Kenneth G. Holum. *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity.*

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The subject of Kenneth Hokum's study in Theodosean Empresses, *Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, is the development of the major creative impulse which produced the Byzantine notion of basileia (imperial dominion) and through it the European ideology of sacral kingship. The study examines assumptions about imperial power in a critical and anxious period of Late Antiquity (379-455), when Theodosius the Great, his sons and grandsons reigned. At that time the traditional gods that had permeated the world, suffusing it with comfort and order, were gone. New crises, such as the Huns' sack of Rome in August 410, resulted in the main visible link to the past being lost, and with it the power for the past to inspire a secure future. In the context, basileia was a dynastic response to the crises of the age (p. 4). Hokum suggests a previously unsuspected origin of basileia: the dynastic proclivities of Theodosius the Great and their manifestation in the careers of Theodosian empresses who reigned in the East (p. 3). Theodosius I "believed that his personal qualities and those of his kin, not abstract principles of laws and ideology, would be strengthened to preserve the state. He knew instinctively that the power he held could best be made effective through the concrete channels of friendship and blood." The dynastic impulse led naturally to the enhancement of imperial women: Flaccilla, Eudoxia, Pulcheria and Eudocia. Through the careers of three generations of these four imperial women a historian can trace a profound development: How these women achieved authentic imperial dominion (p. 3).

Hokum begins his study with an anecdote which culminates with a line from a missive of the Western Emperor Valentinian to Attila the Hun: "'Honor is promised to another...and cannot marry you. Nor does she have any claim to the scepter, for the rule of the Roman Empire belongs not to females but to men (p. 1)." Hokum's book explores this patriarchal gender symbol, the scepter of empire, and its meaning in Honoris Justa's case in 434. He begins with questions her case raised for the western empire in terms of women sharing rule of the empire by examining the meaning of the "scepter" she had forfeited. Hokum uses numismatic as well as textual evidence to examine three assumptions he believes will clarify the Honoris episode and the careers of the Theodosian empresses: a) The Roman Empire in its Late Antique version was more than a juristic and constitutional phenomenon. The emperor's power depended less on his ability to issue commands (which no woman could share) and more on his subjects' willingness to obey. b) The government developed a set of ideas about
imperial power and invited response to its ideology through the channel of official propaganda. Gender presented no barrier to the participation of women. e) Creating consent was an act of sovereignty and could not be accomplished by administration or law.

Holm tries to answer the question Gerda Lerner puts to us in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, i.e., what would our subject of historical study look like if women were central to the age? (p. 228). He explores the social derivation of authority by showing how the dynastic impulses provided and context for the enhancement of the position of imperial women. In doing so, Holm demonstrates Claude Meillassoux's thesis concerning women's value being located in their reproductive capacity. In the Theodosian setting, the empresses seized on the value of their reproductive capacity in order to enhance the status that was conferred upon them, through the manipulation of the rich symbols of the dynasty and Christianity.

Flaccilla, wife to Theodosius the First, shared *basileia* and *arche* (office) with her husband. She made use of her prodigious fertility (*philandria*) and piety (*eusebia*) to have the title of Augusta conferred upon her. Flaccilla, the physical mother, transformed herself into a titular goddess in such a striking way that her "new rank must have impressed contemporaries as a dramatic innovation as reversion to a prestigious Constantinian practice"— Constantine's mother Helena had been celebrated both for her pious deeds and "for the towering and wonderful plant that sprang from her" (p. 31).

Eudoxia, wife to Arcadius, also exemplified piety and fertility. She took the image and distinction of Flaccilla and parlayed them into power she could use (p. 48). She produced Theodosius II and a great number of daughters, to the extent that Holm characterizes her fecundity as "straining physiological limits" (p. 54). Among her daughters, Pulcheria, named for her husband's dead sister, would reign next as empress.

Pulcheria's case is a particularly interesting one. Sister to the emperor and mightily ambitious in political terms, she has enormous power over her rather diffident brother, as well as over potent ecclesiastics. As long as her brother remained unmarried, and she herself remained a virgin, she would hold dominion. Though she could not forestall the first condition in the face of political forces who set Eudocia in her brother's path, she did retain her virginity and made it an institution. In Leaner's terms, Pulcheria was one of those "[h]eterosexual feminists...[who] have throughout the ages, drawn strength from...chosen celibacy" (*The Creation of Patriarchy*, p.227). By means of a complex identification she denied herself physical maternity in order to recreate herself as the Virgin Mother of Christ, and eventually to achieve sainthood (p. 140). "If she, like other virgins, forfeited the traditional advantages of childbearing, she did so only to repeat mystically and even more glorious female function [p. 141]. As Atticus, Bishop of Constantinople, put it, she would receive the king of the universe in..."
her womb." (p.140-141).

