

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Civiles Principes and Persian Despots: Alexander Severus' Admission Ritual in the *Historia Augusta*

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## Abstract

This article argues that the *Historia Augusta* retrojected fourth-century rituals of the imperial court into its presentation of the reign of Severus Alexander in order to criticise the “oriental” and un-Roman practices of the contemporary emperors of the fourth century. The *Historia Augusta*'s two descriptions of Alexander Severus' admission ritual (*salutatio*) are suffused with fourth-century ritual elements which have no place in the early third century. A simplistic reading might interpret these anachronisms as evidence of the *HA*'s sloppiness and incompetence. However, I argue instead that they are conscious and deliberate. These two descriptions highlight a contrast between the *adoratio* of the fourth century and the restrained and moderate *civilitas* of the traditional *principes*, and the descriptions also innovatively present the *adoratio* as Persian. This article thus demonstrates the contemporary political argument of the *Historia Augusta*, which sought to contribute to wider intellectual debates about the ideal emperor and the importance of *civilitas* in the fourth century.

## Introduction

The ritual of admission, often called *salutatio* in the Principate and *adoratio* in the late Roman Empire, was a regular, often daily, greeting ritual during which the emperor received and greeted the elite.<sup>1</sup> While the imperial *salutatio* in the Principate remains an understudied area, it has received increasing attention in recent years: its details have been reconstructed and its wider importance has to some extent been underlined.<sup>2</sup> However, the literary use of the admission rituals, to challenge or support imperial self-presentation and to further authorial agendas more broadly, has received

<sup>1</sup>I use the word “admission” since the *salutatio* and the *adoratio* arguably should not be seen as fundamentally different rituals but as two different points in the long-term development of a Roman greeting ritual, which I have called the “admission”. I will examine this in a future monograph, which will explore the admission from Augustus to the late Roman Empire, from both an institutional and a literary angle. *Adoratio* in the admission was performed by kneeling (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.66–67) and kneeling was in general the most common posture adopted when performing *adoratio* (see e.g. Sen. *Herc.* 410–411; Sen. *Suas.* 1.2; Tert. *Adv. Marc.* 3.13, *Cor.* 3, *Iud.* 9).

<sup>2</sup>See especially Winterling 1999, 117–144; Badel 2007; 2009; Goldbeck 2010; Schöpe 2014, 38–57. See also Turcan 1987, 132–139. On its wider importance, see Lindholmer 2021; Davenport 2022.

virtually no attention. This contrasts with scholarship on other rituals, as Pierre Dufraigne, for example, explored the literary exploitation of the *adventus*, while Sabine MacCormack before him had examined how panegyrics tied into imperial rituals to support imperial self-presentation.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, there has been an increasing appreciation of how literary representations of ritual are not mere reflections of reality, but also act as a vehicle for an author's wider commentary on (or critique of) political practices and political culture.<sup>4</sup> However, this appreciation has not extended to the admission ritual. In this article, I propose to use two unusually long and elaborate descriptions of the admission of Alexander Severus in the *Historia Augusta* as a case study, in order to explore how the admission could be employed by writers for their own agendas. These descriptions generally receive limited attention, but I will argue that they play an important interpretative role.<sup>5</sup>

A brief introduction of the *Historia Augusta* and the biography of Alexander is in order: the *Historia Augusta* professes to have been written by six authors from Diocletian to Constantine but the *communis opinio* today is that the work was actually written by a single author in the later fourth century.<sup>6</sup> The main focus of this article, the biography of Alexander Severus, is by far the longest in this collection of lives, and it is the first biography to be largely fictitious.<sup>7</sup> The anonymous author uses the freedom afforded by this fictitiousness to create a marked contrast between an Alexander who is thoroughly idealised, a portrayal that is in fact unique in the source tradition, and an Elagabalus who is demonised.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>MacCormack 1981; Dufraigne 1994. Scholars of Court Studies focusing on other historical periods have likewise increasingly underlined that the court and its rituals could be exploited by the elite as well: Duindam 1995; 2003; Duindam *et al.* 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Recently, see e.g. Icks 2012; 2014; Flower 2015; Humphries 2019. The same awareness permeates the chapters contained in the important Carlà-Uhink and Rollinger 2023.

<sup>5</sup>This is perhaps because scholarship on the *Vita Alexandri* generally focuses on dating questions, textual aspects or historical matters rather than on interpreting the life itself: See e.g. Hönn 1911; Straub 1970; Kolb 1976b; Straub 1980; Zawadzki 1997; Moreno Ferrero 1999; Lovotti 2002; Mayer 2005.

<sup>6</sup>Building on Dessau 1889, Syme 1968 argued at length for the 390s. See also Syme 1971a; 1971b; 1983. This has been influential: see e.g. Birley 2006, 1. Cameron 2010, 743–782 recently argued that the *Historia Augusta* was published at some point between the 360s and the 380s. On the other hand, Mastandrea 2011 argues for a significantly later date around the year 500. See also Mastandrea 2014. A few scholars still believe in the ostensible date under Constantine: see especially Lippold 1998 but also Baldwin 2010; Baker 2014. Some statistical philological studies (e.g. Meißner 1992) seemed to indicate multiple authorship, but the more recent computational study of Stover and Kestemont 2016 supports the theory of a single author whose aims developed along the lines identified by Syme in his various contributions.

<sup>7</sup>To be precise, the first of the biographies of sole emperors (often called “primary” lives) to be largely fictitious; the biographies of Caesars and usurpers (often termed “secondary” lives) are generally characterised by invention but were probably added after the primary lives (see e.g. Rohrbacher 2013, 158–159, 162).

<sup>8</sup>It is often argued that the biographies before Alexander Severus have a core of truth: see e.g. Rohrbacher 2013, 153–156. This applies to the first half of the biography of Elagabalus, but the second half “by general consent is a rag-bag of fiction and fantasy, product of a fertile imagination” (Mader 2005, 132), with similar judgements in Syme 1971a, 2, 118; Barnes 1978, 28, 56–57. The largely fictitious nature of the *Vita Alexandri* is widely accepted: see e.g. Syme 1968, 133; 1971a, 111–112; Barnes 1978, 57–59; Bertrand-Dagenbach 1990, 120; Birley 2006, 23; Rohrbacher 2016, 8, 13. On the sources used for the life of Alexander see, Kolb 1976a, 146–152; Barnes 1978, 57–59; Rohrbacher 2013, 163; Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, XVIII–LXXII; Stover and Woudhuysen 2023, 235–334.

As far back as the Julio-Claudians, writers began to portray the admission highly negatively with patrons depicted as arrogant and the *salutatores* as fawning parasites. This portrayal of the admission is especially evident in Seneca and Martial, and continues unabated in the fourth century, as exemplified in Ammianus.<sup>9</sup> Fundamentally, this critique of the admission was a literary topos that included a number of stock elements and was employed by Greek and Latin writers, both Christian and non-Christian.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, when the emperor's admission was mentioned, it was not criticised in the same manner and was instead generally treated as merely a backdrop to revealing anecdotes about the ruler.<sup>11</sup>

The article consists of three sections: the first argues that most of the ritual elements mentioned in the descriptions of Alexander's admission, such as the *adoratio* or bejewelled attire, have no place in the early third century but are instead elements from the late Roman Empire. The *Historia Augusta's* idealised Alexander consistently rejects these, which would have been perceived as a critique of the fourth-century admission.<sup>12</sup> The second section explores how the *Historia Augusta* portrays *adoratio* and bejewelled clothes, two key elements of the late Roman admission, as Persian, thereby presenting the admission as an "oriental" ritual and adding another layer to the criticism of this ritual explored in the first section. The final section takes a step back and explores the wider importance of this critique for our understanding of the conception of the ideal emperor in the late Roman Empire. The section shows that *civilitas* was less widely idealised in the fourth century than often supposed. By contrast, Alexander's admission presents him as a *civilis princeps* which is a central part of a wider insistence on the importance of *civilitas* for good government in the *Historia Augusta*.<sup>13</sup> This, in turn, constitutes a sophisticated and distinctive engagement with a debate current in the fourth century where *civilitas* had come under attack.

This article thus reveals the argumentative thrust of the *Historia Augusta* as a contemporary political critique: one scholarly position holds that deception and entertainment were the *Historia Augusta's* central purposes in an allusive game, potentially

<sup>9</sup>See e.g. Amm. Marc. 14.6.13; Mart. 4.8, 5.22, 8.44; Sen. Brev. 14.3–4.

<sup>10</sup>See also e.g. Arr. Epict. diss. 4.10.20; Cypr. Ad Donatum 11; Jer. Ep. 43.2; Juv. 3.127; Luc. Nigr. 21–22; Pel. De Divitiis 6.2; Sen. Sen. Ben. 6.33.4–34.5; Val. Hom. 14.4. This critique, in turn, is often part of a wider literary attack on the corrupt workings of elite patronage: See e.g. Saller 1983.

<sup>11</sup>See e.g. Suet. Aug. 53.2, Galb. 4.1, Tib. 32.2; Tac. Ann. 11.22.1. The sophisticated uses of the admission by Cassius Dio and Claudius Mamertinus are exceptions from this tradition: see Lindholmer 2021, 63–80 134–151.

<sup>12</sup>Reintjes 1961, 13; Alföldi 1970, 37; van't Dack 1991, 60; Molinier-Arbò 2003, 90–91 and Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, 4 n. 58, 64–65 very briefly suggest that Alexander's behaviour in one or both of the passages describing his admission is an alternative to or critique of fourth-century ceremonial, but this point is never pursued.

