

Charles University in Prague

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**The cult of *Sol Invictus* in Late Antiquity**

**Kult *Sol Invictus* v pozdní antice**

Propositions for PhD thesis

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2021

## Introduction

Late Antiquity represents a particularly complex and at the same time fascinating period. The interest of experts in the field and also of non-history scholars, as well as non-scholars' interest, has grown exponentially and in the last decades it has become the main focus of several studies, so that we could claim that an “explosion” of Late Antiquity has occurred.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholars have been trying to remove from Late Antiquity that aura of decadence that had been bestowed on it by scholars of past centuries,<sup>2</sup> who have seen this period as a moment of decadence of the Roman Empire,<sup>3</sup> because of the deinstitutionalization and the crisis of the social structures, but also because of the slow disappearance of the public religious festivals. Scholarship has been trying also to determine a proper timeframe for this period,<sup>4</sup> without much success. If Late Antiquity is designed as moment of deep change and transformation in public institutions, rituals, role of the emperor and social mobility, it would make sense then to see this moment of transformation as beginning with the ascension of the emperor Commodus (161-192; ruling 180-192), whose policy will be perpetrated and supported by the Severans, as this work intends to show.

Furthermore, mutations in individual spiritual development are major, and the religious is submitted to a sensible mutation.<sup>5</sup> In fact, when one analyzes evolution of beliefs and ritual practices, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Giardina 1999; in response, with a focus on the periodization of Late Antiquity, Bowersock and Lo Cascio 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful and detailed discussion about the perception of Late Antiquity by modern scholars, see Rebenich 2009.

<sup>3</sup> In order to contrast the romantic view of the end of the paganism in favor of the rise of Christianity, Cameron 2011 abundantly shows how, in fact, in Late Antiquity pagan practices still survive, because of an aristocracy still in charge of the power, and because the Christians are still involved in those pagan practices. However, the idea of decline of Late Antiquity (whose Gibbon was probably the most eminent champion, but also Mazzarino 1988) is still supported today: see Liebeschuetz 2001; Ward-Perkins 2005; Jongmann 2006.

<sup>4</sup> I will not discuss here in detail the whole debate about periodization carried on by scholars from the XVI century onwards; for the earliest hypotheses about dating of Late Antiquity formulated at the beginning of the XX century, see Riegl 1901, who suggested a periodization between the Edict of Milan (313) and the rise to the power of Charles the Great (768), and Meyer 1910 249, who defined this period between Diocletian and Charles the Great. Among the recent scholarship, refer mainly to the work of Brown (1971; 1978), who extended the periodization of Late Antiquity (from the III to the VII century) and saw this historical period not as an age of decline, rather a very productive time in art, literature and religion, “characterized by change, diversity and creativity” (Rebenich 2009, 90). More recently, see also Mazzarino 1959; Demandt 1984; Inglebert 2003; Marcone 2008; James 2008; Ando 2008. An attempt was also made by epigraphists to determine a periodization of Late Antiquity through changes found in epigraphies, and the year 600 represents the turning point for both East and West of the Empire (Tantillo 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For the phenomenon of religious mutations in Late Antiquity, see Stroumsa 2005.

worth noticing that the old *pantheon* and the public religious festivals are slowly replaced with more intimate and more individual forms of cult, and this happens because the institutions live in a profound crisis, and therefore it is not possible for a human being to feel inserted into a social ritual.<sup>6</sup>

The arrival of external cults in the Roman Empire increases the changes, because those practices, most of them coming from East, have a significant impact on the classical pantheon.

A key word which could incisively express the uncertainties and the needs of the Late Antiquity believers is “individuality”,<sup>7</sup> in the sense that in this historical period the society is characterized by the importance given to the single human being, who is now active part in the social and religious tissue.

The human individuality clearly shows that some important change had happened, and the *mos maiorum* together with old practices and ancient principles could not find proper place now. The citizen of the *res publica* were governed by the state law, which involved a thick ethical background, dictated by the laws of the ancient, “but this *ius*, or *lex*, was created by nature, and thus divine. Because each law, each right was rooted in the divine, correct worship of gods was a *conditio sine qua non* for the stability and the welfare of the *civitas*.”<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to make a distinction between modern and Roman government in order to comprehend that, when we talk of Roman civil law, we actually intend something strictly connected with the religion. This differs much from the secular modern state, where law and religion are supposed to be two different systems and to have different regulations. However, the most discriminating factor between modern and Roman government is undoubtedly the presence of the divine in the Roman law constitution. Public display of worship, religious state festivals and cult practices are, in the timeframe analyzed in this work, often substituted by private cults and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The ideal perspective on Late Antiquity is to see this historical time frame as a moment of transition, mutation and progressive change; this transformation also took place thanks to the profound changes in Roman society. In fact, elites are to be replaced by a mixed community, where now non-elites prevail or acquire at least the same importance as the elites. In north Africa, for example, a crisis investing the III century has been identified; subsequently, during the IV century there is an increasing progress in production of ceramics, pottery, luxury goods. For further analysis of the Empire in north Africa during Late Antiquity, see Dossey 2010.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough analysis of the emergence of individuality in Late Antiquity, see Torrance and Zachhuber 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Noethlichs 2015, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Cameron 2012, 71.

