

# Severing the Old Order:

## The Involvement of Women in the Politics of Ancient Rome's Severan Dynasty (AD 193-235)

UCSB Department of History

Undergraduate Senior Honors Thesis

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Santa Barbara, CA

March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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## Acknowledgments

This thesis is submitted as part of the requirements for a Bachelor's Degree in History from the University of California at Santa Barbara. I consider myself extremely privileged to have been able to create it. My advisor throughout the project has been Professor Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, and Professor Blumenthal supervised the seminar in which this thesis was written.

I would first like to begin by thanking Professor Blumenthal. The weekly meetings held as part of the seminar were instrumental to my completion of this thesis, and your generous giving of time and constructive feedback throughout my writing process was extremely helpful. I would also like to thank Professor Digeser, whose constant support and deep understanding of the subject matter helped me form and then reform ideas on my research. I would also like to thank my parents, who supported me in my desire to learn from an early age and without whom I never would have formed the love of history that I have. Finally, I would like to extend a sincere thank you to all the other members of the honors seminar for their constant feedback and encouragement, especially Nichole Poblete. Everyone in the seminar was extremely talented and insightful, and I consider myself fortunate to have been able to create my thesis alongside them.

## A Map of Severan Rome

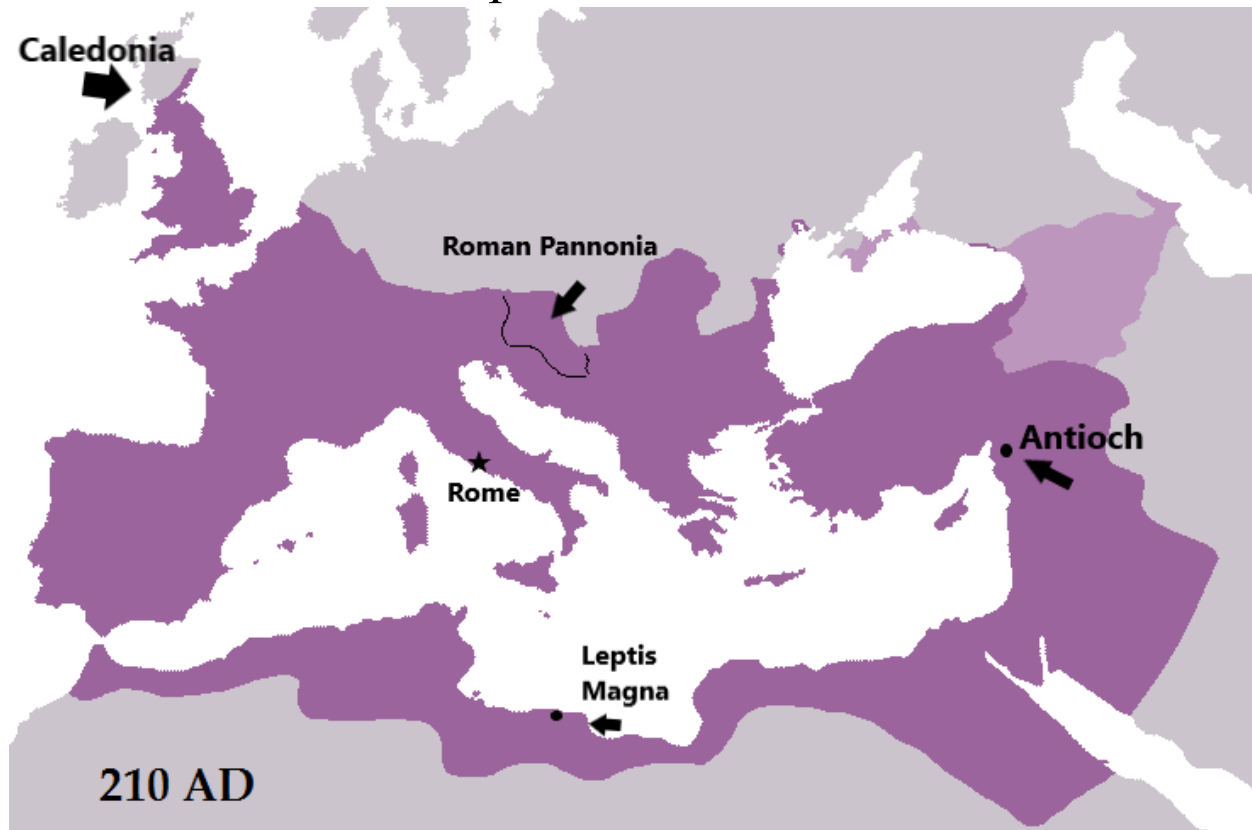


Figure 1: *The Roman Empire in 210 After the Conquests of Severus, showing Roman Territory (purple) and Roman Dependencies (light purple).* Computerized map acquired from Wikipedia edited to show regions and cities particularly important to the Severans.

- 1) **Leptis Magna:** The birthplace of Septimius Severus, the founder of the Severan dynasty.
- 2) **Roman Pannonia:** The province Septimius Severus was a governor of under Commodus.
- 3) **Rome:** The capital of the Roman Empire.
- 4) **Caledonia:** The region in which Septimius Severus died while on military campaign.
- 5) **Antioch:** An important city in Syria and the site of military battles crucial to the Severan dynasty's restoration.

## Introduction

The formation of the Roman Empire saw the establishment of Rome's total domination over the entirety of the Mediterranean basin. From Britain to the borders of Mesopotamia men hailed Augustus Caesar as emperor, and the *Pax Romana* ushered in an unprecedented era of peace for the region. Over time, however, the cultural and administrative institutions that perpetuated the *Pax Romana* deteriorated, causing the Late Roman Empire to be a time of hitherto unseen catastrophe that gutted the population of entire regions. Characteristically, then, the middle Roman Empire is something of a midpoint between these two extremes, with the beginning of patterns of decline situated within a broadly still-functioning imperial system. The Severan Dynasty (AD 193-235) was the longest lasting and most important Roman imperial dynasty of this middle period, presiding over the establishment of said patterns of decline that would continue to intensify over the next couple centuries. The dynasty was original in many ways, seeing the first African emperor, the first Syrian emperors, and the first underaged emperors. At the same time, it was extremely violent, being founded by the first invasion of Italy since Julius Caesar's civil war. Furthermore, three of its four emperors died by assassination, and the one who died peacefully did so while on a military campaign. It was thus both the product and cause of the instability associated with the time in which it ruled, making it possible for previously excluded groups to become politically active.

Under the Severan dynasty, women increasingly became involved in the empire's politics, playing crucial roles in forming the first imperial regencies in Roman history. These changes were both impactful and long-lasting, establishing precedents and trends that would affect Roman politics for centuries to come, and is the focus of this thesis. Because of the violent nature of the period in which the Severans ruled, its legacies such as increasing military control

over the state and a shift towards dynastic politics are often emphasized over the political roles of the dynasty's women. My thesis' purpose is not to argue that one legacy is necessarily more important than another, but rather to bring attention to a subject that I feel is often understudied and underemphasized. That's not to say that it receives no attention, however, and contemporary research on Severan women and the sources through which modernity's information about them is derived were instrumental to forming an understanding of the subject on my part.

I entered my research looking for information on how Severan women interacted with the political system, how their involvement set long-lasting trends, and how the bias in my sources could be interpreted to reveal information about Roman society. Both ancient and modern sources in time provided me with plenty of information to use in answering these questions, helping me to form concrete conclusions used in the writing of this thesis. To draw a line between "political history" and "women's history" for the Severan Dynasty is a misnomer, and strips away deserved recognition from a group of important women whose presence has implications on the character of Ancient Rome. By understanding how Severan women interacted with the Roman political system, one's understanding of Ancient Rome isn't just increased as pertains to matters of gender and femininity, but rather the entire sociopolitical system. Female members of the Severan dynasty played significant roles in their male relatives' reigns, especially as underaged emperors took the throne, thereby playing a key role in establishing the Severan dynasty's legacy of regency politics.

The ways in which women interacted with the political system were affected by the informality of their positions, depending on financial wealth and connections with people invested with concrete, constitutional authority. Reading between the lines of available sources is often required to discover these modes of interaction, as the presence of women was a literary

motif often used by ancient authors to comment on their male relatives. Understanding the importance of Severan women to the empire's politics is important because it affects interpretations of the empire's cultural and institutional legacies. These legacies have effects carrying into modernity as a result of Rome's influence on a number of Western governmental and cultural institutions. Cases in which these women's importance was written off after the empire fell can thus help reveal how historical re-interpretation affects contemporary society, especially when those involved in the rewriting have a stake in the process.

Although "gender" as a category of analysis is useful for understanding how Severan women operated under certain cultural constraints in terms of how expressly they could wield power; (in accordance with the gendered norms of Roman culture) throughout the dynasties reign, gender was not the sole factor determining how concretely they interacted with the political system. Other factors such as their monetary wealth, cultural background, or familial relation to the emperor were arguably much more important. Consequently, each of the four Julias: Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Maesa greatly differed in their participation in Roman politics. Before discussing the women of the Severan dynasty, however, I'll provide a brief overview of the dynasty's four emperors: Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Alexander Severus. From this, the information about Severan women's involvement can be contextualized with broader imperial trends, helping clarify what they were involved in, what they weren't, and the information modern historians use in determining so.

### A Brief Overview of the Severans

The Severan Dynasty's historical significance began not with Septimius Severus' famous invasion of Italy, but rather with the political chaos caused by the reign and fall of Commodus, the infamous gladiator-emperor. In the wake of his death, the Senate wanted to "drag off his body and tear it from limb to limb...", having referred to him as "the gladiator" or "the charioteer"<sup>1</sup> rather than emperor. His successor Pertinax was universally admired, and there was hope among many for a return to the glory days of Marcus Aurelius. Pertinax in turn embarked on an ambitious program of reform. The Praetorian Guard was against these reforms, however, having greatly benefitted from favorable treatment under Commodus, and so they assassinated Pertinax in an effort to maintain their lofty societal station. The most infamous transfer of power in Roman history occurred thereafter, with the Praetorian Guard auctioning off the empire to Didius Julianus at the price of "twenty thousand sesterces per soldier"<sup>2</sup>, an astronomical sum that only the richest Romans could afford to pay. This was an absolutely unacceptable violation of the sacredness of the empire's institutions to many, and in response three governors: Clodius Albinus of Britain, Pescennius Niger of Syria, and Septimius Severus of Pannonia all revolted in an attempt to "secure the control of affairs" for themselves.

Septimius Severus was the first of these three to reach Rome with his legions in AD 193, inflicting "the death penalty on those who had taken part in the slaying of Pertinax"<sup>3</sup> in an effort to portray himself as the slain emperor's avenger and rightful successor. Despite promising to

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<sup>1</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIV*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIV*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIV*, 163.



rule in a manner similar to what Pertinax had promised, granting privileges and protection to the senate, many were soon disappointed with the reality of the emperor's character, however.

Septimius was a military man and thus was most comfortable relying upon them to secure his power, with Dio accusing him of "placing his hope of safety in the strength of his army rather than in the good will of his associates in government."<sup>4</sup> This dependence on military force as the backbone of his administration only intensified the as his reign continued, eliminating his second-in-command Albinus in an effort to cement his biological sons' place as heirs. He even purged dissenters within the city of Rome itself, with Cassius Dio describing his efforts as "venting upon the unarmed all the wrath that he had stored up against them in the past."<sup>5</sup>

Septimius reigned for nineteen years (AD 193-211) however, and so while his military campaigns and violent purges were significant for establishing a status-quo, the majority of his rule was undertaken during a time of peace from the city of Rome. It's during this period and within the context of court politics that Septimius handed off many of his duties to his second-in command, a praetorian prefect named Plautianus. The importance of Plautianus will be explored more in the chapter dedicated to Julia Domna, however, with Septimius' inability to keep a tight grip on his court more important to understanding his reign more broadly. As a result of Septimius' relative absence, his sons Geta and Caracalla indulged in the hectic environment of Rome, with Dio accusing them of having "outraged women... abused boys, they embezzled money... emulating each other in the similarity of their deeds."<sup>6</sup> The similarity of their conduct didn't foster companionship among the two, however, and instead a rivalry began that would

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<sup>4</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXV*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 165.

<sup>5</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXV*, 213.

<sup>6</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 253.

soon threaten to tear apart the state itself. Seeking to instill the military discipline by which he lived within his sons, Caracalla embarked on a military campaign across the empire in Caledonia, modern-day Scotland<sup>7</sup>. Septimius died in AD 211 before he could reconcile his sons, however, his last words to them a microcosm of how subsequent generations of Romans would remember the dynasty's ruling philosophy: "Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men."<sup>8</sup>

Immediately upon assuming the throne as co-emperors, Septimius' sons Caracalla and Geta "quarreled continually..."<sup>9</sup> with each having feared the other would attempt to assassinate them. Domna appealed to filial devotion in an attempt to reconcile the two, but immediately after Severus was buried in Rome, "open hostility followed."<sup>10</sup> Said hostility only escalated after a series of failed negotiations between the pair, resulting in a climactic decision to split the empire into two. Julia Domna in response, lamenting the tearing apart of both her country and family, cried out "Earth and sea, my children, you have found a way to divide... the continents. But your mother, how would you parcel her?"<sup>11</sup> Her moving display stopped the immediate eruption of hostilities, but appeals to family relations couldn't stop the fundamental problems that two opposed brothers desiring the emperorship posed. Of the two, Caracalla made the first move towards violence, and luring Geta into a trap using Julia Domna as bait, "killed his brother in the

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<sup>7</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 263.

<sup>8</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 273.

<sup>9</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 4.1.1.

<sup>10</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.1.

<sup>11</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.8.

arms of their mother...,”<sup>12</sup> with Domna not only unable to stop the murder, but thereafter banned from openly mourning the death of her son<sup>13</sup>.

Caracalla, assuming sole power in AD 212, continued the bloody and violent behavior with which he took the throne. Using a literary motif owing to the Roman understanding of race and nationality, Cassius Dio accused him of possessing the “fickleness, cowardice, and recklessness of Gaul... the harshness and cruelty of Africa... and the craftiness of Syria.”<sup>14</sup> Motif aside, it’s easy to see why he would ascribe such negative descriptions to Caracalla’s moral character. Not only did Caracalla kill Geta to assume power, blatant fratricide, but he extended the same treatment to “some twenty thousand, men and women alike” who had been in any way associated with Geta (285). Cassius Dio insists that the killing was so great in scale that “All could I never recite near the names... completely... both guilty and guiltless alike... he mutilated Rome, by depriving it of his good men.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite his violent securing of power, however, Caracalla’s reign lasted for four years and oversaw the formation of some of the Severan dynasties’ most important lasting legacies. One was the formation of the Antonine Constitution in AD 212, which gave Roman citizenship to nearly all free men in the empire. Additionally, the long-running trend of a shift of power within the empire towards the east intensified, with Caracalla consciously emulating Alexander the Great on tours of his provinces<sup>16</sup>. His administration was assisted by the continued support of

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<sup>12</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.4.3.

<sup>13</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 231.

<sup>14</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 292.

<sup>15</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 291.

<sup>16</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXX*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 437.

his mother Julia Domna, who counseled him on how to wisely spend finances<sup>17</sup> and assisted him by sorting through correspondence for him while on campaign<sup>18</sup>. Her assistance was unable to compensate for the sheer amount of discontent that his bloodlust caused, however, and a military general named Macrinus assassinated Caracalla in AD 217, with Dio claiming it was a preemptive response him having been made the target of one of Caracalla's purges<sup>19</sup> (LXXIX 350). Upon hearing of her son's death in Antioch, "so affected" was Julia Domna according to Cassius Dio's account that "she dealt herself a violent blow and tried to starve herself to death,"<sup>20</sup> eventually succumbing to a burst tumor.

The death of Caracalla and Julia Domna should have resulted in the end of the Severan dynasty, as its male line was now completely exhausted and the matriarch of its maternal side dead. A surprising comeback would be made by Julia Domna's sister Julia Maesa, however, who was alive and well in Syria. She had been forced to remain in Antioch after the death of Caracalla and Domna, but felt sidelined and was ready "eager to return to her familiar life"<sup>21</sup> in Rome. Using her wealth to rally soldiers around the banner of her grandson, a 14-year-old Syrian priest named Elagabalus, the Severan Dynasty was restored and Macrinus easily militarily defeated in Syria in AD 218.<sup>22</sup> This marks a definitive change in the Severan Dynasty's receptiveness to female involvement in politics, as Elagabalus owed his installation as emperor chiefly to his grandmother, Maesa. Before her intervention, he had no military or civil administrative connections, and likely would have remained a priest all his life. Additionally, he

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<sup>17</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 301.

<sup>18</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 347.

<sup>19</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX* 350.

