Introduction to 'Beneath the Surface: Gender and Agency in religious Contexts in Antiquity'

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Introduction

What can we find beneath the surface if we read the ancient sources and think beyond established biases in research? This special issue focuses on the role of women and individuals that were not legally considered male[1] in religious contexts throughout the ancient Mediterranean world from the Archaic period to Late Antiquity (6th century BCE–4th century CE). The subject of women and their role in ancient societies has been studied extensively over the last fifty years. However, the focus has largely been on the given roles of women rather than on their potential to create and shape ancient religions. In antiquity, religion was a pervasive part of political and social life, involving women in all spheres on almost equal terms with men. Against this background, the contributions in this volume analyse the manifold aspects in which women had agency in religion and thus also in the creation of a normative society, be it as direct performers and enablers of ritual acts, as priestesses and benefactors, or more indirectly within family networks or through participation in rituals, as

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[1] In this Special Issue we focus on women and their agency. While we are aware of the issues surrounding gender identity and definitions, for antiquity, we struggle to adequately describe those individuals that do not identify as cisgender, due to a lack of emic perspectives. However, A. Lätzer-Lasar in her contribution in this issue, tries to analyse the perspectives of individuals that were viewed as non-male-identifying in antiquity. We consciously avoid the term non-binary in this issue as it does not adequately describe the complex gender constructions or gender identities that might have occurred in antiquity.

reflected in and generated from the analysis of the ancient sources; this includes literary sources, inscriptions and archaeological evidence such as sanctuaries and ritual objects. Women's agency within religious contexts became visible through knowledge, expertise, networks, and communication between the ritual agents, the worshippers, and the divine. By taking a critical look at the concept of agency we reassess how the term 'agency' has been applied in scholarship in the field of Classics and propose a new perspective on the topic: first, by highlighting the agency of women in social networks and local settings; second, by applying new ways for inclusive studies of the ancient world by re-thinking the use and definition of 'agency' through an intersectional approach; and third, by reflecting upon scholarly biases in the field of Ancient Studies. Our goal is to shift the parameters of 'agency' in order to study women in a more nuanced fashion and not as a homogenous group, but rather in the different status groups which provided them with varied types of agency.

Status Quaestionis, Historiography of Women´s Studies in Antiquity

There are several problems when studying women and gender in the ancient world, but two issues are particularly pertinent for this issue: on the one hand the sources only partially reflect women's lived experiences, as most ancient texts that have come down to us were written by male authors and focused on topics surrounding male interests. On the other hand, written sources often give clues only about certain strata of society, in particular and overwhelmingly about the elite. This leads to a somewhat involuntary focus on directly visible agency, that is agency in line with values corresponding to policies and ideals of the privileged classes, which is then often reproduced in modern scholarship. For instance, Sara Parks (Parks 2019) showed that scholars in Biblical Studies often ignored or misinterpreted clear traces of female leadership in religious networks such as Jewish synagogues, in order to uphold the

conventional model of the weak and passive woman, which she then labelled the 'Brooten Phenomenon'. At present, in studies concerning questions relating to gender in the ancient circum-Mediterranean world, women's agency is often treated as interchangeable with men's agency. In some of the most important publications to date (Van Bremen 1996; Connelly 2007; Schultz 2006; Hemelrijk 2009; Keller and Winger 2017), agency is analysed through, for instance, political or economic influence and public appeal. Furthermore, women's activities in the religious sphere tend to be analysed on a rather generalising basis. More recent studies have tackled this specific issue by focusing on women's 'ritual competence' (Dillon, Eidinow et al. 2017; Blok 2018, 1–41) which at first glance enables women to acquire executive power. However, ritual competence covers only a certain part of religious agency, as access to it was granted and controlled by traditional social hierarchies in antiquity. But even today, an assessment and evaluation by scholars is a prerequisite for attributing competence to ancient women, posing the danger of excluding what can be understood as agency due to one's own social appraisal and bias.