The passage from a devotional public system, where believers express their faith within a community, to an individual religious practice, in which the single believer conveys his own urges towards deities in order to receive personal favors and thanks, is gradual and seamless, and it shows how Late Antiquity is, in fact, a moment of spiritual awareness and profound soul searching. It shows also that the state institutions are not able anymore to meet the needs of the faithful, as approach to ritual practices is different among social classes, and it differs even more when we look at the emperors' religion.

However, studies made by modern scholarship concerning the cult of *Sol Invictus* already exist. The first publication gathering all the ancient literary sources concerning the cult of *Sol* and analyzing the presence of this deity in the Roman Empire is Gaston H. Halsberghe's work,<sup>10</sup> titled *The Cult of Sol Invictus* and dated 1972, which at first view seems to be a comprehensive overview of the origins, development and disappearance of the cult, also providing a complete collection of *loci antiqui*; this work, though, does not provide often clear references to many issues presented by its author, and also conclusions reached by Halsberghe do not take in account information present in non-literary evidence. Furthermore, the author insists on the disappearance of the cult as caused by the fall and decadence of the Empire, and he focuses on the extravagance of the emperor Elagabalus. More recently, the work of Leonardo Arrizabalaga y Prado<sup>11</sup> well analyses the figure of the emperor Elagabalus in the context of non-literary evidence, in order to determine which source of information related to the emperor might be true or not; a discussion about the cult of *Sol Invictus* is present, but only in relation with the emperor, who appears the main aim of his study. Martijn Icks also, in a recent publication,<sup>12</sup> focuses on the figure of the emperor Elagabalus and his deity, *Elagabal*,<sup>13</sup> basing his study mostly on literary evidence, but the analysis lacks a general overview of the development of *Sol Invictus* through the III century and a specific focus on this deity.

The aim of the present work is to discuss the features of the solar cult, its spread and its impact, starting with Commodus, then moving on to address in depth, and through the analysis of written and unwritten sources, the religious syncretism that developed during the reign of the Severans. The first chapter intends to be a discussion about literary and archaeological sources regarding the solar cult; in the first section, it is presented a comparison of the ancient historiography witnessing the

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<sup>10</sup> Halsberghe 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Icks 2011.

<sup>13</sup> When discussing in this work about the emperor Varius Avitus Bassianus and the worship of his cult imported from Syria, the emperor will be always referred to as Elagabalus and the deity *Elagabal*.

existence of the cult, in order to establish the reliability of the historians' accounts; in the second section, I take in analysis the non-literary evidence connected with the cult, in particular inscriptions, coinage and temples, to determine the spread of the cult and the diffusion in the Empire. The second chapter offers an overview of the modern scholars debate where the objective is to put the research up to date, taking in account the actual theories, in order to create a continuity with the ancient literary tradition, while at the same time analyzing the modern hypotheses in regards of the topic.

Finally, it is presented a conclusive section, where it is discussed the role of the ancient sources taken in exam in the dissertation and their limits; also, it is shown which features we might attribute to the sun cult developed in the Roman Empire at the beginning of Late Antiquity. Also, it is discussed the purpose of using *Sol* in the imperial propaganda, the way it was exploited by rulers, its reception among lower classes, its geographical reach.

## Chapter I – *The History Unfolded*

### I.1.1 The literary sources

The analysis of the historians' accounts regarding the spread and development of the cult of *Sol Invictus* in the Roman Empire appears to be a fundamental and chiseled key in order to understand the problematic of the presence of the foreign cults in Rome. Three main literary sources at our disposal mention the presence of the cult of *Sol Invictus* in Rome: Cassius Dio, Herodian, the *Historia Augusta*.

A special focus is reserved here to the figure of the emperor Elagabalus, as it is the written evidence from this period to supply the vastest amount of literature concerning *Sol Invictus*. When describing the emperor, Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta* (as it will be seen in the next section of this chapter) seem more interested in sexual deviations and extreme actions of the young boy. Herodian is the only author who gives us an account of the religious practices of the emperor: he describes the procession made in honor of the deity *Elagabal* and he tells us about rituals connected with the Syrian deity. His description, unlike Dio's, is neutral, and he does not share his personal opinion on the peculiarities of the cult; if anything, he seems not concerned with the novelty of this belief. Furthermore, when he describes the baetyl, he is worried to point out the procedures which led to the introduction of the cult in Rome, but he does not report negative feedback from the public, nor he makes a personal judgment on the matter. The historian rather creates a narration where he is

willing to illustrate, in a neat and plain style, events and individuals involved in chaotic situations; the inconsistency of his work, and also his lack of information, including his own personal experience, makes his history no more than a delightful reading.

