



‘Call me not Lord for I am a Lady’ - Emperor Elagabalus and the Problem of Gender in the History of Cassius Dio

1. Introduction

The subject of my paper is the emperor Elagabalus (218—222) as witnessed by a contemporary historian Cassius Dio. One of the most curious features of his history is his furious attack against the sexual behaviour of the emperor. There is no doubt as such that the emperor’s appearance and sexual activities were something Romans in the capital were not used to see by the ruler; another contemporary historian, Herodian, confers this as well. However, for Herodian, the femininity and strange outlook of the emperor were just minor matters; he did not consider them too important. He does mention that emperor used clothes and a make-up more proper for a woman than a man, but basically leaves it there¹. For Cassius Dio, it was something completely different. Dio was extremely outraged by the strange acts of the emperor, as witnessed by his description. In my paper I will examine the motives behind the attitude of Dio; my purpose is to evaluate the reasons why the sexual peculiarities of the emperor were such an outrage for the historian.

Cassius Dio is the main literary source of the early third century AD. Working in various high offices during the period Dio had a perfect view on Imperial policy during the reign of the Severan dynasty.² Acting first as a senator and eventually as a consul he was, however, absent from the capital in 218—222, when Elagabalus ruled as an emperor. As he personally did not witness the possible mischief of the emperor, but

rather working in the provinces at that time, his hostile attitude and his will to mock the sexual behaviour of the emperor raise some questions.

Apparently Dio begun writing his history in 220 and finished it in 231.³ As a historian, Dio is usually not very highly respected. Fergus Millar, for example, criticises him for his inability to do proper analysis about the events he reported.⁴ On the other hand, Dio does provide a unique view to the opinions of a Roman senator of the early third century, and despite being a Greek, Cassius Dio considered himself first and foremost as a Roman.⁵ Whether his stories are true or false as such, by studying his values and attitudes we can nevertheless examine the ideologies and values of a Roman senator from the early third century.

What is even more interesting from this point of view is the fact that Dio's history had probably one very special purpose. The audience to whom Dio wrote his book were especially the senators from the eastern, Greek-speaking provinces of the empire, who necessary did not have all the knowledge about the customs and institutions of the empire that Dio considered essential;⁶ in other words, Dio's history was a handbook, an introduction to the 'proper' Romanness. For this reason his book dealt very much with the Roman identity and the idea of an ideal Romanness should be seen as a very important theme in his history.

2. Priest of the Sun-God

In April 217 emperor Caracalla was making a journey to the temple of the moon god, north of the city of Carrhae in Mesopotamia, when he was killed by an assassin. The killing was probably organized by the praetorian prefect Macrinus, who became

emperor after the murder.⁷ The reign of Macrinus did not last long, however. As an emperor he failed to make the soldiers happy, and soon they pledged their loyalty for another member of the Severan family, Aurelius Antoninus, better known as Elagabalus (or Heliogabalus). In 218 Macrinus lost a battle at Antioch, was captured and put to death. Elagabalus was now the ruler of the empire, although it is often thought that he was used as a figurehead by his mother Julia Soaemias and grandmother Julia Maesa, niece and sister of former empress Julia Domna.⁸

Generally it seems that his reign was not very important from the governmental or legal point of view; in fact, there is only one document remaining about a law he gave, an inscription which announced the extension of the rights for the soldiers to marry foreign (non-citizen) women.⁹ His religious policy was, however, quite revolutionary. Before he became an emperor he acted as a priest of the Syrian sun-god El'Gabal. When he took for Rome he brought his god with him, eventually attempting to make his deity the supreme god of the empire. Moreover, he took a Vestal Virgin Aquilia Severa as his wife, which aroused severe criticism and hostility in Rome; eventually he had to divorce her. He also organized the wedding of the Carthaginian goddess Astarte with El'Gabal, both deities of heaven.¹⁰ These actions were probably very important reasons for his downfall. He lost his support among the soldiers, and had to placate them by appointing his cousin Alexianus as his heir.

