REREADING THE SENATUS CONSULTUM DE BACCHANALIBUS OF 186 BC:
GENDER ROLES IN THE ROMAN MIDDLE REPUBLIC

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Bacas vir nequis adiuse velet ceivis Romanus
neve nominus Latini neve socium quisquam.

'Let no man at all, either a Roman citizen or a Latin or an ally, consent to entering a meeting of Bacchic women'.

The suppression of the Bacchanalian cult by the consuls and by the Roman senate in 186 BC is one of the most-discussed episodes in the history of the second century BC.¹ These events offer a rare opportunity to combine a detailed treatment in Livy (39.8–19) with the so-called Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus, as well as with a growing body of archaeological evidence that illustrates both the extent of the cult and its suppression.² However, the relative wealth of information

¹ The bibliography on the Bacchanalian conspiracy is now vast. The most recent compilation is in Paillier (1988). I have found the following to be most helpful. Méautis (1940); Tierney (1947); Bruhl (1953) 82–116; Festugière (1954); Herrmann (1964) 68–79; Turcan (1972); North (1979); Rousselle (1982); Voisin (1984); Paillier (1986); (1988); Cantarella (1987) 126–8; Montanari (1988) 103–36; Scafuro (1989); Gruen (1990); Bauman (1990); Walsh (1996); Cancik-Lindemaier (1996); Dubourdieu and Lemine (1997); Nippel (1997); Beard, North and Price (1998); Linke (2000) esp. 269–73.

² Archaeological evidence is conveniently collected and discussed by Paillier (1988). The discovery at Volsinii of an underground chamber with a Bacchic 'throne', which was destroyed in the second century BC, has been adduced as direct evidence for the suppression of public cult sites; cf. Massa-Pairault and Paillier (1979) and Massa-Pairault (1981). There is also a (contemporary?) destruction layer near where the S. C. de Bacchanalibus itself was found; see Paillier (1988) 292. See Menichetti (1995) for the complex Dionysiac imagery on many ciste from Praeneste of the fourth and third centuries BC. Note in particular Smith (1998) 842: 'At the same time, the ciste give us an insight into the significance of the Dionysiac rites to an élite upper class: not just an excuse to drink and go wild, but a key to a whole complex of ideas that embrace both the entry of men and women into their rightful civic place, and also the ordering of that civic body within the divine ordering. When Rome attacked the Bacchanalia in 186 BC, it struck at more than just a few conspiratorial matrons'. See also now Torelli (1999) 140–4.
about what happened has only served to create controversy over the nature of our sources and over the real meaning of the senate’s violent reprisals against cult members throughout Italy. The following brief discussion will focus on the roles both of women and of men in the cult, with particular emphasis on how those roles were defined and targeted by authorities in Rome. My primary goal is to use the Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus to recover some of the concerns and attitudes of contemporary Romans.\textsuperscript{3}

In what follows, gender appears both as a useful category of historical and social analysis for the modern historian and as a prism employed by Romans to view what seemed to them to be the pressing issues of their own day.\textsuperscript{4} No previous study has offered a thorough examination of gender roles in the Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus, although these appear to have been of central concern.\textsuperscript{5} The Bacchanalian crisis illustrates transgressions of traditional gender roles and how these roles were viewed and came to be (re)enforced by the consuls and by the senate. My discussion aims at a new appreciation of how gender roles and gender ideology can elucidate the crisis of 186 BC and consequently also various aspects of Roman society during the middle Republic.

\textit{The Nature of the Sources}

The general character and tendency of our sources for 186 BC can be described in the following way. We have not only a fine example of an original document, but also a historical narrative that is based on documents and on a variety of traditions recorded in earlier his-

\textsuperscript{3} CIL 1\textsuperscript{3}, 581 = ILLRP 511 = ILS 18, discovered at Tiriolo in Bruttium in 1640. Wachter (1987) 289–98 discusses the archaic language and the mistakes that were made in transcribing the text. See also Martina (1998) for an attempt to recreate the oral aspects of the original letter as it would have been read aloud.

\textsuperscript{4} For gender as a tool of historical and social analysis, see especially MacCormack and Strathern (1980) and Scott (1996). For gender and the Romans, see now Cornell and Lomas (1997) with full bibliography.

\textsuperscript{5} Herrmann (1964) 68–79 sees the Bacchic cult as an attempt by women to seize power as part of a larger feminist movement. North (1979) views the introduction of men as a key issue but does not elaborate. The closest to a true analysis based on gender is Cancik-Lindemaier (1996), whose discussion focuses almost exclusively on women in leadership roles rather than as cult members. Her conclusion that a cult led by women could have no real significance in Roman society is not directly supported by any ancient evidence.