The purpose of the historian to give pleasure to the readers is also accomplished by the dualism represented by literary orthodox writing from one side, and vague inaccurate historical facts on the other. Even if Herodian is reliant on Dio, and there is no denying of that,<sup>14</sup> he gives a more reliable work than Dio, gathering data from other sources, and this can be noticed mostly in his account on Elagabalus, when he gives us, unlike Dio, information about the Emesan cult and the sacred stone. In addition, he inserts specific details of the presence of the stone in Emesa and, as said above, he is the only literary source giving us information about the procession of the emperor.

The unreliability of Dio's text, apart from the personal subjective senatorial point of view, is noticeable from the distance he keeps in regards of the description of the cult, which could be also attributed to the fact that he was in Asia during Elagabalus' reign, and therefore he knew little about events and situation in Rome. His literary exaggeration concerns mostly the sexual perversions and the excesses of the emperor, which come probably from a second-hand source or contemporary witnesses. Herodian, on the other hand, seems to understand better the characteristics of the Syrian cult; he suggests that the emperor had an active role in the spread of his religion. Apparently, though, there is no actual proof, not even in the non-literary evidence (as it will be seen later on) of the willingness to disseminate the cult, despite the fact that *Sol Invictus* had been promoted also in other provinces, where it received a full support and was even enthusiastically welcomed.

While analyzing the works of Cassius Dio and Herodian, the latter seems more reliable and interesting; Dio's purpose of building up trust by providing verifiable facts, while at the same time trying to persuade,<sup>15</sup> make his work complex and difficult to read; the constant presence of the narrator and the polemic about the political and administrative situation collide with the facts he reports as indirect speaker, where he seems to enlist, by hearsay, information collected from secondary sources, in particular for the account of Elagabalus. Herodian, instead, having as purpose the reader's entertainment, is more worried to describe events with the sole objective to guarantee a pleasant reading, but at the same time he provides very useful, if not unique, information about the cult of Elagabal. Even if his opinion about the appointment child-emperors is, overall, negative,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rowan 2012, 17.

<sup>15</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 34.

and he seems that he used Dio as a source,<sup>17</sup> Herodian is not inferior to him, and he presents authentic and verifiable details, lacking in Dio's narrative.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth mentioning, in the end, that Cassius Dio and Herodian appear different in regards of style, intention, writing purpose and concept of history and the historian. But these two authors share in common a pessimistic view of the recent and present times, conceiving the new era as deleterious, chaotic or, as in Dio's description, "all iron and rust".<sup>19</sup>

### I.1.2 *Historia Augusta* – the recent debate

One of the literary products necessary to be taken in exam for the analysis of the events of II and III centuries is the *Historia Augusta*.

This work has been reason for many controversies among scholars,<sup>20</sup> as it comes difficult to establish reliability of the text, authorship and the date of composition, even its original title.<sup>21</sup> While it is debatable whether to define the work as a forgery or *Fälschung*,<sup>22</sup> playfulness and irony of the author emerge from the whole work.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the entire opera is attributed to six different authors, but it is possible to recognize the work nowadays as the product of only one author,<sup>24</sup> who

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<sup>16</sup> Regarding Herodian's negative judgement for appointment of child-emperors, it could be useful to compare the historian's description of the reigns of Elagabalus (5.5.1) with the account of the reigns of Severus Alexander (5.8.10) and Gordian III (8.8.8).

<sup>17</sup> Hekster 1974, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Barnes 1978, 84.

<sup>19</sup> Southern 2001, 9. Check, for the original quote, Dio 72.36.4: ἐν δ' οὖν τοῦτο ἐς τὴν οὐκ εὐδαιμονίαν αὐτοῦ συνηέχθη, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν καὶ θρέψας καὶ παιδεύσας ὡς οἶόν τε ἦν ἄριστα, πλεῖστον αὐτοῦ ὅσον διήμαρτε. περὶ οὗ ἤδη ρητέον, ἀπὸ χρυσοῦς τε βασιλείας ἐς σιδηρᾶν καὶ κατιωμένην τῶν τε πραγμάτων τοῖς τότε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν νῦν καταπεσοῦσης τῆς ἱστορίας.

<sup>20</sup> Meckler 1996, 364.

<sup>21</sup> Thomson 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes 1995. In response to Momigliano's terminological debate, Syme argued that both terms are too strong to describe the work and the intent of the author of the *Historia Augusta* (Cracco Ruggini 2013, 483).

<sup>23</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, Rohrbacher 2013. See also Rowan 2012, 18.

wrote it around 400 AD.<sup>25</sup> Once one separates the factual events which figure in the sources used for the composition of this account, its literary rather than historical character is evident,<sup>26</sup> but even when considering the *Historia Augusta* only a literary product, it appears to be an inconsistent one.<sup>27</sup> The complex and irregular narrative scheme of the work, together with the uncertainty of some information, and the singularity of some details contained only in this text, make the *Historia Augusta* a difficult work to rely on; however, the description of some events, and in this case, information about the presence of the Emesan cult in Rome, make the work an indispensable source, at least to be compared with the other extant literary texts at our disposal.

