

EMPRESSES OF THE FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES: IMPERIAL AND RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHIES

It is considered that two of the palaces of the tetrarchs are related to ladies of august status. The first is Felix Romuliana, the residence which Galerius started to build for the years of his retirement and which he named after his mother. We know this from Aurelius Victor who wrote: “ortus Dacia Ripensi ibique sepultus est (Galerius); quem locum Romulianum ex vocabulo Romulae matris appellarat” (*Epitome* 40, 16)¹. The spirit of Romula is perceptible in the dualistic conception of the site²: there are two residential parts, two mausolea (one for Galerius and one for Romula), and two tumuli, the latter related to the year of Romula’s death in 303 as estimated on the basis of the gold coins found underneath³.

Probably the same relationship between mother and son (ruling emperor) should be seen in Sharkamen where the jewellery found during the excavations of the Mausoleum suggests a female, presumably also an imperial burial. It is assumed that Maximinus Daia in his capacity of emperor (305-311) began the construction of this palace which was intended to be his luxurious residence after his abdication. Following Galerius’ example the emperor’s mother most probably was venerated here along with her son: if we accept the identification of the commissioner of Sharkamen palace with Maximinus Daia, the empress-mother would be Galerius’ anonymous sister⁴.

However, the strong veneration of the Mother-Empress seems not to have been characteristic of Diocletian. The only female image in the context of imperial art which we have from his age is the one from the mausoleum frieze in Split. And, although some scholars suggest that we should see here the portrait of Empress Prisca, the iconography is one of a city personification⁵. (fig. 1)

¹ Procopius, *De Aedif.* IV, 4 (ca. 555).

² For the dualistic character of Romuliana: Srejšović (Ed.) 1993.

³ For the coins: Borić-Brešković 1994.

⁴ Aur. Vict. 40.1.18.; For Sharkamen: Popović, Tomović 1998; Also: Kuhoff 2007, p. 49.

⁵ Similar twin medallions with the busts of Tyche and Emperor Galerius were modelled on the “Small Arch” of Galerius found in the Octagon of Thessaloniki.

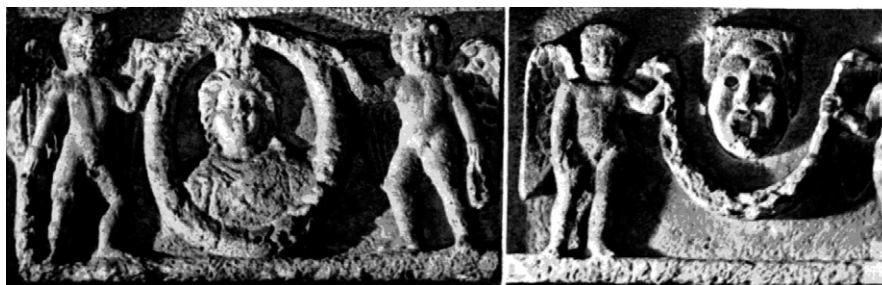


Fig. 1 Frieze with bust of Tyche from Diocletian's residence in Split

Сл. 1 Фриз са бистом Тихе из Диоклецианове палте у Сплиту

The sources inform us that Romula had a strong influence on her son Galerius as regards his religious policy: his zeal for the anti-Christian persecution could have been inspired by her. And again, however, Diocletian demanded that his Christian wife and daughter sacrifice according to the pagan ritual.

The mother-empress Helena was also very active in religious matters, this time on the Christian side⁶. Unlike Romula's case, in which we would rather speak of attitude and emotional reaction, the religious orientation of Helena was probably initiated, and certainly promoted, by her son Constantine⁷ who made the most of it with perspicacity and political wisdom. First of all, the veneration of Helena was given political form by her elevation to the status of *nobilissima femina*, and subsequently, in AD 325, to the rank of Augusta⁸: coins with her diademed image were issued. Meanwhile she showed herself driven by religious enthusiasm, building churches and comforting the poor. The crowning moment of Helena's life was her pilgrimage to Palestine⁹ in 327-328, which gave rise in the second half of the fourth century to the legend of her finding the True Cross. In Helena's personality, female Christian devotees throughout the empire acquired a strong spiritual support and self-confidence. Their feelings were additionally strengthened by the fact that Helena was a mother – the mother of the emperor.

The coins are suggestive in this respect. On a bronze medallion from Rome (AD 325) the front side is occupied by Helena's portrait while on the reverse there is a female figure holding a child in her left arm and giving with

⁶ For Helena's role in Christian policy during Constantine's reign: Drijvers 1992.

