UNTIL modern times societies were patriarchal. The word means “father ruler”. The father was the head of the family and the boss of everybody. Men were in charge and women were confined to household duties and raising children. But throughout history there have been women who have been influential behind the scenes. While a man might have thought he was in charge, there was a woman who was pulling the strings and controlling everything. Such a woman was Pulcheria, the sister of the Roman emperor Theodosius II (402-450 AD).

Pulcheria (Greek: Πολυχερία, pronounced Pool-keria) was the daughter of the emperor Arcadius (383-408) and the granddaughter of the emperor Theodosius I (379-395). Theodosius I (Figure 1) had been born in Spain and was a successful general in the Roman army before Gratian, the emperor of the western half of the empire, asked him to become the emperor of the eastern half. Constantinople was the capital in the east and Rome in the west. (Figure 2 – map)

Following the conversion to Christianity of Constantine the Great (307-337) the number of Christians in the Roman Empire gradually increased, and Theodosius I was a Christian who was intolerant of other religions. He outlawed the old Greek and Roman religion even if the ceremonies were conducted in private. Sacrificing in temples was banned and the temples were closed. Although these were harsh measures he felt that they were necessary to unify the empire, but he was never a persecutor of people as some of the earlier Roman emperors had been. Before he died Theodosius I decreed that his sons should succeed him. So Arcadius (Figure 3) became the emperor of the east and Honorius (Figure 4) the emperor of the west.

Arcadius was eighteen when he became emperor and Honorius only ten, but even as adults they were incompetent. Julius Norwich in his book Byzantium, the Early Centuries described Arcadius: “Small, dark and swarthy, slow in speech and movement, with heavy-lidded eyes that always seemed about to close in sleep, he was in fact even stupider than he looked; and his character was as weak as his intellect.” Sadly his wife, the beautiful Eudoxia (Figure 5), made fun of him in
public, but somehow the empire managed to trundle along.

Arcadius had one son, Theodosius II (Figures 6 and 7), and three daughters. Theodosius II was only seven years old when his father died, but fortunately his guardian, Anthemius, was a capable administrator. He ordered that great walls be built to protect Constantinople, and these walls, known as the Theodosian Walls (Figure 8), kept the citizens safe for a thousand years until the city was taken by Muslim invaders in 1453.

The eldest child of Arcadius was Pulcheria (Figure 9). She was two years older than her brother, and at age fifteen she succeeded Anthemius as the power behind the throne. For the rest of her brother’s reign she was the effective ruler of the empire. Actually this was not a bad thing because she was an intelligent, capable woman, and Theodosius II was quite happy to leave the affairs of state to her. He was certainly not stupid. In fact he was a cultured intellectual. He loved the art of copying and illustrating manuscripts (Figures 10 and 11) and people called him the calligrapher. According to David Vagi, the author of Coinage and History of the Roman Empire, “Theodosius was kind, generous, scholarly and peaceful – indeed he possessed all the wrong qualities to lead an empire constantly under siege. He was a skilled calligrapher, and applied this talent to his all-consuming passion of religion by patiently copying old manuscripts into the late hours of the night.” In keeping with his scholarly interests he founded the University of Constantinople in 425 and supervised the formation of the Theodosian Code, which was a compilation of all the laws issued after 312. It was published in 438.

Pulcheria was quite different: she certainly possessed all the right qualities to lead the empire. She had inherited her grandfather’s talents, but according to Norwich she was “excessively, extravagantly pious.” He wrote that the imperial palace “thronged from morning till night with priests and monks while the princesses, all three of whom had vowed themselves to perpetual virginity, stitched away at their altar-cloths and chasubles to the sound of hymns, psalmodies and muttered prayers.”

Pulcheria’s influence was pervasive. When a beautiful and intelligent young woman called Athenais came to the palace in connection with a legal matter Pulcheria decided that she would make a suitable wife for her brother and she introduced her to him immediately. (Figure 12) Her name was changed to Eudocia, she was given a crash course in Christianity, and the couple were duly married. At first the marriage was a success and they had a daughter, Licinia Eudoxia, who subsequently married the western emperor Valentinian III (Figure 13). He was the son of Galla Placidia (Figure 14) whose adventurous life is related in the February 2018 issue of CAB.

Coin collectors need to realize that the die-engravers responsible for producing the images of these 5th century emperors and empresses were not interested in their actual appearance. On the coins they all look the same. This is a different

Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Arcadius minted at Antioch in 383. The hand of God holds a wreath above his head. Diameter 22 mms. Sear, Vol. 5, 20788.

Figure 4 – Gold solidus minted for Honorius at Constantinople between 408 and 420. Diameter 21 mms. On the reverse Constantinopolis sits on a throne with her right foot on a ship’s prow. Sear, Vol. 5, 20902.

Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Eudoxia, the wife of Arcadius. Diameter 12 mms. The hand of God holds a wreath above her head. On the reverse Victory inscribes the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ on a shield. Sear Vol. 5, 20892.

