

Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for *Studia Variana*

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

II: Nomen Varianum

Introduction: the question of this boy's identity and his nomenclature.

The question most urgently to be addressed by these studies is that of their subject's identity and his nomenclature. It is urgent, because in order to proceed one must choose a proper name whereby to call him in the context of these studies. The question may be stated in terms of contrasting allegations. This emperor's coinage and inscriptions unanimously designate him by the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, or by some part thereof. This nomenclature implies a proposition, explicitly stated as such in much of his epigraphy: *Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus Pius Felix, Divi Severi Pii nepos, Divi Antonini Pii Magni filius*: that he is the son of another emperor, likewise designated by that same nomenclature.¹ In contrast, the ancient historiography concerning him contains and reports a variety of allegations, some sustaining, others contradicting or impugning that assertion, yet others professing agnosticism with respect to it. It also calls him by a wide variety of names, including Avitus, Bassianus, and Varius, as well as Heliogabalus. His nomenclature is therefore controversial.

In order to investigate this controversy, one must therefore compare a constant, the unanimity of his imperial artefacts, with variations in the relevant ancient historiography. In so doing, one must distinguish between two separate questions, although they arise together, and must eventually be answered together: that of this boy's paternity, and that of his nomenclature. This is because of the intricate relationship of each of these to that of his identity. Each is part of that question, and both are controversial. That relationship is therefore determined, on the one hand, by the controversy concerning his paternity, and, on the other, by the role played in that controversy by his nomenclature. Nomenclature is used as an instrument in that controversy, as it is conducted in antiquity by opposing sets of partisans. It is thus relevant, in more ways than one,

¹ Inscriptions (e.g.): *CIL* 2, 4766, 4767 4805; *CIL* 3, 773, 6058, 6170,; *CIL* 6, 37183; *CIL* 8, 10308, etc., etc. Coins: *Thirion*, throughout. *Epigraphica* and *Numismatica Variana*, yet to be published, will provide full catalogues of both these sources.

to any enquiry into this boy's identity. Chronology is also relevant, insofar as there may be a difference between why and how that controversy is conducted in this emperor's lifetime, or in the reign of his successor, and why and how it is conducted by later historians.

Let us therefore now review the way both his paternity and his nomenclature are treated in the ancient historiographical sources. This shall be done in as near as possible to chronological order, where known. In aid of this intention, and for the sake of clarity, it is opportune, just before embarking on this review, to set out the stylistic and rhetorical conventions operating in this study, stemming from the epistemological and methodological considerations discussed in its first part. As there explained, in order to avoid anachronism, yet provide for easy understanding, dates are given both according to the Roman and the Christian calendars. It will of course already have been realised, by virtue of the title of this study, that the name to be chosen for this boy is Varius. But until the reasons for that choice have been properly argued and convincingly demonstrated; until, therefore, by the end of this study, he shall have been so named, I would, in the name of methodological probity, beg the reader's patience with the various periphrases used here to refer to him. Perpetual indulgence is, moreover, requested for the use, throughout the whole range of these studies, of the present historic (given the absence from English of accusative-infinitive, subjunctive, or conditional constructions, elsewhere available for this purpose) to indicate the author's neutrality, with regard to the contents of unverified propositions in reported speech or texts.

This boy's identity and nomenclature in the ancient sources:

The controversy regarding this boy's paternity is reportedly launched by his mother, a Syrian lady, at the instigation of her mother, Maesa, who is the sister of the empress Domna, wife of Severus. Domna's niece, Soaemis,² this boy's mother, allegedly imputes his paternity, not to her husband, recently dead, hence incapable of contradiction, but to the son of her imperial aunt, her recently murdered cousin, a Roman emperor officially designated Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but best known, even in his lifetime, by his nickname: Caracalla. This allegation is said, together with certain other factors,³ to lead to his elevation to the principate. He therefore adopts an official nomenclature, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, identical with that of his alleged imperial father.

² This form of her name is that used by *Dio* and *Herodian*. Other forms are Soaemias, used in coins and inscriptions, and Symiamira, used in the *Historia Augusta*. In these studies, Soaemis and Symiamira are used where appropriate to their respective referential contexts, while Soaemias is used as her default nomenclature.

³ Including bribery of the soldiers, reportedly already infatuated with the boy, on account of his beauty, and his prowess as a dancer, in performing the rituals of the sun god Elagabal, whose high priest he is; *Herodian*, 5.3.6-12.

This name is thenceforth proclaimed on his coins and his inscriptions.⁴

The allegation of this boy's imperial paternity is indignantly contradicted by that same ancient historian, Cassius Dio Cocceianus (vx. ca. 903-988=150-235), whose text is the earliest among those extant, relevant to study of this emperor, to report it. Dio calls him "Avitus, the son of Soaemis and Varius Marcellus", and continues to refer to him thus, occasionally thereafter.⁵ In so doing, Dio ascribes Soaemis' son's paternity to her lawful husband, Sextus Varius Marcellus, a Syro-Roman knight, later elevated to the senate.⁶ Dio, writing in Greek, is himself a Roman senator, as well as a contemporary of this boy's grandmother, Maesa, and of her sister, the empress Domna.⁷ He holds a provincial governorship, and is away from Rome throughout this emperor's reign. Moreover, he explicitly disclaims any contact with this boy, despite a brief period of proximity - but not coincidence - during an imperial journey near his province.⁸ Dio may survive this emperor by as much as a decade, into the reign of his cousin and successor, Alexander Severus, under whom he holds a consulship, and another provincial governorship and military command.⁹

While calling this boy Avitus, Dio goes on to observe that, shortly after his proclamation, the soldiers were already styling him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, Dio begins to call him Pseudantoninus, an epithet he uses repeatedly from that point on, while narrating the events of the uprising against Macrinus, and occasionally later.¹¹ At one point in this narrative, Dio lapses into calling him just Antoninus.¹² From the point at which Dio describes the boy emperor's triumphant entry into Antioch, calling him both Avitus and Pseudantoninus, he introduces a number of other epithets: Assyrius, Sardanapalus, and Tiberinus. Of these, Assyrius¹³ and Tiberinus¹⁴ are repeated only once each, while Sardanapalus tends to replace Pseudantoninus as Dio's preferred form of reference to him.¹⁵ In one badly mutilated passage of

⁴ *Dio* 79.32.2. *Thirion*, throughout. *Epigraphica Variana*, yet to be published, throughout.

⁵ Avitus: *Dio* 79.30.2; 79.31.2; 79.32.2; 80.1.1; 80.3.1.

⁶ For his career, see: Pflaum, Hans Georg, *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres Sous le Haut-Empire Romain*, *BIFB*, 57.1, 1960, (henceforth Pflaum, *Carrières*) p. 638-642.

⁷ *Dio* 78.18.2-3; Millar, F., *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964, (henceforth *FMISCD*) p. 19.

⁸ *Dio* 80.7.4.

⁹ *FMISCD*, p. 168-170; Bering-Staschewski, R., *Römische Zeitgeschichte bei Cassius Dio*, (henceforth *B-S/RZCD*), 1981, p. 3-4.

¹⁰ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus: *Dio* 79.32.2.

¹¹ Pseudantoninus: *Dio* 79.32.4; 79.34.4; 79.35.1; 79.36.1; 79.37.2; 79.38.1,2; 79.39.4, 6; 79.40.2; 80. 1.1; 80.7.3; 80.12.2; 80.18.4; 80.19.1*.

¹² Antoninus: *Dio* 79.34.7.

¹³ Assyrius: *Dio* 80.1.1; 80.11.2.

¹⁴ Tiberinus: *Dio* 80.1.1; 80.21.3.

the manuscript, reconstructed by its modern editor, just after telling how this boy “styled himself emperor and Caesar, the son of Antoninus (Caracalla), the grandson of Severus, Pius, Felix, Augustus, proconsul and holder of the tribunician power, assuming these titles before they had been voted,”¹⁶ Dio may go on to say that “he used, not the [na]me [of Avitus,] but that of his [pretended] f[ather].” Dio uses the name Elagabal, in the form Ἐλεγάβαλος, only to refer to the god.¹⁷

Regarding the question of how to evaluate Dio’s allegations concerning this boy’s paternity, it is necessary to consider the circumstances under which they are made, and his possible motivations. Given their contents, these allegations can only have been made sometime, and may have been made at any time, after this boy’s proclamation. But they would most likely not be written down, let alone made public, till after his death, since they contradict the official justification for his tenure of the principate. Thus they are most likely to have been recorded during the reign of Alexander Severus, 975-988=222-235. For it is unlikely that Dio outlived Alexander as well, continuing to write beyond his early eighties. But this does not necessarily mean that this text was made public during Alexander’s reign. For while it is clear, by virtue of the epigraphic evidence of a *damnatio memoriae*,¹⁸ that Alexander sought to obliterate all record of his predecessor’s reign, it is not at all clear that Alexander had anything to gain by impugning his cousin’s claim to Caracallan paternity, since his own claim to the principate was inextricably tied up with his predecessor’s tenure of that office, which, in turn, was held by virtue of that claim.

