

Women on Coins

Transcript

Welcome to this Tuesday Talk, from the fortnightly series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the Grade I listed art gallery and part of the University of Birmingham. This talk, originally intended to mark International Women's Day on 8 March, features some interesting historical women who have appeared on coins. I'm Maria Vrij, the coin curator, and if you have any questions or comments pertaining to this talk please feel free to contact us at info@barber.org.uk or post to our social media platforms.

In this podcast, I am going to focus on coins held at the Barber Institute's collection. There are so many fascinating examples to choose from that this is naturally a very streamlined list. In choosing just three examples, I have picked stories that reflect women wielding power, the ever-evolving way that historical women are viewed, and how a mother and daughter of equal standing in life can be lauded and marginalised after their deaths. These are also women whose stories you have likely not heard before.

Julia Maesa



First, let us look at the Roman Empress Julia Maesa. Unlike many other of the Roman empresses that appear on coins, Maesa was not powerful due to her marriage, but because she was able to manipulate the political events of her day to her own advantage. She came from a Syrian family of great wealth, and her sister, Julia Domna, became empress in 193 AD. When Domna's son the Emperor Caracalla was killed, Maesa was exiled along with the remaining members of Caracalla's family. Maesa was not a woman to disappear into exile and obscurity, however. She used her wealth and support base to take back the throne in the name of her grandson, known to history as Elagabalus. As an adolescent boy, the emperor Elagabalus was heavily reliant upon the advice of his mother and grandmother, giving Julia Maesa incredible power. It is in this context that Maesa began appearing on coins like this silver *antoninianus*.

On the obverse is a depiction of Maesa, with the legend naming her as *Julia Maesa Augusta*. *Augusta* is the title that Maesa was given by her grandson whose rise she had engineered, and was the highest title in the empire. On the reverse is *Pudicitia*. *Pudicitia* is an interesting character from the perspective of the history of women. She is the personification of female sexual morality and virtue and a minor deity whose behaviours women were expected to follow. *Impudicitia*, being unchaste, and the opposite of *pudicitia* is what Elagabalus was eventually accused of. Even when levelled against Elagabalus, a man, *impudicitia*, like *pudicitia*, still retained its female aspect.

While Elagabalus was emperor, Julia Maesa had engineered the elevation of another of her grandsons, Severus Alexander, to be co-emperor to his cousin. As he grew older, Elagabalus became more unpopular, and though he was executed alongside his mother by his troops, it is suspected that Maesa herself had a hand in the matter. An act of political necessity if she were to retain her position of power.

Maesa continued to have political prominence until her death during the reign of her other grandson Severus Alexander, who was also heavily reliant upon his mother and grandmother. One of the remarkable things about the so-called Severan dynasty in history is that it was not held together as a dynasty through the male line, but through the Syrian women of the Julia family.

Shapurdokht



Next we move East to the Sasanian Persian Empire to consider the Queen of Queens Shapurdokht. Shapurdokht was a wife of the Sasanian King of Kings, or Shahanshah, Varhran II, who ruled from 274 to 293 AD. She is unique among Sasanian empresses for her prominence as the wife of a Shahanshah. Only two other Sasanian women appear on coins, both ruled in their own right.

There is very little literary evidence for the political history of the Sasanian Empire, and so coins are one of the only means by which we even know of Shapurdokht's existence. One of the other means are rock reliefs, a very commonplace form of monumental artwork in the Sasanian Empire. It is from these rock reliefs that we know almost everything that we know about her. She came from a wealthy and powerful family that controlled the rich and fertile lands of Meshan, the region around

modern Basra in southern Iraq and Kuwait. Her union with Varhran helped to secure the relatively new house of Sasan in its place on the Persian throne.

While there is not much that we can say about her life, we do know that the coins of Varhran and Shapurdokht are much more commonplace than those of Varhran alone. Moreover, that Shapurdokht is called by her personal name, rather than her title, denotes her importance in the empire.

On this silver drachm, Shapurdokht is shown behind her husband, but of equal size. The size is of importance because in numismatic art it can denote seniority. She is shown with a unique crown, and her braids of hair hang over her shoulders. The detailed imagery of these drachms is impressive, and that the die engravers took such care to depict Shapurdokht in detail and as a clearly female figure further shows her importance as a woman of the royal court. Her depiction can be directly contrasted with her Roman contemporaries who are effectively depicted as men with female hairstyles.

