

The Deification of Imperial Women:

Second-Century Contexts

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ABSTRACT

In the early second century AD four extraordinary imperial deifications are recorded. The first took place during the reign of the emperor Trajan (r. 98-117), who deified his sister, Ulpia Marciana, immediately following her death in 112. Next, in 119, Marciana's daughter, Matidia, was deified by Hadrian (r. 117-138), who was married to Matidia's daughter, Vibia Sabina. The usual interpretation of these two deifications is that the honours paid these women bolstered imperial prestige within a political atmosphere that later allowed Hadrian to use their deifications as a means of creating a fictive dynastic connection to legitimize his succession. Similar motivations are applied by scholars to the deifications of Pompeia Plotina, the dowager empress of the emperor Trajan, who died during the tenure of his successor, Hadrian, in 123, and of Hadrian's own wife, Vibia Sabina, who died in 136 or 137, little more than a year before her husband. Intriguingly, none of these women is much remembered in extant historical records, though other evidence for their prominence — statues, coins, inscriptions, buildings in Rome's centre — is striking in its abundance. The rationale for the deifications of these women therefore remains the subject of a debate that ultimately engages questions of female involvement and the meaning of that involvement within Rome's traditional hierarchies of power and prominence.

This paper seeks a culturally relevant context for the mystery of these deifications, proposing that the theoretical underpinnings for female deification lie as much in the implications of female involvement in the public sphere as they do in dynastic considerations. Using a social and ethnographic approach, it investigates evidence for the wealth, social standing, and public presence of these early second century women and connects these to the Romans' need to uphold traditional mores and morals in the face of social change and shifting political realities.

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Dedicated to my father, Dr. Eugene Tate (1935-2011)

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

- AJA* = American Journal of Archaeology
- AJAH* = American Journal of Ancient History
- AJPh* = American Journal of Philology
- ANRW* = Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
- BMC* = Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum
- CIL* = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
- CJ* = Classical Journal
- CPh* = Classical Philology
- CQ* = Classical Quarterly
- HA* = Historia Augusta
- ILS* = Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae
- G&R = Greece and Rome
- JRS* = Journal of Roman Studies
- Loeb = Loeb Classical Library
- PCPS* = Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society
- Rh.Mus.* = Rheinisches Museum für Philologie
- RIC* = Roman Imperial Coins in the Hunter Coin Cabinet
- TAPA* = Transactions of the American Philological Society

INTRODUCTION:
LOCATING THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF FEMALE DEIFICATION

Few elements of a civilization are more definitive of it than the sort of relationship it holds with the divine, i.e. with what is recognized as being “larger than.” Through religion a people declare their perceived place in the world and reveal their most distilled and unique aspects as a society. When one studies a culture’s religion, one is poised at a window into a worldview, the sum total of a people’s collective interaction with the reality of human existence and the world outside themselves. That said, our modern understanding of religion as a theology or philosophy set out systematically in creeds and doctrines that are articulated symbolically in ritual, is not especially useful to the student of ancient Roman religion, let alone what we call the imperial cult. Various philosophical schools in the ancient world did undertake a systematic approach to exploring the nature of human existence, and some formulated “best practice” ideologies, but traditional religion offered no such guidance; neither creeds nor doctrines were espoused, and there was no catechism to study and believe as a requirement of participation. Instead, there was an accumulated history of community *action* in the form of ritual, which formed the basis of communal self-identification. This action was the reference point that answered the questions, “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” For Romans, the answers to these questions, as formulated and expressed in a variety of social constructs, were fundamentally predicated on their sense of themselves as a distinct people and, as they established their empire, on themselves and their city as possessing a unique place in the world. Like any worldview, Romans’ stance towards life was expressed (without being explicitly

thought out) in how they lived, and in their art, culture, and religion.¹ Anthropologists have called this “moral and aesthetic style and mood” of a culture its “ethos,” a given people’s response to the world as they understand it.²

This is a study of the Romans and their worldview as expressed via one very particular aspect of their culture during the middle of Rome’s imperial period – the cult of deified imperials as it existed in Rome during the early second century AD, and the place of women within it. Like scholars such as Ariadne Staples, who studies Roman religion in order to better understand the status and roles of women in Roman society, this study seeks to understand the relationship of imperial women to the larger community by looking at evidence for their roles in that community as a way toward understanding their inclusion in the cult of the *divi*, or deified imperials. Indirectly, this study therefore addresses the evolving nature of the relationship between the imperial family and the larger Roman community, and the symbols used to express this shifting reality. Imperial deification itself is analyzed as a socially meaningful aspect of the Roman worldview, and not merely a tool of political expediency. A corrective to the apparent binary opposition we have imposed between “religious” and “political” is sought by exploring the intersection of female participation in the public sphere and social attitudes towards this phenomenon.

The central figures are four imperial women deified during the reigns of Trajan (r. 98-117), and Hadrian (r. 117-138): two empresses – Pompeia Plotina (60s?-123), Trajan’s wife, and Vibia Sabina (85?-136/7), wife of his successor, and two other women who were integral parts of the imperial household — Trajan’s sister, Ulpia Marciana (48-112) and her daughter, later

¹ Clifford Geertz, “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 127.

² Ibid.

Hadrian's mother-in-law, Salonia Matidia (68-119).³ The topic is their apparently inexplicable posthumous inclusion in the imperial pantheon. The question to be answered is "why?" Why were these women deified, or any imperial woman, for that matter? Assuming that there was an internal logic to what we now call the imperial cult, and – the Romans' being a traditional society – that the logic of deification was based on patriarchal definitions of status and power, why deify *women*? An in-depth exploration of these seemingly straightforward questions will help refine our understanding of the relationship between the Roman community and its leader as embodied in its religion. The materials used to examine these women, and thus their cult, are literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological. The broad purpose of this study is dual: engagement with the Romans in order to facilitate insight, a meeting on their own mental turf, so to speak; and an explication of the ways the so-called imperial cult allowed the highly conservative Romans to reflect for themselves new social and political configurations while remaining true to their traditions.

³ Please see page 134 for a map of the family relationships.

CHAPTER 1
APPROACHES: STUDYING EMPEROR WORSHIP

*We must rid ourselves of modern ideas and try to appreciate the historical evolution of emperor-worship.*⁴

By way of illustration, a look at the historiography of this subject reveals how prone it has been to biases that sometimes hamper more than help our understanding. Assumptions concerning Roman religion that are nearly as ancient as the subject matter itself still smolder within modern scholarship and require examination. The roots of these assumptions lie in the works of early Christian evangelists and writers of the first and second centuries AD, which comprise the earliest discussion of the imperial cult. Using terms antithetical to the prevailing mental culture, these men framed their explanations of the new theology in order to present a direct challenge to the imperial cult and the worldview it embodied.⁵ If we understand that the emperor, by virtue of his office, represented the preeminence of Rome and its empire, and that he was viewed as the bringer of peace and guarantor of prosperity, we can begin to see how he was also believed to inhabit that liminal space between — or encompassing — the human and divine.⁶ Emperor worship integrated the *divi* (the deified ones — a different word than *dei*, which denoted the traditional gods) into an already existing understanding that fostered an empire-wide identification with being Roman, and therefore a sense of belonging within the

⁴ Jesse Benedict Carter, *The Religion of Numa and other Essays on the Religion of Ancient Rome* (London, MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1906), 146.

⁵ Mark T. Finney, “Christ Crucified and the inversion of Roman Imperial ideology in I Corinthians,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (March 22, 2005), 20-33.

⁶ The concept of divinity appears to have been, for the Romans, somewhat relative. The gods were understood to have always been divine, while the emperor was obviously human though in possession of something like divine powers not only because of the scope of his powers, but because the fact of his holding imperial power bespoke personal worthiness. Price points out that there was no clear line between *deus* and *divus*, either in Greece or in Rome. See Price, *Rituals and Power*, 119-220. See also J. Rufus Fears, “The Theology of Victory at Rome: Approaches and Problems,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Vol. II.17.2, 736-826.

larger empire – a notion necessarily challenged by the neophyte Christian community, with its own allegiances and definitions of honour, status, and power.⁷ For the first evangelists, ‘spreading the word’ was not simply a matter of revealing a new god, but challenging the validity of the existing ones, including the deified imperials and the identification for which they stood.

As a result of this ideological conflict, and as Christianity began increasingly to define, and redefine, the mental space of the Roman empire, history became inextricably separated into pre- and post-revelation (the coming of ‘the Christ’), as Christian writers reframed the past in order to explain the advent of a new religious consciousness. In fact, as early as our time period, the early second century, Christian writers were claiming that God had allowed the empire to flourish so that Christianity could become established.⁸ Early Christian historiography placed human history within a Biblical time line, charting the relationship between God and His chosen people and the ultimate redemption of humanity through Christ. Clearly, as a Christian reality increasingly dominated and gradually replaced its precursors, there was no interest in understanding the pagan point of view, which was regarded as an error from which humankind was in need of rescue. So, for a very long stretch of time there was simply no theoretical basis for the study of ancient religion. It wasn’t until the Renaissance that there was a resurgence of interest in classical antiquity, and even then, since the purpose of this interest lay at least partly in wanting to find a time period during which the focus had been on humans as political, as opposed to spiritual, animals, the approach was coloured by assumptions about religion and the nature of reality that highlight the differences between the Renaissance worldview and that of the

⁷ James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 108-117.

⁸ Ernest Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 81.

ancients. After all, an understanding of the world predicated on Christian beliefs, even if it seeks a humanist approach, is still nothing like one based on a polytheistic mindset.

Much later, the first modern historians of the Classical era would adapt the interpretive framework of their Christian ancestors and their preoccupation with illustrating former (i.e., pagan) failings, and turn it toward discovering the antecedents of Christianity. This latter aim, which dominated in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, tended to frame the religious history of the western world in terms of decline of the ‘traditional’ cults of the polytheistic ancient world and the rise of a long latent monotheism that saw its fulfillment in Christianity. It seems clear now that this theory of decline was prejudiced in favor of the Christian historiographic tradition because it did not seek insight into Roman religion in its own right, but predicated the discussion on something else – Christianity. In terms of its perspective on history, this approach took the advent of Christianity as its starting point and looked back at paganism in an effort to make sense of the whole. Franz Cumont, for example, in his pioneering study *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (first published in 1911), described Roman paganism as a cacophony of religious creeds and practices, characteristics that supposedly presaged its inevitable failure.⁹ The study of ancient religion was originally based partly on the presumed superiority of order and rationalism of monotheism and the “triumph” of Christianity. Smatterings of these prejudices still exist in scholarly approaches to the imperial cult.

When we look in particular at the imperial cult, then, there are two major biases we must look out for: that which takes as the norm Christian assumptions — that religion ought to be concerned primarily with faith and philosophical/theological considerations — demoting polytheism to a mere precursor of the “ideal” of monotheism and making ancient religion seem

⁹ Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 106-7.

incoherent. Under these criteria the deification of human beings is rendered absurd through unfair and anachronistic comparison. A related interpretation sees nothing genuinely “religious” about Roman religion and therefore frames it as ultimately political, with the result that the imperial cult becomes unintelligible on every level *except* the political. Both these ideological approaches operate subtly and are frequently intertwined, serving as unacknowledged paradigms belying worldviews utterly different from that of the ancients.

Unfortunately for our understanding of the Roman imperial cult, both these ‘Christianizing’ views fail when it comes to providing insights regarding Roman religious institutions in their own right, and inevitably confine us to an overly politicized view in which a tiny group of individuals manipulate once-meaningful social relationships and cultural symbols in order to gain political power and social prestige.¹⁰ Given that this latter is cynical by any standard, and really reveals little about the society it claims to study, it is surprising how prevalent it remains. It would help if we became more aware of the depth of the assumptions. Note, for example, that both these interpretations contain implicit “norms” from which ancient society is thought to have deviated. First of these is the assumption that pre-Christian cults (except for those supposed precursors of Christianity, the so-called mystery religions) failed to provide people with the “mystic identification of man with god in this life and a hope of the continuance of the union in the next,” while according to the politicizing view the imperial period was a deviation from the “norm” of the Republic.¹¹ We need, in the first place, to address both overt and covert Christianizing notions in the scholarship and, in the second case, be careful that our interpretation is polluted neither by a preference for those forms of government that

¹⁰ “Christianizing,” is a term used to describe the use of Christian understanding as the yardstick by which all other versions of reality are measured.

¹¹ Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middleton, Connecticut: Scholars Press, 1931), 51.

favor the educated elite or seem to presage present forms of democracy, nor is biased against those that seem to serve as instructive foils for modern totalitarian regimes.

Overall, I think it is fair to say that rather than trying to discover how the Romans understood themselves and their cultural institutions, scholars have traditionally viewed ancient Rome as a model or ideal that readily served a variety of ideologies and agendas. This has been true in part because it is not only practically impossible to separate ourselves from the worldview of our own time and culture, but because when interpretative frameworks have long gone unquestioned, they bear the weight of fact and are therefore difficult to challenge. By way of revealing these sorts of interpretations, a brief look at the lingering vestiges of the scholarship of nineteenth-century German historians, and the ways their work resonates in the work of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars, is instructive. After all, German scholars had a particular orientation toward history that aptly illustrates the sort of historiographic tangles with which this subject is wrought.

The Scholarship and Influence of Germany's 19th Century Historical Tradition

Eminent historian and historiographer, Karl Christ (1923-2008), once noted in his own assessment of German historical scholarship that, “the German reception of antiquity is marked by three general factors which shaped the philological enterprise throughout the 1800s: a tendency towards aesthetic idealization, the demand for rigorous scholarship, and an ideological appropriation of antiquity.”¹² Aesthetic idealization, although seemingly unrelated to the study of ancient history, actually plays a part in some of the still-discernible difficulties discovered in the

¹² Noted in Christian J. Emden, “History, Memory, and the Invention of Antiquity: Notes on the ‘Classical Tradition,’” in *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World Since 1500. Papers from the Conference ‘The Fragile Tradition,’ Cambridge 2002*. Volume 1. ed. Christian Emden & David Midgley (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 53.

course of my research. There is an underlying assumption, especially in earlier text-based scholarship, that the ancients stand, or ought to stand, as an ideal. Even before German scholars took up the notion of Rome as the template for German statehood, there had been an emphasis on the philosophy, culture, and art of ancient Greek models of purity, goodness, and perfection. Writers and theorists like Johann Wincklemann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Schilling wrote about the Greek style, and educated Germans considered themselves the modern heirs to Greek literary and artistic sensibilities.¹³ The classical past was associated primarily with art and literature, and even its historians were read mostly in this light; the ancient world resided in the minds and hearts of Europeans as a fixed ideal that was part morality tale, part source of philosophical enlightenment, and part artistic inspiration. More importantly, though, antiquity, especially Greek antiquity, was believed to have evolved independent of any “oriental” influences.¹⁴ This belief has created, I think, a bias in interpretation that assumes that an influence-free existence is another ideal, compared with which Roman religion has been regarded as notoriously and unfortunately syncretistic, and therefore especially deficient and prone to corruption. It is not that scholars are incorrect when they ascribe an eastern influence to Roman ruler cult, for example, but their concomitant assumption that this means that the ruler cult was an *artificial* addition to Roman cultural institutions reveals that independence from outside influence is the supposed norm rather than syncretistic evolution, which was clearly the preferred Roman reaction to encounters with other peoples and their religions. This, taken

¹³ Zvi Yavetz, “Why Rome? Zeitgeist and Ancient Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (1976), 278.

¹⁴ Emden, 55.

together with the “ideological appropriation of antiquity,” goes a long way toward explaining the theoretical bent of even very recent scholarship.¹⁵

Of course there were some very good reasons why eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German scholars felt called to this “ideological appropriation,” which combined their studies with prevailing political energies. The upheaval and change experienced in Western Europe as a result of the French Revolution came together with a variety of political and social factors to shift Europeans’ perception of the world in which they lived. As the Revolution soured even for those who had at first embraced its ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, people turned away from the horrors of current events and sought refuge in a distant, idealized, past.¹⁶ The ideologies of the Enlightenment, which had celebrated human progress and rationality and sought the cure for humanity’s ills through rational politics, but which also encouraged a disregard for ages past, were replaced with an emphasis on history as stabilizing force.¹⁷ The undercurrent was one of mistrust of lofty idealism as the basis for liberty and other nationalist ideals. Instead, both conservatives and liberals alike sought a solid footing for their historical outlook.¹⁸ Rising nationalist feeling in Germany found expression in scholarship through a new interpretation based on this historicist outlook. This, according to many scholars, was due to variables unique to the German situation, including, for example, Prussia’s humiliating defeat by Napoleon’s armies in October 1806, and the resulting desire on the part of some intellectuals to kindle nationalist pride in their countrymen.

¹⁵ See note 12, above.

¹⁶ Zvi Yavetz, 282.

¹⁷ Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 6.

¹⁸ Iggers, 6.

Johann Herder (1744–1803) is credited with the genesis of the new historical movement in German historiography; though he didn't invent a new process or interpretation, he did lay the foundation for the historicism for which nineteenth-century German thinking is renowned.¹⁹ Near the end of the eighteenth century he published a short work titled, *Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind* (1774) in which he likened historical movement to the stages of human life; infancy, childhood, youth, and adulthood (or, more accurately, manhood). Significantly, Herder characterized Roman civilization as embodying the “manhood” stage, claiming that Rome represented a height in human social development from which humanity had been descending ever since. Suddenly, the historicizing influence of Romanticism and rejection of Enlightenment ideals was finding its clearest expression, at least in Germany, through the study of ancient history and, specifically, the history of Rome. Following Herder, two of the fathers of the study of ancient history, Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) and Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), crafted a vision of ancient Rome using the lens of their own political aspirations for their nation. For these men and their followers, history was best interpreted by intentionally using the past as a means of answering the social and political concerns of the present.²⁰ It should be noted, though, that although Niebuhr's *History of Rome* represented a newly forming orientation towards history, his inspiration was derived from a deductive study of literature, not the systematic study of physical evidence that would be the essence of Mommsen's monumental contribution to the field.

¹⁹ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Clio the Romantic Muse: Historicizing the Faculties in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 4.

²⁰ Ziolkowski, 30; Peter Hanns Reill, “Barthold Georg Niebuhr and the Enlightenment Tradition,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Feb., 1980), 23-24.

The first, and only, historian ever to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902 (as “the greatest living master of the art of historical writing, with special reference to his monumental work, *A History of Rome*.”), Theodor Mommsen published nearly 900 separate works during his long career.²¹ Most notably, he advanced the study of inscriptions and was instrumental in the construction of an enormous collection of Latin inscriptions, the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (*CIL*), gathering hundreds, if not thousands, of inscriptions himself and studying those previously collected to weed out forgeries. Of the fifteen massive volumes of the *CIL* that were published during his lifetime (there are now twenty), he edited nearly half. Although his own *Roman History* (published 1854-56) is considered his greatest work, his books *Römisches Staatsrecht* (*Roman Constitutional Law*) published 1871-88 in three volumes, and *Römisches Strafrecht* (*Roman Criminal Law*), 1899, remain more influential today. Much of the work done by Mommsen and his peers in the study and categorization of Rome’s institutions; deities, cults, priestly colleges, and the like, is in spirit much like its forerunner, antiquarianism — though without doubt the study of ancient history was gradually becoming systematic under Mommsen’s tutelage, even if it was still serving a political agenda.²²

Unapologetically a historian for his times and believing, like Niebuhr, that history should be used to inspire, the narrative of Mommsen’s *History of Rome* (which deals with Rome from the sixth century BC to Julius Caesar’s reforms of 46 BC in three volumes, and the provinces of the Roman empire from Caesar to Diocletian in a subsequent volume, Vol. V) is much marked

²¹ The Nobel Foundation, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1902.” Nobelprize.org. 14 Jul 2011 http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1902/index.html.

²² James B. Rives, “Roman Religion Revived,” *Phoenix*, Vol. 52, No. 3/4. (1998), 348.

by his passionate political liberalism.²³ In this work Mommsen extended his field of vision beyond Italy to a larger consideration of the empire and, perceiving Roman history as a movement from conflict to order, illustrated for Germans how diverse states could be united in peace.²⁴ His discussion of the role of religion in the state was entirely in keeping with this interpretative method and motive, as well as with Romantic theories concerning the origin and spread of ancient religions, for he depicted Roman religion as having lost its original meaning and depth once a supposed original “Latin national religion” was degraded by later additions.²⁵ Influenced by his own deep dislike of the impact the Roman Catholic church had had on his Germany, Mommsen depicted ancient Roman state religion as having been obsessed with a “tedious prolixity and solemn inanity,” a “rotten machine creaking at the joints,” surviving the failure of the Republic as an institution suitable only for manipulation by the Caesars.²⁶ According to Mommsen, Roman religious practices had been maintained purely for the sake of expediency. “As a matter of course, it fell more and more into disfavor with all those who preserved their freedom of judgment,” he wrote, “Towards the state religion indeed public opinion maintained an attitude essentially indifferent; it was on all sides recognized as an institution of political convenience...”²⁷ Yet we must realize that Mommsen found it impossible to make sense of Roman religious practices because he wanted Rome to serve as a template for

²³ Mommsen’s intended fourth volume on the principate was never published. Various theories exist as to why this was, with most speculating on the causes of Mommsen’s apparent writer’s block when it came to writing about the emperors. A “Vol. IV” pieced together from notes taken in class by Mommsen’s students was published by Routledge in 1996 as *A History of Rome under the Emperors*. See: Thomas Wiedemann and Wang Naixin, “Mommsen’s Roman History,” *Histos*, Vol. 1 (1997): <http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1997/wiedemann.html>. (last accessed, March 17, 2011).

²⁴ Antoine Guillaud, *Modern Germany and Her Historians* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1915), 140.

²⁵ Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, Vol. III, trans. W.P. Dickson (London: MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1908), 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, Vol. V, New Edition, trans. W.P. Dickson (London: MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1901), 443.

German nationhood and sought parallels between Roman history and his Germany, and because his own anti-clericalism rejected the notion of a synchronicity of church and state.

Concomitant with this politicization of Roman religion came the view that it operated at a primitive level, failing to answer the deepest longings of the human heart. In Lily Ross Taylor's seminal work, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, published in 1931, this shows up as an assumption that it was disaffection from the traditional gods combined with a desire for salvific deliverance that paved the way for the imperial cult in Rome.²⁸ Indeed, the over-emphasis on political interpretation both fostered and was fed by Christianizing assumptions concerning the purpose of religion. As has already been suggested, it was supposed that genuine religion addresses philosophical notions of, and emotional yearnings for, relationship with the divine, and therefore that the imperial cult must have been primarily political; likewise, because the Roman state was a political structure within which men vied for personal power and glory, the imperial cult cannot have been true religion. These assumptions seem as much the result of the politicizing slant of Niebuhr and Mommsen, as they are the outcome of ethnocentrism. At any rate, it is clear that the legacy of the early German historians of ancient Rome, while undeniably vital and groundbreaking in many ways, has dominated the subject for over a hundred years. Modern interpretations of Roman history that frame Augustus' religious revival as an artificial imposition on a pre-existing but defunct public cult are surely the grandchildren of this view.

Twentieth-Century Views and the Historiographic Tradition

This nineteenth-century emphasis on the political evolved, in the twentieth-century, into a tendency to compare imperial Roman society with modern totalitarian regimes. Descriptors like "propaganda," and "ideology" were applied to the imperial cult in order to describe its

²⁸ Lily Ross Taylor, 51.

supposedly defining characteristics.²⁹ The influence of modern ideologies applied in wartime, such as Nazi propaganda or American post-war fear of Communist agendas, must at least partly account for the emphasis on these concepts in much of the post-war scholarship in this area. Without a doubt, the vocabulary used to describe the imperial cult was heavily influenced by Ronald Syme and other scholars who had experienced the impact that propaganda had on modern Europe, and this interpretive bent has dominated the discipline since the middle of the last century. This is not to say that a political interpretation is without merit, though the idea that Rome's elite manipulated symbols for the sake of political expediency is perhaps just a little too much like the modern age of advertising and propagandizing. As a way of explaining Roman behaviors, this interpretation offers an almost too-accessible alternative to the prospect of an ancient world of complex otherness.

In terms of the women of the imperial cult, then, it is not surprising that we find post-war scholars such as James H. Oliver (author of the article entitled "The Divi of the Hadrianic Period"), for example, writing of the deification of imperial women as an exercise in propaganda, worked in order to make tenuous family ties seem stronger. Oliver posits this as Hadrian's reason for divinizing Ulpia Marciana, sister of his predecessor, Trajan, as well as Trajan's wife, Pompeia Plotina, *and* his own mother-in-law, Salonia Matidia — women, Oliver says, who were "of no real importance for anyone but Hadrian."³⁰ He also suggests that imperial women were deified to advertise an advantageous relationship, as was perhaps Claudius' (AD 41-54) motivation when his grandmother, Livia, wife of Augustus, was deified on his

²⁹ The standing debate concerning the use of the word "propaganda" is ably covered by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill in his article "Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 76 (1986), 66-87.

³⁰ James H. Oliver, "Divi of the Hadrianic Period," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1. (Jan., 1949). According to the *Fasti Ostienses*, Marciana was deified in 112. It is Oliver's theory that Hadrian was responsible for her deification, not Trajan. See pp. 38-39.

recommendation in AD 42.³¹ Oliver's interpretation ignores the roles these women played in Roman society because his underlying belief is that the imperial cult was an artifice foisted on the Roman public, and that therefore an emphasis on the political machinations of the emperor is justified.³²

Yet Oliver's interpretation is only an example of the sort of debate that has dominated scholarly discussion of the imperial cult; for the difficulty lies not in the methodology but in a reading of history prejudiced in favor of the political as separate from, and more important than, other social variables through which we understand a society. Underlying this reading is a theoretical approach that views all human interaction as a struggle for power, but which, by overemphasizing the role of the individual actor, excludes or deemphasizes the social realities that come into play.³³ And, unfortunately, the act of separating the imperial cult from its broader cultural context creates an environment that excludes all but its own sort of interpretation.

Simon Price addressed this difficulty in his book *Rituals and Power: The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*, asserting that such an emphasis was the result of a methodological orientation in which society is "essentially an aggregate of individuals" that can only be described by couching the discussion in terms of the behavior of the individuals involved. This, Price says, is what drives the focus on ruling elites and the actions of members of those elites, and the preoccupation with how powerful individuals manipulate religion for propagandistic purposes.³⁴ In contrast, Price describes the imperial cult in the Eastern portion of the empire as a spontaneous reaction on the part of the once autonomous city-states of Asia Minor, in order to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Oliver, 36ff.

³³ Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 203.

³⁴ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 11.

represent to themselves the foreign power that ruled them.³⁵ Most importantly, Price proposed that the supposed motivations for the creation of such cult – whether political savvy on the part of the provincials or political maneuvering on the part of the ruling power – cannot be the sole, or even the most useful, constituents for determining the cult’s significance. What is more important is charting the accommodations made by one culture in order to assimilate, and in a sense therefore own or integrate, the imposition of a foreign worldview.

I see this as a very important step forward in our approach to the Roman imperial cult, and it is one that has increasingly infiltrated its way into the study of the imperial world. During the last twenty-five years or so scholars studying ancient Roman religion have been attempting a similar contextualization of ancient society — which should include, I would argue, a reassessment of the imperial cult — by “inverting the lenses,” to borrow a phrase from Thomas Kuhn, and starting from the assumption that the Roman thought-world was essentially different and unique. This has brought a variety of approaches such as that used, illustratively, by Bella Zweig, who has compared the ancient Greeks to the indigenous peoples of North American in order to highlight the ways in which the thinking of both these broad groups fundamentally diverges from that of modern Europeans.³⁶ Most importantly, she recognizes the need to challenge the assumption that ancient society “was structured according to a hierarchical model comprised of categories of social activity—religion, politics, economics, family—that are congruent with the definitions, forms, and valuations assigned these categories by contemporary

³⁵ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 1.

³⁶ Bella Zweig, “The Primal Mind: Using Native American Models for the Study of Women in Ancient Greece,” in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 145–180.

Western society...”³⁷ It is possible, she says, that women possessed and exercised powers that remain little understood or hidden because of a male-bias in approach.³⁸ Or, we might add, because they do not fit modern perceptions that men and women “ought” to have had equal roles and powers of self-determination.

Such an approach — this inverting of lenses — is informed by modern anthropology and ethnology, both disciplines in which scholars have learned from experience that attempts at understanding another culture’s beliefs that do not take into consideration, as much as possible, the totality of that culture are in danger of misrepresenting it. James Rives, in his review of three new books about the imperial cult, noted the recent shift toward understanding emperor worship as cultural phenomena, and called it a “sea change,” which indeed it is, because it represents the formation of a methodology that concentrates on understanding a peculiarly Roman ethos from the inside rather than judging it from a distance.³⁹ This formulation questions Christianizing notions that create the need to reconcile apparent discrepancies between ancient religious practice and the supposed requirement of emotion and belief, and scrutinizes Roman value assessments in order to highlight the difference between Roman categories of understanding and modern sensibilities. It attempts to take seriously the implications of a polytheistic worldview, for example, and the implications of the malleability (or absence) of a boundary between politics and religion.

Scholars like Mary Beard, John North, Simon Price, and Ittai Gradel argue, for example, that the application of modern understanding concerning the appropriateness of combining

³⁷ Zweig, 147. Zweig’s comparison is, as I have said, between ancient Greeks and modern North American First Nations peoples though I think these generalizations also apply to ancient Roman society.

³⁸ See, for example, Zweig’s discussion of “gynocentric” models, 153-160.

³⁹ James B. Rives, “Roman Religion Revived,” *Phoenix* Vol. 52, No. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter, 1998), 348.

politics and religion was irrelevant in the Roman world where, from the beginning, both religion and politics were part of the same civic action, serving the community's needs and interests.⁴⁰

Charles Roberts Phillips, in his article, "The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Empire to 284 AD," likewise warns against the habit of treating modern conceptualizations of "belief" and "religion" as though they were absolutes by which we may measure the validity of Rome's religious practices.⁴¹ Calling attention to points where modern perception and ancient understanding diverge, he asserts, for example, that it is anachronistic to think that ancient philosophical skepticism regarding religion is the ancient equivalent to modern secularism.⁴² We may take this as an instructive warning concerning other points of divergence.

And because we are not always the most insightful judges of ancient concepts and institutions, simply because it is so easy to project onto them, a more useful and neutral starting point is to allow the Romans the validity of their own institutions. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill did this when he explored the Roman concept of *mores* (societal morals) and its use by the ancients to explain the fall of the Republic. In his article, "*Mutatio Morum*: The idea of a cultural revolution," he attempts a Roman context for the question of whether the social and cultural changes that accompanied the end of the Republic and the rise of Augustus constituted a "revolution." In Roman culture, he says, *mores* were deemed a natural part of the Roman character, and were passed on from generation to generation through emulation. It was the job of the ruling elite, the *nobiles* (the men with ancestors), to protect through imitation, and thus transmit, the *mos maiorum* (traditions) and *mores maiorum* (morality), both within their own

⁴⁰ Rives, "Roman Religion Revived," 350.

⁴¹ For more on this see for example Charles Robert Phillips, "The Sociology of Religious Knowledge in the Empire to 284 AD," in *ANRW* (1986) 11.16.3, 2679; *Religions of Rome* edited by Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price. Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 359-361.

