

Pagan Religious Syncretism and Symbolism on the Greek Imperials of the Early Third Century

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I. Introduction: *Syncretism on the Alexandrian Coins*

During the second and third centuries A.D. Greco-Roman religion moved increasingly in the direction of monotheism. All the old gods became subordinate powers of one supreme being, whose visible cosmic manifestation was believed to be the divine sun.¹ By the time this process ran its course pagan religion had assumed a new form, which was very different from that of the high classical period — although its roots can certainly be traced back to the syncretistic patterns of the Hellenistic age. The two most important influences on this process were Greek philosophical monotheism and the increasingly popular eastern mystery cults, some of which had been introduced at Rome as early as the middle Republic. Under the early Principate the mysteries were accepted by some emperors and rejected by others. The reasons for rejection were often social and political as well as religious. For example, the identification of Cleopatra with Isis was not something that would endear the goddess to Augustus. And that emperor's claim to rule over the regenerated city of Romulus led him to favor the old gods of the city.

The Augustan revival, however, did not fully satisfy the growing need for personal salvation which was characteristic of the first centuries of our era. As the state cults became more and more *pro forma* and secularized, people demonstrated an increasing interest in religions of salvation. The mystery religions, with their promises of regeneration and immortality, were well suited for the religious needs of the age. Among the learned, the adherents of Greek philosophy attempted to understand the one principle behind reality in religious terms. They also adopted a religious way of life in tune with the revival of Platonism and Pythagoreanism under the Empire. Ultimately, the philosophers provided a consistent Platonic theology for the mysteries and the syncretistic solar monotheism of the later pagans.

1. This paper was begun at the American Numismatic Society (ANS) in the summer seminar, 1976. Late Classical philosophers made a distinction between the sun of scientific astronomy and the symbolic "cosmic" sun as visible manifestation of the Platonic Good; cf. Julian *Hymn to King Helios* 148A.

Syncretism itself may be defined as the combination and association of divinities, practices, and ideas from different religious traditions. It is a common phenomenon in the history of religions, and, theological claims to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems to occur in one form or another in all religions. In the Classical period the most obvious example is the close parallel between the Greek and Roman pantheons. Already by the Archaic period Aphrodite was associated with the Babylonian Ishtar and the Phoenician Astarte.² The Ephesian Artemis was more like the Asiatic great mother than the goddess of classical mythology. Readers of Herodotus know that the Greeks believed the Egyptian gods to be basically the same as the Olympians; only their names and forms differed. For example, Zeus was associated with Ammon, Apollo with Horus, Dionysus with Osiris, Demeter with Isis, Hermes with Thoth.

Following the conquests of Alexander this syncretism, which was so natural to paganism, became more intense and developed in the direction of universalism. Zeus took on the aspects of many foreign deities with whom he was worshipped in syncretistic form. Cleanthes, the Stoic philosopher, gave expression to this tendency in his famous *Hymn to Zeus*. In that work the god is conceived as the rational immanent logos which permeates all things.³ As we shall see, Sarapis, the new Greco-Egyptian god of the Ptolemies played an important role in these religious developments. Finally, in late antiquity, the universalist elements in Hellenistic religion reached their logical culmination when a transformed paganism systematically subordinated all the gods to a supreme transcendent One. The religions of the East had become so important that the Roman emperors ended up making them central to the state religion itself. By the late third century the process was complete: the emperor had become an earthly representative of the Unconquered Sun. And this *Sol Invictus* certainly had as much to do with the Eastern sun-god as with the old Roman Sol.

The turning point and most crucial period in the final development of paganism was the Severan Dynasty (AD 193-225).⁴ Philostratus' life of the Pythagorean holy man Apollonius of Tyana was written during the reign of Septimius Severus under the patronage of the emperor's wife Julia Domna. This hagiographical

2. Bar, Marc, "Un Bel Exemple de Synchrétisme Religieux sur une Monnaie Impériale Grecque," *Cercle d'Etudes Numismatiques*, Vol. II, no. 2 Avril-Juin 1974, pp. 59-68, p. 62.

3. Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*, fr. 537, 24 ff; cf. Bar, p. 63 n. 4 bottom.

