

## Historiography and Lines of Research in the History of Women in Antiquity

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**Abstract.** *This paper provides an overview of the state of the art in Gender historiography and the roles played by Roman women. The lines of research on this subject have focused especially on the elite women who carried out their social activities in a public space. In a second place, some studies delve into the beliefs of anonymous women who do not hold religious positions and limit their roles to their private space. Finally, in a third place, we must emphasize the studies on Gender history in Antiquity—these have opened up a vast field of research that consists of different lines focused on the History of both aristocratic and devout women.*

**Resumen.** *Se ofrece en este trabajo una visión general sobre el estado de la cuestión de la historiografía de género y los roles que desempeñaron las mujeres romanas. Las líneas de investigación sobre esta temática se han centrado especialmente en torno a la mujer de las élites que desenvuelven sus actividades sociales en un espacio público. En un segundo lugar, se sitúan las investigaciones destinadas a las creencias femeninas de carácter anónimo que no desempeñan cargos religiosos y limitan su papel a su espacio privado. Por último, en un tercer lugar, destacan los estudios sobre Historia de género en la Antigüedad que han abierto un amplio campo investigador con distintas líneas centradas en la Historia de las mujeres, no solo de la aristocracia sino también de las devotas romanas.*

**Rezumat.** *Acest referat oferă o imagine de ansamblu asupra stării problemei istoriografiei de gen și a rolurilor jucate de femeile romane. Liniile de cercetare pe acest subiect s-au concentrat în special pe femeile elitelor care își desfășoară activitățile sociale într-un spațiu public. În al doilea rând, există investigații care vizează credințe feminine de natură anonimă care nu dețin poziții religioase și își limitează rolul la spațiul lor privat. În sfârșit, într-un al treilea rând, ies în evidență studiile asupra Istoriei de gen în Antichitate, care au deschis un larg domeniu de cercetare cu linii diferite axate pe Istoria femeilor, nu numai a aristocrației, ci și a devotatelor romane.*

**Keywords:** Antiquity, beliefs, religious ceremonies, Gender studies, historiography, women.

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## 1. Introduction

“El término y el concepto de feminismo, referidos a Roma, constituyen un anacronismo y carecen de sentido al basarse en hipótesis indemostradas e indemostrables. Parece bastante más prudente limitarse a observar que el proceso — indiscutiblemente — pone de manifiesto la existencia de un grave problema en la relación entre ambos sexos, sin duda enturbiada por un ambiente de desconfianza y de sospecha; desconfianza y sospecha que lejos de desaparecer con el tiempo se vuelven cada vez más intensas” (CANTARELLA 1997, 100)

It is unquestionable that municipal aristocracies of the Roman provinces are the subject of many research works, in comparison with that area of Gender historiography aimed at retrieving a woman who does not belong to any prominent stratum of society. Historical reflection on the religious spaces taken up by these women has filled collective volumes on religions, without actually giving Gender history its rightful place in the History of women in Antiquity.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant aspects of Gender studies is that they cannot be reduced to a single national discourse. Thus, this cultural historiography is comprised of an extensive collection of Roman religious monographs interpreting material culture according to diverse approaches and methodologies to study gender, resulting in the so-called Gender Studies and Women’s Studies.<sup>3</sup>

In the 21st century, there are certain lines of study which are becoming increasingly important: these continue to have—as their main protagonists—elite women who stood out in their communities since they benefited from civic honours of a religious nature that were primarily achieved by men.<sup>4</sup> This knowledge of Roman society and religion is based on the religious customs of aristocratic women — only a discreet second place is reserved for those who do not belong to the more privileged social groups. However, there is a growing interest in Feminist history, especially in the construction of gender roles.<sup>5</sup> These publications arise from the interest and the greater abundance of data generated by the civic dimension, in comparison with the personal beliefs of the devout Roman woman.

In this sense, female representation in urban life was leveraged by a small group of women who had real options to share the civic space with male members of the municipal aristocracies.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the city embodies the political and religious scene, where it is

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<sup>2</sup> MCAUSLAN, WALCOT 1996.

