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WAS ELAGABALUS A TRANS WOMAN? CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON THE RECLASSIFICATION OF A ROMAN COIN BY AN ENGLISH MUSEUM

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Abstract

In 2023, news reports covered the decision of the North Hertfordshire Museum, in England, to display a coin of the Roman emperor known as Elagabalus alongside other items from its LGBTQIA+ collection. The decision was based on the interpretation that Elagabalus was, in fact, a transgender woman. Since 2015, I have been conducting research on Elagabalus and developing hypotheses about their practices. Given the media attention surrounding the museum's curatorial choice, I found it relevant to systematize my reflections and engage with the museum's decision, which constitutes the central aim of this article. Additionally, I present new reflections on possible interpretations of the emperor's religious practices in relation to issues of body and sex. Finally, I explore the potential and limitations of a queer reading of Elagabalus.

Keywords

Elagabalus; Roman emperors; Gender Studies; queer theory.

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Resumo

Em 2023, reportagens noticiaram a decisão do Museu de North Hertfordshire, na Inglaterra, de expor uma moeda do imperador romano conhecido como Heliogábalo juntamente com outros itens de seu acervo LGBTQIA+. A decisão fundamentou-se na interpretação de que Heliogábalo seria, na realidade, uma mulher transgênero. Desde 2015, venho desenvolvendo pesquisas sobre Heliogábalo e levantando hipóteses sobre suas práticas. A partir da repercussão midiática envolvendo a curadoria do referido museu, considerei pertinente sistematizar minhas reflexões e dialogar com a decisão do museu, o que constitui o objetivo central deste artigo. Além disso, trago algumas reflexões novas sobre possibilidades de leitura da relação das práticas religiosas do imperador com questões sobre corpo e sexo. Por fim, exploro as potencialidades e limites de uma leitura queer de Heliogábalo.

Palavras-chave

Heliogábalo; imperadores romanos; Estudos de Gênero; teoria queer.

Introduction

In November 2023, online newspaper articles reported that the North Hertfordshire Museum in Hitchin, a town north of London, would refer to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, known as Elagabalus, with the feminine pronouns "she" and "her."[2] The museum, which has a coin belonging to the emperor, decided to change the information about the item after concluding that he was, in fact, a transgender woman. The articles report that, from then on, the coin began to be displayed among LGBTQIA+ items in the collection. According to the BBC's online article: "*A museum spokesperson said it was 'only polite and respectful to be sensitive to identifying pronouns for people in the past.'*"

The news sparked controversy on social media. Out of curiosity, I read the comments on Brazilian Instagram pages. The main argument of those opposed claims that the museum's attitude is the result of modern identitarianism, anachronistic for Antiquity, or even postmodern readings of history. Regarding the latter opinion, there are comments such as: "*Help, we are going to rewrite history based on postmodern theory*" – originally written as "*pós-moderne*" in Portuguese, where the ending *e* emphasizes the use of neutral language. Another comment followed the same lines: "*Postmodernism is destroying history.*"

Among the comments defending the museum's position, we have statements such as: "*The museum is using the correct pronoun, and you are going against that decision in this publication.*" There are also comments that express personal identification with the proposal, recognizing in the past possibilities for the legitimization of contemporary gender identities, as revealed by statements such as*: "I said we were here from the beginning*" or "*you can cry, but* todes *[Portuguese word for "all" with neutral language] has always existed.*" Additionally, there are comments that demonstrate some knowledge of homoerotic relationships between men in the ancient Roman context—relationships that were not necessarily understood as deviations at the time—although such comments often fail to clearly distinguish the fundamental contrasts between the ethical systems of Antiquity and current conceptions of gender identity, which are structured around sexual practices, self-identification, and compulsory heteronormativity. In this regard, I highlight the following comment: "*What the Roman Empire had the*

[2] Links to some articles: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-67484645; https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/11/21/uk-museum-reclassifies-roman-emperor-as-transgender; https://uk.news.yahoo.com/roman-emperor-reclassified-trans-woman-100913080.html; https://www.out.com/news/roman-emperor-elagabalus-transgender.

most of were gay people, trans people (both willing and forced), and effeminate straight men. But a society deprived of human history isn't ready for that conversation."

There are also comments that see the museum's attitude as a sign of patriarchy that reclassifies a woman—"born male"—as trans, but would not reclassify a man — "born female", according to the comment—as a trans man. In other words, the problem will always be misogyny, according to this interpretation, where even trans women take precedence over trans men. One response to this comment, in the post, suggests reclassifying Joan of Arc as a trans man.

As can be seen, there is a discursive clash between those who want to find modern gender identities in the past and seek identification in the ancients for their standards that differ from contemporary ones, and those who perceive anachronisms. Among the latter, some perceive such ideas as interpretations that jeopardize the foundations of historical knowledge, emptying notions of evidence in order to give voice to what is being called "identitarians."

As a researcher who has been studying Elagabalus for several years, with an emphasis on gender issues and Syrian religious practices associated with their figure, I felt motivated to reflect on the recent public discussion. Thus, this work proposes to analyze the theme based on a critical interpretation of historical sources from the Roman context, while seeking to establish possible connections between gender, cultural practices, and representations of Syrian peoples in Antiquity, Elagabalus' region of origin. I do not intend to enter into the debate about the so-called "identitarianism" and the interpretation of classification seen as the result of postmodern analyses. I would mainly like to draw attention to where the idea that Elagabalus wanted to be a woman came from and how we need to critically examine the sources, seeking similarities, but also discursive clashes. I believe that by knowing about the clashes of the past and understanding them in their context, we can better understand modern disputes and reflect on better ways of coexisting. I therefore propose that these reflections be used as knowledge to improve our attitudes towards differences. In this sense, I will conclude by presenting some of the potentialities and limitations of a queer reading of Elagabalus.

