche Ende. Der Tod des schlechten Kaisers und seine literarische Gestaltung in der römischen Historiographie*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, 230-232.

⁴ On memory sanctions in imperial Rome H.I. Flower, *The art of forgetting. Disgrace and oblivion in Roman political culture*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 2006, 115-159; on Domitian *ibid.*, 235-237. The question of to what extent Roman imperial historiography could express oppositional views is discussed by D. Timpe, *Geschichtsschreibung und Prinzipatsopposition*, in *Antike Geschichtsschreibung. Studien zur Historiographie*, Darmstadt 2007, 237-258, 249-250. On Roman historiography in the imperial period in general M. Hose, *Erneuerung der Vergangenheit. Die Historiker im Imperium Romanum von Florus bis Cassius Dio*, Stuttgart 1994; A. Mehl, *Römische Geschichtsschreibung. Grundlagen und Entwicklungen eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 2001, 112-114.

revenge on a dead ruler by imposing memory sanctions (of whatever kind) upon him was common practice in Roman political action and writing.⁵

Roman historiographers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries had a broad range of tools at hand in order to characterise a deceased ruler as a 'bad emperor'. The archetypical bad emperor was cruel (like Caligula, Domitian and Commodus who all had massacred senators by the hundreds), decadent (like Nero who indulged in unprecedented luxury), sexually abnormal (like Commodus who was a regular in Rome's brothels and like Caracalla who reportedly *suam matrem habuit*⁶), overtly mad (like Caligula who declared his horse a senator) – or all at the same time.⁷ The reason why hardly any polity in history suffered from as many inept rulers as the Roman Empire lies in the principate's unwritten constitution, where the chief *arcanum imperii* – that the emperor was in fact a military dictator whose power rested upon the legionaries' lances – was an open, but only tacitly admitted secret: in order to peacefully die in his bed, an emperor had to find an appropriate tone when communicating with the empire's chief pressure-groups, the senators and the soldiers in the first place, *plebs urbana*, equestrian order⁸ and local provincial elites to a lesser degree. Did he fail, the situation could easily run out of control. A historical narrative stigmatising an Emperor provides strong evidence that something in the communication between the emperor and the senators went terribly wrong: thus Caligula, when he made explicit the hitherto implicit imbalance in power and social status between himself and the senators, was doomed to death; so was Domitian when he revamped the princeps' job description to that of an absolute monarch;⁹ and so were Nero and Commodus

⁵ Flower, *The art of forgetting*, 115-275.

⁶ Eutr. VIII 20.

⁷ M. Sommer, *Dominus et deus. Domitian und die Nemesis der Macht*, «Damals» 37, 2005, 6, 60-65; Id., *Cäsarenwahnsinn. Teil 1: Der Narr im Purpur*, «Damals» 38, 2006, 12, 60-67; Id., *Cäsarenwahnsinn. Teil 2: Kaiser Elagabal*, «Damals» 19, 2007, 1, 64-71. More specifically on Caligula now A. Winterling, *Caligula. Eine Biographie*, München 2003; on Commodus O. Hekster, *Commodus. An emperor at the crossroads*, Amsterdam 2002.

⁸ As pointed out repeatedly by E. Flaig: *Den Kaiser herausfordern. Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, 174-207; *Wie Kaiser Nero die Akzeptanz bei der Plebs urbana verlor. Eine Fallstudie zum politischen Gerücht im Principat*, «Historia» 52, 2003, 351-372. On political interaction between emperor and *plebs urbana* in the arena E. Flaig, *An den Grenzen des Römerseins. Die Gladiatur aus historisch-anthropologischer Sicht*, in W. Eßbach (Hg.), *wir/ihr/sie. Identität und Alterität in Theorie und Methode, Identitäten und Alteritäten*, Würzburg 2000; Id., *Ritualisierte Politik. Zeichen, Gesten und Herrschaft im Alten Rom*, Göttingen 2003, 232-260. The concept has recently been applied and refined by G. Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians. Herrschaftsdarstellung im Principat*, Stuttgart 2004, 17-29. However, local elites do not feature in Flaig's model. In my opinion, they form a fourth group communicating with the emperor.

