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The Sacred Command of the Lord my Brother the Emperor Should Have Come as Something Not to Neglect

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‘The sacred command of the lord my brother the emperor should have come as something not to neglect’

Late Roman stereotypes assigned women certain powers.¹ Thus for example, when the elder but not senior emperor Theodosius faced a choice between defending the interests of Valentinian II, his ineffective colleague from the previous dynasty, or acceding to the aggression of Magnus Maximus, his countryman, an unimpeachably orthodox Catholic, a proven effective general, and as an emperor one whose *imperium* Theodosius had recognized,² Valentinian’s Arian mother Justina could be understood to have swayed Theodosius decisively by offering him her daughter Galla in marriage.³ This scenario enabled hostile interpreters to trivialize Theodosius’s decision as irresponsible appetite and to belittle his execution (e.g., Zos. 4.44.2-4). Invective made women in a narrative a drain down which it flushed male protagonists’ motives. But women might also serve to elevate propriety. Theodosius, married to Galla, was no longer merely Gratian’s fixer. Now he was personally implicated in the family. The parts of Theodosius’s decision that involved inconstantly retracting the acceptance he had granted Maximus earlier, or self-interestedly precluding the chance Maximus might succeed so well in the West that eventually he would strike east with gathered strength, could be eclipsed by the glow with which the marriage suffused Theodosius’s enhanced unity with the family that had made him emperor. Women’s involvement meant family. Familial values won approbation. Thus rhetoric, or representation more broadly, could turn women to either denigratory or exculpatory ends. But real women lived the scripted roles. Social expectations gave Justina and Galla a means to help change history. Theodosius need not have accepted their ploy if he did not have his own reasons to intervene against Maximus. But if by intervening he gained dynastic support, a new sexual partner, and a potential mother of more children, he had so much the more motive to act. It is not the whole truth that Justina and Galla rescued Valentinian’s throne and their own eminence near it, but neither is it false.

Of the union between Galla and Theodosius, Galla Placidia was born. In her 30s and 40s she served as mother-regent to Valentinian III, when Theodosius II authorized the child to be set as a dynastic placeholder on the western throne. Procopius used the old sour topos to blame Galla Placidia’s alleged coddling for Valentinian’s ineffectiveness and alleged vice (Procop. *Wars* 3.3). Meanwhile,

¹ Kate Cooper, “Insinuations of Womanly Influence: an Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992) 150-64.

² Holum 45 n.117.

³ The episode is discussed in detail by Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1982): 44-47.

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however, Galla Placidia held real authority to appoint and recall generals. Their rivalry targeted her decisions. She attempted, under the same limitations as any palace-bound prince, to secure the realm. After Valentinian's majority Galla Placidia remained publicly active in religious patronage. She sponsored mosaic decoration at Sta Croce in Gerusalemme and restoration of S Paolo fuori le mura at Rome, additionally to several churches and the so-called mausoleum at Ravenna.⁴ As patron Galla Placidia followed the example of imperial women from Constantine's mother Helena to her own contemporaries at the eastern court of Theodosius II.

The *Collectio Avellana* opens a window on an intermediate moment of Galla Placidia's career. She occupied a position of prominence within Honorius's court at Ravenna, but also perhaps a conflicted position. She had been living at Rome when it was besieged by Alaric in 410. After the Sack the victorious Goths took her with them south through Italy. They did not cross to Africa. Alaric died. The Gothic force, retaining Galla Placidia, returned back north. They crossed to Gaul in 412. Athaulf joined negotiations with the usurper Jovinus, then broke them off. He captured Jovinus and his brother in 413 and sent them to Honorius's Praetorian Prefect of the Gauls; he executed them. Athaulf and Galla Placidia celebrated marriage January 414 in Narbo, in the home of a Gallic noble. The couple wore Roman garb, but the groom's wedding-gifts to the bride were acquired in the Sack. One epithalamium was delivered by the former Urban Prefect Alaric had declared Augustus, then deposed, during the course of his negotiations with Honorius.⁵ The Goths might have told themselves this highly appropriated ceremony reconciled the Romans' differences with them, but the terms of accommodation were one-sided almost to the point of parody. Whether or not Galla Placidia embraced her position – she had, after all, no available alternative for more than two years – she remained a hostage. Galla Placidia bore Athaulf a son by the year's end, but he died. Not long thereafter Athaulf was assassinated (*Olymp. fr.* 26 Blockley). Galla Placidia was treated like a prisoner by Athaulf's successor, but he was assassinated seven days later. Finally his successor negotiated with Honorius to the point of returning Galla Placidia, but only after receiving a substantial payment of grain (*Olymp. fr.* 30 Blockley). These events apparently took place in summer 416. Sources assert Honorius's general Constantius had wanted to marry Galla Placidia before (*Olymp. fr.* 22 Blockley), but any such goal clearly fell far behind his and Honorius's reluctance to concede anything to her captors. Undoubtedly as Honorius failed to remarry again after

