

*“Vere Phrygiae, neque enim Phryges:”*  
Syrian Clothing and Roman Reception  
of Syrian Identity

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*We three kings of Orient are /  
An other against which the concept of a ‘West’ can be constructed<sup>1</sup>*

Identity can be established in a number of ways, and one of the most pervasive ways of doing so, both in modern and ancient times, was through the construction of cultural communities which are defined by a number of codes, such as language and dress. In the Roman world, an individual’s outward appearance, especially their clothing choices, were given a high degree of significance and helped establish social, gender, and ethnic identities. The wardrobe choices of indigenous Syrians<sup>2</sup> allowed for the establishment of a Syrian identity on Syrian terms. This identity was also received by Roman viewers of the Syrians and, filtered through a Roman lens, created a Roman version of Syrian identity, so that Syrian individuals were sensationalized in Roman literature as “perverts with a proclivity for receiving anal penetration, performing oral sex, and engaging in bizarre acts of sacred eunuchism.”<sup>3</sup> Syrians were thus described by Roman authors as everything which Romans were not (at least in theory). This exotification is apparent in descriptions of the clothing and actions of Syrian priests, both the Galli in Rome and others in Syria, and also is seen in the biography of the emperor Elagabalus. The clothing choices and actions against Roman gender and sexuality paradigms of both the Syrian priests and Elagabalus are described in great detail by contemporary and later authors. Roman reception of Syrian identity was largely based on stereotype and exotification, and Roman concerns about the degenerate East served to place Syrian individuals

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1. A Very Theory Xmas, Twitter post, 2:24 PM - 29 Nov 2014.

2. A distinction not without its own issues. “Indigenous” or “native” Syrians can mean both those inhabitants of Syria who were truly of native origins as well as those who were descendants of Greek settlers. See Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 336-7.

3. Nathanael J. Andrade, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 314.

outside acceptable paradigms of Roman masculinity and gender.

*Technical Definitions: Culture, Identity, and Clothing*

It is important to recognize that “culture” and “identity” are not exactly identical categories. While “the institutions through which identities are organized might be termed ‘cultures,’ [...] individuals can belong to more than one institution (religion, citystate, guild, and so on) and thus can identify with more than one set of codes and symbols” which organize their identities.<sup>4</sup> Individuals can thus belong to more than one ‘culture,’ and this fact allows (and in some cases necessitates) that the individual create different identities, and might also choose to privilege certain codes over others, thereby identifying themselves more strongly with one group than another.<sup>5</sup> Identity, however, is not just that which is created by the internal group, but also how that individual’s choices are “read” by an external group. The external community also privileges certain codes above others, creating an identity for the internal community which is just as powerful as the internal community’s own construction.

This can be particularly observed in Rome’s interactions with its provinces. Roman authors often defined the identities of different groups of peoples both inside and outside their empire by “objective criteria” such as language, clothing, and customs, as well as “the assumption that a people could be associated with a particular space of territory.”<sup>6</sup> While all the provinces were units in the Roman Empire, and therefore ostensibly Roman, finer units of distinction were often employed so that individuals were grouped according to their province instead of with a larger Roman identity. While this is not inherently a negative action, it could and did become so when Romans read these identities through the lens of their own biases and stereotypes, ultimately projecting those presuppositions onto the identities in question. This tendency is especially evident in literary treatments of subject peoples and groups outside of the control of the Roman Empire, but also applies to groups included in it.

One of the ways which Romans differentiated between identities and cultures they encountered was by commenting on

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4. Kevin Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 272.

5. Depending on one’s location and company, certain identities might be more privileged than others, although that does not negate one’s other identities.

6. *ibid*, 272.

appearance, which could do a great deal to differentiate peoples. Such obvious visual differences could also be refashioned into any number of cultural stereotypes, from simple instances of xenophobia to more overt forms of what some authors have seen as proto-racism. One of the more widely used methods to create identity, both for those inside and outside a certain social group, was by dress and clothing. Creating identity based on dress and clothing choices is perhaps one of the easiest ways to go about constructing an identity. In part this is because practically every item of clothing that an individual can choose to wear can be inserted "into an organized, formal, and normative system that is recognized by society" and becomes a regimented and regulated object.<sup>7</sup> By creating regimented systems which dictate who is allowed wear what, individual groups can control both who is allowed to associate with their community and create a cohesive group for themselves, making it easier for that identity to be recognized. This system is then "defined by normative links which justify, oblige, prohibit, tolerate, [and] control the arrangement of garments on a concrete wearer who is identified in their social and historical place."<sup>8</sup> An example of this in Roman history would include cultural codes about who could wear a toga and even what toga could be worn in what context by what individual.

