Julia Domna, her maternal ideology and the Municipium of Gozo

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Epigraphic and other evidence would seem to underscore the popularity Julia Domna enjoyed amongst the Gozitans as much as she did amongst other communities in the Roman Empire. Her motherhood—both real and metaphorical—did not only play an important role in securing her subjects’ loyalty but was also crucial for the promotion of the imperial family’s dynasty. In this respect, dedications to her and to other members of her family might feature on one and the same monument, as might have been the case concerning one such presumed, partially-surviving monument from Gozo.

Keywords: Julia Domna; Gozo; inscription; Roman; Septimius Severus

Introduction: the wider political background

Julia Domna was the second wife of Lucius Septimius Severus, a native of Lepcis Magna in North Africa and Roman Emperor from AD 193 to 211. She was of Syrian origin, hailing from the city of Emesa (today’s Homs, in western Syria). Her participation in politics was largely defined by her role as wife and mother, real and metaphorical (Langford 2013, 6-7, 16, 69, 71-73; Levick 2007, 139) and this same role of hers would prove to be very useful to her husband in the execution of his dynastic plans and ambitions (Langford 2013, 5-6, 16-20, 36, 69, 71-73, 83, 86).

Standing beside her husband during his military campaigns in the East, the Empress’s presence among the troops must have served as a morale-raiser. Her presence at the scene of military operations earned her the title Mater Castrorum/Mother of the (army) Camp, according to her by the Senate on 14th April AD 195, and celebrated annually thereafter. In the eyes of the civilian population, Julia Domna’s metaphorical motherhood of the military signified a particularly close relationship between her and the military—the title meant that the troops were under the protection of the Empress and that, in return, they owed her their protection. More generally, the title expressed a mutual relationship between dynasty and army. Julia Domna’s symbolic patronage or maternal concern for the troops certainly contributed towards her husband’s grip on the military. Even from this point of view, the title may have already proved useful for Severus himself. Statues of Julia Domna would have also been placed in the shrines of the military units. This same title that linked Julia Domna by maternal ties of loyalty and affection to the army had already been given to Faustina Junior, wife of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in a similar situation. Present in her husband’s northern military base, Faustina Junior received the title in AD 174 when multiple incursions coupled with military and political crises made the loyalty of the army all
the more important (Langford 2013, 17, 31-33, 37; Levick 2007, 42-43, 56). The same title is also attached to Julia Maesa, Julia Domna’s sister, and maternal grandmother of Emperor Elagabalus (Levick 2007, 150).

But the title may rather have had other implications for Septimius Severus himself, particularly for the realisation and legitimisation of his dynastic scheme. In his attempt to create a link between himself and the Antonine dynasty, the granting to his wife of a title such as that of Mater Castrorum previously awarded to a woman (Faustina Junior) of the Antonine dynasty would surely have further asserted his claim. In a bid to project himself and his reign as the continuation of the Antonine dynasty, he proclaimed himself as the (adopted) son and heir of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, husband of the above-mentioned Faustina Junior whilst, recalling the

first of the Antonine Emperors Antoninus Pius (who was also Faustina Junior’s father), he added the title Pius to his own cognomina and imperial titles. In so doing, Septimius Severus was associating himself with the prestigious names of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Accompanied by assimilations of Severan and Antonine portraiture, such moves were also meant to be understood as a means of continuity with a great past (Langford 2013, 17-19, 36, 69, 83, 86; Levick 2007, 38, 43-44).

A reported statue of Julia Domna
In 1743 a discovery of large foundation stones together with a large rectangular water cistern were reported at Ix-Xaqqufija (or Ta’ Xaqqufiet) at Gharb, by the eighteenth-century Gozitan scholar and antiquarian Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis (Agius (de Soldanis)
1746, f. 54). On the basis of the evident association between the structure (to which the huge foundation stones belonged) and the nearby water cistern, and also on the basis of the respective descriptions provided by Agius de Soldanis, Ix-Xaqqufija (or Ta’ Xaqqufiet) could have been the site of an agricultural estate or a farm complex perhaps datable to Roman times (Azzopardi 2012, 58). From the same place, the same scholar recorded the discovery, in 1748, of a large marble statue of Julia Domna whose head he kept in his own collection (Agius de Soldanis 1750, 26).

