

Christian Rollinger/Nadine Viermann (eds.): *Empresses-in-Waiting. Female Power and Performance at the Late Roman Court*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2024 (Women in Ancient Cultures). XI, 334 pp., 21 ill. £ 107.00/\$ 140.00. ISBN: 978-1-80207-593-9.

“*Empresses-in-Waiting*” sets out to assess the power and agency that imperial and near-imperial women could exert in the constrained settings of the Late Roman court, and of women’s abilities to act. It is made up of a collection of thirteen papers (including the Introduction and Conclusion), which are divided into three parts: “Political Agency and Power Brokerage” (pp. 41–154); “Performance and Representation” (pp. 155–201); and “Non- and Near-Imperial Women at Court” (pp. 203–260).

The editors of the volume, Christian Rollinger and Nadine Viermann open with an introduction, “*Empresses-in-Waiting? An Introduction*” (pp. 1–13), that sets the scene for the book and introduces the chapters, though their explanation of the structure seems to map onto what must have been an earlier version of the collection. This is followed by an essay by Anja Wieber, “Towards a History of Scholarship on Late Antique Imperial Women: From *Theodora, the Tigress* to Matronage” (pp. 15–39), which is in part a useful summary of previous scholarship on imperial women, in part a setting out of aspects that need future development – the mechanics of power and rule, issues around dynastic prestige, the public and the private, language used of these women, the question of where there might be women’s spaces. Wieber also discusses the term “matronage” and the range of meanings it encompasses. Her proposal is that we should understand the term as specifically female modes and means of expressing and manifesting status, influence, and power in the absence of legal authority.

Five chapters are grouped into the opening section on “Agency and Power”. These all focus on specific imperial women and share an interest in the power of these individuals. Silvia Holm considers Eusebia, wife of Constantius, “Empress with Agency: Eusebia’s Efforts to Consolidate the Constantinian Dynasty” (pp. 43–65). She uses Julian and Ammianus Marcellinus in particular to suggest that Eusebia was a political agent in her own right, promoting and preserving the dynasty of Constantine, in part to maintain her own position. Belinda Washington takes John Chrysostom’s account of the lives of imperial women in his *Letter to a Young Widow*, and sees the references to imperial women as Chrysostom’s way of telling the widow that

things could have been worse (“John Chrysostom’s *Letter to a Young Widow*: Reflections on Imperial Women’s Roles at Regime Change”, pp. 67–95). She looks to identify who these empresses might have been, focusing on their different fates at moments of political conflict and regime change. Both Silvio Roggo and Lewis Dagnall take Sophia, wife of Justin II, as their focus. Roggo argues that Averil Cameron’s¹ influential article on the empress published in 1975 needs reconsideration (“The Empress Sophia Reconsidered”, pp. 97–113). He reassesses the key text of John of Ephesos’ *Ecclesiastical History* in this context, specifically with regard to Sophia’s relationship with Justin’s successor, Tiberios. He suggests that Tiberios was, in fact, more powerful than had been realised and that Sophia’s power and influence was less than Cameron claimed. In this context, the idea that she proposed marriage to Tiberios is seen as hearsay; after Justin’s death, she was secure as empress-mother but not powerful. Dagnall is also concerned with Sophia’s power and influence, but specifically here in the context of imperial foreign policy (“The Empress Sophia and East Roman Foreign Policy”, pp. 115–136). He proposes that Sophia was less in favour of Justin’s hard-line ‘masculine’ views on tribute, managing to shift policy and achieve a truce with Persia. She, as a woman, could act in ways that the emperor, as a man, could not. Finally, Nadine Viermann looks at Martina, wife of Heraklios, who has had a notoriously bad press in the primary sources, specifically in relation to her role after the death of Heraklios in 641 (“Dynasty, Endogamy, and Civil Strife: Martina Augusta and the Role of Imperial Women in the Early Seventh Century”, pp. 137–154). Viermann makes the case that Martina tried to break out of the circumscribed role of mother that this left her in, to be an active player as guardian of her sons. In the end, she failed, underlining that an empress could not rule.

