

# A Silver Roman Coin of Elagabalus and the Ship of State Tradition

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**Abstract:** The significance of a scarce Roman coin type, RIC IV 188, an example of which was found in the Shapwick Hoard in 1998, has been largely overlooked. This paper analyses its iconography in the light of its Syrian-Roman context, the Graeco-Roman ‘Ship of State’ tradition, and other Elagabalus coins found at Shapwick. The conclusion is that RIC IV 188 is significant for presaging a theocratic coup by the Emperor Elagabalus and is the only primary source for his sea crossing from Asia to Europe in AD 219.

## Introduction

A denarius found in the 1998 Shapwick Hoard from Somerset has been identified as coin type RIC IV 188 and is known as the silver ship coin of Elagabalus, AD 218–19 (Figure 1). It is the only example of this type among the 685 Elagabalus denarii in the hoard of 9,238 coins, 75% of which are Severan. This illustrates the relative scarcity of the coin type (Abdy & Minnitt 2002: 169–233). Earlier, the Reka Devnia Hoard found in Bulgaria in 1929 had just sixteen catalogued examples of RIC IV 188 from 4057 Elagabalus coins in a hoard totalling 101,096 coins (<https://chre.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/hoard/3406> accessed 27/6/2021). The scarcity of RIC IV 188 coins suggests that they were a commemorative issue, comparable to the scarce denarii of Philip I, RIC IV 69 and 72, that documented peace with Persia in AD 244: PAX FVNDATA CVM PERSIS (Rowan 2011: 244). Note: ‘RIC’ stands for *Roman Imperial Coinage* (Spink & Son).

This paper attempts to clarify the significance of RIC IV 188 by aligning it with the Graeco-Roman ‘Ship of State’ tradition. The coin type has a rich iconography, but was barely noted by Alföldi (1937: 56, Plate XI.13) and has been overlooked by Grant (1958: 56), Casson (1971), and Basch (1987). Its evidence has even been neglected in the newer literature on Elagabalus (de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010; Icks 2011) and on Roman coins as propaganda (Rowan 2012; Manders, 2012).

Scholars have scrutinized the epistemic limits of third century historiography and shown why numismatic and archaeological data must be used to clarify the history of Elagabalus, AD 218–222, the young Roman Emperor from Syria whose religious-political agenda remains enigmatic. The life of Elagabalus has been revised in the light of source criticism, with Elagabal, the aniconic sun-god he worshipped, becoming more significant as a manifestation of *Deus Sol Invictus*, and the lurid details of his private life being read as hyperbole arising from his *damnatio memoriae* by the Roman Senate (Sommer 2008: 581–90). Problems of bias in Dio Cassius (AD 155–235), Herodian (AD 170–250), and particularly the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (c. AD 380) have even led some scholars to contend that information from those sources is reliable only if it is supported by evidence from material culture, such as coins (de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010: 12–4; Icks 2011: 148).

Given this criticism, the evidence implied in the components of RIC IV 188 is worth studying for insights into the theocratic plans and the voyage westward of a radical emperor. This investigation will confront the problem of how a *descriptive* text, the coin as a record for an historical event, could also have been a *prescriptive* text delivering propaganda to influence Roman citizens’ view of events.



**Figure 1:** RIC IV 188, the Elagabalus ship-at-sea denarius also found in the Shapwick Hoard, 18 mm dia. Image: Zachary Beasley, Beast Coins Research Database, [www.beastcoins.com/RomanImperial/IV-II/Elagabalus/Z5761.jpg](http://www.beastcoins.com/RomanImperial/IV-II/Elagabalus/Z5761.jpg).

To investigate the problem, this paper studies a specific example of RIC IV 188 using *Comparative Textual Analysis* (CTA), drawn from Oster (1982: 195–223), Howgego (1995: 70–77), Elkins (2009: 44–46), and Wenkel (2017:1–12). This method seeks to discern inter-textual linkages by comparing literary texts, such as Herodian (V.3.5 and V.5.6–7) and cognate coin iconographies, such as coin types RIC IV 188 and RIC IV 195, with shared cultural contexts of third century AD Graeco-Asian geography. When seeking inter-textual connections of cognate cultural forms, CTA considers ‘text’ to be *any words or images open to interpretation via their contexts*. It will be used here to discern the descriptive and prescriptive elements of RIC IV 188, in the light of evidence including: Dio & Herodian on Elagabalus; other coins from this emperor; the Graeco-Roman ‘Ship of State’ tradition; ships on Roman coins; and the ancient phenomenon of aniconic gods.

The working hypothesis to be tested against the evidence is that:

*The dating, scarcity, and detail of Elagabalus’ silver ship coin (RIC IV 188) suggest it was both descriptive and prescriptive; being minted to promote a theocratic ‘Ship of State’, among the Roman ruling class, and to document Elagabalus’ voyage with Elagabal from Asia to Europe in AD 219.*

### RIC IV 188 and the Nicomedia portrait

RIC IV 188 was minted in Nicomedia or Antioch (de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010: 64–6) and was one of seven ship coin types produced by Elagabalus, but the only one struck in silver (Tameanko 2017: 37–41, citing RIC IV 188; BMC (Phoenicia) 112, 133, 212; SNG (Copenhagen) 445; Rosenberger (Tiberias) 21; and Rosenberger (Gadara) 80).