There are two ways in which this is so. On the one hand, Alexander could claim legitimate succession to the principate, because he had been adopted, and given the title of Caesar, by a reigning emperor. But if that emperor’s tenure of the principate was deemed illegitimate, what did this imply for his successor’s? On the other hand, Alexander could also claim to be the natural son of Caracalla, thereby rendering his tenure of the principate independent of his predecessor’s. According to Herodian, and to Alexander’s inscriptions, the latter claim was that actually made, exactly as it had been by his predecessor.¹⁹ So the same suspicions that apply to his predecessor’s claim therefore apply to his own. Thus to revive those suspicions, doubtless widespread at the time of the earlier boy’s accession, as Dio’s text certainly does, could hardly serve the pur-

¹⁵ Sardanapalus: *Dio* 80.1.1; 80.2.4; 80.10.2; 80.11 (Xiph.); 80.13.1; 80.15.1; 80.17.1; 80.19.1, 2 (twice); 80 (LXXX).2.2.

¹⁶ *Dio* 80.2.3.

¹⁷ Elagabal (Ἐλεγάβαλος): *Dio* 79.31.1; 80.11.1 (twice); 80.11 (Xiph.); 80.12 (Xiph.); 80.17.3; 80.21.2.

¹⁸ Numerous inscriptions of Alexander’s predecessor have had his name obliterated. They are listed in *Epigraphica Variana*, yet to be published.

¹⁹ *Herodian* 5.3.10; *CIL* 8.5.2 (index) p. 146, *maiores*.

poses of Alexander's imperial policy. For this reason, I think it likely that Dio's text, or at least the relevant portion thereof, was not made public during Alexander's reign. If this is so, it makes it easier to trust Dio's allegations in this respect, since it removes a possible incentive to lie, that of toadying to Alexander. Indeed, Dio may have even taken a certain risk in making and recording them.

The next historian in the relevant canon is Herodian (vx. ca. 931-1003=178-250). He is somewhat younger than Dio, and probably less socially eminent.²⁰ But he is also, self-reportedly, a contemporary of the persons and events he describes, albeit not claiming acquaintance with, or direct witness of this emperor. Also writing in Greek, probably within some three decades of those events, he says that the allegation of this boy's imperial paternity "may or may not have been true".²¹ This profession of equanimous agnosticism does Herodian credit as an historian, almost making up for his fuzziness of focus and lack of detail. It also shows that the controversy was no longer heated, and its outcome no longer consequential, inasmuch as it does not appear to affect Herodian's fortunes either way. Venturing no theory of his own as to this boy's paternity, he first refers to him as Bassianus.²² Like Dio, Herodian reserves the name Elagabal, in the form Ἐλαγαβᾶλος, for the god.²³ He says that immediately this boy reaches the camp where he is to be proclaimed, the whole garrison salutes him as Antoninus.²⁴ From this, and subsequent usages reported by Herodian, including one where the soldiers call him the new Antoninus,²⁵ and another where they honour him with the title of son of Antoninus,²⁶ it would appear, as is also suggested by later texts, that this name had, already by Herodian's period, virtually assumed the status of a title, much as had previously occurred with Caesar. This, in any case, is how this boy is referred to in the rest of Herodian's text.²⁷

Eusebius (vx. 1013-1092=260-339) writing in Greek,²⁸ within the 11th Roman century (early 4th Christian),²⁹ ventures no opinion as to his paternity. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, he calls him

²⁰ Cassola, Filippo, *Sulla vita e sulla personalità dello storico Erodiano*, (henceforth Cassola, *SVPSE*) NRS, 41, 1957, p.216, §2.

²¹ *Herodian*, 5.3.10.

²² Bassianus: *Herodian* 5.3.3 (twice); 5.3.6.

²³ Elagabal (Ἐλαγαβᾶλος): *Herodian* 5.3.4; 5.5.7.

²⁴ Saluted as Antoninus: *Herodian* 5.3.12.

²⁵ The new Antoninus: *Herodian* 5.4.2.

²⁶ Son of Antoninus: *Herodian* 5.4.3

²⁷ Antoninus: *Herodian* 5.4.5; 5.4.6; 5.4.8; 5.4.10; 5.5.1; 5.5.3; 5.6.5; 5.6.7; 5.7.4; 5.7.5; 5.8.2; 5.8.3; 5.8.4; 5.8.5; 5.8.6; 5.8.8; 5.8.9; 5.8.10.

²⁸ *Eusebius, HE; Eusebius, CCQS*.

²⁹ 11th century a.u.c. = A.D. 248-347; 4th century A.D. = a.u.c. 1054-1153

“another Antoninus”;³⁰ in his *Chronicle*, “Antoninus Aurelius”.³¹

Aurelius Victor (fl. 1114-1142=361-389) writing his *Liber de Caesaribus*, in Latin, during the early 12th Roman, or mid to late 4th Christian century - thus long after the relevant events - reports this boy, without reservation, as “Bassiano genitus”, meaning the son of Caracalla.³² (Bassianus was Caracalla’s boyhood name, before he became Marcus Aurelius Antoninus). He calls him Marcus Antoninus, leaving out Aurelius (which is, coincidentally, his own *nomen*). Failing to mention this boy’s tenure of the priesthood of Elagabal, Victor goes on to say that he came to be called by the name of Heliogabalus, after taking refuge from Macrinus, Caracalla’s murderer and usurper, in that god’s shrine.

⁵ The *Epitome de Caesaribus*, an anonymous Latin text of unknown, but roughly similar date, likewise identifies him as “Caracallae filius,” the son of Caracalla.³³ Despite being thought by some to be closely related to Victor’s text, the *Epitome* differs significantly therefrom, with respect to this emperor’s nomenclature. Designating him as “Aurelius Antoninus Varius, also called Heliogabalus”, it goes on to explain his tenure of the name Heliogabalus by virtue of his mother’s grandfather, Bassianus, having been the priest of the Sun, “whom the Phoenicians, whence he was, call Heliogabalus”.³⁴ In addition, it alleges that this boy calls himself “Bassiana”, in consequence of self-castration.³⁵ Finally, it cites the insulting epithets “Tiberinus” and “Tractitius” (*sic*).³⁶

A late antique Latin text, the *Historia Augusta*, whose authorship and date are themselves the subject of ongoing controversy, but which must have been written sometime in the late 11th or early to mid 12th Roman century (mid to late 4th or early 5th Christian) reports this boy’s allegation of Caracallan paternity, initially without endorsing or rebutting it.³⁷ Going on to hint at the possibility of doubt,³⁸ sometimes suggesting belief,³⁹ at others the reverse,⁴⁰ it uses this allegation, or rather its implications of bastardy and adultery, respectively affecting this boy and his mother, to

³⁰ Eusebius, *HE*, 6.21.1.

³¹ Eusebius, *CCQS*, (*Eusebius*), *HE* (Sync 673.11), p. 178.

³² *AVLC*, 23.1.

³³ *AIEC*, 23.1.

³⁴ *AIEC* 23.2.

³⁵ *AIEC* 23.3. This allegation seems inconsistent with the growth of beard visible on his later coins.

³⁶ *AIEC* 23.7.

³⁷ *HA/OM* 9.4.

³⁸ *HA/IAH* 1.4-5.

³⁹ *HA/IAH* 2.1.

⁴⁰ *HA/IAH* 2.2; 3.1; 3.3.

cast slurs on them both.⁴¹ In later sections, however, this text explicitly, indeed indignantly, rejects this allegation.⁴² It seems to wish to have it both ways, using, on the one hand, the presumption of its truth to attack this boy as a bastard, and his mother as an adulteress, and, on the other, the assertion of its falsehood to attack him as an impostor, and her as a liar. This example of bad faith, one among many, shows why this text is particularly unreliable.

The *Historia Augusta* calls him Heliogabalus, without explanation, the first time it mentions him, though shortly after this it says that he “assumed the names Bassianus and Antoninus, for the Phoenicians give the name Heliogabalus to the Sun”.⁴³ Thereafter it goes on to call him Heliogabalus,⁴⁴ Bassianus,⁴⁵ Antoninus Heliogabalus,⁴⁶ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus,⁴⁷ Heliogabalus Antoninus,⁴⁸ Varius,⁴⁹ Varius Heliogabalus,⁵⁰ Antoninus,⁵¹ Varius Antoninus,⁵² Augustus,⁵³ Tiberinus, Tractatitius, Tractaticius or Tractitatus, and Impurus.⁵⁴ It is worth remarking that while it both suggests and states, at different points, disbelief in the story of this emperor’s imperial paternity, the *Historia Augusta* does not follow Dio in calling him by *Schimpfnamen* alluding to that disbelief. Rather it prefers to insult him on other grounds, calling him *Impurus*, focussing more on his alleged depravity; or *Tiberinus*, alluding to the fate of his corpse, reportedly thrown into the sewer leading to the Tiber; or *Tractitatus*, (rather than *Tractatitius* or *Tractaticius*, as this third term of abuse appears in two standard editions, Teubner and Loeb respectively) apparently referring, not as was once commonly supposed, to the dragging of his corpse through the streets, prior to its infumination, but rather, again, to his alleged depravity, translating most meaningfully as “manhandled.”⁵⁵

Among late antique authors who write about this emperor (excepting those who excerpt or

⁴¹ *HA/AH* 2.2.

⁴² *HA/AH* 17.4; 17.9; 33.8

⁴³ *HA/OM* 9.2.

⁴⁴ Heliogabalus: *HA/OM* 9.2; 9.3; 15.2. *HA/AH* 1.6; 2.1; 3.3; 5.1; 9.2; 10.1; 10.3; 11.6; 14.4; 15.1; 15.4; 16.5; 19.5; 22.8; 35.1.

