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Late antique origins of the ‘Imperial Feminine’: western and eastern empresses compared

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*This short analysis of the origins of late antique empresses aims to identify specific features of imperial power exercised by women. Many wives of emperors found themselves widowed and thus in a position to influence the education of their young sons, the ‘child emperors’ of the fifth century. Contrasting the eastern and western courts at Constantinople and Ravenna, it’s possible to trace patterns of preparation for imperial rule, how daughters of rulers were trained, later celebrated as *augoustai*, commemorated in statues and on coins. After comparing Pulcheria and Galla Placidia, the surprising career of Verina is contrasted with that of Ariadne, linking all four in the emerging phenomenon of the ‘imperial feminine’.*

Among the many innovations introduced by Emperor Diocletian (284–305), the new system of government, the tetrarchy, or rule of four, was one of the transformative developments of late antiquity. The plan to set up two senior emperors, each with a junior, called caesar, who would assist his rule and inherit his authority after a fixed term, provided a certain stability from 293 to 305 when Diocletian abdicated. During that period the number of imperial cities multiplied, with Milan and Nikomedeia becoming the principal residences of the emperors and a range of other centres, including Trier, Serdica, Arles and Antioch used by the caesars. Rome remained the home of the Senate and leading aristocratic families, while Constantinople, dedicated in 330, was established as New Rome, partly to replace the older capital of empire. In some of the new centres of government the ruler’s wife might hold a notable position, depending not only on her individual ambition but also on the relative importance and rank of the particular court. And from the early fourth century onwards as the number of imperial centres increased in both East and West, a rivalry between these “leading ladies” developed in step with the intense competition between their husbands, who campaigned to dominate the empire as a whole. Although this meant that the tetrarchy did not survive for long, the movement of courts between so many different imperial cities persisted and generated competitive issues in which the wives of rulers began to play an essential role.

Long after the imperial court was moved from its fixed position in Rome, Theodosius I died in Milan in 395, having decreed that his two young sons were to succeed him as joint rulers in East and West. This significant division of imperial authority into two equal spheres also had the effect of restricting the

number of imperial courts to two – Constantinople and Milan. Superseding all the other centres, these two cities now became the sole hubs of imperial administration and patronage, where ambitious officials and provincial governors, disaffected bishops and monastic leaders, mercenaries, entertainers, craftsmen and adventurers of all sorts went to gain access to imperial power. Like most courts, those of Constantinople and Milan were always full of intrigue and factionalism, as different groups tried to influence decisions in their favour. Foreign envoys and provincial visitors alike tried to increase their chances of a successful mission by approaching court officials who knew the emperors' personal tastes and habits. Empresses clearly fell into this category and some like Justina, the mother of Valentinian II (375–92) and step-mother of Gratian (376–83), enhanced their influence in circumstances where bribery was rife and contacts all-important.

In this short article I would like to explore the activity of some fifth century empresses, who seem to have exploited the official position of wife of the ruler. Building on a previous examination of this unusual potential, which I characterized as 'the imperial feminine', I wish to compare and contrast eastern and western models and styles of exercising a specifically uxorial authority and to identify its origins in the disturbed conditions associated with the accession of child emperors. Despite the differences, in both halves of the empire some wives of rulers initiated policies that contributed to a sense of their power. I start from the critical year of 395, when western empresses began to claim a similar power to their eastern equivalents. The central comparison is between Galla Placidia and Pulcheria and how their assumption of ruling authority might have influenced later generations, especially in the East.

In 395 the two designated centres of government were headed by young emperors: Arcadius probably 17/18, had some experience of imperial administration, though Honorius at age 10 was still a child who wept openly at his father's funeral in Milan. The older brother, as the senior emperor, presided over the more important court in Constantinople with his wife Eudoxia, whom he married in April 395. To safeguard and guide his sons, Theodosius had set up two military officials as guardians, Rufinus for Arcadius, and Stilicho for Honorius.¹ Both had ambitions to marry their daughters to the emperors. Rufinus failed and Stilicho succeeded, not once but twice, though neither Maria nor Thermantia had the desired effect of linking his family more closely to the imperial dynasty. Stilicho also made sure that his eastern rival Rufinus was assassinated on the first possible occasion.²

In the West Milan remained the site of the imperial court where Serena, the wife of Stilicho and an imperial princess in her own right, filled the equivalent position of empress. Theodosius I had adopted Serena when her own father died

1 *Eunapius*, fg. 62, in: R. C. BLOCKLEY, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Late Roman Empire, Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes*, vol. II, Liverpool 1953 (= ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs, 10), 90–91; *Olympiodorus*, fg. 1, *ibid.*, 152–3.

2 M. A. McEVoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West AD 367–455*, Oxford 2013, 153–86; I. HUGHES, *Stilicho, the Vandal who saved Rome*, Barnsley 2010, 14–32.

and she moved from the family estates in Spain to the court in Constantinople where she became the older sister of Arcadius and Honorius. In 384 Theodosius married her to his general Stilicho to link the powerful military leader more closely to his family. As Serena was older than the boys, she may have filled the gap left by their mother's death in 386. She adopted a motherly role toward Honorius and brought him up together with her own daughters and the young Galla Placidia. As a child Honorius was betrothed to Serena's eldest daughter, Maria, and even after their marriage (ca. 389), she retained much power as the imperial mother-in-law.³

At the turn of the fourth/fifth century as Gothic attacks threatened Milan, Honorius was advised to move the imperial court to a safer environment and late in 402 he went to Ravenna. This new capital city appears to have been chosen partly because its setting, surrounded by the marshy land of the Po estuary, meant that it was very hard to besiege and capture. It was also the site of the major port on the Adriatic, with a large harbour that could shelter the eastern Roman fleet and gave rapid access to the Mediterranean and Constantinople. Ravenna had been the capital of the Roman province of *Flaminia et Picenum*, with appropriate buildings for a governor, garrisons and administrative offices. All these were rapidly expanded to provide suitable accommodation for the court, the mint and a substantial increase in military and bureaucratic office-holders, accompanied by Stilicho and Serena.⁴

While Honorius appears to have built quite extensively in his new capital of Ravenna, he did not neglect the defenses of Rome, where the Antonine walls were repaired and strengthened. Throughout his reign (395–423) the ancient capital remained an absolutely critical base, the residence of most established aristocratic families with whom Honorius had to cooperate and the city in which he preferred to celebrate some of his thirteen consulates and triumphs, commemorated in lavish oratory by Claudian, his court poet. This was where the Senate erected statues to himself and his military commanders and where imperial ceremonial could be realised in its traditional setting.⁵ Stilicho and Serena also commissioned many eulogies from the official court rhetor and appear to have maintained a household in Rome and patronised the building of churches (and the desecration of pagan temples, according to one possibly legendary story).⁶

In contrast to Ravenna, the eastern court structures at Constantinople were already nearly a century old. As New Rome the city had imported and copied the layout and decoration of Old Rome, with its own Senate and grand civic

3 *Claudian, Laus Serenae*, F. E. Consolino (ed.), *Elogio di Serena*, Venice 1986, and the introduction, 12–15, 26–33.

4 S. COSENTINO, Ravenna from imperial residence to episcopal city: processes of centrality across empires, *Rechtsgeschichte. Zeitschrift des Max-Planck-Instituts für europäische Rechtsgeschichte* 23, 2015, 54–67.