Figure 6 – 5th century marble head of Theodosius II in the Louvre. (Wikimedia Commons: photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen)
situation from that in the first two centuries of the Roman Empire when the emperors and their wives were shown as they really were, warts and all. The chubby face of Nero is easily recognized on his coins as is the big nose of Nerva, but by Pulcheria’s time it was simply the person’s status that mattered, not their individual appearance. It seems that the idea of the individual was subsumed into the spiritual ethos of the age. In a world of officially sanctioned piety humility not egotism was the norm.

In 438 Eudocia went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was a great success and the people of Jerusalem called her the new Helena, after Constantine’s mother who had also visited the city. The bishop of Jerusalem gave her two sacred relics, the bones of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and the chain that held St Peter by the wrists when he was imprisoned by King Agrippa I. Peter’s miraculous escape from the prison is recorded in Acts, chapter 12. Eudocia took them back with her to Constantinople, but she gave some of the chain to her daughter Eudoxia, who immediately built a church in Rome to receive the precious gift. Another chain said to have tethered Peter before his martyrdom in Rome was added, and today they can all be seen in the church known as San Pietro in Vincoli (St Peter in Chains). (Figure 15)

When Eudocia returned to Constantinople her popularity was sky-high. Then sadly she fell out with her husband and sister-in-law. What actually happened is unknown. Perhaps Pulcheria became jealous of Eudocia whom Theodosius suspected of having an affair with a courtier.

Figure 7 – Gold solidus of Theodosius II minted at Constantinople between 441 and 450. Diameter 20 mms. Theodosius holds a spear and a shield on which a horseman spears a fallen enemy. Constantinopolis is on the reverse. Sear, Vol. 5, 21140. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)

Figure 8 – The walls of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) built during the reign of Theodosius II. (Wikimedia Commons: photo by Laima Gūtmane)

Figure 9 – Gold tremissis of Pulcheria minted at Constantinople between 414 and 453. Diam. 15 mms. Sear, Vol. 5, 21256. There is also a solidus, semissis, siliqua and bronze centenionalis.
The situation became intolerable for Eudocia and she moved to Jerusalem, never to return to Constantinople. Her story is related in the September 2013 issue of CAB.

When Theodosius II died unexpectedly in 450 it was a critical time for the empire because there was no male heir, but Pulcheria took charge of the situation. She chose an elderly soldier, Marcian (Figure 16), to be the emperor. To consolidate his position Pulcheria married him. Needless to say, the marriage was in name only and there was no sex involved. Pulcheria made a wise choice as Marcian proved to be a sensible administrator.

During his reign a general council of the church was called to determine a matter of great importance for Christianity. In 451 AD bishops came from all over the empire to the church of St Euphemia, a woman who had been terribly tortured and martyred during the Diocletian persecutions at the beginning of the 4th century. The church was in the city of Chalcedon, which was just across the strait from the imperial palace in Constantinople. Although Chalcedon had issued coins from the 5th century BC (Figure 17) its mint ceased production in the reign of Gordian III (238-244).
The Council of Chalcedon is considered to be second in significance only to the Council of Nicaea, which was called by Constantine the Great in 325 to determine the relationship between Jesus Christ and God. The Council of Chalcedon was called to consider Jesus himself and it decreed that he was one person with two natures, human and divine. (Figure 18) The majority of Christian denominations today accept the decrees of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon as the basic tenets of the Christian faith. This was a tremendous achievement, but who arranged the Council of Chalcedon and influenced its outcome? You guessed it: it was Pulcheria. According to Vagi, “She was instrumental in both summoning and implementing the canons of the extremely important Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Church at Chalcedon in 451.” No wonder she is a saint in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Pulcheria’s achievement makes one wonder how influential Mary Magdalene was, as a woman behind the scenes, in the initial stages of Christianity. (Figure 19) It raises the question of the place of...
women in the church. Paul Collins, the author of *Absolute Power: How the pope became the most influential man in the world*, which was published in 2018, quotes Pope Francis: “By virtue of their feminine genius, [female] theologians can detect, for the benefit of all, some unexplored aspects of the unfathomable mystery of Christ.” Collins goes on to say, “Given that women do up to 75 percent of the church’s pastoral work, their role as leaders and ordained ministers cannot be ignored.”

Continued overleaf
When Pulcheria died in 453 the people of Constantinople were grief-stricken. She had been generous in life, and in her will she instructed that all of her remaining wealth be distributed to the poor. Not only was she a theologian but she was a pastor as well. If you own a coin of Pulcheria you can be sure that whoever held it in 453 would have felt very sad. How fortunate are coin collectors to be connected in such a tangible way to the great events of the past!

Note: Unless stated otherwise the coins illustrated are from the author's collection.

Figure 18 – Painting of the Council of Chalcedon by Vasily Surikov, 1848-1916. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 19 – “Appearance of Jesus to Maria Magdalena,” by Alexander Ivanov. 1835. (Wikimedia Commons)