

IMPERIAL WOMEN

H. TEMPORINI-GRÄFIN VITZTHUM (ed.): *Die Kaiserinnen Roms. Von Livia bis Theodora*. Pp. 543, map, ills. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2002. Cased, €30.80/SFr 50.20. ISBN: 3-406-49513-3.

The growth industry in publications devoted to women in the ancient world has in recent years produced a stream of collaborative projects, as often as not consisting of widely ranging papers rather loosely connected to the central topic. The volume under review is an honourable exception, in having a coherent theme, and in displaying evidence of a serious effort by the editor and her fellow-contributors to maintain a high degree of consistency in presentation and methodology. Their intention is straightforward: to provide a more or less narrative account of the Roman *Kaiserinnen* in the six centuries after the foundation of the empire. The authors could hardly be more distinguished. Hildegard Temporini, apart from acting as general editor, wrote the introduction and the sections on Augustus and Tiberius, and on Trajan to Commodus. The later Julio-Claudians are handled by Werner Eck, the Flavians by Helmut Castritius, and the Severans down to the Tetrarchy by Bruno Bleckman. The Theodosian period is covered by Manfred Clauss, and Hartmut Leppin has contributed the chapter on Justinian, as well as a concluding essay. The text is well illustrated, with extensive use of coin images.

The title of the book is at first sight troublesome. We may just overcome a distaste for calling wives like Livia and Julia Domna ‘empresses’ (despite a possible etymological advantage, the German *Kaiserinnen* is only marginally less awkward), but to make matters even more complicated, the term in this work embraces also mothers and daughters, as well as a whole chorus of sisters, cousins, and aunts, and a supporting array of assorted concubines and eastern princesses like Zenobia and Berenike, *Kaiserinnen Roms* only by the most generous definition. Temporini observes that since women held no official public position in Rome a single defining term for ‘imperial women’ is an elusive objective. But she also disarmingly admits that she hopes the title will lure the lay reader! Certainly, to this end, the contributors have all made an effort to produce a book that is ‘user friendly’. Lesser-known references are explained. This process inevitably results in a number of repetitions, as, for instance, in the first half of the book, where each author dutifully explains who Dio is. But this certainly does no harm, especially since many readers are likely to dip into individual chapters. In a book of nearly 600 pages there are inevitable incongruities: it is unlikely, for instance, that a reader who needs to be told that ancient Brundisium is modern Brindisi will be familiar with the details of the debate between Julia Domna and the wife of the Briton Argentocoxus, a familiarity taken for granted (p. 272). But on the whole, the right balance is nicely maintained.

Temporini also hopes that the use of the term *Kaiserinnen* will provoke the experts. Perhaps, but the calibre of the contributors ensures that there will be little serious discontent with the actual text that follows the title. There is, however, one major disappointment—the decision not to annotate. This is frustrating for the reviewer, since seemingly questionable claims are not fair game in the absence of the contributory evidence. More seriously, the absence of references reduces the usefulness of a potentially valuable book for serious students. It is a simple fact of life that it is all but impossible to make any assertion about Roman history without being challenged. As a minor example from the hundreds that could be cited, Temporini (p. 67) states that *several* people (*manche*) paid with their lives in the Julia the Younger affair, a claim

supported by Dio 55.10.15. But Velleius 2.100.4 cites Iullus Antonius as the sole individual to be put to death. To complicate matters further, another of the participants, Sempronius Gracchus, was indeed executed, but much later, following a long exile and the succession of Tiberius. In such cases the student needs more guidance, through notes and references, to the complexities that can underlie seemingly simple assertions.

The study of Imperial women is, of course, overshadowed by the problem of the sources, whether it be the almost complete absence of literary evidence for much of the third century, or the relatively copious but highly contentious sources for the Julio-Claudians. Eck provides an excellent brief introduction to the difficulty of developing a methodology, intended for his own chapter but with some modifications applicable generally. He observes that to reject the ancient writings on Roman women as male-written texts is a totally negative process, allowing no theoretical basis for knowledge. He also notes the danger of revisionism, which will tend to select and reject those passages that are critical, while accepting those that are favourable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the individual contributors are not uniform in the faith they place in their sources. Eck is perhaps the most liberal. While generally suspicious of the hyperbolic portraits that have come down from Suetonius and Dio and the like, he is willing to concede that sometimes the characters might have been as odd as they are depicted, and is prepared to entertain the possibility that, say, Caligula did in fact marry his sister Drusilla, or that Messalina's willingness to go through the bizarre and fatal marriage with her paramour was indeed prompted by an excess of passion. On the other side Bleckman is highly skeptical, and since he is largely dependent on the *Historia Augusta* it is perhaps not surprising. But the consequence is that in Bleckman's judicious section women tend to be relegated to very limited exits and entrances. It would have been useful, for instance, to have heard more of Julia Domna's philosophical circle, and the lay reader would surely have been interested to hear such stories as Origen's delivering a sermon to Julia Mamaea, probably totally apocryphal but a nice illustration of how some of these women were viewed by later antiquity. Clauss achieves this in his chapter, where he devotes a whole section to the legend of Helena and the True Cross.

The final impression that the book leaves is perhaps not encouraging, through no fault of the authors. Although there were occasional exceptions, such as Agrippina the Younger or Theodora, for the most part imperial women, like the general run of royal wives of later history, were not main players, but rather little more than pawns, *Legitimationstützen* (p. 234), in a larger political game. But, that said, anyone wanting a broad introduction to the subject would be hard pressed to do better than this intelligent and highly readable volume.

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GERMANICUS AND PISO

G. ROWE: *Princes and Political Cultures. The New Tiberian Senatorial Decrees*. Pp. ix + 195. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002. Cased, US\$49.50. ISBN: 0-472-11230-9.

Within no more than the past twenty years there have been major advances in our understanding of the early principate in general, and of the rôle of the senate in particular. Serious attention has at last been devoted to the latter's workings as a

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