Pseudo-eunuchs in the court of Elagabalus: The riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

This is the full, corrected version of a paper delivered at a conference held under the auspices of the University of Wales Institute of Classics and Ancient History entitled: "*Neither Man nor Woman*": *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, Aberdare Hall, Cardiff University, 26=28 July 1999. A cut version of that paper was subsequently published in *Collected Papers in Honour of the Ninety-fifth Anniversary of Ueno Gakuen*, 1999.

I. Introduction: the riddle.

My research into one of the strangest of Roman emperors has turned up a curious historical riddle. At once prosopographical and historiographical, it also has interesting methodological implications. It concerns the identity, number, status, and sex - or sexlessness - of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon. These are names given in the ancient sources [1] to one or more members of the entourage of the most famous, indeed infamous, character of his time: a celebrated and reviled hierophant, dancer, and hedonist; himself a man - or rather boy - of complex sexuality, with many names and aliases. His original nomenclature may have been Varius Avitus Bassianus. He reigned over the Roman empire under the doubly spurious style of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but is usually remembered as Elagabalus or Heliogabalus. Here we shall simply call him Varius. [2]

The prosopographical riddle surrounding Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon involves many of the same unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, questions as would any such enquiry into incompletely documented persons from antiquity: Who was or were the bearer or bearers of these names? What did he or they do?

[1] They are only named as such in *Dio's Roman History* (henceforth Dio), and in Xiphilinus' Epitome thereof (henceforth Xiphilinus); but are alluded to in *Herodian's History* (henceforth Herodian), and in the *Historia Augusta*, *Antoninus Elagabalus* (henceforth HA/AE). The complete list of references to Eutychianus, Gannys, and Comazon from these texts, covered in this article, given at the end of this article. The numbering of Dio's chapters used here follows that of the Loeb edition, which follows Boissevain's. English translations of these texts, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Loeb editions.

[2] Dio LXXXIX, 30,2 introduces Varius as Avitus. Dio calls his cousin, the future Alexander Severus, Bassianus. Herodian V, 3,4, however, introduces Varius by the name Bassianus, and his cousin by that of Alexianus. Herodian goes on to refer to Varius as Antoninus, during the period of his reign. Varius' official imperial style, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, was based on the improbable assertion that he was the natural son of Caracalla, who also bore that style, albeit only by virtue of a legalised usurpation. For this reason, Dio, particularly in the parts of his text based on the oldest manuscript (Vaticanus Graecus 1288), calls Varius Pseudantoninus. In later sections based on Xiphilinus' epitome, Dio calls him Sardanapalus, after the allegedly effeminate and decadent Babylonian king of that name. HA/AE I,1, introduces Varius as Heliogabalus Antoninus, also called Varius, and goes on to use diverse instances and combinations of these names, including Antoninus Varius, Varius Heliogabalus, and Heliogabalus alone. There is no evidence that he was ever called Elagabalus or Heliogabalus during his lifetime. The HA also mentions other insulting epithets by which he was allegedly called, including Tiberinus, Tractaticius, and Impurus, referring to the fate of his corpse, and to his alleged corporal depravity.

What was his or their social and sexual status? There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such riddles, scattered throughout ancient history. What makes this one especially intriguing, apart from its obvious relevance to the study of Varius, is the curiosity generated by its corresponding historiographical riddle. From at least the eleventh century onward, and well into the twentieth, the names Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon are severally asserted to refer to one, two, or three different individuals. Gannys is supposed by some to be the same person as Eutychianus; Eutychianus, by others, to be identical with Comazon; Comazon, by yet others, to be Gannys.

The bearer, or rather bearers, of these names, are variously described as a slave, a freedman, a member of the equestrian order, or as holder of some of the highest offices in the empire, usually implying senatorial rank. One of them, slain by the boy emperor's hand during the first year of his reign, is said to have been the lover of Soaemias, Varius' mother. Another is said to have thriven in the following principate, that of Varius' cousin, Alexander Severus. Finally, one or more of them - in particular that one who is supposed to have been Soaemias' lover - is often characterised as a eunuch. Yet one, at least, of them, is also thought to be the ancestor of a family prominent in succeeding generations.

Clearly, not all these propositions can be true.

One of the aims of this article is to dissipate, as far as possible, confusion regarding the number, identity, and status of the bearer or bearers of these names. The reason for seeking to do this, beyond a general desire for historical tidiness, is that they designate important agents in the life and reign of Varius, the object of my ongoing research. Some or all of them are credited by the ancient historiography with conceiving and executing the *coup* that brought Varius to power. Both texts and inscriptions attest to at least one of them occupying certain important offices during his reign.

Their significance, moreover, is not limited to their role(s) in the seizure and exercise of power in Varius' name. It extends also to personal interaction with this adolescent emperor; to the effect on his character and behaviour of that interaction; and ultimately to the political and dynastic consequences of that behaviour. This assertion, developed later, raises questions that have not, to my knowledge, been discussed elsewhere in print. I shall consider them here as they become relevant to the present enquiry.

Solution of any riddle in history needs evidence. Unfortunately, that provided by ancient historiography is rendered unreliable, both by virtue of its imperfect transmission *via* the mediaeval manuscript tradition, as well as by its relatively scant interest in the objective recording of fact. Rather, it is usually a vehicle for the expression of the author's attitudes and opinions, which are often influenced, or even wholly determined, by hidden or overt political or personal agendas.

Examination of the ancient and mediaeval sources shows how they could easily generate confusion about the identity, number, and status of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon. The earliest and most detailed source, a fragment of a fifth or sixth century manuscript of Dio's Roman History, is plagued with lacunae, precisely in the parts that deal with the *coup d'état* bringing Varius to power, where both Eutychianus and Gannys are mentioned as agents - a fact which might lead to their confusion with each other by a careless reader. The conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus can be traced to Dio's eleventh century epitomiser, Xiphilinus, who equates them by unargued apposition, possibly based on texts of Dio available to him, but unavailable to us; or possibly on the strength of an association of ideas, tenuously present even in Dio's extant text, revolving round one of these nominees' supposed identical youthful employment as a strolling player. If the latter should prove to be the case, this conflation of identities will have been determined, whether for Dio, or for his epitomiser, by the low status and general opprobrium attaching to the acting profession in antiquity. In the context of a vituperative onslaught on Varius and his reign, no potential slur against one of his principal courtiers would have been neglected.

Epigraphic and numismatic evidence is usually considered more reliable than ancient texts, though this too may prove illusory, as we shall see later on. In any case, there is no numismatic evidence relevant to any of these three names, none of whose putative bearers were sovereigns or members of the imperial family. There is only scant epigraphic evidence for the existence and possible nomenclature of one of them. It comes in the form of two, possibly three, inscriptions, not involving (and thereby seemingly excluding conflation with) either of the other two names. So it may prove impossible to solve the prosopographical riddle completely.

Even if one cannot fully solve this riddle, however, the attempt is worth making, not only in order to gain at least partial answers to questions about these nominees' role in the life and reign of Varius, but also for the light the exercise of doing so sheds on certain vital issues of historical methodology.

Our enquiry will reveal a number of frequent and characteristic errors, or sins, in ancient and modern historiography, which serve as cautionary examples. Some of these sins, especially in the modern period, are interesting indicators of the evolution not only of scholarly opinion regarding the factual history of Varius' reign but also of post-antique attitudes to issues, particularly sexual ones, raised by ancient accounts of his life. Such attitudes may well have influenced authors emitting supposedly objective opinions on matters of fact, distorting their view of them, and leading to manifold historiographical sins.

As regards Xiphilinus' conflation of identities, uncritically perpetuated in the later historiography till Hirschfeld's *Verwaltungsbeamten* [3] and Boissevain's edition of Dio, [4] the riddle is perhaps no more than a muddle, either the result of our ignorance of Dio's original, or of Xiphilinus' misreading thereof. Where the subject of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon truly becomes a riddle is with regard to the ascription of eunuchry to any of these three nominees; an ascription which occurs, so far as I have yet been able to discover, only in the modern historiography. I have traced it as far back as Gibbon, [5] yet found it absent from his seventeenth century predecessor, Tillemont, [6] as well as from Matociis, writing in the fourteenth century. It does not, however, sound from the context as if Gibbon simply invented it.

However that may be, for this ascription, or rather subtraction, neither the ancient sources, nor their mediaeval abbreviators and epitomisers, nor even the late antique chroniclers, provide any substantiation whatsoever. This legend of eunuchry, transmitted uncritically from author to author through much of the modern historiography on Varius, constitutes an exclusively modern riddle. When and by whom was it begun, and why? And how was it so carelessly perpetuated? It is with regard to this eunuch legend that we find in the modern historiography a plethora of sins, mostly venial, but in some cases mortal - or so at least they might well be considered to their authors' reputations.

To attempt to solve this riddle of modern historiography, and follow wherever it may lead into the realm of sociology and modern intellectual history, lies beyond the scope of this article. For now, it will have to suffice to point out its

[3] Otto Hirschfeld, *Die Kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten bis auf Diocletian*, 1st edition, p. 234.

[4] *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, Ed. Philippus Ursulus Boissevain, Weidmann, Berlin, 1901.

[5] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Everyman's Library, Vol. 1, Ch 6, p 139.

[6] Le Sieur de Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, Bruxelles, 1693, Tome III.

existence, by reviewing the relevant modern historiography, hoping others will aid in its solution. Indeed one purpose of providing these examples from the modern historians is to pique the curiosity of others, who may thereby be moved to aid in finding the source of the eunuch legend. Another is to show how ill served, with certain honourable exceptions, the study of Varius and his entourage has been so far, for many of the same historiographical sins we can observe with respect to Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon are also to be found in texts regarding the emperor whose courtiers they were.

Foremost among those honourable exceptions must be mentioned Martin Frey's *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*. [7] While not directly relevant to the riddle here in question, this study sets a standard of rigorous scholarship and bold clarity in its analysis of Varius' religion and religious policy that one can only seek to emulate. Building on the example and methodological advances of this work, the time has now come for a full reappraisal of Varius and his reign. The present article seeks to address one specific, limited aspect of this larger subject, a riddle or muddle concerning his courtier(s), as a prelude to embarking on the fuller exploration of Varius himself.

Now before considering any further the modern historiographical riddle of these courtiers' bogus eunuchry, we should first consider the muddle of their identity, with reference to the ancient texts. In order to place our discussion of these three nominees in its proper historical context, and establish certain points of reference that will frequently recur in that discussion, we must briefly speak of their emperor, of the background to his reign, and of their role(s) in it. Then, before coming to grips with the ancient texts, in order better to interpret them, we shall discuss more fully some of the questions of methodology raised above.

II: Historical background. [8]

The dynasty we are concerned with here is that of the Severans, flourishing in the century leading up to the completion of Rome's first millennium, coinciding with the late second, and early third centuries of the Christian era (*ab urbe condita* 946-988 = *Anno Domini* 193-235). Following the golden age of the

[7] Martin Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal***,** *Historia, Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Heft 62, Einzelschriften, 1989.

[8] The following exposition of the background to the reign of Varius is based mainly on Dio LXXII-LXXIX, and on Herodian V.

Antonines, the Severan period was perceived by its contemporaries as an age of iron and rust. [9] It was followed by a half-century of military anarchy, marking the transition from the middle to the late(r) Roman empire (from *haut empire* to *bas empire* in French historiography, from *Principat* to *Dominat* in the German).

Varius was a Syrian prince, related through his mother to the Severan dynasty. [10] He was also in his own right - again through his mother - hereditary high priest of the temple of the sun god Elaiagabal, at Emesa (modern Homs), in Syria. [11] The Severan dynasty sprang from the union of Lucius Septimius Severus, a Roman general of Libyan origin, with Julia Domna, a daughter of Julius Bassianus, [12] high priest of Emesa. Bassianus is usually supposed to have been a descendant of the former ruling dynasty of Emesa, the Samsigeramidae. [13] Syria, Hellenised by the successors of Alexander the Great, had been incorporated into the Roman empire since the time of Pompey, in the late republic, over two centuries before Varius.

The first family of Emesa, at the time of Domna's marriage to Severus, belonged to a Syro-Roman élite of equestrian or senatorial rank, who usually intermarried with each other. Partly as a result of the influence of their kinswoman, Domna, over her Libyan husband, Severus, once he was emperor, many of her Syrian relatives occupied important posts in the imperial administration. Among these were her brother-in-law, married to her sister Maesa, and the husbands of their two daughters, Soaemias and Mamaea.

Severus and Domna's own two sons, Bassianus and Geta, succeeded jointly to the throne on Severus' death. Bassianus, better known by his nickname, Caracalla, murdered Geta, and reigned alone under the spurious name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, a legacy of Severus' posthumous adoption of that philosophic emperor as his own father. Caracalla moved from Rome to Antioch, in Syria, taking with him his mother, the dowager empress Domna, to run the administration, while he waged war on the Parthians. On campaign in the Syrian hinterland, he was murdered by his praetorian prefect, Macrinus, who succeeded him. It is significant that Caracalla died childless, as far as

[9] Dio LXXII, 36,4.

[10] Dio LXXIX, 30,2; Herodian V, 3,3.

[11] Herodian V, 3,6.

[12] (or Bassus) ; see François Chausson, MEFRA 107, 1995-2, P 698, n 67.

[13] Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p. 119, casts doubt on this supposition.

anybody knew at the time. Domna died soon afterwards, leaving her sister, Maesa, as head of the family.

Maesa, the widow of Julius Avitus, a Syro-Roman notable, had two daughters, Soaemias and Mamaea. These in turn, also the widows of Syro-Roman notables, Sextus Varius Marcellus, and Gessius Marcianus, respectively, were likewise the mothers of Varius, and of his first cousin Alexianus. It was through these two boys that Maesa determined to restore her family to imperial power. She hatched a plot to overthrow Macrinus and raise Varius to the throne. Alexianus was held in reserve, for later use if necessary, as indeed eventually became the case.

Varius' and Alexianus' relationship to the Severan dynasty was indirect and female (through their mothers, Soaemias and Mamaea, to their grandmother, Maesa, and through her to her sister Domna, the wife of Severus and mother of Caracalla and Geta). For this reason (and also possibly since there may have been male members of Severus' own Libyan family alive [14]) it became expedient, in furtherance of Maesa's intention to use her grandsons to regain the empire for her family, to claim that they were not the sons of their mothers' husbands, the Syro-Roman notables, but rather of Caracalla himself.

Caracalla, very much a man's man, had been popular with the soldiers. So following his murder and substitution by Macrinus, every pusilla an accountant, who threatened to cut their pay, the soldiers were restive. Maesa launched the rumour that Varius was not the son of Sextus Varius Marcellus, who had conveniently just died, and was thus incapable of contradiction, but rather the fruit of Soaemias' erstwhile dalliance with her first cousin Caracalla, whilst he was still a prince. Her son's claim to the throne was therefore based on an assertion of maternal adultery that made the boy a bastard.

Not so, however, Varius' claim to the high priesthood of Elaiagabal, apparently transmitted to him quite legitimately from his great-grandfather Bassianus, perhaps via Maesa and Soaemias. [15] In that god's honour he performed the ritual dances that, together with his adolescent beauty, first brought him fame

[14] For this astute observation, and for much other generous help with my research, I am greatly indebted to M. François Chausson, fellow of the École Française de Rome, and professor of the École Normale Supérieure, Paris.

[15] At least there is no mention in the ancient texts of any doubts regarding Varius' legitimacy as high priest, nor (despite the wild speculation on this point of Artaud, see text below, of any parricide or usurpation involved in his great-grandfather Bassianus' tenure of that office. We do not have any record of which other male(s), if any, may have held the priesthood between Bassianus and Varius, nor, since we do not know the date of Bassianus' death, how long any interregnum between them may have been.

with the soldiers of the legion stationed near Emesa. They flocked to watch him dance, captivated by his good looks, evocative, according to one of his ancient historians, of those of the young god Dionysus. [16]

Their enthusiasm aided by generous bribes from Maesa, the legionaries were only too eager to overthrow Macrinus in favour of this attractive and talented boy, the supposed son of Caracalla. At the age of fourteen, he was raised by the soldiers to the purple in a *coup d'état*, conceived and managed, according to the ancient historiography, by Varius' female relatives and their trusted family retainers, none other than our three nominees: Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon.

