

JOYCE SALISBURY'S *ROME'S CHRISTIAN PRINCESS*: Reflections on the Regency of Galla Placidia

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Book Information: *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire.* Joyce E. Salisbury. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

The decay of the Roman Empire has captivated many scholars, even now centuries after its fall. The period preceding the empire's demise was tumultuous—consumed with wars, betrayal, and religious fervor. Such factors allowed for one of the empire's most intriguing, historically unexplored women to take control of Rome: Empress Galla Placidia. Once considered a pawn in the Roman political game, Placidia was able to work her way up to the title of empress, aided by religion and patience. Initially, she married a Gothic barbarian king but eventually remarried with a Roman general, producing the future Emperor Valentinian. Before her son was old enough to rule, however, Placidia controlled legal and religious affairs of Rome. In her work *Rome's Christian Empress: Ruling at the Twilight of the Empire*, Joyce E. Salisbury analyzes the life of Empress Galla Placidia. She argues that Galla Placidia had a lasting impact on Western religion and politics through not only her twenty-year reign but her interactions with leaders before her ascension. Though she prepares her argument with in-depth, well-written narrative of Placidia's life, Salisbury fails to deliver a thorough analysis of her impact.

Salisbury's initial introduction is misleading. She establishes her work with the intention of proving that Galla Placidia is an important empress, one that historians wrongly forget. She proposes that "Placidia influenced both battles and theology."¹ However, she deviates from this argument in favor of detailing the history of the late Roman Empire. In large part, *Rome's Christian Empress* consists of a narrative beginning with the life of Theodosius, her father, and ending with the legacy of the empire after her son's death. There is relatively little arguing within the narrative about the impact of Placidia's actions during her reign. What little argumentation that can be found is relegated to snippets in the seventh chapter and the epilogue, a minimal portion of the work compared to the narrative she develops. Though seeking to assert an argument on Galla Placidia's relevancy and impact, Salisbury lacks enough time crafting her case to successfully execute it.

Despite the disconnect between the intention and product, the narrative itself was wonderfully written. Salisbury delivered an in-depth, accessible history of the late Roman Empire. She steered attention to the empress' family and her empire to contextualize the familial ambitions and circumstances she was living under. In her narrative, Salisbury focused on Theodosius' goals and ambitions to explain the happenings of specific marriages and religious events that took place during the time period. She also promoted the idea that a kingdom's politics were heavily tied to a politician's personal life. For example, Placidia's innocuous conversations with the Eastern Emperor and his court eventually helped her establish a title in the Western Empire. The royal family held such great importance that even their personal lives

¹ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 15.

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could influence the wars, political alliances, and ascensions to power in the empire. In addition, Salisbury would often offer small snippets of culture or religion while talking about the late Roman Empire. She delves into the customs of the courts and marriages, detailing how “the marriage contract was sealed with treasure brought from both sides [and]...after the exchange of gifts, marriage songs were sung.”² She elaborates on the religious situation of Rome and their various beliefs. At one point, she describes battle tactics of the Hunnic tribes and explains a burial ritual of the Goths. Her study of various ethnic groups living within the Roman Empire serves to flesh out the period as well as explain certain aspects that were important to the reader’s understanding of cultural events that transpired.

In order to support her extensive narration, Salisbury turned to a variety of sources. She used architectural landmarks, like the churches Placidia frequented. She used inscriptions on those churches and used artifacts like jewels and other trinkets to support her cultural descriptions of the weddings. However, one source she most noticeably leaned on was written composition. Salisbury quoted or referenced letters from Placidia and pagans, poetry from Claudian, and historical works like those from Orosius. Salisbury’s use of written sources is the most crucial asset to her biography, leading to an extensive historical account of the late Roman Empire.

Although readers can find a few spots where Salisbury is arguing the impact, importance, and legacy of Placidia, it is rare to find Salisbury addressing any counterclaims against Placidia’s regency. During one point, Salisbury argues that “the laws that specifically refer to the West, like those addressing the Roman Senate, must have come from her court, and, I suggest, from her direct influence,”³ then dismantles the arguments of opponents claiming that someone other than Placidia had written those laws. While this counterclaim is effective, others like it are scarcely found. In a discipline that tends to overlook women’s contributions, perhaps it would be better suited if Salisbury was more aggressive in addressing other counterclaims against Empress Galla Placidia. Without it, she leaves her assertions of Placidia’s contributions vulnerable to diminishment.

Although Salisbury does not fully demonstrate the importance of this influential figure Empress Galla Placidia, she does manage to portray the empress rightly as a powerful religious force. In her narrative, Salisbury relays the religious conflicts that were tied to Placidia’s family, like Placidia’s father attempting to portray the family as divine. She also writes of the religious conflicts of the period, with Galla Placidia eventually engaging in a religious conflict herself by advocating for the worship of the Virgin Mary. She engaged in a series of arguments with a bishop and eventually emerged victorious. Salisbury describes how fervently Mary is worshiped across Europe after this, effectively demonstrating the impact of Empress Galla Placidia’s endorsement of the Christian figure. Along with establishing the Virgin Mary as an important figure, Placidia built and restored several churches and basilicas. These churches are considered national monuments and religious centers today, a physical landmark of her impressive contribution to Christianity.

Overall, Salisbury succeeds in one area, but lacks in another. She delivers an accessible, comprehensive narrative of the late Roman Empire. Further, she provides a concise history and background of Placidia’s life while giving information on the culture and traditions of the many ethnic groups she explores. However, she fails to achieve her original purpose of *Rome’s Christian Empress*: establishing Placidia as a ruler who left an important political and governmental legacy, one that should not be overlooked by historians.

² Salisbury, *Rome’s Christian Empress*, 108.

³ Salisbury, *Rome’s Christian Empress*, 160.

References

Salisbury, Joyce E. *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.