

Varius' Vestments Elke Krenzel

The vestments that Varius wore as *Sacerdos amplissimus dei invicti Solis Elagabali* – his official priestly title – were extraordinary for his Roman contemporaries. Modern research has not yet uncovered any comparable vestments. Not even in Emesa have corresponding artefacts been found. Yet we have abundant pictures of the emperor in his priestly vestments, on Roman imperial coins struck at Rome. It is with reference to these that I shall here, for the first time ever, precisely analyse this garment, and compare it both with written accounts by contemporary historians, and especially with extant iconographic evidence from northeast Syria.

According to Herodian, the emperor was advised by his grandmother, Iulia Maesa, before his arrival in Rome, to send ahead a painting of himself in priestly vestments, so that the people could become accustomed to his outlandish appearance. The Romans would consider this clothing quite barbaric, and in any case designed for women.¹

Hans Roland Baldus suspects that a coin type, known till now only by three examples, shows this painting,² but the sacrificing emperor, even on the recently discovered third example, dated to the end of 219,³ does not wear the ankle-length priestly vestment, but a short tunic (fig. 1). Moreover, on a denarius coined at an Eastern mint before his arrival in Rome, Varius is not yet shown in his special priestly vestments, but in the sacrificial dress of a Roman emperor, with toga draped over his head (fig. 2).

Not until the first half of the year 221 did his characteristic costume appear on coins, in the context of a revolutionary change in coin types. The normal variety of reverse types was abandoned, and apart from the type *Libertas*, and the rare *Liberalitas IIII* and Consular types of 222, only the emperor appears, in diverse variant types, sacrificing. On well preserved coins minted with new dies we can study the special priestly costume both in face-on and right side-view.

The Priestly Vestments on Coins

The priestly vestment appears on coins in two varieties, with and without an additional shoulder mantel, depending on type. The substantial coinage of sacrificial scenes can be divided into 6 main categories, which differ from each other even in the smallest details of depiction. None of this variation is left to chance, or to the die engraver's fancy, for it can be detected that Varius has overseen his own depiction on coins, and in some cases ordered corrections in the early stages of minting.

In my opinion, Varius has himself shown in 3 different priestly functions: as *SACERD[OS] DEI SOLIS ELAGAB[ALI]* he is explicitly his god's priest. This series is differentiated from the other 5 main sacrificial types by a different direction of the emperor's sight. Only here is he facing right, and sacrifices over a flaming low altar, or *puteal* (fig. 3). On his own costume he wears a shoulder mantle, which is draped over his

¹ Herodian 5,5,9f.

² H. R. Baldus, Das „Vorstellungsgemälde“ des Heliogabal. Ein bislang unerkanntes numismatisches Zeugnis, *Chiron* 19, 1989, p. 467-476.

³ CNG 29,2005,596.

chest and shoulders, and hangs at the back in folds down to his knees. This resembles the cape that both Sol and Jupiter wear on coins.

This additional shoulder mantle is also worn by Varius, facing left in half profile on the *INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG [USTVS]* type (fig. 4). The mantle folds are slung over his left arm and hang down on one side. He has borrowed from Sol not only the mantle, but also the additional title *INVICTVS*. The small two-level smoking altar, over which he sacrifices, is typical of Oriental cults, and new to Roman imperial coinage. The depiction of a sacrificed and dissected bull, which lies at the foot of the altar, can already be found on the *VOTA* coins of Antoninus Pius. In my opinion, he is sacrificing on this type to Sol Invictus, who was worshipped in Rome especially during the Severan dynasty.

The additional shoulder mantle is only shown further on a rare type dated to 221. This is characterised by two standards, either both standing to the emperor's right, or flanking him on either side. These standards are clearly components of the cult of Elagabal. Depending on whether they are both to his right, or flanking him, Varius either holds a branch downwards, while the mantle tips are invisible behind him, (fig. 5) or holds a bough upwards, with the mantle folds slung over his left arm, hanging behind to one side, as on the *INVICTVS SACERDOS* type (fig. 6). In my opinion, he is sacrificing here to the rising or setting sun, depending on the direction of the bough.

All remaining dated sacrificial types and the *SVMMVS SACERDOS AVG[VSTVS]* type lack the shoulder mantle, as a result of which the frontal view of the priestly vestments as such is clearer. *SVMMVS SACERDOS* is the translation of the Greek high-priestly title *Archiereus*. The emperor here holds a small branch, perhaps an olive branch, downwards, and sacrifices over a tripod, which in Roman Imperial coinage was common for almost all depictions of the emperor sacrificing.

I deduce from this that Varius here is depicted in his function as high priest of all the cults gathered together into his temple. We see now that the costume has a collar at the neckline, and – hard to make out - button-like pictures over his chest. (fig. 7). This costume without a shoulder mantle appears also on both dated types *P M TR P IIII COS III P P* (221) and *P M TR P V COS IIII P P* [222] (fig. 8). On both types the emperor holds a cypress bough upwards and sacrifices over a small round altar.⁴ This, in Roman imperial coinage, is normally to be found on coin types where *Genius Populi Romani* and other deities are shown as objects of sacrifice.

