

*The Importance of Being Varius or
Exploding the Varian Misconception:
an Introduction to Studia Variana*

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

Studia Variana and the Varian misconception: questions of terminology

Studia Variana are studies in the life and reign, and in the mythical or legendary afterlife, of a Roman emperor whose proper name was Varius. He reigned between 971 and 975, by the Roman calendar, corresponding to 218 and 222 by the Christian. His coins and inscriptions identify him as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. He is, however, more commonly, but wrongly, called Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, after the name of a Syrian sun god, Elagabal, or Elaiagabal, whose cult he served as high priest, while he was emperor.¹

The use of a Latin title for studies in English about a Roman emperor requires no apology. Nevertheless, it is opportune to note that it serves to avoid giving a false impression, which might be created by using its English equivalent, 'Varian Studies'. For it would be false to suggest that these are an established subject, with a recognised place in academic curricula, such as Augustan Studies. *Studia Variana* do indeed set out to establish Varian studies (without a capital 'S') as a defined realm of academic enquiry, but without any specific curricular pretensions. Rather they seek, first and foremost, to place Varian studies on a firm epistemological and methodological foundation.

To do so, it is necessary to explode a widespread misconception, adversely affecting most modern historiography concerning Varius. I shall call it the Varian misconception. It consists of treating Varius as a subject of belief, rather than as an object of enquiry. It derives from a methodological error, and is predicated on an epistemological category mistake.

¹ The evidence for his imperial and priestly offices, and for his official nomenclature and dates is contained in his coins and inscriptions. These are collected into *Epligraphica* and *Numismatica Variana*, parts of *Studia Variana* yet to be published. They are discussed in *The Boy on the Coin = Quaestiones Varianae* (henceforth *QV*) 1, which is published. The evidence for his designation as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus is found in ancient and modern historiographical texts. The former are collected into *Historiographica Variana*, yet to be published. Many of the latter are discussed and footnoted individually below, as well as throughout *Studia Variana*. *QV1* establishes the connexion between Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. The contention that this emperor's proper name was Varius is argued in *Nomen Varianum = QV2*, which is published. For detailed reference, see *Studia Variana Publications* at the end of this article.

The methodological error consists of uncritical belief, by most modern historians of antiquity, in allegations made by ancient historiographers concerning Varius. They claim him to have been a monster of cruelty, frivolity, and lust, as well as a religious fanatic and a compulsive dancer. This last is, in Rome, a serious charge. Uncritical belief in such claims involves a failure even to attempt to verify them. This is dereliction of the historian's most basic duty.

If such an attempt is made, as it is in *Studia Variana*, it emerges that many, indeed most such allegations are unverifiable. Now this, in theory, could simply be due to the gap in time between antiquity and now, and a consequent loss of evidence that may once have existed. Were allegations about Varius, made by his ancient historiographers, dispassionate in tone and purely factual in nature, one might be inclined to attribute their present lack of verifiability to this cause alone, and so to grant them a presumption of credibility.

But as one examines more deeply the texts where those allegations are made, one comes to realise that another factor is involved. For their tone is anything but dispassionate. It ranges from an ostentatious show of righteous indignation (not, however, exempt from delight in salacity) through seemingly credulous wonder, laced with hints of irony, to prurience thinly disguised as obloquy. And many of these texts' allegations about Varius, being psychological, rather than factual in nature, are inherently unverifiable.

It emerges from such examination that the ancient historiographers who write about Varius are not really concerned to give a dispassionate, factual account of him. Rather, in consonance with a rhetorical approach to historiography widespread in antiquity, they seek to create, through a mixture of hearsay and invention, an imaginary individual whom they can attack, or otherwise deploy in the service of diverse agenda. Thus, their allegations are often unverifiable because they concern an imaginary individual.

Uncritical belief in such allegations, purporting to relate to Varius, but relating in reality to his imaginary counterpart, leads to an epistemological category mistake. This mistake consists of confusing a once live flesh and blood individual, Varius, with an imaginary one, currently going under the misnomer of Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. This I shall call the Varian confusion.

For a modern historian of antiquity uncritically to predicate his or her treatment of Varius on such a mistake is to propagate a misconception. That misconception consists of treating a potential object of enquiry as a subject of belief. Thus is the Varian misconception predicated on the Varian confusion.

This, however, is not all that there is to be said about the Varian misconception. For it constitutes the basis of a much larger entity, the Varian myth or legend, which is potentially an object of enquiry in its own right. To understand this, we must look more closely at the difference between Varius and his imaginary counterpart.

Varius lived for less than eighteen years. He was probably murdered by his guards. His memory was damned by his successor. Despite this, there is a record of the last four years of his life, during which he reigned as Roman emperor under the name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. It consists of some four hundred coin types, and a similar number of inscriptions. From these, and a few other artefacts, we can derive some knowledge of his life and reign.

But certain probable elements of disinformation, contained in his coins and inscriptions, concerning his identity and his nomenclature, in concert with many more, contained in his ancient historiography, concerning his behaviour and his character, contribute instead to the creation of his imaginary counterpart. That counterpart, in contrast with Varius, continues to thrive after nearly eighteen centuries. Under a diversity of aliases, including Pseudantoninus, Sardanapalus, Tiberinus, Tractitatus, and Impurus, as well as Elagabalus and Heliogabalus, he is the protagonist of a legend or a myth.

The equivocation here expressed between myth and legend, and the difficulty of choosing between them in the context of Varian studies, are discussed in detail elsewhere.² Here, suffice it to say that reserving myth exclusively for “definitely non-historical personages,” and legend for “semi-historical traditions,” as Kirk would have us do,³ diverges both from standard usage, and from etymological authenticity, and does not fit the case of Varius. Therefore here, pending a better solution, we must live with this equivocation, and continue to speak, when absolutely necessary, of a Varian myth or legend.

It manifests itself in ancient and modern historiography, and in more avowedly creative works of literature, both prose and verse, as well as in the visual, dramatic, musical, saltatory and cinematographic arts, and in popular culture. This composite body of works and phenomena I shall call the Varian afterlife. This term will serve, at least in some cases, as an adequate and unequivocal substitute for ‘the Varian myth or legend’.

² *Introductory Address to the Varian Symposium*, Trinity College, Cambridge, 29-31 July, 2005, yet to be published.

³ Kirk, G.S., *The Nature of Greek Myths*, 1974 (Penguin Edition), p. 23.

The Varian misconception thus results from confusing Varius with the protagonist of the Varian afterlife. While these two individuals are closely related, the latter deriving from the former, they are ontologically and epistemologically distinct. They belong to different orders of reality, and constitute different sorts of potential objects of historical enquiry. This is what is meant by saying that their confusion constitutes an epistemological category mistake. It consists of treating propositions proper to one order of reality as if they belong to another.

'Reality' is used here in its etymologically authentic sense, deriving from Latin *res*, 'thing', related to *reor*, *ratus*, 'think', 'thought', meaning 'that which is thought of'.⁴ A reality is thus a given way of thinking about things. A thing is real, in this sense, if it is thought of in a given way. It follows that there can be more than one reality, just as there can be more than one thing, and more than one way of thinking. Both the flesh and blood individual, and the imaginary individual, thought of here, and elsewhere, are real, but they are real in different ways.

The difference between their respective orders of reality is best understood by considering how they can be known to history, and what such knowledge consists of. 'History' is likewise used here in its etymologically authentic sense, deriving from Greek *ἱστορία*, 'a learning or knowing by inquiry... the knowledge so obtained'.⁵ 'Knowledge' and its cognate words are used here in accordance with the assumption that it can only be so of true propositions, otherwise called facts. This is assumed by standard usage.⁶

The epistemological difference between the order of reality proper to a once live individual, and that proper to an imaginary one, is that some propositions concerning the former are verifiable, as matters of material fact, whereas none concerning the latter himself are so as such. The former can be known to history, at least to some degree, on the basis of material evidence, relating ultimately to his physical existence in space and time. The latter cannot be known in the same way, because having no physical existence, but only a notional one, such information as may concern him relates, not to himself as such, but to a notion about him held in a mind, or in a succession of minds.

⁴ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 1st Ed. 1879, p. 1575, *res*; p. 1566, *reor*.

⁵ Lidell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th Ed. 1897, p. 713.

⁶ *Merriam-Webster Online: knowledge*, (2c): the circumstance or condition of apprehending truth or fact through reasoning
<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=knowledge&x=13&y=16>

The Varian confusion thus consists of treating propositions unverifiable as matters of fact, concerning an imaginary individual, as if they were propositions so verifiable, concerning an individual once live. It is, moreover, compounded by a failure to seek to verify those propositions, most of which, on inspection, turn out to be unverifiable. Indeed it involves, as noted, uncritical belief in allegations made by ancient historiographers which ought, if only on the basis of their obvious lack of impartial objectivity, to excite the historian's suspicion. Such dereliction of the most elementary of an historian's duties leads to the Varian misconception. The Varian misconception consists of the widespread diffusion and general acceptance of the Varian confusion, adversely affecting the conduct of Varian studies. For in confusing the physical with the imaginary individual, it prevents proper understanding of either. Varian studies, properly conceived, should undertake to investigate both. In order to allow them to do so, the Varian misconception must be exploded.

Exploding the Varian misconception involves two main steps. One is to dispel the Varian confusion: to show who each of these two individuals is, who he is not, and how they differ. The other is to discover how and why the Varian confusion arose, how it affects Varian studies, and how to counteract it. The former step, showing who Varius is, who he is not, and how he differs from his imaginary counterpart, is undertaken in *Quaestiones Varianae*, a series of enquiries within *Studia Variana*. These also discuss the origins, during Varius' lifetime, of the Varian confusion. Their conclusions will briefly be summarised here. The present article will then go on to take the latter step in exploding the Varian misconception. It will focus on that misconception itself, showing with examples how it develops after Varius' death, how it adversely affects the study of Varius, and how *Studia Variana* serve to counteract it.

Let us now turn to the conclusions of *Quaestiones Varianae*, with respect to who Varius is and is not, and in particular to their thesis regarding the origin, during Varius' lifetime, of the Varian misconception.

Who Varius is and who he is not: the source of the Varian misconception

The basic source of confusion in approaching the study of Varius is a suspicion of likely fraud and disinformation in the original ancient sources. (There may also be misinformation, lacking particular intention, but it is disinformation, designed to mislead, that concerns us here.) This applies as much to Varius' imperial artefacts, his coins and inscriptions, as it does to the texts of his earliest historiographers. As a result of suspicion of this likelihood, Varius' identity, and his nomenclature, are themselves a subject of controversy.

The suspicion of likely fraud springs from a fundamental contradiction between accounts of Varius, specifically with respect to his identity and his nomenclature, given in, or extrapolated from his own imperial artefacts, and those alleged in his ancient historiography. His imperial artefacts give one account of who he is; the earliest and most important of his ancient historians quite another. This I shall call the Varian contradiction.

For Varius, in order to become Roman emperor, adopted a name, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and a corresponding identity, that of bastard son of the previous bearer of that name. That bearer was the murdered emperor more commonly, but rightly, known as Caracalla. Varius' assertion of Caracallan paternity, implied by his coins, and explicitly claimed by his inscriptions, is, as is argued in *Nomen Varianum*, one of the *Quaestiones*, most likely false.

It was, moreover, claimed to be false by the earliest and most influential of his ancient historiographers, Cassius Dio Cocceianus.⁷ Dio's account of Varius was written during the reign of Varius' successor, Severus Alexander, ostensible beneficiary of Varius' murder (ostensible, because the real beneficiaries were Alexander's grandmother, then mother, who ruled while he reigned). Dio's account is obviously hostile and slanted, seeking to justify that murder. Moreover, by Dio's own admission, it is based entirely on hearsay. Hence it is doubly suspect. But at least in his refusal to believe Varius' claim of Caracallan paternity, Dio concurs with the results of historical investigation, as conducted in *Nomen Varianum*.

