

All in the Family? A Reevaluation of Familial Relationships of Priestesses of Imperial Cult in the Latin West

Priestesses of imperial cult were among the most visible women in cities of the Roman provinces. The prestigious position required significant wealth to fulfil the requisite *summa honoraria*, limiting the number of families with members in the priesthood. A number of inscriptions documenting family ties between priests and priestesses of the cult have prompted the conclusion that priesthoods frequently concentrated in a few elite families whose members were not only leaders in the religious sphere, but also held local magistracies. Such familial ties, however, can be documented only in some 20% of the ca. 275 cases. This paper reevaluates the roles of family relationships among the priestesses of imperial cult, suggesting that the extant corpus of inscriptions does not accurately represent the family relationships in the broader population of priestesses. The argument made by Fishwick (2002), Alföldy (1973) and others, which assumes elite municipal status for most priestesses and emphasizes the close family ties of priests and priestesses of imperial cult, comes close to implicitly supposing the existence of a *de facto* priestly class. New analysis of the available inscriptions challenges this supposition, and gives more autonomy to the esteemed women.

While some take a more conservative approach to identifying priestesses of imperial cult (Bassignano 2013; Granino Cecere 2014), according to the parameters of Hemelrijk there are 281 inscriptions of priestesses of imperial cult in the Latin West (Hemelrijk 2015). Of these, 62 have known family members who served imperial cult as either priests, priestesses, or *Augustales*. The fragmentary epigraphic record (the primary source of information for the cult) does not preclude the existence of additional family relationships for which we lack clear

evidence. Nonetheless, the fact that such a relatively small number of women are attested with family members in cult leadership positions raises the question of the extent to which such connections were necessary.

We cannot assume that the cases in which we do have such evidence are representative of the broader population of priestesses: the available corpus of inscriptions likely over-represents women with family connections. The diversity of geographical location and civic status of cult sites is significant. In provincial capitals and particularly important centers of emperor worship there is frequently a higher percentage of priestesses with family connections. In Tarraco, for example, an early cult center and provincial capital, nine of the twelve known imperial priestesses have family members who also held the priesthood. Their inscriptions may reflect the particular role of Tarraco's priesthood, rather than a general tendency for the priesthood to draw its members from families already including priests and priestesses. Perhaps in Tarraco the priesthood served less as a tool of upward social mobility and more as a way to consolidate the position among families of elite status. By contrast, in African Thugga and Nemausus in Gaul, known familial relationships are exceedingly rare. This contrast may result not merely from the limitations of the epigraphic record, but also from substantive difference in local circumstances.

My more nuanced approach can also shed light on the different titles that *flaminicae* bore and the levels at which they held their priesthood. Priestesses at the provincial level or with additional titles such as *prima* or *perpetua* are more frequently from identifiably elite families and more often have relatives who have already served as a priest or priestess of the cult. Those who served at the municipal level and did not have special epithets are less likely to have known relatives already in the cult and are more frequently identified as civic benefactresses. This suggests that public donations could be another way to ascend to the flamine in place of an

elite or priestly pedigree. There is space to further explore these questions elsewhere in the empire in light of previous studies on the Greek East (van Bremen 1996; Price 1986), but my analysis furnishes a clearer idea of women in imperial cult in the western part of the empire.

Bibliography

- Alföldy, G. 1973. *Flamines Provinciae Hispaniae Citerioris*. Madrid: Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología.
- Bassignano 2013. “Culto imperiale al femminile nel mondo romano.” In *L’indagine e la rime: scritti per Lorenzo Braccusi*. Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider. 141-187.
- Fishwick, D. 2002. *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*. Vol. 3, Part 2. Leiden: Brill.
- Granino Cecere 2014. *Il flaminato femminile imperiale nell’Italia romana*. Rome: Edizioni Quasar.
- Hemelrijk, E. 2015. *Hidden Lives, Public Personae: Women and Civic Life in the Latin West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Price, S.R.F. 1986. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Bremen, R. 1996. *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*. Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben.