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**Barbara M. Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age. Women in antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 248. ISBN 9780195379419. \$65.00.**

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### Preview

After her biographies of Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Julia Domna and, most recently, Augustus,<sup>1</sup> Barbara Levick has written the combined biography of two imperial women of the Antonine age: the Faustinae. The choice is a happy one: Faustina I and II (also called Faustina Maior and Minor) were married to the last two emperors selected for the succession by adoption, Antoninus Pius (138-161) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180). The period of their rule is generally seen as a particularly fortunate one – therefore the subtitle: *Imperial Women of the Golden Age* – despite the increasing military problems which kept Marcus Aurelius at the frontiers for much of his reign. In contrast to the childless empresses before them (Trajan's wife Plotina and Hadrian's Sabina), the fecundity of the Faustinae was prolific. Faustina I bore four children, two boys and two girls, of whom only Faustina II and her sister Aurelia Fadilla survived childhood (but Aurelia Fadilla died shortly after her marriage). In 145 Faustina's sole surviving daughter Faustina II was married to Marcus Aurelius, who was her first cousin (the son of her mother's brother Annius Verus). During the thirty years of their marriage, Faustina II bore about fourteen children including twins, of whom only one son, the notorious Commodus, and five daughters survived to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Though the public profile of the Faustinae was not as high as that of their most famous successor, Julia Domna, their public position surpassed their dynastic importance as is testified by a promising array of sources: literary texts, inscriptions, coins and medallions, portrait statues, reliefs, and temples.

In her introduction (pp. 3-12) Levick briefly sketches the main facts of their lives placing them against the background of their predecessors and the Antonine age. Addressing the question whether a biography of the Faustinae is feasible in the light of the casual and often tendentious remarks in the literary sources that – as is common in the study of ancient women – did not focus on them, and the official nature of the numerous statues, inscriptions and coins, she expresses the aim of assessing the relative power and recognition of the Faustinae in comparison to the empresses who preceded and succeeded them.

Another brief introductory chapter (Chapter 1: Sources; pp. 13-18) discusses the unsatisfactory state of the sources, which allow no certainty even about the dates of birth, marriage and death of the protagonists; the rough dates of their lives (Faustina I: c. 97-140 and Faustina II: c. 130-175) are based on modern calculations. Distinguishing the literary sources from the legal and documentary ones, Levick briefly introduces the main literary sources (Fronto, Dio and the *Historia Augusta*), none of which dealt with the Faustinae for their own sake, and the rich evidence of coins, inscriptions and, to a lesser extent, papyri. This brief discussion of the sources should perhaps better be included in the Introduction.

Chapter 2 on 'The Empresses and Women's Power' (pp. 19-39) provides the background to the discussion of the Faustinae by addressing the question of what 'power' imperial women – and upper-class Roman women more generally – might wield and what were the assets of an empress. Drawing her examples from a wide range of imperial and non-imperial women,<sup>3</sup> Levick states that women's power is found mainly in their control of their own money and property and in their possible influence through their male relatives (as powerbrokers or intermediaries). This could lead to a recognized though unofficial position of authority, especially if an empress survived her husband, which neither of the Faustinae did. Starting from the cynical observation that 'an emperor with existing heirs needed no wife' (p. 22), Levick discusses the main assets of an empress: birth, wealth, personal qualities (character, education, intellect and beauty) and connections. In addition to the prolific childbearing of Faustina II, it is clear that the Faustinae – who are not the main characters of this chapter – ranked high in most of these qualifications. Yet, despite the titles of honour, such as *Augusta*, and other public honours and privileges of Roman empresses, Levick shows no optimism about their, or any Roman woman's, power, drawing attention to the unofficial position of the wives of emperors and their dependency on their male relatives.

In the brief third chapter ('The Succession to Hadrian', pp. 41-56) Levick summarizes the imperial succession from the death of Trajan through the various schemes for Hadrian's succession, to Pius' career, his eventual adoption and reign and, finally, his revised plans for his own succession by betrothing Marcus Aurelius to his daughter Faustina. Though imperial women were involved in various ways, they do not take centre stage in this chapter. The Faustinae come to the fore in chapter 4 (pp. 57-89) on 'The Faustinae as Empresses, 138-175'. This chapter sketches the main events of their lives from Pius'

adoption to the death of Faustina II in Cappadocia in 175. Levick sums up the various honours for Faustina I, her coins, title of Augusta, portraits and deification, contrasting the marital harmony emphasized by the famous apotheosis relief of Antoninus Pius and Faustina I with hostile rumours in the literary sources. Dying twenty years before her husband, Faustina I had little opportunity for a high public profile, but her daughter, Faustina II, was more fortunate (if we may call it that). As the daughter and wife of emperors and the mother of the prospective successor, she had a position that was unprecedented. So were her honours: possibly in connection with her prolific fertility, she received the title Augusta before her husband was Augustus, the number and variety of her surviving portraits place her among the best known Roman empresses and late in life, in 174, she received the novel title *mater castrorum*, mother of the camps, which may have been inspired by her presence with Marcus Aurelius in the army headquarters. Perhaps because of her high public profile, Faustina II was open to criticism: the *Historia Augusta* accused her of adultery, poisoning and involvement in the revolt of Avidius Cassius. Rejecting the first two as unfounded vilifications, Levick takes a closer look at her possible involvement in the revolt, but the evidence is inconclusive; Faustina's intervention was not essential and perhaps less likely.

