



# Halley's Comet

## A visual record on coins of Elagabalus

by Michael Kodysz

### INTRODUCTION

This exhibit presents a selection of ancient Roman coins that seem to form a visual record of the apparition of Halley's Comet in 218 CE. The comet was visible in Rome and its Eastern provinces from early May to mid-June. Its appearance coincided with the rise of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (218–22), known to history as Elagabalus. The word *Elagabalus* is Latin for El-Gabal, the name of the Syrian sun god whom the emperor served as chief priest.

The coins displayed here were struck under the emperor's authority at the mint of Rome. They have been acquired through the dedicated labor of eighteen years' collecting and study. Many are scarce or rare in terms of quantity, condition, or specific features of the dies from which they were struck. Several come from the cabinets of distinguished numismatists. This selection focuses primarily on silver coins called *denarii*. Additional depth is provided by the inclusion of some larger-sized bronze denominations.

### NOTES ON CATALOGING

The coins displayed in this exhibit are cataloged with reference to the numbering systems used in the following sources, which are noted respectively in the text as *RIC* and *Thirion*:

Mattingly, Harold, E. A. Sydenham, and C. H. V. Sutherland. *The Roman Imperial Coinage: Vol. 4 Part II: Macrinus to Pupienus*. London: Spink & Son, 1938.

Thirion, Marcel. *Le Monnayage d'Élagabale (218–222)*. Brussels: J. De Mey, 1968.

This exhibit uses the rarity scale found in Thirion (C = common, AR = scarce, R–R4 = increasing degrees of rarity). Obverses not shown are similar to coin no. 1. The exception is coin no. 9, which bears the name, title, and portrait of Elagabalus's first wife Julia Paula.

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**1.** *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 221–2 CE; 19 mm, 4.07 g. RIC 46, Thirion 180 (C = common). Obverse: IMP ANTONINVS – PIVS AVG (General Antoninus, Dutiful Emperor); laureate bust right, draped, with uncertain object over forehead (usually referred to as a “horn,” most likely a cult object). Reverse: P M TR P IIII COS III P P (Chief Priest, 4th Tribunician Power, 3rd Consulship, Father of His Country); Elagabalus, standing half-left, sacrificing out of patera over lighted altar, holding club or branch upward; star (comet with two tails) in field left. Extra Fine.*

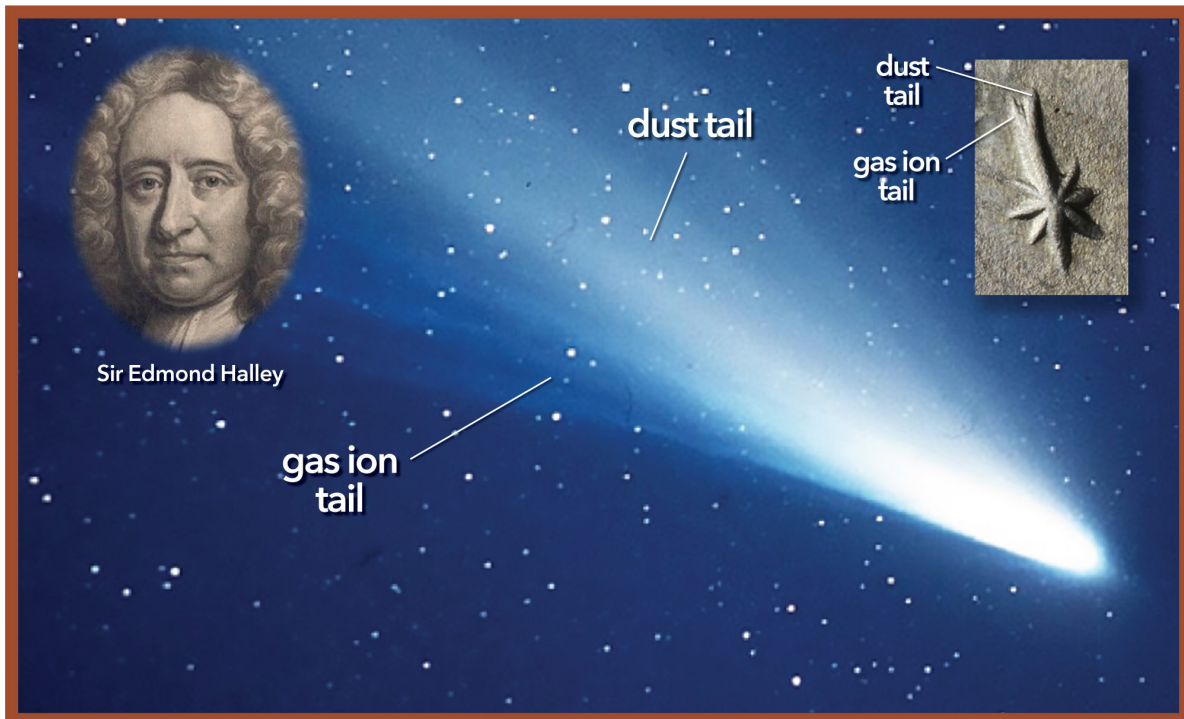
*Coin no. 1 is quite unusual in that the comet seems to be shown with a remarkable level of observational accuracy. Its design includes a star with a long tail. Although a common type, the die from which this coin was struck is apparently unique in showing the comet's tail split into two. The larger, curved prong can be seen to depict the dust tail, with the smaller straight prong depicting the gas ion tail. Though executed in miniature, it is perhaps the only naturalistic rendering of a comet's two tails produced in ancient Rome.*