Clothing choices thus become a system of identity which must be read and recognized. This recognition occurs both on the part of the internal community (those who choose to wear certain items of clothing) and the external community (those who receive the image of the internal society). These readings can be manipulated by individuals on both sides of the equation: the internal society can choose to assert their identity by the adoption of common garment, or giving a certain garment privilege over others to establish their identity, while the external society can look at a common garment worn by individuals and impose an identity onto all those who wear such a garment, regardless of if that identity really applies to the wearer. Because these definitions are able to be so widely interpreted, multiple "readings" of identity can be constructed through clothing, and which reading prevails largely depends upon which community has the largest amount of influence. This phenomenon can be seen in the reception of Syrian/"Syrian"

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7. Roland Barthes, "History and Sociology of Clothing: Some Methodological Observations," in *The Language of Fashion* trans. Andy Stafford (Berg, 2006), 7.

8. *ibid*, 7.

clothing in Roman literature, where typical elements of Syrian clothing are read in different ways by Roman authors who filter these systems of dress through their own lenses of interpretation.

*Constructing Identity: Palmyrene Depictions of Syrian Dress*

One of the best examples for native Syrian representation of Syrians comes from the funerary sculpture found at Palmyra, a wealthy trading city located in modern-day Syria. Even when the city was incorporated into the Roman Empire, it retained some degree of independence in terms of Roman involvement in the daily workings of the city.<sup>9</sup> Many of the existing pieces of Palmyrene sculpture which remain today come from funerary contexts,<sup>10</sup> and date from between 50-237 CE.<sup>11</sup> Palmyrene sculptures display a “lack of Roman style,” in that while certain elements indicative of Roman influence may be present (for example, in the presence of a beard on the statue’s subject), and the statues also display a difference in composition and artistic style from their Roman counterparts. Traditionally Roman forms of dress, when not blended with more local styles, are also conspicuously absent, while outfits which blend “indigenous Semitic costume styles [...] and outer garments often worn in Greek fashion” appear to be more in vogue.<sup>12</sup> While some degree of cultural exchange in clothing is present, most of the depictions of clothing seem not to consciously adopt Greek or Roman styles of dress, despite the prolonged Greek and Roman presence in the area. It is possible, then, that the Palmyrene statues thus depict something which might be close to a local, native, artistic tradition. While the statues may represent clothing which is not entirely accurate as far as day-to-day wear goes, they at least show an idealized representation which many citizens of Palmyra adopted as a means to depict themselves.<sup>13</sup> These funerary portraits reflect a conscious and deliberate creation of a unique identity, established

9. “Palmyra: Trade Center of the Ancient Near East,” accessed in February, 2015, [www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/Palmyra.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/Palmyra.html).

10. “Uses of Palmyrene Sculpture,” accessed in February, 2015, [www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/uses.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/uses.html).

11. “Characteristics of Typical Palmyrene Sculpture,” accessed in February, 2015, [www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/char.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/arc/palmyrene/html/char.html).

12. Cynthia Finlayson, “Textile Exchange and Gendered Cross-Dressing at Palmyra, Syria (100 BC- AD 272),” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2004), 63.

13. Butcher, *Roman Syria*, 327.

by the use of distinct items of clothing which are not found in such combination, or on their own, in other parts of the Roman Empire.

Beginning in the middle of first century CE, there is an “increasing interest in non-Greek costume” to be found in the funerary statues. Along with the hybrid Greek and Semitic outfits, typically “Parthian [also described as Persian/Iranian in modern sources] clothing” begins to appear more frequently in funerary sculpture.<sup>14</sup> This clothing often featured some degree of elaborate embroidery work and richly decorated material, as well as many different layers of clothing which primarily consisted of a short tunic with long sleeves, loose-fitting trousers, and ankle-length boots, and which could also include a long open-front coat and leggings over the lower legs.<sup>15</sup> Although hybridization was still popular at this time, the combination of the Parthian/Persian, Greek, and Semitic elements in single outfits created an entirely unique depiction of clothing which assumed its own uniquely Palmyrene qualities.

