

A Christian Concubine in Commodus' Court?

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In the late 2nd century CE, Marcia, a “god-loving θεοφιλα woman” and the principal concubine of the Roman Emperor Commodus, interceded with her lover to free a number of Christian prisoners who had been sentenced to slave labor in the mines of Sardinia¹. Such an act of charity and clemency might have been expected to earn her a place among the Catholic saints or lists of other early prominent Christians. On the other hand, Marcia’s patronage of a persecuted and despised minority, especially if she herself professed Christianity, might have led to an ignominious downfall and public execution in the Roman arena. However, Marcia was neither particularly honored by the Christians nor condemned by the Roman authorities for her actions. This devaluation of Marcia in both pagan and Christian sources reveals its own story about the nature of early church politics, the complex intrigues of an Emperor’s court at the end of the high empire, and the ability of a lowly concubine to exert political influence and change the course of Western history. The frequent omission of Marcia from the ranks of both influential Roman women and

1 — Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, 9.2.12.

early Christian leaders indicates that there was no place in the record for a woman who failed to conform to existing moral paradigms of either a virtuous lady or a faithless adulteress. Marcia's complex character and actions made her ironically unsuitable as an exemplary figure for either Christians or pagan historians to praise or condemn.

Sources

Unfortunately, the biased and inaccurate nature of many of the pagan and Christian sources for Marcia's story pose substantial difficulties for any historical reconstruction of her life and beliefs. Cassius Dio, writing nearly contemporaneously in the late 2nd century CE, is our most reliable chronicler for the period; he served as a senator under Commodus and probably knew Marcia personally. However, Dio likely began writing his history shortly after Marcia's assassination of Commodus and her own subsequent execution, discussed later in this article. Dio's representation of her political and religious influence is thus presumably influenced by knowledge of these later events, as well as by Dio's own complex relationship with the later emperor Septimius Severus, who was hostile to Marcia². Furthermore, Dio was a fundamentally socially conservative historian and a hereditary consular; he likely disapproved of both Marcia's promiscuity and especially her low social status by birth³. Olivier Hekster notes that Dio's portrayal of Commodus' court emphasizes the role of the evil counselors luring the emperor away from the wise senatorial faction; Marcia would certainly have counted as such a "wicked advisor"⁴. At the same time, Dio does not use Marcia as a stock portrait of the deceptive and faithless woman, choosing rather to minimize her role in the imperial court entirely. Most of the focus is not on Marcia but on the imperial freedmen and chamberlains in Commodus' court, echoing Dio's frequent focus on the misdeeds of freedmen rather than freedwomen⁵.

Unfortunately, the section of Dio's work that covered the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and his co-emperor Lucius Verus is particularly fragmentary. We thus have no way of knowing whether Dio chronicled the political influence of Marcia's direct predecessor, Verus' powerful concubine Panthea, or omitted her entirely from the record (if indeed Panthea was actually a historical figure)⁶. Dio presents the earlier Emperor Nero's mistress Acte as a harmless and benign figure; she is contrasted with the

2 — Millar (1964) pp. 126-31; Hose (2009) 461-7; Marincola (2009) pp. 295-6.

3 — Kemezis (2012) pp. 397-8.

4 — Hekster (2002) 4-6.

5 — Moscovich (2004) pp. 363-66.

6 — Dio. 71.1; See Vout (2007) 229 for the argument of her fictionality, although it seems implausible to me that the poems about Panthea did not have some factual basis.

ambitious and deadly Agrippina the Younger, Nero's mother⁷. Dio similarly gives a relatively favorable if brief treatment to Caenis, Vespasian's concubine in the 60s CE, whom he praises for her loyalty to Vespasian and for her intelligence⁸.

Julia Domna, Septimius Severus' empress, succeeded Marcia as the most powerful woman in the imperial court and thus serves as a useful point of comparison. Dio's representation of Julia Domna focuses on a set of anecdotes that serve his larger narrative of the gradual collapse of the Severan dynasty⁹. She is presented as an innocent victim, the only self-controlled figure among a court of violent and depraved lunatics, but she is not depicted as a particularly influential or powerful politician in her own right¹⁰. Julia Domna's loyalty to her husband and, to the extent possible, both her sons is emphasized, placing her firmly in the category of virtuous Roman matron. Levick suggests that Dio might have been a member of Julia Domna's own philosophical circle, at least in a loose sense, thus giving him extra reason to praise her¹¹. In any case, Dio is careful to make no direct comparison between Julia Domna and Marcia.

To add to the complex historiographical issues regarding Marcia's representation in the ancient sources, Dio's description of Marcia's support of Christianity may be a later addition by the Byzantine epitomizer Xiphilinus¹². Xiphilinus, a Christian monk who composed his summaries of Cassius Dio in late 11th century CE Constantinople, may himself have drawn from the Christian patristic tradition for evidence of Marcia's sympathies, rather than using Dio as his only source.

Although other ancient pagan sources like the *Historia Augusta*, the *Epitome de Caesaribus*, and Herodian mention Marcia, they do not provide any account of her Christian connections¹³. The *Historia Augusta* is notoriously unreliable, but the author may potentially have had access to some particular useful sources such as the *Acta Urbis* for this period¹⁴. Pflaum considers the *Vita Commodi* to be one of the more historically

7 — Dio 61.7.

8 — Dio 65.14.

9 — Dio 76.15; 77.2-4.

10 — Langford (2013) 109 Julia Domna was the wife of Roman emperor Septimius Severus (193-211).

11 — Levick (2007) 113-5.