⁴⁵ Bassianus: *HA/OM* 9.2; 9.4

⁴⁶ Antoninus Heliogabalus: *HA/OM* 15.1-2; *HA/AH* 18.3.

⁴⁷ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus: *HA/AD* 9.4

⁴⁸ Heliogabalus Antoninus: *HA/AH* 1.1

⁴⁹ Varius: *HA/AH* 1.1; 1.6; 2.1; 2.2; 9.2; 10.1; 14.2; 14.5

⁵⁰ Varius Heliogabalus: *HA/AH* 1.4; 17.4

⁵¹ Antoninus: *HA/AH* 1.5; 1.7; 3.1; 3.3 (bis); 9.2; 17.4; 17.9; 18.2; 32.9 (sese); 33.8

⁵² Varius Antoninus: *HA/AH* 3.1.

⁵³ Augustus: *HA/AH* 15.3

⁵⁴ Tiberinus, Tractaticius, Impurus: *HA/AH* 17.5

⁵⁵ Alföldy, Géza, *Zwei Schimpfnamen des Kaisers Elagabal: Tiberinus und Tractitatus*, *BHAC*, *BHAF* 4.12, 1972/4, p. 11-21.

epitomise Dio) only Eutropius (fl. ca. 1122=369) and Jerome (vx. 1100-1173=347-420), both writing in Latin, within the same time frame as that possibly encompassing the *Historia Augusta*, specifically mention this boy's paternity. Both allude to his claim to be the son of Caracalla, but stop short of endorsing it. Eutropius calls him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and says that he "was thought to be the son of Antoninus Caracalla". He also mentions his role as "priest of the temple of Heliogabalus".⁵⁶ Jerome, in his Latin version of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, which in this goes beyond the Greek text, refers to him as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and says that he "was thought to be the son of Caracalla".⁵⁷

The Chronographer of A.D. 354 (=1107 a.u.c.) lists his consulships, in the *Fasti Consulares*, under the name Antoninus.⁵⁸ The *Chronica Urbis Romae*, published together with those *Fasti*, cites him as Antoninus Eliogaballus.⁵⁹ The *Liber Generationis*, also published there-with, calls him Antoninus.⁶⁰

Ammianus Marcellinus (vx. 1083-1148=330-395) refers to him as Heliogabalus Antoninus.⁶¹

Paulus Orosius, in his *Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri VII* (1170=417), calls him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and mentions his tenure of the priesthood of Elagabal.⁶²

Epitoma Chronicon (1186-1208=433-455) gives him his full official nomenclature, M. Aurelius Antoninus, on first mention, and thereafter calls him Antoninus.⁶³

Consularia Constantinopolitana (after 1221=468) list his consulships under Antoninus.⁶⁴

Zosimus, writing sometime after 1251=498, alludes, albeit vaguely, to his link to the Severan dynasty: he tells us that the legions of the East "elevated to the empire a certain young man of Emesa because he had some family relationship with the mother of Antoninus (Caracalla)", and proceeds to call him Antoninus of Emesa.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 8.22.

⁵⁷ Jerome, *Chronicle*, p. 641 *Eusebius, CCQS (Hieronymus)* p. 179.

⁵⁸ *C354 Fasti*, a.p. Chr. 218-222.

⁵⁹ *C354 CUR*.

⁶⁰ *C354 LG*, I, 397.

⁶¹ *Ammianus Marcellinus* 26.6.19.

⁶² *OHAP*, VII.18.19.4.

⁶³ *PTEC*.

⁶⁴ *Eusebius, CCQS*.

Malalas (1233-1323=480-570), excerpted in the *Excerpta de Insidiis* (10th Christian century), calls him Antoninus Heliogabalus.⁶⁶

Cassiodorus (vx. 1243-1338=490-585), in his *Chronicle*, uses Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, once, Antoninus, twice, and Augustus, once, to enumerate his consulships. He also mentions the building of a Roman temple to Heliogabalus.⁶⁷

Hydatius, Bishop of Aquafalvia, (5th Christian century) lists his consulships under the name Antoninus.⁶⁸

Excerpta de Virtutibus et Vitiis, excerpting Dio's text, compiled, together with *Excerpta de Insidiis*, at the behest of the Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (A.D. 905-959), alternate between calling this boy Pseudantoninus and Sardanapalus.⁶⁹

Xiphilinus, a late 11th Christian century Byzantine monk, in his *Epitome* of Dio's history, follows Dio's nomenclatorial schema, outlined above.⁷⁰

Zonaras (fl. ca. A.D. 1118), epitomising Dio in his *Epitome Historiarum*, does not grant this boy a name when he first introduces him as "one of [the grandsons of Maesa]", but says shortly after that the troops "called him Antoninus" when they proclaimed him emperor. He later, like Dio, calls him Sardanapalus and Pseudantoninus, and also cites the epithets Tiberinus and Assyrius. But departing from Dio, Zonaras, having cited this emperor's worship of the god Elagabal, "even granting him precedence over Zeus", says that he was therefore also called by that god's name, in the form Ἐλεγαβάλας.⁷¹

Categorical analysis of the foregoing data yields the following results:

Regarding this boy's paternity, only Dio explicitly ascribes it to any specific individual other than Caracalla: namely, to Sextus Varius Marcellus. Only Herodian explicitly professes equanimous agnosticism, with respect to this boy's claim of Caracallan bastardy. Both Victor

⁶⁵ Zosimus, 1.10.1-2.

⁶⁶ *EHICP*, EI. §15.

⁶⁷ Cassiodorus, *Chronicle*, a.p.Chr. 219-222.

⁶⁸ Hydatius *DC*, 218-222.

⁶⁹ *EHICP*, EVV §403-414.

⁷⁰ Xiphilinus, 344.17 – 354.19.

⁷¹ Zonaras, *Epitome*, Lib. 12, Cap. 13-14.

and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* assent without reservation to that claim. Eutropius and Jerome report it, but ascribe it to others. The *Historia Augusta* vehemently denies it, in places, but seems equivocal in others. The chronicles and other texts of late antiquity (save Dio's excerpts and epitomisers) make no reference to his paternity.

As for his nomenclature, almost all the texts which call him by his full official imperial style, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, are late, as in the case of Eutropius, Jerome, Orosius, and the *Historia Augusta*, or very late, as in those of Cassiodorus and the *Epitoma Chronicon*. Dio does so also, twice. But far from endorsing this usage, he registers dissent, ascribing its use (or misuse) either to the boy himself, together with his handlers, or to the soldiers instrumental in his proclamation.

The binominal form Marcus Antoninus, omitting the *nomen*, Aurelius, is found only in Aurelius Victor.

The use of Antoninus on its own is the form most widely spread over the range of sources, beginning with Dio and Herodian, followed by Eusebius, the Chronographer of 354, the *Liber Generationis*, the *Historia Augusta*, the *Epitoma Chronicon*, the *Consularia Constantinopolitana*, Cassiodorus, Hydatius, and Zonaras.

The name Antoninus preceding some form or other of the name of the god Elagabal, applied to this emperor, is found as Antoninus Eliogaballus in the *Chronica Urbis Romae*; as Antoninus Heliogabalus in the *Historia Augusta*, and in Malalas.

Antoninus of Emesa is found only in Zosimus; Antoninus Aurelius only in Eusebius' *Chronicle*.

Aurelius Antoninus Varius is found only in *Epitome de Caesaribus*.

Augustus, standing alone, is found in the *Historia Augusta* and in Cassiodorus.

The name of the god Elagabal, applied to his high priest, and standing alone, appears in the Latin sources only in the form Heliogabalus, and is limited to Victor, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, and the *Historia Augusta*. In the Greek sources it appears as Ἐλεαγάβαλος, in Zonaras.

The name of the god Elagabal, applied to his high priest, is also found in combination,

standing in initial position, but only as Heliogabalus Antoninus, in both Ammianus and the *Historia Augusta*.

The name Avitus, applied to this boy, is limited to Dio.

Bassianus, applied to this boy, is found in Herodian, and in the *Historia Augusta*; also, but in feminine form, Bassiana, in the *Epitome de Caesaribus*.

Varius, standing alone, is found only in the *Historia Augusta*, and also there, in initial position of two, before either Antoninus or Heliogabalus.

Turning to the *Schimpfnamen*, Assyrius is found only in Dio and Zonaras, the latter epitomising the former. The same two texts, with the addition of *Excerpta de Virtutibus et Vitiis*, which also follow Dio, are the only ones which call him Sardanapalus and Pseudantoninus. Tiberinus is the most widely used, by Dio, Zonaras, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, and the *Historia Augusta*. Impurus appears only in the *Historia Augusta*. The case of the insult Geza Alföldy (see note above) thinks is really Tractitatus is the most complex: it appears as Tractitius in the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, and as either Tractatitius or Tractaticius in the *Historia Augusta*, depending on edition.

Confrontation between, on the one hand, support for or dissent from a given theory of paternity, and, on the other, choice of nomenclature applied to this emperor, gives the following results:

Dio, the only sustainer of this boy's paternity by Sextus Varius Marcellus, calls him Avitus, Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Pseudantoninus, Sardanapalus, Assyrius, and Tiberinus.

Herodian, professing equanimous agnosticism with respect to this boy's claim to Caracallan paternity, calls him Antoninus and Bassianus.

