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# Augustae, Nobilissimae, Dominae: Considerations on the Role of Material Data on the Titulature of the 4th Century AD Imperial Women

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## Objective

This presentation aims to offer some observations on the relevant material data – such as inscriptions and coins – in studying the titulature of imperial women from 284 AD to 395 AD.

## Introduction

Information from numismatic and epigraphic documents have proven to be essential comparative data for the study of imperial women, allowing us to overcome the problem posed by a meagre and often biased corpus of literary sources. Indeed, the ambiguity of scholarly sources on the role of women in the *domus Augusta* makes the titles conferred on them essential to understanding their public functions and the imperial propaganda associated with them [1]. It has been noted that the social context influences the creation of titles, some of which were expressively coined to impose a specific perception of imperial women (e.g., *Mater populi Romani* – CIL VI, 30763), while others resulted from changes in the status of women, both within the imperial court and among the elites of the empire's cities (e.g., *Mater Castrorum* – CIL III, 12272) [2].

## Changes in the Titulature of Imperial Women

Titles of imperial women of the 3rd and 4th century have been studied unsystematically and subordinate to other perspectives. Despite their importance, the titles are often not even mentioned in the *PRLE*, sometimes because they were unknown at the time of writing (e.g., *Prisca* 1 in *PRLE* I, 726), sometimes due to forgetfulness (e.g., *Theodora* 1 in *PRLE* I, 895). However, from 284 AD onwards, there was a significant change in the titulature of imperial women. A decline in the attestations of titles assigned to women from the *Domus Augusta* can be observed from this moment onwards. Furthermore, titles such as *Mater Castrorum*, which had been common from the 2nd century onwards, disappeared from the record. To be sure, they were not abolished altogether. Rather, new titles such as *Domina Nostra* (e.g. CIL VIII, 1633) and *Nobilissima Femina* (e.g. RIC VI, 164), replaced them. Although they appear in both inscriptions and coins, one cannot find them in historiographic sources.



Image 1 AE 2015, 1070: Aureliae Priscae, Nobilissimae Feminae.



Image 2 HSPH 1964, 79: Navicula Fl(aviae) Val(eriae)/ Eutropiae, nob(illissimae) fe(m)il(iae) et filiorum eius./ Lege et recede!



Image 3 RIC VII Constantinople 15  
Obverse: CONSTANTIA N(obilissima) F(emina)  
Iconography: Bust of Constantia, hair plaited with hair pins, wearing necklace, mantled, right  
Reverse: SOROR CONSTANTINI AVG(usti) PIET(atis) P(ublicae) L(ib)er(ationis) CAE  
Iconography: Wreath



Image 4 CIL VI 40777 = CIL VI 1153: Inlustris et divinae prosop[ia]e genitae, venerabili soror[is] d(omi)ni n(ostri) Constantini Aug(usti) et amitae/ dd. n(ostri) dominorum nostrorum duorum) beatissimorum (:beatissimorum) Ca[es]arum duorum)/ d(omi)nae n(ostrae) Fl(aviae) lul(iae) Constantia[rum] nob[il]iss[im]a[rum] feminae ---?/ -----?.

## The problem of the lack of material evidence

The paucity of material evidence marks all the period between the reigns of Diocletian and Theodosius, but it is particularly severe for the Valentinian dynasty. This represents a reversal from the previous fifty years, from where material sources are relatively conspicuous, and there is a lack of historiographic sources on these subject. This lack of sources leads to several problems in studying these figures and it makes much more difficult to establish their precise onomastics without inscriptions and coins as in the case of Valentinian's first wife (*Marina Severa* 2, in *PRLE* I 828) who is mentioned as 'Marina' in *Chron. Pasch.* 287, 369, 'Mariana' in *Joh. Mal.* 339. 20-341 and 'Severa' in *Soc. Hist. Eccl.* 4.31.13-17.

## What does the absence of material evidence imply about titulature?

Gaps in material sources have a major effect on titulature. Since literary sources rarely record the titles of imperial women, these tend to come to us through inscriptions and coins. Moreover, even when titles are documented by literary sources, in the absence of other evidence, scholars are skeptical about their actual attribution [3].

**Table 1:** The table presents, by way of example, the material sources that have come down to us concerning the main imperial women between 284 and 395 AD; in orange are those attesting to their titles.

