Sacerdotes piae: priestesses and other female cult officials in the western part of the Roman Empire from the first century B.C. until the third century A.D.
Gaspar, V.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Gaspar, V. M. (2012). Sacerdotes piae: priestesses and other female cult officials in the western part of the Roman Empire from the first century B.C. until the third century A.D.
Introduction

‘No offices, no priesthoods, no triumphs, no decorations, no gifts, no spoils of war can come to them; elegance of appearance, adornment, apparel – these are the woman’s badges of honour; in these they rejoice and take delight; these our ancestors called the woman’s world.’

These are the words of the tribune Lucius Valerius as written down by Livy in his 34th book. With his speech in 195 BC, Valerius tried – eventually successfully – to convince the senate that the Oppian Law should be repealed, while at the same time the women of Rome were demonstrating against this law that limited women's display of expensive goods.

That women could not hold triumphs or acquire war booty is obvious, and that political offices were closed to them may be clear as well, but to state that they could not hold priesthoods is simply incorrect, not only regarding the women who lived anno 195 BC in Rome itself (to whom this fragment of Livy refers), but also – and especially – those living in the cities of Italy and the provinces of the Empire in later times. There, women could become prominent in public life as priestesses (sacerdotes) or members of the lower cult personnel, as many inscriptions, statues and buildings dedicated by these women from all over the Roman Empire show.

No wonder that it has been stated by modern historians that religion ‘provided the single public space where women played a significant formal role,’ despite the apparent conflict between the traditional (domestic) activities reserved for women and public religious service. While most priests in the Roman Empire were men, from the third century BC onwards women acted increasingly in major ritual roles and priesthoods. Although most priestesses lived in the imperial period and in Italy and the provinces, they were certainly not absent from Rome, where several women, presumably for reasons of argument omitted by Lucius Valerius, held a religious office even in early times. The Vestals were the oldest and most important public priestesses in Rome; their special status has been subject to much discussion. The regina sacrorum and the flaminica Dialis held their office because of

---

1 Livy 34.7.8-9. Transl. Evan T. Sage. Non magistratus nec sacerdotia nec triumphi nec insignia nec dona aut spolia bellica is contingere possunt. munditiae et ornatus et cultus, haec feminarum insignia sunt, his gaudent et gloriantur, hunc mundum muliebrem appellantur maiores nostri. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in this dissertation are my own.

2 In the eastern part of the Empire women could hold offices with a seemingly political character, but these were honorary. See: Van Bremen (1996).

3 The existence of Vestals and the priestesses of Ceres (see chapters 2 and 3) clearly proves this.


8 Beard, North and Price (1998) 82.


10 See also footnote 29.
their marriage to the rex sacrorum and the flamen Dialis respectively, and the same was true for the flaminicae Martialis and Quirinalis. Unfortunately very little is known about these last priestesses and their tasks.

It has been remarked several times that in the cities of Italy and the provinces the evidence for women acting as priestesses is more abundant. Despite this fact, which shows their importance for religious life, modern scholars have not paid much attention to the role of women in provincial religion; there is no in-depth study of priestesses in the Roman Empire. In order to fill this gap, the present thesis will focus on female religious officials in Italy and the Western provinces of the Empire. As ‘Roman religion’ was the result of a two-way process in which Rome influenced the provinces and the provinces influenced Rome, it seems justified to speak of the women who figure in this study as ‘Roman priestesses’.

Apart from filling a gap, this thesis, which is mainly based on epigraphic evidence but includes – whenever possible – also literary sources, has another goal. This second goal is to provide an exhaustive review, enabling us to check, and in some cases correct, our understanding of the public roles of women in Roman religion. It has been thought for a long time that women’s role in Roman religion was unimportant, or even marginal. This view is based on literary sources like Livy, quoted above, and is focussed on the city of Rome, where, it is said, only the Vestals, the Flaminica Dialis and Regina Sacrorum, and some ‘foreign’ women (the Greek priestesses of Ceres) held a religious office. However, Latin inscriptions – evidence that has been neglected until very recently – provide a different picture of women’s religious roles, both in and outside Rome. It will become clear that women served various deities in a wide range of religious offices.

Several questions concerning the nature of the priesthoods held by women will be discussed: what kinds of religious offices were open to women? Where did priestesses serve and in which cults? What was the most important cult open to them, and what were the most notable characteristics of this cult and its priestesses? The practical side of holding a religious office – including special requirements and tasks – and the position of priestesses in their local communities are other key elements that will pass under review. By discussing these topics, I hope to reach a better understanding of female priesthoods in the cities of Italy and the western provinces of the Roman Empire. Although the central topic of this study is female priesthood, it also deals with gender. Male priests will figure as material of comparison, especially when they acted in the same cults as priestesses.

