As the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus and mother of the emperor Caracalla, Julia Domna can be regarded as one of the more influential women of antiquity and a woman who appeals to our imagination. That is how Barbara Levick explains her choice of writing an introduction to the life and times of this empress in the series ‘Women of the Ancient World’. In the introduction, L. announces that she will not only deal with Domna’s personal story, but will also focus on three stories in which Domna was involved: the descent of Domna’s immediate family from the first-century rulers of Emesa, the powerful dynasty of Emesene women in the third century, and finally the ‘orientalisation’ in Roman social life and especially in religion as a result of the dominance of the Severan dynasty. L.’s approach is chronological rather than thematic, except for the topics of culture and cult, which called for separate treatment.

In the first chapter (pp. 6–22), L. presents the geographical situation and the cultural, religious and political history of Emesa, which she considers essential to the understanding of Domna’s background. It is an ambitious attempt to shed some light on Domna’s Syrian roots, but the overwhelming amount of information which L. has put in this chapter may cause confusion and distract the reader’s attention from the persona of Domna. The second chapter (pp. 23–34) deals with Domna’s marriage to Septimius Severus. L. discusses the background and career of Domna’s husband until the death of Commodus and tries to clarify Severus’ motives in taking Domna as his second wife. Chapter 3 (pp. 35–56) is about Domna’s travels to the East and West, and reports on the situation from the death of Commodus until the Ludi Saeculares in 204, when Severus returned to Rome after he had defeated all his rivals. The next chapter (pp. 57–73) starts with a discussion of the position of Roman empresses in general, and continues with an account of Domna’s titulature, coins and building activities, and her role in the dynastic aspect of Severus’ legitimation policy. L. considers that it is difficult to estimate the actual influence of an empress on politics: the sources do not contribute much to solving this problem, since the influence of empresses was mainly exerted in the private sphere. According to L., Domna’s influence is best seen in the traditional female role of supporting relatives and friends in their official careers. Moreover, she argues that Domna might have played a more active role in the downfall of the powerful praetorian prefect Plautianus. The fifth chapter (pp. 74–86) is devoted to Plautianus’ rise and fall, and to the events after his death in 205. This chapter also deals with Severus’ concern for his succession and his attempt to create a stable dynasty, with the expedition to Britannia, and with Severus’ death in 211. In the sixth chapter (pp. 87–106), L. describes how Caracalla killed his younger brother Geta after less than a year of joint rule, and continued to reign as sole ruler. As the sources are silent on the subject, L. speculates on how Domna might have experienced these events and on what her exact role during the reign of Caracalla might have been. The chapter ends with the death of Domna, only a few months after Caracalla was murdered in 217. Chapter 7 (pp. 107–23) focusses on Domna’s cultural activities, especially her friendship with the sophist Philostratus and...
her so-called ‘circle’. It mainly consists of an overview of what has been written on this subject by Bowersock, Flinterman and Hemelrijk. In the eighth chapter (pp. 124–44), L. discusses to what extent Domna and her dynasty can be considered responsible for an ‘orientalisation’ in Roman religion that took place in the third century A.D. On the basis of the source material she concludes that Domna and Severus were rather conventional in following the religious tradition, and that actual changes in the Roman pantheon seemed to have taken place only under Elagabalus. The topics of the final chapter (pp. 145–63) are Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, the role of the Emesene women during their reigns, and the role of Syria and Emesa during the crisis of the third century.

L. ends her book with a twofold conclusion. In the first place, Domna’s power depended first on her husband, and later on her eldest son. In honouring her, they both focussed mainly on her role as a mother figure. Secondly, Domna was important in focussing the loyalties of the armies and especially the eastern part of the Empire, and her effect on internal politics was limited.

On the whole, L. describes the Severan era in a clear way and her study is very pleasant reading. Yet her aim of gaining an insight into Domna’s personality and her role in politics does not live up to its promise, mainly because of want of evidence. The sources, especially the historians, focus on Severus and Caracalla and are less concerned with Domna; L. is forced to concentrate more on the husband and the son, and to search for female parallels in earlier periods (mainly Livia, Agrippina the Younger and Faustina the Younger). Most of L.’s conclusions coincide with previous literature on the subject, especially A.R. Birley in his revised study of Septimius Severus published in 1988. Furthermore, although L. acknowledges in the Introduction that she has to cope with the bias of ancient historians and the flattery of contemporary official documents, in several cases she presents the reports of the historians as truth without further caution.

However, with the additional family trees, maps and chronological outline, this book achieves its main goal of offering an accessible introduction to the life and historical context of Domna. For all those interested in the Severan emperors but unacquainted with this period in Roman history, L.’s study is a valuable contribution.

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PAPERS BY DE STE. CROIX

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As one who as a student (nearly forty years ago) was privileged to sample Geoffrey De Ste. Croix’s immense store of learning and argument on early Christian topics, this reviewer – along with many other pupils and colleagues – was aware that he had very much more material to hand in preparation for future publications than had ever

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