It is written that Eutychianus, a gymnast and entertainer, conceived and planned the *coup*, persuading the soldiers of the legion to defect to Varius. Gannys led these troops against Macrinus, acquitting himself unexpectedly well, in view of his lack of military background. Comazon, together with Gannys, took charge of the government at Antioch, once the *coup* had succeeded, and ran it to suit their own purposes.

Meanwhile, the boy they had put on the throne adopted the imperial style of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. This nomenclature had been effectively usurped by Severus, through his retroactive adoption of that philosophic emperor - helpless in this matter, because dead - as father to himself, and transmitted to his own son, Caracalla. Varius took it in assertion of his claim to be the son of Caracalla.

Given Varius' age, his managers - his grandmother and some or all of these three nominees - were obviously expecting to control him, and to rule while he reigned. But he quickly threw off their yoke. This he did at Nicomedia, in Bithynia, where he spent the first winter of his reign with his court, *enroute* overland to Rome. Here he allegedly manifested sexual proclivities involving soldiers, religious fanaticism in the service of the god Elaiagabal, and sumptuary obstinacy, preferring the flowing silken robes of Syria to the itchy wool of the Roman toga or the weight of a metal cuirass. When Gannys, his appointed tutor, attempted to correct him in these matters, he was slain.

Henceforth, Varius imposed his own will on the empire, though this for less than four years. He reigned from June a.u.c. 971 (= A.D. 218), to March a.u.c. 975 (= A.D. 222), during which it is recorded that he shared the consulship

[16] Herodian, V, 3,7.

with Comazon, and that this courtier was also twice city prefect of Rome. In that brief time Varius allegedly managed so to outrage the mid-imperial Romans - whom one had thought a rather blasé bunch - with his social and religious policies, and his sexual, sumptuary, and convivial behaviour, to such a degree, we are told, that he was murdered, decapitated, dragged through the streets, and thrown into the Tiber, all before his eighteenth birthday. His mother suffered a similar fate.

This was done with his grandmother's consent, if not at her instigation. It is possible, though not stated or proven, that Comazon advised her in this matter, and likely that he agreed with her policy; or if, as both Dio and one inscription attest, he was praetorian prefect, he may even have helped to implement it, insofar as the praetorians were the soldiers who killed Varius. Unlike other members of Varius' court, closely associated with him in his reign, Comazon survived into the next, being reappointed for a third time as city prefect.

Varius was replaced by his much more docile and colourless younger cousin Alexianus, who ruled as Alexander Severus, first under Maesa's then under Mamaea's close tutelage. Under Alexander, the senate damned Varius' memory to eternal oblivion. Since, however, this had little effect (perhaps Varius was simply unforgettable), his name, or rather his posthumously attributed hieronym, that of Elaiagabal, in its Latin, or Romanised Greek form, Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, became for centuries a synonym for infamy.

Ironically, in calling Varius thus, posterity grants him that apotheosis denied him by the senate.

III. Methodological matters.

This last observation would doubtless have greatly displeased his ancient historians, particularly our main source, Dio, who ostentatiously loathed and despised him, and who wrote his vituperative account of him during the reign of his successor, Alexander Severus. Alexander honoured Dio with the consulship.

It is now believed that Dio, who was absent from Rome throughout the reign of Varius, and narrowly - or was it deliberately? - missed a chance to meet him in Anatolia, may have culled much of his material about Varius from a lost history by his contemporary Marius Maximus; also honoured by Alexander Severus, and therefore likely to have been biased against Varius. It is likewise thought that both Herodian's account, written a generation after Dio's, and that in the

Historia Augusta, composed over a century later, may also derive, indirectly, from that same source; and so even the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, Eutropius, and Aurelius Victor. [17]

Thus none of the extant ancient accounts of Varius can be taken as objective, reliable records of fact. Rather, they spring initially from authors serving an opposing faction, and are later perpetuated by others, using Varius as a ready-made negative example, perhaps for purposes quite unrelated to him and his times. They wrote, moreover, in an historiographical tradition that scorned objectivity; one espousing an adversarial rhetoric, where one must choose between panegyric and invective. [18] It is clear that in the case of Varius, for whatever sets of reasons, his ancient historians chose invective.

This has important consequences for the study of Varius, as well as of his courtiers, Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon; for just as we saw above, in the case of these three names, both the state and nature of the ancient texts regarding Varius give rise to both prosopographical and historiographical riddles about him, affecting in turn one's consideration of the corresponding set of riddles regarding these members of his entourage. Ancient historians' attitudes to Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon were doubtless influenced by their attitudes to the emperor whom these courtiers served. Historiographical treatment of these three nominees was surely conditioned, or even determined, by the rhetorical genre in which historians' treatment of Varius himself was cast: that of invective.

Comparing riddles about Varius with corresponding ones about his courtiers should therefore reveal similarities and differences of content and structure in the prosopographical variety, and of style and approach in the historiographical. Analysis of these similarities and differences may provide keys to understanding the rhetoric and intention of the ancient historiography regarding Varius and his courtiers, and thus may help unlock some of its mysteries. So in order to examine the prosopographical and historiographical riddles of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, we must briefly consider, if only in their broadest outlines, the corresponding set of riddles regarding Varius.

[17] François Chausson, *Le Site de la Vigna Barberini de 191 à 455*, in *La Vigna Barberini. Histoire d'un site. Études des sources et de la topographie, Roma Antica*, 3, Rome, 1997, p. 32ff.

[18] Cicero, *de Inventione*, I.v.7, in discussing the three classes of subjects with which the orator is concerned, the epideictic (demonstrativum) the deliberative, and the judicial, has this to say about the epideictic: "Demonstrativum est quod tribuitur in alicuius certae personae laudem aut vituperationem."

The prosopographical riddles surrounding Varius are many and fascinating. They quickly overstep the bounds of prosopography, raising questions in the estimation of ancient historiography as evidence, thereby invoking broader methodological questions. Thus they are historical riddles in the fullest sense.

Was he really the attractive, talented, provocative, witty, sensuous, fanatical, perverse, wicked and outrageous person his ancient historians describe; and did he actually commit any of the enormities they attribute to him? Or is the ancient historiography of his reign a pack of lies from beginning to end? If it is in any measure true, then: How was it possible for him to come to the throne at all, and to last even as long as he did? Most interesting of all, if he was indeed as described, and did what it is claimed he did: Why? What made him so? What motivated his extraordinary behaviour? What did it mean, in the context of his time?

If, conversely, it is all a pack of lies, and he was nothing of the sort, and did none of it, these riddles become historiographical, or rather, belong to the history of historiography: What motivated his ancient historians to say what they did about him? What explains the considerable - though not complete - uniformity in their descriptions of him and their narratives of his reign? And again, since even (or especially) lies have meaning: What would it have meant, in the context of his time, to embody characteristics, and indulge in behaviour, such as are attributed to him; and what would it mean for his historians thus falsely to attribute them?

These questions form the focus of the larger study of which this paper is an offshoot. Here our more limited brief is to compare the riddles surrounding Varius with those regarding Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, in order the better to undertake examination of the latter. This leads us back to the distinction between a prosopographical and an historiographical riddle, central to the present methodological considerations. Just as that distinction, in the case of Varius, lies between determining, on the one hand, who Varius was and what he did or did not do, and why; and, on the other, what historians say about him in these respects, and why; so lies it also, in the case of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, between determining who, how many, and what he or they was or were and did, and why; and what the ancient sources say about these nominees in these respects, and why.

Although this is an obvious distinction, with important methodological consequences, it is one that has frequently been ignored by historians, writing as if there were no difference between these two sorts of questions.

Now in the case of Varius, we are able to distinguish what is claimed to have been the case, from what may in fact have been the case, by comparing two different sets of materials, each primarily relevant to one or the other side of the comparison: on the one hand we have the accounts of the ancient historians, whose reliability is dubious on many grounds, including the imperfect transmission of their texts *via* the mediaeval manuscript tradition, and the obvious bias against Varius they display; on the other there are epigraphic, numismatic, and other archaeological remains, surviving directly from his reign; which, by and large, though requiring extreme care in their interpretation, are usually considered more reliable than historiographical texts as evidence of fact.

From these so-called "hard" sources, mainly epigraphy and numismatics, we know at least that Varius existed, and that he was Roman emperor and high priest of Elaiagabal. We have inscriptions and coins attesting to his official - though doubly spurious - imperial nomenclature, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and linking these names to his tenure of the high priesthood of Elaiagabal. [19] Though we have no comparable "hard" evidence for his putative original *tria nomina*, Varius Avitus Bassianus, we do at least have inscriptions for two of the gentlemen after whom he was allegedly named: one for his mother's husband, Sextus Varius Marcellus, linking her to him, [20] and at least one for her father, Julius Avitus. [21] Likewise, with regard to his anatomical maleness - leaving aside the matter of his psychological gender - we have coins that show the development of his profile, from that of a smooth-cheeked boy, to that of a fluffy-chinned adolescent. [22]

In the case of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, however, we have epigraphic evidence only for the existence and status of Comazon, mentioned in combination with certain additional nomenclature, not involving either of the other two names here in question. [23] For these, explicitly stated, as distinct from

[19] Inscriptions: ILS, Nº 473; Coins: BMC V, Elagabalus Nº 225.

[20] ILS, Nº 478.

[21] AE (1962), Nº 229 (Augsburg).

[22] For examples in print see: Dressel, *Die Römischen Medaillone des Münzkabinetts der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, Tafelband, XIV Nº 104, 105, (smooth); Gnecchi, ***I Medaglioni Romani, Bronzo*,** Tav. 98 Nº 2, Tav. 153 Nº 11, (bearded); BMC V, Plates 85-97 passim (whole range from smooth to bearded). For commentary on this progression see: Wegner, Das Römische Herrscherbild, Macrinus bis Balbinus, Elagabalus, p.147.

[23] CIL XIV Nº 2809 = ILS 6219, which cites Publius Valerius Comazon as consul. Also CIL VI Nº 866, a badly damaged slab, the extant part of which cites only the name Comazon, possibly as consul. A Greek inscription published in RA 46, 1955, p. 240, nº 260 implores good fortune on behalf of Varius, under his official imperial

deduced through mere allusions, we rely entirely on a single ancient text, that of Dio, which, though it mentions all three of the names here under consideration, is, as we presently shall see, in such poor material condition that it is impossible, on its authority alone, conclusively to settle questions of identity, number, and condition, as regards their bearers.

Thus the prosopographical riddle - Who was or were the bearers of these three names? What did he or they do? What was his or their social and sexual condition? - remains, to a much greater extent than that of Varius, largely unsolved, indeed insoluble - particularly with regard to Eutychianus and Gannys - pending the discovery, through archaeology or serendipity, of further "hard" evidence.

That leaves the historiographical riddle. This presents itself in two main sets of texts: the ancient and the modern, with one mediaeval text acting as a bridge between the two.

We shall not, at this point, review the aforementioned selection of modern texts, contributing to the historiographical riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, whether as constituent elements of the riddle itself, or as attempts to solve it. This we shall do later, after first reviewing the ancient historiography regarding these three nominees, and, together with those ancient texts, the commentaries of their modern editors and translators. This order of exposition seems preferable because, so far as it concerns only questions of identity, number, and social status, the sources of the riddle, or rather muddle, can be traced back to divergent readings, by mediaeval and early modern historians, of the main ancient texts relating to this reign: Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*.

These are the sources they cite, when, indeed, they cite any at all. Yet these sources are full of imprecision, ambiguity, and discontinuity, even where the text is established. Some, moreover, are plagued with lacunae. It is hardly surprising, then, in the absence of comparison with epigraphic or numismatic evidence, which either was not yet available, or whose relevance was not yet fully understood, that these texts lent themselves, in the hands of early modern historians, to such widely divergent, possibly uncritical or misconstrued readings, leading to the present state of contradiction and confusion. Yet this is a mere muddle, which can be clarified, at least to some extent, with reference to the ancient texts.

---

titulature, and other members of his family and court, including one Valerius Comazon, whom the commentary identifies as probably one of the emperor's two praetorian prefects.

It is when it comes to the question of these nominees' sex or sexlessness that we shall have to focus on the modern historiography, since this matter is not mentioned in the ancient. Nowhere in any of the extant ancient texts, or indeed in other ancient evidence of any sort that I have yet encountered, is any of our three nominees designated as a eunuch, or anything like it. Neither Dio nor Herodian, in connection with Varius, mention eunuchry at all. Although the *Historia Augusta*, in any case a highly unreliable source, says that Varius appointed eunuchs to high position, it does not name them. [24] And the late, minor sources, abbreviators and chroniclers such as Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, and Ammianus Marcellinus, pass over the reign so briefly that they barely mention Varius himself, let alone any of his courtiers.

Thus, unlike the mere muddle of identity, number, and status, which obviously results, as we shall see, from variant readings of the ancient texts, the ascription of eunuchry appears to be a true riddle, pertaining exclusively to the modern historiography; one whose source would be mysterious, even if located, because it is clearly the product of fantasy.

Writers ranging from at least the eighteenth to the twentieth century repeat, one after another, the same multilingual litany of emasculation: *the eunuch Gannys*, *l'eunuque Gannys*, *der Eunuch Gannys*; thereby uncritically perpetuating a legend of castration rendered especially curious by its choice of object; for the courtier in question, Gannys, is the very same one said by Dio to have been the lover and prospective second husband of Varius' widowed mother, Soaemias. [25]

What makes this ascription of eunuchry even "curiouser", is that Soaemias was reputedly a very sexy lady. Indeed one ancient source, admittedly the least reliable, jokes that her son's name, Varius, was thought by his schoolmates to derive from the many varieties of semen in her womb. [26] It is therefore of particular interest for the study of this riddle that Gannys, out of these three nominees, should be the one most regularly characterised, in much of the modern historiography, as a eunuch. [27]

[24] HA/AS XVIII, 23,6.

[25] Dio LXXX, 6, 2-3.

[26] HA/AE 2,2.

[27] By Gibbon, Duruy, Schiller, Domaszewski, and Pflaum, among others. See below, for a discussion of their relevant texts.

Not that a Roman lady might not have a eunuch as a lover: preferably one emasculated after puberty, his penis left intact; [28] though to have one for a husband would be rather unusual. That said, whether there is any truth or not in Soaemias' characterisation by at least one ancient source as a nymphomaniac, it is unlikely that she would have such a lover, let alone intend to marry him. As a widow, and moreover an imperial lady with the title of Augusta, she would have no need for the discretion, nor for the legal loopholes and social subterfuges, the desire for which might prompt a more demure and private Roman lady to choose a eunuch for a lover or a husband. [29]

Thus on grounds of inverisimilitude, as well as on the evidentiary grounds of its total absence from the extant ancient historiography, it is clear that the ascription of eunuchry to Gannys is bogus, the product of some as yet unidentified post-antique historian's imagination. Yet it is not only significant that this ascription of eunuchry in itself is bogus. It is also useful, for our examination of the larger riddle of which it forms a part, to see what happens when the ascription of eunuchry meets the muddle of conflated identity.

If one is of a mind to indulge in *reductio ad absurdum* - a mode of exposition quite in keeping with the spirit of the ancient historiography - it can be demonstrated that the modern ascription of eunuchry, in combination with the conflation of identity, rooted as this latter is in readings or misreadings of the ancient texts, leads to absurd contradiction.

For it is not only Gannys who is subjected to this phantom castration, whether ascribed or merely implied. Eutychianus is also sometimes designated as a eunuch. [30] I have yet to find an instance of eunuchry attributed to Comazon by name, but insofar as he is alleged by some to be the same person as Eutychianus, and Eutychianus identical with Gannys, they must presumably all three, for any who subscribe to such conflations of identity, share the same deprivation. Yet Comazon is also said to be the father of a Roman lady living decades later. [31]

---

[28] For a detailed account of various methods of castration, see Francis, P., *Castration and Eunuchs in the Ancient World*, in *Pages, Arts Postgraduate Research in Progress*, Vol 1, 1994, Faculty of Arts, University College, Dublin.

