



INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY  
AND ART HISTORY OF ROMANIAN  
ACADEMY CLUJ-NAPOCA



UNIVERSITATEA TEHNICĂ  
DIN CLUJ-NAPOCA

JAHA  
JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY  
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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# Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v13i1>

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN-L 2360 266x



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No. 13.1/2026



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Design & layout: Petru Ureche



EDITURA MEGA | [www.edituramega.ro](http://www.edituramega.ro)  
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## ANCIENT HISTORY

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### FROM THE MOTHER OF THE GRACCHI TO THE SISTER OF AUGUSTUS: REIMAGINING CORNELIA'S LEGACY IN THE LITERARY AND MATERIAL DEPICTIONS OF OCTAVIA

**Abstract:** This article examines the figures of Cornelia and Octavia as *exempla* of Roman motherhood and explores how their memories were reshaped within Augustan ideology to define the ideal of the imperial matron. Through a comparative analysis of literary sources and material culture, it argues that Octavia's public image was constructed in conscious dialogue with that of Cornelia, whose virtues of chastity, moderation, and maternal devotion were adapted to the new political and moral framework of the early Principate. The Augustan regime redefined women's public presence: while female visibility was essential for dynastic legitimacy, it was carefully controlled to preserve traditional gender hierarchies. Public statues, architectural patronage, and family iconography made women's influence visible within acceptable limits, presenting intercession and motherhood as the primary forms of female agency. Octavia's decline after Marcellus' death and Livia's subsequent rise reveal how political necessity dictated the prominence of imperial women and their representation. Later reinterpretations, such as Seneca's portrayal of Octavia, illustrate how these narratives remained open to ideological reconfiguration. By analysing the shifting portrayals of Cornelia and Octavia, this study highlights the complex relationship between gender, power, and memory in Augustan Rome, suggesting that women's visibility in public imagery was not merely symbolic but a subtle manifestation of their real, if constrained, influence.

**Keywords:** *Cornelia; Octavia; Augustan ideology; Roman womanhood; female representation.*

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Augustan Principate is often associated with an alleged effort to restore long-lost virtues, values, and gender roles. However, it was also a period in which women from the imperial family not only assumed public roles but were also actively represented in the public sphere. With the new system evolving into a *de facto* hereditary monarchy, women became essential for maintaining power within the same *domus*. To avoid overt transgression, Augustan policies sought to link individual actions to examples from the past, resulting in the creation and reformulation of memory. For women, this meant that, while they gained increased visibility, their expanded public roles

were still firmly anchored in tradition and idealised notions of femininity.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to explore how memory was both used and modified to elevate the public standing of certain women, how narratives and material culture were employed to reshape this memory, and how materiality served to illustrate women's proximity to power.

One of the biggest swifts in the direction of propaganda during the Roman era took place in the transition from the Second Triumvirate to the Augustan Principate. Following his triumph over a fellow Roman, Octavian changed his image and his name became Augustus, a pious *primus inter pares*, as Zanker magnificently analysed.<sup>2</sup> However, one of the few connective traits throughout this period is Octavian's/Augustus' respect for (or use of) tradition, which also implied the strategic use of propaganda and memory on his behalf.

In the quest for supreme rule and solo power, Octavian had addressed the people's extreme physical and mental exhaustion after a hundred years of civil wars. As a result, main armed conflicts of this period were not depicted as civil wars.<sup>3</sup> The conflict against Sextus Pompey was framed as a war against pirates.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the war against Anthony was portrayed not as a conflict against a fellow Roman, but against an Egyptian queen,<sup>5</sup> since Anthony had supposedly turned his back to his fellow citizens and been subdued by a barbarian woman.<sup>6</sup> Once in power, Octavian became Augustus and legitimised his solo tenure on the necessity of reinstating old values and morals; after all, it was their decay that had caused the crisis and civil wars.<sup>7</sup>

Both issues implied the elevation of the domestic to the public. Anthony's private behaviour became a matter of public concern, as did his relationship to a Roman *matrona*, Octavia, who was portrayed as the embodiment of feminine virtue.<sup>8</sup> Then, after taking power, Augustus legislated on matters of private life, made his family and his exemplary domestic life a public issue, and used the women of his household as *exempla*.<sup>9</sup> The public position of his household was also used as an opportunity to parade his kinsfolk with the intention of introducing the notion of succession and dynasty into Roman consciousness.

This was accompanied by a revival of pre-Civil War Roman past as an idealised reality, including the legends

of Rome, which featured women as *exempla*.<sup>10</sup> It seems that also ideal feminine characters of the present were often paired with those *exempla* from the past to reinforce gender norms and Augustan policies. This is evident in the parallel lives of Cornelia—the mother of the Gracchi—and Octavia, perceivable in both narrative and monuments. Interestingly, this public representation of women also allowed them to develop their own agency in the form of patronages and political influence.<sup>11</sup>

Octavia appears to have been an essential part of Octavian and Augustan politics and propaganda. As a woman, she was a useful tool to establish pacts and alliances with other families.<sup>12</sup> In the struggle for power, she was also an important part of the *casus belli* between her husband and her brother.<sup>13</sup> After the war, she served as the living example of feminine behaviour that the Augustan policy sought to promote among the female population. Finally, in a family lacking males, her role as mother was of utmost relevance, giving birth to Augustus' closest male relative.<sup>14</sup> Praise of her role as a woman and as a mother also provided a basis for the nascent hereditary system.<sup>15</sup>

