PATRONAGE OF CITIES: THE ROLE OF WOMEN

By

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In the third century AD Oscia Modesta, a woman of a senatorial family, was honoured with a public statue by what appears to have been her native city in Roman northern Africa. She received this honour by decurial decree “because of her conspicuous merits in rendering illustrious her city of origin” and is proudly advertised as its *civis et patrona*.¹ One wonders what *merita* earned her this statue and what may have been the city’s reason for choosing her as its *patrona*. Were her merits only financial and are we to assume that she was merely a benefactress who beautified her native city by putting up statues or public buildings? Or does the term *patrona* point to a more wide-ranging activity on behalf of the city?

Patronage of cities, during the Empire, is known almost exclusively from inscriptions. Consequently, our understanding is rather limited. Though much of the procedure surrounding the cooptation of a patron was laid down in municipal law², the precise nature and function of city patronage are unclear. Earlier studies, notably that of Paul Veyne, regard it as a honorific title bestowed in gratitude for, and in expectation of, financial benefactions,³ but this view has now mostly – and, to my mind, rightly – been abandoned in favour of the opinion that promotion of the city’s interests and intervention with the central government in Rome were the essential duties of a city

¹ AE 1898, 112 = CIL 8, 23832 (Avioccata in Africa Proconsularis, around AD 240-50): *[O]sciae Modes/[tae Valer?]iae / [---]n[---]iae Corne/liae [P]a[t]rui/nae Publicanae / c(larissimae) f(eminae) civi et patr(onae) / ob insign(ia) eius me/rita quibus in/lustrat originis suae patriam / civitas Aviocc(alsis) d(ecreto) d(ecurionum) p(ublica) p(ecunia).*

² See the *Lex Coloniae Genetivae*, titles 97 and 130: M.H. Crawford, ed., *Roman Statutes I*, BICS Suppl. 64 (London 1996), 393-454 nr. 25, the *Lex Malacitana*, title 61: Th. Spitzl, *Lex municipii Malacitani* (München 1984), 20-1 and 76-9, and the *Lex Irnitana*, title 61: J. González, ‘The *Lex Irnitana*: a new copy of the Flavian municipal law’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986), 147-243.

³ P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d’un pluralisme politique* (Paris 1976), 349 n. 219 and 767 n. 311. Also B.H. Warmington, ‘The municipal patrons of Roman North Africa’, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 22, n.s. 9 (1954), 47, regards construction and repair of public buildings as one of the main duties of a city patron during the Empire.

patron.⁴ City patrons acted as a kind of brokers between the local town and the central government, especially the emperor. Inscriptions speak of the protection the patron was expected to offer his client-city: a patron was coopted “to protect the city” or addressed as “patron and defender of the public cause”.⁵ Apart from giving legal support in conflicts in which their client-city might be involved, a patron could procure privileges and immunities for his client-city through his connections in the capital.⁶ Therefore, influence with the central powers in Rome, especially the emperor, and a wide social network were the chief assets of a city patron.⁷ In addition to this, a high-ranking patron brought fame to the city by associating his name with the city. Of course, financial benefactions were expected as well, but in this respect – as has been convincingly argued by R. Duthoy⁸ –, there was no difference between a city patron and other members of the (local) elite. To put it briefly: in recent studies mediation and promotion of the city’s interests are given precedence over munificence in defining the tasks of the city patron. Yet, as is well known, Roman patronage is a flexible institution and the terminology used is often deliberately vague. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that different services were expected from different patrons depending on their age, gender or social status.

⁴ See R. Duthoy, ‘Sens et fonction du patronat municipal durant le principat’, *Antiquité Classique* 53 (1984), 145-156, B. Salway, ‘Prefects, *patroni*, and decurions: a new perspective on the album of Canusium’, in A.E. Cooley, ed., *The Epigraphic Landscape of Roman Italy*, BICS Suppl. 73 (London 2000), 140-148. Speaking of the Greek East C. Eilers, *Roman Patrons of Greek Cities* (Oxford 2002) 84-108, argues that mediation was the main function of city patrons during the late republican and early imperial periods. I do not agree with his assumption that in the course of the imperial period city patronage became increasingly honorific.

