WOMEN AND SACRIFICE IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Women in the Graeco-Roman world were formally excluded from political and military functions and responsibilities, but their relation to the third main area of ancient society, religion, was ambiguous. Here, they were both included and excluded: included in some cults and rituals, excluded from others, privileged in few. Boundaries between in- or exclusion seem to have shifted depending on time, place, and social and political context. Since it is generally held that there is no clear dividing line between the political and the religious in the ancient world, study of the participation of women in the religious life of their cities seems to be particularly promising. It may have far-reaching implications for their integration in civic life as a whole.

My approach to Roman religion is from the perspective of women and gender. The problem I am considering is connected with the central religious ritual: sacrifice. As the main means of communication between humans and gods, sacrifice has received much scholarly attention. In this paper, I will deal with one aspect only: the participation of women in sacrifice, especially blood sacrifice. Two questions are my guide: first, did women participate in sacrifice, more particularly in the sacrifice of an animal victim? Second, did the Empire affect their participation in sacrifice and, if so, how?1

Though I deal with the Roman world, the question whether women performed sacrifice cannot be separated from the discussion

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1 As regards both questions my discussion is preliminary; I will deal with these issues more fully as part of my current project entitled “Hidden lives – public personae: women in the urban texture of the Roman Empire”, in which we study the social and public role of women in the cities of Italy and the western provinces of the Roman Empire in the first three centuries AD. Please also note that, unfortunately, R. Flemming, ‘Festus and the role of women in Roman religion’, in: F. Glinister et al. (eds.) Verrius, Festus and Paul: Lexicography, Scholarship and Society (London 2007), 87-108 appeared too late for me to include her argument into this article.
of their participation in sacrificial ritual in classical Greece. Since the influential study of Marcel DETIENNE, the orthodox view is that women in classical Greece were generally excluded from animal sacrifice, not only from the sacrifice itself but also from eating the sacrificial meat (which, according to DETIENNE, was the only meat available for consumption).² Associating the shedding of menstrual blood with the blood of sacrificial animals, he argues that by their nature women were kept from blood offerings since they were themselves bleeding. His view has been called into question by Robin OSBORNÉ in an article in Classical Quarterly of 1993, in which he shows that women’s exclusion from animal sacrifice was not the general rule. Women – so he argues – were excluded with so many words only from a small number of, mostly marginal, cults. Their actual in- or exclusion depended on their participation in the cult group that performed the sacrifice and was restricted to that specific cult, not general.³ This view is supported by Matthew DILLON who in his recent book discusses numerous scenes of Greek women participating in (animal) sacrifice in Greek art, showing that they did not only attend the sacrifices, but also shared in the sacrificial meat. Yet, in spite of the overwhelming evidence against it, the notion of women’s exclusion is not explicitly rejected.⁴ As it stands, the matter is still debated, though the most recent contribution, by Joan CONNELLY in 2007, clearly shows, on the basis of a wide range of evidence, that women were involved in all aspects of blood sacrifice.⁵

The theory of the so-called “female sacrificial incapacity” seems to have spilled over from classical Greece into the discussion of the Roman world. Here, the main defenders are Olivier DE CAZANOVE and John SCHEID in his 1991 article, though in a later paper (from

2003) Scheid qualifies his earlier view.⁶ On the basis of ancient prohibitions for Roman women to grind grain, to prepare meat and to drink wine, they argue that women were denied participation in religious sacrifices, where wine, *mola salsa* (salted flour) and meat were important ingredients. Yet, in order to suit the theory the evidence from the literary sources is unduly generalised. Two points of criticism may be brought against it: first, words and fragments are taken from their contexts and assumed to have a general application, and, second, habits which are presented as oddities from the legendary past are supposed to have lived on into historical times. I will briefly review the main texts that are used in support of their argument.

