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# Brill's New Pauly

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## Women rulers

(1,599 words)

[German version]

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In the societies of the Ancient Orient and Egypt with their rules regarding patrilineal inheritance and succession, women did not assume the role of rulers. The only

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exceptions to this occurred in cases when a female member of the ruling family - generally the queen mother - acted as regent for an underage heir to the throne. For example, Hatshepsut, half-sister and wife of Thutmosis [2] II, acted for 22 years as regent for her underage nephew Thutmosis [3] III. In Assyria, it is not certain whether Shammuramat (Greek Semiramis), the wife of Shamshi-Adad V and mother of his son and successor Adad-nirari III, whose political influence seems to have been substantial, had also taken on the formal regency for her son. Naqī a, wife of Sennacherib and mother of Asarhaddon, played a significant role in securing the throne for her son and later (by way of a vassal treaty) for her grandson Assurbanipal. Her word was seen, "like that of a god, <as> final" [6. 165].

According to the OT, in Judah in particular (Judah and Israel), the queen mother enjoyed significant political and dynastic rights as well as ceremonial rights at court. As a kind of official designation, she bore the title of *g<sup>e</sup>bīrā* (literally 'mistress' or 'patron' as opposed to other members of her family who either had limited or no legal rights). Documents found at Ebla (see [1]) and Ugarit point to a comparable institution. However, in both cases, the queen mother did not hold an official position as ruler [3].

The title of *tawananna*, born by the wife of the ruling Hittite great king, referred to her position as the highest priestess of the sun goddess of Arinna (Sun god). She would retain her title even after the death of her husband; only after her own death would the wife of the successor to the

throne become the new *tawananna* [4; 7]. Nothing is known regarding a regency by the *tawannana* for an underage successor to the throne, as there are no historical records of such a case.

Women rulers in tribally organized Arabian societies appear on the inscriptions of Neo-Assyrian rulers [2]. Into this context also belongs Zenobia [2], ruler of the empire of Palmyra (3rd cent. AD). The biblical report about the Queen of Saba, Sabaei may be a legendary reflection of an actual situation (1 Kg 10).

Gynaecocracy; Rulers; Rulership; Woman I

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[German version]

## II. Classical Antiquity

Using the older constitutional definition of rulership as the exercise of political power by virtue of legal rights invested in the ruler, hardly any woman ruler can be identified because of the limitation of political rights to male citizens, as was common practice in Antiquity. However, a

slightly wider functional understanding of rulership, which also takes into account women's actual disposal of resources and their ability to create a consensus between the ruled and the rulers, makes it possible to classify women as rulers also in Graeco-Roman Antiquity [14. 47-53].

Two types appear in ancient sources: On the one hand, the female co-ruler as the female part of a ruling couple, in parallel with mythical divine couples (e.g. the equation of the Roman imperial couple with Jupiter-Juno or the Hellenistic royal couple with Helios-Selene) with clear assignments as to their respective roles and a gender-specific division of tasks as *father* and *mother* of the dynasty [3]; in this, they acted as models for the population as a whole and in particular for male and female members of the aristocracy. In this context, women provided dynastic legitimization because of their close family relations with past and/or future generations of the ruling family; in addition to material resources, they often also controlled access to the rulers. On the other hand, the temporary sole female ruler who - against the legal norm and sometimes for extended periods - either carried on ruling after the death of the ruler or who took on the rule in place of an underage, incapable or sick nominal male successor [14. 39-42, 51-67; 10].

Ancient literature paints an ambivalent picture of WR, depending on the genre [5]. Whereas epos and tragedy perpetuate the obvious image of powerful female rulers from Greek and Roman mythology (Arete [1], Penelope, Clytaemnestra: [13], Dido: [1]), female rulers, both historical and mythical, are clearly rejected and even demonized by historiographers (e.g. Tomyris, bloodthirsty queen of the Massagetes: Hdt. 1,214,4 f.; the patricidal Roman queen Tullia [1]: Liv. 1,46-48). Callousness, greed, vindictiveness, often also sexual deviance and the interference in the - seen as strictly male - domains of politics and the military are part of the standard *topos* of the 'evil female ruler'. The background to such invectives could be the defence against a danger from outside (c.f. the negative characterization of Cleopatra [II 12] C VII as the enemy: Hor. Carm. 1,37,21) or the compensation of conflicts within the society arising from the changed role of women, particularly of female members of the Roman aristocracy (Fulvia [2]). In the depiction of foreign female rulers in Greek and Roman sources, there was often an overlap between the definition of the genders and the notion of the alien, resulting in an even more emphatic rejection of female rulers in their own culture. This tradition is still clearly apparent in the 4th cent. AD in Ammianus Marcellinus. In his portrait of Constantina, the sister of the emperor and wife of Constantius [5] Gallus, as a power-hungry fury, his criticism of emperors' wives who shared in their husbands' power is all the more biting as he suggests, by citing the usual list of female rulers of the East, that this type of rule was alien to Greco-Roman culture (e.g. Semiramis, Cleopatra [II 12], Zenobia [2]) [14. 74-195, 318-346].

Alongside these negative images of ancient female rulers, beginning in the Hellenistic period, there was a widespread panegyric directed at female members of the ruling families or of the aristocracy, praising them as just and beautiful benefactresses (Euergetism). In Roman times,

added positive attributes were marital faithfulness, modesty in demeanour and, for the late-antique Christian empresses, the praise of orthodoxy (e.g. Claudianus, *Laus Serenae*; Iulius, Or. 3; funeral orations by Gregorius [I 2] of Nyssa). The panegyric reflected the interests of the ruling house and those in its favour; on the other hand, with the increasing importance of closeness to the court as the measure of an individual's social position, the criticism of an author directed at female rulers may also be a reflection of his grumbling that women, too, were barring his access to the centre of power [14. 298-305].

Research into the role of WR has already produced important, mainly prosopographic studies on particular rulers and the role of women in particular dynasties [2; 7; 8; 11; 12], but diachronic studies of the development and structural characteristics of WR still remain desiderata [9]. Question of titles and honours, marriage strategies, disposal of resources (*matronage* versus patronage) or differences in the definition of gender roles in the different cultural spheres of Antiquity still require further clarification in order to identify similarities and differences in the positions of Hellenistic, Roman-Byzantine and foreign WR (e.g. Teuta, Boudicca, Zenobia [2]) and to uncover the nature of the conditions under which ancient WR ruled compared with the typology of their counterparts in other eras and cultures [4]. It is still an open question why the late-antique 'imperial' women (Imperial family, women of the) in the East of the Roman empire enjoyed a far greater potential for political activity than those in the West (even culminating in the middle Byzantine period in the sole rule of women: e.g. Irene, Zoë, Theodora [5]).

Augusta; Gender Studies; Gynaecocracy; Imperial family, women of the; Matriarchy; Rulership; Rulers; Woman

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