

Varian Studies

Volume One

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<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M81/M816743/7.pdf>

QV *Quaestiones Varianae.*

QV1 *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for Studia Variana*, Part 1: *The Boy on the Coin*, *AST*, 22, 2004: 57-87.
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QV2 *Existence, Identity, Nomenclature: a basis for Studia Variana*, Part 2: *Nomen Varianum*, *AST*, 23, 2004: 15-47.
<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M73/M731206/3.pdf>

QV3 *In Varium Heliogabalum imperium conlatum est (HA Hel. 1.4): the Roman imperial succession of a.u.c. 971= A.D. 218*, *AST*, 24, 2005: 15-67.
<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M89/M899278/3.pdf>

QV4 *Iter Principis: Elagabal's Journey from Emesa to Rome?* *AST*, 21, 2003: 59-100.
<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M63/M633663/5.pdf>

QV5 *In Varium: the Indictment*, *AST*, 25, 2005: 71-123.
<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M89/M899279/6.pdf>

QV6 *In Varium: the Verdict*, *AST*, 26, 2006: 59-120.
<http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/limedio/dlam/M84/M845971/6.pdf>

QV7 *Clades alia Variana: Varius his Fall*, *AST*, 27, 2006: 43-99.
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Varian Studies Volume One:

Varius

By

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

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Varian Studies Volume One: Varius

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Images	ix
Preface	xxiii
Acknowledgements	xxxi
Conventions	xxxiii
Introduction to Varian Studies	1
The Importance of Being Varius or Exploding the Varian Misconception	
Chapter One	49
The Boy on the Coin	
Chapter Two	83
His Name is Varius	
Chapter Three	119
Coup d'État	
Chapter Four	183
Elagabal's Journey to Rome	
Chapter Five	227
Indictment	
Chapter Six	293
Verdict	
Chapter Seven	371
Varius' Fall	
Conclusion	443
Bibliography	481




Appendix 511
Sources for *Metamorphoses Varianae*

Index 515

TABLE OF IMAGES

N°	IMAGE	TEXT/ LEGEND CAPTION	OBJECT SOURCE/ CATALOGUE	IMAGE SOURCE	PAGE
1		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 300 BNF 6 1984/403 X.L. 2.79, obverse</i>	LAP	8
2		SACERD DEI SOLIS ELAGAB	<i>TM 300 BNF 6 1984/403 X.L. 2.79, reverse</i>	LAP	8
3		IMP C M AVR ANTONINVS PF AVG	<i>TM 364 BNF 1227, obverse</i>	LAP	48
4		SANCT DEO SOLI ELAGABAL	<i>TM 364 BNF 1227, reverse</i>	LAP	48
5		AVRELIVS CAESAR AVG PII F	<i>RIC III, p. 82, A444</i>	<i>www.foruma ncientcoins.c om.</i>	50








Table of Images








6		M • AVREL ANTONINVS AVG ARMENIACVS P M	<i>RIC III 861</i> (M. Aurelius)	Classical Numismatic Group, Inc https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=308481	50
7		DIVVS M ANTONINVS PIVS	<i>RIC III C271</i> (M. Aurelius)	www.forumancientcoins.com	50
8		ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>RIC 398B</i>	www.forumancientcoins.com	50
9		ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>RIC IV 96 (S)</i>	www.forumancientcoins.com	50
10		ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM	<i>RIC IV 258c (S)</i>	www.forumancientcoins.com	50
11		IMP ANTONINVS AVG	<i>TM 368</i> <i>BNF 731</i>	LAP	51


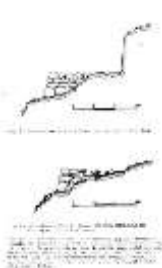




12		IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG	<i>TM 39-40</i> <i>BNF 1195</i>	LAP	51
13		IMP ANTONINVS AVG	<i>TM 127-8</i> <i>FWM 2.05d</i> <i>BMC V 552</i>	LAP	51
14		IMP CAES ANTONINVS AVG	<i>TM 69</i> <i>BNF 443</i>	LAP	51
15		IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 162-5</i> <i>BNF A-</i> <i>V1198</i>	LAP	51
16		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 214</i> <i>FWM1.34d</i>	LAP	51
17		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 258-261</i> <i>BNF 7220</i>	LAP	51
18		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 300</i> <i>FWM 3.23</i>	LAP	51








