

RELIGION AND COINAGE  
Heliogabalus and Alexander Severus: two extremes?\*

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Alexander Severus was 13 years old when he obtained the most powerful job in the Roman world; in 222 he became emperor, which especially in the third century was not an unmitigated pleasure. He succeeded Heliogabalus (218-222), his cousin who, according to the literary sources, was hated by all. That year, Heliogabalus had been murdered by his troops and eventually cast into the Tiber. For him, *damnatio memoriae* was inevitable.

Alexander had to cope with several aspects of Heliogabalus' inheritance. His cousin's religious reforms in particular were the cause of much trouble. While casting Jupiter aside, the priest emperor (SACERDOS DEI SOLIS ELAGABALI) had made the Syrian sun god Elagabal head of the Roman pantheon<sup>1</sup>. This religious alteration had upset the rather fragile balance of power between emperor and senate as well as between the autocrat and his troops.

In response, after gaining control of the Roman Empire, Alexander *cum suis* strengthened their relationship with the senators by giving them a prominent role in government (e.g. Cassius Dio, Tullius Menophilus, Pudens Crispinus)<sup>2</sup>. It is noteworthy that, although the resumed rise of the senatorial class is of considerable importance to modern scholars, military men and logistic specialists (e.g. Maximinus Thrax and Timesitheus) held equally important positions during Alexander's reign<sup>3</sup>. The relation between Alexander and the army, however, was strained from the outset. In the end, this problematic relation was to be fatal; in 235 Alexander was murdered by his own troops.

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\* My gratitude goes to Olivier Hekster and Luuk de Blois for commenting on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks are also due to Martijn Icks (who is preparing a dissertation on Heliogabalus) for valuable discussions about Heliogabalus, to Mark Bainbridge for correcting my English, and to NWO for the funding of my project: 'Patterns and developments in the representation of Roman imperial power, AD 180-284'. It goes without saying that all remaining mistakes are my own.

<sup>1</sup> Dio, 79.11.1. See further Potter 2004, 156. Heliogabalus was the high priest of the cult of the sun god Elagabal and he thus called himself amongst other things SACERDOS DEI SOLIS ELAGABALI (*RIC*, IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 194).

<sup>2</sup> *Cum suis*: The young Alexander must have been surrounded by a group of advisers while governing the empire. The role of the senate: De Blois, forthcoming; Potter 2004, 163.

The image of Alexander's reign in antiquity, notwithstanding his violent death, was predominantly positive. Herodian, who in general shows a profound antipathy against child-emperors, ranks the reign of Alexander Severus as successful<sup>4</sup>. Among those who also consider Alexander's reign positively are Aurelius Victor and the unknown author of the *Historia Augusta*<sup>5</sup>. Worth noting is that the approval is not confined to pagan authors. Orosius, a Christian writer, assesses the regnal capacities of Alexander positively as well<sup>6</sup>.

The lack of knowledge of Alexander's reign possibly misled the authors cited above and could therefore underlie the prevalence of favourable judgements. Cassius Dio seems to confirm this hypothesis. This author was a leading figure during the reign of Alexander (he held the consulship for the second time in 229) and experienced Alexander's emperorship first hand. He therefore did not have to cope with a lack of knowledge of the reign of Alexander while writing his *Roman History*. It is telling that his judgement of the child emperor's reign was fairly negative.

The fact that Alexander's reign followed Heliogabalus' and preceded that of Maximinus Thrax (235-238), both of them labelled 'bad' emperors, could be another motive for considering Alexander, at least in comparison with these extremes, as a 'good' emperor<sup>7</sup>. 'Good' implies here that Alexander's reign was not characterized by excesses, which is in sharp contrast to the period in which Heliogabalus held sway over the Roman Empire and the rule of Maximinus Thrax.

This article focuses on the question whether Alexander really was a 'traditional' emperor who brought 'everything' back to normal after a period of apparent instability. This question will be investigated through a comparison between the 'religious coinage' of Alexander Severus and Heliogabalus<sup>8</sup>. The reasons for placing coins to the fore are manifold. Firstly, coins form a continuous range of evidence. Secondly, it is fairly certain that if decisions about the imagery and legends on imperial coins were not made by the emperor himself, the coins at least 'display the emperor as he wished to be perceived'<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Antipathy: Herodian, e.g. 1.1.6, 1.3.1-5, 2.1.3, 2.10.3, 5.8.10. Successful reign: Herodian, 6.9.8.

<sup>5</sup> Aurelius Victor, *Historiae Abbreviatae* 24; *Historia Augusta, Vita Alexandri* LXVI.1-LXVIII.4.

<sup>6</sup> Orosius, *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII*, 18. Similarly, Eusebius of Caesarea mentions Alexander in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (for instance VI.21.3f and VI.28.1). He gives no negative comment on the emperor and he seems to consider him as a Christian emperor.