[29] For a Roman lady's possible motivation in such cases see Guyot, P., *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, p.64., *Stuttgarter Beiträge zur Geschichte und Politik*, Band 14.

[30] By Artaud. See discussion of this text below.

[31] PIR[1] vol 3, 1898, p 355, No. 42.

So absurd contradiction results when the muddle of conflated identity intersects the riddle of bogus eunuchry.

Such absurd contradiction is not limited to the combination of a modern fantasy of eunuchry with misreadings of ancient texts, embodying conflation of identities. It also emerges from the conflation of identities itself, even when considered on its own, without the intervention of the eunuch legend.

Gannys is said to have been, as well as Varius' mother's lover and prospective husband, the boy emperor's own tutor, during the first few months of his reign. Gannys apparently unwisely insisted on remonstrating against his pupil's behaviour - whether religious, erotic, or sumptuary is unclear - and was killed for his pains. [32] Yet it is also alleged that the bearer of another of these names, Comazon, unlike the rest of Varius' courtiers, survived his reign, and went on to be city prefect, yet again, in the next. [33] While it may not have been impossible, in Rome, to be both a lover and a eunuch, it was certainly impossible to be, at least simultaneously, a prefect and a corpse.

Thus, even within the compass of misreadings of the ancient historiography alone, we find the conflation of identities leading to absurdity.

So far we have surveyed, in its broad outlines, the riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, distinguishing its prosopographical from its historiographical aspects, showing which parts of it relate mainly to the ancient historiography, and which parts to the modern, and how the riddle surrounding Varius compares to that regarding his courtiers.

Now it is time to embark on an examination of the relevant texts, first ancient, then modern.

IV. Examination of the ancient historiography.

It is clear that the ultimate source, if not of the eunuch legend, at least of the muddle of identity, number, and status, regarding these three names, lies in the ancient texts themselves. The first step, therefore, in any attempt to clear up this muddle, is a thorough and systematic study of all relevant *loci* in those few ancient texts in which the reign of Varius is treated or mentioned, and from which early modern historians drew their inferences regarding these names and

[32] Dio LXXX, 6.

[33] Dio LXXX, 4.

their bearers. A concomitant task is to examine commentaries by the editors and commentators of those same texts, and by other historians and prosopographers, adducing such independent evidence as is available.

The three main ancient sources are, in chronological order of composition: Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Herodian's *History*, and the *Historia Augusta*. Both old Dio and young Herodian are contemporary with the reign of Varius (971-975 a.u.c. = A.D. 218-222), while the *Historia Augusta* is at least a century later, or more; whence, among other causes, its lesser reliability. There are also a few late, minor sources, such as Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, and Ammianus Marcellinus, but these have nothing to add to the main sources, regarding the three names that interest us here, so we can omit them from consideration.

Let us begin with Dio's *Roman History*, to start with the earliest and fullest of the three. [34] Our first taste of the conflation of names begins with the General Index of the Loeb edition's Volume IX, covering, among others, Dio's relevant books 78, 79 and 80, where Eutychianus, the first of the three names to be mentioned anywhere, is identified with Comazon, and vice-versa. [35]

Turning to the text itself, Eutychianus is introduced, in a section plagued with lacunae, and dealing with the preparations at Emesa, in Syria, for the *coup d'état* to put Varius on the throne (in a.u.c. 971 = A.D. 218), as *"one who had given people pleasure in amusements and gymnastic exercises"*. [36]

> *... Εὐτυχιανός τις ἔν τε ἀθύρμασι καὶ ἐν γυμνασίοις ἀρέσας καὶ διὰ ταῦτα . . . . . / θείς, ὃς αὐτο . . . . . / τας ἐμμελε . . . . . / ας ἐπὶ του . . . . . / νων αυτω . . . . . / προσωνομ . . .*

Not much more about him can be gleaned from this passage, however, since the text is so fragmentary. Boissevain, in a note to this locus, attempts, on the basis of the fragments, to fill in the gaps, though he admits he is unsure of the result: *"... Eutychianus, an accomplished entertainer and gymnast, thus much in*

[34] The text was most recently established by Boissevain, and published by Weidmann, Berlin, in 1901. It is also available in a Loeb edition, based on Boissevain's text, translated and edited by Earnest Cary, published during the 1960s.

[35] *Dio's Roman History*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol 9, General Index pp. 524 & 516.

[36] Dio LXXIX, 31-1.

demand, who could improvise the most delightful songs ... and therefore was called Gannys ...". [37]

The name *Γάννυς* would, by the etymology here implied, derive from the same root as *γάν(ν)υμαι, γανόω* to be or make glad. [38] It would also, in this context, if Boissevain's conjecture is correct, mean that Gannys was identical with Eutychianus. But not, Boissevain goes on in the same note to contend, with Comazon, who cannot possibly, he argues, be the person alluded to at the next relevant locus of Dio's text.

It occurs soon after, and follows close upon a relatively whole passage in which someone, whose name may be lost in the preceding lacunae, *"...undertook to overthrow Macrinus and to set up as emperor in his stead Avitus,"* (another one of Varius' names) "*Maesa's grandson, who was still a mere boy."* It goes on to say that *"he accomplished both purposes, though he himself had not yet fully reached manhood".* [39]

> *... ἐπεχείρησε τόν τε Μακρῖνον καθελεῖν καὶ τὸν Ἀουῖτον τὸν τῆς Μαίσης ἔγγονον αὐτοκράτορα, καίπερ παιδίον ἔτι ὄντα, ἀντικαταστῆσαι, καὶ κατειργάσατο ἑκάτερον· καίτοι αὐτός τε οὐδέπω πάνυ ἐς ἄνδρας ἐτέλει, ...*

We shall of course address Boissevain's reasons for denying the identification of Comazon with Eutychianus; but since they depend on his interpretation of a passage somewhat further on in Dio's text, combined with reference back to this, we shall deal with them when its turn comes.

With relation to this particular passage on its own, the central question is: Who is "he himself" and is this the same person as simple "he"? In other words, who, in the original, is *αὐτός* ? Is it the presumed grammatical subject of the sentence, whether Eutychianus or someone else; or is it the "mere boy", Varius, whose elevation to power is the subject, not in the grammatical, but in the narrative sense, of this entire section?

This very question is raised by an entry, referring to this passage, in the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, second edition, yet not under the name of

[37] Boissevain, p. 438, note (my translation).

[38] Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1897, p. 300.

[39] Dio LXXIX, 31, 2-3.

Eutychianus, but of Gannys; [40] by virtue of which fact it is clear that *PIR*^{2} assumes that Gannys, rather than Eutychianus, is the subject of this sentence. This entry casts doubt, in the first place, on the correctness of Boissevain's conjecture that Gannys is an eponym for Eutychianus: *"Boissevain ... qui tamen cum Gannym eundem putat atque Eutychianum non recte iudicasse mihi videtur."* It does not, however, give any specific reason for this doubt. But it does go on to argue that the subject of the sentence at this locus, whose name is lost in the preceding lacunae, could well be Gannys: *"Nam etsi ... narratio incipit ab Eutychiano, fieri potest ut subsequentibus lacunis haustum sit nomen Gannyis."* Unless, it demurs, there is an error, and Dio is confusing him (Gannys) with Varius (here called Elagabalus): "*...id si vere traditur nescio an errore contendat Dio ... confundens nempe eum cum Elagabalo...*" A moot point, irresoluble on the basis of the text alone.

But could this ambiguity be the source of the eunuch legend? It would certainly require a convoluted reading of the text to believe that a person described merely as not yet having attained the condition of manhood had not done so (and presumably never would) because he had been deprived of the physical means thereunto. Surely, if Dio had wanted to say Eutychianus - or Gannys, or whoever is the subject of this sentence - was a eunuch, he could have done so directly, without euphemism or circumlocution (let alone hesitation, repetition, or deviation); particularly since he presumably felt no prudery regarding such matters, as he alludes to them quite graphically elsewhere. [41]

It seems more likely that the subject of this sentence, whoever he is, was simply rather young; or, as *PIR*^{2} suggests, that *αὐτός* here marks a change of subject, referring back to the direct object of the previous clause but one, the "mere boy" (*παιδίον*), Varius, only fourteen years old at the time; who thus becomes the subject of this clause.

The second (and last) mention by name of Eutychianus comes soon after, and alludes to his important role in the uprising against Macrinus. He persuades many of Macrinus' soldiers to defect to Varius, with the promise of rewards, and promotion to the rank and possessions of those of their officers whom they kill: [42]

[40] PIR^2 p. 15, No. 74.

[41] Dio LXXII, 14, 4-6.

[42] Dio LXXIX, 32, 4. The text is corrupt at this point, but suggests that Eutychianus sent Festus, possibly an imperial freedman, to convey this inducement to the soldiers.

... ὁ Εὐτυχιανὸς ... ἔπεισεν ἀποσφάξαι πάντας ἐκείνους, ἆθλόν σφισι τὴν τοῦ τεθνήξοντος ἑκάστῳ οὐσίαν τε καὶ χώραν ἐν τῇ στρατείᾳ προθείς·...

Gannys is introduced, for the first time by his own name, legibly and unequivocally, into the extant text, as it comes to the decisive battle against Macrinus. Dio uses the definite article, *ὁ,* rather than the indefinite particle *τις* to introduce him, suggesting either that he has already been mentioned, presumably somewhere in the preceding lacunae, or that he is assumed already to be known. This impression is strengthened by the lack of an explanation, such as Dio often gives, of who he is, or where he fits into the narrative so far. Particular emphasis is laid on his unexpectedly succesful acquittal of himself in seizing the pass leading to an unnamed town, and ordering his troops for battle, especially considering that he is inexperienced in military matters, and has, until then, lived a life of luxury: [43]

... Ἐν δ' οὖν τῇ μάχῃ ὁ μὲν Γάννυς καὶ τὰ στενὰ τὰ πρὸ τῆς κώμης σπουδῇ προκατέλαβε καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας εὐπολέμως διέταξεν, καίτοι καὶ ἀπειρότατος τῶν στρατιωτικῶν ὢν καὶ ἐν τρυφῇ βεβιωκώς·...

Here it is worth briefly comparing Gibbon's paraphrase of this passage [44] with the original, in order to see the eunuch legend at work, although we shall deal with the modern historiography more extensively later.

Having attributed the plot against Macrinus to *'a conspiracy of women and eunuchs'*, (the women being Maesa, Varius' grandmother, and Soaemias, his mother; the eunuchs remaining as yet unnamed), Gibbon comes to this battle. Noting that "*Antoninus* (Varius), *who, in the rest of his life, never acted like a man, in this important crisis of his fate approved himself a hero",* he goes on to state that *"... the eunuch Gannys, whose occupations had been confined to female cares and the soft luxury of Asia, displayed the talents of an able and experienced general."*

[43] Dio LXXIX, 38-3.

[44] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ed. David Womersley, Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1994, Vol. 1, Ch. 6, p. 175.

It will be noted that, though it refers to Gannys' lack of military experience, and to his previous life of luxury, Dio's text falls far short of calling him a eunuch.

Perhaps Dio's use of the word *τρυφή*, luxury, in his description of Gannys' previous life, could be the source of the eunuch legend. We are told by Guyot, describing ancient attitudes, that in antiquity's view *"castration is only possible where all of life is feminised, because ruled by luxury (τρυφή)."* [45] Whether this is true or not, to argue (if following Guyot's dictum) from the presence of luxury in an account of someone's life, that he must therefore have been a eunuch, not only fails to distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions, but makes eunuchs of whole successive generations of the Roman ruling class. [46]

Comazon is first mentioned by name in Dio's extant text alongside Gannys, with no indication at all that either is to be identified with Eutychianus, nor yet confused with one another. After his defeat in battle, Macrinus attempts to flee to Rome, in the hope that the senate and people will support him against Varius. Here Dio calls Varius "Pseudantoninus", in disparagement of the rumour, launched by Maesa, to win the soldiers over to Varius, claiming that he was the fruit of an adultery between their late, lamented emperor Caracalla - officially called Antoninus - and her daughter Soaemias.

Dio seems to think Macrinus might have succeeded, had he reached Rome: those who had once condemned this murderous usurper of Caracalla's throne, thought better of him now, *"in view of the effrontery of the Syrians, the youth of the False Antoninus, and the arbitrary course of Gannys and Comazon,"* and their view would have prevailed, whether by persuasion or by force, upon the soldiers: [47]

> *… καὶ εἴπερ ἐπεφεύγει, πάντως ἄν τι κατείργαστο· ἡ γὰρ εὔνοιά σφων παρὰ πολὺ ἐς αὐτόν, πρός τε τὸ τῶν Σύρων τόλμησα καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Ψευδαντωνίνου ἡλικίαν τό τε τοῦ Γάννυ καὶ τοῦ Κωμάζοντος αὐτεπίτακτον σκοπούντων, ἐποίει, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας ἂν ἢ ἑκόντας μετανοῆσαι ἢ καὶ ἄκοντας καταδαμασθῆναι.*

[45] Guyot, P., op. cit., p. 41.

[46] JRS 66, 1976, Jasper Griffin, *Augustan Poetry and the Life of Luxury*.

[47] Dio LXXIX, 39-4.

It is clear from this passage that in Dio's view, at least, Comazon and Gannys are two distinct persons.

Comazon is next mentioned in a list heading the subsequent and final chapter (80) of Dio's History, as sharing the consulate with Pseudantoninus (Varius) in the third calendar year of his reign (a.u.c. 973 = A.D. 220).

Somewhat further into that chapter, we are told, by Cary's translation in the Loeb, and on the strength of a single, final '*ν* ' to identify (albeit with his name in brackets) the person (if indeed it is a person) concerned, that after Avitus (Varius) was emperor, and had gone to Bithynia (on his way from Syria, where the *coup* took place, towards Rome) he *"frequently employed [Ganny]s as his associate in the government, as he had been accustomed to do at Antioch."* [48]

> *… πάρεδρον . . . . . οι πολλάκις . . . . . .ν, ὥσπερ καὶ κατὰ τὴν Ἀντιόχειαν εἰώθει, ποιούμενος.*

The ascription of this final '*ν* ' to the accusative case of "Gannys" is one that Boissevain, in a note on this *locus*, without committing himself as to its accuracy, refers back to Bekker, an earlier textual editor of Dio's *History*, who offers it as one possible reading, set alongside others not involving any person's name. [49]

The next mention of any of these three nominees comes when Dio provides a list of several executions ordered by Varius, presumably at the behest of his political advisors, including one on Comazon's account:

Claudius Attalus, now in Cyprus, once, when governor of Thrace, *"had incurred Comazon's ill will by having … sent him to the galleys for some wrongdoing of which he was guilty while serving in Thrace"*: [50]

> *… ἐφόνευσε … ἔν τε τῇ Κύπρῳ Κλαύδιον Ἄτταλον τὸν τῆς Θράκης ποτὲ ἄρξαντα, καὶ ὑπὸ μὲν τοῦ Σευήρου ἐκ τοῦ συνεδρίου ἐν τῷ τοῦ Νίγρου πολέμῳ ἐκπεσόντα, ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ Ταραύτου ἐς αὐτὸ ἐπαναχθέντα, καὶ τότε ἐκ τοῦ κλήρου τῇ Κύπρῳ προσταχθέντα, ὅτι τῷ Κωμάζοντι*

[48] Dio LXXX, 3-1.

[49] Boissevain, p. 456, line 2 & note.

[50] Dio LXXX, 3-5.

προσεκεκρούκει· στρατευόμενον γὰρ ποτε αὐτὸν ἐν Θρᾴκῃ καὶ κακουργήσαντά τι ἐς τοὺς τριηρίτας ἀπεώσατο.