<sup>20</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 393.

<sup>21</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus (218-222)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 5.5.1.

<sup>22</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus (218-222)*, 5.3.11.

had no claim to the throne outside of his familial relation to the previous emperor's mother, with Maesa needing to invent a fictitious story of parenthood by Caracalla in order to justify his seizure of power<sup>23</sup>. The "Severan" dynasty was thus now in truth that of Julia Maesa, the male Severan line having been extinguished with the death of Caracalla. Such a shift in power from the paternal to the maternal line in Roman politics in such a fashion was unprecedented, with earlier cases having been accompanied by antemortem imperial adoption.

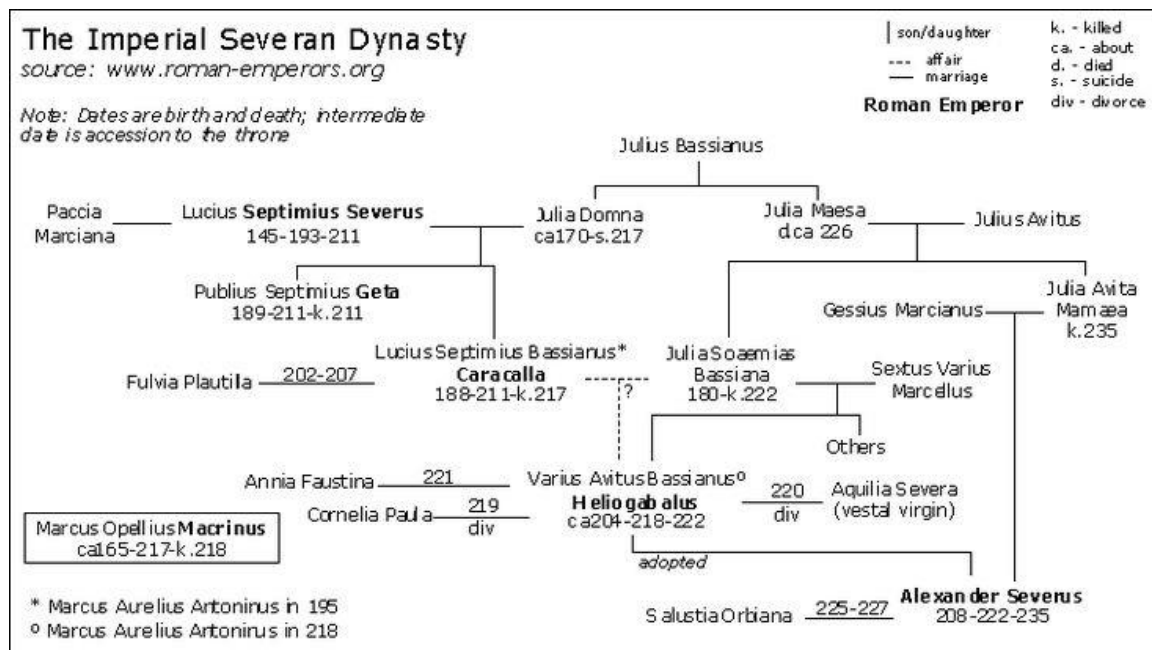


Figure 2. *The Imperial Severan Dynasty*. Family tree created by Gottrop Muriel.

Maesa found Elagabalus to be extremely difficult to control from her informal position once empowered, however, and the youth soon set about abusing his authority in a manner that would cause many historians to view him as one of the worst Roman emperors of all time.

<sup>23</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 411.

Immediately upon leaving Syria to assume power in Rome, Elagabalus resumed his religious rituals to his god Elagabal, which the Romans views as deeply unfamiliar. Contemporaries were harshly critical of his worship, with Dio repeating the claim that he engaged in “mad activities... he went about performing, as it appeared, orgiastic service to his god.”<sup>24</sup> Maesa was “greatly disturbed” at his being culturally insensitive to powerful men he would need the future support of, and so she made every attempt to “persuade the youth to wear Roman dress....,”<sup>25</sup> likely a literary motif implying that she urged him to act more outwardly Roman. Elagabalus was under no obligation as emperor to heed her warnings, however, and with what Herodian described as “contempt” he continued to act as he saw fit.<sup>26</sup> Although ancient accounts of Severan emperors’ personal behavior greatly differ, Elagabalus’ conduct being perceived as extremely strange and obstinate is a commonality between both Dio and Herodian’s accounts. A good anecdote from Dio that demonstrates this comes from his description of Elagabalus as having “threatened his grandmother when she opposed him”<sup>27</sup> in his “marriage” (Dio himself used scare quotes) to a male slave named Hierocles in which he played what Romans would have considered a female role.

Within Roman society, behavior such as this would have been viewed as inordinately vile, and unfortunately for Elagabalus wasn’t something that could have been written off as unfortunate personal indulgences in an otherwise successful administration. The entire second half of the *Historia Augusta*’s account of Elagabalus’ reign, for example, is dedicated to tales of debaucheries engaged in by the young emperor, revealing what later Romans viewed as

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<sup>24</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus* (218-222), 5.5.4.

<sup>25</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus* (218-222), 5.5.6.

<sup>26</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus* (218-222), 5.5.6.

<sup>27</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXX*, 467.

important about his reign. His marriage to Hierocles wasn't Elagabalus' only "non-masculine" display of behavior, and his most egregious act within Dio's account was his request to physicians to "contrive a woman's vagina... by means of an incision,"<sup>28</sup> which within a premodern society would have likely resulted in a quick infection and painful death. Although these "debaucheries" could have been factually true, they were also politically significant in contributing to a widely held perception of the young emperor as being feminine that would continue to shade his character centuries after his reign. It's interesting that the critique of Elagabalus' "feminineness" isn't directed towards the Julias Maesa or Soemias, however, with them being represented as moderating figures whose advice unfortunately wasn't followed. Their issue with Elagabalus likely didn't lie with femininity itself, then, but specifically a male displaying such qualities. Frustrated with her lack of ability to influence Elagabalus' actions as emperor, Maesa shifted tactics in AD 222 and opted to work behind the scenes to change who occupied the throne itself. Forcing Elagabalus to adopt his cousin Alexander as heir, she then engineered a palace coup to put her new favorite grandson (Alexander) in power.

Alexander Severus (r. AD 222-235) was the last emperor of the Severan dynasty, and it was under his reign that women's involvement in the politics of the Severan dynasty reached its peak. Seeking to avoid making the same mistake she'd made with enthroning Elagabalus, Maesa diluted Alexander's power by masterminding the foundation of a sixteen-man council of senators who had to unanimously approve all his administrative actions<sup>29</sup>. As a result, contemporary chroniclers depicted Alexander as a figurehead merely allowed the "appearance and title of

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<sup>28</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 471.

<sup>29</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 6.1.1.

emperor”<sup>30</sup> while his advisory council and maternal relatives, his grandmother Maesa and mother Mamaea, truly ruled. To their credit, this administrative structure facilitated peace in the empire for an extended period of time. Alexander’s 13 year long reign was only eclipsed by Septimius Severus, the dynasty’s founder, and Alexander didn’t need to employ the same reliance upon the army to cement his reign that Septimius did. According to the historian Herodian, the defining feature of his administration was its being “moderate and equitable,”<sup>31</sup> a welcome change from the previous debaucheries of Elagabalus. It’s inclusion of the senate in holding power meant that the regime was particularly suited to Rome, and large bribes given to the praetorians<sup>32</sup> ensured the emperor’s personal safety. Women holding power over the state in such a blatant manner wasn’t palatable to all the empire’s interest groups, however, and when forced to leave Rome to address invading barbarians, Alexander’s lack of masculine leadership in the eyes of the army became apparent. Alexander was assassinated in AD 235 by his own soldiers while on campaign, characterized in the moments leading up to his death as weeping and “clinging to his mother” in a fashion that would’ve been considered shameful to his contemporaries. Nevertheless, women’s involvement in regency councils was legitimized via his reign, and as dynastic politics intensified over time and more boy-emperors took the throne, the presence of women in Roman politics would only increase.

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<sup>30</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Elagabalus (218-222)*, 5.8.9.

<sup>31</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.1.

<sup>32</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.8.



### Understanding the Primary Sources

The three primary sources from which I derived most of my understanding of the Severan dynasty were Cassius Dio's early 3<sup>rd</sup> century *Roman History*, Herodian's early 3<sup>rd</sup> century *History of the Roman Empire*, and the early 4<sup>th</sup> century collection of biographies termed the *Historia Augusta*. Material evidence in the form of statues and coinage displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City was also crucial to my research, especially in contextualizing the Severan dynasty with other periods of Roman history, but the bulk of my information nevertheless came from the prior described written sources. Each of these sources greatly differ from each other, both in narrative structure and authorial points of view. Characterizations of specific figures can wildly vary as a result, and thus a deep understanding of the source is needed in order to derive accurate information about events described within. Although we in modernity know that Cassius Dio was a senator in the AD 180's under the reign of Commodus<sup>33</sup>, and later a governor of Pannonia under Alexander, not much else about him is known. His history of Rome was begun after being personally asked by Septimius Severus to document the "dreams and portents"<sup>34</sup> that led to his rise as emperor, which contextualizes his history as having been written entirely under the reign of the Severans. Although his work originated as specific in scope, he eventually expanded it to cover all of Roman history, beginning in Book 1 with Aeneas of Troy and ending with Book 80 with the early reign of Alexander Severus. Clear throughout his entire work is a personal identification with the senate as a class, part of a view of the Roman government as one that should be (and was in the past) constitutional in nature with the involvement of multiple different powerful groups. This resulted

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<sup>33</sup> Earnest Cary, *Introduction*, eds. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), x.

<sup>34</sup> Cary, *Introduction*, xi.

in him admonishing a number of emperors for infringing on what he saw as the senate's ancient rights, particularly through purges of dissidents.

In Dio's view, it was this violation of the Roman constitution after the death of Marcus Aurelius that caused a gradual decline in the stability of Roman society, with him making the definitive statement that after the death of Commodus the "line of the genuine Aurelii ceased to rule."<sup>35</sup> Considering that Septimius Severus claimed adoption by Marcus Aurelius, what Dio seems to actually be saying here is that the Severan ruling style, which as previously established depended heavily on the army, was not genuine to the historical present of Marcus Aurelius, an idealized figure by for many within Roman society, including Dio himself. Dio felt himself as a senator to be able to confidently identify important trends occurring within Roman from society, such as the empire's worsening financial situation<sup>36</sup> contributing to soldiers' declaring themselves emperors and causing instability. This senate-centered and culturally aristocratic point of view must be kept in mind by historians using Dio's history for information about the Severans. Although expansive in scope and generally accurate, the mere presence or absence of certain things in Dio's work has imbued meaning. The inclusion of a woman in a narrative might be veiled criticism on their husband's inability to rule for themselves, for example, and thus can't be taken at face value by a historian seeking to look at how women were involved in Roman politics. Information seemingly innocuous in nature, such as an imperial family member's involvement in certain activities such as palace life must therefore be read critically, with an awareness of the work's broader aim in exposing larger imperial trends of decline.

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<sup>35</sup> Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIII*, trans. Bill Thayer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 118.

<sup>36</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 297.

Herodian of Antioch's *History of the Roman Empire* was written roughly around the same time as Dio's account, albeit a bit after, and so the two authors should be considered contemporaries who both had the ability to observe certain historical events firsthand. Herodian himself was a "subordinate official in Rome" according to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, and probably an imperial freedman of eastern origin.<sup>37</sup> His work is smaller than Cassius Dio's in scope, consisting of a series of biographies beginning with Commodus (AD 180) and ending with the Year of Six Emperors (AD 238).<sup>38</sup> I used Edward C. Echols' 1961 translation published by the University of California, and by accessing it on Livius.org had access to footnotes explaining the significance of particular terms and historical references modern readers might not pick up on. Although not a historian, Herodian engaged in writing history with the goal of documenting what he saw as a gradual moral decline since the death of Marcus Aurelius<sup>39</sup>. An overarching theme of increasing domination by the military is thus present, since if one takes a snapshot of Roman Emperors from Commodus to Gordian III, that's indeed the most significant change identifiable to a contemporary. The moral decay he focuses on also refers to the personal lives of the emperors, however, and his narrative is thus full of anecdotal stories meant to be applied to general trends of decline in the empire, with a notable example being his description of Alexander's personally weak character as a microcosm of the large problem that the empire lacked strong leaders. Thus, while using Herodian's works for extremely specific details of

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<sup>37</sup> McDonald, Alexander Hugh, and Antony Spawforth, "Herodian (2), historian," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, last modified 7 Mar. 2016, accessed March 8 2023, <https://oxfordre-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/classics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-3065?rskey=wSuWcM&result=1>.

<sup>38</sup> Oxford Classical Dictionary, "Herodian (2), historian."

<sup>39</sup> Edward Echols, "Introduction", In *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 1-10, [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/herodian\\_00\\_intro.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/herodian_00_intro.htm).

emperors' private lives would be a problematic approach, it's excellent for understanding how a contemporary understood the changes in the empire they lived through.

The *Historia Augusta* stands in stark contrast to the other two sources as a result of both its date of composition and narrative structure. Although there are doubts about exactly who composed the book and when, if the source itself is to be believed the chapters on the Severans were written by a biographer named Aelius Lampridius upon the direct request of the emperor Constantine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>40</sup>. It thus reflects what a later Roman would have thought about the Severan dynasty given the context of their visible legacies and the period after their reigns, both of which Cassius Dio and Herodian lacked foresight of. Its distinctive narrative structure is organized into biographical sections containing two figures: emperors and their *vitae*, a term meaning "heir."<sup>41</sup> The *vitae* usually serve as comments on qualities that an emperor lacked, and thus it can be risky to take specific details historical fact. This is especially the case for sections of the biographies specifically dedicated to stories of the emperor's personal conduct. Half of its biography on Elagabalus is dedicated to tales of his personal and "orgiastic" excesses, for example, with most of the tales contained within not being found in other sources. Specific details being of dubious accuracy doesn't make the entire source useless, however. If taken as a reflection of what (some) later Romans thought about characters in their own past, it can be an extremely useful source. Moreover, as it has informed the opinions of many historians on a wide range of topics concerning the period and thus historiographical debates within the

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<sup>40</sup> David Magie, "Introduction," eds. Bill Thayer (University of Chicago Press, 2022), iv.

<sup>41</sup> The *Historia Augusta, Introduction*, trans. David Magie (University of Chicago Press, 2022), xv.

field, it is a source of high importance for anyone using secondary sources in their research of the period of the ancient texts themselves.

As a result of the significant authorial differences among all three literary sources, something contained within one source about the characterization of Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, or Julia Mamaea is likely to be contradicted in another. Since only a limited number of primary sources survived from antiquity at all, however, Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Herodian's *History of the Roman Empire*, and the *Historia Augusta* are necessary sources for historians seeking information on the Severan dynasty. To obtain useful information about women's involvement in Severan politics, therefore, I looked for broad characterizations or descriptions about historical events contained in at least two of the narratives for forming conclusions about my topic of research. Specific depictions of scenes such as Julia Domna's pointed question of "But your mother, how would you parcel her?"<sup>42</sup> in Herodian's account are useful for personalizing the often closely related figures being described, but I tried to avoid using such specifics to generalize about gendered cultural distinctions within Roman society at large.

The following chapters of this thesis are organized as to examine three influential Severan women and their involvement in the empire's politics: Julia Domna, Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea. Julia Soaemias is present as the mother of Elagabalus, but she was a junior figure in relation to Maesa. These women are discussed within the context of their male relatives' reigns as it's through them that they exercised political power, but they nevertheless remain the

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<sup>42</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.8.

focus. The woman discussed in each chapter is used as a case study through which three questions about female involvement in Severan-era Roman politics can be examined:

- 1) How receptive was the Severan dynasty to female involvement in politics?
- 2) How can the personal nature of premodern politics be used to understand how these women concretely exercised political power?
- 3) How can a close reading of each ancient source combined with a cross examination between multiple reveal otherwise obscured information about Severan women's involvement in Roman politics?