However, though deeply embedded in traditional feminine values, Octavia's role risked being too public and civic.<sup>16</sup> Few Roman women before 35 BCE had as visible a role as Octavia and other imperial females. One of them, Cornelia, was also renowned for embodying traditional feminine values and motherhood.<sup>17</sup> Her image became firmly established in Roman history as an *exemplum* for women, becoming an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage. Consequently, the association of Octavia with Cornelia and other women from the past enhanced the former's visibility within the regime's propaganda framework without compromising societal norms. Thus, Octavia's memory was shaped in close connection to Cornelia, raising the question of whether Cornelia's memory, beyond being reappropriated in this period, was itself modified.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> KAMPEN 1992, 161.

<sup>11</sup> FLORY 1984; 1996, SEVERY 2010, 63–77; 104–112, among others.

<sup>12</sup> As was usual among elite females, as analysed by DIXON 1984; CORBIER 1995; HIDALGO DE LA VEGA 2003; CENERINI 2009 or MARTÍNEZ LÓPEZ 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 57.4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, perceived closeness between Augustus and Marcellus would have led Plutarch to understand that the young man had been adopted by his uncle (Plut. *Ant.* 87.3–4).

<sup>15</sup> Latest studies on Octavia's role in the Augustan regimen in: MOORE 2017 and VAN GEEL 2022.

<sup>16</sup> On the civic roles of women in the nascent imperial system LOPEZ GÓMEZ in press.

<sup>17</sup> Her memory fared much better than her son's, Cornelia being immunised against any unfavourable association with their politics (DIXON 2007, 9).

<sup>18</sup> Most of the sources that preserve Cornelia's image are, however, of imperial or transitional date, which makes it difficult to assess how she was represented in the late Republic. Apart from a few remarks by Cicero (*Brut.* 211; *De orat.* 1.34; *Off.* 1.61), the surviving evidence derives from authors writing under Augustus or later, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Velleius Paterculus, and Plutarch among them. It is therefore possible that Cornelia's image, as transmitted to us, reflects not a purely Republican perception but an Augustan reconfiguration of her role as an *exemplum* of feminine virtue and maternal devotion.

<sup>1</sup> MILNOR 2005; SEVERY 2010.

<sup>2</sup> ZANKER 1992, 109–114.

<sup>3</sup> PELLING 1996, 54; VAN GEEL 2022, 8.

<sup>4</sup> RG 25.1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from the *Loeb Classical Library*. The use of these sources in this article focuses on the representation of women and the construction of their memory, rather than on the specific actions they may have undertaken or historical events they may have participated in.

<sup>5</sup> RG 3.1; 27.1; Plut. *Ant.* 61.1; Cass. Dio 50.4.4–5.

<sup>6</sup> This can be perceived through Plutarch's narrative about Cleopatra (Plut. *Ant.* 10.5; 25.1; 29.1–2; 36.2; 53.11; etc.), and on recent analysis, such as ZANKER 1992, 80ff; HEKSTER 2004 or LANGE 2009.

<sup>7</sup> On the connection between civil wars, women's misbehaviour, sexual immorality, the state of moral decay and Augustus' legislation on marriage, adultery and morals: Cic. *Cael.* 13–16; Polyb. 31.23–26; Sal. 24–25; Hor. *Od.* 3.6; Liv. 34.1–8; WILLIAMS 1962; GALINSKY 1981, 132–133; 140; CENERINI 2009, 58; MILNOR 2005, 140; COHEN 2004, 124; EDWARDS 1993, 42–50; SEVERY 2010, 55; KAMPEN 1992, 163; CULHAM 2004, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 31.1; 31.4.

<sup>9</sup> As analysed by LÓPEZ GÓMEZ 2022.

## CORNELIA, OCTAVIA, AND THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Cornelia was a young woman from an important political family (her father being Scipio Africanus) who married Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, a member of another prominent family, and a political rival to her father. Octavia, on her side, was a niece of Julius Caesar on his mother's side and, after he passed, her brother Octavian rose to prominence. As Cornelia, Octavia played a pivotal role in establishing political alliances. Both went down in history as exemplary mothers and women of renowned political influence.

These two women acquire an important role in the narratives through marriage. Unlike Cornelia, Octavia was not an *univira*, having first married C. Marcellus, an exponent of the Pompeian party,<sup>19</sup> in what appears to be a first politically motivated marriage. However, it is her second marriage that most closely mirrored Cornelia's liaison with Gracchus in the narratives.

Narratives about Cornelia's marriage vary, with some dramatic accounts claiming she was betrothed by senatorial acclamation to end the enmity between Africanus and Gracchus. This is historically unlikely, as Cornelia probably married after her father's death.<sup>20</sup> However, the dramatised version circulated in Augustan times (in Livy and Valerius Maximus), and even Plutarch claimed to be aware of it. Octavia's betrothal to Marc Antony was also intended as an alliance to resolve rivalries. The similarities between both women's betrothals are particularly evident in Livy's and Appian's prose.