19		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM 221</i> <i>FWM 1.17d</i>	LAP	51
20		IMP C M OPEL SEV MACRINVS AVG	<i>RIC 35</i> <i>RSC 87</i> <i>BMC 54</i>	<i>www.forumancientcoins.com.</i>	121
21		Μ ΟΠΕΛ ΔΙΑΔΟΥΜΕΝΙΑΝΟ Σ ΚΑΙ	<i>BMC</i>	<i>www.forumancientcoins.com.</i>	121
22		IMP C M AVR ANTONINVS PF AVG	<i>TM 357</i>	<i>BNF 1226</i>	122
23		RECTOR ORBIS	<i>TM 357</i>	<i>BNF 1226</i>	122
24		ΕΜΙΣΩΝ ΚΟΛΩΝ ΖΚΦ	Coin of Marcus Aurelius, showing the god Elagabal at Emesa in its temple	Donaldson, <i>Architectura Numismatica</i> , 1859, table 19	182
25		SANCT DEO SOLI ELAGABAL Coin of Varius showing the god Elagabal in progress, on a cart drawn by four horses	<i>TM 360</i>	<i>BNF 7312</i>	183
26		Bust attributed to "Eliogabalo" (=Varius) Capitoline Museum, Rome	<i>SJ 55</i> <i>F 98</i>	LAP	184

27		Edited scan showing part of Roman Syria		BA, map 3.	186
28		Rome mint Coin of Macrinus, IMP C M OPEL SEV MACRINVS AVG	RIC IV 76	www.forumancientcoins.com .	189
29		Antioch mint Coin of Macrinus, IMP C M OPEL SEV MACRINVS AVG	RIC IV 26a (S)	www.forumancientcoins.com .	189
30		Early Roman Mint Coin of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (= Varius) IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG	TM 1 FWM 1.01 (« un portrait qui n'est certes pas celui de l'empereur » Thirion, Monnayage, p.10))	LAP	189
31		Early Roman Mint Coin of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (= Varius) IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG	TM 4 FWM 1.02 (« un portrait qui n'est certes pas celui de l'empereur » Thirion, Monnayage, p.10))	LAP	189
32		Early Oriental Mint Coin of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (=Varius) ANTONINVS FEL PIVS AVG	TM 360 BNF 7312	LAP	189

33		Early Oriental Mint Coin of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (=Varius) IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	<i>TM</i> 356 <i>BNF</i> 7280	LAP	189
34		Photomerge scan of map showing Roman roads between Emesa and Antioch		<i>BA</i> , maps 67 & 68	190
35		Genealogy of the Priest-Kings of Emesa		<i>Chad</i> , <i>Dynastes</i> <i>d'Emèse</i>	192
36		Genealogy of the Syrian Emperors		<i>Chad</i> , <i>Dynastes</i> <i>d'Emèse</i>	192
37		Antiochia Ichnographia		<i>K.O. Müller</i>	193
38		Scan of map showing Emesa, Raphanea, Arethusa and Apamea		<i>BA</i> , map 68	196
39		Detail of map showing Antioch, Gephyra, and Imma		<i>BA</i> , map 67	199







40		EMISA: Temple of Elagabal in three-quarter view emphasising the high podium (Macrinus A.D. 217-218)		Classical Numismatic Group, Inc https://www.ngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=127163	203
41		EMISA: Temple of Elagabal ΕΜΕCΩΝ ΚΟΛΩΝΙ HKΦ	BMC 16 var. (rev. legend) Caracalla	Classical Numismatic Group, Inc http://www.ngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=290845	203
42		EMISA: Temple of Elagabal Baetyl of El-Gabal flanked by parasols within hexastyle temple with central steps and rectangle in pediment [ΦΛ(?) in exergue]	BMC 17 Elagabalus	Classical Numismatic Group, Inc https://www.ngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=194037	203
43		EMISA: Temple of Elagabal ΕΜΕCΩΝ ΚΟΛΩΝΙ ZKΦ	BMC 10 Julia Domna	http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/syria/emesa/t.html with permission of wildwinds.com	203
44		Coin of Hiérapolis-Castabala with the baetyl on a cart pulled by four horses	Robert, Castabala, ROBERT, L., <i>La Déesse de Hiérapolis-Castabala</i> ,	BIFI XVI, 1964 Planche XXIX, No. 103	204
45		The Pilgrim's Road	French, D., Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor, The Pilgrim's Road.	BIAA, 3, BAR, 105, 1981	206
46		Roman milestone with official nomenclature and titles of Varius:	Ceka, Hasan, 'Dega jugore rrugës Egnatia',	<i>Monumentet</i> , 2, 1971, 27 = JRS, 64, 1974	207