Description of the Vestments

We are given some inexact information about Varius' priestly vestments by Herodian. According to him, there was an over and an undergarment. The undergarment covered the arms to the hands, and the legs to the feet, while the overgarment reached from hips to toes. Both garments were of purple silk with gold threads, and the whole had an appearance halfway between the vestments of a Phoenician priest and the soft clothing of the Medes.⁵

⁴ This cypress branch is often wrongly identified in numismatic works as a club, ignoring the fact that the cypress tree is considered sacred by the Syrian sun-cult. See R. Turcan, *Héliogabale et le sacre du soleil*, Paris 1985, p. 124f.

⁵ Herodian 5,3,11f and 5,5,6f.

This description may be compared with the considerably more detailed depiction of the vestments on coins. The observation of several types, mainly on denarii, leads, in the first place, to a comprehensive understanding which still leaves open some questions, since the die-engraver had to work within the confines of an average length of only 10mm available for depiction of the vestments. The best depictions are to be found on larger asses and sestertii and the rare aurei, whose engravers worked to a high standard. Aes coinage however is rare, and mostly no longer rich in detail on account of wear.

Let us compare the depiction of the vestments on coins with Herodian's description, and with archaeological remains. On all coin depictions without a shoulder mantle it is clear that the garment shows long sleeves arranged in folds, in the Parthian style. This corresponds to Herodian's data. Varius evidently wore a long tunic with pleated sleeves attached, reaching halfway down his calves. On several coins the hem is visible (fig. 9). Similar tunics are depicted on much Palmyrene funerary sculpture. They are adorned with embroidered trimming on the hem and vertical seams (fig. 10).⁶ As can be seen on fragments of cloth found in Palmyra, these trimmings may have been richly embroidered with gold thread, and decorated with pearls and precious stones.⁷ In the *Historia Augusta* a Persian garment of Varius', full of precious stones, is mentioned.⁸ Indeed one can discern on extremely rare coins just such a central trimming, ornamented with large blossoms and tendrils winding round them (fig. 7 and 11). It is truly astounding with what attention to detail certain die-cutters have worked.

The emperor's priestly vestment depicted on coins has a neck opening quite unusual for tunics: a broad collar. From this collar probably hangs another garment over his back, both its ends gathered from behind towards the front in loose curves round his waist and drawn through a large round buckle. Both ends hang like a sash from the front of his waist down to his feet. Below the waist, the garment curves in folds around the legs, so that in many images it looks like pantaloons. So it is not to be excluded that, in addition, beneath the tunic and this outer garment, as well as under Persian trousers, Varius also wore elaborately folded anaxyrides, so altogether three fine layers of silk.

Thus the undergarment, described by Herodian as reaching from hands to feet, becomes a long-sleeved tunic, worn over anaxyrides. Such was the usual dress of the upper classes and priests in north and east Syria from the second Christian century on (fig. 10 and 12). This accounts for that part of the priestly vestments that Herodian describes as Median.

Herodian describes the outer garment as a hip-garment, hanging from the waist to the toes. But as we see on many coin images, especially those showing the emperor's right side, the cloth hangs directly from his shoulders. (fig. 3 and 13). One might reach Herodian's erroneous conclusion from a purely face-on view of the emperor. This shows, once again, that Herodian probably never saw Varius nor his cult object directly, but rather gathered his information second-hand. Hip-garments in Syria are, as is known, of Arab origin.⁹ Camel riders wore them, as did soldiers, and also tradesmen and Arab gods,

⁶ H. Seyrig, *Armes et costumes iraniens de Palmyre*, Syria XVIII, 1937, p. 4-52.

⁷ R. Pfister, *Textiles de Palmyre découverts par la Service des Antiquités du Haut Commissariat de la République Française dans la Nécropole de Palmyre*, I, Paris 1934, III., Paris 1940.

⁸ HA, Antoninus Heliogabalus 23. These precious stones are said to have been attached to his shoes, which is plausible, given the rich ornamentation of Palmyrene shoes on funerary relief sculpture.

⁹ A. Taha, *Men's Costume in Palmyra*, *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes* 32, 1982, p. 117-130, esp. p. 121f.

when these last were not depicted in Roman military dress (fig. 14). Using a vertical girdle one could obviously, for riding, gather the cloth between the legs up to the knees. Often a cloak was so draped that it resembled a hip-garment, as, for example, the cloaks of both gods on the left in a relief from near Palmyra (fig. 15). This seems also to be the case with Varius' outer garment.