As agricultural estates or farm complexes were owned by wealthy individuals who did not only often have a residence attached to the same estates or farm complexes but could also afford to have them adorned with statues, a possible association between this statue and the presumed agricultural estate or farm complex cannot be completely ruled out (Azzopardi 2012, 58-59). Whether agricultural or otherwise, anthropogenic activity there seems to be also suggested by the surface scatter of ceramic fragments implied by the toponym itself – Ix-Xaqqufija/Ta’ Xaqqufiet: ‘the field littered with ceramic fragments’ (Azzopardi 2012, 59).

A monument to Julia Domna?
The documented corpus of Roman inscriptions found in Gozo includes an inscription (CIL X, 7502) marking a dedication to Julia Domna by the Municipium of Gozo (Figs 1-2). The inscription, which has been recorded by several authors, some of whom had seen it physically, refers to Julia Domna by the title of Mater Castrorum, and was engraved on a small pilaster/pedestal (see below), which may have carried a statue of the imperial lady. The inscription and its translation read as follows:

IVLIAE DOMNAE AVG(VSTAE) MTRI (ASTR)ORVM IMP(eratoris) CAES(ARIS) L(VCII) SEPTIMI SEVERI PERTINACIS AVG(VSTI) [CON]IVGI MVNICIPIVM GAVL(I) P[ECVNIA] P[VLICIA] D(EDIT) CVRANT[E] DAPSI[LIA]NO

Figure 3: What could have been a pedestal (now mutilated) that might have carried an inscription (CIL X, 7502) marking a dedication to Julia Domna. The framed part on the stone indicates the only visible and recognizable remaining letters from the inscription’s bottom line. These seem to correspond to the highlighted letters (with the exception of the reconstructed ones) in the last line of the inscription reproduced here (CIL X, 7502). The pedestal is kept in the Gozo citadel, next to the latter’s old gate. It survives to a maximum height of about 80cm (Photograph: the author).

N.B. With the exception of the reconstructed letters, those highlighted in the last line of the above inscription are the only visibly and recognisably remaining letters on the presumably surviving inscribed stone or pilaster/pedestal (see the correspondingly framed part in Fig. 3) and which match the corresponding ones documented in the inscription reproduced above (see also below). The reconstructed cognomen Dapsi[lia]nus (in our inscription it appears in the ablative absolute: Dapsi[lia]no) might actually be a cognomen Dapsilis (see Solin 1970, 42) with an -anus ending, possibly indicating adoption of the person concerned whilst assuming the function of a praenomen for the same person (see Calabi
Limentani 1968, 158). Meaning ‘sumptuous’, ‘plentiful’ or ‘abundant’, the epithet/cognomen Dapsilis might imply that the curator in question was a rich man.

Translation:
The Municipium of Gozo offered (this statue/monument) through public donations to Julia Domna Augusta, mother of the (army) camp and wife of the Emperor Caesar Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus, when Dapsilianus was curator.

However, the same pilaster or pedestal seems to have carried another inscription on a separate side, as observed by Lupi (1753, (Lettera X), 58; 1785, (II, Lettera X), 120-1; see also Castellus 1769, 29). Lupi had physically seen both inscriptions (as well as other inscriptions) during his visit to Gozo in 1735 (Lupi 1753, (Lettera X), 54-60; 1785, (II, Lettera X), 117-22). The latter inscription that was also seen and recorded by Lupi mentions Julia Domna’s husband, Emperor Septimius Severus (Fig. 4), and their son Caracalla (Fig. 5), but it may have, in fact, been dedicated to their other son Geta (Fig. 6), whose name no longer appears on this last inscription. It may have been deliberately erased in an act of damnatio memoriae following his assassination. The inscription (CIL X, 7503) is also reproduced hereunder along with a translation:

[[IMP(ERATORI) CAES(ARI) P(VBLIO) SEP]TI
[MIO GETAE PIO AVG[V[S]]]
IMP(ERATORIS) M(ARCI) AVRELI[I] ANTON[I]NI
[PII AVG(VSTI) [FRATRI] L(VCII) SEPTI
[MI SEVERI PII PERTI
NACIS AVG(VSTI) ARAB[ICI]
[AD]I[ABENICI PARTH[I]
CI MAXIM[I] [FILIO]
ORDO DECVRION[V[M]
CVR[A]NTE [\[]\[]\] PVP[\[]]
[---]MO [---]STO

N.B. The reconstruction of the first two lines (of the inscription), which seem to have been erased following the damnatio memoriae of Geta after his murder in AD 211, is as proposed by Mommsen (1883, 775 (7503)) and adopted by Busuttil (1976, 276-77).

The Ordus Decurionum (dedicated this monument) to the Emperor Caesar Publius Septimius Geta Pius Augustus, brother of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Augustus, son of Lucius Septimius Severus Pius Pertinax, Augustus, Arabicus Adiabenicus Parthicus Maximus, when ---- was curator.