<sup>7</sup> Potter 2004, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Coins of Heliogabalus' wives and (grand)mother, Alexander's wife, (grand)mother, and of Alexander as Caesar will not be discussed in this article.

<sup>9</sup> Hekster 2002, 89. Although the opinions of scholars vary widely with regard to the question of responsibility for the images and legends on coins, I agree with Hekster that 'to the public eye it must have been the emperor himself'. The most telling example is the second series of coins minted for Hadrian. On these coins, a change in titulature is appar-

For reasons of space, this article will look exclusively at coins displaying a religious theme<sup>10</sup>. Religious aspects are often emphasized by ancients and moderns. Evidence from coins on such aspects are also supported by inscriptions and documents. Thus, ‘religious policy’ as expressed through coins may form a good test case for the ‘traditionality’ of Alexander Severus<sup>11</sup>. Of course, there are risks in drawing conclusions solely on the basis of religious aberrance. However, through an analysis of the religious aspects of the imperial representation of both emperors, one can at least find out whether or not Alexander broke radically with the religious representation of his predecessor.

### The ‘great Olympians’

During the Roman principate the head of the Roman pantheon, Jupiter, appeared on many coins, as did Mars, Venus and other prominent residents of Olympus<sup>12</sup>. This continued to be the case throughout the late second century, a period in which a shift seems to have occurred in the importance attached to the Roman gods, launched perhaps by Commodus (the ‘Roman Hercules’)<sup>13</sup>. Although Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla, who adopted themselves into the Antonine dynasty, attached great value to Hercules, Melchior, Liber and Serapis, they still paid considerable attention to the more traditional Roman gods, for, as Marsden observes, it must have been more fitting for an Augustus to connect himself with the greater Olympians<sup>14</sup>.

It would appear that even Heliogabalus, who subordinated the Olympian gods to the Syrian sun god Elagabal, realized that he could not simply disband Jupiter and the other Roman deities in favour of Elagabal, since they had been continuously connected to the Roman state and its society for centuries. Consequently, a part of the coins minted during the reign of Heliogabalus shows or mentions Jupiter, Mars, or Venus<sup>15</sup>. However, these coins constitute a minority. In *RIC*, 96 religious coin types are attested for the emperor Helio-

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<sup>10</sup> All coins concerning the connection of the emperor and his reign with the gods or the divine, and the role of the emperor as *pontifex maximus* play a part in this study: reverses with names and/or images of gods, religious attributes, sacrificing emperor, the legends *PROVIDENTIA DEORUM*, *VOTIS VIGENNALIBUS/DECENNALIBUS*, *RELIGIO*, *VOTA ORBIS/PUBLICA/SOLUTA*. Consecration coins and coins with on the obverse an image of a member of the imperial house (other than the emperor) are not included here. For the religious coins of both emperors which are not mentioned in this article, see my forthcoming dissertation on imperial representation during the period 180-284 AD.

<sup>11</sup> References are to *RIC*; dates to *RIC*, or *BMCRE*.

<sup>12</sup> All coin types on which the gods discussed in this article appear are ‘religious coins’ (see footnote 10). As they show references to these particular gods, they will be included here.

<sup>13</sup> *RIC* III, Commodus, nos. 247, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254a, 254b, 254c, 254d, 616, 629, 637, 638, 639, 640, 643, 644.

<sup>14</sup> Marsden 1997, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Less relevant is Mercury; only one coin type refers to this deity (*RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no 163B). Mattingly denotes the reverse of this coin type as ‘barbarous style’, which means

gabalus. Sixteen of these types are devoted to Jupiter, Mars, or Venus. The greater part of these coins refers to Mars.

The undated coins ascribed to Mars - all of them minted in Rome - are devoted to MARS VICTOR, whereas there appears to be no specification on the one dated coin from Antioch<sup>16</sup>. Apparently, as there was a victory of the young pretender Heliogabalus over the governing emperor Macrinus in 218, one can speculate that the MARS VICTOR coins and the coin type showing only an image of Mars and dated to 219 were minted to celebrate this victory<sup>17</sup>.

Five coin types refer to Jupiter<sup>18</sup>. One type bears the legend IOVI VICTORI and on another Jupiter and Victory are depicted together<sup>19</sup>. The latter was issued in 220, the year in which Heliogabalus had included his religious function as high priest in the imperial titulature<sup>20</sup>. Three types, all undated, denote Jupiter as *conservator*. In this way, Jupiter adopts the role of Heliogabalus' protector<sup>21</sup>. However, as we shall see below, Sol and the conical stone of Emesa appear as CONSERVATOR AUG[usti] as well<sup>22</sup>. On the basis of two coin types, we may assume that the coins with the *baitylos* (conical stone) as CONSERVATOR AUG[usti] can be dated to the period 220-222<sup>23</sup>. In this phase of Heliogabalus' reign, in which the emperor operated openly as priest emperor, the deity Elagabal is portrayed as protector of the emperor. This could imply that the coins with the legend IOVI CONSERVATORI were produced earlier in the reign; a hypothesis confirmed by the dating of the coins ascribed to Jupiter Conservator to the years 219-220<sup>24</sup>.

