

JOHN REA

A LETTER OF THE EMPEROR ELAGABALUS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 96 (1993) 127–132

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn



## A LETTER OF THE EMPEROR ELAGABALUS

We start with the texts of the first edition of P.Bub. I 4 coll. XXIX and XXX:

### Kol. XXIX

1	— — — — —	[.....] [.....] s[.....]	
2		matrimoni[o .....] !c]ripsi • iung[.....]	]l[.....]
3		melioribus m[.....] per]niciei cor]rupi[.....]	]
4		quae enim fil[.....] uobis principem [.....]	]..
5		probi]s moribus in[sin]uare se voluit et per[.....]	]
6		cetera tacere for]tissimi et fidelissim[i ..] [.....]	
7		praetoriani men[.....] olus sciam nihil [.....] ea [.....]	
8		at]is ca [.....] [.....] itus[.....] in cubiculo • meo non eri[.....]	
9		idem [.....] dol[.....] a Balb[o] qui et metu et [.....]	
10		[.....] [.....] re [r]egionibus mei[s ..]	
11		[.....] com]munia uota co [.....]	

### Kol. XXX

1	— — — — —	[(ἔτους) δ' Αὐτοκ]ρ[ά]τορος Κα[ίσαρος Μάρκου (?) Ἄ]ντων[ίνο]υ Ε[ὐ]σεβοῦς Εὐτυχοῦς]	
		Σεβαστοῦ	
2		[(vac. ?) ] (vac.) Π[αῦ]νι [.....] (vac.) [(vac.) ] (vac.)	
3		Α[ὐ]ρήλιος Ἡρακλείδης στρατηγ[ός] Β[ου]βαστ[εί]του	
4		ἀν[τί]γραφον ἐπιστο[λ]ῆς [γ]ραφεί[ς]ης ὑπὸ Γεμινί[ου Χρ]ήστου τοῦ	
5		λαμ[π]ροτά[του] ἡγεμόνος π[ρο]τετα[γ]μένων θείων [θ]ελη[μ]άτων τοῦ	
6		κ[υ]ρίου ἡμῶν] Αὐτοκράτο[ρος] Μάρκου Αὐρηλί[ου] Ἄντωνίνου Εὐ[σ]εβοῦς	
7		[Εὐτυχοῦς Σεβασ]τοῦ περὶ τοῦ [.....]	

The first is headed 'Lateinischer Brief des Präfekten (?)', the second 'Begleitschreiben des Strategen (zu Kol. XXIX)'. The Greek is much more approachable than the Latin.

The composite roll from which the fragments come is made up of administrative documents filed in the office of the strategus of the Bubastite nome in the fourth regnal year of Elagabalus, 29 August 220 to 28 August 221. There is no reason why the date clause in XXX 1 should not be restored with his normal titulature; the addition of Αὐρηλίου, cf. 6, gives only twenty-one letters of the smaller script of the date clause to fill the gap, which corresponds with the width occupied by fifteen letters of the large Chancery style in the body of the letter. The surviving alpha of Κα[ίσαρος] is above the beginning of the pi of ἐπιστο[λ]ῆς in line 4 (Tafel 20), and the first nu of Ἄ]ντων[ίνο]υ is above the eta of γραφεί[ς]ης in 4 (Tafel 21). Read therefore (ἔτους) δ' Αὐτοκ]ρ[ά]τορος Κα[ίσαρος] Μάρκου Αὐρηλί[ου] Ἄ]ντων[ίνο]υ Ε[ὐ]σεβοῦς Εὐτυχοῦς Σεβαστοῦ.

In line 2 the initial pi of the month name is damaged, but not severely enough to suggest any suspicion that it is not a pi (Tafel 20). However, perhaps Π[αχών (26 April - 25 May) should be retained as a possible alternative to Π[αῦνι (26 May - 24 June). The surviving dates in the roll are not quite regular enough to allow a certain conclusion, see the table on P.Bub. I pp.99-101; admittedly May/June makes a more regular succession. This reservation makes little practical difference, since the *terminus ante quem* for this section of the document remains 25 June 221.