Historiography and Concepts of Agency

The concept of agency has been discussed extensively by scholars in the humanities and social sciences in recent years. The term has undergone several changes since Pierre Bourdieu's influential outline of a Theory of Practice in which he formulated his theory of 'habitus' and doxa as deep-seated, learned beliefs that unconsciously steer an individual's agency (Bourdieu 1977).[2] However, his rather static view that individuals and societies were bound

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[2] Bourdieu 1977, 164. Bourdieu's theory creates a synthesis between an individual performing out of their societal restrictions and the capacity for agency—defined as the ability to overcome these restrictions by exercising will. The capacity for agency, so Bourdieu, was particularly limited in ancient societies and widened over time systems of classification which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e. the

unconsciously by their social structures which shaped their agency was rightly criticized by scholars in all fields. For feminist studies, the social anthropologist Saba Mahmood (Mahmood 2001, 215) and the anthropologist and archaeologist Adam T. Smith (Smith 2001) made the case for a more malleable theory of agency and a detangling of preconceived unconscious sets of behaviours attached to the agents through their social structures. Sociologists Emirbayer and Mische suggested a different trajectory: for them, agency was a temporally embedded process of social interactions that is informed by the past (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). It is expressed through habitus or traditions and is also oriented towards the future through awareness of alternative possibilities and a sense of strategic acting. At the same time, it is embedded in the present by contextualizing traditions as well as past habits within the contingency of the given moment (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962).

We propose to view agency as embedded in the multi-layered social relations of a constantly changing society in which it can be entangled with, for instance, status, origin and age. In addition to traditional ways of defining agency, as manifested in intentional and conscious actions, which could be expressed in the form of religious offices, dedications and foundations of sanctuaries, it can be found in less obvious actions such as opening channels of communication that affect a society. Such channels could be socio-religious interactions during ritual practice or engagement in social networks that are established in the context of religious sites or practices such as processions, prayers, and sacrifices.

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divisions by sex, age, or position in the relations of production, make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product, by securing the misrecognition, and hence the recognition, of the arbitrariness on which they are based: in the extreme case, that is to say, when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident. A similarly reductive and somewhat simplistic view on ancient societies and their capacity for agency is formulated by Giddens 1991, 192.

The agency of women in antiquity was not always recognised by both ancient and modern writers, mostly because their actions and interactions often happened in the background. Therefore, we would like to highlight the varied types of agency—such as that of women in religious networks—and the effects such networks could have on any given society and which to date have not been recognised sufficiently by scholarly research. Indeed, the fact that women were responsible for cult foundations, cult transfers and the creation of new religious organisations has only recently been stressed (Vlassopoulos 2007; Taylor 2011). With this issue we hope to add to a better understanding of agency from an etic perspective which has been enabled through the work of scholars in Gender Studies such as Mahmood et al. (discussed below); it allows us to view women as significant initiators, shapers, and maintainers of religious networks and in their capacities as founders, priestesses, benefactresses, dedicands, and worshippers. We hope to highlight the importance of networks since women held agency on a religious and civic level through these networks, subsequently affecting the religious system within a given society. Several contributions in the issue aim to identify such networks, for instance Harry Maier's and Maik Patzelt's chapters on women in early Christianity and on networks of Roman widows respectively.

The Gender Debate

The contributors approach the subject of this issue from an intersectional perspective that takes into account the social class, status and ethnicity of individuals and groups under discussion, and open a dialogue with current feminist research in which the concept of agency has recently been reconsidered (as discussed below). Intersectional approaches are crucial when studying women in the ancient world as they allow us to detect inequalities and possibly overcome social and political barriers and by taking categories other than gender alone into

consideration (McCall 2005). The intersectional method was formulated initially by feminist theorists (Davis 1981, Crenshaw 1989) with the aim of overcoming biases against and marginalisation of individuals. Indeed, they showed that the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, were regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. The approach was quickly adopted by social sciences (Clarke 2007, Clarke and McCall 2013) and used in a variety of fields. By examining the intersections of wealth, social status, and ethnicity, we gain a deeper understanding of agency and lived experience. In this way, we re-negotiate scholarly perceptions of women's agency and so get closer to writing the history of individuals rarely seen or heard: indeed, religious minorities such as early Christian women (Maier), widows (Patzelt) and individuals that were not legally considered male (Lätzer-Lasar) are all treated in this issue.

