[Review of: T.C. Brennan (2018) Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey]

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The book is well-written, presenting often dense and complex arguments in a clear and approachable style. It offers an impressively detailed set of notes and a lengthy and comprehensive bibliography, although the practice of quoting ancient texts and inscriptions only in translation is a little irritating in such an otherwise scholarly work. While it is essential to include a translation to make the work accessible to readers with no ancient languages, it would be very helpful to more specialist readers if the original language was also included, either in the text or in the notes. In a slightly odd editorial choice for a work that opens with a discussion of the iconographic program of a key monument at Rheims, it contains no illustrations. Although the text stands on its own merits, identity is a topic to which visual and material culture has much to offer, and some well-chosen images would have been a valuable addition to the work. This is particularly true in respect to discussions of epigraphic evidence. Inscriptions are, after all, material objects whose appearance and context can profoundly influence their interpretation.

Nevertheless, despite these caveats, the work is a significant contribution to the scholarship on identity in the western provinces of the Roman world. J. makes a convincing case that attitudes toward the pre-Roman past were not such a key difference between the development of the western and eastern provinces of the empire as they have previously appeared.

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Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey. By T. COREY BRENNAN. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. [xxiv] + 302.

The imperial women of Rome have long stood in the shadow of their powerful husbands, uncles, brothers, and sons—in primary sources as well as in modern scholarship. Only in recent decades have we seen a flurry of monographs on such notable empresses as Livia, Agrippina the Younger, both Faustinae, Julia Domna, and Galla Placidia, many of which have been published in Oxford University Press' successful *Women in Antiquity* series.[1] With this book on Sabina, wife of Hadrian, another entry is added to the list. Yet as its author, T. Corey Brennan, is well aware, an in-depth study of this empress is seriously hindered by the dearth of literary sources. While a reasonable amount of numismatic, epigraphic, and sculptural evidence on Sabina survives, the mark she has left on Graeco-Roman literature is dishearteningly slim: a mere two hundred words or so, mostly scattered across texts written long after her death, such as the Byzantine epitome of Cassius Dio's Roman history and the *Life of Hadrian* in the *Historia Augusta*.

It is small wonder, then, that B. starts his introduction with the remark that "This book may strike many as an exercise in the impossible" (p. xv). Rather than writing a biography of Sabina, he aims to situate the empress in Hadrian's principate. Since the bulk of the evidence concerns her representation in various media, this is certainly a sensible approach. As the blurb for the book points out, Sabina was "the most travelled and visible empress to date." The previous two book-length studies on her person, by Andrea Carandini and by

1. E.g., Antony A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven, CT, 2002); *Agrippina: Mother of Nero* (London, 1996); Barbara M. Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age* (Oxford, 2014); *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress* (London, 2007); Hagith Sivan, *Galla Placidia: The Last Roman Empress* (Oxford, 2011).

Benedetta Adembri and Rosa Nicolai, focused mostly on portraits and statues.[2] B. makes extensive use of these works, as well as the numismatic evidence from the *RIC* and *RPC*.

The first five chapters of the book provide the reader with contextual information. In chapter 1, the position of empress, the title *Augusta*, and other marks of honor for imperial women are traced from Livia through the first century CE; chapter 2 sketches Trajan's attitude to the women of his house, especially with regard to their representation; chapter 3 cobbles together what little we can glean of Sabina's life and career from the literary sources (even the date and place of her birth are unknown); chapter 4 provides a brief overview of the life and reign of Hadrian, including a discussion of the influence of the lost biography by Marius Maximus; and chapter 5 discusses key figures who were close to the emperor, such as Plotina, Antinoös, and Hadrian's eventual successor, Antoninus Pius. This is a lot of stage-setting, and while these opening chapters certainly contain much useful information, some topics B. touches upon could perhaps have been dealt with in a less detailed fashion. By the time the reader reaches the end of the fifth chapter, she is definitely ready for the empress to emerge from the wings and take center stage.