“huic Graccho minorem ex duabus filiis—nam maior P. Cornelio Nasicae haud dubie a patre collocata erat—nuptam fuisse convenit. illud parum constat, utrum post mortem patris et desponsa sit et nupserit, an verae illae opiniones sint, Gracchum, cum L. Scipio in vincula duceretur, nec quisquam collegarum auxilio esset, iurasse sibi inimicitias cum Scipionibus, quae fuissent, manere, nec se gratiae quaerendae causa quicquam facere, sed, in quem carcerem reges et imperatores hostium ducentem vidisset P. Africanum, in eum se fratrem eius duci non passurum. senatum eo die forte in Capitolio cenantem consurrexisse et petisse, ut inter epulas Graccho filiam Africanus desponderet” (Livy 38.57.2–5).

“To this Gracchus the younger of Scipio's two daughters—for the elder was betrothed to Publius Cornelius Nasica and beyond doubt by her father—was married, as all agree. What is not certain is whether she was both betrothed and married after the death of her father, or whether the opinions are true, that Gracchus, when Lucius Scipio was being taken

to prison and no one of his colleagues was coming to his assistance, swore that his feud with the Scipios continued as before and that he was doing nothing to curry favour, but that he would not permit the brother of Africanus to be put into that prison into which he had seen Publius Africanus thrusting kings and generals of the enemy. The story goes on that the senate, which chanced to dine that day on the Capitoline, had risen up and begged that during the banquet Africanus should betroth his daughter to Gracchus.

“ὄν ὁ στρατὸς ὁ τοῦ Καίσαρος αἰσθανόμενοι πρέσβεις εἶλοντο τοὺς αὐτοὺς ἐς ἀμφοτέρους, οἱ τὰ μὲν ἐγκλήματα αὐτῶν ἐπέσχον ὡς οὐ κρῖναι σφίσι, ἀλλὰ διαλλάξαι μόνον ἡρημένοι, σφίσι δ' αὐτοῖς προσελόμενοι Κοκκήιον μὲν ὡς οἰκεῖον ἀμφοῖν, ἐκ δὲ τῶν Ἀντωνίου Πολλίωνα καὶ Μαικῆναν ἐκ τῶν Καίσαρος, ἔγνωσαν Καίσαρι καὶ Ἀντωνίῳ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀμνηστίαν εἶναι τῶν γεγονότων καὶ φιλίαν ἐς τὸ μέλλον. ὑπογύως δὲ Μαρκέλλου τεθνεῶτος, ὃς τὴν ἀδελφὴν Καίσαρος εἶχεν Ὀκταουίαν, ἐδικαίουσι οἱ διαλλακταί τὴν Ὀκταουίαν Ἀντωνίῳ τὸν Καίσαρα ἐγγυῆσαι. καὶ ὁ μὲν αὐτίκα ἐνηγγύα, καὶ ἠσπάζοντο ἀλλήλους, καὶ βοαὶ παρὰ τοῦ στρατοῦ καὶ εὐφημίαι πρὸς ἑκάτερον αὐτῶν ἦσαν ἄπαιστοι δι' ὅλης τε τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ ἀνὰ τὴν νύκτα πᾶσαν” (Appian *B.Civ.* 5.7.64).

“When Octavian's soldiers learned these facts, they chose deputies and sent the same ones to both commanders. They took no notice of accusations because they had been chosen, not to decide a controversy, but to restore peace. Cocceius was added to their number as a friend of both, together with Pollio from Antony's party and Maecenas from that of Octavian. It was determined that there should be amnesty between Antony and Octavian for the past and friendship for the future. Moreover, as Marcellus, the husband of Octavian's sister Octavia, had recently died, the umpires decided that her brother should betroth her to Antony, which he did immediately. Then Antony and Octavian embraced each other. Thereupon shouts went up from the soldiers and congratulations were offered to each of the generals, without intermission, through the entire day and night”.

As already suggested, Cornelia's sole marriage and Octavia's two were orchestrated in a political context, as was typical for elite women.<sup>21</sup> However, the parallels in both women's stories extend further: each marriage effectively sealed a truce between enemies and neither of the two marriages were designed by their family members, but by external actors. For Octavia's betrothal to Antony, the “mediators” (οἱ διαλλακταί) in Appian take the place of the Senate in Livy's prose. The third actor in Appian's narrative, the army rejoicing at the embrace of the two generals, underlines the military setting of the whole episode.

Plutarch's version of Octavia's betrothal, even if not so full of details as Appian's, notes that “everybody tried to bring about this marriage” (τοῦτον ἅπαντες εἰσηγοῦντο τὸν γάμον. *Plut. Ant.* 31.2). Even if he does not specify on who

<sup>19</sup> G. Claudius Marcellus as an ally of Pompey: *App. B. Civ.* 2.26–30; *Plut. Pomp.* 58–59; MOORE 2021, 376. It seems that Octavia was offered as a possible bride to Pompey by Caesar (*Suet. Iul.* 27.1), expressing the importance of women from political families as bounders of tactic alliances.

