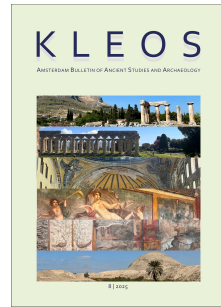




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# A Teenager on the Throne: Addressing Heliogabalus' Age in Cassius Dio and Herodian's Histories

Maaïke E.J.M. van Etten

## ABSTRACT

Roman emperor Heliogabalus (AD 218-222) assumed sole power at just 14 years old, making him the youngest emperor Rome had known up to that time. His reign was characterised by his eccentric behaviour and controversial religious reforms, leading to an overwhelmingly negative reputation in ancient literary sources. While considerable attention has been paid to the impact of his Syrian origins and perceived femininity on this portrayal, the role his age played remains largely underexplored.

This article examines whether Heliogabalus' age played a distinctive role in the negative assessment of his reign in Cassius Dio's *Roman History* and Herodian's *History of the Empire*. I will provide an analysis of Greek and Roman literary works from the first century BC to the second century AD, identifying recurring themes associated with adolescence. Based on these themes, a close reading of the accounts is conducted to determine whether Dio and Herodian employed these themes to characterise the young emperor. Additionally, the relevant passages are analysed in context to determine whether such traits are attributed to Heliogabalus' age or to other factors. Moreover, this analysis includes a study of the purpose behind Dio and Herodian's work. In this article, I will demonstrate that Dio minimised the significance of Heliogabalus' age, as his primary concern lay with Rome's political institutions. In contrast, Herodian emphasised the emperor's youthfulness, aligning with his broader focus on the character of emperors. Therefore, I argue that the decision to either highlight or exclude Heliogabalus' age in their accounts is shaped by the authors' overall aims in writing their histories.

## INTRODUCTION

The reign of Heliogabalus (218-222), a Roman emperor who ascended to power at the age of 14, has long been the subject of fascination.<sup>1</sup> Heliogabalus was known for defying gender norms, at times dressing as a female sex worker and requesting to be

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called 'lady'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the North Hertfordshire Museum in England began using female pronouns for the emperor, suggesting that he identified as a woman.<sup>3</sup> However, using female pronouns for Heliogabalus is not commonly accepted among scholars. Many argue that the ancient accounts about him are exaggerated and biased, with references to his femininity intended to defame him.<sup>4</sup> Central to these discussions are Cassius Dio's *Roman History* and Herodian's *History of the Empire*. Their portrayals of the emperor frequently emphasised his extravagant lifestyle, perceived femininity, and religious beliefs. Current scholarship has therefore primarily focused on these themes, leaving one important aspect underexplored: his age.

In Late Antiquity, the Roman Empire saw the rise of child emperors, with boys as young as 9 months old holding imperial power. This phenomenon has received plenty of scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup> There is a significant contrast between the teenage emperors of the Principate and the child emperors of Late Antiquity. Boys like Valentinianus II (375-392, aged 4) and Theodosius II (402-450, aged 9 months) were emperors in name only, fulfilling ceremonial and religious roles rather than active political ones, while a general took over the administrative and military roles.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the teenage emperors of the Principate, who were no longer children under the law, could exert direct control over the governance of the Empire.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the abundance of ancient literature on the challenges of youth suggests that their age elicited a response from contemporaries. However, such responses have been insufficiently explored in existing scholarship, leading to an implicit assumption that their age was of little significance.<sup>8</sup> The question remains how ancient ideas about adolescence shaped the way in which these teenage emperors were portrayed by their contemporaries.

In this article, I will examine whether Heliogabalus' age was used as a theme by Dio and Herodian to characterise the emperor. The article is structured as follows: First, I will provide an analysis of Greek and Roman literary works from the first century BC to the

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1 Tadema 1888; Couperus 1905. All dates are AD.

2 Cassius Dio 80.13.3, 80.16.5. All translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, unless stated otherwise.

3 Addley 24th of november 2023.

4 Mader 2005; Icks 2008; Chrysanthou 2021.

5 The emergence of child emperors in Late Antiquity was largely a response to specific political crises, without which such accessions might not have occurred. See Hartke 1951; Hartke 1972; McEvoy 2010; McEvoy 2013; Icks 2019.

