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Heresy in High Places: Women of the Imperial Household and the Fourth-Century Christological Controversy

The fourth-century empresses who sided with Arius and his successors are depicted by the orthodox church historians of the fifth century as jezebels, exercising undue power over the emperors and persecuting the men of God who upheld the Nicene faith. Constantia, Eusebia, and Justina are shown as forces for instability, creating discord where it need not have existed. The predictable rhetoric of feminine chaos masks work done by these women within the political system.

Ill-will and misunderstanding between adherents of various sects permeated society in the fourth century, to the extent that keeping the peace among subordinates, or subjects, of differing creeds was liable to be a serious concern for anyone in authority, from the level of the household to that of the empire. At the highest level, many rulers of the church preferred to see conflict settled by the complete elimination of opposition, but the emperors generally kept in view the desirability of at least allowing the loser to save face. In their complex maneuverings the Augustae tended to play the role of patron of the disenfranchised. A similar division of the labor of patronage could also be found at the level of the household. As we see from literary treatments of the heterodox empresses and from the story in Sozomen 8.5 of the woman whose communion bread was turned into stone between her teeth, the church disapproved of this pluralistic approach at any level.