12 — Xiphilinus. 269,19-270, 14 R. St.; Lampe (2003) 203-4.

13 — Cassius Dio 73.4.6-7. *HA* (*Comm.* 8.6, 11.9, 17.1), *Pert.* 5.2, *Did.Jul.* 6.2. For other non-Christian sources regarding Marcia, see CD 72.13-22, *Epit. De. Caes.* 17.5, *Herod.* 1.16-1.17. For other scholarly treatments of Marcia, see R. Friedl (1996) 173, E. Wallinger (1990) 70ff, W. Eck (2000) 210.

14 — Nesselhauf (1966) 127-38; Alan Cameron (2010) 743-781 for the most recent exhaustive treatment of the *HA's* inaccuracy and dating controversy. On the *HA* and Commodus specifically: Kolb (1972) 47-53.; Syme (1971) 30ff; Chastagnol (1994) 249-75.

accurate biographies¹⁵. There is substantial controversy about whether the *Historia Augusta* itself is a pro-pagan, anti-Christian polemic, a pagan plea for religious toleration, or has no religious agenda at all. Alan Cameron's analysis of the *Historia Augusta* as a fundamentally secular, generally inaccurate, and poorly written text seems most accurate based on current evidence¹⁶.

While some aspects of Commodus' reign may have been embellished by the *HA* author, there is no particular reason to doubt his representation of Marcia, except insofar as it may have borrowed material from better attested stories of earlier emperors' mistresses. At the same time, it cannot be relied upon as an accurate source without supporting material from other ancient historians. Unfortunately, such supporting material is itself complicated by the likely possibility that the author of the *HA* drew extensively on Dio and Herodian as his main sources, thus making any similarity between his account of Marcia and Commodus and their accounts less corroborative than plagiaristic¹⁷.

The other contemporaneous pagan historian Herodian is perhaps more accurate than the *HA*, and might also have known directly the major figures at Commodus' court. However, Herodian frequently favored drama and rhetoric over historical accuracy¹⁸. Even more than Dio, he stressed a contrast between good emperors and tyrants and depicted Commodus as a potentially good emperor corrupted by his favorites¹⁹. His treatment of Marcia might therefore be liable to the general stereotype of the evil mistress; it is notable that instead she only appears as a mitigating influence trying to stop the worst of Commodus' excesses²⁰. This either suggests that Herodian was more concerned about male freedman favorites than female mistresses or that his information on Marcia defied any attempt to stereotype her, except perhaps as the traditional loyal imperial concubine. Marcia's role as a faithful concubine like Acte or Caenis, is however inextricably complicated in any narrative by her subsequent assassination of Commodus.

In contrast, the contemporaneous Christian patristic writer Hippolytus provides extensive details of Marcia's charity towards Christians, although little information about the rest of her life. However, as detailed later, Hippolytus had his own strong biases regarding church politics that undoubtedly colored his account²¹. He may also have been a presbyter

15 — Pflaum (1972) 246; Hekster 7.

16 — Alan Cameron (2010) 745.

17 — Hekster 8; Kolb (1972) 47-53.

18 — Zimmermann (1999) 119-143; Matthews (2009) 295-6.

19 — Herodian 1.1.4-6; Hekster 6.

20 — Herodian 1.1.4.

21 — Hippolytus, *Ref.*, 9.2.12. On Hippolytus, see.

from Asia Minor rather than Rome itself; this origin suggests a lack of direct knowledge or contact with Marcia or the Christian community in Rome from 182-192 CE²².

As a result of these problematic sources, any modern account of Marcia's life and actions is a patchwork quilt of anecdotes and sensational narratives. When pieced together, however, we may still gain a deeper sense both of Marcia's political influence and the discourse about her religious patronage.

Marcia the Concubine

Like other imperial concubines, Marcia was an imperial freedwoman and probably originally belonged to the household of the Emperor Lucius Verus, who served jointly as emperor with the more famous Marcus Aurelius²³. She was likely born in the late 150s or early 160s CE, although we have no direct evidence on this point. According to a dedicatory inscription from the Italian town of Anagnina, she was the daughter of an imperial freedman²⁴. She may have been raised in Rome by a wealthy eunuch named Hyacinthus, who was also the Christian presbyter of Pope Victor I²⁵. As a child, she may have known or at least observed Verus' prominent and beloved concubine, Panthea, eulogized by various poets of the period and praised by Marcus Aurelius himself²⁶. Panthea's success might have inspired Marcia's own ambitions towards a prominent role in the imperial household.

Marcia's first known sexual partner was the consul Marcus Ummidius Quadratus, who was executed on charges of attempted assassination in 182 CE. After Quadratus' death, she became Commodus' concubine from 182 until his death at the end of 192. At some point during this time period, she married Commodus' *cubicularius*, or chamberlain, a man named Eclectus. However, this did not affect her ongoing sexual liaison with Commodus²⁷.

Several other notable Imperial concubines, like Claudia Acte, Nero's freedwoman lover, or Antonia Caenis, Vespasian's mistress, began their careers as slaves in the households of imperial women. Caenis, for instance, was the secretary to Claudius' mother Antonia Minor and presumably met the rising general Vespasian at court²⁸. Such a background

22 — Cerrato (2002) 258.

23 — Cassius Dio 73.4.6-7.

24 — CIL 10.5918 = ILS 406.

25 — Hippolytus, *Phil.*, 9.12.

26 — Lucian of Samosata, Marcus Aurelius, *Med.*, 8.37, Vout (2007) 215-6.

27 — *CD* 73.4.6-7.