When an individual consciously adopts an identity, whether it is true or false, we say that he plays or performs a role. In so doing, he may also assume a persona, proper to that role, as when Shakespeare's Prince Hal assumes the persona of Henry V.⁸

The persona assumed by Varius in performance of his role as Roman emperor overlapped with another persona that he had previously assumed, in performance of another role: that of high priest of Elagabal. Unlike Prince Hal, Varius did not repudiate his previous persona. Rather, he continued to perform his priestly role, even as emperor. This was to contribute to his death, but also to the particular form of immortality enjoyed by his imaginary counterpart.

⁷ Dio, 79.30.2-79.32.3.

⁸ Shakespeare, William, *Henry IV*, Part II, Act 5, Scene 2, Scene 5.



Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus ⁹



Invictus Sacerdos Augustus ¹⁰

⁹ BNF, *Élagabale* 1227 = Thirion, *Monnayage* 365

¹⁰ BNF, *Élagabale* 7217 = Thirion, *Monnayage* 252

The persona associated with his role as emperor demanded *gravitas*, a military bearing, as pictured in his image on the obverse of some of his coins with a legend proclaiming his full official nomenclature: Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus. Clad in laurel crown, aegis, breastplate and toga, he is the youthful embodiment of a certain concept of Roman majesty. The persona, however, associated with his role as a Syrian high priest demanded, according to some accounts, orgiastic, ecstatic dancing. Clad in a tiara, flowing silken robes, and jewelled slippers, he would go into a trance, in performance of the ritual of his god. The Romans regarded dancing as effeminate, irrational, and self-indulgent, unworthy of a man, let alone an emperor. Two such personae cannot have easily proven compatible.

Varius' role as son of Caracalla was predicated on a story not universally believed, making Varius a bastard and his mother an adulteress. His tenure of the priesthood of Elagabal seems, in contrast, to have been legitimate, inherited from his maternal great grandfather. At some point, perhaps seeking to shift the basis of his tenure of the principate from a disreputable tale of adultery to a fulfilment of divine will, he decided to emphasise his priestly role. Accordingly, several reverse coin types, with the legend *Invictus Sacerdos Augustus*, show him in the belted robes of a Syrian priest, with a tiara on the ground beside him, sacrificing to Elagabal. The dancing may be a figment of his myth or legend, but the costume, at least, belongs to his life and reign.

Understanding the relationship between these two roles, and their respective personae, holds the key to understanding Varius' conduct of his reign, and his early and violent downfall. It also holds the key to discovering the source of his imaginary counterpart, protagonist of his afterlife, object of the Varian confusion, and hence source of the Varian misconception. For Varius was a boy who at least twice in his brief life recreated himself, adopting new roles and assuming new personae. He did so, moreover, on a stage and for an audience: first at the temple of Elagabal in Emesa, his maternal family's home town in Syria; then on the larger stage of imperial Rome.

We are told, by another of his early historiographers, Herodian, that an audience of legionary soldiers, coming to watch Varius dance in Emesa, were so affected by his beauty and grace that they readily believed, or pretended to believe, the tale of adultery spread by his grandmother and mother. By this account, they consequently rose up against Caracalla's murderer, Macrinus, placing Varius, Caracalla's suppositious bastard, on the throne.¹¹

¹¹ *Herodian*, 5.3.7-12

This, again, in the absence of artefactual evidence, may be a figment of Varius' legend or myth, but it is not implausible. The transition from religious charisma, or even from theatrical fame, to political power, via some form of popular enthusiasm, is, alas! not all that rare a phenomenon.

What matters, however, for the present argument, is that in any such event there are four distinct entities involved: two physical, and two notional. There is the physical individual who constitutes the object of devotion. There is his notion of himself in his own mind. Then there is the group of devotees, distinct physical individuals, forming a coherent collectivity by virtue of their common devotion. And finally there is the notion of the object of their devotion, held in their minds.

Of these four entities, the last, the notion of the object of devotion held in the minds of devotees, has the potential to become a legend or a myth. It is potentially eternal, because it consists entirely of information. It is cast into meaningful form as the protagonist of a story, and is thus easily remembered and transmitted. It may undergo changes of nomenclature and valence, and the influence of alien elements of information. But it may, nevertheless, retain its identity throughout, as "a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity," even through many metamorphoses. Such an entity is called an avatar.¹²

Such an avatar is the protagonist of the Varian afterlife. So, Varius is the primary artificer of his own legend or myth. In assuming the persona, first of high priest of Elagabal, then of Roman emperor, and in fusing them together in his particular performance of both roles simultaneously, he created the notional entity which would become his avatar, the protagonist of his afterlife. The imaginary individual currently going by the name of Elagabalus or Heliogabalus is an avatar of the composite persona assumed by Varius, fused and embodied by him during his lifetime. I shall call him the Varian avatar.

Even during Varius' lifetime, his story and its protagonist underwent metamorphosis, both at his hands, and in the minds of his subjects, as their perception of him evolved. After his death, his story continued evolving in popular memory, as witnessed by an oral tradition lasting into post-antique times, manifest in place names and other forms of popular lore. It continues to do so at that level, in a sense, even to this day, through manifestations of the Varian afterlife in popular culture.

¹² *Merriam-Webster Online*, *avatar* (3): a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity
<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=avatar&x=17&y=17>

Very shortly after Varius' death his story was taken in hand and rendered in literary form by Dio, historian turned propagandist in the service of the beneficiaries of Varius' murder. One of Dio's rhetorical devices is that of calling names. In contradicting Varius' claim to Caracallan paternity, Dio calls him Pseudantoninus. In attacking Varius' 'Oriental' sensuality, Dio calls him Sardanapalus. In gloating over Varius' fate - murdered and thrown into the Tiber - Dio calls him Tiberinus.¹³ Thus Varius' persona is transformed into the first of its many posthumous avatars: that of a fraudulent tyrant, an epitome of bloodlust, impiety, and wantonness, whose murder is therefore wholly justified.

Not long after Dio's death, Herodian writes his account of Varius. Influenced by Dio's with respect to content, it is far less virulent in attitude. Its chief contribution to the Varian afterlife is its introduction of beauty, eros and enthusiasm as possible factors in the legionary soldiers' elevation of Varius to the principate.

At a later stage of antiquity, more than a century after Varius' death, the literary form of his legend or myth is again extensively reworked, in a *vita* in one of a set of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*. This time the Varian avatar is arguably used by a pagan author as a semi-transparent lampoon with which to attack the Christian emperors from Constantine onwards.¹⁴ This *vita* contains allegations modelled on those of Dio, but adds a large amount of new material, most of it salacious, some of it anachronistic with respect to Varius' period. Going well beyond anything charged by Dio, this text accuses its particular Varian avatar of attempting to impose an exclusive monotheism, that of Elagabal, on the Roman empire. In line with this charge, the protagonist of this spurious biography is called Heliogabalus.¹⁵

In this form, and under that name, the Varian avatar is transmitted to modernity. After the fall of the Roman empire, Varius is not mentioned in published writing in the West for several centuries. When his avatar resurfaces, it is in the form shaped by the *Historia Augusta*. The principal vector of its transmission is belief, of a secular rather than religious kind: uncritical belief by modern historians of antiquity, and others, in the allegations of ancient historiographers regarding Varius, or rather, his avatar. For Varius is by now quite overshadowed by his avatar.

¹³ For a complete list of instances of every name used by Dio, see *QV 2, Nomen Varianum*.

¹⁴ Turcan, R., *Héliogabale précurseur de Constantin?* *BAGB*, 1, 1988, p. 38-52.

¹⁵ For a complete list of instances of every name used in the *HA*, see *QV 2, Nomen Varianum*.

It is a task of *Studia Variana* to recover what can be known about Varius, and to bring his memory, damned by his successor, and obscured by the shadow of his avatar, to light. Some of the principal findings of this task of recovery have just been summarised. Now, in order to bring Varius fully into the light, out of the shadow of his avatar, it is time to focus directly on the Varian misconception, in order to explode it.

The first step in its definitive explosion is further to define it. I have so far done so in terms of its epistemological and methodological configuration. Next I shall define it in terms of its particular contents, and of the attitudes they generate; or indeed the reverse, for in the case of the Varian misconception, the attitudes sometimes precede the contents to which they ostensibly react.

Further defining the Varian misconception: attitudes and contents

In its modern form, the Varian misconception involves historians adopting attitudes towards Varius, or rather towards his avatar, under whichever of his names may be current, most often Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. The attitude in question has usually been moralistically condemnatory, or academically dismissive, or both. It has however, sometimes been scurrilously ironical, or even, more recently, enthusiastically laudatory. In whichever case, it has been based on uncritical belief in the contents of accounts of Varius, or rather of his avatar, advanced by his ancient historiographers.

But in its ancient form, the attitudes pertaining to the Varian misconception precede and determine its contents. Indeed it may be said that the Varian misconception consists, in its ancient form, in historiographers, all of whose motives and methods are suspect, and sources at best secondhand, advancing propositions, ostensibly about Varius, but actually about the Varian avatar, each in the service of his own agenda. Such agenda, preceding and motivating such accounts, determine their contents. The effect of their authors' agenda, often hostile to their subject, and that of the nature of their sources, on such propositions' probable veracity, is to render it open to question.

As for those propositions themselves, advanced by ancient historiographers, and uncritically believed by their modern counterparts, they generate the image of a foolish, wicked youth; a murderer, a religious fanatic, a compulsive dancer; a monster of arrogance, cruelty, extravagance, depravity, and mirth, justly murdered by his own praetorian guards before his eighteenth birthday, after less than four years on the throne.

On the basis of that image, and of the resulting misconception, a mythical or legendary afterlife, freed from the fetters of fact, liberated even from the limitations of likelihood, has taken on a life of its own. It has grown and developed, in spurious history, literature, and the arts, showing a remarkable capacity for evolution. In his most recent metamorphoses, this monster is transformed into a hero and a saint.

Historians both ancient and modern, dealing with the Varian avatar, have often issued a disclaimer, conceivably in order to fend off a possible charge of prurience, or even of depravity, against themselves.¹⁶ Any curiosity they may have felt, as to the veracity of those allegations, has apparently been curtailed. They seem not to have wished to be seen to feel the same degree of interest in this particular ruler, or to accord him as much attention, as they devote to other Roman emperors. Historiography ostensibly concerning Varius thus reflects the attitudes of those who feel they must apologise for discussing him at all, and distance themselves from his alleged character and deeds.

In the early, antiquarian stages of modern study of the ancient world, from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, such a combination of apology and obloquy may have sufficed to keep historians safe from accusations of prurience or depravity. It also, at least in their own eyes, justified their failure to question or investigate ancient allegations against the Varian avatar. In the early nineteenth century, however, a more scholarly approach to ancient history was developed, involving reference to artefacts, as well as to historiographical texts. This was followed, in the latter part of that century, by the gradual adoption of a more sceptical view of ancient historiography itself. In the twentieth century, moralistic attitudes to historical characters and subjects were relaxed, at least in certain quarters. The rationale for the Varian misconception was therefore endangered.

Yet rather than simply withering away, it developed a corollary, giving itself a new lease of life. It did so by providing its holders with a new excuse for failing to study Varius in depth, with appropriate standards of historical enquiry. This excuse would appear to be more academically respectable than mere animadversion at seeming prurient or depraved. According to this corollary, nothing of lasting importance was achieved during Varius' reign, whether in the military, religious, economic, political, administrative or institutional sphere, so his life and reign are unworthy of serious historical study.

¹⁶ This practice is inaugurated by the author of the *Vita Hellogabali* in the *Historia Augusta: HAAH* 1.1.

Perhaps as a result, he has not received much. Even serious historians, whose work on other subjects is sound, have not been immune to the Varian misconception. Of the few full-length free-standing works, presented as non-fiction, ostensibly devoted monographically to narration, discussion and interpretation of Varius' life and reign as a whole, none meets proper standards of historical enquiry.

He fares somewhat better in other sorts of works, addressing limited aspects of his life and reign, or related subjects; particularly so in those of an archaeological nature, focusing on specific relevant materials, rather than on Varius himself, or rather, on his avatar. Yet even in these one often finds traces of the Varian misconception: propositions, purportedly of fact, based on ancient allegation, but unsupported by evidence, and unqualified by any expression of doubt. Very few historians who have dealt with Varius or his avatar have escaped altogether unscathed.

