

Sonja Nadolny: Die severischen Kaiserfrauen. Stuttgart: Steiner 2016 (Palingenesia 104). 257 S., 10 Abb. € 52.00. ISBN: 978-3-515-11311-3.

The dominant position of women in the Severan dynasty (193-235 CE) has often been remarked upon in scholarship, but with the exception of Julia Domna, has not come under much scrutiny.¹ Sonja Nadolny seeks to remedy this by placing the public role of the four most prominent *Augustae* of the Severan house – Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea – at the focus of her study. In her analysis, she has made the very sensible decision not to start from the literary sources, which provide a very limited and distorted perspective, viewing the influence of imperial women predominantly through the lens of the emperor's character, family dynamics and unverifiable rumours of what happened within the palace walls, while leaving more structural causes of the empress's growing public role out of consideration. Instead, Nadolny first turns her attention to non-literary media of imperial representation and reception: imperial coinage, provincial coinage and inscriptions.

After the goals and structure of the study have been explained in the introduction, the second chapter provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the presence of the Severan empresses on imperial coinage. Recognizing the problems inherent in reconstructing absolute numbers of coins, Nadolny chooses numbers of coin types as the basis for her analysis. She demonstrates that both in absolute and in relative terms, Domna, Maesa and Mamaea (but not Soaemias) are represented on a greater share of coin types than almost any previous Roman empress. Moreover, they are not just associated with such 'feminine' virtues as *fecunditas* and *pudicitia*, but also with themes concerning the imperial house as a whole, including military matters and *liberalitas*. With the exception of Domna, their role as the producers of the next generation receives no emphasis, but their identity as mothers is politicized through such titles as *mater castrorum*, *mater senatus* and *mater patriae*, forging symbolic ties between the empresses and relevant social groups. The

1 For Julia Domna, see: B. M. Levick: *Julia Domna. Syrian Empress*. London/New York 2007; J. Langford: *Maternal Megalomania. Julia Domna and the Imperial Politics of Motherhood*. Baltimore 2013. For the Severan women in general: E. Kettenhofen: *Die syrischen Augustae in der historischen Überlieferung. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Orientalisierung*. Bonn 1979 (*Antiquitas* III 24). A more popular approach is offered by: G. Turton: *The Syrian Princesses. The Women Who Ruled Rome, AD 193-235*. London 1974.

Severan women, in short, were full-blown participants in a style of representation which placed not just the person of the emperor, but the whole imperial house at the centre of public attention.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the reception of these messages by looking at the roles of Domna, Maesa, Soemias and Mamaea in provincial coinage and the epigraphic record. Due to the lack of comprehensive, up-to-date catalogues for these sources, Nadolny draws on several works, including von Aulock's *SNG* and Sear's catalogue for provincial coins and the *CIL* for inscriptions. As was the case with imperial coinage, remarkably high percentages of provincial coin types are devoted to the Severan empresses, particularly to Domna and Mamaea. This pattern is not bound to a specific region, but can be seen all over the East. With regard to inscriptions, Nadolny shows that the vast majority of these were erected by local elites, soldiers or civil servants, who formed the provincial backbone of the Empire. It is remarkable that many of the titles with which they honoured the Severan empresses, in particular Maesa and Mamaea, are first introduced as local initiatives and are only later, if at all, incorporated into official imperial representation. Evidently, provincials were not only well aware of the great prominence attributed to the empresses by the central administration, but showed no hesitation in honouring them and even developed new initiatives for doing so.

In Chapter 4, Nadolny finally turns to the main literary sources for the Severan period: Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. Treating each work in turn, she first discusses the author's circumstances, notions of good emperorship and attitude towards imperial women, followed by detailed discussions of their depictions of Domna, Maesa, Soemias and Mamaea. The summary at the end of the chapter follows the same scheme, which makes it rather repetitive; better would have been a recap organized around the four empresses. Nadolny rejects most of the evidence from the *Historia Augusta*, since most of its material is either derived from the older sources, or concerns itself with dubious and unverifiable stories about omens, miracles, scandals and excesses. With regard to the evidence in Dio and Herodian, she concludes that it is generally more reliable and broadly confirms the clues from the numismatic and epigraphic record; namely, that Domna, Maesa and Mamaea (but not Soemias) indeed held an extraordinary amount of influence as empresses.

The fifth and concluding chapter starts with a summary of the findings so far. Nadolny proceeds to discuss the structural developments which allowed

three of the four Severan empresses to play such a prominent role in the imperial administration. She points at the steady transformation of emperors in the second and third centuries, which became more openly autocratic, with rulers legitimizing themselves less through senatorial consent and more through military support. This allowed empresses more room to claim a public role. Two things worked in their favour: their personal access to the emperor, providing them with a basis to cultivate their own networks of patronage, and the fact that they were crucial for the building of dynasties. Still, the power of the empress was never formalized, so that her potential to exert influence always remained dependent on her personal character and circumstances.

The strength of Nadolny's study lies not in the formulation of ideas that are wholly new, but in her rigorously applied methodology, which allows her to make a convincing case that the political influence of Domna, Maesa and Mamaea does not just rest on literary tropes, but was a real thing, rooted in structural changes the Principate was undergoing in the Severan age. She treats both the literary and non-literary evidence with great care, avoiding traps and pitfalls as she builds her conclusions. While the author's inclination to provide lengthy, detailed summaries of what has gone before can at times become repetitive, her line of reasoning is always clear and easy to follow. The inclusion of images of coins and statistical graphs are welcome additions that help to cement her arguments. Somewhat puzzling is the complete absence of sculpture and reliefs from the analysis. For Domna in particular, these could have been used as additional types of evidence to put the literary sources in perspective.

In summary, *Die severischen Kaiserfrauen* is a thorough, well-argued study providing oft-made claims about the political prominence of the Severan empresses with a solid foundation.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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