I will begin with a brief presentation of the character and the textual sources from the Roman Empire that have survived to this day. I find it interesting to call Elagabalus a character, as this brings us to our first problem, which is how fiction, reality, and contextual intentions are mixed in what has survived about this ancient ruler.

About the texts on Elagabalus from the Roman Empire and their authors

Elagabalus ruled the Roman Empire between 218 and 222, ascending to the throne at the age of 14 and reigning until his death at the age of 18. He was a member of the Severan dynasty (193–235), an imperial house of Roman-Syrian and Roman-African origins. The Roman-African roots were linked to Septimius Severus (193–211), founder of the dynasty and a native of the province of Africa Proconsularis. The Roman-Syrian connections came from Septimius' wife, Julia Domna, who belonged to the clerical aristocracy of the city of Emesa (now Homs, Syria), the birthplace of Elagabalus. He was the son of Syrian parents, his mother, Julia Soaemias, being the niece of Julia Domna.

Elagabalus' rise to power was a direct result of the political maneuvering of his grandmother, Julia Maesa, sister of Julia Domna. After the assassination of Emperor Caracalla (211–217)—son of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna—by order of the then praetorian prefect, Macrinus, Julia Maesa organized a plot to restore the dynasty's power. As part of this strategy, the narrative that Elagabalus was Caracalla's son was spread, which gave him legitimacy. The plan had the crucial support of *Legio III Gallica,* stationed in Syria.

The young man became known as Elagabalus in the tradition that followed his reign. His name was *Varius Avitus Bassianus*[3], and he became *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* when he was elevated to emperor, making a reference to Caracalla, whose imperial name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Caracalla's choice of name referred to a rapprochement between the Severi and the Antonini. The Latinized name *Heliogabalus* or *Elagabalus* comes from a later tradition, as we see in *Vita Heliogabali,* from Historia Augusta, and refers to Elagabal, the sun god of his hometown, to whom he dedicated himself as a priest after becoming emperor.[4] In other words, the name *Heliogabalus* in the Historia Augusta is a mockery, an offense to the

[3] *Varius* referred to his father (*Sextus Varius Marcellus*); *Avito* referred to his maternal grandfather (*Julius Avitus Alexianus)* and *Bassianus* was the cognomen of the family from Emesa (Icks, 2013: 59).

[4] Although in the Historia Augusta the name that appears is *Heliogabalus*, Elagabalus is the form most commonly used in modern English historiography to refer to the emperor. Elagabal (*Ilāh hag-Gabal* in Arabic) is the standard translation used to refer to the sun god of Emesa. However, in Earnest Cary's English translation from the Greek, which is used in this article, Elagabalus is employed to refer to the god.

emperor, who is seen in this collection of biographies as worshipping his god in an exotic and exaggerated way.

A first reflection comes to mind here regarding the English museum's attitude: if we really wanted to rehabilitate the figure of this emperor, wouldn't it be better to give him his imperial name, as is traditionally done with Augustus, for example? I believe so.

But let us dive into the topic of this article, the association of Elagabalus with femininity. From the texts that have survived to the present day, everything indicates that the issue of the effeminate emperor may have begun, in the texts, with the writings of Cassius Dio, a senator and historian who was politically demoted by Elagabalus, his contemporary. In another text I wrote, willing to investigate whether there were direct reasons for Cassius Dio to have created such negative images of Elagabalus, which reverberated in other texts in different ways according to genres and intentions, I analyzed the historian's *cursus honorum*, pointing to a political demotion in Elagabalus' government.[5] I will comment on this shortly, but first it is important to present the other texts that deal with Elagabalus in the context of the Roman Empire and that have survived to this day in order to consider the difference between Cassius Dio and his possibly inaugural character on the theme of effeminacy.

Among the other texts of the Empire on Elagabalus, the first that should be mentioned is Herodian's *History of the Roman Empire*. The other text is the aforementioned *Vita Heliogabali* from the Historia Augusta. Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado (2017) believes that there was another *life* of Elagabalus written by Marius Maximus, a Roman biographer who, in the early decades of the third century, wrote a series of biographies of twelve emperors in Latin, imitating Suetonius' model. Unfortunately, this work has not survived. According to Arrizabalaga y Prado (2017), the work of Marius Maximus would have been used as a source by Cassius Dio, who was not in Rome at the time of Elagabalus' reign. Therefore, some of the information that Cassius Dio presents may have come from Marius Maximus. Unfortunately, there is no way to measure Marius Maximus' influence on Cassius Dio. Therefore, from what has come down to us, the first text on Elagabalus is that of Cassius Dio. But let us first look at Elagabalus in Herodian's text and in *The Life of Heliogabalus* from the Historia Augusta before we get to Cassius Dio, the "icing on the cake."

[5] See Silva, 2024.

Herodian lived between 180 and 250, held political and administrative positions in the Empire (*History of the Roman Empire*, 1, 2, 5), but in positions lower than Cassius Dio, and wrote the eight books of the *History of the Roman Empire* around 240, covering from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the rise of Gordian III. Little is known about Herodian's life. His origins are uncertain, with some authors believing he was born in Syria (Mazzarino, 1974, apud Gonçalves, 1996: 54) and others who argue that he came from a city in Asia Minor, in Anatolia (Cassola, 1967; Torres Esbarranch, 1985; Roques, 1990, apud Gonçalves, 1996: 54). Regarding the historian's social position, Santo Mazzarino (1974, apud Gonçalves, 1996: 56) argues that Herodian was a freedman, considering him a court writer from the Severan period, which seems unlikely to me given his lack of knowledge of details. I also do not believe that Herodian was a freedman, as he criticizes Commodus and Elagabalus for elevating their freedmen to important positions (*History of the Roman Empire,* 1, 12, 3; 5, 7, 7). On the other hand, Herodian praises the fact that Macrinus managed to become emperor even though he was an equestrian (*History of the Roman Empire*, 5, 1, 5), so he may have been an equestrian procurator. This can also be inferred from the knowledge that Herodian displays, the result of his various travels, as well as his knowledge of fiscal matters. Thus, it is very possible that Herodian was an equestrian official in the Roman bureaucracy.

