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4



Powerful
Women in the
Ancient World

Perception and
(Self)Presentation

Proceedings of the 8th Melammu Workshop,
Kassel, 30 January – 1 February 2019

Edited by Kerstin Droß-Krüpe
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Feminine, influential and different?

The Presentation of Julia Domna

Brigitte Truschneegg

Introduction

The exceptional position of the wives of the Severan Emperors is repeatedly emphasized in both older and current historical research. Julia Domna was one of four highly placed Syrian-born women at the Roman imperial court between A.D. 193 and 235, each of whom had a powerful position and a network of power at her disposal.¹ While the status of these women was primarily established with the help of historical/literary sources, numerous coins, inscriptions and pictorial representations confirm it.

Traditionally, a focus on the literary sources has led to the Severan women being credited with a lust for power and a high degree of ambition.² In the older scholarship, these characteristics – which were condemned in women, but not men – were seen both as a symptom of the growing decadence and decay of the Roman Empire as well as evidence for increasing orientalizing.³ In the course of his reassessment of the imperial crisis of the 3rd century, Kettenhofen has already refuted the latter idea in 1979.⁴ Later historians, such as Karl Christ, consider the fact that women took on completely new roles (functions, positions) to be a characteristic of the Severan dynasty, in which the open and direct political involvement of powerful women was the rule rather than the exception.⁵

In recent years, the women of the Severan imperial house have become more prominent again with a series of publications examining the role of these women as reflected in imperial propaganda, focusing either on individual aspects or different sources such as pictorial representations⁶, honorary titles, and inscriptions

¹ Also living at the imperial court were Julia Domna's older sister Julia Maesa with her daughters Julia Soaemias and Julia Avita Mamaea.

² The biographies of the Severan women in particular are based on the literary sources and consequently on their male-centred worldview.

³ See for instance Herzog-Hauser, 1918: 929–930; Kornemann, 1954: 256, 260, 264.

⁴ For a discussion of older theories of 'orientalization' since 1918 see Kettenhofen, 1979: 1–9 and 173.

⁵ See K. Christ 1988: 633–634. Christ emphasised that this had no negative consequences for the dynasty, but enabled the dynasty to repeatedly assert itself through its extraordinary activity.

⁶ Following Baharal, 1992: 110–118, the portraits of Julia Domna are deliberately aligned with those of Faustina Minor as a sign for the continuity of traditions of the Antonine Dynasty under the new dynasty. Julia Domna is depicted as the first imperial wife with the emperor at the sacrifice (Septimius Severus arch in Leptis Magna, relief in the Argentine

and monuments.⁷ The role of the women in the history of the Severan dynasty was examined, as was their relationship to the gender relations of the time.⁸ Two wide-ranging monographs on Julia Domna complete this picture. In her biography *Julia Domna, the Syrian Empress*, Barbara Levick compares the empress to other imperial wives and investigates the function and significance of Julia Domna's literary patronage.⁹ Sonja Nadolny's 2016 monograph convincingly demonstrated that it was the imperial family as a whole – and not the women individually – which set the framework for the propaganda's depictions on the coins and that these depictions were carefully coordinated.¹⁰

Against the background of this diverse research and with reference to this volume I will first examine how Julia Domna was presented and perceived in the literary sources between the 3rd and the 6th century. Based on this, I will then investigate which indicators denote a 'powerful woman', the sources, instruments and mechanisms of Julia Domna's power and her impact, and whether her origin as a priestess from Emesa in Syria played a role in the literary/historical sources.¹¹

Biographic sketch

Julia Domna hailed from Emesa in Syria and, as the daughter of the sun-priest Bassianus, was a member of an influential family, several members of which had become local rulers of Emesa.¹² She married Septimius Severus between A.D. 185 and 187, and gave birth to Caracalla and Geta in A.D. 186 and 189, before her husband was elevated to emperor.¹³ According to the sources she is said to

arch in Rome). She is also the first to be depicted in the military image program of a triumphal procession: As Victoria she is depicted in the attic of the Arch of Septimius Severus in Leptis Magna, cf. Alexandridis, 2000: 23–25. The image of Julia Domna can also be found on everyday objects, such as a lamp mirror. It testifies to her popularity and position of power and the effectiveness of imperial propaganda. Cf. Siebert, 2000: 35–36.
⁷ Focussing on the aspect of motherhood as a targeted propaganda for the Imperial family: Langford, 2013; Pictorial representation: Alexandridis, 2004; honorary titles and inscriptions: Bertolazzi, 2013: 304–308; Cassibry, 2014: 75–90; Dietz, 2008: 71–83; monuments: Heinemann, 2007: 615–620; coin portraits: Meyer, 2017: 365–374.

⁸ Role in the history of the dynasty: Bleckmann, 2002: 265–339.

⁹ Levick, 2007.

¹⁰ Nadolny, 2016: 19–73.

¹¹ The effectiveness of the Severan women is documented in the pictorial representations by their exemplary character in terms of fashion and hairstyle, among other things. Especially the hairstyle in the portraits of Julia Domna served as a reference to the Antonine dynasty. Baharal, 1992: 110–118;

¹² See Herzog-Hauser, G. 1918: 926–935; Bleckmann, 2002: 265–279; Stegmann, 1999: 4–5; Levick 2007.

