

## Mary T. Boatwright: Imperial Women of Rome

It is unusual for a book in the field of Ancient History to end with a negative result. However, Boatwright closes her *opus magnum* with such a provocative result. The book not only combines decades of her own work but also represents a long-awaited synthesis of past and current scholarship on Roman empresses (which she more neutrally defines as "imperial women") of the early and high imperial period. Chronologically, the book reaches from the early Principate to the end of the Severan dynasty in 235 AD. In general, she asks what position and visibility imperial women would enjoy in the Roman Empire.

Boatwright answers this question extensively in seven thematic chapters. It is precisely this thematic approach that clearly sets the book apart from previous attempts at a general study of Roman empresses. Such attempts moved chronologically along the biographies or dynasties and were often aimed at a broader audience. [1] In doing so, she presents a sophisticated reading of almost all surviving literary and material sources on imperial women.

At first, she discusses the institutional role and power held by imperial women (with the main emphasis on Livia), only to find that, until the rise of the Severan dynasty, no woman ever held direct power (10-46). While spiteful senatorial historiographers reported on their boundless displays of power, these women could exercise power only informally through their close relationship with the emperor. Boatwright then examines the constraints, rights, and privileges of empresses under Roman law (47-82). She concludes convincingly that they did not enjoy a privileged legal position. Several convictions for adultery or high treason prove that empresses never stood above the law (unlike the emperors). She then shows that the role of imperial women within the *domus* always remained tied to the imperial family (83-118). Hence these women's individual traits and personalities can hardly be derived from the scarce sources. In the following chapters, she then examines the visibility of empresses through imperial coinage and in the imperial cult (119-166), in personal appearances in Rome itself (167-210), and in the public display of statues (211-247).

While noting women's increasing visibility in the imperial coinage, she remains ambivalent about the importance of the cult of the empress ("Did anyone believe that Sabina [...] had really flown into heavens at her death [...], or that *diva* Sabina could aid anyone in any way?", 165). Even though Julio-Claudian women were the only ones who were officially responsible for the cult of the deceased emperor, there is also a lack of evidence that they actively partook in it. Furthermore, she notes that imperial women hardly ever made public appearances in the city of Rome at all. Usually, they only appeared at funerals or in the theatre. The empresses were, therefore, most visible through their activities as founders of public buildings in the city of Rome. However, Boatwright convincingly argues that there is no evidence of an explicitly gendered founding activity. Imperial women donated money for the erection of public buildings, independently from these buildings' functions as embodiments of female virtues or deities. The statues of the empresses also reveal little about the agency of imperial women since these mostly relied on standardised portrait types. Moreover, such portraits were not fundamentally different from any other contemporary depiction of elite women. By stating so, she rejects older definitions of such widespread representations as a "period face" ("Zeitgesicht") or notions of mutual influences between the imperial and elite fashion. [2] Statues of empresses were probably only erected alongside the statues of their husbands and sons, thus primarily served the representation of the imperial dynasty. Boatwright also examines the voyages of imperial women and their visits to military camps (248-280). She convincingly concludes that, while literary discourses condemned women's involvement in the

military, this was not unusual, just like their partaking in the emperor's civil voyages across the Empire. Only Severan women, however, could finally exploit such activities for their political gain.

Finally, Boatwright draws her conclusion (281-288), followed by a short prosopography and genealogical tables (289-301). She concludes that the evidence suggests a general powerlessness and silence of the Roman empresses while also stressing that some of them, like Plotina in Athens or Matidia in Suessa Aurunca, were still able to develop much more agency through patronage outside the city of Rome. Boatwright admits that she had hoped to throw new perspectives on the personalities of the Roman empresses while also wanting to identify an increasing visibility and influence of imperial women during the evolution of the Principate. In her opinion, the former was impossible to achieve due to the scarcity of sources; the latter cannot be demonstrated. Although much information about the activities of Livia or Agrippina survived, the lack of sources concerning many of their successors makes it impossible to identify any linear development. However, this is only partially true and has much to do with the temporal limitation of her work. In Late Antiquity, empresses became highly visible, and their position institutionalised, a development which can be partially traced back to the high imperial period. [3]

All in all, Boatwright's book offers an essential contribution to the scholarship on Roman empresses. The scholarship on specific topics, such as the contents and scope of imperial coinage, is skilfully brought together with the meticulously analysed source material. However, there are also minor points of criticism: chronological differences are only partially evident to the reader due to the thematic structure and the narrow scope of the book. For this reason, it is perhaps not recommended as an introduction for newcomers to the subject. The book is also quite distant from theory and should be regarded more as an extensive study of primary and secondary material than a provocative feminist work (although she herself recommends such a one, 7). Nonetheless, the book will deservedly be used as a first companion for future research on Roman imperial women and can be regarded as a milestone for the study of queenship in Ancient History.

#### Notes:

[1] Hildegard Temporini-Gräfin Vitzthum (ed.): *Die Kaiserinnen Roms. Von Livia bis Theodora*, München 2002; Jasper Burns: *Great Women of Imperial Rome. Mothers and Wives of the Caesars*, New York / Abingdon 2007; Francesca Cenerini: *Dive e donne. Mogli, madri, figlie e sorelle degli imperatori romani da Augusto a Commodo*, Imola 2009; Anne Kolb (ed.): *Augustae. Machtbewusste Frauen am römischen Kaiserhof?*, Berlin 2010.

[2] Paul Zanker: *Herrscherbild und Zeitgesicht*, in: *Wiss Z Humboldt Univ Berl (Ges Sprachwiss)* 31.2/3 (1982), 307-12; Klaus Fittschen: *Courtly Portraits of Women in the Era of the Adoptive Emperors (AD 98-180) and Their Reception in Roman Society*, in: *I, Claudia. Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. by Diana E. Kleiner / Susan B. Matheson, Austin 1996, 42-52.

[3] Kenneth Holum: *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982; Liz James: *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, London / New York 2001; Judith Herrin: *Late antique origins of the 'Imperial Feminine'. Western and Eastern empresses compared*, in: *Byzantinoslavica* 74 (2016), 5-25.

#### **Rezension über:**

Mary T. Boatwright: *Imperial Women of Rome. Power, Gender, Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, XII + 382 S., ISBN 978-0-19-045589-7, EUR 64,00

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**Empfohlene Zitierweise:**

Alexander Thies: Rezension von: Mary T. Boatwright: Imperial Women of Rome. Power, Gender, Context, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, in: sehepunkte 22 (2022), Nr. 12 [15.12.2022], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2022/12/36171.html>

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