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Robert Turcan

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Un descendant de Bédouins fixés à Emèse, en Syrie, passe pour le fils adultérin d'un empereur assassiné. Il sert passionnément le culte d'un aérolithe qui passe pour figurer le soleil : Elagabal. Il continuerait volontiers à danser devant l'idole si une grand-mère avide de régner sous son nom ne le faisait proclamer empereur. Loin de renoncer à sa vocation sacerdotale, l'empereur-prêtre, qu'on surnommera Héliogabale, prétend imposer à Rome et aux Romains, à la barbe de Jupiter Capitolin, l'adoration de la pierre noire, ramenée des confins du désert. Rome réagit mal à cette volonté. L'exotisme audiovisuel d'une liturgie barbare choque son sens de la dignité. De surcroît, l'adolescent joue de son pouvoir pour jouir et régner autrement que ses prédécesseurs. Les gamineries, les farces cruelles, la gourmandise inventive, la sexualité frustrée ou pseudo-érotique de ce prince immature ont alimenté la chronique scandaleuse de l'historiographie romaine, qui fait paradoxalement d'Héliogabale un précurseur du premier empereur chrétien.Ce règne éphémère ressemble aux Saturnales d'une révolution manquée, le tout sur fond de complot familial, avec une aïeule inquiète de perdre sa position à la cour et une tante soucieuse de pousser son fils Sévère-Alexandre sur l'échiquier du pouvoir.Le cadavre de l'empereur-prêtre sera jeté dans le Tibre, en pâture aux poissons qu'il aimait naguère servir à table.Ancien élève de l'Ecole normale supérieure, ancien membre de l'Ecole française de Rome, professeur à l'Université de Lyon, Robert Turcan s'est consacré à l'étude des religions du monde romain, en particulier à l'archéologie figurée du dionysisme et des cultes orientaux (Mithra, Cybèle et Attis).

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