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December 3, 2019

Conversing with Julia Domna: A Critical Analysis of Literary Texts, Imperial Portraiture,
Coinage, and Patronage from 193-217 CE

Imperial portraiture is good at conversing with the ideologies and propagandistic goals of ruling emperors in the Roman empire. Literary texts, busts, and coins from the reigns of Septimius Severus (193 CE - 211 CE) and Caracalla (211 CE - 217 CE) tell a complex narrative of gender, sex, and politics, centered on a principal female figure, Julia Domna. This paper will discuss Severan modes of propaganda through the assignment of honorific titles and the construction of various depictions of Julia Domna in literary sources, portrait busts, and imperial coinage. Additionally, a discussion on the extent of Domna's power over the administrative apparatus of the Roman empire as well as her role as a patron of the arts and monumental buildings will be included. Domna's life, status, and artistic representation has interested historians from antiquity to modernity and is certainly one of intrigue and cause for further analysis.

Julia Domna's claims to status and power are rooted in the Roman province of Syria. Between 170-174 CE between the Jebels and the Orontes River, Julia Domna was born in or near the ancient city of Emesa, as the daughter of Julius Bassianus, the high priest of the Emesene Sun God, Elagabalus.¹ Born into a prominent Emesene family, from the very beginning of her

¹ Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*.

For the course of this study I will use the city's ancient name, Emesa, so as not to overlap the timelines of the places and people discussed. The city's modern name is Hims or Homs.

life, Domna became acquainted with a particularly comfortable style of living. In fact, Domna's early years are frequently cited by ancient authors who attempt to sketch a sequence of events that presumes her marriage to Septimius Severus and rise to power to be inevitable and predetermined. There are two common theories discussed in the sources. The first theory presents Julia's name as a predeterminate for her ascent to power. The etymology of her second name, Domna, appears to be a derivative of the Latin, "*domina*", meaning "lady" or "mistress", which equates to the Aramaic word, "Martha", meaning "mistress" or the "wife of a king".² Despite its convenience, this translation is not quite accurate. More likely, Domna is derived from the Latin, "*dimna*", meaning the color black.³ Scholars have had difficulty connecting the etymology of her name to other pieces of evidence that might shed light on new information about her early life. The second theory, extant in the *Historia Augusta* -whose authorship has been much disputed- tells that Julia's horoscope predicted her marriage to a king. Additionally, another biographer, Cassius Dio, who will be further discussed later on, wrote in his *Roman History* that before his wedding Septimius Severus dreamed that Marcus Aurelius' wife, Faustina the Younger, "...prepared the *thalamos* for [Severus and Julia] in the temple of Venus and Rome, built by Hadrian on the slope of the Velia."⁴ Essentially, the union of Severus and Julia was marked with the seal of divine approval by his ancestors.

However fanciful and convenient these theories might be, they do not shed light on Julia's known characteristics. The fact that ancient authors exert so much energy attempting to

² Ibid., 18.

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Gorrie, "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," 11.

The *thalamos* in Severus' dream, refers to the bedroom of a husband and wife in antiquity. Faustina's preparation of the *thalamos* alludes to the consummation of his marriage to Julia Domna and the importance of bearing children and motherhood to the Severan regime.

mysticize Julia's rise to prominence is a testament of male anxieties towards both women in powerful stations and the social mobility of women. The later pages of this study will greatly expand on Julia's portrait on imperial coins and busts, but for greater context and breadth, I have provided a brief description of her below, that portraiture omits or cannot express. When thinking about Julia Domna, one must conjure the image of a brown-skinned woman; well-dressed, educated, and traveled; upper class; who was most likely fluent in at least Greek and Latin, and was privy to the political matters of her day.⁵ I mention these qualities to add color to the historically white-washed images typically presented to students and scholars of antiquity. I implore the reader to recall these aspects of Julia Domna when looking at and reading about the portraits discussed in later pages. What language would we hear her speak if her portrait could talk? What would her skin-tone be? Certainly, not as pale and ghostly as marble. What stories would she tell us? How was her relationship with her sons and husband? Why does she receive the level of both fame and infamy afforded to her by ancient authors that other wives of emperor's do not? It is these questions, among others, that the rest of this paper will seek to address in order to provide a consolidated discussion of Julia Domna.

