

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Arts

Institute for Greek and Latin Studies

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

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

PhD Thesis

Marco Alampi, Mgr.

Supervisor: Dr. Ivan Prchlík, Ph.D.

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I declare that I wrote this thesis by myself using only listed and duly quoted sources and references and that the thesis was not used in another university study, or to acquire another or the same title.

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## Abstract

This Ph.D. dissertation focuses on the development of one of the most interesting cults spread and grown during Late Antiquity: the cult of *Sol Invictus*. Although traces of a sun worship in the Roman Empire are dated since the beginning of the Roman history, the cult of *Sol* acquires, at the end of the III century, original and interesting features. It is necessary to distinguish the sun deity as worshipped in private and initiatory circles (the Mithraic mysteries) from the public festivals and rites made for the sun god. In this work exclusively the public worship of the cult is analyzed, with a specific attention to the time frame which spans from the reign of the last of the Antonines, Commodus (180-192), until the ascension to the throne of Severus Alexander (222-235). This specific choice is due to the fact that this particular historical momentum, apart from having features that could be already defined as Late Antique traits, is also the time in which the sun cult gains favor among different social classes and iconography connected with *Sol Invictus* appears to be, during these times, abundant (of all, the case of Elagabalus and his god *Sol Invictus Elagabal* is perhaps the most original and striking). This work first puts in analysis and comparison literary and non-literary evidence concerning *Sol Invictus*, in order to gather information about solar cultic practices, and at the same time to establish the reliability of the sources at our disposal. Furthermore, the presence of the solar cult in Rome and in the provinces of the Roman Empire is analyzed, through the solar iconography present on the coinage, with the purpose of determining the characteristics attributed to the solar deity and the use made of it by the emperors. Finally, it is determined up to which extent the presence of the sun cult is witnessed, and how *Sol* gets syncretized and gradually englobed in other creeds with the advent of the religions of the book.

Tato disertační práce se věnuje vývoji jednoho z nejzajímavějších kultů, které se objevily a rozvinuly během pozdní antiky: kultu Nepřemožitelného slunce (*Sol Invictus*).

Ačkoli se stopy po uctívání slunce v římské říši objevují již od počátku římských dějin, kult boha *Sola* získává originální a zajímavé rysy na konci 3. století. Je nutné odlišit sluneční božstvo uctívané v soukromých a iniciačních kruzích (Mithrova mystéria) od veřejných svátků a obřadů zavedených pro boha Slunce. V této práci je analyzována výhradně veřejná bohoslužba, se zvláštním důrazem na časový rámec sahající od vlády posledního z Antoninů, Commoda (180-192), až po Severa Alexandra a jeho nástup na trůn (222-235). Specifická volba padla na toto konkrétní historické momentum, které, pomineme-li skutečnosti, jež by již mohly být definovány jako pozdně antické rysy, je také dobou, ve které si sluneční kult získává přízeň mezi různými společenskými vrstvami a objevuje se, zdá se, hojná ikonografie spojená se *Sol Invictus* (z níž je možná nejoriginálnější a nejvýraznější případ Elagabala a jeho boha, *Sol Invictus Elagabal*).

Tato práce nejprve analyzuje a srovnává literární a neliterární prameny ke kultu *Sol Invictus* tak, aby bylo možné shromáždit informace o kultické praxi slunečního kultu a zároveň stanovit spolehlivost pramenů, které máme k dispozici. Dále je analyzována přítomnost slunečního kultu v Římě a v provinciích římské říše, přičemž podrobněji je zkoumána sluneční ikonografie na mincích, což slouží k určení vlastností přisuzovaných slunečnímu božstvu a jejímu využití císaři. A konečně, je vymezeno, do jaké míry je přítomnost slunečního kultu vnímána a doložena a jak *Sol* podléhá synkretismu a s příchodem “náboženství knihy” se postupně zapojuje do dalších vyznání.

Keywords: Sol Invictus, Late Antiquity, cult, solar iconography, sun god, Severan dynasty, Elagabalus, henotheism, religious syncretism, late roman empire, roman history, Historia Augusta, damnatio memoriae, imperial propaganda.

Klíčová Slova: Sol Invictus, Pozdní antika, kult, sluneční ikonografie, sluneční božstvo, Severovská dynastie, Elagabalus, henoteismus, náboženský synkretismus, pozdně římská říše, římské dějiny, Historia Augusta, damnatio memoriae, imperiální propaganda.

## 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> It is generally identified Late Antiquity as a moment of change and transformation in economy, society, politics, urbanization, ritual practices of the Roman Empire. It might be seen as a transitional period, when the legacies of the institutions and traditions of the classical era survive, acquiring new characteristics, or changing their shape. As Michael Roberts in his work claims, "Late Antiquity is a period of continuity and change, of transition and transmission. Its literature is the product of a tension between the prestigious pagan masters, the social conditions and aesthetic presuppositions peculiar to late antique culture, and, at least in the case of Christian authors, the new conceptual and ethical world of Christianity."<sup>2</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>3</sup> who have seen this period as a moment of decadence of the Roman Empire,<sup>4</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>5</sup> without

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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> Roberts 1989, 38.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful and detailed discussion about the perception of Late Antiquity by modern scholars, see Rebenich 2009.

<sup>4</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>5</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

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.

The scenario of the III century appears utterly fascinating and intriguing, because it is possible to assist to a genuine melting pot of beliefs, and this mixture easily creates an intricate canvas, where it is hard to establish limits and characterizations. Thus, notions such as “paganism”,<sup>6</sup> “monotheism”, “polytheism” – and the very same notion of “late antiquity” itself – exist and have been created in order to comprehend the situations which determined a turn of events.

Furthermore, mutations in individual spiritual development are major, and the religious is submitted to a sensible mutation.<sup>7</sup> In fact, when one analyzes evolution of beliefs and ritual practices, it is 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>8</sup>

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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>6</sup> The term “pagan” was used with insulting connotation, implying a rustic backwardness, as pagans were those people coming from the *pagus*, the village. For the debate of Christianity versus paganism as seen by historians in Late Antiquity, see Rohrbacher 2002.

<sup>7</sup> For the phenomenon of religious mutations in Late Antiquity, see Stroumsa 2005.

<sup>8</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.

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. The mutation also happens in a way which transforms the idea of polytheism, that is the worship of all the gods of the pantheon without any preference towards one deity, in the concept of henotheism,<sup>9</sup> that is the worship of one deity above the others, without implying the exclusion of the other gods.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of “One God”, which already appears in the philosophical thought of Neoplatonism, acquires during Late Antiquity a religious significance, and even though it is not possible to categorize all the beliefs presenting the peculiarity of exclusiveness of one deity under one definition, it is possible at least to see a common trend in the paganism, which can be identified as pagan monotheism.

In this sense, henotheism appears to be a particular category which allows to establish a categorization of some sort. As Mitchell and Van Nuffelen observe, “alternative terms have been used to describe various forms of “one god” belief, most notably henotheism, which enjoys wide currency in contemporary scholarship. It nevertheless remains questionable whether the coining of henotheism as a new analytical category is a helpful tool in the debate,

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<sup>9</sup> The term henotheism indicates a religious development from one paradigm to another; there are other definition to classify this religious tendency as, for instance, “monolatry”, “incipient monotheism”, “latent monotheism”. The difference between “henotheism” and “monolatry” stands essentially in the use of the term itself. In fact, while “henotheism” was introduced for the first time by Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Welcker and used by Welcker to discuss the primordial Greek religion, which was characterized by the worship of Zeus alone, the term monolatry “may have been coined by William Robertson Smith to describe early Semitic religion.” (Gnuse 1997, 132) Successively, henotheism is used by Max Muller, in the nineteenth century, for describing the peculiarities of the Rg Veda (Lawrence 2013, 78). The use of this terms might be ambiguous, as Van Nuffelen states, “henotheism and monolatry are sometimes called “practical monotheism”, as they stress the cultic worship of one god out of many, and some scholars distinguish relative and potential monotheism. [...] All these qualifications make clear that monotheism is no longer (if it ever has been) a rigid concept, but rather a flexible term which can cover traditional monotheisms, and also monotheistic tendencies within polytheist religions”. (Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010, 20)

<sup>10</sup> “Monotheism may seem a stark antithesis to polytheism, but there was no abrupt leap from one to the other. No one, so far as we know, suddenly had the revolutionary idea that it would be economical to assume a single god responsible for everything rather than a plurality of gods. Where we see a god emerging as plenipotentiary, the existence of other gods is not denied, but they are reduced in importance or status, and he is praised as the greatest among them. This is what is sometimes called “henotheism”. (West 1999, 24) It is important to see here how the transition from polytheism to monotheism has been slow and gradual, and the importance of one deity does not eliminate the presence of the others. In a henotheistic context, the other deities exist with their specific peculiarities and powers.



however practical it may be to differentiate between various styles of “monotheism” in their historical contexts. [...] The claims about the unity of the divine, which had been commonplace in earlier philosophy, now acquire religious as well as intellectual significance, thus laying the foundations for pagan monotheism to become established as a meaningful concept within intellectual speculation and an active element in religious developments.”<sup>11</sup> Acquiring the notion of henotheism means understanding the need of a social group, which seems not be represented anymore by the institutions and the religious beliefs preexisting, and therefore there is a new urge of commitment to different cults and practices, thus giving birth to new forms of religion which express in a more distinctive and effective way the religious identity.

A key word which could incisively express the uncertainties and the needs of the Late Antiquity believers is “individuality”,<sup>12</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>13</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>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010, 7.

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough analysis of the emergence of individuality in Late Antiquity, see Torrance and Zachhuber 2016.

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

<sup>14</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.

It is fundamental then to get a deeper view on those religious practices, spread during this time in the Roman Empire, which more than others helped the transition from the antiquity to the new era. The cults coming from East significantly mutated the Roman religious structure and also the public institutions: appearing as private cults, sometimes with initiatory nature, deeply changed the nature of the pantheon and the hierarchy of the Roman gods. If we also consider the emergence of the henotheism, then the big picture looks even more puzzled.

This research project aims to analyze development, rise and disappearance of one of the most interesting cults developed and grown during Late Antiquity: the cult of *Sol Invictus*. It is necessary to distinguish, first of all, the sun deity as worshipped in private and initiatory circles (the Mithraic mysteries) from the public festivals and rites made for the sun god. In this work it is analyzed exclusively the public worship of the cult, with a specific attention to the time frame which spans from the reign of the last of the Antonines, Commodus (180-192), until the ascension to the throne of Severus Alexander (222-235). This specific choice is due to the fact that this particular historical momentum, apart from having features that could be already defined as Late Antique traits, is also the time in which the sun cult gains favor among different social classes and iconography connected with *Sol Invictus* appears to be during these times abundant.

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>15</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,

<sup>15</sup> Halsberghe 1972.

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>16</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>17</sup> focuses on the figure of the emperor Elagabalus and his deity, *Elagabal*,<sup>18</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. Furthermore, characteristics and the spread of this religion in the *Urbs* but also in the provinces will be put in exam, in order to determine up to which extent the cult of *Sol* penetrated in the Roman Empire, and until when it could be still possible to track iconography of the sun deity in the evidence at our disposal. In addition, the evolution of the solar religion is studied, with a focus on the reasons which determined the disappearance – or rather mutation – of this cult.

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 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.

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<sup>16</sup> Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Icks 2011.

<sup>18</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*.

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. Ultimately, it is established the process through which sun iconography, even maintaining similar features, as it will be shown, acquires different meaning with the advent of the monotheistic beliefs, and it slowly gets absorbed in other creeds, the most prominent of those being the Christian one.

## 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. During the third century it is possible to assist to a sensible change in the Roman culture and mentality, which is reflected in the production of historians' work; evidence at our disposal shows a mutation in the features of the imperial culture, as the dynasties ruling the Roman Empire arrive from Africa or Syria. Three main literary sources at our disposal mention the presence of the cult of *Sol Invictus* in Rome: Cassius Dio, Herodian, the *Historia Augusta*.

The advantage of reading the histories of the authors of the third century is that, in the view of the new sensibility towards the individual and the growing affirmation of history as personal account, these historians talk and are deeply interested in the problems of their own time.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of history as universal and impersonal work changes in the III century, and the works of Cassius Dio and Herodian are neat examples of this new sensibility. Cassius Dio is the first author since the work of Livy "to create a full-scale narrative linking his own time to the entire course of both Republican and Imperial history".<sup>20</sup> He wrote much likely under the emperor Septimius Severus, terminating the composition of his work before the accession of Severus Alexander, but in the modern debate this matter has been disputed.<sup>21</sup> His work, which covers a time span which goes from the earliest times to his own era, reflects a negative view of the present times, with a nostalgia for the Antonine age.

He compares the different forms of government and the evolution of the Roman political apparatus, and he traces a history that has in the Augustus and the Republican time its highest peak. Cassius Dio's *History* is inspired by two previous works of his: a pamphlet describing

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<sup>19</sup> Alföldy 1974, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Kemezis 2014, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Barnes 1984b, 241.

Septimius Severus' seizure of power, and the account of a dream, in which Severus instructs the historian to write "all that is said and done".<sup>22</sup> While taking into account the stories and the events of Rome, giving us vivid and more accurate descriptions in regard of the facts of his own time, Dio represents "a crucial witness to the self-image of the high Imperial elite."<sup>23</sup> It is a moment in which the institutions are living a dense mutation, since the equilibrium of power changes, favoring now the figure of the emperor, who appears to have less in common with the senate, but seems to be in a more direct relationship with the *publicum*.

The Antonine age, in Dio's account, represents a moment in which the individual lives in direct contact with the political institutions, being immersed in the day-to-day life of the state. In particular, Dio analyzes the historical events from the point of his senatorial perspective, and he realizes that the senate as an institution needs to have unity, in order to survive the subsequent times. At the same time, on the other hand, he is conscious that the fragmentation of power, which characterizes his times, does not allow to constitute a unique view of the senate, which does not exist anymore as a group, but it is formed by different and various entities. This seems to be a necessary prerogative to his work.<sup>24</sup> Writing traditional senatorial history, in a general overview, "Dio is a competent representative of orthodox historiography, and provides copious, accurate and perceptive information about the emperors of his time".<sup>25</sup> He is usually interested in military or political matters, as well as in the relationship of the emperor with the senate. He makes use of his own experience in quality of senator and uses old and reliable sources for the events prior to his birth as, for example, the Ciceronian speeches.<sup>26</sup>

Dio's account on Elagabalus' reign is reconstituted from diverse sources, and the extant text at our disposal, in epitome, is a collection of information the historian, dated mainly after the first or the third of January 219, and therefore before leaving Rome for his senatorial duties. Thus, during the accession and the reign of Elagabalus, Cassius Dio could not be present as a direct witness, and therefore he collected a series of facts and anecdotes.

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<sup>22</sup> Dio 78.10.1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Kemezis 2012, 387.

<sup>24</sup> Kemezis 2012, 412-413.

<sup>25</sup> Kemezis 2014, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Millar 1961.

The historian gives us a description of the emperor's excesses and luxuries, and a display of Oriental extravagances. In order to present his work as reliable and accurate, Dio claims that he was not in Rome during the reign of Elagabalus, and therefore he states that his account is based mainly on hearsay, without using direct witnesses.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, he provides information about the movements of the emperor, in accordance with what he was able to gather from secondary oral sources.

The main purpose of his work is to inform the reader about historical events, and he tries to give as many details as possible, in the view that only after having made a deep analysis of the history as a whole evolving process it is possible to own a critic point of view towards the facts of his own era. Building-up trust is part of Dio's strategy, because the facts in account could be verified by his own contemporaries and therefore accepted as reliable. The relationship of trust between historian and reader is a fundamental matter in the conception of Dio's history, without which the historical discourse cannot have existence, in regard of the reader's acceptance of the facts. But, at the same time, what emerges from Dio's work is often a passionate and personal point of view,<sup>28</sup> diverging from the objectivity which is peculiar of the historian's method.

As mentioned above, though, since he could not have an actually direct information regarding Elagabalus and *Sol*, Dio must trust different sources. In doing so, he expresses his own opinion on the matters he discusses. If the discourse the historian narrates about the religious matter in the policy of Elagabalus is taken in exam, it emerges that the major critique towards the introduction of a new deity consists in the will of the emperor Elagabalus of putting his new deity in the highest position in the Roman pantheon, even higher than Jupiter himself, and becoming high priest of his cult. In his work, Dio narrates:

τῶν δὲ δὴ παρανομημάτων αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ κατὰ τὸν Ἐλεγάβαλον ἔχεται, οὐχ ὅτι θεόν τινα ξενικὸν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἐσήγαγεν, οὐδ' ὅτι καινοπρεπέστατα αὐτὸν ἐμεγάλυνεν, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ πρὸ τοῦ Διὸς αὐτοῦ ἤγαγεν αὐτόν, καὶ ὅτι καὶ ἱερέα αὐτοῦ ἑαυτὸν ψηφισθῆναι ἐποίησεν, ὅτι τε τὸ αἰδοῖον περιέτεμε, καὶ ὅτι χοιρείων κρεῶν, ὡς καὶ καθαρώτερον ἐκ τούτων θρησκευσῶν, ἀπείχετο ἐβουλεύσατο μὲν γὰρ παντάπασιν αὐτὸ ἀποκόψαι: ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μὲν τῆς μαλακίας ἕνεκα ποιῆσαι ἐπεθύμησε, τοῦτο δὲ ὡς

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<sup>27</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado, 2010, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Arbo 2009.

καὶ τῇ τοῦ Ἐλεγαβάλου ἱερατεία προσήκον ἔπραξεν: ἐξ οὗ δὴ καὶ ἑτέροις τῶν συνόντων συχνοῖς ὁμοίως.<sup>29</sup>

This description, which is the only extant information about the cult of *Sol Invictus* in the whole Dio's work,<sup>30</sup> informs us of the introduction of the deity and the attribution of honors, and here Dio refers to the construction of two temples dedicated to Elagabal in the city, the so-called *Heliogabalium* on the Palatine, and another temple in the surroundings of the city. Furthermore, Dio insists on the major importance referred to *Sol Invictus*, and the prominence of this cult above the others. Apart from that, though, Dio does not provide any other specific information about the cult, except some practices adopted by the emperor, the abstinence from meat, circumcision and use of Syrian robes. This passage is concise and does not make clear the impact the cult had, in the promotion endorsed by the emperor.

Neither it is possible to understand exactly what Dio means by Elagabal. We know that other sources use the term in relation to both the deity and the emperor,<sup>31</sup> but Dio prefers to refer to the emperor in comparison with Sardanapalus, obviously using the term with negative connotation. Therefore, we do not know what Dio intended when he wrote about Elagabal, but much likely he was already familiar with the cult, “since the cult seems to have enjoyed imperial favor under Severus and Caracalla, and since Dio claims familiarity, at least with the latter's court, Dio, if he speaks true in this respect, should have been aware of the cult's prior presence in Rome.”<sup>32</sup>

It is possible that it was difficult for the historian to comprehend the cult or to delineate its peculiarities, but unwritten evidence of the solar cult is numerous during the reign of Severus and Caracalla,<sup>33</sup> therefore Dio must have known the existence of the cult. Moreover, the attention of the historian seems to be concentrated mostly on the matter of politics and military achievements, and of course on the situation of the senatorial class during these times.

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<sup>29</sup> Dio 80.11.1.

<sup>30</sup> Except Dio 78.31.1, which informs us of the presence of the cult among the soldiers and tells us that the god Elagabal was worshipped together with other oracles. The deity identified as Elagabal here is an ancient deity, whose earliest attestation appears in a Palmyrean stele, found in Nazala, in the I century. (Niehr and Birley 2006) Herodian also writes about priests of a sun god, who was worshipped by their countrymen under the Phoenician name Elagabal (Her. 5.3.4).

<sup>31</sup> Herodian and *Historia Augusta* identify the deity with the emperor and vice versa; Dio instead addresses the emperor Elagabalus as Sardanapalus, underlining his excesses and extravagances.

<sup>32</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 168.

<sup>33</sup> As will be seen in more detail in the next chapter.



When he describes the cult, he seems to collect information from other sources, giving us a brief narration, although without providing valuable or original facts. His main preoccupation seems to be the situation of the Senate and the relationship between senators and emperors. The lack of stability and the decentralization of the power, as Septimius Severus inaugurates a new time of expansionism and intense foreign affairs policy – founding the new province Osroene and then Mesopotamia - are the main concerns for Dio, who sees his contemporary age as time of degradation and social illness, and cause of this – and at the same time consequence of it – it is the change of habits lifestyle.

When he talks about the emperor Elagabalus, what he underlines above all are his excesses, and he is not worried to focus on religious matters. Moreover, even though the large part of Dio's work survived only through the epitomes of Zonaras and Xiphilinus, "the second half of the LXXIX and the first half of book LXXX, including most of the description of Elagabalus's reign, have come to us unabridged, with only a few lacunae."<sup>34</sup> We do not know if the lacunae in the text regard passages where the historian described the solar worship or he gave an account of the rituals and practices concerning this religious cult, but what comes as result is that Dio's text is fragmentary,<sup>35</sup> mostly in the part regarding the accession of the emperor Elagabalus and the acclamation of the troops.

The reason of the lack of uniformity in the work of Cassius Dio is probably to be attributed to his long absence from Rome during the years of Elagabalus' reign, being relocated in Asia Minor for this time and therefore recollecting oral sources or rumors once he returned to the capital.<sup>36</sup> The historian seems to show in his narrative a period of decline, putting under light the dissatisfaction of his social class. On one hand, he narrates the world of the emperors and informs us about pivotal events, on the other hand he gives his personal opinion as a valid representative of his social class in regards of those events.

The result of his narrative is a persona reflecting nostalgically on the current circumstances, looking with melancholy at the Antonine era, seen as a prosperous age and representing the ideal continuation of Augustus' era.<sup>37</sup> During the II century the presence of provincial elites in

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<sup>34</sup> Icks 2011, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Birley 2000, 192.

<sup>36</sup> Icks 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Kemezis 2014, 18.

the capital appears to be more consistent. They take part to the administration of the *Urbs* and became part of the central power structure. The result is a sensible cultural change, in the sense that the new upcoming class, competing with the traditional organs of power, such as the senate, takes place actively in the political and social life. When this phenomenon regards the senatorial the effect is already visible and perceivable, and it affects profoundly the asset of the Empire, but when the Severan dynasty will take power, that is a dynasty of Africans and Syrians, those issues manifest on the highest level, and political change seems inevitable.

The narration of Dio starts positively and with an apparent sign of hope, as Elagabalus promises to the senate to emulate Augustus and Antoninus.<sup>38</sup> Soon, though, the account changes its tones, as the emperor's plans turn up differently. In fact, Dio shows right after, and for the rest of his account, how the reign of Elagabalus and his reforms had been an enormous failure. In particular, more than the religious reforms, depravation and sexual habits of the emperor are taken into target, as Dio seems to impute to transgression and sex misdemeanors the main causes of the emperor's fall.

The historian analyses the emperor's figure exclusively, if not solely, taking in account his extravagances and his deviated persona, underlining a fracture between ruler and senatorial class. The most crucial theme, for the historian, is the transformation of the aristocracy and the relationship between the institutional powers.

In particular, he reflects on how the Senate had previously formed a stable and strong tool of power in the hands of the emperor, expressing that consensus which for Dio seems necessary in order to achieve a balanced system structure, and how nowadays that balance started to lack. Although he recognizes that times have changed and there is no possibility for the aristocracy to have importance in major political decisions, he is aware that there is no chance of positive change for the future, because also senatorial class has changed, and it is no longer in conformity with the emperor's policy, nor it is anymore expression of that public support which characterized the time of Augustus. Thus, the reign of Elagabalus (and the whole Severan age), represents a moment in which the role of public institutions mutates, and Severus Alexander seems to be the last emperor to create a constructive dialogue with the senatorial aristocracy, before everything transforms radically.

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<sup>38</sup> Dio 79.1.3.

Cassius Dio represents the previous model, where emperor and institutions constituted an organized and intercommunicating system, a model which is no longer functioning because of the incompatibility with the new asset of power. Moreover, all the account is pervaded by the strong presence of the author, who is willing to share his own opinions and to show his view on the current events. Dio's account, while it might be helpful to understand a senator's position during the Severan age and his personal doubts and fears for the upcoming times, it is not a valid and reliable source for the studying of the development of the cult of *Sol Invictus*, as he does not give actual information on the specifics of the cult and its reception.

Dio's work is interesting, though, because it underlines the changes which appeared during the Severan age, and he is aware of the moment of transformation he is living. Even though, at least for what concerns Elagabalus' account, what his history provides is mainly a series of anecdotes, with the purpose of showing emperor's weaknesses,<sup>39</sup> the overall narration gives an interesting picture of the situation in the III century and the problematics connected with preservation and continuity of traditional institutions. The use of oral sources and hearsay for the constitution of his history clashes with Dio's strategy of persuasion, and therefore the purpose of building up trust in the readers fails, and with it the possibility of having a useful witness of the solar cult in Rome.

Herodian, who writes a generation after Dio and probably comes from a lower social status,<sup>40</sup> is the only literary source which gives us some information about the solar cult, and some practices related to it. At first glance the figure of the historian within the account seems more blurred than Dio's, who developed, on the other hand, a "quite complex authorial"<sup>41</sup> persona, and he himself constitutes, in the account, the key to comprehend the events he narrates. Herodian, on the other hand, avoids this identification, providing, at least formally, a neat work.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rowan 2012, 16.

<sup>40</sup> The date of composition of the *Roman History* remains unknown. Herodian wrote his *History* in the half of the III century, and probably around or certainly before 253. A.R. Polley argues, considering the absence of Valerian in Herodians' account of the revolution of 238, that 253 should be considered a *terminus ante quem* (Polley 2003) against Sidebottom, who identified the year 260 as ideal date of composition, and during the reign of Gallienus (260-268) (Sidebottom 1997). I am in favor of Polley's hypothesis, considering the presence of historical elements in Herodian that would confirm an earlier composition of the work.

<sup>41</sup> Kemezis 2014, 20.

<sup>42</sup> The neat style of Herodian clashes though with the content of its work, which appears to be chaotic.

In Dio's account the introduction of Elagabal seems a surprising and shocking event, in the lights of the actual events, and considering the chaotic and unbalanced situation of the present times; Herodian, instead, seems to be more interested in the solar cult and also more familiar with it. It is possible that, during Dio's time, the introduction of the aniconic stone (which appears to be the image of the deity, and it is found also in non-literary evidence)<sup>43</sup> seemed an extraordinary new element, and therefore not totally understood or accepted. It was this probably more than the actual introduction of a new cult, which caused scandal. This is clear in Dio's passages, where he talks of very strange ways of the emperor for exalting the deity, and he informs us about "barbaric chants" and "unholy rites",<sup>44</sup> strictly connected with the cult. On the other hand, Herodian's account informs us about dance performances<sup>45</sup> and rituals, including the description of the background accompanying the ceremonies, as food, wine, bulls' sacrifice, and the making of a choreography, including also the use of music instruments<sup>46</sup> and verbal formulas. In particular, there is a passage in which a divine *pompa* is described in which the god, represented by an aniconic conical black stone, is carried by the emperor, who leads the sacred chariot walking backwards, and facing the god:

"A six-horse chariot bore the Sun god, the horses huge and flawlessly white, with expensive gold fittings and rich ornaments. No one held the reins, and no one rode in the chariot; the vehicle was escorted as if the Sun god himself were the charioteer. Elagabalus ran backward

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<sup>43</sup> This will be more fully analyzed in the second chapter of this work.

<sup>44</sup> Dio 80.11.1. See also de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 169, de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *Varian Studies Volume One: Varius* 2017, 267, Vagi 2000, 297.

<sup>45</sup> Her. 5.5.9. Herodian is the only author informing us about the emperor dancing in a cultic context, locating the performances in Syria and Rome, while Cassius Dio and *Historia Augusta* do not mention of it. It is possible that performances could happen also without dances, but it seems that in Emesa such rituals were very common, and probably Herodian knows it in person, having been in the city (Naerebout 2009, 151-152). Even though there are not non-literary sources attesting the dance performance, there are several inscriptions and dedications to other Syrian gods, describing those acts in a cultic dancing context.

<sup>46</sup> Many are the accounts of emperors performing arts, such as singing, dance and music. "Verus travelled about through Corinth and Athens with instrumentalists and singers, and on his return from the Parthian war brought from Syria players of stringed instruments and pipers; Commodus is described as adept in certain arts not proper and suitable for an emperor, one of which was singing; Elagabalus sang, danced, declaimed to the pipes, played on the trumpet, the pandura, and the organ [...]" (Scott 1957, 417-418) The element of music performance, described by Dio as "barbaric", it is a *topos* recurring often, and even if the dances or the music could had been considered extreme and unpopular, this definitely would not had been the reason of the opposition to foreign elements imported in the Empire.

in front of the chariot, facing the god and holding the horses' reins. He made the whole journey in this reverse fashion, looking up into the face of his god. Since he was unable to see where he was going, his route was paved with gold dust to keep him from stumbling and falling, and bodyguards supported him on each side to protect him from injury. The people ran parallel to him, carrying torches and tossing wreaths and flowers. The statues of all the gods, the costly or sacred offerings in the temples, the imperial ornaments, and valuable heirlooms were carried by the cavalry and the entire Praetorian Guard in honor of the Sun god.<sup>47</sup>

The description of the procession along the streets of the capital is the only literary source informing us of rituals connected with the worship of the black stone; the presence of the god is given also by the fact that the emperor chooses to walk facing the god, therefore establishing a presence of the deity during the ritual. The god is portrayed not by a statue, but a stone. The aniconic black stone, probably a meteorite and possibly obsidian,<sup>48</sup> is called βαιτύλος,<sup>49</sup> baetyl. It might have been an object of worship itself, being the “house of god”, from the Semitic origin *bet-el*, or perhaps *bet-eloah*,<sup>50</sup> and rather than being a representation of the deity, it embodies the deity itself. Moreover, baetyls can be object of worship themselves, thus not representing anything else. The aniconic stone, which represent a newcomer in the end of the second century, had been brought to Rome from Emesa, where the non-Greek cult of Elagabal was worshipped, and the city is not known to have existed until the I century B.C.,<sup>51</sup> when we have the first literary attestation of the presence of a local dynasty, with Sampsigeramus and his son Iamblichus, leaders of the *Emiseni* people, as Strabo informs us.<sup>52</sup> The city had known, since the antiquity, direct and mixed influences, in particular Semitic, Babylonian and Arab, therefore also its pantheon must have reflected this syncretism. Moreover, a Chaldean influence on the city is also detected, and the well-known

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<sup>47</sup> Her. 5.6.7-8 (transl. Echols 1961).

<sup>48</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 166.

<sup>49</sup> The term, deriving from the semitic *bethel*, occurs already in Pliny, Nat. Hist. 27.9. It indicates a specific object of worship which would be the representation of the god, or it was used as a simple dedication to a deity. See “Baetylus” in Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 3 (1911).

<sup>50</sup> Rykwert 1996, 455.

<sup>51</sup> Millar 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Strabo 16.12.10 [753].

