

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

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### I : The boy on the coin

**Introduction: this emperor's existence, and its consequences.**



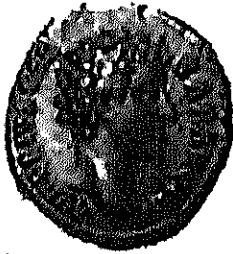
This gold coin appears to be a Roman imperial aureus.<sup>1</sup> The boy on its obverse is depicted as emperor, both textually and iconographically. Its overarching legend identifies him with the title *IMP C: Imperator Caesar*. Laurel crown, cuirass, drapery, and aegis,<sup>2</sup> all imperial attributes, convey the same message: this boy is the reigning princeps. The legend goes on to name him: *M(arcus) Aur(elius) Antoninus* (thereby establishing the nominative case). This is followed by two epicleses, *P(ius)* and *F(elix)*, and a final title, *Aug(ustus)*.

This boy's nomenclature immediately raises the question of his identity. His name rings familiar, but as that of the philosophic emperor, author of the book we call *The Meditations*. Yet that august writer did not become emperor until he was an adult; as is confirmed by consulting

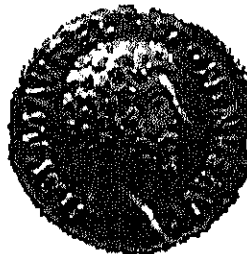
<sup>1</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Inventaire des Médailles Romaines, Élagabale* (henceforth *BNF/E*) 1227 = Thirion, Marcel, *Le Monnayage d'Élagabal, (218-222)*, 1968, (henceforth *Thirion*, or *Th.*) 365.

<sup>2</sup> The aegis is not mentioned by *Thirion*, but is just visible, emerging from beneath the cuirass, over the right shoulder.

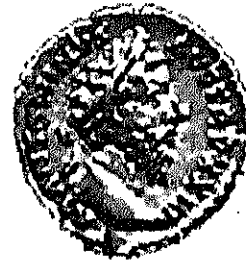
his entry in any numismatic catalogue.<sup>3</sup> His early coins, as heir to the principate, depict him as a serious young man, but without imperial attributes. Apart from growing a beard, and acquiring a laurel crown, he does not change much over time.<sup>4</sup>



RIC 0429a



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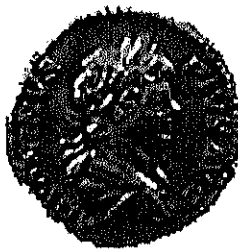


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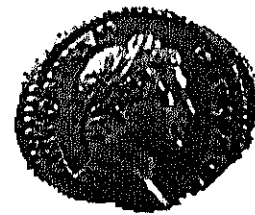
Further perusal reveals another emperor, listed as Caracalla, the obverse legend of whose coins also, despite this listing, bear the same nomenclature: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. His coinage as heir begins when he is a child, even younger than this boy; but he does not resemble him much, in features or in attitude. Nor does he, as princeps, resemble the philosophic emperor. As a child he looks petulant, as a youth foppish, as an adult brutal.<sup>5</sup>



RIC 0064



RIC 0121



RIC 0157

Yet further perusal of the catalogue brings one, at last, to this boy. He is listed under yet another name: Elagabalus; but his obverse legend denotes him, too, as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. His coin nomenclature grows simpler as his reign proceeds, ending up as mere Antoninus. His image also shows considerable variety, as it develops through progressive stages of his boyhood and adolescence, up to the threshold of manhood.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *BMCRE*, *RIC*, *Cohen*, as well as numerous online sites linked to coin merchants, including *WildWinds*.

<sup>4</sup> *WildWinds*, [http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/marcus\\_aurelius/i.html](http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/marcus_aurelius/i.html).

<sup>5</sup> *WildWinds*, <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/caracalla/i.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *BNF/E* = Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Élagabale; *FWM/E* = Fitzwilliam Museum, Elagabalus; *Th.* = Thirion.



BNF/E 7317=Th.368



BNF/E 1195=Th.39-40



FWM/E BMC V 552=Th.127-8



BNF/E 443=Th.69



BNF/E A-V1198=Th.162-5



FWM/E Y865-193=Th.214



BNF/E 7220=Th.258-261



FWM/E CMY6330=Th.306



FWM/E 31.45.5b=Th.221

Who is this boy? Why is his coin nomenclature identical with that of a previous emperor, and this one's with that of a third, even earlier, to whom alone it is universally applied? And why, conversely, does the name under which both these later emperors are indexed and listed in catalogues differ from that on their coins? Why, moreover, for this boy, is his catalogue name Elagabalus? Relevant to this last question is an image one may have seen reproduced, during one's perusal of his entry; or which, if one happens to have to hand the coin, whence one's pursuit of this line of enquiry derives, one may see by turning it over to show its reverse:



Here we have a *quadriga*, or chariot drawn by four horses. Driverless, it bears a massive ovoid object, roughly the height of a man, together with another, smaller, more articulated form, set before it, flanked by four tripartite objects on poles. The overarching legend, *Sanct(o) Deo Soli*, in the dative, dedicates this coin to the holy sun god, whose name, *Elagabal(o)*, appears in the exergue (the horizontal space beneath the image). But where, or what, on this coin, is that god? Further enquiry reveals that he is shown here, not anthropomorphically, but in the form of his principal cult object: a large black meteorite, known as a *baetyl*, fronted by a spread eagle, flanked by standards, borne on a *quadriga*.<sup>7</sup>

Who is this god, and what is his relation to this boy? Secondary sources tell us that the god is Syrian, a divinity of mountains, fire, and the sun. Numerous inscriptions, and several reverse legends on his coins, call this boy *Summus* or *Amplissimus Sacerdos Dei Invicti Solis Elagabali*: high priest of the unvanquished sun god Elagabal.<sup>8</sup> This Roman emperor is, therefore, high priest of a Syrian sun god. Even so, how does the name of a god, albeit one thus served by an emperor, come to be used to designate that emperor himself?

Any attempt to answer this question, or those raised before, concerning the application to this boy, either of the name Elagabalus, or of the nomenclature Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, leads back to that of his identity. For every name by which an individual is called implies at

<sup>7</sup> Thirion, p. 7b. *RIC* vol. IV pt. II, p. 24-25; Klimowsky, E.W., *SMB*, 13/14, 55, 1964, p. 121-134.

<sup>8</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (henceforth *CIL*) 3, LXXXIV; *CIL* 6, 37183; *CIL* 10, 5827, among others.

least one identity, and sometimes more; while the choice by a given individual of a particular name may constitute a claim to a specific or generic identity. In the case of this boy, the choice on his part, or in his behalf, of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus as his official imperial nomenclature constitutes just such a claim; while application to him of the name Elagabalus implies an identity, and an attitude towards him, on the part of its users, quite distinct from those claimed for and shown him as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

The question of identity holds the key to study of this individual. It has already been seen, above, that a question, indeed more than one, with regard to his identity, is raised by his tenure, or by ascription to him, of different names in different contexts. Further investigation, here to be conducted, reveals the existence of yet more names, and hence of more implied identities, applied in one context or other to this boy. It also reveals a controversy, involving those names and identities, conducted during this emperor's lifetime, and after his death, whose resolution one way or the other carries far reaching implications for one's understanding of his life and reign. As a result of this nomenclatorial proliferation, and of the intricate and controversial relationship between this boy's various names and his several identities, whether implied, or explicitly claimed, as well as of the complex interrelationships obtaining among those pairs of names and identities, with and among their respective contexts, the question of this boy's identity may aptly be described as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, I have chosen to inaugurate *Studia Variana*, a group of studies, of which this is the first, dedicated to investigation of this individual's life and reign, not with a name, but with an image. By refraining, for now, from calling him by any of his names, each of which implies not only an identity, but an attitude towards him, I hope to avoid prejudging this enquiry's issue. I also aim thereby to set out, more clearly than might otherwise be possible, the problematic to be studied, as well as to develop and test, in establishing a name whereby to call him in the course of these studies, the method of procedure to be used to try to solve his riddle, unveil his mystery, and interpret his enigma.

