

MINOR WORKS AND MATERIALS

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Could a heretic be a beautiful woman in Socrates of Constantinople's and Sozomenus's eyes?

In their *Historia Ecclesiastica* Socrates of Constantinople and Hermias Sozomenus mention women of various marital and social status. We know some of their names, others are anonymous and we can only learn that they were wives, daughters, widows or virgins. Either way, they appear in the background of the historians' narrations about the history of the Church as well as records of political events. Of all women, both Socrates and Sozomenus devoted most attention to empresses. Among them there was an exceptionally beautiful woman: Empress Justina, the wife of Valentinian I, who was, however, a follower of Arianism, so in Socrates's and Sozomenus's eyes she was a heretic; but can a heretic be beautiful? How was Justina presented by the aforementioned church historians? Did Socrates and Sozomenus, who, to a big extent, based his *Historia Ecclesiastica* on the Socrates's work¹, really perceive that empress similarly. Did he intentionally

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¹ The relation between Sozomenus's and Socrates's texts has been pointed out several times. See G.C. Hansen, *Einleitung*, [in:] *Sozomenus, Kirchengeschichte*, eds I. Bidez, G.Ch. Hansen, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller", Neue Folge, Bd. IV, Berlin 1995, pp. XLV–XLVII; G.F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories. Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius*, Paris 1977, p. 205; G. Sabbah, *Introduction*, [in:] *Sozomène, Histoire Ecclésiastique*, vol. I–II, eds B. Grillet, G. Sabbah, "Sources Chrésiennes" no 306, Paris 1983, p. 59;

introduce significant changes to the image created by his predecessor? These are the questions which I will try to answer in this article, especially as, despite the developing area of research concerning women in late antiquity, no scholar has addressed this issue so far.

Socrates introduced Justina to his narration in *Historia Ecclesiastica* in a sensational fragment about bigamy in the emperor's family. In his account, Emperor Valentinian I, while his wife Severa was still alive, married another woman, Justina². The historian stressed that the ruler, before his second marriage, had not got rid of the first wife, with whom he had a son called Gratian³. What is more, he passed and announced a law stating, that every subject of the ruler, who expressed such a wish, would be allowed to marry

F. Young, *From Nicaea to Chakedon*, London 1983, p. 32; T.D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius. Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, Cambridge 1993, p. 206; T. Urbainczyk, *Observations on the differences between the Church Histories of Socrates and Sozomen*, "Historia" 1997, vol. XLVI, pp. 355–356. Peter van Nuffelen (*Un Héritage de Paix et de Piété. Étude sur les histoires ecclésiastiques de Socrate et de Sozomène*, Leuven–Paris–Dudley 2004) devoted a whole monograph to similarities and differences of both *Historia Ecclesiastica*. According to Paweł Janiszewski (*Żywioły w służbie propagandy, czyli o czyjej stronie stoi Bóg. Studium kłesk i rzadkich fenomenów przyrodniczych u historyków Kościoła w IV i V wieku*, [in:] *Chrześcijaństwo u schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze*, eds T. Derda, E. Wipszycka, vol. III, Kraków 2000, p. 153) Sozomenus "wanted to write a text competing with Socrates's account, closer to the canons of classic literature and the tastes of intellectual circles of Constantinople". In my opinion, the dependence of Sozomenus's work on Socrates's text was due to the involvement of the former in the conflicts inside the Church which had its climax after the synod at Ephesus (*latrocinium efesinum*) in 449. His *Historia Ecclesiastica* dedicated to Emperor Theodosius II could have been an attempt to persuade the ruler to change his ecclesiastical policy, but if it was to be successful, it had to be written quickly. Thus, Sozomenus reinterpreted and broadened the formerly written work of Socrates; see S. Bralewski, *Obraz papieżstwa w historiografii kościelnej wczesnego Bizancjum*, Łódź 2006, pp. 274–278.