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### **SUN, OFFICINA, OR COMET?**

Like many of Elagabalus's coins, those shown here feature star-like symbols as part of their designs. Most of these stars are highly stylized, with the rays rendered as simple hatch marks. Sometimes a ray has been lengthened, extending upward to form a tail. No ancient mint records survive that can tell us the specific meaning of these symbols. Maybe they depict the Sun. Another hypothesis is that they serve as the mark of a particular workshop within the mint called an *officina*.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive, and they do seem to fit the coinage of some other emperors upon which star-like symbols also appear. Nor can they be excluded completely when interpreting the purpose of stars appearing on coins of Elagabalus. Yet in the view of this collector, another and more likely possibility is that the stars on Elagabalus's coins are meant to depict Halley's Comet.



Halley's Comet orbits the Sun. It is known as a periodic comet because it returns to the neighborhood of Earth every 74 to 79 years. The comet was first named in 1758 to honor the English astronomer Sir Edmond Halley (1656–1742). Halley had correctly predicted that the comet would return that year. His prediction dates from 1705, when he published calculations showing very similar orbits for comets observed in 1531, 1607, and 1682. The results led him to suggest that they were all the same object.

The photograph above shows Halley's Comet during its last visit in 1986. Inset at upper right is an enlargement of the "star" shown on coin no. 1, which appears to depict a comet with two tails. Perhaps it is Halley's.

Sources: Comet image courtesy NASA; Edmond Halley (mezzotint, 1722) by John Faber, Jr., published by John Bowles, after Thomas Murray © National Portrait Gallery, London.

### IS IT HALLEY'S?



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2. *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 221–2 CE; 19 mm, 2.93 g. RIC 88, Thirion 258 (C = common). Reverse: INVICTVS SACERDOS AVG (The Unconquered Priest, Emperor); Elagabalus standing front, head left, sacrificing out of patera over lighted altar, holding club or branch and recumbent bull behind altar; star in field left. Very Fine. Ex Elvira E. Clain-Stefanelli Collection.*

3. *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 221–2 CE; 20 mm, 3.05 g. RIC 134 variant (without “horn”), Thirion 304 (R3 = extremely rare). Reverse: SACERD DEI SOLIS ELAGAB (The Priest of El-Gabal the God of the Sun); Elagabalus standing right, sacrificing out of patera over lighted altar, holding club or rod upright; two stars, one each in fields left and right. Mint State*

4. *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 221 CE; 21 mm, 3.59 g. RIC 46 variant, Thirion 181 variant (R2 = very rare). Reverse: PM TR P IIII COS III P P (Chief Priest, 4th Tribunician Power, 3rd Consulship, Father of His Country); Elagabalus, standing left, sacrificing out of patera over lighted altar, holding club or branch upward; star in field left; in field right, remains of erased star. Very Fine. Ex Walter Friedrich Stöcklin Collection.*

