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.
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Conclusion

Lucius Valerius was wrong – that can safely be stated. The “woman's world” in Roman antiquity was not confined to ‘elegance of appearance, adornment’ and ‘apparel’. Women could hold priesthods and other religious offices during the Republican period and under the Emperors. A wealth of epigraphic evidence shows that the official role of women in Roman religion was much more extensive than has often been thought. Women were not just ‘chaste matrons’, who were devoted entirely to their families and were virtually absent from public life.

Many modern scholars have approached the appearance of women who held positions in Roman religious life that did not fit with the ‘standard’ picture emerging from the literary sources, as something that needed to be ‘explained’ by extraordinary circumstances. However, the epigraphic evidence shows that the everyday standard was different from what most literary texts want us to believe. Admittedly, options to acquire a priesthood were more limited for women than for men, but that does not imply that being a priestess was anomalous, nor that the existence of female religious officials needs a special explanation. Both men and women were part of the same socio-religious system, and an individual’s position in this system was not simply determined by his or her sex, but by his or her position within a social network, by the possession of money, and by family relations. Additionally, the availability of offices and the pool of potential candidates determined whether someone could acquire an office.

Nevertheless, there were differences between men and women regarding the possibilities they had for acquiring a religious office. The range of priesthods held by women was much smaller than that of men, who served in virtually all cults for which female religious officials have been attested on inscriptions. The opposite was not the case: the deities served by women were mainly goddesses related to fertility, although women also served some male divinities. However, the number of gods served by priestesses was relatively small. In the cults discussed in this thesis, there seems to have been no absolute exclusion of the other sex. For some cults though, women were clearly preferred over men as religious officials – and vice versa. In Italy for example, only women are attested as sacerdotes of Ceres and Venus, while the epigraphic evidence for female religious officials of a deity as Saturn is very small. Clearly, both women and men were not entitled to hold all religious offices in all places at all times. However, in principle, both were permitted to hold the priesthods of the most important (local) deities.

Like men, women could fulfi a wide range of religious tasks, including carrying out animal sacrifices. Nevertheless, priestesses were often remembered for their ‘female’ qualities, and not for their public or semi-public religious roles, reflecting the current idea(1)s about their proper place in
society. Furthermore, even though women could become priestesses of the most important (local) deities and represent their communities in the eyes of the gods, in the end their appointment had to be sanctioned by an exclusively male group, the local *ordo*. All this shows that in religion women came secondary after men – but also that they were certainly no complement to them and that in many cases their religious offices were as important for their towns as those held by men.

Lucius Valerius was not only wrong where it considered women’s religious offices in Rome, but also – and especially – regarding those in the provinces. In Rome not many inscriptions attesting to female religious officials have been found, but this is made up by the literary sources. This is a major contrast to the situation in Italy and the provinces, where virtually everything that is known about priesthoods of women stems from inscriptions.

The image these inscriptions provide is two-sided. On the one hand, they show the unifying effect of influences from Rome, while on the other hand they are proof of the diversity of local religious life. This diversity can be seen in many different things – sometimes within the cult of a single deity. Various influences – Greek, Roman, and native – present in different places in various proportions, contributed to the creation of a great variety of local cults and priesthoods. This resulted in a wide range of religious offices open to women, the use of different titles or additions to titles, the presence of certain prescriptions or habits regulating ritual behaviour, age and clothing, and the in- or exclusion from either men or women as religious officials. The cult of Ceres, of which many female *sacerdotes* have left their traces in the epigraphic record, is an excellent example of this. This cult, that had Greek, Punic and Roman roots and was mostly limited to Italy and North Africa, shows many local peculiarities. These concern both the focus of the cult – in Africa concentrated on the *Cereres*, in Italy on Ceres alone and in both areas sometimes with specific epithets pointing to local or ritual aspects – and the *sacerdotes*. Gender, rank and standing varied not only between the religious officials found in Italy and Africa, but also between those living in different Italian communities.

Despite this diversity, influences from Rome had a unifying effect on cults and priesthoods and resulted in acculturation: the Latinised titles of the priestesses, the role of the local elite, the habit of erecting inscriptions and their general spread – mostly in northern Africa and Italy – are all clear signs of or results from Romanisation. Furthermore, their role in blood sacrifices, the central element in Roman religion, shows that the priestesses, the cults in which they acted and the communities they represented were influenced by habits from the City. Romanisation can also be detected in the role priestesses could play as benefactresses, mainly in the cases they belonged to important local families. These priestesses-benefactresses used their own money to advance their own prominence and that of their family, likely of their own accord. In these cases, they played an even more significant role in their local society than by exercising their religious office alone, which was expressed by the reciprocal relation they had with their fellow citizens, who could decide to honour them publicly.
However, this role as benefactress was limited to a relatively small number of the most prominent priestesses. Most female religious officials were not such prestigious high-ranking ladies. Instead, they appear to have come from various social backgrounds: some were slaves or freedwomen, while others were of decurial, equestrian or even senatorial rank. Many belonged to a ‘middle class’. In principle everyone could acquire a more or less official place in the religious hierarchy, although of course not every office was open to everyone. Generally, the priesthoods were held by members of the local elite, while ancillary functions were fulfilled by lower ranked people. But this was not always the case, as is illustrated by the cult of Ceres. The priesthood of this goddess was held by women who were freed, women who seemed to have belonged to a middle class, and by women from decurial rank. So again, the picture that emerges is one of variety. ‘The female religious official’ did not exist, which reflects the diversity of Roman religious life in an Empire which was home to so many different cultures and peoples.

Secondary though important, Roman but local, and all different from one another – this seems the best way to characterize female religious officials in the western part of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, they all had one thing in common: pride in their office. From high to low, prestigious to inconspicuous and rich to poor, they all proudly and dutifully recorded their offices on stone. Rightly, they can be called *sacerdotes piae.*