<sup>3</sup> HURCOMBE 2000; AHEARNE-KROLL, HOLLOWAY, KELHOFFER 2010; KRAEMER 2010; MILNOR 2010; DOLANSKY 2012; TRÜMPER 2012; CENTLIVRES 2013; FOXHALL 2013; MONTÓN 2013; KEEGAN 2014; PERRY 2014; DOMÍNGUEZ, MARINA 2015; FERRER, PEREIRA 2015; MOLINA 2015; 2018c; MARTÍNEZ, UBRIC 2017; ORIA 2017; MARTÍNEZ, GALLEGO, MIRÓN, ORIA 2019.

<sup>4</sup> MOLINA 2018b.

<sup>5</sup> CASCAJERO 2002.

<sup>6</sup> CANTARELLA 1991.

possible to see their integration in the local priesthood, as well as their public exposure serving their communities. Actually, it is obvious that the enjoyment of these civic privileges would be intended for women primarily related to judges or priestly positions and reserved for a select number of *matronae*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the involvement in this world of beliefs eventually emphasizes the differences among Roman women according to their social category.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, their religiosity kept them faithful to those beliefs of their own, which they considered more important to maintain their traditions and the stability of their religious sphere. In many cases, this religious sphere was differentiated in public and private spaces, male and female, which poses a series of questions so as to interpret reality in certain contexts.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Gender studies and ceremonies in the public sphere

“Se puede considerar que el poder religioso público pertenecía casi por entero a los hombres” (SCHEID 1991, 446)

In the last two decades, a third line of gender studies has focused on research dealing with what may be defined as “more feminine” cultural and religious practices. In this line, historiographic production in the Anglo-Saxon world has been well received in monographs on Roman religion, with a research focus based on the interpretation of the material culture that facilitates diverse approaches and methodologies in the study of women and the symbolism of their ritual experiences.<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, there is a series of works trying to break—from a gender perspective—with the stereotyped model of the Roman woman with the purpose of creating an identity for them in the Antiquity.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the public representation of women in political propaganda continues to be emphasized,<sup>12</sup> this further confirms their particular beliefs do not seem to be a priority in specialized literature.

From the archaeological point of view, this scientific discipline has cleared up some doubts related to the female religious universe. Research on Roman religion has gone beyond the architectural configuration of private space and its link with the personal universe of believers.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, female religiousness has not been a recurring theme in current historiography, nor has it encouraged a noticeable number of reflections. In addition to these works, some Spanish researchers have opened other lines which prove the importance of the

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<sup>7</sup> CID 2007a.

<sup>8</sup> HOLLAND 2012.

<sup>9</sup> PARKER 2015.

<sup>10</sup> MAEHLE 2008.

<sup>11</sup> BOCK 1991; GARLICK 1992.

<sup>12</sup> HEMELRIJK 2009.

<sup>13</sup> CORRALES 2002.

material record in the so-called gender archaeology, in such fields as domestic architecture, iconography, numismatics or epigraphy in Hispania.<sup>14</sup>

Hence the lack of available material does not allow a historiographic analysis of Hispanic women from a strictly archaeological approach. Nor should it be forgotten that those women represented in such sources belong to the more favoured classes from a social point of view — those who can afford, for instance, a sculpture or a funeral painting, so the more socio-economically disadvantaged female group goes unnoticed.<sup>15</sup> In this way, we must take into account multiple factors that depend on the particular situations and economic conditions of these women, to establish a series of nuances of religiosity that are difficult to explain. According to Bendala:

en una ciudad de la Bética, durante mucho tiempo bajo la dominación romana, un individuo podría vestir toga, porque había adquirido la ciudadanía romana, comer a la manera turdetana, orar y venerar a sus dioses según la tradición púnica y enterrar a sus muertos según ritos mezclados de tradiciones púnicas, turdetanas y romanas, algunas de ellas parecidas o concluyentes (BENDALA 2006, 292).

However, it is not convenient to generalize that with the arrival of the Roman divinities the pre-Roman religious experiences will take a back seat, because the votive epigraphy exposes the existence and maintenance of their more traditional beliefs was a reality.

Likewise, the scarce attention given to these studies due to the lack of existing material has not conditioned the interest in updating the status of the matter through the handling of epigraphic sources.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, religious epigraphy shows the essence of private female worship, largely linked to traditional sacred rites rather than official religious propaganda. Unfortunately, there are not enough epigraphic examples to outline the archetype of the devotee in the different provinces of the Roman Empire. With regard to the above-mentioned trends, interest in the private sphere has aroused as opposed to the public sphere, gaining strength despite the lack of information about domestic rituals.<sup>17</sup> For some historians, it is difficult to guess the possible linkage of an implicit feeling of gratitude through the inscriptions and, in turn, to discover a closer appreciation of a woman's personal religiosity.

