

# **Senatorial Spectacle After the Disgusting Murder of Elagabalus**

Aelius Lampridius



# Table of Contents

<u>Senatorial Spectacle After the Disgusting Murder of Elagabalus</u> .....	1
<u>Aelius Lampridius</u> .....	2

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excerpt from the Life of Severus Alexander by Aelius Lampridius

VI. It will not be without interest to re-read the oration in which Alexander refused the names of Antoninus and "the Great," which were offered him by the senate. But before I quote it, I will insert the acclamations of the senate, by which these names were decreed.

Extract from the City Gazette:

On the day before the Nones of March, when the senate met in full session in the Senate-Chamber (that is, in the Temple of Concord, a formally consecrated sanctuary), and when Aurelius Alexander Caesar Augustus had been requested to proceed thither and, after at first refusing for the reason that he knew that action was to be taken with regard to his titles, had finally appeared before the senate, the following acclamations were uttered:

"Augustus, free from all guilt, may the gods keep you! Alexander, our Emperor, may the gods keep you! The gods have given you to us, may the gods preserve you! The gods have rescued you from the hands of the foul man, may the gods preserve you forever! You too have endured the foul tyrant, you too had reason to grieve that the filthy and foul one lived. The gods have cast him forth root and branch, and you have they saved. The infamous emperor has been duly condemned. Happy are we in your rule, happy too is the state. The infamous emperor has been dragged with the hook, as an example of what men should fear; justly punished is the voluptuous emperor, punished justly he who defiled the public honours. May the gods in Heaven grant long life to Alexander! Thus are the judgments of the gods revealed."

VII. And when Alexander had expressed his thanks the acclamations rose again: "Antoninus Alexander, may the gods keep you! Aurelius Antoninus, may the gods keep you! Antoninus Pius, may the gods keep you! Receive the name Antoninus, we beseech you. Grant to our righteous emperors this boon, that you should be called Antoninus. Purify the name of the Antonines. Purify what he has defiled. Restore to its former glory the name of the Antonines. Let the blood of the Antonines know itself once more. Avenge the wrongs of Marcus. Avenge the wrongs of Verus. Avenge the wrongs of Bassianus. Worse than Commodus is Elagabalus alone. No emperor he, nor Antoninus, nor citizen, nor senator, nor man of noble blood, nor Roman. In you is our salvation, in you our life. That we may have joy in living, long life to Alexander of the house of the Antonines! That we may have joy in living, let him be called Antoninus. The temples of the Antonines let an Antoninus consecrate. The Parthians and the Persians let an Antoninus vanquish. The sacred name let the consecrated receive. The sacred name let the pure receive. May the gods remember the name of Antoninus, may the gods preserve the honours of the Antonines! In you are all things, through you are all things. Hail, O Antoninus!"

VIII. After these acclamations Aurelius Alexander Caesar Augustus spoke: "I thank you, O Conscript Fathers, and not now for the first time, both for the name of Caesar and for the life that has been spared to me, and also because you have bestowed on me the name of Augustus, the office of Pontifex Maximus, the tribunician power, and the proconsular command, all of which you have conferred on me without precedent on a single day."

And when he had spoken, they cried out: "These honours you have accepted, now accept also the name Antoninus. Let the senate be deemed worthy of this boon, let the Antonines be deemed worthy. Antoninus Augustus, may the gods keep you, may the gods preserve you as Antoninus! Let the name of Antoninus appear again on our coins. Let an Antoninus consecrate the temples of the Antonines."

Then Aurelius Alexander Augustus spoke again: "Do not, I beseech you, O Conscript Fathers, do not force upon me the necessity of so difficult a task, that I should be constrained to do justice to so great a name, when even this very name which I now bear, albeit a foreign one, seems to weigh heavily upon me. For all illustrious names are burdensome indeed. Who, pray, would give the name of Cicero to one who was dumb, or Varro to one who was unlearned, or Metellus to one who was undutiful? And who would endure — though this may the gods forbend! — that the man who failed to live up to the tradition of his name should continue to dwell amid the most

## Senatorial Spectacle After the Disgusting Murder of Elagabalus

illustrious forms of honour?"