However, this date does not belong to the communication of the strategus in the following lines, as we will see in a moment. That begins with the name and title of the strategus of the Bubastite nome in the nominative, unaccompanied by any mention of an addressee or any introductory verb. This formula is the mark of a covering letter for material which must be communicated to a further audience, usually by being posted in public, cf. P.Iand. VII 140.1 n. A useful model for us is P.Oxy. XLII 3025.1-6:

Δημ[ήτ]ριος στρατηγ[ός] Ὁξυρυγγε[ίτο]υ.  
 τῆς γραφείης μοι ὑπὸ Ἰου[λί]ου Μαξιμιανοῦ [τ]οῦ κρατίτου  
 ἐπιστρα[τήγου] περὶ κατ[ατ]άξεως πραγμ[ατ]ικῶν  
 ἀντίγρ[αφον] δημοσία π[ρο]έθηκα ὡς [έκε]λεύθη,  
 5 ἵνα πάντες εἰδῶσι ἃ δ[ι]ετάξατο. ἔτους δευτέρου  
 Αὐτοκράτορος Καίσαρος Τρ[αϊαν]οῦ Ἀδριανοῦ Σεβαστοῦ, Ἐπεὶφ κγ̄.

Note the position of the date clause, not only at the end of the prefatory announcement, but clearly attached to it by being started in the same line as its closing words. Therefore in P.Bub. I 4 col. XXX the date clause probably relates to a preceding document which is otherwise lost.

The model suggests that our announcement promises the publication of a copy of a letter written by the prefect of Egypt, which was itself prefaced by an imperial document or documents emanating from Elagabalus, described, according to the restored text, as θείων [θελη]μάτων. No parallel is cited. The matter prefaced must have been written, so that the simplest and best possibility seems to be [γραμ]μάτων. For θεία γράμματα as a standard term for an imperial letter see L.Robert, *Opera Minora* ii 833 (= *REA* 62(1960)317). A very similar phrase can probably be recognized in Stud.Pal. V 119 verso iii 19, where τῶ[ν] θ[είων] γραμμάτων refers to the letter of Gallienus quoted, in Greek, in lines 8-16.

When we turn to the Latin fragments, we find that they refer to praetorian troops (7), which were of course the emperor's guards, and to the writer's bedroom (8). The emperor's *cubiculum* is something we hear about from time to time, since it was almost a department of the imperial government, but the bedroom of the prefect of Egypt is mostly private, the sordid exception, which proves the rule, being in the accusatory speech of the Acta Maximi, P.Oxy. III 471.73 (= H.Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* p.35, *Acta Alexandrinorum* (ed. Teubn.) p.25). These two features alone make it likely that the Latin is the imperial letter in question.

The absence of any certain trace of the letter of the prefect is not entirely surprising. The roll, incomplete at beginning and end, is represented by fragments patchily covering a little more than ten metres in width, but none of the fragments reaches even 8 cm in height. It has been calculated that about 6-7 cm is lost from the tops of the items, but the extent of the loss at the foot is unknown, see P.Bub. I pp. 97-8; at least another ten centimetres would be needed to bring the roll to a plausible height for such documents, say 25 cm in all, and twenty would be perfectly normal, say 35 cm in all.

At first sight it does not seem likely that the date above the letter of the strategus belongs to the prefect's letter, which we expect below, just as the beginning of the letter of the epistrategus stands below P.Oxy. 3025.1-6, in lines 7-15. However, the Latin letter comes in col. XXIX,

before the covering letter in col. XXX, and the order of these fragments is made certain by overlaps of text from the end of col. XXIX to XXX and from col. XXX to col. XXXI. The letter of the strategus refers to a copy of a letter of the prefect to which the imperial letter was prefaced, π[ροτετα]γμένων θείων [γραμ]μάτων, so that if the Latin is, as I believe, the emperor's letter, then the prefect's letter must have occupied the middle position and this date clause is likely to have belonged to it. Hence it is a reasonable hypothesis that the prefect's letter antedates 25 June 221, and that the emperor's letter must be even earlier.