<sup>13</sup>Indeed, scholarship has briefly emphasised the importance of *civilitas* in the biography of Alexander: Callu 1987, 110–111; Bonamente 2010, 79 n. 84; Scheithauer 2014, 466. *Civilitas* more widely in the *Historia Augusta*: see e.g. García Ruiz 2008, 250 n. 98; d'Amico 2015, 275–276; Zecchini 2016b, 220–221 and especially Lindholmer forthcoming 2024.

for a small, educated circle of individuals with literary interests.<sup>14</sup> However, the multi-layered critique of the late Roman admission and the connected engagement with the debate about ideal rule in the fourth century show that the *Historia Augusta* is not devoid of independent and sometimes sophisticated political engagement and interpretations.<sup>15</sup> The article also adds further texture and depth to the intellectual debates about the ideal emperor in the fourth century, both by challenging the common view that *civilitas* remained a widespread ideal in this period and by showing the *Historia Augusta* to be a stout, sophisticated and distinctive defender of this virtue. Lastly, the *Historia Augusta*'s noteworthy presentation of the admission as a Persian ritual underlines the power of literary representations of ritual and that such representations could challenge or support imperial self-presentation.

### Alexander's admission

The *Historia Augusta*'s focus on the imperial *salutatio* in Alexander's biography is evident from the very beginning. The biography starts with a short description of Alexander's background and adolescence and an explanation of why this ruler had accepted many honours already upon his accession.<sup>16</sup> Hereafter, the anonymous author includes the first idealising depiction of Alexander's general rule:

Dominum se appellari vetuit. epistulas ad se quasi ad privatum scribi iussit servato tantum nomine imperatoris. gemmas de calciamentis et vestibus tulit, quibus usus fuerat Heliogabalus. veste, ut et pingitur, alba usus est nec aurata, paenulis togisque communibus. cum amicis tam familiariter vixit ut communis esset ei saepe consessus, iret ad convivia eorum, aliquos autem haberet cotidianos etiam non vocatos, salutaretur vero quasi unus e senatoribus patente velo admissionalibus remotis aut solis iis qui ministri ad fores fuerant, cum antea salutare principem non liceret, quod eos videre non poterat.

"He forbade men to call him *dominus*, and he gave orders that people should write to him as they would to a commoner, retaining only the title "*Imperator*". He removed from the imperial footwear and garments all the jewels that had been used by Elagabalus, and he wore a plain white robe without any gold, just as he is always depicted, and ordinary cloaks and togas. He associated with his friends on such familiar terms that he would sit with them as equals, attend their banquets, receive some of them daily, even when they were not formally summoned, and be greeted like any senator with open curtains and without the presence of ushers, or, at least, with none but those who acted as attendants at

<sup>14</sup>E.g. Syme 1968, 133–140, 212–214; 1971a, 111; 1971b, 88; 1983, 114–128; Smith 2007, 162; Cameron 2010, 743–782; Rohrbacher 2013, 146–147. Cameron 2010, 781 concisely sums up the position: "The author of the HA was a frivolous, ignorant person with no agenda worthy of the name at all." Recently, see especially Rohrbacher 2016 for this position.

<sup>15</sup>See e.g. Baynes 1926; John 1976; Ratti 2010; Nardelli 2016 for other explorations of the *Historia Augusta*'s political standpoints.

<sup>16</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 1–3.

the doors, whereas previously it was not possible to greet the emperor for the reason that he could not see them.”<sup>17</sup>

This appears quite clearly to refer to the ritual of *salutatio* since the passage describes a repeated and formalised greeting of the emperor by large groups, seemingly irrespective of personal connections.

After this passage, the idealisation of Alexander continues: Alexander is severe towards dishonest judges, purges the palace of Elagabalus’ courtiers and uses well-suited and experienced advisors.<sup>18</sup> About one quarter through the biography, another lengthy description of Alexander’s admission is included:

Salutabatur autem nomine, hoc est “Ave, Alexander.” si quis caput flexisset aut blandius aliquid dixisset, ut adulator, vel abiciebatur, si loci eius qualitas pateretur, vel ridebatur ingenti cachino, si eius dignitas graviori subiacere non posset iniuriae. salutatus consessum obtulit omnibus senatoribus atque adeo nisi honestos et bonae famae homines ad salutationem non admisit, iussitque – quemadmodum in Eleusinis sacris dicitur, ut nemo ingrediatur nisi qui se innocentem novit – per praeconem edici, ut nemo salutaret principem, qui se furem esse nosset, ne aliquando detectus capitali supplicio subderetur. idem adorari se vetuit, cum iam coepisset Heliogabalus adorari regum more Persarum.

“In greeting him it was customary to address him by his name only, that is, “ave, Alexander”. And if any man bowed his head or said anything that was over-polite as a flatterer, he was either ejected, in case the degree of his station permitted it, or else, if his rank could not be subjected to graver affront, he was ridiculed with loud laughter. After being greeted, he offered all senators to sit down, but even so he admitted to his admission none but the honest and those of good report; and – according to the custom said to be observed in the Eleusinian mysteries, where none may enter save those who know themselves to be guiltless – he gave orders that the herald should proclaim that no one who knew himself to be a thief should come to greet the emperor, lest he might in some way be discovered and receive capital punishment. Also, he forbade any one to adore him, whereas Elagabalus had begun to receive adoration in the manner of the king of the Persians.”<sup>19</sup>

There is little doubt that this refers to the admission, since nouns originating from *salutare* are almost exclusively used for this ritual and it is indeed difficult to read

<sup>17</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 4.1–3. It should be noted that “*cum antea*” is omitted in the manuscript and Soverini 1981, 88–97, 104–105 suggested an alternative reconstruction: “*fuertant, [furibus autem] salutare...*”, i.e., thieves were not allowed to salute Alexander. In this reconstruction, neither *admissionales* nor curtains precluded *salutatores* from seeing the emperor. Soverini rejects previous emendations since they contrast with *Heliogab.* 28.6 and *Plin. Pan.* 47.5. However, Alexander’s admission is not meant to be a realistic depiction and the claimed contrast to the passage in Pliny (which notably does not describe an admission) and the life of Elagabalus is therefore unproblematic. Indeed, Soverini’s suggestion has not been widely accepted, as seen e.g. in Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, 4.

<sup>18</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 15–16.

<sup>19</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 17.4–18.4.

*ad salutationem non admisit* as referring to anything but the admission ritual.<sup>20</sup> It is striking that the admission is used as one of a select group of aspects which are supposed to support the *Historia Augusta's* presentation of Alexander as an ideal emperor and all the more so since the *Historia Augusta's* literary predecessors had approached the admission very differently with negligible attention to the imperial admission except as a backdrop to noteworthy events. The *Historia Augusta's* positive and lengthy descriptions of Alexander Severus' admission break decisively with this rather uniform tradition.<sup>21</sup>

However, the most striking feature of the passages is, as this section will show, that they are riddled with elements of the fourth-century admission which have no place in the Severan Age.<sup>22</sup> The clearest example is arguably the statement that Alexander forbade anyone to “adore (*adorari*)” him, a praxis which, according to the *Historia Augusta*, was introduced by Elagabalus. Andreas Alföldi argued that the *adoratio* was indeed institutionalised in or just before the Severan Age but Henri Stern long ago pointed out that Alföldi's evidence essentially consists of individuals occasionally performing *adoratio* (kneeling) in front of the emperor.<sup>23</sup> Such instances of individuals performing *adoratio* date back to Augustus and cannot assist in determining whether the *adoratio* had become institutionalised and an obligatory part of court ceremonial in the Severan Age.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the assertion above that Elagabalus introduced the *adoratio* cannot function as evidence independently, since the biography of Alexander, as mentioned, is largely fictitious. Essentially, then, there is no evidence to suggest that the *adoratio* was introduced during the Severan Age.<sup>25</sup>

However, more importantly for my purposes, all fourth-century sources treating the “introduction of the *adoratio*” are unanimous that this was a Diocletianic innovation.<sup>26</sup> For example, Eutropius writes that Diocletian “was the first who introduced into the Roman empire a ceremony suited rather to royal usages than to Roman liberty, giving orders that he should be adored, whereas all emperors before him were only

<sup>20</sup>Chastagnol 1983, 112 agrees. Nouns from *salutare*: Goldbeck 2010, 15–16.

<sup>21</sup>This distinctiveness, and the fact that the life of Alexander is largely fictitious, also underlines that these descriptions are not copied from a source but deliberately constructed. The admission is only mentioned briefly a few times outside the life of Alexander: e.g. *Hist. Aug. Ant. Pius* 13.2, *Did. Iul.* 4.1, *Heliogab.* 28.6, *Max.* 28.7, *Pert.* 9.9.

<sup>22</sup>On the fourth-century admission, see e.g. Avery 1940; Stern 1954; Alföldi 1970, 3–79; Herrmann-Otto 1998; Doležal 2009. This area will also be explored in my forthcoming monograph.

<sup>23</sup>Hdn. 3.11.8 with Alföldi 1970, 3–79, esp. 39, 56–58. See also Ensslin 1939, 362–363; Schöpe 2014, 49–50. Stern 1954. *Adoratio* in the fourth-century admission was performed by kneeling (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.66–67) and kneeling was in general the most common posture adopted when performing the *adoratio* (see e.g. en. *Herc.* 410–411; Sen. *Suas.* 1.2; Tert. *Adv. Marc.* 3.13, *Cor.* 3, *Iud.* 9).

<sup>24</sup>See e.g. Suet. *Aug.* 94.12.

<sup>25</sup>For the problem of when the *adoratio* was introduced, see the recent Lindholmer 2024a.

