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AN ACCIDENTAL TOURIST?
CARACALLA'S FATAL TRIP TO THE TEMPLE OF THE MOON
AT CARRHAE/HARRAN^{†*}

Abstract: The circumstances surrounding Caracalla's death in AD 217 remain confusing. In particular the presence of the emperor near the famous temple of the Moon at Carrhae-Harran has led to much scholarly speculation. Often a preference for 'the East' has been put forward to explain Caracalla's actions. This paper discusses the various possibilities why he decided to visit this specific temple, and argues that the episode ought to be understood through a combination of religious notions and individual, 'political' needs and conveniences which would have made it impossible for this emperor not to go to a deity whose local cult stood for total, universal power. In the process, this article also provides some clarity regarding the contradictory sources describing the events.

INTRODUCTION

If only Caracalla had eaten something else. He might then not have needed to make a fatal sanitary stop on his way to the famous temple of the Moon near Carrhae/Harran. On 8 April 217 he had to stop to excrete and was murdered in the process. "Such was the end of a monster whose life disgraced human nature, and whose reign accused the patience of the Romans", as Gibbon wrote.¹ This infamous and rather embarrassing ending of the emperor's life turned out to be an important event in the history of imperial Rome: "for the first time an Emperor had died while with his troops on campaign, and had been replaced from within his entourage."² Surprisingly enough, Caracalla's reign as a whole has received fairly little attention.³ His death scene has been more discussed, but without satisfactorily discussing the emperor's motivations for going to the temple of the Moon in the first place.⁴ This paper therefore aims

* We are very grateful for the constructive comments and suggestions made by the journal's two anonymous readers, which have substantially improved the present article. Translations, unless indicated otherwise, are adapted from the LCL.

¹ Gibbon (1896) I 151.

² Millar (1993) 144.

³ MacKenzie (1949); Campbell (2005) 15-20; Mennen (2006); Buraselis (2007). Cf. now also Simelon (2010). Unfortunately, Meckler (1994) and Sillar (2001) remain unpublished.

⁴ Hohl (1950). Cf. Arand (2002) 135-136; Domaszewski (1902) 506-509.

to understand *why* Caracalla decided to travel to this specific temple. In the process, we will also provide some clarity in the confusion that scholars find themselves in with regard to the contradictory sources.

CARACALLA'S NEAR EASTERN CAMPAIGNS

In 215 Caracalla, like his father before him, found himself engaged in a Near Eastern campaign. Overall, the events in the two years that followed seem to have been relatively unexciting.⁵ In 215/6 the emperor led his troops through Mesopotamia and Adiabene, as far as Arbela.⁶ He had his winter head quarters in 213/4 at Nicomedia,⁷ was in Antioch in both 215 and 216, and spent at least part of 216/7 east of the Euphrates, in order to organise the expedition for the following year. In the process, colonial status was awarded to Antioch and Emesa, possibly to Palmyra (if not already under Septimius Severus), and to Edessa, the former capital of the kingdom of Osroene that was now incorporated into the provincial structure.⁸ The ancient sources (Herodian 4.10.1-11.7; Dio 79.1.1) give as a pretext for the campaign a marriage proposal to the daughter of Artabanus, who had claimed the Parthian throne as a contender against Vologaeses.⁹ Dio (79.1.1-3) states that Caracalla did not see an enemy while advancing eastwards in 216, but that (79.3.1), “when the Parthians and the Medes, greatly angered by the treatment they had

⁵ Cf. Sartre (2005) 149: “the results of Caracalla’s second campaign, in 215-217,... were less than spectacular.”

⁶ For the route taken see Halfmann (1986) 223-230; Tudor (1987). For the context, see Millar (1993) 141-144; Maricq (1957). Cf. Magie (1950) 684-686, with 1551-1554 n. 41-45.

⁷ Following the suggestion by Scheid (1998), and taking into account *JGR* IV 1298, as cited and discussed by Birley (1997) 2705, 2746. Caracalla’s stay there had traditionally been dated to 214/5. We are grateful to one of the journal’s readers for drawing our attention to these references, and to John Scheid for sending us a copy of his article. The latter also kindly informs us that he soon hopes to have the opportunity to test his hypothesis by examining the actual inscriptions, which have been fixed in concrete, when they will be detached for a new display.

⁸ Millar (2006), esp. 200-213; Ross (2001) 57-64.

