



### Women and the Roman Religion

Women in Antiquity | Meeting #13

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### Upcoming Dates

- Monday, May 18  
• Position Paper Due
- Tuesday, May 26  
6:15 – 8:15 p.m.  
• Final Exam
- Thursday, May 28  
• **Ultimate Deadline**
  - No late papers or resubmissions for reversible deductions after this date
  - No exceptions
  - Incompletes owing to personal emergencies must be mutually agreed before this date

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### Five things today

- Roman religion
- Roman goddesses
- Vestals and priestesses
- Cato's speech
- Matronly virtue

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**Questions from the Responses**

- Questions

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**Questions about whatever**



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**Gender in Roman Religion**

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**Roman ideas of the gods**

- Primordial Roman gods are more like animistic spirits
- Not originally depicted in human form or mythologized with human behavior

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**Unlike Greek gods**

- "Equating" Greek gods with Roman gods came much, much later

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**Roman gods as natural forces**

- Connected to the land and the Romans' relationship with the land
- Would respond with wrath and punishment if the Romans dishonored them

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### Organization of religion

- Attributed to the second king, Numa Pompilius
- Romans created colleges of priesthoods and rituals to ensure the gods were appeased

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### Consultation of the gods

- The Romans believed that the gods must be consulted before any actions of the state
- This empowers the families that control the priesthoods (patricians)

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### Women and the display of luxury

- Sumptuary law – restriction on wearing of luxury goods – ostentation and spectacle
  - Repeal long sought by Roman women
  - Would allow them to demonstrate their status
- Cato the Elder speaks vehemently against repeal
- Representative of ways men use control over public life to control way men and women have separate responsibilities
  - "From the moment that they become your fellows they will become your masters"
  - Laws that made them subject to men

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Secondary Source Reading

Mary Lefkowitz  
"Influential Women"

- Premise: If you assemble the evidence we have of women who are influential in history and literature, women only assert themselves in the public sphere on behalf of their families
- Is this the public/private balance, or something else?
- Is this justified? Does it tell enough of the story?



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### Roman matron

- Force within family
  - Expected to be strong
  - Champion of family, clan, and Rome
- Connection with gods and land
  - Household gods
  - Collective worship
  - Mystical role of matron
- Collective role on culture, society, and state

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**Secondary Source Reading**

Gillian Clark  
**"Roman Women"**

- Fundamental summary of key elements of what we know about women in Roman life
- Not naturally inferior
  - Hesiod: feared women not because women are weak but because men are weak
  - Cato the Elder: women are so strong, have such great power (biologically, sexually)
  - They have to be kept from exerting that power over men
- Men use their control over public sphere to maintain their position in society
  - Otherwise women will be in a superior position
- Rather men recognized the power of women
  - Reacted to it by embracing it or seeking to curb it through customs and legislation




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**Roman religion**

- Numen
  - Spirits investing key aspects of the Roman world
  - Janus: doorways, past/future
  - Vesta: hearth, persistence, protection of things as they should be
  - Terminus: boundaries
  - Penates: household guardians
  - Lares: household guardians
- Gods of the Roman state
  - Anthropomorphized powers interested in Rome's power and legacy
  - Jupiter: sky
  - Mars: war
  - Quirinus: Roman people

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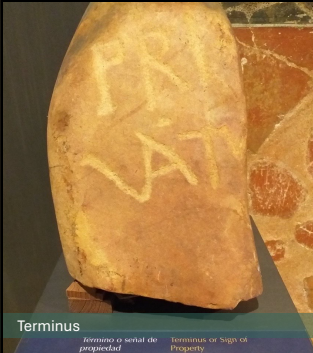
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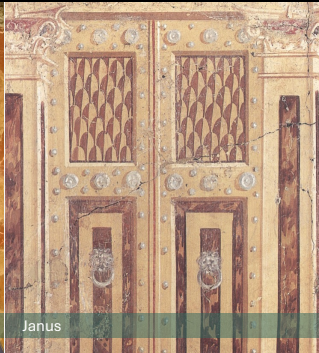
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**Terminus**  
*terminus is verbal derivative of terminus or sign of property*



**Janus**

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Primary Source Reading

Plutarch  
"Advice to the  
Bride and  
Groom"

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**Ideas of marriage in Plutarch**

- Lots of advice for young man and woman
- Partnership of mutual responsibility for household
- Women's effect on men not carnal
  - The greatest hold a woman has on her husband is conversation, character, and comradeship
  - An ideal wife is one who is virtuous and an engaged partner in the relationship
- As usual, a disconnect between the ideal and what is the actual norm

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### Vesta

- Goddess of the hearth
- Association with food and family = survival
- Eternal flame

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### Vestal Virgins

- Maidens of noble birth selected as priestesses of Vesta
  - Purity of virginity
  - Contrasted with men and matrons
- Charged with protection of the eternal flame

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Secondary Source Reading

Mary Beard  
 "Re-reading (Vestal) Virginity"

- Leading Roman historian talking about evolving historical theories
- How do we think about the Vestal Virgin?
  - Function is unique
  - Maps onto daughter and mother
  - Both maiden and matron
  - (cf. Lucretia = chaste matron)



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**Fortuna**

- Fortuna Virginalis
- Fortuna Promigenia
- Fortuna Muliebris
- Fortuna Virilis

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**Bona Dea**

- "Good goddess"
  - chastity and fertility among married Roman women
  - healing
  - protection of the community
- Festival of the Bona Dea
  - Annual rites of fertility
  - Forbidden to men

