

## THE SEXUAL HABITS OF CARACALLA: RUMOUR, GOSSIP, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY\*

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*Abstract.* This paper examines two divergent traditions in Roman historiography about the sexual relationships of the emperor Caracalla. The first is that he had an affair with his mother, Julia Domna; the second is that he became impotent and indulged his desires with men. This article locates these two traditions in contemporary rumour and gossip about Caracalla, a young emperor who remained unmarried and childless throughout his sole reign. It ascribes their subsequent development and embellishment in historical and biographical accounts of Caracalla's reign to popular conceptions of tyrannical young emperors, and in the case of Cassius Dio, to his aim of subverting Caracalla's own public image.

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*Keywords:* Caracalla, Julia Domna, Cassius Dio, Herodian, *Historia Augusta*, imperial ideology

### I. Introduction

There are two main traditions about the sexual habits of the emperor Caracalla in the extant historical accounts of his reign. The first is that he had an incestuous relationship with his mother, Julia Domna. This appears in Herodian's *History After the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, in which Domna is mockingly called 'Jocasta' by the Alexandrians during the emperor's visit to the city. The theme receives more detailed embellishment in the later Latin tradition, represented by the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor, and Eutropius (among others). In these sources, Caracalla is said to have actually married Domna, who is described as his stepmother, rather than his mother. The second tradition, which appears in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, is quite different. Dio reports that Caracalla embarked on numerous adulterous affairs, and even debauched a Vestal Virgin early in his reign. But soon after he became impotent, and instead found sexual gratification in the company of male courtiers, with whom, it is implied, he played the passive role in homosexual acts. The aim of this article is to explain the origin and development of these two quite different historical traditions about the sexual habits of the emperor Caracalla and to examine the role they play in narratives of his reign.

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## II. An Alexandrian Insult

Caracalla was only twenty-three years old when he murdered his brother Geta and assumed sole rule in December 211.<sup>1</sup> He spent the majority of his reign outside Rome, departing the city in late 212 or early 213 for a campaign against the Alamanni on the Rhine, for which he claimed the title *Germanicus Maximus*.<sup>2</sup> After a rocky—and near fatal—crossing of the Hellespont, the emperor and his court established themselves at Nicomedia in Bithynia during the winter of 213/4.<sup>3</sup> Caracalla's mother, Julia Domna, accompanied her son on his provincial tour. There is only circumstantial evidence for her presence in Germany, but she was certainly at court in Nicomedia, and later resided at Antioch in 216.<sup>4</sup> Julia Domna occupied a prominent place within the peripatetic imperial court. Caracalla assigned her the task of managing his correspondence in both Greek and Latin, either placing her above the *ab epistulis Graecis* and *ab epistulis Latinis*, or replacing them altogether.<sup>5</sup> The emperor included Domna's name alongside his own and the army in his letters to the senate.<sup>6</sup> There was a standard epistolary formula in which emperors stated that they and their army were in good health, and expressed the hope that the senate was likewise well.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of the emperor's mother in such a greeting was a public statement of her symbolic importance to the empire.<sup>8</sup> Julia Domna staged her own daily *salutationes* and invited a number of leading philosophers and intellectuals to her court.<sup>9</sup> Several of Domna's relatives from the Syrian branch of the Severan

<sup>1</sup> Kienast (1996) 162, 166. All dates are AD.

<sup>2</sup> Halfmann (1986) 223; Campbell (2005) 18.

<sup>3</sup> It used to be thought that Caracalla spent the winter of 214/5 in Nicomedia (e.g. Halfmann (1986) 224; Kienast (1996) 162), but it is now clear that the sojourn should be dated to the previous year on the basis of the *Acta* of the Arval Brethren. See Letta (1994); Scheid (1998) 288–9. Caracalla also does not seem to have visited Dacia, as demonstrated by Kovács (2012) and Opreanu (2015), which allows for his more rapid progress to Asia Minor.

<sup>4</sup> Levick (2007) 101–2.

<sup>5</sup> Dio 78(77).18.2–3, 79(78).4.2–3; Levick (2007) 95–6.

<sup>6</sup> Dio 78(77).18.2. The surviving official letters of Caracalla bear his name and titles only (e.g. *IG XII* 5.1, 658 = Oliver no. 258; *P. Giss.* 40 = Oliver no. 260; *IGRR IV* 1619 = Oliver no. 263). But this does not mean Dio has erred, since he explicitly speaks of correspondence with the senate, not with provincial communities.

<sup>7</sup> For examples, see Dio 69.14.3 (a reference to Hadrian not including the formula after the Jewish war); *CIL VI* 40776 (letter of Constantine with the formula).

<sup>8</sup> Langford (2013) 21–2 notes that Caracalla would not have wanted to publicly emphasise any real political power or influence on his mother's part.

<sup>9</sup> Dio 76(75).15.7 (during Severus' reign), 78(77).18.3 (under Caracalla); Phil. *VS* 622. Bowersock (1969) 101–10 shows that intellectuals certainly did flock to Domna's court, though there was no fixed 'circle', and that previous attempts to associate every luminary of the Severan age with the Augusta were untenable. Whitmarsh (2007) 32–4 likewise argues

family joined the imperial retinue, including her sister, Julia Maesa, and Maesa's husband, Julius Avitus Alexianus, who was one of Caracalla's *comites*.<sup>10</sup> Maesa's daughter Julia Soaemias Bassiana, and her young son, Varius Avitus (the future emperor Elagabalus), were also among the party.<sup>11</sup> Julia Domna therefore had an official and visible presence at Caracalla's court throughout his sole reign. One would have to go back as far as Nero and Agrippina to find a living mother of an emperor occupying such a prominent position.

The imperial court arrived in Alexandria at the end of 215, staying until March/April the following year.<sup>12</sup> It was to be a disastrous visit, as Caracalla showed no mercy in punishing members of the rioting Alexandrian populace.<sup>13</sup> We are not specifically concerned here with the riot and its aftermath, but with the insults about Caracalla which had been circulating in Alexandria for several years and which had reached the emperor's ears. Cassius Dio and Herodian both agree that he was criticised for the murder of his brother Geta, which would have been common knowledge in Egypt, not least as a result of the thorough *damnatio memoriae* which had been ordered.<sup>14</sup> Dio—here the version in Xiphilinus' *Epitome*—says that the Alexandrians also mocked Caracalla 'on account of other reasons' (*ἐπί τε τοῖς ἄλλοις*), but does not provide details. Herodian, on the other hand, is much more specific: the Alexandrians derided the emperor for his attempt to emulate Alexander and Achilles, since he was much smaller than they were, and for his relationship with his mother.<sup>15</sup> In particular, their jests included referring to the emperor's mother, Julia Domna, as Jocasta, the Queen of Thebes who was infamous for her sexual relationship with her son Oedipus, as well as bearing him two warring sons, Eteocles and Polynices. The nickname therefore had an effective double meaning, mocking the discordant relationship between Caracalla and

against terms such as a 'salon' or 'coterie' to describe the relationship between Domna and intellectuals who attended court.

<sup>10</sup> Maesa: Dio 79(78).30.3; Herodian 5.3.2. Alexianus: Dio 79(78).30.4; *AE* 1921, 604 = 1963, 42, with Halfmann (1982) 219–25; Icks (2011) 56.

<sup>11</sup> *IGRR* IV 1287 shows that Varius Avitus had visited Thyateira when Caracalla was emperor (De Arrizabalaga y Prado (2010) 183–91; Icks (2011) 58–9). For Soaemias, see Levick (2007) 93; Icks (2011) 57. Her husband, the equestrian procurator Sex. Varius Marcellus, had died in Italy not long before (*CIL* X 6569 = *ILS* 498).

<sup>12</sup> Halfmann (1986) 225, 229; Harker (2008) 133.

<sup>13</sup> Dio 78(77).22.1–23.4; Herodian 4.9.1–8; *HA Cara.* 6.2–3; Harker (2008) 133–8.

<sup>14</sup> Dio 78(77).22.1; Herodian 4.9.2. For the *damnatio memoriae* of Geta in Egypt, which far outstrips those of other third-century emperors, see De Jong (2007) 99–100.