Scholars of feminist theory and gender studies have studied extensively the dynamics between gender and agency over the past decades, and pointed out quite rightly, that we run a risk in solely focusing on individual agency and that this reflects our western perspective rather than actual processes or facts, as argued by Mahmood (Mahmood 2001). Along similar lines, the term 'women's agency' and the idea of gendered agency in the context of religion have been re-examined, appreciating the complex nature of constantly changing societies (Castelli and Rodman 2001; Avishai, Afshan, et. al. 2015; Avishai 2016). It has been increasingly recognized that using simple dichotomies of male domination and female subordination are not sustainable and offer little scope for exploring the multifariousness of women's agency. Instead, the aforementioned authors stressed that inequalities among women due to differences in status, generations, ancestry, etc. must be considered. In fact, we need to move away from ahistorical and somewhat anachronistic theories of patriarchy

and female subordination as stressed by first wave feminism. McNay pointed out, with Judith Butler's approach to understand gender as performative rather than static (Butler 1988) in mind, the inherent instability of gender norms and the potential for resistance or subversion that follows from that (McNay 2000, 1–13). This was already suggested by Foucault, who observed that individuals, through 'technologies of the self', resist and subvert normative subject positions by placing themselves in a specific relationship to themselves and their social environment (Foucault 1988, 1649). New approaches working on the nexus between gender and religion have explored theoretical and practical ways in which these terms must be mutually interpreted (Castelli and Rodman 2001; Hawthorne 2013). In separate studies, Hefner, Mahmood and McNay have discussed in depth the transformation of the social status of women in various societies and reassessed questions about gender (Hefner 2018; Mahmood 2011; McNay 2000; Van den Brandt 2019). These are crucial findings for our understanding of ancient women and their agency within their societies. On the one hand, women are embedded intersectionally in the respective social orders, which has an influence on their agency, but on the other hand also enables and has a performative effect on the shaping of gender and societal structures.

Our contributors have acknowledged and incorporated these ideas into their chapters and applied them to the ancient evidence. They investigate the agency of women embedded in their social structures. But they also move beyond it by highlighting the ability of women to form networks that provide them with agency and overcome traditional structures. Furthermore, we consider ancient societies not as homogenous entities but rather as societies shaped by factors such as migration and varying cultural backgrounds.

Religion and Localism

The religious settings analysed in the issue's contributions are in each case deeply embedded in local societies or anchored within these through case studies. We argue that agency can be best understood within the context of the 'local'. The value of the 'local' as a heuristic tool to enable us to gain a better understanding of the complicated relationship between Greek poleis has been acknowledged most recently by Hans Beck (Beck 2020). The focus on place and local aspects of religion as well as a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the cross-fertilization of traditions that become 'local knowledge' as pioneered by Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1983), allows us to better understand the input of the ancient actors to the social and economic spheres of individual communities. In fact, the concept of the local is a powerful tool for developing intersectional approaches to agency. It allows us to understand the ways and means by which the lived experience of women from all strata of society was shaped, and how these individuals in turn shaped their local environment. Local variations in the distributions of religious offices, for instance, could hugely affect the way in which women were able to integrate into local structures or create their own new structures or networks as shown by Sabine Neumann's contribution. With this in mind, we encouraged the contributors to think in terms of the (often local) networks and family ties that were crucial factors in a woman's ability to act.

What is more, in a society such as ancient Greece, religion had the capacity to create an inclusive environment: with regard to hierarchy in ancient Greek and Roman polytheism, women, children and enslaved people were not only represented among the worshippers but were able and even obliged to access important roles and offices through which they were able to increase their capacity for agency within their respective societies. In Greek religion priestesses were as important as priests. There were women-exclusive festivals with relevance for the whole community, such as the Thesmophoria in Athens and throughout the

Greek world. This leads us to two considerations with relevance for the present issue: first, we need to see religion not as an autonomous expression of human activities but as an expression of human culture embedded in the social, economic and political contexts of societies, which cannot be separated from other expressions of human activities (Fassa 2013, 116); second, in the religious sphere, women had agency almost equal to that of men and with an immediate effect on societies. Third, religion in antiquity can be seen 'as an individual resource that enlarges agency, strengthens identity, and furthers communicative success' as Jörg Rüpke recently argued (Rüpke 2019, 1201). Rüpke emphasises the creative processes of religious institutions in antiquity which were created by people and constantly evolving rather than fixed.[3] In a similar vein, the term 'religious agency' equally opens up further avenues of investigation and perspectives.