Whatever the answer to the question of the order is, the content of the Latin letter indicates that it is an imperial letter and it seems perverse to doubt that it is the letter of Elagabalus referred to in col. XXX.

The Latin gives the impression that the matters at issue were very serious and very central to the reign of the emperor himself, although the run of the text is perhaps impossible to recover (Tafel 19).

Line 2 fairly clearly mentions marriage, *matrimoni*[ and *iung*[ being hard to take separately, although *matrimonio* is not inevitable. This might be connected with some general legal provision affecting marriage, possibly the marriage of soldiers, since praetorian troops are mentioned in 7, but, as we shall see in a moment, lines 4-6 suggest that an imperial marriage is meant. *sc]ripsi* is a doubtful restoration, cf. *ri* in *matrimoni*[ (2) and *melioribus* (3). The interpunct here and in 8 is uncertain and unlikely at so late a date, see P.J.Parsons, *JRS* 69(1979)131, esp. n.43.

Line 3 is very difficult. *melioribus m*[ seems right, but *per]niciēi corrupe*[ cannot be: *ri* should not ligature to *i*, cf. 4 *enim*, 7 *praetoriani*, *nihil*; the double *r* looks like *m*, only a little damaged. The second *i* appears to have a short horizontal projecting from the middle towards the right, but looks like no other letter; it may perhaps have been cancelled. The third *i* looks more like *s*. Towards the end *p* could be *t*. However, in spite of these remarks I can offer no sensible reading.

Line 4 looks as if it refers to a woman who (*quae*) perhaps gives(?; or has given, or will give, or wants to give) a son (*fili[um]*) (of hers, *suum?*], of mine, *meum?*]) to you (*uobis*) as *princeps*. If this is the correct view of the words, it is the succession to the imperial rule which is under discussion.

Women who might be considered in this connection are Iulia Soaemias, Iulia Mamaea, Iulia Paula, Iulia Aquilia Severa, and Annia Faustina. Soaemias was the mother of Elagabalus himself, daughter of Iulia Maesa the sister of the empress Iulia Domna. The mention of her marriage to Sextus Varius Marcellus would be a surprise in a letter of this date, because Elagabalus' claim to be emperor rested on the story that he was the illegitimate son of Caracalla.

Mamaea was the sister of Soaemias and the mother of Severus Alexander, also claimed as an illegitimate son of Caracalla. Roman public opinion, outraged by the outlandish behaviour of Elagabalus, forced him to adopt Severus Alexander and make him his junior colleague. The date of the proclamation of Severus Alexander as Caesar was given in the Feriale Duranum, see R.O.Fink, *Roman Military Records* No.117 ii 16, and is restored as the equivalent of 26 June on the basis of convincing historical and palaeographical arguments given in R.O.Fink, A.S.Hoey, W.F.Snyder, *YCS* 7(1940)141-3. The year was 221, proved, for instance, by the earliest Egyptian date clause naming both Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, in a document of 23 August 221, see D.W.Rathbone, *ZPE* 62(1986)107. The date of his proclamation as Caesar is also likely to have been the date of his adoption, and it is plausibly argued that this does not receive notice in the Feriale because of the *damnatio memoriae* of Elagabalus, see *ibid.* 143 and n. 626, citing E.Kornemann, *Doppelprinzipat* 79, 83-4. On 1 July 221, again restored convincingly, see line 18, and *YCS* pp. 143-5, Severus Alexander was designated consul for 222. These dates are slightly later than the latest possible date implied by line 2 of col. XXX, which could only be a *terminus*

*ante quem*. This is not necessarily a fatal objection to supposing that the Latin document has some relevance to the adoption of Severus Alexander. The document could, by some remote possibility, have announced such an event in advance, and, since this date is not well attached to either of the items we are considering, it may not be directly relevant. The same argument applies to the marriage of Mamaea as to the marriage of Soemias: it would be strange, even for Elagabalus, to mention the marriage of a woman whose adultery was the origin of her son's claim to be successor to the emperor. However, the argument has not quite the same force in this connection. It may still be possible that the words refer to Mamaea and Severus Alexander.