*Oracles* were located in Syria, as Saffrey<sup>53</sup> and Athanassiadi<sup>54</sup> seem to point out, even though there is no evidence of the presence of them, as one might expect, and it is only attested the existence of the Emesan temple and the sacred stone.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the mausoleum of Sampsigeramus seems to be of a Mesopotamian type,<sup>56</sup> and the first part of Sampsigeramus' name come from the semitic *shemesh*, the sun.<sup>57</sup> The nomenclature and the origin of the word *shamash/shemesh* could be Semitic, and certainly would allude to the sun, and a Babylonian deity called Shams worshipped by Arabs and spread through the Middle East is attested, and probably would be connected in a comparative or syncretistic association with *El*, representing the "god" of the mountain ("*gabal/gbl*"), as an Aramaic inscription in Palmyrene lettering of the I century AD would confirm,<sup>58</sup> where the deity appears along with the Arab god Arsu, known in the pre-Islamic Arab tradition as Ruda, who was one of the various warrior gods worshipped in the Syrian desert by nomads.<sup>59</sup> The name found in the stele, "*lhl' gbl*", perhaps referred to Elagabal, as "Elaha Gabal" (god mountain), and it is depicted by an eagle with outstretched wings, in a standing position, up on an aniconic rock. The representation of a deity through baetyls was not new in the East, especially in Nabataea, where the use of the stone as image and representation of the god, if not the god himself, is largely attested, and this shows the preference for Eastern and Near Eastern cults for the use of non-anthropomorphic images.<sup>60</sup>

In Rome the baetyl was a newcomer. In the ceremony described by Herodian, the stone is brought through the streets of the capital, following the images of the other gods, and the emperor himself holds the reins of the cart carrying his deity, walking backwards while facing the god. The historian characterizes the cult as Phoenician, saying that Elagabalus is the Phoenician name of the god<sup>61</sup> and informing us that the temple where the deity is originally

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<sup>53</sup> Theurgist. 1989.

<sup>54</sup> Athanassiadi, Polymnia and Frede, Michael 1999, 149-184.

<sup>55</sup> Tanaseanu-Döbler 2013, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Levick 2007, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Millar 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Starcky 1975-1976.

<sup>59</sup> Dirven 1999, 93.

<sup>60</sup> Butcher 2003, 338-339.

<sup>61</sup> See note 30.

located, in Emesa, does not include anthropomorphic images, but it contains a huge black stone, with pointed top and round base, in a conic shape.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Herodian informs us that the sacred stone had incorporated small figures in relief, and Phoenicians claimed that it is an unwrought image of the sun, because this is what they would spontaneously see in those figures.<sup>63</sup> Herodian does not describe an ordinary rock, instead a peculiar one, containing some natural marks, and the worshipper's purpose does not seem to avoid the sight of the deity, rather to search for some meaning in the stone's marks.<sup>64</sup>

However, taking in exam the iconography and non-literary evidence, as it will be discussed more specifically in the chapter dedicated to the spread of the solar cult under the Severan dynasty, the stone does not seem associated with the sun. The epithet of *Heliogabalus* itself, given as misspelled form of the original name of the god, is a form of confusion and misinterpretation of the deity. Probably to the Greeks the name sounded similar to *Helios*, and the epithet was accepted also by the Emesenes without encountering any opposition, since evidence shows that overseas there are dedications to the sun-god Elagabal.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the etymologic solar connotation is a latter invention as natural or due association of the supreme god with the supreme solar entity. In fact, when looking at the development of the pantheon of Emesa and the characteristics of it, it is not possible to find any solar peculiarity connected with Elagabal. As the most certain connection of the deity is with the mountain, it is possible that identification of the etymology came with the latter association of the cult to the solar religion, once the cult was imported in Rome. On the other hand, in the city of Gabala, from what it is possible to evince from the Hellenistic coinage, it was worshipped a triad in which the sun god had been included, but it is rarely represented on mints produced in other near cities, such as, for instance, Laodicea, Aradus and Carne.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in the latter syncretism and during the formation of the traditional pantheons, such a triad become formed by Jupiter-Venus-Mercury, attested in Heliopolis (Baalbek);<sup>67</sup> in the Palmyrene pantheon the solar attributes are given to the god Yarhibol, put in strictly connection with Aglibol, the moon god. The presence of the solar deity in a triad does not constitute an element of predominance

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<sup>62</sup> Her. 5.3.4.

<sup>63</sup> Her. 5.3.5.

<sup>64</sup> Doak 2015, 76.

<sup>65</sup> Birley 2000, 71.

<sup>66</sup> Teixidor 1977, 49.

<sup>67</sup> Kropp 2010.

above the other two deities; in fact, both Yarhibol and Aglibol appear to be acolytes of Bel, who was worshipped in Palmyra but it was firstly attested first in Babylonia,<sup>68</sup> and he appears in the Palmyrean Greek texts under the name of Zeus.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the god Elagabal brought to Rome by the emperor could not possibly be understood as competitor and substitutive of Jupiter, establishing thus a new religious order and be reason of scandal or shock. Even if the new element, constituted by the black stone, could appear as “strange”, because of “new” (possibly in the way Romans perceived the meaning of this word)<sup>70</sup> this novelty could not possibly be received as dangerous or subversive, and mostly because similar processions were already existing and, even though this one could have presented eastern cultic peculiarities,<sup>71</sup> it might comparable to the kind of *pompa aurea*, which is also described by Ovid:<sup>72</sup> *Sed iam pompa venit – linguis animisque favete! / Tempus adest plausus – aurea pompa venit.*<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to notice that in both descriptions a reference to gold is present: in Elagabal’s parade the route is paved with gold dust, as Herodian indicates,<sup>74</sup> for preventing the emperor from falling or stumbling, but gold could be probably also associated to the imperial persona, and it recalls the traditional ceremonies held in the capital, thus keeping a bond with traditional religion. This latest aspect does not come up though when analyzing Herodian’s description of the emperor. In fact, the historian insists on his barbaric taste in dressing. He describes the luxurious garment of Elagabalus, and he specifies that his fashion showed the influence of the sacred robe of the Phoenicians.<sup>75</sup> Again, further, when talking about the ceremony for the god and celebration rites, he describes praetorian prefects and magistrates wearing “long-sleeved robes with a broad purple stripe in the center, robes which hung to their feet in the Phoenician style”,<sup>76</sup> and they wore linen shoes, on the custom of Eastern

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<sup>68</sup> Millar 2011, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Teixidor 1977, 115.

<sup>70</sup> In literary texts the term *novus* could be associated with the meaning of “new”, but also “unusual”.

<sup>71</sup> Rowan 2012, 205.

<sup>72</sup> Ovid. *Amor.* 3.2.43-44.

<sup>73</sup> “But now the procession is coming—keep silence all, and attend! The time for applause is here—the golden procession is coming.”

<sup>74</sup> See the description of Elagabalus’ procession mentioned above (p.16 with n.40), and in particular Her. 5, 6, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Her. 5.5.4.

<sup>76</sup> Her. 5.5.10 (transl. Echols 1961).



prophets. Herodian insists also on the fact that obviously this was the context of the performance of the sacred rites connected with Elagabal.<sup>77</sup> Later on, during the description of the distribution of flesh of tame animals, except swine, Herodian is again willing to remind that this custom was properly Phoenician.<sup>78</sup> The decision of the writer to refer to the emperor's traditions and habits with Phoenician connotations is due to several reasons: various sources classify Syrians in a negative way,<sup>79</sup> and probably the historian's choice is to avoid this direct association, preferring rather to define the emperor's attributes as Phoenician. Furthermore, the author describes Julia Maesa as *Phoinissa*,<sup>80</sup> thus underlining a connection with Dido in the *Aeneid*<sup>81</sup> and establishing a continuity with the tradition. Also, the emperor's choice of the female partner for his deity is interesting, because he chooses as a consort for Elagabal the goddess from Carthage, namely *Ourania (Ashtart)* and probably originally "set up by "Dido, the Phoenician", a move that neatly connected the African and Syrian origin of the Severan dynasty through a Phoenician diasporic relationship."<sup>82</sup> The choice of using the term Phoenician might be due as well to the fact that Septimius Severus had made clear the will of establishing a bond with Phoenician traditions, and strengthening the tie with the family of his wife, Julia Domna.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the choice made by the emperor Severus to denominate "*Phoenice*" the new province of *Syria Phoenice* could be in order to underline the

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<sup>77</sup> See note above.

<sup>78</sup> Her. 5.6.9.

<sup>79</sup> It is interesting how the historian underlines a direct connection with Phoenician traditions, rather than Syrian; this could be explained with the fact that Syrian attributes held negative connotation. The characterization of Syrians as slaves, effeminate, androgynous and sexual deviants is present in Cicero (*Pis.* 1), who also, in the description of his enemy Aulus Gabinius, criticizes his naked dancing amid sounds of tambourines, depilation and promiscuity, comparing Gabinius to the cruel Semiramis, a despotic woman who ruled Syria, well known for her promiscuity, and described as "a shaving dancing woman (*saltatrix tonsa*)". (Andrade 2013, 90) Overall, the literature of the imperial period is particularly hostile towards Asiatics, Syrians and Jews, and according to Cicero Syrians and Jews are those who were born slaves (Isaac 2006, 463). Moreover, in the Bible Syro-Phoenicians belong to an ethnic group characterized as *dogs* (Jones Hall 2004, 137); furthermore, at the end of the IV century *Syri* is used in high culture levelled pagan contexts to describe Christians, with negative connotation (Fumagalli 1994, 21).

<sup>80</sup> Her. 5.3.2-6.

<sup>81</sup> Jones Hall 2004. See also Millar 2011, 37.

<sup>82</sup> Quinn 2017, 149.

<sup>83</sup> Shayegan 2004, 277.

origins of the Severan family (*Lepcis Magna*), and also to indicate his wife's home.<sup>84</sup> Herodian, when describing the cult and stating its Phoenician roots, seems to underline the dichotomy between Oriental peculiarities of the Syrian religion and anthropomorphic representation of deities in the Western Roman Empire, using a condescension which is typical of the primitive ethnography,<sup>85</sup> and he gives us a view of the worshippers of this kind of objects.

If Herodian's work is to be compared with Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, the former appears, at first glance, more impartial and detached from the events he narrates. Cassius Dio develops a structured and complex authority, which is shown throughout his work, informing well the reader about his point of view and his intentions. Dio shows a direct and participated interest in the history he accounts, giving the reader an insightful overview of how a man of higher social status, a senator, could perceive changes occurring in his times and understand religious syncretism. Dio is critical towards new elements imported in the Roman world, making clear his Graeco-Roman roots and beliefs. Herodian, on the other hand, "is a self-effacing narrator who seems deliberately to avoid any identification with specific elements of the world outside his text."<sup>86</sup> He presents a work formally neat, with a plainer style than Cassius Dio, but at the same time he depicts a chaotic world, where history is dominated by decisions and actions of the individuals described in it. The chaos reflected seems symptomatic of the post-Antoine era, and it is well depicted in the account; Herodian, planning to produce a systematic work (which could be classified as orthodox historiography, same genre in which Dio is inscribed)<sup>87</sup> ultimately creates at times a vague and inaccurate narration, presenting banal or superficial descriptions and facts.

Characters in his history are not part of the idealized past he represents, and the chaotic actual situation in which they live is the expression of the sentiment of the author, who looks negatively at the present as a rupture with the past; the ancient reader (as well as the modern one) though can get acquainted, through the description of those events, with issues and contradictions of this era. Dio seems interested mostly in the system of senatorial

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<sup>84</sup> Millar 1993, 266.

<sup>85</sup> Doak 2015, 76.

<sup>86</sup> Kemezis 2014, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Kemezis 2014, 24.

magistracies<sup>88</sup> and he looks with nostalgia at the traditional administrative system; for him the main preoccupation was the matter of *consensus* under the emperor and the analysis of the political situation, reflecting thus the contrast between the classic institutions and the new social and political system. Herodian, on the other hand, is more direct and pragmatic. He offers an impartial point of view, and he gives the reader time for analysis with the insertion, among the historical narration, of digressions and vivid description of characters. Since he gives us little or no information of his life or career, his work appears more objective than Dio's, as the writer does not constitute, in Herodian's case, the central element of the work.

When talking about the emperor Elagabalus, 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>89</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.

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<sup>88</sup> Kemezis 2014, 138.

<sup>89</sup> Rowan 2012, 17.

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. Also, when he briefly mentions the god's marriage,<sup>90</sup> he seems to have misunderstood the Eastern practices and he seems shocked in front of this decision.<sup>91</sup>

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.

In conclusion, 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>92</sup> makes his work complex and difficult to read; the

<sup>90</sup> Dio 80.11.

<sup>91</sup> Even though a different approach and different point of view of both historians are to be recognized, it comes to attention that Herodian and Cassius Dio insist on describing the human marriage of Elagabalus and the divine marriage of *Elagabal*. Those marriages described (Dio 80.12.1-2; Her. 5.6.3), accompanied by big celebrations (Dio 80.9.1-2; Her. 6.4.5), most likely served to secure connection with the Roman nobility, or probably, as recently claimed, in order to force strong bonds between the Emesan and the Roman religion. (Rowan 2012, 215) The marriage could be intended also as a further clarification of identification of the emperor with the deity, underlining his priestly role, and establishing a connection with the traditional institutions. Regarding the partners the emperor Elagabalus had chosen to accompany his *Elagabal*, it is interesting to notice that they are not typical Graeco-Roman; instead, he chose, first, to give him in marriage an eastern deity, Pallas, brought to Rome by Aeneas from Troy, and then Carthaginian *Urania* which, like Emesene *Baal*, was Phoenician. (Ball 2000, 413) This brightly puts under evidence how the emperor tried to establish an Eastern connection, which had been endorsed by his predecessors and favored by the influence of his mother, Julia Soemia, daughter of the High Sun Priest Julius Avitus, a connection which could involve the very foundation of Rome, with Aeneas and Trojan Pallas. Herodian and Cassius Dio seem also to suggest that the emperor might have had the idea of creating a divine dynasty, endorsed by the political and imperial power, where him and the high priestess Aquilia Severa could inaugurate a new generation of emperors and priests (Dio 80.11.3-4; Her. 5.6.2) but the non-literary evidence on the wives' iconography (see later on and n.153) does not confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>92</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 34.

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>93</sup> and he seems that he used Dio as a source,<sup>94</sup> Herodian is not inferior to him, and he presents authentic and verifiable details, lacking in Dio's narrative.<sup>95</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>96</sup>

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<sup>93</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>94</sup> Hekster 1974, 8.

<sup>95</sup> Barnes 1978, 84.

<sup>96</sup> Southern 2001, 9. Check, for the original quote, Dio 72.36.4: ἐν δ' οὖν τοῦτο ἐς τὴν οὐκ εὐδαιμονίαν αὐτοῦ συνηνέχθη, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν καὶ θρέψας καὶ παιδεύσας ὡς οἶόν τε ἦν ἄριστα, πλεῖστον αὐτοῦ ὅσον διήμαρτε. περὶ οὗ ἤδη ρητέον, ἀπὸ χρυσῆς τε βασιλείας ἐς σιδηρᾶν καὶ κατιωμένην τῶν τε πραγμάτων τοῖς τότε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν νῦν καταπεσοῦσης τῆς ἱστορίας.

## 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>97</sup> as it comes difficult to establish reliability of the text, authorship and the date of composition, even its original title.<sup>98</sup> While it is debatable whether to define the work as a forgery or *Fälschung*,<sup>99</sup> playfulness and irony of the author emerge from the whole work.<sup>100</sup> In fact, the entire opera is attributed to six different authors,<sup>101</sup> but it is possible to recognize the work nowadays as the product of only one author,<sup>102</sup> who wrote it around 400 AD.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, all the elements of political and religious life which can be found in the

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<sup>97</sup> Meckler 1996, 364.

<sup>98</sup> Thomson 2007.

<sup>99</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>100</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, Rohrbacher 2013. See also Rowan 2012, 18.

<sup>101</sup> Aelius Spartianus for the lives of Hadrian, Aelius, Didius Julianus, Severus, Niger, Caracalla and Geta; Julius Capitolinus for the lives of Antoninus, Marcus, Lucius Verus, Pertinax, Albinus, Macrinus, The Maximini, The Gordiani, and Maximus and Balbinus; Vulcacius Gallicanus, author of only one life (Avidius Cassius); Aelius Lampridius, the fictitious author of the lives of Commodus, Diadumenus, Heliogabalus and Severus Alexander.

<sup>102</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>103</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

work suggest the background of the same century.<sup>104</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>105</sup> but even when considering the *Historia Augusta* only a literary product, it appears to be an inconsistent one.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the existence of such historical-literary work gives us the possibility to compare information contained in it with data found in other historical sources. For what regards historical data of the second and third centuries found in *Historia Augusta*, Barnes<sup>107</sup> identified six main sources (Ignotus, Marius Maximus, Herodian, Dexippus, *Kaisergeschichte*,<sup>108</sup> Eunapius).<sup>109</sup> For what concerns Marius Maximus, the majority of modern scholars nowadays are in support of his factual existence,<sup>110</sup> generally identifying him with Lucius Marius Maximus Perpetuus Aurelianus, *consul ordinarius* in 223<sup>111</sup> and traceable in epigraphy.<sup>112</sup> Probably *Kaisergeschichte* and the *Historia Augusta* both used Marius Maximus as a source, as it appears in the analysis of the Eutropius' section of the life of Marcus Aurelius (16.3-18.2).<sup>113</sup> The writer of the *Historia*

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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 reflects the event of 409).

<sup>104</sup> Cracco Ruggini 1991, 126.

<sup>105</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 148.

<sup>106</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>107</sup> Barnes 1978.

<sup>108</sup> A hypothetical lost source considered very important for the whole work of the *Historia Augusta* and individuated by Enmann in 1889 with the purpose of explaining common errors found "in the fourth-century epitomes written by Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and the anonymous *Epitome de Caesaribus*" (Rohrbacher 2013, 149).

<sup>109</sup> Eventually also Aurelius and Victor are considered sources, on the same level as the *Kaisergeschichte* (Barnes 1978, 1-34; see also Birley 2006, 20).

<sup>110</sup> See Birley 2006, 21. But scholarship is not unanimous; see, for example, Paschoud 1999.

<sup>111</sup> Arbo 2009, 285.

<sup>112</sup> CIL IV, 1450, 1452, 1453; CIL X, 6567, 6764; AE 1955, 188; one in Greek from Ephesus (IEph. VII, 1, 3030). See also Birley 1997, 2707; Christol 2014, 124.

<sup>113</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 151.

*Augusta* not only used Maximus as a source, but he also borrowed some stylistic features for the later lives, sometimes adapting them in form of parody.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, he is said to have produced a Latin biography of the emperor Elagabalus (of which only fragments might have survived)<sup>115</sup> and it is actually cited by the author of the *Historia Augusta* for support of his claims thirty times,<sup>116</sup> apart from being the main source for the account of Elagabalus.<sup>117</sup> Also, Ammianus Marcellinus in his *Res Gestae* might have used Maximus as a source of historical information.<sup>118</sup>

One has the impression that the comparison of the sources with the *Historia Augusta* appears even more useful and intriguing than the reading of the work itself. The presence of similar details coming from different works allows a better understanding of the facts exposed, and it might be proof, in some cases, of the reliability of the displayed information. But it is also true that sometimes in the *Historia Augusta* we find interesting information not carried elsewhere, and not attributable to any preserved source, as in the case of the details given about the solar cult.

Among all *Lives* narrated in the literary work in analysis, the life of the emperor Elagabalus represents, without any doubt, an interesting proof of the inconsistencies of the text,<sup>119</sup> but it is also the biography which carries the most details about *Sol Invictus*' cult.

Analyzing the *Vita Heliogabali*, the impression is that the story “donne au lecteur une impression de désordre et de négligence littéraires, aussi bien dans la langue et le style que dans la composition.”<sup>120</sup> The reliability and the inconsistency of the work in exam is well known, but *Vita Heliogabali* is interesting, among the other *Lives*, because of the attempt of the author to create a comparison of Elagabalus with his cousin and successor Alexander Severus, who appears to be the good example and the perfect prince, probably in line with the

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<sup>114</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 155.

<sup>115</sup> Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 28.

<sup>116</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 148.

<sup>117</sup> Birley 2006, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Kulikowski 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Even though throughout all the work it is possible to find “erroneous information and gross anachronisms” (Meckler 1996, 364).

<sup>120</sup> Turcan 1993, 59.



view of the aristocratic elites of the IV century.<sup>121</sup> According to Paschoud, in the life of Alexander “le prince y est dépeint comme le modèle de toutes les vertues, sa largeur d’esprit sur le plan religieux est particulièrement mise en évidence”,<sup>122</sup> while the *Vita Heliogabali* puts in evidence the destruction of the religious traditions under the emperor Elagabalus, who is painted as the opposite of Alexander. The comparison of the three main sources at our disposal regarding the spread of the Syrian cult shows that, if Herodian is reliant on Dio’s work, in many passages, it is certain that the *Historia Augusta* relies on Herodian’s work.<sup>123</sup> It is difficult, though, to establish a specific relationship between the two works, also because style and contents of those accounts vary consistently; furthermore, unlike the works of Cassius Dio and Herodian, both written in Greek, the *Historia Augusta* is written in Latin, and more than a century afterwards.

Taking the *Vita Heliogabali* in exam, it is possible to recognize the unreliability of the information provided by the author called “Aelius Lampridius”, especially in the latter part of the *Vita*. At the beginning, as shown above, the writer relies on several historical sources, especially Herodian, but also Marius Maximus and *Kaisergeschichte*.<sup>124</sup> However, if we look at this work from a different perspective, it is possible to find many parallels and *topoi* already present in Cassius Dio and Herodian. Even though the writer of the *Historia Augusta* seems more concerned with the restitution of an overall negative portrait of the emperor, inserting the religious discourse in his work for the only purpose of characterizing and describing the life of the emperor, one could conceive the *Vita* as a useful commentary religious situation of the IV century.<sup>125</sup>

While analyzing more broadly the *Historia Augusta*, the existence of a solar cult appears already in the account of the life of Caracalla, when the author, under the alias of Aelius Spartianus, claims that a temple had been built by Marcus Aurelius in Faustropolis in honor of his wife Faustina, after her death, in 176.<sup>126</sup> Spartianus informs us that the emperor Elagabalus made a shrine into this temple afterwards: *sibi vel Iovi Syrio vel Soli — incertum*

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<sup>121</sup> Cracco Ruggini 1991, 125.

<sup>122</sup> Paschoud 1980, 567.

<sup>123</sup> Rowan 2012, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Rohrbacher 2013, 149-150.

<sup>125</sup> Rowan 2012, 174.

<sup>126</sup> Rowan 2012, 183.

*id est — templum fecit.*<sup>127</sup> The attribution is uncertain, as probably the author did not know whether the emperor made the shrine in order to do a self-dedication, or to the Syrian Jupiter, or to the sun god, but the shrine is also mentioned elsewhere,<sup>128</sup> and therefore it might be a proof of an actual existence of the shrine. Furthermore, the connection of Elagabalus with Caracalla would endorse and strengthen the line of succession and create a more effective bond between the two *Antonini*. The uncertainty of the dedication is interesting, because it is presented also in the *Vita Heliogabali* (*fuit autem Heliogabali vel Iovis vel Solis sacerdos atque Antonini sibi nomen adsciverat*)<sup>129</sup> and again, in another passage of the same *vita* (*Heliogabali dei, quem Solem alii, alii Iovem dicunt*),<sup>130</sup> indicating the confusion in identification of the deity, which is connected either with the emperor or the Syrian Jupiter, or both.<sup>131</sup> *Heliogabalus* appears to be a Latinized form of the Syrian deity, while it never occurs in Cassius Dio or Herodian, nor in the non-literary evidence, as it was stated above and also debated later on. This might be attributed to the fact that the cult had included, after the arrival in Rome, also solar connotations, which is not possible to be noticed in the original characteristics of the Syrian religion.

What the writer of the *Historia Augusta* undoubtedly points out is the predominant role of the Syrian cult, considering Elagabal a supreme and privileged deity above others, and he underlines the connection of the Syrian deity with Zeus or *Sol*. But it is known that the original Emesan cult did not present a solar connotation, and therefore this attribute had to be given to the god once the cult arrived in Rome.

The importance given to the cult by the emperor emerges when the writer describes how the emperor collected heirlooms and shrines of other deities, which were supposed to be venerated together with his god: *Sed ubi primum ingressus est urbem, omissis quae in provincia gerebantur, Heliogabalum in Palatino monte iuxta aedes imperatorias consecravit eique templum fecit, studens et Matris typum et Vestae ignem et Palladium et ancilia et omnia Romanis veneranda in illud transferre templum et id agens, ne quis Romae deus nisi*

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<sup>127</sup> SHA *Car.* 11.7.

<sup>128</sup> SHA *Marc. Aur.* 26.9: [...] *aedem illi exstruxit. sed haec postea aedis Heliogabalo dedicata est.*

<sup>129</sup> SHA *Hel.* 1.5.

<sup>130</sup> SHA *Hel.* 17.8.

<sup>131</sup>The existence of the name *Heliogabalus* is also attested through the *Caesares* of Aurelius Victor, where it is claimed that the emperor was involved in the worship of the sun, *quem Heliogabalum Syri vocant* (23.1).

*Heliogabalus coleretur. Dicebat praeterea Iudaeorum et Samaritanorum religiones et Christianam devotionem illuc transferendam, ut omnium culturarum secretum Heliogabali sacerdotium teneret.*<sup>132</sup> The effort of removing those sacred objects of other cults from their original location is understood as a negative act, probably because this move meant that the new deity could replace other beliefs (*ne quis Romae deus nisi Heliogabalus coleretur*) but right afterwards the author informs us that the emperor's purpose was to worship all the cults, once they had been transferred to the temple of his god.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, it is possible that the author of the *Historia Augusta*, in order to criticize Christianity, had diffused his opinion also towards Jews and Samaritans, emphasizing the absurdity of their practices,<sup>134</sup> and the intent of including these other beliefs is probably provocative, in order to show the religious fanaticism of the emperor.

It seems that, in order to discredit the image of the emperor, who is since the beginning of the account being made known for his depravity and his nefariousness,<sup>135</sup> the author remarks that Elagabalus' purpose is to create a new religious order, in which his deity occupies a prominent, or rather predominant position, therefore belittling the role and the importance of the other gods of the traditional pantheon. The account presents some contradictions, and it is quite questionable, because it seems that the purpose of the fictitious Aelius Lampridius is to individuate a cause for the religious changes of the period in which he writes, and for this purpose, since he prefers not to speak about contemporary events, he rather chooses to refer to Varius Avitus Bassianus, probably alluding to the religious reforms of the emperor

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<sup>132</sup> SHA *Hel.* 3.4-5.

<sup>133</sup> The actual transfer of the cult objects of Jews, Christians and Samaritans to the temple of the god Elagabal was rather unlikely, also because objects of devotion are, for these beliefs, incorporeal, therefore here the author of the *Historia Augusta* refers to a syncretistic measure adopted by the emperor in order to gather all the cults in one site. However, this information is only attested in this source, as no other ancient writer mentions this project (Barnes 1984a, 42). It seems that writer's purpose is give an overview of the religious beliefs in the IV century and at the same time make the reader aware of the existing cults in the Roman empire during the time of writing.

<sup>134</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, 94.

<sup>135</sup> SHA *Hel.* 1.1-3: *Vitam Heliogabali Antonini, qui Varius etiam dictus est, numquam in litteras misissem, ne quis fuisse Romanorum principem sciret, nisi ante Caligulas et Neronas et Vitellios hoc idem habuisset imperium. Sed cum eadem terra et venera ferat et frumentum atque alia salutaria, eadem serpentes et cicures, compensationem sibi lector diligens faciet, cum legerit Augustum, Traianum, Vespasianum, Hadrianum, Pium, Titum, Marcum contra hos prodigiosos tyrannos. Simul intellet Romanorum iudicia, quod illi et diu imperarunt et exitu naturali functi sunt, hi vero interfecti, tracti, tyranni etiam appellati, quorum nec nomina libet dicere.*

Constantine, his sons and also Theodosius'. In fact, the episode of the extinction of Vesta's everlasting fire reminds of the suppression of the Vestals under Theodosius, the same emperor who, in 380, emitted the famous edict, where he orders to embrace one single faith, recognizing the authority of the orthodox pope Damasus and Peter, bishop of Alexandria.<sup>136</sup> Much likely, the decision of Theodosius was due to political reasons, because he was aware of the profound religious divisions between Arians and anti-Arians in the East, and he recognized the danger in keeping this situation ongoing.<sup>137</sup> The edict of Thessalonica states that Christianity will be professed by all nations under the Roman dominion; therefore, that is, an obligation of Christian confession to unite the whole Empire under the one God, and accusations of heresy and punishments of infamy, and ultimately the divine supreme condemnation of the celestial Judge for those who rejected Christianity.<sup>138</sup> Against the heretics, he demands from all Christians the confession of faith in conformity with the deliberations of the first ecumenical church council of Nicaea, convened by the emperor Constantine, in which was established the unity and the predominance of the Christian faith. The edict seems to reflect well the ideal of unity of faith already affirmed by the Nicaean council, and one can hardly attribute Elagabalus such a reform, so radical for the pantheistic vision of the emperor. As one might point out, *Historia Augusta*, assigning to "Heliogabalus" the plan to include in Rome every religion into the cult of Elagabalus, makes him a precursor of the Christianity.<sup>139</sup> Robert Turcan, in a conference held by the members of the Association Guillaume Budé in Lyons, opened his speech with the question "Héliogabale précurseur de Costantin?",<sup>140</sup> concluding that Elagabalus was neither monotheist nor a precursor of Constantine.<sup>141</sup> However, the privilege given to his deity made of him a typical oriental priest-

<sup>136</sup> Codex Theodosianus XVI.1.2

<sup>137</sup> Treadgold 1997, 70.

<sup>138</sup> The edict reads: *Populos Cunctos, quos clementiae nostrae regit temperamentum, in Tali volumus religione Versari, quam divinum Petrum apostolum tradidisse Romanis religio usque ad nunc ab ipso insinuata declarat quamque pontificem Damasum Sequi claret et Petrum Aleksandriae episcopum virum Apostolicae sanctitatis, hoc est, ut secundum Apostolicam disciplinam evangelicamque doctrinam patris et filii et spiritus sancti unam deitatem sub pari maiestate et sub pia trinitate credamus. Hanc legem sequentes Christianorum Catholicorum nomen iubemus amplecti, reliquos vero dementes vesanosque iudicantes haeretici dogmatis infamiam sustinere 'nec conciliabula eorum Ecclesiarum nomen accipere', divina primum vindicta, posta etiam motus nostri, quem ex caelesti arbitro sumpserimus, plectendos ultione.*

<sup>139</sup> Turcan 1982.

<sup>140</sup> Turcan 1988.

<sup>141</sup> Dal Covolo 1999, 43.

emperor. Turcan's view collides, though, with the fact that many lives in the *Historia Augusta* are addressed to Constantine. Moreover Turcan, in order to confirm his thesis, takes as example a particular historical event: the decision of the emperor Elagabalus not to ascend to the Capitolium in order to take vows.<sup>142</sup> A similar event is recorded by Zosimus,<sup>143</sup> who informs us about Constantine's decision not to participate to the solemn ceremony on the Capitol, stepping with his feet on the holy ceremonies. The allusion is interesting because it recalls another historical event, when the emperor Elagabalus drove a chariot led by four elephants on the Vatican hill, destroying the tombs obstructing his way.<sup>144</sup> This episode could be recalling Constantine's destruction of a pagan cemetery, when he made a basilica out of a small St. Peter's shrine. The fact that this episode could allude directly to Elagabalus and his actions is, though, unlikely, also because excavations of the cemeterial area are more recent, and there is no reason to believe that the writer, or even the audience, was aware of the existence of the site, since no other extant source does mention it.<sup>145</sup> The writer of the *Historia Augusta*, after narrating this event, informs us that the emperor harnessed four camels to a chariot as a preparation for a private spectacle at the Circus,<sup>146</sup> probably referring to the episode concerning Nero accounted by Suetonius.<sup>147</sup> It is possible that the author aimed to characterize a general negative portrait of the emperor, without planning a direct attack against the reforms of Constantine. Even when examining the common traits between the two emperors, in particular the relationship with the mother, the worship of the sun god and the Oriental fashion in clothes, these elements constitute the intent of the author to vilify Elagabalus, and more likely in order to create an antithetic model to be compared with his cousin Severus Alexander. Therefore, the refusal of both emperors to ascend to the Capitol to receive imperial honors, and the march with the elephants to destroy tombs does not indicate that the willing of identification of both emperors. Thus, the author might have collected this information elsewhere and afterwards he decided to include it in his account.

