

### **Thus spoke Elagabal: divine arrangements and dynastic intrigues at the court of Elagabalus**

It is well-known that in his *History* Cassius Dio gave considerable space to divine portents. These would often disclose the destiny of future emperors, but, in some cases, it was the emperors who made use of predictions to legitimate their actions. As regards this latter group, two prophecies of the god Elagabal seem particularly worth investigating, for they foretold two crucial moments of the reign of the emperor Elagabalus, namely his rise to power in 218 and, in 221, his decision to adopt his cousin Severus Alexander and to bestow the title of Caesar upon him. It seems to me that both these interventions of the god Elagabal could have had a precise origin, being particularly useful to hide the machinations of Elagabalus' mother and grandmother, Julia Soaemias and Julia Maesa, whose role of emperor-makers is not particularly evident in the account of Dio as it is, on the other hand, in that of Herodian. Starting from the examination of the contexts in which the prophecies of the god Elgabal took place, I would like to try to offer an explanation about why Dio decided to give them a certain relevance in his *History*. I will first analyse the circumstances that led Elagabalus to sit on the imperial throne. Then I will compare them to what happened when he decided to adopt his cousin, as it seems to me that significant analogies can be drawn between these two events.

According to Dio, after the assassination of Caracalla and the death of Julia Domna, Macrinus had forced Julia Maesa and her daughters to leave the imperial court and retire to their hometown, Emesa. Here, some unspecified omens and a prophecy of the god Elagabal persuaded a freedman of Maesa, Eutychianus, to take the young Varius Avitus Bassianus to the camp of the legion III Gallica, which was stationed not far from the city. The soldiers, who had been looking for a pretext to revolt against Macrinus, proclaimed the boy as emperor. Dio also stresses that Eutychianus could count on the help of some other freedmen, soldiers and decurions of Emesa. Both Maesa and Soaemias were, however, completely unaware of what was happening. This last point is contradicted by Herodian, according to whom it was Maesa who devised the entire plan in the hope of bringing the Severan dynasty back to power. Herodian reports that she spread word that Avitus was the illegitimate son of Caracalla and accompanied the young boy to the camp thanks to the help of some soldiers who were also her clients. It is difficult to understand from which sources Dio and Herodian obtained their information. Absolutely nothing can be said about Herodian, who never cites his sources and remains a figure almost totally

obscure to us. On the other hand, I think that a reconstruction might be attempted in the case of Dio. We know, in fact, that Dio was in Asia Minor when the events mentioned above took place. Macrinus had entrusted him with the curatorship of the cities of Pergamum and Smyrna, and he was still in Asia when the emperor Elagabalus wintered in Nicomedia between 218 and 219. Soon after Elagabalus was proclaimed emperor, our historian reports that a propaganda war broke out between Macrinus and the young pretender to the throne. Both parties sent letters “to the provinces and the legions” (ἐς τὰ στρατόπεδα καὶ ἐς τὰ ἔθνη) containing, as it is easy to presume, different versions of the facts. It seems therefore probable that Dio is reporting details taken from these letters, which he certainly knew on account of his position as imperial official. Dio says that Macrinus also sent a letter about “the rebellion of the false Antoninus” to the senators in the aftermath of Elagabalus’ acclamation. Elagabalus, his cousin Alexianus, their respective mothers (Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea) and their grandmother (Julia Maesa) were consequently declared public enemies. Considering that in doing so the senate must have followed the instructions of Macrinus, it seems logical to deduce that Macrinus was well aware of the involvement of the Syrian women around Elagabalus in the plot to overthrow him. Thus, what is reported by Dio sounds like an implicit confirmation of Herodian’s words regarding the active role of Maesa in planning the overthrowing of Macrinus. Dio’s statement that neither Maesa nor Soaemias were aware of the initiative of Euthychianus cannot be attributed, of course, to the letters of Macrinus. It should be rather interpreted as a piece of information taken from the letters of Elagabalus, who tried to conceal the role of Maesa by crediting the god Elagabal and the freedman Euthychianus as the authors of the coup. The reason behind the use of this stratagem is to be found, I think, in Julia Domna’s failed attempt to stir up a military revolt against Macrinus after the latter had assassinated her son Caracalla. This event is narrated by Dio, but the passage is unfortunately riddled with lacunae. Nevertheless, from what is left one can infer that Domna directly appealed to the soldiers without any male mediators. The fact that soldiers were reluctant to riot under the leadership of a woman is probably the cause of the failure of her plan, as Dio’s bitter remarks about her alleged desire of ruling alone in a manner similar to mythical oriental queens seem to indicate. Aware of this, Maesa likely put every effort into hiding her leadership by having Elagabalus declaring her non-involvement in the letters sent to “the legions and the provinces”. Crediting the god Elagabal with the authorship of the plan had moreover the advantage of winning over the numerous soldiers who, according to Herodian,

would often attend the ceremonies in honour of the god performed in the temple of Emesa. A question, however, remains: if Maesa's active involvement in the coup was quite clear to the members of the senatorial elite, why did Dio decide to report the version advertised by the propaganda of Elagabalus? A possible explanation might be recognized in the narrative technique of Dio. Before narrating how the revolt against Macrinus took place, our historian lingered, as usual, over a series of prodigies that would foreshadow new epochal events, such as a solar eclipse and the appearance of a comet. A reference to a prophecy of Elagabal and other divine omens would harmonize well with such events.