28 — Cassius Dio, 64.13.; B. Rawson (1974) "Concubinages," 288.

lent an aura of polish and respectability to these concubines. They were also frequently praised for their sexual fidelity and loyalty; Acte rescued the corpse of the despised Nero and gave him funeral rites with her own money, for instance²⁹. Acte, Caenis, Lysistrate, and other imperial mistresses are often represented as virtuous contrasts to the selfish, ambitious, politically involved emperors' wives whose loyalties might be to their own families rather than to the emperor himself.

Earlier imperial concubines also normally had the emperor as their exclusive sexual partner. Thomas McGinn theorizes that such women were carefully chosen for their relatively high social status as members of the Imperial *familia*. He suggests that Emperors' wives and mothers may even have assisted with the selection of concubines³⁰. However, it is unclear what sort of mechanism was involved in such a selection, given the lack of any formal imperial harem. Seneca and his faction are said to have supported Nero's relationship with Acte as a way of separating him from his mother Agrippina's influence, but this must have been merely a matter of suggestion and verbal encouragement rather than any sort of formal appointment³¹. Rather than any sort of official arrangement, most imperial mistresses were simply court women whom emperors found attractive and their advisers or family considered to be harmless distractions.

Marcia, in contrast, was neither associated with an imperial lady nor praised for her sexual fidelity and devotion to the emperor. She is called Commodus' concubine on multiple occasions, but she seems to have remained married to the imperial chamberlain Eclectus as well. Presumably, her husband tacitly or explicitly permitted her sexual relationship with Commodus³². The *Historia Augusta* notes with questionable veracity that Commodus was infamous for having both "matrons and harlots" as his concubines, rather than simply slaves or unmarried freedwomen. Even if an accurate allegation, it is unclear whether "matron" here means a noble married woman or a freedman's daughter like Marcia³³.

Relationships with Commodus' concubines may have been another means of rising in the convoluted hierarchies of the Imperial court. By marrying a concubine, bureaucrats gained indirect access to the Emperor himself. Commodus' other concubines also apparently made prestigious

29 — Suetonius, *Nero*, 50.

30 — McGinn (1991) 353.

31 — Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.12.

32 — Friedl (1996) 173. Friedl argues that after Marcia's rise to power as the "de facto Empress," her relationship with Eclectus was purely symbolic and platonic; however, there is no direct textual evidence to support this theory.

33 — *HA Commod.* 5.8, 5.4.

marriages, as in the case of Damostratia, who married Cleander, another *cubicularius* or chamberlain of Commodus³⁴. Marcia's relationships with Quadratus and Eclectus may have been a pragmatic method for the men to gain power and the favor of Commodus himself.

On the other hand, Marcia might have gained her opportunity to be a concubine through her role as Eclectus' wife. The *cubicularii* controlled imperial access through their roles as guardians of the bedchamber; they participated in daily work and leisure activities with the Emperor, much like early modern European royal companions or a twenty-first century President's "body man"³⁵. Thus, being the wife of a *cubicularius* would have itself offered opportunity for frequent contact with the Emperor. While neither *cubicularii* nor concubines had direct political power, their daily contact with the Emperor and control over access to him caused courtiers and Senators to perceive them as powerful influences within the world of the imperial court. Such a position therefore transcended the lowly origins that we can presume for both Marcia and her husband.

Given the nature of his position as supervisor of the emperor's own bedchamber, Eclectus would necessarily have been aware of his wife's liaison with Commodus. While sharing a sexual partner is not a particularly common way of forming homosocial bonds, it was not without precedent in the Roman world. During the late Roman Republic, in 56 BCE, a famous example of wife-trading for political reasons occurred in the exchange of the respectable matron Marcia, daughter of the politician L. Marcus Philippus, between her former husband Marcus Porcius Cato Minor and her new husband, the elderly orator Quintus Hortensius in 56 BCE³⁶. This incident caused a fair degree of scandal and gossip, as the formation of a bond of *amicitia* through the sequential sharing of a wife was highly unorthodox. It was arguably echoed a century later in the divorce of Poppaea Sabina from her first husband, the courtier Otho, and her remarriage to his patron, the Emperor Nero³⁷. The prominent late Republican prostitutes Flora and Praecia were also shared among prominent Roman politicians. The women's primary lovers lent out their mistresses to political allies as a means of cementing ties and bestowing favors³⁸.

34 — Cassius Dio 73.12.

35 — Philo, *Leg.* 175; Paterson (2007) 142.

36 — Plutarch, *Cato Minor*, 25.1-5. The exchange of women from one family to form alliances with another elite Roman family was common, e.g. Octavian's sister Octavia or Julius Caesar's daughter Julia, married respectively to Marcus Antonius and Pompeius Magnus. However, such women were normally the daughters or sisters of one man, rather than a former wife as in Marcia's case. See Dixon (1985) 353.

37 — Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.45.4.

38 — Plutarch, *Pompey* 2.8, *Lucullus* 6.2.

The *cubicularius* Cleander gave large sums of money “to Commodus and his concubines,” which suggests that they were seen as valuable agents for those interested in influencing the Emperor³⁹. Marcia’s loyalty, at least initially, seems to have been to Commodus himself rather than to any other patrons. Certainly, Cleander’s generosity did not stop Marcia from turning on him when politically expedient in the year 190 CE. When a rioting mob, angry at Cleander, whom they blamed for high grain prices during a famine, approached Commodus, Marcia, here described as “the notorious wife of Eclectus,” warned the Emperor of his danger. Commodus responded by immediately ordering Cleander and his son to be killed in order to placate the crowd⁴⁰.