47		Roman road construction	French, D., Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor, The Pilgrim's Road.	BIAA, 3, BAR, 105, 1981	208
48		Roman road construction	French, D., Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor, The Pilgrim's Road.	BIAA, 3, BAR, 105, 1981	209
49		Roman road construction	French, D., Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor, The Pilgrim's Road.	BIAA, 3, BAR, 105, 1981	210
50		Coins showing vehicles with religious cargoes	<i>BMC 250</i> <i>Sidon</i>	<i>P&T 460</i>	211
51		Coins showing vehicles with religious cargoes	<i>Ziegler.449</i> <i>Anazarbus.</i>	<i>P&T 461</i>	211
52		Coin of Elagabalus (Varius) with reverse type of emperor on horseback, facing right	Missere, Gianluigi, <i>Cenni su di una moneta di Saitta dell'epoca di Eliogabalo.</i>	<i>RIN</i> , 14.5.68, 1966.	211

53		Coin of Elagabalus from Mopsus with reverse type of emperor on horseback, facing left	Aulock, 'Mopsos', n. 70, pl. 4. 52 (p. 266)	https://www.sixbid.com/browse.html?auction=374&category=6868&lot=333597	212
54		Anatolian coins of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Varius) with shared obverse die		Kraft, System, Gebr. Mann Verlag 1972	212
55		Findspots of artefacts possibly relating to the journey of Elagabal		LAP	213
56		Coin possibly depicting painting of Varius dressed in his priestly garments, allegedly hung in the Senate house in Rome Baldus, 'Vorstellungsgemälde'.		NAC 596o	218
57		Coin possibly depicting painting of Varius dressed in his priestly garments, allegedly hung in the Senate house in Rome Baldus, 'Vorstellungsgemälde'.		NAC 596r	218
58		Map of the Balkan Peninsula in Roman times		CIL 3	219
59		La Pompa del Magistrato Museum of Aquileia, Italy	Balestrazzi, E. di F., <i>La Pompa del Magistrato</i> .	<i>Aquileia Nostra</i> , 56, 1985, col. 337-360.	221

60		'Equites Singulares' inscription, Rome		BCAR, 13.2.155.108 1,1885	222
61	(table)	Table of accusations against Varius		LAP	304-305
62		CONSERVATOR AVG The baetyl of Elagabal	TM 242-244 BNF 1219	LAP	343
63		IOVI CONSERVATORI Jupiter	TM 105-110 BNF 7222	LAP	343
64		SANCT DEO SOLI ELAGABAL The baetyl of Elagabal	TM 359-365 BNF 1227	LAP	343
65		PONTIF MAX TRP II COS II PP Roma	TM 25 FWM 1.29	LAP	343
66		MARS VICTOR Mars	TM 39-46, 77-81 BNF1966-512-3	LAP	343

67		VICTOR ANTONINI AVG Victoria	<i>TM</i> 55-65, 86-89 <i>BNF</i> 145	LAP	343
68		IVNO REGINA Juno	<i>TM</i> 376-377 <i>BNF</i> 146	LAP	343
69		PM TRP IIII COS III PP Sol	<i>TM</i> 206 <i>BNF</i> 1223	LAP	343
70		VENVS CAELESTIS Venus	<i>TM</i> 380-393 <i>BNF</i> 1230	LAP	343
71		PROVID DEORVM Providence of the Gods	<i>TM</i> 127-131 <i>BNF</i> 1196	LAP	343
72		VENVS GENETRIX Venus	<i>TM</i> 467-468, 473 <i>BNF</i> 7358	LAP	343

