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Remember the LADIES

The empresses of Rome's Severan Dynasty are immortalized on coinage bearing their portraits.

THE FIVE EMPERORS of Rome's Severan Dynasty (A.D. 193-235) are generally well known, but the nine Severan empresses are largely unfamiliar, hidden in the shadows of history.

The rulers were indeed a colorful lot: Septimius Severus was one of Rome's greatest generals; his elder son, Caracalla, was a psychopath who ordered the murder of his younger brother, Geta; Elagabalus worked as a male prostitute; and Severus Alexander was murdered by his own troops. While the empresses might have been less flamboyant than their male counterparts, the dynasty would not have lasted as long as it did if not for the imperial women who struggled to keep the Roman ship of state on course.

Julia Domna: Lovely & Wise

Julia Domna, the first Severan empress, was born about A.D. 170 in Syria. Famous for her beauty, intelligence and great learning, she was known as "Julia the Philosopher" and "Julia the Wise." She mar-

ried Septimius Severus in 187, when she was about 17 and he was a 42-year-old widower in need of a new wife. She was proclaimed empress when Severus became emperor in 193, and the following year she received the right to have coins struck in her name.

Julia Domna accompanied Severus on his military campaigns, and in 195 she was given the title *Mater Castrorum* ("Mother of the Camp") in recognition of her willingness to endure life on the march. She ably advised Severus in all areas of government. She also maintained a literary salon in Rome and patronized many great thinkers, some of whom would not be known today were it not for her support.

The imperial mints struck millions of coins in her name

◀ **THIS JULIA DOMNA** *denarius* was struck in A.D. 198 when she was empress under Septimius Severus. It was produced at the Laodicea ad Mare mint.

Actual Size: 17.5mm



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JULIA DOMNA is older in this denarius struck under Caracalla in c. A.D. 215-17 in Rome (top, left). She is portrayed as a goddess on denarii struck under Elagabalus in A.D. 218 (top, right) and Severus Alexander in A.D. 222. The family portrait at the left depicts Julia Domna, Septimius Severus and their son Caracalla. (After murdering Geta, Caracalla ordered his brother's face be removed from all official portraits.) The mosaic in the background is from the Baths of Caracalla, built in A.D. 215-17 by Septimius Severus and Caracalla.

Actual Size: 18mm & 20mm

during Severus' reign. The obverse of her *denarius* typically portrays her draped bust with a braided hairstyle popular at the time. The obverse inscription always reads IVLIA DOMNA AVG ("Empress Julia Domna") or IVLIA AUGUSTA ("Empress Julia"). The reverse design usually features a goddess or a figure personifying a Roman virtue or sentiment, such as Hilartitas ("Rejoicing").

ricide, Julia Domna tried to help Caracalla rule well. If he achieved any measure of success during his reign, it was entirely because of her work. The Roman mints continued to issue coins in Julia Domna's name during Caracalla's rule. The obverse portrait on these denarii resembles the one used under Severus, but the empress looks older and a bit more haggard. The obverse inscription reads IVLIA PIA FELIX AVG ("Faithful Happy Empress Julia"). She was indeed faithful in her service to Rome and her family, but she probably was not very happy. The reverses continued to feature goddesses or personifications of Roman virtues or sentiments; the goddess Venus Genitrix ("Venus the Mother") was a favorite.

Caracalla died with his pants down. On April 8, 217, while marching to invade Parthia, he stopped by the side of the road to relieve himself and was stabbed to death. Julia Domna was in Antioch managing imperial correspondence when she learned of his assassination. Already suffering from breast cancer, she starved herself to death.

Julia Domna's numismatic legacy did not end with her death. The Roman

JULIA DOMNA was with her husband when he died in 211 during his final campaign in Britain. She retained her title as empress and returned to Rome with her sons, who were supposed to reign together. Unfortunately, the young rulers hated each other. On December 26, 211, Caracalla ordered his guards to kill Geta, who fled to their mother, crying for help.

► **DENARII SHOWING PLAUTILLA** as empress were struck in Rome under the joint reign of Septimius Severus and Caracalla.