Two coin types minted during Heliogabalus' reign, both hybrids, refer to Venus<sup>25</sup>. The reverse legend of a coin from Rome, VENUS CAELESTIS, belongs, according to Mattingly, to Aquilia Severa, the high priestess of the Vestal Virgins and second wife of Heliogabalus<sup>26</sup>. The other coin type reads

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<sup>16</sup> Undated coins: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 362, 363, 364. Dated coin: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 172.

<sup>17</sup> Herodianus, 5.4.5-12; Cassius Dio, 79.38.3-41.4.

<sup>18</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 27, 89, 90, 91, 92.

<sup>19</sup> IOVI VICTORI: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 92. Jupiter with Victory: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Inclusion of the religious functions in the imperial titulature: for instance AE(1975) 775 and CIL VII 585. See further: Icks 2004, 354.

<sup>21</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 89, 90, 91.

<sup>22</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 61, 62, 63, 64, 65.

<sup>23</sup> *BMC* RE V, Elagabalus, nos. 197-198. See further Icks 2004, 355.

<sup>24</sup> *BMC* RE V, Elagabalus, nos. 138-142.

<sup>25</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 164 and 204.

<sup>26</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 164. Assimilation between imperial women and Venus, Dea Caelestis or a combination of the two goddesses was not new. Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus, already connected herself with Venus (Caelestis) and Dea Caelestis. In this matter Julia Domna might therefore have served as an example for other imperial women. See further: Marsden 1997, 5-8.

VENUS VICTRIX, which might refer to the triumph over Macrinus, the only military campaign of Heliogabalus<sup>27</sup>.

Although the coins which mention Jupiter, Mars and Venus constitute a minority, they cannot be neglected. These coins, carrying references to the 'great Olympians', serve as a valuable counterpart to the coins that emphasize the status of Heliogabalus as high priest. They show that traditional representation was never totally abandoned during the reign of Heliogabalus<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, those coins are helpful in contradicting the proposition that Heliogabalus wanted to establish monotheism with Elagabal as sole god. If the young monarch had had the intention to overthrow the polytheistic Roman religion altogether and to replace it by a monotheistic religion, he would have tried to cover up all polytheistic tracks. The existence of coins referring to the Roman gods and, if we may believe the author of the *Historia Augusta*, the collection of Roman cult objects in the *Heliogabalium* speak in favour of a more henotheistic approach by the priest emperor<sup>29</sup>.

Although the above coin types may shed some light on Heliogabalus' religious policy, traditional Roman deities were not prominent on this emperor's coins. Alexander, by contrast, attached great importance to these gods; of the 207 religious coin types attested for Alexander Severus, no fewer than 77 coin types refer to Mars and on 48 types references are made to Jupiter<sup>30</sup>. Alexander claimed no special relation with the war god; it is therefore striking that Mars apparently received more attention than the head of the Roman pantheon, even in peacetime, something which was already the case in Heliogabalus' religious coinage. The preferential position of Mars on coins of both Heliogabalus and Alexander, peacetime ruler par excellence, may reflect the growing importance of the army in the course of the third century, which forced the emperor to establish a firm relationship with his troops<sup>31</sup>.

Putting emphasis on achieved victories or military campaigns might serve as a means by which the emperor could legitimize his position militarily. Religious coin types devoted to Mars (and sometimes to military varieties of other deities, such as VENUS VICTRIX) show therefore a mixture of mili-

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<sup>27</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 204.

<sup>28</sup> It is possible to argue that Julia Maesa was responsible for this; inscriptions in which Julia Maesa is called *mater castrorum*, *mater senatus* and *sanctissima Augusta* (ILS 470, 476, 484) do refer to her special status (see further Icks 2004, 353). However, influence of Julia Maesa on Heliogabalus' coins can of course not be proven. Thus, on the basis of the presumed influence of the emperor on the coinage (as described in footnote 12) Heliogabalus may be responsible in the first place.

<sup>29</sup> *Heliogabalium*: Herodianus 5.5.8 and SHA, *Vita Antonini Heliogabali* 3.4-5. Cult objects in temple: SHA, *Vita Antonini Heliogabali* 3.4-5. See further Icks 2004, 358.

