CHAPTER 10

The Dangers of Female Mobility in Roman Imperial Times

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1 Introduction

Recent work on mobility and migration in the Roman empire offers many useful insights into the dynamics of ancient travel, even though the subject of women and travel specifically has been addressed in only limited, albeit useful, ways. Though women’s opportunities for stepping out of the house and travelling on a short or long journey were much more restricted and limited in range than those of the mobile man, Roman imperial women did travel more often than we used to think. Yet the image of the woman who centres her life on her family and restricts her daily activities to those within the domestic walls was an ideal that never lost its power and attraction in Roman society, even in imperial times, when the changing political and social circumstances gave especially upper-class women more opportunities for stepping into the more public (and male) sphere of politics and power.

The traditional ideal of domestic focus for Roman women is the framework within which senators were asked to evaluate the proposal that Aulus Caecina

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Severus made in the Senate in AD 21. In *Annales* 3.33–34, Tacitus reports that in the course of a debate in the Senate “Caecina proposed that no magistrate who had obtained a province should be accompanied by his wife.” He argued that

Haud enim frustra placitum olim, ne feminae in socios aut gentes externas traherentur; inesse mulierum comitatui quae pacem luxu, bellum formidine morentur et Romanum agmen ad similitudinem barbari incessus convertant. non imbecillum tantum et imparem laboribus sexum sed, si licentia adsit, saevum, ambitiosum, potestatis avidum.

Not without reason it was formerly agreed that women were not to be taken among our allies or into foreign countries; it is inherent to the train of women who delay peace through luxury and war with fear and who convert a Roman army on the march into the likeness of a barbarian procession. Women are not only feeble and unequal to hardship but, when they are not under control, also fierce, ambitious, and greedy of power.

Caecina’s proposal was opposed by Valerius Messalinus, who argued that

neque enim, ut olim, obsideri urbem bellis aut provincias hostilis esse; et pauxa feminarum necessitatibus concedi, quae ne coniugum quidem penates, adeo socios non onerent; cetera promisca cum marito nec ulla in eo pacis impedimentum. bella plane accinctis obeunda: sed reverentibus post laborem quod honestius quam uxorium levamentum?

Rome is not longer beset with wars, as in the past, nor are the provinces hostile. A few concessions were made to the women, but they were not a burden to their husbands’ home, not even to our allies; in all other respects a woman who lived in intimacy with her husband was not an impediment to peace. Certainly wars require men ready to go and fight, but when they return home after their hardships, what is worthier than their wives’ consolation?

Messalinus’ rebuttal was supported by Drusus, who closed the debate with a few words on his own experience as a husband. After mentioning the precedent of Augustus, who had been often accompanied by his wife Livia when

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3 Tac. *Ann.* 3.33: *Severus Caecina censuit, ne quem magistratum cui provincia obvenisset uxor comitaretur.* Translations are my own.