**Chapter One: Hollow Matriarch: Continuity and Change in Women's Involvement in Severan Politics as Examined through Julia Domna**

Throughout the written accounts of Cassius Dio and Herodian on the exceptionally violent reign of Septimius Severus, Julia Dona is presented as an important yet narratively passive figure. A potential explanation for this contrast is that both Dio and Herodian felt Septimius' wars and rocky relationship with the Senate most important to emphasize, both of which being activities in which Roman women wouldn't normally publicly participate. Another might take the written histories' narratives at face value, characterizing Septimius Severus as a powerful and headstrong man who didn't need as much help from his dynasties' women as later Severans. Reading into the texts reveals issues with this interpretation, however, since Septimius held Julia Domna as an important figure even before the two were married, only having secured her as his wife "through the mediation of his friends" after learning of her horoscope that had "predicted that she would wed a king."<sup>43</sup> The marriage between the two was fruitful, providing the pair with multiple children, and he held her advice in high enough regard to entrust her with a plethora of honorific titles and a powerful position at court. Although not documented in any of the sources, it's known from the reigns of Elagabalus and Alexander later on that Julia's family was immensely wealthy, and this wealth could have helped propel Severus in power in the first place. This is ultimately speculation, however, and doesn't need to be extensively delved into given the plethora of narrative and material evidence in the form of coinage and statues as to her involvement in Septimius' reign. Through examining Julia Domna's participation in Severan propaganda and her position within the Roman court, her influential yet ultimately secondary

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<sup>43</sup> The *Historia Augusta, Septimius Severus*, trans. David Magie (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 378.

role in Severan politics can be established. She exercised political power through this role in a mostly informal manner, only given official power as far as Septimius and Caracalla extended it, but her role of “mother” was nevertheless important within the context of dynastic politics and gave her a powerful position as intermediary.

### **Severan Receptiveness to Female Involvement in Politics: A Slight Budging of the Boulder**

A partial explanation for why Domna is regarded as an important figure in the literary accounts comes from an exploration of her honorific titles, something that neither Dio nor Herodian pay particular attention to. The first title that Domna would have received was that of “Augusta”, a feminine form of the title of “Augustus” customarily bestowed upon men when becoming emperor. This isn’t particularly unique to Domna, though, since plenty of imperial women had received the title in the centuries preceding Septimius’ rule. The first title rare enough in its application to carry particular meaning with Domna is that of “Mater Castrorum,”<sup>44</sup> meaning “mother of the army camps”. The title was conferred on her in 195AD, only two years after her husband Septimius’ ascension to the throne, and thus serves as a confirmation of the already alluded to fact in Dio’s narrative that the military was particularly important to Septimius’ reign from the beginning. While this title was obviously meant to confer a connection between the ruling dynasty and the military, Julie Langford in *Maternal Megalomania* suggests that the actual target of the propaganda wasn’t legionaries, but rather the civilian population<sup>45</sup>. The coins depicting Domna’s new title weren’t minted and distributed to Septimius’ soldiers in

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<sup>44</sup> Julie Langford, *Maternal Megalomania* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 36.

<sup>45</sup> Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 35.



the east, which Domna was with at the time of the title's conference upon her<sup>46</sup>, but rather far away in the city of Rome itself. If a civilian was under the impression that the ruling dynasty and the military shared a close bond, he might be more intimidated into supporting them, or at the very least feel more positively about the dynasty's impact on imperial stability. Regardless of who the propaganda was aimed towards, however, part of its function was likely to harken back to the Antonines from which Septimius derived his legitimacy, with Marcus Aurelius' wife, Faustina the Younger, having previously received the title.

Whether the title of "Mater Castrorum" was awarded to Julia Domna on account of her accompanying Septimius on campaign, as the *Historia Augusta* claims, or as a deliberate harkening back to the Antonines that matches a more general Severan claim to legitimacy, its distribution in 450 epigraphs<sup>47</sup> across civilian-populated areas of the empire heavily implies Septimius intended it as part of a broader propaganda campaign. This is particularly likely given Septimius' shake hold on the empire during the beginning of his reign, with him needing to eliminate both Prescennius Niger in Syria and Clodius Albinus in Britain as contenders. Septimius chose to eliminate the latter with a shifty diplomatic betrayal after having previously named him *Caesar*, with Cassius Dio representing the public as having resented such a change with chants of "How long are we to suffer such things?" during a festival of Saturnalia<sup>48</sup> This was especially true given the unusualness of his rise to power, with his military invasion of Italy a first since the civil wars of the Late Republic that had ended with Augustus Caesar becoming Rome's first emperor. His legitimacy was likely shaky as a result, and the granting of a title to

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<sup>46</sup> Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVI*, 205.

Domna was thus a reaction to a real and immediate issues with his popularity among the public at large.

This was particularly necessary given his war against Albinus requiring him to leave the city of Rome. His granting of the title to “Mater Castrorum” to Domna so early in his reign thus could’ve been a way to bolster her political power before leaving her in charge of affairs in his absence. Fostering a connection between Domna and the military would have caused second doubts in unruly plebians or senators seeking strike against the Severans during a perceived moment of weakness. They might be able to take control of Rome, but they would still have to contend with Septimius’ loyal legions. The huge geographic span of the Roman Empire and a lack of modern communication meant that selective messaging using the title of “Mater Castrorum” was possible. The title could have therefore been advertised to civilian populations in Rome while the army, a group that might be more able to contend Domna’s close relationship with them, busy at the time receiving speeches from Septimius emphasizing Albinus’ femininity<sup>49</sup>. More importantly, the granting of the title of *Mater Castrorum* and its deliberate use by Septimius in securing his reign during its most vulnerable time demonstrates Julia Domna’s role in the production of imperial propaganda. Said propaganda wouldn’t have been particular effective if Julia Domna didn’t back up her representations in art and honorific titles through public appearance, however. Actions she took such as the patronizing of works of literature and accompanying her husband on campaign helped to show to the public that her reputation was well deserved.

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<sup>49</sup>Herodian, *The Reign of Septimius Severus (193-211)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 3.8.5.

Evidence of Domna's role in imperial propaganda is also supplied through surviving pieces of imperial art, with this statue titled "Marble portrait bust of a woman" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City being one such example.



Figure 3 (left). *Marble portrait of a woman*. On display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, New York. Dated to A.D. 193-211.

Figure 4 (right; for reference). *Bust of Julia Domna*. Photo acquired from the McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture in Knoxville, Tennessee. Dated to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.

The title and the descriptive plaque below indicate that the statue isn't of Julia Domna herself, but rather a currently unknown noblewoman. Despite the loss of her name, however, her hairstyle allows her to be identified as having lived under the Severans. If an empress' societal

station was merely superfluous, an accessory to her husband's power by virtue of ability to provide children, it's curious that other noblewomen in the empire would choose to depict themselves as possessing the same hairstyles. A likely explanation for the emulation of the empress' hairstyle was that by emulating one's physical appearance, one cultivated an association with their character. Given widespread propagandistic depictions of Julia as a highly capable figure and as a successful mother, this emulation could be the result of a number of different virtues. It's existence more broadly implies a cultural presence of the imperial family throughout Roman society not fully realizable if one were to gather their information about Ancient Rome from historical chronicles alone. The dissemination of art can thus be seen as one of the most critical ways in which Julia Domna interacted with the Roman population at large, forging a bridge between the two that transcended limitations of premodern communication.

Although I'll dedicate time to a more specific examination of Domna's political role owing to her motherhood of Geta and Caracalla later on, here I'll be looking at how the advertising of this motherhood to the Roman public at large played within the Severan dynasty's relationship with the Roman public. A broad analysis of coins minted under Severus' reign indicates that 55%<sup>50</sup> of them depicted Domna's role as a mother, either metaphorical (mother of the nation) or literal. While the first would have held meaning for some, particularly those in the army, the depiction of her literal motherhood of Caracalla and Geta is the more important of the two her as it plays into Septimius' plans of establishing a hereditary dynasty rather than holding to the previously common principle of adoptive succession. Evidence of the public depiction of motherhood as part of an announcement of stable succession can be found under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, with Faustina the Younger's breastfeeding of her children publicly displayed

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<sup>50</sup> Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 52.

on coins distributed across the empire<sup>51</sup>. Such a connection makes sense considering Marcus Aurelius' chosen successor, his biological son Commodus. The depiction of imagery involving motherhood across multiple dynasties indicates the extreme importance that a blood heir meant for the empire when headed by an emperor desiring blood succession. An emperor could choose to be succeeded by someone he adopted, and he could choose for his blood son to follow him, with either held as legitimate within Roman society. Chaos could erupt if an emperor desired a blood-heir and died prematurely, however, never having designated someone else on account of the threat they would pose once his blood son was born. For imperial citizens who had just lived under a year in which five different men claimed the imperial purple, the potential of another civil war was a tangible fear. Advertisement via coinage of Julia Domna's ability to produce heirs was thus a source of comfort for the common citizen, assuring them that Septimius' reign was built upon solid foundations and that future succession crisis weren't a concern. This type of propaganda would have been particularly effective for imperial soldiers, who would be constantly reminded via the coinage provided to them that their efforts in fighting for Septimius' claims to the throne would result in a lasting peace, which for them meant a longer time period before they would again be called up to fight. It would have also been a deterrent against those thinking to challenge Septimius' hold on the throne, as the stability of the dynasty would make their task much more difficult. Domna's role in propaganda wasn't a superfluous addition to the dynasty's power, therefore, but a crucial aspect of their legitimization among the general population and long-term success.

Severan receptiveness to female involvement in politics can also be found in Julia Domna's involvement in Septimius' court in Rome, the center of imperial power. While possible

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<sup>51</sup> Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 33.

that she played this role since her husband's initial ascent, with narratives only coincidentally focusing on his military campaigns where her role would be less clear, it's also to be expected that her ability to navigate the power structures of Rome would improve the longer she resided in the city. This was made all the more impressive by the somewhat chaotic nature of Septimius' court, explained both by Septimius' long absence from the city and the generally violent time in which the Severans ruled. This chaos was epitomized most clearly in the figure of Plautianus, a powerful imperial prefect and Septimius' openly disrespectful right-hand man, with Dio's account going so far as to characterize him as having "mastery over the emperor."<sup>52</sup> So powerful was this mastery, according to Dio, that Plautianus was able to continually treat Julia Domna in an "outrageous manner"<sup>53</sup> in public. While difficult to say given current distance from the events described in the ancient sources, it's likely that this treatment of Domna by Plautianus was a result of the threat she posed to his own power within the court, since she had a vested interest in the dynasty's long-term viability and handing over of power to her sons instead of Plautianus after Septimius' death. Plautianus threatened this, with Septimius naming him *Caesar* (a title often given to signify someone as heir to the imperial throne) and valuing him so highly that he's reputed as saying "I love the man so much that I pray to die before he does."<sup>54</sup>

Domna initially responded to Plautianus' criticism by focusing on patronizing works of art and literature within the court, with Dio describing her as having "began to study philosophy and spend her days in company with sophists."<sup>55</sup> Although primarily a philosophical and rhetorical movement, sophistry had power within Roman culture, and Julia Domna's

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<sup>52</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVI*, 233.

<sup>53</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVI*, 234.

<sup>54</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVI*, 231.

<sup>55</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVI*, 231.

intermingling with them could be an act on behalf of Septimius, whose military background makes him unlikely to have had any interest in the endeavor. More than just mingling, there are written records of her patronizing famous sophist works of art from the period, with Philostratus, the author of the *Life of Apollonius*, in the beginning of his work stating “Now I belonged to the circle of the empress, for she was a devoted admirer of all rhetorical exercises; and she commanded me to recast and edit these essays... paying more attention to the style....”<sup>56</sup> These were activities the empress spent significant time on, and had far more significance than leisure, being a way in which the imperial family bridged the gap between them and their subjects. This is especially true within the context of court-life, with patronizing of art and literature being a way in which court officials exercised power across the world throughout many different time periods. Domna’s patronizing of art and literature wasn’t just a fulfillment of some sort of feminine obligation she had as empress, but a way in which she exercised cultural power over the empire.

Eventually the conflict worsened between Domna and Plautianus, however, escalating into a conflict involving physical violence. The transition of these personal slights into a contest of life and death helps to combat the notion that female power within the Roman political system was inconsequential. Plautianus was an official invested with constitutional power within the Roman government, and yet, it was Julia Domna’s connection with her son Caracalla that ensured her ability to triumph over the prefect. Both Cassius Dio and Herodian’s narrative histories represent Caracalla as being interested in disposing with Plautianus for his own ends, made personal in the form of a contentious relationship with his wife, Plautianus’ daughter<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius*. Translated by F.C. Conybeare. Livius, 2022, 1.1-5.

<sup>57</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 245.

Such a marriage, it should be noted, indicates that Dio and Herodian's descriptions of Plautianus as a crucially important figure within the Roman court were accurate. Plautianus' meddling in Caracalla's affairs were too much for the independent and obstinate youth, however, with Caracalla resting him for his "rebuking him for everything that he did."<sup>58</sup> Caracalla thereby formulated a plot whereby Septimius was convinced of Plautianus' intent to murder both himself and Caracalla, with the latter taking the opportunity to order "one of the attendants to slay Plautianus"<sup>59</sup> while he was being questioned. Immediately departing from the scene, Caracalla sought out his mother, who was conversing with Plautianus' daughter at the time, his announcement of the Prefect's death through the presentation of a hair from his beard causing visible "great joy"<sup>60</sup> to Domna. Caracalla's immediate travelling to his mother upon Plautianus' death indicates primary involvement in his death not picked up by chronicles because of Caracalla having been the one to actually carry out the deed. Such an absence in the primary sources isn't proof of Domna's actual non-involvement in the affair, therefore, but a byproduct of the meaning in including a woman in such a plot that I'll discuss in more detail later on. In any case, Domna's elimination of Plautianus proves the concrete political power that a woman could wield within the context of court life. By rewarding her relationship with Caracalla to her advantage, Domna managed to eliminate a person second in power only to the emperor herself, indirectly proving herself to be one of the most powerful figures in all the empire. Her power was also revealed to be dependent on the willingness of males to support her, however, and it's unclear Julia Domna would have been able to triumph over Plautianus without the support of

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<sup>58</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 247.

<sup>60</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 247.



Caracalla. This reveals a “personal aspect” to Roman politics in which relationships with powerful people mattered just as much as titles in someone’s ability to exercise power.

### **The Personal Nature of Roman Politics: The Power and Limitations of Motherhood**

Septimius, a man who built his career campaigning on the extremely vulnerable imperial frontier of Dacia, doubtlessly felt constrained by the court life of Rome. This would have only been compounded by his lack of ability to control the figures of the court for his own ends, with Plautianus’ importance as prefect being an anecdotal example of Septimius’ wider distaste for administration. As a result, when news reached Rome of a Caledonian horde “overrunning the country, looting and destroying nearly everything on the island”, Septimius couldn’t help but be “delighted.”<sup>61</sup> Despite his old age, any excuse to leave the city of Rome and embark on campaign one final time must have seemed irresistible, even it meant he would have to travel to modern-day northern Scotland, called Caledonia during the Severan period on account of the people living there, to do so. As a result of the Caledonian campaign closely following the debacle with Plautianus in Rome, the emphasis here on Septimius taking the initiative to correct his sons’ wayward behavior with “military discipline” holds narrative significance of Septimius setting his house in order, a positive moral quality in Roman society. Although one could miss it if they blinked, being relegated to the bottom of the page, Julia Domna herself is noted as having accompanied Septimius on this Caledonian campaign, participating in diplomatic conversations with the Caledonian chieftain’s wife while Septimius negotiated with the chieftain.

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<sup>61</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Septimius Severus (193-211)*, 3.14.2.

Although Langford viewed this as being of secondary importance, two women talking shop while the men handled the real negotiations, it doesn't make sense for Septimius to have brought Julia Domna for a social call or merely to re-emphasize her title of *Mater Castrorum* within the context of a stable rule that had lasted for nineteen years. Septimius was near the end of his life, and Domna's role as mother of Caracalla and Geta would be extremely important in the event that their ruling as co-emperors following Septimius' death proved untenable. Thus, while Julia Domna's recorded role in the campaign is dwarfed by the documentation of the male Severans' military tactics and Caracalla's cartoonish attempts to assassinate his father, it still had tangible significance. First, while Julie Langford in *Maternal Megalomania* contends that Domna's diplomatic role in the conflict was negligible, it's possible this wasn't the case. Deciding one way or the other is extremely difficult with the available sources, but it's worth considering Septimius was looking to subjugate the whole of Caledonia as a new province. If this was the case, Domna's building of collegial relations with the Caledonian ruling class could've been groundwork for future integration. Secondly, Domna was mentioned by Herodian as staying behind the front lines with her son Geta, who was charged with helping "administer justice and tend to imperial affairs."<sup>62</sup> Given Plautianus' recent downfall, administering the empire would have been an extremely difficult task, and it's very possible that Domna assisted her son in doing so. Third, Domna and Septimius could have been engaged in a joint effort to train their sons in rule, with each teaching one of their children skills suitable to their characters. It would hardly be the first time in Roman history with co-emperors, with Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius being the most readily available contemporaries for the Severans to draw on. After all, the reconciliation of the bickering siblings is indicated by ancient authors as Septimius'

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<sup>62</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Septimius Severus (193-211)*, 3.15.6.

primary motivation for the initial invasion, and it would have been only natural for both parents to want to mediate conflict between their sons.