Certainly, Herodian's subordinate position in political and administrative functions in relation to Cassius Dio would mark his writings. For Herodian, the success or failure of a government depended on the character of the emperor, with his *paideia* being fundamental in this process (Van Etten, 2025: 30-31). Elagabalus, in this case, is presented in Herodian's fifth book as someone who did not receive a Greco-Roman education, did not follow the *mos maiorum* (ancestral customs), and, because he was too young, was inexperienced and manipulated. Unlike Cassius Dio, in Herodian's stories of Elagabalus, there is less emphasis on the emperor's excessive sex life, highlighting his inability to govern. Aspects of Elagabal' devotion and the influence of women in government, especially his grandmother Julia Maesa, are emphasized, precisely because of the ruler's young age. Perhaps the difference between Herodian's Elagabalus lies precisely in the interests of the historian, who was not a senator. Herodian is less concerned with Elagabalus' Syrian origins and how they were influencing both his customs, considered exotic, and his form of government, and especially the rise to power of Syrians and other men who were not part of the traditional elite, which we see receiving more attention in the narrative of Cassius Dio, a senator from the more traditional elite, who seems to have been harmed by this.

The Historia Augusta (*The Augustan History*), known as *HA*, is a series of stories about emperors, usurpers, pretenders to the imperial office, and Caesars, written in Latin. Unlike Herodian's text, and closer to Cassius Dio, *HA* follows the values of the traditional senatorial elite, having been written by someone close to the court, from a Roman-centric perspective (Machado, 2010).

The authorship and dating of *HA* have been debated since the late 19th century. Currently, there is no consensus on its dating, but there is a tendency to accept the late 4th century and the first half of the 5th century as most likely (Corassin, 1988: 160). Furthermore, this debate has been set aside, as greater attention has been given to reflecting on the fictional and historical nature of the work. *The Life of Heliogabalus* is one of the texts whose fictional nature is extremely debated and accepted.

In my analysis, unbridled living is the main theme that drives the text and guides the arguments in the biography of Elagabalus. In addition, it is essential to consider the tone of humor found in jokes, wordplay, character names, and intertextuality with other works known to the public. In this sense, *The Life of Heliogabalus* reinforces the portrayal of the protagonist within an already familiar pattern, the *cinaedus,* a figure depicted in Latin literature as effeminate and sexually penetrated, a deviant from the *vir*.[6] Humor is a key element in *The Life of Heliogabalus,* and facts and fiction about the young ruler are interwoven with strong satirical content.

But let us move on to the central point of the analysis: the writings of Cassius Dio on the figure of Elagabalus, which I consider to be the origin of the idea that the emperor wanted to be a woman, a representation recovered by the museum in 2023. In this context, it is worth examining who Cassius Dio was and what specific elements of his work contributed, in my reading, to influencing the subsequent construction of the emperor's

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[6] Intertextuality is very present in the text with the comedies of Plautus and Terence, but also with satirical writers such as Petronius (*The Life of Heliogabalus,* XXI, 5). *Satyricon* seems to me to have been a fundamental work in establishing the reader's recognition of Elagabalus' sexual deviations in order to present the emperor associated with the figure of the *cinaedus,* so well delineated in Petronius' text. Another interesting aspect would be Elagabalus' origin. In a study on parallels between *The Life of Heliogabalus* and Trimalchio's Feast in *Satyricon,* Cláudia Teixeira (2007) concludes that, in the scene, the idea is to laugh at the negative consequences of social mobility, and in the description of Elagabalus in the Historia Augusta, it is to highlight his Eastern origin, laughing at it. There are also parallels with the lives of bad emperors written by Suetonius. There are several references to Caligula, Nero, and Vitellius (*The Life of Heliogabalus,* 1, 1; 18, 4; 33, 1; 34, 1) and scenes from the life of Elagabalus in common with known elements about these emperors considered bad rulers (*The Life of Heliogabalus*, 14, 6; 23, 4; 26, 3; 31, 8).

image in Historia Augusta, leaving a lasting mark, albeit controversial and often distorted, on the historical character, whose traditional name, Elagabalus, is itself the result of a process of discursive construction.

Cassius Dio was born, possibly between 163 and 164, in Nicaea, an important city in the province of Bithynia. His family was wealthy and influential in local politics; his father, Cassius Apronianus, was a senator, consul, and also governor of the provinces of Lycia-Pamphylia, Cilicia, and Dalmatia. Cassius Dio had an interesting *cursus honorum,* reaching the high position of consul on two occasions.

Regarding Dio's positions under the emperors of the Severan dynasty, it is likely that he assumed his first consulship under Septimius Severus, after serving as praetor, in accordance with the traditional *cursus honorum*. Fergus Millar (1964) believes that this consulship took place between 205 and 206. We know from his own account (*Roman History,* 77, 17, 13-18, 1) that he was part of Caracalla's circle of advisors. He was governor of provinces, friend of the emperor, and consul for the second time during the reign of Severus Alexander (222-235), the successor to Elagabalus, whom Cassius Dio greatly values in his text. Under the rule of Elagabalus, Cassius Dio does not seem to have received any position, losing even the post of imperial advisor that he had held under the two previous emperors, Septimius and Caracalla. Therefore, as I sought to show in Silva (2024), Cassius Dio suffered a demotion during the reign of Elagabalus. Our emperor valued the presence of people from the Syrian circle in power, which must have greatly disturbed a traditional senator like Cassius Dio.[7] It is here, in my analysis, that lies the central point of his very negative portrayal of Elagabalus.