⁴² Charles Robert Phillips, 2700-2702.

families and the rest of society.⁴³ From the Gracchi on, and even before, Wallace-Hadrill says, the elite at Rome possessed a moral authority by virtue of their uprightness and ability to inspire *imitatio* (emulation). Noting that politics was not separate from, but part of, daily life in Rome, he points out that without moral authority the *nobiles* also lacked political authority, and they had been perceived as lacking the former for some time before the fall of the Republic.⁴⁴ His explanation for the rise of Augustus rests, therefore, not on a *solely* political interpretation premised on manipulation of existing social institutions, but on a shift in authority (*auctoritas*) away from its traditional place with the nobility and onto the emperor and his family.⁴⁵

All this makes sense only if we consider that the Romans lacked the notion of a “state” in the modern sense, as an institution or structure separate from the individuals who constituted it.⁴⁶ Instead, as J. E. Lendon has pointed out, “Government was no separate mental category, sharply distinguished from civil society; it was something ‘embedded’ in society.”⁴⁷ This essentially personal aspect of Roman rule goes a long way toward helping explain the shift Wallace-Hadrill charts in his article. Both Wallace-Hadrill’s approach and Lendon’s observations about Roman government have important implications for my study of the imperial cult, not only because they provide a model for interpretation that offers a more balanced approach to the problems presented by the intricate and varied factors involved in this subject, but because they help contextualize the emphasis placed on the moral worthiness and exemplary qualities of the men and women of the imperial house.

⁴³ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “Mutatio Morum: the idea of a cultural revolution,” in *The Roman Cultural Revolution*. Thomas Habinek and Alessandro Schiesaro, editors. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

⁴⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Raymond Guess, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 41.

⁴⁷ J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 23.

All this work, as James Rives points out, is the result of “a willingness to take Roman religion seriously on its own terms, instead of judging it by the standards of alien religious traditions and then trying to account for its failure.”⁴⁸ This approach allows for the organic nature of the imperial cult and therefore a more satisfying exploration of the interweaving of a host of cultural realities that allowed the famously traditional Romans to embrace a ruler cult as they constructed and reconstructed their own traditions to accommodate imperial power. In his book *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Ittai Gradel elaborated on these accommodations. In a sense, Gradel also attempts a reconstruction of the Roman mental world by showing how religious concepts such as the *lares*, *genius*, *numen*, ancestor worship, and the social status of the *paterfamilias* were part of the historical and mental precedents that, together with their attendant ritual practices, were part of a social fabric into which emperor worship was eventually woven.⁴⁹ Like Wallace-Hadrill, Gradel bases his interpretations on his reading of Roman core values and traditions. The Romans valued social status, and so imperial honours were more about paying homage to the supreme status of the emperor within Roman society than about whether or not he was ever viewed as innately divine.⁵⁰ “If we see divinity, and divine honours in pagan terms,” he wrote, “as primarily concerned with status rather than nature, ruler cult begins to make sense.”⁵¹ In other words, Gradel argues that the imperial cult in Rome was one aspect of the Roman obsession with social hierarchy and not an expression of something essentially *religious* (in the modern sense).

⁴⁸ Rives, 351.

⁴⁹ Gradel, 101, writes that there was nothing untraditional or unrepublican about ruler cults.

⁵⁰ Gradel, 44, 101.

⁵¹ Gradel, 101.

In terms of laying a foundation for this study, Gradel's attempt at reconstructing the Roman mindset with regards to the imperial cult is important, but so is noticing what Gradel left unaddressed. While upholding the genuineness of the imperial cult under Augustus by focusing on its cultural precedents, Gradel nevertheless dismisses out of hand all subsequent deifications as a "conventional, even mechanical, response to imperial deaths."⁵² He points out that after Augustus deification was granted not only to emperors, but even to their wives, children, and other relations (sisters, for example, as with Trajan, or, under Hadrian, even a mother-in-law), but seems to assume, like Oliver before him, that these are individuals who were "of little importance and achievement" and that this therefore renders their deifications meaningless. What he ignores are the implications of the mechanisms that allowed for the deification of women in the first place. That is, he does not ask what might have made the deification of women conceivable to the Romans themselves. Granted, the emperor's powers were enormous and, we may suppose, could be used to force the senate to deify imperial family members on a whim, but Gradel's assertion that the process was "mechanical" ignores a key point of his own argument in which he claims that it was not the establishment of a ruler cult that was novel "in terms of mental history," but the fact of the principate itself.⁵³ Ruler cult was, according to Gradel, a culturally determined response to Augustus' unparalleled, and unprecedented, status within Rome's social hierarchy. If this is true, then we might wonder why we should believe that Augustus' pre-eminence should have been the only "novelty" the Romans negotiated by integrating it into their state religion. And given that Roman society continued to negotiate and renegotiate the space between imperial power and Republican traditions with each successive

⁵² Gradel, 287.

⁵³ Gradel, 102.

ruler, it is even more clear that there is no reason to judge deifications during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian solely by Augustan, or even Julio-Claudian, standards. After all, the transformations wrought by the fall of the Republic, the resulting civil war, and the ultimate ascendancy of Augustus were not the only changes to have taken place in Roman history. No civilization's outlook shifts only in response to cataclysm. In fact, social changes more often develop gradually as a people adapt traditions as needed to sustain broad cultural assumptions and maintain their worldview.⁵⁴

Theoretical Shifts: Women within Power & Women as Symbol

The theoretical bases for the deification of the emperor have been much studied and debated; yet the connection between women and their posthumous deification has not received similar treatment. One has to wonder why. Maybe it is because we know that the Romans valued martial pursuits, and that competition was fierce for political office and priesthoods, and that women were excluded from all these overt sorts of civic activity. The link between the emperor and his deification, putting aside any skepticism surrounding its supposed motivation, seems direct and clear: the emperor was the most powerful man, and stood at the top of the social hierarchy, and deification was the only honour that matched his political powers and mirrored his personal dignity. After all, in the patron/client system that dominated social intercourse in ancient Rome, the emperor was patron to all and client to none. He was also *pontifex maximus*, chief priest, and as such acted during public rituals as mediator of that essential element, the *pax deorum* (the peace between the human community and that of the gods), and was therefore integral to Rome's public religion. By extension, he was perceived as protector of Roman society, guarantor of prosperity. Other concepts, which help define the theoretical foundations of

⁵⁴ Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," 127.

emperor worship, allow us to see relationships between, for example, the worship of the *genius* (guiding spirit) of the Roman people during the Republican period, and worship of the emperor's *genius*, which began very early in the principate of Augustus. The segue of one dominant concept into another — as when the perception of a preeminent man replaced one premised on a preeminent collective as the root of the success of Rome and its people, and representing what it meant to be Roman on a symbolic level both at home and abroad — helps clarify, at least in part, how a “good” emperor could be believed worthy of posthumous deification.

When it comes to imperial women, though, finding that theoretical basis seems much more difficult. To follow the above instance, for example, women were for a long time not thought of as possessing anything like a *genius*, probably because women did not generally perform deeds that implied, to the Roman mind, the presence (or need) of one.⁵⁵ Denied the pursuit of any sort of public career, and barred from membership in Rome's assemblies, women played no official part in public life. Since all potential connections to religious conceptualizations seem lacking, scholars searching for a theoretical basis for the phenomenon tend to stress the relationship between what imperial women symbolized within the dominant imperial ideology, usually as crucial links in quasi-dynastic chains. There is a strong basis for this, seeing as the earliest public honours for women were statues awarded to those who had borne sons themselves deemed worthy of public attention and esteem.⁵⁶ And since the practice

⁵⁵ The earliest evidence for the worship of a woman's *juno*, the female counterpart of the man's *genius*, dates to the reign of Augustus. Found near the via Flaminia, the inscription reads: *Genio Augusti et Ti. Caesaris, iunoni Liviae, Mystes li(bertus)* — “The freedman Mystes, (dedicates this) to the Genius of Augustus and Tiberius Caesar, (and) to the *juno* of Livia.” *CIL* 11.3076 = *ILS* 116.

⁵⁶ Plutarch, *Caius Gracchus*, 4.3 refers to a statue erected by the people to honour Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi; providing the earliest record of a statue to a historical woman in Rome. *Plutarch's Lives*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1921); for a discussion of statues to women in Rome see, Marleen B. Flory, “Livia and the History of Public Honorific Statues for Women in Rome,” *TAPA* (1974) (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 290-292.

was apparently tipped toward honouring women as mothers, it is hardly surprising that dynastic considerations are upper-most in many scholars' minds when they write about the women of the imperial cult. The title *Augusta*, for example, was granted, some argue, to highlight the role of the empress as the mother of a dynasty.⁵⁷ Even the women of the Trajan and Hadrian's households, who did not themselves have children, are fitted into interpretations based on this dynastic model. Some scholars argue, for example, that Pompeia Plotina, Ulpia Marciana, Salonia Matidia, and Vibia Sabina — the four *divae* on whom this paper concentrates — held positions of influence within Roman society, and in the imperial house, largely by virtue of their role as guarantors of (potential) dynasty. Others hold that the long-standing difficulty of creating a definitive imperial dynasty (through male heirs) resulted in a reliance on women, from Livia onwards, as links between families, which in turn accorded them an increased status and prestige that translated into honours.⁵⁸

But if we are looking for a rationale for their deification, should we rely on themes, such as dynasty, broadly applied, for our explanations? Other scholars have explored different aspects of the imperial ethos — concepts like “power” and “autonomy” — as important factors in understanding why women might be said to have deserved the honours they were granted. This explanation is most commonly applied to the first empress, Livia, who is remembered in the literary record as politically astute, active in patronage and charity, and benefactress of the state. But literary references to the women of the early second-century are scanty at best. Should we then, like Mary T. Boatwright, for example, argue that the women of the early second-century

⁵⁷ Flory, “The Meaning of Augusta in the Julio-Claudian Period,” *AJAH*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1997), 122. All four of the women on whom this paper concentrates received this title.

⁵⁸ Hildegard Temporini, *Die Frauen am Hofe Trajans: Ein Beitrag zur Stellung der Augustae im Principat*. (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1978), 262-63.

had little actual power or autonomy, and were honoured because they were the passive beneficiaries of the status of the imperial household as an abstract?⁵⁹ In this interpretation, Pompeia Plotina and Vibia Sabina profited from the social cachet of the imperial house, in spite of their childlessness, while a dynastic connection was established between the two successive houses through Hadrian's wife, Vibia Sabina, who was the younger daughter of Trajan's niece, Salonia Matidia.⁶⁰ Keeping with the manipulation theme, then, Hadrian is understood as having used Salonia Matidia's apotheosis in 119 as a means of creating a connection between the two houses.⁶¹ Other interpretations are entirely in keeping with a paradigm in which honours for women are understood as fakes. Boatwright, for one, suggests that these early second-century women inherited a prestige they did nothing to deserve, and that their *arriviste* status — all were from families with origins outside of Rome — explains their supposed lack of political involvement.

All this raises several questions. First of all, is it fair to say that women were deified for reasons identical to those applied to the deification of the emperor? Was it the exercise of political power that convinced the senate that they were worthy of deification? Next, how are we to approach the sources for these particular women, who are amply represented in the physical evidence (statues, coins, etc.), but woefully under-represented in the literary record? If we decide that literary evidence is of primary importance, and interpret it as describing how things actually were, then we would readily believe that the statues, coins, images, dedications were inspired by attention to social protocols, and therefore not meaningful. Ought we assume, then, that their

⁵⁹ Mary T. Boatwright, "The Imperial Women of the Early Second-Century A.C.," *AJPh*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), 515.

⁶⁰ See *Appendix A* for a family tree.

⁶¹ Oliver, 36ff.

deifications were, as Gradel insists, mere convention? Was deification a reward for participation in the imperial household as an abstract, as Boatwright proposes?

The main difficulty here is that such a debate obscures the issues that were of concern for the Romans themselves, and these, if we go by the literary sources, revolved around the disparity between the traditional roles of women and the ones women held, either in reality or potentially, given their relationship to the man in power. We must remember the connection between societal roles and social mores and traditions, and for women to be seeming to step outside of their traditional roles indicated a failure to uphold those aspects of Roman society that were considered the chief identifying characteristics of ‘Romanness,’ and provided the ruling man with a rationale for his power. More needs to be done toward describing what “power” was in female terms, how it was acted upon, and what this might have implied to Romans (by which I mean the ruling elite, not the general population). Unfortunately, understanding the interplay between traditional mores and actual practice is more difficult and subtle than some scholars seem to allow.

An emphasis on elite women and their roles within Roman society, which is what seems to be evolving in the latest scholarship, indicates that elite women’s relationship to the male-dominated society was constantly — albeit slowly — evolving, and was not static as it has more traditionally been portrayed. Scholars are examining the various public roles of imperial women and exploring the implications of these roles. The patronal role of women has been explored most recently by Christiane Kunst, who suggests the existence of what she calls “matronage,” the interconnected social avenues women used because they were excluded from direct interaction in

the public sphere.⁶² Another recent article reconsiders the literary evidence for women's participation in religious ritual, especially their long-assumed prohibition from sacrifice.⁶³ These works have broad implications for my research, as they deepen our understanding of a variety of aspects of women's roles in elite Roman society and therefore allow a new interpretation of the lives and roles of these mostly quiet early-second-century women. This new interest in exploring women's lives in more detail is important, because it completes our picture of the past and helps us understand our own traditional prejudices. This comes to bear on our understanding of the deification of women, the rationale for which, we must conclude, was a quite different thing in the early part of the imperial period than it was during the second, third, or fourth centuries. With these things in mind, it is by contrasting the expectations placed on women in early second-century Roman society with the roles imperial women actually undertook that I intend to show that the consecration of imperial women to the status of *divae* served a purpose larger than the purely political — it helped Romans make sense of the very public presence of imperial women while simultaneously reinforcing traditional Roman values and the mores that justified imperial rule.

A Little Background: Questions of Conservatism vs. Innovation

Because this paper deals with religion in Roman political life, a concept moderns have a great deal of difficulty with, it is worthwhile taking a moment and reiterating some important points. I have already indicated that the Romans perceived religion as having a different form and function than it does in most modern societies. *Publica sacra*, or publicly funded state rituals

⁶² Christiane Kunst, "Patronage/Matronage der *Augustae*," in *Augustae: Machtbewusste Frauen am römischen Kaiserhof?* Edited by Anne Kolb. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2010), 145-161.

⁶³ Rebecca Flemming, "Festus and the Role of Women in Roman Religion," in *Verius, Festus & Paul*. Edited by Fay Glinister & Clare Woods with J. A. North and M. H. Crawford. (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2007), 87-108.

performed *pro populo* — on behalf of the people — were different than the private devotions individuals performed at home. These public sacrificial rituals, of which emperor worship was part, whether animal sacrifice (*immolatio*) or bloodless, formed the core of civic cult activity in the ancient world; they were the source of communal identification, and in this way could be said to have reflected and constructed social realities. We might also say, therefore, that state cult was the acting out of an implicit worldview.⁶⁴ That is, as has basically already been said, civic rituals described the status of the *community* at any given moment in relation to its collective past, not in terms of an abstract theology. It was the traditions of the community that Rome's state cult defined, described, and expressed — and thereby maintained.⁶⁵ So rather than view state cult as a static entity that went unchanged throughout the centuries — or ought to have done, a view that is informed by the modern tendency to think of religion in terms of dogma — it is more helpful to realize that because of this orientation toward action over theology, Rome's public religious institutions allowed and reflected the adaptation and integration of change in key areas, including the socio-political.

During the Republic, public religion enacted the values of the as-yet relatively small community of Rome, but shifted, after the Republic's decline, to describe those of the principate.⁶⁶ It seems odd to us now, as though the Romans were betraying essential religious philosophies by moving from worship of the *genius* of the Roman people to worshipping the *genius* or *numen* of the emperor, or by offering exactly the same sort of sacrifice to deified

⁶⁴ See Gradel, 3-4; J. A. North, *Roman Religion*, Greece & Rome: New Surveys in the Classics, No. 30. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11 ff. Gradel warns that philosophical treatises such as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and *De Divinatione* should be approached with caution in interpreting Roman religion because, he says, attempts at understanding Roman religion that emphasize the exploration of a supposed underlying philosophy are implicitly 'Christianizing.'

⁶⁵ J. A. North, *Roman Religion*, 11.

⁶⁶ North, 17.

imperials as to the traditional gods and goddesses, but if we think of continuity of ritual *action* as the key element and not the underlying philosophy we assume it must be describing, we may get a little closer to understanding the Roman mindset in this regard. It is for this very reason, in fact, that we ought to think of religion in Rome as readily mediating social and political change by creating a link between ancestral traditions and the novelty of the present.

It is essential to keep this difference between Rome's religion and the Judeo-Christian tradition in mind in order to understand how religion helped Romans negotiate the public role and influence of women within the imperial house. I am proposing that, like that of their male counterparts, the deification of women mediated several connected realities: their status relative to others in Roman society, the roles they played within the larger community, and the perception that because of this public role they embodied "Romanness." These public roles were not artificial creations, even though they were acquired originally with the development of one-family rule in Rome, but were the result of Roman tradition applied to an imperial context. What this means is that the deification of imperial men and women was directly linked not only to Rome's status as the locus of imperial power, but to the personal nature of ruling power in the pre-modern world. This is a point that seems to be frequently forgotten — that while the Romans understood the difference between public and private, they possessed no real concept of a "state" that was distinct from the individuals who made up the group that ruled. Rome's *res publica* was therefore actually the accumulated traditions and morals of the dominant group (the elite), and not, as we tend to assume now, a body of independent governing institutions.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ See Raymond Guess's discussion of the difference between pre-modern and modern notions of public and private in *Public Goods/Private Goods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 34-51, and 124, note 12, in which he states, "For us, it is extremely difficult to imagine a social formation in which there is an existing status quo of

Further, the Romans viewed their magistrates — the men who held public office — as being imbued with public authority because they were responsible for matters touching more lives than anyone else.⁶⁸ And it may be fair to say that imperial deification was therefore as much the direct result of the fact that the emperor was the ultimate magistrate, with all the powers, which he held until he died, as it was because he was *the* most public of figure in a world where commanding a public defined one's status in society. He and his closest family members embodied the power of imperial Rome and its whole history — and were god-like by virtue of their status, *dignitas*, and access to *imperium*.⁶⁹

Seeing that the deification of imperial women operates on so many apparently divergent levels, it will not be possible to cover these comprehensively. It is possible, though, to touch on some of the most salient points having to do with the interrelationship of imperial women and Rome's elite and, through that, to their inclusion in the notion of what was “public.” These are relationships that cannot be illustrated using evidence related solely to the four women in question. Instead, while utilizing the evidence available for the status and influence of these women, other sources provide grounding in the developing relationship between women, their public image, and the city. A much broader study, one that takes into consideration cults of women in the Greek East and Roman West would be fascinating but is too far-reaching a project for this, an already far-reaching project. In short, this paper proposes that it was the divide between traditional Roman values, social custom, and the public omni-presence of imperial women that demanded their inclusion into state cult. In Price-ian terms, Romans had need of

distribution of power for dealing with matters of common concern, and yet this is not located in a sociologically separate structure.”

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁹ Gradel, 28-29.

representing to themselves the female powers in society that did not readily accord with the customs and morals idealized by elite Romans.

For the sake of organization, this thesis is broken into two main themes. The next chapter will explore evidence for the wealth and independence these women possessed, and relate this to their public image as presented in the famous *Panegyricus* by their contemporary, Pliny the Younger, by way of showing that these were issues requiring assimilation into more traditional modes. The following chapter considers evidence for their actual public powers and participation in public life, while the last will treat the symbolic element, covering those aspects of their public image frequently interpreted as straightforwardly political. Not surprisingly, because of the nature of imperial power at Rome and the fact that cultural elements are not removed from one another, each topic melds into the next.

CHAPTER 2
QUESTIONING THE DEPICTION OF IMPERIAL WOMEN IN ROMAN SOCIETY

Going back to the question about what constituted female power, we must keep in mind that Roman society was both hierarchical and patriarchal. This meant that women's public roles and personal powers were fundamentally different from those of men, and were defined in relation to those held by men. Still, while women could not hope to attain equality with men on their own terms, they appear to have possessed a complementarity with their male counterparts that they held in their own right, as women and as members of the community. This "complementarity" describes the fact that women operated in an entirely different sphere than men, that a "women's society" existed that in many ways mirrored the framework within which men interacted.⁷⁰ Further, women were invested with a degree of prestige and influence that correlated to the amount of power held by the male head of the household.⁷¹ An anecdote provided by Appian illustrates this correlation, and demonstrates the boundaries of acceptable male and female domains during, in this case, the latter part of the first century BC.

The triumvirs, Octavian (later Augustus), Antony, and Lepidus, having exhausted their means for war revenue, decided to levy a tax on 1,400 of Rome's wealthiest women, requiring them "to make a valuation of their property, and to furnish for the service of the war as much of their personal wealth such portion as the triumvirs should require from each."⁷² Not particularly impressed, and feeling that they had suffered enough from the wars, the women sought redress

⁷⁰ Nicholas Purcell, "Livia and the Women of Rome," in *PCPS*, Series No. 32, No. 212 (1986), 79ff.

⁷¹ Judith Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 207. Hallett actually speaks to the respect accorded the daughters and sisters of "renowned Roman leaders." That this translated into an assumed influence and power is apparent throughout the ancient sources, as Hallett points out, 11ff.

⁷² Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.5.32-34; Valerius Maximus also comments on this event, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, D. R. Shackleton Bailey, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), VIII.3.3.

not from the triumvirs themselves, but from the triumvirs' closest female relatives.⁷³ Ultimately meeting with only partial success, and unable to move forward using what we are apparently meant to understand was the accepted means of dealing with such a situation, the women storm the forum and confront the triumvirs. In her speech to the startled — and outraged — men, their spokesperson, Hortensia, daughter of the famed orator Quintus Hortensius, makes clear that the women's presence in the public forum was neither their intended, nor usual, means of redress.⁷⁴

If we attend to this historical anecdote with the intention of measuring how much power the women held relative to the men in the story, we would naturally conclude that their power was derived solely from their relationship to powerful men, because it was. Still, the fact that the female relatives — a mother, a sister, and a wife — of the triumvirs possessed a prominence and power in society should not be ignored. The fact that the women had the potential to persuade the triumvirs and, through private discussion, effect an emendation or rescission of their edict is not questioned. In this story, the reality of a female domain functioning in tandem with the male is made clear; Roman women operated outside the public domain yet were capable of influencing it through their male relatives. This presented the Romans with several interrelated problems: because Rome's social hierarchy was fundamentally premised on male competition for reputation and status, the threat that female participation in decision-making posed to a man's public reputation meant that these otherwise natural exchanges had to remain part of the private realm of home and family. Note how implicitly acceptable it was for Rome's elite women to approach in private the women of the triumvirs' households but how their public confrontation

⁷³ Appian, 4.5.32, "With the sister of Octavius and the mother of Antony they did not fail, but they were repulsed from the doors of Fulvia, the wife of Antony, whose rudeness they could scarce endure."

⁷⁴ Appian, 4.5.32, "As befitted women of our rank addressing a petition to you, we had recourse to the ladies of your households; but having been treated as did not befit us, at the hands of Fulvia, we have been driven by her to the forum."

with the men inspired outrage. Even more, however, the political disenfranchisement of women necessarily implied a difference in priorities — women, it was assumed, would be naturally more focused on promoting the public careers of their sons, husbands, or brothers, than they would be on over-seeing the well-being of the community as a whole.⁷⁵ Because women’s “power brokering” was necessarily private, not public, they were perceived as lacking the same boundaries in relation to the state that constrained men; women were not subject to the tempering influences of official protocols.⁷⁶

A bind was created, however, since these sorts of power relationships played out differently under a republican form of government, with its emphasis on the collective, than they were bound to do when there was a single ruling family. Under an imperial system, the family of the leading man — women included — was inevitably cast into the public eye, and shared to some extent the same bright light that shone on the preeminent man. Female members of the imperial house therefore possessed an exponentially greater potential for influence on the public sphere, enormous social prestige, and a public presence that was so apparent, and implied so much, that it could not be ignored. Imperial women participated in Roman society as benefactresses and advocates, possessed an intricate web of social connections, and were active as leading matrons. They also likely led or participated in rituals performed *pro populo*, for the people. As a result, their public prestige was enormous and they, like the emperor, were conceived as symbolic representatives of the Roman people. And although women could not be publicly honoured as ancestors in the same way men were — there is no record of a family

⁷⁵ Emily A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10-11.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12; Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women* (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2001), 102.

keeping the *imagines* of female relatives — imperial women were expected to function as models (*exempla*) of Roman virtue for matrons present and future.⁷⁷

These elements, together with the prestige garnered for imperial women by their association vis-à-vis the emperor, provide the basis for a theoretical approach to the phenomenon of female deification, while the link between Roman religion and the deification of women may be found in the way state cult mediated the tension between tradition and social change. When we consider the expectations placed on women by tradition, and compare these to the roles imperial women actually filled as members of the ruling family, we are much closer to understanding a possible rationale for their deification. But we must get a little closer to the heart of the matter than even that. As stated in the introductory chapter, the mechanisms that placed these four women at the top of the social hierarchy, and situated them closer to the seat of ultimate executive power than others, also demanded that they not take advantage of their situation — at least not publicly. In order to set the discussion of imperial women and their public roles and image within a second-century context, then, we might begin by establishing the view of women that dominated at the time. By doing this, and comparing cultural expectations with actual social practice, the social tensions that might be resolved through deification can then be assessed.

Pliny's Panegyricus: The Quandary of Rome's Matrons, Social Status & Influence

The *Panegyricus* of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus is the published version of his *gratiarum actio* (an obligatory thanksgiving speech to the emperor) delivered before the senate on the occasion of Pliny's selection as *consul suffectus* in AD 100. Presenting us with some of

⁷⁷ Harriet I. Flower, "Were Women ever 'Ancestors' in Republican Rome?" in *Images of Ancestors*, edited by J. Munk Højte. *Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity* (Aarhus, Denmark: University of Aarhus Press, 2002), 162.

the few contemporary references to either Plotina or her sister-in-law, Marciana, that survive in the literary record, Pliny's speech mirrors Roman social mores, and the expectations these placed on the ruling family. It is important to remember that although this is a work meant to display Pliny's oratorical skills and enhance his reputation within the imperial court, the *Panegyricus* is more than it appears on the surface; while seemingly offering little more than barefaced flattery, it is at the same time outlining for the emperor the concerns and hopes of the senatorial elite regarding him and his family. At the same time, Pliny is providing us with an idea of how the men of the senatorial elite in Rome understood the role of women in their society. It is for this reason that we may take Pliny's individual points of praise as indications of Roman values and through these get an idea of the sorts of issues concerning female behavior and its meaning in an imperial context with which the Romans grappled during this period.

One notices immediately that in the *Panegyricus* women are treated as extensions of the man, and are relegated to a portion of the speech that addresses the emperor's private, as opposed to public, or political, life. This is in keeping with Roman practice; women were not citizens in the sense of being capable of entering fully into the public (i.e., the political) life of the city. In the *Panegyricus*, therefore, the women are discussed within the context of a portion of the speech in which Pliny congratulates Trajan for private behavior just as exemplary as that he exhibits in public — the assumption being that a man's actions in private revealed the truth of his character. But we should not be fooled by this into thinking that women's behavior lacked implications. As Pliny makes clear, the public, and private, comportment of a wife implied to society at large something essential about the husband — it reflected on his leadership ability, because as the male head of the household he was expected to provide an acceptable model of behavior for its other members. Pliny says this in *Panegyricus* 83.2-3:

Est magnificum quod te ab omni contagione vitiorum reprimis ac revocas, sed magnificentius quod tuos; quanto enim magis arduum est alio praestare quam se, tanto laudabilius quod, cum ipse sis optimus, omnes circa te similes tui fecisti.

It is splendid that you restrain and recall yourself from all taint of vice, but even more splendid that you restrain and recall your own [family]; for as much as it is more difficult to vouch for another than for oneself, so the more praise is yours because, although you may be best yourself, you have made all those around you the likeness of you.⁷⁸

In part because of this, the conduct of the women of his household had broad implications for his perceived ability to function as a reliable member of public society:

Multis inlustribus dedecori fuit aut inconsultius uxor adsumpta aut retenta patientius; ita foris claros domestica destruebat infamia, et ne maximi cives haberentur, hoc efficiebatur, quod mariti minores erant.

A wife taken either too indiscreetly or retained too patiently was a shame to many illustrious men; in this way domestic scandal has destroyed honorable men abroad, and this happened that they were not regarded as great citizens because as husbands they were inferior.⁷⁹

There is also the problem of the reputation the *princeps* inherited from his predecessors. Nerva (r. 96-98), from whom Trajan received imperial powers through adoption as his heir and successor, was emperor for only two years, having risen to power after the assassination of his predecessor, Domitian (r. 81-96). Trajan was therefore much in the shadow of Domitian, who was still remembered by the elite as an autocrat with little regard for senatorial dignity. This fact helps explain the enormous emphasis placed on morals during Trajan's reign, and is felt in the *Panegyricus* in Pliny's constant emphasis on Trajan's character, personal morals, and abilities. Pliny makes much of the sort of man Trajan is behind closed doors, and describes the characters and conduct of Trajan's female relations to prove the reliability of the man as role model, and the sincerity of his moral integrity. Trajan is not just acting the part, Pliny seems to say, or we might

⁷⁸ Pliny, *Panegyricus* 83.2-3. Latin translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷⁹ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 83.4.

reasonably expect that the women closest to him would reveal the truth by behaving in ways that attracted notice and invited censure. In order to highlight his point, Pliny deftly compares the behavior of Plotina and Marciana to that of previous imperial women. These comparisons inevitably touch on the issues that most concerned Rome's elite males — the threat that close female relations posed to the delicate ownership of power.

Notice, for example, that Pliny couches his praise of Plotina and Marciana in terms that recall notorious imperial women from prior regimes. Describing Plotina he calls Trajan to notice, *Quam constanter non potentiam tuam, sed ipsum te reveretur!* (“How resolutely she reveres, not your power, but you yourself!”), thus making her a foil to women like Valeria Messalina or Agrippina the Younger, who are remembered in the historical record — brought vividly to the second-century senatorial imagination by their contemporary Cornelius Tacitus — as having ruthlessly favored personal interests over those of the collective, and abused the privileges that accompanied their proximity to imperial power.⁸⁰ Julio-Claudian women like Agrippina the Younger, who is recorded as having once attempted to mount the imperial dais and receive a foreign delegation alongside her son, Nero — thus implying not a complementarity but an equality — come immediately to mind, as does Messalina because she married consul-designate C. Silius while Claudius was absent from the city, thus making herself the central figure in a potential transfer of power.⁸¹

Likewise, Pliny's claim that Plotina and Marciana co-existed peaceably within the imperial court, possessing the same lofty status without a hint of competition or rancor, called his

⁸⁰ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 83.6.

