

MATERNAL MEGALOMANIA

JULIA DOMNA AND
THE IMPERIAL POLITICS
OF MOTHERHOOD



JULIE LANGFORD

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MATERNAL MEGALOMANIA

To my mother,
Mary R. Langford

*Her children rise up
and call her blessed*

—Prov. 31:28

Julia Domna found me at the observation table in the 2002 American Numismatic Society's Summer Seminar. Blissfully making my way through the collection, picking through tray after tray of coins, I was trying to get a better sense of what iconography and virtues were typical of Roman imperial coinage. When I flipped over an aureus of L. Septimius Severus, I suddenly found myself the object of Julia Domna's gaze (see figure 1). Flanked by her two sons, she was clearly the focus of their attention. Her direct gaze seemed to be a personal guarantee of the words in the legend: FELICITAS SAECVLI "the blessing of/for a generation." This first encounter with the empress unnerved me. I felt a bit like a voyeur whose presence is suddenly acknowledged. Julia Domna caught me looking.

The next two trays I pulled were filled with types and legends flaunting the empress's motherhood. Here she was depicted as a nursing mother, there as the Magna Mater, and in the next tray I learned that she had received the surprising title MATER SENATVS, mother of the Senate. The variety of her types and legends made it clear that she was well publicized, but I noticed that most of these types recalled Faustina the Younger, a woman quite unlike the exotic Julia Domna, daughter of the priest-king of Ba'al. It was my first inkling that these coins were designed not to honor the historical Julia Domna but to publicize the homogenized wife of the emperor and mother of future emperors.

In many ways, this study is a product of my Mormon upbringing. Growing up in Salt Lake City in the 1970s, I witnessed firsthand the political advantages in exalting the ideal of motherhood even while curtailing the influence of individual women. At the University of Utah, I became fascinated by history as tool for thinking through my own issues. I used history to explore how other women found their voices. Of particular interest to me were stories of nuns who carved out space for their own spirituality despite a dictatorial bishop's disapproval. By the time I went to graduate school at Indiana University in 1993, I had grappled with the inevitable clash between my studies and my religion and had

developed a healthy disrespect for authority. But it wasn't until I studied under feminist scholars that I developed the vocabulary to express what I had experienced. Without them, I would not have been able to give words to what I saw at the observation table at the seminar.

I have been blessed with wonderful teachers, colleagues, friends, and family. Without them, this book would not have been written, nor would I have made it through the rigors of graduate school and the dissertation and tenure processes. My mentors at the University of Utah, Glenn Olsen and Lindsay Adams, kindly spent many hours helping me reconcile, rethink, and in some cases reject what I learned from my parents for what I was learning in the classroom. At Indiana University, my friend David Branscome patiently tutored me in Greek and with his wife, Elizabeth Richey, read several drafts of my dissertation chapters. Peter van Alfen and Sebastian Heath at the American Numismatic Society were excellent sounding boards. If they thought my ideas were wacky, they never let on but patiently listened, poked at them a bit, and sent me off with more evidence to consider. Nic Terranato enriched significantly my ideas on ethnicity and empire during the bus ride from Cerveteri to the American Academy in Rome. Ellie Leach, Jim Franklin, and Julie van Voorhis graciously agreed to advise me on a dissertation topic beyond their areas of specialties. They patiently waded through numismatic jargon and helped me apply what I had learned from them to Julia Domna's literary and artistic images. My dissertation was improved greatly by their observations and expertise. Julie and Ellie are still my go-to sources for things art historical.