Religious outfits were different from this everyday wear and were typically more conservative in style of dress, although even in the existing sculptural record there are variations. The most common depictions of priests typically feature distinctive cylindrical hats and longer, belted tunics which were perhaps once elements of formal wear to evoke a more traditional, “consciously Syrian,” appearance.<sup>16</sup> Such depictions are widespread throughout Syria and some instances have been dated as far back as the third century BCE, suggesting that this was the most original, indigenous form of priestly dress.<sup>17</sup> A priestly modius may be substituted for the cylindrical hat, as is attested in monuments from Tyre and Palmyra.<sup>18</sup> Other depictions of priests might include Greek elements and Persian dress, found in depictions from Palmyra, and priests clad in the traditional Roman toga.<sup>19</sup> Other versions of priestly clothing resemble the “Parthian clothing” from other Palmyrene funerary sculpture, and feature a combination of tunics and trousers, and it has been suggested that the depiction of this style of clothing

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14. *ibid.*, 329.

15. *ibid.*

16. *ibid.*, 331.

17. Lucinda Dirven, “The Emperor’s New Clothes: A Note on Elagabalus’ Priestly Dress,” in *Der Christliche Orient und Seine Umwelt*, eds. L. Greisinger and S. G. Vashalomidze (Weisbaden 2007), 27.

18. *ibid.*

19. Dirven, “New Clothers,” 28.

was popular among Roman elites in Syria.<sup>20</sup> While external items of clothing may be used in the depictions of Syrian priests, they usually are combined with more traditional or indigenous forms of clothing. The hybridization of these indigenous and foreign elements, which became typical in depictions of Syrian priests, worked together to create a recognizable image of Syrian priestly identity for both native Syrians and, more importantly, Roman viewers.

*Reading Identity: Roman Authors on Syrian Priests*

It is perhaps unsurprising that Roman literary treatments of the Syrians focus on what the Romans viewed as most uniquely Syrian, by means of which the Romans could enforce some degree of separation between themselves and their eastern subjects. Most of these “uniquely Syrian” aspects were little more than Roman stereotypes regarding the Syrians which they had inherited from the Greeks, and such stereotypes and prejudices are attestable in the Greco-Roman literary tradition. Juvenal mentions an “*adsiduo Syrophoenix udus amomo*” in Satire 8.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere in Roman literature the Syrians are shown to be servile, effeminate, and perverted, embodying qualities which the Romans found to be unbearable in themselves, but all too typical of their Near Eastern subjects.<sup>22</sup> The *Historia Augusta* casts the Syrians as degenerate, frivolous, and mediocre soldiers who do nothing but “have sex, drink, bathe, and live in luxury,” echoing stereotypes about the Syrians which have been present in the Greco-Roman tradition for something like eight centuries.<sup>23</sup> That these stereotypes persisted in the Roman literary tradition for as long as they do with very little change in rhetoric speaks volumes about Roman fears and concerns. Roman authors, especially more conservative senatorial class, feared the “contamination” of Roman society by association with these debilitating eastern qualities.<sup>24</sup>

One aspect of Syrian culture which Roman authors seized as indicative of these wider stereotypes was the behaviors, rites, and customs of Syrian priests. The Roman accounts of Syrian

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20. *ibid.*

21. Juvenal, 8.160. I have tried to quote as much primary material in the original language as possible, and quotes in English tend to be from secondary source material.

22. Isaac, *Invention*, 350.

23. *ibid.*, 348.

24. *ibid.*, 351.

priests, regardless of what deity they serve, focus on priestly garments and behavior. Roman authors tend to link these aspects of Syrian religious practice with a deeply eastern tradition which is simultaneously foreign, bemusing, suspect, and even unnatural. Most accounts of Syrian cults make explicit mention of clothing style and color, the fact that the priests are eunuchs, and depict ecstatic rituals which include some degree of self-abuse. These scenes apply to accounts of the priesthood and rites of the goddesses Atargatis, whom the Romans called the "Syrian Goddess," and Cybele and her consort Attis, who were linked with Phrygia. The similarities in the accounts of the two goddesses suggest some basic elements of native Near Eastern religious practice.<sup>25</sup>

The second century CE seems to have been the height of invectives against both the priests of Atargatis and against the Galli, who were in the service of Cybele, whose cult had been moved to Rome in the third century BCE. Augustan era writers typically saw these priests as "frenzied half-male devotees."<sup>26</sup> The Galli were "pejoratively women or howling, half-male effeminates who unmanned themselves,"<sup>27</sup> enabling Ovid, in his *Fasti*, to describe the galli as "[molles] ministri [qui] caedunt iactatis vilia membra comis."<sup>28</sup> The increase in negative literary depiction directed at the Galli appeared around the same time as the Galli began to increase their own public visibility, establishing funerary monuments for themselves and their colleagues and often choosing to portray themselves in feminine clothing, wearing earrings, and sporting long hairstyles.<sup>29</sup> This self-presentation, when coupled with Roman reception of it, allowed the Romans to view the Galli as "'authentically' Phrygian," despite their new home in Rome.<sup>30</sup>

An interesting development from this is that Roman authors

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25. It could also be a case of similar identity. In the notes to a 1912 translation of *De Dea Syria*, John Garstang identifies the temple Lucian describes as dedicated to Cybele. It could also be that Cybele and Atargatis had similar rites and were simply different iterations of each other, associated with a different deity in different geographical places, as was common in the ancient Mediterranean world.

