

Female Beliefs in Roman Hispania

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Abstract: *In addition to Greco-Roman literary sources and archaeological evidence, inscriptions are the only means of reconstructing the information of certain population groups that were interested in expressing their religious ideas and honourable positions through epigraphy, which was often shaped by very specific local circumstances. The epigraphy of Roman Hispania not only provides valuable information about the daily life, social organization and religious beliefs of the population, but also reflects the adaptation and integration of local communities into the vast Roman Empire. This work provides an overview of women's beliefs in Hispania through the pedestals and votive altars dedicated by female devotees and priestesses (local and provincial), sometimes linked to the imperial cult, who made offerings to a divinity.*

Rezumat: *Pe lângă sursele literare greco-romane și dovezile arheologice, inscripțiile sunt singurul mijloc de reconstituire a informațiilor anumitor grupuri de populație care erau interesate să își exprime ideile religioase și pozițiile onorabile prin intermediul epigrafiei, care a fost adesea modelată de circumstanțe locale foarte specifice. Epigrafia Hispaniei romane nu numai că oferă informații valoroase despre viața cotidiană, organizarea socială și credințele religioase ale populației, dar reflectă și adaptarea și integrarea comunităților locale în vastul Imperiu Roman. Această lucrare oferă o imagine de ansamblu asupra credințelor femeilor din Hispania prin intermediul statuilor și altarelor votive dedicate de femei și preotese (locale și provinciale), uneori legate de cultul imperial.*

Keywords: beliefs, epigraphy, gender, religion, Roman women.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Huic filia una est. Ea mihi cottidie / aut ture aut vino aut aliqui semper supplicat, / dat mihi coronas” (Plaut., *Aul.* 23-25).

The universe of a devotional community could acquire different characteristics in different regions. This phenomenon can be explained as a reflection of the process of adaptation to the Roman cultic schemes, so that the dedicators would transmit in the votive epigraphs aspects that could only be explained by their autochthonous cultic tradition. The religious result of the cultural contact can only be understood in the historical context in which it was born, and the proof of this is the variety of interpretations of the same divinity that can be detected in nearby cultic spaces².

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² RÜPKE 2007.

With regard to the geographical distribution and the analysis of the devotions in Hispania, the epigraphs have been arranged according to the Roman provinces: *Baetica*, *Lusitania* and *Tarraconense*, have provided interesting novelties, since the female priestly dedications, the traditional epigraphic source for the study of female religiosity, represent only a reduced part of the totality of the analyzed documentary volume. This new evidence shows the clear intention of the believers to present their cultic practices in a context far from the civic cults. It is certainly this more intimate space that is the main recipient of the votive altars collected in this work, which form a chronological framework from the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD.

In any case, we have evidence that indigenous and purely Roman deities shared the same territorial scope. Now, in my opinion, if pre-Roman and Roman beliefs in Hispania clearly became a differentiated object of worship, there was also a selective assimilation of cultic uses that must have been established unequally in rural and urban areas. It is certain that autochthonous and purely Roman deities were established, giving rise to an innovative religious panorama characterized by its uneven territorial diffusion³. It is therefore possible to confirm that each community had its own socio-religious expression.

However, in compiling the epigraphs, the criteria I took into account were essentially the search and selection of the inscriptions of the three Hispanic provinces that had women as dedicators or recipients who made an offering to a god⁴. Thus, this option could make us think of documentary omissions that, in my opinion, include the authentic feminine cults, both autochthonous and officially Roman. In this sense, the religious documentary value of this information is characterized by a considerable cultic burden that does not seem to link the devotees to a male member of their family or their closest environment⁵. In fact, the closer we get to the religious sphere of these believers, the easier it is to detect the presence of specific rites that are mainly reserved for the private sphere, leaving the public sphere at a secondary level.

In fact, the present work shows that the state of the question of Hispano-Roman women and their beliefs is not sufficiently outlined and studied in the latest current historiographical trends⁶. Perhaps, little by little, the bibliographic repertoires dedicated to the study of Roman women will be interested in understanding their habits and religious practices in their most personal and familiar environment⁷. For this reason, we have tried to approach a space that is

³ HEMELRIJK 2020.

⁴ D'AMBRA 2007.

⁵ DOMÍNGUEZ, MARINA 2015.

⁶ MOLINA 2020a.

