

Varian Studies

Volume Two

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Varian Studies Volume Two:

Elagabal

By

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado
and Raúl de la Fuente Marcos

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DEDICATED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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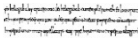
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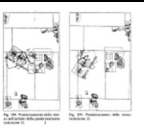
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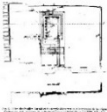
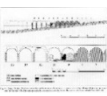
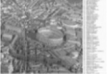
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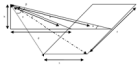
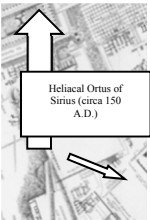
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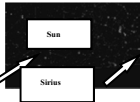
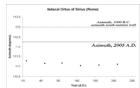
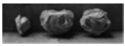
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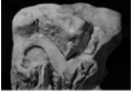
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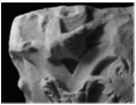
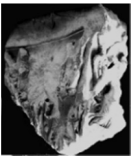
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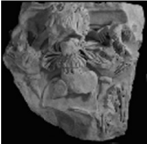
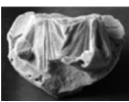
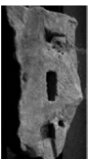
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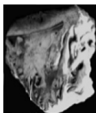
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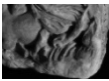
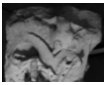
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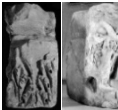
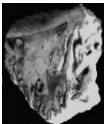
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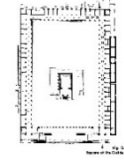
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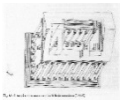
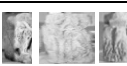
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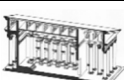
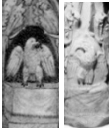
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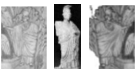
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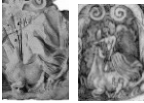
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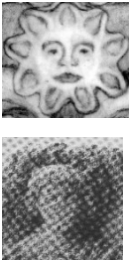
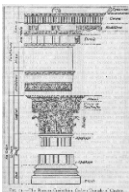
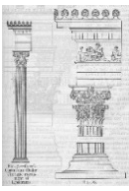
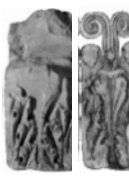
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PREFACE

This second volume of *Varian Studies* is about the Syrian sun god Elagabal's architectural and sculptural legacy in Rome. Elagabal was, and maybe still is, an ovoid black stone, reportedly a meteorite, larger than an eagle standing spread-winged before him. Historiographical tradition identifies this stone with sun worship. The stone is not a representation of the god, such as a statue. It is the god himself, an aniconic cult object.

