

Mujeres imperiales, mujeres reales

# Contexts of Ancient and Medieval Anthropology

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Mattia Cosimo Chiriatti, Raúl Villegas Marín (Eds.)

# Mujeres imperiales, mujeres reales

*Representaciones públicas y representaciones del  
poder en la Antigüedad tardía y Bizancio*



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**Joaquín Gómez-Pantoja Fernández-Salguero**

*In memoriam ac amicitiam sempiternae*

*quid erat ergo quod intus mihi graviter dolebat,  
nisi ex consuetudine simul vivendi, dulcissima et carissima,  
repente dirupta vulnus recens?*

(August., *Confess.*, 9.12.30)



# Índice

Prefacio .....	XI
<i>M. C. Chiriatti - R. Villegas Marín</i>	

Prólogo .....	XIII
<i>Julia Hillner</i>	

## I

### *Constantinianas, Teodosianas y Leónidas*

1. Princess Pipa as a Taste of a Literary Model .....	3
<i>Gabriel Estrada San Juan</i>	
2. Mausoleos imperiales de mujeres cristianas en el Occidente tardorromano: Arqueología y poder <i>postmortem</i> .....	16
<i>Jordina Sales Carbonell</i>	
3. La representación literaria de la emperatriz Elia Flavia Flaccila en el βασιλικὸς λόγος de Gregorio de Nisa .....	46
<i>Mattia C. Chiriatti</i>	
4. Aelia Eudoxia y Arcadio en Constantinopla: la piedad imperial concertada en la ciudad más cristiana del Imperio .....	64
<i>María Victoria Escribano Paño</i>	
5. Κατὰ μίμησιν τῆς μακαρίας Πουλχερίας. Diffrazioni storiografiche per <i>speculum haeresiae</i> .....	96
<i>Silvia Acerbi</i>	
6. Poder y legitimación de las emperatrices teodosianas y su reflejo en la iconografía numismática .....	115
<i>Carles Buenacasa Pérez</i>	
7. Portraits of a Dynasty: Graphic Representations of the Families of the Empresses Verina and Ariadne (457–491) .....	132
<i>Margarita Vallejo Girvés</i>	

## II

*Teodora, emperatriz de Bizancio*

8. Teodora entre papas: de Agapito a Vigilio.  
El delicado equilibrio entre monofisismo y poder ..... 157  
*Juan Antonio Bueno Delgado*
9. Las mil caras de Teodora ..... 167  
*Miguel Cortés Arrese*
10. La imagen filmica de la emperatriz Teodora a mediados  
del siglo XX ..... 190  
*Francisco Salvador Ventura*

## III

*El Occidente postimperial*

11. The councils of Toledo and the Visigothic Queens, Liuwigotho  
and Cixilo: Some (Historical) Remarks ..... 209  
*Oriol Dinarès Cabrerizo*
12. The Barbarian Queens and the Power of Peace against  
Violence ..... 232  
*Purificación Ubric Rabaneda*
13. *Dilectissimae filiae*: emperatrices y reinas en el epistolario  
gregoriano ..... 249  
*Pere Maymó i Capdevila*

## IV

*Emperatrices bizantinas, de Martina a Irene*

14. La famiglia di Eraclio, Martina e l'anno dei quattro imperatori .... 271  
*Salvatore Cosentino*
15. La novela de Esther. Un modelo hagiográfico para emperatrices  
ortodoxas ..... 294  
*Ernest Marcos Hierro*



16. **Fleeting but Powerful: Portraits of Empresses of the Iconoclast Period** ..... 311  
*Petros Tsagkaropoulos*
17. **Irene, Imperatore dei Romani?** ..... 325  
*Nicola Bergamo*

## V

*Emperatrices bizantinas, de Eudokia Ingerina a Irene Dukaina*

18. **Eudokia Ingerina and the “Macedonian Dynasty”:  
The Visible Woman** ..... 357  
*Shaun Tougher*
19. **Gender, Power, and Narrative in Eleventh-Century Byzantium:  
Batatzina’s Leadership of the Rebellion at Raidestos as  
Recounted by Michael Attaleiates** ..... 373  
*Francisco López-Santos Kornberger*
20. **Irene Dukaina en la *Alexiada* de Ana Comnena:  
la *basilissa* ideal** ..... 395  
*Giorgio Vespignani*