Although invading a relatively poor island across the empire may seem overkill for a family intervention, the importance of Septimius and Domna's task in reconciling their sons called for any means necessary to be employed. Septimius' primary purpose at this point of his reign was the establishment of dynastic succession as the basis for future transfer of power to his lineage, and a civil war between his only two male offspring would have been a serious threat to this. Domna, on her part, would have wanted her sons to secure the throne after Septimius' death for their own safety, and the last thing she'd want within that context would be for one to kill the other. More broadly, it was in the interest of all the other major interest groups within the Roman Empire to forestall the breakout of a civil war, as the death and destruction of the civil wars that brought Septimius to power was within living memory for most. Within this context, Julia Domna's role as intermediary between her sons, although not an official title imbued with governmental powers, was in theory extremely powerful. It's a mistake to view the Roman government as analogous to modern ones, with civil offices staffed by revolving ranks of bureaucrats. This was a premodern government in which personal relationships deeply mattered, and in the Roman Empire, patron-client relations made this even more the case. Julia Domna was an active participant in this system. As a result, while she may not have commanded armies, she had an important role in the empire's peacetime rule and succession, both of which were extremely important periods in their own right for establishing status quos for years to come.

To take Julia Domna on campaign to Caledonia was an extraordinary step given her influence in Rome, with the most likely explanation being that she was necessary to Septimius' mission of reuniting his children in a way she couldn't accomplish from a distance. Julia

Domna's intermediary role between her sons while on campaign was thus critically important, with the aversion of a potential civil war depending in part on her involvement. Whether her titles were merely symbolic or invested with constitutional authority, the answer to the question of whether Julia Domna wielded power under the reign of Septimius is the same is a resounding yes, exercised most visibly by her being mother to the heirs to the emperorship. The power of her motherhood depended on the willingness of those around her invested with constitutional authority to heed her authority, however, something highly affected by her physical location at any given time. Within the city of Rome, for example, groups of tutors or imperial officials contended with Julia Domna for influence over her sons, with Herodian's account claiming that the rivalry between the two brothers Geta and Caracalla itself was in part caused by these sycophants<sup>63</sup> jockeying for power. While the emperor was on campaign in the provinces, however, and the center of decision-making was relocated to the far periphery in Caledonia, the military and Severus himself were the only relevant interest groups competing with Domna for influence over her sons. Since Septimius himself already had solid control over the military, Julia Domna could wield the most influence here by exercising her "maternal" skills as a mediator within the dysfunctional imperial family.

While her powers as a peacemaker while on campaign in Caledonia were theoretically strong, however, she was only able to influence the men around her only so much by herself. This is supported by Cassius Dio's and Herodian's concurring reports that Caracalla attempted to murder Septimius while on campaign<sup>64</sup>, which indicates that the relations between the males of the imperial family had deteriorated too much for Domna's intervention alone to solve things.

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<sup>63</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Septimius Severus (193-211)*, 3.10.3.

<sup>64</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 269.

Even more unfortunate for Domna, Severus died on campaign in AD 211 and left her alone responsible for reconciling her sons, something they were under no obligation to do. Herodian's account characterizes the return journey from Caledonia to Rome as very intense, with the two brothers having "quarreled continually on the return journey to Rome...", and "did not use the same lodgings or even dine together... suspicious of all they ate and drank..."<sup>65</sup> Domna would have presumably continued her attempts to reconcile her sons, but even when isolated with them, she seems to have failed. The military split into two separate interest groups each supporting one of the brothers<sup>66</sup> and the pair thus divided "the palace between them..." as to "manage their own affairs."<sup>67</sup> Julia Domna's influence here over her sons is hard to see here, but just because she lacked absolute power over them doesn't mean she lacked any power. The Roman Empire was a gargantuan institution with thousands of candidates vying for the emperor's ear, and it's possible that the two brothers would have caused an open civil war were it not for her intervention. Septimius clearly thought her potential to help the reconciliation of Caracalla and Geta succeed was worth bringing her across the empire for. What's more, absent from all these literary accounts is the extremely close relationship between Septimius and Julia Domna, having to be inferred from her constant use through propagandistic coins and titles as well as Septimius' bringing her on campaign. When he died, Julia Domna's power underwent a significant shift, characteristic female power of the period depending on the men around them. Septimius, the male through which she exercised her power had died, and thus her own power greatly changed.

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<sup>65</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.1.2.

<sup>66</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 280.

<sup>67</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.1.2.

Limited by Septimius' death to only having her motherhood as a source of power to draw on, she attempted to use it in a last-ditch attempt to "effect a reconciliation"<sup>68</sup> among the two brothers. Geta and Caracalla decided that "it was best to divide the empire to avoid... continuing their intrigues,"<sup>69</sup> something that was more the result of failed prior diplomatic negotiations than a sincere roadmap to peace. Domna like felt that a future civil war was the most likely outcome, and so while all others present only "kept their eyes fixed on the ground,"<sup>70</sup> Domna cried out "Earth and sea, my children, you have found a way to divide... the continents. But your mother, how would you parcel her?"<sup>71</sup>. Her display was effective for a time, and "with all pitying her, the meeting adjourned,"<sup>72</sup> but unable to create any concrete solution involving offices or territory, the conflict soon reignited. Always the more violent brother by nature, "Caracalla decided to act and advance his cause by sword," luring Geta into a trap using their mother as bait and then killing "his brother in the arms of his mother, and by this act really killed them both."<sup>73</sup>

Although Julia Domna would continue to be active in Caracalla's administration, even being charged with the important administrative task to "sort everything [letters] that arrived," her inability to stop the murder of Geta functions as the single best example of the limitations in her informal power as "mother"<sup>74</sup> within Roman politics. That's not to say that her later role in sorting letters wasn't significant, since it was a deceptively powerful role by its nature of controlling the emperor's view of his own empire, but that her later position was firmly

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<sup>68</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.4.

<sup>69</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.5.

<sup>70</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.8.

<sup>71</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.8.

<sup>72</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.3.9.

<sup>73</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Caracalla (211-217)*, 4.4.3.

<sup>74</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 348.

secondary to Caracalla and only held by his will. Julia Domna held political power through her figure's importance as a propaganda figure to Severus and her role as "mother" within the imperial family, but such power was ultimately for the benefit of or direct by the men around her. This is especially true for her power as mother, since Caracalla's unwillingness to recognize it was all he needed to do for her authority to be nullified in the matter of Geta's death, despite her presumed pleading for him to stop. Julia Domna's power was informal insofar as her good advice, wealth, and importance within the imperial family didn't technically need to be acknowledged by those with authority granted to them by office. While she managed to eliminate a powerful rival in Plautianus, it was only through Caracalla's (the imperial heir) participation. Domna's political power, while real, was thus constantly changing depending on the males around her and their willingness to acknowledge her.

### **Reading Between the Lines: Domna's Presence in Narrative Histories**

Julia Domna isn't mentioned by Cassius Dio or Herodian as playing as playing the same role of intermediary within the imperial household as she did in Caledonia or after Septimius' death. It would be a mistake to use this narrative absence to then assume that she wasn't important in their upbringing as children, however, for the same reason that her narrative absence in Septimius' early reign doesn't indicate actual absence. The mention of females in histories at the time of the Severans was often a commentary on the inadequacies of their male relatives. A woman interrupting her husband in a public setting could be a commentary on his lack of control over his household, for example. Julia's absence within Dio and Herodian's literary narratives could actually be a sign of their acknowledgement if not tacit approval of Septimius' strong character, therefore, not an accurate representation of the literal facts of Septimius' reign.

Material evidence in the forms of coinage and titles indicates that Julia Domna played a crucial role in Septimius' shift towards the establishment of a dynasty, being both the literal progenitor of his children and a way to bridge the gap between himself and the Roman public. The imperial family was an institution unto itself within the imperial political system, and depictions of them in images were understood to have inherent value.

This reading against the grain of ancient primary sources also needs to be applied to descriptions of Plautianus and his downfall, with Dio and Herodian minimizing Domna's role despite her rivalry with the prefect being one of the defining characteristics of his tenure in office. Once again, this likely has to do with the inherent meaning imbued with the presence of women in dynastic histories within Roman culture rather than the actual facts of what transpired. Julia Domna would have had influence over Caracalla as his mother, particularly given the date of Plautianus' death in 205AD<sup>75</sup>. Being born in 188AD, it's reasonable that Caracalla would have been more impressionable as a 17-year-old than as the man who would disregard his mother's peacemaking attempts and assassinate his brother more than a decade later, then being nearly 30. The fact that Caracalla's first act after the assassination of Plautianus was to go to his mother<sup>76</sup> rather than present himself to his father was highly significant, indicating that it was she above all who desired his death and thus likely that Caracalla acted with her in mind, with protecting her or following her desires both being viable possibilities.

The absence of a direct order from Julia Domna to murder Plautianus doesn't mean that she played no role in the event, and given Caracalla's actions directly after the murder and her

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<sup>75</sup> Jona Lendering, "Gaius Fulvius Plautianus," Livius.org, Accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/plautianus/>.

<sup>76</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVII*, 247.



public rivalry with the prefect, it would be surprising if she didn't. Likewise, her background role in Plautianus' assassination could have been used by Dio and Herodian to comment on Septimius' handling of his court, as he's represented as somewhat aloof in both narratives for letting Plautianus openly insult him and Domna. One possibility is that her absence from what's essentially a cold-blooded murder plot could signal a tacit approval that Cassius Dio and Herodian shared for her as a figure, or at the very least a severe dislike for Plautianus. Representing her as seeking the murder of a prefect would reflect poorly upon her character, and as virtue was a major source of power for public female figures at the time, this would have been greatly damaging to her. Another is that both authors thought it a prudent opportunity to characterize Caracalla as willing to commit violence for his own gain, foreshadowing his later killing of Geta. While Julia Domna is not represented as taking direct political action within Septimius' court in Rome when it came to traditionally male spheres such as physical conflict, she is nevertheless present throughout the narratives in a fashion suggesting she played an important role.

### **Conclusion**

Although ancient historians concerned with the portrayal of Septimius Severus may have altered the political involvement of Julia Domna in Septimius' rule within the narratives, reading between the lines reveals that she played an important role. This importance establishes that the Severan Dynasty was open to women playing a political role from the very beginning, with her prophetic origins, use in imperial propaganda, and court rivalry with Plautianus all serving as examples. Since she lacked constitutional power, she had to exercise this power informally through constitutionally invested officials around her with the exception of patronizing art, but the Roman government functioned off of personal relationships just as much as official positions.

This didn't mean she was powerless, therefore, with her triumph over Plautianus serving as proof. In many ways this personal nature of Roman politics was an asset to Julia Domna under Septimius Severus, since she could help the regime navigate territory within the highly regimented city of Rome that Septimius was unfamiliar with while he kept the military on the dynasty's good side. It also established hard limits to her power that would prove particularly dire in her inability to mediate between her sons Geta and Caracalla, however, with the latter's murder of the former in her arms a single moving image that encapsulates a frustration she likely felt throughout her life in Rome. Uncovering the important role she played requires reading between the lines of ancient sources, for which the mere presence of a woman could be a commentary on the competence or character of males she was related to.

## **Chapter Two: The Infamously Feminine Trio: Maesa, Soaemias, and Elagabalus**

An acute sense of disgust is the best descriptor of the feelings conveyed by ancient sources concerning Elagabalus, the first underaged emperor of Rome. Described by Dio as a “False Antoninus,”<sup>77</sup> by Herodian as a pawn of his power-hungry grandmother Maesa<sup>78</sup>, and by the *Historia Augusta* as a “man so detestable for his... utter depravity that the senate expunged from the records his very name,”<sup>79</sup> one would be forgiven for coming away with the impression that Elagabalus was by far the worst person to ever hold the imperial title. Indeed, the entire second half of the *Historia Augusta*’s account of his reign is dedicated to tales of his debaucheries, many sexual in nature. While this part of the *Historia Augusta* is widely known for being factually untrue, it nevertheless conveys what later generations of Romans thought about the emperor. There are also serious disagreements among the sources, however, especially concerning whether Elagabalus was under the thumb of his mother Soaemias, his grandmother Maesa, or whether both of these figures unsuccessfully tried to curtail his excesses and turn him into a “proper” Roman. This confusion is further amplified by the fact that his rise was almost entirely due to the army’s support of him, the most stereotypically masculine of the Roman interest groups. Why did his erratic behavior during his reign so contrast his representation during his rise in Syria then, and why did it take four years for him to be removed from power?

Elagabalus’ dramatic decline in popularity between the periods of his rise in Syria and his reign in Rome was a result of the two region’s differing receptiveness to his ruling style. While

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<sup>77</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXX*, 439.

<sup>78</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 5.7.1.

<sup>79</sup> *The Historia Augusta, Elagabalus*, trans. David Magie (UChicago, 2022), 143.

his personal eccentricities helped shape said ruling style, the influence of his mother Soaemias and grandmother Maesa in his administration were also crucially important. The reign of Elagabalus is an excellent case study for the paradoxical nature of female influence in Severan politics. While Soaemias and Maesa were critical to Elagabalus' rise by virtue of their financial resources and connections within the Roman political system, once he had been installed in Rome they were powerless to either control Elagabalus or mediate between him and the important interest groups located within the city. Since Elagabalus was a particularly controversial figure within Roman society both during and after his reign, the primary sources require particularly close reading in combination with available material evidence to discern what actually caused his administration to flounder so profoundly.

### **The Rise of Elagabalus: Severan Receptiveness to Female Involvement in Politics**

Whereas Septimius Severus and Caracalla were both relatively traditional in the involvement of females in their reigns, Elagabalus immediately stands out as more or less a pawn of his female relatives, who were the driving force behind his rise to the throne. I use the word "pawn" because of his young age (14) and previous isolation from Roman politics causing him to have a passive role in his own rise, with his initial candidacy as an imperial candidate being Maesa's own brainchild. Furthermore, rumors of his parentage by Caracalla and the bribing of the army, both of which were crucial to his victory, were independent actions taken by Maesa. Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* both introduce Maesa and Soaemias into the narrative and describe their importance before even mentioning Elagabalus, so called because of the sun-god

he served as priest<sup>80</sup>. This mentioning of the women first indicates them as being important, if not primary, players in Elagabalus' political ventures. All three sources also confirm that Maesa had lived with Julia Domna at the imperial palace throughout Septimius and Caracalla's reigns, meaning that she would have been familiar with powerful players in Roman politics. This differs from Elagabalus, who was the priest of a temple to a "Syrian" god whose temples were explicitly described as being different in style from Greek and Roman ones, lacking humanoid statues<sup>81</sup>. For this eastern priest to make a bid for the emperorship would require a mediator familiar with important figures in Roman politics, and his female relatives having served that role fits their narrative characterizations. There's disagreement between Dio and Herodian on how exactly the armies in Syria were persuaded to support Elagabalus, with Dio crediting a singly appearing male named Eutygianus<sup>82</sup> versus Herodian's crediting of Maesa - "rumored to be enormously wealthy"<sup>83</sup> - ostensibly being well positioned to bribe potential supporters. The differing accounts are probably a result of the implications a female's presence would have on Roman politics. Dio in his history heavily focuses on the increasing importance of the army in selecting emperors versus the senate, and to put the blame on them for the picking of a later disastrous emperor supports his lamentation of the Senate's loss in station.

Ultimately Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* all agree that Elagabalus' rise was in large part due to the Julias Soemias and Maesa. Dio specifically characterizes them as his most important supporters, stating that "he had as helpers only a few freedmen and soldiers and six men of the equestrian order and senators of Emesa."<sup>84</sup> These men likely played

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<sup>80</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 410.

<sup>81</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.3.4.

<sup>82</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 411

<sup>83</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.3.11.

<sup>84</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 411.

some role in Elagabalus' rise, but the fact that they remain unnamed by Dio indicates that their role paled in comparison to Maesa's. Elagabalus' link to Caracalla and Septimius Severus was through the dynasty's maternal line, and so his selection as an imperial candidate at all implicitly recognized the importance of women in Roman dynastic politics. Furthermore, Domna's family was well-known to have belonged to Syriac royalty, corroborating Herodian's claim that Maesa's rumored wealth enticed soldiers to back Elagabalus for financial gain, since their support of a boy would otherwise be confusing. This was the first time that an underaged boy was selected to become emperor in Roman history, playing into a larger trend of emperors becoming pawns in the power games of others who sought to rule through them, here the army.