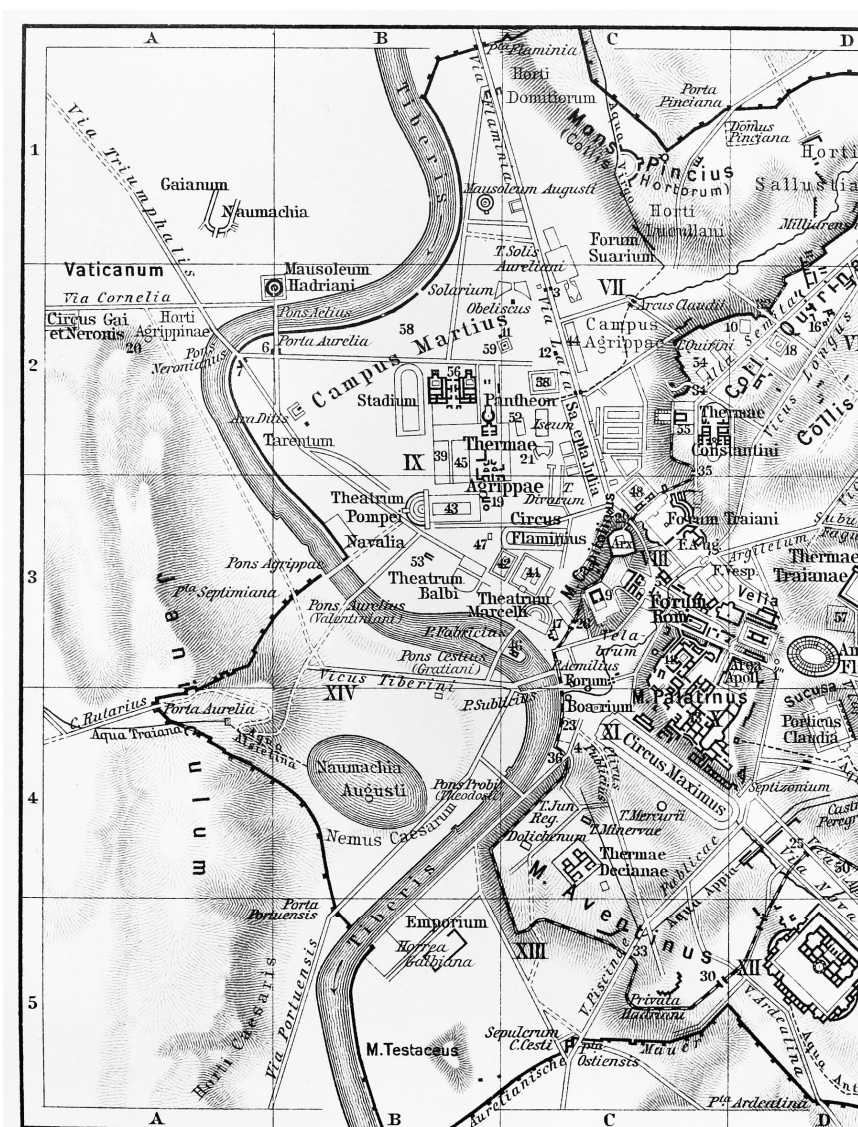
Elagabal was brought to Rome from his Temple of Elagabal at Emesa, Syria, by the Roman emperor reigning in a.u.c. 972 by the Roman calendar, A.D. 219 by the Christian. He was sent back to Emesa by that emperor's successor, after that emperor's murder in 975=222. Both journeys are mentioned by ancient historiography. Moreover, Elagabal is depicted on the coins of the emperor who brought him to Rome, in a cart drawn by four horses: a *quadriga*. After the Islamic conquest of Emesa in Hijri 16, A.D. 637, Elagabal disappears. Since he is probably obsidian, almost as hard as diamond, there is a good chance that he still exists, somewhere.

The emperor who brought Elagabal to Rome ruled fraudulently 971-975=218-222 under the usurped and assumed name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. He appears as Elagabal's High Priest on some of his coins. He is erroneously known to posterity by two variant versions of the name, based on that of his god, of his posthumous legendary or mythical avatar: Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. This avatar has been the object of blame for eighteen centuries, more recently of praise, for actions and passions attributed without proof to the emperor preceding him.

There is no evidence that the priest-emperor generating the avatar ever bore either form of his god's name during his lifetime. His original name, before becoming emperor under false pretences, was Varius. That is why this series of books, dedicated to discerning fact from fiction about Varius, his god, and his avatar, is called *Varian Studies*.

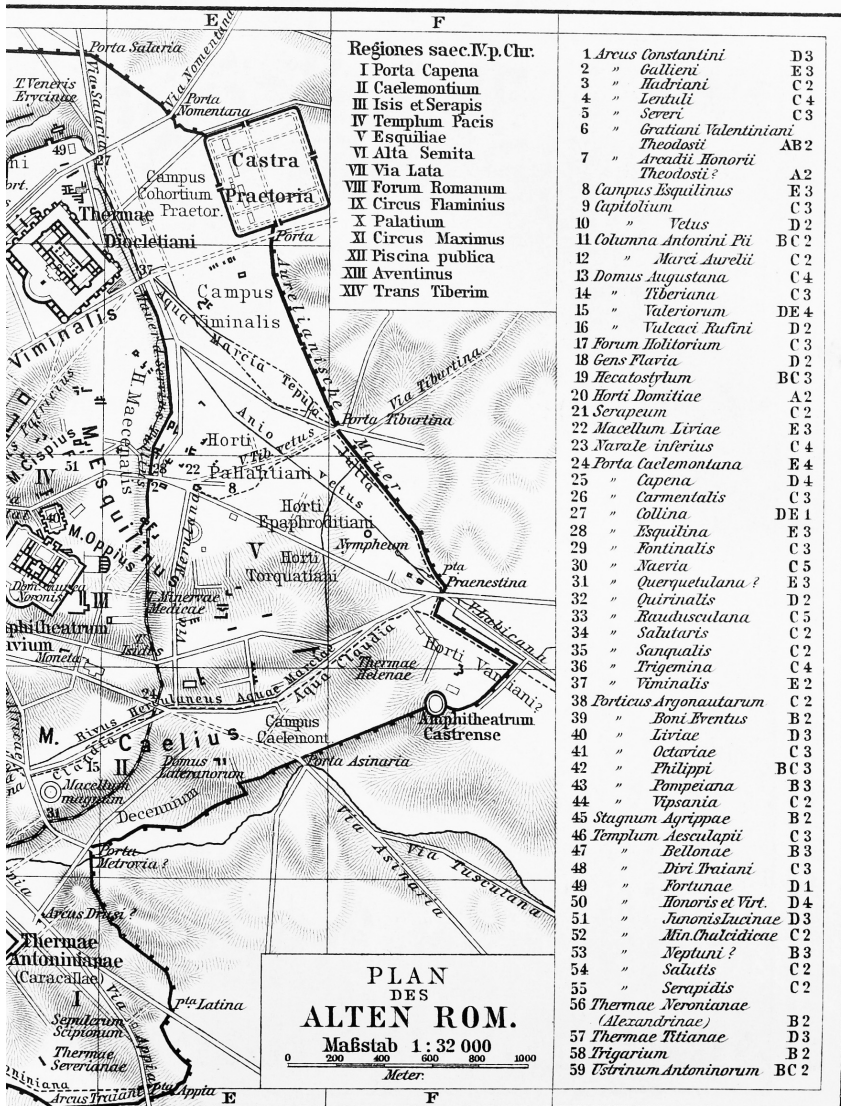
We are told by ancient historiography that during Elagabal's brief stay in Rome, a Palatine temple was dedicated to him by Varius. Here it is called the *Varian Temple of Elagabal in Rome (VTER)*.