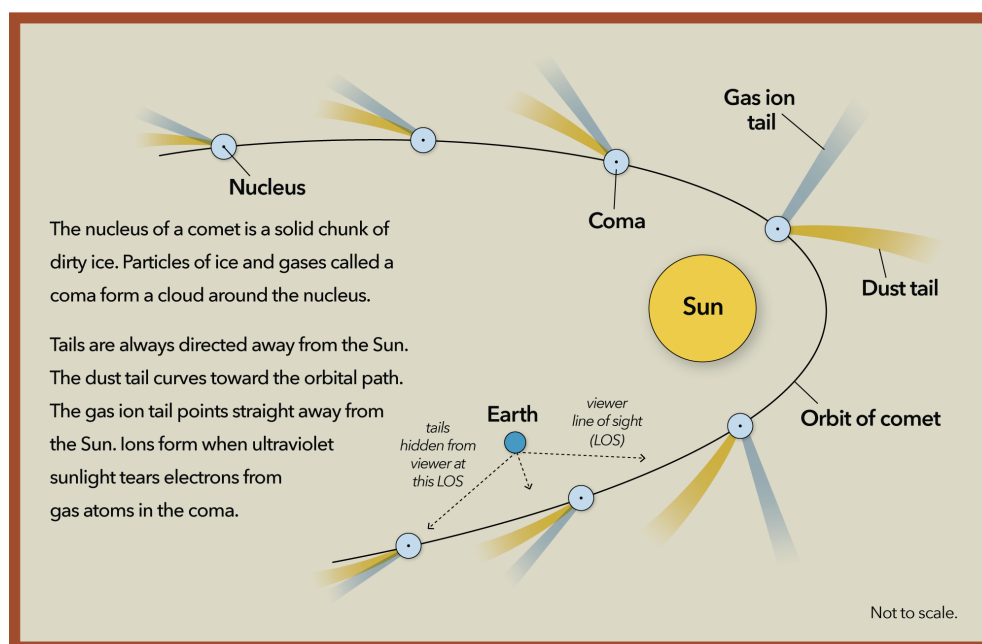
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Calculations made by English astronomer John Russell Hind in 1850 confirm an apparition of Halley’s Comet in the Spring of 218 CE. It was first recorded in China and would have been seen in Rome. The ancient peoples who witnessed this event did not know it as Halley’s.

Chinese chroniclers discovered the comet on or before 8 May, when it first became visible in the eastern sky. It appeared as a “sparkling” morning star for a period of around twenty days. Then on 30 May it was seen in the western evening sky. Similarly, Roman historian Cassius Dio wrote of two comets. He described the evening apparition as a “star” with a very long tail.

We now understand both objects to have been one and the same: the morning and evening appearances of Halley’s Comet. Seen in the morning sky farther from the Earth and Sun, the comet would have appeared dimmer with a shorter tail. The tail may have also been hidden from view as it angled away from Earth. This would have given the comet a star-like appearance. Halley’s was closest to Earth and brightest when it reappeared in the evening sky, this time with a spectacular tail.

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The shape of a comet changes depending on its position along the orbital path and its distance from the Sun. The closer to the Sun, the longer the tails. Tails that angle away from the Earth seem shortened or invisible to earthbound viewers.

Sources: Adapted from <http://www.thestargarden.co.uk/History-of-comets.html>, original image by NASA, modified by Helen Klus.

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### HALLEY'S ROLE IN ELAGABALUS'S RISE TO POWER

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**5.** Elagabalus, bronze as. Rome, 220 CE; 26 mm, 10.85 g. RIC 310, Thirion 157 (R3 = extremely rare). Reverse: *P M TR P III COS III P P / S C* (Chief Priest, 3rd Tribunician Power, 3rd Consulship, Father of His Country / by Senatorial Decree); Elagabalus in slow quadriga left, holding branch and scepter; star in field left. Very Fine.

**6.** Elagabalus, bronze sesterce. Rome, 220 CE; 31 mm, 24.19 g. RIC 300, Thirion 163 (R = rare). Reverse: *P M TR P III COS III P P / S C* (Chief Priest, 3rd Tribunician Power, 3rd Consulship, Father of His Country / by Senatorial Decree); Sol advancing left, raising right hand, holding whip in left; star in field left. Very Fine. Ex Robert O. Ebert Collection.

**7.** Elagabalus, bronze as. Rome, 218–222 CE; 28 mm, 11.66 g. RIC 365, Thirion 294 (R2 = very rare). Reverse: *MVNIFICENTIA AVG / S C* (The Generosity of the Emperor / by Senatorial Decree); elephant walking right, star above. Extra Fine, perhaps the finest known example. Ex Hannelore Scheiner Collection; ex Rodolfo Ratto Sale, 8 February 1928, lot 3607. Plate coin no. 294 in Thirion, 1968.