11 According to Boëls (1973) 92, the parts of religious couples supplemented each other for the sake of a harmony between religious powers. In general, couples were important in Roman religion: the gods themselves were often worshipped in couples of a male and a female, Le Bonniec (1958) 297.
12 Rüpke lists two Flaminicae Martialis, both named Publicia; Rüpke 2853 and 2854. See also Macrobius, Saturnalia, 3.13.11.
13 Boëls (1973) 77.
14 In addition, Roman citizenship was not limited to the city of Rome, and many provincial towns showed many similarities with the City, see also chapter 1.
15 For references, see chapter 1, section 1.2.
As a result of the obvious socio-cultural differences between Rome, Italy and the provinces, and the
fact that most gods and goddesses served by priestesses were Roman deities (or rather: had the same
names as those worshipped in Rome), the concept of Romanization will figure prominently in this
thesis.

Chapter 1 provides a discussion of this term as well as a short overview of the most relevant
modern studies on women in Roman society – particularly with respect to their place in religion. In a
separate section attention will be paid to civic religion, which forms the religious context of most local
priesthoods. As the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ are closely linked to women in Roman society and to
civic religion, I will examine their meaning in the first chapter as well. Furthermore, the possibilities
and limitations of epigraphic evidence for the study of priestesses will be dealt with.

In chapter 2 several questions that explain some basic aspects of the phenomenon of female
priesthoods will pass under review: in which cults did women serve, what titles did they carry and
where were their inscriptions found? Although this view is nowadays more nuanced, it has often been
assumed that women served goddesses and men served gods. This chapter will clearly show that this
supposition is rightly contested.

The third chapter is based on the largest single group of inscriptions recording priestesses.\(^{16}\) It
will provide a discussion of the role of women in the cults of the goddess Ceres, and in the related cult
of Tellus. The character of Ceres, her cults and religious personnel in Rome, Italy and Africa, the three
areas where \textit{sacerdotes Cерeis} have been attested epigraphically, will pass under review. Throughout
the chapter, attention will be paid to gender, standing and the social background of the priestesses.
Besides, Roman, Greek, Italian and indigenous factors that helped shape the Ceres cults will figure
prominently.

Chapters 4 and 5 give answers about the daily lives of priestesses in local towns. The subject
of chapter 4 is the \textit{religious} side of holding a priesthood. This chapter discusses the various religious
tasks of priestesses and of women with ancillary offices, from dedicating to sacrificing. Sacrificing
and its relation to women have been subject to some debate. It has been stated that women were not
allowed to carry out animal sacrifice, but as we shall see, this view needs to be corrected. Sometimes,
priestesses had to meet special requirements, for instance being chaste during their time of office and
wearing special clothing. These requirements are the topic of the second part of chapter 4 which
discusses the function of priestesses as embodiment of ritual.

Chapter 5 focuses on the place of priestesses in local society, both as women and as public
persons. It starts with a short description of the family life of the priestesses and their image that was
propagated in their epitaphs. This is followed by a discussion about the appointment of the priestesses,
the \textit{summa honoraria} they had to pay and the way familial relations could play a role in being elected

\(^{16}\) Apart from the \textit{flaminicae} acting in the imperial cult.
as priestess. Furthermore, their social rank will pass under review, just as the benefactions they gave to their towns and the public honours they received in return. This shows that another persistent assumption about the life of Roman women – that the only appropriate place for them was inside the house – is simply incorrect. All these topics show that holding a priesthood influenced the whole life of a woman, that it was something to be proud of and to be remembered after her death. This can best be demonstrated by the wealth of evidence left behind by the famous priestesses of Pompeii, with which this thesis ends.

The present study is based on a catalogue of inscriptions that record women who served as priestesses and other religious officials. The epigraphic material consists of Latin inscriptions erected in Italy and the western, Latin speaking provinces of the Empire. In practice this means that the inscriptions were originally set up in Rome, Italy, Gallia and Hispania, Mauretania, Numidia and Africa, Germania, Pannonia, Moesia and Dalmatia. No priestesses – that is: of the deities included, see below – are attested epigraphically in other provinces.\(^\text{17}\) As the names of several Roman provinces changed over time, I have decided to use the names *in vogue* at the death of the emperor Trajan in AD 117 (e.g., Hispania Tarraconensis instead of Hispania Citerior). For the sake of convenience, I have made a distinction between inscriptions from Africa Proconsularis, Mauretania and Numidia, but it should be kept in mind that the borders of these provinces shifted in the course of time as a result of Roman political decisions (see also chapter 3, section 3).