<sup>26</sup>*Amm. Marc.* 15.5.18; *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 39; *Jer. Chron.* s.a. 296. All these four sources likely draw on a common source, either the *Kaisergeschichte* (Alföldi 1970, 3–28, 45–65) or the lost history of Aurelius Victor, proposed by Stover and Woudhuysen 2023. On their claim about the *adoratio*, see recently Carla-Uhink 2019, 118–122, who largely agrees with Alföldi. For a contrasting perspective, see Lindholmer 2024a. For the political background to such criticisms of Diocletian, see recently the sensible discussion in Hächler 2023 who questions the common depiction of Diocletian and the Tetrarchs as oppressing the senators of Rome or ignoring their traditional prestige.

saluted (*qui imperio Romano primus regiae consuetudinis formam magis quam Romanae libertatis invexerit adorarique se iussit, cum ante eum cuncti salutarentur*).<sup>27</sup> Aurelius Victor, Jerome and Ammianus Marcellinus all agree. Regardless of whether this was strictly true, the anachronism in Alexander's portrayal would therefore have been evident to a fourth-century reader when Alexander is said to have forbidden anybody to adore him.<sup>28</sup> This, in turn, evoked by contrast the contemporary admission ritual. As mentioned, Alexander is one of the ideal rulers in the *Historia Augusta*, whereas Elagabalus is consistently demonised. Consequently, the *Historia Augusta*'s attribution of *adoratio* to Elagabalus and its rejection by Alexander would have struck readers as a critique of current ceremonial.<sup>29</sup>

The fourth-century admission may have been further criticised by the claim that Alexander ejected or ridiculed any man who "bowed his head (*caput flexisset*) or said anything that was over-polite as a flatterer (*adulator*)".<sup>30</sup> Our sources for the admission ritual in the Severan and pre-Severan periods make no mention of bowing; later, in contrast, bowing was the defining feature of the admission of the late Roman Empire compared to the Principate.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Alexander not only is depicted as rejecting the kneeling inherent in Elagabalus' *adoratio* but even refused the less obsequious bowing of the head and in fact generally rejected all *adulatio*.<sup>32</sup> This arguably underlines the critique of the fourth-century admission, and it contributes to presenting Alexander as a *civilis princeps* since he does not allow flattery that emphasises the distance between ruler and subject. This presentation of Alexander is further accentuated in the *Historia Augusta* through a contrast to the admission of the son of Alexander's successor, Maximinus Thrax: the son "was exceedingly haughty at admissions (*in salutationibus superbissimus erat*) – he stretched out his hand, and suffered his knees to be kissed, and sometimes even his feet."<sup>33</sup> Essentially, while Maximinus Thrax's son insisted on demeaning kisses on knees and feet at the admission, Alexander's rejected all *adulatio* and his admission was characterised by equality between emperor and senators.

<sup>27</sup>Eutr. 9.26.

<sup>28</sup>This rejection may also implicitly contrast Alexander Severus favourably with Alexander the Great's often criticised introduction of proskynesis: van't Dack 1991, 59; Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, 86. On Alexander the Great in the *Historia Augusta*, see van't Dack 1991.

<sup>29</sup>*Contra* Neri 1999, 233–234 who suggests that the attribution of the *adoratio* to Elagabalus was a consequence of a lack of source material available. Chastagnol 1983, 112 merely suggests that the *Historia Augusta*'s author took pleasure in this attribution.

<sup>30</sup>Bertrand-Dagenbach 1990, 112 suggests a conscious parallel to Dio Chrys. Or. 3.2, 16–24 but the parallel is not convincing since Dio Chrysostom simply talks generally about flatterers. A similar point is made by Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, 84–85.

<sup>31</sup>See e.g. Cass. Dio 57.11.1, 62[63].13.3, 73[72].17.3, 78[77].18.3, 80[79].14.4 with Winterling 1999, 117–144. Contrast Euseb. Vit. Const. 4.66–67.

<sup>32</sup>Rohrbacher 2016, 149 rather sees Alexander's ejection of flatterers as a literary response to Amm. Marc. 22.10.4.

<sup>33</sup>*Hist. Aug. Max.* 28.7. Patrons demanding to have their feet or knees kissed are commonly part of the critique of the aristocratic admission in the fourth century: see e.g. Amm. Marc. 28.4.10; *Pan. Lat.* 3(11).21.4.



Another parallel with fourth-century ceremonial is the statement that Alexander used simple and traditional clothes instead of the luxurious and bejewelled attire supposedly introduced by Elagabalus.<sup>34</sup> This is not explicitly connected to Alexander's admission by the *Historia Augusta*. However, luxurious, bejewelled attire became common from the later third century onwards, and Victor, Eutropius and Jerome all assert that it was Diocletian who broke with imperial tradition and introduced these innovations. Importantly, they all mention this in the context of Diocletian's transformed admission: for example, Jerome asserts that "Diocletian was the first to order that he should be adored as a god (*adorari se ut Deum*) and that gems should be inserted in his clothes and shoes (*gemmas vestibus calceamentisque inseri*), whereas before him all emperors were saluted (*salutarentur*) like magistrates and only had a purple *chlamys* in addition to their normal dress (*chlamydem tantum purpuream a privato habitu plus haberent*)."<sup>35</sup> At least from the second half of the fourth century, then, there was a widespread perception that imperial ceremonial had changed decisively from Diocletian onwards and that the introduction of bejewelled attire was attributable to him and part of this process. The rejection of bejewelled attire by the *Historia Augusta*'s idealised Alexander would thus likely have been understood as another criticism of the fourth-century admission, especially since this innovation is again attributed to the *Historia Augusta*'s demonised Elagabalus.

In the first passage (describing Alexander's admission), the assertion that Alexander refused to be called *dominus* likely functions along similar lines: this is not clearly connected to the admission but should probably be understood in this context, since it is seemingly elaborated upon in the second passage which posits that Alexander was greeted only with "ave, Alexander" at his admission.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, while *dominus* was not used generally at the admission in the Principate, this appellation was probably incorporated in the admission from Diocletian onwards.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Aurelius Victor presents the appellation *dominus* as an innovation introduced by Diocletian and mentions it in connection with his critique of Diocletian's new admission.<sup>38</sup> Scholars often view Alexander's rejection of *dominus* as a literary allusion to Suetonius' description of either Augustus or Tiberius, but the late Roman admission

<sup>34</sup>Rohrbacher 2016, 117 instead sees this as another literary allusion. Scheithauer 2014, 466 briefly suggests that this highlights Alexander's *civilitas*. The theme of Alexander's modest clothes is revisited several times: e.g. *Alex. Sev.* 33.4, 40, 42.1.

<sup>35</sup>*Jer. Chron.* s.a. 296. *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 39; *Eutr.* 9.26.

<sup>36</sup>This also ties in with a previous mention that Alexander refused to be called "the Great" and "Antoninus": *Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 6–11.

<sup>37</sup>*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 39 may indicate that Caligula and Domitian demanded to be called *dominus* at the admission. However, no sources from the Principate mention the use of *dominus* at the imperial admission: see e.g. *Cass. Dio* 62[63].13.3, 73[72].17.3. See also Winterling 1999, 117–144.

<sup>38</sup>*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 39. Under Commodus and the Severans, the use of *dominus* in epigraphy to refer to the emperor increased, but this was generally restricted to the military sphere (Noreña 2011, 227, 283–297, 364–415; although senators could also use *dominus* of the emperor: *AE* 1968, 585). Under Constantine, on the other hand, even the city prefect in an inscription calls the emperor *dominus* (*CIL* VI 1140), and *dominus* became obligatory in many contexts in this period. See Chastagnol 1988 for the epigraphic protocol of the late Roman Empire. See also *Amm. Marc.* 15.1.3.



constitutes an additional and, presumably for most readers, more obvious reference point.<sup>39</sup>

The rejection of *dominus* also presents Alexander as a *civilis princeps* who refused to distance himself from his subjects in the manner of the late Roman emperors. It is worth noting that long before the emperor began to be called *dominus* at his admission, patrons in the traditional literary depiction of the *salutatio* were criticised for demanding to be addressed in this way. This is evidenced repeatedly in Martial, and continues in the fourth century as exemplified by Pelagius who condemns the unworthy (*indignus*) client at admissions who bows down to the ground and says *dominus* to a man he loathes.<sup>40</sup> The contrast between Alexander's admission and the arrogant patrons who demanded to be called *dominus* in the literary *salutatio* tradition would further have highlighted the former's *civilis* behaviour.

Another noteworthy element in Alexander's admission is ceremonial curtains that supposedly cover up the emperor so that no one could see and greet him. There is no evidence to suggest that covering *vela* were used at the admission during the Principate.<sup>41</sup> However, *vela* were likely introduced in the fourth-century admission, as indicated by the following passage from Lucifer of Cagliari who was received by Constantius in the 350s as part of an ongoing controversy about the Arian doctrine: "In your palace, although you were standing within the curtain, you received my response (*in tuo palatio intra velum licet stans tulisti responsum a me*)".<sup>42</sup> Athanasius also mentions the use of curtains veiling Constantius' brother, Constans, during an audience, and the earliest depiction of an emperor with a *velum* is the images of Constantius II and his Caesar, Constantius Gallus, in the Chronography of 354 in which curtains are drawn aside to reveal the emperors.<sup>43</sup> Overall, then, it is likely that *vela* were used in the late Roman admission, and the *Historia Augusta* criticises this element as the author has connected it to Alexander's predecessors, perhaps with the thoroughly vilified Elagabalus in mind again, while the thoroughly idealised Alexander wisely rejects the *velum*.<sup>44</sup>

According to the *Historia Augusta*, Alexander was greeted "without the presence of *admissionales*, or, at least, with none but those who acted as *ministri* at the doors." This contrast between the *ministri* who merely stand at the doors and the *admissionales*

<sup>39</sup>Moreno Ferrero 1999, 200 points to Suet. *Aug.* 53.1, while Chastagnol 1983, 111; Bertrand-Dagenbach 2014, 63–64 suggest Suet. *Aug.* 53.1 and *Tib.* 27. Haehling 1985, 219–220, by contrast, argues that the *Historia Augusta* is alluding to Tert. *Apol.* 34.1 See also briefly Béranger 1974, 42.

