

# I. РЕЛІГІЙНІ ПРОЦЕСИ В ІСТОРИЧНОМУ РОЗВИТКУ

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Anita SMYK

## Goddess Vesta on Julia Domna's coins in the propaganda policy of Septimius Severus

The propaganda policy of Emperor Septimius Severus is analyzed. The goals that the emperor wanted to achieve by minting coins with the image of the Roman goddess Vesta are defined.

*Keywords:* Rome, Religion, Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, Vesta, the propaganda policy, coins

Аніта Смик

### Богиня Веста на монетах Юлії Домни в пропагандистській політиці Септимія Севера

Аналізується пропагандистська політика імператора Септимія Севера. Авторка визначає цілі, яких намагався досягнути імператор, карбуючи монети із зображенням римської богині Вести.

*Ключові слова:* Рим, релігія, Септимій Север, Юлія Домна, Веста, пропагандистська політика, монети

What is so extraordinary is the high position of women, wives and mothers from Syria of the Severus dynasty emperors. Obviously, this position was informal, but unique throughout the existence of the *Imperium Romanum*. In particular Julia Domna who was honored with official titles like no other woman in the imperial house. The emperors of the Severus dynasty were able to create a new propaganda framework, guaranteeing imperial women an unprecedented presence in public life [11].

Erich Kettenhofen [10] and Sonja Nadolny [15] prepared monographs about all women of the Severan dynasty. Detailed research on Julia Domna was published by Barbara Levick [13] and Susann Lusnia [14].

Septimius Severus was Roman Emperor from 193–211. He came from Lepcis Magna in Africa today known as Libya, in the romanized family of the local aristocracy. He has had a typical administrative career. In 192 he was entrusted with the governorship of Upper

Pannonia, where three legions were stationed. After the murder of Emperor Pertinax in Rome on March 28, 193, the Praetorian Guard auctioned the imperial power and proclaimed Didius Julian emperor. The circumstances in which he obtained the crown, and above all the fact that he did not have the means to fulfill the 'election' promises made to the army, aroused more and more dissatisfaction of the Roman elite. The culmination point was reached when almost simultaneously three provincial governors were named emperors by their legions: Septimius Severus (*Pannonia Superior*), Pescennius Niger (*Syria*) and Clodius Albinus (*Brittania*).

Severus was proclaimed emperor by his legions at Carnuntum on April 9, 193. He hastily formed an alliance with Clodius, supported by the legions of Gallia and Spain, conferring on him the title of *Caesar*, before moving with the legions towards Rome. Didius Julian was sentenced to death, so the senate recognized Severus as emperor. In early July, Severus left for the East to pacify the threat posed by Pescennius Niger. In 194, Severus defeated his rival army at the Battle of Issus in Cilicia. It was expected that now Severus would turn against his recent ally, Clodius Albinus. Severus openly declared war when he gave his eldest son Caracalla a title of Caesar. Severus forced the Senate to recognize Albin as an enemy of the state, and finally defeated his army on February 19, 197 in the Battle of Lugdunum [4; 8; 9].

Julia Domna was the second wife of Emperor Septimius Severus. She came from the Syrian city of Emesa from a very wealthy and respected family. Her father Julius Bassianus held the hereditary office of the high priest of the sun god Elagabalus. [16; 17, p. 162–165] In 180, the future emperor Septimius Severus was in Syria as a legate of the fourth *Scythian* legion. Most likely, during this time he met the family of his future wife. He chose Julia as his wife, because according to the horoscope her husband would become the ruler. The wedding took place in Lugdunum (today's Lyon) in 187. On April 4, 188, Julia gave birth to her first son Caracalla. On March 7, 189, the younger son of Geta was born [2; 12, p. 78–79].

Forty-two years long reign of the Severus dynasty fell on a difficult time. The three predecessors of the founder of the dynasty, Lucius Septimius Severus, were murdered as a result of the conspiracies of Rome's political elites. Severus, who ruled over the Empire for eighteen years, had to prove his military genius and political brilliance from the very beginning. Due to his firm politics, he managed to build a strong foundation for a new dynasty. Julia, thanks to a very high position at the imperial court, was extremely helpful in promoting his idea. [6] It was the result of Severus' completely deliberate policy, so that the image of his spouse reflected the prosperity and agreement and became a symbol of a suitable, exemplary family associated with the Roman tradition.

Severus, due to his "provincial" origin, was forced to refer to the ancient Roman tradition. This was noticeable in the details of the organization in 204 *ludi saeculares*, the course of which was based on the celebration of this holiday by Octavian Augustus. [18] Vesta's direct link with the imperial family occurred as a result of actions of Octavian Augustus, when he occupied function of *pontifex maximus*. [1, p. 245, 252–253].

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Vesta was an ancient Roman guardian of the hearth. The main temple of this goddess was situated on the *Roman Forum*. In the Temple of Vesta 'Eternal fire' was burning, symbolizing the stability and durability of the Roman state. [19, p. 148–156]

The early issues of Julia Domna's coins, both senatorial and imperial, contained the VESTA legend, without any goddess epithets [20, № 538; 17: № 843] In the later issues the goddess title was expanded. The legend of VESTA MATER (Vesta mother) [20, № 583; 17: № 586] and VESTA SANCTA (Vesta saint) [20, № 587] appeared on the coins of Domna.

On coins, Vesta is depicted sitting (*il. 1*) or standing (*il. 2*) in a veil holding *palladium* and *sceptrum*. On coins with the legend VESTA SANCTA, the goddess holds a plate instead of palladium (*see again il. 2*), as well as a part of the issue with the legend VESTA MATER (*il. 3*) [3].



*Il. 1. Julia Domna, BM inv. R.15774, © The Trustees of the British Museum*



*Il. 2. Julia Domna, BM inv. 1930,0812.133, © The Trustees of the British Museum*



*Il. 3. Julia Domna, BM inv. 1992,0509.36, © The Trustees of the British Museum*

A different iconography is shown by the ‘circumstantial’ issue of Julia Domna’s coins with the legend of VESTA MATER, most likely commemorating the reconstruction (supervised by Domna) of the Temple of Vesta, which was destroyed by a fire in 191 [5]. The reverse of these coins depicts a round temple with an altar on which a holy fire burns, and vestals offering sacrifices on it. The individual variants of the sides differ in the number of vestals shown: one (*il. 4*), two (*il. 5*), six (*il. 6*) or four vestals and two children [17, № 594a]. The reverse depicting four vestals along with two children, accompanied by the legend VESTA MATER (stamped during Severus) [20, № 893], was reused during the reign of Caracalla in the Senate issue, but the legend was changed to VESTA [20, № 607]. A similar maneuver was used for the presentation of six vestals [20, № 392, № 586].



*Il. 4. Julia Domna, BM inv. R.15260, © The Trustees of the British Museum*

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*Il. 5. Julia Domna, BM inv. 1946,1004.834, © The Trustees of the British Museum*



*Il. 6. Julia Domna, BM inv. R.12652, © The Trustees of the British Museum*

Severus pursued a conscious information policy. The simplest and most accessible form of information, and thus propaganda, were coins at that time. The message reached all social strata of the empire. No matter if someone was a supporter of the emperor or not, they had to use coins with his image. The author of the dynasty's propaganda policy, Septimius Severus, was well aware of the fact that the basis for maintaining power is the combination of military strength [7] and the dynastic stability of the state. Understanding these dependencies determined activities in the ideological sphere of the new dynasty.

Summarizing the above considerations, it should be noted that the propaganda policy during the reign of Severus was very carefully thought out and, above all, efficiently presented on that time mass media, i.e. coins.

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