Olivier Hekster suggests that Marcia’s role in this story was invented by later chroniclers in order to increase the narrative drama of the situation, rather than simply describing Commodus’ unprovoked execution of Cleander⁴¹. This incident is similar in nature to Acte’s warning of Nero about his reputation among the soldiers in Tacitus’ *Annales*; this may imply that only one version, at most, is true. However, there is no particular reason to think that this story is invented except for its suspicious similarity to the earlier story of Nero and Acte. There is further controversy raised by the problem that Cassius Dio describes Commodus’ informant as Marcia, whereas Herodian names another woman, Fadilla. Hekster and Alföldy both convincingly argue that Cassius Dio is a more reliable source in this case, and Marcia therefore a more likely candidate⁴². Among other reasons, Herodian might have omitted Marcia so that her appearance at Commodus’ death was more dramatic and more hostile; Hekster notes that the role of a “messenger” may have been purely a historical trope, since large riots in the Forum rarely require a concubine to overhear them.

In both the Neronian and Commodean stories, a concubine allied to a political rival undermines the position of a powerful figure by warning the Emperor about threats to his popularity. However, Marcia and Eclectus also secured their own safety through this move, as well as rising personally higher in the Imperial power structure by arranging for Cleander’s execution. While Marcia’s influence might have been exaggerated in this case, she certainly possessed both the motive and means to protect Commodus and simultaneously overthrow Cleander.

It is impossible to determine, however, whether Marcia was merely a pawn used by more powerful male politicians or whether she was also

39 — Cassius Dio 73.13.

40 — Cassius Dio, 73.13; Ranieri (1997) 149.

41 — Hekster (2002) 74.

42 — Hekster 74; Alföldy (1989) 113.

advancing her own personal ambitions. Certainly, there is a long tradition in Roman rhetoric of attacking men by representing them as being under the domination of women, especially low-status women⁴³. We must therefore be careful to treat critically any depictions of Marcia as a powerful, influential figure in her own right. Most of the surviving histories are highly hostile to Commodus. These sources thus adopted the traditional anti-imperial criticism that Commodus, in addition to being personally immoderate and neglectful of his political duties, was controlled or influenced by freedmen, concubines, and slaves, rather than by senators of the same elite aristocratic status as the histories' authors⁴⁴.

Nevertheless, Marcia's high level of influence over Commodus' policies is detailed in several specific instances by multiple authors. If nothing else, this suggests that she was a plausible target for misogynistic accusations. The *Historia Augusta* offers a few tantalizing although unreliable anecdotes, such as the claim that Marcia encouraged Commodus' desire to name the rebuilt city of Rome "Colonia Commodiana" after himself, a purely symbolic if impolitic move likely inserted to link Commodus with earlier "bad" emperors like Nero⁴⁵. The late fourth century *Epitome de Caesaribus* describes Marcia as "gaining control over Commodus' mind (*cum animum eius penitus devinxisset*)"⁴⁶. Herodian describes her as his "favorite mistress (Παλλακή)" and notes that "she was treated just like a legal wife with all the honors due to the Empress except the sacred fire [carried before empresses in processions]"⁴⁷.

Marcia may also have supported her lover in his gladiatorial ambitions: Commodus "was called Amazonius because of his passion for his concubine Marcia, whom he loved to have depicted as an Amazon, and for whose sake he even wished to enter the Roman arena in Amazon's dress"⁴⁸. Marcia's alleged Amazon costume invokes the motif of the mythical female warrior, which may have been a common one for female gladiators. One of our only surviving visual depictions of female gladiators, the famous relief from Halicarnassus, identifies one of the bare-breasted combatants as "Amazon" or "Amazonia"⁴⁹. While the visual record portrays female gladiators as sexualized but praiseworthy athletes,

43 — C. F. Verres' mistress Chelidon: Cicero, *Ad Verrem*, 1.136-7. With regard to issues of Christianization particularly, see Cooper (1992) 151. For depictions of influential women as means of criticizing their male partners, see Hillard (1989) 166-169; Dixon (1992) 212; Saxonhouse, (1992) 7.

44 — Epictetus *Disc.* 1.19.7; Suet. *Claud.* 29. Dio *Rom. Hist.* LX 2, 8. Paterson (2007) 129.

45 — *SHA*, "Commodus" 8.9.

46 — *Epit. De Caes.* 17.5.

47 — Herodian 1.16.4. Herodian is a less reliable source than Cassius Dio or even the *Historia Augusta*, so such statements must be viewed with some skepticism: Kolb (1972) 47-53.

48 — *SHA*, "Commodus" 12.1.

49 — Coleman (2000) 487.

such an association is also strongly linked with literary discourse about unconventional or immodest elite women who defy normal Roman social mores⁵⁰. Furthermore, this anecdote also associates Commodus with earlier canonically “bad” emperors: Nero supposedly dressed up his own concubines as gladiators⁵¹.

While Marcia may have had a gladiatorial costume, she also supposedly spoke out against Commodus' own gladiatorial ambitions. According to Herodian, on December 31st, 192 CE, Commodus told her his plan to appear at the New Year's festival not dressed as an emperor but as a gladiator, accompanied by the imperial gladiatorial troop. Marcia threw herself on her knees and, weeping, begged Commodus not to disgrace himself in such a fashion “and not to endanger his life by trusting gladiators and desperate men”⁵². While we have no other evidence for this particular anecdote, its representation of Marcia as a pragmatic, nervous politician is consistent with other evidence. Marcia might have been perfectly willing to indulge Commodus' gladiatorial fantasies when he was a popular Emperor but correctly saw them as dangerous and risky when he was at the nadir of his popular and aristocratic support. Unfortunately for all involved, Commodus was not only unconvinced by this advice but reacted by putting Marcia's name on a list for immediate execution.