The following paragraphs present the notion that Severan propaganda was emulous of the actions and artistic decisions implemented under Marcus Aurelius. I argue that Septimius Severus and Julia Domna emulated the behaviors of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger to assert his legitimacy and connection to the last, "Good Emperor". It can also be argued that Severus and Domna were not mimicking the actions of their predecessors, but rather were continuing their traditions. This view presents Severus as attempting to cinch himself to Marcus

⁵ Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*, 19–22.

It is quite possible the Julia may well have been familiar with other Semitic languages like Aramaic or Palmyrene due to the wide and varied use of the language throughout antiquity in Syria and the proximity of Emesa to Palmyra. Yet, this is a statement that cannot be confirmed, is not mentioned by ancient authors, and is of my own speculation.

Aurelius, to present his rise to power as legitimate and seamless. While this conclusion is a part of my argument, I instead present a narrative where Severus' actions are deliberately mimetic of Marcus Aurelius so as to convince the state and Roman citizens of his capableness by conjuring a sense of imperceptible change and stability.

To continue, life in the imperial court under Septimius Severus witnessed the emulation of artistic expressions and political motives of his predecessors, Marcus Aurelius and Augustus. One of Severus' main political goals was to reimplement Augustan moral codes. Particularly, Severus was intent on passing legislation against adultery, just as Augustus Caesar had done prior to him.⁶ Severus' alignment of his political motives with the moral ideologies of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius represents a unique historical trend. The perceived need for laws that regulate sexual practices, and women by proxy, is an expression of the ruling dynasty, or emperor's concern over issues regarding reproduction, dynastic succession, and legitimacy.⁷ The severity of Severus' campaign against sexual promiscuity was felt close to home. After being accused of committing adultery by the head of the Praetorian guard, Plautianus, Julia Domna, Severus' own wife, was forced to stand trial and be tried for her crimes. As a measure taken towards securing the legitimacy of his rule, the continuity of his bloodline, and the prosperity of his empire, Severus aligned himself with two favorable emperors, an action that was neither novel nor unprecedented, but was rather a continuation of a sociopolitical trend with the desired effects of the aforementioned results. Consequently, the reimplementation of imperial moral codes catalyzed the construction of female typologies, and the "wily seductress" that must be repressed in order to be controlled.

⁶ Gorrie, "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," 62.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

Julia Domna and Septimius Severus' relationship too was emulous of the behaviors of preceding imperial relationships. This emulous performance was manifested through several different behaviors and actions. One way this behavior was practiced is made evident by one of Julia Domna's many honorific titles, *Mater Castrorum*, or Mother of the Camps. It is recorded that while Severus was campaigning, Domna was known to travel with him and live on the frontier in the military base camps.⁸ This claim is corroborated by numismatic evidence, that will be discussed later on, contemporary to her adoption of the *Mater Castrorum* title in 195 CE. It is possible that Julia Domna's presence on the frontier was a continuation of an earlier precedent set by Faustina the Younger, who traveled with her husband, Marcus Aurelius, and lived in fortresses on the Roman frontier, and too, was honored with the *Mater Castrorum* title. This action not only expressed the military unity of the empire, but also designated Julia Domna as the "...rightful successor of Faustina,"⁹ Therefore, Julia Domna derived her legitimacy and right to rule from both Severus, and more importantly, Faustina, via mimesis.

Another tactic Severus employed to better align himself with Marcus Aurelius was to emphasize the magnitude of the role of "mother". The promulgation of Severan propaganda can be traced back to the agitprop imperial portrait types employed by and communicated via Roman mints. Between 195-197 CE, during the elevations of Caracalla and Geta to the position of *pontifex*, Julia Domna was honored with three new, distinctly maternal titles: *Mater Augustii*, *Mater Caesari*, and *Mater Augustorum*. The titles celebrate her as mother of the emperors.¹⁰ The full extent of Severus' plan was achieved with the bestowment of the title, *Mater Senatus et Patriae*, unto Domna. The celebration of Domna as "Mother of the Emperors" and "Mother of

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰ Ibid., 64.

the Senate and Country” linked her maternal role to the imperial family and the state itself.¹¹ The dating of this title is conjectural and uncertain. Moreover, the notion of “motherhood” was conflated with fecundity and virtue in Severan gender ideology. This theme was propagated in coins, struck between 193-211 CE, bearing Domna’s image with the legends “VENVS GENETRIX” and “FECVNDITAS”.¹² Numismatic evidence has revealed that both of these titles previously belonged to Faustina the Younger. The fusion of titles relating to motherhood with titles relating to fertility sheds light on the Severan regime’s understanding of women as responsible for sustaining the stability of the bloodline, or dynastic succession for imperial women, and consequently, the stability of the empire as a whole. The ubiquity of Domna’s Fecunditas and Venus Genetrix coin types ensured that Severan propaganda pervaded the vastness of the empire.

