

Rome's emperor of excess meets a bloody end

The Praetorian guard calls time on the controversial and flamboyant reign of Elagabalus

Even in the lurid parade of Roman emperors, Elagabalus stands out. Born into the imperial Severan dynasty in c203 AD, he found himself catapulted to supreme power in his early teens and soon began to court controversy.

To the horror of the Roman elite, their teenage emperor – whose real name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus – had signed up to the cult of the Syrian sun god Elagabalus, after whom he now named himself. Once emperor, he renamed his god Deus Sol Invictus – God the Undefeated Sun – and installed him at the head of the Roman pantheon. Then he declared

himself high priest, had himself publicly circumcised and made the city's bigwigs watch while he danced around the Sun's new altar.

In the meantime, Elagabalus's sexual conduct was raising eyebrows across the city. In total he married and divorced five women, but his chief relationships seem to have been with his chariot-driver, a male slave called Hierocles, and an athlete from Asia Minor called Zoticus. According to gossip, the emperor "set aside a room in the palace and there committed his indecencies, always standing nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do... while in a soft and melting voice he solicited the

passers-by". If any doctor could give him female genitalia, he said, he would give him a fortune.

Eventually, the Praetorian Guard, sick of their emperor's excesses, switched their allegiance to his cousin Severus Alexander and turned on Elagabalus.

As the historian Cassius Dio recorded, there was no mercy for either Elagabalus or his mother: "Their heads were cut off and their bodies, after being stripped naked, were first dragged all over the city, and then the mother's body was cast aside somewhere or other while his was thrown into the river."



A contemporary sculpture of Elagabalus, an emperor known for his excesses