

**Joyce E. Salisbury, *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 236. 12 illustrations, 7 maps. ISBN 9781421417004. \$34.95.**

Writing the biography of any late antique individual is a challenging task given the either fragmentary, normative or highly rhetoricised nature of an overwhelming number of late antique sources. Writing the biography of a late antique woman – not frequently the object of late antique texts – may seem like an unsurmountable task. Galla Placidia, sister of Honorius, wife of Constantius III and mother of Valentinian III, is often considered an exception: her life is reasonably well documented in narrative sources of the fifth and sixth centuries, there are extant churches and church decorations that bear her name as a patron, and – remarkably – we possess documents she ostensibly wrote herself. As a result, there are already a number of biographies of Galla Placidia, from Stewart Oost's masterly *Galla Placidia Augusta: A Biographical Essay* (1968) to Hagith Sivan's *Galla Placidia: The Last Roman Empress* (2011), making the opening claim of Salisbury's book that Galla Placidia is a 'forgotten empress' at least questionable (p. 1). Yet, while Galla Placidia may not be forgotten by academic scholarship, there is a good chance that she is less well known to general readers who will certainly enjoy Salisbury's account of her life.

After an introduction, in which Salisbury highlights her debt to Oost, but also her objective of portraying Galla Placidia as a 'powerful empress in her own right', and not just a 'worthy child' of Theodosius I, as Oost did, Salisbury (p. 5) adopts a conventional form of biography, following Galla Placidia through her lifecycle. There is little direct testimonial on Galla Placidia's childhood and teenage years, however, having led other biographers, such as Sivan, to start narrating the story of her life much later (Sivan starts with Galla Placidia's marriage to Athaulph). Salisbury does her best to extract information about Galla Placidia from the sources available, in particular the court panegyrist Claudian: such as her participation in Honorius' coronation or her engagement to Stilicho's son Eucherius. But Salisbury cannot help that, by necessity, Galla Placidia recedes from view in the first two chapters, which mostly deal with the actions of the men who determined political events in the empire around the turn of the century, her father Theodosius I and Stilicho, husband to Galla Placidia's guardian Serena, as well as with the general background to the religious history of these decades. Salisbury keeps this information relevant by portraying Galla Placidia as a keen observer of these developments, first in Constantinople and then in Ravenna and Rome.

Galla Placidia emerges more clearly in Chapter 3, which sees her captured in Rome by the Visigoths in 410. This is perhaps the most dramatic chapter of the book, vividly describing the sieges of Rome that led up to the sack, the destruction and looting of the city by Alaric's men, the Visigoths' trip down the Appian road with their hostage, as well as Galla Placidia's warming up to her 'Barbarian' captors. Chapter 4 describes her marriage to Athaulph at Narbonne and becoming 'queen' of the Visigoths amid the chaos of usurpations haunting the Roman west in

the years following the sack of Rome, the Visigoths' relocation to Barcelona, and the tragic end to this idyll with the death of first her baby-son and then her husband, which led to Galla Placidia being 'sold' back to her brother in return for Visigothic settlement in Aquitaine. In Chapters 5 and 6, Galla Placidia finally becomes the main protagonist, first as wife of Constantius III and then (after a hiatus of exile in Constantinople) as regent for her minor son Valentinian in Ravenna. Salisbury describes in detail Galla Placidia's main activities in these years: intervening in Christian dispute, the making of law, church building and decoration in Ravenna and Rome, as well as playing off the powerful commanders of the Roman armies (Aetius, Boniface and Felix) against each other. The last chapter not only describes Galla Placidia's final years, but also traces the story up to the death of Valentinian and the Vandal sack of Rome in 455, to show that it had been Galla Placidia who previously held the Western empire together. Consequently, the epilogue emphasises her legacy as a law-maker and Church patron.

By all accounts, Galla Placidia's life was remarkable and versatile. Salisbury beautifully sketches the constant re-invention of her persona parallel with the breathtaking change of political events in the early fifth century: from orphaned princess, 'Barbarian queen' and emperor's wife to regent mother. These roles are nicely illuminated through wider contexts of female life in late antiquity, such as the customs of girls' education (pp. 41-2), of Roman weddings (p. 47-8 and 95), or of child birth and breastfeeding (pp. 96, 104-5, 107, 117), as well as through attention to the spaces in which Galla Placidia moved (with some excellent maps of Constantinople, Barcelona and Ravenna on pp. 14, 101 and 116).

Yet, the question remains whether we can learn anything about either Galla Placidia's character and feelings or her influence over these events from the extant sources. Salisbury is endlessly optimistic that we can do both. Galla Placidia was 'smart' (p. 1), 'strong-willed' (p. 52), 'savvy' (p. 62) and formed an ambition to rule as soon as she held a coin portraying Theodosius' first wife Flacilla in her hand as a little girl (p. 10). Of course, we do not know whether Galla Placidia ever held that coin in her hand or did many of the other things that Salisbury tells us she did (for example, listening with interest to Theodosius' speech after Honorius' coronation p. 16; weeping after Theodosius' death for fear of the future p. 35; or preferring to deal with women over men p. 170). Given that the surviving evidence does not allow us to penetrate Galla Placidia's feelings in this psycho-analytical fashion, or even fully reconstruct her actions, it is no surprise that the terms 'likely' and 'probably' abound in Salisbury's narrative (see, e.g., p. 111: Galla Placidia 'probably' met Constantius in Arles in 416, where he 'likely' proposed marriage and she refused him, because she was 'used to making her own decisions'; p. 118-9: she 'likely' told Constantius she was to remain celibate after Valentinian's birth because she wanted to follow the model of aristocratic Roman ascetics like Melania). At times, however, the boundaries between such educated guesses and factual evidence are somewhat blurred. For example, Salisbury uses an anthropological (and rather romantic) approach to describing the gradual *rapprochement* between Galla Placidia and the Visigoths, focusing on the

generation of community through the sharing of language, food, clothes and religion, but then she also asserts, without reference, 'there is evidence' that Galla Placidia shared 'the first three...with her captors' around the 'campfires' of the Southern Italian nights (pp. 76-7).

