

## METEORITE SPARKS A CULT

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### ABSTRACT

Provided here is a synthesis of all known information about the Black Stone of Emesa, a large black and metallic stone believed to be meteoritic in origin which was worshipped as an artefact of divine origin in the Syrian city of Emesa at the beginning of the common era. Much of that information, including literary texts and ancient coins, relates to Elagabalus, a young high priest of Emesa who had a short reign as Roman emperor from 218 to 222 C.E. and who took the stone with him to Rome.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'article fournit une synthèse de tous les données connues actuellement au sujet de la Pierre noire d'Emèse, une grande pierre noire métallique que l'on croit être d'origine météorique. Elle était l'objet de vénération dans la ville syrienne d'Emèse au début de notre ère, à cause de son origine présumée divine. Une grande partie de l'information, y compris les textes littéraires et les pièces de monnaie anciennes, concerne Élagabalus, un jeune grand prêtre d'Emèse qui eut un court règne comme empereur romain de 218 à 222 de notre ère, et qui a transporté la pierre à Rome.

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In the third century C.E., in the Syrian city of Emesa (now Homs), there was a large temple built atop a hill and dedicated to the Sun-God Elagabalus. That edifice contained a sacred image of the god *not wrought by human hands*, which took the unusual form of a sizeable cone-shaped black stone. Sacred stones, also known as baetyls, were not rare in ancient times, particularly in the East, but this one was something special — it was said to have fallen from the sky. More likely than not, it was a meteorite.

The exact origin of the Elagabalus stone remains obscure, but in historical times its destiny was closely intertwined with that of a dynasty of king-priests who had been nomads, Bedouins of the desert, before settling down in Emesa to erect a shrine to Elagabalus. Eventually, that cult became famous and popular, so much so that Elagabalus ended up being the chief deity of the Roman Empire under the title “*deus invictus Sol Elagabalus*,” albeit for a short period of time, between A.D. 218 and 222.

That period corresponds to a rather interesting episode during the latter years of the Roman Empire, when the Empire came to be ruled for four years by the then high-priest, a mere boy of 13. His official name as Roman emperor was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but he is better known to history under the Latinized

form of his god's name, Elagabalus, or the slightly different Greek form Heliogabalus, meant to emphasize the connection to the Sun.

Born Varius Avitus Bassianus in about C.E. 205, Elagabalus succeeded to the title of high priest at some point during his boyhood. His claims to the imperial purple, on the other hand, were so flimsy as to be almost non-existent — he was merely the grand-nephew of the mother of the late emperor Caracalla, Julia Domna. Caracalla had been assassinated in C.E. 217 and succeeded by the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Macrinus. Elagabalus' hour of glory came when his ambitious maternal grandmother, Julia Maesa, saw an opportunity in the fact that Macrinus had made himself unpopular with the army. She engineered a military coup which succeeded. After she had circulated the rumour that Elagabalus was, in fact, the bastard son of Caracalla, Macrinus was deposed by his own troops and her grandson was proclaimed emperor in his stead (May 16, 218), under the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

As high priest, Antoninus, or Elagabalus as he was generally known, had to preside over the sacred ceremonies held in honour of the black stone. A scrupulous devotee who did not want to neglect his religious duties in any way, he decided to take the black stone with him to Rome. He and his god spent the better part of a year travelling, mostly by land, in a colourful and solemn procession in which the meteorite featured prominently.

Elagabalus turned out to be a pitiful and short-lived ruler. His people soon got to know him as a spoiled and profligate brat, with a sadistic sense of humour and an impressive collection of sexual perversions. Leaving the cares of politics and administration to his female relatives, he was almost exclusively interested in the satisfaction of his private pleasures and the worship of his god. He particularly enjoyed dressing up in multicoloured silken priestly robes, wearing jewels and heavy make-up, and performing outlandish orgiastic rituals in which members of the Senate were sometimes “invited” to take part. The military were not amused. On March 13, 222, they executed Elagabalus and replaced him with his cousin Severus Alexander.

As for the black stone, it was quietly shipped back to Syria and reinstalled in the temple of Emesa. It was probably smashed to pieces when the temple was converted into a Christian church, some time in the 4th century. The site, now occupied by a mosque, has never been excavated. All that remains of the mysterious black stone are ancient texts and a collection of iconographic documents, mostly coins.

Our most precious piece of textual evidence is a short, but detailed description by the historian Herodian who is also our authority for the fact that the so-called “sacred image” was “not wrought by human hands” and that the stone was “rumoured to have fallen from the sky.” Herodian, who may have been an eye-witness (although that is disputed), describes the object as a rather large, cone-



FIG. 1—An example of a coin from imperial Rome depicting the arrival of the stone of Elagabalus in Rome. Illustration from: Henry Cohen, *Description Historique des Monnaies Frappées sous l'Empire Romain Communément Appelées Médailles Impériales* (continuée par Feuardent), 2nd edition, Paris, 1884, Vol. IV, p. 325 (Elagabale #19).

shaped, black stone with a roundish base and a pointed top. Its surface was irregular, “with small projecting pieces and markings” in which the locals claimed to recognize “a rough picture of the Sun.” At any rate, he concludes somewhat skeptically, “that is how they see them.” (Herodian III, 5)

Herodian’s description is supplemented and confirmed by the testimony of coins. Over the years an amazing variety of coins celebrating the stone and its cult were issued both in gold and silver by the Roman mint (under Elagabalus) and in bronze by the city of Emesa. Last but not least, a series of beautiful coins in gold, silver and bronze were issued by another member of the family, a certain Uranius Antoninus, of whom little is known except that he was based in Emesa and that he claimed the imperial title for about a year circa C.E. 254.