Those who maintain, or record without dissent, a Caracallan paternity, *Epitome de Caesaribus*, Eutropius, Jerome and Victor, call him by a variety of names. *Epitome de Caesaribus* designates him as Aurelius Antoninus Varius, Bassiana, and Heliogabalus; Victor also as Heliogabalus; both Eutropius and Jerome as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Finally, the only text, the *Historia Augusta*, which explicitly denies him Caracallan pater-

nity, without however naming any single alternative father, calls him Antoninus, Antoninus Heliogabalus, Augustus, Heliogabalus, Heliogabalus Antoninus, Impurus, Tiberinus, and Tractatitius or Tractaticius, depending on edition.

To sum up: the pattern of this emperor's nomenclature after his death, as recorded in ancient historiography, shows no discernible correlation with support for or dissent from any claim or theory regarding his paternity.

Having thus reviewed the variety, in ancient historiography, both of this boy's nomenclature, and of allegations regarding his identity, and having compared them to each other, it remains to compare them to his epigraphic and numismatic record. This is quickly done, since, as stated and documented at the outset of this stage of this enquiry, that record is a constant, unanimous in calling him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, or at least Antoninus, and, implicitly or explicitly, in claiming him to be the son of Caracalla and the grandson of Severus. Thus, historiographical sources which both call him by those names, in full or in part, and endorse or concede him that ascendancy, agree with his imperial artefacts, and those that do not do not. Only Eutropius and Jerome do so, almost fully, calling him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and reporting, without dissent, that he was thought to be the son of Caracalla. Victor and the Epitome endorse the claim more robustly, but call him, respectively, alongside other names, Marcus Antoninus, and Aurelius Antoninus Varius.

Arguments relevant to the establishment of a nomenclature.

Let us now consider the arguments for and against the application to him of each of his several names, in the light of its implications regarding his identity. Given that he was a Roman emperor, and as such bore, in that capacity, an official nomenclature, why not, then, as one might do for any other emperor, simply call this boy by that name: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus? There are several persuasive reasons for refraining from doing so, all stemming from the fact, already discussed in this study, and central to its problematic, that an identical nomenclature was also used by two previous Roman rulers.

The first is that use of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus for this boy could lead to confusion. Indeed it has been known to do so, even among experienced numismatists, with respect to certain types in this boy's coinage, which have often been mistaken for those of Caracalla. To deal with this specifically numismatic confusion, essays and papers have been published, showing how to tell these coins apart.²²

One might be tempted to avoid this confusion by using numerals to distinguish one bearer from another. Such an attempt would be complicated since one further emperor, Commodus, the son of Marcus, also bore these three names, together with his own, in the order Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus. He is sometimes included in the canon of their bearers, and sometimes not, a circumstance which would make numbering difficult. For that matter, it should be noted that the usurper Macrinus bestowed the name Antoninus, albeit without the rest of the nomenclature, on his son Diadumenianus, when he made him co-emperor with himself, thereby causing him to be considered, at least by the *Historia Augusta*, as one of the Antonines.⁷² If such consideration were taken into account, then one would have to redefine the set of emperors subject to numbering as that of Antonines, both real and spurious, and include the first of them, Antoninus Pius, in the list. But there is no evidence for any such numbering in Roman records, from the time of this, nor of any of the emperors who bore this nomenclature, in any of its forms.

It is a criterion of this enquiry that any name chosen for the purpose of reference to this boy should avoid anachronism. Since there is no contemporary evidence, on whose basis to justify such numbering, it must be excluded. That leaves one with no convenient way to avoid the potential confusion courted by the use of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus for this boy.

Another, graver problem is that this nomenclature implies a proposition, concerning this boy's paternity, hence his original, biological identity, which was highly controversial during his lifetime, and is arguably false. That proposition is, of course, the very same now under discussion here: that he is the son, not of his mother's husband, but of her cousin, Caracalla, the second (or third) emperor to bear this same nomenclature. Lest it be thought that this proposition is not necessarily implied by this boy's use of that nomenclature, it is worth pointing out that in the absence of adoption, of which there is no record, or even allegation, in this case, there is no way, other than biological filiality (of which there is, in this case, an allegation, reportedly his own, claiming for this boy imperial bastardy) whereby he could possibly, in accordance with Roman law and custom, have come, as emperor, to bear a nomenclature identical to that of Caracalla, so soon after his death. Its use here for this boy would therefore tend to prejudge this enquiry's investigation into that proposition.

⁷² As early as Cohen, Henry, *Description Historique des Monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain*, 1860, (henceforth Cohen¹) vol. 3, p. 512: *Essai sur la manière de distinguer les médailles de Caracalla de celles d'Élagabale*. More recently : Johnston, Ann, *Caracalla or Elagabalus? A Case of Unnecessarily Mistaken Identity*, *ANSMN*, 27, 1982.

⁷³ *HA/AD*, throughout.

While these two reasons would seem to be enough to eliminate Marcus Aurelius Antoninus from consideration for use in reference to him here, there is also a third, relating to this boy's dynastic background. For quite apart from the question of whether the proposition that he is Caracalla's bastard is true or false, and from one's desire to avoid prejudging the issue of this enquiry into that question, the circumstances whereby Caracalla himself acquired that nomenclature are themselves highly controversial, and condition the propriety of its use in historiography, or in an investigation such as this, for any other than its original bearer, the philosophic emperor.

Those circumstances involve the claim, by Severus, Caracalla's father, of the first Marcus Aurelius Antoninus as his own. This retroactive claim is allegedly made in order to confer on Severus and his family the prestige of its original bearer. Marcus, a scion of one of the great Roman families, is emperor as the result of a perfectly normal adoption *inter vivos* by his predecessor, the revered Antoninus Pius, and reigns over a long period of internal stability, though fighting numerous external wars, dying much beloved of the senate, and perhaps even regretted by the people, especially in view of what comes after.⁷⁴

Severus, in contrast, a Tripolitanian of Phoenician descent, albeit a member of the senatorial order, allegedly seizes the principate by force, and is the first non-European holder of that office. His accession reportedly comes about as the end result of a series of tumults, beginning with the murder of Commodus by his masseur, followed by the murder, within three months, of his successor, Pertinax, by the praetorians. These then proceed to auction the principate to the highest bidder, Julianus, who is also murdered within three months, as Severus marches on Rome. Severus' accession to the principate is followed by a period of civil war, lasting several years, during which he has to defeat two separate rivals, Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus.⁷⁵

In the midst of all this turmoil, Severus feels the need to legitimise, other than by mere force of arms, his tenure of the principate, and his intended transmission thereof to his son. He resorts to the legally questionable expedient of adopting Marcus as his father, and Commodus as his brother. This gives him access to the name of the Antonines, whose first two holders have, by virtue of their conduct in office, rendered it prestigious, indeed almost sacred. Though Severus does not use this nomenclature himself, preferring rather to add to his own that of Pertinax, whom he claims to have avenged,⁷⁶ he confers it on his son, Caracalla, in order to legitimise the dynasty he hopes to found.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *Dio* 72.34.2-72.36.4.

⁷⁵ *Dio* 75-76.

⁷⁶ *Herodian* 2.14.3

From this account, which, although based on ancient historiography, can be backed up with inscriptions,⁷⁸ it emerges that this nomenclature itself, and the links of kinship it implies, held, in the eyes of Severus, the status of a capital good: a store of political value, which he seized by questionable means. Unlike the case of Augustus' adoption of the name of Caesar, this was unjustified by any preceding close political, genetic, or personal relationship between Marcus and Severus, by any links of marital alliance between their families, or by any testament, spurious or real, making Severus Marcus' heir. It took place, moreover, some fifteen years after Marcus' death, during which he had already been succeeded by Commodus, his perfectly legitimate, albeit personally disappointing, biological son.

This is not the place to comment further on the legality or otherwise of this procedure. It is clear, however, from Dio's account, that contemporary senatorial opinion, at least, strongly dissented from the notion that this Punic upstart, bereft of any of the philosophic emperor's dynastic prestige or personal qualities, should claim to be his son, and cause his own to bear that new-found ancestor's name.⁷⁹

The implication of that ancient senatorial opinion for modern study of this period, and for this enquiry, is that to accord this nomenclature to any bearer other than its first, or at the very most to his real son, Commodus, could be construed as giving one's assent to its seizure by Severus. This might be considered historiographically inappropriate, and indeed seems to have been felt to be so by posterity, not only on the grounds of that seizure's questionable legality, but in view of this nomenclature's prestige. For its first bearer is generally considered to have been one of the best Roman emperors; whereas those who bore it after him, Commodus, Caracalla, and this boy, are usually reckoned among the worst. Perhaps for that reason alone, posterity seems to have felt that the use of the Antonine nomenclature for this boy, as indeed for his alleged imperial father, and even for its original bearer's biological son, is inappropriate, and has largely refrained from such use.

To sum up the results of this enquiry so far, three persuasive reasons have emerged to refrain from using the nomenclature Marcus Aurelius Antoninus for the boy on the coin. The first, the danger of confusion with other emperors, is not only potential, but real. The second, not to prejudice the outcome of this enquiry, with respect to this boy's true identity, derives from this study's methodology. The third, not to seem to abet this nomenclature's seizure by Severus,

⁷¹ *Herodian* 3.10.5

⁷⁸ Including the previously cited *CIL* 8.5.2 (Index) p. 136, *maiores*, & p. 141, *maiores*.

⁷⁹ *Dio* 76.7.4

accords with the scruple of most modern historians of antiquity, with respect to that issue. This enquiry therefore joins in the restraint of the majority.