¹³ Because the exact year of the marriage can only be deduced from various imprecise sources, it has become common in scholarship to use this period. Bleckmann, 2002: 268 and Levick, 2007: 31 argue for A.D. 187, while Stegmann, 1999: 4 makes a case for A.D.

have participated in the overthrow of the *praefectus praetorio* Fulvius Plautianus in 205, to whose hostility she had long been exposed at court.¹⁴ Julia Domna accompanied Septimius Severus on his campaigns to the East and from 208 to 211 on his campaign to Britain. In return, she received the honorary title *mater castrorum*.¹⁵ This title had earlier only been used for Faustina Minor, a member of the Antonine dynasty, which underlines the close ties of Septimius Severus with the Antonines.¹⁶ After the death of Septimius Severus in A.D. 211, the conflict between his two sons broke out openly. Julia Domna is credited with efforts to reconcile her sons (Herodian 4.3.1–9). The conflict escalated in 212 when Caracalla had his brother Geta killed in her presence (Cassius Dio 78.2; Herodian 4.4.3).

The extent of her (informal) political role as an advisor to the government during the reign of Caracalla is difficult to determine (Cassius Dio 78.10.4; 18.1–3). Her high social status as a member of the imperial family is confirmed by the honorary title *pia felix mater Augusti et senatus et patriae*. Julia Domna travelled to the east of the empire several times and remained there for a period, for example in A.D. 214 in Nicomedeia (Cassius Dio 78.18,1–3) and in A.D. 217 in Antiocheia (Cassius Dio 79.4.2). This was probably where she first heard of the death of her son Caracalla, murdered during his campaign against Parthia by his prefect of the guard, Opellius Macrinus (Cassius Dio 7.23.1; Herodian 4.13.8). Contradictory views exist on the circumstances of her own death a short time later (possibly also in A.D. 217); suicide seems possible. Her ashes were later buried in Rome (Cassius Dio 79.23.2–6; 24.1–3).

From exemplary wife to power-obsessed ruler – Julia Domna in the literary sources

Written sources from four centuries are available for the study of the representation of Julia Domna.¹⁷ The broad time spectrum, the relationship of the sources to each other, the gaps in the text, and the diverse intentions of the authors make a historical analysis difficult. However, the conscious selection of the sources as well as the different form given to the significant episodes, make it possible to identify a clear development in the presentation and perception of Julia Domna.

185. With comprehensive embedding in the geographic cultural and historical background in Syria, see Levick, 2007: 6–22.

¹⁴ Cassius Dio 76.15.6–7 Herodian 3.11.

¹⁵ Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum CIL XII 4345; XIV 120.

¹⁶ On the Severans cf. for example Eder, 2002: 1100–1104. On the Roman imperial court in Severan times, cf. Schöpe, 2014.

¹⁷ See Sonja Nadolny, who compares the sources on all four Severan women: Nadolny, 2016: 135–203.

Representation of Julia Domna by Cassius Dio

The contemporary author Cassius Dio, originating from Bithynian Nicaea (A.D. 161–230), pursued a senatorial career and became a member of the Senate under the reign of Commodus (180–192), holding various other high offices for over 50 years. The writing of his ‘*Roman History*’, addressed to a non-Roman audience and comprising 80 books, lasted from A.D. 194 to 229.¹⁸ The relevant parts on Julia Domna were written up to A.D. 216.¹⁹ The books that name Julia Domna are only partially known and are only preserved in 11th century excerpts by Xiphilinos.

The portrayal of the Syrian wife of Septimius Severus in Cassius Dio concentrates on six episodes from the time of her marriage until her death, which I will present in somewhat more detail as a basis for the comparison with the other sources.

In his first mentioning of her, Cassius Dio turns Julia Domna into an essential element of the prophecy of the future imperial dignity of Septimius Severus:

“(1) The signs which had led him to hope for the imperial power were as follows. When he was admitted to the senate, he dreamed that he was suckled by a she-wolf just as Romulus had been. When he was about to marry Julia, Faustina, the wife of Marcus, prepared their nuptial chamber in the temple of Venus near the palace.” (Cassius Dio 75.3.1)

The marriage of Julia Domna and Septimius Severus took place between six and eight years before his elevation to emperor and ‘confirms’ the predestination of BOTH Septimius Severus and Julia Domna as the imperial couple.

The second episode is connected to the domineering attitude of the Praetorian prefect Fulvius Plautianus towards the emperor. His unseemly behaviour goes so far that Julia Domna is also portrayed as a victim of his persecutions and slander.

“(6) So greatly did Plautianus have the mastery in every way over the emperor, that he often treated even Julia Augusta in an outrageous manner; for he cordially detested her and was always abusing her violently to Severus. He used to conduct investigations into her conduct as well as gather evidence against her by torturing women of the nobility. (7) For this reason she began to study philosophy and passed her days in company with sophists.” (Cassius Dio 76.15.6–7)

¹⁸ Cassius Dio began his literary activity by writing about the importance of dreams as omens of a reign in connection with the rule of Septimius Severus.

¹⁹ After the death of Septimius Severus, Cassius Dio extends his work, which was initially planned to only run until the death of Commodus, to an overall history, see Birley, 1997: 1014–1015. As a result, the ‘History’ by Cassius Dio is, together with Livy, the longest representation of early Roman history. On Cassius Dio in general, see the standard reference work by Millar, 1964/1999.

