

The legitimating power of familial relations was vital for Septimius Severus in consolidating consensus for his rule and promoting his nascent dynasty. Three important claims by Severus in 195 underline the importance of familial relations. After eliminating his rivals Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus, Severus announced that he was the adopted son of Marcus Aurelius and thus the rightful heir of his dynasty; Julia Domna was advertised as *Mater Castrorum*, the title first granted to Faustina Minor, wife of Marcus Aurelius; the couple's son, Lucius Septimius Bassianus, named in honor of Julia's father but better known to history as Caracalla, was renamed Marcus Aurelius Antoninus in honor of his adopted grandfather. In coinage, inscriptions and public monuments, Julia Domna was recognized and promoted as a legitimizing link between the past, current and future emperors both by the Palace itself and populations spontaneously celebrating the emperor and his family. Thus far, Julia Domna was only one plank, albeit an important one, in Severus' legitimatizing publicity campaigns.

By 209, however, the maternity of Julia Domna became the subject of extraordinary imperial claims that expanded her maternity beyond her sons and the military to encompass all of creation. These claims had become so inflated and extravagant that she was equated on coinage with the *Magna Mater*, whom Lucretius had identified as *magna deum mater, materque ferarum et nostri genetrix* (Lucr. *DNR* II.598-99). In BMC.47, an aureus produced in Rome, the *Magna Mater* appears as the reverse type, seated in a chariot drawn by a team of lions, holding a tympanum and extending a branch in her right hand. The legend simply reads, "MAT AVGG", Mother of the Augusti, a title which had only been awarded to Julia Domna. While some populations responded positively to this type of propaganda, endowing the empress in dedicatory inscriptions with maternal titles not officially awarded to her, other populations were remarkably unresponsive to the depictions of Julia Domna as Universal Mother. In fact, the rhetoric of motherhood came to be as powerful a tool in the hands of those who were critical of the dynasty as it was for the dynasty itself. This became especially apparent in the sole reign of Caracalla.

In this paper, I will first explain why the rhetoric of motherhood and the family was a powerful tool in promoting Severan legitimacy. I will then explore instances in which various populations turned the imperial rhetoric of motherhood against the dynasty and Caracalla in particular. In the capable hands of Caracalla's critics, the imperial household that had opened its arms to embrace the world into its familial circle (as illustrated in propaganda) was transformed into one suffering under the specter of incest (*HA* Cara. 10), violations of the "natural" order of the sexes (Cass. Dio 78.10, 78.18.2-3, 79.3), fratricide, and the gagging and suppression of normal maternal instincts (Dio 78.2-3). By examining various claims regarding Julia Domna's maternity, this paper will illustrate that motherhood could be used to legitimate or critique current power structures.