4. Parker, H.M.D., *A History of the Roman World from A.D. 138 to 337* (London, 1958), Pt. II, Ch. VI, p. 130.

work set forth a doctrine of reformed and purified paganism. The emperor Elagabalus, whose religion was far from purified or reformed, tried to subordinate all the gods to his own Syrian sun-Baal of Emesa. Severus Alexander saw all religions as particular expressions of one universal truth. He is reputed to have had a shrine in his palace in which were figures of Orpheus, Abraham, Jesus, and Apollonius.⁵ The religious developments of the Severan dynasty, especially those of Elagabalus, will be discussed shortly.

In addition to the literary texts, monuments, and inscriptions of the period, the coins of the Greek Imperial series provide evidence of its characteristic religious syncretism. These coins, locally issued, were almost all of bronze and billon. They represented local, colonial, and provincial coinage. Their usage varied from small change in some places to official provincial coinage, as in Egypt, where they were issued as tetradrams during the Severan age. The Alexandrian issues were of billon for the most part. The obverse types display imperial portraits. In the areas which I have studied, namely Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, and Cilicia a large percentage of reverse types portray temples, divinities, and religious rites. Often local gods are shown syncretized with foreign deities. At times they also provide evidence for the new universal paganism that was developing at the time.

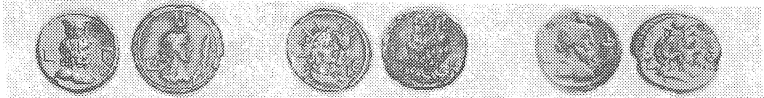


FIG. 1

FIG. 2

FIG. 3

The process of syncretism itself, as it appears on the coins, can most easily be seen on the reverses of the Alexandrian series. Our first example (Fig. 1) depicts Isis and Sarapis portrayed separately on two different coins. Sarapis, bearded and wearing a modius, is on a dated coin issued in the third year of the reign of Elagabalus. The god himself is a Greco-Egyptian creation of the Ptolemies. His name is a Greek form of the Egyptian Hesar-Hapi, which is itself a combination of Osiris and Apis.⁶ The statue of Sarapis was placed in the Sarapeum in the Rhacotis district of Alexandria. There it remained until the destruction of that temple in AD 392 under the orders of the Christian emperor Theodosius. It was either done by the sculptor Bryaxis or brought to Alexandria from another Greek city.⁷ Probably Sinope on the Euxine. The statue was originally one

5. Parker, p. 135.

6. Poole, Reginald Stuart, *Catalogue of the Coins of Alexandria and the Nomes in the British Museum* (Bologna, 1964), intro., p. LX.

7. *BMC Catalogue*, intro., p. LXi.

of Hades, as can be seen from the god's portrayal on coins seated in the Sarapeum with the hound Kerberos at his feet.⁸ He was readily assimilated to Zeus and Helios. As Osiris he was the sun of the underworld, and, after his resurrection, the triumphant god of life and light. He was also known as the Zeus of Alexandria, and, on inscriptions, he is alternately Zeus-Sarapis, Helios-Sarapis, and Zeus-Helios-Sarapis.⁹

Isis, here depicted with her characteristic headdress of horns and (lunar) disc, was the consort of Sarapis. As the great nature goddess of Egypt she took on aspects of other divinities and vice-versa. For example, the Tyche of the city and Euthenia the wife of Nile are often portrayed with her headdress or knot.¹⁰ The second century author Apuleius describes her as the universal goddess in whom all other goddesses find their being.¹¹ Plutarch conceives of her as a symbolic allegory of the Platonic female principle of nature which receives all corporeal and spiritual forms.¹²

Isis and Sarapis were also portrayed as a couple on the Alexandrian series, as were Helios and Selene, the moon goddess. Isis has a lunar aspect which contrasts with the solar aspect of Sarapis.¹³ (Fig. 2; both these coins are of Elagabalus, yr. 5, AD 221-2). The figures of Nile and Zeus-Ammon were also connected with Sarapis. Important to note here is the cornucopia of Nile. He also wears a papyrus or lotus headdress. Zeus-Ammon, a combination of Greek Zeus and Libyan Ammon — whose oracle was visited by Alexander the Great — is seen bearded, with horns and disc headdress, and with ram's horn. The ram was sacred to him. (Fig. 3; Nile, Elagabalus yr. 3, AD 219-20; Zeus-Ammon, Elagabalus, yr. 5, AD 221-2).