That such an endeavour should be undertaken at all may seem, to some, to require apology, especially since biography is currently unfashionable among academic historians. They need not fear the sudden emergence of any such product from this quarter. The little that can certainly be known about this individual's life does not suffice to constitute a basis for biography. Yet, by

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<sup>9</sup> Winston Churchill, in a BBC broadcast, 1st October, 1939, *re* forecasting the possible actions of Russia. So cited in *The Penguin Dictionary of Twentieth Century Quotations*, p. 79.

the same token, the little that is certainly known about his reign does not easily lend itself to sociologically or econometrically meaningful statistical analysis. For some, this shortcoming doubtless suffices to render him unworthy of attention. But even for others, with broader sympathies, his reign lacks any major military victories or disasters, perhaps because, as emperor, he undertook no recorded campaigns. He likewise boasts no lasting institutional achievements, perhaps because, after his early, reportedly violent death, all his decrees, several of which are claimed to have been highly idiosyncratic, even revolutionary, were allegedly repealed, and his monuments and records destroyed, by his immediate successor. Yet despite his apparent lack of significance, in the institutional, military, social or economic spheres, his life and reign are discussed at considerable length, both by ancient and modern historiographers, often in highly emotive terms. Not only, moreover, has he attracted the attention of historians, but also that of authors of novels, poetry, essays, and drama, as well as of music, opera, ballet, painting and sculpture.<sup>10</sup> For these reasons, and for others, yet to be explored in the course of *Studia Variana*, he requires thoroughly to be investigated.

The context in which one first becomes aware of this mysterious individual's existence inevitably shapes the view one takes of him, often rendering it difficult later to see him from another aspect, or in another light. Most of us, myself included, first encounter him either in modern historiography about antiquity, or in works of fiction such as those just mentioned. As it happens - so I have concluded after long and thorough study of the texts concerning this individual - there is not much to choose between these alternatives, if one sets out, as I did years ago, in search of historical fact. This is so, because the vast bulk of his modern historiography is based, quite uncritically, on his ancient historiography; and this, in turn, is largely composed of unverified, often unverifiable allegation.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this, the character about whom one may fancy that one has acquired a certain degree of knowledge, by reading works of historiography, as opposed to fiction, is just as likely, if not more so, to belong to the realm of mythology, as to that of history.

Neither the majority of his historians, nor any of the more avowedly creative artists, who have fashioned his image in shape, sound, or sense, seem much concerned to discover or report factual knowledge about him. Rather, beginning with the earliest extant texts, they seem far

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<sup>10</sup> Relevant works of art and historiography are listed and discussed in *Metamorphoses Varianae*, yet to be published.

<sup>11</sup> Texts of his ancient and modern historiography are discussed respectively in *Historiographica Variana*, part of *Documenta Variana*, and in *Mythologica Variana*, part of *Metamorphoses Varianae*, sections of *Studia Variana* yet to be published.

more eager to relay unproven allegations, often shocking and scandalous in nature, depicting him as an upstart impostor, a sacrilegious hierophant, a connoisseur of human sacrifice, a voluptuary wastrel, a polymorphous pervert, and, moreover, a compulsive dancer, thus providing occasion for rhetorical displays of righteous indignation.<sup>12</sup> The example of his ancient historiography has largely, with a few honourable exceptions, been followed by his modern historians, who have tended to use it as their principal source.<sup>13</sup>

I have long wondered why this should be so, especially since it is not necessarily the case with all ancient history. While there are many and varied particular, specific, and generic reasons why the bulk of the ancient and modern historiography concerning this boy has developed as it has – reasons which themselves constitute an object worthy of enquiry, to be addressed in the course of these studies – there seems to me to be one feature which most of his ancient and modern historiography shares in common with more avowedly creative and fictional works of literature and art. In the vast majority of texts of either sort, both ancient and modern, he is treated, not as an actual, nor even a potential object of knowledge, but rather as the touchstone of a system of belief. By this I mean that he is treated in the way that believers in a given orthodoxy, whether religious or political, cultural, social, national, sexual or racial, treat the propositions which lie at the heart of their belief. Those propositions are taken, unchallenged and unexamined, for granted, thus determining the epistemological assumptions and methodological procedures informing the theory and practice of that system. In consequence, any number of new, equally unsubstantiated propositions may, in ongoing interaction with input from outside the system, be derived therefrom, so long as they remain consistent, or at least in character, with the original set. Such inventions may even, in time, be received into the corpus of orthodox belief. Thus do religions and ideologies evolve and survive. So too has a myth been spun around this individual, then grown and thriven, to the point where it now constitutes, in and of itself, yet another legitimate object of study, one which I am also undertaking, as editor of a separate, closely related, collaborative endeavour.<sup>14</sup>

But that leaves open the question of his life and reign. If the problem with most of his historiography is that it treats him as the touchstone of a system of belief, what must one do to break out of that system, in order to begin to treat him as a potential object of knowledge? The answer to this, curiously enough, lies first in establishing, then in acknowledging a fact – therefore an object of knowledge – so seemingly obvious that one is likely to miss it: the fact of his existence.

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<sup>12</sup> The three main texts are those of *Dio*, *Herodian*, and the *Historia Augusta*. See *List of Abbreviations* at end.

<sup>13</sup> *Mythologica Variana* will include a discussion of how his modern historiography uses its ancient counterpart.

<sup>14</sup> *Metamorphoses Varianae*.

Certain knowledge of his existence, assuming it can be gained, may seem trivial, but, in the case of this boy, it will prove more valuable than may appear, particularly if the value of knowledge, like that of coins or metals, be reckoned as a function of its rarity; for certain knowledge of this emperor is rare indeed. Yet the value of this presumably knowable fact, that of this boy's erstwhile existence, does not rest merely on its rarity, but also on its unexpectedly crucial implications for study of his life and reign.

For what is it that allows the practitioners of systems of belief to continue, with epistemological impunity, asserting propositions which determine the praxis of their system, even when those propositions are unverifiable, improbable, impossible, or patently absurd? While there are many circumstances and conditions which abet such behaviour, there is one, the provision of contrary evidence, which strips away its epistemological impunity. This, alas, is rarely enough to put a stop to it. Impunity, however, is precisely why such systems are often predicated on belief in beings for whose existence there is no material evidence. Were such evidence to surface, in any given case, far from being a cause for rejoicing, because it validated the belief in question, it would prove highly inconvenient for its practitioners, since it would shift the epistemological basis of their system away from the realm of belief, and into that of knowledge, where stringent methodological rules, alien to their system, would limit their freedom of manoeuvre and invention, and hence challenge their control.

Thus the fact of this emperor's existence, seemingly trivial, emerges as crucial. For if it can be proven, as indeed it can, on the basis of material evidence, that this boy existed, then, unlike certain far more famous figures, who are likewise touchstones of systems of belief, but for whose existence there is no such evidence, he becomes a potential object of knowledge. And if this is so, then, given the fate to which the memory of his existence has so far been subjected, involving its transformation into myth, it becomes a standing challenge to one's intellectual curiosity, as well as to one's sense of historical justice, for someone, eventually, to seek to discover, in the light of an appropriate epistemology, using the tools of a proper methodology, what, if anything, can truly be known about him.

This is the endeavour which I hereby undertake, as sole author, in the form of these *Studia Variana*: to discover who he was, what he did and did not do or underwent, where and when and how, and, perhaps most interestingly, why. In order to do this, certain preliminary steps are in order. They fall into three stages. First, I must deliver proof of this individual's existence, on which the rest of the enterprise depends. Then I must deal with questions of epistemology and methodology, deriving from acknowledgement of his existence. Finally, I must decide by which



of his many names to call the individual who constitutes the focus, rather than the touchstone, of these studies.

To accomplish the first of these tasks, let us now return to the coin with which this enquiry began. The immediate task in hand is to confirm that this aureus is genuine, therefore that the boy it depicts existed in reality, rather than being, say, the figment of a forger's fantasy; also that he was indeed a Roman emperor, rather than a mere pretender. The coin's authenticity, the boy's existence, and his status as princeps, are established by following a certain method of procedure, combining numismatic techniques<sup>15</sup> and deductive reasoning. Relevant techniques include comparing the obverse and reverse images and legends of this aureus with those of other coins, attributed to him, as well as with those of coins attributed to others, bearing an identical nomenclature. Inscriptions, codices, and papyri are also used to help date the coins, and so to attribute them to individuals. Of coins thus found to pertain to this boy, counting only those with Latin legends from imperial mints, there are more than four hundred different types (a type consisting of a given combination of obverse and reverse), with thousands of specimens distributed among the world's musea and private collections. The sum of these types constitutes this emperor's coinage. Inscriptions<sup>16</sup> and papyri<sup>17</sup> establish the terminal dates of his reign: from May or June of a.u.c. 971, by the Roman calendar, or A.D. 218, by the Christian, till March 975=222.<sup>18</sup> Further enquiry indicates that this aureus probably comes from the mint of Antioch, in Syria,<sup>19</sup> and was possibly struck in July 971=218, thus forming part of his earliest known issue.<sup>20</sup> Deductive reasoning suggests that it is inherently unlikely, if not impossible, that such a varied and voluminous coinage, let alone the relevant bodies of inscriptions and papyri, discovered piecemeal at widespread locations, spanning the former realm of the Roman empire and beyond, could have been forged, whether in antiquity, or in modern times, or that such a coinage would have been struck, by imperial mints at Rome, and elsewhere in the empire, over a period of nearly four years, all for a mere pretender.