This creates difficulties for one seeking properly to pursue Varian studies, on at least two levels. On one level, the work of predecessors often imposes a handicap and constitutes a hindrance to such a pursuit. On another, since the proper pursuit of Varian studies involves exploding the Varian misconception, and such explosion is bound to be perceived, by some, as an attack on them, it requires one to take measures against possible counterattack.

Adverse effects of the Varian misconception; handicap, hindrance, and the need for defence against counterattack

The handicap arises in seeking to use the secondary sources. One effect of the Varian misconception is that *Studia Variana* cannot, as they should, under normal circumstances, refer to most of the relevant post-antique sources with any degree of confident reliance. Such reference is of course standard in the study of any historical subject, ancient or modern. Previous studies are normally considered useful to investigation, even if a subsequent scholar disents from them, with respect to some particular item of information or interpretation.

In the case of Varius, however, the misconception is so fundamental, so widespread, and so far-reaching in its implications, that it greatly diminishes the usefulness of the majority of the relevant secondary sources. This imposes a handicap on Varian studies, as compared to other realms of enquiry. One must constantly be on one's guard, in using secondary sources, lest one inadvertently fall prey to the Varian misconception oneself, or transmit it unawares. This is a distraction from the study of Varius as such.

Such hindrance affects the presentation of the results of one's investigation. Given the widespread nature of the Varian misconception, one must constantly argue against it in one's exposition. One must also address it, in referring to secondary sources, when and as it arises. This, again, is a distraction, but again it must be done, not only for the sake of thoroughness and academic probity, but also in order to defend oneself against two possible forms of counterattack.

For in attacking the Varian misconception, one does risk counterattack. One could be accused, by those who still think along such lines, of prurience and depravity. More to the point, in an academic context, one invites a charge of frivolity. For the corollary whereby the Varian misconception survives, the proposition that Varius is unworthy of serious study, implies that whoever studies him cannot be serious. Such frivolity might, in the specific context of ancient history, be thought to take the form of antiquarianism. For 'antiquarian' is a label used by historians of antiquity who wish to call other such historians unserious.

The former charge is easily quashed. Moral valuations such as these have a way of changing over time, or from one context to another. One can see this happening in the most recent of Varius' metamorphoses, in his afterlife as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, where he has, for some, become a hero and a saint. Prurience and depravity may, by the same token, merely be hostile characterisations of what, from another point of view, might be called curiosity and openmindedness.

Besides, if interest in Varius, whatever its source, is subjected to the chastening discipline of proper scholarly standards, and trained on a physical, as opposed to an imaginary object - or even on the latter, so long as it is recognised as such - then the source of that interest is of no consequence whatever. Moreover, if so-called prurience and depravity lead to knowledge and understanding of Varius, then whoever, thus motivated, can sustain, through the long and painstaking process of research, and the exacting exertions of exposition, an unflagging intensity of intellectual excitement, such as that required to reach satisfaction, deserves whatever satisfaction may ensue.

The potential charge of antiquarianism is more complex. Used as a weapon or an insult, it is ambiguous. The term can be defined in at least two different ways: it can refer to an alleged failure to adopt the standards, and employ the techniques, of proper historical enquiry; or it can focus on the choice of an object deemed unworthy of enquiry.

Refutation of this potential charge, according to the first of these definitions, is to be found throughout *Studia Variana*. I suggest that it is there achieved by virtue of the clear criteria, proposed by their explicit methodology, for verifying propositions concerning Varius as matters of fact, or for assigning to them differing degrees of likelihood and probability; through the thoroughness and classificatory wealth of their documentation; and by virtue of the properly historical mode, level and logic of their argumentation.

The charge of antiquarianism by the second definition - that which deems Varius unworthy of study - will be refuted by the remainder of the present exposition. That refutation will emerge as this article further explains the new approach to study of Varius adopted in *Studia Variana*, and demonstrates why such an approach is not only not antiquarian, but innovative, with wider implications for the study of Roman history.

First, this article will show in greater detail how *Studia Variana* approach the fundamental, preliminary questions of Varius' existence, identity, and nomenclature. Secondly, it will provide textual examples of the Varian misconception and indicate how, exactly, that misconception detracts from the proper study of Varius. This involves showing how *Studia Variana* serve to counteract the Varian misconception, thus contributing to its explosion. Thirdly, in the process of further defining the proper objects of enquiry of Varian studies, the wider implications of Varius' reign for Roman history will be drawn, demonstrating that Varius is not only important, but also interesting.

The proper study of Varius: Existence, Identity, Nomenclature

As we have just seen, knowing the fact of Varius' physical existence holds the key to distinguishing him from his imaginary counterpart. Knowledge of such a fact imposes a specific obligation on the historian: to treat an object of enquiry enjoying physical existence differently from one for whom it cannot be established. In the former case - say, that of Varius - the potential for discovering further facts, relating to his physical existence, means that the historian must aim at knowledge of truth, but be prepared to countenance consideration of degrees of likelihood, or even to admit insuperable ignorance, in the absence of evidence. In the latter - say, that of the Varian avatar - the operative concepts and criteria for approaching his study include those of literary or artistic criticism: verisimilitude, consistency, continuity, and impact. Moreover, by investigating elements of the Varian afterlife with the analytical tools provided by semantic applications of information theory, particularly with respect to encoding, one may discover the way in which the Varian avatar is formed and deployed by its artificers in the service of their particular agenda.

Leaving for elsewhere more detailed consideration of the methodology proper to the study of the vast and diverse field of the Varian afterlife, let us here concentrate, in seeking finally to explode the Varian misconception, on that proper to the study of Varius himself. It should be obvious that fulfilment of the historian's obligation to treat Varius as an object of enquiry once enjoying a physical existence must involve a serious attempt to discover his true identity, and to determine his proper nomenclature.

Not only that, but in this particular case, beset as it is by a widespread misconception, predicated on the confusion of Varius with the protagonist of his afterlife, it is also the historian's duty to use that proper nomenclature, once it is discovered, for the once live object of enquiry, instead of that pertaining to his imaginary counterpart. For to continue to use for Varius a name other than his own is to perpetuate the misconception.

The first of the *Quaestiones* establishes the fact of Varius' existence, with reference to his imperial artefacts, mainly coins and inscriptions. (It was never actually in question, but its epistemological and methodological consequences have long been ignored.) Given those artefacts' number, distribution, and chronology, it is practically impossible that his existence, as such, should be fraudulent, although, as we have seen, the same cannot be said of his identity and his nomenclature. These are thoroughly considered in the second of the *Quaestiones*, with reference to that same body of artefacts, and also to the allegations of ancient historiography. Let me here briefly summarise the results of that enquiry.

The name *Varius* derives from his mother's husband, Sextus Varius Marcellus. *Elagabalus* and *Heliogabalus* derive from the Syrian sun god, Elagabal, or Elaigabal, whom Varius served as high priest. *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* derives from two previous nominees: first, from the philosophic emperor, author of the book we call *The Meditations*; then, from another, better known as Caracalla, the elder son of the emperor Lucius Septimius Severus.

Severus, unrelated to the first Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, usurps his name by adopting him, after Marcus' death, as his own father, then passes that name on to his own son, Caracalla, in order to claim that his dynasty continues that of the Antonines. Varius claims Caracalla, after Caracalla's death, as his own real father, in order to wrest the throne from the usurper Macrinus, who has murdered Caracalla. Varius then adopts Caracalla's official nomenclature, *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, as his own regnal style.

Since Varius' claim of Caracallan paternity is almost certainly false, and Caracalla's use of the Antonine name is deliberately misleading; and, moreover, that name properly belongs to an emperor far better known, and better regarded, either than Varius or Caracalla, posterity generally refuses to call either by that name. Caracalla, therefore, is rightly called by a nickname used for him during his lifetime. But in calling Varius 'Elagabalus' or 'Heliogabalus' instead, posterity not only perpetuates an anachronism, one first attested well over a century after Varius' death, but also reiterates a malapropism, tantamount to calling the Roman Catholic Pope Jehovah, or the Japanese Emperor Amateratsu. Irrespective of Varius' true biological paternity, which is undiscoverable, since no traces of his DNA have been identified, it is clear that by Roman law and custom, as the unrepudiated son of a woman uniquely and uninterruptedly married to a man called Varius since well before that son's birth, and until that man's death, shortly before that son's ascent to the throne, that son must have been called Varius before he became emperor.

In calling him thus, *Studia Variana* proclaim a new approach to study of this emperor. In order to see more clearly why, and compared to what, such an approach is desirable, indeed indispensable, if proper study of this emperor is to proceed, it is necessary first to acquaint oneself better with the prevalent, historically unacceptable approach: that of the Varian misconception. We have already glimpsed its origins in Varius' lifetime, and briefly noted the roles in its constitution of Varius' three main ancient historiographers. Now we shall see in greater detail how it develops after his death, first in the hands of those three, then in those of post-antique historians.

Posthumous development of the Varian misconception in antiquity

The earliest extant text relating to Varius, that of Dio, inaugurates the Varian misconception. It is written under Varius' immediate successor, his cousin Severus Alexander, though ostensible beneficiary, probably not himself artificer, direct or indirect, of Varius' murder. (The indirect artificers are probably Alexander's grandmother, Maesa, and mother, Mamaea, using the praetorian guards as a tool.) Dio, honoured with the consulship by Alexander, tells how the legionary soldiers in Syria overthrow Varius' predecessor, Macrinus, in a *coup d'état*, in favour of Varius: *τοιοῦτον ἔτερον ἐστήσαντο ὑφ' οὗ οὐδὲν ὄ τι οὐ κακὸν καὶ αἰσχρὸν ἐγένετο*.¹⁷ Having thus disqualified Varius from any further form of comment other than obloquy, Dio relates how Varius' elevation by the soldiers to the throne results from a claim, fraudulent in Dio's opinion,

¹⁷ Dio, 79.29.2: "and ... they set up a successor just like him, one by whom nothing was done that was not evil and base."

that Varius is the bastard of Macrinus' predecessor, Caracalla.

Caracalla, having murdered his younger brother and rival, Geta, and his own bride, Plautilla, among many others, has himself, while on campaign in Syria, been murdered, leaving no heir to the throne. It is usurped by his praetorian prefect, Macrinus, indirect artificer of Caracalla's murder, who remains in Syria throughout his own brief reign, there, in turn, to be overthrown by Varius. Varius' mother, Soaemias, and his maternal grandmother, Maesa - niece and sister, respectively, of Domna, wife of Severus, mother of Caracalla - advance the claim that Soaemias lay with her cousin, Caracalla, when both were young and recently married to others: Caracalla to Plautilla, Soaemias to Sextus Varius Marcellus, who is also, conveniently, now dead. The soldiers, restive under Macrinus' attempts to reimpose discipline, lax under Caracalla, seize on the chance to overthrow Macrinus in favour of an alleged son of Caracalla. Varius' elevation to the throne thus ostensibly, but fraudulently, restores the Severan dynasty, albeit with a bastard, the son of an adulteress.

Dio's account of the *coup*, and of Varius' subsequent reign, reads like an indictment. All its information is, by his own admission, second-hand. Despite this, claiming, on the basis of his proclaimed trust in his informants, that his sources are reliable (without saying who they are or why they should be considered so) he fails even to raise the question, much less undertake the process, of verifying their accounts.¹⁸ He thereby inaugurates one main element of the Varian misconception: uncritical belief in others' unproven propositions. He also, in the process of detailing Varius' alleged misdeeds, inaugurates another element: the adoption of attitudes towards Varius on the basis of that belief. This example is subsequently followed by most historians of Varius.

We may, however, wonder if the attitudes in question do not, in Dio's case, actually precede his hearing or reading those propositions allegedly provided by others. For Dio's account of Varius is so heavily laden with obloquy as to arouse, at least in this reader, immediate suspicion, both as regards its veracity in matters of fact, and its good faith in interpretation. Its overt and unremitting animosity towards its principal character leads one to suspect that it is driven by agenda other than the simple reporting of fact; while its failure to consider any other than a facile interpretation of Varius' alleged misdeeds - he did this because he was mad and bad - confirms its lack both of realism and imagination, as well as of objectivity.