<sup>30</sup> It is not clear whether *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 57 shows Mars or the emperor himself. Furthermore, it is not clear whether Mars or Virtus is depicted on *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 476, 477, 478, 489, 490.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander as peaceful ruler: Herodian, 6.1.7.



Fig. 1. Coin of Alexander Severus. Rev.: MARS VLTOR (*RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 636). Size: 230%.

tary and religious representation. Particularly coins with the legend MARS VICTOR and MARS VLTOR underline the military aspect.

As we have seen, MARS VICTOR was presumably used by Heliogabalus to celebrate his victory over Macrinus. The legend MARS VICTOR also appears on coins of Alexander, but more coins bear the legend MARS VLTOR<sup>32</sup>. The greater part of the coins referring to MARS VLTOR are dated by Mattingly to 231-235; during this period the tension between the Persians and the Romans culminated in a devastating war<sup>33</sup>. In 231 Alexander left Rome for the first time in his reign and the help of Mars Ultor in the combat against the Persians was probably very welcome, especially since the Parthian standards had been housed in the temple of Mars Ultor since 20 BC<sup>34</sup>.

The three coin types of Alexander bearing the legend MARS VICTOR are difficult to connect with actual events. Two of them are dated to the period 222-228 while, according to Mattingly, the one remaining issue was minted between 222 and 231. It is therefore hard to associate these coins with the Persian troubles. On the other hand, the coin type referring to MARS PROPUGNATOR may be related to rising Roman-Persian tensions, though this remains speculative<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> MARS VICTOR: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 157, 162, 584. MARS VLTOR: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 158, 207, 245, 246, 247, 248, 635, 636, 637, 638.

<sup>33</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 245, 246, 247, 248, 635, 636, 637, 638. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 165-167.

<sup>34</sup> Rich 2002.

<sup>35</sup> MARS PROPUGNATOR: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 244.

The coins showing only an image of Mars, without legends mentioning the god (they frequently consist of an enumeration of Alexander's functions), constitute a majority of the coins on which the deity is depicted and can be dated to throughout Alexander's reign<sup>36</sup>. The possibility that they say something about attempts of the emperor to win the loyalty of his troops, because 'trouble with the troops began early', cannot be excluded; many *denarii* with a picture of Mars have been handed down to us<sup>37</sup>.

Coins with only an image of the supreme god and no legend referring to Jupiter are relatively rare<sup>38</sup>. Coin types on which specific roles are ascribed to Jupiter occur regularly. Jupiter appears as protector of Alexander during almost his whole reign<sup>39</sup>. On sixteen coin types Jupiter performs the function of PROPUGNATOR. Most of them were issued in the period 231-235, which could point to the Persian war (and consequently to a military character of those coins as well)<sup>40</sup>. Coins referring to IOVI ULTORI were also minted during Alexander's whole reign, and are therefore difficult to connect with specific events<sup>41</sup>.

Quite a few coins of Alexander Severus show Roman goddesses such as Venus (Victrix and Caelestis) and Diana (Lucifera)<sup>42</sup>. Just like Heliogabalus' Venus coins, Alexander's coin types ascribed to Venus and Diana are hybrids and the reverses belong to imperial women. Only the reverse of the coin type mentioning VENUS VICTRIX, which belongs to Julia Mamaea, may convey a military message.

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<sup>36</sup> 56 coin types show only Mars; of five coin types it is not wholly clear whether Mars or Virtus is depicted.

<sup>37</sup> 'Trouble with the troops began early': Potter 2004, 165. *Denarii*: opinions differ on the money used to pay the soldiers. However, 'gold and silver coins may well have formed the prime medium of military pay' (Hekster 2003, 28). Discussion about money used to pay the soldiers: see Hekster 2003, 28 (footnote 34).

<sup>38</sup> Nine coin types are at issue here: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 4, 5, 18, 19, 20, 34, 35, 387, 423.

<sup>39</sup> IOVI CONSERVATORI: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 140 (222-228), 141 (222-228), 197 (228-231), 198 (228-231), 199 (228-231), 200 (228-231), 558 (222-231), 559 (222-231). The coin type with the inscription IOVI STATORI (*RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 202), which means (as epithet of Jupiter) protector as well, can be added to the series mentioned above.

<sup>40</sup> IOVI[S] PROPUGNATOR[I]: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 201, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634.

<sup>41</sup> IOVI ULTORI: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 203, 412, 413, 560, 561, 562.

<sup>42</sup> VENUS VICTRIX: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 309. VENUS [CAEL]ISTIS: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 308. DEANA LUCIFERA: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 303. DIANA LUCIFERA: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 304.