<sup>40</sup>Mart. 2.68, 5.57, 9.92; Pel. *Div.* 6.2.

<sup>41</sup>See e.g. Cass. Dio 78[77].18.3, 80[79].14.4. The evidence of Tantillo 2015, 574 for *vela* at admissions does not appear convincing; firstly, Sen. *Ep.* 9.80.1 does not refer to the admission. Secondly, the presence of an imperial official in charge of *vela* (*praepositus velariorum domus Augustanae*: CIL VI 8649) does not show that *vela* were involved in the admission specifically. The exact function of the *praepositus velariorum* is unclear but we know that *vela* were used for a variety of purposes, e.g. to provide shade in the imperial garden (Suet. *Claud.* 10.2), and Tomei 1992, 949 suggests that the *praepositus velariorum* was in charge of these. Lastly, *Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 4.3 cannot be used as evidence for Alexander's admission, as this article underlines.

<sup>42</sup>Lucif. *Moriend.* 1. For the context, see Flower 2016, 143 n. 9. Similar curtains are mentioned shortly hereafter: Lucif. *Moriend.* 4 with Flower 2016, 151 n. 52.

<sup>43</sup>Athan. *Apol. ad Const.* 3. Chronography: as pointed out by Eberlein 1982, 15–17. It should be noted that we only know of these depictions from much later copies of the fourth-century original.

<sup>44</sup>On the *velum* in the late Roman Empire more broadly, see e.g. Alföldi 1970, 36–38; Teja 1993, 619–624.

implies that the latter have far wider responsibilities, but this is out of place in the Severan Age: our knowledge of officials at the imperial admission is scanty, but during the Principate such officials are generally portrayed as doormen of lowly status, which fits excellently with the *Historia Augusta's ministri ad fores*.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, it would not be surprising if the attendants at the fourth-century admission played a more significant role as mediators of access to the emperor. This suggestion may be supported by the fact that officials termed *admissionales* are not attested during the Principate but are first mentioned under Valentinian I, in 367.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the contrast between the *ministri ad fores* of Alexander and the *admissionales* of other emperors may likewise suggest an increased role for the imperial staff at the fourth-century admission. Overall, then, it seems likely that Alexander's rejection of *admissionales* and use of only a few doormen should be viewed as yet another attack on the late Roman admission. It is important to note the *Historia Augusta's* assertion that Alexander's rejection of *admissionales* and of a covering *velum* meant that he was greeted "like any senator (*quasi unus e senatoribus*)". It appears that the anonymous author is here underlining how to interpret the descriptions of Alexander's admission, namely as a presentation of this emperor as a *primus inter pares*. This comment also functions as a forceful critique of the late Roman emperor, whose *velum* and *admissionales* distanced him from his subjects and showed that he was not "like any senator".

Lastly, it is also noteworthy that the *Historia Augusta* portrays Alexander as inviting all senators to sit down after having greeted the emperor (*salutatus consessum obtulit omnibus senatoribus*). It was traditionally perceived as arrogant for the emperor to remain seated while high-ranking visitors were standing.<sup>47</sup> This is manifested in the *salutatio* where the emperor seemingly received a small group of the highest-ranking *salutatores* in his *cubiculum* where all reclined or sat.<sup>48</sup> The rest of the senators were received while the emperor was standing.<sup>49</sup> The more informal posture adopted in the *cubiculum* was likely meant to signal close *amicitia*, while the standing was a sign of respect for the rest of the distinguished *salutatores*. By contrast, in the late Roman Empire, no participants at the admission are portrayed as sitting with the emperor and instead probably stand, while the emperor remains seated.<sup>50</sup> This emphasised the participants' inferiority in relation to the emperor. Thus, when the *Historia Augusta's* Alexander offered all senators to sit, the emperor is portrayed as underlining the equality and *amicitia* between himself and the senators, which in turn continues the critique of the late Roman admission and presents Alexander as a *civilis princeps*.

<sup>45</sup>See e.g. Suet. *Vesp.* 14. The different imperial officials with titles including *ab admissione* (CIL III 6107, VI 8699-8701) were likely also involved in the admission.

<sup>46</sup>*Cod. Theod.* 6.35.7. See also *Not. Dign.* [occ.] 9.14, [or.] 11.17. Scholarship on the *admissionales* is sparse but see e.g. Seecock 1893; Boak 1919, 66; Reintjes 1961, 11-13; Jones 1964, 582; Delmaire 1995, 43-44; Tantillo 2015, 552-553.

<sup>47</sup>See e.g. Cass. Dio 57.11.3, 60.6.1; *Hist. Aug. Hadr.* 22.4; *Plin. Pan.* 64.2-4; Suet. *Iul.* 78, *Tib.* 31.2, 72.3.

<sup>48</sup>Cass. Dio 72[71].35.4; *Epit. de Caes.* 9.15; *Plin. HN* 15.38; Suet. *Vesp.* 21.

<sup>49</sup>This is, e.g., clear from Dio's (80[79].14.4) critique of Elagabalus who "often reclined while greeting the senators (καὶ πολλάκις καὶ κατακειμένος τοὺς βουλευτὰς ἤσπαζετο)."

<sup>50</sup>See e.g. Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.67; *Procop. Anecd.* 30.21-24 with Herrmann-Otto 1998; Tantillo 2015, 568-571.

### Reframing the admission as Persian

The *Historia Augusta* thus critiques the contemporary admission by having Alexander Severus, who is thoroughly idealised in the work, consistently reject ceremonial elements from this ritual and by portraying some of these elements as introductions by Elagabalus, a wholly vilified figure in the *Historia Augusta*. Alexander, instead, conducts a more traditional admission akin to that of the emperors of the Principate. This section builds on the previous one by showing that the *Historia Augusta* adds another layer to this criticism: for the first time in surviving Latin literature, *adoratio* is presented as a Persian custom, and the *Historia Augusta* likewise portrays bejewelled clothes as eastern. These elements, especially the *adoratio*, were central to the late Roman admission, and the insistence on their eastern nature therefore presents the imperial admission too as originating from eastern practices. Thus, the *Historia Augusta* presents the introduction of *adoratio* as paramount to transforming the emperor into the eastern “other”. This distinctive reframing of the admission also reminds us that the elite was not simply a passive consumer of imperial self-presentation through the admission. Rather, the *Historia Augusta*’s engagement with the admission can be seen as an attempt to undermine the image of the emperor presented in the contemporary admission.

As we have already discussed, our sources from the Principate typically use *salutare* to refer to the admission ritual while post-Tetrarchic writers use *adorare*.<sup>51</sup> Προσκυνεῖν, the Greek equivalent of *adorare*, was traditionally viewed as a quintessentially Persian gesture. The Latin *adorare*, on the other hand, did not have the same “oriental” connotations and had instead been used to refer to gestures of subservience, mainly towards gods but also towards rulers and powerful individuals, as mentioned above.<sup>52</sup> However, while the word *adorare* in and of itself did not have the same orientalisising connotations as the Greek προσκυνεῖν, it is evident that the *physical gestures* associated with *adoratio* had long been perceived as typical modes of greeting a Persian or eastern despot. This is exemplified by Seneca: when Caligula demanded that a prominent senator prostrate himself (*supplex sibi [...] iacuisset*),<sup>53</sup> Seneca comments that this emperor was “born for the express purpose of changing the manners of a free state into a servitude like Persia’s (*ut mores liberae civitatis Persica servitute mutaret*)”.<sup>54</sup>

Against this background, the introduction of kneeling in the late Roman admission prompted the literary elite to question whether such innovations were compatible with Roman traditions. Incipient attempts are visible in Eutropius, who says that the transformed admission was “suited rather to royal customs than to Roman liberty (*regiae consuetudinis [...] magis quam Romanae libertatis*)”,<sup>55</sup> and in Ammianus who terms it a “foreign and royal (*externo et regio*)”<sup>56</sup> ritual, which was probably a veiled reference to Persia. However, “veiled” is the key word here, and one of the most striking aspects of the critique of Diocletian’s admission in Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Jerome and Ammianus is exactly that none of them mentions Persia explicitly. Rather, it is

<sup>51</sup>See e.g. Amm. Marc. 15.5.18; Aur. Vict. Caes. 39; Cod. Theod. 8.7.16, 10.22.3; Eutr. 9.26; Jer. Chron. s.a. 296.

<sup>52</sup>See e.g. Hdt. 1.134; Fronto Ep. Graec. 5.3; Luc. Nigr. 21. On the various meanings of προσκυνεῖν, see Marti 1936.

<sup>53</sup>Sen. Ben. 2.12.2.

<sup>54</sup>Sen. Ben. 2.12.2. See also Heliodorus (Aeth. 7.19.2) who connects both kneeling and prostration to the Persians.

<sup>55</sup>Eutr. 9.26.

<sup>56</sup>Amm. Marc. 15.5.18.

in the *Historia Augusta* that we see the clearest attempt to vilify the fourth-century admission as Persian and thereby undermine imperial self-presentation in this ritual: the *Historia Augusta* describes how Alexander Severus “forbade anyone to *adore* (*adorari*) him, whereas Elagabalus had begun to receive adoration in the manner of the king of the Persians (*adorari regum more Persarum*).”<sup>57</sup> This presentation of *adorare* is not only evident in the biography of Alexander but recurs later in the description of Zenobia who “was adored in the manner of the Persians (*more magis Persico adorata est*).”<sup>58</sup> *Adoratio* is here again presented as Persian.

This is not merely a reproduction of a long-standing association; in fact, in the surviving Latin literature of the first five centuries, there is only one other instance, found in Justin, where *adorare* is presented as Persian and as an eastern custom.<sup>59</sup> Thus, earlier writers did not use *adorare* in connection with the Persians: for example, Curtius Rufus, describes the Persian προσκύνησις demanded by Alexander as *venerari uti deum*, while Valerius Maximus writes that Hephæstion, being mistaken for Alexander, was *more Persarum adulata*.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Seneca, when describing Caligula as a Persian monarch above, writes that a senator *supplex sibi [...] iacuisset* and Martial depicts Parthian kings as receiving kisses on the soles of the feet (*pictorum sola basiate regum*).<sup>61</sup> Lastly, we may note Claudian, a contemporary of the *Historia Augusta*, who presents the Persians as “venerating (*venerandus*)” the tiara of the Arsacid dynasty.<sup>62</sup> Thus, it appears that the anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta* has drawn on the well-established Persian connotations of kneeling and προσκυνεῖν to break with the traditional use of *adorare* and present this as Persian as well. *Adoratio*, through kneeling, was the central act of the late Roman admission, and the fourth-century critique of Diocletian shows that it figured prominently in the minds of contemporaries. Consequently, by presenting *adorare* as Persian, the *Historia Augusta* portrays the admission as a foreign and eastern ritual that has no place in Rome, and the emperor becomes a Persian despot.

This critique of the fourth-century admission is further supported by Alexander’s rejection of Elagabalus’ bejewelled clothes and shoes. Just like *adoratio*, such attire is presented as un-Roman and eastern: in the biography of Elagabalus, which functions as a contrast to that of Alexander, it is written that this eastern, Syrian emperor “would

<sup>57</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 18.3.

<sup>58</sup>*Hist. Aug. Tyr. Trig.* 30.14.

<sup>59</sup>This nuances the view of Matthews 1989, 245 who asserts that the ceremonial of Diocletian was “perceived to be of foreign origin”, and that the *Historia Augusta* “expresses a contemporary attitude” in presenting *adoratio* as Persian. Rather, this presentation is distinctive. Justin and *adore*: *Epit.* 6.2.13, 12.7.1. His date of writing is disputed: in an ambitious linguistic study, Yardley 2003 posited that Justin wrote around the year 200, but Syme 1988 argued that Justin was roughly contemporary with the *Historia Augusta*, i.e. circa the 390s. The theory that Justin should be placed in the fourth or fifth century has recently received strong support from Zecchini 2016 and especially Hofmann 2018, Lindholmer forthcoming 2025. However, regardless of Justin’s exact time of writing, the *Historia Augusta*’s presentation of *adorare* is still highly uncommon. Furthermore, it is also more sophisticated and wide-reaching than Justin’s brief and embryonic characterisation of *adorare* as Persian.

<sup>60</sup>Curt. 8.7.13; Val. Max. 4.7, ext. 2a.

<sup>61</sup>Mart. 10.72; Sen. *Ben.* 2.12.2.

<sup>62</sup>Claud. *Cons. Hon.* IV 215–216.

wear a tunic made wholly of cloth of gold, or one made of purple, or a Persian one studded with jewels (*usus et de gemmis Persica*) [...]. He even wore jewels on his shoes”.<sup>63</sup> Bejewelled attire had long been viewed as Persian and eastern, which continued in the fourth century, and the *Historia Augusta* is drawing on this cultural perception.<sup>64</sup> Thus, a noteworthy intertextual relationship is developed here as bejewelled attire is first portrayed as Persian in the biography of Elagabalus, and the anonymous author then reminds his readers of this by mentioning Elagabalus when Alexander rejects bejewelled clothes. This rejection, in turn, is a critique of the fourth-century use of bejewelled attire at the admission, and the anonymous author thus presents this ritual element as a Persian innovation. This presentation is further strengthened as the “oriental monarch” Elagabalus is consistently depicted as using jewels for various purposes, whereas Alexander Severus maintained “that jewels were for women and that they should not be given to a soldier or be worn by a man.”<sup>65</sup>

The cultural construction according to which jewels were typical of the effeminate east and antithetical to true Romans, permeates the *Historia Augusta* more widely: for example, the idealised emperor, Tacitus, “did not permit his wife to use jewels”,<sup>66</sup> thereby setting an example of correct Roman comportment. By contrast, Zenobia is portrayed as banqueting “in the manner of the Persian kings”, which entailed “vessels of gold and jewels”; she had a chariot made by the Persians which was encrusted with jewels; and her step-son, who was “wholly oriental (*prorsus orientalis*)”, is likewise given jewels.<sup>67</sup> In fact, this eastern queen, who “was adored in the manner of the Persians”, is repeatedly portrayed as using jewels.<sup>68</sup> Jewels, and by extension the bejewelled clothes of the fourth-century admission, are thus consistently presented as “oriental” and un-Roman in the *Historia Augusta*.

Lastly, an anecdote (surely invented) from the biography of Aurelian may be pertinent here: we are told that the Persian king gifted Aurelian a cloak “from the farthest Indies (*Indis interioribus*)”<sup>69</sup> of exceptionally bright purple, and that Aurelian, Probus and, importantly, Diocletian hereafter diligently searched for the source of this purple colour. Firstly, it is noteworthy that another key aspect of the fourth-century admission, namely purple clothes, is here connected to the Persian king and to “the farthest Indies”. Furthermore, it may be no coincidence that Diocletian is here portrayed as yearning for a Persian symbol of kingship. In other words, the *Historia Augusta* may be attempting to support its critique of the admission by portraying its supposed transformer as eager to imitate the Persian king.

The self-presentation of the fourth-century emperor in the actual ritual was highly complex but, fundamentally, it rejected the role of *primus inter pares* of the Principate, and underlined the monarchical and religious elements of the imperial figure, for

<sup>63</sup>*Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 23.3–4.

<sup>64</sup>Persia and bejewelled attire: Amm. Marc. 23.6.84; Claud. *Carm. Min.* 27.84–85, *Cons. Hon.* IV 585–586; Eun. *Vit. Soph. Eusthatius* (Wright 1921, 399); Flor. 2.21.3; Heliodorus *Aeth.* 7.19.2 with Alföldi 1970, 16–18; Zinsli 2014, 643–647.

<sup>65</sup>*Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 51.1. See also *Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 41.1. Elagabalus: *Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 23.5, 27.6, 29.1, 33.6. Elagabalus as “oriental” in the *Historia Augusta*: *Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 7.3, 23.3 with Mader 2005.

<sup>66</sup>*Hist. Aug. Tac.* 11.6.

<sup>67</sup>*Hist. Aug. Aurel.* 33.2, *Tyr. Trig.* 16.1, 30.13, 30.19.

<sup>68</sup>*Hist. Aug. Aurel.* 26.9, 28.5, 31.8, 34.3, *Tyr. Trig.* 30.24.

<sup>69</sup>*Hist. Aug. Aurel.* 29.2.

example through the purple, bejewelled clothes and the use of kneeling.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, while there were certainly similarities in the self-presentation of Roman and Persian rulers, it seems unlikely that the Roman emperor wished to be seen as a Persian monarch *per se*.<sup>71</sup> Persia was, after all, the traditional arch-enemy, an enemy that had inflicted significant defeats on Rome in the fourth century and continued to be vilified in imperial propaganda from this period.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that the *Historia Augusta*'s presentation of the imperial admission as Persian challenged imperial self-presentation by depicting him as an eastern despot who had rejected the Roman ideal of *civilitas* – a key ingredient of stable rule according to our anonymous author, as the next section will show. In other words, the *Historia Augusta* uses the long-standing trope and rhetoric of Persia as “the other”, a contrast to Rome, in a distinctive way to present the introduction of *adoratio* as constituting a loss of Roman identity and a transformation into this “oriental” alterity. Importantly, this reframing of the admission also challenged the view, surely widespread among the elite, that participation in the *adoratio* was a privilege and an honour.<sup>73</sup> Essentially, if *adoratio* and thereby the imperial admission was a Persian ritual, the participants ceased to be a privileged group honoured by a magnificent Roman emperor and instead became slaves of an eastern despot.

When criticising Diocletian for the transformed admission, writers consistently focus on the *adoratio* and on bejewelled attire.<sup>74</sup> The anonymous author, then, seems to have chosen carefully when presenting his new image of the admission, since it is exactly these two elements which are presented as Persian and explicitly connected to the “oriental” Elagabalus and the eastern queen, Zenobia. Essentially, while the fourth-century admission was probably not heavily influenced by Persian rituals, it is key to appreciate that aspects such as kneeling and bejewelled attire allowed the *Historia Augusta* to characterise the supposedly new form of admission as Persian and foreign.<sup>75</sup> This presentation of the fourth-century emperor as a Persian despot was strengthened by other elements in the life of Alexander, such as his rejection of eunuchs in official positions: “For they wish for emperors to live in the manner of foreign nations or as the kings of the Persians (*more gentium aut regum Persarum*)”.<sup>76</sup> In the fourth century,

<sup>70</sup>As argued by e.g. Babut 1916, 230–232; Ensslin 1939, 386; Alföldi 1970, 46–47; Tantillo 2015, 581.