Where Salisbury closely surveys the sources, her interpretation can be selective, in particular when it comes to understanding the extent of Galla Placidia's influence on events, or her 'guiding hand', as Salisbury puts it (p. 2). On various occasions, Salisbury chooses to believe the sources when they portray the men in Galla Placidia's life as incompetent (in particular her brothers: pp. 18-19, 22; but also her son: p. 196). This goes so far as claiming Honorius had not shown any interest in theology before Galla Placidia arrived in Ravenna in 416 (p. 119), after the emperor had spent a decade sorting out the problem of 'Donatism' in North Africa. Conversely, Salisbury at times chooses to override sources when they ignore Galla Placidia (for example, it is 'hard to believe' that she did not have a hand in the building of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, even if there are no documents, p. 161), or when they credit her with actions that do not fit Salisbury's image of the empress (such as Olympiodorus' incest story, p. 131) or, in turn, credit men with actions that do fit this image (such as Olympiodorus' account of Athaulph naming the little Theodosius, which according to Salisbury Galla Placidia must have done, because it 'signaled her desire to resume the imperial throne', p. 106).

Yet, when we distil the evidence used by Salisbury to concrete testimonies of Galla Placidia's influence, we are mostly left with Athaulph's speech to his Visigoths regarding the benefits of extending Roman law to them on advice of Galla Placidia, as recorded by Orosius. From this speech, Salisbury extrapolates Galla Placidia's deep interest in and knowledge of Roman law, which she later also put to use during conversations at the Eastern court predating the Theodosian Code (p. 136; there is no record of such conversations) and as a legislating empress, and which influenced Visigothic law over the centuries, and hence was 'one of Placidia's contributions to the intellectual and political history of the west' (pp. 81-2). There is, of course, no need not to take Orosius' and other sources' statements about Galla Placidia seriously. They would, however, need to be analysed against considerations of genre, time of writing, and authorial agenda, to make Salisbury's ambitious statements about Galla Placidia's importance fully convincing. Furthermore, if we take the sources as providing factual data, one wonders whether, within the parameters of women's history, we give Galla Placidia the best and most nuanced service if we portray her as an outright force for good. Reading her story as presented by Salisbury, one may doubt whether her choices were always wise (for example, when her actions after the death of Constantius led to bloodshed in Ravenna p. 131-3, or when she let her generals fight each other, pp. 162-5), and hence whether she, like the men around her, was not more complicit in the demise of the Roman empire than Salisbury gives her credit for.

Above all, however, focussing on Galla Placidia's character and personality as the only agent behind her actions overlooks that her room to manoeuvre must

have also been determined by norms, conventions and customs specific to her time. Here, Salisbury may indeed have missed some opportunities to show that Galla Placidia was, indeed, at the 'centre of [a] web' of connections (p. 3). For example, as recent research has shown, many late antique court decisions, including on legislation, were collectively taken in the emperor's *consistorium* in reaction to petitions (see, e.g., J. Harries, 'Men without women. Theodosius' consistory and the business of government', in C. Kelly (ed.), *Theodosius II. Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013)). Yet, a quick glance at the Fasti in the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* shows that we have almost no records on court officials from the years of Galla Placidia's regency and hence of customary procedure in the described sense. This certainly is better 'hard' evidence for Galla Placidia's possible centrality to legislation than establishing a personal connection between the empress and the subjects of the laws issued during these years (for example, through arguing that Galla Placidia was interested in sorting out maternal inheritance, a rather traditional topic of Roman law, because she was a mother, p. 148). Conversely, the Eastern court was teaming with officials. This would suggest that Eastern imperial women, here, following Gibbon, also much credited with influence (p. 138), had it much harder. Furthermore, Salisbury draws our attention to the cross-generational relationships between women and makes much of Honoria and Eudoxia (Galla Placidia's daughter-in-law) following Galla Placidia's example of building bridges with the 'Barbarians' (without considering whether this was, indeed, a literary trope rather than a factual pattern of behaviour). Yet, Salisbury herself consistently places Galla Placidia within a patrilineal family history, illuminating her relationship with her father Theodosius and her half-brothers, rather than her mother Galla and her grandmother Justina, even though it was through them that Galla Placidia was related to previous emperors, including Constantine, and, possibly, to leading members of the senatorial aristocracy of the fourth century. While these maternal connections must have given Galla Placidia prestige, they may also have given her a certain room for action, particularly when she was in Rome in her teens.

Salisbury has written an immensely readable biography of a woman whose story fully deserves to be told and re-told alongside that of the leading men of the period. Salisbury's book certainly opens up Galla Placidia's life and times to an audience of general readers without much prior knowledge of the period, for it is written with style, humanity and a keen eye for the dramatic. For the late antique historian, Salisbury's book does not replace earlier academic accounts of the empress, and raises some questions about her approach to late antique female biography, but perhaps also about the limits of the genre generally.

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