For the sake of international women's day, the historiography of Sasanian women is also worth mentioning here. I often find myself uncomfortable with the imposition of modern morality onto the past. All humans of all genders and all traits operate within the confines of their societal structures, past, present, and future; to judge them by anachronistic standards is wrong. How we view modern perspectives on historic figures – whether laudatory or condemnatory – is entirely more interesting and reasonable. In the historiography of Sasanian women, sexism meets orientalism, where we are only now beginning to view female figures in Sasanian artwork as individual women, and not simply as the goddess Anahita. This astonishing generalisation of all female figures as Anahita has grown up in part because of the orientalising tropes that the Persians obviously didn't depict their women because they treated them as chattel. To be completely clear, that was not the case. As we unravel the baseless assumptions of the past, so more Sasanian women emerge. Though, as the most named and depicted imperial woman, Shapurdokht will likely still remain chief among them.

Theodora and Thekla



For my final example, I have settled on a coin with not one, but two women: the ninth century Byzantine empresses Theodora and Thekla. This gold solidus is believed to have been produced in the years 842-843.

On the obverse is Theodora, the widow of the emperor Theophilos and mother and regent to the 2-year-old emperor Michael III. Like her daughter Thekla, Theodora is shown wearing the *loros*, which is the robe with a pellet in diamond pattern, and a crown surmounted by a cross. Their crowns also have pinnacles and *pendilia*, the peaks on top of the crown and strings of pearls dangling beneath them respectively; these were exclusively female aspects on coins of the period. Like male emperors, they hold cross-topped sceptres and, for Theodora, a *globus cruciger* – the orb surmounted by a cross which is also held by her son, Michael.

On the reverse is Michael beside his eldest sister Thekla. The coded messages about seniority on this coin are interesting. Different aspects of Thekla denote both seniority and inferiority to her brother. She is shown on the viewer's right, that is, the left hand of God, and so the junior position to Michael on God's right hand, or viewer's left. But she is larger; perhaps a reflection of her age, but also a common marker of seniority on a series of coins that usually preferred to reflect theoretical positions and features rather than reality. These are not portraits of Theodora, Thekla and Michael. They do not look similar because they are related, but because this is how all emperors and empresses of this period were depicted.

It is also ambiguous whether it is Theodora or Thekla that occupies the position of honour in relation to each other. Theodora occupies her own face of the coin, but Thekla is shown beside the reigning emperor in the position commonly associated with the co-emperor and heir. Theodora holds a *globus cruciger* like her son, while Thekla does not, linking Theodora more closely with the reigning emperor, but the manner in which Thekla holds her cross is identical to the depiction of the reigning emperor during the preceding four decades.

Theodora is easily the best known figure on this coin. In 843 she led a council that resolved a long-running religious dispute. This council later came to be known as the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy', and is still celebrated by Orthodox Christians today. Theodora is the second most commonly depicted imperial saint on icons after Constantine and Helena, who almost always appear as a pair. While the family that took over after Michael set about trashing his reputation, Theodora remained saintly and untouchable in subsequent propaganda which, if anything, glorified her further.

As to the historical woman, Theodora is believed to have come from a wealthy Armenian family and to have had shipping business interests of her own before her marriage to Theophilos. Indeed, Theodora's business interests may have been part of the reason for her selection by the imperial family. With Theophilos she had at least five daughters and two sons: Thekla, Anna, Anastasia, Maria, and Poulcheria, and Constantine and Michael. Constantine and Maria both died in childhood and, until the birth of Michael in 840, the line of succession looked very female. Before her death, Maria had been married and her husband became the heir apparent, but there was apparently no other attempt to marry off any of the other daughters. The naming of their daughter Poulcheria may offer some insight into why. Poulcheria was an excessively uncommon name for the period, and the girl must almost certainly have been named for the Empress Saint Pulcheria of the fifth century, a famously powerful virgin empress.

Interestingly, when this coin was made, Thekla was the first imperial sister to be depicted on coins since the fifth century empress Pulcheria. Ultimately, Theodora and Thekla were overthrown in a palace coup and sent to a monastery. Theodora's reputation increased greatly with time, but Thekla

is, for a former empress and potential heir apparent, effectively faded out of subsequent histories of the period, and thereby understudied and often overlooked by modern historians.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these Barber podcasts. We now take a break with the next podcast scheduled for 4 May: we look forward to welcoming you back then.