## VI

*Apéndice*

21. **La porpora nel *Sinassario* di Costantinopoli.  
Imperatori ed imperatrici in odore di santità?** ..... 409  
*Lorenzo M. Ciolfi*
- Contributors** ..... 438



## Prefacio

El volumen *Mujeres imperiales, mujeres reales. Representaciones públicas y representaciones del poder* es fruto del workshop internacional homónimo celebrado en la Universidad de Alcalá entre el 27 y el 29 de noviembre de 2019. En esa ciudad, expertos de diferentes instituciones universitarias de ámbito español e internacional se dieron cita para debatir acerca del poder femenino y de la evolución de su expresión pública desde la era de Constantino hasta la Edad media, a través del análisis de las evidencias literarias y materiales (iconografía, numismática, arqueología, epigrafía). La presencia en este coloquio internacional de historiadores de la Antigüedad Tardía, de medievalistas, bizantinistas, historiadores del arte, arqueólogos y epigrafistas confirió al coloquio múltiples perspectivas de enfoque y diversos matices interdisciplinarios respecto al estudio de las mujeres en la Antigüedad Tardía y la Alta Edad Media.

Parte de los resultados de aquel fecundo encuentro ven ahora la luz en esta obra colectiva sobre el empoderamiento femenino, que analiza, desde una perspectiva multi-angular, cómo las mujeres de esta época llegaron al poder y cómo, a través del establecimiento definitivo de su liderazgo dentro del gobierno imperial o real, no fueron únicamente meras consortes y madres de futuros gobernantes varones, sino que, en muchos casos, consiguieron erigirse también en figuras axiales de la política contemporánea.

En su perspectiva más amplia, las fuentes históricas constituyen el soporte textual más importante para conocer este desarrollo, puesto que describen, en la Antigüedad Tardía y en el mundo bizantino, la evolución gradual de una figura política y religiosa como la de *augusta*, de simple esposa a monarca plenipotenciario. Desde los pioneros trabajos de Kenneth Holum a principios de la década de los 80 del siglo pasado, el interés hacia las mujeres de la corte teodosiana y, en un sentido más amplio, hacia el poder femenino en la Antigüedad Tardía y en la temprana Edad Media, ha ido creciendo hasta ocupar en la actualidad un espacio central en la historiografía sobre estos períodos.

Fruto de la sinergia entre los programas de investigación ministeriales Juan de la Cierva Incorporación (IJC2018-035176-I) y Ramón y Cajal (RyC-2017-23402), esta obra ha sido posible gracias al respaldo de la Universidad de Alcalá y del proyecto del MINECO PGC2018-093729-B-I00: “*Augustae: Materializando a una Augusta: Historia, Historiografía e Historiología de las emperatrices Leónidas (457-518)*” dirigido por la Prof.ra Margarita Vallejo Girvés, y ha contado asimismo con el apoyo de la Universidad de Barcelona.

Finalmente, no podemos obviar el generoso apoyo del Prof. Jörg Ulrich y de su equipo de investigadores (Franziska Grave, Hannah Mälck, Malina Teepe) de la Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, así como del Dr. Martin Illert, de la Dra. Martina Kayser y de Jehona Kicaj de la editorial Brill- Schoeningh por su gran profesionalidad y constante apoyo. De la misma manera, profundo es también el agradecimiento a los editores de esta recién nacida serie, Anna Usacheva, Siam Bhayro y Jörg Ulrich, a quienes deseamos los mayores éxitos en este nuevo proyecto.

En Alcalá - Barcelona, 05.03.2021

M. C. Chiriatti - R. Villegas Marín

# Prólogo

While I am writing this, the British public is gripped by what the tabloid press have dubbed a 'crisis' of the British monarchy. A royal woman abruptly departed from the court she, a foreigner no less, had only recently joined through marriage. She left allegedly due to contrasting views about – among others – her son's heritage and hereditary rights.