<sup>71</sup>Smith 2007, 177–178 also thought it unlikely that Diocletian would want the *adoratio* of the admission to be viewed as Persian. The rulers of both Rome and Persia presented themselves as quasi-divine universal rulers. Dialogue, in terms of self-presentation, existed in the fourth century but only in the sixth century does mutual emulation become more prominent: for example, the rulers of Rome and Persia began in this period to refer to each other as “brothers”, and the Persians may have adopted the Roman ceremonial element of *adoratio* in this period (Canepa 2009, 64, 150–153). On this interchange, see especially Canepa 2009.

<sup>72</sup>E.g., in his edict against the Manicheans from 302, Diocletian lambasted “the detestable customs and depraved laws of the Persians (*exsecrandas consuetudines et scaevas leges Persarum*)”. See also Canepa 2009, 83–115.

<sup>73</sup>*Adoratio* a privilege: see e.g. PAbinn. 1.8 with Matthews 1989, 244–247.

<sup>74</sup>Amm. Marc. 15.5.18; Aur. Vict. Caes. 39; Eutr. 9.26; Jer. Chron. s.a. 296.

<sup>75</sup>Especially Doležal 2009 but also Smith 2007, 176; Tantillo 2015, 563 have argued for Persian influence on the *adoratio*. However, as already mentioned, the key element of the late Roman admission, namely kneeling, had a long history in Roman culture as a gesture of deference performed by individuals: see e.g. Suet. Aug. 94.12 with Alföldi 1970, 49–58. Furthermore, Canepa 2009, 64, 150–153 points out that, before the sixth century, there is no evidence from the Sasanian primary sources that genuflection or full prostration was used at the Sasanian court.

<sup>76</sup>Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev. 66.3.



eunuchs were often portrayed as wicked advisors controlling the emperor, and it is inviting to see this passage as another reference to the *Historia Augusta's* own time and an attempt to frame the emperor as a Persian king.<sup>77</sup>

### *Civilitas* and good rule in the fourth century

Overall, then, the *Historia Augusta's* critique of the admission contains two connected thrusts: on the one hand, there is a consistent rejection of the fourth-century ceremonial elements by Alexander Severus and, on the other, the *Historia Augusta* presents *adorare* and bejewelled clothes as Persian. Collectively, these elements present an innovative critique of the late Roman admission but they also point the way forward: a return to a ritual self-presentation more akin to that of the Principate, which Alexander consistently adopts after his rejection of fourth-century ceremonial norms. Indeed, as set out in the first section, Alexander's admission repeatedly emphasises equality between himself and the senators and presents the emperor as a *primus inter pares*. Essentially, it presents him as a *civilis princeps*. In this section, I will contextualise this emphasis on the importance of *civilitas* with a view to deepening our understanding of debates about ideal rule in the fourth century: first I will examine the view of *civilitas* in fourth-century literature and show that writers in this period were not as uniformly positive towards this quality as often supposed. By contrast, I will show that the *Historia Augusta's* praise of Alexander's *civilis* behaviour in the admission is part of a broader presentation of *civilitas* as central to good government, which thus constitutes a distinctive defence of this quality and a contribution to contemporary debates about ideal rule.<sup>78</sup>

It is not infrequently asserted, and with some justification, that *civilitas* remained central to the fourth-century conception of the good emperor.<sup>79</sup> However, the picture in this century is still significantly more complex and varied than under the Principate where authors consistently present *civilitas* as an unquestioned ideal to which rulers should aspire.<sup>80</sup> Aurelius Victor for example, does not mention *civilitas* often: Augustus is *civilis* and Macrinus *incivilis*, while Diocletian's *adoratio* went beyond *civilitas* (*plus*

<sup>77</sup>See e.g. Amm. Marc. 14.11.3, 18.4.3-4; Claud. *In Eutr.* 2.60-70; *Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev.* 23.5-8.

<sup>78</sup>I treat the question of *civilitas* in the *Historia Augusta* and fourth-century literature extensively in Lindholmer 2024.

<sup>79</sup>See especially Scivoletto 1970; Marcone 1985. Wallace-Hadrill, in his landmark study of *civilitas*, likewise asserted that "in the second part of the fourth century there is a marked revival of interest in the ideal [of *civilitas*], evidently associated with the figure of Julian" (1982, 48). The argument of Scivoletto 1970 and Marcone 1985, that *civilitas* retained its importance as an ideal in the fourth century and its literature, is widely accepted: see e.g. Pisapia 1997, 99; García Ruiz 2008, 250 n. 98; Badel 2009, 168-170; Tantillo 2015, 580. However, recently Niccolai 2023, 39-59 has convincingly questioned the fundamental assumption that Julian himself strove for a traditional ideal of *civilitas*. Furthermore, some scholars, mainly focusing on Ammianus Marcellinus, have also pointed out that *civilitas* was not always viewed with unreserved enthusiasm: see e.g. Matthews 1989, 234-237; Kelly 1998, 147-150; Smith 2007, 208-209.

<sup>80</sup>Pliny's panegyric of Trajan, e.g., focuses on *civilitas*: e.g. Plin. *Pan.* 2.7 with Rees 2001, 160-162. *Civilitas* and its cognates are not mentioned explicitly particularly often in the Principate, but the connected ideal of the emperor as *primus inter pares* is central in this period. On *civilitas* under the Principate, see especially Wallace-Hadrill 1982.



*quam civilia*).<sup>81</sup> Likewise, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* only mentions *civilitas* and its cognates once, as it calls Augustus *civilis*.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Eutropius mentions *civilitas* very often and consistently uses it to characterise his “good emperors”: Augustus (who is *civilissimus*), Claudius, Titus, Nerva (likewise *civilissimus*), Trajan, Quintillus, Probus, Constantius Chlorus, Vetricianus, Jovian and Julian are all portrayed as *civiles*.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, Herculius and Gallus are *inciviles*, while Verus and Maximian lack *civilitas*.<sup>84</sup>

By contrast, Ammianus has an ambiguous view of *civilitas*.<sup>85</sup> He thrice portrays Julian as *civilis*, and this emperor’s general, Procopius, as well as the general Ursicinus, much lauded by Ammianus, are likewise *civiles*.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, Constantius claimed to be modelling his life on the *civiles* emperors of the past but his use of *dominus* in reference to himself in letters suggested otherwise, according to Ammianus.<sup>87</sup> This could appear a conventional use of *civilitas* to characterise “good” emperors and individuals, but Ammianus’ Julian is a complex character. Indeed, Ammianus was less than enthused about some of Julian’s shows of *civilitas*, which he characterises as “undignified (*indecore*)” and “affected and cheap (*affectatum et vile*)”. Furthermore, they showed Julian to be “an excessive seeker of empty fame (*nimius captator inanis gloriae*)”, according to Ammianus.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, he commends the supposedly *incivilis* emperor Constantius since “he always maintained the dignity of imperial majesty (*Imperatoriae auctoritatis cothurnum*)”.<sup>89</sup> Lastly, Ammianus pours acidic scorn on *civilitas* as part of his critique of Rome’s senatorial elite: “the height of *civilitas* with these men at present is (*civilitatis autem hoc apud eos est nunc summum*) that it is better for a stranger to kill any man’s brother than to decline his invitation to dinner.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, *civilitas* is treated in a variety of different ways in these historical writers.

Importantly, aside from these writers, *civilitas* and its cognates are seemingly only mentioned in two other works of the fourth century, namely two panegyrics from the *Panegyrici Latini*.<sup>91</sup> Mamertinus’ panegyric of Julian focuses on this quality extensively due to this emperor’s atypical and reactionary self-presentation as an emperor in the mould of the Principate, and Pacatus once portrays Theodosius as *civilis*, but

<sup>81</sup> Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 1, 22, 39.

<sup>82</sup> *Epit. de Caes.* 1.20. This text may, however, be from the sixth century rather than the fourth as traditionally assumed: Stover and Woudhuysen 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Eutr. 7.8, 7.13, 7.21, 8.1, 8.2, 8.4, 9.12, 9.17, 9.28, 10.1, 10.10, 10.16, 10.18.

<sup>84</sup> Eutr. 8.10, 9.27, 10.4, 10.13. On *civilitas* in Eutropius, see especially Scivoletto 1970, 30–43; Ratti 1996a; 1996b, 69–88. Likewise, Bordone 2010, 157 asserts that Eutropius made “*civilitas* il cardine della valutazione dell’operato e delle personalità dei *principes* romani.”

<sup>85</sup> Matthews 1989, 234–237; Smith 2007, 208 likewise stress Ammianus’ ambivalent or critical view of *civilitas*. Neri 1984, 49–52, 56, 61–69, on the other hand, tries to downplay Ammianus’ criticism of Julian’s *civilitas*.

<sup>86</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.1.4, 22.5.3, 25.4.7, 26.6.2–3, 28.1.4.

<sup>87</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.1.3. See also Amm. Marc. 21.16.8.

<sup>88</sup> Amm. Marc. 22.7.1–3.

<sup>89</sup> Amm. Marc. 21.1.6.1. *Contra* Neri 1984, 7–8 who views this passage as critical of Constantius. On Ammianus’ conception of the position of emperor, see especially the excellent chapter in Matthews 1989, 231–252.

<sup>90</sup> Amm. Marc. 28.4.17.

