The circumcised emperor Elagabalus

Name of the author: Cassius Dio
Date: 207 CE to 229 CE
Language: Greek

Category: Roman and Greek

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Roman History
Reference: LXXX.11

Commentary:
For a short biographical presentation of Cassius Dio and of his main work, the Roman History, see Cassius Dio, Roman History XXXVII.16-17.

The eightieth book of Cassius Dio’s Roman History is one of the books that has not been preserved at all. As a consequence, we only know it through the Epitome of the work that the byzantine monk John Xiphilinus made at the end of the eleventh century CE (John Xiphilinus’s Epitome includes books 36 to 80). The eightieth book of the Roman History starts with the accession to the throne of Varius Avitus Bassianus, the future emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, after his victory over Macrinus (we will however use the common denomination Elagabalus in the commentary to refer to him). The personal carrier of Cassius Dio may have been affected by the arrival of Elagabalus to the throne, as Cassius Dio was previously part of the entourage of Macrinus. We do not know much about what he did under Elagabalus’s reign, but the impression that comes from reading the Epitome is that Cassius Dio wanted to give a very negative depiction of this Oriental emperor. Book LXXX narrates all the cruel acts and executions ordered by Elagabalus before his departure from the Eastern regions. Then, the author insists on the irregularities he perpetrated, especially the fact that he applied to himself imperial titles before they had been voted by the Senate. Moreover, Elagabalus is not only described as disrespectful of the institutional order, but the text presented here shows that he is also criticized for subverting the Roman religious and moral order.

This excerpt from the eightieth book of the Roman History is frequently quoted to understand the religious model that the new emperor Elagabalus wanted to set up. It is a well-known fact that during his childhood Varius Avitus Bassianus became priest of the Syrian sun god, Elagabalus, whose temple was located in Emesa. After his mother, Iulia Maesa, instigated a revolt among the Legio III Gallica, they later proclaimed Varius Avitus Bassianus emperor at Raphanea (16th May 218 CE). He was then around fourteen years old. The armies supporting him then defeated Macrinus at Antioch (8th June 218). Afterwards, Elagabalus went to Rome and brought with him the baetylus, that is the black conical stone representing the Syrian sun god. The fact that the baetylus was brought by Elagabalus to the West is attested by various literary accounts (on the adventus of Elagabalus in Rome in July 219 CE, see Herodian, History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus V.5.7-8; Historia Augusta, Life of Heliogabalus I.6 and III.4; Aurelius Victor, De Caesaribus XXIII.1), but also by numismatic issues (see Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa (218-219 CE)).

The text presented here has been frequently quoted in the framework of the debate related to the nature of the religious model that Elagabalus wanted to settle. Insofar as we know Cassius Dio’s opinion through the Epitome made by Xiphilinus, Cassius Dio did not condemn the fact that Elagabalus added a new god to the numerous ones worshiped in Rome, nor the strangeness of the religious Syrian rites. According to Cassius Dio, the main problem was that Elagabalus wanted to assert the supremacy of the Syrian solar god over all the other ones, including Jupiter. Herodian makes a similar statement in his History when he narrates that slightly before Elagabalus’s arrival in Rome, he sent instructions to every person conducting public sacrifices so that the name of the new Syrian god had to be named first and precede any other gods invoked by the officiating priests (Herodian, History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus V.5.7). In addition, the Life of Heliogabalus in the Historia Augusta formulates a quite similar idea, certainly with exaggerations. In this work we read that after the erection of the temple dedicated to Heliogabalus on the Palatine, Elagabalus wanted to transfer into it the representation of the Great mother, the fire of Vesta, the Palladium, and the sacred shields, in a word the most important and symbolic cultic objects of the Roman religion. The Historia Augusta then adds that Elagabalus ordered that “no god might be
worshipped at Rome save only Heliogabalus” (Historia Augusta, Life of Heliogabalus III.4). In VI.7, after having narrated the rape of a Vestal by Elagabalus, the narrator of the Life concludes: “He wanted to extinguish the everlasting fire. And the Roman cults were not the only ones he wanted to abolish, but those of the entire world; his sole wish being that the god Heliogabalus should be worshipped everywhere.” Finally, in VII.4 the narrator reasserts that Elagabalus wanted to make all the gods the servants of his Syrian god. This clearly distorted representation in the Historia Augusta of the religious model established by Elagabalus has led some scholars in the past to conclude that Elagabalus wanted to impose a solar monotheism. However, it is now largely accepted that he may have wanted to establish a henotheist model, that is a form of belief in which there exists various gods not placed on the same level. In this model, it is accepted that a god could dominate others and that a god could receive a preferential cult. Thus, this model may correspond to the one Elagabalus wanted to set up once he arrived in Rome (see Manders, Coining Images of Power, p. 149).

