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The Procession of Elagabalus and the Problem of the Parasols

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The rule of the emperor Elagabalus (AD 218–22) forms a remarkable chapter in Roman history. Born in Syria as Varius Avitus Bassianus, he took the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus when he became emperor, claiming that he was the son of the previous emperor by the same name (whom we know as Caracalla). As he arrived in Rome, Elagabalus brought with him the local deity whose priest he was, the *baetyl* Elagabal (a sacred rock associated with a deity). Due to the *damnatio memoriae* that both the emperor and his god suffered in AD 222, the main evidence remaining for this peculiar event lies in the coins of the period. These show the Emesene *baetyl* in a chariot pulled by horses, surrounded by four items which have traditionally been interpreted as parasols—umbrellas providing protection from the sun.¹

In the East *baetyls* played a prominent role in religion.² The *baetyl* of Emesa was a solar deity named Elagabal, from which the emperor later received his nickname, Elagabalus. Herodian provides us with the best literary account of the *baetyl*, describing it as an enormous, conical black stone³.

The representation of this deity on Roman Imperial coinage is merely one problem in the reign of this enigmatic emperor, but one that deserves attention. Particular consideration should be given to the four items seen surrounding the



Figure 1. RIC 143. Aureus, 22mm, 7.45g. Image from *Numismatica Ars Classica*, Auction 27, # 459.

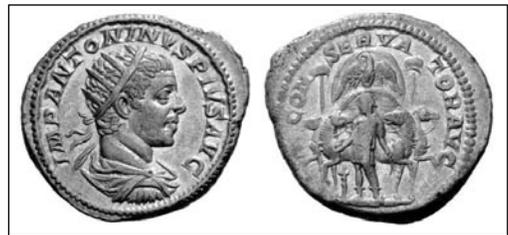


Figure 2. Antoninianus, 21mm, 5.66g. Image from *Numismatica Ars Classica*, Auction 29, # 596.

quadriga, which could take several different forms (seen in Figures 1–4), none of which can really justify the modern interpretation of a parasol.

The different ways these items have been represented suggest that the mint officials were working from first hand observation. The die cutters are struggling to represent something; items so foreign to the Romans that standard iconography has not yet been established. That these are parasols is extremely unlikely. The parasol in ancient times was mostly associated



Figure 3. RIC 195. Denarius, 19mm, 3.26g. Image from *Classical Numismatic group Mail Bid Sale 64*, # 1158.



Figure 4. RIC 195. Denarius, 19mm, 3.30g. Image from *Gorny & Giessner Münzhandlung, Auction 142*, # 2770.

with eastern royalty and only used in India in connection with deities, for example with Buddha.⁴ In the Roman East, the parasol was an indication of status and wealth for rulers and the high elite. The parasol was also considered to be a woman's item, a status symbol, occasionally associated with Aphrodite and very occasionally with Dionysius.⁵ Its association with the stone of Elagabal would thus be rather exceptional. Indeed, considering the confined space for images on coins, these items must have been of prime importance to the scene to warrant inclusion. There is no evidence that parasols played such a role in the religion of Emesa.

An alternative interpretation of these objects, tentatively suggested by Martin Frey in his German study *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik*

des Kaisers Elagabal, is that these items are *semeia*. These were religious cultic standards common to cults in Syria and seen in the cities of Carrhae, Dura, Hatra, Palmyra and most famously in Hierapolis. Hierapolis' *semeion* (σημησιον) has long attracted scholarly attention and was described by the second century author Lucian of Samasota in his work *De Dea Syria*. In section thirty-three of his work Lucian describes the cult statues of the city, which he labels Hera and Zeus, then notes that between these two statues stands another, called the *semeion* by the inhabitants of the city. The *semeion*, Lucian notes, had no shape of its own, but bore the form of other gods, although he was unable to elicit any further information about the object. The excavation of Hierapolis has uncovered archaeological evidence depicting the *semeion* as Lucian described, between the two other cult figures of the city.⁶

Semeia are a likelier explanation than parasols for the objects found on the coinage of Elagabalus, especially when one examines the local provincial coinage of Emesa. Objects similar to those shown on imperial coinage can be seen on either side of the *baetyl* on Emesene coins struck under Caracalla, Elagabalus and under the Emesene usurper, Uranius Antoninus (Figure 5). On coins of Uranius two such objects are placed on either side of the *baetyl* inside the temple of Emesa.

This depiction runs counter to all other depictions of parasols, which are consistently depicted outside, even when functioning as a status symbol. Shelter from the sun would not be necessary inside a temple, and thus the conscious decision by the moneyer to include them on the



Figure 5. Baldus 38–42. Roman Provincial bronze, 32mm, 21.42g. Image from *Classical Numismatic Group*, Triton V, # 1767

coinage suggests that they had a specific, cultic association with the god Elagabal. The religious nature of a *semeion* would fit this characteristic.