In the well-known passage from Festus: “Be away! For thus the *lictor* shouted during certain sacred rituals: foreigner, prisoner, woman, girl, be away; that is to say: it was forbidden to be present”, Festus does not exclude women from religious sacrifice in general but only from “certain sacred rituals” (*quibusdam sacris*), which, in fact, implies their regular presence at other occasions.⁷ The same holds for Cato, who when sternly remarking “let a woman take no part in this offering nor see how it is performed”, speaks about

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⁷ Festus, *De verborum significatu* s.v. exesto (ed. Lindsay p. 72): *Extra exesto. Sic enim lictor in quibusdam sacris clamitabat: hostis, vinctus, mulier, virgo exesto; scilicet interesse prohibebatur*; similarly Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.9.21: *Nocturna mulierum sacrificia ne sunto praeter olla quae pro populo rite fient* (“No sacrifices are to be performed by women at night apart from those that are offered on behalf of the people according to the rite”) suggests that women were normally allowed to perform sacrifices during the day.
women’s exclusion from a sacrifice to Mars Silvanus only. These texts should not be regarded as having a general application; on the contrary, they suggest that, as a rule, women did participate in religious rites.

In his *Roman Questions* Plutarch discusses the question why in ancient times married women were not to grind grain or cook meat for their husbands: he tentatively suggests a historical explanation by referring to the legend of the abduction of the Sabine virgins. This has been interpreted as a prohibition connected with the use of these ingredients in sacrifice. However, the context is purely domestic, as is confirmed by passages on the same topic in Plutarch’s life of Romulus: it was agreed that the Sabine women were to be exempt from all household chores except spinning. Assuming (like Detienne does for ancient Greece) that in Roman society all meat is sacrificial meat and that the exemption from grinding grain barred women from the *mola salsa* used in sacrifice, De Cazanove regards this as a religious prohibition, which is disguised as a privilege. However, apart from the fact that the notion that all meat comes from sacrifice is unfounded even for early Rome, I see no reason to connect this anecdote about women’s appropriate behaviour and marital tasks in the legendary past with the religious roles of women in historical times.

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8 Cato, *De Agricultura* 83 (a sacrifice to Mars Silvanus): *Mulier ad eam rem divinam ne adsit neve videat quo modo fiat.*

9 *Contra* De Cazanove 1987, op.cit. (n. 6), 167-168.

10 Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 85 (*Moralia* 284F): “Why did they not allow their wives to grind grain (*alein*) or to cook (*opsopoein*) in ancient times? Was it in memory of the treaty which they made with the Sabines? For when they had seized their daughters, and later, after warring with the Sabines, had made peace, it was specified among the other articles of agreement that no Sabine woman should grind grain for a Roman man or cook meat for him (*mageireuein)*.”

11 Plutarch, *Romulus* 15.4 and 19.7.

12 De Cazanove 1987, op.cit. (n. 6), 162-167; see also H.S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion 2: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Leiden 1993), 266: “keeping women from the kitchen is keeping them from sacrifice”.

13 Admitting that Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 85 (*Moralia* 284F) speaks about ancient times, Scheid 1991, op.cit. (n. 6), 408 nevertheless believes that the fact that Plutarch mentions it shows that the rule was still one of the essential characteristics of the Roman matron in the second century AD, further suggesting – without any evidence – that in historical times the prohibition was enforced only in regard to religious sacrifice. Against the idea that all meat comes from sacrifice, see M. Kajava, ‘Visceratio’, *Arctos* 32 (1998), 109-131.
The prohibition to drink wine, which is found in several sources, is also firmly placed in a domestic context and is usually associated with the fear of adultery. Moreover, like the prohibitions of grinding grain and cooking meat, it is presented as an oddity from the distant past (usually ascribed to the regulations of Romulus or Numa), not as a description of contemporary habits. On the basis of the word *temetum* used by Gellius, De Cazanove concludes that the prohibition concerns sacrificial wine only. But that is not what Gellius says. He explains *temetum* as an ancient word for wine – apparently out of use in his own days – and this is how we find it in other (mostly early and poetic) texts. Therefore, there is no need to assume that these ancient domestic rules extended to the field of religion, nor that they survived into historical times. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that, in the old days, wine was considered inappropriate for women except in a religious context and in historical times women drinking wine were common, though not always approved of.

