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CHAPTER I

Exposition

RADICAL AND BASIC QUESTIONS

The Roman emperor commonly, but wrongly, called *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus* is considered, by most ancient and modern historiographers, one of the worst of his kind. Ancient writers show him as a specimen of beauty, cruelty, depravity, fanaticism, folly, insolence, pacifism, phallocracy, talent, venality, wastefulness and wit. Modern academic writers portray him as a threat to established belief, order and morality. Perhaps for these very reasons, modern writers of avowedly creative literature, including drama, and artificers of dance, music, opera, painting and sculpture, find him fascinating. They see in him a crowned anarchist, hero of hedonism, saint and martyr of the sexual revolution.

His ancient detractors accuse him, among much else, of: breaches of protocol and precedent; importing a solar cult to Rome, seeking to impose it as an exclusive monotheism; murdering prominent men and comely boys; throwing human genitals to beasts; polymorphous sexual perversity, active and passive, mutual and collective, with males and females; refusal to wage war; dancing; driving a chariot; wearing make-up and silk; wedding the sun god, whose high priest he was, to the moon goddess; building palaces to use but once and destroy; holding dinners for ten bald, fat, or ruptured men; holding conventions for prostitutes of either gender; collecting tons of spider webs, or jarsful of flies; appointing officers of state on the basis of phallic size; selling state appointments; spending more than any previous emperor on banquets and shows for the populace; serving his toadies with glass replicas of food, and, when bored with his guests, smothering them beneath an avalanche of flowers. He has no recorded ancient admirers.

His modern detractors accuse him, among other things, of: imposing Oriental despotism on the Roman empire, thus spoiling their ideal state; bringing Semitic religion and culture to Rome, thereby polluting its purity; persecuting Christians; setting a shocking example for princes.

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His modern admirers credit him, among other things, with: exposing the Roman elite's hypocrisy; achieving ecstasy through orgiastic dancing to his god, with the help of psychotropic herbs and wine; disdaining squeamishness; espousing instinctual liberation; giving and receiving pleasure in synergy with others; being an early flower child; practising an early form of affirmative action; refusing to be bound by the straitjacket of reason; knowing how to make the most of his assets; not being a skinflint; knowing how to provoke, and enjoy, a good laugh.

The battle lines are drawn between his detractors and admirers: proponents of one world view, or of another, diametrically opposed. Hero to some, he is villain to others. Attracted by the strife, on to this field, between its serried ranks, steps a scholar, seeking merely to study him.

Seeking to define the object of his study, the first question this scholar asks is whether it is a character of fact, or a creature of fiction. The reason he does so is that his suspicions have been aroused in this regard. This is so, not only with respect to modern works of creative literature and art about *Heliogabalus*, where fiction may thrive, but also to historiography, ancient and modern, about *Elagabalus*, where, in his opinion, it should not.

Reading ancient historiography about this emperor, one is struck by the irate invective of some texts, the facile credulity of others and the inventive hyperbole of most. Reading modern historiography about him, one notes its failure, with a single exception, seriously to challenge ancient allegations about him, on grounds of objectivity, consistency, or verisimilitude, let alone to subject them to verification, with reference to evidence. Therefore the question arises whether this emperor, or rather, someone called *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus*, is a character of fact, or a creature of fiction.

This book addresses that question. Its answer suggests how, if at all, this emperor may be studied. If character of fact, he may become an object of enquiry, and so known to history. If creature of fiction, he may become an object of the history of historiography, literature and art, and of the psychology and anthropology of myth or legend. If he belongs to myth or legend, he may, though fiction, be believed in, rather than known as fact.

As it happens, he is both, but one is commonly mistaken for the other. Most of what is thought, said and written about this individual is vitiated by a category mistake, confusing knowledge with belief, fact with fiction and vice-versa. Belief is treated as knowledge, fiction as fact. As a consequence of this confusion, neither is properly defined or studied.

This confusion, and its consequence, do not result merely from carelessness. They flow directly from an assumption: that the narratives of ancient historiography are to be considered true, unless proven otherwise.

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This may be termed the credulous assumption. By virtue of the credulous assumption, it is up to the modern historian of antiquity who doubts the veracity of any given ancient account, say, of this emperor, to disprove it. Otherwise it stands as fact. The credulous assumption is held implicitly, but left unacknowledged, by most modern writers on this emperor. I have defined it here explicitly, because it is precisely what this book attacks.