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<sup>142</sup> SHA Hel. 15.7: *deinde in capitolium ad vota concipienda et perficienda sollemnia ire noluit.*

<sup>143</sup> 2.29.5.

<sup>144</sup> SHA Hel. 23.1: *fertur... elephantorum quattuor quadrigas in vaticano agitasse dirutis sepulchris quae obsistebant.*

<sup>145</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, 96.

<sup>146</sup> SHA Hel. 23.1: *iunxisse etiam camelos quaternos ad currus in Circo privato spectaculo.*

<sup>147</sup> Suet. Nero 11.1: *Spectaculorum plurima et varia genera edidit: iuvenales, circenses, scaenicos ludos, gladiatorium munus. Iuvenalibus senes quoque consulares anusque matronas recepit ad lusum. Circensibus loca equiti secreta a ceteris tribuit commisitque etiam camelorum quadrigas.*

Furthermore, after examining the description of Elagabalus, if one takes a look at the *Vita* chronologically later, that of Severus Alexander, one might notice that the former represents an anti-model of sovereign, to be compared negatively with the latter, the cousin, who embodies the figure of the ideal prince.<sup>148</sup> The account shows how Alexander, in order to take distance from his cousin and predecessor, got rid of the bad counselors,<sup>149</sup> or tried to force those who remained to change conduct,<sup>150</sup> upon penalty of death. It is interesting how, in order to designate such palatine eunuchs, who were marginalized by Severus Alexander, the author puts in the mouth of the good prince the expression *tertium genus*,<sup>151</sup> which at least until the time of Tertullian had been used by the pagans to designate Christians.<sup>152</sup> In addition, it is worth mentioning that the lack of fondness towards Eastern practices and traditions emerges also from the use of the appellative *Syri*, with a negative connotation, to indicate people professing the upcoming monotheistic belief.<sup>153</sup> In the *Historia Augusta*, mostly when the minor lives are taken in account, Syrians and other ethnic groups are often object of slurs,<sup>154</sup> and Severus Alexander prefers to claim Roman rather than Syrian origin, recalling that in some special occasions Egyptians, people from Antioch and other groups from Alexandria called him a Syrian archisynagogus and a high priest, and thus irritating him.<sup>155</sup> The negative meaning of the term is also present in the description of Constantine, where the author seems surprised by the fact that a man with such great qualities and attributes could

<sup>148</sup> Cracco Ruggini 1991, 125.

<sup>149</sup> SHA *Sev. Alex.* 23.4: *eunuchos de ministerio suo abiecit et uxori ut servos servire iussit.*

<sup>150</sup> SHA *Sev. Alex.* 34.3: *eunuchos, quos Heliogabalus et in consiliis turpibus habebat et promovebat, donavit amicis addito elogio, ut, si non redissent ad bonos mores, eosdem liceret occidi sine auctoritate iudicii.* Also, Cassius Dio accounts the bad influence of the eunuchs, when he describes the use made of them by the emperor Sardanapalus, whose name is used in the source as pseudonym of the Emperor Elagabalus himself (80.1.1).

<sup>151</sup> SHA *Sev. Alex.* 23.7: *idem tertium genus hominum eunuchos esse dicebat.* For the use of this designation in reference to eunuchs, see Doležal 2008.

<sup>152</sup> Tert. *Ad. Nat.* 1.8.10-11. It is worth noticing that negative connotation gained by eunuchs among pagans clashes with the positive one acquired later on, mostly within some radical groups from Greece and East, where being eunuch was in fact considered a circumstance that brought closer to the Spirit and to God, as a guarantee of perpetual sexual abstinence (Cracco Ruggini 1991, 143).

<sup>153</sup> Cracco Ruggini 1991, 143.

<sup>154</sup> Isaac 1998, 271.

<sup>155</sup> SHA *Sev. Alex.* 28.7: *volebat videri originem de Romanorum gente trahere, quia eum pudebat Syrum dici, maxime quod quodam tempore festo, ut solent, Antiochenses, Aegyptii, Alexandrini laccessiverant conviciolis, et Syrum archisynagogum eum vocantes et archiereum.*

come from a morally inferior background,<sup>156</sup> adding that Syrians lack important qualities at the base of the Roman *mos*, like *fides*<sup>157</sup> and *gravitas*.<sup>158</sup> The bad characterization of this ethnic group, which might reflect tensions and prejudices in the mentality of the IV century, could be consequence of the sentiment born from the not so chronologically far division of Eastern and Western Empire, when there is need for identification and affirmation of one own individuality. In this regard, there is a significative inscription,<sup>159</sup> undated<sup>160</sup> from Sinai:<sup>161</sup> *Cessent Syri ante Latinos Romanos*, which is expression of the feeling Westerners could have had towards the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.<sup>162</sup>

Elagabalus was certainly not the model of the *optimus princeps*, and the author of the *Historia Augusta* insists in more than one occasion on his feminine traits and his delicate features, typical of the East.<sup>163</sup> In comparison with his cousin Alexander Severus, also of Eastern origin, but who became Roman in all respects, Elagabalus underwent a process of "Romanization", in order to make him familiar with customs and traditions of the Romans, regardless of his habits. However, the process was not successful because, apart from his oriental feminine physiognomy, the emperor kept following Eastern practices, even though the astute Maesa had even tempted to claim a higher descendance for his son, insisting on the fact that he was born from Caracalla, and she also used stratagems that highlighted the similarity between the two.<sup>164</sup> But the dubious circumstances of the birth of Elagabalus appeared to the Roman people to be a disturbing element, to the point that it was assumed that the name Varius had been attributed to him in the moment of his conception by a mixture of

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<sup>156</sup> SHA *Sev. Alex.* 65.1: *soles quaerere, Constantine maxime, quid sit quod hominem Syrum et alienigenam talem principem fecerit, cum tot Romani generis, tot aliarum provinciarum reperiantur improbi, impuri, crudeles, abiecti, inusti, libidinosi.*

<sup>157</sup> SHA *Aur.* 26.31: *rarum est ut syri fidem servant, immo difficile.*

<sup>158</sup> SHA *Tac.* 3.5: *iam si nihil de persicis motibus nuntiatur, cogitate tam leves esse mentes syrorum ut regnare vel feminas cupiant potius quam nostram perpeti sanctimoniam.*

<sup>159</sup> CIL III 86.

<sup>160</sup> Isaac 1997, 257.

<sup>161</sup> The inscription was carved by a traveller on a rock of the Wadi Mukatteb (Isaac 1997, 268). These words refer to the supposed superiority of Latin speakers over the Syrians, speaking Aramaic.

<sup>162</sup> Isaac 1998, 282.

<sup>163</sup> SHA *Hel.* 5.5. See also Gualerzi 2005.

<sup>164</sup> Dio 79.31.3; 32.2; Her. 5.3.10; 7.3; SHA *Carac.* 9.2; *Macr.* 9.4; *Hel.* 1.5; 2.1.

male seed derived from several men with whom the mother had sexual relations. The name Varius had been given to the emperor by his *condiscipuli*, as if his supposed irregular birth was at the same origin of his name.<sup>165</sup> The aversion against the emperor, which is systematically present in the account of the *Historia Augusta*, seems to be connected more with his features and political decisions, rather than religious.

The impossibility of relying to the writer of the *Historia Augusta*, the use of other fictitious literary sources, the presence of contradictory elements or lack of other sources in support of the text, all these and other further factors, which is not possible or suitable to mention here, they all make the account debatable and dubious. When the *Historia Augusta* relies on other sources, as for instance Cassius Dio and Herodian, it represents a useful tool for comparing historical information; otherwise, the work represents, in the words of Fergus Millar, an issue “into which sane men refrain from entering”.<sup>166</sup> What it is possible to recollect and to establish is that the work was written by one uncertain author towards the end of the IV century, who made direct use of Cassius Dio and Herodian, with a pro-senatorial tendency<sup>167</sup> and, surely, a pagan. On the other hand, though, it is possible to notice that some information collected in the *Historia* are not present in Herodian and Cassius Dio, and therefore the *Historia Augusta* constitutes, in some cases, the only source of information about the emperor. In addition, the lives of the emperors from Hadrian to Caracalla (including also the *Vita Heliogabali*) present precise and verifiable historical facts, which are also taken from other sources, in particular Marius Maximus or Ignotus,<sup>168</sup> at least for the period until 238.

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

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<sup>165</sup> SHA *Hel.* 2.1-2: *hic tantum symiamirae matri deditus fuit, ut sine illius voluntate nihil in re publica faceret, cum ipsa meretricio more vivens in aula omnia turpia exerceret, antonino autem caracallo stupro cognita, ita ut hinc vel varius vel heliogabalus vulgo conceptus putaretur. et aiunt quidam varii etiam nomen idcirco eodem inditum a condiscipulis quod vario semine, de meretrice utpote, conceptus videretur.* See also Beltrami 1998, 49-51.

<sup>166</sup> Millar 1964, 124.

<sup>167</sup> Hekster 1974, 7.

<sup>168</sup> Barnes 1978, 125. The presence of such source was first postulated by Syme (Syme 1983, 15), but scholarship in this regard is not unanimous: see Pistellato 2020. For the full discussion about the factual existence of Ignotus see Rohrbacher 2013, 156-160.



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 Symmachus-Nicomachus.<sup>169</sup>

The *Historia Augusta* was 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>170</sup> and even whether it was meant to circulate.<sup>171</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>172</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>173</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>174</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>175</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.

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<sup>169</sup> Pausch 2010, 118.

<sup>170</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>171</sup> Paschoud 2013, 198.

<sup>172</sup> A. Birley 1988, 20.

<sup>173</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>174</sup> Rohrbacher 2019, 76.

<sup>175</sup> Rohrbacher 2016, 73.

While embracing a different turning point than Dio's, the author focuses on the failures of the emperors after Septimius Severus,<sup>176</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>176</sup> Levick 2007, 155.

### I.1.3 The History Unwritten

From the exam of the literary sources, what appears is that all the works at our disposal include useful and important information about the religious situation of the third century, and provide interesting and, at times, unique evidence for some facts otherwise unknown. On the other hand, circumstances and descriptions of events are often fictionalized, as in the case of *Historia Augusta*, or even subordinate to an overall subjective view, coming from a specific social class, as in the account of Cassius Dio. Herodian, among the three main sources, is the only one who provides a better objective view on the historical facts, not exempt though from some personal remarks or specific writing choices, as in regards of style and themes; nonetheless, his work constitutes a fundamental source for having a better understanding of rituals and practices connected with the cult of *Sol Invictus*.

What emerges from *Historia Augusta* is an overall negative judgement of the Severan age; Septimius Severus, who inaugurated a new era of religious syncretism and continuity with tradition,<sup>177</sup> created a renovated system, conjugating powers and social groups of the Eastern and Western part of the Empire; doing so, he left a considerable number of non-literary sources, mainly inscriptions and coinage, but also architectural, which had been useful in the development of the ancient historiography. With the Severan age we see an important innovation in the concept of the sovereign, who is representing the Western, but at the same time includes Oriental costumes and traditions, in line with the changes under way during the III century; in particular, unwritten sources give us interesting information concerning the religious approach of the Severan emperors and their sensibility towards the traditional Roman pantheon.

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>178</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

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<sup>177</sup> Kemezis 2014, 74.

<sup>178</sup> Martin 2000, 297.

since the times of Titus Tatius, as tradition shows,<sup>179</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>180</sup> For example, it is known that Gabala showed on coins the solar god. On the evidence the deity figures in a triad<sup>181</sup>, as Helios, together with Zeus and Aphrodite/Astarte<sup>182</sup>. But the deity rarely appears minted, when compared with the presence of other deities on Syrian coins, except for the case of some cities.<sup>183</sup> The appearance of the first coinage depicting the Emesan deity is under the reign of Antoninus Pius,<sup>184</sup> in particular, three coins depict, on the back, an eagle standing on the sacred stone, the baetyl;<sup>185</sup> another mint, again under the same reign, depicts a radiate draped bust.<sup>186</sup> This shows that already during the middle of the II century the cult was very well known in the Roman Empire, and the emperor endorsed the Emesan religion, embodying the sacred image of the deity in the iconography. From the same period, from 158, comes also an inscription<sup>187</sup> found on a votive altar, dedicated by the centurion Lucius Terentius Bassus, from the *cohors III Breucorum*, who was located in *Laurum (Germania inferior)*;<sup>188</sup> the dedication recites: P(ro) S(alute) I(mperatoris?) C(aesaris?) T(iti?) A(elii?) HA(driani?) A(ntonini?) A(vgvsti ?) P(ii?) SOLI HELAGABALO ET MINER(vae) L(vcivs) TERENTIVS BASSVS S(ignifer) COH(ortis) III BREVCOR(vm).

There is another inscription, found on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1921 in calle de Torrijos, near the

<sup>179</sup> The presence of the solar cult since the beginning of the Roman religious tradition will be examined in the next chapter.

<sup>180</sup> Liebeschuetz 1999, 188.

<sup>181</sup> Teixidor 1977, 49.

<sup>182</sup> Seyrig 1964, 24; see also Schnabel 2002, 758.

<sup>183</sup> The presence of a Sun god on coinage is attested in Aradus in 124/123 BCE and in 94/93 BCE, in Carne in an indefinite chronological time, in Gabala since 78/77 BCE; in Laodicea, where the presence of a solar deity is attested since 74/73 BCE, the existence of the Sun god was probably due to its assimilation to a local cult (Seyrig 1964, 23). In the Hellenistic period Helios appears often in Gabala coinage, but it is rare to find the god in Syrian monuments, and even more unlikely, according to Seyrig, that the cult had been originally developed as solar belief in the region. The most certain hypothesis is that the cult had been brought by the Arabs, and they included the Emesan cult in their pantheon. During this process the deity acquired solar attributes.

<sup>184</sup> Birley 2000, 71.

<sup>185</sup> AE 23 (BMC 1); AE 22 (BMC 4); SGI 1496v. It is interesting to notice that these issues minted under Antoninus Pius are the only pre-Severan imperial coinage from Emesa.

<sup>186</sup> SNGCop 308 (BMC 8).

<sup>187</sup> ILS 470 (AE 1938, 117).

<sup>188</sup> Bogaers 1994.

Mezquita, in Cordoba (*Hispania Baetica*),<sup>189</sup> under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, of which only a small fragment is preserved. In the dedication, dated 171,<sup>190</sup> and which probably is a collective initiative,<sup>191</sup> names of the dedicants are missing but, according to Cumont, it was made by *negotiatores Syrii* active in the region;<sup>192</sup> it is written in Greek and addressed to the god Elagabal and his consorts: one of them is Athena Allāt,<sup>193</sup> with whom the god Elagabal had been united in marriage by the emperor Elagabalus; the other name appearing in the inscription is damaged, but it has been reconstructed as Kypris Charinazaia,<sup>194</sup> and they would possibly constitute a triad, which is also possible to be seen in a capital from the *Elagabalium*

<sup>189</sup> Badaracco 2005.

<sup>190</sup> Cumont 1924.

<sup>191</sup> García y Bellido 1967, 96.

<sup>192</sup> Cumont 1924, 342-345.

<sup>193</sup> The goddess is already attested in sources in the V century BCE, as Herodotus mentions *Alilat* as one of the most important pre-Islamic Arab deities, and calls her *Ourania*, because of the similar astral nature of the two goddesses: Διόνυσον δὲ θεῶν μόνον καὶ τὴν Οὐρανίην ἡγέονται εἶναι, καὶ τῶν τριχῶν τὴν κούρην κείρεσθαι φασὶ κατὰ περ αὐτὸν τὸν Διόνυσον κεκάρθαι· κείρονται δὲ περιτρόχαλα, ὑποξυρῶντες τοὺς κροτάφους. ὀνομάζουσι δὲ τὸν μὲν Διόνυσον Ὀροτάλτ, τὴν δὲ Οὐρανίην Ἄλιλάτ. (Herodot. 3.8.3). Greek inscriptions name together Athena and Allāt, in particular the inscription from Cordoba here discussed. Even though the direct identification of Athena with Allāt is lacking (Christides 2003, 72), the theophoric names (wahbalat = Αθηνόδορος) lead to a possible fusion of the two deities. *Athena Allāt* had been given in marriage to the god Elagabal, in the Eastern fashion of celebrating wedding of gods and emperors alike. The deity was worshipped also in Palmyra, in Hauran and in other neighboring areas (Altheim 2007, 69).

<sup>194</sup> The reconstruction of the epithet is probably correct, under the light of the identification of the goddess with Aphrodite/ Ourania in a triad which is attested also in Palmyra (Teixidor 1979, 62; Christides 2003). The interpretation given by Lipinski 2011, who asserts that the epithet could be derived from the name of a sacred place located in the south of Emesa, and therefore the inscription would indicate, in this case, the rock of Kharinaz (see in this regard also Badaracco 2005, 41), seems unlikely, given the attested existence, in the Syrian context, of such a triad. A hypothesis could be that the epithet was connected with Aphrodite, maybe an ethnonym, probably originary from Nazala (Badaracco 2017). Kypris was originally Phoenician, and she was established in Cyprus as love goddess; eventually she was brought from Cyprus to Carthage, where she was connected with the moon and started to be known as Ourania (Icks 2011, 33). In the accounts of both Dio and Herodian, the goddess is united in wedding with the god Elagabal. While Dio mentions the fact that the emperor reached such absurdity that he decided to celebrate the wedding between Elagabal and the Cathaginian Ourania (Dio 80.12), Herodian informs us that the emperor decided to bring the statue of the goddess in Rome, the same statue which, according to the historian, Dido the Phoenician set up at the time when she cut the hide into strips and founded the ancient city of Carthage (Her. 5.6.4). He is also aware of identification of the goddess with the Lybian Ourania and the Phoenician Astroarche, both moon deities (Her. 1.199; Aphrodite is associated by the historian with the goddess, “in whose name Babylonian women offer themselves for sex with a stranger once before marriage” (Maclachlan 1992, 148-149)). It is also worth noticing that the goddess carried solar characteristics, as it appears in

in Rome, where the two goddesses flank the baetyl, located in a central position.<sup>195</sup> Such a triad, though, does not appear on the coinage,<sup>196</sup> and the possible reason of such lack of iconography in the coinage could be due to a different religious policy of the emperor, more centered on the imperial *persona* or on different cultic images. It is likely that the emperor, establishing an Eastern-Western connection, a connection which started already with Aeneas and the Trojan Pallas, therefore enduring the bond with the Roman ancient traditions and myths, maintained the continuity with the ancient and established beliefs, probably with the purpose to fit in those traditional religious practices<sup>197</sup> but at the same time in order to show a connection with Eastern cults.

There is an inscription,<sup>198</sup> found in *Al-Quaryatayn*, today known as Nazala, which is probably the most ancient attestation of the cult, from the I century, where a dedication is made to two deities, respectively 'RŞW and 'LH'GBL, Arsu and Elagabal. The dedication is in Aramaic, and it presents a particular iconography: an eagle perched on the top of a mountain. The etymology of the name of the deity is connected with the mountain, and in fact the Aramaic would indicate the Mountain God, but it might be also interpreted it as "God of Gabala".<sup>199</sup> The element of the eagle recalls somehow the Arab tribes which had settled in the region in the I century BC. The presence of the animal together with the sun and their interconnection is underlined by an inscription<sup>200</sup> with dedication to *Aquila Soli Alagabalo*, made by the *sacerdos Solis* Titus Julius Balbillus, who had dedicated, at the beginning of the III century, a small votive monument. The title of *sacerdos Solis* is attested in several inscriptions dated between 199 and 215.<sup>201</sup> Together with Titus Julius Balbillus also a certain Aurelius Julius a representation of the deity on a second-century BC terracotta, in which she wears a *polos* while standing near a column which is crowned with the sun disk (Ustinova 1998, 223).

<sup>195</sup> von Mercklin 1962, 154-156.

<sup>196</sup> On reverse of coins of Julia Paula, Juno is depicted, alone standing, with the epithet CONSERVATRIX, but this type does not show on the coinage of Aquilia Severa and Annia Faustina. Moreover, mints under Julia Soemias presents the legend IVNO REGINA and VENVS CAELESTIS, thus not including a foreign deity. It is possible that the triad was worshipped before the emission of the mints, but since the dating of the extant coinage is uncertain (Icks 2011, 34), it is impossible to reconstruct the dynamics of this syncretism.

<sup>197</sup> Icks 2009, 413.

<sup>198</sup> Starcky 1975-1976.

<sup>199</sup> Rossetti Tella 1996, 270.

<sup>200</sup> CIL 6.2129.

<sup>201</sup> CIL 6.1027; 1603; 2264 = ILS 4330; CIL 6. 2270; CIL 6.2130.

Balbillus appears, possibly a relative<sup>202</sup> of the former; the *nomen* Aurelius could be due to the adoption of the name of the patron, Caracalla and, in this case, it is plausible to think that the *sacerdos Soli* was the same person, who changed his name in Aurelius after emperor's edict, the well-known *Constitutio Antoniniana*.<sup>203</sup> The attestation of a single priest leads to the possible existence of other priests, covering the same role already during the reign of Septimius Severus and Caracalla; it seems though that the specification of the deity had been added, though, only during the reign of Elagabalus.<sup>204</sup> 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*.<sup>205</sup> He was active in the area of Trastevere,<sup>206</sup> where there were already existing sanctuaries and temples dedicated to Near Eastern deities, among which a temple to the Palmyrean god Bel.<sup>207</sup> While in dated inscriptions Balbillus figures as *sacerdos Solis*, in other two inscriptions, undated, the name Elagabal appears,<sup>208</sup> this could explain the fact that the priest was active in Rome during the early Severan dynasty, probably during the reign of Septimius Severus and Caracalla<sup>209</sup> and

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<sup>202</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 55.

<sup>203</sup> Wachter 2013.

<sup>204</sup> Icks 2011, 26.

<sup>205</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. The epithet of the Syrian deity appears also as *Aelagabalus* (RIU V 1104; 1107); the forms *Alagabalus* and *Aelagabalus* indicate a difference in the spelling of the name of the god, closer so to the Syrian pronunciation, and thus indicating that Balbillus was a Syrian priest (Chausson 1995, 680-681). According to Halsberghe 1984, the introduction of the epithet *Invictus* would indicate the cult imported from Emesa, distinguishing it from the pre-existing solar worship which would not have importance anymore in the third century. A recent and more convincing scholarship (Hijmans 1996) would support the idea that the sun cult in the Severan age recalls the autochthonous solar worship. This topic will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

<sup>206</sup> Late-second century inscriptions attest the presence of a college of priests and an organized cult outside the *pomerium*, in the Trastevere district (Turcan 1996).

<sup>207</sup> There is a mention, in Greek and Latin inscriptions (CIL 6.50; 6.51) of a foundation of a temple dedicated to Bel in this area, “by a Palmyrene called Heliodorus and Caius Licinius N[.]” (Boiy 2004, 306); from the same area also an inscription (IGUR 120) comes where two Palmyreans offer a sacrifice to Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol. The existence of different deities imported from the Near East is in itself a proof of the acceptance of foreign gods into the traditional Roman religion.

<sup>208</sup> CIL 6. 2269; 708.

<sup>209</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 147.

then his position was superseded by the emperor Elagabalus.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, if Balbillus<sup>211</sup> was already priest of the sun god in Rome before Varius Avitus Bassianus ascension to the throne, it means that a solar cult must have existed prior the arrival of the baetyl in the city, and this fact shows that the cult did not need an object of worship to be imported from Emesa, at least until the emperor proclaimed himself high priest of his religion. This could be explained with the fact that the legitimation of the priesthood served to legitimate the sovereignty, and was strictly connected with the imperial figure, and therefore for the emperor the sacred stone is essential in order to stabilize his position as priest-emperor.

The presence of the Emesan cult in the Roman Empire prior the arrival of the emperor Elagabalus is also confirmed by another interesting inscription,<sup>212</sup> made by the *cohors miliaria Antoniniana Hemesenorum c.R. sagittaria* found at Intercisa<sup>213</sup> (now Dunaújváros<sup>214</sup>) in *Pannonia inferior*, naming the legate Baebius Caecilianus and the tribune Q. Modius Quirina (?) Rufinus. The unit was probably formed around 167-169.<sup>215</sup> The inscription is dated 199 to 202, and it is interesting because it witnesses to a presence of the Emesan cult among soldiers and troops, who were worshipping already the Syrian cult. In the same area there is evidence of the construction of two temples, one dedicated to the *Deus Sol Elagabalus*,<sup>216</sup> patron of the

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<sup>210</sup> Rowan 2012, 202.

<sup>211</sup> *Balbillus* does not seem a hierarchy title. In the ancient historiography another priest appears as well, Julius Bassianus, or Bassus, father of Julia Domna and her sister Julia Maesa, and thus grandfather of the emperor Elagabalus. The young emperor did not bear the name *Julius* when acquiring his priesthood, therefore there might have existed at the same time Bassus, Bassianus and Balbillus (de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2017, 105). This indicates that there were probably more priests in charge of the cult, at the same time, and the emperor could have occupied a special position, as high priest of the religion.

<sup>212</sup> RIU-05, 01104 = AE 1910, 141 = RHP 306 = D 9155: DEO / [SO]LI AELAGABALO PRO / [S]ALUTE IMPP(ERATORUM) L(UCI) SEP(TIMI) SEVERI / [PI]I ET M(ARCI) AUR(ELI) ANTONI(NI) PII E/[T] C(AI) SEP(TIMI) G<E>TAE CAES(ARIS) AUGGG(USTORUM) / [C]OH(ORS) (MILLIARIA) ANTO(NINIANA) HEMES(ENORUM) C(IVIUM) R(OMANORUM) S(AGITTARIA) / [C]UI SUB BAEBIO CAECILIANO / [LEG(ATO) A]UGG(USTORUM) PR(A)EEST Q(UINTUS) MODI(US) Q(UINTI) F(ILIUS) QUIRINA RU<F>INUS TRIB(UNUS) / [TE]MP<L>UM A SOLO EXTRU(X)IT.

<sup>213</sup> Grainger 2017.

<sup>214</sup> Tomlin 1972.

<sup>215</sup> Rowan 2012, 184.

<sup>216</sup> See note 186.



Syrian city and of the *cohors*, and the other one to Diana Tifatina,<sup>217</sup> a deity from Campania,<sup>218</sup> who was worshipped in this region as *paredros* of the Emesan Baal.<sup>219</sup> Even though there is no epigraphic evidence of the connection between of the two deities,<sup>220</sup> and therefore the hypothesis of a possible connection, supported by Fitz,<sup>221</sup> seems not to be plausible, the mention of the female deity shows the importation of foreign cults, which were assimilated to the local religion. From the same area, approximately 60 km from Intercisa, in Tac (*Gorsium*), comes a dedication<sup>222</sup> to the Syrian god, made by *militēs cohortis I miliariae Hemesenorum*, between 198 and 199, which attests the building of a temple to the deity Elagabal during the command of *legatus* Titus Claudius Claudianus, built by the order of the governor of the province and funded by those soldiers that were located in Intercisa.<sup>223</sup> The building inscription was found in Székesfehérvár, and it attests, in fact, the previous existence of a temple to the *Deus Sol Elagabalus*, probably constructed at the fort of the *cohors I miliaria Hemesenorum* at Intercisa, as it is known from the epigraphic evidences found in the same area.

<sup>217</sup> RIU-05, 1059 = AE 1910, 140 = AE 1968, 429 = RHP 305 = AE 2015, 35: [NU]MINI DIANAЕ TIFATINAE / [PRO S]ALUTE IMP(ERATORUM) SEP(TIMI) SEVERI ET / [AUR(ELI) A]NT(ONINI) AUGG(USTORUM) ET [[GETAE CAES(ARIS)]] FIL(II) F[E]LICIS/[SIMI MAXI]MI PRINCIP<I>S AGENTE BAE[B]IO CAECILLIANO / [LEG(ATO) AUGG(USTORUM) M]ODIO RUFINO TRIB(UNO) COH(ORTIS) [(MILIARIAE) HEM(ESENORUM) [IN ME]MOR(IAM) CAM/[PANI MARC]ELLI TUNC TRIB(UNI) N(OSTRI) CONV[ETERANI COH(ORTIS) S(UPRA) S(CRIPTAE)] TEMPLUM / [A SO]LO EXSTRUXERU[NT].

<sup>218</sup> The majority of the dedications to Diana Tifatina were found in Capua (CIL 10: 3795; 3828; 3924. EE-08-01, 00472; RECapua 00058), but it is also attested in Treglia (CIL 10.4564), Alife (CIL 10.8059) and in Gallia Narbonensis, in *Pagus Aletanus*, now Le Pegue (CIL 12.1705).

<sup>219</sup> Lengyel and Radan 1980, 153.

<sup>220</sup> Badaracco 2017, 135.

<sup>221</sup> Fitz 1972.

<sup>222</sup> RIU-06, 01490 = RHP 00303 = EpPann-04, 00001 = AE 1973, 00437a = AE 2009, 01085: [DEO SO]LI ELAGAB/[ALO SAC]R(UM) PRO SALU/[TE DOMIN]ORUM NN(OSTRORUM) / [L(UCI) SEPTIMII] SEVERI PII / [PERTINACIS] ET M(ARCI) AUR(ELI) ANTO/[NINI AUGG(USTORUM) [[ET SEPT(IMI) GETAE]]] / [[CAES(ARIS) MIL]ITES COHORT(IS) I / [(MILIARIAE) ANTONIN(AE)] HEMESENORUM / [ADIECTIS(?) OPER]IBUS UT CLAU/[DI CLAUDIAN]I PR(A)ESIDIS / [CURA VOVERANT(?) I]USSU EIUS TEM/[PLUM A FUNDA]MENTIS I<M=N>PE/[NSIS SUIS FEC]ERUNT.

<sup>223</sup> Fischwick 2004, 160.

The earliest inscription<sup>224</sup> with dedication to *Sol Invictus Deus*, as it was mentioned above, is dated 158:<sup>225</sup> “To the unconquered sun god, in accordance with the vow undertaken, on receiving an honourable discharge from the unit of mounted bodyguards of the Emperor, Publius Aelius Amandus gave this as a gift, in the consulship of Tertullus and Sacerdos”;<sup>226</sup> P. Aelius Amandus, *equus singularis Augusti*, elite member of the imperial equestrian order, gives thanks to his deity, during the consulship of Tertullus and Sacerdos, for having received the permission of participating to an honorific mission. The inscription, incised on a small marble altar bearing a depiction of the sun god, is unquestionably intended for the Syrian sun god;<sup>227</sup> the emperor is still not associated with the cult, as it will be with the emperor Commodus and the advent of the Severans,<sup>228</sup> but the importance and the presence of a solar worship during this period is noticeable.

Another inscription<sup>229</sup> worth mentioning comes from the pre-Severan period and it was made by a centurion of the XI legion Claudia, in honor of Verus, the adoptive brother of Marcus Aurelius. In the evidence is recognizable a dedication to the sun god, even though the epithet of the Syrian deity is missing. In 184, T. Pomponius Repentinus, *nomenclator tensarius iugaris*, dedicated an *ara* to Sol Invictus, in Rome. This inscription<sup>230</sup> witnesses that a ceremony probably took place, in which the dedicant, Repentinus, distributed baskets with food (*sportulae*). Even though it is not possible to find any other evidences confirming that a ceremony took place, this source is valuable because it attests the presence of the cult and its

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<sup>224</sup> Bailey 1932; see also Halsberghe 1984.

<sup>225</sup> CIL 6.715: SOLI INVICTO DEO / EX VOTO SUSCEPTO / ACCEPTA MISSIONE / HONESTA EX NUME/RO EQ(UITUM) SING(ULARIUM) AUG(USTI) P(UBLIUS) / AELIUS AMANDUS / D(E)D(ICA)VIT TERTULLO ET / SACERDOTI CO(N)S(ULIBUS). On the other hand, Hijmans 1996, 125 mentions CIL 6.717 (SOLI / INVICTO/ M.AEMILIUS/ M(ARCORUM DUORUM) L(IBERTUS) CHRYSANTHUS / MAG(ISTER) ANNI PRIMI ET/ M. LIMBRICIUS POLIDES / DEC(URIO) ET SODALICIO EIUS / D(E) (SUO) D(ONUM) D(EDERUNT)).

