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.

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Summary

This thesis investigates priesthoods and other religious offices held by women in the western part of the Roman Empire, from the last centuries of the Republic to the third century AD. Although it has been stated that women could not hold (important) priesthoods, there are many Latin inscriptions – mainly from Italy and the provinces – that attest to the existence of priestesses. This epigraphic evidence has been recorded in a catalogue and includes not only priestesses, but also women holding ancillary offices. These female religious officials either served in the cults of Graeco-Roman divinities or acted in unknown or local cults. Women who held offices in cults that originated in the near-East are excluded from this study.

Despite the fact that, in Italy and the provinces, the evidence for women acting as priestesses is quite abundant, 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. Apart from filling this gap, this thesis has another goal: 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 and is focussed on the city of Rome, where, it is said, only a few women held a religious office. However, inscriptions provide a different picture, both in and outside Rome.

As a result of socio-cultural differences between Rome, Italy and the provinces, and the fact that most gods and goddesses served by priestesses were Roman deities (or at least: had the same names as those worshipped in Rome), the concept of Romanization figures 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. It is shown that when female religious roles are discussed by modern authors, their priesthoods in the provinces are mostly neglected. This is partly due to the literary sources, which propagate an image of women, ideally labelled as chaste matronae, who possessed a secondary or marginal position in society. Nevertheless, in practice many women could dispose of their own (often considerable) wealth, and held a relatively strong position in private law. When Roman law spread as a result of Romanization, wealthy women in the provinces could enjoy the same legal advantages as the women in the City.

Furthermore, in chapter 1 attention is paid to civic religion, which forms the religious context of most local priesthoods. Despite the spread of the Roman concept of religion, in the provinces it was still very much a local affair in which the local elites were influential; they held the main priesthoods and made decisions about the organisation of the cults. The terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ are closely linked to both civic religion and to women in Roman society; they should be viewed as positioned on a sliding scale. As a result of this, I have included in this study all female religious officials who did not
act in private familial cults. Thus, women serving in *collegia* are recorded in the catalogue; they held ‘semi-public’ offices. Excluding women serving *in familia* leaves enough inscriptions – mainly epitaphs, honorary inscriptions and votives – for a study of female religious officials in the western part of the Roman Empire. The possibilities and limitations of epigraphic evidence for the study of priestesses are discussed in the last section of chapter 1.

In chapter 2 several questions that explain some basic aspects of the phenomenon of female priestships pass under review: in which cults did women serve, what titles did they carry and where were their inscriptions found? The picture that emerges from this chapter is one of diversity on one side, and broad patterns on the other. Priestesses could carry various titles, the exact meaning of which is not always clear. The most common was that of *sacerdos*. According to local preferences, this title could be slightly changed or specific qualifications could be added. Sometimes a woman was called ‘priestess of a city’. In these cases, it is not clear whether she served in a specific cult, or whether she served as ‘general’ priestess. Frequently, priestesses were simply referred to as *sacerdotes*, without any reference to a deity in their titles. In some instances the cult in which they served can be traced by looking at the text of the inscription, accompanying reliefs, local religious life and the archaeological context.

The distribution of female religious officials roughly fits the general pattern of inscriptions and reflects the spread of Romanization. By far the most are attested in Italy – mainly in Campania – and northern Africa. In Rome the number of priestesses attested epigraphically is relatively small; this is made up for by the literary sources that provide some evidence of priestships held by women in the City. Deviations from the epigraphic habit, both chronological and geographical, can usually be explained by exceptional circumstances. In case of the Ceres cult, the distribution of priestesses reflects the popularity of the cult, which in its turn was linked to the production of grain, Greek and Punic roots and Romano-Italic influences.

Although this view is more nuanced nowadays, it has often been assumed that women served goddesses and men served gods. This chapter shows that this supposition is rightly contested. Women could hold religious offices in the cults of male deities and men could serve female deities in an official function. However, the range of priesthoods held by men was much wider than those held by women, and the number of priests attested epigraphically is much higher than that of priestesses. Men served in virtually all cults of which female religious officials are attested, but the opposite was not the case; female priestships were mostly, though certainly not exclusively, limited to goddesses concerned with fertility. Only when individual cults or areas are examined does it become apparent that in some cases women were clearly preferred over men as the best choice for the religious offices available.
The third chapter provides a discussion of the role of women in the cults of Ceres. The character of Ceres, her cults and religious personnel in Italy, Africa and Rome, where the priesthood of Ceres was one of the few of which women have been attested epigraphically, pass under review. In many Italian – mainly Campanian – towns where the Ceres-Demeter cults were very ancient, priestesses served the goddess. In northern Africa both men and women are attested as sacerdotes. The inscriptions they left behind offer some insight into their rank, social standing and background. These varied between the two main areas where priestesses and priests have been attested, and between the sexes of the religious officials. In Africa, the priestesses belonged to the middle classes while many male priests were members of the local elite, whereas in Italy most priestesses of Ceres were of relatively high social rank and standing.