Finally, the pantheistic issues of Philip I visibly demonstrate the synthesis of all these types into one divinity (Fig. 4; both yr. 4, AD 246-7). The god is bearded with a headdress consisting of a modius and bull-horns of Osiris or Zeus-Ammon. He has the ram's horn of Zeus-Ammon, and behind him to his right the trident of Poseidon, around which is wound the serpent of Asklepios. Solar rays emanate from the back of his head, and to his right is the cornucopia of Nile. Thus we have Sarapis Osiris Zeus Ammon

8. *BMC Catalogue*, intro., p. LXi.

9. *BMC Catalogue*, intro., p. LXii.

10. *BMC Catalogue*, intro., p. LXiii.

11. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* II 5.

12. Plutarch, *de Iside et Osiride*, 372E.

13. Sarapis is commonly portrayed with radiate crown and the inscription ZEUS HELIOS SARAPIS; cf. Bar, p. 66.

Helios Poseidon Asklepios Nilus. It has been argued, however, that the cornucopia is of Pluto rather than Nile.¹⁴ Part of the evidence is the association of the statue of Sarapis with Hades, which has already been discussed. In addition, the emperor Julian in his *Hymn to King Helios* says that "Zeus, Hades, Helios Sarapis are one."¹⁵ In his Neoplatonic interpretation Sarapis is also called Hades because he represents the unseen (i.e., A-ides) intellectual realm, where, according to Plato, just souls ascend after having lived a righteous life.¹⁶ Consequently, the cornucopia may be that of Pluto-Hades rather than Nile. On the other hand, the people who used the series were conditioned to associate the cornucopia with the figure of Nile. It would also be natural for those who issued the series to do the same. Thus, although it is difficult to reach a definite conclusion on this point,¹⁷ it is perhaps more likely that the cornucopia belongs to Nile.

The Alexandrian coins, then, are useful in demonstrating the principles of Greco-Roman syncretism. It must be pointed out, however, that all of these types were not first issued during the Severan dynasty. For instance, the pantheistic type goes back at least to the time of Hadrian, and the ANS collection contains a large bronze example of the same from the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96). On the other hand, it is worthy of consideration that the pantheistic issue was so popular in the reign of Philip I — there are several examples in the ANS and the standard catalogues — just before the millennial birthday of Rome. For at this time, a fully developed solar monotheism was already dominating the pagan philosophical and religious scene.

II. *The Coins of Elagabalus and those associated with him.*

The coinage of the emperor Elagabalus provides us with clues to specific contemporary religious changes. Elagabalus or Heliogabalus reigned from early spring AD 218 to late spring AD 222. When Caracalla was killed and Macrinus assumed the imperial power, Julia Domna died at Antioch.¹⁸ Julia Maesa, her sister, was permitted to return to her native city of Emesa in Syria. There her fifteen year old grandson was the head priest of the local Baal, who was believed to be the sun-god. This priesthood was

14. Bar, p. 66, n. 10.

15. Julian, *Hymn to King Helios*, 136A.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Bar, p. 67.

18. Parker, p. 99.

hereditary in the family of the Julias.¹⁹ His original name was Bassianus or Avitus, depending upon which source one believes.²⁰ Following Eastern priestly tradition he took the name of his god when he became emperor. His accession was achieved with the aid of a scheme contrived by Julia Maesa, who spread rumors that he was the natural son of Caracalla.²¹ Many troops who had been loyal to the Severan dynasty enlisted in his cause. Thus he was able to defeat the usurper Macrinus at Antioch. He then promised the legion III Gallica a large donative so that the troops proclaimed him emperor on May 16, AD 218.²² Cassius Dio records that certain oracles and the god himself helped to persuade the devout soldiers to accept his priest as the new Augustus.²³