The *Historia Augusta*, drawing from Herodian, characterizes Maesa as being one of these power players, having been "expelled from her home in the palace through the arrogance of Macrinus".<sup>85</sup> Herodian also supports this view of events, with Elagabalus' later journey to Rome being prompted by Maesa being "eager to return to her familial imperial life."<sup>86</sup> While the army had their own desires separate from those of the Julias, Elagabalus' mere existence was able to satisfy all relevant parties at once, at least in comparison to the alienating Macrinus, who lacked a dynastic justification to power. Whether Elagabalus would be able to deliver on the promise of a later pay raise for the imperial army or not was an open question, but his grandmother was known to be fantastically wealthy and Macrinus had already been unwilling to comply, making Elagabalus the more likely choice for those interested in personal advancement. While Macrinus' initial defeat by "Elagabalus' army" outside Antioch didn't mean certain death, his empire-wide alienation meant he was later "arrested and beheaded by centurions, though he had authority to

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<sup>85</sup> *Historia Augusta, Elagabalus*, 68.

<sup>86</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.5.1.

put to death both them and others.”<sup>87</sup> The army was supportive enough of Elagabalus in the beginning, then, to not just defeat Macrinus in battle but hunt him down and execute him. They wanted Elagabalus on the throne, and were willing to go to great lengths to ensure it happened.

The rise of Elagabalus thus shows openness to female engagement with politics unique to the Severans alone at their particular moment in Roman history, with females persuading legions to support candidates unprecedented. It was only a few decades prior that Septimius Severus had made history by seizing the throne with the help of an outside army marching into Italy, and already the trend of settling succession with military conflict had intensified to the point that the distant province of Syria was the site of contest over who would take control of the Roman power structure. While traditional Roman modes of masculinity wouldn't indicate him as a promising candidate to legions on paper, his grandmother's wealth combined with Macrinus' particular mistake in refusing to continue the trend of ever-increasing bribes to secure military loyalty turned him into someone worth fighting for.

Because the historical chroniclers all doubted the veracity of the claim of Elgabalus' parentage by Caracalla, senatorial narratives don't properly portray the importance of the title "Antoninus" in his rise. "Antoninus" was the true name of the emperor Caracalla, referring to a type of military cloak he often wore,<sup>88</sup> and carrying his name would denote a connection between the two. Although succession was always murky for the emperorship, a candidate with either a blood or adoptive relationship to a previous emperor always had an edge. Furthermore, Elagabalus made sure to capitalize on his resemblance through taking actions that would associate him with Caracalla, such as cultivating a good relationship with the military. The

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<sup>87</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 434.

<sup>88</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXVIII*, 288.

combination of a claim of parentage by his supporters with similar public representation helped his claim of blood relation be legitimized, furthering his candidacy for the throne.

The Julias Soaemias and Maesa may not have wielded swords, but they were nevertheless crucial in the military defeat of Macrinus, and their predominance in the primary source narratives introduces a question as to whether Elagabalus ever would have become emperor without their assistance. Not present within any of the primary sources are the conversations and politicking that would have been necessary on the parts of Maesa and Soaemias to secure the soldiers' support. This is a result of the lack of names of his supporters besides Maesa and Soaemias, with the segments of the armies supporting him only referred to as "the soldiers" by Herodian (5.3.12). To decide for Elagabalus and stir up open revolt was a massive step for those involved, and would have required promises of land, the doling out of concrete (not rumored) wealth, the granting of positions, and other rewards. Maesa and Soaemias were able to promise these because of their particular backgrounds as Syriac royalty, which gave them wealth, and because of the connections they had made with military and political figures while living in Rome, from whom they could subsequently draw support. Their importance being derived from their relationships with others rather than a constitutionally invested position would also work against them once Elagabalus was enthroned, however. Once a crown is put on someone's head, they can become much harder to control, and in Elagabalus' case, his newfound publicity brought to light certain inclinations that were thus far left in the dark.



### **The Personal Nature of Roman Politics: Maesa and Soaemias' Political Limitations**

The influential role of Julia Maesa in Elagabalus' rise contrasted with her later difficulty in controlling him demonstrates the limitations of a woman's ability to influence Roman politics. These limitations were present even considering Maesa's more advanced age and experience relative to junior members of her own family, with her personal power being limited by the constitutionally invested person's (here, Elagabalus) willingness to listen. While Elagabalus' move from Syria to Rome was portrayed by Herodian as emerging from Maesa being "eager to return to her familiar imperial life...",<sup>89</sup> upon inspection Elagabalus himself probably had a bigger role in the decision than what's indicated. Rome under the Severans was still an influential city and capital of the empire, and if Elagabalus wished to cement his rule he would need to travel there. Maesa being able to operate in advantageous political terrain was a temporary situation for her, and she would have needed to content with the traditional political classes situated in Rome eventually if she wished to cement Elagabalus' rule. While her participation in Roman politics had been accepted and encouraged when financial assets of hers were critical to Elagabalus' rise, and all relevant players were present in Syria and thus subject to local interests. Once in Rome her role would essentially be reduced to that of any other advisor, albeit an important one.

This is shown by the change in the power dynamic between her and Elagabalus once reaching Nicomedia, a major city on the northwest coast of Asia Minor. Her inability to control Elagabalus here immediately became apparent, with him being "plunged into his mad activities... he went about performing, as it appeared, orgiastic service to his god."<sup>90</sup> Elagabalus'

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<sup>89</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.5.1.

<sup>90</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.5.3 & 5.5.4.

worship of a largely unknown eastern god presented problems for the justification to power provided upon his ascension to the imperial title in Syria: spiritual and blood continuity with Caracalla. Maesa knew this, and was “greatly disturbed and tried... to persuade the youth to wear Roman dress.” Nonetheless, she was stopped in her tracks by the fact that Elagabalus had “contempt for the old woman’s warnings.”<sup>91</sup> What’s more, Elagabalus didn’t just refuse to change his dress, but actually sent a portrait of himself in eastern dress to Rome ahead of time to accustom the senate to the sight of him. Despite undoubtedly having his best interests at heart, as the fate of the dynasty was at least partially tied to him, Maesa was unable to stop this. Elagabalus had the ability to disregard her advice and take completely contrary actions. Although one could cite a diversity of examples from all three written sources of Elagabalus engaging in excesses contrary to what Roman society viewed proper, with half of the *Historia Augusta*’s chapter on him dedicated to tales of his debauchery alone (mostly sexual), the general characterization of him as a figure engaging in excess remains the same throughout his reign. Elagabalus was viewed as culturally anathema to the Roman ruling hierarchy, gradually alienating his supporters more and more until they felt a change was necessary lest the whole structure should come crashing down, catching those who had supported his rise within. While Julia Maesa had the power to facilitate his rise to the throne, once on it she was unable to control him, needing to engage in a replacement to ensure her continued involvement in Roman politics.

This eventual shifting of power towards a replacement, Alexander Severus, Elagabalus’ cousin and son of Maesa’s daughter Mamaea, shows that the personal nature of Roman politics could simultaneously work for and against women in their engagement with the political system. While neither Maesa nor Soemias could place Elagabalus under lock and key in Rome and

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<sup>91</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.5.6.

directly rule in his name, they could use their wealth and dynastic connections to present a viable alternative that other Roman interest groups, such as the Praetorian Guard, the Senate, and the military could get behind. Although details vary, all three primary sources indicate that Julia Maesa played a major role in the adoption of Alexander, with Dio reporting Maesa and Soaemis as taking “their places on either side of him”<sup>92</sup> during the adoption and Herodian representing Maesa as able to “persuade the... empty-headed young idiot to adopt... her grandson, the child of her other daughter, Mamaea.”<sup>93</sup> Maesa continued to perpetuate rumors of her grandchildren being the legitimate heirs to the Severan dynasty, with Herodian claiming “Maesa’s daughters, and the old woman too, boasted of their adultery with Caracalla.”<sup>94</sup> These claims of adultery shows how female participants in politics still had to justify their presence as acting on behalf of male holders of power, even if some in ancient society would understand such claims to be figurative. Although it's murky whether the naming of Alexander was merely influenced by Maesa’s advice or primarily instigated by her, with Elagabalus performing the actual adoption, it’s clear that he soon regretted his decision, soon moving against Alexander’s “teachers” and putting “to death some of the most distinguished.”<sup>95</sup> The difference between advisors and teachers for underaged emperors was at times paper thin, and this move on the part of Elagabalus was likely the best he could do against the coalescing of a faction seeking a more controllable and culturally acceptable child ruler. In response to this and repeated assassination attempts, Alexander’s mother Mamaea handled the choosing of trusted cupbearers and cooks to handle the preparation of his food, as well as personally having “secretly distributed money to the

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<sup>92</sup> Dio, *Epitome of Book LXXIX*, 474.

<sup>93</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.7.1.

<sup>94</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.7.3.

<sup>95</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.7.6.

praetorians”<sup>96</sup> as to secure their loyalty. These weren’t necessarily political moves yet on the part of Mamaea, since she presumably de-facto in charge of Alexander’s household before he became *Caesar*, but it nevertheless had political effects of creating two separate imperial candidates.

Whether this was for protection of her son or preparation for a coup, Mamaea likewise mobilized the support of Julia Maesa, the grandmother of both emperors and matriarch of the Severans for her son Alexander, effectively outmaneuvering and shifting the power towards her section of the dynastic line.

The tug and pull of power within the palace culminated in a direct appeal by Elagabalus to the Praetorian Guard, who refused to protect him after a false rumor concerning Alexander’s death was spread. Elagabalus thereafter decided to release “the fury of his wrath” against them and ordered their arrest, the Praetorians reacting by proclaiming Alexander emperor. Elagabalus and Soaemias were both slain and their thrown into the Tiber, Soaemias being included as she was his “Augusta and mother”<sup>97</sup> and thus intrinsically associated with him. “Augusta”, being a Roman title reserved for female members of the imperial family, could also denote an important role in government depending on the woman named, and it’s possible that Soaemias was more involved and thus deserving of this treatment than what the chronicles claim. Although merely one part of a period of Roman history in which bloody turnovers between emperors were the norm, the Praetorian Guard’s choice to replace Elagabalus with Alexander is essential here for understanding my description of Roman politics as possessing a “personal nature” through which a woman’s ability to interact with the system was filtered. Today, government institutions are generally thought of as bureaucratic entities with clear interests, goals, and functions. An

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<sup>96</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.8.3.

<sup>97</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.8.7.

example of this would be the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who, no matter the director, fulfills more or less the same role within the American government. In a premodern political system such as that of the Roman Empire, however, the person often defined the position's power just as much as vice versa. While this description doesn't hold up as much in settings like the army where people had clearly defined ranks within an organized hierarchy, it fits the imperial court extremely well, in which a person's power was primarily determined by their ability to either influence the emperor or affect a change.

The Julias Maesa, Soaemias, and Mamaea's primary title was that of "Augusta", which denoted an imperial wife or mother and lacked the granting of an official government office. As a result of its generality, the power of any one of these figures fluctuated from extremely influential to superfluous at different times during the reign of Elagabalus. Their relative influence depended on the individual woman's ability to do any number of three things: effectuate a change on the throne, influence the emperor to carry out her will, and mediate between different interest groups to magnify the importance of her position within the court. The first was demonstrated through Julia Maesa's use of her immense wealth in Syria to persuade soldiers to fight for Elagabalus over Macrinus; given the youth's previous absence from the historical narrative, this was presumably critical to his rise. The second avenue to exercising power, influencing the emperor, was notable more in its absence (i.e., Maesa's lack of influence) after Elagabalus ascended to the throne, with the emperor engaging in "debaucheries" that would ultimately unite two key competing interest groups – both the senate and Praetorian guard – against him, who had previously been coming into conflict with each other. Accordingly, Maesa's presence within the ancient sources dwindles once Elagabalus started to reign in earnest (save for the sections mentioning her disapproval and move to support Alexander). Evidence for

Maesa exercising the third avenue available to women seeking to exercise power, mediating to different interest groups for magnification of her own power, needs to be read into the sources a bit. Both Maesa and Soemias were brought before the Senate upon Elagabalus' naming of Alexander as heir, indicating that their influence within his administration was well known and that their presence before the Senate was beneficial or necessary in some way (traditionally women didn't enter the Senate). Additionally, Elagabalus reigned for four years (218-222), meaning that while the literary sources denote his behavior as extremely disturbing to the point of disgust for all of Rome's major interest groups, somebody did the legwork to secure their loyalty while Elagabalus was off "dancing" and engaging in "orgies" for four long years. The most likely candidates here would be his grandmother, who secured his reign, and Soemias, who likely wished to see her son live a long and happy life. Throughout this time, his grandmother and mother would have met with senators, made bribes to the praetorians, and commissioned art depicting Elagabalus to be distributed throughout the provinces. Elagabalus may have worn the purple, but it was his grandmother Maesa and mother Soemias who worked to keep him in that position for as long as possible.

### **Reading Against the Grain: The Presence (or lack thereof) of Maesa and Soemias in Texts**

One might ask, however, when reading Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta's* accounts of Elagabalus' reign, why the Julias Maesa and Soemias appear as background characters for so much of it if they were influential. A close reading of where they appear in the texts is necessary to uncover the answer to this, keeping in mind the authors' goals and the meaning imbued within the presence of women in Roman historical narratives. Taking Herodian's text as an example, one will notice that both Julia Maesa and Julia Soemias are

mentioned before Elagabalus, linking him to Caracalla through the maternal Severan line (casting aside his rumored parentage). Maesa is then continually important throughout his rise, presenting him as the son of Caracalla and helping persuade the army to support him through bribes, an ability unique to her alone within the Severan dynasty by virtue of her personal wealth. These actions were driven by a dynastic claim, with her imploring the soldiers to restore the empire “to her family,”<sup>98</sup> and although the claim was manufactured as paternal in nature, it was Maesa’s brainchild and her familial line in truth. Although the soldiers in the imperial army were the ones who took up swords and fought for Elagabalus against Macrinus, without Maesa his claim wouldn’t have existed in the first place. After the defeat of Macrinus and the granting to Elagabalus of the imperial title by his soldiers, Maesa and Soaemias’ narrative presentation changes, however, becoming background figures.

As background figures, Maesa is represented as having expressed increasing amounts of disgust with Elagabalus’ headstrong inclinations towards abuse of his power for self-gratification, with Soaemias largely silent altogether. There are two reasons while chroniclers would represent these women in such a fashion and not acknowledge their important role in Elagabalus’ administration. The first is that their accounts of Elagabalus’ reign largely focused on the debauched character of the man himself, with the *Historia Augusta* being particularly useful as a mirror into how Roman society viewed him in posterity. The *Historia Augusta* was composed in either the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> century, which is partly why the second part of its chapter on Elagabalus, which features shocking scenes of debauchery not found in Dio or Herodian’s accounts, is usually regarded as fictitious. To simultaneously present Elagabalus as a

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<sup>98</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Heliogabalus (218-222)*, 5.3.11

shockingly deranged figure along with the fact that the empire ran under him without major crises for four years would bring into question who was responsible for said administration, with a possible answer being the women. Not mentioning them is therefore a compliment, and by instead presenting them as powerless to stop Elagabalus' excesses, the focus is drawn to the power they weren't able to exercise as opposed to what they likely did.

The second reason a chronicler might choose to largely ignore Maesa and Soaemias has to do with narrative continuity. Herodian's chapters titled "Heliogabalus' unusual behavior" and "Heliogabalus' religious excesses" along with the fact that chapters 18.4-35 of the *Historia Augusta's* coverage of him are dedicated solely to "tales of his extravagance" demonstrate that chroniclers' coverage of Elagabalus was largely devoted to his shocking departure from accepted Roman standards of masculinity and leadership. To present Elagabalus as receiving sage advice from Maesa yet refusing to obey her is part of a larger negative portrait painted of him as lacking virtue, with his own pride being one of many reasons for his downfall. Limiting mention of Maesa and Soaemias' active involvement in politics to Elagabalus' rise and fall portrays women's participation in politics as extraordinary, occurring only during times of crisis and upheaval when societal traditions were loosened and the Roman political system became more of an open contest for leadership. Within such a setting, one would be much more accepting of support from someone traditionally shunned from politics, for example, as financial power was more important than negative fallout from being culturally uncouth during times of peace. The importance of Julia Maesa's support to Elagabalus' rise was likely publicly known and indisputable, just as her subsequent withdrawal of this support likely was popularly regarded as a significant factor in Elagabalus' fall. Chroniclers' inclusion of Maesa in the narrative here in a limited way, however, hardly acknowledges (much less endorses) growing involvement within



Roman leadership of classes generally kept out. Rather, it presents Maesa's actions in a traditional as part and parcel of a dynastic political game long part of the Roman emperorship, seen previously with the Julio-Claudians. The chroniclers' discussion of Maesa's participation in politics thus a way to narratively link the Severans to the past while also featuring changes within the Roman political order, such as the growing importance of the east and the army.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Julias Maesa and Soaemis were undoubtedly heavily involved in Elagabalus' rise, with the former being responsible for him initially being pushed forward as a claimant, the importance of their roles wasn't static across time. Immediately upon Elagabalus' defeat of Macrinus and departure from Syria, where Maesa's influence was strongest, he appears to have begun to behave erratically despite his grandmother's multiple attempts to intervene. Her failure to be as effective in Nicomedia probably owed to the army's increased influence in his administration. Although the narratives don't mention anyone, there would have been high ranking military officials swirling around Elagabalus advising him and seeking his favor. They had already hitched their fates to his through their defections in Syria, and Elagabalus' getting away with traditionally shunned behavior could have been related to their inability to put forth a viable alternative, with Septimius' precedent of generals seizing power for themselves not quite yet set in stone. Elagabalus' rise to power was indicative of a novel openness to female involvement in Roman politics, with Maesa directly acting as an intermediary between Elagabalus and the army in Syria during her quest to secure their support. These actions were characterized by historians as deriving from her own desire to return to power in Rome, and thus Maesa was an important power player in her own right, not just a behind-the-scenes supporter of

male relatives. With that being said, her and Soaemias' failure to then dominate Elagabalus' reign indicates that although the Severans were receptive to females becoming involved in politics, there were still limitations on how this power could be exercised.