26. Jacob Latham, "'Fabulous Clap-Trap': Roman Masculinity, the cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the *galli* at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Religion* 92.1 (2012), 106.

27. *ibid.*, 107.

28. Ovid, *Fasti*, 234-4, quoted in Latham, "Clap-Trap," 106.

29. Latham, "The Fabulous Clap-Trap," 109.

30. Maria Grazia Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History: King Priest and God* (Leiden: Brill 2002), 102.



were able to draw sharp distinctions between Cybele and her priests, which helped to establish the divide between acceptably Roman and unacceptably Eastern. By creating such a divide, Roman authors were able to work out a definition of Roman-ness which did not contain any sort of Eastern influence, although concerns about Eastern corruption would always be present. This enables Virgil to have one of the Rutulians insult the Trojans in the *Aeneid* by saying “vobis picta croco et fulgenti murice vestis, / desidia cordi, iuvat indulgere choreis, / et tunicae manicas et habent redimicula mitrae. / o vere Phrygiae, neque enim Phryges,” which reads like a typical depiction of the rituals of the galli and Syrian priests.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in Book 12, prior to his fight with Aeneas, Turnus says of the mythological founder of Rome: “da sternere corpus / loricaeque manu valida lacerare revulsam / semiviri Phrygis et foedare in pulvere crinis / vibratos calido ferro murraque madentis.”<sup>32</sup> These views of the Trojans by the native Italic peoples of the *Aeneid* are interesting because they seem to reflect typically Roman views of the East, despite the fact that the “East” in this question is the mythological homeland of the Romans. It seems possible that this was part of the process of working through their own concerns about a mythological relocation from the foreign East, and that it is part of the same process by which Cybele became naturalized to Rome while her priests did not. Virgil and Ovid’s accounts of these foreign Easterners, such as the Galli, played into both Roman concerns with masculinity and also fears about the East and its purported corrupting influences. By separating the Galli from Roman tradition over time, Roman authors were able to more firmly define what made Roman-ness by defining what it wasn’t. Roman-ness could never be the same as Syrian-ness, which perhaps helps to explain the level of invective directed at the Syrians.

In the high empire, literary depictions of the Galli and Syrian priests began to display more of Rome’s preoccupation with their foreign and non-binary qualities. Two literary treatments dating from this time concerning the Syrian priests are those by Apuleius and Lucian of Samosata. Both authors’ accounts of Syrian religion focus on the foreignness of Syrian rites and customs and in that respect fit into the broader pre-existing Roman literary tradition of the east. Considering both Lucian and Apuleius as writing purely

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31. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 9.614-7, quoted in Latham, “Clap-Trap,” 105.

32. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 12.97-100, quoted in Latham, “Clap-Trap,” 105.



from a Roman point of view, however, is complicated by the fact that both authors came from the Roman provinces. Apuleius' view may be more in line with the Roman literary tradition, highlighting the Syrians' outlandish rituals, but it may not be the case that his intentions are the same as Roman authors voicing their concerns about the corruptive dangers of the East on Rome itself. These depictions, but especially Apuleius', highlight the non-binary gender status of the galli as a group which possesses both aspects of Roman gender identity while simultaneously being non-binary.

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* Book 8 features an episode with a group of Syrian priests in the service of the Syrian Goddess. The narrator Lucius, still in donkey form, is bought by one of the priests, whom he describes as a "cinaedum, [...] unum de triviali popularium faece, qui per plateas et oppida cymbalis et crotalis personantes deamque Syriam circumferentes mendicare compellunt."<sup>33</sup> Once Lucius and the priest return back to their home, the head priests addresses the others as "puellae," but Lucius corrects this for the reader by stating "illae puellae chorum erat cinaedorum," and elsewhere in the text Apuleius refers to the priests as both *semiviri* and *effeminati*.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Lucius dwells on the perversity of the priests, who not only imagine that Lucius is some "hominem servulum ministerio suo paratum,"<sup>35</sup> but who also have a flute-playing slave who "domi vero promiscuis operis partiarius agebat concubinus."<sup>36</sup> Lucius describes the priests' preparation of their appearances before they go out and beg:

variis coloribus indusiati et deformiter quisque formati  
facie caenoso pigmento delita et oculis obunctis graphice  
prodeunt, mitellis et crocotis et carbasinis et bombycinis  
iniecti, quidam tunicas albas, in modum lanciolarum  
quoquoversum fluente purpura depictas, cingulo  
subligati, pedes luteis induti calceis[.]<sup>37</sup>