As we have seen, the literary evidence does not support the notion that Roman women were, as a rule, banned from partaking in sacrifice. Moreover, as the advocates of the theory admit, the sacrificial activity of some Roman women is beyond doubt: apart from preparing the *mola salsa*, the flour mixed with salt, which was sprinkled between the horns of the victim and on the sacrificial knife before the actual killing, the Vestals participated in sacrifice (though not beyond doubt in blood sacrifice) at several occasions. The *flaminica Dialis* sacrificed a ram to Jupiter on market days and the

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15 De Cazanove 1987, op.cit (n. 6), 159 and 170 translates *temetum* as “vin pur”, by which he means wine used for sacrifice, but there is no reason for translating *temetum* in this specific sense (see the following note).


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regina sacrorum offered a sow or a female lamb to Juno on the first day of every month. Like the priestesses of the so-called ‘foreign’ cults of Ceres, Magna Mater and Isis, they are described by modern scholars as exceptions to the rule and the same holds for the numerous sacrifices performed by women in the matronal cults.\(^{18}\) However, the sheer number and importance of these so-called ‘exceptions’ raises doubts as to whether there was such a thing as a ‘rule’ of “female sacrificial incapacity” at all. Instead of upholding the paradox of women’s alleged formal exclusion but actual—though occasional—performance, it seems more useful to examine whether or not gender actually was the decisive criterion for exclusion from sacrificial activity.

Let us first turn to the ritual itself: was there anything in the ritual that precluded women from participating? When discussing the possible participation of women in animal sacrifice, we should keep in mind that in Roman sacrificial ritual the priest did not kill the animal himself. The popa and the victimarii performed the actual slaughtering and dissected the victim. Numerous reliefs on altars, temples and arches representing sacrificial scenes show the officiating priest, the back of his head veiled by his toga, pouring wine or burning incense on the altar. The victim stands by, held by

\(^{18}\) For these, and more examples presented as ‘exceptions’, see De Cazanove 1987, op.cit (n. 6), 168-169 and Scheid 1991, op.cit. (n. 6). For the question whether, or in how far, the cult of Magna Mater should be defined as ‘foreign’ or ‘Roman’, see M. Beard, ‘The Roman and the Foreign: the cult of the ‘Great Mother’ in imperial Rome’, in: N. Thomas – C. Humphrey (eds.), Shamansim, History, and the State (Ann Arbor 1994), 164-189. For the ritual duties of the Vestals, see R.L. Wildfang, ‘The Vestals and annual public rites’, Classica et Mediaevalia 52 (2001), 223-256, who argues that the evidence for their performance of blood sacrifice is unclear; and Prudentius, contra Symmachum 2.1108: in flamman iugulant pecudes (“[the Vestals] cut the throats of cattle over the flames”). A marble relief from Sicily shows the Vestals at a sacrifice presided over by the emperor, see R. Turcan, Religion Romaine II (Leiden 1988), fig. 31. For the flaminica Diaulis, see Macrobius, Saturnalia 1.16.30: siguendum flaminica omnibus nundinis in regia Iovi arietem soleat immolare, for the regina sacrorum, Macrobius, Saturnalia 1.15.19: Romae quoque Kalendis omnibus (…) etiam regina sacrorum, id est regis uxor, porcam vel agnam in regia Iunoni immolat. Because of their military dress Versnel 1993, op.cit (n. 12), 158 plausibly interprets the sacrifice performed by the Saliae Virgines as a role-reversal, see Festus, De verborum significatu s.v. Salias virgines (ed. Lindsay p. 439): (...) quaes Aelius Stilo scripsit sacrificium fæcere in Regia cum pontifice paludatas cum apicibus in modum Saliorum (“about whom Aelius Stilo writes that they performed sacrifice in the Regia together with the pontifex dressed in military cloaks with apices like the Salii”).
the *victimarii*, while the *popa* is about to strike it with his axe or mallet. After the *popa* had struck the animal, one of the *victimarii* cut its throat with the sacrificial knife. Apart from these, the reliefs portray other cult personnel, such as *camilli* carrying a pitcher, a *patera* or an incense box (*acerra*), a flute-player and, sometimes, a *lictor*.19 Since the priest was not actually to kill the victim, but only to preside over the ceremony after having performed the preliminary rites by pouring wine and sprinkling incense on the burning altar, there seems to be no reason (for instance, of physical strength) to exclude women from participation in animal sacrifice.20 Yet, this is not to say that they actually did partake. What positive evidence do we have of their sacrificial activity, in particular of their participation in animal sacrifice, both in an official capacity – as priestesses or other cult personnel – and as private worshippers?