Actual Size: 20mm

Critically injured, he died in her arms. Despite her younger son's frat-



Senate consecrated her a goddess in 218 (thus reuniting her with her husband, who had already been a god for seven years), and coins were minted showing her divine status. One of the loveliest, issued during the reign of her great-nephew Elagabalus, portrays her as a young,

► **THIS DENARIUS** depicting Julia Maesa as empress was struck under Elagabalus, c. A.D. 202-22 in Rome. Actual Size: 19mm

veiled woman with the inscription DIVA IVLIA AVGVSTA (“Divine Empress Julia”). The reverse depicts a peacock, the sacred bird of Juno, queen of the Roman gods,

with outspread tail feathers and the inscription CONSECRATIO. The peacock symbolized immortality, based on a common belief that its flesh did not decay after death. (Apparently, no one ever bothered to put this to the test!)

Publia Fulvia Plautilla: Married to a Psychopath

The second Severan empress was Publia Fulvia Plautilla, who married Caracalla in 202 when both were about 14 years old. Her father, Gaius Fulvius Plautianus, was Septimius Severus’ closest friend and confidant. The two men arranged the marriage to unite their families. Unfortunately, Plautilla and Caracalla despised each other, and their union was doomed from the start. For his part, Caracalla promised to kill her and her father as soon as he became sole emperor.

► **JULIA SOAEMIAS** is pictured on this denarius struck under Elagabalus in A.D. 220-222 in Rome.

Actual Size: 19mm

In 205 Caracalla convinced his father that Plautianus was plotting against them. When the latter came to answer the charges, the ruler ordered

a Praetorian guardsman to kill him. Plautilla was exiled to one of the many remote, barren islands that Roman emperors kept handy for such situations. Caracalla had her strangled after his father died.

Plautilla’s denarius depicts her bust facing right, with the braided hairstyle. The obverse inscription reads PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA (“Empress Plautilla”) or some variant. The re-

verse, shown opposite, depicts Venus Victrix (“Victorious Venus”) holding an apple, a palm and a shield, with a diminutive Cupid at her feet. The motif refers to the beauty contest in which Paris, a Trojan mortal, awarded a golden apple to Aphrodite, the Greek equivalent of Venus.

Julia Maesa: Savior & Restorer

Julia Maesa, the third Severan empress, was Julia Domna’s older sister. Julia Maesa was living in Rome with her daughters, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea, at the time of Caracalla’s assassination. The new ruler, Emperor Macrinus, ordered the women to go back to Syria. Julia Maesa immediately began planning for her family’s return to power.

Julia Soaemias’ son, Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus, better known to us as Elagabalus, was the high priest of the Syrian god El-Gabal. He resembled his cousin Caracalla, and Julia Maesa and her daughter changed his name to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus—Caracalla’s official name at the time of his death—and spread a rumor that he was the former ruler’s son. Caracalla had been very popular with the soldiers, and they flocked to his “son,” proclaiming Elagabalus emperor on May 16, 218.

Macrinus led his army in battle against Elagabalus and the rebel troops on June 8. Macrinus was soundly defeated and later captured and executed. Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias both actively participated in the combat.

Elagabalus gave Julia Maesa the title Augusta Avia Augusti (“Empress, Grandmother of the Emperor”). He declared Julia Soaemias an empress as well.

Roman mints began striking coins in Julia Maesa’s name almost immediately. Her denarius portrait shows her as the strong, determined woman that she was, but with hair in looser braids than Julia Domna had favored. The obverse inscription usually reads IVLIA MAESA AVG (“Empress Julia Maesa”). The reverse again features Roman goddesses or allegorical figures, with Felicitas (“Happiness”) being a favorite. The inscription SAECVLI FELICITAS can best be translated as “happy times.”



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PHOTOS: CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP (CNGCOINS.COM)

Julia Soaemias: Like Son, Like Mother

Julia Soaemias Bassiana, the fourth Severan empress, was the older daughter of Julia Maesa. She was notorious for her bad behavior. After Caracalla was murdered, she actively spread the lie that he was the father of her son. Insofar as Caracalla was one of many men with whom Julia Soaemias was rumored to have developed a close personal relationship, it is conceivable (so to speak) that Elagabalus could have been the previous emperor's offspring.

ELAGABALUS had no interest in, nor any talent for, governing. He spent his time performing his duties as high priest of the sun god El-Gabal and exploring new depths of personal depravity, leaving his mother to handle his responsibilities as emperor. Unfortunately, unlike the other women in her family, but exactly like her son, Julia Soaemias had no real desire for good government. She made no effort to steer Elagabalus along a path that would have helped him grow into his imperial role; instead, she used her power to gratify his whims and her own unseemly cravings.

Julia Soaemias was not authorized to have coinage struck in her name until 220, and her issues are much scarcer than those of her mother. Her denarius typically portrays her facing right, surrounded by the inscription IVLIA SOAEMIAS



▲ DENARII OF JULIA PAULA as empress, struck under Elagabalus in A.D. 219-220 in Rome, are scarce.

Actual Size: 19mm

AVG ("Empress Julia Soaemias"). The reverse usually depicts Venus, and the inscription is normally a variant of VENUS CAELESTIS ("Celestial Venus"), but the goddesses Juno and Cybele occasionally appear as well.

Julia Paula: A Fortunate Escape

Elagabalus married seven times (to one woman twice), but we know the identities of only three of his wives, each of whom had coins struck in her name. We also know the name of one of his male lovers, who he referred to as his husband, the charioteer Hierocles. He was the emperor's favorite spouse, but the ruler struck no coins for him.

Elagabalus' first known wife, Cornelia Paula, belonged to one of Rome's most noble families. Julia Maesa arranged for her to marry

Elagabalus, hoping to connect him with the traditional Roman aristocracy.

Upon marriage, Cornelia Paula acquired the imperial family name "Julia" and became the fifth Severan empress. The union was celebrated with lavish games in the summer of 219.

The sporting event proved much more successful than the matrimony: the couple divorced after one year, with Elagabalus claiming that Paula was "unsuitable" to be his spouse. The real reason for the separation was Paula's refusal to participate in her husband's debauchery. She lived in quiet retirement after they parted ways.

Julia Paula's coins are scarce. While her marriage to Elagabalus lasted longer than any other, it nonetheless ended after barely a year. Her denarius' obverse typically portrays her facing right

THE DENARIUS bearing Aquilia Severa's image and name was struck in A.D. 220-22. Shown here is the House of the Vestal Virgins in Rome, where the Vestal priestesses resided.

Actual Size: 19mm



PHOTOS: CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP (CNGCOINS.COM) & GETTY IMAGES/ALEXTIMALOS

facing right with the fashionable braided hairstyle and the inscription JVLIA PAVLA AVG (“Empress Julia Paula”). The reverse usually shows Concordia (the embodiment of “Harmony”) with the inscription CONCORDIA. The earliest pieces, struck at the time of the marriage, often depict Paula and Elagabalus standing together with Concordia.

Aquilia Severa: The Virgin Bride

Aquilia Severa married Elagabalus in early 221, shortly after he divorced Julia Paula. She took on the imperial family name “Julia” and became the sixth Severan empress.

Aquilia Severa was a Vestal Virgin, one of the six priestesses who tended the sacred fire of Vesta. The marriage of a Vestal shocked Rome. Not only did the wedding violate a fundamental religious tradition, it also undermined the very foundations of the Roman state. Julia Maesa convinced her grandson that the union must end, and in the summer of 221, he divorced Aquilia Severa and wed his third wife, Annia Faustina.



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Elagabalus apparently had real feelings for Aquilia Severa—the only woman he ever seemed to genuinely care for—and within a few months, he divorced Annia Faustina and remarried Aquilia Severa. They were still together when he died about three months later.



