

Fay Glinister, University College, London

Virgins for Hire and Other Stories: Putting Women in their Place

This paper highlights the need to approach and question old material pertaining to the role of women in ancient religion with a fresh perspective. Two examples can briefly be given here: the *Saliae* in Rome and the Paelignian *pristafalacirix*. Our information comes with high authority: for the former, our source is Festus (439.18L), the mid-imperial epitomator of the Lexicon of the Augustan antiquarian Verrius Flaccus, who explicitly cites Varro's teacher Aelius Stilo, and Cincius, a late Republican antiquarian described by Livy as *diligens*; for the latter, a Paelignian epitaph from Corfinium (Ve 213) provides primary evidence for the role of certain priestesses within the wider sphere of Republican Italy.

Festus' lemma tells us that the *Saliae* sacrificed in the Regia together with the pontifex, while wearing military dress and the *apex* of the Salii. Almost without exception, modern scholars (from Wissowa to Beard) have assumed that these girls were hired for the sacrifice (M. Torelli, *Lavinio e Roma* (Rome, 1984), p. 111 even uses the loaded word *prezzolate* of them), since Cincius says they are *conducticiae*. They were thus, it is widely presumed, from the lower classes. Yet this kind of transaction seems anomalous within a Roman religious context. It will be argued that the *Saliae* are young girls of good Roman family, performing a key ritual role in a sanctuary that in several senses lies at the heart of the Roman community. The activities of the *Saliae* also have a striking military dimension that undermines the passive and domestic role normally attributed to Roman women and girls. Their actions represent another nail in the coffin of female 'sacrificial incapacity', and the still-prevalent belief that women were marginal to Roman public religion.

Our second case study, the *pristafalacirix*, is sometimes identified as (or else as a survival of) a 'sacred prostitute' (e.g. by E. Peruzzi, 'Sulla prostituzione sacra nell'Italia antica', *Scritti in onore di G. Bonfante* II (Brescia, 1976), pp. 673-686). Once again, we find ourselves confronted by women for hire in a religious context (in this case, not characterised as *virgines*!); once again, I argue that a reappraisal of the material offers different interpretative possibilities. In the first place, there is no convincing evidence for the existence in Republican-period Italy of 'sacred prostitution' (however one defines that nebulous concept). Equally pertinently, the inscriptional evidence for the *pristafalacirix* points to her status as an *uxor* and *sacerdos* – not the sort of terminology we would really expect for a temple brothel-keeper. The reference to her marital status may instead demonstrate how here, as at Rome (cf. the *flamen* and *flaminica, rex* and *regina*) priestesses often operated as part of a husband-wife partnership.

Reanalysis of the material indicates how women and men operated together in the religious sphere in ancient Italy far more than is generally acknowledged. Moreover, our reinterpretation of the roles of the *Saliae* and the *pristafalacirix* shows respectively that even in a text scrutinized by scholars since the late fifteenth century and in inscriptional evidence studied since the late 19th century, there remains material that can be used to subvert the prevailing understanding of women in antiquity, and indeed opens up new perspectives and possibilities for their roles in religion. In cults operating at the very heart of the community, women were not incidental, but necessary and fundamental parts of a unitary whole.