These limitations were primarily an effect of female power being personal in nature, with a comparison between "soft" vs. "hard" power being useful. Whereas Elagabalus' position as emperor possessed "hard" power, with constitutionally defined responsibilities and abilities, Maesa and Soaemias' "soft" power was essentially defined by their ability to diplomatically convince those around them with hard power. Their money spoke for itself, but since they couldn't hold the office of emperor themselves, their ability to use this money was capped to either convincing constitutional officials to support their designs or installing a different candidate on the throne, as had been done in Syria against Macrinus. While their attempts to exercise their soft power during Elagabalus' reign were ultimately ineffective in terms of controlling the youth's behavior on account of his own obstinacy, this doesn't mean that they were completely sidelined from politics. The two likely met with officials in the senate to overlook his apparent "excesses" and convince them of the virtues of Elagabalus' reign. In addition, they patronized art featuring the emperor to be displayed across the empire, and their characterization in written sources supports them as having picked up administrative slack that Elagabalus couldn't be bothered to take up himself. It's telling that even after the emperor's deposition and the installment of Alexander Severus, Maesa remained in power, the institutional dissatisfaction against the Severan dynasty being limited to Elagabalus' inappropriate behavior. There is no indication that it provoked any sort of condemnation of Maesa and Soaemias' involvement in politics.

To properly discern the full extent of Maesa and Soaemias' involvement in politics during the reign of Elagabalus requires a historian to read against the grain of the written record, given the reality that the mere mention of a woman involved in politics was a commentary in itself. This commentary could be limited to Elagabalus' ineptitude, but in the case of historians like Dio writing a history in which Rome itself was the subject, it would also reflect on the people of the empire as a whole. The general absence of women in these three chronicles' discussion of peacetime rule during Elagabalus' reign, thus, is hardly definitive evidence of their generalized absence from Roman politics during the time period, and historical sources can help uncover the truth. The *Historia Augusta's* later date of composition is particularly useful in illuminating how certain female historical figures associated with the Severan dynasty would be remembered; its date of composition means characterizations of historical figures are at least somewhat indicative of their lasting impression within Roman culture. Soaemias' casting as a villainess actively involved in corrupting and enabling her son, for example, indicates that subsequent generations of Romans remembered her as more active in her son's reign than Dio or Herodian's written texts would indicate. Maesa and Soaemias' ability to influence Elagabalus may have been limited, but their involvement in his reign was undisputed by contemporaries, as shown by this statue of (most likely) Soaemias from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City:



Figure 5. *Portrait of a woman*. First quarter, 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Marble portrait. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

At first, it appears as though this statue of Soaemias is merely one of countless examples from antiquity that were damaged across time from material recycling or exposure to the elements. The plaque under the statue, however, states that Roman archaeologists and art historians see evidence here that the statue had intentionally been defaced, and that this damage likely occurred in later antiquity. Given the recent controversy over the preservation of monuments commemorating Confederate leaders in the American Civil War, it isn't very difficult to imagine the motivations behind this defacing of Soaemias' statue. Within Roman culture, the Julias Maesa and Soaemias were vilified by some, likely as corrupters that helped cause Elagabalus to develop "female" modes of behavior. If damage like that present in this statue was widespread, possible that they were used as warnings of sorts against female

involvement in politics in the future, with emperors being given traditionally masculine advisors and teachers to ensure they turned out different.

Although incomplete, the historical record of Elagabalus' reign paints his grandmother Maesa as essential to his rise, with the murky nature of Roman imperial succession helping facilitate moments of crisis in which women found it easier to interact with the political system. Once things were stabilized, Maesa and Soaemias became merely one of many interest groups vying for the emperor's favor, limited by both their power being informal and Elagabalus' lack of desire to be constrained. Looking at what the texts don't mention, as well as the material record, it's clear that much of Maesa and Soaemias' involvement in Elagabalus' reign has been lost to time. Nevertheless, available evidence helps solidify Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias as unique firsts within Roman politics by virtue of their active involvement in succession in the pursuit of independent personal goals. Later limitations on their power don't detract from their status as "firsts" here, and their involvement would set a precedent followed by later regents of "boy emperors" through the 5<sup>th</sup> century. While they may have been vilified, Julia Maesa and to a lesser extent Soaemias were impactful figures in Roman history.

### **Chapter Three: Rome's First Marionette Emperor: Alexander Severus**

Elagabalus, who began his reign so beloved by the soldiers that they flocked from his rival Macrinus to join him, now lay dead at the feet of the Praetorians along with his mother Soaemias. Although there had been emperors in the past detested after their deaths, Elagabalus and Soaemias were so reviled that according to Herodian their bodies were “mutilated” and “dragged” throughout the city of Rome before being hurled into the Tiber<sup>99</sup>. The rest of the Severan dynasty escaped this fate, however, and the transfer of power to Alexander was relatively quick and clean. The Severan matriarch Maesa had played a significant role in orchestrating the coup against her own blood, and now she and Julia Mamaea, Alexander’s mother, held the reins of state. Owing to the sheer hatred Elagabalus was regarded with by the Roman establishment, this intra-familial power struggle is universally positively regarded by the ancient sources, with disapproving references to women’s “corrupting influence” notably absent. Seeking to avoid her past mistake of giving a child authority over the state, Herodian relates how the 14-year-old Alexander in this arrangement was merely allowed the “appearance and title of emperor,” with true power remaining in the hands of “his women:”<sup>100</sup> Maesa and Mamaea. Elagabalus’ reign proves that two women couldn’t rule the empire by themselves, however, and so they diffused power to multiple aristocratic advisors in a fashion that distinguished Alexander’s reign as unique from all his predecessors, a momentary reversal of the gradual autocratic trend within Roman leadership that had intensified since the time of Augustus.

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<sup>99</sup> Herodian, *Elagabalus (218-222)*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. Livius, 2022, 5.8.9.

<sup>100</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.1.

This entrusting of imperial power to a council of sixteen “dignified and temperate”<sup>101</sup> senators epitomizes Alexander’s lack of control over his reign, even after he came of age and ostensibly became *paterfamilias* of his household and state. Despite his clearly eastern background and culture, Alexander’s reign came to embody a style of aristocratic governance long pined for by elements of the Roman cultural elite that emperors since Commodus had failed to uphold. The *Historia Augusta* emphasizes the ways in which he personally came to embrace this style of governance, instilling military discipline<sup>102</sup> in his troops and getting rid of Elagabalus’ gaudy visual displaying by adopting simple clothing. He explicitly refused to adopt titles offered to him by the Senate such as “the Great”<sup>103</sup> and “Antoninus”, both of which were culturally powerful for their potential to link Alexander to admired figures of the past. Alexander’s regents however, and perhaps the boy himself, sought to differentiate the young emperor as a new dynastic model, implicitly promising that Severan rule going forward would be of a vastly different character. From now on, the Severan Dynasty would be traditionally Roman in character: firmly rooted in the city of Rome itself, not constantly travelling on military campaign, and the emperor would rely on the senate for legitimacy rather than just his soldiers.

The heaping of praise upon the emperor in the wake of Elagabalus can make it difficult to ascertain where Mamaea and Maesa fit into this power arrangement, however. Although all agree that both remained relevant after Alexander took power, Maesa died early on in Alexander’s reign. Furthermore, the sources differ in their characterization of Mamaea, with Herodian portraying her as a corrupt and dominating figure responsible for her son’s downfall

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<sup>101</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.2.

<sup>102</sup> The *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, trans. David Magie (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 287.

<sup>103</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 188.

while Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta* credit her with providing Alexander stable influences and sage advice. Analysis of courtly intrigue such as that between Julia Domna, Caracalla, and Plautianus isn't a viable mode of analysis, as the mechanics of decision making aren't described in any of the sources besides Herodian stating "nothing was said or done unless these men had first... given unanimous approval"<sup>104</sup> when discussing the sixteen man senatorial council. More concrete statements about Maesa and Mamaea's role in Alexander Severus' reign can nevertheless be made, however, if one is willing to read between the lines of literary sources and do interpretive work, as well as considering representations of the administration on material evidence such as coinage. The ruling style of Alexander Severus provides further support for the Severan Dynasty's continuing acceptance of an increased female role in politics, with the development of regency protocols for underaged emperors being something new that would drastically affect the character of later Roman dynasties. Furthermore, while Roman politics had a dynastic and personal nature in which women could wield more power than often popularly portrayed, the intersection of Alexander's reign with traditionally masculine institutions such as the Senate demonstrate the limitations of this mode of analysis. Disagreements between all three sources on what precisely this institutional intersection looked like establishes as a Severan legacy the precedent of female political roles being highly flexible, dependent on resources at the woman's disposal and the character and abilities of the emperor, particularly in regard to regencies.

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<sup>104</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.2.



### Severan Openness to Women in Politics: A More Equitable Arrangement

The sixteen man senatorial council put together by the Julias Mamaea and Maesa was designed to facilitate a more “moderate and equitable administration”<sup>105</sup> according to Herodian, an open-ended statement that leaves important questions unanswered. If the moderateness was directed towards Alexander, this would refer to their surrounding of the young emperor with tutors who would impress upon him governance more acceptable to Roman citizens and institutions. It would make sense for them to construct a ruling apparatus in which his power was restricted, therefore, to prevent a repeat of youthful obstinacy corrupting the public’s perception of the entire administration as had happened under Elagabalus. If this was Maesa and Mamaea’s goal, they succeeded, with Alexander being near opposite of Elagabalus in his public behavior. Herodian in particular noted this through his “statues of the gods which Heliogabalus had moved...”<sup>106</sup> consciously creating a contrast between two. Other sources corroborate Alexander as having been of a sound moral character according to traditional Roman values of leadership and masculinity, with the *Historia Augusta* particularly approving of the way in which he constantly trained himself for “literature and military service...”<sup>107</sup> The *Historia Augusta* also described him more generally as having “had the strength and height of a soldier...”<sup>108</sup> which at the very least probably accurately portrays the character that his regents and advisors carefully curated for the public at large.

It’s also possible, however, for Herodian’s description of Alexander’s reign as “moderate and equitable” to refer to a more general investiture of Roman governmental authority to

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<sup>105</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.1.

<sup>106</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.3.

<sup>107</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 185.

<sup>108</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 187.

institutions outside of the emperor himself. While this may appear drastic at first, the position of “emperor” had always been something of a legal grey area within Roman high society, and different emperors relied on the Senate for political justification to power to different degrees. It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for an emperor to involve the Senate more explicitly in his administration, especially considering how both the Senate and Equestrians had always been important for emperors by virtue of their financial resources and political connections. Support for this interpretation comes from Herodian’s characterization of the sixteen man council as having total control over the emperor’s political actions, with nothing being “said or done unless these men had first considered the matter and given unanimous approval.”<sup>109</sup> Changes were also made in administrative staffing outside of the palace, with Herodian recounting how “unqualified men whom Heliogabalus had promoted...” were replaced both by those deemed “competent lawyers and skillful orators...”<sup>110</sup> and “men who were skilled in the arts of war”<sup>111</sup>. While this could refer to patsies installed by Elagabalus who would help run the empire while he was off on personal adventures, the word “unqualified” here could also instead refer to specifically senatorial markers of qualifications for governance, such as wealth or family pedigree.

Part of Maesa and Mamaea’s encouragement of a more moderate government was a careful curtailing of Alexander’s education, helping form him into a more statesmanlike figure who wouldn’t chafe against the restrictions he’d been placed under. They wanted Alexander to become a successful emperor in order to propagate the dynastic line, further justifying Maesa and Mamaea’s involvement in politics as well as ensuring Mamaea’s long term safety in Rome.

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<sup>109</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.2.

<sup>110</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.3.

<sup>111</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.4.

Additionally, they didn't want Alexander to have full rein over the state until he reached an age when he was mature enough to do so, with Elagabalus being a particularly vivid cautionary tale of what could happen if a child was given power. The broadening of the imperial power structure to include senators who had previously been excluded didn't necessarily decrease these women's own power as compared to what they wielded over Elagabalus, which was zero, but it did mean that Alexander wouldn't be able to single-handedly sideline them if he wanted to take a radically different approach to governance.

This establishment of Maesa and Mamaea's involvement in Roman politics for years to come was aided by Alexander's age, with regencies for underaged peoples having been a grey area within Roman law and society. This involvement was much further than under any previous Severan as a result. Though Maesa had determined who wore the purple, playing a critical role in Elagabalus' rise to power, the extent of Maesa's power under Elagabalus was almost nil, having no control to stop the emperor's increasingly self-destructive behavior. The ease with which this new status quo was accepted by the Senate indicates that although they were ostensibly a masculine body which explicitly forbade any women from joining, they didn't extend this attitude to all of Roman politics at large. A stable government emerged under Alexander and his regents, with none of the sources documenting any major scandals or excesses in personal behavior that tarnished his administration's reputation. Although we lack information on specific ways in which the different groups involved in Alexander's administration hashed out their conflicting interests or delegated specific powers amongst themselves, all the sources agree that Alexander's female relatives remained influential advisors throughout his teenage years and adulthood. In the *Historia Augusta*, this came in the form of sage advice from his mother that Alexander followed throughout his reign, whereas Herodian castigates Mamaea as a controlling

figure whose excesses reflected poorly on Alexander's reign. Despite these irreconcilably different characterizations of Mamaea from the two sources, concrete similarities can be drawn to establish the receptivity of Alexander Severus' administration to the influence of women more generally.

One important commonality between the sources is the publicity with which Maesa and Mamaea's effective positions as regents were portrayed. One example of this was in the Senate's conferment of "imperial honors" upon Maesa after her death, recognizing her as a deity.<sup>112</sup> The deification of imperial family members had been gradually increasing in frequency over the years, but to become a god was still one of the highest honors the Senate could posthumously bestow on a figure, and so it was far from a formality. Maesa being just one advisor among many would have likely precluded her from the publicity needed for deification to be conferred on her, with recognition by either the public or influential political figures in Rome being necessary for the machinery of state necessary for the giving of such a role to turn. As a result of her importance in restoring the Severan dynasty to power and affecting a change in leadership to Alexander, her transformative role in Roman politics was likely publicly known and acknowledged. Mamaea's public importance in Alexander's reign is also present in the narrative histories, albeit often through stories representing her as a malicious matriarch chiefly responsible for her son's downfall. In Herodian's biography, for example, despite Alexander having "blamed his mother for her excessive love of money" when Mamaea moved vast sums of money meant for bribing Praetorians into her personal control, he was unable to take concrete action to stop her.<sup>113</sup> She was also supposedly responsible for the removal of allies of Alexander

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<sup>112</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.3.

<sup>113</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.8.

who threatened her grip over her son, most notably his wife Sallustia Orbiana and her father, the praetorian prefect. The rank of prefect was already demonstrated to be extremely powerful from Septimius' dependence on Plautianus, and the fact that Mamaea would approve of Alexander's marriage to Orbiana in the first place suggests that the rank was still significant. Despite this, Herodian accuses her of starting a vicious rivalry with Orbiana out of a "egotistic desire to be sole empress... so excessively arrogant... that the girl's father... could no longer endure the woman's insolence."<sup>114</sup> Orbiana's father, the Praetorian Prefect, likely tried to persuade the Praetorian Guard to eliminate Mamaea after having "took refuge in the Praetorian camp", provoking his killing by Mamaea and the driving of Orbiana "from the palace to exile."<sup>115</sup> Alexander is described as explicitly disapproving of all this, but nevertheless relented to his mother, which Herodian credited to "abnormal filial devotion."<sup>116</sup> Whether or not Herodian was merely protecting Alexander's image because of the implications being under the thumb of his mother would have, Mamaea does appear to have been in control of the imperial household even after Alexander reached the age of adulthood. This is odd, since as an adult and especially as a married man his status as *paterfamilias* should have superseded his mother's authority.