The passage continues immediately on, expressing contempt for Comazon's character and scorn for his name *" derived from mimes and buffoonery",* as well as surprise at his elevation to command of the praetorian guard, for which he was, in Dio's opinion, wholly unqualified, due to his relative lack of experience in military commands. It goes on to disapprove of Comazon's subsequent, indeed repeated appointments to even higher offices: the consulate and the city prefecture, in flagrant breach of all precedent: [51]

... τοιοῦτος γάρ τις ὁ Κωμάζων ὢν καὶ τοῦτο τοὔνομα ἔκ τε μίμων καὶ γελωτοποιίας ἔχων τῶν τε δορυφόρων ἦρξεν, ἐν μηδεμιᾷ τὸ παράπαν ἐπιτροπείᾳ ἢ καὶ προστασίᾳ τινὶ πλὴν τῆς τοῦ στρατοπέδου ἐξετασθείς, καὶ τὰς τιμὰς τὰς ὑπατικὰς ἔλαβεν, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὑπάτευσεν καὶ ἐπολιάρχησεν, οὐχ ἅπαξ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ δεύτερον καὶ τρίτον, ὅ μηδενὶ πώποτε ἄλλῳ ὑπῆρξεν·

This passage brings us back to Boissevain's note, discussed earlier, containing his speculative emendation of the text, which would make Gannys an eponym for Eutychianus; and to his denial therein of the possibility that Eutychianus could be Comazon. The conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus, found throughout the historiography preceding Boissevain's refutation in 1901, and surviving at least as late as the Loeb edition of this volume, 1969, dates back (at least) to Xiphilinus, the eleventh century Byzantine monk, whose epitome of Dio's work long stood as the main, often the only, means of access to large tracts of the text.

It so happens, however, that precisely for this portion of the text, relating to Varius, an older, presumably direct transcription of Dio's original exists: the fifth or sixth century vellum manuscript known as Vaticanus Graecus 1288. [52] It is on this manuscript that Boissevain bases this portion of the text in his edition, a practice which is also followed by the Loeb. Although, as we have seen, it is plagued with lacunae, it is nevertheless much fuller and more detailed

[51] Dio LXXX, 4.1-2.

[52] Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1288; see Loeb Dio Introduction p. xxvi.

than Xiphilinus' epitome, also edited by Boissevain, and published as an appendix to his text of Dio proper. [53]

Xiphilinus' reason for conflating the names, which he does with a simple apposition: *... ὁ μὲν γὰρ Εὐτυχιανός, ὁ καὶ Κωμάζων ...* [54] seems to be that, taking as factual aetiology the etymology suggested at this locus of Dio's original, he supposes the name Comazon derives, in this specific individual's case, from its generic meaning in Greek of a festive reveller or strolling player. [55] But Xiphilinus goes well beyond Dio in affirming that this therefore links it to the previously mentioned gymnast and entertainer, Eutychianus. Nowhere in his extant text does Dio make any such connection.

Dio's sneering remarks about Comazon's name and possible origins would seem to be the only conceivable basis, however flimsy, in this text at least, for establishing any conflation of identity between Comazon and Eutychianus. But to do so on such a basis would be to suppose that only one such comedian or mime (if indeed the name really does imply the profession) was involved in the reign of Varius. Since numerous slaves and charioteers, male and female prostitutes, and several other forms of Roman low life, including actors, are mentioned by the other ancient sources as favourites of this emperor, there seems to be no particular reason to espouse a supposition of uniqueness in this case. [56]

Boissevain's reason, however, for denying the conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus is not this, but something apparently far more compelling for him than mere evidence of sloppy argument and faulty logic: chronological incompatibility. For how, Boissevain observes, citing the PIR for reference, could Eutychianus, described as not yet fully a man at the beginning of the reign of Varius, possibly be the same person as Comazon, who had served time in the galleys under Attalus, whose governorship of Thrace had taken place in the reign of Commodus, well over a quarter of a century before?

Compelling - till one remembers that the ascription to Eutychianus of this particular manhood as yet unattained is itself disputable.

---

[53] Xiphilinus, in Boissevain Vol III, p. 720-729.

[54] Xiphilinus, in Boissevain Vol III, p. 724, line 23.

[55] Liddel & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 865-866.

[56] Herodian V. 7, 6-8; HA/AE, XII.

Nicomedia, the capital of Bithynia, where Varius and his entourage, including both Comazon and Gannys, spent the first winter of his reign, *enroute* from Syria to Rome, is the scene of the next mention of any of our three nominees. Note that after the first two unequivocal mentions of Eutychianus, his name does not appear again. This could mean, if he is one of three distinct persons (as I suspect), that he stayed behind in Syria, after the success of the *coup*, and the initial period of residence in Antioch; or, if he is taken as identical with either of the other two, it could be that Dio prefers to use that other name, rather than Eutychianus, or merely that it had more luck in the lottery of textual survival.

Next, we come to the unfortunate end of Gannys, one whose luck in the game of flesh and blood survival at the Roman imperial court ran out quite suddenly and unexpectedly. He is granted detailed credit for past services to Varius and his family: for launching the *coup d'état*, by taking Varius to the soldiers' camp and inciting them to revolt; for leading the rebellious troops in their victorious battle against Macrinus; and for being to Varius both *"foster-father and guardian"*. Of course he was *"living rather luxuriously"* (again that word *τρυφή*), and was *"fond of accepting bribes*"; but, in Dio's opinion, he *"did no one any harm and bestowed many benefits on many people"*. Most important, in the author's view, he *"showed great zeal"* for Varius, and was *"thoroughly satisfactory to Maesa and Soaemis"* (a variant form of Soaemias); to Maesa, Varius' grandmother, *"because he had been reared by her"* (and was thus presumably obliged and accustomed to do her bidding); to Soaemias, Varius' mother, *"because he was virtually her husband"*. [57]

> *. . . ν δὲ δὴ τὸν τὴν ἐπανάστασιν κατασκευάσαντα, τὸν ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον αὐτὸν ἐσαγαγόντα, τὸν τοὺς στρατιώτας προσαποστήσαντα, τὸν τὴν νίκην αὐτῷ τὴν κατὰ τοῦ Μακρίνου παρασχόντα, τόν τροφέα, τὸν προστάτην, ἐν ἀρχῇ εὐθὺς τῆς ἡγεμονίας ἐν τῇ Νικομηδείᾳ ἀποκτείνας ἀνοσιώτατος ἀνδρῶν ἐνομίσθη· ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ καὶ τρυφερώτερον διῃτᾶτο καὶ ἡδέως ἐδωροδόκει, οὐ μὴν οὔτε αἴτιός τινος κακοῦ οὐδενὶ ἐγένετο καὶ πολλοὺς πολλὰ εὐηργέτησε. τὸ δὲ μέγιστον, ἰσχυρῶς αὐτὸν περιεῖπε, καὶ τῇ Μαίσῃ τῃ τε Σοαιμίδι σφόδρα ἤρεσκε, τῇ μὲν ὅτι ἐτέθραπτο ὑπ᾽ αὐτῆς, τῇ δὲ ὅτι συνῴκει τρόπον τινὰ αὐτῇ.*

[57] Dio LXXX, 6,1-2.

It is worth noting that again, a solitary '𐤍' is the basis for identifying Gannys as the verbal object at this locus. This ascription, however, unlike the previous one dependent on a mere '𐤍', can be justified here by intra-textual reference: in this case to his role in the battle, where Gannys is unequivocally named.

Now I promised earlier to raise, as and when they became relevant, hitherto undiscussed ways in which the bearers of these three names, Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon, are significant for the study of Varius himself, in terms of their personal interaction with him, and of the effect on his character and behaviour of that interaction, and, ultimately of the political and dynastic consequences of that behaviour. That time has come.

The death of Gannys seems to me to be an event of much greater importance than has hitherto been accorded it, in the comments of historians on this text (the only one of the three that records it), and in narrative histories of this reign. For this seems to be the decisive moment at which Varius comes into his own, seizing power from his would-be managers, and daring henceforth to rule, as well as reign, in his own right.

It is moreover significant that it should be unclear what precise sort of behaviour - from the context we would suspect religious or sexual, or both, with their overlapping sumptuary implications - was the object of Gannys' fruitless attempt at moderating his pupil's wilful excesses. It is particularly in these three respects that, according to a consensus of his ancient historiographers, Varius would go on most signally to distinguish himself for eccentricity, thus outraging Roman opinion. So a close examination of this episode, as related here by Dio, seems in order at this point.

For his rash and unpremeditated murder of this interloper into his mother's bed, inquisitor into his own, and would-be inhibitor of his religious impulses, a tutor whose ever-zealous custody was doubtless, for the adolescent emperor, both evidence and instrument of his managers' collective intention to dominate him, and to rule while he reigned, Varius is regarded, according to Dio in the passage quoted above, *"as the most impious of men"*: *ἀνοσιώτατος ἀνδρῶν.* Yet Dio expressly denies that Gannys' link to Soaemias motivated Varius' act of self-liberation; for he assures us that Varius had *"wished to give [Gannys] a marriage contract, and appoint him Caesar".* Rather, Dio avers, *"it was because he was forced by Gannys to live temperately and prudently".* [58]

[58] Dio LXXX 6,3.

... ἀλλ᾽ οὔτι γε διὰ τοῦτ᾽ αὐτὸν κατεχρήσατο, ὁπότε καὶ συμβόλαιον αὐτῷ γαμικὸν ποιῆσαι καὶ Καίσαρα αὐτὸν ἀποδεῖξαι ἠθέλησεν, ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι σωφρόνως τε καὶ ἐμφρόνως ζῆν ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ ἠναγκάζετο.

One may perhaps be forgiven, especially since Dio tells us elsewhere that he himself was not present at the scene, but heard of the events in Nicomedia from a third party, [59] for doubting the scope and depth of his venture into the complex psychology of an adolescent killer's motivation, especially of one whose father is dead, who is emperor of Rome, and whose victim is his mother's lover. One may, moreover, question the accuracy of Dio's apparently uncritical ascription to Varius of an alleged intention - that of marrying Gannys to his mother, and making him his heir - when it is just as likely, indeed far more so, in the context of his tutelage, that such an intention, if ever it existed, was Gannys' or Soaemias', rather than her son's.

For there remains the distinct possibility, in no way obviated by Dio's denial (indeed possibly, contrariwise, reinforced thereby), that Varius may have felt threatened in his tenure of the throne by the possibility that his mother might remarry, and, assuming he was not a eunuch, have a son by Gannys, thus generating a potential rival to himself. This is a possibility, based on a common sense understanding of the vicissitudes of dynastic politics, that has been alluded to obliquely by Hay, though not developed by him, [60] and is apparently neglected, as far as my researches show, by other historians. Perhaps because it is both obvious, and, in the context of dynastic politics, a rational consideration to have entertained, Dio and other historians with a vested interest in making Varius seem as irrational as possible prefer to leave it out: it does not fit their preordained typology.

But there is yet another quibble, one which I have not seen raised before, even obliquely, anywhere at all: for the usual reading of this passage is that Varius intended to make Gannys his stepfather. Yet one may wonder, in view of the ambiguity of the text, and of Varius' later nuptial behaviour with the charioteer Hierocles, as related by Dio, if it was not rather his thwarted wish to make his mother's lover his own husband. This hypothesis would put quite a different

[59] Dio LXXX 7, 4.

[60] Stuart Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, p. 102.

construction on his murder of Gannys, involving far more complex analyses of its motivation than have hitherto been attempted.

However this may be, Dio's unconvincing attempt at motivational interpretation is followed by his narrative account of the murder itself, which makes it clear, if nothing else, first, that it was unplanned, and second, that till then the power of the Roman empire had not really been deposited in Varius, but in his managers. It is by being the first to raise his hand against Gannys, when no soldier dares to do so, that Varius achieves his metamorphosis from puppet to tyrant: [61]

> *... καὶ αὐτός γε αὐτοχειρίᾳ πρῶτος αὐτὸν κατέτρωσε διὰ τὸ μηδένα τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἄρξαι τοῦ φόνου τολμῆσαι.*

Having seized power by the sword, Varius eventually perishes by the sword. While Dio - having many other crimes and misdemeanours yet to charge him with - does not characterise the emperor's eventual fate specifically as just deserts for this particular murder, the accusation of impiety invites one to supply the connection. It would seem, to sum up this episode, that Dio's indulgence towards Gannys stands in direct proportion to his intolerance of Varius, perhaps in part a consequence of the adversarial nature of his rhetoric of invective.

An account of Comazon's survival, unique among Varius' courtiers, into the next reign, and of his succession (likened by Dio to the old custom of placing a comic mask on an empty stage between acts) to the post of an erstwhile colleague torn apart by the mob, is the last mention we have of him, or of any of our three nominees, in Dio's *Roman History*, or, indeed, by name, in any of our three ancient texts: [62]

> *... καὶ αὐτὸν ὁ Κωμάζων, ὡς καὶ τὸν πρὸ αὐτοῦ, διεδέξατο· ὥσπερ γὰρ προσωπεῖόν τι ἐς τὰ θέατρα ἐν τῷ διακένῳ τῆς τῶν κωμῳδῶν ὑποκρίσεως ἐσεφέρετο, οὕτω καὶ ἐκεῖνος τῇ τῶν πολιαρχησάντων ἐπ᾽ αὐτοῦ κενῇ χώρα προσετάττετο.*

So let us pause now for a moment to review what we have gleaned from Dio, with respect to the riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon:

[61] Dio LXXX 6-3.

[62] Dio LXXX 21-2.

First, there seems no compelling reason, on the basis of the extant text, to suppose that any one of these characters is to be confused with any other. Rather, as one passage cited shows, Comazon and Gannys, at least, are presented as quite distinct individuals.

Secondly, there is no firm basis on which to assign either Eutychianus or Gannys to any particular social class or order, whereas Comazon, however low his origins - and these are by no means clearly designated as such - is credited, or rather discredited, in Dio's opinion, with undeservedly attaining some of the highest offices in the empire; offices which would normally bespeak equestrian or even senatorial rank.

Finally, there is no mention of eunuchry in any way, shape or form, in any extant portions of Dio's text relating to these three characters.

It remains to be seen whether either of the two remaining ancient sources, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*, will cause us in any way to alter these conclusions.

Coming to Herodian, we find that no mention is made in the text, at least by name, of any of our three nominees. The footnotes, however, to the Loeb edition, by Professor Richard Whittaker, then of Alberta, now of Cambridge University, identify a number of allusions to members of our trio. [63] For that reason, our discussion here will focus more on those footnotes, than on Herodian's text itself. I should like to take advantage of this opportunity of publication, which involves the written formulation of conversations he has kindly honoured me with in recent years, to thank him for them, and respectfully to invite Professor Whittaker to expand in print on some of these footnotes, and on his more recent verbal comments.

Gannys is first mentioned, in connection with Soaemias, who is cited early in Herodian's text, [64] in a footnote referring to a passage we have already seen in Dio: *"..she was alleged to be having an affair with Gannys, Dio 79 6. 2-3..."* Professor Whittaker does not, however, comment further on this allegation. His next mention of Gannys identifies him as one of Maesa's clients *(οἰκεῖοι),* cited by Herodian as having *" fled to (Maesa) for protection"* (presumably from Macrinus): [65] *"... H(erodian) probably has in mind Gannys, who had been*

[63] Herodian, *History*, Book V; Loeb Classical Library, Herodian Vol II.

[64] Herodian V, 3.3; Loeb p. 17, note 2.

[65] Herodian V, 3.9; Loeb p. 22-23, note 2.

brought up in the household of Maesa; Dio 79.6 (but fragmentary; cf. PIR^2 G 74 which does not accept the identification of Gannys with Eutychianus); Gannys must have had a remarkable influence over the soldiers to become one of their commanders, Dio 78.38.3-4; …"

Professor Whittaker raises here the matter of the possible identification of Gannys with Eutychianus; a supposition, the source of whose original affirmation he does not furnish at this point, though he does note its rejection by PIR^2 (in its entry under Gannys). His comment on Gannys' remarkable influence over the soldiers suggests that he considers it surprising, but does not say why. Could the eunuch legend be lurking behind his surprise? Or does he have some other theory about Gannys?