<sup>15</sup> These are discussed in greater detail in *Numismatica Variana*, a volume in this series, yet to be published.

<sup>16</sup> The official acknowledgement in Rome of the beginning of his reign is dated by an inscription of summer 971=218 recording his reception into the college of Arval priests, an institution of the Roman state religion. See *Acta Fratrum Arvalium Quae Supersunt*, ed. Henzen, 1874, *Elagabalus*.

<sup>17</sup> The end of his reign is dated by a military record of the *dies imperii*, or first day of the reign of his successor. See Welles, Fink, & Gilliam (ed.), *Feriale Duranum*, 1959, p.209, col. 2, line 16-17.

<sup>18</sup> Calendrical equivalence of a.u.c. (*anno ab urbe condita*) to A.D. (*anno domini*) is based on correlation of the mythical date of the foundation of Rome to the mythical date of the birth of Christ. Thus a.u.c. 1 = 753 B.C. (before Christ), and A.D. 1 = a.u.c. 754. There is no year zero in either calendar.

<sup>19</sup> Antioch was the capital city of the Roman province of Syria. It is now called Antakya, and lies within the borders of Turkey.

<sup>20</sup> For this coin's provenance and date, see *Thirion*, p. 14a.

Thus, unless one wishes to subscribe to Bertrand Russell's paradox (whereby one cannot logically disprove that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, complete with the spurious knowledge of a non-existent past)<sup>21</sup> or to adopt some other, equally beguiling theory, denying the possibility of knowledge altogether,<sup>22</sup> it can certainly be known, on the basis of the evidence afforded by this aureus and related materials, that the boy depicted on its obverse did in fact exist, and that he was princeps at the time of its minting.

Having thus established its subject's existence, there is a series of epistemological and methodological steps, which must occupy the remainder of the present study. The assumptions underlying this enquiry must be stated, and, if necessary, defended. The relevant materials must be identified, assembled and classified. In view of the nature of those materials, one must determine the method of procedure to be followed in examining them. In particular, one must decide which of them constitute evidence, or otherwise, for what sorts of propositions, and what sorts of questions may be asked of them. In so doing, one will be establishing the basis for a methodology proper to these studies. One will also thereby have identified the problematic here to be addressed. Then, confronting the questions raised in the foregoing exposition, those relating to this individual's identity and his nomenclature, the concluding part of this enquiry must decide how to call him, in the context of the present group of studies. In particular, it must decide whether to call him by the name he is given in his coins and inscriptions, by that used for him in most of the relevant academic and creative literature, or by neither; and if by neither, then by which, from what source. This involves examining his ancient historiography, in search of a name for him, and leads one straight into the core of these studies' problematic.

### **Epistemology and methodology: assumptions and categories.**

The epistemological assumptions underlying this enquiry are implicit in the foregoing discussion of the consequences, for study of this individual's life and reign, of acknowledging the fact of his existence: it is thereby assumed that such study, if properly conducted, may lead to knowledge about him. This is because knowledge is deemed possible in principle, and all that exists, or has ever existed, is a potential object of knowledge. Knowledge can only properly be such of true propositions. These, in the context of history, can only be verified as such on the basis of evidence. Propositions that are not thus verifiable cannot be known to be true, though they may be judged more or less likely. Determining what, in a given case, constitutes evidence

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<sup>21</sup> *The Analysis of Mind*, 1920, p. 159-160.

<sup>22</sup> Such as those associated with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and so-called Poststructuralism and Postmodernism.

of fact, what merely an indication of possibility, and how to judge the relative likelihood of allegations, speculations, hypotheses, and other sorts of propositions, whether verifiable or not, leads one into the realm of methodology.

The defence of these epistemological assumptions, should it be required, is best left to those who have most eloquently undertaken it, and to whose works the reader is referred.<sup>23</sup> The next step to be taken here, however, is to descend from the rarefied air of epistemology, into the more earthly realm of methodology, there to claim citizenship for this endeavour. This involves agreeing to abide by the laws of that realm, specifically as they may apply to the claimant. Determining how such laws may apply to this specific enquiry involves identifying, assembling, and classifying the set of materials it aims to examine. Their inclusion in that set is based on their potential relevance to any of the questions here addressed, regarding this individual, his life and reign, his period and context, and his myth. This process, undertaken over several years, and ongoing, has led to the constitution of a database, where all these materials are listed and described, and may, in succession, be diversely classified, according to various sets of criteria. It is my intention eventually, once it is formally complete, and instrumentally functional, to publish this database itself, in such a way that it can be consulted online, and, as appropriate, corrected or updated, so that all its information becomes directly and immediately available to scholars.

The most fundamental distinction, regarding the classification of these materials, is that between ancient and modern.

The relevant ancient materials are distributed among musea, libraries, and archaeological sites, identified where possible. Since, in the case of this individual and his contemporaries, no human remains have been found, all these materials are artefacts. In terms of their material substance, they consist, in descending order of density and hardness, of metal, stone, ceramics, wood, parchment or vellum, and papyrus. In terms of their artefactual form, which may overlap, in whole or in part, with some of the substantial categories, they are classified as coins, inscriptions, sculpture, structures, legal and administrative records, and historiography.

A distinction cutting across parts of both of the foregoing categories is that between those artefacts with texts, and those without. Most, presumably, including sculptures and structures,

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<sup>23</sup> Elton, Geoffrey Rudolph, *The Practice of History*, 1967, throughout, but especially chapter 2, *Research*, section 1: *The possibility of Historical Truth*; Windschuttle, Keith, *The Killing of History*, 1994, throughout, but especially Chapter 1: *Paris Labels and Designer Concepts*; Watson, George, *The Certainty of Literature*, 1990.

had texts, if only in the form of labels, in antiquity; but many of these are missing, often making attribution difficult, if not impossible. An absence of texts does not, however, imply a lack of propositions, since these may be conveyed iconographically. In the case of texts, a crucial distinction is to be drawn between those which, like records on papyrus, inscriptions on stone, and the legends of coins, are direct survivals from antiquity, and those which, like most historiography, have been transmitted to us on parchment or vellum through the manuscript tradition, subject to all the vicissitudes thereby entailed.

Another set of important distinctions, also cutting across other categories, and relating to the origin, context, and purpose of artefacts, are those between public and private, institutional and individual. Most of the relevant ancient historiography is private and individual in origin, although the circumstances of its composition, and the nature of its intended audience or readership, hence that of its purpose, may show considerable variation. All relevant coins, most structures, most sculptures, and most inscriptions, are imperial or civic artefacts. As such, they embody official policy and propaganda. Yet there are also inscriptions commissioned by private individuals, some dedicated to gods or goddesses, others to other individuals, usually dead. And certain inscriptions, such as those dedicated to the reigning emperor, or to a deity, by individual holders of public office, or by groups of soldiers or citizens, as well as certain historiographical texts, whose intended audience is public, or institutional, including the emperor himself, cut across this distinction.

A distinction especially vital, as shall be seen, to the method of procedure of the present group of studies, is that between ancient artefacts whose propositions, textual or otherwise, were potentially verifiable, by an antique audience or readership, and those which were not. A similar distinction applies, within individual artefacts, to different sorts of propositions. A closely related set of distinctions concerns the possible consequences, for a given author, or issuing authority, of being caught in a misrepresentation or a lie.

Even to mention, let alone list, such categorical distinctions, surely commonplace to any serious student of ancient history, may seem pedantic and otiose. But, just as in the case of this emperor's existence, it is opportune to do so here, because these distinctions are necessary, though not sufficient, frames of reference for determining, in the case of any given artefact, whether, and in what context, it constitutes evidence or otherwise, and, therefore, what value may be placed on any propositions it may generate. Had this individual's modern historians observed these distinctions more scrupulously, it would not be necessary to mention them here, or indeed to embark upon these studies. But the academic literature concerning him is full of

examples of their neglect. The most common is reporting, as fact, propositions about him which are based on allegations, usually unverified, often unverifiable, found in ancient historiography. The unqualified use of the indicative mood, in declarative statements of the form “he was” or “he did”, though very common, is rarely justified by the available evidence about him. Such uncritical use as a source, by modern historians, of ancient historiography, ignoring not only the generic limitations imposed by its status as allegation, rather than as verified fact, but also the possible motives behind its composition, and their potential effect on its likely veracity, is, however, not the only form of such neglect. It extends even to the point of ignoring the most fundamental distinction of all: that between ancient and modern materials. For it ought to be obvious that no modern material may, in itself, constitute evidence for any proposition of fact regarding antiquity. Yet this emperor’s modern historiography contains numerous examples of such propositions, for which there is no ancient evidence whatever, nor even allegation, but which are, nevertheless, on the basis of their pronouncement by a modern author, treated as fact, and passed on, unquestioned, from one generation of historians to the next.<sup>24</sup>

The relevant modern materials fall into two groups: academic and creative. The creative include sculptures, paintings, drawings, musical scores and recordings, choreographical sketches, libretti, and the texts of literary works. Discussion of these is deferred to *Metamorphoses Varianae*. The academic mostly take the form of printed texts, though a few are websites, or databases, which can be consulted electronically.