Elagabalus' immoderate behavior in various matters and activities is presented throughout the entirety of Dio's Book 80, the emperor's lack of clemency towards his enemies (80, 3; 80, 5, 1), his overriding of the titles granted by the Senate (80, 8, 1-3), Elagabalus' refusal to wear the traditional Roman clothing (80, 8, 3; 80, 11, 2; 80, 9, 2), his placing of Elagabal above Jupiter himself (80, 11, 1), his violation of the law by marrying a vestal virgin (80, 9, 3), his effeminacy (80, 5, 6; 80, 13; 80, 14, 3-4; 80, 16, 4), his numerous marriages (80, 9-10), his excessive homoerotic relationships (80,

[7] As Herz (2024) points out, the Severan emperors valued military support over senatorial approval and treated senators such as Cassius Dio and Marius Maximus, for example, with disdain. Contrary to Herz's statement, I prefer not to generalize that the Severans treated senators with disdain. However, in the Severan context, there was a great appreciation of military groups over more traditional senators and in favor of provincial elites, especially from Syria and during the reign of Elagabalus.

15, 1-4), and even a possible attempt to create a vagina on his own body (80, 11, 1; 80, 16, 7; 80, 17, 1).

It is important to understand that all of Cassius Dio statements in his portrayal of Elagabalus follow elements of the literary *topos* of *pessimus princeps*. In other words, they are part of the unfolding of a series of values that appeared as a recurring theme in the texts of the Principate and were a rhetorical tool aimed at reinforcing the philosophical, ethical, and political arguments of the traditional layers of the Senate. This *topos* involved: tyranny and authoritarianism, moral and political corruption, disrespect for the laws, traditional gods, and Roman customs (and in this sense, virility), and administrative incompetence. In the face of all these negative elements, I highlight that Dio's emphasis is on the emperor's feminine performativity.[8] Let us see, then.

Elagabalus' Feminine Associations: Source Criticism and Historical Verisimilitude

Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, 80, 17, 1) refers to Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus as Avitus and *False Antoninus*. The latter in order to disparage the relationship and the search for legitimacy linked to Caracalla and the Antonines. Cassius Dio also gives him a name that evokes feminine references and excessive use of sex: Sardanapalus (*Roman History,* 80, 1, 1; 11; 12).[9] Sardanapalus is known through the *Bibliotheca Historica* by Diodorus Siculus, a writer from the late 1st century BCE and early 1st century CE, and, according to Diodorus, he was an Assyrian king who wore women's clothing and makeup. This king is said to have had many concubines, not only women but also men. His lifestyle caused

[8] Gender performativity is understood here as a set of actions that regulate gender identity, inscribed in the materiality of bodies and constituted within discursive practices. To understand this concept, I draw on the theoretical contributions of Judith Butler (2010), who conceives of the subject as a *subject-in-process,* performatively produced through the acts they perform within previously established discursive structures. In this sense, the subject is not a fixed or essential entity, but a performative construction, whose identity manifestations can strain and destabilize normative dichotomies such as male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, among others. As I am focusing on the analysis of discourses and representations, I choose not to address another concept mobilized by Butler (2010), distinct from gender performativity: gender performance, understood by the author as a notion centered on the subject's action and processes of subjectivation.

[9] Another way of referring to the emperor linked to the feminine appears in the work of Philostratus (*Lives of the Sophists,* II, 625), with the term *Gynnidós,* from the Greek *γυνή/gyné,* woman.

dissatisfaction among the commanders of the Assyrian Empire, which allegedly led to a conspiracy against him. Sardanapalus lived in the 7th century BCE and is portrayed as a hedonistic, "decadent" figure who died in an orgy of destruction (*Bibliotheca Historica,* 2, 23).

Consequently, through the name Sardanapalus, it is possible to see how Cassius Dio is relating Elagabalus to the feminine excesses of a Syrian/Eastern monarch. It is important to note that, in the Roman imagination, Syrians and Assyrians, such as Elagabalus and Sardanapalus, were perceived indistinctly and often associated with femininity, rather than with a generic notion of the East. Reducing this representation to the broad category of Eastern runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes of modern Orientalism. In this context, the effeminacy attributed to these figures is more linked to Syrian/Assyrian identity than to an Orientalizing generalization.

With this, I perceive how Cassius Dio constructs a highly potent image of Elagabalus, since such a representation of the feminine man who came from the eastern Syrian regions was already known in Roman literature and imagination. In addition to Sardanapalus, we have significant examples of the connection between the feminine man and those who come from the East, for example, with the myth of Attis, the consort of *Magna Mater,* who emasculates himself, according to the myth[10], or the priests of the Syrian goddess Atargatis.

Cassius Dio gives several examples of Elagabalus' feminine attitudes. He mentions his marriages to three women, which is also considered excessive. Notably, excessive relationships with women were seen as a form of effeminacy. According to David Halperin (2002), effeminacy was long defined as a symptom of excess. A "womanizing" man was thus considered effeminate in Greco-Roman culture, since he had "deviated from masculine gender norms insofar as they preferred the soft option of love to the hard option of war" (Halperin, 2002: 111).