Lucius describes the priests undergoing typical Roman beauty regimes, but only with the outcome of deformity. The priests also

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33. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 8.24, The Latin Library, accessed December 2014, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/apuleius/apuleius8.shtml>.

34. *ibid.*, 8.26.

35. *ibid.*

36. *ibid.*

37. *ibid.*, 8.27

wear the *crocata*, a yellow garment typically worn only by women and effeminate men, and the rest of their clothing is typically luxurious, made of silk and featuring purple designs. Throughout his account, Lucius plays up the fact that the priests exhibit both typically masculine and feminine traits, which only serve to place the priests outside traditional Roman gender ideology. Even if Apuleius' account is meant to be comic in its overall tone, the outlandish depiction of the Syrian priests gives some indication of the uncertain status which they had in the Roman mind.

While Apuleius' account focuses on the priests' depravity and their disturbingly confused gender presentation, Lucian similarly emphasizes the feminine aspects of the priests in his *De Dea Syria*. Benjamin Isaac notes that when Lucian deals with Syrians in his other literary accounts, there is typically an air of "apology or criticism" for his fellow provincial inhabitants, but this is not entirely present in *De Dea Syria*.<sup>38</sup> Whether this is a result of Lucian's own reverence for the Syrian goddess or whether Lucian's restraint is a sarcastic commentary on Roman views of the Syrians in their literary tradition is uncertain. He traces the ritual autocastration back to Attis, a mythological figure who, "βίου μὲν ἀνδρῆσι ἀπεπαύσατο, μορφὴν δὲ θηλέην ἡμεΐψατο καὶ ἐσθῆτα γυναικίην ἐνεδύσατο."<sup>39</sup> Following this mythological precedent, the male devotees of the Syrian goddess similarly castrate themselves and "ἐσθῆτα δὲ οἶδε οὐκέτι ἀνδρῆσιν ἔχουσιν, ἀλλὰ εἴματά τε γυναικῆα φορέουσιν καὶ ἔργα γυναικῶν ἐπιτελέουσιν."<sup>40</sup> Lucian also gives a brief description of the priests' clothing which differs from Apuleius' account. The priests "ἐσθῆς δὲ αὐτέοισι πᾶσι λευκή, καὶ πῖλον ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ ἔχουσιν. ἀρχιερεὺς [...] πορφυρέην τε μῦθος οὗτος φορέει καὶ τιάρη χρυσῆν ἀναδέεται."<sup>41</sup> Lucian's depiction of the Syrian priests focuses mostly on priestly clothing and a mythological explanation for their autocastration. While not as overtly disparaging as Apuleius or earlier Roman writers towards the eunuch priests of the Syrian goddess, Lucian's account further helps to define an identity by which a Roman audience might standardize Syrian priesthood.

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38. Isaac, *Invention*, 345.

39. Lucian of Samosata, *De Dea Syria*, 15.

40. *ibid.*, 27.

41. *ibid.*, 42.

*"The Assyrian:" Roman Reception of Elagabalus*

Given the sheer amount of invective against the *galli* apparent in Roman literature by the later empire, the constant worrying by Romans about Roman masculinity, and the distrust of Syria apparent in the Roman literary tradition, it is unsurprising that these misgivings should manifest themselves in Roman accounts of the emperor Elagabalus. Given the Romans' preoccupation with viewing the Syrian east as a hotbed of iniquity by which otherwise upstanding Roman armies could be converted into luxury-loving effetes, Elagabalus' being appointed emperor by winning over the Roman armies in the east would almost certainly have proved disconcerting to the more conservative senatorial mind. For such authors, Elagabalus became the nightmarish embodiment of all of these Roman concerns, an emperor of Emesene Syrian heritage with all the personal decadences that came with it. In some respects these biographies read like earlier Roman accounts of Syrian individuals. Both contemporary and posthumous accounts of Elagabalus' life focus on aspects which are typical of Roman accounts of Syrian priesthood, such as a firmly "Eastern" origin and "unnatural" gender and sexual presentation.