The academic materials fall into three main bibliographical categories, so defined by their purpose and scope. The first, corresponding to the artefactual categories of ancient materials, is that of numismatic and sculptural catalogues, and epigraphic or papyrological corpora, together with reports of archaeological discoveries in any of these fields, or in those of architecture and topography. The second is that of entries in encyclopaedias, including prosopographies, as well as volumes, sections or chapters in multiples, and articles in serials or periodicals, addressing specific topics or questions concerning this emperor and his reign, or related subjects. These are cross-classifiable, according to the nature of the subjects they address, to that of the materials they adduce as evidence, or otherwise. The third set, one with very few examples, in the academic sphere, though with many cognates in the creative, is that of book-length works, monographically devoted to this emperor, supposedly covering all, or a very broad range, of his aspects. Difficult to classify is one such which, presented as a work of erudition, is in fact more destruc-

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<sup>24</sup> One such case is discussed in my *Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gannys, Eutychi- anus, and Comazon*, in *Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, Tokyo, 1999.

tive, at least of understanding, than creative.<sup>25</sup>

The main methodological, rather than bibliographical distinction among academic texts, is between those which espouse, and observe, a sceptical and rigorous method of procedure, and those which do not. Those which do so sustainedly, throughout, are few and far between.<sup>26</sup> But there are many cases where, with regard to specific points, pertaining to a given discipline, such as numismatics or epigraphy, scholars are rigorous enough, but when they discuss matters such as this emperor's alleged character and deeds, or misdeeds, methodological scruple is abandoned.<sup>27</sup> There are also examples of authors whose work on other subjects is sound, but who, when it comes to this boy, allow their standards to slip.<sup>28</sup>

### **Problematic and procedures: tests for the evidential status of ancient materials.**

There is no need to dwell further here on instances of such transgressions against methodological probity, plaguing the study of this emperor, since they are exposed, when and as appropriate, in other parts of these studies, in the course of discussing the matters to which they relate. Rather, now, let us consider, in the light of the distinctions outlined above, and in relation to specific questions, emerging from the study of this individual, how to construct a methodology proper thereunto. In order to do so, let us return to the questions raised by the aureus with which this discussion begins, and specify the matters which they, in turn, raise. Who is this boy? Why is his nomenclature on coins identical with that of a previous emperor, and this one's with that of a third, to whom it is universally ascribed? Why does the name under which both these later emperors are listed in catalogues differ from that on their coins? Why, for this boy, is that name Elagabalus? The matters raised by these questions are those of his identity and his nomenclature. Taking nomenclature first, since it is easier to document, given the available materials, than identity, how does it relate to the categories outlined above?

<sup>25</sup> Artaud, Antonin, *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste Couronné*, 1934, reprinted 1970, in his *Oeuvres Complètes*.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Frey, Martin, *Umersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, *Historia, Einzelschriften*, 1989; Chausson, François, *Vel Jovi vel Soli, Quatre études autour de la Vigna Barberini*, *MEFRA* 107-2, 1995; Krenzel, Elke, *Das Sogenante Horn des Elagabal: Die Spitze eines Stierpenis*, *JNGG* 47, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> One such case, that of Franz Studniczka, is discussed in detail in my *Anaglyptica Variana, Studies in Language and Literature*, 43, Tsukuba University, Japan, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> A case in point is that of Robert Turcan, whose book-length monographic treatment of this emperor, in *Héliogabale et le sacre du Soleil*, 1985, is markedly less scholarly and rigorous than other works of his, including even some, such as *Héliogabale précurseur de Constantin?* *BAGB*, 1, 1988, and *L'Oronte déversé dans le Tibre, Les Cultes Orientaux dans le Monde Romain*, 1989, which deal with historiographical and religious subjects germane to the study of this individual, but do not focus directly on his alleged character and deeds.

All this boy's textual imperial artefacts, including coins and inscriptions, as well as inscriptions dedicated or referring to him, call him Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, or, at very least, Antoninus. Virtually all his modern historiography, including the indices and titles or headings of numismatic catalogues and epigraphic corpora, together with the body of creative works inspired by him, call him by some variant of the name Elagabal. He is diversely referred to by ancient historiography as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, or simply Antoninus; as Avitus, Bassianus, or Varius; by a number of insulting epithets; and also as Heliogabalus, a variant form of Elagabal.

The earliest extant relevant text, that of Cassius Dio Cocceianus, proposes an answer to the first, and provides one for the second of these questions: Who is this boy, and why is his nomenclature on coins identical with that of a previous emperor? It alleges that he is the son of a Syrian lady, related, through her maternal great-aunt's marriage with its founder, to the Severan imperial dynasty, and that his father is her husband, a Syro-Roman knight. According to Dio, this boy gains the throne as the result of an imposture, falsely claiming to be the bastard of his mother's first cousin, the recently murdered emperor, colloquially known as Caracalla, whose official imperial style, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, he adopts. Dio refuses to call him thus, preferring, alongside other insults, the epithet Pseudantoninus, embodying his allegation of mendacity and imposture.<sup>29</sup>

This allegation raises the most fundamental question, after that of his existence, which can be asked about this individual: that of his identity. Unlike that of his existence, this has more than two possible answers; but only two matter in this immediate context: either he was the bastard son of Caracalla, or he was not. This is the central question in the problematic addressed by these studies; for on one's choice of either of these alternatives depends one's interpretation of his reign. Either he is who he says he is, *Divi Severi Pii nepos, Divi Antonini Pii Magni filius*,<sup>30</sup> grandson of Severus, and son of Caracalla, in which case his behaviour, and his conduct of his reign, so far as we can know them, bear one interpretation; or he was not, in which case quite another. For to pursue certain policies, indulge in certain sorts of behaviour, and present oneself in certain ways, as emperor, if one is the rightful heir to a dynastic throne, will tend to suggest one set of likely explanations, quite different from those likely to apply, if one is an upstart and a fraud.

The question of this boy's identity, raised by Dio's allegation, is also central in another

<sup>29</sup> *Dio* 79,30.2 and the rest of books 79 and 80 (Boissevain's numbering).

<sup>30</sup> *CIL* 2, 4767; *CIL* 3, 773; *CIL* 6, 37183 (diptych); *CIL* 8, 10308, among many others.

sense; for it implies the central questions involved in constructing a methodology proper to these studies: how to evaluate the evidential status, on the one hand of ancient historiography, on the other of imperial artefacts, relating to him. Here we shall address the methodological questions, leaving those of his identity and his nomenclature for the concluding section of this study.

There are three basic tests to be used, in assessing the evidential status of any ancient text or artefact: those of proximity, motives, and veracity. How close, in space, time, and degree of personal access, is its author or artificer to the information it contains, and how, therefore, does he come to know, believe, or entertain it? What is his intention in seeking to convey that information in this form? What contemporary circumstances, if any, condition his likely veracity? In addition to these, there is a further test, that of fidelity, generically applicable to historiography. How closely does our text resemble the original?

### **The evidential status of ancient historiography.**

Since the challenge to this emperor's veracity comes from historiography, let us examine that category first, in the light of these questions, at its generic, specific, and particular levels. In the context of this examination, "generic" refers to ancient historiography as such, "specific" to that concerning this emperor, and "particular" to the texts of individual authors. Generically speaking, with reference to the test of fidelity, texts of ancient historiography are not usually direct survivals from antiquity, but copies, transmitted through the manuscript tradition, with all its potential for mistranscription, omission, and interpolation. This is specifically so of the entire corpus relevant here, though differently so in particular cases, which shall be considered individually in this respect, as they arise in the course of this discussion. It is likewise necessary to apply the tests of proximity, motive, and veracity individually to particular texts, but there are certain generic characteristics worth noting, with regard to these matters.

Ancient historiography is usually the product of individuals, writing for a relatively small number of readers, who share their prejudices, interests, and points of view. Their texts typically allege propositions of fact, but almost never mention, much less provide, any evidence therefor. Their accounts are rarely dispassionate, and frequently display overt partisanship. In view of these generic characteristics, it is debatable whether ancient historiography places much value on truth, as here understood. Substantiated, accurate, dispassionate reporting of objective fact is very rare.<sup>31</sup> Many ancient authors seem rather to consider that the purpose of writing history, regarded as a branch of rhetoric, is not so much to inform, as to instruct; to amuse and persuade; to edify and praise; or to ridicule and damn.