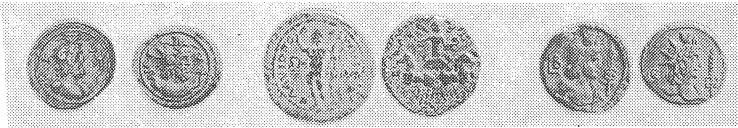


FIG. 4

FIG. 5

FIG. 6

Needless to say, during his principate solar worship became extremely popular throughout the Empire. This is reflected on his Roman coinage as well as on the colonial coinages. On the Syrian imperials the sun-god Helios is depicted standing, with radiate crown, and holding a globe in his hand while driving a quadriga. (Fig. 5; Flaviopolis; Leucas, Coele Syria ΔNC=217-18). As his reign proceeded and his devotion to the god increased, interesting religious developments occurred. Striking among these is a new reverse type²⁴ which appears in the series of Alexandrian tetradrams. It is a portrait of Helios-Hermanubis. As Hermes, the god of eloquence, was equated with Thoth, the scribe of the Egyptian gods, so Hermes Psychopompos, the guide of souls to the underworld, was equated with the jackal-headed Anubis, god of embalment.²⁵ The regular Alexandrian series had the god in profile wearing a modius with a lotus petal in front. On his left is a caduceus combined with a palm branch (Fig. 6; yr. 2 Elagabal AD 218-19). The ANS has a coin issued by his third wife, Annia Faustina, in year five of his reign (AD 221-2) which portrays Hermanubis with radiate crown (Fig. 6). Thus Helios-Hermanubis.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Herodian calls him Bassianus, Cassius Dio, Avitus.

21. Parker, p. 99.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Cassius Dio, *History, Epitome*, LXXIX, 31-1.

24. Not in ANS collection, Milne, Dattari, or *BMC Catalogue* before reign of Elagabalus.

25. Cf. *BMC*, Alexandria, intro. LXVIII-iX.

One may ask why this particular god would be associated with the sun. Was it simply because of the general religious direction of the age? Or does it reflect a more specific tradition? Most probably the latter. For, in his *Hymn to King Helios*, the emperor Julian makes a reference to Hermes which connects him to Helios and to the cult of Emesa itself: The people of Emesa, a place sacred to Helios from ancient times, associate two gods with the sun-god in their temple. Their names are Monimos and Azizos. The emperor's most important theological influence, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, interprets the secret meaning of this practice as that Azizos is Ares and Monimos Hermes, the assessors of Helios, who are the Channel for many blessings that descend to earth.²⁶

The Baal of Emesa itself was not a statue image in the Greco-Roman mold, but a large black conical stone, rounded at the base and coming to a point at the top. It had on it markings which the devotees believed to be a picture of the sun. The imperial series of Emesa shows a six pillared temple with steps leading up to an altar on which the stone rests. There is a lunar crescent above on the pediment (Fig. 7; coin of Caracalla AD 216). Herodian's description may be used to fill in some details that are not obvious on the coin: the temple was very large and richly ornamented with gold, silver, and precious stones.²⁷

When Elagabalus became emperor he had the stone brought to Rome, where he built two temples for it. One on the Palatine, the other in a suburb of Rome,²⁸ *ad spem veterem*, near present day Porta Maggiore. Each year at midsummer he put the stone on a quadriga, stood in front of the horses, took the reins, and, looking devotedly at the god, ran backwards all the way to the suburban temple where he deposited the god for the great festival. A bodyguard accompanied him to prevent him from stumbling.²⁹ The driverless triumphal quadriga appears on the Alexandrian coinage of the reign with an eagle on the stone (Fig. 7; Elagabalus, yr. 4 AD 220-21; Fig. 8; Aquilia Severa, yr. 4 AD 220). It also appears on coins of Laodicea in Syria and Aelia Capitolina,³⁰ depicted with a crescent on top of the stone, a star above the crescent, and four parasols around the quadriga (Fig. 8; Elagabalus, Laodicea in Syria or Aelia Capitolina). The same scene is depicted on a silver *denarius* issued from the Antioch mint (Fig. 9;

26. Julian, 150C-D.

27. Herodian, *History* 5.3.4.

28. Herodian, *History* 5.6.6.

29. Herodian, 5.6.7.

30. This coin is found in ANS collection under Laodicea, but there is disagreement as to its origin, which may be Aelia.

AD 220-21).³¹ The obverse shows the emperor with laureate head, draped, and the inscription ANTONINUS PIUS FEL. AUG. On the reverse is the quadriga surrounded by four parasols and with an eagle on the stone. The inscription around the edge reads SANCTO DEO SOLI ELAGABAL.