The credulous assumption is easily discredited in principle, simply by exposing contradictions among different ancient accounts of the same thing. They cannot all be true. Moreover, it contravenes modern historical and legal practice. One does not assume that historiographic or other allegations about modern individuals are true, unless proven otherwise. So why should one do so with respect to such allegations about ancient individuals?

Yet despite these obvious objections, the credulous assumption is held, albeit unacknowledged, by most modern writers on this emperor, whether academics, or their more avowedly creative counterparts. What some may allow among artists and creative writers, I do not excuse among academics.

Accordingly, this book is based on the contrary assumption. It may be called sceptical. No allegation of ancient historiography about this emperor is here considered true unless proven. This sceptical assumption agrees not only with modern historiographic and legal practice, but with common sense. It puts the onus of proof on the proponent of an allegation; not that of disproof on the historian who doubts its veracity. For one does not believe all that one is told, without enquiring into one's source's aims and motives. One does not state, as fact, what cannot be proven to be true. One demands evidence. This, of course, raises the question of what constitutes evidence.

This book addresses that question, and all others relevant here, in the light of the sceptical assumption. Given the widespread confusion between knowledge and belief, fact and fiction, about this emperor, one cannot properly approach his study without confronting and dispelling that confusion. This means separating fact from fiction, knowledge from belief.

So, in this book, I discuss the problematic surrounding study of the emperor *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus*, and show why, by either name, he is largely fictional. I ask how fiction concerning him arose, and what fact, under what name, may rightly take its place. Thus I distinguish the character of fact from the creature of fiction, and so reclaim study of the character of fact for history. Elsewhere, I may study the creature of fiction.[1]

[1] In *The Emperor Heliogabalus: Myth or Legend?* yet to be published.

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To do either, I must first define the terms, including fact and fiction, knowledge and belief, evidence and allegation, in which I shall study both. These terms have never yet been systematically and thoroughly applied to this emperor's study. One lone excellent work questions what is commonly thought about him, regarding one key aspect of his life. Others, with varying degrees of rigour, examine texts or artefacts, relating to diverse aspects of his reign. But no previous study subjects his whole life and reign to rigorous enquiry, distinguishing fact from fiction, so establishing, for his case, the difference between knowledge and belief, evidence and allegation.

In order to do all this, one must not only define one's terms. Having defined fact and fiction, knowledge and belief, and related terms, in the context of study of this emperor, one must test one's definitions in practice. In so doing, one ends up proposing a theory of knowledge, or epistemology, and developing a method of enquiry, or methodology. And, as a result, so one is told, the theory of knowledge and method of enquiry here proposed and developed may have wider application to other historical subjects.

In view of that potential wider application, study of this emperor, fascinating in itself to some, becomes potentially interesting, as a case study, to all those interested in ancient history, or in history as such. For the questions this study asks about this emperor are those that should always be asked about any historical subject. They may be stated as: *What do we know?* – about it, him or her – and: *How do we know it?*

These are the two radical questions of history, of whichever period, with whatever focus. They should be asked, but are not always, about: persons or things; actions or passions; circumstances or events, ancient or modern. So, study of this emperor involves considering the theory and practice of history, specifically of ancient history. Therefore, this book aims to do so.

This book belongs to a group of studies called *Studia Variana*, so called because *Varius* is this emperor's original name. He reigned under the usurped style of *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*. He was simultaneously high priest of the Syrian sun god Elagabal or Elaiagabal, hence his misnomers: *Elagabalus* derives from Elagabal, *Heliogabalus* from Elaiagabal. Today, most academics call him *Elagabalus*; most avowedly creative writers and artists, *Heliogabalus*. Both are malapropisms. Full discussion of his nomenclature is found in one of *Studia*, and is revisited in this book.

Studia Variana are published in print and on the Internet. This book refers to them often. Details are provided in the *List of abbreviations.*

Studia are divided into: *Historica*, studying the character of fact; *Mythologica*, that of fiction. *Historica* are subdivided into: *Documenta*, a series of

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catalogues raisonnés of materials, historiography and artefacts, with interpretative commentary; *Quaestiones*, a series of arguments, asking and answering questions about Varius' life and reign.

Quaestiones ask six basic questions, arising out of the first of the radical two: *What do we know about Varius?* becomes: *Who was Varius? What did he do or undergo? When, Where, How*, and (importantly) *Why?*

Scattered throughout *Quaestiones* are answers to questions arising out of the second of the radical two: *How do we know it?* The answers to this question constitute *Studia Variana*'s theory of knowledge and method of enquiry, and so those of this book. Here, they are gathered into a single epistemological and methodological exposition, argued from first principles. Methodology, or method of enquiry, is a section in the main text. Epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is placed in an appendix.