	Aur. Prisca	Eutropia	Theodora	Galeria Valeria	Valeria Maximilla	Fl. lul. Helena	Fl. lul. Constantia
Epigraphic Sources	AE 2015, 1076.		CIL VI, 40769.	e.g. AE 1979, 602 a; CIL III, 13661; IG VII, 2503; IGRR IV, 1562.	CIL XIV, 2826.	CIL III, 14333; VI, 1134; 1135; 1136; 36950; 40769; VIII, 1633; IX, 2446; X, 517; 1483; 1484; HEP 13, 2003/2004, 110; ICVR II, 4093; CIG III, 4349.	CIL VI, 1153 = 40777.
Numismatic Sources			e.g. RIC VIII Treveri 43, 48.	e.g. RIC VI Antioch 80, Cyzicus 38, Heraclea 43..		e.g. RIC VII Alexandria 38, Arelate 278, Heraclea 79, Londinium 299, Rome 248, Sirmium 54.	RIC VII Constantinople 15.
	Fl. Val. Eutropia	Fl. Max. Fausta	Helena II	Fl. Costantina	Eusebia	Faustina	Charito
Epigraphic Sources	HSPH 1964, 79.	AE 2007, 354; CIL III, 14378; VI, 40769; X, 678; XII, 668.	CIL VI, 40769.	CIL VI, 40790; CLE 301.			
Numismatic Sources		e.g. RIC VI Treveri 756; VII Alexandria 39, VII Antioch 56, Heraclea 80.					
	Marina Severa	Domnica	Justina	Constantia II	Thermanzia	Ael. Flaccilla	Galla
Epigraphic Sources					CIL VI, 36960.	I.Eph. 314, 114-115; I.Eph. 314, 115-116; IGC 280.	
Numismatic Sources						e.g. RIC IX Alexandria 17, Antioch 43, Cyzicus 24, Constantinople 48, Heraclea 13, Nicomedia 36.	

We can notice the importance of material evidence for the study of the titulature by examining the following sources, without which we would not know their full names or the fact that they acquired the title *Nobilissima Femina*.

**Image 1:** Recently brought to light, the inscription mentions Aurelia Prisca, Diocletian's wife (*Prisca* 1 in *PRLE* I, 726). This is the first chronologically known attestation of the title *Nobilissima Femina*.

**Image 3:** The relatively recently found inscription is dedicated to Flavia Valeria Eutropia, half-sister of Constantine (*Eutropia* 2 in *PRLE*, 316).

**Images 3 and 4:** Both the inscription and the coin are dedicated to Flavia Iulia Constantia, sister of Constantine (*Constantia* 1 in *PRLE* I, 221).

## The title of Augusta

Although the problem concerns all titles, the most eloquent example regards the title of *Augusta*, the best known of those attributed to imperial women. Between 284 A.D. and 395 A.D., the material evidence documents its attribution to only five women: *Galeria Valeria* (e.g., RIC VI 74; CIL III 13661), *Theodora* (RIC VIII, 143), *Fausta* (e.g., RIC VII 308; CIL X, 678), *Helena* (e.g. RIC VII 285; CIL VIII, 1633), *Aelia Flaccilla* (e.g. RIC IX 17; IGC 280). If one also takes into account the literary attestations, we should also include *Constantina* (Philost. 3, 22, 3; 3, 28, 4), *Domnica* (e.g., Jord. Rom. 314), and *Marina Severa* (e.g., *Chron. Pasch.* 287, 369). Since, in general, only women with the title of *Augusta* had the right to be depicted on coins (except for the *Nobilissimae Feminae* of the Constantinian Dynasty, e.g., Fl. Iul. Constantia see *supra*), the extreme rarity of women portrayed on coins could indicate that only to a few of them were granted the title of *Augusta*. Alternatively, it could be that material sources attesting to this title are particularly scarce.

## How could one explain the absence of material sources?

Since, by their very nature, epigraphic and numismatic sources relating to imperial women are closely linked to imperial propaganda, the most logical explanation for their absence, or lack thereof, could point to a lack of use of these figures for propaganda purposes, especially during the period of the Valentinian dynasty. Considering the current state of the sources, this

hypothesis would be reasonable in a period like the 4th century AD, characterized by profound political and religious changes, which may have affected their role in propaganda. This circumstance, linked to the lack of attestation of titles, suggests that the women of the imperial family played a secondary role during this period. However, this seems totally at odds with the literary sources, which instead attest to their central role in imperial propaganda even under the Valentinian dynasty, and their considerable political and religious influence (e.g., Amm. 21.7.10; Philost. *Hist. Eccl.* 3, 22, 3; Ruf. *Hist. Eccl.* 11.16).

## Preliminary conclusions

The paucity of epigraphic and numismatic sources is a significant obstacle to the study of the titles of imperial women of the Late Empire, making it crucial to deeply study the available corpus of evidence. Collected data points nevertheless to a significant change in the titulature of these subjects over time, a fact that rises questions about the accuracy of historiographical sources concerning these attributions, underlining the need to understand the reasons for these gaps. Despite their rarity, material sources are nevertheless essential to establish whether the information reported by literary sources is accurate. The reasons that might have caused the absence of material evidence appear to be in stark contrast to what is reported in the historiographic sources. This contrast raises a last but fundamental question: is the non-attestation of titles a consequence of the lack of epigraphic sources, or is the lack of sources a result of the non-attribution of titles?

## Notes

[1] e.g. W. Kuhoff, *Zur Titulatur der römischen Kaiserinnen während der Prinzipatszeit*, in *Klio* LXXV 1993, 244-256.

[2] F. Cenerini, *Il ruolo e la funzione delle Augustae dai Giulio Claudi ai Severi*, in *Donne, istituzioni e società fra tardo antico e alto medioevo*, a cura di F. Cenerini, I.G. Mastrososa, Lecce-Brescia 2016, 36-46.

[3] e.g., K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982, 31 n. 91 on the attribution of the title of *Augusta* to *Domnica* in *PRLE* I, 265.