² She was probably of Sicilian origin and she was related to many important Roman families; see J. Rougé, *Justine, la belle Sicilienne*, "Latomus" 1974, no 33, pp. 676–679. François Chausson (*Stemmatta Aurea: Constantin, Justine, Théodose. Revendications généalogiques et idéologie impériale au IVe s.*, Rome 2007, pp. 160–188) treated her as the great-granddaughter of Constantius and thus the great-niece of Constantine the Great. Because of her relations with the family of Constantine, her origins could be also derived from Illyria, the fact that might explain her Arian beliefs. See D. Woods, *The constantinian origin of Justina (Themistius, Or. 3.43b)*, "The Classical Quaterly" 2004, No. 54, pp. 325–327.

³ Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* (further on: HE), IV 31, 10; 15, ed. G.C. Hansen, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller", Neue Folge, Bd. I, Berlin 1995, pp. 267–268.

two legal wives⁴. The historian specially assured the readers that such a law really existed (καὶ ὁ μὲν νόμος πρόκειται)⁵. To make the issue even more controversial, the historian pointed out that it was Severa, although she was a woman, who first eulogized over Justina's beauty and shared her impressions with her husband. Severa herself learned the charms of the girl very well, since she took care of her as a *girl without a father*⁶ and allowed for such an intimacy between them that they even had baths together and so, which the historian failed to write openly, did not hide their nudity from each other⁷. The historian stressed that Justina was a beautiful virgin⁸. In the further part of his narration, he wrote that from the emperor's relationship with Justina four children were born, Valentinian the Younger, as well as daughters: Justa, Grata and Galia, the two former of whom remained virgins throughout their lives and the third one, Galia, got married to Theodosius I⁹.

Later in his account, Socrates pictured Justina as a follower of Arianism¹⁰ and claimed that, while her husband was alive, she had

⁴ Socrates, HE IV 31, 16, p. 268.

⁵ Socrates, HE IV 31, 17, p. 268. Such a law never existed; see J. Rougé, *La pseudo-bigamie de Valentinien Ier*, "Cahiers d'Histoire" 1958, no 3, pp. 5–15; A.D. Manfredini, *Valentiniano I e la bigamia*, "Studi in onore di Cesare Sanfilippo", Milano 1985, vol. VII, pp. 361–386.

⁶ According to Socrates (HE IV 31, 11–12, p. 267) her father Justin, the superior of the Picenum province, was killed on the command of Emperor Constantius II due to his prophetic dream predicting that his descendant would become an emperor. In fact, he was one of the followers of usurper Magnentius to whom he had married his daughter (see Zosimos, *Historia nova*, IV 19,1; 43,1, ed. F. Paschoud, 2, Paris 1979, pp. 279–280; p. 311) and this was probably the reason for the capital punishment that he was sentenced to.

⁷ Socrates, HE IV 31, 13–14, pp. 267–268.

⁸ Socrates, HE IV 31, 13; 14, pp. 267–268. Jean Rougé (*Justine...*, p. 677) was of the opinion that «Pour ce qui est de sa beauté, réelle ou non, il nous est impossible de le savoir, elle découle uniquement du récit graveleux de Socrate». But also Zosimos (*Historia nova*, IV 43,1, p. 311) wrote about her extraordinary beauty. However, she was not a virgin anymore, since it was her second marriage. Unless her first marriage was white, as Jean Rougé believed (*Justine...*, p. 677). According to Liz James (*Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, London 2001, pp. 63–64), Justina drew Valentinian's attention because of her marriage with Magnentius.

⁹ Socrates, HE IV 31, 17–18, p. 268.

¹⁰ Justina, as a follower of a doctrine accepted in Ariminum, belonged to the homean parties. In Milan which before Ambrose's election, between 355–373, was ruled by the Arian bishop Auxentius, the homean parties were very powerful. See D.W. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, Oxford 1995, p. 78, pp. 112–113; T.D. Barnes, *Valentinian, Auxentius and*

no possibilities of acting to the disadvantage of those who believed in consubstantialism, but when he died and she took care of his underage son, she opposed Ambrose, the bishop of Milan¹¹. According to the historian, she was planning to send him to exile but she encountered resistance from the people, who sympathized with him very strongly and openly withstood her will¹². Only Maxim's usurpation and the assassination of the 24-year-old Caesar Gratian could pacify Justina's anger against Ambrose¹³. Surprisingly, Rufi-

Ambrose, "Historia" 2002, vol. LI, pp. 235–236. See also M.S. Williams, *Auxentius of Milan: From Orthodoxy to Heresy*, "Studia Patristica" 2013, vol. LXVI, pp. 263–272.