The relationship between the cousins worsened from 221 on, and since Alexianus, now known as Marcus Aurelius Alexander, had quite a lot popularity among the soldiers, the situation for Elagabalus worsened considerably. In 222 the soldiers rioted, and the emperor went to see them with his mother to calm them down. In the next day both of

them were killed, along with a number of their associates and supporters. The bodies were dragged through the streets of the city and eventually thrown to Tiber. Alexander became the new emperor, and from that point was known as Marcus Aurelius Alexander Severus.¹¹

3. The Problem of Gender

The reputation of Elagabalus and his reign is very bad, thanks especially to Cassius Dio's efforts. The emperor is first and foremost remembered for his extraordinary sexual behaviour, of which Dio paints a vivid picture. For Dio, Elagabalus was a woman in a very real sense. What essentially made him a woman was to some point his physical appearance but most of all his acts and gestures, his womanly behaviour. According to Dio, the emperor used feminine poses, tried to sound like a woman, practised stupid, unmanly dances and, especially, took a woman's role in his sexual affairs with his male lovers.¹² He is described as a submissive, passive partner who loved to take a beating from his so called husbands.¹³ At the end Dio describes how Elagabalus wanted to become a female in the biological way as well, and how he promised great deal of money for the doctors who could help him in this sense, but this is mostly just a sort of a logical conclusion for the whole process, as Dio sees it.¹⁴ The simple fact that the emperor was acting like a female clearly was enough for Dio to prove that he was practically a woman, or at least certainly not a man.

Describing people as women on the basis of their behaviour was not by any means an innovation by Dio. For example Marcus Antonius Polemo, a writer from second century AD, wrote about physiognomies, according to which masculinity and femininity were not something that were decided only by one's body, but by one's

behaviour as well.¹⁵ Dio's description about Elagabalus thus can be seen as a prime example of this kind of thinking. Dominic Montserrat has in his article shown that for Dio gender is transient and his description of Elagabalus shows how the gender for the emperor is mostly a constructed quality.¹⁶ As Montserrat states about gender in the Roman world, it 'is not a fixed bodily state, but a shifting cultural category in which biological sex may or may not be a determining factor'.¹⁷

There is no need to dispute the article of Montserrat as such; however, from my point of view, the important question is what exactly was the reason for Dio's hostility? Why is he condemning the practice of the emperor so strongly? As conservative as Dio was, it seems that Elagabalus' religious policies would have given Dio enough ground to criticise. There is no good explanation why he decided to concentrate so heavily on the femininity of the emperor – especially as Dio himself did not witness the extraordinaries of the young ruler.

There is a certain hint in Dio's writing that perhaps explains more about his attitude towards Elagabalus. In one passage Dio describes how Elagabalus worked as a prostitute and had a strong desire to be seen as an adulterous woman, who cheated both his legal wives and male lovers.¹⁸ In fact many or in fact the most of his observations about the reign of Elagabalus are dealing with marriage and adultery. He mocks Elagabalus for his many marriages (since Dio sees the emperor as a woman, he thinks his many marriages with different women ridiculous) , his will to arrange the divine marriage between his sun-god and Juno Caelestis, his decision to marry a Vestal Virgin and so on.¹⁹

The reason what perhaps makes this an important issue is the fact that the questions of marriage and morals were very actual during the early third century, since both predecessors of Elagabalus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla, put a lot emphasis on the moral values both in their propaganda and legislation. Severus, for example, was very strict when dealing against adultery. A case can be found from the *Digest* where the emperor convicted right away, without prosecution, a senator who had taken his wife back after accusing her of adultery.²⁰ Caracalla condemned four Vestal Virgins to death because of adultery; an act extremely rare in the history of the empire and especially in the later Imperial period.²¹ One very important concept related to marriage and morals was *concordia*, or harmony.

4. *Concordia* as an Imperial Doctrine

Originally *concordia* was a cult of harmonious agreement, common in Rome already in the Republican period and often connected with the political struggles of the republic.²² It was widely used during the Imperial period as well, especially in the coinage. In the numismatic evidence of the late second century it usually celebrates the harmony of provinces, soldiers or rulers. For example, a coin from 161 AD celebrated the *concordia* of emperor Marcus Aurelius and his co-ruler Lucius Verus, with the text *CONCORDIAE AUGUSTOR(UM)*, the harmonious rule of the two emperors.²³

Concordia was also used to celebrate the marriages of the emperors and was often used this way in the coinage of the empresses. In one example from 141 AD empress Faustina can be seen shaking hands with the emperor Antoninus Pius with the text *CONCORDIA*; the coin is probably celebrating the marriage of the Imperial couple.²⁴ The images of empresses with *concordia* were often connected with ideas of fertility,

continuity and harmony, as is the case here as well.²⁵ Another very common way to use *concordia* can be seen, for example, during the period just after the civil war of the 190's. In this case a coin-type of Septimius Severus celebrates the harmony among the army and the new, peaceful period after military struggles, with the text CONCORDIA MILITARUM; appropriate enough just after the military struggles. In these types *concordia* is seen standing in the middle of the army standards.²⁶