Although Domna was idealized and celebrated for being the mother of the emperors, literary sources offer a different account of her relationships with her two sons, Caracalla and Geta. After the death of Septimius Severus in 211 CE, tensions between Caracalla and Geta increased. The two brothers were slated to rule jointly, with Caracalla in the West and Geta in the East, despite reports that they were never truly amicable with one another. In fact, even when the two were in the imperial palace, they divided the space and servants and stayed on their respective sides so as to avoid communication and poisoning.¹³ Contemporary literary sources discussing the conflict between Caracalla and Geta have a tendency to insert Domna into her sons’ struggle for ultimate power. Herodian actually assigned blame to Domna, stating that she was the reason why the empire was split hemispherically between the two brothers, and thus the

¹¹ Ibid., 64.

¹² Bertolazzi, “Julia Domna and Her Divine Motherhood: A Re-Examination of the Evidence from Imperial Coins,” 466.

¹³ Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*, 89.

reason for political turmoil.¹⁴ Furthermore, Dio claimed that she favored Geta over Caracalla and that she was openly hostile towards him. Some authors even refer to her as Caracalla's stepmother since she was Severus' second wife and the dating of Caracalla's birth is dubious.¹⁵ Many fictive stories like the aforementioned, are written about the feuding brothers with almost all of them including Domna and characterizing her as deceptive, cold, and even incestuous. A particularly intriguing account, first recorded by Herodian, tells of a nickname Domna acquired, Jocasta, mother of the quarrelsome Theban brothers Eteocles and Polynices. The ancient authors eroticize the conflict between Caracalla and Geta by placing Domna into a narrative, that in reality she likely had limited influence in, thus turning her into a symbol of power. Playing with the implausible story of Domna being Caracalla's stepmother, the authors detail a lustful sex scandal between the two, where in the most radical of accounts they even marry!¹⁶ The stories presented here differ quite drastically from the imperial biography sketched above.

A closer look at the assassination of Geta may lend insight into what appears to be outlandish claims made about Julia Domna. There may be some truth to Dio's claim that Domna openly was hostile towards Caracalla. Whether or not her extreme dislike for her first born was a result of his character, his involvement in the murder of Geta, a combination of both, or existent at all is not clear. Two story lines for Geta's murder pervade history and remain extant in the literary sources. Barbara Levick, author of *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*, suggests reading Dio's version while keeping in mind the story of Aphrodite protecting her son Aeneas. According to Dio, Geta was in his mother's chambers when the praetorian guard, under the control of Caracalla, surrounded the room. Geta ran to his mother for protection but was

¹⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

inevitably killed in her arms with the deathblow injuring her hand.¹⁷ Herodian, favoring a Caracalla with an even greater sense of bloodthirst, graphically narrates that he planned the attack and executed his brother by himself.¹⁸ However fanciful and enticing these stories are, it is likely that they are highly embellished and constructed according to the prerogatives of the author. Levick proposes that a closer reading of Caracalla's account may reveal a more promising testimonial, "... the murder resulted from a quarrel at a meeting intended to reconcile them that turned into a brawl of the kind the brothers had enjoyed in the past; Caracalla simply got the better of the scrap."¹⁹ Whether Caracalla killed Geta with his own hands or not, he certainly was involved in his brother's assassination. Thus, Dio's claim that Domna expressed enmity towards Caracalla becomes a little clearer. Herodian's ascription of Domna as the incestuous Jocasta of Thebes relates to another account of Geta's assassination. In this account, Caracalla goes before the Senate and charges Geta with attempting to poison him and for disrespecting Julia Domna. In this testimony, Geta is criminalized and Julia Domna's favor is shifted to lay with Caracalla.²⁰ Ancient authors pursued an angle that depicted Domna's "favoritism" for Caracalla to be imbued with licentiousness and sexual desire, as evident in the development of the Jocasta comparison. Additionally, Caracalla used her as a political tool to earn the loyalty of the Senate and military, especially the Second Legion, Parthica, as he narrowed his sights on possessing sole rule of the Roman Empire.