⁸¹ The entire career of Agrippina was interpreted by Tacitus as a travesty of female greed for official power and recognition: See *Annals*, 13.2; 13.5; 13.13-16; 13.18; and 13.21 for examples of the censure powerful woman received. For Messalina's marriage and ultimate undoing, see Tac. *Annals*, 11.26-37; Suet. *Claud.* 26; Dio 60(61).31.1-5.

senatorial listeners (and readers) to remember infamous rivalries, such as that between Livia and the elder Agrippina, or Messalina and the younger Agrippina.⁸² Pliny does not need to name these other imperial women because his readers would have been well aware of his intended meaning.⁸³ The relationship of women to the peace of the imperial court, the capital city, and, indeed, the whole empire was one that is not readily established in the modern mind, but to the ancients there was a correlation between the private behavior of women in the imperial court and the establishment of a broader peace. The underlying assumption is that women had a part to play in imperial rule — not through action and decision-making, but by proper attention to their appropriate role within the household, or family. This concept, which the Romans called *pietas*, is essential to understanding the basis for expectations placed on individuals by tradition. And it is *pietas* that Pliny is really describing throughout these chapters of the *Panegyricus* — Trajan fulfills his traditional role as householder, husband, and brother by attending to the demands of social propriety and establishing an expectation of behavior within his household, while his wife and sister participate in their socially prescribed roles by complying with these expectations. But just as Pliny sets his praise of Trajan in contrast, not to the Republic — the period to which the Julio-Claudians had been constantly compared — Pliny relates the behavior and attitudes of Plotina and Marciana to prior *imperialis* in order to illustrate how much they exceed the (imperial) example set for them. Each point that Pliny chooses to emphasize implies its opposite. Had the threat — or experience — of female encroachments on the public (i.e., male) domain not

⁸² Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.33, describes Livia's antipathy toward Agrippina, and how only love of her husband, Germanicus, inspired Agrippina to check her "indomitum animum" (wild spirit); for Messalina's hatred of Agrippina minor, see *Annals*, 11.12.

⁸³ See Harriet I. Flower, "Were Women ever 'Ancestors' in Republican Rome?" in *Images of Ancestors*, edited by J. Munk Højte (Aarhus, Denmark: University of Aarhus Press, 2002), 157-182, for an interesting discussion of the notion that individual women were frequently part of the collective memory, both as *exempla* and as cautionary tales.

been perceived as a possibility, Pliny would not have made a show of negating any possible comparisons between Plotina and Marciana and imperial women who had laid public claim to an equality with the emperor or made a show of their wealth and standing.

Pliny's reference to Plotina's apparent modesty in her attire and number of attendants, then, is likewise meant to elevate her to the status of imperial *exemplum* by making implicit comparisons between the empress and other elite women of power and wealth. *Eadem quam modica cultu, quam parca comitatu, quam civilis incessu!* ("How modest she is in her attire, how sparing in the number of her attendants, how unassuming when she walks abroad!"), Pliny says, touching pointedly on attitudes that had once inspired Republican sumptuary laws, restricting the rights of women to own gold, wear finery in public, or ride in a carriage (*carpentum*) in the city.⁸⁴ And while Pliny's congratulation is aimed at Trajan for having a wife who imitates his personal austerity, *An, cum videat quam nullus te terror, nulla comitetur ambitio, non et ipsa cum silentio incedat, ingredientemque pedibus maritum, in quantum patitur sexus, imitetur?* ("Or, when she sees how neither fear nor pomp accompanies you, should she herself not walk in silence, and should she not imitate her husband walking on foot, in as much as her sex allows?"), he is simultaneously praising Plotina's choice of imitation over self-advancement.⁸⁵ In other words, Plotina does well to learn from her husband, eschew the temptations of her estate, and be careful not to declare her public presence too boldly or attract attention to herself by ostentatious shows of wealth and social standing. The empress might have chosen to insinuate her influence and power in public at every opportunity by being accompanied publicly by a large entourage, or being conveyed in a *carpentum*, yet Pliny calls attention to her lack of ceremony and the fact that

⁸⁴ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 83.7

⁸⁵ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 83.8.

she goes about on foot, both of which imply a lack of self-importance, in contrast to that demanded by other emperors and their courts.⁸⁶ Compare Pliny's description of Plotina with, for example, the description of Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso and his wife, Plancina, that Tacitus offers in the midst of his sensationalist narrative of their prosecution for the murder of the imperial heir presumptive, Germanicus, in AD 16. Tacitus highlights the couple's pride and scorn for popular feeling by describing how they purposely attracted public attention with open — and therefore unrepentant — displays of wealth and influence while arriving in Rome from the east, where the alleged poisoning had taken place.⁸⁷ Plotina's 'scanty retinue' stands in contrast to Plancina, who boldly paraded through the busiest part of the Campus Martius with her 'retinue of women' on her way to her festively decorated home for a sumptuous party. Clearly, public behavior — and maternal behavior in particular — was an issue for the Romans as they worked to negotiate societal changes that placed women alongside their husbands in the public eye. Pliny's insistence that Plotina and Marciana were *exempla* in their own right indicates to us a locus of social tension, the nature of which appears to have been intimately linked to the inevitable exposure of women to public life engendered by the imperial system. By 98, when Trajan became emperor,

⁸⁶ Whether Plotina had been granted the privilege of the *carpentum* is not documented. However, since Pliny highlights the fact that, like her husband, she walks everywhere I think we are meant to contrast this with a wheeled conveyance, such as the *carpentum*, which was used (with special permission) by the empresses Messalina and Agrippina during the reign of Claudius. See Dio, 60.33.2; Suetonius, *Claudius*, 17. Other possibilities include a litter or sedan chair.

⁸⁷ Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.9. *Ab Narnia, vitandae suspicionis an quia pavidis consilia in incerto sunt, Nare ac mox Tiberi devectus auxit vulgi iras, quia navem tumulo Caesarum adpulerat dieque et ripa frequenti, magno clientium agmine ipse, feminarum comitatu Plancina et vultu alacres incessere. Fuit inter inritamenta invidiae domus foro imminens festa ornatu conviviumque et epulae et celebritate loci nihil occultum.* "From Narnia, either to avoid suspicion or because the plans of a frightened man are apt to be inconsistent, he sailed down the Nar, then down the Tiber, and added to the exasperation of the populace by bringing his vessel to shore at the mausoleum of the Caesars. It was a busy part of the day and of the river-side; yet he with a marching column of retainers, and Plancina with her escort of women, proceeded beaming on their way. There were other irritants also; among them, festal decorations upon his mansion looming above the forum; guests and a dinner; and, in that crowded quarter, full publicity for everything." Translation by John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library edition. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1943).

the continued public scrutiny of imperial women, and the degree of their participation in civic life meant that imperial women had become symbolic representatives of “official” Rome as much as the emperor himself.

Pliny’s contextualization of these women should give us a clue as to how he and his contemporaries viewed the imperial family, including the role of the imperial women. The fact that Pliny does not laud the participation of prior imperial women and lament the comparative passivity and lassitude of Plotina and Marciana, as some modern scholars have done, should clue us in to actual Roman priorities. In Pliny the imperial women were important because they did not participate in civic society in the forward way that earlier imperial women supposedly had, nor did they attempt to subvert the authority of the emperor by behaving in a way that implied to the public gaze an equality of status or access to authority. Instead, Pliny highlights the passivity of Trajan’s female family members as a positive, inspired by Trajan’s own example as a man motivated more by concern for the commonwealth than for his own personal ambitions. But we should not be so naïve as to think that Pliny is representing the reality of female roles and relationship to imperial power any more than he was reflecting Trajan’s actual motivations and character.

Marks of Status: Ownership and Independence

How can we tell what was really happening when the lives of individual women were never described by Roman authors in a way that accurately portrays their actions, let alone helps us interpret their motivations? One first step is to align Pompeia Plotina, Ulpia Marciana, Salonia Matidia, and Vibia Sabina with the public roles and private access to imperial powers that were theirs as integral members of the imperial house. In order to do this, we must establish the first source of their prestige and influence — their family origins, wealth, and connections, for these

were the foundation upon which any individual's claim to status was built in ancient Rome. Contrary to Mary T. Boatwright, who argued that, "almost nothing attests the financial standing and activity of these second-century women," our knowledge of the activities and possessions of the early second-century women, while fragmentary, indicates that all possessed senatorial status and significant personal wealth from birth.⁸⁸

The *gens* Ulpia — the family of Marciana (born around 44) and her brother, Trajan — was well established in Roman Spain. Their father was of the senatorial class, and had held a consulship and several important governorships. About Marciana's presumed husband, C. Salonius Matidius Patruinus, little is known except that he was also a member of the senatorial elite and left her widowed at a relatively young age.⁸⁹ The couple had one daughter, Salonia Matidia, born probably around AD 69. In keeping with traditional practice, the widowed Marciana and her daughter were part of Trajan's household in Rome — along with his wife, Plotina — after Trajan inherited imperial power following the death of his adoptive father, Nerva, in AD 98. Archaeological evidence from Rome and its environs indicate that Marciana also owned property — villas at Cumae and Grottaferrata, near Tusculum, a short distance from Rome, where many wealthy Romans lived in luxury outside the confines of the city.⁹⁰

Inscriptions also attest to land ownership in Calabria; a freedman named Oecius, procurator of

⁸⁸ Mary T. Boatwright, "The Women of the Early Second Century A.C.," 520.

⁸⁹ Marie-Thérèse Raepsaet-Charlier, *Prosopographie des Femmes de l'ordre Sénatorial: I^{er}-II^e Siècles* (Lovanni: Aetibus Peters, 1987), p. 646, no. 824; C. Salonius Matidius Patruinus was of the senatorial order, from the Italian town of Vicetia (modern Vicenza), but little is known about his career except that he was praetor before 78, and legionary legate in 70/71 or 72/73. See *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, Vol. 2, M 365.

⁹⁰ The villa at Cumae is known from a portion of a lead pipe, discovered in 1894, inscribed with *Ulpiae Marcianae*. See *American Journal of Archaeology* 2 [1898] 398, nbr. 67. For the villa at Grottoferrata, see *EE* IX 682 = *AE* 1906, 81 = *NSc* 1905. 276. The nearby 'Valle Marciana' still bears the name of Ulpia Marciana, whose villa was thought to have been in the immediate vicinity. Coarelli asserts that during the imperial period sometime residents of this area included Tiberius, Agrippina, Nero, Galba, Marciana, and Matidia, see *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007), 515. See also my map at the end of this paper, for the location of properties belonging to all four women.

what must have been extensive holdings, had a stone inscribed noting a sacrifice to Juno Lacina *pro salute Marcianae sororis Aug[usti]* — *for the well-being of Marciana, sister of the emperor*.⁹¹ Clearly, the fact of her considerable wealth is borne out by her property holdings in Rome and across Italy.

Pompeia Plotina was also a property owner, with holdings in Rome, in Italy, and in other parts of the empire. An inscription provides the name of an equestrian *procurator* assigned to overseeing her property in Italy, while brickstamps and fragments of other stamped earthenware signify that she owned estates near Rome on which were *figlinae* (brickworks) with kilns producing bricks, roofing tiles (*tegulae*), and other products.⁹² *Figlinae* were usually owned by members of the senatorial elite, including the imperial family, and could be found alongside agricultural production on estates where there was a ready supply of good-quality clay and enough fuel for the kilns.⁹³ The *figlinae* would have supplied a substantial income owing to the extensive building campaigns undertaken by both Trajan and Hadrian.⁹⁴ Indeed, tiles identified by their stamps as produced at Plotina's estates, an example of which appears in *CIL* 12.5678, were found at Nemausus, in Gallia Narbonensis, and also in the area of Sant' Agnese fuori le mura, in Rome. This suggests imperial ownership and/or building activity in these places.⁹⁵ The scope of Plotina's personal estates is suggested, further, by stamps from her *figlinae*, which name

⁹¹ *CIL* 10.106 = *ILS* 4039. This inscription is likely dated to before 105, when both Plotina and Marciana received the title *Augusta*, or we might expect Oecius to have noted the fact in his inscription.

⁹² *CIL* 10.7587 = *ILS* 1402 records that Rufus served as procurator *Plotinae Aug., proc. Caes. Hadriani*; *CIL* 12.5678 = *CIL* 15.693.16, for *tegulae*. We might note here that one of Plotina's *offinatores* (workshop stewards) was a woman — Valeria Nice, whose name appears on both brickstamps and stamped *tegulae*.

⁹³ Annalisa Marzano, *Roman Villas in Central Italy: A Social and Economic History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 171ff.

⁹⁴ Paul Weaver, "Imperial Slaves and Freedmen in the Brick Industry," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 122 (1998), 238.

⁹⁵ Eugène Germer-Durand, *Découvertes Archéologiques faites a Nimes et dans le Gard, pendant l'année 1872* (Nîmes: Chez A. Catélan Libraire, 1876), 76. [Http://www.google.ca/books?id=s_VBAAAAYAAJ](http://www.google.ca/books?id=s_VBAAAAYAAJ)

no fewer than ten separate *officinatores*, or production supervisors, while Plotina's name appears (*PLOTINA AVG*) as *domina*, the owner of the estate and its workshops.⁹⁶

The fact that Pompeia Plotina had an imperial procurator named Rufus — as described in *CIL* 10.7587 (and Appendix B, no. 4, below) — is interesting. The presence of an equestrian *procurator* is in keeping with the practice of having a man of rank managing imperial holdings, and indicates not only that Plotina's property was likely vast and the profits from it not inconsiderable; the fact that she employed a man of equestrian rank as *procurator* speaks directly to Plotina's status within the imperial house and wider community. The empress had slaves and freedmen (*liberti*) running her businesses for her just like other wealthy female property owners — but she also employed men with a public career, just as her husband and his successor. This implies that Plotina's status was marked out as much more significant than that of other women — including her sister imperial, Marciana. It may also imply a measure of equality with Trajan and, later, Hadrian, at least as a property owner and businessperson.

Hadrian's wife, Vibia Sabina, was also a woman of substance and a businesswoman who owned *figlinae*. She had a house in Rome, and an estate at Velleia (near modern Piacenza) valued at 100,000 sesterces.⁹⁷ She participated in Trajan's grain relief program as a landowner here in c. 102, fifteen years before she was empress. Not insignificantly, Sabina is also named, jointly with Hadrian, on a public inscription not far from Rome, at Gabii:

⁹⁶ Françoise Chausson & Alfredo Buonopane, "Una fonte della ricchezza delle *Augustae* – Le *figlinae* urbane," in *Augustae: Machtbewusste Frauen am römischen Kaiserhof?* Edited by Anne Kolb. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2010), 102.

⁹⁷ Sabina's brickworks, in Boatwright, "Imperial Women of the Early Second Century A.C.," 523, and Françoise Chausson & Alfredo Buonopane, "Una fonte della ricchezza delle *Augustae* – Le *figlinae* urbane," 102.; House in Rome, *CIL* 15.7313; land in Velleia, *CIL* 11.1147, line 52 (though some argue that this woman cannot be positively identified as the empress. See Boatwright, 523, n. 39).

Hadriano Sabinae
Augusto cos. III, p. p. Augustae
locupletatoribus municipii
*ex d. d. publice*⁹⁸

To Hadrian To Sabina
Augustus, consul three times, Augusta
father of the fatherland
enrichers of the municipality
(erected by) the decree of the town councilors, from public money

Note the alignment of their names, placed as they are on the same line at the top of the inscription, the parallelism of the titles *Augustus* and *Augusta*, and the fact that the text unites to name them, together, as *locupletatores municipii* (“enrichers of the municipality”). Taken together, these elements suggest that the emperor and empress were viewed as partners, at least in certain aspects of their public roles. We know, also, that Sabina was responsible for at least one structure in Rome though all that is left of it is the dedicatory inscription, found in Trajan’s forum.⁹⁹

Interpretation of the evidence concerning the wealth and economic activity of Marciana’s daughter, Salonia Matidia, is made problematic by the fact that both Salonia Matidia and her elder daughter, Mindia Matidia, are often referred to in inscriptions as simply “Matidia.” A “B[y]b[i]otheca M[at]idiana” in Suessa Aurunca (in Campania), for example, might have been built with money provided by either woman, but is attributed to the daughter, Mindia Matidia, based on the existence of inscriptions from the same area praising the benefactions of the

⁹⁸ *ILS* 321 = *CIL* 14.2799. Gabii was on the Via Praenestina, east of the city.

⁹⁹ *CIL* 6.997. More on this inscription, the structure to which it belonged, and its implications, below.

younger.¹⁰⁰ The elder Matidia owned a house in Rome in the same district as homes owned, so it seems, by her daughters, and evidence suggests *familia* (freedmen and women bearing her nomenclature) in Italy and Dacia, attesting to connections and likely land ownership across the empire.¹⁰¹ Both Matidias may have also contributed to a fund from which money was drawn by the town council of Vicetia (in Northern Italy) to erect a statue to Gordian III. That money was being drawn from this fund, made possible *ex liberalitate Matidiarum* — *from the generosity of the Matidias*, as late as AD 242 indicates that this benefaction must have been considerable.¹⁰²

Although not one of the women of this study, Mindia Matidia is, in fact, a very interesting case. Although Sabina's half-sister, she received none of the titles or honours granted her nearest female relations. This may be due to the relatively distant nature of her relationship with the emperor. She was apparently ineligible for titles like *Augusta*, and there is no evidence that she ever tried to exercise any type of influence, or asked any particular favors of either Trajan, her great uncle, or Hadrian, her brother-in-law. It is interesting, though, that a series of inscriptions from Italy, and one from as far away as Asia — dedicated by the *bule and civitas* of Ephesus — describes her in relation to her female relatives, indicating that her social context was largely supplied by the women of her family.¹⁰³ Moreover, the fact that the inscription places her socially in relation to three eminent women before noting her relationship to then emperor,

¹⁰⁰ *CIL* 10.4760 = Appendix B, No. 9, for the library's inscription; for dedications to Matidia by a *libertus procurator* and *Aug[usti] lib[ertus]* in Suessa, *CIL* 10.4746 = Appendix B, No. 17 and *CIL* 10.4747 = Appendix B, No. 18. Both of these latter likely indicate that Mindia Matidia owned land in the area.

¹⁰¹ Matidia the Elder's *familia* is attested by a seal belonging to one of her slaves, which is noted to have been found in *agro Allifano*, suggesting land ownership near Beneventum – *CIL* 9.6083.84 = Appendix B, No. 10; land ownership in Dacia suggested by *CIL* 3.1312 = *ILS* 1593.

¹⁰² This inscription notes the payment, made to "Caesar Marcus Antoninus Gordianus Pius Felix Augustus," or Gordian III, from monies set aside by both the elder and younger Matidia, *CIL* 5.3112 = *ILS* 501 = Appendix B, No. 13. It is not insignificant that this bequest was sufficient to maintain a supply of money from perhaps AD 119 (the year of the elder Matidia's death) to AD 242, when the statue was erected. Boatwright states that this inscription indicates a "presumable donation [by Mindia Matidia], with mother, of a foundation to Vicetia." It is also possible, however, that it refers, not to these Matidias, but to another family of the same name.

¹⁰³ *CIL* 10.4744 = Appendix B, No. 11; *ILS* 327 = Appendix B, No. 12.

Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161), implies a vital importance to these women as links in a dynastic chain from Trajan to Hadrian to Antoninus Pius and, later, Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180). But besides highlighting the importance of women dynastically, on the social, everyday, level of family relationships, it illustrates the degree to which women had become ancestors through whom men might meaningfully trace vital family relationships of social and political import.

One would think that if political expediency and advertising dynastic relationships was the chief motivating factor behind imperial honours and ultimate deification, this woman would have been granted the same honours accorded her mother and sister at the least, but she was not. Since (it is assumed that) she never married, it could be that the lack of a husband or son who might have introduced a competing political agenda into the imperial house helps explain her lack of honours, but this is not a very satisfying explanation. If these women were more influential and deemed more potentially threatening by virtue of their access to power, we might conclude that Mindia had no interest in, or real access to, the sort of influence that would have made her a force to be reckoned with. It seems that Mindia Matidia's case is an instructive lesson in the informality and lack of structure that characterized imperial rule in Rome. Titles and honours were not granted because official criteria were met, but because someone — likely the emperor — applied to the senate for the application of a title or honour on behalf of the woman in question.¹⁰⁴ In order to receive this sort of distinction, the individual had to have played a role in routine decision-making, as confidant or advisor. Indeed, it was the usual place for a mother, sister, or wife to take on such roles within a household, but neither a grand-niece (Mindia

¹⁰⁴ The text of just such an appeal survives from the reign of Hadrian. An inscribed slab, found at Tibur (Tivoli), records a speech Hadrian delivered in honour of Salonia Matidia following her death in 119. Long thought to have been her funeral oration, Christopher P. Jones, "A Speech of the Emperor Hadrian," *CQ* 54.1 (2004), 271, argues that the speech was delivered before the senate on the occasion of Hadrian's seeking her deification.

Matidia's relationship to Trajan), nor a sister-in-law (her relationship to Hadrian) could command the sort of respect the other relationships implied to the Romans.¹⁰⁵ We know that the other women did play these roles to either Trajan or Hadrian, but there is no evidence whatsoever of Mindia Matidia doing so. This alone may explain Mindia Matidia's lack of 'official' honours. Mindia Matidia, by the nature of her relationship to either Trajan or Hadrian, was likely not a significant enough person in terms of her relationship to power to receive either the titles that conferred highest status (*Augusta*) or posthumous deification. Nevertheless, her immense wealth and social standing in the community, as communicated in the inscription from Suessa, place her solidly among Rome's most elite individuals. Letters exchanged between the orator Fronto and the emperor Marcus Aurelius provide a glimpse of her near the end of her life, living steadfastly outside of the limelight, having the emperor's "parvolae" (little girls) for sleepovers, and maintaining, we may presume, some sort of relationship with the empress Faustina, who was named primary heir in Mindia's will when she died, age about 80, in 165.¹⁰⁶

If we have questions about the wealth and status of the female family members of these royal houses, then, we might use what we know concerning Mindia Matidia and generalize it to her mother and sister. Mindia, like her sister, Sabina, and mother, Salonia Matidia, like other elite matrons of her era, enjoyed a degree of economic independence unknown by her predecessors due to inheritance laws that virtually guaranteed the financial autonomy of women

¹⁰⁵ Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1984), 64ff. Hallett maintains that among Rome's elite there was no major disparity between the sexes in terms of either power or privilege. Instead, women were "structurally significant" because they had control over household resources and were integral to family decision-making.

¹⁰⁶ For Marcus' assertion that "parolae nostrae nunc apud Matidiam in oppido hospitantur," see *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto with Marcus Aurelius, Antoninus, Lucius Verus, Antoninus Pius, and Various Friends*. Vol. I. Edited and translated by C. R. Haines. (London: W. Heinemann & Sons, Ltd., 1919), 301; for Matidia's will and the issues surrounding it as mentioned by Fronto, see Vol. II, 94-97. Fronto describes Matidia as "Summo genere, summis opibus nobilissima femina..." (A most noble woman of the highest rank, with the greatest wealth...), see Vol. II, 96.

who had outlived their fathers.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, it was entirely possible for women to gain personal fortunes primarily through inheritance and, because of this fact, evidence for the wealth of Mindia Matidia may easily be generalized to her mother, Salonia Matidia, who was likely one of the primary sources of her daughter's affluence.¹⁰⁸ Further, thanks to Fronto, who wrote to the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, offering advice on how to act in the matter of certain 'fortune hunters' who had contested Mindia Matidia's will, we know that Mindia enjoyed personal autonomy in the disposition of her finances, or fortune hunters would not have been in a position to hinder the disposition of the will. We also know, since Mindia Matidia did make her own will, that she must have been granted exemption from the *Leges Iulia et Papia Pappaea*, under which an unmarried woman such as herself would certainly have fallen if not granted the same rights as the mothers of three children by imperial dispensation.¹⁰⁹ It makes sense, therefore, since this Matidia enjoyed these privileges, that the other women of Trajan and Hadrian's households did as well. When we add to this the relative abundance of inscriptional and other evidence for the relative personal and financial autonomy of Mindia Matidia, we can infer that this woman was probably not wealthier than her sister, mother, or aunt, nor would she have been allowed financial and other freedoms that had not already been granted the other female family members.¹¹⁰ Indeed, while scholars concede — based on the numerous inscriptions attesting to her activity as benefactor — that this Matidia was active as benefactress and financier of public buildings, it is difficult to imagine that she could have been *more* public a figure in this regard

¹⁰⁷ See Päivi Setälä, "Female Property and Power in Imperial Rome," in *Aspects of Women in Antiquity: Proceedings of the First Nordic Symposium on Women's Lives in Antiquity*, edited by Lena Larsson Lovén & Agneta Strömberg (Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 1998), 96; R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 166.

¹⁰⁸ Mary T. Boatwright, "Matidia the Younger," *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views*, XXXVI, n.s. 11, 1992, 25-6.

¹⁰⁹ See Jane Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, 77-78, for a discussion of the Augustan legislation.

¹¹⁰ Boatwright, "Imperial Women of the Early Second-Century A.C.," 524.

than her more highly honoured female relatives, in spite of the relative dearth of supporting evidence.

Generally, then, based on these pieces of material evidence, and including evidence for the *familiae* of all four women in Rome, Italy, and across the empire — which suggests a wide scope of ownership and substantial wealth — we must conclude that Pompeia Plotina, Ulpia Marciana, Salonia Matidia, and Vibia Sabina were far more wealthy and involved than the meager number of surviving inscriptions themselves, if taken at face value, attest.¹¹¹ In fact, if we take all these bits of epigraphic and archaeological evidence as just part of, but not the whole, picture, we get a sense of women who, while unique in their position by virtue of their relationship with the emperor, were situated within Rome's elite as substantial property owners, business women, and benefactors. We also see that the imperial couple acted together as benefactors and that the empress received a share of the commendation no less than that offered to her husband.

¹¹¹ Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women* (Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2001), 104.

CHAPTER 3
WOMEN AS PUBLIC FIGURES

“...in the Roman *res publica* to be the object of the state’s religious observances was to be as public as was well possible.”¹¹²

As we have seen, not only were Plotina and her nearest female relations wealthy in their own right and possessors of the highest social status, their relationship to the state corresponded to that place held by their closest male relative, the emperor, a reality that presented a very tense situation from a Roman perspective.¹¹³ As a result of the centrality of their roles as leading matrons within Roman society, tradition demanded that imperial women embody the idealized attributes of the Roman matron. This operated largely as a counterbalance to the capacity for influence that women held by virtue of their place in the imperial household. This chapter will examine the relationship of these four second-century women to the public realm within the city of Rome, and seek evidence for their involvement in imperial rule as another aspect of the lived-reality that did not accord with the idealized past Romans sought to maintain.

We have already discussed the public record concerning the women of Trajan and Hadrian’s households and the reality that it belied. Clearly, even these supposedly “quiet” women possessed a place in Roman society that was theirs by virtue of their wealth, rank, and publicly articulated moral superiority, and within which they functioned successfully. We should not downplay the importance to the Roman ethos of women as *exempla*, nor the personal power and social clout this implied; moral worthiness was a concern of both men and women, and

¹¹² Nicholas Purcell, 94.

¹¹³ See Judith Hallett’s discussion of the political influence, real and imagined, of Rome’s elite women in *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 9-12ff.

served as the means by which elite Romans rationalized their rule. That Rome's elite had long been deemed failures at such a responsibility provides all the more reason that public deference and *pietas* exhibited by Plotina and Marciana would bolster the position of the emperor, and their own as well. But their public image also belies another reality – that women were public figures in a world where the public realm was supposed to be exclusively male, and where being a public figure implied participation in official matters — though in what form and to what degree is a matter of debate, and seems to have depended at least somewhat on the inclinations of the emperor.¹¹⁴

Rome's Matrons and the Weight of History

Given the nature of power in ancient Rome, it would be misleading to judge the level of participation available to women by comparing it with that possessed by men. But even though women did not possess the power of direct political input, or of self-determination, they were not left out of participating in Rome's welfare. Indeed, in the male dominated society that was ancient Rome, the structures accommodating female participation operated along side the public realm, and were considered an indispensable part of the whole. Exploring the avenues for public life open to the second-century women and its relationship to their later deifications, though, is made problematic by the difficulty of interpreting literary sources because ancient authors preferred to emphasize the moral implications of their participation rather than what they actually did.¹¹⁵ As with the dichotomy between public image and lived reality discussed in the

¹¹⁴ That is, if we are to believe Roman historians on this fact – it is difficult to say whether a historical anecdote showing, for example, Gaius (Caligula) including the names of his sisters in the oath magistrates swore when undertaking public office represents actual historic fact or was an exaggeration (or fiction) intended to illustrate Gaius' contempt for propriety.

¹¹⁵ They tended to do this for men, too, emphasizing the degree to which public figures adhered to the traditional notions of appropriate behavior. Since the workings of the state were central to Roman life, however, we know quite a lot about men's occupations, and the social structures that supported them, but very little about women's.

preceding chapter, it will be useful to examine here the disparity between the historical accounts of these women and the evidence for their participation in imperial rule, as well as the implications of the tensions presented in the literary tradition, in which the full effect of, for example, Plotina's wealth and status are so pointedly negated. What does it mean that 3rd-century historian Cassius Dio depicts Plotina; upon entering the imperial palace for the first time, as having paused, turned, and said, "I enter here such a woman as I would wish to be when I depart."¹¹⁶ I suggest that Dio is purposely using Plotina as an *exemplum* in a world where female participation and public image implied a threat that could only be mitigated by careful adherence to a culturally prescribed mode of expression.

Dio's short aside about the empress — only two lines long — follows immediately on his description of Trajan's initial arrival in Rome as emperor, where, we are told, he immediately set about improving public administration and increasing grants to municipalities for the care of children. Dio then presents the figure of Plotina as she enters for the first time the physical residence of imperial rule. This is her own personal *adventus*, as she is on the cusp of undertaking the management of that portion of the realm deemed suitable to her as the female head of the household — the palace.¹¹⁷ Dio's Plotina, possessing an awareness of her situation and status, and managing both as carefully as her husband administers the state, declares her intention of mastering the two things under her direct control: her household, and herself. Clearly, the public image of Plotina represented here by Dio, writing a century after Trajan during the reign of emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193-211), is meant as a commentary on the

¹¹⁶ Dio, *Roman History*, 68.14.5.

¹¹⁷ There are implications here relating to the Roman understanding of the house. Here, the palace clearly represents the private, *in camera*, aspect of imperial rule.

very public presence and powers of the Severan women, and is part of a wider Roman discourse concerning women as public representations of Romanness.¹¹⁸

An earlier senator and writer, Tacitus, friend to Pliny the Younger and a contemporary of Plotina's, made his own contribution to this discourse while reporting an event during the reign of Tiberius (r. AD 14-37).¹¹⁹ The passage, which appears in book three of his *Annals*, illustrates the tensions that existed with regards to the presence of women in public life. It comes in the midst of a narrative of senate business, and within the context of a senatorial debate surrounding the question of whether or not women ought to accompany their husbands to official postings abroad. One speaker, Aulus Caecina Severus, decries first the neglect of an older reasoning, *Haud enim frustra placitum olim ne feminae in socios aut gentis externas traherentur* — “For it was not without reason that in former times it had been decided that women should not be taken among our allies or foreign peoples,” and then reviles the practice of placing women in situations that tested their capacity for self-control in the face of power and public attention. He exhorts the senate to consider the difficulties women present:

*Cogitarent ipsi quotiens repetundarum aliqui arguerentur plura uxoribus obiectari; his statim adhaerescere deterrimum quemque provincialium, ab his negotia suscipi, transigi; duorum egressus coli, duo esse praetoria, pervicacibus magis et impotentibus mulierum iussis quae, Oppiis quondam aliisque legibus constrictae, nunc vinclis exsolutis, domos, fora, iam et exercitus regerent.*¹²⁰

They [the senators] themselves should consider that whenever any men are prosecuted for extortion, more charges are cast against their wives. It was to the wives that the worst sort of the provincials immediately cling; it was the wives who took in hand and transacted business; the goings of two to honour; two headquarters; and the more headstrong and imperious orders came from the

¹¹⁸ See Peter Michael Swan, *The Augustan Succession: an Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History, books 55-56 (9 B.C.-A.D. 14)*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6, on Dio and women's power.