Rubbing elbows with other Severan scholars has given me the opportunity to test my ideas, and I have been lucky to spend time with two women whom I very much respect. Susann Lusnia generously walked me through Severan Rome one summer, and together Clare Rowan and I haunted the American Numismatic Society vaults and library for several weeks. Susann's archaeological expertise and Clare's numismatic knowledge gave roots to my flighty literary ideas. Conversations with friends and colleagues also shaped and refined my ideas. For these I thank Jason Hawke, Stefanie Levecchi Rossi, Steve Tuck, Trevor Luke, Eric Kondratieff, Elizabeth Green, Heather Vincent, Liv Yarrow, Danielle Kellogg, Mike Nehrdaht, and Sheramy Bundrick. My friend and colleague Jonathan Scott Perry (bless him!) read drafts of this book. I am not sure I ever convinced him of my arguments, but he nonetheless graciously read the full manuscript and offered suggestions. Jim Anderson, Barbara Burrell, Tony Corbeill, Kristina Milnor, and Hans Friedrich Müller also read the manuscript. Their comments

strengthen a number of my arguments, though of course I am responsible for all remaining errors.

Other colleagues at the University of South Florida have caused me to rethink ideas, especially Bill Murray, Eleni Manolaraki, Phil Levy, Anthony DeStefanis, Fraser Ottanelli, Gary Gebhardt, Patrick Kelly, and David Johnson. My graduate students and undergraduate researchers helped to compile, sort, and analyze the inscriptions, provincial coinage, and coin hoards examined in this study. Andrew Bird worked closely with me to identify the handful of inscriptions erected in honor of Julia Domna by military units. Joe Magliocco and Matt Warner helped proofread the manuscript.

My dear friends Liz Cass, Sarah Cox, Davina McClain, Mary Thurlkill, and Naomi Yavneh have been wonderfully supportive, remarkably insightful, and wickedly funny throughout this process. I am a better scholar and person for knowing them. Terry and Kate Johnson witnessed the beginnings of this project. By the time I finished it, Terry had moved to Chicago and Kate was completing her degree at Eckerd College. They dodged a bullet. My husband, John Myers, saw me through the most difficult and final phases of this project. He even singlehandedly planned our wedding while I was finishing the manuscript. I am grateful that he still loves me despite all this and astounded that he is encouraging me to get started on the next manuscript.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Mary Langford, who fed, clothed, and educated seven children on one civil engineer's modest income. She woke us at the crack of dawn to read scripture before we went to school, surreptitiously robbed the grocery budget to pay for our music lessons, and mended her winter coat so that she could buy us new ones. Though she initially disapproved of my decision to pursue a career in academia instead of staying home to raise a family, once she got on board with the idea, she defended it fiercely. She admits that she does not always understand what I am yammering on about, but she is sure nonetheless that it is brilliant. For these and so many other kindnesses, I thank her.

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Introduction

As the historian Herodian tells it, Julia Domna singlehandedly saved the Roman Empire from dissolution and civil war. Less than a year after her sons had assumed the principate, they nearly destroyed the empire. Though the new emperors publicly touted their cooperation and harmony, in private, the young men volleyed constant attacks against each other, even resorting to assassination attempts. Eventually, they decided to abandon all pretense and to divide the empire between them: Caracalla would receive the western provinces, Geta would rule the East. Armies and senators would be distributed equally between the two. As the negotiations drew to a conclusion and the imperial advisors looked on with gloomy acquiescence, Julia Domna at last raised her voice in dissent:

“You have discovered a way to divide the earth and sea, my sons, and to cleave in two the continents at the Pontic Sea. But your mother, how do you propose to divide her? And how am I, wretched woman, to rend myself in two and distribute myself between you? So kill me! Then each of you, after you have carried me off, bury your part near you. And in this way, I should be split along with the earth and sea.” Then amid tears and lamentations, Julia stretched out her hands and clasping both her sons in her arms, tried to draw them together to her. And with everyone pitying her, the meeting adjourned and the project was abandoned. Each youth returned to his half of the imperial palace.¹