In the case of imperial historiography, these characteristics must, as well, be seen against the background of writers' relations with the principate. On the one hand, there are the potential rewards of lending one's talents to imperial propaganda. On the other, there is the danger courted by criticism of a reigning emperor. Censorship, or self-censorship, leads to two distinct consequences. The most obvious is that once a given reign is over, and it seems safe to speak out, a torrent of pent-up vituperation is released, with scant regard to methodological restraint. Less obviously, but occurring in the case of one text directly relevant to this enquiry, is that one may write about one emperor, but mean quite another.

There is, moreover, a generic tendency, which operates specifically in the historiography about this emperor, for authors to copy one another, often lifting whole passages from the work of predecessors.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, coincidence of allegations, if from different periods, counts for little or nothing. And even when contemporaries agree, one must ask whether this is due to their adherence to the truth, or to a given policy. It may be that some atypically excellent ancient author, such as Thucydides or Tacitus, can be trusted always to tell the truth, so far he knows it, without distortion or bias, and that his accuracy, at least on certain points, can even be verified today.<sup>33</sup> But this cannot be said of any of those whose work concerns this individual. The relevant canon consists mainly of unverified, usually unverifiable allegation, often in the form of invective.

In the particular case of Dio, author of the cited allegation, the most salient feature of the portion of his *Roman History* dealing with this boy is its sustained exhibition of virulent hatred for its subject. The possible reasons for that hatred, if real, or at least for its exhibition, and the question of that exhibition's possible role in Dio's self-presentation, at the time of composing the relevant passages, are matters to be discussed where appropriate in the course of these studies. Significant here, is that Dio's indulgence in invective leads one to question his motives, and doubt his veracity, with regard to his subject.

In contrast, as regards the test of proximity, Dio's account of that subject enjoys the distinc-

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<sup>31</sup> See: Hohl, Ernst, *Über die Glaubwürdigkeit der Historia Augusta*, SDAW/Gs, 1953; Momigliano, Arnaldo D., *The Place of Ancient Historiography in Modern Historiography*, CSSC 7, 1984; Finley, Moses, *Ancient History, Evidence and Models*, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> See: Kolb, Frank, *Cassius Dio, Herodian und die Quellen der Historia Augusta*, HACM, 1995; Barnes, Timothy D., *The Composition of Cassius Dio's Roman History*, Phoenix, 38, 1984; Barnes, Timothy D., *The sources of the Historia Augusta*, 1978; Kolb, Frank, *Literärische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der "Historia Augusta"*, BHAF 4.9, BHAC, 1972.

<sup>33</sup> See the Introduction to Kenneth Wellesley's English translation of Tacitus' *Histories*, 1964, p. 10-15.

tion of being not only the earliest extant, but also the most nearly contemporary. Dio's long life includes, towards its end, the much briefer span of his subject's. The date of composition of the relevant portion of his text falls within the space of less than a decade between its subject's death and his own. With regard to personal access, he should, in principle, also enjoy certain advantages. A senator, long resident in Rome, Dio is close, geographically and socially, to the centre of political power and intrigue. But the value of this fact, with regard to his account of this particular reign, is counterbalanced by his admission – or is it a boast? – that despite his previous fairly close acquaintance with Severus and Caracalla, he never encountered this emperor in person, was absent from Rome during his reign, and that all his information about him comes from “reliable” informants.<sup>34</sup>

In view of its performance with respect to the tests of proximity, motive, and veracity, it is clear that Dio's account of this boy should not be taken at face value. And if this is so of Dio, whose proximity to this subject is greater than that of any other extant author, it is so of all the rest, whose performance with respect to motives and veracity is, besides, no better than Dio's.<sup>35</sup> No text of ancient historiography may therefore, on its own, be construed as constituting evidence for any proposition of fact about this individual.

The contents of such propositions may, however, despite their assertion as fact by ancient historiographical texts, nevertheless be entertained as possibilities; as is done in the concluding section of this study, with respect to Dio's allegation of imperial mendacity. Propositions of possibility may, if supported by other sources, even, subject to certain conditions, become propositions of likelihood. That is as far as the process can go, with respect to ancient historiography alone. The standard of proof for propositions of fact about this individual, such as that of his existence, demonstrated above, requires the intervention of artefacts other than historiographical texts. Discussion of that standard is therefore deferred until we come to consider this emperor's imperial artefacts.

The minimum standard to be satisfied by any given proposition, regarding this individual, for entertainment as a possibility, is one that applies throughout the study of ancient history: avoidance of anachronism. (It is precisely for this reason that this study cites dates of events, occurring within the context of Roman history, till the end of antiquity, both according to the Roman calendar, and to the Christian.) Such avoidance not only, as remarked above, precludes

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<sup>34</sup> *Dio* 80.7.4

<sup>35</sup> Detailed discussion of the evidential status of these ancient texts is conducted in *Historiographica Variana*.

propositions of fact about antiquity based on materials originating in modernity, but also applies within the time span of antiquity. Yet there are instances of anachronism in the later antique historiography about this emperor, which alert one to severe limitations on the value that may be placed on support in the texts where they occur for propositions even of possibility, let alone of likelihood.<sup>36</sup>

Establishment of likelihood occurs in two degrees: lesser and greater. The lesser degree may be established by comparison between or among historiographical texts alone; the greater requires comparison of such texts with other artefacts, a process which may, in certain cases, even lead to the establishment of fact. Again, we leave consideration of the greater degree of likelihood to this study's proximate examination of imperial artefacts.

Within the lesser degree, the value of any particular comparison depends on two sets of criteria: on the one hand, how each relevant text fares, on its own, in the tests of originality, proximity, motive, and veracity, with relation to the matter in question; on the other, how it satisfies an additional test, affecting comparison between or among texts: that of independence. Independence in this context means that support for the likelihood of a given proposition should come from a source other than that where it is originally made; one whose author's interests, moreover, are not aligned with those of the original text's author; and, of course, not from a source deriving from that text itself.

Application of these criteria to Dio's account of this reign, reveals that its likelihood cannot be convincingly supported by any subsequent historiographical account. His very pre-eminence, with respect to proximity, greatly diminishes the value of any possible coincidence with less favoured sources. The next in the canon, that of Herodian, shares certain features with Dio's: its author, though younger than Dio, was already an adult during this boy's childhood and adolescence; but he waited much longer, possibly as much as thirty years, to record his impressions of his reign, generally less vivid and detailed than Dio's, for none of which, moreover, does Herodian, unlike Dio, cite even "reliable" sources. Textual comparison reveals, indeed, that much of Herodian's account derives from Dio's.<sup>37</sup> As for the rest of the ancient historiography, all of it belongs to considerably later periods, and much can likewise be shown to derive from Dio, or from Herodian.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This is particularly true of the *Historia Augusta*, as discussed in *Historiographica Variana*.

<sup>37</sup> Scheithauer, A., *Die Regierungszeit des Kaisers Elagabal in der Darstellung von Cassius Dio und Herodian*, *Hermes*, 118-3, 1990.

The only potential rival to Dio's text, in terms of proximity, is the lost imperial history of Marius Maximus, his rough contemporary, and, like Dio, a Roman senator. Direct confrontation of both their original texts, were it possible, would be highly illuminating, but any coincidence thereof would not, even so, necessarily support their respective likelihood. Because they are both senators, a certain similarity of institutional outlook and attitudes, especially towards the principate, may, in the absence of indications to the contrary, be supposed. Thus any coincidence between their accounts of a given situation or event, particularly one of institutional or political importance, could be dismissed as collusion. Coincidence despite differing attitudes or interests would be more persuasive, with respect to likelihood, than coincidence born of community of attitudes or interests. One known difference between them, which might furnish differing attitudes, is that Marius Maximus writes in Latin, and is possibly from Africa, while Dio, from Asia Minor, writes in Greek. Were they, in addition, known to be of different, or, preferably, opposing political factions, then, should they nevertheless coincide in their accounts of any given matter, particularly one germane to their contention, this might count as strongly supporting their respective likelihood, though only with regard to that particular matter. Alas, even within such strict limitations on deduction, deriving from considerations *ad hominem*, concerning their respective authors, such confrontation remains hypothetical, since the text of Marius Maximus is lost; although, as shall presently be seen, it may not be entirely forgotten.

Another set of limitations on deduction, relevant here, relates to the test of fidelity. As it happens, though much of Dio's text is also lost, and is only known to us through a Byzantine epitome, his treatment of the first part of this emperor's reign survives in a codex,<sup>39</sup> dating from the twelfth Roman century (= fourth or fifth Christian) presumed to copy his original. According to a major modern scholar of antiquity,<sup>40</sup> part of Marius Maximus' history is also preserved in part of the *Historia Augusta*, a late Latin text, of roughly the same date as that codex, with a long section devoted to this emperor.