6 McEvoy 2013, 318-321.

7 Once a boy had donned the *toga virilis*, around the age of 15, he was no longer considered a child.

8 See Roberto 2021; Cordes 2022.

second century AD, identifying recurring themes associated with adolescence. Next, these themes, particularly moral naivety and political inexperience, will serve as a starting point to provide a critical literary analysis of Dio and Herodian's descriptions of Heliogabalus, to determine whether they employed similar themes to characterise him. Lastly, I explore the purpose behind the histories written by these authors, contextualising their decision to either highlight or exclude Heliogabalus' age in their accounts within the larger framework of their historical narratives. I will argue that Dio did not emphasise Heliogabalus' age, as his focus lay with the functioning of Rome's political institutions. In contrast, Herodian highlighted the emperor's age, reflecting his broader interest in the character of emperors.

Before starting the analysis, it must be noted that Dio and Herodian have been chosen as the main sources for this article, as both historians lived through Heliogabalus' reign and left surviving accounts of it. Although the 4th-century *Historia Augusta* also offers an interesting account of the emperor, it was written over a century after his reign.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, W. Hartke has already offered a satisfactory and elaborate analysis of the *Vita Heliogabali*. Heliogabalus' age is not mentioned at all, which, as Hartke convincingly argues, results from the *Historia Augusta's* literary aim to present the *Vita Heliogabali* as a counterpart to the *Vita Alexandri Severi*.<sup>10</sup> Since age is emphasised in the latter to portray Alexander as obedient to his mother, Heliogabalus is characterised instead by other traits.

## YOUTHFULNESS IN THE ANCIENT LITERARY DISCOURSE

To assess whether Heliogabalus' age was significant to Dio and Herodian, it is necessary to first analyse the views on youthfulness in ancient literary sources. Romans divided life into distinct phases, starting with the first approximately 15 years, known as *pueritia*, followed by *adulescentia*, which lasted until the age of 30.<sup>11</sup> The transition between these phases is marked by the donning of the *toga virilis*, the all-white adult toga. This signified a threshold to the Romans, indicating that the boy had left childhood behind and was now eligible to participate in society.<sup>12</sup> However, it did not grant eligibility for all political offices. Political positions often required candidates to meet specific age requirements and to have held prior offices, a path known as the

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<sup>9</sup> Syme 1983, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Hartke 1972, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Eyben 1993, 6. These age categories were not strictly defined and could vary by a few years.

<sup>12</sup> Roller 2006, 167.

*cursus honorum*.<sup>13</sup> This path reflected the widespread idea that the state should be led by older men. The very term for Senate captured this preference; *senatus* refers to the assembly of *senes*, 'elders'. In *De Senectute*, Cicero echoed this sentiment when he claimed that many great states had been ruined by the young and restored by the old.<sup>14</sup>

This idea stemmed from the perception of *adulescentia* as a turbulent and morally precarious stage of life. Literary sources from the late Republic and early Principate contain numerous references to *adulescentiae lubricas*, 'slippery youth'. Cicero noted that giving in to a life of pleasure is especially alluring for young men, because youth is a 'slippery' path.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Junius Gallio, in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*, praised his father's ability to pass through *adulescentia* without any problems, acknowledging that it is a challenging time, "lubricum tempus".<sup>16</sup> This idea is reiterated in Tacitus' *Annales*, when Nero asked Seneca: "Why not rather, if the frailty of my youth goes in any respect astray, call me back and guide yet more zealously with your help the manhood which you have instructed?"<sup>17</sup> *Adulescentia* was viewed as a challenging stage of life, because adolescents were considered to be "[...] soft as wax for moulding to evil," and "[...] subject to many a change in impulses."<sup>18</sup> Plutarch even asserted that "[...] some of our young men, as soon as they lay aside the garb of childhood, lay aside also their sense of modesty and fear, and, undoing the habit that invests them, straightway become full of unruliness."<sup>19</sup> This is exemplified by Isaeus in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*: "Isaeus the Assyrian sophist had given the period of his youth over to pleasure, for he was at the mercy of his stomach and love of drinking, and dressed himself in soft clothes and was often in love and openly joined in drunken revels."<sup>20</sup> Only when Isaeus reached adulthood was he able to take control over his life again.