Let us focus on the imperial period and see whether their participation was somehow affected by changes under the Empire. Here, we see a dual trend. On the one hand, Augustus recognized women’s ritual importance by giving new responsibilities to the Vestals: they were to perform the annual sacrifices at the altar of Fortuna Redux and the Ara Pacis. Moreover, he officially recognized women’s participation in sacrifice as worshippers by including them – for the first time in Roman state art - in the sacrificial procession depicted on the Ara Pacis.21 On the other hand, women were almost totally excluded from the official sacrificial iconography of the imperial period. In state art the emperor dominates as a sacrificant almost to the complete exclusion of all other persons, male or

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19 For iconographic evidence of Roman sacrifice see I. Scott Ryberg, *Rites of the State Religion in Roman Art* (Rome 1955) and *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* V (Los Angeles 2004); for cult personnel assisting during sacrifice, see F. Fless, *Opferdiener und Kultmusiker auf stadtrömischen historischen Reliefs: Untersuchungen zur Ikonographie, Funktion und Benennung* (Mainz 1995).

20 Also in classical Greece the priestess usually presided over the sacrifice leaving the actual killing of the victim to a male sacrificant, but in some (mostly all-female) cults the women themselves wielded the sacrificial knife killing piglets or other (small) animals, see Dillon 2002, op.cit (n. 4), 114-117 and 236-246.

female, who might, in daily life, have performed sacrifices.\textsuperscript{22} Even empresses are rarely portrayed as such. I know of only very few exceptions: on a much restored relief in the Vatican a priest pours wine and a priestess (perhaps Agrippina Minor) sprinkles incense on a lighted altar, while the \textit{popa} leads the steer towards it. A relief on the arch of Septimius Severus at Lepec Magna shows Iulia Domna offering incense on an altar, while the \textit{popa} and a \textit{victimarius} are about to kill the victim.\textsuperscript{23} That women are so rarely represented as sacrificants in public art does not mean that they were actually excluded from performing animal sacrifice in the state cults; yet, the textual evidence is meagre too.\textsuperscript{24} Two examples: at the secular games at Rome in AD 204 110 \textit{matronae}, including the empress Iulia Domna, held \textit{sellisternia} sacrificing (and eating) young sows on the third day.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, the wife or mother of the leading magistrate, or the Vestals, sacrificed a sow on behalf of the Roman people (\textit{pro populo Romano}) at the December festival of the cult of Bona Dea.\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{23} For the Vatican relief, see Ryberg 1955, op.cit. (n. 19), 96 with fig. 45c; for the triumphal arch at Lepcis, see ibid., 134-135 and 161-162 with fig. 89a-b, Beard – North – Price 1998, op.cit. (n. 21), 350-351 and N.B. Kampen, ‘Between public and private: women as historical subjects in Roman art’, in: S.B. Pomeroy (ed.), \textit{Women's History and Ancient History} (Chapel Hill – London 1991), 224-226. For an altar at Copenhagen showing a priestess (the empress?) preparing to offer a steer to a \textit{divus}, see C. Jacobsen, \textit{Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. De antike Kunstvaerker} (Copenhagen 1907), 27-28 nr. 53.

\textsuperscript{24} On sacrificing women generally, see Varro, \textit{De Lingua Latina} 5.130, on the etymology of \textit{rica}: “because women veil their head when performing sacrifice according to Roman rite” (\textit{quod Romano ritu sacrificium feminae cum faciunt, capita velant}).

