

Two-Faced Faustina: The Contrasting Images of Faustina the Younger

Very little is known about most Roman imperial women of the second century AD. Perhaps the best-recorded life of any second century empress is that of Faustina the Younger. As daughter of emperor Antoninus Pius and Faustina the Elder, wife of emperor Marcus Aurelius, and mother of emperor Commodus, Faustina the Younger was, by far, the most “imperial” of all the empresses during this period. And yet, what little literary evidence we have about her comes from biographies (the less-than-historically accurate *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (*HA*)) and histories (by Cassius Dio) concerning the men she was related to, and not the empress herself. This literary evidence depicts her as a power-hungry wife who was conniving, unfaithful and even resorted to murder. In contrast, surviving epigraphic evidence extols her virtues as the perfect wife and mother, to her family and the empire.

This study shows why each type of evidence (literary vs. epigraphic) portrays Faustina the Younger in a certain manner, and what audience each type of evidence was originally intended to reach. The agenda of the authors of the literary evidence is made extremely obvious when it is understood that empresses by this time had surpassed male senators in rank and potentially influence, and were second in the empire only to their husband. Likewise, the agenda of the epigraphic evidence is also very evident when it is considered that all coins and titles were issued and granted by the imperial family and the senate, both of which were controlled by the emperor.

Finally, an attempt is made to determine what the actual life and personage of Faustina the Younger was like using the contradictory literary and epigraphic evidence, as well as modern interpretations, to find a reasonable middle ground. It will also be shown that the contradictory evidence is not limited to Faustina the Younger, but dates back to the beginning of the imperial period, and continues on long after Faustina’s death.