<sup>15</sup> Herodian 4.9.3. *HA Cara.* 6.1–3 does not record any insults against the emperor.

Geta, while also insinuating that Caracalla and Domna were lovers.<sup>16</sup> There may yet have been a third aspect to the Jocasta jibe, since Caracalla was rumoured to have been planning to murder Septimius Severus, just as Oedipus had (unknowingly) killed his father Laius.<sup>17</sup> The Alexandrians were known for their freedom of speech when it came to criticising Roman emperors, as seen in the popular literature known as the *Acta Alexandrinorum* and anecdotes about Vespasian's time in Egypt.<sup>18</sup> A good emperor, however, was supposed to bear such jibes with equanimity—something which Caracalla did not do, instead being driven into a murderous rage.<sup>19</sup>

In an important article examining this incident, Marasco has convincingly argued that the insult levelled against Julia Domna, and the implied incest between mother and son, is accurately reported by Herodian and that we should take it as a genuine Alexandrian witticism.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the fact that the anecdote can be found in Herodian, who otherwise takes little interest in the emperors' sexual habits, increases its plausibility.<sup>21</sup> Marasco proposed that the Egyptian tradition of incestuous marriages, and cultural acceptance of incest in general, explains the formation of this insult in Alexandria. However, as Levick has pointed out, this is somewhat unconvincing given that the Alexandrians were actually denigrating, rather than praising, such a relationship between mother and son.<sup>22</sup> Levick was surely correct to highlight the importance of contemporary rumours about Caracalla and Domna that lie behind the characterisation of the Augusta as Jocasta, though she was agnostic about the way in which

<sup>16</sup> It could be argued that the Alexandrians were referring solely to the rivalry between Caracalla and Geta in calling Domna Jocasta, rather than implying an incestuous relationship. However, we do not know the exact content and phrasing of their witticisms, as they are only reported by Herodian. It seems difficult to imagine that the name Jocasta could be used without any implications of incest, as references can be found to the inappropriate sexual relationship in Roman literature (Seneca, *Oed.* 629–30; Statius, *Theb.* 1.234–5; Hyginus, *Fab.* 67). Fantham (2010) 500 argues, for example, that Seneca especially focuses on the incestuous elements in his tragedies. Most scholars accept that the Alexandrian insult has an incestuous meaning, including Hohl (1950) 16; Whittaker (1969) 423; Kolb (1972) 98; Levick (2007) 98.

<sup>17</sup> Mallan (2013a) 751 makes this suggestion.

<sup>18</sup> Herodian 4.9.2 specifically notes this Alexandrian characteristic. For the *Acta Alexandrinorum*, see Harker (2008). For Vespasian, Suet. *Vesp.* 19; Dio 66(65).9.2–6.

<sup>19</sup> Herodian 4.9.3.

<sup>20</sup> Marasco (1996) 119–20.

<sup>21</sup> Herodian's lack of interest in sexual matters can be seen in the striking difference between his portrayal of Elagabalus and the depiction of the emperor in Cassius Dio, as noted by Icks (2011) 105. It could, of course, be suggested that Herodian did not read any sexual innuendo into the Jocasta jibe, but that does not mean that such an implication was not in the mind of the Alexandrians.

<sup>22</sup> Marasco (1996) 121–2; Levick (2007) 195.

such rumours may have arisen.<sup>23</sup> I would like to propose that rumours about the relationship between Caracalla and his mother developed as a result of her prominence in the official public image of the regime, and the manner in which her position was interpreted by provincial audiences. In order to support this argument, we need to examine both the ways in which rumours emerge and their wider social function.

### III. The Ambiguous Relationship

Sociological and psychological studies of rumour have demonstrated that it is fundamentally an act of ‘sense making’. Rumours emerge as popular explanations for ‘ambiguous situations’ when individuals and groups either do not have good information from official channels, or do not trust, or understand, the information they are receiving.<sup>24</sup> It is proposed here that Caracalla’s unmarried and childless status, coupled with the prominent public position of his mother Julia Domna, constituted an ambiguous situation in the minds of Roman audiences. Although he was still in his early twenties at the beginning of his sole reign, Caracalla did not take a wife, though he did later make overtures towards the daughter of the Parthian king, probably in 216.<sup>25</sup> He had previously been married to Fulvia Plautilla, daughter of the praetorian prefect C. Fulvius Plautianus, between 202–5, when the *domus divina* of the Severans was at its greatest, and most felicitous, extent.<sup>26</sup> At the time, there was great hope that the union of Caracalla and Plautilla would result in a *parvulus* Antoninus playing in the imperial halls.<sup>27</sup> However, such cozy dynastic domesticity was not to be. In 205, Plautianus fell from power and Caracalla divorced Plautilla, who was exiled to the island of Lipara. She lived there unmolested until Car-

<sup>23</sup> Levick (2007) 98–9.

<sup>24</sup> Allport and Postman (1947) 2, 47; Shibutani (1966) 17, 23–4; Di Fonzo and Bordia (2007) 13–15, 113. One might justly ask if it would be more appropriate to speak of ‘gossip’ rather than ‘rumour’ in the case of Caracalla and Domna. Sociologists do distinguish between the two phenomena, with gossip defined as ‘evaluative social talk about individuals’ (Di Fonzo and Bordia (2007) 19) which is ‘restricted to small local groups’ (Shibutani (1966) 41), and generally lacks the ‘sense making’ imperative which results in the emergence of rumour. We will return to this issue in Section V of the paper.

<sup>25</sup> Dio 79(78).1.1; Herodian 4.10.1–11.1. The precise date of the proposal is unknown, but both Dio and Herodian place it after the Alexandrian incident, so it probably occurred in 216.

<sup>26</sup> *CIL* VI 220, 226, 1074; *CIL* XI 8050; *AE* 1944, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Note the minting of coins with reverse legends such as PROPAGO IMPERI (*RIC* IV.1 Plautilla 362, 578A) and PIETAS AVGG depicting *Pietas* or Plautilla with a child (*RIC* IV.1 Plautilla 367, 578).

acalla ordered her execution in 211, bringing her unhappy life to a brutal conclusion.<sup>28</sup> Caracalla was clearly an emperor worried about imperial rivals: he executed, or drove to suicide, various surviving members of the Antonine family, the son of the emperor Pertinax, and even his own Severan relatives.<sup>29</sup> Yet he did not take any serious steps to remedy the situation by marrying and producing his own heir to carry on the Severan line. Instead, the public image of Caracalla's regime heavily featured the emperor's mother in a way that the Roman world had not seen since the prominence of Agrippina on official coinage produced in the early years of Nero's reign.<sup>30</sup>

While Septimius Severus was alive, Domna had been formally included as part of the imperial household, the *domus divina*, alongside her husband and two sons.<sup>31</sup> After 211, the *domus divina* consisted solely of Caracalla and Domna, with her names and titles usually following those of her son.<sup>32</sup> Domna had previously been awarded the titles *mater Augusti* and *mater castrorum*, but from 211 was also styled *mater senatus* and *mater patriae*.<sup>33</sup> The mint at Rome struck silver coinage in Domna's name at approximately the same rate as under Severus, indicating that one *officina* continued to be devoted to producing her coins.<sup>34</sup> But Domna's prominence on the coinage was enhanced by the fact that her coins now gave her the epithets *Pia Felix*. She was the first imperial woman to receive such titles, with the feminine adjectives clearly designed to emulate Caracalla's own *Pius Felix*.<sup>35</sup> Further unprecedented acts of recognition soon

<sup>28</sup> Dio 77(76).6.3, 78(77).1.1.

<sup>29</sup> Davenport (2012) 811–12. To my earlier list, we should add Cornificia, daughter of Marcus Aurelius, whom Caracalla drove to suicide (Dio 78(77).16.6a). Such paranoia seems to have been common among young emperors who were eager to enforce their authority, such as Nero (Suet. *Nero* 35.4).

<sup>30</sup> For the public image of Agrippina on imperial coinage under Nero, see Ginsburg (2006) 72–4. The mint at Rome ceased to produce coins for Agrippina after 56 (Hekster (2015) 132). There was significant variation in the presence of Agrippina on coins produced at provincial mints (Hekster et al. (2014) 13–16).