<sup>91</sup> To this we may add Jerome’s chronicle, although it is mainly a translation of the Greek chronicle by Eusebius and therefore different in nature than the other works considered here. He uses (*in*)*civilitas* once: curiously, he notes that Messala Corvinus relinquished his urban prefecture since he considered it *incivilis* (*magistratu se abdicavit incivilem potestatem esse contestans*) (a. 26 BC).

otherwise *civilitas* is absent from Latin literature of this century.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Pacatus only calls Theodosius *civilis* in the context of his visit to Rome where he made “frequent and *civiles* public appearances (*crebro civilique progressu*)”.<sup>93</sup> Importantly, when visiting Rome, such behaviour was expected from the emperor as a sign of respect for the history of the hallowed city and its senators. This is exemplified by Constantius who, after an *adventus* in which pomp and majesty predominated, afterwards acted *civiliter* by speaking in the Senate and showed regard for the traditional *libertas* of the Roman plebs, according to Ammianus.<sup>94</sup> Pacatus is seemingly praising Theodosius for living up to this tradition, and he thus views *civilitas* as mainly appropriate to Rome. This is a very narrow view of the importance and appropriateness of *civilitas* and John Matthews has even labelled this *civilis* behaviour in Rome as “relics of the past”.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the outlook on *civilitas* in fourth-century literature is less monolithic than sometimes supposed: Aurelius Victor and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* mention *civilitas* rarely and do not attach particular importance to it; Pacatus briefly praises *civilis* behaviour but only does so in the context of Rome; Mamertinus aligns himself with the self-presentation of Julian in his extensive focus on *civilitas*; Ammianus Marcellinus mentions *civilitas* often but views it as a quality that could become problematic in excessive measures; while Eutropius focuses on *civilitas* consistently and views it as a key ingredient in the figure of the good emperor. Furthermore, this overview also highlights the relative rarity of *civilitas* in fourth-century literature, as only Ammianus and Eutropius, aside from the *Historia Augusta*, repeatedly engage with the *topos* of *civilitas*, albeit in markedly different ways.<sup>96</sup>

It is against this background that we must understand the significance and distinctiveness of the *Historia Augusta*’s focus on Alexander Severus’ admission and the connected engagement with the theme of *civilitas*. As already mentioned, this ritual presented Alexander Severus as a *civilis princeps*, which is part of a broader focus on this quality in the *Historia Augusta* in general. For example, Antoninus Pius, Verus and Marcus Aurelius are all called *civiles*, while Hadrian is *civilissimus*.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Pertinax is praised for always acting *civiliter* at the admission, which underlines the importance of *civilitas* in this ritual for the anonymous author.<sup>98</sup> So far, the *Historia Augusta*’s use of *civilitas* parallels Eutropius in the sense that good emperors are described as *civiles*. In other words, *civilitas* becomes a moral quality characterising good rulers.

<sup>92</sup>According to the Library of Latin Texts. *Civilis* behaviour may of course still be praised without mentioning *civilitas* or its cognates (e.g. Claud. *Cons. Hon IV* 294–295), but such instances do not upend the basic picture that emerges from the analysis of explicit mentions of *civilitas*. See also Lindholmer 2024.

<sup>93</sup>*Pan. Lat.* 2(12).47.3.

<sup>94</sup>*Amm. Marc.* 16.10.13–14. *Contra* Neri 1984, 49–52 who views Ammianus’ description as a critique of Constantius disregarding the requirements of *civilitas* during his visit in Rome. Guidetti 2018a, 25–26; Moser 2018, 288–292; Diefenbach 2019, 78–92 disagree. See also Matthews 1989, 233–234.

<sup>95</sup>Matthews 1989, 234. Likewise, MacCormack 1981, 42.

<sup>96</sup>This nuances the views of Scivoletto 1970; Marcone 1985 who portray *civilitas* as a widely diffused ideal in the fourth century. It is worth noting that *civilitas* continued to be a key marker of a good emperor in some writers all the way into the sixth century: Cassiod. 9.14.8, 9.19.3; Ennod. *Pan.* 3.11, 4.15; Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.2.1. See also Saitta 1993.

<sup>97</sup>*Hist. Aug. Ant. Pius* 11.8, *Hadr.* 20.1, *Marc. Aur.* 8.1.

<sup>98</sup>*Hist. Aug. Pert.* 9.9.

However, the *Historia Augusta* takes a step further and ties *civilitas* directly to stable government. Firstly, it is worth noting the *Historia Augusta*'s description of Hadrian: "*Civilissimus* in his conversations, even with the very humble, he denounced all who, in the belief that they were thereby maintaining the imperial dignity, begrudged him the pleasure of such friendliness (*In conloquiis etiam humillimorum civilissimus fuit, detestans eos qui sibi hanc voluptatem humanitatis quasi servantes fastigium principis inviderent*)."<sup>99</sup> It is striking that Hadrian emphasises that *civilitas* did not undermine the dignity (*fastigium*) of imperial rule. In other words, this virtue did not affect imperial rule and its authority negatively. This was even the case when the emperor was *civilissimus*; in contrast to Ammianus, emperors could not be too *civiles* in the *Historia Augusta*.

The link between *civilitas* and stable, constructive rule becomes even clearer in the biography of Antoninus Pius: he "reduced the imperial pomp to the utmost *civilitas* (*imperatorium fastigium ad summam civilitatem deduxit*) and thereby gained the greater esteem (*plus crevit*), though the palace-attendants opposed this course, for they found that since he made no use of go-betweens, they could in no wise terrorise men or take money for decisions about which there was no concealment."<sup>100</sup> Thus, *civilitas* caused Antoninus to obtain "greater esteem (*plus crevit*)", but it also prevented imperial underlings from selling favours, which is a persistent problem in the *Historia Augusta*.<sup>101</sup>

In the life of Alexander, *civilitas* is also presented not merely as a moral quality but as a key ingredient to good rule: Alexander's female family members "would often upbraid him for excessive *civilitas* (*nimiam civilitatem*), saying, 'You have made your rule too gentle and the authority of the empire less respected'. He would reply: 'But I have made it more secure and more lasting' (*dicerent, 'molliorem tibi potestatem et contemptibilem imperii fecisti, ille respondit, 'sed securiorem atque diuturniorem'*). In short, he never allowed a day to pass without doing some kind, some generous, or some righteous deed (*aliquid mansuetum, civile pium fecit*), and yet he never ruined the public treasury."<sup>102</sup> Firstly, *civilitas* is presented as securing Alexander's *imperium* and *potestas*, thereby ensuring the longevity of his reign. Secondly, we again see an emperor rejecting accusations of excessive *civilitas*, just as in the biography of Hadrian. Thirdly, the anonymous author also underlines that Alexander's daily shows of *civilitas* did not ruin the public treasury. The author here seems to anticipate potential objections, explaining that *civilitas* did not entail emptying the treasury to gain popularity or please one's subjects. The emperor could be *civilis*, and thereby obtain the positive effects of this virtue, without ruining the public treasury.<sup>103</sup>

Alexander is thoroughly idealised by the *Historia Augusta* and Alexander's response above therefore cannot be rejected as the ramblings of a naïve youth. More significantly, *incivilitas* is elsewhere tied to the loss of legitimacy and death of the emperor: the anonymous author asserts that the murder of Macrinus and his son was directly

<sup>99</sup>Hist. Aug. Hadr. 20.1.

<sup>100</sup>Hist. Aug. Ant. Pius 6.4.

<sup>101</sup>See e.g. Hist. Aug. Hadr. 21.2, Heliogab. 10.2, Alex. Sev. 35.5–36.3.

<sup>102</sup>Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev. 20.3–4.

<sup>103</sup>Aside from the explicit mentions of *civilitas* in the life of Alexander, this emperor is also repeatedly presented as an equal of the senators: e.g., Alexander in a speech exhorts the senators to "in your greatness hold me as one of yourselves" (Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev. 11.5). See also Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev. 4.3.

attributable to the former's "harsh and *incivilis* rule (*incivilem [...] atque asperum principatum*)."<sup>104</sup> Likewise, Aurelian is described as *incivilius* since he used too severe punishments for the defeated leaders of revolts and he even "killed some senators of noble birth, though the charges against them were trivial".<sup>105</sup> Consequently, "men ceased to love and began to fear an excellent princeps (*princeps optimus*), some asserting that such an emperor should be hated and not desired, others that he was a good physician indeed, but the methods he used for healing were bad."<sup>106</sup> Thus, although Aurelian was a *princeps optimus*, his *incivilitas* undermined his legitimacy as emperor in the eyes of his elite subjects.

Against this background, the fictitious descriptions of the admission in the biography of Alexander become more than just a narrow critique of fourth-century ritual praxis: Alexander's admission is fundamentally an expression of and emphasis on this emperor's *civilitas*, and it is diametrically opposed to the late Roman admission. By extension, then, the late Roman admission is an expression of *incivilitas*, a characterisation that would have resonated with fourth-century readers given the kneeling, use of *dominus* and bejewelled clothes at the admission in this period. Indeed, Aurelius Victor describes Diocletian's admission as *plus quam civilia*, as mentioned above. Thus, the *Historia Augusta* arguably portrays the fourth-century *adoratio* not merely as a break with tradition and a moral failing to be castigated, but as prohibiting *civilitas* in the emperor. This becomes highly significant when combined with the *Historia Augusta*'s presentation of *civilitas* as an essential ingredient of stable and constructive rule: against this background, the *incivilitas* of the *adoratio* can be seen as undermining imperial rule more broadly. As the biographies of Macrinus and Aurelian show, such *incivilitas* resulted in the hatred of one's subjects and, ultimately, the murder of the emperor.