After discovering this “death list,” Marcia and a few co-conspirators, the praetorian prefect Q. Aemilius Laetus and Marcia's husband, the *cubicularius* Eclectus, supposedly murdered the Emperor Commodus in a desperate attempt to preserve their own power and perhaps to prevent further acts of insanity by the increasingly deranged ruler. This was an elaborate and well-planned plot: they had already selected Pertinax, the urban prefect, as the new Emperor⁵³. The sources differ on whether Marcia was a pawn of Laetus and Eclectus in this matter or an equal partner. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Marcia initially maintained a position of power in Pertinax's reign, suggesting that she had indeed played a key role in the conspiracy, but this version is not well supported by Dio or Herodian⁵⁴.

Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus' power had fundamentally depended on their close personal ties to Commodus. While they may have saved themselves from immediate execution, they were not able to maintain their power or strengthen Pertinax' claim on the throne⁵⁵. Both Dio and Herodian present the conspiracy as a relatively impromptu and desperate

50 — Juvenal 6.104-5; 1.22.3.

51 — Suet. *Nero* 44.1; K. Coleman (2000) 499.

52 — Herod. 1.16.4; Levick (2007) 70.

53 — *SHA, Commodus*, 16.8, Cassius Dio, 73.22.4-6, *Epitome de Caesaribus*, 17.154.

54 — *SHA, Pertinax* 4.3-5; Ranieri (1998) 398; Friedl 173; Champlin (1979) 296.

55 — Hekster 83.

move intended to save the lives of the conspirators themselves (or, according to Dio, the new consuls) from an increasingly deranged ruler⁵⁶. However, the close connections of various newly appointed commanders and ministers to the new emperor Pertinax and the quick response of Septimius Severus suggests that this assassination may have been planned significantly in advance⁵⁷. It's unclear whether a coordinated conspiracy would have included as prominent a role for Marcia, and the sources here remain ambiguous.

Unfortunately for Marcia, Pertinax reigned for only three months before being killed by the Praetorian Guard and replaced by Didius Julianus, who bought the affection of the Praetorians through outrageous bribes. In an effort to associate himself with the last "legitimate" emperor and restore justice, Didius Julianus ordered both Marcia and Laetus to be executed for Commodus' murder⁵⁸. While she may have survived being executed by Commodus, Marcia was unable to parlay her influence into a lasting role in a new imperial court.

Marcia the Christian

Having established that Marcia held a lofty and influential position at court, it is time to turn to the question of her acts on behalf of oppressed Christians. The ancient sources offer inconclusive and somewhat contradictory evidence. Cassius Dio, as edited by Xiphilinus, is clear about Marcia's religious sympathies, but he fails to offer any specific facts or claim direct knowledge:

ἱστορεῖται δὲ αὕτη πολλά τε ὑπὲρ τῶν Χριστιανῶν σπουδάσαι καὶ
πολλὰ αὐτοὺς εὐηργετηκέναι, ἅτε καὶ παρὰ τῷ Κομμόδῳ πᾶν
δυναμῆν.

The tradition is that she greatly favored the Christians and did them many kindnesses, as far as she was able to persuade Commodus.

Cassius Dio 73.4.6-7

"The tradition" ἱστορεῖται already casts doubt on the veracity of this claim, since Dio/Xiphilinus does not offer a particular source for this allegation of Marcia's Christian patronage. As a contemporary of Marcia's and a senator under Commodus, Dio may have personally known her and certainly was privy to court politics and gossip. We cannot be certain that this reference to Marcia's Christian charities is merely an addition of the Christian Byzantine tradition, although that is certainly a plausible

56 — Dio, 73.22.4. *SHA Comm.* 17.1-2; Hekster 79-81.

57 — Hekster 81-2.

58 — Dio, 74.16.5; *SHA, Didius Julianus*, 7; *SHA, Pert.* 11.10-11.

explanation. Therefore, it is unclear whether Marcia's pro-Christian policies were known outside the Christian community.

We do possess some indirect evidence of a change in imperial policy during this period. Marcus Aurelius, the previous ruler and last of the "Good Emperors," passed laws mandating public sacrifice in order to appease the gods during the plague and wars of his reign. As an indirect result of these laws, local governors harshly persecuted many Christians who refused to participate in polytheistic worship⁵⁹. After some initial enforcement of his father's religious policies, Commodus changed tactics in the early 180s and practiced greater tolerance towards Christians, although the official prohibitions remained in force⁶⁰. Any evidence of Marcia's influence here is circumstantial at best, although no changes in policy were made until after she became his concubine in 182⁶¹. Three Christian martyrdoms occurred between Commodus' accession to the throne and, at the latest, 185; none are recorded in the last seven years of his reign⁶². At the same time, Commodus made no official statements condoning or permitting Christianity, so any argument relies strongly on a lack of evidence of persecution rather than an explicit change in policy.