Contributions Overview

The contributors to this special issue come from Classical Philology, Archaeology, Ancient History and Biblical Studies. The articles gathered here cover a chronological framework from the Classical period to Late Antiquity and focus on the ancient Mediterranean region. Four contributions were originally presented at a session on women's agency held at the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) conference in 2019. These chapters are

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[3] Rüpke 2019, 1: Religions, as seen from below, are the attempt – often by just a few individuals – to at least occasionally create order and boundaries through means other than a normative system imperfectly reproduced by humans. Such boundaries would include the notions of sacred and profane, pure and impure, public and private, as well as gendered conceptions of deities. Institutions such as professional priesthoods and the reformulation of religion as knowledge that is kept and elaborated by such professionals could constitute further features of crucial importance for sketching a history of such systems. This is religion in the making, though it casts itself as religion made forever. Acknowledging the individual appropriation and the production of meaning at play in these situations excludes the employment of only cultural interpretations, drawing on other parts of a dense and coherent web of meaning. See also Rüpke (2015).

complemented by three contributions from additional scholars who were invited to participate in this edited issue.

In her analysis of the book of Esther, Esther Brownsmith shows that while agency is indeed often associated with supposedly 'male' qualities, as measured by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (the BSRI is a measure of masculinity and femininity to better understand gender roles) the Old Testament text under scrutiny suggests otherwise: here, the power dynamics do not necessarily correspond to the inventory and the author questions its findings. Brownsmith suggests that rather than classifying direct agency as inherently masculine as such, it may be the capacity to exercise agency that can be associated with men who usually hold more powerful positions than women.

In her contribution, Radwa Salem explores the inherent agency women had in death rituals in Classical Athens. Local archaeological evidence such as painted vases and grave monuments mirror ritual performances of women, and shape these reciprocally. By analysing the reflection of these rituals in material culture, she adds a different perspective to the literary descriptions of upper-class male authors and uncovers why and how women played such a crucial part in dying, death and the 'thereafter'. Salem argues persuasively that women, through their networks and active engagement with the rites, hold much agency, helping ancient (and modern) societies deal with and make sense of death and dying.

Sabine Neumann's contribution discusses the agency of women in the cults of the Greco-Egyptian Isis and her companion Sarapis, that were disproportionally organised and maintained by men. In doing so, she ventures beneath the surface of priestly and official lists by examining women's agency from a different perspective: she focuses on institutional boundaries of the Athenian city-state that excluded women from official priestly positions as well as on modern scholarship's reservations about women in positions of religious power.

Neumann demonstrates that women in the cult of Greco-Egyptian gods had agency in the form of family networks and in a personal relationship with the deities.

Gender identity and appropriation are key points in Asuman Lätzer-Lasar's discussion of agency in a cult that includes individuals not legally defined as male at its heart and that clearly differed from all other cults of Imperial Rome, namely the cult of Magna Mater. Lätzer-Lasar asks to what extent can (and should) we think in fixed gender categories when the religious ritual includes their blurring, at least to some extent? By approaching the topic from an intersectional perspective, Lätzer-Lasar sheds new light on gender, self-identity and agency in a religious context by analysing views of the in- and the out-groups and makes an important contribution to the study of gender and religion as well as notions of gender in the Roman world.

Maik Patzelt uses qualitative network theory in his contribution to highlight the agency of women that are almost always forgotten by ancient and modern scholars, namely widows. By focusing on late antique literary evidence, Patzelt is able to show that widows, despite the 'powerlessness' they encounter through the deaths of their husbands, retain a significant amount of religious agency through patronage that is amplified through their powerful networks.

Early Christian women, their agency and networks are discussed in Harry Maier's contribution. Maier, by looking at the description of female Christ-believers and their perceived networks, sketches how such networks were imagined from the outside. At the same time, he examines how these networks perceived themselves with a view to their belief and practice in a time where strong male leadership and administration were not yet established amongst Christians. With this, the paper offers an historical analysis of women's embedded agency in emergent Christ religion.

Finally, in the afterword, Jörg Rüpke contextualises the contributions of the issue within the field and offers his own views and interpretations as one of the most active scholars in the field of ancient religious studies.

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