This emperor is most commonly called by one version or other of the name of the god whose high priest he was. That god is known, in the ancient Semitic languages of Syria, where he originates, variously as 'LH'GBL, *Elagabal*, *Elah-a-Gabal*, or *Elaiagabal*.⁸⁰ Differing forms of this name are alternatively Hellenised, by Dio and Herodian, the first two ancient historiographers to cite this god, as 'Ελεγάβαλος and 'Ελαιαγάβαλος respectively.⁸¹ It is Latinised, as can be seen on the coins and inscriptions of this emperor, as *Elagabalus*.⁸² So far, it applies only to the god.

The first ancient sources which use this name for the priest-emperor, as well as for his god, *Liber de Caesaribus*,⁸³ *Epitome de Caesaribus*,⁸⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus,⁸⁵ and the *Historia Augusta*,⁸⁶ are all late antique Latin texts. They do so in Helleno-Romanised form, as *Heliogabalus*. This version involves a pun on 'Ηλιος, the Greek name for the sun. It seems to result from combination of that name with 'Ελαγάβαλος, by which it is followed on a Greek inscription from Emesa.⁸⁷ The *Chronica Urbis Romae* uses the form Eliogaballus, and says that under him an "Eliogaballium", presumably meaning the temple of his god, was dedicated.⁸⁸ Certain later ancient Greek sources sometimes use some form of this nomenclature to designate the priest, as well as the god.⁸⁹

Following the lead of the *Historia Augusta*, the only relevant ancient source widely available to it, post antique Western European historiography concerning this priest-emperor, regularly uses the name Heliogabalus, or vernacular versions thereof, for him, as well as for his god, from the 14th to the 19th century.⁹⁰ Beginning in mid 19th century, numismatic catalogues start list-

⁸⁰ Millar, Fergus, *The Roman Near East, 31BC-AD 337* (henceforth *FMIRNE*), 1993, p. 301; Starcky, J., *Stèle d'Elahagabal*, *MUSJ*, 49, 1976, p. 501.

⁸¹ Dio 79.33.1; 80.11.1; 80.12.1; 80.17.3; 80.21.2. *Herodian* 5.3.4; 5.5.7.

⁸² Coins: *Thirion*, §300-308, 359-365; Inscriptions: index to be published in *Epigraphica Variana*. For example: *CIL* 3S, LXXXIV (diploma).

⁸³ *AVLC* 23.1-2

⁸⁴ *AIEC* 23.1-2

⁸⁵ *Ammianus Marcellinus* 26.6.19.

⁸⁶ Priest-emperor: *HAI/OM* 9.2; 9.3; *HAI/AH* 1.6; 2.1; 3.3; 5.1; 9.2; 10.1; 10.3; 11.6; 14.4; 15.1; 15.4; 16.5; 19.5; 22.8; 35.1. God: *HAI/OM* 9.2; *HAI/AH* 1.5; 2.3; 3.4 (twice); 3.5; 17.8; 24.7.

⁸⁷ Mousli, Majed, *Griechische Inschriften aus Emesa und Laodicea ad Libanum*, *Philologus*, 127, 1983, p. 254-261. See *FMIRNE*, p. 304-305.

⁸⁸ *C354, CUR*.

⁸⁹ *EHICP, EVV* §15; Zonaras, *Epitome*, Lib. 12, Cap. 13-14.

ing the coins of his reign under the name Elagabalus.⁹¹ This is also how this emperor is referred to in the commentary and indices of the main epigraphic and papyrological corpora.⁹³ Throughout the course of the 20th century, the form Elagabalus becomes increasingly predominant in academic writing, while Heliogabalus remains the commonest form in artistic and literary contexts.

Despite its widespread acceptance, the use of this name for this emperor must be rejected by a study such as this, with its stricter epistemological and methodological criteria. For this nomenclature, in any form, as applied to him, raises a number of insurmountable objections.

The first, and most important, is that it is not his.⁹² It is a metonymy, equating the priest with his god. As such, it is a malapropism, tantamount to calling the Roman Catholic Pope “Jehovah”, or the Japanese Emperor “Amateratsu”. Since this enquiry has frequent occasion to discuss the god Elagabal, in terms of his ritual and iconography, as well as of his place in the policies of this emperor’s reign, it seems unwise to invite unnecessary confusion between that god and his high priest, by using the same name for both.

Another reason to eschew its use is that it involves, as well as a malapropism, an anachronism. All the ancient historiography that applies this nomenclature to the high priest, as well as to the god, dates to well over a century after the former’s death. There is no record in coinage or inscriptions or papyri, dating from this emperor’s lifetime, attesting to contemporary use of this name for him. The only artefact that might be thought, by some, even to come near to doing so, is an inscription from Lātrūn, in Palestine,⁹⁴ in which occurs the sequence: --’Ελεγα [βάλου -- | ’Αυτο] κρότορ [ος -- | --] υ Κάλσα [ρος -- | -- ’ε] ποιησ { αν --}. Even if, and this is debatable, the reconstruction is correct, specifically with respect to case, the coincidence of (reconstructed) genitive, between the name of the god, and the title of the emperor, would not necessarily indicate that the latter stands in apposition to the former.

For both these reasons, therefore, avoidance of malapropism and anachronism, these studies diverge from received nomenclatorial practice, and refrain from using any version of the name

⁹⁰ An index of his nomenclature in modern texts will be provided in *Metamorphoses Varianae*. The earliest recorded modern use of Heliogabalus, ca.1320, is by Matociis, Giovanni de (alias Mansionario), *Historia Imperatorum Romanorum*, Ed. Bertrand-Dagenbach, C. (proximate publication).

⁹¹ Cohen’.

⁹² As stated by Whitaker, in his notes to the Loeb translation of Herodian (p. 18, n. 2, which also adduces plausible reasons for this emperor’s possible use of the name Bassianus).

⁹³ *CIG, CIL, ILS, TAM*.

⁹⁴ *SEG* 8. 1937, p. 22, No.152.

Elagabal for the emperor who was his high priest. The only exception to this rule is in quoting or referring to works that do so, where dissent from that practice is noted or implied.

Such restraint should not, however, be taken to imply any subestimation of the importance, in this boy's life and reign, of his tenure of that priesthood. Indeed it will be argued, later in these studies, that his assumption and performance, whether prior to his tenure of the principate, or concurrent with it, of that role (a word here chosen advisedly, to embrace its full theatrical meaning) came into conflict with the assumption and performance of his imperial role; and that in the conflict between these two roles lies the key to understanding his reign. Likewise, in his assumption, first of one role, then of another, lies the origin of his myth, of which he may justly be called the first artificer.

In both cases, tenure of the office involved an accession, leading to the conscious assumption of certain forms of self-presentation, in terms of appearance and behaviour, and the use of a certain titulature, respectively that of emperor and priest. In addition, in the case of the imperial office, accession involved the adoption of a new nomenclature, one chosen in order to expedite and justify that accession. It is not known whether his accession to the priestly office likewise involved the adoption of a specific nomenclature, and, if so, in what circumstances such a nomenclature might have been used.⁹⁵

The only epigraphic evidence for any priest of Elagabal, other than this emperor, is for a certain Tiberius Julius Balbillus, priest of Elagabal in Rome during the reigns of Severus and Caracalla.⁹⁶ (Contrary to the report or implication of ancient historiography,⁹⁷ which maintains this cult was introduced to Rome by this boy, it was already present there two generations earlier.) The evidence looks negative in this respect, at least in the context of public self-presentation, since Julius Balbillus does not seem generically to be a hieratic name. Ancient historiographic reference to the name of yet another priest of Elagabal, Julius Bassianus (or Bassus),⁹⁸ the father of the empress Domna and of her sister Maesa, therefore this boy's great-grandfather, whilst possibly indicating some family relationship between Bassus or Bassianus and Balbillus, by virtue of their shared *nomen gentile*, Julius, likewise suggests that Bassus or Bassianus held the priesthood under his own secular nomenclature.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ This point is taken up below, with reference to Herodian's use of Bassianus to designate this boy.

⁹⁶ *IGVR* 124=*IG* XIV, 997= *IGRR* I, 78 ; *CIL* VI, 708; 2269=32456a=*ILS* 4330;1603; 2130; 2129; 1027. See Chausson, *Vel Iovi vel Soli, Aedes Beli*, p. 662-718.

⁹⁷ Report: *Dio*, 80.11.1; Implication: *Herodian* 5.5.6-7; *HA/AH* 1.6

⁹⁸ See Chausson, *Vel Iovi vel Soli*, p.698, n.67 for the likelihood of Bassus.

⁹⁹ *AIEC* 21.1, 23.2. *PIR*², J 202.

The fact that this boy, who did not bear the nomen Julius, held that priesthood nevertheless, raises the question of whether its tenure was regularly transmitted through the female line. This, while theoretically possible, is unlikely.¹⁰⁰ Indeed the co-existence, whether sequential or simultaneous, of Bassus or Bassianus and Balbillus in that role might be taken to indicate the contrary, as well as raising the possibility that there might be more than one priest of Elagabal at any given time;¹⁰¹ although, presumably, only one could be supreme, *summus* or *amplissimus*, as in numismatic and epigraphic instances of this boy's priestly titlature.¹⁰² This is a separate question, also to be discussed elsewhere in the course of these studies.