<sup>226</sup> Campbell 1994, 42-43.

<sup>227</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 45.

<sup>228</sup> Brent 1999, 264-265.

<sup>229</sup> CIL 3.7483: DEO INVICTO, PRO SALUTE IMPERATORI MARCI ANTONINI VERI, ANNIUS SATURNINUS, CENTURIO LEGIONIS XI CLAUDIAE VOTUM SOLVIT LIBENS MERITO.

<sup>230</sup> CIL 6.740: SOLI INVICTO SACRUM TITUS POMPONIUS REPENTINUS, NOMENCLATOR TENSARIUS IUGARIS, SUA PECUNIA DONUM DEDIT. DEDICATUM XV KALENDAS IULIAS MARULLO ET AELIANO CONSULIBUS. OB DEDICATIONE AD SPORTULAS DEDIT SINGULAS DENARIOS II.

growth already under the reign of Commodus. It is necessary to say that this inscription belongs to the *corpus* of Mithraic epigraphies;<sup>231</sup> nonetheless, it shows that the solar cult started to gain importance.

The presence of the cult is attested in various provinces of the empire during the end of the III century, and it confirms the growing importance of the solar religion. A particular case is represented by the province of Dacia: *Apulum* (Alba Iulia), under the emperor Commodus, represents one of the most important and active cities for the sun cult.<sup>232</sup>

An inscription<sup>233</sup> informs us that a certain Caius Caerellius Sabinus, of the *legio XIII Gemina*, provided the necessary resources for the restoration of the temple dedicated to the deity; even though no traces of such temple remain,<sup>234</sup> it is plausible to think about the actual existence of a place for the worshipping of Sol Invictus, and the existence of a temple was probably connected with the presence of other adherents in the area.<sup>235</sup> From *Apulum* as well, the *legatus Augusti* Quintus Caecilius Laetus, again from the same legion of Caerellius Sabinus, dedicated an inscription, *votum libens*.<sup>236</sup> Other two noteworthy inscriptions, always from *Apulum*, date in the Severan age. The former represents a dedication to the sun by a commander of the *legio XIII Gemina*,<sup>237</sup> the latter<sup>238</sup> is an official dedication to *Deus Sol Invictus* by the imperial procurator of the province, M. Cocceius Genialis, and it indicates the ruling of two emperors at that time, therefore the dedication must have been done under the reign of Septimius Severus and Caracalla.<sup>239</sup> The fortune of the solar religion is not evident only in Dacia: from the analysis of the evidence found in Sardis it emerges that the cult was

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<sup>231</sup> Vermaseren 2012, 219.

<sup>232</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* 1972, 47.

<sup>233</sup> CIL 3.1111: SOLI INVICTO / AEDEM RESTITUIT / C(AIUS) CAERELLIUS / SABINUS / LEG(ATUS) AUG(USTI) / LEG(IONIS) XIII GEM(INAE).

<sup>234</sup> It is impossible to locate the temple today, even though we know that it is attested during the reign of Commodus (183-185) and its ruins were still visible in 1711, during the period of construction of the Vauban fortress (Szabo 2018, 56).

<sup>235</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 48.

<sup>236</sup> CIL 3.1013: SOLI / INVICTO / Q(UINTUS) CAECIL(IUS) / LAETUS / LEG(ATUS) AUG(USTI) / LEG(IONIS) XIII G(EMINAE) / V(OTUM) L(IBENS) S(OLVIT)

<sup>237</sup> CIL 3.1118.

<sup>238</sup> CIL 3.7662.

<sup>239</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 48.

well supported in the city. In fact, the emperor Elagabalus granted the neokorate to Sardis,<sup>240</sup> Ephesus and Nicomedia in occasion of the wedding of his deity with the goddesses of the respective cities. Peculiar case of spread of the cult is Anazarbos, whose coinage<sup>241</sup> presents the legenda AMK, “the first, the greatest, the most beautiful”<sup>242</sup> city in Cilicia,<sup>243</sup> honorific titles accorded by the emperor Elagabalus. It appears that he had introduced in the city, as demiurge of the city itself, religious festivals and competitions previously held in Tarsus. It is notable that Tarsus had obtained the very same honours, having the same legenda AMK in the local coins.<sup>244</sup> Therefore, for a certain amount of time both cities had competed for the same title, which actually seems to have belonged previously to the city of Tarsus.<sup>245</sup> Under the reign of Elagabalus, the deity appears on coinage abundantly also in the cities of Bithynium, Marcianopolis,<sup>246</sup> Nicopolis,<sup>247</sup> Philippopolis<sup>248</sup> and Tomis.<sup>249</sup>

The cult spread quite rapidly, so as to reach the extreme Western borders of the Roman Empire, Hispania and Lusitania, the latter occupied under the emperor Octavian Augustus.

In Hispania there is epigraphical evidence of Sol, in particular a votive altar found in Burgos,<sup>250</sup> with the inscription S(OLI) I(NVICTO) D(EO) / V[A]L(ERIVS) SATVR/NINVS / P(OSVIT), and a rocky inscription from Barcelona, Cataluña.<sup>251</sup> An interesting *titulus pictus*, from *Augusta Emerita* (today Merida) with votive and cult functions, carries the qualification *invictus*, referred though, in this case, to the goddess Nemesis.<sup>252</sup> Furthermore, significant in the Galician area during the pre-Roman age is the presence of the name of a deity *Sol* or *Sul*.

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<sup>240</sup> Rowan 2012, 185-188.

<sup>241</sup> SNG Lev. 1425; SNG Lev Supp 330; Ziegler 395.

<sup>242</sup> From the Greek: A (standing for “first”), M (μέγιστη) K (κάλλιστη). See also Rowan 2012, 186 (and n.128). For a useful discussion regarding the phenomenon of neokoria, see Burrell 2004.

<sup>243</sup> Icks 2009, 119.

<sup>244</sup> SNG Lev Supp 274. See also Sayles 1998, 179.

<sup>245</sup> Icks 2009, 179.

<sup>246</sup> AMNG 904; Moushmov 626, 644; 683; Varbanov 1470, 1578, 1579.

<sup>247</sup> Moushmov 1402; Varbanov 4043, 4044 var.

<sup>248</sup> Moushmov 5420; SNGCop 785; Varbanov 1733, 1790.

<sup>249</sup> AMNG 3086.

<sup>250</sup> ERLara 42.

<sup>251</sup> CIL 2.4604

The noun, probably meant to identify a solar connection, is used within names of places often connected with thermal or medical locations. *Sol* appears as a component of toponyms such as *Castrosol*, *Soldevil(l)a*, *Solad(e)* and *Soladoura*. It is possible to find also Celtic names in a Romanised form, as *Solanus*, *Solatus*, *Solinus* and theonyms like *Soli-rigus*, *Soli-boduus*, *Remisol*. Moreover, the presence is attested of a female deity *Soli-mara*<sup>253</sup> and the name *Sol-deu*.<sup>254</sup>

Concerning the compresence of important autochthonous cults, it is possible to find traces of solar worship preexisting the advent of the Romans. In fact, it is attested a solar deity, *Neto*, connected with the inhabitants of Acci (Guadix, Granada),<sup>255</sup> whom Macrobius assimilates to the god Mars.<sup>256</sup> The deity, probably with Celtic origins, appears in an inscription from Condeixa-a-Velha<sup>257</sup> and in another epigraphy in Trujillo.<sup>258</sup>

Going more towards West, properly the occidental borders of the Roman Empire, in Lusitania, it is impossible not to notice that also here the solar cult had reached a consistent diffusion, assuming relevant and original features. Two inscriptions, in particular way, inform us about the presence of *Sol* in the territory: the first inscription,<sup>259</sup> regarding the construction of an altar by a governor of Lusitania, dedicated to *Sol Aeternus* and *Luna*, in Alto da Vigia, near Colares, in the area of Olisipo (Lisbon), was intended to ensure the good health of Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, and to grant the eternity of the empire.<sup>260</sup> The inscription The epigraph of Alto da Vigia might be dated between the end of the II and the beginning of III centuries; the governor appearing in the epigraph is D. Junius Celianus, governor of Lusitania between 200 and 209.<sup>261</sup> It has been found within a sanctuary, full of

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<sup>252</sup> AE 1961, 48: DEAE INVICTAE / CAELESTI NEMESI / M(ARCUS) AURELIUS PHILO (!) / ROMA V(OTUM) S(OLVIT) A(NIMO) L(IBENS) / SACRA V(OTA) S(OLVIT) M(ERITO).

<sup>253</sup> CIL 13.1195.

<sup>254</sup> Caridad Arias 1999, 72.

<sup>255</sup> Pastor Muñoz 2015, 126.

<sup>256</sup> Macr. *Sat.* 1.19.5.

<sup>257</sup> CIL 2.365.

<sup>258</sup> ILER 889.

<sup>259</sup> CIL 2.259.

<sup>260</sup> Nogales Basarrate and González 2007, 553.

<sup>261</sup> Garcia 1991, 438.

symbolism above all for its geographical position. In this sacred place believers tried to obtain protection from the celestial bodies, indirectly benefiting from the perpetuity of the empire.<sup>262</sup> Here the solar cult is utilised in order to grant the emperors' health, and therefore it serves as political propaganda, favouring the Severan dynasty.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, the utilisation of the epithet *Aeternus* indicates the evolution in the religion and the spread of Oriental cults, which meant to possess universality; also, it shows again the religious syncretism typical of the Severans.<sup>264</sup>

The second inscription from Lusitania, and interesting because it shows different characteristics of *Sol*, is CIL 2.258.<sup>265</sup> The inscription was found upon an *ara*, dated 180-198,<sup>266</sup> and surely it does not belong to the corpus of Mithraic inscriptions.<sup>267</sup> From what the epigraph shows, the sun is in association with the moon, therefore it recalls the primitive solar cult, and it does not carry Oriental features of any sort. The association refers to the natural and astral cyclicity of growth and vegetal reproduction. In particular, Luna “domina pelo tamanho, pela originalidade das suas fases. A Lua é o pai da ninhada de estrelas; a Lua é o homem, o Sol a esposa, por toda a América, por toda a África. O culto lunar é o primitivo, o solar é posterior. O reinado religioso do Sol começa com a civilização. É então que a Lua, como todos os vencidos, desce à condição feminina e maligna.”<sup>268</sup> Certainly the citation is exquisitely literary, but the importance of the lunar cult in connection with *Sol*, association present also in the Eastern cults, in particular the Syrian ones,<sup>269</sup> it is proof that the period in which the inscription is dated is a moment of religious syncretism, in which the deities undergo evolution, and this process might be also caused by the contact with Eastern cults.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Da Silva Fernandes 2008, 250.

<sup>263</sup> Berrens 2004, 43.

<sup>264</sup> Piso 2008, 160.

<sup>265</sup> SOLI · ET · LUNAE / CESTIUS · ACIDIUS / PERENNIS / LEG(ATUS) · AUG(USTI) · PR(O) · PR(AETORE) / PROVINCIAE LUSITANIAE. The noun *Acidius* is uncertain: D'Encarnação 2007 suggests the solution ACIDIUS. Garcia 1991, 437 suggests, in alternative, TVL?]CIDIUS instead of ACIDIUS. The variant *L. Fulcidius* has also been proposed and it has been postulated also the possibility of *Tigidius* or *Nigidius* (Canto 2004, 326).

<sup>266</sup> Cardim Ribeiro 1995-2007, 596.

<sup>267</sup> Garcia 1991, 437.

<sup>268</sup> Gil Malta 2008, 430.

<sup>269</sup> Teixidor 1977.

<sup>270</sup> Piso 2008, 161.

There is also evidence of an autochthonous deity connected to the solar worship, Endovélico, well attested in S. Miguel da Mota, Alandroal,<sup>271</sup> different from the Mithraic solar element, which appears in a more advance age.<sup>272</sup> For what concerns the lunar cult, in association with *Sol* it is registered the presence, during the Chalcolithic and only in the area of influence of Serra da Sintra, (and in a sporadic way in neighbouring regions), of limestone votive objects with a shape of a growing moon, in a funerary context, *lunulae*,<sup>273</sup> and again in the same areas cylindrical idols or betyloids have been found, with identical representations.<sup>274</sup>

Still in connection with *Sol*, three other inscriptions from Lusitania are worth mentioning: the first one,<sup>275</sup> bearing the title SOLI / SACRV / M, has been found in a sandstone altar. On its left side a six-edged rosetta is shown, inscribed in a circle. The lack of further data does not allow us to know more specifics, but the representation is without any doubt singular, and it is widely attested in hellenistic mosaics.<sup>276</sup> The second inscription,<sup>277</sup> from Idanha-a-Velha (Idanha-a-Nova), was found on a sandstone *arula*, the upper part of which is extant: SOLI / TVROLI/[VS?...]ANI?/[...].<sup>278</sup> If we intend the writing ANI as whole name, the only possible explanation of this mention could in connection to the presence of an ancient cult of Anu, Ani or An, whose bride is the goddess Anet, who is also his sister, in the same characterization as Isis and Osiris,<sup>279</sup> and whose cult was established along the Nile River. But here ANI could also integrate a part of the text which is now lacking. On the other hand, the name Turolius is attested.<sup>280</sup> As for the last inscription, an epigraphy has been found again in the region of Colares (Sintra),<sup>281</sup> bearing the dedication SOLI AETERNO,<sup>282</sup> from the II century AD.

<sup>271</sup> For the archaeological investigation of the sanctuary of Endovelico in S. Miguel da Mota, see Guerra et al. 2003; more recently, see also Schattner, Fabião and Guerra 2013.

<sup>272</sup> AE 1984, 465, which confirms the presence of a Mithraic cult in Beja.

<sup>273</sup> Cardim Ribeiro 2011, 595.

<sup>274</sup> Cardim Ribeiro 2011, 600.

<sup>275</sup> AE 1973, 278.

<sup>276</sup> Bonghi Jovino and Chiaramonte Treré 1997, 79.

<sup>277</sup> AE 1961, 355.

<sup>278</sup> Garcia 1991, 436.

<sup>279</sup> Mokhtar 2010, 8.

<sup>280</sup> HAE 772 = CPILC 794.

<sup>281</sup> Lambrino 1952.

<sup>282</sup> AE 1954, 253.

The inscriptions here examined attest the presence and the persistence of the sun god in the Roman tradition 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>283</sup> as, for instance, those erected by Balbillus.<sup>284</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 identification or of attribution.<sup>285</sup> Therefore, apart from inscriptions,<sup>286</sup> coinage constitutes another relevant and reliable source useful to study the development of the cult and its peculiarities.<sup>287</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>288</sup>

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<sup>283</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 recurving 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>284</sup> Rowan 2012, 218.

<sup>285</sup> de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 17.

<sup>286</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>287</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>288</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.



Vespasianus, Trajan and Hadrian.<sup>289</sup> After 128, *Sol* disappears from the coinage, until making its appearance again under the reign of Commodus in 186,<sup>290</sup> when the sun is portrayed more times on coins,<sup>291</sup> now the solar deity seems to be rather assimilated with Hercules and the Mithraic cult, and being the emperor a worshipper of both cults<sup>292</sup>, this might be the reason for the reappearance of *Sol*. In fact, the epithet *Invictus*, which does not appear in the extant evidence in association with the sun, is more likely connected to the emperor's *persona*.

On the other hand, with the advent of Commodus, a tendency towards monotheism is noticeable, which is reflected in his role of autocrat,<sup>293</sup> but also in the use of a new religious language. In fact, on coins<sup>294</sup> appears an appellative applied to Jupiter and honoring him with a name higher than any normal designation, *exsuperantissimus*.<sup>295</sup> While the identification of the emperor with Hercules and the use of diverse epithets might refer to a predilection towards one single deity above others, as the example of the designation EXSVPER which, apart from being attributed to Jupiter, could be also addressed to Jupiter Doliche, the presence is worth noticing of four deities in the emperor's mints, and among those two attested Sol-types. The connection of the emperor with Sol is also evident in a medallion from AD 190/191, where the solar deity, wearing a radiate crown, mounts a quadriga.<sup>296</sup> The fact that the deity appears bearded might indicate the purpose of depicting the emperor himself, and therefore a strict identification of the latter with the deity itself.

The "rising sun"<sup>297</sup> Commodus, therefore, promoting 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 it becomes a strong instrument of imperial and personal propaganda. The binomial deity-

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<sup>289</sup> Martin 2000, 298.

<sup>290</sup> Rowan 2012, 243.

<sup>291</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 49.

<sup>292</sup> Mastrocinque 2017, 62.

<sup>293</sup> Grant 1994, 3.

<sup>294</sup> RIC 3.152, Cohen 242, BMC 213.

<sup>295</sup> Versnel 1998, 193. See also Grant 1994, 74.

<sup>296</sup> Hekster 1974, 99.

<sup>297</sup> Dio 72.34.

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*. Commodus' purpose was probably not to anticipate nor create forms of monotheism, but rather new and particular forms of devotion, where believers might still worship traditional cults, as for instance the solar one, while emperors might benefit of the devotion in order to strengthen their role and their control. The Severans, since the advent of their first ruler, Septimius Severus, will continue this tradition, creating a deep connection with East, promoting Oriental cults – as it will be seen in the next chapter – and putting major importance on the cult of the sun god.

## Chapter II – My god is the Sun

*Far beyond the desert road  
Where everything ends up  
So good the empty space, mental erase  
Forgive, forgot  
Heal them, like fire from a gun  
Kneeling, my god is the Sun  
Heal them, with fire from above  
Kneeling, my god is the Sun*

Queens of the Stone Age – *My God is the Sun* (...*Like Clockwork*, Matador Records, 2013)

## II.1 Religious explosion

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>298</sup> Non-literary evidence, in particular inscriptions related to the imperial family, is numerous.<sup>299</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>300</sup>

In the *Urbs*, *Septizodium* is probably the brightest example of the Severan building programme. It was a monumental façade of a nymphaeum, filled with ornaments and statues,<sup>301</sup> erected by the emperor in 203, and built underneath Palatine Hill. In the *Septizodium* there were probably erected statues of the Severan rulers, or their predecessors,<sup>302</sup> and *Historia Augusta* informs us that a gigantic statue of Septimius Severus had had built in front of the monument by the *praefectus urbi*, therefore blocking even the passage of the emperor himself through the monument.<sup>303</sup> The extant evidence related to the monument is scarce, even though there are other examples of *Septizodium*, all from Africa,<sup>304</sup> but it is thought that the

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<sup>298</sup> Mastino 1997.

<sup>299</sup> There are over 1.500 inscriptions from North Africa dedicated to Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta, Julia Domna, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander.

<sup>300</sup> Rowan 2012, 201.

<sup>301</sup> Rantala 2017, 130.

<sup>302</sup> Gensheimer 2018.

<sup>303</sup> SHA, *Sept. Sev.*, 24.3-4: Cum Septizonium faceret, nihil aliud cogitavit, quam ut ex Africa venientibus suum opus occurreret. nisi absente eo per praefectum urbis medium simulacrum eius esset locatum, aditum Palatinis aedibus, id est regium atrium, ab ea parte facere voluisse perhibetur.

<sup>304</sup> Longfellow 2011.

construction refers to seven planetary deities: Sol/Helios/Apollo, Luna/ Selene/Diana, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn, and a statue of Apollo was discovered near the foundations of the monument.<sup>305</sup> The number of deities associated with the Severan dynasty not only shows how many cults the family embraced, but it is also a choice of representation, that is which cults could better embody ideas and policy of the Severans. If it is true that planetary deities were depicted in the monument, the message endorsed by Septimius Severus is even more fulgid, because it refers to the most ancestral and traditional cults in the Roman Empire. Although it is not entirely certain that Severus had been portrayed on the Septizodium as Sol among the planets,<sup>306</sup> it is without doubt that the solar deity constituted an important and essential role in the representation of the emperor and his family. Not only the sun cult, but also other beliefs are object of worship in the Severan family, and ruler cult was of great importance during this period.

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>307</sup> Moreover, it is well known the marriage by the emperor Elagabal and Urania in Rome, as union between sun and moon, recorded by Herodian, of which probably a similar event happened in Sardes, during the reign of Elagabal, with Kore, who received a particular devotion in that city, and so in other cities, evidences of those unions are many, even though not all seem to represent a divine marriage, or a union between

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<sup>305</sup> Rantala 2017, 130.

<sup>306</sup> Fishwick 1993, 341.

<sup>307</sup> Rantala 2017, 100.

sun and moon.<sup>308</sup> In the Palmyrene pantheon of the I century BC, as shown above, Aglibol, the moon god, appears in a trinity with Bel, an early cult, and Yarhibol, the sun god; Yarhibol and Aglibol are depicted as acolytes of Bel who, in the Palmyrene texts, is also named Zeus<sup>309</sup>. The presence of solar and lunar gods is though already present in some inscriptions of the VIII and VII centuries found in North Syria. In one in particular, Aglibol overpass in importance Malakbel, who though is indicated in the inscription as *sol sanctissimus*. The information refers to the III century AD, and it shows that Malakbel, in the early days merely a deity connected with vegetation, had acquired solar connotations.<sup>310</sup> In the Cretan culture, as in Egypt, the bull, symbol of fertility, had been identified with the sun, as the cow was connected with the moon; the association of the bull with the sun appeared also in relation to the deity Talos, depicted with a bovine head and which is also identified with Kronos, the Phoenician form of the deity El.<sup>311</sup> The importance of the sun and the moon therefore, not only as deities,<sup>312</sup> but also as elements of cohesion and stability, it is a decisive vector of communication of the stability of the Empire, and in particular way the stability of its imperial dynasty. The Phoenician identity was particularly endorsed by the Severans, because it would recall their blood heritage from the mother country. This could have been a way for including non-Romans into upper levels of society, and in particular among the senators; but the connection with the Phoenician land could have also been used as a defense of the Severan culture and its solidarity with the Greek world. In this sense, the presence of the Phoenician merchant appearing in Philostratus' *Heroikos* might recall the Greekness of the Severan dynasty.<sup>313</sup> Moreover, "Severan emperors and their wives were perceived at least in some

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<sup>308</sup> Icks 2009, 116.

<sup>309</sup> See p. 20 and note n.69.

<sup>310</sup> Malakbel's association with the sun, or at least with solar connotation of any sort, does not associate this deity, however, with Aurelian's Sol Invictus. Moreover, his character appears as sun god when in union with Baalshamin, acquiring no more importance he had before. In fact, his power does not increase, and he is also often overshadowed by the moon god Aglibol (Dirven 1999, 169). Furthermore, there is no evidence supporting the existence of a temple dedicated to Malakbel in Palmyra, and this could probably explain the regular importance of the god.

<sup>311</sup> Willetts 1962, 100-101.

<sup>312</sup> The appearance of sun and moon as deities in on certain Greek coin types, while before, according to Wissowa, sun and moon were no thought of as gods. The sun cult seems to have Sabine origins and then, a *Sol Indiges* appears mentioned in three calendars, but it might be the same cult (Warde Fowler 2008).

<sup>313</sup> Berenson Maclean and Bradshaw Aitken 2005, xxiii.

circles as Phoenician”<sup>314</sup>. Emphasizing eastern origins could correspond to the need of unification of the imperial power, which in the III century appears difficult to maintain, and mainly because of the difficulty to control the local authority in the provinces, but this also could be seen as a political programme which would not only attenuate the discrepancies between East and West, but as well it would define proper Phoenician origins, against the reception of the Syro-Phoenician community, a Canaanite group from the southern Roman Syria, whose members were indicated in the bible as dogs.<sup>315</sup> Moreover, Herodian describes Julia Maesa as *Phonissa*,<sup>316</sup> and so it is called Dido in the *Aeneid*.<sup>317</sup> Even though the mother cities of the two women differ, Herodian underlies the importance for the Severans to include Phoenician elements, especially in religious practices.<sup>318</sup> The historian also claims that Elagabal is the Phoenician name given to the sun god by its worshippers in Emesa, roman province of *Syria Phoenice*.<sup>319</sup> It is also worth noticing that Heliodorus called himself “a Phoenician from Emesa, from the race of the sun”.<sup>320</sup> It is without doubt that in Syria and Phoenicia paganism and religious cults had big spread, if still in the IV and V centuries pagan rituals survived, even keeping their authentic shape,<sup>321</sup> before being torn down by Christian monks in east and west.<sup>322</sup> Same tensions appeared in Alexandria, where pagan statues in the IV and V centuries had been burnt, reused or simply forgotten, the most notable event being the closing of the famous Serapeum in the city, in 392.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Bradshaw Aitken 2005, 277.

<sup>315</sup> The passage indicated here is the account of the Syro-Phoenician woman, found in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-29.

<sup>316</sup> See note n.80.

<sup>317</sup> Verg., *Aen.* 6.450. See p. 22.

<sup>318</sup> Jones Hall 2004, 137.

<sup>319</sup> Her. 5.3.4.

<sup>320</sup> Hel., *Aeth.* 10.41.3.

<sup>321</sup> During the reign of Valens (364-378) and throughout the V century blood sacrifices, orgies in honor of Bacchus and libations were still performed in Syria (Frend 1990, 476).

<sup>322</sup> Frend 1990, 483.

<sup>323</sup> Kristensen 2010.

## 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 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>324</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>325</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>326</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>327</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. But

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<sup>324</sup> Xella 2001-2002, 33.

<sup>325</sup> Xella 2001-2002, 36.

<sup>326</sup> Harden 1971, 74.

<sup>327</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 (Chuvín 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.



Baals were not unknown in the Roman religion, since the Baal of Doliche was already introduced by the Antonines, under Septimius Severus and Caracalla;<sup>328</sup> the second one, the Baal of Heliopolis, identified at the time of Pompeus as Jupiter Heliopolitanus, had been popular until the beginning III century, when Septimius Severus promoted Heliopolis as Colonia Iulia Augusta Felix Heliopolis, thus becoming the principal center of the province Syria-Phoenice. Jupiter Dolichenus was worshipped as a major unitary cult,<sup>329</sup> and thus acquiring monotheistic peculiarities and yet within the pagan polytheism. The deity appears on inscriptions, in the majority of cases, with the appellative Optimus Maximus (Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus), and his success started under the reign of Commodus and the Severans.<sup>330</sup> Inscriptions refer to the deity with the qualifications of *aeternus* and *conservator*. It is interesting an inscription, from the first half of the III century, because in this evidence the deity is indicated as *invicto*.<sup>331</sup> The epithet is associated to Jupiter also in a mint from Laodicea,<sup>332</sup> dated 196-97, carrying on the front a laureate head of the emperor Septimius Severus; on the *verso*, the legenda “IOVI INVICTO” and the image of Zeus, sitting and holding a small statue of Victory in his right hand and a scepter in his left hand. The same designation is often used to indicate the emperor, and an important number of evidences where the appellative is addressed to the sovereign are to be found during the reigns of Septimius Severus, Elagabalus, Probus and Carus.<sup>333</sup> There is a funerary dedication to a man named Marcus Antonius Sotericus, made by the father, dated 201-300, in which the deceased is designated as *filio karissimo et sacer/doti Solis Invicti dei et / Iovis Ederanisve*

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<sup>328</sup> Bailey 1932, 45.

<sup>329</sup> Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010, 10-11.

<sup>330</sup> Sanzi 2016, 191.

<sup>331</sup> B(onum) f(actum) / ex praecepto I(ovis) O(ptimi) M(aximi) D(olicheni) Aeterni Conservatori totius poli et Numini Prae/stantiss(im)o Ex[h]ibitori Invicto L(ucius) Tettius Hermes eq(ues) R(omanus) et / <c=K>andidatus et patronus huius loci pro salute sua et Aur(eliae) Restitutae coniugis et Tettiae Pannuchiae filiae suae / et suorum et Aureli Lampadi fratris carissimi et pro sal{u}te / sacerdotium et <c=K>andidatorum et colitorum huius loci tabula(m) / marmorea(m) cum proscaenio et columnis d(onum) d(edit) quos elexit / I(upiter) O(ptimus) M(aximus) D(olichenus) sibi servire M(arcum) Aurel(ium) Oenopione(m) Onesimum signum Acaci / notarium et Septimium Antonium signum Olympi patre(m) <c=K>andid(atos) / patronos fratres carissimos et collegas hon(estissimos) Aur(elium) Magnesium / Aur(elium) Serapiacum Antonium Marianum M(arcum) Iul(ium) Florentinum principe(s) / huius loci et Aur(elium) Severum veteranum curatorem temp{u}li et / Aur(elium) Antiochum sacerdote(m) Gemi(us) Felix et Vibius Eutyichianus / lecticari(i) dei Corn(elius) Cres[centianus] (CCID 381). The text reports also the information that the dedicants were belonging to the sacral status of *colitores*, worshippers of the place which would be benefiting from the dedication (Rüpke 2014, 40).

<sup>332</sup> RIC IV 480a, 480b.

<sup>333</sup> Manders 2012, 140.

*Dol(i)chen(i)*.<sup>334</sup> He was therefore priest of Sol Invictus and of Jupiter Dolichenus; as for the appellative *Ederanis*,<sup>335</sup> it is in doubt whether it refers to Jupiter, or it indicates the dedication to a further deity; in the latter case, the appellative, which is to be found only in this inscription and nowhere else, would be referred to a certain Syrian god Hadaranès, but this is just conjectural,<sup>336</sup> even though a deity bearing this name is attested.<sup>337</sup> Apart from the identification of *Ederanis* and its possible attribution, the inscription is interesting because it shows not only the presence of *Sol Invictus* with other cults, in the same cultic context, but also it is an example of the religious syncretism in the III century. In fact, while literary evidence<sup>338</sup> insist on the predominance of the solar cult above the other beliefs, non-literary *testimonia* show not only the compresence of the sun god with other gods and goddesses, but also it is proof that the cult of Sol had been well assimilated and received, in Rome as well as in the provinces. If *Ederanis* is the designation for Hadad, the Semitic god which would correspond to the Hittite god Teshub and identified by Syrians as the Baal of Doliche, the comparison becomes more appealing. Moreover, it is worth noticing that Jupiter Dolichenus is portrayed in a fringed tunic, and in the field above his head is usually depicted the sun disk, winged.<sup>339</sup> It is necessary, therefore, to make a distinction between this form of cult in the East and in the West. In the East, in Doliche, the deity was more likely connected with a past religious tradition, presumably in oral or ritual forms, from the Bronze or Iron Age; in the West, where the cult starts to have its presence between 125-230,<sup>340</sup> more precisely in the Northern borders of the Roman Empire, and among the soldiers, the deity is connected to Hadad of Doliche<sup>341</sup> and presents solar attributes. In particular, three elements seem to constitute a triad or, at least, are strictly connected with the cult of Dolichenus: Sol, Luna and the eagle.

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<sup>334</sup> AE 1960, 365.

<sup>335</sup> *Ederanisve* indicates a connection, in the structure of the sentence of the epigraphe, with Jupiter, instead of enlisting another deity bearing this designation. It is also seen here a probable mention of the Syrian Iuno Dolichena, or it might just indicate, if *Eder-* is used as prefix and with the meaning of “goddess”, the name of a possible deity called *Anis* (Rossetti Tella 1996, 258).

<sup>336</sup> Haack 2005, 172.

<sup>337</sup> In Niha Zahlé, in Lebanon, are two Roman temples dated I AD. The smaller and lower temple was built in honor of the Syro-Phoenician goddess Atargatis and the god Hadaranes, consort of Atargatis and god of thunder. Furthermore, Hadaranes could be a variant Hadaran, or Hadad (Millar 1993, 282), and this would explain the direct connection with Jupiter Dolichenus.

<sup>338</sup> Most notably *Historia Augusta* and Cassius Dio.

<sup>339</sup> Nash-Williams 1952, 72.

<sup>340</sup> Bellar 2013, 79; 1978, 64.