Cassius Dio also tells us about Elagabalus' marriage to two men. The first was Hierocles, an enslaved man from Caria who participated in chariot races and, as the emperor's favorite man, had a lot of power, even more than the emperor himself (*Roman History*, 80, 15). The second was Aurelius Zoticus, an enslaved athlete from Smyrna. In addition to Elagabalus' lack of control in demonstrating his passion for these men, both are enslaved,

[10] On the effeminacy of Attis in Greco-Roman literature and in objects of material culture, see: Alvar; Lopez-Gómez; Pañeda, 2019.

which further suggests the inferiority to which the emperor subjected himself.

Thus, Elagabalus married several times during his short reign. In approximately four years of government, Dio Cassius records seven marriages, among which I highlight the union with a vestal virgin, considered a serious crime. The figure of Elagabalus thus ends up representing the apex of excess and lack of control, attributes associated with the feminine. But the peak of the effeminacy of the False Antoninus in Dio's text is his desire to have a vagina. Quoting the passages:

> […] also in his circumcising himself [*hóti te to aidoîon periéteme*] and abstaining from swine's flesh, on the ground that his devotion would thereby be purer. He [referring to Elagabalus] had planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether [*pantápasin autò apokópsai*], but that desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy [*tês malakías*]; the circumcision which he actually carried out was a part of the priestly requirements of Elagabalus, and he accordingly mutilated [*elumḗnató*] many of his companions in like manner (*Roman History*, 80, 11, 2).

> He carried his lewdness to such a point that he asked the physicians [*toùs iatroùs*] to contrive a woman's vagina [*aidô gunaikeîan*] in his body by means of an incision, promising them large sums for doing so (*Roman History*, 80, 17, 1).

According to the BBC online article, the North Hertfordshire Museum justifies its change in the emperor's gender identity by quoting a line from Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, 80, 16, 1) that the ruler once said, "Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady."[11] As can be seen, the museum accepted Dio's defamatory statement as truth, without historical criticism.

Knowing this and making the necessary criticisms of the problem of a museum, an important place for the production of memories, not having a historian who makes a minimal critical analysis of sources[12], we can then ask ourselves: Was there any truth to Elagabalus' practices? Or rather, in

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[11] *Mḗ me lége kýrion; egṑ gàr kyría eimí.*

[12] I refer here to the critical analysis of sources because I consider it one of the fundamental skills that we seek to develop from the very beginning of academic training in history. At the start of my training as a historian at UNESP/Franca, I was introduced to the critical study of textual sources in the first semester of my undergraduate degree. Currently, as a professor of Ancient History, initially at UFSM and, more recently, at UFU, I consider working with the textual analysis of ancient sources to be an essential introductory task, guiding students, already in the first semester of the course, in the fundamental procedures of traditional historical hermeneutics, especially the distinction between external and internal criticism of texts. This is, therefore, an elementary stage of historiographical practice, the absence of which, in the case of an institution such as a museum, reveals a failure in the area of responsibility for the production and public mediation of historical knowledge.

what aspects of reality did Cassius Dio seek resources to develop his text on the effeminacy of Elagabalus and his supposed vagina, making it credible? Where could the historian's association of the emperor with a woman have come from?

In general terms, in my interpretation, Cassius Dio talks about the emperor's alleged attempt to have a vagina due to the fact that he performed religious rituals that very possibly involved cuts to the male genitals. This is a hypothesis. Thus, these rites could have been developed by Elagabal' solar and fertility attributes. In cults such as this, male genitals had strong symbolism as a kind of simulacrum of masculinity. In the 19th century, the French scholar Jacques-Antonie Dulaure, in a study on phallic cults in Antiquity (*Des Divinités Génératrices)*, raised the idea that the bull and the goat were linked to ancient fertility rites that involved ritual castrations for zodiacal reasons, with the sun, according to ancient studies and astrological/astronomical beliefs, entering the sign of the celestial constellation of the bull and the goat. Thus, these signs were considered the symbol of the spring sun, the regenerator of nature.

Indeed, it is possible that there was something related to the strength of the penis, at least of animals, represented on the coins issued by Elagabalus. Elke Krengel (1997) argues that the phallus of a bull began to appear on the emperor's clothing on coins minted after he became a priest, as can be seen on the coin below.

Figure 01: Aureus of Elagabalus. On the obverse and reverse, there is a phallic object attached to the emperor's head. Reference: RIC, IV, 2, Elagabalus, 86.

Perhaps there was something in the myth of Elagabal that involved the bull's penis as a force of masculinity, of the solar attribute, of the generative male order, as well as some relation to this in the bodies of the priests of the deity. Let us remember that ancient rituals were directly linked to myths. The rite recreated the myth and maintained the cosmic and social order (Eliade, 1972). However, this mythology has not reached us, which makes the statement impossible.

Cassius Dio also brings us, in a rather hyperbolic passage, the information that Elagabalus used human genitals in his rites:

> I will not describe the barbaric chants which Sardanapalus [referring to Elagabalus], together with his mother and grandmother, chanted to Elagabalus, or the secret sacrifices that he offered to him, slaying boys and using charms, in fact actually shutting up alive in the god's temple a lion, a monkey, and a snake, and throwing in among them human genitals, and practicing other unholy rites, while he invariably wore innumerable amulets. But, to pass over these matters, he went to the extreme absurdity of courting a wife for Elagabalus—as if the god had any need of marriage and children (*Roman History,* 80, 11-12).