The consolidation of Caracalla's rule enabled Julia Domna to become better acquainted with the mechanisms of the Roman administrative apparatus and to exert greater influence in Roman politics. Any articulations of enmity against Caracalla were harbored by Domna and/or

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁰ Ibid., 89-90.

silenced by male imperial biographers and artists. Interestingly, it is during the reign of Caracalla that Domna reaches the height of her “power” or more appropriately, her political sway. After burying Geta and her inexpressible grief, Domna repositioned herself behind Caracalla to ensure that what her late husband had worked to achieve would not fall through the cracks of political rifts.²¹ She served as a critical member of Caracalla’s entourage when traveling and campaigning in the East. Her fluency in Greek and Latin, in addition to her working knowledge of Roman political affairs, made her a useful clerical assistant to the emperor. From the provincial capital city of Antioch, Domna returned to her homeland to assist her son while he was campaigning. It is said that Caracalla frequently turned to his mother with questions and concerns while he was away. What is more, Domna was charged with the responsibility of managing Caracalla’s Greek and Latin correspondence and replying to citizen petitions.²² Though, it is difficult to gage the extent of her influence over Caracalla when making decisions, her voice was not silenced. The next portion of this paper will attempt to provide a comparative discussion of how literary sources, material culture, and imperial portraiture treated Domna’s position in Roman government from 193-211 CE and 211 and 217 CE.

Cassius Dio’s *Roman History* is one of the earliest and most complete documents that includes a biographical summary of Julia Domna. In its rawest form, Dio’s history of Domna’s life is highly misogynistic and consistently describes her as power-hungry and perpetuates and adds to stereotypes attributed to “easterness” that were operative in his time.²³ Dio attempts to legitimize his account by stating his relationship and proximity to the imperial family. Essentially, Dio persuades readers to recognize the authenticity and authority of his text because

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 92,95.

²³ Scott, “Cassius Dio’s Julia Domna: Character Development and Narrative Function,” 414.

he had access to a “hard core” of knowledge about Domna and her Syrian background.²⁴ The most important drawings from Dio’s account is that Domna was unvirtuously opportunistic and the locus of descent within the Severan regime. Dio describes Domna as obsessed with power and paints her to act authoritatively, or at the very least like a co-regent. He compares her to Semiramis, a quasi-mythological queen, born of humble origins who rose to prominence. Semiramis had children from two separate marriages and is said to have enslaved her first husband, Onnes, and then became regent when her second husband, King Ninus, died.²⁵ His comparison of Domna to a power-crazed queen is indicative of male anxieties about women who come to power. Furthermore, his assessment of Domna as power-hungry is critical of her easternness and the fact that she does not adhere to the expectations of women; wielding power and ruling is exclusively in the male sphere. Dio represents Domna as so preoccupied by power (it’s acquisition and sustainment) that she was aggressively rivalrous with Caracalla and even after his assassination, attempted to organize a *mouvement de résistance* against Macrinus, the usurper, in order to preserve her station.²⁶

Furthermore, in an elaborate and convoluted explanation of succession, Dio traces the legitimacy of the succeeding emperors to Julia Domna. After the short rule of Macrinus (r. 217-218 CE), Elagabalus (r. 218-222 CE) became emperor, and after him Alexander Severus (r. 222-235 CE).²⁷ By the time of her death, it would not have been made clear to Domna that her family would regain control over the Roman world, but the rise of Elagabalus, named after the famous Emesene sun god, would restore the “Severan dynasty”. Technically, the assassination of Caracalla ended the Severan bloodline, yet, Elagabalus and Alexander Severus both claim

²⁴ Ibid., 416.

²⁵ Ibid., 420.

²⁶ Ibid., 419, 425.

²⁷ Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*, The Family of Julia Domna.

legitimacy through Caracalla and Severus. In other words, via their familial connection to their great-aunt, Julia Domna, Elagabalus and Alexander Severus claimed their right to rule. Though the emperors rephrase their claim to the throne to tell the traditional narrative of patriarchal descent, Dio's assessment is more historically accurate. We should not mistake his acknowledgement of Domna as the locus for imperial power and descent as progressive or accepting. Instead, Dio chastises her for her manipulateness and blames her for the ascent of powerful, openly eastern, regent-like women in Rome. He wants the reader to believe that Macrinus was wrong, it was not Caracalla that needed to be deposed, it was Domna.²⁸ Dio's account of Domna perpetuates eastern stereotypes and casts her as power-obsessed, regent-like, and cataclysmically close to the management of the imperial concentration of power and descent.