Roman authors emphasized Elagabalus' Syrian origins, frequently giving detailed accounts of Elagabalus' religious practices. These details are typical across accounts and usually feature dancing around altars to the music of flutes and cymbals in an ecstatic state, sharing many similarities with Roman accounts of the music-maddened *Galli* and their rituals. However, information on religious practice at Emesa itself is "slight, scattered, [and] puzzling," and virtually nothing is known about Emesene culture or social organization.<sup>42</sup> There are also uncertainties about the exact nature of the cult of Elagabal, besides that Roman reception of the cult focused on the cult's exhibiting "a whole range of features which contemporaries took to be 'Phoenician,' 'Syrian,' 'Assyrian' or 'Barbarian,'" whether the cult was being viewed in the East or in Rome.<sup>43</sup> While the accounts of religious ritual are certainly important in linking Elagabalus to the "Eastern tradition," Roman authors further this by emphasizing the emperor's adoption of "traditionally" Syrian religious dress. Cassius Dio's account

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42. Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 BC - AD 337*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 301-2.

43. *ibid.*, 306-7.

links it with an eastern tradition that has no place in Rome:

καὶ μέντοι καὶ ὅτι τὴν ἐσθῆτα τὴν βαρβαρικὴν, ἣ οἱ τῶν  
Σύρων ἱερεῖς χρῶνται, καὶ δημοσίᾳ πολλακίς ἐωρᾶτο  
ἐνδεδυμένος· ἄφ' οὐπὲρ οὐχ ἦκιστα καὶ τὴν τοῦ Ἀσσυρίου  
ἐπωνυμίαν ἔλαβεν.<sup>44</sup>

Much like other authors' attempts to distance the Galli from the acceptable Roman cult of Cybele, Elagabalus here is portrayed as what Romans could consider an "authentic" Syrian other. Herodian, himself a native of Syria, gives two descriptions of Elagabalus' clothing choices. Both of these descriptions come from a context where Herodian is explaining Elagabalus' services and devotions to Elagabal:

προΐει τε σχήματι βαρβάρῳ, χιτῶνας χρυσοῦφεις καὶ  
άλουργεῖς χειριδωτοὺς καὶ ποδήρεις ἀνεζωσμένους, τὰ τε  
σκέλη πάντα σκέπων ἄπ' ὀνυχῶν ἐς μηροὺς ἐσθῆσιν ὁμοίως  
χρυσῷ καὶ πορφύρᾳ πεποικιλμέναις. τὴν τε καφαλήν ἐκόσμει  
στέφανος λίθων πολυτελῶν χροιά διηνητισμένος.<sup>45</sup>

Herodian then describes the winter in Nicomedia where Elagabalus began to practice the "ecstatic" rites of Elagabal. Again, Elagabalus' priestly clothes make an appearance, and Herodian here mentions Elagabalus' tendency towards luxury:

σχήμασί τε ἐσθῆτος πολυτελεστάτοις χρώμενος, διὰ τε  
πορφύρας <καὶ> χρυσοῦ ὑφάσμενοις περιδεραίοις τε  
καὶ ψελίοις κοσμούμενος, ἐς εἶδος δὲ τιάρας στεφάνην.  
ἐπικείμενος χρυσῷ καὶ λίθοις ποικίλην τιμίους. ἦν τε αὐτῷ τὸ  
σχῆμα μεταξὺ Φοινίσσης ἱερᾶς στολῆς καὶ χλιδῆς Μηδικῆς.  
Ῥωμαϊκὴν δὲ ἢ Ἑλληνικὴν πᾶσαν ἐσθῆτα ἐμυσάττετο, ἐρίου  
φάσκων εἰργάσθαι, πράγματος εὐτελοῦς· τοῖς δὲ Σηρῶν  
ὑφάσμασι μόνους ἤρεσκετο.<sup>46</sup>

44. Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, ed. Herbert Baldwin Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), LXXX 12.2.

45. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, in *Herodian: Volume II: Books V-VIII* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), V.3.6.