FIG. 7

FIG. 8

FIG. 9

As priest of the god, Elagabalus continued to indulge in wild rites during 218 while still in the East. He wore a long chiton of purple and gold and a crown of jewels.³² He was considered to be comparable in beauty to images of the god Dionysus. Before he went to Rome Julia Maesa suggested to him that an emperor who had promised the Senate to rule in the tradition of Augustus might think of changing clothes before entering the city.³³ Her attempt at persuasion failed. Instead he had a huge picture of himself sent to Rome, in which he was depicted in his robes sacrificing to his god.³⁴ He ordered the picture to be placed above the statue of victory in the *curia*,³⁵ and, that his name should be invoked before all others by the officiating priests.³⁶ The cult objects of all the gods were also to be transferred to Elagabalus, who was to be worshipped above all others.^{36a}

When he entered Rome in spring of 219 the populace, prepared by the picture, was not surprised to see him in his priestly garments. Dio reports that because he was seen in public in the barbaric dress of Syrian priests he was given the nickname "the Assyrian."³⁷ Dio also calls him Pseudantoninus and Sardanapalus.³⁸ On a silver *denarius* minted at Rome he presents himself as priest of the sun in somewhat modified form (Fig. 9). On the obverse he is seen with his priestly horn and the inscription IMP ANTONINUS PIUS AUG. On the reverse he is veiled,

31. Cf. H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum, Vol. V, Pertinax to Elagabalus* (London, 1950), no. 284.

32. Herodian, 5.6; 5.7.

33. Herodian, 5.5.5.

34. Herodian, 5.5.6.

35. Herodian, 5.5.7.

36. *Ibid.*

36a. *Scriptores Historiae Aug.*, 3.4.

37. Dio, *Epitome*, LXXX.1-1-2.

38. *Ibid. et passim.*

draped, and sacrificing over an altar. The inscription reads SACERD DEI SOLIS ELAGAB.³⁹ This title was to take precedence over all imperial titles.

Not to be turned away from his single-minded devotion, Elagabalus outraged the senatorial class by continually flaunting Roman tradition in every possible way. All of his tyrannical acts, immoralities, and debaucheries were viewed by himself as expressions of his devotion to the god of whom he was the high priest and representative on earth.

Dio, the representative of senatorial opinion, tells us that he himself was willing to pass over many of the emperor's most horrible excesses: barbaric chants, secret sacrifices for which youths were slain, magic charms and amulets, shutting up alive in the temple a monkey, a lion, and a snake, and throwing among them human genitals — and other unholy rites. But he could not ignore his most ridiculous scandal: the wedding of the god Elagabalus to the Carthaginian goddess Urania, as if the god had need of marriage and children.⁴⁰ At any rate, after rejecting the image of Pallas Athena taken from the Vestals as too warlike for marriage, the emperor sent for Urania and established her on the Palatine.⁴¹ He himself married the Vestal Virgin Aquilia Severa, apologizing to the Senate, but saying that it was fitting that a priest should marry a priestess.

Herodian states that the Libyans called this goddess Urania, but the Phoenicians Astroarchè, wanting her to be the moon.⁴¹ Astroarchè is the great Near Eastern nature goddess Astarte, biblical Ashteroth, to whom Solomon was allegedly devoted. She is also a sea goddess and a celestial goddess equated with the moon, who has Venus as her planet. Astarte or Atargatis was sometimes called *dea Syria* and was equated with goddesses such as Magna Mater, Aphrodite, and Venus Caelestis.⁴² Thus the marriage was of the Syrian sun to the Phoenician moon.⁴³ The emperor declared public and private celebrations all over Italy in honor of the *Hieros Gamos*. The goddess had a temple in Tyre which we see (Fig. 10) as having six columns, an arch over the middle with a pellet (baetyl) in the pediment. Within, Astarte is turreted and thus syncretized with Tyche. She is placing her right hand on a trophy and being crowned by Nike. At her feet on the left is Marsyas. Before the temple there is an altar between the

39. Cf. *BMC Catalogue (Rome, V.5)*, no. 225, LXXX.

40. Dio, LXXX.II 1-2.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Herodian, 5.6.4-5.

43. *Ibid.*

murex shell on the right and a palm tree on the left.⁴⁴ Like Elagabalus she also seems to have a liking for stones. Her car is depicted on a bronze of Sidon (Fig. 10) carrying a baetyl stone (perhaps representing sun and crescent). The baetyl might be the fallen star (aeropetès astèr) that the goddess is said to have consecrated in Tyre between lunar "horns of consecration."⁴⁵ The inscription reads *Colonia (Aurelia) Pia Metropolis Sidon*. Sidon was given colonial rights by Elagabalus. "It is supposed that Tyre lost some of its rights, which were transferred to Sidon" early in his reign.⁴⁶ The reason being that the legion III Gallica which had originally supported him, soon became disgusted, and wished to replace him with their commander Verus. They were stationed at Tyre at the time.

