

BOOK REVIEW

Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire. By JOYCE E. SALISBURY. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. 236. Hardcover, \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1700-4.

This compact volume offers a bibliography of Galla Placidia, one of the most powerful women of the Late Antique period. Although the women of this period are generally underserved in scholarship, this particular Empress has fared better than her contemporaries, most recently as the subject of Hagith Silvan's 2011 monograph.¹ Salisbury adds to this body of work in this eminently readable book, which, unlike prior scholarship, attempts to reconstruct her subject's childhood as well as her years in the public spotlight.

The book's main goal is to place Galla Placidia in the larger socio-cultural context of her time period, demonstrating via primary sources the ways that Placidia was first shaped by, then shaped, the sociopolitical environment of the Late Antique Empire. Salisbury succeeds admirably considering the limited sources available to her, especially in her treatment of her subject's off-neglected youth.

Salisbury organizes her material chronologically and follows Silvan's example in dividing her chapters into the important periods in Placidia's life. The first two chapters naturally focus more on the major cultural events and players that shape young Placidia's world than the subject herself, since actual sources on the her childhood are sparse. The first chapter ("The "Most Noble" Princess," 379–395) is devoted to Theodosius and ends with his death, while the next chapter ("Orphan Princess in Stilicho's Shadow," 395–408) explores the ways that the Romano-Vandal general Stilicho's regency would have affected Placidia's world on the grand and personal levels.

The first two chapters present Galla Placidia as a persona growing and changing in response to her environment, but in chapter three the book changes course to show how the now adult princess begins to exert her agency as a potent

¹ Sivan, H. (2011). *Galla Placidia: The last Roman empress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Other past treatments of Galla Placidia include Sirago, V. A. (1996). *Galla Placidia: La nobilissima (392-450)*. Milano: Jaca Book and Oost, S. I. (1968). *Galla Placidia Augusta: A biographical essay*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

political player. Chapter three (“Held Hostage by the Goths,” 408–412) focuses on the siege of Rome and its aftermath, when Placidia first gains influence over one of the important leaders of the period, Athaulf, the brother-in-law and successor of Alaric. Chapter four (“Queen of the Visigoths,” 411–416) deals with Placidia’s experiences as Athaulf’s wife in Spain.

Finally, the last chapters see Placidia’s return to Ravenna as a widow with her own loyal faction of Visigoths (“Wife and Mother in Ravenna,” 416–424) and her rise to Empress of the West as the Regent of her young son, Valentinian III (“Empress of the Romans,” 424–437) and her time as the still powerful Dowager Empress (“The Empress Mother and Her Children,” 438–455). There is an Epilogue that summarizes the final years of the Western Empire and the legacy of Placidia’s artistic endeavors.

This comprehensive volume does make some sacrifices for the sake of accessibility. Salisbury sometimes takes information at face value, rather than unpacking the sociocultural intricacies of this undeniably complicated historical period. Early in the book Salisbury seeks to explain the reasons that Placidia developed into a strong political player while her brothers both grew up to be puppet rulers. She presents the standard theory that eastern decadence in the form of conniving court eunuchs is to blame. This leads to an oversimplification of both court politics and the lives of eunuch slaves in the Late Antique (19–20).

Furthermore, many readers hoping to use this volume for research purposes will be frustrated with the scarcity of sources cited. That is not to say that the text is lacking in rigor, but that sources are downplayed in favor of readability. For example, Salisbury mentions that generic ‘people’ were impressed that Bishop Ambrose could read silently (42) when she could easily have cited Augustine on the topic (*August. Conf.* 6.3).

The strength of this volume is its ability to interweave the major historical events of the period with the story of one imperial princess. Salisbury offers a masterly summation of the content and significance of Augustine’s *City of God* in conjunction with Placidia’s own personal upheaval as a hostage/advisor to Athaulf, and explains the relationship between Rome and the Huns during the fifth century to give context to Placidia’s daughter Honoria’s rebellious overtures to Attila. Salisbury does not neglect the social history of the period, either. She uses the birth of Placidia’s son Theodosius to give the reader a short explanation of Roman birthing and infant care practices and Placidia’s marriage to Athaulf to discuss both marriage customs and the nascent Church’s views on marriage as a sacrament.

Salisbury uses Galla Placidia as a focal point to explore the massive political, religious, and cultural shift that the Roman Empire underwent during this transitional period in Rome's history. The result is a prosopological history of the Roman Empire from the time of Theodosius to the fall of the Western Empire with a strong emphasis on the development of church doctrine as it affected Late Antique law and culture. The language of the book lacks the precise diction of high scholarship, but the resulting exoteric text is pleasantly accessible. It makes this book an ideal text to supplement the standard Peter Brown textbooks for an undergraduate class on the Late Antique, especially one with a women's studies emphasis.

KRISHNI BURNS

University of Akron, kburns1@uakron.edu