The obverse of RIC IV 188 shows a young Elagabalus with his throne name, Antoninus, facing right with a laurel crown. The legend, ANTONINVS PIVS FEL AVG, includes AVGVSTVS (emperor) and titles noted by Dio in his *Roman History* (LXXIX 17.4): PIVS (godly) and FELIX (happy). These titles were used by other emperors, but Dio draws attention to Elagabalus’ prescriptive appropriation of them. Dio (LXXIX 17.4) quotes him saying: ‘I do not want titles derived from war and bloodshed. It is enough for me that you call me Pius and Felix’ (translation, E. Cary, Loeb). Elagabalus’ drive to prescribe how he ought to be represented is also noted by Herodian who records how the new emperor sought to project his image, for propaganda purposes, well before his arrival in Rome from Syria.

On the reverse of RIC IV 188 Elagabalus is depicted with a sacred stone or *baetyl*, the Stone of Emesa, because this stone was regarded as an aniconic manifestation of the sun-god, Elagabal. Emesa is modern Homs.

After defeating Macrinus near Antioch on 8 June AD 218, Elagabalus spent the winter in Nicomedia and commissioned a portrait of himself performing a ritual before Elagabal, for display in the Roman Senate, as Herodian (V.5.6–7) outlines:

*Before he went to Rome, Elagabalus had a full-length portrait painted, showing him performing his priestly duties in public. His native god also appeared in the painting; the emperor was depicted sacrificing to him under favourable auspices. Elagabalus sent this picture to Rome to be hung in the centre of the Senate House, high above the statue of Victory...By the time the emperor came to Rome presenting the appearance described above, the Romans saw nothing unusual in it, for the painting had prepared them for what to expect. (translation, C.R. Whittaker, Loeb)*

This effort at making his preferred image precede his Roman reality suggests Elagabalus understood what Jean Baudrillard has recently called ‘simulation’ (1983: 32) and ‘the anticipation of reality by images’ (1987: 19). Elagabalus, it seems, followed a practice that has become familiar to us: that images may be used to model facts and to shape realities in accordance with those models.

Was the silver ship of Elagabalus, like the Nicomedia portrait, loaded with a prescriptive model inside a descriptive image and intended to encourage a practical outcome? I will approach this question by examining RIC IV 188 as a text within two contexts: Roman ship coins (Orna-Ornstein 1995: 179–200) and the ‘Ship of State’ figure as a rhetorical model or *trope* (Dixon 1971: 37).

Before drawing on Figure 1 to describe RIC IV 188 in detail, the epistemic reserve of Orna-Ornstein must be noted: ‘ships on Roman coins cannot always be taken as literal copies of Roman vessels’ (1995:179). There are, for example, considerations of scale when representing large objects in small spaces and the distortion of depicting ships-at-sea as if in dry dock, a pictorial convention I will call *the dry dock profile*.

Despite these distortions, I will follow Basch (1987: 35–8) and Davey (2015: 33; 2018: 24–5) who maintain that ancient makers of ship images sought to represent ship reality, and so their images can be used as evidence. Otherwise, such images would have been *unrecognisable* to those who knew about ships and were the audience for the images. In short, there is little reason to deem the reverse of RIC IV 188 to be an inaccurate representation of a *liburna*, a type of imperial galley adopted from the Liburni seafarers of Illyricum in c. 30 BC. This is supported by Vegetius’ *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (c. AD 400), which contains a cognate sketch of these nimble vessels (4.33; 37), while Hockmann provides corroborative details from archaeological, literary, and numismatic sources (1997: 192–216).



**Figure 2:** A Rome mint denarius RIC II 112 of Emperor Hadrian AD 119-122, 18 mm dia. One of many ‘Ship of State’ coins by that emperor. Image: courtesy Roma Numismatics, E-Live Auction 1 # 617, [www.RomaNumismatics.com](http://www.RomaNumismatics.com).

The reverse of RIC IV 188 pictures a *liburna* in dry dock profile from its starboard side, showing a bank of *remigia* (oars) pulled by seven *remiges* (oarsmen), steered from the stern by a *gubernator* (coxswain) using a *gubernaculum* (steering oar). Between the *gubernator* and the *remiges* rests an enigmatic oval object, separated from the *remiges* by a thick vertical line. On the stern, *gubernator*, oval object, and vertical line form a coherent group and may be termed the *gubernator trio*.

Within this trio, the *gubernator* is stretching out a right arm, embracing the oval object touching the vertical line. This congested after-deck scene also features an *aplustre* (curved post) and *signum* (army standard), while the prow has a furling *artemon* (bow-sail or spritsail) and a twin-pronged *rostrum* (ram). Below the ship ripple furrows & wake, while above it a *vexillum* (martial ensign) arises amidships, emblazoned with the oval form.

The overall impression is of dynamic movement, even urgent change. This is achieved by having the furling *artemon* pierce through the frame of letters (FELICITAS) and by having the *aplustre* curve forward, but then bend back, as if caught feather-like in the wake of the galley. Ship speed is also signified by ripples and wake. This striking image is framed by a two-word legend, FELICITAS TEMP, with the first word (good fortune or happiness) arching over the ship like a rainbow, while below it there is an abbreviation for *temporum* (of the times).