⁵ CIL 8, 1548 (Agbia, Afr.Proc., 2nd c. AD): a patron elected *ad tuendam rem publicam suam ex consensu decurionum omnium*; CIL 8, 26597 (Thugga, Afr. Proc., 2nd c. AD) in honour of *patroni et defensoris causae publicae*; ILT 1514 (Thugga, Afr. Proc., 2nd c. AD) a patron addressed as *patrono et advocato eloquentissimo*, cf. also Tacitus, *Dialogus* 3 and Fronto, *ad Amicos* 2.11; CIL 8, 8837 (a bronze tablet from Tubusuctu in Maur., 1st c. AD): *eosque patrocinio suo tuendos recepit* (i.e. the decurions and citizens of the town); see also the bronze *tabulae patronatus* CIL 9, 10 = ILS 6113: *tutos defensosque praestiterit* (Neretum, It., 4th c. AD) and CIL 9, 259 = ILS 6115: *quod tanta familiaritate et industria singulos unibersosque tueatur et fobeat* (Genusia, It., 4th c. AD).

⁶ For some examples see R.P. Duncan-Jones, ‘Patronage and city privileges. The case of Giufi’, *Epigraphische Studien* 9 (1972), 12-16.

⁷ See also A. Lintott, *Imperium Romanum. Politics and Administration* (London 1993), 171-3.

⁸ Duthoy 1984, op. cit. (n. 4).

In this paper I shall deal with city patronage exercised by women. Two questions will be my guide: first, what was expected of city patronesses by their client-cities and did female city patrons differ in this respect from their male counterparts? And second, what public image was created of these city patronesses by the statues and inscriptions set up for them? But before entering upon these questions the main evidence regarding female city patrons should be briefly outlined.

Compared to male patrons female city patrons were exceptional: against roughly 1,200 male patrons of communities recorded in Italy and the western provinces during the first three centuries AD there are only nineteen women (mentioned in eighteen inscriptions) whose patronage of a city is beyond reasonable doubt.⁹ The size and status of their client-cities do not essentially differ from those of male patrons, but their geographical and chronological distribution is more limited: patronesses of cities are attested only between the mid-second and the early fourth century AD and their client cities are restricted to Italy and North Africa. Of course, when dealing with such small numbers any new find may greatly alter our judgement, but on the basis of the present evidence it should be noted that no city patronesses are recorded in Roman Spain despite the marked epigraphic presence of women in the Spanish provinces,¹⁰ nor are any city patronesses attested before the middle of the second century AD.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the evidence, see E.A. Hemelrijk, 'City patronesses in the Roman Empire', *Historia* 53 (2004), 209-245.

¹⁰ See M. Navarro Caballero, 'Les femmes de l'élite Hispano-Romaine, entre la famille et la vie publique', in M. Navarro Caballero and S. Demougin, eds., *Élites Hispaniques* (Paris 2001), 191-201, and the numerous benefactresses mentioned by L.A. Curchin, 'Personal wealth in Roman Spain', *Historia* 32 (1983), 227-244. A quick count of the honorific inscriptions on public statue bases in the *conventus Tarraconensis*, studied by G. Alföldy, 'Bildprogramme in den römischen Städten des Conventus Tarraconensis: das Zeugnis der Statuenpostamente', *Revista de la Universidad Complutense (Homenaje a García Bellido IV)* 18 (1979), 127-275, teaches us that more than twenty percent of these inscriptions mention women either as dedicants or as honorands, or otherwise (for instance, when a statue was erected 'also in the name of' a woman). The evidence for male city patrons in the Spanish provinces is contradictory: of the thirty well-preserved *tabulae patronatus* discussed by J. Nicols, '*Tabulae patronatus*: a study of the agreement between patron and client-community', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.13 (1980), 535-561, thirteen stem from Baetica and Tarraconensis in Roman Spain and fourteen from northern Africa which causes the author to remark (on p. 538) that: "the overwhelming majority of the client-communities were in the African and Spanish provinces". Yet, this does not agree with the list of city patrons given by L. Harmand, *Un aspect social et politique du monde*