5 H. LEJDEGÅRD, *Honorius and the city of Rome. Authority and legitimacy in late antiquity*, Uppsala 2002.

6 Serena is said to have adorned herself with a jewelled necklace taken from the statue of the goddess Rhea in the temple of Cybele, a crime noted by the pagans who supported the decision to have her put to death during the siege of Rome, *Zosimus, New History*, 5.38, R. T. Ridley (tr.), (*Byzantina Australiensia*, 2), Canberra 1982, 119.

buildings. In the fifth century the court developed its rituals within the Great Palace, a massive complex of buildings in which the wife of the emperor had her own quarters, with her own servants (officials to assist in the administration of her property, secretaries, guards, eunuchs and ladies in waiting). Arcadius' wife, Eudoxia, who had been raised and educated in the city, sought to enhance her position within the court in every possible way. Zosimus states that she took advantage of her husband's foolishness and even stupidity to assert her own authority: she 'was especially willful even for a woman'.⁷ He also condemns Eudoxia's devotion "to the insatiable and ubiquitous eunuchs and her female attendants' which made life unbearable for everyone."⁸ Her quarrel with the patriarch John Chrysostomos sprang from the inauguration of a silver statue in her honour on the Augustinus; it was accompanied by traditional songs and music, which disturbed the liturgy nearby.⁹

In January 400 Eudoxia was acclaimed *augusta* and coins were struck with her image, title and innovations including the Hand of God, *dextera Dei*, crowning her with a wreath (on the obverse, front), which led to her being identified as crowned by God.¹⁰ This gradually became the established form on most coins minted for empresses. A more radical change introduced the image of the empress enthroned (on the reverse), rather than the more common enthroned emperor. Some of Eudoxia's coins clearly represent the feminine version – the *basilis* seated on her throne with her arms crossed over her breast.¹¹ This innovation may lie behind the rather curious coins of Eudoxia's granddaughter, Licinia Eudoxia, minted in Rome and Ravenna between 450 and 455.¹² Since coinage

7 Zosimus, op. cit., 5.24, Ridley (tr.), 111. Clearly, clever wives had always taken advantage of their slow-witted husbands. Whether Arcadius took any account of Synesius of Cyrene's advice, delivered in the speech, *De regno*, remains uncertain. AL. CAMERON and J. LONG, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*, Berkeley 1993, 127–42, doubt it was ever given. On Eudoxia's management of the eastern court, K. HOLM, *Theodosian Empresses, Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982, 48–78.

8 Zosimus, op. cit., 5.24, Ridley (tr.), 111.

9 Socrates, *Church History* VI, 18, in: P. Schaff (ed. and tr.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series*, Edinburgh 1989, 150. In the sixth century Marcellinus adds that the statue still stood on a porphyry column beside the church, see *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, tr. and commentary by B. Croke, (Byzantina Australiensia, 7), Sydney 1995, 8.

10 J. KENT, *The Roman Imperial coinage*, vol. 10, *The divided empire and the fall of the western parts AD 395–491*, London 1994, Catalogue nos. 77–81, and pl. 4. My thanks to Cécile Morisson for her expert guidance in the use of Kent's catalogue.

11 As above.

12 As above, nos. 2016 and 2023, and pl. 49. Licinia Eudoxia is shown full face on the obverse and enthroned holding cross on globe and long cruciform sceptre. Cf. no. 2046, pl. 51, dated 450–55. D. ANGELOVA, *Sacred Founders: women, men and gods in the discourse of imperial founding, Rome through early Byzantium*, Oakland 2014, reproduces this type as an example of an enthroned empress, though it is quite unlike the earlier coins of her grandmother. The radiate crown surmounted by a cross and long sceptre and cross on globe she holds seem quite exceptional. Later, Empress Euphemia, the wife of Anthemius would use a similar type, see no. 2805, pl. 62. The unusual portraits have cast doubt on the authenticity of these coins.

was such a vital element of propaganda, a widespread symbol of empire, the decision to depict an empress enthroned must reflect the higher claim to shared authority made by wives of emperors. The shift would have been noticed by all who handled such coins.

After her acclamation as *augusta*, Eudoxia's new status was also broadcast to the Roman world in images (*imagine muliebri*), sent out to mark her promotion. These were to be greeted and celebrated in the same way as images of newly crowned emperors, *laureatae*. When the western court at Ravenna received evidence (or just news) of this 'innovation', Honorius wrote to his older brother to protest.¹³ This was not the normal procedure, he claimed, and had provoked 'voices raised in objection around the world'. Stilicho who was probably behind this letter did not approve of the prominence allotted to the empress, nor the novel measures taken to announce it, apparently by Eudoxia herself. Nonetheless, the procedure confirmed patterns of female rule that continued to stress the significance of imperial wives.

In her short life as empress, Eudoxia was almost constantly pregnant: between 395 and her death in childbirth in October 404, she produced four daughters and a son, Theodosius, who succeeded his father in 408 aged seven. In this way, another boy-emperor became the nominal ruler in Constantinople. Later writers suggest that his older sister, Pulcheria, who was only two years his senior, played a major part in his upbringing and preparation for the role of emperor. Sozomenos wrote a eulogy of her Christian devotion but is vague about her particular achievements.¹⁴ Whether she organised it or not, she at least acquiesced in the quite unexpected choice of a bride for her brother: Athenais, daughter of a pagan philosopher from Athens, who was converted and baptized as Eudokia.¹⁵ The new empress gave birth to two daughters and a son who did not survive into childhood.¹⁶ And this lack of a male heir gave Pulcheria her chance to direct imperial affairs.

Pulcheria (399 – 453) had an archetypal imperial family background in the palace of Constantinople. Because her mother died when she was only five, and her father four years later in 408, Pulcheria was raised by court nurses and eunuch servants, the *cubicularii* led by Antiochus, and received a thorough educa-

13 *Collectio Avellana*, no. 39, O. Guenther (ed.), 2 vols., (CSEL) 1898, I, 85; HOLUM, *Theodosian Empresses*, op. cit., 66–67.

14 *Sozomen, Church History from A.D. 323–425*, XI, 1, in: *A Select Library*, op. cit., 419–20.

15 *Socrates, Church History from A.D. 305–439*, XXI, in: *A Select Library*, op. cit., 164, stresses her considerable education and capacity to compose poems in heroic verse. The story that Theodosius said he only wanted the most beautiful woman in the world, a non-parille, and Pulcheria considered Athenais most appropriate, is found in John Malalas, book 14. 3–4, in: E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys and R. Scott (eds. and trs.), *The Chronicle of John Malalas. A Translation*, (Byzantina Australiensia, 4), Melbourne 1986, 191–93; copied by *Chronicon Paschale 284–628 AD*, tr. with notes and introduction by Mi. and Ma. Whitby, Liverpool 1989 (= *Translated Texts for Historians*, 7), 66–68. For the alternative account, see HOLUM, *Theodosian Empresses*, op. cit., 114–28.

16 Her career was upset by a scandal that forced her to retire to Jerusalem where she completed many charitable works, but she was never considered a model for later ruling empresses.

tion in both Latin and Greek. Anastasius, a friend of Synesius of Cyrene, and of the praetorian prefect, Aurelian, may also have been involved in teaching the imperial children.¹⁷ It seems very likely that patriarchs also took over their training in Christian history and theology. Church leaders often sought membership of a council of regency where they might influence minors, though none is recorded in this case. In one specific and very important decision Pulcheria must have taken the lead: she is reported to have devoted her virginity to God and to have persuaded her younger sisters to do the same. The decision was announced in a major ceremony when she consecrated a golden altar decorated with precious stones in the cathedral church (of Hagia Sophia), inscribed with her vow. Having thus resolved the problem of marriage, she refused to allow men to enter her palace “to avoid all cause of jealousy and intrigue”, and set about educating her younger brother Theodosius II in the correctly princely way to rule: how to gather his robes, to walk, to take a seat, to listen to petitions, and above all to adopt a deeply pious Christian attitude and to support the orthodox church. Leaving his training in horsemanship, military weapons and literary matters to other experts, she may have taken on the maternal role of the deceased empress.¹⁸