A connection between a prophecy of Elagabal and a portent that attracted Dio's attention appears in another point of his narration, namely on the occasion of Elagabalus' adoption of his cousin Alexianus, who became Caesar with the name of Severus Alexander. According to Dio, the emperor, escorted by Maesa and Soaemias, brought his cousin to the senate, and there he affirmed that Elagabal had ordered him to adopt Alexianus and to call him Alexander. Dio shows some skepticism towards this justification, but then he declares himself absolutely persuaded that this happened "because of some divine arrangement" (ἐκ θείας τινὸς παρασκευῆς), for a supernatural event that occurred between Europe and Asia Minor confirmed this. According to what Dio himself had learned when still in Asia Minor, a spirit resembling Alexander the Great had appeared in the area around the Black Sea and then vanished near the city of Calcedony just a little before the adoption of Severus Alexander became official. In Herodian's version, on the other hand, neither the prophecy of Elagabal nor the appearance of the spirit of Alexander the Great are mentioned. According to Herodian, it was once again Maesa who took the initiative. Elagabalus' grandmother was, in fact, worried about the excesses of her grandson, whose popularity among the soldiers was decreasing alarmingly. Fearing that she would have been reduced to a private station if Elagabalus had been killed, she managed to persuade him to adopt his cousin and promote him to the rank of Caesar in order to improve the image of the regime. Elagabalus then proceeded to the senate and asked the senators to confirm the adoption of Alexianus. Dio's account concerning this period does not report anything of this sort. One must admit, in truth, that this survives only through the abridgement of Xiphilinus, who switches from Elagabalus' growing unpopularity to his appearance in the senate with Maesa and Soaemias. However, considering that Dio himself affirms a belief in a divine arrangement behind the

promotion of Severus Alexander, it seems unlikely that he mentioned the intervention of Maesa in a lost section of his work.

All in all, I think that it is possible to draw at least two conclusions from the reading of Dio's passages concerning Elagabalus' rise to power and his decision to adopt and promote Severus Alexander. The first is that prophecies of the god Elagabal and other oracles were indeed used to disguise the initiatives of Julia Maesa and make them more acceptable to her contemporaries who would not have tolerated seeing an imperial woman openly orchestrating the deposing of emperors and the creation of new ones. If, on the one hand, some uncertainties may arise regarding the origin of the story of Eutychianus being persuaded to act by the god Elagabal, on the other hand I am certain that Dio is reporting genuine information regarding what Elagabalus said in the senate. For everything must have been registered in the *acta senatus*, which, as demonstrated by a recent study by Cesare Letta, Dio used abundantly to write his account of the reign of Elagabalus. The second conclusion is that, unlike Herodian, when describing both events Dio prefers the official explanations provided by the regime to a reality which should have been quite obvious to many of his contemporaries. The constant presence of the Syrian women around the young Elagabalus is, after all, sufficiently evident not only in the account of Herodian, but also in that of Dio, as the above-mentioned presence of Maesa and Soaemias in the senate at the side of the emperor well illustrates. As I have already noted, a possible reason for Dio's narrative choices might be his inclination to place particular emphasis upon prophecies and extraordinary events. The passage in which he affirms a belief in the miracle of the spirit of Alexander the Great sounds like a confirmation of this attitude. Yet a further explanation, in my view, might be added to this reconstruction. Our historian certainly had good reasons to place Severus Alexander's advent to power in a favourable light. More or less at this time the young Caesar and his mother Julia Mamaea gave a fresh impulse to Dio's career, which had been stagnating since the reign of Septimius Severus. After the end of the curatorship in Asia Minor and a period of convalescence following some complications with his feet, Dio was sent directly to Africa, presumably as legate of the legion III Augusta. Then he returned to Rome, but after a brief period in the capital, during which he was probably appointed consul suffectus, he was entrusted with the governorship of Dalmatia. From there he was sent to govern Pannonia Superior by the time Severus Alexander had become sole ruler. Finally, together with the emperor, he was appointed consul ordinarius for the year 229 as a recognition of the exceptional benevolence he

was enjoying at court. It seems therefore evident that, as a protégé of Severus Alexander, Dio had every reason to depict the latter as a real emperor rather than a puppet in the hands of Maesa and Mamaea. Attributing his promotion to Caesar to a divine intervention rather than to the machinations of Maesa could have consequently had the effect of putting Dio's career in a better light. More in general, I think this is the reason that led Dio to gloss over the role of Maesa as "emperor-maker" of both Elagabalus and Severus Alexander. From the point of view of our historian, it was much more convenient to present Elagabalus' reign with its extravagances and indecency as a sort of accident of history, which a series of inauspicious phenomena had duly forewarned. Positive omens had, on the other hand, announced the rise of Severus Alexander, under whom Dio and other members of the elite had tried to bring the imperial power back on track. Leaving the scheming Julia Maesa in the shadow could only corroborate this picture. It is necessary to admit, in truth, that the Syrian women are not completely omitted from Dio's account, appearing here and there during the reign of Elagabalus. During the final confrontation between the troops of Elagabalus and Macrinus, Maesa and Soaemias leaped down from their chariots and restrained the soldiers from abandoning the fight with their lamentations. They would sing "barbaric chants" to the god Elagabal when in Rome. Furthermore, Maesa tried to discourage Elagabalus from bestowing honours upon the charioteer Hierocles, one of his favourites, and, together with Mamaea, she protected Severus Alexander from Elagabalus' attempts to murder him. Finally, Soaemias is said to have been the virtual wife of Gannys, a freedman of Maesa who was supposed to mentor the young Elagabalus and to check him from indulging in behaviours that were regarded as immoral. One may nevertheless note that these are all incidental episodes. On the one hand, they indeed suggest that the Syrian Augustae were much more than passive spectators of the events. Yet, on the other hand, they are not fundamental episodes as in the account of Herodian, and they were evidently meant to increase the emphasis upon the wickedness and debauchery of Elagabalus. The juiciest part, namely Maesa's role as "emperor-maker" seems to have been consciously omitted from Dio's narration.