▲ **THIS TETRADRACHM** of Aquilia Severa from the time of her second marriage to Elagabalus was struck in Alexandria in A.D. 221-22. Actual Size: 23mm

The coins of Aquilia Severa are even scarcer than those of Julia Paula. Her denarius generally depicts her bust facing right, again with braided hair, and the inscription reads IVLIA AQVILIA SEVERA AVG (“Empress Julia Aquilia Severa”).

▼ **THIS DENARIUS** of Annia Faustina as empress was struck under Elagabalus in A.D. 221 in Rome.

Not Actual Size



The reverse on most denarii shows Concordia with the inscription CONCORDIA or a close variant. Some portray Elagabalus and Severa on the reverse with the inscription CONCORDIA, but without a rendering of the symbolic figure.

No numismatic evidence exists to suggest that the mint in Rome struck coins for Aquilia Severa during her second marriage to Elagabalus. The emperor might have recognized that it was not entirely wise to issue coins in Rome itself advertising their sacrilegious union. However, coins from Alexandria do name Aquilia Severa. Dated to the fifth year of Elagabalus’ reign, which commenced August 29, 221, their issuance suggests that religious sentiment outside the capital

was less conservative. The obverse of this tetradrachm depicts Aquilia Severa facing right, with the Greek inscription ΙΟΥΛΙΑ ΑΚΟΥΛΙΑ ΚΕΥΗΠΑ ΚΕΒ (“the Revered One, Julia Aquilia Severa,” using σεβαστή [“Sebasti”]—the literal Greek translation of the Latin “Augusta”). The reverse shows the joined busts of the sun god Helios and the moon goddess Selene. The Ε at lower right represents the Greek number 5, indicating the date (the fifth year of Elagabalus’ reign in the Alexandrian calendar).

Annia Faustina: Another Fortunate Escape

Annia Aurelia Faustina, the seventh Severan empress, did not take the imperial name “Julia” when she married Elagabalus in 221. She was a great-granddaughter of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (whose birth name was Marcus Annianus Verus), and the “Annia” and “Aurelia” in her name were imperial enough.

Like Julia Paula before her, Annia Faustina was handpicked by Julia Maesa as a wife for Elagabalus. She was an eminently respectable woman, but the last thing Elagabalus wanted was “respectability,” and the pairing was doomed from the beginning. The fact that Annia Faustina was at least 20 years older than her husband

probably didn't help. The emperor ended the marriage a few months after their wedding. She retired to her estates, and, like Julia Paula, lived out her days in peace.

Her coins are extremely rare. Only five denarii are known, two of which reside in museums. All five were struck in Rome from the same pair of dies. The last denarius to cross the auction block brought a hammer price of \$190,000 in June 2014.

The obverse of Annia Faustina's denarius shows her facing right, also with braided hair and the inscription ANNIA FAVSTINA AVG. The reverse depicts Elagabalus and Annia Faustina clasping hands, with the inscription CONCORDIA.

Julia Maesa: Saving the Dynasty One More Time

Elagabalus violated every religious, political and social taboo he could, and his dissolute mother, Julia Soaemias, only encouraged his excesses. Fearing Elagabalus' activities would bring down the entire imperial family, his grandmother Julia Maesa began plotting against him. She first persuaded him to adopt Gessius Bassianus Alexianus, the son of her younger daughter, Julia Mamaea, as his heir. Julia Maesa then provoked a rebellion within the Praetorian Guard, which led to the murder of Elagabalus and Julia Soaemias on March 11, 222. Julia Maesa sacrificed her daughter and



▲ **JULIA MAESA'S** consecration denarius was struck in Rome under Severus Alexander, c. A.D. 225. Actual Size: 20mm

denarius depicts her bust facing right, with the inscription DIVA MAESA AVG ("Divine Empress Maesa"). The reverse portrays her rising to heaven on the back of a peacock (as above) or an eagle, with the inscription CONSECRATIO.

Maesa's consecration denarius is far scarcer—and much more expensive—than her lifetime issues. High-quality examples of the latter are readily obtained for less than \$200, while similar quality consecration coins usually start at around \$1,500 and even then are difficult to find.