It is also possible that the rite for Elagabal on the priest's body was a circumcision with symbolic aspects involving male genitalia and related to issues of fertility, rites of passage, and cosmic order, as well as an ascetic meaning. For me, an indication of asceticism in Elagabalus' practices can be seen in one of the above-mentioned passages from Cassius Dio (*Roman History,* 80, 11, 2) where he says that the emperor abstained from swine's flesh so that his devotion would be purer. In the same passage, the term used for cutting the genitals is *perieteme* (*περιέτεμε)*, from the verb *peritemnō* (*περιτέμνω),* which means to circumcise, mutilate, cut around, a term formed by the prefix *peri* (*περι,* around) and the verb *témnō (τέμνω,* to cut).

There are several societies that practiced circumcision rites in the ancient world, the reasons are varied, as are their interpretations. There is evidence that Mesopotamian Semitic peoples practiced this rite as early as 3200-2700 BCE, with characteristics of a rite of passage featuring death, resurrection, fertility, etc. (Weiss, 1966: 77). Among the Israelites, a group that lived in regions geographically very close to Elagabal's Emesa, the rite is interpreted by followers as a covenant between man and God, as well as being an element of identity. Based on a study of passages from Israeli books, Charles Weiss (1966) perceives a possible association between circumcision and death and resurrection, in addition to the fertility of the circumcised.

But these are only hypotheses surrounding the rite to Elagabal. However, these reflections shed light on an appearance of truth, or at least on known rites that may have been used by Cassius Dio to lend credibility to his discourse. Thus, seeking verisimilitude less in the rite to Elagabal itself (of which we have little evidence) and more in the idea brought forth by Cassius Dio, for some years I have been cross-referencing my research on Elagabalus with research on the *galli,* priests of Cybele (*Magna Mater)*. It is also possible that the rites in honor of Elagabal had some mythical similarity to the cults of the goddess Cybele and her consort Attis, which were quite popular in the Roman Empire. According to several ancient

testimonies, a specific type of Cybele worshippers, the *galli,* cut something on their genitals.[13] Similarly, according to the Syrian writer Lucian of Samosata (*The Syrian Goddess)*, the priests of the Syrian goddess Atargatis performed rituals on their genitals. Because of this, the priests of Cybele and Atargatis were seen as feminine in the ancient Roman context.[14]

Figure 02: Funeral relief of Lavinius (2nd century). Capitoline Museums, Rome. This bust is often associated with a *galus*, as the clothing of these cultists was seen as feminine. Françoise Van Haeperen (2019) questions this identification, raising the possibility that it is a priestess of Cybele.

However, from the sources we have, we cannot know what the initiates cut from their bodies. We do not know if it was a cutting of all male genitalia, only part of it, or even if this cutting was symbolic and not physical.[15] Furthermore, we cannot know what these rites meant to the initiates themselves, nor if they signified a "transition" of gender and sex for those who practiced them.

Thus, if the rites for Elagabal involved cutting the priests' bodies, this ritual may have been exaggerated by Cassius Dio. But we cannot be sure whether the rites for Elagabal were similar to those of the *galli* of Cybele; it is a possibility. Another hypothesis is that Cassius Dio brought the rites of

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[13] Although the *galli* are the most common type known today as ancient priests of Magna Mater, they were not the only cultists of the goddess, and even their identification as priests is questioned by researchers. Françoise Van Haeperen (2019) argues that the status of the *galli* was marginal and not exactly priestly and, according to her, they were not part of the official cult of Cybele in Rome, nor in the other cities of the Empire, although they could participate.

[14] On this topic, see Silva, 2020.

[15] For more information on these rites, possible hypotheses, and the connections made by researchers with taurobolium rites, see Silva, 2021b.

Elagabal closer to those of the *galli* in the imagination of his readers. Thus, even though the rite of Elagabal had no connection with the practices of the *galli,* Cassius Dio rhetorically used an imaginary surrounding the repudiated existence of these cultists. Let us remember that the *galli* were not portrayed positively in literature, as I mentioned.[16] From then on, a feminine textual tradition for Elagabalus would be created, which would be taken up again in texts still in the Roman context and in works of the centuries to come.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that the customs and clothing of ancient Syrian men were seen as feminine by Greco-Roman writers. Juvenal (Satire 3, 60-72), a poet who lived between the mid-first and mid-second centuries, presents Syrian men as wearing light clothing and perfuming themselves. This does not mean that these men were feminine, but their masculinity was different from the traditional virility of the Romans in the eyes of the Romans themselves.

In *The Life of Heliogabalus* from the Historia Augusta, Syria is, to a large extent, a Greco-Eastern side that spills over the borders of the Empire with its exotic customs, with its perfumed, noisy, and adorned men. Thus, Syria and Elagabalus would be on the margins of Romanity. There is undoubtedly an intersectionality between being Syrian and, therefore, feminine that stands out when we read ancient texts and that cannot be disregarded in analyses as a discursive clash and a discourse of Romanity and the affirmation of Greco-Roman power by the more traditional elites, especially in Cassius Dio, where the discursive pattern seems to have begun. The Romans were strongly uncomfortable with the anomaly (Alvar; Lopez-Gómez; Pañeda, 2019), and these writers emphasize this to enhance the negative image they wanted to convey about Elagabalus.

The texts thus reproduce classic *topoi* of bad emperors' behavior and, in the case of Elagabalus, they exaggerate. We must consider that ancient Roman historiography, especially that produced during the imperial period, should not be understood as an objective record of events, but as a literary genre with a strong pedagogical and moralizing character. When narrating the events of the past, Roman authors aimed to offer positive and negative models of behavior that would serve as examples (*exempla)* for their contemporaries. This is fundamental to understanding the narrative logic. *Exemplum* is a central concept in the Roman mentality: the deeds of the past

[16] Another set of evidence that allows us to understand the negative perception of the *galli* by the population of the Roman Empire, beyond literary accounts, can be found in the five curse tablets (*defixiones)* discovered in the temple dedicated to Isis and Mater Magna in Mogontiacum. See Silva 2022.