To summarize, the work represents a view of a pagan writing at the end of the IV century, interested in the religious melting pot of his time. The work altogether is the product of an individual, whose identity is still unknown, although is often identified with historical members of pagan aristocracy, which was represented majorly by the family of Symmachi-Nicomachi.<sup>28</sup> The *Historia Augusta* was

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<sup>24</sup> Syme calls the author joker (Cameron 1993, 22), and rogue grammarian (Rohrbacher 2013, 147). The one-author hypothesis was put forward for the first time by Dessau 1889 and disputed by Mommsen 1890, but “hardly anyone now seems to believe in the ostensible date of composition, under Diocletian and Constantine, or, indeed, in the existence of six separate authors” (Birley 2006, 19). Nowadays the idea that the *Historia Augusta* is the product of a single writer is arguably put in discussion: against the one-author hypothesis stands alone Alan Cameron (2010, 781-782; 1968; 2010, 744). There is also a computational study proving the possibility of multiple authorship (Tse, Tweedie and Frischer 1998), although two more recent computational studies reveal with certainty the existence of one only author (Stover and Kestemont 2016; see also the computation work of Ian Marriott, who reached the same conclusion, even though his method has been demonstrated as erroneous (Sansone 1990)). Scholarship of the half-past century took the reins after Dessau and moved beyond, trying also to determine the true date of composition of the *Historia Augusta* and its purpose: see Momigliano 1954, Straub 1963, Alföldi 1964, Syme 1971, Chastagnol 1994 and more recently also Honoré 1998, Rohrbacher 2013, Ehrman 2013, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Paschoud 1980, 567. See also Birley 2006, 19 and Cameron 1993, 22. This dating nowadays is widely accepted, although there are still several proposals of different time of composition: see Domaszewski 1918, who locates the work in the late sixth century; Baynes 1924, who concludes his article suggesting an earlier date (under the reign of Julian); Lippold 1998, placing the *Historia Augusta* in the Costantinian age. More recently, but also without success, Alan Cameron, who in his work suggests a date of “some twenty years earlier (375-380)” (Cameron 2010, 745; see also Cameron 1968, 20). For a complete discussion of modern scholarship about dating of the *Historia Augusta* see now Rohrbacher 2019, 64-66, who pushes the dating up to 409/410 (see also Rohrbacher 2016, 153-169, in support of Neri 2002, who claims that historical facts narrated in the work reflect the event of 409).

<sup>26</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 148.

<sup>27</sup> It is very difficult to establish the reliability of the author of the *Historia Augusta*, mainly because of his constant wordplay and inventions and lies, and the total lack of adherence to the facts of his era (Rohrbacher 2016, 4).

<sup>28</sup> Pausch 2010, 118.

written in the context of cultic traditions and new beliefs imported in the Empire, and we do not know how it circulated after its composition,<sup>29</sup> and even whether it was meant to circulate.<sup>30</sup>

The success of the text during Late Antiquity is not known, but the earliest use of the *Historia Augusta* as a source is in the *Roman History* written by Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, consul in 485.<sup>31</sup> Probably the whole work was written for a small and private audience, whose participants were of the same social extraction as the author. They might even have known the author's identity and favored the circulation of the work.<sup>32</sup> This kind of audience, close to the writer in social status and probably also interests, would understand his irony and his allusions: this would also explain the use of parodic scenes. The social status of the audience and the author is revealed, for example, when the senatorial power gets praised in the life of Tacitus.<sup>33</sup> Straub suggested the possibility of two audiences: a "simpler" audience would read the *Historia Augusta* to obtain historical information and mainly for entertainment, while a second and more sophisticated audience would understand the jokes and the subtle allusions.<sup>34</sup> While it is possible to admit the existence of such a small private audience, it is also plausible that on the other hand that the author wanted to give the reader historical information gathered from various sources, then "embellished" by literary jokes perceivable by a specific social group.

While embracing a different turning point than Dio's, the author focuses on the failures of the emperors after Septimius Severus,<sup>35</sup> and from the reading of the lives of the latest emperors the fact emerges that the moment of crisis and changes is ongoing. Even though the authenticity of the information contained in the work, as stated above, is certainly doubtful, it is still possible to consider the *Historia Augusta* a necessary and interesting source to understand the climate and the religious controversies of the Late Antiquity, through the eyes of a passionate witness, who is involved in *prima persona* in the sensible changes of his times.

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<sup>29</sup> Rohrbacher claims that the work was intended to be received by a group of peers, and it was "not meant to last beyond its initial unveiling." (Rohrbacher 2016, 171-172).