Imperial portraiture of Julia Domna on statue busts are highly charged works of art employed by the Severan regime to purport an idealized representation of the empress and the imperial family. Two distinct portrait types emerge of Domna, an earlier style (193-211 CE) and a later style (211-217 CE). The corresponding dates of portrait types align with the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla respectively. Drora Baharal, author of "The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus" describes Domna's early portrait type:

²⁸ Scott, "Cassius Dio's Julia Domna: Character Development and Narrative Function," 422.; Dio believed that Domna set the stage for Julia Soemias (mother of Elagabalus) and Julia Mamaea (mother of Alexander Severus) to rule as regents queens.

“...the empresses’ hair...completely covers the cheek almost enshrouding it, and is only pulled back when it reaches her shoulders... the empresses’ curls are pulled back into closely braided and twisted buns.”²⁹

She appears quiet and passive. For instance, in Fig 8. her eyes do not meet our gaze, they drift to left as if she is looking thoughtfully at someone in the distance. Perhaps she is listening to or admiring Septimius. Her earlier portraits paternalistically portray her as docile and contemplative, traits that would have been admirable and sought after in the context of Severus’ moral and gender ideologies. It is also important to note that many scholars have noted the similarities between her portrait and Septimius Severus’.³⁰ The two are both are represented with somber, docile, almost sleepy facial expressions. The empress’ adoption of her husband’s physiognomy was not novel in imperial portraiture. As a matter of fact, statue busts of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger depict the same trend, which fits nicely into the aforementioned argument that Septimius Severus sought legitimacy through Marcus Aurelius and expressed it via mimesis. What is more, of the few extant statue busts that jointly depict the emperor and empress, they are uncoincidentally of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger and Septimius Severus and Julia Domna.³¹ If this was a part of Severus’ political agenda, how much influence did Domna have over how she was represented? How did she feel about having her husbands’ features transplanted and superposed over her own? Moreover, her physiognomic features too maybe be part of a visual campaign aimed at restoring Domna’s reputation after

²⁹ Baharal, “The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus,” 111.

³⁰ Hiesinger, “Julia Domna: Two Portraits in Bronze,” 43.

³¹ Baharal, “The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus,” 118.

facing slander from the head of the Praetorian Guard, Plautianus, but there has yet to be corroborating evidence to strengthen this claim.

In the early type, her chignon begins near the nape of her neck and extends to almost the top of her head. It is unmistakably clear that her coiffure is separate from her head which suggests that she is wearing a wig.³² Busts depicting Domna wearing a wig have a dual effect. For starters, her modeling of the wig may have been popularized by its use among elite women, but it cannot be concluded that she was the original trendsetter. In fact, the wig was not even an original Roman fashion. Domna and/or her portraitists, adopted the wig from Eastern cosmetic trends and introduced it to the western world, most likely in an attempt to recognize and subsequently normalize her “foreignness”. Additionally, her wig can be interpreted to function analogously to a veil. Her hair coddles her head and cheeks like a hood, partially covering her face and completely hiding her natural hair. The wig, as an adaptation of the veil, helped to advance Severus’ political goals by reinforcing the notion of female modesty. The veil, and wigs by proxy, enabled women to express a certain amount of freedom and have a role, regardless of how small, in the public sphere without abandoning their gender roles or intruding on male space. Furthermore, Baharal’s observation that Domna’s early hairstyle is reminiscent of a helmet, lead me to relate this design potentially to her role as *Mater Castrorum*.³³ As Mother of the Camps, Domna was celebrated for her presence in the frontier as a maternal figure in Roman fortresses. Sculpting her hair to conceptually look like a helmet was one way for agitprop sculptors to highlight her femininity and role in the camps without masculinizing her. Portraits of Domna sculpted under the reign of Septimius Severus portray her with a contemplative and

³² Ibid.,

³³ Ibid.,

passive expression, crowned with a tamed, modest hairstyle that may allude to a helmet or the use of veils and certainly applauded the image of a submissive wife.