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**Roma**

- Spiritual force of Rome
- Vulnerable to the actions of men

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Secondary Source Reading

Elizabeth Fisher  
**"Theodora and Antonina in the Historia Arcana: History and/or Fiction?"**

- Much later in Roman story
- Debate about presentation of women in *Historia Arcana*
- Why Theodora and Antonina are depicted as unscrupulous and ambitious
  - Antigone, Medea, Clytemnestra - extreme fem behavior
  - Why us their story being told this way?
  - Not representative of normal female behavior - not how women normally lived
- Intent of the writer: role of the matron




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**Isis**

- Most powerful of Egyptian gods
  - Mother goddess
  - Protector of the Egyptians
- Cults spreads among Greeks and Romans
  - Private shrines and altars set up on the Capitoline Hill
- Adopted into the Roman pantheon
  - Banned by Augustus but only within the sacred boundary of Rome
  - Later emperors claimed Isis as a patron of their rule

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**Virgil's *Aeneid***

- Romans using Greek tools to reinforce Roman identity
- Positions Romans as successors to Troy
  - Founded by a heroic Trojan, Aeneas
  - Travels Mediterranean like Odysseus
- Main encounter with a powerful woman: Queen Dido of Carthage

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Secondary Source Reading

Christine Perkell  
 "On Creusa, Dido, and the Quality of Victory in Virgil's Aeneid"

- Peers of the Greeks by origination with Troy
- Aeneas and Dido parallel Rome's interaction with Carthage (nemesis, defeated, destroyed)
  - Dido throws herself on a pyre
  - Dido despises herself to Aeneas, but Aeneas has a greater destiny and must leave her
- Could Carthage and Rome have joined together and made a new, combined civilization?
  - Rome had greater destiny than Carthage
  - Aeneas not torn up by feelings for Dido
  - How does he deal with the fact that he has to leave?



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The Hellenistic East

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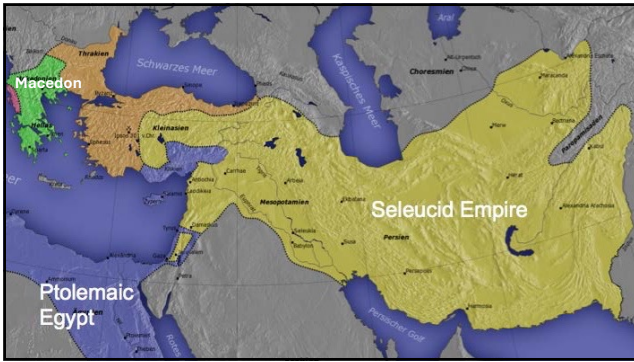
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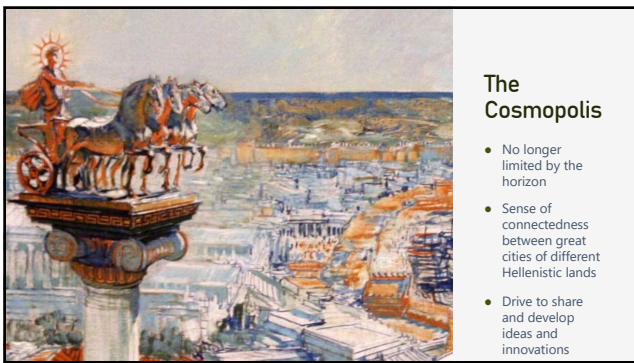
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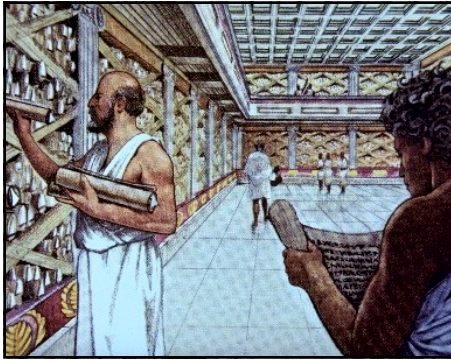
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**Alexandria**

- Not just storage of information
- Catalyzing new ideas through discussion and diversity

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**Macedonian royal women**

- Egyptian history of powerful royal women
- Continues under foreign rule
  - Important princesses, regents, queens, and pharaohs
- Observe Egyptian customs
  - Sibling marriage
  - Egyptian royal regalia
  - Egyptian gods and rituals
- Keep Macedonian names
  - Berenike, Eurydike, Kleopatra

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Primary Source Reading

Plutarch  
Roman  
Accounts of  
Cleopatra



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### The Roman perspective

- We know Cleopatra almost entirely through stories about Roman men
- Effect on Julius Caesar and Mark Antony contrasted
- Complex reaction to her as pharaoh
  - Admired her as a strong and assertive woman
  - Feared her as a foreign threat and influence

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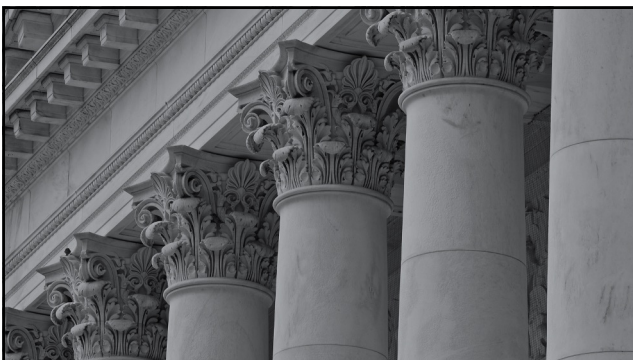
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