This passage of Cassius Dio is of particular interest to us as it is the sole source attesting that because of his membership in the group of the priests of the Syrian sun god, the emperor Elagabalus followed ritual practices identical with those of the Jews. First, Elagabalus is said to have circumcised himself (?? ??????? ???????????/ to aidoion perieteme) and to have ordered the people of his entourage to be circumcised too. Second, he abstained from eating pork. As no other source confirms these two specific elements, they remain unverifiable, but it is a well-known fact that the practice of circumcision during Antiquity was not limited to Jewish or Egyptian populations. Circumcision was known from the inhabitants of Northern Syria since the early third millennium BCE (see Sasson, “Circumcision,” p. 473-476). Even if we do not know much through other sources about the practice of circumcision in Roman Syria, and about its practice among the priests of Elagabalus in Emesa, the fact that during his reign Elagabalus endeavoured to represent himself as a high priest in charge of the cult of the Syrian sun god is attested by various numismatic issues. Among these issues, the most famous are certainly the ones in which Elagabalus is assimilated in the legend on the reverse of the coins as sacerdos dei Solis Elagabali, “priest of the sun god Elagabalus” (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, no. 131-135, p. 37; no. 194, p. 43; no. 369-371, p. 58), as invictus sacerdos (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, no. 86-88, p. 34; 191, p. 43; 350-351, p. 56; see Denarius depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor sacrificing over an altar (220-222 CE)), or as summus sacerdos Augustus (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, no. 146-147, p. 38; no. 200, p. 44) (all these coins are presented in Manders, Coining Images of Power, p. 147, n. 227). In many of these numismatic issues produced during the period 220-222 CE, it is generally agreed that Elagabalus is represented as wearing an oriental garb (see Manders, Coining Images of Power, p. 148, n. 235), yet this fact has been questioned by Lucinda Dirven who considers that Elagabalus’s dress did not look like the conventional attire of Syrian priests but corresponded to the dress, probably of Germanic origin, that many emperors wore at the beginning of the third century to gain the favour of their soldiers (Dirven, “The emperor’s new clothes”). Whatever the inspiration of the tunic worn by Elagabalus may have been, Cassius Dio’s words on the subject are not ambiguous, as he writes that Elagabalus was frequently seen in public “clad in the barbaric dress (??? ??????? ???? ???????????/tên esthêta ten barbarikêten) which the Syrian priests use.” However, the changes implied by the religious reforms imposed by Elagabalus at the beginning of his reign – changes described by most of the authors as leading to a subversion of the Roman religious order in favour of an Easternisation of the religious customs – should not be over-interpreted. As stated by Martijn Icks, from 220 CE onwards, it is highly probable that the entourage of Elagabalus made efforts to present the new religious reforms as fitting in the tradition of Roman religion. This may be exemplified by the reuse of traditional titles to designate the priest-emperor Elagabalus on coins, or by the fact that traditional figures such as Providentia or Victory still appear on coins produced in 221 CE (Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 77-78).

