

Elagabalus (218–222 AD): East Meets West

With the assassination of Caracalla, Macrinus became emperor, but the powerful Severan family would not accept the loss of power so easily. They immediately began plotting. In response, Macrinus expelled the family from Antioch and Julia Domna, already seriously ill, starved herself to death. Her sister, Julia Maesa, began to spread the rumor that her grandson, Varius Avitus Bassianus, son of her daughter Julia Soaemias, was the secret child of Caracalla. The child was the high priest of the Syrian god El-Gabal, and thus he was called Elagabalus. Sometimes he is also called Heliogabalus, from the Greek god Helios, who was considered the Greek equivalent of El-Gabal.

Julia Maesa convinced the Third Legion and its general, Comazon, to proclaim Elagabalus emperor. More legions followed, discontent that Macrinus had ended the ill-conceived war against Parthia and revoked the high salaries Caracalla had bestowed on the troops. The legions loyal to Elagabalus and Julia met Macrinus's forces at Antioch and defeated the emperor. Macrinus fled but was captured and executed. Elagabalus was hailed by all as emperor.

Before Elagabalus and his family arrived in Italy, his supporters sent a painting of him to the Roman Senate. Elagabalus was portrayed with mascara and priestly robes, characteristics of an Easterner, which was offensive to traditional Roman values. This impression was made worse when the new emperor actually arrived. Elagabalus entered the city on foot while a meteorite, the embodiment of his god, was carried on a triumphal chariot in a bed of priceless gems. He built a massive temple to his god on the Palatine Hill. Elagabalus made the important step of incorporating his god into the Roman pantheon as *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquerable Sun. He forced influential Romans to take part in the Eastern rites of the god. Elagabalus gave high office to unworthy supporters, such as Comazon, who he made Praetorian prefect. His grandmother, Julia Maesa, was the real power behind the throne, however, and he made her the first woman to sit in the senate. As long as she could control him, she did not care about his antics.

However, Elagabalus's conduct soon became worse. He mocked Roman conventions, marrying a sacred vestal virgin while at the same time flaunting his homosexuality by naming a chariot driver his husband. He lived a lavish life and further devalued the currency to pay for it. Rumors began to spread that were almost certainly not true—that he had guests at a party smothered to death in an avalanche of rose petals, that he sought to have a sex change—but speak to how Elagabalus was perceived. In response, rebellions broke out among the soldiers, including the very legion that elevated him to power. These rebellions were put down, but Elagabalus continued to provoke with his behavior, angering both the senate and the army.

Julia Maesa realized that her grip on power was weakening due to Elagabalus's behavior, so she turned to another grandchild—the hard working and straight-laced Severus Alexander, son of her other daughter Julia Mamaea. She was able to convince Elagabalus to name Alexander as Caesar by assuring him that Alexander would take care of the dull business of the state that Elagabalus hated. However, Elagabalus soon realized that his cousin was preferred both by his grandmother and the Praetorian

Guard. He stripped Alexander of his titles and imprisoned him in the palace. Rumor spread that Alexander was dead. In response, the Praetorians demanded that Alexander be brought to them to prove he was alive. Elagabalus complied, and led Alexander to the Praetorian camp. When Elagabalus attempted to reprimand the Praetorians for favoring Severus Alexander over himself, the Praetorians rioted. They killed Elagabalus and his mother and proclaimed Alexander emperor.

Elagabalus suffered the *damnatio memoriae*, as his reign was seen as one of unbridled excess and moral decadence. While the Roman Empire approached crisis, Elagabalus squandered time and resources and helped bring about the Crisis of the Third Century. However, the unpopular Eastern religion that characterized his reign demonstrated a larger trend of the growing influence of Eastern cults in Rome. Sol Invictus would continue to be worshipped in the Roman pantheon until the triumph of Christianity, and many aspects of the god would influence how Romans later understood and depicted the Christian god.

Summary:

- Elagabalus came to the throne thanks to the scheming of his grandmother, Julia Maesa, who helped him overthrow Emperor Macrinus and restore the Severan Dynasty to power.
- Julia Maesa attempted to rule through Elagabalus, and through his intervention she was given immense power, including a seat in the senate, but her grandson proved difficult to control.
- Elagabalus was a priest of the Syrian god El-Gabal, and incorporated the god as part of the Roman pantheon as Sol Invictus. His devotion to this Eastern religion alienated many Romans, but marks an important trend—the increasing importance of Eastern cults in Roman life.
- Elagabalus further alienated the people, the senate, and the army with his luxurious lifestyle and sexual antics.
- Julia Maesa was alarmed that Elagabalus's unpopularity was threatening her power, and she arranged for him to be replaced by his more straight-laced cousin, Severus Alexander. Elagabalus and his mother were murdered by the Praetorian Guard.