Under the heading of “Performance and Representation”, Mads Ortving Lindholmer contends that Theodora, wife of Justinian, had a place in imperial rituals, most significantly in the ‘admission’, though not in other significant rituals, such as imperial triumphs (“Constructing Power Through Rituals: The Case of Theodora”, pp. 157–176). Based on Procopius, Lindholmer sees this as a regular performance, targeting the aristocracy and emphasising Justinian and Theodora as a couple, and as a manifestation of the empress’ ‘soft power’. The other paper in this section, by Pavla Gkantzios

1 Av. Cameron: The Empress Sophia. In: *Byzantion* 45, 1975, pp. 5–21.

Drápelová is the only contribution to consider visual material [“Empresses on Early Byzantine Coins (Sixth to Seventh Centuries): Evidence of Power?”, pp. 177–201]. Drápelová examines coins depicting empresses from Sophia to Martina. Although each example is different with each empress presented in different ways, there seems to be a common theme, that of emphasising dynastic legitimacy and stability, to a wide public.

The final section is focused on “Non- and Near-Imperial Women”. Geoffrey Nathan looks at Anicia Juliana, for what her life might speak to in terms of elite female behaviours, limits and expectations (“Augusta Unrealized: Anicia Juliana and the Logistics of Place”, pp. 205–222). He sees a parallel between her life and those of imperial women, suggesting that legitimacy is not power and that female power depended on circumstance. Christopher Lillington-Martin considers Procopius’ portrayal of Antonina as ally, or not, of Theodora, in affairs of state (“Antonina *Patricia*: Theodora’s Fixer at the Female Court and the Politics of Gender in Procopius”, pp. 223–241). He explores the relationship between the two women and concludes that though Antonina might have been Theodora’s “fixer”, she acted first and foremost from self-interest. Finally, Marco Cristini discusses Matasuintha, granddaughter of the Gothic king Theoderic and daughter of Amalasuintha, whose marriages took her from Italy to Constantinople (“Matasuintha: From Gothic Queen to Imperial Woman”, pp. 243–260). As Cristini says, very few Late Antique women were both the queen of a post-Roman kingdom and the wife of a candidate for the imperial throne. Matasuintha, as wife of the Gothic leader Vitigis and then of Justinian’s cousin, Germanos, was both, though how far she had agency and power as either is a key element in the discussion.

Finally, Julia Hillner rounds off the volume, knitting together the themes (“Imperial Women after Curtains”, pp. 261–271). She pulls out questions around the problems of co-rulership, especially when associated with spatial segregation (how often did emperor and empress appear side by side in the same place?), around the potential irreplaceability of the empress, linked to dynastic legitimacy and male inheritance of power, and around the violence that so often surrounded these imperial and near imperial woman (as her table of the fates of imperial widows demonstrates only too clearly). Her lasting reflection is about the amount of hard work it took to survive.

Compilation volumes are always tricky in the sense that having one vision run throughout can be problematic. The editors make a virtue out of that,

explaining that it is a collection interested in a variety of imperial and near-imperial women and is concerned with a broad range of questions. In some ways, therefore, the book is a collection of essays about specific imperial or near-imperial women, considering how these women as individuals might have had power and agency. Several of these women are less regularly discussed by scholars – Matasuinthia and Martina, for example. Others – Theodora and Anicia Juliana – are more familiar. But the nature of the volume and the spread of the women covered means that these essays are snapshots, each with different emphases and priorities, and the common themes of the book, well-expressed by Hillner, are harder to spot in the reading of the chapters. I am not sure that the promise of power and performance at court is always apparent. This is not a study of ‘the Late Roman court’ or even ‘Late Roman courts’ (the court in the volume is almost always the court in Constantinople), though it certainly is an important step towards that, and ‘performance’, however defined, does not feel a central theme. And despite the presence of twenty-one figures (though no list of figures), these images play a frustratingly small part in many of the arguments made about power and performance.

What the collection does offer, however, are new insights and good and thought-provoking questions about these women’s abilities to push boundaries through their wealth, family connections and personal connections in a court setting. And the editors are right to make the point that the imperial court, as institution, place of power, and physical space, would benefit from sustained analysis. The editors make the point that to truly understand the scope of imperial female agency in the late antique empire, a holistic approach to that subject is needed and one that firmly situates their potential influence and roles within imperial court society, and that without doubt is correct.

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