Domna's later portrait type emerged in 211 CE when Caracalla assumed sole rule of the Empire. Under Caracalla, Domna's portrait type, in both coins and statue busts, shifts to communicate a new component of Severan propaganda. Focusing less on the importance of motherhood, Domna's image began to appear less restrained. One of the most distinguishing features of this later type, is her hair. Here her coiffure is pulled back, revealing more of her cheeks and face. Braids line the edges of her hair and a small knot, near the base of her neck, takes the place of a broad chignon.³⁴ Most likely, the development of this style was established in the imperial court, but it is hard to say with certainty if Domna was responsible for its creation. Possibly, the new style was introduced by Caracalla's wife, Plautilla. The longevity of Domna's preeminence in the imperial court is surprising. Similarly to Livia, Domna was not replaced by a daughter-in-law.³⁵ With the death of her husband and Caracalla's presumed murder of Plautilla, Domna's imperial portraits reflect the changes in her status from wife and mother, to widow and dowager. Might the loosening of her hair signify these life changes? Can wigs be used as a medium to express one's current position or title? Whatever the reasons were that called for edits to be made to her portrait, it is clear that both portrait types, communicate an idealized version of Julia Domna that clashes with Cassius Dio's testimony.

Numismatic evidence bearing Julia Domna's image also sheds light on the differences between the literary sources and imperial representations of the empress. Coins with Domna's image too can be identified by an earlier or later type dependent on the ruling emperor, Septimius Severus or Caracalla. The early type has a *terminus ante quem* of 193 CE. Coins from

³⁴ Hiesinger, "Julia Domna: Two Portraits in Bronze," 41.

³⁵ Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress*, 92.

193-211 CE celebrate Domna's maternity and her procreative abilities and typically portray her with deities who have children.³⁶ The most significant legends that adorn Domna's coins in this type is FECVNDITAS and VENVS GENETRIX. Coins bearing the Venus Genetrix legend are devoted to the motherhood of Venus.³⁷ She can be identified as "...sitting on a throne with scepter, apple, and a little Cupid at her feet..."³⁸ The imagery on this coin type most likely appeals to Domna's maternity and royal status. Fecunditas, the goddess of fertility, is typically represented as seated on a throne with one child standing in front of her and the other supported on her lap.³⁹ The two children likely represent Caracalla and Geta and evoke the sense that the goddess and her bountifulness is linked to Domna.⁴⁰ What is more, all of the imagery discussed thus far belonged to coins of Faustina the Younger before they were appropriated on Domna's coins.⁴¹ Though not set apart from coin types of the Antonine period, the striking of the coins in all denominations is indicative of their importance to the dynastic propaganda of the Severan regime. There is one example of a coin type minted specially for Domna. Struck in Syria and Egypt and inscribed with the legend, "SAECVLI FELICITAS" ([Age of]Good Fortune), the reverse of this coin depicted Isis nursing Horus. The Egyptian goddess is shown standing, breastfeeding with her left foot resting on a "prow".⁴² Scholars expressed doubts about the goddesses identification though. Typically, Isis is shown seated while nursing Horus. If the goddess is Isis, scholars have suggested a reading of this coin that highlights Domna's role "...as an imperial

³⁶ Bertolazzi, "Julia Domna and Her Divine Motherhood: A Re-Examination of the Evidence from Imperial Coins," 465.

³⁷ Ibid.,

³⁸ Ibid., 466.

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ Ibid.,

⁴¹ Ibid., 466.

⁴² Ibid., 467.

mother, but also as the guarantor of an era of prosperity.”⁴³ Moreover, in the Egyptian pantheon, Horus is linked to kings and kingship, thus symbolizing Isis and Julia Domna as the bearer of kings. Domna’s earlier coin types are employed by Severus to emphasize maternity as the basis for fostering prosperity and harmony throughout the empire.

Domna’s later portrait types on coins from 211-217 CE correspond with the reign of Caracalla and are connected to a general notion of motherhood through the conflation of her identity and status with mythological women. Additionally, coins begin to reveal what is probably more accurate and less flattering portraits of Julia Domna. As her reign progressed, artists began to experiment with her portrait on coins, making her nose more pronounced, diminishing her smile, and revealing the effects of age.⁴⁴ The most frequent characters that Domna’s image is conflated with is Luna, Cybele, and Vesta.⁴⁵ Coins bearing the “Concordia Aeternae” or “Eternal Harmony” legend could be paired with different sets of images. One intriguing coin with the legend that fits the purpose of this study is paired with busts of Severus and Domna as personifications of Sol and Luna, with a portrait of Caracalla on the obverse. Severus is depicted wearing “the radiate crown” while Domna is ornamented with a diadem and lunar crescent.⁴⁶ What makes this type unique is that it is the first of its kind to depict a living empress with the lunar crescent under her bust. Antedating this type are examples of both Faustina the Elder and Younger appearing on coins with the lunar crescent, but only after they had died and been deified.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., 469.