Under FELICITAS, the ship is marked by martial motifs at stern (*signum*), prow (*rostrum*), and amidships (*vexillum*). Somewhat contrary to Elagabalus’ aversion to ‘war and bloodshed’, these motifs suggest the *realpolitik* that even beauty is beholden to armed power. This may mean the scene was intended for the educated Roman elite as a ‘Ship of State’ model: a rhetorical trope derived from Plato’s *Republic* (VI 488a7–489a6) and still used in the third century AD to emphasize who should steer the state (e.g., Dio LII.16.3–4).

In total the ship image on RIC IV 188’s reverse has thirteen separate details, of which two are enigmatic objects. These objects need to be identified as part of this investigation.

### Enigmatic objects and aniconic gods

The two puzzling shapes on the reverse of the coin are an oval object between *gubernator* and *remiges* and a vertical line separating oval object from *remiges*. It is tempting to identify the oval object as a cabin like the ‘doghouse’ cabins on Rome mint denarii, 121–123 AD: RIC II 112 Hadrian 525–529 (Figure 2). But it shows the cabin to be hollow and tubular, not solid and oval, and it is behind the base of the *gubernaculum*, not in front of the *gubernator*. The cabin depicted on RIC II 112 is typical of those that appear on Roman coins, paintings, mosaics, and sculptures (Casson 1971: 179–181, Fig. 154; Basch 1987: 453–4, Figs 1001,1004–1010, 1054, 1098–1100). A bronze ship coin by Hadrian RIC II, 3 (2) 1013–1014, with FELICITATI AVG legend from the Rome mint, AD 129–30, also follows this pattern, but can still be understood as a ‘Ship of State’ model for RIC IV 188, together with RIC III 443 from Marcus Aurelius, AD 169, and RIC IV 120 from Caracalla, c. AD 201, among others. However, RIC IV 188 does not adopt the ship cabin standard.

There are some Roman ship coins that have cabins between *gubernaculum* and *remiges*, an example being Anthony’s legionary denarius, RRC 544/18, from 31 BC (Crawford 1974). However, the cabin is rectangular and has windows.

This suggests that the oval object is something other than a cabin. Given Elagabalus’ penchant for including the Stone of Emesa, which is usually shrouded by a coverlet depicting an eagle, on coins, it is suspected that the oval object was meant to represent the aniconic Elagabal. Mettinger notes that aniconism refers to, ‘cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity’, and includes, ‘cults using material objects as aniconic





**Figure 3:** Eastern mint denarius Emperor Antoninus (Elagabalus) AD 218 19 mm dia. Image: courtesy the Classical Numismatic Group (CNG), [www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com), e-Auction 475, Lot 203.

symbols' (2004: 90). An example of this, Elagabal was seen by Herodian, a native of Antioch in the same province as Emesa, as he outlines (V.3.5):

*There was no actual man-made statue of the god, the sort Greeks and Romans put up; but there was an enormous stone, rounded at the base and coming to a point on the top, conical in shape and black. This stone was worshipped as though it were sent from heaven.*

Herodian describes a conical stone without mentioning a coverlet depicting an eagle, just as some coin images of Elagabal (Figure 3) also portray it as a round stone without an eagle coverlet (e.g., the RIC IV 195 in CNG e-Auction 475: Lot 203). Sommer (2008: 588) argues that this unadorned aniconic god was a paradigm shift in Roman religion:

*A god without any human shape could not be pinpointed within the pecking order – it was a supernatural being sui generis, a dangerous outsider who, unlike other foreign gods, could not be assigned a place within the order by means of simple interpretation.*

Given the practice of this 'dangerous outsider', the silver ship's oval object may indeed signify the stone, drawn contemporaneously with the Nicomedia portrait to help model the reality of a new aniconic god for Rome. But even if this is correct, there is still the identity of the vertical line that separates the oval object from the *remiges* to determine.

### **A horned priest-emperor and the Ship of State trope**

The other Elagabalus coin type, RIC IV 88 (Figure 4), found in the Shapwick Hoard, of which there are twenty-three examples from the 685 Elagabalus denarii, may shed light on the theocratic aspect of the hypothesis. It may also help identify the enigmatic vertical line on RIC IV 188. Was it etched as a flaming *foculus* for the sun god *Sol Invictus Elagabalus*?

RIC IV 88 coins were minted in Rome in AD 221–22. The obverse shows a bearded Elagabalus facing right with a horn arching up from under his laurel crown and an abbreviated legend, IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG (the general Antoninus, godly emperor). The martial term here, although a common title for emperors, is still notable as a departure from Elagabalus' policy concerning his titulature (Dio LXXIX.17.4). It is possible that upon reaching Rome, his grip on power needed tightening as his devotion to Elagabal began to alienate the Roman elite (Dio LXXIX.11.1).

Elagabalus's horned bust, a unique innovation on Roman coinage, must have also troubled traditional Rome. Indeed, it remains a mystery (Rowan 2012: 209–10; Icks 2011: 75). Considering the tradition of Near Eastern solar symbols, this enigma may have signified a bull's horn as divine power, 'the power residing in the sun' (Farbridge 1970: 199). A bull in the background on the reverse supports this interpretation, as does its legend, INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG, with *invictus* connoting the sun (Cumont 1903: 98–101).