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{CIL} 6.32329 as restored by I.B. Pighi, \textit{De ludis saecularibus populi Romani Quiritium, libri sex} (Amsterdam 1965), 168-169 Va 83-84: [\textit{sellisterni}a su\textit{a sicu\textit{t praec\textit{eden}}\textit{ti} biduo, porc\textit{ilias imm\textit{olaverunt} et} e\textit{sidem cena[verunt]}; the 110 matrons also participated in the secular games of Augustus and Domitian, but only here their performance of blood sacrifice is stated unambiguously. B. Schnegg-Köhler, \textit{Die augusteischen Säkularspiele} (Munich – Leipzig 2002), 91-92 assumes that they performed blood sacrifice also during the games of Augustus.

\textsuperscript{26} Wildfang 2001, op.cit. (n. 18), 250-253, Cicero, \textit{De Haruspicum Responsis} 37, Plutarch, \textit{Cicero} 19. Though not explicitly mentioned as sacrificants, the women must have performed sacrifice themselves, since no men were allowed to be present; see Iuvenalis 2.86-87 and Macrobius, \textit{Saturnalia} 1.12.20 and 23 with H.H.J.
In private (mostly funerary) art and in rites other than those of the state cults women are portrayed more often while performing sacrifice, particularly outside Rome. Let us look at some examples from the cities of Italy and the western provinces. Several funerary monuments for priestesses of Ceres and Diana in the towns of Italy show scenes with a priestess about to sacrifice a sow at the altar.\textsuperscript{27} Women offered animal victims not only to female deities. Some evidence from the provinces show them sacrificing to male deities: a sandstone altar from Corbridge at the Hadrian wall in northern Britain dedicated with a Greek inscription by a high-priestess (\textit{archiereia}) of Heracles depicts a knife and \textit{bucranium}, which seem to refer to her sacrificial tasks.\textsuperscript{28} And according to an inscription on a stele in Caesarea in the province of Mauretania Caesariensis in northern Africa a woman performs an animal sacrifice to Saturnus having received the victim from another woman.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} Supplementa Italica 3, Corfinium nr. 12 = \textit{AE} 1900, 85: funerary inscription of Helvia Pothine, priestess of Ceres in Corfinium with, in relief, a sacrificial scene, of which only the lower left corner is preserved, showing an altar, a priestess and a female attendant with the sacrificial animal, a sow, as was usual in the cult of Ceres. See also \textit{IG} 14.702 (Pompeii, Campania) with a relief showing Ceres, pig, altar and \textit{CIL} 10.5073 (= \textit{ILS} 3344) from Atina, an inscription for Munnia, priestess of Ceres, with a sacrificial knife and a sow depicted below the text. \textit{CIL} 9.3089: funerary inscription of Helvia Quarta, \textit{sacerdos Cereris et Veneris} from Sulmo showing a woman sacrificing at an altar with a boy or girl holding the victim. Similarly, a marble altar from Rome, now in Copenhagen (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek inv. nr. 858), shows a relief of a priestess with covered head who sprinkles incense on an altar. She is accompanied by two attendants: one of them carries a basket with incense and the other, having a sacrificial knife in his left hand, stands behind the ox near the altar. Because of a relief portraying a stag at the rear side of the altar, it is believed to be connected with the cult of Diana.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{RIB} 1129 (Corstopitum), left side: knife and \textit{bucranium}, right: a wreath.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{AE} 1938, 149 (Caesarea, Mauretania Caesariensis; AD 29-30): [\textit{Pro salute r}egis Pt(o)lemaei / [r]egis Iubae f(ili)i / anno decumo(!) / Antistia / Galla votum Saturno solvi / libens merito victuma(!) / [a]b Iulia Respecti / Vitale Rusguniense], see L. Leschi, ‘Un sacrifice pour le salut de Ptolémée, roi de Maurétanie’, in: \textit{Mélanges de Géographie et d’ Orientalisme offerts à E.-F. Gautier} (Tours 1937), 332-340 and M. LeGlay, \textit{Saturne Africain. Monuments II: Numidie – Maurétanie} (Paris 1966), 315-17. The stele was set up about ten years before Mauretania became a Roman province. Two sarcophagi with Dionysiac themes show women participating in animal sacrifice to Dionysus, see F. Matz, \textit{Die Dionysischen Sarkophage I-II, Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs IV}, 1-2 (Berlin 1968), vol. I, 137 nr. 37 with pl. 35.1: a bearded man sacrifices a ram while a young woman
Women also appear among the (lower) cult personnel assisting the priest during sacrifice. Among the *camilli* there is an occasional girl, a *camilla*, carrying an incense box or a jug, though in art the gender of these young sacrificial assistants is hard to establish, *camilli* being often portrayed with feminine traits, such as long hair hanging loose on their shoulders or tied into a knot at the back of the head. The strikingly feminine hairstyle of these figures has not been satisfactorily explained, but the distinction between these long-haired ministri (she rejects the term *camilli*) assisted during sacrifice from the Augustan period onward; cf. also Turcan 1988, op.cit. (n. 18), fig. 54 (Trajanic period) and fig. 80 (Julio-Claudian period). I.C. Mantle, ‘The role of children in Roman religion’, *Greece and Rome* 49 (2002), 91-99 suggests that portrayals of *camillae* include Ryberg 1955, fig. 25 (a sacrifice of a heifer to Pax on a small frieze from the Augustan period), 93 (a wedding sacrifice on a sarcophagus) and possibly fig. 38a (on the altar in front of the so-called temple of Vespasian in Pompeii). Dating the first phase of the last-mentioned temple and the altar in front of it to the Augustan period J.J. Dobbins, ‘The altar in the sanctuary of the genius of Augustus in the forum at Pompeii’, *Römische Mitteilungen* 99 (1992), 262 tentatively suggests that the small figure with female hairstyle represents the priestess Mamia who dedicated the temple, but Fless 1995, 41 more convincingly considers it to be a young male assistant. A votive stele from Thuburbo Maius (Africa proconsularis; 2nd c. AD) now in Tunis (Bardo Mus. inv. 3514b) shows a girl (presumably the dedicant) with a jug and an incense box, see *ILTun* 711 = *ILP*Bardo 347; Mantle 2002, 93 assumes that she was a *camilla*. For some textual evidence of *camillae* (mostly used for girls assisting the *flaminica Dialis* at Rome): Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.8.7 = Servius, *ad Aeneidem* 11.543: Romani quoque pueros et puellas nobiles et investes camillos et camillas appellant, flaminicarum et flaminum praeministr os; Fless 1995, 60-63 connects the feminine hairstyle of the long-haired sacrificial attendants with that of slave *delicati* and youthful servants at banquets in the houses of the wealthy, whose feminine appearance was informed by contemporary ideals of youth, beauty and luxury. However, this does not account for the different rationale behind the sexual ambivalence of sacrificial attendants and *delicati*: whereas the feminine traits of *delicati* and young slaves serving at private banquets were mainly appreciated for (homo-)erotic reasons, the sexual ambivalence of the sacrificial attendants should, I think, rather be explained by notions of sacred liminality – an interstitial person...
haired boys and possible girls assisting at sacrifice is slight; only certain details of dress and adornment indicate their gender.