The fact that Plautianus had noble women tortured, who probably were less than ideal informants on political conspiracies and more able to confess social transgressions, also points to the character of the slander. According to Cassius Dio, Julia Domna turned to philosophy because of this difficult situation.²⁰ The fact that she now moved in philosophical circles reinforces the impression of a withdrawal from other social – and possibly public – circles.²¹ Furthermore, Julia Domna stands out in a positive sense from the extremely negative portrayal of Plautianus by Cassius Dio, who claims that he celebrated wild orgies and had sexual intercourse with underage girls and boys. The fact that Plautianus also isolated his own wife from other social contacts, including the imperial family, reinforces the negative impression. (Cassius Dio 76.15.7).

Julia Domna is twice involuntarily involved in the violent resolution of a family conflict. After Plautianus was murdered for his agitation against Septimius Severus, the still unsuspecting Julia Domna meets Plautilla – who is both Plautianus' daughter and Julia Domna's daughter-in-law – and they are confronted with hair from the beard of Plautianus. The secret relief of Julia Domna is contrasted by Plautilla's grief:

“(4) [...] And somebody plucked out a few hairs from his beard, carried them to Julia and Plautilla, who were together, before they had heard a word of the affair, and exclaimed, ‘Behold your Plautianus,’ thus causing grief to the one and joy to the other.” (Cassius Dio 77.4)

Apart from the literary tension that emanates from the ambiguity of this scene, Cassius Dio here presents Julia Domna as a woman who can control her emotions if the social norms demand it. In the second paragraph, Julia Domna is an involuntary witness to the conflict between her sons Caracalla and Geta. Caracalla uses his mother to invite his brother Geta to a conversation in her private rooms. He then has the defenceless boy murdered by his men and his deceived mother has to watch her younger son die in her lap.

“(3) ... but when they were inside, some centurions, previously instructed by Antoninus, rushed in a body and struck down Geta, who at sight of them had run to his mother, hung about her neck and clung to her bosom and breasts, lamenting and crying: ‘Mother that didst bear me, mother that didst bear me, help! I am being murdered.’ (4) And so she, tricked in this way, saw her son perishing in the most impious fashion in her arms, and received him at his death into the very womb, as it were, whence he had been born;

²⁰ On the literary patronage of women, see for example Hemelrijk, 1999: 100–104.

²¹ E. Hemelrijk rightly concludes from the disputes between Plautianus and Julia Domna that Plautianus thereby wanted to reduce the influence of Julia Domna on the emperor, Hemelrijk, 1999: 123.

for she was all covered with his blood, so that she took no note of the wound she had received on her hand.” (Cassius Dio 78.2.3–4)

The counter-image of the birth invoked by Cassius Dio underlines the fact that Julia Domna – albeit blameless – cannot live up to her role as a mother. The co-emperor’s mother cannot protect her other child and is exposed to the manipulation of Caracalla as well as his anger, which prevents her from openly mourning her dead son.²²

Parallel to this, a passage about Caracalla’s reign provides key information on the function of the Emperor’s mother as a counsellor. In it, Julia Domna admonishes Caracalla not to waste too much money on his soldiers (Cassius Dio 78.10), but the young Emperor disregards this and other wise advice from his mother, as Cassius Dio explicitly reports (Cassius Dio 78.18.2). Nevertheless, he involves his mother in his government work and entrusts her with official activities. She answers the petitions and the Latin and Greek correspondence (Cassius Dio 78.18.1–3) and sorts the incoming correspondence for him (Cassius Dio, 79.4).²³ Cassius Dio explicitly mentions that her name is mentioned together with the emperor’s name in political and military letters, and that she herself, like the emperor, gave public receptions for leading personalities.²⁴

Julia Domna is only criticised by Cassius Dio for behaviour exhibited towards the end of her life. First he describes her shock as a mother when she receives the news of Caracalla’s assassination. But her grief was not for her son, whom she hated (because of the assassination of his brother), but concern about her imminent loss of power (Cassius Dio 79.23). With these claims, Cassius Dio not only diminished a mother’s pain, but also ran counter to the expectations of his readers.

Unexpectedly, Macrinus continues to let her have her own bodyguard and her court despite her verbal abuses against him.²⁵ Once again, Julia Domna acts unexpectedly and plans to take political action against Macrinus. He reacts by making her leave the city (Antiocheia), after which she – already seriously ill – kills herself by refusing food.²⁶

²² Cassius Dio 78.2.5. In his account, Julia Domna’s sense of duty offers a significant contrast to the headstrong and inhuman behaviour of Caracalla.

²³ B. Levick in particular pointed out the extensive linguistic skills (Greek, Latin and possibly Aramaic) that the Syrian woman had to acquire in order to cope with these challenges. Levick, 2007: 20–22.

²⁴ Cassius Dio 78,1,1–3. S. Nadolny understands this passage as Cassius Dio’s criticism of the public appearance of Julia Domna. She sees this in connection with his criticism of the rule of Caracalla, Nadolny, 2016: 144–145.

²⁵ With the claim that she wanted to make herself the sole ruler of the Roman Empire in the style of Semiramis or Nitokris, Cassius Dio now condemned Julia Domna’s behaviour as definitively outside the social norms! Cassius Dio 79.23.

