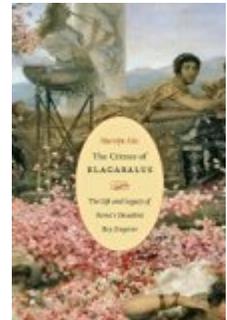


Martijn Icks. *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 304 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06437-9.



Reviewed by Nathanael Andrade

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Commissioned by Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

The reign of the teenage Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (218-222 CE), born as Varius Avitus and now commonly known as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, is a topic of great fascination and complexity. Uniquely perverse and foreign, he inflicted the cult of his aniconic Syrian divinity Elagabal (Aramaic for “god-mountain”) upon Rome, brutally murdered numerous senatorial and equestrian administrators, appointed his churlish favorites to key imperial positions, indulged every lecherous vice, wore Eastern garb, ushered in the domination of imperial women, and aspired to be a woman himself. Androgynous, “oriental,” tyrannical, and devoted to a strange divine rock, he transgressed the cherished morals of the Roman senate, the true embodiment of Roman tradition. Or so Elagabalus’s most immediate sources claim. But Rome’s most notorious, androgynous, and “un-Roman” emperor is among its most elusive. Martijn Icks examines this elusive figure and how ancient and modern works have represented him.

Icks situates his work against the mainstream scholarship on Elagabalus’s reign by emphasizing its holistic nature. Whereas previous scholars have mostly focused on verifying specific events or acts in his reign, Icks strives for two objectives. First, he endeavors to “reconstruct and interpret events and developments during the reign of Elagabalus” by analyzing ancient sources and modern studies. Some of these modern studies constitute useful recent reassessments treating particular aspects of Elagabalus’s reign or sources, and various segments of Icks’s synthesis benefit from them. Second, he aims “to describe and interpret Elagabalus’s fictional legacy, and the myriad layers of ancient and modern images which have formed around the historical core.” Icks deems these two goals to be mutually informing endeavors. As he states, “One cannot properly examine a subject’s *Nachleben* without some notion of the historical core from which it is ultimately derived. At the same time one cannot plausibly reconstruct a historical person or period without taking later distortions or interpretations

into account” (p. 5). Hence, Icks’s book is divided into two parts. The first treats Elagabalus’s reign and its most proximate sources; the second examines his literary, artistic, and scholarly *Nachleben* (afterlife).

As part of his endeavors, Icks emphasizes Elagabalus’s “images.” For Icks, images in part constitute the various forms of visual propaganda circulated by the emperor’s administration, including statues, coins, and similar material objects. Such images and their ideological implications have indeed received much scholarly interest in the last two decades. But Icks also conceives of images as including the representations of the ancient authors primarily responsible for memories of Elagabalus’s reign and “the many different representations ... in modern historiography, art, and literature” that have drawn on these ancient authors. Icks regards all these materials as more or less “derive[d] from a historical core: the ‘real’ Elagabalus” (p. 5). Accordingly, he maintains that all these representations should both be used to analyze Elagabalus’s reign and be assessed within their own social contexts.

Excavating the “real” Elagabalus is however no easy task. Late in his text, Icks summarizes the argument of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacres et simulation* (1981) to remark how amid their mass proliferation during the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century, images no longer refer to reality or to putative referents. They merely refer to other images in ways that generate experiences of reality or referents. But in regard to Elagabalus’s images, this dilemma may not be uniquely modern. Late antique, Byzantine, early modern humanist, and modern academic and popular images of Elagabalus all have depended in some way on the images produced by Cassius Dio (c. 230), Herodian (mid-third century or so), and the *Historia Augusta* (generally dated to the late fourth century). These sources constitute the earliest surviving narrative treatments of Elagabalus’s reign. They all are eminently hostile, laden with invective,

and informed by conventions specific to Greco-Roman historiographical or biographical literature. Even if they represent, as Icks maintains, generally (but not totally) independent traditions, they all are influenced directly or indirectly by the *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory) with which the Roman senate condemned Elagabalus and thereby informed subsequent treatments. Their images perhaps more occlude than convey the real Elagabalus, and subsequent representations of Elagabalus arguably refer to them more than the real or historical core. Indeed, much modern scholarship has uncritically accepted their general veracity, according to Icks, despite some exceptions.[1] Icks’s solution to this difficulty is to implement “sound reasoning and adequate use of non-literary sources and parallel examples” to produce a cogent image of the “real” Elagabalus (p. 5).

Part 1 examines Elagabalus’s ascension to the throne, the significance of his Emesene Syrian background, his reign as a “priest-emperor” patronized by a solar deity who assumed the form of a stone, and the principles underlying the ancient sources’ hostile treatment. Icks integrates the most immediate literary and material sources, including numismatic and epigraphic ones, into his discussion of the “real” Elagabalus and the image that the emperor and his administration crafted for his diverse subjects. From such sources he premises that Elagabalus’s reign was offensive to Roman and especially senatorial sensibilities not because of his alleged perversity but because of innovations that spelled the “demotion” of Jupiter from the summit of Rome’s divine pantheon. Devoted to his Syrian cult and maintaining Eastern priestly dress after arriving in Rome in 219, he implemented the relatively spontaneous elevation of Elagabal to the summit of the Roman pantheon late in 220. Amid such innovation, he married a Vestal Virgin and arranged marriages between Elagabal and the cult statues of goddesses. In themselves, Elagabalus’s personal cult preferences and dress were unproblematic. But because

of his official elevation of a distinctly “un-Roman” god and its accompanying “un-Roman” practices, senators and praetorians came to favor his cousin Alexianus, who became the emperor Severus Alexander through their support.