<sup>30</sup> Paschoud 2013, 198.

<sup>31</sup> Birley 1988, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Syme 1971, 62; 76-77. For a useful discussion about circulation of literary texts in the Roman world see Marincola 2009; Johnson 2010; Starr 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Rohrbacher 2019, 76.

<sup>34</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Levick 2007, 155.

### I.1.3 The History Unwritten

While analyzing non-literary sources which witness the presence of the sun god in Rome in the III century, what appears is that the solar cult does not spread spontaneously,<sup>36</sup> but it was worshipped with the intent to pay homage to the ruler and was existing as image and tool of propaganda of the emperor. Although the presence of a sun god is already attested in Rome since the times of Titus Tatius, as tradition shows,<sup>37</sup> it is in the III century AD that the cult knows its fortune. It is in this very century that emperors begin to display *Sol* in the coinage.<sup>38</sup>

The inscriptions here examined attest the presence and the persistence of the sun god in Rome and prove useful to understand the dynamics of the cult, especially when the dedications are looked at, above all those ones made by soldiers.

Unfortunately, for the period related to the Severans until the ascension to the throne of the emperor Elagabalus, non-literary sources are scarce; in fact, inscriptions carrying the epithet of the god were already suffering *damnatio memoriae* much before the advent of the priest-emperor<sup>39</sup> as, for instance, those erected by Balbillus.<sup>40</sup> For what concerns papyri, sculpture and architecture, even though the information carried by them might be relevant, there are problems of dating, but also of

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<sup>36</sup> Martin 2000, 297.

<sup>37</sup> The presence of the solar cult since the beginning of the Roman religious tradition will be examined in the next chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Liebeschuetz 1999, 188.

<sup>39</sup> *Damnatio memoriae* was a process regarding the erasure of the name of an emperor or his family from inscriptions or, in other cases, the reuse through recurling of a statue or a bust carrying the emperor or the imperial family features. This procedure was made to condemn the memory of the addressed person, so that his name and/or physical attributes would be not remembered. During imperial times it had become a mass phenomenon, and recycling statues and busts in order to reuse them was very popular, also because of its easy affordability (Galinsky 2008, 2). Sometimes, in the case of statues, they were left intact and only the name was changed, as for example one statue representing Caracalla, whose name was changed some time afterwards to that of Constantine (Galinsky 2008, 6). A popular fashion developed in the third century AD regards hair retouch, with a technique commonly known as *a penna*, as in the case of the portrait of Macrinus, which represents one of the earliest uses of this technique in imperial portraiture, even though this type of execution is already evident in the portraits of Caracalla and Geta (Wood 1983, 490).

<sup>40</sup> In some epigraphic sources Titus Julius Balbillus is designated as *sacerdos Solis* (CIL 6: 2270; 1003; 1027; 1603; 2130), while some other inscriptions report him as *sacerdos Solis Elagabali* with the variant *Alagabalo*: CIL 6.2129; 6.2269; 6.708. Titus Julius Balbillus may have promoted, probably under the instigation of Julia Domna, the cult in Rome, and therefore his title of *sacerdos Solis* might have become *sacerdos Solis Elagabali*. See also Rowan 2012, 218.

identification or of attribution.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, apart from inscriptions,<sup>42</sup> coinage constitutes another relevant and reliable source useful to study the development of the cult and its peculiarities.<sup>43</sup> Coins carrying the image of the sun god are dated prevalently between the III and the IV century, and they show the deity with the features of the *Sol Invictus*. Iconography connected with the sun deity appears though already under Augustus,<sup>44</sup> Vespasianus, Trajan and Hadrian.<sup>45</sup> After 128, *Sol* disappears from the coinage, until making its appearance again under the reign of Commodus in 186,<sup>46</sup> when the sun is portrayed more times on coins.<sup>47</sup>

The “rising sun”<sup>48</sup> Commodus endorses a new religious policy open to accept and import eastern cults, and keeping the distance, in this and many other aspects, from the father and emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, and inaugurates a new era, when religion becomes an important – if not indispensable – tool in the hands of the *Augustus* and a strong instrument of imperial and personal propaganda. The binomial deity-emperor, which has been a *leitmotif* for many rulers since the beginning of the Roman Empire, acquires under Commodus an innovative feature, the deity being the real presence of the imperial power on earth, endorsing his *persona*, as coinage analyzed in the present work shows.

## Chapter II – *My god is the Sun*

### II.1 Religious explosion

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<sup>41</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Evidence of iconography connected with *Sol* is also to be found in frescoes, mosaics, gems, silverware, oil-lamps and statuettes, but the motifs appearing on these items might be reconducted to the images carried on mints. Moreover, both coins and inscriptions offer an explicit and clearer message (Barnes 1984a, 61), which is not always possible to find in other non-literary sources.

<sup>43</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 127. Coins reveal particularly useful when information related to the emperor is erased or missing, for instance from papyri and inscriptions; a usual practice subsequent to the *damnatio memoriae* of the emperor (Icks 2009).