²⁶ Breast cancer could be the main cause for the death of Julia Domna, suggests S.M. Fick. The massive weight loss associated with the disease could be explained by tumor cachexia.

Until the death of Caracalla, Cassius Dio presents Julia Domna as the ideal wife, determined by fate to marry Septimius Severus, whose position with the emperor was not affected by the slander of Fulvius Plautianus and who, because of it, withdrew into a philosophy.²⁷ With the violent death of her older son, the portrayal of Julia Domna turns negative. In her ('male') endeavour to maintain power, she acts between emotional predicament and strategic planning.²⁸ Cassius Dio indirectly tries to introduce the idea of power-hungry 'oriental' women, which has negative connotations in Roman society.

In this, the presentation of Julia Domna reflects a tendency observable in the whole work of Cassius Dio, namely that after an initial phase of optimism, a negative attitude towards Septimius Severus prevails. Sonja Nadolny has pointed out that, for Cassius Dio, the relationship between the emperor and the senate plays a decisive role. The depiction of the emperor and Julia Domna demonstrates a shift from the senatorial ideal of rulership to an emphasis on the ruler's personality and his family.²⁹

Representation of Julia Domna by Herodian

The imperial official Herodian (178/180–after 240), probably hailing from Antiocheia, wrote a history of the Roman Emperors in eight books, dealing with the period from after the reign of Marcus Aurelius until the sole reign of Gordian III (A.D. 180–238).³⁰ The books, written in Greek, were published after A.D. 240. Despite a lack of source criticism and little political knowledge, his imperial history is an important source of indispensable information on the history of the first half of the 3rd century.

Herodian was not a member of the senatorial class and accordingly was not bound by its values.³¹ The stated aim of his publication, namely to entertain his readership, is achieved by Herodian (among other things) though combining the various references to Julia Domna into a coherent narrative and garnishing it with anecdotes. In this manner, Julia Domna becomes a literary persona, mediating between her sons. This approach clearly shows Herodian's selective use of his source Cassius Dio.

Fick, 2005: 49–54.

²⁷ On the role of the Roman imperial wife in general, see Kunst, 2000: 1–6.

²⁸ Cassius Dio also described the male activities of women before the Severans, for example the negative depiction of Fulvia (48.10.2) explained by Schnegg, 2006: 269 in her investigation on Cassius Dio focusing on women in wartime.

²⁹ Nadolny, 2016: 136–148. That the agitation of Julia Domna in public is also understood as criticism in this context seems to be too far-fetched to me.

³⁰ Franke, 1998: 467. Sidebottom, 1997: 271–276. For a comprehensive overview of the author and work see cf. Müller, 1996: 9–26.

³¹ See in more detail Nadolny, 2016: 158–164.

The fundamental assessment of Julia Domna by Herodian does not differ significantly from that of Cassius Dio, but his selection of episodes shows a different accentuation; unlike Cassius Dio's description, Julia Domna is not at the centre of the accusations of Fulvius Plautianus, Herodian places her and Septimius Severus as a couple at the centre of the attack. When Fulvius Plautianus tries to force the military tribune Saturnius to carry out the assassination attempt of the imperial couple, the latter can skilfully manoeuvre himself out of this difficult situation. Saturnius, like Julia Domna, hailed from Syria, and Herodian described the people from the east as perceptive and quick-witted (Herodian 3.11.4–8).

Herodian emphasises Julia Domna's role as mediator between the brothers Caracalla and Geta even more than Cassius Dio. The official significance of her efforts is shown when she is mentioned first in a series of respected men and advisors of Severus who are striving for reconciliation of the sons (Herodian 3.15.6). In this context, there is an episode that is only summarized in Cassius, which Herodian embellishes into an impressive scene that gives Julia Domna a grand speech.

The sons gather both Julia Domna and a number of fatherly friends and try to enforce a division of the empire. While the gathered men look down with gloomy faces, the mother says:

“Earth and sea, my children, you have found a way to divide, and, as you say, the Propontic Gulf separates the continents. But your mother, how would you parcel her? How am I, unhappy, wretched – how am I to be torn and ripped asunder for the pair of you? Kill me first, and after you have claimed your share, let each one perform the funeral rites for his portion. Thus would I, too, together with earth and sea, be partitioned between you.” (Herodian 4.3.8)

Herodian here presents Julia Domna in all her authority as the emperors' mother, an authority that is ultimately recognized and successful. He also documents her political commitment to a united imperial rule of both her sons, prompted by the drastic image that a division of the Empire would be tantamount to a division of the mother.

The text of the scene of the Geta's murder is incomplete, but Herodian probably based himself on the narrative of Cassius Dio. Geta dies in the arms of Julia Domna, leaving her covered in blood and in deep sorrow (Herodian 4,4,3).

The assassination of Caracalla is turned by Herodian into an act of humiliation, in which the emperor is stabbed to death in Carrhae on the way to the temple of Selene while relieving himself. When Julia Domna is handed the urn with the ashes of her son, Herodian does not give any indications that Julia Domna fears for the loss of her power, but sees her death as a consequence of the loss of her sons.