## Sol

Although the sun god had an important function, it is not appropriate to equate Sol with the ‘great Olympians’ mentioned above. The cult of Sol played an additional role in Rome (and the Greek world)<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, before the reign of Commodus, Sol hardly ever appeared on the imperial coinage. During Commodus’ reign, however, Sol emerged on coins and medallions and may have been connected with a new age introduced by Commodus: ‘As much as Janus, Sol was a deity who could be intimately connected to the inauguration of a new age’<sup>44</sup>.

Septimius Severus paid considerable attention to the sun god. In 194, Septimius made Emesa one of the main cities of Syria-Phoenice. One of the reasons he did so must have been the status of Emesa as centre of the sun cult. In addition, in this period the existence of a college of *sacerdotes Dei Solis*, favoured by the imperial house, is attested for Rome<sup>45</sup>. From the reign of Caracalla onwards, Sol could measure up to the well-known Olympians and the god appears as *comes*, *augustus*, *invictus*, *oriens*, and *propugnator*<sup>46</sup>.

The sun god was also important to Heliogabalus, with seventeen coin types showing this deity. It is striking that more attention was paid to Sol as Heliogabalus’ rule progressed; in 219 two coin types are devoted to Sol, five in 220 and eight in 221<sup>47</sup>. This runs parallel to the period in which Heliogabalus’ priest emperorship was emphasized. It is not strange that Sol received more attention during Elagabal’s supremacy: both deities are sun gods. The use of the sun god Sol for preparing the way in Rome for the other sun god Elagabal could explain this tendency<sup>48</sup>. The fact that sixteen of the seventeen coin types referring to Sol are minted in Rome and that Sol appeared as *conservator Augusti*, just as Elagabal did, and as Sol Propugnator with a thunderbolt, seems to support this hypothesis<sup>49</sup>. The parallel between the Sol coins and the coins devoted to Sol’s Syrian equivalent cannot be accidental; the explanation that the coins are a continuation of a tradition begun by Commodus and continued by Septimius Severus and Caracalla may be too simple.

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<sup>43</sup> Wallraf 2001, 693-694.

<sup>44</sup> Hekster 2002, 100. The question whether or not the emperor associated himself with the deity will not be examined further here.

<sup>45</sup> Clauss 1990, 431.

<sup>46</sup> Wallraf 2001, 693-694.

<sup>47</sup> 219: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 17 and 289. 220: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 28, 300, 301, 302, 303. 221: *RIC* IV.II, nos. 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 318, 319, 320. Two coin types (*RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 63 (CONSERVATORI AUG) and 198 (SOLI PROPUGNATORI)) are undated.

<sup>48</sup> Clauss 1990, 432: ‘Der Weg in den eingangs erwähnten solaren Pantheismus war seit längerer Zeit beschritten und der Kult des Sol Invictus Elagabal diente in den Augen des Kaisers und seiner Ratgeber zur Verwirklichung dieses Synkretismus’.

<sup>49</sup> CONSERVATORI AUG: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 63. SOLI PROPUGNATORI: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 198.





Fig. 2. Coin of Alexander Severus. Rev.: SOL (RIC IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 500). Size: 400%.

Alexander did not renounce Sol. On the contrary, ‘(...) Sol erscheint häufiger als je zuvor auf den Münzrückseiten und wird gegen Ende seiner Regierungszeit fast zum ausschließlichen Münzbild’<sup>50</sup>. No fewer than 51 coin types show the sun god surpassing Jupiter on Alexander’s coins. Sol coins were most prominent in the period 230-235. No types on which Sol has a special function (for instance *conservator* or *propugnator*) are attested, only images of Sol either with a globe or with a whip. A chronological development may be responsible for Sol’s prominence on Alexander’s coins. Nevertheless, the continuation of a tradition cannot wholly explain the overwhelming prominence of Sol on coins issued in the period 230-235<sup>51</sup>.

### **The emperor as *pontifex maximus***

The Roman emperor not only showed his *pietas* by paying attention to the various deities of the Roman pantheon as described above, he also served the gods, and thereby the Roman empire and its inhabitants, as *pontifex maximus*. After the death of Lepidus in 12 B.C., the function of *pontifex maximus* fell to Augustus. Thereafter, every emperor, as leader of the *pontifices*, was automatically responsible for the maintaining of the *pax deorum*. The sacrificial

<sup>50</sup> Claus 1990, 433.