The pilaster/pedestal with the inscriptions was kept for a while near St George’s Church in Rabat (today’s Victoria) but it was later moved — along with other ancient inscriptions — to the stairway leading up to the Citadel when works on a new access to it were completed in 1622. The pilaster/pedestal in question was placed at the top of the stairway (Abela 1647, 212, 215). This appears to be corroborated by Lupi (1753, (Lettera X), 58; 1785, (II, Lettera X), 121).
At this point, Abela (1647, 215) says that the former inscription (CIL X, 7502) was to be seen on another base/pedestal, seemingly implying that this was a separate base/pedestal from that containing the latter inscription (CIL X, 7503). However, as the latter inscription (CIL X, 7503) does not immediately precede the former (CIL X, 7502) in Abela’s list (in fact, there are two more inscriptions listed between the two inscriptions under review), it sounds more logical that, when speaking of another base/pedestal, Abela could have mentioned this in relation to that base/pedestal on which the immediately preceding inscription, namely CIL X, 7501 (Mommsen 1883, 774 (7501)), was carved. This surviving inscription (CIL X, 7501 marking a dedication to Ceres Julia Augusta) is, in fact, also carved on a statue base/pedestal. This lack of clarity also led Lupi to question whether Abela (1647, 212, 215) and Gualtherius (1625, 52) had observed, as he did, that the two inscriptions (i.e. CIL X, 7502 and 7503) were on two (separate) sides of the same base/pedestal (Lupi 1753, (Lettera X), 58; 1785, (II, Lettera X), 121). Nor did Abela (1647) and Gualtherius (1625) make it clear, as Lupi (1753; 1785) did, that they had physically seen the inscriptions themselves.

As recently as 2017, a few surviving letters from the bottom line of an inscription carved on the face of what could have been a now-mutilated pedestal (Fig 3) kept in the Gozo Citadel were brought to the attention of the present writer by Mr Daniel Cilia and Mr John Cremona. Following a close examination of these few surviving letters, the present author identified the following lettering: …DAPSI …NO. A search for these letters in the documented Roman inscriptions from Gozo reveals that these same letters were recorded by Gualtherius (1625, 52) and Abela (1647, 215), followed by Muratorius (1739, 249) and Anon (ACM, Misc. 81), f. 169v) and, subsequently, by Agius (de Soldanis) (1746, f. 107), Ciatar (1749, 8; 1772, 580) and Saint-Priest (1791, 56) at the end of an inscription to Julia Domna (see also Bres 1816, 314; Caruana 1882, 148; 1899, 299), and which is the same inscription given above, namely CIL X, 7502. Differing slightly from the above sources, Lupi (1753, (Lettera X), 58; 1785, (II, Lettera X), 120) followed by Castellus (1769, 29), and later, Mommsen (1883, 775 (7502)) and Pirino (2012, 1 (EDR112581)) give …SI …NO, which, nonetheless, also correspond. Perhaps for reasons of lack of space, the above-mentioned authors transfer the last two letters along with the preceding empty space left by missing letters to a separate (final) line.

Further examination of the stone revealed that while its mouldings seem to have originally gone all around it, its opposite side also carried another inscription above the traces of a raised edge that extends around the entire stone. At present, the pilaster/pedestal is positioned against a wall. Therefore it was not possible to view this opposite face. However, with the aid of a mirror inserted in the space between the wall and the pilaster/pedestal, traces of lettering on this side of the stone could be made out, but any attempt to decipher these mutilated letters proved unsuccessful. However, in view of what has been said above, this inscription could easily be CIL X, 7503, which mentions Julia Domna’s husband, Septimius Severus, and their son Caracalla, although it may have been dedicated to their other son Geta.

The surviving mouldings on the stone also seem to suggest that the stone was itself a pedestal or plinth, or possibly an altar. However, if the inscription to Julia Domna (CIL X, 7502) was originally engraved on this plinth as is being hypothesized here, then the latter could be ruled out on account of the inscription to Julia Domna, wherein the imperial lady was not deified. Thus if the stone was indeed a plinth, it may have supported a statue of Julia Domna, while the inscription on the plinth face (i.e. the inscription to Julia Domna) may have recorded the dedication of this statue by the Municipium of Gozo (see reproduced inscription and translation above). As the caduceus (which in the Graeco-Roman world serves to invoke peace) that sometimes forms part of Julia Domna’s iconography is taken as a sign of her status as Mater Castrorum like the sceptre of Faustina Junior (Levick 2007, 135-36), likewise a Mater Castrorum as shown above, it is not at all unlikely
that any statue possibly borne by the presumed pedestal could have carried any of these symbols.