⁴⁴ Hiesinger, “Julia Domna: Two Portraits in Bronze,” 43.

⁴⁵ Bertolazzi, “Julia Domna and Her Divine Motherhood: A Re-Examination of the Evidence from Imperial Coins,” 464.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 467.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 468.

Domna's Cybele coins are typically accompanied with the legend "MATER MAGNAE" (Great Mother) or "MATER AUGG" (mother of the augustii). Cybele's most common iconographic symbols feature her holding a drum or a scepter or with attendant lions by her sides.⁴⁸ In Fig. 4 Cybele rides in a chariot, being pulled by a quartet of lions. Her association with loyal lions is probably bound up with her connection to kingship; lions are a cross-cultural symbol of royalty. Therefore, Cybele's appearance on the reverse of Domna's coins indicates the gravity of Domna's maternal relationship to the emperor and bond to regality.⁴⁹

Vesta's image on the obverse of Domna's coins is rendered through two distinct iconographic modes. Fig. 5 is an example of the first type: Vesta Mater enthroned. In this type the goddess is seated on a throne carrying a scepter and the Palladium, an ancient Roman temple dedicated to Pallas Athena. This pairing of Domna and Vesta Mater enthroned is suggestive of her connection to maternity and the civic responsibility of women to maintain the hearth. The second Vesta type is evidenced in Fig. 7. This type is identifiable by the Temple of Vesta with six Vestals in the foreground engaged in a sacrificial ritual on the reverse. On the obverse she is, "...portrayed with divine attributes: in her right hand she held a statuette of Concordia and in her left arm she carried a cornucopia."⁵⁰ Her image is most likely paired with the Temple of Vesta due to her role as a patron. This will be discussed further in the following paragraph. Combining Domna's image with divinity and portraying her as the carrier of Concordia (harmony) connotes her as the bringer of fertility, peace and stability. As should be expected, these aforementioned coin types all belonged to Faustina the Elder and the Younger before they were appropriated for Domna's coins. Interestingly, the employment of her honorific titles and types discussed above,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 471.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 470.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 476.

essentially disappears from the coinage of imperial women and the archaeological record after Domna's death in 217 CE.⁵¹ Later portraits of Domna on imperial coinage purport her as a divine mother, bearer of kings, and imparter of harmony and prosperity.

Domna became an increasingly conspicuous figure as a patron of religious buildings. Most of the renovation projects she was associated with, were for temples of cults and deities connected to women and domestic life.⁵² Two notable projects she was involved with was the reconstruction of the Aedes Vestae and the Temple of Fortuna Muliebris. Domna's patronage for the reconstruction of the Aedes Vestae highlights her as the linchpin of maternity in Severan dynastic propaganda. A devastating fire that destroyed much of the Aedes Vestae at the end of Commodus' reign (191-192 CE) prompted the need for restoration. The temple's appearance on the reverse of particular issues of Domna's coins is the most cited piece of evidence that supports the idea that Domna, and not Septimius Severus, or another wealthy person made the benefaction.⁵³ Domna's patronal relationship to the Aedes Vestae, "communicated a message of continuity with the past," and her imperial reputation as a virtuous wife and mother.⁵⁴ Her role as an imperial matron should not be forgotten when considering how her patronage of the temple might have benefitted and restated Severus' political ambitions. By inserting her name into the temple's history, Domna's identity and position in the empire became conflated with Vesta's and her virginal priestesses role as the guardian of the hearth and the chaste defender of the *domus* and state. The Cult of Vesta was especially popular among *matronae*. The temple was opened between June 7th and June 15th, with the Vestalia being celebrated on June 9th. It is reported

⁵¹ Ibid., 482.

⁵² Gorrie, "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," 66.

⁵³ Ibid.,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

that Domna was a conspicuous figure during cult rituals and even helped to lead the worship.⁵⁵ It may be safe to conclude that Domna was liked and maybe even cherished by Roman women. What is more, the fire that originally affected the Aedes Vestae also inflicted damage on the residence of the Vestal Virgins, the Atrium Vestae.⁵⁶ It is difficult to say without doubts, but the fact that she was a visible, powerful figure in the Cult of Vesta, and paid for the temple's restoration, it would not be outrageous to suggest her patronage too, of the Atrium Vestae.⁵⁷ What is evident, is the continuous trend of Domna's copious portrayal as a virtuous and devout wife and mother and guarantor of prosperity and stability in the realm in her appearances in art and as a patron during the reign of Septimius Severus.