<sup>51</sup> Berrens argues that the prominence of Sol coin types during Alexander’s reign might have a connection with the imperial *virtus* (see Berrens 2004, 59). However, an explication for the combination of Sol and imperial *virtus* is lacking. Moreover, VIRTUS AUGUSTI is hardly advertised on Alexander’s coins during the period 230-235.

role of the emperor as *pontifex maximus* was expressed on, amongst other media, imperial coins<sup>52</sup>. The image of Heliogabalus making a sacrifice emerges on 27 coin types<sup>53</sup>. As in the case of Sol, the period in which a sacrificing Heliogabalus makes his appearance on coins corresponds with the phase of his rule in which his priesthood was emphasized most strongly. One coin type shows a sacrificing Heliogabalus for both 219 and 220, seventeen coin types with the sacrificing emperor are attested for 221, and six types for 222<sup>54</sup>. Because of this parallelism and the fact that the priest emperor often appears on these types while wearing oriental clothes, it is probable that Heliogabalus is expressing his piety to the Syrian Elagabal and not to the traditional Roman deities<sup>55</sup>. Concerning two undated *pietas* coins, however, it is hard to distinguish to which god(s) the young emperor expressed his *pietas*, to the ordinary Roman gods or to his own Elagabal<sup>56</sup>.

However, in the case of one coin type, it is clear that Heliogabalus is addressing the Syrian sun god: the top end of a bull's penis has been fixed to Heliogabalus' forehead<sup>57</sup>. This refers to the priestly status of the emperor as it was used on imperial coinage immediately after the emperor acquired the priestly title<sup>58</sup>. Similarly, it is evident that the three coin types bearing the legend PROVIDENTIA DEORUM involved the traditional gods<sup>59</sup>.

Images of the emperor sacrificing are much less prominent on Alexander's coinage: 24 types, all dated to the period 222-231, have survived<sup>60</sup>. Only three coin types show, next to the sacrificing Alexander, specific gods: Jupiter is depicted on all three of them and the emperor crowned by Mars appears on only one type<sup>61</sup>. The same three types (one dated to the period 228-231 and

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<sup>52</sup> On the sacrificial role of the emperor, see Gordon 1990, 199-231.

<sup>53</sup> Coin types with an image of a sacrificing Heliogabalus and referring to Elagabal (i.e. revolutionary legends concerning the deity Elagabal or Heliogabalus as Elagabal's high priest, images of the conical stone) will be discussed in the paragraph 'The emperor and his unique status'.

<sup>54</sup> 219: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 24; 220: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 307; 221: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 177, 178, 179, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330; 222: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 52, 53, 181, 334, 335, 336. Undated: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 202 and 203.

<sup>55</sup> Heliogabalus in oriental garb: *BMCREV*, Elagabalus, nos. 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 268, 269, 270, 338, 339, 340, 341, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 446§, 449, 454, 455, 455\*.

<sup>56</sup> *Pietas* coins: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 126 and 127.

<sup>57</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 24.

<sup>58</sup> Kregel 1997. See further: Kaizer, 2005. Mattingly refers to it as a 'horn': *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 24.

<sup>59</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 128, 129, 130.

<sup>60</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 49, 50, 54, 55, 68, 69, 70, 81, 195, 273, 401, 437, 438, 446, 447, 468, 469, 470, 484, 485, 486, 487, 555, 556. Another type shows Julia Maesa sacrificing (*RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 310).

<sup>61</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 195, 555, 556.

two to 222-231) have a military connotation. Alexander seems to call upon the gods to maintain the harmony in the army (FIDES MILITUM) during the period in which the tensions with the Persians had begun to develop. Although the *pietas* of Alexander is partly shown by the great number of coins devoted to the Olympian gods, few references to a sacrificing emperor and also few direct references to *pietas* are attested<sup>62</sup>. Moreover, only six coins types which advertise PROVIDENTIA DEORUM are mentioned<sup>63</sup>.

### The emperor and his unique status

‘The amazing phenomenon of a Roman emperor so obsessed by fanatical zeal that he could subordinate the obligations of his imperial office to the claims of a foreign deity and invest the most bestial sensuality with a quasi-religious character, presents a problem for the student of religious psychology rather than for the historian or numismatist’<sup>64</sup>.

As this citation shows, the ‘religious behaviour’ of Heliogabalus has determined the overall image of his reign, not only in antiquity but also in modern times. This image largely originates from a few ancient authors who inform us about Heliogabalus’ reign: Cassius Dio, Herodian and the unknown writer of Heliogabalus’ life in the *Historia Augusta*. Heliogabalus’ religious excesses are frequently emphasized in all of these three works. The image of the young monarch that Dio and the author of the *Historia Augusta* sketch is a compilation of gossip and anecdote. They describe the religious excesses as one of the many oddities by which the reign of this ‘lunatic’ was characterized. On the other hand, Herodian interprets Heliogabalus’ religious behaviour more in the light of his cultural background<sup>65</sup>. This does not mean that Herodian offers a balanced view of Heliogabalus and his reign. He does not strive for objectivity in his narrative of Heliogabalus’ emperorship but like Dio and the author of the *Historia Augusta* offers biased stories about the emperor.