The most remarkable difference between male and female patrons, however, lies in their social status, which, for female city patrons, is both more uniform and notably higher than that of their male peers. Apart from a patroness from the imperial family fourteen patronesses are of senatorial status, – at least ten of them are the wives and daughters of consuls – and the remaining four are of equestrian status or stem from the most prominent families of the local elite. The social status of male patrons is more varied: it ranges from an occasional imperial freedman to members of the senatorial order.¹¹ Most city patrons are attested in the second century.¹² There are indications that, in the third century AD, the number of the most coveted type of patrons – men who were both citizens of the client-city and of the highest (= senatorial) rank – decreased.¹³ In Italy, this led to a gradual decline from predominantly senatorial and equestrian patrons in the first two centuries AD to a greater share of members of the municipal elites in the third century.¹⁴ Thus, male and female patrons show an opposite trend and we may perhaps assume that because of the gradual decline in the numbers and social status of male patrons, some cities preferred to coopt a woman of the highest status.

Romain: le patronat sur les collectivités publiques des origines au Bas-Empire (Paris 1957) who lists only few (25) patrons of Spanish communities, mainly in the first two centuries AD.

¹¹ Nevertheless, senators and, especially, equestrians form the bulk of the evidence. For a detailed discussion of the social status of city patrons see R. Duthoy, 'Le profil social des patrons municipaux en Italie sous le Haut-Empire', *Ancient Society* 15-17 (1984-6), 121-154.

¹² Duthoy 1984-6, op. cit. (n. 11), 130 and Harmand 1957, op. cit. (n. 10), 286. Judging from the list of patrons given by Warmington 1954, op. cit. (n. 3) the peak in the number of city patrons in the African provinces was somewhat later (in the late 2nd – early 3rd c. AD). However, we should be cautious in using these numbers, since they may reflect changes in the epigraphic production rather than in the actual number of patrons.

¹³ Duthoy 1984, op. cit. (n. 4) convincingly argues that in choosing a city patron two criteria were of primary importance: the patron was to be a person of the highest possible status and, preferably, a citizen of the client-city. With the apparent decline in the availability of male patrons who were both citizens and of the highest (=senatorial) rank, the cities took more and more recourse to citizen-patrons of decurial or equestrian rank (in Italy) or to high-ranking officials who were not citizens (northern Africa). Both in Italy and in northern Africa the shortage of male patrons who were both citizens of the client-city and of senatorial rank may have caused some cities to choose a female citizen of the highest rank.

¹⁴ Duthoy 1984-6, op. cit. (n. 11). Warmington 1954, op. cit. (n. 3), 39-55, notices a change in the status of city patrons in Roman northern Africa from the beginning of the third century AD onwards: since the number of Africans who reached a senatorial career in Rome declined, patronage shifted from this group to governors and other administrators serving in Africa.

This brings me to my first question: what was expected of city patronesses and did female city patrons, in this respect, differ from their male counterparts? The occurrence of women among civic office-holders in the Greek East has sometimes been taken as proof of the ceremonial nature of their office. According to this view, the essential duty of a woman chosen as a city patron was to spend her wealth for the benefit of her client-city.¹⁵ Most authors writing on Roman city patronage, however, do not pay any attention to gender, or to the nature and duties of female city patrons, gladly leaving the matter unresolved.¹⁶ Only J. Nicols, in a comprehensive article on city patronesses, tries to explain the occurrence of female city patrons by pointing to the “unparalleled” power of the women of the Severi.¹⁷ However, this explanation is hardly convincing since some city patronesses predate the Severi. To my mind, the occurrence of female city patrons cannot be explained by a change in the status of women under the influence of ‘powerful’ women of the imperial family, nor is there any evidence to suggest that a city patroness was coopted on account of her father or husband who exercised the duties belonging to it, whereas she herself only bore the title. In what follows I shall argue that city patronesses were coopted for their own sake and that, within certain limits, the same duties were expected of city patrons irrespective of their sex.