Generally it seems that the importance of *concordia*, and especially as an idea of a harmonious relationship between genders, became even more important in the early third century. In the visual arts the harmony between men and women was of particular interest, putting emphasis on the proper gender roles. This can be seen, for example, in the funerary monuments of the period. The mythological figures, often described in these reliefs, were often presented as male-female protagonists to create a certain balance between men and women, thus celebrating the proper behaviour genders. On the other hand, they can be seen as a warning example: a woman behaving like a man was considered a monstrous freak, an aberration of nature. Moreover, her masculinity endangered the masculinity of males associated with her.²⁷

Coincidence or not, the visual arts were not the only field where *concordia* received attention. It seems that from the Imperial policy of the early third century there can be found some kind of an innovation regarding the concept of *concordia* as well. This is witnessed at least by the coinage of the period. When Septimius Severus took power in 193 AD he, as mentioned, paid a lot of attention to the moral legislation of the empire. The sanctity of marriage, and more generally of family, was a central theme in these laws. It seems that during this point the idea of *concordia* as something which was to

be connected with the harmony of families, or perhaps harmony in the family relations, was taken forward.

One evidence for this kind of thinking is a coin from 201 AD. The coin is a perfect *exemplum* for the subjects about an ideal family, the Imperial family, with the future emperor Caracalla on the one side and the parents, emperor Septimius Severus and empress Julia Domna, together on the other.²⁸ The harmonious relationship between the husband and a wife is obvious, highlighted still by describing the emperor as a Sun and empress as a Moon. The ideal family is described under title CONCORDIAE AETERNAE. What the coin basically expresses is that it was the harmony between a husband and a wife that could produce continuity for the whole empire, which in this case is symbolised by the very youthful future emperor. In addition, the *concordia* highlighting the harmony of the Imperial family and the proper gender-roles was not limited to the coins, but was prominent in the various important religious activities as well, especially in the great *ludi saeculares* of 204, one of the most important events in the reign of Septimius Severus, which highlighted especially the role of Julia Domna as an ideal wife and mother of the empire, setting up an example to the Roman women how a Roman *matrona* should behave.²⁹

5. Conclusion

According to Dio, the major sin of the emperor Elagabalus was that he actively, by his own behaviour, abandoned the idea of *concordia*, which for Dio meant the healthy, normal relationship between women and men; the emperor abandoned the harmony of proper gender-roles. By becoming a woman he questioned the very basis of the Roman identity as it was seen in the early third century by quite a conservative Roman senator

like Dio. The fact that especially the adultery and the mock of marriage by the emperor receive so much attention is thus probably not a mere coincidence. As the young emperor stepped away from the ideal gendered identity of an emperor, by becoming a woman, he not only gave a bad *exemplum* for his subjects, but because of his behaviour he was also unable for a harmonious marriage and thus endangered the idea of continuity. As he abandoned the idea of *concordia*, it was precisely opposite with the values his predecessors, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla, wanted to bring forward.

When evaluating Dio's ideas it should also be remembered that he was living in a period of great changes, for example the radical expansion of Roman citizenship in 212 (*constitutio antoniniana*) was taking place during the time he wrote his history.³⁰ We may say that there were many processes, both cultural and political, taking place in the empire which really forced Dio to evaluate the question of what being a Roman was it all about and which were the values that were essential for the Roman identity. As Dio fully identified himself with the Roman history and tradition and considered himself as a true Roman, so we may say that he also considered himself fit indeed to define which was acceptable for a Roman and which was not. As a 'true Roman' he clearly supports the idea of *concordia*, even if he in many other aspects was very hostile towards Caracalla, and criticizes Septimius Severus occasionally as well.

The case of Elagabalus is in fact a sort of a case study when he is describing those "others", who are not true Romans. Elagabalus, with his extraordinaries, is a prototype of a non-Roman. However, as he is also an emperor whose should be an *exemplum* for his subjects he is also a very dangerous case for Dio, since now we are dealing with the

institution that is defined the very Roman identity. Therefore the case of Elagabalus is, for Dio, potentially catastrophic for the whole idea of Romanness. Compared to Herodian, Dio as a senator was much more interested about the habits of the emperor from this point of view; he saw the contradiction between the acts of the emperor and the values that were considered as essentially Roman.

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¹ Especially Herod. 5.8.1. Herodian does mention the feminine nature of Elagabalus compared to his successor Alexander Severus.