The coins which inform us about Heliogabalus’ religious reforms are less subjective but also less informative. Thirty-one coin types show either the Syrian sun god in the form of a black conical stone or the emperor fulfilling his priestly duty. The greater part refers to the emperor as *invictus sacerdos*, *sacerdos dei soli Elagabali* or *summus sacerdos*<sup>66</sup>. The coin types which emphasize the priestly status of the emperor, then, can be dated to the period 220-

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<sup>62</sup> PIETAS: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 170, 209, 292, 293, 312.

<sup>63</sup> PROVIDENTIA DEORUM: *RIC* IV.II, Alexander Severus, nos. 172, 294, 295, 597, 598, 599.

<sup>64</sup> *RIC* IV.II, 23-24.

<sup>65</sup> Sommer 2004, 105-106.

<sup>66</sup> INVICTUS SACERDOS AUG: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 86, 87, 88, 191, 350, 351; SACERD[os] DEI SOLI ELAGABALI: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 131, 132, 133, 133A, 133B, 134, 135, 194, 369, 370, 371; SUMMUS SACERDOS: *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 146, 147, 200.



Fig. 3. Coin of Heliogabalus. Rev.: INVICTUS SACERDOS (*RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, no. 88). Size: 300%

222. At that time, the religious function of the most prominent man in the Roman empire was already known; even before his arrival in Rome, Heliogabalus had sent a portrait to this city:

‘So an enormous picture was painted of him as he appeared in public performing as a priest. Also in the picture was a portrait of the Emesene god, to whom he was represented making a favourable sacrifice. The picture was sent to Rome with orders that it should hang right in the middle of the senate house, very high up over the head of the statue of Victory’<sup>67</sup>.

The portrait made the *baitylos* and the deity Elagabal familiar to the population of the *urbs Roma*. As a matter of fact, just like the other inhabitants of the empire, they could have known these images already from circulating imperial coins. Baldus dates the coin types bearing the legend *SANCTO DEO SOLI ELAGABAL*, minted in Antioch, to Heliogabalus’ journey to the west in 218/219<sup>68</sup>. Unfortunately, the coins with the same legend minted in Rome are undated<sup>69</sup>.

Images of the deity Elagabal are also important on coins showing the legend *CONSERVATOR AUG[usti]*, which have been mentioned above. It is noticeable that the god is much less emphasized in comparison with the attention paid to the priestly status of the emperor. Presumably, it follows that Heliogabalus seems to attach more importance to the presentation of himself

<sup>67</sup> Herodianus, 5.5.6. Translation: C.R. Whittaker (1970).

<sup>68</sup> Baldus 1989, 473. *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 195, 196, 196A, 197.

<sup>69</sup> *RIC* IV.II, Elagabalus, nos. 143 and 144.

before the Roman people as priest emperor than to the propagation of his Syrian god to the inhabitants of Rome, the military camps and the empire at large. The sizeable amount of coins with an image of a sacrificing emperor, which has been discussed earlier, suggests the same. This does not take away the fact that coins showing only Elagabal were important in Heliogabalus' reign. The precious metal from which five coin types (four *aurei* and one gold medallion) were struck probably reflects the importance Heliogabalus attached to the deity.

There is no evidence on coins of Elagabal's presence in Rome during Alexander's emperorship. Likewise, Dio states that the deity was sent back to his homeland by decree of the senate<sup>70</sup>. Yet, there is one coin type of Alexander Severus, minted in Antioch, bearing the legend SACERDOS URBIS and thereby referring to the priestly status of the emperor<sup>71</sup>. This undated coin type may have been minted in 222, the year in which Alexander was made Caesar. The coin, then, has no special significance since Heliogabalus, as Augustus, was responsible in the first place. Another possibility could downplay the exceptionality of the coin as well: the coin may reflect an intermediate stage during Alexander's reign in which the mint masters were still heavily influenced by Heliogabalus' idiosyncratic self-representation. This remains, however, very speculative and a decisive answer concerning the significance of this coin cannot be given. Labelling the coin 'irrelevant' in advance is therefore not justified.

The religiously based sacralised status of a monarch was not only advertised by references to the emperor's appearance as high priest of an 'exotic deity'. Stars that are present on the coinage of both Heliogabalus and Alexander may give an indication about the special status of the monarchs too. For Heliogabalus, 107 coin types showing a star on the reverse are attested, while only eleven types with a star minted during Alexander's reign are mentioned. The star has been interpreted as a 'solar symbol'<sup>72</sup>. This seems plausible; Heliogabalus claimed a special relation with the sun god Elagabal. At any rate, the star has presumably some connection to Heliogabalus' religious reforms and thus with his special status; the appearance of the star on coins runs parallel to coins from 220-222 on which the deity Elagabal and his imperial priest loom large.