¹¹⁹ Little is known about Tacitus, but he is thought to have died about AD 120. Plotina died in 123 or 125. Again, exact dates are lacking.

¹²⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.33.4.

women, who, once kept in check by the Oppian and other laws, now, their chains cast off, rule in the home, the courts, and even the army.

This raises several important points. Caecina's speech reveals the depth of distrust and dislike women occasioned when they were perceived as over-stepping the bounds of tradition, and venturing into the public sphere, and Caecina himself is being used by Tacitus to stand for traditional Roman sentiments concerning women and their public presence and potential for influence. Women, according to Caecina, challenge official powers because when a woman is present private *and* public attention is divided; the statesman must provide for his wife, and two people — a man and a woman — now attract attention and are courted because *both* are perceived as representing the Roman state (though note that women attract “the vilest of the provincials”). And in this lies the heart of the matter — the traditional expectation that a woman had the ear of her husband led inevitably to the courting of women as important avenues to power, and this, as Caecina makes clear, made a woman a public figure, and opened the door for her to hold her own sort of court, one that detracted from the legitimate, male, center of power. These troubles are compounded when the negative attributes that were supposedly part of a woman's nature created challenges for the ruling official: *Non imbecillum tantum et imparem laboribus sexum, sed, si licentia adsit, saevum, ambitiosum, potestatis avidum* — “Not only is that sex weak and unequal to labors, but, if license is present, harsh, ambitious, greedy for power.”¹²¹ Women were considered a threat to the orderly governance of a province because they were perceived as lacking the moral strength to resist the temptations wrought by public attention due to their proximity to power; they were understood as having the power to sway

¹²¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.33.

their husbands and, if unchecked by him, running riot over traditional notions of propriety and a woman's place.

This is the mentality Dio's Plotina addresses directly as she steps into her new role as empress; she openly displays her adherence to traditional notions of female behavior, thereby establishing the superiority of her moral strength of character. But if Dio is representing Plotina here as an *exemplum* against whom his readers might measure Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus, under whose dynasty Dio lived out his senatorial career, then perhaps Tacitus, too, was commenting on the public participation of women during his lifetime, which ended within a few years of Plotina's. It is difficult to say, given that direct literary evidence concerning Plotina is so lacking, but his treatment of imperial women as public figures is consistent throughout the *Annals*, in which tensions between female participation and its implications in Rome's male-dominated society are ever-present. Women were praised when their behaviour conformed to tradition, and were censured when they were too public, or their actions somehow suggested a greed for power. At the very least, so far we can affirm that Roman attitudes toward women in roles of public prominence were still very much active throughout the period in question, and connect these with the reason for the supposed "quietude" of these four women in the literary tradition.

Parsing the Literary Record: Moral *Exemplum* or Meddlesome Woman?

So if we suspect, given this reading of Dio, that these imperial women were bound by idealized expectations in terms of their public behavior while simultaneously exercising a degree of wealth, personal autonomy, and influence as members of Rome's elite, we might reasonably wonder what roles in Roman society, besides membership in the imperial house, they might have possessed that would help explain the tensions raised in the accounts of contemporary authors.

We might also suspect that details of their actual activities and potential powers lie concealed by the emphasis ancient authors placed on their moral superiority. In the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, for example, the empress Plotina is depicted as possessing the moral strength to chide Trajan for failing to respond to reports that his *procuratores* were unjustly levying taxes in the provinces. On the surface, Plotina is attending primarily to an aspect of the domestic sphere — her concern for Trajan’s reputation — and it is this that earns her praise from the author of the *Epitome*, who remarks that this concern increased Trajan’s glory (*incredibile dictu est quanto auxerit gloriam Traiani* — “It is remarkable to say how much she increased Trajan’s glory.”).¹²² This is Plotina the *exemplum*, and her concern for her husband’s good name is contrasted in the *Epitome* with that of Eusebia (wife of the emperor Constantius II (r. AD 337-361), whose conduct, the author notes, was nothing but damaging to her husband. Obviously, the concern of the author of the *Epitome* was to depict an imperial woman — possessor of the same temptations to will-to-power and influence as her later imperial sister, Eusebia — whose only concern was the damage done to her husband’s reputation through his apparently willful inaction in the face of injustice. Plotina’s great strength as *exempla* lies in her attention to imperial matters in such a way that she does not threaten the balance of power. Indeed, she enhances it. So although the author’s emphasis is squarely on the moral implications of Plotina’s actions, and he is clearly using Plotina as a foil for a more contemporary empress, the cause and effect nature of this clause reveals, more importantly, that Plotina is the active party in this anecdote, overseeing events abroad, and clearly cognizant of imperial business. The fact that she advised her husband on his duty to his subjects, and corrected his lapse in attention to imperial matters is not evidence only

¹²² *Epitome De Caesaribus: A Booklet About The Style Of Life And The Manners of the Imperatores Sometimes Attributed to Sextus Aurelius Victor*, translated by Thomas M. Banchich, Canisius College Translated Texts, Number 1, (Buffalo, New York: Canisius College, 2009), 42.21.

of a housewifely attention to moral concerns; the empress is apparently aware of imperial business abroad, and speaks up to the emperor when the occasion demands it.

We find Plotina involved in participating in Trajan's decision-making in another of the brief reports concerning her that has survived. A controversial Egyptian papyrus, written by Alexandrian Greeks and dated to the second century, recounts the audiences of two delegations from Alexandria — one Greek, the other Jewish — before Trajan and his *consilium* at Rome.¹²³ The papyrus, measuring roughly 16 x 54 cm and consisting of the lower section of four columns of text, three of which are well-preserved while the fourth is fragmentary, recounts an exchange between the leader of a Greek embassy, an otherwise unknown man named Hermaiscus, and the emperor.

Part of the rich find of ancient papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, and first published in 1914, the historical authenticity of this document, *P. Oxy.* 1242, has been called into question because of the depiction of Trajan and, interestingly, of Plotina. Herbert A. Musurillo, S. J., editor of a book providing a translation and commentary of this papyrus and others that recount the tension between upper-class Greeks and Romans within the Eastern portion of the empire, describes the majority of such fragments as “reworked protocols,” documents based on, and imitating, actual legal proceedings.¹²⁴ In this particular document, the apparently anti-Semitic and anti-Roman Greek author is in essence describing the martyrdom of Hermaiscus, whose highly-charged exchange with Trajan is offered by the author as evidence of Roman partiality for the Jews. Trajan's favouritism is blamed on Plotina, who, the author reports, had persuaded both the emperor and the senators present to help the Jews. This she presumably did

¹²³ *P. Oxy 1242: Acta Hermaisci*, in *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum*, edited by Herbert A. Musurillo, S. J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 44-48.

¹²⁴ Musurillo, 162.

behind the scenes; the text refers to her as having “approached the senators in order that they might oppose the Alexandrians and support the Jews,” while the cordial welcome Trajan extends to the Jews is explained by his “having already been won over by Plotina.”¹²⁵

As it turns out, this text is difficult to set within a definite context. The second-century dating is generally accepted, though Musurillo suggests that the author may be generalizing to Plotina, for whom there is no evidence corroborating her supposed interest in Jewish concerns, the interests of Nero’s wife, Poppaea Sabina, for whom there is such evidence.¹²⁶ The depiction of Plotina, Musurillo points out, although twisted by bias, may contain at least an element of truth; that imperial women were understood as possessing an interest in the goings-on within the empire and lobbied for support for those who had sought their favor and won it. And although scholars generally question the veracity of this papyrus based primarily on its depiction of Trajan (as confrontational and unjust) and Plotina (as politically involved), the fact that Plotina is not usually depicted in this activity is not evidence that she never played the part of advocate. In fact, if the author of the papyrus wished his claims to be taken as truth, then he is unlikely to have presented the empress in a light that would have made his claims patently ridiculous. In regards to using this source as a means of ascertaining Plotina’s participation in the business of empire, we should be careful not to take too literally her public image as presented by Roman sources and conclude, as E. Mary Smallwood does, for example, that the document must be inaccurate

¹²⁵ *P. Oxy 1242: Acta Hermaisci*, (= Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), no. 516), line 21, ff. There have been disagreements as to the translation of this line; see S. West, “A Note on P. Oxy. 1242 (‘Acta Hermaisci’)” in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 7 (1971), 164, in which West suggests that the Greek verb ἀπαντάω is used more precisely here in the sense of “entreat, ask, request.”

¹²⁶ Herbert A. Musurillo, S. J., 162; E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule: from Pompey to Diocletian*, (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 389-90.

because Plotina was “no Agrippina, meddling in political matters.”¹²⁷ The fact that this document is of non-Roman origin should make us consider the possibility that its author was willing to present an aspect of Plotina’s career as empress that was generally ignored at Rome. Indeed, we do not know to what extent the empresses’ involvement in political matters was an accepted practice at Rome. Senatorial attitudes toward the imperial house depended on the nature of the relationship individual emperors fostered with the senate. Plotina had inherited all the responsibilities and public demands that accompanied the role of imperial consort, and if her reputation was not besmirched by either time or her contemporaries, this was the result of the good feeling that existed between Trajan and the senate. As we shall see, Plotina’s reputation was not impugned until she was implicated in bringing about the tenure of Trajan’s successor, Hadrian, who managed to create enough ill-feeling between himself and Rome’s ruling elite that his own deification was for a while in doubt. Either way, other evidence illustrates the degree to which Plotina successfully negotiated the boundary between acceptable public image and private involvement.

One well-documented event from near the end of her life may serve as an example: a series of five inscribed letters, discovered at Athens, three in Greek and one in Latin, and an imperial rescript in Latin, attest to Plotina’s role in securing an exception to the law of succession for the leadership of the Epicurean school at Athens during the reign of her adoptive-son, Hadrian.¹²⁸ All the inscriptions in this series are in a fragmentary state, and belong to two main groups. The first group consists of five marble fragments, while the second is made up of

¹²⁷ Smallwood, *Ibid.*, 391.

¹²⁸ Riet van Bremen, “Plotina to All her Friends: the Letter(s) of the Empress Plotina to the Epicureans in Athens,” *Chiron*, 35 (2005), 500. See also Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), No. 442 = Appendix B, No. 14.

two fragments that were at some point cut and made into Byzantine capitals. Scholars recognized the inscribed slabs in question as part of the same original text — perhaps a large stele — because they are all of the same Pentelic marble, have the same raised border, and are identical in thickness (14 cm). Owing to differences in letterforms, we know that the inscriptions were not all added to the slab at the same time.¹²⁹

The first group consists of remnants, but is datable to AD 121 because of the consular dating formula found at the top of the first fragment. The inscription that follows records a letter, in Latin, from the dowager empress, Plotina, to the emperor Hadrian. In it, she asks that the emperor free the head of the Epicurean school in Athens, a Roman citizen, from following established Roman law and, in order to broaden the number of candidates eligible for his position, allow him to designate as his successor his choice of either a Roman citizen *or* a peregrine (“*peregrinae condicionis ... successorem*”). Hadrian’s rescript, or official reply, also in Latin, is presented next in the inscription; in it he informs the school’s head of his permission as per Plotina’s request. Following this is a letter, in Greek, from Plotina to the school, in which she celebrates the emperor’s decision, and offers advice on how best to remain faithful to the teachings of Epicurus while enjoying fully this “excellent extension of authority.”¹³⁰ A fourth letter, also in Greek, was written (or dictated) by Hadrian after Plotina’s death and deification in 123 — he refers to her as “the goddess Plotina, our venerated mother.” In this letter Hadrian assures the Epicureans that he “confirm(s) all the steps she has taken for you,” and reiterates that the honour she achieved for them is perpetual.¹³¹ The consuls’ names at the end of the inscription

¹²⁹ van Bremen, 498-532, for text and commentary.

¹³⁰ van Bremen, 527, line 20.

¹³¹ van Bremen, 528.

provide a more precise date — 125. The fifth letter is also addressed to the head of the Epicurean school, and discusses benefactions and gifts to the school.

The letter from the dowager empress to Hadrian has been used as evidence that Plotina engaged in harmless, non-political patronage, as her official public image indicates.¹³² The deferential language of the initial letter is held as proof that Plotina's relationship to imperial power was passive, not active, and this is tied together with the cultural aspect of the group for whom Plotina advocates as proof that her interests lay outside the political. There are a couple of difficulties with this interpretation. First, Plotina's supposed deference in the letter is not necessarily evidence of her adherence to an entirely a-political stance vis-à-vis her relationship to the emperor.¹³³ And in fact Plotina's tone toward Hadrian, though polite, is relaxed; she opens the letter by recalling to him his intimate knowledge of her appreciation for Greek philosophy — *[Quod meum studiu]m erga sectam Epicuri sit, optime scis, d[omi]ne*. — “You know very well what my zeal for the sect of Epicurus is, lord,” she says, her use of *domine* not so much formal and distant as in keeping with the relationship of a woman, no longer the female head of the imperial house, to the male head of her household who also happened to be the emperor. We should not mistake the careful wording as distance, therefore, but attention to hierarchical protocol. After all, Pliny the Younger used the same word, *domine*, in addressing Trajan.¹³⁴ Even an imperial woman had to structure her requests with care, being sure to strike a balance between the interests she was representing and seeming too overtly interested; too heavy an emphasis on her personal involvement and she risked rejection, which in the public world of imperial Rome

¹³² Mary T. Boatwright, “The Imperial Women of the Early Second Century A.C.,” 531; Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London: Routledge, 1999), 118.

¹³³ *Ibid.*; Boatwright makes much of Plotina's deference, using it as a commentary on her relationship to power, i.e., that Plotina embodied the ideal matron, and stayed out of politics.

¹³⁴ Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*, Vol. II, Book 10. Thank you to Prof. P. M. Swan for this point.

would damage her prestige, especially if she might have reason to suspect that the letter would at some time be published.¹³⁵

Plotina's letter to Hadrian not only indicates her adherence to appropriate female behavior, its wording suggests that her approach to the situation was dictated by her allegiance to Epicurean principals.¹³⁶ At the same time, though, it would be misleading to depict the favour she asked as entirely a-political. After all, she was asking Hadrian to allow two important exemptions from Roman law that would inevitably have not-insignificant ramifications in the highly stratified social structure that was the ancient city. The first exemption ensured the legality of a will written by a Roman citizen in Greek instead of Latin, while the second allowed the leader of the Epicurean school to put the succession in the hands of a *peregrinus*, a foreigner and non-citizen, over and above the claims of members who held Roman citizenship. It is important that we are careful here not to gloss over the broader implications of this latter point. Although the Epicureans taught that friendship was more important than social status, they had so far been subject to the same laws as other, competing, philosophical schools, and the possession of a leadership position within Athens's Epicurean school would have allowed a not inconsiderable rise in one's personal social standing. Hadrian's decision, in this case, therefore, was whether or not he would make an exception in Roman law *and* the established social order for the sake of the Epicurean succession.¹³⁷ This was no small thing, a fact acknowledged by Plotina in her letter to then leader of the school, Popillius Theotimus, and "all her friends," in which she emphasized "this excellent extension of authority... which binds us to express true

¹³⁵ Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 118.

¹³⁶ van Bremen, 513ff.

¹³⁷ Plotina's request, and the subsequent grant by Hadrian, allowed the Epicureans at Athens to by-pass established Roman law of universal succession, which required that Roman citizens write wills in Latin (Gaius, *Inst.* 2.281, "Legacies written in Greek are invalid"), and forbade *peregrini* from inheriting from a Roman citizen's will (Gaius, *Inst.* 2.285).

gratitude to him who is verily a benefactor and guardian to all culture and therefore a most venerable emperor.”¹³⁸ Further, Plotina’s concern that the leader of the Epicurean school “always tries to appoint in his own place the best of those who share in the doctrine and to attach more importance to the view of the community as a whole than to his own predilections for particular individuals,” suggests that in spite of Epicurean teachings to the contrary, she was fully aware that human nature inclined individuals in a direction that might potentially involve the whole Epicurean community in difficulties, or she would not have been concerned that the leadership be determined by philosophical, and not social, or personal, considerations.¹³⁹ After all, in the ancient city an individual’s social status was determined by factors like wealth, class, and ethnic origin. Giving a *peregrinus* the potential for the same privileges as a citizen was extraordinary, and conferred on the school itself not only a particular honour but standing within the community as having been singled out by the emperor for this honour. Indeed, they advertised their “excellent extension of authority” by erecting, in marble, inscribed versions of the documents relating how it came to be.¹⁴⁰ Plotina’s request not only advanced the Epicureans ahead of legal considerations to which other philosophical schools would presumably still be bound, but opened to its individual members, regardless of citizenship (and, therefore, social status), possibilities for advancement in the eyes of society that had not existed previously.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ E. Mary Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), 442.3.

¹³⁹ In her letter, Plotina contrasts references to *διάθεσις τῶν ἠθῶν*, ‘moral conduct,’ with *ἄσθενείαν*, ‘weakness.’ Moral conduct was considered the element that created and held together the Epicurean brotherhood, while weakness was, according to van Bremen, “a favourite Epicurean word, always contrasted with the tranquility and fortitude that following the doctrines brought to man...” See van Bremen, 516.

¹⁴⁰ Plotina uses the phrase “excellent extension of authority” in her letter to the Epicureans, which follows Hadrian’s rescript granting them the concessions she had requested on their behalf. See van Bremen, 526-527.

¹⁴¹ Stanley Kent Stowers has an interesting discussion of the social context for competition among philosophical schools in ancient Greece in his article, “Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul’s Preaching Activity,” *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 26, Fasc. 1 (Jan., 1984), 73ff.

Taken as a whole, then, the set of inscriptions erected by the Epicureans at Athens pays tribute to the power of a woman to secure for them exemption from Roman law. After all, the five missives inscribed in stone proclaim to the public the story of Plotina's participation in helping one particular group gain new and unprecedented attentions. The dowager empress's immense personal prestige and authority are apparent throughout, from her initial letter to Hadrian informing him that the school in Athens needs his help, to her gracious letter celebrating with the Epicureans the emperor's compliance with her request, to her final benefactions and gifts to the school, expressed in the fifth, and final, inscription.¹⁴² We do not know if Plotina was ever formally *patrona* of the Epicurean school in Athens, but she certainly behaved like one — using her influence to better their circumstances, and doing all in her power to ensure the continued existence of the school. It is entirely unlikely that this was the only time that she used her relationship with the emperor to effect change, and an anecdote related by Dio supports this conclusion: “When Plotina died, Hadrian praised her saying: ‘Though she asked much of me, she was never refused anything.’”¹⁴³

Unfortunately, evidence that might provide us with a more complete picture of Pompeia Plotina's interests and involvement is lacking. We have seen that she was educated, intelligent, and informed concerning the political scene both at Rome and abroad. She acted as benefactress to the Epicureans, and used her influence, as Dio illustrates, on numerous occasions. That she was also frequently sought out by petitioners seeking the emperor's ear, just as Livia and other

¹⁴² In spite of the fact that the salutation is missing from the fifth letter, and its author is therefore actually unknown, this final letter has long been ascribed to Hadrian. Van Bremen raises the possibility that the author was Plotina, and that this final letter may, in fact, have been her testament providing legacies to the Epicurean school. For arguments and evidence, see Van Bremen, 513-522.

¹⁴³ Dio, 69.10.3¹ (Xiphilinus); 69.10.3^a (Pet. Pat. *Exc. Vat.*)

empresses before her had been, should be assumed.¹⁴⁴ In a letter to Voconius Romanus, Pliny the Younger assures his friend that he will deliver his petition (?) to the empress, *Quarum una iniungis mihi iucundissimum ministerium, ut ad Plotinam sanctissimam feminam literae tuae perferantur: perferentur* — “In one (of your letters) you charge me with the most pleasant service of ensuring that your letters to the most venerable lady Plotina be delivered: and so they shall be.”¹⁴⁵ This Voconius was a member of the elite from the city of Saguntum, in Spain. Pliny had apparently advocated for Voconius, who, as a man of lesser rank, sought from his higher-ranking friend an introduction to the empress. Voconius was seeking a grant of senatorial rank, and the fact that he was simultaneously seeking an audience with the empress indicates that she was a valuable conduit of advancement.

Pompeia Plotina also used her influence on behalf of a Cretan named M. Pompeius Cleumenidas to gain him his Roman citizenship, and the inscriptions he set up in her honour are well documented.¹⁴⁶ It has been suggested, too, that Plotina arranged for her husband’s patronage of the sacred thymelic synod, a group recorded in an inscribed decree as *the ecumenical union of the Artists gathered around Dionysus and the New Dionysus, Emperor Trajan Hadrian Augustus Caesar*, and that she corresponded with the Pythagorean Nicomadius of Gerasa.¹⁴⁷ Evidence proving a solid link between Plotina and either the thymelic synod or Nicomadius of Gerasa is tentative. James H. Oliver supports his claim that Plotina may have been the actual patron of the thymelic synod, a group of musicians of the cult of Dionysus, by focusing on the

¹⁴⁴ See Dio 57.12 — Livia received senators and the public at her home, and these visits were entered into the official records.

¹⁴⁵ Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*, IX.28.1.

¹⁴⁶ William C. McDermott, “Plotina Augusta and Nicomachus of Gerasa,” in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1977), 198-199; James H. Oliver, “The Empress Plotina and the Sacred Thymelic Synod,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1975), 125; both reference M. Guarducci, *Inscriptiones Creticae* Vol. I (Rome, 1935) nos. 27-31.

¹⁴⁷ Oliver, “The Empress Plotina and the Sacred Thymelic Synod,” 127; McDermott, 192-203.

empress's known interest in philosophy and culture, and on inscriptional evidence indicating that the Dionysiac artists once gathered at Nemausus (Nîmes), the city assumed to have been her place of birth.¹⁴⁸ Although Oliver's interpretation is only tentatively supported by the evidence, and it is not possible to concretely connect the empress with the gathering in Nemausus, or to prove that she acted as patron of the thymelic synod, the suggestion that she may have influenced Trajan's choice is at least plausible. Although there is no real association between philosophy and the Dionysiac artists, we know for certain that the empress had an interest in philosophy, as the majority of available evidence for her activity indicates, and she may have indeed arranged for her husband's patronage of this group. Regardless, it is unlikely that Plotina acted as benefactor only to the Epicureans at Athens. Clearly, although successfully walking that fine line between appropriate and "inappropriate" public involvement, Plotina, like the other women of the Ulpian household, fulfilled her roles according to what Roman society allowed. A woman of learning, she championed the groups in whose philosophical and religious goals she had an interest, and her influence was felt not only in Rome but across the empire, as evidence scattered across a broad geographic range indicates. Rather than infer, however, that Plotina's interests were entirely apolitical, as Mary Boatwright has suggested, I propose that these instances be interpreted as confirmation that she was fully engaged as a "broker" of patronage, and frequently as benefactor, roles that women had filled since the inception of the imperial period and before, and that this brokering had political implications, at least in so far as it suggested a degree of involvement and attention to various distinct interest groups within the empire that could be interpreted as a potential threat to male hegemony in decision-making, patronage, and public

¹⁴⁸ For the gathering in Nemausus, see *Inscriptiones Graecae*, XIV.2497. Plotina's birthplace is surmised from the fact that Hadrian dedicated two temples to her following her death — one in Rome and the other in Nemausus. See *HA, Hadrian*, 12.2.

dealings.¹⁴⁹ This interpretation is based not only on the assumptions made by the anonymous Greek author of *P. Oxy 1242*, who claimed that it was Plotina who convinced Trajan and his *amici* — friends and advisors — of the justice of the Jewish plight, but on the overwhelming body of evidence for the involvement of imperial women through history. And we can say with certainty that matters of citizenship and grants of senatorial rank were *not* apolitical.

Generalizing our knowledge of their activity to subsequent imperial women is reasonable because the involvement of imperial women was built, for the most part, on an accepted body of tradition that had been in play for some time before the advent of Augustus and Livia.

We might recall here that the impression served us by the ancient literary tradition concentrated on denigrating women who openly engaged with political concerns — as examples, note Caecina’s emphasis in Tacitus, above, on the outrage of a woman dividing public attention while abroad, or Agrippina’s attempt at mounting the imperial dais to stand with her son, Nero, also provided by Tacitus.¹⁵⁰ The relationship between Rome’s matrons and the public sphere was always tentative at best.¹⁵¹ An interesting case in point is Plotina’s supposed manipulation of the imperial succession after Trajan’s sudden death in 117, while he was in Syria, as it reveals some more details concerning the empress’ access to power, and the tensions this inspired.¹⁵² The *Historia Augusta* states that Plotina delayed making public the news of Trajan’s death — even

¹⁴⁹ Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 103.

¹⁵⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.2 relates Agrippina’s very public expression of her apparent belief that she shared power with her son.

¹⁵¹ Outside of Rome, women could wield considerable public clout, acting openly as patrons of towns and cities, for example. At Rome, however, it was a different story, and a public role for women remained a source of controversy. See Emily A. Hemelrijk, “City Patronesses in the Roman Empire,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2004), 226ff.

¹⁵² Plotina’s part in concealing Trajan’s death, thus ensuring the succession of her favorite, Hadrian, should be compared with Livia’s reported part in securing imperial power for her son, Tiberius; see Dio 56.31.1; Tacitus *Annals*, 1.5. See also R. A. Bauman, “Tranquil-Livia and the Death of Augustus,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1994), 182.

hiring an actor to mimic his voice — until after Hadrian’s adoption as his successor was affirmed.¹⁵³ Dio’s account likewise implies that Plotina engineered Hadrian’s succession, signing the adoption papers herself and delaying news of Trajan’s death until after the papers had been received by the Senate in Rome:

For my father Apronianus, governor of Cilicia, learned all things regarding him clearly, and he used to talk about other things but especially that his death was concealed for several days for this reason – so that the adoption might be announced. And this [the adoption] was clear from Trajan’s letters to the senate, for he did not sign but Plotina did, which thing she had done on no other occasion.¹⁵⁴

This provides several telling bits of information. First, it appears that the empress had the power to sign official documents, but whether with her own signature, or on behalf of the emperor (i.e., with his name) is not clear. Still, this fits with other historical anecdotes such as one provided by Suetonius, in his narrative of the end of Augustus’s life and the beginning of Tiberius’s reign. Here, Suetonius suggests that the empress Livia may have composed a letter *nomine Augusti* — “in the name of Augustus” — ordering the execution of Tiberius’s main rival, his nephew, Agrippa Postumus.¹⁵⁵ Actually, Suetonius introduces two possibilities, which he presents as equally plausible: that Augustus left a note (Suetonius uses the word *codicillus*, an addition to his will) with instructions for Agrippa’s death, or that Livia wrote a letter in her deceased husband’s name, of which Tiberius may or may not have been aware.¹⁵⁶ We tend to assume subterfuge on Livia’s behalf in this instance, yet the emperor’s *amici* did sometimes write letters on the

¹⁵³ *HA, Hadrian*, 4.10.

¹⁵⁴ Cassius Dio, 69.1.4.

¹⁵⁵ See Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars* (London: William Heinemann & Sons, 1914), *Tiberius.*, 22, for Livia’s presumed involvement in the writing of such a letter.

¹⁵⁶ Suetonius, *Tib.*, 22.

emperor's behalf.¹⁵⁷ Livia is known to have had a hand in the official correspondence during the reign of her son, a practice she may have continued from that of her husband.¹⁵⁸ Empresses like Agrippina, mother of Nero, and Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus, are also recorded as having had charge of imperial business, especially, as in Julia Domna's case, of official correspondence.¹⁵⁹ So it is clear that women could, and did, play a role within the imperial administration that placed imperial correspondence in their hands.

What is interesting is that information about female involvement in these sorts of management roles is usually only pointedly included when the author wishes to imply some character defect on the part of the man with decision-making power. Dio wishes to explain how Hadrian, who other sources tell us was not particularly popular with the senatorial elite, came to power but Trajan was a popular ruler, so Dio chooses his words carefully: Plotina never signed official letters *except on this one occasion*.¹⁶⁰ We might interpret this to mean that she made only this single mistake, one that Dio attributes to the "fact" of her being in love with Hadrian, a claim that is barely plausible and does not accord with the marital harmony with which Dio and others credited Trajan and Plotina. So Dio makes clear that it had not previously been Plotina's job to sign imperial correspondence. The fact that she did so on this occasion proves, he claims, that Trajan was already by that point incapable (dead), and therefore the fact that Plotina had signed

¹⁵⁷ Suetonius, *Aug.*, 50, states that Augustus used a signet ring to sign official correspondence. This seal was used, Suetonius says, by his successors to Suetonius's own day (reign of Hadrian). There were two of these rings, one of which was used by Augustus' friends to mark letters and edicts *quae ratio temporum nomine eius reddi postulabat* — "which, by reason of the times, he asked be sent out in his name." See Pliny the elder, *Natural History*, XXXVII.4. The question of imperial correspondence is covered by Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, 213-228.

¹⁵⁸ Dio, 57.12.2, reports that, "The letters of Tiberius bore for a time her (Livia's) name, also, and communications were addressed to both alike."

¹⁵⁹ See Suetonius, *Nero*, IX, says that *Matri summam omnium rerum privatarum publicarumque permisit*. "He entrusted to his mother authority of all affairs both public and private." Julia Domna had charge of the imperial correspondence during the rule of her son, Caracalla (r. 211-217). See Dio, 78.18.2-3.

¹⁶⁰ The *HA*, *Hadrian*, 7.1-6, tells us that Hadrian's execution of four men of senatorial rank was occasioned by a plot against him, and that Hadrian's public reputation suffered as a result.

them instead should tip the reader off to their inauthenticity. He does not say that Plotina did not have the right to sign the letters, only that it wasn't her usual habit. The point is that Dio's explanation is arguably meant to insult Hadrian, who was put into power through the agency of a woman.¹⁶¹ This bit of historical spin provides us with another instance where the empress's authority and potential for influence and action loom large. It also presents us with a clear double standard. As companion and confidante to her husband, who better to handle imperial correspondence, or draft emergency adoption papers after the emperor has suffered a stroke, than the empress? Yet context was everything. A woman might manage her husband's business concerns while he was abroad, advise him in private, and function as a necessary (and convenient) means of filtering the number of individuals who clambered for his attention, but set this in the framework of imperial politics and her authority seemed to take quite a different tenor.

So far, though, although the empress's actual powers are mostly hidden by a heavy emphasis on the moral superiority attached to adherence to appropriate female behavior, Plotina, at least, comes across as not only immensely wealthy and influential, but willing to cross the boundary into potentially dangerous moral territory when the situation (the sudden death of the emperor without an heir apparent) required it. We should not necessarily infer that she had never crossed another such boundary the whole time she was empress. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that Plotina did not participate in her husband's rule, especially given her various roles as Rome's leading matron, even if the degree of her actual participation has been obscured by history. We have solid evidence that she was not shy about asking the emperor to patronize those who had won her favor, and, as we have seen, we know that women were sought out for their potential

¹⁶¹ Dio, who knew that Hadrian had, after all, not been popular with the senate, associates Plotina's action on Hadrian's behalf with the inevitable tragedy that results from a woman's meddling in the affairs of state, just as the 'tragedy' that was Tiberius was blamed on Livia.

influence with powerful husbands. It was a concern of Tacitus' senator Caecina, and a very public reality throughout the imperial period, because of the complementarity that existed at Rome between the male and female spheres of activity.¹⁶² From ancient times to the modern era, historians have asserted that the women of Trajan and Hadrian's households were never inclined to act in ways that implied a threat to the delicate balance between complementarity and equality, but we should not be hasty in our interpretation, taking time, instead, to examine the sorts of roles they must have played in Rome, and the implications of their approach to these roles.