“[...] After burning the body on a pyre and placing the ashes in an urn, Macrinus sent it for burial to the emperor’s mother in Antioch. As a result of these similar disasters, which befell her two sons, Julia died, either by her own hand or by the emperor’s order. Such was the fate suffered by Caracalla and his mother Julia, who lived in the manner I have described above.” (Herodian 4.13.8)

In all four episodes, Herodian is exclusively positive about Julia Domna! He ignores the negative attitudes of Cassius Dio towards the emperor’s mother at the end of her life. This is remarkable, especially when one considers the intended entertainment value of the work. In contrast to Cassius Dio, Herodian even gives Julia Domna a brilliant scene in which she is presented in all her authority as a mother, but also showing a high degree of political responsibility. He places Julia Domna in a politically relevant context, emphasizing the political significance of her function as the emperor’s mother. This is clearly expressed by a powerful image: to divide the Empire would be like dividing the mother and would explicitly mean the death of the mother and implicitly the downfall of the Empire.

Representation of Julia Domna in the Historia Augusta (H.A.) and later historiographies

The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* is a collection of biographies of Roman emperors, pretenders to the throne, and usurpers running from Hadrian (117–138) to Numerianus and Carinus (283–284/5).³² Among the surviving texts are also five vitae (Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta, Opilius Macrinus, Alexander, Clodius Albinus), which serve as the basis for the descriptions of Julia Domna. Despite many open questions, the date of origin of the H.A. is roughly estimated to be in the first half of the fourth century. The *Scriptores historiae Augustae* are difficult to classify in terms of textual intention due to their unclear chronology. This source is mainly interesting for the further development of the image of Julia Domna, which is why the question of authorship only marginally affects the subject matter.³³

In the vita of Septimius Severus there is a reference to the fact that Julia Domna was prophesied to marry a ruler, which is why Septimius Severus asks for her hand (H.A., *Septimius Severus* 3.9). Without even mentioning Fulvius Plautianus and his intentions, the episode around his attacks is reduced here to the accusations against Julia Domna. These accusations, whose character had never been specifically mentioned before, are now named: both love affairs and a con-

³² *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* henceforth abbreviated H.A. fundamental Syme, 1971; Johne, 1998: 637–640.

³³ For a compilation of all passages on women in the *Historia Augusta*, see Wallinger, 1990. On the *Historia Augusta* and the model character of many episodes about women, see Nadolny, 2016: 179–185.

spiracy against Severus are attributed to her:

“For all that, he [Septimius Severus] was less careful in his home-life, for he retained his wife Julia even though she was notorious for her adulteries and also guilty of plotting against him.” (H.A., *Septimius Severus* 18.8).

The accusations of private misconduct increase when the author, after the death of Severus, reports about Julia Domna that Caracalla takes her as her wife:

[...] (7) who took his own stepmother to wife – stepmother did I say? – nay rather the mother on whose bosom he had slain Geta, her son.” (H.A., *Septimius Severus* 21.7).

The fact that in this vita, Caracalla is regarded as her stepson instead of her own son slightly weakens the transgression of such a relationship, but nevertheless massively defames Julia Domna.³⁴

The vita of Caracalla offers two very different narrative variants of well-known episodes: At the murder of Geta, Julia Domna openly mourns the death of her son, and Caracalla is tempted to kill her and the other mourning women, but is prevented from doing so (H.A., *Caracalla* 3.3). Caracalla’s relationship with Julia Domna is mentioned here as well, but is now clearly described as an incestuous relationship: One day, Julia Domna is described as having almost completely exposed herself to her son and allowed him to touch her – and so Caracalla added to fratricide (*ad paricidium iunxit incestum*) incest (H.A., *Caracalla* 10.1.ff.).

The references to Julia Domna in the Vita of Geta are neutral in comparison and draw on well-known interpretations of the narrative elements: the role of fate in the choice of his spouse by Septimius (H.A., *Geta* 3.1) and the desire of Caracalla to kill Julia Domna because she cries over the murder of Geta (H.A. *Geta* 7.3). The third reference shows Julia Domna concerned about the future of her son Geta. When a dream leads Septimius Severus to believe that a man with the name Antoninus will be his successor, he renames Caracalla, originally called Bassianus, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Another dream of Julia Domna, which makes it clear that he would thus block Geta’s path to the throne, leads to Geta also being given the name Antoninus (H.A., *Geta* 1.3).

The origin of Julia Domna are stressed for the first time in connection with fate in the Vita of Alexander³⁵:

“For, as Marius Maximus narrates in his Life of Severus, Severus, at that time only a commoner and a man of no great position, married a noblewoman from the east [*nobilem orientis mulierem*], whose horoscope, he

³⁴ Caracalla is supposed to have been the son of Paccia Maricana, the first wife of Septimius Severus, who died in A.D. 185.

³⁵ Marcus Aurelius Severus *Alexander* Augustus was the grandson of Julia Domna and Roman emperor in A.D. 222–235.

learned, declared that she should be the wife of an emperor.” (H.A., *Alexander* 5.4).

Moral criticism predominates in the representation of Julia Domna in the vitae of both Septimius Severus and Caracalla: Julia Domna is explicitly accused of love affairs for the first time and is said to have had a sexual relationship with Caracalla.³⁶ An out-of-control ruler is accused of having had a morally bad wife/mother/stepmother. In contrast to this, the vita of Geta emphasizes her origin from the East in a positive way!