73		FORTVNAE REDVCI Fortuna	TM 399 BNF 7215	LAP	343
74		Senatus Consultus de Bacchanalibus October 7, 186 B.C.	CIL I, 43, n.196; CIL I 22, 437, n.581 CIL X, 13, n. 104	Public Domain http://www.hsaugsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lsante02/Bacchanalia/bac_orig.html , https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8091105	344
75		The Idyll of Elagabal		LAP	346
76		IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG	TM 25 FWM 1.29	LAP	359
77		VOTA PVBLICA	TM 373-375	Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auct. 134, 2004, 2950	359
78		IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG	TM 339 FWM 1.16	LAP	359

79		RECTOR ORBIS	TM 327 BNF 1226	LAP	359
80		FIDES MILITVM	TM 37-38 BNF 144	LAP	359
81		PM TRP III COS III PP	TM 147-153 BNF 1222	LAP	359
82		SACERD DEI SOLIS ELAGAB	TM 301-305 BNF 7302	LAP	359
83		PM TRP IIII COS III PP	TM 170-183 BNF 7286	LAP	359
84		INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG	TM 252 BNF 7217	LAP	359

85		CONSVL II PP	<i>TM 327 BNF 1220</i>	LAP	359
86		SVMMVS SACERDOS AVG	<i>TM 311-313 FWM 3.27</i>	LAP	359
87		ADVENTVS AVGVSTI	<i>TM 237 BNF 1218</i>	LAP	359
88	(table)	Table of accusations against Varius		LAP	364-365
89		CASTR PRAETORIA REGIO X MONS CAELIVS AD SPEM VETEREM		Lugli, G., <i>Pianta di Roma Antica , Il Centro Monumentale , 1946,</i>	419
90		IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS AVG	<i>TM 308: FWM 5.25</i>	LAP	442
91		SACERD DEI SOLIS ELAGAB	<i>TM 308: FWM 5.25</i>	LAP	442

PREFACE

This book is about the Roman emperor of 971-975 by the Roman calendar, 218-222 by the Christian. He reigned aged 14 to 18 under the name of *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*.

That, of course, is properly the name of quite a different emperor, who does not concern us here. To avoid confusion, one should not use that name for the emperor who does. Posterity, aware of this, calls him by the names *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus*. Yet there is no evidence that either of those names, based on that of a Syrian sun god whose high priest he was while Roman emperor, was ever used for him during his lifetime. Both, however, now properly denote a posthumous, legendary character; an avatar loosely based on him, inhabiting academic and creative literature and other arts.

Although *Heliogabalus* is used for him by some, *Elagabalus* by other writers on ancient history, neither name properly denotes the Roman emperor of the cited dates, the subject of this book. For him, they are misnomers. Both are versions of the name of a god, Elagabal, not of any emperor. This book seeks to be more historically rigorous than most previous works about this emperor. So its author's first task is to decide how to call the individual who is its subject, and thus how to call this book.

I faced the same problem with my previous book about this emperor. It was decided then, to call him, in the title, *Elagabalus*, the form of his misnomer preferred till now by most modern academic writers, and only to reveal and argue in the text how more properly to call him.

Accordingly, in *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction? (EEFF)*, published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) in 2010, I show that this individual's original nomenclature, before becoming emperor, was almost certainly *Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus*. Of these four names the one by which he would most likely have been known officially is *Varius*, his *nomen*, or paternal family name.

In consequence, in *EEFF* I argue for calling him *Varius*, and do so consistently throughout. That choice has since been explicitly ratified, citing *EEFF*, by the latest edition of *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, (*PIR*²) 2015, V 273. This, the maximum authority on Roman prosopography, calls *EEFF* '*opus praetera valde mirum*': 'a work, moreover, highly admirable'. Therefore this book, the first in a new series about this emperor, published in 2017 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing (CSP), is called *Varian Studies, volume one: Varius (VS1)*. It is followed by two more.

Varian Studies, volume two (VS2): Elagabal, studies that god's legacy in Rome. *Varian Studies, volume three (VS3): A Varian Symposium*: studies Varius, some of his courtiers, his god, and his posthumous avatar.

VS1: Varius, the present book, therefore stands in a particular relationship to *EEFF*. In this preface I shall explain that relationship in detail, in order to explain what *VS1* is, and why I am publishing it now.