This book is divided into five main parts: *Exposition* sets out its assumptions, problematic and method of enquiry; *Explosion* explodes the creature of fiction; *Constitution* constitutes the character of fact; and *Speculation* speculates about his motives, actions and passions. *Findings in Contexts* places his study in the context of Roman and ancient history, of history as such, and of culture. In addition, illustrations provide images of his coins, of sculpture attributed or related to him, and of relevant archaeological sites. Appendices include *Theory of knowledge*, *Varian propositions*, lists of coins and inscriptions, and a *Varian chronology*.

PROBLEMATIC

This book's problematic is prefigured in Arnaldo Momigliano's essay, *The Place of Ancient Historiography in Modern Historiography*. It concludes:

> The way in which ancient history will be written in the near future will depend on the answer we are going to give to these apparently simple questions: 1) how are we going to proceed where we cannot be guided by the ancient historians? 2) how are we going to evaluate the classical historians if and when they are no longer our guides and we are thereby tempted to reduce them to the rank of ideological evidence for their own time?[2]

Momigliano's near future has arrived, and none too soon. We should never have let ourselves be guided by the ancient historiographers, at least not unquestioningly. For they are not, with few exceptions, historians, as we now understand that term. Therefore I do not call them so. And, to

[2] Momigliano 1984: 32–3.

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avoid confusion, I call modern ancient historians modern historians of antiquity.

A modern historian of modernity writes: 'History is about evidence . . . no evidence, no history.'[3] I go one step further and say: History is about facts . . . no facts, no history. Current historical best practice demands that facts proposed as such be verifiable, with reference to evidence. It also requires the historian, analysing and interpreting facts, to try to be objective and unbiased.[4] This, at least, is its ideal. Few ancient historiographers cite evidence. Fewer still try objectively to analyse, or to interpret without bias.

Awareness of these shortcomings, by classicists and modern historians of antiquity, means that Momigliano's temptation has long since been succumbed to. Ancient historiography is read, by many, not for facts about or understanding of its subjects, but rather to study its authors' ideologies. Concomitantly, ancient history – the pursuit of facts about antiquity, and their objective analysis and unbiased interpretation – is disdained, in favour of hermeneutic exegesis of ancient historiographical discourse.[5]

That is a pity. For while such exegesis is valuable, its value is only fully realised if it contributes to historical enquiry in the fullest sense. By this I mean discovering and interpreting verifiable facts, not only objectively and without bias, but with understanding of their context and meaning in their own time. Is ancient history possible, by this definition, in the fullest sense?

I think so. This book aims to answer Momigliano's first question: how to proceed in writing ancient history where we cannot be guided by the ancient historiographers. In answering the first, it addresses the second. It shows how, despite its shortcomings, one can use ancient historiography in proper historical enquiry into antiquity, while observing rigorous standards.

One can argue such propositions theoretically, discussing theory of knowledge and method of procedure, or practically, by example. I do both. Before discussing theory or method, let me show with an example, alluded to above, why we cannot be guided by ancient historiographers.

Modern historians of antiquity, and more avowedly creative writers, following late antique historiographical texts, call the emperor here studied *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus*. He was indeed, while emperor, high priest of a Syrian sun god, called Elagabal or Elaiagabal. *Elagabalus* and *Heliogabalus* are Latin or Greek forms of these Semitic names. Yet there is no evidence

[3] Vincent 1995: 1. [4] Elton 1967: throughout; especially chapters 1, 2 and 3.
[5] E.g.: Edwards 1993: 11; Sommer 2004: throughout.

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that this emperor, in life, was ever called so. There is, however, that he styled himself *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*; and that his *nomen*, before he became emperor, was *Varius*.[6] Misattribution, by ancient historiographers, of that god's name to his high priest – rather like calling the Pope *Yahweh* or *Jehovah* – is but one of many reasons why we cannot let them guide us.

In the course of this book, I shall identify several proven falsehoods about this emperor, from sundry ancient sources. I shall also identify many more unverifiable allegations. Alongside a few truths, a mass of false and unverifiable statements constitute most ancient historiography about him.