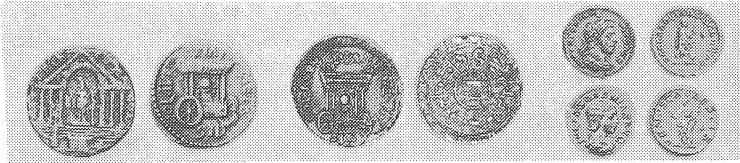


FIG. 10

FIG. 11

FIG. 12

We can see the astral aspect of the goddess on coins which portray her car in the center of the Zodiac (Fig. 11).⁴⁷ Here we see on two colonial issues of Elagabalus the car and its representation in the center of the Zodiac. Each sign is separated by rays with a lunar crescent at left and a star at right.⁴⁸

Julian, in his saner Neoplatonic version of solar theology, has something to say about the goddess: "for Selene is the last of the heavenly spheres which Athene fills with wisdom, and by her aid Selene beholds the intelligible which is higher than the heavens and adorns with forms the realm of matter that is below her."⁴⁹ And again: "I have still a few words to say about Aphrodite, who, as the wise men among the Phoenicians affirm, and as I believe, assists Helios in his creative function. She is, in truth, a synthesis of the heavenly gods, and in their harmony she is the spirit of love and unity."⁵⁰

As Elagabalus presented himself on Roman coins as priest of the

44. Cf. Hill, George Francis, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Phoenicia in the British Museum* (Bologna, 1965), no. 393.

45. Hill, intro., p. cxiii.

46. Hill, intro., p. cxi.

47. Cf. Hill, intro., p. cxiii; Rouvier, Jules, *Numismatique Des Villes De La Phénice* (Athènes, 1900), no. 1527.

48. Rouvier, *Ibid.*

49. Julian, *Hymn to King Helios* 149D-150A.

50. Julian, 150B.

unconquered sun, so his equally fanatical mother was associated with Venus Caelestis on a silver *denarius*. The obverse inscription reads JULIA SOAEMIAS AUG. The reverse depicts Venus draped, standing facing front, holding an apple in her right hand and a vertical sceptre in her left. The inscription reads VENUS CAEL (ESTIS) (Fig. 12).

Stones, as we have seen, had their religious importance in this era as manifestations of the sacred. There is an interesting development with respect to sacred stones in the Tyrian series issued under Elagabalus. I would like to discuss these coins now in a somewhat more speculative spirit.

In his *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus has Herakles relate the foundation legend of Tyre to Dionysus.⁵¹ He describes two floating rocks which *Physis* has named the ambrosial rocks. On one of them grows an olive tree which has an eagle on top of it. There is a fire which does not consume the tree. When the eagle is sacrificed the rocks cease to float and become the foundations of the city of Tyre.

The ambrosial rocks, or baetyls, are very well represented on the coinage of Tyre. Here (Fig. 13) we see two reverses from the reign of Gordian III,⁵² which portray the two baetyls on separate bases. Between them is an olive tree and in exergue the inscription AMBPOCIE PETPE-COL TYR METR. Here again they are portrayed on a coin of Gallienus (Fig. 14) with the hound of Herakles discovering the murex shell, from which Tyrian purple was made. And on a coin of Valerian I, Okeanos is depicted with rocks above him, and water flowing from them. The inscription is COL TYR METR. They are also shown with Herakles-Melkart, who is portrayed naked with club and lion skin, pouring a libation from a *patera*, while water flows from the baetyls (Fig. 15). The coin of Valerian I (to the right) shows the baetyls after having settled down. Hill suggests that this sacrifice might be an allusion to the foundation legend itself.⁵³

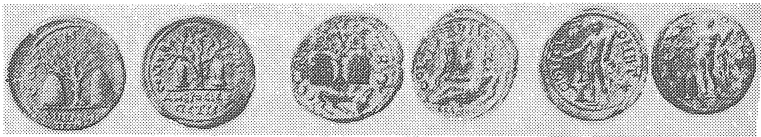


FIG. 13

FIG. 14

FIG. 15

During the reign of Elagabalus a new reverse type appears which continues beyond his reign. On it is depicted a horned snake surrounding an ovoid baetyl. On the right is a murex shell, on the

51. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, xL 465 ff.

