

## II. The Titulature of Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea: Two Notes

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### I

Julia Soaemias has long been included in the general opprobrium visited upon her son, Elagabalus; whatever virtues or abilities which she possessed (or may have possessed) are overwhelmed by the description of the vices of herself and the emperor. The picture of her customarily presented reads something like this: "... beautiful, voluptuous, religious, neurotic, ... a woman with few, if any, political aspirations, tendencies, or abilities."<sup>1</sup> Again, we are told: "Die Nachricht, dass Soaemias gleich ihrer Schwester Mamaea in ihrer Jugend Beziehungen zu Caracalla gepflogen habe, deren Frucht Elagabal sei, was Maesa ... den Soldaten erzählt, ist freilich kaum zu glauben, wenn auch der Hofklatsch die Sache als ganz sicher hinstellte (Hist. aug. Hel. 2,1). Dass sie sich im übrigen bei Hofe skandalös benahm (Hist. aug. a.O. und 18,2: *probrosissima mulier et digna filio*), haben wir keinen Grund zu bezweifeln."<sup>2</sup> Since the source of both statements is the same, the notorious *Historia Augusta*,<sup>3</sup> to reject one and accept the other without further evidence seems unfair, particularly when the retention involves expressions such as *cum ipsa meretricio more vivens in aula omnia turpia exerceret* (2.1) and that of 18.2.

The rank of Soaemias must always have suffered in comparison with that of her masterful mother Maesa, whose money and influence, after all, had been chiefly responsible for the acceptance by the eastern legions of Elagabalus as emperor<sup>4</sup>; Soaemias' lone

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus* (London 1911) 40.

<sup>2</sup> G. Herzog, *RE* 10.1 (1919) 950.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the value and reliability of the *Life of Elagabalus*, see O. F. Butler, "Studies in the Life of Heliogabalus," in *Roman History and Mythology*, ed. by H. A. Sanders (New York 1910) 1-169, and K. Hönn, *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den Viten des Heliogabalus und des Severus Alexander* (Leipzig 1910).

<sup>4</sup> Herzog (above, note 2) 941.

contribution, it seems, was to accept the slander, if false, or the dishonor, if true, of having had intercourse with Caracalla about a decade and a half before, while her husband, who reached high levels of service under Septimius Severus, was advancing in importance and favor.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, she was quite as active as Maesa in the actual battle against the troops of Macrinus, encouraging bravery by her own example.<sup>6</sup>

It has been said that "The inscription MATER AUG, so common on the coins of Domna and Mamaea, is never found on those of Soaemias."<sup>7</sup> This is true; yet the number of different coin types of Soaemias that we have barely exceeds a dozen<sup>8</sup>; those of the others are many times more numerous.<sup>9</sup> It is not unlikely that the lack of evidence from numismatic sources can be blamed upon the chances of survival, for inscriptional material proves she was not inferior to her aunt, Domna, or her sister, Mamaea, in regard to this important appellation.<sup>10</sup>

Elagabalus has been taken to task by the author of the life in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae* for being the first emperor to introduce women into the senate, and to permit them to take part in the deliberations of that body.<sup>11</sup> Maesa's share in these

<sup>5</sup> Her husband was Sextus Varius Marcellus, whose offices included *procurator aquarum* and *legatus legionis iii Augustae praeses provinciae Numidia* (*CIL* x. 6569=*ILS* 478; *CIL* xv. 7326). The date of his death is uncertain; see Butler (above, note 3) 41, *PIR* 3 (1898) 386, no. 192, Klass, *RE* 8A (1958) 407-10.

<sup>6</sup> Dio Cassius 78.38.4 (Loeb ed., 79.38.4). But cf. E. Kornemann, *Grosse Frauen des Altertums*<sup>4</sup> (Wiesbaden 1952) 275: "Aber Maesa und Soaemias sprangen selbst vom Wagen und hielten zusammen mit dem jugendlichen Prinzen die Fliehenden unter Tränen zurück. Nur Maesa hat sich also den Ehrentitel 'Mutter des Feldlagers' in der Schlacht wirklich verdient." But Kornemann does not give any evidence for the last statement.