46. *ibid.*, V.5.3-5

The Vita Heliogabali of the *Historia Augusta*, written considerably after Elagabalus' death, reads similarly to Herodian's account and focuses not so much on the ethnicity of Elagabalus' clothing, but instead on its overly luxurious qualities:

usus est aurea omni tunica, usus et purpurea, usus et de gemmis Persica, cum gravari se diceret onere voluptatis. habuit et in calciamentis gemmas, et quidem scalptas. quod risum omnibus movit, quasi possent scalpturae nobilium artificum videri in gemmis, quae pedibus adhaerebant.<sup>47</sup>

The anonymous author also recounts that Elagabalus "[p]rimus Romanorum holoserica veste usus fertur, [...] linteamen lotum numquam attigit, mendicos dicens qui linteis lotis uterentur," again emphasizing Elagabalus' decadence in terms of clothing.<sup>48</sup> The depictions of Elagabalus' clothing and the rituals of the cult of Elagabal in Roman literature are "accompanied by features which deliberately accentuated its 'Oriental,' 'Syrian,' or 'Phoenician' features," which borrow from the preexisting literary traditions and xenophobic rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of whether the clothes being described are personal or priestly, in all three accounts Roman authors both unite the luxurious character of "Eastern" clothes with Elagabalus' purported personal depravity.

Along with depictions of Elagabalus' "Eastern" clothing, Roman sources also focus on Elagabalus' non-normative gender presentation and sexual practices. Here again the literary accounts bear much in common with accounts of the Galli. As in Apuleius' treatment in the *Metamorphoses* where the Syrian priests are depicted as lecherous perverts, so too is Elagabalus depicted in the *Historia Augusta* and Dio's account, which read more like a catalogue of various perversities and indiscretions than a historical biography. The *Historia Augusta* describes Elagabalus as "omnia sordide ageret inireturque a viris et subigeret" and engaging in "cuncta cava corporis libidinem."<sup>50</sup> Dio says that Elagabalus

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47. *Historia Augusta*, in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 23.3-4.

48. *ibid.*, 26.1.

49. Millar, *Roman Near East*, 308.

50. *Historia Augusta* 5.1-2.

“πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἄτοπα, ἃ μῆτε λέγων μῆτε ἀκούων ἅ τις καρτερήσειεν, καὶ ἔδρασε τῷ σώματι καὶ ἔπαθε,” including engaging in self-prostitution both in public brothels and in the private palace.<sup>51</sup> As with depictions of the Galli, issues of gender presentation were prevalent in accounts of Elagabalus’ life. The anonymous author also says of Elagabalus that “voluit uti et diademate gemmato, quo pulchrior fieret et magis ad feminarum vultum aptus,” tying the account back to tropes about the Syrian priests adopting women’s clothing.<sup>52</sup> Dio is similar in his account, and mentions Elagabalus “καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐνηλείφετο, ψιμυτίῳ τε καὶ ἐγχοῦση ἐχρίετο,” as well as removing any facial hair or hint of a beard, “ὥστε καὶ ἐκ τούτου γυναικίζειν.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus, in later sources Elagabalus came to represent all that senatorial Romans distrusted, even despised, in their Syrian subjects: “androgyny, wanton sexuality, excessive love for festivals, [and] tyrannical impulses” served to further separate Elagabalus from the Roman senate and any concrete ideas about Roman-ness.<sup>54</sup> As was seen with literary treatments of the Galli, there became some element of Elagabalus’ Syrian-ness which became fundamentally incompatible with their later Roman-ness. Severus Alexander, who succeeded Elagabalus, was portrayed in the *Historia Augusta* as being ashamed of his Syrian heritage, further suggesting some level of incompatibility between Syrian identity and imperial office.<sup>55</sup> Above all, there seems to be a conscious effort by Roman historians to associate Elagabalus with the Syrian East, or a highly imaginative Roman version of it, than with Rome.

But the question remains as to how much of this association was wholly on the part of the Roman senatorial class. There is a possibility that some degree of what Roman authors were responding to was actually a product of Elagabalus’ own creation. Despite Dio and Herodian’s insistence that Elagabalus’ clothing was typical of Syrian priests, the contemporary evidence suggests another story. Conspicuously absent from these accounts are the almost universal conical hats, and the use of trousers in Syrian religious clothing is also uncommon or unheard of.<sup>56</sup> The question

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51. Dio, *History*, LXXX 13.2.

52. *Historia Augusta* 23.5.