On the reverse Elagabalus stands facing left, sacrificing over a *foculus* (a portable fire altar) with a *paterna* (libation bowl) in his right hand, while his left arm holds 'a bundle of twigs, a common attribute of Syrian priests' (Rowan 2012: 211). Beneath a bright star, he wears trousers like those in Herodian's description (V.3.6) of him as Elagabalus' priest in Syria. Given the coin's context, the star is probably the sun, with the priest-emperor shown sacrificing at its altar (Manders 2012: 148). The *foculus* is pictured as a thick vertical line, a shape not unlike the thick line fronting the oval object on RIC IV 188. This same shape is also like the *foculus* on the rare Elagabalus coin (AD 219–20) noted by Hans Baldus, as cited by Icks (2011: 72). This is significant because the reverse of that coin appears to depict the Nicomedia portrait noted by Herodian (V.5.6). This coin, illustrated in Rowan (2006: 114), has an oval-shaped Stone of Emesa with coverlet depicting an eagle, in a four-horse chariot beneath the legend CONSERVATOR AVG (preserver of



**Figure 4:** A Rome mint denarius RIC IV 88 of Emperor Antoninus (Elagabalus) AD 221-22, 19 mm dia. Image: courtesy Paul-Francis Jacquier Numismatique, Auction 44 # 237, [www.coinsjacquier.com](http://www.coinsjacquier.com).

the Augustus). Rowan (2006: 118–9, footnote 15) notes that the eagle, in the Roman East, symbolised the sun god; while Halsberghe (1972: 45–6) places Elagabal in the Syrian tradition of *Deus Sol Invictus* (Invincible Sun God). In front of the stone, Elagabalus is shown sacrificing before a *foculus*, pictured as a thick vertical line.

So, RIC IV 188's thick vertical line appears comparable with a pattern of *foculi* forms that helps mark Elagabalus as *sacerdos* (priest). This is consistent with contemporary concerns that he put Elagabal 'even before Jupiter himself, causing himself to be voted its priest' (Dio LXXIX.11.1), but it is also consistent with him putting Roman gods on his coins. Furthermore, given the arching of FELICITAS over the silver ship, its *gubernator trio* may have signified a ritual 'under favourable auspices', just like the ritual in the Nicomedia portrait (Herodian V.5.6). If so, then the vertical line on the silver ship would represent the flaming *foculus* of Elagabal. This inter-textual interpretation is reasonable, given the contemporaneity of RIC IV 188 and the Nicomedia portrait, both AD 218–19, and the likelihood that the die-maker of RIC IV 88 knew the portrait, as hung in the Senate House in Rome.

However, the thick line in question on RIC IV 188 seems more probably the *clavus* (tiller) for the ship's *gubernaculum* (Casson 1971: 224–8, Fig. 147; Basch 1987, Figs 1081–83), shown in its *raised* position (Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 21.13.10), like the *clavus* on one of Rome's first complete 'Ship of State' coins, the C. Fonteius denarius (RRC 290/1) from 114 BC (Figure 5).

Three centuries separate these two issues, but four factors may clarify matters:

- (a) Roman ship design first derived from Phoenicia via a Carthaginian vessel (Polybius, *Histories*, 1.20);
- (b) RRC 290/1's vertical line is clearly a *clavus*;
- (c) RIC IV 188's fat line has the same position as RRC 290/1's *clavus*, indicating that it too is a *clavus*;
- (d) RRC 290/1's *clavus* fronts an object that may well be a sacred shrine under shelter (Brody 1998: 1–4; Orna-Ornstein 1995: 190).

This suggests RIC IV 188's *clavus*-fronted object was etched as sacred cargo too, arguably to connote a new



**Figure 5:** A C. Fonteius denarius, RRC 290/1, 114 BC, 21 mm dia. It was one of Rome's first complete 'Ship of State' coins. Coin from the author's private collection, image courtesy the Classical Numismatic Group (CNG), Auction 401 # 376, [www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com)



master for Rome's 'Ship of State', that was the god Elagabal. The metaphorical ship was in fact a well-known trope at the time, at least among the Roman elite, according to Dio's *Roman History* (LII.16.3–4) (c. AD 215).

By citing this trope Dio was using a model already manifest on Hadrian's ship coins, a good example of which is RIC II 3 (2) 1013–1014, and in texts such as: Plato's *Republic*, VI 488a7–489a6; Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, 1–2; Demetrius' *De Elocutione*, 78; Livy's *History*, 24.8.12–13; Cicero's *De Inventione*, 1–4; Varro's *De Lingua Latina*, 9.6; and Horace's *Carmina*, 1.14.

The 'Ship of State' model foregrounds the *gubernator* and *clavus* motifs, with the whole device being used to emphasise who should, and who should not, steer the state. On RIC IV 188, the *gubernator trio* could well have been drawn to prescribe a new theocracy, with the vertical line denoting the Ship of State's *clavus*, the oval object signifying the Stone of Emesa as *gubernator*, and the figure embracing the stone being the priest-emperor Elagabalus.

All this apparent inter-textual correspondence suggests that Elagabalus ran an integrated propaganda program which included the use of commemorative coins to communicate to the ruling class in Rome the theocratic destiny of Elagabal. If this is so, then RIC IV 188's reverse legend (FELICITAS TEMP) may have represented much more than the conventional sentiments noted by Manders (2012: 195–6). After reading Mettinger (2004: 89–100), Sommer (2008: 581–90) and Manders (2012: 149), I am inclined to think that the silver ship coin of Elagabalus presaged a theo-political coup; being struck to simulate an anticipated new order wherein the iconic gods of Roman pantheism would be incorporated into aniconic Elagabal, that is *henotheism*.