On 4 July 414 Pulcheria was acclaimed as *augusta*, aged 15, and two years later Theodosius II assumed his imperial position as *augustus* when he entered the city from Heraclea and in accordance with custom received a golden crown from Ursus, the city prefect, and the Senate.¹⁹ Pulcheria was also honoured with a portrait in the Senate (at Constantinople) by Aurelian, twice praetorian prefect and *patricius*, and Honorius and Theodosius were similarly commemorated.²⁰ In 421 she and her brother dedicated an honorary column to their father Arcadius, one of the grandest decorated monuments, topped with a statue of the emperor, and commemorating the defeat of the Goths in 400. Pulcheria’s position as adviser to the emperor was often threatened by other courtiers and when one eunuch official, Chrysaphius, gained greater influence with her brother she was forced to retire from the court to her palace outside the city at Hebdomon. She also disagreed with the Monophysite definitions of Christ’s nature that Theodosius supported during the 440s. After the Council of Ephesus held in 449, Pope Leo I addressed letters to her appealing for assistance in correcting ecclesiastical policy.²¹

17 *Malalas*, book 14.15 (tr. 197), op. cit., records the role of Antiochus in the education of Theodosius; CH. ANGELIDI, *Pulcheria. La Castità al Potere (c. 399 – c. 455)*, Milan 1996, 17–18, 48–49; HOLUM, *Theodosian Empresses*, op. cit., 80–82. Synesius’ letters 31, 34, 38 to Aurelian, (PG, 66), 1360 A–B, 1361C, 1364B, and letter 61 to Pylaimenos about finding the palace of Ablabius now belonging to Placidia, sister of the emperors, (PG, 66), 1405B. Online at <http://www.livius.org/articles/person/synesius-of-cyrene/synesius-texts/> and see PLRE I, 128 – 9 (Aurelian), PLRE II, 77–8 (Anastasius), PLRE II, 101–2 (Antiochus).

18 *Sozomen*, *Church History*, op. cit., IX, 1. He adds that “she caused all affairs to be transacted in the name of her brother”, Schaff (tr.), 419; ANGELIDI, *Pulcheria*, op. cit., 54–55.

19 *Chronicon Paschale*, 65 and n. 222.

20 *Ibid.* 63, reports her title as *nobilissima*, but cf. *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, 11 under the year 413–14.

21 Before concluding that Pope Leo I knew what a dominant influence Pulcheria had in the eastern court, it is important to remember that bishops of Rome wrote regularly to

The death of her brother in a riding accident in 450 presented her with an unexpected chance to assert her own authority, which she seized with alacrity. After initially concealing the emperor's condition, she negotiated with a possible successor, settled on Marcian, a military commander, and persuaded him to join her in a marriage of convenience. This was designed to enhance his imperial credentials and permit her to take a full part in the government as empress. Together they planned and then summoned the Council of Chalcedon, which met in 451 and reversed the decisions taken at Ephesus two years earlier. At this major gathering of largely eastern bishops plus a delegation from Rome, Marcian and Pulcheria were acclaimed as a New Constantine and Helena.²² The empress died in 453 leaving the succession unsettled, and on Marcian's death the Gothic leader, Aspar, held sufficient power to install another military emperor, Leo I. But in her life Pulcheria had manifested a distinct imperial profile nurtured within the imperial palace, which created a specific model for later empresses.²³

The contrast with Galla Placidia is very marked, beginning with the fact that she had much less exposure to the Constantinopolitan court. Her mother, Galla, had married Theodosius I in Thessalonike late in 387, and went to live in the eastern capital, while the emperor campaigned in the West.²⁴ Theodosius must have donated property to his new wife to establish her in Constantinople, but he does not appear to have considered how his family would react to the arrival of their stepmother.²⁵ His sons were probably 10 and 3 years old respectively and his adopted daughter Serena who had been married to Stilicho, may have been involved in their early lives inside the palace where they had their own staff of courtly officials. Galla may have found the situation difficult, the more so

the wives of emperors in their efforts to bring the Byzantine church into agreement with Rome.

22 *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, II, sixth session, acclamations at paras. 3, 5, 11, 13, 15, 20, tr. with introduction and notes by R. Price and M. Gaddis, 3 vols. Liverpool 2005 (= *Translated Texts for Historians*, 45), 214, 216, 240, 241, 243.

23 She was associated with the patronage of buildings dedicated to the Mother of God, though several may have been built later. In this Pulcheria set an example followed by many empresses, such as Verina, see L. JAMES, *Empresses and Power in early Byzantium*, Leicester 2001, 66–68, 91–2, 154–5; her charitable activity included the establishment of cemeteries for foreigners who died in Constantinople, J. HERRIN, *Ideals of Charity, Realities of Welfare: the Philanthropic Activity of the Byzantine Church*, in: *Margins and Metropolis. Authority across the Byzantine Empire*, Princeton 2013, 299–311, at 304.

24 On the motives behind the marriage see the brilliant analysis in: F. CHAUSSON, *Stemmata aurea: Constantin, Justine, Théodose: revendications généalogiques et idéologie impériale au IV^e siècle ap. J.-C.*, Rome 2007, 160–165, 189. Galla and her mother Justina were obliged to renounce their commitment.

25 The palace of Placidia was later known to Synesius of Cyrene, who mentions it in letter 61 directing a friend where to find a contact in Constantinople, PG, 66, 1405B. When the young empress Galla arrived in Constantinople she would have attended the eastern court as the step-mother of the two young emperors and may not have owned this residence later associated with her daughter. There was another *domus Placidiae Augustae* in the 10th region. By the sixth century the former, now called *oikos tes Plakidias*, which was close to the imperial palace, had been bestowed on papal legates (*apokrisiarioi*), R. JANIN, *Constantinople byzantine: Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (2nd ed.), Paris 1964, 135.

when she gave birth to a son, named Gratian after Theodosius' predecessor.²⁶ Although frequently identified as Galla Placidia, there is clear evidence for Gratian as the first child born to Galla and Theodosius.

In 390 Arcadius, prompted no doubt by his courtiers, tried to exile Galla from the court, and she may have retired to her own palace, but this was clearly a symptom of disagreement if not of deep rivalry. Once Theodosius returned to the eastern capital from his campaigns in the West, late in 391, relations apparently improved and Galla gave birth to at least two more children, another son named John and Galla Placidia (henceforth, Placidia) who was the only one to survive. In 394 Galla died and one year later when Serena was ordered to bring the emperor's children to the West, only Honorius and Placidia are named. Leaving Arcadius nominally in charge in Constantinople, Serena took these two younger children to Milan where they witnessed their father's death in 395. Theodosius had stipulated that Stilicho was to act as Honorius' guardian and he and Serena assumed the same role for Placidia, who was at most three years old. She was accompanied by her nurse Elpidia and many other servants from Constantinople who continued to look after her. Placidia thus grew up within the family of Stilicho and Serena in the imperial court at Milan, and after 402 in the palace of her half-brother Honorius at Ravenna, and was educated in the appropriate imperial fashion.

In order to strengthen his position, Stilicho intended to betroth his older daughter Maria to Honorius and his son Eucherius to Placidia, thus ensuring his commanding position within the ruling Theodosian dynasty. The first marriage duly took place in about 398, but the second never did. Nor were measures taken to marry Placidia to a suitable husband, who would not threaten the joint rule of Arcadius and Honorius. Perhaps like her cousin Pulcheria she refused any idea of marriage and opted for Christian celibacy, which would permit her to choose

26 Galla's only child to survive to adult life was her daughter Galla Placidia, who is normally identified as the first, born a year or so after the marriage in 387. The couple did not meet again until Theodosius returned to Constantinople in 391. But it seems quite clear that in 390 her son Gratian was alive and known to Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who mentioned Gratian as the son of Theodosius in his letter of 390 condemning the massacre in Thessalonike: *Ambrose, Epistulae extra collectionem*, 11.17 'patrem Gratiani', (= Maur. 51), M. Zelzer (ed.), *CSEL* 82. 3, Turnhout 2010, 218. This must be a reference to the young Gratian, who was therefore the first child of the couple, rather than the old Emperor Gratian, but see N. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, Berkeley 1994, 325, n. 115, for an interpretation of this reference as a posthumous invocation of the emperor of 367–83. Similarly, in the *Funeral Oration for Theodosius*, para. 40, Ambrose specifies that in heaven the dead emperor will meet 'Gratian and Pulcheria, his sweetest children whom he had lost here' as well as his wife Flaccilla, who predeceased him, and his father and Constantine I, see J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan Letters and Orations*, Liverpool 2005, 197 and 269; T. Moreau, *Le De obitu Theodosii d'Ambroise (395)*, in: *Shifting genres in late Antiquity*, G. Greatrex, H. Elton and L. McMahon (eds.), Farnham 2015, 27–40, esp. 38 n. 63 pointing out that Theodosius had lost five of his closest relatives: his two wives, and three children (Pulcheria, Gratian and another unnamed baby who died with Galla). The case for Gratian as the first born child of Galla and Theodosius was initially made by S. Rebenich, 'Gratian, a Son of Theodosius, and the Birth of Galla Placidia', *Historia* 34, 1985, 372–85. My thanks to Professor McLynn to Dr Lunn-Rockcliffe for help with these passages.