In studying the question of what was expected of city patronesses we have to make clear distinctions between different types of inscriptions. Most evidence consists in honorific inscriptions on statue bases. Though mentioning the patronage of the honorand, these inscriptions were usually not set

¹⁵ Speaking of the Greek East, Veyne 1976, op. cit. (n. 3), 276, 357 n. 261, classes public offices held by women together with those held by gods, minors and deceased persons, i.e. offices that require only wealth, but do not entail duties. For the same kind of reasoning, see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton, N.J. 1950), 649-50, who groups women, children, deceased persons and deities together as “those who were obviously unable to perform the functions attached to them” (p. 650). I suspect that similar unfounded assumptions underlie the relative silence on patronesses of cities in some of the studies mentioned in the following note. For a balanced appraisal of female office-holders in the Greek East, see H.C. van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation. Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam 1996).

¹⁶ Warmington 1954, op. cit. (n. 3), Harmand 1957, op. cit. (n. 10), 281-2, who groups female patrons under the heading “patronats divers”, F. Engesser, *Der Stadtpatronat in Italien und den Westprovinzen des römischen Reiches bis Diokletian* (Freiburg 1957) and Duthoy (1984-6), op. cit. (n. 11).

¹⁷ J. Nicols, ‘*Patrona civitatis*: gender and civic patronage’, in C. Deroux, ed., *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History V*, coll. Latomus 206 (Brussels 1989), 122 ff. and 139.

up *because of* it. Instead, they were mostly set up in gratitude for some financial benefaction (or perhaps in the hope for more). An example is the inscription on a statue base in Bulla Regia of the early third century, which praises Julia Memmia “because of the extraordinary magnificence of her work, the baths, by which she beautified her native city and contributed to the health of the citizens”.¹⁸ The last surviving line of this inscription, which was found in the baths she built, mentions her patronage almost as an after-thought. No direct connection is made between her patronage of the city and her benefaction, but of course, mentioning her patronage added to her prestige. As in the case of men, benefactresses of cities are much more common than patronesses;¹⁹ apparently, there was felt to be a clear difference between the two. At a closer view, benefactresses and city patronesses appear to be only partly overlapping: though most city patronesses were praised for their benefactions,²⁰ only very few benefactresses were also elected as city patronesses. Thus, benefactions were not decisive; something else was expected of a city patroness. In other words, the honorific inscriptions on statue bases praising city patronesses for their benefactions should not be regarded as an adequate source for studying the nature and duties of their city patronage.

To get a clearer view of what was expected of a city patroness we should turn to another class of inscriptions: the *tabulae patronatus*. These are bronze tablets, which record the decree of the local council to coopt a certain person as a patron of the city and summarize the reasons for this decision. These tablets were displayed publicly and a copy was offered to the patron to commemorate the cooptation. Among the thirty odd tablets that have been preserved in some detail,²¹ there is one for a female patron. This tablet records the decision of the council of the small town of Peltuinum Vestinum in

¹⁸ ILAfr 454 = AE 1973, 578 = AE 1921, 45 (Bulla Regia in Africa Proconsularis, AD 200-210): [Iul]iae Me[m]mia[e] / [Prisc?]cae Ruf[ae] Aemi/[liana]e Fidia[nae] claris/[simae et sanctis]s[imae] f[eminae] / [C(ai) Memmi Fidi I]ul(i) Albi consularis / [viri patr]oni et alumni fil(iae) ob / [praeci]puam operis sui thermarum / magnifi[centiam] qua et patriam / [suam] e]xornavit et saluti civium / [sumptu magnif?]ico consulere / [dignat]a est / [---] bene et eius / [---] pa]tronae et [alumnae] ----

¹⁹ In my corpus of over 750 inscriptions showing upper-class women in a public function in the Western part of the Roman Empire during the first three centuries AD (mainly priestesses, civic benefactresses, and patronesses of cities or *collegia*) 281 inscriptions were set up for civic benefactresses.