Chapters 6–10 constitute the meat of the book, providing a detailed discussion of the evidence for Sabina's life, death, and immediate legacy. B. discusses the material in more or less chronological order. Chapter 6 focuses on the period up to Sabina's elevation to *Augusta* in 128 CE; chapters 7 and 8 deal with Hadrian's third great journey to Greece, Asia, and Egypt (128–132 CE), on which Sabina accompanied him; chapter 9 deals with the remaining years in Rome (132–137 CE); while chapter 10 covers Sabina's death and deification. Unfortunately, there is really not enough material available to present a continuous narrative. B. is therefore obliged to skim over large parts of the empress' life. Even so, she sometimes disappears from her own monograph for pages on end. This is most glaring in chapter 7, which discusses the circumstances of the foundation of Aelia Capitolina, the arrival of the imperial company in Egypt, Antinoös' mysterious death in the Nile, and the creation of the Antinoös cult, among other things. One could argue that these topics help to establish a firm chronology and paint a picture of the courtly and cultural environment in which Sabina lived and operated; however, that does not take away from the fact that very little of what we are told bears any direct relevance to her.

When scraps of evidence for Sabina's doings and goings *are* present, B. makes every possible effort to wring some information from them. In chapter 6, for instance, he discusses the scandalous incident which led to the removal of the praetorian prefect Septicius Clarus and the imperial secretary Suetonius from court—"the single best-known anecdote involving the empress" (p. 82), recorded in the *Historia Augusta*. B. scrutinizes every detail of this much-discussed passage, commenting on the corrupted state of the Latin—a key phrase may say either *in usu eius* ("in their relations with his wife") or *iniussu eius* ("without his/her consent"), which bears on Hadrian's motive for the dismissal—citing evidence for a personal link between Clarus and Suetonius and speculating on the date and location of the scandal. In the end, however, he must conclude that "our passage does not allow much latitude for confident analysis" (p. 85). The most important takeaways are the observation that the empress' personal status made her a powerful and potentially dangerous individual and, following from this, the suggestion that the incident may have prompted Hadrian to take Sabina with him on his third great journey.

2. Andrea Carandini, *Vibia Sabina: Funzione politica, iconografia e il problema del classicismo adrianeo* (Florence, 1969); Benedetta Adembri and Rosa M. Nicolai, eds., *Vibia Sabina: Da* Augusta *a diva* (Milan, 2007).

A bit more is gained from some other pieces of evidence, namely Sabina's inscribed statement and the inscribed poems of her travel companion, Julia Balbilla, on the left leg and foot of the gigantic "singing" Memnon statue in the Theban necropolis. B. discusses these inscriptions in detail in chapter 8. He does an excellent job contextualizing the women's visit to the famous site, remarking that it "animates, at least for a flashing moment, the empress in our understanding" (p. 136). From the inscriptions, B. plausibly deduces that a competitive dynamic existed between Hadrian, Sabina, Balbilla, and other members of the imperial entourage. While Balbilla's archaizing, Sapphic poetry was obviously meant to highlight her skill and erudition as a lyric poet, Sabina's plain Greek prose betrays no such pretensions. The Memnon inscriptions, however, clearly show her association with attributes that also define her public persona in other contemporary sources: youthfulness, seductive beauty, religious piety, and marital fidelity.

In fact, B.'s analysis is most successful when he moves away from the actual person and deeds of Sabina and focuses on her image as it was represented and perceived throughout the Empire. Here there is more material to work with. Remarkably, Sabina was wholly ignored in Hadrian's representation for the first ten years he was in power. Instead, emphasis was placed on Trajan's wife Plotina and niece Matidia I, Sabina's mother, to stress continuity with the reign of the *optimus princeps*. Only in 128 CE was Sabina elevated to the status of *Augusta*, an event that was closely tied to Hadrian's acceptance of the title *pater patriae*. From then on, the imperial mint issued a sustained, regular coin production for the empress, which was unprecedented. Even more remarkable are the constant updates to her portrait, which exist in many variations, adorned with many different hairstyles. Moreover, many new reverse themes were introduced, associating Sabina with Juno, Venus Genetrix, and even Cybele, among other deities and personifications. These innovations would persist in later, post-Hadrianic coinage, prompting B. to remark that "the Sabina coins from the Rome mint represent her most important legacy" (p. 212).