Another fourth-century source confirms the tendency of sources to reduce the representation of Julia Domna to potential transgressions: The late Roman historian Aurelius Victor, in his mid-4th century A.D. history of the emperors (*Liber de Caesaribus*), describes the excesses of Julia Domna and the conspiracy accusations as a shadow on the life of the excellent statesman Septimius Severus. The fact that Severus still has feelings for her, despite Julia Domna’s criticised ‘free lifestyle’ further, diminishes the emperor’s fame (Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 20.23). He finds even clearer words for her behaviour towards Caracalla:

“He [Caracalla] was patient, accessible and calm, he had the same fortune and wife as his father. For, captivated by her beauty, he made every effort to marry his stepmother Julia, whose crimes I have recorded above, since she, in her great eagerness for power, had showed herself unclothed to the gaze of the young man as if unaware of his presence. When he passionately declared: ‘I should like, if I may, to...’; she replied even more shamelessly, for she had stripped off her modesty with her clothes; ‘You want do? Certainly you may.’” (Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus* 21.2–3)

Aurelius Victor hides all positive aspects (suitable wife, counsellor, loving mother) in the depiction of Julia Domna. She is reduced to her female charms and sexual transgressions, which cast dark shadows not only on her person but also on her husband and son. There is no other representation in ancient literature that is so clearly and exclusively negative.³⁷

This overview of the literary sources on Julia Domna clearly shows that the descriptions of the wife of emperor Septimius Severus in contemporary sources of the third century still address various aspects of her life: her suitability as a wife, the conflict with Plautianus, her efforts in the conflict of the sons, her powerlessness in the assassination of Geta, her role as the emperor's mother and his

³⁶ On the model character of many episodes about women, see Nadolny, 2016: 179–185.

³⁷ For later authors such as the Christian Paulus Orosius at the beginning of the 5th century, the marriage with his mother had a negative effect on the judgement of Caracalla, because of his inability to control his lust (Orosius 7.18.2). At the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries, the Greek historian Zosimos once again takes up the role of Julia Domna in the murder of Geta, which not even she as the mother of both the murderer and the victim could prevent (Zosimos 1.9.2).

advisor, her visibility in public correspondence and her participation in the representation of the imperial family, including even her efforts to retain her power.

These aspects fade into the background in the 4th century and are ultimately completely blanked out in favour of the portrayal of a woman, whose feminine charms tie the men of the imperial family to her against all conventions, and who thus damages their image.

The power of Julia Domna

Against the background of these representations of Julia Domna in the historical sources, the question arises to what extent and in which areas Julia Domna was presented or perceived as a powerful woman and to what extent some aspects of power possibly reflect power in reality.

In general, the power of Julia Domna is closely linked to the roles and positions she has assumed in the course of her life within the imperial family.³⁸ Her power – as it is presented in the literary sources – is not legally sanctioned and can be understood as ‘informal’, but it shows several dimensions of power.³⁹ Sociology distinguishes several dimensions of power: *sources of power* (such as physical superiority, personality, availability of resources, organizations); *instruments of power* (such as social capital, official authority, functional authority, material authority, information); *forms of exercising power* (such as influence, persuasion, motivation, exercising personal authority, control, compulsion, violence); *mechanisms of power* (such as negative and positive sanctions, manipulation).⁴⁰ What dimensions of power are reflected in the presented sources on Julia Domna?

Instrument of power: *proximity to the emperor*. The episode of the prophesy about Julia Domna’s marriage documents the superhuman legitimation for the reign of Septimius Severus as well as their common predestination for the highest power. Julia Domna thus becomes an elementary component of the emperor’s claim to power and his representation of power.

Instrument of power: *social capital*. Julia Domna operates within the social framework of the imperial family. The conflict with Fulvius Plautianus reveals one aspect of her social capital, as it fosters her interest in philosophy and the formation of a philosophical circle.⁴¹ The scene gives the impression that she transfers her presence from politically influential groups to possibly less public

³⁸ Patronage of women as an official means of integrating women into the imperial representation cf. Kunst, 2008: 145–161.

³⁹ On the *Augustae* and the forms of their political power from the beginning of the imperial period to Late Antiquity cf. Kolb 2008: 11–35; on the ‘informal power’ of the Imperial women cf. Wagner-Hasel, 2017: 226–229.

⁴⁰ The dimensions of power from a sociological perspective are discussed by Imbusch, 2018: 281–284.

⁴¹ Her wealth, education and high social status as the emperors’ wife and mother shows that she was an important patroness, Hemelrijk, 1999: 125.

circles. The fact that she succeeds in establishing herself as a literary patroness is a clear sign of her well-established social network. To interpret this as a retreat from politics would presuppose that she was previously politically active, and this is something not really believed to have been the case during her marriage to Septimius. However, it may be seen as a withdrawal from a circle in which political actors like Plautianus were active. The fact that he also isolated his own wife from contact with the imperial family reinforces the public and social role of Julia Domna.

Instrument of power: *information and functional authority*. When Julia Domna reviews and answers the correspondence for Caracalla in his absence, when the letters bear both his and her name, she is involved in functions within ruling. She is the only one besides the emperor who is praised in letters to the senate and her welfare is reported. Like the emperor, she gives receptions for important political figures. On these occasions Julia Domna not only represents the rule of her son, she also represents his power. That the historical sources perceive her participation in official governmental tasks as political is also indicated by the fact that these are mainly reported from outside of Rome, when Julia Domna is staying in Nikomedeia and Antioch or more generally in the East of the Empire.