As for the moon,<sup>342</sup> it appears in connection with the sun already in Cretan and Egyptian myths, being identified with the cow,<sup>343</sup> while the bull, embodying the sun, becomes a symbol of fertility.<sup>344</sup> It will suffice to say for the purpose of this study that in the III century the cult was strictly associated with *Sol* to underline the connection between deity and emperor. In fact, both Cassius Dio<sup>345</sup> and Herodian<sup>346</sup> report the marriages orchestrated by the emperor Elagabalus between his deity Elagabal and the goddess Urania,<sup>347</sup> worshipped by Carthaginians and Lybians and known among Phoenicians with the appellation of Astroarche, and identifying her with the moon.<sup>348</sup> This act clearly was meant to show an association between human and divine, which “also seem to have been accompanied by large celebrations, which would reinforce the connection.”<sup>349</sup> An analogue episode has to be found in Faustropolis, where the emperor builds a shrine, in the temple of Faustina, in honor of himself, or the Syrian Jupiter, or the sun; the dedication is uncertain,<sup>350</sup> but it is relevant the fact that the Emesene god might have encountered the local cults without opposition. On the

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<sup>342</sup> For the discussion about the association of sun and moon, with particular focus on the provinces, see previous chapter.

<sup>343</sup> This might be also the case of Tarxien, where “the latter’s litter of 13 young would be nothing less than the thirteen lunar months of most primitive calendars.” (Bonanno 1986, 166).

<sup>344</sup> Willetts 1962, 100.

<sup>345</sup> 80.12.1-2.

<sup>346</sup> 5.6.3.

<sup>347</sup> The presence in Sardes of *Chrysantina*, a festival in honour of Kore, makes think to a connection between this cult and the cult of Elagabal, as reminiscence of the marriage between the god Elagabal and Urania in Rome (Icks 2009, 116). It is interesting also to notice two types of coinage from Sardes: in the first one (Mionnet IV 759) Kore is carried on a quadriga, presenting a posture and a gesture typical of the representations of Sol (in particular the raised right arm), while on the second type the goddess is surrounded by the symbol of sun and moon. Moreover, still from the Sardes a coin type, again from the reign of Elagabalus, depicts Helios naked but for chlamys hanging from both shoulders, standing right, looking left, holding globe and raising right hand behind him (SNG vA 8259 var). The presence of Helios in the coinage of the province and the correlation between Elagabal and Kore confirm the presence of different religious traditions, which would coexist and be accepted positively by the city and the community.

<sup>348</sup> 5.6.4.

<sup>349</sup> Rowan 2012, 215.

<sup>350</sup> SHA, *Vita Ant. Car.* 11.6-7: *habet templum, habet Salios, habet sodales Antoninianos. qui Faustinae templum et divale nomen eripuit, certe templum quod ei sub Tauri radicibus fundaverat maritus, in quo postea filius huius Heliogabalus Antoninus sibi vel Iovi Syrio vel Soli — incertum id est — templum fecit.*

contrary, it was celebrated in festivals and other religious occasions, as for instance in Hierapolis-Castabala in connection with Perasia, a local deity associated with Selene, and in Nicomedia with the goddess Demeter, probably in occasion of the *Demetria Antonia*.<sup>351</sup> A further, and probably more appealing case, is represented by the presence of the Emesan cult in Anazarbos where, under Commodus, minted coinage<sup>352</sup> show the depiction of Zeus Olybreus, worshipped on the mount Zarbos and connected somehow with the god Elagabal, which appears in the coinage of the city in the form of baetyl and was probably connected in relationship with Aphrodite Kassalitis, a local mountain goddess.<sup>353</sup> Even though the introduction of the cult of Elagabal might not have been spontaneous in those areas, seeming rather a purposeful introduction made by Elagabalus as proclamation and propaganda of the emperor himself,<sup>354</sup> the cult finds well place among the local deities, acquiring particular importance. The iconography presents variants in some local cases. For instance, in the coins of Neapolis Elagabal is associated with Mount Gerizim, whose baetyl was associated with Zeus and it had solar characteristics.<sup>355</sup> The same baetyl appears in Laodicea, where the coinage shows also a crescent, probably in relation to the celestial peculiarity of the Emesene deity and putting the god in relation with the moon.<sup>356</sup>

Furthermore, a special celebration took place on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August in Rome, at Circus Maximus. In this special occasion, even though most importance was given to the sun god, moon was also celebrated, appearing immediately after him, as protector of the bigae<sup>357</sup> in the

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<sup>351</sup> Icks 2011, 86.

<sup>352</sup> SNG France 2041, SNG Lev Sup 325.

<sup>353</sup> Icks 2009, 117.

<sup>354</sup> The Emesan cult is not attested prior or after the reign of Elagabalus, and it is introduced probably with the purpose of self-presentation of the emperor and emanation of his *persona*.

<sup>355</sup> Icks 2009, 188.

<sup>356</sup> Rowan 2012, 182.

<sup>357</sup> “Neither Sun nor Moon were thought of as deities until certain Greek coin-types, with a quadriga and a biga for sun and moon respectively, came to Rome in the Second Punic War and invited imitation, producing in later times a special connection of Sol with the Circus.” (Warde Fowler 2008, 57). There are still examples of sun and moon intended as natural elements during Constantine’s reign, the emperor had been a worshipper of the sun god, as shown on coinage; in particular, a scene of sacrifice to the sun is present in the Arch, where the emperor Hadrian hunts a boar and then sacrifices to the deity, and sun and moon appear on the east and west, maybe symbolizing the fact that the emperor had been chosen by the natural order (Potter 2014, 353).

circus.<sup>358</sup> The two obelisks in the arena seems to be dedicated, according to Cassiodorus, to the Moon (the smaller one, that of Augustus) and to the Sun (the bigger one, that of Constantius II).<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Halsberghe 1972, 33.

<sup>359</sup> Curran 2000, 249.

## II.3 This is the end?

What emerges from the brief analysis of the relationship between sun and moon is that the combination of both symbols, appearing as deities or natural elements, is well known before Roman times. The presence of the deities is attested in the empire since the beginning of Roman History and non-literary evidence from the provinces shows that both cults were practiced, often one in relation to the other. But 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 same time implying the co-dependence and connection of the two deities.<sup>360</sup> Once one goes through the use of these two symbols in the Roman history on coinage<sup>361</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*,<sup>362</sup> 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>363</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

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<sup>360</sup> Rantala 2017, 100.

<sup>361</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>362</sup> See also page 44.

<sup>363</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.

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.

Use of traditional symbols as moon, in order to express unity and dependence of two forces of different entity, such as *Sol* and *Luna*, helped the reception of the message; inasmuch transmitted in this way, impossible not to understand. The view of a familiar element could easier favor the reception of the religious message, and the use of symbols in combination with the sun created also a logic connection with the solar deity, which was presented in one way or another. The relation among known spiritual elements not only reinforced the concept of stability of the Empire, in the respect of the ancient beliefs, but also endured the imperial power, through the unity of the emperor's dynasty, ensuring a continuous legacy.

As previously mentioned, another interesting element, which figures in several evidences, is the eagle. The eagle, appearing already in the iconography in the East before the Hellenism, in the Hurrites myths was associated with Teshub, storm god and god of lightning, becoming a symbol of the deity itself.<sup>364</sup> In the Hittites myths,<sup>365</sup> this element figures as a god helper, an assistant of the sun god. In the Roman context, this symbolism is still maintained, but it acquires different features and usage. Apart from being adopted by the Roman legions in *insigna*, where it had been preferred as the sole representative symbol of the soldiers after the reforms of Caius Marius in 104 BC, as Pliny the Elder informs us,<sup>366</sup> substituting the four previous elements depicted. Eagles had been used on coinage from the Antiquities throughout

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<sup>364</sup> Sanzi 2013.

<sup>365</sup> In two different Hittite myths, the Sun God is accompanied by an eagle, which functions as messenger and tool of the deity: the myth of the Disappearance of Telipinu narrates: §4 (A i 12-16) The Sun God sent the swift eagle: “[Go] search for Telipinu.” The eagle went. It searched [the springs(?). It searched] the rivers. But it didn’t find him. So, it brought back a report to the Sun God: “I didn’t find him” (Hoffner 1998, 18). The eagle appears as well in the fragments of Myths about Lost and Found Deities, in the myth so-called Mission of the Eagle, which reports: §3 (B 3-8) The Sun God [made] a feast [and] summoned the gods. The Sun God [looked for ...’s] eyes, but he could not find [them] there. So the Sun God [summoned the other gods(?) and said:] “Go [summon] the swift eagle for me.” They went and [summoned] the swift eagle. [The Sun God said to] the eagle: “[Go] search [...] [Following context lost.] (Hoffner 1998, 37). In both narrations, Sun God appears as a summoner and a supervisor of the other gods, helped by the eagle.

the Middle Ages, when emperors Frederick I and Frederick II Hohenstaufen decided to adopt this symbol<sup>367</sup> and later on.<sup>368</sup>

Furthermore, there are innumerable examples, in the Roman tradition, to be found in other artifacts. One for all, a sardonyx cameo in the Cross of Lothair, part of treasure of the Aachen cathedral, dated during the reign of Augustus, which shows the emperor himself wearing military garments, holding in his right hand an eagle-tipped sceptre;<sup>369</sup> it is an unusual and distinctive iconographic message, because on coins the emperor never appears in cuirass and *paludamentum* or holding a scepter surmounted by an eagle.

If one focuses in particular on the coinage minted during the Severan dynasty, one notices that the usage of this symbol is abundant, also in the Near Eastern provinces during that time.<sup>370</sup> It is also meaningful, in this context, the fact that also production of coinage is profuse and it decreases after the Severan dynasty, going to disappear, at least for what regards civic and *koinon* coinage, at the end of the third century.<sup>371</sup> The abundance of mints is significant, because the big production, also in the provinces shows that in fact this historical period does not represent a moment of crisis and decadence, rather an era of mutation and gradual evolution. As a matter of fact, emperors in the third century began to use consistently the depiction of Sol on some of their emissions, which appeared portrayed also after Constantine's conversion in 312, while the other deities slowly disappeared from coinage.<sup>372</sup> It is interesting to notice also that the solar deity had appeared in Hellenistic coinage found in Gabala, as a youthful member of a triad worshipped in the city.<sup>373</sup> In Syria, in particular in

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<sup>366</sup> Romanis eam legionibus Gaius Marius in secundo consulatu suo proprie dicavit. erat et antea prima cum quattuor aliis: lupi, minotauri, equi aprique singulos ordines anteibant. paucis ante annis sola in aciem portari cepta erat, reliqua in castris relinquebantur; Marius in totum ea abdicavit. ex eo notatum, non fere legionis umquam hiberna esse castra ubi aquilarum non sit iugum (Pliny the Elder 10, 16).

<sup>367</sup> During the reign of Frederick II the depiction of a single-headed eagle eventually changed into the representation of a double-headed eagle, which became the royal symbol (Fibiger Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012, 157)

<sup>368</sup> In a medal dated 1736, minted for the wedding of Francis Stephen and Maria Theresa, the couple stands beneath a single-headed eagle, used as image of the elected king (Kleisner and Boublík 2011, 78).

<sup>369</sup> Woytek 2014, 48.

<sup>370</sup> Howgego, Heuchert and Bu 2005, 147-148.

<sup>371</sup> Howgego, Heuchert and Bu 2005, 33.

<sup>372</sup> Liebeschuetz 1999, 188-191.

<sup>373</sup> Teixidor 1977, 49.



Emesa, the earliest emissions under the reign of Antoninus Pius show an eagle on top of a black stone.<sup>374</sup> In particular, one emission<sup>375</sup> depicts the animal occupying the right of the mint for almost all its size; on another mint,<sup>376</sup> unfortunately not so well preserved, it appears the same iconography. On a third coin, the sacred baetyl of Elagabal is surmounted by eagle, which is holding wreath in its beak.<sup>377</sup> It is interesting also that in other Emesan coinage the emperor appears radiate, while on the verso a bust of Helios is depicted.<sup>378</sup> Therefore, both elements are present in describing a religious and at the same time political context. In fact, the depiction of the eagle is a motif which had belonged to the Roman tradition, as military vessel but it was used also for symbolizing the emperor's power. Already under the reign of Antoninus Pius, though, eagle is presenting new features, and acquiring a more religious meaning. In fact, while before the animal had been portrayed alone or in connection with symbols and deities of the Roman traditional pantheon, now it appears bestowed of a new significance, and connected with religious iconography from Near East. The same iconography of the eagle standing on the sacred stone of Emesa and holding wreath in its beak is present also under Julia Domna.<sup>379</sup> The coinage under Caracalla presents curious features because, apart from the already seen representation of the eagle on the baetyl,<sup>380</sup> the bird is portrayed still facing, head left and wreath in beak, but between its legs, at the bottom of the verso, is represented the deity Shamash, bust sized;<sup>381</sup> the iconography is captivating because there is a direct connection with a sun god, in this case the Sumerian-Akkadian solar deity (which was known as Utu in the Mesopotamian religion), part of an astral triad of divinities of the Sumerian pantheon (the other two were the moon god Sin and Ishtar). Shamash was known in Hatra through the coinage emitted in the city, but he was also known with his Semitic name Maren as sun god and the most important deity of the city, in particular from the second century to the half of the third, when a dynasty of priest-kings governed the city.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Birley 2000, 71.

<sup>375</sup> BMC 1.

<sup>376</sup> BMC 4.

<sup>377</sup> SGI 1496v.

<sup>378</sup> BMC 8.

<sup>379</sup> Prieur 978, 980, 982.

<sup>380</sup> BMC 13, Mionnet 608, SNG Cop 310, SNG Cop 310 var.

<sup>381</sup> Prieur 954, 983, 986, 1000v.

<sup>382</sup> Bertolazzi 2018, 71.

According to Dio,<sup>383</sup> Septimius Severus had failed while attacking the city because of his decision to prevent the destruction of the civic cult of Shamash, who had a great temple dedicated in the center of the city.<sup>384</sup> The same god had intervened during Trajan's attack against the city, always according to the historian.<sup>385</sup> As Clare Rowan wisely points out, the use of Trajan's iconographic type of Sol by Septimius Severus might be a choice underlining the connection between the Severans and Trajan himself.<sup>386</sup> Legends of coins from the city bear the title "Hatra of the sun-god",<sup>387</sup> since the city had been dedicated to this deity, which is shown by the presence of the legend *htr' dsms*,<sup>388</sup> and the city itself was named, again on coinage, city of the sun.<sup>389</sup> The presence of Shamash in Hatra and his preeminent role in the pantheon of the city show how the cult was fervent in the city. Not only, but the use of Shamash also under coinage of other emperors, as for example under the reign of Elagabalus,<sup>390</sup> suggests on one hand a willing to show continuity with the tradition, on the other a syncretistic approach of the Severans towards Eastern cults. The predominance of the sun cult in Hatra, though, does not mean that the solar cult was the main religion also in the nearby provinces. In fact, Shamash is a different deity than the Syrian Elagabal, who did not present solar attributes and he was not predominant in Emesa, where the cult had the main worship, nor in other cities. The sun deities of Palmyra and Edessa also differ from this god. The presence of Shamash should therefore be explained with the connection with Trajan, and Severans' interests in Near East; the combination of the deity with the eagle on coins might also imply a direct connection with the rulers' tradition, since the same iconographical type is used under the reign of Hadrian,<sup>391</sup> and the use will be continued, after Caracalla, by Macrinus, under whom it is possible to find the same representation<sup>392</sup> in Syrian coinage from Emesa.

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<sup>383</sup> Dio 75.12, but the account is also narrated in Her. 3.9.3-5. In Dio's account the historian underlines also the incompetence and lack of skills of Syrians; check also Her. 2.10.7 for this topic.

<sup>384</sup> Hoyland 2001, 77.

<sup>385</sup> Dio 68.31.

<sup>386</sup> Rowan 2012, 244.

<sup>387</sup> Healey 2009, 16.

<sup>388</sup> Dijkstra 1995, 172.

<sup>389</sup> Kaizer 2008, 35.

<sup>390</sup> Teixidor 1979, 68.

<sup>391</sup> SNGCop 232.

<sup>392</sup> Prieur 961, 975, 989, 1004, 1015.

In the mints emitted during the reign of Caracalla the portrayal of sun god is abundant, and it shows particularly striking features. *Sol* is presented as standing naked (or with chlamys draped over chest and over his left arm)<sup>393</sup>, radiate, holding orb and spear<sup>394</sup> or with upraised right hand and holding the globe<sup>395</sup> or again, always on the verso, it is possible to find the depiction of the draped bust of *Sol*;<sup>396</sup> in other types, a radiate *Sol* drives galloping the quadriga on the left,<sup>397</sup> holding reins<sup>398</sup> and whip,<sup>399</sup> in some other cases, the deity appears standing and holding the whip and raising the right hand.<sup>400</sup> The same feature of the god standing with one raised hand is displayed in a coin issued in Nikopolis-ad-Mestum, in Thrace,<sup>401</sup> while in a mint<sup>402</sup> from Leukas-Claudia in Syria the god presents interesting characterization, as he is depicted holding the globe while facing the quadriga, an unusual depiction in the solar iconography, since commonly, also in the successive coinage related to the upcoming Severan emperors, the deity drives the quadriga from one-sided view. It is striking the similarity with a mint from Tavium,<sup>403</sup> where Septimius Severus, instead of *Sol*, is now depicted driving slow a quadriga to the right, holding a patera and an eagle-tipped sceptre. As for the element of the eagle, in the coinage of the emperor Caracalla is portrayed in many different ways, and in some cases recalling a more traditional fashion. In fact, eagle is tipped on the sceptre of the sovereign while he drives the quadriga<sup>404</sup> or while he is standing left in walking quadriga,<sup>405</sup> and in other mints the bird is connected with the god Jupiter, standing at his foot while he is holding Victory and sceptre.<sup>406</sup> The animal also appears in its

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<sup>393</sup> RIC 264d.

<sup>394</sup> RIC 30a, 30b, 39b, 40, 55var, 141, 264a, 264b, 264c.

<sup>395</sup> RIC 281a, 281b, 293var.

<sup>396</sup> RIC 163.

<sup>397</sup> RIC 282e, 282f, 294c, 543var.

<sup>398</sup> RIC 265c.

<sup>399</sup> RIC 265d, 294var.

<sup>400</sup> RIC 293d, 293 e-f,

<sup>401</sup> Moushmov 4050.

<sup>402</sup> Winsemann 1637.

<sup>403</sup> Burstein 1040

<sup>404</sup> RIC 87a, 210.

<sup>405</sup> RIC 104.

<sup>406</sup> RIC 200, 240, 260a, 260b, 260v, 277b, 277c, 541a, 559a, 568b.

ancient symbolism, in a coin<sup>407</sup> where Fides, standing left, holds a standard and a legionary eagle; this feature is shown also in other mints.<sup>408</sup> Taking in analysis Caracalla's use of the eagle in the coinage of the provinces, this image is sometimes in connection with Zeus.<sup>409</sup> The coinage of Aelia Capitolina is quite peculiar, because the bird is represented in the whole size, with wreath in beak and standing, with some decorative elements: a vine leaf<sup>410</sup> or a cantharus;<sup>411</sup> in other cases, the same iconography is respected while the bottom elements between the legs of the bird change, as the case of Ake-Ptolemais, in Phoenicia where, below the eagle, caps of the Dioscuri are displayed;<sup>412</sup> in some cases. In the coinage of other provinces, the use of the animal reflects a more direct connection with the emperor, that is the case when on verso eagle is standing facing, with its head on the right, while holding wreath in its beak,<sup>413</sup> and in some example from Antioch, in Syria, a star is portrayed between its legs,<sup>414</sup> or a crescent with horns upwards, as it appears in the coinage of Arados in Phoenicia.<sup>415</sup> In a coin from Carrhae<sup>416</sup> the star appears on the left, while the crescent is still displayed between the legs. The animal still makes his appearance in other coins of other

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<sup>407</sup> RIC 213.

<sup>408</sup> RSC 18a.

<sup>409</sup> This is the case of a coin struck in Adana, Cilicia (SNG Tahberer 70) where Zeus Nicephorus is seated left, while holding Nike and sceptre, and an eagle sits at his left foot, which has similarities with a coin struck in Dium, Macedonia (Moushmov 6185); in another mint from Adramyteion, Mysia (Fritze 145) it appears a cult image of Artemis Ephesia facing, with supports, Zeus on right, standing facing, head left, holding eagle and sceptre; again Zeus Lydios is depicted holding eagle with wings spread on right hand and sceptre in left in a mint from Bagis, in Lydia (SNG vA 2916). Another example of the combination eagle-Zeus Lydios comes from Attaleia, in Lydia (Waddington 4881), which shows Septimius Severus standing left, holding patera and sceptre, facing Zeus Lydios standing right, holding eagle and sceptre, and an altar between them; this case is also interesting because it highlights the religious component of the dynasty, and their bond with one of the most ancestral and long-established deities of the pantheon. There is a similar depiction in a drachm from Alexandria, Egypt (Matthies 286), but in this context eagle is on a pedestal in the right field. A further case is represented by Serdica, Thrace, where Zeus appears on coinage (Golyama Hoard 7) seated left, holding patera and sceptre, and the eagle is at his left foot.

<sup>410</sup> Hendin 815cf, Prieur 1617.

<sup>411</sup> Prieur 1635.

<sup>412</sup> Prieur 1222, 1223. Caps of Dioscuri appear below or between eagle's legs also in one mint struck in Tripolis (Bellinger 257) and another one from Tripolis or Ake-Ptolemais (Bellinger 259).

<sup>413</sup> For example, the coinage from Antioch, Syria (Bellinger 9, Bellinger 18, Bellinger 25, Prieur 214, Prieur 226, Prieur 228).

<sup>414</sup> Prieur 229, 235, 244.

<sup>415</sup> Prieur 1261, TLA 110710.

<sup>416</sup> Bellinger 159.

provinces, in some cases with an unusual iconography,<sup>417</sup> but still presenting a strict connection with the emperor and/or Jupiter; the presence, on some mints, of a thunderbolt,<sup>418</sup> as the case, among others, of Markianopolis,<sup>419</sup> accentuates the connection with Zeus/Jupiter, who is depicted in other mints from the same province.<sup>420</sup> A striking change of depicted motifs occurs in Emesa, where a new element emerges, that is the baetyl, the sacred stone of the city. Even though the sacred stone arrived to the capital with the emperor Elagabalus, being brought back to the Syrian city after the emperor's death, according to Herodian,<sup>421</sup> the element is present already in the previous coinage, as shown in Emesan mints struck under the reign of Caracalla, where an eagle is perched on the sacred black stone,<sup>422</sup> on another mint,<sup>423</sup> eagle appears as ornament of the stone, set on rectangular base and flanked by two parasols or religious standards, contained in the hexastyle temple of Emesa. From the same city, as previously observed, coinage shows connection with eagle and the sun god Shamash. Again, this deity shows up in Julia Domna's coins from Emesa, in association with eagle,<sup>424</sup> while the altar of *Elagabal* and the flaming temple, alone, appear in other coinage under the same period.<sup>425</sup> The same association eagle-Shamash is present under Macrinus, where either this deity or Helios are depicted between eagles' legs.<sup>426</sup> The deliberate choice of using either Helios or Shamash is meaningful. In fact, this usage is proof of the possibility of association of eagle with different deities recalling the solar element, and in this aspect it is significant the example of several emissions from Phoenicia where the animal is also connected with

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<sup>417</sup> This is the case of a mint struck in Mylasa, Caria (BMC 37), under the reign of Caracalla and Geta, where on the recto the bust of the two emperors is depicted, Caracalla is laureate, draped and cuirassed on the right, facing the bare headed, draped and cuirassed bust of Geta which appears on the left. On the verso, the statue of Zeus Osogoa standing on the right, holding trident and eagle, while facing the statue of Zeus Labraundos, standing on the left, holding double-axe and spear.

<sup>418</sup> This element, in combination with the eagle, is present in the traditional coinage, as shown in the mints struck in Egypt under Augustus (Roman Alexandria, Emmett 1, 30-28 BC; still from Alexandria, Milne 1 and RPC 5001).

<sup>419</sup> Moushmov 443.

<sup>420</sup> Moushmov 433.

<sup>421</sup> Her. 6, 6.

<sup>422</sup> BMC 13, Mionnet 608.

<sup>423</sup> BMC 15.

<sup>424</sup> Prieur 978, 980, 982.

<sup>425</sup> BMC 9, BMC 10, Mionnet 599.

<sup>426</sup> Prieur 961 (Helios), Prieur 975, Prieur 989, Prieur 1004, Prieur 1015 (Shamash).

Melqart,<sup>427</sup> the Phoenician god known as Heracles/ Hercules in Graeco-Roman tradition, a deity with which Commodus had tied a particular connection, followed by Septimius Severus, and maybe encouraging the religious policy of the emperor Elagabalus.<sup>428</sup> The coinage struck by Romans in Phoenicia from the II century BC<sup>429</sup> up to the III century<sup>430</sup> shows a continuity of the usage of Melqart. This deity was considered *comes* of the emperor; in particular way he appears in these features since Commodus,<sup>431</sup> who bestowed with the representation of the military power and value upon the deity, so that Hercules appears as *victor*, *Invictus*<sup>432</sup> or also *triumphalis*.<sup>433</sup> *Hercules Invictus* had a temple<sup>434</sup> near the *Ara Maxima* in Rome; he also appears in a tondo, in a relief from the II century representing the emperor Hadrian sacrificing to him, the same tondo which is to be found in the triumphal arch of Constantine in Rome, reused.<sup>435</sup> Here is underlined the descendance from Hercules; also, the deity is used as protector and at the same time representant of the imperial family, and emperor's military successes. The use of the epithet *Invictus* for Hercules might have been also a mistake, generated by the confusion with the use of the epithet *Victor*; at least this seems the case of *Allifae*'s calendar, compiled after 17, where the two epithets were overlapped and used with the same meaning.<sup>436</sup> As previously observed,<sup>437</sup> Commodus had given a particular attention to the deity, together with Janus, Jupiter and Sol.<sup>438</sup> Fondness of one emperor for one or some limited deities is not uncommon, as in the Roman history Apollo appears to be the favorite of Augustus and Nero; Dionysos, Hercules and Serapis are the most prevailing gods for Septimius Severus, while Commodus shares his predilection for Hercules with Postumus and

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<sup>427</sup> Melqart was very well known to the Romans; see Her. 2.44

<sup>428</sup> Hekster 1974, 193.

<sup>429</sup> BMC 50, BMC 63, BMC 65, among many other examples.

<sup>430</sup> At least BMC 492, which shows how still under the reign of Gallienus the same iconography is respected.

<sup>431</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* 1972, 87.

<sup>432</sup> Hercules Invictus appears in a dedication from 149 (CIL VI 327).

<sup>433</sup> Chirassi Colombo 1979, 667.

<sup>434</sup> The construction of the temple began during Scipio Aemilianus's first censorship, in 142 BC. The dedication was properly addressed to a Hercules "hero" rather than "god", underlining Hercules' human nature and his triumphant aspect (Torelli 2006, 588).

<sup>435</sup> Bernstein 1999, 126.

<sup>436</sup> Cecamore 2002, 102.

<sup>437</sup> See, in the previous chapter, the discussion about imperial religious trends.

<sup>438</sup> Hekster 1974, 99.

Maximianus.<sup>439</sup> Aurelian, appointed emperor by god, has a particular worship for two deities: Hercules, declared his own “consors”, and Sol Invictus, which appears as *conservator* or *dominus imperii romani*.<sup>440</sup>

The element of the eagle, therefore, had been depicted on coinage in different contexts (alone or in combination with other elements or deities), in various poses (facing standing, at the left foot of a deity, facing left perched on pedestal), and with different symbolic meaning (eagle as: standard of the Roman legions; company of a deity; decorative elements in portrayed temples), or with no meaning at all.<sup>441</sup>

The analysis of coinage under Severan dynasty shows that Septimius Severus and his descendants, maintaining the traditional religious system and adopting an imperial policy which would allow the Empire to remain compact and at the same time preserving power and authority in the provinces, constituted a moment of transition, in the sense that there is a mutation in the philosophical and religious thinking, as well as in the concept of the role of the worshipper in the community. Individuality of faith emerges in the III century,<sup>442</sup> and it is reflected also in the emperor’s approach to the imperial communication. The trend towards monotheism is already present in the Neoplatonism and in Plotinus’ philosophical discourse in *Enneads*, where it is established the idea of One, of a unity which would include and be the origin of other entities or deities.<sup>443</sup> This concept, in the Severan times, lives together with religious syncretism;<sup>444</sup> Septimius Severus had promoted inclusion of different cult practices and compresence of deities originated from disparate social and geographical context.

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<sup>439</sup> Mastrocinque 2014, 321.

<sup>440</sup> Curran 2000, 17.

<sup>441</sup> There are particular cases of provincial coinage where the meaning and the presence of the bird is dubious, as for instance mints associated with Antioch. Here between the I and III centuries production of coins had risen, and eagle appears abundantly on the reverses of silver coins, together with the legend SC; it is unclear though the function of the bird, as well as the abbreviation SC. This might be, however, proof of assimilation of civic coinage produced in other cities nearby, and voluntary inclusion of outer elements into the city.

<sup>442</sup> “Pagan polytheists did not individually become monotheists, but through philosophy and the comparing of religious ideas, by adopting and inventing new cults and learning how to individualize and express religious experience, they transformed ancient religion into a terrain of human experience where much, including monotheism, was possible.” (Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God* 2010, 15)

<sup>443</sup> It is worth saying that Neoplatonists’ concept of the solar cosmology differs from the traditional cult. In fact, in Neoplatonism “the sun takes its place in a cosmic hierarchy under symbolic aspects differing from those relating to its cult as bearing a closer analogy to the real celestial Being” (Evola 1957, 306).

<sup>444</sup> Grant 2013, 74.

Moreover, he himself had made usage of such religious symbols for showing vividly his devotional but also political interests – through the message on coins – and at the same time for endorsing his imperial image. The visual understanding, made at ease by the presence of elements common also in the previous tradition (as for instance the portrait of deities as Zeus and Hercules or the depiction of other elements, one for all the eagle) was also supported by the usage of distinct designations, epithets enduring the information expressed by iconography. In regards of appellations used by the Severan emperors in order to embrace their propaganda, it is particularly striking the use of the term *invictus*.

The epithet, which has shown above had been also given to Jupiter or Hercules, now it refers to a new deity, namely *Elagabal*. However, presence on non-literary evidence attesting the compresence of a deity with Helios or the solar element is not brand-new. Moreover, compresence of a deity with *Sol Invictus* is not unusual, as it is shown by two inscriptions. The first one, dated 151-250,<sup>445</sup> is a dedication to Sol Invictus made by Marcus Ulpus Chresimus, priest of Jupiter Dolichenus: Soli Invicto / pro salute Imp(eratorum) / et Genio n(umeri) eq(uitum) sing(ularium) / eorum M(arcus) Ulpus / Chresimus sace[r(dos)] / Iovis Doliche[ni] / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) l(aetus) [m(erito)]. Here Marcus Ulpus Chresimus, *sacerdos* of Jupiter Dolichenus, dedicates to Sol Invictus; reference to Sol is dubious, since it is uncertain if the term indicates the official cult of Sol or the Mithraic Sol Invictus, but it is more likely to designate the non-Mithraic Sol cult.<sup>446</sup> The second inscription,<sup>447</sup> from Lambaesis in Numidia, accomunates Sol Invictus with Jupiter Dolichenus, unfortunately without giving further information: I(ovi) O(ptimo) D(olicheno) / Soli Invict(o) / Felix ar(morum) / cus(tos) leg(ionis) III Aug(ustae).

The epithet, which appears to be of dubious origins, as the Oriental provenance might not be proven by evidence, was again in fashion since Commodus and Caracalla, and until 324 it kept the usage in reference to the emperors.<sup>448</sup> The usage of *Sol Invictus* in combination with Elagabal, on the other hand, becomes consistent since the advent of the emperor Marcus

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<sup>445</sup> CIL 6, 31181.