⁹ It has been noted that the passage in Herodian matches the attempt by Dio to mirror Caracalla’s actions to those of Septimius Severus on a wider scale, with the son taking on only the father’s negative qualities. Zimmermann (1999) 211: “... Caracalla durch die Wiederholung identischer Handlungsmuster als Karikatur des Septimius Severus zu präsentieren”; and p. 213: “... Caracalla als gelehrigen Schüler seines Vaters zu präsentieren, der sich... gerade die zweifelhaften Praktiken angeeignet hat.” On the two Parthian rival contenders, see Karras-Klapproth (1988) 36-39, and 208-209, respectively.

received, proceeded to raise a large army, he fell into the greatest terror.” Likewise, Herodian (4.14.1) relates how, following the emperor’s death, “Artabanus was advancing with a large and powerful force to punish the Romans”. These scenes must be seen in light of the general tendency of the ancient literary sources to emphasise Caracalla’s wish to be portrayed as a soldier.¹⁰ In any case, and whatever the pretext, Caracalla’s Near Eastern campaign seems to have been “a demonstration of Roman strength rather than a serious attempt at annexation”.¹¹ The events surrounding the campaigns are presented as relatively straightforward. Quite naturally, most attention has been given to the emperor’s untimely end. As Dio (79.4.1) states, “Antoninus made preparations in his turn; but it did not fall to his lot to carry on the war, for he was murdered in the midst of his soldiers, whom he most honoured and in whom he reposed vast confidence.”

DEATH OF AN EMPEROR

The sources seem to be only roughly in agreement on the actual assassination: the praetorian prefect Macrinus plotted for the empire, and may or may not have enlisted the services of at least (but not necessarily exclusively) Martialis, who served as either *evocatus* (reservist), centurion, or *strator imperatoris* (equerry), and who seems to have borne a personal grudge against the emperor.¹² Naturally, it is inherent to any conspiracy that the details remain forever clouded in secrecy, or, in the words of Dio (54.15.2): “it is not possible, of course, for those on the outside to have certain knowledge of such matters.” In this particular case, however, several parallels to the death scenes of other ‘bad’ emperors,

¹⁰ Dio 78.13.1-2; Herodian 4.7.3-7. Cf. Mennen (2006) 257-259; Hannestad (1998) 284. Note, however, the *decrease* of military images on imperial coinage in Caracalla’s sole reign; Manders (2012) 231 fig. 33-34; Rowan (2009) 205.

¹¹ Campbell (2005) 19.

¹² Herodian 4.12.3-13.5 (centurion); Dio 79.5.3 (*evocatus*: ἐν τε τοῖς ἀνακλήτοις στρατευόμενον); SHA *Caracalla* 6.6-7.3 (*strator*). On Caracalla’s murder, see especially Speidel (2005); Alföldy (1996). On Martialis see *PIR* I, 412, with references to the relevant sources. For Dio, see especially appendix I of Scott (2008) 180-236. The sources disagree on the reasons for the grudge, attributing it either to Caracalla’s execution of Martialis’ brother and personal slights (Herodian) or to the emperor’s unwillingness to promote Martialis to the rank of centurion (Dio). Note that Zosimus (1.10.1), albeit in a very brief passage, explicitly states that ‘Antoninus paid the penalty for fratricide and his slayer was never discovered’ (ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ Ἀντωνίνος ἔδωκε τῆς ἀδελφοκτονίας μετ’ οὐ πολὺ δίκην, καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ παΐσαντος τοῦτον ἀγνοηθέντος); transl. Ridley (1982). For an overview of the different sources on Caracalla’s death, see Arand (2002) 66 n. 40; 314.

especially Caligula, throw some doubts on the stories' trustworthiness.¹³ Matters become even more problematic because of the striking inconsistencies in the description of the situation in which Caracalla got killed. This is what Herodian (4.13.3-5) writes:

Soon after this discussion [i.e. between Macrinus and Martialis] Antoninus, who was spending some time at Carrhae in Mesopotamia, decided to leave the camp and visit the temple of Selene, the main cult of that region. The temple was some distance from the town, needing a proper journey to see it. But not to disorganize the whole army, Antoninus made the trip with a few cavalry, intending to make a sacrifice to the goddess and then return. In the middle of the journey he was forced by a stomach ache to tell the whole column to stop while he went off with a single attendant to relieve his trouble. So everyone turned their faces away and walked off as far as they could out of respect for the emperor's dignity and his modesty while in the act. Martialis was watching every opportunity and spotted the emperor all alone. He ran towards him, pretending he had been summoned by a nod to tell the emperor something or to be told something. He stood over Antoninus while he was pulling down the clothes from his waist and stabbed him with the dagger he had hidden in his hands while the emperor's back was turned. The blow, which caught Antoninus just near the clavicle, was fatal and he died unexpectedly while he was off his guard.¹⁴

As we will see later, not only is the topography more complicated than Herodian presents, but the description of the deity concerned is also problematic.

Cassius Dio spends much time on the plot, but is brief about the details of the assassination and the specifics of its context. He writes the following (79.5.4-5):

¹³ Cf. Tac., *Hist.* 3.68.1; Jos., *A.J.* 19.46-8; Suet., *Cal.* 56.2, 58; Dio 59.29.