It is certainly not fact, by any definition, least of all that here adopted. Rather, it is fiction, with a little fact. Fact, here, is truth that is known to be so. Fiction, here, is proposing as fact what one does not know to be true. Knowledge, here, can only be such of thoughts or propositions proven true. Belief, here, is assent to propositions one cannot prove true or false.

By that definition, most modern study of this emperor studies mainly fiction, rather than fact, his purely notional avatar, rather than himself.[7] Modern historiographers, credulously following their ancient counterparts' lead, largely uncritically transmit, sometimes with creative addition, the usual ancient mix of unsubstantiated allegation, invective and occasional facts. The antique fiction of Varius' life and reign, embroidered with modern invention, thus becomes a vehicle for self-righteous posturing, and for displays of prurient indignation.[8] An example of addition, in this case by subtraction, is the appearance, in modern Varian historiography, of eunuch courtiers, absent as such from the ancient.[9]

Even ostensibly factual study of archaeological materials from Varius' reign is sometimes tainted by uncritical reference to, and so tacit acceptance of, the fiction woven round him by his ancient historiographers.[10] The examples cited here are discussed in detail in one of *Studia Variana*.[11]

I have noted, at the outset, that opinion of the Varian avatar is split. Some consider him a villain, others a hero. Those Classical and Byzantine writers (save one of the latter)[12] who bother to characterise him at all proclaim his villainy or folly.[13] In Renaissance to Enlightenment political thought, he becomes a byword for tyranny; the worst possible prince.[14]

[6] For evidence and argument establishing the proper Varian nomenclature, see *QV 2*, throughout.
[7] *MWOD*: **avatar**: **3:** a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity.
[8] Matociis 1320: 5–6v; Tillemont 1693: 265–85; Gibbon 1776: 173–82; Schiller 1883: 753–64.
[9] For evidence and argument debunking this modern Varian fiction, see *PECE*, throughout.
[10] Cohen 1860: 510, 1884: 319; Studniczka 1901: 273–82; Bartoli 1958: 13–49.
[11] *TIBV*: 116–24. [12] Sarris 2005: throughout.
[13] See *Ancient Varian Historiography* in *List of abbreviations*.
[14] Macchiavelli, 1532: 19.8; 19.19, Locke 1690: 3.27.6, Chaussard 1802: throughout.

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His use as a vehicle for satire, rather than as an object of invective, begins in the Renaissance.[15] In Baroque opera, he is evil, handsomely, seductively so.[16] In drama (but not in historical fact) he persecutes Christians.[17]

His transformation into hero and martyr – the triumph of fascination over indignation – spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beginning among visual artists and creative writers,[18] followed by historiographers,[19] it culminates with the appearance of a curious work of insane imagination, posing as a product of scholarship, that has done more than any other text to define the Varian avatar's characteristics in the arts and popular culture.[20]

Yet even when opinion of the Varian avatar begins to change, his early academic apologists base his defence, not on debunking old fictions with new facts, but on new interpretations of the same old set of unproven allegations, based on the credulous assumption that ancient historiographers speak true.[21] Even a prestigious Classical encyclopaedia assumes the veracity of ancient historiography, while advocating pity, not censure, for Varius.[22] And, late in the twentieth century, a scholar who critically and sceptically questions the motives behind the best known ancient text about Varius relaxes his standards when ostensibly writing about Varius himself, uncritically following the lead of that very same text.[23]

The basis on which most opinions of Varius, or rather of his avatar, are held, are five ancient texts. *Dio*, *Herodian*, *HA*, *Victor* and *Epitome*.[24] Each alleges diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory propositions about Varius: that he is a eunuch and rapist; a pacifist and murderer; a sacrilegious priest; and much else. Subjected to verification, only one such allegation is proven: that he was a priest; but not that he was sacrilegious.

This is not to say that all such propositions are false, though some seem mutually exclusive. Rather, it is to say that we cannot know that they are true. Only knowing that something is true makes it a fact, as here defined.

Since one cannot know that these allegations are true, they are not facts, by this book's definition. That being so, one should not here uncritically propose interpretations, let alone value judgements, on their basis.

To show, by example, how one may write ancient history without recourse to the 'guidance' of ancient historiography, I shall, in one part

[15] Aretino 1408; Erasmus 1516. [16] Cavalli 1667: throughout. [17] Tysens 1720: throughout.
[18] Solomon 1866; Alma Tadema 1888; Jourdan 1889; George 1892; Couperus 1905.
[19] Hay 1911. [20] Artaud 1934. [21] Hay 1911, throughout. [22] Lambertz 1955: 391–404.
[23] Turcan 1988: 38–52, sceptical about *HA*; 1985, credulous throughout.
[24] See *List of abbreviations* for full documentation of these sources.