<sup>20</sup> As in DIXON 2007, 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> DIXON 2007, 15

this ἅπαντες is, that version clearly matches Appian's on third-party interests. Thus, Plutarch also informs about the circulation in his time of stories linking Cornelia, Octavia, and their families to weddings as political alliances, intended to unite factions at odds over political events. The enduring popularity of these versions is evident in their continued use (at least) until the 3rd century:

“οἱ δὲ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ, ὡς ἢ τε Σαρδῶ εἶχετε καὶ ἡ παραλία ἐπορθεῖτο, τῆς τε σιτοπομπίας ἐστέρηντο, καὶ ὁ λιμὸς τὰ τε τέλη πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα καθιστάμενα καὶ προσέτι καὶ συντέλειαι τοῖς τοὺς δούλους ἔχουσι προστασσόμεναι δεινῶς αὐτοὺς ἐλύπουν, οὐκέθ' ἠσύχαζον, ἀλλ' ὅσον ἐπὶ ταῖς τοῦ Ἀντωνίου καὶ τοῦ Καίσαρος καταλλαγαῖς, ὡς καὶ σφετέρως εἰρήνης τῆς ἐκείνων ὁμοιοῦσας οὖσης, ἦσθησαν, τοσοῦτον ἢ καὶ πλεῖον ἐπὶ τῷ πρὸς τὸν Σέξτον σφῶν πολέμῳ ἠσχαλλον. ἐν δ' οὖν τῷ τότε ἐπὶ τε ἵππων αὐτοὺς ὥσπερ ἐν ἐπινικίοις τισὶν ἐσαγαγόντες, καὶ τῇ νικητηρίᾳ στολῇ ἐξ ἴσου τοῖς πέμψασιν αὐτὰ κοσμήσαντες, τὰς τε πανηγύρεις ἐπὶ τῶν ἀρχικῶν δίφρων θεωρεῖν ποιήσαντες, καὶ τὴν Ὀκταουίαν τὴν τοῦ Καίσαρος ἀδελφὴν γυναικᾶ τῷ Ἀντωνίῳ, ἐπειδὴ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς ἐτετελευτήκει, καὶ κροῦσαν προμνησάμενοι” (Cassius Dio 48.31).

“But as for the people in Rome, they would no longer hold their peace, inasmuch as Sardinia was in hostile hands, the coast was being pillaged, and they had had their corn supply cut off, while the famine, the great number of taxes of all sorts which were being imposed, and in addition contributions assessed upon such as possessed slaves, all irritated them greatly. Much as they were pleased with the reconciliation of Antony and Caesar, —for they thought that harmony between these men meant peace for themselves,— they were equally or even more displeased at the war which the two men were carrying on against Sextus. But a short time before they had brought the two rulers into the city mounted on horses as if at a triumph, had bestowed upon them the triumphal dress just as upon those who celebrated triumphs, had allowed them to view the festivals seated upon their chairs of state, and had espoused to Antony Caesar's sister, Octavia, now that her husband was dead, though she was pregnant”.

Dio offers a similar account, but in his account the action of the mediators/Senate is replaced by the Roman people as the epitome of popular sovereignty. It is them who demanded a truce through the marriage of Anthony and Octavia. Although the setting is erroneously described as Rome rather than Brundisium, the narrative demonstrates how Octavia's story was crafted to mirror Cornelia's, suggesting that also Cornelia's narrative may have been reshaped in Augustan times to align with Octavia's. This notion is further reinforced when examining other instances in which the experiences of both women are presented as analogous.

Cornelia and Octavia's marital experiences were distinct. Both became young widows, yet Cornelia's relationship with her husband was praised, and she was highly esteemed by Gracchus Senior. Octavia, however, after remarrying, faced

a different reality, sharing her husband with Cleopatra. Yet, despite the differences in their marital circumstances, both women ultimately came to be associated with the same ideal of virtue and devotion. Thus, despite their ongoing separation, Octavia had two daughters by Antony. One key aspect of Cornelia's exemplary status was her choice to remain *univira*.<sup>22</sup> Octavia likewise never remarried after Antony's divorce. Thereafter, she devoted herself to raising her children, a dedication that aligns her story with Cornelia's, since both are portrayed as exemplary mothers throughout their lives. Thus, although their marital realities diverged sharply, later representations aligned them within the same moral paradigm: the devoted widow and mother who embodied the stability of Roman virtue.

The propaganda surrounding Octavia presented her as a match for Cornelia's child-rearing virtues: both had numerous children to care for. The sources claim that Cornelia was the mother of twelve, whilst Octavia had five during her two marriages.<sup>23</sup> Both women met Roman standards of female fertility,<sup>24</sup> and were also depicted as ideal models of femininity through their maternal devotion. Cornelia is said to have referred to her children as her most precious jewels,<sup>25</sup> and, in Plutarch's account, the main reason for her refusal to remarry appears to have been her wish to keep a watchful eye on them.<sup>26</sup> Even Cicero (*Brut.* 211) conceded that much of her sons' eloquence could be attributed to Cornelia's careful upbringing. She was also credited with selecting their tutor, she herself being an educated woman with intellectual interests.<sup>27</sup>

For Octavia, it was her refusal to abandon Antony, together with her determination to raise not only their children but also Anthony's offspring, that earned her the aura of an exemplary mother.<sup>28</sup> When she rejoined her brother's household, she may also have taken charge (alongside Livia) of the upbringing of children and grandchildren from the Julio-Claudian couples, as well as of the offspring of client kings who were sent to Rome.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, she is renowned for personally intervening in the betrothal of girls in her household,<sup>30</sup> for fostering the development of children under her care,<sup>31</sup> and for cultivating intellectual pursuits.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Plut. *TG* 1.4.