All that being as it may, what matters in the present context is that this boy's accession to the priesthood, as well as to the principate, was tantamount to the assumption of an identity, one composed or constructed out of all the elements of self-presentation pertinent in either case. Both these identities are distinct from that previous, underlying one, which this boy must be presumed to have had, before his occupation of either office. That original, puerile identity must therefore constitute the focus of the rest of this enquiry: for whichever name was most likely his, corresponding to that puerile identity, will be the name whereby he shall be called in the rest of these studies.

Leaving out of reckoning insulting epithets, used by some of his antique historians, there are three reported names, whereby he may have been called, during his boyhood, before he became emperor: Avitus, Bassianus, and Varius. Avitus and Bassianus are, depending on which modern source one consults, *nomina gentilia*, or *cognomina*, or both.¹⁰³ In any case they both derive from this boy's maternal ascendants. Varius is a *nomen gentile*, deriving from his mother's husband, his presumptive father. It is from among these three, for no further names for him are given by any ancient source, that one must choose.

Faced with this choice, some modern historians of antiquity have opted for what seems, on the surface, like a clever, even elegant solution: using all three names, in the order Varius Avitus Bassianus.¹⁰⁴ This nomenclature is, however, unattested in this tripartite form, for this boy, by

¹⁰⁰ Chausson, *Vel Iovi vel Soli*, p. 699, n.71, argues convincingly against its likelihood.

¹⁰¹ Chausson, *Vel Iovi vel Soli*, p. 696, n. 62.

¹⁰² Summus: *Thirion*, § 311-314. *Amplissimus*: (e.g.) *CIL* 10, 5827.

¹⁰³ Solin, Heikki & Salomies, Olli, *Repertorium nominum gentilium et cognominum Latinorum*, 1994, lists them as follows: under *Verzeichnis der Gentilicia*: Avitus, 34.37; Bassianus, XIII 7890 + 27. BRGK 78.172 + 58. BRGK 150+ ES 13, 1983, 126-7 NR. 13; Varius, 249; under *Verzeichnis der Cognomina*: Avitus, 18.79.80.134.304; Bassianus, 142. Contra: Reynolds, J.M., in e-mail communication with myself, 17 October, 2003, maintains "...Avitus and Bassianus are cognomina and not normally used as nomina gentilia".

¹⁰⁴ The earliest example I have found is *Cohen*¹, vol. 3, p. 510.

any ancient document.

The *Historia Augusta*, as well as calling him Varius, remarks that he was also called Bassianus, but fails to use Avitus as a name for him. Herodian calls him neither Avitus nor Varius, nor does he cite anyone, related to him, to whom these names might refer. Dio is the only one of all his ancient historiographers to record all three names, in connexion with him. But of these three names, for this boy himself, Dio uses only Avitus.

While remarking, in leading up to his first mention of this boy, whom he goes on to call Avitus, that Avitus was the name of his maternal grandfather, Dio speaks, in the same passage, of Varius, referring, not to this boy, but to his mother's husband, Sextus Varius Marcellus.¹⁰⁵ In referring to Caracalla, in earlier sections of his narrative, Dio sometimes calls that emperor Bassianus, his childhood name (which for him was a *cognomen*, deriving from his mother's family)¹⁰⁶ before he was renamed Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.¹⁰⁷

This is the full sum of cross-reference among these three names to be found in the ancient historiography relating to this boy. This particular combination, Varius Avitus Bassianus, as used in modern reference to him, would therefore seem to lack any documentary justification. Perhaps that is why those who use it offer no explanation of its rationale.

Should one wish to reconstruct that rationale, in order to see if it is at all persuasive, the first step must be to eliminate a tempting but egregious error: euphonious though Varius Avitus Bassianus sounds, perhaps because it superficially resembles a standard set of Roman *tria nomina*, consisting of *praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*, it is of course nothing of the kind. None of these names is a *praenomen*; and the *nomen gentile* Varius should, in a proper set of *tria nomina*, be in second place, not in first, since it is that of this boy's mother's husband, therefore that of his presumptive father.

Thus any attempt to combine these three names into a set of *tria nomina* founders on the absence of a *praenomen*. This is regrettable, since, given that he was a Roman citizen, this individual must presumably have one, perhaps recorded somewhere lost to us.¹⁰⁸ His triple nomen-

¹⁰⁵ *Dio* 79.32.2.

¹⁰⁶ *AIEC* 21.1, 23.2.

¹⁰⁷ *Dio* 79.9.3

¹⁰⁸ The legal requirement for a Roman citizen to bear, at least for census purposes, the standard *tria nomina* is implied in the *Tabula Heraclensis*, lines 146-147, *Roman Statutes*, ed. Crawford, M.H., 1996, Vol. 1: text p. 368; translation p. 377; commentary p. 389.

clature, whatever else it was, would have had Varius in the medial position, corresponding to that of the paternal *nomen*. It may, however, not have been so in common discursive, as opposed to legal usage, which, by this period, was no longer uniformly trinominal, if indeed it ever had been.¹⁰⁹

There is another format, that of *nomen* followed by *cognomen*, which is common in literature from the Republican period into late antiquity, and which, extended to include more than one *cognomen*, a format that is also attested, might provide a rationale for this usage.¹¹⁰ In such a format, the paternal *nomen gentile* Varius, would be followed by either of the two *cognomina*, Avitus or Bassianus, or by both. But, given the state of our sources, there is no way reliably to determine which *cognomen*, in the case of choosing one, is likeliest to have been used by this boy, or by others in referring to him; or in which order, in case of using both, they may have been so used.

Given that this problem is insoluble, it is fortunate that no combination of names whatsoever is necessary, since one alone will do. For any one of these three names, independently of its status as *nomen gentile* or *cognomen*, or as paternal or maternal, could be that single name, by which a Roman citizen is informally referred to, in the third person, by his fellows and contemporaries, both attestedly in writing, and presumably, in everyday speech, however long or complex his full, official, nomenclature may be.¹¹¹ Such a name will do for our purposes. Thus this emperor may, for the purpose of informal uninominal discursive reference, in the context of this study, adequately be called by any one of these three names; as indeed he is, on occasion, by each of the texts of his three main ancient historiographers, but differently so in each. The present question, therefore, is by which of these three names, chosen on what basis, he should thus be called here.

There are two alternative criteria for that choice: legal propriety, or actual usage. One may either call him by the single *nomen* he must have borne, by virtue of his legal paternity, or by the single name, of whichever category, whereby he was actually called, in everyday usage. Either of these may or may not be known, and the twain may or may not coincide.

¹⁰⁹ See Salway, Benet, *What's in a name? A survey of Roman onomastic practice from c. 700 B.C. to A.D. 700*, *JRS*, 84, 1994, for a lively discussion of this question.

¹¹⁰ See Morris, J., *Changing fashions in Roman nomenclature in the early empire*, *LF*, 86, 1963, for examples of this, and of several other variations.

¹¹¹ Morris, J., *op. cit.*, p. 44: "The fashion of stringing a long sequence of names together meant that a man must select a few, usually a couple, by which he was normally known. Usually, the father's *nomen* prevailed..."

It should be noted, as observed above, in discussing the imperial succession, that legal paternity need not correspond to biological paternity. The crucial factor, in Roman law and custom, for determining an individual's paternity, and hence nomenclature, is that he be recognised, usually at birth, by a given man, as his child, or later adopted as such. A man has the option, after his wife or concubine gives birth, of recognising her child as his own, or not. If he repudiates the child, it may be exposed, or otherwise disposed of.¹¹² So long as an individual, whether infant or adult, is either recognised as his offspring, or adopted by a given man, that individual bears that man's *nomen*.¹¹³ Thus, even if - as allegedly claimed, after her husband's death, by Soaemis - her son was the fruit of an adultery with her cousin Caracalla, so long as her son was recognised as his own by her husband, Sextus Varius Marcellus (that is, so long as he was not repudiated by him) he must, at least during his boyhood, before he became emperor, have borne the *nomen* Varius. This, therefore, is the single name which adoption of the criterion of legal status inevitably leads one to choose.

The criterion of legal status has the virtue of being simple and clear-cut, and is independent of the ultimately unverifiable question of this boy's biological paternity. It also has the advantage of being applicable to this case, as shall presently be seen, on the basis of evidence, albeit indirect, rather than of mere allegation. But before deciding finally to adopt it, one should, in the interests of methodological scruple, at least consider the alternative.

The criterion of actual usage may be applied to this case only on the basis of historiographic allegation, regarding the names Avitus, Bassianus, and Varius, since there is, practically by definition, no epigraphic or numismatic record of informal discursive uninominal reference to him, by any name whatever. His coins and inscriptions cite only his official nomenclature. As a consequence, only likelihood, not certainty, may be predicated on historiographic allegation of the use of any of these names for him by his contemporaries. Moreover, even if one could establish that his official nomenclature, or part of it, such as Antoninus, coincided with that used for informal discursive reference to him, this could only be so for the period of his tenure of the principate, and thus would fall outside the time-frame, corresponding to his puerile, original identity, which concerns us here.

The fact that Dio and Herodian (both this emperor's contemporaries, though of different generations from him and from each other) call him, informally and uninominally, each by a dif-

¹¹² Adkins, L. & R, *Handbook to life in Ancient Rome*, 1994, p. 340: *Children*.