her own life style. But other factors intervened and instead determined her well-known adventures with the Goths – a very different, eventful and colourful period. When Alaric first besieged Rome in 409 Placidia was taken hostage and held in the Gothic camp as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with the Senate and Honorius.²⁷ She was then about 17 years old, and after the sack of the city in 410 she left with other aristocratic hostages and the rest of the Gothic booty. They spent the next four years moving from place to place in the wagons of the Goths. This life was certainly quite different from Pulcheria's protected palace existence. It involved much travelling with the Goths, marriage to Athaulf in Narbonne, the birth of their son, christened Theodosius, and his death, followed by the assassination of Athaulf and Placidia's humiliation by his successor.²⁸ Eventually the Goths exchanged her for 600,000 measures of grain and she returned to the western imperial court, accompanied by a Gothic guard. On New Year's Day 417 her half-brother Honorius took her by the hand and gave her to his general Constantius who had long desired to marry her.²⁹

From this marriage Placidia had two children, a daughter Honoria and a son, Valentinian. In 421 Honorius acclaimed Constantius as co-emperor and Placidia became augusta.³⁰ And then later that year her second husband died. After this turbulent life, she retired to quarters in the imperial palace at Ravenna, where Honorius became overly fond of her, according to Olympiodorus.³¹ The precise nature of their relationship is hard to discern; as children of the same father, who had been raised in close proximity, they must have known each other quite well. But within a short period the emperor had banished her from his court, using as a pretext the fighting in the streets of Ravenna, attributed to her Gothic guards. She took refuge in Constantinople with her children. At this point in 423 Pulcheria and Placidia met and found that they shared a profound commitment to Christian observance, whatever their other differences.³²

Her arrival in the eastern capital was followed rapidly by the news of Honorius' death in the summer of 423, an event that made Theodosius II the senior emperor with the responsibility of appointing a western colleague. Since neither

27 The assassination of Stilicho was followed by the condemnation of his entire family: Honorius repudiated his second wife Thermantia and ordered the death of Eucherius, *Zosimus*, op. cit., 5.34, 35, 38, 38, tr. 117–19; *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, op. cit., 9–10. Serena was then put to death in Rome by order of the senate. Whether Placidia had any part in this decision is unclear.

28 Sigeric, Athaulf's successor, forced her to walk with a crowd of captives in front of his chariot for twelve miles. He was deposed after one week.

29 Olympiodorus records many events in this period of her life, see figs. 7, 22, 24–26, 33, BLOCKLEY, *Fragmentary historians*, op. cit., 158–61, 184–5, 186–191, 196–7.

30 J.-M. SPIESER, *Impératrices romaines et chrétiennes*, *TM* 14, 2002 (= *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*), 593–604, sees this assumption of the imperial title for Placidia as an expression of rivalry with the eastern court.

31 Olympiodorus, BLOCKLEY, *Fragmentary historians*, op. cit., fig. 38, 200–203.

32 *Sozomen*, *Church History*, op. cit., 9.16, Schaff (tr.), 427: *Galla Placidia*, 'sister of Honorius, born of the same father ... distinguished herself by real zeal in the maintenance of religion and of the churches'. The concluding chapters of the *History*, which come from an independent source, stress the peace that pervaded the eastern empire and emphasize God's beneficence in revealing many holy relics.

of Honorius' wives had produced any children, there was no obvious heir. And in the ensuing power vacuum the imperial position had been usurped by a civilian administrator named John, the chief secretary to the court at Ravenna. With senatorial support he had been acclaimed in Rome and sent his credentials to Constantinople. Theodosius refused to acknowledge them and considered how best to remove John and set up an appropriate ruler in the West.³³ These developments presented Placidia with a challenge full of potential, for she realised that her son Valentinian was the sole direct descendant of the founder of the Theodosian dynasty who could strengthen the family's hold on power. Her role in persuading Theodosius to promote his young cousin Valentinian, "the son of his aunt Placidia, [who was] sister of the two *augusti* Arcadius and Honorius" and to send him "into the western parts" has recently been disputed.³⁴ Because there was no constitutional role for a regent, in the sense in which Placidia is often cast, her position as the mother of the boy-emperor remained unofficial. Yet contemporary sources describe Theodosius as "committing the administration of affairs to his [Valentinian's] mother Placidia".³⁵ While eastern officials accompanied the large military force sent from Constantinople and were doubtless appointed to the highest positions in the western administration and military leadership, Placidia does appear to have been the figurehead that embodied imperial authority, in a way that her young son could not.³⁶

A rather obvious comparison presents itself: since Theodosius had been educated by his sister Pulcheria, he was aware of the role of a well-informed imperial princess, and may have seen a similar potential in his aunt. Assisted by experienced eastern male advisors and military men, Placidia could ensure the establishment of his young cousin as the nominal western emperor, following the pattern of Honorius' and Theodosius' own upbringing. Her wide experience in dealing with Goths, Roman senators, ambitious generals and powerful bishops was well known.³⁷ And did Pulcheria support the plan, which set Placidia in a position so similar to her own role in the education of Theodosius? Given her determined authority in the court of Constantinople she may well have endorsed a decision to grant Placidia a comparable role.

It seems quite likely that Placidia played a significant part in the decision taken in 424 to send Valentinian aged four back to Ravenna. Theodosius recognised her status by recognizing her title of *augusta* and minting coins in her

33 McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule*, op. cit., 226–35, details the extent of the military operation and the entirely eastern control imposed on the court at Ravenna.

34 As above, 235–8.

35 *Socrates, Church History*, op. cit., Bk 7.24, Schaff (tr.), 166; Olympiodorus, fg. 43, BLOCKLEY, *Fragmentary historians*, op. cit., 206–7; JAMES, *Empresses and Power*, op. cit., 74.

36 F. E. CONSOLINO, La 'santa' regina da Elena a Galla Placidia, in: R. Raffaelli (ed.), *Vicende e figure femminili in Grecia e a Roma*, Ancona 1995, 467–92, esp. 476–86; see also recent biographies by H. SIVAN, *Galla Placidia: the last Roman Empress*, Oxford 2011, and J. E. SALISBURY, *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia rules at the twilight of the empire*, Baltimore 2015.

37 F. E. CONSOLINO, Galla Placidia imperatrice cristiana, *Filologia Antica e Moderna* 7, 1994, 17–33, provides an excellent summary.

name.³⁸ Until her death in 450 these types were issued by western mints at Ravenna, Roma and Aquileia.³⁹ Placidia also benefited from another aspect of the arrangement: the betrothal of Theodosius’ little daughter Licinia Eudoxia to her son. This alliance enhanced Placidia’s position in that it allied her family even more closely with that of the eastern emperor.⁴⁰ Imperial authority was thus kept within the family of Theodosius I – the dynasty would continue to rule both spheres of the Roman empire under the control of the senior emperor, Theodosius II.