53. Dio, *History*, LXXX 14.4.

54. Andrade, *Syrian Identity*, 322-3.

55. Isaac, *Invention*, 350.

56. Dirven, “New Clothers,” 26.

of dress becomes even more complicated when Elagabalus' coins are examined, as yet again depictions of the young emperor change. On coinage, Elagabalus wears trousers and short tunic with tight sleeves which does not reach to the ground, as mentioned in Herodian's description.<sup>57</sup> Instead of wearing a crown or bejeweled tiara, Elagabalus wears a simple diadem "normally associated with Roman emperors."<sup>58</sup> Elagabalus' portraits on coinage not only have no direct parallel in Dio or Herodian's textual account, they also have no parallel in any known, extant images of Syrian priestly clothing.<sup>59</sup>

There is any number of possibilities for why these discrepancies exist. As there are no extant depictions of priests from Emesa, where Elagabalus lived before becoming emperor, it is possible that the depictions given in detail in Herodian, and glossed by Dio, are more or less accurate representations of the clothing of the Emesene priesthood, although it would certainly be an odd departure from the more traditional elements of Syrian religious clothing depicted at Palmyra. Dirven points out that, in comparison, Herodian's account seems to fit more with depictions of what modern scholars have labelled "Iranian" priestly dress, which is documented at Palmyra, but the depictions of Elagabalus which come from coinage deviate from this mode of dress, as well.<sup>60</sup> Herodian could also simply be describing Elagabalus in the most "Eastern" way possible, to further establish his separation from Roman paradigms of masculinity and religion. This seems to be in line with Dio's account, which continually describes Elagabalus' clothing as belonging to any number of interchangeable Near Eastern ethnicities. Accounts of Elagabalus' clothing present it "through the filter of what to Western eyes is 'Oriental,'" with little regard for what we might consider historical accuracy, so that those choices of clothing help to present an identity through which "what is 'other' and 'Barbarian from the East' is seen."<sup>61</sup>

There could also have been a conscious choice on Elagabalus' part to have these numismatic portraits deviate from traditional Syrian dress. It would be highly unlikely that the amount of vitriol aimed at Syrian priests would be unknown in Syria, especially to

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57. *ibid.*

58. *ibid.*

59. *ibid.*, 28.

60. *ibid.*, 29.

61. Lancellotti, *Attis*, 102.



members of an aristocratic family with ties to imperial power at Rome. By presenting a modified image of the emperor which has more in common with “military uniform[s] worn by the emperor at peacetime” than Syrian religious garb, Elagabalus could be aiming to present a personal image which appeals most broadly to the Roman troops in order to secure imperial power.<sup>62</sup> Herodian also reports that upon being made emperor, Elagabalus sent a portrait ahead to Rome which depicted their public performance as priest of Elagabal, so as to naturalize the Romans to Elagabalus’ appearance, and that the Romans, upon Elagabalus’ arrival, found nothing at all strange in this choice of clothing or appearance.<sup>63</sup> Herodian does not describe the portrait in great detail, saying only that Elagabalus arrived in Rome appearing in a similar manner to the portrait, so determining whether that portrait fit more with Herodian’s literary description or the numismatic portraits is likely impossible. Despite this, there clearly was some attempt to have Elagabalus’ Syrian dress viewed as acceptable by a Roman audience. Even if depictions of Elagabalus’ clothing on coinage are conscious modifications of Elagabalus’ actual clothing calculated to appeal to Romans and are not any more accurate than the literary accounts, it is extremely telling that Roman authors would choose to emphasize the exotic and “Oriental” qualities of Elagabalus’ dress even when there was material evidence to the contrary.

### *Conclusion*

The adoption of what might be considered traditional or indigenous forms of dress by Syrian individuals was fundamental in constructing a basic Syrian identity, as can be seen at the funerary reliefs in Palmyra. Roman authors such as Virgil, Apuleius and Lucian used their readings of this form of self-presentation to construct their own versions of Syrian priesthood, largely portraying the Phrygians and their priests as perverse and lecherous, decidedly effeminate or emasculate—or simultaneously both and neither—fanatics who were driven to madness and barbarous practices by their similarly barbarous Eastern gods. Roman mistrust of Syrians did not stop when Syrian individuals

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62. A Alföldi, mentioned in Dirven, “New Clothers,” 29. Dirven notes that while material representations of the emperor in such garb date from around 60 years after Elagabalus, literary accounts mention that emperors were already adopting the outfit at the beginning of the third century CE.

63. Herodian, *History*, V.5.6-8.

and practices were re-situated in Rome, but often intensified, suggesting that the Romans viewed some fundamental problem with being a Roman and being a Syrian. This is further emphasized in the accounts of the Galli given by Roman authors and historians. Roman perception of this fundamental incompatibility is nowhere more apparent than in Roman accounts of the emperor Elagabalus, whose Syrian identity was emphasized in accounts cataloguing Elagabalus' decadence and personal sexual proclivities.