¹¹³ *OCD*, p. 1024-1026: *names, personal, Roman*.

ferent one of his three alternative names, immediately poses a problem. Not only do they disagree, but neither claims direct knowledge or awareness of this emperor's existence, let alone contact with him, during the time frame here relevant: that of his boyhood, preceding his accession to the principate. In both cases, their choice of one or another of these names, Avitus or Bassianus, both deriving from his mother's family, each implying a puerile identity that each of these authors presents him as possessing in that period, is the result of retrospective reconstruction, in texts written after that period: in Dio's case fairly soon;¹¹⁴ in Herodian's considerably later.¹¹⁵ These names are therefore not necessarily evidence of how the boy was called, before he became emperor, but only of how each of these historians chooses to reconstruct and represent his pre-imperial persona.

In Dio's case, the choice of Avitus for this purpose may well be ascribed to his greater familiarity with that name than with any of the others. Julius Avitus Alexianus, this boy's maternal grandfather, was of roughly Dio's generation, and, like him, a member of the senate, during the reigns of Severus and Caracalla.¹¹⁶ Thus it is likely that Dio knew him personally, though this is not stated by Dio's text. Whether Dio knew him personally or not, he certainly knew of him, since he identifies him as the husband of Maesa, father of Soaemis, and grandfather of the boy he calls Avitus.¹¹⁷

In the case of Herodian, the use of Bassianus to refer to him may be ascribed to the fact that, unlike Dio, a Greek who seems to try to be more Roman than the Romans, when it comes to adopting their xenophobic prejudices, Herodian writes from a wider Hellenic perspective, more curious than condemnatory with regard to exotic places such as Syria, in whose religions he shows particular interest. Of the three names used by ancient historiographers to refer to this emperor, Bassianus is the one that links him most directly to the high priesthood of Elagabal, the focus of much of Herodian's narrative concerning him.

It does so genealogically, because Bassianus (or Bassus) is the cognomen of the high priest who fathered this individual's grandmother.¹¹⁸ It is also that of her nephew, the emperor claimed by this individual as his father, better known as Caracalla.

¹¹⁴ *FM/SCD*, p. 168-170; *B-S/RZCD* p. 3-4.

¹¹⁵ Cassola, *SVPSE*, p.216, §3.

¹¹⁶ Pflaum, Hans Georg, *La Carrière de C. Iulius Avitus Alexianus, grand' père de deux empereurs*, *REL*, 57, 1979, p. 298-314.

¹¹⁷ *Dio* 79.30.2

¹¹⁸ *AIEC* 23.1

But in calling this individual Bassianus, was Herodian somehow referring to Caracalla, and implicitly assenting to the story of this boy's Caracallan paternity? Unlikely, since Herodian calls Caracalla Antoninus, and seems unaware that he was ever called Bassianus. Dio, the historian who does call Caracalla Bassianus, also calls him Antoninus, Caracallos, and Tarautas, this last being the name of a famous gladiator, either used by Caracalla for himself, or used of him by the soldiers he commanded.¹¹⁹ Indeed, Dio seems to delight in calling the characters in his narrative by different names in different passages. In the case of this boy, he uses seven different names, including *Schimpfnamen*, leading one to wonder if such variety reflects actual usage, or is merely a rhetorical effect.

This consideration prompts another. It is a commonplace of everyday experience, both now and in the ancient world, attested, in the latter case, both by the rules of usage governing *praenomina*, and by the frequent use of *cognomina*, rather than *nomina*, for uninominal discursive reference, that when one has more than one name, each of those names may be used in a different context. Thus any one of an individual's recorded names, or even some other appellation, such as a nickname, perhaps unknown to us because it has not found its way into the written record, may have been used for informal discursive reference to that individual by members of his family or his circle of close friends.

It is thus perfectly possible that Dio's use of Avitus for this boy may somehow reflect a preference, most likely among the female members of his family, and in particular his maternal grandmother, for calling him by that name, evocative as it would be of that lady's husband, the boy's maternal grandfather, dead some time before the period leading up to the *coup* that placed their grandson on the throne.¹²⁰

Likewise, it may be the case that, given the possibility of using any one of several names to denote a given individual in different contexts, Herodian's use of Bassianus for this boy may somehow reflect, not only that author's personal interest in his subject's role as high priest of the sun god of Emesa, but the actual name by which this individual was known in that capacity. For it is possible, though not in any way attested, that in his capacity as priest of Elagabal, this boy may have been addressed by some appellation other than his normal secular name. It is significant, however, that should this be the case, the only plausible potential candidate for such is not the name of his god, but that of a previous high priest, his great-grandfather, Bassianus, or Bas-

¹¹⁹ *Dio* 79.9.3

¹²⁰ *Dio* 79.30.4

sus.

Even, however, if either of the foregoing theories could be verified, this would not necessarily tell us how this boy was referred to by his fellows in the world outside his family circle, or outside the temple: say, given his age, by his schoolmates (if indeed he went to any sort of school). If, and this in turn is unknown, he had any sort of public social or political role, in his capacity as a not yet adult Roman citizen - indeed as a member, even if his father be reckoned as his mother's husband, through her, at least, of a lateral branch of the imperial family - then it is likely that his known relationship with that family would cause him to be called, in public at least, in accordance with traditional and legal usage, by his father's *nomen*. Thus, in a public and secular context, this individual is most likely to have been called Varius, the *nomen* of Sextus Varius Marcellus, his presumptive father, in the period before the notion of raising him to the principate was conceived.

Now it should not necessarily be held against the use of Varius, for the purpose of reference to this boy, that it is used for that purpose by the *Historia Augusta*. It is true that much of what that text has to say about this emperor is not only most likely invention, but, moreover, most probably has nothing whatsoever to do with this individual. For, according to the most plausible interpretation of this curious text, it embroiders his already mythical character, in order to use it as a transparent monstrous persona, through which to attack the Christian emperors of the period in which it was written.¹²¹ Even so, in keeping with the methodological criteria outlined above, in the first part of this enquiry, we may suppose that not every word of it is necessarily a lie.

Indeed, according to a persuasive analysis, cited above, of its highly uneven text, there are parts of it that may have been plagiarised, more or less wholesale, from a lost Latin history, that of Marius Maximus, who was roughly contemporary with Dio.¹²² The parts in question, those narrating the final months of this emperor's reign, leading to his downfall and murder, are not those which most directly concern us here; but rather the fact that in earlier parts, those referring to this individual as he was before his elevation to the principate, and sometimes also after this, the name Varius is used for him, sometimes alone, sometimes in combination with Heliogabalus or with Antoninus.

Two mutually contradictory explanations are given for this name by the *Historia Augusta*.

¹²¹ Turcan, Robert, *Héliogabale précurseur de Constantin?* BAGB 1, 1988.

¹²² Syme, Ronald, *More about Marius Maximus*, in *Emperors and Biography*, 1971.

One is clearly fanciful: it is claimed to be a nickname given him by his schoolfellows, alluding to the variety of semina from various men, which, commingled in his mother's womb, jointly conceived him.¹²³ The other explanation is one of many errors of fact to be found in the *Historia Augusta*. It ascribes the name Varius, not only to this boy, but also, in its feminine form, Varia, to his grandmother, Maesa, and claims he derives it from her.¹²⁴ Although the *Historia Augusta* does suggest that the story of this boy's Caracallan paternity was an invention of Maesa's, it does not mention another Varius, the husband of Maesa's daughter, whom, by the way, it calls Symiamira.¹²⁵

Despite the obvious absurdity and error, as well as the mutual contradiction, of the two explanations given by this vita in the *Historia Augusta* for the name Varius, as applied to this boy, the useful point to be drawn from this text is that its author, perhaps as a result of reading Marius Maximus, or perhaps from some other source, was heir to a Latin nomenclatorial tradition, which calls this boy Varius. Although the use made of this tradition in this text is clearly in line with its author's agenda, to denigrate the emperor, whoever he may be, most likely his own contemporary, at whom the jibe of plural paternity is really aimed, there is no reason to suppose that the tradition itself is invented, particularly since we know (what the author of this text either did not, or chose to obscure, in favour of telling his anecdote) that Varius was the *nomen* of his mother's husband, this boy's presumptive father.

The Latin nomenclatorial tradition to which the *Historia Augusta* seems to be heir, albeit garbled by its text, does bear out the conclusion, reached theoretically above, that the individual in question would properly have been called, before his accession to the principate, by the *nomen* of the man who was doubtless universally and publicly, until it became impolitic to do so, presumed to be his father: Sextus Varius Marcellus. Although, for the purpose of determining this boy's legal nomenclature, that presumption suffices, independently of any facts in its regard, before finally settling on Varius as a name for him it remains to be demonstrated, on the basis of evidence, rather than of allegation, not only that he was unlikely, as is claimed, to be the son of Caracalla, but that he was likely to be that of his mother's husband: Sextus Varius Marcellus.