<sup>23</sup> Plut. *TG* 1.4; *Ant.* 57.2–3; *App. B. Civ.* 5.8.76.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis on ideal standards on feminine fertility: HUG 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Val. Max. 4.1.

<sup>26</sup> Plut. *TG* 1.4.

<sup>27</sup> Plut. *CG* 19.

<sup>28</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 54; 57.3; 87.1; Cass. Dio. 48.54.5.

<sup>29</sup> It seems that her daughter Antonia Minor, was in charge of the education of some client kings, as Herodes Agrippa, who was raised in her house (*Jos. AJ* 6.1; 6.4). The connections Octavia made in Greece during her marriage to Antony surely set her as patroness of local elites (MOORE 2021) and, most likely, Antonia inherited her role taking care of foreign children from her mother.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch stated that Octavia decided on the marriage of Cleopatra Selene to Juba (*Plut. Ant.* 87.1) and also suggested to Augustus the possibility of Agrippa divorcing her daughter Marcella (*Plut. Ant.* 87.3–5) in order to marry Julia, even if Suetonius claims that Octavia had to be persuaded to allow such a thing (*Suet. Aug.* 63.1). One way or another, the situation illustrates the relevance of Octavia's decision-making on the younger generations of the household.

<sup>31</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 87.1.

<sup>32</sup> It is known that Nestor de Academic, who used to be head of the government of Tarsus, was in Anthony's and Octavia's entourage and became the teacher of Marcellus (*Str.* 14.5.14). Athenodorus Cananites

Nevertheless, Cornelia is depicted as taking a more active role in political matters that Octavia deliberately avoided. She is shown not only as influencing her son's education and intellectual formation, but also as actively promoting Tiberius and Gaius through the *cursus honorum*, even being accused of direct political involvement in order to advance their careers.<sup>33</sup> Octavia, by contrast, held a central position as intermediary between her brother and her husband,<sup>34</sup> yet she never disclosed any personal preference nor encouraged Marcellus to hasten the beginning of his political or military career.<sup>35</sup> After all, the struggle for power had ended at Actium, and her son was the prospective successor; she had no need to push him forward. This contrast with Cornelia highlights contemporary perceptions of what was considered appropriate or inappropriate for women: they were expected to intervene in politics through their male relatives or to promote third parties, but not to adopt explicit political stances, as Cornelia was rumoured to have done.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding this, women were praised for benefiting others through intercession with male relatives. Cornelia is said to have influenced Gaius to refrain from branding his enemy Octavius with *infamia*. As for Octavia, Dio (47.7.4–5) reports that she assisted in the rescue of Titus Vinius during the proscriptions, acting on the desperate pleas of his wife, Tanusia, which led to Octavia's intervention with her brother, Octavian. Octavia might have acquired a reputation of being merciful, and a kind and devoted sister with influence over her brother, just as Cornelia had over her sons. Octavia and Julia, Antony's mother, were also said to have shown mercy towards the pleas of the senatorial women led by Hortensia.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in imitation of Cornelia, Octavia is portrayed as exercising political influence in a moderate and traditional fashion; that is, through the male members of her household.

## CORNELIA AND OCTAVIA IN MATERIAL CULTURE

Octavia, as a narrative figure, seems to have been shaped to follow the exemplary path set by Cornelia, or, as stated, perhaps the memories of both women were reworked during the Augustan period to construct the ideal of the imperial matron, combining a number of stereotypes defined by Roman intellectuals. However, this use of memory, in true

Augustan fashion, was not limited to written texts, but also took tangible form in the urban fabric of Rome. In 35 BCE, Octavia and Livia received a series of honours that set them above their peers, including *sacrosanctitas*, exemption from tutela, and the erection of public statues.<sup>38</sup>

The widespread use of public images for women was a novelty introduced in Augustan times. The right to a public statue—financed by the people and the Senate and set in a public space—was an honour granted to citizens who had achieved great deeds on behalf of the state. Such achievements were usually political or military in nature, two spheres barred to women.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, a few examples from legendary Republican history offered useful precedents: Taracia Gaia, a Vestal Virgin who donated the field bordering the Tiber to the Roman people;<sup>40</sup> Cloelia, who freed the Roman captives taken by Porsenna;<sup>41</sup> Claudia Quinta, who helped to release the vessel with the image of Magna Mater from the banks of the Tiber;<sup>42</sup> and, lastly, the aforementioned Cornelia.<sup>43</sup> Among these cases, the existence of Cornelia's statue is the only one that can be confirmed with certainty (*CIL* 6.1.0043). The others appear to be *ad hoc* explanations for the presence of feminine statues that may originally have represented divinities.<sup>44</sup>

After all, it was difficult for women to perform the display of greatness that typically warranted public commemoration of the individual's identity, as feminine virtues such as *castitas* and *pudicitia* were performed in settings that tended to escape the public eye.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it seems that Cornelia's example might have served as a precedent for the erection of statues of imperial women.