¹⁴ συνέβη δὲ μετ' οὐ πολὺ τῆς σκέψεως ταύτης θελῆσαι τὸν Ἀντωνῖνον, διατρίβοντα ἐν Κάρραις τῆς Μεσοποταμίας, προελθεῖν τῆς στρατοπεδείας ἀπελθεῖν τε ἐς τὸν νεῶν τῆς Σελήνης, ἣν μάλιστα οἱ ἐπιχώριοι σέβουσιν. ἀφειστήκει δὲ τῆς πόλεως ὁ νεὼς πολὺ, ὡς ὁδοιπορίας χρῆζειν. σὺν ἱππεύσιν οὖν ὀλίγοις, ἵνα δὴ μὴ πάντα τὸν στρατὸν σκύλη, τὴν ὁδοιπορίαν ἐποιεῖτο, ὡς δὴ θύσας τῇ θεῷ ἐπανεέλθοι. κατὰ δὲ τὴν μέσσην ὁδὸν ἐπειχθεὶς ὑπὸ τῆς γαστρὸς, ἀποστήναι τε πάντας κελεύσας, ἀνεχώρει σὺν ἐνὶ ὑπηρέτῃ ἀποσκευασόμενος τὰ ἐνοχλοῦντα. πάντες τοίνυν ἀπεστράφησαν καὶ ὡς πορρωτάτω ἀπῆσαν, τιμὴν καὶ αἰδῶ τῷ γινόμενῳ νέμοντες. ὁ δὲ Μαρτιάλιος τοὺς καιροὺς πάντας παραφυλάττων, ἰδὼν τε αὐτὸν μεμονωμένον, ὡς δὴ κληθεὶς ὑπ' αὐτοῦ νεύματι ἔρων τι ἢ ἀκουσόμενος, προστρέχει, ἐπιστάς τε αὐτῷ τὰς ἐσθῆτας τῶν μηρῶν καθέλκοντι, ἀπεστραμμένον παίει ξιφιδίῳ, ὃ μετὰ χειρᾶς ἔφερε λανθάνων. καιρίου δὲ τῆς πληγῆς ἐπὶ τῆς κατακλειδῶς γενομένης ἀπροσδοκῆτως τε καὶ ἀφυλάκτως ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος ἀνῆρέθη.

On the eighth of April, when the emperor had set out from Edessa for Carrhae and had dismounted from his horse to ease himself, Martialis approached as though desiring to say something to him and struck him with a small dagger. Martialis immediately fled and would have escaped detection, had he thrown away his sword; but, as it was, the weapon led to his being recognized by one of the Scythians in attendance upon Antoninus, and he was struck down with a javelin. As for Antoninus, the tribunes [i.e. Nemesianus and Apollinaris, cf. 79.5.3], pretending to come to his rescue, slew him.¹⁵

Following the passage, Dio discusses, as so often, the omens preceding the emperor's assassination (79.7-8). Again, parallels with other imperial deaths are striking.¹⁶

Finally, the *Historia Augusta* (*Caracalla* 6.6), after a brief outline of Caracalla's Eastern campaign, in which the author wrongly mocks him for taking the name *Parthicus* without real cause,¹⁷ tells us the following:

After this he wintered at Edessa with the intention of renewing the war against the Parthians. During this time, on the eighth day before the Ides of April [6 April], the feast of the Megalensia and his own birthday, while on a journey to Carrhae to do honour to the god Lunus, he stepped aside to satisfy the needs of nature and was thereupon assassinated by the treachery of Macrinus the prefect of the guard, who after his death seized the imperial power.¹⁸

After listing Macrinus' accomplices (including the tribunes Nemesianus and Apollinaris), the logistics of Caracalla's assassination are confirmed (7.1-2):

He was slain in the course of a journey between Carrhae and Edessa, when he had dismounted for the purpose of emptying his bladder and was standing in the midst of his body-guard, who were accomplices in the murder.¹⁹

¹⁵ τῇ ὀγδόῃ τοῦ Ἀπριλίου ἐξορμήσαντά τε αὐτὸν ἐξ Ἐδέσσης ἐς Κάρρας, καὶ κατελθόντα ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵππου ὅπως ἀποπατήσει, προσελθὼν ὁ Μαρτιάλιος ὡς γε εἰπεῖν τι δεόμενος ἐπάταξε ξιφιδίῳ μικρῷ. καὶ αὐτὸς μὲν αὐτίκα ἀπέφυγε, καὶ διέλαθεν ἂν εἰ τὸ ξίφος ἀπερρίφει. νῦν δὲ γνωρισθεὶς ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ τινος τῶν Σκυθῶν τῶν σὺν Ἀντωνίνῳ ὄντων κατηκοντίσθη. ἐκεῖνον δὲ ... οἱ χιλίαρχοι ὡς καὶ βοηθοῦντες κατέσφαζαν.

¹⁶ This may have more to do with the nature of omens. For imperial deaths, only a limited set of omens was applicable. Cf. Vigour (2001) 343-354, on how such omens could be employed for the transmission of imperial power.

¹⁷ The cognomen was already bestowed on Caracalla in 199, on the occasion of his father's victory over the Parthians. Cf. Kneissl (1969) 148-151.