This text of Cassius Dio is the only one that mentions the circumcision of the priests of the Syrian sun god Elagabalus. This information must first be put into the context of the evolution of the Roman legislation regarding circumcision during the second and the beginning of the third century CE. A passage of the Digest attests that from Antoninus Pius’s reign onwards (whether this was preceded by a general ban of circumcision under Hadrian or not remains debated, see Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian XIV.2), Jews had been allowed to practice circumcision only on their sons (about this rescript of Antoninus Pius, see Digest XLVIII.8.11 (quotation of Modestinus, Legal Rules VII)). In addition, we know that aside from Jews, the practice of circumcision was also common in the Egyptian clergy, and that during the second half of the second century CE, this practice was supervised by the Roman authorities. Actually, papyri referring to events of this period suggest that young candidates who wanted to enter the Egyptian clergy had to ask for permission to be circumcised from the high priest (archiereus) of Alexandria and Egypt, who was a Roman high procurator in charge of the cults (see Mélèze-Mordzewiecki, Un peuple de philosophes, p. 382-385, who quotes P. Tebt. II.292 and 293, dating respectively to 189/190 CE and 186 CE). Thus, even if Antoninus Pius had prohibited Jews to circumcise non-Jewish slaves, or even non-Jews in general, it seems that during the second half of the second century some privileged groups (Egyptian priests and Jews) were authorized to circumcise their members for the purposes of their religion which were considered as
religio licta inside the Empire (on this point, see Méleze-Modrzejewski, Un peuple de philosophes, p. 401). However, for Joseph Méleze-Modrzejewski, the fact that we do not have any normative texts attesting that a similar exception had been made for the priests of Elagabalus, prevents the conclusion that an exception had also been granted for the Syrian priesthood. For Joseph Méleze-Modrzejewski the fact that Elagabalus practiced circumcision on himself and ordered it to be practiced on his companions should rather be interpreted as a consequence of his imperial omnipotence, but cannot be considered as proof of the fact that the previous Roman legislation that had set out a strict framework for the practice of circumcision was no longer in force (Mélèze-Modrzejewski, Un peuple de philosophes, p. 401; contra Cohen, “Those Who Say,” p. 20). This interpretation remains debatable, however, and it is perfectly possible that the Romans never intervened in order to control the practice of circumcision among Syrian people as among other peoples.

Nevertheless, we must question the credibility of this reference to circumcision and more generally the global depiction made of Elagabalus by Cassius Dio, as far as we know it through the Epitome. Actually, it is not only stated that Elagabalus practiced circumcision on himself or on his companions, but also that he planned to castrate himself (literally “to cut off all (i.e. his genitals) together,” ??????????? ????? ?????????/pantapasin auto apokopsai). This element clearly recalls the eunuch-priests (also called galli) officiating for the Phrygian goddess Cybele and for her consort Atargatis, yet Cassius Dio explains it by the “effeminacy” (????????/malakia) of the young emperor. We may suppose that the reference to Elagabalus’s wish to practice self-castration was added by Cassius Dio to support a major point of his depiction of Elagabalus, namely that he embodied the stereotypical bad ruler (see Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 94-103; note that since Hadrian’s banning, all kinds of castration were prohibited inside the Empire; see Digest XI.VIII.8.4 (Ulpianus, On the office of the Proconsul VIII)). Thus, the association of the character of Elagabalus with self-castration and the reference to his effeminacy must fit in with the globally negative depiction that Cassius Dio makes of him. After having insisted from LXXX.1 to 11 upon the numerous unjustified and cruel executions Elagabalus ordered in order to present him as a cruel tyrant, Cassius Dio seems to proceed to a moral condemnation of Elagabalus, which hinges upon one element constantly recalled by Cassius Dio, namely his Oriental origins and nature, which are presented as the main cause of his flaws. We thus find in Cassius Dio’s depiction of Elagabalus commonplaces of the representation of Oriental despotic monarchs. This identification is perfectly exemplified by the fact that Cassius Dio himself calls Elagabalus Sadarnapalus. Among these representations, there is of course his effeminacy – recalled in this text – which is highlighted by Elagabalus’s taste for dressing up as a woman (see also Cassius Dio, Roman History LXXX.14.3-4). This ambiguity is stressed by Cassius Dio when he writes that he appeared “both as man and woman” (Roman History LXXX.5.5). Directly connected to this, Cassius Dio also deals with the sexual deviance of Elagabalus, who is depicted as consenting to be sexually abused by men of lower rank such as Zoticus and, more particularly, the charioteer Hierocles (Roman History LXXX.16.1-6; see also the passage in which Cassius Dio narrates that Elagabalus played the prostitute, LXXX.13.1-2; the examples quoted here appear in Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 98-101). In another passage, it is even recalled that Elagabalus asked the physicians to implant a vagina in his body. Even if the credibility of this anecdote, known through the summaries made by two Byzantine authors, Cedrenus and Zonaras, has been contested by some, Martijn Icks thinks that this story may have appeared in the original narrative of Cassius Dio. Martij Icks thus considers that this story fits in with the “other remarks that Dio makes about the emperor’s effeminacy (like the plan to castrate himself)” (Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 100).