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In ancient times, comets were thought to portend calamitous events and the fall of rulers. According to Dio, the comet of 218 CE caused “terrible alarm” when it was seen in Rome. He read it as an omen signaling a celestial call to action for the overthrow of the Emperor Macrinus (217–8).

Macrinus had gained the throne after having allegedly arranged the assassination of Emperor Caracalla (197–217). The apparition of Halley’s Comet might have helped to embolden Caracalla’s aunt, Julia Maesa, to stage a coup on behalf of her grandson Elagabalus, who was Caracalla’s cousin. On 8 June 218, nearly one month to the day after the comet was first observed, Roman forces loyal

to Elagabalus defeated Macrinus at the Battle of Antioch. Elagabalus may thus have considered the comet of 218 to have been instrumental in facilitating his rise to power.

### SYMBOLS OF THE SUN GOD



Sources: Kronk, Gary W. 1999. *Cometography: Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Scarre, Chris. 1995. *Chronicle of the Roman Emperors*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Elagabalus was born in the city of Emesa in the Roman province of Syria. As emperor he held the office of *Pontifex Maximus*, or chief priest of the Roman religion. But he was also chief priest of the Emesene cult of the sun god El-Gabal, from which his nickname is derived. When he arrived in Rome from Syria, he brought with him a conical black meteorite. This stone was the sacred symbol of El-Gabal. So fervently did Elagabalus worship his Syrian sun god that he often neglected the traditional duties of emperor. According to Dio, the emperor elevated El-Gabal to the position of chief Roman god, “even before Jupiter himself.”

Just as Elagabalus revered the sacred meteorite as a symbol of his Emesene sun god, he may have also venerated the apparition of the comet. According to the cosmology of the time, both the Sun and comets were made up of burning stones. Sometimes these “thunderstones” were hurled by angry gods, landing on the ground as meteorites. It thus seems likely that Elagabalus would have interpreted the apparition of Halley’s Comet, which ushered in his reign, as another aspect of his god. Perhaps Elagabalus would have viewed the comet as the source of the sacred stone, returned

to bestow favor upon him while also condemning Macrinus.

Elagabalus struck coins in Syria and other Eastern provinces bearing images of the sacred meteorite. But for coinage produced in Rome, the more conservative choice would have been to denote the comet using a star motif. This symbol would have seemed more familiar to the Roman populace, who themselves had firsthand experience of the comet and may have agreed upon its meaning.

## CONCLUSION

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**8.** *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 221 CE; 18 mm, 2.78 g. RIC 51, Thirion 185 (R = rare). Reverse: P M TR P IIII COS III P P (Chief Priest, 4th Tribunician Power, 3rd Consulship, Father of His Country); Elagabalus, standing left, sacrificing out of patera over lighted altar, holding club or branch upward; before him and placed between the altar and the emperor, a standard; behind him a decorated spear; star in field left. Extra Fine.*

**9.** *Elagabalus for his first wife, Julia Paula, silver denarius. Rome, 219–20 CE; 20 mm, 2.78 g. RIC 211, Thirion 452 (AR = scarce). Reverse: CONCORDIA (Harmony); Concordia seated left, holding patera; star in field left. Extra Fine.*

**10.** *Elagabalus, silver denarius. Rome, 220–2 CE; 19 mm, 3.12 g. RIC 107, Thirion 271 (C = common). Reverse: LIBERTAS AVG (The Freedom of the Emperor); Liberty standing left, holding cap (pileus), and scepter or rod (vindicta); star in field right. Near Mint State.*