Moreover, on the imperial issues of Elagabalus these ‘parasols’ are presented alone without standard bearers, like depictions of other eastern cultic standards.⁷ In his study of the phenomenon of the *semeion* in Syria, Caquot suggests that the *semeion* was a remnant of itinerant divinities that pre-Islamic Arabia continued to adore in the form of a *baetyl*.⁸ This would also argue strongly in favour of *semeia* in connection with the Emesene stone. Indeed, an inscription in honour of *semeia* has been found near ancient Emesa, now modern day Homs.⁹

What role did these *semeia* play in the cult of Elagabal and what are these particular coins trying to commemorate? The only literary description of the *semeion* is found in the *De Dea Syria*. Lucian, in a passage neglected by scholars, describes the oracle of Hierapolis as ‘λεγει δε και του σημητιου περι’, that is, the oracle speaks about or for the *semeion* (*De Dea Syria* 36). It thus appears that for the city of Hierapolis at least, the *semeion* had an active role in religion. Lucian also notes that the *semeion* played a role in an

annual procession down to the sea from Hierapolis (*De Dea Syria* 33). The coins of Elagabal also show the cultic standards playing a role in a procession, but the precise context of this parade is more difficult to identify.

The most likely interpretation is the ceremony described by the author Herodian, in which the *baetyl* of Emesa was transported from one temple to another during midsummer. Herodian notes that the *baetyl* was placed in a chariot drawn by six horses, decorated with gold and precious stones and then driven from the centre of Rome to its outer suburbs. Herodian also notes that the reins of the chariot were fastened to the *baetyl* ‘as though he were driving himself’.¹⁰ This description roughly corresponds to that shown on the coins of Elagabal, although Herodian describes six horses, not the four shown on the coinage. This difference might, however, be explained by the small amount of space on the coins: four horses might be representative of six. Interestingly enough, some coins show the *baetyl* in a *quadriga*, but without *semeia* (Figure 6).

Why the *semeia* are present on some coins and not others remains obscure. HR Baldus, believing that the items were parasols, postulated that the coins with the ‘parasols’ represented the procession at midsummer described by Herodian, whereas coins without parasols signified a mid-winter procession, when the stone did not need to be sheltered from the sun.¹¹ Baldus’ identification of the items as parasols is, as we have seen, problematic, as is the idea that a solar deity should need protection from what it represented. There is also no evidence that such a procession occurred in winter. Baldus’ theory must



Figure 6. RIC 32. Aureus, 22 mm, 6.24g. Image from *Münzen & Medaillen AG Basel*, Auction 93, # 228



Figure 7. Coin of Anazarbos. Roman Provincial bronze, 26mm, 15.48g. From *Numismatik Lanz Münzen*, Auction 117, # 1004

then be placed aside, leaving us no closer to understanding the reasoning behind the decision to place *semeia* on some coins and not others. It may, however, be significant that the coins without the *semeia* are issued only in gold, and have a different reverse legend—instead of the usual SANCTO. DEO SOLI ELAGABALO, these read CONSERVATOR AVGVSTI, and thus perhaps were minted for another purpose, presenting the stone as the protector of the emperor. A difference in function and purpose could certainly explain the difference in the iconography between the coins.

It is also fruitful to look at these issues in a quantitative manner. An analysis of hoards from this period and close after provides valuable information on the numbers in which these coins were issued.¹² From a sample of over 100,000 *denarii*, only nine coins showing the *baetyl* in procession were found, representing only two issues by the emperor—RIC 195 and RIC 144. Interestingly enough, these were all found in the west of the empire. It is thus obvious that these issues were not released as substantive types, but rather as commemorations of a specific event, the midsummer procession of the *baetyl* being the most likely candidate.

Provincial coinage produced under Elagabalus also showed the *baetyl* in procession. Coins of this kind were produced at provincial mints in Alexandria, Neapolis, Aelia Capitolina, Hierapolis-Castabala, Anazarbos and Laodicea ad Mare¹³ (Figure 7).

More cities than those listed here may have been involved in producing these representations. The lack of a complete centralised catalogue of provincial issues for this period means that a definitive listing is yet to be established. The fact that the *baetyl* is presented in a *quadriga*, however, is clear evidence that these mints were obtaining their iconography from Rome rather than Emesa (where to our knowledge the *baetyl* is never shown in this manner), and thus we can trace the spread of the cult from the empire's capital. The purpose or motivation behind these coins remains unclear. They might have been struck as an attempt to curry favour with the emperor, but this is unlikely considering that we have no evidence for Elagabalus visiting many of these areas, for example Alexandria. The geographical location of some of these cities means that it is also unlikely that the coins were struck in commemoration of Elagabalus' overland journey to Rome upon his succession. Indeed, the Alexandrian

issues can be precisely dated. The delta in the reverse field dates the coin to AD 221, the fourth year of Elagabalus' reign according to the dating system used at Alexandria. Perhaps more likely is the suggestion that these coins commemorate the introduction of the cult of Elagabal in these cities. Inscriptional evidence suggests that this phenomenon did occur; the city of Sardis celebrated a festival named the *Elagabalia*, which must have been in honour of the Emesene *baetyl*.¹⁴ The phenomenon is one that deserves further attention and will form the focus of future studies.