Hippolytus reports a specific incident in which Victor, who became Bishop of Rome in the 190s CE, appealed to Marcia to gain mercy for convicted Christians in the mines in Sardinia:

Marcia, a concubine of Commodus, who was a God-loving (θεοφιλα) female, and desired to perform some good work, summoned (προσκαλεσαμένην) the blessed Victor, who was at that time a bishop of the Church, and asked him what martyrs were in Sardinia. Victor delivered to her all their names, but he did not give the name of Callistus, knowing the acts he had committed. Marcia, obtaining her request from Commodus, handed the letter of emancipation to Hyacinthus, a certain eunuch, rather advanced in life... he succeeded in having the martyrs released, with the exception of Callistus. But Callistus himself, dropping on his knees, and weeping, entreated that he likewise might obtain a release. Hyacinthus, therefore, overcome by the captive's begging, requested the governor to grant a release, alleging that permission had been given to himself from Marcia (to liberate Callistus), and that he would make arrangements that there should be no risk to the governor. Now (the governor) was persuaded, and liberated Callistus also. And when the latter arrived at Rome, Victor was very much grieved at what had taken place; but since he was a compassionate man, he took no action in the matter.

59 — Motschmann (2002) 205-71; Keresztes (1968) 340.

60 — Eusebius, *H.E.*, V, 9, I; 21,1.

61 — Keresztes (1969) 375.

62 — Keresztes (1969) 374-5.

Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, 9.2.12

Many Christians are saved from certain death in the Sardinian mines, including a future Pope, Callistus. We might expect greater praise and commemoration from the early Church Fathers. However, this mercy was gained only through the intercession of a concubine, an unpopular emperor, and a morally questionable eunuch. Furthermore, Hippolytus' account is highly influenced by internal Church politics, and he may have deliberately shaded his account to devalue Callistus' status as a martyr. Why is this story of nigh-miraculous rescue tainted by such dubious agents?

Pope Victor I spent much of his ten-year papal reign (~189-199) trying to resolve a controversy over the dating of the celebration of Easter, which had caused major doctrinal rifts in the Asian and African churches⁶³. Victor became unpopular with many of the other early church fathers and historians after excommunicating the Asian prelates for celebrating Easter on a weekday rather than a Sunday⁶⁴. His friendship with Marcia, while beneficial to the individuals rescued from Sardinia, may thus not have improved her own reputation among Christian writers.

Callistus, meanwhile, who would later become Pope himself, was even more mired in early Church controversy and a personal enemy of Hippolytus, the author of this particular text. Hippolytus elsewhere accuses him of corruption and heresy. In this account, Callistus is accidentally saved not through Victor's compassion but through his own cowardly pleas and the intercession of a eunuch and a concubine. While Callistus himself would presumably have been highly grateful to Marcia, we have no surviving texts from his perspective or that of his supporters.

Hippolytus also claims that the Christian eunuch Hyacinthus was Marcia's foster-father and used this connection to gain the freedom of Callistus, who was not included in the initial decree releasing the other prisoners. It is unclear whether Hyacinthus served as a spiritual father to Marcia or actually raised her. As Hippolytus is our only source for this detail, I am disinclined to speculate as to the implications for Marcia's life and relationship to the Christian movement⁶⁵.

Jean Colin argues that Marcia and her allegedly fellow Christian comrade Damostratia, Cleander's wife and another imperial concubine, also caused a Roman governor, Arrius Antoninus, to be punished by Commodus due to his mass execution of forty Christians in Galatia

63 — Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, V, xxiii.

64 — Eusebius — extracts from St. Irenaeus' letter.

65 — Hippolytus, *Phil.*, 9.2.12.

in 177 CE⁶⁶. However, such a theory assumes that Marcia would have been directly connected to any pro-Christian policies, rather than such actions resulting from Commodus' own inclinations. We know that Antoninus was demoted by Commodus but not why. Since this affair took place so early in Marcia's career as a highly placed concubine, a direct connection is difficult to trace.

There seems little reason to doubt the basic facts of the Sardinian incident, our only specific evidence for Marcia's Christian sympathies. Marcia appears to have initiated contact with Victor and then succeeded in procuring amnesty for a number of Christian "martyrs" at his request. The lack of widespread Christian recognition or praise for Marcia's generosity must be due to her association with unpopular figures like Victor and Callistus. Particularly after her fall from power, no Christian authority figures or chroniclers had much to gain from tying their own reputations to that of Marcia's. Furthermore, as an adulterous concubine of a morally dubious Emperor, she herself was not an uncomplicated figure of Christian female virtue. Yet despite her questionable status as a role model, Marcia's connection with Commodus' leniency towards Christians was remembered by Christian chroniclers even centuries later. The 5th century CE historian Eusebius both cites Cassius Dio and directly ascribes the lack of martyrdoms during Commodus to Marcia's influence, for instance⁶⁷.

G. R. Stanton argues that we should not overestimate Marcia's role as a crucial Christian patron during this period, given the scattered comments of historians suggesting a single intervention in a specific case. However, he also admits that there is a notable lack of recorded Christian martyrdoms during Commodus' reign⁶⁸. Certainly, her liberation of the Sardinian martyrs does not necessarily imply that Marcia herself was Christian; Cassius Dio's statement that she "greatly favored the Christians" is the most accurate assessment of her behavior available⁶⁹. The impact of such favor is difficult to measure; how many Christians might have otherwise been martyred during the 180s CE is an unanswerable question.

While Christians were not actively prosecuted during Commodus' reign, it would still have been dangerous for such a highly placed figure to openly practice Christianity, regardless of her personal beliefs. Hippolytus refers to Marcia as θεοφιλα, god-loving, whereas Callistus and Carpophorus are termed πίστος, faithful, or ἀδελφοί, brothers.

66 — J. Colin (1964) 39-48.

67 — Eusebius, *Ecc.Hist* 5.21.2-5.