Both Pulcheria and Placidia appear to have used every chance to influence imperial policy and perhaps followed particular models of feminine leadership. They might well have known of Helena’s early fourth century achievements as detailed by Bishop Ambrose in his oration at Theodosius’ funeral.⁴¹ Ambrose also specifically invites Serena to imitate the first Christian empress.⁴² They could have heard of Empress Justina’s quarrels with Ambrose, when the widowed Arian empress ordered the court official, *magister memoriae*, responsible for drafting legislation, to write an edict in favour of the Arian Christians and he refused. But she got another more pliant secretary and the law was then issued in 386 over Ambrose’s strong objections.⁴³ Justina’s husband Valentinian I had also refused to admit St Martin of Tours to his court, while the usurper/rebel Magnus

38 KENT, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit., catalogue nos. 230–231, 263, 305, 426, 1804. See also J. P. CALLU, “Pia Felix” in his volume of collected articles, *La Monnaie dans l’Antiquité tardive*, Bari 2010, 479–96, who points out that Galla Placidia adopted the epithet Pia Felix, which was never used in the East, and traces its use from ancient Roman examples through to Amalasantha in the sixth century. It is particularly associated with empress-mothers holding power for their under-age sons. In Constantinople, in contrast, Aelia became the common epithet of all empresses following Flacilla. I thank Cécile Morrisson for alerting me to this article.

Recently ANGELOVA *Sacred Founders*, op. cit., 193–5 has identified the reverse of Kent’s Cat. no. 2009 as an image of Galla Placidia enthroned, with nimbus, holding a scroll, see the enlarged fig. 115. This is not the same as the type used by Eudoxia with hands crossed over the breast, and looks suspiciously like an emperor holding the mappa, with his feet on a footstool (Kent identifies it as Valentinian III).

39 KENT, *The Roman Imperial coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit., nos. 1333, 1804, 1808, 1811, 2077, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2020, 2052, 2059, 2062, 2066/7, 2082/3, 2090, 2092, 2109, 2111–2117

40 *Socrates, Church History*, op. cit., 7.44, tr. Schaff, 177; *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, 13 (under the year 423–4).

41 LIEBESCHUETZ, *Ambrose Letters and Orations*, op. cit., Funeral Oration, 41–51 with details of Helena’s ‘discoveries’ in Jerusalem, cf. S. LUNN-ROCKLIFFE, ‘Ambrose’s Funeral Orations’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 59, 2008, 191–207; MOREAU, *Le De obitu Theodosii*, op. cit.

42 A. GEORGIU, Helena, the subversive Persona of an Ideal Christian Empress in early Byzantium, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21.4, 2013, 597–624, esp. 606–8.

43 *Sozomen, Church History*, op. cit., 7.13, Schaff (tr.), 384; *Rufinus, Ecclesiastical History*, op. cit., 11, 16; JAMES, *Empresses and Power*, op. cit., 93–4; D. H. WILLIAMS, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of Nicene–Arian Conflicts*, Oxford 1995, 212–3. This example of an empress persuading Benivolus, the *magister memoriae scriniorum*, and his legal colleagues to draft legislation that reflected her interests is quite exceptional.

Maximus honoured him.⁴⁴ Such behaviour would not have been recognised as suitable for orthodox Christians. Neither were the stories of powerful Roman empresses like Agrippina and Livia positive or helpful models, although they preserved stories of imperial women acting independently.

In contrast, Pulcheria and Placidia both had mothers whose example of traditional imperial virtue was manifested as wives who gave birth to legitimate imperial heirs. In addition, Flaccilla was noted for her charity (she is reported to have visited prisons to alleviate the conditions), while Placidia's step-mother, Serena, was excessively praised by Claudian for her virtuous activity and Christian patronage.⁴⁵ Since most of the male authors of this period were not very interested in recording the achievements of imperial women, though they are always quick to condemn inappropriate behaviour, there is little evidence. Their attention to rival factions within the imperial courts, such as eunuchs trying to overstep their powers, or scandals involving corrupt officials and bishops buying positions of influence, was a more common focus.⁴⁶

It is quite difficult to distinguish personal initiatives taken by the two empresses who were so closely allied with their younger male relatives. Placidia definitely adopted a ruling position (even though there was no official post of regent) for her young son Valentinian III and appears to have taken a lead in trying to sort out contradictory legal regulations.⁴⁷ On 7 November 426 an imperial speech to the Senate in Rome introduced a series of new rules which has been described as a mini-law code, covering a wide range of problems in testamentary law, gifts and transfers of property through the emancipation of slaves, including both general principles and specific instances. This so-called *Law of Citations* also attempted to clarify which ancient legal authorities were to take precedence over the others and how discrepancies between them were to be settled.⁴⁸ The speech was given in the name of the seven year old Valentinian III and origi-

44 See *Sulpicius Severus, Dialogues* II. 5. 6–9, J. Fontaine (ed. and tr.), SC, 510, Paris 2006, 240–43 on Valentinian's refusal to admit Martin to the court at Trier, though he made his way in anyway, see McLYNN, *Ambrose of Milan*, op. cit., 81 and *Vita Martini* 6, J. Fontaine (ed. and tr.), SC, 133–135, Paris 1967–69, I, 266–7, on the saint's hostile reception at Milan, when Auxentius was bishop (this could just be a slur against the Arians). On Maximus' opposition to Justina and Arianism, see *Collectio Avellana* I, 39, Guenther (ed.), op. cit., 88–90.

45 *Theodoret of Kyrros, Ecclesiastical History*, 5.18 (PG, 82, 1237C); *Elogio di Serena*, Consolino (ed.), op. cit., 15 characterizes the *Laus Serenae* as a hybrid form that unites Greek panegyric with Latin epic; cf. AL. CAMERON, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, Oxford 1982, 406–17.

46 *Eunapius*, fig. 79, sets the tone for what women could do by alluding to an exceptional case: 'a woman of manly virtue undertook and carried out a deed of such nobility and courage that if I set it in my narrative it will not be believed.' BLOCKLEY, *Fragmentary historians*, op. cit., 122–3. She is unnamed and the deed is not described.

47 SALISBURY, *Rome's Christian Empress*, op. cit., 148–50; SIVAN, *Galla Placidia*, op. cit., 125–7.

48 J. F. MATTHEWS, *Laying down the law. A study of the Theodosian Code*, New Haven – London 2000, 24–25, with fn. 52 quoting T. HONORÉ, *Law in the Crisis of Empire, 370–455 A.D.: The Theodosian Dynasty and Its Quaestors*, Oxford 1998, 249–51, the sees the hand of Galla Placidia behind the law, and *ibid.*, 255, attributes its authorship to Antiochus, later chairman of the Theodosian Code commission. *Idem*, *Some Quaestors of the reign of*

nated in the West with no relation to other comparable efforts in the East. Yet it precedes the first legal commission set up by Theodosius II in 429 by only three years. While the author of this wide-ranging initiative remains unknown, Honoré suggests Placidia inspired it. Her understanding of the importance of written law can be traced back to the time when she was a hostage of the Goths and influenced her Gothic husband, Athaulf, to add some Roman legal principles into his rule. On her return to the imperial court in Italy, she could have acquired a deeper knowledge of the law, and might have discussed it with legal experts in Constantinople during her stay there.

The laws issued during the first years of her regency, drafted by the quaestors, deal with all essential issues, and one concerning the rights of mothers to inherit their deceased children's property may be related to her own personal interest.⁴⁹ Because the western provinces were almost constantly threatened by rebellion and/or invasion, military commanders took an increasingly dominant role in imperial administration. In managing the rivals, Boniface and Aetius, Placidia eventually lost ground to the latter, but left an impressive legacy of regular administration during her son's minority.⁵⁰ When he came of age, went to Constantinople to collect his bride and took over from his mother, Valentinian had to confront the same problem of an immensely powerful military leader, in this case, Aetius. Once Attila's death had removed the most serious threat to the empire posed by the Huns, the emperor dispensed with Aetius by assassinating him.

When comparing Placidia and Pulcheria, their shared commitment to Christian theology and monuments appropriate for its celebration is immediately noticeable. They patronised Christian building and encouraged skilled artistic work in a manner typical of powerful aristocratic women. Pulcheria's contribution to the liturgical development of the cult of the Virgin – building Marian churches, collecting icons and processing them through the streets, long night vigils,⁵¹ was not replicated in the West until the sixth century, though Pope Sixtus III created the great basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus (431).⁵² Beyond this Christian dedication, the major difference in their activity lies in the settings of their respective courts: Constantinople provided better opportunities for the celebration of empresses and

Theodosius II, in: J. Harries and I. Wood (eds.), *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity*, London 1993, 68–94.