Eudocia, wife to Theodosius II, came to her role of empress as a newly converted pagan steeped in Hellenistic culture rather than Christian symbology. She achieved the role of Christian mother of daughters who undertook first a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and later repaired there permanently in circumstances that seems to indicate that Pulcheria had won influence back over her brother and had insisted on ruling with him. It is of interest to note that a charming folk legend provides another, romantic motive for Eudocia’s departure with her husband’s master of offices, Paulinus.

How did these women become nearly the equals of men in the dynastic family? By taking a look at what kinds of power the empresses had in the theory of organizational frameworks, one can arrive at the following assessments. Structurally, they were analogues to the emperors and shared arche (office), and enabled the physical creation of heirs to the dynasty. Politically, the empresses exerted enormous power via the welter of virulent infighting involving the ecclesiastics who were entangled in rival alliances over conflicting heresies and loyalties. Through manipulation if the ecclesiastics the empresses delivered allies, secured support, and took part in multiple, fluid coalitions, as conditions warranted. In terms of the human resource model, the empresses provided beneficence to "the least of these", and were thereby instrumental in the symbolic realm. The empress-mother looked to the well-being of all and the empire itself. Through her contact with holy men living and dead (via the adventum of relics of patron saints), These empresses achieved a sacral quality. By overcoming the defects of Eve and becoming the New Eve, they rejected the secondary position women had occupied in Christian society and transformed themselves into living goddesses, into Augustas.

Holum’s thesis of the origin of basileia is a convincing one and aptly demonstrates the fruitfulness of setting aside traditional assumptions about gender and power when undertaking an analysis. In searching for the origins of this particular phenomenon, he looks beyond the emperors in this era. In this case, he believes that traditionally too much stock was put in the "Roman genius in administration" and not enough on sovereignty and the creation of consent (p. 4). From the discrepancy of clue he finds in Honoris’s case, i.e. the denial of "the scepter of empire" to her, he builds a convincing case for active female participation in the dynasty.

Holum depicts the vast panorama of the eastern empire and narrates with enormous specificity the detail of day-to-day events. The easier is confronted with an overwhelming cast of characters who act in intensely political ways. The documentation is extensive and includes contemporary and modern sources. The account he develops is impressive given that the textual evidence is limited by the fact that empresses could not issue commands or decrees. Problems with the investigation are minor and include the sin of attribution, e.g., "He knew
instinctively..." (p. 3), and the striking inclusion of folksy images such as, "he never bounced on his knee a potent intimacy a grandson" (p. 49). This is an impressively scholarly text that translates overlooked dimensions of a well-investigated world. It would have been even better if Hokum had not so assiduously kept the emperors off-stage. As it is written, the book reads like one half of a fascinating conversation.

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This is a global history of the decline in eradication of human bondage. Most of Ziskind's book traces the legislative acts and royal decrees emancipating slaves. It is much needed history in the literature on slavery. Ziskind has written it in an excellent narrative style. The following is a characteristic paragraph of the book.

In the ups and downs of battle, Toussaint L'Overture proved himself to be a skillful strategist and a charismatic leader. On August 29, 1793, he circulated a proclamation:
'I am Toussaint L'Overture. My name has perhaps become known to you. I am bent on vengeance. I desire the establishment of Liberty and Equality in St. Domingue. I strive to bring them into being. Unite with us, brothers, and fight with us in the common cause.' He trained his volunteers in rudimentary tactics, drill, weapons and discipline. Battle victories came, but the cost were great as the British brought in more and more troops. Riggaud's mulattos overcame French forces and imprisoned the French Governor, Leveaux. Toussaint, through secret maneuvers had Leveaux released and in gratitude the Governor made Toussaint the Lieutenant Governor of St. Domingue. (p. 107)

As the book title indicates, Ziskind gives his narrative a legal framework, as well as a chronological one. This the earliest emancipation act he discusses is the of King Hammurabi, in Babylon, around 2000 B.C. Hammurabi's code had several laws that require giving freedom to a slave of improving a slave's status.

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