²⁰ See Hemelrijk 2004, op. cit. (n. 9).

²¹ Nicols 1980, op. cit. (n. 10) discusses thirty of the better-preserved *tabulae patronatus* from the period between 50 BC and AD 250.

Italy to coopt a senatorial woman, Nummia Varia, as their *patrona*. In support of their cooptation the decurions mention the following considerations:

Nummia Varia, a woman of senatorial rank, priestess of Venus Felix, has started to act with such affection and good-will towards us, in accordance with her custom of benevolence, just as her parents have always done, that she should rightfully and unanimously be made *patrona* of our *praefectura*, in the hope that by offering this honour, which is highest in our city, to her so illustrious excellency, we may be more and more renowned by the repute of her benevolence and in all respects be safe and protected (...) All members of the council have decided to bestow on Nummia Varia, a woman of senatorial rank, priestess of Venus Felix, in accordance with the splendour of her high rank, the patronage of our *praefectura*, and to ask from her excellency and extraordinary benevolence, that she may accept this honour we offer to her with willing and favourable inclination and that she deigns to take us and our *res publica*, individually and universally, under the protection of her house and that, in whatever matters it may reasonably be required, she may intervene with the authority belonging to her rank and protect us and keep us safe.²²

Apart from the tone of deference, which stresses the social distance between the high-ranking patroness and the decurions and which was, evidently, meant to flatter her, the decree expresses definite expectations as to her activities, which do not markedly differ from those expected from male patrons. First of all, like male patrons, she was to protect and defend her client-city – to underline their importance the words *tuti ac defensi* are mentioned twice. This protection she was to render by intervening on behalf of the city, with the central government in Rome we may suppose. As the *tabu-*

²² CIL 9, 3429 = ILS 6110 (AD 242): *Nummiam Variam c(larissimam) f(eminam) sacerdotem Veneris Felicis, ea adfecti/one adque prono animo circa nos agere coepisse pro instituto / benevolentiae suae, sicut et parentes eius semper egerunt, ut/ merito debeat ex consensu universorum patrona praefecturae / nostrae fieri, quo magis magisque hoc honore, qui est apud nos potissimus, tantae claritati eius oblato dignatione benignitatis eius glori/osi et in omnibus tuti ac defensi esse possimus, (.....) Placere universis conscriptis Nummiae Variae, c(larissimae) f(eminae) sacerdoti Veneris/ Felicis, pro splendore dignitatis suae patrocinium praefecturae nos/trae deferri petique ab eius claritate et eximia benignitate, ut hunc/ honorem sibi a nobis oblatum libenti et prono animo suscipere/ et singulos universosque nos remque publicam nostram in cl/ientelam domus suae recipere dignetur et in quibuscumque / ratio exegerit, intercedente auctoritate dignitatis suae, tutos defensosque praestet.*

la patronatus suggests in the last line quoted, her intervention on behalf of the city was expected to be successful because of the authority – which I interpret as ‘unofficial power’ – she derived from her lofty status (*auctoritate dignitatis suae*). Being a woman she could not give legal assistance in her own person nor favour the city by means of an office in the imperial administration, but she could prompt others to take action on behalf of the city. Like their male peers, women of the foremost Roman families had widespread social connections through which they could wield great power – though their power was informal. As can be learned from various sources, women of distinguished families could exert public influence not only through male relatives, but also through their own social contacts with men and women of their rank: for instance, Fulvia went round the houses of the most important senators to gain support for Antony, Servilia undertook to secure changes in a senatorial decree appointing her son Brutus to the corn commission, and in the inscription known as the *Laudatio Turiae*, ‘Turia’ pleaded for her husband with Lepidus.²³ The tablet for Nummia Varia should be interpreted in this context of female “lobbying” and mediation. Apart from this, the decurions expressed the expectation that she would bring fame and renown to the city by associating her name with it. As a woman of a consular family, and a municipal priestess, Nummia Varia had great prestige and authority, both locally and in the capital, and the city evidently hoped to profit from it by electing her as its patroness.