It is hardly surprising that the Arab origin of Varius' priestly vestments is evident, since the emperor himself after all descended from an Arab priestly family of Emesa. Altogether it is a combination of Parthian underclothing and an Arab hip-cloak. It was surely worn by all Elagabal's priests. It was also worn by Uranius Antoninus, when he faced Shapur before Emesa in AD 253 and Shapur recognised him as a priest on account of his vestments.¹⁰

As one can clearly see on coins, Varius' priestly footwear was half-length closed boots with heels (fig. 6 and 8). Till recently it was still thought that in Antiquity there were no shoes with heels, and that these were an invention of the Middle Ages. Recently, however, K. Parlasca rediscovered clay models of shoes with heels that come from Hellenistic graves in Egypt (fig. 16).¹¹ He believes this fashion was limited to Ptolemaic Egypt. Yet, as one can clearly see on Roman coins of the Severan period, several emperors of that dynasty wore the same sort of boots with heels as did Varius, when sacrificing to make vows. Varius, on his early coins, wears particularly extravagant boots with pointed toes, together with traditional Roman sacrificial dress (fig. 2). This is a type of footwear that can be seen in Etruscan art, but may be due to Ionian or Near Eastern influence.¹²

The headgear pertaining to the priestly vestments was apparently not worn by Varius in Rome, as he has it depicted separately beside him on some coin types (fig. 1 and 17). As one can see on such coins, this headgear is not the cylindrical headgear-modius worn by Palmyrene priests, (fig. 12), but rather a tall pointed cap without ear-flaps, as one finds on depictions of priests from Dura Europos (fig. 18). Moreover the cap seems to have been decorated, particularly on its forward leaning point (fig. 1).

Herodian says that Varius wore a tiara in Emesa. But he does not mention the unusual object that Varius wears on his head, apparently instead of the priestly pointed cap, at sacrificial ceremonies in Rome. His portrait on obverses bears it (fig. 19), and it can be seen on an early reverse trial-type (fig. 17).¹³ Many scholars have maintained that it is not a horn, as is still wrongly but commonly thought. My thesis, that it is the dried penis of a bull (fig. 20), offers the only explanation so far ventured for the fact that a few weeks before Varius' murder, this headgear is no longer shown on his coins. The first attempted coup by his pretorian guards at the turn of AD 221 to 222, may have persuaded Varius to adopt a more moral lifestyle. But this concession was not enough to save him.¹⁴

¹⁰ H. R. Baldus, *Uranus Antoninus*, Bonn 1971, p. 237.

¹¹ K. Parlasca, *Modische Schuhe mit Absätzen im ptolemäischen Ägypten*, in: *Chronique d'Égypte* 77, 2002, p. 303-311, esp p.303.

¹² N. Goldman, *Roman footwear*, in: J. L. Sebesta (ed.), *The world of Roman costume*, 1994, p. 101-129, esp. p. 116.

¹³ On this coin the multilevel portable smoking altar is particularly authentically depicted. (Compare. fig. 15 and 18).

¹⁴ E. Kregel, *Das sogenannte „Horn“ des Elagabal- Die Spitze eines Stierpenis. Eine Umdeutung als Ergebnis fachübergreifender Forschung*, *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* 47, 1997, p. 53-72.

List of Figures

- 1 Reverse of an antoninianus of Elagabalus, late A.D. 219, Rome; Baldus, Chiron 19, 1989, p.471.
- 2 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 218-219, eastern mint, BMC 292; Gorny 134, 2004, 2950.
- 3 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221-222, Rome, BMC 225; priv. coll.
- 4 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221-222, Rome, BMC 211; priv. coll.
- 5 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221, Rome, BMC 260; priv. coll.
- 6 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221, Rome, BMC 259; priv. coll.
- 7 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 222 (without “horn” on obverse), Rome, BMC 230, priv. coll.
- 8 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 222 (without “horn” on obverse), Rome, BMC 268; priv. coll.
- 9 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221-222, Rome, BMC 231; in commerce.
- 10 Relief of Maqqai, Palmyra; Seyrig, Syria XVIII, 1937, pl. IV.
- 11 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221-222, Rome, BMC 231; Lanz 109,2002,674.
- 12 Relief of the Nabo-temple from Palmyra; H. Stierlin, Städte in der Wüste, Stuttgart and Zürich, 1996, p. 148, fig. 118.
- 13 Reverse of an As of Elagabalus, A.D. 222, Rome, BMC, p. 615; Münzkabinett Berlin.
- 14 Relief of the “genuises” of planets from Khirbet-Farwan; D. Schlumberger, La Palmyrene du Nord-Ouest, Paris 1951, p. 67, pl. XXIX,1.
- 15 Part of a Relief from Wadi el Miyah, Palmyra region; Taha, AAAS 32, 1982, p. 125, fig. IX.
- 16 Clay model of shoes from a child’s tomb in Mazghuna, Egypt; K. Parlasca, Chronique d’Égypte 77, 2002, p. 307, fig. 3.
- 17 Reverse of a denarius of Elagabalus, A.D. 221, Rome, BMC 209, note; H. J. Berk, list 90, 1996, 336.
- 18 Part of the relief of Aphlad, Dura Europos; M. I. Rostovtzeff, Dura and problems of Parthian Art; YCS V, 1935, p. 226, fig. 44.
- 19 Obverse of a denarius of Elagabalus of the INVICTUS-type, A.D. 221-222, Rome, BMC 211; priv. coll.
- 20 Photo montage of a marble head of Varius in the Museo Capitolino with the top of a bull’s penis; E. Krenzel, JNG 47, 1997, p. 62, fig. 16.