Julia Mamaea: Brilliant Beginning, Tragic End

Julia Avita Mamaea, the younger daughter of Julia Maesa, became the eighth Severan empress when her 13-year-old son, Severus Alexander, ascended the throne in 222. As regent, she generally ruled wisely and well. She was especially popular when she "drained the swamp" of corruption that had flourished under Elagabalus.

Ancient sources universally describe Julia Mamaea as a virtuous woman who worked hard for the betterment of Severus Alexander and the empire. Her one great weakness as regent was that once she had a taste of power, she was unwilling to yield it to her son, who remained subordinate to her for his entire life. A more serious failure was that she did not adequately prepare him for his role as commander of the Roman armies.

What he could not win by force of arms, Severus Alexander tried to gain through diplomacy. This did not sit well with his troops, who were eager for battle (and the plunder it could bring). On March 19, 235, while he and his mother were campaigning in Germany, his soldiers murdered them. The Severan Dynasty died with them.

Julia Mamaea was empress for 13 years, and her coinage is second in scope only to that of Julia Domna. Her denarius typically depicts her bust facing right, but the braided hairstyle is modified to more closely resemble tight curls. The obverse inscription reads IVLIA MAMAEA AVG or IVLIA MAMAEA AVGVSTA ("Empress Julia Mamaea"). The reverse designs feature goddesses or personifi-



▲ **EMPERESS JULIA MAMAEA** is shown on this denarius, struck under Severus Alexander in A.D. 226 in Rome. Actual Size: 19mm

grandson for the good of the state and the preservation of the Severan Dynasty. The Praetorians proclaimed Alexianus, who had earlier changed his name to Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, the new emperor.

Her work done, and the imperial throne securely in the hands of her second daughter and second grandson, the elderly Maesa faded into the background. We do not know for certain if Severus Alexander struck any coins in her name before she died, but he did issue pieces commemorating her deification in 225. The obverse of the consecration

cations of Roman virtues or sentiments. The example illustrated here names and depicts Vesta, goddess of the hearth. Vesta often appeared on Roman coins, but one might wonder if Julia Mamaea chose to depict this particular sacred figure as often as she did because of Elagabalus' scandalous marriages to a Vestal Virgin.

Sallustia Orbiana: Unlucky in Love

Seia Herennia Sallustia Barbia Orbiana, the ninth and last Severan empress, married Severus Alexander in 225. Although their marriage was arranged, Severus Alexander and Sallustia Or-

biana were genuinely fond of each other and seemed destined to enjoy a happy life together. However, this was not to be.

Julia Mamaea became jealous of Orbiana's growing influence over her son, and while he did love his wife, Severus Alexander could not stand up for her against his mother. Orbiana turned to her father for help, the Senator Seius Sallustius, who made the mistake of asking the Praetorians for protection. Julia Mamaea was able to characterize this as an act of high treason. Sallustius was executed, and Orbiana was stripped of her title and exiled to North Africa. Severus Alexander did nothing to help either of them.

Coins produced in Rome for Orbiana are rare, and all probably were struck at the time of the marriage. Her denarius typically shows her facing right, with a more relaxed hairstyle than the other Severan empresses. The obverse inscription usually reads SALL BARBIA ORBIANA AVG ("Empress Sallustia Barbia Orbiana"). The reverse features goddesses and personifications of Roman virtues or sentiments. This piece depicts Concordia, seated on a throne with the inscription CONCORDIA AVGG ("Harmony of the Emperor and Empress").

The nine empresses described here played influential roles during Rome's Severan Dynasty. Largely forgotten today, their legacy lives on in the beautiful pieces that pay homage to them. ■

THIS DENARIUS depicting Orbiana was a special marriage issue struck under Severus Alexander in A.D. 225 in Rome. The empress served as the model for the goddess in this Venus Felix ("Happy Venus") statue in the Museo Pio-Clementino of the Vatican Museums.

Actual Size: 19mm



PHOTOS: CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP (CNGCOINS.COM) (COIN) & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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