Women's Society and Women's Standing: Further Considerations

When, in 42 BC, Rome's matrons sought a remedy for the burdensome "tax" proposed by the triumvirs they did so, not individually, but as a group, and they petitioned, not the men, but the women of the triumvirs' households. Meetings with Antony's mother, Julia, and Octavia, sister to Octavian, the future Augustus, apparently went well but, in the end, rebuffed by Marc Antony's wife, Fulvia, the women resorted to confronting the men in the forum.¹⁶³ What impresses the reader of this account is, as Nicholas Purcell has pointed out, the degree to which "women were used to behaving in ways analogous to the male political world."¹⁶⁴ And as Purcell also points out, the roles played in this particular story by the female relations of the triumvirs presage the roles played later by imperial women. Julia and Octavia clearly stood in relation to Rome's elite matrons in a place and role that corresponded, with certain limitations, to the position their male relations held to the public realm. But their status was not merely a social reality, it also implied a public role, one that enhanced, emphasized, and completed that of the triumvirs'. There is no doubt that the same correlation of male and female status existed in the

¹⁶² Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.33; Dio 57.2.

¹⁶³ Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.5.32-34.

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas Purcell, "Livia and the Womanhood of Rome," *PCPS*, No. 212 (1986), 81.

second century, or that the women of Trajan's and Hadrian's households stood in relation to the community at Rome as representatives of power, possessing a social status as high above other women as the emperor's was above other men's, or that they possessed the potential for influence that was troubling. Evidence for these public roles is, however, not necessarily specific to these four women, but must be deduced from various sources. The question is not whether the imperial women played a public role in Rome, but what their roles were, and what they meant.

Imperial Women and Rome's Well-born Matrons: The *Conventus Matronarum*

At some point during her tenure as empress, sometime after a date as early as 119 or as late as 128, Vibia Sabina dedicated a building to Rome's matrons. The inscription, which was apparently discovered in the area of Trajan's Forum, is only two lines long, and reads:

Iulia Aug Mater Augg et castrorum matronis restituit
*SABINA AUG MATRONIS*¹⁶⁵

Julia Augusta, mother of the *Augusti* and of the camps,
restored this to/for the matrons
SABINA AUGUSTA, TO THE MATRONS¹⁶⁶

Scholars have long connected this inscription with a building known only indirectly, by means of references, as the meeting place of Rome's elite matrons, the so-called *conventus matronarum*. The inscribed stone itself is lost, its inscription documented in a number of medieval and renaissance codices. Theodor Mommsen connected it with the meeting place of the *conventus* that stood on the Quirinal Hill, as described in the *Historia Augusta*, and generations of scholars have taken the connection to be true.¹⁶⁷ If this is correct, it seems clear that the

¹⁶⁵ *CIL* 6.997. The physical stone no longer survives.

¹⁶⁶ This is Julia Domna (d. 217), wife of Septimius Severus. The *Augusti* are her two sons, Caracalla (r. 211-217) and Geta (d. 211).

¹⁶⁷ *CIL* 6.997 = *ILS* 324, note 2, *Titulum pertinuisse ad conventum matronarum, qualem fuisse in Quirinali traditur (vit. Elag. 4), coniecit Mommsen Ber. d. sächs. Ges. d. W. 1850, p. 298*; Both Purcell and Hemelrijk accept that this

original building, funded by Sabina, was at some point damaged or destroyed, causing Julia Domna to include it in her rather extensive building campaign.¹⁶⁸ The inscription clearly states that the building was for the use of the matrons alone, since it is to them that it is dedicated (*matronis* — “to/for the matrons”), a fact that also helps explain Julia Domna’s patronage of the restoration project (*matronis restituit* — “restored [this] for the matrons”). But even if the supposition that the inscription belongs to a particular building is incorrect, the empress’s patronage of Rome’s *matronae* is clear, and this gives us another venue through which to explore the relationship of the early second century imperial women with the city of Rome, as well as the public role of the empress and other female members of the imperial house.

There are three different terms used by ancient authors to describe Rome’s elite women as a group: *ordo matronarum*, *conventus matronarum*, and *senaculum*. Emily Hemelrijk suggests that the term *ordo matronarum* was used — beginning in the Republican period and into the imperial era — to describe Rome’s elite matrons when acting as a group in public, and that this group functioned as a social and moral complement to the senatorial order, distinguishing the elite matrons from the women of other social stations and highlighting their supposed moral superiority, just as membership in the senatorial order distinguished Rome’s high-born men, whose privilege and power were thought justified by their moral worthiness.¹⁶⁹ The use of the

inscription does, indeed, refer to the meeting place of the matrons. I would like to say more, but I cannot access Mommsen’s work.

¹⁶⁸ Beside the matrons’ meeting place, Julia Domna restored the Temple of Vesta, which had been badly damaged in a fire of 191/192, the house of the Vestals in the *Forum Romanum*, and the Temple of Fortuna Muliebris on the Via Latina, outside Rome; *CIL* 6.833. See C. Gorrie, “Julia Domna’s Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (2004), pp. 61-72.

¹⁶⁹ Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 11-13. The term *ordo matronarum* appears to refer to the matrons as though they were a discrete social order in spite of the fact that women were not possessors, in their own right, of membership in a social class, in the way men were, but were deemed members of that class to which their fathers or husbands belonged. A woman’s status could change – for example, born into the senatorial order because her father was a senator, a woman might later be married to an equestrian and consequently become a member of the equestrian class.

word *conventus*, which was also used to describe this same social grouping, though it clearly refers to a coming together for some particular purpose and indicates a more active public aspect than the does the word *ordo*.¹⁷⁰ Since Roman society was highly stratified, the matrons likely established a nuanced ranking system amongst themselves that mirrored that of men. This was evinced in public display — for example, all matrons of senatorial rank wore the *stola* (gown) and *vittae* (hair bands), and were allowed to wear purple as marks of their social standing, but only a select few of these women were permitted use of the *carpentum*, a two-wheeled covered carriage, within the city limits.¹⁷¹ Given that the social status of women was attached to that of their husbands (or fathers, if unmarried), it is impossible that the empress would not have been at the top of this female hierarchy, with other female members of the imperial house following closely behind.

The so-called *senaculum* of women is mentioned twice in the *Historia Augusta*: once in the *vita* of Elagabalus (r. 218-222) and again in that of Aurelianus (r. 270-275). Both these narratives provide clues to the nature of earlier gatherings of matrons in Rome. In the description of Elagabalus' formation of the *senaculum* (the word for a place in which the senate convened outside the Curia,¹⁷² but used here as a designation for the so-called 'women's senate'), Rome's elite women were given a formally-appointed venue within which to debate and decide matters

¹⁷⁰ Hemelrijk, *Ibid.*, 13, notes that the phrase *conventus matronarum* refers to an assembly, and is attested during the empire. References to the *conventus* during the imperial period include: Suetonius, *Galba*, 5; *HA*, *Elegab.*, "conventus matronalis," 4.3; "inter matronas," Seneca, *De Matrimonio*, in Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, bk. 1.49; "consortia matronarum," see St. Jerome, *Select Letters*, translated by F. A. Wright (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), XXII.16.

¹⁷¹ Valerius Maximus, 5.2.1; Hemelrijk, 13. During the empire, the *carpentum* was allowed only to the Vestals and certain female members of the imperial family, though its use was likely circumscribed.

¹⁷² There were apparently at least three such meeting places for the actual senate. One was an open space, later a hall, in the Forum Romanum, near the Curia. Another was outside the *pomerium*, the sacred boundary of the city, near the Porta Capena. It is here the senators gathered when they met with those who, for whatever reason, could not cross the *pomerium*. Another was near the Temple of Bellona in the Campus Martius. See Coarelli, 214; Platner & Ashby, "Senaculum;" Richardson, 348.

important to them. The story is used to ridicule the barely teen-aged emperor, who, it was widely held, was ruled by his mother, Julia Soaemias. She was made leader of this “women’s senate,” and presided over debates concerning mostly, it seems, points of primacy and public display: who should defer to whom upon meeting, who was allowed to travel via what sort of conveyance, and who was allowed to wear gold on her shoes.¹⁷³ The author of the *vita* derides these “*senatus consulta*” as insignificant and silly, though the description is telling — for even if the account of the *senaculum* is entirely corrupt, the author of the *vita* must have drawn from reality in portraying it. The empress’s (or, as in this case, mother’s) tacit role as leader of the matrons is, in this account, turned into proof of the regime’s excess and disregard for Roman custom. The reality of a valued and respected place for women as partners in imperial rule is disparaged when it is made too public, and contempt for a ruler who allowed female incursions into the male domain is distilled into a description of the emperor’s mother, placed at the head of a women’s senate, debating the petty details of daily female existence.¹⁷⁴ But what is most interesting in this portion of the narrative and is clearly a reflection of reality is the fact that the highest-ranking female in elite society is she who is most closely related to the emperor. This only makes sense, given the structure of Rome’s elite society, though the fact that the empress was at the pinnacle of the social order, along side the emperor, is frequently neglected in debates about female deification.

The author of the *HA* also provides a few tidbits of information about the history of the *conventus*, explaining that,

¹⁷³ *HA*, Elagabalus, iv.1-4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Fecit et in colle Quirinali senaculum, id est mulierum senatum, in quo ante fuerat conventus matronalis, solemnibus dum taxat diebus et si umquam aliqua matrona consularis coniugii ornamentis esset donata...

He [Elagabalus] established on the Quirinal Hill a “senaculum,” that is a women’s senate, where before a congress of matrons had met, but only on certain festivals, or whenever a matron was presented with the insignia of a consular marriage...¹⁷⁵

So what we see here, though admittedly the information is sketchy, is the matrons acknowledged as a separate body, or congress, that had a special place (*conventus*) on the Quirinal Hill where they met for religious and other ritual celebrations, like the presentation of special *ornamenta* that proved social standing and enhanced prestige (the insignia of a consular marriage), much in the same way men were given outward signs of their standing. The *conventus* was replaced by a more formal *senaculum*, which eventually fell out of use, though an attempt at restoring it was made in the late third century by Divus Aurelianus (or Aurelian, r. 270-275): *Senatum sive senaculum matronis reddi voluerat, ita ut primae illic quae sacerdotia senatu auctore meruissent* — “And he had wanted the senate or “senaculum” restored to the matrons, so that those who were first in that place could have gained priesthoods with the senate’s approval.”¹⁷⁶ Presumably, the emperor wished the *senaculum* restored because membership in it was a means of establishing an elite matron’s suitability to hold priestly office. We might wonder at the implications of matrons vying for public recognition and priesthoods.

Taking all this, we know so far that Rome’s elite matrons, having the empress as their leader (because their internal organization mirrored men’s structures), performed rituals and met to formalize their own signs of status. But the matrons had other private/public roles besides that of their formal gatherings. Another of the Greek martyrology papyri, the *Acta Isidori*, depicts the

¹⁷⁵ *HA*, Elag. iv.3.

¹⁷⁶ *HA*, Divus Aurelianus, xlix.6.

emperor Claudius (r. 41-54) holding court in a private garden in Rome. He is trying an Alexandrian Greek, Isidorus, for an undisclosed crime. Present are the emperor's friend, Herod Agrippa, various men of senatorial and consular rank, and "the matrons."¹⁷⁷ Another papyrus, *P. Berol.* 511, describes Claudius's reception of an embassy of Alexandrian Jews while in the company of "the matronae," a group of which we may assume the empress, Agrippina, was part.¹⁷⁸ The implication of the matrons' presence at a private trial and official audience suggests a role in the imperial house, apparently as the empress's private retinue. After all, the female members of Rome's elite had female attendants, a *comitatus*, in the same way that men had clients whose duty it was to attend their patron in public, accompanying him to the forum or other public venues in order to advertise to the public eye his importance and wealth. For both men and women, the public spectacle created by a crowd of followers not only announced the individual's status relative to the rest of the community, it could inspire awe or ill-feelings; public comportment was, after all, an important venue for illustrating proof of moral fortitude — or moral failing.¹⁷⁹

For the emperor and his family members, the issue of attendants was especially charged with meaning. The emperor's entourage was by all accounts sizeable, and included bodyguards, lictors, and various assistants employed for the emperor by the state, as well as his own freedmen, men of equestrian rank employed in various capacities, and more. This select group

¹⁷⁷ *Acta Isidori*, col. ii, 7-8, in *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum*, edited by Herbert A. Musurillo, S. J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 19ff. Musurillo suggests that the presence of women is meant to convey the weakness of the Rome's rulers (p. 135), also discussed, above, regarding Plotina and Trajan. No doubt, to Greek eyes, the presence of women did imply a weakness on the part of Roman men, but this only highlights the cultural differences between Rome and Greece; it does not necessarily mean that these details are inventions.

¹⁷⁸ *P. Berol.* 511.2, in Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), no. 436.

¹⁷⁹ For a comparison of Pliny's description of Plotina and Trajan and Tacitus' account of Plancina and Piso's behavior, see Chapter II, above.

constituted an important part of the emperor's public image, as did the retinue of any magistrate or man of importance. We might consider, then, that the empress was attended on a daily basis by those of the elite matrons who merited a place 'at court,' along with those attendants who were part of her usual retinue, and that this public assemblage of persons contributed to her public image just as the emperor's entourage was part of his.

It is clear, then, that over time the tradition developed of the empress (or other close female relations of the emperor's) being patron of Rome's matrons, just as her husband was effectively the patron of the senate and the empire. This patronal relationship was most obvious during the lifetime of Julia Domna (d. 217), who is unique among later imperial women in the scope of her documented achievements. She embarked on a building campaign, taking care to restore to Rome three places with close links to the matrons as a group: the Temple of Vesta, Temple of Fortuna Muliebris (where each July women celebrated the intervention of two women who, by changing the mind of their male relation, succeeded in saving the state),¹⁸⁰ and the *conventus matronarum*. Each of these buildings was a physical marker of the matrons' vital role in Rome's religious and political history and, by restoring them, Julia Domna was re-enacting a relationship between empress and matrons that had been established long before the third century, as the inscription thought to refer to the *conventus* indicates. And although we cannot say for certain that the inscription bearing Vibia Sabina's name originates with the meeting place of the matrons, it makes sense that the empress would pay to maintain the public meeting place of the *conventus* because by doing so she not only maintained the tradition of empress as patron, but acknowledged the dignity and contribution of the matrons much in the same way the emperor

¹⁸⁰ For example, Valerius Maximus, 5.2.1a. See also Scheid, "The Religious Roles of Roman Women," in *A History of Women in the West: I. From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*. Pauline Schmitt Pantel, editor. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 388 ff.

was expected to recognize the dignity of the senate. It is for this reason that I think we can say with confidence that during the early second-century the *conventus matronarum* was a public gathering of elite matrons for religious and ritual purposes that had its own internal hierarchy at the head of which was the empress.

How this accords with what we know about the religious festivals celebrated by matrons we cannot say for certain because, again, evidence is lacking. Still, it seems reasonable to extrapolate from the empress's leadership of Rome's elite matrons her involvement in the main matronal festivals — the *Matronalia* (March 1), for example, during which the matrons offered flowers to Juno Lucina in celebration of the anniversary of the dedication of her temple on the Esquiline Hill (in 375 BC), or the *Matralia* (June 11), a festival celebrated by *univirae* (women married only once) at the temple of Mater Matuta in the Forum Boarium. It is only a suggestion, but these religious rituals may have provided opportunities for the imperial women to take a central role. The hierarchy of roles exhibited during the December celebrations for Bona Dea certainly suggests a leadership role for the empress. Republican sources record that these rites were observed by Rome's leading matrons, who convened in the house of the leading magistrate (*cum imperio*). According to Plutarch, no men were allowed to witness the rituals or even to be in the house while they were being conducted.¹⁸¹ Instead, the wife of a leading magistrate presided, along with the Vestal Virgins. In the year 63 BC, for example, the rites were held in the home of then consul, Cicero, whose wife, Terentia, presided with the Vestals.¹⁸² In 62 the same rites were held in the home of Julius Caesar, who was *Pontifex Maximus*. Caesar's wife,

¹⁸¹ Plutarch, *Caesar*, 9.4.

¹⁸² Plutarch, *Cicero*, 19.3.

Pompeia, and mother, Aurelia, conducted the ritual.¹⁸³ Juvenal's sixth satire indicates that these rituals were still being observed during the early second-century, though it does provide information about venue.¹⁸⁴ If the custom was still in place that saw the wife of a leading magistrate *cum imperio* lead the sacred rites then it is possible that the empress led the women in the prayers and sacrificed *pro populo*. After all, she was the only matron whose husband possessed ultimate *imperium* and was *Pontifex Maximus*. On the other hand, it may be that traditional religious rituals like December's nocturnal rites of Bona Dea maintained an independence from imperial monopolies of marks of status and prestige, and the role of hostess allowed senators' wives a role in the religious life of the city. As there is no source that even hints at the reality, it is impossible to say. The connection established between the empress and the Vestal Virgins, too, suggests that the empress would have attended state rituals in which the Vestals participated. We know, also, that the empress and matrons of Rome were intimately involved in public events, and that their participation was not supplemental, but central, to the ritual actions undertaken. Note, for example, the matrons' part in mourning the death of Drusus in 9 BC, and in the funeral of Septimius Severus, as described by Herodian.¹⁸⁵ – Matrons were integral, as well, to the rituals for the *ludi saeculares*, celebrated first in the imperial period during the reign of Augustus, during which 110 matrons held *sellisternia*, or ritual meals, with seats for the goddesses Diana and Juno.¹⁸⁶ The *matronae* were present again during the *ludi*

¹⁸³ Plutarch, *Caesar*, 10.1-4.

¹⁸⁴ Juvenal, *Satires*, 2.86.

¹⁸⁵ "During most of the day people sit on each side of the couch; on the left is the entire Senate, clad in black; on the right are all the women who, because of their husbands' or their fathers' positions, are entitled to honor and respect. None of these women wear gold ornaments or necklaces; each affects the plain white garments associated with mourning." Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, translated by C. R. Whittaker. Vol. I, 4.2.3.

¹⁸⁶ *CIL* 6.32323, lines 101-102; *ILS* 5050.

saeculares celebrated in 204, during the reign of Septimius Severus, this time with a much more central role for the empress, Julia Domna, who led the matrons in prayers to Juno and Diana.¹⁸⁷

The point is that we should not ignore the implications of the empress having a leadership role among Rome's matrons. We may not be able to state precisely what her roles were, but we can remain aware that they were neither negligible nor inconsequential. We know this because a foundation of typical roles and modes of interaction with Rome's elite and non-elite populations was gradually laid down during the empire by successive imperial houses and continued into each era that followed as each family tried, with more or less success, to imitate what worked for their predecessors in terms of behaviors and roles that reinforced imperial advantage (or, to put it another way, described — in terms of prestige, personal power, and social standing — most accurately the real implications of imperial rule).

The publicness of the empress and other female members of the imperial house was undoubtedly part of what constituted the rationale for their posthumous deifications. The extent of their participation in the relationship with the empire and the city of Rome was not, however, limited to political involvement, whether in the form of giving advice to the emperor or holding a position in court relative to that of the emperor that undeniably involved them in the intimate workings of the state. I have tried to show that the empress, especially, had a relationship with the city that embedded her in the workings of the state just as deeply as the emperor himself. Until the imperial period, women had not possessed such access to public display, or such close proximity to an all-encompassing *imperium*. Even more, although women were not supposed to have dealings in the male (public) world, and in spite of the fact that these women were especially adept at maintaining the traditional separation between public and private, and

¹⁸⁷ *CIL* 6.32329, lines 8-9.

between overt displays of interest in political matters and a public deference to the will of the emperor — they nevertheless possessed an authority (*auctoritas*) by virtue of their station and contributions to the success of imperial household and, because of the centrality of the imperial house, the state. And, like the *auctoritas* of the magistrates of old, imperial women were perceived, with the male head of their household, the emperor, through the public gaze as representations of Romanness. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the artistic representations of imperial women with which Rome and its empire abounded.

CHAPTER 4

IMMANENCE AND HONOUR: THE ICONOGRAPHY OF FOUR IMPERIAL WOMEN

Human experience and general custom have made it a practice to confer the deification of renown and gratitude upon distinguished benefactors. This is the origin of Hercules, of Castor and Pollux, of Aesculpaius, and also of Liber — and this is also the origin of Romulus, who is believed to be the same as Quirinus. And these benefactors were duly deemed divine, as being both supremely good and immortal, because their souls survived and enjoyed eternal life.¹⁸⁸

In the last chapter I looked at how the empress was depicted publicly, the relationship of this portrayal to her actual influences and potential for persuasion, and the need to assuage the fear and mistrust engendered by the potential for female action within the informality and family-centredness of imperial structures. I will look briefly at the artistic imagery used to laud these women and relate it to their roles within Roman society, and their relationship vis-à-vis the elite community at Rome. All four of these second-century women were celebrated in coinage minted at Rome, and in statuary. The empresses, Pompeia Plotina and Vibia Sabina, were also portrayed on gemstones and reliefs. And because these women were placed forever in the public gaze through art, just like their male relatives, the images of them that abounded in Rome constituted part of their public presence. The imperial family was immanent or always present because almost everywhere one looked, there they were imaged. This ‘publicness’ brought the women of the imperial house an untold wealth of prestige and status that was not only connected to their relationship with the emperor, which, although it reflected on and was attached to the public reputation of the emperor himself, did not redound to him alone — their reputation and

¹⁸⁸ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*. Translated by H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1933), 2.24.62.

public standing was theirs, too. That is, by displaying self-control and her own allegiance to the ideals of society, a woman controlled her reputation and earned social prestige.¹⁸⁹ This chapter will focus on the iconography of these women on coinage produced in Rome, with the intention of making a connection between selected coin types and the roles of these women, both actually and symbolically, within Roman society.

The Coins: Selection, Approach, and Interpretation

In order to focus the discussion as much as possible, the coins selected for this chapter all originated from Rome's mint on the Coelian Hill. And because they were produced at Rome by men who were directly influenced by the social practice and cultural assumptions of that city, they are understood in this chapter as expressions of Roman — as opposed to provincial — attitudes. Coins were chosen from those published in two important catalogues: *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, edited by Harold Mattingly in 1966 (*BMCRE*, Vol. 3), and *Roman Imperial Coins in the Hunter Coin Cabinet University of Glasgow* (*RIC*, Vol. 2), edited by Anne S. Richardson.

“Reading” Roman coins is fairly straight-forward. On the obverse — the ‘heads’ side — of each coin was the image of the emperor or other imperial person, accompanied by a legend identifying that individual, usually by name and title(s). The image on the reverse side, with or without an identifying legend, varied, and might be a deity, public building, religious ritual, or some public event — like a *profectio*, the emperor's taking leave of the city on the eve of a military campaign. In the “deities” category we should also place images of divinized abstract — moral qualities that were conceived of as deities by the Romans, and which were almost always

¹⁸⁹ See Rebecca Langland's discussion of female competition for social prestige by displays of *pudicitia*, a virtue associated with (sexual) self-control; Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50ff.

depicted as female. But whereas reading coins is easy, the interpretation of coinage presents special challenges. The nature of the relationship between the image on the obverse to that on the reverse is, especially, much debated. Traditionally, the obverse of the coin is understood as providing the coin with its authority. That is, since the coin depicted the emperor, it was taken as authentic by those who used it. The reverse, it is thought, carried what scholars refer to as “the persuasive content.”¹⁹⁰ The relationship of reverse to obverse contains the “message” of the coin. Most readily understood as political art, coin types are believed by many to have been selected with persuasion or manipulation in mind — the image on the reverse was meant to persuade viewers concerning the values or benefactions of the person depicted on the obverse. But this is an interpretation, and in fact we do not know for certain why, or how, coin types were actually selected. It would seem to make a difference if the individuals depicted on coins chose the images or if they were chosen for them. And, if others chose the images, who were they, and what were their motivations?¹⁹¹ Wallace-Hadrill has discussed the proposals of various scholars, pointing that while the latter option opens up the possibility that the images on the coins are like a panegyric in metal, which although no more chosen “from above” than Pliny was instructed on how best to flatter Trajan, nevertheless seek to persuade because they invite contemporaries to view the emperor in a particular light.¹⁹²

But persuasion may have been only one aspect of the equation. After all, coinage was not really meant for the dissemination of information. Public monuments, rituals, and other

¹⁹⁰ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill provides a nice breakdown of various approaches to coin interpretation, “Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus,” *JRS*, Vol. 76 (1986), 68.

¹⁹¹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Ibid.*, 67, offers a few suggestions, while acknowledging that we cannot know. “The difficulty lies in imagining that emperors personally played a significant part in the day-to-day choice of types (and given the astonishing multiplicity of types employed, there was much choosing to be done). It is more plausible to see lesser men at work, whether the senatorial *tresviri monetales*, or a high imperial official like the secretary *a rationibus*, or a lower mint official like the *procurator monetae*.”

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 68.

community celebrations did this so much better.¹⁹³ Coins repeated what was already known. In other words, it may be that the image on the reverse side of the coins was the association already established in the popular imagination with regards to the imperial on the obverse, because of that person's public demeanor or actions. At any case, if we skirt the question of "imperial programs" for a moment and look instead at other possible meanings for the associations made between a coin's images, we allow a broader religious and social reading of these images, and not only a political one.

Indeed, the relationship between a coin's reverse and obverse images may be quite practical. According to numismatist Carlos Noreña, who conducted a study of imperial coinage minted between the reigns of Vespasian (r. 69-79) and Severus Alexander (r. 222-235), reverse images and legends most frequently reflect the roles actually held by the emperor within Roman government and society.¹⁹⁴ Images of divinized moral qualities like *Aequitas* (fairness), *Clementia* (mercy), and *Iustitia* (justice/righteousness) personified on the coins as female figures each with her own defining attributes — a set of scales for *Aequitas*, for example — all communicate the emperor's powers and qualities as judge and administrator of justice. Likewise, images of the personifications *Indulgentia* (favor), *Liberalitas* (generosity), or *Munificentia* (bountifulness), declare his patronage of Rome's urban population. *Providentia* (foresight), *Pietas* (dutiful conduct), and *Virtus* (moral perfection) proclaim the emperor's possession of, and respect for, fundamental Roman values, and manifest qualities or dispositions that allow him to care for the empire.¹⁹⁵ This being so, the question arises of whether we might likewise interpret

¹⁹³ Wallace-Hadrill, "Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus," 68.

¹⁹⁴ Carlos F. Noreña, "Communication of the Emperor's Virtues," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 91 (2001), 156.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

the coins featuring a female imperial on the obverse and a goddess or personified virtue on the reverse as describing, in a similar fashion, the roles women held. We know that while imperial women held no *official* roles in Roman society, they did, as we have seen, possess the power of displaying their moral qualities through benefactions, advocacy, and even patronage. The difficulty, of course, is that the women of the imperial house could not act too publicly without engendering resentment and suspicion; even the fact that women were in such close proximity to imperial power posed a threat. We cannot expect that the images on their coins would speak as directly to their public actions as did the emperor's coinage. Imperial women are never connected on the reverse of their coinage with "public" virtues like *Aequitas*, *Clementia*, or *Indulgentia*, which imply action and authority, but with idealized personal virtues like *Pietas*, *Fides*, or *Pudicitia*. Parsing the images in a search for actual events, therefore, is very difficult. What is most readily understood about these images of idealized feminine behavior (though *pietas* and *fides* were also expected of males) is how they joined the public image of Plotina, Marciana, Salonia Matidia, and Vibia Sabina to ancient values, and promoted the virtues that prevented them from desiring to exercise imperial powers. The women and the imperial house were allied on their coinage with the traditional past, and the idea that the emperor and his family stood for all that was "Roman" was reinforced. Still, it is worthwhile testing Noreña's hypothesis by applying it to the coinage of these four women.

Rather than offer a catalogue of all the coin types that existed for each of these four women, the images discussed here were selected based on how representative they are of the iconography of the imperial women depicted. There are two exceptions — a gold *quirinus* of Plotina's showing Minerva on its reverse, and a coin type that associates Vibia Sabina, pictured on the obverse, with Venus Victrix on the reverse. These images are interesting because of the

seeming discrepancy between them and those most usually associated with each of these empresses. However, as is discussed below, these images are not necessarily the anomalies they first appear if approached as expressions of the empresses' public roles rather than only as propaganda. The coinage of these women is divided here into two groups — that of the empresses, Plotina and Vibia Sabina, and that of the close female relations, Marciana, Trajan's sister, and Matidia the elder, Trajan's niece and Hadrian's mother-in-law. In this way the nature of each woman's relationship to imperial power, and her role(s) within Roman society is emphasized. Coins minted during their lifetimes are discussed first, with an overview of the coinage minted to celebrate their consecrations coming last in each section. And because Marciana is the eldest of the women, and she and Matidia form something of a "core" grouping — because theirs is the blood relationship that effectively forms a bridge between the families of Trajan and Hadrian — we will begin with their coins and imagery.

Reflections of Community Involvement & Family Ties: The Coinage of Marciana & Matidia

The images featured on the coinage of Ulpia Marciana, elder sister of the emperor Trajan, and her daughter, Matidia the elder, accords with what we already know about their public role as moral *exempla*, reflecting as they do a hierarchy of appropriate public behaviors that reassured viewers that the imperial family adhered to traditional mores. This is in fact true of all the women discussed here, but the overall timbre of the associations is different in the imagery of Ulpia Marciana and Matidia the elder, with a decided emphasis on the household and family relationships. There are also hints that these women were involved in broad initiatives that, as imperials and wealthy landowners, were essentially public displays of their *pietas* to the wider society and investment in traditional Roman values. In all the coin types featuring these two women, the lived-reality of Rome's empire as ruled by a single elite family, with the *princeps* at

its head, is clearly communicated. Social hierarchy was, after all, a reality of private — as well as public — life in Roman society. Within the imperial household — as with all households — each family member possessed, and played out, the role assigned him or her by birth and marriage. Trajan's sister, Ulpia Marciana, had been married young, and widowed while her daughter was just a child and she was herself only about 28 years old.¹⁹⁶ Part of the imperial household from the death of her husband to her own death on 29 August 112, her place within the imperial household was that of a widow whose brother was now head of her family and household.¹⁹⁷ Marciana appeared with her brother and his wife on state occasions, as indicated, for example, by the inclusion of her and Plotina's names on a dedicatory inscription memorializing Trajan's visit to the port at Luna, on the Via Aurelia, in 104/5.¹⁹⁸ Pliny's characterization of Marciana in his *Panegyricus* accords with that made evident by her presence at Luna; as the eldest female in the household, the emperor's sister was a key figure whose public position and demeanor won her praise and prestige. Pliny's praise for Marciana and Plotina's ability to peaceably co-exist within the same high estate brought by access to imperial powers clearly suggests that both women had claim to an ascendancy in the household that might have easily caused friction, and been potentially detrimental to Trajan's ability to conduct imperial business without threat of court factions and dissension (in other words, neither were

¹⁹⁶ Marciana was likely married to a C. Matidius Patruinus, who was *magister* of the Arval Brethren when he died in 78. See "The Acta Fratrum Arvalium," in *Select Documents of the Principates of the Flavian Emperors*, edited by M. McCrum & A. G. Woodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), No. 8. For evidence concerning Marciana, s.v. "Ulpia Marciana," Raepsaet-Charlier, *Prosopographie des femmes de l'ordre sénatorial: Ier-IIe siècles* (Louvain: Aedibus Peeters, 1987).