If neither Dio's nor Herodian's nearly contemporary accounts of this boy can be taken at face value, so much the less can that of the *Historia Augusta*. This is so, not only on grounds of chronology, but also on those of style and contents. It stands self-condemned by its indulgence in hyperbole and anachronistic invention, and by a prurience, thinly disguised with pretended outrage, that has led to its characterisation, by that same scholar who finds in it traces of Marius

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<sup>38</sup> Kolb, F., *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der "Historia Augusta"*, *BHAF*, 4.9, *BHAC*, 1972.

<sup>39</sup> Vaticanus Graecus 1288.

<sup>40</sup> Syme, Ronald, *More about Marius Maximus*, in *Emperors and Biography*, 1971.

Maximus, as a “farrago of cheap pornography”.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, were it conclusively shown that it does contain a long quote from, or paraphrase of part of Marius Maximus’ history, this might form some basis for comparison with Dio’s text. One circumstance, however, diminishing the potential value of such a comparison, is that the relevant section of the *Historia Augusta* covers a series of alleged events, those of the last few months of this emperor’s reign, leading to his violent death, which do not fall within the confines of the codex supposedly transmitting Dio’s original, so that such comparison would have to be made with a passage of Dio reconstructed from the Byzantine epitome. The presence, albeit in ghostly or virtual form, of Marius Maximus’ lost text, in the *Historia Augusta*, does, however, if established, provide something of value to the coming discussion of this emperor’s nomenclature, till when further mention thereof is deferred.

The foregoing discussion has served to illustrate certain important limitations on the use, as a source, of ancient historiography in study of this individual. Ancient historiography does not, in and of itself, supply evidence for propositions of fact about his life or reign; and its value, even in support of propositions of likelihood, is circumscribed by factors which must be assessed individually, case by case.

#### **The evidential status of imperial artefacts.**

It remains here to discuss the evidential status of imperial artefacts. These are normally, in most branches of ancient history other than that concerning this emperor, accorded a higher degree of presumption of veracity than ancient historiography; so much so that they are sometimes loosely referred to, perhaps because most are made of metal or stone, as “hard evidence”. But this presumption must be questioned, both generically and specifically. Generically, imperial artefacts present a problem, with regard to the test of motive, by virtue of their role as propaganda. Specifically, moreover, in the case of those pertaining to this boy, there is reason to suspect that they imply or proclaim at least one particular proposition, that regarding his paternity, hence his identity, which may be false. The question then arises as to whether any or all other propositions conveyed by them may also be false. To discuss the evidential status of those pertaining to this boy, it is necessary first to explain why imperial artefacts in general, from Augustus onward, despite their acknowledged role as a form of propaganda, normally enjoy a greater presumption of veracity than ancient historiography.

With regard to fidelity, imperial artefacts are, by definition, originals: direct survivals from

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<sup>41</sup> Syme, Ronald, *The bogus names in the Historia Augusta*, *BHAC* 1964/5, *BHAF* 4.3, 1966, p. 258.

antiquity. With regard to proximity, their production is usually contemporary, or nearly so, with the events and situations they record, and their contents are normally authorised, perhaps even determined, by the subjects or protagonists of those events and situations. With regard to veracity, they are normally the product of several artificers, involved in a process of collaborative production, whether in the mint, or the sculptor's or stonemason's yard, during which, knowingly to fashion them so as to state or imply a false proposition requires collusion, involving the risk of exposure. They are, moreover, at least in the case of coins and inscriptions, as well as of most statues, public materials, available to large numbers of unforeseeable handlers or beholders, who might be expected to detect, and possibly denounce, any falsehood or misrepresentation which they might contain.

Any propositions of fact imperial artefacts may make about given events and situations are therefore liable to public verification, possibly by witnesses of those same events or situations, and hence are not thought likely to be factually untrue. The reason why this liability to public verification is normally considered effective, in limiting the likelihood of their mendacity, is that coins and inscriptions are not only vehicles for propaganda, but, insofar as they are legal tender and official documents, essential elements in the function and administration of the state. If they, and their issuers, fall into public disrepute, the state's credibility, hence its stability, and even its existence, are potentially threatened.

While it may take a crisis, as well as a bold man, to suggest that a public statement is untrue, neither is in short supply during the principate. Indeed, a blatant public lie might constitute a provocation to unrest, or even to rebellion, and provide a rallying point in its support. Even given the state of communications in the Roman empire, and corresponding limits on speed and range in the spread of information, it suffices, for liability to public verification to constitute at least a cautionary factor in the calculations of issuers of imperial artefacts, that such liability be thought by them to operate effectively in Rome. For in the capital, where the emperor normally resides, and the state is most susceptible to interaction, the speed and density (in stead of range) of spread of information is the greatest, as is the number and station of persons, potentially knowledgeable about events and situations cited in imperial artefacts, with power and incentive to foment public unrest, or launch a plot, if they come to feel, as the result of a blatant public lie, that the principate, or its current tenant, is contemptuous of popular, equestrian, senatorial, or military opinion.

There are, by way of contrast, in the case of ancient historiography, few external factors, comparable to those operating in the case of imperial artefacts, limiting the likelihood of factual

inaccuracy or outright mendacity. Even if one supposes that the allegations of ancient historians are subject to challenge by their readers, the consequences of their authors' potential exposure as liars are not necessarily dire for their individual fortunes. Indeed, if their lies are pleasing to the powers that be, their fortunes may even be enhanced. Thus the only external restraint on an ancient historiographer's temptation to lie, exaggerate, or simply to assert as fact what is only allegation or hearsay, is his judgement of the likely evolution of political circumstances, in relation to the content of his texts.

While imperial artefacts are not, for the reasons just cited, normally thought to lie about the basic facts of events and situations they record, they are, however, believed to convey a particular interpretation thereof: one determined by imperial policy; though precisely how, and how far this is so has been debated.<sup>42</sup> Statements and implications in imperial coins and inscriptions, whether of policy, or of alleged fact, are thought to be made in the name, if not at the personal behest, of the protagonist or subject, usually an emperor, of the relevant events or situations, and seek to propagate his version of same. Thus, whether that version is factually true or not, it is at least normally that authorised by the emperor, or by his entourage and handlers. In view of this, it is assumed that imperial artefacts normally reflect and propagate imperial policy, and constitute evidence thereof.

Because of these circumstances, imperial artefacts may, in most cases, together with certain private artefacts, subject to similar circumstances, be construed as evidence for certain sorts of propositions. Among these may be included: the dates and locations of military victories, recorded on triumphal arches, together with the name of the defeated tribe or nation; the actual performance of a ritual, dedicated to a deity, cited on a votive altar, by the dedicants there named; the erstwhile physical existence of an individual, commemorated in an epitaph, and his or her actual tenure of the offices and roles there listed; the payment to soldiers or populace of donatives recorded on a coin type; the repair of a road or bridge, claimed on a milestone; and such fundamental assertions as those of a given emperor's identity, cited on his coins and inscriptions, including the list of his ascendants.

It should be noted, with respect to the last item in this list (which does not pretend to be exhaustive), that assertions of filiality, often included alongside the titlature and nomenclature in an emperor's inscriptions (though omitted, for reasons of space, from his coinage), do not nec-

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<sup>42</sup> For part of the debate, see: Sutherland, C.H.V., *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy*, 1951; Sutherland, C.H.V., *President's Annual Address, Proceedings of the Royal Numismatic Society*, 11, 21/06/1951; and Jones, A.H.M., *Numismatics and History, Essays in Roman Coinage presented to Harold Mattingly*, 1956.

essarily refer to biological paternity.<sup>43</sup> In fact, they more often allude to the adoptive variety.<sup>44</sup> Adoption of a chosen successor by a reigning emperor was, alongside proclamation by uprisen soldiers, whether of an unadopted exogene,<sup>45</sup> or of an unadopted kinsman,<sup>46</sup> the most frequent mode of succession to the principate, during the span from Augustus to this boy. In only one case did the senate, of its own initiative, undertake the proclamation of an unadopted exogene.<sup>47</sup> In the majority of claims of filiality, because of the obstacles, cited above, to blatant mendacity in imperial artefacts, and the lack of evidence, or even allegation, from other sources to the contrary, we assume that most of these adoptions actually took place, in one form or another; also, that when the claim refers to biological paternity, it was at least legally so, in the sense of being recognised as such by the putative father, whatever the genetic truth of the matter may have been. (This is an important distinction, which becomes particularly relevant, later in this study.) Such recognition, whether of an adoptive or biological son, as heir to the principate, normally involved his proclamation as such by imperial artefacts, issued in the name of the reigning princeps.