It should also be noted, in connection with this passage, first that the identification of Gannys with one of these "clients" is only supposed, and second, that even if such identification were firmly established, the word *οἰκεῖοι* does not necessarily specify any particular legally defined social status. Clienthood places one beneath the person to whom one is beholden for favours and protection, but is a relative condition, rather than absolute. Thus one cannot, on the basis of this allusion, assign Gannys to any particular class of persons, whether slave, freedman, or otherwise.

Next, in a note regarding the chronology of the events of 15 May 971 (=218), the night of Varius' proclamation as emperor, Professor Whittaker says: [66] *"Dio 79.31 is very fragmentary, but suggests that only Gannys (probably the same person as Eutychianus, see Boissevain 3.438), accompanied E(lagabalus)"* (Varius) *"to the camp."* Here Professor Whittaker appears, in contrast with PIR^2 G 74, to accept the identification of Gannys with Eutychianus, attributing it to Boissevain. Is this "probably" his final and considered opinion on the matter?

Professor Whittaker draws our attention to Comazon, in connection with Herodian's narration of the legionary uprising: [67] *"Pflaum, Carrières, no. 290, plausibly suggests (though on very little evidence) that the praefectus of the legion was P. Valerius Comazon, later promoted to praetorian prefect, consul, and three times urban prefect; Dio 79.4.1-2 (who says he was "prefect of the camp")."* The latter reference here is to the passage of Dio in which he

---

[66] Herodian V, 3.10; Loeb p. 25, note 2.

[67] Herodian V, 4.4; Loeb p. 29, note 2.

ridicules Comazon's name, and disapproves of his appointments to posts for which he was not qualified. The former leads to Pflaum's *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres*. One would like to know more about Professor Whittaker's current views on evidence and plausibility in this connection.

Gannys comes up again in the notes, when Herodian narrates the battle without even alluding to him. Professor Whittaker cites Dio, and poses an intriguing question: [68] *"Dio 78.38.4 says that E(lagabalus)'s"* (Varius') *"troops, led by Gannys, showed lack of fighting spirit, and would have been defeated, but for the flight of M(acrinus). Is this credible?"* One wonders what exactly prompts this question, and what its author thinks the answer might be.

Soon, Dio's account of Gannys' death at Varius' hands is cited, without comment, in connection with a reference by Herodian to Nicomedia. [69] *"...Gannys, E(lagabalus)'s"* (Varius') *"original supporter and choice for Caesar, was executed;"* Although elsewhere in this note he cites Dio concerning the murder of Attalus at Comazon's behest, Professor Whittaker does not here mention Comazon by name, though he does soon after.

Perhaps the most useful, for our enquiry, of all Professor Whittaker's footnotes to Herodian, pertains to the last allusion to any of our three nominees in Herodian's text. The original is worth quoting here, since it so closely follows Dio's etymologically based suggestion regarding Comazon's possible theatrical origins, and even goes beyond it, eschewing etymology in favour of biography, affirming such origins as fact (thereby possibly providing a precedent for Xiphilinus' similar assertion). The subject of the sentence here is Varius, whose lunacy leads him to appoint as military prefect a man who in his youth had been a dancer in public in the theatre at Rome : [70]

> *... ἐς τοσοῦτον δὲ ἐξώκειλε παροινίας ὡς πάντα τὰ ἀπὸ τῆς σκηνῆς καὶ τῶν δημοσίων θεάτρων μεταγαγεῖν ἐπὶ τὰς μεγίστας τῶν βασιλικῶν πράξεων, καὶ τοῖς μὲν στρατοπέδοις ἔπαρχον ἐπιστῆσαι ὀρχηστήν τινα γεγονότα καὶ δημοσίᾳ ἐν τῷ Ῥωμαίων θεάτρῳ ὀρχησάμενον, ὅτε ἦν νέος·*

[68] Herodian V, 4.5; Loeb p. 31, note 3.

[69] Herodian V, 5.3; Loeb p. 39, note 2.

[70] Herodian V, 7.6; Loeb p. 64, note 1.

The note says: *"A clear reference to P. Valerius Comazon (Eutychianus?); Hanslik, RE (Valerius 134); probably from a family of professional dancers and actors, if the name is correct, though he may not actually have been one himself, since he served, when young, (in the fleet?) in Thrace c. 181-3, where he was punished by Claudius Attalus (3.1.6n); later he gained influence at court (probably accounting for the term Caesarianus applied to him) and rose to be "prefect of the camp" - either praefectus castrorum or prefect of the Parthian legion (cf. 5.4-4n; Howe, Pret. Pref. 97 ff., wrongly c. 182). In 218 he was made praetorian prefect, and in 219 adlected inter consulares replacing Marius Maximus as urban prefect; he was consul in 220 (cos. II in CIL VI. 866 probably on the basis of his earlier ornamenta consularia), but replaced by Leon as urban prefect (Dio (Xiph.) 79.14.2, though no date); a second tenure of the urban prefecture followed, perhaps in 221, but he was replaced by Fulvius (Diogenianus?; cf. 5.8.8n), whom he in turn replaced in A(lexander Severus)'s reign."*

One would like, in concluding this examination of Herodian's text, in the light of Professor Whittaker's notes, also to have the benefit his opinion on the questions and issues raised here in connection with the texts of Dio and the *Historia Augusta*.

Finally, we come to the biography of Antoninus Elagabalus (Varius, again, under another name) ascribed to "Aelius Lampridius" in the *Historia Augusta*. Again, as in Herodian, there is no mention of any of our trio by name, but only a couple of allusions, fleshed out in the notes to the Loeb edition, by Dr. David Magie.

The first is to Gannys. "Lampridius" is casting aspersions on the character of Soaemias, as reflected in her son's name, Varius: [71]

> ... et aiunt quidam Varii etiam nomen idcirco eodem inditum a condiscipulis quod vario semine, de meretrice utpote, conceptus videretur.

Dr. Magie's note remarks: *"The manner of life imputed to Soaemias in this passage is certainly much exaggerated, and quite in keeping with the general tone of this biography. An amour between her and Gannys, her son's tutor, is alluded to by Dio (lxxix. 6, 2)."*

[71] HA/AE II. 2-3; Loeb p. 108 note 1.

This is followed, a long way on, by an allusion that may be to Comazon: [72]

> Ad praefecturam praetorii saltatorem, qui histrionicam Romae fecerat, adcscivit...

The note explains: *"Probably Valerius Comazon Eutychianus, a freedman; see Dio lxxviii. 31, 1; lxxix. 4, 1.2; Herodian, v.7,6. He aided in the overthrow of Macrinus and was appointed prefect of the guard. Later he received the consular insignia and in 220 was Elagabalus' colleague in the consulship. He was prefect of the city on three different occasions."* It is interesting that in this note, Dr. Magie gives a form of his name that assumes Comazon and Eutychianus are indeed one and the same person.

With this we have concluded our review of the three main ancient historiographical sources regarding the reign of Varius. It is now possible to summarise what Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*, together with their editors, translators, and commentators, bring to the riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon. The conclusions to be derived from them can be summed up in three points, all negative:

None of these three ancient texts, nor any other evidence available, clearly identifies Gannys, Eutychianus, or Comazon with one another, in any combination whatsoever.

None of the ancient texts clearly identifies the original legal or social status of any of them, whether slave, freedman, ordinary citizen, equestrian, or senator; though it seems that Comazon, at least, attained high office.

Nowhere in any of the ancient sources do we find any evidence whatever for the characterisation of Gannys, or of any of the others, as a eunuch.

Beyond these negative conclusions, what have we learned from the ancient texts about the riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon?

From detailed study of the relevant portions of Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*, we have seen that the lamentable state of Dio's text in particular, plagued as it is with lacunae, could easily give rise to doubt or confusion regarding the identity of some of the characters he cites as agents in his

[72] HA/AE XII.1; Loeb p. 130 note 1.

narrative. Since he is the only one who mentions them by name, this is a major inconvenience. Conversely, at least in their present state, none of the extant ancient texts that have come down to us provides any basis whatsoever to uphold any conflation of identity, nor for the assignation of specific original legal or social status, and certainly not for the ascription of eunuchry, concerning any of these three nominees.

Where, then, do these conflations, assignations, and ascriptions come from?

The conflation of identities seems to stem from Dio's epitomiser Xiphilinus, and his conflation of Eutychianus with Comazon. Regarding this conflation, and the assignation of low social status it entails (deriving as it does from Comazon's presumed background as an actor, in view of the low social status of actors in antiquity) there are two main possibilities: either both conflation and assignation are substantiated in some version of the text available to Xiphilinus, but lost to us; or he himself has been affected by the doubt and confusion generated by Dio's text. That doubt and confusion may be due to imperfect transmission of the text, or to carelessness in its original composition, or to both. Whichever the case, in view of such confusion, Xiphilinus, interpreting the name Comazon literally as that of a strolling player, and seizing on the characterisation of Eutychianus as a gymnast and entertainer, may have made one person out of two. Whether it is owed to Dio himself, or to Xiphilinus, this conflation has the merit (from the point of view of a writer of invective) of denigrating Comazon's origins, as part and parcel of denigrating the emperor he served.

Whatever its origin and motivation, this conflation has, till recently, been passed on uncritically through much of the post-antique historiographical tradition, which relies heavily on Xiphilinus; sometimes adding Gannys into the mix, in one combination or another. The original source of this addition of Gannys, who is also the most frequently named subject of the eunuch legend, into the conflation of identity, remains so far undetected. As for the eunuch legend itself, there never has been, as far as we can see, in any of the ancient texts, nor even in Xiphilinus, any basis whatsoever for historians to perpetuate it, though some have done so, assiduously.

Thus, with the sole caveat of the possibility that Xiphilinus knew something about Eutychianus and Comazon that we do not, it can be shown that the confident, unquestioning assertions of conflated identity, specific social status, and deprived sexual condition, to be found scattered throughout the modern

historiography, repose on pure speculation, rather than on evidence, even on such dubious evidence as ancient historiography may afford.

It is now time to review some, at least, of that modern historiography, in order to show how the conflation of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon manifests itself therein, and how the eunuch legend is perpetuated. Since our purpose here is merely demonstrative, rather than compendious or analytical, we shall not attempt to review all the texts of modern historians partaking of, or relevant to, this riddle and this legend. It is however opportune, not only in order to demonstrate the existence of the conflation of identity and the presence of the eunuch legend, but also to identify certain characteristic faults in the scholarship regarding Varius and his courtiers, to cite a few of the most important, whether they merely unthinkingly perpetuate the riddle and the legend, or represent attempts to address these topics critically. As with the ancient texts, we shall consider them in chronological order of composition or publication.

V: Review of some of the modern historiography.

We have already heard what Gibbon, writing in mid eighteenth century, has to say: while abstaining from indulgence in conflation of identity, by the simple device of mentioning neither Comazon nor Eutychianus, he asserts Gannys' eunuchry with characteristic aplomb. This assertion is not, however, to be found in one of his main and chronologically nearest secondary sources: Tillemont's *Histoire des Empereurs*, 1693. [73] Tillemont refers once in his chapter on *L'Empereur Antonin Héliogabale* to eunuchs, but only (following the *Historia Augusta*, and the *Vita Alexandri Severi* in particular [74]) as persons unnamed, to whom Varius sold offices, from which they were ejected by Alexander Severus.

> ...Ce n'est rien pour luy de dire qu'il tiroit de l'argent de toutes sortes de charges & d'offices, ou par luy même, ou par les ministres de ses passions. Il les vendoit souvent à des eunuques, ou à d'autres personnes si décriées, que la premiere action d'Alexandre son successeur, fut de casser les officiers qu'il avoit mis...

[73] Le Sieur de Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, Bruxelles, 1693, Tome III, p 270.

[74] HA/AS XXXIV, 3.

Tillemont, following Dio, cites Gannys' death, without conflating him with anyone else, or calling him a eunuch. [75] He does, however, follow Xiphilinus (though he cites him as Dio) in conflating Eutychianus with Comazon. [76]

The nineteenth was a century in which a more scientific and thorough investigation of sources is supposed to have taken hold of classical scholarship. Despite this we find not only French, but even German scholars indulging in unsubstantiated conflation of identity and ascription of eunuchry.

Crevier, in his *Histoire des Empereurs Romains*, 1827, [77] at least distinguishes between Gannys and Eutychianus, even going slightly beyond the sources in doing so:

> ...[Maesa] fut très bien servie dans l'exécution de ses desseins par Eutychien et par Gannys, l'un affranchi des Césars, l'autre instituteur et gouverneur de l'enfance d'Héliogabale. Ces deux hommes, quoique avec des caractères très-différents, étaient l'un et l'autre puissants en intrigues... [78]

But then, citing the *fasti* of the reign, he lists "Eutychianus Comazon" and glosses (following Xiphilinus):

> ...Le collègue d'Héliogabale dans le consulat était un affranchi, à qui son premier métier de farceur avait fait donner le mon de Comazon, qui a cette signification en Grec. [79]

Duruy, in his *Histoire des Romains*, 1883, [80] refers to Gannys as a eunuch or servant of Mamaea, suggesting that these terms are to be regarded as alternatives, rather than concurrent possibilities:

> ...l'eunuque ou le serviteur de Mammée, Gannys...

[75] op. cit. p. 272.

[76] op. cit. p. 277.

[77] Crevier, *Histoire des Empereurs Romains*, Paris, 1827, Tome VII.

[78] op. cit. p 264.

[79] op. cit. p. 275.

[80] Victor Duruy, *Histoire des Romains*, Paris, 1883, Tome VI, p 272.

Which assignation of relationship is odd, in view of Dio's designation of Gannys as a lover and prospective husband to her heartily detested sibling, Soaemias.

Schiller, in *Geschichte der Römischen Kaiserzeit*, also of 1883, [81] seems firmly convinced of Gannys' eunuchry:

> ... und 33 Kilometer von Antiocheia kam es zum Entscheidungskampfe, in dem Macrinus zuerst siegte, aber schliesslich durch den Eunuchen Gannys, der über die Truppen der Gegenpartei den Befehl hatte, geschlagen wurde (8. Juni).

We have already noted the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani's* entry, in its second edition, 1952, under *Gannys*, which rejects his identification (by Boissevain) with Eutychianus. Volume II of the first edition, 1897, [82] has only this to say about Gannys:

> Gannys Elagabali educator, in pugna contra Macrinum dux Dio 78,38. Ab Elagabalo occisus Dio 79,6 . Memoratur Dio 78, 39.

The entry in PIR[1], volume III, 1898, under *P. (M.?) Valerius Comazon Eutychianus*, [83] represents the fullest treatment of Comazon up to its date of publication, so it is worth quoting in full, as it should, in theory, be the basis for all subsequent historiographical consideration of this individual:

> P.(M.?) VALERIUS COMAZON EUTYCHIANUS. *Εὐτυχιανός Dio integer (vel certe Dionis integri codex Vatic.) 78,31 (quo loco bibliopega … νός tantum reliquit). 32,* ***Κ****ωμάζων ib. 78, 39. 79, 3. 4, neque additur unum eundemque esse, Εὐτυχιανός, ὁ καὶ* ***Κ****ωμάζων Dio a Xiphilino breviatus 79,4 (p. 347 ed. r. Stephan.) fortasse ex codice Dionis magis pleno quam Vaticanus (sed dubitat qui de loco Xiphilini monuit Boissevain),* ***Κ****ωμάζων Dio (Xiph.) 79,21 (ex Xiph. pendet Zonar. 12,13.14). In consulatu:* Comazon *XIV 2809 (lapis integer et certae lectionis),* M. [Val.] Comazon *VI 866 (lapis mutilus et bis tantum saeculis prioribus descriptus),* ***Λ****ολλουαλι* ***Κ****ωμάζων Dio ind. l. 79 (ut testatur*

[81] H. Schiller, *Geschichte der Römischen Kaiserzeit*, 1883**,** Vol.I, p. 755ff, Art 75, *Sturtz und Restitution der severianischen Dynastie* (M. Opellius Macrinus und M. Aurelius Antoninus [Elagabalus]), p. 761.

[82] PIR[1] vol. 2, 1897, p. 110, Nº. 40.

[83] PIR[1] vol. 3, 1898, p. 355, Nº. 42.