Thus, it is quite clear what was expected from Nummia Varia: she was to act as a kind of ambassador on behalf of her client-city protecting it by her authority and bringing it fame by her lofty status. What about the other city patronesses? Does what we know of them confirm this conclusion? Unfortunately, no *tabula patronatus* for any of them has been preserved. Honorific inscriptions on statue bases are our sole evidence. Though such inscriptions are no adequate source for studying the nature and duties of city patronage, they do shed light on my second point: the public image of city patronesses.

²³ Fulvia: Appianus, *Bella Civilia* 3.51, Servilia: Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum* 15.11. For ‘Turia’, see E.A. Hemelrijk, ‘Masculinity and femininity in the *Laudatio Turiae*’, *Classical Quarterly* 54.1 (2004) 185-197, for her encounter with Lepidus: A. Gowing, ‘Lepidus, the proscriptions and the *Laudatio Turiae*’, *Historia* 41 (1992), 283-296. The most striking example is Livia’s influence (leading to the acquittal of Plancina in the Piso-process) on Tiberius and the senate, which was openly acknowledged in the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*, lines 113-119, see the text and translation by D.S. Potter and C. Damon in ‘The *Senatus Consultum De Cn. Pisone Patre*. Text, translation, discussion’, *American Journal of Philology* 120.1 (1999), 13-41.

In about half of the inscriptions the public honour bestowed on these women is justified by referring to their virtues. Unlike most inscriptions in the Greek East, which stress the traditional virtues of female office-holders, it is the civic virtues of the patronesses that count most.²⁴ Traditional female virtues are mentioned only twice and then together with civic virtues. The merits, benefactions and liberality (*merita*, *beneficia* and *liberalitas*) for which some are praised, probably refer to material benefactions, conferred or expected, but the *amor* and *adfectio* attributed to them point to a more general attitude of goodwill: they were the mark of the ideal citizen.²⁵ This could, of course, find expression in benefactions or political intervention, but these words also indicate an emotional tie between the city and its patron or patroness. They are a symptom of what has been called the “domestication of public life”, a tendency to present the relation between members of the elite and the people of municipalities in terms of affectionate family relations.²⁶ The relationship between the patron and the city is depicted as a warm and loving one: the patron or patroness, like a parent, shows a personal interest and an emotional involvement in the well-being of the citizens and of the city as a whole. Besides, the inscriptions parade the high rank of the patronesses, their lofty family relations and their intimate connections with the client-city even when – strictly speaking – this is not completely true.²⁷ This image of the patronesses as highly prestigious and dutiful citizens who care for the city and add to its splendour and renown agrees with the expectations the decurions of Peltuinum Vestinum expressed when coopting Nummia Varia.

Unfortunately, no statue belonging to the honorific inscriptions has survived. However, public statues of women in the imperial period were more or less standardized: they consisted in a heavily draped body-type, usually somewhat over life-size, combined with a portrait head, which is sometimes

²⁴ For female office-holders in the Greek East, see Van Bremen 1996, op. cit. (n. 15). For this difference in the language of praise between honorific inscriptions for women in Italy and the Greek East, see also E.P. Forbis, ‘Women’s public image in Italian honorary inscriptions’, *American Journal of Philology* 111.4 (1990), 493-512.

²⁵ See, for instance, CIL 11, 6354 = ILS 6655, CIL 9, 4894 = ILS 6554, CIL 11, 4180 and AE 1964, 106 discussed by Hemelrijk 2004, op. cit. (n. 9).

²⁶ Cf. Van Bremen 1996, op. cit. (n. 15), 156-170.