⁴ Brubaker, "Memories of Helena" in James, ed., *Women, Men & Eunuchs* (1997); cf Connor, *Women of Byzantium* ch 3 (2004).

⁵ *Olymp. fr.* 24 Blockley. Priscus Attalus, *PLRE* 2.180-81 interp Philost. 12.3 Ἴων τὸ γένοϋς as Ionian => Asian; Aug again by Goths 414 b discarded 415 on fall back to Barcelona, tho Philost 12.4 says ret'd to Romans w/ GP (Blockley's note cit Oost for arg: 132 as no further use; presum linkage + *Chron.Pasch.* for E receipt of news > inferred date for GP's return)

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repudiating Thermantia, his sister Galla Placidia's value as a marital prize could only increase. In 416 she resisted marrying Constantius, but at the celebration of his and Constantius's joint consulate for 417 Honorius gave her to him (*Olymp. fr.* 33 Blockley). Justa Grata Honoria was born about one year later. Although nothing definitively excludes it, evidence provides no basis for inferring a common purpose united her parents. Galla Placidia was still a hostage, now to Honorius's succession. Whether or not she was reconciled to her circumstances is an open question.

Not quite two years after Galla Placidia's marriage to Constantius, the bishop of Rome Zosimus died on the 26th of December 418. On the two successive days different groups elected Eulalius, Zosimus's archdeacon, and Boniface, a presbyter. Both were ordained by their adherents on 29 December 418. The urban prefect Symmachus reported to Honorius the events and his own endeavors to secure public order (*Coll.Av.* 14).

Honorius in reply recapitulated Symmachus's report and accepted Eulalius as the legitimate bishop. He laid weight on procedure: a sufficient number took part in the ordination, the formality of a lawful time and place was observed, and the candidate was of worthy reputation (*Coll.Av.* 15.1, 3). The surprise Honorius voiced anyone should have contested this result expressed prescriptive wishful thinking. Yet Honorius also declared himself willing to pardon Boniface's party, since they repented and asked forgiveness on the grounds they were victimized by violence (*Coll.Av.* 15.2). Symmachus's report contains neither plea nor excuse from the Bonifatians: Honorius's indulgence reacted to other communication, with whose content he assumed Symmachus was sufficiently familiar to need no other explanation. Conceivably some of the acclamations Symmachus forwarded with his initial report (*Coll.Av.* 14.8) represented the Bonifatian side. A detailed petition of Boniface's partisans is included in the *Collectio Avellana* two documents later (*Coll.Av.* 17), but by the time Honorius responded to it he had also learned from Symmachus how Boniface resisted his own earlier orders (*Coll.Av.* 16). Nonetheless Honorius then radically changed his mind what to do (*Coll.Av.* 18).

Although as Symmachus reported he had excluded Boniface from the city in accordance with Honorius's orders, Eulalius celebrated the mass at San Pietro "with almost all the multitude," and "the Roman populace gave thanks to your Majesty with various acclamations" (*Coll.Av.* 16.7, 8; cf. 15.4), Honorius decided the petitioners had "inserted a cause of not superfluous deliberation; it is right that uncertainty be laid aside and the trustworthiness of the facts be tested closely" (*Coll.Av.* 18.1). In short, he reversed himself. He retracted his earlier ratification of Eulalius's election and called both Eulalius and Boniface to Ravenna to justify themselves before a "sufficient number" of priests Honorius also

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summoned (*Coll.Av.* 18.2-4). Overthrowing his approval and halting the momentum of events was a very strong action: obviously Honorius felt no commitment to a papacy of Eulalius.

