

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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T. Corey Brennan, *Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey. Women in antiquity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xxiv, 302. ISBN 9780190250997. \$85.00.

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Preview

This is not a biography. A complete scholarly account of the life of Sabina, the wife of the emperor Hadrian, is impossible, given the exiguous nature of the literary sources. As T. Corey Brennan points out, only 200 words about Sabina survive in ancient texts. He remarks that an ‘average adult could comfortably read aloud a translation of that amount of text in about 90 seconds’ (p. xvi). This book therefore concentrates on the representation of Sabina, not only in the literary sources, but also in the epigraphic, numismatic, and artistic material. Brennan is a genial and reliable guide to the sources, clearly explaining what they can—and cannot—tell us about Sabina and her life. In interpreting this evidence, he proposes that ‘whatever the (much-discussed) dynamics of their marriage, Hadrian meant for Sabina to play a key role in promoting the public character of his rule’ (p. xxiii). This is a sensible and convincing argument, and the book raises important questions about the roles and functions of Roman imperial women.

Sabina Augusta falls into two halves. The first five chapters are largely introductory, providing important historical background on the Roman monarchy (Chapter 1: “‘Empress” at Rome’) and the dynasty of Nerva and Trajan (Chapter 2: ‘Trajan and the Imperial House’), before moving on to examine Sabina and Hadrian in detail (Chapter 3: ‘Sabina’s Personal History’; Chapter 4: ‘Hadrian’s Personality’; Chapter 5: ‘Hadrian’s Relationships’). This material will be largely familiar to scholars of early second century A.D. Rome, but it will be of great benefit to undergraduates or researchers from other disciplines who are interested in the representation of imperial women. Brennan offers comprehensive overviews of issues such as the chronology of Hadrian’s reign and travels, the literary sources (especially Marius Maximus as a source for the *Historia Augusta*), and key personalities, including the emperor’s lover Antinoös and his chosen heirs, Aelius Caesar and Antoninus Pius.

In Chapter 6: ‘Sabina Augusta’, Brennan analyses Sabina’s position and representation after Hadrian’s accession in A.D. 117. This chapter discusses topics such as Sabina’s presence on Hadrian’s second journey and the infamous incident that saw the praetorian prefect Septicius Clarus and the *ab epistulis* Suetonius Tranquillus dismissed from court. But its most important scholarly contribution concerns Sabina’s public

representation. For the first decade of Hadrian's reign, Sabina is all but absent on coins minted at Rome and on provincial issues, except for an appearance on types from Gaba in Galilee (p. 68). This changed in A.D. 128, when Sabina was awarded the name of Augusta and Hadrian that of *pater patriae*. Brennan shows that these honours were not bestowed simultaneously: Sabina became Augusta first, probably as a way to 'heighten the drama of the emperor accepting his title' (p. 89). This demonstrates that the awarding of imperial honours and titles was never a pro forma act, but was carefully organized and choreographed. The large volume of coinage produced for Sabina set a standard that would be followed by Hadrian's successors, cementing women as an important part of imperial representation in the Antonine age. Chapter 6 also includes a detailed discussion of Sabina's first official portrait types, which were probably created in A.D. 128 to coincide with her acclamation as Augusta. Although Brennan's account is clear and straightforward, it is a pity that the book does not include illustrations of the portrait styles to accompany the text (pp. 90-4).

The next two chapters, entitled 'The Journey to Egypt' and 'Egypt and the Journey Home', examine Hadrian's third provincial tour and the notorious death of his lover Antinoös in Egypt. The narrative is supported by two very good maps (Figures 7 and 8), prepared by the Ancient World Mapping Centre, which provide a helpful guide to provinces and cities visited by Hadrian and mentioned in the text. Brennan includes an extended discussion of the death of Antinoös and the extent of his commemoration, as a way of highlighting differences between his representation and that of Sabina (p. 119). Sabina herself enters the picture more fully in an excellent discussion of the Colossus of Memnon, which the Augusta visited during the court's time in Egypt. Brennan's skills as a historical storyteller come to the fore in his engaging account of the visits of the poet Julia Balbilla, Sabina, and Hadrian to this monument, and his exegesis of the surviving inscriptions (pp. 125-137).

Coinage and portraiture take centre stage once again in Chapter 9: 'Final Years in Rome'. Drawing on Richard Abdy's detailed numismatic analysis of Sabina's coinage, Brennan provides the reader with a careful chronology of the issues and a discussion of the Augusta's publicly promoted virtues. The chapter then proceeds to examine provincial coinage featuring Sabina issued in the eastern provinces after A.D. 128. A crucial point emerges from this discussion: in the reign of Trajan, the eastern mints produced types for the emperor and his wife Plotina at a ratio of 85:1. Under Hadrian, the ratio of his provincial types to Sabina's was 14:1, signifying a major increase in the number of types representing the emperor's female partner (pp. 158-9). Brennan sensibly cautions that many of the reverse images on these coins are themselves conventional (p. 163), but the increase in types remains significant. The second major iconographical development highlighted in this chapter is the change in Sabina's portraiture after her return to Rome in A.D. 133. She is now depicted in a more timeless way, as a 'young serene beauty', which marks a change from her earlier representation in the style of the Trajanic women (pp. 170-2). Once again, this chapter could have benefited from a wider range of illustrations, particularly of the provincial coinage and of the hair-knot which features on some of Sabina's later portraiture (discussed on pp. 172-4).

Sabina probably died in late A.D. 137, and Chapter 10 deals with representations of her death and deification on coinage and on the panel relief from the Arco di Portogallo. Brennan is a sure-footed guide to the chronology of Sabina's death and that of Hadrian's heir Aelius Caesar, as well as the details of conspiracies against the emperor (pp. 182-5). But he also strikes a controversial note, entertaining the idea that Hadrian

may have had a hand in Sabina's death. This stems from the ancient sources. The *Historia Augusta* (*Hadr.* 23.9) reports that after Sabina passed away, there was a rumour that Hadrian poisoned her, while the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (14.8) says she was driven to suicide. For a book that spends much of its length distancing itself from the hostile account of the ancient sources, the possible acceptance of Hadrian's responsibility for his wife's death comes as a surprise. Brennan's reasoning is that 'it was very much to Hadrian's advantage for Sabina to predecease him', because of the role she could play in his public image as a deified wife (p. 186). He even suggests that there were 'disquieting signs that the regime ... started laying the groundwork for the empress's death and apotheosis' (p. 186). Brennan cites in this context a series of coins minted at Rome depicting Sabina with a range of hairstyles worn throughout her lifestyle. Yet this re-use of earlier obverse types of Sabina could have had a purely commemorative purpose. If they were issued because the mint expected Sabina to die soon, it could have been because she was seriously ill, rather than because Hadrian was plotting to kill her.

The book's conclusion offers a brief survey of the reception of Sabina in the art, literature, and history of the early modern and modern period, before summarising the main themes of each chapter. The takeaway point from this discussion, and from the book itself, is that Sabina was virtually absent in official media between A.D. 117 and her proclamation as Augusta in A.D. 128. This acclamation resulted in the commissioning of portrait types representing Sabina and her appearance on coins produced at Rome in large numbers. The impact of Sabina's new status reverberated around the Roman Empire, as shown by the range of provincial coin issues featuring the Augusta. Brennan is to be commended for producing a clearly written and accessible book that thoroughly documents these changes in the representation of Sabina. She and Hadrian never had children, but she nevertheless became an important part of the public image of his regime. This conclusion encourages us to think beyond the significance of child-bearing to the official representation of imperial women and consider their wider importance as *exempla*, role models, and partners.

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