¹⁸ For discussion of Dio's account of the *coup*, and of the question of his possible sources, see *QV3*; for his account of Varius' reign, *QV5*.

Plausible, rational, practical reasons, of an institutional, dynastic, and individual nature, explicable in terms of political expediency, and of self-interest, can be adduced to explain Varius' conduct of his reign (assuming, if only for the sake of argument, that some, or even all, of what is alleged of him is true). In particular, his religious policy, amply attested by his coins and inscriptions, and consisting of promotion of the cult of Elagabal, with Varius as its high priest, may (as has already been suggested, and will presently be further explained) be understood as a bid for an alternative source of legitimacy for his tenure of the principate. Most modern historians of antiquity, however, have uncritically followed the lead of Dio's text, obviously slanted and shallow though it is, and considered Varius' religious policy as mindless fanaticism. Few, if any, have brought to the fore such qualms or considerations as are mentioned here. None, moreover, have systematically subjected Dio's account of the succession of Macrinus by Varius, or his catalogue of Varius' alleged crimes while in office, to attempted verification, with reference to the evidence of artefacts. When this is done, as in *Quaestiones Varianae*, it emerges that virtually none of Dio's claims can be verified.

Herodian's sources are unidentified, but on the basis of *Quellenforschung* can be said to include Dio.¹⁹ Writing perhaps a generation after Dio, Herodian lacks any direct interest in disparaging Varius. He is nevertheless willing to follow Dio's example in censuring him, albeit with far less venom. He suggests that the legionary soldiers are already infatuated with Varius, even before hearing the claim of his imperial bastardy. They flock to the temple of the sun god Elagabal, at Emesa, in Syria, to watch his puerile high priest perform the ecstatic ritual dances of that god's opulent and orgiastic cult: ἦν δὲ τὴν ἡλικίαν ἀκμαῖος καὶ τὴν ὄψιν τῶν κατ' αὐτὸν ὠραιότατος μειραιῶν πάντων, ἐς τὸ αὐτὸ δὴ συνιόντων κάλλους σώματος, ἡλικίας ἀκμῆς, ἀρβοῦ σχήματος, ἀπέικασεν ἄν τις τὸ μειράκιον Διονύσου καλαῖς εἰκόσιν.²⁰

Thus, according to Herodian, Varius' god-like beauty and grace, in combination with his claim of Caracallan paternity, lead, through the soldiers' enthusiastic response to both, craftily managed by Maesa, Varius' grandmother, to his elevation to the throne. Herodian's introduction of beauty and eros, spawning enthusiasm, as well as of his deeper reading of Maesa's motives and methods, into the mix of elements leading to Varius' propulsion to the princi-

¹⁹ Kolb, F., *Literarische Beziehungen zwischen Cassius Dio, Herodian und der "Historia Augusta"*, BHAF, 4.9, BHAC, 1972; Scheithauer, A., *Die Regierungszeit des Kaisers Elagabal in der Darstellung von Cassius Dio und Herodian*, Hermes, 118-3, 1990.

²⁰ Herodian, 5.3.7: "[Varius] was in the prime of his youth, and the most handsome of all the young men of his time. With this combination of good looks, youth, and splendid dress there was a possible resemblance between the young man and the magnificent statues of Dionysus."

pate is every bit as unsupported by evidence as Dio's less nuanced account. Despite this, perhaps if only because it fits so well into the subsequent mythical or legendary story of Varius' reign, where eros plays a major role, it becomes a permanent part of the Varian afterlife.

The honeymoon, however, is not destined to last. Both Dio and Herodian relate how Varius soon loses the soldiers' support, and, eventually, that of his grandmother, Maesa, who approves his murder and replacement by his cousin, Severus Alexander. The soldiers' disaffection is attributed, in the Varian misconception, entirely to Varius' allegedly scandalous behaviour: religious, political, administrative, sumptuary, saltatory and sexual. As for Maesa, the cause of her disaffection, according both to Dio and Herodian, is simply that of the praetorians: she knows that Varius' position, and thus her own power and influence, depend on their continuing support. Therefore, perceiving Varius' unpopularity with them, she abandons Varius in favour of Alexander, who has by now replaced his elder cousin as the soldiers' favourite.

Again, proponents of the Varian misconception have not bothered to subject these attributions of causes for Varius' downfall to scrutiny. Let us assume, again for the sake of argument, the factual veracity of Dio's and Herodian's accounts, (and indeed that of the *Historia Augusta*, which in this particular is thought to derive from a lost account by Marius Maximus)²¹ ascribing Varius' murder to the disaffection of his soldiers. In that case, a more persuasive reason, in my opinion, for that disaffection, than Varius' allegedly scandalous behaviour, is the soldiers' greed. For the soldiers who overthrow Varius are not the legionaries who thrust him on the throne. Rather, they are the praetorians, less susceptible to the blandishments of Eros than to the calculations of Moneta.

Let me stress, lest I be accused of arguing here for propositions unsupported by evidence, that this discussion is purely hypothetical. The reason for undertaking it here is to show that proponents of the Varian misconception have taken as literal truth something open to a variety of interpretations. We do not really *know* that Varius was murdered by his soldiers. That is merely the most likely hypothesis. But on the basis of that hypothesis, I maintain that it is possible to argue more persuasively than Dio and his followers do, with respect to the soldiers' motivations and interests. Their disaffection from Varius on account of greed could develop in at least two ways.

²¹ Syme, R., *Emperors & Biography*, 1971, Ch. 6 & 7.

One could relate to Varius' alleged pacifism. For, according to Dio's account, after Varius has gained the throne through a military uprising, in which he is said to have led the charge in a decisive battle, he refuses to wage war. In war, it should be understood, soldiers stand to gain as much or more in loot as by imperial donatives. For the praetorians, therefore, Varius' pacifism is a likelier source of grievance, than any concern about religious, political, administrative, sumptuary, saltatory or sexual matters that do not directly affect their purses. Another, simpler, possible cause for the praetorians' disaffection, on account of greed, is that they are promised more money by Mamaea for overthrowing Varius, and replacing him with Alexander, than Varius gives them to buy their loyalty. For Maesa's daughters, Soemias and Mamaea, the mothers, respectively, of Varius and Alexander, are locked in a deadly rivalry comparable to that of Caracalla with Geta. There is every reason to suppose that Mamaea has intended all along, from the start of her immediate maternal family's imperial adventure, to replace Varius with Alexander.

In the case of Maesa, self-interested political considerations, such as those adduced by Dio and Herodian, are doubtless relevant. But again, in an alternative reading of her decision — here granted for the sake of argument — to replace Varius with Alexander, as suggested by those texts, there could be an emotional cause. It is that this headstrong and rebellious youth defies her, daring to seek to rule, as well as to reign. At one point it is claimed he threatens her. This turns any grandmotherly love Maesa may once have felt for him to hatred. He must therefore be replaced with his more docile younger cousin, Alexander, who is likelier to remain subject to Maesa's, and later to Mamaea's will. This would explain Mamaea's victory over Soemias, the mother of Varius (who is murdered together with her son).

None of the historians in the thrall of the Varian misconception raise either of these possibilities. Yet they arise quite naturally from an open minded reading of Dio's and Herodian's texts, which grants them, for the sake of argument, the benefit of doubt as to factual matters, leaving open questions of interpretation. Rather, uncritically accepting ancient historians' accounts, both with respect to fact and to interpretation, modern historians of antiquity, slavishly following Dio's lead, credit the praetorians with a greater degree of statesmanlike concern for matters properly concerning pontifices, senators, and censors, than was ever shown by that body of soldiers, exclusively devoted, throughout most of their previous history, to their own material self-interest. Conversely, in characterising Maesa as motivated solely by considerations of political self-interest, they forget that however cold and calculating she may have been, she was a woman, a mother, and a grandmother, suscepti-

ble to the influence of feeling - especially of hurt feelings - as well as to reason.

Over a century after Varius' death, and possibly nearer two, a long and very detailed account of Varius' reported behaviour is given by the late Latin text known as the *Historia Augusta*. It recounts Varius' alleged religious fanaticism, neglect of administrative matters, sumptuary, ludic and convivial extravagance, favouritism and corruption in official appointments, and actions and passions with spouses and lovers both female and male. Passing judgement on him it remarks: *Hic ultimus Antoninorum fuit ... vita, moribus, improbitate ita odibilis, ut eius senatus et nomen eraserit.*²²

Close examination of this text reveals many of its details, and much of its conception, as anachronistic, with respect to Varius' period. Indeed, as previously mentioned, it is now thought that its account of Varius is not meant by its author (disguised under a series of pseudonymous personae, purportedly the separate authors of its several biographies) as an account of Varius at all, but rather as an attack, under the guise of 'Heliogabalus', on Constantine, to whom it is supposedly dedicated, and on his Christian imperial successors.

It is perhaps an unintended irony of this text that in calling Varius 'Heliogabalus' - that is, in calling this imperial high priest by the name of the god of his particular devotion - it accords to Varius that apotheosis, otherwise routine for dead emperors, denied him by the senate, who sought instead, unsuccessfully, as it turns out, to eradicate his memory altogether. However that may be, it is this text that is destined to form the basis for the Varian misconception in the West.

Shortly after the *Historia Augusta's* composition, the Roman empire splits, and Byzantine scholarship is largely lost to the West for a millennium. In the East, Greek historiography concerning Varius or his avatar continues to be produced, if only by reduction, in the form of excerpts and epitomes, by Zosimus, Malalas, Xiphilinus and Zonaras. In the West, his Latin historiography continues to be copied, but not, except for possible errors in transcription, substantively refashioned, by the manuscript tradition.

The evolution of the Varian misconception in modernity

From the perspective of modernity, the Varian misconception may be traced back to the early Renaissance and beyond, through the work that

²² *HA/AH*, 18.1: "He was the last of the Antonines ... a man so detestable for his life, his character, and his utter depravity, that the senate expunged from the records even his name."

marks a resumption of writing Roman imperial history in the West: the *Historiae imperiales* of Iohannes de Matociis, also known as Giovanni Mansionario, of Verona.²³ Writing circa A.D. 1320, Mansionario announces: ... *impudicissimam vitam eius lampridius ad constantinum augustum scripsit quem sequi decrevi.*²⁴

Mansionario's decision, thus recorded, to follow 'Lampridius', determines the subsequent development of the Varian misconception. 'Lampridius' is one of several pseudonymous personae of the author of the *Historia Augusta*. Mansionario's uncritical belief in his source's veracity leads him to summarise or synthesise that text in his own, stating as fact a series of its propositions about Varius, for which Mansionario neither asks nor offers any evidence. Among those propositions are:

... *Hic secundum aliquos fuit bassiani secundum alios vero non fuit filius bassiani sed alterius viri unde et varius dictus est ... Fuit autem eliogaballus sacerdos templi solis apud arcenam syrie civitatem unde mater erat oriunda ... Hic antoninus romam veniens tantum matri deditus fuit ut sine illius voluntate nil in senatu faceret cum ipsa meretricio more vivens in aula omnia turpia exercebat. Hic eliogaballum in monte palatino iuxta aedes imperatorias consecravit ei que templum fecit volens omnia sacrificia legem iudeorum et cristianam religionem illuc transferre ... lenones meretrices mimos ioculatores et ystriones undecum que congregavit cum quibus libidinum diversa genera inaudita quoque inaudibilia exercebat ... vendidit honores ... officia passim pecunia potiore offerentibus dabat ... amasium suum cum quo sodomiticum opus exercebat sic impure diligebat ut inguina ei oscularetur ... virginem vestalem constupruit ... humanas hostias immolavit ... novas voluptates semper exercuit. Eratque eius continua cogitatio de voluptatibus et libidinum generibus ... Omnes de circo de theatro de stadio et omnibus publicis locis et balneis meretrices collegit in edes publicas et apud eos contionem habuit vocans eas commilitiones disputavit que de generibus scematum et voluptatum. Postea adhibuit in tali contione lenones et pueros sodomiticos. Ipse quoque muliebri habitu indutus cum servis suis inter meretricium gregem vagabatur ... Virgines uxoratas iuenculas et proventas cuiuscumque conditionis et generis constuprabat et a suis constuprari se vidente faciebat. Convivium quoddam fecit tanti apparatus quam dies non sufficit epulis adveniente nocte lampades balsamo replevit. Per singula fercula cum sociis mulieribus utebatur ...*²⁵

²³ Ed. Cécile Bertrand-Dagenbach., See *Acknowledgements*.