<sup>44</sup> The first emission carrying an image of the sun god is dated 18 BC, under Augustus (RIC 1.303). The coin bears the name of the moneyer, L. Aquilius Florus. It shows on the *recto* the radiate head of *Sol* and in the *verso* a quadriga with modius-shaped car in which there is a flower.

<sup>45</sup> Martin 2000, 298.

<sup>46</sup> Rowan 2012, 243.

<sup>47</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 49.

<sup>48</sup> Dio 72.34.

The impact Septimius Severus and his dynasty had on the political, economic and urbanistic situation, especially in the Roman provinces of North Africa, is without doubt.<sup>49</sup> Non-literary evidence, in particular inscriptions related to the imperial family, is numerous.<sup>50</sup> The success Severan policy had in the southern provinces might have reflected the necessity of a change, due to the political, economic and institutional instability of the Empire.

However, the reason of great *consensus* towards Septimius Severus and his family might also be related to their sympathy for the local communities, and those who did not possess Roman citizenship. Interesting is the construction of two temples in Rome by the emperor Elagabalus, in which it is perhaps possible to notice a dialogue between imperial and local framework, and it is also worth noticing how all the dynasty had built other temples within Rome and outside the capital, in order to create a connection between the imperial representation and the existing religious practices.<sup>51</sup>

The emphasis given to the celebration of the house of the emperor causes a revitalization of the imperial role, which is joined by a vitality in arts and architecture and as well, as previously underlined, in religion. This historical time frame is characterized by a sensible mutation in imperial ideology, in particular way the depiction in the non-literary sources of the emperor and his dynasty, as the emperor has to represent a symbol of continuity with the past and its glories, and at the same time he embodies the bond between East and West of the Roman Empire, in a moment in which they were slowly distancing from one another. In this context, the solar cult could well fit.

In this regard, to communicate the harmony of their relationship, emperor and empress were portrayed as sun and moon, and this to express not only their deep bond, but also to underline the power of the empress and its dependence on the emperor's power. Those images start to appear on coinage since Severus.<sup>52</sup>

## II.2 The cult of *Sol*

The Syrian territory had religious influence from the Phoenician tradition, in which deities identified as Baal embodied different roles and function. At the beginning, though, in the

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<sup>49</sup> Mastino 1997.

<sup>50</sup> There are over 1.500 inscriptions from North Africa dedicated to Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta, Julia Domna, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander.

<sup>51</sup> Rowan 2012, 201.

<sup>52</sup> Rantala 2017, 100.

Phoenician myth, the epithet was used to identify a single god, father of the years and of the man, and his name appears in the texts collected by Niqmaddu II, kinglet of Ugarit (today Ras Shamra). Niqmaddu decided to collect the religious and cultural tradition of the region in an archive, in the XIV century BC, probably between 1370 and 1350.<sup>53</sup> The texts were collected on clay tablets and written in Ugaritic, using the cuneiform system; then they had been deposited in the library of the Great Priest. In these written sources a diarchy appears, constituted by two elements: El, creator of the universe and father of gods, and Baal, son of El and Defensor of the cosmic order. It is interesting to notice that by neither of them we find, in the literary texts in Ugaritic, association with solar aspects, as the role of solar deity is exclusively given to Shapash, a minor deity which appears as helper of Anat, Baal's faithful companion, while bringing the corpse of Baal for the funerary rites on Sapanu, the sacred mountain.<sup>54</sup> Even though the alphabet used for the clay tablets is cuneiform, the language used is Canaanite, and so also the religious system, as it emerges from the excavations at Ugarit.<sup>55</sup> Even though Shapash had officially the role of sun god, in the Canaanite tradition other deities could also acquire solar attributes, as it is the case for the god El.

El, who appears in the scripts as the chief god, had also solar connotations<sup>56</sup>, but the name itself represents just the meaning, in the Semitic, for "god"; there were also many deities identified as Baal or Baalat, properly "lord" or "lady", and this same attribute had been given to the deity of Emesa, the same one brought in Rome by the emperor Elagabalus in Rome.

### II.3 This is the end?

In the Severan times sun and moon pass to identify respectively emperor and empress, through a peculiar iconography which portrays the emperor with the sun god's crown and the empress with the moon goddess' crescent, thus emphasizing and enduring the husband-wife relation, but at the

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<sup>53</sup> Xella 2001-2002, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Xella 2001-2002, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Harden 1971, 74.