The unlikelihood of his being the son of Caracalla is supported by negative evidence. The absence in Rome, or elsewhere, of any pre-imperial portraits of him, and the lack of any mention of him whatsoever, let alone of any statement linking him to Caracalla, in any record, numis-

¹²³ *HA/AH* 2.2

¹²⁴ *HA/AH* 10.1

¹²⁵ *HA/AH* 2.1

matic, epigraphic, legal, administrative, or historiographical, predating his accession, militate against the proposition of this individual's paternity having been officially ascribed to Caracalla, before his accession to the throne. Although one would not expect official advertisement of a bastard, unless Caracalla had taken him up as his heir, the absence even of recorded rumour is significant. Had Caracalla fathered a male child, or even been presumed to have done so, in or out of wedlock, some rumour thereof would surely have surfaced long before his death. The absence of any such rumour, particularly from such a consummate gossip as Dio, who says he was with Caracalla in Nicomedia, during the period of his sole rule, after murdering his brother, Geta, when the succession was an open question, also counts against that proposition.¹²⁶ So does Dio's statement that Caracalla, perhaps because impotent as a result of untreated venereal disease, died childless.¹²⁷

Such is the negative evidence. But there is also positive evidence to the contrary, and in favour of the alternative. A bilingual Greek and Latin inscription to Sextus Varius Marcellus,¹²⁸ found, in the 18th Christian century, in the town of Feltre, Latin Velletri, a popular summer resort of the Roman elite in the imperial period, and now displayed in the Cortile Ottagono, in the Vatican,¹²⁹ reads in Latin as follows:

Sex(to) Vario Marcello / proc(uratori) aquar(um) (centenario) proc(uratori) prov(inciae) Brit(anniae) (ducenario) proc(uratori) rationis / privat(ae) (trecentario) vice praef(ectorum) pr(aetorio) et urbi functo / c(larissimo) v(iro) praef(ecto) aerari militaris leg(ato) leg(ionis) (tertia) Aug(ustae) / praesidi provinc(iae) Numidiae / Iulia Soaemias Bassiana c(larissima) f(emina) cum fili(i)s / marito et patri amantissimo

“To Sextus Varius Marcellus, procurator of the waterworks, with a salary of one hundred thousand, procurator of the province of Britain, with a salary of two hundred thousand, procurator of the privy purse, with a salary of three hundred thousand, stand-in for the praetorian and urban prefects, noble lord, prefect of the war chest, legate of the third Augustan legion, governor of the province of Numidia, beloved husband and father, dedicated by Julia Soaemias Bassiana, noble lady, with their children.”

¹²⁶ Dio 78.17.4-78.18.1; 79.8.4.

¹²⁷ Dio 78.15.3; 78.16.1; 79.8.6.

¹²⁸ CIL, X, 6569 = ILS, 478 = IG, XIV, 911.

¹²⁹ Bildkatalog der Skulpturen des Vatikanischen Museums, Museo Pio Clementino Cortile Ottagono, 1998, p. 256.

The career of Sextus Varius Marcellus, summarised in chronological order by this inscription, has been reckoned to take place between 949=196 and 970=217.¹³⁰ The reason given for this terminal date is that by May 971=218, the date of this boy's proclamation as emperor, Sextus Varius Marcellus was already dead, so Dio tells us.¹³¹ There is no particular reason, however, to suppose that the latest possible date for his death is necessarily 970=217, since, even if Dio speaks true, he could have died in early 971=218. If, as may be supposed, he was in his twenties at the beginning of this *cursus*, he would have been in his forties at its end.

It is not only because Dio alleges so that it may be supposed that this man, though still relatively young, was dead by then, but also because of the likelihood that his existence, if alive, would have posed an obstacle to the conception and execution of the *coup* which placed his presumptive son on the throne. This is not necessarily to say that he was murdered, in the course of laying the groundwork for that *coup*, though the thought naturally occurs to one, given all that is alleged about the character of Maesa; but merely that his absence from the scene was highly propitious to its success.

For this inscription constitutes positive, though indirect, evidence of this boy's identity as the son of Sextus Varius Marcellus. It does so by virtue of the following chain of deductive reasoning:

Soaemias is identified by numerous inscriptions, incised during the reign of this emperor, as his mother.¹³² She is also identified, by an inscription incised at the time of the Secular Games of 957=204, corresponding roughly to the time of this boy's conception and birth,¹³³ as the wife of Sextus Varius Marcellus.¹³⁴ She is likewise identified as such, at a later date, by this inscription itself, of which she is the dedicatrix. It is known, from the image on his earliest coins, such as the aureus reproduced at the beginning of the first part of this study, as well as alleged by his two earliest ancient historiographers, that this emperor was a boy of about fourteen at the time of his accession.¹³⁵ This inscription, dated to within a time frame corresponding to this emperor's boyhood or very early adolescence, is dedicated by Soaemias and her children to their beloved hus-

¹³⁰ Pflaum, *Carrières*, p. 638-642.

¹³¹ *Dio* 79.32.2.

¹³² Inscriptions: for example: *CIL* 8, 2715.

¹³³ So calculated by Whittaker, C.R., editor, in the Loeb edition of *Herodian*, vol. 2, p. 18-19, note 2, on the basis of *Dio* 80.20.2.

¹³⁴ Inscription : *RA*, 5.36, 1932, *RPE*, p.214-221, §70. Commentary: Gagé, Jean, *Recherches sur les Jeux Séculaires*, *CEL*, 11, 1934.

¹³⁵ Coins: *Thirion*, throughout. Historiography: *Dio*, 79.31.2; *Herodian*, 5.3.3.

band and father. Given the fact of her attested maternity of this emperor, and his probable age at the time of this inscription, less than fourteen, which falls within the known time-span of her marriage to Sextus Varius Marcellus, the boy who became this emperor is therefore most likely to have been one of those children.

This would normally, if there were no contending proposition, be enough to consider the matter of this boy's paternity, and hence of his identity, as settled: he must be a son of Sextus Varius Marcellus, one who later went on to become emperor under an assumed name and identity. The evidence provided by this epitaph also suffices for the purpose of determining that boy's proper nomenclature. For it follows from the chain of reasoning just advanced that he must therefore, during his boyhood, have been recognised as the son of Sextus Varius Marcellus, and should therefore, according to standard Roman usage, have borne his putative father's *nomen*, Varius, as his own.

It is not strictly necessary to establish, for purely nomenclatorial purposes, whether Soaemias did, or did not, commit adultery with her cousin, and whether the semen that fathered this boy was indeed that of Sextus Varius Marcellus, or that of Caracalla, or of anyone else; something which, in the absence of an opportunity to subject any identifiable remains to the tests of modern science, is in any case unknowable.¹³⁶ For the purpose of establishing this boy's legal nomenclature, in the period before he became emperor, it is enough to know that he was recognised by his putative father, Sextus Varius Marcellus, as that man's son; as he clearly must have been, if, as is virtually certain, he is one of the children alluded to in this inscription.

But because of the existence of a proposition claiming for this individual Caracallan, as opposed to Varian paternity, it is necessary, for the purpose of establishing for him a Varian identity, as opposed merely to a legal or likely nomenclature, to confront that proposition with all the evidence, both positive and negative, adducible against it.

As it happens, this inscription also provides, by virtue both of contents and findspot, together with the identity of its dedicatrix, yet further negative evidence against the proposition, later advanced by Soaemias, of her son's Caracallan paternity. If Soaemias thus publicly acknowledges her children to be those of Sextus Varius Marcellus, it is unlikely that, at the time of that acknowledgement, she was planning to claim Caracallan paternity for one of them. Since

¹³⁶ To consider this is not so far-fetched as it may seem: DNA analysis has recently been conducted on the remains of certain members of the family of Augustus, and is displayed in the *Palazzo dei Conservatori* in Rome.

she dedicates the epitaph in Velletri, together with her children, it is likely that she was there with them, at or shortly after the time of her husband's death.

Whether he died in Velletri, or in Numidia, or elsewhere, is not known, but Soaemias' presence there, with children she publicly acknowledges to be those of Sextus Varius Marcellus, is recorded, by this inscription, during a time when Caracalla had already left Rome, and was either in Asia Minor or in Syria. This shows that Soaemias had not, at that time, followed the imperial court in its eastward progress. Had she at this time been thinking in terms of claiming, either because it was true, or for whatever other reason, that her eldest son was Caracalla's, rather than her husband's, it seems likely that she would, like many senators and other notables, have followed the court in its progress, in order to be in a position to put her claim forward, when, as sooner or later must happen, given the general loathing of Caracalla, someone finally murdered him.

This in turn makes it likely that the story of her adultery, and that of this boy's Caracallan paternity, is invented after the date of this inscription, and after the death of Caracalla. It is likeliest that it is invented when Soaemias, perhaps already widowed, perhaps not, is, for whatever reason, together with her children, residing in Syria, most likely in Emesa, her home town, where her son's comely presence, and the enthusiasm generated by his dancing before the soldiers, in his role as high priest, suggests to Maesa the possibility of using him as a pawn in a bid to restore her family to power.

This raises the question, to be addressed in another part of this enquiry, of the itinerary and chronology, as well as the motivation, of the movements of Soaemias, and her children, in the period between this inscription, which finds them in Italy, and that of the coup, when they are gathered in Emesa, together with Maesa. How long have they been in Syria, and in Emesa, before a juncture of crisis and opportunity is created by Caracalla's murder? Certainly, if Herodian is to be believed, long enough for Soaemias' son to assume and learn his role as high priest.

Although perhaps not categorically unexpected, Caracalla's murder seems to have caught his family, when it actually happens, by surprise. Only thereafter, during the space of fourteen months corresponding to the reign of Macrinus, does the notion arise in Maesa's mind, of putting on the throne Soaemias' son: the boy on the coin; who shall henceforth, in these studies, be called Varius.

The choice of this name for him, justified as it clearly is by all the serious considerations

detailed above, also affords a less serious, but not inconsiderable, rhetorical reward. Like the nomenclature Heliogabalus, playing as it does on the Greek name for the sun, while alluding to his priesthood of the sun god of Emesa, the *nomen Varius*, as applied to this particular bearer, also embodies a pun: one alluding, in this case, to the variety of his identities. This pun is no less apt than the other, for the interplay of his identities constitutes the central problematic of his life and reign.