<sup>7</sup> Butler (above, note 3) 40, note 4; see also Herzog (above, note 2) 949. For a most inadequate survey of the coins relating to Soaemias see V. Scrinari, "Le Donne dei Severi nella monetazione dell' epoca," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 75 (1953-55) 130.

<sup>8</sup> H. Mattingly, E. A. Sydenham, and C. H. V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* 4.2 (London 1938), nos. 207, 234-48, 400-408 under "Elagabalus."

<sup>9</sup> See Mattingly *et al.* (above, note 8) 4.1 (London 1936) and 4.2, under "Domna" and "Mamaea."

<sup>10</sup> *CIL* vii.2564=*ILS* 470, mentioned by Herzog (above, note 2) 949; *AEpigr.* 1948, 212; 1936, 39. *AEpigr.* 1956, 144 is discussed below.

<sup>11</sup> *SHA Elag.* 4.1-2: "Deinde ubi primum diem senatus habuit, matrem suam in senatum rogari iussit. quae cum venisset, vocata ad consulum subsellia scribendo adfuit, id est senatus consulti conficiendi testis, solusque omnium imperatorum fuit, sub quo mulier quasi clarissima loco viri senatum ingressa est." 12.3: "... cum ingressus est vel Castra vel Curiam, aviam suam, Variam nomine, de qua superius

deliberations may well have been recognized by the title *mater senatus*,<sup>12</sup> but it has never been suggested that her daughter was thus equally honored.

A recently published inscription can perhaps give us a clue. Its text reads as follows<sup>13</sup>:

Rum Numini [praese]nti Veneri C[ae]lesti  
iussu Imp. Caes. M. Aureli An]tonini [Pii F]elicit Aug PP [Iu]liae  
Aug. Matri Au[g et castr  
et senatus et totius do]mus divin[ae nov]um templum exstruxit  
Asellin  
Idemetri                      ac sibi datum ab Appio Cla[udio]

Since the emperor is either Caracalla or Elagabalus, the Julia must be Domna or Soaemias. If Domna, several questions must be asked. Why is the word *patriae* absent from her titles, for *mater castrorum et senatus et patriae* is by far the most common form of her titulature,<sup>14</sup> at least after the death of her husband, if not, indeed, earlier?<sup>15</sup> Even granted that exceptions do occur, who should properly be included in *tota domus divina* during the period from 212 to 217? Geta and Plautilla had been murdered, and dedications of and to Caracalla seem not to have included the other Julias or the children of Soaemias and Mamaea.<sup>16</sup> If,

dictum est, secum induxit, ut eius auctoritate honestior fieret, quia per se non poterat; nec ante eum, quod iam diximus, senatum mulier ingressa est ita, ut ad scribendum rogaretur et sententiam diceret."

<sup>12</sup> *CIL* viii.2564=*ILS* 470; cf. Kornemann (above, note 6) 277 and J. Babelon, *Impératrices syriennes* (Paris 1957) 221.

<sup>13</sup> *AEpigr.* 1956,144. The inscription was published by A. de Franciscis, *Not. degli scavi* 79 (1954) 285-87. I am not aware of any disagreement over the restorations as far as space goes. They certainly make sense and fit the formulae of the early third century.

<sup>14</sup> See M. G. Williams, "Studies in the Lives of Roman Empresses: I. Julia Domna," *AJA* 6 (1902) 52, 285; H. Dessau, *ILS* iii.1, page 288; and the indices to *CIL*, particularly to vol. viii.

<sup>15</sup> See H. W. Benario, "Julia Domna—Mater Senatus et Patriae," *Phoenix* 12 (1958) 67-70.

<sup>16</sup> Williams (above, note 14) 287 says that "The 'divine house' now included only the Emperor and Julia Domna." It has, however, been argued that Maesa and her daughters were very closely connected with the imperial court during Severus' lifetime. They *could* thus have been anonymously included in official documents under *tota domus divina*. This is the view of R. Mowat, "Le titre d'Augusta conféré à Maesa, à Soaemias, et à Mammée par Septime Sévère à propos de moules monétaires trouvés en Égypte," *Rev.Num.*, 4th ser., 12 (1908) 22: "Pour me résumer les quatres Julies syriennes, Domna, Maesa, Soaemias et Mamaea ont bénéficié du statut privilégié des princesses, respectivement en leur qualité d'épouse, de belle-sœur et de nièces de