¹⁹⁷ The *Fasti Ostienses* states that Marciana died four days before the kalends of September. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), 22.38-46.

¹⁹⁸ *ILS* 288 = Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), 106 = Appendix B, No. 15. The same configuration of names, except with Marciana noted as *diva*, appears on an inscription from Ancona, *ILS* 298 = Appendix B, No. 16, and dates to 114/115. It is interesting that, although she had been dead for several years, her name still warranted inclusion in the dedicatory inscription marking Trajan's opening of a new port there.

schemers). This harmony may be reflected in the fact that Marciana was granted the title *Augusta* in 104/5 together with the empress, Plotina.¹⁹⁹

The first coin under consideration features Marciana's image on the obverse, and was probably minted soon after her death in 112.²⁰⁰ The coin depicts Marciana on its obverse, her hair elaborately built up in the style of the day, with a metal headband called a "stephane" — an accoutrement often seen also in depictions of Juno — visible at its peak. The legend declares her relationship to the emperor — *MARCIANA AUG SOROR IMP TRAIANI* (*Marciana Augusta, Sister of the Emperor Trajan*), thus placing her socially, the title *Augusta* emphasizes her enormous personal prestige. The legend winding its way around the outside edge of the reverse continues Trajan's titles from the obverse, and reads, *CAES AUG GERM DAC COS VI PP* (*Caesar Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, Consul Six times, Father of the Fatherland*). Depicted on the coin's reverse is a female figure, draped and veiled, seated on a chair, her slippered feet resting on a low footstool. In the background is what appears to be a curtain. She holds her extended right hand toward a child standing behind her, and rests her left hand on the head of another child by her side. The words *MATIDIA AUG* (*Matidia Augusta*) in the exergue (the small space below the central design on a coin or medal), though, indicate that this figure is Salonia Matidia, Marciana's adult daughter.²⁰¹ One plausible interpretation of this reverse image is that

¹⁹⁹ The inscription from Luna (*ILS* 288) is the earliest instance of the title *Augusta* used for either of these women.

²⁰⁰ *BMCRE* III, 108, No. 531. The coin is dated to 112 because that is the year, according to the *Fasti Ostienses*, in which Matidia received the title *Augusta*, which she bears on this coin. See Ladislaus Vidman, *Fasti Ostiensis* (Prague: Academia, 1982), 48.

²⁰¹ Note that on this coin both Marciana and Matidia bear the title *Augusta* in spite of the fact that, so far as we know, they never held it simultaneously: the *Fasti Ostienses* notes that, *IIII K. Septembr. || [Marciana Aug]usta excessit diva q. cognominata* — "On the fourth day before the Kalends of September, Marciana Augusta died and was named diva." See Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), 22.39-45. Guido Calza reconstructed a key missing portion of line 41 as, [Eodem die? Mati]dia Augusta cognominata — "On that same day Matidia was named Augusta." See G. Calza, *Notizie degli Scavi di antichità* (Rome: Academy of the Lincei, 1932), 188-205. J. Carcopino suggested [et eius filia] Matid]ia, *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'année 1932 de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, no. 4 (1932), 363-381. This restoration

the coin depicts Salonia Matidia with her two daughters, Mindia (Matidia the younger) and Vibia Sabina. However, since the goddess *Pietas* was also frequently depicted with children, it may be that here the figure is meant to be understood as *Pietas*, with whom Matidia is being assimilated. These images are best understood in comparison with later ones belonging to Matidia herself, on all of which the figure of *Pietas* figures largely.

Salonia Matidia, Marciana's only child, became *Augusta* upon the death of her mother in 112 — on the same day, if Guido Calza's restoration of the *Fasti Ostienses* is to be believed²⁰² — and her coinage, though limited, is interesting because it associates always her with *Pietas* and connects her with her mother, Marciana.²⁰³ The coinage minted in the name of these two women, therefore, all seem to conform to the picture offered of imperial women in sources like the *Panegyricus*, where they are depicted as close-knit, peaceable, and attentive to traditional virtues. This may at least partly explain the apparent assimilation of Salonia Matidia with *Pietas*, since *pietas* is perhaps best summed up as an attitude that inspires the fulfillment of one's customary obligations toward family, religion, and state. Salonia Matidia fulfilled her pious intentions towards her mother, and so *Pietas* therefore expressed at the same time both her personal virtues and an all-encompassing and powerful force for social cohesion, intimately tied

takes into consideration that we have no way of knowing when the title *Augusta* was actually awarded to Matidia. At any rate, this coin presents us with a quandary: if Matidia was named *Augusta* after her mother's death in 112, why do both women bear the title *Augusta* on this coin? We will never know for sure, but the fact that both mother and daughter have the title *Augusta* on this coin might make us question whether Marciana's deification was as simultaneous as the *Fasti Ostienses* seems to say it was.

²⁰² Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), 22.41: [*Eodem die Matid]ia Augusta cognominata*. Bickerman, (1974), cast doubt on the restoration of the beginning of this line, and pointed out that G. Calza's first published restoration contained an all-important question mark: [*eodem die? Matid]ia*; see note 198, above. In this, he was followed — though without the question mark — by L. Vidman and A. Degraasi. See E. J. Bickerman, "Diva Augusta Marciana," *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (Winter, 1974), 362; Guido Calza, *Notizie degli Scavi di antichità* (Rome: Academy of the Lincei, 1932), 188-205; A. Degraasi, *Inscriptiones Italiae*, XIII, 1 (1947), 43; Ladislaus Vidman, *Fasti Ostienses*, (Prague: Academia, 1957), 64.

²⁰³ Matidia's coinage was issued in gold and silver (*aurei* and *denarii*) — *BMCRE* III, 127, Nos. 658-664 — and bronze *sestertii*, *BMCRE* III, 231, Nos. 1088-1089.

to the survival of Roman society. Personified as a goddess, *Pietas* was frequently depicted on emperors' coins, including those of Trajan and Hadrian. During this period, she is first seen on Trajan's *denarii* beginning in about 104.²⁰⁴ A brief survey of other imperial coins reveals a tendency to connect the women of the imperial family with personifications of some divine attribute, usually a guiding principle of Roman life like *Pietas*, *Concordia*, or *Salus* (concern for the well-being of the state, in a sense an extension of *pietas*). Yet it hardly makes sense to mint a coin that only abstractly connects these women to a virtue, when on so many other imperial coins the appearance of a personified virtue relates somehow to an action undertaken by the person depicted on the obverse. It is more likely, then, that this coin is relating *pietas* to something both Marciana and Matidia embodied in action. Since the figure of *Pietas* is central, and is depicted with small children on both Marciana's coin and that of Matidia the elder, it seems likely that these coins are commemorating their participation in Trajan's alimentary (child welfare) program in Italy. Evidence for such a connection is admittedly circumstantial, but suggestive enough to consider.

Dio tells us that Trajan, "did much to reform the administration of affairs...to the public business he gave unusual attention, making many grants, for example, to the cities in Italy for the support of their children..."²⁰⁵ Knowledge about the actual workings of the scheme Dio glosses is thanks to the discovery of two enormous bronze plaques — one found by plowmen in northern Italy, near ancient Veleia (in the region of modern Piacenza), and the other further south, near Beneventum (modern Benevento), during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries,

²⁰⁴ *RIC*, xxxviii, and 21, No. 135. The date of 104 is based on titles supplied on the reverse legend, which declares Trajan *optimus princeps*, a title he was formally granted by the senate in about 103. See Julian Bennet, *Trajan* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 105-106.

²⁰⁵ Dio, 68.14.4.

respectively.²⁰⁶ Trajan's scheme, which was in place by about 101, was really the reform of an already-existing alimentary system put in place by his predecessor, Nerva (r. 96-98), who had declared that children from needy families should be provided for by the state.²⁰⁷ From information provided by the bronze plaques, we know that Trajan's scheme worked by offering imperial loans to land owners that were equivalent to one-tenth the value of their property. Interest payments on these loans were then redirected to the care of children (both boys and girls, slave and free-born) from disadvantaged families. In this way, wealthy landowners participated in the care of families who lived in the region, and received money at a low rate of interest — five percent or less — that they could reinvest into their property.²⁰⁸

Trajan's enthusiasm for this program was apparently great, and he provided money for the loans from his personal finances.²⁰⁹ During his reign the *alimentaria* were celebrated and advertised on coinage, in inscriptions, and with sculpture.²¹⁰ And since the alimentary program in Italy received much attention, and relied on local landowning elites — most of whom were not permanent residents in the regions where they owned land — it seems very likely that Marciana and her daughter, the elder Matidia, would have supported the emperor by taking part in the regions where they themselves owned estates. The *Tabula Veleiae* (also called the *Tabula Alimentaria*), the bronze tablet found near the northern town of Veleia, attests that at least one imperial woman was involved, for on it is inscribed the name of Vibia Sabina, Matidia's younger

²⁰⁶ The tablet found near Veleia was discovered in 1747, the one at Beneventum in 1832. See Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), Nos. 436 and 435, respectively.

²⁰⁷ *Epitome de Caesaribus*, "Nerva," 12.4.

²⁰⁸ See Frank C. Bourne, "The Roman Alimentary Program and Italian Agriculture," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 91 (1960): 47-75; Alice M. Ashley, "The 'Alimenta' of Nerva and his Successors," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 141 (Jan., 1921): 5-16.

²⁰⁹ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 26.3.

²¹⁰ Inscriptions: *CIL* 6.1492=*ILS* 6106; *CIL* 9.5825; Sculpture: *CIL* 10.6310=*ILS* 282.

daughter.²¹¹ Sabina owned land near Veleia, and is named in the *Tabula Veleiae* as the owner of estates assessed, based on the testimony of her freedman, Vibius Idaeus, with a value of 100,000 sesterces. Given that Sabina participated in the alimentary program, and given the closeness of the women of the imperial family, it is likely that Marciana and Salonia Matidia participated where they owned land as well.²¹² Both Salonia Matidia and her daughter, Mindia Matidia, were already benefactors. They set up a fund for the town of Vicetia, though all we know about how the money was used was that in the third-century the town used it to raise a statue to Gordian III.²¹³ Unfortunately, inscriptions attesting to the participation of landowners in Trajan's alimentary program from this area of Italy are missing. Seeing that the images on coins frequently referred to actual events, we might surmise that the images of *Pietas* on the coins of Salonia Matidia, especially, are meant to convey information about her activities relating to the *alimenta*. In order to test this, it is worth comparing the reverse images on coins that we know relate directly to the alimentary program with those on the coinage of Marciana and Salonia Matidia.

Trajan's issues, like the one mentioned above, included coins that attest to the importance of the alimentary program for Italy, as had those of his predecessor, Nerva. On one of these, Nerva is depicted seated on a curule chair extending his hand to Italy personified (*Italia*). Next to *Italia* stand two small children, a boy and a girl. The legend reads: *TUTELA ITALIAE SC* (*Care of Italy, by a decision of the Senate*).²¹⁴ The theme of giving to children is repeated on silver

²¹¹ *CIL* 11.1147 = Appendix B, No. 6.

²¹² Marciana and Matidia both owned land in Italy, as we have seen. See Appendix A: Properties in Italy, below.

²¹³ *CIL* 5.3112 = *ILS* 501 = Appendix B, No. 13.

²¹⁴ H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'empire romain* (Paris, 1880-1892), 2.12.142.

denarii featuring Trajan on the obverse, draped and laureate.²¹⁵ His titles, provided in the legend *IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS V DES VI* (*To the emperor Trajan Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus, Pontifex Maximus, holding the Tribunician power, Consul for the fifth time, consul designate for a sixth*), provide a date of roughly 111. On the reverse Trajan appears again, wearing a toga, standing facing left. He holds a scroll in his left hand, and extends his right hand towards two children, a boy and a girl, who represent the fact that children of both sexes were supported under his scheme.²¹⁶ The reverse legend reads, *SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI* (*The Senate and People of Rome to the best princeps*) and, in the exergue, *ALIM ITAL* (*support of Italy*). The shorthand used to depict the sexes of the two children on Trajan's coin — the male figure being slightly taller and clothed in a short tunic, and the female figure shorter and clothed in a long tunic — is carried over on Marciana's coin (discussed above; *BMRC* No. 581) in the two figures standing near Salonia Matidia on its reverse. Here, the child standing in the background, though partially obscured by Matidia's body, is clearly taller than the one that stands to her left hand, in the foreground of the image, and the lines used to sketch out the children's forms are nearly identical to those used on Trajan's coin. For further corroboration, however, it makes sense to look at the images on Salonia Matidia's subsequent coinage, on which the themes seen here are repeated.

Pietas, who appears on all of Matidia's coinage, is depicted in one type in the more traditional mode, as sacrificing at a garlanded altar.²¹⁷ On the rest of Matidia's coinage, the

²¹⁵ *RIC* II, 139, p. 22.

²¹⁶ One must look closely to note this detail, but the figure on the (viewer's) left, is slightly taller than the figure to the right, and wears a toga. This is identified as the boy. The shorter figure, whose clothing looks more like a simple sheath, is identified as the girl.

²¹⁷ *BMRC* III, 127, No. 658. I say "traditional" because this is the type more frequently used to depict *Pietas*. She was frequently depicted in this same pose — the action of offering sacrifice at a garlanded altar — on coins of both Trajan, *RIC* 140, for example, and Hadrian, *RIC* 257.

figure of *Pietas* is flanked by two small figures, as we have seen, both of whom are in an attitude of beseeching something from her. On the coins with this latter type, the obverse legend *MATIDIA AVG[usta] DIVAE MARCIANAE F[ilia]* (*Matidia Augusta, daughter of the deified Marciana*), accompanies an image of Salonia Matidia, her hair massed on top of her head in the ornate style so readily connected with this period. On the reverse is the image of *Pietas* with two small children: the legend, *PIETAS AVGVST[ae]* (*the pietas of Augusta*), makes this association clear. Tomasz Micocki, in his study of imperial iconography, claims that this type depicts Salonia Matidia, assimilated with *Pietas*, standing with her two daughters, Matidia the younger, and Vibia Sabina. The association, he says, is meant to define, not Matidia herself, but her attitude toward her children.²¹⁸ This is contrary to the interpretation put forward by numismatist P. L. Strack, who identified the two small figures as Vibia Sabina and her husband, Hadrian.²¹⁹ Both these scholars, though, are attempting to relate Matidia's coinage to dynastic considerations and therefore miss an interpretation that might provide insight into one of the roles these women undertook as members of the imperial house and prominent members of Rome's elite women. As landowners of substantial estates, Marciana and Salonia Matidia participated in the alimentary program and earned through this an association with *Pietas*, the personification of duty, in this case to the state. It may be, however, that the association with *pietas* is not meant to be limited to their involvement with the Italian alimentary program, in spite of the fact that the images and symbols on the coins point to this one scheme in particular. *Pietas* might also more broadly signal their willingness to provide benefactions to municipalities with which they had ties,

²¹⁸ Tomasz Micocki, *Sub Specie Deae: Les Impératrices et Princesses Romaines Assimilées à des déesses – Étude Iconologique* (Roma: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1995), 108.

²¹⁹ *BMCRE* III, lxxxiii. In his commentary, Richardson notes Strack's assertion and then dismisses it by pointing out that, if this were true, the clear dynastic implications of the coin would have rendered absurd any subsequent questions regarding the legitimacy of Hadrian's accession.

whether through family and/or land ownership, for we know that they did do these things (see Chapter Three). At any rate, there is no reason why, as a symbol, *pietas* would not work on multiple levels at once.

Generally speaking, then, the images on the first coin discussed, above, of Marciana, and those of her daughter, Salonia Matidia, connect both women with care and regard for Roman values, and with the intention of safeguarding the state through the appropriate use of their wealth and influence and, especially if the *alimenta* interpretation is correct, with programs funded by the emperor. These were core values in the Roman world, at one with those moral virtues deemed necessary for the proper and appropriate wielding of any public power whatsoever. What is interesting, though, is the way the images and symbols in the coins of emperors Nerva and Trajan differ from those of the imperial women. References to the poor-relief programs are explicit on the coins of Nerva and Trajan, and each is depicted on the reverse in the act of bestowing a benefaction to the children of Italy. Compare this with the coins of Marciana Augusta and her daughter, Salonia Matidia. On his coins, the emperor is the central figure, depicted in the act of bestowing: both Nerva's and Trajan's coins show the emperor with hand outstretched. There is distance between the emperor and the children, who stand opposite him. On the women's coins, the female figure on the reverse has the children on either side of her. On Salonia Matidia's *Pietas* coins, the children reach up to her beseechingly.²²⁰ The difference in these depictions is the difference between (male) providing and (female) protecting, and is in keeping with the separation in Roman gender roles. On the coin bearing Marciana's image on the obverse, two children appear with the *Pietas*-like figure identified as Salonia Matidia on the reverse. This imagery is akin to the coins of Nerva and Trajan. Like Nerva,

²²⁰ *BMCRE* III, No. 1088, p. 231.

Matidia-as-*Pietas* is depicted seated, though where Nerva's chair is a curule chair, which represented official power, Matidia's is the sort of chair or throne upon which Vesta, another goddess, or a personified virtue might be seated. This chair clearly has a back, and the female figure (Matidia-*Pietas*) has her feet upon a low stool. The authority implied by the curule chair is missing, and is replaced with symbols connecting the female with the divine — throne and footstool. Likewise, the action of bestowing — the outstretched hand — is still present, but the legends on the women's coins do not refer directly to the *alimenta*. The woman's action is indicative of virtue, but is not "official." *Pietas* is attributed to Salonia Matidia and, by association, to Marciana as well, who, here, is remembered as a living woman — an *Augusta*, and not yet as *diva*.

The correspondence between the coins of Nerva and Trajan and those of Marciana and Matidia makes a strong case for the supposition that the coins associate the women with a concrete action, perhaps the alimentary program. Yet it is clear that the women's virtue lay in following the lead of their brother and uncle rather than instigation; they had no part in setting up or governing the program. Instead, the women are honoured as members of the imperial family, their generosity and compliance equating them with the highest traditional virtues. Clearly, there was an association in the Roman mind between adherence to tradition and the smooth and successful functioning of everything from the individual household to the relationships between individuals, peoples, and communities. These imperial women supported the state by doing their duty — acting with *pietas* in a gender-appropriate way. And yet we see the women of the imperial house continually tied in this period to symbols of power and highest social standing. All other coins featuring Marciana on the obverse celebrate her elevation to the status of *diva*,

and the integration of her cult into the imperial pantheon, and use the same symbols to indicate her new status as had been used for emperors and imperial *divi* since the days of Augustus.

Marciana's *Consecratio* Types: The Triumph of Rome

A series of gold coins with the reverse legend, CONSECRATIO S(enatus) C(onsulto), are marked with a draped bust of Marciana on the obverse, her hair drawn back in an elaborate bun and adorned with a triple *stephane*.²²¹ On the reverse is an eagle, a bird with unique symbolic connotations in the Roman imperial ethos: not only did the eagle represent the patron god of Rome, Jupiter, it had close associations with the imperial cult — when an eagle was released from Augustus's funeral pyre in AD 14, it symbolized his ascent to the realm of the gods and the eagle as a metaphor for imperial Rome became permanently associated with Rome's ruling house. In Marciana's *consecratio* series, the eagle is alone on the coins' reverse, wings spread as though about to take flight. On some coins, the eagle appears to be grasping a sceptre in its talons, while on others it seems, instead, to be standing on a horizontal line. These images not only describe the continuance of imperial traditions — an eagle may have flown from Marciana's funeral pyre as it had from Augustus's — they express the connection between the concept of deification and the continuance of Rome as imperial power.²²² Marciana was deified by a vote of the senate, and thus joined other *divi* in standing publicly for the superiority of Rome, as had other *divae* before her. As *diva*, Marciana became part of Rome's religious landscape, with statues dedicated to her, and a basilica bearing her name flanking the temple Hadrian later built for his deified mother-in-law, Salonia Matidia. Her inclusion in annual

²²¹ *BMCRE* III, Nos. 647-649, 652, 653. The same images also appeared on silver *denarii* of the same year, and bronze *sestertii* of 113-117 (*BMCRE* III, Nos. 1088, 1089).

²²² It may be that funeral rituals for imperial women were nearly identical to those used for men. We know that when his sister, Drusilla, died in AD 38, her brother, then-emperor Gaius, granted her all the honours that had been bestowed on Livia and, further, seemed to use the funeral of Augustus as a template for Drusilla's funeral. See Dio, 59.11.

religious rituals reminded Romans that the austere traditions of their ancestors had lived on in one of its recent inhabitants, the sister of the emperor. Other coins reveal details of these rituals.

If we take the eagle coins, on the most basic level, as a short-hand for indicating that Marciana was indeed deified, then these other coins reveal just how she was, as *diva*, incorporated into the religious life of the city. A series of coins with obverse legends reading, DIVA AVGVSTA MARCIANA and a reverse legend declaring the senate's participation in commissioning the mint: EX SENATVS CONSVLTO (*by decision of the Senate*) show a carriage, pulled by two elephants, bearing a seated, veiled, female figure holding, on a coin of 113, a torch in her left hand and ears of corn in her right, and on another, possibly of later date, a sceptre in her left instead of the corn.²²³ Minted as bronze *sestertii* and silver *denarii*, all these types with the carriage pulled by elephants refer to the inclusion of an image of Marciana in the *pompa circensis*, the parade of carts bearing images of gods and goddesses that wound its way from the Capitoline Hill to the Circus Maximus along the route taken by triumphing generals, except in reverse.²²⁴ This procession formed a part of the religious ceremonies that preceded games celebrated in the Circus on set occasions, and Marciana's image is dressed as Ceres, a divinity intimately associated with the well-being of the city and its empire. This is an interesting assimilation, bearing a variety of meanings.

In the first coin (*BMC* 655), the sceptre and ears of corn evoke an association with Ceres the protector of crops and fertility, while the torch is an attribute of Ceres as patron of the bonds

²²³ *BMCRE* III, 126, No. 655; 230, No. 1086; 231, No. 1087. In Gneccchi, *I medaglioni Romani*, Vol. II, (Bologna, 1912), 5 (p. 292), identifies a coin on which the objects the female figure is holding are corn ears and a *patera* (bowl used in religious ritual offerings of wine). This coin is not in the *BMCRE* catalogue.

²²⁴ Inge Nielsen (Hamburg); Augusta Höhle (Rottweil). "Circus." *Brill's New Pauly*. Antiquity volumes edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider. (Brill, 2010). Brill Online. University Of Saskatchewan. 04 July 2010. http://www.brillonline.nl.cyber.usask.ca/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e234810.

of marriage.²²⁵ Micocki's suggestion that these attributes assured viewers of the fecundity of the empress, and expressed the abundance and well-being that were the imperial couple does not readily apply to the sister of the emperor, who anyway bore only a single daughter and no sons. Instead, we might take the assimilation of Marciana as Ceres as communicating her participation in the larger community. She supported the emperor as his sister and is remembered as wife and mother through the guise of Ceres because of her participation in seeing to the well-being of the state — the roles of good sister, wife, and mother readily undertaken, and of chaste widowhood (she remained *univira*) after her husband's death. Ceres was, as Babette Spaeth has pointed out, the goddess who guarded boundaries — both personal and communal — idealized in the case of female sexuality as chastity.²²⁶ This virtue, chastity, was regarded as integral to the steadfast continuance of the city itself because a direct connection existed in the Roman psyche between the chastity of upper-class women and the physical integrity of the *urbs*. The virtue of chastity and the issue of female sexuality were likewise linked socially with the integrity of the community through elite participation in the obligation to marry and raise children for the state. Marciana's role in life was therefore reinforced through assimilation, after death and consecration, with Ceres the guardian of sexual boundaries and of the marriage bond. As a public person, Marciana had been expected to model the traditional virtues, a fact expressed in the choice of assimilation. She had successfully negotiated the temptation to become overly involved in the affairs of state.²²⁷

²²⁵ Tomasz Micocki, 91.

²²⁶ Babette Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 116.

²²⁷ We might bring to mind here, again, the negative connotations imposed by historians Tacitus and Cassius Dio on an empress's intervention in the imperial succession. See my discussion of Plotina's involvement in Hadrian's adoption and succession, above, p. 69.

An identical message is sent by a series of coins bearing an image of Marciana, again, on the obverse, and a rendering on the reverse of a cart drawn, this time, by two mules. The legend, DIVA AVGVSTA MARCIANA, is the same as the other series, and both series have been dated by Mattingly to *c.* AD 113.²²⁸ On these coins, however, rather than depicting an image of Marciana as *Ceres* drawn along by elephants in the *pompa circensis*, the carriage on these coins is drawn by mules. It is richly decorated and, instead of a chair bearing the image of the goddess, is topped by what appears to be a triangular object with projections coming from it. On close inspection, the *carpentum* is clearly decorated with garlands, and panels that feature human figures. A triangular decoration tops the front; this has a double edge, and is itself adorned with fleurettes. The connotations recalled for the viewer are several: the *carpentum* (drawn by mules) was a vehicle allowed only to female members of the imperial house and to Vestal Virgins, and then only on special occasions. It is featured on coins belonging to Livia (on a Tiberian *sestertius* with the legend, IVLIAE AVGVST (to *Julia Augusta*), the name and title she was granted after AD 14), and the Flavian *diva*, Domitilla, and others. That the *carpentum* is here depicted on a posthumous coin clearly bespeaks Marciana's role as one of Rome's leading matrons.

But do the curious decorations on Marciana's carriage describe something we need to know? Lily Ross Taylor, in a 1935 study of the symbolism of Flavian coinage, explored the possibility that the triangular shape, similar to that seen here on the top of Marciana's *carpentum*, denoted the *sellisternium* — a procession of chairs (*sellae*), which, topped by symbols of divinities, were placed in the theatre as though leaving a seat for the god or goddess to view the

²²⁸ *BMCRE* III, p. 126, No. 653.

proceedings.²²⁹ She distinguishes between two types of *sellisternia* — the festival celebrated by Rome’s matrons during the secular games, and another that was part of the ritual proceedings in the theatre.²³⁰ Although Taylor was not describing the coinage of Diva Marciana directly, the triangle-shaped decoration on her carpentum may nevertheless be a symbol used to substitute for an image of the goddess — here, the deified Marciana.

As described by second-century Roman author, Festus, *capita deorum* (heads of the gods) were sometimes placed on the couches or chairs during the festivals of the *lecisternium* and *sellisternium* to stand in for the gods or goddess in question — though boughs, bundled together and decorated with corn-ears or other foliage, were often used instead of the *capita*.²³¹ One thinks immediately of instances when chairs (sometimes with images and/or particular symbols) were placed in the theatre in order to honour deceased imperials.²³² If it is correct, then, that the triangular or semi-circular shape, in particular, was a symbol for the women of the imperial family, then perhaps the shape displayed on this coin connects Diva Marciana with the *ludi scaenici*, and chair was placed in her honour at theatrical presentations.²³³ The implications of such actions are interesting, especially because the one being honoured is a woman, and the same

²²⁹ Lily Ross Taylor, “The Sellisternium and the Theatrical Pompa,” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (Apr., 1935): 130.

²³⁰ During the Secular Games, celebrated under Augustus and, later, Septimius Severus, one-hundred and ten of Rome’s elite matrons celebrated *Sellisternia* for three days. In both cases, the goddesses honoured during these celebrations, which were expiatory in nature, were Juno and Diana. See *CIL* 6.32323.100.

²³¹ Sextus Pompeius Festus, *De Verborum Significatu quae Supersunt cum Pauli Epitome*, edited by Wallace M. Lindsay (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965), 56.

²³² Dio, 53.30.6, relates how Augustus ordered “a golden image of the deceased [his nephew, Marcellus], a golden crown, and a curule chair should be carried into the theatre at the Ludi Romani and should be placed in the midst of the officials having charge of the games;” and Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.83, in reporting the honours granted posthumously to Germanicus, Augustus’ grandson, notes that “curule chairs surmounted by oaken crowns were to be set for him wherever the Augustan priests had right of place; his effigy in ivory was to lead the procession at the Circus Games...”

²³³ Aline L. Abaecherli, “Imperial Symbols on Certain Flavian Coins,” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (Apr., 1935). The triangular shape was an image belonging to the imperial cult, she posits, because it recalled the triangle-shaped *fastigium*, or pediment, that had been a feature of imperial homes since Julius Caesar. See pp. 131-133 ff.

sorts of honours accorded male imperials are evidently being offered to her as well. The image on this coin therefore refers to a variety of religious associations and practices: The *carpentum*, which during her lifetime Marciana may have had use of during ritual or festive occasions, segues here into a sacred cart for a goddess; and the custom of granting deceased imperials a seat at the theatre — just like a god — is revisited for the viewer, as is the connection between Marciana and the participation of elite women in the religious life of the city. Like her posthumous participation in the *pompa circensis*, assimilated with Ceres, the decorated *carpentum* placed the new imperial *diva* visually within the city's history. If the symbol atop her *carpentum* was meant to be carried into the theatre to adorn a seat reserved for her as goddess, the ritual action clearly expressed the connection between the imperial house and the community at Rome.

Mirror of Two Empresses: Pompeia Plotina & Vibia Sabina

So far it seems clear that the Romans had the habit of expressing in straightforward terms the action of men on behalf of the state — as on Nerva or Trajan's coins commemorating their alimentary schemes — while rendering the action of women using symbols that highlighted the virtues underlying their participation, rather than the actions that the virtue occasioned. This is certainly true of the coinage of Pompeia Plotina, which appeared in two imperial reigns, that of her husband Trajan (r. 98-117), whom Plotina outlived by at least six years, and his successor, Hadrian (r. 117-138), who saw to her deification following her death in 123/5. More gossip than actual fact appears in the literary record concerning Vibia Sabina, Hadrian's wife, but her likeness abounds in a variety of visual media, including coinage. Given the nature of the relationship between the empress and the man in power, it is not surprising that the imagery employed on the coins of these two empresses is of an entirely different nature than that used on

the coins of Matidia and Marciana, but we should still be aware that the images may be expressing more than facile propaganda. The goddess Vesta appears on much of Plotina's coinage, while on coins of Sabina, personified virtues like *Concordia* and *Fides* figure largely, though Vesta was very common as well. Considered integral to the very existence of the *res publica*, Vesta was allied with imperial women beginning in the reign of Augustus, when honours to her priestesses, the Vestal Virgins, were increased. But seeing that Vesta was associated with empresses from the very beginning of the imperial period, scholars have tended to assume that her continued appearance on the coins of empresses meant that the image had been merely appropriated by successive imperial houses in an effort to align themselves with earlier "legitimate" reigns. Imperial tradition may have been part of the picture, but the association would have been devoid of meaning unless the perceived relationship between goddess and empress was actually grounded in Roman understanding and practice. The public nature of the imperial house, the empress's frequent appearances with her husband, as well as her own roles within Rome all bestowed upon the empress a prestige and field of appropriate activity unparalleled in the female sphere. In this portion of the chapter, I will explore on the relationship of the empress to the goddess *Vesta* as expressed on coins of both Plotina and Sabina, in order to highlight their public roles as empresses, and look as well at two coins that stand out from the rest. On one, Plotina is associated with the image (on the legend-less reverse) of what Mattingly has called "Fighting Minerva." Later, in an equally puzzling association, a coin of Sabina's bears her image on the obverse and *Venus Victrix* (Victorious Venus) on the reverse. These images merit further investigation and discussion precisely because of the anomaly they represent in terms of the supposed "official" depiction usually put forth of these women as exemplified by Pliny in his *Panegyricus*.