¹⁸ *deinde cum iterum vellet Parthis bellum inferre atque hibernaret Edessae atque inde Carrhas Luni dei gratia venisset, die natali suo, octavo idus Apriles, ipsis Megalensibus, cum ad requisita naturae discessisset, insidiis a Macrino praefecto praetorii positus, qui post eum invasit imperium, interemptus est.*

¹⁹ *occisus est autem in medio itinere inter Carrhas et Edessam, cum levandae vesicae gratia ex equo descendisset atque inter protectores suos, coniuratos caedis, ageret.*

The accounts in Eutropius and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* do not add to our knowledge.²⁰ The unknown author of the *Historia Augusta*, as we will see later, is more accurate than Herodian on the nature of the deity. On the dates, and indeed some other details, his information is flawed.²¹ Firstly, Caracalla's birthday was not eight days before the Ides, which would have been 6 April, but on the 4th of the month.²² Secondly, Caracalla did not die on 6 April either, but two days later, as is correctly stated by Dio.²³ The link with the Megalensia cannot be used as an argument for the accuracy of dates, since it would have been valid for any date between the 4th and 10th of April. The festival opened on 4 April and had a closing ceremony on the 10th. Though Hadzsits has argued that there is no evidence for specific Megalensian festivities between those dates, and stated that the games on 6 April were in commemoration of Caesar's victory at Thapsus in 46 BC, he ignored the epigraphic evidence, which confirms continuous activities for the festival.²⁴ Looking at the sources in detail, it seems only clear that Caracalla was on his way to the temple, but never arrived. Whether, however, he was on his way to the temple from nearby Carrhae (Herodian), or from Edessa (Dio and the *Historia Augusta*), which would imply a thirty-mile detour, remains unclear.²⁵ Furthermore, apart from the *Historia Augusta*, which gets dating issues wrong, there is no evidence that the emperor's planned visit should be connected with his birthday celebrations.²⁶

²⁰ Eutr. 8.20: *defunctus est in Osdroena apud Edessam; Epit. de. Caes.* 21.6: *Cum Carras iter faceret, apud Edessam secedens ad officia naturalia... interfectus est.*

²¹ Reusch (1931) 51; Hohl (1950) 291-292; Syme (1968) 34: "Everything from 213 to the emperor's death in 217 gets reported in a scrappy fashion, barely intelligible." Cf. Heinen (1971), who shows that notwithstanding the arguments by Reusch (and Domaszewski), the *Vita Caracalli* is not a fraudulent attempt to whitewash the emperor's reputation.

²² Caracalla's birthday is well-known: e.g. *CIL* VI 1054; XIV 119. As noted by Palmer (1978) 1104 n. 118, "we happen to have more dedications on Caracalla's birthday than on any other emperor's", with reference to Snyder (1940). Cf. Herz (1975) 37; 175-176; 422 n. 21.

²³ Reusch (1931) 51; Hohl (1950) 280, 291. See esp. Alföldy (1996) 10. Eutr. 8.20.2, like Dio, states that Caracalla reigned six years and two months, but has him erroneously die at the age of forty-three; Bird (1993) 131. Cf. Bird (1994) 114, at *Aur. Vict., Caes.* 21.5-6.

²⁴ Herz (1975) 176-177, *contra* Hadzsits (1930). Cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 4.179-392.

²⁵ Cf. Luther (2003) for an ingenious discussion on the location of Caracalla's death.

²⁶ Even *if* Caracalla had been murdered on his *return* from the temple, it is still doubtful whether that would explain the four days difference between his birthday and his death. Cf., however, Alföldy (1996) 10, 12.

CARACALLA AND THE MOON CULT

If the sources are in some agreement on the conspiracy as a whole, and contradicting each other about the specifics of the assassination, they are wholly silent on the question of *why* Caracalla would have wanted to visit the temple of the Moon at Carrhae/Harran in the first place. Though some modern scholars have raised the point, it has not been properly discussed. In general, Caracalla's voyage through the East has been interpreted as an *imitatio Alexandri*.²⁷ But whereas there is no doubt that emulating Alexander was crucial for the emperor's visit to the East and important for some other aspects of his reign,²⁸ it cannot explain all his actions, and, indeed, not his aborted visit to the Moon at Harran either. Likewise, the fact that Carrhae had been granted colonial status under Septimius Severus, the site's importance in a supra-regional trade network, or even its function as a 'lieu de mémoire' of Crassus' defeat (and hence a location for a possible symbolic revenge), may have played some role, but in themselves they remain unsatisfactory motives for the excursion.²⁹

The most explicit attempt to make sense of Caracalla's fatal trip to the Moon at Carrhae/Harran was made by R.E.A. Palmer now over thirty years ago. He placed the visit within the context of a perceived importance of the Moon cult for the Severans in general, and for Caracalla in particular. In fact, he argued that "no doubt Caracalla had formed a religious attachment to Lunus on his earlier expedition with Severus against the Parthians".³⁰ Palmer furthermore linked the detour to Carrhae to the emperor's birthday.³¹ Yet, as we have already discussed, the dating of events does not allow for a sacrifice to be made at Harran for his birthday