<sup>31</sup> For depictions of the Severan *domus divina* in different media, see Lichtenberger (2011) 339–50.

<sup>32</sup> Kettenhofen (1979) 135–8, 141. Examples from Caracalla's reign include: *AE* 1913, 46; *AE* 1956, 144; *AE* 1998, 1538.

<sup>33</sup> The dating of these additional titles of *mater senatus* and *mater patriae* has been the subject of significant controversy. See Kettenhofen (1979) 86–97, who argues they were awarded while Severus was still alive, while Langford (2013) 134–6, whom I follow here, dates their conferral between February and December 211. As Rowan (2011) 254 points out, *mater senatus* and *mater patriae* only occur on coinage minted after Severus' death, which is surely a significant development in the official presentation of the Augusta's public image.

<sup>34</sup> Rowan (2011) 246–8.

<sup>35</sup> Kettenhofen (1979) 237; Callu (2000) 195–6; Rowan (2011) 254. She also receives the epithets on some inscriptions (*AE* 1912, 182; *CIL* VIII 1483, 1798).

followed. The Arval Brethren incorporated Domna into their formal *acclamations* for the emperor's health and well-being. After first exalting Caracalla himself, they chanted:

Augusta! We wish good fortune for Iulia Augusta, mother of the Augustus! It is because of you, Augusta, that we behold the Augustus! May the gods keep you safe forever, Augusta! Augustus!<sup>36</sup>

The Arval Brethren also included Domna in their formal thanksgiving for Caracalla's German campaign, sacrificing to Juno Regina on her behalf.<sup>37</sup> The senatorial priesthood evidently regarded it as important to recognise the emperor's mother in their rituals, probably because of the honours that the state had accorded to her, and on account of the fact that she was travelling with Caracalla in the imperial retinue. As Levick has pointed out, the cumulative effect of these titles and honours marked out Domna as the female counterpart to her son, creating a 'royal pair'.<sup>38</sup> Male–female pairings offered a satisfying balance to imperial ideology, but it was far more usual for the Augustus and Augusta to be husband and wife, rather than son and mother.

The recognition of Domna as the female counterpart to her son was not restricted to official coinage, titles, and religious rituals in Rome, but can be found throughout the empire. Coins minted at Marcianopolis in Moesia and Smyrna in Ionia featured facing busts of Caracalla and Domna on the obverse, a style which recalls imperial coins of Nero and Agrippina.<sup>39</sup> The names and titles of the emperor and his mother appear in the ablative case as part of dating formulas on milestones in Africa. Domna had sometimes been listed with her husband Severus in this fashion in the eastern provinces, but now, for the first time, she was joined together with her son, as if they constituted a new imperial pair.<sup>40</sup> It is especially interesting that the emperor and his mother were often recognised together in commemoration of Caracalla's Alamannic campaign. This can be seen on an inscribed dedication to the pair from Germania Superior, erected 'on account of the German victory' (*ob victoriam | Germanicam*).<sup>41</sup> A Temple of *Victoria Germanica* at Thugga in Africa Proconsularis

<sup>36</sup> *Aug(usta)! Iuliae Aug(ustae) matri Aug(usti) feliciter! ex te, Aug(usta), Aug(ustum) videmus! d(i) t(e) s(ervent) in perpetuo, Aug(usta)! Aug(uste)!* (Scheid (1998) 99a, l. 19). See Williams (1902) 287–9.

<sup>37</sup> Scheid (1998) 99a, ll. 20–9; Williams (1902) 289–90; Levick (2007) 68.

<sup>38</sup> Levick (2007) 95.

<sup>39</sup> Lichtenberger (2011) 341, 393–4.

<sup>40</sup> Williams (1902) 292; Kettenhofen (1979) 97. For examples, see *CIL* VIII 2369, 2370, 10253; *AE* 1981, 903.

<sup>41</sup> *CIL* XIII 6459. The dedicator is unfortunately not specified in the inscription. This may suggest that Domna was actually present with her son during the campaign against the

was dedicated to Caracalla, Domna, and the entire *domus divina*, while a triumphal arch erected at Volubilis under the auspices of the provincial governor featured statues of the emperor and his mother.<sup>42</sup> Some pieces of art produced in the 210s depict Domna as the guarantor of her son's victories, either as Victoria or Venus Victrix.<sup>43</sup> The first of these is a sardonyx cameo now in Berlin, which shows Domna as Victoria, crowning Caracalla with a wreath as they stand in a triumphal chariot carried aloft by eagles.<sup>44</sup> Such gems occupy an ambiguous place in the study of imperial art: they may have been commissioned by the imperial family as gifts for loyal courtiers, or they may have been produced at the behest of aristocrats themselves.<sup>45</sup> The second piece of art which demands our attention is a provincial relief of unknown provenance, now in Warsaw. It shows Domna in the guise of Venus Victrix crowning Caracalla, who stands triumphant with two captive barbarians at his feet.<sup>46</sup> The style of the relief marks it out as a provincial, rather than imperial, commission, and it is unparalleled on any contemporary official imagery promoted by Caracalla's regime.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the monument clearly recalls a much earlier, provincial image, that of Agrippina crowning Nero on the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias.<sup>48</sup>

This numismatic, epigraphic and artistic evidence demonstrates how Julia Domna was promoted by both the imperial administration and provincial audiences as the natural female counterpart to her son Caracalla. This was an understandable way of demonstrating the continuance of the Severan *domus divina* while the emperor remained unmarried and without issue.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, I would suggest that these representations of Caracalla and his

Alamanni, though we do not have any firm evidence for this (Williams (1902) 288; Levick (2007) 100).

<sup>42</sup> Thugga: *CIL* VIII 1483. Volubilis: *CIL* VIII 9993. See also *CIL* VIII 27773, a fragmentary inscription from Althiburos in Africa.

<sup>43</sup> Mikocki (1995) 76. Julia Domna had been depicted as the goddess Victoria during the reign of Septimius Severus on the triumphal arch in Leptis Magna and on the famous Kessel sardonyx cameo (Mikocki (1995) 216 nos. 446–7). However, this was not a dominant feature of her public image (Kettenhofen (1979) 125, 259; Lichtenberger (2011) 357–9).

<sup>44</sup> Mikocki (1995) 216 no. 440.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart (2008) 121–3. See Ginsburg (2006) 91–7 for a specific case study of the cameos of Agrippina.

<sup>46</sup> Mikocki (1995) 76, 216 no. 445. The monument was originally published by Picard (1966), who argued that it was probably created in Syria or Phoenice c. 215, prior to Caracalla's Parthian campaign, and commemorates the emperor's victories in Germany.

<sup>47</sup> For example, although Venus features prominently on Domna's coinage produced in her son's reign, it is not in her guise as Venus Victrix (Rowan (2011) 256).

<sup>48</sup> This has been noticed by several scholars, such as Mikocki (1995) 77; Levick (2007) 100; Hekster (2015) 152–3.

<sup>49</sup> Kemezis (2014) 78; Hekster (2015) 148.



mother were fundamentally ambiguous to the Roman viewer, which meant that they were susceptible to multiple interpretations. Would the Roman people not wonder, for example, why the young Caracalla was unmarried and childless?<sup>50</sup> Why was it that his mother occupied such a prominent position instead? Such questions are distinct from the rational reasons behind the public promotion of Julia Domna, which we have explored above. We are now in the realm of rumour and popular speculation. Caracalla had ascended to the purple as a member of a dynasty that had systematically promoted the imperial house as a family unit, ushering in a new felicitous age.<sup>51</sup> Yet now he himself made no serious attempt to marry and secure the continuance of the dynasty.<sup>52</sup> Such a situation was often subject to rumour and innuendo, as in the case of the unmarried young emperor Constans, who was accused of having homosexual affairs with barbarians.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Romans were always invested in the question of the imperial succession, whether that was to be achieved through blood relatives or adoption. To take only one example, the issue of

<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that rumours did often circulate about why a married emperor did not bear children, attesting to wide interest in the imperial succession. For example, there is a story reported by Zosimus (5.28) that Honorius and his first wife Maria did not conceive because Maria's mother, Serena, was concerned about her daughter being too young for intercourse and so contrived to render the emperor impotent. The fact that the relationship between Honorius and Maria produced no children before her death in 408 had implications for the balance of power at court, and particularly the influence of Maria's father, Stilicho. See McEvoy (2013) 180.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, *RIC* IV.1 (Septimius Severus) no. 175, discussed by Langford (2013) 106–7.