In her efforts to preserve the integrity of the Roman Empire, Julia Domna tapped into a fundamental Roman virtue, *pietas*, which demanded an esteem that bordered on reverence for parents, country, and gods. It was *pietas* combined with a healthy dose of guilt and a dash of needling that allowed Julia Domna to save the day. These techniques were likely in the arsenal of every Roman mother. The difference between the empress and other women, however, was her proximity to imperial power, lending her influence not afforded by any constitution. This influence was not without its limits, nor did *pietas* always work in Julia

Domna's favor. Cassius Dio dramatically illustrated this point when he described how Caracalla tricked his brother into dropping his defenses by convincing his mother to arrange a reconciliation for the two sons in her own apartments. Geta guilelessly left all his bodyguards outside her chambers:

But when they were inside, some centurions whom Caracalla had instructed earlier suddenly rushed at Geta, who, upon seeing them, ran to his mother. He hung about her neck and clung to her bosom and breasts, lamenting and crying, "Mother, you who bore me, Mother, you who bore me, help! I am being murdered!" And so tricked in this way, she saw her son perishing at her breast in the most impious fashion. She received him at his death into the very womb, as it were, whence he had been born. For she was all covered with his blood so that she took no notice of the wound she had sustained on her hand. But she was not permitted to weep or mourn for her son, though he had met so miserable an end before his time (for he was only 22 years and nine months old). On the contrary, she was forced to rejoice and laugh, as though at some great good fortune, so closely were all her words, gestures and changes of color observed. Thus, she alone, the Augusta, wife of the emperor and mother of the emperors, was not permitted to shed tears even in private over so great a sorrow.²

If we had only these two vignettes by which to judge the nature of an empress's power, we would be left scratching our heads. One scene presents Julia Domna as so influential that she alone was able to diffuse a situation that would have literally destroyed the empire. Though she held no defined constitutional powers, at times her maternal reproach proved more effective than the powers of the most important officials of the court. The other scene emphasizes Julia Domna's impotence as a woman and mother: she could save the empire, but not her son as he cowered in her arms. Still worse, the most powerful woman of the empire was not permitted to mourn properly for her son, even within the privacy of her home.

Fortunately, there are more vignettes of Julia Domna in a variety of media, though these hardly clarify the contradictions witnessed above. Official Severan propaganda publicized Julia Domna as the mother of the future emperors, associated her with important female deities, and even touted her as the protectress of the empire. Contemporary authors Herodian and Cassius Dio drew inspiration from these images and manipulated them to suit their own agenda. For example, in one reverse type (see figure 2), Julia Domna stands between her two sons, resting a hand on Geta's shoulder while the two young men shake hands to show their unity of purpose in ruling the empire, represented as a globe. The

inscription celebrates the empress's *pietas* while the image depicts a Julia Domna whose mere presence guaranteed familial harmony. But in Herodian's twist on the official version, he paints the boys as so selfish and self-centered that they were willing to pull apart the empire to be free of one another. Only with great reluctance do they yield to their mother's reconciling embrace. In Cassius Dio's anecdote, the empress's *pietas* is no guarantee of harmony. It was through her *pietas*, after all, that she was duped into colluding in Geta's murder.

Clearly, these three portraits present conflicting evidence concerning the empress's degree of influence. Recognizing inconsistencies in portrayals of other imperial women, recent scholarship rejects similar literary portraits as being merely descriptive. Rather, scholars assert that such images were rhetorical tools used to praise or to blame the women's male relatives.³ Among friends, the virtuous qualities of women indirectly called attention to laudable qualities in their male relatives.⁴ In the hands of enemies, women's characters could likewise be proof of their men's worthlessness and depravity.

The high drama and conflicting portraits of the empress in the passages above ought to raise other concerns among historians, alerting us that here, too, we have entered the "world of declamation," where all is not as it seems, and where rhetoric is at play.⁵ As is true with other prominent Roman imperial women, Julia Domna's images are a complex mixture of literary and visual narratives that, depending on the speaker's agenda, might at one moment showcase her maternal and wifely virtues, while at the next accuse her of ambition, adultery, and incest. These literary sources are not reliable in helping us locate the real Julia Domna; they cannot tell us who she was in private, what she felt about her position as a mother, or how involved in shaping imperial policy she really was.