²⁴ "Lampridius wrote for the emperor Constantine (an account of) his shameless life, which I have determined to follow."

²⁵ "According to some he was the son of Bassianus (the emperor Caracalla) but according to others not so, but rather of another man, after whom he was called Varius ... Eliogaballus was the priest of the temple of the sun in the Syrian city of Area, whence his mother originated ... This Antoninus, when he came to Rome, was so devoted to his mother that without her consent he did nothing in

This catalogue of titillations to the presumable prurience of Mansionario's readership is, like that of its source to its own audience, innocent of serious, objective analysis of the dynastic, military, political, religious, economic, institutional and social aspects of the reign. Neither does it indulge in rigorous, objective enquiry, whether in terms of verification, or of interpretation, into those sexual, ludic, and sumptuary aspects of this emperor's alleged behaviour, which so overwhelmingly occupy Mansionario's text, as do they that of his source.

Mansionario's uncritical summary of 'Lampridius', and later, in the sixteenth century, Egnatius' printed edition of the *Historia Augusta* itself,²⁶ form the basis of what most subsequent historians think and write about the Varian avatar. Thus we find in subsequent approaches to this avatar, confused with Varius, a total lack of scepticism as to whether allegations against him are true, likely, possible, or anachronistic, together with an abiding fascination with the more salacious of those allegations. This fascination is often disguised under a semblance of scandalised shock and righteous indignation.

From the late Renaissance onward, Dio's and Herodian's texts concerning Varius become known in the West. Given the similarity between their condemnatory stance, particularly Dio's, and that of the *Historia Augusta*, they do nothing to alter the Varian misconception. Rather, they reinforce it, giving it a luster of seemingly greater authority. Modern historians of antiquity take uncritically as fact Dio's charges against Varius, together with those of the *Historia Augusta* (with whose particulars the former do not always coincide).

the Senate, and he lived with her in the imperial palace as if with a prostitute, performing every sort of turpitude ... He consecrated an Eliogabalium (a temple to the god Elagabal) on the Palatine hill, next to the imperial palace, wishing to transfer to it the worship and laws of the Jewish and Christian religions ... He brought together pimps and whores and nimes and jokers and actors from everywhere, with whom he practiced diverse sorts of sex, both unspeakable and inaudible ... He sold honours ... granting all manner of offices to those who offered the most money ... He so grossly loved his boyfriend, with whom he engaged in sodomitic practices, that he kissed his groin ... He ravished a Vestal Virgin ... He slaughtered human sacrifices ... He was always indulging in new forms of pleasure ... He collected together into a public building prostitutes from the circus, the theatre, the stadium, and all (sorts of) public places and baths, and addressed a speech to them, calling them his colleagues, and discussing the various sorts of postures and techniques proper to their profession. Then he gathered into such a meeting the pimps and sodomitic boys. And he himself, dressed as a woman, ranged among the prostitutes together with his slaves ... He ravished virgins and wives, young girls and mature women, of every class and kind, and had them ravished before him by his minions while he watched ... He held a feast of such magnificence that a whole day was not long enough for it to be consumed in, so when night came he filled lamps with balm. Between courses, he dallied with his female partners."

²⁶ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, ed. Egnatius, J., 1519.

They make the requisite noises of horror and disgust (which, however, rarely prevent them from retailing those charges in considerable detail). They also use comment on the Varian avatar as a vehicle for their own particular prejudices and obsessions, and to advance their own political and social agenda.

Tillemont explicitly apologises for treating this emperor at all. He justifies his failure to examine him in depth, as compared to his fuller treatment of other Roman emperors, on the basis of uncritical acceptance of the accusations against him made by his ancient historiographers:

«Tout le reste de son regne ne fut qu'une suite continuelle de crimes contre la pudeur, contre l'humanité, & contre toutes sortes de loix. [Les lecteurs Chrétiens nous pardonnerons bien si nous ne leur representons pas ces choses dans le detail, & si nous n'avons pas osé les étudier avec autant d'exactitude que nous avons tasché de faire l'histoire des autres Princes. La seule idée qu'on a d'Heliogabale suffit pour persuader à tout le monde qu'outre ses crimes, ç'a été un monstre de somptuosité, de prodigalité, & de folie. Tout ce qu'on peut s'imaginer d'un jeune homme sans esprit & sans retenue, qui ne songe qu'à abuser des richesses immenses & du pouvoir absolu d'un Empereur Romain, on peut dire que c'est ce qu'il a fait.] »²⁷

For Tillemont, writing under an aging *Roi Soleil*, slowly approaching the crisis of his succession, the burning issue is absolute power and huge wealth in the hands of a young prince lacking in sense or restraint. The Varian avatar, himself high priest of the sun, is a monitory counterexample.

Gibbon excuses his own lack of scepticism with regard to ancient sources by an appeal to 'grave and contemporary' authority. The magic of his prose almost manages to trick the reader into ignoring the flimsiness of his argument, and adopting the prejudice of his opinion:

“Elagabalus, (I speak of the emperor of that name) corrupted by his youth, his country, and his fortune, abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury, and soon found disgust and satiety in the midst of his enjoy-

²⁷ Tillemont, S., *Histoire des Empereurs*, 1693, p. 269-270. "All the rest of his reign was nothing but a continuous series of crimes against modesty, against humanity, and against all sorts of laws. [Christian readers will forgive us if we have not dared to study them with as much exactitude as we have in the history of other princes. The mere idea that one has of Heliogabalus suffices to persuade everyone that, in addition to his crimes, he was a monster of extravagance, of waste, and of folly. All that one can imagine of a young man without sense or restraint, who dreams of nothing but of abusing the immense wealth and absolute power of a Roman emperor, that one may say was what he did.]"

ments ... It may seem probable, the vices and follies of Elagabalus have been adorned by fancy, and blackened by prejudice. Yet confining ourselves to the public scenes displayed before the Roman people, and attested by grave and contemporary historians, their inexpressible infamy surpasses that of any other age or country ... The emperor ... viewing every rank of his subjects with ... contemptuous indifference, asserted without control his sovereign privilege of lust and luxury ... Elagabalus was massacred by the indignant Praetorians, his mutilated corpse dragged through the streets of the city, and thrown into the Tyber. His memory was branded with eternal infamy by the senate; the justice of whose decree has been ratified by posterity."²⁸

Gibbon writes in the afterglow of the British triumph over absolutism, still fairly recent. For him, this emperor's corruption is not only a matter of youth and fortune. To these sources of corruption is added that of his country. His origin in Syria, then under Roman, but in Gibbon's time under Ottoman rule, leads the Varian avatar to display toward his subjects the contemptuous indifference of an Oriental despot, for which he gets his just deserts. The monitory counterexample is thus defined not only in terms of traits of individual character, but of the customs of differing cultures.

Schiller's treatment, equally credulous, builds on the ancient prejudice, previously reflected by Gibbon, against all things 'Oriental'. This means, in the context of antiquity, principally Syria, Persia, and Egypt, sources, for Rome, of luxury and vice.²⁹

„Der neue Kaiser war durchaus in orientalischen Anschauungen erwachsen, geistig unbedeutend, ohne jede Würde, ein abgesagter Feind jeder ernsthaften Thätigkeit ... Nie wurde das Kaisertum in gleicher Weise herabgewürdigt, wie unter diesem unreifen, tollen Knaben ... Der Kaiser trat auch äusserlich am Hofe ganz als orientalischer Despot mit dem Diadem auf und verlangte die Adoration. Was von Elagabals Thätigkeit überliefert wird, beschmutzt lediglich die Blätter der Geschichte, und seine Regierung ist ein wahrer Hexensabbat von Unzucht, Ausschweifungen und Luxus. Sein einziges Interesse war neben der Befriedigung viehischer Lüste die Verehrung seines Syrischen Sonnengottes, dem er in Rom einen Tempel baute und dessen Kult er in Rom eizubürgern suchte ...“³⁰

²⁸ Gibbon, E., *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776, p. 178-182.

²⁹ Griffin, Jasper, *Augustan Poetry and the Life of Luxury*, JRS, 66, 1976.

³⁰ Schiller, H., *Geschichte der Römischen Kaiserzeit*, 1883, p. 762-763. "The new emperor had grown up entirely with Oriental opinions, mentally insignificant, utterly worthless, an unremitting enemy of all earnest activity ... Never had the principate been in similar manner devalued as under this unripe, mad boy ... The emperor paced the court openly quite the Oriental despot, wearing

For Schiller, writing in an age of increasingly explicit German anti-Semitism, Varius' alleged 'Oriental' - for which read Semitic - attitudes and aspirations stain the pages of history, rendering his reign a witches' sabbath of sexual depravity, orgies, and luxury. In Schiller's time, the philological discovery and ethnological elaboration of the correspondences between and among language and culture, race and religion are still fresh. The definition of categories such as Indo-European (or Indo-Germanic, as some would prefer), Japhetic, Hamitic and Semitic - and, of course, Aryan - involves, moreover, the realisation that Arabs - such as Varius - are Semites. This opens the way for the use of censure of the Varian avatar as a way of scoring broader hits. 'Oriental' in German classical historiography frequently carries this coded connotation.³¹

For Bartoli, more an archaeologist than an historian, publishing in a journal of the Pontifical Academy of Roman Archaeology, on the subject of his excavation of what he thinks (probably rightly) to be Varius' Palatine temple of Elagabal, the rituals of that pagan cult are merely the crazy ceremonies of a perverted boy:

*"A Roma venne nel 219 e portò con sè l'idolo della sua divinità: un areolito di forma conica. A questa divinità costruì il famoso tempio sul Palatino. L'estate perchè la sua divinità non soffrisse la calura della città, trasportava l'idolo fuori di questa probabilmente negli Orti Variani, proprietà della famiglia e dove forse aveva fatto erigere un secondo tempio o un'edicola, insomma un luogo sacro. A prendere parte al corteo erano obbligate tutte le magistrature e l'imperatore stesso a piedi guidava i cavalli camminando a ritroso per non voltare le spalle all'idolo ... Siamo stati forzati ... a ricordare questa cerimonia pazzesca per la questione dei due templi. Tralasciamo, chè non ci interessano, tutte le altre pazzie e brutture di quel ragazzo pervertito."*³²

a diadem, and demanding adoration. What has been handed down of Elagabal's activity merely attains the pages of history, and his reign is a true witches' Sabbath of sexual depravity, orgies, and luxury. His only interest besides the satisfaction of beastly lusts, was the worship of his Syrian sun god, to whom he built a temple in Rome and whose cult he sought to install in Rome."

³¹ Hijmans, S.E., *The sun which did not rise in the East: the cult of Sol Invictus in the light of non-literary evidence*, *BABesch*, 71, 1996, p. 116-150, esp. p. 116, n. 4.

³² Bartoli, A., *Culti Orientali sul Palatino*, *APARAR*, 29, 1967, p. 29-30. "He came to Rome in 219 and brought with him the idol of his god: a meteorite of conical shape. To this divinity he built the famous Palatine temple. In summer, so that his god should not suffer the heat of the city, he transported the idol outside it, probably to the Horti Variani, a family property where he may also have had built a second temple or shrine, at any rate a sacred place. All the office-holders were obliged to take part in the procession, and the emperor himself, on foot, led the horses, walking backwards in order not to turn his back on the idol ... We are forced to remember this mad ceremony on account of the two temples. We leave out, because they do not interest us, all the other follies and ignominies of this perverted boy."

It is clear, from Bartoli's disclaimer, that to manifest too much interest in Varius, or his avatar, is, in mid-twentieth century Rome, to invite a charge of prurience, depravity, or even, perhaps, of impiety or apostasy. The Pontifical Academy is obviously not one of those quarters where moralistic attitudes to historical characters and subjects are relaxed during that century, thus endangering the rationale for the Varian misconception. Even so, one may detect, in Bartoli's dismissive, as well as indignant attitude towards Varius, the presence of its corollary, that which deems him unworthy of serious study.