The presence of the eagle on these coins is also of interest. The *baetyl* is nearly always shown on imperial coinage with an eagle above or in front of it. For the Romans the eagle was the symbol of Jupiter, but it had an entirely different context and set of associations in the east. In Syria and the Roman East the eagle was the symbol of the sun god with its own independent tradition.¹⁵ Thus although the emperor Elagabalus may have had one set of cultural associations for the eagle, the Romans had quite another and perhaps this cultural misinterpretation contributed to the belief at this period that Elagabalus was attempting to replace Jupiter with his native *baetyl*.¹⁶

The reign of Elagabalus requires deeper investigation. It is clear, however, that the iconography of these coins is best interpreted in the eastern context of the *baetyl's* origins and the Roman context of its midsummer procession. The visual conjunction of the *semeia*, the *quadriga*, the reverse legend and the eagle, not only refers to a specific occurrence, but assists in articulating and defining the Emesene *baetyl* itself. The strangeness of this god in the Roman Pantheon, reported by Herodian,

is also hinted at by the numismatic evidence.¹⁷ By surrounding the sacred rock with its associated paraphernalia, and identifying it through the unusually long reverse inscription, the Roman populace could begin to identify and recognise this strange and new Emesene deity.

Notes

1. The coins in question are RIC 176, 61, 62, 143, 144, 195–7.
2. For a discussion of *baetyls* see HR Baldus, *Uranius Antoninus Münzprägung und Geschichte*. Bonn, 1971, p 147, and F Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337*. Cambridge, 1993, pp 13–14.
3. Herodian 3.5–6.
4. See EW Klimowsky, 'Sonnenschirm und Baldachin', *Israel Numismatic Society Numismatic Studies and Researches*, vol 7, 1974, pp 51–69.
5. PGP Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*. Leiden, 1995, pp 312–19. See also MC Miller, 'The Parasol: An Oriental Status-Symbol in Late Archaic and Classical Athens', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol 112, 1992, pp 91–105.
6. See JL Lightfoot, *Lucian on the Syrian Goddess*. Oxford, 2003, p 540ff, and RA Oden, *Studies in Lucian's De Dea Syria*. Michigan, 1997, p 109ff.
7. For examples see HJW Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs ad Edessa*. Leiden, 1980, p 80ff; H Ingholt, *Parthian Sculptures from Hatra. New Haven*, 1954, and MAR College, *The Art of Palmyra*. London, 1976, p 45.
8. A Caquot, 'Note sur le *Semeion* et les Inscriptions Araméennes de Hatra', *Syria*, vol 32, 1955, pp 59–69.
9. IGLS 2089.
10. Herodian 5.6.6–7.
11. HR Baldus, 'Zur Aufnahme des Sol Elagabalus-Kultes in Rom, 219 n. Chr.', *Chiron*, vol 21, 1991, pp 175–8.
12. The hoards analysed were: Britain: Darfield, Denbighshire, East England, Scotland, St Mary Cray; West Continent: Viuz-Faverges, Eining, Kempten Lindenberg III, Kirchmatting, Pfünz;

Italy: Via Tritone; Danube: Börgöndi, Ercsi, France_ti, Reka-Devnia, Rustschuk; East:

Haydere, South-east Turkey, Sulakyurt, Tell Kalak.

13. Alexandria: *BMC Alexandria* 1520, mistakenly described as an eagle surmounted by a canopy; Neapolis: *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine*, nos 101 and 102, Aelia Capitolina: *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine*, nos 85–90; Hierapolis: L. Robert, *La Déesse de Hiérapolis Castabala (Cilicie)*. Paris, 1964, plate XXIX, nos 103 and 104; Anazarbos, *Numismatik Lanz Münzen*, Auction 117, lot # 1004; Laodicea ad Mare Meshorer 149.
14. B Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors*. Leiden, 2004, p 111.
15. F Cumont, 'L'aigle funéraire des Syriens at l'Apothéose des Empereurs', *Syria*, vol 62, 1910, pp 119–64, and K Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria*. London, 2004, p 217.
16. Dio 80.11.1.
17. Herodian wrote that Elagabalus, fearing the populace's reaction, sent an image of himself and his deity to Rome before his arrival so that the population of Rome might adjust to his appearance. (Herodian 5.5.6).

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