Anyhow, epigraphy plays a key role in building the religiosity of women and giving meaning to their experiences.<sup>18</sup> This is an accessible source that has been the subject of several catalogues, despite the difficulty to date and contextualize the pieces.

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<sup>14</sup> SÁNCHEZ 2009.

<sup>15</sup> MOLINA 2015.

<sup>16</sup> ZARZALEJOS 2008.

<sup>17</sup> ZACCARIA 1995.

<sup>18</sup> CHANIOTIS 2009.



Figure 1. Ideal recreation of the painting of C. Voconius and Caecilia Anus made by M. Bendala (BENDALA 1972, 246).

From a public perspective, the contributions of some authors depict a certain role for a woman who is publicly exposed and involved in religious ceremonies, where they spend their personal money in order to support their husbands and children.<sup>19</sup> In addition, these contributions bring up the matrimonial interests and strategies that link local aristocracies for women to achieve priesthood. Certainly, civic activities undertaken by a small group of female aristocrats has been a recurring theme in Gender historiography.<sup>20</sup> These women, whose goal was to imitate members of the Roman oligarchies through public statutory tributes, had a real chance of receiving public honours.

In this civic context, papers on munificence have monopolized most of the sections on religion. It is also noteworthy that this feminine presence not only does manifest itself

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<sup>19</sup> HEMELRIJK 2004.

<sup>20</sup> MACLACHLAN 2013.

in municipal and religious donations, but also in the payment of banquets, generous distributions of money among fellow citizens, the celebration of public games, or their integration into the imperial cult.<sup>21</sup> But, in any case, and despite the numerous studies about Roman priestesses, we do not know the requirements to achieve a religious position within their cities.

However, this is not the general trend in this line of research. The possibility that Roman women became priestesses as individuals, and not through marriage, is a historiographic advance in understanding the personal influence of these elite women, together with the use of civic cults for their own benefit. We do not necessarily have to consider this hypothesis, since family ties in a public context are particularly difficult to document, which is the reason why it is hard to establish the relationships that priestesses might have had with male administrative or religious positions.<sup>22</sup> Some authors argue that achieving and holding female positions was linked to the fact of being related to magistrates or priests. In fact, the privileges acquired by the male members of their families monopolize most of the studies that reconstruct the Roman municipal system.<sup>23</sup>

Put briefly, and despite the fact that the urban space was basically monopolized by men, the devotion to Juno Lucina and the importance of this marriage ceremony reinforced the presence of women in the institutional life.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to point out how religious manifestations meant the particular intervention of Roman matrons in the civic sphere, which was beneficial to them, as well as to their male relatives, in order to receive the same public honours.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in this unique process, the motivations that led these devotees to become involved in a sacred setting are synonymous with personal identity.

Regarding exclusively female rituals, the authors use the term *ordo matronarum* to refer to a matronal organization that celebrates a series of ceremonies of its own, which was configured as an instrument of socio-religious cohesion.<sup>26</sup> In spite of the amount of studies on this subject, we do not know if Rome introduced these matrimonial liturgies among the Iberian women, or if they were left out of their religious practices. Thus, it must be made clear that, despite the fact that certain deities are worshipped, we do not know of any exclusive and gender-differentiated celebrations of Hispanic matrons, such as *Matronalia*, *Bona Dea* or *Fortuna Muliebris*, which were characteristically Roman.<sup>27</sup> However, a small fragment of a lintel dedicated by a freedwoman, Iulia Saturnina, to Bona Dea had to be part of a temple to the goddess in Beja, which could mean that this cult was practiced in Hispania.

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<sup>21</sup> HEMELRIJK 2007.

<sup>22</sup> MIRÓN 2007.

<sup>23</sup> FISHWICK 2012.

<sup>24</sup> CID 2007b.

<sup>25</sup> BUONOPANE, CENERINI 2005.

<sup>26</sup> GAGÉ 1963.

<sup>27</sup> CID 1999.