The distribution of coinage featuring Maesa and Mamaea indicates a widespread acknowledgement of their importance to Alexander's reign. One example of such coinage is this Orichalcum sestertius (an ancient Roman coin made of a gold-copper alloy)<sup>117</sup> of Alexander

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<sup>114</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.9.

<sup>115</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.10.

<sup>116</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.10.

<sup>117</sup> Liana Miate, "Orichalcum," *World History Encyclopedia*, Last modified December 07, 2022. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Orichalcum>

Severus currently displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.<sup>118</sup> The front depicts a draped bust of Mamaea, while the back displays the goddess Venus holding a statuette and scepter.



Figure 6 (left; front). *Orichalcum Sestertius of Alexander Severus: Roman: Late Imperial, Severan.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 7 (right; rear). *Orichalcum Sestertius of Alexander Severus: Roman: Late Imperial, Severan.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The religious associations of the goddess Venus with Roman imperial power are well known, and she was commonly depicted on coinage featuring imperial women. The diadem or wreath (it's not specified on the coin's plaque) worn by Mamaea is also something that wives of

<sup>118</sup> "Orichalcum Sestertius of Alexander Severus: Roman: Late Imperial, Severan," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248064>.

emperors had commonly been depicted with dating back to Livia, Augustus' wife.<sup>119</sup> The continuity of Mamaea's public depictions with previous imperial women is itself important for understanding their role in Alexander's reign, however. Never before had women been regents, but neither had child emperors been a reality before Elagabalus. After the disaster of Elagabalus, people simply wanted a return to normal government. If Alexander's regime could deliver that, neither the senatorial class nor the people cared if his female relatives acted as regents, looking past cultural norms for the sake of stability. Imagery emphasizing continuities with previous imperial woman was thus strategic in its own fashion, helping characterize Maesa and Mamaea's powerful positions as regents as part of a gradual evolution of the imperial title as opposed to sudden usurpation.

Nonchalance towards Maesa and Mamaea's involvement didn't hold true for all groups within Roman society, however, especially those who found stability stifling. The army's discontent, which is the second commonality found in both the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian's biographies of Alexander Severus, dates back to Septimius Severus' close relationship with the army setting a tone for the dynasty as a whole. One of Septimius' lasting legacies had been relaxing disciplinary regulations on the army, allowing them to marry and giving them their first pay raise in decades<sup>120</sup>. Furthermore, the way in which he rose to power set a precedent of marching into Italy with an army as something acceptable within Roman political society. While the army had been indispensable to the Severans' rise, under Alexander they were now relegated to a second-class interest group, with Alexander's reigning mostly from within the city of Rome itself meaning the Praetorians were a more relevant interest groups than the far-flung legions.

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<sup>119</sup> The Roman Numismatic Gallery, "The Emperors' Wives and Families," Accessed March 6, 2023, <http://www.romancoins.into/Kaiserinnen.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 3.8.5.

Despite his “personal inclinations”<sup>121</sup> towards civil rule, however, a Sassanid invasion of Syria-Palestine meant that Alexander was forced to leave Rome, where his influence was strongest, embarking on a campaign with the same legions who had thus far felt alienated from his rule. Mamaea attempted to assist her son by accompanying him on this campaign, but her presence actually ended up contributing to unflattering characterizations of the young emperor as a “mother’s boy” unable to rise to the mantle of leadership, dangerously hurting his ability to keep his soldiers in line. Mamaea’s poor effect on Alexander’s reputation is perhaps best reflected in Alexander’s account of how she stopped him from personally fighting in battle out of fear for his safety,<sup>122</sup> an event which, combined with his seeking of a peaceful settlement with the Germans,<sup>123</sup> painted the young emperor as a coward. Admittedly, the *Historia Augusta*’s representation of Mamaea here differs; here, Mamaea is defended as being a morally upright woman unjustly represented by her political enemies as a poor martial influence by political rivals with their own goals. Despite the sources’ disagreements on the truth of Mamaea’s personal character, however, both agree that the army disliked Mamaea and used Alexander’s association with her to justify the furthering of a candidate more traditionally masculine and soldierly.

By taking Herodian’s representation of a 16-man senatorial council along with the *Historia Augusta*’s line about Mamaea having been falsely represented, it can be established that Julia Mamaea played an important role in her son’s reign, despite the lack of official documents explaining how. Furthermore, the posthumous divination of Maesa along with her role in the

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<sup>121</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.3.4.

<sup>122</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.5.9.

<sup>123</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.7.9.



coup toppling Elagabalus strongly supports her also having played a strong role in Alexander's administration, albeit the early part. After her death, her wealth likely passed to either Alexander or Mamaea, with the latter remaining the effective controller in either case. When examined along with Julia Domna's political involvement and Julia Maesa and Soaemias' roles in Elagabalus' reign, the Severan Dynasty thus seems to have gradually been more receptive to explicit female involvement in politics over time. Domna started off as a propaganda asset and financial benefactor similar to previous Roman women, but then played an important administrative role under Caracalla. Maesa and Soaemias found their financial assets able to help affect changes in who held the emperorship, but their role in the administration depended on the emperor's willingness to listen. Maesa and Mamaea, however, were able to effectively curtail Alexander's power to completely depend on the approval of the senatorial council and possibly themselves, since they retained total control over the imperial palace. By using divisions within interest groups in Roman politics to create fragmented decision-making processes, here the Senate, Mamaea and Maesa were able to carve out a place for themselves. It's important to remember that the fundamental nature of their roles remained informal, however, lacking the institutional investment that the senators on the regency council had. Had Alexander's temperament been more like Elagabalus, it's hard to say whether Maesa and Mamaea would have continued to have the influence that they did.

### **The Personal Nature of Roman Politics: Maesa and Mamaea's Fuzzy Roles**

One might be confused as to why, if Maesa and Mamaea wished to remain influential in Alexander's reign, they essentially gave control of the state away to sixteen senators. Additionally, the fact that Alexander never took back the reins of government is at odds with depictions of him as a highly capable man who should have been able to rule by himself. The

fact that his reign fell apart immediately upon having to leave Rome, too, is baffling, considering that the army thus far had been the Severans' biggest supporters. The answer to these seeming contradictions and hazy areas of the ancient accounts lies in the personal nature of Roman politics, here meaning the importance of particular people's backgrounds and abilities in defining their roles within the power structure. Maesa and Mamaea were able to continue being important to the Roman political system by effectively forming relationships with people invested with official power, although this also resulted in certain groups being left out and eventually turning on Alexander. Alexander himself was a Syrian who ascended to the emperorship at the age of 14, drastically affecting his ability to exercise power over the regime he was ostensibly the head of. These facts along with Maesa's prior established importance during the reign of Elagabalus had a profound impact on the Roman political system as a whole under Alexander's 13 year long reign.

First, reasons why Maesa and Mamaea would seek to establish a regency council should be delved into, since they don't conflict with the two women holding power and in fact enhanced it. The establishment of the council wasn't something the two were forced to do, since the "management and control of imperial affairs were in the hands of his women"<sup>124</sup> before it was established. The two, although particularly Maesa, had just experienced under Elagabalus what happened when a teenager with only his female relatives to keep him in check was given unlimited power over the state. I acknowledge that this is a gross oversimplification of the problems with Elagabalus' reign, and that Maesa had by no means been innocent in the flaws of Elagabalus's regime, but ancient sources all imply that she tried to keep him in check and was met with limited success. The structure of the narrative sources when analyzed likewise support

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<sup>124</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.1.

memories of Elagabalus as playing at least a partial role in the decision to curb Alexander. For Maesa and Mamaea to attempt to do so by themselves was risky, however. Although all Roman politics possessed a personal aspect to it, this was particularly the case for women, whose lack of constitutional investment meant their ability to influence the emperor was limited by his willingness to listen. Alexander may have been of a milder temperament when a youth, but throughout his teenage years and early adulthood it was quite possible that influences around him would turn the boy's character more ambitious and obstinate, making it harder for Maesa and Mamaea to influence him. By bringing in the Senate, a powerful and respected institution even under the emperors, Alexander's hands would now be institutionally tied by people he couldn't afford to defy. It's also likely that the position of the Severan dynasty as a whole was weak after Elagabalus' downfall, meaning that forming the regency council could have been a necessity, and not altruistic in nature.

The establishment of a regency council, while meaning that control over all imperial actions was given over to the unanimous consent of 16 senators, didn't result in any concrete changes to Maesa and Mamaea's situation. Had they not been included in government, their influence still would've been limited, albeit by Alexander alone. By including the senators, they may have increased the number of people they needed to convince to do anything, but they also gave themselves institutional support for any legitimately good actions they would have advised Alexander to take. Since Alexander was the last male claimant of the Severan dynasty able to wear the purple, the two women's interests were tied to his well-being. Furthermore, the entrustment of "political matters and public affairs to... competent lawyers and skillful orators"<sup>125</sup> describes a wide-scale administrative reshuffling of those put into office by

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<sup>125</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.4.

Elagabalus and perhaps Caracalla before him. This effort would have helped Maesa and Mamaea, but they didn't have the power to do this themselves. The senate and the equestrians below them were the important officials in the empire responsible for overseeing administration, and the emperor's closest confidants would have only been able to do so much without them. By including them in the empire's power structure, especially with the option to later remove them once Alexander reached adulthood, Mamaea and Maesa actually furthered their own control.

Second, while the council had control over actions taken by Alexander in his official capacity as emperor, Mamaea retained a "close guard"<sup>126</sup> over the palace. The palace was the place where the emperor slept, dined, and lived, but it wasn't merely a home. The imperial palace was the seat of Roman government from which the emperor drafted orders and issued commands to his subjects. To control the palace would be to essentially control the emperor, especially given Alexander's age. Mamaea's control was described by Herodian as being extended to Alexander, too, and not just in the manner that she was able to control guards and cooks in an effort to keep him safe. Herodian describes Mamaea as having "tried to govern and control him...", isolating him from "flatterers" in an effort to prevent him from being "corrupted" similarly to Caracalla and Geta<sup>127</sup>. Furthermore, she "induced him to serve as judge in the courts continually...", ensuring he would have "no opportunity to indulge."<sup>128</sup> While the regency council may have had a powerful role in Alexander's administration, their influence stopped where the imperial household began. Mamaea and Maesa held the role that would normally be held by a *paterfamilias* here by virtue of the absence of living male Severans, including control over the emperors' daily activity and education. This role was even further

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<sup>126</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.5.

<sup>127</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.5.

<sup>128</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.6

strengthened when Maesa died, making Mamaea able to take action as she saw fit without consulting anyone else.

This control over Alexander by Mamaea isn't corroborated by all narrative accounts of his rule, however, with the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian particularly disagreeing. This is particularly true in regard to Alexander's marriage to Sallustia Barbia Orbiana<sup>129</sup>, a noblewoman handpicked<sup>130</sup> by Mamaea. Because the *Historia Augusta* hardly describes Orbiana at all, however, I'm given no choice but to take Herodian's depiction of events as at least partially authoritative, which definitively changes interpretations of Mamaea's role in Alexander's reign. According to Herodian, despite Alexander getting along well with his wife and father-in-law, Mamaea's "egotistic desire to be sole empress"<sup>131</sup> led her to become increasingly "arrogant" and mistreat the girl. This stemmed from her power being rooted in the honorific title of *Augusta*, which Orbiana also would have possessed. Its power was thus primarily defined by Alexander's willingness to acknowledge its importance, with two *Augustas* outranking each other only in so far as others recognized one as more important. Mamaea, seeing her role as gradually being diminished by this intruder into the household, ordered Orbiana's father, an aristocrat, to be killed, and the woman herself to be driven "from the palace into exile."<sup>132</sup> Herodian blames Alexander's inaction here as being a result of being "dominated by his mother..."<sup>133</sup> something that Mamaea was likely only able to do because of Alexander's youth upon assuming the throne. Roman society usually gave the *paterfamilias* total control over his female relatives, explaining why previous imperial mothers had lacked such control over their sons. Alexander would have

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<sup>129</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 59.

<sup>130</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.9.

<sup>131</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.9.

<sup>132</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.10.

<sup>133</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.10.

had to consciously revoke Mamaea's power upon reaching adulthood, however, which he could have been unwilling or unable to do for any number of reasons. Thus, Mamaea retained an outsized role in Alexander's administration for his entire reign that she possessed by virtue of her familial relationship to the emperor.

The third example of Roman politics possessing a personal nature in which women operated can be found in Alexander's failure to adapt when forced to embark on campaign to defend the empire's borders from barbarian incursions. Alexander's reign was particularly well-suited for the city of Rome, including the Senate in decision making and setting aside large sums of money to "gratify"<sup>134</sup> the Praetorians. The Senate and the Praetorians were two of the most important interest groups in the empire that an emperor had to satisfy if one was going to be ruling from Rome itself, a relative rarity since Commodus. The army was another important interest group, however, and Alexander's mostly peaceful reign had left them ostracized from their previously paramount place in Roman political society. Alexander knew this, and Herodian reported that he was "weeping and repeatedly looking back at the city"<sup>135</sup> as he left to respond to a Persian invasion of the east, something completely contrary to his inclinations. Alexander had been raised by his mother to completely abjugated hard decisions to others, whether it be the regency council or herself, and so to have to take up the mantle of warrior and travel far from home must have been a terrifying concept to the youth. The heaps of praise lauded unto Alexander for his mild temperament in the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian's biography thus far were positive contrasts to Elagabalus' erratic ruling style, something to be modeled by future

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<sup>134</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.9.

<sup>135</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.3.1

emperors in how they dealt with the Senate and equestrians. When fighting wars, however, the same style of rulership wouldn't suffice, and Alexander here was deeply out of place.

That unfamiliarity with military conflict would plague Alexander's eastern campaign, which was immediately complicated by the soldiers attempting to proclaim a man named Taurinus<sup>136</sup> the new emperor. The *Historia Augusta* represents Alexander as able to bravely face down the mutineers and those refusing to obey codes of military discipline in Antioch<sup>137</sup>, but it was nevertheless a serious impediment to the campaign that took precious time to address. The *Historia Augusta* and Herodian significantly disagree on how Alexander fared in the Persian campaign, with Herodian representing it as a stalemate in which Alexander was unwilling to personally fight<sup>138</sup> and the *Historia Augusta* describing the campaign as so successful that Alexander was rewarded as a triumph on his return to Rome<sup>139</sup>. Of the two accounts, Herodian's appears more reliable, since Alexander's lack of wrongdoing in the *Historia Augusta* causes his assassination to feel bizarrely out of place as compared to Herodian's account, where it's the result of gradual dissatisfaction among the soldiers. According to Herodian's account, after an effective stalemate against the Persians following failed diplomatic negotiations and the destruction of an entire army, Alexander was forced to respond to a massive Germanic invasion that made it "absolutely necessary that he and his entire army come..."<sup>140</sup> Once again, although he "loathed the idea, Alexander glumly announced his departure"<sup>141</sup> and actually crossed the Rhine into Germania.

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<sup>136</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.4.7.

<sup>137</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 289.

<sup>138</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.5.9.

<sup>139</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 293.

<sup>140</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.7.3.

<sup>141</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.7.5.

So far, one might be confused as to why soldiers felt the need to mutiny against Alexander, who had taken up his duty to fight despite personal ability. Augustus was no great warrior, and yet merely appearing on the battlefield while using his tactical mind to secure victories was enough to buttress his reign with military backing. Herodian's account places the blame for his assassination on his own soldiers, who were increasingly unconfident in Alexander's ability to lead them. This lack of leadership was encouraged by Mamaea, who attempted everything she could think of to keep her son away from the battlefield out of "feminine fears or excessive mother love."<sup>142</sup> In Persia, this took the form of "Persuading him that he should let others risk their lives for him...",<sup>143</sup> contributing to an absence of leadership that ended in massacre for the Romans. Alexander's efforts at diplomacy with the Persians and Germans were construed by his enemies as cowardice, with the soldiers proclaiming a man named Maximus emperor during the German campaign on grounds of his superior masculinity, having "despised Alexander as a mother's boy."<sup>144</sup> According to Herodian, "their contempt for the emperor was increased by the fact that the empire was being managed by a woman's authority<sup>145</sup>", with actions Alexander have personally undertook being constantly shaded by questions of womanly influence. This wasn't just ideological, but also practical for many of the mutinying soldiers who blamed Alexander for his "stinginess in the matter of gifts,"<sup>146</sup> something tinged by common discontent over perceptions of Mamaea's handling of finances as miserly.