<sup>56</sup> Even though Shapash had direct connection with solar attributes, other deities had as well characteristics to be connected with the sun: apart from El, in the Ugaritic texts appears also Melqart, who had previously been identified as a solar deity (Chuvin 2009, 205), and eventually acquired sea attributes. This same god is connected with cultic dancing, as it emerges from the dedications to a deity named Baal Marqod in Der al-Qalat (Naerebout 2009, 152). It is possible that the ritual dancing performed by Elagabalus in Herodian's account (Her. 5.3.8) might be connected to this deity, but also to a general Oriental fashion in the sense of a performative cultic ritual.

same time implying the co-dependence and connection of the two deities.<sup>57</sup> Once one goes through the use of these two symbols in the Roman history on coinage<sup>58</sup> and other cases attested also in literary evidence, one recognizes the deep familiarity of Romans with those images. The characterization of these two entities, either as natural phenomena or supreme and ancestral deities, is part of the Roman tradition, and part of their traditional religious background. The reforms of Septimius Severus in this matter were consistent, and they were followed by a tolerant and opening approach promoted by his successor, Caracalla, who in 212 promulgated the well-known *Constitutio Antoniniana*, the edict granting Roman citizenship to all the inhabitants of the Empire and, by effect, causing a time of religious tolerance of all those cults and deities worshipped within the borders of the Empire.<sup>59</sup> Septimius Severus' policy towards the provinces and his religious renovation both consolidated the idea of unity expressed in the *Constitutio*. Religious syncretism appears, in this transitional period, as a propeller and a stabilizer at the same time, in the sense that the evolution and transformation of cultic practices well works with the changes happening in society and politics, but at the same time the usage of ancient and well-known traditional symbols such as sun and moon constituted a milestone for believers who were participating in the religious public life of Rome. A new system was established, in which traditional religious symbols persisted, incorporating further characteristics and iconography coming from outside the *Urbs*. The way iconography communicates with the viewer is affected by the religious changes, presenting old beliefs combined together with outer pantheons and symbols of worship; the message depicted on coinage is clear and easily perceivable by Roman communities, including the provinces. Thus, solar iconography had also reached a way to become more understandable by religious groups confined at the end of the Empire, and in this case, it gave a way to religious syncretism.

## Chapter III - Sunrises and sunsets

### III.1 One of a kind

During the reign of Severus Alexander, the Emesene religion ceases to be considered an official cult in Rome, and the black aniconic stone is brought back to Syria; on the other hand, solar iconography persists, even though it appears to be more traditional and lacking powerful epithets, as

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<sup>57</sup> Rantala 2017, 100.

<sup>58</sup> An example among many is, for instance, the image of AETERNITAS, holding in her hands the heads of the sun and the moon, “as a special mark of Flavian coinage” (Brent 1999, 167).

<sup>59</sup> The text (papyrus Gissensis 40) is very damaged, and even if the transcription might implicitly suggest an inclination towards religious tolerance, the matter is not present in the extant evidence at our disposal.

*Invictus*. After Elagabalus' death, many portraits representing him went destroyed, and at the same time his name got erased from inscriptions and papyri.<sup>60</sup> The *damnatio memoriae* was a well-known process during the Severan dynasty, under which numerous *damnationes* were imposed on members of the royal family, but also on the usurpers: Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, Plautianus, Plautilla, Geta,<sup>61</sup> Macrinus, Diadumenianus, Elagabalus, Julia Soemias.<sup>62</sup> If we only pick the case of the emperor Elagabalus, who had been promoter of an Oriental cult and had associated himself to this god, displayed on coinage together with the formula *Sol Invictus*, the process of *damnatio* does not reflect a reaction to an extravagant or extreme religious choice, and apparently does not justify the cancellation of the memories related to the cult of Elagabal,<sup>63</sup> but it seems rather imposed on the emperor himself.<sup>64</sup> Of all the sculpted evidences depicting the emperor Elagabalus, only six are extant; furthermore, four distinct examples of portraits show the replacement of the emperor's features with those of his cousin Severus Alexander.<sup>65</sup> But also Severus Alexander suffered *damnatio memoriae*, with his mother,<sup>66</sup> a decision imposed by Alexander' successor Maximinus, who had killed him and his mother, slaughtered their friends and put to death those fugitives who made attempt to escape.<sup>67</sup>

The usage of the sun deity, depicted with its traditional features or appearing in relation with Oriental attributes, or also portrayed solely as solar symbol, is indicating the syncretistic approach of the Severan rulers: choosing a universal and well-known deity, which would endorse the

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<sup>60</sup> Icks 2011, 87.

<sup>61</sup> In the Arch of the Argentarii in Rome the preserved scene of the relief is mutilated on its right side, where once Geta's figure was portrayed; the image, appearing on the monument at the moment of the construction (the arch had been commissioned by Argentarii in 204), had been afterwards removed under the ruling of Caracalla by the emperor's orders (Tuck 2014, 287).

<sup>62</sup> Varner 2004, 156.