Some may be sceptical of the idea that the oval object on RIC IV 188 is the Stone of Emesa. After all, it is not eagle-shrouded, although neither is Herodian's stone. It also differs somewhat from Herodian's description of the stone, unlike the close match between his description and images of the stone on some Elagabalus coins. We refer here to coins on which the Stone of Emesa is pictured as more *conical* than oval such as RIC IV 195 (CNG e-Auction 475: Lot 194). However, other coin-pictures of the stone represent it as more *oval* or round than conical, like RIC IV 195 in (CNG e-Auction 475: Lot 203). So, although the rounded shape on our RIC IV 188 example (Figure 1) is more oval than conical, this does not necessarily mean the shape cannot signify the Stone of Emesa. In other words, RIC IV 188's die-makers may simply have been working within a known range of representations for the stone, as Figures 3 and 6 show and the examples in Rowan (2006: 114–7) further demonstrate.

## The Stone as a chariot driver and galley *gubernator*

This semiotic controversy still suggests a question that goes to the heart of the research hypothesis, how can it be known that the detailed reverse of RIC IV 188 is a descriptive record of Elagabalus and Elagabal at sea in the tradition of a new 'Ship of State'? This may be answered by comparing two scarce coin types issued in the East by Elagabalus.

The Shapwick Hoard data, in Abdy & Minnitt (2002), confirmed RIC IV 188 to be scarce type, just as ancient coin scarcity was becoming widely regarded as indicative of commemorative coin issues (Rowan 2006: 117–8; Rowan 2011:244). This means RIC IV 188 was probably struck to mark an actual, specific event. Here, the likelihood that this type has prescriptive elements does not necessarily preclude it from having descriptive elements too. Given the silver ship's dating and *liburna* details, we suspect it was struck to document Elagabal and the emperor crossing from Asia to Europe (with this description doubling as 'Ship of State' prescription), instead of only being struck as just another third century FELICITAS coin type proclaiming a general sentiment of happiness or dynastic hopes (Manders 2012: 195–6).

The likelihood of RIC IV 188 being a commemorative issue is underlined by the atypical contents of its reverse image: a ship with *bona fides* grounded in real life, rather than the common reverse on FELICITAS coins: the mythological figure of Felicitas with *caduceus* and *cornucopia* (Manders 2012: 196). In fact, Elagabalus minted an issue of this typical sort (RIC IV 150), also found at Shapwick (eight examples): a Rome mint denarius (AD 219–20) bearing the reverse legend TEMPORVM FELICITAS. Our argument from the atypical also stands supported by the fact that although Gallienus also placed FELICITAS (in its dative form) on a ship coin (RIC V 32, AD 260), only Elagabalus linked FELICITAS with TEMP(ORVM) on a ship coin minted contemporaneously with an actual voyage that he undertook.

Further support for RIC IV 188 as documentation (not just proclamation) can be gleaned from another Elagabalus coin found in Britain (*Portable Antiquities Scheme*, PUBLIC-B923E1). This scarce coin type RIC IV 195 shares the same mint, Nicomedia or Antioch, and year AD 218 as RIC IV 188. Like the latter, RIC IV 195 (Figure 6) has the ANTONINVS PIVS FEL AVG legend on its obverse, while its reverse has the Stone of Emesa, usually with eagle coverlet.

The stone is shown in a four-horse chariot flanked by two pairs of *semeia*: 'religious cultic standards common to cults in Syria' (Rowan 2006: 115). The legend is SANCT(O) DEO SOLI ELAGABAL(O): 'to the sun (SOLI), the holy god, 'Elagabal''. Given its date and historical context, RIC IV 195 was probably issued to mark this sun god's journey to Rome (Manders 2012:



**Figure 6:** Eastern mint denarius of Emperor Antoninus (Elagabalus), AD 218, with rare *ELAGABA* variation, 19 mm dia. Coin the author's private collection, image courtesy of Downies Coins, Auction 328 # 2715.

148). The shared mint, year, and general design of these chariot and ship coins suggests they were struck to commemorate Elagabal's journey from Emesa, with the ship coin minted to mark the maritime leg of an otherwise land-based journey. A corollary of this, for our hypothesis-testing and RIC IV 188 analysis, arises from the correspondence between this stone-in-chariot coin, RIC IV 195, and Herodian's description (V.6.7) of Elagabal in ritual procession:

*A six-horse chariot bore the sun-god, the horses huge and flawlessly white...no-one held the reins, and no-one rode in the chariot; the vehicle was escorted as if the sun god himself were the charioteer. Elagabalus ran backwards in front of the chariot, facing the god and holding the horses' reins.*

There is a suggestive correspondence between this description and RIC IV 195's chariot-driving stone. This is so despite Herodian's text referring to the stone's mid-summer procession in Rome, not Elagabal's chariot-powered journey from Emesa (Rowan 2006: 116). In short, both Herodian V.6.7 and RIC IV 195 effectively portray Elagabal as a *charioteer* insofar as both texts signify the stone in a driverless chariot. This detail may be quite significant, especially if we assume the chariot and ship coins were produced together to commemorate Elagabal's aniconic power and Elagabalus' long journey to Rome. Indeed, RIC IV 188's juxtaposition of *gubernator*, oval shape, and *gubernaculum* invite us to think that the salient detail in Herodian and on RIC IV 195, 'as if the sun god himself were the charioteer', was an intentional trope that can be extrapolated to this ship coin, 'as if the sun god himself were the *gubernator*'. This extrapolation assumes further cogency if the vertical line held by the stone on RIC IV 188 is a *clavus*, not a *foculus*. Furthermore, if the ship coin, the chariot coin, and Herodian share this same trope, then those texts may reflect a theocratic principle prescribed by Elagabalus. In the specific case of RIC IV 188, the theocratic message is arguably this: Elagabal,

as a new god for Rome, should steer the Roman 'Ship of State' with its priest, the Emperor Elagabalus.