²⁷ Millar (1993) 142-143, at 142: "Abundant contemporary evidence makes perfectly clear that Caracalla's imitation of Alexander was no superficial whim but the determining factor in his actions as Emperor." Cf. Millar (1964) 214-218, esp. 215; Wilkes (2005) 217 (erroneously placing Caracalla's death "near Circesium"), 245; Kühnen (2008) 176-178; Levick (1969). But mind the cautionary remarks by Johnston (1983). Cf. also Salzmann (2001); Rowan (2009) 192-198.

²⁸ Baharal (1994); Baharal (2003).

²⁹ Colonial status: Millar (2006) 200. Trade: Jones (1971) 217-220. Crassus' defeat: Mattern-Parkes (2003) 393 n. 39: "Both Caracalla and Julian stopped at Carrhae to sacrifice to the moon — no doubt to propitiate the gods that had destroyed Crassus — before proceeding on their great eastern campaigns."

³⁰ Palmer (1978) esp. 1107-1108.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1108: "When Caracalla's days were truly numbered, the emperor was campaigning in the East and he diverted his route to Carrhae to pay homage to the local male Moon Lunus on his own birthday, 4 April 217. In four days he was dead".

celebrations. But Palmer went even further, and suggested that Caracalla's personal interest in the Moon arose from his own birthday: "an original devotion to the male moon... will have arisen from Caracalla's birth on the feast day of the Romans' Palatine Noctiluca or Diana".³² However, the date of the feast of Noctiluca is not attested and Palmer's argument, though ingenious, seems ultimately circumstantial (if not circular).³³ Still, an inscription on which much of Palmer's argument is based can be clearly dated to Caracalla's birthday: [*sancto die nativitatis tuae* leaves little room for doubt.³⁴ In fact, the inscription in question does seem to testify for Caracalla's fascination with, and attachment to, the Moon — though not, as Palmer argued, supplying an origin to that attachment. The link between emperor and divinity, however, is clear from line 12: *Nox Dea fit lux*.

Alföldy, who convincingly dated the inscription to 211, suggested that it testifies to Caracalla entering Rome after the death of his father on his birthday, in order to link the British victory to him personally in the strongest possible terms.³⁵ In this reading, Victory became closely connected to the emperor at a time when the latter was in his well-known struggle with Geta. If correct, it would place the decision to connect himself with the Moon firmly in the hands of Caracalla, rather than this being part of a more general Severan Moon cult, as Palmer suggested.³⁶ More importantly even, Alföldy shows that Caracalla evidently falsified his year of birth, from 188 to 186, thereby not only making himself two years older, but also making his birthday, the 4th of April, a Monday or *dies Lunae*. This personal choice by Caracalla to link himself to a particular god coheres well with the messages that the emperor broadcast through his coinage. Two recent analyses of the differences between the

³² *Ibid.*: "Caracalla held in esteem his birthday deity, the Moongod."

³³ *Ibid.* 1097-1107, where he linked *CIL* VI 1080 (= 31236), and esp. line 12 (*nox fit lux*), with the cult practice known for Luca Noctiluca (sometimes identified with Diana, e.g. by Laevius fr. 26; Macr., *Sat.* 3.8.3; Varro, *LL* 5.68). He supported the link through noting that Horace addresses Diana as Luna in the *Carmen Saeculare* 1.35-36, but as Noctiluca "in his poem on the rehearsal of this hymn", cf. p. 1107, referring to *Carm.* 4.6.38. Palmer's argument, that a triumphal arch to Caracalla was situated at the Graecostasis where the male moon god had been worshipped at least as early as the first century BC (p. 1107), cannot count as proper evidence for a fascination by the Severans, let alone Caracalla, with the moon cult. The suggestions of Palmer have been taken up by Mastino (1981) 186-187. For a more reserved reaction, see Alföldy (1996) 19, 22.

³⁴ *CIL* VI 1080 (= 31236), l. 9, with a full reconstruction in Alföldy (1996) 23-24, 25 fig. 2.

³⁵ Alföldy (1996) 28, 30.

