

Reviving a Roman Empress: Creating a Fictionalized Narrative around Galla Placidia

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During a Roman History course at Bowdoin, I discovered a young princess who was kidnapped by barbarians, exerted her influence on them and became their queen, returned to her family, was exiled to Constantinople, and finally returned to seize the throne for her son. Despite the fascinating details of her life story, Galla Placidia, the Empress Regent of the Western Roman Empire remains largely unknown. I felt that hers was a story that needed to be told, and resolved to do so myself. My goal was to write a historical fiction novel to entertain and inform people about her life. However, to attempt this, I needed to do a large amount of research on her and on fourth- and fifth-century Roman Empire, which was my focus for the summer.

I began my summer research by reading three biographies about Placidia's life, Oost's *Galla Placidia Augusta: a Biographical Essay*, Salisbury's *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of Empire*, and Sivan's *Galla Placidia: The Last Roman Empress*. These books gave me a good outline of the major events of her life, and I was able to use the books' footnotes and bibliography to find primary sources that referenced Placidia. The next phase of the research was to track down these primary sources – letters, poems, sermons, and the records of ancient historians. This was difficult, because many of these ancient sources would only mention Galla Placidia in passing, perhaps only in one line or an oblique reference for me to draw from. But still these references hinted at new and fascinating information. I began compiling a timeline, recording her life events and which source I found them in. These sources gave me a good idea of how she and the people around her were viewed in antiquity, which I could use as the foundation for their fictionalized characterizations in my novel. I even found a letter she wrote, which helped me to imitate and develop her voice in my writing. Towards the end of the summer, I started expanding into secondary sources, hoping to learn more about the physical geography of cities such as Rome and Ravenna, and the role of women in the ancient world, which is not usually the focus of ancient texts. These secondary sources allowed me to visualize a more dimensional ancient world to write about.

I also wished to learn more about historical fiction in general. I read Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, which are two well-known historical fiction novels that take place in ancient Rome. These books are both written in first person, as if the character is looking back on their life and recording their experience for posterity. I decided that was a technique that I wanted to adopt for my story, and that Galla Placidia would be recording her adventures for her two granddaughters, whose historical experiences parallel Placidia's in many ways. At the end of the summer, I began to draft the book, putting together what I had learned about the world and people around her.

Some things about Galla Placidia will always remain a mystery. We will probably never know when exactly she was born, or whether she married the Visigoth King Athaulf willingly, or why she sentenced her aunt to death on flimsy evidence. My book can only speculate, given the facts I have. Yet, all these facts pointed towards a woman who was ambitious, pious, stubborn, resilient, and intelligent, with an unshakable faith in the glory and power of Rome at a time in which the empire was falling apart. My work is not done, however. I hope to visit the American Numismatic Society to learn about late antique coins, and I will continue my writing during the school year as an honors project. I am very thankful for all the research and knowledge I have acquired this summer which will serve me well in those future endeavors.

Faculty Mentor: Robert Sobak, Brock Clarke

Funding Provided by the Surdna Fellowship

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