This reading gives further reason to think that the silver ship coin of Elagabalus is both a descriptive text and a prescriptive text. After all, it apparently notes a *fact*: the voyage of Elagabalus and Elagabal, but it may also note a *value*: this aniconic god can, and should, pilot reality (e.g. steer ships or drive chariots). Nevertheless, up to now, our inter-textual analysis within the relevant data suggests our hypothesis about empirical description may have less evidence in its favour than our hypothesis about imperial prescription. To test this impression, we will now investigate RIC IV 188's empirical world more closely, with emphasis on the geographical and historiographical contexts for the voyage which it depicts.

### The silver ship and maritime geography

The itinerary for Elagabalus' journey from Syria to Italy must be reconstructed from the sketchy details in Dio and Herodian. Although these historians lived in the same period as Elagabalus, they are quite vague about his year-long journey from Emesa, now Homs in Syria, to Rome. Fortunately, details on RIC IV 188 allow us to identify a possible maritime route ignored by Dio and Herodian.

Herodian (V.5.3 & V.5.7) has the Emperor travelling from 'Syria' to 'Nicomedia' (modern Izmit) to 'spend the winter', then to 'Rome'. Herodian fails to provide any details for this east-west journey and mentions no sea routes for Elagabalus, neither towards Nicomedia nor away from it. Dio (LXXIX.3.1–2) is almost as sketchy, writing: 'after spending some months in Antioch' (now Antakya), Elagabalus 'went to Bithynia', in north western Turkey, and 'after passing the winter there, he proceeded into Italy through Thrace' (now shared by Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria) and 'Moesia' (now shared by Serbia and Macedonia) and 'both the Pannonias' (now shared by Hungary, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovakia), then 'remained there', in Italy, 'until the end of his life'.





Figure 7: A Map of North Western Turkey with ancient names. Image: Muir (1963).

The general itineraries of Herodian and Dio leave open the possibility that Elagabalus travelled to Nicomedia by sea, departing from Seleucia Pieria, the port of Antioch, in a *liburna* from the *Classis Syriaca*, a branch of the eastern Roman fleet. Indeed, references to *liburnae* on naval tombstones (c. AD 200) dug up in Seleucia Pieria provide some archaeological support for this possibility (Pollard 2000: 281–3).

However, a sea route from Antioch to Nicomedia would involve passage along the southern coast of Turkey in the Mediterranean, then the western coast of Turkey in the Aegean, through the Hellespont, now the Dardanelles, and across the Propontis, now the Sea of Marmara to Nicomedia.

Given the difficult logistics of such a long voyage, especially in a small *liburna*, it is more likely that Elagabalus took the land route to Nicomedia, travelling from Syria through the Cilician Gates in the Taurus Ranges north-west of Tarsus into Cappadocia, Galatia, and Bithynia. This use of the Cilician Gates finds support in Dio, but only if his route for the fleeing Macrinus is a guide for the eastern part of Elagabalus' land journey. Dio (LXXIX.39.1–5) has Macrinus fleeing 'from Antioch' to 'Aegae in Cilicia', near Adana in south-central Turkey, 'through Cappadocia, Galatia and Bithynia', 'as far as Eribolon, the harbour that lies over against the city of Nicomedia'. Dio then has Macrinus 'sailing from Eribolon for Chalcedon', now a district of Istanbul, before finally being caught in Chalcedon while presumably seeking a boat to Byzantium, western Istanbul. The itinerary of Macrinus may be a guide for the route taken by Elagabalus. And yet, Dio makes no mention of where the new emperor crossed the waters separating Asia from Europe. Herodian (V.4.11), however, offers us a clue: Macrinus was slain in Chalcedon after 'setting sail for

Europe across the narrow straits of Propontis' that is the Bosphorus, only to be blown back to Chalcedon by adverse winds. The wind mentioned here is salient because it draws our attention to the furred *artemon* on the silver ship of Elagabalus (see below).

Like Macrinus, Elagabalus could have crossed the Propontis from Eribolon to Chalcedon, before making passage across the Bosphorus Strait to Byzantium. Or he could have travelled by road to Chalcedon before crossing the Bosphorus Thracius, the southern end of the Strait to Byzantium. Alternatively, the new emperor could very well have crossed the Propontis from Eribolon to Perinthus, now near Tekirdag in north-western Turkey. Elagabalus could also have travelled south-west by road from Nicomedia to Cyzicus, now near Bandırma in western Turkey, before sailing from there, across the Propontis, to either Perinthus or Byzantium. For a map of these places, see Muir (1963: 7).

Faced with this uncertainty, RIC IV 188 becomes crucial as the only record we have for the sea passage of Elagabalus and Elagabal in AD 219. Details on this denarius help us discern the most likely sea route for emperor and stone.