Even more unexpectedly: though *popae* and *victimarii* portrayed in Roman sacrifice are invariably men, the only *popa* known by name turns out to be a woman. In a funerary inscription in Rome from the imperial period a freedwoman, Critonia Philema, presents herself as *popa de insula*. Since *popae* depicted in art (mostly reliefs) are clearly distinguishable by their dress, attributes and naked, muscular torso, this inscription of a female *popa* is highly surprising. Taking it at face value, Jörg RÜPKE assumes that Critonia Philema, wife of the freedman Quintus Critonius Dassus, assisted in blood sacrifices as a *popa* (sacrificial slaughterer). The enigmatic addition *de insula*, denoting the place where she exercised her profession, perhaps means that she worked as a *popa* on an island (the Tiber island?) or in an *insula* of Critonius Dassus, who in that case would not be her husband but the owner of the apartment block in which she plied her trade. The most important point, however, remains unexplained. Are we to assume that Critonia Philema was a *popa* in the usual sense: a sacrificial assistant who felled the victim with the axe or mallet? In literary texts the word *popa* clearly refers to sacrificial slaughterers only, their bellies fattened from sacrificial meat. Are we to assume that in epigraphy *popa* has the same meaning? Or should we believe that *popa* when used for a woman (and perhaps in combination with the addition *de insula*) denoted, for instance, a female trader or keeper of sacrificial animals or a seller of...
sacrificial meat? Since this is the only inscription mentioning a popa, no certain answer can be given, but we may reasonably assume that she was involved, in some way or other, in animal sacrifice, though perhaps not as the actual slaughterer. Finally, several inscriptions from cities in the western provinces present a woman as a mater sacrorum ("mother of the sacred rites"), which suggests some role in supervising rites, especially sacrifice, though her precise function is unknown.38