³⁶ Palmer (1978) 1086.

images on central coinage during on the one hand the joint reign of Severus and Caracalla, and on the other Caracalla's sole reign, show an enormous rise in the number of coin types emphasising associations between the emperor and the gods when Caracalla came into sole power.³⁷ Dividing the coin types in *RIC* into different 'representational categories', the category 'divine association' actually rises from 18.2% (198-210) to 66.9% (212-7).³⁸ Such 'legitimation' of his power through emphasising divine support might also account for Caracalla's choice to include *pius felix* in his titulature, following Commodus in doing so.³⁹ Within this category of 'divine association', there was also some scope (though formed by only a few types) for coins depicting Diana/Luna (Lucifera).⁴⁰ Noticeably, however, not a single building initiated by Caracalla and connected to the Moon cult can be found in Rome.⁴¹

Such a search for religious support on the part of the young emperor seems a more likely explanation for the flurry of divine references than the oft-cited 'eastern religious climate' of the Severan age.⁴² Caracalla chose to legitimate his emperorship by associating himself with a substantial number of gods and by visiting numerous temples. With regard to the Near East, imperial visits by Caracalla to the important cult centres at Bambyx-Hierapolis (Mabug) and Doliche (Dülük) have been postulated by H. Seyrig and M. Facella respectively.⁴³ As regards Hierapolis, it was however not the city's leading deity Atargatis (who as the 'Syrian goddess' came to be emblematic for the religious life of the Near East as a whole), but rather the local version of Apollo (i.e. Nebu) who was directly associated with the emperor on the local coinage, on account

³⁷ Manders (2012) 229-242 with fig. 33-34; Rowan (2009) pl. 30, fig. 60-61.

³⁸ Manders (2012) 230-232.

³⁹ Dio 77.16.1; Hohl (1950) 286 n.4; Hekster (2002) 92-95; Van't Dack (1991).

⁴⁰ *RIC* IV.1, nos. 256a-c, 274a-c, 284a-d, 540a-b, 550a, 554a, 558a-c, 565, 567a-b; Manders (2012) 320 app. 3, also citing the *RIC* references for other third-century coin types depicting Diana/Luna.

⁴¹ Palmer (1978) 1088-1092 and Hamdoune (2009) have argued in favour of an African Severan cult centre with Caracalla as Moongod, based on the Septizonium, but this is based on insufficient evidence, as has been rightly noted by Lichtenberger (2011) 73-74.

⁴² Oliver (1978) 381; Mennen (2006) 263-266, though she rightly notices "the fact that Eastern gods hardly occur on coins of Septimius Severus" (p. 262). The many references to Egyptian divinities may well be linked to the supply of grain from Egypt. Cf. Manders (2012) 239-241; Hekster (2002) 110. The notion of Caracalla vs 'the East' is heavily overstated by Ball (2000) 409, and esp. 487 n. 71, where the staging of Verdi's *Aida* in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome is referred to in order to show how "to this day the ghost of the East still returns to haunt Caracalla, almost two millennia after his death."

⁴³ Seyrig (1949); Facella (2008).

of his oracular ability.⁴⁴ Concerning Doliche, a strong case has now been made to suggest that a newly discovered inscribed statue base for the emperor ought to be interpreted as a reflection of an actual visit to the home sanctuary of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus, a local god whose epithets link him directly with the universal power of the leading deity from the Roman state pantheon, and who was particularly popular amongst the military (on whom Caracalla depended so much).⁴⁵ In any case, divine association was known to many, and was reflected in both central and provincial coinage. After all, by the third century, if not long before, “an emperor’s personal piety could not remain a private matter”.⁴⁶ Association with the gods in order to sanction his reign may well have been a motive for Caracalla to aspire to a visit to the temple of the Moon at Carrhae.

CARACALLA AND THE MOON OF HARRAN

Imperial visits to important temples throughout the empire were common in the Roman world.⁴⁷ Regardless of whether one prefers to apply to them the term ‘pilgrimage’ or ‘tourism’, such activities formed part of “sacred mobility in the broader sense”,⁴⁸ and from that perspective Caracalla’s outing to the Moon temple at Harran can give the impression of being a standard visit. This particular temple was, however, important and well-known, and Caracalla would not be the last emperor who wished to worship at the sanctuary: Ammianus Marcellinus records (23.3.2) how Julian the Apostate, advancing through Mesopotamia on the way to his fateful encounter with the Sasanian King of Kings, paid his respect at Carrhae to the local Moon goddess “to offer sacrifices according to the local rites to the Moon, who is worshipped in that region” (*et Lunae quae religiose per eos colitur tractus ritu locorum fert sacra*).

But perhaps this was more than just a famous cult centre. As we have seen above, Caracalla felt the need to legitimate his rule through trumpeting divine support. And in earlier times “the cult of Sin at Harran

⁴⁴ Seyrig (1949) 27. Cf. Lightfoot (2003) 456-469.

⁴⁵ Facella (2008) esp. 131: “the honour offered to Caracalla in the central sanctuary of Jupiter Dolichenus was unusual and perhaps reflected particular circumstances”; cf. p. 132, 135.

⁴⁶ Fowden (2005b) 554.

⁴⁷ Cf. Dignas (2002) 134-135 on the possible effects and consequences of imperial visits to cities and their temples.

⁴⁸ Horden & Purcell (2000) 446. Cf. the collection by Elsner & Rutherford (2005).