Icks’s other observations follow a similar tack. He examines how Elagabalus’s ascension to the throne was plausibly accompanied by the elimination of key senatorial and equestrian functionaries from the previous regime, but he maintains that Elagabalus did not appoint favorites to key positions or alter imperial policies to the extent that his narrative sources convey. Icks explores how Elagabalus or his supporters initially linked his rule to that of the emperor Caracalla, his alleged father, and more remotely to the Antonine emperors, and he shows that his administration’s coin issues bore many traditional symbols of imperial legitimacy. Icks also posits that Elagabalus was manipulated by the women of his household and his political handlers, who responded to his priestly devotion to Elagabal by anchoring his legitimacy in the god’s patronage before eventually shifting allegiance. Finally, he debunks the premise that Elagabalus initiated a monotheistic religion foreshadowing the empire’s sponsorship of Christianity under Constantine I a century later; provincials who worshipped Elagabal or celebrated its priest-emperor were conducting standard imperial politics. As Icks concludes, it is plausible that Elagabalus’s realignment of Rome’s public religious life foremost alienated many senators, the praetorians, and even members and primary supporters of his own household. The praetorians therefore murdered Elagabalus, and the senate imposed *damnatio memoriae*. From there, the hostile sources adorned the demonized Elagabalus with the stock features of two interwoven stereotypes: the evil tyrant and the unrestrained “oriental.” Such stereotyping, typical of Roman imperial historiography, is likely responsible for memories of Elagabalus’s androgynous aspirations and sexual deviance. Late an-

tique and Byzantine authors mostly followed this tradition.

By analyzing narrative and material sources and synthesizing the valid assessments of recent scholarship, Icks presents a cogent and consistent argument for what from the ancient literary sources constitutes evidence for the “real” Elagabalus. Such evidence is distinguishable from the stock tyrannical or “oriental” stereotyping inspired by Elagabalus’s official condemnation by the senate, the tropes of ancient historiography, and beliefs about “un-Roman” easterners. These points are significant. At the same time, Icks’s Introduction could have clarified more fully how his methodological approach to the epistemological problem raised by the ancient narrative sources differs in principle or logic from previous ones. His “adequate use” of inscriptions, material sources, and parallel examples is valid, and so is his balanced assessment of the ancient narrative histories. But otherwise his recourse to “sound reasoning” does not define in concrete terms his critical stance toward the ancient literature. As a result, even while Icks’s reconstruction is persuasive, it often appears that he has produced, like other scholars, an image of the “real” Elagabalus based on his implicit understanding of how the Roman empire worked, of the internal logic of ancient narrative sources, and of concerns raised by modern identity politics. Likewise, for a topic relying on Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* (even if nonliterary sources are brought to bear), Icks discusses relatively briefly his perspective regarding how scholars have variously theorized relationships among these sources, have positioned them in the broader imperial framework, and have hypothesized from where they acquired information. It also would have been interesting if Icks could have situated his representation alongside that of Leonardo de Arizabalaga y Prado’s recent *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* (2010), which maintains that nothing from the literary sources is reliable evidence unless authenticated independently by

material objects linked to Elagabalus and his reign. Icks indicates that this book, which he has reviewed elsewhere, was published too recently for him to engage it directly.[2]

Part 2 explores the various shifts in Elagabalus's images from the Renaissance to modern popular culture. New contexts inspired new images derived from the ancient representations, and some of these departed from the ancient sources' negativity. From the period of modern humanism to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European literature and drama highlighted Elagabalus's tyrannical qualities; Icks examines select works from Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. Nineteenth-century European writers and artists, especially those associated with the Decadent movement, celebrated Elagabalus's alleged sexual deviance, androgyny, "oriental" excesses, and destabilization of normative social, gender, and sexual categories; works from France, Germany, and the Netherlands receive specific examination. Twentieth-century fictional literature, drama, and even some scholarly works celebrated what they deemed Elagabalus's countercultural or anarchic image, homosexual inclinations, "oriental" spiritualism, or androgynous subversion of conventional gender expectations; works from France, Great Britain, and the United States are explored in particular. Such representations contrasted sharply with those of the mainstream academic vein, which replicated the ancient sources' negative treatment of Elagabalus as an immoral, sexually deviant, salaciously "oriental" tyrant. One could contest Icks's claim that Elagabalus's afterlife has bearing on how scholars should interpret the "real" or "historical" Elagabalus, but Icks does show how modern fictional works have engaged Elagabalus's ancient historiographical "images," reassembled their constituent parts for new contexts, and cast in favorable terms some of Elagabalus's most notorious (alleged) trademarks. Students of queer and gender studies have crafted Elagabalus as a figure of liberation from material generated by the ancient sources that maligned

him. Whoever he was, may this be Elagabalus's legacy.

Notes

[1]. Some such exceptions are Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989); D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 148-150, 153-157; and Michael Sommer, "Elagabal: Wege zur Konstruktion eines 'schlechten' Kaisers," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004): 95-110.

[2]. References for Prado's numerous prior publications are accessible in this volume. Martijn Icks, review of *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* by Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *Sehepunkte* 10 (2010), <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2010/10/18108.html> (accessed March 27, 2012).

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(pp. 25-37 and p. 72-73)

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(pp. 18-25)

(pp. 62-72)

(pp. 25, 37-38, and 89)

(pp. 83-87 and 90)

(pp. 120-122 and Epilogue, pp. 215-216)

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[1]. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

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Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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