⁷ Eus. *VC*, 3.47: "She (his mother) became under his (Constantine's) influence such a devout servant of God that one might believe her to have been from her very childhood a disciple of the Redeemer of mankind" (from the Catholic Encyclopaedia). The earliest reference to the True Cross is in the *Catecheses* of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (*P.G.* XXXIII, 468, 686, 776), written in the year 348.

⁸ *Nobilissima femina* – for Flavia Iulia Helena: on bronze coins from Thessaloniki: Bruun 1966, nos. 48, 50 and for Flavia Maxima Fausta on bronze coins from Thessaloniki: Bruun 1966, nos. 49, 51. For the status of *Nobilissima femina*: Alföldi 1959-1960.

⁹ Helena's journey was described by Eusebius in *Vita Const.* III. 42-47.



Fig. 2 Coin of Helena, reverse with Pietas with two children (AD 325)

Сл. 2 Јеленим новчић,
наличје са Пијетама са двоје
деце (325.н.е)



Fig. 3 Coin of Fausta, struck at Constantinople in AD 326.

Сл. 3 Фаустин новчић, искован у Цариграду, 326.н.е



Fig. 4 Folis. Serdica, 303-309 AD

Сл. 4 Фолис. Сердика, 303.-309.н.е



Fig. 5 Medallion of Constantine, Constantinople (Bruun 1966, no. 87, Pl. 19, p. 583)

Сл. 5 Константинов медаљон, Цариград
(Bruun 1966, бр. 87, Pl. 19, стр. 583)



the other hand an apple to a second child at her right. The legend runs: PIETAS AVGVSTES¹⁰. The personification should be identified with Helena in her complex role of mother and benefactress¹¹. (fig. 2)

Constantine's wife, the Empress Fausta, adopted the cherished image of the mother for her coinage as well. She was represented with her children and sometimes as a nursing mother. The legend PIETAS AVGVSTAE alternates on these coins with SALVS REIPVBLICAE and SPES REIPVBLICAE¹² – words that express hope in security, stability and prosperity. (fig. 3)

With good reason the mother type on the coins of Helena and Fausta has been related to the idea of dynasty¹³. Already Theodora Augusta, the second wife of Constantius Chlorus (and daughter of Maximianus Herculus) was represented diademed on coins, whose reverse showed Pietas standing and holding a baby (with the legend: PIETASROMANA). In comparison, the persistent type

¹⁰ Kent 1978, nos. 639, 640, Pl. 162; Kalavrezou 1990, p. 166.

¹¹ For similar identifications: Bruun 1966, p. 53.

¹² Kalavrezou 1990, p. 166.

¹³ Kalavrezou 1990, p. 166.



Fig 6 Putti with a cornucopia from the ceiling of the imperial room in Trier (Simon 1986)

Сл. 6 Пути са рогом изобиља, са таванице царске одаје у Тријери (Trier) (Simon 1986)

on the contemporary coins of Galeria Valeria, daughter of Diocletian and Empress consort of Galerius, showed her diademed bust on the obverse and the figure of Venus Victrix on the reverse¹⁴. (fig. 4)

In relation to this, it is probably not a coincidence that in Constantinian imperial art and coinage genii in the form of children appear as symbols of the “joy of our Augustus” (GAUDIVM ROMANORVM and GAUDIVM AVGVSTI NOSTRI) according to the legends on medallions from Constantinople, Nicomedia and Thessaloniki.¹⁵(fig. 5)

The same idea of the rejoicing about the empire’s prosperity is expressed on the ceiling of the imperial room in Trier through the figures of the genii/putti, holding cornucopias¹⁶. (fig. 6)

Genii holding garlands are a repeated motif in the frieze of Diocletian’s Mausoleum, implying victory, salvation and joy in general.

The gradual emergence of the female political figure (although in shadow) at that period was certainly a reaction to the exaggerated masculine and military atmosphere during the era of the soldier emperors. In harmony with the ideas of gender in Late Antiquity, imperial ladies did not have the chance to govern *de jure* but some of them did this *de facto*. This, as we know, was valid especially for the Theodosian dynasty and more precisely for Pulcheria, the sister of Theodosius II. She was elevated to the rank of Augusta in 414. A domineering woman, Pulcheria was sincerely pious; she considered herself the bride of Christ but also compared herself to Mary¹⁷, i.e. to the Mother of God. It is indicative of Pulcheria’s strong will that it was precisely during the reign of Theodosius II that the Virgin was proclaimed to be the Mother of God – Theotokos, at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431.

¹⁴ Although the reverse image was traditional, coming from previous coins, e.g. of Magnia Urbica (283 AD), the reason for its choice might have been caused by the fact that Galeria Valeria had not borne her own child (she adopted Candidianus, Galerius’s illegitimate son).