Boissevain Mnemos. nov. ser. 13, 1885 p. 320, qui putat Λολλουαλι ortum esse ex M.Οὐαλ.). P. *praenomen tuetur Publia Valeria Comasia, filia eius ut videtur, cf. infra n. 156 (utrumque praenomen ei fuisse suspicatur Boissevain).*

Libertus e domo Caesaris (*τῶν Καισαρείων τις) Dio a Xiphilino breviatus 78,31 p. 344 Steph. (ex hoc Zonar. 12,13) nescio an errore excerptoris (certe non ipsius Augusti libertum eum fuisse ostendit gentilicium).* In ludicris et palaestris placuerat (*ἔν τε ἀθύρμασι καὶ ἐν γυμνασίοις ἀρέσας*) *ib. (in Dione idem suppletur, sed incertum num recte, nam in codice Vat. haec tantum relicta esse ἐν. . . . .καὶ ἐν γυ… neque spatium superesse vocabulo ἀρέσας testatur Boissevain).* Mimus et scurra, ideoque (*ἔκ τε μίμων καὶ γελωτοποιίας*) Comazon appellatus *Dio 79,4.* Pantomimus qui Romae in theatro saltaverat *Herodianus 5, 7, 6, similiter vit. Elag. 12, 1 (neque hic neque illic nomen ponitur, sed videtur significari Comazon). Famam de histrionica ab eo factitata ex nomine Comazontis ortam esse coniecit Hirschfeld Verw. p. 234.* - Militaverat in Thracia; a Claudio Attalo legato *(temporibus Commodi, cf. supra sub Claudio Attalo)* propter maleficium quoddam in classiarios translatus *Dio 79, 3.* Neque procuratione neque praefectura ulla functus erat nisi legionis *Dio 79, 4.* A. 218 in Syria *(praefectus legionis fortasse, cf. supra),* primarius auctor extitit motus militaris, quo deiecto Macrino imperium ad Elagabalum translatum est; hic Soaemiadis filium, Caracalla genitum dictitans, ad milites produxit *Dio 78, 31 (locus mutilus suppletus ex Xiph.; ex hoc Zonar. 12,13); cf. Dio 78,32.39.* Ab Elagabalo victore praefectus praetorio factus *Dio 79,4 (Zonar. 13,14); cf. Herod. 5,7,6 vit Elagab. 12,1 ubi nomen non ponitur, sed hic videtur significari histrio ab Elagabalo praefectus praetorio factus.* Ornamentis consularibus ornatus *Dio l.c.* Consul *Dio l.c.,* (consul II *VI 866. XIV 2809 propter ornamenta consularia*) ord. a. 220 cum M.Aurelio Antonino Aug. (Elagabalo) III *fasti.* Praefectus urbi, nec semel tantum sed bis ac tertio, quod nemini alii evenerat *Dio 79, 4* (*cod. Vat.; Xiphilinus, ex quo Zonaras, locum corrupit omissis verbis καὶ ἐπολιάρχησεν*), praefectus urbi saepius factus in locum aliorum, postremo a.222, occiso Elagabalo, in locum Fulvii *Dio (Xiph.) 79, 21. - Filia puto eius:* Publia Valeria Comasia clarissima femina (*cf. infra); ex posteris eius* Valerius Coma[z]on, consularis aedium sacrarum a. 299 *t. urbanus CIG. 6002 = Inscr. Gr. Sicil.Ital. 1026.*

This entry seems to support the conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus. It does not do so uncritically; indeed it cites Xiphilinus as its source for this conflation, and mentions Boissevain's objection thereunto (interestingly, three years before the publication by Weidmann of his edition of Dio); it also does so by default, without itself arguing the matter specifically, one way or another, merely by virtue of its title heading, and the fact that it includes in its body Dio's references by name both to Comazon and Eutychianus. It cites epigraphic evidence for a consulate under the name of Comazon, for ascribing to him the possible *praenomina* Marcus, Valerius, and/or Publius, and for his possible paternity of a Roman lady living in the next generation.

At the start of the twentieth century, we find a watershed in the consideration of this question: the publication in 1901 of Boissevain's edition of Dio, [84] incorporating the manuscript Vaticanus Graecus 1288, a work whose arguments regarding the conflation of identity we have already discussed. Briefly to remind ourselves of his position: Boissevain equates Gannys with Eutychianus, and dissociates Eutychianus from Comazon. There is no excuse for any scholar writing on this subject after this date to neglect the contents of this vital contribution to the debate, whether in agreement with it or not. Nevertheless, some do.

Domaszewski, in *Geschichte der römischen Kaiser*, 1909, [85] also thinks Gannys is a eunuch:

> Maesa und die anderen emesenischen Weiber sprangen von ihren Wagen und warfen sich mit lautem Geschrei zwischen die Fliehenden, die soweit zum Stehen kamen, dass der Eunuch Gannys am Eingange eines Dorfes eine neue Schlachtlinie bilden konnte.

Stein's article on *Gannys* in *RE* VI, 1910, [86] does not refer to the eunuch legend at all. Stein recites the by now familiar series of textual references, and mentions the controversies regarding assignation of identity raised by the poor state of the text, without coming to any conclusion. He does, however, seem to

[84] *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, Ed. Philippus Ursulus Boissevain, Weidmann, Berlin, 1901.

[85] A.von Domaszewski, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiser*, 1909, II p. 272ff., *Untergang der Römer, Elagabal*. p. 273.

[86] RE, vol VI, 1910, col.708.

accept, by default rather than by argument, the conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus, inasmuch as he refers to "Valerius Comazon Eutychianus" as a colleague of Gannys in the preparation and execution of the *coup*. This despite Boissevain's refutation of the conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus, which had appeared nine years previously. In this connection it is worth pointing out that there is no article in the relevant volume of *RE* (V, 1905) under *Eutychianus* referring to any of our trio.

Also in 1910, appears published in book form, as part of a series on Roman history and mythology, Orma Fitch Butler's 1908 Michigan University dissertation, *Studies in the Life of Heliogabalus*. [87] The "Life" referred to in the title is the Vita Heliogabali of the *Historia Augusta*, rather than the brief stay on earth of the person who inspired it. This notwithstanding, in an introductory chapter, Miss Butler very thoroughly reviews the textual and epigraphic evidence as it stood at that point, regarding the reign of Varius, and, in a footnote, [88] addresses the question of conflation of identities. In full awareness of Boissevain's 1901 edition, she discusses the alternatives, and underlines the difficulties attending any of the proposed conflations of identity, without espousing any of them. Only in the Subject Index does she fall into the habit, also found in other authors, of citing the names in such a manner as to presuppose the conflation: *P. Valerius Comazon Eutychianus*. [89] Equally cautious is her treatment of the eunuch legend: in citing Schiller, who, as we have seen above, overtly espouses it, on the subject of Gannys' role in the *coup*, she omits mention of Schiller's ascription of eunuchry to Gannys. [90] Her most interesting contribution to the discussion of these three nominees rests on her development of a citation of Borghesi, arguing that Comazon's two spells in office as City Prefect of Rome coincide with periods of relative quiescence on the part of Varius, whereas his absence from that post in A.D. 220-221 (=a.u.c. 973-4) coincides with the emperor's "most flagrant transgressions of Roman tradition." [91] Such benign influence, she believes, argues against Xiphilinus' disparaging statements about Comazon.

[87] O.F. Butler, *Studies in the Life of Heliogabalus*, in *Roman History and Mythology*, Ed. Henry A. Sanders, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1910.

[88] op. cit. p 47, n. 7.

[89] op. cit. p. 169.

[90] op. cit. p.73, n. 1.

[91] op. cit. p 97, text and n.5.

We have already cited Gibbon's mention of "the eunuch Gannys". The British after Gibbon, as one might expect of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, tend not only to refrain from mentioning the question of eunuchry, but also euphemise Varius' more flagrant sexual eccentricities. Stuart Hay, author of *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, 1911, [92] using the quaint word *leman* to refer to Gannys' alleged relationship to Soaemias (which he extends, on no evidence, to Maesa), is an example. The following passages are relevant to our quest, insofar as they show that Hay was well aware of the existence of a riddle, regarding the identities of our three nominees. He distinguishess Gannys from Eutychianus, though he ignores Boissevain's dissociation of Eutychianus from Comazon:

> The emperor was alone, henceforward his will was unopposed. His grandmother tried to make herself felt; on each occasion she had to give way, to retire beaten, till one can well imagine that lady's despair at the unforeseen development, - almost anticipate the final resolve of that crafty old sinner, to rid herself of the grandson whom she had set up, fondly imagining him a mere puppet. Still, advisers were necessary. From what we can see of the available men (and a man would certainly be Antonine's [Varius'] choice) there is but one for whom consistently through his life the Emperor had respect, namely, Eutychianus. He had, so Dion states, conceived the plot of the proclamation, and carried it out by himself, while the women were still unconscious of what was going forward. He was immediately made Praetorian Praefect, later he was Consul, and twice City Praefect, which frequent recurrence of office, being unusual in one person, is put down by Dion as a gross breach of the constitution - where no constitution existed except the imperial will. The sneer of Xiphilinus at his buffooneries is obviously an untruth, considering the fact that we know of him as a soldier as far back as Commodus' reign. If he had been a mere nonentity or a worthless person, it is incredible that, in the proscriptions and murders following that of Antonine, Eutychianus should have been reappointed to the office of Praefect of Rome for at least the ensuing year. Taking all the evidence into consideration, it is probable that from the outset the soldier Eutychianus was chief minister and director of the government, and as such supported Antonine against his grandmother. To him therefore, as well as to Maesa, may be attributed much of the sane

[92] Stuart Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, Macmillan, 1911.

common-sense work that was done; work which, especially in the dealings with the soldiers, shows a man's hand, a soldier's touch, indeed that of a soldier who knows, by reason of his position, just how far he can go. [93]

...As was quite natural, the first offices were bestowed on Eutychianus, the man whom we have just mentioned. In all probability it was to him that the success at Immae was actually due; he was the soldier, the trained leader, while Gannys, the boy's tutor, to whom Xiphilinus ascribes the victory, was admittedly an effete and uxorious leman of both Soaemias and Maesa, who could never have been a real leader of men, even though he were personally popular with the troops, as the Valesian Fragment states. It is obvious that the work and abilities of the two men (Eutychianus and Gannys) have got muddled. Xiphilinus (78.31.1) ascribes the plot to Eutychianus; later (79.6), still presumably quoting Dion [*sic*], he states that Gannys was solely responsible for the whole plot. Dion (Frag. Vales.) states that Eutychianus had contrived the whole revolution. Clearly some scribe has erred in the insertion of names, or Xiphilinus is not a trustworthy abbreviator. If we can judge by results, we see that Eutychianus was immediately appointed Praefect of the Praetorian Guard in the room of Ulpius Julianus, deceased, while Gannys, the personal favourite of the Emperor and his women, got no sort of distinction. Eutychianus' elevation was not altogether popular. Xiphilinus considered that he had no right to the post (though he had just remarked that he alone set the Emperor on the throne), and that the frequency with which he was reappointed was actually a constitutional scandal; but he certainly did good throughout his tenure of office. [94]

...But, to proceed to Xiphilinus' third charge, that of putting men, even his best friends, to death without reason. This almost certainly refers to the death of Gannys, his mother's and grandmother's obliging servant, and the Emperor's tutor, to whom, Herodian tells us, he was much attached. Forquet de Dorne says that this man considered himself authorised to remonstrate continually with the Emperor on his conduct, just as though his

[93] op. cit p. 80-81.

[94] op. cit. p 86-87.

> relations' grumblings did not weary him sufficiently. Further, Wotton tells us that a marriage had been arranged between him and one of the imperial ladies, and that there was an idea of declaring him Caesar. Probably these two circumstances led to the tragedy or accident which resulted in Gannys' death, and which, we are told, Antonine always bitterly regretted.
>
> The tutor was nagging and pedagogic. Further, a plot was unmasked. Gannys did not realise that the Antonine temper, when developed, was not a thing to play with. The Emperor forgot himself, and in a fit of mad anger rushed at his tormentor with his sword or knife drawn, struck, and even wounded him. As was only natural, Gannys drew to defend himself, and the guards, fearing for Antonine's life, interposed, and the unfortunate man was no more. Gannys' fault lay in neglecting the boy's training for amorous converse with his female relations; putting off his duty of moulding the plastic character until all was set, hard as bronze, in a misshapen and distorted mould... [95]

By whom are we told that Varius bitterly regretted Gannys' death? Certainly not by Dio, who is the only ancient historian to mention Gannys at all. It is clear from the degree to which he goes much further than the sources warrant that Hay's vocation was not history, but fiction. The sympathy he expresses for Varius, moreover, highly unusual among historians, most of whom follow Dio's lead in preferring obloquy, makes one suspect that he may have had a hidden agenda in writing this, one perhaps related to the sexual politics of his time. This is a matter which merits further investigation elsewhere.

The foregoing quotations contain examples of various historiographical sins: carelessness, in the case of Duruy, in the assignation of relationships, combined with uncritical perpetuation of the eunuch legend, of which latter sin Schiller and Domaszewski are also guilty; Stein's failure to address an active controversy, that of the conflation of identities; speculation beyond the limits of the evidence, as indulged in slightly by Crevier, and far more so by Hay. But none of these prepare us for the full horror of Artaud's *Héliogabale, l'anarchiste couronné*, first published in 1934 by Denoël et Steele. [96] This stands in a class by itself.

[95] op.cit p. 101-102.

[96] Antonin Artaud, *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste Couronné*, Denoël et Steele, Paris, 1934.

Certainly not the work of academic scholarship it presents itself as, nor yet avowedly a work of imaginative fiction, this text is an example of the worst kind of imposture: fiction masquerading as scholarship. This imposture is aided and abetted by its posthumous republishers, Gallimard, in 1970, [97] who call it, in their notes, "*un ouvrage d'érudition*", going on to provide a lengthy bibliography, consisting of books found in Artaud's study after his death, some of the most crucial ancient texts for such a study of which, as here shall be demonstrated, Artaud cannot have read, or if he did, cannot have understood.

Despite its manifest inadequacy as a work of scholarship, *Héliogabale, l'anarchiste couronné* is cited here for two reasons: first, because it is the work about Varius best known by far to the general, non-specialist but educated reading public; second, in order to illustrate the lengths to which a delirious pseudo-scholarly imagination can take the notion that Gannys and Eutychianus were eunuchs. All quotations are from the 1970 text:

Artaud speaks first of Gannys: [98]

> Dans cette population, un homme entre tous se distingue: grand et sombre, aux hanches flexibles, aux pectoraux resplendissants, et qui porte, sous la ceinture, le signe d'une cruauté toute neuve, toute récente, faite sur lui par Julia Soemia.
> Gannys, l'amant de Julia Soemia, le précepteur d'Héliogabale, vient de subir la castration rituelle. Sous les chairs bronzées de sa face, apparaissent des marbrures subtiles occasionnées par une abondante perte de sang.
> Gannys est un homme pieux, un initié du sacerdoce solaire: être l'amant de la mère du dieu solaire est pour cet initié un grand honneur. Mais c'est pour Soemia une cruauté calculée que de lui avoir fait sectionner le membre. Dans ce geste, sa jalousie ne parle pas seule, mais le désir de laisser dans l'esprit de Gannys une empreinte ineffaçable.
> De plus, Gannys est le précepteur d'Héliogabale. Soemia a flairé en lui un esprit subtil, une intelligence pratique et sagace, qui se révélera quand il le faudra, qui les servira, elle et son fils, dans les circonstances qui se préparent et pour lesquelles on a besoin d'un vrai homme, vrai par la tête, sinon par la virilité qu'il n'a plus,

[97] Antonin Artaud, *Oeuvres Complètes* tome VII, NRF Gallimard, Paris, 1970.

[98] op. cit. p. 83 ff.

> pour défendre les intérêts d'Elagabalus, le cône érectile, représenté par un jeune enfant.