This conception of *civilitas* as a key ingredient of stable imperial rule is highly distinctive: it contrasts sharply with Ammianus who views Julian's attempts at *civilis* behaviour as excessive and as undermining the dignity of imperial rule. It also deviates from the seemingly common view of *civilis* comportment as something mainly appropriate to Rome, a "relic" in the words of Matthews. Rather, the anonymous author underlines the necessity of making the anomalously *civilis* imperial behaviour in Rome universal, of making it a cornerstone of imperial rule. The *Historia Augusta* does evince some parallels with Eutropius who likewise defends the importance of the traditional virtue of *civilitas*. However, Eutropius portrays *civilitas* mainly as a moral quality that characterises numerous rulers, and he never explores practical consequences or effects on imperial legitimacy and power deriving from *civilitas*. By contrast, the *Historia Augusta* ties (in)civilitas directly to the stability of imperial rule and the fall and survival of emperors.

The *Historia Augusta*'s critique of the fourth-century admission and the lack of imperial *civilitas* may appear out of place in the late fourth or early fifth century. However, as pointed out by Christopher Kelly, "the construction, presentation and perception of imperial power [in the later Roman Empire] remained disputed territory. The fourth century, in particular, was marked by an unresolved tension between traditional

<sup>104</sup>*Hist. Aug. Diad.* 8.2. A similar evaluation is found in *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 22.

<sup>105</sup>*Hist. Aug. Aurel.* 21.6.

<sup>106</sup>*Hist. Aug. Aurel.* 21.8.

moralizing views of imperial power, which stressed the close relationship between citizen and king, and other, more ceremonial versions which emphasized the distance between subject and ruler.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Eutropius focused extensively on the virtue of *civilitas*. Likewise, despite Ammianus’ ambiguous view of *civilitas*, he does praise several individuals for this quality and he criticises the *adoratio* as a “foreign and royal (*externo et regio*)” custom.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, the critique of Diocletian’s admission for breaking with tradition was not limited to a conservative, Rome-based senatorial elite, as evidenced by the criticism in Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Jerome and Ammianus, four writers with very different backgrounds.<sup>109</sup>

Furthermore, a few decades before the *Historia Augusta*, Julian’s reign had sparked a renewed focus on *civilitas*, and at least once he had conducted an admission that stressed *civilitas* along the lines of the Principate.<sup>110</sup> Both Mamertinus and Eutropius praise Julian’s *civilitas* and the latter incorporated *civilitas* as a key element of his evaluation of emperors. On the other hand, Pacatus in his panegyric of Theodosius from 389 was significantly more reserved, viewing *civilitas* as mainly appropriate for Rome. Shortly hereafter, what was perceived as Julian’s *civilis* behaviour came under attack from Ammianus who thought that his *civilitas* at times was excessive and therefore undignified.<sup>111</sup> The *Historia Augusta*’s Alexander Severus was likewise upbraided for “excessive *civilitas* (*nimiam civilitatem*)”, but his answer quoted above and the *Historia Augusta*’s presentation of *civilitas* more broadly underline that this quality, in the anonymous author’s eyes, could never come in excessive quantities. The *Historia Augusta*’s praise of *civilitas* as key to imperial government can thus be viewed partly as a response to criticisms of Julian and his *civilitas*, and perhaps as a response to Ammianus’ critique specifically given that the two were likely roughly contemporary.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup>Kelly 1998, 149–150.

<sup>108</sup>It has been argued that Ammianus was neutral towards the *adoratio* (Matthews 1989, 245–246; Smith 2007, 215–216; Zinsli 2014, 647) and he does at times mention it dispassionately or as a special honour (e.g. 15.5.18, 21.6.2, 21.9.8). However, Ammianus’ assertion that the *adoratio* was “foreign and royal” indicates a critical attitude that could co-exist with a pragmatic acceptance of this element as part of imperial government.

<sup>109</sup>Amm. Marc. 15.5.18; Aur. Vict. Caes. 39; Eutr. 9.26; Jer. Chron. s.a. 296. On their backgrounds, see Bird 1984, V–XV; 1993, XII–XVIII; 1994, VII–XI; Matthews 1989, 8–13; Scheck 2010, 3–8. They all draw on the *Kaisergeschichte* (Alföldi 1970, 6–9; or the lost history of Aurelius Victor: Stover and Woudhuysen 2023), but it is still significant that they all chose to include the critique of Diocletian’s admission.

<sup>110</sup>Julian’s grand admission on New Year’s Day in Constantinople stressed *civilitas*: Pan. Lat. 3(11).28.1–4. However, this may have been anomalous and his daily admission may have been more in line with fourth-century praxis: Amm. Marc. 21.6.2; Greg. Naz. Or. 4.80.

<sup>111</sup>Libanius also testifies to debates about Julian’s shows of *civilitas*: for example, commenting on Julian’s excited reaction to one of his speeches, Libanius writes that “some of our boors would assert that in his excitement he forgot the dignity of his position, but anyone who is aware of what it is that makes kingship an object of reverence would maintain that he stayed within the bounds of what is proper” (Lib. Autob. 129). See also Lib. Or. 18.155 where he praises Julian for leaping up in the Senate at the coming of a philosopher, an act which Ammianus later criticised heavily: Amm. Marc. 22.7.3.

<sup>112</sup>This ties in with the long-standing theory that the *Historia Augusta*’s Alexander was modelled on Julian: the connection between Alexander and Julian was first noted by Baynes 1926 and more recently by Rohrbacher 2016, 147–150. One could be tempted, therefore, to find parallels between their predecessors, Elagabalus and Constantius II, as did Baynes 1926, 101, 139. However, Elagabalus’ portrayal is probably rather modelled on Constantine: Turcan 1988; Fowden 1991; Ruggini 1991; Zinsli 2005.

The *Historia Augusta's* distinctive view of *civilitas* raises the question of audience. It is generally assumed that the anonymous author was based in Rome, for example because authorial self-references place the *scriptores* there and because anecdotes and digressions frequently focus on this city as well.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, traditional senatorial values permeate the work, as exemplified by Alexander's admission. Consequently, it is often assumed that the intended audience was Rome's senatorial aristocracy or a part thereof, and it has indeed recently been asserted that "it is beyond question [...] that the author primarily focused precisely on the [...] aristocracy of the city of Rome."<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the biographies of Marius Maximus were seemingly in vogue in Rome in this period, and the *Historia Augusta* would therefore have fit excellently with elite tastes.<sup>115</sup> A senatorial audience, and an author sympathetic to their views (perhaps even senatorial himself), may contribute to explain the *Historia Augusta's* distinctive view of the importance of *civilitas*: Rome's senatorial elite would have been especially receptive to this view since *civilitas* entailed an emperor who acted as a *primus inter pares* in relation to the senators and, as set out above, emperors did in fact routinely show Rome's senators respect by acting *civiliter* when visiting the capital. Thus, just like Ammianus' somewhat ambiguous view of *civilitas* was probably influenced by his background as a military man from the east, the *Historia Augusta's* emphasis on the importance of *civilitas* may be viewed as fundamentally coloured by Rome's senatorial culture.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the admission of Alexander Severus as described in the *Historia Augusta* is suffused with ritual elements from the fourth-century admission, which functions as a critique of this ritual and an attempt to challenge imperial self-presentation in the late Roman admission by reframing it, and thereby the emperor, as Persian. The descriptions of the admission of Alexander are also part of a wider emphasis on the importance of *civilitas* to sound and stable government in the *Historia Augusta*, which engages with contemporary debates about ideal rule.

These conclusions elucidate the wider nature and aims of the *Historia Augusta*: as mentioned in the Introduction, one scholarly position excludes any serious engagement with politics or religion, and entertainment and deception are instead viewed as the central preoccupations. The *Historia Augusta* is a complex work with many layers at work simultaneously, and the descriptions of Alexander's admission might indeed include humour and erudite literary allusions. However, for the majority of ancient readers, the most immediately discernible function of these descriptions was

<sup>113</sup>See e.g. Aurel. 1-3, Car. 2-3, Prob. 2.1. See also Thomson 2012, 54-59.

<sup>114</sup>Haake 2015, 293. Likewise Thomson 2012, 54: "Clearly, our imposter sought out readers among the great houses of the Roman aristocracy, among the senatorial order, and among scholars and teachers associated with these groups." See also Thomson 2012, 54-66. On the other hand, the *Historia Augusta* is seen by some as the work of a "rogue scholar" intended for a small audience of fellow grammarians: Syme 1968, 183-202; 1971b, 89; 1983, 128-129; Mader 2005, 168-169; Rohrbacher 2016, 170-172. However, the *Historia Augusta* could have catered to different audiences simultaneously. Thomson 2012, 103-114 argues that the work circulated little outside the family of the Symmachi, but the actual audience should be separated from the audience intended by the author.

<sup>115</sup>Amm. Marc. 28.4.14. Paschoud 1999; Stover and Woudhuysen 2023, 235-334 have, however, questioned whether Marius Maximus the biographer existed.



to criticise the late Roman admission. The *Historia Augusta* presents the hitherto most developed critique of this ritual, reframing it as a *mos persicus* and challenging imperial self-presentation. This shows that, while the *Historia Augusta* is no doubt entertaining and even if one accepts that an all-encompassing political or religious purpose is difficult to discern, this enigmatic work also includes distinctive political points and engagement with contemporary debates, which were taken seriously by the readers.

Lastly, this article also aimed to illustrate, through the case study of the *Historia Augusta*, the wider importance of literary representations of the admission and rituals more broadly. Numerous ancient writers incorporate rituals in their works but this is not merely a reflection of reality; rather, emperors presented certain images of themselves through ritual, and literary representations of ritual could then support and strengthen or challenge this imperial self-presentation. Essentially, the enactment of rituals and their literary representations are inextricably interlinked and constitute a struggle over the meaning of ritual which is continuously being configured and reconfigured. In order to understand the significance of ritual, it is thus central to explore both sides of this two-way communication, focusing not only on the rituals themselves but recognising the complexity and fluidity of meaning that literary representations of ritual entail.

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