



Elagabalus (204 or 205-222)

by Louis Godbout

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A bust of Elagabalus.
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Elagabalus (sometimes corrupted to Heliogabalus) was proclaimed Roman emperor in 218, when he was a teenager, and ruled until 222. His brief reign became legendary for its sexual excesses.

His accession to the throne was the result of a revolt fomented by his grandmother Julia Maesa, sister-in-law of the emperor Septimus Severus and aunt of Caracalla, the emperor who had been assassinated and replaced by the Praetorian Prefect Macrinus in 217. She circulated rumors that her grandson, originally named Varius Avitus Bassianus, had been fathered by Caracalla and used her considerable fortune to garner the support of legions stationed in Emesus (Homs, Syria) where the boy was being raised and groomed as a priest of Elah-Gabal, the local name of the Syrian sun god Baal.

A successful military campaign and the backing of allies in the Senate assured the teenager's accession to power, and he slowly made his way to Rome. He at first raised hopes of an enlightened and peaceful rule by forgiving many of his opponents and restraining the usual purges that followed changes in regime to the closest allies and immediate family of Macrinus, but he soon disappointed the Romans by his eccentric behavior.

He had first styled himself Antoninus to claim descent from the much admired Antonine dynasty, as Caracalla had done, but came to be known as Elagabalus because of his maniacal devotion to the god whose cult he tried to impose. He had a temple built on the Palatine hill next to the imperial palace to house the black conical stone that was the phallic representation of Elah-Gabal. He then shocked the Romans by raiding their most ancient and sacred temples in order to take such precious relics as the Palladium into the temple of his favored god.

As if this sacrilegious behavior did not suffice, Elagabalus seemed to strive during his short reign to break every social and sexual taboo of Roman society. He refused to wear the traditional woolen garb of the Romans and appeared in barbaric silk dress. He introduced his mother to the Senate and later created a women's senate.

Elagabalus himself behaved effeminately; and though he successively married five women, one of whom was a Vestal virgin, he remained childless. He circumcised or infibulated himself for religious reasons, but expressed the wish that surgeons could make him a vagina. Dressed as Venus, he reenacted the myth of Paris and the golden apple in a public ceremony.

In the guise of a woman Elagabalus married Hierocles, a former slave and chariot driver upon whom he heaped all honors, but wished to be beaten by him as an adulterous wife. He performed fellatio on Hierocles, a practice considered particularly degrading, but also used "all the cavities of his body" for lustful purposes.

Elagabalus was fascinated with well-endowed men and had agents look for them. He distributed favors and administrative positions according to the size of genitalia.

Elagabalus had particular affection for prostitutes, whom he tried to imitate. He purchased and freed enslaved ones from brothels and distributed money to others. He invited them to his palace to discuss sexual techniques and postures. He commissioned silver vases with obscene pictures and enjoyed shocking grave philosophers and serious men by the use of foul language and gestures.

These and other excesses led to his murder by the Praetorians, who replaced him with his cousin Alexander. He was killed in latrines where he was found hiding, and his body was thrown in the Tiber River.

Elagabalus became the emblematic figure of the debauched, sexually perverse ruler. As such, he is extremely important in the history of homosexuality, homophobia, and transphobia (to use modern terms).

Ancient historians expressed their revulsion not at his homosexuality per se (after all, they did not see Hadrian's love for Antinous as a flaw), but rather at his effeminacy and excesses. However, modern historians, such as Edward Gibbon and Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, clearly associated his homosexuality with the decline of Roman civilization, a vision that continues to be expressed by opponents of gay rights for whom the increased visibility of homosexuals is a sure sign of decadence and decline.

Satirists have made much use of the figure of Elagabalus as the epitome of the decadent homosexual ruler. For example, in Thomas Artus' *Les Hermaphrodites* (1605), an attack on the French king Henry III and his court minions, the body of laws and customs that rules the land of the eponymous hermaphrodites is purported to have been drawn up by Elagabalus, in which the reader is to recognize King Henry.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Elagabalus emerged in decadent or *fin-de-siècle* literature as a model sensualist unfettered by bourgeois morality. Allusions to his reign abound in important novels such as Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884), the major inspiration for Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Elagabalus also appears as the main character in Jean Lombard's *L'Agonie* (1888), a now forgotten work that had great influence on writers such as Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and Octave Mirbeau.

In 1910, Elagabalus was the subject of a lyrical tragedy by Émile Sicard with music by Déodat de Séverac, and in 1911 of a short film by the famous French filmmaker Louis Feuillade. Historical novels and essays also appeared in the 1930s, when Elagabalus came to be seen as a model revolutionary, as in Antonin Artaud's *Héliogabale ou L'Anarchiste couronné* (1934). More recently, his figure inspired Martin Duberman's play *Elagabalus* (1973), which paints the portrait of a gay socialite whose shocking behavior is a threat to his family's political ambitions.

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About the Author

Louis Godbout is a collector and amateur historian. He is a longtime member of the Archives gaies du Québec and has participated in the preparation of several exhibits in Montreal. He has also produced three multi-media lectures that reflect his varied interests: *Beaux enfants de Sodome*, on eighteenth-century sodomitical imagery; *Ébauches et débauches*, on gay French literature from 1859 to 1939; and *Le rideau rose*, on French gay and lesbian theater before 1969.