To prevent such transgressions, young men required guidance.

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13 See Duncan-Jones 2016, 22-35 for an overview.

14 Cicero, *De Senectute* 20.

15 Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 41.

16 Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 2.6.4.

17 Tacitus, *Annales* 14.56: "Quin, si qua in parte lubricum adulescentiae nostrae declinat, revocas ornatumque robur subsidio inpensius regis?" The translation was taken from the Perseus Digital Library.

18 Horace, *Ars Poetica* 163: "imberbis iuvenis, [...] cereus in vitium flecti [...]"; Plutarch, *Moralia*. Tyrwhitt's Fragments 9: "[...] ἐξ ὧν μεταβαλλόμενον ἐπὶ πολλὰ ταῖς ὁρμαῖς τὸν νέον ὀρώμεν."

19 Plutarch, *Moralia*. On listening to lectures 1.37C-D: "[...] οὕτως ἔνιοι τῶν νέων ἅμα τῷ τὸ παιδικὸν ἰμάτιον ἀποθέσθαι συναποθέμενοι τὸ αἰδεῖσθαι καὶ φοβεῖσθαι καὶ λύσαντες τὴν κατασχηματίζουσαν αὐτοὺς περιβολὴν εὐθύς ἐμπίπλονται τῆς ἀναγωγίας."

20 Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 513: "Ἰσαῖος δ' ὁ σοφιστὴς ὁ Ἀσσύριος τὸν μὲν ἐν μεираκίῳ χρόνον ἡδοναῖς ἐδεδώκει, γαστροῦ τε γὰρ καὶ φιλοποσίας ἤτητο καὶ λεπτὰ ἡμίσχετο καὶ θαμὰ ἦρα καὶ ἀπαρακαλύπτως ἐκώμαζεν."

In Book 1 of Herodian's history, Marcus Aurelius (161-180) stressed the need for a guardian for Commodus (180-192), given that young men are prone to slipping into a life of pleasure.<sup>21</sup> They lack political and moral experience, simply because they have had less time to gain it. Similarly, in the words of Maecenas, Dio posed the rhetorical question "[...] is it not disgraceful, and indeed hazardous, to entrust the public business to men younger than this [25], when we never commit our private affairs to anyone before he has reached this age?"<sup>22</sup> This underscores the notion that young men should not be senators, much less emperors.

Adolescents were clearly considered to be morally naive. They were impressionable and therefore easily influenced. Additionally, their lack of political experience made them more susceptible to poor and unconventional decision-making. These characteristics diminished as men matured and reached adulthood.<sup>23</sup> However, this was not the case for Heliogabalus, given that he died at the age of 18. Therefore, the question must be posed as to whether Dio and Herodian portrayed Heliogabalus as a morally naive and inexperienced emperor, who failed to successfully lead the Empire, due to his young age.

Before proceeding, an important observation must be made. The traits commonly associated with youthfulness in the literary discourse may also stem from other factors. The fact that Heliogabalus came from Emesa, Syria, is significant. In ancient literary sources, Syrians were often depicted through a lens of cultural stereotyping.<sup>24</sup> These portrayals frequently highlighted traits such as sexual licentiousness and effeminacy.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Heliogabalus is frequently depicted as indulging in excessive and unconventional sexual behaviours.<sup>26</sup> These actions can also be linked to youthfulness, as moral naivety can lead to questionable (sexual) actions. Therefore, passages referring to the identified themes must be carefully analysed within the broader context of the narrative and the author's intentions, to determine whether the traits attributed to Heliogabalus result from his young age or are informed by other factors.

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21 Herodian 1.3.1.

22 Cassius Dio 52.20.1: "πῶς γὰρ οὐκ αἰσχρὸν καὶ σφαλερόν ἐστι τὰ μὲν οἰκεία μηδενὶ πρὸ ταύτης τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπιτρέπεσθαι, τὰ δὲ δημόσια καὶ νεωτέροις τισὶν ἐγχειρίζεσθαι." See Millar 1964, 102-109 for the argument that Cassius Dio is expressing his own political thought here.