On the provincial level, there was a massive response to the empress, with over eighty provincial mints issuing coins bearing her portrait. Some cities clearly struggled with Sabina's proper place in the imperial hierarchy with regard to the deified Antinoös and Lucius Aelius, Hadrian's intended heir. Others produced nothing for her at all. The epigraphic record is equally rich, with Sabina receiving more public honors and civic commemorations than any previous imperial woman since Livia. This stands in marked contrast to the sparse attention she receives in the (much later) literary sources.

B. does a fine job charting these representations and dedications. Two appendices testify to his meticulous work on the numismatic and sculptural evidence: the first presents a table of Sabina's Roman coinage, adapted from the overview provided by Richard Abdy,[3] listing the various portrait types, legends, and reverses; the second presents a table listing the empress' sculptural portraits, referencing their location, appearance, and interpretation by previous scholars. These will certainly be of great benefit to future research. Unfortunately, the book contains only a handful of images of these numerous coin types and sculptures. Only one portrait bust of Sabina is depicted (p. 171; it is also on the book's cover), while a visual overview of the empress' different hairstyles is lacking.

Chapter 10, which concerns Sabina's death and deification, raises the possibility that Hadrian had a hand in his wife's demise in (probably) late 137 CE. However, there is very

3. Richard Abdy, "Chronology of Sabina's Coinage at the Roman Mint," *Revue Numismatique* 171 (2014): 73–91.

little evidence to support such an extraordinary suggestion. The fact that the literary sources record rumors that Hadrian had poisoned Sabina is not all that surprising, considering the well-worn clichés of Roman historiography and repeated stories that the imperial couple had a rather strained marriage. The other clues that B. cites in favor of this theory—such as the fact that portraits of Sabina from her final years put less stress on her distinctive personal features in favor of a classicizing portrait with an idealized hairstyle—do not seem convincing to me either. It is one of the very few instances in which I felt the author was pushing the evidence too far.

The epilogue contains a brief discussion of Sabina's reception in the literary, visual, and performative arts from the early modern age to the present. Here B. touches upon the influence of the Arco di Portogallo relief on Renaissance art, the empress' depiction in Metastasio's opera *Adriano in Siria*, and various other topics. There is a surprising amount of material available, even though the authors and artists often relegate Sabina to a minor role in favor of Hadrian and Antinoös, and there would certainly be potential to expand this cursory overview into a full-blown chapter or journal article. The second half of the epilogue segues somewhat awkwardly to the book's concluding remarks, shifting the focus back to Sabina in antiquity. This final section is a bit repetitive, going once more over many of the details of the empress' life and representation. It would have been a good place to take a step back and reflect on Sabina's place among the imperial women of second-century Rome, especially in light of B.'s remark that Hadrian's promotion of his wife "initiated a new trajectory for the concept of empress" (p. 217); however, such reflections are not forthcoming. In fact, the quoted words form the epilogue's final sentence.

Sabina Augusta is a handsomely produced book, containing high-quality figures and images and boasting very few typos. Without question, it is a very solid piece of scholarship, crafted by an author who knows his way well around (mostly) nonliterary sources. Writing the history of Graeco-Roman women poses major challenges, even for ones as prominent as Sabina. Efforts to counter their centuries-long marginalization and grant them a more central place in our understanding of the ancient world are commendable as well as necessary. B.'s monograph, however, also demonstrates the limitations of the subject. When all the contextual material is stripped away, it is undeniable that what we are left with is rather thin for a 300-page study. The book might have benefited from a slightly broader focus—perhaps by taking all the prominent women of Trajan's and Hadrian's imperial houses into account, like Sonja Nadolny has recently done for Severan imperial women;[4] or by making Hadrian's court and entourage the main object of study. As it stands, *Sabina Augusta* is probably the best monograph on Sabina one could hope for. Yet for all of B.'s skill and ingenuity, the empress remains an elusive presence.

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4. Sonja Nadolny, *Die severischen Kaiserfrauen* (Stuttgart, 2016).

The Language of Ruins: Greek and Latin Inscriptions on the Memnon Colossus. By PATRICIA A. ROSENMEYER. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 265.

> *The priest, Sab, was forced to climb up one of the statues due to the nearby pack of crocodiles that had set their lair at the Colossi's feet. Sab was rescued by the Hidden One Bayek of Siwa, who eliminated the crocodiles*.