This observation brings us to the case of this boy's claim. How does it differ from the foregoing? Not in being contested. The alleged "testamentary adoption" by Caesar of Augustus is contested by some,<sup>48</sup> as is that of Hadrian by Trajan.<sup>49</sup> But in each of these cases the alleged adoptee is an adult, with an extensively recorded military and political career, who is deeply involved with the alleged adopter, and with his family, so that his adoption, even if unverified, is not implausible. In contrast, this boy, barely adolescent at the time of his accession, judging from his earliest known image, that on the aureus here reproduced, is totally unknown and unrecorded before his sudden ascent to the throne; which, moreover, according to Dio, is predicated, not on an unverified claim of adoption, but on an unverifiable claim of imperial bastardy. This, indeed, is a novelty in Roman history, if true.

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<sup>43</sup> Biological paternity, six cases: Titus & Domitian (by Vespasian), Commodus (by Marcus), Geta & Caracalla (by Severus), Diadumenianus (by Macrinus).

<sup>44</sup> Adoptive paternity, nine cases: Augustus (testamentary adoption by Caesar, disputed), Tiberius (by Augustus), Gaius (by Tiberius), Nero (by Claudius), Trajan (by Nerva), Hadrian (by Trajan, disputed), Pius (by Hadrian), Marcus (by Pius), Verus (by Pius).

<sup>45</sup> Proclamation by soldiers of an unadopted exogene, ten cases: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Pertinax, Didius, Niger, Albinus, Severus (who later claims posthumous adoption by Marcus), Macrinus.

<sup>46</sup> Proclamation by soldiers of an unadopted kinsman, one case: Claudius.

<sup>47</sup> Proclamation by the senate of an unadopted exogene: Nerva.

<sup>48</sup> See Schmitthenner, W., *Oktavian und das Testament Caesars*, Zetemata, 4, 1952; Syme, R., *Clues to Testamentary Adoption*, *Roman Papers*, 4.9, 1988, p.159-173.

<sup>49</sup> For a rare coin relating to this controversy, see <http://www.dcatalog.de/nac/00080h00.htm>



We have already seen why one cannot believe this allegation merely on the strength of Dio's word. But can one, alternatively, believe the imperial artefacts, not only of this boy, but of his alleged father and grandfather? Were no ancient historiography about him, or about Caracalla, to have come down to us, there would be almost nothing, except for the curious absence of any reference whatsoever to him, in any imperial artefacts datable to the reign of Caracalla, to prevent us from believing that he was indeed the son of that emperor, whom we would call, not Caracalla, but Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, as we should also have to call this boy. There does, in fact, as shall be seen in the concluding section of this study, exist one piece of epigraphic evidence, of private, as opposed to official imperial origin, for an alternative hypothesis; but if we had not been alerted to the possible mendacity of this boy's claim, we might not understand its relevance, or realise its importance. If, moreover, there were no extant ancient historiography concerning Severus to alert us to the contrary, we might even believe that Caracalla was, as he is proclaimed to be by his inscriptions, the grandson of the philosophic emperor, and that Severus was Marcus' son, alongside Commodus; for that is the impression both their epigraphic corpora seek to convey.<sup>50</sup>

Because, however, of particular allegations by Dio - a contemporary of Marcus, Commodus, Severus, Caracalla, and this boy - we become aware that the propositions of ascendancy, in the last three cited of these emperors' inscriptions, may be unreliable. Dio tells us that Severus' claim to be the son, and Caracalla's the grandson, of the philosophic emperor, is not biological, but merely adoptive, and that, moreover, of dubious validity.<sup>51</sup> He also tells us that this boy's claim to Caracallan paternity is biological, and false.<sup>52</sup> We are thus alerted by a text of ancient historiography, whose evidential status is itself subject to question, to the possibility that this boy's coins and inscriptions, as well as those of his epigraphically recorded "father" and "grandfather" may lie, explicitly, or by implication, in these particular respects. This, of course, as has already been noted, raises the question, which we now address, of whether they may also lie in any or all other respects.

Though it is possible they lie in all, it is unlikely. This is partly because not all respects, in which a given artefact may possibly have meaning, are foreseeable to its authors and artificers; and partly because even if they were, not all would matter equally to them. Perhaps most important, however, is that to tell, and sustain, a lie requires far more effort than simply to tell the truth. One must therefore assume that the intellectual authors of imperial artefacts will only take

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<sup>50</sup> For example CIL 8.5.2 (Index) p. 136, *maiores*, & p. 141, *maiores*.

<sup>51</sup> *Dio* 76.7.4

<sup>52</sup> *Dio* 79.30.2; 79.32.2

the trouble to lie, accept the risks involved, and obtain the collusion of its material artificers in doing so, if they have a particular incentive. They will, moreover, only lie in those respects which are related to the matter of the lie, or to its incentive. The rest of the information, conveyed by a given artefact, may, in that case, still be usable as evidence for propositions unrelated to the lie.

So one must formulate criteria for determining what sorts of propositions, where there is suspicion of a lie, may be proven by the evidence of imperial artefacts, and what sorts may not. This involves determining the nature of those respects in which the information contained in a given artefact has meaning. This determination is most easily performed by identifying questions, which propositions, stated or implied in that information, are designed to answer. Once those questions are identified, their consequential liability may be determined. This is best done by asking what consequences flow from any given answer to them. Identification of those consequences will, in turn, provide the key to understanding the respects in which the information in question has meaning for its authors and artificers. In the light of that understanding, it may be possible to estimate whether they are likely or not to lie in those respects. And this estimation will allow one to determine the value as evidence, with respect to a given proposition, of the artefact in question.

An important factor, in determining the nature of a given question, is whether the issue it addresses is controversial, or not. Consequential liability is closely related to the presence or absence of controversy, since the consequences, flowing from a given answer to questions raised by a given proposition, may be different for different people. Yet another is whether the matter in question is verifiable. The combination of these factors, in relation to a given artefact, constitutes a test of that artefact's potential value as evidence, in relation to a given question. This test may itself be framed as a question: does anyone have reason to lie about this matter, and if so, how easily could such a lie be exposed?

With reference to the boy on the coin, if the relevant question be framed in the form: "What is this emperor's official nomenclature?" the answer, on the basis of the evidence of coins and inscriptions, is perfectly straightforward: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. His official nomenclature is not a matter of controversy, nor even of opinion, but of easily proven fact: he is called, in his official media, whatever he is called there, irrespective of whether such denomination is legitimate, unique, ambiguous, or misleading; of what it may state or imply; or of what consequences may flow from any of its statements or implications. If, in contrast, the question be framed as "Who, really, is the boy depicted on this coin?" the answer to this highly controversial question,

as given by differing parties to that controversy, will differ, according to the consequences for those parties of any given answer.

In this individual's case, it is clear that the consequences, flowing from one answer to the question of his identity, differ greatly, for certain people, including himself, from those that flow from any other. If this boy is, or rather is believed to be, the bastard son of Caracalla, then, with the aid of certain other factors, such as the enthusiasm reportedly generated by his dancing, in his role as high priest of Elagabal, among the soldiers quartered near Emesa, his home town in Syria, and the bribes his grandmother allegedly pays them,<sup>53</sup> he is elevated by those soldiers to the principate, replacing Caracalla's slayer and usurper, Macrinus, while his grandmother, mother, and sundry hangers-on, currently exiles, albeit at home in Emesa, are able to return to Rome, occupy the palace, and live at the expense of the exchequer. If not, not. Clearly, all those involved have ample motivation to lie. And, if their lie (if it is a lie) is believed, and results in the desired consequences, they will also have the power to ensure that it is propagated by this emperor's imperial artefacts.

But this is not to say that his coinage and inscriptions necessarily lie in other respects, unrelated to the question of his identity. For other questions may not be so consequential, or so perfectly unverifiable, as that of his biological paternity. This last consideration is particularly interesting, for it provides the answer to what might otherwise seem an insoluble enigma: Why, instead of claiming to be Caracalla's bastard, with all the opprobrium both adultery and bastardy invite (and which, it shall be argued, in a subsequent study, crucially affect this emperor's conduct of his reign) might this boy, or his handlers, not simply claim that he has been adopted as his heir by Caracalla? After all, it is possible that Hadrian got away with such a lie, with respect to Trajan. The answer could be that this boy's handlers know that they cannot get away with such a lie, given what is known about Caracalla: in particular his paranoia with regard to any possible rival or successor; given also what is known, or rather not known, about this boy, on account of his total obscurity, up till the moment when he is thrust onto the throne. Thus, unverifiability outweighs opprobrium.