Rome's *Classis Syriaca* fleet and the martial elements on the silver ship's reverse: a *signum* (army standard) on the prow, a twin-pronged *rostrum* (battering ram) at the stern, and a *vexillum* (martial ensign) amidships. These details suggest the reverse of RIC IV 188 either depicts a *liburna* from Seleucia Pieria, which is unlikely or, more likely, a *liburna* from Cyzicus, a Bithynian base for the *Classis Syriaca* at the time of Elagabalus (Dio LXXIX.7.3). In other words, from all the possible routes noted above, it seems the emperor may have travelled by road from Nicomedia to Cyzicus, before taking a *liburna* to either Perinthus or Byzantium.





**Figure 8:** Reverse sides of denarii by Elagabalus RIC IV 188, left, and C. Fonteius RRC 290/1, right. Images: As per Figures 1 and 5.

Nevertheless, further details on RIC IV 188 indicate an even more likely route for the sea voyage of Elagabalus and his holy stone. We noted earlier that the *artemon* (spritsail or bow-sail) was not rigged and the *remiges* (oarsmen) were rowing; the ship has been represented as man-powered, not wind-powered. This suggests the depicted voyage involved a sea passage that could readily be rowed, or had to be rowed because there was too little wind on the day to warrant using an *artemon* (Casson 1971: 242–5; Davey 2015). This is a salient detail because Roman die-makers could readily depict galleys under sail when images of wind-powered ships were appropriate, as the unrigged *artemon* on RIC II, 3 (2) Hadrian 525–529 demonstrates (Figure 2) and as the denarius (c. 44 BC) from long-distance naval raider Sextus Pompey (RRC 483/2) proves (Crawford 1974).

The man-powered galley on the reverse of RIC IV 188 therefore suggests the sea passage taken by the Emperor and Elagabal was *the shortest route possible*: across the Bosphorus Strait separating Chalcedon from Byzantium. Here, Elagabalus would probably have travelled by road from Nicomedia to Chalcedon. With the safety of his precious Elagabal in mind, the young emperor may have waited for a day without wind, before joining a *liburna*, from the *Classis Syriaca*, which furled its spritsail (*artemon*) and rowed Emperor and Elagabal across the Bosphorus Thracius to Byzantium.

### A denarius with historical significance

This study has examined the problem of how a descriptive text on coin RIC IV 188 could be the record of an historical event and could also have been propaganda for the citizens of Rome. The exploration of the hypothesis concluded that prescriptive elements co-exist with descriptive elements in this text producing a powerful hybrid image designed to communicate a new theological order for the Roman Empire.

The description on RIC IV 188 appears to be an accurate representation of a *liburna* from Cyzicus or Seleucia Pieria. Issues of scale aside, there was nothing to preclude this representation from being the sort of ship available

to the Emperor Elagabalus. Moreover, several salient details on RIC IV 188, including the furled *artemon* and the bank of *remigia*, have helped discern the probable route and nautical conditions for the sea passage, in AD 219, of Elagabalus and his sacred stone; across the Bosphorus Thracius, from Chalcedon to Byzantium, on a day without wind.

The most problematic part of the hypothesis remains its contention that Elagabal was depicted on RIC IV 188. After scrutinizing a range of relevant data, the weight of evidence appears to support this contention, even though the oval object on the ship is not eagle-shrouded. There is a continuity of aniconic forms in several related texts:

- (a) Herodian's description, with no eagle shroud, of the Stone (V.3.5);
- (b) the oval object on the reverse of RIC IV 188;
- (c) the range of representations of Elagabal, oval, conical, round on RIC IV 195 and other stone-in-chariot coins like RIC IV 144.

The oval object on RIC IV 188 fits in with this group of aniconic forms, suggesting that it was meant to represent the Stone of Emesa. Moreover, if the vertical line fronting the oval object on RIC IV 188 was drawn as a *clavus*, as was the case on other Roman ship coins, RRC 483/2 and RIC IV 120, then Elagabal was depicted as a *gubernator*, just like the helmsman on one of Rome's first complete 'Ship of State' coins, the C. Fonteius denarius, RRC 290/1 from 114 BC; Figure 8 offers a comparison. The 'Ship of State' trope was still being used at the time of Elagabalus, as Dio LII.16.3–4 (c.AD 215) indicates. The scarcity of RIC IV 188 coins, together with its temporal (AD 218–19) and geographic (eastern mint) data, suggests the west-bound Elagabalus wanted it minted as a commemorative coin with a prescriptive agenda. Indeed, we know from Herodian (V.5.6–7) that the young Syrian emperor targeted the Roman ruling class with image-based propaganda about Elagabal.

Elagabalus' commissioning of the Nicomedia portrait in AD 218 supports the suggestion that he also commissioned

his silver ship coin intended to influence the Roman elite. If so, its reverse was probably designed as a rhetorical model that involved what Baudrillard (1987: 19) calls ‘the anticipation of reality by images’. At the core of this model, the *gubernator trio* is embraced by its legend and guarded by martial signs, *signum*, *vexillum*, and *rostrum*. In a salient detail, the holy stone at the heart of this trio is apparently doubled by being emblazoned on the silver ship’s martial ensign (*vexillum*). This complex iconography arguably anticipated a new theocratic experience for Rome, steered by Elagabal and guarded by the army. The murder of Elagabalus by soldiers on 13 March, AD 222 may now cruel this vision with irony, but in AD 219 this image of a young priest-emperor on the water between two worlds was probably a picture of poignant promise, as Alföldi (1937: 56) has noted.