²⁷ For instance, ILAlg 2, 4661: the small town of Thibilis in Numidia poses as the *patria* of Vibia Aurelia Sabina, daughter of the late emperor Marcus Aurelius, whereas – in fact – it was the native city of her late husband, L. Antistius Burrus, who is not even mentioned, see Hemelrijk 2004, op. cit. (n. 9).

slightly idealized.²⁸ The dignified and restrained pose of these statues, together with their heavy and complicated drapery, conveyed several messages at once: wealth, high status and – last but not least – traditional female virtue. Yet, one wonders how the ancient public reacted to these statues, which – in the West – were quite uncommon for women outside the imperial family, at least during their lifetime. For instance, did they regard the statuary patronesses just as the women they met in the streets, or did the heavily draped statues towering above them on their high pedestals impress them as hardly human, almost as goddesses? It seems to me that in the eyes of the ancient public they were sharply distinct from actual women. Not only were they dressed in elaborate, almost unmanageable drapery, very different from contemporary everyday dress,²⁹ but their standardized bodies and sometimes idealized heads made it impossible to think of them as ordinary women. The fact that these women received a public statue, which was essentially a male honour, may have made them, in a sense, even ‘masculine’ in the eyes of the ancient public.³⁰ In short, the public honour bestowed on city patronesses set them apart from other women.

So far, no essential difference has been found between male and female patrons as regards the activities expected from them or the way in which they were honoured, apart from the obvious fact that women could not give legal assistance but had to act indirectly. Yet, the small number of female as compared to male patrons and their limited geographical and chronological range seem to point to some hesitation on the part of the client-cities to choose a woman for this prestigious public function. Most patronesses were coopted in the third century when the number and social status of male patrons were in decline, which may have incited some cities to look for feasible alternatives. Also the fact that only women of the highest ranks were coopted – in contrast to the more varied social range of male patrons – sug-

²⁸ See, for instance, H.-J. Kruse, *Römische weibliche Gewandstatuen des zweiten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Göttingen 1975) and J. Trimble, ‘Replicating the body politic: the Herculaneum women statue types in early imperial Italy’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000), 41–68.

²⁹ For the thorny question of the relation between statues of women and contemporary everyday dress, see P. Zanker, ‘Statuenrepräsentation und Mode’, in S. Walker and A. Cameron, eds., *The Greek Renaissance in the Roman Empire. Papers from the Tenth British Museum Classical Colloquium*, BICS suppl. 55 (London 1989), 102–107, who interestingly, but unconvincingly, suggests that the classicising dress of female statues of the imperial period influenced contemporary dress.

³⁰ Cf. M.W. Gleason, ‘Elite male identity in the Roman Empire’, in D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1998), 67–84.

gests that female patrons were considered second choice. But the evidence makes it clear that, once coopted, male and female patrons were treated as equals shouldering the same responsibilities and receiving the same public honour, such as *tabulae patronatus* and public statues.

For women, this is remarkable. In fact, the public prominence of city patronesses is in stark contrast with the low social valuation of women in general, which was expressed, for instance, by the place assigned to them among beneficiaries of civic distributions of food or money. As is well known, such distributions confirmed the internal hierarchy of a town: the decurions were at the top of the pecking order and received most, whereas the people near the bottom of the list received a much smaller amount. Women – if mentioned at all – are invariably mentioned last and receive least.³¹ Thus, the public prominence and political authority of certain eminent women, such as city patronesses, should be set against the background of the social subordination of women in general. To understand this contrast between the happy few and the masses of the female population the patronesses may perhaps be regarded as “honorary men”. Their social prominence and public honours resembled those of men of their class, but their fully draped statues presented them as women of traditional virtue. Keeping a precarious balance between their male and female qualities, such “honorary men” were set off clearly from other women; thus, they posed no threat to the established social order.³²

But perhaps we may speculate a bit further and consider the fact that recent studies of social behaviour of primates show a similar pattern: in so-called “despotic” societies of monkeys and apes the overlap in rank between the sexes is much higher than in so-called “egalitarian” societies. In “despotic” societies of primates, which like Roman society are characterized by aggression and a strong hierarchy, some females are dominant over both males and the masses of females, whereas in the “egalitarian” ones all males are dominant over all females.³³ The evidence for female city patrons strong-