<sup>446</sup> Speidel 1978, 29, *contra* Halsberghe 1972, 108.

<sup>447</sup> AE 1957, 88.

<sup>448</sup> Hijmans 1996, 124.



Aurelius Antoninus, as well known in the *Historia Augusta* as *Varius*,<sup>449</sup> namely the emperor Elagabalus.<sup>450</sup>

The appearance of the solar element during the reign of the emperor Elagabalus is not a novelty, and it is known that Baal could also have characteristics to be in connection with the sun.<sup>451</sup> The import of an Oriental deity is also not new, in particular from the Arab culture, and the spread of the cult of Elagabal might have represented a peak among the contributions from this area of the Empire.<sup>452</sup> This deity had acquired an important role under the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and even though, as previously discussed, the conical black stone of Emesa appears in previous coinage, it makes his presence in Rome just with *Varius*, who brings the baetyl in the Capital. The emperor identifies himself with the deity, and it takes the same name; coins struck bear the image of the emperor and legends name him as SACERDOS AMPLISSIMVS DEI SOLIS ELAGABALI and INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG(ustus),<sup>453</sup> underlining a change of direction in the choice of the emperor's tutelar deity: in fact the emperor immediately install himself in Rome, after the nomination, as highest priest of the Emesene cult, a maneuver probably planned by the family of the emperor, rather than by the emperor himself,<sup>454</sup> considering also his young age. This action could not be interpreted by the Romans as hostile or impious, as the cult was already known and, in the provinces, soldiers were worshipping the Emesene god before its arrival in the *Urbs*. It is also interesting the fact that the deity was present in cities where the emperor has never been, like Alexandria and Aelia Capitolina,<sup>455</sup> and this shows that the cult spread autonomously, independently than ruler's imposition, and that, as also shown previously in regards of the epigraphic material related to Elagabal, there was no opposition to this belief. In particular, two examples from Aelia Capitolina show the sacred stone of Emesa, either carried on a

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<sup>449</sup> Hist. Aug, *Vita Hel.* 1.1: Vitam Heliogabali Antonini, qui Varius etiam dictus est, numquam in litteras misissem, ne quis fuisse Romanorum principem sciret, nisi ante Caligulas et Neronas et Vitellios hoc idem habuisset imperium.

<sup>450</sup> The designation *Heliogabalus* has never been used to identify the emperor; therefore, it appears that the appellative might be a Greek form of the name; see also Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 6.

<sup>451</sup> Bailey 1932, 194.

<sup>452</sup> Shahid 1984, 46.

<sup>453</sup> Martin 1998, 92.

<sup>454</sup> Kemezis 2014, 74-75.

<sup>455</sup> Rowan 2012, 185.

facing quadriga,<sup>456</sup> or drawn by.<sup>457</sup> The quadriga reveals a specific religious function in relation with the emperor,<sup>458</sup> but also with the deity: in fact, coinage from Sardes, bearing the name of the magistrate Sulpicius Hermophilos, portrays Helios naked and radiate, facing a quadriga and holding a statuette of Kore in his left hand and raising his right hand; in the field a crescent and a star.<sup>459</sup>

Helios on chariot is an element which will be found also later, as it is shown in the arch of Constantine, where Sol appears in a medallion in a quadriga, rising from the sea.<sup>460</sup> However, the same iconography is attested during the reign of Commodus: a medallion, dated 190/191, depicts on its reverse Sol radiate, while mounting quadriga. This evidence is interesting because the sun god, which always makes his appearance beardless, here carries the beard, and the image was probably meant to be identified with the emperor.<sup>461</sup> The emperor Elagabalus, following the tradition of his predecessor, appears on coins as well disguised as a deity; there are mints struck in the years 221-222, showing him in the features of the god Hercules. The deity is recognizable by the fact that he is holding a club or a cypress branch,<sup>462</sup> and in the upper left field of the same reverse is portrayed, in many cases, a star<sup>463</sup>. Also, in the provinces the portrait of Hercules is very well spread, as it is visible in minting from Blaundos,<sup>464</sup> Gordus Julia<sup>465</sup> and Saitta<sup>466</sup> in Lydia; Germe in Mysia;<sup>467</sup> Laodikeia ad Mare in Syria,<sup>468</sup> where in some cases<sup>469</sup> Herakles is portrayed together with Dionysos, recalling some coinage, struck under the reign of Septimius Severus, in which Hercules appears displayed together with Bacchus.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> BMC 85.

<sup>457</sup> Meshorer 133a.

<sup>458</sup> Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 80.

<sup>459</sup> Mionnet IV 759.

<sup>460</sup> Curran 2000, 89.

<sup>461</sup> Hekster 1974, 100.

<sup>462</sup> Lueckger 14.

<sup>463</sup> RIC 46, 51, 52, 88, 135, 177, 191, 325, while other types presents no star (RIC 350).

<sup>464</sup> BMC 81.

<sup>465</sup> Mionnet V, 222.

<sup>466</sup> Mionnet Supp. VII, 416 .

<sup>467</sup> Waddington 7037.

<sup>468</sup> BMC 105,

<sup>469</sup> SNGCop 373.

The god is also portrayed in mints struck in Markianopolis<sup>471</sup> and Assaria of Tomis,<sup>472</sup> Moesia Inferior; Diassarion of Nicaea, Bithynia,<sup>473</sup> Nikopolis ad Istrum,<sup>474</sup> Philippopolis, Thrace.<sup>475</sup>

It is worth of a particular attention the case of Perinthos, in Thrace, where in different medallions Herakles appear is depicted in different iconographies: with a cloak flowing out behind him, while he is grasping the antlers of the Cerynean Hind and pinning it down with his knee in its back,<sup>476</sup> naked and front standing, looking right, while he carries a lionskin on his left arm and he is resting on club with a serpent-entwined tree at his side;<sup>477</sup> dressed with a lionskin over his shoulder and carrying the Erymanthian boar on his shoulders,<sup>478</sup> holding the characteristic club and grasping the hair of an Amazon on the back of a horse, while he is holding a shield.<sup>479</sup>

The most interesting case from Perinthos, though, is represented by a medallion<sup>480</sup> which shows the deity while sacrificing with patera above a lighted altar and holding club and lionskin; on the same side, in the upper right field, it is portrayed an eagle. The bird is portrayed above the right hand of the god. A similar iconographical type of Herakles can be seen in a denarius,<sup>481</sup> showing the emperor disguised as Hercules, in front of an altar and holding the club, traditional attribute of the deity. The embodiment of this particular god might refer to the usage of the deity made by the emperor Commodus, who had been also

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<sup>470</sup> RIC 661 var , 669, 762, 764a but also SNGCop 428var, which is though dubious. There are also another mints (RIC 25, 257, Cohen 120), always from the reign of Septimius Severus, showing Hercules with Liber.

<sup>471</sup> Varbanov 1391 (here appears though only the club of the god, as symbol of the deity), Varbanov 1611 var.

<sup>472</sup> Moushmov 2078, Varbanov 5202.

<sup>473</sup> RecGen 562.

<sup>474</sup> Varbanov 4033.

<sup>475</sup> Varbanov 1723.

<sup>476</sup> Moushmov 4620.

<sup>477</sup> Moushmov 4621.

<sup>478</sup> Varbanov 387.

<sup>479</sup> Varbanov 398.

<sup>480</sup> Moushmov 4619.

<sup>481</sup> RIC IV.2 Heliogabalus.

shown on coinage as Hercules<sup>482</sup> and, according to *Historia Augusta*,<sup>483</sup> had been presented himself in the god's attributes, wearing female garments and *leonté*. Elagabalus would have made use of this practice probably in order to show a connection with the traditional Roman religion and with his descendance, but not, in my opinion, with the purpose of justifying "his uncanny behavior".<sup>484</sup> In fact, it is evident how importance is focused on the religious depiction of the god, and consequently of the emperor. The same iconography of the emperor Elagabalus presented as Hercules/Herakles appears also in other mints, with small differences in regards of secondary symbols depicted: in a denarius from Rome or Antioch,<sup>485</sup> for instance, the emperor is standing left while holding the patera and a club, with a bull at his foot left, but there is no altar in the scene; in a sestertius from Rome,<sup>486</sup> all the elements are presents except the star. The latter appears very often in the symbology Emperor/Hercules, always on the upper right side of the sovereign, above his right hand;<sup>487</sup> if it is accepted the hypothesis that this symbol might represent the sun, then it is explained how not only the emperor Elagabalus promoted other cults different than his Emesene one, which would be also shown by two inscriptions which attests religious practices in honor of Hercules during his reign,<sup>488</sup> but how he continued and endured the syncretism already present under Commodus, then boosted by Septimius Severus and his successors until him. Even though the element of the star might dubiously refer directly to the sun god, being the symbol present also in other contexts, as shown above, the presence of the epithet *Sol Invictus Elagabal*, under the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, attests that these three elements – *Sol*, *Invictus* and *Elagabal* constitute a triad; the third element, *Elagabal*, a Syrian cult of Emesene origins (worshipped in form of baetyl, whose cult was already known in Rome before the emperor's rise)<sup>489</sup> makes his appearance with an old religious symbol of the Roman tradition, *Sol*, which was worshipped by Romans with the appellative of *Indiges* at least since Titus Tatius and

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<sup>482</sup> Gnechi 21, Gnechi II, 32 var, Gnechi II, 33, RIC 221, RIC 253, Sear 5687.

<sup>483</sup> HA, Comm. 9,6.

<sup>484</sup> Mastrocinque 2014, 328.

<sup>485</sup> Lueckger 14.

<sup>486</sup> RIC 350.

<sup>487</sup> See note 365.

<sup>488</sup> CIL VI 323, 31162. See also Mastrocinque 2014, 329.

<sup>489</sup> Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 168-169.

linked to the *Aurelii*.<sup>490</sup> The epithet *Invictus*, which was used by emperors and attested in Rome from the III century BC, remained a standard title used by emperors until 324.<sup>491</sup>

Emperor's Elagabalus religious policy seemed aim to a powerful representation of the emperors, who was endorsed by the solar deity, presenting imperial and divine attributes. The formula *Sol Invictus Elagabal*, which might have been mistaken for a new powerful deity coming from East, as previous scholarship thought,<sup>492</sup> could have been instead the emperor's attempt to create a unique form of communication, which citizens in the capital and also in the provinces would be able to comprehend. Indeed, non-literary evidence shows how the designation was well received and accepted, and how the cult of Elagabal was spread. Impersonating the deity itself, and acquiring in fact the own's god appellation, the emperor was the direct representant of his cult, and for this reason he was invested with the title of *Sol* and *Invictus*; the cult object, the baetyl, appears on the coinage verso to better describe the message presented on the recto, but at the same time to enforce the emperor's policy as well and his religious and imperial propaganda. This programme did not contrast previous political reforms, and this message is underlined on the coinage produced under his brief and yet intense empire.

Furthermore, respect for the traditional religious practices of the Romans is shown by the fact that Elagabalus, right after having acquired power, had himself immediately coopted into the Roman priestly *collegium* of Fratres Arvales, a very ancient religious order which was active in the Rome even since Romulus, according to Plinius the Elder, who narrates the legend about the foundation of the *collegium* in his work.<sup>493</sup> This priestly order is well attested throughout the Roman empire also in epigraphy at least until the IV century;<sup>494</sup> more specifically, record of their rituals on inscriptions ceased to appear after the reign of Gordian III (238-44).<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> S. E. Hijmans 1996, 117.

<sup>491</sup> S. E. Hijmans 1996, 124.

<sup>492</sup> See, in particular, Halsberghe 1972.

<sup>493</sup> Plin., Nat. Hist. 18.2.6.

<sup>494</sup> For the abundant epigraphic sources related to the existence of the order of Fratres Arvales, which is not possible to discuss here, see Scheid 1998.

<sup>495</sup> Gradel 2002, 193.

Even though literary sources fail to mention the emperor's cooptation into the *collegium*,<sup>496</sup> this ritual took place, as witnessed by a *Praecatio cooptationis*, found in the same table of the well-known *carmen* of the Fratres: *quod b(onum) felix f(austum) fort[unatum]que siti imp(eratori) Caes(ari) divi Mag(ni) Antonini fil(io) divi Severi nep(oti) M. Aurelio Antonino pio felici Aug(usto) p(ontefici) m(aximo) tr(ibunicia) pot(estate) co(n)s(uli) p(atri) p(atriciae) proco(n)s(uli), et Iuliae Maesae Aug(ustae) aviae Aug(usti) n(ostri), tot[i]que domo divin(ae) eor(um), senatui populoq(ue) Rom(ano) Quiritib(us), fr[a]tr(ibus) Arval(ibus), parentib(us), liberis coniugibusque nostris, fratrem Arvalem [ex s(enatus) c(onsulto)? domin(um) n(ostrum)] imp(eratorem) Caes(arem) M. Aure[llium A]ntoninum pium felicem Aug(ustum) collegam nobis cooptamus fel(iciter).*<sup>497</sup> The decision of the emperor to enter in this particular religious order might have been motivated by the fact that Elagabalus tried to continue an ideal cultic *trait d'union* with other beliefs, maintaining at the same time his Emesene god as a reflection of his own power. The lack of literary evidences in regard of this ritual (about Elagabalus' cooptation there is a further epigraphic evidence,<sup>498</sup> dated 218, which attests that the acceptance of the emperor had probably been done *supra numerum*)<sup>499</sup> shows that ancient historiography aimed to rather focus on the emperor's excesses and weaknesses, transferred and mixed in the accounts with the emperor's religion. However, use of specific symbols on coinage and information gathered from inscriptions reveal an acute and strikingly effective language, which would not, and could not, be understood as intent of the emperor to impose a monotheistic cult in Rome.<sup>500</sup> If during the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus it emerges a sort of *reduction ad unum*, this regards entirely the emperor's persona, and his way of ruling the empire. Identifying himself with the Syrian god and incorporating in this context the solar element with the use of the epithet *Invictus*, Elagabalus aims to gather together a plurality of meanings, he as an invincible emperor, endorsed by *Sol*, and at the same time showing his predilection for the Emesene religion, of which he was the high priest.

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<sup>496</sup> Naerebout 2009, 155.

<sup>497</sup> Paladino 1988, 61.

<sup>498</sup> CIL VI, 2104 b.

<sup>499</sup> Scheid, *Le collège des frères arvaux. Études prosopographique du recrutement (69-304)* 1990, 123.

<sup>500</sup> "Mars constituted 4% of the silver coinage in the emperor's name, Sol 8% and Jupiter 2% [...]. Though both Sol and Jupiter could have been associated with Elagabal through interpretation Romana, their presence on the emperor's coinage suggests that Elagabalus did not intend to usurp or destroy the existing Roman pantheon." (Rowan 2012, 207)

After Elagabalus' death, his successor Severus Alexander placed back the gods statues to their original place, and sent back the baetyl to Emesa, as Herodian informs us<sup>501</sup>; the impact that the religious reforms of the emperor Elagabalus had can be seen on coinage, where it is possible to detect a disappearance of the god Elagabal on mints, after 222, with exception of coins struck under Uranius Antoninus in the year 253/254<sup>502</sup>, from Emesa, where the black stone appears depicted inside of the hexastyle temple, ornamented with a facing eagle, dedicated to the deity. However, while the baetyl does not constitute anymore object of religious interest for the extant rulers after the year 222, the iconography related to *Sol* still persisted, presenting though some notable differences.

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<sup>501</sup> Her., 6.1.3.

<sup>502</sup> BMC 24.

### Chapter III - Sunrises and sunsets

*My vision is clear*

*My mind paves the road I ride*

*I don't need my eyes*

*When it's all dark outside*

*I don't know*

*What I see I believe*

*And I know where I belong*

*Cos I worship the sun*

Allah Las – *Worship the sun (Worship the sun, Innovative Leisure 2014)*



### III.1 One of a kind

Under the reign of Severus Alexander (222-235), the sun god appears often on coins, although it is noticeable a change of direction in his religious plan, in the sense that, in order to endorse his power, Alexander makes use now of a different deity. *Sol* appears on the verso of mints represented standing towards the left, while holding whip<sup>503</sup> or globe<sup>504</sup> and raising his right hand; from two examples from Amaseia, in Pontus, comes an interesting and distinct iconography: on those mints,<sup>505</sup> dated 228, it is depicted on the verso an altar upon which an eagle appears, while standing facing; above, Sol is portrayed in facing the quadriga, while holding probably a whip, and a tree is portrayed to left of the altar. The motif of *Sol* on quadriga might have been reminiscence of coinage struck under the emperor Elagabalus. As a matter of fact, under the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *quadriga* appears on coins in connection with the emperor, who is depicted while driving it<sup>506</sup>; in many cases, it is portrayed with above the Emesene baetyl, the conical black stone representing his deity Elagabal.<sup>507</sup> Not only, but on other coins dated under the same reign it is possible to see also other deities depicted while driving the chariot, such as Hades,<sup>508</sup> Apollo Tyrimneos,<sup>509</sup> or Helios.

As for the latter, in a coin<sup>510</sup> minted in Sardis, Helios is represented on a quadriga, depicted with in the same exact iconography as presented under Severus Alexander; this might suggest that the new emperor, even though keeping distances from his predecessor, as historical accounts inform us, was aware of the religious and ideological thread which Elagabalus and

<sup>503</sup> RIC 101, 112, 114c, 120, 123, 125, 500, 511, 513, 525, 531, 535, 536, 537, 538, 540, 541, 542, 543.

<sup>504</sup> RIC 102, RIC 109, 503, 515, 516, 528, 530,

<sup>505</sup> BMC 39, RecGen 104.

<sup>506</sup> RIC 175, 308, 311, 319, 337, LindgrenI 2188 (from Leukas, Syria), Moushmov 1394 (from Nikopolis ad Istrum), BMC 412v (from Tyre, Phoenicia).

<sup>507</sup> RIC 61, 144, 195, BMC 85 and Meshorer 133a (from Aelia Capitolina), Meshorer 149 (from Laodikeia ad Mare),

<sup>508</sup> Rosenberger 27, from Samaria, Sebaste. Here Hades is driving a quadriga and restraining a struggling Kore/Persephone while Eros is portrayed flying right above the horses. An analog iconography is represented in a medallion from Thyateira, Lydia (Mionnet IV, 974). On a third evidence, instead, from Tyre, Phoenicia (BMC Sup 6), Hades is shown while driving the quadriga and pulling Persephone on chariot.

<sup>509</sup> NAC 40, 786, from Thyateira.

<sup>510</sup> See notes 248 and 360.

his dynasty had initiated, and therefore his political programme would have consequently and naturally followed Severans' policy. Probably the emperor's iconographic choice was more in line with Elagabalus' predecessor Macrinus (217-218), under which coin minted had shown the emperor on quadriga, endorsed by Victory, who crowns the ruler while standing behind him<sup>511</sup> or in some other cases the emperor alone on the chariot;<sup>512</sup> Macrinus appears again on quadriga, together with his son Diadumenian who had been appointed by him co-emperor in May 218, on two mints.<sup>513</sup> There is particularly interesting coinage, struck under the same period, which recall the imagery used again by Severus Alexander: Helios on quadriga appears in three mints from Leukas in Syria,<sup>514</sup> where the god is depicted facing standing and holding scepter and globe; this deity is portrayed again in a coin from Tarsos, Cilicia,<sup>515</sup> though in this case Helios is holding a whip while driving quadriga from left.

Severus Alexander, if from one side is aware of religious changes and mutation of ritual practices, in Rome and in the provinces, from the other is willing to maintain probably distances from his cousin Elagabalus;<sup>516</sup> in fact, as evidence shows the emperor choose to replace the Emesene deity, which had been prominent under the ruling of his predecessor, replacing now the Syrian god with a proper Roman deity. Already before Elagabalus, under Macrinus abundant coinage witnesses the still importance of Jupiter in the representation of the power, and of the emperor's *persona*: depiction of Jupiter is often depicted on mintage,<sup>517</sup> in which also the emperor is shown, portrayed as small figure before the god.<sup>518</sup> Severus Alexander also decides to divert his religious attention towards this deity, installing a temple in Rome dedicated significantly to Jupiter Ultor, the Avenger.<sup>519</sup> In his political programme there is a renewed attention for the senatorial class,<sup>520</sup> and more focus on the situation of the

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<sup>511</sup> RIC 36, 152, 162.

<sup>512</sup> Two examples come from Nikopolis ad Istrum (Moushmov 1254, 1255).

<sup>513</sup> Varbanov 3355 and 3356, again from Nikopolis ad Istrum.

<sup>514</sup> Lindgren II 2187, SGI 2956cf, SNG Switz. 2174.

<sup>515</sup> SNG Lev 1077.

<sup>516</sup> Kemezis 2014, 86.

<sup>517</sup> RIC 2, 15, 17, 28, 72, 73, 119, 136, 154, 185.

<sup>518</sup> RIC 76, 77, 189.

<sup>519</sup> Gradel 2002, 351.

<sup>520</sup> Kemezis 2014, 86. See also Manders 2005, 123.

*Urbs*; on religious matters, the emperor favored Christianity, as her mother Julia Mamaea.<sup>521</sup> The mother also appears on the verso of some hybrid examples, showing a goddess and an imperial woman; Julia Mamaea appears in connection with VENUS VICTRIX, maybe with a military meaning,<sup>522</sup> but she also figures on coins together with other legends. Two hybrids<sup>523</sup> depict on the recto the emperor and his mother, and on the reverse emperor appears standing and holding his sceptre while sacrificing from a patera over a burning tripod altar, while he is crowned by Mars who is holding his shield; on the right, Jupiter is portrayed standing left, naked except for a chlamys over his shoulder, while holding the classic thunderbolt and the sceptre, and an eagle is displayed at his feet; the mints bear the legenda FIDES MILITVM; in other hybrids with different iconography other appellations are indicated, as AEQVITAS PVBLICA<sup>524</sup> and FELICITAS TEMPORVM,<sup>525</sup> and different examples show that not only Jupiter and Mars were depicted, but also other deities, as the Edessan series showing the river god Scyrte and Tyche, which appear both depicted on some coins.<sup>526</sup> Different deities are also appearing in coinage from Markianopolis, Moesia, where mints depict again the emperor and his mother, and on the verso, it is possible to see Herakles,<sup>527</sup> Tyche,<sup>528</sup> Demeter,<sup>529</sup> Dionysos,<sup>530</sup> Nemesis,<sup>531</sup> Apollo,<sup>532</sup> Hygieia<sup>533</sup> and Zeus.<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Shahîd 1984, 46-47.

<sup>522</sup> Manders 2005, 129.

<sup>523</sup> Gneccchi 4, 18.

<sup>524</sup> Jameson 219.

<sup>525</sup> RIC 661.

<sup>526</sup> Babelon 82, BMC 93, BMC 103, BMC 108, BMC 112, BMC 115, SNG Cop 215, SNG Cop 217, SNG Cop 219, SNG Milan 80.

<sup>527</sup> AMNG 1064.

<sup>528</sup> AMNG 1073, Moushmov 748.

<sup>529</sup> Moushmov 739; AMNG 1083 (here the emperor appears though together with Julia Maesa).

<sup>530</sup> Moushmov 740.

<sup>531</sup> Moushmov 747, Varbanov 1834.

<sup>532</sup> Varbanov 1821.

<sup>533</sup> Varbanov 1838.

<sup>534</sup> Moushmov 741.

The latter had already appeared on one tetradrachm from Alexandria,<sup>535</sup> when the emperor was still a Caesar, dated “year 5 of Elagabalus”. The mint shows Zeus Ammon wearing a headdress of horns and solar disk. The same solar symbol appears on a coin<sup>536</sup> struck in Bostra, Arabia, when Alexander was already appointed emperor: the example shows Zeus Ammon, this time busted size, wearing the solar disk.

The sun disk, apart from being a decorative element related to Zeus, is shown also in other contexts, as it is witnessed by an example from Alexandria, in Troas,<sup>537</sup> in which a temple is depicted, and on its pediment, there is a solar disk.

Inside of the temple appears the statue of Apollo as mouse-god, who had appeared in Homer’s Iliad,<sup>538</sup> and he had a central sanctuary dedicated to him in Sminthium.<sup>539</sup> This religious cult was connected with Alexander the Great, who “was blended into a framework of earlier founding legends surrounding the prominent local sanctuary of Apollo Smintheus”;<sup>540</sup> in fact, Alexander also appears depicted under the reign of Commodus, in three evidences always from Alexandria Troas: the first two examples,<sup>541</sup> depicts Alexander riding on horseback while greeting the statue of the god; the third mint,<sup>542</sup> instead, shows him performing a sacrifice above the altar, and on the left the statue of Apollo; above it is depicted an eagle which carries the head of a bull. The deity had appeared in the city consistently since Commodus, but there is coinage attesting the use of a similar iconography in the town also during the reign of Caracalla, under which an interesting coin<sup>543</sup> shows a person not clearly identifiable as Caracalla or Alexander the Great on horseback while galloping and raising his hand at the statue of Apollon Smintheos, which appears on a column. Furthermore, coinage

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<sup>535</sup> Milne 2853.

<sup>536</sup> SNGANS 1224 .

<sup>537</sup> Bellinger A331.

<sup>538</sup> Hom, Il., 1, 3, 9.

<sup>539</sup> Margalith 1994, 39.

<sup>540</sup> Dahmen 2007, 26.

<sup>541</sup> Bellinger A194, A237.

<sup>542</sup> Bellinger A239.

<sup>543</sup> BMC 84.

depicting this deity from the same location is attested under Elagabalus,<sup>544</sup> Julia Paula,<sup>545</sup> and it will appear again in Alexandria, after Severus Alexander, under Volusian (251-53)<sup>546</sup> (in this particular case presents also the portrayal of the eagle flying above the scene, while grasping a bull's head) and under Gallienus (260-268).<sup>547</sup>

In the Troad, earliest attestation of the god on coinage is dated 350-310 BC and it comes from Hamaxitos.<sup>548</sup> The example of usage of Apollo Smintheos, even though is not comparable with the symbolism and the iconography related to Sol, underlines the fact that Severus Alexander's political and religious programme intended to refer to a deep tradition, the ancient cult of Apollo Smintheos, which was well known in the Eastern empire, and it had a long tradition also due to its connection with the figure of Alexander the Great; the conqueror was meant to symbolizing the power and the prestige of the emperor, or in some cases, as seen above for Caracalla, the ruler himself. It is not possible to put in direct relation the depiction of the solar disk in the context of the temple or of the bust of Zeus Ammon with the solar imagery witnessed in his predecessor Elagabalus; however, this example well illustrates how a deity might be employed in serving the emperor's religious propaganda, and to endure his role. As seen above, the emperor also used the image of *Sol*, even though now purged from the elements introduced by his predecessor Elagabalus, and also abandoning its peculiar terminology (as *Sol Invictus* and of course *Sol Invictus Elagabal*). The deity is depicted in its old fashion, and with its traditional attributes, while he chooses another epithet probably more suitable to represent him.

The appellative *Vltor* can be found, under the reign of Severus Alexander, referred exclusively to two deities, Mars and Jupiter. As for Mars, this particular deity was also used by Elagabalus on coinage, under the legenda *Mars Victor*,<sup>549</sup> maybe to celebrate his victory over Macrinus in 218.<sup>550</sup> Severus Alexander recovers the god, which figures significantly in

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<sup>544</sup> BMC 92, SNGCop 147.

<sup>545</sup> Bellinger A321v.

<sup>546</sup> Bellinger A415.

<sup>547</sup> Bellinger, A.446.

<sup>548</sup> BMC 3, Mionnet Supp. V, 357, Mueller 102, Rhousopoulos 3471, SNG Turkey 9, 557, Traite II-2, 2320.

<sup>549</sup> RIC 120, 121, 122, 123, 363.

<sup>550</sup> Manders 2005, 126.

17% of the extant silver coinage struck during his reign;<sup>551</sup> Mars is accompanied by also by the epithet *Victor*,<sup>552</sup> but now the god gains also other appellatives, as *Pacifero*,<sup>553</sup> “peace-bearer”, and *Utor*.<sup>554</sup> This same title was given to Jupiter, who during Elagabalus also had been presented on coins and appeared, in particular in one denarius<sup>555</sup> and on one *antoninianus* dated 219<sup>556</sup> with the legenda CONSEVATORI; it is interesting to notice though that the same appellation appears not in relation with Jupiter, but presented in direct connection with the emperor (CONSERVATOR AVG), on two examples: the first one<sup>557</sup> offers on the reverse the representation of the Emesene cultic stone, shown on quadriga, with an eagle carrying a wreath in its beak, and a star is portrayed on the left field; on the second mint,<sup>558</sup> Sol is depicted in the most traditional iconography, standing and greeting with his right hand, while keeping a whip in the other (also this type present a star, portrayed above the image. This interchangeability of the use of this epithet has a slight change of direction under Severus Alexander, since the title is assigned exclusively to Jupiter, as coinage displays;<sup>559</sup> not only, but on some evidences<sup>560</sup> the small figure of the emperor is represented at the feet of the deity, offering an unequivocal understanding of his religious preferences. Even though the sun deity was present in Severus Alexander’s iconographical setup, he loses those particular designations acquired with Elagabalus, who had made him, and who also made himself *Invictus*, as appears from the legenda INVICTUS SACERDOS AVG.<sup>561</sup> The choice of Severus Alexander to pursue the solar symbolism though explains the willing of the emperor to continue an ideological thread started by Commodus and continued by Septimius Severus and Caracalla, and it is striking the fact that the most prominent presence of the sun god happens right under his emperorship, during which the production of coinage with Sol is

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<sup>551</sup> Rowan 2012, 233.

<sup>552</sup> RIC 157, 162, 584.

<sup>553</sup> RIC 159, 160.

<sup>554</sup> RIC 245, 246, 248, 635, 636, 637, 638.

<sup>555</sup> RIC 91.

<sup>556</sup> RIC 90.

<sup>557</sup> RIC 61.

<sup>558</sup> RIC 63.

<sup>559</sup> RIC 141.

<sup>560</sup> RIC 199, 200, 558.

<sup>561</sup> RIC 88.

without precedents.<sup>562</sup> The most sensible changes are shown in the religious building programme: the conversion of the *Elagabalium* (the temple on the Palatine Hill built by the emperor Elagabalus and dedicated to the Emesene deity) into the temple of Jupiter Ultor is significant; even though it is believed that Jupiter, as avenger, would have been employed as response to Elagabalus's provocation, as also ancient literary evidence displays, it is uncertain that this exact appellation had been used by the emperor in this context. Whether Severus Alexander had replaced the *Elagabalium* in favor of a prior cult of Jupiter Victor or not, archaeological evidences show that no temple was installed before the one dedicated to Elagabal.<sup>563</sup>

Whatever might be the case of the construction of a temple dedicated to an avenging Jupiter, it is true that 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 *Invictus*. After Elagabalus' death, many portraits representing him went destroyed, and at the same time his name got erased from inscriptions and papyri.<sup>564</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>565</sup> Macrinus, Diadumenianus, Elagabalus, Julia Soemias.<sup>566</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

<sup>562</sup> Manders 2005, 137.

<sup>563</sup> Rowan 2009, 128. It is also believed, though (Richardson 1992, 142) that Elagabalus might had rebuilt and enlarged the temple of Jupiter Victor, which had been erected by Q. Fabius Maximus Rullianus, and therefore, according to this hypothesis, the epithet of VLTOR on coinage might indicate so. It seems more likely though, that a temple of Jupiter Victor, or even *Invictus*, was never placed in the site where the *Elagabalium* had been erected (Cecamore 2002, 110). The idea of the existence of a temple in the location of the erection of the temple dedicated to Elagabal is also to be found in Chausson 1995, 763.

<sup>564</sup> Icks 2011, 87.