Just like the SACERDOS URBIS coin, Alexander's coins with a star possibly reflect, because of the small number, an intermediate phase after Heliogabalus' reign. When we take Mattingly's interpretation of the star as 'solar symbol' for granted, the excessive attention Alexander paid to Sol on his

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<sup>70</sup> Dio, 79.21.2.

<sup>71</sup> RIC IV.II, Alexander Severus, no. 297.

<sup>72</sup> BMCRE V, ccxxxv.

coins, and thus the special relation of the emperor with the sun god, could also possibly explain the appearance of stars on Alexander's coins.

However, precedents may offer an explanation. Stars appear on the coins of a few imperial predecessors as well. The most famous example must be the *sidus Iulium* added as a homage to his deified father on Augustus' coins<sup>73</sup>. Coins of Tiberius show a star above the head of the deified Augustus, again linking the star to deification<sup>74</sup>. Commodus also has stars on his coins, but his stars are quite exceptional: they appear in great numbers only in the last year of his reign, when Commodus' identification with Hercules was at his height. The interpretation of Commodus' stars as 'signs of good omen' seems therefore inconclusive; in my view the link between Commodus' identification with Hercules and the appearance of stars on his coinage is no coincidence<sup>75</sup>. The possibility that the stars have something to do with Commodus' special status cannot be excluded. Although Commodus connects himself with Sol during his reign, the extraordinary appearance of stars solely in 192, the year in which Hercules played such an important role, does not plead for an interpretation of the stars as 'solar symbols'<sup>76</sup>.

Finally, a fourth century parallel exists. One new issue of Julian the Apostate shows both a bull and stars. These coins may have a mithraic connotation: not only the bull but also the stars, which represent Aldebaran and Antares (equivalents of Cautes and Cautopates), refer to the deity Mithras<sup>77</sup>. With these coins, Julian the Apostate possibly claimed a special relation with Mithras by which the emperor enhanced his own status.

It seems, then, that stars on coins of the emperors mentioned above indicate the special divine status of the emperor, either as newly created god or as monarch with a special connection to the gods, including, but not exclusively, sun gods.

### **Tradition, continuity and renewal**

The comparison between Heliogabalus' and Alexander Severus' religious coins on specific points (the attention paid to the Roman gods, the role of the emperor as *pontifex maximus* and the religiously based sacralised status of the ruler) gives an indication as to Alexander's 'traditionality' concerning religion. Compared to his cousin Heliogabalus, with his religious preferences, Alexander certainly fits better into Roman religious tradition. The *pietas*

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<sup>73</sup> *Sidus Iulium*: Ross Taylor 1975, 90 ff. Coins with *sidus Iulium*: *RIC I*, Augustus, nos. 141, 253, 271.

<sup>74</sup> *RIC I*, Tiberius, nos. 1, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Stars as 'signs of good omen': *BMCRE IV*, clxxf. See further: Kaiser-Raiß 1980, 95 (footnote 420).

<sup>76</sup> Commodus and Sol: Hekster 2002, 100-101. Commodus does apply the epithet 'Invictus', which refers presumably to Hercules and not to Sol. (Hekster 2002, 134).

<sup>77</sup> Vanderspoel 1998.

Alexander showed to the traditional Roman deities, in particular Jupiter and Mars, is apparent. Although Heliogabalus did not ignore those gods, the difference between the two emperors concerning the great Olympians is clear. Nevertheless, in other aspects Alexander was not the traditionalist that the author of the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor and Orosius make their readers believe. The young monarch hardly advertised his role as *pontifex maximus* to the Roman subjects. One could speculate that Alexander in this way tried to distance himself from the priest emperor Heliogabalus. On the other hand, Alexander continued to pay attention to the sun deity Sol, implicitly connecting himself to Heliogabalus, who favoured the sun god Elagabal. Sol was most prominent on Alexander's coinage during the last years of his reign. Although Commodus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla already propagated the sun god to the Roman population, the quantity of Sol coins minted during Alexander's reign was without precedent. Moreover, the stars on Alexander's coins probably emphasize the special status of Alexander, based on his connection with Sol. Of course, the significance of Sol was marginal in comparison to Elagabal as supreme god, but it is telling that sun deities, either Sol or Elagabal, occupied an important place in the Roman pantheon during the rule of both child emperors.

In conclusion, Alexander seems to have broken with the exceptional religious representation of his predecessor by banishing the deity Elagabal from his coins and returning the prominent positions in the Roman pantheon to the traditional deities. Alexander's traditionality, however, has been overemphasized both in antiquity and in modern times; Alexander's religious policy, as it was advertised on his coins, was in some ways not only influenced by Heliogabalus but also renewing in itself.

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For figs. 1-3: <http://www.coinarchives.com/a/>

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