23 For a more in-depth discussion about the themes associated with youth, see Eyben 1977; Bradley 1999; Roller 2006; Laes 2011; Laes 2018; Laes 2023.

24 Isaac 2004, 324-351 provides an overview.

25 Isaac 2004, 494; Habash 2017, 985-986.

26 Chrysanthou 2021.

## CASSIUS DIO'S PORTRAYAL OF HELIOGABALUS

Having identified the themes linked to youthfulness, it can be examined whether Dio used Heliogabalus' age as a deliberate tool for his characterisation. Dio, who was a senior senator during the Severan age, wrote his *Roman History* between 197 and 230.<sup>27</sup> In 80 books, he wrote an overview of Rome's entire history up until his own time, drawing upon his firsthand knowledge from the reign of Commodus onwards. As a defender of monarchy, Dio was concerned with Rome's political institutions and the general (downward) trajectory of the Empire, viewing the emperor as part of a larger institutional framework.<sup>28</sup>

His account of Heliogabalus is negative from the outset.<sup>29</sup> When describing the fall of Macrinus (217-218), Heliogabalus' predecessor, Dio wrote that he "[...] was overthrown by a mere boy of whose very name he had previously been ignorant".<sup>30</sup> Dio used παιδάριον, 'little child', to describe Heliogabalus. As a diminutive of παῖς, the word carries a belittling connotation, highlighting Dio's contempt for the emperor. The next reference to the emperor's age appears at the beginning of Book 80. Upon becoming emperor, Heliogabalus promised to emulate Augustus, "[...] to whose youth he likened his own."<sup>31</sup> According to Dio, Heliogabalus only did this in response to Macrinus' mockery of his age.<sup>32</sup> This passage, like the previous one, can be interpreted as an attempt by Dio to ridicule the emperor. The sole respect in which Heliogabalus sought to emulate Augustus—whom Dio regarded as the ideal ruler—was his youthfulness.<sup>33</sup>

Most references to Heliogabalus' age are less direct. For example, Dio stated that "he applied to himself certain titles connected with his imperial office before they had been voted, [...]"<sup>34</sup> Specifically, Heliogabalus made himself consul twice, without having held the requisite prior offices or titles. Heliogabalus' lack of prior office underscored his political inexperience, which was a direct result of his age. However, it is important to question whether Dio attributed this decision to the emperor's youthfulness or to other factors. The fact that he emphasised that "[...] they were innovations upon established

<sup>27</sup> Scott 2023, 28-31.

<sup>28</sup> Scott 2023, 4.

<sup>29</sup> It has recently been argued that Dio's interest in the negative construction of Heliogabalus was directly related to his tendency to judge the Severan emperors on the basis of the political positions they offered him. See Silvia 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Cassius Dio 79.40.3: "[...] ὑπὸ τε παιδαρίου, οὐ μὴδὲ τὸ ὄνομα πρότερον ἠπίστατο, [...]"

<sup>31</sup> Cassius Dio 80.1.3: "ὅ καὶ τὴν ἡλικίαν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀφωμοίου."

<sup>32</sup> Cassius Dio 80.1.4.

<sup>33</sup> For Dio's view on Augustus, see Madsen 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Cassius Dio 80.8.1: "[...] τι τε τῶν ὀνομάτων τινὰ τῶν ἐς τὴν ἡγεμονίαν αὐτοῦ τεινόντων, πρὶν ψηφισθῆναι [...]"