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<sup>142</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.5.8.

<sup>143</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.5.9.

<sup>144</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.8.3.

<sup>145</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.8.3.

<sup>146</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.9.4.



Quite literally being slain while “clinging to his mother...,”<sup>147</sup> Alexander’s competency as emperor was undergirded by questions of how influential his mother was, with a woman holding political power over the empire anathema to at least some parts of the military. Mamaea’s role heavy involvement in Alexander’s reign may have soothed the Senate in Rome, who viewed her as a beacon of rationality following Elagabalus, but the soldiery wanted a traditionally masculine emperor who was competent on the field of battle. More importantly, Alexander’s being isolated to the courts and civilly-inclined tutors during his upbringing meant it would have been difficult for him to navigate the military culture familiar to Severus and Caracalla, who heavily relied on the army as supporters of their dynasty. What worked in Rome didn’t work on the frontier, where the Senate and Praetorian Guard were replaced as interest groups able to affect the emperor’s safety with the army alone. A woman’s role in Roman politics was thus demonstrated to be highly dependent on their geographic location, which affected acceptable manners in which they could rule. Mamaea’s direct handling of political affairs was unacceptable to the army, a traditionally masculine sphere of Roman society, and so Alexander’s entire reign became negatively regarded as a result.

### **Reading Against the Grain of the Sources: Disagreements Between the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian**

While narrative histories including the Julias Domna, Maesa, and Soaemias all contain broadly similar depictions of historical events, the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian’s view on Alexander Severus and the Julias Maesa and Mamaea wildly disagree with each other. The

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<sup>147</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.9.6.

*Historia Augusta* presents Alexander as being highly competent at the emperorship almost immediately, with his first action having been to “forbade men to call him *Lord*”<sup>148</sup> and reverting the emperor’s garments from Elagabalus’ jeweled finery to a “plain white robe.”<sup>149</sup> According to the *Historia Augusta*, Alexander had been “nurtured from his earliest boyhood in all excellent arts, civil and military”<sup>150</sup> by his mother, and that nurturing combined with a naturally amenable character carried over into everything he did. Julia Maesa was an intelligent woman who advised her son well with “righteous” counsels, unfairly becoming the target of a propaganda campaign through no fault of her own. In Herodian’s view, however, Mamaea’s efforts to educate and guide Alexander derived from a desire to “govern and control”<sup>151</sup> the youth. Her embezzlement of money<sup>152</sup> and murder of Alexander’s wife went unpunished, as her control of the imperial household was too great for Alexander to offer any significant challenge. His ability to properly carry out administrative duties was neutered by the 16-man council put together by Maesa and Mamaea, and his duties as emperor were mostly limited to judging in the courts<sup>153</sup>. These two views of Mamaea, one a dutiful advisor and the other a contriving matriarch, are incompatible with the other. To understand why they exist, a larger narrative view of the purposes of both sources needs to be considered.

The *Historia Augusta* is a biographical-style history of the Roman Empire using emperors as the subjects along with their *vitae*,<sup>154</sup> or heirs. Although the work had multiple different authors, the chapter on Alexander Severus is typically attributed to Aelius Lampridius,

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<sup>148</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 185.

<sup>149</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 186.

<sup>150</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 184.

<sup>151</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.5.

<sup>152</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.8.

<sup>153</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.1.6.

<sup>154</sup> *Historia Augusta, Introduction*, xv.

who wrote upon the Emperor Constantine's direct request<sup>155</sup>. The thematic construction of chapters took inspiration from the *Lives* of Suetonius, which the Loeb introduction describes as "not biographies in the modern sense... but merely collections of material arranged according to certain definite categories."<sup>156</sup> These definite categories often followed the course of literary themes, and speeches documented in the work are often fictitious and made to fit the theme owing to the influence of Thucydides' Greek histories. These fictitious elements were sometimes added by later authors, and most commonly appear when episodes from an emperor's personal life is being described. Because so much of Alexander's reign took place within the confines of the imperial palace, however, this means that much of Alexander's chapter is extra factual. This is especially true for chapters 29-52 of his biography, titled in my LacusCurtius translation as "private life and character". Stories like his early morning worship routine<sup>157</sup>, his giving away of all but the simplest garments,<sup>158</sup> and his shunning of his Syrian ancestry in conversation<sup>159</sup> are all completely unique to the *Historia Augusta*, uncorroborated elsewhere.

The questionability of the historical accuracy of specific events doesn't make the *Historia Augusta* completely useless as a source, however. First, historians like Edward Gibbon<sup>160</sup> took its contents as historically accurate, so if one is wading into historiographical debates, it can be useful for understanding how other historians formed their arguments. Second, it's date of composition under Constantine helps indicate how later Romans (albeit from the limited perspective of court officials) thought about their predecessors. Alexander's portrayal as an

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<sup>155</sup> *Historia Augusta, Introduction*, iv.

<sup>156</sup> *Historia Augusta, Introduction*, xvi.

<sup>157</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 237.

<sup>158</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 259.

<sup>159</sup> *Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander*, 268.

<sup>160</sup> *Historia Augusta, Introduction*, xxxi.

extremely competent emperor is in contrast with the soldier-emperors who would rise after his reign, many of whom reigned for a year or less. The empire was thrust into a period of instability that culminated in the Crisis of the Third Century, and so of course Alexander would look extremely capable by comparison, the last bastion of stability before a decline. Additionally, the influence of women in imperial affairs increased over time as boy emperors became more common and piety became a legitimate reason for women to be involved in politics. This was particularly the case with Constantine, whose mother, St. Helena, was an important part of the empire's conversion to Christianity, an important legacy of his reign. For Lampridius to represent a mother as providing wise counsel to her son wouldn't be anathema, therefore, since it's detached from the Severan era context of a woman's involvement being the result of her male relative's incapableness. Alexander was wise despite his age, and so him taking his mother's advice was more the result of filial piety and the good quality of the advice than it was being forced into it.

In contrast, the *History of the Roman Empire From the Death of Marcus Aurelius to the Accession of Gordian III*, written by the civil servant Herodian, possesses an entirely different style. The chronological period covered by the book was chosen because Herodian identified the death of Marcus Aurelius as the end of an age<sup>161</sup> for Rome, and its exceptionally simple biographical structure reflects that.<sup>162</sup> Traditional rules of Roman politics had broken down, with powerful generals able to seize the purple at will and the senatorial class at constant risk of being purged by the new "emperor of the year". Although never explicitly described, contemporary readers would have identified themes like the emperors' presence being increasingly required to

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<sup>161</sup> Echols, "Introduction", 1.

<sup>162</sup> Adam Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 21.

fight off invasions on the frontiers as a symptom of the clearly identifiable decline<sup>163</sup> Herodian was commenting on. Rather than by virtue, nostalgically embodied in the memory of Marcus Aurelius, emperors like Septimius Severus were able to seize power merely by commanding an army at the right place during the right time.<sup>164</sup>

Much of Elagabalus and Alexander's biographical accounts, therefore, while unique pertaining to their personal characters and the role of their mothers and grandmother, are merely part of larger trends being described by Herodian. The most important of these trends is the inability of any one regime to satisfy all constituent elements of Roman society, with divisions like the army vs. the Senate and the western vs. eastern parts of the empire clear throughout<sup>165</sup>. In relation to Alexander, the divide between the army and the Senate is the most important to understand. Septimius Severus's setting of a precedent whereby generals could march into Italy with their troops and seize power couldn't later be undone. It's only narratively fitting that the Severan dynasty should end by military force, the same tactic they used to secure their initial rise under Septimius. While Herodian wrote his histories closer to the date that the Severans reigned as compared to the *Historia Augusta*, because of this overarching structure, specific events of his also need to be interpreted as being potentially symbolic. Coins and statues are also useful, helping historians understand the past beyond what textual problems would otherwise limit them to.

The differences between these two sources are useful for understanding my methodology whereby I attempt to understand the concrete roles that the Julias played in their male relatives'

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<sup>163</sup> Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans*, 240.

<sup>164</sup> Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans*, 280.

<sup>165</sup> Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans*, 83.

reigns. I will never be able to say with certainty, for example, whether Alexander's continuing use of the senatorial class in his reign was a result of his mother's influence or a personal decision to rule in a style acceptable to interest groups relevant to his safety. By combining commonalities between the accounts, however, I can say that Julia Mamaea was an important power player throughout her son's entire reign, giving him advice and accompanying him on military campaigns across the empire. Furthermore, just because the information within the narrative sources are biased doesn't mean that they're false, and the general gist of a description can be true without every individual detail needing to be corroborated. The two sources' descriptions of the same events need to be examined side-by-side, then, with the reasons behind their respective portrayals then being made clear.

When the accounts as a whole are closely read, it's clear that Herodian's broad characterizations of Alexander Severus and Julia Mamaea are more reliable. In Herodian's account, the soldierly become tired of Alexander's repeated attempts to make unfavorable peace treaties so that he might return to the comfortability of Rome, as well as generally disliking him because perception of him being a "mother's boy."<sup>166</sup> These assertions aren't immune from being narrative in nature, with the second part in particular possibly having been an allusion to general discontent over the softness of his rule in the army's eyes. The *Historia Augusta*, however, gives no concrete justification for why Alexander Severus was assassinated outside of vague allusions to a plot carried out by Germanic guardsmen. If I'm to attempt to construct a picture of the past, I'd rather try to wade through a knowingly biased interpretation from one source than one that offers no interpretation at all.

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<sup>166</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.8.3.

Operating off this principle, I was able to arrive at the vague generalities about Julia Mamaea's role in Alexander's administration described in the first part of this section. It's clear that she played an important role alongside Julia Maesa during Alexander's early reign, and both sources describe the Senate as playing a more active role than they had under Septimius or Caracalla. Furthermore, that role continued even after the death of Julia Maesa, which establishes that Mamaea as able to effectively navigate the political scene more than Soaemias. For her to be a background character in this while her teenage son ruled alone doesn't seem like the likeliest course of events, and while characterized differently, both sources confirm that she had an influential role in palace affairs and how the emperor spent his time. Even the *Historia Augusta*, which attempts to establish a positive overall image of Julia Mamaea, concedes that the soldiers who overthrew Alexander in favor of Maximinus Thrax used her role in Alexander's reign to portray the emperor as having been corrupted and emasculated. Although broad, the assertions able to be made about her role in Roman history are important for understanding both Alexander Severus as an emperor and the ability of woman to interact with the political system more generally.

### **Conclusion**

From the very first moment the mantle of emperor was thrust on him by his mother and grandmother, Alexander Severus was limited in how much he could exercise his power. These limitations were a direct response to the reign of Elagabalus before him, whose excesses were likely interpreted as embodying the risks that allowing absolute power to a teenager could produce. Whether it was by the imposition of a 16-man regency council or by deferring to them in matter of administration, the Senate was brought in to help administrate and educate Alexander. Julia Maesa died soon after the status quo was established, and Mamaea took up the

position of regent for herself. From here, she maintained total control over the imperial household, pushing out rival aristocrats who threatened her influence over her son and hand-picking advisors who would train him in certain ways of thought. This strong regency eventually worked against Alexander's public image, with the army citing him being dominated by his mother as a reason why he was unfit to lead, assassinating him while on campaign.

The primary reason why Maesa and Mamaea were able to do this was Alexander's age upon assuming the throne. Since the Severan dynasty lacked a single male claimant other than Alexander, they were able to take the position within the imperial household a *paterfamilias* traditionally would have occupied. To wield power beyond the palace, however, they needed the assistance of institutions primarily comprised of men, namely the Senate and Praetorians. While this made their rule particularly stable within the city of Rome itself, a perception held by some of the regime's domination by females combined with Alexander's age made extending their influence beyond Rome itself difficult. The story of a revival of senatorial authority in particular didn't play well with the self-interested army. Their role was only able to be filled by Maesa and Mamaea because of their familial relationship with Alexander, with other aristocratic families presumably possessing just as much wealth never able to displace the two.

When trying to separate fact and fiction about Maesa and Mamaea's roles in Alexander's administration, historians must keep in mind the intended purpose of the books they're using. The *Historia Augusta* was written around biographies of individual emperors and their heirs, with a moral theme usually commented on within personal anecdotes about the emperor's personality and private life. Herodian's history, in contrast, has one overarching theme of decline since the death of Marcus Aurelius and the depravity of the emperors as one aspect of that. The inherent meaning that a women's presence would have within Roman politics must therefore be



balanced with the very real assistance Alexander, a teenager, would have required if he was to rule the Roman Empire. The common appearance of details concerning Mamaea functioning as a regent and manager of the imperial household suggest that she played a very real and influential role in Alexander's reign. The positive representation of her nearly a century later in the *Historia Augusta* helps establish that Severan women's roles in their male relatives' reigns helped establish a long-term trend of more female involvement in Roman politics. This was especially the case as the empire's politics became more dynastic, increasing the power of family members regardless of gender as youths inheriting the throne justified the role of regent. This was a trend established under the reign of the Severans, cementing their women as playing a pivotal role in the dynasty's long-term impact on the empire.

## Epilogue

The joint assassinations of Alexander Severus and Julia Mamaea in AD 235 brought the Severan dynasty to an abrupt end. The military general Maximinus Thrax<sup>167</sup> took control of the empire in his stead, and for all the Severans' faults, many in the empire likely soon wished for their return. Over the four decades during which the Severans ruled, a number of societal patterns had emerged that would cause a period of intense instability after the dynasty's collapse. The decline in military discipline was particularly damaging, with a catch twenty-two emerging for emperors in which they couldn't afford to pay soldiers who expected continual rises in pay but also couldn't afford not to pay them, at least if they wanted to remain on the throne for much longer. Herodian's history chronologically ranging from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the Year of Six Emperors (AD 238) is apt here, with the entire work in truth being a history of the moral decline of Rome during which the Severan dynasty ruled and in part helped cause. Although particularly damaging, the Year of Six Emperors would be far from the last leadership crisis within the Roman Empire sparked by assassinations and civil war. Were it not for the emperor Aurelian (r. AD 270-275), it's possible that the patterns of decline that begun during the Severan dynasty would have caused the total collapse of the empire. The women of the Severan dynasty, who exercised more involvement in politics than their imperial predecessors, thus left a somewhat complicated legacy.

To assume that the empire would have been left in a better state after the Severan's collapse without their involvement is flawed, however. Most of the dynasty's negative effects on military discipline began with Septimius Severus, the dynasty's founder and the emperor under

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<sup>167</sup> Herodian, *The Reign of Severus Alexander (222-235)*, 6.8.1.

which women had the least political involvement. Although Domna has been viewed as a matriarch by some for her involvement in both her husband and son's reigns, it was always for their benefit, not for independent designs of her own. It was Julia Maesa's propelling of Elagabalus into challenging Macrinus for the emperorship that changed this, with a period of chaotic succession allowing women to exercise political power they had previously been unable to. After this, however, Maesa encountered the same cultural limitations on her power that had frustrated Julia Domna for decades: the informality of women's positions making them dependent on the males around them. For Maesa under Elagabalus' reign, this essentially resulted in her concrete power over the emperor (at least as represented by ancient historians) being nil. In response, she masterminded a transfer of power to her other grandson Alexander, after which formulating a regency council that would prevent the young emperor's ability to be as dismissive of her authority as his predecessor had been.

This gradual increase in Severan women's ability to exercise political power over the course of the dynasty was as much a result of the emperors as the women themselves. Elagabalus and Alexander were both fourteen upon becoming emperors, and their inability to rule created a power vacuum that Maesa and Mamaea were all too happy to fill. This wasn't particular to the Severans, however, with their preference for hereditary succession being emulated by subsequent dynasties. As a result, when children in the subsequent decades and centuries took the throne, the Julias Maesa and Mamaea would have been looked at as having established a precedent for female involvement in regencies going forward. Likewise with Septimius' provoking a decline in military discipline, however, child emperors would also become an issue for the Roman political system later on, leaving it vulnerable during a time of famine and external invasions.

The success of dynasties other than their own wasn't the goal of the Julias Domna, Maesa, Soemias, or Mamaea, however. They were all figures interested in either their own survival, the success of their male family members, or the perpetuation of their dynasties power for as long as possible. In this, they succeeded, involving themselves in politics in fashions according to the unique challenges that the broader societal situation and the emperors through which they ruled demanded. This flexibility was an asset for the Julias Maesa and Mamaea, through whose political involvement the dynasty was able to be restored to the throne and rule for another seventeen years. Their affects on trends such as the imperial military and hereditary succession aside, the women of the Severan dynasty had a lasting impact in the ability of women in Roman politics to be politically active within regencies. This wouldn't just be applicable in following Roman dynasties, but would also be seen in medieval Europe, and thus the women of the Severan dynasty's political involvement had impacts far exceeding their own time and place.

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