

The episode of the emperor Elagabalus' installation of his native Syrian deity, the Emesene El-Gaba'al into the Roman pantheon in 219 CE is well known among Roman historians and religionists of the third century CE. Part of Elagabalus' religious program included the "sacred marriage" between his personal god, El-Gaba'al (a large black conical meteoritic rock) and Rome's Palladium, a civic relic in the form of an archaic wooden statue of Athena, presumably transported from the city of Troy to Rome by Aeneas himself. Modern scholars have often emphasized this event either as the emperor's attempt to establish a syncretistic union of "eastern" and "western" deities to establish religious unity in Rome, or, have seen the elevation of El-Gaba'al as part of the growing popularity of imperial solar monotheism, continued on later by the emperor Aurelian in 272 CE and culminating with Constantine the Great's support of Christianity in 312 CE.

Rather than viewing the emperor's attempt at creating a religious fusion, which even accommodated the more exclusivist religious groups: Jews, Samaritans, and Christians (as one of the more dubious sources asserts), this paper argues that Elagabalus consciously and aggressively sought to impose a religious hegemony over Rome's traditional deities. Elagabalus' installation of El-Gaba'al was a well-calculated program of religious subjugation, which followed traditional patterns of Near Eastern kingship. This included the emperor's removal of the cult statues of other Roman deities and installing them as captives in the newly built temple to El-Gaba'al, the *Elagaballium* in Rome. The selection of the Palladium as El-Gaba'al's "bride" and its removal from its traditional place as one of the *pignora* (religious guarantors) in the temple of Vesta, served to undermine the perceived civic-relic's ability to guarantee the stability of Rome itself, causing much fear and anxiety among the citizenry. As a parallel to his god's marriage, Elagabalus took the hand of Julia Aquilia Severa, a Vestal Virgin. This relationship might be interpreted as Elagabalus' desire, owing to his Syrian origins, to provide an earthly representation of the divine marriage between his god and the Palladium. The Romans, however, construed this as a defilement of one of their sacred priestesses, whose chastity preserved the connection between the Romans and their gods.

This dual marriage caused such a violent reaction among the Roman population across social classes that became a major factor in the downfall of the emperor's regime and a subsequent, *Damnatio Memoriae* (a senatorial condemnation of Elagabalus' memory and legacy). The civil strife engendered by Elagabalus' religious policies is not simply a conflict between "eastern" vs. "western" or "monotheistic" vs. "polytheistic" religious sensibilities, but rather a reaction by the Romans to a perceived threat to the established religious order. In a broader context, this study's examination of this instance of religious conflict challenges the assumption of general polytheistic tolerance of religions in the Roman Empire.