

## BOOK REVIEW

*Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey*. By T. COREY BRENNAN. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 302. Hardback, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-19-025099-7.

From the outset, Brennan stresses that his latest book is not a biography of Sabina, the wife of Hadrian and, ultimately, the deified *Augusta* of Rome. Rather, the work is an attempt to contextualize and “situate Sabina in Hadrian’s aspirations (xxiv).” As a result, this is not a book, as the title somewhat suggests, intended to join the ranks of recent biographical studies of empresses, but one which means to look closely at a historical moment with Sabina as its thematic center. Brennan’s task is an ambitious one, especially given the limited evidence available for this reign as a whole, and for Sabina as an individual. While the work successfully analyzes some essential features of Hadrian’s reign and the ways that he used his court as an extension of himself, the work, by necessity, often strays from its eponymous empress, who remains a mysterious figure even in the book’s conclusion.

*Sabina Augusta* is structured in two halves, supplemented by a pair of appendices, one of Sabina’s coin types and another of her portraits. The first half establishes the world of Sabina as empress and of Hadrian as emperor, collecting and presenting this material in an engaging and clear manner. Brennan begins with an excellent chapter on Roman empresses, tracing the development and public presentation of the role from Livia to Sabina. From here, in four chapters, he lays out crucial groundwork that, while familiar to most who study the period, will leave students and scholars of other periods informed and comfortable with the material.

Brennan’s Chapter 2 begins with Trajan, Hadrian’s adoptive father and immediate predecessor, and discusses the examples set by the imperial women who preceded Sabina: Plotina, Trajan’s wife, Marciana, Trajan’s sister and Matidia, Trajan’s niece and Sabina’s mother. Chapter 3 turns to Sabina’s “Personal History,” focusing on the sources that exist for a study of the empress. Throughout, Brennan has a clear understanding of the limitations of our evidence and addresses, among other subjects, the challenge of working with the *Historia Augusta*.

The fourth and fifth chapters, “Hadrian’s Personality” and “Hadrian’s Relationships,” respectively, address succinctly and clearly the necessary background for Hadrian and his court.

In the second half, Brennan transitions to a chronological study, in so far as it can be constructed, of Sabina’s life. Needless to say, examples of lengthy narrative are thin on the ground, but Brennan draws on a variety of evidence to sketch out the picture as fully as possible. Brennan is able to be most expansive in Chapters 7 and 8, which discuss Hadrian and Sabina’s trip to and through Egypt. On this journey, it is possible to examine both the extent of the imperial court, including Antinoös and the princess-poet Julia Balbilla, and some of its relationships with the emperor and empress. Brennan characterizes this group as creative and competitive, but struggles, even with a unique example of Sabina’s “voice” preserved in an inscription on the statue of “singing Memnon,” to discern the place of the empress in that company. Following the trip to Egypt, Sabina is, once again, largely absent until her death and deification, when it is clear that Hadrian made the most of an opportunity to display his piety, as he had following the death of Antinoös. It is here that Brennan becomes controversial, siding with ancient evidence that suggests that Hadrian may have had a hand in, or actually compelled, Sabina’s death. He cites a series of “commemorative” coin types as possible evidence for the empresses impending doom, though this claim lacks any explanation of the role he imagines being held by the Roman mint in this period. If intentional, these revived types may have signaled that Sabina was expected to die, naturally or otherwise, but it is also possible that these types were accidentally or incidentally created by mint workers simply reusing old dies. Generally, it is regrettable that Brennan’s analysis of Sabina’s coins is essentially limited to an iconographic study. While the iconography is very interesting, offering both great continuities and some startling innovations in the appearance of empresses, a study of the circulation of these types could have revealed more about what populations Hadrian wished to reach with the image of his empress.

Nevertheless, Brennan offers a strong conclusion, in which he briefly covers some of the later reception of Sabina’s life and summarizes the earlier chapters, noting the early absence of Sabina in public media prior to being named *Augusta* in 128 CE, her prominence in numismatic and epigraphic material thereafter and the careful positioning of the empress as a supporting figure to her husband in the latter portion of her life and after her death. Throughout, the reader is struck with how difficult it is to imagine Sabina as a central figure in Hadrian’s reign. In effect, this work represents not her “imperial journey” but rather a reflection of

the Hadrianic court and the public promotion that Hadrian made, or did not make, for important members of that body. Brennan has done a remarkable thing in asserting the possibility of placing such a sparsely attested figure at the heart of a scholarly enquiry and revealed the value of shifting the lens away from the emperor and toward an era and its cultural icons.

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