

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xxxvii + 381. ISBN 978-0-521-89555-2 (Hardback).

An accurate assessment of the life and reign of the priest emperor Elagabalus is always a difficult task. Due to his *damnatio memoriae*, material sources concerning his rule are rare, while ancient historiography despises him as an outrageous tyrant. In his recent study “The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?” Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado (subsequently P.) faces these problems and attempts to examine all ancient sources relating to the predecessor of Severus Alexander thus aiming to distinguish the emperor’s “character of fact” in his real name Varius from the “creature of fiction”, Elagabalus (p. 2). The motivation for this approach is P.’s perception that modern scholars do not use the historiographical propositions on Elagabalus with sufficient critical scrutiny and objectivity.

P.’s book is divided into five parts: an outline of the development of a theory and methodology for his inquiry (1–24); an examination of the relevant historiographers focusing on Elagabalus (i.e., Cassius Dio, Herodian, the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor and the *Epitome de Caesaribus*) (25–56); an inquiry of the material sources that have survived the emperor’s violent overthrow (i.e., coins, inscriptions, papyri, sculptures and archaeological sites) (57–161); a speculation about Elagabalus’ childhood and the motives for his public actions (162–259); and observations of the final results in the context of the history of the Roman Empire, with particular emphasis on the Severan period (pp. 260–284). Supporting appendices including, *inter alia*, catalogues of relevant coins, inscriptions and papyri, complete the study and provide the reader with useful information for further research.

P.’s approach attacks the so-called “credulous assumptions” (p. 3) of modern scholars and demands evidence for historiographical propositions. According to him, historical truth, which should be the ultimate aim of modern scholarship, can only derive from facts that ancient historiography is unable to provide. Instead, only archaeological evidence is capable of revealing facts and thus proving the allegations stated by ancient historiographers. Therefore, in his examination, P. gives priority to material rather than historiographical sources, since they provide the only access to the non-fictional character of Elagabalus. However, although his method seemingly combines all relevant types of sources in a critical manner, it underestimates the value of ancient historiography.

The aim of the second chapter is to demonstrate the irrelevance of ancient historiography for the detection of factual evidence. In his examination of the diverse intentions of the relevant historians P. generally adopts the current scholarly consensus on them. Thus he regards Herodian as an historical novelist, while the *Historia Augusta* is considered to be of no evidential value for the study of the person of Elagabalus. Their assumptions, as well as those of Dio, Aurelius Victor and the *Epitome* are evaluated through an apparatus constructed around several questions (pp. 21; 294); the inquiry results in the clarification that most of the sources’ propositions are unverifiable as factual evidence. P. is rightly skeptical about Dio’s portrayal of Elagabalus, but he fails to determine the essential point for his justifiable position. Dio’s method of inquiry, i.e., his confidence in the trustworthiness of the

accounts on Elagabalus provided by eye-witnesses (as Dio was absent from Rome during his reign), should not be regarded as the main point of criticism. Perhaps P. should have considered whether a potential impact of Severus Alexander on the historian can be detected, since Dio reached the peak of his career under this emperor and also wrote down his histories during his reign, while Elagabalus was deemed as a *persona non grata*. P. also incorrectly assumes that ancient historiographers were unaware of the difference between reality and fiction (p. 35). Thus P. misconceives both the ancient historian's sources and methods of inquiry and Dio's potential personal intentions in regard to Severus Alexander, affecting his depiction of Elagabalus.

The third chapter reconstructs the emperor's persona entirely from archaeological evidence. The reader is therefore encouraged to accept P.'s assumption of the irrelevance of ancient historiography and should embrace the notion that material sources provide the only available access to information about Elagabalus. Although P. occasionally has to make use of the historiographical evidence to aid his line of argument and therefore cannot keep up his intended approach throughout his entire analysis, he nevertheless gives an accurate account of most of the relevant artifacts, concentrating in particular on the emperor's official nomenclature and presentation. Brief summaries at the end of each section help to detect all crucial findings made by P., whose collection of all types of material sources is as laudable as it is enriching for further research on Elagabalus. Nevertheless, criticism must be made of P.'s occasionally far too superficial treatment of some of the material. For example P. is aware of the problematic classification of diverse busts identifying Elagabalus, Caracalla or Geta, but fails to discuss these instances in detail, thus depriving the reader of critical understanding of the matter. Instead of simply presenting all probable sculptures of Elagabalus without any commentary, he should have clarified his explanations by adding some examples regarding the above mentioned difficulties.¹

The next chapter seeks to analyze the reasons for Elagabalus' behavior during his reign, emphasizing particularly his self-presentation as a priest, which is seen as the key to the understanding of his whole personality. For this purpose P. speculates about the emperor's priesthood, childhood and family relations in order to obtain an idea of his character. Contrary to his proposed approach he does not rely entirely on factual evidence, but utilizes the historiographical account as well, thereby proving his methodology inconsequential. Nevertheless, some aspects of his interpretation deserve mention: for instance, by analyzing two inscriptions P. succeeds in demonstrating that the child-emperor was probably born in or near Rome, instead of the Syrian Emesa. If P.'s conjecture is right, before the boy began his education as a priest for the Syrian sun-god in Emesa, he followed his mother Soemias, who herself probably accompanied her husband and the real father of the later emperor, Sextus Varius Marcellus, through Britain and Rome. Less convincing however is P.'s interpretation of the boy's sacerdotal policy as an

¹ Cf. H.B. Wiggers, M. Wegner (edd.), *Caracalla. Geta. Plautilla. Macrinus bis Balbinus. Das Römische Herrscherbild* III,1, Berlin 1971, pp. 86, 107, 148, 150f. on the figures 1, 4, 13, 15.

“adolescent rebellion in pursuit of personal freedom” (p. 243) which does not stand up to the ancient sources.

The last chapter briefly discusses the results of the inquiry and puts them into the wider context of the history of the Roman Empire. Once again there is an emphasis on the study's purpose to admonish modern scholars to utilize their sources more cautiously. This, together with the preference for material over historiographical sources, leads P. to the conclusion that the factual evidence clearly states that Elagabalus governed his empire in the same manner as his predecessors in terms of administration. P. also concludes that the historiographical accounts are almost all unverifiable and a good number therefore outright fictitious.

In sum, P.'s book leaves the reader with conflicting impressions. His view of modern scholarship's uncritical approach to ancient sources is erroneous and perhaps more relevant to the research methods of the beginning to mid-20th century than to current research tendencies. His methodology is inconsequential and takes on a far too extreme position in relation to ancient historiography. On the other hand he is the first author to collect and reprocess various sources concerning Elagabalus and lay them out clearly in the body of the text as well as in the appendices, thereby unquestionably enriching scholarly research and shedding new light on the emperor's childhood and priesthood.

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