Although now issued as a book several years after *EEFF*, the contents of *VS1* were originally written before *EEFF*, and published between 1999 and 2006, as articles in three scholarly journals. Those journals are published by two Japanese universities where I was then teaching. One of them later put all its articles by me online, while a sole article published in print by the other was put online by CUP when it published *EEFF*. It did so because *EEFF* refers to all those articles throughout, treating them as preliminary studies, or *Vorarbeiten*, as I call them in *EEFF*. So the contents of the present book have been published before, both in print and online.

Why, therefore, publish *VS1* now as a book? An obvious reason is to facilitate access to its contents for Western scholars. The Japanese print journals containing the articles on which *VS1* is based are not always available in Western libraries, and the digital versions are not always reliably accessible online. Moreover, consulting them in either form involves acquiring several separate journal issues or digital files. Therefore the existence of a single, unified print and digital version, published and hosted in the West, should facilitate access.

The original text of those articles has been largely, but not entirely, kept intact in *VS1*. Most of the changes I have made are stylistic, designed to turn a series of articles, already closely related among themselves, into the continuous chapters of a book. I have tried to eliminate repetition, clarify internal reference, and make the prose uniformly readable. The result is a volume which differs from the articles whence it is constituted in being more internally coherent, consistent and consecutive.

Another difference between book and articles is that in turning articles into chapters, I have expanded their range of reference to include *EEFF* and other recent work. This is because *EEFF* develops arguments launched in the articles underlying *VS1*, and answers questions first asked there.

Conversely, *EEFF* often refers to those *Vorarbeiten*. It does so because they first identify the problematic, ask the questions, establish the methodology, record the results of research, and launch the arguments on which *EEFF* is based. This reference enables *EEFF*, whose task within Varian studies is to draw the distinction between fact and fiction about this

emperor implicit in its title, to do so while taking those articles' findings as given, without having to re-present and argue them all over again.

Now, with both *EEFF* and *VSI* readily available, scholars may view their joint purpose in its entirety: one in which they complement each other.

What is that purpose? The simplest way to state it in general terms is to say that both *EEFF* and *VSI* are works of history about a Roman emperor who has, with very few exceptions, not normally been the object of proper historical enquiry. He has been the subject of fiction, drama, music and visual art, and even of historiography, but rarely of history, if history be defined as the pursuit of factual knowledge of the past on the basis of evidence. Both *EEFF* and *VSI* study Varius as a subject of history.

The need to stress this arises from critical reaction, both adverse and favourable, to *EEFF*. Both *EEFF* and *VSI* are argumental, innovative, and so, for many, challenging, even threatening. This is because both books seek to change how their subject, Varius, is seen, studied and discussed.

How Varius is seen, studied and discussed is the subject of the *Introduction* to *VSI*, originally published as *The Importance of Being Varius: an Introduction to Varian Studies*. I shall not pre-empt its contents here, but briefly summarise them.

For centuries Varius' posthumous avatar, under the names *Elagabalus* or *Heliogabalus*, has inhabited literature and academia as a legendary, hence semi-fictional character. (The relevant definition of 'legendary' is given and attributed in *Introduction*.)

The main characteristics of that character are Oriental despotism and monotheistic zealotry, thrust by a Syrian tyrant on free polytheistic Romans; polymorphous perverse sexuality, unbridled extravagance, and a mad sense of humour, involving inventive cruelty, paraded, imposed and inflicted on his subjects by a juvenile delinquent deliberately insulting Roman values.

Most writers have been hostile to this legendary character, although some have lauded him. Whichever way, with few exceptions before *EEFF*, this semi-fictional character has been uncritically accepted as a factual image of the emperor of the cited dates by most writers about him. They have not treated Varius as a once live individual, to be studied with a rigorous historical method.

Instead, Elagabalus or Heliogabalus has been written about by authors both ancient and modern, some posing as historians, most of whom do not, however, seek factual knowledge on the basis of evidence about him, but rather create, propagate, develop and exploit his legend for their own purposes. The terms in which he is discussed say more about those who discuss him, their audiences and purposes, than about the emperor whom they ostensibly describe. So Elagabalus or Heliogabalus has been execrated

as an alien monster of adolescent tyranny or idolised as a crowned martyr to anarchism, while Varius has been ignored.

I have sought to change all this. First I have sought clearly to distinguish the semi-fictional character of legend from that of fact. In pursuit of fact, I have adopted a sceptical stance towards texts that create, accept and perpetuate the legend. I have used other sources of evidence -coins, inscriptions, papyri, sculpture and topography- to find what can be known, or considered virtually certain, likely, possible, unlikely, or false, concerning Varius.