Rather than read these passages and imperial propaganda at face value, expecting them to tell us something of the historical Julia Domna and her influence in the imperial court, I propose that we ask what they tell us about the authors and their attitudes toward the empress's male relatives.⁶ By approaching the evidence in this light, we can better explain the clash of realities between the official narrative as represented by the coin and the unofficial narratives as related in historians' anecdotes. In short, rather than use these texts and images in an attempt to peek behind the curtain of rhetoric to find the real Julia Domna, I intend to examine the rhetoric itself. In the empress's portraits drawn by the imperial administration, the military, the Senate, and the populations of Rome, I find evidence not so much for the historical Julia Domna as for ideological negotiations that took place between the creators of these images.

This approach reaps immediate rewards. Even a quick comparison of the coin

with the narratives above reveals that through Julia Domna and her maternity, Dio and Herodian castigated her male relatives, painting them in the worst possible light. Herodian's anecdotes depict an imperial court in such chaos and crisis that only a mother's guilt could persuade the emperors to put aside their differences and do their jobs. If examining this passage only to excavate the real Julia Domna, Herodian's point regarding Caracalla and Geta would be lost; we would see only that Julia Domna was capable of influencing imperial policy. The leap from here to proposing that Julia Domna was a powerful player in shaping imperial policy is short yet treacherous. Likewise, the appearance of Julia Domna in Cassius Dio's account heightens the drama of the scene. As despicable as Caracalla was for murdering his brother, his character is blackened even further because of the torture he inflicted upon his mother. In this passage, Dio presents Julia Domna's motivation for the meeting as rooted in *pietas* for her family and perhaps even her country; she wanted reconciliation, a motive lacking any political guile.⁷ Yet this is hardly a consistent picture of Julia Domna. Elsewhere in Dio's history, Julia Domna is so hungry for political power that she even considers a bid to seize the empire and rule it alone. Dio's scene thus emerges not as a moment when the audience should feel sympathy for the empress, but as a convenient opportunity to depict Caracalla as ambitious and bloodthirsty, with a hatred that was out of control. Knowing that Dio usually portrays the empress as the masculine foil for the effeminate emperor prevents the historian from offering Geta's death scene as evidence that Julia Domna was powerless in her home. Furthermore, these authors used Julia Domna as a metaphor for the Roman Empire in order to make her sons look even worse. For Herodian, dividing the empire between two emperors would be as unnatural and macabre as tearing Julia's body in two. For Dio, the wound that Julia Domna sustained in Caracalla's attack is analogous to the *damnatio memoriae* that followed Geta's murder. The wound to the empress's hand during the attack had to be ignored, and she was forced to laugh and smile at the preservation of Caracalla. If we approach these passages asking only how powerful or influential the empress was, we might overlook these finer points that say more about Julia Domna as a rhetorical device than as a historical figure.

Scholars writing on Julia Domna thus far have shown little recognition of the importance of rhetoric in our sources, or read these literary sources as being more about the empress's husband and sons than they are about her. Seeing the empress's extraordinary maternal titles and knowing something of her remarkable life, they endowed her with a sort of power unknown to imperial women before her.⁸ I believe they have been misled because they equated visibility with

power.⁹ Admittedly, Julia Domna was very visible, but there is simply no evidence of a consistent agenda behind her celebration that might indicate any personal control over her own images or titles.¹⁰