Such a tradition of credulity, prejudice, apology, dismissiveness and righteous indignation, together with the instrumentation of history for modern political and social agenda, is hardly conducive to serious study of this emperor. But Bartoli's is not its final example; not a mere, isolated hangover of outdated attitudes. For even in those quarters where moralism is relaxed, together with righteous indignation, credulity remains, as do dismissiveness and prejudice. So does the instrumentation of history for modern political and social agenda, sometimes in the form of apology.

To observe the continuing effects of the Varian misconception, not only in Catholic Rome, but in other quarters, it suffices to examine the rest of the literature concerning Varius or his avatar, produced in the twentieth century, in the light of criteria defining serious historical enquiry. Such criteria require (among other things) open-mindedness, objectivity, thorough and accurate documentation, and discrimination between allegation and evidence. This leads to systematic questioning of sources' interests, motives and agenda, involving sceptical cross-examination of their allegations, in the light of evidence.³³ These requirements are sometimes, perhaps even often or usually, observed by modern historians of the ancient world in treating subjects other than Varius. Most, however, of what passes for study of this emperor, including even fairly recent monographs devoted to him, fails to meet these criteria.

Since the beginning of modern classical scholarship early in the nineteenth century, only four full-length free-standing monographs, allegedly non-fiction, all produced in the twentieth, have been devoted ostensibly to Varius: those of Hay,³⁴ Artaud,³⁵ Thompson,³⁶ and Turcan.³⁷

³³ For discussion of these criteria see, among others, Carr, E.H., *What is History?*, 1961, Elton, G. R., *The Practice of History*, 1967, Windschuttle, K., *The Killing of History, How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists*, 1994, and Evans, R.J., *In Defense of History*, 1997.

³⁴ Hay, J.S., *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, 1911.

³⁵ Artaud, A., *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste Couronné*, 1934.

³⁶ Thompson, G.R., *Elagabalus, Priest-Emperor of Rome*, 1972.

Artaud's belongs in a class all its own. It is the product of a diseased imagination posing as a work of erudition. Presenting the Varian avatar's unexamined actions and passions as the lay of a heroic antihero, or the *acta* of an unholy saint, it is a mine of factual error and textual misinterpretation. It subtracts from the sum of knowledge and understanding of Varius. It is also, alas! by far the most widely read and influential of these four monographs, forming the basis for most subsequent evolution of the Varian afterlife in literature and the arts, and even leaving its stamp on some academic treatments of Varius.

The rest of these monographs have some pretensions to academic solvency, more or less justified as regards documentation, but fail to exhibit any, or sufficient, scepticism towards their sources. Hay's lachrymose apology seeks to exonerate the Varian avatar (whom he calls Antonine) from blame for actions and passions whose factuality Hay fails to verify. Thompson's dissertation, widely unknown because unpublished, is well documented, and even hints at the possibility of doubting ancient historiographers' veracity.³⁷ But it does not follow this insight up in searchingly questioning their motives, or in systematically testing their allegations. Turcan's contribution is the most disappointing, because in other works, such as that cited above, relating indirectly to Varius, he does adopt proper scholarly procedures. But when faced with Varius directly, Turcan seems to succumb to a spell which renders him an uncritical transmitter of propositions, ostensibly concerning Varius, stemming from the very work whose agenda, regarding Varius, or rather Constantine, Turcan has questioned elsewhere. Citing, moreover, Artaud without censure, Turcan fails to acknowledge or remedy the damage his countryman does to the study of Varius. Rather, he seems almost afraid to offend the mad poet's admirers (who are, indeed, organised into an association).

Beyond these four monographic treatments of Varius, or of his avatar, twentieth century historians dealing with Varius tangentially, in studies of related topics, often exhibit the same credulity and censoriousness as Tillemont, Gibbon, Schiller and Bartoli. Some even echo Bartoli's religious animadversion, adopting, not a Catholic point of view, but that of a defender of the ancient Roman state religion. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Studniczka, following in Schiller's 'anti-Oriental' footsteps, works himself up into a

³⁷ Turcan, R., *Héliogabale et le sacre du Soleil*, 1985.

³⁸ Thompson, G.R., *op. cit.* p. 7: "Unfortunately, the value of Dio's history is somewhat diminished as the result of his devotion to the principle governing historiography in his day which demanded that an historian also employ a rhetorical style. If facts themselves were not sufficiently effective, they could be embroidered, modified, or recombined in order to create a more dramatic presentation."

frenzy of righteous indignation, decrying Varius' alleged assault on Jupiter's primacy in the Roman pantheon, in favour of Elagabal, quite as if Studniczka were personally involved in this long dead religious controversy.³⁹ In the middle of the century, Lambertz, in an encyclopaedia entry, dealing directly with Varius - and that by his proper name - fails nevertheless to challenge the charges against him, but, following Hay's example, adopts a more lenient view, arguing that Varius is more to be pitied than censured.⁴⁰ Near the end of the twentieth century, Cracco Rugini, addressing directly the question of the credibility of the *Historia Augusta's* account of Varius, affirms its veracity, on the grounds that it is based on Dio and Herodian.⁴¹

A number, however, of twentieth century scholars have approached certain limited aspects of Varius' reign, or related subjects, in particular those relating to archaeological materials, rather than to Varius, with proper historical standards. These provide means for exploding the Varian misconception.

Exploding the Varian misconception: means provided by modern scholarship

Boissevain establishes the text of Dio's account of Varius.⁴² Butler provides the first list of Varian inscriptions.⁴³ Domaszewski explores the political meaning of the religion of Emesa.⁴⁴ Hiller studies an inscription relating to the cult of Elagabal,⁴⁵ as does Cumont.⁴⁶ Seyrig, in a whole series of articles, explores Syrian culture and religion, including that of Emesa.⁴⁷ Millar illumines the life of Dio, and the political, social and cultural condition of Syria in Roman times.⁴⁸ Thirion provides an analytic catalogue of Varius' coinage.⁴⁹ Whit-

³⁹ Studniczka, F., *Ein Pfeilerkapitell auf dem Forum*, *M(KODAIR)*, 16, 1901. This is discussed in detail in the section devoted to Studniczka's article in *Anaglyptica Variana*, q.v. in the present article's *Bibliography*.

⁴⁰ Lambertz, M., *Varius Avitus (Elagabal)*, *RE*, 8 A1, 1955, col. 391-404.

⁴¹ Cracco Rugini, L., *Elagabalo, Costantino e i culti "siriaci" nella Historia Augusta*, *HACP*, 1991, p. 123-146, esp. p. 135-136.

⁴² *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, ed. Boissevain, 1901.

⁴³ Butler, O. F., *Studies in the Life of Heliogabalus*, *University of Michigan Studies, Humanities Series*, 4, 1907 (1910).

⁴⁴ Domaszewski, A. von, *Abhandlen zur römischen Religion*, 1908, Ch. 22, *Die Politische Bedeutung der Religion von Emesa*.

⁴⁵ Hiller von Gaertringen, F., *Syrische Gottheiten auf einem Altar aus Cordova*, *ARW*, 22, 1923/24, p.117-132.

⁴⁶ Cumont, F., *Une dédicace à des dieux syriens trouvée à Cordoue*, *Syria*, 5, 1924, p.343-345.

⁴⁷ Seyrig, H., *Antiquités de la Nécropole d'Émèse*, *Antiquités Syriennes*, 53, *Syria*, 29, 1952, & *AS*, 53 (suite), *Syria*, 30, 1953; *Caractères de l'histoire d'Émèse*, *Antiquités Syriennes*, 76, *Syria*, 36, 1959; *Le Culte du Soleil en Syrie à l'époque romaine*, *Antiquités Syriennes*, 95, *Syria*, 48, 1971.

⁴⁸ Millar, F., *A Study of Cassius Dio*, 1964; *The Roman Near East, 31BC-AD 337*, 1993.

⁴⁹ Thirion, M., *Le Monnayage d'Élagabal, (218-222)*, 1968.

taker contributes enlightening notes to Herodian's text.⁵⁰ Bowersock examines Herodian's treatment of Varius.⁵¹ Alföldy reinterprets one of the insults directed by his ancient historiographers at Varius.⁵² Kettenhofen addresses prosopographical questions concerning Varian courtiers.⁵³ Bering-Staschewsky updates Millar's treatment of Dio.⁵⁴ Baldus finds, in a coin, illustration of a passage in Herodian's account of Varius.⁵⁵

Frey's contribution is perhaps the most significant, from an epistemological and methodological point of view. He addresses the question of whether the statements made by ancient historiographers about the cult of Elagabal, and about Varius' religious policy, are true, likely or possible.⁵⁶

Scheithauer compares Dio's and Herodian's accounts of Varius.⁵⁷ Chausson examines the history of Roman sites relating to the cult of Elagabal, and makes valuable contributions also to Severan prosopography, relevant to Varius' reign.⁵⁸ Krenzel offers a novel solution to a long-standing riddle in Varian numismatic iconography.⁵⁹

This list is not exhaustive, but representative. It shows that serious study of subjects related to Varius, and even of aspects of Varius himself, is possible, and has indeed been undertaken, in the twentieth century, despite the reticence of a Bartoli, the credulity of a Lambertz and a Cracco Rugini, or the occasional lapses into the Varian misconception, with regard to Varius himself, even of those scholars who otherwise contribute to interpreting and understanding materials relevant to Varian studies, thus providing means to ex-

⁵⁰ *Herodian's History*, ed. Whittaker, *Loeb Classical Library*, GS, 455, 1970.

⁵¹ Bowersock, G.W., *Herodian and Elagabalus*, *Studies in the Greek Historians in Memory of Adam Parry*, YCS, 24, 1975, p. 229-236.

⁵² Alföldy, G., *Zwei Schimpfnamen des Kaisers Elagabal: Tiberinus und Tractitatus*, BHAC, 1972/4, BHAF, 12, 1976, p. 11-21.

⁵³ Kettenhofen, E., *Die syrischen Augustae in der Historischen Überlieferung, ein Beitrag zum Problem der Orientalisierung*, *Antiquitas*, 3, AVFGS, 24, 1979.

⁵⁴ Bering-Staschewski, R., *Römische Zeitgeschichte bei Cassius Dio*, 1981.

⁵⁵ Baldus, H.R., *Das "Vorstellungsgemälde" des Hellogabal, Ein bislang unerkanntes numismatisches Zeugnis*, *Chiron*, 19, 1989, p. 467-476.

⁵⁶ Frey, M., *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, *Historia Einzelschriften*, 62, 1989.

⁵⁷ Scheithauer, A., *Die Regierungszeit des Kaisers Elagabal in der Darstellung von Cassius Dio und Herodian*, *Hermes*, 118-3, 1990.

⁵⁸ Chausson, F., *Vel Iovi vel Soli: Quatre études autour de la Vigna Barberini*, *MEFRA*, 107, 1995-2, p. 661-765; *Le site de la Vigna Barberini de 191 à 455*, in *La Vigna Barberini*, I, *Histoire d'un site: étude des sources et de la topographie*, I - *Les Sources Antiques: L'état des lieux et les hypothèses*, *Roma Antica*, 3, 1997, p. 31-85.

⁵⁹ Krenzel, E., *Das Sogennante Horn des Elagabal: Die Spitze eines Stierpenis, eine Umdeutung als Ergebnis fachübergreifender Forschung*, *JNGG*, 47, 1997, p. 53-72.

plode the Varian misconception.

Till now, however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, no modern historian of antiquity has sought systematically to know, on the basis of evidence, whether Varius actually performed or underwent any or all of the actions and passions imputed to him; considered what it might have meant for him to do so, in the context of his time and place; or searchingly questioned his accusers' interests, motives and agenda.⁶⁰

Building on the example of those serious historians - especially Frey - who have dealt, in a proper scholarly way, with limited aspects of Varius, or with related subjects, I aim, in *Studia Variana*, to extend such an approach to the whole of Varius' life and reign, and to his mythical or legendary afterlife, an entity which vastly overshadows both.⁶¹

Debunking the corollary to the Varian misconception: the Varian afterlife

The foregoing account of the history of the Varian misconception demonstrates amply that a new approach to the study of Varius is needed, if, indeed, he is to be studied at all. Thus part of my purpose here is accomplished. But what sort of approach must it be? This I have begun to suggest, in discussing the epistemology and methodology of Varian studies, and by giving examples of how this new method of enquiry applies to particular questions. Now I shall soon go on to demonstrate this in greater detail.

