



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

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[1]

Denomination:

Denarius

Date: 220 CE to 222 CE

Material:

Silver

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Elagabalus

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: laureate and draped bust of Elagabalus looking right, with horn over forehead

Inscription: IMP(erator) ANTONINVS PIVS AVG(ustus)

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Elagabalus standing facing, head left, holding patera over altar and club, recumbent bull behind altar; star in left field

Inscription: INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG(usti)

Weight (g): 3.51g

Commentary:

RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, n° 88, p. 34; BMCRE V/2, Elagabalus, n° 212, p. 562.

This denarius, minted between 220 and 222 CE, depicts on the obverse the head of Elagabalus and on the reverse the emperor offering a sacrifice. The inscription on the obverse refers to the emperor as *imperator*, or commander in chief of the army, Antoninus, Pius, and Augustus. The name Antoninus associated the emperor with his predecessor Caracalla of whom he pretended to be an illegitimate son. The inscription on the reverse refers to the emperor as *invictus sacerdos Augustus* or “the invincible imperial priest”. The reverse depicts the emperor, holding a patera with his right hand and a club with his left hand. The emperor is depicted as dressed in a long tunic which has been usually interpreted as being of eastern origin; a fact which would comfort Cassius Dio’s narrative when he writes that Elagabalus was frequently seen in public “clad in the barbaric dress (??? ?????? ??? ??????????/ten esthêta ten barbarikên) which the Syrian priests use” (see [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXXX.11 \[2\]](#)). This fact has been however 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”). We will see however that there are various elements connected to this issue indicating that Elagabalus may accomplish here a sacrifice to the Syrian solar god. In addition to the tunic, the emperor sports a crown of laurel on the head, and the *paludamentum*, or the mantle, hanging from his left shoulder, which denote his imperial standing.



The coin presented here is part of the numerous coins issued to commemorate the role of Elagabalus as priest-emperor. As rightly recalled by Martijn Icks, if Elagabalus styled himself *pontifex maximus*, after 220 CE he seems to have been rather called first *sacerdos* – as is the case with this coin (Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 73). Thus there exists plenty of coin issues for the period 220-222 CE bearing on the reverse the legend *sacerdos dei Solis Elagabali*, “priest of the sun god Elagabal” (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, n° 131-135, p. 37; n° 194, p. 43; n° 369-371, p. 58), or *summus sacerdos Augustus* (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, n° 146-147, p. 38; n° 200, p. 44), or, as is the case with the issue presented here, *invictus sacerdos* (RIC IV/2, Elagabalus, n° 86-88, p. 34; 191, p. 43; 350-351, p. 56) (all these coins are presented in Manders, *Coining Images of Power*, p. 147, n. 227; Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 73). However, the variations of the way the priest-emperor is represented in these various coin issues has raised the question of whether or not they could be interpreted as a manifestation of the religious reforms imposed by the new emperor. The coin issue presented here is certainly one which associates more elements indicating that Elagabalus performs a sacrifice for the Syrian sun god. First, the bull recumbent behind the altar may recall Herodian’s writings when he narrates that during ceremonies for the sun god Elagabalus, many sheeps and bulls were sacrificed (Herodian, *History of the Empire* V.5.8). Second, the club has been interpreted by some as a Syrian symbol of fertility (see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 51). Third, the presence of a “horn” upon the head of the emperor on the obverse of the type has raised many questions regarding the nature of the object but also its meaning. In reality the shape of the object does not correspond exactly to that of a horn. A very plausible explanation that has been given to interpret this object has been formulated by Elke Krenzel. She has argued that it would correspond to the end of a dried bull’s penis which would have symbolized fertility and strength and whose aim would have been to ensure the transfer of the power of the Syrian sun god to the high priest, here the emperor (Krenzel, “Das sogenannte,” contra Dirven, “The emperor’s new clothes,” p. 25). These various elements show that, in the case of this specific issue, the emperor may perform the sacrifice for the Syrian god.

The last point which has to be commented upon is the title *invictus sacerdos* used to refer to the emperor. This title first echoed the fact that the god to whom the emperor was sacrificing a bull was Sol Invictus Elagabalus, who had been recently promoted to the rank of leader of the Roman pantheon. Second, it also enabled Elagabalus to be granted the title “invincible” which was a quite common imperial title. We can imagine that for this young man, who in 220 CE was around seventeen years old, who did not have any political experience and who, contrary to most of his predecessors, had never distinguished himself in any military campaign, it may have been important to legitimate his reign by boasting his invincibility (see Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus*, p. 77).

Keywords in the original language:

- [Augustus](#) [3]
- [Pius](#) [4]
- [imperator](#) [5]
- [sacerdos](#) [6]
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Thematic keywords:

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- [Sol Invictus](#) [9]
- [sun god](#) [10]
- [sacrifice](#) [11]
- [patera](#) [12]
- [altar](#) [13]
- [bull](#) [14]
- [piety](#) [15]
- [Rome \(city\)](#) [16]

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- [3] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/augustus>
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