⁷ CHRYSTAL 2013.

particularly new in the series of female religious activities and that has allowed us to interpret the significant commitment that Hispano-Roman women professed to their devotions⁸.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION AND ANALYSIS OF FEMALE DEVOTIONS IN HISPANIA

“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)

Baetica

In the specific case of *Baetica*, the epigraphic testimonies remain uncertain when we want to relate the autochthonous beliefs to the Roman deities. This difficulty lies in the existence of a Mediterranean feminine religiosity, easily assimilated to the new cults coming from Rome, which becomes an obstacle to knowing its Roman equivalent. In a certain way, this identity of functions or attributions between some deities and others facilitated the process of Romanization in this area and, consequently, the formation of a specific pantheon⁹. In fact, there is a clear feminine tendency for goddesses such as Diana, Isis, and Juno. Perhaps one of the factors influencing the cultic selection of these deities is their protective function, especially of the female cycle. The cult of Diana had a notable preference among the worshippers, who not only showed their devotion through the religious propaganda that includes the use of the epithet *Augusta*, but the divinity is also adorned with jewels, which is a frequent practice in the donations of *the Conventus Cordubensis* and *Gaditanus*¹⁰.

From this perspective, the deities invoked by Betic women are closely related to their gender. Nevertheless, it is their personal motives that determine their choice of deities. Therefore, as it seems to be deduced from the dedications to Juno and Isis, these mother goddesses also participate in the syncretism with other pre-Roman deities strongly established in *Baetica*. While the cult of the former extends over the four *conventus*, possibly identifying her with the Carthaginian *Tanit*, and also coincides with areas of Punic influence, the Isis cult was curiously concentrated in *Italica*, with formulas such as *Victrix*, *Regina* or *Domina*. In fact, the religious syncretism of these female deities and their assimilation with the Roman matron cults was the main option of the *Baetica* followers.

⁸NAVARRO 2017.

⁹RANTALA 2019.

¹⁰MOLINA 2020b.

to the predominance of clearly Roman beliefs in the *conventus Pacensis* and *Emeritensis*, making Juno and Venus the goddesses most worshipped by women. Nevertheless, there seems to be nothing to suggest that the faithful should seek in their devotion a deity of their own. In fact, the imperial function prevalent in the cult of Venus seems to reinforce the Lusitanian preference for the gods of the Roman pantheon. In fact, their followers, aware of the importance of the Roman cults, opted for gods that provided a solution to their religious demands.

Tarraconensis

In a way, the cultic preferences of Hispano-Roman women for indigenous deities were more evident in *Tarraconensis*. These deities, which were not assimilated to the Roman pantheon, spread throughout the territory without us being able to specify their specific functions. In any case, it is remarkable the small number of religious manifestations of the faithful that make a *votum* to the Capitoline Triad, in contrast to the rest of Hispania. The fact that the geographical points are distant makes it difficult to explain this phenomenon in an area as territorially extensive as *Tarraconensis*. The areas where the votive elements to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva appear are remarkably Romanized, which could indicate that the purely Roman cults coexisted with the indigenous ones. This explains the fact that the supreme god of the Roman pantheon appears in an autochthonous cultic context, invoked as *Iovi Deo Candamo*. Considering the scarcity of epigraphs that show the pre-Roman essence of this divinity, it is most likely that the indigenous element was located in the less Romanized regions of the peninsula, where the imperial cult could have been negligible.

The cult of *Jupiter Optimus Maximus*, on the other hand, was concentrated in the hands of the autochthonous elite and spread throughout all the *conventus* except *Lucensis*. As for the other members of the triad, the epigraphic mentions of the cult of Juno and Minerva were modest. In fact, their worshippers are not too explicit in making votive offerings to them. Therefore, and despite the limitations of the preserved data, we must be especially cautious in determining the extent to which the official pantheon was important in the spiritual world of the believers. Similarly, we find no justification for the worship of Diana compared to the scarce worship of Venus. What is more peculiar is the attachment of the popular classes to Diana and the absence of evidence of imperial worship, which would indicate different forms of religiosity according to social class.

maintained her more intimate cultic uses, based mainly on her pre-Roman beliefs, a reduced feminine sector was inclined to manifest public devotions that may or may not have a religious motivation. In any case, the incorporation of Roman gods into indigenous religion can be interpreted as a gradual adaptation of their local practices to new religious ideas, at the individual or collective level¹⁴. This process of religious change, resulting from the Romanization process, entailed a cultic adaptation that would not be assimilated by all the conquered communities of the peninsula. One of the reasons for this was that Romanization did not have the same cultural impact in all areas of the peninsula, and this was reflected in the persistence of a system of local devotions¹⁵. However, we cannot generalize that with the arrival of the new Roman gods, pre-Roman religious experiences were pushed into the background. Among other reasons, because the votive epigraphy undoubtedly reveals that the existence and maintenance of the cultic uses of their most traditional beliefs was a reality.