nevertheless, we grant their inclusion after all, why is Venus Caelestis the divinity to whom the dedication is made in the name of Domna as well as her son?<sup>17</sup> The relationship of Domna to Venus Caelestis is very rare<sup>18</sup>; Soaemias, on the other hand, fits in much more easily. We know from the coins that the divinity with whom she is most closely connected is Venus Caelestis<sup>19</sup>; the *domus divina* would easily embrace Maesa, Mamaea, and the latter's son, Alexander<sup>20</sup>; and the presence of *senatus* may well indicate that there is some truth in the *Historia's* statement that she was present at deliberations of the senate.<sup>21</sup> It appears not unlikely, then, that we must expand the traditional

Septime Sévère, ces trois dernières ayant officiellement fait partie de la famille impériale longtemps avant la naissance d'Elagabale et de Sévère Alexandre." E. Linkomies, "Die Syrerinnen im Kaiserpalast Roms," *Studia Orientalia* 11.5 (Helsingfors 1945) 6, would at least eliminate Mamaea from such a close relationship: "Sie (Maesa) und ihre älteste Tochter Iulia Soaemias wurden so eng zu der Kaiserfamilie gerechnet, dass in den . . . Akten der Säkulargefeier vom Jahr 204 nicht nur Soaemias als erste der in der Prozession vorgehenden Frauen des Ritterstandes erwähnt wird sondern auch in dem Säkulargedicht . . . ganz deutlich auf ihre soeben geschehene Niederkunft hingewiesen wird. Denn keine andere Deutung gestatten die allerdings fragmentarischen Worte des Gedichtes: *Lucina . . . quae Romam nuper caelo*." He refers this last to the birth of Elagabalus. Babelon (above, note 12) 243 follows Mowat closely in including all three in the special favor of Severus, perhaps with the title of *Augusta*.

<sup>17</sup> There was a cult of Venus Caelestis at Puteoli, where this inscription was found (cf. *CIL* x.1596). Cf. de Franciscis (above, note 13) 285–86.

<sup>18</sup> She is once equated with the Carthaginian goddess Caelestis—*CIL* XIII. 6671: "[Iuliae Augustae] Caelesti deae [matri imperato]ris Caesaris [M. Aureli Anton]ini pii felicitis [Augusti Parth]ici maximi [Britannici maxi]mi Germanici [maximi item]que senatus patri[ae et castror]um . . ." Cf. Herzog (above, note 2) 929. But this is the Virgo Caelestis, not Venus Caelestis; see G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1912) 373 ff., particularly 374, notes 5 and 7. Williams (above, note 14) 300 ff., especially 303, has no mention of Venus Caelestis; but for two coins with this legend, see Mattingly *et al.* (above, note 8) 4.1, s.v. "Domna," 173, nos. 604, 605.

<sup>19</sup> Mattingly *et al.* (above, note 8); Herzog (above, note 2) 949. It is granted here that, as was indicated above (10), the number of coins is limited. The close relationship of Soaemias with Caelestis perhaps stems from the importance of the Carthaginian divinity in the "career" of the god Elagabalus, to whom the latter was "married" by the emperor; see Wissowa (above, note 18) 375: "Welches Ansehen die Göttin zur Zeit des Kaisers Elagabal genoss, beweist die Tatsache, dass er gerade sie für würdig erachtete, die Gemahlin des Sonnengottes von Emesa zu werden, und darum ihr aus dem karthagischen Mutterheiligtume herbeigeholtes Bild in der feierlichen Form des *ἱερός γάμος* mit seinem Gotte vermählen liess."

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *AEpigr.* 1954,28: "Aug Aviae [Aug]usti nostri et////////// Augustae [tot]iusque domus divinae [A]urelius Titus M. Aureli." Maesa, of course, is the *avia*, and slight traces of Soaemias' name are readable in the erasure before *Augustae*.