<sup>63</sup> The cult of *Sol Invictus Elagabal* does not seem to have been imposed from above, or it does not seem to have been given particular attention; coinage under Elagabalus shows that the stone of Emesa is represented only in 1% of reserve silver types, whereas Sol occupies 8%. A good percentage of examples shows the emperor as the high priest of his cult (23%), and it is explanatory of the fact that the emperor was, as well as the *pontifex maximus*, also the *sacerdos amplissimus* of his deity; but the percentage might not be that compelling, if compared with the usage of other personifications and virtues (47%) or the abundant presence of Victory (13%) (Rowan 2012, 166).

<sup>64</sup> Brent 1999, 310.

<sup>65</sup> Varner 2004, 189-190.

<sup>66</sup> Maximinus' decision had been revoked after the emperor's death.

<sup>67</sup> Her. 6.9.6-7.

emperor's persona and his religious preferences, could allow an easier inclusion of external elements in the traditional Roman pantheon. The impact of the cult of *Sol*, *Sol Invictus* and *Sol Invictus Elagabal* on Roman religion is evident from analysis of non-literary sources, as shown above, and in particular in the coinage produced under the ruling of the Severans, which attests the popularity of the solar cult and its worship in the empire and the provinces and witnesses the success of their propaganda.

### III.2 Endroducing

After Severus Alexander's death and the sunset of the Severan dynasty, the solar deity appears still on coins. Maximinus Thrax, Gordianus III, Philippus I and Otacilia Severa, Valerian I, Macrianus, Gallienus, Claudius Gothicus, Quintillus, Postumus, Regalianus, Victorinus, they all minted coins representing *Sol*.<sup>68</sup> However, it is with Aurelian that *Sol Invictus* appears again consistently as a title. Under Aurelian, it seems that religious syncretism inaugurated and promoted by the Severan dynasty finally had succeeded.<sup>69</sup>

The gradual transformation of the representation of the deity might also be caused by the fact that, at the beginning of the IV century, the process of Christianization implied appropriation of Roman religious motifs and the transformation of polytheistic symbols, adapted then in the upcoming religion as representation of the only God. The choice of using solar imagery in Christian context is ambivalent, since this natural element, interpreted now as God's creation, becomes in a positive meaning the personification of God itself, who appears as a charioteer,<sup>70</sup> but on the other hand, in some biblical sources the image of sun is often connected with idolatry.<sup>71</sup> In a general perspective, though, the sun symbol represents the power of God, or God himself, as it is shown in a mosaic preserved in the Vatican necropolis in Rome, dated in the III century, where Christ is represented as the sun deity, on a chariot.<sup>72</sup> Again, the solar deity, most likely Helios, appears with radiate head and holding the globe in a mosaic dated in the VI century from Hammath Tiberias.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hijmans 1996, 135.

<sup>69</sup> Brent 1999, 264.

<sup>70</sup> Philo, De Cherubim 7.24 and 3 (Greek) Baruch.

<sup>71</sup> 2 Kings 22-23. Moreover, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel draw a polemic against Jakob and his worship of sun-images, imagined as solar columns (Hezser 2016, 216).

<sup>72</sup> Hezser 2016, 225.

<sup>73</sup> Idel 2013.

Therefore, while *Sol Invictus* ceased to exist, losing the epithet and the relation of the deity with the emperorship, the sun symbol kept being employed for reflecting ritual practices of Christians and non-Christians in Late Antiquity and up until the Byzantine era, because of its generic and multivalent characteristics.<sup>74</sup> Even though some Christians might have avoided the usage of this deity because of the emperor Julian's interest towards it, the first churches were oriented towards the sun, and Christians in the Byzantine times were bowing toward the sun. *Sol* become a representation of Christ and his invincibility, and its iconography mutated with the religious changes at the end of Late Antiquity.

## Conclusion

The difficulty in establishing cult practices connected to the solar cult and in defining the peculiarities of the sun cult as such is conspicuous, and such difficulty is caused mainly by the scarce reliability of the literary sources, in a particular way those concerning the existence and the spread of the cult of *Sol Invictus* during Late Antiquity, as shown above. From non-literary evidence, however, we have knowledge that solar worship had a very long tradition, in which often the sun is in connection with the moon and other deities, and it appears in multiple forms and meanings. *Sol Invictus* gained importance and success with the advent of the Severans, who promoted the spread of such religion within the imperial political propaganda, and therefore this cult assumed a new connotation, reaching its *apex* with Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the one also known as Varius Avitus Bassianus, the notorious emperor Elagabalus.

After the emperor's tragic death, the cult of *Sol Invictus* maintained still popularity, as coinage shows, and emperors after Elagabalus often represent the deity on coinage.

Severans' usage of *Sol* was emulated, as shown on mints, by their successors. after the reign of Constantine the Great, who had associated the sun with himself as a *comes Augusti*, *Sol* continues to be present in the iconography, with the traditional motifs that had previously appeared. Gradually, with the loss of the center of gravity of the Empire, Rome, and the subsequent advent of the religions of the book, solar cult and sun iconography mutate in symbols and purpose, being absorbed and syncretized in the monotheistic beliefs.

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<sup>74</sup> Hezser 2016, 230.

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