usage” is particularly significant.<sup>35</sup>

This emphasis sets the stage for understanding the other passages. A revealing example is the description of the emperor’s many marriages. Dio ridiculed Heliogabalus’ reason for marrying Cornelia Paula: “The False Antoninus married Cornelia Paula, in order, as he said, that he might sooner become a father—he who could not even be a man!”<sup>36</sup> The Greek word for man here, *άνήρ*, is the standard term for the male gender and is not a reference to the emperor’s young age. Dio accused him of being feminine. The marriage did not last long, and Heliogabalus married Aquilia Severa, a Vestal Virgin, instead. Dio described this act as “[...] most flagrantly violating the law; for she was consecrated to Vesta, and yet he most impiously defiled her.”<sup>37</sup> Despite committing a crime by marrying a Vestal Virgin, Heliogabalus did not take the matter seriously and married four other women before returning to Severa once more. C. Rowan argued that the grotesqueness of the act and Dio’s wording presented the emperor as sexually licentious.<sup>38</sup> His blatant disrespect for Roman law is clearly exemplified here. While his conduct reflects the impulsive nature often attributed to youth, when combined with the reference to his lack of masculinity, this passage must have invoked the Syrian stereotype.<sup>39</sup> Dio’s purpose in writing *Roman History* also suggests that he was primarily focused on Heliogabalus’ Syrian origins. The character of the emperor was secondary to the functioning of the state. Dio linked Heliogabalus’ Syrian descent to his sexually deviant behaviour, which he believed violated Rome’s institutions and destabilised the state.<sup>40</sup> Heliogabalus’ age had no such consequences.

The passage about Heliogabalus adopting his younger cousin, Severus Alexander (222-235), must likewise be understood within this context. After the adoption, Heliogabalus “[...] congratulated himself on becoming suddenly the father of so large a boy, —though he himself was not much older than the other—and declared that he had no need of any other child to keep his house free from despondency.”<sup>41</sup> Heliogabalus is depicted as not taking

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35 Cassius Dio 80.8.1: “[...] πλὴν καθ’ ὅσον παρὰ τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐκαινοτομήθη.”

36 Cassius Dio 80.9.1: “Ἐγήμε δὲ Κορνηλίαν Παῦλαν, ἵνα δὴ θάσσοι, ὡσπερ ἔφη, πατὴρ γένηται ὁ μὴδ’ ἀνὴρ εἶναι δυνάμενος.” For Dio’s usage of nicknames, see Rowan 2012, 169-170.

37 Cassius Dio 80.9.3: “[...] ἐκφανέστατα παρανομήσας· ἱερωμένην γὰρ αὐτὴν τῆ Ἑστία ἀσεβέστατα ἤσχυεν.”

38 Rowan 2012, 168.

39 Isaac 2004, 494.

40 Kemezis 2016, 358; Sommer 2004, 104-105; Icks 2008, 481-483.

41 Cassius Dio 80.17.2: “[...] ἐαυτὸν δὲ ὡς καὶ πατέρα ἐξαίφνης τηλικούτου παιδίου, καίπερ οὐ πολὺ τῆ ἡλικίας αὐτοῦ προέχοντα, ἐμακάρισε, καὶ μὴδὲν ἄλλου τέκνου δεῖσθαι ἔφησεν, ἵν’ ἡ οἰκία αὐτοῦ ζᾶνευ ἀθυμιῶν διαγένηται.”

the adoption seriously by making jokes. Additionally, Dio recorded that the emperor was controlled by the god Elagabal—the Syrian sun-god of whom Heliogabalus was high priest—who commanded him to adopt and name his new son Alexander.<sup>42</sup> While Heliogabalus' unserious attitude could be attributed to his age, it should be understood within the broader context of Dio's narrative. The passage began by noting that the adoption was brought before the Senate for approval. By setting the stage in the Senate House and highlighting the emperor's irreverence, Dio showcased Heliogabalus' contempt for this political body. The reference to Elagabal is then meant to underscore the influence of Heliogabalus' Syrian origins on his inappropriate behaviour. Once again, Dio linked the emperor's disregard for Roman customs to his Syrian background.

There are no other references to Heliogabalus' age. The account is characterised by the emperor's deviant behaviour stemming from his Syrian background, which expressed itself in his disregard for Roman customs and institutions. Therefore, the passage regarding Heliogabalus assuming the consulship twice should be understood in this context. Dio focused on his usurpation of titles not granted by the Senate, viewing this as a more significant issue than his lack of experience. Thus, Heliogabalus' failure as emperor is first and foremost caused by his Syrian background, which led to his disrespect for Roman customs. His age, though mentioned in passing, was not significant enough for Dio to use it as a prominent theme in negatively characterising him.

### HERODIAN'S PORTRAYAL OF HELIOGABALUS

Herodian wrote the *History of the Roman Empire* somewhere in the 240s.<sup>43</sup> He wrote a history from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the accession of Gordian III (238-244), drawing on his firsthand knowledge of this period. Throughout the work, significant weight is placed upon the emperors' traits and actions.<sup>44</sup> For Herodian, the success or failure of the Empire hinged entirely on the character of the emperor.

Heliogabalus' age is noted at the beginning of the narrative. Upon becoming emperor, he immediately relinquished his imperial duties to his grandmother, Julia Maesa. According to Herodian, this was because Heliogabalus "[...] was young and without

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<sup>42</sup> Cassius Dio 80.17.3. See Icks 2006 for the significance of Elagabal for the reign of Heliogabalus.

<sup>43</sup> See Zimmermann 1999, 285-301 for an overview of the time of composition.

<sup>44</sup> Sidebottom 1998, 2804; De Blois 2003, 154-155.

administrative experience or education”.<sup>45</sup> Herodian used παιδείας, paideia, to refer to Heliogabalus’ lack of education, suggesting that he lacked more than mere schooling. As U. Roberto has convincingly argued, Herodian considered paideia to be fundamental for cultivating self-control, as it encompassed the teaching of both moral and political virtues.<sup>46</sup> These virtues were essential for navigating life at the imperial court—virtues which, according to Herodian, Heliogabalus did not possess.

Maesa played an important role in Herodian’s narrative.<sup>47</sup> Herodian strongly contrasted the emperor’s inexperience with his grandmother’s experience. For instance, she frequently intervened during Heliogabalus’ attacks against Alexander. According to Herodian, her success in these interventions was due to her extensive knowledge of imperial business, having lived at the imperial palace during the reign of her nephew, Emperor Caracalla (211-217).<sup>48</sup> Heliogabalus’ young age prevented him from acquiring similar experience. By emphasising Maesa’s understanding of political and social matters and pitting it against that of Heliogabalus, Herodian highlighted the emperor’s lack of experience, thereby revealing a flaw in his leadership.

Later in the narrative, Herodian described Heliogabalus as “[...] in most matters a thoughtless, silly young man,” which explained why Maesa was able to intervene so easily.<sup>49</sup> In C. R. Whittaker’s translation, ἄφρων is translated as silly, but this does not capture the full gravity of the term.<sup>50</sup> Its relation to φρήν, ‘the seat of the intellect’, suggests that Heliogabalus did not merely make poor decisions; he was incapable of making good ones. This interpretation aligns more closely with Herodian’s portrayal of Heliogabalus, as the emperor is consistently depicted as blindly following orders.

This theme is particularly evident in the prominent influence of Maesa throughout the account. As M. Icks has convincingly argued, Herodian presents an emperor who is played like a puppet by his grandmother.<sup>51</sup> For example, Maesa convinced Heliogabalus to adopt Alexander and appoint him Caesar.<sup>52</sup> Similar to Dio,

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45 Herodian 5.5.1: “[...] αὐτὸς γὰρ ἦν νέος τε τὴν ἡλικίαν, πραγμάτων τε καὶ παιδείας ἄπειρος [...]” It could be argued that ἄπειρος functions as a specification of νέος, illustrating that Heliogabalus’ young age caused his lack of experience, as they are grammatically coordinate. This interpretation is consistent with the broader themes in Herodian’s work.

46 Roberto 2021, 137.

47 Nadolny 2016, 167-172.

48 Herodian 5.8.3.

49 Herodian 5.7.1: “[...] κουφον ἄλλως καὶ ἀφρονα νεανίαν [...]”

50 Whittaker 1969/1970.

51 Icks 2023, 56.

52 Herodian 5.7.1. This contradicts Dio, who claimed that it was Elagabal who instructed Heliogabalus to adopt Alexander.

