Livia

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Livia Drusilla (59 or 58 BCE–29 CE) was the wife of the first Roman emperor, AUGUSTUS, and mother of the second, TIBERIUS. Her name is misleading. She was a Claudian by descent, but her father, Marcus Livius Drusus Claudianus, who would ultimately commit suicide after the battle of PHILIPPI in 42 BCE, was at some point adopted into the Livian *gens*, most likely by the famous tribune of 91, Livius Drusus. Livia married another Claudian, Tiberius Claudius Nero, and in 42 bore the future emperor Tiberius. Her husband was a supporter of Antony, and after the fall of Perusia, in 40, the family fled, first to Sicily then to Sparta. They returned to Rome under an amnesty, in 39, whereupon Octavian fell in love with her. He divorced his wife Scribonia, and married Livia on January 17, 38, following her own divorce. Livia's second son, Drusus (the Elder), was born shortly afterward. The union provoked something of a scandal, but it proved to be lasting and apparently harmonious, despite her bearing no more living children.

Livia remained very much in the background during the first three decades of her marriage. She accompanied Augustus on his extensive travels throughout the empire, and gave him advice in private, advocating a conciliatory approach toward opponents. But generally she seems to have focused on quietly building up an extensive network of clients and allies, and on carefully cultivating an image of modesty, duty, and virtue. Following the death of her son Drusus on campaign in Germany in 9 BCE, she acquired a more public persona. The Senate voted her statues and granted her the *ius trium liberorum* (exemption from the disabilities incurred by having fewer than three children). The Porticus Liviae was dedicated in her name. Henceforth, she devoted considerable energies to ensuring the accession of her surviving son, Tiberius, who in 11 BCE had married Augustus' only daughter, Julia. The deaths of potential rivals, Marcellus (son of Augustus' sister), Gaius and Lucius Caesar, and Agrippa Postumus (Julia's sons by Marcus Agrippa), even her own grandson, GERMANICUS, were later attributed to her by some literary sources (scholars generally consider the claims unconvincing). Her efforts were rewarded in 4 CE, when Augustus adopted Tiberius, thus clearly marking him out as his successor. Augustus died in 14 on a visit to Campania, accompanied by Livia. There were later suspicions, reflected in TACITUS and CASSIUS DIO, that she poisoned him, possibly by tampering with ripe figs still on the tree. This scenario may be derived from the tradition of Claudius' poisoning by Agrippina. SUETONIUS relates a touchingly affectionate final scene between the couple (Tac. *Ann.* 1.5.1; Suet. *Aug.* 99.1; Cass. Dio 56.30.2).

In his will, Augustus created an extraordinary status for Livia. She was adopted into the Julian *gens*, and, even more remarkably, was adopted by Augustus as his daughter.

Figure 1 Bust of Livia. Louvre, Paris. © Photo Scala, Florence.

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She was also given the title of Augusta, and her official name henceforth was Julia Augusta. Augustus' precise motives are unclear, but her elevation would certainly have strengthened the legitimacy of Tiberius' rule, since he now became both the adopted and the natural son of a Julian. Livia also became a priestess in the cult of the deified Augustus. Additional honors voted by the Senate, including the title *mater patriae*, were vetoed by Tiberius as excessive. In the early years of Tiberius' reign she seems to have been treated with much deference by her son, and she continued to exercise considerable influence. During the famous trial of CALPURNIUS PISO in 20 for his conduct in Syria, for instance, Piso was forced to commit suicide, but his wife Plancina escaped punishment through the Senate's respect for her friendship with Livia. The passing of the years may, however, have robbed Livia of some of her adroit tactfulness; Tiberius felt that she interfered in matters of state, and grew increasingly resentful of the assumption that he owed his position to her. Matters may have improved briefly in 22, when she fell seriously ill during his absence from Rome and he returned to be with her (Tac. *Ann.* 3.64.1). Otherwise, relations deteriorated. When in 26 Tiberius left Rome for Capri (he would never return to the capital), it was rumored that he did so to avoid his mother's company (Tac. *Ann.* 4.57.3; Suet. *Tib.* 51.1; Cass. Dio 57.12.6).

Livia survived Tiberius' departure some three more years, during which time she protected the family of the late Germanicus from the machinations of the ambitious praetorian prefect, SEJANUS. She died in early 29, at the age of 86. Tiberius did not attend her modest funeral, and such senatorial awards as a commemorative arch came to nothing; he explicitly disallowed divine honors. She was buried in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Her great-grandson CALIGULA delivered the eulogy, and it was he who allowed her bequests to be paid (Tiberius had blocked them). She was eventually deified under her grandson, the emperor CLAUDIUS (TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS CAESAR AUGUSTUS GERMANICUS).

Livia was a woman of considerable ability. Caligula repeatedly described her as a *Ulixes stolatus* (Suet. *Calig.* 23.2), a respectable stola-clad Roman matron, who beneath it all possessed the craftiness of Greece's most ingenious hero, Ulysses/Odysseus. Inscriptional, numismatic, and papyrological evidence suggests that she continued to be honored long after her death. That said, her reputation has suffered from the consistently hostile portrait in Tacitus, motivated no doubt by his antagonism toward powerful imperial women. To Tacitus, Livia was *gravis in rempublicam mater, gravis domui Caesarum noverca*, "detrimental to the state as a mother, detrimental to the house of the Caesars as a stepmother" (Tac. *Ann.* 1.10.5). Cassius Dio is also hostile, though less so than Tacitus. On the other hand, Suetonius presents a quite balanced portrait, while Livia's contemporary, VELLEIUS PATERCULUS, is laudatory. Velleius' penchant for flattery is well known, but in this instance it is probably he who best reflects the general Roman sentiment.

SEE ALSO: Antonius, Marcus; Women, Roman.

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