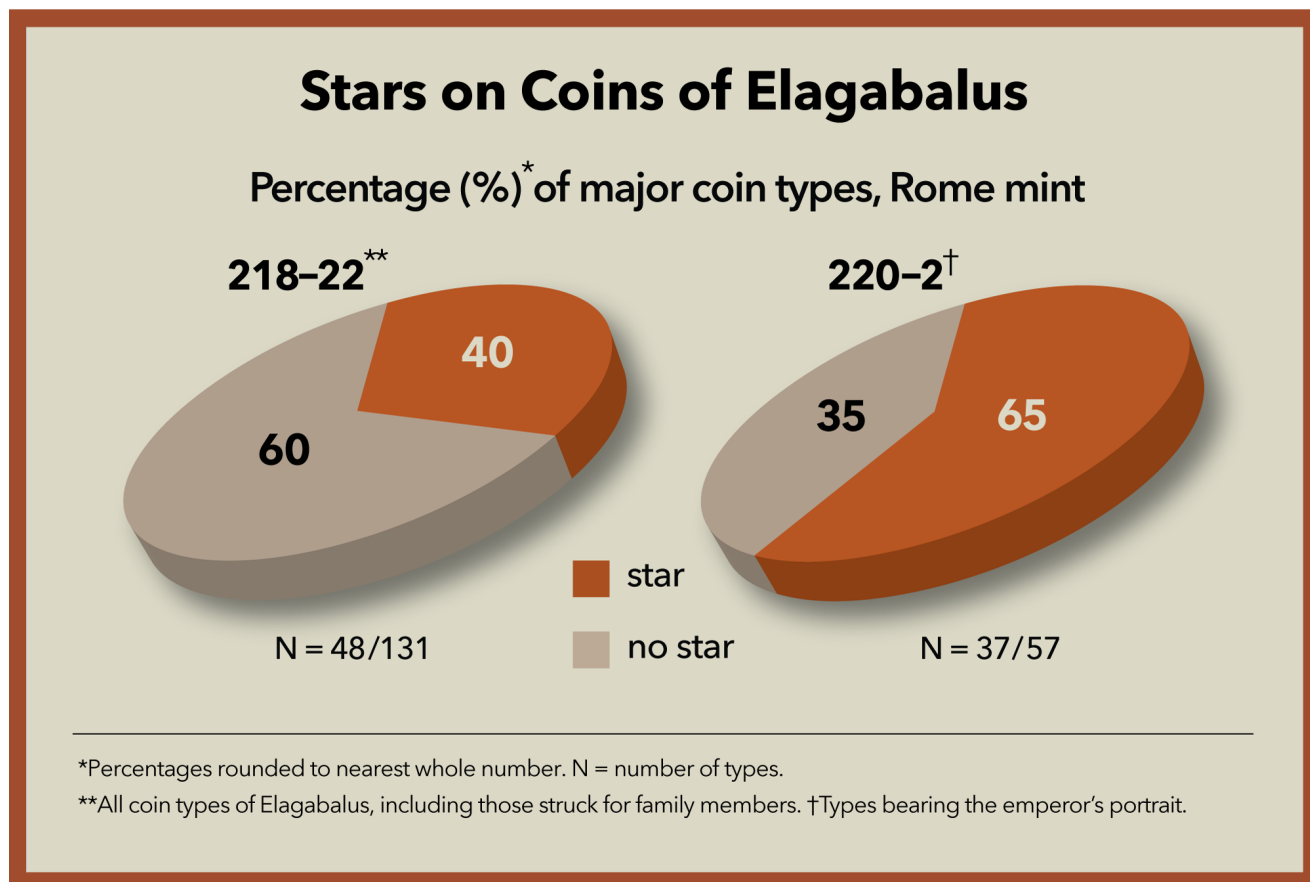
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Stars, often with elongated tails, appear on several design types showing the emperor dressed in exotic Eastern garb and sacrificing over an altar (nos. 1–4, 8). Stars also appear on many other design types, such as those showing the Roman deity Sol (6). They are often shown alongside personifications of concepts such as harmony and freedom (9–10), and on types commemorating events such as games and the emperor's arrival (5, 7). If the stars on Elagabalus's coinage do in fact show Halley's Comet, it is well represented on all denominations.

Most collectors, dealers, and scholars persist in following the standard numismatic references, which invariably describe these symbols as stars. In a poetic sense they are correct. Indeed, the ancients

themselves, lacking better descriptors, used the word *star* to refer to a variety of celestial bodies. Planets were wandering stars. Meteors were shooting stars. Comets were bearded stars, hairy stars, or broom stars.

Some of these terms remain in common usage today, but we now know that none of the objects to which they refer can be scientifically classified as stars. It is time for us to revise our understanding of the meaning of the star-like symbols appearing on coins of Elagabalus. The historical record, astronomical data, and an examination of the coins themselves all combine to point to the apparition of Halley's Comet in 218 CE.



*Elagabalus (218–22 CE) reportedly elevated the Syrian sun god El-Gabal to chief Roman god in 220. This coincides with the greater frequency with which stars appear on coins minted at Rome from 220–2. Stars are especially abundant on types bearing the emperor's portrait on the obverse. If the stars do indeed represent Halley's Comet, a connection is suggested between it, the status of the god, and the emperor's claim to power.*

Source: Thirion, Marcel. 1968. *Le Monnayage d'Élagabale (218–222)*. Brussels: J. De Mey.

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