<sup>52</sup> It might be objected that Caracalla's unmarried and childless status would have occasioned no alarm because he could always adopt an heir. But this seems unlikely given the pronounced emphasis on family and dynastic succession under Marcus Aurelius and the purple-born Commodus (Davenport and Mallan (2014) 657). This continued under the Severan dynasty itself, as Septimius Severus was blessed with two sons who were expected to succeed him. Adoption was actually a fairly restricted phenomenon occasioned by specific political circumstances in the late first and second centuries, and even then emperors looked for heirs among their relatives (Hekster (2001); Davenport and Mallan (2014) 643–5, 651–2).

<sup>53</sup> *Aur. Vict.* 41.24; *Zos.* 2.42.1; Harries (2012) 190. Constans was not the only young emperor of the later Roman world to remain unmarried: Valentinian II had not wed by the time of his death aged twenty-one in 392. There were no rumours about his sexual proclivities (that we know of). However, by the late fourth century, the impact of Christianity on imperial ideology meant that Valentinian II's unmarried status could be interpreted as an act of pious chastity and a choice to remain devoted to his sisters (Ambrose, *De ob. Val.* 17, 38; McEvoy (2013) 108–9). The case of Valentinian II reminds us that we must examine the contemporary context of unmarried young emperors when considering reactions to their situation, as he lived in a quite different world from Caracalla. Moreover, as Meaghan McEvoy points out to me, Valentinian II's co-emperor Theodosius I would likely have preferred the young Augustus to remain without issue to prevent the emergence of rivals to his own sons.

Hadrian's heir lingered throughout his reign, and proved to be especially contentious given his execution of close family members and other *capaces imperii*.<sup>54</sup> The *Historia Augusta* scandalously suggests that when Hadrian did adopt L. Ceionius Commodus as his successor, the emperor selected him because of his good looks.<sup>55</sup>

One possible popular explanation for Caracalla's unmarried status and the prominence of Julia Domna was that the emperor and his mother were actually having an incestuous affair. This may initially seem like a bold conceptual leap, but it can be supported by studies in both art history and the sociology of rumour. Imperial art was always liable to be read in different ways, depending on the different backgrounds and perspectives of individual viewers.<sup>56</sup> Some of these interpretations were certainly subversive. Imperial statues were often targets for graffiti which lampooned, and implicitly undermined, the public image the emperors wished to foster.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, as Vout has noted, 'one of the few things that Roman emperors could not do was control the minds of their subjects'.<sup>58</sup> But why would a Roman viewer assume that Caracalla and his mother were having a sexual relationship? Qualitative and quantitative studies of rumour conducted by sociologists and psychologists have demonstrated that rumours do not develop as flights of fancy, but that they are firmly grounded in accepted social and cultural norms.<sup>59</sup> The Romans, like most people throughout history, enjoyed speculating about the sex lives of their leaders.<sup>60</sup> But more importantly, they were especially inclined to believe and circulate stories of sexual relationships and antics that may seem implausible to the modern audience. This is because emperors were larger than life figures, closer to gods and heroes than humans in the Roman imagination, as Vout has demonstrated.<sup>61</sup> If Oedipus, king of Thebes, could have sex with his mother, then it was no less plausible to the Romans that an emperor might do

<sup>54</sup> Dio 69.17.1–3; *HA Hadr.* 15.8, 23.2–8.

<sup>55</sup> *HA Hadr.* 23.10; *Ael.* 5.1. On the unsuitability of Ceionius Commodus, see Davenport and Mallan (2014) 653.

<sup>56</sup> Clarke (2003) 9–12; Stewart (2008) 123–7, though he notes that our ability to ascertain these interpretations is inevitably speculative.

<sup>57</sup> For examples, see Suet. *Aug.* 70, *Nero* 45; Dio 62(61).16.1–2a. In the poetic sphere, Ahl (1984) 91–102 argues that Statius' *Silvae* 1.1 is a deliberately subversive reading of Domitian's equestrian statue.

<sup>58</sup> Vout (2007) 37.

<sup>59</sup> Allport and Postman (1947) 60; Shibutani (1966) 65, 76–81, 128; Di Fonza and Bordia (2007) 100, 174.

<sup>60</sup> Allport and Postman (1947) 36, 178.

<sup>61</sup> Vout (2007) 4–5, 13–4. Blanshard (2010) 85–7 develops this same theme.

the same.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, rumours of incestuous relationships often attached themselves to ‘bad’ emperors.<sup>63</sup>

The only previous parallel for a mother of a young emperor occupying such a prominent public position was Agrippina in the early years of Nero’s reign. It is therefore surely no coincidence that similar incestuous stories appear about Nero and his mother.<sup>64</sup> Nero was a married man, of course, but the unprecedented prominence of his mother within the regime and its public image certainly provided sufficient grounds for rumour and speculation.<sup>65</sup> Cassius Dio explicitly says that stories of Nero and Agrippina’s scandalous liaisons reached the ears of the people of Rome, but in a piecemeal fashion that gave rise to rumour and conjecture about their relationship.<sup>66</sup> This is one of the key tenets of modern studies of rumours, namely that they emerge when accurate information and news is in short supply.<sup>67</sup> We can see, therefore, how the status, perceived influence, and public prominence of Agrippina over her son Nero, as well as stories filtering out from the imperial palace, created rumour and speculation among the populace. The Roman people deduced changes in the favour in which Agrippina was held by her son from public observations. When she emerged without her usual guard of praetorians for the first time, the people knew that the relationship between the emperor and his mother had altered significantly.<sup>68</sup> Whether rumours of incest between Agrippina and Nero circulated outside Rome is a matter of speculation. But we can say that the prominence of Agrippina on provincial coinage continued well after she stopped appearing on coins produced at the mint of Rome, so her image as the emperor’s mother would have been very familiar to provincials.<sup>69</sup> Indeed,

<sup>62</sup> Di Fonza and Bordia (2007) 90 state that a rumour that people believe to be true will circulate much more widely than one they believe to be false.

<sup>63</sup> These include stories about Caligula and his sister Drusilla (Suet. *Cal.* 24.1; Dio 59.11.1), and Domitian and his niece Julia, who is said to have been compelled to have an abortion after she fell pregnant with the emperor’s child (Suet. *Dom.* 22; Dio 67.3.2; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 4.11.6–7). Such rumours continued in the later Roman empire. For example, in 421, the level of affectionate behaviour between the adult emperor Honorius and his recently widowed sister Galla Placidia prompted lurid speculation about their relationship (Olympiodorus, frag. 38 (ed. Blockley); McEvoy (2013) 216). The famous case of Nero and Agrippina is discussed in detail in Section IV.

<sup>64</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.2; Suet. *Nero* 28; Dio 61(61).8.5; 62(61).11.3–4.

<sup>65</sup> This did not happen in the reign of Tiberius while his mother Livia was still alive, probably because Tiberius came to the throne in middle age. The prevailing narrative of their relationship was one of conflict and tension. See Barrett (2002) 146–73 on Livia under Tiberius.

<sup>66</sup> Dio 61(61).8.5.

<sup>67</sup> Shibutani (1966) 57–62.

<sup>68</sup> Dio 61(61).8.4, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ginsburg (2006) 74–9; Hekster (2015) 133–5.