One should, however, note the difference between the references to circumcision and dietary laws and that to castration. For circumcision and prohibition to eat pork, the fact that “they do not appear to be of a scandalous character” would lend them “an air of credibility” (Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 51-52). The juxtaposition of circumcision, prohibition of pork, and of the practice of castration in this short passage gives the impression that the author may have wanted to present the emperor Elagabalus as profoundly anti-Roman, especially in the religious model and way of life he tried to impose. Actually, Cassius Dio was a high-ranking Roman senator that must have been hostile to any attempt to disrupt the sacred Roman tradition (Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, p. 79-80). The references to circumcision, voluntary castration, and the effeminacy of Elagabalus fit in with a strategy that consists of underlying Elagabalus’s incapacity to fully live up to the manly imperial figure. Finally, it is highly probable that by mentioning both the reference to circumcision and the abstinence from pork’s flesh, Cassius Dio knew that he referred here to two fundamental marks of Jewishness. If that was actually the case, this would correspond to the way Cassius Dio represents Jews in another part of his work. Actually in Roman History XXXVII.16.5-17.4, when Cassius Dio presents briefly the customs of the Jews, he insists upon the fact that most of their customs placed them aside the rest of mankind, and that they do not honour “any of the usual gods,” but preferred to “show extreme reverence for one particular divinity.” It is obvious that the way Cassius Dio depicts the Jews clearly echoes the way he depicts Elagabalus later in the narrative. References to circumcision and to abstinence from pork may thus have been added to insist upon the fact that the new Oriental emperor followed cultural and religious customs that made him “anti-Roman.” However, the association of Elagabalus with Jewish customs or
characteristics remains quite limited. Actually, the Romans used to represent Jewish men as men having an unrestrained sexuality and an impressive virility – see for instance Martial’s epigrams –, a description which is thus totally different from that of the effeminate nature of the emperor Elagabalus.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- barbarisation
- betyl
- castration
- circumcision
- dietary laws
- Elagabalus
- mutilation
- priesthood
- swine
- Syrians

Bibliographical references:  
Cohen, Shaye J. D., “‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?”, in Diasporas in Antiquity (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, Ernest S. Frerichs; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 1-45


Other sources connected with this document:  
Text

Cassius Dio, Roman History XXXVII.16-17
Digression on Jews

- Read more about Cassius Dio, Roman History XXXVII.16-17

Numismatic item

**Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa (218-219 CE)**

- Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa (218-219 CE)

Numismatic item

**Denarius depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor sacrificing over an altar (220-222 CE)**

- Read more about Denarius depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor sacrificing over an altar (220-222 CE)

Text

**Digest XLVIII.8.11 (Modestinus, Legal Rules VI)**

Antoninus Pius’s ban on circumcision for non-Jews

- Read more about Digest XLVIII.8.11 (Modestinus, Legal Rules VI)

Text

**Digest XLVIII.8.4 (Ulpianus, On the office of the Proconsul VII)**

Hadrian’s ban on castration

- Read more about Digest XLVIII.8.4 (Ulpianus, On the office of the Proconsul VII)

Text

**Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian XIV.2**

Hadrian’s ban of circumcision

- Read more about Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian XIV.2

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