But first, in order simultaneously to keep my promise to show that the study of Varius is indeed worthwhile, I must finish exploding the Varian misconception by debunking its corollary: the proposition that Varius is unimportant and therefore unworthy of serious study. Such debunking may be undertaken in two stages. The first is to show that Varius is, though not necessarily in any conventional sense, important. The second is to show how exactly he is so. Consideration of his afterlife provides a way to accomplish the first of these tasks.

⁶⁰ Excepting Turcan's substitution of Constantine for Varius as the real target of the *Historia Augusta*; which example, however, he fails to follow through in his monographic treatment of Varius himself.

⁶¹ For a discussion of the proper vocabulary with which to characterise that afterlife, see the *Introductory Address* of the Varian Symposium held at Trinity College, Cambridge in July, 2005.

Unlike more obviously important emperors, with long lists of achievements in the usual spheres of imperial activity, Varius, or rather his avatar, is the subject of a vast mythical or legendary afterlife. It includes works, not only of spurious history, but of more avowedly creative genres of literature and art, including poetry, fiction, and drama, chamber and symphonic music, opera and ballet, painting and sculpture. There are even products of popular culture, such as manga, rock bands, nightclubs, and chat and contact groups. Thus the Varian avatar, under the name of Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, constitutes the subject of a system of uncritical belief and creative invention.

Inside that system, this avatar is free from any restraint imposed by reference to historical fact, or even to likelihood or possibility. Rather, he is a monster in a tale, growing and evolving according to canons of verisimilitude peculiar to such tales. He becomes a persecutor of Christians, despite the absence of any such report in his ancient historiography. (Pope Calixtus III apparently survives Varius intact, only to be defenestrated under Alexander, a darling of Christian historians.⁶²) Likewise, on no textual basis at all, Varius' principal courtiers, including his mother's lover, are turned into eunuchs.⁶³

Anything may with impunity be said about Varius, and incorporated into his ever evolving legend or myth, so long as it follows the morphology proper to such tales, and performs the function required of his mythical or legendary persona by the moral or message of the tale. That function is, in turn, determined by the ideology and values which the tale serves to propound.⁶⁴

This is so even, or especially, when, in the service of a contrary ideology or set of values, the moral or message of the tale is inverted, and the monster is transformed into a hero or a saint: for some, like Artaud, a crowned anarchist; for others, such as a numerous contingent of creative writers committed to gay liberation, a martyr of the sexual revolution; for those with nostalgic memories of Paris in 1968, an embodiment of *l'imagination au pouvoir*. His mythical or legendary persona remains identical, but its valence changes. Depravity becomes allure; foolishness wit; wickedness "a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others."⁶⁵

⁶² Vignolius, J., *Liber Pontificalis*, 1724, p. 39.

⁶³ Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gan-nys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, 1999, p. 117-141.

⁶⁴ Propp, V., *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1968 (1928).

⁶⁵ Wilde, Oscar, quoted in Stanford, Derek (Ed.), *The Witticisms of Oscar Wilde*. Garnstone Press, London, 1971.

The very existence of this afterlife, itself a consequence or product of the Varian misconception, constitutes a paradox, challenging that misconception's corollary, to the effect that Varius is unimportant. For how could such an unimportant emperor, one so unworthy of serious study, spawn such a varied and voluminous afterlife? Varius' afterlife is far greater, richer, more diverse and vital, than those of more conventionally important emperors: How many novels has Augustus? How many dramas Vespasian? How many operas Trajan? How many ballets Marcus? How many comic books Constantine? How many discotheques Justinian?

In the light of this paradox, it is clear that Varius is not unimportant, though his importance may lie outside conventional spheres of imperial activity. Much depends on how one defines and measures importance, more about which presently. In any case, it is now clear that, paradoxically, by virtue of the very existence of the Varian afterlife, the corollary to the Varian misconception, the first step in debunking the proposition that he is unimportant, hence unworthy of serious historical study, is accomplished.

All that is wanting to complete the explosion of the Varian misconception is to undertake the final step in debunking its corollary. This consists in showing exactly how Varius is important. I would propose that Varius is important to historians in at least three different ways, all arising out of the particular epistemological challenges he poses.

The nature of Varius' importance

The first is methodological. The particular epistemological problems which one encounters in attempting to study him force one to develop a more precise and discriminating method of enquiry. This is an instrument of potential value to historians outside the field of Varian studies. Hard cases may make bad law, but they can make good methodology.

The second is limited to Roman imperial history. The reason why study of Varius poses the particular challenge that it does, is because he and his handlers acted, at a certain moment in Roman history, in a certain way, in response to a particular opportunity, arising out of a specific crisis, relating to a generic problem of the Roman empire: that of the imperial succession. To study in depth and in detail the causes, nature, and consequences of his response to that crisis and its opportunity, with all its implications, leads to greater understanding of that problem, hence of the nature of the principate as such.

The third relates to historical epistemology itself. For in obliging the historian to distinguish between Varius and his imaginary counterpart, and causing one to formulate a detailed and precise definition of the nature of the notional entity which, beginning as a series of assumed personae, becomes the protagonist of the Varian afterlife, Varius adds to the repertory of objects of historical enquiry. The lessons learned in defining him, and distinguishing him from his avatar, are applicable elsewhere, wherever the historian is faced with a notional entity, whose physical existence may or may not be provable.

Let me briefly illustrate each of these three propositions of Varius' importance. This will suggest how *Studia Variana* are innovative.

The development of a methodology proper to Varian studies arises in response to the Varian contradiction: that between conflicting accounts of his identity and his nomenclature, given, on the one hand, by his imperial artefacts, and, on the other, by the earliest extant of his ancient historiographers. Faced with this, one must determine how to evaluate the truth, or relative likelihood, of conflicting propositions. This requires a complex calculation of their authors' or artificers' circumstances, sources, interests, motives, means, and agenda, involving several questions: whether a given proposition, stated or implied, is, in ancient circumstances, verifiable; whether it was likely to be subject to independent, random, public verification; what, if anything, depended on its being believed; and what degree of collusion, among how many people, of what condition, would be required to uphold a public fiction.

A consequence of applying this method of enquiry to Varian studies is the realisation that statements of the form 'Varius was *x*' or 'Varius did *y*' can almost never properly be made without qualification: 'allegedly', 'reportedly', 'supposedly' and similar terms, are, regrettably for one's prose style, almost always necessary for the sake of historical integrity. (Such regret is peculiar to English, which lacks the accusative-infinitive construction for reported speech, or its equivalents, the hypothetical conditional or subjunctive.)

This implies an adverse judgement of most of what has ever been written about Varius, even by authors who otherwise observe proper scholarly standards. This is not to say that nothing can be known and affirmed concerning Varius; only that any proposition about him must be subjected to the tests identified, and judged on its merits. This leads to a hierarchical classification of propositions, into those that are factually true, those that are likely, and those that are possible. Whereas truth does not admit of grades, likelihood and possibility do.

All the foregoing methodological developments and insights are applicable elsewhere. Applied to the study of Varius, they lead to examining the distinction between his role as emperor and that as high priest of Elagabal. In the light of this method of enquiry, one quickly detects a tension, indeed a conflict, between these two roles. It thus becomes clear that questions of identity and nomenclature, including not only that of Varius' biological and legal filiality, but also that of his differing, conflicting imperial and religious roles, hold the key to understanding his life and reign. They also hold the key to understanding his place in the larger context of Roman history, specifically relating to study of the principate, and to that of its evolution into the dominate.

Varius faces the recurring problem of imperial succession, and the perennial question of the source of legitimacy for tenure of the principate. In his accession to the throne, and his decision, once in power, to emphasise his priesthood, Varius responds to the challenge posed for him, as for others, by both these unresolved matters. On the one hand he seizes, probably by fraud, an opportunity arising out of the unresolved nature of the imperial succession. Should it be hereditary, adoptive, or elective? Does it involve some criterion of merit, or merely of power? On the other he must consider, in seeking to keep his throne, the relative weight of three factors, in determining the sources of his tenure's legitimacy: the acclamation of the soldiers, the acquiescence of the senate, and the approval of the gods. Properly conducted study of his actions and his choices in response to these challenges illuminates one's understanding of the principate as such. It also leads to exploring the question of how the principate evolved into the dominate, and what was the role of religion - more specifically that of the emperor's religious function - in that process.

Understanding the importance of Varius to study of the Roman empire as a whole, encompassing both the principate and the dominate, may begin with asking how it was that the empire could survive, more or less intact, at least in its administrative functions, even the rule of an emperor so neglectful of most of those functions as Varius is reported to have been. This leads to the larger question of the relationship between the empire, seen as a military, religious, political, social, territorial and economic institution, and the principate, seen as the peculiarly personal means of its rule. Thence, one may, returning to one's point of departure, address the question of Varius' performance as princeps, in the context of that relationship, and more particularly, that of whether it was merely neglectful, but relatively harmless, or whether it contained the seeds of a change in the nature of that relationship itself. This leads to consideration of the Orientalisation of the empire, a process begun before Varius, but of which he may be considered an important example.

The importance of being Varius

It may be noticed that the questions at the centre of the epistemological challenges posed by Varius, constituting, as they do, the source of his importance for history, revolve around the matters of existence, identity, and nomenclature: in a single word, of *being*. So far, in relation to his being, we have concentrated on the question of who Varius is and who he is not.

Another aspect of the challenge posed by Varius' being is that raised by seeking to know *what*, rather than *who* he is. This relates to the definition of objects of historical enquiry. Considering it here finally draws together the various threads of my argument. For defining more precisely the object of enquiry of Varian studies is the last of my purposes in writing this text. This coincides with the final step in showing the nature of Varius' importance, exploding, once and for all, the Varian misconception. It also demonstrates how and why he is interesting.

In the case of Varian studies, undertaking definition of their object is tantamount to asking: "What is the nature of the entity we call Varius?" In order to answer this question we must first consider how we may come by the requisite information, out of which to constitute a definition.

Given that our object of enquiry was, himself, an entity presumably once capable of feeling, perception, knowledge, self-knowledge, and self-presentation, as well as of observable behaviour, in seeking an answer to that question we must distinguish between information coming from him, and that coming from other sources. This means that we must distinguish between subjective and objective modes of knowledge: between experience and behaviour.⁶⁶ We must also distinguish between who or what Varius was, on the one hand, and, on the other, what he did or underwent: between his persona, and his *res gestae*. The former is a matter of interpretation, the latter a matter of facts. In the case of Varius, the provable facts are few and, not, in themselves, very interesting. What is potentially so is his persona.

His persona is not only Varius' only lasting achievement, but also our principal source of knowledge, or of informed conjecture, about him. All his artefacts, spanning less than four years of his lifetime, out of a total of less than eighteen, are dedicated to its propagation, in successive stages of development, using diverse modes of self-presentation, corresponding, presumably, to Varius' intention. Arguing from that hypothetical intention, interpreting the vari-

⁶⁶ As does R.D. Laing, in *The Politics of Experience*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967.

ations in his persona with reference to the few objective facts we know about relevant events and circumstances, we may deduce something of Varius' subjectivity, his being as he experienced it during his lifetime.

The next major stage of development of his persona is out of Varius' hands, and in those, first, of Dio, his murderers' spokesman, then, later, in those of Herodian, and of the author of the *Historia Augusta*. Obviously, we cannot observe Varius' real behaviour, the objective component of his persona, in Dio's indictment, or even in Herodian's more nuanced account, let alone in the fantasies of the *Historia Augusta*. First there is the problem posed by the fact that neither observation of Varius is first-hand. Next there is the likely distortion of Dio's hostility, of Herodian's fertile imagination, and of 'Lampridius' concern with an object other than Varius.