Returning to his artefacts, there are respects where one must be alert to distortions, as opposed to outright lies, deriving from administration of the consequences of his claim's success. During the first six months of his reign (which officially begins in June 971=218, with his victory over Macrinus) his coins show him as consul, and holder of the tribunician power, both

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<sup>53</sup> *Herodian* 5.3.11.

unnumbered, as is normal for an emperor's first tenure.<sup>54</sup> These offices were previously occupied by Macrinus, who usurped them from Caracalla in April 970=217. This boy immediately takes them over, without waiting for the senate's approbation, and counts them as his first. This forms part of his attempt to make it look as if he himself directly succeeded Caracalla, whose tenure of these offices, had he lived, would have lasted till the end of 970=217.<sup>55</sup> This boy's artefacts of 972=219 record his second tribunician power, and his second consulship, just as if he had entered on his first immediately after Caracalla, and Macrinus had never occupied either.<sup>56</sup> He seems to have succeeded in this obfuscation, since late antique records of the *fasti consulares* omit all mention of Macrinus.<sup>57</sup>

Apart, however, from allowing for such distortions, there is no reason necessarily to suppose mendacity in other sorts of propositions contained in this boy's imperial artefacts. Thus one may take it as evidence of fact that the legend on some of his coins, *adventus Augusti*,<sup>58</sup> and an *ob reditum* inscription,<sup>59</sup> record his arrival in Rome; that both coins and inscriptions indicate his actual tenure of the high priesthood of Elagabal, simultaneously with the role of *Pontifex Maximus*; <sup>60</sup> and even that the ladies, cited as Augustae on some of his inscriptions, and whose names and portraits appear on coins minted during his reign, were really, as is claimed by their texts and legends, his grandmother, mother, and wives.<sup>61</sup>

Not so, however, with regard to his alleged husband, the handsome Carian charioteer; nor to that husband's reported rival, the prodigious son of a Bithynian cook; nor to the supposed victims of his imputed human sacrifices; nor yet to those of his attributed practical jokes, amongst other persons mentioned only by his ancient historiography. The existence of most of these *dramatis personae* must, in the absence of evidence from other sources, bringing them into the realms of likelihood or fact, forever remain in that of possibility. Some, however, of his alleged senatorial or equestrian victims, whose existence, location, and dates are epigraphically or papyrologically attested, therefore admissible as fact, may also thereby participate in likelihood, and that in its greater degree, as regards the proposition that they may have interacted, politically or

<sup>54</sup> Thirion, p. 22, §1-14.

<sup>55</sup> The Tribunician Power till 10 December, the Consulate till 31 December.

<sup>56</sup> Dio 80.8.2 provides an irate account of these irregularities.

<sup>57</sup> *Chronographus anni CCCLIII, Fasti consulares a regibus exactis, a.p. Chr. 218-222, Chronica Minora* p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Thirion, §339-340.

<sup>59</sup> BCAR 13.2, 1885, §1081.

<sup>60</sup> Coins: Thirion, §300-308. Inscriptions (e.g.): CIL 3S, LXXXIV (diploma). An index is to be published in *Epigraphica Variana*.

<sup>61</sup> Inscriptions: For example: CIL 8, 2715. Coinage: Thirion, p. 78-93.

socially, in Antioch, Nicomedia, or Rome, with this emperor. For it is the conjunction of just such heterogeneous sources of evidence that constitutes the greater degree of likelihood. These persons' status, however, as his victims, unattested outside historiography, fails to attain to that degree of likelihood, let alone to meet the standard of proof adopted by these studies for propositions of fact.

It would indeed be pedantic and otiose, having shown the operation of that standard by example, to list now, in logical order, all its principles, as well as those determining the various degrees of likelihood and possibility, operating here. It would also be premature, since these studies are a work in progress, subject to ongoing conceptual development. Only when all the relevant materials have been thoroughly examined, and all the pertinent questions asked – and as many as possible answered – shall one be able fully to describe the methodological procedures that will have been employed in that examination and interrogation.

The methodological outline traced above has, therefore, the status of a set of working hypotheses, or rules of thumb. Following these will, I believe, eventually lead, in the course of these studies, by virtue of the cumulative evaluation of individual cases, to the formulation of criteria whereby to estimate the relative value as evidence or otherwise of the whole array of this emperor's imperial artefacts. A similar, but far more complex, evaluation of ancient historiographical texts, may likewise lead to the formulation of criteria whereby to judge the relative degrees of likelihood which one may attach to each of their several propositions. By developing, case by case, both these sets of criteria, I seek to use both sorts of materials more effectively than they have normally been used before, in the study of this individual, to address the questions they raise.

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**Abbreviations used in footnotes:**

*AIEC* = *Auctoris Incerti Epitome de Caesaribus*.

*ANSMN* = *The American Numismatic Society Museum Notes*.

*AVLC* = Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*.

*BAGB* = *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*.

*BCAR* = *Bulletino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*.

*BHAC* = *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium*.

*BHAF* = *Beiträge zur Historia-Augusta-Forschung*.

*BIFB* = *Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique de l'Institut Français de Beyrouth*.

*BMCRE* = *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*.

*BNF/E* = Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet de Médailles, unpublished internal catalogue, *Élagabale*.

*B-S/RZCD* = Bering-Staschewski, R., *Römische Zeitgeschichte bei Cassius Dio*, 1981.

*C354 Fasti* = *Chronographus anni CCCLIII, Fasti consulares a regibus exactis*, a.p. Chr. 218-222, *Chronica Minora*, 1, ed. Mommsen, 1894, p. 59.

*C354 CUR* = *Chronographus anni CCCLIII, Chronica Urbis Romae, Chronica Minora*, 1, 1894, p. 147.

*C354 LG* = *Chronographus anni CCCLIII, Liber Generationis* 1, 397, *Chronica Minora*, 1, 1894, p. 138.

*Cassola, SVPSE* = Cassola, Filippo, *Sulla vita e sulla personalità dello storico Erodiano*, *NRS*, 41, 1957.

*Eusebius, CCQS* = *Eusebii Chronicorum Canonum Quae Supersunt, Chronicorum Libri Duo*, (*Eusebius, Versio Armenia, Hieronymus, Epitome Syria*) ed. Schoene, 1866.

*CIG* = *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*

*CIL* = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

*Cohen'* = *Description Historique des Monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain*, 1<sup>re</sup> édition, 1860.

*CEL* = *Collection d'Études Latines*

*CSSC 7* = Arnaldo Momigliano, *Settimo Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico*

*Dio* = *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, ed. Boissevain, 1901, 79.30.2 – 80.21.3.

- EHICP, EI* = *Excerpta Historica Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti* vol. III, *Excerpta de Insidiis, ex Ioanne Malala* §15.
- EHICP, EVV* = *Excerpta Historica Imp. Constantini Porphyrogeniti* vol. II, pars I, *Excerpta de Virtutibus et Vitiis, ex Cassio Dione*, §403-414.
- FWM/E* = Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University, coin collection, unpublished labels, *Elagabalus*.
- HACM* = *Historiae Augustae Colloquium Maceratense*, Bari, 1995.
- HAAD* = *Historia Augusta, Antoninus Diadumenianus*, ed. Hohl, 1965.
- HA/ AH* = *Historia Augusta, Antoninus Heliogabalus*, ed. Hohl, 1965.
- HA/ OM* = *Historia Augusta, Opellius Macrinus*, ed. Hohl, 1965.
- Herodian* = *Herodiani Ab excessu Divi Marci Libri Octo*, ed. Stavenhagen, 1922.
- Hydatius, DC* = *Idatii Episcopi Aquae-flaviensis Descriptio Consulium*, 218-222, *Patrologia* 52, p. 904-5.
- IG* = *Inscriptiones Graecae*.
- IGRR* = *Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes*.
- IGVR* = *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae*.
- ILS* = *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*.
- JNGG* = *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte*.
- JRS* = *Journal of Roman Studies*.
- LF* = *Listy Filologicke*.
- MEFRA* = *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome*.
- FM/SCD* = Millar, F., *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford, 1964.
- MUSJ* = *Mélanges de l'Université de Saint-Joseph*, Beyrouth.
- NRS* = *Nuova Rivista Storica*.
- OHAP* = *Orosii Historiae adversus Paganos*, ed. Zangmeister, 1967.
- OCD* = *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.
- PIR<sup>2</sup>* = *Prosopographia Imperii Romani Saec. I.II.III*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.
- PTEC* = *Prosperi Tironis Epitoma Chronicon, Chronica Minora*, 1, ed. Mommsen, 1894, p. 435-436.
- REL* = *Revue des Études Latines*.
- RIC* = *Roman Imperial Coinage*
- SEG* = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*.
- SDAW/Gs* = *Sitzungsberichte der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*.
- SMB* = *Schweizer Münzblätter*
- TAM* = *Tituli Asiae Minoris*
- Thirion or Th.* = Thirion, Marcel, *Le Monnayage d'Élagabal, (218-222)*, 1968.
- Xiphilinus* = *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum quae supersunt*, ed. Boissvain, 1901, vol. 3, p. 722-729, *Xiphilinus*, 344.17 – 354.19.