⁹ On Domitian and his attempt to change the political layout of the principate B.W. Jones, *Domitian and the senatorial order. A prosopographical study of Domitian's relationship with the Senate*, A. D. 81-96, Philadelphia 1979; Id., *The Emperor Domitian*, London 1992; P. Zanker, *Domitian's palace on the Palatine and the imperial image*, in A.K. Bowman et al. (Hg.), *Representations of empire. Rome and the Mediterranean world*, Proceedings of the British Academy, Bd. 114, London 2002, 105-130; J.D. Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman succession crisis of AD 96-99*, London 2003; P. Zanker, *Domitians Palast auf dem Palatin als Monument kaiserlicher Selbstdarstellung*, in A. Hoffmann – U. Wulf (Hg.), *Die Kaiserpaläste auf dem Palatin in Rom*, Mainz 2004, 86-99; Sommer, *Dominus et deus*.

when they reinvented the emperor's role as that of an artist respectively a gladiator.¹⁰

So, what went wrong in Elagabalus' case? To be sure, the emperor was exceptionally young when he, just 14 years old, came to power in 218.¹¹ He was the representative of a dynasty with whom the *ordo senatorius* was at odds since Septimius Severus, the husband of Elagabalus' great-aunt Julia Domna, had favoured the military to the detriment of the old ruling class. He was finally a usurper who had revolted against the short-lived emperor Macrinus, the first equestrian in the imperial purple. Elagabalus enjoyed the support of the majority of the soldiery; some saw in him a reborn Caracalla. But all this did not necessarily make him a particularly unacceptable ruler in the eyes of the senators.

The fragmentary final book of Cassius Dio's history, our main source for the events between 218 and 222, provides little information as to why the senators developed such a fervent aversion against the young man on the Palatine hill. The Bithynian senator presents the usual mix of sexual abnormality, insane ferocity and violation of everything which passed for decent and decorous. The religious aspects of Elagabalus' 'insanity' are reported rather incidentally: Dio notes circumcision, abstention from «swine's flesh» and «his introducing a foreign god into Rome or in his exalting him in very strange ways»¹². To Dio, the cult of the god Elagabalus was just another form of sexual perversion, and his description of the cult practice features the same voyeurism that is characteristic for the entire episode: Elagabalus, according to Dio, «had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether, but that desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy.»¹³ Elagabalus' prime offence consisted, as far as religion is concerned, «in his placing him [the god Elagabalus] even before Jupiter himself and causing himself to be voted his priest.»¹⁴ The *Historia Augusta's*, Eutropius' and Aurelius Victor's narratives, which are largely based on Dio's account, roughly follow the same lines.¹⁵

However, quite a different perspective is provided by Herodian who – unlike Dio – presents Elagabalus as a systematically acting mind determined to overturn Rome's pantheon. Herodian's Elagabalus, though a hard-core fanatic, is intellectually capable of working out a strategy of cultural and religious infiltration: when on his way to Rome, he orders a painting to be made of himself and to be sent to Rome where it was put up in the senate house as «he was anxious that the senate and people of Rome should get used to seeing his dress, and to test out their reactions to the sight before he arrived.»¹⁶ Herodian circulates the usual stories on cruelties and perversions, but in his account, offences such as Elagabalus' marriage with a Vestal Virgin¹⁷, the removal of the palladium from the Temple of Vesta to his own palace¹⁸ and the execution of «very many distin-

¹⁰ On Nero J. Malitz, *Nero*, München 1999, 40-50; on Commodus Hekster, *Commodus*, 137-162.

¹¹ Hdn. v 3, 3.

¹² C.D. LXXX 11, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For a full examination of Dio's narrative M. Sommer, *Elagabal - Wege zur Konstruktion eines 'schlechten' Kaisers*, SCI 23, 2004, 95-110, 100-106.

¹⁶ Hdn. v 5, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* v 6, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* v 6, 3.

guished and wealthy men»¹⁹ all form part of a wicked master plan. Later in his reign, Elagabalus sparks off a veritable clash of civilisations within the *Domus Augustana*, when Julia Mamaea, his aunt and the mother of his Caesar Alexianus, decides to entrust professional teachers with her son's *paideia* in Greek, Latin, philosophy and wrestling. The emperor, enraged, because he wanted to make Alexianus a priest, removes the teachers from court, has some of them killed and appoints new supervisors for his cousin: «charioteers and comedy actors and mimers».²⁰

In contrast to Cassius Dio, the *Historia Augusta* and the remaining sources, Herodian provides us with an explanation for Elagabalus' behaviour, an explanation that employs a rudimentary theory of socialisation. When he first introduces Elagabalus and his cousin Alexianus, he begins with a lengthy digression on the temple of his ancestral town Emesa and the cult of the sun god Elagabalus, which is worth quoting in full:

