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Worshipping Women in the Roman Empire: Ritual and cult

This project relates to one of my most enduring research interests, which I have been pursuing since working on my dissertation 'Mulieres ex voto' in 1994. In the context of gender research, the fundamental question is whether the religious practices of women differs from that of men. This determines a large part of the research literature on gender and religion that has been published until now. In this context, it is of great importance whether there were specific women's cults, such as the Bona Dea cult, which is still found outside Rome, for example, in Glanum, Arles and Aquileia for purely female communities. In Lyon, Lectoure and Alzey, women in the local Magna Mater communities have apparently introduced their own new rituals. A stone relief from Bonn shows a circle of worshipping women in front of the statues of the three matrons. What specific priestly offices did women hold in contrast to men, and above all: what rituals were associated with them? In classical Athens, where the sources are relatively good, the exhibition 'Worshipping women: ritual and reality in classical Athens' (December 10, 2008 - May 9, 2009) dealt with female piety and the rituals associated with it. The Magna Mater cult in Gaul was still called a 'school of feminism' in the last century. A systematic investigation of significant examples from parts of the Roman Empire can, for example, focus on whether and how women developed their own piety and whether certain religions and associated rituals had more resonance for women.

Core hypotheses:

1) Women are clearly in the minority in epigraphic material containing information on religious practices, accounting for about 10% of all consecrations. Nevertheless, votive inscriptions by women or mention of female cult officials in inscriptions contain important information about female piety and can be evaluated in comparison with votive inscriptions by men and couples. 2) Women were able to establish their own cult communities with their own cult functionaries, which can rarely be located archaeologically (e.g. Glanum). 3) Women could develop their own rituals in religious communities (Lyon, Lectoure, Alzey).

Sources and methods:

Methodologically, research will analyse mainly votive and donor inscriptions and archaeological images of women to get information about their religious practices and the places where they took place, from the point of view of resonant self–world relations. Are there, in addition, detectable differences between the religious practices of men and women belonging to different groups of worshippers in a sanctuary? The major aim of the dissertation – or, ideally, regionally and chronologically differentiated dissertations – is to analyze the votives and religious practices of women, for which we have archaeological or epigraphic evidence.

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