Iulia Paula was the first wife of Elagabalus. The chronology of his four certain marriages is approximately fixed by Alexandrian tetradrachms with the superscriptions of his wives and a mark for the year of the reign. The authorities state that there are coins of Iulia Paula for years 2, 3 and 4, and that therefore she was married before 30 August 219, the first day of the third regnal year, see the clear account in Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal* 88-9. Although it is irrelevant to the present document I can report that the single alleged coin of year 2, for which see R.S.Poole, *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum. Alexandria and the Nomes* 195-6, No.1528, cf. J.Vogt, *Die Alexandrinischen Münzen* 176, n.1017, has now been assigned to Iulia Maesa. The coin does indeed have L B = (ἔτους) β clearly, as Mattingly reported to Vogt, but the damaged superscription has IOYΑΙΑ ΜΑΙC[, as is made doubly certain by comparison with other coins of Maesa, e.g. 1572. This information, together with very clear photographs of 1528 and 1572, was kindly supplied by Dr Ute Wartenberg of the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum. The coins of year three and four are secure, which means that the marriage took place before 29 August 220, the first day of the fourth regnal year. It ended during the fourth year, when Elagabalus divorced Iulia Paula and married the Vestal virgin Iulia Aquilia Severa, whose Alexandrian coins bear marks of years 4 and 5, Poole, op.cit. 197-8. However, coins of years 4 and 5 also have the name of Annia Faustina, *ibid.* 198-200. In her case year 4 depends again on a singleton, *ibid.* 198-9 No.1549, but Dr Wartenberg's clear photograph shows a well preserved coin with an unmistakable superscription and date. This means that Elagabalus divorced Iulia Paula, married and divorced Iulia Aquilia Severa, and married Annia Faustina all between 29 August 220 and 28 August 221. The third marriage continued into the fifth regnal year, but during that year he repudiated Annia Faustina and remarried Iulia Aquilia Severa, as recounted by the historians and illustrated by the Alexandrian coins of both for the fifth year. He claimed to have divorced Iulia Paula because she had a blemish on her body (κηλιδά τινα περὶ τὸ σῶμα) and married the Vestal virgin to have children fit for his god, if that is what θεοπρεπεῖς means (ἵνα δὴ καὶ θεοπρεπεῖς παῖδες ἔκ τε ἐμοῦ τοῦ ἀρχιερέως ἔκ τε ταύτης τῆς ἀρχιερείας γεννῶνται), see Cassius Dio LXXIX 9.3. According to Herodian, as well as saying that the marriage of a priest and priestess was fitting and sacred, he claimed to have fallen in love with her (V 6.2 προσποιητάμενος ἔρῶν ...; ... φήσας ἀνθρώπινόν τι πεπονθέναι πάθος. ἔρωτι γὰρ τῆς κόρης ἐαλωκέναι, ἀρμόζοντά τε καὶ σεβάσμιον εἶναι γάμον ἱερέως τε καὶ ἱερείας). Since he remarried her after divorcing her successor, we can accept that he wanted her, whether for herself or for the advancement of his own views.