«Both boys were dedicated to the service of the sun god whom the local inhabitants worship under its Phoenician name of Elagabalus. There was a huge temple built there, richly ornamented with gold and silver and valuable stones. The cult extended not just to the local inhabitants either. Satraps of all the adjacent territories and barbarian kings tried to outdo each other in sending costly dedications to the god every year. There was no actual man-made statue of the god (*ágalma cheiropoieton*), the sort Greeks and Roman put up; but there was an enormous stone (*lithos mégistos*), rounded at the base and coming to a point on the top, conical in shape and black. 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. Bassianus (Elagabalus), the elder of the two boys, was a priest of this god (as the elder of the two had been put in charge of the cult). He used to appear in public in barbarian clothes, wearing a long-sleeved *chiton* that hung to his feet and was gold and purple. His legs from the waist down to the tips of his toes were completely covered similarly with garments ornamented with gold and purple. On his head he wore a crown of precious stones glowing with different colours.»²¹

What looks, at first glance, like an unprejudiced description of the Temple of Emesa, its cult and deity, the god Elagabalus, turns out to be a subtle narratological strategy of discrediting the emperor Elagabalus. The thread of the digression is the profound otherness of the deity and its cult as seen from a Greco-Roman perspective. From this point of view, the emperor, who was raised as its high priest, looks, by all standards, like a barbarian. For a cultural conservative like Herodian, for whom M. Aurelius embodied everything an emperor could aspire to,²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.* v 6, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.* v 7, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.* v 3, 3-6.

²² M. Zimmermann, *Kaiser und Ereignis. Studien zum Geschichtswerk Herodians*, München 1999, 23-28; B. Kuhn-Chen, *Geschichtskonzeptionen griechischer Historiker im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr. Untersuchungen zu den Werken von Appian, Cassius Dio und Herodian*, Frankfurt am Main 2002.

the 'barbarian' Elagabalus was the antithesis of the classical Greek *paideia* he held in so much esteem. Herodian's Elagabal was, as it were, the writing on the wall that announced an empire quite different from the classical *oikoumene* Greco-Roman intellectuals like Aelius Aristides had in mind when they praised Rome for its cultural achievements.

Herodian – who may well be a native of nearby Antioch – emphasises the importance of the cult: the temple is «huge» and «richly ornamented», it caters not only for the local residents, but attracts worshippers from further afield, including «satraps» and «kings». This is certainly not a petty cult as they flourish in a great many provincial towns; Herodian's Emesa is a religious centre of prime importance whose catchment area reaches far beyond the imperial frontiers into Partho-Sassanian territory. The high priest of such a cult is a powerful figure, his prominence is highlighted by his habit and attire. At the same time, the attributes again echo his cultural strangeness: no Greek or Roman priest appears in public in a similar robe. The precious material reveals an inclination to the ostentatious display of wealth which, for Greeks and Romans, left a dodgy taste in the mouth. However, the most important of all factors designed to create the notion of otherness is the aniconic character of the cult image – the absence of an *agalma cheiropoieton* in favour of a conical *lithos mégistos* which was not the representation of a deity, but the god himself and «worshipped as though it were sent from heaven». Herodian makes it perfectly clear to his readers that, in his eyes, the worshippers of such a stone – a *baitylos* – are misguided: «[...] 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.»²³

The cult of the sun god Elagabalus – who, judging from his name, started his career as a mountain deity – was hardly Herodian's invention. Nor are the details he lists *per se* unreliable because he uses them to discredit god, cult and emperor. They are, by and large, confirmed by other evidence, the coins issued by Elagabalus himself, in the first place. However, what matters here is not the 'true' nature of Emesa's religion (to which we will – this is my strong conviction – never find a clue anyway²⁴), but Rome's reaction to what I have called, in the title of my paper, the challenge of aniconism. Why is, in Herodian's eyes, the cult of Emesa and – for a Roman citizen taking pride of his Greek *paideia* – its striking lack of an iconic cult image a pivotal explanans for the Emperor Elagabalus' eccentric performance?

²³ On aniconic cult images in the Roman Near East and their perception in Greco-Roman literature see now M. Gaifman, *The aniconic image of the Roman Near East*, in T. Kaizer (Ed.), *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Period*, Leiden 2008, 37-72.

²⁴ For such attempts see T. Optendrenk, *Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal im Spiegel der Historia Augusta*, Habelts Dissertationsdrucke. Reihe Alte Geschichte, Bd. 6, Bonn 1969; R. Turcan, *Héliogabale et le sacre du soleil*, Paris 1985; M. Pietrzykowski, *Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, in W. Haase (Hg.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Bd. 2. 16. 3, Berlin 1986, 1806-1825; M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, «Historia» Einzelschriften, Bd. 62, Stuttgart 1989.