Vesta & The Empress

Gold and silver issues for Plotina are dated to c. 112-115, and feature the empress on the obverse and Vesta on the reverse. Plotina is depicted with hair carefully separated into small braids like corn-rows, pulled back into a plait that falls to the nape of her neck. She wears a metal *stephane* and jewelry — a necklace and small hinged earrings. The legend, PLOTINA AVG(usta) IMP(eratoris) TRAIANI — “Plotina Augusta (wife) of emperor Trajan,” — declares her status and positions her socially in relation to her husband. *His* titles continue on the coin’s reverse side along with an image of the goddess Vesta, who is depicted seated on a chair, draped and veiled. She holds the palladium in her right hand, and a sceptre in her left.²³⁴ (The palladium is a small statue of Pallas Athena (Minerva) which, according to legend, was taken by Aeneas from the temple of Athena at Troy and transported to the ‘new Troy,’ Rome.)²³⁵ Believed by the Romans as essential to the protection of the city, it was housed in the temple of Vesta in the *Forum Romanum*.²³⁶ Mattingly identified the image on this coin as “Vesta of the Palatine” because of the attributes of palladium and sceptre which, he says, denote “the special cult within the house of the Pontifex Maximus,” and further claimed that when associated with an empress on coinage, this image is meant to characterize the empress as “Vesta of the chaste matrons,” and create a link between the present empress and Livia, the first empress to whom such an epithet had

²³⁴ *BMCRE* III, p. 106, No. 525. The Palladium was a statue of Athena kept in the temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum. A talisman of sorts, the Palladium ensured the safety of the city. See Francesca Prescendi, “Palladion, Palladium.” *Brill’s New Pauly*. Antiquity volumes edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider. (Brill, 2010). Brill Online. University Of Saskatchewan. (last accessed: 08 July 2010).

<http://www.brillonline.nl.cyber.usask.ca/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e904560>

²³⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities*. Translated by Earnest Cary. Vol. I (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1937), 1.68.

²³⁶ Maurus Servius Honoratus. *Vergilii carmina comentarii*. Edited by George Thilo and Herman Hagen (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner. 1881), 7.188; Ovid, *Fasti*, Translated and edited by A. J. Boyle and R. D. Woodman (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2004), 6.437ff, mentions the bravery of L. Caecilius Metellus, then Pontifex Maximus, who was blinded while saving it from a fire in the Temple of Vesta (241 BC).

been applied.²³⁷ But this is only part of the story. Rather than concentrating on a history of the empress as “chaste matron,” what deserves greater attention is the connection made in the Roman mind between the imperial couple as co-guarantors of the peace and stability of the Roman state.

Rome’s matrons had long been associated with the cult of Vesta. The innermost chamber (*penus*) of the temple of Vesta in the Forum, normally accessible only to the Vestals and to the *Pontifex Maximus*, was opened to the *matronae* every year during the June festival of the *Vestalia*.²³⁸ As the goddess of hearth and household, and, by extension, therefore also the hearth and centre of Rome itself, Vesta was readily connected in her functions with the one matron who oversaw the imperial house, the earthly source of peace and prosperity. Imperial consorts from Livia onwards inherited a close association between Vesta, in part because, like the goddess, the empress “held first place.”²³⁹ It is not surprising that the Romans would blur the lines between the gods and goddesses who protected the city and its empire and those with absolute power, or access to power. For Romans, human and divine protectors lived in the city, and both worked for the protection and peaceful continuance of Rome and the values that made it great. These were not new concepts; Romans had long believed that the magistrates and the gods worked together to ensure the safety of their city, and from this developed the notion that especially successful magistrates and generals shared a special connection with the gods and were divinely gifted in

²³⁷ Mattingly, *BMCRE* III, cl and lxxxii. Ovid, *Ex Ponto*, IV.13.29, addressed to Livia, is the source of “Vesta of chaste matrons.”

²³⁸ For more on the *Vestalia*, see R. L. Wildfang, “The Vestals and Annual Public Rites,” in *Classica et Mediaevalia* 52 (2001): 241-246.

²³⁹ Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.305: *inde precando praefamur Vestam, quae loca prima tenet* — henceforth when praying I begin by naming Vesta, who holds first place.

order to succeed on behalf of the state.²⁴⁰ An ancient sensibility that perceived a male and female function to various key public priesthoods is also undoubtedly being referenced in the imagery of Vesta of the Palatine.²⁴¹ During the Republic, the wife of the *flamen dialis*, high priest of Jupiter — Rome’s paramount protective deity — undertook various public roles as the *flamenica dialis* that were considered an essential part of the priesthood’s overall duties. If his wife died before him, the *flamen* was required to relinquish his office.²⁴² Likewise, the *rex sacrorum* and his wife, the *regina sacrorum*, officiated at a variety of rituals of ancient origin.²⁴³ This symmetry was likely applied also to the emperor who, as Pontifex Maximus, was chief priest of the state religion. Given the Roman affinity for depicting external powers as male/female dyads (*genius/juno*, god/goddess) it is only fitting that the empress must therefore have had a status within the state religion that suited her station as partner of the chief *pontifex*. The association of the empress with Vesta, therefore, was entirely logical. This virgin goddess, one of the state’s most important deities, embodied those elements of the empress’s traditional roles as leading matron and female head of the imperial household that were demanded of her — in spite of the fact that she could never have been a Vestal owing to the dictates of tradition. And like the Vestals who, unique among women, were freed from tutelage, free to make their own wills, and were under no man’s *potestas*, the empress enjoyed a social standing higher than women of any other station. The powers of influence that Plotina held in the imperial court, and the degree to

²⁴⁰ *Religions of Rome*, 142; J. Rufus Fears, “The Theology of Victory at Rome: Approaches and Problems,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Vol. II.17.2, 736-826.

²⁴¹ “if we are correct in interpreting her as such,” Mattingly states, saying that this figure of Vesta “marks the personal share of the Emperor and his family in the religion of the state.” See Mattingly, lxxix.

²⁴² There were three major *flamines*, that of Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus. All of these priests had to be of the patrician order. For the *flamen dialis*, Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, edited by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 10.15.1-25; also in *Religions of Rome*, edited by Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.2.

²⁴³ See John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, Translated by Janet Lloyd (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 132-136.

which she was likely involved as advisor to her husband have already been discussed.²⁴⁴

Empresses from Livia on traveled on state business with their husbands, and were worshipped as goddesses in the eastern portion of the empire while still living, while at home in Rome they were participants in state religious rituals performed on behalf of the entire people. The empress's role therefore complemented the emperor's, and she was a public personage to whom the ability for action that benefited the state and provided for its security could be ascribed. The perception that she worked with the emperor for the good of the state and behaved in a way that supported and nurtured the emperor's role naturally associated her with Vesta and the Vestals, who through the proper conduct of their ritual duties likewise achieved the peaceful continuance of the state.²⁴⁵ The image of Vesta, connected with the empress on coinage bearing her likeness present us with a couple of possibilities, depending on who selected the types. If chosen by a mint official, and intended as a message for the empress, the images called her to be Vesta to the community and oversee the well-being of the state. If chosen by the empress herself, they may have been a sort of vow or promise to the people that she would, like Vesta, behave in a way that preserved the best interests of Rome and its empire; Vesta was associated with the empress because they shared the ability to maintain the welfare of the state, while the goddess's example to, and influence on, the empress might reasonably be expected to keep her within the boundaries of the acceptable.

Another aspect to the imagery of Vesta that we might explore, however, is somewhat more practical than symbolic. It relates to the empress's role as priestess in Rome. If, as was

²⁴⁴ It is interesting to compare the description of Plotina chastising Trajan for not reining in the greed of his imperial procurators with the description of Livia's advice to Augustus on the necessity of clemency in a monarch, described in Dio, 55.14-22. In both cases the empress schools her husband on an imperial virtue and her status and reputation is correspondingly reinforced and enhanced.

²⁴⁵ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 83.6, mentions the imperial couple's joint ability to submit themselves to the demands of their public life.

discussed above, one of the empress's roles was that of leading matron, and if we allow that the elite matrons' religious duties were one aspect of their participation in Roman communal life, and that at least some of the religious rituals they participated in were on behalf of the larger community, then it is possible that the empress's duties included partaking in — or officiating at — ritual sacrifices performed on behalf of the Roman people.²⁴⁶ That is, the empress was acting on behalf of the state and was therefore representing the Roman people in their relationship with the divine. This would mean that the empress was more “public” than merely “appearing in public” — her role as priestess placed her on a nearly equal footing, if not with the emperor then at least with the Vestal Virgins, who sacrificed in their capacity as priestesses of Vesta. This intersection between the ritual obligations of the empress and that of the Vestals might help explain why the image of Vesta was so frequently depicted on the coins of successive empresses.

Naming Imperial Virtues: Personifications and the Empress

Concerning the frequent appearance of the goddesses Ceres, Juno, Venus Genetrix, and Vesta on the coinage of empresses, Mattingly remarked that these types connect the “great ruling goddesses” with the empress, their earthly counterpart.²⁴⁷ But how do we make sense of the frequent collocation of the empress and a personified virtue?²⁴⁸ On the *Pietas* coinage of Salonia Matidia, the image of the personified virtue may be describing the moral implications of her participation in Trajan's alimentary scheme, though without corroborating evidence this is so far

²⁴⁶ I suggested, above, that this capacity might have been undertaken as part of cults that were traditionally conducted by matrons, such as that of Bona Dea, though admittedly there is no evidence that explicitly links the empress with this festival.

²⁴⁷ Mattingly, *BMRCE* III, clxxxiv.

²⁴⁸ Separating the discussion between goddesses and personified virtues is perhaps a little misleading, owing to the fact that the Romans themselves made no clear distinction. For the ancients, personified virtues were every bit as real as the other gods they worshipped and had temples and priests or priestesses, and were supplicated and sacrificed to. See Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39; Andreas Bendlin and Alan H. Shapiro, “Personification” in *Brill's New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes. Edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill, 2011).

http://www.brillonline.nl.cyber.usask.ca/subscriber/entry?entry=bnp_e915780.

only a guess. If it is true, what is interesting is the way emphasis was placed on the virtue, while the action that proved it was only implied. The interplay between action and virtue was not explicit on the coins of Marciana, S. Matidia, Pompeia Plotina, or Vibia Sabina. On the coins of the empresses, however, it appears to have followed a mode more like that used to represent the emperor's actions.²⁴⁹

One very interesting gold issue of Plotina's features on its obverse a legend and image identical to those on her Vesta coins.²⁵⁰ The reverse shows a rectangular altar viewed straight-on, the figure of a goddess just visible on its front. This figure is clearly standing on a curule chair, and holds a staff or scepter in her left hand.²⁵¹ The reverse legend reads, CAES(ar) AVG(ustus) GERMA(nicus) DAC(cicus) COS VI PP (Trajan's titles again). The altar and its figure are identified in the exergue, where the legend reads ARA PVDIC(itiae) — altar of *Pudicitia* (chastity) — a virtue and goddess described by Valerius Maximus as closely allied with Vesta and Capitoline Juno and, with the women of the imperial house.²⁵² And although traditionally allied with matrons, *Pudicitia* oversaw appropriate sexual behavior in both sexes throughout their lifespan. Following Platner, Mattingly states that the altar was erected to Plotina herself as the embodiment of this virtue.²⁵³ It seems more likely that this coin depicts an altar erected (or restored) by Plotina herself, since this is the sense of images on Trajan's coins that depict

²⁴⁹ Where the coin clearly recalls or commemorates an actual event, or depicts a particular building in order to celebrate its construction or completion.

²⁵⁰ That is, PLOTINA AVG(usta) IMP(eratoris) TRAIANI — "Plotina Augusta (wife) of emperor Trajan." *BMCRE* III, p. 107, No. 529.

²⁵¹ The *sella curulis* was a magistrate's seat, and therefore represented his powers of *imperium*.

²⁵² Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, Edited and Translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.1 (praef.).

²⁵³ Samuel Platner, "Pudicitia, Ara" in *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929); *BMCRE* III, lxxxii. Mattingly sees a connection between this altar and the notion that Plotina was "Vesta of the chaste matrons." Again, I see this is a one possible connection, but one that is by no means comprehensive.

constructions like Trajan's forum, or the bridge Trajan had built while on campaign in Dacia in 103-105.²⁵⁴ Unfortunately, archaeological evidence concerning the location of Plotina's altar to *Pudicitia* is lacking. The empress, like all matrons, was no doubt a devotee of *Pudicitia*, and in this case *Pudicitia Patricia*, the cult of *Pudicitia* specifically for Rome's patrician *univirae* (women married only once), the ritual centre of which was the goddess's temple in the Forum Boarium.²⁵⁵

Clearly, the coin invites an association between the *pudicitia* of the empress and the figure on her coin. Plotina is joined on her coins in the public imagination with *Pudicitia*, a deity deemed integral to the success of Rome and its empire since she oversees relationships and upholds traditional values. And the empress who, as we have seen, had an important role in Roman society as leading matron, wife of the *Pontifex Maximus*, and consort to the emperor, would have been expected to display publicly the moral virtues personified by the goddess. If Plotina did build an altar to *Pudicitia*, it would have displayed her allegiance to the values with which the goddess was associated.²⁵⁶ The act of ordering the construction of such an altar — if that was Plotina's role — also gives us an instance of Plotina's contribution to the physical landscape of the city. This coin's reverse image could very well be broadcasting to the public Plotina's contribution to Rome's physical environment — the dedication of an altar to *Pudicitia* made the goddess's presence within the city concrete. It also served as a memorial to Plotina's possession of *pudicitia*, proving her virtue.

²⁵⁴ For these coins see *BMRC* III, p. 102, No. 509 (Forum of Trajan), and p. 179, No. 849 (bridge over Danube).

²⁵⁵ Plebian women worshipped *Pudicitia Plebia* at her shrine in the Vicus Longus. For the cults of *Pudicitia Patricia* and *Plebia*, see Livy, x.23.1-11.

²⁵⁶ *ILS* 4433 = *CIL* 8.993 features a reference to a statue of *Pudicitiae Aug[usta]*, or of the Chastity of *Augusta*, in a temple vowed by one Cassia Maximula, a flaminica of the divine Plotina, in the North African colonia of Carpis.

Imaging the empress as a personified virtue emerges also on the coins of Sabina. Frequently associated with *Concordia* (harmony), the relationship between coin image and rulers in this case emphasizes the impact that the nature of the imperial marital relationship had on Roman society. There were many issues featuring *Concordia* during Sabina's lifetime, in both silver and gold. On the coin under consideration, Sabina is depicted draped, wearing a thin fillet in her hair, which is pulled back and falls down her back in a loose plait in a style much less ornate than that of Plotina.²⁵⁷ On the reverse, *Concordia* is seated on a throne. In her right hand she holds a *patera* (a dish used for pouring libations), and rests her left arm on a small statue of *Spes* (Hope).²⁵⁸ Mattingly points out that the goddess *Concordia* oversaw the harmony of the imperial house.²⁵⁹ However, *Concordia* had more than just these personal implications. As with the other deities we have discussed so far, *Concordia* was perceived as active within both home and the state, on the personal and communal planes. She was an essential deity, with a temple in the Forum. This Temple of Concord is known from the *Forma Urbis Romae*, the third-century AD marble map of Rome. Reportedly vowed in 376 BC in response to the end of the Struggle of the Orders, it was restored by L. Opimius following the murder of Gaius Gracchus (121 BC), and restored again by Tiberius (r. 14-37).²⁶⁰ Sometimes the setting of senate meetings,²⁶¹ the Temple of Concord represented peace between emperor and senate but also, more broadly, the harmony of the body politic and all its elements. It may be that Sabina's *Concordia* coins were meant to

²⁵⁷ *BMCRE* III, p. 353, Nos. 894-900, feature the bust of Sabina on the reverse facing right. On p. 354, Nos. 901-903, she faces left. All but No. 894 are *denarii*.

²⁵⁸ It is difficult to see in this details in this photograph, and I am trusting Mattingly in his assessment. *Spes* was depicted in iconography as a maiden holding a blossom in one hand and lifting her skirt with the other. See Clark, *Divine Qualities*, 278.

²⁵⁹ *BMCRE* III, xl.

²⁶⁰ See Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*, translated by James J. Clauss and Daniel P. Harmon, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 67-68.

²⁶¹ Dio, 58.11, recalls Sejanus's trial and condemnation, which took place in the temple.

symbolize her role in marital concord. After all, Sabina's ability to successfully play her part in keeping her marriage to Hadrian happy and the household at peace (in the Roman conception, the woman's job) would have been perceived as having ramifications on the state. At the same time, because Hadrian's relationship with the Senate was, in fact, not an easy one, *Concordia* on Sabina's coin may seek to join all aspects of the concept of harmony to senate and imperial house, the focal point of Roman society.²⁶² For her, maintenance of a harmonious household had much broader implications than it did for other women. The peace and happiness of the imperial house extended outward to the state.

We should note by now that by joining together the images of imperial women and deified abstractions (virtues) on a coin (and, later, after their deification, in cult ritual) the tensions created by imperial power and female proximity to it were assimilated. Traditional boundaries were affirmed, and the dangers of female power dispelled. The empresses modeled key virtues that underpinned Roman moral values, and were celebrated for doing so. As well, if we think of coins and their images as "panegyrics in metal," one of the clear implications is that the actions of imperial women were being celebrated and/or commemorated, albeit in a highly symbolic form.

"Fighting Minerva" & Venus Victrix: Two Empresses and Imperial Power

This brings us to consider two coins, one from Trajan's reign minted in Plotina's name, and the other from Hadrian's reign, featuring Sabina. These two coins stand apart because of the associations they present, and should be considered because these associations suggest that the

²⁶² It should be noted here that although the *HA* asserts that Hadrian and Sabina's marriage was not a happy one, this story is suspect and should not be taken at face value. Sabina and Hadrian traveled together extensively and although Hadrian's love of the youth, Antinoos, is often cited as one cause of their supposed marital discord, we might at least wonder at the fact that Trajan's reported "devotion" to boys (Dio 68.7.4) apparently had no remarkable effect on his reportedly harmonious marriage to Plotina.

empress possessed an authority of her own, the dimensions of which require further investigation.

The first coin, Plotina's, is listed by Mattingly in the *BMCR*, but a photo of the gold *quinarius* can only be found in a 1902 catalogue by numismatist Francesco Gnecci.²⁶³ Dated by Mattingly to 112-115, the obverse depicts Plotina, facing right, with her hair curled along the hairline and pushed up in front by a stephane and braided in the back, where it is pulled into a loose plait. The obverse legend reads PLOTINA AVG(usta) IMP(eratoris) TRAIANI, while on the reverse there is no legend. Mattingly, following Gnecci, calls the figure on the reverse "fighting Minerva, and states that, "the choice of reverse image is "unusual for an empress and puzzling."²⁶⁴ Indeed, the figure is clearly Minerva, and although the quality of the photograph from Gnecci's catalogue is poor, the outline of her tunic is visible, as is the plume on her helmet, her pike or spear, and shield. It is difficult to understand what makes this figure "fighting," however, when she is clearly in an attitude of relaxation, her spear over her right shoulder and shield on her back. She is not fighting, she is marching.

When featured on a coin belonging to an emperor, Minerva is interpreted as a martial force as, for example, on two coins of Trajan, where a bust of Minerva appears on the obverse, draped and helmeted like a general.²⁶⁵ The obverse legend, IMP(erator) [CAESar] TRAIAN AVG(ustus) GERM(anicus), connects Trajan the warrior with the Minerva's qualities as goddess of war, and peace brought about through war. But Mattingly does not associate these undated

²⁶³ F. Gnecci, *Rivista italiana di numismatica e scienze affini*, Vol. XV, (Società Numismatica Italiana, 1902), p. 17, Tav. III.3.

²⁶⁴ *BMCRE III*, lxxxii.

²⁶⁵ *BMCRE III*, 1057, and two un-numbered, p. 226-227.

coins with any particular event.²⁶⁶ But easily identified with actual events are Trajan's many coins featuring the god of war, Mars. On these, Mars is frequently depicted helmeted, with sword in right hand and a trophy in his left. These were thought by Mattingly to commemorate Trajan's victories against the Dacians, in battles fought between 101 and 106.²⁶⁷ Is there perhaps a parallel here between the images of Mars on the coinage of Trajan and that of Minerva on Plotina's? And, if so, what are the implications? Both Mars and Minerva were martial divinities, and both had as attributes the accoutrements of war — helmet, spear, and shield. On Plotina's coin, Minerva is depicted, as Mars is on Trajan's, with spear in hand, except where Mars holds a trophy, Minerva carries a shield. But if Mars on Trajan's coins indicates the emperor's role as successful general, then the image of Minerva on Plotina's coin might refer to her role as the emperor's complement, a role Minerva could be said to have held in relation to Mars. We can do nothing more than speculate, though it is likely not straying too far from the mark to suggest that the image of Minerva expresses the empress's roles that enhanced, or completed, those filled by the emperor.

But are these connections plausible? Minerva, as part of the Capitoline Triad, was counted as one of the most important deities of the Roman pantheon, along with Juno and Jupiter. The complementarity of Mars and Minerva is suggested in Greek mythology. Ares and Pallas Athena present a balance between Athena's prudence and sense of justice and Ares' desire for violence.²⁶⁸ Indeed, the character of Minerva/Athena is complex, as the goddess was

²⁶⁶ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, 9.3, tells us that Trajan received the title "Germanicus" when governor of Germany — i.e., during the reign of his predecessor, Nerva. Inscriptional evidence confirms that Trajan held this title prior to Nerva's death. See Julian Bennet, *Trajan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 236, n. 26.

²⁶⁷ *BMCRE III*, lxxii-lxxiii.

²⁶⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony* l. 885-895, describes Athena's (Tritogeneia) birth from her father, Zeus' head. Homer, in his hymn to Athena, recalls the love of war she shares with her brother, Ares. *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, with English translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1914).

associated not just with war, but also crafts, and artisans.²⁶⁹ Minerva's association with generals and warfare was acknowledged by Pompey the Great, who built a temple to her in the northern area of the Campus Martius, in thanks for her aid in making him successful in battle.²⁷⁰ In imperial Rome, both Mars and Minerva were perceived as concerned with imperial well-being, and received sacrifice on dates important to the imperial family. The Arval Brethren, who performed religious rituals in their sacred grove just outside of Rome in honour of their divine patroness, Dea Dia, sacrificed cattle to Mars and Minerva together with other deities closely associated with the imperial *domus*.²⁷¹ These sacrifices were almost always *pro salute* — for the well-being— of the imperial family. During the reign of Hadrian, for example, one portion of the Arval calendar records the sacrifice by one Trebecius Decianus, then leader (*magister*), to the deities Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Juno, Minerva, Mars Ultor, and Victory.²⁷² Likewise, the military calendar from Dura Europus (AD 223-227) records that animals were sacrificed in thanksgiving for the health of the emperor, Severus Alexander (r. 222-235), to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Juno Regina, Minerva, Mars Pater, and Victory.²⁷³

But even if we accept Minerva as a suitable image for this empress, how can we make sense of its use on this coin? We know that coins frequently commemorated historical events, so it would make sense to look and see what possible correspondences exist between the image and the events in Rome during this period. This coin is thought to date to 112-115 and, undoubtedly, the most notable event during this latter part of Trajan's reign was the Parthian war. In 112 Trajan undertook his sixth consulship, a fact that is clearly marked on all of Plotina's coins

²⁶⁹ Walter Burkert, John Raffan, *Greek Religion* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1987), 141 ff.

²⁷⁰ Robert E. A. Palmer, "Studies of the Northern Campus Martius in Ancient Rome," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1990), 1-6.

²⁷¹ *CIL* 6.3285

²⁷² *Ibid.*, Col. II, ll. 25-32.

²⁷³ Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 2: 3.5.

minted at Rome. By 113, preparations were being made in Rome for a war on Parthia, where the king had broken a long-standing agreement with Rome. Trajan sent reinforcements from Rome to join troops already in the East, and then left the city himself, with his court, his *profectio* taking place on the anniversary of his adoption by Nerva.²⁷⁴ Plotina undoubtedly traveled with her husband, for she was present when he died suddenly while still in the east in 117.²⁷⁵ Indeed, it was Plotina and Salonia Matidia who accompanied Trajan's ashes back to Rome, leaving Hadrian in Syria to make arrangements for his return as emperor.²⁷⁶ Rather than remain puzzled over this coin, then, it makes sense to connect its reverse image to an actual historical event — the imperial couple heading east for war. Plotina/Minerva, striding forth with spear and shield, is companion to Trajan/Mars on his Parthian campaign. Other similarities between this coin and those of Trajan from this same period are also suggestive.

An *aureus* minted to commemorate Trajan's departure from Rome, depicts him, on the reverse, in military dress, on horseback, holding a spear in his right hand; a soldier with shield and spear walks in front of his horse, while two soldiers carrying spears follow behind.²⁷⁷ The obverse legend addresses him as IMP[eratori] TRAIANO AVG[usto] GER[manico] DAC[ico] P[ontifici] M[aximo] TR[ibunicio] P[otestate] COS VI P[at]ri P[at]riae], while on the reverse the legend *in exergue* says simply, PROPECTIO AVG[usti]. Mattingly dates this coin to 112-115, which places it within the same time period as the coins of Plotina. Another *aureus* from the

²⁷⁴ Anthony Birley, *Hadrian, The restless emperor* (London: Routledge, 1997), 65.

²⁷⁵ Dio describes the care Plotina supposedly took to disguise Trajan's sudden death, sending letters, signed by herself and not Trajan, to the senate in Rome. See Dio, 69.1.3-4; Trajan's *profectio* was in October, Trajan's adoption being three months before Nerva's death, which took place in January 98.

²⁷⁶ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Hadrian, V.9, which states that Hadrian went to Antioch to view Trajan's remains, which were being escorted by P. Acilius Attianus, Plotina, and Matidia. For Acilius Attianus see *PIR*² A 45.

²⁷⁷ *BMCRE III*, No. 511. A similar coin, *BMCRE III*, No. 512, is dated by its legends to after 115. Differences between the two are noted by Mattingly as "Trajan on horse pacing r., accompanied by soldiers, as on No. 511 (but behind, l., three soldiers walking r.)."

same period depicts Mars on its reverse.²⁷⁸ The god is helmeted, holding spear and trophy. The reverse legend reads MARS VICTOR. On the obverse, the legend, IMP[erator] TRAIANVS AVG[ustus] GER[manicus] DAC[icus] P[ontifex] M[aximus] TR[ibunicia] P[otestate] COS VI P[ater] P[atriae], declares by the absence of Trajan's title, *Optimus*, that, like the *profectio aureus*, this coin was minted before 115. The theme of marching to war, joined with the appearance of Mars on a coin of Trajan and Minerva on a coin of Plotina — both marching left holding spears — suggests a shared purpose. On Trajan's coins, these images and their associations may have suggested to the Romans not only the fact that the god Mars was overseeing, approving, and guiding the emperor in battle against the Parthians, but that Trajan was going forth, like Mars, to wage war and gain victory over Rome's enemies.

Minerva suggests something similar in relation to Plotina, but the connections are more diverse and intricate than those suggested by Mars. Not only are the empress's patronage of art and philosophy and her facility for judicious understanding part of the equation, but the direct affiliation with a goddess kitted out for military ventures also conveys the impression that the empress had joined the emperor on his journey east. The *virtus* (courage, bravery) and *auctoritas* (authority, influence; responsibility; prestige, reputation) of the empress is underlined and, through her, the imperial couple. The confluence of associations connected with Minerva and the personal prestige and powers of the empress suggest that as empress Plotina was deemed an indispensable component to imperial rule. The coin, minted with her image on the obverse, and Minerva on the reverse, implies that the actions of the empress were important, too, and her role as consort and companion — along with the implication that she possessed the advisor's role —

²⁷⁸ This coin is part of the *BMCRE* catalogue between Nos. 510 and 511, though without a catalogue number. Mattingly gives as reference, "Montagu Sale, 20 April, 1896, lot 267."

essential. Long associated with maternal goddesses like Juno Regina — the obvious counterpart to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, whom the emperor might be said to represent — an empress is here associated with Minerva, the other female deity in the Capitoline Triad. It is not possible to offer anything but a suggestion here, but the fact that the image of Minerva on this coin of Plotina's, which appears at this point something of an anomaly, would feature frequently on the coinage of later *Augustae* suggests that public displays of female significance in imperial rule were gaining acceptance.²⁷⁹

How this played out during this part of the imperial period is, after all, what this paper has all along been exploring. The discourse between traditional Roman values, societal expectations, and the reality of imperial women as important participants in the “family business” of running an empire, in securing a dynasty, and in providing the emperor with an image suited to the ruling man was obscured, during this era, by a renewed emphasis on the traditional that we should not believe was suddenly the norm — even given the apparent lack of evidence to the contrary. When we examine the images on their coinage, for example, we notice that while largely traditional, the coin series are also punctuated by associations that seem to deviate from their “official” public image. On the look-out for these anomalies, then, we should wonder what is being conveyed by a bronze issue minted at Rome featuring the obverse image of Vibia Sabina, empress to Hadrian, and Venus Victrix on its reverse. Sabina is, in fact, a very interesting case, considering that of the four women on whom this study focuses, she is the most under-represented in the sources. Yet, at the same time, a greater variety of coin types was issued bearing her image on the obverse than of any of the others, even Plotina. Indeed, during her

²⁷⁹ Minerva is on the coinage of Julia Domna (156-217), wife of Septimius Severus, on that of Plautilla (187-211), wife of Caracalla, on Julia Maesa's (165?-224), and on Magnia Urbica's (wife of Carinus, r. 283-285).

tenure as empress, from 117 to her death in 137, the most common reverse types for her coinage were Concordia, Juno, Ceres, Pietas, and Vesta, in descending order of frequency. A single issue associates her with Venus Genetrix, the traditional progenitor of the Julio-Claudians, and another with Venus Victrix. It is on this latter type that this section will concentrate.²⁸⁰

The obverse legend of this coin, SABINA AVGVSTA HADRIANI AVG(usti) P(atris) P(atriciae) provides a *terminus post quem* of 128, the year Hadrian received the title *Pater Patriae*. Note the visual pairing of the titles *Augusta* (spelled out) and *Augustus* (abbreviated) in the legend. The image of the empress shows Sabina facing right, her hair elaborately coiffed and shaped, her forehead fringed with horizontal rows of ringlets that culminate in a metal stephane behind which are braids coiled around the crown of her head to form a shallow turban.²⁸¹ On the legend-less reverse is an image of *Venus Victrix*, “victorious Venus.” Venus, twisted to the right, has her back to the viewer and stands next to a short column. Her garment has fallen to her hips and she is naked to the waist. She holds a helmet in her outstretched right hand, at which she appears to be gazing as though admiring her own reflection in its surface. The spear in her left hand cuts across the scene on the diagonal, pointing to the 10 o’clock position. One wonders how this semi-nude image of Venus accords with the image of the empress on the coin’s obverse because the image of Venus Victrix, like that of Minerva, associates the empress with what is usually regarded as a martial goddess. Mattingly parses this by stating that, “Venus Victrix, while originally by her arms suggesting victory in war, now suggests the victory of love that

²⁸⁰ *BMCRE III*, 356, No. 920.