Source of power: *financial resources*. When Julia Domna accuses Caracalla of being wasteful, it becomes apparent that she is informed about financial resources and issues and also about their importance for imperial rule. Beyond that several passages in Herodian (Herodian 5.4.1) document that the Severan women have considerable financial resources of their own. He points out that her sister Julia Maesa had become rich through imperial privileges, and it can be assumed that Julia Domna also had similar resources. All the efforts to preserve her power, when she plans to take political action against Macrinus, which Cassius Dio attributes to Julia Domna, would not be conceivable without this financial support in the background, which demonstrates the power of Julia Domna.

Source of power: *personal authority*.⁴² Julia Domna's personal authority is shown in different aspects: Her personal authority as wife prevents that the slander of Plautianus may cause her to withdraw from public life, but does not seriously threaten her. Julia Domna is said to have successfully used her maternal authority several times, together with advisors to the emperor and other distinguished men, for the reconciliation of her sons. In his episode about the prevented division of the empire, Herodian virtually erects a monument to the prestige – and thus the power – of the emperor's mother. When he states that a mother can be divided just as little as the Roman empire, he gives this domestic image a political dimension. A division of the Empire, just like the division of the mother, would mean decline or death.

Source of power: *autonomous control over the body – suicide*. It is not self-

⁴² Authority is understood in the above sense as a source of power (personality), which tries to convince by instruments of power (functional authority).

evident that the sources unanimously present Julia Domna as a woman for whom suicide in a hopeless situation is an option. Taking agency for her own situation at the end of her life is an instrument of power. This mostly 'male' and socially accepted way of coping with such a situation is used by Julia Domna in a manner that is 'typical female', namely the refusal to eat. It is rarely acknowledged that this bloodless and non-violent form of suicide requires a more lasting and stronger determination than the more 'male' and quicker methods.⁴³

Mechanism of power: (*sexual*) *attractiveness*. Both the Late Antique Historia Augusta and Aurelius Victor attest Julia Domna emotional and physical attraction, to an extent that causes a loss of status for father and son alike. Using the proverbial 'weapons of a woman', the sources present Julia Domna's emotional power over Septimius Severus, who does not abandon her despite the accusations made against her and her emotional/erotic power over her son Caracalla, who marries her. This is a well-known image of the defamation of women, which skilfully combines two points of criticism of female behaviour: the reprehensible use of sexual attractiveness for personal or political influence.⁴⁴

Limits of power: The option of power also includes aspects of powerlessness – as the depiction of Julia Domna in the sources clearly shows. The slanders of Plautianus force her to give up previous social networks; his death is portrayed as liberation. Her proximity to the emperor as part of her social capital provides her with the required protection to avert the consequences of moral hostility. It does not however, protect her from it or even defy it. Moral and societal norms limits her instruments of power. The manipulation by her own son, which ends with the murder of Geta, bears witness to a moment of bitter powerlessness. The fact that she is said to have been denied public mourning casts a bad light on the emperor, but again demonstrates her lack of power. Her son's ambition becomes the limit of her maternal authority. Coercion and manipulation rather show the mechanisms of Caracalla's power. Even when Julia Domna is presented as her son's advisor, the fact that he does not follow any of her advice again underlines the limits of her power.

The categories presented in the depictions of Julia Domna reveal instruments of power, such as social networks, proximity to the ruler, functional authority and access to information. To an equal extent sources of power are already tangible through Julia Domnas' access to financial resources and through her personality. The limits of power relativize the framework of her activities and significance.

⁴³ Cassius Dio (79.24.3) report that she had an additional illness, which she contracted as a result of the shock of Caracalla's assassination and which is said to have accelerated her death. This view fits very well with his picture of Julia Domna, who, apart from her last phase of life, always corresponds to the Roman ideal of women.

⁴⁴ Cf. the accusations against Sophoniba, who seduces Syphax and Massinissa with these methods and for political and personal purposes: Diod. 27.5.12; Liv. 30.13.9; App. Lib. 27,114.

The effect of the instruments of power (mechanism of power) is used by the sources to defame the empress, using sexual attractiveness as an example.

Julia Domna – foreign and/or Roman?

Studies on the portrayal of foreign/barbarian women in ancient Roman sources have shown that foreign women are granted different rights and greater freedom of action than those in Roman society.⁴⁵ Often, foreign women are said to have ‘male’ characteristics and fields of activity, and for this very reason they are perceived as barbaric and foreign. The same descriptive criteria were also applied by ancient authors to Roman women when they acted beyond the norms of society. This gives the impression that Roman women were perceived as ‘foreign’ in their own society as soon as they moved outside the fields of activity intended for women / in male fields of activity.

Against this background, the question arises as to whether the origin of the emperor's wife from Emesa in Syria is relevant for her depiction in the literary/historical sources. The preceding analysis has clearly shown that her origin does not play a significant role in the representation of Julia Domna; it does not serve as an argument to underline or explain her portrayal. Only in two cases is reference to her origin made at all: in the reference to the kinship between Alexander Severus and the noble Julia Domna from the East (H.A., *Alexander* 5.4) and in the account that Julia Domna aspired to be sole ruler, like the Assyrian queen Semiramis and the Babylonian queen Nitokris (Cassius Dio 79.23.1).