<sup>565</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>566</sup> Varner 2004, 156.

not justify the cancellation of the memories related to the cult of Elagabal,<sup>567</sup> but it seems rather imposed on the emperor himself.<sup>568</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>569</sup> But also Severus Alexander suffered *damnatio memoriae*, with his mother,<sup>570</sup> a decision imposed by Alexander's successor Maximinus, who had killed him and his mother, slaughtered their friends and put to death those fugitives who made attempt to escape.<sup>571</sup> The emperorship of Severus Alexander had been characterized by regularity and wise administration of the power, according to Cassius Dio, who was first witness during his second consulship, as he informs us.<sup>572</sup> Also, in Herodian's account, the emperor showed benevolence and good deeds, being a stranger to illegality, savagery and murder.<sup>573</sup> But the death of Severus Alexander, due not to religious purposes as also appeared to be the death of his cousin Elagabalus, marks the end of an era constituted by deep and fascinating religious mutations, boosted by a significant imperial propaganda and a strict connection of the emperor with tradition and, therefore, with the gods. Severan dynasty produced an interesting and appealing iconography, through the usage of traditional images at times flanked by new imported elements, communicating a powerful message.

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 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*

<sup>567</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 reverse 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>568</sup> Brent 1999, 31.

<sup>569</sup> Varner 2004, 189-190.

<sup>570</sup> Maximinus' decision had been revoked after the emperor's death.

<sup>571</sup> Her. 6.9.6-7.

<sup>572</sup> 80.2.1.

<sup>573</sup> Her. 6.9.8.



*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>574</sup>

While taking in analysis the coinage struck under Gordian III, in particular, one notices the continuity with the solar symbolism already expressed by the previous emperors. The solar god appears on mints again on quadriga,<sup>575</sup> or in the traditional standing position, holding a whip and/or a globe.<sup>576</sup> But it is with Gallienus, who had ruled in a joint reign with Valerian for some years (253-260), acquiring afterwards the sole reign (260-268), that the presence of the sun deity becomes more frequent. Under his ruling, in fact, is displayed again on coinage the legenda SOLI INVICTO, which after Elagabalus had been abandoned. In particular, two mints,<sup>577</sup> struck under the period of sole reign,<sup>578</sup> bearing this legenda, display Sol holding whip and raising his right hand. This interest for the sun deity is also underlined in *Historia Augusta*,<sup>579</sup> where the emperor's appreciation for this god put him in direct connection with Nero.<sup>580</sup> Furthermore, as it emerges from inscriptions, Gallienus had himself called *Invictus*.<sup>581</sup> It is significative that presence of the solar deity in mints struck under his emperorship overpasses Aurelian's usage of the sun god, a presence which also can be seen in Western

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<sup>574</sup> S. E. Hijmans 1996, 135.

<sup>575</sup> Gnechi 7. Also, from the provinces emerges the same iconography, as witnessed by a mint struck in Leukas-Claudia, Syria (BMC 6), where Sol, holding the globe, is driving facing the quadriga.

<sup>576</sup> RIC 82, 83, 97, 111, 213, 297<sup>o</sup>, 297b.

<sup>577</sup> RIC 620, 658 (this exemplar presents an engraver's error, reporting the legenda GOLLIENVUS AVG).

<sup>578</sup> Another case (RIC 611), presenting similar iconography, is dated under the whole Gallienus' emperorship.

<sup>579</sup> Hist. Aug. *Gall.*, 18.2.

<sup>580</sup> Canepa 2017, 271. Like Nero, according to the writer of the life of Gallienus in *Historia Augusta*, also Gallienus would have had the idea of building a gigantic statue, representing himself in the resemblances of the sun god. The historical value of this passage, though, is generally debated (De Blois 1976, 157).

<sup>581</sup> De Blois 1976, 136. See also Southern 2003, 105.

usurpers, as Regalianus or Postumus, but also it emerges under legitimate emperors like Claudius Gothicus and Quintillus.<sup>582</sup> Furthermore, under Gallienus reappears again on coins also the title *Genius Augusti*<sup>583</sup> and *Genius Populi Romani*,<sup>584</sup> a type which had been present in the latest coinage of Septimius Severus and then disappeared until been reused by Gallienus.<sup>585</sup> Furthermore, the emperor seems to have given the god a special veneration, probably converging towards the principle of “highest deity”, since it is reported that he ordered the construction of a statue, to be built on the top of Esquiline hill, representing himself on a “chariot arrayed as the Sun”.<sup>586</sup>

Although it is not sure the reason of the reemployment of the title *invictus*, it is noticeable the emperor’s policy towards traditional Roman issues, and this is enforced by the presence, on coins, of several deities, often associated with animal symbols, and bearing the legenda *conservator*.<sup>587</sup> Reprise of classical motifs, as the use of traditional epithets in connection with the classical Roman pantheon, means also a continuity with the treatment sun cult had had under the previous rulers. The emperor does not seem to give preponderance to the sun god, as the coinage shows, since all deities are displayed in equal importance, *Sol* included. The same fact that he associated his persona with Jupiter and Hercules, declaring to be protected especially by Apollo, Diana or *Sol*<sup>588</sup> reflects a policy which could guarantee the success of his empire.

The motif of the “undefeated sun” appears again under Victorinus (269-271), who in his brief reign struck coins depicting the sun deity, walking from the left and holding the whip; this well-known imagery is accompanied usually by the legenda *INVICTVS*<sup>589</sup> or also *ORIENS*

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<sup>582</sup> Hijmans 1996, 137.

<sup>583</sup> Alfoeldi Studien, 2; Goebel 1631c; RIC V, 198; RIC VI, 198; RIC 638.

<sup>584</sup> Goebel 703h, RIC 2 (interregnum), Vagi 2425.

<sup>585</sup> Gradel 2002, 194. The title is found also with military connotation, as displayed by the legenda *GENIVS EXERCI* (see for example RIC 199).

<sup>586</sup> Odahl 2010, 29.

<sup>587</sup> Manders, *Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193-284* 2012, 289. This epithet is referring, on mints, directly to the emperor (RIC 632), or in some cases to Apollo (Calico 3469, RIC 262[j], RIC 416), Jupiter (RIC 143[j], RIC 440[j], RIC 210, RIC 486, RIC 608, RIC 641 var), Pietas (RIC 171a).

<sup>588</sup> Southern 2001, 152.

<sup>589</sup> Cunetio 2539, RIC 114.

AVG.<sup>590</sup> A star is again portrayed in the field, as indicating a renewed interest towards the Eastern part of the Empire. The glorification of the sun god in its invincibility proves that the emperor was putting emphasis on the representation of the deity, maintaining that same approach to the supreme being which was adopted by the Severans.<sup>591</sup> As well as the Severan dynasty, also Victorinus showed continuity with tradition and excellency in command; the account of the Thirty Tyrants, contained in the *Historia Augusta*, describe him as military skilled and being *fortissimus* and *optimus*, except for his lustfulness,<sup>592</sup> which also caused him the death.<sup>593</sup> Also, by other historians the emperor is acknowledged favorably, as Eutropius defines him *vir strenuissimus*, who though had fallen into lust and killed for that,<sup>594</sup> the same kind of information is provided by Aurelius Victor.<sup>595</sup> The courage shown by Victorinus in battle had granted him the co-emperorship with Postumus, whom he aided in the fight against Gallienus' troops. Also, Postumus (259/260-268/269) is included in the account of the Thirty Tyrants, celebrated as restorer of peace and beloved by the Roman people;<sup>596</sup> as well as under Gallienus and Victorinus, it is possible to find, under his emperorship, the image of Sol on coins. The deity appears again in his classical pose, standing facing and raising his right hand, in a mint<sup>597</sup> bearing the legenda ORIENS AVG; the same typology had been used by the usurper Regalianus (260), as a mint from Carnuntum displays.<sup>598</sup>

There is an interesting example,<sup>599</sup> minted under the reign of Postumus, showing three radiate and draped busts of Sol, one of which is facing between the other two facing him; the

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<sup>590</sup> RIC 115.

<sup>591</sup> Grant 2013, 49.

<sup>592</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 6.4: De hoc, quod fortissimus fuerit et praeter libidinem optimus imperator, a multis multa sunt dicta.

<sup>593</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 6.3.

<sup>594</sup> *Eutr., Brev.*, 9, 9: Victorinus postea Galliarum accepit imperium, vir strenuissimus, sed cum nimiae libidinis esset et matrimonia aliena corrumperet, Agrippinae occisus est actuarius quodam dolum machinante, imperii sui anno secundo.

<sup>595</sup> *Aur. Vict., De Caes.*, 33.12.

<sup>596</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 3.6: si quidem nimius amor erga Postumum omnium erat in Gallicanorum mente populorum, quod summotis omnibus Germanicis gentibus Romanum in pristinam securitatem revocasset imperium.

<sup>597</sup> Becker, Hill 229. Same symbolism might be found also in RIC 77, RIC 316.

<sup>598</sup> RIC 7.

<sup>599</sup> RIC 18d, bearing the legenda AETERNITAS AVG.

iconography is striking, as the elements displayed would represent the family of the emperor (mother facing, while son and daughter looking at her). This would immediately communicate the viewer how the emperor and his family are devoted to the sun god; not only, but solar attributes, worn by the members of the imperial family, confer *Sol* the role of protector and endorser of the unity of the Empire.<sup>600</sup> Another interesting evidence<sup>601</sup> is an aureus which depicts on the recto the laureate head of the emperor, portrayed together with Hercules, while on verso are portrayed the busts of Sol and Luna. Presence of everlasting symbols, and also sometimes, as in the latter case, reminiscence of Severan motifs, constitute a *trait d'union* which could serve well to sane the crisis of the third century, as after the Severan dynasty several emperors had longed for keeping the power, but had encountered limits in keeping the unity of the reign. Nonetheless, evidences demonstrate how religious impact and worship trends were spread through a pattern appealing for believers from the capital and the provinces. The impact Severans' political and religious propaganda had in the Empire is evident when analyzing the presence of the solar god in Syria under the reigns of Odaenathus (260 ca.- 267/268) and Vabalathus (271-272).

Odaenathus, who bore the *gentilicium* Septimius, as expression of affiliation with Severus, had acquired the title of King of Kings of the East (with the son Herodianus as junior co-emperor, 263-267),<sup>602</sup> being already king of Palmyra (260-267) and Ras of the city (240s-260). Loyalty to Rome was showed by the emperor's choice of mintage, as he had chosen, even after having obtained power, to continue issuing mints in the name of the emperor Gallienus.<sup>603</sup> The court of Gallienus had granted him the title of *corrector totius Orientis*, and the title would correspond to the appellation of "mtqnn' of all the East"; the title "king of

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<sup>600</sup> Worth of interest, in the sense of displaying the emperor as peacekeeper and image of the unity of the Roman Empire, is a coin (RIC 317), carrying the title PACATOR ORBIS and showing on the verso a radiate and draped bust of Sol.

<sup>601</sup> RIC 260.

<sup>602</sup> Such designation can be found as well in two inscriptions. The first one (PAT 0292), dated 271 and therefore produced after the death of the emperor, is a description of the statue of the emperor, designated with titles "king of kings" and "corrector of the whole Orient". The second evidence (PAT 0317, bilingual and presenting heavy corruptions on the Greek part) designates the queen mother as "mother of king of kings", naming her son Vabalathus with the same titles used for Odeanathus (Pairman Brown 2012, 85).

<sup>603</sup> Fowlkes-Childs and Seymour 2019, 256.

kings” instead was unprecedented in Palmyra,<sup>604</sup> while it was well known in the Graeco-Roman tradition, as well in connection with Zeus.<sup>605</sup>

In Palmyra the sun god was worshipped in the features of Malakbel, who appears in an inscription of the III century as *sol sanctissimus*.<sup>606</sup> It is not sure whether the god had a specific temple dedicated to him in the city, as no evidence is extant, even though a passage<sup>607</sup> in *Historia Augusta* refers to a restoration of a temple of Helios by the emperor Aurelian after his troops conquered Palmyra (272), but there is no proof that Malakbel possessed his own temple in the city, and the temple Aurelian restored could actually have been dedicated to the god Shamash.<sup>608</sup> Moreover, as also shown above, the sun cult did not seem predominant in Palmyra, as his role was often challenged by Aglibol, the moon god. However, even though there are no traces of a sanctuary erected for Aglibol nor Malakbel,<sup>609</sup> the pantheon of Palmyra had acquired more importance in the third century and had influenced other forms of cult.

One particular example of the impact religion of this area had in the Orient is represented by the worship of Baalshamîn, representant of the Palmyrene triad together with Malakbel and Aglibol, whose temple had been erected in Palmyra in the year 17 and then enlarged and embellished by the emperor Adrian in 130; the same construction was made even bigger right under Odeanathus. In the East a deity named *Theos Hypsistos* was identified with Baalshamîn; the epithet, which was also used by Jews in connection with Jehovah and appears on inscriptions as *deus aeternus*,<sup>610</sup> occurs in over 375 inscriptions dated from the I century BC up to the IV century, from the East, mainly from Asia Minor, Mediterranean Islands and Black Sea,<sup>611</sup> and it is generally referred either to Hypsistos, Theos Hypsistos or Zeus

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<sup>604</sup> Andrade 2018, 137.

<sup>605</sup> Pairman Brown 2012, 86.

<sup>606</sup> CISem., II, 3903.

<sup>607</sup> Hist. Aug., *Aur.*, 31, 7-9: Templum sane Solis, quod apud Palmyram aquiliferi legionis tertiae cum vexilliferis et draconario et cornicinibus atque liticinibus diripuerunt, ad eam formam volo, quae fuit, reddi. Habes trecentas auri libras de Zenobiae capsulis, habes argenti mille octingenta pondo de Palmyrenorum bonis, habes gemmas regias. Ex his omnibus fac cohonestari templum; mihi et dis immortalibus gratissimum feceris.

<sup>608</sup> Dirven 1999, 169.

<sup>609</sup> Seyrig 1971, 101.

<sup>610</sup> CIL, III, 10321. See also Turcan 1997, 194.

<sup>611</sup> Mitchell 2009, 686.

Hypsistos,<sup>612</sup> but it appears also in connection with Sarapis and Helios, thus not identifying one single god.<sup>613</sup> Even though it is unsure whether the cult of Hypsistos was characterized by being monotheistic, or at an exclusive and predominant belief, it is noticeable the idea of syncretism and tendency towards universality, by the identification of different deities using similar appellations.<sup>614</sup> Usage of this epithet was made by Christians, Jews and Graeco-Roman believers alike, and followers of the god, the so-called Hypsistarians, represents probably the wider phenomenon of pagan monotheism in the ancient world.<sup>615</sup> If this example might indicate a mutation of religion beliefs, inferring a *reduction ad unum*, as also the Neoplatonism and the conception of the One in Plotinus seems to underline, different is the case of the solar worship.

Even though under Odaenathus there is no praedominance of a sun cult a prophecy, contained in the Thirteenth Sybilline Oracle,<sup>616</sup> compares the emperor to a lion, sent by the sun (he is twice indicated in the Oracle as *heliopemptos*, “sent from the sun”)<sup>617</sup>, denominating him as well in the first verses as “the last priest of all”,<sup>618</sup> in order to destroy “the greatest beast”, i.e. Shapur I;<sup>619</sup> in another text, namely the Christian version of the Apocalypse of Elijah,<sup>620</sup> Odaenathus appears as the emperor who will rise from the city of the sun,<sup>621</sup> Palmyra. The imagery of a king sent from the sun is of Egyptian provenience, and it was used for the pharaoh, son of the sun deity.<sup>622</sup> However, the passage might refer instead to Sampsigeramus,

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<sup>612</sup> A temple dedicated to Zeus Hypsistos is still extant in the ancient Thelsea, the modern Al-Dumayr, in Syria (Millar 1993, 317). Another sanctuary erected for the same deity is located in the ancient Dion; inside of the temple was placed an eagle, marble-made, with outstretched wings and its head turned towards the god.

<sup>613</sup> Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God* 2010, 167.

<sup>614</sup> For the identification of the designation of Theos Hypsistos and further evidences of the presence of this worship see Harland 2014, which discusses the birth and the development of this religious phenomenon.

<sup>615</sup> Finkelstein 2018, 35.

<sup>616</sup> The prophecy had actually been written after the events prophesied (Andrade 2018, 137).

<sup>617</sup> Vss. 151 and 164; see Charlesworth 2010, 453.

<sup>618</sup> Syb. Or. 13.151.

<sup>619</sup> Kaizer 2009, 185.

<sup>620</sup> There is as well a Jewish version of the Apocalypse of Elijah, where Odaenathus is identified with the Antichrist (Bousset 1908).

<sup>621</sup> Ap. El. 2, 39.

<sup>622</sup> Boyce and Grenet 1991, 397.

being Emesa the city of the sun mentioned in the Oracle<sup>623</sup> or, according to another hypothesis, the priest mentioned in the text could be Lucius Julius Aurelius Sulpicius Uranius Severus Antoninus, as it seems that Odeanathus was willing to make a peace treaty with Shapur.<sup>624</sup> Whatever might be the identification of the priest mentioned in the prophecy, the emperor had granted by the Roman Empire the command of Syria and he was able to conjugate Roman and Eastern political interests; the prestigious title of *imperator Orientis*, “victorious general of the East”,<sup>625</sup> which had been conferred to Odeanathus for his important position and his affiliation with Romans, enforced by the attack against the Persians after the capture of the senior emperor Valerian (253-260) in Carrhae, under which several mints display classical representation of *Sol* with legends ORIENS AVG<sup>626</sup> or AETERNITATI AVG.<sup>627</sup> The successes obtained in the war against the Persian are celebrated also on coinage, where legends as ORIENS AVG or AETERNITATI AVG explain the emperor’s reputation and his authority in the East; in addition, on the verso of some coinage is represented *Sol* in his typical features, and sometimes the emperor himself in this deity’s features. In some cases, it is depicted the image of a sun-lion, or the symbol of the eagle standing on the back of the lion (probably giving Roman credit to the battles which granted the success and the safety of Palmyra); what is more, titles as *Sol Invictus* and *Invicto* appear on coins in 264, after the defeat of the Persians.<sup>628</sup>

The emperor was assassinated between the end of August 267 and the end of August 268, as evidence from Egypt might suggest, in Emesa or in Cappadocia, even though the second hypothesis seems to be more viable.<sup>629</sup> After his death, in 268 Zenobia, Odeanathus’ wife, took the power, nominating her son Vabalathus *Rex Regum*.<sup>630</sup> Zenobia, described by Zosimus as “brave as a man”,<sup>631</sup> took up the administration, with the help of the husband’s friends, always according to the historian; the account among those of the Thirty Tyrants, included in

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<sup>623</sup> Dodgeon and Lieu 2002, 55.

<sup>624</sup> Klijn 1999, 98.

<sup>625</sup> Potter 2014, 267.

<sup>626</sup> RIC 10, RIC 12, Goebel 868c, Goebel 868k, RIC 13, RIC 106, RIC 107, RIC 170, RIC 198.

<sup>627</sup> RIC 211, 232.

<sup>628</sup> De Blois 1976, 136.

<sup>629</sup> Watson 2004, 59.

<sup>630</sup> Senden 2008-2009, 138.

<sup>631</sup> Zos. 1, 39, 2.



the *Historia Augusta*, also underlines her strength and military valor: she boasted her descentance from Cleopatra and the Ptolemaic dynasty, as another passage of the *Thirty Tyrants* might indicate;<sup>632</sup> this assumption would be created by the fact that Zenobia's Palmyrene name means literally "daughter of Antiochus" and therefore, welcoming the claim in *Historia Augusta*, and also acknowledging the absence of this name from Palmyrene inscriptions, it would be reconducted to Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria, descendant of Seleucus and founder of the Seleucid Empire after the death of Alexander the Great;<sup>633</sup> but this argument, even though appealing, it is not corroborated by any historical evidence, except the claim in *Historia Augusta*, where in another passage Zenobia would call Alexandria of Egypt her ancestral city, in an imperial order issued in 269 and addressed to the inhabitants of the city;<sup>634</sup> furthermore, also her ability to speak Egyptian is also well praised in another excerpt of the story.<sup>635</sup> However, it is now universally believed that her origin is from the Near East, and it is possible to find some parallel with the emperor Elagabalus, at least for what it concerns their religious approach and the boasting of their origins, as Zenobia embraced Arabian cultic practices, the same way Elagabalus had made with his own Emesene tradition, and both forge links to an ancient Phoenician connection, an ideological programme initiated by Septimius Severus.<sup>636</sup> The coinage produced under Zenobia and Vabalathus is expression of their connection with Roman traditions and with the Severans. The usage of epithets as *AUGUSTA* and *JUNO REGINA*<sup>637</sup> made by the empress is meant to signify a pact with the Romans<sup>638</sup> and their religion, as well as to endure her power in Palmyra, legitimated by the Roman authority. Again, the imagery of the sun deity is present under Vabalathus: in particular, in two examples struck under his reign, *Sol* is depicted standing and looking towards left. In the first evidence,<sup>639</sup> the deity appears holding globe, and a star is present on

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<sup>632</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 30, 4.

<sup>633</sup> Southern 2008, 5.

<sup>634</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 30, 22.

<sup>635</sup> *Hist. Aug., Tr. Tyr.*, 30, 21.

<sup>636</sup> Andrade 2018, 169.

<sup>637</sup> RIC 2v and RIC 2v (2), both struck in Emesa, display on the reverse Juno holding patera and scepter, with a peacock at her feet and a star depicted on the background. It is also attested on mints the presence of Selene, as the case of a tetradrachm from Alexandria (Emmett 3913); from the same city comes also another type showing Homonoia (Milne 4353).

<sup>638</sup> A. Senden 2008-2009, 142.

<sup>639</sup> RIC 2.

the field; in the second mint,<sup>640</sup> instead, the god holds a globe but also a spear, and an eagle is portrayed down his foot, on the left. Both coins bear the legenda AETERNITAS AVG.<sup>641</sup> The acknowledgement of the power of the empress and her son by the central administration of the Empire, in return for her support and her affiliation with Rome, ended when came to rule the emperor Aurelian. Even though initially the emperor, at least in the first year of his reign, had to confirm the position of Zenobia, approving for her son the titles of *imperator dux Romanorum* and *vir clarissimus*, in 271 the situation changed, as the emperor, recognizing the uprising power of the queen, decides to attack the Palmyrenes, of which campaign Zosimus gives a detailed account.<sup>642</sup> Aurelian obtained the emperorship after the abdication of Quintillus, brother of Claudius II, who reigned in the 270;<sup>643</sup> it is worth noticing that under the reign of these two emperors is possible to see still the image of the sun deity depicted on coins.<sup>644</sup>

However, it is with Aurelian that *Sol Invictus* appears again consistently as a title. In a passage of Eutropius, Tetricus, unable to bear anymore the mutinies of his troops, entreats Aurelian to march towards him by sending him letters, one of which would contain the Vergilian verse: *eripe me his, invicte, malis*.<sup>645</sup> Even though it is now safe to claim that the sun god promoted and worshipped by Aurelian is different than *Sol Invictus Elagabal* endorsed and embodied by his predecessor Elagabalus, being the Emesene cult an independent form of cult and not necessarily characterized by solar connotations, as also it is evident in the ancient literary sources,<sup>646</sup> and there is no evidence that Aurelian sun cult had particular

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<sup>640</sup> RIC 2 var.

<sup>641</sup> For a deeper analysis of coinage under Vabalathus and Zenobia see Bland 2011.

<sup>642</sup> Zos 1.50-61.

<sup>643</sup> Eutropius informs us that Quintillus was comparable in virtue and rulership skills to his brother, but he was killed on the seventeenth day of his reign (Quintillus post eum, Claudii frater, consensu militum imperator electus est, unicae moderationis vir et civilitatis, aequandus fratri vel praeponendus. Consensu senatus appellatus Augustus septimo decimo imperii die occisus est. Eutr., 9, 12.)

<sup>644</sup> In particular, under the reign of Quintillus one antoninianus (RIC 7) with the legenda AETERNIT AVG portraying *Sol* standing and holding globe; the same type appears under his brother and predecessor Claudius II Gothicus (RIC 16, RIC 116), sometimes with the alternative legenda ORIENS AVG and depicting *Sol* holding whip (RIC 155) or globe (RIC 153). Always under Claudius II, an interesting antoninianus from Antioch (RIC 221) bears the legenda SOL AVG.

<sup>645</sup> Eutr. 9.13.

<sup>646</sup> Hijmans 1996, 120. It is also believed that the sun cult supported by Aurelian might be a Romanized version of the cult of the sun-god of Emesa, to which he would owe his victory over Palmyra (Liebeschuetz 1999, 188), but this hypothesis does not take in account the fact that the

predominance, therefore it was not presenting monotheistic or even henotheistic peculiarities,<sup>647</sup> it is undeniable that the deity acquires again, under him, bright significance.

In fact, as also a passage from *Historia Augusta* informs us, the emperor built a temple in 273, after his return from the East, to the Sun<sup>648</sup> and he instituted a *collegium* of *pontifices Solis*.<sup>649</sup> The order, among others,<sup>650</sup> was joined in the middle of the fourth century by Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, chosen by Macrobius to host the literary gathering narrated in his work as representative of the Roman nobility and the Roman religious tradition,<sup>651</sup> and whose participation at the congregation is attested by a well-known inscription.<sup>652</sup> The idea of instituting a college of *pontifices* marks a clear connection with the older college of priests present in Rome, that according to some scholarship had to change his designation, after Aurelian's reform, as *pontifices maiores*,<sup>653</sup> but this hypothesis would not match non-literary evidence, attesting the designation of *maiores* before the reign of Aurelian.<sup>654</sup> However,

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Emesene god was, indeed, not a solar deity. See also Turcan 1996, 183.

<sup>647</sup> Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God* 2010, 25.

<sup>648</sup> *Hist. Aug., Vit. Aur.*, 35, 3. See also 1, 3 (cumque ad Templum Solis venissemus ab Aureliano principe consecratum, quod ipse non nihilum ex eius origine sanguinem duceret, quaesivit a me quis vitam eius in litteras rettulisset). The information about the construction of such temple is also reported by Eutropius (9, 15), Aurelius Victor (*Caes.*, 35, 7) and Zosimus (1, 61, 2). The sun deity worshipped in the temple might have been of no specific importance, but the usage of the epithet would enforce his status (Bailey 1932, 194).

<sup>649</sup> This religious order was reestablished by Aurelian after the built of the temple dedicated to sun. On this particular occasion, games had been instituted, called *agon Solis*, which were to be held in Rome every four years since 274, on the *Dies Natalis Invicti*, celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December (Elm 2005, 287). On this date, between 354 and 360, the emperor Constantius II established the celebration of the birth of Christ, previously held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, thus superseding the pagan cult (Stoneman 1994, 186-187). The emperor Julian wrote his Hymn to King Helios for one of this occasions; the hymn presents an expounded version of Platonic theology (Harries 2012, 298), influenced by Iamblichus with a focus on the depth of theurgy and the initiatic mysteries (Berg 2001, 146-147). In particular, Julian establishes a triad where One, Helios and the sun represents a triad which constitutes altogether the first principle of unity, borrowing the idea of the One from Plato and Porphyry; the discourse about the One will be object of analysis in the work of Plotinus.

<sup>650</sup> The first one known to have assumed the role of priest in the order is Virius Lupus, consul in 278 and *praefectus urbi* in 280; another well-known member of the *collegium* was Rufius Volusianus (Altheim 2007, 173). In particular, information about Virius Lupus priesthood can be gathered from an inscription (AE 1953, 235), where he appears as *pontifici dei Solis*.

<sup>651</sup> Hen 2018, 60-61.

<sup>652</sup> CIL 6, 1778, dated 387.

<sup>653</sup> Badaracco 2017, 213.

<sup>654</sup> Panciera 2006, 995.

choosing to create such religious order, the emperor probably meant to underline deep ties with the traditional Roman institution and deities, at the same time emphasizing the role of *Sol* as representation of the emperor and symbol of unity of the Empire.

The preponderance given by the emperor to Sun is most visible on coinage. The sun deity appears abundantly, having the emperor issued much more coins depicting *Sol* than his predecessors.<sup>655</sup> Apart from the traditional imagery of the god standing,<sup>656</sup> except some interesting and different depiction,<sup>657</sup> it is underlined again, under the reign of Aurelian, the undefeatability of the sun deity: in fact, in some cases *Sol* is depicted still in the traditional fashion, standing and holding globe, this time though walking between two captives, and a star appears in the left field, as it is the case of three antoniniani from Ticinum, which bear the legenda SOLI INVICTO.<sup>658</sup> Not only, but the special consideration expressed towards the deity by the emperor is manifested by attributing the god the epithet of “Lord of the Roman Empire”, SOL DOMINVS IMPERI ROMANI, on evidence showing this epithet on the *recto*, while on the reverse the emperor, instead of the Sun god, is portrayed, standing and holding a patera.<sup>659</sup> *Sol* also is represented on mints bearing the legenda CONSERVAT AVG,<sup>660</sup> but not

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<sup>655</sup> Hijmans 1996, 135.

<sup>656</sup> With the following legendas: ORIENS AVG (Goebel 222c2 var and Goebel 222c5 from Sciscia, with a captive depicted at the left foot of the deity; Goebel 244a from Serdica; RIC 61 and RIC 62 from Rome, showing two captives. With the same legenda and analog iconographic types, see also RIC 62, S; RIC 62, T; RIC 62, V; RIC 62, IV; RIC 62, X; RIC 62, EXXI; RIC 63, T; RIC 64, A; RIC 64, B; RIC 64, H; RIC 64, Z; RIC 65v, RIC 135, RIC 137 RIC 150, S; RIC 150, T; RIC 151, RIC 247, RIC 248, RIC 249, RIC 251, RIC 254, RIC 255, RIC 276, RIC 278, S; RIC 278, T; RIC 279, T, RIC 397. From Cyzicus, RIC 360, BC, RIC 360, BC (2), RIC 360, ΔC, RIC 360, XXI, RIC 364, RIC 365, ΔC, RIC 365 var, AC), PACATOR ORBIS (RIC 6 and RIC 6 var from Lyons), AETERNIT AVG (RIC 20 from Rome), CONCORDIA AVG (RIC 80, Γ; RIC 80, Δ; RIC 80, Z; RIC 80v; RIC 81. Note that in this series the reverse shows not the traditional standing and facing image of the god, but the deity is displayed as a bust, portrayed in the background while Aurelian and Severina, on the center of the scene, both clasp their hands), PROVIDEN DEOR (RIC 152, P; RIC 152, S; RIC 152, T; RIC 152, P, all from Ticinum. This montage displays the sun god accompanied by the personification of Fides, standing at his right. See also RIC 284, from Serdica), RESTITVTOR ORIENTIS (RIC 257ADD, from Sciscia).

<sup>657</sup> Some coins bearing the legenda ORIENS AVG, for instance, present the emperor standing right and holding spear, while he receives the globe from *Sol*, who holds whip and treads on bound a captive sitting at his foot (see Goebel 255d3, RIC 283 var (2), RIC 283v, all from Serdica).

<sup>658</sup> RIC 154, P; RIC 154, S; RIC 154, T. From Serdica, RIC 308, P; RIC 308, S; RIC 308, T; RIC 308, T var. From Tripolis, RIC 390.

<sup>659</sup> RIC 319.