Until now, it seems that civic ceremonies had little to do with those held in private – the study of the latter has been practically neglected by historiography, although it constitutes an interesting line of research. Nonetheless, the concern of many authors regarding questions about the civic role of women, their participation in public worship and tributes, the particular control of their fortunes, and the relationships of clientelism open up new research approaches<sup>28</sup> that modify our expectations so as to understand the meaning and repercussions the private religious sphere of the devout Roman woman had.



Figure 2. Epigraphy to Bona Dea  
(Pax Iulia; Conventus Pacensis)  
(HEp 17, 2008, 212)  
(Photo by Susana Correia)

### 3. The private sphere of women

“Women had specific ritual obligations within the home, and they participated in observances alongside other family members” (SCHULTZ 2006, 136)

By approaching gender-specific iconography in the family sphere, the practices carried out in this space move away from civic cults. Iconographic studies have not paid much attention to these private activities compared to other public expressions. In this line of research, it has been considered that the scope of action of the matron would be the *domus*, and not the forum.<sup>29</sup> In fact, research generally sustains that, in the private sphere, the religious role of women is secondary, since domestic worships would be officiated exclusively by their husbands.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the studies on the domestic sphere of the devotee do not reach the depth we would like, as they make such a sketchy analysis of the spaces of worship and domestic religious architecture.<sup>31</sup> For now, it is obvious that the main hindrance to understanding religion in the private sphere remains in a fragile line that establishes a difference between the sacred from the strictly ornamental. Furthermore, and although we do not have much information about it, the domestic ritual would follow certain guidelines during the course of the ritual.<sup>32</sup> In these ceremonies, which represent the beliefs of a family group, the general opinion—which some might say that falls into cliché—is that women,

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<sup>28</sup> HEMELRIJK, WOOLF 2013.

<sup>29</sup> BOËLS-JANSSEN 1993.

<sup>30</sup> SCHEID 1991.

<sup>31</sup> MAÑAS, URIBE 2012.

<sup>32</sup> LIPKA 2009.

together with their spouses, were responsible for officiating the ritual according to an established procedure.

The concern of some authors to match men's and women's degree of responsibility in private liturgies does not clarify the role assigned to women as domestic priestesses. In this sense, one of the best preserved examples, the *Casa delle Pareti Rosse*, allows us to glimpse the representations that would be chosen by the offerers for their prayers.<sup>33</sup> Oftentimes, the choice of these deities included in the domestic altar would correspond to the images of the divinities found in the main public worship. As far as archaeology allows us to document, certain comparisons can be made with what is known for the rest of the Roman world, especially in Pompeii.<sup>34</sup> The divinities found in the domestic environment have been mainly studied in the form of small bronze sculptures that appear out of context, far from their original lararies, and thus do not allow an overall assessment.



Figure 3. Lararium of House of the Red Walls (Pompeii) (PÉREZ 2014, 108)

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<sup>33</sup> ALLISON 2010.

<sup>34</sup> BEARD 2008.



Related to this private environment, some works focus on analysing the symbolism of these figurines with an overall perspective, without us being able to know the motivations behind the choice of gods in the domestic sphere.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, other studies consider that women's religious preferences for certain tutelary gods of the home was intended to favour the protection of the private atmosphere. Consequently, and even though it is a complex subject, the devotee has been traditionally considered a depositary of the religious practices of her closest environment. Far from facing this reality, other authors refer to the Roman family with a broader vision that, naturally, does not see women as individual agents within the family group.<sup>36</sup>

That said, although we do not know for sure who held the religious powers or the distribution of responsibilities among the members of a family, the latest research suggests the existence of main and secondary lararies in Pompeii, the former being used to worship the protective gods, located in the kitchen or close to it.<sup>37</sup> In a way, this theory considers that these lararies found near the kitchens made meal preparation easier, as well as the relationship between the deities and the fire, although another line of study assumes the main ones would be those located in the atriums. Since it is as obvious in the Iberian Peninsula (Roman Hispania) as in the rest of the Roman provinces, the material record is the only element of study that allows us to infer the belief system, to which it is added that religious representations had a symbolism difficult to interpret.

