

Mary T. Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome: Power, Gender, Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 382. \$99.00 (USD). ISBN: 9780190455897.

The women associated with the imperial courts of ancient Rome inhabit a paradoxical space in the historical record. Many of the surviving narratives, especially those by Tacitus and Suetonius, paint a picture of scheming women exercising power in ways dangerous to the state, while material evidence preserves images largely focused on modesty and familial unity. The *de facto* authority of figures like Livia (later Julia Augusta) and Agrippina the Younger has thus proven challenging for scholars to assess. Boatwright's book is an attempt to navigate between such extremities by analyzing a fulsome set of evidence; in doing so she incorporates much-needed nuance into our understanding of women's relationship to power in the ancient world.

Concentrating on women who were either married to or immediate family of an emperor between the beginnings of the principate in the 30s BCE and the murder of Julia Mamaea in 235 CE, this book identifies several means of assessing imperial women's impact on Rome, from their positions within the imperial household to their places in Rome's architectural and artistic culture. Boatwright assigns a chapter to each approach and cautiously works through the evidence as it applies to various imperial women over time, rather than offering individual narratives. Her choice to open each chapter with a short illustrative example (e.g. the appearance of Agrippina, Drusilla, and Livia on the coinage of Caligula in the chapter on coins, pp. 119–122) is especially helpful when making one's way through a necessarily dense set of evidence. The text is also supplemented throughout with a variety of useful tables (e.g. Table 2.1, "Crimes and Punishments of Imperial Women", pp. 52–55) and illustrations, which aid in digestion of such wide-ranging and comprehensive evidence.

In her first chapter, Boatwright unpacks the idea of power in Imperial Rome and how the concept can be applied to Roman women in general, arguing that with a few exceptions that applied only to Octavia and Livia early in the Principate, imperial women were no more powerful than any other elite women and even when they did hold power, it was informal, transitory, and always mediated through their relationships with the emperor. This argument is then further demonstrated in the second chapter on the crimes and punishments of imperial women, which focuses on the increased liability of imperial women to accusations of criminal, and especially sexually criminal, conduct. Here Boatwright shows how imperial women were used to demonstrate the princeps' adherence to the law, especially in the Julio-Claudian period (p. 56), and how entangled the concept of morality was with politics and power (p. 69).

Chapter 3 takes up the place of women within the imperial family, with an emphasis on motherhood and the connection between children and the future of the imperial family. In a welcome refinement of this line of inquiry, Boatwright also looks at how the so-called "adoptive" emperors (Nerva to Marcus Aurelius) expanded key roles for imperial women to include sisters, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, and beyond (p.

106). She also touches on women within non-traditional domestic arrangements (e.g. Antoninus Pius and Lysistrate) and how these relationships created perceptions of illicit political influence.

In chapter 4, Boatwright turns, from what has to this point been largely a literary analysis, to material evidence, looking at images of imperial women on coins and then at imperial women's participation in religious cult. Boatwright points out that women in the imperial family were an essential part of imperial cult from its very inception (p. 146), and even if they had little influence on its practice, the cult of these women had a significant impact on local communities where they were worshipped, especially the women who were the priestesses responsible for their cults (pp. 156–157).

Chapter 5 then continues the theme of the impact of imperial women beyond the imperial court with an investigation of their personal appearances in public and their monuments in the city of Rome. Here Boatwright's chronological and spatial investigation reveals patterns both anticipated (Livia and Agrippina the Younger being the most visible of imperial women, p. 207) and surprising (the relative scarcity of images of Flavian women at Rome, particularly in contrast with Plotina's public presence in Athens, p. 208). Public imagery is also central to the 6th chapter, on statuary portraits of imperial women, which once again notes the essential role of women in the imperial family in bolstering the public reputation of the princeps (p. 224). Boatwright finds that such images are for the most part characterized by "blandness and homogeneity" and not individualized as might be expected (p. 246), although she includes a brief discursus on a charming 2nd-cent. CE statue of Matidia the Younger from a theater at Suessa Aurunca that departs from this pattern.

Chapter 7 leaves behind the city of Rome to consider the travels of imperial women and their connections to the military abroad. Here Boatwright adds to her overarching theme of the importance of imperial women to the public face of the imperial family, showing that as these women traveled through the provinces, they represented the entire imperial concern (p. 261). With the later development of titles like *mater castrorum*, first given to Faustina the Younger (p. 267), imperial women took on increasing importance in male spaces. The Severan women in particular leveraged their connections to the military into actual political power (pp. 248–249, 274).

In the conclusion, however, Boatwright is careful to point out that the influence of imperial women does not develop over time in a neat and tidy way and that any power they did exercise could fluctuate over time, even within an individual's lifetime (p. 281). She concludes that although individual anecdotes suggest that imperial women could exercise power behind the scenes, overall, their condition is marked by a general powerlessness (p. 282). Rome itself looms large in this analysis, as it seems that many of the restrictions on imperial women's public presence were far stronger in the capital. Several appendices conclude the volume, with Appendix 1 offering particularly useful accounts of each woman studied along with a list of key events from her life.

Overall, this book is a welcome contribution to the study of elite Roman women, with a most thorough consideration of the factors that comprise individual power and impact on society. Boatwright makes intricate arguments, a reflection of the variety of sources she uses, and she never resorts to an oversimplified narrative. This complexity may make the book more challenging for those who are new to Roman history; however, the fulsome background information provided throughout (e.g. the relationship of the princeps to the law, p. 58), the use of English translations in the main text (with the Latin footnoted below), the many illustrations, and the specific examples at the beginning of each chapter help guide the reader. For the expert reader, Boatwright's approach to the thorny question of female agency in the ancient world offers a roadmap for further work beyond the confines of the imperial household.

MELISSA FUNKE
UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG
m.funke@uwinnipeg.ca