52. Cf. Rouvier, no. 2559.

53. Hill, intro., p. cxiii.

left a palm tree. The inscription around reads TVRIORUM (Fig. 16, right side). The ANS has a mirror image of the same coin minted under Gordian III (Fig. 16, left side). No one has yet been able to explain this image, although scholars agree that it is a religious symbol. Hill suggests that it may be one of the baetyls surrounded by the snake of the foundation legend. Or that it might be the *aeropetēs astēr* which was consecrated by Astarte at Tyre.⁵⁴ He also alludes to Pietschmann's comparison of the rocks with the Delphic *Omphalos*, which was sometimes represented encircled by a serpent. Since this reverse type first appears in the reign of Elagabalus, and, since Delphic Apollo had a solar aspect, this might be a clue to the meaning of the symbol. Could it be a solar symbol? Is there any evidence for the snake as a solar symbol in late antiquity? The answer to both questions must be in the affirmative.

Hans Leisegang in his study "The Mystery of the Serpent"⁵⁵ has interpreted the religious iconography and inscription on a bowl of the second or third century A.D.: "The inside of the bowl . . . has at the center a winged snake twined around an egg shaped omphalos At its upper edge this base has radiate spikes and at its lower edge tongues of flame (or an heliac blossom)."⁵⁶ This is certainly a solar symbol. Macrobius, in the solar theology section of his *Saturnalia*, quotes a verse which is an Orphic fragment and part of the inscription on the bowl: "The theologians in general believe that the power of the sun is the summit of all forces, and they prove this in their sacred rites by saying: all powerful Helios, spirit of the cosmos, force of the cosmos." Then comes the Orphic verse which begins: "Hear, thou who turnest forever the radiant sphere of distant motion . . . glittering Zeus, Dionysus, . . . sun, all-engendering, all moving, flaming with gold."⁵⁷ Leisegang equates the serpent of the bowl with the Orphic sun-god born from the cosmic egg, who is also called Herakles and Chronos. The top part became heaven, the lower, earth. A biform serpent god also emerged, known as Phanes, the glittering one.⁵⁸ The Neoplatonist Damascius mentions a similar story, also with the serpent Chronos-Herakles creating the cosmic egg.⁵⁹ According to Orphic

54. *Ibid.*

55. Leisegang, Hans, "The Mystery of the Serpent," *Pagan and Christian Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, Ed. Joseph Campbell (NY, 1955), pp. 3-69.

56. Leisegang, p. 4.

57. Quoted by Leisegang, p. 9.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Quoted by Leisegang, p. 16.

etymology Herakles means the coiling serpent, *dràkon heliktòs*. The solar serpent-god is also known as Aeon, or unending time.⁶⁰ In addition to this, Leisegang points out that "Hellenistic astrology knew of a being which dominated the heavens and encompassed all the spheres: *draco caelestis*, of the Babylonians and Chaldaeans."⁶¹

Agathos Daimon, the good spirit of light was also associated with Helios. And at Alexandria he was associated with Sarapis and portrayed on coins as a snake with the head of Sarapis. The Aion as Helios and Agathodaimon is represented in the religious writings of the period as a great serpent.⁶² Magical papyri call him the great serpent,⁶³ and, Macrobius explains that the sun is represented as a great serpent because of its regenerative power and all-seeing-eye.⁶⁴

Philo of Byblus⁶⁵ says that the snake as fire and pneuma, wind, life, breath, and spirit, make him the beast of Helios. And again, Macrobius⁶⁶ attributes the invention of the Ouroborus symbol to the Phoenicians. Finally, in antiquity there existed magic solar snake rings which were thought to bring success to their owners.⁶⁷

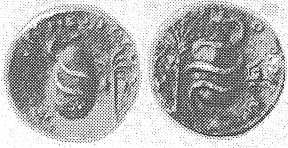


FIG. 16

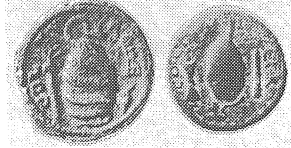


FIG. 17

Do we have here, then, a representation of the solar snake surrounding a Tyrian baetyl as the cosmic egg? Or the baetyl of Astarte as the cosmic egg? Two coins of Gordian III display the same symbolism (Fig. 17). Interesting to note is the portrayal of a conical object with a human figure at the top and the clear depiction of a horn on the serpent's head. The association of the human figure with solar symbolism or solar rites is probable, but it remains problematic. Given the date of the first appearance of this reverse type, the religious atmosphere of the time, and the many contemporary parallels, I believe that solar symbolism provides the key to the interpretation of this coin.

