

Abstract of the dissertation "The Severan Empresses", by Sonja Nadolny

Several times the ancient historians emphasised the remarkably powerful position of the Severan empresses Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea: It's said that they extensively dominated the Roman reign and the policy between 193 and 235 AD. In light of this estimation it is astonishing that the Severans are still underrepresented in the numerous publications about Roman empresses. Furthermore it was only rarely asked for the reasons of their outstanding position. Based on the literary sources the few publications referring to the Severan empresses focused on their personal characteristic traits, their motivations and their environment – internal affairs, whose validity is barely verifiable.

Instead of only discern the Severan empresses as individuals in their social relations, I chose an alternative approach in my thesis. To obtain a definition of their position in the reign I first analysed their public role. This public role was not formally defined, but still the Severan empresses were holding a superior social function, which exceeded the position of a mother or a wife keeping in the background by far. Their public role appeared in a big amount of numismatic and epigraphic sources. They throw light on the position and the influence of the Severan empresses and are evidence of their strong public presence.

A study of the documental sources of imperial representation showed that the Severans publicly presented themselves as a family reign, integrating all members of the nuclear family. Important political messages were propagated through the imperial coins of all family members. The imperial house was legitimising itself by a long dynastic tradition which was substantially born by the women. At the same time it was tending to bind big parts of the populace by personal relations of loyalty. As family members and guarantors of the dynasty the empresses always were in the foreground of the imperial representation. They were taking a public and political role which was shaped in the interest of the whole reign.

These ideas imparted by the imperial representation were generally understood, accepted and adopted by the Roman public. This was visible in provincial coins and inscriptions, which were issued independently. These sources integrated the concept of a family reign as well as important key aspects of the imperial representation in their program. Furthermore a distinctive willingness for reverence of the dedicants often led to an active participation in the accentuation of the empresses, which transcended pure imitation. Their public, political and dynastic role was identified as inherent to the political system and was further supported.

The remarkably influential position of the Severan empresses, which the coins and inscriptions indicated, was also basically confirmed and partly concretised by the literary sources. As prerequisite of this position it became apparent that the Roman reign was gradually less integrated in the senator's rank but increasingly autocratic, socially isolated and dynastically orientated. The developing autocracy also proved to be fundamental for the public and political presence of the empresses. Thus the senate's loss of importance involved an increasing social mobility which allowed people with contact to the emperor to exert considerable influence. These prerequisites were given for the women of the imperial house. Their status

as family members guaranteed them access to the emperor and by that the possibility to bring forward and accomplish personal concerns. This was again the base for their own patronal relations. The rise of the empresses furthermore benefited by other factors: Generally familiar bonds and obligations had a high value in ancient Rome. The family membership itself may already had a positive impact on the ascent of some women. Compared to a man an influential woman also meant no potential thread for the emperor because the sole reign of a woman was impossible in Rome. And – as mothers – their importance for the dynastic succession could have a beneficial effect on the position of the empresses. By emphasising his mother or his wife, the emperor could stress the stability and the continuity of his reign and, by that, gain the support of the Roman public. The position of the empresses was potentially strengthened by that as well.

The Severan empresses thus possessed all the preconditions to play an important part in the autocratic system of the Roman imperial period. Their influential public position is inherent to the political system. Beyond their individual situation it is pointing to some crucial political and social developments inside the Roman society.