68 — Stanton (1975) 532; Hekster 185.

69 — CD 73.22.4.

Lampe argues that this terminology implies that Marcia was not Christian herself⁷⁰. While the distinction is noteworthy, *θεοφιλα* still implies some support of the Christian God, although perhaps not exclusive worship of that God. It seems most probable that Marcia found the Christian faith appealing but did not subscribe exclusively to its belief system or refuse to sacrifice to the divine cult.

Roman elites who were sympathetic supporters of Judaism but not Jewish converts are often called “*θεοσεβής*,” or “God-fearing.” However, this term may mean “pious” rather than explicitly referring to worship of the Jewish or Christian God⁷¹. It often refers to Roman elites who were presumptively not Jewish converts, but the word could also be used to describe actual devout Jews. Nero’s Empress, Poppaea Sabina, for instance, is referred to as *θεοσεβής* by Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, for her sympathetic treatment of Jewish envoys, but she herself was almost certainly not an exclusive follower of the Jewish God⁷². Josephus uses a different term for Greeks “who revere our practices,” who are actual converts if not strict monotheists.

The term “*θεοφιλα*” is rarer and unattested in a Christian context before this point⁷³. Hippolytus might have been trying to draw a contrast between the loving God of Christianity and the fearsome God of the Hebrew Bible. Its basic similarity to *θεοσεβής* suggests a common meaning of “sympathizer.” The ambiguity leaves Marcia’s own religious beliefs unclear, which may have been a deliberate choice on Hippolytus’ part.

The early Church did not respond to Marcia’s generosity by beatifying her or otherwise honoring her, further suggesting that while she may have protected Christians, she may not have been an active member of their faith. The incident demonstrates Marcia’s power and ability to influence imperial policy in this regard, although there is little way of knowing what priority Commodus himself placed on persecuting Christians. Tomassini suggests that Marcia favored Christians as a means of bolstering her own support and gaining a loyal faction, but this seems an unlikely motive, given the precarious position of the Christian religious leaders at the time⁷⁴. Marcia might have patronized many other more powerful and less

70 — Hipp. 9.12.10; Lampe 336.

71 — Feldman (1950) 203.

72 — Flavius Josephus, *AJ* 20.8.11.195; Feldman 206.

73 — Other uses of *θεοφιλα* include: Ph. 2.415, Luc. JTr.47 (Sup.), Agath.3.13, Cod. Just.1.1.5.4 (Sup.); only the Philo reference is specifically Jewish or Christian.

74 — Tomassini (1994) 81-2. Hekster notes that Marcia was already in a very strong political position, as the Emperor’s favorite mistress and confidante, and did not need assistance from a politically dubious religious cult. (Hekster: 79).

dangerous factions; it is also unclear what use a large number of Christian clients might have been to her.

The erasure of Marcia's reputation and possible beatification as a Christian benefactress contrasts notably with the early Christian discourse about Flavia Domitilla, a niece of the Emperor Domitian through his sister Domitilla the Younger, or possibly two separate Domitillas, one of whom was Christian and the other not⁷⁵. In 96 CE, one Flavia Domitilla's husband, the consul Titus Flavius Clemens, was executed by Domitian for political reasons, and at the same time she was exiled to an island (Knudsen, 1945, p. 28). Contemporaneous sources such as Tacitus and Suetonius do not mention Domitilla at all. However, Cassius Dio, writing 125 years later, claims that both husband and wife were charged with atheism and practicing Jewish customs, an accusation that later writers linked with claims that Domitilla and her husband were actually early Christians⁷⁶.

While no early Christian sources mention Flavia Domitilla as a Christian, Eusebius in the early 5th century CE identifies a virginal niece of Clemens named Domitilla as a Christian martyr persecuted by Domitian⁷⁷. Other major Christian writers of late antiquity, such as Jerome, also promulgate the tale of the virtuous imperial lady Flavia Domitilla, exiled for her faith by the evil persecutor Domitian, although their details about Domitilla herself vary notably⁷⁸. By the Middle Ages, Flavia Domitilla had become an official saint of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, although she was later removed from the official roster of Catholic saints in 1969.

We have only one surviving piece of possibly contemporaneous evidence of Flavia Domitilla's religious inclinations. A cemetery in the Christian catacombs was founded on Domitilla's property by her freed-woman nurse, but its connection with Christianity during the late 1st century CE is somewhat more nebulous⁷⁹. This archaeological evidence has led many modern scholars to accept Flavia Domitilla as a secret Christian, even if her religion had no correlation with her husband's execution or her exile⁸⁰. A Jewish midrash, the *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, from approximately 900 CE may also refer to Flavia Domitilla and Clemens as secret Jews⁸¹.

In any case, Flavia Domitilla was upheld in the later Christian tradition as a preeminent example of a virtuous and noble woman who was

75 — Keresztes (1973) 20.

76 — Dio 67.14; Knudsen (1945) 17.

77 — Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.* III.18.

78 — Jerome Ep. 108.7, 31; Coon (2011) 188.

79 — Knudsen (1945) 24-5.

80 — Knudsen (1945) 27-8.

81 — *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2.25.

martyred for her Christian beliefs by one of the paradigmatic wicked and persecuting emperors, Domitian⁸². She served as a role model for later generations of Christian women, despite a lack of any particularly notable intercessions or acts of charity on behalf of other Christians and, indeed, the dubious evidence concerning her own beliefs. Domitilla's fame eclipsed that of Marcia, due probably to a combination of her status as a martyr and, depending on the version, as either virtuous matron or noble virgin. In any case, she was certainly not a concubine turned assassin.