Vout has suggested that the famous relief of Agrippina crowning Nero from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias may well have called to mind rumours of their sexual relationship, and was perhaps even deliberately designed to do so (though such an argument is very speculative).<sup>70</sup>

In the same vein, it is worth returning to the Warsaw relief, in which Julia Domna crowns Caracalla in the same manner as Agrippina does Nero on the Sebasteion. Domna is depicted in this relief as Venus Victrix, a goddess invested with ideas of both military and sexual conquest.<sup>71</sup> The provincial viewing public would have been used to seeing similar paired depictions of Severus and Domna as husband and wife, which were manufactured throughout his long reign. For example, a bas-relief from Luxor shows Domna as Nephthys standing beside Septimius Severus, who is depicted in the guise of Nephthys' husband Antaios.<sup>72</sup> Hekster has even suggested that the emperor in this bas-relief may be Caracalla himself, and it is quite true that it is difficult to tell precisely whether it is the father or the son who is featured.<sup>73</sup> The distinction between the two Severans may not have been clear to the provincial viewer either. Even if the relief was created while Severus was alive, the male figure could have been interpreted as Caracalla in the period 212–17, when the young emperor was so frequently depicted with his mother.<sup>74</sup> The relationship between Caracalla and Domna was potentially ambiguous on multiple levels, and required explanation in the minds of Roman audiences, just as had been the case with Nero and Agrippina. This helps us to understand why the Alexandrians mockingly derided Domna as Jocasta. The jibe not only referred to

<sup>70</sup> Vout (2007) 36.

<sup>71</sup> Vout (2007) 35.

<sup>72</sup> Mikocki (1995) 77, 215 no. 448, who interprets the male figure as Severus, as does Lichtenberger (2011) 76.

<sup>73</sup> Hekster (2015) 152.

<sup>74</sup> We must not assume that all viewers of this monument would have necessarily seen it when it was first erected for Severus and Domna: potential viewers, and interpreters, of monuments were always changing. For the theoretical basis behind such a polyvalent reading, see Clarke (2003) 40–1 on different perceptions of the Column of Trajan according to the social status of the viewer. I offer here two ancient examples of misinterpreting images. The first is a statue of a male figure at the Argive Heraion in Greece. This bore an inscription stating it represented Augustus, but which Pausanias (2.17.3) said was traditionally understood to be of Orestes. The second concerns Septimius Severus' praetorian prefect Plautianus, whose statues were bigger and more numerous than those of the emperors (Dio 76(75).14.6–7). Peter the Patrician (*Exc. Vat.* 132 = Dio 76(75)15.2a) notes that Plautianus was once even addressed in writing as a fourth Caesar.

the fractious relationship between her sons, but also emerged from the circulation of rumours that she was having a sexual relationship with Caracalla, her very own Oedipus.<sup>75</sup>

#### IV. A Second Nero

The tradition of an incestuous relationship between Caracalla and his mother Julia Domna does not only survive in the Alexandrian jibe reported by Herodian. It also figures significantly in our fourth-century Latin sources, appearing in the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, Eutropius, and Orosius.<sup>76</sup> In the works of these authors, Domna is not Caracalla's biological mother, but his stepmother, and it is not only claimed that they had a sexual affair, but that they actually married.<sup>77</sup> The way in which this relationship came about is described by the author of the *Historia Augusta* and Aurelius Victor. Their works both feature a story in which Domna accidentally-on-purpose exposes her body to Caracalla in order to seduce him.<sup>78</sup> The apothegms attributed to the emperor and his mother are nearly identical in both sources. In Victor, Caracalla looks at Domna's naked body and says, 'I would like to do so, if you'll let me' (*vellem, si liceret, uti*), to which his mother replies, 'You want to? Of course you can' (*libet? plane licet*). The *HA* preserves this basic dialogue but embellishes Domna's response. Caracalla says, 'I would like to, if you'll let me' (*vellem, si liceret*), and his mother replies, 'If you want to, you can. Don't you know that you are the emperor and that you make the laws, rather than being subject to them?' (*si libet, licet. an nescis te imperatorem esse et leges dare, non accipere?*). The basic phraseology clearly derives from a common source.<sup>79</sup> It is interesting that the *HA* places this incident in the immediate aftermath of Geta's death, with the author remarking that Caracalla 'accordingly united himself in marriage with that woman whose son he had just killed' (*siquidem*

<sup>75</sup> It could of course be pointed out that there are cases of prominent imperial mothers and unmarried emperors which did not give rise to such rumours. The most notable cases are those of Valentinian II and his mother Justina, and Valentinian III and his mother Galla Placidia in the years before his marriage to Licinia Eudoxia (McEvoy (2013) 124–5, 234–9). However, the influence of Christianity on imperial ideology meant that these young emperors were portrayed as chaste and pious figures. Being unmarried at the age of twenty-one, as in the case of Valentinian II, was merely the result of such virtues, rather than any sexual perversions (McEvoy (2013) 108). As noted earlier, the precise political context is crucial in determining how people perceived Roman emperors.

<sup>76</sup> Hohl (1950) 16; Pennella (1980) 382.

<sup>77</sup> *HA Sev.* 20.2; 21.7; *Cara.* 10.1–4; Victor, *Caes.* 21.2–3; *Epit. de Caes.* 21.5; Eutrop. 8.20; Orosius. 7.18.2.

<sup>78</sup> *HA Cara.* 10.1–4; Victor, *Caes.* 21.2–3.

<sup>79</sup> Syme (1968) 186; Mallan (2013a) 751.

*eam matrimonio sociavit cuius filium nuper occiderat*).<sup>80</sup> Hence, there is an association between the fraternal disharmony of Caracalla and Geta, and the incestuous relationship between Caracalla and Domna, similar to that found in the Alexandrians' insult. Most importantly, the author of the *HA* dates the incest to the period after December 211, during the emperor's sole reign. From this narrative, Caracalla emerges as a tyrant, while his mother appears lustful and predatory, using her sexuality to gain power over her son.<sup>81</sup>

Where did this scandalous story come from? We certainly should not presume that the author of the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor, and the other later Latin writers all independently extrapolated the incest story from the brief remark in Herodian.<sup>82</sup> Instead, the common source of this tradition is almost certainly the now-lost historical work known as the *Kaisergeschichte* (*KG*), which probably featured the original dialogue between Caracalla and Domna during the disrobing scene.<sup>83</sup> The author of the *KG* would have used the biography of Caracalla composed by the Severan consular Marius Maximus, who wrote lives of the legitimate emperors (but not usurpers) from Nerva to Elagabalus.<sup>84</sup> Maximus' biographies were still popular in the late fourth century, when Ammianus Marcellinus referred to them in disparaging terms.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the consular biographer seems to have had 'a penchant for gossip and scandalous anecdote', to use Barnes' words, which would have ensured their wide appeal.<sup>86</sup> Scholars are divided as to whether the *HA*'s main source for its early biographies was Marius Maximus or a putative *Ignotus*, though even those who argue for the *Ignotus* accept that the *HA* used Maximus in some form.<sup>87</sup> The specifics of that debate are largely tangential to the present argument, however. As far as this paper is concerned, the crucial point is that the *KG* employed Maximus' biography of Caracalla, and that his work underlies our Latin tradition of incest.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Syme, who argued that *Ignotus* was the main source for the *HA*'s biography of Caracalla, suggested that it was Maximus who was

<sup>80</sup> *HA Cara.* 10.4.

<sup>81</sup> Penella (1980) 382; Mallan (2013a) 750.

<sup>82</sup> The author of the *HA* certainly knew, read, and used Herodian (Syme (1968) 201), but we should not extend this knowledge to the Latin epitomators.

<sup>83</sup> The *KG* as the common source is widely accepted: Hohl (1950) 16; Kettenhofen (1979) 59–61; Penella (1980) 383; Bird (1994) 113; Marasco (1996) 127–8.

<sup>84</sup> For Marius Maximus' life, career, and work, see Syme (1971) 45–9, 113–43; Birley (1997).

<sup>85</sup> *Amm.* 28.4.14. See also the *HA*'s own description of Maximus' work in *Quad. Tyr.* 1.1–2.

<sup>86</sup> Barnes (1978) 102.

<sup>87</sup> Birley (1997) 2744–8 has argued that Marius Maximus was the *HA*'s main source for the emperor's reign. For the *Ignotus*, see Syme (1968) 90–2; (1971) 45–9; Barnes (1978) 102.