Since there is only one coin of Annia Faustina for the fourth year, it may be guessed that her marriage took place not very long before 29 August 221. The adoption of Severus Alexander took place on or about 26 June 221. The Latin letter probably belongs some time before that event, if the date clause in col. XXX 1-2 belongs to the prefect of Egypt's covering letter for it. Therefore there may be some reason to connect the imperial letter with the divorce of Iulia Aquilia Severa, which was preceded in the same year by her marriage and the divorce from Iulia Paula. It has been argued that the marriage to the Vestal produced a reaction in the people of Rome and particularly in

the praetorian guard which forced the divorce and also the adoption of Severus Alexander, see Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen* 94-7. According to Herodian (V 7.1) Iulia Maesa, suspecting that the soldiers were displeased and despairing of Elagabalus as an acceptable emperor, persuaded Elagabalus to adopt Severus Alexander, whom she viewed as a candidate who would conform to Roman standards, and to make him Caesar.

A possible run of the text and sense of lines 4-8 might be, *quae enim fili[um suum (or meum?)] uobis principem [idoneum (or futurum?) dare et ipsa] probis moribus in[sin]uare se uoluit et per [quam, ut decet me] cetera tacere, for[ti]ssimi et fidelissim[i] mei [milites et] praetoriani me ..., in cubiculo meo non eri[t, 'For she, who wished to give you a son of hers (or mine?) as a fitting prince (or 'future emperor') and to win favour herself through her honourable character, and through whom, as it behoves me to pass over the rest in silence, my most valiant and most loyal soldiers, including the praetorian guards, ..., (have found?) me (able to refuse nothing that they asked?), shall not remain in my bedchamber'.*

The readings in the middle and at the end of 7 and at the beginning of 8 are very doubtful, and so I offer no Latin words to match my vague idea of the sense. *sciam* seems right, so that we might expect *quod ... sciam*, 'so far as I know', but this will not suit, and I have found nothing else.

In line 9 there are many uncertainties, but it looks very likely that *qui et metu et* [ should be articulated and restored rather as *qui et me tuet[ur*, and that we have a mention of the god Elagabalus directly before it, where ]*a Balb[o]* is printed. The case is very doubtful; probably only the accusative *-um* is excluded. The *h* gives a strong impression of *o* at first, this being too high for the roundel of *b*, but *u* might be possible, and the thing that seems round may be patch of damage rather than ink, so that *-u[s]*, as well as *-i* or *-i*] and *-o* or *-o]*, is possible. It may be worth considering the formulation *dei] şol[is inuicti Elag]agabal[i]*, *qui et me tuet[ur et ...*: ] is certain; *o* is very small, but possible; the printed *d* is wholly uncertain, as is my suggested *ş*. The restoration seems long by comparison with the printed text, but in fact the ] comes below the first *e* of *tacere* in line 6 and the ]*a* comes below the *e* of *et* in line 6, which means that the thirteen letters of the restoration correspond with twelve letters in line 6. However, a more basic objection to this wording is that in the known examples of similar phrases the word order is always (*sacerdos amplissimus*) *dei inuicti solis Elagabali*, see ILS I 473 (om. *dei*), 475, 2008, III.ii 9058, M.Roxan, *Roman Military Diplomas* (1954-1977) No.75 (twice), G.Alföldy, *Die römischen Inschriften von Tarraco* No.84. Even if we ought to restrict the restoration to *Elag]abal*, *qui et me tuet[ur*, the idea seems worth considering. The emperor might be saying that he did something or was about to do something by order of the god Elagabalus, who protects both him and, say, the whole empire.

In line 10 it is very hard to see what the restored [*r*]egionibus mei[s] would mean in a letter of a prefect of Egypt; it seems an unlikely way for him to refer to his province, for instance. It is almost inevitable that [*l*]egionibus was written, with the corollary that the writer was an emperor. The argument that the *l* of [*l*]egionibus would have left a trace in the next line is not convincing: the long stroke downwards to the right might well have run at too steep an angle to show up there and the damage along the foot is so severe that it might have disappeared, and in any case the undoubted *l* of *Elag]abal* in line 9 does not seem to extend into 10.