IX. Again the same acclamations as above. Again the Emperor spoke: "How great was the name, or rather the divinity, of the Antonines, Your Clemency remembers well. If you think of righteousness, who was more holy than Pius? If of learning, who more wise than Marcus? If of innocence, who more honest than Verus? If of bravery, who more brave than Bassianus? For on Commodus I have no wish to dwell, who was the more depraved for this very reason, that with those evil ways of his he still held the name of Antoninus. Diadumenianus, moreover, had neither the time nor the years, and it was only through his father's artifice that he seized upon this name."

Again the same acclamations as above. Again the Emperor spoke: "Surely, not long ago, O Conscript Fathers, when that filthiest of all creatures, both two-footed and four-footed, vaunted the name of Antoninus, and in baseness and debauchery outdid a Nero, a Vitellius, and a Commodus, you remember what groanings arose from all, and how in the gatherings of the populace and of all honourable men there was but a single cry — that he was unworthy to bear the name of Antoninus, and that by such a plague as he that great name was profaned."

When he had spoken, there were again acclamations: "May the gods avert such evils! We fear them not with you as our emperor. We are safe from them with you as our leader. You have triumphed over vice, you have triumphed over crime, you have triumphed over dishonour. You will add lustre to the name of Antoninus. We foresee it surely, we foresee it clearly. From your childhood on we have esteemed you, now too we esteem you."

Again the Emperor: "It is not that I shrink, O Conscript Fathers, from accepting this revered name merely because I fear that my life may fall into vices which will cause me to feel shame for the name; but I do not desire to take a name which, in the first place, belongs to a house that is no kin to me, and, in the second, I feel assured, will weigh heavily upon me."

X. And when he had spoken, there were acclamations as before. Again he spoke: "If indeed I take the name of Antoninus, I may take also the name of Trajan, the name of Titus, and the name of Vespasian."

And when he had spoken, there were acclamations: "As you are now Augustus, so also be Antoninus."

Again the Emperor: "I see, O Conscript Fathers, what impels you to bestow upon us this name also. The first Augustus was the first founder of this Empire, and to his name we all succeed, either by some form of adoption or by hereditary claim. Even the Antonines themselves bore the name of Augustus. Likewise the first Antoninus gave his name to Marcus and also to Verus by a process of adoption, while in the case of Commodus it was inherited, in Diadumenianus assumed, in Bassianus simulated, but in Aurelius it would be a mockery."

And when he had spoken, there were acclamations: "Alexander Augustus, may the gods keep you! May the gods in Heaven look with favour upon your modesty, your wisdom, your integrity, your purity! Hence we can see what an emperor you will be, and hence we esteem you. You will be a proof that the senate can choose its rulers with wisdom. You will be a proof that the choice of the senate is the best of all. Alexander Augustus, may the gods keep you! Let Alexander Augustus consecrate the temples of the Antonines. Our Caesar, our Augustus, our emperor, may the gods keep you! May you be victorious, may you prosper, and may you rule for many years!"

XI. Alexander the Emperor spoke: "I perceive, O Conscript Fathers, that I have obtained my desire, and I count it as gain, feeling and expressing the deepest gratitude. And I will endeavour to make the name which I bring to this office so famous that it will be coveted by future emperors and be bestowed upon the righteous in testimony of your loyalty."

Thereupon there were acclamations: "O Great Alexander, may the gods keep you! If you have rejected the surname Antoninus, accept then the praenomen of 'the Great.' O Great Alexander, may the gods keep you!"

And when they had cried this out many times, Alexander Augustus spoke: "It would be easier, O Conscript Fathers, to take the name of the Antonines, for in so doing I should make some concession either to kinship or to a joint possession in that imperial name. But why should I accept the name of 'the Great'? What great thing have I done? Alexander, indeed, received it after great achievements, and Pompey after great triumphs. Be silent then, O revered Fathers, and do you in your greatness hold me as one of yourselves rather than force upon me the use of the name 'the Great.'"

XII. Thereupon they cried out: "Aurelius Alexander Augustus, may the gods keep you!" and all the rest in the usual manner.