The synod at Ravenna, however, did not conclude a decision. As Easter approached, Honorius arranged for Achilleus of Spoleto to celebrate Easter at Rome in place of either Eulalius or Boniface (*Coll.Av.* 21-24). He called a larger synod to convene; the only destination mentioned in the dossier is Spoleto (*Coll.Av.* 26.3). These arrangements produced further letters, not only from Honorius but also from Galla Placidia. As she remarked in two letters, her writing was not needed to call the synod: “the lord my brother the emperor” issued summons directly to her addressees (*Coll.Av.* 27.2, 28.3). Someone, presumably at least one of herself, Honorius, and Constantius, must have expected her involvement to make some other contribution.

It is worth contrasting the stances Honorius and Galla Placidia assumed in their letters. Honorius’s “to the African bishops” typified the elephantine conscientiousness he displayed throughout the dossier (*Coll.Av.* 26). He claimed to be piously judicious: “Our Serenity, while in all cases then especially in these which pertain to venerable religion, yearns to have a well-thought-out judgment.” When he rescinded his endorsement of Symmachus’s actions and called the first synod to Ravenna he insisted pre-judgment attached to neither candidate (*Coll.Av.* 18.2, 20.3). Now that those bishops had failed to settle the controversy, still Honorius cast imperial inaction as a form of rectitude. “The contention that has arisen about the priesthood of the eternal City we believe has been reported even across the seas. It has not been able to be ended by a few, and so it is agreed the judgment of many shall be necessary.” The imperial request is limited to calling a second synod, and *necessarium constat* holds even this command impersonal. When Honorius’s third sentence brings his repeated noun *iudicium* to verbal action, the bishops and their qualifications and God and the papacy are the actors: “For which reason let Your Sanctity, whom the good quality of life and the learning of the Law commends, think it right to hurry to the city of Spoleto by the Ides of June, excuses cut short, so that the thing which truth and the standard of religion shall have dictated may be judged by verdict, God giving support equally with the minds of all, so that the priesthood of the apostolic seat may not be in dispute longer.” As emperor, Honorius convened the synod and receded, leaving all decision to the bishops.

Galla Placidia suggested her regard for Bishop Aurelius of Carthage in more lively fashion: “We had wished a different reason had arisen for seeing Your Veneration, so that we might enjoy the longed-for sight of your blessing” (*Coll.Av.* 27.1). Where Honorius looked to the bishops for the godliness to deliver a judgment in accordance with abstract truth, established religion, and God, Galla Placidia immediately invoked emotions, mutual presence, and the function of Aurelius’s office to mediate divine

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grace for others. Whether or not she and Aurelius had ever met, Galla Placidia's lively desire conjured intimacy. Warmth established, she explained the circumstances. Not only was there contestation: Galla Placidia said *certamen*, Honorius *contentio* (*Coll.Av.* 26.2, 27.1). But with more detail and more bitterness than Honorius, Galla Placidia declared a "reprehensible ambition⁶" had been at work. A "holy life" was being spurned as qualification for the episcopate. She asserted an irregularly small number of bishops had been involved in the synod at Ravenna. Now, however, the flaws of the proceeding extended the discussion and handed it over to "more men and the most learned," of whom, flatteringly, "Your Sanctity is the chief." While modestly acknowledging, "the things written by the lord my full-brother the Augustus were able to do enough" to summon Aurelius, Galla Placidia also underlined the high status she was being modest about. It added force to the request she personally "joined on." *Quaeso*, first-person singular, vividly spoke agency. Whereas Honorius's climax to the verb, *id ... sententia iudicetur*, impersonally prioritized the bishops' verdict, Galla Placidia breathed her own voice into her previous sentence's *mea [scripta]* (*Coll.Av.* 26.3, 27.2). Both siblings used grammar so as to reinforce their chosen styles of invitation and projection of power. Honorius portentously delimited zones of authority. Galla Placidia, graciously desiring Aurelius's blessing, doubled her appeal to his duty to round out the new synod, look to God, and strengthen the priesthood now under dispute.