In his judgement of the cult, which Elagabalus doubtlessly tried to implement in Rome, Herodian was hardly alone. In Dio's bill of indictment, the attempt to replace Jupiter Optimus Maximus by the Syrian deity as the principal god of the Roman pantheon is the main charge. Still more telling are the events in the immediate aftermath of Elagabalus' assassination in Rome. Still in the early years of his reign, Elagabalus' successor Severus Alexander – his cousin Alexianus – issued a coin with a six-columned temple surrounded by a portico on the revers. According to the legend, the temple was dedicated to IOVI VLTORI. Scholars have conjectured for quite some time, that political-religious 'reaction' against the 'reforms' instigated by Elagabalus was determining for such a dedication. The first to put forward the idea that Severus Alexander had rededicated the sanctuary originally built by his cousin was, in 1911, Paul Bigot.²⁵ The French archaeologist identified Elagabalus' sanctuary whose existence is attested by various historical narratives, with the Vigna Barberini, the platform towering the north-easterly slope of the Palatine Hill.²⁶ Until recently, Bigot's hypothesis has been no more than pure, though intriguing speculation.

From 1985 to 1998, the *École Française de Rome* has carried out extensive fieldwork on the site overlooking the southern part of the Forum, the Arch of Constantine and the Colosseum. The excavation confirmed that a large temple was built on the belvedere in the Severan period. The site had previously been occupied by a garden which dates back to the reign of Hadrian. The *peripteros* with 8×12 columns, measuring 40×59 meters, was, like the temple depicted on the coin, surrounded by a substantial portico, measuring 160×114 meters. Very little of the building itself survived, but the archaeologists were able to trace substantial remains of the foundations, some of them reaching a depth of more than 10 meters. Some fragments of the decoration have been uncovered as well: they resemble forms known from the Hellenistic architecture of Asia Minor. The surrounding, rather austere garden – which contrasts with the sacred groves characteristic for Greco-Roman sanctuaries – may have paid tribute to the tradition of Adonis gardens popular in Syro-Phoenician temple complexes. The building was, with an estimated overall height of 31 meters, one of the largest temples in the city of Rome. Given its prominent location overlooking the Forum and the depression of the Colosseum, the temple was a true landmark in the capital's townscape.²⁷

The underlying layer of brick fragments (dating mainly from the late Antonine period) excludes a construction period prior to the reign of Commodus. The extant fragments of the decoration substantiate (but admittedly do not conclusively prove) that the temple was built in the Severan period, most likely during the

²⁵ P.-M.-A. Bigot, *Le temple de Jupiter Ultor et la Vigne Barberini*, «*Bullettino della Commissione Comunale di Roma*» 39, 1911, 80-85.

²⁶ C.D. LXXX 11, 1; *HA Elag.* 1, 6; *Hdn.* V 6, 6.

²⁷ N. André et al., *Vom "schwebenden Garten" zum Tempelbezirk. Die Untersuchungen der École Française de Rome in der Vigna Barberini*, in A. Hoffmann - U. Wulf (Hg.), *Die Kaiserpaläste auf dem Palatin in Rom*, Mainz 2006², 112-143, 129-138.

reign of Caracalla or later. The only sacred building project in the capital of which we know for sure that it was undertaken in those years was the *Elagabalium*. The image on Severus Alexander's coin is consistent with the archaeological evidence from the Vigna Barberini. Moreover, it is only logical to assume that Elagabalus, when he put into praxis his project of imposing the Syrian god on Rome, was determined to plan and build big – and in the shortest possible construction time. This suffices to explain both, the extraordinary scale and the amazingly early completion of the temple probably by mid summer 220 when – if we believe Herodian – the first of the annual processions seems to have taken place which escorted the stone-god to his temple.²⁸ If the assumption that the remains uncovered in the Vigna Barberini belong the *Elagabalium* is correct, the annual ascension of the god to his home on the Palatinus Mons was a magnificent display of the deity's power.

Why did Rome's elite, which had, since the Roman Republic, welcomed in their city countless religions with origins vaguely in the East, but later adopted by Rome – the cults of Kybele, Ma-Bellona, Atargatis, Tanit-Caelestis, Ba'al, Iuppiter Heliopolitanus, Adonis, Iuppiter Dolichenus, Isis, Mithras and numerous others –, react with such hostility on the introduction of the Emesene god who was, after all, just another 'oriental' deity imported to Rome? What was so exceptional about Elagabalus that he was perceived as a threat?