The tradition holds that Cornelia was awarded a statue in recognition of her efforts to persuade Gaius to spare Marcus Octavius<sup>46</sup>—that is, for her intercession on behalf of others. The honours granted in 35 BCE have been interpreted as part of the propaganda war between Octavian and Antony.<sup>47</sup> Yet, at the same time, the concession may also have been linked to Octavia's significant mediation at Tarentum (37 BCE), in imitation of Cornelia's intercession. After all, according to contemporary propaganda, Octavia not only facilitated the negotiations but also the exchange of men and ships.<sup>48</sup> Both Cornelia and Octavia played pivotal roles in fostering relations between families and acted as mediators. As a result, even if the honours of 35 BCE are to be understood in the context of the struggle for power between Antony and Octavian, they also served as a recognition of female intercession within a highly politicised environment, in which Octavia herself had become part of the political narrative.

also had some kind of link to Octavia (Plut. *Pub.* 17.5; WHITEHEAD/BLYTH 2004). Most famously, Vitruvius thanked the emperor's sister in the preface of his *De architectura* (Vit. *De arch.* 1. Pr. 2). For the existence of an interconnected community of philosophers at the Augustan court: VAN GEEL 2022, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Plut. *TG* 8.5. Plutarch (*CG* 13.2) states that it was rumoured that Cornelia had hired reapers and sent them to Rome to favour Gaius. However, he also states that it was only a mere gossip and that he doubted its reliability.

<sup>34</sup> Octavia's role as political mediator has been lengthily discussed, as in SINGER 1947, MOORE 2017, LÓPEZ GÓMEZ 2022 OR TORREGARAY PAGOLA/ÑACO DEL HOYO 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Here, Octavia's image might be influenced by her mother, Atia. Atia is described as cautious in regards to Octavian: she did not want him to go to war in Spain with Cesar and also tried to convince her son to reject Caesar's inheritance (Suet. *Aug.* 8).

<sup>36</sup> As stated by DIXON 1983; CLUETT 1998, 72; CORTÉS TOVAR 2005 OR HILLARD 1992, 39, among others. The censure of women taking too active a role in politics during this same period was articulated through the example of Fulvia and her involvement in the Perusine War, among other transgressions (Plut. *Ant.* 10.3; Cass. Dio 45.12–13; 48.10.3–4).

<sup>37</sup> App. *B. Civ.* 4.136–137.

<sup>38</sup> Cass. Dio 49.38.1.

<sup>39</sup> Ulp. *Dig.* 50.17.2; Liv. 34.7.8

<sup>40</sup> Plin. *HN* 34.11.24.

<sup>41</sup> Liv. 2.13.6–11.

<sup>42</sup> Val. Max. 1.2.11.

<sup>43</sup> Plin. *HN* 34.21.

<sup>44</sup> As stated by FLORY 1993, 289.

<sup>45</sup> ROLLER 2018, 200.

<sup>46</sup> Plut. *CG* 4.2–4.

<sup>47</sup> PURCELL 1986; FLORY 1993.

<sup>48</sup> App. *B. Civ.* 5.10.95, Cass. Dio 48.54.2; Plut. *Ant.* 35.4; MOORE 2021, 378.

The association between Octavia and the ideal matron, as well as the monumental pairing of Octavia and Cornelia, became even more explicit through Octavia's involvement in the construction of the *porticus Octaviae* and the reappropriation of Cornelia's statue for this complex.<sup>49</sup> There remains some controversy regarding Octavia's degree of involvement in the project, as later authors attributed the building activities to Augustus. However, recent scholarship generally agrees that contemporary evidence points to a more direct female role in the planning of these monuments and in their official inaugurations.<sup>50</sup> In any case, the naming of the complex clearly indicates that official propaganda intended the *porticus* to be associated with Octavia. Accordingly, her architectural patronage may be understood as an extension of her role within the emerging imperial system.<sup>51</sup>

The *porticus* and the artworks displayed within it also served to promote Octavia as the ideal Roman matron and to underline her association with motherhood. Not only was Cornelia's statue used for this purpose,<sup>52</sup> but also several statues of Venus, the mythological matriarch of the Julian line, and her son Cupid, functioned as public statements on Octavia's maternal virtues.<sup>53</sup> As with Livia's *porticus*, it seems that Octavia's project was likewise originally conceived as a mother-son collaboration.<sup>54</sup> Work on the *porticus Octaviae* began the year of Marcellus' aedileship and was completed by the time the theatre dedicated to his memory was inaugurated.<sup>55</sup> Octavia's associations with Marcellus were pervasive and included, among other things, a dedication of a library to her son. The construction of the *porticus* reinforced Octavia's social capital as the potential matriarch for the imperial line.<sup>56</sup>

Cornelia's statue in the *porticus* along with other elements, carried clear contemporary connotations. Allusions to motherhood and feminine virtue reflected a renewed interest in women as pivotal figures within the family structure.<sup>57</sup> Like Cornelia, Octavia, embodied the ideals of motherhood and the same values that Augustan

policy sought to promote through marriage legislation. This has led some scholars to wonder whether a statue of Octavia would have been placed alongside Cornelia's in this context.<sup>58</sup>