If, however, we develop a technique of interpretation that neutralises Dio's hostility, curbs Herodian's imagination, and disregards most of 'Lampridius', leaving only the few valid elements of their respective objects; and if we combine this technique with another, one that measures likelihood, with reference to artefacts, and to a wider historical and cultural context, we may arrive at an educated guess as to what may have been the actions and passions, events and circumstances, forms and colours, rhythms and melodies, scents and textures, of the observations behind the reports out of which Dio and Herodian, at least, fashioned their accounts of Varius. These, with any luck, might roughly correspond to Varius' behaviour, as it was observed by others during his lifetime, or was remembered shortly after his death.

This educated guess at his observed behaviour may next be compared, juxtaposed, superimposed, added or subtracted, or otherwise combined with the image of himself generated by Varius' imperial propaganda. If this process is undertaken with sufficient care, and its results are considered with sufficient scepticism, it may allow us to begin to reconstruct the nature and presence of the Varian persona, both as he intended it to be perceived, and as it may have been perceived, during his lifetime. This is probably the best that can be done, the closest we can get to Varius himself.

So, having seen how we may come to know the Varian persona, or at least arrive at informed conjecture concerning it, we are finally in a position to ask: what kind of entity is this persona, considered as an object of historical enquiry? One way of answering this question is to consider what sort of historiographical product may be produced with it.

The most obvious candidate would seem to be biography, since all the materials of these studies relate to a single individual. But insofar as what results from investigation of that individual is merely a persona, conjoined with very few facts, it does not seem enough to serve as a basis for biography.

This would not have bothered an ancient historiographer. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, or Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars*, are not built exclusively, or even mainly, on what we would call facts. There were of course - and are still - facts to be had, for many of Plutarch's and all of Suetonius' subjects, derivable from coins and inscriptions. But these are not the materials those writers employed as a basis for their biographies. It would not even bother - indeed has not bothered - those modern historians of antiquity who have written on Varius in a quasi-biographical mode, making unqualified statements of fact, unsupported by evidence.

It must, however, bother us. We simply have too few facts to be able to produce, on the basis of our study of Varius, a biography satisfactory to modern standards of historical scholarship. This is not to say that we cannot write history about Varius, but merely that it cannot take the form of biography. For unlike those who write about, say, Jesus, Socrates, or Buddha, we do have some facts. Varius at least has his coins and inscriptions, as well as his historiography, his legend, or his myth. We know far more provable facts about him than about any of these others. Yet we do not know enough to say, in any wealth of detail, let alone with any degree of certainty, what he did or did not do, or underwent, where and when and how. These are the stuff of biography, and these are precisely what we lack.

What we can do, however, is to discuss, in a properly historical way, those aspects of Varius we do know something about, or about which we dare to venture informed conjecture. We can therefore, in the form of essays or monographs, discuss the facts that we know, and the likelihoods that we suspect. And once we have exhausted all the facts and likelihoods - or perhaps even before - we can go on to discuss his persona in depth.

In so doing, we shall be crossing a threshold. For Varius is an epistemological amphibian, a beast belonging to more than one realm of knowledge at once. His *res gestae*, together with an accurate description of what can be known of his persona, belong to history, *tout court*, understood as the record of real individuals, actions, and events. In another sense, however, Varius' persona belongs to the history of ideas. If we propose to discuss it in depth, that is the realm we must enter.

It is indeed there that we find a formulation of the kind of entity constituted by the Varian persona. In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel describes the way in which certain individuals in Athenian history, of whom Socrates is the main, but not the only example, fashion themselves:⁶⁷

„Er hat unter seinen Mitbürgern gelebt und steht vor uns als eine jener grossen plastischen Naturen, durch und durch aus einem Stück, wie wir sie in jener Zeit zu sehen gewohnt sind, - als ein vollendetes klassisches Kunstwerk, das sich selbst zu dieser Höhe gebracht hat. Solche Individuen sind nicht gemacht, sondern zu dem, was sie waren, haben sie sich selbstständig ausgebildet; sie sind das geworden, was sie haben sein wollen und sind dem treu gewesen. In einem eigentlichen Kunstwerke ist dies die ausgezeichnete Seite, dass irgend eine Idee hervorgebracht, ein Charakter dargestellt ist, so dass jeder Zug dadurch bestimmt ist, und indem dies ist, ist das Kunstwerk einerseits lebendig, andererseits schön, da die höchste Schönheit eben die vollkommenste Durchbildung aller Seiten der Individualität nach dem einen innerlichen Principe ist. Solche Kunstwerke sind auch die grossen Männer jener Zeit. Das höchste plastische Individuum als Staatsmann ist Perikles, und um ihn, gleich Sternen, haben Sophokles, Thukydides, Sokrates, u.s.w. ihre Individualität zu einer eigentümlichen Existenz herausbearbeitet, die ein 'Charakter' ist, der das Herrschende ihres Wesens und Ein durch das ganze Dasein durchgebildetes Princip ist.“

Now I am not suggesting that Varius is comparable in terms of wit, beauty, or the nature of his lasting influence to Socrates (although it may be noted that both were allegedly terminated by their contemporaries for not altogether dissimilar reasons); nor that he is a great man, in the sense meant by Hegel; though I fancy that Socrates, if presented, in Reven (the temporal equivalent of Erewhon), with such a comparison, and such a characterisation, would find much of interest to say about them both. What I am suggesting is that the fundamental nature of the entity described here by Hegel corresponds

⁶⁷ Hegel, G.W.F. von, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1.2.B. *Sokrates*: "He lived amongst his fellow-citizens, and stands before us as one of those great plastic natures consistent through and through, such as we often see in those times — resembling a perfect classical work of art which has brought itself to this height of perfection. Such individuals are not made, but have formed themselves into what they are; they have become that which they wished to be, and are true to this. In a real work of art the distinguishing point is that some idea is brought forth, a character is presented in which every trait is determined by the idea, and, because this is so, the work of art is, on the one hand, living, and, on the other, beautiful, for the highest beauty is just the most perfect carrying out of all sides of the individuality in accordance with the one inward principle. Such works of art are also seen in the great men of every time. The most plastic individual as a statesman is Pericles, and round him, like stars, Sophocles, Thucydides, Sokrates, &c., worked out their individuality into an existence of its own — into a character which regulated their whole being, and which was one principle running throughout the whole of their existence."

to what our investigation has come to call the Varian persona, if that persona be considered from a sympathetic point of view, and seen in its best possible light.

This brings us, finally, to the question of sympathy, which is closely related to that of interest. We have observed, throughout this exposition, that much depends on point of view. It is only when Varius' story is told, as it usually has been, from a resolutely unsympathetic point of view, that, indeed, of his murderers, and of their apologists or propagandists, that he comes across as fanatical, depraved, extravagant, and, above all, expendable.

But Varius can be a monster, or a hero or a saint, depending on how he is perceived. Indeed, throughout the eighteen centuries of his afterlife, he has been diversely perceived from various points of view: in the rhetoric of hostile historiography and political thought as an object of obloquy, a counterexample; in that of the arts as a character of comedy or farce: a grotesque buffoon, or a villain or victim of melodrama; in the propaganda of political or sexual revolution, as a hero or a saint and martyr.

An alternative version of his story, unlike any of those just mentioned, based as closely as possible on ascertainable historical fact, and derivable from the considered interpretation of his life and reign proposed by *Studia Variana*, has all the elements of classical tragedy, as defined by Aristotle, or indeed by Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. In this version, Varius is an extraordinary individual, of exalted background, the possessor of graceful distinction, in the form of beauty and talent, who, as a result of the worldly ambition of others, which, using or abusing his beauty and talent, he adopts and makes his own, is led to an ontological dilemma: Who shall he be?

This dilemma, rooted in the question of its central character's identity, is integral, not incidental, to its outcome. In resolving that dilemma, drawing on the depths of his own being, Varius chooses what he perceives as truth over what he knows to be a lie, and, as a result, brings about his own destruction. There is, in this hypothetical drama, a moment of *anagorisis*, when Varius realises that he has been used, but that he has it in his power to become the master of his own destiny. His tragic flaw, an obstinate insistence on authenticity rather than falsehood, may, from a certain point of view, be considered a heroic quality. And the spectacle of an adolescent boy thrust, by the selfish ambition of those who should protect him, into an impossible dilemma, whose likeliest outcome is his early and violent death, may easily produce, in a sympathetic audience, a catharsis of pity and fear.

It is the dramatist's task to establish that sympathy, and to tell the story in such a way as to make its inherent dramatic structure work, bringing out its ironies and contradictions, its reversals and sudden insights, radically altering the protagonist's view of circumstances and himself, and leading him finally to his destruction. Thus enacted, it cannot fail to excite interest.

So it becomes apparent that the most potentially interesting aspect of Varian studies lies, precisely, in discovering the importance of being Varius.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank M. Michel Amandry, Directeur, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, for his kind permission to publish the pictures of coins from that collection. I wish also to thank Dr. Cécile Bertrand-Dagenbach, Professeur à l'Université Nancy 2, for a transcript of Mansionario's text, which she is editing for publication. Finally, I wish to thank Dr. Leslie Croxford, of Cambridge University, for his editorial assistance in preparation of this article.

Abbreviations:

APARAR = *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti*

ARW = *Archiv fuer Religionwissenschaft*

AVFGS = *Abhandlungen zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte, zur klassischen und provinzial-römischen Archäologie, und zur Geschichte des Altertums.*

BABesch = *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*

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

BHAC = Bonner Historia Augusta Colloquium

BHAF = Bonner Historia Augusta Forschungen

BNF, Élagabale = Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Monnaies, Catalogue des monnaies d'Élagabale

Dio = Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt, ed. Boissevain, Weidmann, 1901; ed. & English translation by Cary, Loeb, 1969.

HA = Scriptores Historiae Augustae, ed. Hohl, Samberger & Seyfarth, 1971; ed. & English translation by Magie, Loeb, 1980. **HA/AH = Vita Antonini Hellogabali**.

HACP = Historiae Augustae Colloquium Parisinum

Herodian = Herodiani Historiarum Ab Excessu Divi Marci Libri Octo, ed. Stavenhagen, Teubner, 1922; ed. & English translation by Whittaker, Loeb, 1970.

JNGG = Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte

JRS = Journal of Roman Studies.

MEFRA = Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire des Écoles Françaises de Rome et d'Athènes

M(K)DAIR = Mitteilungen des (Kaiserlich) Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts, (Römische Abteilung)

RE = Real Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft

Thirion, Monnayage = Thirion, Marcel, Le Monnayage d'Élagabal, (218-222), 1968.

YCS = Yale Classical Studies

Studia Variana Publications (to Autumn 2005)

QV1 = Quaestiones Varianae, 1 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for Studia Variana, I: The Boy on the Coin, Tsukuba University Area Studies 22, 2004.

QV2 = Quaestiones Varianae, 2 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for Studia Variana, II: Nomen Varianum, Tsukuba University Area Studies 23, 2004.

QV3 = *Quaestiones Varianae*, 3 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *In Varium Hellogabalum imperium conlatum est (HA/IAH 1.4): the Roman imperial succession of a.u.c. 971= A.D. 218*, Tsukuba University Area Studies 24, 2005.

QV4 = *Quaestiones Varianae*, 4 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Iter Principis: Elagabal's journey from Syria to Rome*, Tsukuba University Area Studies 21, 2003.

QV5 = *Quaestiones Varianae*, 5 = Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *In Varium: the indictment*, Tsukuba University Area Studies 25, 2005.

Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gannys, Eutygianus, and Comazon*, *Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, Tokyo, 1999, p. 117-141.

Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, *Anaglyptica Variana, Column Capitals with Sculptural Relief, related to the Cult of Elagabal*, *Tsukuba Studies in Literature and Linguistics*, 43, 45, & 46, 2004-2005.

Arrizabalaga y Prado, L. de, & Fuente Marcos, Raul de la, *The Site of the Varian Temple of Elagabal in Rome: a Topographical and Astronomical Approach to the Question*, *Tsukuba Studies in Literature and Linguistics*, 47, 2005.

Forthcoming:

QV6 = *Res Gestae Varianae: the Verdict*.

QV7 = *Clades Variana: Varius' fall*.

QV8 = *Ratio Variana: Varius' meaning*.