¹⁵ *Age of Spirituality* 1979, nos. 35, 36; Bruun 1966, p. 54 and coins no. 42 (Constantinople), no. 161 (Nicomedia), Pl. 19; for their publication: Bellinger 1958, nos. 6, 19. For the concept of *gaudia*: Alföldi in *Historia* IV, 1955, pp. 131-150.

¹⁶ Simon 1986.

¹⁷ Holum 1982, pp. 141-145; Taft 1998, p. 70.

It is also noteworthy that in Byzantine hagiography the relationship between mother and child also gained prominence especially as a guarantee of a proper Christian education and further affiliation to the Christian community¹⁸.

Maternity, as we see, became the basis for the imposition of the cult both of the Empress and the Virgin during the 4th and 5th centuries. In the first case the demand came from dynastic interests. Its material expression was the erection of statues of the imperial ladies throughout the empire: those of Constantine's mother Helena were the earliest¹⁹.

As regards the cult of the Mother of God, its background was far more humanistic but also practical. She was considered the mediatrix before the Lord for humans: her intercession was expected and it was hoped that it would be exercised with the full dedication of a mother. (fig. 7)

However, as far as we know the monumental images of the empresses did not follow the maternal type. The iconography of the seated mother with her child on her lap was adopted for the image of the Mother of God for her earliest and simple representations in the catacombs²⁰. By the 5th century she was depicted in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (AD 432-440) already on a throne and in rich garments and adornment according to the iconography of noble ladies of the type we see on Projecta casket²¹. On the other hand this is an image in majesty, derived from imperial iconography. Scholars believe that the "princely



Fig. 7 Mosaic with the Virgin in Santa Maria Maggiore

Сл. 7 Мозаик са Богородицом (Девцом) у Санта Марији Мађоре (Santa Maria Maggiore)

¹⁸ Kazhdan 1998: in the author's opinion even the adjectives "maternal" and "paternal" gained different, resp. "good" and "bad" connotations.

¹⁹ Veneration for former empresses was also shown from later emperors as sources tell us: *The Parastaseis chronikai* I. 45: "Leo the Great (457-74) greatly honoured the Empress Pulcheria; accordingly he observed the commemoration of her death and on her tomb he represented her image (*indalma*). And in the imperial palace when he looked on her picture he would deem her whole life blessed? Leo also transferred a statue (*stela*) of Marcian (450-57) and Pulcheria to the Theodosian porticoes and gave it to the imperial city": for this and other examples: Cameron, Herrin 1984, e.g. I, 29 sq.

²⁰ Wilpert 1903, Taf. 83.1; Kondakov 1914, pp. 21, 34, fig. 2, *et passim*.

²¹ Kitzinger 1977, p. 40 and n. 48.



Fig. 8 Mosaic with Infant Jesus enthroned and the Mother of God in Santa Maria Maggiore

Сл. 8 Мозаик са Богомладенцом Исусом на престолу и Мајком Божијом у Санта Марији Мађоре

splendour” (to use the words of Ernst Kitzinger) in which Mary is represented in the mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore was inspired by the decision of the Council of Ephesus²². (fig. 8)

The role and destiny of Mary as Mother of God is further emphasized in the scene of the Adoration of the Magi in the same church of Santa Maria Maggiore: Mary, now wrapped in a maphorion, is sitting on a throne-like chair on her Divine son’s left side, the Infant Jesus, himself sitting on a magnificent throne.

The iconography of the Mother of God seated on a throne seems to be influenced by royal iconography which is again revealed by coin imagery. Aelia Eudoxia, the Empress consort (395-404) of Arcadius, appears sitting on a ceremonial seat on coins struck in 400-404 (e.g. Nicomedia, Heraclea)²³. (fig. 9)

²² Kitzinger 1977, p. 74 and lit.

²³ Aelia Eudoxia Augusta, Æ 17mm, Nicomedia mint, struck 400/401 AD; AEL EVDOXIA AVG, diademed draped bust right being crowned by *manus Dei* / GLORIA ROMANORVM, empress seated facing on throne, hands folded, being crowned by *manus Dei*; cross in right field; SMNA in ex.; Aelia Eudoxia Augusta; Æ 18mm; Heraclea mint; AEL EVDOXIA AVG, pearl-diademed and draped bust right being crowned by *manus Dei* / GLORIA ROMANORVM, Eudoxia seated facing, being crowned by *manus Dei*; cross in right field; SMHD in ex.