## THE AFTERMATH

Both of Cornelia's sons died while serving as tribunes of the *plebs*. Octavia's son, Marcellus, passed away from illness during his term as aedile. It is at this point that the shared traits between both women cease to be perceptible. Cornelia's education of her children had transcended the domestic sphere and acquired civic significance.<sup>59</sup> Octavia's role in Marcellus' upbringing is less well known, yet it undoubtedly carried political implications, as he was Augustus' most likely successor. His premature death meant that his imperial destiny remained unfulfilled. Consequently, Julia—his widow and Augustus' daughter—married Agrippa and bore him five children, two of whom were adopted by Augustus as prospective heirs.<sup>60</sup> Following the deaths of Agrippa, Caius, and Lucius, Tiberius eventually became Augustus' successors.

As a result of Marcellus' death, thus, Octavia's popularity seems to have declined, while Livia's rose. This is most clearly perceived in the absence of any narrative providing guidance on how Octavia's memory was to be addressed in the aftermath of Marcellus' demise. Even though Octavia still had four living daughters and a number of grandchildren, she disappears from the historical record until her own funerals.<sup>61</sup> Later authors, however—such as Seneca—revisit her image after Marcellus' death, though not in conjunction with Cornelia's or within the framework of imperial propaganda.

That is the case with Seneca's consolation to Marcia. In this work, the philosopher encourages Marcia to find strength and move beyond her grief, using examples of notable women who faced similar losses to illustrate how they had coped. Positive role models included Cornelia and Livia, while Octavia served as a cautionary example.<sup>62</sup> Traditionally, in Roman thought, a mother's grief was regarded as more intense than any other form of sorrow, and gendered stereotypes of female mourning involved weeping, wailing, lamentations, hair-pulling, and breast-beating. Nevertheless, the ideal woman was expected to display *virtus* and behave in a more "manly" manner avoid withdrawing from society.<sup>63</sup> Cornelia epitomised this ideal, since she was remembered for maintaining good spirits in her old age at Misenum, remaining devoted to her children's memory, and, despite losing eleven of her twelve children, not considering herself unfortunate.<sup>64</sup>

According to Seneca, Octavia behaved in a completely different manner after losing Marcellus at a young age: she refused to look at her son's portraits, could not bear to

<sup>49</sup> Plin. *HN* 34.14.

<sup>50</sup> On Livia and Octavia as patrons for *porticus*: Str. 5.3.9; Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.71–72. On both buildings sponsored by Augustus: Cass. Dio 54.23.1; 55.8.2; Suet. *Aug.* 29.4. Modern scholarship on this issue: PURCELL 1986, 89ff; WOODHULL 1999, 80ff. Also, note the difference between *porticus Octaviae* and *porticus Octaviae*, as in Festus 188L, WOODHULL 1999, 81; 2003, 23–25, and SENSENEY 2011. Four librarians in charge of Marcellus' libraries at the *porticus Octaviae* were buried in Marcella Minor's family tomb (*CIL* 6.4431–3; 4435; 4461), clearly supporting the idea of Octavia as a patroness: BOYD 1953, 157; RICHARDSON 1976, 62; WOODHULL 2003, 21–22; MOORE 2021, 382.

<sup>51</sup> Cass. Dio 55.8.1; Ov. *Fast.* 6.637–640; FLORY 1984, 309–311; WOODHULL 2003, 23; CENERINI 2016, 27.

<sup>52</sup> The presence of Cornelia's statue and other artistic elements also ideologically linked the building with ideal maternal virtues. The statue base was unearthed during excavations in the *porticus*' area (Plin. *HN* 34.31; PELLEGRINI 1861, 1879; LANCIANI 1878; COARELLI 1978, 13–28; KAJAVA 1989). For insights into the concept of maternity during the Augustan era: MCAULEY 2016, esp. 28–166.

<sup>53</sup> Moore 2021, 382. Pliny (*HN* 35.1–35) states that different statues of Venus by several artists were displayed in Octavia's *porticus*. It included (at least) five different Venus by Praxiteles, Phidias, Philiscus, Daedals (bathing Venus) and Polycharmus (standing Venus).

<sup>54</sup> The *porticus Liviae* was inaugurated by Livia and Tiberius: Cass. Dio 55.8.1; Ov. *Fast.* 6.637–640.

<sup>55</sup> Cass. Dio 54.26.1; RICHARDSON 1976, 62.

<sup>56</sup> Cass. Dio 49.43.8; Plut. *Mar.* 30.6; Suet. *Gram.* 21.

<sup>57</sup> WOODHULL 1999, 123.

<sup>58</sup> LEWIS 1988; WOODHULL 1999, 123.

<sup>59</sup> ROLLER 2018, 200.

<sup>60</sup> Cass. Dio 54.18; Suet. *Aug.* 64.1; Vel. 2.96; Tac. *Ann.* 13.2.

<sup>61</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 61.2; Cass. Dio 54.35.4–5.

<sup>62</sup> Sen. *Ad Marc.* 2–16.