<sup>88</sup> Birley (1997) 2715–18.

primarily responsible for the transmission of the anecdotes about the emperor's sexual relationship with his mother.<sup>89</sup> If this *Quellenforschung* is accepted, then Marius Maximus' biography of Caracalla serves as our second contemporary attestation of the incestuous tradition.<sup>90</sup>

Marius Maximus moved in the highest circles of the imperial court and administration. In particular, he was proconsul of Asia for two consecutive years in 214/6, and would have begun his term in office during Caracalla's journey through the province.<sup>91</sup> Maximus may therefore have become aware of gossip at court about the emperor and his mother during this period.<sup>92</sup> It is difficult to separate the elements of the story that were originally present in Marius Maximus from those that developed subsequently. However, we can say that the story of Domna exposing herself, which is found in the *HA* and Aurelius Victor, clearly derives from the same source. It is very similar to a scene in Tacitus' *Annals* in which Agrippina appears before the inebriated Nero, 'gussied up and ready for incest' (*comptam in incesto paratam*).<sup>93</sup> The story itself did not originate with Tacitus, but circulated in earlier histories written by Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus, among others, indicating that it derived from contemporary rumours about the pair.<sup>94</sup> Nero and Agrippina were the obvious precursors to which an author seeking to depict an incestuous relationship between the emperor and his mother would turn.<sup>95</sup> The author of the *HA* certainly developed the allusion to Nero and Agrippina further in his own biographies by including the allegation that Caracalla wanted to murder Domna, a story not repeated in other sources.<sup>96</sup> The fiction that Domna was actually Caracalla's stepmother is an embellishment of the fact that she was

<sup>89</sup> Syme (1968) 34, 91; (1971) 123. The description of Domna as Caracalla's stepmother cannot have come from Marius Maximus, however, and must be a later interpolation. This is discussed further below.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Kolb (1972) 98, who suggests Herodian could have been the source for this Latin tradition, which seems unlikely, given that Maximus was writing before Herodian.

<sup>91</sup> Barnes (1986); Birley (1997) 2694. *IGRR* IV 1287, dated to 215, proves that emperor and proconsul were in the province at the same time. Unfortunately, Marius Maximus is conspicuously absent at this point in the extant or epitomized portions of Cassius Dio's narrative, only surfacing under Macrinus when he becomes *praefectus urbi*.

<sup>92</sup> Mallan (2013a) 751. The circulation and function of gossip is discussed further in Section V of this paper.

<sup>93</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.2.1.

<sup>94</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.2.2 notes that Fabius Rusticus argued that Nero made the approach, rather than Agrippina, but says that most writers agree with Cluvius Rufus that Agrippina was the initiator.

<sup>95</sup> Penella (1980) 383; Marasco (1996) 128. For the stories about Agrippina and incest, particularly in Tacitus' *Annals*, see Ginsburg (2006) 120–32.

<sup>96</sup> Penella (1980) 383; *HA Cara.* 3.3, *Geta* 7.3.

Septimius Severus' second wife.<sup>97</sup> There was also a rich Graeco-Roman tradition about inappropriate relationships between wicked stepmothers and their stepsons upon which the *KG*, or any other of our authors, could have drawn.<sup>98</sup> By reconfiguring Caracalla as Julia Domna's stepson, their relationship emerges as a parallel to Hippolytus and Phaedra, rather than Oedipus and Jocasta. The marriage between Caracalla and Domna is something that would not have been plausible to Marius Maximus' readers, and can be safely ascribed to later embellishment. But the fact that the incest tradition can be ultimately traced back to Marius Maximus, a senatorial contemporary of Caracalla, suggests that stories about the young emperor's relationship with his mother were not confined to Alexandria, but probably circulated in elite circles as well.

### V. Undermining the *Sophron* Emperor

There is a second, completely different, tradition about Caracalla's sexual behaviour which features in the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio. The surviving portions of Dio's account of Caracalla's reign, either preserved in the Constantinian excerpts or in epitomised form by Xiphilinus, contain no explicit or implicit insinuations about an incestuous relationship between Caracalla and Julia Domna.<sup>99</sup> This is especially striking because Dio was a senatorial coeval of Marius Maximus, whose life of Caracalla was probably the source for the later Latin tradition. Indeed, just as Maximus would have spent time in the imperial retinue during his tenure of the proconsulship of Asia in 214/6, Dio was himself present at Caracalla's court during its sojourn at Nicomedia in the winter of 213/4.<sup>100</sup> This means that both Maximus and Dio would have both been aware of gossip circulating at court. In the *Roman History*, however, there is no hint of a sexual affair between Caracalla and Domna, and the emperor and his mother are portrayed as continually at loggerheads, as he ignores her sound administrative counsel.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, as Mallan has demonstrated, Dio passes no significant moral or ethical judgement on Domna's character, nor does he suggest unbecoming sexual behaviour, as with other imperial women.<sup>102</sup> As we have already noted, Xiphilinus' *Epitome* of Dio has the people

<sup>97</sup> Penella (1980) 382.

<sup>98</sup> Levick (2007) 98. For the wicked stepmother trope, see Watson (1995), and Ginsburg (2006) 107–12 on the application of such a stereotype to Agrippina.

<sup>99</sup> This is particularly noticeable given Dio's taste for Euripidean language and allusions, as highlighted by Moscovich (2003).

<sup>100</sup> Dio 78(77).17.1–18.1.

<sup>101</sup> Mallan (2013a) 746–7.

<sup>102</sup> Mallan (2013a) 750 and *passim*.



of Alexandria criticising the emperor for the murder of his brother and ‘on account of other reasons’ (ἐπί τε τοῖς ἄλλοις).<sup>103</sup> The reference to incest and the Jocasta jibe could potentially have been omitted by the Byzantine epitomator.<sup>104</sup> However, this seems unlikely, given that Dio’s own narrative of Caracalla’s sexual proclivities is virtually irreconcilable with the incest tradition. It is to this different account to which we now turn.

Dio reports that Caracalla and his brother Geta were renowned for their riotous and debauched behaviour with women while their father was still alive.<sup>105</sup> Caracalla embarked on numerous liaisons with other men’s wives, leading Dio to describe him as ‘the most adulterous of men’ (μοιχικώτατος ... ἀνδρῶν).<sup>106</sup> After becoming emperor, he raped the Vestal Virgin Clodia Laeta, later executing her together with three other priestesses—although Laeta protested to the end that her virginity remained intact.<sup>107</sup> The debauching of women (especially sacred women like Vestal Virgins) was typical invective levelled against ‘bad emperors’ and tyrants in general, though we have no particular reason to disbelieve that the violation and subsequent executions took place.<sup>108</sup> The date of Caracalla’s deflowering of Laeta is unknown, but must have taken place before he departed Rome in late 212 or early 213, after which point the Vestals were presumably safe from his clutches.<sup>109</sup> Dio reports such heterosexual debauchery was only possible for a limited period, however:

For afterwards his power for sexual acts became completely ineffective. And so, it was said that he performed obscene acts (αἰσχουργεῖν) in a different fashion, and in emulation of him, so did other men of similar habits. They not only conceded that they did things such as this, but even asserted that they did them for the well-being of the emperor.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Dio 78(77).22.1.

<sup>104</sup> This is suggested by Kolb (1972) 98. On Xiphilinus’ method of adapting Dio’s narrative, see Mallan (2013b).

<sup>105</sup> Dio 77(76).7.1.

<sup>106</sup> Dio 78(77).16.4. This is preserved in *Exc. Val.* 384, but is not in Xiphilinus.

<sup>107</sup> Dio 78(77).16.1, 2<sup>2</sup>–4.

<sup>108</sup> For the sexual habits of tyrants in Dio, see Mallan (2014) 764–5.

<sup>109</sup> Millar (1964) 155 places these events at Rome in the winter of 213/4, but they must be moved earlier given that we now know that Caracalla was at Nicomedia by then. It is unlikely that Caracalla ever returned to Rome after leaving for the German front.

<sup>110</sup> Dio 78(77).16.1–2<sup>1</sup>: ὕστερον γὰρ ἐξησθένησεν πᾶσα αὐτῷ ἢ περὶ τὰ ἀφροδίσια ἰσχύς. ἀφ’ οὗπερ καὶ ἕτερόν τινα τρόπον αἰσχουργεῖν ἐλέγετο, καὶ ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἕτεροι τῶν ὁμοιοτρόπων, οἳ οὐχ ὅτι ὠμολόγουν τοιοῦτό τι ποιεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρίας δὴ τῆς ἐκείνου πρᾶττειν ταῦτα ἔφασκον. This is preserved in *Exc. Val.* 382.