¹¹ Socrates, HE V 11, 3–5, p. 285. The issue was presented in a similar way by Rufinus of Aquileia (*Historia ecclesiastica*, XI, 15, eds E. Schwartz, T. Mommsen, F. Winkelmann, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller", Neue Folge, Bd. VI, Berlin 1999, pp. 1020–1021) and Theodoret of Cyrus (*Historia ecclesiastica* V 13, 1, eds L. Parmentier, G.Ch. Hansen, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller", Neue Folge, Bd. V, Berlin–New York 2009, p. 303). The account given by Ambrose (Ep. 75a [21a] – *Sermo contra Auxentius de basilicis tradendis*, ed. M. Zelzer, Vienna 1982, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 82, pp. 82–107) suggests that the empress was under an influence of Mecurinus, the Arian bishop of Durostorum, who came to Milan around the year 382, got a name of Auxentius (Ep. 75a [21a], 22, p. 96) the late Arian bishop of Milan, predecessor of Ambrose on the Episcopal throne and gained a significant role at the court of young Valentinian. See K. Iłski, *Idea jedności politycznej, społecznej i religijnej w świetle pism Ambrożego z Mediolanu*, Poznań 2001, pp. 310–311. According to N. McLynn (*Ambrose of Milan. Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1994, pp. 172–173), Valentinian was not directed by the empress-mother but by a high official of the court.

¹² Socrates, HE V 11, 6, p. 285. See also Rufinus Aquileiensis, HE XI, 15, p. 1021; Theodoretus Cyrensis, HE V 13, 5–6, p. 304. In fact, it was a conflict over basilicas that were demanded by Arians supported by Valentinian II. See H.F. Campenhausen, *Ambrosius von Mailand als Kirchenpolitiker*, Berlin–Leipzig 1929, p. 192; J.-R. Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire romain. Contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État à la fin du IV siècle*, Paris 1933, pp. 511–514; F.H. Dudden, *The life and times of St Ambrose*, Oxford 1935, pp. 270–297; A. Lenox-Conyngham, *The Topography of the Basilica Conflict of A.D. 385/6 in Milan*, "Historia" 1982, vol. XXXI, pp. 353–363; K. Iłski, *op. cit.*, pp. 309–318.

¹³ Socrates, HE V 11, 6–10, pp. 285–286. The anonymous author of the *Chronicon Paschale* (380, ed. W. Dindorf, Bonnæ 1832, p. 562) claimed that Justina was involved in the assassination of Gratian which took place in the hippodrome in Constantinople and was made because of religious issues. He indicated that Gratian was a Christian while Justina was an Arian. According to Liz James (*op. cit.*, p. 74), those accusations were brought against the empress as it was believed that she wanted to strengthen the position of her son. Hippodrome as the place of Gratian's assassination had been indicated much earlier by John Malalas (*Chronographia*, 344, ed. J. Thurn, Berlin–New York 2000, p. 266),

nus of Aquileia, whose *Historia Ecclesiastica* was used by Socrates, wrote about the impiety (*impietas*) of Justina¹⁴, comparing her to Jezebel, the wife of king Ahab and a tormentor of prophet Elias, who is a symbol of false prophetess, misleading Christians in the *Apocalypse* of St. John¹⁵. Thus, it is visible that Socrates deliberately failed to picture Justina as ungodly.