³¹ For one example, out of many: CIL 9, 109: *ob dedica/tione huius statuae dedit de/curionibus liberisque eorum /singulis HS VIII n(ummorum), [Augusta]lib(us) / liberisque eorum [sin]gul(is) / HS VI n, populo viritim HS IIIII/ n. feminis HS II n.* “because of the dedication of this statue he gave the decurions and their sons 8 sesterces each, the Augustales and their sons 6 sesterces each, the male population 4 each and the women 2 each”.

³² See Hemelrijk 2004, op. cit. (n. 23).

³³ C.K. Hemelrijk, ‘An individual-oriented model of the emergence of despotic and egalitarian societies’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society London B: Biological Sciences* 266

ly suggests that, comparable to the “despotic” societies of primates, women’s relation to public life in Roman society was complex and ambiguous entailing public prominence and a high social status for some women – not only those of the imperial family –, which went hand in hand with a low social valuation of women as a sex.

To conclude: the view that female city patronage was a merely honorific title bestowed on a woman because of her willingness to spend her wealth on behalf of her client-city is misleading, since it overlooks the difference in function and purpose between the honorific inscriptions on statue bases and the *tabulae patronatus*. As we have seen, within certain limits, city patronesses were expected to fulfil the same duties and received the same public honour as their male counterparts. Though city patronesses were rare, their occurrence shows that women were not, by definition, barred from public prominence and positions. The restrictions imposed upon their sex could be overruled by high birth, wealth and standing, and by the prestige and social connections that went with them. Without abandoning the general principle that women, because of their sex, were excluded from a public career, they could, in practice, be chosen as city patronesses for reasons that transcended their gender. There is no reason for assuming that this was brought about by the possible influence of powerful women of the imperial family. Rather, the compatibility of the “male” qualities of public honour and good citizenship (stressed in the inscriptions) with the traditional “female” virtues (expressed by the statues) seems to point to a greater acceptance of the public prominence of women – and a less rigid attitude as to the exclusion of women from public life – in the local towns than is usually assumed. Of course, these towns had much to gain by acknowledging the prominence and authority of high-ranking women. They hoped to profit from their social connections and from their wealth, and expected that the prestige of these women would reflect on them.

Lastly, what about the patronesses themselves? What did they think of their patronage? To my mind, for the senatorial women among them, who lived

(1999), 361-369, provides a new model based on the principle of self-organisation to explain the differences in behaviour – especially in the relations between the sexes – between these societies of primates, which seems more widely applicable than earlier explanations focussing on female cooperation such as are given by B. Thierry (1990) ‘Feedback loop between kinship and dominance: the macaque model’, *Journal of theoretical Biology* 145 (1990), 511-21, and A.R. Parish, ‘Sex and food control in the “uncommon chimpanzee”: How bonobo females overcome a phylogenetic legacy of male dominance’, *Ethology and Sociobiology* 15 (1994), 157-179.

most of their lives in Rome and whose exalted position went far beyond the local level, the patronage of their native towns was a favour they bestowed on the city because they felt morally obliged, rather than a source of pride. For Oscia Modesta at least, the woman with whom I began, her patronage of her native Avioccala and her “conspicuous merits” for that town seem to have counted for little in the end. In an epigram, which she probably composed herself for her own burial in Rome, neither Africa nor her patronage of her native town is mentioned.³⁴ Grief for the early death of her husband and children and pride in her *Romanitas* and her high birth, which she deceptively traces back to the Scipiones, were what mattered to her. Compared to this her patronage of a small town in Africa was of little account.

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³⁴ IGUR 1311 = IGR 1, 336 = IG 14, 1960 = Kaibel *Epigr. Gr.* 674 discussed by Hemelrijk 2004, op. cit. (n. 9), 232-233.