In 11 *com]munia uota co* [ (perhaps *com*] ) seems right, but this is too multifariously ambiguous to invite speculation.

We may well raise the question why the imperial letter was included in this file, which relates to business between the strategus, that is the local governor, and the *dioecetes*, that is the Roman procurator in charge of such money as was destined for the main branch of the government revenue, as distinct from the *idios logos*. Most of the items in fact concern either the compulsory

appointment of public servants responsible for the compilation of records of taxpayers in the Bubastite nome, or offers from private persons to buy state property offered for sale. All that I can suggest is that this letter, in some part of it which can no longer be recognized, ordered a tax or levy to be paid by the populace through the administrative machinery controlled by the strategus. To connect a levy with the subject of this letter one might refer to Cassius Dio, who records that when the emperor whom we call Elagabalus fetched the cult image of the Dea Caelestis from Carthage to Rome, in order to marry her to the god Elagabalus, he collected marriage gifts for her from all his subjects, and Dio adds that he did this also for his own wives (... τὴν Οὐρανίαν τὴν τῶν Καρχηδονίων ... ἐκ τὸ παλάτιον καθίδρυεν ἕδνα τε αὐτῇ παρὰ πάντων τῶν ὑπηκόων, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἑαυτοῦ γυναικῶν, ἤθροισε. LXXIX 12). This goes a stage beyond what I have already tried to recognize in the remains of the letter, implying that it announced the marriage to Annia Faustina as well as the rejection of Iulia Aquilia Severa. Obviously we are in the realm of speculation.

Yet another puzzle remains. The word *uobis* in 4 seems to ensure that this document was a letter, as is also implied by θείων [γραμ]μάτων in XXX 5. Who were the recipients? For the moment I can only suggest, with diffidence, that if *uobis principem* [ ... dare ...] ... *uoluit* is on the right lines, the letter may have been directed to the Roman Senate.

Since so much of what has been said above is speculation and imagination, it will be salutary to give a transcription with minimal restoration, with the warning that it still contains conjectural word divisions and restorations. It is based on only about two hours work on the original, all that my schedule would allow me. More might emerge from a more thorough inspection.

## Kol. XXIX

	— — — — —		
1	[ . . . . . ] [ c. 16 letters ]	ῥ [ c. 20 letters ]	
2	matrimoni[ . . . . . ]	ipsi iung[ c. 18 letters ]	!![ . ]
3	melioribus m[ . . . . . ]	icie com[ . ]	[ c. 16 letters ]
4	quae enim fili[ . . . . . ]	uobis principem [ c. 15 letters ]	
5	probiῥ moribus in[sin]uare se voluit et per[ c. 13 letters ]		
6	cetera tacere for[ti]ssimi et fidelissim[i . . . ] [ . . . . . ]		
7	praetoriani me n[ . . . . . ]	lus sciam nihil [ . ] a [ . . . . . ]	
8	[ . . . . . ] [ . ] t[ . . . . . ]	in cubiculo meo non eri[ . . . . . ]	
9	dem[ . . . . . ]	!![ . . . . . ] abal qui et me tuet[ur . . . . . ]	
10	[ . . . . . ] [ c. 20 letters ]	re [r]egionibus mei[s . . . . . ]	
11	[ . . . . . ] [ c. 25 letters ]	com]munia uota co [ c. 7 letters ]	
12	[ . . . . . ] [ c. 35 letters ]	[ . . . . . ] [ . . . . . ]	
	— — — — —		

I am very grateful to Dr Cornelia Römer and Dr Klaus Maresch, who arranged for me to have access to the original in Cologne, and especially to Dr Jaako Frösén, who supplied me with excellent photographs and a convincing reconstruction of this part of the roll. Those who have seen only the published plates, which are a technical miracle, can have no idea of what it is like to work on the coal-black original, on which the writing can only be seen, as shiny black on matt black, if the surface is constantly tilted and turned so as to remain at precisely the proper angle to the light.