If there is a 'crisis', it may lie in this woman and her princely husband's decision to speak publicly about it. There are of course also contexts of race and class that are very specific to and concerning about this situation. Yet, the underlying issue is part and parcel of dynasties throughout history, especially those built around male succession, as succession to the British royal title has been until very recently as well.<sup>1</sup>

Due to their essential role as horizontal connectors between families, and therefore also between different cultures, identities and values, royal women have always been both a constituting element in dynastic stability, and a disruptive force to dynastic vertical structures. Accordingly, as in the British media today, categorizing royal women as conforming or non-conforming and measuring them against each other on these grounds have been discursive tropes throughout the ages. Whether born into royal families as rulers' daughters, sisters or nieces, or as royal men's consorts coming in from the outside, royal women's existence has been a source of anxiety and fear in many historical contexts, producing diverse exogamic or endogamic marriage strategies.<sup>2</sup>

As this volume shows, late antiquity, the early medieval West and Byzantium are no exceptions. This is despite – or perhaps because – the hereditary dynastic principle not being as strong in these societies as it became in more recent times. At least during the earlier part of this period, imperial or royal kinship was only one factor in the establishment of legitimacy to rule, alongside personal charisma, military might, regional supremacy, aristocratic and popular consensus, the right form of piety and therefore divine approval.

While this situation means that there was perhaps less attention to 'pure' blood lines, it increased both women's image as royal ancestresses and their dynastic potential, the ability to pass legitimacy on to other, even outside

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1 The principle of male primogeniture, where the title passes to the eldest male direct descendant, was changed only in 2013 through the Succession to the Crown Act. The British monarchy is in any case currently looking forward to three generations of male heirs to the throne, albeit by accident of birth.

2 J. Duindam, *Dynasties. A Global History of Power*, 1300–1800, Cambridge 2016, 87–155.

men.<sup>3</sup> As Shaun Tougher reminds us in his contribution to this volume, it has long been argued that Byzantium had a tendency to ‘matriarchy’. His contribution illustrates that what was at stake were emperors’ attempts to create dynasties by emphasising their wives or mothers’ sometimes near-mythical credentials, in the absence of a more established hereditary principle. This was a technique that already Constantine, the first Christian emperor, applied to his own mother Helena, whose unusual mausoleum is here discussed by Jordina Sales-Carbonell. Dynastic potential was, in turn, especially true for women born into ruling families (‘porphyrogenitae’ in Byzantine parlance) or those who were the last remaining survivors of dynasties. In the absence of clearly designed heirs to the throne, contenders could or would often try to increase their chances by attaching themselves to female relatives of rivaling or previous rulers, or were suspected of doing so. Oriol Dinarés Cabrerizo and Margarita Vallejo Givés show this in this volume with respect to dowager queens in both the fifth-century East and the Visigothic kingdoms in the West. Such fear of royal women giving their husbands or sons unwanted power was one of the reasons behind a very specific method to tame female dynastic potential: monastic confinement or even monastic consecration, practiced across the period studied in this volume, as, for example, the contributions by Silvia Acerbi on the fifth-century Augusta Pulcheria (d. 453) and Giorgio Vespignani’s on Irene Dukaina and Anna Komnena (d. 1153) illustrate.

At the same time, daughters, sisters and nieces were also considered precious assets to strike alliances across borders in a fragmenting Mediterranean world. No earlier Roman emperor had used marriage prospects in diplomacy with other ruling families, as Gabriel Estrada San Juan explains in this volume, but it was enthusiastically practiced in the post-Roman kingdoms, as Purificación Ubric Rabaneda shows, and sometimes in the Byzantine empire too. A role as pawn in deal-making was also true for royal consorts chosen to consolidate ties with internal stakeholders, especially a ruler’s nobility, which, as many contributions to this volume show, was the usual practice for Byzantine emperors. Sometimes Byzantine royal consorts were also believed to have decidedly shady backgrounds, such as, above all, Theodora, the subject of an entire section in this volume due to her ‘rags-to-riches’ story’s timeless appeal. In all cases – whether originating from a different royal court, a noble family, or especially if of more common backgrounds – the foreignness of royal consorts, and correspondingly their ability ‘to fit in’, caused unease. In Byzantium, as

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3 For the concept of dynastic potential see also A. Busch, *Die Frauen der Theodosianischen Dynastie: Macht und Repräsentation kaiserlicher Frauen im 5. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 2015, 214–217.