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of this book, *Constitution*, seek and find facts about this emperor, without recourse to historiography. But if not there, where shall I seek such facts?

The answer to this provides an answer, itself apparently simple, to the first of Momigliano's apparently simple questions: if one cannot trust ancient historiography for facts, or for objective analysis and unbiased interpretation on their basis, one must look elsewhere, if alternatives exist.

For the Classical world, alternatives exist. Facts can be gleaned from artefacts: coins, inscriptions, papyri, sculpture, paintings, ceramics, tools, mosaics, architecture and engineering works. Gleaning facts from artefacts is not easy, but it can be done, with exegesis, verification and interpretation.

Exegesis tells one what an artefact says, explicitly or implicitly; verification whether this is true or false; interpretation what it means, in an historical context. Combining all three, one can glean facts from artefacts.

Facts that one can, with effort, glean from artefacts are not always interesting in themselves. Their interest often lies in interpreting their meaning in a given context. In this respect, historical enquiry through artefacts is far more challenging than that through ancient historiography.

The reason for this lies in the nature and function of interest. Insofar as history involves not only discovering and interpreting facts, but communicating one's discoveries and interpretations to a readership or audience, it must be made interesting. Otherwise, it will not communicate.

What makes history interesting? Obviously, different things interest different people. But what interests almost everyone is seeing how others fare, in the struggle for requital, advantage and survival that we all face.

This kind of interest is shared by history with fiction, with the difference that in fiction we do not expect the story to be factually true, whereas in history we do. If it is not, we feel cheated. Fiction aims primarily to tell an interesting story, freely inventing to produce that result. History aims to tell the truth, with the additional challenge of making it interesting. Ancient historiography often confuses the two.

Excepting some modern schools that seek to write history without humans, or at least without individuals, especially rulers, most historiography, ancient or modern, focuses on interesting things: human motives and intentions, their execution, outcomes and effects. In so doing, it constructs a narrative, combining information with interpretation. Though its information may be false and its interpretation wrong, narrative is usually interesting, and, for most of us, easier to remember than a list of facts.

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Culture is largely constituted of such narratives – leading to the wish to control narratives, in order to control culture, in order to rule.

This is also why historical enquiry through artefacts poses a greater challenge to the modern historian of antiquity than that through ancient historiography. With historiography, the narrative is already there. One may agree or disagree with it. Yet whether its content be affirmed or denied, its unfolding and discovery engage the audience's attention, and provide a framework, in terms of which to order and interpret information.

Unlike historiography, most artefacts do not provide interpretation. Likewise, with some exceptions, they do not offer narrative. But given enough facts, one can oneself provide interpretation. And if one is a writer, as well as a diligent researcher, one can combine facts and interpretation to fashion narrative, even on the basis of artefacts alone.

This is my apparently simple answer to Momigliano's first apparently simple question. One can write ancient history on the basis of ancient artefacts, rather than on that of ancient historiography. This, after all, is what some archaeologists do, for periods where there is no historiography.[25]

Looked at more closely, however, this answer is not quite so simple. For the artefacts whence one gleans facts, in historical periods, are often propaganda. This is so of all coins, most inscriptions, much sculpture and many other artefacts. This means that so-called 'facts' they render may be partial, selective, tendentious, or even false: not facts at all, but falsehoods.

This is the case with many artefacts issued by the emperor here studied. They claim for him a genealogy which is almost certainly false. Partly through that genealogy, he becomes emperor, so, an issuer of artefacts.

Thus his case is an example, not only of the unreliability of ancient historiography, but of the unreliability of ancient artefacts, at least in one important respect: that of this emperor's identity. If his artefacts lie in this respect, can they be trusted in any other?

One seems caught in a bind. If one can trust neither historiography nor artefacts, is ancient history really possible, after all? Perhaps the students of discourse are right to abandon it.

That is a counsel of despair. Ancient history is indeed possible, within certain bounds. But it must be undertaken in full awareness of the virtues and vices of its sources: ancient historiography and artefacts. For ancient sources do have virtues, as well as vices. Just because they lie, distort or conceal, some of the time, or in some respect, does not mean that they do so always, in all respects. Sometimes, they tell the truth.

[25] E.g.: Renfrew 1973, 1972; Daniel 1958; Childe 1928,1925.

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