The last three chapters deal with specific themes concerning the Faustinae. Chapter 5 on 'Public and Private in the Dynasty' (pp. 91-118) summarizes their public representation, especially on coins and portrait statues, and their public appearances followed by a discussion of private life: their marriages and children. Starting from the notion of the empire as theatre, Levick asserts that the empresses of the Antonine age were a vital part of this theatricality: they were presented to the public as models exemplifying the ideals of the dynasty. Marital harmony (*Concordia*) was one of these ideals; in Rome and Ostia newlyweds were to make an offering before the portrait statues of the imperial couple, which is also depicted on coins. Obviously, *Concordia* stabilized the dynasty and together with the Fecundity of the Faustinae advertised on coins, it was to ensure its permanence. The 'Faustian girls', an alimentary scheme for the support of girls instituted by Antoninus Pius after the death of his wife and extended by Marcus Aurelius after the death of Faustina II, fit these ideals.

Chapter 6, 'The deified Faustinas. Association, Assimilation, and Consecration' (pp. 119-137), deals with the various forms of religious worship the Faustinae received, ranging from their association with goddesses such as Ceres to the official consecration decreed by the senate after their deaths. Discussing the divine status of imperial women during their lifetime, Levick focuses on the Greek east, where indeed many examples can be found. She thereby overlooks their equally divine status in Italy, outside Rome, and in the Latin speaking western provinces, where numerous priestesses are attested serving the cult of the living Augustae, including the Faustinae.<sup>4</sup> The final chapter, 'Faustina's Children and the End of the Antonines' (pp. 139-154), concludes the narrative of the Antonines by summarizing the advancement and notorious reign of Commodus, his death, posthumous damnation and his eventual rehabilitation by his self-adopted 'brother' Septimius Severus. The Faustinae reappear only as *exempla* exploited by the women of the Severi and in the stories of Faustina's daughters and their families, several of whom were involved in court intrigues and eventually fell victim to Commodus.

Taking a broad scope, Levick synthesizes a wide range of sources and studies not only on the Faustinae but also on the Antonine emperors, their ancestors and families and their predecessors with their wives and families. Her vast knowledge of prosopography allows her to knit them all together. Yet, despite the useful 'Family Trees', the 'Who's Who' listing the most important persons and the 'Chronology' appended at the end of the book, the sheer number of persons mentioned, most of them in passing, is dazzling and their relevance to the central theme is not always made clear. Levick's Syme-like brevity, which touches upon controversies and discussions rather than going into the details and often merely hints at possible interpretations and perspectives, makes one wish to probe deeper into the many issues raised. But if that is the effect of this erudite study, its aim has surely been reached.

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## Notes:

<sup>1.</sup> *Tiberius the Politician*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1976 (2nd edition: Routledge, 2000); *Claudius*, London: Batsford, 1990 (see BMCR [01.02.12](#)); *Vespasian*, London: Routledge, 1999 (see BMCR [2001.01.20](#)); *Julia Domna, Syrian Empress*, London: Routledge 2007; *Augustus: Image and Substance*, London: Longman, 2010 (see BMCR [2011.05.30](#)).

<sup>2.</sup> For the contested number and order of birth of the children of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina II, see the useful appendix on pp. 115-118.

<sup>3.</sup> A small remark on one of the numerous women referred to in this chapter: Pompeia Marullina was not 'honoured with a statue at Nemausus' (p. 21) but set up a statue for someone else (CIL 12, 3169: in honour of Decimus Terentius Scaurianus).

<sup>4.</sup> For priests of the imperial cult in the Latin West (but not in Rome) worshipping both living and deified emperors and empresses, see the series by Fishwick, D. (1987-2005) *The imperial Cult in the Latin West. Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, vols I-III, Leiden/Boston and Gradel, I. (2002) *Emperor Worship in Roman Religion*, Oxford. For priestesses officiating in the cult of living and deified women of the imperial family, see Hemelrijk, E.A. (2007) 'Local empresses: priestesses of the imperial cult in the cities of the Latin West', *Phoenix* 61.3-4: 318-349, (2006) 'Priestesses of the imperial cult in the Latin West: benefactions and public honour', *Antiquité Classique* 75: 85-117 and (2005) 'Priestesses of the imperial cult in the Latin West: titles and function', *Antiquité Classique* 74: 137-170. Cassia Cornelia Prisca, mentioned in n. 41 on p. 204 of Levick's study, was

certainly not 'the only priestess identified as serving a living empress'.

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