<sup>660</sup> RIC 383, RIC 384, RIC 385 ADD, E, all from Antioch.

only: the deity in fact receives the designation of CONSERVATORI, for example in a mint<sup>661</sup> from Cyzicus portraying Aurelian receiving the globe from the god; the same symbolism appears in two cases bearing on the reverse an interesting legenda, MARS INVICTVS,<sup>662</sup> and portraying Mars, instead of the emperor, while receiving the globe from *Sol*. The freedom of usage of this appellation is confirmed in other mints, where the emperor himself is designated as “undefeated”, figuring as AVRELIANVS INVICTV AVG;<sup>663</sup> the iconography of these cases is appealing, because on the reverse it is shown a woman (personifying Orbis Terrarum, as also the legenda RESTITVT ORBIS might seem indicating), presenting the wreath to Aurelian, who is standing and holding the sceptre; a star appears in the background on the left. The presence of the star underlines again, as it had happened under the Severans, proximity and sympathy for the East, in particular for that area in which religious syncretism had reached decisive significance. Aurelian, establishing the sun god as representation of the invincibility of the emperor, and also building a temple dedicated to the sun, intends to communicate an idea of unity, finally reached under his reign. Although, unlike Elagabalus, the emperor utilizes a depiction of the deity which seems to recall a more general nature of the god, this enforced by the fact that Aurelian purged Oriental elements in connection with *Sol*,<sup>664</sup> and he did not instate a new title for himself in the college of priests by him created, and the fact that the sun god, rather than himself, appears to be the true *dominus imperii Romani*.<sup>665</sup> Exalting *Sol* signifies exalting the emperor himself; at the same time, though, this assimilation should not be seen as an innovative and surprising religious change, as it is expression of the Roman polytheism and of the Roman religious traditions.<sup>666</sup> The sun was worshipped since the beginning of the Empire, and its cult was well spread among Romans, as it is attested by an inscription,<sup>667</sup> dedicated to *Sol Sanctissimus*<sup>668</sup> found on an *ara* erected by a

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<sup>661</sup> RIC 353.

<sup>662</sup> RIC 357, RIC 358.

<sup>663</sup> RIC 301, RIC 301 var, RIC 301 var (2), RIC 301 var (3), RIC 301 var (4), RIC 303.

<sup>664</sup> Although it is worth noticing that the sun temple built by Aurelian is one of few temenos temples in Rome, and it presents architectural and decorative elements proper of the Eastern tradition, as it is possible to observe, in specific, in two examples, the Temple of the Sun at Hatra and the temple of Anahita at Kangavar (Ball 2000, 329-330).

<sup>665</sup> Icks 2011, 90.

<sup>666</sup> Lo Cascio 2005, 171.

<sup>667</sup> CIL VI, 710.

group of Palmyrenes,<sup>669</sup> under the reign of Tiberius,<sup>670</sup> which are indicated in the inscription as *Calbienses*. In the area in which the evidence was found, the Horrea of Hortensius, where other Eastern cults are attested, the worship of the sun deity is present still until the first half or third quarter of the third century, as the central panel of a *sacellum* shows a disc with rays and an inscribed star, probably representing the sun.<sup>671</sup> Under Aurelian it seems that religious syncretism inaugurated and promoted by the Severan dynasty finally had succeeded.<sup>672</sup>

After Aurelian's death, of which Eutropius, among other historians, gives us his account,<sup>673</sup> the deity is still depicted on coins: under Tacitus (275-276) *Sol* appears on coins bearing the legenda PROVIDEN DEOR and carrying the traditional iconography of the god, holding globe and raising his right hand, standing left, while Providentia stands on the right, holding two standards.<sup>674</sup> The epithet *Invictus* is used also under Tacitus, only this time in direct connection with the emperor, as it is displayed in mints portraying *Fides*<sup>675</sup> or *Providentia*.<sup>676</sup> The traditional iconographic type of *Sol*, accompanied by the legenda PROVIDEN DEOR and depicted with *Providentia*, or together with *Fides*<sup>677</sup> appears again under Florianus,<sup>678</sup> an interesting example from Lyons, always under his brief kingdom, shows *Sol* running and holding whip, in a coin carrying the legenda PACATOR ORBIS.<sup>679</sup> It is though with his

<sup>668</sup> Soli Sanctissimo sacrum / Ti(berius) Claudius Felix et / Claudia Helpis et / Ti(berius) Claudius Alypus fil(ius) eorum / votum solverunt liben(te)s merito / Calbienses de coh(orte) III // L(ucius) Umbricius / Priscus / libens animo / d(onum) d(edit) //

<sup>669</sup> Coarelli 1982, 51.

<sup>670</sup> The inscription dates 51 to 100.

<sup>671</sup> Bakker 1994, 70-73.

<sup>672</sup> Brent 1999, 264.

<sup>673</sup> Eutr. 9.15: Occiditur servi sui fraude, qui ad quosdam militares viros, amicos ipsius, nomina pertulit adnotata, falso manum eius imitatus, tamquam Aurelianus ipsos pararet occidere; itaque ut praeveniretur, ab isdem interfectus est in itineris medio, quod inter Constantinopolim et Heracleam est stratae veteris; locus Caenophrurium appellatur. Mors tamen eius inulta non fuit. Meruit quoque inter Divos referri.

<sup>674</sup> Estiot 2393var, Estiot 2402, A, Estiot 2402, D, Estiot 2404, RIC 195, B var, RIC 195, D var, RIC 195, G var, RIC 196, D, RIC 197, G var, RIC 198, Δ (all issued in Serdica).

<sup>675</sup> RIC 194 var.

<sup>676</sup> RIC 197, D, RIC 197, G.

<sup>677</sup> RIC 110.

<sup>678</sup> Estiot 2922, RIC 111, RIC 112, RIC 112 var.

<sup>679</sup> RIC 7.

successor, Probus (276-282), that the sun deity appears more consistently on coinage.<sup>680</sup> It is striking the abundance of presence of *Sol Invictus* during his rulership. The deity appears on quadriga while galloping, in mints bearing the legenda SOLI INVICTO,<sup>681</sup> sometimes followed by the designation COMITI AVG, as it appears on one coin,<sup>682</sup> while on other examples the epithet is directly associated with the emperor himself.<sup>683</sup> Even when Probus is designated as *Invictus*, Sol is portrayed on the reverse,<sup>684</sup> but sometimes also Jupiter, under the legenda IOVI CONSERVAT,<sup>685</sup> Mars<sup>686</sup> and Providentia.<sup>687</sup> In two mints struck in Ticinum with the legenda SOLI INVICTO, *Sol* appears standing in a temple, probably dedicated to him.<sup>688</sup> In a mint struck in Siscia, the emperor appears again under the title IMP PROBVS INV AVG with *Sol* on the recto, while on the reverse *Securitas* is shown;<sup>689</sup> from the same area *antoniniani* show the emperor standing for his title alone, accompanied on the verso by *Concordia*,<sup>690</sup> which in some cases faces Probus, while clasping hands;<sup>691</sup> *Felicitas*,<sup>692</sup> *Providentia*,<sup>693</sup> *Securitas*,<sup>694</sup> *Spes*.<sup>695</sup> The most interesting coins coming from Siscia show *Sol Invictus*, which carries this time the designation instead of the emperor,<sup>696</sup> with the legenda SOLI INVICTO<sup>697</sup> and while galloping the quadriga from the left or standing facing on spread

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<sup>680</sup> Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* 1972, 164.

<sup>681</sup> Alfoeldi 76.60, Alfoldi 76-125 var, Alfoldi 78.1 (from Siscia), RIC 101 (from Cyzicus), RIC 200, Γ, RIC 202, B, RIC 202, E, RIC 203, RIC 204, RIC 205 (from Rome).

<sup>682</sup> RIC 138, showing the radiate and draped bust of Sol.

<sup>683</sup> Cohen 384, Gneccchi 47.

<sup>684</sup> RIC 353.

<sup>685</sup> RIC 389.

<sup>686</sup> RIC 431 from Ticinum, with the legenda VIRTVS PROBI INVICTI AVG.

<sup>687</sup> RIC 492, with the legenda VIRTVS PROBI INVICTI AVG. Similar examples are RIC 518, where *Pax* instead of *Providentia* is depicted, and RIC 527, showing *Securitas*, all from Ticinum.

<sup>688</sup> In RIC 416 the deity stands within a tetrastyle temple, while in RIC 417var the temple is hexastyle.

<sup>689</sup> RIC 596.

<sup>690</sup> RIC 657, B.

<sup>691</sup> RIC 657, D, RIC 657, G, RIC 657, RIC 657C, RIC 657v.

<sup>692</sup> RIC 679, 686.

<sup>693</sup> RIC 727.

<sup>694</sup> RIC 762 var (2).

<sup>695</sup> RIC 790.

<sup>696</sup> Who appears, in these cases, as IMP C M AVR PROBVS P F AVG.

quadriga,<sup>698</sup> an analog example is provided by Cyzicus, where on coinage showing *Sol* on quadriga the deity, rather than the emperor, receives the designation<sup>699</sup> The emperor addresses the epithet again to his persona on mints struck in Serdica showing on their reverse *Fides*,<sup>700</sup> Jupiter (while conferring the globe to the emperor, with legenda CLEMENTIA TEMP)<sup>701</sup>, *Providentia* facing *Sol*,<sup>702</sup> or Probus himself.<sup>703</sup> In one case, the emperor and *Sol* receive the same title *Invictus*.<sup>704</sup>

Evidence shows that with the accession to the throne of Probus epithets and symbolism adopted in the Roman tradition was advertised as well as the image of the ruler; versatility of religious titles is traceable when one analyses coinage produced under his reign. While continuing to honor the sun god, as Aurelian and his predecessor had done,<sup>705</sup> Probus keeps a close affiliation with the sun deity, investing himself and the god of the same appellation. On the other hand, mints show that also other deities are needed for endorsing and enduring imperial power. It is noticeable, though, that *Invictus* in many cases is exclusively attributed either to god or the emperor, while in just one case appears otherwise. This might be symptomatic of those religious mutations, already in process, which under Probus reach the most meaningful change. The attribution of the same epithet for emperor and deity recalls again the idea of unity of the Empire, and proof of that is that also his successor, Carus (282-

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<sup>697</sup> RIC 767, Q, RIC 767, S, RIC 767, G, RIC 767, H, RIC 768, RIC 769, XXIV var, RIC 770, RIC 774, RIC 774var, RIC 783, RIC 796v.

<sup>698</sup> RIC 776, G, RIC 776, XXIVI, RIC 776, RIC 776A, RIC 780, RIC 861, A, RIC 861, B, RIC 861, B var, RIC 861, G, RIC 861, RIC 861 var, RIC 862, A, RIC 862, A, var, RIC 862, B, RIC 862, B, var, RIC 862, Γ, var, RIC 862, Δ, var, RIC 863 var, RIC 864, RIC 864 var, RIC 872 var.

<sup>699</sup> RIC 911, A, RIC 911, B, RIC 911, Γ, RIC 911, Δ, RIC 911, XXI, RIC 911, XXIA, RIC 911, XXIP, RIC 911, XXIS, RIC 911, XXIT, RIC 911, XXIQ. RIC 911, XXIV, RIC 911, XXIB, RIC 911, XXIF, RIC 911, XXIA, RIC 911, XXIE, RIC 911, XXIZ, RIC 911, CXXIM.

<sup>700</sup> RIC 823 var.

<sup>701</sup> RIC 840 var, RIC 840 var (2). It is interesting to notice that in other coins with similar iconography the emperor bears on the verso the appellation of *deus et dominus* (RIC 841 var, Γ, RIC 841 var, Δ, with legenda IMP DEO ET DOMINO PROBO AVG).

<sup>702</sup> RIC 848, Γ.

<sup>703</sup> RIC 882, RIC 884 var, RIC 884 var (2).

<sup>704</sup> RIC 868 var, B, showing on the verse the emperor as BONO IMP C PROBO INVICTO AVG and the god as SOLI INVICTO on the reverse, facing on spread quadriga.

<sup>705</sup> Odahl 2010, 38.



283) figures under the title VIRTVS CARI INVICTI AVG<sup>706</sup> or DEO ET DOMINO CARO INVIC AVG.<sup>707</sup> One other example for the latter is a mint showing Sol and Probus on the verse.<sup>708</sup> On some other cases, *Sol* appears again but in his own traditional depiction, with legenda ORIENS CARI AVG<sup>709</sup> or AETERNIT IMPERI.<sup>710</sup> After him, coinage under Numerian (283-284)<sup>711</sup> and Diocletian (284-305)<sup>712</sup> presents similar usage of the deity, but in one *aureus* from Cyzicus emitted before Diocletian's monetary reform and dated 284-286 it is possible to see again the appellation SOLI INVICTO, with on reverse the deity standing and holding globe.<sup>713</sup> Different usage of the title is made by Maximian, adopted as Augustus by Diocletian in 286; under his reign the epithet appears directly in connection with Hercules, as some *antoniniani* from Lyons attest.<sup>714</sup> When *Sol* is depicted, it is shown in its classical pose.<sup>715</sup> Even though it might seem that the deity loses the appellation towards the end of the IV century, evidence attests the presence of *Sol Invictus* again under Galerius, during his rulership as Caesar.<sup>716</sup> It has been given importance to the Sun god, as symbol of the imperial supreme rulership and representation of the emperor himself. Furthermore, the solar cult seems also to have been characterized by being a sort of ecumenical worship, which Aurelian had used to accredit his power, and it is probably in the same way that Diocletian had made use of the epithet GENIO POPVLI ROMANI.<sup>717</sup> The adoption of a deity with unificatory role, symbolizing cosmic unity and the firmness of the imperial power, would embody the concept of unity already expressed in the Neoplatonism, but it would be also proof of the religious syncretism developing since the second century.<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> RIC 117, from Cyzicus.

<sup>707</sup> RIC 100var, from Siscia.

<sup>708</sup> RIC 99, from Siscia.

<sup>709</sup> Price 239, from Cyzicus.

<sup>710</sup> RIC 35, 36.

<sup>711</sup> RIC 355v (from Lyons), RIC 454 var and RIC 381 (from Siscia), RIC 411 and 412 (from Rome), bearing the legenda ORIENS AVGG; RIC 373 from Antioch, with the legenda CONSERVAT AVGGG.

<sup>712</sup> RIC V 116, with legenda CLARITAS AVGG; RIC V 174, with legenda ORIENS AVG; RIC V 206, with legenda CONSERVAT AVG; RIC V 244, with legenda VIRTVS AVG.

<sup>713</sup> RIC 302.

<sup>714</sup> RIC V 365, RIC V 367, RIC V 369, RIC V 369 (2), RIC V 369 var, RIC V 369 var (2), RIC V 370 var.

<sup>715</sup> RIC V 474, with legenda CLARITAS AVGG.

<sup>716</sup> RIC VI 7, from Nicomedia.

<sup>718</sup> Brent 2006, 246.

The sun deity appears still on coins under Carausius (286-293)<sup>719</sup> and Maximianus (286-305),<sup>720</sup> but it is with the emperor Constantine (309-337) that a major interest towards the Sun god is expressed. In the arch erected in Rome by the emperor, Sol appears depicted in different features: in connection with Luna, in a tondo on one side and carried in a military triumph, in the form of a statue, together with Victoria.<sup>721</sup> In the Eastern arch the deity appears portrayed in direct connection with the emperor, who presents features of the solar god.<sup>722</sup> Sol is part of the emperor's iconographical programme on coinage also after his conversion to Christianity;<sup>723</sup> mintage bearing the legenda SOLI INVICTO COMITI shows the deity in the traditional standing position, holding Serapis' head,<sup>724</sup> in scene with a captive wearing a Phrygian cap,<sup>725</sup> or alone.<sup>726</sup> The epithet bestowing invincibility thus is not associated directly with the emperor, as ruler and god appear distinctively as two separate entities, and the god figures as companion and representant of Constantine. Different case is constituted by the iconographical propaganda of the emperor Licinius (308-324), who certainly adopted still, on

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<sup>719</sup> RIC V 408, with Sol on quadriga.

<sup>720</sup> RIC VI 26 (from Antioch), RIC VI 17 (from Nicomedia).

<sup>721</sup> Van Dam 2011, 134.

<sup>722</sup> Hijmans 1996, 144.

<sup>723</sup> Liebeschuetz 1999, 191.

<sup>724</sup> RIC VI 167c, dated 312, from Antioch and with legenda SOLI INVICTO.

<sup>725</sup> RIC VII 1, P, dated 316-317, from Aquileia.

<sup>726</sup> RIC VII: 75, 80, 92, 93, 101, 102, 138, 164, 169, 170 (from Arles); RIC VI: 120, 121a, 124, 126, 234, 281, RIC VII: 8, 13, 17, 27, 32, 33, 43, 47, 53, 56, 73, 74, 84, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 109, 110, 111, 120var, 123var, 138, 140, 141var (from London); RIC VI 308, 310, RIC VII 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 16, 17, 20, 32, 34, 36, 39, 46, 51, 52, 53 (from Lyons); RIC VI 83 (from Ostia); RIC VI 323a, P; 18, T; 19, S var; 27, S; 27, T; 33; 40, S; 40, T; 40, Q; 46, T; 52; 57, S; 57, T (from Rome); RIC VII 31, E; 33 (from Siscia); RIC VI: 128, 129, 131a (P-S), 132, RIC VII: 3, 7, 8, 16, 21 (P, S, T), 64 (from Ticinum); RIC VI 866a (and var), 868, 870, 871, 873, 874, 875; RIC VII 39, 40, 42, 47, 72, 72v, 74, 76, 94v, 97, 101, 102, 105, 131, 132 (A, B), 134 A, 135 (A, B), 157 A, 158, 159, 162 (A, B), (from Trier. Note that a series of coins, from this area and bearing the same legenda, depicts the sole bust of Sol, i.e. RIC VI 887, 890, 893, 894 (and var), or some example show again the traditional standing figure of the deity with the sole designation SOLI INVICTO, as RIC VI 899); RIC VI 312 (from Lugdunum); RIC VI 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895 (from Treviri, all showing the radiate and draped bust of Sol, seen from behind); RIC VI: 142, 143, 144 (from Aquileia, with a seated captive depicted at the feet of the god); RIC VII 180 (from Arelate); RIC VII 3, 21 (from Sirmium: this type is very interesting because it shows Sol crowning Constantine, who holds spear and globe).

coinage showing Sol, the designation SOLI INVICTO<sup>727</sup> or SOLI INVICTO COMITI,<sup>728</sup> but he also uses the epithet to address his persona, as witnessed by a coin struck under Constantine, dated 320-321 and carrying the appellation LICINII INVICT AVG ET CAES;<sup>729</sup>; in other examples bearing the same designation the emperor is associated with Jupiter, who is depicted on the reverse while standing and holding the sceptre,<sup>730</sup> or a simple wreath is portrayed, as in some mints from Ticinum.<sup>731</sup> In an example from Nicomedia,<sup>732</sup> Licinius I is designated as *Invictus* together with his son, who had been appointed *Caesar* in 317. *Sol* appears also in unusual iconography in an evidence from Thessalonica,<sup>733</sup> with different legenda,<sup>734</sup> because this time his standing figure, holding the globe, is inscribed within a plan of a roman camp, comprised of a symmetrical pattern of lines. However, presence of the epithet and of the representation of the god is proof of the importance that *Sol Invictus* kept maintaining in the symbolization of power of the rulers and in the legitimization of power itself. The attention towards this cult is also witnessed by the fact that Constantine allegedly had erected, in the city which bore his name and would be the new capital of the Empire, Constantinople, a porphyry column, originally 37 meters ca. tall, where atop a statue, fallen in 1106 but known through literary and graphic sources, such as the *Tabula Peutingeriana*,<sup>735</sup> was placed. The statue resembled the emperor, standing with radiate head and holding a spear and a globe.<sup>736</sup> Even though the factual presence of such statue in the new capital is dubious, as no archaeological evidence supports the existence of this monument

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<sup>727</sup> RIC VI 167a, H and RIC VI 167a, S from Antioch (dated 312).

<sup>728</sup> RIC VII: 46 T, 60 Q, 68, 82, 88, 147, 148 Q, 153 P, 154 T (from Arles); RIC VII 35 var (from London); RIC VI 73a, 77a Γ, 77 a var (from London); RIC VI: 336c, P; 337c, S; 337c, T; RIC VII: 4, 22 (S, Q), 23, 29, 30, 35, 36, 42 (from Rome); RIC VI: 131c, S, var; 131c,T; RIC VII 4 (and var), 9, 22 S, 46 T var (from Ticinum).

<sup>729</sup> RIC VII 145, from Ticinum.

<sup>730</sup> Bastien 5 (B, Γ, E, S,) from Antioch.

<sup>731</sup> RIC VII 133, 144 var, 146, 147 S.

<sup>732</sup> RIC VII 38 dated 320 and struck during the co-emperorship of Licinius I and Licinius II, and showing on the reverse Fortuna standing right, holding cornucopiae and rudder, while facing Jupiter, who is holding Victory on a globe while leaning on his sceptre.

<sup>733</sup> RIC VII, 70.

<sup>734</sup> On *recto* LICINIVS IVN NOB CAES, on the reverse VIRT EXERC.

<sup>735</sup> Della Valle 2007, 32.

<sup>736</sup> Smither 2014, 22. See also Altheim 2007, 138, Hezser 2016, 225.

(although the presence of the column is certain and also confirmed by two drawings from the XVI century,<sup>737</sup> and several Byzantine sources inform us about the monument),<sup>738</sup> it is probable that the statue represented the emperor as *Sol*, either the traditional cult of Apollo-Helios or *Sol Invictus*. Moreover, the edification of a column which conjugated polytheistic and Christian elements would be sign of a dual significance, expressing emperor's respect for the Roman traditional religion but at the same time his interest towards Christianity. It might be for this reason that Sozomenus does not mention the porphyry column, and Eusebius of Caesarea, author of the emperor's biography, does not talk about it in his work.<sup>739</sup> Sun worship does not cease to exist after Constantine's conversion, and with his son and successor, Constantine II (337-340), the motif keeps being portrayed, with the legenda used by the father SOLI INVICTO COMITI.<sup>740</sup> It seems that sun deity and ruler coexist in a balance of religious and political power, one investing the other with supreme rule; not only, the emperor (as in the case of the coinage of Constantine the Great from Sirmium mentioned above, and probably in this sense might be intended his representation on top of the porphyry column) acquires solar attributes and he is the personification of the divine power.

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>741</sup> but on the other hand, in some biblical sources the image of sun is often connected with idolatry.<sup>742</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

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<sup>737</sup> Mango 1980-1981, 104.

<sup>738</sup> John Malalas (XIII, 7), Georgius Monachus, (p. 500), Pseudo-Codinus (45, p. 174) and Zonaras (XIII, 3). Furthermore, Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos (*Historia ecclesiastica*, VII, 49) informs us that the globe held was surmounted by a cross. (See Bralewski 2011, 9) Anna Comnena (XII, 4, 5) tells us that the statue held a globe, and it was called by the citizens of Constantinople Anthelios or Anelios, namely "Opposite the Sun" or "Facing the Sun," though conceivably it could mean "In Place of the Sun" (Kaldellis 2016, 732).

<sup>739</sup> Bralewski 2011, 100.

<sup>740</sup> RIC VII 117 (and var), 118, 123, 145, 147 (and var), 153v, all from London. RIC VII 107, from Trier.

<sup>741</sup> Philo, *De Cherubim* 7.24 and 3 (Greek) Baruch.

in Rome, dated in the III century, where Christ is represented as the sun deity, on a chariot.<sup>743</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>744</sup>

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 by Christians and non-Christians in the Late Antiquity and up until the Byzantine era, because of its generic and multivalent characteristics.<sup>745</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* became a representation of Christ and his invincibility, and its iconography mutated with the religious changes at the end of Late Antiquity.

## Conclusion

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<sup>742</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>743</sup> Hezser 2016, 225.

<sup>744</sup> Idel 2013.

<sup>745</sup> Hezser 2016, 230.

It is not easy to withdraw a solution for what regards the characterization of the solar cult in the Late Antique period. Indeed, the extant archaeological (mostly inscriptions and coinage) and literary evidences often provide biased or ambiguous data; as for the Roman historical sources, literary texts which report the existence of a solar cult are various and diverse, and they belong to many different historical timeframes.<sup>746</sup> Traces of worship of the sun deity are found in all Roman history, and it is clear that Sol and *Sol Invictus* (including the successful attestation of *Sol Invictus* during the III century) were popular among different social classes, and well spread outside of the *Urbs*.

However, 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

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<sup>746</sup> Here is a list of works which describe the worship of the solar deity throughout the Roman Empire: *Sol* worshipped as one of the primitive deities of the Roman pantheon (Var. *De re rust.* 1.1.5; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.50.3; Tac. *Ann.* 15.41.1, 15.74.1, *Hist.* 3.24; Apul. *Met.* 2.22, 3.7, 3.16, 11.5, 11.24, 11.26); *Sol* carrying Oriental or syncretistic features (Lucian. *De Dea Syr.* 34.1-10; Paus. *Perieg.* 8.9.4, 8.31.7; Her. 5.5.3, 5.5.6-9, 5.6.1-7, 5.7.3-5; Tert. *De spect.* 8.[1], 8.5, 9.3, 20.2, *Apol.*, 12.4, 15.2, 23.6, 24.7-8; Dio 78.31.2, 78.32.2, 79.3.3, 79.8.4, 79.9.1, 79.9.3-5, 79.11, 79.12.1-2, 79.19.1-2, 79.20.1-2, 79.21.2; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 32.5-6, 32.8; Arnob. *Adv. nat.* 2.33.2, 3.35.4, 4.14.1, 4.16-17, 4.22.2, 5.42.4-6, 6.10.3, 6.12.3; SHA *Hadr.* 19.12-13, *Hel.* 1.4-5, 1.6, 3.4-5, 5.1, 7.1, 7.4, 8.1, 17.8, *Aur.* 1.3, 4.2, 5.5, 14.3, 25.3-6, 28.5, 31.7-9, 35.3, 39.2, 48.4; Eutr. 8.22, 9.15; Jul. *Orat.* 4; Aur. Vict. *De Caes.* 23.1-3, *Epit. de Caes.* 23.1); *Sol* included into the Christian paradigm, as image of the supreme God and symbol of light (Hier. *Chron.* 245e, 296e, 296g, 305a, 305b; Lact. *Div. inst.* 1.12, 2.5, 3.23, 6.2; Hil. Pict. *De Trin.* 6.10; *Paneg. Max. et Const.*; Avien. *Desc. orb. ter.* 1073-1081; *Chron. min.* 1, *Chron.* 354; Ambr. *Hex.* 4.1, 4.2; Aug. *De civ. Dei* 4.23, 7.16, *Quest. in Hept.* 1, *Quaest. de Gen.* 136, *Serm.* 12.11-12, *Contr. Faust.* 5.11, 9.2, 14.11, *Contr. Sec. Man.* 2.16.20, *Enn. in Psalm.* 25.2.3, *Enn. in Psalm.* 93.5; Oros. *Hist. adv. pag.* 7.18.5, *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur*, Part 64 *Dies octavus Novembris, Passio SS. Quattuor Coronatorum, auctore Porphyrio* 1.4.6.18.18.19.19.19.19, *Passio SS. Quattuor Coronatorum, auctore Petro* 2.7.9.10.11; *Breviarium Romanum, pars aestiva* 704; *Martyr. Rom.* 8a Nov.; *Brev. Rom., pars autumnalis* 664; *Passio Sancti Stephani Papae et Martyris* 147; *Macr. Sat.* 1.17.1, 1.17.2-3, 1.17.4, 1.17.66, 1.18.7; Leo, *Ser.* 21.6; Cass. *Chron.* AD 275; Zon. *Epit. hist.* 12.14). For a more comprehensive collection of ancient literary source in Greek and Latin concerning the solar worship in the antiquity, see also Halsberghe 1972.

Elagabalus. The cult of the Unconquerable Sun god acquires new interesting features, and it is connected to a profound religious syncretism, which finds in the Roman polytheism its biggest expression. Tolerance and admissibility of foreign cults promoted the diffusion of different cult practices, not mutually exclusive. Sol Invictus acquired Eastern connotations, and, in the coinage, it is possible to find non-traditional symbolism, as for instance the presence of the baetyl and the star. It is important to say that the association Sun – Moon continues also during the Severan age; even after the advent of the Christianity, up until the Middle Ages, the connection of the two astral elements continued to exist, despite the disappearance of the cult of *Sol Invictus*. This could be caused by the fact that Sun and Moon were a very popular combination, and they surely had an important role as symbolic emblems. With the advent of the Severans, and especially under the emperor devotee to *Sol Invictus Elagabal*, a variety of gods and goddesses were existing in syncretism, and this signifies that the dynasty endured great religious tolerance, an evolved and broader version of the same tolerance promoted by the emperor Caracalla.

The success of the imperial propaganda Septimius Severus and his successors boasted is more evident in the provinces than in the central areas of the Empire. In fact, as shown above, even in the farthest provinces (as for instance Dacia, Hispania and Lusitania, as previously shown) there is evidence (mainly inscriptions, papyri and coinage) witnessing not only the existence of the solar cult, but also showing presence of solar syncretism, for example through the association of *Sol* with local deities. The emperor and the sun god were both celebrated on coinage, both as a symbol of power of the ruler and unity of the Empire; not only, as analyzed above we have proof of religious festivals (Herodian's account of the parade of Elagabalus in Rome) and public challenges among cities to receive honorific grants from the emperor (as in the case of Anazarbos and Sardis, which celebrated on coins for the occasion the emperor and also *Sol Invictus Elagabal*, as already seen).

It is evident that a rupture occurred during the reign of the emperor Elagabalus. Also, other young emperors were deeply criticized for their ruling choices and for creating an unstable political situation, like Caracalla or Commodus. In the case of Elagabalus, though, all sources (also, or perhaps above all, non-literary ones, with the example of *damnatio memoriae*), carry negative judgement towards him, and this cannot be simply traced back to his excesses and the fact that he was high priest of a foreign cult (actually embodying the cult itself), because it has been shown how Elagabal was well welcomed and worshipped in the capital and in the provinces of the Empire, without any imposition. It seems more plausible that provinces far

from the *Urbs*, in order to receive the emperor's attention, endorsed his *persona* and the cults he professed, and non-literary evidence they produced in this regard had well served; there is no actual proof of transmission of the cult of Elagabal, or *Sol Invictus* (and of course *Sol Invictus Elagabal*) from above. It is possible that a bad political strategy had been adopted, by the emperor and his mother Julia Soemias, who was included with her son and the deity Elagabalus in the memory sanctions.<sup>747</sup>

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. The iconographical utilization of the solar deity made by Aurelian and Constantin the Great is probably the most evident proof of how *Sol* had become to represent the emperor, his dynasty and also the continuity of the Roman Empire. For this reason, one could notice how, in fact, *Sol Invictus* in the III assumed other peculiarities, representing more the empire than the solar cult itself. Severans (as well as some of their predecessors and successors, as shown through the analysis of evidence produced under their rule) chose the most suitable and understandable natural and divine element, so that the emperor's voice could reach, geographically and socially, everywhere.

The impact the Severan propaganda had, and their maneuvers in foreign affair's policies (starting with the head of the dynasty, Septimius Severus) allowed the message to circulate also in the remote areas of the Empire; the communication, however, was not only political. The information carried on coinage was perceived fully by the owner of the coin, who could receive the message probably in a clearer way, being this supported by symbols familiar to him. Inscriptions, on the other hand, informs us about the circulation of the sun cult, and also about worshippers, and they give us a picture of geographical spread of the solar religion. But it is also necessary to say that evidence shows how *Sol* did not occupy a predominant place among other deities, and in the Roman pantheon is worshipped at the same level as the other deities. If a choice was made by emperors to use the sun iconography to endorse their image, and at the same time endorsing the sun deity itself, this was due to political reasons, and not in order to make this deity predominant on the others.

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

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<sup>747</sup> For a recent and full discussion about the causes which led to the fall of the emperor, see A. Kemezis, *The Fall of Elagabalus as Literary Narrative and Political Reality: A Reconsideration* 2016.



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.

Although desired, it will not be possible here to discuss in more detail the importance of the sun as a divine element in different Roman times, not to mention the copious literature and art referring to *Sol*; it will suffice to say, that until early Byzantine times, “visual representations of the sun were part of the artistic *lingua franca*”,<sup>748</sup> and sun iconography was quickly recognizable by any person in the Empire. The solar deity in the centuries acquired many shapes and served different purposes, and it is certainly up to today issue of interest and discussion among scholars, for the controversies this topic shows, but also for the rooted presence of *Sol* in the ancient cultures.

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<sup>748</sup> Hezser 2016, 232.

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