This is to distinguish it from a *Transtiberine temple* where, as we know from archaeology, Elagabal was worshipped alongside other Syrian deities before Varius' reign. That temple is here called the *Syrian Temple in Trastevere (STT)*. STT is the subject of study by others, cited here.



Plan of ancient Rome¹ Trastevere: A/B x 3/4; Area Apollinis D3 southwest corner

¹ <https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photo-vintage-map-ancient-rome-image>
23262720



Roman Forum: C3; Horti Variani: F3/4.

There is also mention of a possible third temple to Elagabal in Rome: one at the *Horti Variani*, near the Porta Praenestina, where Varius allegedly had a palace including a racetrack, the *Circus Varianus*. We are told by ancient historiography that during Varius' reign Elagabal was ceremonially paraded in a *quadriga* between two temples: one on the Palatine, another in the suburbs. It is debated whether the putative Suburban Varian Temple of Elagabal in Rome [SVTER] is the STT, or one at the *Horti Variani*. If the existence of [SVTER] is proven and its location established, VTER should come to be designated in these studies as PVTER: The Palatine Varian Temple of Elagabal in Rome.

While VTER's location on the Palatine has been debated for centuries, it is now virtually certain that it was on an artificial platform, on this map *Area Apollinis*, now known as the *Vigna Barberini*. The study dedicated to VTER in the first part of this book argues for that location on grounds different from, but complementary to, those argued for it by its most recent excavators, archaeologists from the French school in Rome.

Downhill from that location, in the Roman Forum, late nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeologists from the Austrian and German schools in Rome found and described three Corinthian column capitals with relief sculpture, one of which is clearly related to the cult of Elagabal. Depicting a scene of worship and sacrifice set in a sacred grove, it shows the ovoid stone fronted by a spread eagle standing on a platform, flanked by two goddesses on plinths. Elagabal is being worshipped in an act of taurine sacrifice by a third goddess, watched by a fourth playing with an infant boy. Here this scene is called Elagabal's Idyll.

The three column capitals were obviously part of a structure. Given their relatively modest size they were probably interior, in a courtyard or *cella*. It has been debated whether they belonged to VTER, or to a *statio* of the Emesenes somewhere in the Forum. If to VTER, they would most likely have been commissioned by Varius as part of that temple's decoration. If to a *statio*, they could predate Varius' reign, as does STT.

The second part of this book, devoted to those three column capitals and four smaller fragments of sculpture found near them, announces a possible inscription on one of the goddess's plinths. It also gives a full account of what scholars have said about them. This reveals ideological prejudice affecting scholarship concerning Varius, his god and his avatar.

This book does not resolve the debate over their origin and date. Only archaeology can do that. It does, however, study the iconography of the capital most clearly related to the cult of Elagabal in detail and depth, as a work of religious art. In so doing, it formulates original hypotheses concerning that god's cult: its cosmology, theology and ritual.