The meaning of the first part of the passage is clear: Caracalla became impotent, a turn of events that may well have been related to the illness that he began to suffer during his German campaigns in 213.<sup>111</sup> The second half, which is omitted by Xiphilinus but preserved by the *Excerpta Valesiana*, is more obscure.<sup>112</sup> The verb *αἰσχροργεῖν* ‘to act obscenely’, is very rarely attested in classical Greek, and can specifically refer to masturbation, though it is unlikely that is Dio’s meaning here.<sup>113</sup> Instead, the historian seems to be leaving the precise acts in which Caracalla and ‘other men of similar habits’ (*ἕτεροι τῶν ὁμοιοτρόπων*) engaged up to his readers’ imagination. It may well be that he is insinuating, given Caracalla’s own impotence, that the emperor was the passive partner in homosexual acts. What is revealing, however, is that the men involved confessed their actions, which were undertaken ‘for the well-being’ (*ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρίας*) of Caracalla. The chronology of the emperor’s sexual activities can therefore be reconstructed as follows: Caracalla was an adulterer and defiler of Vestal Virgins while in Rome, but after embarking on his provincial tour, he began to suffer from an unknown illness which left him impotent. This led to him seeking sexual gratification in other ways, probably as a passive homosexual partner.

There is a second fragment of Dio’s text, again preserved in the *Excerpta Valesiana* but not included by Xiphilinus, which demands our attention in this context:

That self-controlled man, as he referred to himself, a censor of other men’s licentiousness, seemed to have been aroused to anger after a serious incident that was simultaneously shameful and dreadful occurred. But he certainly did not deal with that anger in a manner that was appropriate, and allowed the young men to do those things that no one up to that point had had the effrontery to do, and he greatly maltreated them, as they imitated the behaviours of both female courtesans and male buffoons.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> In addition to the above passage, Dio references the emperor’s impotence at 78(77).16.4 (preserved as *Exc. Val.* 384). For the beginning of Caracalla’s illness, see Dio 78(77).15.2–7; Rowan (2012) 112–15.

<sup>112</sup> Xiphilinus (333.30–1) has the first two lines referring to incest, but omits everything else after *ἐλέγετο*.

<sup>113</sup> *LSJ* s.v. *αἰσχροργέω*.

<sup>114</sup> Dio 78(77).24.2: *ὅτι ὁ σώφρων ἐκεῖνος, ὡς γε καὶ ἔλεγεν, ὁ τῆς τῶν ἄλλων ἀσελγείας ἐπιτιμητής, αἰσχίστου τε ἅμα καὶ δεινοτάτου τολμήματος γενομένου ἔδοξε μὲν ὀργὴν πεποιῆσθαι, τῷ δὲ δὴ μήτ’ ἐκείνη κατ’ ἀξίαν ἐπελθεῖν καὶ τοῖς νεανίσκοις προσεπιτρέψαι ποιεῖν ἃ μηδεὶς μέχρι τότε ἐτετολμήκει, πολὺ σφισιν ἐλυμήνατο μιμησαμένοις τὰ τῶν ἑταιρῶν γυναικῶν καὶ τὰ τῶν ἀνδρῶν τῶν γελωτοποιῶν.* This is preserved in *Exc. Val.* 395.

The precise incident to which Dio is referring is entirely unknown, as Boissevain noted in his edition.<sup>115</sup> However, there are specific aspects of this passage which connect with Dio's earlier remarks about Caracalla's sexual habits. The first is the emperor's hypocrisy.<sup>116</sup> A man who was 'self-controlled' (*σώφρων*) was able to curb his lusts and behave in a sexually continent manner.<sup>117</sup> Yet Caracalla's claim to the virtue of *sophrosyne* was exposed by his numerous adulteries, his deflowering of Vestal Virgins, and his obscene behaviour.<sup>118</sup> This made his attacks on the licentiousness of other men equally hypocritical, echoing Dio's earlier comment that Caracalla harshly enforced laws against adultery, despite being guilty of such a crime himself.<sup>119</sup> The meaning of the second half of this passage is obscure, but it may refer to sexual matters, given that the young men are said to have been maltreated by Caracalla and 'imitated the behaviour of female courtesans' (*μιμησαμένοις τὰ τῶν ἑταιρῶν γυναικῶν*).<sup>120</sup> What we can say is that these passages preserved in the *Excerpta Valesiana* show that Dio was determined to undermine Caracalla's self-presentation as a sexually continent individual, which formed part of his larger strategy of denigrating the emperor in the *Roman History*.<sup>121</sup>

Although hostile to Caracalla, Dio is unlikely to have simply invented the stories of the emperor's sexual indiscretions. Indeed, he states that the men who participated in the obscene acts with Caracalla actually confessed that they had done so for the emperor's well-being. Dio was in attendance at the imperial court in Nicomedia during the winter of 213/4, and it is plausible that

<sup>115</sup> Boissevain (1898–1931) III.402. He remarked that this passage and two other fragments from the *Excerpta Valesiana* must refer to events between 77(77).23.2 and 79(78).2.2, at which point *Codex Vaticanus* 1288 provides us with the original (though lacunose) text of the *Roman History*.

<sup>116</sup> Dio had read Caracalla's own account of his Parthian campaigns, so he was familiar with the emperor's claims (79(78).2.1).

<sup>117</sup> *LSJ* s.v. *σώφρων* III.

<sup>118</sup> On *sophrosyne* in Dio's political and ethical thought and its importance to the self-presentation of the Severan emperors, see Mallan (2014) 766–7. It is related to the Latin virtue *pudicitia*, though *pudicitia* does not quite have the same semantic range as the Greek (Langlands (2006) 2). On imperial *pudicitia*, see Noreña (2007).

<sup>119</sup> Dio 78(77).16.4. This is preserved in *Exc. Val.* 384.

<sup>120</sup> Alternatively, given that the next excerpt (*Exc. Val.* 396) refers to a 'Culenian performance' in which the performers and spectators were criticised, our passage could refer to men who debased themselves by appearing on stage.

<sup>121</sup> On Dio's consistent hostility towards Caracalla's personality and policies, see Millar (1964) 150–60 and Davenport (2012), though neither Millar nor I discuss the historian's treatment of the emperor's sexual habits. Rowan (2012) 161 suggests that Dio was aware of the emperor's interest in healing gods and sought to undermine that aspect of his ideology in the *Roman History* by emphasizing his illness.

he heard the emperor's associates make such a defence at that time. After Caracalla left Nicomedia in April 214, Dio had no further interaction with the court (though that does not mean he lacked other sources of information).<sup>122</sup> I would suggest, therefore, that Caracalla's illness and his impotence were the subject of rumour at the imperial court (especially given his previously active sexual relations with a wide range of women). The development of rumour, as we have noted above, is an act of collective sense making in response to a problem that requires explanation. Rumours about the emperor's sickness and lack of sexual prowess could have developed as an explanation for his repeated consultation of oracles, which Rowan has called his 'medical tourism'.<sup>123</sup> There was also the problem of Caracalla's unmarried status. Impotence and a newfound fondness for obscene sexual acts with men (in whatever form) could have been a contemporary explanation for the emperor's reluctance to take a wife. Caracalla was known for spending time with the soldiers, and accusations of passive homosexuality could have developed as a hostile response by courtiers who resented his cultivation of the troops.<sup>124</sup> In 216, Caracalla finally made a marriage proposal to the daughter of the Parthian king.<sup>125</sup> This may well have been an attempt to put rumours of impotence or inappropriate homosexual relations to bed.<sup>126</sup> At the same time, Dio's narrative features no insinuation about Caracalla and Julia Domna, as probably existed in Marius

<sup>122</sup> Caracalla left shortly after his birthday in April 214 (Dio 79(78).19.3–4). Indeed, the last time Caracalla even spoke to Dio was at the Saturnalia festivities in Nicomedia in November 213 (Dio 79(78).8.4–5).

<sup>123</sup> Rowan (2012) 110–63 reviews the iconographical evidence for Caracalla's interest in oracles and the deities Apollo, Aesculapius, and Sarapis.

<sup>124</sup> For Caracalla and the soldiers, see Dio 78(77).9.1, 13.1–2, 17.1–4; Herodian 4.7.3–7.