² The dynasty of the Severans consisted of the reigns of four emperors: Septimius Severus (193—211), Caracalla (211-217, with his brother Geta as a co-ruler for the first year of his reign), (218—222) and Alexander Severus (222—235). About the dynasty in general, see Potter, David S., *The Roman Empire at Bay AD 180—395*. Routledge, London 2004, pp. 98—167.

³ Birley, Anthony R., *Septimius Severus. The African Emperor*. Routledge, London 1999, pp. 203—204.

⁴ Millar, Fergus, *A Study of Cassius Dio*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, p. 118.

⁵ Millar, pp. 190—192.

⁶ Gowing, Alan, *The Triumviral Narratives of Appian and Cassius Dio*. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1992, pp. 292—294.

⁷ Cass. Dio 79.5; Herod. 4.13.3—8; *HA Car.* 7.1—2. In my article I am using the (rather confusing) system of Loeb edition when referring to the texts of Cassius Dio.

⁸ Cass. Dio 79.39—41; Herod. 5.4; *HA Hel.* 1—2.

⁹ Halsberghe, Gaston H., *The Cult of Sol Invictus*. Brill, Leiden 1972, p. 71.

¹⁰ For the Elagabalus' policy of religion, see Pietrzykowski, Michael, 'Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal'. *ANRW* II.16.3 (1986), pp. 1806—1825.

¹¹ Cass. Dio 80.20.1—21.3; Herod. 5.8.5—9. *HA Hel.* 16.5—17.3.

¹² Cass. Dio 80.13.2—15.1.

¹³ Cass. Dio 80.15.3—4

¹⁴ Cass. Dio 80.16.7.

¹⁵ Polem. Phys. 2.1.192

¹⁶ Montserrat, Donimic, 'Reading Gender in the Roman World'. In Huskinson, Janet (ed.), *Experiencing Rome. Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman World*. Routledge, London 2000, pp. 154—157.

¹⁷ Montserrat, p. 154.

¹⁸ Cass. Dio 13.2—3; 15.3—4.

¹⁹ Cass. Dio 80.13.1; 80.12.12; 80.9.3—4.

²⁰ *Dig.* 48.5.2.6. For the Severan moral laws in general, see Birley, p. 165 and Gorrie, Charmaine, 'Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation'. In *Historia* 53 (2004), pp. 61—65.

²¹ Cass. Dio 78.16.1—2. For the death sentences of the Vestal Virgins, see Mustakallio, Katariina, 'The Changing Role of the Vestal Virgins.' In Larsson Lovén, Lena & Strömberg, Agneta (eds.), *Public Roles and Personal Status. Men and Women in Antiquity. Proceedings of the third Nordic Symposium on Gender and Women's History in Antiquity, Copenhagen 3—5 October 2003*. Paul Åströms Förlag, Sävedalen 2007, pp. 195—196.

²² Price, Simon & Kearns, Emily (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth & Religion*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 128—129.

²³ *RIC* 1290; *BMC* 869. There are many other examples as well.

²⁴ *RIC* 381.

²⁵ The fertility and continuity associated with *Concordia* can be especially seen in the symbol of *cornucopia* which can be found in the coins celebrating the empress and *Concordia*. See, for example, *BMC* IV 85 (Faustina II); 333 (Lucilla); 406 (Crispina). For the coins of the empresses in the second century more generally, see Keltanen, Minerva, 'The Public Image of the Four Empresses. Ideal Wives,

Mothers and Regents?’ In Setälä, Päivi, Berg, Ria, Hälikkä, Riikka, Keltanen, Minerva, Pölönen, Janne & Vuolanto, Ville, *Women, Wealth and Power in the Roman Empire* (Acta IRF vol. 25), Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, Rome 2002, pp. 105—147.

²⁶ *RIC* 256.

²⁷ Hansen, Inge Lyse, ‘Gendered Identities and the Conformity of Male-Female Virtues on Roman Mythological Sarcophagi’. In In Larsson Lovén, Lena & Strömberg, Agneta (eds.), *Public Roles and Personal Status. Men and Women in Antiquity. Proceedings of the third Nordic Symposium on Gender and Women’s History in Antiquity, Copenhagen 3—5 October 2003*. Paul Åströms Förlag, Sävedalen 2007, pp. 114—118.

²⁸ *RIC* 52.

²⁹ For the Severan *ludi saeculares*, see Birley, pp. 157—160.

³⁰ For *constitutio antoniniana*, see Sherwin White, A.N., *The Roman Citizenship* (2nd ed.). Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973, pp. 279—287.