All in all, Socrates included in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* a very complex picture of Empress Justina. On the one hand, he depicted her as a woman of extraordinary beauty, for whom the ruler not only committed bigamy, but also decided to change the law allowing for marrying two wives and who gave him four children; on the other hand, though, he described her as an eager follower of the Arian doctrine, who, until he lived, either did not show off her true religious beliefs, or did not have enough influence on him to persuade him to act against the supporters of the Nicene Creed. The historian pointed out, that it was after her husband's death that she became dangerous to orthodox Christians, which bishop Ambrose, who was undoubtedly an orthodox leader in the West, could experience himself. Only active resistance of the people as well as the usurpation of Maxim forced her to resign from the actions aimed against the followers of the Nicene Creed. Socrates of Constantinople depicted Justina as a heretic, which did not prevent the historian from emphasizing her unusual beauty, because of which the emperor introduced a new law allowing him to marry her.

Sozomenus also wrote about Justina, but depicted her in a slightly different way. He did not describe her beauty, he omitted the issue of bigamy and the law which enabled men to marry two women. Probably, being aware of the applicable law, he rejected the account of his predecessor as a false one. Instead, he focused on her pro-Arian actions, developed and corrected Socrates's account. He

who, however, did not make any allegations suggesting that Justina was to be blamed. More information on Gratian's death see *Chronicon Paschale 284–628 AD*, eds M. Whitby, M. Whitby, Liverpool 1989, p. 51, n. 159.

¹⁴ Rufinus Aquileiensis, HE XI, 15, p. 1021. According to Rufinus, Justina, through her struggle with Ambrose, tried to set the people at variance (*animare et inflammare ad discordiam populos*). Even Ambrose of Milan (Ep. 60 and Ep. 76 [20], pp. 17–18) compared the empress to Eve, who deluded Adam, Jezebel, who harassed Elias or Herodias, who ordered to kill John the Baptist. See A. Belleli, *Justine en Jézabel. La fabrication textuelle d'une mauvaise impératrice romaine dans la première moitié du Ve siècle*, "Revue des Études Tardo-antiques" 2016, no 6, pp. 93–107.

¹⁵ Ap 2, 20–23.

explained why she tried to bring about Ambrose's exile. Like Socrates, he emphasized that she was a supporter of the Arian doctrine¹⁶. He added, however, that she tried to ensure victory in Church for the followers of the doctrine of the Council of Ariminum¹⁷, battling against the teaching of Nicaea, which caused chaos in the ecclesial life and many problems to Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Since he stood up for the Nicene Creed, the empress got very angry and accused him of an insult in front of her son¹⁸. Sozomenus openly suggested, that it was a false and defamatory allegation. Valentinian, who believed his mother's accusations, commanded soldiers against the bishop. They assaulted the temple, forced Ambrose out of it to be banished, but the people did not allow this to happen as they surrounded the bishop with a tight group and withstood the soldiers, ready to die to protect their shepherd¹⁹.

As a result of this event, Justina became even more furious with Ambrose and decided to introduce the doctrine she supported as a new law. Sozomenus based his further narration strictly on the account of Rufinus of Aquileia²⁰. According to it, Benevolus²¹, an official, in Sozomenus's opinion responsible for legislation²², refused to pass it and, as a follower of orthodox doctrine, did not want to do that, despite various incentives from the empress, who tempted him with promises of a promotion to an even more honorable office. Benevolus supposedly took his belt off his hips in a demonstrative way and threw it at the empress's feet, showing that he would never let his office or a higher position become remuneration for profanity (ἀσεβείας)²³. Nevertheless, the empress found other officials who fulfilled her will, formulated a law allowing supporters of the Council of Ariminum and later Constantinople to gather;

¹⁶ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 2, p. 316.

¹⁷ Rufinus of Aquileia wrote about it earlier (HE XI, 15, p. 1021).

¹⁸ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 3, p. 316. See also Rufinus Aquileiensis, HE XI, 15, p. 1021.

¹⁹ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 4, pp. 316–317.

²⁰ Rufinus Aquileiensis, HE XI, 16, pp. 1021–1022.

²¹ PLRE I, p. 161; see also N. McLynn, *op. cit.*, p. 181; T.D. Barnes, *Ambrose and the Basilicas of Milan in 385 and 386: The Primary Documents and their Implications*, "Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum" 2002, Bd. IV, pp. 292–293.