[had] implied the notion of a kingdom of the totality of the land, which was given to the rulers at Harran".⁴⁹ The Moon at Carrhae was one of those local divinities that encompassed a degree of divine universality (similar to, though not to the extent of, the Syrian goddess and Jupiter Dolichenus, for both of whom there is evidence for widespread worship), and this no doubt formed an attraction for an emperor who passed by the region with a view to campaigning against the Eastern enemy.⁵⁰ Harran-Carrhae had always been well-known in the wider region for its temple of the Moon, known as Ehulhul. It must certainly have been known to Caracalla who was travelling through the region with his mother, aunt and cousins, all from Emesa, and for this semi-Syrian family a 'Syrian' universal deity must have been highly attractive. The temple is first mentioned in a Mari-tablet ca 2000 BC, rebuilt by Asurbanipal in the seventh century, famously rebuilt again by Nabonidus in the mid-sixth century, and was generally established alongside Ur as one of the two main centres of the cult of the Moon, who — in the Mesopotamian Pantheon — was mother to a son Shamash (the Sun) and daughter Istar-Venus.⁵¹ If it is debatable to what degree the indigenous population of Carrhae was actually aware of its religious past, it seems clear that the Ancient Mesopotamian Moon cult had somehow survived here into the Graeco-Roman period, and the local temple was still sufficiently prominent to appear on the coins issued by the city under Caracalla.⁵² For the emperor, interested above all in the legitimation (both 'religious' and 'political') of his rule, the perceived permanence of the native cult served his aim well. As regards the precise nature of the cult at this time, however, our sources seem to be confused, and this uncertainty has remained visible in modern literature.

As we have seen above, the ancient accounts are not in agreement about the deity's sex, with Herodian talking about the temple of the goddess Selene, and the *Historia Augusta* referring to the god Lunus. Later sources add to the confusion, such as the reference in the *Doctrina Addai*

⁴⁹ Drijvers (1980) 141-142, cited with approval by Fowden (1993) 63 n. 13.

⁵⁰ Fowden (1993) 63 n. 13. Cf. Labat e.a. (1970) 281: "Le rayonnement de son culte, bien loin d'être seulement lié à la fortune politique de ces deux villes, s'imposa durablement à toute la Mésopotamie, et, bien souvent, au cours de son histoire, des liens personnels existèrent entre ses souverains et le dieu."

⁵¹ The literature is long. See Green (1992); (1996); Lewy (1946); Tubach (1986) 129-142; Theuer (2000) 329-369.

⁵² E.g. Hill (1922) 82 no. 4, with pl. XII.4. Note how Clarke (2005) 604, referred to the "notoriously" long adherence to traditional cults. Cf. Millar (1993) 480.

(an early fifth-century Syriac story about the legendary correspondence between Jesus and a king Abgar of Edessa, expanding a version of the tale known from Eusebius) to the inhabitants of Harran as worshipping the goddess Bath Nikal.⁵³ Some scholars have attempted their way around this problem by envisaging the emperor touring past multiple shrines. Thus D.S. Potter, for example, stated confidently that Caracalla visited *two* temples:

when he set out from Edessa to see the famous temples of the moon around the ancient city of Carrhae... On April 6 Caracalla participated in the rites of the moon goddess in her temple at Asagi Yarimca, two miles north of the city. On April 8 he set out to make the six-mile journey from Carrhae to the temple of the moon god at 'Ain-al-'Arus.⁵⁴

In addition to these two sanctuaries (Asagi Yarimca and 'Ain-al-'Arus), one more relevant temple has been identified, by S. Lloyd and W. Brice, "in the core of the castle",⁵⁵ implying that the famous temple of the Moon was situated at the site now occupied by the eleventh-century citadel, located less than half a mile from the centre of the town of Carrhae.⁵⁶ Lloyd and Brice, however, based themselves on an antiquarian approach, taking the literary sources for granted, trying to match archaeology (even if no firm evidence for temples from the Roman period has been found) and backing it all up with apparent parallels from many centuries later. The actual gender problems can of course not be solved,⁵⁷ but what would have been relevant for Caracalla was that what fitted in

⁵³ "Behold, there are those among you who adore Bath Nical, like the inhabitants of Haran, your neighbours" (*w' gyr 'yt bkwn dsgdyn lbrt nykl 'yk hrny' šbbykwn*), as cited and translated in Griffith (2003). Cf. Howard (1981), and now also Illert (2007).

⁵⁴ Potter (2004) 146. In the accompanying endnote (p.613 n.100), Potter referred to Lloyd & Brice (1951) "for details of the geography". He added that "no single source shows knowledge of more than one temple. April 6 is otherwise attested as the main festival day for the moon goddess, and, if he visited the goddess then, it would explain how a date for a visit to a temple in the area made it into the *Historia Augusta* account." Cf. Luther (2003) 107.

⁵⁵ Lloyd & Brice (1951) 96.

⁵⁶ According to Sinclair (1990) IV 29, the temple "may well have stood on the northern slopes of the great mound a little south of the present walled area's centre." *Ibid.*, p. 36-7: "A medieval source implies that the citadel was a conversion from a Harranian moon-temple, and this is confirmed by the polygonal shape of the only tower defending the inner buildings which correspond loosely to the description of the medieval Arab scholars." Cf. Hohl (1950) 279-280.