Moreover, I have attempted to enter into his vital predicament, imagining the choices available to him, in an effort to make sense of his conduct of his life, and so of his reign. I have attempted to see matters from his point of view. From this joint exercise of rigorous historical examination with sympathetic historical imagination results as full a factual or probable account as possible, given the evidence available, of Varius' life and reign.

Both effort and result mark a shift in historical investigation of this emperor. The effort differs radically from how he has been seen, studied and discussed before, as do the results. The detailed contents of that shift are presented and argued in the articles constituting *VSI*, and in *EEFF*.

Again, I shall not pre-empt, but merely summarise those contents here. I do so with respect to the main characteristics of the semi-fictional character of Varius' avatar, which are debunked in those articles and in *EEFF*. This is because belief in those characteristics has fostered two different, often implicit, excuses among academics for failure to investigate Varius historically.

The first is that since factual study of this aspect of the past is thought difficult or, for some, impossible, we should be content to study those characteristics as examples of discourse about the past, and focus our attention on discourse rather than fact.

The second is that because of those characteristics Elagabalus or Heliogabalus is deemed unworthy of historical study. Even those willing to consider enquiry into others, based on fact rather than discourse, may regard Varius as merely one of a set of brief and insignificant emperors; little more than the pawn of his female relatives seeking to advance their own interests in maintaining the Severan dynasty through his agency.

The shift in how Varius is seen, studied and discussed in *VSI* and *EEFF*, challenges both these excuses. These books' most important finding is that there are facts to be known about Varius, if only one bothers to look for them. This rebuts the argument that all there is to be studied is discourse. Moreover, the facts emerging from such study debunk standard notions about the emperor of the cited dates. Far from insignificant, as I shall

presently argue, he confronts in his own person the most fundamental unresolved structural problems of the principate.

Rather than Elagabalus, born and bred in Syria, whom certain writers love to hate, emerges Varius, a boy of Syrian family, linked by marriage to the Severan dynasty, most likely born in or near Rome. He spends his childhood and early education in Rome, Britain, and Numidia, in constant proximity to the epigraphically recorded movements of his mother, and those likewise of his Syro-Roman equestrian become senatorial father.

This is so until that man's early death, recorded on an inscription found in Latium, sends Varius to live with his mother's family in Syria. There he accedes to the solar priesthood associated with her family. There too he is thrust into the principate by his handlers, his maternal grandmother and her helpers, in a *coup d'état* under false pretences of imperial bastardy.

Far from seeking to abolish Rome's gods and goddesses, whom he honours with numerous, varied coin issues, he seeks to install his own god among them. So rather than a monotheistic zealot set on imposing a single god on Rome, emerges the boy priest of a polytheistic cult, suddenly thrust into a very dangerous political role. How shall he survive, assert himself and rule, rather than merely reign as his handlers' puppet, on the basis of a false pretence of imperial bastardy; a lie not universally believed? He arguably finds, in his fully legitimate priesthood, authentic, and exclusively his own, an alternative basis for legitimacy in his tenure of the principate.

It cannot be known, on the basis of evidence, whether this adolescent emperor indulged in any or all the forms of sexuality so censoriously yet pruriently described by his ancient and modern historiographers. However that may be, his alleged sexuality can usefully be studied in diverse ways.

Those ways either (1) assume that he did and underwent any or all of what is said about him, in which case one may speculate about his alleged behaviour; or (2) accept that we cannot know if he did or not, in which case one may certainly study such allegations as discourse. In the former case, assuming, for the sake of argument, he did or underwent all or some of what is said, one may speculate why: whether for reasons explicable by his psychology; or deploying his sexuality in political or religious practice, as husband of women in the Roman aristocracy, or as priest of an orgiastic cult, or both. In the latter case, one may study what is said about his sexuality, not only by ancient writers, as a distorting prism to illuminate ancient culture through ancient prejudice, but also as an example of the deployment of ancient prejudice and culture by modern writers for their own purposes.

Conversely, it can be known, and is, on the basis of coins and inscriptions, that he was married to three successive Roman women. These marriages may arguably be seen, rather than as erotically driven, in the light:

first, of his handlers' need to make political alliances in Rome; later, of his own need for an ally in his struggle for his own autonomy.