(both virtuous and reprehensible) were rescued not for their factual accuracy, but for their potential to teach and morally influence the public. Historiography thus functioned as a repository of memory and civic education, operating as an instrument of education. Authors such as Cassius Dio and Herodian made use of this structure, often shaping historical characters to serve as warnings or *exempla.* Events were subordinated to moral and rhetorical utility, which means that critical analysis of these sources requires attention to narrative purposes, contexts, and strategies.

Furthermore, Roman historiography was strongly influenced by the ideal of *mos maiorum*, which valued traditional values such as *virtus, pietas*, and *gravitas*. In this sense, the ancient historian of the Empire was not only a chronicler, but also a guardian of morality, a builder of selective memories guided by political, social, and ethical interests.

Another point in the construction of Elagabalus' image concerns the Roman imperial order. Since my doctoral dissertation, I have defended historiographical positions that recognize the existence of a shared space among the elites of the Empire, with values based on the interaction of Greek and Roman cultures (Silva, 2019b). This political and cultural identity included ways of dressing, speaking, eating, and behaving in general, acknowledging the existence of a *paideia/humanitas* that shaped the *romanitas*, which in turn varied according to the contacts with different cultures within the Empire and the particularities of individuals and groups. In contrast, what I see in the texts about Elagabalus is that he steps outside this discursive space of order, with his Syrian politics and values taking center stage.

Elagabalus queer?

Aware of the situation of ancient texts on Elagabalus, knowing especially the position of Cassius Dio and the possibilities regarding his negative image of the emperor in terms of being a Syrian, and therefore a femininity aversive to Greco-Roman values in various ways, but especially in relation to gender performativity and body standards. One point I have been thinking about is the queer potential of studying the character.

According to Sarah Salih (2012: 19-20), the English expression *queer*, as a theoretical strand, is a radical appropriation of a term that had previously been used to offend and insult people who deviated from normative standards of body and gender. Broadly speaking, as a theory, queer aims

to deconstruct categories of identity, affirming the instability of all sexual and gendered identities. The proposal starts from the destabilization of the category of subject, which Judith Butler, the queer theorist par excellence, calls the critical genealogy of gender ontologies. The radicalism of the expression lies precisely in its resistance to closed gender standards.

In another text I wrote (Silva, 2019), I suggested that Elagabalus' queer potential for analysis lies in his construction as an abject subject. I continue to defend this potential. However, as I have emphasized throughout the text, we must analyze how these texts are part of discursive clashes within a context and political-administrative issues and literary *topoi* specific to the elites who were writing. Similarly, we must also think about the use of an already established literary representation between Romanity and the view of foreigners, especially Syrians. But there are other interesting points to consider in relation to the question of the queer gaze on Elagabalus. And to discuss these points, I refer to Zachary Herz's text *How to do the History of Elagabalus (*2024).

The title of Herz's text refers to David Halperin's book *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (2002). Broadly speaking, Halperin's central idea is to question essentialist analyses of history that point out that there has always been a natural and stable form of homosexual identity. Inspired by the works of Michel Foucault, Halperin argues that contemporary ways of understanding homosexuality cannot be projected onto the past, as the categories of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are products of specific historical processes, especially Western modernity. One of the central theses is the distinction between sexual practice and identity. In many societies, people may engage in acts that would today be considered homosexual without, however, constructing an identity around it. Thus, homosexual identity as we know it arises in specific historical contexts and did not exist in the Roman world, even though sex between men existed and discourses on deviance also existed, but not in a way that created identities as we understand them today.

Based on these reflections, which I share, Herz (2024) proceeds to analyze ancient texts about Elagabalus in order to avoid essentialism and anachronism, as I have been doing for years in my research on the emperor. From this, he realizes that the portrait of Elagabalus reflects the anxieties and the insecure social position of elite biographers, more specifically in the Severan context when there was special attention to the armies to the detriment of the Senate. Herz does not provide a detailed analysis of Dio's *cursus honorum*, showing his political decline during the reign of Elagabalus, as I did in the aforementioned work (Silva, 2024). This analysis,

in my view, complements Herz's, making his reflections and mine an interesting set for thinking about Dion's representation of the character, which I call in this text the "icing on the cake."

But it is precisely here that we encounter a problem for a queer analysis of Elagabalus. Queer theory often adopts a stance of concern for the lived experience of abject subjects. The queer historian "fights in the first person" (Herz, 2024: 408), he is eager to find "community" and "kinship," he wants to give voice to the marginalized. But since marginalized subjects in antiquity generally did not leave their testimonies, Herz's concern is that we want to tell a story that is above how the subject himself would like to be heard. Certainly, Elagabalus was not a marginalized subject; he occupied the highest social status. But he suffered *damnatio memoriae*[17] and left no accounts of his own beyond coins and busts that have survived and in which he does not appear as female. Thus, at least, this was not his proposal for public self-representation in the artifacts that remain to us.

Given this, Herz (2004) points out that, even if Ancient History never adapts to certain types of research, queer theory has produced insights into social functioning that historians of Antiquity should consider. This is where the aforementioned historian corroborates my proposal (Silva, 2019) for a queer look at Elagabalus: we can construct knowledge through the abjection of the character's representation. For Herz (2024: 413), it is possible to think of ancient discourses as "evidence for someone's life, or alternately (perhaps simultaneously) as evidence for some ways of talking about people's lives." In particular, I would restrict myself to "evidence for some ways of talking about people's lives," since ancient texts were constructed rhetorically, and what we see in the constructions of Elagabalus is hyperbolic rhetoric, which Herz does not point out.