He then goes on to contrast him with Eutychianus: [99]

> Gannys le sérieux, le subtil, est doublé d'un second eunuque qui a lui aussi profité des faveurs de Julia Soemia et en a été payé par la suppression de son membre. Ce second eunuque, Eutychien, est un pitre veule, une nature amorphe, malléable, et de la plus abjecte féminité. Il est nécessaire à Gannys comme Sancho Pança est nécessaire à don Quichotte, ou Sganarelle à don Juan. Et l'on peut dire que Julia Soemia s'est donnée a lui par esprit d'équilibre; et parce qu'elle a senti la versatilité profonde, la nature spasmodique et glissante de l'esprit d'Héliogabale, qui a besoin auprès de lui, pour faire contrepoids au sérieux de Gannys, d'une sorte de farçeur attitré. Dans la logique amoureuse de Julia Soemia, dans sa maternité absorbante et attentive, on trouve en clair toutes ces notions, cette lucidité prévoyante qui a pensé jusqu'aux plus minimes effets. Et l'on verra par la suite que sa logique ne l'a pas trompée. Les amours de Julia Soemia ont été faites en vue de quelque chose, et ce quelque chose, pour l'instant, est la réussite d'un complot. À ce complot participent les deux pôles de sa complexité sexuelle:
>
> GANNYS LE SUBTIL,
> EUTYCHIEN LE GROTESQUE
>
> comme participent les transbordements d'or clandestin de Julia Moesa, comme participent les parades journalières d'Héliogabale sur les marches du temple, au bas duquel se croisent en des galopades incessantes des groupes de cavaliers scythes et de mercenaires macédoniens.

Such ravings would be harmless enough except that they are presented with a pretence of scholarly apparatus. The pseudo-scholarly rhetoric of the text itself, abetted by editorial collusion in its self-presentation as a work based on extensive reading and research, "*un ouvrage d'érudition*", could lead an unwary reader to take it seriously. Lest one be tempted to do so, it is worth

[99] op. cit. p 84.

considering the following example of Artaud's misuse of the texts found on his shelves, which he may have read, but clearly did not understand:

Artaud's thesis here is that the high priest of Emesa, Julius Bassianus (father of Septimius Severus' wife Domna, and of her sister Maesa, grandmother of Varius) was himself a parricide, and that this supposed fact has deep implications for the nature and conduct thereafter of the high priesthood of Emesa, eventually inherited by Varius. Artaud claims, on no evidence whatever, that the priesthood, long settled in the Samsigeramidae, the family of Bassianus, (romanised, since the time of Pompey, under the *nomen* Julius) followed a matrilineal line of descent. Artaud sees in Bassianus' alleged parricide the male usurpation of a previously female role, and considers whether it was indeed his mother, from whom he supposedly inherited the priesthood, or his father, who was the object of his parricide. Thinking the father the likelier victim, Artaud weaves a web of supposition that seeks to explain the androgynous character of Varius as a result of the fusion (or confusion) of the male and female principles, a confusion introduced into the family by the parricide Bassianus. This entire web of supposition is based on Artaud's misreading of two sentences in the *Historia Augusta*. Referring to Heliogabalus, the historian styled "Lampridius" says: [100]

> Igitur occiso Macrino eiusque filio Diadumeno, qui pari potestate imperii Antonini etiam nomen acceperat, in Varium Heliogabalum imperium conlatum est, idcirco quod Bassiani filius diceretur. fuit autem Heliogabali vel Iovis vel Solis sacerdos atque Antonini sibi nomen adsciverat vel in argumentum generis vel quod id nomen usque adeo carum esse cognoverat gentibus, ut etiam parricida Bassianus causa nominis amaretur.

It should be obvious to anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the sources, and is capable of reading the text carefully, even if only in translation, that the Bassianus referred to here is not Varius' great-grandfather on his maternal side, the high priest of Emesa, but rather his putative father, better known as the emperor Caracalla, who also bore the name Bassianus (given him by his mother Julia Domna in honour of her father, the high priest), and who was indeed a parricide, inasmuch as he murdered his brother Geta. Now it is unlikely that even so careless a writer as "Lampridius", in calling Varius *Bassiani filius*, would mistake a son for a great-grandson. There is, moreover, no mention anywhere in the sources, nor is there any other evidence, of the old

[100] *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol II, p. 106, l.4.

high priest of Emesa, the Syrian Bassianus, ever having been accorded the Roman imperial name of Antoninus. There can therefore be no possibility of confusion in this passage, between one Bassianus and another. Artaud's entire web of supposition, regarding the high priest's alleged parricide, and its putative consequences, being based on precisely that confusion, is exposed as nonsense.

Returning to serious scholarship, *PIR*^{2}*'s* treatment of Eutychianus, in volume III, 1943, [101] is laconic, though in its heading it accepts, by implication, the conflation of Eutychianus with Comazon:

> -P.(M.?) VALERIUS COMAZON EUTYCHIANUS.

Hanslik's article on *P. Valerius Comazon* in *RE* XIV A, 1948, [102] agrees with Boissevain in rejecting the conflation of Comazon with Eutychianus. It chronicles his career using both textual and epigraphic evidence, in terms much the same as those established by Dio. It draws particular attention to the surprising fact of his survival, despite his close association at the highest levels of the state with Varius, well into the reign of Alexander Severus, and his continued success therein.

We have already referred to *PIR*^{2}, 1952, [103] in its entry under Gannys, and its doubts concerning Boissevain's conflation of Gannys with Eutychianus. Besides that point, it makes a number of others, which because it represents the fullest treatment of this nominee up to its date of publication, we quote here in full:

> Gannys (de lectionibus v. Boissevain) Dio 78, 38, 3; 39, 4. Praeterea nomen nusquam servatum est, sed his locis collatis potest suppleri 79, 6, 1-3, ubi nomen excidit, item 78, 31, 2-4. Cf. Boissevain in editione Dionis III 438 qui tamen cum Gannym eundem putat atque Eutychianum non recte iudicasse mihi videtur. Nam etsi 31, 1 narratio incipit ab Eutychiano, fieri potest ut subsequentibus lacunis haustum sit nomen Gannyis.

[101] PIR^{2} vol. 3, 1943, p. 93, unnumbered insert between Nº 130 Eutychianus (unrelated) and Nº 131 Eutychius Proculus. Sends one to Valerius.

[102] RE, vol. XIV A, 1948, col. 2412-2413.

[103] PIR^{2} vol. 4, 1952, p. 15, No. 74.

> Alumnus (Iuliae) Maesae, cuius filia Soaemias cum eo familiarem consuetudinem habuit 79, 6, 2 et Avitum (=Elagabalum) filium educandum ei tradidit ib. 6, 1. Quem puerum etiamnum, quamquam ipse nondum inter viros conscriptus (id si vere traditur nescio an errore contendat Dio 78, 31, 2 confundens nempe eum cum Elagabalo) ut seditionem in Macrinum commoveret insciis matre et avia clam nocte in castra duxit militesque ad defectionem impulit ib., Elagabalum imperatorem acclamavit (die 16 Mai. a. 218) 78, 31, 2-4. In pugna prope Antiochiam (die 8 Iunii) cum Macrino commissa aciem apte instruxit, quamvis rei militaris imperitus 78, 38, 3, cf. 79, 6, 1. Elagabalus ei Soaemida in matrimonium dare et Caesarem eum nuncupare in animo habebat, sed ubi primum rerum potitus est eum quasi paedagogum incommodum Nicomediae sua manu occidit 79, 6, 3.
> Eius vitae licentia 78, 38, 3; 79, 6, 2; fuit venalis, verumtamen quadam liberalitate 79, 6, 2.

Lambertz's article on *Varius Avitus* (Varius) in *RE* VII A1, 1955, [104] cites Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*, in the same terms as we have here, in connection with all of these names. The only novelty for us is a suggestion (quotation nº 5, below), left unargued, that there may have been two separate people independently called Eutychianus: one who was also called Gannys; another whose *praenomina* were either Publius or Marcus, followed by Valerius and Comazon, with Eutychianus at the end, as a *cognomen*. The relevant citations from this article are the following:

> (1) Varius Avitus ging mit den Frauen fort vom Kaiserhofe nach Emesa. Dort war Gannys sein Erzieher (s.Stein o. Bd. VII S. 708). [105]

> (2) Durch ihr [Maesas] Geld, die Anhänglichkeit an Caracalla, und die Sympathie für den schönen Jüngling Varius Avitus gewonnen, nahm die bei Emesa stehende dritte Legion am 16. Mai 218 die Frauen, den jungen Elagabalpriester und seinen Erzieher Gannys im Lager auf (Cass.Dio LXXVIII 31). [106]

[104] RE, vol. VII A 1, 1955, col..391 ff.

[105] op. cit. col 392, line 65 ff.

[106] op. cit. col 393, line 52 ff.

(3) Als Consuln seiner Regeierungsjahre zählt Cass Dio LXXIX init. auf:
...220 *Ψευδαντωνῖνος τὸ γ΄ καὶ Μ.Οὐαλέριος Κωμάζων...*[107]

(4) ... wurden beseitigt, wie ... Claudius Attalus, der Proconsul von Cypern (s. Groag Bd. III S. 2676, Nr. 65), weil er während seiner thrakischen Statthalterschaft unter Caracalla den P. Valerius Comazon Eutychianos beleidigt hatte (er hatte ihn wegen eines Verstosses zum Matrosen degradiert), ... [108]

(5) Die Regierung führten 218 und 219 noch neben der Grossmutter Maesa Eutychianus, der auch Gannys hiess und P. (M.?) Valerius Comazon Eutychianus (Prosop. Rom. III S. 355, n. 42. Cass. Dio ed. Boissevain, Bd. IV Index p. 683, n. 5). Letzterer überlebte den Kaiser, ersterer wurde 219 vom Kaiser persönlich getötet (Cass. Dio LXXIX 6), weil er den Jüngling zu bestimmen suchte, bescheiden und vernünftig zu regieren. [109]

(6) In die Zeit des nikomedischen Winterquartiers fällt die Tötung des Gannys. [110]

(7) Dass er hohe Staatsämter mit ungeeigneten Personen besetzte, berichtet die vita (Hist. aug. Heliog.12) Er habe ein Tänzer, der vorher Schauspieler in Rom war, zum praefectus praetorio... [111]

Pflaum's article *Publius Valerius Comazon* in *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres*, 1960, [112] strangely cites no epigraphic evidence at all, though such was available well before its publication. [113] Seconding Boissevain's refusal to conflate Comazon either with Gannys or Eutychianus, it does not pronounce itself regarding Boissevain's conflation of Gannys and Eutychianus with each other.

[107] op. cit. col 394, line 69ff.

[108] op. cit. col 395, line 49ff.

[109] op. cit. col 396, line 25ff.

[110] op. cit. col 396, line 47ff.

[111] op. cit. col 397, line 53ff.

[112] Pflaum, *Les Carrières Procuratoriennes Équestres*, 1960, p. 752, No. 290, P. Valerius Comazon.

[113] See footnote 23, above.

Pflaum begins by quoting the passage from Dio, listing, among others, the murder of Claudius Attalus on Comazon's behalf, and disapproving of Comazon's subsequent appointments to high office. This is followed by a quotation from the later passage mentioning his succession of Fulvius in the city prefecture, with its simile of a mask on an empty stage. Pflaum then goes on to explain why he does not quote from other passages in Dio and Herodian that some have thought to link Publius Valerius Comazon with Gannys and/or with Eutychianus:

> On ne s'étonnera pas que nous n'ayons pas eu recours aux passages de Dion Cassius et d'Hérodien, se référant soit au gouverneur d'Élagabale, Gannys, qui porte aussi le nom d'Eutychianus, soit à un danseur, devenu préfet du prétoire dans les derniers temps du règne. Hirschfeld et après lui Boissevain ont déjà écarté ces témoignages. Ce qui nous intéresse, c'est de retracer le cursus militaire de P. Valerius Comazon et d'essayer d'expliquer sa nomination à la préfecture du prétoire. [114]

Which he goes on to do, affirming *en revanche* his trust in other passages of Dio. Pflaum attributes Comazon's rise from the ranks to his association with Septimius Severus (possibly motivated by a desire to confront Attalus, who sided with Niger against Severus in the war of succession after the death of Commodus). Pflaum ascribes his occupation of a place in the court of Elagabalus second only to that of Gannys, to his having come to the adolescent pretender's support with the second Parthican legion, which Pflaum conjectures (on very little evidence, but plausibly, says Whittaker) that Comazon commanded at the time of the uprising against Macrinus. Pflaum appears to accept without reservation the assertion that Gannys was a eunuch:

> En fait, c'est bien à Gannys que revint la première place, puisque nous le verrons peu après entretenir, malgré sa condition d'eunuque, l'espoir d'épouser la mère de son élève et de se faire conférer la dignité de César. [115]

[114] The first two footnotes in this passage are [(1)] to Dio LXXVIII, 3,1 and [(2)] to Herodian V, 7, 6. The two footnotes referring to Hirschfeld and Boissevain are: [(3)] Hirschfeld, V B, 1ère édit., p. 234; and [(4)] Boissevain, Dion Cassius, III, p. 48.

[115] Pflaum's footnote [(12)] refers to Dio LXXIX 6, 2-3.

Since it is unsupported by the text (Dio) to which Pflaum refers, one wonders whence his confident characterisation of Gannys as a eunuch originates. He does not choose to address the question, except with the meagerest *malgré*, of the possible oddity of a eunuch intending, or being intended, to marry the emperor's mother. Pflaum provides no further enlightenment on these points, and only refers once more to Gannys, in citing the passage from Dio discussed above, mentioning him together with Comazon, and remarking on their arrogance (or "arbitrary course", in Cary's translation).

Another British author, Godfrey Turton, in *The Syrian Princesses, The Women Who Ruled Rome, AD 193-235*, 1974, [116] has this to say about Comazon and Gannys:

> ...Among Maesa's friends at Emesa the most active on her behalf were Comazon and Gannys. The former was an old soldier whose background was not unlike that of Caracalla's general Theocritus, as he began life on the stage. The name Comazon is in fact a Greek word meaning a strolling player. A disreputable flavour clung to the profession, and his enemies seized on it to disparage him; but as he had already a long and successful career of military service to his credit, it is clear that his dramatic performances dated from a distant past. The disdain expressed in Roman society for his humble origin was not shared by his fellow-officers who set more store by his gift for leadership and skill in battle. Gannys, the other ringleader, was less a soldier than a statesman. Little is known of his past except that Maesa employed him as her grandson's tutor, and that the boy's mother, Sohaemias, became so attached to him that she accepted him as her lover; but he seems to have been the brains of the movement to raise his pupil to be Emperor.... [117]
>
> ...The guiding spirit behind the government was Maesa's. She was ruthless but not vindictive, preferring to get her way by diplomacy. When the circumstances demanded it, however, she did not shrink from arbitrary justice, treating the Roman senate with Syrian disdain. Her principal adviser in the conduct of affairs was Gannys, and the rapid success achieved in eliminating opposition bore witness to his statesmanship. Unlike Comazon, promoted to be Praetorian Prefect, who was accused of abusing his position to

[116] Godfrey Turton, *The Syrian Princesses, The Women Who Ruled Rome, AD 193-235*, Cassell, London, 1974.

[117] op. cit., p. 140.

> pay off old scores, Gannys served with single-minded devotion the interests of the princely-priestly family, in whose household at Emesa he was brought up. His loyalty was reinforced by a passion for the attractive Sohaemias, who had accepted him as a lover and now promised to become his wife. It was agreed that after the marriage he would bear the rank of Caesar, Emperor designate, a title ensuring him eminence in the state even if it was never likely to be more than honorary, conferring on a man already in the prime of life the right to succeed a reigning Emperor who was still a child. [118]
>
> ...Nevertheless she [Maesa] persisted in remonstrance, as did Gannys also. There came an occasion when the latter was alone with the boy except for the soldiers on guard at the door. The argument between Gannys and his pupil became ever more and more heated, the former scolding, the latter defiant, till suddenly the boy lost his temper and struck Gannys in the face with his fist. Gannys, taken by surprise and in pain, drew his sword. The gesture was automatic, without conscious intent, but the guards, believing that he threatened the Emperor's life, came running and stabbed him to death. [119]

Turton's account, like Hay's, also goes much further than the sources warrant, but is diametrically opposed in its evaluation of the relative importance and roles of Comazon and Gannys. (Here the name of Eutychianus is not even mentioned.) As for the murder scene, the details - all important in such a case - are widely different, though equally unsubstantiated. In fact, Turton seems also a novelist manqué.