As for this last aspect, the main obstacle to enter the spiritual intimacy of Roman women comes from the limited knowledge about the cultual practices dedicated to the protective deities of the home. In reference to Hispania, everything seems to indicate that the internal structure in Roman houses does not correspond to the architectural schemes commonly found in the different regions of the Empire.<sup>38</sup> This heterogeneity influenced the typology of the domestic constructions as well as the arrangement and use of the cult structures. With regard to the latter, the remains preserved are so few that it is not possible to know the degree of similarity they might have had. Thanks to the archaeological studies, as per the materials that have been found, we know that most of them are rooms for some kind of ritual process, but it is not possible to be more specific because of the lack of preserved remains.<sup>39</sup> In this space, it is really difficult to explain the use of a private room when the few cultual objects do not appear *in situ*, which makes it impossible for the authors to deepen in the study of women's religiousness.

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<sup>35</sup> FERNÁNDEZ, ESPINOSA 2007.

<sup>36</sup> CENERINI 2002.

<sup>37</sup> GIACOBELLO 2008.

<sup>38</sup> TRÜMPER 2012.

<sup>39</sup> PÉREZ 2014.

Certainly, the devotions in a family group determined the symbolism of images of worship.<sup>40</sup> However, while for some authors the function of these bronze figurines is mainly aesthetic, for others these domestic deities have a strong religious content. According to this, we must understand that these images form the authentic religious expression of private worship practices. Significantly, researchers focus their analysis on the preference women had for deities with a protective character<sup>41</sup> — these women make up a large group of believers and hold a preeminent position in the most Romanized areas. The devotees did not limit themselves to worship goddesses of the Roman pantheon, but the cult of male deities such as Apollo, Jupiter, Mars or Mercury shows their preference for the prevailing ritual practices in the political and religious intricacies of Rome.



Figure 4. Relief of the sanctuary “Las Atalayuelas” (CC-SA-BY-2.0 by Á.M. Felicísimo)

Nonetheless, indigenous beliefs practised in collective or family worship spaces make difficult to define the syncretic character of these divinities. In fact, as we approach the religious sphere of these devotees, it is easier to detect the presence of specific rituals preferably reserved to the private sphere, where the public one remains in a secondary level. It is here where the beliefs shown in salutary sanctuaries unify different social groups that have a religious purpose and common interests in their personal and family environment. Consequently, native deities coexisted on an equal basis with the Roman religious world, which benefited the confluence of group—or even individual—devotions. This could be the case of *Aelia Belesiar* and the indigenous god *Betatun*. In all likelihood, the result of this belief is present in the relief found in the sanctuary of the Atalayuelas, in Jaén, Spain.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> BASSANI 2008.

<sup>41</sup> MOLINA 2018a.

<sup>42</sup> CORZO, PASTOR, STYLOW, UNTERMANN 2007; ORDUÑA 2009; MARCO 2018.

#### 4. Conclusions

In short, the different lines of research presented here show the negligence to develop a joint work aimed to reconstruct the religious universe of the Roman woman. In fact, the abundant works reflecting a woman who gained a certain degree of power and independence in the public religious sphere have given way to an interest in the field of private worship. Little by little, an interesting line of study is taking shape — it may be especially productive in the future and will allow us to formulate new hypotheses in order to understand the place that women held in their religious sphere.

Similarly, and as we mentioned earlier, for some authors the female religious function should be side-lined, since domestic cults would be officiated by husbands. It is even recognized that a woman must manage her home and devote herself solely and exclusively to the care of her family. From this perspective, most of their duties were carried out in private, far from a public context, since the Roman house would be the microsphere for women's participation in family cults. According to this approach, we know very little about the rituals in which they could—or were allowed to—participate. There are a few pieces of research which do not exclude the possibility of women's active participation alongside their husbands, or probably with a secondary role. Moreover, a woman would have a cultural duty to her gods that she could exercise individually to maintain her devotions. This line of work has been barely studied by researchers, which means that there is a historiographical gap in knowing about their beliefs.

Anyway, the presence of women in religious environments, both public and private, also confirms a categorization of the group clearly defined by the privileged position of Roman citizens in contrast to those who come from lower strata, compared to male presence in the same areas. On the other hand, the importance of certain religious festivals organized by women, which emphasize the maternal functions of a small group of matrons, is a sign of recognition in an eminently patriarchal society. Finally, and regardless of other factors, women were not excluded from the ritual practice since they had a respected space which exalted their traditional virtues, yet at the same time reinforced a consolidated form of religiosity.

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