Julia Domna's prominence in monuments, inscriptions, and coinage, stems not from unprecedented personal charisma, exotic qualities, or influence. Her official advertisement shows little of the empress's most remarkable characteristics and instead homogenizes her fascinating background, rendering her virtually indistinguishable from her predecessors, at least initially.¹¹ Like every other imperial woman, Julia Domna was advertised in official media when it suited the propagandistic needs of her male relatives.¹² Her titles appeared at the convenience of those who wished to benefit from them. As this book demonstrates, the empress's titles boasting her maternity over the military, the Senate, or the *patria*, which scholars have taken as indicating some sort of unprecedented personal power, were nothing of the sort. Severus and the populations he addressed in his propaganda exploited images of Julia Domna when they could be politically beneficial. Those grandiose and elevated titles that claimed metaphorical motherhood for Julia Domna, a kind of maternal megalomania, were not about flattering or courting the empress at all. For Severus, they were just one of several planks in the Severan platform of propaganda that was ultimately designed to legitimate himself and his dynasty. For the populations who employed these titles when speaking to the imperial administration, they were powerful tools, used as signals to the imperial administration that they were ready to engage ideological negotiations. The ultimate goal for such populations was to obtain favors and honors from the emperor.¹³

This book explores how Septimius Severus harnessed Julia Domna's images to negotiate ideologies with important populations in the empire, especially the military, the *populus Romanus*, and the Senate. Like most successful politicians, Severus told the people what they wanted to hear. Because these three populations had very different agendas, he negotiated an ideology particular to each. Some of the negotiated "truths" overlapped between populations, while some were used as leverage in order to bully other populations. I explore these negotiations through the case study of Julia Domna—or, more accurately, through the maternal imagery of the empress. I ask what the imperial administration was saying about her maternity, contextualizing it within the overall message of Severan propaganda sent to a particular population. I then examine the responses to these messages, looking for overlap between one negotiated ideology and another. Each "conversation" or negotiation between the imperial administration and the military, the *populus Romanus*, and the Senate produced a dif-

ferent image of the empress, and each of these changed over time. The distinct images that emerge are sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting, but the goal of these negotiations was always the same: to create a mutually approved interpretation of the past, present, and future that ultimately legitimized the emperor and his dynasty while simultaneously conferring benefits and honors on the population with whom he was negotiating at the moment. What will surprise and hopefully delight the reader is that none of these resulting images are what she might expect. They were certainly not what I thought I would find when I began to examine this body of evidence.

Julia Domna Who?

Julia Domna stands in stark contrast with earlier imperial women in her origin and ascent. She was born in Syria, the daughter of the priest-king of Emesa who conducted ecstatic rites on behalf of his god Ba'al.¹⁴ Later propaganda boasted that Julia Domna's horoscope had proclaimed she was destined to marry a king.¹⁵ At seventeen, she married L. Septimius Severus, a native of North Africa, with whom her family became acquainted after he had served in the region some years earlier. Shortly thereafter, she bore Severus two sons, Caracalla (originally named after his maternal grandfather, Bassianus) and Geta. In 193, Severus seized the Roman Empire and spent the next four years fighting two civil wars in order to maintain his position and found his dynasty. As wife to one emperor and mother of two others, Julia Domna enjoyed an uninterrupted proximity to imperial power not known since the days of Agrippina the Younger.¹⁶ Occasionally, Julia Domna was depicted as unscrupulous and uncompromisingly ambitious. The writer of the *Historia Augusta* reported that she was to blame for the civil war between her husband and Clodius Albinus, after she coaxed Severus into attacking Albinus so that her sons could be emperors.¹⁷ Once the civil wars were over, Severus embarked on a campaign to punish the allies of his former rivals, and he reportedly kept Julia Domna and his family by his side. With her husband, she traveled the length and breadth of Rome's territories, appearing in Syria, Egypt, Africa, Rome, and even far-flung Caledonia, later Scotland. Severus died while on campaign in Eboracum, now York, on February 4, 211. Julia Domna accompanied her sons to Rome, bringing with them Severus's ashes and his final purported advice to his sons: "Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all others."¹⁸ Julia Domna soon found herself as we first encountered her, attempting to keep peace between her fractious sons. Literary anecdotes set after Geta's murder gleefully mangle the maternal imagery touted by the imperial