Again, there is no evidence of his unbridled extravagance or mad sense of humour. But close examination of the texts where these are alleged reveals internal contradictions, anachronisms, and the rehearsal of well-worn topics in the rhetoric of invective common in antiquity.

Thus, rather than the alien monster execrated by most of his ancient and modern historiographers, or than the crowned anarchist martyr dear to others, emerges a boy thrust into a predicament where he tries to survive in the context surrounding him, using elements directly affecting him. Seeing that context and identifying those elements, by using the method of enquiry developed in these studies, leads to deeper understanding of the Roman empire in Varius' period and beyond, and of his significance therein.

The context of Varius' predicament is that of one of the unresolved structural problems of the Roman empire: the mode of succession to the principate. This involves another such problem: the basis for legitimacy in tenure of the principate. Among elements directly affecting Varius' struggle to survive in that context are: (1) certainly, the claim of imperial bastardy, made by his early coins and inscriptions, implying a hereditary principle for imperial succession; (2) possibly, his popularity among the legionary soldiers who raise him to the throne, and his unpopularity among the praetorians who depose him, both alleged by his ancient historiographers, suggesting military popularity as the real basis both for succession to and tenure of the principate; and, (3) certainly, promotion of his image as priest-emperor on his coins and inscriptions, implying an attempt to shift from a dynastic to a religious basis for legitimacy in tenure of the principate.

Thus it emerges that Varius, far from being, as some of his detractors claim, an insignificant emperor, unworthy of serious historical enquiry, embodies, in his vital predicament and failed attempt to solve and survive it, the basic structural problems of the Roman principate: its mode of succession and the basis for legitimacy in its tenure. By shifting emphasis in his imperial artefacts from a patent lie about his paternity to self-promotion as high priest of Elagabal he dramatizes both those problems. Moreover, he prefigures the resort to religion that later emperors such as Aurelian, Constantine and Julian would undertake in trying to solve them.

Such a shift in historical perception and understanding is not easily achieved. First, one must eliminate misconceptions generated by centuries of misleading historiography, to grasp the basic outlines of the case. This involves adopting a sceptical theory of knowledge and a rigorously evidential method of enquiry, applying them in arduous, thorough research involving many classes of artefacts.

One finding of such study has bearing on a long-standing controversy among Roman historians, about whether coinage can be linked to policy. The close link between Varius' Roman imperial coinage and his epigraphically and historiographically attested religious policy suggests that it can, at least in the context of his reign.

Sceptical epistemology and rigorous methodology do not mean ignoring historiography or discourse, but rather using both in concert with artefacts to search for facts. In looking for facts about Varius, these studies have assembled the most complete array to date of artefactual evidence about his life and reign. The success of their procedure in shifting views of Varius may lead one to seek to apply it beyond him.

This, if not before, is where their procedure becomes challenging, even threatening for some. For some fear that they may be asked to use such an epistemology and methodology, and undertake such arduous research, in the rest of ancient history, long accustomed to a far lower standard of proof.

So, like all such shifts in perception and understanding, this one has supporters and opponents. It is still in progress. *VSI*'s purpose, ever more urgent in view of opposition to *EEFF*, is to continue to promote that shift, answering its opponents by providing scholars with easy access to the information and arguments underlying it, and setting out in detail its epistemology and methodology.

Accordingly, *VSI: Varius* is arranged, not in the chronological order of its contents' original publication as articles, but in one conducive to understanding Varius' life and reign.

It begins with an *Introduction*, mentioned above, which identifies the problematic about Varius and suggests how to solve it.

This is followed by two chapters, *The Boy on the Coin* and *His Name is Varius*, which address Varius' identity and nomenclature.

These are followed by two chapters, *Coup d'État*, concerning how Varius rose to power in Syria, and *Elagabal's Journey*, about how Varius, together with his god, Elagabal, travelled from Syria to Rome.

The next three chapters in the book *Indictment*, *Verdict*, and *Varius' Fall*, are framed like a posthumous trial of Varius, on the basis of accusations made against him by his ancient historiographers, and accounts of his death.

A *Conclusion* (1) reviews the current state of Varian studies, (2) answers critics, and (3) proposes lines of enquiry for the future.