These examples, though few and widely spread, show that women actually did participate in animal sacrifice. Moreover, they are usually presented as full participants, not simply as adjuncts to men. The matter-of-fact way in which they are treated suggests that there were no objections against their participation in blood offerings. Yet, though we may now safely reject the notion that women were barred from animal sacrifice, the scarcity of the evidence for women performing such sacrifices requires an explanation. Does it mean that women only rarely participated in animal sacrifice? Or were they for some reason hardly portrayed as such in public art?

Definitive answers to these questions cannot be given. As a conclusion to this paper I will tentatively propose that the answer to both questions is yes and suggest a possible reason. Starting with the last question, why female sacrificants are so rare in public art, we

37 Cf. Clodia Nigella, freedwoman of Clodia, public priestess of Ceres in Pompeii (CIL 10.1074), who was commemorated on her funerary stele as a porcaria publica ("public pig-keeper"). This suggests that she tended the sows that were to be sacrificed in the cult of Ceres, see L. Savunen, Women in the Urban Texture of Pompeii (Helsinki 1997), 138 and A. D’Ambrosio – S. De Caro, Un impegno per Pompei. Fotopiano e documentazione della necropolis di porta de Nocera (Milan 1983), 5 OS.

38 Mater sacrorum: CIL 8.20650 = 8842 (funerary inscription from Tubusuctu, Mauretania Caesariensis); CIL 13.5384 = AE 1984, 704 (funerary inscription from Vesontio, Germania Superior); CIL 13.575 (from Burdigala, Aquitania), an altar(?) dedicated to Mercurius; CIL 8.24519 = AE 1899, 46 = ILS 4427 (Carthago, Africa proconsularis), a dedication to Iupiter Hammon Barbarus Silvanus, with three matres sacrorum listed among the priests; CIL 13.8244 = ILS 3384 (colonia Agrippinensium, Germania inferior), an altar dedicated to Semele ob honorem sacri matratus of Reginia Paterna. Cf. also CIL 10.4791 = ILS 3113 (Teanum Sidicinum, Campania): ministria sacrorum publicorum. As far as their status is known most matres sacrorum seem to have been freedwomen. In Rome, we find the (abbreviated?) title sacrorum for both men and women; for some examples of women see CIL 6.2279-2282.
should keep in mind that magistrates, generals and, in the imperial period, the emperor dominated all public sacrificial scenes leaving little room for others, even for empresses, to be portrayed as sacrificers. It is hard to say whether this means that women only rarely carried out animal sacrifice in actual life. Yet, though the relationship between representation and actual behaviour is dubious, I believe that women did indeed perform animal sacrifice (far) less often than men. The reason for this, to my mind, should not be sought by simply pointing to gender, and even less by supposing a general prohibition for women: gender is involved, but only in an indirect way.

To explain this I will briefly consider a female priesthood of which we have ample evidence, namely that of the imperial cult. More than 270 inscriptions from the towns of Italy and the western provinces mention imperial priestesses, but there is no evidence whatsoever that they performed animal sacrifice. The occasional representation of sacrificial utensils accompanying their inscriptions, such as a patera, urceus (pitcher), incense box (acerra) and even, in one case, an axe is of no help, since these instruments were regularly portrayed on graves and funerary and votive altars. How should we interpret the silence of our sources? Let us, for the sake of the argument, assume that it was not caused by Roman iconographic habits or by the loss of contrary evidence but that it reflects their actual absence from animal sacrifice in ancient times. Does this warrant the conclusion that imperial priestesses, because of their gender, were barred from animal sacrifice? To my mind, this conclusion is not feasible. In his voluminous study of the imperial cult, Duncan Fishwick suggests that the local towns – unlike Rome – offered wine, incense and sacrificial cakes at imperial festivities, restricting the more expensive sacrifice of a victim to the most


