

During his short reign, the emperor Elagabalus (218-222 AD) carried through some unprecedented reforms in Roman state religion. He put Elagabal, the sun god of the Syrian town of Emesa, at the head of the Roman pantheon and presented himself as the god's high priest on coins and in inscriptions. Thus, a very specific local ritual, which was unknown to most Romans at the time, gained great significance in the seat of Roman power. But how great were the effects of the reforms outside of the capital?

Rupert Ziegler has argued that the cult of Sol Elagabal was introduced in many cities during Elagabalus's reign (*Chiron* 2004). Other authors, notably Gaston Halsberghe and Robert Turcan, claim that the emperor attempted to unify the empire under a new, universal state religion, with Turcan remarking that there is no supranational empire without a cosmic cult (Halsberghe 1972; Turcan 1985). This implies that the cult of Elagabal was introduced in the provinces as the result of an imperial decree, demanding worship from citizens all over the empire. The parallels with fourth-century Christianity seem evident.

In my paper, I will contest this hypothesis. Comparing literary, numismatic and epigraphic evidence, I will argue that the cult of Elagabal was only introduced in a minority of cities, which acted on their own initiative in the hopes of winning imperial favour and did not submit to a policy of compulsory worship. Far from being a means to unify the empire, the religious reforms of Elagabalus seem to have largely been restricted to the capital. I will discuss the evidence for the only three cities which we know for certain to have adopted the cult of Elagabal: Altava, where a temple was erected for the Syrian deity; Attaleia, where the city council dedicated an inscription to Elagabal; and Sardes, where coins attest the celebration of Elagabalía. Many of the cities which certainly, probably or possibly adopted the sun cult are situated in Asia Minor. This can be explained by the fact that Elagabalus lingered in this province for several months on his journey from Syria to Rome. The emperor is known to have paid a visit to some of these cities and must have passed by in the vicinity of others.

I will argue that the religious reforms of Elagabalus should not be seen as a third-century parallel to the rise of Christianity as the empire's official religion in the fourth century. The introduction of the cult in provincial cities was in all likelihood the result of local initiatives – stimulated and rewarded, but not ordered by the emperor.