49 SALISBURY, *Rome's Christian Empress*, op. cit., 148.

50 Despite Cassiodorus' insistence to the contrary, which is clearly related to the contrast he wishes to draw with Amalasantha, extravagantly praised, *Variae*, XI, 1. 9, S. J. B. Barnish (tr.), Liverpool 1992, 147.

51 SPIESER, *Impératrices romaines et chrétiennes*, op. cit., 602, relates the development of the cult of the Theotokos to the ambiguous unity of virginity and female imperial authority (maternity) created by Pulcheria, and understands the combination as a critical model for later Byzantine women.

52 ANGELIDI, *Pulcheria*, op. cit., 80–85; M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Aldershot 2005, especially part IV 'Public and Private Cult'; L. Brubaker and M. B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium Texts and Images*, Farnham 2011; JAMES, *Empresses*, n. 15.

their achievements in statues erected in the public sphere.⁵³ In Ravenna there is much less evidence for similar tributes, and there were fewer dominating figures to be acknowledged in this way. In Rome the Senate was empowered to decide which individuals to honour with statues on the Forum (military leaders like Aetius, emperors, consuls and city prefects and patrons), but women were rarely commemorated. A bust attributed to Placidia might correspond to the one for Pulcheria that was put up in the Augousteion in Constantinople. The miniature portrait in gold glass often identified as Placidia and her children was quite clearly intended for private rather than public use and ended up adorning a large processional silver cross.⁵⁴

Yet both empresses assumed unusually prominent positions during the rule of their weaker young relatives, and thus countered the all-powerful influence of military men, generals usually of non-Roman origin. In this threefold division of authority, which allowed imperial women as mothers or sisters to balance the military against civilian officials (especially the very influential corps of court eunuchs), they persisted in upholding the formal rule of younger or just less ambitious male relations.⁵⁵ Patriarchs of Constantinople also tried to assert their influence, which may have been paralleled by bishops of Ravenna or Rome. In both cases, however, women sustained the dynasty of their family, which provided greater stability than at other times. It was their misfortune to grasp these powerful positions when the worst disaster for the entire Roman world occurred: the capture of Carthage by the Vandals and the immediate cutting of the regular grain supply to Rome, as well as the export of many other products, such as African Red Slip ware, a high-class ceramic used throughout the Mediterranean.⁵⁶ The military failure, however, must be laid at the doors of the generals, Aetius in particular.

In one respect Placidia failed conspicuously: her own daughter Honoria had been acclaimed *augusta* in 424, coins were minted in her name but she was

53 J. HERRIN, *The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium, Past and Present* 169, 2000, 3–35, (repr.) *Unrivaled Influence. Women and Empire in Byzantium*, Princeton 2013, 161–93. The *Patria* identify numerous statues of empresses (Pulcheria, Eudokia, Eudoxia, Verina, Ariadne and especially Helena), and whether these are accurate or fantastic they reflect an understanding of the significance of the empress in Byzantium. SPIESER, *Impératrices romaines et chrétiennes*, op. cit., 604, shows how Helena becomes the partner of Constantine I, rather than just his mother, standing either side of the Cross, and in conjunction with the cult of Mary they establish a position of greater power for Christian empresses than their Roman predecessors.

54 Now in the Museum of Santa Giulia, Brescia, attached to the lower end of the so-called Cross of Desiderio, which was probably made in the late eighth or ninth century from 212 gems and cameos. The Greek inscription BOYNNERI KEPAMI has been considered the name of the maker, but a more recent hypothesis suggests that this is the name of the paterfamilias who commemorates his wife and children. <http://www.brescia-musei.com/nsantagiulia.asp?nm=14&t=I+capolavori.+La+Croce+di+>

55 McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule*, op. cit., 228–39, is quite skeptical about Placidia's influence, citing a number of eastern officials who accompanied Valentinian III back to the West.

56 On the significance of the conquest of Africa, see CH. WICKHAM, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2005, 20, 87; idem, *The Inheritance of Rome, a History of Europe from 400–1000*, London 2009, 41, 77–79.

never provided with a suitable husband.⁵⁷ McEvoy has suggested this might have been part of the dynastic plan: as a child-empress Honoria could fill the gap if her relatives should die. Like Pulcheria in the East, she could guide her young brother in his imperial role if their mother died, or she could be used to ensure the continuity of Theodosian rule by a speedy marriage to a suitable candidate, if Valentinian himself died prematurely.⁵⁸ But instead of either of these developments, Honoria used her own imperial status in her appeal to Attila the Hun before 450 – as an empress in her own right she had the means to send a eunuch to his court, carrying her ring as a sign of her authority and then she waited to be rescued, to the horror of her brother Valentinian III and cousin Theodosius II in Constantinople. Honoria had been raised in the court in Ravenna as an imperial empress but had nothing to do. Her audacious act of high treason has been attributed to the boredom induced by a luxurious life with no purpose, restricted to her own palace with only Eugenius, her steward, and eunuchs and ladies in waiting for company.⁵⁹

The contrast between Honoria and the elder daughter of Theodosius II is telling: Licinia Eudoxia had been more effectively brought up in Constantinople and prepared for her imperial role before she became the wife of Valentinian III and moved to the western court at Ravenna.⁶⁰ True, she gave birth to two daughters rather than sons who could continue the Theodosian dynasty, but the eldest, Eudokia, was used to ensure good relations with the Vandals of North Africa. After her husband's death in 455, however, when Licinia Eudoxia was faced with a forced marriage to a usurper, Petronius Maximus, she repeated Honoria's tactic and appealed to the Vandal king to come and rescue her. Geiseric was only too pleased to oblige and the sack of Rome that followed his invasion left the city more desolate than ever before. Eudoxia and her daughters Eudokia and Placidia were taken to Carthage along with the booty, and remained there for years as honoured but captive hostages.⁶¹

So although Licinia Eudoxia had been raised within the eastern court with the expectation of an imperial role as empress of the western provinces of the empire, she was unable to avoid the fate of so many aristocratic women. In the fifth century, losing a husband automatically raised the issue of remarriage. Since empresses carried imperial status they were particularly important prizes for usurpers. In this case Eudoxia's reaction to an unwanted remarriage for po-

57 KENT, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit., nos. 2021/2, 2053, 2055, 2063, 2068.

58 MCEVOY, *Child Emperor Rule*, op. cit., 238–9.

59 P. HEATHER, *The Fall of the Roman Empire. A new History*, London 2005, 335–6.

60 The marriage in 437 was marked by a coin that proclaimed 'Feliciter Nubtiis' and when she arrived in the West another with the inscription 'Salus Orientis Felicitas Occidentis', KENT, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit., nos. 276 and 269, plate 10, cf. earlier issues such as no. 332.

61 P. MACGEORGE, *Late Roman Warlords*, Oxford 2002, 258 points out that Placidia was also taken to Carthage as a hostage with her mother and sister in 455, and therefore only rejoined her husband Olybrius in Constantinople in 461. There they improved the church of St Euphemia. In 472 Leo I sent Olybrius to make peace in the West and he became emperor in April with Ricimer's support but died in November of that year.

litical reasons resulted in a long period of enforced (even if honorable) captivity among the Vandals of North Africa. Her relatives did eventually secure her liberty and she returned to Constantinople. But her life reflects the powerlessness of women whose male protectors died, failed or abandoned them. Her appeal to Geiseric had as little chance of success as Honoria's. Possibly she was also denied the only alternative: a commitment to widowhood with *univira* status and Christian dedication.