Some of the coins provide a fairly good idea of what the temple of Emesa looked like as seen from the outside. Others depict the great altar standing in front of the building, and, based on that depiction, it is surmised that Elagabalus was not the only god worshipped in the temple, but that he had six companions. Since he was considered to be the Sun-god, it is quite likely that those companions were none other than the Moon and the five planets visible to the naked eye.

As for the stone itself, the many different coins illustrating it confirm the accuracy of Herodian’s description — it was cone-shaped and somewhat pointed at the top, like an Easter egg. Finer details are not often visible, at least on the preserved or documented specimens, but there are exceptions, such as a series of imperial coins depicting the stone’s arrival in Rome, carried on its horse-drawn ceremonial cart and bearing the likeness of an eagle on one of its sides (figure 1).

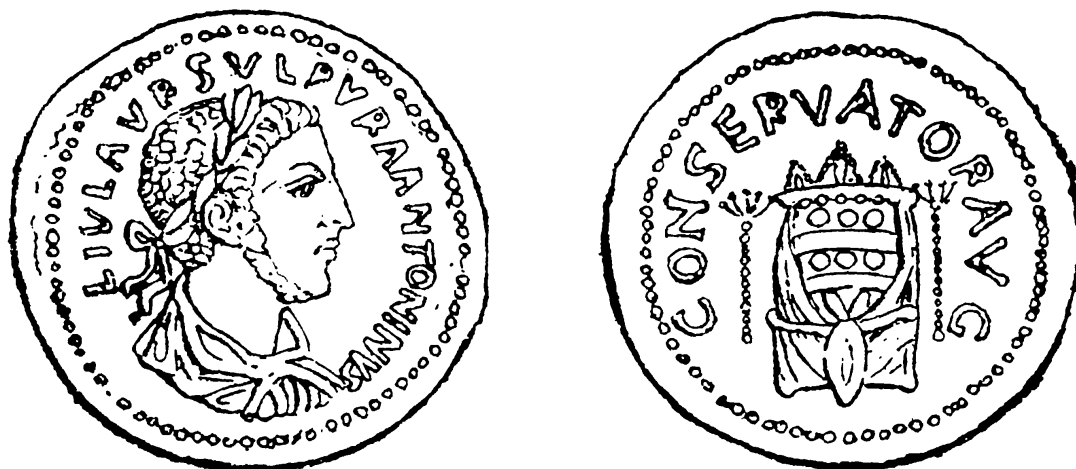


FIG. 2—A reproduction of the gold coin of Uranius Antoninus. Illustration from: Henry Cohen, *Description Historique des Monnaies Frappées sous l'Empire Romain Communément Appelées Médailles Impériales* (continué par Feuardent), 2nd edition, Paris, 1884, Vol. IV, p. 503 (Uranius Antoninus #1). For an enlarged and detailed photograph of the abovementioned coin of Uranius Antoninus, see, Robert Turcan, *Héliogabale et le Sacre du Soleil*, Paris (Albin Michel), 1985, III. # 8.

Some have surmised that a picture of an eagle was indeed carved on the stone, but it is more likely that it was some sort of a coverlet used to conceal the god from profane eyes, as well as to symbolize its sovereign power in such a way as could be understood throughout the empire. Various coins from Emesa which show the stone as smooth-surfaced with an eagle perched on top of it or standing in front with a wreath in its beak would seem to confirm that hypothesis. On at least one of those coins the stone appears to bear the likeness of a star on one of its faces, corroborating the details of Herodian's testimony.

By far the most precious document is a gold coin of Uranius Antoninus, of which a superb specimen in mint-state is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Its reverse depicts the stone in photographic detail as a massive block resting on a square pedestal and all decked out in some cope or chasuble, wide-open in the front and held together at the bottom end by some clasp or ornament of a curious shape (figure 2). Some scholars have interpreted that detail as a sexual symbol, although that may be more revealing of their own unconscious mind than anything else. The bulges and protuberances described by Herodian are fully visible, although it has been argued that some of those "rough spots" are in fact chaplets of flowers adorning the object. The aerolith is also crowned by three conical structures or "peaks" (a large one in the centre and two smaller ones on the sides) apparently made up of precious stones whose purpose is obscure. Finally, there are two delicate parasols laid out on both sides of the idol. The reason why a sacred idol of the Sun may have needed protection from the Sun's rays is unclear, unless those "parasols" were something altogether different. At any

rate, their recurring presence on various coins, on which they are sometimes shown “unfurled” *inside* of the temple structure itself, would seem to point to a special ceremonial significance.

The stone of Elagabalus is not the only meteorite which ended up being worshipped as an idol or regarded as a mystical object of great religious value. Perhaps the most well known comparable case is the Black Stone (al-hajar al-aswed) set in the southeast corner of the Ka’bah in Mecca. While the stone of Mecca is “only” 11 inches wide and 15 inches high, Roman coins depicting the stone of Emesa being carried in a horse-drawn carriage suggest that it was a significantly larger object. Its loss is all the more regrettable.

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