

Whose Momma? Julia Domna as Mater Castrorum in Imperial Ideology

The title *Mater Castrorum* seems to say it all: Julia Domna must have had a particularly close relationship with the military. This is a typical scholarly explanation of the title. Most recently, Barbara Levick writes, “The specific meaning of the title is obvious: the troops were under the protection of the empress, and she could expect their protection in return; more generally, it expressed the symbiotic relationship between dynasty and army.” (2007)

This paper will argue, however, that there is more behind the title than meets the eye, and curiously, there is very little evidence for close relationship between Julia Domna and the military. It will examine the specific circumstances under which Julia Domna received the title which are in fact largely unknown. It will then show how scholars have relied upon the circumstances of Faustina Minor receiving the title to explain Julia Domna’s title. A quick glance at how the titles were employed by each dynasty will reveal some very different propagandistic strategies. Faustina’s title was little employed beyond a small issue of coins in bronze and silver. There appear to be no surviving inscriptions for Faustina that name her as *Mater Castrorum*, either by the military or the imperial house. By contrast, Julia Domna is named *Mater Castrorum* in 90% of her roughly 700 surviving inscriptions, the most common title after *Augusta*. Her issues were minted in Rome in all three metals.

The paper will next examine the epigraphic and numismatic evidence to show that very few of Julia Domna’s inscriptions that name her as *Mater Castrorum* were erected by the military, only seven, less than one percent. Furthermore, an analysis of hoards in Gaul, Germany and Britain found in military contexts show that Julia Domna’s *Mater Castrorum* coinage was not distributed among the soldiers. This evidence is supported by the lack of *Mater Castrorum* types minted by traveling military mints designed to pay troops campaigning with Severus in the East. It seems that Julia Domna was not advertised as *Mater Castrorum* to the military, and that the military seemed little interested in the empress.

Why advertise Julia Domna as *Mater Castrorum* when she appeared not to have a close relationship with the military? I will suggest that the title was employed by the Severan administration not to flatter the military, but to suggest to all others, especially the senate and potential rivals, that the military had a so close a connection with Severus that it even loved his wife. Such closeness discouraged dissent from all quarters. This phenomenon is an exciting finding for scholars working on imperial relations. The use of Julia Domna’s supposed relationship with the military as a device to coerce other populations into obedience is a sophisticated propaganda tool. It means that we need to revise our vision of imperial relationships from being an exclusive conversation between the administration and a particular population about their relationship to one in which other populations can be used to the administration’s advantage.

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