40 For a detailed discussion, see Hemelrijk 2007, op.cit. (n. 39).
important celebration: that of the birthday of the reigning emperor.\textsuperscript{41} Though we should allow for local differences, this might more convincingly explain the lack of evidence for animal sacrifice performed by imperial priestesses. If the empresses, as a rule, received only the smaller offerings of wine, incense and sacrificial cakes in the local towns, imperial priestesses (who served the cult of the female members of the imperial family in the towns outside Rome) were far less commonly involved in animal sacrifice than their male colleagues who served the cult of the emperor. This implies that animal sacrifice was not bound up with the gender of the sacrificant, but with the rules of the cult in question or, in this case, with the relative importance of the deity and his or her festival. It was ‘cult-specific’ rather than ‘gender-specific’.

To understand female participation in animal sacrifice, therefore, it seems useful to examine their participation in the various cults of the Roman world and the rules of the cult in question. Here, the Empire meant change, though we should keep in mind that our view may well be influenced by the increase of (epigraphic) evidence in the imperial period. As compared to the Republican period when female priests, apart from the Vestals, seem to have been rare and restricted to a few cults,\textsuperscript{42} female priesthoods grew in number and importance in the imperial era, especially – but not exclusively – outside Rome. In the towns of Italy and the western provinces numerous priestesses are attested who served the cult of Ceres, Venus, Diana, Bona Dea, Magna Mater and other, mostly female, deities. Most of our evidence for female participation in (animal) sacrifice stems from their private monuments, such as tombs and votive altars.\textsuperscript{43} Also female cult personnel assisting in sacrifice is mainly found in the imperial period.\textsuperscript{44} By giving them more

\textsuperscript{41} Especially D. Fishwick, \textit{The imperial Cult in the Latin West. Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire II} 1 (Leiden 1991), 509-517 and \textit{CIL} 11.3303 = \textit{ILS} 154.

\textsuperscript{42} Schultz 2006, op.cit. (n. 6) shows that testimonies for priestesses increase in the late Republic.

\textsuperscript{43} Apart from the examples mentioned above (n. 27), the funerary relief of Laberia Felicula, priestess of Magna Mater in Rome in the first century AD, shows her pouring a libation on a burning altar, \textit{CIL} 6.2257 = \textit{ILS} 4160: \textit{Laberia Felicula / sacerdos maxima / matris deum M(agnaer) I(daeae)} and N. Mekacher, in: \textit{Thesaurus Cultus et Ritus Antiquorum V} (Los Angeles 2005), 99 nr. 101.

\textsuperscript{44} Numerous inscriptions from the imperial period refer to \textit{magistrae} and \textit{ministrae} of various cults; some examples: \textit{CIL} 2.2/7, 3 = \textit{CIL} 2.3349 (Ossigi,
opportunities to be priestesses and to join the lower cult personnel in various cults, the Roman Empire influenced women’s participation in animal sacrifice. Yet, compared to male cult personnel female priests remained a minority, also in the imperial period. Moreover, local customs and the rules of the cults of female deities may have reduced their actual involvement in animal sacrifice. However, rather than resorting to the notion of “female sacrificial incapacity”, the scarcity of the evidence for women carrying out animal sacrifice may be explained by their (restricted) access to priesthoods and other religious functions, and by the sacrificial rites of the cults in question. In short, rather than showing a rigid division on the basis of gender, the picture is one of greater diversity and differentiation, and instead of their alleged marginalization, we find that women were integrated in religious life including its sacrificial rites, though in a less prominent manner than men. If the notion that the boundaries between the political and the religious were blurred also holds for the local cities in the imperial period, this might have had profound implications for their integration in civic life as a whole.

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45 In the cult of female deities in the local towns animal sacrifice may have been performed less often and mostly of smaller animals, such as piglets (for instance, for Ceres and Bona Dea).