

# Book Review: *Rome's Christian Empress*

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## Book Under Review

Salisbury, Joyce E. 2015. *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

In *Rome's Christian Empress*, Joyce Salisbury offers a fictionalized biography of Empress Galla Placidia. Salisbury provides a comprehensive narrative of Placidia's life, detailing the theological debates of her lifetime and the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. This narrative addresses the lack of substantial scholarship on Placidia, who is often easily cast aside because she is female, and evaluates her reign as regent and her contribution to the development of the Christian Empire.

Salisbury effectively narrates Placidia's life and fills in gaps in knowledge by drawing on political and religious sources. Through the use of primary religious sources, particularly the letters and texts of Claudian and Augustine, Salisbury convincingly explains developments in theology and the environment in which Placidia lived. Through her creative and smooth writing style, complex theological issues and debates are woven into the narrative to illustrate Placidia's family background and explain the difficulties she encountered. The intellectual debate, in which Augustine was central, is particularly well articulated and used to illustrate the struggle between Rome's pagan history and the gradual shift to Christianity. This is done to contextualize and explain Placidia's patronage of Catholic monuments, artwork, and the overpowering of Arian Christians.

As a fictionalized biography, this text is challenging as Salisbury sets out to provide a comprehensive narrative of Placidia's life, but the genre makes it difficult to determine its academic relevance and use. In its presentation, there is some ambiguity for the reader who wishes to distinguish whether this is a biography or a realistic work with fictional elements. The introduction and first two chapters discuss the lack of attention to Placidia's childhood in scholarship, but this is not remedied by the current work. Salisbury takes the liberty to make small, but multiple assumptions about Placidia's upbringing. This is problematic in that an image of Placidia is thus created without sufficient historical support. From a storytelling standpoint, a

disjunction is created in the narrative as Salisbury fails to effectively connect and address the missing links. The liberties taken do not tie together the first part of the novel, concerning Theodosius's reign and the impact of Placidia's later rule, an aim that is explicitly stated.

Despite this slight criticism of the early part of the text, Salisbury carefully blends primary sources in later sections of her narrative to create a convincing and supported account of the theological debates in this period. This effectively displays how Placidia, as a woman, had a strong and direct role in bringing Christianity to the empire. The book recasts Placidia as far more significant than a mere, inconspicuous detail in Roman history.