The later example of Melania the Elder, meanwhile, suggests how powerful Christian chroniclers' opinion was in shaping the reputations of early Christian figures, especially women. Although he had originally been her close friend, Jerome condemned and blackened the reputation of the Christian patron Melania after she took the opposing side to him in the Origenist controversy⁸³. Jerome also attempted to expunge his earlier favorable comments about her, although his revision of her representation did not stop the Eastern Orthodox Church from ultimately canonizing her. In Melania the Elder's case, she possessed enough allies among other early Church writers that her memory and deeds were preserved, if tainted by Jerome's insults. However, his slander may have succeeded in preventing her beatification in the Roman Catholic Church. Marcia, on the other hand lacked any such ally in either branch of Christianity.

It is tempting to characterize Marcia as one of the early female Christian leaders who helped spread Christianity, as discussed in many analyses of the role of women and the early Christian church⁸⁴. However, recent studies have demonstrated that the actual conversion impact of Christian women upon the Roman aristocratic elite during the early centuries of Christianity was probably fairly minimal⁸⁵. Averil Cameron notes that the women whose stories were preserved and praised tended to be represented as ascetic virgins or widows, in opposition to highly sexualized, morally dangerous pagan women⁸⁶. In this context, a woman such as Marcia would have been especially problematic; she was a benefactor for Christianity and yet an explicitly sexualized, polyamorous, hedonistic figure. Lacking a convenient moral niche, she largely dropped out of the Christian record of virtuous women.

82 — Keresztes (1973) 17-19. Martyrdom is of course not usually defined as exile to a pleasant Italian island, but the early Christian fathers may have been somewhat generous in their definition.

83 — Jerome Ep.133,3; *CSEL* 56, 246; Murphy (1947) 60; Brown (1961) 5; Salzman (1989) 218.

84 — A. Harnack (1905) 2:335f; Brown (1961) 1-11; Laporte (1982); E. Clark (1983); Brooten (1985) 66: none of these scholars, notably, focus on Marcia.

85 — K. Cooper (1992) 151; M. Salzman (1989) 212.

86 — Averil Cameron (1989) 189.

Marcia's Pagan Legacy

Why did Didius Julianus, his successor Septimius Severus, or later Roman chroniclers not attack Marcia as a treasonous Christian, if her patronage and sympathies towards persecuted Christians were well known? While Julianus did not last long as Emperor, the more successful Septimius Severus returned to a strict enforcement of Marcus Aurelius's religious laws and consequently presided over the deaths of many Christian martyrs⁸⁷. He would certainly have been intolerant of the presence of an influential Christian sympathizer in the imperial court, if Marcia had survived into his reign and her religious patronage remained consistent and public. However, there was no need to smear Marcia with additional unsavory associations; she was already labeled as an emperor's assassin.

Furthermore, Commodus himself was ultimately responsible for the mercy and tolerance shown to Christians during his reign. Since both Severus and Didius Julianus wished to associate themselves with the Antonine dynasty, they sought to rehabilitate Commodus' reputation and would have ignored any questionable religious connections. As later emperors and authors reconstructed the story of Commodus' reign, they chose to represent Marcia as a flagrantly prominent concubine and symbol of the sexual excesses of Commodus' court, rather than as a Christian political agent. Allowing Marcia the status of a religious and political advisor would have glorified both her and, perhaps more importantly, the influence and power of the Christian movement. From the perspective of pagan emperors and historians, the Christians in 192 CE simply were not important enough to merit significant inclusion in their chronicles⁸⁸.

Conclusion

While perhaps the most powerful imperial concubine in Roman history, Marcia has been largely forgotten because neither the surviving pagan nor Christian sources found any advantage in promoting her legacy. However, the erasure of her story is not the typical historical case in which ancient male authors minimize all female accomplishments. It seems likely that her representation would be similar if she was a Marcus or an Antinous. Instead, the accounts of Marcia help reveal how much surviving narratives are shaped by external political concerns and the particular biases of individual authors.

87 — Tertullian, *Ad martyres*.

88 — Keresztes 19-20.

The internal political intrigues of Roman imperial courts undoubtedly shaped the course of history and, in this case, the Christian church, but our ability to assess their impact is severely limited by the nature of our sources. While we can gain some insight by reading in between the lines of Dio and Hippolytus in order to discover the actions of this charitable concubine, we learn more by analyzing the Christian discourse about such charity. It demonstrates that the type or impact of aid given to early Christians did not determine the subsequent veneration of the donor. Church Fathers eulogized saints whose beliefs and deeds accorded with the particular doctrines of those authors. Marcia happened to be ultimately unlucky in her choice of Christian clients.

On the other hand, Septimius Severus' decision not to use Marcia's Christian sympathies as a weapon against her reputation suggests that it was not a sufficiently powerful criticism. We have every reason to think that authors like Hippolytus might have aggrandized the importance of Christians in imperial politics in late 2nd century CE. Christians might have been a minor annoyance from the perspective of Severus. Certainly, a woman like Marcia was vulnerable to many other charges of disloyalty and immorality; accusations of Christianity might have merely muddled the issue.

Although her personal religious beliefs remain unclear, Marcia was both the first high-level public Roman patron of Christians in the imperial court and may have significantly influenced Commodus' policies of religious toleration. We will likely never know the true motivation for her acts of charity, but the various representations of Marcia's deeds provide a vivid demonstration of how indirect biases can easily shape or erase the story of even the most prominent women – or Christians – of antiquity.

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