In contrast, the depiction of Julia Domna in the sources of the 3rd century shows parallels with the depiction of Roman noble women, who in emergency situations – for sons and fatherland – exceed the established norms. The motif of the mother's authority, for example, is already used by the Roman historian Livy for an episode of early Roman history: it is the reproaches and appeals of his mother that resonate with the renegade Coriolanus. Livy claims that, after she had been successful and the enemy army had withdrawn from Rome, the men allowed the women their success, because in former times there was no resentment against “foreign fame” (*gloriae alienae*) (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2.40).

Even before Julia Domna, Roman women had used their networks to support their sons in their careers, such as Cornelia (190–100), mother of Gracchi. The literary representations of these two women have much in common. Both come from respected families and support their sons in their political careers. Both sons are murdered. Both were patronesses of literary circles. They wrote letters that went beyond private correspondence and they received guests and cultivated contacts with notable and political personalities of the leading circles. The major differences can be seen in the behaviour of the two women after the death of their

⁴⁵ Ulf, 2002: 15–31; Rollinger / Ulf, 2006a: Rollinger / Ulf, 2006b; FRuGAE – Database on (the perception of) women and gender in ancient ethnography“: <https://www.uibk.ac.at/alte-geschichte-orient/frugae/datenbank.html>.

sons. Julia Domna's political agitation to maintain her power is in stark contrast to the behaviour of Cornelia, who completely withdraws from public life to Misenum.

The extent to which the Syrians Julia Domna and her sister were involved in the cultural and social scene in Rome can be seen from Herodian's report on Julia Domna's elder sister Julia Maesa after Bassianus/Elagabal came to power. Julia Maesa admonishes her grandson Bassianus/Elagabal to dress neatly and according to Roman tradition when he appears before the Roman senate, because his barbaric appearance (luxurious robes with gold and purple) would disturb the senators, as they deemed such things only appropriate for women. She imparts Roman cultural values to her grandson, and she also longs for the Roman palace in which she lived with her sister for years (Herodian 5.5.1). In later perception, Julia Maesa and her daughters are linked to foreign behaviour and political agitation characterised as oriental.⁴⁶ Among the advantages of Julia Maesa's life at the Roman imperial court – apart from the imperial privileges – is both the wealth that can be acquired there and experience in defence against politically motivated assassination attacks. None of the planned attacks of Elagabal on Alexander Severus and his mother Julia Soemias succeeds (Herodian 5.8.3). The Syrian sisters clearly wanted to live at the Roman imperial court and remain there. It remains unclear whether the social networks, the cultural environment, or the political opportunities for the male descendants were decisive for this. Their 'foreignness' is always mentioned in the literary sources when the women become politically active and break through Roman patterns of behaviour.

Against this background, the perception and representation of Julia Domna in literary sources could be considered – besides all allegations especially in the later tradition – as well as a testimony to the successful integration of a Syrian priestess at the imperial court in Rome.

Summary

It is above all the later literary sources that have long shaped the image of Julia Domna in scholarship. The empress from Emesa is only presented negatively in the literary/historical sources from the 4th century onwards, where she is burdened with increasing moralising criticism! If one looks at her portrayal by the contemporary historians Cassius Dio and Herodianos, one gains a predominantly positive image of the wife of Septimius Severus. The emperor's Syrian wife conforms to the portrayal of Roman noble and powerful women and also to the ideal women in Roman culture more than one would expect.

The dimensions of power of Julia Domna can be differentiated by using various categories. Her authority (source of power) as wife of the emperor is based

⁴⁶ The defamatory character of the portrayal of the Severan imperial women in antiquity and modern times as unbridled, power-hungry and greedy was already pointed out in 1988. Christ, 1988: 634.

on the person of Julia Domna, as well as it is part of the power of the Severan dynasty. In addition to the literary sources, inscriptions, honorary titles and coinage amply support this.⁴⁷ As a member of the closest circle of the imperial family, she possesses a high level of social capital (instruments of power) and as *mom-in-chief* she is not only available as an advisor to her son during his reign, but also takes on political tasks with which he entrusts her (source of power). In most cases, the imperial family is the basis of these power dimensions. This is clearly evident when Caracalla's successor, Macrinus, at first misjudges Julia Domna as politically harmless, because she had been deprived of the most important members of the imperial family. At a later point he banished her from Antiocheia later, after she had begun to use her financial resources for propaganda against him with the aim to make herself the sole ruler of the Roman Empire as Cassius Dio (79.23) claims.

These family-based instruments of power are increasingly supplanted in the sources by mechanisms of power focusing on the character of Julia Domna or, more generally, on her femininity. This is also where the indicators of her emotional and erotic power are to be found, with which she is said to have tied her husband to herself and seduced her son. Last but not least, Julia Domna's power spectrum also shows the limits of her power against male propaganda and family violence.

The question of her origin is without relevance for the representation of Julia Domna. The image of foreignness and accusations of excessive political activity are more relevant to the representation of her sister Julia Maesa and Julia Maesa's daughters, whose Syrian origin and foreignness is emphasized, although they obviously estimated the Roman imperial court with its networks and the political opportunities for their male descendants. The negative perception of the political machinations of the latter seems to include Julia Domna in retrospect. The portrayal of the Severan empresses' wives in the literary/historical sources is thus just as inconsistent as that of the Severan Emperors, but reflects the views of a negative development of the Severan dynasty.

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⁴⁷ See footnote 7.

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