It is not a banal generalization to admit that the reproduction of the Roman religious system was an unavoidable condition for direct intervention in civic life, and that this was accepted by the privileged classes of Hispania. Moreover, it was customary for a woman's intervention in the cultic practices of the community to be publicly recognized, just as it was for a man¹⁶. Given this, it is coherent to think that not all the female collective was able to intervene in the civic cults. It is obvious that these privileges were reserved for a woman related to the elite and that she must have imitated the model of the Roman matron, who would serve as an example for the other women of the Empire, including Hispanic women. In a certain way, despite the localism of the provinces of Hispania, I would like to emphasize the diffusion of the cult of august divinities and its relationship with the most intensely Romanized areas, such as the *Baetica*, for example.

In this sense, the sacrifice of a priestess or a devotee to an august deity came from women of a certain economic level who did not necessarily belong to a privileged social class. Therefore, it is difficult to explain whether the purpose of a devotee or a priestess could really express a personal devotion or rather the fulfillment of cultic or also official obligations, since sometimes devotion can be confused with obligation when a dedication is carried out with a state character and necessarily far from the sphere of private religiosity¹⁷. Thus, it is difficult to properly assess the meaning of a religious practice because in many cases we do not know the true motivation that leads her to make a devotion. In a way, it is natural that a devotee belongs to a family group, but that she feels the need to make a promise in favor of her family is an often-repeated option. It is true that the religious imagination of a Roman woman

¹⁴ LIPKA 2010.

¹⁵ CURCHIN 2004.

¹⁶ KEEGAN 2014.

¹⁷ PÉREZ 2014.

reproduced a unique system of beliefs that included deities of a different nature¹⁸. In general, her preference for the cult of female deities related to health and personal protection must be attributed to the specific circumstances of the believer. In fact, a common characteristic of Hispano-Roman female worshippers is their concern for the health of their close relatives, although we do not know the specific reason for the petition, since it is rarely specified.

Indeed, devotion to the goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon is a reality, but I believe that a woman's cultic tendency is not only determined by the sacred qualities attributed to these deities, which in some way relate to the gender concerns of the believer¹⁹, but they also preferred male gods that suited their religious needs. This meant that worshippers had a certain preference for salutary gods associated with a promise of health for a blood relative. To this end, they preferred to preserve their local uses, linked to their traditional sphere and therefore close to their private habits. This cultic system, characterized by a strong indigenous substratum, was maintained in coexistence with the official Roman beliefs, mainly in *Lusitania* and *Tarraconensis*, during the first to third centuries AD. These indications of the survival of a pre-Roman past, still present in the votive epigraphs of the dedicators, imply an integration of local devotions with the official ones and, at the same time, the introduction of a religious model that did not exclude their traditional gods. In fact, this ancient belief system was clearly reduced to marginal areas of the peninsula²⁰. In any case, it is not unusual that the sacrifices made by women from mostly rural geographical nuclei worship Roman gods with a local epithet that would largely explain the characteristics of the territorial area where these divinities are worshipped. More precisely, the indigenous cultic manifestations had as their referent a collective meeting place in sacred enclosures located in the open air.

In short, we can confirm that the religious heterogeneity of the Hispano-Roman worshippers responded to a clear diversity of cultural models that coexisted in Hispania and were not repressed after the Roman conquest²¹. The participation of a female collective in the indigenous cults and their perseverance in preserving their most traditional religious uses meant the continuity of some popular deities linked to a private environment. Precisely this domestic space, in which beliefs alien to Roman religious practices were forged, was transferred to the public sphere. It is at this moment that women, both individually and collectively, adopted Roman forms of worship and adapted them to their own beliefs, thus materializing them in the set of epigraphs analyzed.

¹⁸ ORLIN 2010.

¹⁹ BOATWRIGHT 2021.

²⁰ JAMES, DILLON 2012.

²¹ MACLACHLAN 2013.

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