Herodian noted that the adoption was ridiculous and a charade.<sup>53</sup> The passage is followed by Heliogabalus' downfall, thereby highlighting the naivety of the puppet-emperor. The soldiers favoured Alexander and killed Heliogabalus to declare the former emperor, as he was already next in line.<sup>54</sup> The way the narrative is structured suggests that, had Heliogabalus not blindly followed Maesa's advice and appointed Alexander as his successor, the soldiers might have struggled to find a suitable replacement. This could have prevented them from taking matters into their own hands. Clearly, Heliogabalus was too young to have any political experience or understanding of how to rule as an independent emperor. As a result, he blindly followed his grandmother's advice, even when it put him in danger. Herodian truly painted the picture of a senseless young man characterised by his age.

Due to Herodian's focus on the emperor's character as crucial to the stability of the Empire, Heliogabalus' young age became a key factor in his portrayal. The emperor's inexperience and naivety, attributed to his age, directly contributed to his inability to rule effectively. This conclusion becomes particularly striking when considering that Alexander also ascended to the throne at the age of 14, yet maintained a largely positive reputation. Age alone did not determine Heliogabalus' portrayal. Other factors also contributed to his portrayal, such as his Syrian origins.

The activities Heliogabalus engaged in—dancing, performing sacrifices to Elagabal, wearing makeup, and indulging in luxury—might have reinforced the image of a young man.<sup>55</sup> However, Herodian primarily drew on Heliogabalus' Syrian background here.<sup>56</sup> As noted earlier, the traits typically associated with adolescence are not necessarily exclusive to it and can stem from other factors. In Herodian's narrative, as A. Kemezis pointed out, Heliogabalus' effeminacy, love of luxury, and religious practices can be seen as products of his Syrian origins rather than youthful indiscretion.<sup>57</sup> Herodian drew upon both the common literary stereotype of youthfulness and the prejudiced views against Syrians to characterise the emperor. He attributed Heliogabalus' inexperience and naivety to his youth, while his extravagant behaviour and indulgence in luxury reflect his Syrian origins.

## CONCLUSION

Both Dio and Herodian present a negative view of the young

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<sup>53</sup> Herodian 5.7.4. For Dio as one of Herodian sources, see Scheithauer 1990; Chrysanthou 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Herodian 5.8.1, 5.8.8.

<sup>55</sup> Herodian 5.5.4, 5.6.1, 5.6.10.

<sup>56</sup> Icks 2008, 486-487.

<sup>57</sup> Kemezis 2016, 366-367.

emperor Heliogabalus, yet they differ in the way they characterise him. For Dio, Heliogabalus' behaviour was not a result of his age, but rather of his Syrian origins. The emphasis on his Syrian background reflects Dio's broader focus on Rome's institutions. The emperor's sexual licentiousness and effeminacy resulted in his failure to respect Roman norms and customs, which Dio saw as the main reason for his failed reign. Heliogabalus' age had no such consequence, and therefore, Dio did not use age as a prominent theme in his portrayal of the emperor. This conclusion raises an intriguing question: would Dio have used the stereotype of youthfulness to negatively characterise a young 'Roman' emperor, such as Commodus, in the absence of other stereotypes?

Herodian, on the other hand, places much greater emphasis on Heliogabalus' age as a key factor in his downfall. Heliogabalus is depicted as a puppet-emperor who lacked experience due to his young age. The emperor is consistently portrayed as a morally naive and thoughtless young man, incapable of effectively leading the Empire. Herodian's focus on the character of emperors explains why he invoked broader themes associated with youthfulness to illustrate Heliogabalus' failure as a ruler. This portrayal was further shaped by the emperor's Syrian background and effeminacy, which, in Herodian's view, reinforced his unsuitability for the role of emperor.

The age of Heliogabalus was not a standard theme in historiographies from the early third century AD. The aims behind writing their histories reflect the differing importance Dio and Herodian attributed to Heliogabalus' youthfulness. Dio did not consider Heliogabalus' age to be a defining characteristic. In contrast, Herodian believed that the emperor's youthfulness was the driving force behind his actions. Dio disapproved of a Syrian on the throne; Herodian disapproved of a teenager on it.

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