During the turbulent period between 455 and 476, the only recorded empress resident in the West was Aelia Marcia Euphemia, daughter of Emperor Marcian from his first marriage, so from an Eastern military background. She became *augusta* on the elevation of her husband, Anthemius, to emperor (467–72), was commemorated on the coinage and spent five years in the West.⁶² At the time the military commander Ricimer was directing the government and strengthened his position by marrying Euphemia's daughter, Alypia.⁶³ The imperial couple suffered from the western opposition to the *graeculus*, as western authors mockingly called Anthemius.⁶⁴ Other wives of short-lived emperors were never accorded imperial authority with the title of *augusta*; some of their names are simply not recorded.⁶⁵ Only Julius Nepos whose wife (unnamed) was related to Verina, appears to have had imperial connections (see below). Wives of important military leaders were reported to exert more power, for instance, the wife of Aetius, who allegedly forced Maiorianus to retire to his estates rather than being promoted as a candidate for emperor in 454.⁶⁶

While the western provinces were steadily overrun by non-Roman forces that often remained in permanent occupation, military affairs in the East were also very disrupted by foreign invasions. Yet several powerful women held the imperial title after Pulcheria. Their backgrounds differed and provide interesting contrasts. Aelia Verina (?457–ca 484) married Leo I before his accession to the

62 KENT, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit., nos. 2827, 2853 (Euphemia coins with Roma enthroned on the reverse. Cf. no. 2805 which may imitate the portraits of Eudoxia, see note 12 above. In the tenth century *Patria Constantinoupoleos*, 2.31, a sister of Leo I (457–74) identified as Euphemia was said to have erected a statue to that emperor called Pittakes, because people came and deposited their *pittakia* (petitions) at the base of the column, and the emperor dealt with them promptly, *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople. The Patria*, A. Berger (tr.), Cambridge Mass.–London 2013, 71 and 296, for the suggestion that this unattested woman may have been modeled on Empress Euphemia, wife of Anthemius.

63 *Priscus*, 64, Blockley (tr.), op. cit., 372–3. MACGEORGE, *Late Roman Warlords*, op. cit., 235–6.

64 *Ennodius, Vita Epiphani*, G. Hartel (ed.), (CSEL, 6), 1882, 244.35, *graeculus*, MACGEORGE, *Late Roman Warlords*, op. cit., 245 emphasises the contrast with 'catholicus et romanus'; S. A. H. KENNEL, *Magnus Flavius Ennodius. A Gentleman of the Church*, Ann Arbor 2000, 206–7; *Priscus*, fig. 30, Blockley (tr.), op. cit., 326–29, on Valentinian killing Aetius; *ibid.*, 330–33 on Eudoxia married to Maximus, and fig. 31, 332–35; *ibid.*, fig. 62 on Anthemius and Ricimer, 370–71; and fig. 64, 372–3.

65 The wife of Avitus, unnamed, was from Gaul; nothing is recorded about the possible wives of Maiorianus, Severus, Glycerius.

66 Pelagia, the wife of Aetius in 454, effectively opposed Maiorianus, Sidonius Apollinaris, *Panegyric* v, 126–274, W. B. Anderson (tr.), *Sidonius Poems and Letters*, I (Loeb Classical Library, 296), Cambridge, Mass–London 1936, 70–85 (where she is incorrectly identified as his first wife, whose name is unknown).

throne in 457, so they were both unfamiliar with imperial politics and court life. He was an Illyrian from Dacia and became *kourator* of Aspar, an Arian general. In 457 when Marcian died, Aspar set up Leo as a cover for his own ambitions. Verina, therefore, was not a product of the imperial court, but was parachuted into it, and apparently developed a significant grasp of her status and potential power. She was depicted on the bronze coinage holding a sceptre.⁶⁷ In 474 after seventeen years at the head of the eastern court, she had great ambitions to rule for her grandson Leo II, while her daughter and son-in-law, Ariadne and Zeno (previously named Tarasicodissa, a warlord from Isauria) assumed imperial control. But her plans were wrecked by the death of little Leo II, and Zeno became emperor. She continued to live in the Great Palace and Zeno was terrified that she would arrange his death, having him assassinated by some palace officials. By the sixth century Malalas has a clearly condemnatory attitude to the ‘mother-in-law’, claiming that she plotted against Zeno twice (first bringing in her brother Basiliskos, whom she crowned and appointed consul, and later with Illos and Leontios).⁶⁸ On the second occasion when Ariadne begged Illos to release her mother from imprisonment in a castle in Isauria, he asked “So that she can make another emperor in place of your husband?” – so Verina’s abusive use of imperial authority was well known.⁶⁹ Even allowing for typically misogynistic attitudes, these qualities would certainly commend her later reputation as a witch, but later sources preserve the evidence of many statues dedicated to her.⁷⁰

Recently Kaldellis has used the text of Verina’s edict elevating Leontios as emperor, reported by John of Antioch and reproduced in Malalas, as an indication of the republican traditions in the East: the empress offers to the city of Antioch and governors of other eastern provinces a new imperial candidate for their consideration.⁷¹

Know that the imperial rule is ours” (through Leo I her husband) “and we chose as emperor Tarasicodissa, later renamed Zeno ... But now seeing that the state together with its subjects are being ruined through his avarice, we have considered it necessary to crown you a Christian emperor, distinguished for his piety and justice, so that he may preserve the Roman state, bring a peaceful end to the war and protect all subjects in accordance with the laws. We have crowned the most pious Leontios.

67 D. ANGELOVA, *The Ivories of Ariadne and Ideas about Female Authority in Rome and Early Byzantium*, *Gesta* 43.1.2004, 1–15, esp. 4.

68 MALALAS, *Chronicle*, op. cit., 15. 1–6, 12–13 (tr. 209–11, 214–17); R. KOSINSKI, *Emperor Zeno: Religion and Politics*, Cracow 2010, provides a very careful examination and evaluation of all the source material, and deals with role of Verina, 79–82, 147–9; cf. M. J. LESZKA, *Empress-Widow Verina’s Political Activity during the Reign of Emperor Zeno*, *Mélanges d’histoire byzantine offerts à Oktawiusz Jurewicz (= Byzantina Lodzinsia III)*, ed. W. Ceran, Lodz 1998, 128–36; K. TWARDOWSKA, *Empress Verina and the events of 475–6*, *BSI* 72, 2014, 9–22, emphasizes Verina’s resentment at the elevation of Basiliscus’ wife Zenonis, which excluded her from her role as the sole augusta.

69 MALALAS, *Chronicle*, op. cit., 15. 13 (tr. 216).

70 Averil CAMERON and J. HERRIN (trs.) *Constantinople in the early eighth century*. The *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, paras. 29, 40, 89, Leiden 1984, 93, 111, 165; BERGER, *Patria*, op. cit., 2.25, 78; JAMES, *Empresses*, 73–4, op. cit., 91, 96–7.

71 MALALAS, *Chronicle*, op. cit., 15. 13 (tr. 216–7).

Leontios was acclaimed in Antioch, sent out his portrait, and fought against Chalkis when that city wouldn't accept his imperial image. So regardless of the fact that Illos forced Verina to set up Leontios as emperor, and got her dressed up in imperial robes to make the announcement, she clearly thought of herself as a king-maker and had officials who knew the correct way to present the change of leadership.⁷² Zeno was able to muster such a large military force that Leontios, Illos and all the others involved in the plot took refuge in the castle of Papyrios in Isauria where they were eventually captured and beheaded. Their heads were sent to Constantinople where Zeno ordered them to be exposed on poles at Sykai and people went to gaze at them (ca 490).

Verina may have been fortunate to die of old age in Cherries-Papyrios the castle in Isauria that held out for four years against Zeno's forces.⁷³ But her activity as empress encapsulates the claim that women can preserve imperial power, even if they are not members of the ruling family who have been raised in the court with all the qualifications that provides. This example may have inspired her daughter Ariadne, who was, however, born into the imperial court and became the wife and mother of emperors, augusta of Zeno and then Anastasios, a Constantinopolitan civilian bureaucrat. Aelia Ariadne (474–515) represented the dynasty that had replaced the Theodosian and personified this female hold on power even more clearly. In 478 when Odovacer's ambassadors from Rome and Ravenna arrived with the imperial *ornamenta*, signifying the end of imperial rule in the West, Zeno and Ariadne advised Odovacer to acknowledge the authority of Julius Nepos, the western emperor still ruling in Dalmatia. But after the death of Nepos in 480, Zeno became sole emperor of the entire Roman world, and Ariadne sole empress. Whether she is depicted on the ivory now in Vienna is unclear, but this could well be an image of her imperial authority.