Fig 9 Coin of Aelia Eudoxia, AD 400-401, Nicomedia

Сл. 9 Новчић Аелије Еудоксије, 400.-401.н.е, Никомедиа



Fig. 10 Coin of Constantine, after AD 324 (Bruun 1966, Pl. 18)

Сл. 10 Константинов новчић, после 324.н.е (Bruun 1966, Pl. 18)

Much earlier coins of Constantine, marking changes in coin types after AD 324, bear on the reverses the image of Victory enthroned, holding a cornucopia²⁴. (fig. 10)

They could have inspired the coins of the empresses from the Theodosian dynasty, especially the type on the golden medallion of Aelia Eudocia, the Empress consort (421-460) of Theodosius II, struck at Constantinople.²⁵ The throne on its reverse is majestic and the Empress is represented diademed and nimbate. (fig. 11)

Christian symbolism impregnated the reverse imagery of the coins of the Late Antique Empresses from the Theodosian dynasty onwards. On coins of Aelia Flacilla, wife of Theodosius I, along with her image of pagan type, holding scroll in both hands²⁶, there are two reverses with boldly declared Christian character. (fig 12)



Fig. 11 Coin of Aelia Eudocia, struck at Constantinople

Сл. 11 Новчић Аелије Еудоције, искован у Цариграду



Fig. 12 Coin of Aelia Flacilla, AD 383-388, Antioch

Сл. 12 Новчић Аелије Флациле, 383.-388.-н.е, Antioh (Antioch)

²⁴ Bruun 1966, p. 53.

²⁵ Eudocia, AV Medallion of 2 Solidi; Constantinople mint; AEL EUDOCIA AVG, draped bust right, in pearl diadem / SALVS REI PVBLICAE, empress, nimbate, seated facing on throne, arms crossed before breast, feet on footstool shaped like ship's prow, CONOB in exergue, star in left field.

²⁶ Coin from Antioch (Aelia Flacilla, AD 383-388; AE 22mm (5.72 gm). AEL FLACILLA AVG, diademed and draped bust right; SALVS REI-PVBLICAE, Empress standing left, head right, holding scroll in both hands; Exergue ANTE



Fig. 13 Coin of Aelia Flacilla, Constantinople

Сл. 13 Новчињ Аелије Флациле, Цариград



Fig. 14 Coin of Aelia Flacilla, AD 383-388, Constantinople

Сл. 14 Новчињ Аелије Флациле, 383.-388-.н.е, Цариград



Fig. 15 Solidus of Pulcheria, AD 420-422, Constantinople

Сл. 15 Pulherijin solidus, 420.-422.н.е, Цариград



Fig. 16 Solidus of Pulcheria, AD 442 - 443, Constantinople

Сл. 16 Pulherijin solidus, 442. – 443.н.е, Цариград

One shows Victory seated right, holding a shield with inscribed Chi-Rho monogram. (fig. 13)

A rare silver coin, struck in Constantinople between AD 383 and 388, bears on the reverse the Christogram in a wreath. (fig. 14)

Both types were perpetuated on the coins of pious Aelia Pulcheria. She is also considered to have been responsible for the introduction of the cross on reverses of the Victory type (420-422 AD), as well as for the Christianization of the globe, held by the seated personification of Constantinople on coins of AD 430 and 442. (fig. 15,16)

This short survey of the extant visual material, most of it numismatic, shows that ladies of imperial rank re-appeared on the political scene during the 4th and 5th centuries after a considerable period of “political

silence” in the 3rd century. Their domain of activity was religion, which, as we know, gradually acquired extremely strong political power. The maternal type, adopted for the reverses of the Empresses of the Constantinian dynasty, yielded precedence to Christian symbols on the coins of the Theodosian dynasty. Elements of imperial imagery such as the throne, bejewelled garments and insignia, penetrated into religious iconography and, specifically, into the iconography of the Mother of God.²⁷

²⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Miša Rakocija for inviting me to participate at the Nish conferences. I would also like to thank my colleague Pat Witts who kindly agreed to check the English of my article.

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ЦАРИЦЕ ЧЕТВРТОГ И ПЕТОГ ВЕКА: ЦАРСКЕ И РЕЛИГИОЗНЕ ИКОНОГРАФИЈЕ

Рад се бави појавом и развојем царичиног култа у току IV и V века. Примећен је већ кроз поштовање Ромуле за време владавине Галерија, а јак подстицај добио је кроз материнске и религиозне врлине Јелене, Константинове мајке. Матерински тип и Јелене и Константинове жене, Фаусте, који је искован на новчићима, требало би гледати као симболе династијских тежњи. У V веку долази до јачих владалачких претензија царских дама Теодосијанове династије, посебно Пулхеријиних. Њен статус девице омогућио јој је да се прогласи Христосовом невестом. Њена побожност и жеља да влада допринели су развоју култа Девице и, посебо догми Богородице, коју је одобрио Ефески сабор 431. године н. е. Ово постепено признавање улоге коју је играо женски пол и у политичком наступању царства и у хришћанству, допринело је стварању касно античког уметничког идиома, и паганског и хришћанског, под јаким утицајем царске иконографије.