In Galla Placidia's urging may be heard the female counterpart of the extensive clerical and monastic lobbying, theological and practical, otherwise attested in male-authored texts.⁷ They divide between seeking aristocratic women's support and decrying antagonists for illegitimately practicing on 'weak women' as in the gendered stereotype. Honorius's conventional expressions of regard for his addressees bulked out rather than modulated imperial authority. "Symmachus, dearest and most loving parent," called formulaically on personalized respect and affection, but "your Sublimity" and "your illustrious Magnificence" enlisted the numinous qualities of rank (*Coll.Av.* 15.5, 18.1, 21.2, 31.2, 33.3). Achilleus, bishop of Spoleto, Honorius called "your Beatitude," the senators with great traditionalism "Conscript fathers" and "your Eminence" (*Coll.Av.* 22.1, 23.1, 3). Galla Placidia more effusively individualized her attention, with warmth that might tickle a prelate's ear. And with it she directed Aurelius, as just the sort of man who "ought to reveal the rewards of chastity and merit, when the vices are removed that the sacrosanct instruction of divine religion spits away" (*Coll.Av.* 27.1).

Galla Placidia's hint that Aurelius was specially qualified to correct error by the Ravenna synod significantly exceeded Honorius's emphasis on ending an impasse. Her letter to seven African bishops

⁶ etymol "electioneering": resonant in It emp?

⁷ Maier, "Topo Heresy/Dissent" *Historia* (1995) compiles several exx

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expressed dissatisfaction with the Ravenna synod even more sharply (*Coll.Av.28*). The *Collectio Avellana*'s heading lists the seven by name, but Galla Placidia's letter used second-person singular forms throughout her text. By contrast Honorius used second-person plural in his letter "to the African bishops"⁸: it appears he wrote to them as a group whereas the *Collectio Avellana* preserves for her a master-copy of letters to individuals. Characteristically, she used her second-person far more often than Honorius. He supposed the African bishops had heard of the struggle at Rome; Galla Placidia opened with the idea, immediately connecting the news with her addressee and her concern. The idea vices fight with chastity was shared with her letter to Aurelius (*Coll.Av. 28.1, 27.1*). Likewise common was the idea the deserving candidate's life, "strengthened by apostolic precept," was being ignored as his qualification (*Coll.Av. 28.3, 27.1*). The length of the conflict was more salient in Honorius's letter although Galla Placidia too referred to it (*Coll.Av. 28.1, 26.2-3*). Her idea certain participants blocked the Ravenna synod from resolving the dispute cast blame (*Coll.Av. 28.1*). Honorius had directed bishops previously involved with the rivals must not sit with the synod or offer testimony (*Coll.Av. 20.3*); he did not suggest to the African bishops the possibility the synod was infected nonetheless. Galla Placidia asserted the dissenters would acknowledge her addressees' judgment, proceeding as it did from the "merit of life" (*Coll.Av.28.2*): she thus enrolled them not only as part of the solution to the impasse but on the side of the deserving candidate. Her expression of deference to Honorius's authority and her double request to her addressees for personal blessing and priestly duty echoed her letter to Aurelius (*Coll.Av. 28.3, 27.2*): Galla Placidia used these elements as a sort of formula, but in vastly more personally engaged form than Honorius's requests.

Collectio Avellana 25 to Paulinus of Nola like *Letters* 27 and 28 is docketed as coming from Honorius. Unlike them it contains no reference to "my full-brother the Augustus" by which to correct the dossier's compiler. It uses the first person plural throughout. Yet it shares the style of approach Galla Placidia used in her letters to Aurelius of Carthage and to the seven African bishops, and she has been recognized as its author also. She opened astringently, referring to the Ravenna synod's delay with personal irritation: "already then there was with us a sure opinion that nothing could be finished by these priests who had come to the synod" (*Coll.Av. 25.1*). Galla Placidia tied the failure of the synod to Paulinus's absence on the plea of bodily indisposition. Because he was not there, "vices" rather than desirable qualities won praise, and "twisted, inveterate ambition" had its contest, for a long time, with a blessed man of holy life," violently assailing the good of the "apostolic institution." As in the letters to Aurelius and to the seven African bishops, Galla Placidia portrayed the Ravenna synod as continuing to

