

This paper explores the dynamics of power during the ascendancy of Aelia Pulcheria Augusta (ca 414-453 CE), sister of Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II (408-450 CE) and wife of Eastern Roman Emperor Marcian (450-453 CE). Ancient church historians dither between depicting her as a power player in the empire and as a properly subservient Christian woman, and these two personae never overlap. I will argue that Pulcheria achieved unprecedented influence by eschewing the traditional boundaries for womanly activity. The apparently contradictory evaluations of Pulcheria among ancient historians can then be explained in large part by their various attempts to classify her into an established category.

Pulcheria was an extraordinary person. She took a vow of perpetual virginity in 414 CE. For her time she was the youngest woman to be crowned Augusta, a supreme title that was usually reserved for women who had served the state through multiple childbearing. She administered the empire for her brother the emperor until a clever coup temporarily removed her from influence. She promoted the interests of the church of Rome in all her activities, and was generous with benefactions. Upon her brother's sudden death, she seized the reigns of the empire and oversaw a smooth administrative transition by marrying his successor herself. She eventually was honored with canonization as a saint.

This paper counters the usual paradigms for ancient women of influence: the sanctioned rulers vs the "powers behind the throne". Pulcheria's dominion is a sort of hybrid of these categories, not conforming to the typical profile of either group. Women who ruled from behind men usually either were married to these men or were their mothers. I will argue that Pulcheria sanctioned her nominally informal influence as the emperor's sister by associating herself with the Virgin Mary. The close relationship between church and state at this time as well as the new devotion to the Virgin Mary provided ideal conditions for Pulcheria to carve an independent niche for herself. Furthermore she became empress on her own terms. That is, not only did Pulcheria briefly turn the empire into a matrilineal institution when Marcian became emperor through marriage to her, but she also had a unique prenuptial agreement that guaranteed the preservation of her virginity and thus her authority through her connection to the Virgin Mary.

Pulcheria successfully floated among several classifications: imperial sibling, holy woman, imperial administrator, female benefactor, and, finally, empress. Her refusal to espouse any of these identifications formally, except the last one at the end of her life, gave her immense personal freedom and made her a difficult, but not impossible, target for her enemies. As a point of comparison, I will also consider Pulcheria's sister-in-law, Empress Eudokia, who pursued a more typical career path for imperial women but eventually adopted some of Pulcheria's strategies.