²² As Rufinus of Aquileia pointed out (HE XI, 16, p. 1021) he was the head of *scrinium memoriae* and as his superior (*magister memoriae*) was not entitled to make the law; see R. Delmaire, *Les institutions du Bas-Empire romain de Constantin à Justinien*, Paris 1995, pp. 65–73.

²³ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 6, p. 317.

while anyone who would disturb them or report claims opposing the emperor's decree were to be punished by death²⁴. Putting these laws into practice was prevented by the death of Gratian, as Justina, under the influence of the terrible misfortune, abandoned her anger against Ambrose, especially as the troops of usurper Maxim were approaching Italy. Maxim, conducted his military actions under the pretext of protecting the holy faith of the fathers and the Church organization²⁵, while Valentinian and his mother were looking for a shelter in Thessalonica²⁶. Eventually, according to the historian, the victory of Theodosius over the usurper brought prosperity to the Church in Italy, to which the death of Empress Justina contributed as well²⁷.

Sozomenus's account on the subject of Justina suggests that she was an eager heretic²⁸, a mother of the young emperor, who desired to impose her own doctrine to the whole Church. She was said to be ruthless in fighting against her opponents, she did not avoid false allegations in the name of the rule, stating that the ends justify the means, which Ambrose, the Orthodox leader of the West, experienced himself. She devoted herself to impiety and even used bribery towards officials as long as it enabled her to achieve her ungodly goals. Thus, it is obvious that Sozomenus developed the negative side of the empress's depiction created by Socrates, at the same time, omitting the information which would make her image more pleasant, such as her beauty, her maternity or the fact that she was an orphan – it should be remembered that, apart from Valentinian, she also mothered three daughters, which Socrates

²⁴ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 7, p. 317. In the Theodosian Code (XVI, 1, 4, ed. Th. Mommsen, "Sources Chrétiennes" no 497, Paris 2005, pp. 118–121) under the title *De fide catholica* there is a law of Valentinian the Younger of January 23, 386, which guarantees freedom of gathering at masses to the followers of the doctrine of Ariminum. It was announced three years later than Sozomenus assumed, that was after the death of Gratian, who was an Orthodox and for whom Justina had to show consideration.

²⁵ Rufinus of Aquileia wrote similarly about that issue (HE XI, 16, p. 1021).

²⁶ Sozomenus, HE VII 13, 8–11, pp. 317–318. According to Rufinus (HE XI, 16, p. 1022), the empress suffered the fate of an exile to which she condemned God's priests before.

²⁷ Sozomenus, HE VII 14, 7, p. 319.

²⁸ A similarly negative picture of Justina can be found in an account by Ambrose's biographer, Paulinus of Milan (*Vita Ambrosii* 11; 15; 20, *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 14) who presented her not only as a follower of Arianism, but also a vengeful woman full of negative emotions. See also L. James, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

pointed out. Probably, the fact that Justina was a follower of the Arian doctrine determined, in the eyes of Sozomenus, her negative image.

So the image of Empress Justina sketched in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Socrates and Sozomenus appears very different. The first of them introduced her in a more comprehensive way, the other one, unilaterally. Socrates primarily emphasized her beauty, which raised admiration not only in men, but also in women. The emperor, enchanted with her, according to Socrates, changed the law and legalized bigamy in order to marry her. Thus, a girl who came to the imperial court as an orphan, thanks to her beauty became an empress and gave birth to numerous offspring of the emperor. The information about her heterodoxy was given later, as if it was, in a way, less important, since the historian only mentioned the empress's anger at Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. These negative emotions were soothed by Maxim's usurpation and the assassination of Justina's stepson, Gratian, committed at his command. Thus Empress Justina, in the eyes of Sozomenus, was a godless, militant heretic, trying to forcibly impose her theological beliefs on the Church and using slander to fight her opponents. The historian deliberately omitted those events of her life, mentioned by his predecessor, which would thaw her image and which referred to her beauty, orphan state or maternity. So, it seems, in Sozomenus's conviction, beauty could not be an attribute of the heretic.

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