²⁸¹ Though Sabina’s title, *Augusta* is emphasized, the near-equality of the titles *Augusta* and *Augustus* is suggested. Debate as to when Sabina received the title “Augusta” puts it at 127 or 128 based on a bronze *sestertius* of 128 that bears the legend ‘Sabina Augusta...’ but Boatwright (“Women...”, p. 522.) puts the date as either 119 or 123. The *terminus post quem* of 119 is based on brick stamps, from a brickwork owned by Sabina in Rome, which say “Sabina Augusta.” See Boatwright, “Women of the Early Second Century CE,” who cites W. Eck, *RE Suppl.* 15 (1978), 932-34; see also Françoise Chausson/Alfredo Buonopane, “Una fonte della ricchezza delle Augustae – Le *figlinae* urbane,” 102.

gives the Empress command over the heart of her lord.”²⁸² This is interesting, but seems here somewhat too neat a gloss when in reality the religious and cultural implications of the association are much more complicated. It is plausible that the image of Venus Victrix on a bronze *aes*, which would have received wide circulation, depicted the empress and her roles as essential to the imperial house and to Roman society, and an equal participant with her husband in steering the imperial ship.

The goddess Venus was of enormous importance to the Romans, and much venerated. And although usually associated with love, both the cult representations of Venus Genetrix and Venus Victrix — which is what appears on the coinage of imperial women — are considered essentially political because of long-held associations with dynasty, and the divine origins of the house of the first imperial family, the Julii.²⁸³ But Venus Victrix was at the time a novel association for an empress, the only other record of an image of Venus Victrix being used on a coin for a woman *earlier* in the imperial period is on the coinage of Julia Titi, daughter of Titus (r. 79-81).²⁸⁴ Prior to this, Venus Victrix was closely associated with victorious generals — including, notably, Pompey the Great (106-48 BC), who built a temple to Venus Victrix atop the theatre he had constructed in Rome’s Campus Martius in fulfillment of a vow made for military victories. Aulus Gellius refers to this temple’s dedication, but calls it the “Temple of Victory” rather than that of Venus Victrix, which suggests a close identification in the Roman mind with this aspect of Venus and the personification of Victory.²⁸⁵ The association of the empress with

²⁸² *BMCRE III*, cl.

²⁸³ Julius Caesar hailed Venus as the source of the Julian *gens*, and called her “Genetrix,” mother, or ancestress.

²⁸⁴ This is based on searches through all volumes of both *RIC* and *BMCRE*, and online searches for coins in other collections. For Julia Titi’s coin, see *RIC*, Vol. I (Oxford, 1962), 275. I see no reason to think that an explanation for the association of Venus Victrix with Julia Titi should necessarily be generalized to Sabina, seeing as Julia, although *Augusta*, was never empress.

²⁸⁵ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 10.1.6; also Coarelli, 283.

the goddess responsible for military victory — and, by extension, the success of the empire — then, appears gradually, and not until well into the imperial period. Following Sabina's coinage, the image of Venus Victrix would later appear on the coinage of other *Augustae*, including the empresses Aurelia Lucilla, daughter of Marcus Aurelius (r. 138-161) and wife of Lucius Verus (r. 161-169), Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211), the unfortunate Fulvia Plautilla (married 202, murdered 212), wife of the emperor Caracalla (r. 211-217), and Julia Maesa, mother and *Augusta* during the reign of her son, Elagabalus (r. 218-222).

How can we account for the use of an image that formerly had only been associated with men?²⁸⁶ If Venus Victrix is a new arrival on the coins of women, the use of two cult names of the same goddess — Genetrix and Victrix — on separate issues of Sabina's coinage suggests differentiated aspects to the role of empress that were deemed vital enough to communicate now but not before. Perhaps a shift had taken place, if not in the actual role of the empress, at least in the degree of importance assigned to the roles she held. It is impossible to say either way because corroborating evidence is lacking. Still, using the one image, Venus Genetrix, the empress is depicted as mother-figure, whether as mother of a long line of emperors and imperial households (the more specific reference to the Julian *gens* no longer being directly relevant), and/or mother of the state. She is also alluring, her sexuality possessing a supremacy that is here acknowledged.

These associations are powerful enough, but when connected with Venus Victrix, who brings about victory in battle and ensures Rome's successful continuance, the underlying reference, like that of Minerva, is to an *auctoritas*, an authority, hers by virtue of her role as

²⁸⁶ The earliest occurrence of Venus Victrix that I could find was on coins of Octavian (later Augustus), dated to c. 32-29 BC. See *RIC* I, 250a.

empress, that was understood as integral to the success of the Roman state.²⁸⁷ The coin communicates this with subtle cues. Sabina's hairstyle on this obverse type, for example, is different from the rest of her coinage, on which she is depicted wearing her hair in a distinctly Greek style, the subtly-wavy locks pulled back into a loose braid and kept in place with the help of a narrow ribbon. The elaborate formality of her hairstyle on this coin, however, clearly recalls the complicated hairstyles of her mother, Matidia, grandmother, Marciana, and great-aunt, Plotina. The turban shape into which her masses of hair have been shaped recalls the headgear of a priestess, and conveys to the viewer the dignity and status of its wearer.²⁸⁸ These styles were in vogue during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, when the height and complexity of a woman's coiffure advertised her rank, and contributed to her public prestige. Rather than the casual Greek style of other coins, Sabina's more traditional, definitively Roman hairstyle on this coin provides a balancing element to the overt sexuality, and sensuality, of the image of Venus that appears on the coin's reverse. Venus Victrix, although turned from the viewer, is still, after all, naked to the waist. Her stance is confident, her gaze self-directed (through the reflection of the male element, the helmet). She appears in this image not as predominantly maternal, like Venus Genetrix, who was most commonly depicted on coinage as fully clothed and seated on a throne. These images communicate the importance of female dignity and moral uprightness, and connect it with the grandeur of Rome. Here, the Venus figure conveys the sense of a self-possessed adult woman. The juxtaposition of the images on obverse and reverse highlights their relationship, which conveys the empress's worthiness as consort, companion, and advisor to the emperor — i.e., her

²⁸⁷ For a discussion of the meaning of images of Venus in the art of this period, see Eve D'Ambra, "Nudity and Adornment in Female Portrait Sculpture of the Second Century AD," in *I Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society*. Edited by Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (University of Texas Press, 2000), 106-107, especially.

²⁸⁸ Eve D'Ambra, "Nudity and Adornment in Female Portrait Sculpture of the Second Century AD," 104.

roles as wife. This is further reinforced by the obverse legend, which places the title *Augusta* on an equal footing with Hadrian's *Augustus*, even in spite of the genitive, which reveals the Roman sense that the man provided the woman's social context.

If we read the coins as reflecting the roles of the women, and as evidence of the values and preoccupations of the people who produced them, we will see that the coins depict a relationship between the imperial house and Roman society in which the women were central. That is to say, the coin's images and legends suggest that the concept of empire resided with the image of the women of the imperial house just as it did with the emperor. In terms of their deification, then, the images of these women — including on their coinage — expressed not just an eminence, but reveal also an immanence. Together, the meaning of the images used to describe and contain these women and their public presence constituted an all-pervading message of the centrality of Rome and its imperial family.

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, it is not possible to prove definitively that these four women were deified because there was a need to reconcile their powers and public immanence with the requirements of tradition. The Romans' community-orientation and broad application of traditional social relationships to government — which was the result of their lack of governing structures that were truly independent of the men who comprised them — must account in large part for the fact that sisters, nieces, wives received deification and cult along with the emperor. But while it cannot be shown without question that the women of the imperial house during the early second-century did anything remarkable *personally* to explain their apotheosis, if we remove the requirement of personal action from the equation we might at the very least be free to explore as legitimate the honours and prestige these women possessed during their lifetimes. Admittedly, evidence that speaks directly of Pompeia Plotina, Ulpia Marciana, Salonia Matidia, and Vibia Sabina is scanty compared to that available for earlier imperial women like Livia and Agrippina the Younger. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the lack of a substantial literary record indicates that these women were insignificant. A careful reading of the evidence for their financial wealth and participation in Roman elite society reveals not only that these women were immensely wealthy and influential through their actions as *patrona*, benefactresses, and property owners, they were the companions and advisors to emperors. Each individual woman could confidently assert her relationship to the man in power. As sister to Trajan, Ulpia Marciana possessed the prestige and place within the *ordo matronarum* that was the direct result of her assumed influence with her brother. She received the title *Augusta* to indicate this status, and was honoured at Rome and across the empire. Likewise, her daughter, Salonia Matidia, who already possessed enormous social prestige because of her relationship to the emperor, was

subsequently honoured for her role as daughter of an *Augusta* and *diva*, and inherited the title *Augusta* following her mother's death in much the way an imperial male would inherit the title *Caesar* or *imperator*. Matidia's daughter, Vibia Sabina, was married to the heir-apparent of imperial power, another coup for Matidia's social standing, and both mother and daughter enjoyed financial autonomy. Hadrian paid public homage to his mother-in-law, Matidia, his sometime travel companion and likely confidante, with deification and the unprecedented honour of a temple built and dedicated to *Diva Matidia* in the city of Rome.²⁸⁹ The cult of these *divae* Marciana and Matidia was widespread, and *supplicationes* to these goddesses were still being performed by Roman legionaries in the region of the Euphrates river a hundred years later.²⁹⁰

The empresses, Plotina and Sabina, shared with their husbands an ultimate prestige and status. Rich and involved, they were the tacit leaders of Rome's *ordo matronarum* and would have participated in Rome's religious and social life in this capacity. We might suspect some of the literary sources as biased or inaccurate, but the overall sense communicated by the historical record is that these were powerful women with a broad sphere of influence and an even greater potential for influence. The author of *P. Oxy.* 1242 did not shy from attributing to Plotina the willingness and ability to influence Trajan and his council toward supporting the Jewish delegation in deciding disputes among Jews and Greeks in Alexandria. The attempt at such an attribution would have been laughable to contemporary readers had the idea not been plausible. But if *P. Oxy.* 1242 raises some interesting possibilities, the full potential these women held as

²⁸⁹ For more on the *Templum Matidiae*, see Mary T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 58-62. The temple, the location of which was much debated over the years, was discovered in the vicinity of Piazza Capranica during renovations to the parliament buildings in Rome. Excavation reports have yet to be published, but news reports indicate that the temple's remains will be incorporated into the basement of the parliament building, and will eventually be opened for public viewing. The temple was located near the Pantheon, in the Campus Martius.

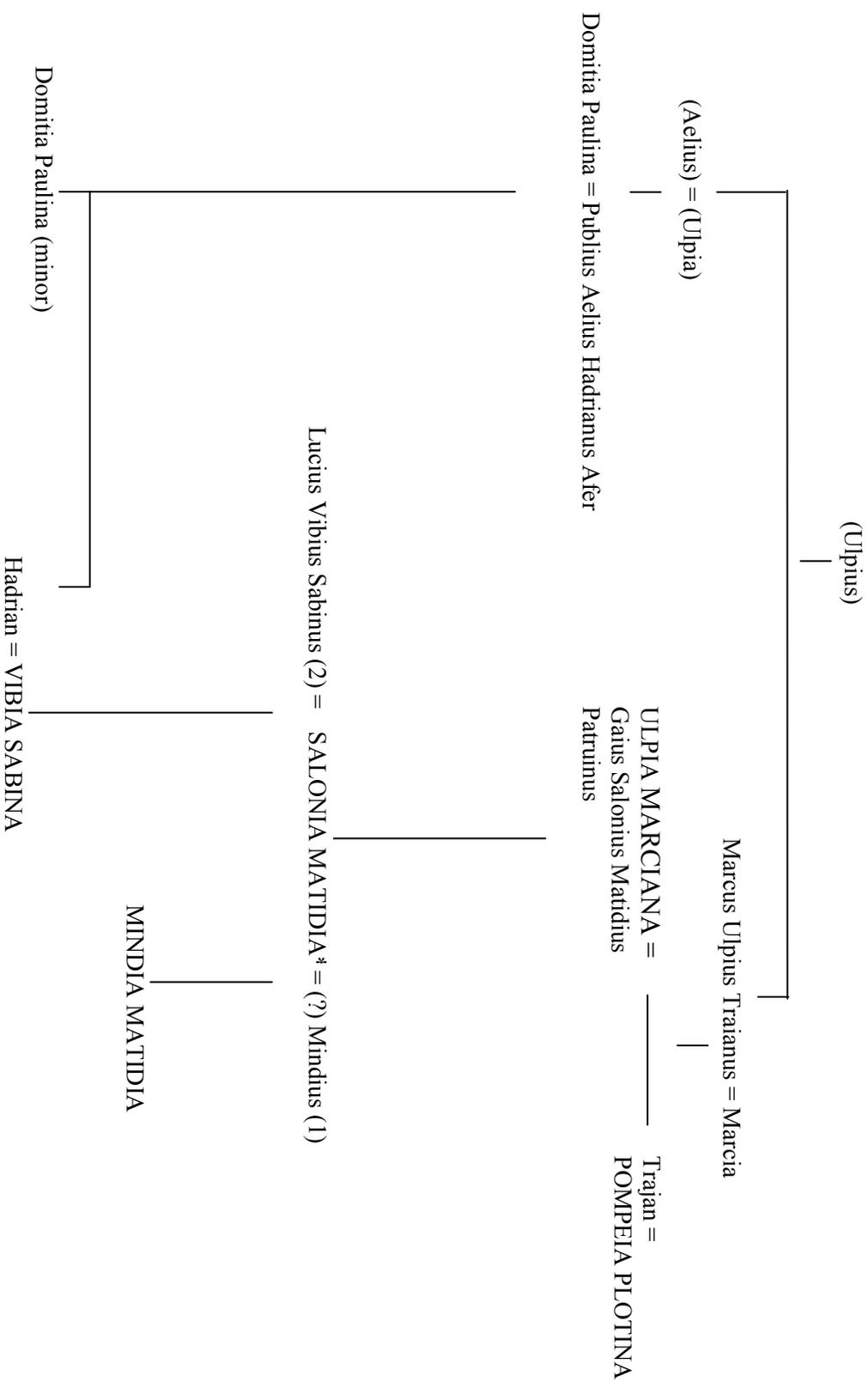
²⁹⁰ The military calendar from Dura-Europus (AD 223-227), in Beard, et. al., *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 2, 3.5, p. 74.

empresses is expressed in the widely broadcast story of Plotina's involvement in Hadrian's succession. This story, which is almost certainly a fiction designed to remove from Trajan any guilt for the accession of his unpopular relation, is the most powerful evidence we have from this period for the formidable political tensions that swirled about each empress. Even Sabina, about whom the historic record is perhaps the most quiet, is glimpsed in snippets, as landowner and business woman, participant in charitable schemes, as an "enricher" of a municipality alongside her husband, and as *patrona* to the matrons at Rome. Ancient authors claimed that her marriage to Hadrian was unstable and contentious, but attention to these claims suggests that the real unhappiness lay in the relationship between Hadrian and the senate. Sabina traveled with her husband, living abroad while he was in charge of the troops in Syria. If she has been left out of the historic record, we might thank her relationship to the women of Trajan's household, who enjoyed a public image that may be directly attributed to the happy relationship Trajan enjoyed with Rome's elite ruling class. After all, Rome's historians tended not to remark on women's actions unless it was to blame them for some political misdemeanor or praise their non-involvement.

It appears that, in the end, many of the difficulties modern scholars have with the deification of the four women of this study reside in their approach to the evidence. Assessing the deification of women in the early second-century AD using the same criteria with which we estimate the powers of early imperial women — Livia, especially — is more than somewhat detrimental to our ability to understand the whole, and is predicated on the assumption that the Romans themselves understood their history as something static, all weighed according to Republican standards. But while Livia's honours and behavior was compared — sometimes negatively and sometimes not — with the expectations placed on matrons in Rome's idealized

republican past, the women of the early second-century lived in a time of long-established imperial precedents. The contextualization provided by authors such as Pliny the Younger should give us a clue as to how he and his contemporaries viewed the imperial family, including the role of the imperial women. The fact that Pliny does not laud the participation of Livia and lament the comparative passivity and apparent civic lassitude of Plotina and Marciana, as some modern scholars have done, should clue us in to actual Roman priorities. In Pliny the imperial women were important because they did not participate in civic society in the forward way that earlier imperial women had, nor did they attempt to subvert the authority of the emperor by behaving in a way that implied to the public gaze an equality of status and access to authority. Within the imperial context, Pliny highlights the passivity of Trajan's female family members as a positive, inspired by Trajan's own example as exemplary man motivated more by concern for the commonwealth than for his own personal ambitions. But we should not be so naïve as to think that Pliny is representing the reality of female roles and relationship to imperial power any more than he was reflecting Trajan's actual motivations and character. Without doubt, in actuality these women — Plotina and Sabina especially — were at the pinnacle of a hierarchical structure that dominated the social actions of Rome's matrons, just as it did all individuals. They were bound by their roles within the imperial household to be public figures, obligated to be part of the requisite religious festivals, and to be consorts and advisors to the most powerful man in the world. The question is therefore not about whether the powers they enjoyed were theirs by virtue of their relationship to the emperor — the answer to this question should be considered absurdly obvious. It is not even about whether they wielded power, as evidenced in obvious acts of patronage, of entertaining senators and being called "Mother of the Country." These are all acts that are usually recounted as evidence that Livia, the proto-type empress, held the sorts of

powers that proved her autonomy and influence. Yet much of what we know about Livia is tainted by the assessments of later authors that place her at the forefront of what is not meant as a praiseworthy precedent of female influence and back-room political involvement. What we are actually dealing with is much more subtle. The fact that women were involved in providing advice to their husbands is well-known; this is how it was in the average elite Roman household, and we may assume that it was so in the imperial palace. The Romans apparently assumed this, too, or they would not have been so nervous about the behavior of imperial females. We might readily assume that women participated in public events and were treated as representative of Roman attitudes and values because they did so. Being in public meant something different to the Romans than it does now, and the difference is not incidental but key to how we understand and interpret the fact of women traveling with the emperor, participating with Rome's other elite matrons in religious festivals, or proclaiming patronage of the *ordo matronarum*. A host of ideas and associations accompanied each individual magistrate who undertook to act on behalf of the state — as each man did when he took his oath of office — and so it was with imperial women, though more threateningly in many ways because it was unofficial — and female.



* Alternately, Salonia Matidia may have been married to a man named L. Vibius Mindius. In this case, Mindia Matidia and Vibia Sabina would have had the same father. See Françoise Chausson and Alfredo Buonopane, “Una fone della ricchezza delle *Augustae* — Le *figlinae urbanae*,” 96.



Roman Italy. www.unc.edu/awmc/awmcmmap46.html. Compiled and produced by Rachel Barkhaus, Mary T. Boatwright, Alexandra Dunk, Tom Elliott, Daniel Gargola, Andrew Hull and Richard Talbert.

APPENDIX B: INSCRIPTIONS

1. *AJA* 2 (1898), p. 646, no. 824: lead pipe found at Cumae:

VLPIAE MARCIANAE
– of Ulpia Marciana –

Length of inscription: 30cm; letters about 2 cm high.

2. *CIL* 10.106 = *ILS* 4039: Marciana's land in Calabria:

HERAE LACI|NIAE SACRUM | PRO SALUTE MAR|CIANAE SORORIS | AUG.,
OECIUS | LIB. PROC.

– Oecius, freedman procurator, consecrated (this) to Hera Lacinia for the well-being of Marciana, sister of Augustus –

3. *CIL* 12.5678 = *CIL* 15.693.16: *Tegulae* (rooftiles) from Nemausus, Gaul.²⁹¹

[Opus] Dol[iare]
Ex prae[diis] Plot[inae] Avg[ustae]
Ex of[f]icina Valeriaes Nices

– Earthenware from the estates of Plotina Augusta
from the workshop of Valeria Nice –

²⁹¹ Image is from E. Germer-Durand, *Découvertes Archéologiques faites a Nimes et dans le Gard*, 76.

4. **CIL 10.7587 = ILS 1402:** Plotina's equestrian procurator.

.....im..... | ... u .. L. f. Quir. | Rufo praef. Coh., |
 subcuratori viae | Aemiliae, trib. Leg. XIII Gemin. et X[X]V Vict., |
 proc. Plotinae Aug., proc. Caes. Hadriani | ad ripam, pontific[i], |
 IIIvir. i. d. qq. | T. Cutius

– T. Cutius to ... Rufus son of Lucius of the tribe Quirina, prefect of a cohort, subcurator of the Aemilian Way, tribune of Legion 14 Gemina, and 25 Victrix, procurator of Plotina Augusta, procurator of Hadrian Caesar for the riverbank, priest, quattuorvir, quinquennalis.

5. **CIL 15.7313:** two inscriptions from lead pipes (*fistulae*) found on the Esquiline Hill, between the church of S. Eusebius and the intersection of Via Napoleone III and Piazza Vittorio Emanuele. Location identified as a house belonging to Vibia Sabina. Pipe “b” is smaller than “a” with irregular lettering:

a.	b.
SABINAE • AVG	SABINAE AV[G]
– of Sabina Augusta –	

6. **CIL 11.1147, l. 52:** a portion of the *Tabula Veleia* (Tabula Alimentaria)

VIBIAE SABINAE PROFITENTE VIBIO IDAEO SALTVS CARVCLA ET
 VELIVS ET• FVND(us)• NAEviaNVS• P(ro)• P(arte)• DIM(idia) PAGIS
 SALVIO ET VALERIO INTER ADFINES REM [LU]CENSIVM ET P
 NAEVIVM PROBVM ET C TITIVM GRAPHICVM ET Q CASSIVM
 FAVSTVM ET POP(ulum) HS C ACCIP(ere) DEBET HS X

Vibius Idaeus declares: the Carcula and Velian pasture and half of the Nevianus property belonging to Vibia Sabina - which are found in the Salvian and Valerian districts, and which border on the Lucensian property and [on the property of] Publius Nevius Probus, Gaius Titius Graphicus, and Quintus Cassius Faustus, and the public property – [are estimated at] 100,000 sesterces. [Vibia Sabina] is to receive 10,000 sesterces.

7. **ILS 321 = CIL 14.2799:** Indicating Sabina's land ownership at Gabii.

Hadriano Sabinae
Augusto cos. III, p. p., Augustae
Locupletatoribus ex. d. d. publice
municipii

To Hadrian Augustus	To Sabina Augusta
consul for the third time, father of the fatherland. enrichers of the municipality by the decree of the town council, from public money	

8. **CIL 6.997 = ILS 324:** Sabina's building inscription (found in Trajan's forum)

Iulia Aug, mater Augg et castrorum, Matronis restituit

Sabina Aug Matronis

Julia (Domna) Augusta, mother of the Augusti and of the camps,
restored (this) to/for the Matrons

Sabina Augusta to/for the Matrons

9. **CIL 10.4760:** A statue base found at Suessa Aurunca indicating a "Bybliotheca Matidiana." Letters following this portion of the inscription are missing.

NONIS · SEPT · EMBR
SVESSAE · IN · BYBLIOTHECA · M^{ati}
DIANA SCRIBVND O ADFV *erunt*
T · IVLIVS · BASSVS · M · MAESIVS · Q
M · ARRIVS · ADIVTOR · L · MILDIVS
L · ASINIVS · MARSIRIANVS

On the nones [i.e., the 5th] of September
at Suessa in the Matidian library
T Julius Bassus, M Maesius, Q [..?]
M Arrius *adiutor*, L Mildius,
L Asinius Marsirianus
were present for the purpose of writing...

10. **CIL 9.6083.84:** seal belonging to Matidia's procurator, found in a field at Allifano (near Beneventum):

LIBERALIS
MATIDIAE
AVGVSTAE P(rocurator)

Liberalis, Procurator
of Matidia Augusta

11. **CIL 10.4744:** One of four inscriptions, all from Suessa Aurunca, placing Mindia Matidia in relation to her female relatives and calling her *matertera* (i.e., aunt) of emperor Antoninus Pius. Matidia's land holdings at Suessa Aurunca are proof of extensive estates that were in the family, and that Mindia Matidia likely inherited them from her father or mother. 10.4744:

MATIDIAE	The Minturnenses to Matidia
AVG FIL DIVAE	Daughter of (Matidia) Augusta
MARCIANAE AVG	Granddaughter of Diva Marciana Augusta
NEPTI DIVAE SABINAE	Sister of Diva Sabina Augusta
AVG SORORI	Maternal aunt of the Emperor
IMP ANTONINI	Antoninus Pius,
AVG PII P P MATERERE (sic)	Father of the Fatherland,
MINTVRNENSES	by decree of the town councilors
D D	

12. **ILS 327:** Honourary inscription in Latin for the younger Matidia; AD 138/161; found at Ephesos: *CIL* 3.6070a; *ILS* 327; *IEph* 283.

Matidiae | divae Marcianae | [A]ug. Nepti, divae | Matidiae Aug. F., divae | Sabinae Aug. sorori, | imp. Antonini Aug. Pii | materterae, bule et civitas Efesiorum | c. a. Successo lib. proc.

The Bule and city of Ephesus to Matidia, granddaughter of the divine Marciana Augusta, daughter of the divine Matidia Augusta, sister of the divine Sabina Augusta, maternal aunt of emperor Antoninus Augustus Pius, taken in hand by Successus, freedman procurator

13. **Matidiae, from Vicetia — CIL 5.3112 = ILS 501:** Dessau notes that the plural “Matidiarum” refers to mother and daughter, or Salonia Matidia and Mindia Matidia, who apparently willed money to the town of Vicetia.

imp[eratori] Caes[ari] | M[arco] Antonio | Gordiano Pio | Fel[ici] Aug[usto] p. p., cos. II | procos., tribun. | potest. V, pont. | maximo, | res publica | ex liberalitate | Matidiarum | d. d.

The state (town of Vicetia) [dedicates this] from the generosity of the Matidias to Emperor Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus Pius Felix Augustus, Father of the Fatherland, Consul for the second time, Tribunician Power five times, Pontifex Maximus. By the decree of the town councilors.

14. **Plotina to Hadrian regarding the Epicurean succession:** Athens Epigraphical Museum no. EM 10404. Five fragments of Pentelic marble that form part of a larger block. Broken above and below. The stone has a slightly raised border, still evident on left and right.²⁹²

[M. Annio Vero II. Cn. Arrio augure co[ss]. (AD 121)

A Plotina Augusta.

[Quod meum studiu]m erga sectam Epicuri sit, optime scis, d[omi]ne. Huius secessioni a te succurendum

[est, nam quia n]on licet nisi ex civibus Romanis adsumi dia[do]chum, in angustum redi[g]itur eligendi

[facultas.] VAC.

[Rogo e]rgo nomine Popilli Theotimi qui est modo diado[c]hus Athenis, ut illi permittatur a te et Graece

[t]estari circa hanc partem iudiciorum suorum quae ad diadoches ordinationem pertinet et peregreinae condicionis posse sub(s)tituere sibi successorem, s[i] i]ta suaserit profectus personae, et quod Theotimo

concesseris ut eodem iure et deinceps utantur fut[ur]i diadochi sectae Epicuri eo magis quod observatur

quotiens erratum est a testatore circa electionem [di]adochi, ut communi consilio substituat[ur] a studiosis

eiusdem sec[t]ae qui optimus erit, quod facilius fiet, si e[x] compluribus eligatur. VAC.

In the consulship of [M. Annius Verus for the second time and of Cn.] Arrius Augur.

From Plotina Augusta

Of my zeal for the sect of Epicurus you know very well, lord. His School needs help from you, for since (4) it is permitted only to choose a successor from those who are Roman citizens, the choice is narrowly limited. I ask therefore in the name of Popillius Theotimus, who is currently successor at Athens, that he be permitted by you both to draw up a testament in Greek concerning that part of his decisions which pertains to the organization of the succession and to be able to appoint as successor to himself a man of (8) peregrine status, if the distinction of the person should make it advisable. And that which you have conceded to Theotimus, all future successors of the sect of Epicurus may also use with the same right, all the more so because it is the rule, whenever a mistake has been made by the testator about the selection of a successor, for the best man to be substituted by the members of his sect in a common meeting, something which will become easier if the selection is made from a larger group.

²⁹² See R. van Bremen, "Plotina to all her friends: the letter(s) of the Empress Plotina to the Epicureans in Athens" *Chiron*, 35 (2005), 525; text and translation also from van Bremen, 526, 527.

15. **ILS 288:** inscription from Luna. This is the earliest inscriptional evidence of Plotina and Marciana bearing the title *Augusta*. Dated to 104/5.²⁹³

<i>Plotinae August.</i>	<i>imp. Caes. Nervae Traiano Aug. Ger Dacico pont. max., tr. pot. IX, cos. V, d. d.</i>	<i>Mar[c]ianae Aug.</i>
To Plotina Augusta	To imperial Caesar Trajan Nerva Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, Pontifex Maximus, (holding) tribunician power nine times, consul five times, by decree of the town councilors	To Marciana Augusta

16. **ILS 298:** dedication on an archway at Ancona. Dated by means of Trajan's titles to December, 114/115.

<i>Plotinae Aug., coniugi Aug.</i>	<i>Imp[eratori] Caesari divi Nervae ffilii] Nervae Traiano Optimo Aug[usto] Germanic[o] Dacico, pont. max., tr. pot. XVIII, imp. IX, cos. VI, p p., providentissimo principi, senatus p. q. R., quod accessum Italiae, hoc etiam addito ex pecunia sua portu, tutiorem navigantibus reddiderit</i>	<i>divae Marcianae Aug., sorori Aug.</i>
To Plotina Augusta, wife of Augustus	The senate and the people of Rome (erected this monument) To Emperor Caesar Trajan Nerva Optimus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, son of the Divine Nerva, Pontifex Maximus, holding Tribunician power 19 times, hailed imperator nine times, consul six times, Father of the Fatherland, most provident ruler, because from his own funds he made the approach to Italy safer for those sailing even through the addition of this harbour	To the Divine Marciana Augusta, sister of Augustus

²⁹³ See Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian* (1966), No. 106.

17. **CIL 10.4746:** Found at Suessa Aurunca. This inscription indicates Mindia Matidia's land ownership in the area.

Matidiae
Avg(ustae) Fil(iae)
Divae Sabinae
Sorori
Imp(eratoris) Antonini
Avg(usti) Pii P(atris) P(atriciae)
Materterae
Agathemer Lib(ertus)
Proc(urator)

The freedman procurator Agathemer
 To Matidia
 Daughter of Augusta
 Sister of the Divine Sabina
 Aunt [mother's sister] of
 Emperor Antoninus Pius Augustus
 Father of the Fatherland

18. **CIL 10.4747:** dedication found at Suessa Aurunca. Like 4746, above, the presence of freedmen of Matidia's in this location probably indicates that she owned land there.

Matidiae Aug(ustae)
Fil(iae) Divae Sabinae
Sorori
Imp(eratoris) Antonini Avg(usti) Pii
P(atris) P(atriciae) Materterae
t. Flavius Aug(usti) Lib(ertus)
Onesimus Campanus

Titus Flavius Onesimus Campanus
 freedman of Augustus
 To Matidia
 Daughter of Augusta
 Sister of the Divine Sabina
 Aunt [mother's sister] of
 Emperor Antoninus Pius Augustus
 Father of the Fatherland

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