

Scribonia

Augustus's First Wife

by L.A. Curchin

Livia, wife of Augustus, is possibly the best known of all Roman empresses. Yet she was not his first spouse. This article is about the mysterious lady who was.

In 40 BC, Octavian (as Augustus was then called) married an older woman named Scribonia. As frequently happened among the upper class, the main purpose of this marriage was political. Although Julius Caesar had defeated Pompey the Great several years earlier, Pompey's son Sextus Pompeius commanded a rogue navy that controlled the western Mediterranean and threatened the grain supply to Rome. Octavian attempted to appease Pompeius by marrying Scribonia, Pompeius' closest female relative. Specifically, Scribonia's brother Lucius Scribonius Libo, a junior magistrate at the time, was Pompeius' father-in-law. Octavian also hoped that Scribonia would give him a son and heir.

Scribonia was of solid senatorial pedigree. Both her father's family (the Scribonii Libones) and her mother's (the Sentii) were of praetorian rank, which means that some of their ancestors had reached the position of praetor, the magistracy just below consul. Her brother Lucius would eventually advance the family's honour by achieving the consulship in 34 BC. Their father's family was moreover associated with the Puteal Libonis, a well-known place in the Forum where financial matters were transacted. Scribonia had been married twice before. Her first husband was Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Marcellinus (consul 56 BC); they had a son, Cornelius Marcellinus, who does not appear to have survived to adulthood. By her second husband, Publius Cornelius Scipio (suffect consul in 35 BC), Scribonia had a son Publius who reached the consulship in 16 BC, and a daughter Cornelia. This marriage evidently ended in divorce. Scribonia's brief marriage to Octavian was not any happier. It failed to win any concessions from Sextus Pompeius, and meanwhile, Octavian found Scribonia's personality disagreeable. Though Scribonia was pregnant with Octavian's child, he was already having an affair with the 18-year old Livia. This cannot have improved Scribonia's mood! When the baby turned out to be a girl, Octavian unchivalrously sent Scribonia a divorce notice the same day.

Because Octavian had been adopted by Julius Caesar and thus admitted to the Julian family, his daughter was naturally named Julia. Under Roman law, children of a divorced couple belonged to the father, and daughters were valuable tools in forging political alliances. When Julia was only two years old, Octavian had her engaged to Marc Antony's five-year old son Antyllus, to cement the two men's faltering partnership. This marriage never took place, but at age fourteen, Julia was married to her cousin Marcellus, who unfortunately died two years later. Augustus then married Julia to his general

Agrippa, although she was sixteen and he was nearly forty! Julia bore Agrippa three sons and two daughters.

But what of Scribonia? After being divorced by Octavian, she apparently retired to private life and was never remarried. Several inscriptions, which can hardly all date to the one year she was married, refer to her as the wife of Caesar, i.e. Augustus. She thus appears to have continued to be known by that title.

Following Agrippa's death, Augustus forced Tiberius to marry Julia, whom he hated. As a result of this unhappy marriage, Julia began to hang around with other men, and allegedly was involved in orgies in the Forum. Though these reports may be exaggerated, she was definitely found guilty of adultery. To rid himself of any scandal, Augustus exiled Julia to a distant island, and never allowed her to return home. Scribonia voluntarily accompanied her daughter into exile, and remained with her for the next fifteen years. After Augustus' death, Julia lost all hope of being recalled to Rome, and wasted away until she died. But Scribonia survived. Returning to Rome, she was living in her family's house in AD 16 when her grand-nephew Scribonius Libo Drusus was accused of conspiring against the emperor Tiberius. Scribonia, now in her late eighties, advised Libo not to commit suicide but to face his punishment like a man.

Scribonia's older daughter, Cornelia, was married to Paullus Aemilius Lepidus, who helped Octavian in the war against Sextus Pompeius in 38 BC (which was declared, conveniently, after Octavian had divorced Scribonia, the aunt of Pompeius' wife). Lepidus then became suffect consul (34 BC) and later censor. Cornelia, who died prematurely after producing two sons, is praised by the poet Propertius as an ideal wife and mother – a very different sort of woman from Scribonia's younger and less virtuous daughter, Julia.