60. Quoted by Leisegang, pp. 19-20.

61. Leisegang, p. 26.

62. Leisegang, p. 29.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.20.3.

65. Quoted by Leisegang, p. 30.

66. Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.9.12.

67. Leisegang, p. 31.

Let us return to Elagabalus himself. Disgusted and insecure because of the excesses of the emperor, Julia Maesa convinced the praetorians to kill him and Julia Soaemias. Severus Alexander became emperor, the conical stone was kicked out of Rome, and a milder but equally universal syncretism held sway. The sun was still the most important god in an empire whose most powerful institution, the army, was devoted to Mithras, the Persian savior-god of light. He is portrayed on a coin of Caracalla, issued at Tarsus in Cilicia, as tauroctonous Mithras, slayer of the cosmic bull (Fig. 18). On another coin from Tarsus, issued under Gordian III, he is depicted with radiate crown as Helios-Mithras (Fig. 19), the center of the intellectual gods in the Neoplatonic interpretation of the emperor Julian.



FIG. 18



FIG. 19

Thus the cult of the Syrian sun-god, which first reached Empire-wide popularity under Elagabalus, was reinforced by the solar associations of other Eastern and Classical divinities. The result of all this was the development of a universal solar monotheism which, stripped of the excesses of Elagabalus, was brought into harmony with Greco-Roman traditions. The third century was a period of chaos for the Roman Empire. It was essential to find a religion which would both satisfy the emotional needs of the people of the Empire and provide a means for the expression of loyalty to state and emperor. In AD 273 Aurelian appointed Senators to fill the offices of *pontifices dei solis*. He built a temple to the sun and established games in his honor.⁶⁸ In



FIG. 20

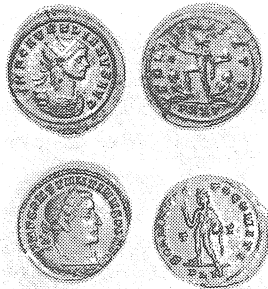


FIG. 21

68. Parker, p. 208.

addition, he became the representative of the divine sun on earth, and had himself depicted on coins in a manner similar to that of Elagabalus (Fig. 20; Fig. 21). On an *antoninianus* from the Ticinum mint, for example, the emperor is portrayed on the obverse with radiate crown and the inscription IMP AURELIANUS AUG. The reverse has the sun-god standing with globe in left hand, chlamys on left arm, whip in right hand, below which is a star, seated captives, and the inscription SOLI INVICTO, to the unconquered sun (Fig. 20, top). So powerful was the solar religion of late antiquity that Constantine, the first Christian emperor, continued to issue coins depicting Sol years after his alleged conversion to Christianity, before the battle of the Milvian bridge, near Rome, in AD 312. Perhaps the reason for this is that Constantine, a devoted solar syncretist, at first thought of Christ as an epiphany of the sun: A god who brought victory to the emperor, and whose cult was deserving of special attention and special privileges. Only later (after 324) did Constantine become a Christian in the accepted sense of the word. However this may be, a typical example of Constantine's solar coinage is a *folles* minted at London in 316-17. The obverse shows the emperor with laureate head and the inscription IMP CONSTANTINUS P F AUG. On the reverse is Sol standing with whip in right hand, globe in left, and chlamys over left shoulder. The inscription around the edge reads SOLI INVICTO COMITI, to the unconquered sun our companion.

An important difference between the solar religion officially established by Aurelian and that of Elagabalus was that under Aurelian Roman tradition was to be respected. The imperial cult and the sun cult were united, so that a secularized state cult was re-valORIZED under the influence of the mysteries and Greek philosophy. It was in this form that paganism made its last stand against Christianity, in the fourth century.

In his *Saturnalia* Macrobius has the pious Vettius Agorius Praetextatus deliver a disquisition on solar theology. This Senator, mystagogue, and friend of the emperor Julian sums up the pagan position in the phrase *omnes dii ad solem referrunt*, all the gods are connected with the sun. And this in an antiquarian work which placed the highest value on ancient Roman traditions. For the later pagans, who attempted to maintain old traditions in a rapidly changing world, antiquarian classicism and solar religions were compatible. Their historical sense was different from ours.