The monument was evidently set up as an official initiative by the Municipium of Gozo originally to honour or pay tribute to Julia Domna, either as a sign of loyalty, gratitude for favours received, or to court favour in expectation of benefits. What is sure is that the Gozo Municipium was willing to spend money to this end. Such dedications by loyal subjects were commonplace throughout the empire (see Langford 2013, 11; Levick 2007, 137-39, 141). The monument could have been erected as a form of response to imperial propaganda among the Gozitan population (Langford 2013, 10). The tribute paid to her, however, could have also been extended to other members of her family. Such extended tribute could have led to the later inclusion of a second inscription on the opposite side of the pedestal. As Julia Domna always travelled with her husband and sons, dedications frequently encompass the entire imperial family (Levick 2007, 137), and it is certainly possible that it was the same in this local case.

Further to the above, the naming of Julia Domna as *Mater Castrorum* in our inscription cannot necessarily be taken as an indirect reference to a military presence on the island. Contrary to what one might expect, Julia Domna was rarely honoured as *Mater Castrorum* by military populations (or in military inscriptions). Nor was she presented to them with this title (Langford 2013, 11, 17-18, 23-24, 36-37). Whenever the title was used in a military context, this was generally done for purposes other than those to express a parental or loyal relationship between dynasty and army (Langford 2013, 24). It was generally used addressing civilian audiences that the title was meant to give an impression of a close relationship between the
imperial family and the military. To a civilian population (like that in Gozo), use of the title with this propagandistic connotation must have been a comforting statement that guaranteed continuity and stability and, therefore, garnered civilian support for the emperor and his dynastic ambitions (Langford 2013, 36-37, 47). Furthermore, honouring the entire imperial family through both inscriptions (i.e. CIL X, 7502 and 7503) on the same pedestal might have reflected a local (Gozitan) response to the emphasis of imperial propaganda on the promotion of the dynasty as a whole (as in Langford 2013, 45).

On the basis of internal evidence, the inscription to Julia Domna (CIL X, 7502) is being dated to AD 195 which could, thus, have been the year when the dedication to her took place and the presumed monument was set up. The suggested year also coincides with a period when her husband Septimius Severus most needed support from civilian populations (Langford 2013, 37-38). Julia Domna received the title Mater Castrorum as it appears in this inscription, on 14th April AD 195 (Bivona 1970, 33 and above). In the same year, Septimius Severus assumed the titles Pius and Adiabenicus (Calabi Limentani 1968, 471), which, however, do not appear in this inscription. Therefore, the inscription must have been made sometime during the year AD 195, after the 14th April, but before Septimius Severus received these new titles. The other inscription (CIL X, 7503) presumed to have been on the other side of the stone is dated to AD 211. This is based on the fact that in this inscription the name Lucius Septimius Severus is not preceded by the titles imperator and Caesar, whilst the name of Septimius's elder son Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Caracalla) precedes that of his father (Septimius Severus). It therefore suggests that the inscription was not made before the death of Septimius Severus on 4th February AD 211. On the other hand, as Geta was murdered by his elder brother Caracalla on 26th December of that same year, then it appears that the inscription was made in AD 211 (Busuttil 1976, 276-77). Bonanno proposes the same year (1981, 506). This may suggest that the last inscription may have been added slightly later than the previous one, but before the inscribed name of Geta was erased from it following his murder. It is suggested here that the later addition of this inscription (CIL X, 7503) on another side of the same monument was meant to accommodate an evolution of imperial propaganda or to address changing demands of the imperial family (as in Langford 2013, 78). In any case, since both inscriptions are related to the same family, they could easily have been placed together on the same monument. It is unclear whether the heavy mutilations evident on the stone at present were deliberate as a result of some form of iconoclastm, or simply, a result of neglect along the passage of time.

Finally, it should be stressed that a statue of Julia Domna which could have stood on this pedestal likely had nothing to do with the one reportedly discovered at Ix-Xaqqifija (or Ta’ Xaqqifiet) at Gharb in 1748. The inscribed pedestal from Rabat (Victoria) was already known in the 17th century when its inscriptions were first recorded, but no statues are ever mentioned in association with it or, at least, in its close proximity. On the other hand, the statue from Ix-Xaqqifija/Ta’ Xaqqifiet was discovered more than a century later in a place considerably distant from Rabat/Victoria.

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