Furthermore, I would add that a queer reading of Elagabalus needs to implode modern classifications, not only because this is anachronistic, which would be enough, but because queer theory aims to deconstruct these categories. Queer as a theory does not share the idea that identities are fixed or static entities and explores the ways in which society constructs them, with transgressions. In this sense, Elagabalus should not be placed as a trans woman, but his story is adequate to stage the difference between

[17] *Damnatio memoriae* was a symbolic and political Roman practice that aimed to erase from official history the memory of individuals considered undesirable by destroying their names and images in public spaces. In the case of Elagabalus, *damnatio* was decreed by the Senate after his death in 222, favoring the legitimization of his successor, Severus Alexander.

norm and deviation for the ancient Romans, inferring how they understood transgressive performativity.

Our character's story is unusual and very powerful. This power can be seen in its many uses, appropriations, and receptions in different contexts, by different readings, and by groups that are also deviant. Herz (2024: 413) cites Martijn Icks' (2013) analyses of Elagabalus' reception in later communities that he describes as queer. Based on Icks (2013), he notes that Elagabalus became an icon for deviant Victorians and Romantics. I realize that even in Brazil, Elagabalus also arrived in a queer way. An example of this is the music video for the song *HéLioGaBaaLo* (2016), by LuKaSH. This audiovisual work combines historical, cultural, and political elements, presenting the figure of the emperor as a symbol of transgression and resistance. Directed by LuKaSH himself, the clip features the participation of activist Indianarae Siqueira, a political leader and militant. The recording took place in Lapa, more specifically at the crossroads of Beco do Rato, where CasaNem is located, a support center and shelter for *travestis* and transsexuals in Rio de Janeiro.

In conclusion, Herz (2024) suggests setting aside the subject of "Elagabalus" [18] and focusing instead on the system that constrained and ultimately destroyed him—a task I believe I have been pursuing for some years. In this article, I also aim to explore the possible realities that ancient writers invoked to legitimize their claims: the *galli*, the exoticized Syrian Orientals, fertility rituals, and perhaps a form of asceticism embedded within the shared mythical-ritual universe. Queer imaginaries, particularly religious ones, existed outside the normative order—an order that writers sought to preserve, with their denials functioning as part of a group's self-affirmation.

Final considerations

Overall, it is important to highlight that in writing history, there are no answers to everything; there are interpretations, and they must be based on the analysis of sources and the possible intentions of the producers. Thus, the only certainty we have is that, by perceiving the emperor as effeminate and saying that he wanted to make a vagina on his body,

[18] The quotation marks I have used here are to emphasize that, in my reading, in the very way of referring to the character of Elagabalus, we are no longer talking about him, but about a defamatory construction. The best thing here would be to leave aside the subject Marcus Aurelius Antoninus or, even, Varius Avitus Bassianus.

Cassius Dio had defamatory intentions, creating from this an "Eastern Syrian other" based on possible realities of the emperor's practices, verisimilitude, and literary *topoi*. It is because of the passages about Elagabalus' vagina and the fact that his testimony is inaugural that I called Cassius Dio the "icing on our cake". He is the first icing that has come to us, and it is possible to eat it, "queering it" with appropriate criticism.

This criticism concerns reading the texts in context, and such reading needs to be intersectional, crossing Elagabalus' Syrian origins with the feminine and the political demotion of Cassius Dio—and even of the more traditional senatorial elite in general—by the emperor. It is necessary to perceive the existence of deviations from the norms for the *vir* that are used in the representation of the emperor in order to make his image credible, legitimate, and strong.

Regarding the comments on Instagram posts about the museum's decision to rename Elagabalus in the feminine, I would like to point out that at no time did the pages I followed call on experts in ancient history to comment on the museum's stance. These pages only brought news from international websites in summary form on cards decorated with busts and other types of images. There are comments that make it clear how the reader would like to better understand the fact contextually, as well as feeling that the posts brought news that was very empty of historical content, such as: *"Unnecessary! Could women be emperors at that time? Don't make things up"* and *"Isn't that an anachronism?"*

It was all speculation, therefore. Speculative readings that revolve around the same theme are nothing new to any researcher of Elagabalus. Even in academia, we have different anachronisms and speculations ranging from studies on his psyche, considering him either a character wronged by sources (Hay, 1911) or a mad emperor (Villeneuve, 1957), to studies on his gender without support in documentation and historiographical methods (Gualerzi, 2005). We also have a tedious repetition of ideas already explored by other researchers that will not lead to new discoveries, but which demonstrate the curiosity that the character arouses and the lack of preparation to deal with a complex subject.

The Elagabalus of the sources may be a fiction, but he is nonetheless important for historical knowledge if considered from the perspective of his construction and, I emphasize, the possible realities in that context that supported the discourses and gave them significant force. And, in an analysis in this sense, there is potential for reflections from a queer analytical perspective.

I would like to end this text with a reflection by Walter Benjamin (1987: 224-225, our translation), who says the following:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. […] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Based on the above reflection, I argue that I do not want to know the truth about Elagabalus, as there is no way to do so with the material we have today. At best, we can only arrive at hypotheses. Nor do I intend to rehabilitate him as emperor, which some scholars do with "bad" emperors (Winterling, 2012: 7). What I propose is a rehabilitation of the feminine as a historically constructed category of defamation. Regardless of whether Elagabalus identified as feminine or not, this element constituted the core of the criticisms formulated by Cassius Dio, later exacerbated in the Historia Augusta and transmitted with different uses and abuses over the centuries. This femininity, therefore, can no longer be a reason for someone to fall from grace. If there is an intention to rehabilitate Elagabalus, let him at least recover his imperial name, instead of perpetuating his satirical nickname.

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