<sup>63</sup> HOPE 2020, 271–272. Collective feminine mourning after Cannae had to be legislated against (Liv. 22.53.3; 22.56.4–5; Val. Max. 1.1.15). Women's mourning, thus, had the potential to disrupt civic life.

<sup>64</sup> Sen. *Ad Marc.* 16.3; *Helv.* 16.6.

hear his name, and was accused of withdrawing from public life, neglecting her surviving children, and behaving as if she was still in mourning after Marcellus' death.<sup>65</sup> Seneca wrote several generations after these events; however, the official narrative devoted little to no space to Marcellus' death or Octavia's reaction. His demise is acknowledged only as a great loss for Augustus and his succession plans,<sup>66</sup> while Octavia disappears from the record until her own death. Seneca exploits this disappearance as an indication of Octavia's overwhelming grief, which, in his view, prevented her from engaging in normal public activities.

Even if there is no evidence that Octavia's life changed dramatically after Marcellus' death, it seems plausible that her social position altered significantly. The early death of Augustus' nephew and son-in-law represented a major setback for the dynasty, as reflected in *Aeneid* 6.860–886. Consequently, Octavia lost her standing as the mother of a possible successor,<sup>67</sup> while the spotlight shifted towards Julia and Livia. It appears that, following this blow to the *domus Augusta's* plans for succession, no further propaganda was issued concerning Octavia, and she ceased to form part of the official narrative. This silence, in turn, allowed Seneca to appropriate her figure freely, since there was no established version of her later life that contradicted his portrayal.<sup>68</sup>

This does not mean that Cornelia's character ceased to be of relevance within the imperial narrative. Her memory remained a useful ideological tool and continued to be invoked after the transformation of Octavia's public image. Livia, by contrast, followed Cornelia's example after the death of Drusus' in 9 BCE: she set aside her sorrow, spoke about her son frequently, and had his image displayed everywhere.<sup>69</sup> As Augustus' wife, Livia could not withdraw from the public sphere to devote herself to mourning—she had public duties to perform. She was granted a new public statue and the privileges accorded to women with three children as a form of consolation.<sup>70</sup> Later, in 7 BCE, Tiberius and Livia dedicated the *porticus Liviae*, and Livia herself also consecrated the *aedes Concordiae* and other religious buildings associated to women and motherhood.<sup>71</sup> At this time, Livia's maternal role underwent significant development.

## CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the decline in Octavia's prominence and the rise of Livia can be attributed to political factors, particularly the necessity of establishing a dynasty. In this context, the association with Cornelia, the ideal matron of the past, served as a model through which female public prominence

could be shaped and legitimised. Ultimately, the public visibility of women, though essential for dynastic legitimacy, was carefully regulated so as to minimise any transgression of traditional gender roles. This juxtaposition of increased visibility and strict adherence to convention maintained the illusion of continuity in gender dynamics. Nevertheless, this raises important questions that deserve further exploration.

The gendered messages conveyed through public imagery do not necessarily denote powerlessness among imperial women, contrary to some scholars' views,<sup>72</sup> but rather invite a deeper examination of women's power in Rome. The heightened visibility of imperial women may have increased public awareness of their proximity to power and potential for influence. In material culture, despite the absence of distinct portrait typologies,<sup>73</sup> the scarcity of other feminine representations likely made the empresses' identities more recognisable. The novelty of female public portraiture in the early Principate must have had a considerable impact before becoming conventionalised. Although these images may not directly attest to women's influence, they undoubtedly helped to establish the visual framework through which female power could be conceptualised.

Following Marcellus' death, Octavia vanished from the historical record, leaving several questions unanswered. No longer the mother of the future heir, her position became difficult to address publicly, given the political sensitivities surrounding the nascent dynasty. Consequently, Octavia faded from written narratives, even though her image persisted in the material record, and she likely continued to exert influence over her brother. Her memory, however, remained open to reinterpretation by later authors, such as Seneca, who reshaped her figure according to new moral and ideological needs. The exceptionality of her representation in material culture thus reflects a specific moment of female agency; yet, even when such influence endured, women's memory in historical narratives remained subject to continual revision and adaptation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is a part of the project JC-2022-050025-I funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Union NextGenerationEU/PRTR

<sup>65</sup> Sen. *Ad Mar.* 2.4.

<sup>66</sup> Cass. Dio 53.30.5.

<sup>67</sup> The *porticus Octaviae* was inaugurated after Marcellus' demise, but it had been started during his aedileship (Plut. *Marcell.* 30; Liv. *Epit.* 140). It will remain a mystery whether Octavia would have been entrusted with such a project had her son died before the commission.

<sup>68</sup> Aelius Donatus and Servius recount Octavia's emotional reaction to Virgil's passage on Marcellus (Ael. Don. *Virgil* 32; Ser. *Ad Aen.* 6.861). There seems to have existed a narrative on Octavia's tears regarding her son's appearance in the *Aeneid*, but not such a colourful one as in Seneca.

<sup>69</sup> Sen. *Ad Marc.* 3.2.

<sup>70</sup> Cass. Dio 55.2.5.

<sup>71</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 6.635.

<sup>72</sup> BOATWRIGHT 2021, 282.

<sup>73</sup> FEJFER 2008, 356–357; BOATWRIGHT 2021, 223.

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