Robert Turcan's *Héliogabale et le Sacre du Soleil*, 1985, [120] is the most recent full, academic book-length general treatment of Varius by a twentieth century scholar (though there have been some self-confessed novels, which here we must ignore). It has this to say, in the context of the preparations for the *coup*, about the questions here under consideration:

[118] op. cit., p. 149.

[119] op. cit., p. 151.

[120] Robert Turcan, *Héliogabale et le Sacre du Soleil*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1985.

> ...Dans ces contacts avec les légionnaires, deux hommes émergent qui jouent, semble-t-il, un rôle décisif en faveur des comploteuses: Valerius Comazôn (autrement dit "le Fêtard") et Gannys Eutychianus.
>
> Le premier est un acteur ou danser de pantomimes, vieil amant de Julia Maesa, homme habile qui sait cabotiner et manoeuvrer en sous-main comme en public. Il a réussi à faire carrière dans l'armée, malgré certaines incartades qui lui ont valu d'être relégué parmi les rameurs lorsqu'il servait en Thrace. mais en 218 il se trouve qu'il est préfet du camp de *Raphaneae*, près d'Émèse (plus probablement que de la II^{e} légion parthique, comme l'a conjecturé H.G. Pflaum).
>
> Le second, Gannys, vit depuis longtemps dans les bonnes grâces de Julia Soaemias... Le vieil amant a pris soin de Bassianus dès son plus jeune âge. C'est en somme son "père nourricier". Il a l'expérience des femmes et aussi des hommes. [121]

Turcan therefore, though without citation, discussion, or argument, appears to come down on the side of the conflation of Gannys with Eutychianus, proposed by Boissevain. Yet strangely, he also, in contradiction of that view, accepts Xiphilinus' characterisation of Comazon as an actor or pantomime dancer; a characterisation which is supposed to tie his name to that of Eutychianus. Equally strangely, he assigns to Comazon the designation "fêtard", which is a rough translation of the generic meaning of Gannys, as discussed above. It seems Turcan wants it all possible ways. Quite how he is able to know that Comazon was Maesa's lover, or what length of time Gannys was Soaemias' lover and Varius' tutor, or yet about the variety of Gannys' sexual experience, is likewise left unexplained, unsubstantiated as these affirmations are by any known ancient text. At least he does not call Gannys a eunuch.

We have already mentioned Martin Frey's *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabals*, appearing in 1989. Though it does not bear directly on the riddle of these courtiers, it sets a new and higher standard in the study of Varius and his reign. In particular, through detailed study of the Syrian and other Near-Eastern cults in antiquity, it considers the plausbility of ancient historiographical accounts of Varius with relation to these. Its critical manner of assessing the relative value of different sorts of evidence constitutes a methodological advance in this field.

[121] op. cit. p. 68.

An article by François Chausson in *MEFRA*, 1995, entitled *Vel Iovi vel Soli*, [122] posits the existence of a temple of the sun god Elaiagabal, together with other Syrian deities, at Rome, well before the reign of Varius. With reference to Roman inscriptions from the reigns of Severus and Caracalla, Chausson cites a certain Eutyches, apparently an important imperial freedman, attached to the court, in close connection with one Julius Balbillus, possibly an Emesene, and certainly a priest of the sun god Elaiagabal at Rome during those reigns. Chausson speculates as to whether Eutyches may also have been Syrian, whence his link to the imperial family. [123] It is tempting to speculate further, as to whether, if indeed he was Syrian, he may in any way have been related to our Eutychianus. Elsewhere in the same article, Chausson draws on the distinction between *nomen* and *agnomen* to speculate that the father of the empress Domna, the high priest of Emesa, after whom both her son Caracalla and her great nephew Varius were called Bassianus, may himself have been called Bassus, rather than Bassianus, as is commonly supposed. [124] By the same token, conversely, one wonders if our Eutychianus' name may be an *agnomen* derived from this Eutyches. Both, however, are fairly common names in the Greek speaking part of the empire in this period. If, despite this, such a connection were to be established, it would reduce the likelihood of any conflation of identity with Gannys: it is highly unlikely that Soaemias would intend to marry the descendant of a slave from her own household. But this is only speculation.

With this useful and fertile contribution by Chausson, we end our exploration of the modern historiography in this regard.

VI. Prosopographical speculations.

Let me, before concluding, on the basis of my reading of the ancient texts, and of the scraps of evidence provided by epigraphy, speculate as to what I think may have been the case regarding Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon. It should by now be clear that I think they were three different persons.

Comazon was most likely the Publius Valerius Comazon of the inscriptions cited, and was probably a member of either Domna's or Maesa's entourage, though not necessarily of their household, based in Syria, during the period

[122] MEFRA 107, 1995-2, p. 661-765, François Chausson, *Vel Soli vel Iovi, Quatre études sur la Vigna Barberini.*

[123] op. cit. p. 695 & n. 57.

[124] op. cit. p. 698, n 67.

between the murder of Caracalla and the uprising at Emesa, corresponding to the reign of Macrinus. He would by then have been a man of some years, proven ability, and considerable experience; one with good connections throughout the imperial administration: a very useful ally in the planning and execution of a *coup d'état*.

His relations with the imperial ladies may or may not have been physically intimate, as has been suggested by some modern writers, but physical intimacy is not necessary to explain his role in their entourage, and in the subsequent court of the emperor he helped them raise to the throne. His ability, experience, and connections are sufficient. Given, moreover, his survival into the next reign, with honours and appointments intact, indeed repeated, such qualities constitute a far likelier basis on which to have built his successful career than amatory prowess with such capricious women as the Severan ladies, especially as the years wore on. He probably participated in Varius' downfall, just as he had in his uprising.

Eutychianus may or may not have been related to the Eutyches mentioned just above. He was probably a member of Maesa's household, whether slave, freedman, or otherwise. He was also, among other things, a gymnast, as well possibly as a good singer and impromptu versifier. It seems likely that after loyally and effectively rendering his services to Maesa in the preparation and execution of the uprising, he may have remained in, or have been sent back to Emesa, possibly to look after the princely-priestly family's property, while the rest of the household went on to Antioch, Nicomedia, and eventually Rome. At any rate he disappears from the historiographical record even before the decisive triumph of the *coup*.

Gannys was possibly also a member of Maesa's household, though, if he was, as Dio claims, Soaemias' lover, and intended second husband, he was unlikely to have been a slave or freedman (let alone a eunuch). Whatever his origins and social status, he was highly instrumental in the success of the *coup*, and perhaps for that reason was rewarded with power and influence at the court set up by the victors, first in Antioch, then in Nicomedia, where he met his fate. This seems to have been determined by his occupation of an equivocal position: on the one hand lover of the young emperor's mother, on the other would-be corrector of his morals.

Perhaps Varius felt disgust at the hypocrisy underlying such an attempt by such a man to moderate his sexual or religious behaviour. He may also have been amazed at how easy it was, in the heat of the moment, for him to express that

disgust, with fatal effect for its occasioner, and decisive empowerment for himself as emperor. Perhaps this realisation led to his espousal, in the course of his reign, of what seems, if one gives any credence at all to the ancient historians' accounts of him, to have been a deliberate campaign to unmask hypocrisy, ridicule sycophancy, and challenge the social, sexual and religious assumptions of the Roman world. But all this, again, is merely speculation.

VII. Methodological reconsideration.

Before concluding, since my prosopographical speculation seems to have widened the compass of the current discourse, I should like to reconsider in a more theoretical vein, and in the light of all the above, the methodological implications, discussed in earlier sections of this paper, deriving from consideration of the riddle of Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon. The central issue here is the distinction between truth on the one hand and falsehood or unverifiability on the other, and also that between different sorts of truth. One sort is the truth of logic and science; another the truth of art and imaginative literature. At issue here is what sort of truth can be the goal of ancient history.

We usually suppose that historical enquiry seeks to establish knowledge of truth, or at least of fact, defined as a more or less exact correspondence between a given narrative or description of a situation or event, and what actually took place or was the case: to cite Ranke's oft quoted dictum yet once more: *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. This is a sort of truth thought to be available to science, at least by some conceptions thereof, though even this is questioned now. However that may be, it is widely believed that it should also be available in the humanities, and to history in particular. In the spirit of such a belief, therefore, the questions asked earlier in this article, regarding Varius - questions which we carefully refrained at that point from answering - can be extended now to his courtiers: Is anything the ancient sources or the modern historiography says about Gannys, Eutychianus, and Comazon true? Or is it all a pack of lies?

Any possible answers to these questions will necessarily invoke evidence. But in a case such as this, what constitutes evidence? We have spoken above of the distinction between textual sources and the so-called "hard" evidence: mainly coins and inscriptions. Because of the imperfect transmission of texts *via* the manuscript tradition, and also because of the absence of objectivity and obvious presence of partisanship and bias in the ancient texts, we tend to consider them more or less unreliable. Because of its direct survival from antiquity, we usually think the "hard" evidence more reliable.

But the so-called "hard" evidence is also partisan. It is almost always the product of official propaganda, propagating, for example, in the case of the imperial nomenclature of Varius as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, if not an outright lie, at least an improbable assertion of his paternity; one attaching itself, moreover, to a spurious nomenclature, hinging on a posthumous adoption. (To recapitulate: Varius calls himself Marcus Aurelius Antoninus on his coins and inscriptions in order to perpetuate the myth that he is son of Caracalla. Caracalla's use of that name as his official style derives from Severus' anachronistic adoption of the original Marcus Aurelius Antoninus as his own father.) Thus an ancient artefact, a coin, say, or an inscription, genuine in itself, can perpetuate a falsehood, or at least an unverifiability.

What, in view of this, is the "truth function" (to use the vocabulary of logical positivism) of an inscription naming Publius Valerius Comazon, and ascribing certain offices and accomplishments to him? If Varius (or his managers) could order the imperial mints to propagate a lie about his own paternity, could Comazon not hire a stonemason to do the same about his status and accomplishments? Clearly, in the absence of other, corroborating evidence, this question is unanswerable. What might constitute corroborating evidence, in a case such as this? Is it likely to be or become available to us? Can it lead to certainty, or only to probability? If even the "hard" evidence raises such questions, how much less can we know facts on the basis of unreliable textual sources, which constitute, in this case, the vast bulk of the material available?

So is the pursuit of historical knowledge, based on fact, impossible in this case? Is this enquiry a waste of time? Perhaps so, if one is single-mindedly committed to the search for verifiable facts, for in this case they do not seem to be available. But not so, if one takes a broader view, accepting that one will never "know" - in the sense of one's thoughts or words corresponding exactly to what took place and what was the case - "the truth", thus tautologically defined. What one **can** know, however, is what has been said about this or that event or circumstance, in texts and other artefacts; and on the basis of this knowledge, one can judge between different possibilities and likelihoods. If there is enough evidence (and it remains yet to be seen what that might be) in cases other than this, one may even be able to arrive at some facts, or virtual facts. One can also entertain, and perhaps even instruct oneself and others, by speculating, more or less intelligently, as to what a given proposition means, and why it was said by whoever said it. Here we enter into a territory nearer to literary criticism, pursuing the truth of art and imaginative literature, rather than facts on the scientific model. This may seem woefully inadequate, but, honestly considered,

it may sometimes be the best we can do, at least in such a case. If we are unhappy with this, we should consider pursuits other than ancient history.

VIII. Conclusion

Speculation seems, therefore, to be endemic to the study of Varius and his reign. Something about him seems to have gripped the imagination of writers, both ancient and modern, leading them to fantasise about him and his entourage.

Perhaps based on some grain of truth - or perhaps not - Dio, to a lesser extent Herodian, and to a much greater one "Lampridius", the purported author of the *Vita Heliogabali* in the *Historia Augusta*, seem to have delighted in exaggerating his eccentricities, indeed in inventing them, whether sumptuary, religious, convivial or sexual. License to do so was granted by the rhetorical conventions of the mode of invective in which they wrote.

Yet even among modern historians, his reign has served, as we have seen above, as an excuse to free their imaginative faculty from the constraints of evidence and verisimilitude. Oddly, this seems to have spilled over from history into other, allegedly more scientific disciplines. In demonstration of this curious fact, I should like to conclude this paper by presenting another, separate, but closely related example of the spontaneous generation of eunuchs in the minds of modern writers, when dealing with the reign of Varius.

Moll, in *Die Conträre Sexuellempfindung*, an early work of allegedly scientific sexology, with a preface by Krafft-Ebbing, [125] discusses, in a chapter on sexual inversion, what he calls uranianism, citing Varius, whom he calls Heliogabalus, as an example thereof. He quotes or paraphrases, in Latin, "Lampridius", to the effect that this emperor received love through every orifice of his body: *"per cuncta cava corporis libidinem suscipiebat"*. [126]

Then, referring to Hierocles, a handsome and athletic young charioteer, who, according to Dio, captivated Sardanapalus (yet another one of Varius many names) by his nocturnal feats, *τοῖς νυκτερινοῖς ἔργοις*, [127] and whom Varius

[125] Albert Moll, *Die Conträre Sexuellempfindung*, Berlin, 1891; French translation: Les Perversions de l'Instinct Génital, Paris, 1893. The citation here is from p. 41 of the Paris edition.

[126] HA/AE V, 2; Loeb p. 114. The Loeb text has *recipientem*, instead of *suscipiebat*.

[127] Dio LXXX 15,2; Loeb p. 466.

considered as his husband, Moll asserts that the emperor's love for "the eunuch Hierocles" went so far (and here Moll has recourse to Lampridius' Latin), *"ut eidem inguina oscularetur"* ; [128] so far, indeed, that he kissed him (according to Dr. Magie's very careful translation) "in a place which it is indecent even to mention".

This from a sexologist. It prompts two questions, and one final observation:

If Hierocles were, indeed, a eunuch, what might there have been for Varius to kiss, that would be capable of performing the sustained nocturnal feats attributed to its owner?

If it is unlikely that the alleged nymphomaniac Soaemias would have had a eunuch as a lover and prospective husband, how likely is it that her son, claimed by Moll's own source [129] to have sent scouts throughout the empire looking for particularly well endowed and lusty youths, would have done so?

To paraphrase Voltaire, even where eunuchs did not exist, it seems to have been necessary to invent them.

List of ancient sources and loci cited:

Dio:
1. LXXIX, 31,1*
2. LXXIX, 31,2-3
3. LXXIX, 32,4
4. LXXIX, 38,3
5. LXXIX, 39,4
6. LXXX, 3,1
7. LXXX, 3,5
8. LXXX, 4,1

[128] HA/AE VI, 5; Loeb p. 116.

[129] HA/AE V, 3; VII, 6-7.

9. LXXX, 6,1-2
10. LXXX, 6,3
11. LXXX, 6,3
12. LXXX, 20,2

Xiphilinus:
Boissevain's Ed. Vol III, p. 724, line 23.

Herodian:
1. V, 3,3
2. V, 3,9
3. V, 3,10
4. V, 4,4
5. V, 5,3
6. V, 5,3
7. V, 7,6

HA/AE:
1. II, 2-3
2. XII,1

Abbreviations in text and footnotes:

AE	*L'Année Épigraphique*
BMC	*Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* (British Museum Catalogue)
Boissevain	Boissevain's recension of Dio, Weidmann Edition
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
Dio	*Dio's Roman History*
HA/AE	*Historia Augusta*, Antoninus Elagabalus
HA/AS	*Historia Augusta*, Alexander Severus
Herodian	*Herodian's History*
ILS	*Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
Loeb	Loeb Classical Library editions of Dio & Herodian
MEFRA	*Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome et d'Athènes*
PIR^1	*Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, First Edition
PIR^2	*Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, Second Edition
RA	*Revue Archéologique*
RE	*Real Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*
Xiphilinus	Xiphilinus' epitome of Dio, Weidmann Edition