Almost all inscriptions recording priestesses stem from the imperial period, and accordingly, the first to third century AD will be central in this study. However, some Italian priestesses of Venus and Ceres are attested on inscriptions from the end of the Republic, and therefore, the period under discussion is wider than those three centuries under imperial rule.

Ceres and Venus have already been mentioned as goddesses whose priesthoods were held by women, but they were no exceptions: many other deities were also served by priestesses. This thesis focuses on female religious officials who served in the cults of Roman and Romanised deities and personifications, like Spes and Salus. The deities who are recorded in the catalogue are not only some of those included in the pantheon as listed by Ennius,\(^\text{18}\) like Juno, Minerva, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Mercury and Jupiter, but also various others, like Bona Dea, Liber, Tellus, Fortuna, Caelestis, Mater Matuta, Angitia, Saturn and Dis Pater. Apart from these gods, goddesses and personifications, priestesses whose religious title does not clarify which deity they served, are included, for instance

---

\(^{17}\) Even though there is evidence for ‘prophetic priestesses’ among the Germans, see: Rives (2002) 153-155. See also chapter 2, footnote 46.

\(^{18}\) The *Di Consentes* were Juno, Vesta, Minerva, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Neptune, Vulcan, Apollo; Ennius, fragment 45 = Varro *RR* 1.1.5; Long (1987) 235; Turcan (1988) 10. The pantheon is no useful category, for we do not know whether the order of gods was fixed or subject to individual decisions, Rüpke (2007b) 4-5.
women who are simply called *sacerdos* (see sections 1.1 and 2.2 of chapter 2). Besides, priestesses who carried a Roman(ised) title, but who served deities that had no Roman names, are recorded in the catalogue. Their inscriptions make up only a small part of the total, but as the priestesses were clearly subject to influences from Rome (e.g., resulting in the erection of Latin inscriptions and the use of Latin religious titles) they deserve to be discussed as well.

In addition to priestesses (*sacerdotes, antistitae* etc.; see chapter 2), several women who held offices as *magistrae* and *ministrae* have been attested epigraphically. Like many *sacerdotes, magistrae* and *ministrae* did not always add the name of a deity to their title. When there are convincing arguments to range them under the category of religious officials, these women are also recorded in the catalogue. Apart from *magistrae* and *ministrae*, I have also included women with other religious functions in the cults selected above, for example the *canistriæ* of Ceres in North Africa, or women supporting a local cult and its priestesses in a more mundane way, for instance by providing the victims as ‘public pig breeder’ (*porcaria publica*) or acting as religious slaves.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I had to exclude some priestesses and members of the lower cult personnel. I have decided not to include women serving as religious officials in the cults of deities originating from the Near East and Egypt, i.e. mainly those of Isis and Magna Mater, even though I am aware that some of these deities received a state cult in Rome at an early stage, and that, in case of Magna Mater, the cult spread to the rest of the Empire *via* Rome, and not directly from Pessinus. The women acting as priestesses of these divinities are only occasionally mentioned in the text as comparison or when they offer the best way of illustrating some aspect of female religious life in general. The priestesses involved in the imperial cult are another category I have not included, partly for the same reason: as *flamininæ* are more frequently attested on inscriptions than any other type of female priesthood, it is beyond the scope of the present study to incorporate them, other than as

---

19 E.g., cat.no.195.
20 See also chapter 4, footnote 92.
21 Fortunately, a special study has already been devoted to women in the cult of Isis, see Heyob (1975). Priestesses of Isis are for the first time attested in the imperial period; they seldom held the highest positions and not all cult offices were open to women, Heyob (1975) 82, 88, 95, 110.
22 A specific study of the religious officials of Magna Mater – both men and women – is still a desideratum. The goddess had an elaborate cult organization, with many different groups of male and female officials from various backgrounds, Beard (1994) 173.
23 The priesthood of Magna Mater had always been open to both sexes, and flowered mainly in imperial times when citizens could become priestesses and priests (though not *Galli*, although from the reign of the emperor Claudius onwards, the *archigalli* had to be an officially appointed Roman citizen); Graillot (1912) 239; Thomas (1984) 1528; Rüpke (2005) 630-631; Lambrechts (1952) 148. Only when the priestesses of Magna Mater served also other deities, they are included in the catalogue.
24 I mention the *CIL* numbers (or those of other *corpora*) of these inscriptions that are not included in the catalogue in the footnotes. The inscriptions that are included in the catalogue are referred to by their catalogue numbers.
material of comparison. A second reason to exclude them is that they have already been discussed extensively in several recent articles.25