If we want to get to the bottom of things, we need to return to the texts. Their criticism seems to focus on three aspects of Elagabalus' implementing his god in Rome. First and most obviously, the observers claim to be appalled by «his placing him even before Jupiter himself.»²⁹ One may argue that such a degradation of the Roman state gods did not matter much in a period when traditional Roman religion was merely a shadow of itself and worshipping specific gods became increasingly a question of 'subculture'. But the point here appears to be a different one: the god Elagabalus was perceived as a threat because his appearance seemed to doom the whole concept of a state pantheon. Behind the meteor stone loomed a brave new world of heno-, if not proper monotheism. This threat was closely intertwined with the second menace coming from the imported cult: the priesthood of the emperor.³⁰ The new ruler styled himself as a high priest in the first place – being the Roman Emperor was clearly his second job. Thus, theocratic 'representation' (as Jan Assmann puts it), the most common model of political theology in the pre-Hellenistic East, was the second threat that loomed behind

²⁸ Hdn. V 6, 6 mentions the annual event, but no date. As the procession appears to have taken place at least twice, it must have happened in the years 220 and 221 (since Elagabalus was already dead in mid-summer 222). According to Herodian (*ibid.*), the temple was «large» (*mégiston*) and «magnificent» (*polyteléstaton*); it was constructed in a «suburb» (*proasteio*), which may well refer to the Palatine Hill which was central, but not densely built up. However, the information provided by Herodian should be treated with due caution, as the historiographer probably never saw the Roman topography with his own eyes. In addition, the temple may not have been fully completed when the procession took place for the first time.

²⁹ C.D. LXXX 11, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

the *baitylos*.³¹ To the senatorial aristocracy who, under the first Severan Emperors, had to surrender much of their previous power to the emerging military elite, such an attempt to introduce – through the back door, as it were – a new paradigm of monarchic legitimacy meant a deadly menace, indeed.

The third threat was represented by the stone itself, and again this facet is closely interlaced with the two other motives: the anthropomorphic character of cult images in Roman religion was not just an aesthetic nicety, but bore immediately upon the character of that religion itself. For a Roman, divineness was no absolute category. As Ittai Gradel has pointed out in his investigation of the Roman imperial cult, the attribution of divine status was no more and no less than the expression of an immense difference in status and rank.³² The slave could worship his master, the *cliens* his *patronus*, the subject his emperor and everybody the Olympic Gods. Where divineness is a reflection of social difference, there is no real difference in substance between 'human' and 'divine' beings – the categories derived from modern religions and their dogmatic superstructures turn out to be anachronistic when applied to phenomena such as the imperial cult. The Roman concept of 'relative' divineness and the Empire's institutional framework were perfectly compatible – religion reflected hierarchy, most visibly in the amazing ritual of Roman sacrifice: sacrifice assigns to everyone present his precise position in the pecking order, from the addressed deity to the most humble of participants. The size of portions and the order according to which they were allocated depended on social rank and nothing else.³³ The senators had every reason to be happy with a public religion that mapped and secured a social building in which they inhabited the comfortable penthouse. What they had to fret was a theocratic order in which the ruler could rely on a transcendent source of legitimacy – precisely the kind of order that loomed behind Elagabalus and his *baitylos*.

In Rome, the anthropomorphic cult image was an accurate visual expression of 'relative' divineness, one that survives, by the way, till the present day in Christianity. Where the difference between divine and non-divine was one of rank and not of substance, the objects of worship had to be the images of the worshippers. An aniconic god who took the shape of a conic meteor stone was the obvious negation of such a principle – and therefore dreaded by those who had plenty to lose. A god without any human shape could not be pinpointed within the pecking order – he was a supernatural being *sui generis*, a dangerous outsider who, unlike other foreign gods, could not be assigned a place within the order by means of simple *interpretatio*. This is precisely the reason why religious systems that assert a holistic claim on man and society, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, denounce 'idolatry' so vehemently – and, in the extreme case, try to enforce periodical bans on images altogether.

³¹ J. Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002, 37-45; Id., *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, München 2006.

³² I. Gradel, *Emperor worship and Roman religion*, Oxford 2002, 4-8; 25-26.

³³ J. Rüpke, *Die Religion der Römer. Eine Einführung*, München 2006, 146-148.

Such considerations were far from the Roman senators in the Severan period. For them, the disgraceful death of the Emperor Elagabalus came as an immense relief. Accordingly they had their gods take revenge on the Syrian strangers: both, the Emperor and his god. The *Elagabalium* was converted into a temple for Jupiter Ultor. In Rome, Elagabalus' attempt to introduce his ancestral god from Emesa was not the last experiment with a transcendental legitimation for imperial power. However, it was, till the present day, the last experiment with religious aniconism. The dogmatic masterminds of the Vatican will know why.

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