The inscriptions of the Ceres priestesses illuminate local preferences and peculiarities that resulted from the blending of Roman, Greek and native influences. Superficially similar cults were managed in different ways in the towns of Italy and North Africa, their individuality even surviving unifying factors like colonisation. This shows that the cults of Ceres and the goddess’ priesthoods were on the one hand local but on the other hand products of acculturation, implying that the women who held the priesthood where very much involved in local life but at the same time clearly part of the large cultural changes that were brought about first by Hellenization and later by Romanization.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the daily lives of priestesses in local towns. The subject of chapter 4 is the religious side of holding a priesthood. This chapter deals with the various religious tasks of priestesses and women with ancillary offices, from dedicating to sacrificing. Holding a religious office usually required an active attitude; it was not just a ceremonial role. A priestess was the representative of her community – or sometimes a special group within it – that she had to embody during sacrifices and other rites. Her tasks were manifold and assured her a position in the public eye. Other members of the cult personnel had a great variety of tasks that were probably held in less high esteem, but these tasks were still necessary to enable the worshipping of the deity they served in the proper fashion.

But there could be more to a priesthood than performing religious tasks. The person and the behaviour of the priestesses could become a focus of ritualization. In their outward appearance, at least when they were fulfilling their religious duties, priestesses looked different from other women. As some priestesses seem to have held their priesthood for many years, they will have been clearly visible during a long time of their life. Sometimes priestesses were very young when they were appointed, which shows both the value attached priesthoods and the importance of family relations in acquiring a religious office. Others, i.e. the African sacerdotes Cercis, may have been of a ripe age, but there are many uncertainties concerning the age when these women held their priesthoods. The same priestesses of Ceres may have had to live (temporarily) separated from their husbands and remain chaste during their time of office, but this is controversial. Even more debatable, is the topic of religious prostitution.
in the cult of Venus - there is no convincing evidence which shows that slave women in service of this
goddess had to act as prostitutes.

Chapter 5 focuses on the place of priestesses in their local society, both as women and as public
persons. Even though they were not commemorated as such, for they were characterised by common
female qualities in their epitaphs, priestesses were women who played prominent roles in their local
communities, shown by their non-religious roles in public life. They were highly regarded inhabitants
of their towns and were keen on keeping and strengthening their prestigious positions. Although their
families may have profited from the prestige of the priestesses, family members were not more present
in the inscriptions of priestesses than in those of other women.

The consent of the local council was needed to be elected as a priestess, apart from money to
pay the *summa honoraria*. Furthermore, it was often helpful to have an influential family, of which
several other members already held civic offices and priesthoods. This implies that priesthoods could
not be obtained by everybody. Priestesses were often members of the local elite, which was connected
through ties of kinship, while ancillary functions were generally held by lower ranked women. Several
priestesses showed their prestige and wealth by acting as benefactresses or patronesses. In turn, they
were honoured with statues and public burials. Therefore, the relationship with their city can be termed
active and reciprocal. In contrast to their colleagues in the eastern part of the Empire, priestesses in the
West played an active role in the dynastic politics in which priesthoods were used as devices whereby
powerful families increased their collective prominence in the public and ritual lives of their towns. In
some cases the priestesses were even the last surviving members of their family, and accordingly they
decided how to act and how to show their own prominence and that of their families.

The abundant evidence for priestesses available in the Campanian town of Pompeii provides the
opportunity to bring together several important themes of this study and shows how these might have
worked together in reality. The picture that emerges from the Pompeian material is that of prominent
elite women, who were often related to each other and who were conscious of their own social
standing and that of their family. They acted as benefactresses and spent their money on sometimes
extravagant monuments to consolidate and enlarge their standing and to be remembered in perpetuity.

Based on the findings discussed in this thesis, it can be concluded that female religious
officials in the western part of the Roman Empire can be characterized as follows: they were
secondary though important, Roman but local, and all different from one another. 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.*