Another group of priestesses that is excluded are the Roman Vestals, whom have been given much attention by modern scholars.26 They have not only been left out because they ‘were different; different from any other phenomenon of Roman life or ritual,’27 but also because the cult of Vesta was restricted to Rome28 and a few surrounding towns: 29 Bovillae, Lavinium 30 and Tibur. 31 As a consequence, Vesta’s priestesses have not been attested in the rest of Italy and the provinces of the Empire, and therefore they are not comparable to the priestesses that are recorded in the catalogue. The same holds true for the reginae sacrorum and the Roman flaminicæ of individual gods (i.e. the Dialis, Martialis and Quirinalis).

As I focus on the Latin speaking part of the Empire, priestesses in Greek-speaking provinces who are recorded on Latin inscriptions or priestesses living in the West but attested on Greek inscriptions, are not included. 32 Occasionally, they are mentioned in the text or referred to in a footnote when their inscriptions add some useful information, can be used as comparison or record a relevant priesthood – for example that of Ceres.

Concerning this selection of inscriptions and priestesses, there are a few specific problems. The first is that, although the catalogue will be as complete as possible, it can never be exhaustive, because not all inscriptions have been published yet and new ones are discovered regularly. 33 In addition, there is a

25 Hemelrijk (2005); Eadem (2006a and b); Eadem (2007). I exclude the flaminicæ and sacerdotes of imperial women, but I include women who served goddesses or personifications related to the imperial house, like Tutela Augusta and Spes Augusta, for although these were closely related to the imperial cult, they were not identical with it. The two female sacerdotes Augustalium that are attested epigraphically are excluded, even though the religious activities of the Augustales were not always limited to the imperial cult, Mouritsen (2006) 237, 240, 241, 242. AE 2001, 854 records Marcia Polybiana from Liternum (region 1). The Augustales from this town seem to have been mainly involved in the imperial cult, as the words si qui in cultu domus divinae contul(o)rent that are part of Marcia Polybiana’s inscription, show. Therefore, this inscription has not been included in the catalogue. The other inscription recording a female sacerdos Augustalium (AE 1993, 477) stems from Misenum (region 1), a town in which the links between the Augustales and the imperial cult were also especially strong, see Mouritsen (2006) 241. Accordingly, this inscription is also excluded. About CIL 6, 9044 = ILS 7355, Rüpke (2005) 1050, no. 1967, writes that the woman mentioned may have been honoured with a priesthood, but there is no evidence to prove this.
26 Beard (1980); Beard (1995); Martini (2004); Mekacher (2006); Wildfang (2006); Takács (2008).
29 Granino Cecere (2003) discusses the epigraphic and literary evidence for the Vesta cult outside Rome. See also Wissowa (1915) 2-4, about the Vestals from Bovillae and Wissowa (1915) 23 about the one from Lavinium.
30 According to a legend from Lavinium, Vesta made a woman her priestess, Eichenauer (1988) 50.
31 Eichenauer (1988) 49-50
32 When used by the native inhabitants, the use of Latin in the non-Latin speaking parts of Italy had a political side and showed the acceptance of Roman values, Lomas (1993) 175. The same is true for other parts of the Empire.
33 Cf. Millar (1983) 83. Besides, it is difficult to determine to what extent this catalogue is representative of all priestesses of the western provinces, cf. Joshel (1992) 17. Besides, it should be stressed that the epigraphic material is lacunose and stems from many different places, which implies that the picture that emerges from the total collection is inevitably deformed by religious differences between the provinces. Obviously, this is true of
discrepancy between epigraphic and iconographic evidence. Sometimes statues\textsuperscript{34}, wall-paintings,\textsuperscript{35} reliefs that accompany inscriptions or votive stones with only carvings, depict female religious officials who have not been attested epigraphically.\textsuperscript{36} This iconographic evidence will not be discussed. Despite these omissions, there is still a wealth of information available, which enables us to gain a clear picture of women’s religious roles in the Western part of the Roman Empire.

\textsuperscript{34} Wrede (1981) 114, 298.  
\textsuperscript{35} Silberberg-Peirce (1993-1994) 30: On several wall paintings, often in houses of members of the imperial family, priestesses are depicted.  
\textsuperscript{36} Stones with carvings but without accompanying text that records women in a priestly role, are not included in the catalogue.