⁸ Hon uses 2 sing to Symmachus, Achilleus

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deprive the deserving candidate of the episcopate. Now, however, she declared the wrongs were done because Paulinus did not take part. Her request to him too doubled invocation of duty with her desire for blessing (*Coll.Av.* 25.3). With an individual touch, she mentions now the pleasant climate. Nor does Galla Placidia refer to a letter of her brother's. Apparently because Paulinus had already been summoned to the synod at Ravenna, unlike the African bishops, but had excused himself, Galla Placidia now endeavored to draw him in with extra cajolery. This letter does not imply Galla Placidia or Honorius proposed to put the new synod in Paulinus's charge, any more than Aurelius's being a "chief" does in the letter to him. Rather, Galla Placidia hoped by getting these bishops to the bigger synod this time she would create a majority for the result she desired.

None of Galla Placidia's letters comes out and says which of Eulalius and Boniface she considered ambitious or holy. Like Constantius's terse *Ep.* 30 to Symmachus, with its driving purpose clauses and emphasis on compliance, Galla Placidia avows Honorius's purpose of getting the decision made, now. Yet by portraying the Ravenna synod not just as inconclusive but effectively favoring a bad choice, Galla Placidia takes a side in the dispute in such a way her addressees could take direction from her. Speculation in the scholarship splits, but the view that has prevailed more recently follows the assumption Constantius favored a choice for bishop of Rome who would continue Zosimus's alliance with Constantius's own associate Patroclus of Arles⁹: its next assumption is that Eulalius, having been Zosimus's archdeacon, would continue his partnerships. But it is much less easy to assume the African bishops to whom Galla Placidia wrote reiterating Honorius's summons to the synod would favor Constantius's choice for Constantius's reason. It begs a question to assume that Galla Placidia did. She had lived at Rome, albeit years before. She might well have been involved, in the "women's auxiliary," in some of the African bishops' lobbying at Rome about Church discipline and policies. Augustine, for example, consistently advocated the authority of Rome's decisions – though his famous "Rome has spoken" referred specifically to Innocent's decision against Pelagius, and opposed Zosimus's willingness to re-open the matter.¹⁰ The Africans had then appealed successfully to Honorius in Ravenna and trumped Zosimus. Plausibly Honorius now accepted the initial election of Eulalius as reported by Symmachus simply as *fait accompli*, relying on its having been carried out in line with accepted protocols. Nonetheless Honorius's indulgence to an opposing party stands out. The petition of the Roman priests supporting Boniface re-opened the possibility he was a more acceptable candidate to more of the Christian community there. Honorius re-opened the decision. Boniface's service to

⁹ Mathisen, *Eccles Factionalism* (1989) 35-36, 73

¹⁰ O'Donnell, *Ruin*

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Innocent, the bishop when Galla Placidia lived in Rome, might have made him a more acceptable candidate to her. Possibly Honorius retained a negative association with Eulalius from Zosimus and the dispute about Pelagius, or possibly he was genuinely neutral.

Honorius first retracted his endorsement of Eulalius. Emphasizing that his earlier message should not prejudice decisions now, and banning interested parties, Honorius assembled the Italian synod at Ravenna. Not satisfied by its results, he then called a wider circle of bishops to Spoleto. Galla Placidia reinforced Honorius's summons of the Africans and hinted that the choice she expected from them would rectify a miscarriage. If they indeed could be counted on for skepticism toward Zosimus and his legacy, Honorius's and Galla Placidia's tact calling them in, rather than rejecting an earlier decision more bluntly, might have aimed at preserving comity with Constantius.

All tact ultimately was preempted by Eulalius's disorderly entry to Rome and the further disturbances he caused. Symmachus feelingly reported the disturbances. All gentle manipulation from the court ceased. Honorius confirmed Boniface as bishop of Rome. A subsequent letter to Boniface provided that double elections should not be able to get so far out of hand in future. Galla Placidia, with a distinctive voice, added a flattering personal touch to her brother's proceedings. No more than feminine sweet-talk might have been discerned – but the sweet cajolery came from a very high place, and it came down on one side. It would be a mistake to discount her intervention just because she said it was superfluous. On her long road Galla Placidia carried a mind of her own, if also the ambiguous skills to pursue its goals.