<sup>21</sup> *Mater castrorum* she unquestionably was: Herzog (above, note 2) 949. Cf. also Kornemann (above, note 6) 277: "Sie (Maesa and Soaemias) erschienen ganz unrömisch im Senat und als 'Mütter des Feldlagers' auch in der Prätorianer-Kaserne."

titulature of Soaemias to include the impressive element of *mater senatus*, and this may well mean that her political influence was not quite as negligible as it has been painted.<sup>22</sup>

## II

Julia Mamaea does not present problems similar to those which face us concerning her sister. She has long since been the subject of a careful study<sup>23</sup> and, in even more than a half century, little new evidence has come to hand. On one point, however, it seems that a correction may be made; this deals with the date of her acquisition of the title *Augusta*.

On the basis of a statement of Zonaras, *ὁς* (Alexander) *αὐτίκα τὴν οἰκείαν μητέρα Μαμαίαν Αὐγούστην ἀνέῴπεν* (12. 15), there has been almost unanimous agreement, as far as I have seen, that she did not receive the title *Augusta* until her son had become emperor.<sup>24</sup> The only disagreement seems to be that of Mowat,<sup>25</sup> but his argument perhaps does no more than claim a close relationship of Mamaea, her mother, and her sister to the imperial household of Septimius Severus; it does not insist that the official title of *Augusta* was granted to any one of the three before her respective rise to the height of power.

Zonaras, although explicit, is certainly not the surest source for any statement; though his excerpting of Dio Cassius promises particularly well for the reign of Alexander Severus,<sup>26</sup> the very passage of about a millennium invites caution. We cannot be certain what, if any, inaccuracies are present here. Indeed, an

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *SHA Elag.* 4.3–4 on the *senaculum mulierum*, and, discussing this, Butler (above, note 3) 127: "It is entirely possible that it might have suited Heliogabalus to give his mother this quasi-political function by way of offset for her lack of participation in the government." A rare exception is A. Momigliano, *OCD* 470, s.v. "Julia (6) Soaemias Bassiana": "... she ... took part in political life."

<sup>23</sup> M. G. Williams, "Studies in the Lives of Roman Empresses: II. Julia Mamaea," in *Roman Historical Studies and Institutions*, ed. by H. A. Sanders (New York 1904) 67–100.

<sup>24</sup> To cite a few: Williams (above, note 23) 71, 93–4; P. S. Wild, "Two Julias," *CJ* 13 (1917–18) 22; Herzog (above, note 2) 917; W. Ensslin, *CAH* 12 (1939) 58; Kornemann (above, note 6) 280.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in note 16; he is followed by Babelon (above, note 12) 243: "Elle est l'*Augusta*—peut-être depuis le règne de Septime Sévère, où elle aurait reçu cette dignité en même temps que Maesa et Soaemias—..."

<sup>26</sup> E. Schwartz, *RE* 3 (1899) 1684, 1720–21; A. H. McDonald, *OCD* 282, s.v. "Dio (2) Cassius."

inscription which has been generally ignored suggests that, on this point, Zonaras is wrong<sup>27</sup>:

[M. Aurelium An]toninu[m August]um Pi[um Felicem et Iuliam Soae]miadem [et Iuliam] Mama[eam Augustas Aris]taenetu[s et . . . s. lib. pr[occ].

The crucial word, of course, is *Augustas*, and it must be granted at the beginning of our discussion that no part of this word survives and that we are basing our conclusion upon a restoration. Yet it seems a plausible, and even a necessary, restoration. The names of the emperor, Soaemias, and Mamaea are indisputable, and surely the two women must have had a title. *Augusta* seems to be the only one which they could have had in common, since Mamaea was, officially, no more than the emperor's aunt.

Soaemias unquestionably had her official title which, at the minimum, is *Augusta*; on the basis of the available inscriptions dealing with her, which are to be dated after the accession of her son, this is incontrovertible, for she never appears without it.<sup>28</sup> And it is obvious that the inscription was composed before Alexander Severus became emperor early in 222. His mother, then, appears to have had one of the attributes of empress before becoming empress.

<sup>27</sup> *AEpigr.* 1933,281; first published by T. Wiegand, "Zweiter Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Pergamon 1928-32: Das Asklepieion," *Abhand. preuss. Akad. d. Wissen., phil.-hist. Kl.*, 5 (Berlin 1932) 54. The restorations are by W. Weber.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Herzog (above, note 2) 949.