<sup>125</sup> Dio 79(78).1.1; Herodian 4.10.1–11.1. The exact date of the marriage proposal is unknown, though it probably happened in 216, after the visit to Alexandria, on the basis of Dio and Herodian's narrative. Baharal (1996) 70 sees the proposal as an act of *imitatio Alexandri* on the part of Caracalla. If this were the case, it would have been very misguided, given Alexander's own well-known problems in securing the succession.

<sup>126</sup> It was certainly not frowned upon for emperors to have homosexual lovers: note especially Dio's comment about Trajan's fondness for boys, which did not have any negative ramifications (68.7.4). However, this does not mean all homosexual affairs were equally accepted—as Dio points out in his discussion of Trajan, his liaisons would have been problematic if he had done anything 'shameful or bad' (*αἰσχρὸν ἢ κακόν*). Caracalla, on the other hand, did behave in a sexually shameful manner, according to Dio. Negative stories of homosexual liaisons surfaced about other emperors, such as Constans, whom we mentioned earlier. Rumours circulated about Hadrian's relationship with Antinous, the manner of the young man's death, and the emperor's excessive commemoration of his lover, which made him the subject of mockery (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 14.7–9; *HA Hadr.* 14.5–7; Dio 69.11.2–4, with discussion in Vout (2007) 63). The context of the homosexual relationship(s) is the crucial factor in determining contemporary reactions, and this explains the different interpretations.

Maximus' biography. He may not have been aware of such stories, or, what is more likely, chose not to include them in his own version of Caracalla's principate. Instead, by concentrating on the hostility between the emperor and his mother, as well as the emperor's illness and sexual indiscretions, Dio implicitly undermined the public image of the happy *domus divina* in a very different way. This was part of his larger strategy of rewriting the imperial ideology of the Severan period, an aspect of Dio's narrative recently highlighted by Kemezis.<sup>127</sup>

The different stories about Caracalla's sexual habits could also have circulated at the imperial court as gossip, rather than rumour. Although the two processes are related, they are not identical. Gossip does not have the same 'sense-making' origins as rumour: instead, it is 'evaluative social talk' about individuals' private lives and behaviour, which is conducted in small groups.<sup>128</sup> The transmission of gossip serves to strengthen relationships amongst those doing the gossiping—in this case, different groups of imperial courtiers who may have had competing interests in either defending Caracalla's activities (notably those who confessed to have the emperor's well-being at heart), or disparaging the emperor's sexual habits.<sup>129</sup> In his seminal study of the cultural function of gossip, Gluckman showed how it serves to delineate the 'unity, morals and values of social groups'.<sup>130</sup> Roman emperors were supposed to live up to the model of the *civilis princeps*, which included the expectation of sexual continence.<sup>131</sup> This is why, for example, sexual *mores* form a key rubric in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*.<sup>132</sup> Yet there is also the fact that from the mid-second century onwards, the emperor was increasingly expected to be the head of a family, a *domus divina*, not only composed of himself and his wife, but also their children and other male and female relatives. An emperor was required to possess the virtues of *sophrosyne* or *prudicitia*, not only because it showed their self-control, but also demonstrated their commitment to their wife and family.<sup>133</sup> Gossip about Caracalla's sexual habits gave voice to the idea that this was not how an emperor was supposed to behave. But did the circulation of such gossip actually have any causal effect, forcing a change in imperial behaviour? Wick-

<sup>127</sup> Kemezis (2014) 30–4, 146–9.

<sup>128</sup> Gluckman (1963); Shibutani (1966) 41; Di Fonza and Bordia (2007) 19–22.

<sup>129</sup> In an earlier article, I proposed that we should think of Caracalla's court in terms of rival groups (Davenport (2012) 811–14).

<sup>130</sup> Gluckman (1963) 308.

<sup>131</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (1982) 35; Mallan (2014) 767.

<sup>132</sup> Langlands (2006) 348–63.

<sup>133</sup> Noreña (2007) 307–12.

ham has drawn attention to the two-fold nature of gossip about authority figures.<sup>134</sup> On the one hand, gossip can be very ineffective, as it merely focuses on ‘undermining reputation, not dominance’, but it can also allow individuals ‘to construct alternative transcripts of power’. We can see both aspects at work in the different stories about Caracalla’s sexual habits. If Marius Maximus’ biography of the emperor did contain reference to an incestuous relationship between the emperor and Julia Domna, then that story could be plausibly understood as deriving from gossip designed to undermine the Augusta’s womanly virtues, on which the Severan *domus divina* had been built. The same point can be made about Caracalla’s impotence and obscene acts with men, which we find in Dio’s narrative. This gossip certainly did not change the emperor’s nature, although we might speculate that it prompted him to issue the marriage proposal to the daughter of the Parthian king. Cassius Dio himself did not stand up to the emperor himself while at court in Nicomedia, saving his resentment for the pages of his history. But while writing the *Roman History*, Dio was able to use this gossip to present an ‘alternative transcript of power’, to use Wickham’s apt formulation. The stories of Caracalla’s adultery, impotence, and homosexuality undermine the emperor’s stand against adulterous men, and his claim to be a model of sexual continence.<sup>135</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

The rumours and gossip about Caracalla’s incestuous relationship with his mother, Julia Domna, and his homosexual relationships acted as hostile popular and elite responses to the public image of the imperial regime. The high honours given to Domna were, on one level, a mark of the respect that she had earned, and deserved, as wife of a deified emperor and the mother of the reigning *princeps*. She and Caracalla formed the central male–female pair at the heart of the *domus divina*, with Domna acting as the Augusta to his Augustus. The public image of their relationship, both the versions that were centrally disseminated and those created by provincial audiences, may have given rise to sexual interpretations, similar to those which developed in the case of Nero and Agrippina. I have argued that rumours about a sexual affair developed as part of a wider ‘sense making’ process, as a way of explaining why a young

<sup>134</sup> Wickham (1998) 18–19.

<sup>135</sup> These stories would also have undermined the later claim that Elagabalus was Caracalla’s illegitimate son, which once again reflects the preference for dynastic succession through blood relatives rather than adoption (see Davenport and Mallan (2014) 660). Given Elagabalus’ age, any liaison between Caracalla and Julia Soemias would have had to have occurred in the 200s, at which time the emperor still had all his full sexual abilities intact. Such logic may not have been a concern to those who circulated the information about Caracalla’s impotence, however.

emperor remained unmarried, and why his mother was such a prominent figure in his regime. It was these rumours that resulted in the Alexandrians, who were known for their satirical attacks on Roman emperors, lampooning Julia Domna as Jocasta. These contemporary stories were later developed by fourth-century writers, such as the author of the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelius Victor, and the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus*. The ultimate source of this tradition was probably Marius Maximus' biography of Caracalla, which reflects the circulation of gossip about the emperor and his mother at court, representing an elite response to the imperial regime. The tradition was embellished further in Late Antiquity, as the author of the *Historia Augusta* drew particular inspiration from the story of Nero and Agrippina. However, incest between mother and son was not the only subversive reading of the imperial house during Caracalla's reign. In his *Roman History*, Cassius Dio emphasised that the *domus divina* was not the close-knit family unit it officially appeared to be by depicting the hostile way in which Caracalla dismissed his mother's advice, despite publicly promoting her in his letters to the senate. If Dio was aware of the incest stories, he chose to ignore them in favour of a different version of Caracalla's sexual habits. This was that the emperor was given to wanton affairs with other men's wives and with Vestal Virgins, until he became ill and impotent and had to seek sexual gratification in other ways, perhaps as a passive homosexual partner. These stories could have arisen as a form of 'sense making' rumour, but it is perhaps more likely that they circulated as gossip at the imperial court, among dispossessed individuals or groups who resented Caracalla, and wished to undermine his own claims to be a 'self-controlled man', a model of *sophrosyne*. Such gossip appealed to Cassius Dio's agenda of denigrating Caracalla and creating a narrative of Severan history that was very different from the official version. The range of rumours and gossip about Julia Domna and Caracalla reveal the way in which the public image of Roman emperors and their families could be reinterpreted by the people of the empire, courtiers, historians, and biographers, both during their reigns and beyond.

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