Domna's connection to the Temple of Fortuna Muliebris is indicative of one method that emperors and dynasties use to derive power from their predecessors. The earliest version of the temple was erected in approximately 493 BCE. The temple was dedicated by the Roman state to commemorate, "...the women involved in dissuading Coriolanus from attacking Rome during the war between the Romans and the Volsci."⁵⁸ I have excluded a discussion on the historical narrative of the Roman-Volscian Wars for two reasons. One, it is simply beyond the scope of this paper and two, it is my assessment that it's retelling would not add much depth to the analysis of the temple's lifespan in the context of this examination. When it was actively used, the temple functioned as the fulcrum for the religious rituals of married women.⁵⁹ Over the course of the temple's lifespan it received renovations by several powerful patrons. The first imperial benefactor of the temple was Livia, wife of Augustus Caesar. A lone fragment of epigraphical

⁵⁵ Ibid.,67.

⁵⁶ Ibid.,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁸ Ibid.,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 71.

evidence found along the Via Latina, records imperial restorations made to the temple by Livia, Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, and Julia Domna.⁶⁰ The authority of the temple increased with age and its historic ties to Livia, and became regarded as a descendent and translator of traditional Roman religion and morality reinstated during the Severan dynasty. The Temple of Fortuna Muliebris developed as an architectural palimpsest that was manipulated by Roman rulers to elicit a sense of continuity and stability.

Over the course of this study, Domna has been discussed under the lens of maternity. It is clear that literary sources and archaeological sources do not agree on many aspects of Julia Domna's life or her personality traits. In written accounts by Herodian, and especially Cassius Dio, Domna is portrayed as a deceptive, grasping despot who manipulated her husband and children in an attempt to gain supreme rule of the Roman Empire, who would have rather killed herself than be stripped of power after the fall of Caracalla. One of the most significant issues with literary sources, aside from the content of the text, is the inability of scholars to draw steadfast conclusions or translations from documents that are dotted with lacunae. On the other hand, archaeological remains depict her as a loyal, traditional matron, imbued with divinity and the qualities of a resplendent queen-mother. In fact, in Athens, epigraphical evidence has led some scholars to contend that attributes, responsibilities, and ritual functions of Athena Polias began to be translated unto Julia Domna; Domna was not the rival of Athena Polias but rather, the "living incorporation" of her.⁶¹ This anomalous practice might be justified as the Athenians attempting to win back the grace of Septimius Severus after expressed disfavor for them for siding with his opponent, Pescennius Niger.⁶² There are still plenty of questions that remain.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁶¹ Oliver, "Julia Domna as Athena Polias," 525–26.; The Athenians apparently made offering to Julia Domna as Athena Polias.

⁶² Ibid., 526.

How did mints design imperial portraits? Where were her statue busts originally displayed? How much say did Julia Domna have in the design of her portrait and the use of her name? Did she choose to be portrayed as she was, or to be the patron of particular buildings or was she forced to, to appease/promote her husband and sons?

Readings of Julia Domna's portrait type and literary biographies are fragmentary and saturated with the political motivations of the Severan dynasty and the perspectives of ancient authors. What is clear, is that Julia Domna was a complex and controversial figure even in her own time. For one moment, if we mute the background conversations of our authors, we may for one moment, converse with Julia Domna, the brilliant and cultured empress of the Roman world who was synchronously slandered, idealized, and deified.

Figures:



Figure 1 Denarius of Julia Domna (obverse) and seated Fecunditas with two children (reverse)



Figure 2 Aureus of Caracalla (obverse) and joint busts of Septimius Severus and Julia Domna with Sol and Luna attributes (reverse)



Figure 3 Denarius of Julia Domna (obverse) and Isis nursing Horus (reverse)



Figure 4 Aureus of Julia Domna (obverse) and Cybele steering a lion-drawn chariot (reverse)



Figure 5 Denarius of Julia Domna (obverse) with Vesta Mater enthroned (reverse)



Figure 6 Double denarius of a divine Julia Domna (obverse) and Venus Genetrix enthroned (reverse)



Figure 7 Medallion of Julia Domna (obverse) with six Vestals in front of the Aedes Vestae (reverse)

Figures II :



Figure 8 Portrait of Julia Domna 193-211 CE



Figure 9 Portrait of Julia Domna 193-211 CE



Figure 10 Portrait Statue Bust of Julia Domna 211-217 CE



Figure 11 Portrait of Julia Domna 211-217 CE

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