Ernest Marcos Hierro reveals, this issue brought about the circulation of the famous ‘bride show’ stories, designed to explain emperors’ seemingly arbitrary exogamic decisions. The arrival of female newcomers to courts also generated continuous debates about the ideal expectations of royal women – as we witness today with the British family. Victoria Escribano Paño studies one such debate here, about the behaviour of the ‘semi-barbarian’ empress Eudoxia, wife of Arcadius (d. 404). She demonstrates that despite Eudoxia conforming to Theodosian expectations of imperial womanhood she was frequently misconstrued as non-conforming. Eudoxia’s case shows that debates about female royal behaviour were (and are) often proxy to larger clashes of social values. They were therefore debates royal women themselves could and perhaps cannot win.

Where then is female power in all this? Here, it is helpful to think about power – the ability to control and organise the behaviour of others – as formal, informal or collective, and about the intersection between these categories.<sup>4</sup> The first is located in institutional and legal privileges, such as titles, insignia, or even roles in government. As Mattia C. Chiriatti and Carles Buenacasa Pérez show, the Theodosian Dynasty (379–450) was instrumental in creating an official image of the late Roman and then Byzantine empress as a ‘partner in government’, often reproduced in material culture. In combination with procreative qualifications, evidenced through the motherhood of heirs, it could give at least some imperial women considerable agency, to the extent of one, Irene, ruling for a time all by herself (797–802), as Nicola Bergamo discusses here. We should note, however, that Irene did not set an example, and formal power quickly reverted to men afterwards, or, at most, female regents of child emperors, however much empresses continued to be portrayed as ‘partners’. Visibility in iconography was not necessarily the same as power. More common for royal women of this period was the second type, informal power, also sometimes called personal power. This accrued from women’s proximity to emperors and their corresponding ability to act as ‘gatekeepers’. Its extent can be measured by the degree of such closeness. As Liz James has long argued, and is here reconfirmed by Petros Tsagkaropoulos, such personal power was an accepted fact, at least in the Byzantine empire.<sup>5</sup> Although often denigrated as a source of intrigue, everyone in reality used the routes of personal proximity in an empire where the emperor himself was very much presented as

4 As laid out in the volume edited by A. Kolb, *Augustae. Machtbewusste Frauen am römischen Kaiserhof*, Berlin 2010, especially by Thomas Späth, ‘Augustae zwischen modernen Konzepten und römischen Praktiken der Macht’, 293–308.

5 L. James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, London 2001, 1–7.

the head of a household. The popes writing to empresses discussed by Pere Maymó Capdevila knew this very well. Equally important, however, but less studied, was the power that came from royal women being part of collectives, or – to use a different term – networks that cut across government, court and household structures. Such networks could be varied and overlapping and the power they generated therefore of a diverse degree. They could originate from activities that royal women undertook as royal women, such as, in this period, the patronage of religious institutions. But we also need to remember that all royal women were or were feared to be connectors. They had birth families, and – especially where these differed from the courts they were part of – potentially resources, knowledge, and contacts independent from their court roles. Nonetheless, perhaps the most long-lasting power came from royal women being able to develop their own narratives. In this period this may have been only possible in distance from a royal court, as the example of Anna Komnena indicates. But if we consider our modern, British example, this is perhaps true today as well.

Royal women matter. It is a privilege to learn and relearn this basic, but not self-evident fact from this volume's beautiful comparative scope and multilingual perspective. I would like to congratulate the editors and publisher for having allowed their contributors to express their evidence, analysis, and concepts through the voice they feel most comfortable with, and in this way enrich this volume with an inspirational polychromy impossible to achieve in monoglot form.

Julia Hillner