RIC IV 188’s detailed ship-at-sea suggests it was the work of a die-maker eyewitness, commissioned by the emperor to represent Elagabal and himself steering the Roman ‘Ship of State’. This coin picture of Elagabal navigating the Bosphorus may also have been designed to convey the anticipated primacy of a new god arriving from the east. Given the Roman geo-political framework of West (*in occidente*) and East (*in oriente*), i.e., the framework noted by Tacitus (*Historiae*, 1.2.1), Elagabal-on-the-Bosphorus as *adventus dei orientis* risked being provocative, as third century AD Rome increasingly viewed the East as a source of danger (Manders 2012: 127-28). The dies of this commission could have been made in either Nicomedia or Antioch for the minting of RIC IV 188 as a commemorative denarius, issued to describe the emperor’s Bosphorus crossing and to prescribe a theocratic *Felicitas Temporum*.

During this moulding process, the die-maker of RIC IV 188 appears to have drawn on earlier coin issues of RIC IV 120, Caracalla, c. AD 201, but in doing so changed two salient details to emphasise Elagabal as *gubernator*. This was achieved by replacing the lowered *clavus* operated from a three-person cabin on RIC IV 120 (early

dies) with Elagabal operating a raised *clavus* while being held by Elagabalus on RIC IV 188 (see Figure 9 for a comparison).

Placing an aniconic presence at the helm of a Roman flagship arguably anticipated Elagabal’s elevation ‘even before Jupiter himself’ (Dio LXXIX.11.1) and perhaps even signalled the stone’s henotheistic absorption of Rome’s iconic gods.

### Conclusions for further research

Research focusing on a single coin may be deemed too narrow and thus of limited value for a wider historical or cultural significance. Nevertheless, this study reveals how a data-rich and illustrative single coin can be interpreted in the context of other coins and relevant literary sources to corroborate salient details.

The study of RIC IV 188 has underlined a practice emphasised by Elkins, ‘the understanding of an ancient coin is broadened by the number of contexts to which we can relate it’ (2009: 46). Indeed, scrutiny of RIC IV 188 appears to have reconstructed its theocratic meaning, Elagabal as Rome’s *gubernator*, within the Graeco-Roman ‘Ship of State’ tradition. This is significant insofar as it confirms Elagabal as a manifestation of *Deus Sol Invictus*, the Syrian sun-god, who preceded and succeeded Elagabalus as a theo-political force in the Roman Empire, most notably under Aurelian (Halsberghe 1972: 45–6; 173–4). The original working hypothesis appears to have been confirmed, or at least not disproved, by corroborative evidence drawn from the contemporary cultural context of RIC IV 188. The silver coin ship of Elagabalus, studied as a text in its time, seems to exemplify the research value of numismatic minutiae, as outlined by Schaps, ‘Events much more fleeting than revolutions and world wars were recorded on coins, and the choice of design and legend is often significant’ (2011: 203).

We must conclude, however, by noting that further research on the silver ship’s iconography may be



**Figure 9:** Right, a Rome mint, of Caracalla’s RIC IV 120 c. AD 201, lowered *clavus*, operated from a three-person cabin on a *liburna*’s stern, was a notable detail on early issues. Left, the die maker of RIC IV 188 changed that detail into Elagabal operating a *liburna*’s raised *clavus* while being held by Elagabalus. Image: RIC IV 120 courtesy Nomos AG, Obolos Web Auction 4, Lot 663; RIC IV 188 courtesy Auktionen Fruhwald, Auction 141, Lot 485.



undertaken by studying the dies used to strike issues of RIC IV 188 during AD 218–19. The value of this additional approach is highlighted by Elkins, ‘die studies allow one to establish a chronology of dies and examine the evolution or transformation of a specific image over time’ (2009: 32). Drawing upon Kleiner (1985), Cox (1991), and Beckmann (2008), Elkins (2009: 32–3) notes three considerations that could prove useful if assumed by a die study of RIC IV 188,

- (1) iconography from the early dies of a coin type tends to represent its referent with more detail – compared to the dies used to strike later issues of the same type;
- (2) the early die iconography of a coin type (e.g. a *liburna* at sea) presumably resembles its referent more closely than the die iconography of later issues because the latter were probably copied from earlier dies, shedding detail in the process;
- (3) during this die evolution process, only certain details of the referent may become less distinct, less explicit, or more standardised.

Given the problem of interpretation associated with the *gubernator trio* on the silver ship of Elagabalus, a die study of RIC IV 188 would usefully supplement the Comparative Textual Analysis used for our investigation here.

With this prospect in mind, the author has given an early issue of RIC IV 188 to The Australian Institute of Archaeology (Figure 9) so that further evidence for the trio’s evolving image may be available for any future die study of this suggestive Roman Empire coin type.

After the theo-political sophistication of RIC IV 188, the Empire’s ‘Ship of State’ coins were never again quite so innovative. The trope continued to be used, for example by Gallienus, RIC V 32, AD 260, but as wars leeching more and more bullion and beauty from Roman coins, the silver ship of Elagabalus eventually emerged as both the acme of a form and the beginning of its end.

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## Abbreviations

CTA	Comparative Textual Analysis
RIC	Roman Imperial Coinage (Spink & Son).
RRC	Roman Republican Coinage

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