After the deaths of Verina, her mother (ca 484), and then of her husband in 491, Ariadne dominated the court. As a widowed empress she was not allowed to rule in her own right, but the Senate of Constantinople recognised her sole power to associate an emperor to do so, and invited her to choose one. When she nominated Anastasios, the *silentarios*, an elderly court official, she provided imperial qualifications to a relatively insignificant figure. She may not have thought it possible that he should outlive her but he did, dying in 518. Their marriage of convenience functioned in the same way as Pulcheria's: it preserved the dynastic line and established a competent male ruler.⁷⁴

The only other fifth century eastern empress was Aelia Zenonis (475–6) wife of Basiliskos, thus a sister-in-law of Verina. Her origins are not specified

72 A. KALDELLIS, *The Byzantine Republic: people and power in New Rome*, Cambridge, Mass 2015, 62–4, cited as an example of *imperial legitimacy ... established by universal popular consent*.

73 *Malalas, Chronicle*, op. cit., 15. 14 (tr. 217); J. B. BURY, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian*, London/New York 1923, repr. 1958, I, 398 n. 3, notes that it had been specially prepared by Zeno as a safe retreat for himself if need be.

74 L. MAGLIARO, *Arianna. La Garante della Porpora*, Milan 2013, 129–32. Anastasios' religious views made him unpopular but he managed the finances and reformed the bronze coinage effectively.

and she became *augusta* only when her husband was crowned in January 475. Some authors hold her responsible for Basiliskos' efforts to overturn the council of Chalcedon; he issued a Monophysite edict abolishing its decrees. It is quite likely that a woman of Monophysite beliefs who found herself in this position would have done so. Her husband's brief reign was brought to an end in August 476 when he was exiled to Cappadocia. The family was incarcerated in a castle at Limnae and starved to death.⁷⁵

Conclusion

After reviewing the achievements of these eastern empresses, it is tempting to conclude that the court of Constantinople did provide a training ground for female rulers.⁷⁶ Pulcheria and Ariadne, in particular, were brought up in court circles and gained enhanced power through their knowledge of the way the imperial administration could be influenced. They were also able to take advantage of their position as older sisters/mothers of young emperors they could control. Yet Verina, who had no exposure to courtly life until well into her marriage to Emperor Leo I, clearly adopted the status of empress to great effect. During the seventeen years when she held the imperial title she mastered the governmental system of Constantinople and used it to promote her two major interventions – in favour of Basiliskos and Leontios. So the skills of manipulation and control could be learned and re-employed by those women with ambition. And although Placidia was not reared in the imperial court, her childhood in the family of Serena and Stilicho, close to her half-brother Honorius, gave her access to Roman circles of government. She was able to exploit her knowledge when exiled to Constantinople in order to argue for her son's promotion to imperial status.

Once established as regents/protectors/educators of their young male relatives, these imperial women tried to assume the key feature of directing the administration: holding court. As empresses they presided over the court, enthroned, and in this dominant position they received petitions, embassies, tax reports, military news – all the business of imperial government that emperors were expected to perform. On gold coins they are shown seated on thrones, with the inscription 'Safety of the Roman Republic', and a similar posture is found on one of the most impressive surviving ivories.⁷⁷ Regardless of the identity of the individual represented, she holds a globe and disperses gold, wearing imperial regalia, and is clearly a figure of great authority if not an empress.⁷⁸ Such women

75 *Marcellinus comes, Chronicle* under year 476, Croke (tr.), 26; *Malalas, Chronicle*, op. cit., 15. 5 (tr. 210).

76 HERRIN, *The Imperial Feminine*, op. cit.

77 KENT, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10, op. cit. Only the coins of Eudoxia show the empress enthroned on the reverse but many associate the portrait of the empress with the legends *Salus Rei Publicae*, *Gloria Romanorum*, and images of the cross in a wreath, or the Chi-Rho sign. And regardless of the identity of the empress depicted on the ivory in Vienna, she is presented as a female ruler enthroned holding a symbol of authority (the orb), see ANGELOVA, as above fn. 12; and *eadem*, *The Ivories of Ariadne* and op. cit., where she insists on the full shared imperial authority of emperor and empress.

78 SPIESER, *Impératrices romaines et chrétiennes*, op. cit., 600, suggests that the lavish decorative regalia carried by such empresses may not reflect their actual power and

appointed officials to leading positions in the military and civil administration and dismissed those that failed in their responsibilities. They minted coins; issued laws and made sure that they were enforced; raised and spent taxation. Like all good rulers they were praised for maintaining peace, securing borders, sustaining markets with sufficient supplies of food and the necessities of life, and relieving poverty. The reception of foreign embassies was often considered a specifically male duty (perhaps because it was inappropriate for visiting diplomats to witness a woman in charge of the imperial court). Yet when the mothers of young sons acted for them, to protect their interests, courtiers praised them as fulfilling their maternal duty in the best possible way.

This presumed maternal concern helps to explain the relatively positive understanding of the ‘mother behind the throne’, the empress who directed a council of regency to rule until her young son came of age. The role was acknowledged and permitted; it became the regular one for imperial women with minor sons. Verina tried to copy Placidia and Pulcheria by taking the place of her grandson Leo II, but he died before she could secure her authority. And when she extended her role to the elevation of new emperors, even under duress, she was severely criticised. In contrast, her daughter Ariadne continued it with her designation of Anastasios, who became emperor by marrying her – this was the key to his legitimacy.

Constantinople also remained the key site for the display of female authority in statues set up in the major squares and fora of the city, where they continued to remind later generations of earlier outstanding women. From the first commemoration of Constantine I’s mother Helena, through to later Byzantine empresses, statues of women, identified by inscriptions, recorded those who had inspired Christian devotion in good works and public buildings. Rome preferred to reserve the Forum for its male leaders, and Milan and Ravenna gave less public prominence to women. This element of the ‘imperial feminine’ was more developed in the eastern capital than elsewhere through visible monuments, ritual processions, court ceremonies and philanthropic foundations. Empresses were regularly named as benefactors of imperial charity, cooperating with their spouses or acting alone.⁷⁹

While Kaldellis has stressed the role of the populace in making emperors, dynastic blood continued to be the key legitimating factor that women possessed and could employ to secure their powerful positions, often to great effect. Looking forward, Sophia, the widow of Justin II, displayed serious resistance to Tiberios and prevented him from taking up his full imperial powers as emperor; Martina, the empress-mother adopting a protective role over her children, was accused of displacing those of Herakleios’ first marriage with her own; or Fausta,

in fact compensate for their deficit of authority. This seems to overlook the impression they give of wielding imperial power. E. RUBERRY, The Vienna ‘Empress’ Ivory, in: A. Eastmond and L. James (eds.), *Wonderful Things. Byzantium through its Art*, Farnham 2013, 108–10, identifies her as Ariadne, but before her elevation to the position of empress (with much bibliography on the study of the two ivories). Her dress and regalia suggest the rank of *nobilissima*, the title held by the wife of a consul, in this case her husband Zeno, in 469.

the widow of Constans II, mother of Justinian II, and grandmother of Theodosius III, who tried to protect him in 711 – but the soldiers of Philippikos dragged him out of the Blachernai church and killed him. Most strikingly in the eighth century Eirene used her married status as empress to control her son’s minority and curb his later rule; and Theodora later did the same for Michael III. In this way the patterns of feminine control established in the fifth century continued to inspire early medieval queens in the West and to mould the ambitions of later empresses of Constantinople.

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Note on general bibliography:

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