⁵⁷ On these gender issues, cf. Green (1992) 27-28, and Lloyd & Brice (1951) 89, for references to later sources, such as Clemens Romanus, who mentions Selene at Harran, and Euty chius, according to whom a golden image was erected for the male Sin. Cf. Ricci (1982).

with Roman conceptions in his own time. And the cult seems to have been known, and discussed, as is clear from a passage in the *Historia Augusta* (*Caracalla* 7.3-5):⁵⁸

Now since we have made mention of the god Lunus, it should be known that all the most learned men have handed down the tradition, and it is at this day so held, particularly by the people of Carrhae, that whoever believes that this deity should be called Luna, with the name and sex of a woman, is subject to women and always their slave; whereas he who believes that the god is a male dominates his wife and is not caught by any woman's wiles. Hence the Greeks and, for that matter, the Egyptians, though they speak of Luna as a "god" in the same way as they include woman in "Man", nevertheless in their mystic rites use the masculine "Lunus".⁵⁹

The discussion concerning a female and a male deity is understandable in the terms of *interpretatio romana*, but above all it ought to be noticed that the Moon temple at Carrhae-Harran is mentioned in a *Roman* source addressing a *Roman* audience.⁶⁰ If Caracalla felt a personal attachment to the Moon at Harran, the specifics of the local cult do not seem to have been of much relevance. Or rather, it is the *deity*, and its *cult*, that are important for the emperor. It would have been immaterial for him whether this concerned Sin or Selene or Lunus or Luna.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis suggests that Caracalla visited the temple of the Moon at Carrhae-Harran because it was important as such. It did not matter whether it involved a goddess or a god; what *did* matter was the claim, that could be made in this local context, of a certain universality. And this notion can be further strengthened if it is accepted that comparative visits were made to other sanctuaries (such as Hierapolis and Doliche)

⁵⁸ At least, if one holds the *Vita Caracalli* as one of the 'major lives' based on (near-) contemporary source material. Cf. still Barnes (1978), Barnes (1995), and Birley (1997) 2744-2748, with the observations of Paschoud & Wirz (2007).

⁵⁹ *et quoniam dei Luni fecimus mentionem, sciendum doctissimis quibusque id memoriae traditum atque ita nunc quoque a Carrhenis praecipue haberi, ut qui Lunam femineo nomine ac sexu putaverit nuncupandam is addictus mulieribus semper inserviat; qui vero marem deum esse crediderit, is dominetur uxori neque ullas muliebres patiatur insidias. unde, quamvis Graeci vel Aegyptii eo genere quo feminam hominem etiam Lunam deum dicant, mystice tamen Lunum dicunt.*

⁶⁰ On the excursus on the Moon cult in the context of the *Vita* as a whole, and the *Historia Augusta* as a whole, cf. Birley (1991) 30-31, 50-51 table I.

whose cults, from a locally-based underpinning, could be perceived as emblematic for the religious world of the wider region. As we have seen, the fact that this concerned an ‘Oriental cult’ is — in this context — unimportant.

Gibbon may have been partly right in choosing pilgrimage as the most adequate term to describe Caracalla’s motives on his way to his death.⁶¹ Yet pilgrimage (or whatever we call the phenomenon of ancient travel to a sacred site) alone is insufficient to explain the situation. And it would be similarly incorrect to justify Caracalla’s actions in purely political terms, in the context of a so-called *imitatio Alexandri*. It is rather the combination of religious notions and individual, ‘political’ needs and conveniences which would have made it impossible for this emperor *not* to go to a deity whose local cult stood for total, universal power. It is, then, highly ironical that it was the very personal, physical need of Caracalla that put an end to the whole enterprise.⁶²

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⁶¹ Gibbon (1896) 150, echoed by Fowden (2005a) 550, who described Caracalla as “a typical pilgrim, merely better travelled than most”.

⁶² An interesting parallel to the whole episode is the murder of the Danish king Harald Bluetooth, as related by Saxo Grammaticus (book X, section viii). In his version of the story, Harald Bluetooth went into a leafy part of a wood to relieve himself, but was then killed by an arrow shot by the Jomsviking leader Toko (Palna-Toki), who fought on the side of Harald’s son Sueno (Sveinn), who had forced his father out of the country. Cf. Olrik & Raeder (1931) 277, with translation and commentary in Christiansen (1980). We owe the parallel to Ittai Gradel, and the precise reference to David ‘Ash’ Ashurst and David Varley. Cf. Millar (1993) xix: “If in the course of [a car-journey through eastern Turkey] I gained a deeper understanding of why Caracalla had needed to step aside on the journey from Urfa to visit the temple of the Moon-Goddess at Carrhae/Harran, it was still an absolutely essential and invaluable experience.”

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