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). 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 OSBORNE 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. 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. 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.

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

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